VECTOR 89

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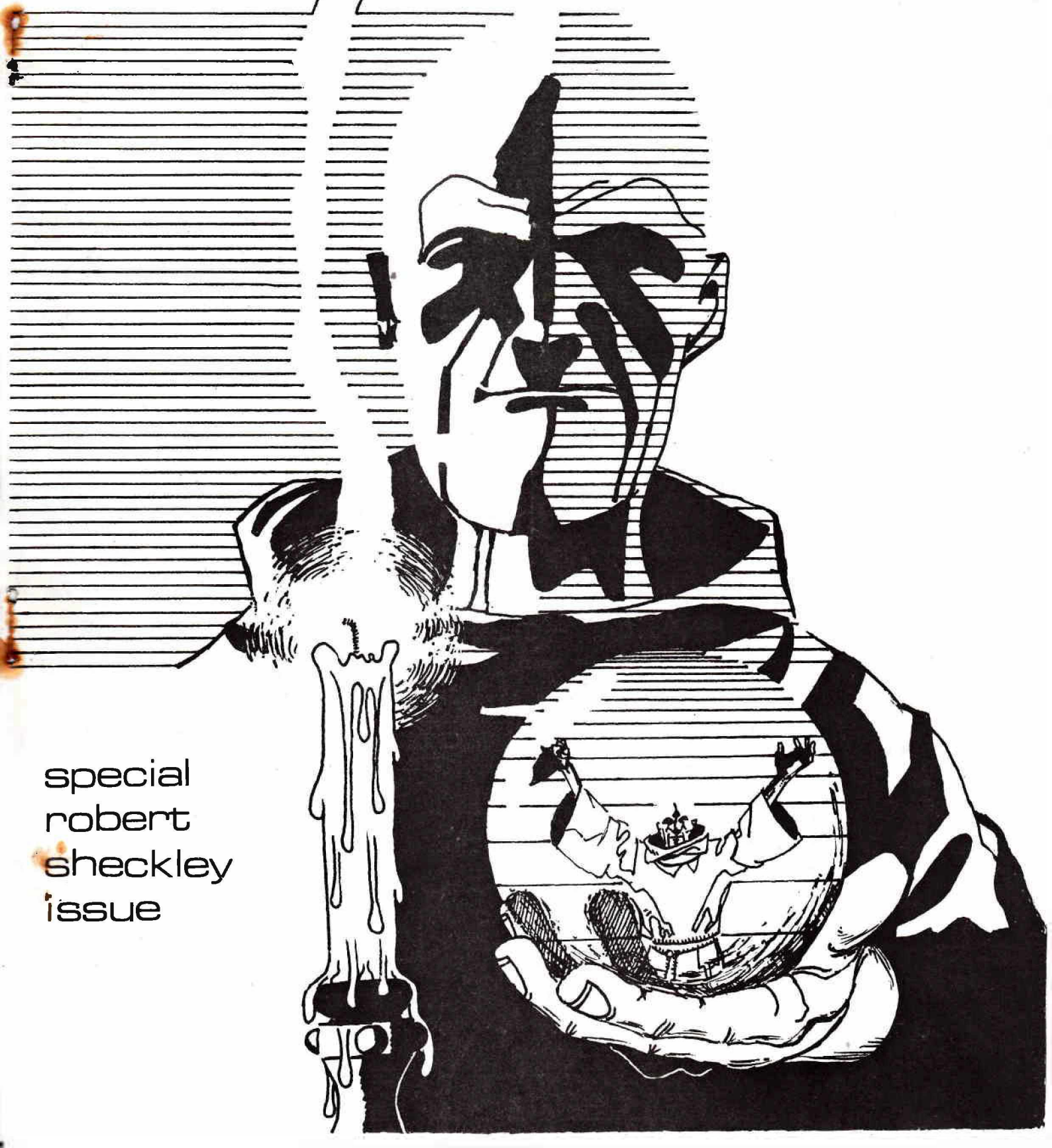

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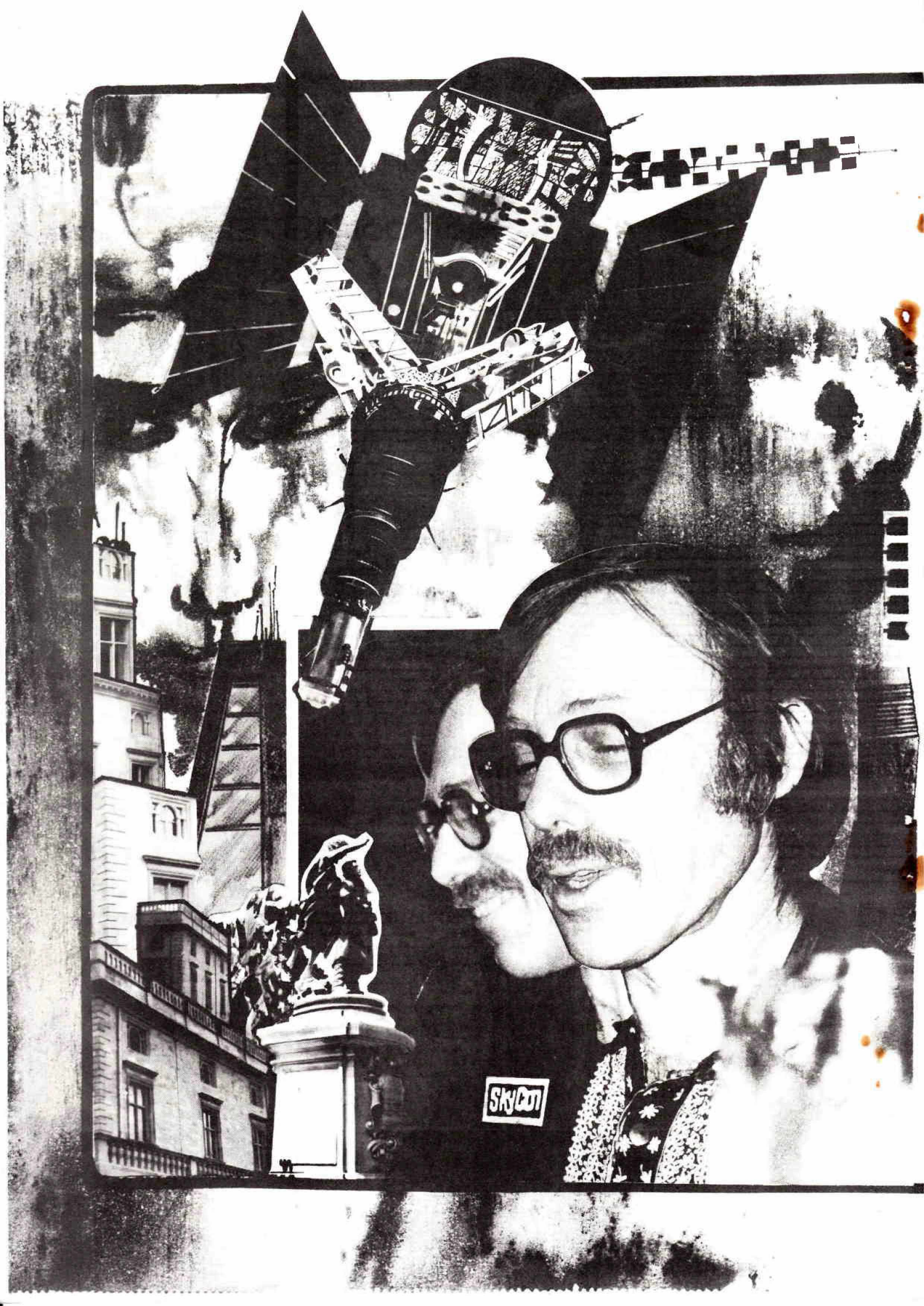
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VECTOR 88

sep-oct 78

CONTENTS:

Illustrations: Richard Bancroft (p2)
Jim Barker (p55)
Steve Bruce (cover)
Dave Harwood (pp10, 13, 17, 20, 26)
Mackay (p29)
Peter Jones (p5/p36)

(and apologies to Carol Gregory, the mystery artist of VECTOR 88's cover)

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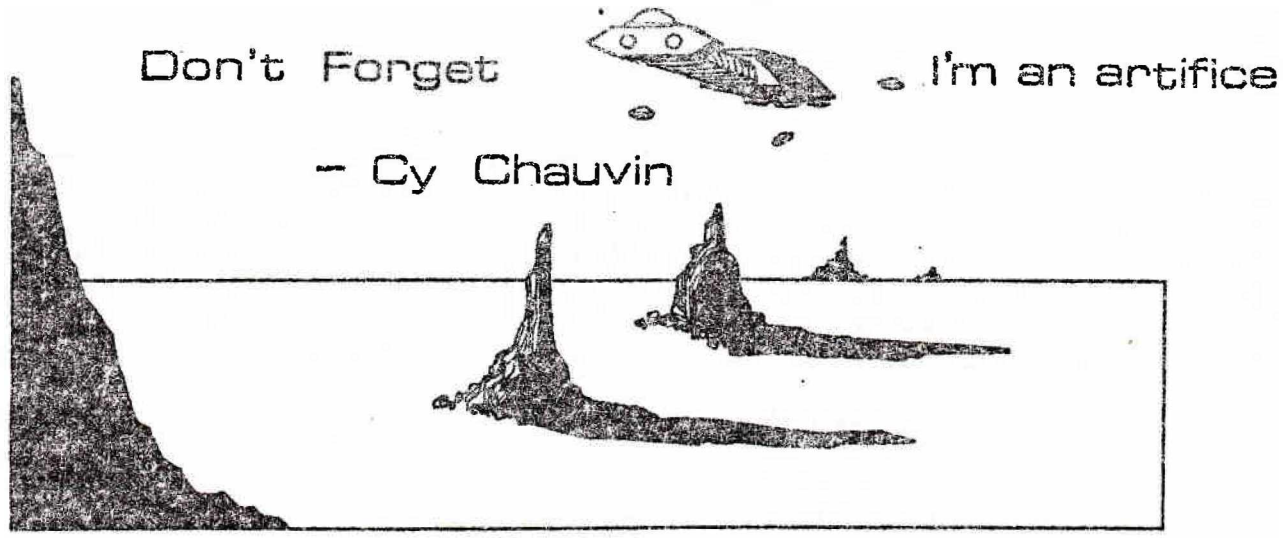
The Android's Dreams

Various happenings and discussions over the past two months have brought me to question just how valid the standard view of the sf genre from within actually is. The talk with Bob Sheckley in this issue touched upon the matter, and Paul Kincaid's brief Silverberg review raises the matter more overtly. How are we to measure the worth of the work the sf genre produces? Are we to simply maintain an isolated, introverted view of it and - as Mr Kincaid suggests - judge it only by its own limited standards? This seems an old and somewhat tired theme to have an editorial on, but the question continues to nag at me, and I'm sure, others. Probably like a number of people who have come into extreme contact with sf (and perhaps felt saturated by it) I find myself becoming jaded with most of it, tired of the simple ideative content. At such times I pick up something that's as far removed from Sf as I can possibly find on my shelves. And yet I persevere and return to the genre's works again and again; and even find the occasional exciting work that regenerates my faith in sf. That apart, I find myself continually disappointed by its lack of genuine vision. It rarely fails to amuse or to entertain, but, beyond that, it also rarely inspires me, changes me in any sense. And, of course, you can easily say that to expect to be stimulated by every book you encounter is rather a rose-tinted view anyway, yet sf claims that for itself more than any other genre: it claims to view from new, fresh perspectives. But how often does it say anything of importance to us? How often does it express something that we aren't already conscious of? How often does it make us examine what we actually are? How often does it cop out and reiterate the already familiar cliches ?

In the lettercolumn Greg Hills is challenging my bias, and goes on to criticise my choice of material for VECTOR, telling me to open my mind to all the different types of sf there are. Indeed, he has a point; in looking at science fiction there is more to it than the latest Disch collection or M. John Harrison book. But - and I'll admit I may be wrong in this - I see little point in continuously regurgitating the same comments about the same type of formula work. And there is a basic formula, whether the fans of that style of writing will care to admit it or not. I cover the books I cover because they seem to me to be extending the genre, not re-stating old themes - often in ham-fisted manner. There is a place for occasional re-statement, and I would also like to see much of the new American writing see more space in this magazine, but unless there is anything of interest, anything that attempts to present a slightly new slant on the basic material of which sf's semiology is composed, then is it worthwhile commenting? That is a serious question asked of all VECTOR's readers. What is the point of commenting on sf's output unless new ideas are brought into the light, unless sf's critics give pointers as to where the most stimulating writing in the genre exists? Like any specialised journal, the foundations must be assumed. As editor I have to try to avoid re-stating what can easily be found, amply covered, in several mass media magazines. VECTOR must be concerned with the direction of the genre (though it may look back and trace developments) if it is in any way to be of service to its varied readership. It has to act as a guide book as to what is happening NOW in the genre. Else it is doing no more than judging by old standards, and fostering that diehard attitude of introversion that still exists in many quarters. To ignore what Mr Hills mistakenly calls the 'new wave' element is to deny the genre any hope of a realistic critical perspective... DW.



" To say that science fiction holds within itself the seed of an entirely new literature does not mean that science fiction, as we know it, is that literature. Nor does it mean we can now foretell the exact forms that literature will take when it evolves from science fiction and non science fiction ..." Reginald Bretnor; MODERN SCIENCE FICTION, 1953 (1)

In the years since Bretnor wrote his essay, many works have been written which seem not to be science fiction, yet have evolved out of it, or grown up parallel to it. In this vague area between sf and traditional literature lie most of the works of John Barth, Robert Coover, Thomas Pynchon, Jorge Luis Borges, Donald Barthelme, J.G. Ballard, and a few others; it has been termed "metafiction" by one critic (though the name is unimportant). This parallel evolution is both exciting and disturbing. What effect will this new genre have on sf, if any? Could this be a good influence, or a bad one? And, possibly, just possibly, could these writers of metafiction have taken sf's techniques, and by using them with more skill, imagination and wit, have beaten most sf writers at their own game?

"Metafiction" first surfaced in the early sixties; Judith Merril first noticed that unusual things were happening both inside and outside sf, and tried to reflect this in her annual anthologies. Science fiction writers borrowed techniques from experimental novelists; John Brunner from Dos Passos, Farmer from Joyce, Aldiss from the French Anti-Novel, etc. It is not surprising that the reverse should happen, that techniques and images from sf should begin to influence the construction of non-sf novels and stories. Probably the first was from within sf's own camp: J.G. Ballard. "The Terminal Beach" was published in 1964 in NEW WORLDS, and things were never the same again.

The motivating force behind "Terminal Beach", and especially those stories collected in THE ATTROCITY EXHIBITION, was a desire for fresh imagery. Aldiss suggested in a speech given in Rio de Janiero in 1967 that "locations like the Manski Island, Anguilla, Vietnam, Berlin, the Negev" might be "less stale" than other more standard props in sf -- such as the corridors of a giant spaceship. (2) Ballard himself complained that "when sf writers have a monopoly on space travel they can define, invent machinery literally, and they are the judge of their own authenticity. ...the decks are stacked, the reader doesn't have a chance...the stuff isn't won from experience." (3)

This lead the writers that wrote for NEW WORLDS to make their fiction oriented more towards the present day. It was easy to do, because many of the images of sf were becoming part of the real world.

In contrast to Aldiss and Ballard, John Barth said, in an interview given in 1969, that "what (my favourite) writers ... share (except for Robbe-Grillet) is a more or less fantastical, or as Borges would say, 'irrealist', view of realism; and this...is all that I would confidently predict is likely to characterise the prose fiction of the 1970's. I welcome this (if it turns out to be ... true), because unlike those critics who regard realism as what literature has been aiming at all along, I tend to regard it as a kind of abberation in the history of literature." (4)

Barth's prediction has largely come true. Science fiction writers might greet his comments with enthusiasm, yet metafiction has many fundamental differences from sf, even if the two genres share much of the same imagery. They do not make comfortable bedfellows.

In metafiction, the contemporary world always predominates; the 'irreal--istic' elements are foreign. They are exceptional, and not minor background details added for verisimilitude (in fact, the basic reality of such stories always seems in doubt). In science fiction stories, imaginative details are added to make the invented world seem more "real", more believable; Barth or Pynchon, on the other hand, use the same details and images to destroy the reality of the contemporary world.

The strongest point of much science fiction is its vision, which absorbs the reader despite the poor writing. Some readers become so absorbed in the vision that it becomes quasi-real; the many concordances, appendixes, histories, etc, compiled for THE LORD OF THE RINGS, or even STAR TREK, attest to this. They want to know more details about the author's creation than originally created by the author. In contrast, the artificiality of literature is often stressed in metafiction. In "Life Story", John Barth screams at the reader: "Another story about a writer writing a story! Another regression ad infinitum! Who doesn't prefer art that at least overtly imitates something other than its own processes? That doesn't continually proclaim, 'Don't forget I'm an artifice?' That takes for granted its mimetic nature instead of asserting it in order (not so slyly after all) to deny it, or vice versa?" (5)

Spaceships become metaphors in metafiction. To a large degree, so do characters. Words are treated as words, images as images, rather than as representing something else. Pynchon's THE CRYING OF LOT 49 is an extended pun; the writer plays games with the reader, and makes this obvious. Science fiction writers occasionally do this as well: Heinlein's "By His Bootstraps" is largely a game. But it is a serious one; Pynchon is (at least superfic--ially) comic. So are most of the other writers of metafiction.

Many of the literary devices used in these works are distancing devices, and make the reader more conciously aware that they are reading fiction, rather than involving the reader in an unconscious manner. The other worldly elements reinforce this; the reader can take nothing for granted.

SF, on the other hand (as the Panshins have argued), is a very unconscious literature; its writers are rarely in control of their visions. Metafiction is inward oriented, sf outward. The point of so many of the novels of Barth, Pynchon, Coover, etc., is that there is no point. The stories are introverted because the authors believe that all meaning comes from ourselves, from humanity. Science fiction novels at worst are naively optimistic; at best, they are transcendant. They take us beyond ourselves.

George Turner says this of sf: "The characters do not determine, as they generally do in realistic fiction, the action of the story; instead they move within an environment and demonstrate by their activities what the effects of the environment are. Plot is no longer 'character in action', but the action of the environment on the humanity within it." (6) If the environment of the story has the ontological status of metaphor, the story is not sf. I think that THE CRYING OF LOT 49 is an experiment in the use of environment as a determining factor of plot and characterisation, but the environment is metaphoric, rather than pseudo-realistic. In DYING INSIDE, Robert Silverberg used the Psi powers of his protagonist, David Selig, to reveal things about the other characters for which writers of realistic fiction use literary conventions, such as changing viewpoints, direct thoughts, etc. It is the means of contemporary fiction made reality; the protegonist is something like the omniscient author of fiction. In metafiction, this process is reversed. The effects are more self-conscious; "reality" is turned into literary device, eg. "The Magician" in Coover's PRICKSONGS & DESCANTS. Coover's magician does one outrageous thing after in his act, but it doesn't have any effect until the story's climax. "The Elevator" is a collection of elevator rides, different alternatives that the protagonist apparently imagines, but we are never given a clue as to which is 'real' (Philip K. Dick's always do). That doesn't matter; all the segments of the story are given equal importance, it is all equally 'real', and this is not a question that is even relevant to the story. These are not parallel worlds; they are not delusions induced by drugs. They are 'fictions', realities induced by literature. A literary device with as much reality as a footnote. (Coover's style and imagery here reminds me very much of Barry Malzberg's work.)

A certain kind of style predominates in these stories. John Brunner has pointed out one aspect of it: "The regular reader of sf, coming to the opening section of GRAVITY'S RAINBOW, would certainly be struck by Mr. Pynchon's employment of a technique greatly akin to that used by Michael Moorcock in his Jerry Cornelius stories (...): a piling on of details elaborately catalogued, observed as though through a state of acute fatigue or while tripping out on drugs, combining to induce in the reader a respect-ful acceptance of the verisimilitude of fiction." (7)

The "cataloguing" links together otherwise unrelated images into long, rambling metaphorical passages, in what is a kind of 'informational noise'. The writing is deliberately casual -- "One summer afternoon Mrs. Oedipa Maas came home from a Tupperware party..." (Pynchon) -- and often mannered, but the descriptions are never stock. They are also outrageous, silly, and often densely written. "Behind the initials was a metaphor, a delirium tremens, a trembling unfurrowing of the mind's plowshare. The saint whose water can light lamps, the clairvoyant whose lapse in recall is the breath of God, the true paranoid for whom all is organised in spheres joyful or threatening about the central pulse of himself (sic), the dreamer whose puns probe ancient fetid shafts and tunnels of truth all act in the same special relevance to the word, or whatever it is the word there, buffering, to protect us from" (8). The passage is written rather like a poem, and its information and emotion is conveyed by image and association, rather than by straightforward description. It is a highly artificial construction, a digression, a highly intellectualised stream-of-consciousness. It seems a protest against concrete and linear description. It is not an image anyone can contain within their mind, but is wedded to paper. An intellectual exercise rather than a vision.

I called metafiction 'introverted', a game. Its images are often drawn from fiction (this is especially obvious in Borges). In Barth's "Life Story", the author says he has had complaints about his work from those "who prefered

life to literature." It is literature about other literature.

In contrast, while there is much bad science fiction that uses stock situations and ideas from other stories, it is not an intrinsic feature of sf. SF writers do want to change their readers' lives, they want to influence our actions, even in many otherwise bad stories. I used to wonder if sf writers should try to change the world (the attempt seemed to ruin many good stories), but I've come to think that it is a valid function. The best art changes us. And despite Ballard's reservations, I cannot help but believe that much new sf (eg. THE FEMALE MAN) is "won from experience". In bad sf the men and women are cardboard, and the aliens less than that; but in the best sf the status quo is altered. This is not true of metafiction, because it does not view the future as a real event, or as anything other than an extension of the present, and so we encounter elaborate metaphorical assemblages, but no changed human beings. One can't complain, however; this simply isn't within its purview.

In his essay in MODERN SCIENCE FICTION, Reginald Bretnor says that "Eventually, we will have an integrated literature. It will owe much, artistically, to non-sf. But its dominant attitudes and purposes...will have evolved from those of modern sf..." (9). I do feel that metafiction is the link between sf and contemporary literature, but I think the homogenization of sf with other fictions would be unfortunate. There is something called cultural diversity which is important. And sf and metafiction really do not have similar functions or limitations.

In SATURDAY REVIEW, March 1973, Richard Poirer reviewed GRAVITY'S RAINBOW. He wrote that "literary techniques are perhaps less powerfully revealing about human nature and history than are scientific ones" and that "There are forms of inquiry into the nature of life that are beyond the reach of the Novelist's imagination." (10). I'm sure this is true. Poirer is very enthusiastic about Pynchon's novel, and feels it goes further in these directions than most fiction. He even says that there will be some readers who will be impatient with the book, because they will be "too literary" in their responses to it. The comment sounds all too familiar.

As with so much fiction, what it means seems to depend a lot on what we bring to it: our expectations. Metafiction does not make sf obsolete, or even necessarily destroy old forms of writing. It should only make us more aware of those things sf can be used for most profitably, those areas of the human experience it views most uniquely.

- Cy Chauvin.

References:

1 Quoted by Judith Merril in "What Do You Mean: Science? Fiction?" in SF: THE OTHER SIDE OF REALISM, ed. by Thomas Clareson, Bowling Green University Press, 1973, p. 83.

2 "Science Fiction As Empire", ALGOL 20, p. 19

3 Interview, VECTOR 73/74, March 1976, p. 43

4 Interview, NEW AMERICAN REVIEW 15, Bantam, p. 136

5 LOST IN THE FUNHOUSE, Bantam, p. 114

6 THE VISUAL ENCYCLOPEDIA OF SF, ed. by Brian Ash, p. 258

7 Review, FOUNDATION 10, June 1976, p. 24

8 THE CRYING OF LOT 49, Bantam, p. 95

9 Quoted by Judith Merril in "What Do You Mean: Science? Fiction?" (see Note 1) p. 84

10 SATURDAY REVIEW, March 1973, pp. 62-63

* * * *

BSFA AWARD 1978

Nominations as at 14th October 1978

(1) Best Novel:

Aldiss (Brian)	THE MALACIA TAPESTRY
Amis (Kingsley)	THE ALTERATION
Bishop (Michael)	A FUNERAL FOR THE EYES OF FIRE
Bova (Ben)	MILLENIUM
Coney (Michael)	HELLO SUMMER, GOODBYE
Crowley (John)	BEASTS
Margolis	CHILD'S GARDEN OF GRASS
Niven & Pournelle	LUCIFER'S HAMMER
Pohl (Frederik)	GATEWAY
Shaw (Bob)	WREATH OF STARS
Tennant (Emma)	HOTEL DE DREAM
Tennant (Emma)	THE CRACK

(2) Best Collection/Anthology:

Cowper (Richard)	THE CUSTODIANS
LeGuin (Ursula)	ORSINIAN TALES
LeGuin (Ursula)	THE WIND'S TWELVE QUARTERS (two volumes)

(3) Best Cover Illustration: NO AWARD as yet.

(4) Media Award: "Hitch-hikers Guide To The Galaxy"
"The Last Wave"

Another list will be published in VECTOR 90 (publication deadline Nov 24) with a final nominations date of 31st December 1978. A full list of the books, illustrations and media events nominated will be included in VECTOR 91 together with a voting slip. As previously mentioned, should the lists become excessive, a short list will be compiled by committee. At present rate that seems very unlikely. I'll just say that if you don't send me your nominations it is no good, at a later date, complaining that certain books, films, illustrations were not in the running.

The first three awards, it should be noted, are in respect of books having their first paperback publication in Britain in the year of the award and with the exclusion of all books/illustrations that have appeared in previous award nomination lists.

'I am a bill collector disguised as a tree,' said the bill collector disguised as a tree.

an INTERVIEW with

robert sheckley

by

david wingrove

BS: This is a test recording. Mr Sheckley is not here yet but his stand-in is going to warm up the tape recorder for you. Blah-blah-blah-blah. Okay, where were we, Dave?

DW: I forget. Talking about the ending of stories...

BS: Finishing stories. I know that you just have to go along for a while, before the thing gets going again.

AS: You shouldn't have told him it was on...

DW: Yeah. I should have sneaked it on at first and just got on with it. They're unreal things, interviews, aren't they?

BS: Yeah. Well, it's hard getting over the up-tightness of being interviewed <u>for the record</u>, as it were.

DW: I think you rarely get to the things you want to talk about, anyway.

BS: Yes, well, it's up to you to direct it when it starts rambling. You have to be provocative, I think.

DW: I don't know. I like the rambling better than the provocative bits.

BS: Yes, you have to be judging it also, because this recording is, in my opinion, your composition.

AS: You're trying to get <u>him</u> uptight...

BS: I just want him to realise the gravity of the situation. I know that if I were interviewing somebody I would think of myself as trying to elicit certain things from them. I would hope to find the mainstream of their preoccupations. Something of that sort. I don't know...

DW: It depends upon your perspective, doesn't it?

BS: Yes, and varies with the person you're interviewing too, of course.

DW: I always find myself asking questions about books and music: the things I'm interested in. Also, because I'm interested in the mechanics of writing, those are the sort of questions I ask.

BS: Well, I'm interested in the mechanics of writing also. But I find them inextricably bound up with the personal situation, you know. Science fiction is interesting that way. Sometimes it seems like science fiction is the last great refuge of impersonal writing in an increasingly personalised writing world.

DW: But it's becoming increasingly personalised itself, isn't it?

BS: In a way.

DW: The whole New Worlds experiment - which was an attempt to take it that way, into the mainstream.

BS: Yes.

DW: It's also difficult interviewing you, because you're not a very typical science fiction writer.

BS: No, I guess I'm not. And I never have been, really.

DW: You realise I shall probably ask the same questions again, even the ones I'm finding tiring...

BS: On the other hand, I can probably turn any question into what I want to say about something, so you shouldn't worry about what you ask me. You know, I'm probably going to say what's on my mind anyway.

DW: Diverted away again...

BS: Yes.

DW: Okay. As an interesting line to set off on, this business about the American culture that we were talking about earlier...

BS: American culture, yes...

DW: Why you miss it.

BS: Well, it's simple really. You do over here, for example, a number of very good BBC plays about the English situation, and they're terribly well done, but I can't really get into them. Although they're on a human level, what I can empathise with best is American situations, and I miss exactly that thing - our own American versions, you might say, of Play of the Week. I miss our own sports too. I'm a basketball fan and a football fan and an ice-hockey fan. You know, the only thing I can really watch over here is Wimbledon. I don't really care about soccer. I've tried to get interested in it but I like different types of sport. My sport is really basketball because it's so fast and beautiful. But even Sports is only a small part of it. Sometimes I just miss American ways. Our great big open roads and our large cars. And I miss our hot-dogs and sky-high malts so thick you can't get them through a straw.

DW: Basically, just New York culture?

BS: I have been greatly influenced by New York. In fact, California is populated, as far as 'thinking' or 'creative' people, by New Yorkers. Who often don't begin as that... Most New Yorkers began as people from Ohio or Kansas or whatever. Just as I started out as a New Jerseyite. And then we go to the Big City and it puts a permanent stamp on us, and we can live anywhere in the world as New Yorkers after that. The technical name for what afflicts me, I think, is called Weltanscauung. I always like to get in the three or four long German words I picked up in College... Weltanscauung is very much it. All exiles are caught up in Weltanscauung.

DW: Do you feel yourself exiled?

BS: Oh yes.

DW: Self-exiled?

BS: Self-exiled, yes. But I think anybody who doesn't live in his home, if they don't really make a new home for themselves, if they don't love the land that they're in and somehow get with their new place spirit--ually or on some sort of deep level - then they're exiles. Exiled simply means living away from home. There was a time I thought I could make Ibiza a new home. And I could if Ibiza had stayed static. But it's a tiny island and after a while became completely overwhelmed by package tours. It became more expensive to live there than here in the West End even.

DW: I should think the ambience of the place would have been destroyed.

BS: Yes. Exactly so. It was always fragile but now one month of it is going to be all that either of us will probably need. But, anyway, that is the only place that I've felt I could perhaps make a home out of. It would be a simpler matter, anyway, for me to make a home out of that than out of England. England demands much more participation, because we speak the same language. And if I'm to be really at home here, then I think I must become at home in the way that Henry James did or T.S. Eliot. They...

DW: Became more English than the English.

BS: Yes. In some ways, yes. Otherwise, as an artist, you can't deal with the genius of the place and its people, unless you can somehow join them. That ought to be a good science fiction theme. You see, all these things are science fiction themes. The exile experience informs me of what the alien planet experience will be. And, in a way, my writing on the alien planet thing has become more a sort of exploration of my own feelings as an exile. I do that very consciously in some of my short stories.

DW: When you think of it, there are not a lot of science fiction themes that are anything other than an extrapolation, or a 'metaphoric deform--ation', using your own term, of what you feel about the various things you encounter. They are nothing more than putting into a nice handy metaphor, if you like, something you've experienced, or a feeling about something very common to your life.

BS: Well, sometimes they aren't even that. I see a great deal of science fiction as being involved in what for me now would be a false object--ivity. When I first started writing, I could write a story simply because I had a plot. Now, that's not really enough for me. I don't care to read objective works any more. I really only care to read felt works, you know. Now Kurt Vonnegut feels that way and says he's not a science fiction writer. I feel that way but I maintain I still am a science fiction writer - but I'm a wierd one, you know, because most science fiction writers, I think, still have a basically crafts

approach. They see it as an objective, extrapolative work.

DW: Much like a piece of engineering, really, isn't it?

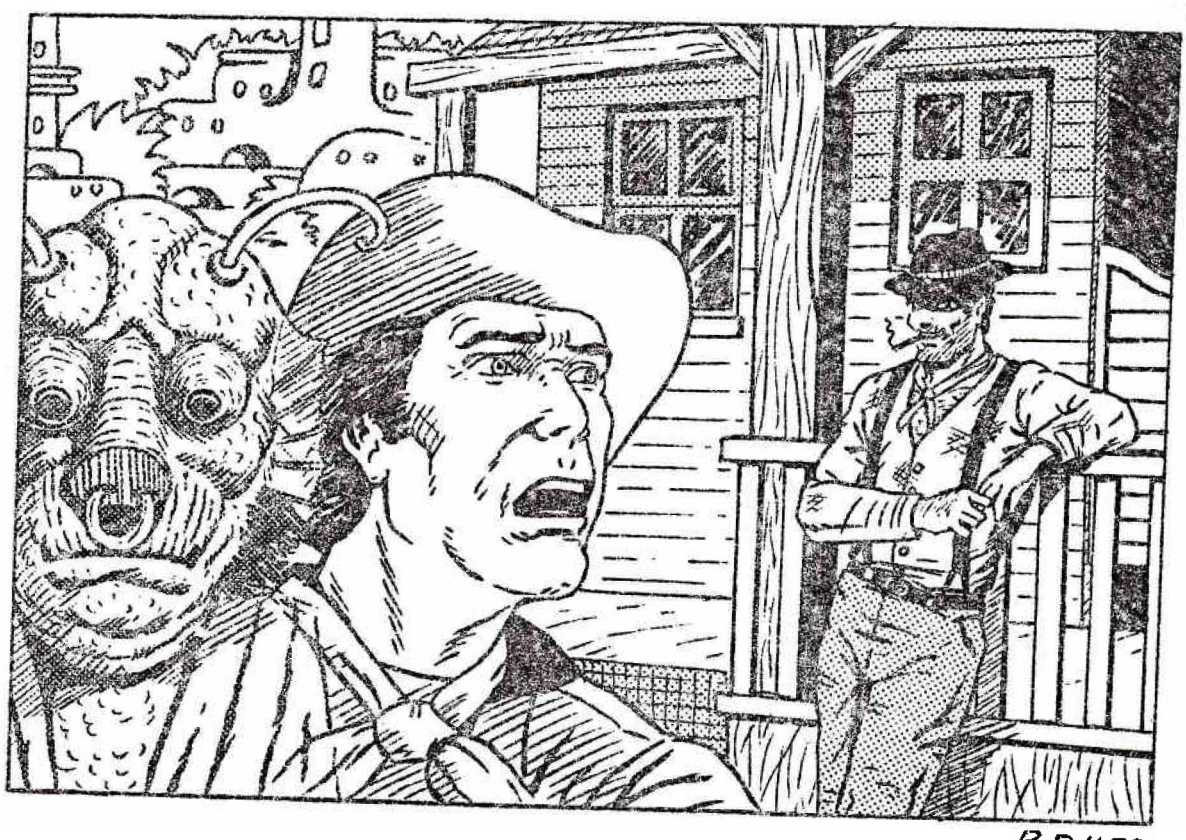
BS: Well, take Arthur Clarke. You know, Arthur's really interested in the future of Earth. I'm not interested in future Earth, I'm interested in the future of the individual. And it's not even the individual. I can only exemplify the individual by writing about one of them: the only one I know, and can ever know. The science in science fiction has led me to the problem of knowledge. That's why I say I'm a science fiction writer still. I'm just working in the psychological aspect of science fiction.

DW: It's a very tenuous line, though, isn't it? I see your writing more in the vein of people like Flann O'Brien, John Barth...that school. It's metafiction: which isn't really mainstream fiction, nor is it science fiction. It doesn't even want to change the characters - it just wants to explore what they are.

BS: Exactly. Yes, and there's a whole area now into which I think I fit, along with Barth, as you say, Kotzwinkle, Donald Barthelme...

DW: It's a very different emphasis to science fiction though...

BS: Very different emphasis, yes. Oh god, that reminds me of a whole novel idea I got the other night. I didn't even bother writing it down. Basically, I wanted to start a book or a story with a character coming out on stage or on the paper and saying "Hi, I'm the great magician, Albert Magnus, and here's my empty box. A trick. Here's a plain, shiny cardboard box. Empty, you see. I puts it down. I reach in. I remove a mountain. I puts it over here. Here's a man. His name's George. I put him here. And here's a spaceship. And...well, just get on with the story. Simply drop the frame until the end of the story. And then, when the next story happens, take something else out of the box.



DW: Yes, do a whole series of stories and pack them all away at the end.

BS: At the end he vanishes into the box. And the box vanishes. And it's all trickery. It is all tricks with mirrors, all a trick with words, really.

DW: It makes you wonder how people got into the whole idea of fiction in the first place. Why they drifted from just making factual accounts...

BS: Well, I think there has been a very ancient tradition of story-telling. People seem to have a need for fiction, whether it's in the form of theatre or greek choral work or roman farce.

DW: Perhaps I didn't make it quite clear. I meant the idea of dressing it up as if it were real: the need for a 'fiction' as an alternate reality. If you're going to have a 'fiction', why not make it nice and clear that it is fiction. Why do they need that - you see it on the box in Crossroads and Coronation Street - that bit? Re-telling their lives, and not even adding to them?

BS: Some people are only opened up by that sort of approach. Styles change also. One form is always being over-turned for a different form.

DW: Perhaps it's simply because realism doesn't appeal to me much in the things I read.

BS: No. Realism is a fairly recent trend and I look upon it as a form of romanticism. Emile Zola, who thought he was such a realist, was in fact a wild romantic in thinking that what he wrote was 'reality', when it was simply his selection out of all the facts in the world. To say that writing about the contents of garbage cans is realism and about angels, for example, is really a fallacy.

DW: It's just how you see it.

BS: Well, in science fiction we owe it to ourselves, I think, to see things in as many ways as we possibly can, because, in effect, I think all of us who write it and read it and are interested in it share the desire to be opened up by it, to see more, to understand more.

DW: To broaden the horizons.

BS: Yes, and broaden ourselves. Something like that.

DW: I like that idea. A selection of all the various things that are going on around you. Do you find there are certain things you get obsessed with at times? Are there certain aspects of life you keep finding yourself focusing on? Can you think of any examples?

BS: Well, I have various themes I return to, over and over again. I've got one whole thing I keep getting into. I keep on visualising, for example, a Reality War, a war between conflicting realities. I've been writing that one up in a dozen different forms for many years. It's also a theme within a lot else that I do.

DW: It's like philosophy these days, I suppose...

BS: Yes, it is. And it's like mysticism also. So maybe I'm doing next century's science fiction.

DW: If there's going to be one. Do you think science fiction has much of a future?

BS: Oh, absolutely.

DW: Not the kind you write, but the kind we were talking about earlier, the very heavy 'engineering' type of science fiction. Or do you think it's going to evolve into metafiction? Because a lot of the stuff that the hard science boys are writing now is quickly overtaking them: the

stuff you see in Science Journals is ~~more the hard~~-core of science fiction than stuff the genre's writers can turn out.

BS: My feeling is that it's going to be around for a long time because there is a readership for that level of things. Most readers are not interested in metafiction, I don't think.

DW: Else you'd be very rich.

BS: Yes, and Barthelme and Barth probably would also be, and I suspect they're not. And Coover and all those guys. They're doing dazzling work sometimes. But most people don't like to read anything that is in the slightest difficult, and will not give themselves to a fiction that demands very much of them. Probably most science fiction reading is escapist reading, after all, stuff you can read while you're riding the underground to work, stuff you can put down and pick up without a thought. Stuff you can finish and never think about again. Now, there will always be a market for that, and the market will probably grow as the population of half-educated people increases.

DW: When you meet somebody for the first time and they don't know that you are a writer and you say "I'm a writer" - do they start telling you, "Oh, I've got a book in my head" and "I've always wanted to do that"?

BS: Very often, yes. Frequently not on first meeting. But often after a while. You know, people are terribly shy about that. I sometimes ask people, "Have you ever thought of writing this up?" and often they say "yes, I've thought about it and..."

DW: "...and my wife would think I was mad if I went into a back room and started scribbling away". Instead of tinkering with the car on a Sunday.

BS: There are many ways of working it out, you know. One needn't be a freelance writer to be a creative and happy person, I think.

AS: It seems to work <u>against</u> it.

BS: Yes, it often does, you know. I can't say that being a writer has been an especially happy way of life for me. I would have done a lot better, happiness-wise, if I'd stayed in band work. I played in bands until the age of about twenty, and it was a great life. I loved being on the road. You know, this was before rock, but it's the same life...well, we got less girls than the rock guys do. Still, if I'd just <u>waited</u> instead of going into this dreary line of work in which you have to lock yourself up in a room most days of your life if you want to achieve anything.

DW: It sounds like committing yourself to a long prison sentence, doesn't it, if you look back on it?

BS: Yes, yes.

DW: You will produce X number of books in the next ten years...

BS: Exactly so. I can look back upon a long history of dreary rooms that I've done writing in. I mean, it's rarely done under pleasant circumstances.

DW: It's not a question of choice, though, really, is it? You don't really <u>choose</u> to be a writer. Some little nagging thing inside...

BS: You don't choose; it chooses you. You know you're a writer because you're writing, basically. And you don't even know you're a <u>writer</u>, even when you're writing, because one never loses all doubts. But I think that if you're called to writing, as it were - that's a very religious phraseology, 'called to', but writing <u>is</u> a vocation, and it's probably so for most men who have a high output, or a regular output, no matter what they write...

DW: How long have you been in England now?

BS: About three years now. Three years going on four, I think.

DW: Do you find you've assimilated a little bit of the culture - though not as much as you've rejected?

BS: It's not exactly 'rejected'. I'll tell you this. I have a very great and very true appreciation of England and the English. I would probably have to be gone from here to write about it. It's hard to state, but I find it really utterly fascinating here, because to me you people are as strange as the Japanese - perhaps stranger. You certainly have got a more complex character structure, both individually and socially, than the Spaniards, say, whom I feel - to some extent - I know something about...and something about the French also. And you've certainly got a beautiful country.

DW: I suppose, with the English character, you almost have to have it in your genes to understand it...

BS: Well, even then, all the places in England have meanings already. I can impose a meaning on Big Sur, because it only has a fifty year history. But I can't impose any meaning on Dorset or Westminster. These things have been around since before Alfred. They are already a complete world system. But that, I think, hangs-up English writers also, because of the difficulty of clearing away the past and seeing Westminster, for example, as a structure right now, forgetting all about how it was built and which king was there. Simply seeing it as a fact, now, which is all we can do in the States. Our buildings don't have any histories. We build them up and tear them down so quickly. So, for us, everything is a temporary structural fact. But over here your buildings and your trees go on and on. Your lawns were laid before California was a State. Two different realities...

DW: Reality Wars...

BS: Yes, that's the only metaphor I can find for a certain way in which I actually see, actually feel, that life is. For me there is no commonplace life that I lead anymore. Everything is being improvised. And I just see the whole world as collapsible stage sets, and we just nod and say "oh yes, that's how it is." And we'll accept anything. If we read in the Evening Standard that a colony of Martians has just been found in a remote part of Scotland, where they've been camping out for ten years - "oh, isn't that interesting. I see that attempts have been made to establish contact. And they're going to have several of them at a rock concert..."

DW: And it relates to education too. There are no foundations for what we are shown. We live in what Frank Herbert called "primitive times".

BS: Yes! Very much so. I would say it's very much a primitive and romantic time and there really isn't any interest in the classical continuity and the whole idea of the continuity of a classical, humanistic civilisation is too heavy an idea for people to get their heads around - except if it is made of cotton-candy in science fiction. The only way anybody's going to read about the fall of the Roman Empire is if we fictionalise it. And the only way anybody's going to learn anything about Ancient Rome is when the BBC films "I, Claudius". Now, all of a sudden you meet a lot of people who know a hell of a lot about Ancient Rome.

DW: That's a way for TV to go, in a way, isn't it? For them to - by select-ively taking things like "I, Claudius" and, perhaps, some of the H.E. Bates stuff they've done, things like that - to get people to know how other people thought, how they acted, what societies they lived in. Whether it's fifty years ago or a thousand-five hundred years ago. Put

it in cotton-candy, fair enough, but unless you push the button in the first place, nobody's going to move.

BS: That's lovely. Oh, I'm for it. I know that people are not going to sit through a course in Roman Lit anymore, if they can possibly avoid it. So, I'm all for the popularisation of culture - at least as a holding action, until the times change.

DW: I see that age as having died with the First World War, because before then you can see certain strains of literature where there was a very romantic movement - which seemed suddenly to have died. The World War seemed to have killed any notions of romanticism. It also killed any ideas of the whole pantheist thing - of Man and Nature coalescing. It was then Man against Nature. Perhaps we're moving back that way - but through another Dark Age...

BS: It's very possible. Certainly the conditions look right.

DW: But a long way downhill first.

BS: Well, it seems that on a worldwide level we don't know how to run ourselves socially.

DW: It is a problem. I was thinking particularly of the old social institutions - the church, marriage. The British have now taken up, it seems, the American attitude to marriage - that it's more like a contract than a full-time, 'til death us do part' thing. And yet we haven't really come up with a decent alternative to it. One that works.

BS: No. Well, I think that a lot of recent experimentation in this way has been based upon ideas of how humans work which aren't really valid. There's been an enormous amount out about satisfying sexual needs, for example, but very little out about how to fulfil your love needs. I don't mean romantic love, I mean eros in the Freudian sense and the Platonic sense also. The urge to get together with a person, which includes sex but is not entirely ruled by it. We've almost given up the possibility of loving each other, and we think, well, let's shelve that and let's get on with what we can get on with - and we'll carry our love buried deep in our hearts.

DW: You've been through a lot of changes; a lot of different lives. Do you feel just as impotent in each one? Do you feel that you can't change much of it? You can direct yourself a little way but it's all going to change anyway? Your basic sense of Free Will - is it being eroded over the years?

BS: No. No. My feeling on all that is that if you want to be happy, you have a lot of learning to do. At least, I do. And you learn, after all, that a lot of life is a viewpoint problem and that it has nothing to do with your circumstances or how well your stuff sells or how well your love affair is, or anything of that. To some extent you can choose your own psychological set. You can choose almost - well, this is a very American thing I guess, also, but I think it's so - you can make a solid choice as to how you're going to take things.

DW: You mean attitude?

BS: Yes.

DW: Whether you're going to be serious about something or laissez-faire?

BS: Not that. It's in your own hands whether you interprete your present experience as you-having-a-good-time or you-having-a-bad-time.

DW: The same event, but just how you see it?

BS: Yes. It's the same event, and all that life is made up of is the same event. What changes is not the events as much as your own emotionality within them.

DW: It seems, actually, that the more successful you are in getting near to the 'realities', the more it demands of you, the more it drains from you.

BS: If you're doing it right it does not drain you, it charges you. You know, when I'm writing right I come out of it with more energy at the end of the day. I get positively energised as I write - if I really write as I please. But it's not easy to write as I please even if I believe in it. For one thing, I'm very complicated and there are lots of different me's who want to say things, so it's not as simple as opening up my heart and spilling it out on the page.

DW: Do you remember what people's attitudes to you were when you were first writing? The only decent thing I've ever read of Robert Heinlein's was when he said that writing was rather like masturbation. It was okay if you did it in private and washed your hands afterwards. Did you find that you had to fight against some sort of hostility or were you in a position where you didn't need to do that?

BS: Well, when I was starting off I was very single-minded on what I was doing and I shrugged disapproval off. Also, I was lucky - I started to sell fast, so it became an okay thing, to write. I was selling one year out of College, so I didn't have to spend very long with the "what's he doing?" sort of thing. Also, when I started - before I even sold - I got hold of an office and I simply went there every day and

wrote.

DW: It's very much something that is considered anti-social until you actually make a living out of it.

BS: Yeah. Well, you see, I'm a long way from having any experience of that. People now usually simply envy the life they think I must have and wish they could have it also.

DW: Have you ever felt compelled to get out of it?

BS: Yes.

DW: Frequently?

BS: No. And not recently. But I went through some years in which I really wanted to just give it up. It was just too impossibly hard and I was trying and trying and just getting my wheels jammed. I just wasn't getting anything out.

DW: Not a block necessarily, but...

BS: I was blocked. I didn't know what to write anymore and I didn't like anything that I was writing.

DW: It goes back to 'feeling' - you said you liked reading what was 'felt'.

BS: Not entirely. I often like very dry intellectual exercises, also, but I couldn't do either thing then. I was paying, you might say, for getting into writing so easily. Most people do all that in their first years. I just sat down and started writing. For years I could not understand how anybody ever got blocked, when all you had to do was what I did - sit down and write. And, obviously, that impression of the ease of it had to be corrected: and it got corrected very thoroughly. I went through seven to ten years or so in which the most I would do would be a story or two a year.

DW: Were you finding those stories were publishable?

BS: Oh yes. What I finished was always fine. But I didn't finish much because the conviction that made the story an entity would leak out of me before I got it all done, and I would be left with a mass of words that I couldn't make sense out of, even though you could make sense out of them. They didn't give me the proper signal back: "Here's work, here's the way it should go".

DW: It must be, once again, what you were talking about earlier - seeing things in different lights - whether its good or bad depending upon your mood. Are you as productive now as you were ?

BS: Yes, but I find it harder to satisfy myself.

DW: A case of the more you know the less you're satisfied with what you do?

BS: Yes.

DW: Do you find you're more aware, in a way, of your own imperfections - in your writing? As you read all the styles and various different philos-ophies of writers, do you begin to become aware of the things you do wrong and the things you neglect?

BS: I've always had a very over-powering awareness of all that. It's only recently I've started to get a feeling of what I'm doing right, in fact. I've always been able to see what fails. I shudder to think of the reviews I could write of some of my own things. Its part of a total process. I can only get things as right as I'm feeling. My writing is inextricably bound up with my life situation and I seem to have a great need, or have had, anyway, to keep that pretty well unstable.

DW: It rather tends to bugger up your writing schedules as well, do you find?

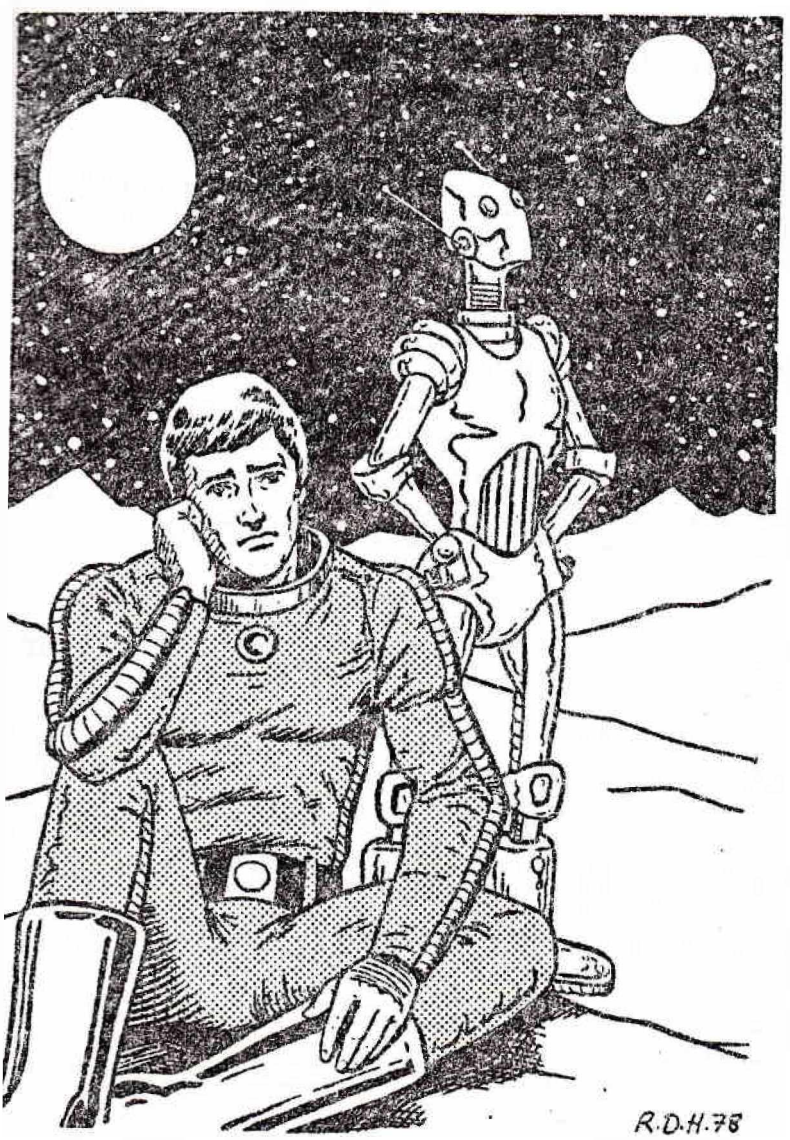
BS: It does. My excitement urge gets in the way of my 'get the work out' thing.

DW: And you've never tried to discipline yourself..or, if you have, you obviously must have failed, because you still feel the same way.

BS: Yes. Well, you can't separate it. It's just part of my make-up, and I just have to find a way to handle it. Fair enough, in a different sense it isn't a problem. I get, over the years, somehow, a respectable amount of work down and I can earn what I need - so there **really** isn't any problem.

DW: The problem's just up there, yes?

BS: It's a viewpoint problem. There isn't any reason why I should get all that work done. What could it do? It wouldn't alter anyone's life. I might get **wealthier**, which would probably be very bad for me because it would put me off work, which would make me unhappy. So...so, everything is going along exactly as it should, actually. I think I quite like having a big file filled with unfinished things. It gives me a great sense of security, you know. I used to worry, when I first began writing - I worried that I would run out of ideas, so I kept notebooks filled with story ideas and plots and one day - I was about three years into all this - I found that I had filled up 40-odd notebooks and that I rarely used anything out of them because I always had something new I wanted to do.



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Editor's Note: My thanks to Bob and Abby Sheckley for their hospitality on 5th August, when this interview (abridged from a sprawling conversation) took place. Thanks too to Dave Harwood for the illustrations, which were inspired by Mr Sheckley's novels, MINDSWAP and OPTIONS. Perhaps I could also refer VECTOR's readers to Arena 6 (Geoff Rippington: 15 Queens Ave, Canterbury, Kent, CT2 8AY) which has another interview with Bob and an article on his work.

On Working Method

— robert sheckley

transcript of the G.O.H. speech given at Skycon; Heathrow 25th March 1978

The subject of my talk today is Working Method. I believe that many of you here **either are** writing science fiction, or are secretly plotting to. Back when I was a fan and an aspiring writer, I wanted to know, how do profess--ional writers actually do their job? How do they develope their ideas, plot their stories, overcome their difficulties. Now, twenty-five years later, I know.

Professional writers differ greatly in their approaches to writing. For a lucky few, it is simple: you get an idea, which in turn suggests a plot and characters. With that much in hand, you go to a typewriter and bash out a story. When it is finished, a few hours later, you correct the grammar and spelling, and check to make sure your hero's name remains the same through-out. If you insist upon perfection, you then type out the whole thing again, this time taking out the dangling participles. Otherwise, you're finished.

That's more or less how I felt in the beginning of my career. Plotting was simple: you gave your hero a serious problem. You gave him a limited amount of time in which to solve it, and serious consequences if he failed to do so. You started your story in the middle of an action, flashing back briefly to set forth the over-all situation. You cut off all easy possibilities of solving the problem. The hero tries this and that. But all his efforts are in vain, and only serve to get him into deeper trouble. Soon the time-limit is approaching and he still hasn't defeated the villain, rescued the girl, or learned the secret of the alien civilization. He is at the end of his rope, on the verge of utter defeat. Then, at the last possible moment, you get him out of trouble. How does this come about? In a flash of insight, your hero solves his problem by some unexpected but logical means, some way that was inherent in the situation but overlooked until now. Done properly, your solution makes the reader say, "Of course! Why didn't I think of that?" And then you swiftly bring the story to a conclusion, and that's all there is to it.

This simpleminded approach saw me through many stories. But inevitably, sophistication set in, and I began to experience difficulties. I became self-conscious, dissatisfied with what I could do. I began to view writing as a problem, and to look for ways of solving that problem.

I looked to my colleagues, and saw that they had many different ways of writing stories. Lester del Rey, for example, claimed that he wrote out his stories in his head, word for word and sentence for sentence, before putting

anything down on paper. His method involved quite a long incubation period, of course: months or even years would be devoted to mental composition. When he was ready to transcribe onto paper, only then would Lester go to his office. Lester's office was about the size of a broomcloset, though not so pretty. He had constructed it in the middle of his living room. You opened the door, edged in, and sat down at a miniature desk. An overhead light came on and the door closed behind you automatically. A typewriter unfolded from the wall into your lap, locking you in place. Clean paper, pencils, cigarettes and ashtray were close at hand. There was a circulation fan to keep you from suffocating. It was very much like being in a sarcophagous, but with the disadvantage that you were not dead.

Phillip Klass, better known as William Tenn, had many different methods back in those days, with which he tried to cope with a blockage as tenacious and enveloping as a love-stricken boa constrictor. Phil and I discussed our writing problems at great length. Once we came up with a method adapted for two writers. Some of you might care to try this. It consisted of us renting a studio and equipping it with a desk, typewriter, and heavy oak chair. The chair was further equipped with a chain and padlock. When it was, say, Phil's turn to write, I would chain him to the chair, leaving his arms free to type, of course. I would then leave him there, despite his piteous pleas and entreaties, until he had produced a certain, previously agreed-upon amount of wordage. At which point I would release him and take his place.

We never did do that one, probably because of the difficulty of finding a chair strong enough to restrain a writer determined to get away from his work. We did actually try something else, however. We would meet at a diner in Sheridan Square at the end of the working day. There we would show each other the pages we had done. If either of us failed to fulfil our quota on any given day, he would pay the other ten dollars.

It seemed simple and foolproof, but we soon ran into difficulties. Neither of us was willing to actually let the other read our unfinished copy, since the other might laugh. We got round that by presenting our pages upside down, hastily. But since the copy was upside down, there was no way of telling if we had actually written new copy that day, or were showing pages from ten years ago. It became a matter of individual honour for each of us to present new copy that the other could not read. We did this for about a week, then spontaneously and joyously went back to our former practice of talking about writing.

As the years passed, my own blockage became wider, deeper and blacker. I knew what my trouble was, however. My trouble was my wife. As soon as I did something about her, everything would be ok. Two divorces later, I knew it was not my wife. The trouble was New York. How could I possibly work in such a place? What I needed was sunshine, a sparkling sea, olive trees and solitude. So I moved to the Spanish island of Ibiza. There I rented a 300-year old farmhouse on a hill, overlooking the sea. It had no electricity, but it did have four different rooms I could use for my office. First I tried to work in the beautiful, bright upstairs room. No good: I couldn't get any work done because I spent all my time looking out the window admiring the view. So I moved downstairs. Here there was no problem of a distracting view. My two rooms had only one narrow window, with bars over it in case of attack by pirates. These rooms had been used to store potatoes. They were cold and dark. There was nothing to distract my attention. Unfortunately I couldn't work here either -- my paraffin lamp gave off too much smoke.

At last I saw what the trouble was. The trouble was working indoors. Henceforth I would work outdoors, like it was meant to be. So I set up on the beach. But I couldn't work there because it was too hot, and sand got into my typewriter. I tried composing under a shady tree, but the

flies drove me away. I tried working in a cafe, but the waiters made too much noise. So I came to London and decided that my problem was self-discipline. I began to search in earnest for ways and means of doing by artifice what once I had done naturally. Here, in no particular order, are a few of the methods I have tried.

When I am blocked, I tend, very naturally, not to write. But the less I write, the less I feel capable of writing. The sense of constriction and oppression increases as my output dwindles away, and I begin to dread writing anything at all. How to break this vicious cycle? It can only be done by writing. I need to practice my trade regularly if I am to maintain any facility at it. I need to produce a flow of words. But since I <u>am</u> blocked, how am I to get that flow?

To solve this problem, at one point I set myself to type 5000 words a day. Type, not write. Wordage was my only requirement. It didn't matter what I actually wrote. It could be anything at all, even gibberish, even lists of disconnected words, even my name over and over again. The content did not matter. All that mattered was producing daily wordage in quantity.

Perhaps that sounds simple. I assure you it was not. The first day went well enough. By the second, I had exhausted my available stock of banalities. I would find myself writing something like this:

> " Ah yes, here we are at last, getting near the bottom of the page. One more sentence, just a few more words... that's it, go, baby, go, do those words...Ah, page done. That's page 19, and now we are at the top of page 20 -- the last page for the day -- or night, since it is now 3.30 in the bloody morning and I have been at this for what feels like a hundred years. But only one page to go, the last, and then I can put this insane nonsense aside and go do something else, anything else, anything in the world except this. This, this, this. Christ, still three-quarters of a page to go. Oh words, where are you now that I need you? Come quickly to my fingers and release me from this horror, horror, horror ... O God, I am losing my mind, mind, mind ... But wait, is it possible, yes, here it is, the end of the page coming up, O welcome kindly end of page and now I am finished, finished, finished."

After a few days of this, I realised something. It slowly dawned on me that I was working very hard, and I wasn't even getting paid for it. I saw that since I was writing 5000 words a day any-how -- and since I was getting tired of typing my own name over and over -- why not write a story? And I did just that. I sat down and wrote a story. And it was easy! My God, I had the master key to writing at last! I wrote another story. This one was not so easy, but it was not so tough either. So there I was with two entire stories written, and each of them had only taken me about a day. I thought proudly of those stories for the rest of the year, and for a year or so afterwards. I didn't ever actually write anything else in that way, but I always knew that I could. I can heartily recommend this method. It is a true master key. Someday I shall do it again, when I'm feeling really desperate. But in the meantime, I'm still looking for an easier method.

And anyhow, wordage isn't the only thing. Writing a story can be a strange and fearsome business. You want so badly to get it right. You try so hard, and judge yourself so severely, that you succeed only in confusing yourself. Perhaps you write thousands of words, but you are dissatisfied with them. It's all chaos and you can't seem to find the handle. That was my next Problem. Not Wordage, but an unwillingness, a fear, of actually producing a story.

My solution, typically enough, was to avoid the problem. Since there was no way of writing a story without getting into a state of utter despair, I decided I would not write a story. I would write, instead, a simulation of a story.

My simulations are the same length as a story, and they are made up of narration, dialogue, exposition, etc., just like a proper story. The difference is this: in a true story, the words you choose are very important. In a simulation, the actual words are of no importance whatsoever. In the simulation, it doesn't matter if my images are banal and my dialogue leaden. After all, it isn't a story. My simulation is only something like a story, but without the beauty, precision, humour and pathos that a real story must have.

A simulation is a mere formal exercise rather than a piece of creation.

As you can see, you need a certain gift for self-deception to do this sort of thing. The few times I have kidded myself into doing this, I have discovered a curious fact. Except for a few rough bits here and there, my simulation is very much like any other story I have ever written.

The fact is, I can only write as I write, not much better or worse, no matter how hard I try. In fact, trying too hard has a deteriorating effect upon my performance. The whole idea of simulation is to work rapidly and with a certain lightness of touch, as one would do a watercolour rather than an oil painting. This method can work. But there are two obstructive thoughts I always have to watch out for when I do one. The first is "Hell, this is going badly, I'd better chuck it in and begin again." The other is, "Hey, this is going well, I'd better tighten up and make it really good." Both these judgements are counter-productive.

Sometimes writing is not the problem, thinking is the problem. Often you will have various ideas which must be considered from various angles before you can begin writing. There are critical decisions that must be taken, alternatives which need to be considered, various bits of data to be juggled, fit into place, discarded or altered. These problems are elusive and difficult to look at. They refuse to solidify. You make some notes, or go for a long walk, or discuss it with your wife. Nothing seems to help much. It's all vague and unclear; you have too many things to think about at the same time, and no means of arranging your data. At times like this, it can be very helpful to make a diagram.

Here is the sort of diagram which I find useful. You put down a key word in the centre of a sheet of paper, and draw a circle around it. Then you draw lines from that centre, and write, as succinctly as possible, the various considerations associated with that idea. When you have finished, you have produced a diagram of your present knowledge on the subject. The entire situation can be taken in at a glance, enabling you to see what you have and, equally important, what you don't have. Hookups between different parts of the diagram will suggest themselves. Important areas can be enclosed or connected. Different colours can be used for emphasis. New data can be easily added. Areas of specific pertinence can be taken off and made the basis of a new diagram.

Diagrams are really a lot of fun. At first I made mine with a plain fountain pen. Then I switched to coloured pentels. For greater efficiency, I worked out a list of colour-coded symbols. This took a little time, but it was well worth it. Next I experimented with different kinds of lettering for greater clarity. My diagrams grew larger and more complex, and I switched to larger sheets of paper. After that I got into coloured inks. The commercial brands weren't quite right, so I began to mix my own. The system still lacked a certain something. It was getting too mechanical and lifeless. So I began to illustrate my diagrams, first with little sketches, then with line and wash drawings, and then with watercolours. I lacked the

technical skill for these, so I started looking round for a good art course. Unfortunately, I had to drop the whole thing and get some work done. Still, it was not a complete waste. When a market opens up for diagrams, I'll be all set.

I don't think that all confusion and anxiety can be eliminated from writing. Ideas frequently have to develope in a semi-conscious state until something clicks into place. But often, at least in my case, that gestation period is allowed to continue too long, to the detriment of the later stages of the work. You reach a point where the idea id more or less developed, but there is still something wrong, and you don't know what it is. It sits there, a soggy dark mass in your mind, a vague unpleasantness that will not allow you to continue. What to do then?

There is a ridiculously simple method that I came across to handle this very point. It consists of asking yourself questions. Isn't that obvious? Yet I never thought of it until recently. A typical session might go like this:

"Well, what exactly is wrong?"

"The story stinks, that's what's wrong."

"But how, precisely, does it stink?"

"It moves too slowly, for one thing."

"So how could you speed it up?"

"I don't know."

"Of course you know. Name a way in which you could speed it up."

"Hmmm...Well, I suppose I could take out the two thousand word description of a sunset on Mars."

"Would that solve the problem?"

"No. My characters stink, too."

"In what way?"

"They just sit around wishing they were somewhere else."

"What could you do about that?"

"Give them something to do, I suppose."

"Like what?"

"I don't know ... wait - I got it! They can look for an alien civilisation!"

This method works well. But it does take a certain degree of concentration. That's the only tough part about it. Sometimes I can't even get my questions into focus. At such times, my internal dialogue is apt to go like this:

"Well, Bob, how's the lad?"

"I'm fine, thanks. How about you?"

"Oh, I'm fine."

"That's nice."

"Yes, it is, isn't it?"

"Yes."

Long pause. Then:

"Was there some problem you wanted to discuss with me?"

"Problem? Oh, yes. It's this story."

"What story?"

"The one I've been trying to write for the last three months."

"Oh, that story."

"Yes."

"You mean the story with the two thousand word description of the Martian sunset?"

"That's the one."

"You got any ideas?"

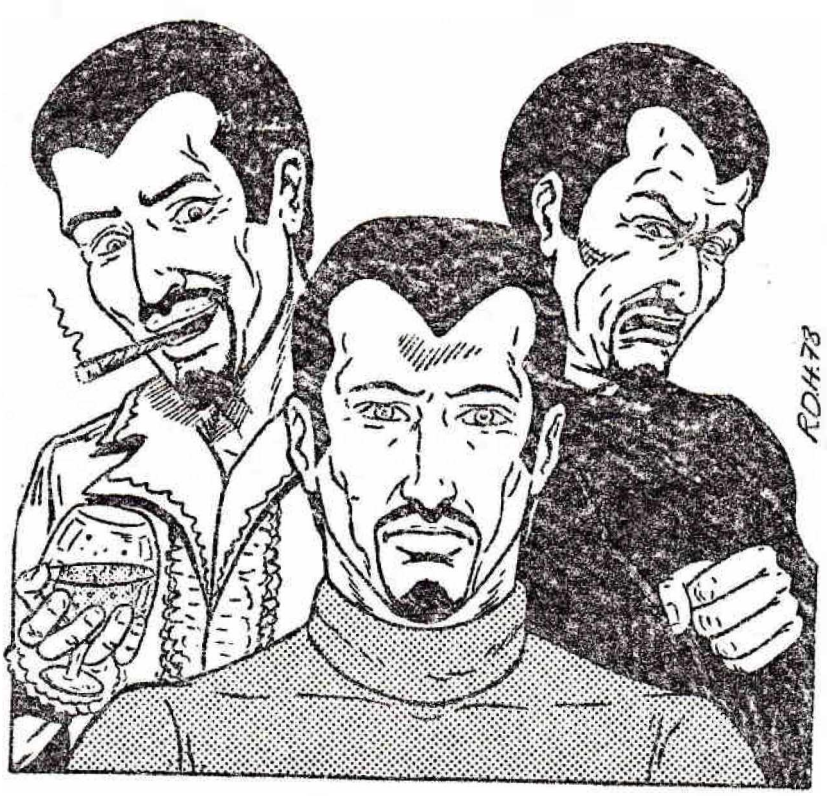
"About what?"

"The story, dum dum. How can I fix it?"

"Well... you could always expand the description of that sunset."

And so it goes - you win some and you lose some.

In conclusion let me say -- for those of you who are writers, I hope you have enjoyed this excursion through the pitfalls of our profession. For those of you who are thinking of becoming writers -- you have been warned. Thank you.



DIMENSION OF MIRACLES by Robert Sheckley: Panther/Granada; 1977; 60p; 139pp; ISBN 0586 04551 1)

Reviewed by David Wingrove

There is a mediaeval concept that the jester is the wisest of all men and that the veneer of idiocy is only a mask to hide his true visage.

Sheckley is a jester, and DIMENSION OF MIRACLES is an amazing book. It would need a volume or two of VECTOR to unearth its riches, and perhaps even that would not suffice. If Nietzsche could have written with Sheckley's infectious wit then he may not have gone mad...

But that's conjecture.

So what is this about, then? Thomas Carmody is an ordinary man (extraord--inary only in his ability to assimilate the miraculous). He wins (by coincidental error) a Prize in the galactic sweepstake. Why put Prize with a capital P? Ah, well...this prize is a sentient Prize capable of metamorphosing at the change of a planetary backdrop.

> "'Even Prizes need occasional nourishment,' the Prize added sarcastically. 'And I might add we also need rest, mild exercise, sexual congress, intermittent intoxication and an occasional bowel movement; none of which you have made provision for since I was awarded to you.'" (p.45)

So... We have Carmody and his Prize. We are also given a Predator that is uniquely tailored for hunting Carmodies, a being that exists because logic and the food chain demand its existence. The chase begins and we flit across the continuum sampling exotic planets and alternate Earths by the dozen as Carmody tries to find his home and his Predator tries to find a mouthful of Carmody.

The situations in which Carmody finds himself present him with numerous occasions in which to reflect philosophically, to debate philosophically and to shrug his shoulders.....

> "'So?' asked the clerk.
>
> 'The conclusion is clear' the computer said. 'I was programmed for error, and I performed as I was programmed. You must remember, gentlemen, that for a machine error is an ethical consideration indeed, the only ethical consideration. A perfect machine would be an impossibility; any attempt to create a perfect machine would be a blasphemy. All life, even the limited life of a machine, has error built into it; it is one of the few ways in which life can be differentiated from the determinism of unliving matter. Complex machines such as myself occupy an ambiguous zone between living and non-living. Were we never to err, we would be inapropos, hideous, immoral. Malfunction, gentlemen, is, I submit, our means of rendering worship to that which is more perfect than we, but which still does not permit itself a visible perfection. So if error were not divinely programmed into us, we would malfunction spontaneously to show that modicum of free will which, as living creations, we partake in.'
>
> Everyone bowed their heads, for the Sweepstakes Computer was talking of holy matters. The alien Carmody brushed away a tear, and said:
>
> 'I cannot disagree, although I do not concur. The right to be wrong is fundamental throughout the cosmos. This machine has acted ethically.'

'Thank you,' the Computer said simply. 'I try.' " (p.21)

Here, in complexity, absurdity and humour is the essence of Sheckley. Perhaps this dry and wry free-wheeling doesn't appeal. But if it does then why haven't you got this book? Why haven't you read it?

Ideatively this is probably the densest written of all of Sheckley's books. It has only the most tentative of grips upon reality. It is about the alien and the familiar and, well, Sheckley says it so much better:

> ' Carmody swallowed hard. That was the trouble with exotic life forms; just when you thought you understood something, you found that you didn't understand at all. And conversely, when you thought you were completely mystified, they suddenly threw you off balance by acting in a completely comprehensible manner. In fact, Carmody decided, what made aliens so thorough -ly alien was the fact that they weren't completely alien. It was amusing at first; but after a while it got on your nerves."
>
> (p.46)

Anyone with a taste for logical paradoxes will relish this.

THE ALCHEMICAL MARRIAGE OF ALISTAIR CROMPTON by Robert Sheckley (Michael Joseph; 1978; 191pp; £4.50; ISBN 0 7181 1695 X)

Reviewed by David Wingrove.

Before I am summoned before the Committee for the Preservation of Critical Dignity I shall state simply that there are no rules to this critique. After all, I did begin this book with a firm belief in my own identity...

> "'But that is not the case at all. Actually, you have no independent life of your own. You do not live, you are lived! You are a completely automatic mechanism with a built-in I-reflex. Your life has no meaning, since you are not even a person. You are nothing more than a short-lived, inconsistent and accidental collection of tendencies.'" (p.176)

This is a book about the schizoid personality and how a future society deals with that. Massive Cleavage is the means by which the disparate elements of our protagonist, Alistair Crompton's personality are handled.

> 'Under deep syntho-hypnosis three separate personalities were evoked. The doctors talked to them and made their choice. Two personalities were given names and projected into Durier bodies. The third personality - Alistair - was judged the most adequate by a narrow margin and retained the original corpus." (p.18)

As can be imagined, Alistair has problems. Whilst he is the successful chief taster of Psychosmell Inc., his monochrome existence nullifies any pleasure he might derive from such success. At 30 he may reintegrate with the other parts of his personality. But to do so would mean travelling vast distances across the galaxy - and at great cost. The book begins at this stage, with Alistair's plans to achieve Reintegration.

I'll leave the plot there. Unlike OPTIONS, the book does actually develope in a reasonably predictable manner. But...

"'We've been fighting continuously ever since we met,' Crompton said. 'All it does is drive us crazy.'

'That's because you've been doing it the bad old-fashioned way - the internalised conflict way. Whereas modern science knows that the good modern way is to externalise your most interior conflicts and thus resolve them.'

'But how can I do that?'

'Luckily for you, the Universal Ways and Means Committee has just met in plenary session and invented especially for you a device known as the External Circumstance Simulator.'

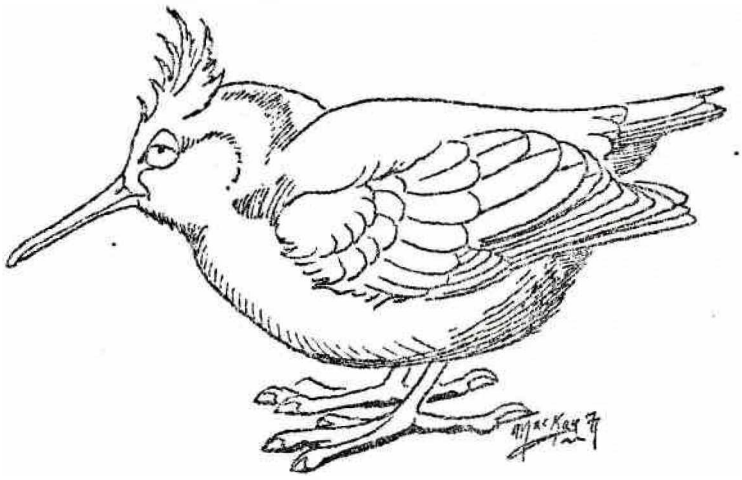
'They have? For me? That's the first real break I've had to date in this story!'" (p.187)

By the time Sheckley has shut the lid on the surrealistic dungeons of his protagonist(s)'s mind(s) we have been presented with one of the most astute yet hilarious examinations of what it is to be neurotically human. Each of the individual segments of Crompton's personality (with Loomis as the pleasure instinct and Dan Stack as blind, instinctual agression) is beautifully described.

So what about the story? What about a few words on language, style and theme? If you don't know Sheckley then I can't enlighten you more than to say that I think the Royal Aiain Northwest Mounted Illusion Squad were partly responsible. It is probably the best written of Bob Sheckley's books. Unlike OPTIONS (again!) there is no serious auctorial intercession: Sheckley sits back here and allows his creations to flounder in their own ignorance.

" On all sides of him, the envious Crompton saw people with all their marvellous complexities and contradictions, constantly bursting out of stereotypes that society tried to force on them. He observed prostitutes who were not good-hearted, army seargants who detested brutality, wealthy men who never gave a cent to charity, Irishmen who hated talking, Italians who could not carry a tune, Frenchmen with no sense of logic. Most of the human race seemed to live lives of a wonderful and unpredictable richness, erupting into sudden passion and strange calms, saying one thing and doing another, repudiating their backgrounds, overcoming their limitations, confounding psychologists and driving psychoanalysts to drink." (p18/19)

This is a work of pure comic genius. But then, perhaps I have a perverse sense of humour. I'll probably read this every six months or so until I've Reintegrated.



found in a bathtub

letters

Cherry Wilder: Langen/Hessen, Germany

Paul Kincaid's review of Cecilia Holland's fine novel FLAOTING WORLDS was silly and inaccurate. Vector Readers who have not encountered the book should not be misled by his opening comments on style, punctuation and lack of description. For instance:

> "Paula looked straight up overhead. The light was diffuse. It fell in pale sheets through the height of the dome, here blue and there definitely more yellow. It was hard to realise that the ocean covered them.....She went across the street. From here she could see through the broken walls to the next row of ruins, and through them to the next, all huge, the biggest buildings she had ever seen. The people who had built this city had dominated Earth for three centuries, by money, by force and by guile; they had colonised Mars, reached out as far as Uranus, cracked atoms and made whole cities out of polymer, and Manhattan had been the heart of that Empire."

This is an example of the author's short-sentence style and it contains, besides adjectives, one of her fairly rare semi-colons (there is another on the same page). Kincaid says: "Gradually, as the novel progresses, she learns the use of the comma; but, apart from two very brief passages where they are used excessively and incorrectly, she never uses the colon or semi-colon." The passage I have quoted is taken from page two of the Pocket Books edition and the author is already handling commas perfectly well. There are semi-colons on pages 4, 7, 18, 21, and colons on 12 and 21: in other words these marks are used infrequently but correctly throughout the book.

The air-cars do have a number of mirrors (p.101) and although the author doesn't mention their fuel or method of propulsion I think it is unfair to assume that they are petrol-driven on the basis of the word 'choke', which is a metaphor anyway (a theatrical dimmer, for instance, can be a 'variable choke'). I know what an artificial city is here on Earth....Brasilia and Canberra are different from London and Los Angeles...and given the author's convincing description I accepted the sphere cities on Saturn and Uranus.

It is very difficult to argue points like these and point out Kincaid's inaccuracies without losing the atmosphere of a rich, exciting, well-characterised book. The author uses her highly original style with great suppleness to give an unusually vivid, often hilarious picture of life within several societies of the far future. Maybe 4000 years is a little too far distant, but in the matter of names we are up against a convention of SF. The language of the future may well be something we can't understand at all, yet characters in books must have understandable names. The names must also indicate, in this book, the wide gap between the Styth and the inhabitants of the Middle Planets.

Kincaid has misread and messed up the melange of names and skin colours that make up these worlds. The inhabitants of Earth are dark-skinned (Tony Andrea

and Richard Bunker chocolate brown, Paula dark enough to be refered to by a polite Martian as a negress) or they are yellow, like An Chu, with an occasional white such as the old Committee member, Sybil Jefferson. The members of the right-wing group on Mars are white; the Martian we hear most of is a woman called Cam Savenia. There is an even tougher Christian Militarist clique on Luna; their leader is General Gordon. Yes, names can have satirical reference too. The Styths, from Saturn and Uranus, are not 'copper-coloured' as Kincaid will have it, but black, black as soot or the ace of spades. The Martians and the Styths are heavily intolerant, the Earth persons are not, but to read this as a simple racist-alien formula is as dumb as seizing on the name Mendoza as Spanish-American.

For one thing the anarchists of Earth are not 'good'. This anarchy, as opposed to the high-minded socialist society of The Dispossessed, and to the anarchy advocated by historical anarchists such as Bakunin, is a run-down, catch-as-catch-can society of free enterprise, containing business persons as well as artists, students, drop-outs and crooks. There is no law and no government and no police; do it yourself is the rule, so is bribery. These anarchists are pacifists...they have to be. The last vestige of government is a worldwide company, the Committee for the Revolution, who act as middlemen and diplomats for the Council of the Middle Planets.

This anarchist society is a subtle and fascinating creation; the anarchists exist under domes on a heavily polluted Earth, which remains still, healing itself, a green and beautiful oasis in the solar system. The fierce society of the Styths is described with equal conviction, especially the violent life aboard the ships of the space fleet. Paula is a tough, persistent heroine, guided only a small part of the time by sex (which is never 'coy 50's sex'...a phrase which suggests to me an early Sheckley heroine slipping into 'something gossamer'.) The story is strong, not fragmented and the characterisation is good. Perhaps the novel is overlong but Ms Holland is clearly a gifted writer and as readers we should be equal to the demands of this book.

((Free enterprise and anarchy seems a mixture that doesn't work, and the only truely convincing anarchist society I've yet encountered in sf is that created by Thomas Disch, and that works because the beings involved are immortal and are thus unconcerned with many normal human predilections. I also note, incidentally, that Ms Holland has a small reputation in the mainstream.))

Chris Evans: Chiswick, London.

As much as I enjoyed VECTOR 88, I can't remember when I was in such disagreement with so many of your contributors. Critical judgements are essentially personal judgements, I realise, but I'd like to take issue with three people nonetheless.

Firstly, I think Paul Kincaid is far too harsh on Cecelia Holland's FLOATING WORLDS; it's a much better book than he claims. True, it's overlong and set too far in the future for its stated social and scientific development; true, Holland favours a terse style, with short sentences, few descriptive passages and little character reflection. But the book is about people; their personalities emerge from their interplay with one another. I don't see where he gets the idea that the characterisation is poor; I found it to be excellent. I also thought that the relationship between the Styths and the humans was very well handled. As for lack of subtlety, again I found the reverse to be true. A delicate sense of irony pervades much of the book, accomplished because Holland does not state what is transparently obvious (eg. the fact that the Anarchist's Committee is very beaurocratic). Does a writer have to spell everything out?

Secondly, I want to extend the dispute on John Varley's THE OPIUCHI HOTLINE by disagreeing with Chris Morgan: I didn't think it was a very good novel. I'd agree that Varley is quite inventive, but he lacks imagination, which is another thing altogether. The novel reads like a dramatised report; there's no sense that Varley has actually sat down and envisaged (formed a mental picture of) what he's writing about. Only once or twice are incidental details thrown in which enable the reader to "see" a scene; the rest of the time its just words on a page. You don't have to have a "poetic" or "literary" style to do this - Philip K. Dick is a good example of someone who uses basically utilitarian prose to attain a fine effect of realism - but you do need to conceive your characters and situations clearly before you commit the scene to print, otherwise no imagery comes across. This, I feel, Varley hasn't done, and it's a common flaw with much American sf. The idea, the plot, is all. That Varley admits to having been influenced by Larry Niven is an added indictment, for Niven is a writer with similar failings: his books read like synopses of real novels; there's no imagin -ative dimension to them whatsoever.

My final and most serious gripe is with Maxim Jakubowski's review of Chris Priest's ANTICIPATIONS. However sincerely he may have been disappoint -ed by the contents of the anthology, it's utterly ridiculous and totally fallacious to claim that an editor can stamp his own literary style on the efforts of his contributors, especially people with as distinctive a voice as Brian Aldiss or J.G. Ballard. And to attack a writer in his editorial capacity via an overall criticism of his body of fiction is thoroughly impertinent. It's a dishonest review, because Jakubowski, unable to pinpoint his basic dissatisfaction with the anthology, has used this as an excuse to question the validity of a single writer's contribution to the genre. This is disgraceful. I'm also suspicious of the way in which he bandies opinions as if they were facts ("Tom Disch, another writer whose intellect and deep-frozen emotional stance is already well-established". Is it? I wasn't aware of it. And what is a "deep-frozen emotional stance", anyway?) and claims as his own, insights ("I do keep detecting strongly repressed misogynous traits in Ian Watson's novels...") which have been provided by others (by John Clute in FOUNDATION 13). I think Jakubowski should seriously question his own motives and honesty in his attitude to reviewing.

And I said I enjoyed the issue? We,, yes, I did; there's nothing like a few problematical judgements to sharpen one's critical sensibilities. The interview with Frank Herbert was very interesting (I'm about to embark on a re-reading of DUNE and its sequels as a result) and it was nice (tho' surprising) to see Flann O'Brien take his place in the ever-widening canon of sf. The more I read of Andy Darlington's criticism, the more impressed I am; his piece on Moorcock was no exception. Hang on to him! A very impressive issue, this; the best, in fact, for some time. Keep it up!

((I'll admit that I disagreed with Maxim's evaluation - as I noted in VECTOR 88 - and now feel that I was possibly wrong to publish that review in that form, as it possessed the faults that Chris Evans so clearly high-lights above. I'll put forward no excuses for my lapse of judgement but score it against experience. Hopefully Chris' comments will tempt a few of you to see what the fuss is about. There are three of the best written stories in contemporary sf represented in the anthology.))

Grahaeme Young: Hayes, Middlesex

Chris Morgan is wrong: I didn't spend my time looking for (very obviously) non-existent poetry in THE OPIUCHI HOTLINE - I spent it looking for the (equally obvious) lack of any writing ability. The quotations I gave merely served to show that Varley was pretty well inept at prose and poetry.

It seems to me that Chris Morgan has missed (wanted to miss?) the point of my strictures, which was that it is no longer sufficient to throw 'new' technology at us (whether or not it excites or convinces - I certainly had no trouble staying away from the edge of my seat) and then claim the innovation excuses the bad writing. Nor, for that matter, does the writer admitting he can't write - if he's that aware of his failings he should go and play golf or take up sewing. Unless, of course, the Chris Morgans of this world are saying that the efforts of the good writers over the last twenty years have been wasted because sf isn't about writing, or communication, or people, but solely and utterly about technology, and any thought of style and competence a mere irrelevance, necessary, if at all, to get from page 1 to page 150 and create a marketable package. "throwing in another plot element, or an innovation, or a bit of sex, whenever things look like slowing down" are not at all a worthy approach to the writing of literature or anything else; they are the mark of the bad craftsman. They certainly do not give "a novel more pace" because they do not give a novel but a hotchpotch of scenes cobbled together with no other justification than that the author says they ought to be cobbled together.

Chris Morgan's (and, by implication of having accepted the book, Asimov's and Bova's) thesis seems to be that new ideas (which anyway aren't new - the 'Hotline' theme is a re-hash of the 'Gateway' idea, exiled mankind turns up all over the place - even in 'Floating Worlds', reviewed in V88 - symbiote vegetables are not new, neither are clones, nor indeed the idea of immortal clones) are excuse enough to publish anything. And given that this is 1978 not 1938, they aren't.

((I'm beginning to feel that Sf as a genre is losing all sense of 'balance' and is slowly separating into two 'camps', distinctive and distanced. There seems to be a formula approach and a 'literary' approach. The technologists aren't interested in the traditions of 'literature', it seems, whereas the smaller (and less popular, undoubtedly in terms of sales) body of writers who have 'artistic' pretensions are no longer writing anything that could be recognised as 'science fiction'. The convincing syntheses in modern sf are few and far between.))

Michael Moorcock: London, W1.

Thanks for VECTOR. I enjoyed the issue a lot and was flattered by Andy Darlington's attention. The last End of Time book (or rather The End Of All Songs) is geared to strip the paint, as it were, from the skull. Which is why, I suppose, some readers thought it the best and others thought it disappointing. Like writers I admire (such as Firbank and Meredith) I try to convey emotional pain through characters who feel obliged to disguise such pain (this is 'true dandyism' - similarly in The English Assassin where the Cossacks are hanging a dandy they admire for his bravery - Sartor Resartus, etc.) I think I'll always deal with such characters - Jerry C. is similar - because they have the 'true feeling' of the romantic, but feel they shouldn't show the 'bottom' of the regency buck. That's why the most appalling outrages of modern life lead one to produce comedy; I suppose. It's complicated. Thanks too, for Maxim's review of Gloriana, which was also kind.

Philip Muldowney: Plymouth, Devon.

Your editorial was an interesting point. The economics of magazine publishing are indeed interesting. In the past ten years or so, since New Worlds ghosted into non-existence, there have been some interesting attempts to found a British sf magazine. VISION OF TOMORROW was by far the best surprisingly enough; it was developing into a pretty good magazine when its publisher

decided to end it. SF MONTHLY was a curious hybrid indeed. It struck me that NEL never wanted to spend any money on actually developing it. Hence the crafty use of paperback book illustrations in poster size, big sf fact articles, a lot of space to fandom. All ways of using up space cheaply. As for VORTEX, it did have certain things going for it; in good distribution. However, if ever there was an object lesson in how NOT to edit an sf magazine, this was it. Post new wave nonentity stories, with an interminable Moorcock serial, and lousy layout. No wonder it bombed. Three magazine failures in ten years. What did they all lack? MONEY.

((I'd add OTHER TIMES to that list, off the top of my head...and there are no doubt others))

A chicken and egg situation really. You will not get a successful sf magazine without name authors, good, apt illustration and - above all - good distribution. This is what all the American sf mags are crying about; there is no national magazine distribution chain in the States, whereas over here there is a very efficient one. You can order ANALOG, F&SF, GALAXY (when it's published) and ISAAC ASIMOV'S Mag from any newsagent in this country and be sure of getting it. Good distribution also needs money. So, no sf magazine will go very far in this country without the money to back it for some time. You just cannot any longer put a mass circulation magazine onto the market with no financial backing.

This is where the new Penthouse OMNI looks interesting. There is quite definitely big money involved. Rates for stories seem to be touching 15 cents a word ((I've heard it's 10 cents)) upwards. Now, whether there is the heart and editorial flair, that is another matter.

Your argument has a big hole in it. Sf is virtually the last home of the short story - has been for twenty years or more. With the top names tied up in novel writing, the sf magazines are crying out for stories, and there are more new names in the American sf magazines than there ever have been. On the contrary, NOW is one of the best times to sell sf short stories. The British short story sf writer of the past twenty years has always had to aim for the American market anyway. To justify that point, take three latest issues of the American sf mags. F&SF September has a new story from Reid Collins, Isaac Asimov has stories from E. Amalia, Andujae, Jesse Peel, G. Richard Bozarth, Ted Reynolds, Jeff Dunteman, Anne Lear and K. W. Macann - all new or relatively new names.

((For a start I disagree that the short story form has been 'kept alive' in the sf genre and has died off elsewhere. If that were the case then it would be a sad day indeed. What about 'New American Review, Quarterly Review Of Literature, Evergreen Review, Playboy, Esquire, Cavalier, Olympia, The Atlantic Monthly, The New Yorker etc...just to mention a few of the magazines in the States that command larger or as large audiences as the sf mags? And as far as the standards of Isaac Asimov's Magazine is concerned, I don't think very many reasonable, non-formula stories have a chance of being published from new names. New names are not all of the story. New names are only important if they involve a progression of new ideas, innovations of approach and style))

Tom Jones: Bracknell, Berks.

Chris Priest did an excellent hatchet job on me, I'm writing to congratulate him. But I feel his comments on points 3 and 4 didn't really disagree with the points, they just said 'I don't like them'. And you really must read F&SF. They're publishing a lot of good, new authors - so much so that I'm becoming optimistic about the future of sf short fiction.

One comment on your editorial. Whilst agreeing 100% about the lack of an UK outlet for short fiction, it's worth noting that there are a lot of

markets now in the USA and I've read comments from a number of the major magazine editors saying they just can't get enough good material (lots of material, yes, but good material, no). Okay, some US magazines don't like taking UK material but I believe that's a minority. Good material will sell (eg. Richard Cowper). Perhaps there's a parochial attitude amongst our UK writers, or maybe a fear of becoming small fish in a big pool (it's easier to retain your ego and complain about a lack of outlets than to look at a collection of reject slips from F&SF, ANALOG and IASFM etc). I have no personal experience of this, of course, and thus no facts to cloud my opinion.

((I think any writer with a minimum of self-respect would hesitate before submitting material to a magazine that sends you pre-printed pro forma telling you how to clean out your typewriter with the rejection slips - as IASFM apparently does...))

Steven Bridge: London, SW12

((This refers to an earlier editorial - a late arrival))

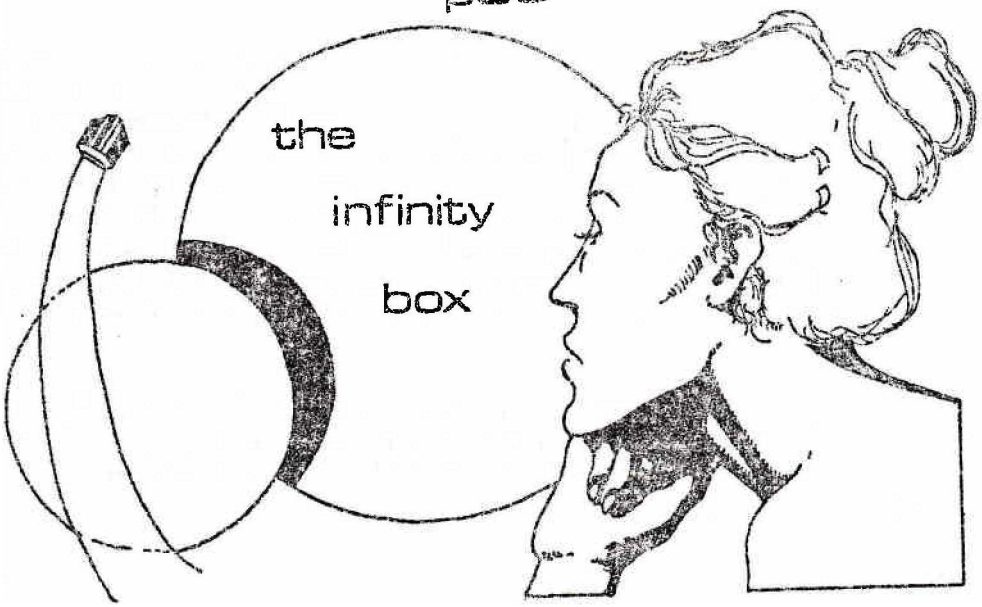
As for the editorial discussion, I must say I wholeheartedly support those noble people who are prepared to spend their valuable time dredging up and presenting to the world the filth you cleverly insert in deceptively prim paragraphs throughout your magazine. Time and time again, they bring to our notice the results of their selfless endeavours. One grouse though; I wish they would be more precise concerning the location of these lurid passages and shocking expletives because I'm sure I overlook them on first reading, and I would like to promote my nascent but eager sense of outrage. Every four-letter word, sexual connotation, scatalogical reference or heaven-shaking blasphemy would raise my coprophilious consciousness nearer to the cherishable state of prudish exasperation, open to those of us possessing the necessary refined sensibility. Seriously, it is obvious to me that there is a difference between censorship and editing, and I would not want to see any of the former in Vector. I find the idea of censorship far more insulting than anything it seeks to eradicate.

((Which about says it all.))

Greg Hills: Palmerston North, New Zealand.

The Android's Dreams: I am surprised you haven't realised the main reason all these UK mags have been failing. You nibble at it: they do not 'reach a large audience'. You note that the only existent 'mag' is 'apparently moving to a US bias'. Yet with all these clues you miss the essential point -- a point which, I think, throws vast light on your attitudes. The reason (I won't keep you in suspense) is that each new mag is immediately so loaded down by 'significant' works, 'speculative fiction' (as opposed to 'science fiction') and Names from the 'new wave' era, that it cannot help but fail to make touch with an audience who want science fiction. They don't want to be shown how revolting they are, or how sick present-day society is. They want to get away from that. .... Read US sf, I mean, read it. Open your mind. It isn't the world that's out-of-step; it's you.

((Yes, my bias is towards a literature of self-discovery. I enjoy the odd purely escapist book, to 'season' the mix. But I genuinely feel that only those books that add something to our lives and expand us a little are worth cherishing. The rest is so much icing - sweet but transient. And it is an essential part of literature, I feel, to stimulate and seek ideals, standards of excellence. Otherwise we may as well pack up and crawl back to our caves...))



THE VIOLET APPLE by David Lindsay: Sidgwick & Jackson; 1978; 252pp; £5.50; ISBN 0-283-98442-2

Reviewed by Brian Stableford.

David Lindsay wrote seven novels, of which only five were published during his lifetime. Of those five, three sank without trace, leaving only A VOYAGE TO ARCTURUS and THE HAUNTED WOMAN (though these, too, failed initially) to gather a posthumous reputation about his name. The former work is one of the outstanding imaginative works of all time - a masterpiece which can be described, without any exaggeration, as a work of genius. It is, however, so strange that it has always been a rather esoteric work, and its advocates, though enthusiastic, have been few in number. Its publication record has not been such as to encourage publishers to risk reissuing SPHINX, DEVIL'S TOR or THE ADVENTURES OF M. DE MAILLY, nor to show much interest in THE WITCH or THE VIOLET APPLE. Now, at last, this wall of indifference has been breached, and Sidgwick & Jackson have brought out THE VIOLET APPLE, half a century after its final revision. That the novel has finally appeared owes much to the efforts of J. B. Pick, who introduces this edition and who wrote an appreciation of both the unpublished novels for the 1970 collection of essays, THE STRANGE GENIUS OF DAVID LINDSAY. THE WITCH, to judge by what Pick wrote then, might not be published even now, because the last chapter remained unrevised and in a form which Lindsay considered unsuitable for publication. If THE VIOLET APPLE does well, though, there may be hope.

THE VIOLET APPLE is a novel which puts everyday human affairs, sensitively observed and minutely evaluated, into a greater context. The context itself is defined in the second paragraph of the novel, where it is presented as the fundamental tenet of the hero's belief-system:

> "Not to go too closely into his creed, he soberly regarded mankind, with all its boasted skill, energy, science, law and progress, as no more than a petty heap of blind, wriggling, three dimensioned insect-like beings, surrounded by terrific unseen forces, not only the slightest abnormal variation of which would suffice completely to annihilate the human race and its memory, but which also, historically and actually, had been, and still were, responsible for the major changes of civilisation. When a new ideal, a new disposition, or a

> new fact entered the world, it sprang neither from development nor inspiration, but it was imposed. The half-perception of the existence of those forces, he believed, was supplied by such authentic supernatural phenomena as knockings, the sound of falling masonry, appearances at the moment of death, and so forth. We were separated from a whole active universe by an opaque wall of senselessness. "

The notion of mankind as a "petty heap of blind, wriggling, three-dimensioned insect-like beings" emerged naturally enough from the expanding horizons of time and space opened up by the nineteenth century science, and it is an attitude which fuels the boldest endeavours of speculative fiction from Wells to Stapledon (via Doyle's "The Poison Belt" and Beresford's "A Negligible Experiment"). Lindsay's interpretation of the perspective is, however, quite distinct. It is more mystical than either Wells' or Stapledon's, but in spite of the use of Judaeo-Christian mythology in this particular novel it is also far removed from orthodox religious mysticism. C. S. Lewis was an admirer of Lindsay's, but Lindsay's brand of mysticism is based on a very different moral order, and perhaps the closest writer, in spirit, to Lindsay was Lewis' friend Charles Williams, who developed in MANY DIMENSIONS and THE GREATER TRUMPS especially, a deliberately enigmatic version of syncretic occult mythology that comes no closer to conventional Christian symbology than the Gnostic heresies.

The narrative component of THE VIOLET APPLE is the story of two engaged couples whose alliances are troubled by the fact that the female partner in one is possessed of an uneasy and irrational lust for the male partner in the other. The hero - the subject of this unorthodox passion - struggles manfully with the situation, trying to keep matters under control though burdened by his own disregard for the demands of 1920s middle-class propriety. The second component of the novel is the gradual and tiny intrusion of one of the 'unseen forces' through the medium of a seed reputedly carried out of Eden by Adam, potentially capable of reproducing the tree of knowledge of good and evil. The seed does indeed produce a tree, but only a feeble and decadent echo of the original, which bears two miniature apples. The hero and his Eve obtain, by means of these fruits, the merest glimpse of the world of possibility hidden by the "opaque wall of senselessness" that confounds the human situation.

In its day, this particularly visionary incident must have been quite new and - to the majority of those who saw the manuscript - almost incomprehensible. Today, ironically enough, there is a danger that the episode may seem over-familiar, for we are now in the era of hallucinogenic "mind-expansion" and the fetishistic pursuit of "consciousness-raising". Despite the fact that fashion has caught up with the novel, however, Lindsay's handling of the vision - its substance, its implications and (perhaps most important) its aftermath - has a clarity and control which is quite unparalleled.

I found this book spellbinding. Once absorbed in it I became oblivious to external happenings until I had finished it. Few books have that effect on me, and it is a long time since I read the last one. I do not often recommend that people buy books at £5.50 but in this case I must make an exception. It is worth pointing out that this is a great deal less than you will have to pay if you want to read SPHINX or DEVIL'S TOR, assuming you can find a copy at all. This is the first edition of a work of outstanding brilliance, a classic work of imaginative fiction. No one whose interest in the literature of the imagination is serious can afford to pass over this book. Casual readers may find the mundane component of it rather dated - so much so that it will be an effort for them to attune themselves to it, but the quality of the prose will give them every chance, and the rewards are considerable.

Buy this book, then.- and hope that Sidgwick & Jackson will follow it up, either with THE WITCH or by rescuing SPHINX, DEVIL'S TOR and THE ADVENTURES OF M. DE MAILLY.

THE SAVOY BOOK edited by Michael Butterworth & David Britton. Savoy Books; 3, Whittle Street, Tib Street, Manchester, UK; 144pp; £0.95p; ISBN 0-352-33001-5)

Reviewed by Andy Darlington.

You probably associate Michael Butterworth's name with the successful "Hawklords" and "Space 1999" novels. But there's another, more important aspect to his work; one which now - with the launching of this new, independent paperback imprint - will receive the recognition it deserves. Heathcote Williams writes that 'the sky begins on the ground', and in accordance with this philosophy (sky-shooting artistic ambitions grounded in sound hardnosed publishing machinery) the 'Savoy Books' series is a decisive slap in the mind designed to exorcise myths of conventional cultural apathy. Heathcote Williams contribution is as euphorically absurd and illogically impertinent as an erection; great shovel-fulls of manic prose foraging through Rastafarianism, ganja clouds of technicolour stereo dream, animal liberation and free-wheeling oblique humour. The 'Savoy' letterheads declare an intention to 'stomp your mind -effetely', and this they do in the most direct and effective way - by making "The Savoy Book" itself just about the most exciting new anthology of creative writing and graphics to appear in a decade. There is "The Incalling", a mood-piece of startlingly evocative writing by M. J. Harrison with descriptions that approach the very essence of Mervyn Peake underpinning a disturbingly tactile exercise in the creation of atmosphere. An air of haunted fin de siecle decay in which characters as bleak and timeless as Modigliani figures ebb across a symbolist urban landscape, as frozen and inescapable as Edvard Munch's "The Cry". Further into the anthology Lester Bangs - the Buckowski of New Rock journalism - gate-crashes the very portals of death itself to interview the deceased Jimi Hendrix. Its a cleverly constructed dialogue in which Hendrix devotees (as in Michael Moorcock's "A Dead Singer") can identify every nuance and inflection of utterance in such declarations as 'heaven is like total stardom with a constant-touring clause'.

The lineage of "The Savoy Book" project can be traced back as far as "Concentrate", a magazine-venture that came out from under "New Worlds". Directed by Butterworth, impatient for change and literary revolution, it ran for three issues from August '67 to January '70, spreading names like Sladek, Anselm Hollo and Charles Platt across large, single-folded sheets. It was followed by five issues of "Corridor", a Manchester-based magazine that became an object lesson in what could be achieved with limited financial resources - but with unlimited energy, enthusiasm and editorial inventiveness. "Corridor" metamorphosed into "Woodworks" for two further issues (6 and 7), becoming the most potently consciousness-expanding publication since the demise of the large-format "New Worlds". David Britton (fresh from a stint producing "Crucified Toad") became Art Editor, infiltrating the lavish gloss with his intricate drawings. Elements of Beardsley's pornographic art colliding with Magritte's complex mind-game landscapes of ludicrous and bizarre juxtapositions enacted across inner-mind Victorian drawing rooms. "Woodworks" drew the most envigoratingly experimental work being produced in the U.K. - some of its flavour, and some of its contents seeping over into "The Savoy Book". There are two pieces lifted intact from "Woodworks 6" - Paul Ableman's memories of a dead friend with its occasionally clumsy phrasing compensated for by haiku-like intensities - 'we tend to die as we have lived; in fragments'; and Paul Buck's "The Kiss" with stark, compressed

sexual imagery. Comparisons with "New Worlds" were inevitable, but over the space of an intervening decade the whole machinations of teonique have gone through several degrees of sophistication, and there are no embaress-ingly failed or ineptly incomprehensible experiments here. Michael Butterworth's own creative writing is represented by "Stick" and the ("Ticket that...") "Pub that exploded". Two short pieces of jagged surrealism, words that ignite the page like napalm; try 'severed wrists fell down from the sky and hung in front of his blue eyes on puppet strings. Streaked across with barbed wire'.

Later on there is a minimalist novel from Richard Kostelanetz that cuts clear through the middle-class pretentions of all those 'significant' novels that infest dense "Sunday Times" review columns - by reducing the whole genre to a series of algebraic cyphers. Then there is an interview with Brian Aldiss, and a prequel to Harlan Ellison's "A Boy And His Dog", a compulsively readable tract disgourged in Ellison's unique fusion of inventive audacity and lyrical freshness. A post-nuclear scenario populated by wild barnarian children and wise telepathic dogs. While etched all around the solid blocks of type are full-page visuals. Bob Jenkins' perfectly drafted, macabre image-cycles of nubile pubescence reflecting death; Jim Leons mythopoetic eroticism, and Jim Mottersheads towering Byzantine imaginings, plus work by Britton and Cawthorn.

Finally there is J. Jeff Jones perceptive re-write of Ginsberg's epic Beat-poem, retitled "Howl Now" about the'flatulent smug fashionable' media gods 'destroyed by success'. It's dedicated to Bob (Dylan?), Joni (Mitchell?) Frank (Zappa?) and others. It neatly encapsulates the significance, not only of the book, but of the whole 'savoy' project - it lays the ghost of the 60's. It rejects the conventional, boring, tedious wisdom of the last decade by the very fact of its living, vibrant existence. Writ large THIS BOOK IS AS GOOD AND BETTER THAN ANYTHING THAT CAME OUT OF THE SHALLOW DAYGLO '60's. While others sit around bemoaning the fiction of creative wastelands, experimental impasse's, economic impossibilities, and the drying-up of ineptly pathetic media-hyped abilities, Mike Butterworth and Dave Britton have GONE OUT AND DONE IT. Like Lester angs ignoring the very obstacle of death they have gone out and created the most exciting damn anthology of words and pictures in a decade. Its a statement you can't ignore. It's happening now. In 1978. Give it the support it deserves: buy it, promote it, get it into your local bookshop - or you'll lose out. The sky begins on the ground; Britton and Butterworth are gonna shoot that sky into fragments with or without you!

ENEMIES OF THE SYSTEM by Brian W. Aldiss: Jonathan Cape; 1978; £3.50; 119pp; ISBN 0-224-01583-4.

Reviewed by David Wingrove.

> "You find a hunting life exciting, no doubt, Takeido, because you are young. But there is more challenge in the way of life our system has set itself. Our challenge is existential. It cannot be cured temporarily by a full belly or a wench. We suppress our self, we surrender our identity, for the greater benefit of society and the state. We are aware of the cost of doing so, we are also aware that the condition of life is tragic. But that is the way we have chosen and we must pursue it throughout life - without pity for our own weaknesses, or for the weaknesses of others." (p105/106)

We are looking through the eyes of one of the System's inmates in the above quotation: a System that has produced Homo Uniformis - Man Alike Throughout. It is one of the most poignant moments in this novel, for the irony is that there is no choice for these far-future Utopianists: choice is something that departed with the bio-shunt, some 1 million years before this tale begins. No, this story concerns a test - a form of 'quality control' for the new product, Man. It depicts the faults of a 'system' by contrasting it with the 'degenerate', the 'natural' and the 'ritualistic'. It is a system that has little that is recognisably human left in it:

" 'I was meaning only to imply that some Progressives regard the male-female relationship as a little old-fashioned, even irrelevant to the needs of the system: they question the useful function of gender.' "

(P11)

This is Brian Aldiss' contribution to the Dystopian Novel; and a direct lineage can be traced from Zamyatin through Huxley to Orwell and thus to ENEMIES OF THE SYSTEM. Unlike his precursors, however, Aldiss has no illusions about the 'noble savage'. Lysenka II, whereon all of the action of this novel takes place, is a world where the predator-grazer ecology is false, composed entirely of the descendants of a starship crew that crashed on the planet 1.09 million years before. Faced with a planet rooted firmly in a Devonian state of evolution, they have devolved, become a complex ecological system: animals of cunning rather than instinct. It is in the encounter between homo uniformis and the devolved homo sapiens that Aldiss examines the doctrines of the Utopia.

The machanics of this tale are appealing. Homo Sapiens possessed three governance systems 'which were in conflict': to progress to Homo Uniformis 'one harmonious super-system' had to be created, an 'in-built processor which phases out much of the activity of the old autonomic nervous system or renders it subject to the direct control of the thought system" (p.26) It is the very basis of the System, the bio-shunt, the machine that freed Man from his contrary nature ("Division was his lot") and allowed the individual to become a corporate being. Utopia is seen here to work, but the true cost can only be measured away from the heart of the System, on the frontiers of its dominion, on 'savage' Lysenka II.

If this were a simple condemnation of systems then there would be little to distinguish this from the sforementioned books. It is more than its predecessors in one vital area: it makes no final value judgement. It is contrasting but not making an overt statement, as if Aldiss has viewed both genera of Man and found them wanting. If his sympathies lie with either party they must be with sapiens, because he is one of them; but he is not totally antipathetic to uniformis; for in the hell that the New Men have created for themselves, there remains a spark of the curiosity and outwardness that characterised sapiens. Herbert Read, in his ANARCHY AND ORDER, commented that "the political fanatic will denounce such customs as aspects of a degenerate social order, but his new social order, if he succeeds in establishing it, will soon evolve customs just as absurd, and even less elegant." ("Revolution & Reason: P17). This has happened to uniformis at the stage we see him here: he has substituted his far less elegant rituals for the grandiose images of his predecessor, choosing stability against change. Uniformis is a political creature, evaluating his environment by its constructiveness, its necessity, its utility. He has evolved from aesthetics and in doing so, contrary to his claims, has shed both genuine honesty and logic. Beyond his cosseting System he is shown to be a frail and unstable creature still:

> "'If you speak out, you are an enemy of the system. Is our way of life then so insecure? Can one question make a whole statement collapse?'" (p.102)

These are the potential executives of the system, given a 'vacation' on Lysenka II: the 'privileged' being tested in the only way such a system can test its component parts. Their failure to meet the rigorous demands of the System is, in our terms, a triumph of humanity. And yet the System is shown to win. Which is one of the rules of the Dystopian novel.

For me, the book hinged about a single line, describing the plight of devolved sapiens - 1.09 million years on and clinging grimly to the shreds of past rituals, past civilising influences. It comes from Che Burek, one of the Utopianists Aldiss puts before us for our judgement:

> "for to me the tale of Lysenka II, if it can ever be fully told, is a fable of triumph as well as horror." (p.72)

This is a highly polished example of its small-but-growing genre: a novel that will doubtlessly stand the test of time far better than any of Aldiss' previous works. It is not disguised commentary upon contemporary Russian politics, though that interpretation might be made by those blind enough to believe that the questions raised in this book are merely contemporary problems. It is, I feel, an attempt to establish what makes us sapiens: whether the Nietzscean idea that 'Man is something that is to be surpassed' has any credence. In the past Aldiss has always championed Chance against Permanence: here he adroitly leaves the choice for us to make, and in so doing is at his most eloquent.

((For those of you who cannot afford the cover price, it should be mentioned that ENEMIES OF THE SYSTEM appeared in the June edition of FANTASY AND SCIENCE FICTION.))

SHIP OF STRANGERS by Bob Shaw: Gollancz: London; 1978; £3.95; 160pp; ISBN 0-575-02482-8.

A WREATH OF STARS by Bob Shaw: Pan; London; 1978; 70p; 190pp; ISBN 0-330-25387-5.

Reviewed by James Corley

Turning a related series of short stories into a novel is an easy exercise for a writer, but the distortion of the expected pattern and structure of a novel often grates on the reader. SHIP OF STRANGERS is exceptional. The components have previously appeared in Analog, If and Universe but Bob Shaw has reworked them to minimise repetition of plot establishment - the function of the Cartographic Service ship Sarafand, captained by a logical, though fallible, computer, hints of pre-human galactic empire and so on - instead there is a variety of conventional but never cliched themes carried off at a fast pace and the inevitably fragmented climaxes are overlaid with a genuine development of character that provides the book with a satisfying overall shape.

Vivid imagination and a traditional concern to tell a good story can be taken for granted from Shaw, and possibly the short story form has been used to explore his range of talents more fully than the longer works, but the success of STRANGERS as a novel is really due to this attention to characterisation, the achievement of a balance between the physics and the personalities, a bittersweet counterpoint to the raw adventure which takes the episodes beyond a thinking man's Star Trek. The linking, though not

always central, figure is Dave Surgenor. When we first meet him he has been operating a survey module for sixteen years, though we're told it's a casual job that usually attracts young men only until they've saved enough to set themselves up in business. Surgenor however enojoys his 'oldest member' role and is putting off thoughts of a home and family until he has 'satiated mind and soul with the sight of new worlds'.

As time goes on, Surgenor's insight into his life and motivations deepens: 'the men he called his friends, with whom he spent all his waking moments, were not really his friends. It was true that they treated him with amiable toleration and respect, but no other attitude was viable in the close confines of the ship, and were he to retire his replacement would be given exactly the same consideration. Wilful strangers, he thought, recalling an old fragment of verse which for decades had served him as a personal creed.' He comes to realise that survey crews, himself included, are 'incomplete, flawed humans all'.

These maturely-depicted characters are plunged into stories that have, in the best sense of the adjective, an almost juvenile verve. In the first episode the Serafand is threatened by a hungry, shape-changing alien disguised as one of its survey modules. Next there is an experiment with 'Trance-Ports' to give the footloose crew a nightly illusion of an ideal home life - going drastically wrong when a practical joker gets hold of the programme tapes. The third story has an inexperienced crewman pitting his gambler's instinct against 363 deadly war machines - an archetypal problem resolution tale. In contrast, the fourth is a mystifying and moody encounter with time 'ghosts' on a long-dead planet. Certainly mystery is the intended effect, but it must be said the motivations in this story are uncharacter-istically obscure. Finally there is an amazing climax in a 'dwindlar' region of space oscillating uncontrollably between zero and infinite size, an episode so full of invention that many another writer would have built a full-length book from it alone.

But it's the characters who interest me most. The unattached hero searching for someone, preferably nubile, to share his life with as he approaches middle age is a recurring figure in Shaw's novels. Surgenor certainly belongs to this tradition, but he is one of the most attractive yet, more controlled than the randy Hal Tarrant of Medusa's Children, more sympathetic than the bleak Tavenor of Palace Of Eternity. At the end of SHIP OF STRANGERS, the decision to retire coinciding with the obsoleting of the Serafand, Surgenor's life is not so much resolved as starting again. He has shared the last adventure with Christine Holmes, whose tragic past has created a shell of toughness and a denial of femininity, a woman as incomplete and flawed as any of the crewmen. A few panic-filled hours when extinction looked inevit-able cracked the shell and established a temporary intimacy with Surgenor; but human contact fades as the danger passes. Though Surgenor appears a good deal more resiliant, it is he who needs to re-establish the intimacy: 'determined to hurl his message across the gulf of lost years that separated their lives' he admits 'I'm a bigger expert on loneliness than you are.'

'Surgenor picked up his own case and he and Christine - separated from each other by a short distance - walked towards the field's far-off perimeter. The sudden warmth of the sun on his back told Surgenor whom he had emerged from the shadow of the ship, but he did not look back.'

It is a poignant ending which nicely balances the dominant optimism of plots where a serendipidous idea always resolves the worst dilemma. It's to Bob Shaw's credit that the insight and the romp blend so well.

WREATH OF STARS, the 1976 novel now re-issued in paperback, contains one of

Shaw's most original inventions - a wraith-like anti-neutrino world inside the Earth which begins to emerge through an African diamond mine when the passage of another anti-neutrino planet disturbs its orbit while leaving the Earth unaffected. There is little interaction between anti-neutrinos and normal 'hadrionic' matter, but magniluct spectacles make the slowly separating world visible and the hero can communicate telepathically with the strange inhabitants.

It is without a doubt an exciting concept, but for me at least it is not one of Shaw's most gripping novels. The fault partly lies with Gilbert Snook, again in many ways a typical Shaw hero - a loner who drinks his gin from beer glasses - but Snook fully deserves his description, 'the human neutrino'. He is quite content in his aimless existence and even when political expediency forces him to flee into the anti-neutrino world, leaving behind the girl from UNESCO, he fails to achieve much depth. He is not, as you need to be to succeed, a positive thinker. Nor does the plot exploit the brilliance of the concept. It's a slim volume that allows little room for development, only skimming the surface of a grand idea that could support a book twice the length.

The peak of Shaw's career to date was, of course, ORBITSVILLE. WREATH OF STARS, as the follow-up, was obviously an attempt to get as far away from that theme as possible, perhaps it was bound to be an anti-climax. But to my mind Shaw gets better the deeper he is in interstellar space; in the depths of an African mine he doesn't have enough room for the adventure to flourish. His forte, to be profound, is swinging cats. An excellent story all the same, that still entertained on what must be the third time I'd read it.

THE FALL OF CHRONOPOLIS by Barrington J. Bayley (Daw Books; New York; June 1974; 95c; ISBN 451-1114-095)
THE GRAND WHEEL by Barrington J. Bayley (Daw Books; New York; August 1977; ISBN 0-87997-318-8)

Reviewed by Chris Evans.

Science fiction is supposedly an imaginative literature, its prime function being to explore unfamiliar ideas and situations. But it is a sad fact that of the multitude of sf books published each year, very few contain any real speculative element. Most are stock adventure stories which incorporate the standard props of the genre as mere decorations or gimmicks to provide plot-twists. Sf of this nature has much in common with westerns and romantic fiction: it offers, essentially, variations on a theme, providing the reader with a series of familiar images and a scenario which follows a predictable, time-honoured pattern. Avid readers of this kind of fiction generally baulk at extreme manifestations of originality because what they are seeking is a continuous and comfortable reaffirmation of their fantasies. As a consequence, publishers often have a tendency to prefer work which will not strain their readers' imaginations unduly. Barrington Bayley is one of the most inventive and idiosyncratic writers in the genre; his short stories, especially, read like no-one else's. He has been writing sf for two decades, yet it is only comparatively recently that he has found a regular market for his novels. I suspect that the major reason for this is that publishers were afraid to risk their necks on such obviously original work.

Barry Bayley's books are written in the pulp idiom - by which I mean that his plots are fast-paced and action-packed, with the fate of a world or a solar system in the balance - but his subject matter extends far beyond the limited horizons of the pulp format. I met the author recently and he told

me that his main aim was to provide an entertaining narrative in which to embody his ideas. He is not primarily interested in character; his concerns are philosophical and metaphysical, and each of his books seems to be set in a self-contained universe with its own set of wierd and wonderful laws.

Consider:

"Orthogonal time is but the surface of the bottomless ocean of potential time, or the temporal substratum: the hidden dimension of eternity in which all things co-exist without progression from past to future...Time is composed of a wave structure. The nodes of the waves travel at intervals of approximately one hundred and seventy years and are of crucial importance for the business of time-travel, since they comprise 'rest points' in the tensioning of the Chronotic energy field." (THE FALL OF CHRONOPOLIS, pps 31-32)

and:

"Randomatics rested on certain unexpected discoveries that had been made in the essential mystery of number. It had been discovered that, below a certain very high number, permutating a set of independent elements did not produce a sequence that was strictly random. Preferred sub-structures appeared in any 'chance' run, and these could be predicted. Only when the number of independent elements entered the billions..did predictability vanish. This was the realm of 'second-order chance', distinguished from 'first-order chance' in that it was chance in the old sense: pure probability unadulterated by calculable runs and groupings." (THE GRAND WHEEL, p.9)

Bayley has a delightfully fertile imagination, formulating his preposterous concepts with seeming ease, then slotting them into his vigorous narratives and developing them with such thoroughness that any reader with a sense of wonder cannot fail to be carried along by the sheer intellectual stimulus of the ideas. These two books, replete with their visions of absolute power and their glimpses of the underlying structures of the universe seem at times to be far removed from any present reality or probable future. Yet the author's mastery of his material and his insistence on providing rational explanations for the most outrageous events gives each book an internal consistency which makes it impossible to dismiss them as mere whimsy. They fall into that sphere of sf which Brian Aldiss has christened "wide screen baroque" and in so doing they provide us with Bayley's most obvious progenitor: Charles Harness. Much of Bayley's work, like Harness's, deals with the interaction of polarities: science vs art (or religion); chance vs predictability; light vs darkness; mutability vs immutability. So the Chronotic Empire battles against the Hegemony and its time-distorter to preserve the integrity of the temporal stream; so the Legitimacy struggles with the Grand Wheel to prevent the organisation, with its belief in the rule of chance, from gaining overall power in the solar system. Underlying these conflicts is the principle of entropy, an over-used term in sf criticism, but one which nonetheless seems perfectly applicable to Bayley's ouevre. All physical systems have a tendency to move towards a state of increasing randomness or disorder, and thus eventually the entire universe must run down like a spent clockwork toy, its energies dissipated and darkness prevailing. Man, himself a product of a freak, anti-entropic process (a series of chance combinations of molecules which eventually became self-replicating) struggles against this tendency towards decay but ultimately can fight only a rearguard action since the conclusions of the second law of thermodynamics are inescapable. Bayley recognises this, but he is still fascinated by the struggles and invents in these fictions ways by which man may cheat his ultimate fate. If the Chronotic Empire can defeat the Hegemony then its people will achieve some form of immortality since when each person dies their souls are immediately transported back to the time of their births

and they begin living their lives again, although without knowledge of their 'previous' existence. This theme of continual rebirth is the same one that Charles Harness explored in THE RING OF RITORNEL, and it is clear that both authors share very similar concerns. In THE GRAND WHEEL there is no obvious avoidance of the ultimate decay, but even so Bayley has one of his characters dispersed into "pure randomness" only to reappear in a kind of phantom zone from where he may eventually re-enter the physical universe. In a sense, these books are out-and-out fantasies, but fantasies of the highest calibre; they engage the mind like abstract puzzles which might have little practical relevance but are nonetheless still fascinating to contemplate. Bayley is a member of that rare breed of true visionaries who are not afraid to look the universe straight in the eye and ask: "What makes you tick?".

One last point. I said earlier that Bayley was not interested in character, but comparing these two novels one can see a development in this area.

CHRONOPOLIS, published in 1974, contains only the most rudimentary characterisation, whereas THE GRAND WHEEL, of 1977 vintage, shows that the author is capable of instilling personality into his human creations. This is an advance which I thoroughly welcome; after all, there's no reason why an author shouldn't juggle with mind-boggling concepts and provide his readers with some character delineation, is there? On this evidence I'd say that Barry Bayley is still growing in strength as a novelist, and all that remains is to add my voice to the belated but growing chorus of acclaim for Bayley's work and to urge everyone to get aquainted with it.

(An irrelevant afternote: There is a story, probably apocryphal, of the time when Bayley, unable to sell his short stories to Ted Carnell's NEW WRITINGS IN SF, began submitting them under the pseudonym of P.F. Woods. They sold. Reverting to his real name, he submitted another story which was rejected by Carnell with an accompanying note to the effect that "You should write stories like that P.F. Woods fellow". Is it any wonder that writers are often prone to curse editors?)

STAR KING by Jack Vance; Dobson 1978; £3.95; 158pp; ISBN 234-77918-7
THE KILLING MACHINE by Jack Vance; Dobson 1978; £3.95; 158pp; ISBN 234-77010-4.
THE PALACE OF LOVE by Jack Vance; Dobson; 1978; £3.95; 189pp; ISBN 234-77221-2.
MASKE: THAERY by Jack Vance; Fontana; 1978; 75p; 215pp; ISBN 0-00-615093-4.
FANTASMS AND MAGICS by Jack Vance; Mayflower; 1978; 75p; 192 pp; ISBN 0-583-12498-4.

Reviewed by Chris Morgan.

A trilogy reprinted, a new novel, a collection -- this is a representative cross-section of Jack Vance's work, all newly in print. These five books are a microcosm of Vance's output of three dozen, displaying between them all the Vance trademarks, particularly the strong-willed characters and deeply-held philosophies of life, leavened by touches of wit and presented with incessant gaudy detail against a host of alien environments. It is easy to read these books as nothing more than shallow, escapist adventure stories, and to dismiss the backgrounds as unimportant, but to do so is to miss out on much of the potential enjoyment.

STAR KING, THE KILLING MACHINE and THE PALACE OF LOVE, the 'Demon Princes' books, are three of a projected series of five, of which the last two have still to be written. (In an interview in Dick Geiss' SFR 23, Vance says he

is "trying to work out a deal" so that he can get on and write them.) The basic theme of the series can be quickly related. Kirth Gersen, a trained killer in his mid-thrities, is trying to avenge the raid by a group of slavers on his home planet a quarter of a century earlier, when his family and friends were all captured or killed except for Gersen and his grandfather. It has taken Gersen a long time to train for his role -- with his grandfather fanning the flames of hatred and revenge for the first ten years until the old man's death. Gersen has discovered that the raid was organised by five notorious and sadistic space pirates, known as the 'demon Princes'. In each of these three volumes Gersen has his revenge on one of the five -- Attel Malagate (a Star King), Kokor Hekkus (known as the Killing Machine) and Viole Falushe (creator of the Palace of Love).

To reveal that much is not to spoil anything for the reader. These books are formula stories to the extent that Kirth Gersen is a hero figure who must inevitably prevail, surviving a variety of perils to capture and kill his selected adversary in the closing pages each time. That Gersen should be a skilled fighter -- almost unbeatable at unarmed combat or in a fair fight with any weapon -- and that he should not be killed or seriously injured by any of his opponents are necessary concommitants.

But he is not the archetypal hero. Instead, he is a typical Vance leading man -- monomaniacal, mercurial of mood, often prickly in personal relationships, and a deep thinker. Sklar Hast in THE BLUE WORLD, Ghyl Tarvoke in EMPHYRIO and Jubal Droad in MASKE:THAERY are others of this type. Not that all of these are the same character under different funny names; each is the product of a different environment, but they share those basic traits. Gersen broods over the fact that he has been raised as an agent of vengeance and is rarely able to establish lasting friendships with others. This is particularly so with women, and in each of these novels he makes contact with one he likes then allows her to slip away. Also, he is a man of honour. He will never take advantage of a lady and will kill only his arch enemies and their immediate (and equally vile) associates. Even so, this is not reduced to a simple fight between good and evil, because Gersen, being something of a trickster, is not wholly good. As Vance says of Gersen in that SFR interview, "after working with him for three novels he began to become a human being."

Depth of characterisation is an aspect of Vance's work which rarely receives attention, even though it is the one which has changed most over the last twenty years or so. In early works only the protagonist has any depth. In BIG PLANET, for example, all except Claude Glystra are little more than cyphers, while in SLAVES OF THE KLAU not even the hero, Roy Barch, seems to come alive. But during the 1960's Vance began taking more trouble over his supporting characters , mainly using the device of getting them to explain their personal philosophies of life, or at least some of their beliefs. It has developed to the point where, in THE GRAY PRINCE (1974), there are long and convoluted discussions, particularly on the subject of politics, and it is difficult to establish which is intended as the major character out of the leading group of five, all of whom are built up in this manner. (I must say, in passing, that THE GRAY PRINCE is a major work of SF, examining many vital issues relating to imperialism, land ownership and political self-determination. It is Vance's version of WAR AND PEACE. It is flawed because he could not decide whether to deal with a single episode or an entire decade, and fell between two stools, but it deserves a more detailed analysis than there is room for here.)

While Gersen is undeniably the most carefull detailed character in the 'Demon Princes' trilogy, he is at various times overshadowed by Vance's more vivid creations, whom he encounters along the way. In STAR KING there is Hildemar Dasce, of unforgettably grotesque appearance:

> " At some stage of his career his nose had been cleft into a pair of cartilaginous prongs, and his eyelids had been cut away; to moisten his corneas he wore two nozzles connected to a tank of fluid which every four seconds discharged a film of mist into his eyes. There was also a pair of shutters, now raised, which could be lowered to cover his eyes from the light, and which were painted to represent staring white and blue eyes similar to Dasce's own." (p 23-4)

Nicknamed 'Beauty', he is a sadist who "knows every horror there is to be known", an associate of the Star King. In THE KILLING MACHINE there is Alusz Iphigenia, a beautiful girl from a planet believed to be mythical. Gersen helps her because he believes she will lead him to Kokor Hekkus, becomes infatuated with her, but will not allow himself to love her because she would be too much of a liability to him. In THE PALACE OF LOVE there is the mad poet, Narvath, a Falstaffian blusterer who swaggers through the book, adding humour and pathos and finally leading Gersen to Viole Falushe and the Palace of Love. The Demon Princes whom Gersen defeats are, likewise, well described, but there is a problem of identification; in each case neither Gersen nor the reader is sure which face belongs to his adversary until the very last chapter.

The plots are exercises in detection. Gersen has sufficient intelligence and perseverance to follow up even the most vague of clues until he locates his quarry. As examples of that sub-genre, SF detection, these are admirable stories, full of futuristic gimmicks but not depending upon them for the solution. Perhaps the reader is kept in the dark a little too much at times, due to Gersen's reticence. And certain plot sequences are repeated, notably the "one of these three men is my enemy, the other two are innocent: which is which?" element. Some unconvincing plotting is unavoidable because Gersen must stay alive to confront Demon Princes four and five, and this entails him being merely knocked unconscious by his enemies on a couple of occasions, when logically they should have killed him. But such shortcomings can be ignored; they do little to spoil the books.

Jack Vance is an author obsessed by the need to add colour and detail to every locale he uses, to name and explain each strange facet of life on the planets to which he takes his readers, to describe the shade and cut of clothing even of his spear-carriers. In these three novels there are no intelligent aliens, merely a never-ending array of races and varieties of Mankind. Face-paint is in general fashion, and he describes two girls thus:

> "One had dyed her hair forest green and toned her skin a delicate lettuce green. The other wore a wig of lavender metal shavings with dead-white skin toning; an elaborate cloche of silver leaves and tendrils clung to her forehead, clasped her cheeks." (STAR KING, p64)

He makes use of many different planets, having Gersen travel rapidly from one to another. Smade's planet, Alphanor, Olliphane, Bissom's End, Sasani, Krokinole, Thamber, Sarkovy, Aloysius, Earth. Gersen visits all these and more in his quest, and each world is different, original. Some are memorable --- Smade's planet is deserted except for Smade's Tavern; Sasani is the home of Interchange, an organisation acting as go-between for kidnappers and ransom-payers, holding kidnap victims in comfort and passing on ransoms (less commission); Sarkovy is the poisoners' planet. Others tend to merge into a kaleidoscopic jumble of names and colours, despite the great lengths to which Vance goes to inform the reader of their gravity, periods of rotation, indigenous animal and vegetable life, and the unpleasant habits of the humans who live there.

The means by which Vance puts across all this information are sometimes open to criticism. To include descriptive passages --even lengthy ones -- amidst plot and action is fine. Footnotes are acceptable in small numbers. But to preface each chapter with lengthy 'extracts' (up to four pages) whose connection with that chapter is sometimes obscure, is unnecessary and off-putting, distracting the reader from the story. The answer is to ignore all such prefaces, or at most to skim them briefly, for few are essential to an understanding of the plots. On the other hand, much of the information which Vance provides is useful if one wishes to fully appreciate the intricacies of the cultures he is using as backgrounds. It is the mechanics of different cultures which seems most to fascinate Vance. Beneath the plot, beneath the veneer of his idiosyncratic word-use (archaisms and made-up terms in profusion), it is the adaptation of human culture to different physical conditions and the culture-shockinherent in travelling from one planet to another that he is really writing about. Many of his protagonists have become alienated from their cultural backgrounds -- either by geographical distance or by a rebellious nature -- enabling him to make acerbic comments on both the cultures into which they have been born and those into which they move. (In this context, different cultures refers not only to different planets, but also to rich and poor classes on the same planet. Vance has several times allowed his poor protagonists to achieve wealth, and Kirth Gersen (like Ghyl Tarvoke in EMPHYRIO and Jubal Dread in MASKE: THAERY uses the wealth not as an end in itself but as a means to achieving justice.)

Often Vance seems to write about the systems and institutions of different cultures for the sole purpose of debunking them. In the 'Demon Princes' trilogy he eschews religious targets which are, after all, sitting ducks (remember the delightfully satirical devotions in EMPHYRIO which consist of leaping and jumping about on patterned carpets?). Instead he satirises all institutions at once (in THE KILLING MACHINE) with Interchange, the kidnap go-betweens. Then, in THE PALACE OF LOVE, he has a city (Kouliha) dotted with many identical tall towers where the populace go to "pay their taxes". This is a brothel and child-slavery enterprise. Once again it is an example of a Vance institution which lacks credibility in operation and seems almost impossible to establish. Perhaps this is why, in his revolutionary s tories (THE ANOME, for example) the rebels find it so easy to topple the establishment.

Whether read at widely separated times or straight through in a couple of days, the 'Demon Princes' novels are fun. These Dobson editions are reissues, STAR KING having also been published as a British paperback (by Mayflower & Panther).

Having laid Vance bare in dealing with the trilogy, I need comment less exhaustively on the new novel and the collection. MASKE:THAERY is another richly detailed novel set on yet more strange planets in that region of space termed the Gaean Reach (as are the 'Allastor' books and THE GRAY PRINCE). It is almost as good as EMPHYRIO (which is high praise indeed) and is particularly remarkable for the amounts of dry wit and irony which it contains. This is Jack Vance's most amusing book, bar none, and it maintains a consistent level of dryness and subtlety, never quite becoming farce.

Jubal Dread, an almost obnoxiously proud young man from a noble outback family, pits his wits against metropolitan beaurocracy in an attempt to establish himself in a secure career. Like Kirth Gersen, he is prepared to take revenge on anybody who wrongs him.

All the familiar elements are present, carefully refined. Only the initial provision of information is ugly, with about six pages of potted history and non-stop facts before the action is allowed to begin. This is enough to put

off anybody except a Vance fan. After that Vance takes more care and the pace never slackens. The plot itself is presented with a remarkable economy of words, most of the book being taken up in description of planetary backgrounds and in character-building conversations, particularly between Jubal Dread and the important magnate who employs him, Nai the Hever. The land of Thaery on the planet Maske is a fascinating area, semi-medieval due to isiolationist religious beliefs. It is sufficiently well described to be the basis of sequels. Although there are no loose ends left at the end of this book, Vance hints (in the SFR interview) that another novel or two might be set on the planet. The map of Maske, at the beginning of the book, is totally inadequate, however, omitting most of the important places mentioned (and visited) in the later stages of the story.

The collection FANTASMS AND MAGICS contains six of the stories from EIGHT FANTASMS AND MAGICS, leaving out "Telek" and "Cil". It proves that Vance's style is unsuitable for short stories. Although some of his best work has been in the short novel category ('The Dragon Masters', 'The Last Castle') he seems unhappy when restricting himself to less than a hundred pages, and half of the stories here give the impression of being unfinished fragments. Only "The Miracle Workers", a variation of the 'magic versus science' theme, is long enough to be satisfying, and even this would have been better at greater length. One story from THE DYING EARTH is included --- "Guyal of Sfere".

To be honest, there is no real lack of quality in this collection, just a lack of explanation after perhaps ten or twenty pages which promise much. Particularly tantalising is "The Men Return", ten pages describing a fascinating and totally alien landscape, a horrifyingly changed Earth resulting from its intersection with a "pocket of non-causality". This idea has so much potential that it seems a watse for it not to have been explored at novel length. The cover, by Peter Goodfellow, is an attempt to illus trate this story.

THE ROAD TO CORLAY by Richard Cowper (Gollancz; London; 1978; £3.95; 158pp; ISBN 0-575-02481 x

Reviewed by David Wingrove.

In the last few pages of his 1967 novel, BREAKTHROUGH, Babbit, the daughter of the narrator, Jimmy Haverill, describes a dream she has had, of a man she never knew:

> " I was standing in this sort of place - a sort of garden with big hills all around - and I looked up into the sky. And all at once, high, high over my head I saw an enormous great white bird all lit up, as if searchlights were shining on it. And behind it were millions and millions and millions of stars."
>
> (p213)

Without ever having met him, she knows this is 'Dumps', Professor Dumpkenhoffer, who 'disappeared' after experiments using an Encephalo-Visual Convertor (EVC, for short). Both the 'vision' and the means by which 'Dumps' was transformed are crucial to Cowper's new novel, THE ROAD TO CORLAY; for the white bird is used once again as a symbol of harmony with the cosmos, whilst the EVC is the device by which the future world in which Corlay exists is made available to us. As in BREAKTHROUGH, we are presented with two worlds - one almost contemporary to our own, one a thousand years in the future - which are linked by the images displayed from the EVC as it follows the disembodied mind of Michael Carver into the post-flood world of

3018, lodged in the mind of Thomas of Norwich, a kinsman.

Leaving aside the various devices and emphases common to the body of Cowper's work, this is a very special book, describing the emergence of a new religion, that of the kinsmen of the White Bird - a form of unsullied Christianity, almost, whose tenets are basically pantheist/communalist - and their persecution under the prevailing orthodoxy. In alternate chapters we encounter the almost-medieaval world of Corlay, an England split into numerous islands by the rise in the sea level, fragmented into seven kingdoms and owing allegiance to the Established Church, and June 1986 when the rains are falling and Michael Carver is lying in a coma during an experiment into Out Of Body Experiences. The emphasis is heavily on the happenings in Corlay, of course, but the added perspective given by this literary device is important. In his short story "Piper At The Gates Of Dawn", Cowper described the martyrdom of Tom,.the boy piper of the title, in the first minutes of the new millenium. The poetry and richness of that tale is re-captured in the Corlay segments of this novel, whilst the usual homely observations of contemporary Man are reflected in Cowper's writing in the remaining chapters.

Beside the literary effect of this 'contrast', the plot also hinges on this 'bridge' between near-future and far-future. Carver's presence in Thomas' mind saves him from drowning in the Somersea and changes the predestined events that have been 'hueshed' (forseen) by the girl, Jane (herself an interesting character, in that she was born the moment the boy, Tom, was martyred): and the events of this book are geared to fulfilling the prophesies, to achieving the 'hueshed' moment when Thomas is washed up in the gulley known as 'the Jaws'. But though it might seem that these are characters from some mythology, they are nevertheless frail and intensely human in their actions and desires. It is fairly simple to establish the romantic image of a persecuted belief, its apostles sheltered by the faithful, its members - good people one and all - cruelly hung or burnt alive in their own homes - it is easy to create reader sympathy in this manner - but it is difficult to satisfy a religious sceptic like myself of the motivations of these people. Cowper overcomes that by presenting us with a potent brew of anarchism and pantheism: the original idea of the christian brotherhood of man, linked with a sense of unity with the cosmos, as symbolised in the white bird;

> "(Morfedd) said true happiness was simply not being afraid of anyone at all. He called it the last secret. "
>
> ('Piper At The Gates' p.115, Gollancz Edition)
>
> "In that instant he learned the bitter truth that the last enemy to be faced was not Death itself, but the fear of Death."
>
> ('Road To Corlay' p.73)

It is this escape from the shackles of Fear that Tom preached, that the White Bird stands for, that these stories are about; and in this respect this novel and its prequel are akin to Ursula LeGuin's EARTHSEA trilogy. It perhaps stems from another theme that is common within Cowper's work; that the direction our society is taking is the wrong one (indeed, this is common to several of the British school of sf writers); that technology is leading us away from our true selves, alienating us from ourselves. The Flood at the end of this century, as depicted in this novel, is thus the only satisfactory means (as one of the characters comments) of purging Man of his technocratic madness.

Indeed, I would say that Cowper has more than a passing similarity to LeGuin in his writing: he is also conscious of 'the balance' of things, is equally concerned with the simple act of letting the message emerge within the telling of the story. There is nothing didactic and yet the clarity of the message pervades every aspect of the tale: there is a congruity to the things observed - sound, smell, sight and taste - and as it is an agrarian world, lacking the technological trappings of our own, everything is simple: but from this simplicity stems the profound.

Aside from theme and plot, there is the pure language of this novel, which marks it out as something special. In my opinion, Cowper is one of the genre's finest wordsmiths, and whilst there is not the density of language seen in 'A Piper At The Gates Of Dawn' (which was, to my mind, a piece of prose poetry), it is the means by which the above-mentioned profundity-in-simplicity exhibits itself:

> "By her own reckoning she had lived for seventy-seven years and her life's rhythm was far older than the turbulent sea channels among which her days had been passed. Birth, death, hardship and hunger were the fixed stars in her cosmos. Universal Kinship was a concept beyond her compass. She tolerated it because her son and his wife wished her to. And yet something reached out to her in that dark passage beyond the dying Kinsman's room, reached out and held her heart in thrall. Hearing Gyre play she forgot who she was and why she was there. She stood as if transfixed, listening with ears she had long since forgotten she possessed - the ears of a child who hears for the first time a music which speaks of all the infinite possibilities lying within the grasp of the unshackled human spirit. Time held no meaning for her then. Like a down feather adrift on the dark tides she felt her soul being swept this way and that at the behest of forces immeasurably stronger than herself. In a series of flickering lightning flashes she re-lived moments long since forgotten, when she no longer had an identity to call her own, moments when her girl's heart had seemed to wing out from her body to share another's anguish and she would willingly have given her own life to ease some other creature's pain. She did not even associate her own ecstasy with the sound of the Kinsman's piping. For all she knew a magic key had suddenly unlocked a casket buried so deeply within her that she had long since forgotten its existence, yet from it a fountain of pure joy came welling up to spill over in unregarded tears upon her cheeks. "
>
> (pp. 78/79)

Something of the general spirit of the book is captured in that excerpt. There is the almost allegorical sense of good and evil, with the tempering acknowledgement of intermediary states (states of circumstance, such as when a young boy, weak and fearing, betrays the kinsman and causes his death). There is the sense of a mystery being slowly unravelled, of an awakening of something long submerged in the human consciousness, buried beneath fear and neglect. And it is all drawn, as if by a watercolour artist, with a few apposite brush-strokes conveying the totality from the outline. And there are many other things to be found in this novel, small items of detail which I found delightful, in both the language and the story-line, things which "set an idle mind wandering dreamily down the long-forgotten hedge-rows of distant summers" ("Piper" p.99). This is essential reading for anyone who enjoys the sensuous pleasures of richly poetic story-telling and the simple, but often neglected, craft of writing.

THE WORLD INSIDE by Robert Silverberg; Panther; 1978; 188pp; 75p

Reviewed by Paul Kincaid.

I have always argued that science fiction should be judged not by its own incestuous standards, but by the standards of good literature in any field. Of course, when I first propounded these ideas I believed that sf could stand the comparison. Now, as I read less and less sf and more and more of the mainstream, I'm not so sure. Most recently I've just come down from a heady diet of Nikos Kazantzakis, William Golding and Lawrence Durrell, and my jaundiced eye is beginning to see that maybe sf should not be judged by any but its own petty standards. Let's face it: the involute and introvert world of sf as we know it has not produced anything like great literature since the odd intrusion from outsiders like Huxley, Orwell and Borges. And those writers who have tried, however feebly, to register some improvement in the general standard seem to be either ignored - as Gardner Dozois appears to be in this country - or castigated - as Delany was with his perhaps ill-judged effort at experiment, DHALGREN. The more I want good sf to be recognised as good by any standard, the more I find myself forced to the conclusion that we don't really deserve such recognition anyway.

With all that in mind, I recall with a sickly and embaressed grin that in the naivety of my first discovery of sf I used to say "Of course science fiction is the equal of mainstream - just look at Robert Silverberg." Even so, I also remember that I was disappointed with THE WORLD INSIDE the first time I read it. Coming back to it after however many years...

...I'm still disappointed. More so.

The 'world inside' is inside Urbmon 116 of the Chipitts constellation, a 1000-storey towerblock with getting on for 900,000 inhabitants, a couple of centuries in the future. The population explosion has resulted in these monstrosities, and it is now strenuously encourgaed that people have as many children as possible. Sex is free and easy; since everyone lives on top of one another it is 'unblessworthy' to cause any frustration. Nobody but the 'flippos' ever want to leave the building, and they are ruthlessly disposed of. In outline it is a chilling picture, and a marvellous theme for a science fiction story. But the style Silverberg adopts to tell the tale robs it of any impact.

It consists of a series of short stories, each focusing on one inhabitant of Urbmon 116, with the characters reappearing in the background of other stories. Unfortunately, Silverberg has the habit of putting preposterously flowery speeches into the mouths of these characters. Which, to be honest, didn't bother me as much in other stories, since I found it impossible to believe in any of the characters anyway. They are no more than standard-issue carboard, hacks for the use of. If someone is, for instance, angry, then Silverberg simply says "he was angry", without managing to convey the emotion in any other way.

That doesn't do a great deal to help the book along. But he compounds the error by adopting a flat, lifeless prose, all in the present tense which should have brought a sense of immediacy, but which here has exactly the opposite effect. Description consists solely of a constantly repeated list of large numbers that convey no picture and make the whole thing read like an intellectual exercise by a half-way literate mathematician. Thus he never tires of telling us that the Urbmon has 1000 storeys, is 3-kilometers high, has 888,904 inhabitants, has had so many births, so many deaths. Emphasis involves no more than repeating a word or phrase three times. The slang is unconvincing.

It is dull, impersonal journalism. Now quite possibly this is deliberate, to make the reader feel the boredom of living in such a place. The book, certainly, has a strong element of propaganda. But if so he has only

succeeded in making the book boring. Because the telling of the story is so impersonal that he gives no glimpse of what ordinary, everyday life within the Urbmon is like. And he has filled the place with such faceless characters that he arouses no empathy, no fellow feeling. If a writer wants to make his readers feel something, than no matter how huge his theme, he has to deal with it on a human scale. In this book I can only assume that Silverberg has lost his sense of proportion.

Riding the New Tsunami...

THE LAST WAVE (AA) directed and co-written by Peter Weir; 1977, Australian (United Artists): Approx. 105 minutes.

starring Richard Chamberlain, Olivia Hamnett, Gulpilil & Nandjiwarra Amagula.

Reviewed by Martin Hatfield.

Destiny, tribal and racial inheritance, precognition, dreams and the concept of time: these elements form the underlying themes that have been woven together into Peter Weir's third, and most ambitious film, The Last Wave. Weir is a young (34) Australian, whose cinematic interests parallel those of his American contemporary, Steven Spielberg. The common subject matter in their films is the nature of reality, explored by their characters' encounters with the unknown. Where Spielberg's vision is firmly linked to the U.S. highways, skies and coastline, Weir's has a distinct Australian outlook. His first feature, 'The Cars that Ate Paris', reviewed by Andrew Tidmarsh in Vector 70, may be linked with Spielberg's 'Duel' in the common treatment of sentient vehicles. Weir followed with an enigmatic period piece mystery, 'Picnic At Hanging Rock', which was deservedly acclaimed by the critics and established him at the forefront of the new Australian directors.

The Last Wave is also a mystery which doubles as a contemporary holocaust movie.

Middle Class corporate tax lawyer, David Burton (Richard Chamberlain) suddenly starts to have recurrences of his childhood nightmares, in which strange figures are seen, apparently wishing to steal his sleeping body. Life for David and his wife, Annie (Olivia Hamnett) is made worse by two factors. The first is the continually fluctuating weather situation, during which grapefruit sized hailstones rain on a desert-based school from a cloudless sky. Secondly, David is hired to defend a youth, Chris Lee (Gulpilil), who has been accused, with four other aborigines, of murdering a fellow aborigine.

Chris admits that he did not commit the murder. The deceased simply stopped living when Charlie (Nandjiwarra Amagula) pointed a death bone at him. The case thereafter revolves around David's attempts to discover the reason why Charlie caused the death of one of his fellows.

As the case proceeds the links between David's dreams, the tribal aborigines who inhabit Sydney and the natural elements are slowly tied together. Finally, dream-based precognition merges with David's perception of reality, due largely to the impending holocaust. The past and the future randomly transpose themselves within his world view. The natural cycle of events is then completed with each of the characters achieving their destiny: the viewer is left with several rather enigmatic questions unresolved.

The film is beautifully photographed, containing some well realised subjective camera work and competent, though modest, special effects. The vision of a series of natural events which would lead to a Ballardian 'Drowned World' scenario is quite a chilling experience. The soundtrack too is extremely effective in lending atmosphere to the screen action and one would hope that it is released as an album. A constantly recurring musical theme is reminiscent of 'Echoes' by the Pink Floyd, and the use of electronic synthesiser and aborigine instruments greatly adds to the suspense.

Where the film may fail for some people is at the final ending, where the tightly compressed action leaves no time for comment on the 'answers' which are displayed on screen. However, this is one of the film's great strengths as an atmospheric mystery, succeeding where many fail in that it does not succumb to the demands of an audience for a tidily resolved ending. The film explores intelligently, within its set limitations, specific sf themes which have long concerned the genre's more literary practitioners. It is especially noteworthy in that such themes are noticably absent from the recent spate of Hollywood SF and Disaster movies.

The Last Wave will establish the Australian cinema as an international commercial force. Furthermore, it is a creditable achievement for Peter Weir, who joins the ranks of Lucas, Spielberg and Carpenter as one of the great young (Sf) film makers of the late seventies.

BRIEF MENTIONS:

LABRYS 1: This is a sixty page, extremely eclectic magazine, which offers fiction, poetry and articles to its readers. Certainly not light reading, though very rewarding if you're willing to put in the necessary effort. Giles Gordon's "Seven Men Together", is a short story about perspective and identity, and itgells nicely with poetry by George Barker and Kathleen Raine, amongst others. Of the articles I liked Vernon Watkins' "War And Poetry: the reactions of Yeats and Owen" best, though both Michael Ayrton's piece, "On the meaning of the Maze" and Stan Gooch's "Alternative Persons: the entities of Science Fiction and Myth" are stimulating reading. Issue 2 - with a poem by Fowles, I note - is already out. LABRYS is available by subscription (£2.50/$6.00 for 3 issues a year), or for 90p for a single issue - from Grahaeme Young, 91, Wimborne Avenue, Hayes, Middlesex.

FOUNDATION 14: This is the first issue under Malcolm Edwards sole control, and it is a stimulating mix. Whilst you might quibble with the views expressed and the styles in which several of the critics delight in presenting their views, the overall effect is highly provocative. For an 'academic' venture FOUNDATION is certainly far more readable than most, and (from a personal viewpoint) is an entertainment as much as it is an invaluable reference source. This issue hasseveral extremely good pieces: Michael Bishop's piece "Evangels of Hope" (his Guest of Honour Speech at Solarcon III) matches the excellence of his fictional writing, and Disch's "Ideas: A popular misconception" is astutely reasoned. There are also pieces by Samuelson (on Benford), Alexei Panshin ("Why I No Longer Pretend to Write Science Fiction"), Stableford ("Science Fiction and the Image of the Future") and Jakubowski ("Essex House: The Rise And Fall Of Speculative Erotica"). A brief lettercolumn and a large and varied review section make up the 108 pages. FOUNDATION is available by subscription (£3.00/$7.50 for 3 issues) from The Editor, "Foundation", The Science Fiction Foundation, North East London Polytechnic, Longbridge Road, Dagenham, Essex, RM8 2AS, United Kingdom. (And, as a final note: Gregg Press - 70 Lincoln Street, Boston, Massachusetts, 02111, USA - have just published the hardback reprint of FOUNDATIONs 1-8. 600 pages for $35.00). And that's it for this time out..

HALF-LIFE

The life & times of Elmer T. Hack