S F COMMENTARY 44/45

AUTHORS' SPECIAL:

SFC looks at
the work of

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Bruce Gillespie
Gerald Murnane

URSULA K LE GUIN
George Turner
Angus Taylor

PHILIP K DICK
Angus Taylor

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A & B STRUGATSKI
JACQUES STERNBERG
Gerald Murnane
George Turner
Bruce Gillespie
Barry Gillam
James Mark Purcell

FOOTNOTE
or, lack-of-foot note

Because of a stupid mistake, I chopped the foot off the cover drawing. Apologies to

MICHELINE CYNA TANG

who was the cover artist. Because of a second stupid mistake, I left off her name from the Contents Page. Blush, blush.

SECOND FOOTNOTE
Phone numbers:
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S F COMMENTARY 44/45

December 1975
104 pages

SUBSCRIBERS AND LIBRARIANS:
Because of Circumstances Beyond My Control (see pages 8, 9, and 99) the fabled Bob Tucker Issue, SFC 43, has been delayed indefinitely. So, for subscription purposes, the Tucker Issue will be counted as No 45, and the current issue will be counted as No 43/44. Please do not be surprised if you receive a re-subscription letter after the appearance of the current issue.

However, librarians please note that the Tucker Issue will still be No 43 and official publication date will still be August 1975. Please reserve a spot for it on the shelf.

PHILIP K DICK: ELECTRIC SHEPHERD is the first in the series "The Best of S F Commentary" and it has been published just recently (see page 9). $A4 from Norstrilia Press (same address as SFC) or $US6 from Fred Patten, 11863 West Jefferson Blvd, Apt 1, Culver City, California 90320, USA.

I've just found out that The Wind's Twelve Quarters, by Ursula K Le Guin, will be released in England on 18 March 1976 by Victor Gollancz; 303 pages; £3.75 (see page 20).

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Last stencil typed
8 February 1976.

I MUST BE TALKING TO MY FRIENDS

MY 1975: EVERYTHING HAPPENED

* In the report I wrote about my 1974, I said that not much happened during that year. A nice year, but dull. Never again will I complain that nothing happened. In 1975 everything happened.

* My 1975 began on 21 November 1974. On a warm evening, I was sitting in my comfortable living room, reading a book, as is my usual custom - when all hell broke loose next door. It must be brimstone season, since hell has remained rampant ever since. Windows were thrown up; floors clattered; the sounds of loud, drunken, offensive voices interrupted my reading. I sat still, horrified. "Not..." I thought, "Not...new neighbours!" I threw down the book and wandered around the place, feeling attacked and wounded. I could hear the Ghastlies, as I came to think of them, out on the neighbouring balcony. Already they were shouting at people who walked past on the street underneath. "Bite yer bum!" shouted one particularly loud, penetrating voice. It was the most intelligent remark any of them said while they lived next door.

It's difficult to describe the tranquility of my physical surroundings until that moment. I live in a terrace house in Carlton, one of a series of houses that were built probably in the 1880s. It has thick walls and floors. For the first eighteen months that I lived there, I heard almost nothing from my neighbours. On one side were the Nagorckas and assorted friends. At one stage, five people shared that house and I heard almost nothing from them. Underneath are Martin and Noelle. Occasionally I would hear their small daughter and, even more occasionally, their record player. For the first year I was at Carlton Street I heard absolutely nothing from the house on the other side of me. Martin would tell me every now and again that people actually lived there, but I was tempted not to believe him. In May 1974, the owners moved but had not yet sold the house. They rented it to five students and again, I heard almost nothing from them. I guess I came to believe that I lived in the quietest spot in Melbourne, which is just the way I like to live. I had come to believe that no noise could cross from either of the two next-door places to mine. This belief was incorrect.

The new neighbours got worse as November turned into December. So did my temper and rate of adrenalin production. What could I do when, a week after moving in, the Ghastlies brought in a record player which they never played at less than top volume, and often played all day? What could I do when they ruined my sanctified sleeping times and actually woke me up by yelling at the tops of their voices at 7 o'clock in the morning! Hell indeed. The greatest advantage of my present work and mode of living has been that I could wake up as late as I liked. Seven in the morning, even a bright, hot Melbourne December morning, felt like the middle of the night.

What could I do? I complained, of course - three times. The only bloke I talked to, who looked quite inoffensive, apologised for the noise and said that they would be in the house until the end of January. I shuddered, and went back inside my place to await the sudden silence. No sign of it. Instead, they turned up the volume of the record player.

These things matter to me, you see, although I am sure that many people could have lived in the situation while rarely noticing the noise from next door. When outside noise interrupts my concentration, I can't read or sleep. I spend hours grinding my teeth and shouting mentally, "Shut up! Shuttup! Shuttuuuup!"

Or I go into exile. I get out of the house. This is what happened during December, and is really the point of it all. In SFC 41/42, I gave the impression that things went well for me during 1974, but that I didn't seem to enjoy things going well. I could not work out what was the matter. I kept pounding myself over the head and saying to myself, "Be happy, you idiot, be happy! Things are going well." Yet I went through what I now recognise as the beginnings of depression, only made worse by incipient self-pity and a seeming inability to do anything creative apart from the writing and editing which earned me money. After the Ghastlies moved in next door, I realised what had been happening to

me. I had nothing or no one to hate except myself. Now I had a very obvious object of hatred. I couldn't stay at home and read and vegetate, so I began to go to films and see people. Fairly soon I was enjoying life more than I had since returning from the overseas trip.

December was an extraordinary month. The Australia Cinema ran a series of movie double-bills, including many films I had never had the chance to see before. At last I could see Robert Altman's marvellous fantasy, Brewster McCloud, and saw Play It Again, Sam for the first time (it's all about me). Bergman's Virgin Spring and Cries and Whispers were a bit much to take on the one bill, but that night was more than made up for when Don Ashby, Ken Ford, and some of their friends from the State College went to see the Marx Brothers' Big Store and Night at the Opera. We felt intoxicated after seeing those two films, although we hadn't been drinking at all. When I went to see Bunuel's Viridiana and The Exterminating Angel, I ran into Carmel and Barry Oakley at the Australia. The latter film in particular gave Barry enough comic ideas to keep him going for a year of play-writing. ("When the film ends, will we be able to get through the cinema door? If so, will there be an invisible wall around Melbourne?") Then there was the night I staggered (literally) home after seeing Coppola's The Conversation, after recognising so much of me and my situation in Gene Hackman's overwhelmed face and mania for privacy.

But that was only part of December. Things kept happening, mainly because I felt that I couldn't stay at home and face the possibility of events not happening. I took up swimming for the first time in more than ten years. A doctor had told me in September that I should take up swimming three times a week to save my spine from inevitable future collapse. However, I gained a pass from Melbourne University to use the pool at the Beaurepaire Centre only by the end of November. The first time I tried, I could not even swim a length of the pool. I sweated for half an hour afterwards. It was most embarrassing. The doctor hadn't been kidding when he had said that I was about the least fit man of my age that he had ever met. Still, I managed to swim at least twice a week during all December, took off weight, and even became a bit fit. Which was good, because swimming is about the only form of physical exercise which appeals to me in the slightest.

Parties happen in December, and I went to some good ones. I renewed friendships and made new friends. Frank Payne gave me my first Tarot reading, and a very pleasant girl "adopted" me at the annual party of Publications Branch, where I used to work. Unfortunately, she was married. Don Ashby and Ken Ford had just moved in at 259 Drummond Street, to begin the slanshack which became Innuendo Inc and, eventually, the Magic Pudding Club. This establishment has been a great cultural institution in Carlton, and the temporary home, on some occasion or other, of most of Australian fandom. My friends Rick and Reen were living in a flat in Elwood at the time, so one day I visited them, and went swimming in the sea for the first time since 1963.

What did I do when I was at home? Since it wasn't quiet enough to read, I began to write again. I began notes for the article which became eventually the review of Gerald Murnane's Tamarisk Row, and appeared in SFC 41/42. During the times when I could work, I put everything into that article. It even took a week to find one quotation which I needed to sum up the rest of the article. As usual when I finish a long article, I felt exhilarated by the whole process. I felt my mind begin to unfreeze. I could work again.

If only those bloody neighbours would go away - if they would just... go... away. On one night a few days before Christmas, they began what seemed like their Christmas party (more loud record-playing; more shouting at passers-by in the street; noise! noise!), so I rang up my parents, bundled some things into a bag, took a taxi to Flinders Street station, and went to visit my parents over Christmas. I didn't want to return to Carlton Street ever. But parents are quite soothing people as long as you don't have to live with them, and after a few days in the Dandenongs, up at Belgrave where my parents live, I felt almost sane again. Except that every time I thought of going home, I felt that familiar cold panic in my stomach. But I had to go back.

It was one of those pleasant, sunny days between hot spells, one of those days which almost make a Melbourne summer worth living through. I was trembling when I put the key in my door. Would a blast of 100-decibel Elton John knock me onto the floor as soon as I entered the house? Would there be some yokels frolicking outside, yelling so loud they could be heard from one end of the street to the other? No. I looked out the window cautiously. No sign of anybody from next door. Oh well, I thought, they'll be back. They always come back. It's only the nice people who move away. Perhaps they are away between Christmas and New Year. They'll be back. I went into the back yard and found Martin, enjoying the sun, swinging on a seat suspended from a tree, and reading The Farthest Shore. He said that They had been away since Christmas Eve, and hadn't been seen since. I breathed slightly easier, but not much. One must stay prepared.

Somehow They never came back. There was nobody next door until the end of January, when the new owners moved in. That's when the story gets really ghastly. But meanwhile I lived through the most idyllic January I have ever experienced.

January in Melbourne is usually a rough month. In January 1973, for instance, the temperature went into the 90s (Fahrenheit) on almost every day of the month. The wind swings around to the

northwest, a high pressure stays stationary, and a corridor of hot air from the centre of Australia blows right into every corner of the city. Usually my flat gets hotter and hotter, and takes days to cool after the southerly change arrives. But in January 1974, cool winds blew most of the time, and the warm days had moderate north-easterlies, which were quite cool at night. I could throw open the windows and let the house lose heat. As each day went by, miraculously free from noise and heat, I settled down to read, write, and enjoy life as I had not done for some time. Now that I had finished the Tamarisk Row essay, I could begin to plan SFC 41/42, which originally I had expected to publish the preceding October.

January began with a gathering at Foysters' farm near Kyneton and a missed Nova Mob. The Nova Mob had actually begun its resurrection steak in December, with the discussion of The Dispossessed to which George Turner referred in his article in SFC 41/42. The idea itself had been dusted off its three-year-old shelf some time before. Joyn Foyster, Carey Handfield, and I wanted Melbourne to have a meeting where s f fans, and others, could actually talk about science fiction. (Melbourne s f fans meet quite often, but for almost any other purpose but talking about our favourite reading matter.) The first meeting of the new series was successful, and so have been most of the others. (About the only two unsuccessful ones were held at my place.) I had to miss the January meeting, which discussed the Basic S F Library.

January had all sorts of delights: the housewarming when Robin Johnson and Peter Darling moved into a new flat in St Kilda (Robin had been at 259 Drummond Street and Peter had just arrived from Sydney); the visit to Melbourne of Sally and John Bangsund; various frivolities at 259 Drummond Street, including mass readings from Lord of the Rings, and...

SYNCON '75

* I'm not sure why, but I didn't really expect to enjoy the Sydney Convention which was held at Macquarie University, 24-27 January. Maybe it was the price of the air fare to Sydney which put me off. Or the quite warm weather which I faced when I arrived. Or the fact that I had not moved more than 25 miles from the centre of Melbourne since I had arrived back in Australia from England almost exactly a year before.

So I became more and more amazed as I began to realise that, yes, I was back in Sydney, that most exciting city, and yes, the Convention was going to turn out very well. (I could still remember the strange reaction I had to Ozcon the previous August, after which I had wondered whether I would ever enjoy a convention again.) I have some vague memory go going out to the Convention site by train with Robin Johnson, of registering and paying money at the Convention, of trying to talk to Eric Lindsay as he tried to organise events, of meeting people like Margot D'Aubbonnett whom I had known only through letters, and others, like Franz and Sonya Kantor, whom I had never met before, and haven't heard of since. There was Shayne McCormack, organising things. And enough Melbourne fans nearly to fill the place. And Alan Evans, unrecognisable in short hair.

I can't say much about the Convention, except that bits of the program itself were enjoyable, and the room parties were marvellous. A few of us got very maudlin on the first night, and one very drunken Englishman was still rambling on when I went to sleep at about 3am. We had some sleep one of the nights, but on the last night enough of us were still up at 3 am for us to hold the Business Meeting for the Convention. This was only after about thirty of us crowded into a room meant for three, and held the best room party I've been squeezed into. People like Damien Broderick, Helen and Leigh Hyde, and various others were involved.

My real convention took place during the week after Syncon. This is the first chance I have had to thank, in print, people like Marea and Ken Ozanne (and Alexander), Keith Curtis, and Eric Lindsay, who helped me have a great week in and near Sydney. Even the weather helped, with day after day of cool, sunny days.

On the last day of the Convention, Eric drove me up to his place at Springwood (his address says Faulconbridge, but that's only the address of his mail drop). By some process of ingenuity which I never expect to emulate, Eric arranged to have his house built to his own specifications. One of those specifications was that Eric would be able to Get Away From It All. In that respect, he hasn't been too successful. In Springwood, more than thirty miles from the centre of Sydney, the street where Eric lives is already becoming like any suburban street. In everything else, Eric is establishing a fan's paradise. Soon every room will have bookshelves...filled. Eric has records and a record-player and tape equipment. He has spare beds for visitors and some spare food and drink for the weary Melbournian tourist. And Eric is interesting to talk to, which is more than I can say for myself. In fact, Eric is funniest when he talks about his own weakness - his foible for miserliness, if that's a "weakness". If we all took as much trouble as Eric to buy only the cheapest, all prices would stay at 1950 levels.

Eric is not the only fan in the area. The Clarke family were living at Warrimoo at the time, and the Ozanne family live nearby at Faulconbridge. Ken, Marea, and Alexander live in a small house with a large backyard (including a mountain valley and a waterfall). The small house contains a vast number of books and what seemed like a continuous s f convention the whole time I was in the area. We took time out from discussing science fiction (for Sydney fans actually like

discussing s f, compared with their Melbourne counterparts) to visit the Blue Mountains. My parents are fond of Scenic Wonders, but even their praise for the Blue Mountains, about 40 miles west of Sydney, had given me little idea of how remarkable they are. Place a sponge cake on a plate, cut around the sides of the cake at random, and imagine yourself as a beetle looking over the side of the cake into the "valleys" below. That's what the Blue Mountains are like from the top. Rock formations stick out from the sides, and people like Ken Ozanne enjoy climbing out to such features as the Three Sisters. Since I have an acute fear of heights, I didn't enjoy that bit of the tour.

But I enjoyed everything else: thanks to Blue Mountains fandom for the trips round the hills, and the omelettes which Marea makes so well, and those very expensive wines Ken can retrieve from under his house at the drop of a name. Thanks also to Eric for taking me to visit John Gibson. Readers of early SFC (say, 1969-71) will remember quite a few entertaining articles which John contributed. I had never met him, but had exchanged tapes with him. I had never been able to persuade him to visit a Sydney convention. But finally we did get to talking outside that small house at Blaxland, and I found that John is just as interesting to talk to as he is to write to. And he mounts his verbal attack on cities and cars very well.

Keith Curtis is as much of a book-maniac as Eric and the Ozannes, and twice as enthusiastic. Keith's specialty is book retrieving. He claims that he visits every central-Sydney second-hand book store and "junk shop" at least once a week, and has visited most in the Sydney metropolitan area. That's hard work, since even central Sydney has many more secondhand shops than Melbourne has. Being shown Sydney bookshops by Keith Curtis is one of those exhilarating (and exhausting)(and expensive) experiences which I recommend to every true reader and book collector. Probably he'll set up a guided tour for a small fee. And he will find almost any book ever printed for you, as long as you give him enough time. (For a small fee, of course.) He's also good to yarn to, even if he never quite writes the reviews he promises to do while he is talking to you. Thanks, Keith, for showing me Sydney, and for letting me stay in that book-filled flat. Most unforgettable moment of the trip: sipping coffee on the plaza in front of the Sydney Opera House, with the Harbour Bridge on one side, the Opera House behind, and the Harbour in front,

Or was that the most unforgettable moment? I will never forget the expressions on the faces of either Ken or Keith when I picked up a book in a tiny, cluttered junk shop in Lawson, a small Blue Mountains town, and handed it to Ken. "Would this be any good?" I said, "It's the Arkham House edition of Stanley Weinbaum's The Black Flame." I don't think Keith has ever forgiven me for handing it to Ken first.

GHASTLIES II

* On Saturday, 8 February, not long after I arrived back from Sydney, They held a party. It finished about 4.30 am, which was the earliest I could get to sleep.

This is a different They: these are the owner of the house next door and friends. They moved in during January, but I heard little sound from them until this particular night. Quickly I realised they were going to be (and still are) just as pestilential as the blokes who were in the house during December. My temper and adrenalin rate started rising again. How to declare war?

Not to labour the point, They have beaten me on all fronts so far. Well, not quite. About a week after The Big Party, they began something similar, but this time they started at midnight. About 2.30 am, I knocked on the door, and received what I can only describe as a smart-arse reply. But the character who owns the house (young; unmarried; "well-spoken"; obviously rich) made a big mistake. Out of ritual politeness, he invited me in "to have a few beers". So, dressed only in the ragged bits and pieces I had put on when I gave up trying to sleep, I went in to "meet the gang". Some of the overdressed people had the grace to be embarrassed by the interruption to their party, and the reason for it, but everybody, conspicuously, failed to turn down the record-player. One bloke actually made conversation. I was told that Mine Host - my unwanted neighbour - was in "the rag trade", ie the chief designer of some clothing company. The others looked as if they put most of his products on their backs. More interesting was the house itself. Its basic design is the same as the house where I live, but whereas the decor of my place is almost non-existent, next door is decked out in white and gold, with polished floors and wooden fittings. Very impressive. When I get $50,000 from somewhere and buy this house, or one like it, maybe I can make my own living quarters slightly less dingy. (But I can think of better things to do with $50,000, like quit work and publish fanzines for the next twenty years.)

The final turn of the screw - or should I say, the latest? - was when Next Doors acquired two dogs. Not any two dogs, of course, but neurotic dogs which shuffle and scuffle and whine and bark at all hours of the day and night. It has now reached the point where I can't sleep in the bedroom, for fear of being woken at some unattractive hour, like 6.30 am. Blaah to bad neighbours. Too bad I can't afford to m

Not that this diatribe is the point of what I am trying to say. The point is that it is very difficult to relax when you know that, at any time of the day or night, some horrible sound might disturb you. No sleeping in the middle of the day - the dogs will bark, disturbing a nice dream. No staying up most of the night reading, secure in the knowledge you can sleep

in next morning. I don't even have much security in settling down for a good night's reading; They will come home and turn on their record-player. So I tended not to relax. As the record player went louder, I typed louder. Plagued by other disturbances, I would go out and see friends. It's been the best thing that has happened to me, after the lethargy and depression of 1974. Now that somebody keeps kicking over my garden patch, I can hardly sit still and vegetate. In 1975 I even did some of the things I set out to do.

OWEN'S END

* On Friday 21 March, I picked up my copy of Nation Review as usual, and turned to John Hepworth's "Outsight" column on the back page. There was Hepworth's "obituary" for Owen Webster, who I had last seen only two weeks before. I could barely speak for the rest of the day. I still miss his counsel, friendship, and empathy. A special introduction to, and appreciation of Owen Webster accompanies his article on John Wyndham (see page 41).

THREE ROADS TO A GIVEN CONVENTION

* On 22 April, Carey Handfield helped me to transport all the copies of SFC 41/42 to the Carlton Post Office for despatch. Six months in the making, the monster was out of my hands at last. (And, thanks, Carey and John Foyster, for collating help, and to others who helped.)

On 23 April I dislocated my shoulder. I ran down one side of the stairs which split my flat into two, jumped across to the other side, and slipped. Result: the bone in one shoulder stuck out about half an inch from where it should have been. Luckily, Martin and Noelle were home, and Martin was able to take me straight down to the Casualty Department of St Vincents Hospital, and next day a specialist was able to strap up the shoulder. My arm was anchored to the side of my body for the next four weeks. It didn't hurt too much, but it was hell trying to tuck myself into bed. As Charles Taylor said (he was visiting on the night of the accident), "I'm glad it happened after you had finished S F Commentary."

My parents took care of me for the next week or so (aren't parents nice at times like this?). While I was staying at their place at Belgrave, I began to write my notes for the Tucker article. Also I edited some proofs for the Dick book and did some work for the Writers' Workshop. So began The Three Months: that most intense period of activity ever in my life.

* Carey Handfield was one of the people who helped to arrange a meeting with John Counsel in the first place. John is an amiable bloke from onthaggi. He arranges printing jobs. xHe's been interested in s f for some time, and wanted to publish a magazine about science fiction without ever having heard about fanzines. When he heard about them, he thought it would be a good idea if he came to some agreement with somebody like me, already publishing a fanzine, who could prepare the copy for a collective magazine. John would do the graphics and arrange to print it at a cheap rate. On this basis, Carey and I decided to go ahead with two projects in assocation with John Counsel - the Tucker issue of SFC and the Philip Dick book.

And, so that these projects could be completed. Carey decided to be my Business Manager. I don't think he enjoyed this job very much, but it worked. Left to myself, I would not have completed the work on the Tucker article, or on the Dick book, or the work I had promised to do for the Writers' Workshop. Carey's method was simple. On one day, he said, I would write some more notes for the Tucker article. On Day 2 I would type some more copy or edit proofs for the Dick book. On Day 3 I would do some organising for the Writers' Workshop. Carey would remind me of each deadline as it approached. For once, I didn't need to think about organising myself, and so the arrangement worked.

APOLOGIES TO BOB TUCKER...AND EVERYBODY

* Our arrangements with John Counsel were always rather risky. Beside doing two projects for Carey, he had also promised to complete the Souvenir Book for the World Convention. However, he promised that he could complete the three pieces of work. Unfortunately, he finished only two. The Tucker issue is the casualty.

Even by the middle of 1974, Jackie Franke had raised enough money to bring Bob Tucker to Australia for the World Convention. However, I still felt that I should publish a special Tucker issue of S F Commentary, concentrating on Tucker the writer. (Other fanzines have done a good job of showing Tucker the fan.) Lesleigh and Hank Luttrell were eager to donate articles about Tucker's mystery novels and his latest s f novel. Denny Lien contributed a bibliography, and S F Echo gave me permission to run the Tucker interview. All that remained was for me to write the lead article - on Tucker's science fiction novels. It was going to take a month to plan and write, and be about 9000 words. I planned to finish writing it by October 1974. Instead I began the notes for it in late April and finished the article on 27 July. By that time I had completed about 60,000 words of notes and an 18,000-word article.

As far as I know, it's a marvellous issue. John Counsel had completed all the proofs before the World Convention, and I was really hoping to hand a copy to Bob Tucker at the Coventnion. It's all sitting there: 40,000-

50,000 words of the best material anybody is ever likely to devote to this underrated author. The point of it - Tucker's triumphal trip - has been lost, but I'd still like to see a copy of the Tucker SFC. But it still hasn't been printed, and I don't know where I will ever see a copy. I suppose if the worst comes to the worst I can type up a duplicated copy, but it won't be what I envisaged. Apologies, Bob. Sorry, Hank and Lesleigh and Jackie and Denny and Paul and others who contributed.

AT LAST...PHILIP K DICK: ELECTRIC SHEPHERD

* People who are embarrassed by commercial breaks may stop reading for the next few paragraphs. One of our projects worked. Somehow, against all the odds, Carey and John and I did produce the first volume of "The Best of S F Commentary": Philip K Dick: Electric Shepherd. It is produced by Carey and Me - also known as Norstrilia Press. I edited it, sort of. Irene Pagram sweated blood and ink to produce its great cover. Since she didn't get paid paid much for it, she did all that work mainly out of love for Phil Dick's work. Roger Zelazny wrote us an Introduction at almost no notice. Mrs Linebarger let us use the Cordwainer Smith phrase of "Norstrilia". The book includes the Vancouver Speech, "The Android and the Human", from SFC 31; Lem's analysis of Dick in "Science Fiction: A Hopeless Case - With Exceptions", from SFC 35/36/37; my articles from SFCs 1, 2, 4, and 9; replies from Dick and George Turner; and George's remarkable Devil's Advocate summing-up of Dick's career. It costs $4 Australian or $US6. We urge you to buy it. (This is not to make anybody rich, but simply so we might get on and produce the next in the series.)

There's not much to say about this except that John Counsel did a beautiful job on this book, and that somehow I fitted in the work on this book as well as doing everything else. People tell us now that Carey and I set a world record by setting up, printing, and publishing a book such as this in three months. Well, it had to be ready for the World Convention, remember.

A TRIP TO THE GROUP MIND... AUSTRALIAN S F WRITERS' WORKSHOP

* The story of the Writers' Workshop begins more than a year ago, and the process of its gestation forms an epic of which Robin Johnson is the hero, and the full story of which may never be told.

It's all Ursula Le Guin's fault (if I may (re) coin a phrase). About this time last year, she had almost reached the stage where she could no longer see a way to attend the World Convention in Melbourne and also accompany her family to England in August this year. Besides, I don't think she really knew what science fiction conventions were all about. Perhaps she took Stanislaw Lem seriously when he described conventions as "gay parties".

At any rate, she wanted to do something "serious" during her stay in Australia as well as be Guest of Honour at the Convention. She suggested that we run a writers' workshop for previously unpublished writers. Which, as we found out, takes about nine months of organising.

Robin Johnson, our noble Worldcon Committee Chairman and doer of all good deeds, pointed at me and said, "You're It." "But," said our quivering reporter, "everything I've ever tried to organise has been a complete failure." "This had better not be a failure," said Robin, and left me with the job.

Somehow Robin kept doing most of the jobs anyway. Our first task was to gain finance for the Workshop. We had to spend several weekends writing long-winded appeals to the Arts Council for money. Then Robin spent hours on the phone ~~pleading~~ persuading Dr Costigan to give us the money. Finally he told us that we had received the money, and we could begin true preparations. Meanwhile, Carey and I had spent some time in the Dandenongs getting lost down bush tracks and talking to the proprietors of guest houses and country pubs. We made a tentative booking, but later found the ideal place for a Workshop - Booth Lodge. Still meanwhile, Robin placed another application for funds to help people to attend what could only be a very expensive Workshop. Again, success. In the long run, the budget for the Workshop was about half that of the entire World Convention, but if only a few of our aims are fulfilled, the investment will have been worth it.

As Australian Administrator of the Workshop, I made one major gaffe, but I'm not sure that it's correctable. Lots of people who would have liked to have attended the Workshop didn't hear about it. I still don't know how I could have told them. We placed 1000 copies of the "prospectus" in with the Space Age Newsletter. I had expected that they would reach most people seriously interested in writing science fiction in Australia. As it turned out, the most successful source of entrants were the various branches of the Fellowship of Australian Writers. The FAW accepts as associates unpublished writers, compared with the ASA. Eventually 47 people applied for entry forms, and 24 people submitted stories.

* It's very difficult to describe quite how hectic were the last weeks before the World Convention. Eventually we had to guess who was attending, for instance, and so draw up a Program in a night. At one stage it looked as if the Souvenir Books would not arrive. And somehow we had to photocopy 20 copies each of every page of one story from each of 20 people attending the Workshop. And I didn't have to do any of that horrible job, since such marvellous people as Ken Ford, John Ham, Don and Derrick Ashby, and I-don't-know-how-many other people ran them off during the week before the Workshop. At the same time I was finishing the ubiquitous Tucker article and falling in love. But that's another story.

Robin even did most of the work of finding transport for people from Melbourne to Booth Lodge, since, by the night of Friday, 1 August, I was scarcely in a condition to think about putting one foot in front of the other. (Neither was Robin, but he kept going anyway.) All of us, including the interstate people, met at Cahill's restaurant and then travelled by car to Booth Lodge, about two miles beyond Belgrave (that is, about thirty miles due east of Melbourne, and very much in the hillside country of the Dandenong Ranges). Ursula was expected to arrive from Sydney the next morning. I was very nervous.

I had based the entire organisation of the Workshop upon suggestions from Ursula herself, in innumerable letters, and Vonda McIntyre, who helped Ursula to run something similar at Washington State University. I had a few ground rules - make sure people are physically comfortable; that they have typewriters galore and a photcopier; that they realise that a Workshop is a working week, not a holiday. When I arrived at Booth Lodge, it was as if I had radiated my expectations for the Workshop by telepathy. Everybody was sitting in a circle, industriously reading each other's stories. Not a sound. Mrs Chisholm, in charge of Booth Lodge, met me at the door, and did her best to keep things running smoothly during the next week. ("You look so delightfully vague," she said to me next day, as I wandered around wondering what an Administrative Organiser should do.)

The working mood did not fade during the entire week. I was amazed. After she arrived on the Saturday, Ursula was amazed. It was like being part of a group mind. In the mornings we would tear apart the stories which were submitted before the Workshop began. In the afternoons, we would tear apart (and often read aloud) the stories which we had written overnight. Ursula would give us our next assignment. As soon as the evening meal finished, everybody would rush to typewriters, wrinkle brows, pace floors, and produce the extraordinary pieces which we read the next day.

"Perhaps I shouldn't say anything because I've been up all night and I really don't know what I'm talking about," said Andrew. He stayed up all the next night as well. David Grigg stayed up til 3 am on several nights to finish stories which were highlights of the Workshop. One night I was wandering around in a stupor at 2 or 3 am when I looked up to see a light from the room of Marian and Pip Maddern. They were both still writing. I started writing as well, even though I was supposed to organise. Everybody else did the organising. I wrote the first pieces of fiction I have finished for four years. Other people even said they liked them. I began to realise what other people were feeling.

"You trusted us to trust each other to trust ourselves," I said to Ursula as the Workshop ended. At the centre of the group mind was surely the most remarkable person I've ever met. Nobody could call Ursula Le Guin a "teacher", since really she said little during the entire week. When she commented on a story, she could summarise everything she wanted to say in a sentence or two. But somewhere in those sentences, and in the comments each person said to each other, were the keys which opened up tho minds of everybody else. Everybody's writing improved unbelievably during the week of the Workshop. At the same time, we all found that we didn't need to treat Ursula with Expected Reverance. Instead she organised a wild night of frivolity during which one group of us had to achieve communication with the others, who were the Aliens. When communication failed, people became quite upset, but the point had been made. We made nonsense of all those science fiction stories where the aliens have little translating voice boxes on their abdomens and understand instantly all the world's languages. Ursula wrote ribad stories with us, and contributed some pieces for discussion. She went for a walk with us through Sherbrooke Forest. (We were nearly lost, or slithering in the mud. By the side of the road there is a sign saying, "Danger. Lyrebirds cross." Afterwards, Ursula drew us a cartoon which showed the cross lyrebirds.) Somebody, probably Randal Flynn, invented the two alien tribes, the Grongs and the Grooblies. We all turned into grongs, including Ursula Le Grong. Soon we were no longer a group mind, but a whole new race of super writers, all ready to astound the world with our efforts.

We haven't astounded anybody yet, of course, least of all the editors of magazines and original fiction anthologies. But a lot of people have begun submitting stories for the first time. The rest of us are trying to stay in touch with each other, rather than let the experience disappear. Quite right, too: it was the best week of my life, and probably the best week of theirs. And, thanks to Robin and Ursula and the members of the Workshop and Magic Pudding and everybody else who helped, it wasn't a flop. Amazing. When's the next Writers' Workshop?

SMOOOOTHCON
THE 33RD WORLD SCIENCE FICTION CONVENTION (AUSSIECON)

* We Australian fans waited six years for this Convention. We staged a campaign to persuade American fans not to support the idea of a NaSFiC; we bit our fingernails until Sweden abandoned its bid for 1976; we fretted until San Francisco abandoned its opposing bid; we published more than 100 different issues of fanzines in 1971 and had already done two years' work when the decision was made to bid; we campaigned through 1973 and had eleven Australians at Torcon; we saw Australia's bid win by nearly 300 votes at Toronto and then settled down to two years' work leading up til August 1975. People spent thousands of dollars travelling overseas on our behalf. Others spent hundreds of dollars publishing fanzines and writing letters to promote the bid.

This poem was written during the few spare moments we had during the week of the ork-shop. Here is the mood of it all.

PEGASUS

Being an explication and exegesis
of the brain-patterns
of the s f author.

Kathy Buckley
Rob Gerrand

Illusion and fission
and far-reaching vision
converging and merging
in perfect precision

Mystical twists
statistical lists
arranging ideas
of grooblies and seers
round atmospheres
clanging of gears
noses and ears
graft and corruption
dust of destruction
threes that are crumbling
dwarves that are fumbling
roots ornamental
stones monumental
whirling and
swirling
giggling and
gurgling
planets emerging
timelines diverging
gadgets and robots
computers and new lots
of android and alien
who battle and fail in
their contests with man
growth ecologic
spacewarps spasmodic
dreams episodic
brains positronic
sorcerors demonic
chthonic
moronic
end-of-world plans
disasters pernicious
solutions auspicious
commanders suspicious
space-cubs naive
scientists didactic
maidens pneumatic
all fit quite pragmatic
you have to believe

It's coincidental
and quite accidental
ideas that we use
have a very short fuse
and serve to confuse
all those who refuse
to follow the same
unexpected and strange
mind-bending range
of thoughts that we do

It's alarming and charming
the screaming and dreaming
and neurotic scheming
while all the time seeming
perplexing
and vexing
extremely
complexing
perpetual
flexing
and sexing
of minds

The fans understand us
the world cannot stand us
no use reprimand us
you cannot demand us
to give in
and live in
a sieve in
which ideas like treacle
would dribble and trickle
and tickle
no more

No mor-
tal should chor-
tle at all our contor-
ting of por-
tals of time
and dispor-
tings sublime

If you are content
with the world just a tent
we'll invent an event
we'll rent you a rent
in the fabric of time
and the life you have spent
which will make you relent
AND
THEN
YOU'LL
BE
MINE!!!!!!

So was it all worth it? Was there any way in which four days' experience could repay six years of hard work and expenditure?

As one answers every other question: Yes and No. The Organising Committee did not expect to enjoy the Convention, but some of us did. Organising Committees of Worldcons have to go to other people's Worldcons to enjoy them. Robin Johnson, Peter Darling, Peter Millar, John Foyster, and a few others were in the front line of hassles, and probably saw only the difficult side of the Convention. Others of us, like me, had specific duties and, except in one bad case, found that we could perform those duties and still enjoy the Convention. (The bad case was me. After four hours' sleep on Sunday morning, I had no idea how to act as Head Organiser For The Day on Sunday. Eventually I sat around looking seedy while John Foyster sorted out the last scraps of organisation for a dying convention.) I didn't see Robin very much during the Convention, so I presume that he was doing a good job.

I find it impossible to give any idea of the experience of the Covnention. My main impression of the whole Convention is of the glare of spotlights and the anticipatory strains of the mood music that began each session's proceedings. Probably I saw more of theprogram at this Worldcon that I have seen of the program of most recent local conventions. The spotlights were needed because the entire proceedings were videotaped. A small number of people performed very well on the program - Susan Wood and Mike Glicksohn, most obviously; Bob Tucker bringing a whole convention to its feet for a final "smooooth" salute and telling the Rosebud story to 500 people; Ursula Le Guin's splendid Guest of Honour speech and her impeccable, illuminating words and smiles on the panels. Some people, like Mike and Susan, Ursula and Bob Silverberg, and others, had to work very hard because they were celebrities. I saw lots of the program because I had to organise two items plus the whole Saturday morning, and because I appeared on at least one other item. Many people found themselves in the same on-again, off-again position.

Much of the Convention I wasn't really there. Carey and I sold Philip Dick books or did odd jobs for whoever wanted odd jobs done. I was otherwise preoccupied, as I will explain soon. The people who manned the video cameras didn't "see" the convention at all, although they were staring at it all the time through tiny lenses. Most others were so busy that they couldn't see the whole. I managed to get to room parties on two nights out of the four, and Mike Glicksohn told the whole of fandom that he saw me rather the worse for wear. Too bad; it was a good room party anyway, with John Bangsund and Mike and Leigh and others discussing fandom, and Denny Lien in the other corner trying to decide whether to throw people out or drag them in from the corridor. One night some friends stayed for a natter. When they left at about midnight, Susan brought some other people up for a recovery party (Susan lost a Hugo to Geis; Bob Silverberg to at least three other people). Finally I met Barbara Silverberg, who is probably the most pleasant person I met for the first time at Aussiecon. (I didn't even see her at Torcon.) There was the swinging Bruce Garrison, and Genie DiModica, last seen over a table in a Chinese restaurant near Columbia University in September 1973, and always the remarkable Susan Wood and the brilliant John Berry. No wonder that party went all night.

I had some high moments at Aussiecon. When John Bangsund read out the list of Hugo nominees, S F Commentary received a cheer that I didn't believe was possible. Of course I did not win, and never will - but it was worth being nominated to hear that cheer.

And Susan Wood said, "It was worth coming 12000 miles to see Bruce Gillespie smiling."

As I keep writing, I find lots more to say about the World Convention than I expected. For instance, did anybody really thank Robin Johnson for his work? I've said several times that Aussiecon became basically an idea in the head of Robin Johnson. Certainly nobody, at any one time, knew a fraction as much of what was going on as did Robin. It was his convention.

And I enjoyed meeting Bob Tucker again so much, and getting to talk to Rusty Hevelin (the DUFF winner) and, after the Convention, finally getting that yarn with Susan that eluded us all during Torcon. I saw Peter Nicholls very little during the Convention itself, but it was good to catch up on some news and two years' chatter a few weeks after the Convention. As Tucker might say, we were all good friends. It was a smoooooth convention.

If only I had been truly there. But that is another story...

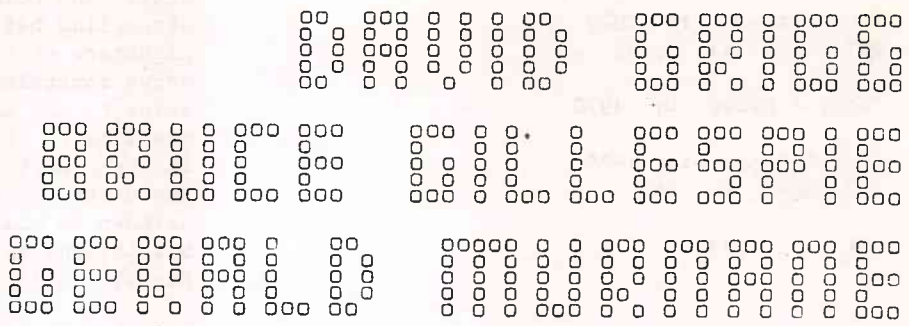
(The End of The Story):

AFTER DINING AT BORBLES

(THE STORY SO FAR: Bruce Gillespie, ace lazy writer and triple Hugo loser, meets The One (or, as John Hepworth would say, a Splendid Ms). Said Splendid Ms departs hurriedly for overseas, leaving behind Our Hero floating high above the ground (SFC 30-31). Hero's balloon breaks; screams of agony when he crashes (SFCs 33 and 35/36/37). Determined to find The One or at least Another One. Sets out in an American Airlines Sopwith Camel and is dazzled by damsels east of the Rockies (SFCs 39, 40). Meets Another One, who doesn't trust the rubber bands on the Sopwith Camel. Hero flies back to Melbourne alone. More isolated whimpers and grouches (SFC 41/42). Sympathy and derision from supporters of this wounded chook. Then,.. then one day in July 1975... (NOW READ ON):

(PLEASE TURN TO PAGE 80)

THE CHRISTOPHER PRIEST SECTION



PRIESTLY VIRTUES

EDITOR: Not many authors, inside or outside s f, produce such an impressive "body of work" in the first three novels as has Christopher Priest. His novels yet to be written will probably be even better than Inverted World, Fugue for a Darkening Island, and Indoctrinaire, but this does not prevent us making some just assessment right now. Even so, it's difficult not to be blinded by the visible signs of Chris's success: publication in hardback and paperback on both sides of the Atlantic for each of those books; a prize in the John W Campbell Award for Fugue for a Darkening Island; a Hugo nomination this year for Inverted World; other awards and praise. Add to that what I see as Chris's personal triumph - that without being the scion of a distinguished family or clawing his way up from a poverty-stricken background, without being a manic depressive dervish or a painfully shy introvert, he has managed to remain an interesting, pleasant person who has the special ability to sit down every so often, lock the door on the world, and write a good novel. And they have been good novels. Here, three writers give some idea of his achievement.

DAVID GRIGG is a nearly arrived "filthy pro". After publishing excellent fanzines for some years, he began to write fiction seriously about two years ago. He was one of the best writers at the recent Australian S F Writers' Workshop, and already magazines like Science Fiction Monthly have accepted stories by him. The following piece was written some years ago.

GERALD MURNANE has published one novel, Tamarisk Row, and is currently hard at work on the second. His first novel was short-listed for The Age Book of the Year Award and (I presume) was a close contender for the Miles Franklin Award.

EDITIONS: Each book has been published by Faber & Faber (h/b) and NEL (p/b) in England, and by Harper & Row (h/b) and Pocket Books (p/b) in USA. I've listed extra details, where available.

David Grigg reviews:

INDOCTRINAIRE

Harper & Row :: 1970
227 pages :: $5.95

Faber & Faber :: 1970

Pocket Books :: 1971
186 pages :: 75c

NEL :: 1971

It isn't Kafkaesque, Chris, it really isn't!

Nor is it, as Gillespie suggested, the least bit Ballardian.

But Indoctrinaire is an odd book. This book is not Kafkaesque, nor Ballardian. It's Priestish. The air (literally) of unreality that pervades the first half of the book is very well done. It is, if you like, how a reasonable person might feel if thrust into a ridiculous, but frightening situation. Realist unreality.

The main character of the novel, Dr Wentick, is working in Antarctica at "Concentration" on a new drug which has dangerous hallucinogenic properties. He has taken some of the drug himself at various times, so there is the doubtful hint that the whole book is a drug experience.

People supposedly representing the US Government "kidnap" him and take him to South America. They drive him across the jungle and through what we later discover is a time warp into the Planalto district. Here he finds a prison surrounded by shorn stubble instead of jungle as far as the eye can see. This prison is a piece out of the future.

Here Wentik experiences a non-stop nightmare. Everybody in the prison seems insane. One of Wentik's captors, Astourde, questions him incessantly. Astourde also dominates, in an inexplicable way, the othr people in the prison, especially Musgrove, Wentik's other captor. The captors put Wentik through an advanced form of maze, evidently as a form of torture. There is a table with a human hand growing up from its centre. A huge human ear is fixed to the wall of the prison. Nothing makes sense.

However, eventually wentik is told why he was taken to the prison. From that point the novel runs downhill rapidly. It seems pointless to tell you the whys of the situation. At any rate, Wentik drops back into the twentieth century, in the middle of the jungle. He struggles through the jungle against tremendous odds, finds a canoe, travels down river, steals a plan, flies south, crashes in Antarctica, and finds that "Concentration" is empty.

Despite what he has been told about his own future, he cannot change it. He finds a way back to England, only to arrive just before the Cataclysm. Wentik stays there, waiting. Big deal. The book crashes at the end. After struggling beside the protagonist through the nightmare of the first part of the book, we deserve something better. Perhaps, if there is a point to the novel, it is that a man has only one time to live in, and that is his own. Being transported into the future has destroyed the externals of Wentik's life. He can live neither in the future nor in his own present, but internally it seems to affect him little, for all we discover.

The strength of Indoctrinaire is its approach to the viewpoint changes of the human mind. Drugs and the atmosphere of the jail alter people in fascinating ways. Memories and reactions are not changed, but the basis, the viewpoint that controls the thoughts, is changed.

There could have been much more to this novel, but Chris Priest lost control, I think, as it progressed. And that's a bloody pity.

Bruce Gillespie reviews

FUGUE FOR A DARKENING ISLAND

Faber & Faber :: 1972
147 pages :: $A5.60

Harper & Row :: 1972

NEL :: 1973

The "darkening island" of this book's title is a future Britain. Metaphorically, the "darkening island" is also Alan Whitman, a future Briton.

Britain has been "darkened" by the situation which it seems to fear more than any other - invasion from without. Even worse, and also fitting the book's title, the invaders are black, and they don't care a jot for the customs or traditions of the island that they have chosen as home.

"In Britain, the news was taken calmly; the holocaust in Africa was the embodiment of something awful, but not something that seemed to threaten us directly." However, the "holocaust" - atomic wafare between neighbouring countries on the African continent - has left millions of people alive in a burnt-out continent. They set sail for anywhere and, inevitably, many of them emigrate to Britain. "Everywhere they caused social upheaval; but in Britain, where a neo-racist government had come to power on an economic-reform ticket, they did much more." Their presence, increasing organi-

sation, and resistance to John Tregarth's Conservative government, leads to civil war.

Alan Whitman has "white skin", "light brown hair", and "blue eyes", dresses conservatively and, as he admits, has "no political ambitions". He resolves to ignore the surrounding political situation for as long as possible. Whitman will not acknowledge that his life has also been affected by national events until Afrim settlers take over the house where he lives with his wife, Isobel, and their daughter, Sally. Forced onto the road with the family, Whitman regards himself as a resourceful man. He becomes impatient because his wife complains about the situation. He proves to be an unreliable travelling companion. Eventually he reaches the position where he has abandoned, or been abandoned by, every friend or acquaintance, every light in the dark, he has ever known. Fugue for a Darkening Island becomes the story of Whitman's self-impelled moral disintegration, and a metaphor for the destroyed country in which he tries to survive.

In the science fiction field, which is painted with the grins of smug, muscular heroes, it is remarkable to find a figure like Alan Whitman. Not only is he interesting to the reader, but he is the central interest of the author. Even so, this is not a confessional novel: for most of its length, Whitman simply tells what happens to him and the people he meets. Instead, it is a deadpan comedy, in which Whitman condemns himself out of his own mouth, by showing us how he reacts to what he sees and knows. The metaphor of the "darkening island" is so effective because Priest has made Whitman just typical enough of a certain kind of inoffensive, well-educated chap for him to represent, and condemn, the way of thinking of a whole nation.

Whitman barely experiences the events of the novel; they just seem to happen to him. Like Vonnegut's Billy Pilgrim, he sees the events of his life as happening simultaneously, without significance in time. No events seems to matter more than any other to Whitman, so he tells us his story all at once. Within the first few pages of the novel, we meet Whitman before he is forced to flee across country (that's the white-skinned, brown-haired, blue-eyed conservative dresser I've shown already); Whitman as he appears after all the events of the rest of the novel have taken place ("dry, salt-encrusted, and itchy" hair, dirt-smudged skin, and "smelling abominably"); Whitman on the road, scrounging for food as part of Lateef's guerrilla army group; Whitman and his wife and [illegible] child on the day they are forced to abandon their house in Southgate; and Whitman during the first few years of his marriage to Isobel. The patchwork structure of the book (or "fugue", as Priest insists in the book's title) gives the impression that, even after all these events have rolled over Whitman, to him they will still all have equal emotional importance, which isn't much. The effect is strengthened because Whitman observes his surroundings so precisely, and because he tells a clear narrative, although it is broken into discontinuous segments.

What is valuable to Whitman? What kind of a person is he? Priest writes so clearly that he makes us want to find out. During the first few pages of the novel, the Whitman family waits in the suburban house for the disturbance to quieten outside. The Whitmans assume that the soldiers will just go away. Just like any Australian family under the same circumstances, they think that events like these aren't supposed to happen. But when Whitman looks into the street, he sees that "The burnt-out shell of the Martins' house opposite ours was a constant reminder of the violence inherent in the patrols, and the never-ending parade of homeless shambling through the night past the barricades was disturbing in the extreme." Priest shows us much about Whitman in including just the words, "disturbing in the extreme". The phrase is just fussy enough, just sufficiently "well meant" and politely appropriate for us to realise that, somewhere inside him, Whitman is not in the least disturbed by what is happening. He watches and waits to take action. Indeed, the book hints that he welcomes the turmoil.

The civil war enables him to escape some of the problems he has been having with his wife. Whitman delivers a reproving little lecture to us and to himself:

> While being in full sympathy with her feelings, and realising that it is no small upset to be dispossessed in such a manner, I had experienced Isobel's lack of fortitude for the last few months... I had made every attempt to be sympathetic and patient with her, but had succeeded only in reviving old differences.

Almost every word picks up a different meaning for us than it does for Whitman. It seems that he has never been in even partial sympathy with anybody in his life, let alone in "full sympathy" with Isobel. Her "lack of fortitude", seen by us, is an understandable panic at being deprived of a whole way of life. The rest of the novel shows us that Whitman has little fortitude, but the strength which insensitivity gives him enables him to survive where others cannot. The novel shows us that Whitman cannot be "sympathetic and patient" with anyone, let alone with Isobel, and the "old differences" which are "revived" centre around the fact that Whitman sleeps with every girl he can pick up, and has never hidden the fact very well from his wife. Whitman has told us already, or will tell us, all the facts which contradict his statements about his own emotions. Our final impression is that Whitman feels little about anything.

Despite all that, Whitman can certainly reveal to the reader what he sees, hears, and touches. Whitman is one of the people who see the first

ship filled with African refugees arrive at the docks in London. The ship looks like a barely moving hulk but "I saw from the black smoke still issuing from her funnel and from the white-cream froth at the stern, that the ship's engines were still running." When the ship reaches the wharf, the people who emerge are "in an advanced state of starvation. Skeletal arms and legs, distended stomachs, skull-like heads holding staring eyes; flat, paper-like breasts on the women, accusing faces on them all... Those whom no one would carry were left on the ship... We waited and watched. There seemed to be no end to the number of people on board." Four and a half thousand survivors leave the ship, and seven hundred bodies are found inside. The power of the passages does not come from Whitman's experience of what he sees, but from the fact that he sees everything. Priest's hidden, central point is that, again, Whitman really doesn't feel much at all. Numbness of emotional response can be a function, not of burying one's head in the sand, but of seeing things too clearly.

Whitman's clarity of vision has some disturbing, and even quite funny effects within the novel. He is a sort of PeepingTom at the universe. At the age of seven, while trapped in a loft, he watches as a man and a woman copulate beneath him, without realising that he is watching. "When they were both naked he lay on top of her again and they began to make noises with their throats. The girl's eyes were still closed, though the lids fluttered from time to time." Whitman sees everything happen in close detail yet, of course, he misses the meaning entirely. Out of his naivety he delivers the best line in the book: "I was curious to see a girl who could open her legs so wide - all the women with whom I had come into contact (my mother and my aunts) had seemed incapable of opening their knees more than a few inches." Later in the novel, and in Whitman's life, his friends and their early-pubertal girlfriends play a game which leads to their sexual initiation. Whitman gains his greatest kicks from watching from behind a pile of unpainted windowpanes. Thus educated by example, "By the end of the following week I had had sexual intercourse with the girl I had known through my parents, and was proud that I was the only one of us she would do it with."

The novel shows that Peeping Toms can do little but peep, hide, and run. Because he can't feel anything about what he sees, Whitman still lacks any real ability to act. "In a limbo between what I was doing and what I should be doing, either was effected well," says Whitman of his childhood, showing a bit more self-awareness than usual. The only thing he can do well is fuck women, but he can't love them very well, and he doesn't seem to succeed either way with his wife. He claims to love her, but eventually shows that he loves only the distant image of the beautiful, frigid girl she was when they were first married. Fugue for a Darkening Island is, as much as anything, the story of the process by which he abandons his wife and daughter.

Whitman lets down everybody who deals with him. In the longest continuous segment of the book, Whitman is part of Lateef's band of guerrillas when they encounter a group of Afrim helicopter pilots. Lateef's group are hiding in the houses of an abandoned village when they hear about twenty helicopters fly overhead. The helicopters attack a target some miles away, and then begin to leave without discovering the hidden men. One helicopter straggles behind. Whitman has the only rifle in the group.

> I lifted my rifle, took careful aim and fired.
>
> Olderton leaped over to me and knocked the barrel aside.
>
> "You stupid bastard!" he said. "They'll know we're here."
>
> "I don't care," I said. I was watching the helicopter.
>
> For a moment I thought my shot had had no effect. Then the engine of the machine accelerated abruptly and it lifted away. Its tail spun around, stopped, then spun again... I saw the helicopter check its sideways motion, but then it flipped again. It skidded down over the burnt-out house, disappeared from sight. Two second later there was a loud crash.
>
> "You cunt, you stupid bastard," Olderton said again. "The others will be back to find out what happened."...
>
> In any event, I had derived a curious pleasure from the incident, as it had signalled my first positive participation in the war. From here I had committed myself.

The other helicopters do not return, as Olderton expected. The men approach the stricken helicopter, and discover that the pilot is not dead, but only wounded. They cannot lift him out, and they cannot relieve his pain while he stays inside the wreckage. "Lateef, we've got to do something for that man!" says Whitman, sounding unusually concerned. Lateef replies, quite reasonably, "If you don't like blood, you shouldn't have shot the fucking thing down." Whitman offers to shoot the Afrim pilot to put him out of his misery, but he gets cold feet. "I had no wish to shoot him, my emotion in me having been expended by the act of shooting at the helicopter in the first place." On the one hand, he feels justified in shooting the man because Afrim soldiers had abducted Isobel and Sally some time before. On the other hand, "the fact was that the physical act of pulling the trigger and killing the man was too positive an act... one in which my commitment would be affirmed." So, in order to save his philosophical

position and save face at the same time, "I lifted the barrel and fired two shots into the air." The guerrillas don't bother to check on his action. The pilot stays inside, suffering. Whitman can stay "uncommitted". The tail end of the joke is that he loses the power which the rifle gave him. The guerrillas discover that the Afrim pilots had been attacking a munitions van, which split open. Now they all gain rifles for the first time, and Whitman has lost his precarious position of prestige within the group.

Fugue for a Darkening Island is a sardonic moral comedy rather than a science fiction novel, and so unexpected a book to spring up from within the s f field that it has been ignored altogether. Yet I suppose it began with a typical s f proposition, a "What if.,?" idea. I would guess that Chris Priest began with, "What would happen if Britain were invaded by a refugee group of poor, desperate foreigners, most probably Africans?" Priest's general answer is that such an invasion would break down every form of coziness upon which English life is based, and would cause a near-disappearance of information systems. The novel is about, as much as anything, the disappearance of "Englishness".

Probably this is why Priest makes many of the characters as typically English as possible. Whitman himself is protected by the armour of traditional English middle-class prejudices. He is appalled by conservative attitudes to the refugees when they first arrive, but he likes the Afrims no better than does anybody else. He "solves" the contradiction by ignoring the situation. He has a comfortable academic job until the worsening political situation makes him unemployed - so he gains the next-safest job he can. Ignorance may not be bliss, but it's a lot more enjoyable than thinking. When events force him to begin his circular pilgrimage across the English countryside, he finds himself escaping from different unidentified groups who seem to be fighting each other at random.

England is trapped in the same contradictions. Traditional liberals cry out when the police try to stop the African refugees from landing in England, but they also find their towns and villages being taken over. The traditional Conservatives get punchdrunk immediately. Civil riots make it easier for the refugees to dig in, take over sections of cities, and form armies. As the country divides, each stops information from reaching the others. Eventually no radio programs are left except light music on the BBC and, on Radio Peace, "prolonged prayer-sessions, Bible-readings, and hymns". In one very effective section toward the end of the novel, Whitman stumbles upon a whole area that has managed to stay "suburban", with its houses kept neat and groceries still in the shops. However, the citizens of this area keep up the facade of normality by ignoring every piece of news that might upset their complacent attitudes. Nothing could make them recognise that, a few miles away, the bodies of hundreds of anonymous "victims of war" lie piled on the beach.

Science fiction writers have never won laurels for exposing uncomfortable truths or telling disturbing stories, and I doubt whether Fugue for a Darkening Island will ever become popular. Whitman's myopia is too much like our own in similar situations. It's too much like the attitudes of the typical s f "hero". But I think that somebody ought to state clearly that Fugue for a Darkening Island is one of the subtlest and best-written s f books to appear during the last five years, and a much more penetrating and probable chronicle of our near futures than most other recent books that claim to explore the future. Chris Priest's third s f novel, Inverted World, is marvellous, as the following piece shows, bu I hope that somebo remembers that his second novel, Fugue for a Darkening Island, is also an extraordinary work of moral fable and personal exploration.

Gerald Murnane reviews

THE INVERTED WORLD

Harper & Row :: 1974
310 pages :: $7.95

Faber & Faber :: 1974
256 pages :: $A7.25

NEL 45002303 :: 1975
252 pages :: $A1.55

The central event in this novel is a great journey. It wouldn't be fair for a reviewer to reveal where this journey begins and ends, but it's a journey that deserves an epic poem to commemmorate it.

Epic poems don't get written nowadays, although plenty of authors trick out their tedious narratives with what they imagine to be epic language. Christopher Priest is not one of them. Inverted World is almost wholly unpretentious, and for this very reason it has a hint of the epic about it.

This much about the journey can be told: A band of people inhabits a city that must keep moving or be destroyed. The life of the city is organised so that the place does move. A guild of experts surveys the land ahead and plots the route. Another guild lays steel tracks ahead of the city (and laboriously tears up the tracks behind it for re-use). When a new stretch of track is ready, a Traction Guild mans powerful winches. Then, watched by anxious guildsmen and guarded by militia-men with crossbows, the city rolls a few miles further forward on its mysterious journey. As soon as it stops, the track-layers put up buffers behind it and start

the job of laying down the next few miles of rails.

How big is this city on wheels? Why must it keep moving over hills and plains and even rivers? What planet is it travelling across? How long has it travelled like this? Is there any obstacle that can stop its progress?

To each of these questions (and dozens more the occur throughout the book) there are two possible answers. The first, in each case, is the answer that the citizens themselves consider true. The second is the answer that the reader discovers (and is strongly persuded to believe) in the last few chapters.

In some cases the reader can be in no doubt about a question that has puzzled him throughout the book - the size of the city, for example, and the true extent of its journey. But the essential questions are left undecided. The final uncertainty is not in the least disappointing or irritating. It seems the most satisfying of all the ingenious features of the "inverted world".

There's far more to the narrative than the solving of puzzles deliberately thrown up in the earlier chapters. It's also the story of Helward Mann, an unassuming and likable young fellow (a rarity among s f heroes) from Earth City, as its inhabitants call the city on wheels.

Thanks to the peculiarly protective system of education in the city, Mann has to wait until adulthood before he learns even such facts of life as that his home town is portable. At the customary age, he leaves the creche, where all the young citizens are nurtured and taught, and enters one of the guilds, whose work it is to keep the city in motion. He becomes an apprentice Future Surveyor and ventures out of the city for the first time. Much of the story from then on is an account of Mann's efforts to answer for himself the questions I mentioned earlier. The inverted world is as much a mystery to young Helward Mann as it is to the reader. This means that the story has none of the irritating gaps or the deliberate witholding of information that so many s f writers have to use to keep their readers hanging around. Even better in this novel, the men who should know all the answers - the senior guildsmen and the city's leaders - are far from certain about the world beyond the city or the true beginnings of their journey.

Mann and the other residents of the moving city are recognisable human beings, descendants (they believe) of people from Earth who somehow became separated from their home planet in the vague past. Mann has received an arid, theoretical education, much of it concerned with his people's ancient home - the planet Earth. Emerging from the seclusion of the creche, he has to learn almost from scratch the customs and way of life of Earth City. And he is totally unprepared for what he finds outside the city.

The strange life of the city is described fairly convincingly. Priest understands a subtle feature of most human set-ups which too often escapes s f writers. This is the widespread tendency to modify or to evade or to pay mere lip-service to any custom or usage whose immediate purpose is not apparent. When Helward Mann is enrolled in the Guild of Future Surveyors, he takes an oath which binds him to say nothing of the world outside the city to those of its residents who are not guildsmen (and must therefore remain forever inside). The penalty for breaking the oath is death.

After his very first trip outside, Mann tells his wife a little of what he has seen, and so violates his oath. Later, he tells a senior guildsman what he has done:

> "If you knew I'd broken (the oath) - if you knew at this moment - you'd kill me. Is that right?"
>
> "In theory, yes."
>
> "And in practice?"
>
> "I'd worry about it for days, then probably talk to one of the other guildsmen and see what he advised..."

Helward then tells the guildsman, almost word-for-word, what he has told his wife. The guildsman tells him he has nothing to worry about.

> "But it can't be as simple as that," said Helward. "The oath is very firm in the way it is worded, and the penalty is hardly a light one."
>
> "True...but the guildsmen who are alive today inherited it. The oath was passed to us, and we pass it on. So will you in your turn. This isn't to say the guilds agree with it, but no one has yet come up with an alternative."

Passages like this make the city a place of flesh-and-blood people. There are no villains or heroes or similar caricatures of human beings - only men and women involved in humdrum tasks and occasionally wondering at the reasons behind their existence. Their leaders, the guildsmen, are busy administrators preoccupied with their worrying duties and using outdated rituals to keep their most important concerns from their subordinates. It could almost be your own municipal authority or a government department.

Not unexpectedly, a time comes when the subordinates in the city (who are not at all badly treated) challenge the guildsmen. Must the city go on moving? What is the awful peril that will overtake it if it rests?

It so happens that when this challenge arises, the city actually faces what is possibly the gravest external peril in its history. The authenticity of the human situation inside the city, added to the sheer physical danger from outside, makes the last chapters convincing indeed.

The book gains in other ways from having characters of unheroic proportions. In the last chapters it becomes apparent to the reader that the guildsmen have accomplished a remarkable feat. At this point, the guildsmen - fussy, harassed, self-effacing fellows - appear as true types of the "unlikely hero", the character who, for commonplace or even misguided motives, unwittingly performs a marvel.

Probably I have dwelt too much on what I have called the "feat" of the city-dwellers. Their "world purpose" is just as fascinating. They inhabit the inverted world of the book's title. Priest supplies us with a mathematical justification of this world. I couldn't understand it, although it seemed vaguely like some of the stuff that caused me to fail fifth-form maths twenty years ago. (Helward Mann, too, found it hard to understand, which endeared him to me.) Late in the book, Helward Mann meets a woman from outside the city, who seems able to disprove all that he has ever perceived of the world.

> He took her arm again, and whirled her round. He pointed upwards.
>
> "What do you see?"
>
> She shielded her eyes against the glare. "The sun."
>
> "The sun! The sun! What about the sun?"
>
> "Nothing. Let go of my arm...you're hurting me!"
>
> He released her, and scrambled over to the discarded drawings. He took the top one, held it out for her to see.
>
> "That is the sun!" he shouted, pointing at the weird shape that was drawn at the top right of the picture, a few inches away from the spindly figure that he said was her. "There is the sun!"

In its full context, this is one of the great moments of the book. For me it is rich in allusions. It called up what is surely one of the "primal scenes" of human history. Two people, having exhausted all arguments over which of their two ways of seeing is the true one, finally appeal to evidence that surely cannot be refuted. "Look," says the first and points to the sky or the grass or perhaps at the empty air. "Look, and see what I see!" And the other looks - but does not see.

This is only one of many passages in Inverted World that seems to describe not just an event in a particular novel but an episode of larger significance in human affairs. Inverted World is no parable or allegory, but it seems to me a wonderfully detailed meditiation on the irreconcilable differences between subjective and objective worlds.

The novel, unfortunately, has many of the faults that seem to plague even the finest s f works. It begins slowly and with much emphasis on details that later prove irrelevant to the main story-line. It has a Prologue, which the author perhaps thought as the first, ominous notes of a grand symphony, but which comes across like the noises of the orchestra tuning up.

The reader is advised to skip the Prologue unless he enjoys the spectacle of a capable author writing with his left hand.

Another irritation is the author's urge to close each chapter with a drum-roll in prose:

> I watched the city from a distance, seeing it as alien as it was; not of this world, no longer even of me. Mile by mile it hauled itself forward, never finding, nor even seeking, a final resting place.

Or:

> He lay down, only too aware of Caterina's body lying close beside him in the next sleeping-bag. He stayed awake for a long time, trying to rid himself of a fierce manifestation of his arousal. Victoria seemed to be a long way away.

(Helward Mann, by the way, has a sexual appetite that is mild and uncomplicated. The only person it bothers is the author.)

At its best, however, the prose of Inverted World does its job well. The many descriptions of physical work, discomfort, and day-to-day drudgery emphasise effectively the immensity of the labour that keeps the city safe.

> The silence was broken abruptly. With a loud cracking noise that echoed round the rocky walls of the chasm one of the winching cables snapped, and whiplashed back, slicing through a line of militiamen. A physical tremor ran through the structure of the bridge, and from deep inside the city I heard the rising whine of the suddenly free winch, sharply cut off as the Traction man controlling the differential drive phased it out. Now on only four cables, and moving visibly slower, the city continued on its way. On the northern side of the chasm, the broken cable lay snaked across the ground, curling over the bodies of five of the militiamen.

In the end, when it finally seems that the years

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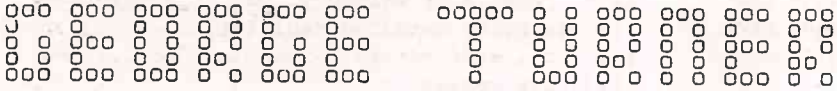
THE URSULA K LE GUIN SECTION I



FROM PARIS TO ANARRES:

The Le Guin Retrospective

George Turner discusses

THE WIND'S TWELVE QUARTERS

by Ursula K Le Guin

Harper & Row :: 1975
297 pages :: $8.95

The habit of fanzine critics - and others - of grinding through a volume of stories, one by one, with a few lines of pat or poison for each, should be abolished. The late P Schuyler Miller, I think, introduced this scrutiny-of-minutiae method many years ago, when he was s f's only consistently appearing reviewer; but he knew most of the writers personally and possibly felt that if he mentioned Weinlein's "Cement-Heads from the Blue Dimension" and didn't give equal billing to Heinbaum's "Menace from the Jim Beam Planet" he'd have a feud on his hands. That doesn't mean we all have to do it.

I admit having done it myself, mainly because it seemed to be expected of me, and was once taken to task by "Irate Reader" or someone similar for not doing it, and don't propose to carry on this unproductive habit. Anthologies are usually put together with a plan or theme in mind, and the reviewer should use this as the standard to be measured against, discussing the book, not its disparate bits. Author collections also tend to be arranged with some deliberation, and it is the reviewer's business to observe the fact, report on it, and bear it in mind as he writes.

So what is to be borne in mind regarding Ursula Le Guin's collection? She courteously lays it out for us in the first paragraph of the Foreword:

> This collection is what painters call a retrospective; it gives a roughly chronological survey of my short stories during the first ten years after I broke into print, belated but undaunted, at the age of thirty-two. They appear here very roughly in the order in which they were written, so that the development of the artist may become part of the interest of the book. I have not been rigid about the chronology (it is impossible; stories may be written in one year, not published until two or three years later, and then possibly revised, and which date do you use?) but there are no severe displacements.

"...The development of the artist..." Yes, indeed. And Le Guin is one of the few s f and fantasy writers who can claim that description with the capital A which she does not give it, being a sensible woman who knows that "artist" is what you are or are not, something you cannot take credit for any more than for having eight fingers and two thumbs rather than nine or three. She is also a first-class literary technician, which is something else again, so much so that it is often difficult to

decide whether artist or technician is responsible for a particular effect. (At this point the reviewer usually stops prodding at the prose and points glibly to the author's "taut control of her material". Budding reviewers take note: readers are easily conned by that sort of thing and you might as well learn the sleazy tricks of the game early on.)

So, since the lady is pretty good at her business - bloody good, in fact - we shall surely go along with her suggestion of seeing what has happened to her product since "April in Paris" appeared in 1962.

** ** **

In all honesty, the book would be better off without "April in Paris", which is very much a beginner's piece. But, for Le Guin watchers, it catches attention for much the same reasons as do the photographs of our friends when young; we scrutinise the fluid, forming features for the traces which have deepened into the lines and planes of the personality we recognise today.

It is a time-travel fantasy, wherein a spell worked in fifteenth-century Paris gatheres together an unlikely quartet whose provenance is spread over millennia, and is a group of incidents rather than a plotted tale. It is clumsy; it lays emphasis in all the wrong places as well as some of the right ones; it subjugates common sense to the demands of romance; it... "Now see here, young Ursula - just you take this back and rehandle it from the point of view of the magician...and don't use phrases like 'fed up' and 'muffed it' when you are trying to put across a medieval atmosphere, because they dump the reader back immediately into the twentieth century..."

And, having locked young Ursula in with her homework, we see that the face of an older, wiser, rounded-off Ursula is forming already in the failed story. There is that "feeling" for the medieval which persists behind the errors of taste and diction, and was to flower in the Earthsea trilogy. There is that commonsense view of magic and fantasy which insists on limitation and order instead of free-for-all incantation and wand-waving, and even discovers a reason of sorts why the magician's silly spell should have worked; this, too, became one of the more potent characteristics of Earthsea, with its different kinds of specialised wizards, variant schools of magic, and inherent limitations of power. Le Guin is here present, half formed.

Next, "The Masters", which she calls her first s f story. Perhaps it is. It deals with the rediscovery of science in the post-holocaust age, but really is a meditation (though not a very deep one) on the type of intolerance faced in another age by Galileo. Perhaps that is why it reads like an historical vignette. Written a year or so later than "April in Pairs", it shows a huge stride forward in technique, but is oppressed by that affliction of the up-and-coming short-story writer, the need to express the basic material of a slow and thoughtful novella in a few thousand words - to be read and forgotten by some bug-eyed reader while he chomps his lunch.

Three competent, enjoyable, but otherwise unimportant fantasies fill the time until 1964, when appears "Semley's Necklace", a nice little brooding tale of love and courage, hovering somewhere between the realistic setting of s f and the obliquely oriented psychology of fantasy. The tale later provided the basis for a short novel, Rocannon's World, and so is the cornerstone of that ramifying "Envoy" structure whose latest wing is The Dispossessed. The nice little short-story writer has taken some mighty strides down the corridor between them.

** ** **

There is a gap of five years to the next story. What happened between-times? Well, Rocannon's World happened, and Planet of Exile and, in 1968, A Wizard of Earthsea - and the first period of Le Guin's development was over. At that point she had smoothed her style to a sinewy, deceptively strong instrument which could be direct or oblique, descriptive or ruminative, swift or slow; she no longer made noticeable errors of aesthetic taste or literary tact. She was still writing pleasant little romances that structure themselves like science fiction but wore the evasive/brooding/something-lurking atmosphere of fantasy. Over all lingered the shadow of that medievalism, that affinity with the past, which enlivened both fifteenth-century Paris and the future world of "The Masters". Always a hint of barbaric splendour and romantic speech meshed with the ansible and the spaceships and the Ekumen of worlds.

All this was to end, but there was to be one more s f rimance with the aura of fantasy. "Winter's King" appeared in 1969. Basically it is a palace-intrigue story which finds a new use for the time lag in interstellar travel. It is a good story without being outstanding; its main residuum is that impression of dark emotion restrained and inevitable destiny accepted which had characterised all the work of those years.

And was now to be abandoned.

For "Winter's King" is the tale which sparked the creation of the cold planet, Gethen, and its androgynes for The Left Hand of Darkness, and began a fresh cycle of the Le Guin oeuvre.

At last the intellectual moved in on the romanticist, and the result was synergy rather than synthesis.

** ** **

One third of the book is behind us - the formative third; what remains is mature Le Guin.

This does not mean that in 1969 everything clicked into place and all that followed was plain sailing. What followed was, in fact, fresh experiment and movement into other areas of the s f field.

In 1969 came the excellent and well-known "Nine Lives", for me the first true Le Guin s f story, uncontimainated by the air of fantasy, the touch of one-remove-from-reality which suffused such tales as "Winter's King" and "The Masters". "Nine Lives" is too well-known to require detailed treatment here. Suffice it that it was one of the first science-fictional considerations of cloning from the psychological angle; more forerunners had been content with its possibility for melodrama. That I do not agree with Le Guin's projection of the idea is neither here nor there; the story is strong and disagreement over extrapolation is part of the fun of traditional s f; one doesn't bother disagreeing with bad work and the literature of ideas can only be fertilised by dissension.

More interesting from the developmental point of view are the tales of vintage 1970 - "The Good Trip", "Things", and "A Trip to the Head" - which, I think, Le Guin would describe as psychomyths, if I properly understand her use of that word in the chatty, gossipy (and useful) personal notes preluding each tale.

These three stories are close to indescribable. Each of them postulates a protagonist in an archetypal situation, responding to it with a personal logic of the deep psyche which transcends the simple logic of intelligence. These people do what they must without reference to systems of reason; they move in a straight line to an inevitable consummation without knowing or asking why. These are little masterpieces of craftsmanship, bearing so completely on the psychic point (or, if you like, the mythic point) that one has the sense of being present at the making and growth of a work - clay to armature, accretion, shaping, no waste.

She is here exploring the ground just beyond the edge of psychological visibility. R A Lafferty springs to mind as an example of parallel interests, but where Lafferty cavorts and caracoles amid paradox and irresolvable confrontation, Le Guin allows the story to move with deceptive simplicity. She contrives this without emphasising the strangeness of the material, presenting the extraordinary as an integral part of the ordinary. Disbelief is not suspended where no disbelief is allowed, only a creeping conviction that things probably are so in some place over the way. These tales are central to the contemplative aspect of her literary method.

The 1969-71 group is completed by "Vaster than Empires and More Slow", a superb piece of writing whose climax I accept but do not believe in. It is one of the rare pieces wherein Le Guin fails to carry me right to the end. The build-up is faultless and the solution (for it is a "puzzle" story) elegant, but the outcome a little obvious and not entirely justifiable for the characters as presented. But another may read it and ask, "What's up with the man? It's the perfect ending!" Right or wrong, I cannot call it less than fine story-telling, for by 1971 the Le Guin style had firmed and, most importantly, she knew precisely what she was about. She had finished fiddling with themes, turning them over to see what moved underneath and recording the vision hesitantly because it had scuttled away before she caught it clearly.

** ** **

From '71 to '73 there is another gap (filled, I imagine, by the writing of The Lathe of Heaven and "The Word for World is Forest". Then comes the extraordinary "The Stars Below". This one belongs with the group of psychomyths and is about the last of them in this book. Here, for once, I sense a slackening of control, as though the material were not thoroughly comprehended (and, indeed, Le Guin's foreword to the story more than hints of uncertainties) but had to be written down because it was there and must be voided before it blocked the flow. I do not pretend to understand completely this story of an astronomer fated to live in the darkness of a mine. As with Lafferty's demented "Continued on Next Rock", I feel I almost understand, and then it slips from under my mental claw. In a month or two I shall read it again. In Le Guin territory, afterthoughts are in order once the tension has relaxed or the smile faded.

In 1973 "The Field of Vision" attacks a problem similar to that posed by Lem in Solaris and, as is typical of this lady, she caroms off it at an opposite angle to him. The problem, of course, concerns the human reaction to meeting with a fact which our senses cannot construe. Where the Lem answer, tailored to a satirical purpose, is one of endless intellectual and philosophical frustration (and, incidentally, allows no other), the Le Guin answer grapples with the problem instead of satirising the unhappily confronted. She suggests that the orientation of the mind will develop until the senses can construe the alien fact. Throughout her work, the mind opens to challenge and difficulty, whereas Lem's satire - and, for that matter, most satire - is postulated on the closed and unreceptive mind. (It seems to me that the problem itself may be unreal in the ways in which it has been presented, in that a fact inconstruable by our senses would probably be imperceptible by them, if only by reason of psychological refusal. The universe may well be jampacked with such items which we are not capable - yet - of perceiving.) But the truth is that neither author has really produced an unassimilable fact; nor do I think the human imagination, in bondage to its senses, can produce one. How imagine the unimaginable? The question can be asked, but the model cannot be constructed. However, "The Field of Vision" is a good story which conveys the strangeness of new experience better than most writers can

manage; if the ending seems a trifle flip, at least it is logically possible.

Of the remaining three, one is a fantasy about trees which seems to me ingenious but pointless (anyone is at liberty to point out that I am a blind mole, unable to see the obvious) and one is the fabulous "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas". There is deceptively little body to this story. It doesn't really contain a central incident, only a central and static situation. Its value lies in the arresting nature of the question, "Are you prepared to base your happiness on the misery of another?" Think carefully about the actual condition of the world and your position in it before, secure in the consciousness of virtue, you answer No!

Finally, "The Day Before the Revolution" seems to have been written specially for this volume. It is not magazine stuff, though Silverberg or Knight might well have snapped it up had they been given the chance. It is fiction, but not a story with a beginning, a plot, and an end. It is a "day in the life" - in the life of Odo, who sparked the revolution which gave birth to Anarres and The Dispossessed - and it fascinates by the obtrusion of a factor not heretofore outstanding in Le Guin's work: characterisation.

** ** **

Now, a digression on the role of characterisation in fiction:

Reviewers have written a little breathlessly of the fine characterisation in the Le Guin novels, but have stopped short of defining the fineness or giving examples. Here in Australia the Nova Mob and some others have complained of too little characterisation, but again have been content with the statement and have not attempted deeper vision. I have always found the first reaction silly-worshipful and the second a little obtuse, possibly based on the idiotic stuff taught about "characterisation" in school. I stand somewhere in the middle, neither praising nor damning, but finding what is offered sufficient for the novelist's purpose.

"Purpose" is the operative word. Deep, intense, powerful characterisation is not a sine qua non of the novel in all its varieties. The action novel gets by on a trayful of stock types and would lose much of its punch if it attempted significantly more. The sex novel needs prancing genitalia and gets them; characters it can and does do without and, whether you approve of sex novels or not, the technique is correct for the purpose. Early science fiction almost did without characters beyond a routine hero and villain and an occasional "lithe, nubile" heroine, because the orientation of the stories was towards objects and events rather than people, the characters were subservient to the geewhizz goings-on. Again the technique was correct for the purpose; it was the purpose which was limited and outstayed its welcome, so that "people" filtered into s f to populate the vacuum as the interests of writers became human rather than technical.

But one thing did not alter and it is, I think, the thing which, more than any other, distinguishes the approach of s f from that of other fiction. The emphasis of s f is, by its very nature, centred upon change. The characters are, in the main, acted upon by universal forces and happenings, and the world overview which is essential for the recording of such progressions can accommodate only representative types. The "individual", thoroughly explored and presented, becomes a special case, suitable for the minutely detailed sociological examinations of non-s f but not applicable to the purposes of a fiction whose overview demands rumination on a racial and historic scale. In s f the characters represent facets of humanity at whatever crossroad the author has provided; they are acted upon and, as representative humanity, they react. It is a rare work of s f wherein character determines the direction and outcome of the novel. Even so flamboyant and memorable a personality as Gully Foyle is able to act only within the limits of a predetermined outcome. The possibility of failure was never in the conception, so that half the man is eternally missing. Gully does not create the situations of The Stars My Destination - they are quite blatantly created for him in the prologue and he is only what the incidents make him. But - he is a success because the presentation of him is judged exactly to fill the role. Gully is a lively puppet, but still a puppet. He is also precisely what was needed, which makes him a successful characterisation.

So, in s f character is subservient to other fictional requirements, and it is a myth propagated by unimaginative teaching that, without deep and powerful characterisation, a work of fiction is valueless. It won't reach the heights of Tolstoy or Dickens without it, but that is a far cry from being valueless. Characterisation should occupy the position and prominence demanded by the overall scheme of the work. Neither boringly and incompetently less nor fussily and pointlessly more.

The test of adequate characterisation is the reader's ability to accept the individual fully in the role presented.

The test of characterisation in depth is the reader's ability to imagine the individual in a context other than that provided by the author. For me, Le Guin fulfils that requirement as damned few others in the genre do. (As an afterthought, it may be the lack of flamboyance in her people that disappoints some to the point where they fail to see what is there; s f has been too much cursed with the unnecessarily and inconsequentially strange.)

End of digression.

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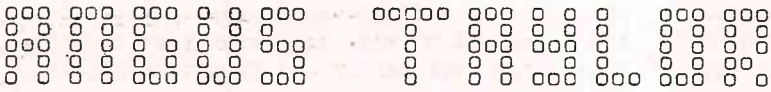

THE POLITICS OF SPACE, TIME, AND ENTROPY

Angus Taylor is best known to me as one of the people who did most to make my stay in Toronto, Canada so enjoyable, more than two years ago. Since then I've kept hearing from and about Angus, and reading his articles in other publications. His book, Philip K Dick and the Umbrella of Light has been published recently by T-K Graphics, PO Box 1951, Baltimore, Maryland 21203, USA, and costs $US2.25. He has been in Europe for most of this year and, before that, worked at the famous Space-Out Library in Toronto. The following article has the distinction of being rejected by one Famous Academic Journal and being offered to SFC instead of another Famous Academic Journal. But Angus still had to wait six months or more to see it in print.

> ...The increase of entropy is due to two quite different kinds of effect; on the one hand, a striving toward simplicity, which will promote orderliness and the lowering of the level of order and, on the other hand, disorderly destruction. Both lead to tension reduction. The two phenomena manifest themselves more clearly the less they are modified by the countertendency, namely, the anabolic establishment of a structural theme, which introduces and maintains tension.
> - Rudolf Arnheim, Entropy and Art

The critical analysis of science fiction as a field of literature has tended, in recent years, to crystallise around two perspectives. These two perspectives are essentially those related to form and function. In its formal aspect, science fiction is a type of non-mimetic story-telling congruent with industrial or post-industrial "scientific" paradigms. Inherently, it places special emphasis upon setting, so that the environments in which its protagonists move assume large roles in their movements. Functionally, science fiction emphasises the sociological/political view of social interaction. Focus is primarily on the roles of individuals as members of social groupings, rather than on the particular characteristics which make each individual unique. Form and function are natural complements here, for it is the deviation of the invented setting from the world-as-experienced which permits the intensive examination of social contexts through their ready mutability.

While there is no guarantee that the degree or scope of non-mimeticism in any given story will correspond precisely to the balance struck between the depiction of characters as unique personalities and as social types, it can reasonably be argued that sophisticated fiction will tend toward this criterion of overall integration. If form and function are related, socio-political processes will reflect environmental constraints.

The fiction of Ursula K Le Guin and Philip K Dick is noteworthy for being founded on distinctive, and mutually distinct, views of the natural universe and man's place in it. The Dispossessed is, at this point, the culmination of Le Guin's remarkable "future history" series, and formulates, in an unusually explicit way, her model of man-in-the-universe. And while Dick's numerous novels and other stories are superficially unrelated to each other, they proceed virtually uniformly from a particular vision of the human condition. Dick's model must be pieced together laboriously,

bit by bit, like the fossil skeleton of some fabulous undreamed beast; but the skeleton, once reconstructed, is the whole that lends meaning to each of its parts. It is somewhat difficult to discuss Dick's model in terms of individual stories, but the novels Now Wait For Last Year and Ubik can be of considerable use, in large measure because of their special utilisations of the time dimension. In The Dispossessed, too, time adds another dimension to the man-universe equation.

Both Le Guin and Dick can be said to be concerned in their fiction with the universal play between the forces of entropy on the one hand, and those supporting the establishment and elaboration of structure on the other. However, their approaches are notably different. According to Le Guin, there is a basic tendency in the natural universe toward order; for Dick, the basic tendency of the natural universe is toward chaos. Entropy, in Le Guin's terms, is not so much the disoolution of all order, as the reduction of the level of order to less complex states of balance. Ordered complexity is a key concept in her model. Nature is seen as an integral whole, consisting of a hierarchy of systems exhibiting isomorphic features: witness Odo's analogy between the body and the community in The Dispossessed. There is a reciprocal relation between human cultures and the landscapes they inhabit. In "The Word for World is Forest", the native Athsheans inhabit an environment of complex and various forms: "No way was clear, no light unbroken, in the forest. Into wind, water, sunlight, starlight, there always entered leaf and branch, bole and root, the shadowy, the complex... Revelation was lacking. There was no seeing everything at once: no certainty" (chapter 2). Cultural variation reflects this fact: "They were not all one people on the Forty Lands of the World. There were more languages than lands, and each with a different dialect for every town that spoke it; there were infinite ramifications of manners, morals, customs, crafts; physical types differed on each of the five Great Lands" (chapter 2). And yet, "Within the Lodges the Dreamers spoke an old tongue, and this varied little from land to land" (chapter 2). The Athshean word for "dream" is also the word for "root"; the dream is the root, and the root of complexity is unity. In The Dispossessed, the fundamental unity of Sequency and Simultaneity is seen thus by the physicist Shevek: "It was simplicity: and contained in it all complexity, all promise. It was revelation. It was the way clear, the way home, the light" (chapter 9). Yet this unity is described as predicated on a lack of certainty.

For Dick, by contrast, a lack of certainty is inherent in a fundamentally chaotic nature. Human culture is something built over a dangerous abyss, and humans are constantly in peril of falling through the floors of their constructed realities as, for example, does Jason Taverner in Flow My Tears, The Policeman Said, a famous, affluent television personality who awakes one morning to discover that no one else remembers who he is, that he has no legal status in society, and must live by his wits from moment to moment. Now Wait For Last Year features the drug JJ-180, which alters the user's perception of time, breaking down its continuity and thereby undermining the meaning of the present moment. It is only the human mind which imposes coherence and relatedness on the external world: "Here, where she lived, Kathy had established potent spirits of the past, trapped within the concoctions of other periods: a lamp from early New England, a chest of drawers that was authentic bird's-eye maple, a Hepplewhite cabinet..." (chapter 5). The drug reifies the user's environment by destroying this capacity of the mind: "The objects had lost their heritage of the familiar; by degrees they became cold, remote, and - hostile. Into the vacuum left by the decline in her relatedness to them the things surrounding her achieved their original isolation from the taming forces which normally emanated from the human mind; they became raw, abrupt, with jagged edges capable of cutting, gashing, inflicting fatal wounds" (chapter 6). Contrast this "original isolation" of the external world with Shevek's thoughts on the woman Takver: "There are souls, he thought, whose umbilicus had never been cut. They never got weaned from the universe. They do not understand death as an enemy; they look forward to rotting and turning into humus. It was strange to see Takver take a leaf into her hand, or even a rock. She became an extension of it, it of her" (chapter 6). That such an extension is possible betokens a radically different natural world from that postulated by Dick, for whom the only human extensions are created ones, whether social or technological.

At one point, Shevek quotes one of his society's dictums as follows: "The more that it is organised, the more central the organism: centrality here implying the field of real function" (chapter 8). The utopian anarchists of the planet Anarres here attempt to carry their understanding of the physical universe into the political realm. When a physicist in a capitalist state on Urras tries to exaplain the planet's power politics by claiming that "The politician and the physicist both deal with things as they are, with real forces, the basic laws of the world", Shevek retorts, "You put your petty miserable 'laws' to protect wealthy, you 'forces' of guns and bombs, in the same sentence with the law of entropy and the force of gravity? I had thought better of your mind, Demaere!" (chapter 7). The basic laws of the world can be arbitrary in politics no more than they are in physics. Useful human action must be grounded in recognition of man's place in nature's organisation hierarchy; the necessity of following this Way (Tao) is emphasised throughout Le Guin's works - never more so than in The Lathe of Heaven. Society must be regarded as an organism; the body politic is a natural system, and alienation arises from the attempt to impose unnatural forms on nature.

In the future history series, Terrans destroy the original ecology of Earth, making a wasteland of their planet. It is said of Terran colonisers in "The Word for World is Forest": "They have left their roots behind them, perhaps, in this other forest from which they came, this forest with no trees" (chapter 2). Terrans are "uprooted" from nature. The Athshean Selver declares, "If the yumens are men they are men unfit or untaught to dream and to act as men. Therefore they go about in torment killing and destroying, driven by the gods within, whom they will not set free but try to uproot and deny. If they are men they are evil men, having denied their own gods, afraid to see their own faces in the ark" (chapter 2). On the other hand, it is said of the Athsheans, "They're a static, stable, uniform society. They have no history. Perfectly integrated, and wholly unprogressive. You might say that, like the forest they live in, they've attained a climax state. But I don't mean to imply that they're incapable of adaptation" (chapter 3).

Shevek's theoretical physics results in his formulation of a General Temporal Theory, which leads to the development of a machine called the "ansible". The ansible, which permits instantaneous communication over interstellar distances, in turn makes possible a community of worlds, for it eliminates the informational error inherent in the lag of light-speed messages. Similarly, telepathy, the direct contact of mind with mind, is a union coincident with truth: one literally cannot lie when one "mindspeaks". It is the eventual coming of aliens who can lie with their minds which sunders the League of All Worlds. And those who conquer through the Lie, we discover in City of Illusions, are also those who cut themselves off from the natural world and from those who inhabit it... "Though there were said to be so many of the Lords, yet on Earth they kept only this one city, held apart, as Earth itself was held apart from the other words that once had formed the League. Es Toch was self-contained, self-nourished, rootless; all its brilliance and transience of lights and machines and faces, its multiplicity of strangers, its luxurious complexity was built across a chasm in the ground, a hollow place. It was the Place of the Lie. Yet it was wonderful, like a carved jewel fallen in the vast wilderness of the Earth: wonderful, timeless, alien" (chapter 8).

How characteristic of Le Guin is this equation of artifice and alienation, of the rootless city with the Place of the Lie! And how unlike Dick, for whom the "artificial" gathering-together of beings is a necessary precondition of the authentic life, for whom, in fact, a dichotomy between the artificial and the authentic conceived in terms of the human response to nature does not exist. With the entropic tendencies of the universe perceived in terms of chaos and anomie, the question of the artificial versus the authentic response arises only within the framework of human relationships.

To this end Dick employs his particular metaphor of the android: not the externally oppressed creature common to most authors, but the being who is internally alienated, whose artificial nature arises from his inability to relate humanely to other persons. For Dick, the android is the human being who is becoming more like a machine; the robot, the machine that is becoming more like a human being. Communication, the medium of politics at the international or interpersonal level, is for Le Guin a function of man's relation to the natural environment; for Dick, a function of the relations among men. The real aliens of Now Wait For Last Year are also masters of illusion, masquerading as human. But their alienness lies not in their biology or their ecology but in their lack of empathy and compassion. The Prime Minister of the 'Starmen induces a sense of anomie in those he confronts: "Facing Freneksy, they became as they were born: isolated and individual, unsupported by the institutions which they were supposed to represent...facing Minister Freneksy, the naked, hapless, lonely man reemerged - and was required to stand up to the Minister in this unhappy infinitude. The normal relativeness of existence, lived with others in a fluctuating state of more or less adequate security, had vanished" (chapter 9).

Politics in such a world is conducted at a highly personal and subjective level. Gino Molinari, UN Secretary and leader of Earth, is in effect stripped of his role in such a situation and thrown back entirely on his internal resources. His solution to the desperate confrontation with Freneksy is to suffer acute illness in empathy with his fellow human beings and to "produce himself" existentially - a feat he accomplishes in the most literal manner by successively pulling new and healthy versions of himself from parallel time-streams. "His whole psychology, his point of orientation, is to dabble with death and yet somehow surmount it" (chapter 12). Similarly, Eric Sweetscent, the doctor sent to cure Molinari's illnesses, must instead face a crisis of his own, for he has been addicted to JJ-180 by his wife, Kathy. Thus the breakdown of his marriage, which destroys the secure foundations of his life, is reflected by the effect of the drug, which casts him adrift in time. With his objective time continuum destroyed, he must save himself in the subjectivity of alternate time-streams. While gaining the antidote to JJ-180 he, like Molinari, literally rescues himself from the grip of the 'Starmen. The antidote to JJ-180 represents the power to survive existentially: by being able to see beyond the structures of everyday social life and yet remain in control of one's being, the individual can face up to the forces of chaos and alienation. "...By having unhindered use of JJ-180, without the possibility of addiction, of neural disorientation, he can't be controlled by them. That is why, on a deep, psychosomatic basis, Molinari can defy Minister Freneksy. He is not entirely helpless" (chapter 11). But the man who has seen chaos cannot return to everyday

life, as Sweetscent discovers: "Nothing within him remained untouched; it had all been disfigured and even the antidote had not stopped this. As long as he lived he would never regain the purity of the original organism" (chapter 11). For Dick, the social order is maintained only with difficulty; the "natural" tendency is entropic regression to the alienated state of isolation and meaninglessness. Man is "condemned to be free" - to use Sartre's phrase - and must therefore constantly produce his own reality.

If the literary models of these two authors subsume different aspects of the concept of entropy, the respective concepts of anabolic structure which they oppose to entropy contain much in common. The Dispossessed tackles the problem of individual freedom and responsibility within the natural context. "The singing of the front of the march, far away up the street, and of the endless crowds coming on behind, was put out of phase by the distance the sound must travel, so that the melody seemed always to be lagging and catching up with itself, like a canon, and all parts of the song were being sung at one time, in the same moment, though each singer sang the tune as a line from beginning to end" (chapter 9). As in physics, so in politics: the General Temporal Theory is an attempt to reconcile Sequency and Simultaneity; likewise, the individual must be a part in a whole, not a cog in a machine. "The duty of the individual is to accept no rule, to be the initiator of his own acts, to be responsible. Only if he does so will the society live, and change, and adapt, and survive. We are not subjects of a State founded upon law, but members of a society founded upon revolution" (chapter 12). The great danger for any revolution is the growth of bureaucracy and the reification of the social structure, so that "the social conscience completely dominates the individual conscience, instead of striking a balance with it. We don't cooperate - we obey. .. We have created crime, just as the propertarians did. We force a man outside the sphere of our approval, and then condemn him for it. We've made laws, laws of conventional behaviour, built walls all around ourselves, and we can't see them, because they're part of our thinking" (chapter 10). This is the manifestation of entropy in Le Guin's terms - the reduction of tension through the lessening of the possibilities that should inhere in a complex society. "Favouritism, elitism, leader-worship, they crept back and cropped out everywhere," thinks Odo in the short story "The Day Before the Revolution". And, "What is an anarchist? One who, choosing, accepts the responsibility of choice." Society must be in a state of continuous internal revolution, for it is only individual self-responsibility that will maximise complex potential.

"True journey is return" - a catch-phrase of Odo's that figures both in the theme and structure of The Dispossessed - refers to the fact that there is no safety in the past: its promise can only be fulfilled by taking the Way that lies ahead, the abandonment of reified structure which makes possible the revolution of return to the original animate vision. Starting with a world view based on the concept of natural order, Le Guin formulates a philosophy of action not far removed from the existential position. "We know that there is no help for us but from one another, that no hand will save us if we do not reach out our hand. And the hand that you reach out is empty, as mine is. You have nothing. You possess nothing. You own nothing. You are free. All you have is what you are, and what you give" (chapter 9). On the other hand, when Molinari tells Sweetscent not to wait for last year to come back, that "you've got only one tiny life and that lies ahead of you, not sideways or back" (chapter 13), he is simply expressing Dick's fundamental approach. Dick begins with the existential position and then proceeds to formulate a concept of (potential) universal order. Dick's ideal of universal harmony is implied through its juxtaposition with incomplete or deteriorating forms of social or technological integration. The Man in the High Castle and Ubik are structurally similar, in that both set two mirrored entropic worlds against an ideal third. In the former novel, the secondary fictional world - that of Abendsen's parallel-world novel - represents the ideal, while the primary fictional world reflects the entropic tendencies of our own (continuously suggested) world. In Ubik, however, one of the two fictional worlds (that in which Runciter is supposedly alive) also represents our own world, though in an imagined future form, while the ideal world is suggested through the mysterious substance Ubik, which combats the regression of organised forms to earlier types. Therefore Ubik represents negentropy, and points to a world of Platonic form, beyond time; but it is significant that, despite its obvious divine quality, the substance is said to have been invented by Ella Runciter and other threatened half-lifers, working together a long, long time. And there still isn't very much of it available, as yet" (chapter 16). Dick's ideal, organised universe is a human construct.

Le Guin and Dick seem to approach from opposite directions a somewhat similar position: both contend that a reified social structure is a mystification, and both affirm that a proper stance must be one of individual self-responsibility coupled with community solidarity - this latter represented in Now Wait For Last Year, not only by Molinari's illnesses, but by Sweetscent's decision at the end not to forsake his hopelessly ill wife. But Dick's view of man's relationship with his environment is less Taoist and more dialectical than Le Guin's. That human and non-human structures come to reflect each other is for Dick not a moral imperative dictated by natural law, but an inevitable consequence of mutual adaptation. Therefore technology is seen as the potential instrument of reconciliation between man and the universe; the infusion of the environment with technolo-

gical animation is a step away from alienation. This is not to say that the effects of technology are seen as always beneficial, but simply that technology, as an extension of human head and mind, reinforces the reciprocal relationship between human and non-human. The potential for the reciprocal movement of these spheres towards disintegration and death is exemplified by Dr Bloodmoney, or How We Got Along After the Bomb, and by The Man in the High Castle, in which it is said of the Nazi rulers: "It is their sense of space and time. They see through the here, the now, into the vast black deep beyond, the unchanging. And that is fatal to life. Because eventually there will be no life; there was once only the dust particles in space, the hot hydrogen gases, nothing more, and it will come again. There is an interval, ein Augenblick. The cosmic process is hurrying on, crashing life back into the granite and methane; the wheel turns for all life. It is all temporary. And these - these madmen - respond to the granite, the dust, the longing of the inanimate; they want to aid Natur" (chapter 3). Conversely, in such a universe it is only human initiative that can begin the process of animating and "taming" nature. For Le Guin, the proper use of technology permits the establishment of complex societal forms within the context of natural ecology. The people of Anarres "knew that their anarchism was the product of a very high civilisation, of a complex diversified culture, of a stable economy and a highly industrialised technology that could maintain high production and rapid transportation of goods. However vast the distances separating settlements, they held to the ideal of complex organicism" (chapter 4).

Science fiction, in addressing itself to the implications of the landscapes through which human beings move, explores that region where the city of mankind verges on the unassimilated outer universe. Negentropic imagination extends the human noosphere in the direction of the Millennium and an "end" to the tensions of politics, even while its totalitarian success would result in the ontological destruction of imaginative potential - a sudden reversal experienced by colonised people. The literature has not failed to recognise the dystopian elements in the closed secular city - Ballard's short story "Build-Up" (also published under the title "The Concentration City") being perhaps the most strikingly concise example - and it is in this vein that The Dispossessed is subtitled "An Ambiguous Utopia", suggesting the necessarily open-ended nature of any ideal state of affairs. Shevek's mission is to "unbuild walls" (chapter 10), and it is his understanding of the physical and social worlds which leads him to this political action. Political theory, if it is not to be an instrument of mystification, must become an instrument of liberation, revealing to men and women the nature of the myths by which they live, so that they may dream new myths. If science fiction is not only a literature with certain formal aspects, but also one fundamentally concerned with socio-political processes, then Le Guin and Dick have done much the help sicence fiction fulfill its true function.

Angus Taylor
August 1974

FROM PARIS TO ANARRES

(continued from page 23)

But I have wondered at times: Is she capable of the insight and evocation necessary for major characterisation?

And now can answer, Yes.

"The Day Before the Revolution" is simply a character study of revolutionist Odo in old age, and it is a gem. A miniature only, but perfect in its way. It completes the book with the display of a fresh acquisition in the writer's literary toolroom.

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It would be foolish to claim that this is one of the great s f author collections, but it is a good one. If its lows are low, its peaks are high and the general level of the terrain is well above high tide. Between 1962 and 1975 Ursula Le Guin has travelled a rough road from hobbled promise to a proficient striding through every branch of her art (except comedy, almost totally absent).

Reading "April in Paris" in 1962, one could not have forecast The Dispossessed. Reading it in 1975, one can just perceive that the possibility was there. Round about 1969 the synergistic fusion took place, but what sparked it? Le Guin herself may not know; if she does, perhaps she will tell us.

To sum up: Ursula Le Guin writes fantasy and straight s f with equal grace - and "grace" is the merited word. Her ideas and treatments are original and her conclusions, however bizarre, are arrived at logically. She neither overwrites nor decorates unnecessarily: "Nine Lives" and "Vaster than Empires and More Slow" are lessons in how to write superior s f.

Among the stridencies and pretensions of contemporary s f, Le Guin's work stands out for its concern with quality and for the lack of strain with which quality is achieved. She follows the great classical tradition, not of science fiction, but of all fiction.

George Turner
November 1975

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I think, I believe in some sense much akin to the belief of faith, that I noticed, felt, or underwent what I describe - but it may be that the only reason childhood memories act on us strongly is that, being the most remote we possess, they are the worst remembered and so offer the least resistance to that process by which we mould them nearer and nearer to an ideal which is fundamentally artistic, or at least nonfactual; so it may be that some of these events I describe never occurred at all, but only should have, and that others had not the shades and flavours - for example, of jealousy or antiquity or shame - that I have later unconsciously to give them.

- Gene Wolfe, Peace

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It is too late for it now, but it sometimes seems to me that we ought to have kept records, by the new generations, of our remoteness from events of high significance, when the last man to have seen some occurrence or personality of importance died; and then when the last person who knew him died; and so on. But first we would have the first man describe this event, this thing that he had seen, and when each of them had gone we would read the description publicly to see if it still meant anything to us - and if it did not, the series, the chain of linked lives, would be at an end.

- Gene Wolfe, Peace

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A day comes when we understand that tomorrow will be no different from today since of today will it be made.

- Marcel Proust

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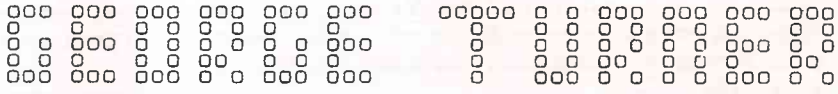
THE GENE WOLFE SECTION



THE REMEMBRANCE OF THINGS PRESENT

George Turner discusses

PEACE

by Gene Wolfe

Harper & Row :: 1975
264 pages :: $8.95

In 1914 a man named Prinzip fired, in Sarajevo, a shot which rang, as they say, round the world. Two years before I was born, that man's action determined much of the course of my life - and yours. With a simple contraction of the index finger he precipitated World War I, and the political stupidities arising from the Allied victory (if "victory" has any specific meaning) gave rise to World War II, which effectively ended the famous Depression Years, set me and a few million other wide-eyed innocents to discovering the degradation of mindless conflict, and produced a syndrome of politico-scientific terrors and rivalries which culminated in the nuclear flash at Alamogordo. Which in turn...

Wars and nuclear flashes are big news, but what of the little news? World War II ended, for me, when I was discharged from the army, to the relief of both parties, in 1945. I have since spent thirty years growing out of the world's trauma and trying to grow into whatever I might have been if Prinzip had never lived. Impossible, of course, "might have been" cannot be discovered. But I wrote a war novel back in the 1950s, thinking that, with its publication, I had laid the ghost of the locust years, that that part of my life was ended at last.

A foolishness, because nothing ends. It attenuates, reaching asymptotically towards an unattainable zero, but never ends. Last August I found myself in a fleeting moment of excited, almost hostile disagreement with Ursula Le Guin at dinner in a Melbourne cafe, when she spoke of her involvement with anti-war protest and I affirmed that, while the protesters were right to take their stand, they hated war for all the wrong reasons, that the dreadfulness of the psychic degradation in soldiers far outweighed death, pain, and destruction. She disagreed. We exchanged glances - and dropped the subject.

Sixty-one years ago Prinzip helped to cause that moment . Nothing ends. I am not free of him. Nor is she. Nor are you who read this.

** ** **

Somewhere in America a man named Gene Wolfe knows this fact of interlocking endlessness and has written a novel about it. I don't recall that the word "war" is ever mentioned in it, but its title is Peace. It probably refers to peace of mind, but I will not presume to make final judgments of meaning on this very beautiful, luminous, fantastic, far-removed, utterly realistic novel.

It is not science fiction, though it has much to do with the conception of time-in-the-round, time in which present and past are one, existing now and still existing tomorrow.

It is not science fiction, but it is by the man who wrote that thoughtful, probing The Fifth Head of Cerberus, and is as much greater than that book as that is greater than, say, The Skylark of Space.

It is not science fiction. So read it and discover something of what the science fiction mind has to offer the mainstream - and what the mainstream (how I detest that double-crossing, double-talking word with its background of inverted snobbery; but what better have we, in our s f paranoia?) has to offer to science fiction.

** ** **

Alden Weer, born at the turn of the century and now grown old, suffers a stroke. His thought turns not to Last Things, which bother him little, but to the eternal fact of his existence. He is not concerned that his life is going out, but that it has been lived and in its entirety exists forever in the matrix of time. He remembers, not seeking some philosophic summing up of complacent pattern or justification of himself to God, but a recognition of the shape of his term on Earth.

Never in his seventy or so years does he leave the environs of his small mid-western town, yet his story moves out across the map of America, even crosses the sea with a fine tertiary tendril, sees and hears and touches and returns to where he sits, wealthy and alone, in his vast old house, remembering.

Nothing is Lost:

> When I designed the entranceway of this house, I tried to recreate the foyer of Blaine's - not its actuality in a tape measure sense, but its actuality as I remembered it; why should not my memory, which still exists, which still "lives and breathes and has its being", be less actual, less real, than a physical entity now demolished and irrecoverable?
>
> Between this paragraph and the last, I went to look for that foyer...

Each room in the house is a reproduction of another person's room which has impressed itself on Alden's memory; the whole structure is an aide-memoire, a filing cabinet of experience unlost. Like his memory it is vast and rambling and he loses his way in it as easily as in his recollections. He seeks a room which will reconstruct a sequence and cannot find it, but finds another which presents a different sequence, but one which finally leads to, impinges upon, enters the one he wanted - because a life is a whole life, not a thing of parallels and overpasses and stopped ends.

He finds marvels in his memory and relates them to us - not always accurately, but as best he can, fancy being as much part of reality as the hitching posts we call facts. Sometimes he finds whole stories. The book is a gold mine of short stories woven into the tapestry - not inserted into it but part of it. There is the China Egg Story and all the consequences that arose from it, as well as the consciousness of consequences which tried to arise but did not. There is the Chemist's Story, which did not happen to Alden at all but eventually entered his life, many years later, by way of an unexpected ripple. There is the Buried Treasure Story and an Arabian Nights Fantasy, as well as a Chinese Morality and a Story About Forgery which lays out a whole jigsaw of Questioned Morality.

And every now and then there is something that is not quite a story, just an incident, which illuminates a corner of the human cellar and terrifies with knowledge of the narrowness of the gap between fancy and fact. Such as this:

(I know there are limits to be respected regarding the length of quotes; it says so in the front of every novel. But we must, just this once, push the boundary a little far for this really beautiful excerpt.)

Young Alden, aged about ten, is with his Aunt and her anthropologist lover, who is about to lower himself over a cliff to investigate a cave.

> Then, with a sliding loop round his waist, he lowered himself from the edge, fending off the stones of the bluff with his legs much as though he were walking.
>
> "Well," my aunt said, standing at the edge to watch him, with the toes of her boots (this I remember vividly) extending an inch or more into space, "he's gone, Den. Shall we cut the rope?"
>
> I was not certain that she was joking, and shook my head.
>
> "Vi, what are you two chattering about up there?" The Professor's voice was still loud, but somehow sounded far away.
>
> "I'm trying to persuade Den to murder you. He has a lovely scout knife - I've seen it."
>
> "And he won't do it?"
>
> "He says not."
>
> "Good for you, lad."
>
> "Well, really, Robert, why shouldn't he? There you hang like a great, ugly spider, and all he has to do is cut the rope. It would change his whole life like a religious conversion - haven't you ever read Dostoyevsky? And if he doesn't do it he'll always wonder if it wasn't partly because he was afraid."
>
> "If you do cut, Alden, push her over afterward, won't you? No witnesses."
>
> "That's right," my aunt Olivia told me, "you could say we made a suicide pact."
>
> Frightened, I shook my head again, and heard Professor Peacock call, "There is a cave here, Vi."
>
> "Do you see anything?"
>
> He did not answer and I, determined to be at least as daring as my aunt, walked to the edge and looked over; the rope hung slack, moving when my foot touched it. Trying to sound completely grown up, I asked, "Did he fall?"
>
> "No, silly, he's in the cave, and we'll have to wait up here for ever and ever before he'll come up and tell us what he found."
>
> She had lowered her voice, and I followed suit. "You didn't really want me to cut the rope, did you, Aunt Olivia?"
>
> "I don't suppose I cared a great deal whether you did or not, Den, but I would have stopped you if you'd tried - or didn't you know that?"
>
> If I had been older, I would have told her I did, and I would - after the fashion of older people - have been telling the truth. I had sensed that cutting the rope was only a joke; I had also sensed that beneath the joke there was a strain of earnestness, and I was not mature enough yet to subscribe fully to that convention by which such underlying, embarrassing thoughts are ignored - as we ignore the dead trees in a garden because they have been overgrown with climbing roses or morning glories at the urging of the clever gardener. I continued to wait thus, embarrassed and silent, until the professor's head appeared above the edge of the bluff and he scrambled up to stand with us.

** ** **

Alden Weer is not simply a recorder of incidents; he is an observer of the appearance and disappearance of strands in the weft as they wind over and under the warp of events. So: When he is a little boy a group of ladies make idle mention of a piece of bucksin - perhaps 100 pages further on the piece of bucksin reappears as part of a snippet of local history - leading to a tale of buried treasure - and a burgeoning love where greed soils innocence - and, curiously, to a matter of faked manuscripts - which in turn gives rise to an unexpected offer of sex from a teenager to a now-ageing Alden Weer - which then...

This is not unduly complex as novels go, but it becomes miraculous when you realise that each of these incidents is central to another part of the pattern, that incidents, stories, fantasies, and meanings crisscross endlessly, that author Wolfe is telling half a dozen major tales at once and that each is dependent on the others for its existence.

Peace is not simply the tale of one man's life (that kind of fictional biography has been done to death since David Copperfield) but an examination of the complexity of existence, of its interaction and connectivity. It is not a statement of the shape of life but of the marvellous topology which is independent in each of us, yet inseparably connected to all life and all time.

** ** **

It is no news to the followers of Wolfe's stories that he can, on occasion, write superlatively well. In Peace he does not rise to occasions but writes with a reticent, wondering beauty throughout. Here is a childhood Christmas evoked in long, smooth sentences recalling the easy precision of Henry James in his middle period of unmatched grace:

(Eight-year-old Alden has wakened in the night and seen a light under the parlour door.)

> Whether I thought it was light from the isinglass window of the stove, or that someone had left a lamp burning, or that it was the sun in an east window - for I was firmly convinced, remember, that it was morning - I did not stop to speculate. I opened the door (not with a knob that turned, as we had at home - as we had also gaslights and only used kerosene when a light had to be carried about, so that I thought, when I first came, that my grandfather's house was in a constant state of emergency - but with a strange latch that lifted to the downward pressure of my thumb) and as I did so the soft yellow light, as soft as a two-day-old chick, as soft as the blossom of a dandelion and more radiant, came pouring out, and I saw to my astonishment that the Christmas-tree candles were all lit, each standing erect as its own flame near the tip of a limb, a white specter crowned with fire.

Lovely, isn't it? One could quote forever, but two more short pieces must suffice. Here is one of many moments of precise, emotion-laden description, simple and unremarkable in individual words, but sharp and memorable in the dramatic matching of images:

> It grew steadily darker and colder, and a wind rose. I saw something bright, the only colourful thing I had seen in the garden except for the breast feathers of the dead bird, blowing across the path. I ran and caught it, and found that it was a broken paper lantern.

And here is one to show that the quirky thinking of the science fiction writer is not much overlaid by the concerns of the "straight" novelist: (Weer is talking to the faker of books.)

> "You say that the title means 'The Book That Binds The Dead'?"
>
> "Yes. It is a volume of necromancy - among other things."
>
> "Isn't there a danger that someone will really try to do whatever it is the book indicates they should?"
>
> "They will fail, Mr Weer. Magic is an unreliable thing."
>
> "It seems to me that the danger lies in the harm they may do in failing."
>
> "I would worry about their succeeding, if I were you. It may not be as easy to hold the dead down as we think."

It would be simple to go on revealing small glories ("small", because Peace is for the lover of good fiction, not the brass-throated stuff of which million-sellers are made) indefinitely. I could also list minor weaknesses, and feel only impatient with myself for bothering. I have tried instead to transmit something of the inward, complex, quiet excitement the novel communicated to me.

However, since I haven't written a word about structure, symbolic metaphor, characterisation, and all the technical what-have-you of novelising, it may be thought that these things are non-existent in Peace. Be assured they are very much existent, but that I prefer not to insult a minor masterpiece and a genuine literary experience by dissecting it.

All right. Just one note. On characterisation:

Three weeks after finishing the book I can close my eyes and name, visualise, and psychologically describe seventeen distinct persons from Peace. I know, because I have just done it.

When did you last read a novel you could do that for?

George Turner
October 1975

> Every artist loves his material as well as the design to which it gives body - the painter his precious colour; the sculptor his stone, metal, wood; the stained glass artist, his tinted hyaline; the poet, words. But to Joyce words are more than a pleasurable material out of which agreeable patterns can be made, or thought and emotion communicated. They are quick with human history as pitchblende with radium, or coal with heat and flame. They have a will and life of their own and are not to be put like lead soldiers, but to be energised and persuaded like soldiers of flesh and blood. The commerce of life new mints them every day and gives them new values in the exchanges, and Joyce is ever listening for living speech from any human lips.
> - Frank Budgen, James Joyce and the Making of Ulysses

THE A E VAN VOGT SECTION

EDITOR: A E Van Vogt is not an author particularly well-liked by me or many of the contributors to S F Commentary. In my own case, I did not even "grow up on" Van Vogt, as did many s f readers, and I've had little temptation to catch up on what I "missed". Many s f readers who became addicts of the stuff were influenced greatly by Van Vogt, and it is obvious from even their current writings that many s f authors have also been influenced by him.

This is hardly the point of including here a special section devoted to Van Vogt. The point is that such a forum is probably the most useful way to examine science fiction as a whole - to look at the work of particular authors, rather than at genres, periods, themes, etc. In other words, probably I prefer a section on "The Contributions of Heironymous T Throgmorton to the Grunge Magazine Chain, 1911-1912" to somebody's thesis on "All You Never Wanted to Know About the Role of Sheep in Science Fiction".

Provided that the former article was better written than the latter, of course. It helps to publish well-written articles. No worries here. BILL WRIGHT is famous for his amusing and illuminating exegeses on indigestible s f authors, and for his parliamentary procedures at s f conventions. ROB GERRAND is an amiable gentleman-about-Melbourne-fandom who wears a continuous, friendly smile and, insofar as anybody knows anything about his mysterious doings, seems to lead a life devoted to the relentless pursuit of pleasure, money, and any Jack Vance stories he hasn't read yet.

HOW TO LOVE PRIMITIVE LITERATURE

Bill Wright reviews

THE BEST OF A E VAN VOGT

edited by Angus Wells

Sidgwick & Jackson :: 1974
438 pages :: $A9.50

Sphere 7221 8774 :: 1975
437 pages :: $A1.90

This is an enthusiastic review. If you are looking for literary criticism with a deeply intellectual content, please refer to most of the other contributions to this excellent magazine - such things are not applicable to the works of the Master nor, indeed, to most of his readers.

A E Van Vogt began writing science fiction during the early 1940s, and this anthology, The Best of A E Van Vogt, represents a selection of his best work from that time until 1968. These days, nobody pretends that there is anything scientific in the concepts which Van Vogt

juggles in his stories, but this was not always the case. (George Turner tells of a spirited debate amongst Melbourne University students inthe 1940s, when they questioned the viability of a civilisation based on the possession by everyone of personal energy weapons - see "The Weapon Shops" in this anthology.)

For me, modern science fiction began with E E Smith (Ph D) and his incredible universes. Van Vogt's universes are not incredible at all; they are perfectly rational and totally absorbing - for the duration of the story. Afterwards, of course, the real world, with its everyday patterns of logic, impinges on the consciousness, and often this has the effect of a delayed-action time bomb. In The Weapon Makers (a sort of sequal to "The Weapon Shops"), there is a time-travel sequence which sends the mind spinning off into logarithmic spirals as soon as any reader is foolish enough to attempt to reason the whole thing out. The secret of reading Van Vogt is: don(t question anything; just enjoy it.

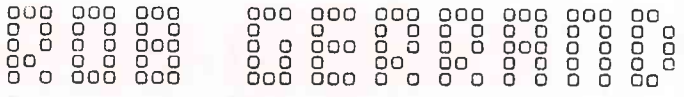
Van Vogt was a pioneer in many ways. He introduced competent writing into science fiction; he was the first of the "modern" writers to attempt to forecast the effect of scientific developments on the lives of people; he pioneered the Golden Age of the 1950s, and we should all thank him for that; but, above all, he was an absolute genius at gathering together a bundle of his magazine stories and expanding them into novels - sometimes successfully, often not. Among his successes were The Weapon Shops of Isher, Voyage of the Space Beagle, and The War Against the Rull. His failures include Rogue Ship (an expansion of the short story, "The Expendables", in this anthology).

Some of Van Vogt's best work was done in collaboration with other writers (unfortunately, this anthology has no examples). My favourites are "Research Alpha", a novelette about the experimental development of a superwoman, written in collaboration with James H Schmitz of Agent of Vega fame (oh, how I loved the Golden Age!), and Planets for Sale, written in collaboration with E Mayne Hull.

If you have not been spoiled by too much literary education, you will enjoy The Best of A E Van Vogt. An appreciation of primitive literature is what distinguishes the true science fiction fan. You will find in this anthology absorbing stories, many of which you will want to read again. In stories of up to novella length, such as appear in this volume, Van Vogt writes with great care (by his own admission in the introduction). It shows. Words are carefully chosen, as much for their emotive content as for their meaning (the only other s f writer to equal Van Vogt in this respect is James Blish). There are no irritating breaks in any of these stories, although the same is not true of some of his long novels. (There used to be a dispute on this point. Some people maintained that the element of total supprise is a desirable characteristic of the science fiction novel. If so, then Van Vogt is, unequestionably, the greatest writer of them all. In The Weapon Makers, Robert Hedrock - Earth's one immortal man - leaps right into an energised wall in the stronghold of the Weapon Makers' council and emerges in one of his secret laboratories, where he is immediately attacked by a giant rat. I defy any reader to predict that sequence of events in the story. Anyway, Van Vogt can get away with it, even though it is my opinion that he has simply become tired of the way the story is developing and starts telling a different story about the same characters.)

This anthology was edited with the cooperation of the author and a number of active British fans, including TAFF winner, Peter Weston. This is probably why it contains a comprehensive bibliography of Van Vogt's science fiction works. (He has written in other fields, as he goes to great pains to tell you in his introduction.) If, like me, you went through the Golden Age of the 1950s, then buy the book for nostalgia's sake. If you are one of the frightening new generation of literary s f types, then I don't know how to advise you. I think that the stories are well enough written to satisfy the most discriminating critic. Why not judge for yourself?

Bill Wright May 1975



ABOUT A E VAN VOGT

EDITOR:
The following article was delivered as a talk to the July meeting of the Nova Mob, which is Melbourne's s f discussion group. Discussion, biscuits, and coffee followed, but unfortunately nobody tape-recorded the discussion.

The Weapon Shops of Isher is perhaps A E Van Vogt's best novel. Certainly it has a consistency in the plotting and a density in the ideas that is not often encountered in his other novels.

The contrast is well illustrated if we examine

The Weapon Shops of Isher and its sequel, The Weapon Makers. Both books have startling ideas galore, but whereas in the former the ideas are all cleverly balanced, and fit together - despite the reader's doubts - impressively, in the latter there are gaping flaws, and the simplest effective way that Van Vogt bridges the gap is to introduce a new idea; and for no other reason.

Even more interesting in The Weapon Shops of Isher is the complex visualisation of society. Van Vogt builds up, carefully and convincingly, the motivation of his characters; characters at different levels in his society - from different time periods, indeed. He presents activity from the viewpoints of these different characters, and successfully restrains his tendency toward authorial intrusion.

In this book Van Vogt is also engaged seriously in propounding certain ideas about the nature of man - a definite political view that all political systems are, in the end, much the same, and that any government needs an independent system of checks and balances to counter excesses of power exercised by it.

Regardless of how one views Van Vogt's politics - whether worth talking aout, or simplistic, or whatever - they do not intrude. This is not a book of political theory. Nonetheless, Van Vogt has gone to considerable trouble to imagine the workings of his society. I don't mean that he has created a new system. Obviously he hasn't; it is the same old capitalist system. But he doesn't claim to have created one. What is commendable is the extent to which he has gone in understanding the subtleties and ironies of any human system.

Also, he has thought cleverly about some of the basic physics of time and energy and he has provided, with breathtaking simplicity, a stunning framework to the whole novel. This very simplicity (remembering that all feats of genius seem simple once they have been explained) makes all the more startling the climax of the book, one which it is hard to conceive of surpassing.

The sequel, The Weapon Makers, lacks the depth and emotional strengths of the former. It is, rather, like a typical meretricious Hollywood film of an s f novel: all of the gimmicks but none of the substance; none of that rare quality of extended and logical and original imagination - the sense of wonder - which keeps us in thrall to science fiction.

** ** **

I'm quoting from the 1969 New English Library edition of The Weapon Shops of Isher (London, 127 pages, $A1), which has been cut - a sentence here, a sentence there. I don't know whether the editing was done by Van Vogt, or by NEL.

> The village at night made a curiously timeless picture. Fara walked contentedly beside his wife along the street. The air was like wine; and he was thinking dimly of the artist who had come up from Imperial City, and made what the telestats called - he remembered the phrase vividly - "a symbolic painting reminiscent of a scene in the electrical age of seven thousand years ago."
>
> As they walked, Fara half turned to his wife. In the dim light of the nearest street lamp, her kindly, still youthful face was almost lost in shadow. He murmured softly, instinctively muting his voice to harmonise with the pastel shades of night: "She said - our empress said - that our little village of Glay seemed to her to have in it all the wholesomeness, the gentleness, that constitutes the finest qualities of her people. Wasn't that a wonderful thought, Creel? She must be a marvellously understanding woman."

The passage captures the mood effectively: the attractions of village life, together with the parochialism.

> Fara had a strange, empty feeling as he stared at the blazing sign. (FINE WEAPONS.) He saw that other villagers were gathering. He said finally, huskily, "I've heard of these shops. They're places of infamy against which the government of the empress will act one of these days. They're built in hidden factories and then transported whole to towns like ours and set up in gross defiance of property rights. That one wasn't there an hour ago." His face hardened. His voice had a harsh edge in it as he said, "Creel, go home."
>
> He was surprised when Creel did not move off at once. All their married life, she had had a pleasing habit of obedience that had made life a wonderful thing. He saw that she was looking at him wide-eyed, and that it was a timid alarm that held her there.
>
> "Go home!" Her fear brought out all the determination in his nature. "We're not going to let such a monstrous thing desecrate our village. Think of it - " his voice shivered before the appalling thought - "This fine, old-fashioned community, which we had resolved always to keep exactly as the empress has it in her picture gallery, debauched now, ruined by this... this thing - But we won't have it; that's all there is to it."
>
> Creel's voice came softly out of the half-darkness of the street corner, the timidity gone from it: "Don't do anything rash, Fara. Remember it is not the first new building to come into Glay - since

the picture was painted."

Fara was silent. This was a quality of his wife of which he did not approve, this reminding him unnecessarily of unpleasant facts. He knew exactly what she meant. The gigantic, mutitentacled corporation, Automatic Atomic Motor Repair Shops, Inc, had come in under the laws of the State with their flashy building, against the wishes of the village council, and had already taken half of Fara's repair business.

This gives us something of the relationship between Creel and Fara - husband and wife. Also we see the change from quiet village to industrialised state. And next:

He watched the slender woman-shape move off into the shadows. She was halfway across the street when Fara called after her: "And if you see that son of ours hanging around some street corner, take him home. He's got to learn to stop staying out so late at night."

The first intimations of the generation gap. It is Fara's son, Cayle, who plays a central part in the novel. Through him again we are shown the differences between city and village life, with some nice understated satire. For example, after the inevitable split between Fara and Cayle, Cayle leaves the village and takes his first trip to the big smoke:

There was a man in a chair about ten feet along the aisle. Cayle suppressed an impulse to ask him all the questions that bubbled inside him. Other people might not realise as clearly as he himself did that, though he had lived all his life in Glay, he wasn't really village. He'd better not risk a rebuff.

A man laughed. A woman said, "But, darling, are you sure we can afford a trip to the planets?" They passed along the aisle, Cayle assessing the casualness with which they were taking the trip.

He felt enormously self-conscious at first, but he also gradually grew casual. He read the news on his chair 'stat. With idle glances he watched the scenery speeding by below, adjusting his chair scope for enlarged vision. He felt quite at home by the time the three men seated themselves opposite him and began to play cards.

It was a small game for tiny stakes. And, throughout, two of the men were never addressed by name. The third one was called "Seal". Unusual name, it seemed to Cayle. And the man was as special as his name. He looked about thirty. He had eyes as yellow as a cat's. His hair was wavy, boyish in its unruliness. His face was sallow, though not unhealthy-looking. Multiple rings flashed coloured fire from his fingers. When he spoke it was with slow assurance. And it was he who finally turned to Cayle and said: "Noticed you watching us. Care to join us?"

Cayle had been intent, automatically accepting Seal as a professional gambler, but not quite decided about the others. The question was, which one was the sucker?

Cayle accepts the invitation, after guessing that they are a team out to get him. During the game he naively questions Seal (realising that probably he is making a fool of himself) and finishes up by asking:

"Are you married?"

Seal laughed. "Married! Listen, my friend, I get married every place I go. Not legally, mind you." He laughed again, significantly. "I see I'm giving you ideas."

Cayle said, "You don't have to get ideas like that from other people."

He spoke automatically. He hadn't expected such a revelation of character. No doubt Seal was a man of courage. But the glamour had gone from him. Cayle recognised that it was his village morality, his mother's ethics, that were assessing the other.

After Cayle is robbed by the trio, he meets a drunken colonel in Her Imperial Majesty's Army who, during their discourse, reveals why Cayle had been selected by them.

"...When I was your age. Boy, was I green!" He quivered in a spasm of vinous indignation. "Y'know, those damned clothing monopolies have different kinds of cloth they send out to the country. You can spot anybody from a village. I was sure spotted fast..."

Later, after Cayle has been processed by the city, we return to Fara.

Fara worked, he had nothing else to do, and the thought was often in his mind that now he would be doing it til the day he died. Fool that he was - he told himself a thousand times how big a fool - he hoping that Cayle would walk into the shop and say: "Father, I've learnt my lesson. If you can forgive me, teach me the business, and then you can retire to a well-earned rest."

Then a call comes on the telestat: a money call.

Fara and Creel looked at each other. "Eh," said Fara finally, "money call for us."

He could see from the grey look in Creel's face the thought that was in her mind. He said under his breath: Damn that boy!"

But he felt relieved. Amazingly, relieved! Cayle was beginning to appreciate the value of parents. He switched on the viewer. "Come and collect," he said.

It is an impersonal representative from the Fifth Bank of Ferd, requiring 12,100 credits.

"But the bank had no right," Fara expostulated, "to pay out the money without my authority."

The voice cut him off coldly. "Are we then to inform our central that the money was obtained under false pretences? Naturally, an order will be issued immediately for the arrest of your son."

After an argument with his wife, Fara agrees to pay, by taking out a loan.

The deal completed, Fara whirled on his wife. Out of the depths of his hurt and bewilderment, he raged, "What do you mean, standing there and talking about not paying it? You said several times that I was responsible for him being what he is. Besides, we don't know why he needed the money. He said it was an emergency."

Creel said in a low, dead voice, "In one hour he's stripped us of our savings. He must have done it deliberately, thinking of us as two old fools who wouldn't know any better than to pay it."

"All I see," Fara interrupted, "is what I have saved our name from disgrace."

His high sense of duty rightly done lasted until mid-afternoon, when the bailiff from Ferd came to take over the shop.

"But what..." Fara began,

The bailiff said, "The Automatic Atomic Repair Shops, Limited, took over your loan from the bank and are foreclosing."

Fara decides to fight, and takes his case to court.

The courthouse was a big, grey building; and Fara felt emptier and colder every second, as he walked along the grey corridors. In Glay, his decision not to give himself into the hands of a lawyer had seemed a wise act. Here, in these enormous halls and palatial rooms, it seemed the sheerest folly.

He managed, nevertheless, to give an account of the criminal act of the bank in first giving Cayle the money, then turning over the note to his chief competitor, apparently within minutes of his signing it. He finished with: "I'm sure, sir, the empress would not approve of such goings-on against honest citizens."

"How dare you," said the cold-voiced person on the bench, "use the name of her holy majesty in support of your own gross self-interest? ... Plaintiff's appeal dismissed, with costs assessed at seven hundred credits, to be divided between the court and the defence solicitor in the ratio of five to two."

And so, in relatively few words, Van Vogt paints in how the wheels of the system grind on, the nature of legal redress, and the nature of Fara's delusions.

All this time, meanwhile, in the balance of power between the Weapon Shops organisation and the Isher empire, the humble reporter McAllister is trapped in oscillation with a military building, in a sort of temporal balance, each jumping in oppsoite directions in time. Because of its huge mass the building, in taking a short hop in time, causes McAllister to travel a correspondingly long hop: forward and back, gradually bigger and bigger jumps.

At one stage, when the building is in Cayle's time, he enters it, and travels with it back in time on its next hop. At the end of the book, when McAllister has swung from the distant future to the remote past, McAllister thinks about his position, trapped in his protective suit.

Then he had thought that he must die so that others might live...

How it would be worked he had no idea. But the seesaw would end in the very remote past, with the release of the stupendous temporal energy he had been accumulating with each of those monstrous swings.

He would not witness but he would aid in the formation of the planets.

** ** **

The sequel, The Weapon Makers, does not have the same complexity and the same satisfying consistency, where every bizarre happening has a reasonable place in the plot. There is not the same interest in character types nor in social structure.

Instead, we have such tedious things as Hedrock, the protagonist, and ultra-man, working any wonder necessary to keep the book moving. For example, laboriously he buys up a series of buildings in the city and then (he's a super-scientist) transforms himself into a giant so he can trample on them. The object: to frighten the

populace into believing he is going to destroy the whole city unless certain ultimata are met. But no harm's done; the buildings destroyed are his.

This book is Van Vogt spinning out ideas as fast as he can type them onto paper. Weapon Shops, however, has only a few ideas, but Van Vogt explores their implications and relates them to people and society.

The Weapon Makers has no convincing characters. By this I don't mean that a character must be delineated with Dostoyevskian subtlety, but we should be able to identify with the characters; a very different thing. With Fara, or Cayle or McAllister, we can agree, "Yes, that's how I would have reacted if I were he." We can be sympathetic with their condition.

This shows up differences in Van Vogt's works. When he is interested in motivation, and presents it from the viewpoint of the characters, he is good. When he is interested primarily in creating a "super-rational" being, or in tossing in mind blowing ideas without spending the energy required to develop them, he becomes boring. He actually manages to devalue his amazing ideas.

A final example of this. In 1966, in If, Van Vogt had published a novelette called "Silkies in Space". This has been reprinted in the collection The Best of A E Van Vogt, edited by Angus Wells, which contains thirteen stories ranging over the period from 1940 to 1968. Buried in the cardboard characterisation of "Silkies in Space" one discovers, if patient enough, one of the most startling and ingenious theories for the creation of stars. But such beauty, when mixed up with the hodge-podge of melodramatic power games, becomes trivialised. The incongruity destroys the sense of wonder. Ah, Mr Van Vogt, why not pick up those long-dropped threads?

Rob Gerrand
July 1975

PRIESTLY VIRTUES

(continued from page 19)

of journeying may have been all for nothing, these pages of sinewy prose reinforce the irony and tragedy of Priest's theme.

The awesome point of the book's final pages is that it is quite possible that the guildsmen of Earth City may have done what they did as a result of a delusion. It is this possibility which put me in mind of a comparison that may well seem bizarre. Reading the last chapters of Inverted World, I found myself recalling parts of Don Quixote.

Heaven forbid that I should be thought of as comparing the two books. But I repeat: the ending of Priest's novel produces faint but distinct echoes of Cervantes. The world that Don Quixote sees before him is invisible to others. But the deeds he does in it and the injuries he suffers on account of it are all too real. He thrusts his lance at some imagined enchanter and a stout Spanish traveller hurls him into the dust with blood spilling from his cracked head. The world that Mann and his fellow guildsmen travel through endlessly rests perhaps on a doubtful mathematical proposition. But they fix their great steel rails into place and drag thier lumbering wheeled city a few miles further each year. They drag it across mountains and streams. And when they come to the most daunting river of all, a river so wide they cannot see its farther shore, they drive in the first timbers of a bridge that only heroes or madmen would undertake.

So what are they - heroes or madmen?

I can think of no higher praise for Christopher Priest's novel than to say that it raises some of the same kinds of questions as Cervantes' masterpiece.

Gerald Murnane
May 1975

"The last year of my father's life was the first year of his life he'd ever been out of debt. If he'd lived another year he'd have been broke, because the cattle business went to hell after that."
- Fred Harris, quoted by Tom Hayden, Rolling Stone

In a good season one trusts life; in a bad season one only hopes... Without trust, a man lives, but not a human life; without hope, he dies. Where there is no relationship, where hands do not touch, emotion atrophies in void and intelligence goes sterile and obsessed.
- Ursula K Le Guin, City of Illusions

From Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid to Dirty Harry Callahan; the mythic American hero is a man, almost always womanless, who has somehow been trapped in that curious nether world between comic innocence and tragic experience; unable or unwilling to make a choice, he can at best (or worst) embrace either adjective, neither noun. He has known happiness once, lost it, and now nothing will help. For the sentimental there is Christianity... It is small wonder that most American worship no god except their own lost innocence,
- Paul Nelson, Rolling Stone

JOHN WYNDHAM AS NOVELIST OF IDEAS

ABOUT OWEN WEBSTER

"John Wyndham as Novelist of Ideas" did not appear in the lifetime of the author. Neither did the review of So, his only novel, which I always meant to write. Having just read So for the third time, I'm not sure that I can write that review even now. Having lived through nearly a year since Owen's death, I'm not sure that I can introduce the author.

The incomprehensible, horrible thing about Owen's suicide was that he loved life so much. If he should die, who then should live? So, which was attributed to the fictitious "Adam Pilgrim" is a novel all about trying to live life. When I first read So, in late 1970, it gave me hope that perhaps I could control my life, and not let it drift in the disastrous direction it was taking. Reading So was the beginning of the five best years of my life; or should I say, the first five good years of my life. I still cannot accept that its author is dead.

This Introduction has become confused and congested already. I begin by talking about a person and switch immediately to talking about a book. It's just that I cannot separate the two. Because of the book, I got in touch with Owen and met him and his family. From then on I rang him about every six months and visited the Websters' place even less seldom. Yet so much that he and Gail said to me changed my life or helped me to change my life. When I came back to read So again in 1973, I found that it was a different book. When I had read the book for the first time, nothing in it had happened to me. The book sat on the table and reproached me just because I had experienced so little of what was there. When I came to the book for the second time, many things I had not noticed the first time spoke directly to me. They were events and feelings which had happened to me since I had read the book first, and might never have happened to me if I had not read it. Now that I've read the book a third time, many of its perceptions seem even more extraordinary. Passages of prose which I had not noticed the first time now struck me with their meaning.

Meanwhile, Owen Webster went beyond So in achievement, but progressed little in his public literary career. After a lifetime of being a ilgrim, this stocky, acerbic Engoishman settled down with Gail and their two children, Justin and Amber, to a life which I regarded as the nearest any people could reasonably find to heaven on earth. They lived in a mock-Tudor cottage built into the side of a hill at Warrandyte. Trees and a garden (so well described in So) surrounded the house, which was separated from the road by a creek and a valley. There Owen worked for more than four years on what was to be his last work, the first volume of his biography of Frank Dalby Davison. Justin grew up there; Amber was born there.

So what, I keep asking myself, went wrong? Why did heaven on earth become so hellish that Owen took leave of life? Probably I will never know. Shortly after I returned from overseas (February 1974) I missed my last chance to visit the Websters'. They had a birthday party for Owen. Shortly afterward, Julie and her husband arrived from England. Julie was the daughter (whom I had always presumed to be fictitious) to whom So is written as a letter. Owen did not expect the real Julie ever to read it. This arrival caused some extraordinary tensions, the exact nature of which I never discovered. Next I heard, the Websters set out on a long trip to Queensland in the steps of Frank Dalby Davison, in search of Australia and - as I understand now - in search of a disintegrating marriage. In December 1974, Owen rang me, needing help and advise from me, who had alwys asked help from him. I saw him twice after that. He could barely speak or concentrate; he could no longer write; his marriage had dissolved; he was so poor that he had to sell the dream cottage. On 14 March, 1975, he took his own life.

Perhaps he would not have been driven to despair

if only the second main article of faith in his life had not disappeared at the same time. Owen used to say that he wanted to excel in the three rs: reading, writing, and rooting. After a long and complex sexual career, he had thought that he had found the perfect marriage partner in Gail. (Indeed, their life must have been splendid for at least four or five years; not many people have even that.) After a nondescript career in journalism in England, he came to Australia in the early 60s and immediately set out to become a literary figure here. He published So himself; a Commonwealth Literary Grant enabled him to finish the first volume of the Davison biography. By August 1974 his marriage had broken up; in November 1974 he was told that the Arts Council had not renewed his grant. Owen was destitute, deriving no income from his writing, and was alone for the first time in twenty years. He could no longer continue living.

** ** **

I still hope that the Davison biography will appear. Meanwhile we have his book, So (and I wonder whether any copies are left to buy, or were all the remaining copies destroyed when the house was sold?). What does it have to say?

So is a devious book, like its author. It is written as a letter by an author who signs himself at the end as just "Your Father". None of the characters have names. The narrator describes his early years, both in the first-person and in the third-person narrative form. Most of the book tells of the narrator's first marriage. It is obvious that most of the events are based on events in Owen's life, yet it is not an autobiography. The author even describes how he had to fictionalise some events in order to reconstruct the total effect they had on him. Much of the book is very funny. This is because the narrator laughs at his younger self, and sees comi-tragedy in social situations rather than individuals. The story of his honeymoon is chilling, funny, and one of the few good passages about this common disaster to appear in fiction.

So tells the story of a person who is impatient with all forms of humbug and public deception. To me, this was always Owen's most attractive characteristic, although others hated him for it. Owen suffered fools, but not people who surrendered to foolishness. Rebellion against the unacceptable was central to his belief in a dynamic, ever-changing, ever-improving life. He once called himself "the oldest angry young man in Australia".

It is easy, then, to see why the narrator in So collides so easily with so many aspects of the class-ridden, humbug-defended society of England after the Second World War. Here we see behind the scenes at courts where pompous judges automatically convict the poor and free the gentry; where local citizens object to music criticism which dares to prick the self-importance of local amateur performers; where people work for next-to-nothing for years at a time and are supposed to be grateful for their good luck. Eventually the narrator arrives in Australia, but not before observing the depths of the society he was leaving.

Sexual liberation also takes a struggle, but in this aspect of his life the narrator is more passionate, more concentrated, and even tending to the visionary. When I read the book at the age of twenty-three having, as they say, never been kissed, this aspect of the book confused me the most. Was sex a matter of "ought"? Was I condemned, then? I wrote a letter to Owen saying, more or less, that I would like to join the pilgrimage, but could not - that I had opted out of ordinary life. Owen sent back a copy of the book, inscribed: "To Bruce Gillespie, a more committed pilgrim than he thinks". This was so, but my potentialities, such as they were, lay deep and took long to rise.

Owen believed in the potentiality of people - that the greatest betrayal of life and oneself is to be content to be an "ordinary" person. He saw the English as a race of people who had drifted out of the life of the world, protesting merely that they wanted to live quiet, "ordinary" lives. He saw this as death. To be content with the sexual second-best was also a form of death, said So quite clearly. Take responsibility for one's own actions; live for the best. Perhaps Owen died because he had reached the best, and had fallen back. I'm still sad for him, for me, for the marriage that disappeared, for the books never written.

The following article, however, was written and then hidden. Owen wrote it in 1959, then forgot about it until he discovered that it fitted the SFC style very well. He gave it to me in early 1973, but about that time the frequency of SFC slowed down considerably. It's a prophetic article, like all Owen's best work. "What will be the theme of the next (Wyndham novel)?" asks Owen at the end of the article. "Or can there never be another one now?" Basically, there never was another one. The Trouble with Lichen, which appeared soon after, was an hysterical melodrama. Wyndham did not like Chocky, five years after, and neither did the critics. So Owen prophesied that Wyndham would finish his life's work ten years before he died.

Is there some answer here for me? Did Owen see that his life's work and potentiality was over (although I will never concede this), and he decided to do the decent and appropriate thing by ending his physical life? Or was he a false prophet, as he feared? I've only my own experience to test this. But now I can never ring Owen and tell him how much I enjoyed life...

Bruce Gillespie November 1975

OWEN WEBSTER:

JOHN WYNDHAM AS NOVELIST OF IDEAS

I

A lusty hatred of the human race convincingly argued in imaginative form qualifies John Wyndham for consideration as a novelist of ideas pertinent to our times and as a writer with a sense of Zeitgeist. He is, of course, usually classed as a writer of first-rate science fiction and, in a superficial sense, his four novels conform to the formula of the horror film: "innocent" people are beset by a Monster or a Thing From Outer Space and have to set about destroying it before it destroys them. The difference with John Wyndham is a distinct reluctance to destroy the Thing in the end; indeed, in The Chrysalids, the third of his novels in this genre, he does not do so, and in the second, The Kraken Wakes, the outcome is uncertain.

He writes slickly and conversationally without literary pretensions, and the people of the books are never more than single-visioned mouthpieces and shadows from Newton's sleep; nevertheless, he remains more than a science fiction writer. He is a satirist and at times perhaps a visionary: his rich imagination is rooted, if not in a knowledge of the human heart, at least in an understanding of the interplay of social and economic forces in human ecology.

These ingredients alone, however, do not constitute a novel of ideas; and so long as one's standards are derived from the effervescent debating exercises of Peacock and Norman Douglas, it might be difficult to see Wyndham as a novelist of ideas at all. His characters, as people, are not only as insubstantial as, say, the Bishop of Limpopo, or even Calamy and others from Huxley's early novels; they haven't the shadow of an idea in their spectral heads.

But there are other criteria by which novels of ideas may be judged besides those of intellectual debate. Indeed, once one's critical sights have been lowered from the peaks of Dostoevsky and Musil the novel of ideas may take many forms; and unless one's sights are lowered they would be unlikely to encounter any English novelist of the first half of the twentieth century who merited serious aesthetic target-practice along the multidimensional front potentially offered by such a flexible art form as the novel.

At the shorter range offered by the modern English novel, then, another type of novel of ideas may be admitted to include Wyndham. This is a form of satire in which the ideas are related not to personal behaviour or a narrowly circumscribed ecology, but to all kinds of social action in a broad cultural setting. The people are shown only as social types - the scientist, the politician, the policeman, the liberal humanist, and so on - but they take part in unfolding a narrative that expresses ideas not in the abstracted form of intellectual debate, but implicitly and in an applied manner, as in certain aspects of Erewhon, and in The Plumed Serpent, Brave New World, or Animal Farm. And in this sense perhaps such novels have a more practical value than those novelists' novels in which clever mouth-pieces discuss the author's ideas. For ideas have no value except in terms of the

behaviour that embodies them: individuals hold ideas reflecting their personality structures; and personalities, like schools of thought and political philosophies, grow from cultural circumstances. This, at least, is the romantic viewpoint as opposed to the classical; and adequate classical treatments of modern civilisation are extremely rare, demanding as they do an almost superhuman compass of a gigantically complex macrocosm to precede microcosmic re-expression of it. Perhaps Ulysses and La Peste are the only modern examples. It may be that the disappearance of classical integrity is symptomatic of a dying culture: a consequence of speed, democratic forms of art patronage, and the loss of quietude. In such circumstances, prophetic denunciation, provided it is colourful and not too unequivocal, is as acceptable to the novel-reading public as the benign reprovals of a comic spirit.

Wyndham's literary progenitors, therefore, are more likely to have been Richard Jeffries and Samuel Butler than Mary Godwin and Bram Stoker. He knows his H G Wells, but where Wells is discussed he is rather censorious. In The Day of the Triffids, Wells' short story, "The Country of the Blind", gives rise to this dialogue:

> "In the country of the blind the one-eyed man is king."
>
> "Oh, yes - Wells said that, didn't he? - Only in the story it turned out not to be true."
>
> "The crux of the difference lies in what you mean by the word 'country' - patria in the original," I said. "Caecorum in patria luscus rex imperat omnis - a classical gentleman called Fullonius said it first; it's all anyone seems to know about him. But there's no organised patria, no State, here - only chaos. Wells imagined a people who had adapted themselves to blindness. I don't think that is going to happen here - I don't see how it can."

And in The Midwich Cuckoos, The War of the Worlds is discussed:

> "My experience, hitherto, of interplanetary invasion," said Zellaby... "has been vicarious - indeed, one might even say hypothetically vicarious, or do I mean vicariously hypothetical - ? ... At any rate, it has been quite extensive. Yet, oddly though, I cannot recall a single account of one that is of the least help in our present dilemma. They were, almost without exception, unpleasant; but also they were almost always forthright, rather than insidious. Take H G Wells's Martians, for instance. As the original exponents of the death-ray they were formidable, but their behaviour was quite conventional: they simply conducted a straightforward campaign with this weapon which outclassed anything that could be brought against it. But at least we could try to fight back.... There you have the prototype of innumerable invasions. A super-weapon which man fights valiantly with his own puny armoury until he is saved by one of several possible kinds of bell. Naturally, in America it is all rather bigger and better. Something descends and something comes out of it. Within ten minutes, owing no doubt to the excellent communications in that country, there is a coast-to-coast panic, and all highways out of all cities are crammed, in all lanes, by the fleeing populace - except in Washington. There, by contrast, enormous crowds stretching as far as the eye can reach, stand grave and silent, white-faced but trusting, with their eyes upon the White House, while somewhere in the Catskills a hitherto ignored professor and his daughter, with their rugged young assistant, strive like demented midwives to assist the brith of the deus ex laboritoria which will save the world at the last minute, minus one.
>
> "Over here, one feels, the report of such an invasion would be received in at least some quarters with a tinge of preliminary scepticism, but we must allow the Americans to know their own people best. Yet overall, what do we have? Just another war. The motivations are simplified, the armaments complicated, but the pattern is the same and, as a result, not one of the prognostications, speculations and extrapolations turns out to be of the least use to us when the thing actually happens.."

Despite the literary manner of an intelligent sixth-former, this is an amusing and accurate assessment of Wellsian science fiction and all its many imitators. It also epitomises what might be regarded as Wyndham's credo: he is always at pains to ensure that the pattern is not the same; that conventional weapons are not only impotent against the invader, but in three of his four "invasions" they are quite inappropriate, like shooting at hallucinations, as will be seen from the descriptions of the novels that follow. The essential difference is that Wyndham's invaders - with the possible exception of the triffids - are not bent on destroying man as an enemy, but are simply engaged in establishing themselves and ensuring their survival by idiosyncratic means that happen to be inimical to human civilisation. The intelligence beneath the sea in The Kraken Wakes melts the polar ice caps for its own purposes: the consequences of engulfing London are an irrelevant by-product.

Thus the threats to man's existence invented by John Wyndham may be seen on two levels: as an actual threat by a species having some natural superiority over man, or as a symbolic threat, created from within by man's own evil nature. On either level man is seen destroying himself by his refusal to acknowledge the potency of the invading power. It is the plight in which

Blake's Job found himself: praising God with a life of habitual comfort and prosperity and clinging so tenaciously to the values of that life long after it has changed that his own Satanic nature has to destroy him almost utterly before he will acknowledge its existence.

Wyndham's piece of information about "The Country of the Blind" nicely illustrates another aspect of his sixth-form manner, a didactic air patching his narratives, as if he were back in the classroom where he once earned his living. Sometimes he is distinctly pedantic, as in the example quoted, or in this rather precious observation:

> "They implode - almost as thoroughly as a broken light-bulb implodes," I told him.
> (The Kraken Wakes)

As "they" in this context are some weird, jelly-like manifestations of an unknown deep-sea intelligence, the image is not even an appropriate one. On the other hand, he may be idly or facetiously informative:

> "Come on. We'd better be shifting. 'Tomorrow to fresh fields and pastures new' - if you'd care for a really hackneyed quotation this time."
>
> "It's more than that, it's inacurrate," I said. "It's 'woods', not 'fields'."
> (The Day of the Triffids)

The Kraken Wakes has plenty:

> "Well, it says here that over sixty people were drowned when a tsunami struck Roast Beef Island. Where's Roast Beef Island? And what's a tsunami?"
>
> "I don't know where Roast Beef Island is, though I can offer you two Plum Pudding Islands. But tsunami is Japanese for an earthquake-wave."

Where Wyndham's didacticism is indigenous to his narrative, there is evidence of extensive study and careful authentication. Although The Day of the Triffids (1951), the first and best-known of these four novels, is more a feat of projected imagination than of specialised knowledge, the author does succeed in conveying an easy familiarity with spearhead researches in biology and the machinations of international cartels, as well as a sound understanding of the sociology of crisis. In his second, The Kraken Wakes (1953), much of the narrative depends on the author's authentic knowledge of oceanography. The Chrysalids (1955), by far the most profound and thoroughly worked of them all, shows an unusual grasp of the extended meaning of uncontrolled genetic mutation, as well as a thoughtful study of anthropology and folklore. The Midwich Cuckoos (1957), geographically on a smaller scale than the others, has a central idea that seems to have been triggered off by the ideas in the former work, and creates an alarming sense of the mysterious promise of a new generation, an awe comparable only with Richard Hughes' A High Wind in Jamaica. Perhaps the prototypes for Wyndham's Children were provided by his experience as a teacher at Bedales, a "progressive" school where the young, like the Midwich Cuckoos, were probably also knowledgeable, treating adults as equal but different beings, alarmingly in sympathy with each other, and often terrifying.

Each of the novels is written to roughly the same formula, springing from an initial question in the author's mind: What would happen if...? The question is rather more apparent than in other forms of fiction and drama where, if asked at all, would be completed by a supposition more plausible than, as in The Day of the Triffids, "What would happen if everybody, except a few lucky ones, were struck blind overnight?" When, for example, Dostoevsky planned The Idiot, he asked, in effect, "What would happen if a human being, as near perfect as I can conceive of one, were put among ordinary people?" Musil, in The Man Without Qualities, asked a similar question about a man of integrity who lived out the fullest possible implications of the discovery that all human affairs - everything, in fact - might just as easily have been arranged in any other way.

However, Wyndham's problem is to make the fantastic, the monstrous, the cataclysmic, seem plausible; and the degree to which he succeeds is what makes him, as a science fiction writer, so much better than those who tackle similar problems less plausibly, or with the cliches that Wyndham's Zellaby sees in tales like The War of the Worlds. His fantasies have their origins in science or pseudo-science, and the whole idea will then be placed in a familiar human setting which the author allows to change and develop in the light of his knowledge of social behaviour, himself as narrator sniping the while from behind the concealing pillar of the first-person singular. Perhaps the emergence of useful ideas from such an alchemy seems unsurprising and even accidental; but before the ideas themselves are considered, the novels must be more closely examined.

II

The answer to the basic "What would happen if..?" question of The Day of the Triffids is that the human race would be reduced to a state more helpless within its environment than any other species, and would in time be exterminated by whatever predatory form of life developed a rudimentary intelligence. Even plants, given the determination, could do it.

How could the primal incident, striking the entire race blind overnight, be accomplished? Wyndham presupposes a not-too-distant future world in which artificial satellites are orbiting in profusion, all controlled by the Great Powers who, by pressing a button, can release on

their enemies some form of destruction, such as germ warfare or radioactive dust, that Science has invented but may not be able to control. One night the world witnesses a grand cosmic firework display, and all who see it wake up the following morning - blind. It is hinted, but never explicitly stated, that something went wrong up there among the satellites.

A second scientific fantasy is needed to provide the semi-intelligent species by which unseeing mankind is to be exterminated. No existing animal species would serve: none is widespread enough. Therefore it had to be a plant and - perhaps for the sake of poetic justice rather than verisimilitude - a hybrid developed by scientists. The author enjoys sniping at the Russians, so he presents us with a discovery of Russian biologists:

> The world we lived in then was wide, and most of it was open to us, with little trouble. Roads, railways, and shipping lanes laced it, ready to carry one thousands of miles safely and in comfort... It must be difficult for young people who never knew it to envisage a world like that. Perhaps it sounds like a golden age - though it wasn't quite that to those who lived in it. Or they may think that an Earth ordered and cultivated almost all over sounds dull - but it wasn't that, either. It was rather an exciting place - for a biologist, anyway. Every year we were pushing the northern limit of growth for food plants a little farther back. New fields were growing quick crops on what had historically been simply tundra or barren land. Every season, too, stretches of desert both old and recent were reclaimed and made to grow grass or food. For food was then our most pressing problem, and the progress of the regeneration schemes and the advance of the cultivation lines on the maps was followed with almost as much attention as an earlier generation had paid to battle-fronts...
>
> Russia, who shared with the rest of the world the problem of increasing food supplies, was known to have been intensively concerned with attempts to reclaim deserts, steppe, and the northern tundra. In the days when information was still exchanged she had reported some successes. Later, however, a cleavage of methods and views had caused biology there...to take a different course. It, too, then succumbed to the endemic secrecy. The lines it had taken were unknown, and thought to be unsound - but it was anybody's guess whether very successful, very silly, or very queer things were happening there - if not all three at once.

They were, in fact, secretly cultivating an unknown species of plant for its extraordinarily rich food-oil content. In the course of a typical Iron Curtain escape incident a box of selected fertile seeds is scattered abroad - probably when the aircraft escaping with them is shot to pieces by pursuing jets in the stratosphere - and soon, as hardy and prolific as weeds, the plants are growing all over the globe, later to be assiduously cultivated in huge plantations. They come to be called "triffids", and the narrator grows up with a boyish fascination for them so that he chooses work on a plantation as his career. He is in hospital recovering from a triffid sting with his eyes bandaged on the night of the cosmic fireworks. Hence he not only survives the holocaust and witnesses the results; he also writes it all up for the posterity he ultimately helps to create.

And so the narrative is constructed upon these twin improbabilities of blind humanity and - for purposes of hastening and heightening the drama - the purely science-fictional "horror" sub-plot of the three-rooted (hence "triffid") peripatetic predators, growing to gigantic sizes like sea anenomes surviving on land and showing signs of being able to intercommunicate. Triffid guns are as much a part of the triffid farmer's kit as masks are that of beekeepers. The triffid sting is fatal, unless long experience from the lesser stings of young triffids has afforded some slight immunity. But it is the spectacle and symbolic power of chaos through blindness, worked out logically and remorselessly, that elevates the tale to the status of a novel of ideas.

Everything stops, except for the groping, hungry humans. There is no transport and no other form of communication, and thus the problem of an international setting is avoided. Though it is assumed that the rest of the world is in the same plight, the action begins in London and does not move outside England. The narrator makes his way from hsopital to Piccadilly Circus - a setting that heightens the atmosphere of chaos - and sees in the functionless streets a gang of drunken marauders led by a sighted joker promising them free drinks at the Cafe Royal, and capturing passing blind girls for his blind flock.

> My head was still full of standards and conventions that had ceased to apply. It did not occur to me that if there was to be any survive anyone adopted by this gang would stand a far better chance than she would on her own. Fired with a mixture of schoolboy heroics and noble sentiments, I waded in. He didn't see me coming until I was quite close, and then I slogged for his jaw. Unfortunately, he was a little quicker...

On recovery - and reflection:

> ...I at last began to admit that what I had seen was all real - and decisive. There would be no going back - ever. It was finish to all I had known... I came face to face with the fact that my existence simply had no focus any longer. My way of life, my plans, ambitions, every expectation I

had had, they were all wiped out a stroke along with the conditions that had formed them... There was no particular person dependent on me. And, curiously, what I found that I did feel - with a consciousness that it was against what I ought to be feeling - was release...

His existence was soon to find a focus - in a girl who also missed the cosmic fireworks through sleeping off the effects of a party. He finds her being beaten by a blind brute who had tied her hands to use her like a guide dog. She is rescued and together they go in search of equipment for surival, helping themselves to triffid guns, food, clothing, and an empty flat which they find after watching its occupants, a pair of blind lovers, locked in each other's arms, throw themselves out of a top-floor window. They also see three triffids driving a group of blind people, and learn that the blind soon show signs of knowing that a moving car means a sighted driver, that a blind crowd is quieter than a sighted one of equal size, that a light in the night means other sighted people, and that the situation brings the inevitable clash of ideology. They find a sighted group organising themselves into a military operation and defending London University against a blind crowd led by a sighted man dedicated to the defence of the luckless:

"I've been showing them where to get food. I've been doing what I can for them, but Christ, there's only one of me, and there's thousands of them. You could be showing 'em where to get food, too - but are you? - hell! What are you doing about it?..."

But at a conference in the University the universal, long-term significance of the situation is put to them by the Wyndham intellectual, the figure who has this role in each of the novels:

"...With the old pattern broken, we have now to find out what mode of life is best suited to the new. We have not simply to start building again: we have to start thinking again - which is much more difficult and far more distasteful... We can accept and retain only one primary prejudice, and that is that the race is worth preserving... We must look at all we do with the question in mind, Is this going to help our race survive - or will it hinder us? If it will help, we must do it, whether or not it conflicts with the ideas in which we were brought up...

"The men must work - the women must have babies. Unless you can agree to that there can be no place for you in our community... We can afford to support a limited number of women who cannot see, because they will have babies who can see. We cannot afford to support men who cannot see. In our new world, then, babies become very much more important than husbands."

The ensuing discussion provides further opportunity for the display of a viewpoint that heightens the drama and amusement of all the novels: the existentialist attitude to morality that the right action is whatever serves humanity best when all possible ingredients of a total situation have been taken into account. And significantly, it is Josella, the heroine, who suggests to the narrator that if he marries her he must take on two blind girls as well.

The consequences of this idea are interrupted, however, when a coup by Coker, the dedicated protector of the luckless, results in all the sighted people at the University being captured and each being forcibly put in charge of a group of foraging blind. The narrator daily watches for an opportunity to escape and go in search of Josella, but daily finds the bonds with his charges strengthening - through pity. Here, though virtually unexplored, is one of the key issues of our time: the strange ties that exist between opposing elements - master and servant, oppressor and oppressed - more potently developed in modern Continental literature, notably with Pozzo and Lucky in Beckett's Waiting for Godot. When at last the narrator is free to escape an eighteen-year-old blind girl offers herself to him on condition that he will stay with them. It is one of Wyndham's rare human episodes. He declines her offer, but stays until the spreading plague kills several of them and drives the rest away from the house where they are squatting. The girl is dying:

"Please, Bill. I'm not very brave. Could you get me something - to finish it?"

"Yes," I said. "I can do that for you."

I was back from the chemist's in ten minutes. I gave her a glass of water, and put the stuff in her other hand.

She held it there a little. Then:

"So futile -- and it might all have been so different," she said. "Goodbye, Bill - and think you for trying."

I looked down at her lying there. There was a thing that made it still more futile - I wondered how many would have said, "Take me with you," where she had said, "Stay with us."

Good, clean, stiff-upper-lip stuff, perhaps, with virtue bearing its own reward, for the hero escapes the plague. But whether it stands on the economy of its style or falls through its proximity to the trite and maudlin, it cannot be denied that within its context the episode transcends itself in one respect: by contrasting the squalor with a rare glimpse of qualities that would have averted the holocaust had they been racially more prolific, the author has succeeded in heightening the reader's disgust with the human animal..

In arenewed search for Josella, the narrator reencounters a disillusioned Coker:

"I reckon you lot did have the right idea from the start - only it didn't look right, and it didn't sound right a week ago."

Their inquiries together lead them to a country house in Wiltshire where they find only a part of the University party have taken refuge. The best, they learn, went elsewhere:

"This is a clean, decent community with standards - Christian standards - and we intend to uphold them. We have no place here for people of loose views. Decadence, immorality and lack of faith were responsible for most of the world's ills. It is the duty of those who have been spared to see that we build a society where that does not happen again. The cynical and the clever-clever will find that they are not wanted here, no matter what brilliant theories they may put forward to disguise their licentiousness and their materialism... So long as they keep their influence away from here they may work out their own damnation as they please. And since they choose to consider themselves superior to both the laws of God and civilised custom, I have no doubt that they will."

Coker discerns in this a plea for help, and the pair remain long enough to organise the community's economy before driving on in their two stolen lorries. There are further complications with triffids and provincials defending their food stocks against marauding gangs - some of them holding out in confident anticipation of American aid - and Bill eventually finds Josella staying with blind friends in a Sussex farmhouse, having left Coker to make a convenient exit by taking a party of survivors to the Christian community in Wiltshire. (Bill is later to find the house deserted after being stricken by plague, with triffids lording it over the grounds.) Josella's friends had survived until her arrival by one of them wearing a helmet and gloves for protection on foraging expeditions to the village, where the rest of the population had been killed off by triffids. He found his way by unravelling a ball of twine and spent his leisure determinedly learning Braille. They remain at the farmhouse for several years, during which Bill and Josella, adopting some of the standards of a "clean, decent community" after all, consider themselves married and have a baby. In one passage, strongly reminiscent of Jefferies' After London, Bill describes his annual foraging visits to the metropolis:

"The place still contrived to give the impression that a touch of a magic wand would bring it to life again, though many of the vehicles in the streets were beginning to turn rusty. A year later the change was more noticeable. Large patches of plaster detached from housefronts had begun to litter the pavements. Dislodged tiles and chimney-pots would be found in the streets. Grass and weeds had a good hold of the gutters and were choking the drains. Leaves had blocked downspoutings so that more grass, and even small bushes, grew in cracks and in the silt in the roof gutterings... Growing things seemed, indeed, to press out everywhere, rooting in the crevices between the paving stones, springing from cracks in concrete, finding lodgements even in the seats of abandoned cars. On all sides they were encroaching to repossess themselves of the arid spaces that man had created. And curiously, as the living things took charge increasingly, the effect of the place became less oppressive. As it passed beyond the scope of any magic wand, most of the ghosts were going with it, withdrawing slowly into history.

"Once - not that year, nor the next, but later on - I stood in Piccadilly Circus again, looking round at the desolation, and trying to recreate in my mind's eye the crowds that once swarmed there. I could no longer do it... They had become as much a backcloth of history as the audiences in the Roman Colosseum or the army of the Assyrians, and somehow, just as far removed. The nostalgia that crept over me sometimes in the quiet hours was able to move me to more regret than the crumbling scene itself. When I was by myself in the country I could recall the pleasantness of the former life: among the scabrous, slowly perishing buildings I seemed able to recall only the muddle, the frustration, the unaimed drive, the all-pervading clangour of empty vessels, and I became uncertain how much we had lost..."

In that last sentence is a key to Wyndham's work; but is he expressing the true vision of an artist, or merely indulging in the immense satisfaction of a fantasy of destroying a world that disgusts him? Only time, perhaps, will tell. But whatever the answer, the immense popularity of his books is significant in itself. His warnings are patently prophetic, especially in this dialogue between hero and heroine about the cosmic fireworks:

"You remember what Michael Beadley said about the tightrope we'd all been walking on for years?... What happened was that we came off it - and that a few of us just managed to survive the crash.

"Up there," I went on, "up there, there were - and maybe there still are - unknown numbers of satellite weapons circling round and round the Earth. Just a lot of dormant menaces, touring around, waiting for someone, or something, to set them off. What was in them? You don't know; I don't know. Top-secret stuff. All we've heard is guesses - fissile materials, radioactive dusts, bacteria, viruses... Now suppose that one type happened to have been constructed especially to emit

radiations that our eyes would not stand - something that would burn out, or at least damage, the optic nerve...?"

Josella gripped my hand.

"Oh no, Bill! No, they couldn't... That'd be - diabolical... Oh, I can't believe... Oh, no, Bill!"

From a helicopter pilot they learn that the remains of the University party had fled the plague and eventually had established themselves on the Channel Islands, where Coker, still miraculously surviving, had succeeded in joining them. Reluctantly, the Sussex party decides that it must ultimately settle with them, too. "Time was on the triffids' side. They had only to go on waiting while we used up our resources."

One last dramatic hazard must be evaded before their story can end in the new colony. This is the unexpected arrival of an armed group led by Torrence, who describes himself as Chief Executive Officer of the Emergency Council for the South-Eastern Region of Britain, supervising the distribution and allocation of personnel. They are based in a barricaded Brighton, and are engaged in distributing people to live off the land in units of one sighted person to ten blind. Bill and Josella are ordered to accommodate seventeen more blind and their children on the farm in addition to the three who own it.

"Why, it's utterly impossible. We've been wondering whether we shall be able to support ourselves on it."

"It is perfectly possible. And what I am offering you is the command of the double unit we shall instal here. Frankly, if you do not care to take it, we shall put in someone else who will... You'll have to lower your standards a bit - we all shall for the next few years, but when the children grow up a bit you'll begin to have labour to expand with. For six or seven years it's going to mean personal hard work for you, I admit - that can't be helped. From then on, however, you'll gradually be able to relax until you are simply supervising... Your way, you'd be worn out and still in harness in another twenty years and all your children would be yokels. Our way, you'll be the head of a clan that's working for you, and you'll have an inheritance to hand on to your sons."

"Am I to understand that you are offering me a kind of - feudal seigneury?"

But soon the full force of Torrence's position becomes clear. He suggests that they feed on mashed triffids (cattle fodder); that armed forces, controlled by the Executive Council, will be raised by levies on the seigneuries, and may be called on by a seigneur in case of attack or unrest; and that the same army would be required to defend Britain against whichever country gets on its feet first and attempts to restore order in Britain.

"Clearly it is our national duty to get ourselves back on our feet as soon as possible and assume the dominant status so that we can prevent dangerous opposition from organising against us..."

"Great God Almighty! We've lived through all this - and now the man proposes to start a war!"

Torrence said, shortly: "I don't seem to have made myself clear. The word 'war' is an unjustifiable exaggeration. It will be simply a matter of pacifying and administering tribes that have reverted to primitive lawlessness."

A nice touch, ruthless and wry, with a dramatic escape on the penultimate page. But it makes the final note of optimism from the Channel Island colony sound like the bedside manner of a physician who has done all he can for the dying patient:

Our hopes all centre there now. It seems unlikely that anything will come of Torrence's neo-feudal plan, though a number of his seigneuries do still exist with their inhabitants leadings, so we hear, a life of squalid wretchedness behind their stockades. But there are not so many of them as there were. Every now and then Ivan reports that another has been overrun and that the triffids which surrounded it have dispersed to join other sieges.

So we must regard the task ahead as ours alone. We think now that we can see the way, but there is still a lot of work and research to be done before the day when we, or our children, or their children, will cross the narrow straits on the great crusage to drive the triffids back and back with ceaseless destruction until we have wiped the last one of them from the face of the land that they have usurped.

** ** **

The title of The Kraken Wakes was suggested by Tennyson: "Far far benath in the abysmal sea... The Kraken sleepeth..."

But the deep-sea intelligence that provides the answer to the basic question of this tale is nowhere given a name and, from the opening incident, seems to find its way into the sea in the form of mysterious luminous halations dropping from the sky and meeting the water with a hiss of pink steam. Witnessing one incidence of this widespread phenomenon establishes the narrator's claim to have been acquainted with the holocaust from its origins, and his position as a sound radio documentary script writer ensures his continued interest in it.

The basic question, then, is: What would happen if the polar ice-caps melted? But where The Day of the Triffids began with its key incident, most of the narrative of The Kraken Wakes is occupied with establishing plausibility, and the consequences of melting ice-caps are confined to the last fifty pages.

The tale begins tomorrow or the day after; and the author makes a not entirely unconvincing attempt within his ninety thousand words to give it an international setting. It provides a fine opportunity for him to stick pins in his wax image of the Kremlin, which behaves as inscrutably as ever, enduring and dispensing blame for the fireballs. Rockets are still tested at Woomera, Government departments are no less circumspect, and Britain has allowed commercial sound broadcasting. The author calls his narrator Watson, and so allows himself to indulge in some idle pedantry about Sherlock Holmes:

> "People," I told him, "are continually quoting to me things that the illustrious Holmes said to my namesake, but this time I'll do the quoting: 'When you have eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth'..."

Life, in short, is not substantially different.

As the reports of the mysterious fireballs increase, they are seen to be mainly concentrated in deep-water areas of more than four thousand fathoms. A specially designed "bathyscope" containing a crew and television camera and built to resist a pressure of two tons to the square inch is sent down a little over a mile to investigate. The screens reveal only an indistinct oval shape moving towards them before the cables are severed. Examination shows them ending in a blob of fused metal. In following up the incident, the US Navy loses a ship, and in succeeding months several ships all over the world sink swiftly and in unaccountable circumstances. When civilised humanity produces its outraged reflex response, in the shape of atomic depth charges, the Wyndham intellectual appears on the scene. This time he is an eminent geographer, Dr Alastair Bocker, and in a closely argued memorandum to the Admiralty he adduces evidence of intelligence at work in the depths, probably evolved on a large planet where the pressure was similar to that of the ocean bed.

> His memorandum had concluded with the observation that such an incursion need not necessarily be regarded as hostile. There was such a thing as flight to refuge from conditions that had become intolerable. It seemed to him that the interests of a type of creation which existed at fifteen pounds to the square inch were unlikely to overlap seriously with those of a form which required several tons per square inch. **He advocated, therefore, that the greatest efforts should be made to develop some means of making a sympathetic approach to the new dwellers in our depths with** the aim of facilitating an exchange of science, using the word in its widest sense.

It is rejected by the Admiralty, the Press, and other instruments of orthodoxy as the ravings of a crank, but as crisis inexorably and ingeniously follows crisis, and Bocker's theory begins to look less fanciful, his liberal voice pleading for sanity sounds more and more pathetic.

An oceanographer reports discolouration of certain ocean currents appearing to result from severe disturbances of deep-sea sediments but without the corroboration of seismic shocks. He is baffled, but not worried:

> There is a great deal of nutrious ooze lying wasted on the sea-bottom. The more of it that comes up, the more the plankton will thrive; and the more the plankton thrives, the more the fish will thrive; consequently the price of fish ought to go down...

Bocker cleverly argues that the invading intelligence is colonising its environment by mining for metal; and in confirmation of his hypothesis, the discolourations cease just as unaccountably, unless it is postulated that the mining has cleared away the ooze to start on the more quickly precipitated rock. The repercussions of all these events begin to be felt in other directions:

> In...three days cancellations of sea-passages had been wholesale, overwhelmed airline companies had been forced to apply priority schedules, the Government had clamped down fast on the sales of oils of all kinds, and was rushing out a rationing system for essential services, the bottom had dropped out of the shipping market, the price of many foodstuffs had doubled, and all kinds of tobacco had vanished under the counters.

Then two isolated islands are reported mysteriously depopulated in circumstances of unpreparedness not unlike those of the submerged Pompeii. At the instigation of one of the sponsors of the narrator's broadcasting company, an expedition is planned under Bocker's leadership to fly to a similar island in the Caribbean to await developments. Bocker's calculations are accurate, and after a series of attacks on other islands, leaving a few survivors, the expedition is at last rewarded with an adventure belonging more to science fiction than the novel of ideas:

> Imagine an elongated egg which has been halved down its length and set flat side to the ground, with the pointed end foremost. Consider this egg to be between thirty and thirty-five feet long, of a **drab, lustreless leaden colour, and you will have a fair picture of the "sea-tank" as we saw it pushing into the Square.**

The metal tanks disgorge huge organic bladders that detach themselves and "burst into instantaneous bloom by a vast number of white cilia which rayed out in all directions." Any animate thing that touches the ciliar remains attached to them. Thus captives are taken, drawn back into the bladder, and it all rolls slowly back into the sea from whence it came. Four of the expedition remain to tell the tale and to construct theories. Thus Bocker:

> "How are they made to clutch the animate even when it is clothed, and not attach themselves to the inanimate? Also, how is it possible that they can be directed on the route back to the water instead of simply trying to reach it the nearest way? The first of these questions is the more significant. It implies specialised purpose. The things are used, you see, but not like weapons in the ordinary sense, not just to destroy, that is. They are more like snares."
>
> "You mean," said Phyllis, "the purpose was to catch and collect people, like - well, as they were sort of - shrimping for us?"

The attacks increase, moving to less remote areas, such as the east coast of Japan. Meanwhile, chaos is spreading:

> The national airlift was working now, though on a severe schedule of primary necessities... In spite of the rationing system the cost of living had already risen by about two hundred per cent. The aircraft factories were working all around the clock to produce the craft that would bring the overheads down, but the demand was so great that the schedule of priorities was unlikely to be relaxed for a considerable time... Harbours were choked with the ships that were laid either because the crews refused to work them, or the owners refused to pay the insurance rate. Dockers deprived of work were demonstrating... seamen...joined them. Airport staff pressed for higher pay... Reduced demand for steel (in the shipyards) reduced the demand for coal. It was proposed to close several impoverished pits, whereat the entire industry struck...
>
> The petrels of Muscovy, finding the climate bracing, declared through their accustomed London mouthpiece...their view that the shipping crisis was largely a put-up job. The West, they declared, had seized upon and magnified a few maritime inconviences as an excuse to carry out a vastly enlarged programme of air-power...
>
> Mr Malenkov, interviewed by telegram, had said that although the intensified programme of air construction in the West was no more than a part of a bourgeois-fascist plan by warmongers that could deceive no one, yet so great was the opposition of the Russian people to any thought of war that the production of aircraft within the Soviet Union for the Defence of Peace had been tripled.

The narrator and his wife, busy among their broadcasting scripts, begin to think. This is later accounted for by Watson's somnambulistic nightmares following his adventure with the sea-tanks, which keep Phyllis awake at night until she is approaching breakdown.

> "Nobody knows where they will come next, and you have to act quickly when they do," said Phyllis. "That would mean letting people have arms."
>
> "Well, then, they should give them arms. Damn it, it isn't a function of the State to deprive its people of the means of self-protection."
>
> "Doesn't it sometimes strike you as odd that all our governments who loudly claim to rule by the will of the people are willing to run almost any risk rather than let their people have arms? Isn't it almost a principle that people should not be allowed to defend itself, but should be forced to defend its Government?..."
>
> "What's wrong, Phyl?"
>
> She shrugged. "Nothing, except that at times I get sick of putting up with all the shams and the humbug, and pretending that the lies aren't lies, and the propaganda isn't propaganda, and the dirt isn't dirt... Don't you sometimes wish that you had been born into the Age of Reason, instead of into the Age of the Ostensible Reason?..."

Then a town on the Spanish coast is attacked, with at least three thousand losses, and Europe is affected at last.

> It was immediately clear to the more classically minded citizens that, since the advancing objects were no known form of machine, their origin was likely to be diabolic, and they aroused their priests. The visitants were conjured in Latin to return to their Captain, the Father of Lies, in the Pit whence they had come. The sea-tanks had continued their slow advance, driving the exorcising priests before them. The military, on their arrival, had to force their way through throngs of praying townspeople. In each of several streets patrols came to a similar decision: if this were foreign invasion, it was their duty to repel it; if it were diabolical, the same action, even though ineffective, would put them on the side of Right. They opened fire.
>
> In the comisaria of police a belated and

garbled alarm gave the impression that the trouble was due to a revolt by the troops. With this endorsed by the sound of firing in several places, the police went forth to teach the military a lesson. After that, the whole thing had become a chaos of sniping, counter-sniping, partisanship, incomprehension, and exorcism, in the middle of which the sea-tanks had settled down to exude their revolting coelenterates.

By the time of the second attack in Spain, and later attacks in Portugal, Brittany, Ireland, and finally, Cornwall, defences are ready - and effective. The attacks cease, and there is talk or victory. Then Bocker makes himself unpopular again with another accurate, but untimely, statement:

> "We, a maritime people who rose to power upon shipping which plied to the furthest corners of the earth, have lost the freedom of the seas. We have been kicked out of an element that we had made our own... We have been forced by a blockade, more effective than any experienced in war, to depend on air transport for the very food by which we live. Even the scientists who are trying to study the sources of our troubles must put to sea in sailing ships to do their work. Is this victory?...
>
> "It may even have been part of an attempt to conquer the land - an ineffectual and ill-informed attempt but, for all that, rather more successful than our attempts to reach the Deeps. If it was, then its instigators are now better informed than us, and therefore potentially more dangerous...
>
> "It may be recalled by some that when we were first made aware of activity in the Deeps I advocated that every effort should be made to establish understanding with them. That was not tried, and very likely it was never a possibility, but there can be no doubt that the situation which I had hoped we could avoid now exists - and is in the process of being resolved. Two intelligent forms of life are finding one another's existence intolerable. I have now come to believe that no attempt at rapprochement could have succeeded. Life in all its forms is strife; the better matched the opponents, the harder the struggle. The most powerful of all weapons is intelligence: a rival form of intelligence must, by its very existence, threaten to dominate, and therefore threaten extinction. Any intelligent form is its own absolute; and there cannot be two absolutes..."

Bocker's warning is justified. The xenobaths, defeated on land, pursue a different activity which becomes apparent after six months when unusually widespread summer fog, including an unprecedented one persisting for three months in an area of Northern Russia, gives rise to a hostile East-West Exchange of Notes. Then icebergs are reported forming in phenomenal numbers off Greenland, followed by similar reports the following winter from the Antarctic. Bocker finds his way into the columns of a Sunday paper given to "intellectual sensationalism" and argues that the submarine enemy is engaged in melting the ice-caps:

> "I have seen 'estimates' which suggest that if the polar ice were melted the sea level would rise by one hundred feet. To call that an 'estimate' is a shocking imposition. It is no more than a round-figure guess. It may be a good guess, or it may be widely wrong, on either side... In this connexion I draw attention to the fact that in January of this year the mean sea-level at Newlyn, where it is customarily measured, was reported to have risen by two and a half inches."

In private he is still more apocalyptic:

> "The only possible thing that I can see for them to do is to organise salvage. To make sure that certain things and people are not lost... The rest will have to take their chance - and I'm afraid that for most of us it won't be much of a chance..."

In the event, the salvaging is significantly indiscriminate. It is suggested that warm water is being piped up from the tropics or the earth's central heat is being tapped. Bocker has a theory about an atomic reactor driving the mining apparatus and generating a warm current. His advice to his friends is brief: "Find a nice, self-sufficient hilltop and fortify it."

California has a cold, wet, foggy summer and the April spring tides overflow the Embankment wall at Westminster. At last the authorities try to do something. Sea defences are strengthened, riverside walls in London are reinforced and topped with sandbags, and traffic is diverted from the Embankment. But at the next spring tides the rising water breaks through in several places. The respite during the neap tides is used for a program of concrete sea and river defences on the scale of a national emergency. "I wonder how high they'll go before the futility comes home to them," says Bocker wryly.

The author takes a last review of the international situation before abandoning it to follow the immediate and identifiable reality of the Watsons' fortunes, who decide to remain in London as long as possible manning the emergency broadcasting station.

> In addition to the difficulties that were facing ports and seaboard cities all over the world, there was bad coastline trouble in the south of the United States. It ran almost all the way around the Gulf from Key West to the Mexican border. In Florida, owners of real estate began to suffer once

> again as the Everglades and the swamps spilt across more and more country... The enterprise of Tin Pan Alley considered it an appropriate time to revive the plea: "River, Stay 'Way from My Door", but the river did not...
>
> But it is idle to particularise. All over the world the threat was the same. The chief difference was that in the more developed countries all available earth-shifting machinery worked day and night, while in the more backward it was sweating thousands of men and women who toiled to raise great levees and walls...
>
> The Dutch had withdrawn in time from the danger areas, realising that they had lost their centuries-long battle with the sea. The Rhine and the Maas had backed up in flood over square miles of country. A whole population was trekking southward into Belgium or south-east into Germany... When the inhabitants of the Ardennes and Westphalia turned in dismay to save themselves by fighting off the hungry, desperate invaders from the north, hard news disappeared in a morass of rumour and chaos...
>
> The dwellers in the Lea Valley, Westminster, Chelsea, Hammersmith, left their homes for the most part belatedly and reluctantly, but as the water continued to rise and forced them to move, the obvious direction to take was towards the heights of Hampstead and Highgate, and as they approached those parts they began to encounter barricades in the streets and, presently, weapons. Where they were stopped they looted, and searched for weapons of their own. When they had found them they sniped from upper windows and rooftops until they drove the defneders off their barricades and could rush them.

And, inexorably, through the winder and into the following summer the chaos spreads in a picture not dissimilar from that in The Day of the Triffids, with armed bands roving in search of food, outbreaks of epidemic disease, and familiar landmarks transformed: a canal down Whitehall, gulls on Landseer's lions, suburban London barricaded into armed city states.

> At Hyde Park Corner we hove-to a couple of hours, waiting for the tide, and then ran safely up into Oxford Street on the flood.
>
> No one had known, within a wide limit, how much ice there was in the Antarctic. No one was quite sure how much of the northern areas that appeared to be solid land, tundra, was in fact simply a deposit on a foundation of ancient ice; we had just not known enough about it. The only consolation was that Bocker now seemed to think for some reason that it would not rise above ore hundred and twenty-five feet - which should leave our eyrie still intact.
>
> Nevertheless, it required fortitude to find reassurance in that thought as one lay in bed at night, listening to the echoing splash of the wavelets that the wind was driving along Oxford Street.

Moving about in a fibre-glass rowing dinghy, the Watsons encounter a drifting motor boat and at last decide to escape from London and their now inactive broadcasting station to their former pied a terre in Cornwall. After a month's journey with a small stock of food, finding storage-tank water in the lofts of flooded houses, they arrive at their hilltop cottage to reap the reward of Phyllis' foresight - an ideal Wyndham woman, beautiful, capable, companionable in any adversity, mysterious, and endowed with an apparently prophetic abundance of common sense. Her unexplained bricklaying activities during one of the summers when the ships were being sunk and she was living at the cottage alone, are now revealed as a scheme for walling up a stock of food in the cellar, undiscovered by hungry marauders. During the winter there, Watson writes his report and eventually they learn that a Council for Reconstruction has been formed and is broadcasting for them to return to London. The water seems to have reached its limit, and a weapon has been devised to kill off the xenobaths. The mystery of their identity remains - significantly, as will be seen - only "a lot of jelly stuff came up, and went bad quickly in the sunlight". In their last evening at the cottage, watching the sunset, human optimism again prevails:

> "What is it?" I asked.
>
> "I was just thinking... Nothing is really new, is it, Mike? Once upon a time there was a great plain, covered with forests and full of wild animals. I expect our ancestors hunted there. Then one day the water came and drowned it all - and there was a North Sea... I think we've been here before, Mike... And we got through last time..."

** ** **

The Day of the Triffids and The Kraken Wakes have been popular partly because of their symbols of mystery. The triffids and xenobaths echo a stage in the evolution of literature: the fairy tales and legends in which psychological truth is communicated by means of symbols with a subconscious appeal. The Chrysalids is a departure from this form, in that there is no such mystery. The novel has been significantly less popular. Yet its basic question is realistic and topical: What would happen if there were a nuclear war? Common sense suggests that humanity would not be entirely destroyed, for the war would cease after the centres of civilisation had been razed. Small, isolated pockets of humanity, struggling with the problems of genetic mutation, would probably survive in primitive agricultural or food-gathering groups. Give them ten generations to stabilise a culture and forget the holocaust, and then what? The Chrysalids provides a fascinating answer

Such mystery as there is lives in the gradual revelation of this situation through the awakening awareness of his world by a boy of ten: the narrator recalling his childhood. These opening chapters contain some of Wyndham's best writing: both in the observations of an intelligent ten-year-old and in their sustained strangeness. It is possible, in fact, to read the whole book (without the give-away blurbs of the Penguin edition) and not catch on to its meaning.

The narrator begins with a recurrent boyhood dream of a coastal city he could never have seen, where there were carts without horses and shiny fish-shaped things in the sky. His sister warns him not to tell anyone else: he is seeing the world that the Old People had lived in before God sent Tribulation.

> People in our district had a very sharp eye for the odd, or the unusual, so that even my left-handedness caused slight disapproval.

He has a secret friendship with Sophie, a girl of his own age who never takes off her shoes. In an accident at play her shoe is removed and he sees that she has six toes. Her parents bind him to secrecy.

> The commandments and precepts one learns as a child can be rmembered by rote, but they mean little until there is example - and, even then, the example needs to be recognised.
>
> Thus, I was able to sit patiently and watch the hurt foot being washed and bound up, and perceive no connexion between it and the affirmation which I had heard almost every Sunday of my life.
>
> "And God created man in His own image. And God decreed that man should have one body, one head, two arms and two legs: that each arm should be jointed in two places and end in one hand: that each hand should have four fingers and one thumb: that each finger should bear a flat finger-nail..."
>
> And so on until: "Then God created woman also, and in the same image, but with these differences, according to her nature: her voice should be of higher pitch than man's; she should grow no beard; she should have two breasts..."

On the way home, he makes the connexion:

> The Definition of Man recited itself in my head: "...and each leg shall be jointed twice and have one foot, and each foot five toes, and each toe shall end with a flat nail..." And so on, until finally: "And any creature that shall seem to be human, but is not formed thus, is not human. It is neither man nor woman. It is a blasphemy against the true image of God, and hateful in the sight of God."

The boy is a member of the family of the local preacher and principal landowner, a fierce Puritan whose house is decorated with texts from Nicholson's Repentances, the only book to have come down from the ages of barbarism as the Bible was the only book to have survived from the times of the Old People. These two works are the basis of their religion:

> "The only image of God is man."
> "Keep pure the stock of the Lord."
> "Blessed is the norm."
> "Accursed is the mutant."
> "The Devil is the father of deviation."
>
> ...An Offence was sometimes quite an impressive occasion. Usually the first sign that one had happened was that my father came into the house in a bad temper. Then, in the evening, he would call us all together, including everyone who worked on the farm. We would all kneel while he proclaimed our repentance and led prayers for forgiveness. The next morning we would all be up before daylight and gather in the yard. As the sun rose we would sing a hymn while my father ceremonially slaughtered the two-headed calf, four-legged hen, or whatever other kind of Offence it happened to be. Sometimes it would be a much queerer thing than those...
>
> Nor were Offences limited to the live-stock. Sometimes there would be some stalks of corn, or some vegetables, that my father produced and cast on the kitchen table in anger and shame...

An Offence among people is called a Blasphemy, and the offender is deported to the Fringes:

> Ours was no longer a frontier region. Hard work and sacrifice had produced a stability of stock and crops which could be envied even by some communities to the east of us. You could now go some thirty miles to the south or south-west before you came to Wild Country - that is to say, parts where the chance of breeding true was less than fifty per cent. After that, everything grew more erratic across the belt which was ten miles wide in some places and up to twenty in others, until you came to the mysterious Fringes where nothing was dependable, and where, to quote my father, "the Devil struts his wide estates, and the laws of God are mocked." Fringe country, too, was said to be variable in depth, and beyond it lay the Badlands about which nobody knew anything. Usually anybody who went into the Badlands died there, and the one or two men who had come back from them did not last long.

There are echoes of the sufferings of Ernest Pontifex in The Way of all Flesh when the narrator is punished for idly wishing he had an extra hand to bandage an injured one; and his

father's character is further revealed as a second Theodore Pontifex when he condemns his half-brother for farming with "great-horses", an Offence of simple giantism approved by the Government because they are profitable - a nicely observed piece of compromise. Every new birth, animal or human, and every field of crops, has to be approved by a government inspector who issues a Normalcy Certificate. Even the birth of a child is kept secret until the inspector has examined it and the receipt of the certificate can be celebrated. Sophie's family, guilty of a concealment, have to leave the district when their crime is discovered, and David is severely punished by his father for abetting them.

Then David realises that he, too, is a mutant. For some time he has been able to confide to his only ally, Uncle Axel, that he and seven other local children can held telpathic conversations with each other. They are not all known personally to each other, but they send "thought-shares" agreeing to a silent conspiracy. Then as David's new-born sister, Petra, grows up, they discover that she is one of them too, but uncontrolledly, and with a difference:

> "...Something like us, but not one of us. None of us could <u>command</u> like that. She's something much more than we are."

When Uncle Axel is told, David learns more of his philosophy, and here again, through in home-spun garb, the Wyndham intellectual is revealed:

> "...Tribulation wasn't just tempests, hurricanes floods and fires like the things they had in the Bible. It was like all of them together - and something a lot worse, too. It made the Black Coasts, and the ruins that glow there at night, and the Badlands. Maybe there's a precedent for that in Sodom and Gomorrah, only this'd be kind of bigger... What can it have been - this terrible thing that must have happened? And why? I can almost understand that God, made angry, might destroy all living things, or the world itself; but I don't understand this instability, this mess of deviations - it makes no sense.
>
> "We've got to believe that God is sane, Davie boy. We'd be lost indeed if we didn't do that. But whatever happened out there" - he waved his hand round the horizon at large - "what happened there was <u>not</u> sane. It was something vast, yet something beneath the wisdom of God... It'd do the preachers good to see it for themselves. They'd not understand, but they might begin to think. They might begin to ask themselves: 'What are we doing? What are we preaching? What were the Old People really like? What was it they did to bring this frightful disaster down upon themselves and all the world?' And after a bit they might begin to say: 'Are we right? Tribulation has made the world a different place; can we, therefore, ever hope to build it up again into the kind of world the Old People lost? Should we try to? What would be gained if we were to build it up again so exactly that it culminated in another Tribulation?' For it is clear, boy, that however wonderful the Old People were, they were not too wonderful to make mistakes..."
>
> "But Uncle, if we don't try to be like the Old People and rebuild the things that have been lost, what <u>can</u> we do?"
>
> "Well, we might try being ourselves, and build for the world that is, instead of the one that's gone," he suggested.

He talks of what little he knows about evolution, and suggests that "some way or another you and Rosalind and the others have got a new quality of mind". He warns of the dangers, but says that they must face them and keep themselves safe.

Two more quotations from the exciting first half of <u>The Chrysalids</u> will serve to place, in time and space, the setting of the adventures in the second half.

> For a long time it had been disputed whether any parts of the world other than Labrador and the big island of Newf were populated at all. They were thought to be all Badlands which had suffered the full weight of Tribulation, but it had been found that there were some stretches of Fringes country in places... Altogether, not much seemed to be known about the world, but at least it was a more interesting subject than Ethics which an old man taught to a class of us on Sunday afternoons... According to Ethics, mankind - that was us, in civilised parts - was in the process of climbing back into grace; we were following a faint and difficult trail which led up to the peaks from which we had fallen...
>
> Farther south still, you begin to find patches where only coarse plants grow, and poorly at that, and soon you come to stretches of coast and land behind it, twenty, thirty, forty miles long, maybe, where nothing grows - nothing at all. The whole seaboard is empty - black and harsh and empty. The land behind looks like a huge desert of charcoal... There are no fish in the sea there, no weed either, not even slime, and when a ship has sailed there the barnacles and the fouling on her bottom drop off, and leave her hull clean... There was one ship whose captain was foolhardy enough to sail close inshore. Her crew were able to make out great stone ruins... But nobody knows any more about them. Most of the men in that ship wasted away and died, and the rest were never the same afterwards, so no other ship has risked keeping close in... They came back saying that they thought it must go on like that to the ends of the earth.

But evidence of other populated parts accumulates slowly. One ship returns with spices, giving rise to more "theological" argument. Petra, as a more powerful telepathic transmitter and receiver than any of them, gets messages from someone abroad, a land spelt out with thought-pictures as "Zealand". But this is not before Petra's uncontrolled broadcasting has got all of them fleeing for their lives. One of their number has committed suicide and two more are caught and tortured. One, still unsuspected, joins the search party and is able to keep contact with the quarry, guiding them to safety.

Petra's description of "Sealand", as they interpret it, reminds David of his boyhood dreams. She adds:

> "...Everybody there can make think-pictures - well, nearly everybody - and nobody wants to hurt anybody for doing it... They aren't all of them very good at it - most of them are more like you and David... But she's much better at it than most of them, and she's got two babies and she thinks they will be good at it, only they're too little yet. But she doesn't think they'll be as good at it as me. She says I can make stronger think-pictures than anybody at all," she concluded complacently.

The Sealanders, flying to the rescue, are able to give the fugitives more advice as they come within ordinary thought-range. The tale reaches its climax in the Fringes, where Sophie reappears, embittered but able to protect her childhood friend. During a battle between the Fringes people and the hunters, in which Sophie is killed, the Sealanders' helicopter arrives, emitting a substance that conveniently disposes of the combatants by arresting all movement. The "chrysalids" are released from the binding of this strange weapon's sticky plastic threads and the rest of the battlefield is left slowly petrifying.

> "...They're all dead. The plastic threads contract as they dry. A man who struggles and entangles himself soon becomes unconscious. It is more merciful than your arrows and spears... It is not pleasant to kill any creature," she agreed, "but to pretend that one can live without doing so is self-deception... Sometime there will come a day when we ourselves shall have to give way to a new thing. Very certainly we shall struggle against the inevitable just as these remnants of the Old People do... Your minds are confused by your ties and your upbringing: you are still half thinking of them as the same kind as yourselves. That is why you are shocked. And that is why they have you at a disadvantage, for they were not confused. They are alert, corporately aware of danger to their species. They can see quite well that if it is to survive they have not only to preserve it from deterioration, but they must protect it from the even more serious threat of the superior variant...
>
> "For ours is a superior variant, and we are only just beginning. We are able to think-together and understand one another as they never could; we are beginning to understand how to assemble and apply the composite team-mind to a problem - and where may that not take us one day?..."

And the "Sealand woman" rejoices in finding Petra:

> "It was worthwhile... At her age and untrained - yet she can throw a thought halfway round the world!... She has still a great deal to learn, but we will give her the best teachers, and then, one day, she will be teaching them."

At last, at the end of some of Wyndham's best writing, both for its emotional appeal and the strength of characterisation, there sounds the familiar note of hope: David realises his childhood dream, but with something new, too:

> I was aware of the engineer in our machine communicating with someone below, but behind that, as a background to it, there was something new and unknown to me. In terms of sound it could be not unlike the buzzing of a hive of bees; in terms of light, a suffused glow.
>
> "What is it?" I said, puzzled.
>
> "Can't you guess, David? It's people. Lots and lots of our kind of people."

** ** **

Although The Midwich Cuckoos is, in many ways, the least of the four novels, its theme shows an authentic development out of its predecessors; and there is a sense in which the author, by being parochial in a more familiar sense than he is in The Chrysalids, is also at his most universal. Here "the even more serious threat of the superior variant" is ruthlessly exterminated in the English village where it appears, leaving a final sense of relief among the villagers, but not, insignificantly, the note of hope. By an act which prevents the race from becoming more human the village ends in being less human, and the author's incipient sympathy with the intruders and his disgust with mankind is seen at its least equivocal. It is noteworthy, too, that the destructive act is committed, suicidally, by the Wyndham intellectual.

The theme of the superior mutant is blended with that of the mysterious invader in a form that does not quite synthesise the symbolic themes of The Kraken Wakes and The Chrysalids, but leaves a tantalising pointer to the next novel in the genre.

Midwich is an ordinary English village and the narrator one of its residents (middle-class detached), this time escaping the disaster by

being out of the village with his wife celebrating his birthday. "One of the luckiest accidents in my wife's life," the story begins, "is that she happened to marry a man who was born on the 26th of September." On their return to Midwich they find out that anyone who tries to approach it within a certain distance falls instantly and harmlessly asleep. The situation gives rise to the usual English responses to crisis and provides the author with more grist for his dark satiric mills. Investigations suggest that the invisible force has settled like a dome on the village, but its identity is never discovered because twenty-four hours after its arrival there is no sign of it and the villagers wake up from their "day-out" as if nothing had happened. Only about three months later is it gradually discovered that all its women are pregnant. An echo of the "shrimping" assaults in The Kraken Wakes may be heard in the outburst of one of the Midwich women during the developing crisis:

> "...It's all very well for a man. He doesn't have to go through this sort of thing, and he knows he never will have to. How can he understand? He may mean as well as a saint, but he's always on the outside. He can never know what it's like, even in a normal way - so what sort of an idea can he have of this? - Of how it feels to lie awake at night with the humiliating knowledge that one is simply being used? - As if one were not a person at all, but just a kind of mechanism, a sort of incubator..."

Ten chapters of nicely sustained anxiety about what the women will produce culminate in a delightful anticlimax: the babies are all quite normal, except for the minor detail of having golden eyes. The village doctor, in one of his reports, notes that the more educated of the women accept the thesis that they are host-mothers, adding that he knows of no reason why xenogenesis should not be possible among humans. He tries to discount as hysterical the women's claims that the children exert a powerful compulsion over their mothers, forcing them to feed them and to bring them back to Midwich if they are taken away. The most extraordinary thing, he suggests, is that there are thirty-one males and thirty females so alike that their ostensible mothers cannot tell them apart. It is Zellaby, the squire, who first makes the comparison with cuckoos, hints that the sensible course would be to treat the visitants as people treat unwanted kittens, and ridicules the doctor's theory about hysteria:

> "...If you were wishful to challenge the supremacy of a society that was fairly stable, and quite well weaponed, what would you do? Would you meet it on its own terms by launching a probably costly, and certainly destructive, assault? Or, if time were of no great importance, would you prefer to employ a version of a more subtle tactic? Would you, in fact, try somehow to introduce a fifth column, to attack it from within?"

By the time the Children are a year old, they look like well-developed two-year-olds and when one of them learns something, the other twenty-nine or thirty of the same sex know it too:

> "...It certainly does not mean normal abilities to the power of thirty, thank heaven - that would be beyond any comprehension. It does appear to mean multiplication of intelligence in some degree... What seems to me of more immediate importance is the degree of will-power that has been produced - the potentialities of that strike me as very serious indeed. One has no idea of how these compulsions are exerted, but I fancy that if it can be explored we might find that when a certain degree of will is...concentrated in one vessel a Hegelian change takes place - that is, that in more than critical quantity it begins to display a new quality. In this case, a power of direct imposition...
>
> "...A spirit is a living force, therefore it is not static, therefore it is something which must either evolve, or atrophy. Evolution of a spirit assumes the eventual development of a greater spirit. Suppose, then, that this greater spirit, this super spirit, is attempting to make its appearance on the scene. Where is it to dwell? The ordinary man is not constructed to contain it; the superman does not exist to house it. Might it not, then, for lack of a suitable single vehicle, inform a group - rather like an encyclopedia grown too large for one volume?..."

At two they can all read, and a little later, all ride bicycles and swim. They are sent to "a kind of school-cum-welfare-centre-cum-social-observatory" and eventually all take up permament residence there. It is soon discovered that any lesson can be attended by only one boy and one girl and six couples can be taught different subjects simultaneously. At the age of nine they look sixteen.

Then a village youth is killed in a motor accident and, although the inquest was formal, Zellaby has a different view. He saw four of the Children walking strung out across the road just before the accident:

> The car, a small, open two-seater, was not travelling fast, but it happened that just round the corner, and shielded from sight by it, the Children had stopped... The car's driver did his best. He pulled hard over to the right in an attempt to avoid them, and all but succeeded. Another two inches, and he would have missed them entirely. But he could not make the extra inches. The tip of his left wing caught the outermost boy in the hip, and flung him across the road against the fence of a cottage garden...
>
> Whether the car actually came to a stop

> Zellaby could never be sure; if it did it was for the barest instant, then the engine roared. The car sprang forward. The driver changed up, and put his foot down again, keeping straight ahead. He made no attempt whatever to take the corner to the left. The car was still accelerating when it hit the churchyard wall.

"They did it," says Zellaby later, "just as surely are they made their mothers bring them back here." And when the village comes to know of it, the dead man's brother takes his revenge by shooting one of the boys:

> The standing boy turned, and looked at us. His golden eyes were hard, and bright. I felt as if a sudden gust of confusion and weakness were seeping through me... Then the boy's eyes left ours, and his head turned further. From behind the hedge opposite, came the sound of a second explosion...

The avenger had turned his second barrel on himself. In a discussion about the incident Zellaby answers the vicar's claim that the brother was administering the justice that the law had denied him:

> "The one thing it certainly was not, was justice," Zellaby said firmly. "It was feuding. He attempted to kill one of the Children, chosen at random, for an act they had committed collectively. What these incidents really make clear...is that the laws evolved by one particular species, for the convenience of that species are, by their nature, concerned only with the capacities of that species - against a species with different capacities they simply became inapplicable."

Then the villagers march in a mob to burn down the school, but their intentions are thwarted by a riot unaccountably breaking out among them, causing death and injury. By the time the police arrive to investigate, all the inhabitants of Midwich are found to be going about their business normally except that they are incapable of leaving the village, not even to visit their relatives in hospital.

Zellaby fumbles his way further into the logical labyrinth of his own humanism: understanding the Children (he is the only person they trust) yet knowing he has no precedents by which to justify treating them humanely.

> "Physically we are poor weak creatures compared with many animals, but we overcome them because we have better brains. The only thing that can beat us is something with a still better brain. That has scarcely seemed a threat: for one thing, its occurrence appeared to be improbable and, for another, it seemed even more improbable that we should allow it to survive to become a menace. Yet here it is - another little gimmick out of Pandora's infinite evolutionary box: the contesserate mind..."

The Wyndham intellectual has evolved from the progressive brave-new-world builder of The Day of the Triffids, through the blindly certain and demonstrably wrong campaigner of The Kraken Wakes and the stoic realist of The Chrysalids to this point of disorientation of uncertainty which is just as ineffectual as the attitude of the wooden-headed Chief Constable who supplies the penultimate dramatic incident in an interview with one of the Children. One can almost feel the author's delight in creating it. The boy has calmly explained that the Children caused the rioters to fight one another:

> "...If there is any attempt to interfere with us or molest us, by anybody, we shall defend ourselves. We have shown that we can, and we hope that that will be warning enough to prevent further trouble."
>
> Sir John stared at the boy speechlessly while his knuckles whitened and his face empurpled. He half rose from his chair as if he meant to attack the boy, and then sank back, thinking better of it... Presently, in a half-choked voice, he addressed the boy who was watching him with a kind of critically detached interest.
>
> "You damned young blackguard! You insufferable little prig! How dare you speak to me like that!... Talking to your elders like that, you swollen-headed little upstart! So you're not to be 'molested'; you'll defend yourselves, will you! Where do you think you are? You've got a lot to learn, m'lad, a whole - "
>
> ...The Chief Constable's mouth went slack, his jaws fell a little, his eyes widened, and seemed to go on widening. His hair rose slightly. Sweat burst out on his forehead, at his temples, and came trickling down his face. Inarticulate gobblings came from his mouth. Tears ran down the sides of his nose. He began to tremble, but seemed unable to move. Then, after long, rigid seconds, he did move. He lifted hands that fluttered, and fumbled them to his face. Behind them, he gave queer, thin screams. He slid out of the chair to his knees on the floor, and fell forward. He lay there grovelling, and trembling, making high whinnying sounds as he clawed at the carpet, trying to dig himself into it. Suddenly he vomited.
>
> The boy looked up. To Dr Torrance he said, as if answering a question: "He is not hurt. He wanted to frighten us, so we have shown him what it means to be frightened. He'll understand better now. He will be all right when his glands are in balance again."

And somebody observes afterwards: "They've broken that man, for the rest of his life."

It is learned that there were three other incidents of a "Day-out" in different parts of the world, close to the date of the Midwich one. In an Eskimo settlement the babies were exposed at birth and none survived. In Outer Mongolia it was assumed that the women had been lying with devils and all perished, including the Children. The third village, in Eastern Siberia, was allowed to rear its Children to the age of those in Midwich. Then a new atomic cannon is tested, and "Gizhinsk" no longer exists. The Midwich Children know of this and begin to take the initiative in defending themselves against destruction sooner or later. One of them explains:

> "...You cannot afford not to kill us, for if you don't, you are finished. In Russia ...it is the duty of the community to protect itself from traitors whether they are individuals or groups. In this case, biological duty and political duty coincided ... But for you the issue is less clear. Not only has your will to survive been much more deeply submerged by convention, but you have the inconvenience here of the idea that the State exists to serve the individuals who compose it... Your more liberal...and religious people will be greatly troubled over the ethical position... As a securely dominant species you could afford to lose touch with reality, and amuse yourself with abstractions ... You will think of artillery, as the Russians did, or of guided missiles whose electronics we cannot affect. But if you send them, you won't be able to kill only us, you will have to kill all the people in the village as well - it would take you a long time even to contemplate such an action, and if it were carried out, what government in this country could survive such a massacre of innocents on the grounds of expediency?... Neither you, nor we, have wishes that count in the matter - or should one say that we both have been given the same wish - to survive? We are all, you see, toys of the life-force. It made you numerically strong, but mentally undeveloped; it made us mentally strong, but physically weak: now it has set us at one another to see what will happen. A cruel sport, perhaps, from both our points of view, but a very, very old one. Cruelty is as old as life itself, There is some improvement: humour and compassion are the most important of hunan inventions; but they are not very firmly established yet, though promising well."

Zellaby eventually finds the only solution. The Children are still children enough to enjoy a film show, and he arranges one for them all in their school. His extra heavy load of projection equipment is on this occasion loaded with time bombs. The conclusion is thus the familiar spectacle - this time less overt - of humanity starting all over again from a point some way back. "If you want to keep alive in the jungle," says Zellaby's last letter, "you must live as the jungle does."

III

The popularity of the Wyndham novels depends, of course, more on their status as science fiction romance than on their inherent ideas. The appeal of scarification is as old as childhood. The Day of the Triffids, in which the horror is at its most tangible, is by far the most popular; and The Chrysalids, in which the science is at its least fictional and the ideas most prominent, appears to be liked the least. But all good monsters exist in more than one dimension, and Wyndham's are no exception. Their real importance lies in their symbolic meanings, and in the forms of the ideas in which they are clad.

Philosophically, they are all a play upon the reductio ad absurdum of elemental questions about nature and nurture: extrinsically concerned with modern hubris. Civilised man, Wyndham is saying, is so smugly confident in his scientific humanism that he is failing the examine the precarious foundations on which his civilisation stands. It may be argued that there cannot be much wrong with the foundations if the only way they can be undermined (apart from a nuclear war, which everyone knows about) is by an accident as unlikely as the beginning of life itself - universal blindness or the mutation of a contesserate mind. Yet this is just where one of the symbolic interpretations of these disasters is relevant. Any detached observer can see that underlying the superficial contemporary mood of brazen self-confidence (the potential omniscience of science; the potential omnipotence of Man) is a profound lack of confidence; an uncertainty of which, indeed, the arrogance is itself a symptom, like whistling in the dark. And the impending disasters are the more real, the more catastrophic, because their approach is unacknowledged. That is why a nuclear war is the least likely holocaust. Whatever the "something" is that Beckett and others know "is taking its course" may not turn out to be as fantastic as an actual deep-sea intelligence, but its arrival will be socially no less confounding.

At another level of interpretation, Wyndham's picture of civilised mankind is that they are groping blindly towards chaos; that they must (but will not) follow Bocker's advice to establish friendly relations with the power beneath the mean sea level of their consciousness and that it can only take its course by inundating the "arid spaces" of the citadels of reason. Wyndham knows that all this force, though destructive, is also a sign of unquenchable vitality, and that human life will survive the holocaust to become richer than before; but he

knows, too, that this cannot happen within the Midwich scale of three generations. The destructive power is so great that any creative upward urge appearing before the something has taken its course will be destroyed before it can gain a hold by the very people who nowadays affect the changes in the climate of ideas, and who will destroy themselves in the process: the rationalist intelligentsia.

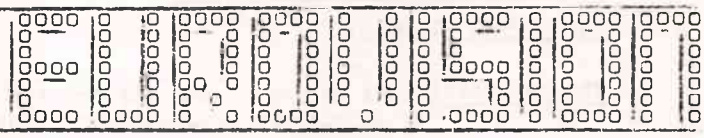
There remains the question of how far Wyndham understands his own symbols. Serially, in the four novels, he brings closer and closer together, towards the point of their conception in the human mind - the periphery of the familiar - the always ambivalent elements of matter and mystery (in the metaphysical sense). At first the two illusions are externalised: a rather worthless material world is lost through the impact of something not too mysterious to be, ultimately, indestructible (the triffids), and then by something a little more mysterious (the xenobath), the destruction of which is unconvincing and uncertain. In each case, there is a remnant of the fittest who survive with a stiff upper lip and a trembling lower one. In the third instance, the mystery is internalised and dominant, reorganising the now formless matter into a new and improved quality of being and calmly destroying the residue. But lastly, both matter and mystery become stabilised at equal strength in a present-day setting. In their interaction the rational consciousness, for all its learning and detachment, can find no place.

Explicitly, the law of the jungle prevails throughout, immediately something happens to sever the slender restraints of civilisation. Whichever way the author turns he cannot escape it, and as long as he is dealing with modern man, he implies, he never will. Only a new kind of superman can really hope to transcend the beast, and then by taking defensive measures that are not only less jungly by virtue of the fully conscious deliberation that motivates them. It is a long and courageous journey from the "primary prejudice" of "The race is worth preserving" in The Day of the Triffids, to "We are all toys of the life-force" in The Midwich Cuckoos. The comparison with Back to Methuselah is obvious, though Wyndham reveals a deeper disgust than Shaw, for all his caecal, sexless ancients. It would be difficult to imagine a superceded species of Wyndham being provided with the gentle death from discouragement of Shaw's elderly gentlemen. Perhaps this is because humanity is more unequivocally disgusting than it was forty years ago.

And with it all goes the Wyndham intellectual, the one consistently developing character. It is he who explains, for the reader's benefit, what can only be the workings of the author's intellect before the fable takes shape. The narrator is his "feed"; he asks the questions that the reader is asking and so emphasises the identification of reader with narrator, the one person who will always be assumed to survive the disaster. Reductio ad absurdum, and the end result is an impasse resolvable only by an actual or symbolic intellectual death - by a means, incidentally, which in the circumstances is an act of questionable heroism, as double-edged as Wyndham sees all the cornerstones of a culture that has elevated relative values to absolutes. Intellectually, the author can see no way of fusing these two forces of matter and mystery, so he finds them always in conflict, mutually exclusive. "There cannot be two absolutes," says Bocker. But Western thought juggles with several. Thus a hatred of humanity as it is - though not as it could be - is the inevitable concomitant of Wyndham's apocalyptic vision.

That is why there remain two exciting and terrifying unanswered questions about the novels of John Wyndham. What will be the themes of the next one? Or can there never be another one now?

Owen Webster 1959
First publication anywhere



GEORGE TURNER
GERALD MURNANE
BRUCE GILLESPIE
BARRY GILLAM
JAMES MARK PURCELL

DISCUSSED IN THIS ISSUE:

EUROVISION:

View From Another Shore
The Science Fiction Book

from FRANZ ROTTENSTEINER

POLAND:

The Cyberiad
The Investigation
The Invincible
Memoirs Found in a Bathtub
The Technological Congress

by STANISLAW LEM

USSR:

Hard to be a God

by ARKADI AND BORIS STRUGATSKI

FRANCE:

Future Without Future

by JACQUES STERNBERG

All first published
in English
Seabury Press/Continuum Books.

EDITOR:

Until recently, science fiction books by European writers were published infrequently in English-language editions, and were ignored by reviewers and book-buyers when they did appear. Publishers found it difficult to discover or pay suitable translators, so new readers were discouraged by the awkward prose they found in books by unfamiliar authors. And, I suspect, European s f suffered from undisguised chauvinism; readers felt that they should not touch it just because it was "foreign".

By 1975, the situation has not really changed so much, but the remaining conservatism is that of the readers, not of the publishers. During the last five years, several publishers have invested much time, money, and care into various projects to publish science fiction translated from European languages. Some early successes were Sven Holm's Termush, Stanislaw Lem's Solaris, and Other Worlds, Other Seas, a collection of stories edited by Darko Suvin. Donald Wollheim, of DAW Books, has kept up a consistent effort to publish the works of such people as Gerard Klein and Herbert W Franke.

And, in 1973, Seabury Press began the most ambitious project of all - a series of hardback novels and short-story collections, featuring some of the best-known s f authors from Europe, translated by some of the best people available. This is an extensive investment which I've been grateful for. I don't know whether the project of Continuum Books paid back its financial investment; that's for Seabury's accountants. However, the writers in this issue of SFC have tried to measure the worth of the artistic investment made by Seabury/Continuum.

This assessment raises the question of translations, which George Turner deals with. Patrick McGuire and others have published articles on these books in other magazines. The translations are improving; the question we ask is, what in particular have European writers to show us? What is their special vision?

WHAT'S LOST IN TRANSLATION?

by GEORGE TURNER

The Invincible, by Stanislaw Lem (translated by Wendayne Ackerman from the German) Seabury Press/Continuum Books; 1973; 183 pages; $US6.95; original Polish publication 1967

The Cyberiad: Fables for the Cybernetic Age, by Stanislaw Lem (translated by Michael Kandel from the Polish); Seabury Press/Continuum Books; 1974; 295 pp; $US8.95; original Polish publication 1967

Memoirs Found in a Bathtub, by Stanislaw Lem (translated by Michael Kandel and Christine Rose); Seabury Press/Continuum Books; 188 pages; $US6.95; original Polish publication 1971.

Dear Bruce

After these three volumes you lent me it will be a long time before I can face another Lem work. I begin to think we have paid far too much attention to this man on the strength of one fairly good novel, a batch of table-thumping extracts from his magnum opus on futurology, and the unrelenting promotional activities of his agent.

I don't want to make an article of this; a few comments will do.

The Invincible is, of course, incredibly badly translated. Even allowing that it is a rendition from the German from the original Polish, there is no excuse for "natrium" (page 2), when "sodium" is the recognised English word, or such a phrase as "Each weighed thirty tons of heavy machinery..." (page 8) or, on page 17, "technologists" when obviously "technicians" is intended. And still 166 pages to go! Later we meet with "The Zeta of the Lyre constellation" for "Zeta Lyrae" and "the delta of the Lyre" which one may be forgiven for confusing with the estuary of some celestial river. After shedding a tear for the wretched author who has to put up with this ruthless slaughter of his prose, one pauses to wonder about the publisher's reader. Probably an illiterate. Lem simply has no luck in English.

But something worse is in store for the reader. The whole work is translated - if that is the word - in a flat prose which effectively prevents any hint of the author's intention coming to the surface.

Is The Invincible a satire? It has all the incidental trappings of one,but never a line of which the reader can say, "Ah, that's what he's getting at!"

Or is it just plain bad s f of the kind which was going out of fashion round about 1935 - the super-science story wherein the author, when in doubt, simply unloaded another 1000 words of transdimensional-hypernucleonic "scientific" hogwash on the dazed reader and blasted on, force screen intact?

For here we have the daddy of all force screens. It keeps everything out - except that, in order to keep the crew alive, it allows air to percolate through. And, in a moment of forgetfulness, Lem allows his gunners to fire a mortar through it. (This "mortar" is one of the more mysterious transliterations of the book. It seems to be used whenever the unfortunate author means "gun" or perhaps "projector", and for anyone who has ever seen or used a military mortar the results are hilarious - particularly in the case of the character who uses a "hand mortar"). The force screen also ends at ground level, which is much nattier than the old-fashioned spherical screen, and you can make holes in it for going in and out.

Aside from the question of just where you stand in order to project an impermeable screen, the mere mathematics of Lem's variation are shattering. Think about it in formula terms for a few seconds, then take the computer round to the pub and drown the poor thing's sorrows.

All through the book there are scientific howlers; I gave up marking them after a while. One I recall is that the "rocket" (sic) is brought from near-lightspeed to landing speed in 300 hours! That would mean deceleration at something like 20+ g. Rough on the crew.

Then there is the marvellous passage which would have been just the thing in 1935, wherein a scientist does a nine-page analysis of the nature of an utterly alien life form from the kind of evidence which would rock even a Lady Bogey crossword puzzle expert.

Now Lem, we are told, is a literate, intelligent, brilliant man. Therefore this farrago of nonsense is one of a number of possible things:

(a) A straight s f adventure story, leading one to the conclusion that Lem's ideas of s f are even cruder than the Western trash he sneers at;

(b) A "philosophic" novel, having much the same point as Solaris, by a writer who couldn't care less about science or thinks his readers won't know any better than he, in which case it is a boring exercise in the obvious; or

(c) A satire.

"Satire" looks possible, but Wendayne Ackerman's translation will never let us know. But satire on what? On the kind of s f written in America in the thirties? If so, it is such a good imitation of the brashest of the kind that it is indistinguishable from the item satirised - which means it has strangled itself on its own cunning.

There is also the possibility that man is being satirised for the helplessness of his boasted science in the face of the unknown. If so, what we have is an inferior Solaris with pseudo-scientific trappings which would be funny if they weren't merely irritating.

Whichever way you look at it, the book is a resounding failure. And worse - a pretentious bore.

The other two books are comedies, and here Lem has been fortunate in having as translator Michael Kandel, who works directly from the Polish original.

The difference is astonishing. The prose flows, even sparkles occasionally. Style becomes apparent. One even feels now and then that the genuine voice of the author is heard.

And it is this genuine voice that provokes question.

The Cyberiad: Fables for the Cybernetic Age is (I quote the blurb) "a cyle of tales recounting the escapades of the robot 'cosmic constructors' Trurl and Klapaucius, as they out-invent each other or take up the Gargantuan tasks thrust upon them in other galaxies... Lem draws upon the vocabularies of fairy tale, folk tale, and mythology - and those of twentieth-century scientific, philosophical, and mathematical thought as well. The result is intellectual slapstick of the highest order..."

All this is perfectly true, except perhaps that last bit about "highest order". These stories are indeed quite amusing, and if it hadn't been for Robert Sheckley covering the field with just as much slapstick and twice as much subtlety some twenty years back, I might have enjoyed them more than I did.

They are good magazine-style comedies of the kind which you can look forward to on a one-a-month basis, but are indigestible in the mass. And, unfortunately, I am no lover of slapstick unless it has the virtues of speed, inventiveness, and unexpectedness. Lem is inventive enough for a dozen comic writers, but his hand is too heavy and the joke is over long before he lets it go. He could take some lessons in technique from the western stuff he despises. But, on the credit side, he has some marvellous ideas, many of which would march well with the concepts of Jorge Luis Borges - but his comic sense is cold porridge. (But it may be much sharper in Polish.)

Memoirs Found in a Bathtub purports to be a Kafka-like parable of the last days of our present civilisation, strangling itself on its own administrative ethos and expertise. It takes place in some super-Pentagon, where the nameless hero is given a mysterious task and spends the rest of the novel trying to find out what it is as "the system" entangles him more and more tightly in its confusing coils. Just like Kafka's K- trying to discover the nature of his crime.

But this is a comedy. It starts very well, with an Introduction telling, in lively manner, how the twentieth-century civilisation met its end. (You will discover pretty quickly that it is Western, not socialist, civilisation that is being mocked; the scenes and characters are drawn almost exclusively from British and American stereotypes.) Then chapter 1 tells you in the second line: "First I wound up at the Department of Verification, then the Department of Misinformation, then some clerk from the Pressure Section..."

And if you fear right away that you are in for about 70,000 words of sophomoric satire laid on with a shovel, you are dead right. If there's one thing about comic writing that sets me grinding my teeth, it is the type that hits me over the head with a secondhand joke (straight descent from George Orwell in the bit quoted) and insists that is being funny-intellectual, and why aren't I laughing!

In chapter 1 we also meet the military mind, in the form of a general - probably George C Scott in Dr Strangelove - who talks pompous jargon and bangs telephone buttons. You've met him in every anti-military tract since Balzac.

In chapter 2 the hapless protagonist meets the mysterious "other spy" who thinks he is being caught out at double-agenting and kills himself. This one smells of Graham Greene sending up the espionage racket - except that Greene never pretends that human tragedy is funny.

At this point I stopped reading and simply glanced through the book to see if my suspicions about being led through all the cliche sendups of the technological West were true. It seemed they were, so I stopped bothering.

The dreadful thing about this book is that in 1950 or thereabouts it would have been an avant garde riot. Now it is just another tired kick at a horse that died of overwork years ago. The true satirist would see the menace and fear behind the futility - Lem sees only the fatuity. And his satirical method is as tired as his subject. Even the Jerry Cornelius tales (which I don't much like) do it with more bite and understanding. So, for that matter, does Philip Dick, who never makes the mistake of thinking that jokes have to be written up on signposts. (Department of Misinformation, indeed! Remember Orwell's Ministry of Love, and know how teeth can really bite!)

Looking over what I have just written, I see that one of the major irritations of the novel is the way in which each item, even in the forty or so pages I have real attention, calls to mind some other writer who did it better. Not that I think Lem is simply copying - he may even be deliberately "taking off" various writers by using their cliches - but his basically pedestrian humour does not survive even the best translation. (And the translators have to work hard in this one, finding suitable equivalents for puns, idioms, and even rhymes.)

This may, of course, resolve itself into a question of what the individual does or does not find humorous. Lem's satire, if that's what it is, does not tickle a risibility which has heard it all before. And if you have never read Kafka, Memoirs Found in a Bathtub may leave you all at sea in an intellectually leaky boat.

As I noted at the outset, we have perhaps paid too much attention to Lem the novelist (Lem the critic is another matter) and these three books can only subtract from a reputation which bid fair with Solaris. We have been too soaked in praise. What we need is some communication from Central European readers who do not bow down and worship. Excoriating bad translation is an ultimately unrewarding chore; being doubtful about what seem good ones is not much better. We need balanced criticism from readers of the originals, who are also familiar with Lem's real reputation, as against that exported to us. But where can we get it?

BROTHERS GRIMM IN LAPUTA

by GERALD MURNANE

The Cyberiad: Fables for the Cybernetic Age (Cyberiada), by Stanislaw Lem (translated by Michael Kandel); Seabury Press/Continuum Books; 295 pages; $US 8.95; 1974; original Polish publication 1967.

The setting of The Cyberiad is like an infinite extension of Laputa, where Lemuel Gulliver discovered perhaps the first mad scientists of fiction. The sense of endless space in The Cyberiad is exhilarating - constellations, galaxies, supernovae are no more than mileposts on the way from one marvel to another. Time scarcely matters - aeons are like shop windows glimpsed on a sight-seeing stroll. And while the scientists of Laputa toiled for years at tasks such as building houses from the roof downwards or extracting sunbeams from cucumbers, Lem's constructor-heroes knock up this sort of thing:

> He built a machine and fashioned a digital model of the Void, an Electrostatic Spirit to move upon the face of the electrolytic waters, and he introduced a parameter of light, a protogalactic cloud or two, and by degrees worked his way up to the first ice age - Trurl could move at this rate because his machine was able, in one five-billinionth of a second, to simulate one hundred septillion events at forty octillion different locations simultaneously. And if anyone questions these figures, let him work it out for himself.
>
> Next Trurl began to model Civilisation, the striking of fires with flints and the tanning of hides, and he provided for dinosaurs and floods, bipedality and taillessness, then made the paleopaleface (Albuminidis sapientia), which begat the paleface, which begat the gadget, and so it went, from eon to millennium, in the endless hum of electrical currents and eddies. Often the machine turned out to be too small for the computer simulation of a new epoch, and Trurl would have to tack on an auxiliary unit - until he ended up, at last, with a veritable metropolis of tubes and terminals, circuits and shunts, all so tangled and involved that the devil himself couldn't have made head or tail of it.

There are enough passages like this in the book to give any reader a pleasant attack of giddiness. The most fanciful dream of present-day science is old-hat to the inventors in The Cyberiad. Yet, ungracious as it seems, I sometimes stopped in the middle of one of Lem's delightful fables of the remote future and thought of Gulliver's journey to Laputa. The comparisons that follow are not meant to measure Stanislaw Lem against Jonathan Swift. The Cyberiad is such an unusual book (and such a pleasure to read) that I couldn't have begun to assess it except by comparing it with something that seemed vaguely like it.

Nearly every story in The Cyberiad is laced with bombastic, mock-scientific jargon. Here's just one example:

> Trurl opened a small box...and showed it to the King... It was a portable bilateral personality transformer, with retroversible feedback, of course. Using it, any two individuals could quickly and easily exchange minds. The device, fitted onto one's head, resembled a pair of horns; when these came into contact with the forehead of the one with whom one wished to effect the exchange, and were lightly pressed, the device was activated and instantaneously set up two opposing series of antipodal impulses. Through one horn, one's own psyche flowed into the other, and through the other, the other into one's own. Hence the total deenergising of the one memory and the simultaneous energising of the other in its place, and contrariwise.

This is comic-strip science. It does for the story what the recipe for a witch's brew does for a fairy tale. This particular story is set in a fantastic kingdom ruled by a madcap king who has a passion for parlour games, appoints his officers according to their skill at riddles, and once (purely for fun) hid for three days in one of the palace chandeliers.

The king steals Trurl's machine and uses it for his greatest-ever game of hide-and-seek. By swapping personalities with his subjects, he actually hides in their bodies.

The original improbability sets off a very funny sequence of complications, and the story turns into a romp. The ending is straight from the Brothers Grimm.

The science, such as it is, in these stories serves the same purpose as the magic in traditional fairy tales. Of course it's true to its own laws and not all-powerful. But so is magic. In the best fairy tales the spell can only work under certain conditions, or it can be mullified by its equally magical antidote.

The bumbling scientists and their absurd projects in the Academy of Laputa tell us a great deal about a certain kind of scientist common in the eighteenth century (and perhaps not yet extinct today). Grotesque as it is, the account of Laputa actually argues a case against many of the pretensions of science. The Cyberiad is set in a world totally dependent on science. It seems reasonable to expect Lem's fables to tell us something of the value of science-as-a-way-of-life. Do they?

The characters in The Cyberiad are nearly all machines. The behaviour of Trurl and Klapaucius and their mechanical brethren might come as a shock to anyone who expects machines to be logical, unemotional, and coolly efficient. They certainly exhibit a remarkable knowledge of physics, astronomy, and other, more esoteric, branches of science. But they thirst for power, they fly into rages, they play practical jokes on one another, and at times they take rather too much interest in the opposite sex. They are almost compulsively active - building machines, undertaking long journeys, or executing devious schemes. The frantic activity in The Cyberiad had me reading at twice my usual speed. And many of the scenes in the book, when I recall them, have the speeded-up, slightly farcical appearance of old movies.

It was this that gave me a promising clue to the meaning of The Cyberiad. The remote future, as described by Lem, is only a re-run of the past.

Like many people, I'm rather suspicious and fearful of the future. As for advances in technology - well, I still haven't ventured into an aeroplane or learned what a cassette is, so you can guess how the approach of the cybernetic age affects me. Yet The Cyberiad seems to reassure people like me that no amount of technical expertise will prevent men from behaving as they always have - like overgrown children.

I hear the objection, "But Lem's fables are not about mankind - his characters are intelligent machines." It makes no difference. If The Cyberiad is a description of a possible future, then it's a future not very different from what we've always been used to. Even if the galaxies one day become the playground of tribes of machines, their most common activity will still be the appropriation of their neighbour's goods or his wife. Anyone who worries about men turning into machines can find comfort in Lem's stories of machines that turn into men.

The denizens of Lem's fantastic world are really chaps like ourselves, despite their metallic complexions and programmed brains. Most of them are shallow and simply motivated - like the most memorable characters from the best fairy stories. (The fabulous constructors, Trurl and Klapaucius, reminded me at times of Big Claus and Little Claus.)

Even though there are no complete human personalities in The Cyberiad, this doesn't mean that Lem can't hit us with unexpected revelations about ourselves. (One of the hoariest myths about fiction is that it ought to create "fully rounded characters" who could step down from their pages and take up normal life among us - shades of old-time schoolmasters praising Shakespeare and Dickens.)

Consider this: Trurl has presented an exiled monarch with a kingdom-in-a-box. It has every single component of a real kingdom - towns, rivers, forests, palaces, and thousands of subjects, including "the necessary handful of traitors, another of heroes ...a pinch of prophets and seers, and one messiah and one great poet each.":

> Trurl...showed him where the input and output of his brand-new kingdom were, and how to program wars, quell rebellions, exact tribute, collect taxes, and also instructed him in the critical points and transition states of that micro-miniaturised society - in other words the maxima and minima of palace coups and revolutions - and explained everything so well, that the king, an old hand in the running of tyrannies, instantly grasped the directions and, without hesitation,

> while the constructor watched, issued a few trial proclamations, correctly manipulating the control knobs, which were carved with imperial eagles and regal lions. These proclamations declared a state of emergency, martial law, a curfew and a special levy. After a year had passed in the kingdom, which amounted to hardly a minute for Trurl and the king, by an act of the greatest magnanimity - that is, by a flick of the finger at the controls - the king abolished one death penalty, lightened the levy and deigned to annul the state of emergency, whereupon a tumultuous cry of gratitude, like the squeaking of tiny mice lifted by their tails, rose from the box, and through its curved glass cover one could see, on the dusty highways and along the banks of lazy rivers that reflected the fluffy clouds, the people rejoicing and praising the great and unsurpassed benevolence of their sovereign lord.

Of course the king is only a caricature. But put your hand up, anyone who hasn't sat down and fiddled with the control knobs of a kingdom just like that one, or thrilled to that noise like the squeaking of mice.

I should mention that the machines in The Cyberiad, being only human, are capable of cruelty and infamy as well as jolly pranks. There are several incidents of robots behaving just like the worst kind of police investigators in some twentieth-century totalitarian state.

And if it hasn't yet emerged from this rather too-solemn review, it should be made clear that The Cyberiad is a consistently funny book. The language is extraordinary. No quotation can suggest the torrential effect of the puns, the fanciful neologisms, the ballooning lists and mock-treatises packed with polysyllabic gibberish. The translator has done a remarkable job to give us all this in idiomatic English.

I wandered away from the comparison with Gulliver's Travels at the point where I asked what Lem says about science. (It's not hard to wonder, when the subject is as rich and varied as The Cyberiad.)

It's probably misleading even to talk of the "science" of The Cyberiad. No one could possibly read these stories for information about the future development of physics or electronics or the like. And yet the fact remains that much of the interest in the book depends on devices or journeys or processes made possible by a super-science of the far future.

If ever a kingdom-in-a-box or a bilateral personality transformer becomes a reality, it will be science that produces it. But how it is used will depend on its users. One of the peculiar merits of The Cyberiad is its way of taking the most astonishing marvels in its stride. The characters use scientific wonders for exactly the same purpose as we use the artifacts, status symbols, and cultural tokens of our day.

The scientists in Laputa were slaves of science. They were driven out of their wits by the effort to produce results.

> The Projector of this Cell was the most ancient Student of the Academy. His Face and Beard were of a pale Yellow; his Hands and Clothes dawbed over with Filth. When I was presented to him, he gave me a very close Embrace, (a Compliment I could well have excused). His Employment from his first coming into the Academy, was an operation to reduce human Excrement to its original Food, by separating the several Parts, removing the Tincture which it receives from the Gall, making the Odour exhale, and scumming off the Saliva. He had a weekly Allowance from the Society, of a Vessel filled with human Ordure, about the Bigness of a Bristol Barrel.

Thus Jonathan Swift, savaging science as he saw it - a worthless dream that reduced men from the paths of common sense.

Compare Swift's tirade with this description of one of Trurl's constructions.

> This was, he told the King, a femfatalatron, an erotifying device stochastic, elastic and orgiastic, and with plenty of feedback; whoever was placed inside the apparatus instantaneously experienced all the charms, lures, wiles, winks and witchery of all the fairer sex in the Universe at once. The femfatalatron

operated on a power of forty megamors, with a maximum attainable efficency - given a constant concupiscence coefficient - of ninety-six percent, while the system"s libidonous lubricity, measured of course in kilocupids, produced up to six units for every remote-control caress.

The characters who dabble in this sort of enterprise could not conceive of anyone jeering at science. And yet Lem, in his light-hearted way, still cuts science down to size. He does it, I think, by reminding us that science is only a human activity used by people (or hot-blooded machines) for their own ends.

Gulliver sailed past the limits of the known world and journeyed among dwarfs and giants and hairy yahoos and talking horses, but could find no marvel greater than human folly. If he had sailed through a time-quake into the world of The Cyberiad he would have had no reason to change his mind.

THE MACHINERIES OF HAPPINESS

by BRUCE GILLESPIE

View From Another Shore, edited by Franz Rottensteiner; Seabury Press/Continuum Books; 234 pages; $US6.95; 1973.

Stories: Poland: "In Hot Pursuit of Happiness" by Stanislaw Lem
France: "The Valley of Echoes" by Gerard Klein
France: "Observation of Quadragnes" by J P Andrevon
Denmark: "The Good Ring" by Svend Age Madsen
West Germany: "Slum" by Herbert W Franke
Czechoslovakia: "Captain Nemo's Last Adventure" by Josef Nesvadba
Rumania: "The Altar of the Random Gods" by Adrian Rogoz
Italy: "Good Night, Sophie" by Lino Aldani
USSR: "The Proving Ground" by Sever Gansovski
USSR: "Sisyphus, the Son of Aeolus" by Vsevolod Ivanov
USSR: "A Modest Genius" by Vadim Shefner

When I was young, my parents told me that happiness was not something that could be looked for. Influenced by Christian doctrine, they said that happiness could be found only through self-sacrifice and forgetting one's own desires. Looking for happiness itself would produce only unhappiness.

When I was a lot older, a friend confused me by telling me that happiness could never be found unless it was looked for. He said that people who founded their lives on the ethic of self-sacrifice and self-induced misery could lead only lives, appropriately enough, of sterility and self-extinction.

And then... and then... I discovered, and lost, Happiness - the real thing; the pure bliss. She was... well, you know the story, in your life if not in mine. From then on the Search for Happiness became more purposeful and desperate. Later I rediscovered the condition which I thought was it happiness itself. It wasn't. I felt almost like turning full circle and adopting the belief that the least likely way to find happiness was to look for it.

At least, that's the message of that splendid character, Cerebron, who offers his acerbic advice from the grave in Stanislaw Lem's "In Hot Pursuit of Happiness", the leading story in View From Another Shore, edited by Franz Rotteinsteiner. "Happiness, happiness worth the effort, is not a thing in itself, a totality, but part of something that is not happiness, nor ever could be," says Cerebron, trying to drum some sense into Trurl, the robot inventor. Trurl, who is always trying to top the efforts of his rival, Klapaucius, employs what seem like infinite physical resources in his attempts to build a world where all the inhabitants are perfectly happy. Trurl's efforts are universally, comically disastrous.

"You confuse ethics and physics, confuse them utterly!" shouts Cerebron in frustration, when his former pupils rouse him from his deathbed (since robots cannot die completely, but can only switch themselves off). However, the damage has been done

already. Trurl has already used every means available in an effort to make physical means solve ethical problems. "In the beginning he created a happy civilisation composed of nine hundred persons" who "do nothing but jump around, look plump and rosy, remove stumbling blocks and shout in unison that they are positively thrilled." Klapaucius is not impressed; instead he accuses Trurl of having invented compulsorily happy puppets. Undefeated, Trurl seeks to invent another society where happiness is real, but not programmed directly into the minds of the inhabitants. Unfortunately for Trurl, the citizens of Felifica get rather carried away. They fight to the last man in the cause of Universal Goodness. Of all the "happy" civilisations which Trurl constructs, probably this is the one which follows his ideal most closely. It is also the one which disintegrates most rapidly.

In his desperation, Trurl invents micro-civilisations, he invents duplicates of himself (which promptly invent further duplicates in order to pass the buck of solving the problem), and he invents the Ecstatic Contemplator of Existence. It is meant to be the one happy being in the world. Somehow none of these inventions fits the bill. The inhabitants of one of the micro-civilisations (whose entire country is stored on a microscope slide) fires a laser beam at Trurl's prying eye when he tries to see how the happy citizens are faring. He invents a civilisation whose inhabitants gain happiness from self-sacrifice. "Everyone ran about frantically looking for someone to save - widows and orphans were in particularly great demand, especially if blind." No wonder that Trurl gives up in the end and seeks the help of old Cerebron.

Cerebron calls Trurl a dunderhead - why couldn't he have worked out this simple problem for himself instead of waking up his old master from a well-deserved death? The answer is, says Cerebron, that there was no quest in the first place. Trurl gives himself away from the start. Even his measurement of "happiness" is suspect. "In the Contemplator's belly he installed a large dial with a golden pointer and calibrated in units of happiness, which he called hedons or heds for short. A single hed was taken to be the quantity of bliss one would experience after walking exactly four miles with a nail in one's boot and then having the nail removed...one megahed the joy of a man condemned to hang but reprieved at the last minute." What sort of a quality is this if it can be defined only in terms of relief from pain? One of Trurl's later investigations shows that "It's always <u>others</u> who are happy." And, because the whole quest has been formulated in intellectual and technological terms, it's no consolation to discover that "Idiots you can render happy with next to nothing; it's the intellectuals that present the problem. Intellectuals are hard to please. Without some challenge, the intellect is a wretched, pitiful vacuum; it craves obstacles. Whenever obstacles are overcome, it grows sad - goes mad." At the end of the story, Cerebron trips up Trurl in the trailing threads of his own assumptions. For Trurl can only react in horror when Cerebron suggests that he should turn the hose of his own invented happiness on himself:

> "You see, you intellectual dud? You won't be hit over the head with happiness yourself, irreversibly halcyonicized and elysiated for good, yet cheerfully propose doing just that to the entire universe; what fills you personally with horror you are ready to perpetrate on a cosmic scale!... And what if you <u>had</u> solved every problem, answered every question, what then? The only thing left would have been to hang yourself out of boredom or else start punching holes in that universal happiness. Out of laziness you sought perfection..."

So what's the answer to the question? Two points occur to me. In my own experience, I was conditioned to believe that happiness is an absolute good, and that no personal, social, and political actions could be judged without referring them to the standard of human happiness. In the light of Lem's dazzling display of intellectual fireworks, the notion of happiness itself dissolves into a spectrum of values, each of which seems as valuable as happiness. However, I notice that Lem does not even consider the psychological notion of happiness - that it is an ability rather than a quality, a sort of muscle of the personality to enable a person to bounce back smiling. Some people, such as myself, have a weak happiness muscle, and must shuffle along without its benefit.

Or perhaps that's my second point: Trurl's real happiness, or at least the delighted frenzy which animates the story itself, springs up from the search for happiness itself. Perhaps the only happiness is what we also call the "grass is greener" syndrome. Again, maybe not. Some people are happy without looking forever for new sources of satisfaction.

I've devoted a fair amount of space to "In Hot Pursuit of Happiness", not merely because it is one of the most brilliant s f stories to appear in English for years, but because most of the questions it asks reappear in the other stories in this collection. And this is particularly interesting because the stories have been gathered from eleven authors from eight different countries - rather a random sample, I would have thought. Do the same questions, concerns, and tendencies dominate all European science fiction (apart from the Perry Rodan books, of course)?

"Captain Nemo's Last Adventure" is written by Josef Nesvadba, a Czech. His collection In the Steps of the Abominable Snowman (The Lost Face in USA) has had its admirers for some years, and this new story is welcome.

Captain Nemo (so nicknamed because he commands the spaceship "Nautilus") gains all his pleasure in life from his adventures in space. The trouble is that he is born out of time. The newspapers are more interested in his private life than his adventures. The world has settled down to a contented "age of universal brotherhood". "Heroism was no longer considered much of a profession... Today's heroes were those who designed new machines or found the solution to some current problem. There was no longer any need to risk one's life." However, Captain Nemo insists on risking the life of himself and his crew members in one final adventure - the bid to turn back the huge spaceship approaching Earth from another solar system. It is believed that the ship contains "cosmic pirates". Captain Nemo says an offhand goodbye to his long-suffering wife and his grieving mistress, and off he goes.

The cosmic "pirates" are no such thing. They have roamed the universe , seeking only one object - the "answer to the fundamental question of life". Captain Nemo cannot even begin to answer them, so they are deflected away from our solar system, saddened. Nemo returns to Earth, but because of the effects of relativity it is an Earth of some hundreds of years in the future of the time he set out. He discovers that the whole purpose of life has disappeared. Again, the concept of happiness is at the centre of this story. Would Nemo have been "happier" if he had kept his illusions about his own role, and had never set out on his last adventure? Or is he, eventually, more content for having undergone the first real pain of his life, just so that he can realise, at the end of the story, that "I must tell them not to send rockets out to look for the fundamental question of life... We must find the answer down here, on Earth."?

In his Introduction, Franz Rottensteiner, the editor, makes a number of claims that European science fiction is qualitatively different from English-language s f. After reading "Captain Nemo's Last Adventure", we begin to see some real difference between the approach of a story like this and the approach of even the best English-language s f. There seems to be an unsppken agreement among writers and readers of American s f in particular that one does not ask questions directly about abstract values - about Happiness and "the fundamental question of life". Out of embarrassment, it seems, they bury such questions in the mud of action stories and obliterate them in a kaleidoscope of symbolry, on the few occasions when they want to ask them at all. As a result, English-language s f writers take more for granted than do the authors of the stories in View From Another Shore; or is it that people like Nesvadba ask the questions which others avoid? For instance, most American s f writers will not consider the possibility that the answer to humanity's problems might rest on Earth after all.

Perhaps this is what the Editor means when he says in his Introduction that European s f writers are more willing to talk about "real problems" than are English-language writers. I've never been quite sure that Franz and I are talking about the same thing when he mentions "real problems", but for the sake of this review, I'll assume that he and I agree on this point.

For instance, I could discuss Gerard Klein's "The Valley of Echoes" from a number of viewpoints, but I'm most interested in its tone and method. It is a story about the exploration of Mars, but its approach is quite different from that of, say, the classic Mars-exploration story, Stanley Weinbaum's "A Martian Odyssey". "The Valley of Echoes" is not so much about what the explorers do as about what goes on in their minds while they are doing it. Moreover, the effect is not entirely impressionistic, as we find in the works of many much-praised American authors. The main danger of the expedition, for instance, is not the threat of a broken leg or punctured space suit. The main hazard is boredom. "From time to time you lift your eyes to the sky and,

through flinching lids, perceive the stars' sparkling in mid-day, which first surprises and then bores you mortally, so that you would give anything for these eyes of the night to finally close." The explorers become bored because eventually they cannot see the purpose of their expedition. "We know that man today is steering a false course in asking of this planet what it cannot give, in turning towards the past, in desperately sifting through the sieve of memory in hopes of finding once more the traces of an ancient downfall."

The expedition becomes a matter of faith, not endurance. The explorers must have faith that some form of life once lived on Mars. They need faith that they will discover some evidence of this life form, that the artifacts will mean something to them, and that the information will mean something to the people who sent them. "Our tracks come to breach the hazardous irregularity of the desert," says the narrator, looking back over the path he has taken, "They will survive us." And, in the mangificent ending of this story, their own fumbling destroys the one tenuous "artifact" that they discover. Meanwhile, perhaps the narrator has discovered more from his observations and thoughts during the expedition itself than from any meaning implicit in the apocalyptic ending. The tone here is not one of mere resignation. The whole story is a cry of anguish - anguish caused by facing all the factors in the situation, rather than evading most of them.

As I was reading the stories in this volume, I made a list of some of the superficial themes and tendencies which link them. I'll mention some of them, and hope that you will seek out the book to discover some more for yourself.

Firstly, I could not help noticing that several of these stories are constructed as fables. By contrast, most English-language s f until recent years has been constructed as variations on the war story, the detective story, or the western yarn. In a story like "The Good Ring", by Denmark's Svend Age Madsen, the fable form appears merely trite and meaningless. The approach is completely successful in two other stories in the book, Vadim Shefner's "A Modest Genius" and Vsevolod Ivanov's "Sisyphus, the Son of Aeolus".

"Sisyphus, the Son of Aeolus" is not science fiction at all. I suppose it could be described best as speculative myth. As he returns from war, the soldier Polyander decides to take a short cut over the mountains to reach his home in Corinth. On the path he meets the giant, Sisyphus, who is forever condemned by Zeus to push a rock to the top of a mountain, only to have it roll down again. When Polyander arrives, Sisyphus hopes that he might willingly take on the task and give Sisyphus a rest. That very day, Zeus has promised Sisyphus some relief. At night, Sisyphus and Polyander get drunk together. In perhaps the finest single passage of this volume, Ivanov describes how Polyander babbles about his adventures fighting with the army of Alexander the Great. "Still shouting, the soldier babbled nonsensically: there's nothing more beautiful than a besieged city on fire; to tell the truth, though, storming a city is a horrible experience...the prettiest girls flinging themselves into the fires; no one but old people for prey and killing them is no fun at all." The drunken Polyander even hints that he might take up Sisyphus' burden, just so the the son of the god Aeolus could spend the last years of life at rest in Corinth. But in the morning, Polyander looks up the hill and sees Sisyphus back on the job. "You go to your Corinth, traveller, and I'll go to my mountain," calls out Sisyphus, "I'm g-g-glad to move - towards the wind - useless stones, better to sow now than to reap evil."

In the breahtless sweep of the fable (where the form of the story gives the willing suspension of disbelief which so many s f writers attempt to find but fail to achieve) the reader is brought back to the question of happiness and the purpose of life. Polyander has led an active, adventurous life in which he has been able to achieve most of his wants. He is as near to being a happy man as most of us reach. Yet even Sisyphus, incomprehensibly and endlessly tortured by his task, can see that Polyander's greatest happiness - his delight in pillage and death - springs out of evil. The relationship between worth and happiness is as difficult to solve as ever.

"A Modest Genius", my other example of a fable, also provides an example of another of my observations about this volume as a whole. Most of these stories are about ordinary people, the modest heroes of the world. Apart from anything else, this facet of these stories makes a welcome change from the heroes of most second-rate s f stories in USA and England. Even Captain Nemo is a flamboyant hero only in an age that does not recognise heroes. Sergei Kladesev, the "modest hero" of this story's title, is a good bloke who does not recognise his own fine qualities. Neither does anybody else.

Both his adolescent girlfriends give him up because they can see no value in his talent for invention. Later, Sergei marries a dull, scolding woman who spends much of her time laughing at his inventions:

> To get more freedom of movement in the room, Sergei built his LEAG or Local Effect Anti-Gravitation machine. With the aid of this machine he could do his work on the ceiling of the room. He laid flooring on the ceiling, set his desk on it, and brought up his instruments and tools... (His wife) Tamara was still dissatisfied; she was now afraid that the superintendent might find out about the expansion of the room space and demand double rent.

So much for an invention that would have earned anyone else fame and a fortune. But Sergei accepts his fate for most of the story, and keeps producing marvellous inventions. This is not a glum story, however. Eventually Sergei realises that he should go back to Luissia, one of the girls who rejected him many years before. He takes her skating over the water on the marvellous skates which he had invented when he was a boy. Luissia has always pined for Sergei, and welcomes him when he asserts just a bit of his real self. The ending of the story is just right for this completely convincing fable: "They sat down, close together, on a wave, as though it were a crystal bench, and the wave carried them back to the shore."

I'm glad to report that there is some happiness for some people, sometime, somewhere. And there is good in the world for those people who take the trouble to look for it. There is also plenty of evil, and some of these stories' chilling warnings of Things to Come are as effective as anything in England's dystopian and disaster-prone tradition of science fiction. A brilliant story which I leave for you to discover is Sever Gansovski's "The Proving Ground", which could have appeared in Analog magazine and won a Hugo if it had been written by an American.

Not that I can praise every story in this book. I cannot understand why Franz Rottensteiner included such pieces as "Observation of Quadragnes" (J P Andrevon), "Slum" (Herbert W Franke), "The Altar of the Random Gods" (Adrian Rogoz), and "Good Night, Sophie" (Lino Aldani). They are every bit as dreary and pointless as the average offerings in Galaxy magazine.

I'm hoping for the appearance of more collections like View From Another Shore. "In Hot Pursuit of Happiness" alone would justify buying the book, especially since this Trurl-and-Klapaucius story does not appear in The Cyberiad. Most of the other stories are refreshing and delightful, and repay all the effort that Seabury/Continuum, Franz Rottensteiner, and the translators have invested in them.

FRAGILE GODS IN HELL

by BRUCE GILLESPIE

Hard to be a God (Trudno Byt Bogom), by Arkadi and Boris Strugatski; Seabury Press/ Continuum Books; 219 pages; $US6.95; 1973; original USSR publication 1964. Paperback edition: DAW Books

Sometimes the ants of science fiction are so busy scurrying over their little sandpile that they do not see a burly, glittering beetle saunter past, dwarfing them all. The ants of science fiction insist on picking at motes (often called Hugo and Nebula Award winners), while not bothering to glance up at a book like Hard to be a God, let alone give it the recognition it deserves.

Perhaps Hard to be a God was condemned before it was published. It has been translated from the Russian, so it's foreign; besides, it might carry some taint of that strange ideology they have in USSR. The Strugatski brothers have never appeared at a Worldcon or won a Hugo. I don't really know why this book has been ignored. Whatever the reason, a lot of readers have missed out on one of the most invigorating science fiction books to appear in English during the 1970s. It is also one of the few s f books which resembles a work of art.

Take, for instance, the way in which we enter the world of this novel - allusively

(and elusively), yet feeling as if somebody had pushed us head first into a refreshingly cold stream In the Prologue to the novel, we meet a group of children - Anton, Anka, and Pashka,- who have set off on a jaunt through the woods. The three of them jostle us with their conversation and movement; they are not sure where they are going, but they enjoy getting there. It is, "a day filled with unexplored places, strawberries, sun-scorched deserted meadows, lizards, and ice cold water from unexpected deserted meadows". Yet "the path led up a steep slope and the wood became darker and darker". The children's games with bows and arrows become suddenly, unexpectedly, dangerous when Anton takes the challenge to hit a red fez from the top of Anka's head at a distance of thirty paces. He misses the shot, but Anka barely forgives him for taking the challenge in the first place. The mood of the day has been lost already when they reach the Forgotten Road. It has been long since covered over with gravel and vegetation. A "Do Not Enter" sign guards its entrance. It is a one-way street. Antons walks all the way along the deserted road. At the other end, he finds "a collapsed bridge. And the skeleton of a German, chained to a machine gun."

As yet we cannot see the entire significance of this childhood episode. Its meaning becomes clearer by the end of the book. However, the Prologue has given us already a vital sense of life, somehow made complex and difficult by a sense of unease, and as a result of intentions that go wrong. Here, children's games become dangerous challenges. The playful relationship between three children goes sour; Anka is affected by a sense of unexplained disappointment. Even the most exciting pleasures of life crumble, forming new, less comprehensible shapes, particularly for people with an innocent trust in life.

Innocence is hardly a quality of which the Strugatskis could be accused, yet innocence is a major theme in the novel. When life goes sour on the innocent, it seems corrupt and evil. A wiser observer might take things more in his stride. In any case, it is life itself which has the final, mocking word on the matter. For this reason alone, Hard to be a God is unusual among books which call themselves science fiction; we can see that when the Strugatskis look over their literary shoulders, they look toward the shadows of Dostoevsky and Tolstoy, rather than those of Gernsback and Campbell.

Anton, the boy we meet in the Prologue, grows up and becomes "Don Rumata" of the rest of the book. We meet him next in the country of Arkanar on a planet many light years from Earth. As Rumata, he takes on the role of a boisterous nobleman who seems to do little with his time but challenge other noblemen to duels and spend nights with their wives. By reputation, he is very rich and his tongue over-sharp. The private Rumata is quite different from the public role. Rumata is an observer for the historical institute of Earth. On his head, he wears a bracelet containing a television camera which observes everything which its wearer observes. Although he has been commissioned not to interfere with the "natural" historical processes of this society, Rumata still intervenes surreptitiously from time to time. Usually he rescues scientists, artists, and other intellectuals whose lives are threatened by the rulers of this society. As an observer, he is anything but the cheerful vagabond seen by most people he meets. He is in a better position than anybody else to see the surrounding agony of a vicious, proto-medieval life. Yet, for all his knowledge, Rumata is the innocent hero of this novel.

Hard to be a God is made up of a series of vivid contrasts and contradictions: contrasts between the reality and the ideal, between the way in which Rumata sees events around him and the direction he would like them to take and, most importantly, the contrast between Rumata's viewpoint and that of the authors. There are two main patterns in the book, each based on the difference between the way that Rumata sees the world around him and the alternate ways he might have seen this world. The two patterns are (a) the day-to-day, minute-by-minute contrast between "healthy" life and "corrupted" or "evil" life; and (b) the difference between Rumata's long-term vision of history, and the evidences of daily decline which he sees around him.

From the beginning of chapter 1, we are part of Rumata's world. We follow his singular, winding path through the boggy wasteland of Arkanar. We feel everything with him, and discover everything he feels. He finds no reassurance in the country around him. "Far off in the distance the sullen, lambent flames of a fire flickered: most likely a village was burning somewhere over there"; "the terrain teemed with hosts of gnats, gouged by gorges, half smothered by swamps; its inhabitants were raked by fever and forever threatened by pestilence and vile colds." We feel the strength of Rumata's

impatience with and disgust at the perpetual corruption of the world around him. When he visits the king's court, he observes around him only "the crowds of bedizened, perfumed, and profusely sweating people". Even his own servant, Uno, thinks him odd for washing himself all over every day. All around him, Rumata can see only killing and the desire to kill. "To the right of the road, the black silhouette of a gallows tree loomed in the dark." It is an emblem for the country. The capital city lies under the shadow of the Tower of Joy, the local factory for the state's professional torturers. Eventually Rumata can look at almost nobody without thinking to himself:

> I can try as hard as I might, but I now see quite clearly that this is my enemy, hostile to everything I hold dear, the enemy of my friends, the enemy of all I personally hold sacred. And I do not hate him in an abstract manner, nor as a "typical representative", but as an individual. I hate his disgusting mouth, all smeared with saliva, the stench of his unwashed body, his blind faith, his antipathy toward anything beyond sexual needs and guzzling beer.

Is this all that Arkanar contains? - revolting people, vile smells, and the rejection of all that Rumata holds valuable? Is this novel merely a diatribe of hate? Or does the quality of hatred itself reveal something richer?

It is an obvious thing to say that Rumata expresses his hatred so strongly only because he thinks that the situation could be improved. He wants these people to be different. He would like to give them the gift of cleanliness; he would like to use the technology available to him to enforce a just state instead of theocratic despotism; he would like to bring peace and prosperity to these people. Yet the terms of his job prevent him from doing this; if he tried, he would be removed; even if he succeeded, history would go on regardless. Rumata feels disgust for less-than-life because he loves life so much.

Rumata's idea of the good life is not necessarily the only one - or that's what the authors seem to show. The novel itself works because the Strugatskis show a love of the colour and movement of real life as well as a desire for the possibilities of an ideal Life. Even at the beginning of the book, as Rumata glances around him bitterly, the Strugatskis create for us the joy of the desperate chase, the baroque splendour of this people's superstitious folklore, and the dangerous allure of the dark forest. The Stugatskis relish the pleasure of the delicious, odd detail and the sudden, revealing movement. In this way, "swamps stinking of rotten vegetation and decaying animals glimmered in the faint light of the stars". When a man appears from the darkness at the side of the road, the Strugatskis tell us, apparently with the authority of the much-ambushed, that "There is actually no such thing as a silent ambush. Robbers are betrayed by the singing of their bow strings; the men of the Gray Militia constantly belch up their sour beer, the hordes of the barons grunt with greed and rattle their sabers; and the monks who hunt for slaves scratch themselves noisily." An unpleasant world, but enjoyably <u>there</u>.

The Strugatski brothers reveal their own literary intentions most obviously in their spectacular, cinematic pageants which open out in front of us from time to time during the novel. We can almost pin tags to them: the Street Scene, the Court Scene, or the Ambush Scene. In the Dockside Scene, we watch the "down-and-out seamen, bloated merchants, fishermen with somber faces, slave traders, pimps, heavily made-up whores, drunken soldiers, men impossible to classify, hung with arms from head to toe, and fantastic vagabonds in torn clothes with golden bracelets around their dirty wrists." The key word here is "fantastic". While watching the scene, all Rumata can see are the signs of corruption, imminent death, and decay. On their part, the authors can see that any pageant of people, seen with a clear eye, look fantastic, grotesque, deliciously evil, yet quite innocent. This is the centre of the authors' irony: if we take away the burden of the basis theory of history, by which Rumata lives, it's the world around which is innocent, not the observer. Because Rumata has committed himself to a fantastic, absurd interpretation of everything he sees, he cuts himself off from common knowledge, and so from the life he wants to understand.

Little wonder, then, that <u>Hard to be a God</u> is the story of Rumata's disappointment and eventual despair - and also the story of how life persists despite all attempts to destroy it. Rumata's despair and the author's hope intermingle so completely, line by line and page by page through the book that we live in it ourselves.

Rumata falls into despair because he feels that everything happening around him

should not be happening. This is not the result of some vague moral outrage, but because the laws of history, previously believed immutable, have proved that the events around could not be happening. Don Reba, the chief minister of Arkanar, has assassinated and bullied his way up through court circles until now he controls all political processes in the country. He controls the Grey Hordes, which have a favourite target, the intellectuals of the country. "It won't be long now until not a single intelligent person will remain alive in Arkanar," says Rumata. The "basis theory of history" has predicted a different series of events: that by now this society should be heading towards its renaissance. Instead, Don Reba is taking it backwards as fast as he can.

Rumata attempts to rescue some of the persecuted intellectuals. Those who fall into Reba's hands are tortured into becoming gibbering idiots or weak-minded yes-men. In one of the finest passages in the book, Rumata debates his position with Doctor Budach, recently rescued from Reba's torturers. Budach retreats from his former defiance towards the state. Instead, he puts the medieval viewpoint: that the world and society are shaped in geometrical perfection; that the only natural shape for society is a pyramid. "Only the Supreme Power itself can change," he says to Rumata. "Suppose you had the opportunity to give God some advice," says Rumata. Budach replies, "Let it happen that all men have sufficient bread, meat, and wine." Rumata, who is now enjoying the debate, counters with, "This would be no blessing for mankind. For the strong of your world take away from the weak whatever I gave them and the weak would be as poor as before." Budach continues to offer advice to God, who can reach only despairing conclusions. "My heart is heavy with sorrow," says Rumata at the end, "but that is not within my power." He has the physical power, but it is not within his range of possibilities. Rumata seems to have calmed his own sense of rebellion, yet still he feels pain for these people. And he feels this pain because he fails to recognise, as we do, that the people around him are not a separate race, merely to be observed; they are himself. They are his own origins.

> Rumata pushed a chair to the window, sat down at ease and looked out over the city... Twenty thousand human beings! In the eyes of a terrestrial observer, they all had something in common. Probably it was the fact that all of them, with almost no exceptions, were not yet human beings in the current sense of the word, but rather preliminary stages... They did not realise that the future was ahead of them, that the future was impossible without them.

Rumata regards all the people around him, even people he loves, such as Kyra, Uno, and the irrepressible Baron Pampa, as "not yet human beings in the current sense of the word". Since he regards history as a continuum of evolution, with its own rules and guideposts, he cannot reach out across the centuries to these people. He is a "god" because he calls himself one. By contrast, every word of the novel shows how human these people are; that they are just different shapes of ourselves. If we accept the fact that the authors are satirists, we can see certain aspects of the USSR's own immediate history in the deadly antics of Reba and the Grey Hordes. The cutthroat, Reba, is the most typical human in the novel. The Strugatskis pose the central question: what would happen if Rumata realised that he was one of these people as well?

> Rumata was still looking out over the city, a petrified glob veiled in gloom. Somewhere in its midst, in some stifling little room, was Father Tarra, twisting and squirming on a wretched cot, racked by fever..,Gur the poet...pacing the floor of his empty elegant rooms, blind with despair... And somewhere down there Doctor Budach was spending the night, who knew how? Humbled, forced to his knees, and beaten but still alive... My brothers all, thought Rumata. I am one of you. After all, we are of the same flesh! Suddenly he was overwhelmed by the insight that he was no god protecting the luminaries of the mind between the palms of his hands, but rather a brother helping another brother, or a son hurrying to his father's rescue.

Brothers and son, indeed. For one moment of the novel (and it is only for one moment, like Levin's "insight" in Anna Karenina) Rumata sees that he is one with these people because they are his origins. They are his distant history and family. In observing their society, he is observing himself. Rumata forgets again; he is not strong enough to hold to the vision he is looking for. However, the Strugatskis have given us the secret of the novel. It is not a story of Rumata vs Arkanar, but the story of Rumata vs Rumata - the tragic process by which Rumata "finds" himself by searching through the hellish landscape of this world many light years from his own. If we extend the idea, we find ourselves here; we are all "innocent" until faced by all the alternatives of

life; that a book like Hard to be a God can make us gods enough to look into our own human faces; that we all have the choice to look away, and so miss the meaning of even that which concerns us most.

Hard to be a God gives life to a grand conception, and perhaps the authors should have taken the book to grander, more Dostoevskian dimensions. The physical details are here, but some of the characters are lost in the compression (but those who are brought to life remain as some of the few memorable characters in science fiction). Some of the scenes that are meant to be powerful sound merely melodramatic. However, nothing in the book is unnecessary, and most of the writing is compact, vivid, and satisfying. Patrick McGuire has commented (in Notes from the Chemistry Department, edited by Denis Quane) that some of the translation is inaccurate. However, his own examples show that Wendayne Ackerman's translation gains in liveliness what it loses in occasional inaccuracy (for instance, she renders family titles as Father and Brothers, making us think that Arkanar is a nation of churchmen). No roll call of pluses and minuses can hid the fact that Hard to be a God rises far above nearly all other science fiction books published recently. It is a novel of passion and ideas which put to shame the tediousness of the cheap adventure stories which litter the field.

At the end, I have only one unresolved question: when will Seabury, or some other publisher, translate and publish some more of the s f novels of Arkadi and Boris Strugatski?

A SENSE OF ACTUALITY

by BARRY GILLAM

The Invincible (Niezwyciezony), by Stanislaw Lem (translated by Wendayne Ackerman); Seabury Press/Continuum Books; 183 pages; $US6.95; 1973; original Polish edition 1964.
Also available from Ace Books (paperback, USA), Sidgwick & Jackson (hardback, UK), and Arrow Books (paperback, UK)

The earliest reviews of The Invincible described it as a very ordinary novel for the idiosyncratic Lem. I made no immediate effort to read it, despite my admiration for Solaris, and have come to it now after reading the more ambitious Memoirs Found in a Bathtub and The Cyberiad.

My first impression of The Invincible was that if Lem has chosen a more conventional form than his other r cently translated works reveal, he has nevertheless invested it with his considerable intelligence and talent. As I read on, I found the unassuming story helpful in isolating Lem's particular additions to and revisions of a stock situation.

The Invincible is a heavy cruiser with a crew of eighty-three that has been dispatched to Regis III. One year earlier, The Condor, a ship of the same class, had landed on the planet in the course of a routine survey and never returned. When search parties are sent out, with cumbersome precautionary measures in force, the puzzle only deepens. The remains of The Condor and its crew are found, along with the ruins of an alien city, but since there is no land life of any kind, the question of what The Condor succumbed to remains unanswered.

The novel opens with a striking personification of the spaceship as it wakes its hibernating crew. Lem's careful observation of detail, as in Solaris, immediately establishes a sense of competence and professionalism. As with the shuttle in Solaris, the ship's active role is limited to a single "job of work". The accurate description and the subtle personification are joined at the end of the sequence when The Invincible is at rest on Regis III. The contraction of the jet nozzles while they cool off is accompanied by "a characteristic sound not unlike a hoarse groan".

The sense of actuality that Lem imparts is very important. In the opening he gives the reader a good deal of information, but he dramatises it quickly. Almost everything mentioned is used sooner or later. Early in the novel, Rohan, the viewpoint character,

throws some sand against the invisible force field protecting the ship, "not that he needed any confirmation," Lem comments. But this is just the point: he does need the physical assurance of seeing the sand hit the otherwise suppositional barrier. Remember that in Solaris the "ocean" does not intensify dreams or memories but produces a physical recreation of each scientist's bete noir. In The Invincible, Lem insists on the sensations of the safety suits, the straps, just how it feels to breathe using the oxygen tanks.

Having established the astronauts' methods and viewpoint through the examples of their first sallies out onto the planet, Lem presents the riddle of The Condor. The scene is set with his customary visual quality: sand has mounted in drifts about the abandoned ship. A round object buried in the sand turns out to be a skull. Complete skeletons are found in space suits. The interior is a mess but Lem eschews the obvious wind metaphors for one more graphic: "it looked as if the place had been invaded by a herd of rampaging apes."

As in Solaris, these incongruous images stand out. For Lem, who values his intelligence and rationality so highly, they are intimations of madness. Like the impact of violence in even a poor Fritz Lang film, the portryal of the irrational is so effective because Lem is personally affected. Rohan finds "several soap bars pierced with tooth-marks" and is so shaken that he keeps this to himself because it "seemed particularly incomprehensible and insane, and thus chilling."

One is reminded of Dr Johnson's fear of his mental powers failing. And the connection is particularly strong in Lem's inevitable library scene. The highest ranking scientists have gathered to discuss the findings of The Condor, and the contrast between the room and the subject being discussed is never lost sight of.

The first victim of the still-unknown menace has total amnesia. A man who has reverted to an uneducated, dependent state, he has lost all ability to communicate. The antagonist here is depriving man of his highest achievements. The process, though, is like that in a cautionary tale. The fact that their opponent is nonrational is repugnant to many of The Invincible's scientists and they refuse to accept it despite the growing evidence.

The planet's inhabitants, then, like the "ocean" of Solaris, are part of a nature not only inimical to mankind but incomprehensible as well. The scientist who advances the first consistent hypothesis about the Regians asks that they be regarded not as an intelligent adversary but as forces of nature. "'Nature herself never creates values. These structures are their own raison d'etre; they simply exist for themselves, and they behave the way they do simply in order to continue to exist...'" This condemnation of human ethnocentrism and the limits of a too-rigid scientific method are also explored in Solaris. There is an affinity here to the work of L Sprague de Camp, who states, "Nature cares nothing for human definitions."

I have refrained from discussing and disclosing the answer to the novel's puzzle, in part because that answer is ultimately less interesting than the steps taken in reaching it. I much prefer the first half of the novel, with its careful, gripping narration to the second, with its dull overkill of battle after battle. The Invincible, like Solaris, assumes the form of a mystery, but unlike Solaris, or, say, Hitchcock's Vertigo, it did not sustain my fascination after the mystery was solved in the middle of the work. The whole book is nevertheless a tribute to Lem's fine story-telling abilities. His handling of the characters, who always remain figures in the grip of the larger situation, is well balanced, never falling into the unfortunate cliches of Rendezvous with Rama, yet purposefully never moving into the closeups of Solaris. And his use of the controlling irony inherent in the title is characteristic of Lem at his best.

EDITOR:
To my knowledge, the first review of The Invincible to appear in English was a review which Franz Rottensteiner wrote about the German edition. The review appeared in Australian Science Fiction Review 19, March 1969. Franz asked me not to reprint the entire review, but a few of his points remain interesting now that the book has received wide circulation in English. Franz places more emphasis on the ironies inherent in the situation of the final battle, commenting that, "What has happened so far one could also expect to find in an American or British book; but the conclusion is

different. What sets Lem apart from most s f authors (apart from his greater stature as a writer) is his Weltanschauung, his humanitarian aims. His heroes don't destroy Regis III, as almost all American s f heroes would have done. On the contrary: they conclude that the robots, different as they are, hostile as they are to all life, and useless as they are to us, are a life form of a kind and so have a right to exist. And that to exterminate them would be a crime.

"Just how different Lem's attitude is can be seen by comparing his novel of ideas with A E Van Vogt's novella 'Black Destroyer', an admirable story in its own right. In the magazine version of Van Vogt's story, the character Kent says, after Coeurl has been killed: "We've got a job - to kill every cat in that miserable world.'

"Nobody objects: another character, Korita, just remarks that that should be simple...

"...To make my position clear, let me say that I don't object to the appearance of such opinions or such characters in stories; such people are eternal human types, and such opinions have been expressed in the past and will be expressed in the future. Therefore a writer has a right to present such men and opinions. But what seems strange to me, and even a little shocking, is that there are hardly any other characters in s f stories. There are the modern barbarians and little else... These days it seems to be impossible to open an American s f novel without finding the author talking about survival, and always in the most trivial way. One concludes that s f authors are terribly afraid (most of all, it seems, of themselves) and try to get rid of their fears of life by acting them out on patient paper...

"Stanislaw Lem doesn't share this fear of alien beings: he would appear to be one of the few s f authors capable of accepting the truly alien. By way of reply, one might choose Hal Clement from amongst American writers. But it should be noted that Clement's aliens, however different they may be physically, are psychologically quite human, indeed even more human than his humans. But he never attempts to portray the truly alien; something that may be incomprehensible to us, or even revolt and horrify us - and with which we may yet have to live in the future. It is more difficult to accept such differences in moral, political, religious, and other matters than irrelevant differences in outward shape. And this acceptance, this having-to-live with the alien is one of Lem's major themes, recurring in a number of his books. In The Invincible, the idea of the alien being the true 'hero', with the human characters being mere chiffres; what there is of human interaction between the crew of Invincible is more of an intrusion than anything else."

Franz states the case very nicely, and rounds out Barry Gillam's argument. Neither writer mentions the visionary last four chapters of the book, which I still remember with great pleasure, although I read the book more than two years ago. In his review, Barry says that the explorers "solve" the mystery. They don't, really. The "solution" to the mystery of the planet's inhabitants is nearly as open-ended as the unravelled riddles of Solaris. When Rohan goes out to meet the aliens, he has what can only be called a mystical experience: all he can do is attempt to place some human meaning on the alien experience which he undergoes. Lem moves beyond the humanitarian, which is hardly his specialty, into what I would call the religious, or transcendental area, which is. Franz sums it up very well: that Lem's books are about "having-to-live with the alien". A similar statement might summarise The Investigation: *

PUZZLES ALL AROUND HIM

by GERALD MURNANE

The Investigation (Sledztwo), by Stanislaw Lem (translated by Adele Milch); Seabury Press/Crossroads Books; 216 pages; $US7.95; 1974; original Polish edition 1959.

The Investigation describes the efforts of a Scotland Yard detective to solve a series of puzzling events. Several corpses have disappeared from mortuaries. The evidence suggests that the corpses left their coffins or slabs under their own power. A mathematician (of whom more later) predicts that the next disappearance will take place within a certain area of south-eastern England. Police are posted at every hospital and cemetery within this area. Sure enough, another corpse does move - before the

eyes of a terrified police constable. The ending, such as it is, is not for a reviewer to disclose.

Now, each single fact surrounding these disappearances is presented to us as being beyond dispute. The trouble is that these facts cannot be fitted together to provide an acceptable explanation. Hundreds of so-called mystery or suspense novels have been written around a puzzle that at first seems inexplicable. In almost every case the key to the mystery turns out to be an item of evidence that was, in fact, presented to the reader, but against a camouflage of irrelevant details. The Investigation plays no such cheap tricks on its readers. It gives us the simple facts and invites us to explain them.

The reactions of readers to Lem's story would provide a useful illustration of the behaviour of human beings confronted with something apparently inexplicable. In any case, the central mystery threw its shadow over the whole of the story. I found myself pausing over descriptions of interiors, of the mannerisms of minor characters, and even of natural scenery as if some revelation might suddenly appear to me.

This was not entirely my fault. There are several minor mysteries in the book. The central character, Gregory, as he moves around London with the details of his investigation always on his mind, sees puzzles all round him. Sometimes these seem to be the result of his own faulty perceptions. (A man asleep on a train has the same features as one of the missing corpses.) Sometimes there is no apparent solution. (Gregory strolls by chance into a bar that he rarely visits - and is called to the telephone to speak to his superior. But how did the Chief Inspector know where to find him?) Incidents like these have no real bearing on the story, but there were enough of them to keep me looking for signs and portents in passages of innocent scene-setting.

My inclination to view every isolated fact as a possible "clue" received encouragement from another quarter. A mathematician consulted by the police makes a statistical analysis of all the facts that might be connected with the incidnets of the moving corpses. He actually comes up with some impressive mathematical proof that the disappearances are linked with the incidence of cancer for the area of England under scrutiny. But for all his maths, he cannot explain the mystery in a way that will satisfy ordinary human understanding.

This may well be the central point of the book - that a certain kind of mystery cannot be explained (as we commonly understand that word) by facts and logic alone. If we seek an explanation that reassures us and allows us to feel we understand events, we may have to ignore certain facts or postulate a theory for which we have no conclusive evidence.

But what could we postulate to explain a case of self-propelled corpses? Well, the gentlemen from Scotland Yard come up with a theory that doesn't offend common sense. The only trouble is that it is obviously wrong.

Several characters speculate about a supernatural or "abnormal" explanation. What if something with powers beyond our comprehension is bending what we think of as the inflexible laws of nature and activating corpses? This possibility is probably the first to occur to anyone who reads even a little s f or who knows something of Lem's other works. But The Investigation is such a scrupulously factual book that no responsible reader could leap to this conclusion without feeling that he is somehow cheating.

If The Investigation is, after all, about Something Out There, it certainly gives a convincing impression of how the first appearance of an alien intelligence might confuse any human beings who insisted on rejecting anything illogical or "unnatural". We are too used to accepting marvels in s f. Perhaps we need to be reminded that even the least departure from what we call reality would be sufficiently marvellous to be the subject for a whole novel. And perhaps this is what Lem is up to.

But I confess I soon became impatient with the book and its characters. What sort of dullard would use nothing but logic to investigate a case of strolling corpses? Lieutenant Gregory and his humourless colleagues were sometimes so solemn I was tempted to interpret the book as a satire on police methods or as a plea for the introduction of s f into the reading lists for trainee detectives.

EDITOR:

I like The Investigation better than Gerald Murnane does, and I find it both a good horror story and a repository of much macabre humour. The best line of the book is said by Soiss, the mathematician: "If you proceeded gradually, you could lead anyone - even the College of Cardinals - into the practice of cannibalism." In other words, our beliefs spring mainly from what we are used to. This book has as many possible interpretations as reviewers. Apart from Gerald's, the most interesting review I have seen so far is Bill Gibson's in Dick Geis' Science Fiction Review. Gibson calls The Investigation a "Fortean" novel, and makes out a good case for his viewpoint. *

RECIT, NOT ROMAN

by JAMES MARK PURCELL

Future Without Future (Futurs sans Avenir), by Jacques Sternberg (translated by Frank Zero); Seabury Press/Continuum Books; 210 pages; $US6.95; 1973.

French edition: Futurs sans Avenir: Nouvelles; Robert Laffont; 1971.

((brg: In this review, Mr Purcell looks at the original French edition. This review has also appeared in Franz Rotteinsteiner's Quarber Merkur and Ann and Frank Deitz' Luna.))

One of Gerard Klein's recent packages for Ailleurs et Demain has been organised by dipping into Jacques Sternberg's 1957 Entre 2 Mondes Incertains for Denoel; then by adding other magazine work, and finally some new stuff. Futurs sans Avenir contains two long novelettes, seven shorts, and Klein's own useful critical preface. The "collection" is unbalanced as such by the two novelettes, which consume more than half the fiction space of the book. The lead story, "Fin de Siecle", runs 100-plus pages, has the word length of an American s f paperback, and logistically might appear this separate way in its English translation.

In form, both the long stories are "journals". Doesn't this psychological inclination suggest the technical problem of the French novelist in composing s f? It's the Heisenberg problem all over again. If a writer (Sternberg) prefers to analyse his protagonist's psyche, he needs a stable, predictable working world outside (just as personalities like Dylan Thomas or Brendan Behan expected quiescent wives). On the other hand, if the writer's world is exploding, literally, or a 200-page intergalactic war is under way, the characters necessarily tend to become part of a complex transmission belt of information fed the reader. It was Gide's argument - to cite one source for the form of Futurs' two short novels - that the French novelist is historically committed to the analytic recit, as the British are to the roman.

The most important new material in the book, "Fin de Siecle" is another post-1984 (both meanings) dystopia. Technically, it is the year's diary of a 1999 Parisian; but like most plot summaries of s f stories, this is already misleading. An unidentified central control system has so mastered the space-time continuum that the number of days each week or hours per day is now under administrative choice. At one point during Spring '99 the citizens lose their vacation Sundays for a whole month. Sternberg has projected a Christian Democrat-clerical future where all Frenchmen are "Catholics" by fiat, but private lives follow a Maoist personal-sexual code. "Families" are registered three-unit menages, giving each couple one child and vice versa. Mistresses (no reference, I recall, to state gigolos) are available under official adultery tickets, punched out like food stamps at each monthly visit (under the government's all-seeing voyeuristic televisual eye). Public amusements like films are modelled on the Stalinist tractor epics that enthralled the helpless Russians in the thirties, or perhaps contemporary Maoist ballet-choreography. Restrictive sex and decorous theatre don't seem like current Western trends, incidentally; Sternberg seens to be attempting a permissive-liberal satire based on 1984, where Orwell was actually satirising 1948 welfare-state restrictions.

Despite the journal form, the book's private plot is only a few pages of eroticism. Tristan meets his contemporary Ysoult; ie an amiable bunny-girl lets the hero play with her on a crowded metro. The heroine, Francine, is described as a "simple femelle

feminine", and as a character she has the advantage of encouraging some of the best writing in Futurs. But the reader feels none of the three-dimensional fertilising weight of the fully adult sexual female. Francine has the cuddly boyishness that anthropologists note about the young childless girls used as toys or extra wives by small tribal chieftains along the Amazon. Apparently, Sternberg daydreams about Marilyn Monroe-Zelda Fitzgerald instead of Sophia Loren-Nora Joyce, an incredible waste of synergy.

The space-time required for a passionate love affair is won by the lovers through the climactic breakdown of the computerising control. The story's title and diary-chapter headings develop their own narrative function as time goes out of whack. There's a suggestion that urban pollution helped to rot the system. (It's also implicit that the "system" is self-operating: no individual Stalin nor Schickelgruber to manipulate the controls.)

In the public plot, by concentrating on the moral reactions of a dullard, "Fin de Siecle" plays down some interesting historical ideas. Take its argument that French Catholicism will gladly reverse all its historical sexual attitudes, provided only it may retain control of its parishioners' private lives. To trace the development of this process would make a plot more interesting than the diary notations of a clerk-schmuck hero, perhaps borrowed from The Space Merchants. But, as I began by saying, the French novelist may require new narrative tools or models. Perhaps Celine's Nord? - a crazed, exploding outer world counterpointing the hero's inner stresses, and recorded with detailed naturalism.

English edition: Contents:

"Fin de Siecle" (novel-length)
"Very Sincerely Yours" (novelette)
"The Ephemera" (short story)
"Vacation" (short story)
"Future Without Future" (novelette)

THE EDITOR'S LAST WORD...

The Futurological Congress (From the Memoirs of Ijon Tichy) (Ze Wspomnien Ijona Tichego. Kongres Futurologiczny), by Stanislaw Lem (translated by Michael Kandel); Seabury Press/Continuum Books; 149 pp; $US6.95; 1974; original Polish edition 1971.

The Futurological Congress deserves much more attention than I can give it here. Its complex, concentrated structure encloses a great deal in its short length, and I should think that many readers would simply not like its many rapid changes of tone, direction, and tempo. Readers who like being dazzled will find a book that forms a companion to Philip Dick's work in the USA, and to the work of some of the best South American writers. At a recent Nova Mob, Rob Gerrand read bits of this books to an audience who are usually neutral-to-hostile towards Lem's works. Immediately several people asked to borrow the book. The Futurological Congress begins as an inspired exercise in anarchism and comic uncertainty. Uncertainty turns into dread; dread into hallucination; hallucination into an increasingly disintegrating view of the future. Marvellous stuff.

The Science Fiction Book: An Illustrated History, by Franz Rottensteiner; Thames and Hudson; 1975; 160 pages; $A7.50; forthcoming from Seabury Press in USA.

This is not the book about science fiction which I would have liked Franz to write, but it is the first book, either s f or about s f, to receive widespread publishers' promotion in Australian bookshops. Marketed as a coffee-table book, it is about the best introduction to s f that I could wish for anybody. For most people, the main interest of the book is the illustrations; unfortunately, the layout is attributed simply to the staff of Thames and Hudson. The text is made up of short pieces about most subjects in the history of science fiction except, oddly, some of the authors I know that Franz likes best (Dick, Le Guin, etc). This suggests to me that Franz worked within a very tight format, and had little scope for his own radical ideas about the state of science fiction. I'm hoping he will write that book some day. Meanwhile, The Science Fiction Book shows that s f has "arrived" - although nobody yet knows where.

I MUST BE TALKING TO MY FRIENDS
(continued from page 12)

I wouldn't tell this story at all if it didn't finish that which has been appearing in episodes during the last three years of S F Commentary. And I won't tell too much of the story...

* Borbles, in Elgin Street, is my favourite Carlton restaurant. It has been the scene of many pleasant meals, fannish and otherwise, the food is still cheap enough for my pocket, and the waitresses smile at me.

So, when my friends the Murnanes did a bit of matchmaking between me and a girl they thought was "just right" for me, where else to ask her for a dinner date but to Borbles? "Do you want to share a bottle of something?" I said. "No," she said, "I'm a cheap drunk. Orange juice will do." Until that meal I did not realise that the orange juice at Borbles had aphrodisiac properties. How else to explain the fact that, shortly after, we were holding hands, looking into each others' eyes (you know - the whole bit), at a table in Borbles, and I was asking Kristin to live with me and be my love, and she was saying yes? Why? Why?

Joy! Hosanna! Kristin finds the bloke she had been looking for and Bruce Gillespie makes it into the human race. All live happily ever after...

Yes? But that's not how the story goes.

That strange scene took place two days after I had finished writing the Tucker article, four days before I was due to attend the Writers' Workship, and a fortnight before the beginning of the World Convention. Perhaps it was only during a time of such frenzy that I would do something that required so much unexpected courage as ask a girl to live with me. Nevertheless, the die, as they say, was cast. It split apart two months later.

The fact that Kristin and I had met gave as much happiness to our friends as it did to us. More, I suppose, since they didn't have to try living with me. Peter Nicholls said that British fans will be most relieved to hear that I've met somebody like Kristin; now I'll stop moaning about how lonely I am. That's true, but not for the reasons Peter imagines. Susan Wood talked to Krsitin for five minutes and came up to me later to say, "Isn't she the most beautiful woman?" Kristin is all of that; especially on Banquet night. Susan also said, "It was worth travelling 12,000 miles to see Bruce Gillespie smiling." Thank you, Susan; I hope I keep smiling. Bob Tucker was quite smitten with Kristin, which is fairly dangerous for a neo-swain like me. "If I were staying in Australia," he said, "I would give you some real competition. So if you lose her, I'll kick your arse in." You'd better sharpen up that kicking foot, Bob.

Leigh Edmonds was more realistic. "It's physically impossible for two people to live in that flat together," he said. He was right about that. "Living together" just didn't work out. No details here; except to say what a lot of people could have told us, but which we had to find out for ourselves - that's it quite possible for two people to love each other very much and still not be able to share each other's company, every day, from day to day.

Here's what I really wanted to say:

I apologise to my friends. I apologise quite sincerely for telling the people who read my magazines, for the last three years, how lonely I was; how much I wanted to meet The One and settle down to a happy life forever; how much I was struck down by the bad fortune that no girl wanted to ask the time of day of me, let alone live with me. I thought myself unlovable, yet somehow not wanting to be left out of love altogether. Eventually I thought that happiness was an unreachable ideal for me.

In particular I want to apologise to Susan Wood. Of everybody who's read this magazine, I think she is one of the few who really understood what I felt and could most genuinely wish me well. In SFC 41/42, she assured me that I might still find happiness. I scorned the idea. You were right, Susan, although the happiness I've found, fragile though it might be, is hardly the kind of happiness that you expected for me.

Tom Collins, in his long, passionate letter in SFC 35/36/37, was most correct after all. The message of his letter was that I could trip over the happiness under my feet any day of the week. I didn't believe him. Happiness was always a "what if?" thing. In 1970 I said to myself - "What if I get out of this dreadful job and find a way to earn my living as a writer? - then I will be happy." In 1972, and afterwards, I said - "What if I find The Right Person to share my life? - then I will be happy." In 1975 I found the right person, but discovered that happiness itself is only an illusion.

So where am I now? I don't know. I've found out that nobody should try living with me, not even somebody who loved me as much as Kristin did. I live on anxiety and contradictions, usually unnoticed because I live alone. Anybody who is exposed to me for too long suffers only distress. I found that I suffer distress if I must live continuously with another person, no matter who she is. But I also lost my fear of loneliness, which I've had for the last three years. I am free to be alone again - that's the main source of my present lightheadedness. I hope that I can find somebody, somewhere, who might be content with the strange sort of existence which would be involved in living with me. But I don't feel that I need desperately to find that relationship. The illusion has disappeared, leaving only the somber possibility that maybe I never needed anybody in the first place.

I apologise to Kristin for letting her down. Maybe, just maybe...but let's not go into that again. I apologise to Susan and Bob and Catherine and Gerald and Noelle and Reen and Rick and Peter and Leigh and Valma - just so many people who helped, and who hoped so much that Kristin and I could find that Special Relationship which is supposed to be there for every person. Perhaps it isn't.

Don't go away, though. I'm sure I can find something else to moan at. I enjoy jeering at the universe; it seems so perpetually poised to step on me, but it hasn't yet. I don't really like the person I see myself to be at the moment - not able to deal with strong emotions, cold, withdrawn, awkward with people, a necessary loner. But I suppose that it is better to know that than to maintain the illusion that someday I will turn into a model husband and father. I don't know what I will be instead; perhaps I'll keep drifting, and publishing SFC, until some catstrophe gives me a direction.

There are some people I don't apologise to. They are the readers who did not see the intention behind my maudlin meanderings. They are the people who did not take the trouble to tell me what moves them, or gives them a reason for living, or drives them to drink, or motivates them to read a magazine like SFC. I don't write about what happens to me for self-aggrandisement. I want to hear what it's like to be you - the real you, not just the person who reads science fiction. Some marvellous people, like Phil Dick and Susan Wood, have seen my intention all along. They wrote back. Thank you very much.

And, thank you so much, Kristin. Perhaps the next three years will be disastrous compared with the past three years, or (small hope) even better. Whatever they are, they cannot be anything without the love you gave me and the two months we spent together. I think I can say here, among friends, that I love you, Kristin. It's the only way to end the story. 21.11.75

OBITUARY FOR AUSTRALIA

It's two weeks since I wrote that. Yesterday all hope for Australia died for at least the next three years when the conservative coalition gained the largest government majority ever in the Australian House of Representatives. Normally I don't care much about changes in Australian politics. However, Labor began the process of turning Australia into a civilised country. Now they've lost power. We're just another hick plutocracy again. Besides, I'm thoroughly scared of this mob - is there a civilised or intelligent person among the lot of them? (or, if there is, will he or she have a Cabinet portfolio?). Fraser and Anthony now have extraordinary power to begin their promised program to rob the poor and middle class to give to the rich. It's horrible and depressing. There go the next three years down the drain for everybody.

EDITOR

FAREWELL, JAMES BLISH

Less than two months before James Blish died, he sent me this note:

> I owe you many thanks for S F Commentary from 40 on, and wish I could also write back even part of the comment I've wanted to. The problem is, since this Easter I've been seriously ill again, unable to work, out of touch, the whole unutterably boring routine. SFC was some of the best reading matter anybody sent me while I was virtually flat out, and the competition was stiff, believe me.
>
> ((Enclosed is Josephine Saxton's address)): I agree with every word you say about her work and I'm glad to see your opinion in print. There are signs that some of the pig-blind editors are becoming interested again, too. (21 June 1975)*

There's a tribute to James Blish expressed in his own words. So seriously ill, he took the trouble to thank me for SFC, provide some information, and praise another author's work.

Jim Blish has received already some of the most heartfelt obituaries ever given to any figure in science fiction, so I hardly need add more. I'm grateful to him particularly for his friendliness on the two occasions when I've met him, the kind letters he sent from time to time, and his two books of criticism, The Issue at Hand and More Issues at Hand. I've read very little of his large output of fiction; I'm ashamed that I did not get around to reading Dr Mirabilis before he died, so that I could write to him about it.

** ** **

* Everybody mentions Jim Blish's generosity. In SFC 40 I mentioned that he had paid tribute to George Turner's reviewing, saying that he wished he could review books as well as George does. The answer:

* GEORGE TURNER
87 Westbury Street, East St Kilda, Vic 3182

> I don't believe a word of it. Of course you made it up and James Blish never said anything of the sort. Or you misheard him, or something.
>
> The truth is that, all these years, I've been trying to write reviews like James Blish. *

* The grey-bearded readers of SFC might remember issue 38 of this journal. It was a while ago, but it did provoke some comment. George again:

> In the otherwise tolerable issue No 38 of your highbrow (I am not responsible for that description) magazine, your locum tenens takes issue with me on the spelling of the word "pretension".

I beg, sir, that you will refer him to the Concise Oxford Dictionary and thereafter preside over the consigning of such idiosyncrasies as "pretention" to the nether hells. To the preference of such as Edmund Wilson and others geographically constrained to the use of the Webster's Dictionary version of neo-English I extend the tolerance of a fellow colonial, and understand but do not condone.

The failure of John Bangsund to support linguistic rectitude requires closer investigation, which may lead to the deletion of Canberra as a cultural centre.

For the interest of both Bangsund and Editor Foyster, the word is derived from the Middle Latin "praetensio", with the third person form "praetentio". Nouns from the Latin are formed from the stem of the first-person singular of a verb or the nominative case of a noun; adjectives are formed from the stem of the third-person singular of a verb and the genitive case of a noun; application of this rule gives us "pretension" as the noun and "pretentious" as the adjective.

Fie upon Foyster and all his works!

PS: The ancient sport of fie-ing upon turbulent Foysters has fallen into desuetude, but the final figure, when the still-living ribbons of flesh are flung to the maddened contributors, always received a big hand from the audience of etymologists.

(1 October 1974)*

* I feel like fie-ing upon Foyster at the moment, since he appears to be contributing to the Opposition (literary, not political, but also located in Canberra). *

* JERRY KAUFMAN
880 West 181st Street, 4D, New York, New York 10033, USA

((Re SFC 38)): I especially liked George Turner's doing in Lem; as you know, I agree with George, even though I couldn't express myself as well as he.

I talked to Joanna Russ and Ginjer Buchanan at the Pghlange about Lem's position. Russ believes Lem to be the best s f critic going, and I attempted to argue, but I'm feeble in conversation at best, and Joanna and Ginjer soon bested me on the subject of freedom of authors to get things published. They told me that Delany, whom I thought would have little trouble getting things published, searched for years before finding Lancer willing to publish The Tides of Lust, and Dahlgren was also bounced several times before Pohl bought it. (Implying that it is eccentric.) So I withdraw the relevant paragraph of my letter in SFC 40.

I can't resist painting out (after the smoke has cleared and Joanna gone from my presence a month) that if Joanna agrees with Lem, then either she doesn't write s f herself, or her books, too, are trash. Neither of which I believe myself. (30 October 1974)*

* BOB TUCKER
34 Greenbriar Drive, Jacksonville, Illinois 62650, USA

SFC 38...is a fascinating document, and I believe the term "document" is quite apt in view of the subject matter. Like you, John, I viewed the articles by Lem as a straight-faced leg pull; not necessarily a hoax in the cruel sense, but perhaps a humorous literary hoax in the grand manner. When I first began reading Lem in SFC I thought of Stephen Pickering, the California fan of several years ago who proclaimed himself an authority on just about everything fannish. Pickering was eventually unmasked as a cruel hoaxer who lied about his credentials. I don't think of Lem in that context; I now think of him as a leg-puller who succeeded in large measure. (10 December 1974)*

* JOHN ALDERSON
Havelock, Victoria 3465

I am moved, in the way one's bowels may be moved, to comment on Ballard. His Crash does not surprise me.

There is but one occupation I know (others may know of others) that seems akin to reading Ballard. When I have a sheep die in full wool, forced by economic necessity, I pluck the wool. To do this one waits two or three days, depending upon the weather, for the carcass to get "ripe" and the wool to pull out easily. Too soon and it has to be ripped out, too long and it's an even viler job. One then squats down beside the sheep on the windward side, thinks of something much more pleasant, and starts pulling the wool. The plucked carcass is beautiful in a Ballard sort of way: colourful mixtures of blues and purples, violets, greens, pinks, with here and there an odourous black rent where the skin has been torn. It is the beauty of a putrifying corpse. One finishes and feels ill, and worse, feels unclean, an uncleanness that takes a lot of scrubbing away. After his "Drowned Giant", what a story Ballard could write of plucking a stinking sheep.

The whole atmosphere of his work reeks of the putrifying corpse, and its colours are those vile colours that only death can inflict on a body. It is not that Ballard is obsessed with death; rather that he is obsessed with the vileness of the rotting corpse. This is so even in "The Illuminated Man", where the unnatural colours of the crystal are those of a world destroyed. Note that the story is concerned after the "death", not with the dying. Crash is only too apparently a pup from the same bitch. *

* HARRY WARNER Jr
423 Summit Avenue, Hagerstown, Maryland
21740, USA

I am amused and edified by the contrasting pair of reviews of the Ballard novel. But I'm not sure I want to read the book. Fred Goldstein published in his little fanzine a two- or three-page story about a fellow who makes love to the most aristrocratic autos he can find in auto graveyards, and it seems foolish to try to f nd any other fiction about autos and sex that will equal that modest little tale.

Besides, I supsect that both that author and Ballard have turned down the wrong autobahn. It's increasingly evident that autos are becoming wombs rather than sex symbols. The designers force occupants of most cars to assume foetal postions while riding, the seats, headrests, straps, and other paraphenalia provide an increasing envelopping of the driver and passengers, such as they haven't experienced since their mothers went into labour, and such accessories as automatic speed control on the open highway make it unnecessary even to move the feet up and down on the gas pedal during long trips. All that is needed now is to eliminate the nuisance and danger of stops for meals, by a small surgical adaptation at the belly button, to which a tube can be attached for intravenous feeding en route.

I'm defying my own principles by writing criticism of criticism of criticism, in anything I say about George Turner's and John Foyster's material.

I suspect that the whole controversy typifies the dangers of coping with different languages. I don't care how intelligent, learned, and careful Lem is, he's going to miss shades of meaning when he reads English and what he writes isn't going to be understood quite as intended by English-speaking people, particularly when it passes through the Polish-German-English translating route. He's obviously attempting to stir up people with his article, and deserves to be criticised on that basis, but there's still a very great danger that his choice of individual words has created additional agitation which he didn't mean, due to this language barrier.

Besides, there is a considerable amount of truth behind some of the obvious hyperoble in Lem's statements. Even if new books aren't hailed as the finest ever written as regularly as he contends, it happens with alarming frequency; in fact, in this very issue of SFC we read that Ballard is "the truest s f writer of his time... Crash is arguably Ballard's best book." If pros don't really go around saying they are such great authors, they do the next best thing when they fly fifty feet into the air and make anguished noises at the mildest criticism by a fan of something they wrote.

(24 February 1975)*

((In SFC 40)) The continuation ofyour non-trip report was quite interesting. It told me more than I'd known before about the home life of several of the fans you visited, such as Jackie Franke and Ed Cagle. Oddly, you seem to be describing the end of a fannish era to some extent, because some of those you visited have since either gafiated or cut back drastically on fanac. ((* Maybe my visit ended that fannish era; still, some people have recovered enough to begin fannish activity again.*)) I hope you eventually manage to produce a genuine trip report, one in which you can digress and amplify on all those matters over several hundred pages. I'd like to see more of your impressions of mundane United States of Americans, more details of the physical appearance of the fans whom we don't often see at conventions, and other matters which you just skim over in this version.

And I've tried to decide what I would do if I were ever in that situation you encountered when you discovered an inability to make the USA-Australia flight. Probably I would have gone into a cataleptic condition long enough to settle the matter of whether I'd spend the money or stay put. I'm miserly to a considerable degree and I have an awful fear of losing my possessions out in the middle of nowhere, and the conflict between those two factors would have been too much for me.

It would be well for fanzine editors everywhere to get together and create an Index of topics which should stay out of fanzines for the next decade because of over-exertion in the past decade. These would include the new-vs-old-wave theme, what pros think of Ted White and vice versa, sex in science fiction, a new definition of science fiction, Lem, and Worldcon elevators.

The twenty-cent Australian stamp on your last page which depicts an apparent turtle strikes me as splendid self-analysis by the postal people. Maybe fans could stage a campaign of writing letters to their congressmen, urging creation of a new series of USA postage stamps in a similar mood: besides the turtle, other demominations could contain such illustrations as snails, molasses, and Bob Shaw glassware.

(25 March 1975)*

* Ah, nostalgia. The same issue would now cost 40 cents to post. :: I wonder whether I could still remember all those fine details if I decided to turn the non-trip report into a trip report. It's got a name, at least: In Search of Angie. But all the people have probably changed in two years, and by now it would all seem like a work of fiction. *

* CHRISTOPHER PRIEST
1 Ortygia House, 6 Lower Road, Harrow, Middlesex HA2 ODA, England

I haven't read much of SFC 40, beyond your non-trip report. I thought this was a pretty accurate assessment, and at least as far as the English section is concerned, it seemed to tally with the things you were saying when you were here. It occurred to me when reading it that it's likely to evoke one of two responses: one would be something like "Thanks for the flattering comments", and the other would be, "How you misunderstand me". I wonder if this is what people have been saying to you? I ask this because your various pen-portraits seemed circumspect at times, revealing more by what wasn't said than what was. However, some of your actual comments were remarkably perceptive. For instance, when of Brian you say: "An ability to make the world more enjoyable just by talking about it", you seem to describe the very essence of the pleasures of Brian's company.

Your general remarks about England make my patriotic hackles rise a little, just as they did while you were here. What I think you make as your major mistake is to see rather little of what is under the surface, a common mistake of visitors. What is more, the surfaces were themselves unusually distorted. Winter isn't much fun in England anyway, and that winter was the worst I can recall; not for the weather, but beause of the rotten political and economic state. The British aren't a race of masochists, so when you say that few of us would want to leave, do you pause to wonder why? The qualities of English life are subtle, and have to be worked at to be appreciated in full.

The extra irony was, of course, that all of the things you said you felt most lacking in Australia are present in abundance in England. Further, I think that there is probably more variety here than there. (The other day I was watching a television film about how people in the North-East spend their Sundays. Nearly all of it was completely alien to me - brass bands, workingman's clubs, naturists, motorcyle freaks, etc - but it was instantly recognisable as utterly English. But it wasn't the "England" that an American or an Australian would associate with the traditions of this country. That seems to be based much more in a mythical countryside somewhere in the Home Counties, with overtones of Robin Hood, Christmas cards, and Canterbury Cathedral, larded with a grudging respect for Shakespeare and the royalty, and shot through with the basic misconception that the English are on the whole a decent lot of chaps.)
(10 September 1974)*

* Two of Valma's friends from Brisbane had dinner at Degraves Tavern one night after I arrived back in Australia. It became obvious that they didn't really like Melbourne all that much. "Aren't the houses small!" said one of the girls. "And they're so close together," said the other. Shades of what I said about London. :: Since the recent announcement of the election results, it has become obvious that the only civilised place left in the country is South Australia, where Don Dunstan's Labor government bucked all the national trends and won a state election only a few months ago. I'm tempted to put everything in storage and move to Adelaide. But no matter how tempted, I'm tied to Melbourne by a twenty-eight-year-old umbilical cord. I just couldn't live anywhere else for long (but might need to yet). So I have some idea why Londoners stay home. :: And if I'm going to judge countries by the standard of the slob politicians who control them, there's not many countries to move to. Anyone for Antarctica? :: I wish that you had got to Australia to make snide comments about us to get your own back. Also, I would have enjoyed returning some of your hospitality. *

* PHILIP STEPHENSEN-PAYNE
28 Woodfield Drive, Charlbury, Oxford OX7 3SE, England

It seems a common mistake to make - underestimating the fatigue of travelling. A couple of years ago I went to the USA with a friend on a student flight. We spent a while working in upstate New York to finance the trip, and then set out to reach my friend's relatives in California, seeing the USA on the way. Boy, what an ambition! We were basically poor and so did our sleeping on the Greyhounds - it also saved the problem of losing days travelling. But we didn't last, and ended up cutting out a lot and bee-lining for LA. Which, in the end, was a good thing. Wandering around American cities where you know no one, with only a brief guide to go on, can be soul-destroying. I loved seeing Niagara, the Grand Canyon, and the Hatton House Hotel in Atlanta, but much of the rest was wasted. However, reaching LA we made a number of friends (the aunt and uncle took us out to a club one night and, while we were talking, a couple at the next table turned around and said, "Are you English? How would you like to come and visit us at our beach house tomorrow?" Which we did) and even picked up a mass of cheap secondhand books. I enjoyed seeing the foreign parts, but it was the people who really made the time worthwhile (I did a lot of hitchiking around in my spare time from work and the Union Jack was a passport to anywhere.) I suppose if/when I go back, I will be armed with fannish addresses and phone numbers, but I don't know if I would be able to phone them up of my own accord.

It's a great shame that you missed out on London. It's a fascinating city.I worked there for quite a while and used to go for

long (sometimes two-hour) walks in my lunch hours and occasionally wander around at weekends as well. Yet I wouldn't say I know London. Probably I've seen more of it than most Londoners, but remembering which bit goes where - other than in the City or West End - is still a troublesome task. But the small things I remember "discovering" still delight me, and it always distresses me when people pass off the city as "just another city" because I know how much they're missing - just as I know how much I must have missed in all those American cities.

I'd love to know your basis for sweeping statements like "the English still hate the Germans" as it has little basis in reality. There are a number of people who fought in the last war (and more particularly those who fought in both wars) who still hate the Germans. They've little choice. A lot of money and effort over six years was put into forcing them to hate the Germans, and it's not easy to forget what you've been taught just because someone else says "Stop". But, then, that's just as true in other races - the Germans still hate the Jews and the Americans still hate the Communists (in the sense that you employ). But those of us who were not indoctrinated at the time have no hatred for the Germans - none that I've ever detected. I think that what might be misleading you is the general xenophobia of the British. As I see it, we spent several centuries as top dog, telling countries what to do and - to be blunt - not doing it so well. Now the tide has turned, and the dog is scared of being whipped. The English live in the past, because that's where the glory lies. That is why there is so much opposition to joining the Common Market - the reluctance to admit that England really can no longer stand on its own two feet. Nobody has ever managed to invade England - but there wouldn't be much difficulty now if any of the Big Powers really wanted to try. Yes, the English do have little concern for outside news - that's the twentieth century out there. Cowardice, perhaps, but I prefer my cosy out-dated England to the Amerika that we hear of from Phil Dick.

(31 March 1975)*

* My education in Australia in the 1950s was that England was somehow much better than Australia - a country to which nothing here could quite match up. I suppose that the phenomenon is called Ex-Colonial Cringe. A lot of people still believe in this; a "trip to England" is still obligatory for most people in Australia who are under forty and can afford the trip at all. This is a ridiculous ritual. I found England much as you describe it: sort of sunk in on itself. Coming from Australia, I received the impression that things were not even cosy; that people were crawling over each other to find living space; that there was little point in trying to improve things. At the centre of my feeling - and I should have said this more clearly in SFC 40 - is an indignation at people in Australia who discount their own country compared with places like England.

It's said that "Scratch an Australian and you reveal a racist", so I should not have written as if from some morally superior plane. Again, I was disappointed because one of my illusions disintegrated when I visited England. I had always been told that London was a cosmopolitan, tolerant, civilised city - again, somehow much superior to anything in Australia. But the inference I received from lots of small remarks (nothing I can document in detail) is that the English are at least as xenophobic as the Australians (from whom xenophobia is always expected). Maybe I'm prejudiced, since the English certainly don't like Australians very much. It just seems that the image England still has in Australia is a green-tinged, thatched-roofed, frightfully delightful little village.(with monarch).

I hope th t I did not imply that London was "just another city". It's only that I was not lucky enough to have the sort of extensive guidance around London that Barry Gillam gave me in New York. On another similar trip, the position could have been reversed. Talking of Barry Gillam: *

* JERRY KAUFMAN (again)

In SFC 40 I liked best your recounting of your travels. I'm sorry we didn't get to seem more of you while you were here, but there was someone we did see more of, thanks to you. Barry Gillam was known to many of us through his writing in SFC, but we all wondered about him. He never showed up at any fan function, and he only lived a short distance from Dena and Charlie Brown. Thanks to your arrival, we had several dinners with him, saw him at several film shows, and talk to him (infrequently) on the phone. He seems a bit retiring, but has a penetrating intelligence, a friendly nature, an encyclopediac knowledge of literature and film, and a deep, unobrusive energy.

(30 October 1974) *

* But what's happened to him? I've written twice during recent months, have paid my bills for all the books Barry bought for me in New York - and haven't heard a thing for more than eight months. Maybe he's fallen in love or something - that's fatal to fan activity. *

* RICK STOOKER
403 Henry Street, Alton, Illinois 62002, USA

I was interested in your trip report, especially as you came close to my area. When you were in St Louis, I was in Washington, so I missed you there. To your description of Leigh and Norbert Couch as two of the

finest people in fandom, all I can say is amen, brother, amen. I'm proud to call them friends.

Reading about your visit brought home to me the accuracy of the truism that residents don't know some areas of their cities as well as tourists. I've never been on the top of the Arch. I've never been to any of the museums in Forest Park, and to the Planetarium only on grade-school field trips. I've never been to St Genevieve, or to any of the restuarants you mentioned.

Ever since your visit, the city has been creeping up on the Couches. It's an hour's drive from me, so Ivisit them only sporadically and, each time I go, I see more signs of developments. However, with the housing recession this country is in, I'm sure that that has slowed down quite a bit.

One bit of geography: you mentioned the flatness of southern Illinois, as compared with Kansas. I've never been to Kansas; but southern Illinois is quite hilly, actually sort of Ozarkian, if not actually considered a part of that same plateau. That bus from Indianapolis to St Louis would have taken you along Interstate 70, which goes through central Illinois. Heyworth, where you visited Tucker, is in central Illinois. Central Illinois is flat, I would be the last to deny. (17 December 1974)*

* I suppose it's like somebody saying that Bendigo is in northern Victoria. :: I've heard even less from Leigh and Norbert in recent years than I have from Barry or other people. (It could be because I don't write letters, but still...). I hope they're doing all right.

* SFC 41/42 had an astonishing response. I worked on that issue for more than six months. I wrote most of the editorial, for instance, in October 1974. By the time it appeared in Australia, I was just glad to see it finished. By the time it reached overseas, and letters of comment began to arrive, I had almost forgotten its existence. (Besides, I wrenched my shoulder the day after I posted SFC 41/42, and then all those other things began to happen.) But the letters began to arrive, and the trickle has only just stopped. Here's the first letter of comment to drop into my GPO box: *

* LEE HARDING
Flat 2, 29 Gurner Street, St Kilda, Victoria 3182

S F Commentary 41/42 arrived this morning: thanks for remembering me. I was so pleased to see the magazine back in circulation that I went straight to the typewriter to write you a... well, this isn't really a loc. The sight of so many pages - crammed with so many words about s f, aroused in me the usual reluctance to actually read through it in detail. But I knew from experience that I'll come back to it eventually, and read through it a few paragraphs at a time - usually over morning coffee or in the autumn afternoons when the day's work is dun. What I did notice, leafing through, was your kind mention of my Fallen Spaceman, for which many thanks. I remember writing to John Bangsund about his "review" of Bert's Bitter Pill, and saying something to the effect that you don't have to read your friend's books, and you shouldn't need to review them. (Raymond Chandler has written that he couldn't bear to read his friends' "awful books", and the poet/critic A Alvarez, on being appointed as poetry critic to one of the prominent British weeklies, made a point of living well away from established poets and avoiding them like the plague, so as not to colour his reviews of their works. Fair enough.) I guess I feel that if you can't say anything good about the book, or something critical that can be of use to the writer, then it's best not to say anything. And saying it well is everything, I suppose. So thanks again. That little book was written during the worst time of my life - as you must know - and if I'm pleased with anything about it - and, as you also know, I'm rarely pleased with anything after I've written it - then I liked the way that none of the gloom (none?) got into the writing. The book has been very successful; I understand it is prescribed or recommended at State College, and continues to do well overseas. I'll be interested to see your comments on Children of Atlantis in a few years' time (it's due from Cassell in August so by the time the next SFC appears...) ((*brg* It's a close race, isn't it?*)) Yes, writing remedials has certainly helped my prose style...and my characters no longer "shiver" or lapse into gibbering rhetoric, I'm pleased to report: it helps to work with an intelligent editor. On the other hand, I recently poorf read my first novel, A World of Shadows, due from Hale soon. At this remove (nearly six years!) it seems to have been written by someone else, and probably was. So it goes. I seem to have forgotten to paragraph. Well, I didn't know this would carry on so. I mean to set no precedent, Bruce. It seems that the deeper I get into full-time writing, the less interested I become in reading fanzines. Also, I am inclined to agree with Philip Adams, in his piece on Owen Webster, that the kind of self-exposure (some would prefer to call it psychological self-disembowelment) he practised in his columns, which is so similar to the sort of thing you and Philip K Dick and John Bangsund do in fanzines, is more suitable to poetry and drama than to the newspaper. Dick, of course, saves most of it for his art. Fans, I'm afraid, seem to lack the excitement of discipline. Thank heaven for the George Turners and the John Foysters. ((*brg* There wouldn't be much to this magazine without the George Turners.*))

But enough...I've somehow run over to a second page. And if I ramble on much longer I may say something that will make me look foolish in the morning.

All the best...and it really was good to see SFC again. I look forward to easing my way through it, gradually, over morning coffee. But I will have to keep it well away from Irene...she reads every word.

PS: When are you going to ask someone (Foyster?) to write a regular column in SFC for lovelorns? (23 April 1975)*

* I was going to say, "What would John Foyster know about the lovelorn?", but then I realised that John knows about everything. I hope that his column might begin next issue. :: World of Shadows is out now, and I might even get time to review it for this issue of SFC. I have seen a copy of the latest Cassells book, but it has not been released yet. :: Owen's enemies objected to his Nation Review articles because he seemed to bare his soul; his friends objected to them because he didn't write them very well. This was because NR paid him such a measly sum that he could afford to work on each week's column for only one day of the week. The fine work he was doing on the other six days of the week (the Davison biography) still has not been published. :: I'm glad you're enjoying SFC again, Lee, since you threw away at least one issue, and seem not to have read much of the rest. 41/42 must have included some good things to prompt your letter of comment. Thanks.

* Several other authors were pleased to see their names appear in SFC 41/42: *

* BERT CHANDLER
Flat 23 Kanimbla Hall, 19 Tusculum Street, Potts Point, NSW 2011

I stumbled upon the brief review of The Bitter Pill on page 8. Interesting. All the reviews to date have been interesting, some more so than others. I'd say that the two most interesting were John Bangsund's and that in Nation Review. The trouble with John's review was that I found myself agreeing with him on one or two (not all) points.

In the same mail I got authors' copies of The Road to the Rim, as published by Hayakawa of Tokyo. Interesting. I can't read it, of course, but one can almost follow the story by the interior pics. They have that odd, somehow old-fashioned quality that one associates with Japanese s f films. In fact, if one ignored the futuristic machinery in the backgrounds, they could be illustrating a pre-World-War-II sea story. And I have one whinge. When I was asked - by long-distance telephone from Tokyo yet - what cap badge Grimes wore in the Survey Service I had to think hard and fast. Somehow I have a clear mental picture of Rim Runners' uniform trimmings but not the Survey Service ones. I suppose that I always sort of took for granted something on the lines of the RN cap badge with a silver rocket in lieu of the silver foul anchor. Anyhow, I specified a silver star with a gold laurel leaf surround. But they got that wrong. I'd visualised a six-pointed star and what did I get? A five-pointed one. Oy vey.

In re COA - no, I haven't flown the coop. The everloving decided, on my retirement, that, Polly Adler notwithstanding, a house is so a home and not working premises. So what used to be my workroom in Cell 7 is now the dining room. So it goes. Or went.

Retirement? More or less. I said my fond farewells to the Union Steam Ship Company on March 28 and was back on their payroll on April 4. The job I have is not one for an extrovert. Every second afternoon I toddle down to one of the small shipyards in Balmain and accept responsibility for a laid-up vessel for the night - she was my first command under the Australian flag, actually. No, I'm not a nighwatchman. I turn in at my usual time. The only snag is that I do not have a steward to make my bed or a cook to cook my dinner and breakfast, so I make do on sandwiches (luckily I like Dagwoods) and a thermos container for hot food. And I do crossword puzzles (of the cryptic variety) and catch up on my back reading. And work out plots, of course. It has occurred to me how easy it would be to steal a laid-up ship. I've worked out every detail. The trouble is that, at the moment, I have opportunity and modus operandi but, todate, no motive. So that part of it I've passed on to the everloving. If she comes good I might - at long last - break out of the science fiction ghetto.
(30 April 1975)*

* You have your way of being a pro writer, and Gerald Murnane has a different way. He does the housework while Catherine saves her sanity by working as a child psychologist. This idea has possibilities: I wonder how many lady child psychologists are reading this magazine, and... um... Sometimes the editor of this magazine should be ignored. Here's somebody more interesting:

* GERALD MURNANE
22 Falcon Street, Macleod, Victoria 3185

Not many authors consider it proper to reply to a review of their work. But then not many authors have a review like your essay on Tamarisk Row in SFC 41/42.

I wonder if it should even be called a review. (You describe it as an essay, which sounds rather too formal.) Like nearly all your prose in SFC, it is absolutely unselfconscious and honest. You must be the only person I know who doesn't start to strike

poses as soon as he sits down at the typewriter. ((*brg* That's odd; I thought my writing for SFC was one long pose from beginning to end.*)) I know you'll never mention it in your magazine, so I'll let your readers know that a member of a university English department who read your piece in Tamarisk Row wished aloud that the academic critics he knew could write their critical stuff as well as you do yours.

And what about that throwaway line somewhere in your article: "It was not until I read Tamarisk Row four times...?" You haven't reviewed my novel - you've conferred on it The Freedom of Your Mind, which is high honour indeed.

The next thing I want to say may come as a disappointment. It's this: I don't believe I can explain or interpret Tamarisk Row as well as you do.

This is no pretentious mock-humility. I could easily prove it by trying to write my own review of the book. Anyway, I think you realise this yourself. Perhaps some of your readers, as they followed your painstaking investigation into Tamarisk Row, might have said, "Gillespie knows Murnane. Why doesn't he get his answers from the author instead of sweating over these questions on his own?" If anyone thinks that a word from me could clear up whatever is puzzling about Tamarisk Row or explain what the book is "really about", let them read what follows and forever hold his peace.

It was in 1962 that I first set out to write a novel about a family in a Victorian country town in the years just after the Second World War. From 1962 to 1965 I began, and later abaondoned, at least five versions of the novel. There were dozens of reasons why I rejected those early efforts. I think the chief one was that I could not devise a satisfactory shape (or plot, if you like) to hold together the mass of events I wanted to include.

Towards the end of 1964, I decided that what I was trying to write was only thinly disguised autobiography. It suddenly occurred to me to write a straightout autobiography, and be done with it. Life itself would provide the shape of the book. The marvellous natural shape of life-as-it-really-happened would be superior to any artificial pattern - and a lot easier to write.

I began the story of my life during those years after the Second World War and expected to have it finished within six months.

I invite anyone reading this to sit down one evening and try to write a chapter of an honest autobiography. It's the best method I know of for learning that most of our experiences are not facts but fiction - and bad fiction at that. In my case it was like discovering I'd been walking all my life on water instead of solid earth. As soon as the novelty had worn off I decided it was none of my business trying to write the truth about my owh life.

It would have been a joy to get back to fiction again, except that my spare time for the next four years was taken up with the drudgery of obtaining a university degree by part-time study.

When my last exams were over, in December 1968, I began what eventually became Tamarisk Row. I began it with fifty pages of notes that I called the Master Plan. I wrote those notes with exuberance, still remembering what I had learned four years earlier - that life cried out to be turned into fiction. According to the Master Plan, Tamarisk Row was to weave together about twenty "themes". These themes would recur throughout the novel and make the experiences of the Killeaton family into a complex but satisfying pattern.

Six nights a week for nearly two years I scribbled away at the first draft of the novel. In the end it amounted to more than 180,000 words. I wrote it out again to shorten it for my typist and, in the process, it grew by another 10,000 words.

The typist worked at it for four months. When she was finished, I gave the typescript to you, Bruce, to take home during your fortnight's holiday in August 1972. I don't remember what I said to you then, but what I wanted you to tell me was what Tamarisk Row was about.

Of course I wasn't handing you 700 pages of automatic writing. Of course I had my Master Plan with its carefully linked themes. If you had refused to read the typescript until I told you what it was about I could have said something to oblige you - as I could even now. I could have told you what those so-called themes were - as I could now. If you had asked me, I could even have told you the peculiar aim I had in mind when I started to spin out those long, long sentences.

But I didn't tell you any of these things because I trusted your ability to discover what Tamarisk Row meant. And I never will tell you, because I know now that my trust was not misplaced.

In 1964, when I started my misguided effort to write autobiography, I realised I could never tell the honest truth about anything - not even my own life. Even the simplest event that I witnessed or the simplest thing I did became, at the moment of its occurrence, a part of the long work of

fiction that I have been composing all my life - the fiction that I (like everyone else) for convenience call fact.

If I can say that about simple events, how much more emphatically I ought to say it about the most complex thing I have ever done - the writing of Tamarisk Row. I planned the novel, I wrote it, I can even open it and read again what it contains. But how could I, of all people, try to say what it really is?

Someone with a taste for argument could object to all this that the truth about something comes from consensus. If I am so perverse as to deny that I know what happened during my lifetime, surely I can go to others to verify it. Well, if this is how we establish the truth of things, Tamarisk Row was my way of asking, "Was it really like this?" And your comments on the novel have already given me my answer, "That's how it was."

* *Sigh* What can I say to such praise? Only that this one letter, apart from infuriating me for not answering some of my questions in the review, has given me a reason for living, when I needed it. How can we sink when we can fly? *

* TOM DISCH
New York, USA

Dear Bruce
And dear George Turner too, wherever, whoever you are: thank you. I've never had a review so gratifying or so welcome by half. Not only because 334 has gone largely unreviewed - even in s f magazines (for the which they have, one and all, a quiet soul-felt curse - which is an unhappy fate for any book one writes, and most unhappy when the book is presumably one's major effort, etc). But beyond that I'm happy that the source of such high praise should be someone I respect for being so sober and judicious in his pronouncements, the sternest critic in the field. Truly, though I don't think I wrote before this to say so (and I'm glad now I didn't, since there can be no possible trace, after the fact, of mutual admiration and back-scratching) I think his reply to Lem is one of the finest all-round statements on where the field is at that I know of - and I mean to quote extensively from it when I teach a course in s f at Wesleyan this summer. So there! Really and truly, it meant a lot to know that at least one intelligent person who hasn't been compromised as a critic by prior acquaintance has as much regard for the book as its author, who has necessarily had to wonder just how badly he's been kidding himself, or alternately indulging in sour Satanic lone majesty on the deserted mountaintop of his inaccessible art. Well, thanks. I guess if I had to choose between that review and a Nebula I'd prefer (in my moments of most exalted rationality) that review. (13 June 1975)*

* To give the s f world its due nod, I must say that 334 was, eventually, not completely ignored by fandom. Charlie Brown, of all people, praised 334 highly in Locus, and it missed the Hugo nomination ballot form only because (I'm told) the Hugo Nominations Committee ruled it ineligible. The Nebula nomination was gratifying, but a win would have been just. :: And I agree that George Turner's well-considered praise or blame of any work one has written is worth all the awards put together. For instance, SFC 41/42 contained George's long discussion of Ursula Le Guin's umpteen-award-winning The Dispossessed: *

I follow George's arguments as far as they go, but I think he neglects a central excellence of the book. It is a Bildungsroman, a novel of education, and a subtly conceived one. In such a work, the author shows - usually in clinical, laboratory circumstances - how a mature character may be formed. The two paradigmatic worlds of Urras and Anarres, while too schematic and "traditional" to be exciting as utopia or dystopia, work very well as "ideal" structures supporting an ethical theory.

Anarres, in this schema, represents the classroom stage of the hero's education. Without the many painful lessons he learns on Anarres, he would not have been capable of meeting the more stringent ethical demands of Urras; that is, of the Real World. A number of specific parallels are presented in the alternating chapters: the involvement or disinterestedness of intellectuals with their work; the contrast of Shevek's marriage and of his rather comic effort at philandering; the insistence, in both worlds, that only by being stripped of possessions can one attain to freedom. In every case, these lessons must be learned first on Anarres, then re-learned on Urras.

Any Bildungsroman is implicitly a treatise on child-rearing and, as such, The Dispossessed reflects the conventional wisdom of our time. It parallels the preachments of Melanie Klein and others, who see the individual's character as a function of family relationships established in the first years of life (Anarres) and then inexorably exfoliating into the larger canvas of adult life (Urras).

Construed along these lines, the book seems virtually flawless. (9 August 1975)*

* On the platform at Aussiecon, Ursula Le Guin said that The Dispossessed was the story of a marriage - which seems to me as worthwhile a description of it as any I've seen. Your theory is also very interesting; nobody has suggested it before. Some people did not agree with you or George: *

* ANGUS TAYLOR
14 Edburton Avenue, Brighton, Sussex BN1 6EJ, England

I completely disagree with George Turner's analysis of The Dispossessed, and I think his remarks should not go unchallenged. Turner's contention that the societies of Anarres and Urras are presented as equally oppressive shows that one of us has entirely misread Le Guin's intentions. Or perhaps just shows that Mr Turner and I have radically different views about the nature of an ideal society.

To me, at any rate, it seems very clear that Le Guin comes down on the side of Anarres. The Dispossessed is a utopian novel and Anarres is its utopia. It is an "ambiguous utopia" (as the sub-title proclaims) because Le Guin recognises that nothing is static, and that any community must be recreated at every moment - nothing is final or certain. Shevek and his friends have to learn this fact - that their revolutionary society can only continue to exist if it is maintained in a state of revolution. Turner completely botched up this idea - he mistakes the bureaucratisation of Anarres for the revolutionary utopia; he thinks Le Guin is telling us that nothing ever changes, rather than the reverse. He thinks the novel is pessimistic as regards the role of society in moulding the individual, when in fact it is one of the very few truly optimistic s f novels of recent years.

Why does Turner miss the heart of the novel so completely? Is he being deliberately perverse? Perhaps we should look to this self-confessed ignorance of political theory. Mr Turner, in his own words, is "amazingly ignorant of political theory, and of firm intent upon staying that way." Egad! The man hangs himself. When he says, "Le Guin is posing questions to which we have no answers, but such are the questions that must be asked, year after year, until the beginnings of answers appear," I am reminded of the "essay" written by Holden Caulfield in The Catcher in the Rye:

> The Egyptians are extremely interesting to us today for various reasons. Modern science would still like to know what the secret ingredients were that the Egyptians used when they wrapped up dead people so that their faces would not rot for innumerable centuries. This interesting riddle is still quite a challenge to modern science in the twentieth century.

George Turner might be interested to know that modern science in the twentieth century does indeed know something about the secret ingredients of authority, self-determination, etc, in political systems. And although I cannot claim to know which political philosophies inspired Le Guin in this instance, it might be useful to consider Marx, Mao, and the anarchist Kroptkin (author of Mutual Aid). Shevek would probably understand what the Chinese Cultural Revolution was all about.

Is The Dispossessed political? Of course. But then name something in life that isn't.

(7 May 1975)*

* George Turner would probably argue, and I would probably agree with him, that all problems are personal, not political. But since I can anticipate at least some of Angus' answers to that argument, I won't start it. At the Nova Mob meeting where we discussed The Dispossessed (now more than a year ago, believe it or not), at least some people argued that TD was unconvincing politics. My own argument is that Earthsea is Le Guin's utopia, not Anarres. Somebody else who doesn't think much of the politics in the book is the following writer. He is Carey's uncle, a reader of science fiction who has had little or nothing to do with fandom, and a former President of the Australian Society of Authors. This letter was sent to Carey Handfield: *

* GUS O'DONNELL
11 Corinth, 29 Nelson Street, Woollahra, NSW 2025

If, as it appears likely, s f writers will seek their place in the great stream of writing as proper practitioners of the art, then serious reviews of their work and serious comment on those reviews are part of the process.

Of course it could be argued that the general category of adventure writing, in which s f may be plausibly included, is not a form of writing that merits serious criticism.

I do not propose to argue in this way. I accept, for myself, that all writing should be criticised. I resist the idea that some writing, for instance, that is categorised as literature or, say, classical should be criticised and other forms should not.

The test of writing surely is its attack, its proper professional quality as distinct from the amateur qualities so often exhibited.

If this is so, and I think it is, then the mark of the professional is a recognition that between the beginning and the end of the work a recognisable world is created, a world which the reader acknowledges as a world of his own.

This is not an esoteric test. A crude example will suffice. Nobody can accept Chaucer's world who reads only the bald original. It just does not relate to what we know of life. The words have to be translated.

Strictly pursued, this thought supposes that Chaucer's world is forever lost to us and this is true; we only know the translator's words and only then so far as we recognise them as part of our lives.

But the example shows my meaning. Professional writing begins and ends with the idea of a recognisable human world between the covers.

Take westerns. The standards are steadily improving. The world created becomes more and more human, less and less stereotypes. Zane Grey and Clarence E Mulford yield to Alan Le May, but all of them are remote from the six-gun pulps, even though each of them might be put through exactly the same test of professionalism - just how much they relate to the reader's reality, to his world.

Some s f writers establish their professionalism by limiting their world, in a neighbourhood sort of way. John Wyndham, in The Midwich Cuckoos or The Day of the Triffids. Others - and I am thinking of an author whose hero had given up all four of his limbs for artificials of much greater capacity - limit their world to the activities of a small group, even though the geography is world-wide.

The ones who fail the test, and it's still only the category of adventure writing, are those whose world purports to be a whole world. Perhaps they should be congratulated for their aim rather than their achievement.

If, as I said I expect they will, s f writers come out of their special category of adventure to the general stream of fiction writing, then they will need to recognise that they begin with humans, the same as their readers, to create a world that reflects that humanity.

The s f writer becomes incidental, as it were, to the human condition. It's a matter of chance that Tolstoy's or Shakespeare's or Rilke's characters happen to be Russian, English, or German. They are first of all people; men, women, and children.

Enough.

George Turner makes a valiant effort, but I cannot agree. The Dispossessed is not a world that relates to anything much I know of politics and, since it is essentially a political world that it's about, then it fails.

The human condition, Carey, as you know, is awkward, messy, full of odd corners and changes. It may not be so divided as it is in The Dispossessed.

Viet Nam is as full of people who don't know, who only want to make a crust, who couldn't care less, as it is of standard men and women of one political style or another.

The sum of what they do or say, or don't do or don't say - is politics!

So many people write, think, talk as if politics existed outside people, as if it was a tangible something to be described, analysed, coded, etc. It's not in the sums - and the sums include the politicians, the journalists, the professors all saying their pieces about their politics.

It's the sum of people in public - that's politics - not the bloody words, millions of them, written and spoken about politics.

And Ursula K Le Guin may never understand this. She certainly doesn't in The Dispossessed. (2 May 1975)*

* I disagree with some of Mr O'Donnell's assumptions but, to me, his argument about The Dispossessed is invalid even on its own terms. The Dispossessed is a book which is totally "professional" and very much a book about human beings - their aspirations, feelings, disappointments, triumphs, etc. Unfortunately, it has some boring Poul-Anderson-type lectures as well. The second time I read The Dispossessed, I skipped the lectures and concentrated on the important parts: those dealing with the struggle to find an adequate, satisfying life on Anarres and, in particular, the attempt by Shevek and Takver to bind their lives together. Every part of the book illuminates Shevek's struggle to love, understand, ask questions, keep faith, until he is presented with uncomfortable answers. There are not many Australian "mainstream" novels about which we could say as much.

Which brings me to my second point. Mr O'Donnell's ideas of "professionalism" sound very like the standards of the naturalistic novel and/or the middle-brow novel - standards which have frozen Australian literature in its tr for at least the last eighty to a hundred years. It's not enough for the novel to present us with universal human types: we read Tolsoy's novels as much to read about uniquely Russian humans as to read about ourselves. In other words, we read any novel to read about aliens, which (to follow a point made by Gerald Murnane in SFC 41/42) is almost any person or creature beside ourselves. I don't think it's enough for literature to mirror human nature; I think the writer has the task of somehow illuminating and repainting the human form according to his own palette. The only standards are those of good writing, and my ideas of good writing sound very different from Mr O'Donnell's. I allow, for instance, that a writer like Ursula Le Guin may simplify and separate ideas in order to make them brighter and clearer; that she is allowed to live in the world she creates, and show us around. Most of the "secondary universe" worlds which Mr O'Donnell criticises fail because the author does not know them himself; you could

hardly say the same about Ursula Le Guin and Anarres and Urras.

But I must say thanks to Mr O'Donnell for allowing me to reprint his letter. Perhaps other readers will have more favourable reactions to his views. *

* DOUG BARBOUR
10808-75th Ave, Edmonton, Alberta, Canada T6E 1K2, Canada

On page 66 of SFC 41/42, George Turner says, "Once this frame is selected - and most writers select with some deliberation before the actual writing begins..." This is where I begin to get a bit edgy about George's approach to the work of art. I would accept that the writer will eventually discover the "frame" (Turner's word, and it implies too much mechanism for me) as she/he seeks the shape of the story about to take place on paper before her/his fingers/eyes, but I think it is only the "professionals", writers churning it out for pay only, whom Turner castigates at various points, people who "plan" and "select" a "frame" for their novels in the way that Turner seems to imply he thought Le Guin did with The Dispossessed. Turner appears to be dividing in order to conquer: he divides the seamless novel into various aspects: characterisation, plot, theme, etc. But do these things come to the author that way? I think not, though I have not myself written stories or novels, and can only speak from attempts at poetry. I believe the critic should be aware of the damage that she/he is doing to the work by so dividing it into parts, and to let her/his readers know that this is happening and shouldn't be. I feel that Turner's evaluation was on the whole fair, though probably I think a bit more of the book than he does. Within the limits - self-imposed, I suspect - of his approach, he says a lot about the book. I might find it more powerful for seeing the cumulative build in the whole Hainish Universe series of novels, more than can be accounted for in any discussion of a single work within it (the three Earthsea books are more than just the sum of their parts, as Peter Nicholls implies in his very sensitive review, which I enjoyed rereading in SFC). I have been long interested in other parts of Le Guin's writing: the image clusters in each Le Guin novel, which create a great deal of its meaning; the philosophical notions of balance, of Taoistic holism in the universe of meaning which we all inhabit, etc.

I want to thank you for your article on Tamarisk Row, a book I will try to get my hands on as a result of your words. I was particularly interested in the way you went about organising your critique. I'm not sure it worked all the way, but you were trying something very worthwhile - that is, criticism which is more personal than I'm sure you were told was good in university. But we are in the "Post-Modern" era now, and the best forms of Modernist criticism will just not do anymore. I believe that contemporary Canadian and Commonwealth literature is both Post Modern, and also different for being post-colonial, and therefore we need new ways to deal with it. Since the New Criticism will miss the boat in dealing with contemporary writing, other approaches must be sought. Your personal reminiscences, as a way into the world of Tamarisk Row, is one such possible approach. I found it interesting, even if I was reading it as much for insights into you as into the novel. I think your point about the relevance of the article to SFC at the end was well-taken. Blur the boundaries! Only the critics put them there in the first place.

(19 August 1975)*

* I must admit that I don't know much about all these "New Critics" and "Post Modernists", but I'll presume that some readers know what you're talking about, Doug. The Tamarisk Row article springs out of a simple assumption: that, even though I know the author of the book, can see in the experience shown in the book much of my own childhood experience, and have discussed the book with the author while it was being written and ever since - that I still cannot say anything sensible without exploring and knowing the book itself. In his letter in this issue of SFC, Gerald himself covers this point very well. I'm annoyed, however, when people think that the Tamarisk Row essay is somehow more personal than, say, the Hard to be a God review in this issue, or even my "Confessions" in various issues of SFC, simply because it contains more superficial details about my own life. Readers refuse to see that everything I write is as passionate and personal as everything else I write. Sandra Miesel is not somebody who seems to like me much these days, but a few years ago she spoke for me and her when she said that her serious reviews are works of involvement and passion. Put more simply: if you want to do some psychological detective work, you could tell as much about me from my "dispassionate" reviews and articles as you could from my "personal" pieces.

Having said all that, I still find that my throwaway lines in the "I Must Be Talking to My Friends" column receive unexpectedly personal responses. Here is The Dave Piper Letter: *

* DAVE PIPER
7 Cranley Drive, Ruislip, Middlesex HA4 6B2, England

Thank you for SFC 41/42. Excellent issue... even if it does read like the SFC of old! To do it justice, as you well realised when you posted it, I'd have to write ya, at least, a fifty-page letter of comment, as there are at least fifty full-page comment hooks here. But I doubt whether you'd ever recover from a fifty-page Piper letter. ((*brg* Try me.*))

DAVE PIPER

I love your lists - I disagree so strongly with your opinions that it's a sheer delight to wallow in self-contratulatory feelings of superiority and "gawd blimey, that Gillespie dun 'arf have some barmy ideas about what's good and what ain't" reactions. Keep 'em coming, Bruce - please. One thing I find fascinating - that you actually took the time during all those years to make lists of "favourite" short fiction.

* I didn't make those lists during the years, though. For the last ten or so years I have written down the title of every piece of fiction - novel or short story - I've read, and beside it, I have put a star rating (eg **** = brilliant; ***½ = very good; which are the only two worthwhile categories; the list descends to * = terrible/unreadable). When I went back through my lists, I picked out all those to which I had given ****. Some I rejected immediately, as I had changed my opinions. The others were in the running for the lists. *

I really wonder if, on looking back at those lists when you're a venerable old sod back in Bacchus Marsh twenty years from now, you'll cringe (?) and wonder what the hell you were like way back then. ((*brg* I can remember what I was like way back then, and I do cringe.*)) Still, we've met, you know me a little, and it's flogging a dead horse to match my lists with yours - even assuming I could produce a list(s). An illustration, though, wouldn't do any harm. (Would it?) Your choice of best short for 1968 ("The Heat Death of the Universe" by P Zoline). I read it, and from what I can remember, it was complete, unadulterated crap. Seriously, I consider I could write something just as pointless and pathetic and, considering your writing ability (for which I have a very great respect...and you know I mean that) I find it slightly incredible that you considered that particular item so good. You're a far better writer, a deeper thinker, more sensitive, with a greater insight into (for want of a better phrase) the human condition in general and a human being (BRG) in particular to waste your time throwing bouquets and praise to deadbeats like so many of the s f and associated writers on your lists.

* All that might be true (and I know now just how horribly untrue it is), but Brian Aldiss backs my judgment on that particular story, in an essay he write for Robert Silverberg's collection, The Mirror of Infinity. Brian's exposition of "The Heat Death of the Universe" is nearly as long as the story itself, and only slightly less interesting. *

I don't include the non-(recognised) s f writers, as my reading in other fields is lamentably lacking. Well, I don't, in all honesty, lament it very much.

Usually I read everything in SFC, and especially your own material. But, I have to admit, that I got completely bogged down with your "review" of your friend's book. I found myself, literally, unable to continue reading it after about the first three pages. I just can't explain it - perhaps it was just the frame of mind I was in or something. I'll have to dig it out in a few months and try again. ((*brg* Read Gerald's answer before you do so. It might help.*)) I have the sneaking suspicion that I've missed, for the moment, what is basically a superb review/reaction (in the personal sense) which takes off from the book in question and becomes Something Else. That's the impression I got from the bit I did read. I'm sorry. Must be me. Colour me envious of your facility with words. P'raps that's the reason I didn't/couldn't carry on with it - you're getting too bleedin' intellectual fer me, Gillespie.

* I didn't mean it that way. I tried to make everything I wrote in that essay as clear as possible. But after six weeks working on the Tamarisk Row essay, I must have had too much to say to fit it into the space I allowed myself. I went all sort of transcendental while I was writing it. *

Stuff it! No, you're not - s'just I didn't feel too good at the time.

Incidentally, I got SFC last Friday and it occupied me on two each-way journeys to work plus about 2½ hours last night. A lot of words this time. The sheer size is a little off-putting, let alone the contents.

Oh, before I forget - and this is funny, believe me. Ever since No 1, with its ropey old repro, thru all those issues, the production has got better and better, with the last dozen or so (except for Foyster's abominations) superb. Clear, beautifully laid out, a real labour of love. And nowhere in all those 42 issues has there ever been a page or part of a page missing. ((*brg* You are lucky. Everybody else has had pages missing.*)) Page 91 of my copy seems to have slipped somewhat and I've lost about a third of it. What's funny, of course, and strangely poetic in a way, is that Lem's letter appears on that page and I wouldn't have read it anyway - not, as I've previously told you, because I don't agree with his views, but because, to me, he's dead boring - so I don't give a damn! Hundreds and hundreds of pages of SFC and the one page missing is a Lem page - I think that's funny. Don't you?

* Well, I suppose so. If I had been you, I would have been really annoyed to miss out on the Lem letter. *

As I mentioned when we met (and yeah, yeah, yeah, I know there were other things in the Speech) I'm with Buck in his opinion of

P K Dick and the Coke episode. 'Nuff said.

With the attention Le Guin gets in this issue I'll have to admit something. As an aside (aside! aside!), y'know, increasingly I seem to find exterior influences affecting me while I'm reading. I don't mean distractions, but how I feel at the time; how the kids are; what sort of day it was/is, is gonna be...and all like that. I don't recall this happening to me when I was younger. Maybe it's a sign of creeping senility or something. But (confession time) I think Le Guin is just about the best writer at present using the s f/fantasy medium. I would be very interested to see what sort of work she'd turn out if she dropped the mechanics and trappings of s f. She's using the stock ideas and conventions of s f to build quite extraordinary books. But - and here's the rub - I loved A Wizard of Earthsea, wasn't quite so happy with The Tombs of Atuan (struck me like too many middle-of-the-trilogy books; too much the "bridge" between the first and third) and (whisper it, Bruce) I found The Farthest Shore unreadable. ((*brg* Shame, Piper, shame.*)) Well, that's not quite true. It was immensely readable but I couldn't read it. And I still haven't picked it up and carried on. In fact, I've forgotten where I got to; too much must have been happening to me on a personal level for me to concentrate on it. That's what I would like to think, but I can't remember what was happening. So, if for nothing else, SFC 41/42 reminded me that I must pick it up again and read it.

I didn't enjoy Murnane's talk very much, not because of anything he said particularly, but I just didn't find it very interesting. ((*brg* That's a pity, since both Catherine and Gerald Murnane are great fans of Dave Piper letters, whenever they appear in fanzines that I publish.*)) Perhaps he'd got the wrong impression of s f fans and fandom from you. You, we all know, are not typical - you spend $$$$ on SFC and use it (s f) more as a crutch (or, at least, you did) than most fans. I doubt that the majority of fans really conform to Gerald's apparent mind's-eye view of them.

Susan's letter is...well, a "Susan letter". I agree - it's not often that the really best fan writer gets the award in any year. She did, and I was delighted.

Cath's fine. The kids are fine. I'm fine. I'm now down to 10st 9lbs - from 12st 8lbs - sylph-like is me! S'got to be a way of life now - just seem to keep losing. I'm back on the wine, but no beer - well, hardly any beer. I'm a little pissed off with salads though, to tell the truth. (25 June 1975)*

* Dave liked the lists, and so did a few other people. I might have room to include their comments later in the issue. Joe Sanders' piece on Frankenstein received little response (except Lesleigh's comments below). I was expecting a fairly outraged'n'angry reaction to the speeches given by George Turner and Gerald Murnane, but instead received such careful and reasonable arguments as this one from: *

* LESLEIGH LUTTRELL
525 West Main Street, Madison, Wisconsin 53703, USA

I enjoyed SFC 41/42 (how do you decide when it's more than one issue, and not just a largish single issue, by the way?) ((*brg* From the postage rate. A single issue costs 30 cents surface mail to post, but a double issue costs 40 cents.*)) I was especially glad to see Joe Sanders' column, "Re-Visions". I really don't know why Joe decided to start writing for Starling so long ago (before I was associated with it) but I'm certainly glad he did. He really is a good writer, and very dependable, which is even better for a fanzine editor. We finally did meet him, though, when we stopped in Mentor, Ohio to visit Don and Maggie Thompson on our way to the Discon last year. Anyway, I'm glad he's finally started to get some of the attention he deserves.

* The only trouble is that (a) I haven't heard from him since I received the first episode of his column; and (b) he wrote an article for Prehensile (about Silverberg's The Mirror of Infinity collection) that makes me wonder why I believed so much in Joe's critical abilities. I will save my rebuttal for the next SFC. *

Reading SFC brought several vague thoughts to mind, which I'll try to put down here as best I can. I've often thought (and I think this is a common observation made by brighter people in high-school English classes) that critics sometimes get more out of a literary work than the author really put there. I know I wrote papers about aspects of literary works which I knew the authors almost certainly were not aware of when they wrote them (I remember finding lots of evidence in Cyrano de Bergerac that Cyrano was really an extraterrestrial trying to make his way on Earth as best he could.) Sometimes it seems to me that such twistings are wrong, that one shouldn't get more out of a work than the author consciously put there. ((*brg* Gerald Murnane gives a pretty sound rebuttal to this argument in his letter in this issue. I got more out of his book than he put there.*))

But I don't really believe that any more. Suppose young Mary Shelley didn't realise that her novel contained all the elements which Joe found in it. Would it make any difference to Joe's interpretation? I don't think so. Not unless he actually decided to interpret her work in a way which was really the opposite of her intention. No, I think a work of literature (and probably of art as

well) grows as more and more people try to read and interpret it. It seems that the process of what were originally one person's ideas filtering through many other people's minds must add to those ideas. Critics are just people who decide that their filterings are worth putting down on paper and adding to the literary stream. I suppose one can't take a work that was trite to begin with and make something great out of it (although that doesn't mean it can't engender something great and profound, or at least interesting ideas in the minds of some of its readers), but I don't think a literary work is as good when it's first written as it is when it's been read and thought about by lots of people. Shakespeare is a good example. It's hard to imagine even a very careful writer with lots of talent being as good as everyone says Shakespeare is, let alone someone who was trying to turn out commercial plays for a living. But he managed to put in the beginnings of enough ideas, things that could be worked out by the people watching and reading his plays, that he really was a great writer. (I think that if you take this sort of reasoning to an extreme you end up thinking that writers who do try to work out things as far as possible, like James Joyce, aren't really great. I wouldn't go that far.)

That's not very well thought out, and perhaps reflects literary ideas which haven't progressed beyond the college undergraduate stage. Which wouldn't be surprising, since I haven't really taken any literature courses since then. When it comes down to deciding which of the two cultures people should be put into, I'd end up in the scientific culture.

Gerald Murnane's comments are a good illustration of this. Obviously he is the kind of person who is interested in literary ideas, in "what ifs" carried to an extreme, even more so than most s f fans. He seems to like to play with ideas, and admires people who are good at doing the same thing. (I assume from your review of his book that he is good at at.) But he likes his ideas to be about "people" rather than "things". I put those in quotes because I'm not sure that we'd agree on where to draw the line between people and things (science and humanities). He seems to feel that scientific ideas just aren't as valuable as literary ones (and I get the feeling that George Turner feels the same way).

Now, I don't feel that way at all, and I enjoy playing around with scientific ideas more than playing around with literary ones. (I realise that I haven't really distinguished between the two; literary ideas are ideas that are about people, especially about the human mind. Scientific ideas are ideas about everything else in the world. That's a rather lopsided way of putting it, but I hope you see the distinction I'm trying to make.)

There's a lot to be said for both sorts of ideas. It's hard not to be interested in the human mind. We are more or less confined to the limits of our minds, and perhaps exploring those limits is the only worthwhile activity we can engage in. I think it can be argued that not recognising that we are so limited, that we can never see things except through the eyes of a human mind, is one of the biggest mistakes a scientist can make. We can't ever get to absolute knowledge or truth (although the possibility of doing so seems to be something humans like to believe in, and they use religion as a way of pretending they've done so.) I think a scientist's goal is to find out something that agrees with the things that anyone else can observe if they look at things in the same way. Scientists are trying to get at a shared truth. But what I find even more appealling about science is that it studies things outside ourselves. It seems to me that people who spend all their time exploring the human mind are risking falling into the trap of believing that it is the most perfect thing in existence, or perhaps the only thing (everything is an illusion). Man is only a small part of existence (I'll use that word rather than reality so that I can't get into any "What is reality?" debates which are generally pretty pointless). The part of it that exists outside our minds (and that includes our bodies) is worth studying and thinking about.

I get the impression that both Murnane and Turner think that the most worthwhile thing we can do is to try and get into someone else's mind - that to see the world through someone else's eyes, if only for a second, is about the best we can do. Now, I agree that that is an interesting and worthwhile goal. The idea of each individual being their own alternate universe, being the only way we can see into alternate worlds, into the past and the future, is intriguing. But I think you can get at the same thing by working as a scientist and trying to see things, not as someone else might see them, but as everyone can see them. Scientific ideas are subjected to the filtering and reworking process I was talking about even more so than literary ideas, and I think it's a very exciting process. To see an idea or observation of one worker expanded and applied to other areas is to see the scientific way of thinking in action. I suppose, in a way, one can't be a scientist without being a critic, without trying to do something valuable with ideas which originated with someone else. On the other hand, it seems that while all "literary people" (for want of a better term) seem to think they are critics, only a few of them are genuinely able to expand on ideas. (10 June 1975)*

* I'll leave George and Gerald to answer that argument for themselves. Gerald might well answer that, quite simply, he finds literary ideas more interesting than scientific ideas, and that he resents the submergence of literary ideas in general under the weight of scientific ideas in our present culture. (See his review of The Cyberiad in this issue of SFC.) Since I know that George is at least as interested in scientific ideas as he is in literary ideas, I would be interested to see his reply.

Losleigh's answer to George 'n' Gerald came from 10,000 miles away. The other reply came from 100 yards from the place where I live:

DON ASHBY
Magic Pudding Club, 259 Drummond Street, Carlton, Vic 3053

((Re Gerald Murnane's speech:)) In the realm of fantasy there is a dichotomy between fantasy that seeks to explain reality by contrasting it with created reality (arrangement of our reality, with a different emphasis) and the creation of a different reality for the sheer delight of walking through greener fictional pastures.

In the Gormenghast books, the psychological convolutions of Peake's characters and social milieu show sharply the perversity and injustice in our own culture. Each of the major characters represents a "view of life" or "class attitude" in western culture.

On the other hand, The Lord of the Rings is a story, first and last. It is art because it creates, for its own sake, a world. The world of Middle Earth is very little different from our own. There are elves and dwarfs and dragons, but the reactions of these creatures is human, and twentieth-century human at that. The book is written in archaic-English style, but it shows a picture of man. Each of the races of Middle Earth represent man in a certain stage of existence.

The Gormenghast books try to rearrange human values in a way that will, by contrast, highlight our own. Middle Earth uses our own values in a different way. The difference is subtle, and largely is in the intent of the author. From the time that The Lord of the Rings was published, Tolkien denied that it was an allegory. The Gormenghast trilogy is obviously an allegory; it has a didactic purpose, compared with the ennobling, entertaining purpose of Tolkien. *

* But does this distinction say anything about whether one work is actually better than the other? I don't think so. But then Gerald Murnane wasn't really concerned about this point, either. (Go back in your box, Editor.)

* Here's the Cy Chauvin Letter: *

CY CHAUVIN
17829 Peters, Roseville, Michigan 48066, USA

George Turner, in "Back to the Mainstream", says that s f "takes itself far too seriously". That really depends upon who you talk to. Poul Anderson, Jerry Pournelle, and a number of other writers insist that what they write is meant merely as "entertainment", and that they are "competing for the reader's beer money". Surely these writers aren't taking themselves too seriously? Also, different writers have different sorts of aspirations, and yearn after the respect of different sorts of people. Many, perhaps, couldn't care less what literary crtics or English professors think of their work; they are more interested in being taken seriously by the mass media. Others want the respect of sociologists, or scientists. George's generalisation just doesn't hold true. And while George is probably right that there is no such thing as a "literary establishment" ("establishment" is just a piece of jargon anyway), it's also true that s f has never been taught so widely on college campuses and in high school as it is today (at least in the USA).

George says that there are only three people writing s f today who can be called writers of good prose, and he lists Aldiss, Blish, and Compton. I think that's under-estimating s f vastly, even if George is trying to compensate for those who would list every writer who takes pen to paper. Apparently George doesn't think these three writers represent the sum total of "writers of good prose", since he mentions Disch as one in a review a few pages later, and I get the impression that Le Guin isn't too bad either, to judge from his ten-page discourse on The Dispossessed. Dare I list Lafferty and Russ as writers of good prose too? And there are many interesting new writers: Michael Bishop, Keith Roberts, Gardner Dozois, Gene Wolfe... I think we can all agree that George is exaggerating things quite a bit for the purpose of his argument. (3 October 1975)*

* The trouble with prose works in general is that usually the whole has more effect than any of the parts, so that large sections of even the best novels are fairly mediocre prose. Maybe George had this thought in mind when he narrowed the circle so tightly. *

STANISLAW LEM
Krakow, Poland

Thank you for SFC 41/42. It is curious to what a degree what I publish (as s f criticism in the first place) divides the set of readers sharply into two radically opposed subsets: the approving minority and the antagonised majority, as if every text of mine were a catalyst. The dumb readers are no problem at all, but rather those such as

Mr Turner, who surely is a reasonable being, and I am mostly in agreement with his opinions concerning literature in general. But then, because he is very strong antagonised by Lem, he disapproves not of what I did write, but of what he thinks I have written, and what he can know b, hearsay only (Phantastics and Futurology). Perhaps he thinks that in this book (two volumes really, but no more than 700 pages together) I have compared futurology, as "the positive", with s f as "the negative". This was not the case; I proved only what a lot of nonsense one can find here and there, and I did plead for a non-existent s f, value- and science-oriented at the same time. I am sorry to say this, but it is nonsensical to say, as was said in SFC 41/42, that men of science are wonderful, but not science itself. There is simply no substance for any kind of comparison ("What is more splendid, an apple or an apple tree?"). Science is simply falsifiable knowledge of what is the case, including the never-ceasing effort at transgressing all human limitations, ie a task never to be really accomplished, since it implies the knowledge of the whole man (self-knowledge), and the futility of this task can now be proved beyond any doubt. Because of this, there is an antinomy hidden in the heart of science; it is insatiable, full of awe and of despair for the world, and for itself too (being self-reflexive). As only "partially" an s f author, I did plead in my book for the incorporation of scientific paradigmatics into the arts (not into s f only), because to judge something (in this case science), one must understand it at first hand. The contempt for science, even if perfectly understandable in our times, is a misapprehension and a danger at the same time. A "post-scientific civilisation" must be a shambles, ruin and chaos, since there is no other way for mankind of 4 billion beings. This number alone implies that technology is the only instrument of survival, and technology implies per necessitum science. Because of specialisation, today there are many scientists who do not know what science as a whole is: a truly dangerous situation. (29 April 1975)*

* That's the end of the "heavy" bit of SFC; now here's the self-indulgent bit: *

* BILL SCHAUB
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The opening list/reviews/stream-of-consciousness and the favourites lists were the highlights of SFC 41/42 to me. I too am a lists fan. Some comments on the publishers' listings: I have a so-far unread copy of The Werewolf of Paris which I bought after a mention by Sturgeon. In a review of Ice (Galaxy 1/72), Sturgeon calls it one of the handful of "unique" books. (The only defining characteristic mentioned is that "not even the author can copy a 'unique'".) The other unique books: A J Langguth's Jesus Christs (I can see why, and if you are unfamiliar with it, I recommend it highly); ((*brg* It's sitting beside my bed, waiting for me to familiarise myself with it.*)) Catch-22; Wylie's Finnley Wren; and, to the point, Endore's The Werewolf of Paris and Methinks My Lady.

From the lines you quoted from The Eighty-Minute Hour, I don't think I could stomach it, jape or no. But thanks for mentioning the Ketterer book, which I had passed over earlier. I'm glad you uncovered What Mad Universe, a book I enjoyed greatly a few years ago, and which has long been out of print in the US. I know that when Charlie Brown asked for suggestions to Bantam Books on which items on their backlist they ought to reprint, What Mad Universe was one of the two suggestions I made. As to your proposed investigation of the early 1950s' s f - an acquaintance and occasional s f reader mentioned to me, circa 1967, that the best s f novels were written in the early 1950s. I disagreed, and then found myself listing novel after novel among my favourites that was a product of this era, eg A Mirror for Observers, City.

You introduced me to Stanley Elkin whom, if I had seen his name previously, I had confused with Stanley Ellin, who writes mysteries/suspense novels I've never read. I read first The Dick Gibson Show a couple of months ago, and bits of it have been coming back to me ever since. An excellent, memorable novel, which contains several of the funniest segments of my recent reading. A week ago I read "The Bailbondsman" and "The Making of Ashenden". The latter I did not think exceptional; the former most certainly was. (1 September 1975)*

* No bookshop in Melbourne imports books by Stanley Elkin, but about three months ago about 100 remaindered copies of the Random House edition of The Dick Gibson Show were on sale in Myers for a dollar each. :: I've bought Stanley Ellin as well, on the recommendation of Ed Cagle. Keith Curtis recommended Finnley Wren to me, and even gave me a copy.

* DON D'AMMASSA
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I have just a few comments to make on SFC 41/42:

1 I have not read Castaneda either, so you're not alone. I do have a copy of the first three books, though, and I suppose that one of these days I'll read them out of curiosity if nothing else. I have an ingrained dislike of mysticism.

2 The best first novel in the genre of all time has to be A Canticle for Leibowitz.

3 Damon Knight's last novel was The Tree of Time, alias Beyond the Barrier. Double Meaning is the original title of The Rithian Terror; it's quite old.

4 Aldiss' best novel is Greybeard. So there.

5 Malevil struck me as very close to Earth Abides, although the characterisation struck me as what would happen if Heinlein were more rational about his philosophy and could present his position with some degree of objectivity. I was very impressed by it.

* Unfortunately, the main character of Malevil has the same taste for smug cynicism as have the main characters of most of Heinlein's novels. The fine writing in many parts of the book makes me think that Merle was satirising his main character, but there's little internal evidence (except Thomas' epilogue) to back up this opinion. *

6 I can see from your discussion of More than Human that you and I have radically different views of literature. As it happens, I find Malzberg, for example, very erratic, ranging from some of the best stuff in the genre (Beyond Apollo) to some trivial private jokes (Destruction of the Temple).(21 September 1975)*

* ANDREW WEINER
610 Querbes, Apt 15, Outremont, Montreal, Quebec, Canada

((SFC 41/42)): On Malzberg. Not fair. The man overwrites relentlessly, repeats himself interminably, has written some fantastically dreadful stuff, and yet...and yet he seems to me perhaps, just possibly, some kind of genius. Specifically, a comic genius. This may be just a private taste for mutant Jewis humour, but I thought Herovit's World was hilarious; similarly The Falling Astronauts, some of Beyond Apollo, most of his short stories. Malzberg's work I understand as mostly an attack on WASP values, particularly WASP s f values (Campbell, Astounding), machinemen problem-solving their way to the stars and wondering whether they left the tap running. I think he's worked very hard and very seriously to get at the fundamental absurdity of the Apollo program.

* But he seems to have substituted the Protestant Work Ethic for (possibly) WASP values and (often) style and taste. He writes too much too fast : *

On Bester's Tiger! Tiger! I disagree again. An extraordinary novel, I think: great pulp humanism - but there's no sense arguing about it.

On Ayn Rand: I don't know much about Australian politics but I do know about Ayn Rand and Mungo McCallum misrepresents her. Great leaders, private armies, and so on may be favourites with Heinlein, but Ayn Rand is first and foremost an individualist-free market-Libertarian and has written against them often enough. Whether or not her own ideas make sense is another question, but McCallum should at least research them out before dismissing them. (6 July 1975)*

* Believe it or not, there was actually a Randist party which fielded candidates in the latest elections (whose results, no doubt, have seeped even into Canadian newspapers). The party is called, in a masterpiece of Doublethink nomenclature, the Workers Party. It gained an average of 1 per cent of the vote in seats where it stood candidates. Meanwhile, our new National Leader, whose bedtime reading is (he says) Ayn Rand, has yet to show the colours of zany megalomania which I find in Rand's writing, and which showed every now and again during the campaign. One can only tremble to think what will happen if Fraser's economic theories are as far behind the times as those recommended in Atlas Shrugged. *

* ALAN SANDERCOCK
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Your list of books up at the front of SFC 41/42 was quite impressive. I haven't read any of the latest Aldiss, although I am told by Paul Stokes that The Eighty-Minute Hour makes exciting reading. I have exactly the same attitude to the books of Anne McCaffrey as you seem to have: I simply find them boring and wonder why I am reading one of them when I am halfway through. I didn't like The Unsleeping Eye and finally threw my DAW edition across my bedroom out of sheer annoyance at Compton's persistent avoidance of "sense of wonder". In throwing out the bathwater of pulp s f, Compton has thrown out the baby of visionary qalities as well. I read The Dispossessed a while ago and enjoyed it immensely. I read it from the beginning under the impression that it was a philosophical novel rather than a political one, and simply accepted it as a philosophical novel which explores the problem of the individual in society. :: Your lists of best stories and films for the various years is quite interesting, but I can't say that I've actually read many of the novels, for example. Of your list for 1974, I've read only The Castle, The Cyberiad, and Rendezvous with Rama. I'm reading America currently, inbetween writing the thesis and reading the odd passage from The Mote in God's Eye. I would also like to read Inverted World sometime before I cast my Hugo vote. I am quite intrigued by this novel, especially after reading John Brosnan's interview with Priest in S F Monthly. Priest said that he was influenced by the author John Fowles, and especially the novel The French Lieutenant's Woman. (4 May 1975)*

* Well, here we are at the 8th February, 1976. Unless a miracle happens, soon I will be celebrating the first anniversary of the previous SFC... It's embarrassing, especially as I have been working on this issue consistently, conscientiously, and with no more than one coffee break per hour, since the second week of October. And then there's the heartbreak story of the Tucker Issue, but I won't go into that. After all, this is the Guaranteed Non-Lugubrious Issue of SFC, and not even John Counsel is going to make me break that guarantee. (But the story is heart-breaking...)

Now that all the pages of this issue except six are printed, we come at last to the bit called:

I ALSO HEARD FROM...

* I heard from Phyrne, Franz, and Andy, who sent three of the best letters I received about SFC 41/42, but who did not want their letters to be published. :: WOLFGANG KOHLER (DDR-7901 Winkel, Haupstrasse 44, Kreis Bad Leibenwerda - which may or may not be another name for East Germany) who is 22 years old, works in a factory, has met Stanislaw Lem, and would like to exchange letters with s f fans in the West. I haven't had time to conduct a regular correspondence with him, so maybe somebody Out There would like to write to him. "I also like good music, pop music and classical, pop music from good old times, like Beatles, Stones, The Doors, Hollies...but also some modern groups - Pink Floyd with their phantastical sound." :: WERNER KOOPMANN, this time from West Germany, has sent his list of his favourites for several years running. It's hard to summarise from his lists, since I'm not sure whether the items are in order. In '73 he liked such s f as Vance's The Star King, Blish's A Clash of Cymbals, and A Canticle for Leibowitz. For 1974: Best Non-Fiction: Rape of the Taxpayer, by Philip Stern; Best Book of Cartoons: Isnogud der Grosswesir, by Goscinny and Tabary; Best Novel: Voss, by Patrick White (good on yer, Werner); Best Crime Novel: Perry Mason und der Tote Skipper, by Erle Stanley Gardner; Best Humour: Nicht so laut vor Jericho, by E Kishon; Best Book about Science Fiction: Science Fiction: What It's All About, by Sam Lundwall; Best S F: Winterplanet, by Ursula K Le Guin (known otherwise, I suspect, as The Left Hand of Darkness). :: ERIC LINDSAY, speaking on behalf of several other SFC readers, mentions that I and the general run of SFC reviewers "act as almost perfect 'negative reviewers' for me and for several other Sydney fans. If you recommend a book in glowing terms I can be nearly positive that I will dislike it (there have been exceptions - Le Guin comes to mind." Eric also asked how freelance writing was suiting me. At the beginning of 1975 I had $1000 in the bank. By the end of the year I had nothing. Perhaps I'll do better in '76. :: PHILIP DICK sent a long letter in which he berated Stanislaw Lem for what seem like incompetent and/or dirty dealings about reprinting books in Poland. Unfortunately, Phil also attacked Lem personally in what I considered to be a quite unjustified way. Phil has never come back at me on the matter, but complained in their magazine to the members of the SFWA. The whole problem is being chewed over there, so I think I will still leave the original letter unpublished, unless Phil asks me particularly to print it here. :: MIKE GLICKSOHN regretted getting no more than a line or so's mention in SFC 39, but forgot that nobody was mentioned much in that issue. In fact, half my trip report has never been written, and I would like to add much more to the material which appeared in SFC 40 about the second half of the trip. :: BRIAN ALDISS sent one of those short notes which keep me publishing this damn magazine no matter what: "With the autumn, I've settled down to a new regime which includes not answering any letters, not paying any bills and settling comfortably down over the winter to write two novels I very much want to write. This new regime began four days ago and I haven't weakened yet. But I have to just look up and say thanks for the lively SFCs 38 and 40..." In a dnq note which followed SFC 41/42, Brian mentions that he has finished at least one of those novels. :: AKITSUGU TASHIRO and I had an unsatisfactory exchange of letters about a stray phrase I used in SFC 40. We never did solve anything, but I hope it did make me a bit more careful. :: JOAN DICK agreed with George Turner's feeling, expressed in SFC 38, "that mankind is young, at the beginning of evolution, not the end or even the middle: the best is yet to come." Joan made dozens of short points about SFC 41/42, beginning with an attitude which I find incomprehensible: "Personally, I read s f as pure escapism, and Tamarisk Row sounds like a rehashed kaleidoscope of everything that happened to me...my husband...and/or friends and relations in years gone past. That is not what I read." But then Joan says, quite in kindness, I'm sure, but rather contradictorily, "Dear Bruce, climb out of the books and find life, just outside the front door waiting for you to arrive." Joan then provides a list of her favourite short stories, or at least those which she doesn't think I will have heard of. I'm not familiar with "The Gardener", by Margaret St Clair, "The Snowball Effect" by Katherine Maclean, or "Desertion", by Clifford Simak, but "Grandpa", by James Schmitz is, I think, one of the very best s f short stories ever written. :: JOE SANDERS' letter of 9 December 1974 was just about the last letter on Lem's "S F: A Hopeless Case" to thud into my letterbox, and he disagrees with Lem for much the same reasons as everyone else did. Ho hum. Maybe I can get Joanna Russ to write an essay showing just why Lem's diagnosis of s f is so accurate. Joe does say some nice things about faith, hope, and love, topics which intrude into the pages of SFC from time to time, to everybody's dismay. "Hope does spring eternal. Even cliches can be true, under the crust of overuse... In the meantime, confronting the gap between your desire and reality. Laugh...God is an eternal practical joker, and He delights in the laughter of those who can take the joke well." With a wry grin, perhaps? :: VIRGINIA KIDD sends me very encouraging letters and notes

from time to time, but I don't send back letters often enough. Sorry, Virginia. She suggests for the cover of SFC 38: "Wherefore sawest thou me?" Virginia sent me an address for Josephine Saxton, and some description of Josephine herself. (Incidentally, I've just received what must be the best fanzine for 1975 - or for most other recent years - Khatru 3/4, edited by Jeff Smith - which is mainly the "Women in Science Fiction" symposium. In that long issue, at least two of the contributors become angry over the fact that so little of Josephine Saxton's work has been published, and even less has been released in England, her home country, than in USA.) Right at the end of her second letter, Virginia writes, "Stay well and (silly thing to say) be happy. Be ready to be happy. I am sure you are overdue for something marvellous...that no one else deserves." After reading a comment like that, what can I do but be happy? *Glow.* :: PERRY CHAPDELAINE writes that he agrees with Lem's "Hopeless Case") and Turner/Foyster (SFC 38) at the same time, which is some feat. He does point out that Lem and Turner may not even be arguing about the same things. :: WALDEMAR KUMMING has read Lem's essay in the original German, so his comments, sent directly to John Foyster, are interesting. According to Waldemar, Lem's logic would lead him to conclude that "the SFWA is obviously a subdivision of fandom. Now, if we can manage to take over the publishers too..." After looking at several other instances, Waldemar concludes that "It's 'facts' like these that make us take the words of wisdom from the pen of the alleged all-time s f superstar with at least a teaspoon of salt, much as I like many of his stories." :: DAVID TAEUSCH sent two quotes for my collection: "As the Australian said when the boomerang hit him in the back of the head: 'Things have taken a turn for the worse.'" (Amos and Andy). And: "A good book review tries to give you the impression that you have read a book when all you have read is the review." (Inglish Bowan and Gehlmann Schramm, Adventures in American Literature). Well, that's what I aim to do. :: PAUL ANDERSON has lots of different comments about different subjects. He doesn't think much of the Hugo nominees; thinks I was "a bit unkind to Dragonquest"; doesn't like Compton - "too often his books seem to be devoid of all emotion on the part of the characters"; finds it incredible that I "could actually place The Cyberiad, Aldiss, and Rendezvous With Rama above The Dispossessed" on my list for '74. Any year now, Paul, I will write my proposed article about The Best S F Novels of '74, and show why I did what I did. Paul reports that The Conversation filled a cinema for four weeks in Adelaide when it was released there, but so far no cinema management in Melbourne will give the film even the courtesy of a fortnight's try-out here. :: SHAYNE McCORMACK: "I think SFC 41/42 is quite the most marvellous fanzine I have seen in a long time." Thank you, Shayne. :: BERND FISCHER has sent me a great long letter including his "Favourites" for '75, but that letter will have to wait until next issue, since I can't find it right at the moment. In the meantime, he says that he saw Tarkovsky's Andrei Rublev ("even better than Solaris"), read the German edition of Gene Wolfe's The Fifth Head of Cerberus ("I liked it."), and notes that Lem's S F and Futurology still had not been published in Germany by the middle of 1975. :: MICHAEL SHOEMAKER says that Foyster and Turner need not have worried about Lem's article because "there is one fact that must be kept in mind at all times: Lem is a Communist. When that is understood it explains everything." I wrote back to Mike, asking him, more or less, if he had actually seen Lem's party membership card. (Actually, I suspect that John Foyster speaks from a position that is considerably to the left of Lem's - and I see Lem as, at heart, a Catholic rationalist.) :: BRIAN THUROGOOD complains that "too many literary comparisons and putdowns of s f seem to be creeping in...too involved in introspection and existential importance." You can't say that in SFC, Brian. You must remember that I am the shadow Minister for Introspection in the Fanarchist Party which will take power when justice reigns and the trufans of the world take over. :: PAUL WALKER says, in a short letter, "You must try Lanier's Hiero's Journey. It is gaining some popularity here, and is quite well done." :: SYD BOUNDS sent, as usual, a whole lot of short comments which I cannot summarise. Still, a paragraph which caught my attention: "So '74 was a non-year...'I went freelance and stayed alive.' Of course. But how many other people manage this? In time you will realise this is no small achievement and that a lot of fans - stuck in factories, offices, shops - envy you. I know that when I first went full-time, the year flashed by - but I didn't consider it a non-year. I suspect you are just discovering that writing full-time is work...and full-time work. Glad you made it anyway." When I was in England, Syd had been forced to take a factory job for awhile but, last I heard, he was freelancing himself again. Yes, I am conscious of the privileges bestowed upon me, Syd - the "non-year" was more in other aspects of my life. Syd also says that my essay on Tamarisk Row is interesting for the background it shows on yourself - was that the intention?" Of course. "I note the book is in the local library and will get around to reading it one day."

I have an idea that I've left out some letters that should have been mentioned here. That's because my letter file is in even more chaos than usual. I recall some comments by Van Ikin, for instance, but will just have to wait til his letter rises in the normal course of letters-floating-to-the-surface-of-piles-of-paper-round-Gillespie's-flat. Thanks to everybody who wrote, and I hope that you will write again about this issue, the Tucker issue (when... if...), and the forthcoming Silverberg issue. Seeyuz.

Last stencil typed 8 February 1976.*

FURTHER REMINDER to subscribers, librarians, and others that, for all practical purposes, this issue is actually SFC 43/44 - with subs due if yours finishes with this issue.

EDITOR

MENTIONED
IN
S F COMMENTARY 44/45

EDITOR