

## PHILOSOPHICAL GAS

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*16 January* Two hours since it became 16 January in New York, and if anything of note has happened in Mesopotamia I have yet to hear of it. Like any self-respecting Australian marxist Fapan – or Amerikan grammatical fascist, for that matter – I hope yet to see an outbreak of hard-headed sweet reason in Baghdad and Washington, but do not expect it. So I might as well do a few mailing comments on FAPA 213 while I'm waiting for the end of the world. Foyster would say that could well bring it on.

I don't know whether I am one of the marxists Jack Speer refers to. Perhaps he had Stone and Lindsay in mind. I can't recall ever reading Marx, but that may not excuse me. On the other hand, if Jack admits to being a grammatical fascist I would probably have to wear that label too.

And I don't know why some people call the last movement of Beethoven's ninth symphony 'the Hymn to Joy'. Perhaps that's what Beethoven wanted but his typesetter misheard him. Certainly the original title page reads: *Sinfonie mit Schluß-Chor über Schillers Ode: "An die Freude"* usw.

*17 January* He who speaks first may live to justify his words to the media. Old proverb. Operation Desert Storm has been in progress for half a day. Iraq's airforce has been decimated. With one voice, when we heard this news in the *Meanjin* office, we demanded to know what had happened to the nine-tenths left. Marxists we may be, but we are editors, and in the interest of communication we desire those who claim to have utterly destroyed something to say so – not to say that they have destroyed one-tenth of it. We admit that this may be part of the propaganda war, to deceive the opponent by claiming far less than has been achieved.

Jenny said this must be the first live-coverage-via-satellite war. I mentioned the live-coverage-by-transistor-radio Bay of Pigs affair, which made me

feel old. Later I mentioned to Sally my first 'this is it' reaction to news of war – the Suez business in 1956 – and felt even older. And I think of the muddy trenches that we played in in the vacant lot opposite Helen Street State School, Northcote, in 1943, and wonder at living so long, and the world and I learning so little in all that time.

It was most moving to hear Leonard Bernstein's pan-German orchestra and chorus performing the Beethoven 9th with the word *Freiheit* (freedom) substituted for *Freude* (joy) in the last movement, as we have always understood Beethoven intended. Not a great performance on the whole, but the word and the occasion made it memorable, and Bernstein had the good fortune to die before Saddam Hussein put the new world order to the test.

I am, perhaps, too old to believe in the possibility of a new world order. That such a thing is desirable hardly needs saying. I hear that socialism is dead, that capitalism is dead: these things we know are untrue. I detect the beginning of another untrue thing, that nationalism is dead, superseded by something called 'collective world security'. I wish I could believe that, but I know it's just another lot of muddy trenches we play in as we await the sirens of Armageddon, which we will probably not watch night-long, live, on television.

*18 January* Sally's boss, Lazarus, was off to a party last night to celebrate. 'Celebrate what?' Sally said, and made clear her feeling that such a thing was inappropriate. When she rang me today with the news that Israel had been bombed I suggested that Lazarus's celebration had been a bit premature. She said he had said much the same. I haven't met Lazarus, but I like him, and I feel for him: he has many relatives in Israel, I have none. If I have any relatives involved in this conflict they are probably American aerospace technologists. I don't know of any Bangsunds 'on the ground', as they say.

*Alle Menschen werden Brüder . . .*

Elaine Cochrane says 'They can put a man on the moon. Why don't they put them all there?'

Crossing back to Jack Speer in our Albuquerque studio . . . Jack, am I the first to tell you that the Terraplane was a Hudson? (More important: can I trust my memory on that?) ::: New England is the north-eastern part of New South Wales. The earliest reference to the name that I know of is dated 1836, but it was apparently well-established then. ::: I am distressed to learn that Rectangular Cassidy gambled. ::: 'I'd' and the like are Foystrialien spellings, not Australian; they may have some limited use in distinguishing between 'I had' and 'I would', but otherwise do not contribute much to the new world order. ::: If you didn't say it, I suspect that John D. Berry called fanzines 'the continuing conversation'. :::



I thought I spelt out the International Standards Organization's edicts on paper sizes. The basic unit is A0, which is a sheet of paper one square metre in area, with sides in the ratio of 1 to  $\sqrt{2}$ . As you fold this sheet, the smaller sizes retain that ratio, so image reduction is simple and constant. A sheet of A4 size, such as this, is one-sixteenth of an A0 sheet. ::: I don't know anything about William Haggard's relations, only his novels, which an old friend of mine once described as the kind of novels C. P. Snow might have written if he had been interested in the genre. ::: 'Reckon' is good colloquial Australian for 'think'. ::: I recommended 'Reject' or 'Stage 2', the latter meaning 'I can't reject it, so it's your problem.' ::: I have read animal and alien allegories, sometimes with enjoyment. This writer didn't have the knack, and should have attempted to write about people. ::: Poseidon was a mining company that discovered nickel in Western Australia. In 1969-70 its \$1 shares shot up to about \$300 before common sense set in.

That merry chap Percy Grainger coined the term 'alternative pugilistics'. I don't know what it means either, Jack. Leafing through *Synapse*, my colleague David Greagg struck the word LOFGEORNOST, told me what it meant, and went on to tell me the story of the Battle of Maldon. I may yet ask him to write mailing comments for me. You would find him an interesting dinner companion, Fred. Can't say I've heard of Lucy Boston, but I would certainly invite Sydney Smith to dinner. Thanks for your account of the Panshins' book.

My copy of Diana Christian's singing Christmas card may be untypical, but you seem to have invented the unplayable cassette, David, or fallen victim to its inventor. If I could take the casing apart I could probably move the tape so it makes contact with the capstan, but the casing is moulded, not screwed. A nice thought anyway. *Or did I get the agnostic version?*

Speaking of religious publications, Brian Earl Brown mentions the absence of ¢ from computer keyboards. I have sometimes wondered why £ is missing. The major programs these days, I imagine, compensate for these oversights as WordPerfect does, by giving you hundreds of symbols to play with. Whether your printer can reproduce them is another matter. My humble Epson LQ550 can do an *í* (italic i circumflex), but last time we tried it on Lisa's HP LaserJet II (on which this is printed) it came out roman. ::: I still don't know why WP 5.0 wouldn't let me have A4, but there's no such problem in version 5.1. From Lisa and from Robert Lichtman I gather that I am fortunate to have an early copy of 5.1. And from Jenny Lee, who has just acquired a 286 with VGA color monitor, I gather that my choice of white-on-black VGA monochrome was equally fortunate. The package I started with included a

color monitor, 20Mb HD and 640kb RAM; I swapped that for mono, 44Mb HD, 2Mb RAM and a mouse, and reckon I came out of the deal fairly well. If I had thought that my favorite usurers would lend me two or three hundred dollars more I would have gone for an 80Mb hard disk and 4Mb of RAM. You need a lot of RAM to run WordPerfect 5.1 — 640kb makes it very slow, as I think Robert has found. Lisa tells me that WordPerfect for Windows recommends a minimum of 2Mb. I can't afford to get excited about WP for Windows yet, but Foyster insists I invest in Windows itself, which I will do real soon now, courtesy of the Australian Taxation Office, which has just sent me a refund cheque.

*20 January* Since Friday I have refrained from taking a minute-by-minute interest in the progress (if that's the word) of the war. It's all too depressing for words. *Mozart before missiles!* I thought as I drove home on Friday, listening to the former on 3MBS on the car radio while most of the other stations were burbling endlessly about the latter. A 'barrage of information', someone called it on Wednesday, accidentally using 'barrage' in its original sense (from French *barrer*, to obstruct). As I write (3.54 p.m.) 3MBS is playing Haydn's *Creation*, and at any moment they'll be up to 'The heavens are telling'. Yep. Terrific. In Baghdad it's 7.59 a.m., coming up to the hour. Do they see the glory of God in the firmament this morning, or the enduring folly of Man?

For me the most memorable and personally confronting thing in FAPA 213 is a paragraph in Roy Tackett's *Notes from Arinam*:

Camus wrote "To grow old is to move from passion to compassion"? He was playing with words for that is not necessarily true. I find that as the weight of years increases it squeezes compassion into something smaller and smaller. There is little left. I am becoming one with the universe. The universe doesn't care. Neither do I.

In *PG* 79 I mentioned Nietzsche's 'noise on dark streets', the noise we make in an uncaring universe. Camus took this a little further — if I understand him aright. The absurdity of existence is that nothing matters, ultimately; but that frees me to decide what matters. As I get older some things matter more and some less, some not at all. In my universe Roy Tackett matters, and so do the people of Iraq and Kuwait and Israel. There are more of them than there is of Roy, but there is a limit to my 'compassion', only so much suffering I can in any way comprehend, so Roy matters more to me than they do.

And so do you.