

THE NEHWON REVIEW

"...Redd's attack is another disturbing example of his growing tendency to call people names and use invective instead of depending on logic and reason."

-- HARRY WARNER,
Horizons, Vol. 32, No. 1

IF YOU'RE REAL,
THERE'S SOMETHING
WRONG WITH REALITY



NO. 7

WILL WONDERS NEVER BEGIN!

Some Meditations About Greg Shaw's "Polymorphous Pree-vert"

I.

TODAY HAS BEEN a glorious day -- fog, wind, and rain, and early, oppressive darkness -- for one of autumnal temperament, and I have been sitting here alone luxuriating in gloomy reflections. On such a day as this, even a fanzine brings sad thoughts to the mind, and since I have just been perusing Starling #16, edited by Hank and Lesleigh Luttrell, I fought a losing battle with tears when I realized that Greg Shaw's three-part article, "The Polymorphous Pree-vert," which has been running in that fanzine, really ought to win him the Hugo, but, alas, will not. (Richard Delap, who is pretty good too, is still around, after all.)

My tears continued unabated, and the hot drops splashing down thoroughly water-crunkled my copy of Starling, as I considered the sorrowful plight of all the fapans who will not have seen and read Mr Shaw's lyrical piece. Fapans, one might say, in the melancholy years, who no longer bother to keep up with non-FAPA fanzines. Only a curative quaff of monkish Benedictine served to cleanse my mind of the picture, painted with a Rembrandt palette, of all these old and outworn fapans eternally hitching their wheelchairs around to catch the light and reread the mailing comments in Vandy....

But let us say no more about the matter. I rise to speak, not of winter weather in the Bay area, nor of cheerless noncreative fapactivity, but rather of Mr Greg Shaw himself and his three-part article in Starling. Mr Shaw is in fact something of a phenomenon in present-day fandom, where dull minds labor mightily to make tedious even the likeliest subject, to besmirch and besmudge with pedestrian style and myopic vision the happiest idea for fan writing since F. Towner Laney was corflued by the Great Fan Publisher in the Sky. Lo, in the midst of this fannish Sahara comes Mr Shaw. A miracle, as if a man of quality had appeared on the faculty of the University of Alabama or of SMU, or something else equally incongruous. I have great joy in it.

Greg Shaw, by dint of a slightly coltish but ebullient style and a discerning eye, can make even the most unpromising subject fascinating, as he proves with commendable regularity in his own fanzine, Metanoia, in which he talks about rock music and suburban neighbors. In "The Polymorphous Pree-vert" (spelled "Pre-vert" in the first article), he has focused his astonished gaze upon the career (or as much of it as he ever managed to observe) of one Chester Anderson, late of San Francisco and the Haight. Anderson, a writer of sorts, is reputed to have written a delightful science fiction novel called The Butterfly Kid, which I have not read and, having been forewarned, will not read. I suspect that it ought to be avoided like a TV commercial for heartburn remedy.

Shaw presents a few examples of Anderson's alleged poetry. One poem starts out like this: "Initiate condition aleph. / Foreplay epera-

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tions in effect, blue zones, cycling."... (I'm not sure whether that word "eoperations" is a mistype or not, and probably Anderson -- at least at this remove -- isn't either.) Another consists of a pageful of deliberately typoed-up variations of the iteration "all bad trips are not a delusion all bad trips are not a delusion." If this is poetry, then so are the grunts of a hog rooting for acorns. Examples of Anderson's polemics reveal no discernible talent in that direction, either, but of these more later.

As a phenomenon, however, Chester Anderson takes on a certain luster. He lived in the Haight-Ashbury during its moment of glory, circa 1967, and was as much a part of the scene as infectious hepatitis, and was as hard to dose and eradicate. And he was far more dangerous.

About Chester Anderson as a phenomenon of the Haight, Shaw writes with all the artless art that makes a cockleshell. His prose, without conscious style, has all the gross nimbleness of a dancing bear, and his account of Anderson's frenetic activity, though no literary masterpiece by miles, has acuity, cleverness, and the light and wayward charm of a pubescent chin whisker. It even has a splash or two of that essential ingredient of the best fan writing: a pungent and permeating fuggheadedness. The latter admixture derives not alone from the subject, Anderson himself, but in small tipples from the author himself. For if Chester Anderson emerges here as the veriest Lumpazivagabundus, then the author does too, for he admired and imitated the great man, and was his acolyte at the time, though he has since reformed. Indeed, in a recent letter to me, Shaw strikes the elegaic note, remarking that "Those articles chronicle certain events in the life of 17-year-old Greg Shaw, as written by 20-year-old Greg Shaw. At 22, I find the thoughts and actions I ascribe to myself therein totally alien. So let's just call it history and keep it in perspective."

One is almost inclined to suspect that Anderson's part in the relationship between himself and Shaw may have included a certain amount of Ratterammelei, as did his relationship with various others. Anderson "seemed to feel almost paternal toward me," Shaw writes; "he referred to young people like myself as 'puppies,' a designation I resented, though I suppose it was pretty much justified." It is a term that mirrors an undetermined quantity of condescension, justified or not, but Shaw does not complain of being ratfucked, and perhaps even considers it to be one of Anderson's quaint and more amiable qualities that he allowed Shaw and other "young people" to work as his willing slaves. Perhaps it was.

II.

AH, THE PORTRAIT that emerges from the froth and simmer of Shaw's back-burner prose! It is a worshipful portrait of a hippy Scaramouch, and fittingly, is not without touches of folly and frolic and even of farce, for Shaw, despite his genuflections before Anderson's saintly feet, manages to see a lot, and not all of it is pretty. He tells us that Anderson "was in his late thirties but he looked at least ten years older. His hair was almost grey and his face had an overall grizzled look." If not unpretty in themselves, these details are at least true things, but there are more devastating observations, too: "He would exaggerate and even lie without qualms if it served to help him make a

suitable impression," Shaw writes. "For example, when he found out I was interested in Tolkien, he mentioned that he knew the professor fairly well. When I asked him if he knew anything about Tolkien's long-awaited book The Silmarillion, he assured me he'd read the manuscript. He became very evasive when pressed for further details."

The first of the three articles, subtitled "Green Dream" (Starling #14), describes Anderson's grandiose plans for the 1967 Westercon, once he had learned about science fiction fandom from Shaw. Among other dancing visions he nurtured in his head (some of them quite feasible, such as the idea of importing the San Francisco Mime Troupe to put on skits), Anderson concocted a feverish scheme to "turn on" the Westercon, using "Electric Kool Ade" (drenched with LSD), or else "the legendary 'contact chemical'.... The way this worked was that the person would either ingest it or rub it on his skin, I forget which, and then the person would drop some acid. He would or would not (I don't remember) get stoned himself, but anybody he touched certainly would...." It was Anderson's theory, expounded in a later essay, that fandom was composed "of our kind of kids" -- the referent is unclear -- "who aren't heads only because they haven't been turned on yet and are amazingly easy to turn on." It would seem that Anderson's knowledge of fandom, like Jeff Jones' of anatomy, was inexact, indeed most sketchy and based on hearsay evidence.

Of this "huge undertaking," this far-out Daugherty project, Shaw reports a few sneaking misgivings. "I was seventeen years old, and... I definitely did not feel up to the task of taking the responsibility for an outrage of this magnitude.... As Chester Anderson told me his plans...I was stupefied. Terrified, actually. But I didn't say anything to Chester about my fears, because I had a feeling that it would never really happen. And, as I'm sure you must be aware, I was right. And fandom will never know what it missed." In a letter printed in Starling #16, Shaw writes, in response to a criticism by Harry Warner, "He's quite right in implying that I was irresponsible to sit by and allow such plans to be made.... But then...I'm sure I never for a moment seriously thought there was any chance of the Westercon Acid Test actually occurring. I may have given a different impression to make the story a bit more suspenseful, but in truth it was never more than a wild fantasy." Shaw deserves credit for seeing clearly that the scheme, "wild fantasy" or not, was not a sweet and innocent one. That it would not be carried out, any more than Anderson's pipe (or pot) dream of buying a war-surplus aircraft carrier and sailing all over the world with a crew of hippies, hardly excuses the supposedly wise and mature Chester Anderson. He is, to be sure, only a poor damned bastard who has been slurped by society and left slightly out of shape, but one would not weep unduly to see such an irresponsible person safely locked up, for our sakes, if not for his.

In the second article (Starling #15), with the subtitle "Outrage Upon Outrage," we learn about some of the "far-out" schemes that Anderson actually carried out during his nine months in the Haight. Shaw tells us that "One of Chester's favorite concepts was that of the 'outrage.'" Like Ken Kesey, he believed that outrage was one of the most potent forms of revolutionary activity that could be undertaken at the time. Outrage, in the sense that we are considering, is what we call that form of stress experienced by people accustomed to conducting their

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affairs within the limits of contemporary social forms, when confronted with the sight of people engaged in activities that fall outside these social forms...."

"For his first Outrage," Shaw reports, "Chester chose to have a Happening" which was held in the Glide church, "located in the middle of the Tenderloin District of San Francisco, which is where all the drunks, degenerates, and losers of every description get together." The stage certainly seemed to be set for an "Outrage, in the sense we are considering," for one can be dead certain that the drunks, degenerates, and losers of every description would indeed feel outrage at the spectacle of a passel of "laughing and screaming hippies" doing their thing. The author quotes a description of the Happening at the Glide church from an old Berkeley Barb. The man from the Barb reports that of the hundreds of attendees, "Most were young people, there were a few drag queens and Hell's Angels and probably some narks and other fuzz." Certainly few of the down-and-outers of the district were around, in any case, and while the hippies at the Happening played around with drugs, sex, plastic junk, and rock music, other less fortunate people were at their usual business of starving, suffering the DTs, and picking off nits only a stone's throw away.

With such an element of tension present, the Happening ought to have been a revolutionary event indeed. But was it? Shaw doesn't tell us. He describes the hippies who were in attendance, who may have been intrigued and delighted, but hardly outraged. In any case, most of them were too stoned -- according to the author -- to care very much about outward events, having narrowed rather than broadened their mental horizons. So much for revolutionary activity.

III.

"THEN," SAYS SHAW, "there was the Bedrock" -- another Happening, or rather a series of three, of which only the first ever took place. There are some odd aspects about this event which Shaw chronicles without any particular comment. According to him, Anderson intended to perpetrate another series of "outrage upon outrage" in this event, having convinced himself, no doubt, that he had set the world on its ear with the Happening at the Glide a little earlier. Besides such minor ploys as alternating the signs saying "Men" and "Women" on the restrooms and projecting stag movies in the women's lounge, Anderson was inspired to conceive the idea of distributing drugs to the crowd -- about as original an idea as having corn liquor at a Kentucky barn dance.

Anderson is said to have worked a month or more charting "an extensive time-table for the six hours of Bedrock, listing everything he intended to occur, and when." But according to Shaw, Anderson never even thought of "checking out" the hall where the event was to take place till just the day before. He had never in his life seen the place. Now this may demonstrate what a genius Anderson is, to plan elaborately for an event without ever having seen the physical setup in which it was to occur -- but then again it may hint that he is just a damned ass.

Shaw then tells us that having had a previous experience in putting on a concert at the hall he warned Anderson about "a secret clause" in

the contracts with the proprietor of the place which gave the proprietor "the right to close the dance down at midnight, even though the promoter has paid through 2:00." Despite the warning, however, Anderson somehow "got stuck with the Midnight Clause." No doubt this is just another tribute to his godlike genius.

"In any case," Shaw concludes, "the Bedrock was a bust, Chester lost a bundle, ended up not paying some of the musicians, and of course Bedrock II and III never occurred." It is not entirely clear why Bedrock I was such a flop. Getting stuck with the Midnight Clause should not have done it, nor even the fact that Bedrock really "hadn't been an exceptional affair." Most of the customers must have paid their money long before these two factors emerged. One might almost imagine that a lot of people mistrusted Chester Anderson's ability to outrage anybody but the musicians suckered out of their money.

At this point Anderson was batting a hefty .000, and not outrage but ennui was building up, no doubt. A more constructive side to Anderson's activity in the Haight is described in the final article, called "ComCo" (Starling #16). Purchasing (on credit) a brandnew Gestetner 366 and other equipment, Anderson set up a small organization which he called the Communications Company. "Love is communication," he proclaimed, then having gotten the obligatory mysticism out of the way at first crack, he spat daintily upon his palms and set forth some practical proposals for a change: "OUR PLANS & HOPES: to provide quick and inexpensive printing service for the hip community; to print anything the Diggers want printed; to do lots of community service printing; to be outrageous pamphleteers; to compete with the Establishment press for public opinion...."

Some of these goals were actually reached, and a few others at least approached. The ComCo "put out free bulletins for the Diggers, the Mime Troupe, the Sexual Freedom League, and other such organizations and an occasional public service flash about batches of bad acid being sold on the street." Once or twice they even published an entire book, written by one Willard Bain.

Unfortunately, however, Anderson (like many a fan editor) ended up publishing too profusely of his own stuff. As a polemist he was no great shakes, although Shaw calls some of his stuff "bitter, angry essays." He depended too heavily on uninspired invective ("you are all shit"; "What kind of sucker are you? What do you suck?...And whose shit are you, little freakout?") -- Anderson could have taken lessons from F. Towner Laney -- and was too fond of sentences like this one (addressed to the Underground Press syndicate and referring to sf fandom): "It furthers a UPS member to gear now to serve the needs of the peripheral underground...." Having failed as a secondrate Ken Kesey, Anderson now aspired to become a fifth-rate Jerry Rubin.

Surveying the prospect of an invasion of San Francisco by thousands of hippies from all over the country in the summer of 1967, Anderson issued an open letter addressed to the hip community in which he pictured the "Hip Merchants" of the Haight as -- in Shaw's words -- "a pack of villains." He asked "the owners of bead and poster stores, the publishers of the Oracle, and in general anyone who stood to profit from the tourist trade on Haight street.../to/ give a share of their profits

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to the Diggers to help feed and clothe the hordes of hungry, stranded kids who'd be coming." Anderson concluded what Shaw calls "a pretty strong attack" on store-owners by writing, "If any of these merchantile phonies proves me wrong [by contributing money], I'll apologize in print in the grandest style imaginable. But I don't really expect to have to. The hucksters will find it easier to denounce me than to correct themselves, that, oh my brothers, is exactly what they'll do. But at least we will know now exactly where they're at. Remember that." Thus this "extremely polemic tract" ends not with a bang but a whimper.

As Shaw remarks, the Haight street merchants were not "evil exploiters" for the most part, or at least not major ones, and in any case Anderson's moral indignation might sit better if subsequently he did not take over Crawdaddy and become something of a "merchantile phony" himself. Rock music itself is a capitalist shuck, but not quite so insidious as the gimmick that replaced it as the subject of the Anderson-edited Crawdaddy: astrology. Anderson thus seems to deserve a tab or two of moral indignation himself for helping rook his hippy audience out of eating money. Hippies are probably the biggest suckers, hip or straight, for commercial fads in the whole world, and the question is whether Anderson in his fervor against "merchantile phonies" was a Baked Alaska, with all the heat on the outside, or merely another sucker himself, who soon relapsed after a night of fever and vision. Despite his relative age and experience -- he had made the beat scene in the 1950s, according to Shaw -- Anderson was probably only another lamb or "little freakout," like all the rest, and thus deserves more pity than censure.

IV.

ANDERSON NEVER BECAME a hero of the upper stratum in the Haight, but only reached the level of a tinpot Herostratus (the Ephesian who in 356 B.C. burned down the temple of Artemis at Ephesus in order to immortalize himself). His "outrages," futile as they turned out to be due to inept execution, never were quite balanced off by the constructive work of the "ComCo" -- or so we must infer from Shaw's account. Anderson was basically an irresponsible and destructive force throughout his nine months in Haight-Ashbury. It isn't clear exactly what happened, but before the summer of 1967 was over, the ComCo "went into hiding for a while...and finally split up in early August." As a grotesque finale, Anderson edited two issues of his Haight/Ashbury Newsletter from exile in the remote outpost of Hollywood, Florida. Presumably Florida struck him as more copesettic at the time, though Shaw never explains Anderson's urceus exit. From this distance in time, the retreat sounds like a cop-out and other unhip and unholy things Anderson professed to despise. At any rate, this dwindling glimpse from the wrong end of the telescope is the last we see of him.

As sometimes happens in the history of biography -- though commonly it is just the other way -- the subject of these articles, like Al Ashley, is far less interesting and important than his biographer, like Charles Burbee. Thus it saddens me, and starts another freshet of tears pelting into my analgesic Benedictine, when I contemplate the portrait that builds up, stroke by stroke, of Chester Anderson's biographer, Mr Greg Shaw, age 20 at the time these articles were written. The most significant of these dark touches comes in Shaw's description of his own

experience at, and immediately previous to, Bedrock I, the "outrage" aforementioned.

Shaw reports that before leaving for the affair he paid a visit to his friendly, philanthropic dope peddler, one Harry, "a quiet, shy young man" married to a Playboy Bunny (!), who was so nice and considerate of his customers that he sometimes offered them free (?) samples of "new creations" to test. (The guinea pigs must thumpingly approve of such a fellow!) En route to Bedrock on the city bus, Shaw promptly swallowed the entire purchase from his humanitarian buddy: three capsules of "clinically pure Sandoz acid...rated at 750-1000 micrograms each." He tells us, "Before we got downtown I was so far gone I didn't know what a bus was."

Led to the hall by two friends, Shaw spent the entire concert sitting on the floor, feeling like "a single point of consciousness drifting through another dimension." Because of this, he doesn't remember much about Bedrock, and of course he missed the considerable Schadenfreude of observing several hundred people willingly submit themselves to the torment of high-decibel air pollution, a pleasure that sometimes compensates for one's own agonies in such circumstances. Here he was, in the middle of one of the most fascinating cities in America, surrounded by some of the weirdest characters in the country, and he voluntarily reduced his observational powers to nil and ensmallled himself to a "single point of consciousness." One wonders what oceans of mal de siècle can possibly have engulfed such a young man and caused him eagerly to foreswear what he obviously most enjoys -- observing and communicating -- for the dubious byways of a diminishing ego trip.

In his letter published in Starling #16, Shaw reports that at the time he wrote "The Polymorphous Free-vert" -- three years after the events transpired -- "my attitude was, 'Gee, I actually did all this crazy stuff. Imagine that!' but now it's more like 'Good grief, how could I have ever been involved in such madness?'" I'm not sure that he refers here specifically to the acid episode, but there is a wan hope. But if Greg Shaw has changed, and matured, other fans, alas, have not. It is all a little sad, a little terrifying.

THE END

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