

SNICKERSNEE

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Published at extremely infrequent intervals for the Fantasy Amateur Press Association by Bob Silverberg, Box 13160 Station E, Oakland, California 94661. Mimeo work this issue by somebody, maybe even Susan Wood, but at the time of stencilling I don't have the foggiest. If you are reading this, someone is being gypped of credit for a lot of messy work being done on my behalf.

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The trouble, dear friends, is one of temporal discontinuity. I contribute to FAPA once a year, usually in summer, since my membership is of the November-to-August cycle; once, when we were all very young, and some of us weren't even born, I was more active in this fine organization than that, but one of our quaint customs is the tradition of Distinguished Senior Deadwood, folks like Elmer Perdue and Helen Wesson and Sam Moskowitz, who hang on decade after decade, arising now and then to scatter a few pages of joy through the mailing. I am of that gifted company. I am, actually, not nearly as senior as Perdue and Wesson and Moskowitz, since I joined FAPA as recently as November of 1949, and all three of them were already on the roster when I came in. But I figure I've been around long enough to assume the privileges of an eight-pager, letting all you tads (Warner, Calkins, Carr, Moffatt) crowd the bundles with your frantic and feverish output.

Very well, but in that kind of deal you never do get any real conversations going in the mailing, not when you drop in once a year like that. Things become too ancient too fast. There is the additional problem that I am always three to five mailings behind in reading the damned things. I do read them, every one of them, but I fell behind in 1968 during the Great Houseburning Episode, and I never have caught up, so at the moment I'm working my way through the early 1975 mailings, plodding diligently onward toward the happy moment when a new mailing arrives and I get right down to it. Which makes for jumpy conversation too.

For example, a couple of years ago Seth McEvoy had some remarks in his FAPazine on the subject of literary style to which I wanted to reply. I'm not sure even if McEvoy is still a member of our

little band, and I'm not going to look it up now, because of the quaint two³/₄ building arrangement of my living quarters here; the current mailing is over in the main house, and I'm out back of the swimming pool in the room I do my typing. But even if McEvoy is no longer around to hear what I have to say, I'll say it anyway, because I'll never have a timelier opportunity. "Most people," Seth wrote, "advise writers to pick a style, imitate it for a while, and then branch out into your own style. I would say just the opposite. Pick your own style, and work with it until you are able to stand on your own two feet. After you have learned to write a readable story, then is the time to start looking around and see how other people write stories, and see if there is any technique or trick that you can borrow from them. But until you are able to write your own style well, you won't have any good way to compare, and to decide who is a good stylist and what is a good style to choose."

Well, yes, but also no. What I would have told Seth, had I been doing mailing comments in proper sequence back in 1974 when that appeared, is that it doesn't make a whole lot of sense to talk about "what is a good style to choose." A gifted parodist, a Terry Carr or a Dick Lupoff or a John Sladek, can slip into another writer's style as a stunt, and do a creditable Asimov or Ballard or Ellison number. Sometimes a professionally published story of a non-parodic nature is a deliberate donning of someone else's style too: Chip Delany once did a Zelaznyoid story as an act of friendly homage, and a recent anthology contains a splendid George R.R. Martin story that is pure and obviously conscious Jack Vance, and I've written a few stories in the tones of Vance and of Philip K. Dick, just for the hell of it. But that's no way to conduct an entire career.

There are also plenty of imitations done, not as finger exercises, but as the result of some inner confusion about one's own voice. (Or maybe as an attempt to sell stories.) I get an amazing number of submissions to NEW DIMENSIONS that are obvious attempts at writing late-Silverberg stories, and some of them sound incredibly like my own stuff. (Some of them get bought, too. If I didn't like the way I wrote stories, I wouldn't have written that way, and sometimes I like it when other people do it that way.) But what I would have told McEvoy back then, if I had been doing mailing comments back then, is that it's futile to choose styles. Styles choose you. "The style is the man himself," said Georges de Buffon in 1753. (He said it in French. That was his style.) Style is

not something a writer normally slips on casually, like a polo shirt; the style is the man himself, there in the bones, the sinews, the gristle. Sam Moskowitz is an earnest, rather Teutonic sort, a heavy-artillery type, a bit on the ponderous side in personal mannerisms, in way of thinking, in his total approach to life. Sam can be quite funny on occasions, even a bit sly, but there is nothing mercurial about him, and his writing style mirrors that. Walt Willis, on the other hand, is nimble, self-effacing, a bit fey, and so is his writing, agile, pun-dappled, underplayed. Listen to their voices a while -- Moskowitz' famed basso boom, audible six counties away, and Willis' soft, lilting Belfast brogue -- and you understand at once that Sam's touch with prose will be a heavy one, Walt's elfin. They don't write as they do because they want to write that way; they do it because they are that way. The style is the man himself.

A style grows and changes, as people do. As a writer gains experience in handling the tools, his work is apt to become more supple, more richly shaded, more vigorous, more vivid. Yet a klutz will always have an ineluctable klutziness at the heart of his prose, and a person of grace will manifest that grace in schooldays compositions. As for quirks of style -- Bradbury's unmistakable tone of the Martian Chronicles days, Phil Dick's feverish intensity, Vance's stateliness -- these things are in part deliberately assumed, but in general are mere outgrowths of the consciousness within. When I wrote in the Vance tone, it was a stunt; when Vance does it, it's because Vance is Vance, and expresses himself accordingly.

What does a young writer, a McEvoy, do about the problem of style? Worry about it, if he is McEvoy. Imitate Silverberg or Delany or Ellison, if he is X or Y or Z. But I think the only viable approach to the problem of style is to set out to write as clearly and directly as you can, and to hell with frills. Attempt to communicate. Everyone's notion of what is immediate communication differs; your goal of being direct will inescapably express itself in your own voice. Even if you don't know what your voice sounds like, you can't help speaking with it; so too with style. As you grow, you may shape your voice a bit, but it still is a function of your own innate equipment. Ellison, Silverberg, Vance, Dick, and all the rest don't make much effort to write in their characteristic styles. They write that way because that's how they write. (I spoke just now on this topic to Terry Carr, who reminded me of a Jack Woodford essay on style, the essence of which is, "After you've

been writing for a while, you'll discover that you tend to write in a certain way. This is known as your style." Yes.

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Gestetner work on this issue was supposed to have been done by Susan Wood of far-off lovely Vancouver. ("Sue," as she is popularly known, especially by the same sort of people at conventions who call me "Robert.") But rumor descends from the northland that Ms. Wood has dropped out of FAPA and for all I know she's hocked her Gestetner, and though she will be here in sunny Northern California a couple of weeks from now I feel like doing these stencils right this minute, in the hope that I'll get them run off by someone somewhere. It was all a lot simpler in the old days, when stencils were STENCILS and all brands were interchangeably holed.

I am still living on welfare checks and food stamps, editing s-f anthologies in my spare time, and doing no writing at all. My retirement has now stretched over fourteen blissful months, and I like it a whole lot. Since last bulletin I have cleared about a quarter of an acre of wasted land here and planted all sorts of stuff the names of which will mean nothing to any of you except Don Fitch. (Who will be delighted to know that the *Hibiscus hugelii* that I picked up at the gift shop of the LA Arboretum last October came through Northern California's one-day winter, the snowstorm of Feb 5, without any scathement at all, and is growing enormous and has been covered by gaudy huge lavender blooms constantly since early April.)

Briefly I unretired last September to do the screenplay for the Star Trek movie. It seemed like a whole lot of fun to write a movie, and there would of course have been a ton of money in it too, so what the hell, what the hell, I went down to Hollywood and talked to Paramount, and fabricated a story idea for them, and sold them a treatment. A treatment is what we prose writers sometimes call an "outline." My Star Trek treatment ran about 10,000 words, and I received for it a sum larger than any book

publisher has ever advanced me for a novel. But I never wrote the screenplay, and, last I heard, no one else has either; and the picture, a guaranteed moneymaker if there ever was one, is apparently on the shelf. That's Hollywood, as the man said. In the course of the project, though, I watched ten or twelve Star Trek episodes, never having paid much attention to the show when it was alive, and a little to my surprise I found myself quite charmed by the whole thing, even fascinated. A lot of people who ought to know better thought I was slumming when I took the Star Trek job -- obviously a writer like Silverberg, who turns out that arty hifalutin' fiction and who is in no need of money for its own sake, has no business working on anything as trashy as Star Trek, they said -- but in fact I was rather looking forward to the job, because I perceived, after my period of research, just how well done the show had been, what a genuine s-f accomplishment it was. (At least in the first two years.) So no, I didn't clamber aboard the Enterprise to make a quick buck, nor did I ever have a patronizing attitude toward the assignment, and I think that if Paramount had let me make the movie I wanted to write, the result would have been something extraordinary. On the other hand, they probably would have hoked the script up mercilessly after it left my hands, and I'd have nothing to show for my efforts except a big blotch on my escutcheon and seventy-odd paltry thousand dollars.

Anyway, I'm not going to write the Star Trek movie, and I'm not currently fishing for Hollywood work of any other kind, although I've been fished for by Hollywood on a couple of other thus far abortive projects; I'm available but not actively so. I have no immediate plans for writing fiction, either. The mood of bitterness and anger with which I terminated my career has largely dissipated, but in retirement I've found plenty of other creative ways to amuse myself, and the thought of interrupting them just to write more stories seems altogether bizarre to me. One reason I quit, of course, is that my books were going out of print; now it seems that they're mostly going to come back in print, and there is also a vast and very gratifying Silverberg book going on in five or six foreign countries; but, paradoxical as it may seem, the more reprints and foreign sales that turn up, the less likely I am to do new writing. I think if my work had vanished from view everywhere forever, I might ultimately have been driven to write

something else if only to see my name in print again -- for it is, you know, the unceasing lust for egoboo that is the only motivation for writing anything. But here I am signing contracts for Urdu and Swahili editions of DYING INSIDE, for Antarctic rights to THE THIRTEENTH IMMORTAL, for a Polish edition with introductions by Ivar Jorgenson. My cup runneth over.

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This past April Barbara and I visited Morocco -- in what may have been the last overseas trip I take for a long, long time. We had long wanted to go to Morocco, not only out of the usual love of the exotic but also specifically because San Francisco has an odd little enclave of superb Moroccan restaurants, and we had become so enamored of the local version of Moroccan food that we itched to try the authentic item on its home turf. But once I was there I found that I hated the place, and was suffering from terminal homesickness besides, and I couldn't wait to get out.

It's a pretty place. Last night, looking at Barbara's slides of the trip, I couldn't help responding to the scenery -- the mysterious winding labyrinthine medieval streets of Fez and Marrakesh, the rugged beauty of the Sahara, the strange mud-brick fortresses in the oases, and all that. And yet, and yet -- the trouble with Morocco is that it's full of Moroccans, genial and attractive folk who believe that Allah put tourists into the world for their special benefit. Sixteen hours a day I found myself badgered by natives, from the ages of three to ninety-seven, trying to sell me things. (Guide services, mostly, but also woolen rugs, brass plates, jewelry, skullcaps, taxi rides, postcards, what-all else.) I have been beleaguered by such entrepreneurs on nine or ten continents, but never with such persistence as in Morocco, and it turned me off totally. There are occasions when I really do want to hire a guide (my Surinam trip would have been infinitely less enjoyable without the remarkable Boggel) or buy a rug or even pick up some postcards; but I want to do it at my own rhythm, and the rest of the time I simply want to be left alone to wander. They don't let you do that in Morocco. They follow you. They pluck at your sleeves. They wheedle you in six or seven languages. You tell

them No, in six or seven languages. You make furious gestures. You rend and tear your clothes in exasperation. And still they follow you. Most of them mean well; but some don't. (My quintessential memory of Morocco is of a five-year-old boy in the marketplace of Marrakesh who tried to sell Barbara a handful of shish-kebab skewers. She didn't want any, but she stooped and asked him some sort of question of the kind one asks cherubic little urchins, something like, "How old are you?" or "Where did you learn to speak English?"

"You buy skewers?" he asked again.

"We don't want any," Barbara said.

"Fuck off, then," the cherub murmured.

And so it goes. And so I went, straight up the wall. The food wasn't all that sublime, either -- just as good as we can get in San Francisco, and on occasions better, but my craving for Moroccan food can be assuaged a lot easier than by hauling myself off to North Africa, I now realize.

The Sahara was pretty. Nice dunes, a lot like those in Death Valley. Barbara rode a camel. I climbed a dune. The oasis towns were madly picturesque. The would-be guides didn't cluster as avidly down there, although there were plenty of them.

I spoke a lot of Snorsk. Snorsk is a language I invented in East Africa years ago for the sake of beating off the postcard-peddlers; it's a mixture of pseudo-Scandinavian, bastard Esperanto, and sheer doubletalk, guaranteed to defeat the linguistic skills of even the most polyglot persecutor of tourists. It goes like this:

BOY: You want to buy postcards?

ME (with apologetic smile and shrug): Scoos, yi taler ikke Snorsk.

BOY: What language you speak?

ME: Snorsk, taler ikke.

BOY: You speaka Inglis? Sprechen Deutsch?

ME: Snorsk. Sola taler Snorsk. Yik vis? Nov schmoz ka pop?

BOY: Parlez-vous Francais? (Desperately). Se habla espanol?

ME: Snorsk. Gitten mittnish, min frind.

It works pretty well on anyone up to the age of fifteen or so. Above that, I have trouble keeping a straight face, and at least one Moroccan penetrated the ruse by a process of trying all the French obscenities he knew, one at a time, in a purely conversational tone, just to see if I'd react; he finally broke me up, and I confessed I knew a little English, and he then told me what

he was trying to do, which was to sell me some dope. (I didn't buy. Going home the next day and didn't feel much like carrying illegals into the United States, no matter how cheap the price.)

I was very glad to see California again. I think I've just retired as a traveling giant.

Of course, it wasn't all Morocco's fault. Barbara was more tolerant of the incessant huckstering than I was, and loved the place. I was programmed against it from the start. On the plane heading across the Atlantic, on the very first day of the trip, an hour or so out of San Francisco, I found myself thinking, "Every minute that passes brings me a minute closer to home." That is not the most positive way to start a journey.

The thing is that California, after nearly five years, still seems like a trip to me. I don't want to go anywhere else because I'm on perpetual holiday here, buzzing around from Eureka to San Diego, from the Sierra to the desert. This is, after all, a part of the world that other people travel thousands of miles to see, that I used to travel thousands of miles to see before I woke up and moved here. To the native Californian, the local wonders are old stuff, taken for granted, practically invisible. To me, after even this much continuous immersion, it's an endlessly fascinating landscape; and, so long as I'm right here, with the comforts of home around me and all these miraculous things besides, the impulse to travel to far lands and contend with airports, customs officials, bellhops, ~~postcard~~ hucksters, currency swindlers, and all the rest of that routine is absolutely not present in me. I begin to see now that much of my wanderlust of earlier years was a function of living in New York, which is also a place that people travel thousands of miles to see, but which is the sort of place whose climate and general emotional ambiance encourage frequent departures therefrom.

Of course, had I not traveled so much in the past, I might feel more of an urge to gad around the world now, California or no. But the combination of factors keeps me home. For the first time in at least fifteen years I have no major travel plans even in the formulative stage, unless you count an upcoming trip to ...ah...Kansas City.

Kahsas City?

Oh, well. See y'all there.

-- Bob Silverberg

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