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Redd Boggs' Spirochete

BRECKENRIDGE AND THE CONUNDRUM

The other night I tried to phone my friend Nikki in Oakland and misdialed (yes, I too make a FEW mistakes now and then). Instead of Nikki I reached the phone of a doctor who rather than subscribing to an answering service like most doctors has his office phone equipped during after-hours with an answering machine. Even before I told to wait for the beep I had my message formulated. "Dr Smeet'?" I said gutterally in a foreign accent -- but god knows which one -- "Thrasna derzing vleenor mootrig groster." I came down hard on the last word, and then continued in similar tones with similar pseudo-words till the tape ran out. I felt that this would give the doctor (or his receptionist) something to think about when he played back his messages in the morning. Who knows, it might brighten his day. Like the self-possessed young woman in Saki's "The Open Window" I try to bring a little sunshine into each life that I touch.

Although in the past I have left ambiguous messages on somebody's answering machine that I reached by mistake, I had almost forgotten the childish delight of such tomfoolery till I happened to reach that doctor's answering device the other evening. When I was a kid I discovered that I could talk in unintelligible doubletalk without effort, and I often did it back then, just for the fun of it. Where I learned to glossolate, or "speak in tongues," I don't remember. Unlike the gargling evangelicals such as Jimmy Swaggart and Pat Robertson, who proclaim, in the red-letter words of Christ, "In my name shall they cast out devils; they shall speak with new tongues" (Mark 16:17), I didn't discover the trick, or cultivate it, as a Christian exercise. I did it for godless pleasure, a romp in the service of Euphrosyne. As they can too, perhaps, I could turn it on or off at will. There was nothing at all ecstatic or irrational about it.

I tried to remember when I did it for the first time, back in my misspent boyhood. The earliest occasion I could recall was the day I stumbled climbing the front steps of the Breckenridge (Minnesota) city hall, where the public library was located, and hit my head on the front door of the building. I suppose I was hurrying to return some books and borrow others. As a skinny eight- and nine-year-old I was a frequent visitor to the library. Sometimes I went twice a day, having read the first books before the library closed, giving me time to rush back and return them and borrow others. I read very nearly every book in that little library: boys books, girls books, grown-up books. In an alcove at the rear I even found a book, uncatalogged, that no one else had ever borrowed or perhaps even looked at. It was a slim volume of Lord Dunsany's one-act plays, which I read with great pleasure and amazement. I had never heard of him before. In Berkeley, 40 years later, I found and bought a secondhand copy of the same book, whose contents came back to me with an alienated majesty.

I must have climbed those few steps up from the sidewalk five hundred times before, but this time I fell and bumped my head, and the books in my hand scattered in all directions. I rolled over dizzily and sat up, feeling a trickle of warm blood coursing down my forehead. As I fumbled for a handkerchief to stanch the blood, a friendly hand reached down and picked up the books I had dropped.

A large elderly man said, "Are you all right, kid?" in a worried voice, gazing down at me solicitously. Sprawled bloodily on the top step I must have looked in bad shape. The poor fellow sounded as if he were about to call the doctor. Instantly, the devil having prompted me, I knew what to do. "I feel...very...vrenom plitch frotritomis," I said in a shaky voice (I didn't have to fake that). I picked myself up slowly and accepted the books he handed me. "Brema griks..." I

faltered and limped into the library. The man watched me narrowly as I departed, his expression a mixture of consternation and puzzlement. A fine way to repay the man who was trying to help me. Why should I make him think I had been knocked silly and was completely out of my skull? There's a good question I would like to ask my nine-year-old self. But why should I leave the man with any other impression?

HEINLEIN: A GRAVE UNDERTAKING *(First of Two Parts)*

Why is it that the two great architects of modern science fiction -- John W. Campbell Jr and Robert A. Heinlein, of course -- turned out to be utter fuggheads? Maybe it has something to do with the genre itself. Are we all fuggheads? Martin Gardner, meditating about Dianetics and psionics as promulgated in *ASF/Analog*, remarked, "Judging by the number of Campbell's readers who are impressed by this nonsense, the average fan may very well be a chap in his teens, with a smattering of scientific knowledge culled mainly from science fiction, enormously gullible, with a strong bent toward occultism, no understanding of scientific method, and a basic insecurity for which he compensates by fantasies of scientific power." However true that may be, we are all reactionary, in a sense. Even for sf fans it is always safer to look to the past, where everything seems familiar and comfortable, than to project ourselves into the strange and uncertain future, and even Campbell and Heinlein were not immune to this powerful urge. They sought to protect us, and themselves, from that terrifying future with a shield of primitive magic, having lost faith in science. (It's just human to always fear the worst.) And as with drugs, the supplier of nonsense and nonscience must share much of the blame. Is anyone who is interested in visions of the future likely to end up in muddled mysticism, like Campbell, or in militaristic machismo, like Heinlein? Is the future as terrifying and hopeless as that? Our idealistic dreams shaped from the days of "Twilight" and "Methuselah's Children" turned into the bad-dream fastuousity of the Dean drive and *I Will Fear No Evil*. There's something sad, even tragic, in that.

I reached my conclusions about the great geniuses Campbell and Heinlein after a vexing study of Heinlein's *Grumbles from the Grave* (1989), edited by Virginia Heinlein, and I hasten to add that I mean nothing negative when I call them fuggheads. They had more influence on science fiction than anybody else with the possible exception of H. G. Wells, Hugo Gernsback, Raymond A. Palmer, and Richard S. Shaver. William Butler Yeats, who wrote great poetry, and Arthur Conan Doyle, who gave us Sherlock Holmes, were fuggheads too. Campbell and Heinlein were probably disagreeable people, but that's no knock against them either. Mozart was too, and Wagner, and Whistler, and Dr Johnson. I don't think I would have gotten along with any of them. As we all remember, someone said of Thoreau, "I love Henry, but I cannot like him, and as for taking his arm, I should as soon think of taking the arm of an elm-tree." As for Heinlein I would as soon think of hugging the number two jet that blew and blinded Rhysling as of having any liking for Rhysling's creator. After reading *Grumbles*, I still love Heinlein, only not so much.

I call them fuggheads because crazy seems too harsh a term for Campbell, perhaps, and certainly for Heinlein. They were both intelligent men who took a wrong term somewhere, who can say why. Surely there is more than a touch of overweening vanity in both men, and at the end a whiff of paranoia, as in the case of the great L. Ron Hubbard. Campbell once called himself a "nuclear physicist," although he spent three years at MIT and never graduated (for some obscure reason he was never recruited for the Manhattan project), and Heinlein once characterized himself as "a mechanical engineer, a ballistician, a student of reaction engines, and an amateur astronomer." On a more modest level he is said to have taken "some graduate study in

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physics and math" at UCLA. Is there any documentation of this? Was L. Ron Hubbard a war hero? Did Claude Degler have a cosmic mind? I grow disgustingly cynical in my old age.

In contributing to popular belief in the "paranormal," UFO sightings, ESP, Atlantis and Lemuria, the hollow earth, "psychic detectives," out-of-body experiences, reincarnation, and other highgrade hogwash, science fiction has a lot to answer for, and both Campbell and Heinlein are among the culprits. For starters, Campbell published all those stories about spaceships propelled by wish power; Heinlein wrote "Lost Legacy" and "Waldo" (masterpiece though it is). Both men, as Martin Gardner points out, took seriously the now-almost-forgotten claims of writer Morey Bernstein, one of the precursors of Shirley MacLaine, in the Bridey Murphy case (1956). Campbell said, "I am all for Morey Bernstein's highly successful effort to call attention to the lack of real understanding" of "the nature of the hypnotic phenomenon," while Heinlein, who after all should have known better, predicted that, following Bernstein's precepts, before the year 2001 the survival of the soul after death would be demonstrated with "scientific rigor."

Grumbles from the Grave is a thoroughly disappointing book. Obviously it isn't the book of the title that Heinlein would have written if he had gotten around to it. Although the dust-jacket blurbist describes the projected book as "a selection of his letters," Heinlein planned something far more elaborate than that: "a memoirs-autobiographical job to be published posthumously....I'll write it as if with a Ouija board. It will be easy to write -- lots of notes, lots of pack-rat-saved souvenirs, more than fifty years of letters, many things I have never discussed....plus a Secret Life of (Walter Mitty) Heinlein, etc." The book we have is largely a book of his letters, mostly those addressed to his agent Lurton Blassingame, along with a few letters sent to him, and it reveals very little about his Walter Mitty secrets. What indeed was his "secret life"? It sketches a few of his dogmatic opinions, but leaves obscure many things that might help us understand the man. Did he drink? Did he believe in God? Was he in favor of gay rights and women's lib? How did he stand on abortion rights? What else, in short, was there to irritate us about the man besides his politics? (It's too bad he isn't around to help campaign for David Duke.)

The book is made even less interesting than it might have been by being arranged by topic and subtopic rather than chronologically from that momentous day of 10 April 1939, when he wrote Campbell a covering letter in submitting "Lifeline" to "either *Astounding* or *Unknown*, because I am not sure which policy fits the better," to the end of his life on 8 May 1988. Fragmented under such imprecise titles as "In the Beginning," "Beginnings," "Miscellany," "Travel," and "Potpourri," the story jumps around temporally like the protagonist in "Elsewhen." There's also a five-page report by Virginia Heinlein about their visit to Antarctica (or Antartica, as a picture caption calls it): lots about penguins, seals and sea lions, the snow and the cold, but nothing about Heinlein except as part of the "we" in the recounting.

However, in a book of 250 pages (plus appendices and index) there are bound to be some amusing tidbits. For instance, Heinlein had plans for a book on "monetary theory" and another that would be "a primer of semantics and general semantics," and it's just as well that we were spared these excursions into the pontifical in fields where he was presumably not an expert. But he planned, and didn't finish, a book about writing that would be "more practical than Jack Woodford's *How to Write and Sell,*" and judging from his pieces on the craft of fiction in *Of Worlds Beyond* and *The Science Fiction Novel,* that would have been a useful volume. He wrote half a book about his trip around the world in 1953-54, but found no market for it. And he thought "The Green Hills of Earth" could be made into "a musical motion picture"!

Like many writers Heinlein complained about the problem of fan mail ("and other time wasters," as the chapter head in the book says), but seems to have made more than perfunctory attempts to answer most letters, although, at least in later times, they were often "checkoff letters." He decided, however, not to acknowledge receipt of fanzines (did anyone we know send fanzines, I wonder) because "it simply results in more of them and requests for free copy."

And like most writers, Heinlein might have said, as Joseph Conrad did, "I don't want criticism, I want praise." Blassingame's secretary, Margo Fischer, knew that well when she wrote him (28 February 1968) to say, "Here's a little ego boo for you," relaying some praise she heard from a "Heinlein fan." (But it IS curious that Ms Fischer, not a fan so far as I know, used the fannish term "egoboo." It is as useful a term as "fanzine," but unlike that term it has never quite made it to the outside world, and in fact has nearly been forgotten even in fandom.) He was a very private person, but not offended, at least not in a J. D. Salinger sort of way, by admirers he encountered in his travels. He notes gleefully that at a big party in Houston he "was followed around all evening by three tall beautiful blondes -- Heinlein fans." (More likely they were girls hired to keep him entertained.) At Palmer Station in Antarctica he met another admirer (not a tall blonde, unfortunately), much to his satisfaction. Evidently it made that huge cold nearly-empty continent worth visiting. Heinlein didn't subscribe, perhaps, to Virgil Thomson's notion that "When I find myself among those who don't know my name, I know I'm in the real world."

Heinlein seldom underestimated his self-worth, but, like Alexei Panshin, he seems to have seriously undervalued his early short stories. It is amazing, or rather astounding, to learn that he thought "By His Bootstraps" was "hack -- a neat trick, sure, but no more than a neat trick. Cotton candy," and it took Campbell to explain to him that the story was "the first all-out, frank attack on the circle-of-time story. It's a magnificent idea, and it's been worked out beautifully." Heinlein never quite accepted that. He thought "If This Goes On --" was hack too, to which Campbell wisely countered with "You are definitely wrong in suggesting that 'If This Goes On --' is, or has any tendency to be, hack. It has flavor, a roundness of background that makes it lovely." In those words Campbell neatly characterized the virtues of the early Heinlein.

At one time, as early as 1940, Heinlein had aspirations to "get out of the field of science fiction and into something else," perhaps much in the same way that H. G. Wells did before him. In 1949 he wrote Blassingame, "I am collecting notes on (Forgive me!) the Great American Novel....I have fallen ill of the desire to turn out a 'literary' job...somewhat like Ayn Rand did in *The Fountainhead.*" Nothing further is heard of this ambition, and presumably he decided ultimately that his particular talent -- as he wrote in 1945 -- "is for the prophetic novel, i.e., the novel laid in the future, perhaps only a few years in the future but nevertheless in the future." He thought he could do "contemporary fiction," but knew he could write science fiction "especially well."

Much of his tormented self-appraisal was a beginner's jitters. Indeed, Heinlein was soon consistently overestimating his worth. "The popularity of my stuff," as he wrote Campbell 6 September 1941, "has been based largely on the fact that I have continually enlarged the field of S-F and changed it from gadget motivation to stories more subtle in their themes and more realistically motivated in terms of human psychology. In particular I introduced the regular use of high tragedy and completely abandoned the hero-and-villain formula." Not to diminish Heinlein's influence on the field, I think with that large estimate he neatly wiped out of existence H. G. Wells, John Taine, Olaf Stapledon, David H. Keller, and Stanley G. Weinbaum, to name a few of his distinguished predecessors. As for "high tragedy," where? Where?

That was the early Heinlein. Despite being "a man of fragile health," as Virginia Heinlein calls him, he lived nearly 50 years after selling his first story, time enough, not only for love, but for him to have become an old phart whose creative powers had diminished and whose reservoir had run dry. He died just two months short of turning 81, on 8 May 1988, but as a novelist he had been dead for some years before that.

(Concluded next issue)

Poetry : A bird singing in the wilderness where nobody is.
