

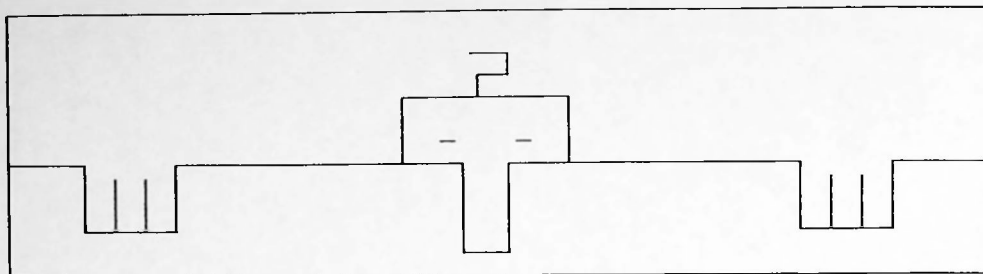
PHILOSOPHICAL GAS 78

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PO Box 80 West Brunswick 3055 Australia
for the Fantasy Amateur Press Association
and some others but especially you
and tentatively dated February 1990

30 December 1989 As the last hours of the 1980s dribble away and we prepare to enter the last year of the ninth decade of the century, I just know that some readers will feel impelled to argue with that description of 1990. Some have already done so, in effect, maintaining in FAPA mailing 208 that the last year of the twentieth century is 1999. But no argument can displace the facts of the matter. The Christian era was established by Dionysius Exiguus, at the request of Pope John I, in the year 525. It commenced, retrospectively, on 1 January 754 AUC (anno urbis conditae), which became AD 1. Dionysius did not provide a Year Zero between 1 BC and AD 1, so the twentieth century of the Christian era ends on 31 December 2000. (The only problem with little Dion's calculation is that Jesus seems to have been born about 749-750 AUC, or 5-4 BC, but if the Church can live with that discrepancy I suppose I can.)

What a boring start to *Philosophical Gas* - the *fun-filled* fanzine! Let's talk about computers. Oh, come on! I just want to mention that I have a new printer, an Epson LQ-550. It doesn't like WordPerfect 4.2, so on Christmas Day a good friend from Adelaide (no names, no piracy charges) put WordPerfect 5.0 on the computer for me. Terrific. The printer loves it. But WP5 refuses to recognize A4 paper. The hell with it. I've capitulated to the Yankee imperialists. I use that term affectionately, of course, taking neither side in the great conflict between the states and not even mentioning Panama. You can say what you like in WordPerfect 5.0. But when you get into Page Format and select A4 from the menu you are told politely that it is *unavailable*. You can have any format you want, providing it's American Quarto (any color you like, providing it's black). "It's standard," the stationers tell me. They tell me this, that 279mm x 216mm is standard paper size, in a country that purports to follow the International Standards Organization's recommendations.

Harry Bond, who writes beautifully and knows more about protasis and apodosis than I ever will, admits in *Jeux Sans Frontieres* 1 that he knows little about ISO paper sizes and would prefer quarto and foolscap any day. This sounds odd in a



I DON'T KNOW ANYTHING BUT WHAT I KNOW ABOUT ART LIKE

fanzine printed on A4 paper, but never mind. I am formatting these pages for American Quarto but they could easily end up being printed on A4, since the ISO sizes seem to be standard on photocopiers.

The ISO paper sizes are based on a rectangle with sides of proportion 1 to the square root of 2. The A series starts with A0, which is a rectangle one square metre in area, with sides 1189mm x 841mm; as you fold it you get A1, A2, A3, A4, A5, A6. The B series starts with B0, 1414mm x 1000mm (which illustrates the proportion nicely), the C series with C0, 1297mm x 917mm. The beauty of the system is that as you enlarge or reduce your material in these sizes it always occupies the same proportion of the paper. When I was doing the *Society of Editors Newsletter* I typed two columns on a sheet of B4, which was then reduced and printed on A4. The C series is intended for envelopes: A4 goes neatly into a C4 envelope. But try asking a stationer for C4 envelopes: he'll assume you said "see-fru" and direct you to the window envelopes.

I liked the little piece about the Underground, Harry. The impression made on you by the birdsong at Shadwell station is well conveyed. :: Talking to Janice Eisen, you say that her slushpile makes you think you should have a go at writing sf, since you couldn't do worse. Slushpiles have the opposite effect on me: I don't want to add to them, and I'm not at all confident that I could do better. I tried several times to write sf stories, and Ted Carnell almost published one in 1967, but my urge to write any kind of fiction is not strong.

Dave Wood's account of the Holmes in the Bristol Channel is fascinating. I particularly liked the sentence "Rabbits were followed by religion." *On the Brink* is a joy to read, Dave. Your writing is lively, and "What Robert Didn't Do And See In Avon" is nicely constructed. Your individual approach to spelling and punctuation detracts little from the reading pleasure. Is "holmes" the local plural of "holm"? OED has both "holm" and "holme" for this kind of islet, but gives the plurals "holms" and "holmes".

From Clevedon Pier to somewhere south of Massawa - a small step for a fan. Dick Eney's *Stupefying Stories* 116, the third part of his 1986 Ethiopian trip report, is the best extended piece of writing in this mailing. I recall not liking the first part for some reason. The only New Year's resolution I've made so far, Dick, is to find the two earlier parts and read the whole story in one sitting.

It's unusual to find myself agreeing with Graham Stone, but I would go along with most of his remarks to Harry Warner Jr on the subject of abortion. Normality is restored almost immediately: Graham has sampled Ursula Le Guin's fiction and generally thinks little of it; poetry ended with Robert Bridges; Graham likes some of the quotes from Janice Eisen's slushpile. I usually enjoy your writing, Graham, but sometimes it's for the wrong reasons.

And I certainly enjoy Russ Chauvenet's selection of "highlights of the mailing" in *Detours*. If I were compiling one for this mailing, Russ, I would include at least one of your remarks to Bruce Gillespie: "Since I am deaf, it was quixotic of me to buy a book accompanied by its own music on cassette." "When I finish a 40 pp fanzine ... I'm always surprised to find I have not yet exhausted my life span."

I'm not sure I can stand the pace of *Life with Gallagher*, Kathleen. Being asked to move out of the family home, ego slowly being eroded, going to "murder" parties (dare I ask what they are?), losing your job, finding Dan, suddenly getting married - all this and much more in so few pages. Ease up! :: I have a note here (without page reference) to ask you what "newly bed things" are.

A nice sentence by Sam Moskowitz in A. Langley Searle's *Fantasy Commentator* vol.6 no.3: "It is my own experience that it has always been much easier to locate material, even when rare, once I knew it actually existed." :: I wonder how Russ Chauvenet feels when he finishes an 80-page fanzine. I must admit that I rarely read all of *Fantasy Commentator*, but I admire the work that goes into it and the exemplary production.

Two hundred issues of a fanzine is not too many. Not when it's called *Horizons* and done by Harry Warner Jr. Congratulations! You may regard it as "a less complicated way of projecting into the future than by writing immortal symphonies or the Great American Novel", Harry; your readers may beg to differ; all of us salute you - and ask you, please, not to stop.

I can't recall exactly when I first read *Horizons*. I have a clear memory of a flight from Melbourne to Hobart, probably early in 1966, when I was a publisher's sales representative. On that old Electra I started reading a year's supply of *Horizons* - and finished some time later, at Hadley's hotel, or possibly at a table outside a coffee lounge off Cat and Fiddle Arcade. I was not an energetic sales rep. No, that's not true: I was energetic enough, but I never had the nerve to try to force my employer's wares on people who didn't need them. So let's just say I was not a very good sales rep. My conscience therefore allowed me time to sit over coffee in Hobart's benign sun reading science fiction, Hermann Hesse and *Horizons*. (Them was days, Joxer.)

The "Chronicles of Hagerstown" were fascinating, and I was sorry that you felt the need to stop writing them. At the time I couldn't understand why. Who on earth was likely to be embarrassed by an article in an apazine? I have since come to understand. It's a pity, but you were right: sooner or later the big world intrudes into our private little world, what we have written we have written, and our privacy is of no account. Our most profound thoughts and most shallow, our accounts of events momentous and trivial, written with humor or without, all alike become archives for future students of our times, who may not have the wit to appreciate the function of fanzines.

In light of *Philosophical Gas* 76/77's extensive discussion of Rectangular Cassidy, I am pleased to have your confirmation that the FAPA Constitution allows me to write about Buffalo William or Moby Richard if I so choose. It follows that you can say what you like about Arnold Schoenberg - even that "Schoenberg is the only famous composer who never wrote any music." I would have thought that FAPA's most perfect Wagnerite would have some regard for the *Gurrelieder* or *Pelleas und Melisande* at least. Can you listen to *Verklaerte Nacht* and say "That is not music"?

"It's almost forgotten that the fannish custom of pouring out one's soul on mimeograph stencils was pioneered by Elmer [Perdue]": I didn't know that, Harry. I always felt that I knew Elmer, and was fond of him, even though we'd never corresponded and not had much to say to each other in FAPA. :: I thought it was the "wine-dark" sea that Homer kept referring to, but even if it was "wine-red" the adjective is appropriate: red wine has many hues, none of them (none that I would care to drink anyway) truly red, and even in Australia I have seen seas that remind me of Homer's. ::: My understanding of the "sexist" origin of the possessive 's is the same as yours.

The latest annual report of the Commonwealth Ombudsman (speaking of sexism) comes down heavily on the *Commonwealth Style Manual* (fourth edition, 1988) for some of its recommendations on "non-sexist" language. This would not have happened if Janet Wyatt had lived. I worked with Janet at the Australian Government Publishing Service in 1975-76, and in 1986 she engaged me as a consultant on the fourth edition of the manual. She was killed in a car accident on 2 July that year. Little of her work is reflected in the book that was eventually published, and none of mine. Janet was an active Christian and feminist, and one of the best editors in Australia. She did not speak of "sexist" language; her approach to everything was positive; she spoke of "inclusive" language. The word does not appear in chapter 8 - "Non-sexist Language" - of the *Style Manual*. I doubt that Janet would have recommended general use of "attorney, ombud, ombudsperson, parliamentary commissioner, protector, representative (of), watchdog (colloquial)" in place of "ombudsman". In the specific sense of the word, when the gender of the person holding office is known, the manual recommends "ombudsman/ombudswoman". The Commonwealth Ombudsman points out *inter alia* that his office is governed and his title specified by an Act of Parliament, and that AGPS could be expected to know this.

A TASTE OF HEMLOCK

I enjoyed Janice Eisen's slushpile selections. We get a better class of illiteracy at *Meanjin*, but in my freelance work I see stuff that makes Janice's writers seem not just competent but brilliant. Since October 1987 I have had the honor to be poison-taster, or slushpile-reader, for the Melbourne office of a multinational book-publisher. I am required, simply, to decide quickly whether a manuscript should be looked at or rejected, and to say enough in a written report to support my decision. If I spend more than fifteen minutes on a manuscript I earn less than a proofreader. I must deal with four manuscripts per hour - look at them, make decisions, scribble reports. As well as that, since August 1988 I have typed the reports on this computer and supplied a print-out to the publisher, and kept a running index - but that's not part of the deal. So far I have reported on over 700 manuscripts. I like to think I have been fair to them all; if I haven't, I remind myself that it's my function to recommend, the publisher's to decide.

About the 200 mark I stopped trying to think of new things to say about bad books. "Unpublishable" conveys as much to the publisher as five sentences, after all. But the borderline manuscripts, the almost-books, I spend more time on. The following is a fairly random sample of reports I have written in the last year. The first line of each report briefly describes the book. The names of authors and titles of their works are omitted to diminish my legal liability.

Fantasy

Author seems to have read people like LeGuin and McIntyre, and this is her attempt at a meaningful feminist other-world fantasy. She writes reasonably well, but I didn't get much impression of pace or momentum. Not publishable in Australia, but it could have possibilities in USA if the story is good enough. Worth looking at, if that interests you.

Novel - seven people in Hong Kong

An odd sort of book, well-written, interesting, but I can't tell whether it all comes together. The basic idea is the same as Thornton Wilder's *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*: seven people die in an accident, and these are their stories. But the author has added a supernatural element. The seven are seen in hauntings, and their stories are pieced together by a journalist investigating the phenomena. Worth looking at.

Mixed-up political fantasy

Author has tried to place Aborigines in historical perspective, "from Alcheringa to Armageddon". What he achieves is an unreadable mess. (But I did like the "Cro-Magnum" people of Gondwanaland.)

Memoirs of a bookmaker

Book is untitled. "Memoirs of a Racist" is a possibility - see his anti-Semitic comments in page headed "Forward". Book is a hopeless jumble.

Novel in form of schoolgirl's diary

This is so bad it's probably authentic.

Humorous novel - out-of-work actor in London

The author suggests this book might be better appraised in UK. I agree. There's a nice oddball quality about the book that appeals to me. Worth looking at.

Children's adventure: convict girl growing up in NSW, 1820s

I can't get excited about this, but it's plain, intelligible, informative, and no worse than some children's books I've read. With illustrations it could be OK.

Verse collection

This is probably the best collection of verse I have seen from your slushpile - but don't get excited: it's unpublishable.

Spy story

Author has attempted an adventure story in the tradition of Ian Fleming, William Haggard, Robert Ludlum et al. He has failed. The advent of Gorbachev has wrecked his central thesis; the rest of the damage is his own.

Short novel - naval adventure

Brevity is its best attribute. I like the "skipper, dressed in regulation whites with epilleptes".

Fictionalized biography of A-- H--

H--, an engineer/mechanic, arrived in South Australia in time for the anti-German nastiness of 1914-18, was interned, and was deported to Germany after the war. He returned in 1929. His story is interesting. The author's promise of an account of Nazi activities in SA is interesting. But fiction overpowers fact, and the result is a mess.

200 "multicultural" jokes and yarns

There's a nice European sense of humor here. Some of the stories I read are quite funny, some not. The multicultural easily shades over to the racist, unfortunately - perhaps inevitably.

Catholic missionary in outer space

The author seems a gentle, thinking, devout sort of bloke, but his book is not much more than a presentation of the problems of religious belief. The SF aspect is minimal (in places laughable). Reject prayerfully.

Long poem

How rarely one sees nine-line rhyming stanzas these days! And such a fascinating rhyme scheme - AAAABCCCB -, which, as far as I can tell, the lady keeps up for 139 stanzas. One can only admire her energy and application. One could wish to admire more about her work, but...

Surfing spy thriller

I don't quite get the drift, but I think it's about a public servant who starts illegally investigating a mysterious installation in NSW. He falls foul of his department and ends up dead. There are lots of people; there's a lot of travelling and surfing; the public-service aspect seems authentic. I think I could happily read this novel.

Stories of boyhood in India before Independence

The author practically says in his covering letter that this book would not interest most Australians. He also says it would sell like crazy overseas. For a self-assessment, one out of two isn't bad, I suppose.

Travel book - personal, literary and unusual

Despite the accompanying self-promotion, usually a sign of an author's desperation, this book looks interesting. It's one of the few MSS I've seen lately that I wanted to go on reading. And despite P-- A--'s advice to the author, the subject of Greece and Macedonia will continue to interest many Australians.

Experimental novel

It's about the life, loves and regrets of an 83-year-old man. He is supposed to be telling these things, or thinking about them, or reliving them. All the "action" takes place in one fine day in Sydney. I don't think it works, but the author makes me think here and there that he knows what he's doing.

Two historical romances, one spy thriller (samples)

The author has nine or ten books in mind, these three becoming trilogies and the tenth being the story of his five years in jail (he's still there). I suppose it keeps him off the streets.

Novel, vaguely SF

I lost the thread a bit after Justin swept the railway tracks with his bold eyes.

Andrew Hume's expedition, 1874

This is fascinating stuff. Hume set out to find a "wild white man" who could have been a survivor of Leichhardt's fatal 1848 expedition. With Hume was Timothy O'Hea, the only man ever to win the VC in Canada, possibly the only person to win the VC while not actually fighting anyone. The Hume expedition failed; only one member survived. And it has been pretty much forgotten. Author is not a first-class writer, but a competent editor could make a publishable book out of this MS.

History of Poseidon boom and crash

Author turns 80 this year. His book is a sort of financial history of the Poseidon bubble. Those were the days, by George, out in the colonies, riding the stock-market roller-coaster! Not a word about the morality of the thing, its significance for Australia today, etc. - just great fun. I would reject it, but business is business, so I suppose you'd better look at it.

Lesbian romance

It takes Tansie 900 pages just to pass through Alix's life. If she had stayed, what truly unliftable manuscript would we have been in for? (The truth, I suspect, is that there wouldn't have been a book if real-life Tansie had stayed.) Writing is a little above Mills & Boon standard.

Novel

Badly presented (smudgy photocopy, text entirely in capitals), badly written (crook spelling, grammar, punctuation), but otherwise not very interesting.

Bad verse, corny jokes etc.

It's dedicated to his dear wife Min, who reckons he shouldn't have bothered. Agree with Min.

(a) Cartoon strips. Reasonably well drawn, not very funny; I've seen worse in print, but not in a book. (b) Short fiction and verse. Badly written, not very funny; can't recall seeing worse in print. Should someone tell him that it's an idea to put your MS in some sort of sequence - number the pages, say - then *not* staple it in the bottom right corner? No, stuff him.

Science Fiction with a Message

This is meant to be a moral tale, using the conventions of SF. The moral may be there, but the fiction is hopeless, and the book is written in some sub-dialect of English.

Violent contemporary novel, with added UFOs

The most interesting thing in this rambling mess of verbiage is one character's answer to the question "What was there before the universe started?" A Seven-Eleven store, he suggests. No-one can say this book doesn't have a touch of humor, but that was probably it.

Adventure/romance, with penguins

Anyone who can describe the government as a "bottom-like body" commands my respect. Reject respectfully.

Humorous, convivial fantasy

I don't know whether this is meant to be a children's book; with the illustrations it deserves it very well could be. I read most of it, and it's delightful.

Sort of history of Australia for younger readers

Author majored in history at UNE, now teaches it in Victoria. The writing is not good (spirited, but careless). The *history* is not good: does he really believe that in 1788 "Arthur Philip landed at Port Philip and started the convict colony of NSW"?

Author's travels (London, Ethiopia, Italy), cast as fiction

I see real promise here. Impossible to tell whether the book works as a novel, semi-documentary or whatever, since this is only half of the MS. But author has a confident voice, a viewpoint, an eye for important detail, a nice narrative pace. He would need close, sympathetic editing, but on what I've read I think he could be worth it.

Semi-autobiographical novel. Category: Poor Little Rich Girl

Author writes reasonably well, but I find her story boring, condescending, gushy and distasteful. The subject is potentially interesting: strict Baptist childhood, discovery of sex, money etc., marriage to millionaire, high life, fast lane etc., messy divorce etc., probably drugs etc. If we could get an eminent Baptist - Billy Graham, say - to pronounce it blasphemous and order her execution...

Animal allegories

This bloke seems fair dinkum, but you can take only so much of Kath Kookaburra, Ron Red-back and their animal antics. If he wants to say something about *people*, why doesn't he just do that?

Novel about the future of Britain

"The work", says the author, "has already been checked for spelling and grammar by a lecturer at London University." Obviously a lecturer in poststructuralist engineering, or psycho-acoustic plumbing perhaps, not English. The writing is stilted, the story (as much as I read) boring.

Contemporary novel - entertainment industry

Most of what I read here I found distasteful, but author has an assured and individual style, so I'll recommend that someone read more of his book. It's obvious from his covering letter that he needs encouragement, obvious from this MS that his talent deserves it.

Mystery, sort of

A rollicking yarn about murder, theft, fast cars, rape, AIDS, heroin, brothels and police work. Not well written, but you can't have everything.

Semi-mystical novel, US and Latin-American setting

"He responded with a shy acquiescent grom." Now that's something I've always wanted to do: a shy grom would probably get you through so many of life's difficult situations. There's lots of useful stuff in this book. Did you know that you can become a Baba from the Three Kona plant? "To take the root of the Kona is to eradicate history." Dangerous knowledge this, I reckon, but you could edit it out, along with the boring and pretentious parts of the book. That would leave you with two or three pages, maybe.

4 January I'm not sure that I like the justified margins in this issue. They make the page look neat, but I wouldn't allow letter-spacing in a book and am a bit unhappy about it here. Comments welcome. See you next time.