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THE METAPHYSICAL REVIEW

No. 2

November 1984

DAMIEN BRODERICK: ALDISS'S HELLICONIA



I MUST BE TALKING TO MY FRIENDS

Thanks for all the letters and cards which have been pouring in. I hope to have room in this issue for some of the letters, which are the reason why I returned to fanzine-publishing.

A warning, however . . . the same warning I gave last issue. I'm sending this issue to people on the *SF Commentary* mailing list, but not next issue. The only people on next issue's list will be members of FAPA and ANZAPA, fanzine traders, publishers who have sent me books, and people who have replied to these two issues. There are some people who cannot escape receiving issues of my magazines, but don't depend on being one of that group. Write, now!

Pauline Dickinson (Fisher Library, University of Sydney) wrote: "Goody, goody" and "about bloody time" were what I thought as I read *TMR* . . . No subscriptions, he says—I'll try to write, but it would be easier for me, and probably for you, if I could send you a small donation in lieu of letters. That way, I could look upon myself as a patron of the arts. Are you sure you wouldn't prefer a nice cheque to a boring postcard?

I wrote back to say that I would like the money, but I refuse to start a subscription system. I will acknowledge all donations, and say thank you. But if I began to charge subscriptions, I would charge for the real cost of each issue, including my labour—about \$5 a copy. I was subsidising each *SF Commentary* subscriber to the tune of about \$3 a copy, and costs have gone up since then. Okay, say some, it's a hobby, so you shouldn't charge for your labour. Okay, say I, it's my hobby, and I call the shots. A small number of copies, to a small number of interested readers—that's the only way to keep the *Metaphysical Review* enterprise interesting to me.

ALL CHANGE!

By the time that *The Metaphysical Review 1* appeared, its editorial was entirely superseded. In that editorial, I said that nothing much had happened to us recently. As soon as I had typed those stencils, in late May, things began to happen.

FIRST, THE GOOD NEWS . . .

In early June I applied for yet another fulltime job. This time I gained an interview, which was more than happened when I applied for jobs during late 1983 and early 1984. The interview went favourably, or so I thought, but I did not get the job.

In order to ask for a reference for my job application, I rang a bloke who had often given me freelance editing work. 'Why do you want a reference for a job?' he said, all astonishment. 'We've lots of freelance work for you here.' 'But I haven't seen any of it,' I said. 'I've earned nothing for four weeks. I must have a regular income, and I'll keep applying for regular jobs until I get the income I need.' My friend did a wonderful piece of thinking on his feet. 'Why don't we pay you a certain amount per month in advance? If we don't supply you with enough work, we still pay the money. If you earn more than that, you receive the extra money.' I said yes. Very quickly.

This offer is so unprecedented that I'm still not sure how it will work out. I know of at least one person who was working freelance, but also working fulltime in the office of a publisher, but I don't know of anybody else receiving a set amount in advance for doing the same thing.

A letter arrived in late July, confirming the offer. The first cheque, delayed a bit, arrived in early August. It remained for me to do the freelance work. Soon I found that the rules were being changed. Could I help write a large project on which the company is working? Since it will be sent to Hong Kong on diskette, could I learn to use the new word-processor? (IBM PC, with Wordstar program, for those who are interested.) We'll set aside a room for the word-processor, and give you a desk as well.

The result is that I've spent some time learning to use the word-processor, which is not too easy for somebody as computer-dumb as I am. Also I've just spent several weeks working fulltime in the company's office. After seven years of working freelance at home,

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Edited, published, and printed by Bruce Gillespie, GPO Box 5195AA, Melbourne, Victoria 3001, Australia. Phone (03) 419 4797 AH.
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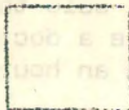
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Damien Broderick

CHANGE OF ADDRESS: Please send it as soon as you know your new address. Many post office systems do not forward mail these days.

CUTTING THE MAILING LIST: Which is what happens after this issue. If the box below contains the Big Red X, you won't receive any more issues unless you get in touch.



You might be seeing this magazine for the first time.

Maybe something of yours is reviewed (on p.)

or I want to trade with your magazine (.....).

EDITORIAL POLICY: I'm after interesting, well-written articles about the topics that concern you. If TMR resembles SFC so far, it's because I've received articles about science fiction. Maybe next issue will see a change of direction.

MONEY: I will accept money for advertising (\$100 a full page, \$60 a half page, \$30 a quarter page), and as donations - but I won't accept subscriptions, for reasons given on page 2.

(From Page 2)

that comes as a shock. My backbone does not like the experience. On many evenings recently I have found that all I can do when I get home is lie flat on my back - not an easy position from which to write.

For the last two years, Elaine has been working as a proofreader for a typesetting agency. Proofreading is hard and annoying work, and Elaine wanted to make the step up to editing. She applied for several jobs, including several which, on paper, were unattainable. One of them was a job advertised last year at Oxford University Press. Elaine did not get that job, but she had put her foot in the door and, more importantly, left a copy of her c.v. When OUP advertised another job in July, Elaine rang and asked for an interview, which she received. A few weeks later, on 1 August, she heard the news that she had made the step into editing. She copy-edits and supervises manuscripts for the Education Division of OUP, and is enjoying the job.

NOW, THE BAD NEWS...

I used to say, even when money ran out at the end of 1983, that things are going well if money is the worst of your worries. I was right.

In early June, just after I had finished typing the stencils for TMR 1 and the galleys for Van Ikin's next Science Fiction, I noticed that my eye felt continually water-laden. No pain or irritation, but I had to keep wiping away moisture from my left eye. This had happened before, but my eye always returned to normal after watering or twitching for a few days. Now nothing helped.

I visited my local GP. He said that I must have an infection in my eye, so I had to buy antibiotic eye-drops. No help. A week later, he prescribed a stronger antibiotic, based on cortisone. Not only did this not help the problem, but it made my eye feel very sore. I could hardly bear to open my eye on the Saturday.

In 1972 a local GP (in East Preston) had misdiagnosed an eye complaint, and I had come close to losing the eye. At that time, I received help only when I visited the emergency department of the Eye and Ear Hospital. So on this Sunday morning I sought help from there again.

Few places in Melbourne can be as bleak as the emergency department of a large public hospital on a Sunday morning. The overhead tv set was emitting World of Sport. I wouldn't have watched it, even if I could have. People sat still on hard benches, glum, hoping that somebody would see them sometime. A notice on the wall said that I would probably need to wait for more than an hour before a doctor would see me. Fortunately the time lapse was less than an hour.

A young Chinese or Malaysian doctor looked deep into my eye through a device attached to a trolley. 'Look at that! How interesting,' said the doctor to the three students gathered around him and me. Each of them looked in my eye. 'He's had scratches on the cornea at some time. See, there.' He decided that there was nothing wrong with the eye itself, so the tear duct must be blocked. I had guessed this already, a week before, but my GP hadn't; in any case, the GP should have sent me straight to an eye specialist.

I had to lie face up on a table. The Chinese doctor placed tiny tubes in my tear duct. He squeezed water through the tubes. The water splashed straight back into his face, and all over me. We all had a bit of a laugh. Yes, the tear duct was blocked.

This narrative abounds with astonishing things that were not done to help me. If that doctor had persisted, I suspect that he could have pushed some water through the tear duct, and much of the rest of this story would not have happened. Obviously he was an intern, and did not quite know whether or not he was doing the right thing. He backed off from the situation, and arranged for me to come back next day, this time to the Outpatients Department. I staggered off into the chill wind and walked home. That afternoon we went for a long, relaxed lunch with a friend; I noticed that my eye was clear of liquid when I was out of the house and not doing any work.

Next day, when I arrived at the outpatients department, I received a little card. I was told to give that to the nurse on duty; the first people to hand in their little card would be served first. More than twenty people, who knew the system better than I did, were already waiting in a queue. The nurse who was supposed to take the cards was not scheduled to arrive for three-quarters of an hour. Since one queue had formed already, I sat in an annexe room. I would then try to leap for a place in the queue when the door beyond opened. I looked at the other people sometimes, and closed my eyes the rest of the time. By then I could not read. Most of the other people were old. Many seemed to speak little English. Why were they here? Surely the introduction of Medicare had meant that many people who used outpatients departments as the only source of free care during the Fraser years could now afford to seek out a GP or eye specialist? Many were, I suppose, outpatients of the main Eye and Ear Hospital. And some, like me, must have been referred from the emergency department.

At last The Nurse arrived. She was big, friendly, and bossy. Her job was to organise large groups of people, and by then she had quite a crowd to work with. More than fifty people were waiting in the narrow corridor or the annexe in which I was sitting. We filed into a very large room, handing in our little tickets. There were just enough seats for all of us.

Our little tickets had nothing to do with the order in which we were 'served'. One by one, we were called to sit beside closed doors. When I was ushered into a room, I was given a peremptory eye-chart test. Back to the main room. My newly opened file was placed in a pocket in front of a door. Nothing happened.

The doctor who eventually arrived looked harassed, as did all the nurses and doctors who milled around the large room. I received the impression that we were unpleasant nuisances, and should realise that from the start. This eye doctor again took a long, hard look into my eye. They all did that. He gained no inspiration. There was nothing wrong with my eye. I still have good eyesight, although I need spectacles to watch movies. Okay, it was a blocked tear duct. What blocked it? The doctor thought that he saw tiny specks. This, he said, was a fungus that had spread along the tear duct. There existed eye-drops that could fix the problem. No, the pharmacy had none at the moment. Too bad; I would just have to keep using the first eye-drops that my GP had prescribed. If that didn't work, he would have to 'open things up a bit' and clear out the fungus. Meanwhile, I should have an X-ray, but the results would not be available for more than a week after. This grave, dismissive, early-fortyish man, having

accomplished nothing, ushered me out, without even making another attempt to use a syringe to clear the tear duct.

I was in despair. Would I be unable to read, work, or watch tv or movies for the next week and a half? I went straight back to my GP, but said nothing about the trip to the Eye and Ear Hospital. If he hadn't offered immediately to arrange a visit to an eye specialist, I would have tried to find another GP. He mentioned somebody who lived not too far away, and arranged an appointment for that afternoon. I went. The eye specialist was brisk, efficient, and obviously had no idea what was blocking my tear duct. Again he examined my eyes with extraordinarily elaborate equipment, and again they proved faultless. He seemed never to have encountered my problem before. He presumed that something had blocked my tear duct somewhere, so he applied the tiny syringe to the duct. This time the water ran through to the back of my nose. Caramba! All clear! No more problems. Hah!

The next day my eye was still very sore, still caused, I guess, by the second lot of drops prescribed by my GP. I was still afraid that my eye would infect because the tear duct was not yet working properly, so I kept using the first antibiotic.

An appointment had been made already for the X-ray at the Eye and Ear Hospital. I lay flat out under the X-ray machine. Tiny catheters were stuck in the ducts on both sides of my face. A dye ran through the catheters, so that the X-ray could be taken. I felt like brushing away the whole apparatus; it did not hurt, but it felt like yet another attack on my precious eyes.

All I could do was wait during the next week or so. On some days I had no problems with my eye. On other days I could barely see to work. I could not read for more than a few minutes at a time. I had to stop watching television. And meanwhile the date of beginning my new 'job' was drawing near, although I had no assurance that I would be able to continue working. Good fortune was blocked by bad fortune.

I kept using the antibiotic drops. That was probably a mistake, or at least, no help. However, when I applied the drops I could feel the bitter taste run down from inside the nose, so I knew that the tear duct was still open.

My second visit to the outpatients department of the Eye and Ear Hospital was as depressing as the first. I overheard one old lady arguing with The Nurse. The old lady had caught a train at 6 a.m. that morning at Hamilton, out on the western plains of Victoria, so that she could keep this appointment at the Eye and Ear. 'You've been given the wrong appointment,' said The Nurse, over and over. 'That doctor won't be in until Thursday.' 'Isn't there anybody I could see?' said the old lady. 'We'll see,' said The Nurse. 'I'll try to arrange something.' And what if the old lady, at the end of her pilgrimage across Victoria in search of help, had been given two minutes of uncomprehending audience, only to be sent on her way with a cheery 'That will be all right'? That was what happened to me.

I waited about an hour. A different doctor saw me, not the one who thought he saw spots in my eye. This doctor read the notes made by the doctor of the week before, looked at the Eye and Ear's X-rays, and sent me off for yet another syringe of the tear duct. I came back,

and he said, 'There, that'll be all right! We won't need to see you again.' No mention of the dreaded fungus that was supposed to be littering my internal passages. No explanation of what the X-rays had shown or not shown. Nothing. I felt baffled and angry. The problem of my tear duct was just as much of a mystery as ever. For these doctors, it did not fit particular categories of eye problem, so it didn't exist.

The doctors at the Eye and Ear Hospital could be excused for being harassed and uncomprehending, for the outpatients department's air-raid shelter organisation made life as difficult for them as it did for nuses and patients. But I find it unforgivable that a person calling himself an eye specialist, charging \$24 a consultation, and equipped with the entire resources of a prosperous practice, should show as much ignorance about my problem as the doctors at the Eye and Ear Hospital. For I did go back to the specialist. He looked into my eyes again. Perhaps my left eye was still puffy because of sinus problems. Take some Sinutabs. I did - for a week. I was still using the antibiotic drops, and after a week, I felt a violent pain down the left side of my face. I gave up both. I went back to my GP, appealing for help. He wouldn't have anything to do with the problem, now that the eye specialist was in charge. He sent me to a pathologist to take X-rays of my sinuses. They were not at all blocked.

What did I want of these doctors? The ability to put 1 and 1 together and get 4, the same ability that one expects of any professional problem-solver who charges high consultation fees. I expected some attempt to make a pattern of all the possible symptoms and influences. Most of all, I expected that somebody would listen to me. That did not happen. Instead, each doctor saw my eye as a kind of Meccano puzzle - put the bits together somehow, and anything that doesn't fit doesn't matter. Nobody wanted to listen to me; each doctor wanted to get me out of the office as quickly as possible so that the next sheep could be led in.

I felt that somebody, somewhere, must have some idea of what was wrong with my eye. Why, for instance, had nobody thought of examining the other end of the tear duct - the outlet in my nose? Maybe it was entirely a nose problem. I began to experiment. I did a bit of selective nose-picking, and found that if I could keep clear the top of my nasal passage, I had fewer days when it 'silted up'. I found that I had no problems when I was working away from the house. On one particular day my eye was very annoying. The next day, I was learning to operate the word-processor at the site of my new 'job'. That involved seven hours of intense eye-work, but my eye felt none of the usual strain. Did our house contain some ghastly allergic triggers? Why had none of the doctors investigated possible allergic reactions?

One day I was talking to my sister. She told me that one of my aunts, who had suffered terrible eye problems, had been cured by one bloke, who was both a medical practitioner and a naturopath. I rang the given number, and received an appointment some weeks in the future. My eye had improved slightly by the time I trekked across Melbourne to see this new doctor, but it still felt uncomfortable. I hoped for nothing.

When I reached the naturopath's office, I was met by a young, stylish man who did not, for once, give the impression that he wanted to usher

me out the other door as soon as possible. Indeed, the consultation lasted an hour, which means that this doctor, even at the rate he was charging, was making a lot less money than the useless eye specialist.

Most impressively, this bloke actually listened to what I had to say. He seemed to understand the problems I had had. I told him everything that seemed to relate to the problem. He interrupted me and told me symptoms that I hadn't yet mentioned. Did I suffer from headaches? Did I suffer from headaches! I had, he said, the classic symptoms of food allergy problems. Why don't you take these, have these, and give up these? - and I'll see you in two months' time. End of consultation.

Have you ever tried to give up coffee, sugar, white flour, dairy products, and chocolate - all in the same week? I managed most of these quite easily, because I was not addicted to them. It was less easy to give up coffee. Readers of Science Fiction 15 (the 'Last SF Commentary' edition) will have noticed what happened when I tried to give up coffee over one day. I did not repeat that mistake. This time I had fewer cups each day until finally, after a few days of one cup per day, I was able to spend whole days at a time without the stuff. I had help this time. Many of the prescribed items from the naturopath were high-protein diet additives designed to provide substitutes for addictive foods. I lost 3 kg during the first week of the diet (but not much more since), which showed how much ice cream and tacky foods I had been eating. Every few hours I must drink a concoction of water, brewer's yeast, carob powder, calcium ascorbate, and soy milk. It doesn't taste too bad.

Was it worthwhile? My eye has cleared up, although I still do not know which foods I was allergic to. My headaches have not disappeared, which shows that they have been caused more by a deterioration of my spine than by consumption of coffee. So now I'll have to go looking for a good chiropractor. Maybe that will be the next chapter of this medical saga.

** **

I've left very little room for letters, most of which must go in the next edition. But I can't resist a few snippets in this issue, including these comments from:

LEANNE FRAHM, 272 Slade Point Rd, Slade Point, Qld 4741

Who'd a thunk it - Bruce back in print! Great, mate! Kerry brought in the mail and threw a fanzine on the table. I immediately noted the return address. Kerry made himself a sandwich, chatting about the office. I picked up the packet and turned it round and round in my fingers. Kerry continued talking business. I tried to peer between the staples. He said, 'You're dying to read that, aren't you?' 'Who, me?' My knuckles twisted. He grinned. I picked at the sticky-tape, mumbling 'Bruce hasn't done anything for a while. He's very good...' Unable to constrain myself any longer I wrenched at the wrapper and unfolded The Metaphysical Review. I don't know when Kerry left...

And Bruce is still very good.

Often you've annoyed me, Bruce, when your articles in various

other fanzines have decried the lack of good sf. Come on, I've thought. It can't be that bad. So after reading your editorial in TMR, I'm sitting here trying to remember all the good sf novels I've read lately. And surprise, surprise - it's hard. There was Riddley Walker, but that was two years ago. And The End of the World News, by Anthony Burgess, which I read in February, and after which there seems little point in anyone's trying to write another sf novel. I did make it through Little, Big a couple of weeks ago because I found the writing delightful, although I couldn't quite fathom the plot. Aldiss's The Eighty Minute Hour was unreadable as a novel, but I read it one chapter a night as a book of comedy essays and managed to finish it, except for the excruciating lyrics, much inferior to those of Burgess in the above-mentioned book. I threw aside Watson's The Martian Inca just last night after thirty pages. In fact the more I think of it, the more I find that very little stirs me now in the sf genre - and if I read one more earnest unhumorous social commentary-type sf trendy novel, I'll puke! Guess you're right after all, Bruce. Sad, isn't it? (21 September 1984)

When you haven't published a fanzine for a while, you like to think that somebody will appreciate it when you finally turn out the next issue of something. But it was still a nice surprise to receive your letter, Leanne, showing that Somebody Out There wants to read TMR.

Thanks for the list of books you have enjoyed recently. I'll print some more such lists later in this issue, if there's room, or certainly in the next issue. A letter that echoes yours, Leanne, is this one from:

HARRY WARNER Jr, 423 Summit Ave, Hagerstown, MD 21740, USA

Just now I'm in the middle of my semi-annual attempt to recapture my old love for science fiction. The last time, I went through a half dozen quite recent books labelled science fiction by the publishers and it was an ordeal. This time I'm cheating by turning to books published from five to twenty years ago, in the hope they won't suffer as much from the current epidemic of sequels to sequels and the propaganda tracts disguised as stories about the immediate future. But I'm afraid I feel just now much as the panellists at Kinkon whom you cite in the editorial. Here and there I find a chapter or two that hold me enthralled. But this latest effort is obviously doomed to suffer the same failing grade its predecessors did. I'm sure it isn't altogether the fault of the writers and the editors and the publishers. Part of my reaction must come from having grown old and jaded with some of the things that delighted me long ago. But maybe having read so much mundane fiction in recent years has spoiled science fiction for me to some extent. I've been gobbling down mystery novels in particular during the past few years and that has caused me to question science fiction novels as I read them in a manner I never used to do. Good mystery fiction either has a logical chain of events and properly motivated characters or is written by authors skilful enough to make failings in these respects hard to detect by the casual reader. So now when I read a science fiction novel, I can't prevent myself from asking repeatedly: What is causing the hero or the villain to do this? Is it logical that society on this

planet would permit these conditions to exist? Why is this institution functioning in such a manner? All too often, I answer myself with the explanation that the writer took the easy way out or improvised his story as he went along instead of making the plot, incidents, and characters believable.

It's good to find someone else who likes the unauthentic manner of performing Messiah. My own favourite recordings are those directed by Sir Thomas Beecham. A combination of good luck and patience have enabled me to acquire all three of his complete recordings of the work at bargain prices in good secondhand condition, not an easy feat because the first of them never appeared in an lp version in the United States and only miraculous intervention of providence caused a virtually mint set of the 78 rpm albums to turn up at a book and record sale at a price I could afford. Be consoled by the fact that all the eighteenth-century composers whose works are being reproduced today exactly as they were premiered never hesitated to use the largest performing forces available to them and I don't think any of them is on record as protesting the employment of too many musicians in an orchestra or chorus. Besides, the musicologists who think it's proper to use the same number of musicians that Messiah had at its premiere in England never urge the employment of the two or three thousand musicians who participated in the first performance in England of Verdi's Manzoni Requiem.

(17 October 1984)

Since I don't have a logical mind, I don't worry too much about the logic of sf novels, although perhaps I should. It's just that almost nobody in the sf trade (except for exceptions like Wolfe, Disch, etc.) worries much about the words they use. Or maybe they do, but have lost the power of speech-through-writing. I read quite a few mystery novels two years ago because I found that the best practitioners of that craft could tell a light, interesting story and construct a pleasing sentence in the English language. All I've ever asked for is a minimum standard of literacy in sf, but that minimum standard seems to have flown up to the stratosphere.

Lauris Elms, Australian contralto, was interviewed on ABC radio the other night. The interviewer asked about performing in the authentic version of Messiah. Lauris Elms said something like: 'Which authentic version? I've been in six performances that called themselves authentic, and each was different from the other.' As in other matters artistic, the search for historical authenticity tells more about changing taste today than about the state of music in the eighteenth century. I happen to like the 'authentic' versions I've heard, by Hogwood and Harnoncourt, of the Mozart symphonies. If I were not committed to publishing this fanzine, maybe I could afford to buy both sets. But surely the pleasure I feel when hearing these stripped-down, clarified versions has more to do with the recent history of playing music than with any sudden desire of me, music consumer, to 'go authentic'? I like your idea, Harry, of an 'authentic' Verdi Requiem.

** **

Harry Warner Jr was just one of many correspondents who said that they enjoyed Yvonne Rousseau's article about Stanley Elkin's George Mills,

although they had never heard of Stanley Elkin or George Mills, and probably would not read the book, even if they could get hold of it. I asked Yvonne to review George Mills because (a) I think that Stanley Elkin is the best living American writer; (b) he is almost never published outside of USA; and (c) I wanted a good article about a non-sf subject. Marc Ortlieb is the only letter-writer, so far, who didn't like the way Yvonne went about reviewing the book, so I'll leave his letter till next issue. (But thanks, Marc, for finding time to write.) I don't have room here to show why Elkin is an interesting writer, so a few quotations from his books will have to do:

Significance is as available as gravity. (The Dick Gibson Show)

They'd go into Woolworth's... 'Nothing for something'...

(A Bad Man)

'My God, it's God.' (A Bad Man)

...everyone had already been tempted, ...everyone had already succumbed, had had those things happen to him which he wanted to have happen, and was looking for them to happen again. Seduction was routine; yielding was; everyone had a yes to spend and spent it.

(A Bad Man)

'I didn't even know I had secrets until I found out that strangers knew them.' (George Mills)

To the poor most places are foreign, all soil not the neighbourhood extraterritorial and queer. They cling to an idea of edge, a sense of margin. (George Mills)

And so on. If you can't get Elkin's books, order them from America, as I did.

** **

Not much room left, so here are a few early suggestions for books-that-are-not-labelled-sf-but-will-do-now-that-nobody's-publishing-good-sf-anymore. George Turner called them 'parafiction', but I like my title better:

Brian Aldiss (COA: Woodlands, Foxcombe Rd, Boars Hill, Oxford OX1 5DL, England): 'So science fiction is over the hill, eh? Somehow I find that remark more convincing when I make it than when other people do. Have you read Brin Townsend's Valley of the Chateau of Death?' (*No. I haven't seen a copy yet.*) :: George Hay (COA: 5 St Andrew's Mansions, St Andrew's Rd, West Kensington, London W14 9SU, England): '...Crowley's Little, Big, which I find the best novel of any kind for the last twenty years, a mountain which would take anyone many years to mine.' :: Guido Eekhaut (Berkenhoflaan 13, B-3-30 Leuven (Heverlee) Belgium): '...people like Nabokov, John Hawkes, Borges, and newcomers like John Calvin Batchelor'. (*Guido is very erudite about the whole subject, so I'll save the rest of his letter for later.*) :: Ralph Ashbrook (303 Tregaron Rd, Bala Cynwyd, PA 19004, USA): 'The Time Falling Bodies Take to Light, by William Irwin Thompson, Up from Eden, by Ken Wilbur, and Godel, Escher, Bach, by Doug Hofstadter. Fringe area stuff, as sf used to be - although I had no trouble finishing No Enemy But Time, which I liked more than any sf since Watson's late seventies blitz.' :: Andy Sawyer (45 Greenbank Rd, Birkenhead, Merseyside, L42 7ST, England): 'Little, Big... Umberto Eco's The Name of the Rose, and W. J. Corbett's The Song of Pentecost.'

So ends Part 1 of letters. Part 2 in next issue. Last stencil 26 Oct 84.

Damien Broderick is a full-time writer of fiction (recent novels include Transmitters and Valencies, the latter co-written with Rory Barnes) and sometime polemicist. He is also the science fiction reviewer for Melbourne's Age newspaper.

THE GREAT WHEEL TURNS:

ALDISS'S HELLICONIA

by Damien Broderick

(What follows is a somewhat expanded version of two newspaper reviews - June 1982 and May 1984 - from the Melbourne Age. So points are stressed which fans might find self-evident. Still, my remarks arose in a certain context which should be taken into account if I am to repeat them here.)

Helliconia Spring

by Brian Aldiss

Jonathan Cape; 1982;
361 pp.; \$A 17.50

Readers of sf and fantasy become attached to their favourite fairy-tale settings. Writers, too, obliged with each new work to invent entire ecosystems and social orders, find the possibility of lengthy exploration increasingly attractive. Laziness is not always the motive, in either case, though that is the constant risk and temptation.

So sf and fantasy have revived the Victorian three-decker. Not that multi-volume fiction ever entirely vanished: Proust, Powell, Durrell, and Waugh took their shots at it. Yet it has been unpopular for decades. (Radio and television narrative, on the other hand, have subsisted on it during this period, most notably in the current big-budget mini-series.)

Instead of a comforting, leisurely stroll through the reassuring stability of an Imperial social landscape, sf can offer brisker jogs through entire invented worlds. This opportunity can meet fair ends and foul. Doc Smith made full use of it, to our cost, with his endless adolescent galactic adventures, which Asimov bureaucratised. Frank Herbert set himself up nicely as the Lawrence of Dune (T. H., naturally, not D. H.), and a remorseless stampede of horses of similar colour have pounded through the stable door ever since. Yet Le Guin took her chance and made the Earthsea universe for our delight, our joy, our gain.

A decade ago Brian Aldiss, an extravagantly gifted writer poised always between facility and felicity, spoke wistfully of a day to come 'when writers who invent whole worlds are as highly valued as those who recreate the rise and fall of a movie magnate or the breaking of two hearts in a bedsitter.' A movie magnate? How odd. Did Aldiss envy more the Harold Robbins millions or the John Updike literary acclaim?

Well, for three years now Aldiss has immersed himself in the creation of a whole world and the millennial cycles of its civilisations.

Helliconia Spring is announced, in a spectacular flurry of expensive promotional publicity, as the first of three books. Clearly, this is

not the start of an endless cycle, but a single, decent three-volume novel. Yet each is published as it is written, so Aldiss must pay the price either of creating false climaxes or of leaving his readers dangling. The structure of the trilogy's universe seems tailored, in some ways, to meet this problem head on: the time scale is so great that conventional unities are burst before we begin.

In Helliconia Spring, Aldiss spares us the lofty pretensions of Dune and its prescient superfolk, the soothing whimsy of all those sword-and-sorcery trilogies by Piers Anthony and his epigones, the flattened affect of most news-stand sf. Of course. This is Aldiss we're discussing here. (I suppress, for the purposes of this heartening outburst, my pain-dulled memories of Enemies of the System and Moreau's Other Island.)

But the book bored me. (Astonished, I checked with other hardened sf readers. It bored them too.) With a few obvious recent exceptions, Aldiss has rarely been boring. Daffling, yes. Pedestrian, certainly not. His language danced. Now, it seems, the weight of his seriousness has slain his joy. As well, too much hangs on coincidence. (Shay Tal's 'ice miracle', for example; it's a wonderful idea, quite nicely executed, and so improbable that it bleaches the page of its ink.)

A couple of passages make it clear that this first volume, dreary as it is, has indeed been written by Aldiss and not by some drab of the same name. Those sections dealing with psychic descent into the underworld of the dead 'fessups' and 'gossies' are authentically chilling. And yet here, somehow, it seems simultaneously that Philip Dick has taken possession of Aldiss's arm:

There was no smell except terror. Every death had its immutable position... This was the realm of entropy absolute, without change, the event death of the universe... In the original boulder... the gossies and fessups were stacked, like thousands of ill-preserved flies... They resembled mummies; their stomachs and eye sockets were hollow, their boney ((sic)) feet dangled; their skins were coarse as old sackings, yet transparent, allowing a glimpse of luminescent organs beneath. Their mouths were open like fish, as if they still recalled the days when they breathed air. Less ancient gossies had their mouths stuffed with things like fireflies which issued forth in smokey ((sic)) dust... The gossies emitted a noise of unceasing complaint.

The whingeing iteration of grievance which Aldiss goes on to create is more horrifying still, a vision of hell from some menopausal suburban medium.

Yet even in this evocative stretch of writing, the depressing blunders of the whole are evident: a carelessness, a blurring of focus. Through which consciousness (in a world straining for the insights of a Galileo) do we compare the afterlife with the second law of thermodynamics? Do fish really hold their mouths open to breathe air? Is it Aldiss or his proofreader who cannot spell? ('Boney' reappears on page 168 of the second book.) An even more astonishing lapse can be found at the book's beginning: on page 3, 'Yuli was seven years old'; by page 15, a few hours later, he has become 'a nine-year-old human being'. Perhaps these are Batalix years and Earth years respectively? No; the ratio is 1.42:1. I know this is trivial, but it suggests a kind of heedlessness in getting the book out which I find inconsistent with its announced importance to Aldiss.

I have said nothing much about the Helliconia universe: the two suns, the alien Phagors, the Earth station in orbit endlessly watching. Yes, all these are presented dense with detail and sometimes with vivid life - but not often enough with life, too often merely with lists and assertions and tricks of timing and Boy's Own eclipses to stun the ignorant natives... It is too soon to be certain that Aldiss has killed his book; we must await all three volumes. But I wonder if any of his friends will be there to read them.

Helliconia Summer

by Brian Aldiss

Jonathan Cape; 1983;
398 pp.; \$A 22.95

At its most ambitious, science fiction aspires to the achievement of civilisation's great learned crackpots: Gibbons, Marx, Spengler, Wells, Jung, Levi-Strauss. And Wells, after all, is himself the greatest of sf's fathers.

The impulse is to catch all the world's bounty in a single equation. So a formula for generating freewheeling adventure stories is recast to fuse the rigorous insights of science with the deep heart-pulse of myth.

Climbing high for perspective (left foot on the physicist's shoulder, right on the shaman's), the visionaries are foredoomed but exhilarating. Asimov plots the dynamics of empire out of Gibbon into the galaxy. Blish sends entire immortal cities aloft, borne up by Spengler's peevish ghost.

Brian Aldiss is one of the few truly able successors to those prodigious dreamers. Happily, his impulse has always favoured the generous over the austere, the done, or the shriek.

With his current project, the massive Helliconia trilogy, Aldiss turns down a trail marked by Wells. These novels are no mere tales; they are thought-experiments. A world is erected where seasons are centuries long. History is an ellipse frozen at one end, burned at the other.

This cruel, ferociously fecund world of Helliconia, a world with two suns and two intelligent species, serves as a testing ground for ideas about love and truth, endurance and transience. The trilogy is authentically epic. In modern letters, only Doris Lessing's ongoing 'Canopus in Argo' sequence begins to match Aldiss's audacity.

Lessing suffers by the comparison. She is an awkward writer, and knows little of sf. This latter deficiency would be of no moment at all if she had not chosen to use science fiction's tropes in her mythmaking. Her ignorance of sf's possibilities and grammar betray her at every turn. Aldiss is a master of both. One expects much. To my horror, I found the first volume boring. Intrusive lumps of exposition (vouched for, we are told insistently, by leading scientists and linguists) crashed in italics on to the page. What had gone wrong?

'When sf writers began taking themselves seriously', wrote Aldiss in 1976, 'they tended to abandon their imaginations and rely instead on the predictions of think-tanks or on extrapolations from scientific journals and population statistics; the result was a descent into greyness, a loss of the original driving force, an espousal of literalism.'

I feared that this unattractive fate had overcome Aldiss in turn. His credo has been that 'my fiction should be social, should have all the laughter and other elements we associate with prosaic life, yet be shot through with a sense that our existence has been overpowered (not always for the worse) by certain gigantic forces...'

He meant the forces of intellect coupled to energy which had been unleashed in the Industrial Revolution. On Helliconia, those gigantic forces are emblemised by the terrible cycles of seasons beyond our ready comprehension.

Still, one could discern in Aldiss what Aldiss had found in Wells. Together with a 'sense of melodrama' and his 'dramatic feeling for the organic flow of history', there were 'whispers of that didacticism which rose up and choked off his great creative ability'.

Helliconia Summer goes much of the way toward relieving Aldiss from this fate. The compass of the book is restricted to a few months, and we can follow a handful of people (fifteenth-century-style kings and queens, ice traders, and proto-scientists, human and otherwise) across the landscape without feeling that they might on any page be snatched from us and cast abruptly into the narrative's antiquity.

Even the segments of laboured exposition are renewed by embodying their principal viewpoint in the person of a young man from the human observatory satellite, the Avernus, which has circled Helliconia for 3269 years. A further haunting resonance is set gonging as we watch as well the response, a thousand years later, of viewers on Earth.

Aldiss has experimented with this dislocated perspective before, most notably in his nouveau roman, Report on Probability A, in which watchers watch watchers who watch other watchers... This recursive voyeurism is now mediated by communications technology and the limits of the speed of light.

The expedition which launched the Avernus left our world in 2108. Those who witness the new world through its lens do so in 7877. The cultures of Earth ebb and change to a cycle more slow but no less ineluctable than that which wracks Helliconia.

In many places the book is bright with life and wit. (In a typical, clever Aldiss reversal, the voyage in the underworld of fessups is replayed in summer garb - and we find the dead cloyingly sweet, forgiving, and so still more irritating than before. Moreover, with advances in scientific insights, the 'original boulder' as the heart of the Helliconian ontology has become the 'original beholder' - a sort of quantum mechanical jest, or perhaps merely a Berkeleian one.)

Elsewhere, the language is once again no better than drab. The canvas becomes so broad that we lose hold on our commitment to its components. This, too, though, is a suitable metaphor for the multilayered art-object which Aldiss offers us.

Is there any merit in making such an imaginary object as this trilogy's world/s? Do we really wish to hear about flawed, nervy kings and their beautiful, betrayed women? Might Aldiss be better advised to stick to the mundane world and have his say more directly? I think of L. H. Myers's The Near and the Far (1940), which chose as setting a largely fanciful sixteenth-century India. 'My object', Myers stressed, 'was to carry the reader out of our familiar world into one

where I could - without doing violence to his sense of reality - give prominence to certain chosen aspects of human life, and illustrate their significance.'

He wrote under the hammer of fascism, but stood firm in his belief in imagination. 'It has certainly not been my intention to set aside the social and ethical problems that force themselves upon us at the present time. On the contrary, my hope has been that we might view them better from the vantage-ground of an imaginary world.'

Aldiss's developing achievement in this sequence is to create a genuinely wondrous world without, indeed, violating our sense of reality. What he means to teach us through this medium seems to be a tragic acceptance, a conservatism spelled out thus by one character: 'Culture may flourish better under old injustice than under new.'

Yet this, in turn, is not wholly defeatist. Aldiss is obsessed by the principle he terms 'that chastising enantiodromia': the force in mind and brute matter alike which ceaselessly changes each thing into its opposite. It is the axis upon which the great wheel of the seasons of Helliconia, world and novel, turns.

- Damien Broderick,
June 1982 and May 1984

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If so, please read the following information and get in touch with us as soon as possible.

ACADEMIC TRACK

Aussiecon II, next year's World SF Convention to be held in Melbourne, Australia, will include a substantial academic track of literary criticism, centred around studies of Gene Wolfe and of Australian sf.

Aussiecon II will be held at the Southern Cross Hotel, Melbourne, from 22 to 26 August 1985. Submissions are now being called for papers to be presented as part of the academic track of programming.

The Guest of Honour at Aussiecon II will be Gene Wolfe, and it is planned that the academic track will feature studies of Wolfe's writing as a leading aspect of a coherent program. Since this is only the second World Convention to be held in Australia, particular sympathy will also be given to proposals for papers about Australian writers.

The theme of the academic program is Science Fiction: A Contrary Mode. Specific (but not exclusive) areas of interest for sessions and papers might include:

- (a) The Torturer as Hero: the problem of treating sympathetically protagonists and societies whose value systems are radically different from our own.
- (b) Feminist Contrarities: feminist perceptions of science fiction; perceptions of the female in science fiction.
- (c) The Other as Alien: science fiction's treatment of the Other as other race (usually in earlier sf) or other species.
- (d) Contrary Faiths: science fiction and religion; science fiction as religion.
- (e) Planetary Exotica: sf/fantasy novels that create detailed societies discontinuous from our own, often elaborated enormously in successive volumes.

The deadline for receiving offers of papers is 15 February 1985. It is hoped to publish a Proceedings volume, which will be available at Aussiecon II. The subcommittee responsible for the academic track are Lucy Sussex and Jenny and Russell Blackford. For further information:

GPO Box 2253U, Melbourne, Victoria 3001, Australia.

GENERAL TRACK MEDIA TRACK

also would like to hear from possible speakers who have not yet become attending members of Aussiecon. Write to:

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