

# VECTOR 93

May/June 1979

75p



focus upon  
Christopher Priest

VECTOR 93  
The Official Journal Of The British Science Fiction Association  
May-June 1979  
ISSN Number 0505-0448



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This is for "that woman" with especial thanks for getting the cover  
together for me. And for the frisbee-thrower of Harrow...  
and for "everyone young going down the long slide..."

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Vector 94 Deadline: Friday 22 May 1979.  
Special Worldcon Issue. Leiber & Aldiss;  
SF and the Cinema examined. Book reviews  
and readers' letters.

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# LEGERDEMAIN; the fiction of christopher priest



"His mind is liberated, you see. Anything he imagines, wishes or expects would be entirely real to him. He could build a whole world, I suppose, and it would be totally real and have substance and existence. In some ways, it's man's oldest dream.

But in others ... it's a hell we cannot conceive." (1)

The character is Knowland, and his fate is to be dependent upon a heart-lung machine, his heart removed, his body's motor responses inert. Only his brain remains in working order, adrift from all its sources of sensory input, locked in an autism of sensory deprivation from which he will never be released. And when we look inside the mind of Knowland as it drifts in dream we are confronted with a world where things are kept in order only whilst he is perceiving them. When he moves away the solidity of things melts, the compactness crumbles and disintegrates into the chaos of non-existence. Knowland is busy creating his own universe, cut off from our own.

"Transplant", the story in which Knowland is found, does not mark an important stage in the writing career of Christopher Priest, but I have chosen it as a starting point for this article because, to me, it is the simplest and most direct example of the theme that permeates the whole of his oeuvre; the idea of Man separated and at a distance from reality.

Knowland's personal brand of autism, extreme in that he neither receives sensory input nor communicates outwardly, is that of any "character" newly-born of fiction, adrift on a blank sheet of paper. It is also the plight of any author who embarks upon a word-voyage into those bleak areas of factual non-existence. He must create vast edifices from the substances of unreality, artifices paper-thin in their pristine state of visualisation but which grow ever more solid as the mud of descriptive images is daubed thickly upon their walls. The creative act that Knowland undertakes in this story is thus not so dissimilar from the creative act performed by the author of the story; a stumbling gesture of faith in the illusion which gains in confidence as the process gathers momentum and, with momentum, certainty.

Christopher Priest has, throughout his maturity as a writer, approached reality from a distance. In "Real-Time World" he separates a group of

scientists from the 'real' world by a single nano-second, in *INVERTED WORLD* this division exists in the flick of a switch which can 're-invert' the physical properties of the world of the people of the City, Earth. In *A DREAM OF WESSEX* the distance exists, quite simply, in a dream. Finally, in its most elaborate form it is to be found in the shifting vistas of "Whores" where the perception of the narrator is adrift in the overpowering confusion of synaesthesia.

Always there is the gap between primary reality and the secondary state; a gap artificially enhanced by Priest, using machines and drugs to achieve this. It is an attempt to 'make real' the fictional aspect that other stories (especially in SF) take as their only level, simply by making it secondary. In effect he encourages our belief in his primary illusion by discouraging our belief in the more 'mechanical' fiction within it, achieving this like a conjurer whose legerdemain focuses upon the unimportant so that he might obscure the essential.

But between the clinical statement

"I can show you the results in the form of a chart." (2) expressed in "Real-Time World" and the elaborately visualised "...the houses ached like decaying teeth, the road was soft and hairy like the surface of a tongue, the tropical flowers and trees were like half-chewed food, and the warm wind that came in from the sea was like feid breath." (3)

is an improvement in presentation from the purely competent to the lucidly expressive; something reflected in the quality of Priest's more recent fiction.

An article which attempts to deal with the whole of a writer's fiction (4) must at some point touch upon those areas where he has failed to bring the geminating idea to a healthy fruition. I intend to do so here, before examining the development of the various thematic strands, but to do so as briefly and concisely as possible.

Chris Priest has often complained of the limitations placed upon a writer whose work is defined (by publisher's categorisation or whatever) as SF, and it is my own feeling that this 'uncertainty' of his is occasioned by the fact that as a pure science fiction writer he is none too successful.

In the collection, *REAL TIME WORLD*, (5) there are examples of his short fiction which first appeared in various sf books and magazines in 1970 and 1971. There are, particularly, five stories which are as near as Priest ever gets to writing classic science fiction. They have an air to them of the fifties; the ideas paramount and the characters jerking as if in pavlovian response at the appropriate moments. "Fire Storm" (6) is perhaps the strangest of these, a study of the controlled destruction of a city by a man obsessed with his job and, ultimately, driven to a spectacular suicide. It reads like power fantasy and its gimmickry is quite lacking in subtlety. Nowhere in the course of its telling does it rise from the competent and, like two other stories in the collection, "Sentence In Binary Code" and "Breeding Ground" (7), there is a slick thoughtlessness about its execution that is not to be found in his later work. These stories lack psychological depth and seem content to explore the less important aspects of the situation – be it war as an art form or being placed onto computer tape as a 'panacea for sedition' – rather than come to grips with the crucial human element involved in the situation.

From the Ike Asimov 'spacer' style of "Breeding Ground" to the alien menace of "The Perihelion Man" (and encompassing the dodgy economic rationale of "Double Consumption" and the obvious naivety of "The Run" (8)) there is a dearth of credible characterisation. One almost has sympathy for the characters in their impotence to act outside the scope of their 'conditioned' scripts. However, this is a fault that is only evident in these few examples. By the time of *INVERTED WORLD* there is no further sign of this weakness: the dalliance with pure idea is over and Priest's focus is upon the alienation of recognisably human characters in abnormal circumstances.

It is unsurprising, in view of the above, that Priest's first novel, *INDOCTRINAIRE* (9), dealt with the impact of psychological indoctrination and extrapolated the methods of Pavlov and his scientific progeny into a post-holocaust future where a newly-achieved stability is threatened by "disturbance gases".

The book begins promisingly, its language precise and its development quite complex. But as it progresses the tightness dissolves and, ultimately, it resolves very few of its plot elements and comes to no sound moral evaluations. Throughout the book the characters involved are slow to realise the nature of the events that are happening to them and around them and, unfortunately, their naivety is unconvincing. To me it intimates that here, as in the examples already quoted, Priest's focus upon the ideas themselves, rather than upon their effects, is a weakness and acts to the detriment of the book. The central character, Wentik, displays a genuine enough sense of indecision but, nevertheless, he is also an unattractive creation, unable to win the reader's empathy, and it is this lack of identification with Wentik that ultimately robs the book of any real impact.

The idea of a circle of land that exists coincidentally both 200-plus years in the future and in the Brazilian jungle of a near-contemporary future could have been used to great effect, but here it, like the idea of the 'disturbance gases' is handled far too mechanically and without real insight into what it would do to a man like Wentik. The whole thing is generally amorphous, undisciplined and only rarely does it escape this. When it does it is threatening in the manner of Kafka, the menace real enough but not entirely understood:

"There is an element of terror in any natural object that does not exist in its proper place. Wentik experienced the full force of this as he stood in the dark. A hand grows from a table, and an ear from a wall. A maze is constructed to sophisticated mathematical formula, yet is housed in a tumble-down shack. A minor official terrorises me, and a man tries to fly a helicopter without vanes. Land exists in future time, though I feel and believe instinctively that I am in the present. Irrational behaviour creates a reaction-pattern of its own." (10)

But if it is kafkaesque in places, it is also lightweight and unsustainable; almost the outline for a book that was visualised but never quite achieved.

In this early manifestation Priest's writing was of no greater interest than any number of other sf writers. He seemed to tend to the soft sciences in his work but, that apart, there was nothing distinctive in his work that would indicate an unique approach to the subject matter.



1972 appeared to mark a definite change in Priest's attitude to his writing. Two short stories were published in that year, together with his second novel. Each of them shows a greater maturity than his previous output and two of the three evidence a much more individual approach.

The transitional piece would appear to be "Real-Time World" which sets out to answer one simple question:

"precisely what would be the effect on a community deprived of news?" (11)

In doing so it describes a community of people in an 'observatory', cut off from the vast communications network of the world and separated by space (they are on the moon) and time (they are displaced in time by one nano-second). Like *INDOCTRINAIRE* it deals with the effects of sociological experimentation but, unlike the novel, it deals with it successfully. Winter, the narrator, believes he is the only one who is not conditioned and in control of all the 'facts'. He observes the 'inmates' of the observatory who, he believes, are individually sane but collectively insane. As things progress it is shown that he is the conditioned one, unaware of the true state of things. The essential element of sensory deprivation is used again (this time in the sense of 'news' from the outside being held back). The scientists in the observatory, deprived of the greater part of the news, begin to create their own. At first their speculations tend towards pure unfounded rumour (or 'fantasy') but then return to the realms of pure fact. By the end, and unknown by Winter at first, they have become able to anticipate events. The observed become the observers; a neat reversal, and one that is to be used once again by Priest in "The Watched".

"Real Time World" is still, in essence, a 'mechanical' tale and its mood is such that whilst the idea remains in mind for some while, the atmosphere of the story quickly fades. "The Head and the Hand" (12), however, is a powerful tale of obsession and its impact is considerable.

It is a genuine horror story, with its own cool, implacable logic. Unlike anything in Priest's work preceding it, the story is densely written, each image crucial to the overall effect. It concerns Todd Albome, the "Master", a man suffering from some deep psychological blight. He hates all signs of life and visits his hatred upon both his own body and upon all that surrounds him.

It is a story that has to be read at least twice to be fully appreciated, for, whilst the clues are all there from the opening page, the details of

of Alborne's profession and his state of mind are hidden from the reader (as are his disabilities) until much later in the story. And, when we do discover that Alborne uses self-mutilation as a media event, the psychological effect is great.

"They were still in silence ... the anticipatory motionlessness of the voyeur." (13)

This aspect of voyeurism, so significant here, is to become a prominent motif in Priest's work from this time on.

"The Head and the Hand" is a beautifully balanced story, linking the unnatural acts of the "Master" with the natural workings of the Seasons; Alborne's psychological morbidity extended to his environment is shattered with his death, "... and the first leaves were spreading." (14). It is as if to say that with his de-capitalization and the resultant riot, his excesses have been purged and Spring can, at last, come.

Priest's second novel, *FUGUE FOR A DARKENING ISLAND* (15) was again something quite different from the work that came before. It is written in a style that seems to deny all emotion, a first-person narrative that all the time seems third-person because of its distance from the events it describes, as if none of the horror of the situation has impinged upon the narrator, Alan Whitman. Throughout its pages it has all the impersonal menace of a nightmare, rationally irrational. It is this sense of distance that makes it, almost paradoxically, Priest's most emotive book. The impotence of Whitman is writ large in this story. He is unable to formulate his own course of action and becomes a victim of fate.

The situation upon which the novel hinges is as follows. War breaks out in Africa and, in a period of World recession, none of the Western powers is able to give aid to relieve the famines that follow. Millions of refugees from Africa flee the Continent in crammed boats and several millions of them disembark on the south coast of England. With economic recession and a Right-Wing government committed to taking harsh measures, the situation rapidly degenerates into civil-war as various factions (including an U.N. peace keeping force) struggle to stabilise the country. In this atmosphere, Whitman and his wife and daughter lose their home and, attempting to reach the safety of relatives in Bristol, start a trek across country, are separated and become entangled directly in the political upheavals. It is, throughout, all achingly familiar, and Priest's use of a jigsaw technique to present brief glimpses of the past and present of Whitman (producing, in the process, a very good character sketch of Alan Whitman and making credible his reactions in the 'present' of the story) successfully creates an impression of fragmentation and disorder, whilst nonetheless presenting the explanatory details in a coherent sequence.

I said that this is a distanced and yet emotive book, and this is so because the reader, at a certain point early on in the book, begins to supply the emotional response that is lacking in Whitman. Whitman records and we, the readers, make the moral judgements. And so it is, right until the final page when Whitman finally makes his choice, after discovering the dead bodies of his wife and daughter.

Whitman's 'past' is largely a history of his sexual encounters from early childhood onward. His is a cold and selfish approach, and the impotence he feels in the face of events seems echoed in several of his relationships. The motif is predominant, standing for the lack of volition he feels, for his frustration and indecision. There are no heroes in this book and Whitman cannot even be considered an anti-hero. He is simply a narrator.

The most important aspect of this book, however, is its implicit challenge of the 'liberal' stance in the face of circumstance. Whitman is an extremely typical product of British society placed in an atypical situation. The conflict between ideology (in that he is a *professed* African sympathiser) and practical reality (in that he and his wife are physically disrupting and destroying all that he holds dear and eventually kill his wife and daughter) causes this internal stasis of irresolution, this impotence. That his final choice is against his *professed* ideological views is an honest, if pessimistic, outcome. It does not mean that Priest has accepted that the end justifies the means - in fact I interpret it the other way about. Priest is here rejecting the 'means' of ideology and stating that the average thinking man (for Whitman is possessed of a degree of sensitivity) must always act as an individual.

As important as the thematic content of this book is the stylistic approach Christopher Priest adopts. *FUGUE* is perhaps the first example of what has become the most noticeable trade mark of Priest's writing, the clarity and precision of his prose. This is a

delightfully well written book and at times takes on a rueful tone simply because of this clarity.

"In the good times, I would gaze at Isabel across a distance, seeing again the pale blue dress and the youthful beauty of her face, and a bitter regret would well inside me." (16)

It is simple and poetical and, in this example, wistfully ironical, in that Whitman's relationship with his wife, Isabel, was stunted by her sexual frigidity from the outset.

*FUGUE* is a direction Priest has not yet returned to. Its juxtaposition of the horrific and the mundane in order to examine a question of morality, has not been used again. But the whole matter of social relevance was explored again, if briefly, in the short story, "A Woman Naked" (17), where a future society imposes a system of rigid morality upon women (who are, incidentally, outnumbered by men in a ratio of four to one) and punishes offenders by making them 'a woman naked' and made to go unclothed and un-protected in public. Its simplicity is again its greatest strength and Priest makes excellent use of the story's possibilities. It deals, unsurprisingly, with male voyeurism, but its denouement takes that voyeurism one stage further, from the superficial state of "watching" to the psychologically intimidating state of "interrogation". The 'trial' here is not to ascertain the woman's guilt or innocence, it is to provide vicarious pleasure for the male 'audience'. "The rape had begun", Priest ends; a brutally effective conclusion.

Priest's next novel, *INVERTED WORLD* (18), first appeared in a very different form, as a 15,000-word short story. It is, perhaps, worthwhile looking at both versions because it is rare to have concrete examples of two different approaches by the same writer to a single idea.

The novella-length version is only an eighth the size of the novel and, by comparison, seems hurried and extremely cramped. The ideas within it are raw and undeveloped. Indeed, the idea of the *Inverted World* was one that Priest was toying with from as early as 1965, and it seems that it was only in its fully-extended form that it was properly handled. The "New Writings" version presents a dual perspective of the *Inverted World*, from both outside and inside, and treats it very much as a standard sf tale, with scientists attempting to free the inhabitants of the City of Earth before it drives into the Atlantic. The explanation of the *Inverted World* is mechanical - a didactic process where things are told and not shown. I have commented already that, as a pure science fiction writer, I feel Priest falls down, and this is a good example. Here, in the shorter version is the undeveloped core of a story, all working parts showing and little subtlety displayed. There are no credible characters and even Gerdun Mann, the anachronistic bookworm, is a cypher at the beck and call (literally) of the plot. The result is an effective, competent story which leaves the reader with a sensation of having almost read something unique - something that only failed to be special because of the predictable manner of its presentation.

The novel, however, is an entirely different matter. I have stressed the singularity of approach in the shorter version; a concentration on the single level of "how it works". In the 1974 novel version this mechanical aspect is made secondary and the attention of the reader is focused upon the perceptions of Halward Mann, the narrator of the first, third and fifth books of the novel, as he discovers at first-hand (and in an heuristic manner) the strange physical properties of the universe in which he exists and the reasons for the complex social structure of the Guild System that runs the City of Earth. This emphasis upon the human response to a speculative idea, rather than as 'scientific study' of the phenomenon by puppets, is essential to the success of the book. The idea of *Inverted World* is quite awesome, and I still find it one of the few original speculative ideas in sf, but it is the presentation of the idea at a secondary level that makes this a fascinating book. The shorter version is presented in the third person and never comes to grips with the emotional aspects of a world where to travel northward slows time and to travel southward accelerates it, where the equator spins at a speed in excess of the speed of light and the poles taper off into infinity. Priest captures the awesome implications in sober tones and forces the reader to genuinely marvel:

"What had been the mountain became a hard protuberance beneath his chest, his chest lay in what had been the valley beyond, his feet scrambled for a hold against the diminishing ridge of what had been another mountain. He was flat along the surface of the world, a giant recumbent across an erstwhile mountain region ...

... There were clouds, and borne on the wind they skimmed a few inches above the ground like a white unbroken sheet. They surged around his face, flowing around his nose like foam at the bow of a ship. " (19)

In my opinion this is a far more fascinating idea than that of Rama or of Ringworld, and it seems for better structured. The pure, intricate coherence of the Inverted World's workings, so modestly presented as Priest leads us through a 'concealed environment' (20) story, is delightful. It is a compelling book that stimulates the reader's interest for the whole of its 255 pages. It would, in fact, be fatuous of me to try to describe the extent of its coherence, for it is best discovered personally. It permeates the whole of the novel and succeeds in doing what the shorter novel fails to do in creating a totally credible environment from a fantastic hypothesis.

Before moving on, I should also like to mention, if briefly, one other aspect of the book that I noticed and enjoyed. It is something that is far more prominent in his next novel, *THE SPACE MACHINE* (21), and has to do with control of one's own destiny and the feeling of entrapment;

"I am," she said. "And for the good reason that the system which runs my life is itself dominated by what goes on outside the city. As I can never take part in that I can never do anything to determine my own life."

Victoria is, for a brief while, the wife of Helward Mann, and is later one of the leaders of a group of rebels called the Terminators who wish to halt the continual progress of the City of Earth. She, naturally, wants to determine her own life, but what she does not know is that the City must always move if it is to stay at the optimum position on its strange world. If it were to stop, the City would go southward and accelerate to its own destruction on the Equator. Priest's evocation of this dilemma of necessity against valition is nicely brought into the story. And, the whole novel being about essential perception, he leaves it until late in the story to ask the pertinent question, 'what happens to all of the people and lands they pass by on their strange trek, and why are they not subject to the laws of the Inverted World?' Mann's ultimate refusal to face this question - his inability to alter his indoctrinated perception of the universe - is thus crucial to the book. Priest can remove the machine (it is switched off near the end of the book) but he cannot alter so easily the workings of the human mind. In acknowledging this, Priest makes this far more than a simple sf adventure.

If *INVERTED WORLD* is somewhat awesome, then *THE SPACE MACHINE* is rather audacious. Sub-titled, "A Scientific Romance", it is by far the best-written of all Priest's works, long or short, and is impressive for its sustained atmosphere. As might well be imagined, it is an exaggerated hybrid, part Wellman in ancestry and part modern - the latter mainly arising from the tacit morality of the book. The 'reality' of the book is thoroughly dubious, built as it is upon the imaginings of the late-Victorian/early-Edwardian social forecasters, their cumbersome speculations here made concrete and taken quite literally. A Mars with canals and an ancient civilisation, a giant cannon several miles long that fires shells the size of large buildings across the gulf of space; these are the playthings of Victorian speculation, where the future meant bigger versions of what already existed. And to accompany these bold imaginings, Priest sets the book firmly within the prevailing social structure of the time. The dynamics of Victorian social intercourse that resulted from the repression of sexual desire are here manifest in the uneasiness of good manners and propriety. This sense of propriety (and, of course, distance) is

captured without flaw. As the book progresses and the central characters, Edward and Amelia, are more intimately engulfed by the alien world of Mars, this propriety appears in its true light; an illogical code that is entirely absurd when faced with the alien. There is, of course, nothing new in de-bagging the eccentricities of the society that spawned Oscar Wilde, but here it is dealt with as a literal, existent thing, without secondary comment by the author. At no stage does he say, "see how absurd this is", he merely allows Edward and Amelia to enact their social roles in a place where all relevance has departed from them; and whilst the characters do eventually adapt, it is not until page 219 that this elaborate joke (22) is swept aside.

It is usually sf's boast that it is a progressive and liberal art form, whereas it is usually no more than historical fiction, thinly disguised. Here, Priest is withdrawing that thin veil and, by exaggerating the obvious naiveties, is creating something quite different and, despite (or perhaps because of) its comic/satiric level, something quite honest.

Edward's progress from being a shy commercial traveller in Skipton to becoming the monster-killing hero of Mars' oppressed peoples, gives Priest an opportunity to examine the morality of scientific progress. Again, this is nothing new, though here, as in the early non-didactic writings of Wells, Priest's 'message' (if it can be said to be such) is far clearer for having been delivered in such an entertaining package than it would have been had it been placed before us as an un-diluted lecture, "good for our souls". It is a simple and oft-repeated message; that science must always be tempered with compassion.

It has been said that the book is simply a "cabbaging together" of the two books by Wells, *THE WAR OF THE WORLDS* and *THE TIME MACHINE*, and whilst it is undoubtedly true that aspects of both books are incorporated into the scheme of *THE SPACE MACHINE*, the tacit morality of the 1970s imposed upon this new hybrid by Priest makes it so much more. The sufferings of the Martians is perhaps derived from Wells, whose social conscience was ever-vigilant, and the menace of the monsters is certainly Wells, but the implicit sexual undertones are put there by Priest, and the genuinely comic nature of the first half of the book (our reaction prompted by implausibilities and exaggerations) is something that could only arise from a contemporary perspective within the writing.

Hopefully I have given enough idea of the plot to satisfy that demand because I would rather, at this opportunity, consider Priest's style in this book. As elsewhere, it is a style that impresses not by its use of elaborate imagery but through its detailed wealth of observation and the precision of expression - something that struck me far more forcibly with *THE SPACE MACHINE* than elsewhere. It is a highly visual book, the descriptions powerfully evocative, and the writing unusually gripping. In that last respect - for pure readability - *THE SPACE MACHINE* is unique amongst Priest's fiction, thoroughly entertaining in its immediacy. Which is not to say that this is not also a book that is a delight in another, quite



separate way for it is also a 'writers' book. The care with which the book has been constructed, a cumulative effect of the writer's care to make each word and sentence apposite, is evident page after page. It is a work of undeniable craft and was, at the time of writing, a considerable upward step in Priest's maturity as a writer. Its final resolute glow of optimism – the afterglow of reality reasserting itself, perhaps – was, like the pessimistic ending of *FUGUE*, no clue as to the direction Priest was to take after it. The boosterism of *THE SPACE MACHINE* is not to be found in his next novel, *A DREAM OF WESSEX* (23), nor the solid certainty of 'reality', no matter how exaggerated. *A DREAM OF WESSEX* is Priest in his element and perhaps at his most natural – at a slight distance from his subject and in total control. It is his most complex and, for me, most satisfying novel;

"All this was reality. He could touch it, smell it. He breathed it. In the dusty air of the vault, sweated in the unventilated room, kicked up clouds of ancient dust: this was the world of external reality, and it was necessarily so. As he strode past the seemingly endless rows of files and books, each of which contained its own fragments of remembered past, he concentrated on what he himself conceived as reality. Was there an inner reality of the mind which was more plausible than that of external sensations? Did the fact that he could touch something mean that it was as a consequence real? Could it not also be that the mind itself was able to create, to the last detail, every sensual experience? That he dreamed of this dust, that he hallucinated this heat? He halted in his fretful pacing, closed his eyes. He willed the vault to vanish ... let it be gone! He waited, but the dust he had kicked up was irritating his nose ... and the vault was still there." (24)

It is a return to those areas touched upon in "Transplant" and with which I began this essay, the fundamentals of Priest's writing and the heartland of his interests. In "Transplant" the creation of an alternate reality by the mind was the product of autism, an unchosen necessity which manifested itself in a solipsist world, one well-disposed towards its creator. In *A DREAM OF WESSEX* an alternate reality is once again created, though this time it is an act of choice, mechanically assisted by a "neurohypnagogic projector" (the 'Ridpath' projector), a communal act which whilst originally beneficial, ultimately becomes hostile to those taking part.

The story-line of *WESSEX* would appear simple enough. A group of scientists 'dream' an alternate society into being with the help of the Ridpath projector. The alternate society, 150 years in the future, is one based upon an extrapolation of contemporary trends and shaped by the hopes and expectations of those taking part. The entry of a single antipathetic character into this team of 'dreamers' is enough to change the corporate vision violently, even though "no one could rape the mind of anyone else ... for the effect of the Ridpath was to blend the unconscious, to produce a kind of corporate dream." (25). In the climax of the story the whole question of 'reality' is placed under severe scrutiny and eventually the hero and heroine emerge unscathed ... but in the 'projected' universe of the future, and beyond recall.

But that synopsis over-simplifies to an absurd degree what is a multi-layered work that shifts subtly between different states of reality. It is also a story of different types of love and the powerfully destructive force of possessiveness – the urge to conquer in relationships rather than cherish and share. (26).

Memory and tangible event are the questionable factors in this book, and where most novels use these as the fixed props about which the silk of characterisation is woven, Priest instead makes his characters the solid elements of the book about which he weaves contradictory layers of experience.

"Memory was created by events surely?  
It could not be the other way around." (27)

But in this novel not only is that possible but also the possibility exists that the real world, from which the dreamers begin their sojourn, could be questionable:

"Did one world project the other, each dependent upon the other for its own continued reality?" (28)

The mechanical facts of "*Wessex*" are casually introduced and, in fact, it is only a quarter of the way through the book that the nature of the project is made clear, and from that point on the transition from one state to another – and its concomitant effects upon those

experiencing it – is the only demarcation between what is 'dream' and what 'real'. Paul Mason's entry into the Ridpath brings an alien element into the "wessex" of the future and his 'Influence' causes the peaceful vision to disintegrate. The past memories of the dreamers become spectral and uncertain and the physical landscape of their dream-world becomes a desolate and much polluted one, reacting to the expectations of Mason.

But while the theme of *WESSEX* is intoxicating enough, I felt that the author's awareness of the delicate interplay between the characters was far more important. Their reactions, emotions and instincts are both carefully observed and displayed, impressions gradually built up throughout the story. This is the real strength of the novel, the subtle shifts of character that mirror the equally subtle shifts of 'reality'. And it is all vividly presented to us in a crystalline prose style that allows pure observation to lead us across that 'imaginative gap' and secure our credulity.

*A DREAM OF WESSEX* is perhaps the best example of that gap between primary and secondary states of reality, the grand act of legerdemain, the great distancing device that, curiously enough, draws us deep into the levels of illusion.

This sense of 'Illusion' is at the core of each of the five stories that comprise Christopher Priest's second collection of short fiction, *AN INFINITE SUMMER* (29). The quality of these stories is unquestionable and there is little comparison in this respect to *REAL-TIME WORLD*. Three of the stories are vaguely connected, set in "The Dream Archipelago", Priest's own metaphysical future setting (30). The other two, however, are interesting in that they appear to be off-shoots to the earlier novel, *THE SPACE MACHINE*, dwelling upon the rigid social customs of the Edwardian era (even though one of them is set in a future society). In fact, Priest acknowledges this in his introduction to the new collection, saying that "*An Infinite Summer*" was written in the middle of working upon *THE SPACE MACHINE*, (31), utilising his knowledge of Richmond to give a setting to an idea. The idea itself is a delightful one and, in the manner of all good fiction, is only gradually explained to us as the story progresses. The tale oscillates between June 1903 and August 1940 – two eras alien to each other in terms of social behaviour – and each is captured with sympathy. The two eras are linked by Thomas Lloyd who has the misfortune to be 'frozen' into a set tableau by people from a future society, and who somehow breaks free of the tableaux in 1940. His 'escape' is at first a source of great bemusement to him, but as he adjusts to the situation he realises he can perceive both present time (in which he is real, palpable) and the freezer tableaux (which are not apparent to the people of the 'present' of 1940), and besides this he is aware of the freezers themselves (the denizens from a future earth "who constantly moved in their half-world of intrusive future" (32)). His beloved, Sarah, is entrapped in the tableau, and there is great pathos in Thomas' daily pilgrimage to see her, hoping that she, like he, can be freed from the grip of frozen time:

"Time passed, but there was never a day when he did not walk along the riverside path, and stand again before the image of Sarah and reach out to take her hand." (33)

The delicate mystery of this tale unfolds and then, when all seems explained, Priest gives the story a final ironic twist as Thomas catches Sarah as she falls, and then is frozen once again, to be captured in yet another, far crueler tableau. But this 'explanation' of sorts, this subtle turning of the screw, does not so much explain the story as focus its mood. The vicarious, unexplained actions of the freezers, Priest's intense observation of the tableaux, the movement in time and social atmosphere; these are the elements that raise this story above the simplistic level of so much science fiction. The reader is made to do a lot of the work – something unexpected in sf – and, if the effort is made, receives a far deeper satisfaction (34). In fact, this lack of explanation and the generally 'literary' approach to each of these stories, is a continuation of the natural progression of Priest's writing from *INDOCTRINAIRE* through the two 'novels of discovery' (35), *INVERTED WORLD* and *THE SPACE MACHINE*, to the mature *A DREAM OF WESSEX*. His increasing dissatisfaction with cut-and-dried exercises in ideas (which is still at the heart of the bulk of sf) has naturally led to these far more complex and considered pieces. But this complexity is not so much in theme as in approach. It is perhaps least apparent in "*Palely Littering*", the second of these stories possessing an 'Edwardian' mood.

On a simplistic plot level it tells the story of three bridges over a channel of liquid that 'fluxes' time, and of the adventures of the narrator as he travels to and fro seeking a girl he has

fallen in love with. Expressed in that manner it could easily be told as a standard of ramp, but Priest concentrates upon the various emotional states of his narrator – as disinterested little boy, as idealistic youth and, finally, as pragmatic, middle-aged man. The mystery of the tale slowly unravels, but its delights are small by comparison to the insight Priest finally allows us;

"She frightened me because of the power she had, the power to awaken and arouse my emotions. I did not know what it was. Everyone has adolescent passions, but how many people have the chance to revisit those passions in maturity. It elated me, but also made me deeply melancholic; inside I was dancing with love and joy, but she terrified me; she was so innocently, glowingly young, and I was now so old." (36)

My own feeling is that the story should have ended at this point with this intoxicating realisation of an infatuation in maturity, but it then takes the path of A DREAM OF WESSEX (37) and allows not a single resolution but two. The mature man remains, relatively inviolate, but the youth branches off into an alternate reality where he has summoned up the courage to claim his beloved, Estyll. It does emphasise, however, that Priest is no longer using sf as anything other than a literary device, a setting in which to explore the deeper motivations of his characters, a process which began in earnest in INVERTED WORLD, and which has been taken to extremes in the nebulous vistas of 'The Dream Archipelago'.

"Whores" (38) is the shortest of the three Dream Archipelago tales collected in AN INFINITE SUMMER and is by far the most immediately colourful.

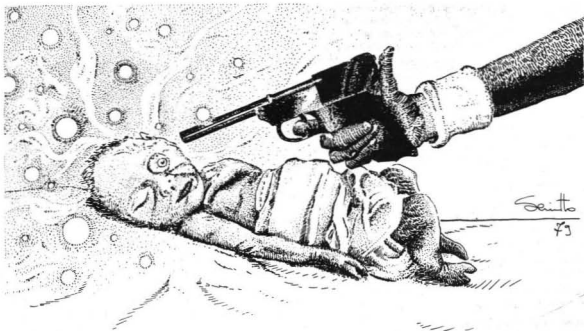
"(I remembered nothing then, only the agonies of twenty-five years of life, transmuted insanely to colours and smells and pain)" (39)

Like Golding's PINCHER MARTIN, it extends the character of the narrator into his surroundings as he suffers all the delusions of sensory confusion resultant from a synaesthesia hallucinogen. It is an extremely tender and, at the same time, mildly erotic story, sensitive and highly visual. In its denouement it turns to instant nightmare as a soldier returns from the long war to seek out a girl, Slenje, "who spoke like musk, who laughed with the texture of spring-water and who loved in deep vermillion." (40). He finds that she is dead and seeks solace in another whore. Suffering from the after-effects of the hallucinogenic gases he suffers vivid vampiric fantasies as he makes love to her. In the last few pages, the final stage of this potent and horrific tale is enacted as both his mind and body open up and give forth their quite nasty discharges.

Like "The Head and the Hand", "Whores" is a story that refuses to be easily forgotten and its potency remains long after reading it, for it depicts a fear-inspiring nightmare as daunting as Orwell's Room 101, as Winston Smith's cage of rats. (41).

Indeed, it is the spirit of 1984 that permeates The Dream Archipelago, that vague menace of impersonal forces – an atmosphere that has been evoked in much of the memorable literature of this century. It exists most certainly in the well-crafted story, "The Negation", finding its concrete form in the symbol of the wall in the writer, Moylita Kaine's book, "The Affirmation", and in the actual wall that Dik, the young soldier-and-fledgling-poet, must guard as part of his military duties. As in many of Priest's tales, his viewpoint character, in this case Dik, is at a great distance to the events about him (the "sound of an accordion band, and men were laughing drunkenly" (42)), yet he is shown to be a person of great passion despite the impotence of his circumstances, the passion of an idealist in a practical world. The war is again central to this story, as are the hallucinogenic gases, but here it is art that is at the centre of Priest's focus. Moylita Kaine's stand for a nebulous "truth" amidst a system that uses mind-distorting drugs and gases reflects Priest coming closest to dealing with the responsibilities encharged upon a writer in the face of such a system. That Dik himself appears to 'negate' the positive ideals that Moylita Kaine propounds by admitting his own lack of valition, does not detract from her gesture in defying the ruling burghers. Something has been awakened in him by her example, by her covert demand that he climb the wall (both actual and symbolic), and though the system appears to triumph at the end (as, indeed, it does in every tale that truthfully examines this subject), Priest has made his point to us, his readers. (43).

The final story in AN INFINITE SUMMER is perhaps my favourite of all Priest's stories and is, without doubt, the finest example of his art. "The Watched" is the story of Yann Ordier, a man who has grown rich from his development of the 'scintilla', a minute glass bead that, in mosaic with others of its kind, can capture every detail of sight and sound in any circumstances and transmit them back. It is the ultimate instrument of espionage, yet Priest ignores the trite, yet natural, desire to tell a spy story and instead focuses upon Ordier himself, a man who intensely dislikes the thought of being watched and who has moved to an island on the Dream Archipelago to escape the insidious spread of the scintillae. The levels of voyeurism are complex, beginning with Ordier's evocation of Jenessa's body as she showers – a mind image conjured from memory – through to a final, ironic moment of self-revelation at the hands of the secretive native tribe, the Qataari. Amidst this total erosion of privacy caused by the scintillae, the Qataari have maintained their integral anonymity, their sense of enigma. Ordier is obsessed with observing the Qataari and believes that, from the privacy of his 'folly' above the Qataari camp, he is the only person who has ever observed their theatrical rituals. Priest





fasters this belief in us and, in his own slow, meticulous manner, heightens the atmosphere and unravels the skein of circumstance before us. Hints as to the nature of the Qataari are at first given abstrusely and then with greater solidity as we are drawn - with Ordier - deep into the web of the fiction. Priest builds image upon image until one senses that in its complexity of detail it is a recollection of the author's own personal nightmare, one psychologically far more traumatic than that suffered by the narrator of "Whores", one that here, in the powerful climax of the story (and a climax that is not lacking in its sexual undertones) once again evokes, with bitter irony, the impotence of the individual in the face of events, as Ordier becomes the watched and not the watcher. And we, the readers, are there too, silently observing and unobserved in our watchfulness:

"There was no one about, no one watching. He was alone with the girl. But as he stood before her, breathing the sickly fragrance of the roses, he could still feel the pressure of eyes as distinctly as if it were the touch of a hand on the back of his neck." (44)

But voyeurism and that nightmare feeling of being watched (that sense that children have when told that God can see all and hear all) are not the only elements that Priest emphasises in "The Watched" for he elevates the culture of the Qataari - the known 'external' signs of it, at least - to become the very essence of Art in the Dream Archipelago and seems to say that it cannot be mechanically observed and explained but must retain its enigmatic nature or be destroyed. It is Priest's finest use of the secondary fiction, the supreme conjuring act in his repertoire, almost a statement about the craft of writing itself:

"And Ordier watched, surrendering to the exquisite excitement of sexual pleasure. As he came to a physical climax, releasing wetly into his trousers, he saw through the shaking lenses of the binoculars that the girl had opened her eyes, and was staring upwards with a dazed, delirious expression. She seemed to be looking directly at him ... and Ordier moved back from the crack in the wall, ashamed and embarrassed." (45)

(C) David Wingrove, May 1979.

#### NOTES:

(1) From "Transplant", which first appeared in the magazine *WORLDS OF IF*, February 1974 and reprinted in the collection *REAL-TIME WORLD* (New English Library; 1974 & 1976; 158pp; ISBN 450 02432 6)

(2) "Real Time World", first appeared in *NEW WRITINGS IN SF* 19, 1972 and reprinted in *REAL-TIME WORLD*.

(3) From "Whores", first appearance in *NEW DIMENSIONS* 8, and reprinted in *AN INFINITE SUMMER* (Faber & Faber; 1979; £5.25; 208pp; ISBN 0 571 11343 5).

(4) By which I mean that part of a writer's fiction that he himself sees as his 'oeuvre' and produces under his own name and not those works produced as exercises in paying the rent under a nom de plume.

(5) See Note (1)

(6) "Fire Storm", which first appeared in *QUARK* 1, 1970.

(7) "Sentence In Binary Code", which first appeared in *FANTASTIC STORIES*, 1971; "Breeding Ground", first appeared in *VISION OF TOMORROW*, 1970.

(8) "The Perihelion Man" first appeared in *NEW WRITINGS IN SF* 16, 1970; "Double Consumption" first appeared in *THE DISAPPEARING FUTURE*, 1970; "The Run" first appeared in *IMPULSE*, 1966, incidentally, his first professional publication.

(9) *INDOCTRINAIRE*; Faber & Faber; 1970; 158pp. Reprinted by New English Library 1971 & 1973 and re-issued by Pan in slightly altered form, 1979; 75p; ISBN 0 330 25608 4.

(10) *INDOCTRINAIRE*, Page 73 (NEL version)

(11) Page 138 of *REAL TIME WORLD*. See Note (2).

(12) "The Head and the Hand", which first appeared in "New Worlds Quarterly 3", 1972 and was reprinted in *REAL TIME WORLD*.

(13) Page 19 of *REAL TIME WORLD*.

(14) Page 21 of *REAL TIME WORLD*.

(15) *FUGUE FOR A DARKENING ISLAND*; Faber & Faber; 1972; 147pp; £1.75; ISBN 0 571 09794 4. Also re-issued by Pan, 1978.

(16) *FUGUE*, Page 96.

(17) "A Woman Naked", *Science Fiction Monthly*, 1974 and reprinted in *REAL TIME WORLD*.

(18) *INVERTED WORLD*; Faber & Faber; 1974; 256pp; £2.50; ISBN 0 571 10444 4, and also as a short story in *NEW WRITINGS IN SF*, 22, 1973. The novel version has been re-issued by Pan, 1978.

(19) *INVERTED WORLD*, Pages 136/7

(20) His own term; used in an interview with John Branson in *SFM*, Volume 1, No. 12, 1974.

(21) *THE SPACE MACHINE*; Faber & Faber; 1976; 363 pp; £3.50; ISBN 0 571 10931 4. And re-issued in *Orbit*, 1977.

(22) One manifestation of which is Edward's constant care for Amelia's handbag while they are parted - a vestige of civilisation and a symbol of the "Englishness" only abandoned on P.219.

(23) *A DREAM OF WESSEX*; Faber & Faber; 1977; 199pp; £4.25; ISBN 0 571 11118 1.

(24) *A DREAM OF WESSEX*, Page 141.

(25) *A DREAM OF WESSEX*? Page 86

(26) In the space of a few pages (p.65 onwards), Priest manages to create a totally unsympathetic character in Paul Mason, magnifying his faults by showing the effect his destructive egoism has upon the 'heroine', Julia Stretton, who finds herself impotent before his brutal psychological assaults.

(27) *A DREAM OF WESSEX*, Page 72

(28) *A DREAM OF WESSEX*, Page 188

(29) *AN INFINITE SUMMER*; Faber & Faber; 1979; £5.25; 208pp; ISBN 0 571 11343 5.

(30) And which, in some respects, reminds one of Le Guin's *Orsinia*, although Priest's setting possesses little of Le Guin's scope for contemporary political comment and, instead, concentrates upon the plight of the individual in the face of the 'illusion'.

(31) "An Infinite Summer", first published in *ANDROMEDA* 1, 1976 and subsequently reprinted in *AN INFINITE SUMMER*.

(32) *AN INFINITE SUMMER*, Page 31

(33) *AN INFINITE SUMMER*, Page 32

(34) Something that has alienated the sf audience from much of Brian Aldiss' recent fiction.

(35) In the sense of Priest discovering his technical abilities as a writer.

(36) *AN INFINITE SUMMER*, Page 96. From "Palely Loitering", first published in *Fantasy & Science Fiction*, 1979.

(37) And, dare I say it, John Fowles' *THE FRENCH LIEUTENANT'S WOMAN*.

(38) "Whores", first published in "New Dimensions 8" and reprinted in *AN INFINITE SUMMER*. (1st Pub. 1978)

(39) & (40) *AN INFINITE SUMMER*, Page 41.

(41) George Orwell, "1984", from Part III, Chap. 1. The idea of Room 101 is much akin to Priest's nightmare of "dreams rich with agony, and lurid colours, and an uncontrollable and unfulfilled sexual desire." (page 54, A. I. S.). There is also some similarity to Kafka's "In The Penal Settlement". In each case there is the sense of undeserved and illogical punishment and a shared lack of understanding of the deeper processes from which punishment stems.

(42) "The Negation", first published in *ANTICIPATIONS*, 1978, and reprinted in *AN INFINITE SUMMER*.

(43) Kaine's Prachous is Fowles' Phraxos, "the fenced island".

(44) & (45) "The Watched", first published in *F&SF*, 1978, and reprinted in *AN INFINITE SUMMER*. (Pages 206/172).

# Overtures and Beginners'

- Christopher Priest

(Editor's Note: This article first appeared in FOUNDATION 13, May 1978 under the title "the profession of science fiction: overtures and beginners".)

I am 33 years old as I write this article, although by the time it sees print the calendar clock will have ticked at least once more. If I were a sportsman (as I once intended to be), I would be nearing retirement age, and if the sport were swimming or gymnastics I would be a decade past retirement. If I were in industry (as I once had to be), I would probably be a middle-management executive, already keeping my back turned towards the wall whenever I saw pushy young graduates coming up behind me. If I were a rock star (as I once wanted to be - I am the same age as Mick Jagger and Paul McCartney), I would be an elder statesman. Instead, I am a writer, and at the beginning of my career. I shall go on being a "young" writer until I am at least forty.

(To put this into a sort of perspective: I am the same age as H. G. Wells when he was writing LOVE AND MR LEWISHAM, and older than when he wrote THE WAR OF THE WORLDS, THE TIME MACHINE, THE ISLAND OF DR MOREAU and many others. I am twelve years older than Mary Shelley, when she wrote FRANKENSTEIN. I am the same age as Brian Aldiss, when NON-STOP was published.)

The science fiction world, with which I closely identify, and with which I am closely identified, has a large number of "young" writers, and many of them are Turks, in the colloquial sense. It seems to me that a great weakness of the science fiction industry (for that is what it is) is the way in which writers without any real track-record are encouraged to think of themselves as important or influential figures. I can think of several burgeoning talents which have been effectively nipped in the bud by too much early praise, or who have developed into self-conscious and pretentious writers because they were not told at an opportune moment, that there is a difference between promise and delivery. It worries me that I have been invited to write an autobiographical piece for FOUNDATION; it worries me more that I am writing it.

Well, I'll spare you a lot of autobiography; my life is of interest only to me. Young men shouldn't write autobiographies unless they are Robert Graves, and although I am the same age as he was when he wrote GOODBYE TO ALL THAT, my external life is short on action and colour, and the internal life is carefully husbanded raw material. I'd prefer to concentrate upon the "profession" of science fiction - or, as is more the case, the profession of writing - and combine it with fragments of autobiography, where those will explain.

For instance: when I left school in 1959 I went to work in an accountant's office, wherein I was eventually articulated to the senior partner for a period of five years. I stayed in accountancy, in fact, for a total of nine years, and it is probably true to say that the august profession has never known a more unwilling, bored, lazy or unsuccessful student. It seems remarkable, in retrospect, that I stuck it for so long; if I had been only an accountant for all that time, I should certainly have gone mad. However, for the last six of those years I was reading science fiction and was peripherally involved with fandom, and for the last five of those years I was writing. (I gave up accountancy for good in 1968, when I became a full-time writer.)

The benefits of that long sojourn are few, but they do exist. Some of the benefits are minor - for example, even to this day I can add up a page-long column of figures in a few seconds - but one of them is, for me, of major importance.

Accountancy is a profession, and accountants are professionals. An accountant will not do something unless he is able to do it, and prepared to do it, and then he does it. When he charges a fee for his work it is charged according to the hours he has put in and the expertise he has employed. He maintains a correctness of demeanour, and a confidentiality about his clients and his intelligence of them. He works to a code of practice that is unspoken and unbreachable.

He addresses his creditors as "Mr" and his debtors as "Esq".

Now, I'm not suggesting that the professionalism that is right for an accountant is right for an author, nor even that I have brought that brand of professionalism to my own writing...but after many years exposure to it, some of it must have rubbed off on me. Certainly, I learnt the real meaning of the word from accountants, and have grown to recognise and admire examples of it in many different fields. The abstract notion of "professionalism" is for me a state of mind, not a state of affairs.

I don't believe that selling written work to a commercial publisher makes one into a "pro", and, equally, I don't believe that someone who writes in his spare time is necessarily less of a professional than a full-time writer. In my own case, I knew my attitude to writing was a professional one well before I wrote my first published story, and certainly some years before I gave up my job. I knew also, in 1968, that becoming a full-time writer was a permanent step; the thought that I might one day have to go back to a job simply never occurred to me...I felt able to do it. I was prepared to do it, and I did it.

Professionalism embraces all aspects of the writing activity. It means that one should never write at less than one's best. That one should take an interest in the business side of one's work, and see that both sides of a publisher's contract are abided by. That one acts correctly, and abides by a code of practice. In these matters, and others, I have failed in the past, and will probably do so again, but an awareness of them constitutes a principle that influences every moment of my writing career.

The man is the life, and the life is the work, and where one fails is in personal weakness. This is something that greatly interests me.

Every writer, every whole writer, has three distinct modes of existence. The first is his private life, which, to one degree or another, produces the internal and external experience that becomes the subject matter of his work. In his "private" existence, the writer will spend much time thinking or talking about his work - what he plans to write, what he is writing, and what he has written - and he may brag or he may be modest, but he will see his work in ideal terms.

A writer also has a "public" existence. This is in the form of his published work, or when he is reviewed in newspapers and magazines, or when he gives a talk, or is interviewed, or when he writes an autobiographical piece for FOUNDATION. In this manifestation he either adopts, or has ascribed to him, a public view of his work. A reviewer will hail his latest book as a classic, or damn it as incompetent hackwork; when answering an interviewer's questions, the writer gives his replies in the terms of how his writing appears now that it is finished. Even when he speaks of the process, he chooses his words carefully; the work has been worked, the achievement achieved. Again, the writer may be a braggart, or he may not, but he will see his work in terms of completion.

No writer worth his salt ever mistakes either of these for the true state of being a writer, although both occupy a large proportion of his threescore years and ten. The third existence is the "real" one, and it is the one about which I, at least, am almost inarticulate.

It is that period of time when one is actually writing. Without wishing to mystify something that I've seen many other writers make light of, I am genuinely baffled by the act of writing. It's a kind of fusion of the private and public existence, but it is not that at all. It's a process of the unconscious, even though one consciously employs experience and craft and skill. It's a period of isolation, solitude and introspection, but it is not lonely. It is a process which requires great concentration and energy, and which, like masturbation, comes entirely from oneself and drains the energy, but which, unlike masturbation, raises the desire for more. It is a period in which success and failure coexist quite naturally, in which joy and despair go hand in hand. It is a process of expression and communication, and it is inexpressible and incommunicable.

When I have finished writing a piece of work, quite apart from the fact that I'm not entirely sure where it came from, I have a feeling of satisfaction that is dangerously close to smugness...but this is balanced by a feeling of intense relief, as if one has driven in an old car from Cornwall to the north of Scotland, and broken down repeatedly all the way, but got there in the end anyway.

Returning for a moment to the nature of "professionalism": I feel at my most professional - in other words, that I am most capable of pursuing my work in a correct manner - when I am most confident

about my work.

But I, and presumably other writers too, bolster that confidence artificially when the confidence does not arise from the work itself. (We talk to our friends, as opposed to our foes; we listen to praise instead of to criticism; we write autobiographical pieces for FOUNDATION.) Here, precisely here, is the writer's greatest potential for failure, and it is at such times that he becomes less than wholly professional.

There is, though, another kind of failure, and it is not to be discounted.

I do not see myself as a successful writer; I scrape by. I feel I must constantly improve... because there's nowhere else to go. I described just now a feeling of relief when I have finished writing something; it has been the inevitable concomitant of everything I have ever written. It is the relief of having found something marginally worth writing about; the relief of having stayed with it to the end, and not abandoning it. If anyone ever says he likes something I've written, I feel relief that he has missed the weak bits, not delight that he is praising something else.

I find myself duplicating the sentiments of a far better writer than myself, Graham Greene. When I first read the following passage (from his autobiography, A SORT OF LIFE) it has a profound effect upon me, because he had put his finger on exactly the right place:

For a writer success is always temporary, success is only a delayed failure. And it is incomplete. A writer's ambition is not satisfied like the businessman's by a comfortable income, though he sometimes boasts of it like a nouveau riche. The reception of my New Magdalene was prodigious. I was forced to appear half way through the piece, as well as at the end. The acting took everyone by surprise, and the second night's enthusiasm quite equalled the first. We have really hit the mark. Ferrat translates it for Italy, Regnier has two theatres ready for me in Paris, and Lambé of Vienna has accepted it for his theatre. Where is The New Magdalene now, and how many remember the name of its author?

I have not, so far, had much to say about science fiction, because it is of secondary interest to me. I dislike science fiction, and many of its peripheral activities. Most of the writing that is published in the genre seems trivial, badly written and depressing. (As for the peripheral activities, it seems from what one hears that many New Magdalenes are being written.)

What I like is the work of individual authors, some of whom - many of whom, in fact - are published in the science fiction category. If this is a fine distinction lost on some, so be it.

Yet the fact remains that what I write is unmistakably "science fiction", and it would be disingenuous to pretend (as some writers of a similarly independent bent have pretended about their own work) that it has no connection with the rest of the field. This is something that causes me a lot of self-examination, because I am a writer first and a science fiction writer second, and I cannot evade it. I know that the first time someone in a bookshop or library picks up a Christopher Priest book they are doing so because they are hoping it will be "as good as" something by Isaac Asimov, or John Wyndham, or Ursula LeGuin... and I am very glad to have that reader. You cannot get away from the fact that there are a lot of people who are science fiction readers... who pick up a book because it is sf (or labelled as such). What one hopes is that when the book is put down, the reader not only picks up another, but picks it up because it is by Christopher Priest. I have no ambition to be "as good as" or "better than" any of those writers I named, nor to any other, but to extend the reader's taste to make room for me too. No writer can survive creatively if he thinks of himself as being a contributor to a genre; what one must always work towards is being accepted for one's own individual merit as a writer. In other words, one is looking for the right readership who will read you for the right reasons.

The fact remains that working within the science fiction field can be a dispiriting experience. One sees scientific puzzle-solving and dandified masquerading as literature (and being hailed as such), impotence-fear masquerading as story-telling, purple prose masquerading as style, hacks masquerading as writers. One sees a positive embarrassment at prize-giving. One sees critical writing which compares you with Philip Jose Farmer and Michael Moorcock. One hears diminutive talents with a knack for self-publicity and nothing else making more noise than a roomful of Nobel Prize winners. One has perit yawn

women from radio-stations reading your new novel, and asking you if you believe in flying saucers.

I write science fiction because... I don't really know why.

I cannot write unless I have an idea, a real idea, and those ideas that appeal to me come out speculative in nature. Also, it was the reading of science fiction at an impressionable age that first revealed the possibilities of the novel form. I have been a voracious reader of books since the age of seven, but until I was eighteen almost everything I read was non-fiction. Then I discovered sf, and read every example of it I could lay my hands on. When interest began to wane after a few years, I mixed my reading, with science fiction fairly low in priority. Perhaps the most satisfying novel I can think of reading is a well written, deeply imagined and profoundly felt science fiction novel... but one of those comes along about once a decade. I've given up the fruitless search, and now read only those books which, for whatever reason, I have to, or enough to keep up with what the colleagues I most admire are doing at the moment.

For those who take an interest in such matters: I'm not an only child, I didn't have a miserable or lonely childhood, and I have an uncle who used to jump over barrels on a motorcycle. (One of my great-uncles dropped bombs on German submarines during the First World War, and a grandfather - whom I closely resemble, according to some - owned a toyshop at the seaside; under different management, Priest Bros. is still in business.) I write on an electric typewriter, I type my own manuscripts, and work very slowly. THE SPACE MACHINE took fourteen months of close, concentrated work; FUGUE FOR A DARKENING ISLAND was written in nine months, A DREAM OF WESSEX in six. In a typical working day I will spend approximately one or two hours actually at the typewriter, and ten to twelve hours drinking coffee, watching TV, walking very slowly down the road to post a letter, or otherwise wasting time. I write approximately one novel every eighteen months, and one or two short stories a year. I am very happy in my job, and am seeking neither raise nor promotion.

I can never re-read my work with any pleasure, and as a matter of rule I always regret any non-fiction from the moment it appears in print. By the time you read this, I will disclaim every word of it. Having reached the end of it I am more convinced than I was at the outset that this is an interim report, and that "young" writers should curb their lips. I look forward to writing the second instalment of this when I am "old".

Christopher Priest.

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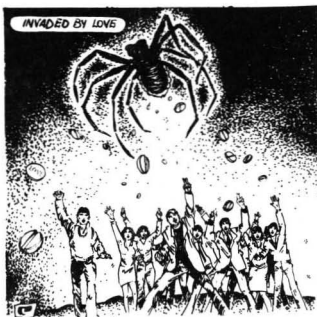
## Sense And Sensibility:

### the short stories of THOMAS M. DISCH by Chris Evans

Thomas M. Disch's first stories began appearing in the American sf magazines (principally *Fantastic*) in the early sixties, although it is through his association with Michael Moorcock's *New Worlds* that he achieved prominence. Disch is commonly regarded as one of the standard-bearers of the "New Wave" of writers who revolutionized sf in the latter half of the sixties by eschewing the genre's traditional preoccupation with hardware and its essentially optimistic world-view for a more humanistic approach in which man became the victim rather than the master of his technology. Many of these new writers were grounded in artistic disciplines rather than possessing the scientific training which was the norm amongst the established writers of the day, and they brought to sf a literary heritage which went far beyond the pulps. In Disch's case it was the German novelist Thomas Mann who inspired much of his early work, his 1968 novel, *CAMP CONCENTRATION*, dedicated in part to Mann, being a science-fictional reinterpretation of Mann's *DOCTOR FAUSTUS*. The myths which Disch shares with Mann is a fascination with the talented or sensitive man (the aesthete) and the problems which face him in living in a world which, by and large, does not recognise the merits of art. Disch's best fiction is concerned with those realms of experience and insight which are accessible only to those of the highest sensibilities.

To date, three collections of Disch's short stories have appeared in this country: *WHITE FANG GOES DINGO* (Arrow, 1971 - an expanded version of a 1966 Compact Books edition entitled 102 H-BOMBS); *UNDER COMPULSION* (Hart-Davis 1968; Panther, 1970, 1978); and *GETTING INTO DEATH* (Hart-Davis, MacGibbon, 1973). *WHITE FANG GOES DINGO* contains mostly whimsical pieces which show Disch applying his own brand of wit and wisdom to some of the more traditional themes and situations in sf. The title story, which was later expanded into a novel, *THE PUPPIES OF TERRA* (reviewed in *VECTOR 87*), is possibly the "hardest" sf story which Disch has written. Many familiar science-fictional trappings are present and the plot has a familiar ring: mysterious energy beings invade the Earth and mind-yoke humans into subservience; some humans throw off their yokes and organize a resistance movement which eventually, in the manner of much traditional sf, is successful in forcing the aliens to leave Earth. Mankind is victorious; a fairly commonplace tale, it would seem. But Disch transcends his subject matter by making the aliens benevolent despots and the human freedom fighters bores. The central character, White Fang, enjoys his time as a "leashed" human for he is able to pursue sensual and intellectual gratification at his leisure, free from illness and pain. When he is eventually press-ganged into joining the rebellion, he realises that he gains his freedom at the price of the civilised life-style which he has grown to love.

"Invaded by Love", another story from the same period, covers similar ground. Once again we have a benevolent invasion, this time conducted by a single alien, Brother Luster Lovely, who comes to Earth preaching love and dispensing pills which reveal the "holiness" of life. Lovely's pharmacological gospel spreads rapidly, but Seneca Traquair, the Secretary-General of the United Nations, holds out. Lovely courts Traquair, tempting him with the prospect of eternal happiness if he will only accept the proffered pill (biblical parallels abound in this story). The point here is that Brother Lovely's paradise is a state of unreasoning bliss, "a permanent short-circuiting of intellectual wires", and there is no doubt that this is anathema to Disch. Traquair eventually succumbs to the Universal Brotherhood not of his own volition, but by the overwhelming force of love which radiates from the rest of the invasion when it reaches Earth. And should there be any lingering doubts as to where Disch's sympathies lie, the Divine Being is portrayed as a giant spider.



"The Affluence of Edwin Lallard" is set in a near-future America in which it is a crime to be insolvent. Most people are extremely wealthy but at the same time only semi-literate, and it is this question of literacy (or, more broadly, culturedness) which ultimately turns out to be central to the story, for Lallard, under trial for poverty, has deliberately engineered his prosecution in order to retreat (into prison) from a world dominated by consumerism, to be free to "read all the books he had never had time for: Gibbon and Toynbee, Virgil and Dante, Tolstoi, Joyce and Gaddis, Firsiroti and McCallum". However, Lallard, like Traquair, is ultimately defeated. At the prison there is no library.

Two basic preoccupations underlie and link these three stories (and, indeed, inform practically all of Disch's work). The first is the polarity between the great mass of people who live their lives solely for the purpose of sensual gratification and the minority who are capable of appreciating the "finer" aspects of life, its intellectual luxuries such as philosophy and art. The second, which arises from the first, is the conflict between freedom and contentment. Disch is constantly reasserting the superiority of independent thought and action over the mere fulfilment of desire. Thus White Fang's blissful, problem-free existence under leash is less important than his later activities as a rebel, for it is only by being free that he can be truly human. It is essential for the individual to grow and change, to meet challenges, to confront new experiences. Disch sees happiness as a kind of stasis which numbs one to the stimuli of the external world (and, in a later story, he puts it even more bluntly: "Happiness is not important..."). In "Invaded by Love", mankind's ready acceptance of Brother Lovely's pills is depicted as a lemming-like drive towards a state of mindless nirvana, and Traquair, despite being a man of hawkish propensities, comes across as a sympathetic character because he is not moved by blind emotion. Similarly Edwin Lallard is a man of high sensibilities pitted against a world of philistines, one of the few repositories of culture in an age when most minds are stupefied.

What, then, of the talented man, the artist? How, for example, does Disch see his own role as a writer? We can begin to approach this question by examining his attitude towards fiction as illustrated in another story from *WHITE FANG*, "The Descent Of The West End", a literary squib which describes the sinking of a ship:

"Alfredo was floating languidly three feet from the ceiling of the ship's bar, drifting past islands of pink light (the lighting fixtures were recessed into the ceiling) that softened and flattered his Italianate features, features already soft and often flattered. Pages of the poet's manuscript could be seen (had

there been someone there to see him) bobbing about on the water, one, and then another, up and down, and all together, like the petals of an oversized flower floating on the languid waters of some blue lagoon on some tropical isle. The poet, however, could not be seen (had there been someone there unable to see him), for like a submarine balloon, or like the seaweed at the bottom of the lagoon already described, he was washing about beneath the surface of the water, tangled in the wires of the microphone."

The whole passage is gloriously over-written, of course, but the bracketed asides ("had there been someone there to see them") are ironic, for there is someone there to see and record everything: the eye of the artist. Disch is aware that fiction is an artifice since the writer is able to describe scenes to which we would have no access in 'real' life. The subtle sense of playfulness in which Disch indulges at times is often traceable to this awareness, and it also enables us to understand the motivation behind such seemingly superfluous lines as "When they had left the room, the room was empty" and "Behind them the VW was still alone in the parking lot". These lines create the impression of a literary camera tracking over the proceedings (Disch is a confirmed movie-buff) and they serve up a more complete slice of life than we would ever experience outside fiction.

From time to time, however, Disch shows his dissatisfaction with this very artificiality and attempts to break down the formal barriers which exist between a writer and his audience. **WHITE FANG GOES DINGO** comprises stories from Disch's earliest, U. S. based period, whereas **UNDER COMPULSION**, a collection of more solemn and pessimistic visions - many of which were first published in the U. K. - shows Disch in a more autobiographical mood, moving away from the traditional props of sf and even the traditional appearances of fiction itself. This is best illustrated in "The Squirrel Cage" which remains, for me, Disch's most powerful statement.



A man is imprisoned in a windowless room by unknown captors who feed him through a nozzle and provide him with copies of the *New York Times* (by which he is able to maintain some semblance of contact with the outside world). The room contains a typewriter on which the man composes stories and poems which he believes are then displayed on a billboard outside. He does not know when or why he was imprisoned, or how long he is likely to remain in solitary. His tone, as he speculates on the possible answers to these questions, is one of resignation. Periodically he pleads with his captors to set him free, but without any real expectation of release. Towards the end of the story he confesses that he believes them to be humans just like himself (previously he had theorized that they might be aliens) who have put him in a kind of zoo and

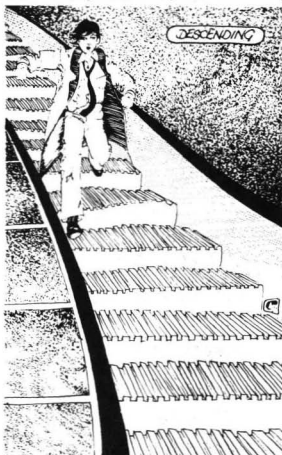
came along from time to time to read the stories and poems which he writes. "None of them thinks it's at all strange or unusual that I'm in here," he says. "None of them thinks it's wrong. That's the terrifying thing."

"Terrifying?"

"It's not terrifying. How can it be? It's only a story after all. Maybe you don't think it's a story because you're out there reading it on the billboard, but I know it's a story because I have to sit here on this stool making it up. Oh, it might have been terrifying once upon a time, when I first got the idea, but I've been here now for years. Years. The story has gone on far too long. Nothing can be terrifying for years on end. I only say it's terrifying because, you know, I have to say something. Something or other. The only thing that could terrify me now is if someone were to come in. If they came in and said, 'All right, Disch, you can go now.' That, truly, would be terrifying."

It is Disch's use of his own name in the penultimate sentence that gives this story its tremendous impact. With that final flourish, Disch rips away the veil of fiction to reveal himself not only as the author of the story but as its principal character. At once it becomes something more than a general statement of the artist's isolation in society; it becomes a vivid portrayal of Disch's own alienation. Without sacrificing dramatic intensity, Disch has succeeded in appealing directly to the reader.

The squirrel cage motif (that is, the idea of someone being trapped in a treadmill-like situation from which there is no escape) recurs in Disch's fiction and is particularly pronounced in "Descending", a classic tale of mounting horror. The main character, a rootless, essentially anonymous man (though there are hints that, again, it is Disch himself) boards a down escalator in a department store. He becomes immersed in a novel he has just bought and has read over fifty pages before he realises that the escalator is still descending. As with the protagonist of "The Squirrel Cage", he attempts to rationalise his situation, but as he is carried further and further downwards he is forced to accept its bizarre reality. The success of this story lies in the manner in which Disch gradually transforms the most prosaic of situations into a predicament of horrifying proportions - horrifying because the very forces which have trapped



the man are blind, mechanical ones which refuse to recognize his existence. For Disch, what malevolence there is in the world springs from those objects, situations and people that are not amenable to reason. He does not see evil as a consciously calculated force, but as arising out of ignorance and insensitivity.

"Moon dust, the smell of Hay, and Dialectical Materialism" finds a Russian astronaut stranded on the Moon, his oxygen supply almost exhausted. Faced with death, he is forced to consider for what ideals he is dying. For science? For love? For the state? He considers all three in turn but finds that none of these are sufficient. With his oxygen gone, he unscrews the face-plate of his helmet. "Then he was dead," Disch concludes, "and though he did not know it, there is never a good reason for dying." This superbly restrained story demonstrates Disch's commanding use of imagery from its opening paragraphs:

"He was dying for science.

"This was, in fact, the very mausoleum of natural philosophy - all those great and long-ago intelligences metamorphosed her into rockpiles: Harpalus, Plato, Archimedes, Tycho, Longomontanus, Faraday; and, on the face turned away from Earth, a ghostly horde of his own countrymen - Kozirev, Ezerki, Pavlov. An honour, therefore, to be the first, the very first, to join them thus corporeally, like Ganymede lifted living up to Olympus."

Karkov, the astronaut, is faced with an impossible situation, just like the characters in "The Squirrel Cage" and "Descending"; and, just like these, the only way he can come to terms with it is by embracing it. When something cannot be understood, it must simply be surrendered to. In "The Roaches" a woman with a phobic fear of cockroaches suddenly discovers that she can exert mental control over them, and this discovery enables her to transform her fear into love so that she ends up summoning a horde of the insects to her. There are strong sexual undertones in this story, one of several instances where Disch equates suppressed sexual desire with perverse forms of compulsive behaviour.

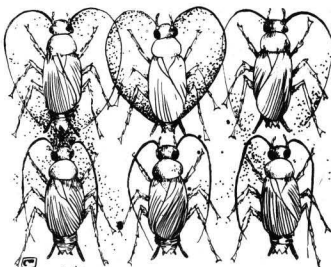
Disch has travelled extensively and such travels have provided the stimuli for some of his best stories. "Casablanca" has an average American couple holidaying in Morocco when the United States is devastated in a nuclear attack. Here's how Disch introduces this information into the narrative:

"A grown man came into the ice-cream parlour with a bundle of newspapers. French newspapers. Despite his lack of French, Fred could understand the headlines. He bought a copy for twenty francs and went back into the hotel, leaving half the sundae uneaten.

"The minute he was in the door, Mrs Richmond cried out, 'Isn't it terrible?' She had a copy of the paper already spread out on the bed. 'It doesn't say anything about Cleveland.'"

Lesser writers than Disch would have emblazoned the newspaper headline across the page, but Disch's oblique approach, the use of Mrs Richmond's almost banal comment, makes the tragedy at once more poignant and more real. The Richmonds are dispossessed, made stateless by the attack, and the local inhabitants' reactions to them rapidly shift from politeness to scorn to outright hostility. The national tragedy is encapsulated in the personal tragedy of the Richmonds, who, it could be argued, have lost far more than all their dead countrymen.

"Casablanca" has parallels with "The Asian Shore", one of Disch's finest stories, anthologized in his third collection, GETTING INTO DEATH. Here an American architect is on a sabbatical in Istanbul, the interface between Europe and Asia (or the West and the East). John Benedict Harris is attempting to write a book which expresses his own theories on architecture. A Turkish woman begins to haunt him, and as the story progresses Harris is slowly transformed from an American intellectual into a Turkish peasant, absorbed, as it were, by his environment. This idea of the environment impinging on the affecting consciousness is another central theme to Disch, a preoccupation which he shares with J. G. Ballard. For Disch, the inorganic world is not neutral; it can be hostile (as in "Descending"), so potent that it completely transforms the people who inhabit it ("The Asian



THE ROACHES

Shore"), or comforting, as in "Let Us Quickly Hasten to the Gate of Ivory" which has a brother and sister becoming lost in a seemingly boundless cemetery and rediscovering their filial affection as they wander through its placid, elysian landscape. This story has a Hansel-and-Gretel-like quality; in the reclusive atmosphere of the cemetery, Mickey and Louise, both adults, are able to slough off the veneer of sophistication and propriety imposed by society and recover the candour of their childhood relationship. As night descends, Louise falls "asleep in her brother's arms, smiling: it was just like old times."

If death forms a backdrop to this story, in "Getting Into Death" it is the central image. Cassandra Millar, sometime author of detective and gothic novels (one of the latter being entitled CLARA REEVE - a touch of irony from Disch, who published a novel of the same title under the pseudonym of Leonie Hargrave) is dying of heart disease in a hospital. Cassandra, a shrewd, unsentimental woman, finds it difficult to come to terms with her impending death because she does not feel the terror or despair which would seem to be the appropriate responses to her situation. She sees death as a metaphor underlying many of the sexual elements of real life and romantic fiction, but she is only able to view it in this intellectual, abstract fashion; she cannot respond to the idea emotionally. The story also explores her ambiguous relationships with her relatives and friends, most of which are characterized by a superficial politeness which masks an essential antagonism. Eventually the two themes fuse: Cassandra is forced to recognise that "Death is a social experience; an exchange; not a relationship in itself, but the medium in which all friends and lovers meet." She deliberately sets about repairing all her damaged relationships, doing so not to comfort herself but to comfort those who will be left behind after she is dead. Thus morbidity is banished and the story ends on a small note of personal triumph.

From death we move to love in "The Colours", which describes the progression of a love affair through the eyes of a man who makes use of a colour machine developed by a friend which enhances his perceptions. He falls in love with a girl called Helen; or rather, as Disch puts it, Helen enables him to experience love by acting as a catalyst for his new perceptions. At first reds and oranges dominate his consciousness; then he starts to move through the spectrum while the love affair peaks and begins to decline. A difficult, complex story whose allusions, I must confess, often escaped me (although it's interesting to note that in a recent article in FOUNDATION 15, Michael Moorcock describes it as a "fantasy about heroine addiction"). It contains, nonetheless, some splendid and provocative passages on one man's particular vision of the nature of love.

Disch is not always successful. "Qlncunx" is a story composed of five sections with no obvious linkages, although Disch has stated that "there are formal relationships between the five parts but not logical ones". His idea was to write a story of poetical intensity,

but there seems to be no focal point which is accessible to the reader and thus no communicable vision. "The Master Of The Millford Altarpiece", an attempt to directly describe the artist's life by using fragments of autobiography, letters, reflections, the comments of friends, all taken from Disch's life (some as he is actually writing the story) also fails to cohere as an artistic whole. But what does emerge is Disch's remarkable candour, his capacity for making often disparaging (as well as complimentary) statements about himself. In this respect, perhaps, the story succeeds because it is imperfect, by way of demonstrating that art arises from people with all-too-human failings. There's something innately appealing in the idea presented in this story that a writer may be capable of delineating precise shades of emotion or of making profound statements through his art while at the same time worrying about being overweight or about the competition he faces from rising young authors.

It is Disch's essential integrity as an artist that, allied to his brilliant intellect and his literary eloquence, makes his work so valuable. And the fact that his fiction continually examines the perennial themes of love and hate, life and death, duty and morality, will, I believe, make his work endure. In an interview published in ETERNITY 2 (a now-defunct fan magazine) Disch has stated: "I would like to think that I mirror themes more often than I espouse causes." Just so; Disch is not a didactic writer, but rather uses his stories to explore his own feelings and ideas on particular themes and subjects; the reader is not being taken for a ride by someone who has all the answers prepared in advance, but being invited to share a discovery. Since discovery is a continuous, unending process, and since Disch is wholly committed to self-examination and social analysis, there is good reason to suppose that his work will continue to stimulate and entertain.

I have a feeling that Disch has sacrificed much in his private life for his pursuit of Art. As readers, we can only be grateful for this sacrifice, for it has provided us with some of the best literature being written today. In CLARA REEVE, Disch (as Leonie Hargrave) has written: "The winged boy represents the Ideal, which lifts up the rest of creation and redeems it from the gross reign of Appetite."

It is possible that this could eventually provide the most fitting epitaph for Disch's own work.

Christopher D Evans (C) 1979

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