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# DELIVERANCE

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D. WEST

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**D. West**

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## Original Appearances

- “Introduction”: *Deliverance*, 1995
- “Shock of the New”: *Still Life* 3 ed. Simon Ounsley, 1986
- “Artistic Licence”: Albacon Progress Report 3, 1986
- “Quoth the Raven”: *Prevert* 15, ed. John Jarrold, 1986
- “The Real Thing”: as “Introduction” in *Now Read On*, Conspiracy 87, 1987
- “The Usual Routine Brilliance”: *Frontier Crossings*, Conspiracy 87, 1987
- “A Clear Sight”: as untitled in *Frontier Crossings*, Conspiracy 87, 1987
- “Bloody Moon”: *Lip* 2, ed. Hazel Ashworth, 1987
- “The Secret Diary of Nigel E. Hedgehog”: *Lip* 4, ed. Hazel Ashworth, 1988
- “Then and Now”: *Critical Wave* 13, ed. Steve Green and Martin Tudor, 1989
- “The Main Event”: *Conrunner* 13, ed. Ian Sorensen, 1990
- “Postscript”: *Deliverance*, 1995

## Ebook Acknowledgements

Sadly, Don West died in 2015. Many thanks to his partner Hazel Ashworth West and his sons Graham and Mick West for allowing this reissue of *Deliverance*. Thanks too to Ian Sorensen, who as noted above typeset “the

main text” (everything from “Shock of the New” to “The Main Event”, inclusive) for the first edition, and who brilliantly recovered all this material from obsolete Pagemaker files in 2019. The rest – “Acknowledgements”, “Introduction” and “Postscript” – was typed straight on to stencil for the first edition and has been scanned. Apart from occasional fixes of obvious typos and word repetitions (“the the”), and moving the Original Appearances credits from the Contents list to this section for the sake of ebook tidiness, the text is unchanged.

*David Langford, 2019*

deliverance, liberation: release: parturition: the utterance of a judgement or  
authoritative opinion

*Chambers Twentieth Century Dictionary*

# Introduction

It is said that a week in politics is a long time, but in fandom the calendar is an even less certain guide. There may be periods when half a lifetime of fannish activity seems to be crammed into a few days – and there may be other passages which proceed at such a leisurely pace that the exchange of a few opinions or ideas can spread itself over a couple of years. Time in fandom is elastic and variable: intermittently compressing much solid matter into a few hectic hours; more commonly spinning out an insubstantial thread of talk to the most dawdling and tenuous of connecting webs.

So, in this ambiguous context, how does one rate the passing of a decade?

Eleven years ago in 1984 I published *Fanzines In Theory And In Practice*, a collection of work written between 1976 and 1982. Ten years ago, in 1985, I wrote the first of the articles reprinted here. Today, both events seem simultaneously as far away as last century and as recent as last week. This apparent contradiction is confusing, but also obscurely reassuring: change and decay have done their usual work, but enough remains of the earlier flesh (and spirit) to keep the old body identifiable.

I have survived, fandom has survived, and the connection between the two of us goes on.

Indeed, there was never much prospect of that particular union breaking down. After more than thirty years around the scene you might say that fandom is nothing but a confirmed bad habit, but the allegiance goes deeper than that. Earnest persons have often declared that the whole business is merely a substitute for other more worthwhile or desirable activities, but this has always struck me as an entirely self-serving and circular claim. By what values and by whose standards are these alternatives to be judged? One can easily concoct objections to fandom on the grounds that it is trivial and ephemeral, but once one looks higher than the basic efforts needed for physical survival there are few human activities which can be guaranteed as safe from similar criticisms. Life, death, and the bodily wellbeing of one's self and one's close connections are important – the rest is optional. Declarations that fandom is valueless are merely asserting that mass taste should dictate personal taste: most people care nothing about fandom,

therefore everyone should care nothing about fandom. As soon as one rejects the concept of the infallibility of the herd the whole argument collapses. Taste is personal, and where it does no damage to others there is no reason why it should not be free. I have other interests, and most of my time is probably spent on other concerns, but fandom is a significant part of my life. Other people would doubtless say much the same about their own particular passions, interests or obsessions, in many cases supporting their choice with some more or less plausible line of self-justification based on personal or general welfare. Myself, I can't be bothered with such rationalisations. It is very probable that fandom has done nothing at all to improve my health, wealth, or mental, moral or social wellbeing, but so what? I've never been involved for self- or world-improvement; I stay involved because it sure as hell keeps me entertained. As they used to say in the olden days: it suits my humour.

In view of this declaration of undying allegiance some readers may wonder why I often seem to have so much to say about fandom's failings and deficiencies. Purely, as a self-proclaimed enthusiast I should be more forgiving, more tolerant? My reply is that any such forbearance is likely to be the outcome of lack of discrimination rather than tolerance. Alternatively, it is nothing more than cowardice: the potential critic stifling criticism for fear of the reaction. But it is precisely because I *am* a hardcore enthusiast that I reject the slack and easy option of holding back from adverse comment.

Eighteen years ago, in 1977, I came out with a flat statement: Fanzines are Art. I don't know for sure that I was the first person to say it (and I certainly hope I was not the first person to *think* it) but I do have the impression that I was the first person to say it without any kind of hedging or apology. *Fanzines are Art* – and the corollary is that one must set one's critical standards accordingly – *and without mercy*. True, as I also said at the time, many fanzines are Bad Art, but this is no more than another example of Sturgeon's Law. All artforms face the same problem of maintaining (or even establishing) a basic level of excellence, since they are all subject to the usual living processes of growth and decline, youth and senescence. And in all the Arts, stasis is the next thing to death – and orthodoxy is only a hop and a skip ahead. My aim has never been to impose a single incontrovertible point of view upon others – an orthodoxy after my own pattern – but rather to compel them to give some real consideration to the very basis upon which they hold views at all. The true enemy of the critic is not the person who disagrees on

the details of the standards which are to be applied, but the person who seeks to deny the validity of standards in any shape or form – and still seeks to claim the verdict of success.

A little background seems appropriate here. This year of 1995 marks not only my fiftieth birthday but the twentieth anniversary of the introduction into fannish use of the phrase “Kill The Fuckers”, later commonly abbreviated to “KTF” and generally understood to denote the more savage specimens of fanzine criticism. It was in 1975 that I wrote my first set of fanzine reviews (for Brian Parker’s *Parker’s Patch*) and here I quoted the phrase (with approval) from a letter of comment by John Hall (probably found in an early issue of Roy Kettle’s *True Rat*, though I failed to note the reference). The words subsequently became a kind of slogan or rallying cry among members of the Leeds Group and their associates, and from thence spread outward. (I don’t recall many early appearances in print, but word-of-mouth and letters apparently made the KTF tag familiar enough for me to use it in a 1979 cartoon with confidence that it would be understood.) Examples of my own work which I would acknowledge as being in the KTF vein appeared in my fanzine *Daisnoid* (from 1976), in Roy Kettle’s *True Rat* (1976), in Pat and Graham Charnock’s *Wrinkled Shrew* (1977), and in Dave Bridges’s *One Off* (1980), all the main material being later reprinted in *FITAIP*. The other chief practitioners were Alan Dorey and Joseph Nicholas, the latter’s “K is for Knife” column in Ian Maule’s *Nabu* being what most people would probably nominate as archetypal KTF. Among several less-committed others Steve Higgins and Simon Ounsley tried their hands, but they were rather lacking in the authentic vicious abandon, the one being too academic and the other too mild. Such limitations did not apply to Michael Ashley, whose later works were often of such savagery that they inspired a response of appalled delight from some and appalled horror from others, on the one hand winning him a Nova as Best Fanwriter and on the other hand (allegedly) leading to the gafiation of at least one prominent fan.

In more recent times there has seemed to be much less material which could undoubtedly be called KTF, but it is possible that this is as much a matter of the lack of a clear definition as of lack of production. Many people seem to have only the most imprecise and muddled ideas as to what or to whom the term should be applied, and in some circles it has become merely a pejorative label for almost any fanzine critic of the last thirty years, regardless of affiliations. According to the current mythology, KTF fans are

both all-powerful and an insignificant minority, a monstrous conspiracy which daily threatens the destruction of everything good, right, and proper in fandom, but which is also an entirely marginal bunch of weakly splenetic and self-destructive misfits.

As usual, the reality is much less lurid (and less self-contradictory) than the fantasy. There was, and is, no conspiracy, no concerted plan, and no party line. KTF critics have disagreed with each other as often (and as violently) as with anyone else. If they still seem to hang together this is not because they all think exactly alike but because they recognise that they share common ground: that they're all in the same game. "KTF" has never really been more than the label attached to an *attitude*: the affirmation of a determination to take fanzines seriously enough to judge them on the basis of standards which reject the all-too common assumption of innate inferiority. In the end, the KTF message is very simple: *there is no excuse for being bad*. Contrary to the myth, there is no requirement to be nasty at all times; the requirement is simply to be as nasty as is necessary whenever it is necessary. Also, the critical assault should be made openly and publicly, so that the target is denied the opportunity of pretending that the words were never said, a line often followed with more private or less vehement remonstrances.

Yes, it's a ruthless creed, and one which some people reject altogether, but the point of this little historical digression is to emphasise that the KTF attitude to fanzines is one I have had right from the start and have never abandoned. (Before 1975 I behaved myself, but only under protest, so to speak. My early outbreaks of dissidence were largely confined to sercon issues, as exemplified by the sending of letters full of rude remarks about *New Worlds* to Graham Hall.) Today, Michael Ashley is only spasmodically active; Steve Higgins and Alan Dorey appear to have retired into domestic life; Simon Ounsley appears destined to remain as mild as ever (unless his spirit guides suddenly direct him to develop a taste for blood); and Joseph Nicholas has disowned his raffish fannish youth to move on to more weighty political and social concerns. But I, on the other hand, am just as much a thug at heart as I ever was. I do not disown any part of my past. Not all of it was glorious, but I would probably do just the same again. Rereading old diatribes I sometimes have difficulty in remembering exactly what it was that got me so excited, but when I make an effort and reconstruct the circumstances I generally have no problem endorsing my former self. (They think they can get away with shit like this? That no one will say a word against it? Kill The

Fuckers.)

If I do not now regularly lay waste delinquents with fire and sword this is not an indication of a mellower outlook. My disposition has not improved, and the iron certainty of my convictions is no more than slightly rusty. (Remember, these are not ideas I dreamed up last week. They have been a part of my outlook for a long, long time.) The comparative restraint of my recent association with fanzines does owe something to changes in interests and priorities, but mainly it is a matter of economy of effort. I can't be bothered to Kill The Fuckers as often as in the Good Old Days because I've got a limited amount of energy and other more interesting things to spend it on. My policy these days is to give the offenders lots of rope (and a fair trial, of course) before proceeding to the more extreme measures. Maybe they'll get lost, maybe they'll get educated – but either way there's no great hurry.

– But why oh why (as the columnists say) can't I just be *nice*? Why can't I be *constructive*? Why can't I acknowledge that (as the more pious members of the fannish congregation have been saying for years) God (or Ghod) is Love? Why won't I follow (or at least recognise) the Golden Rule? Surely I would not wish other people to do unto me the same awful things I seem so keen to do unto them?

Well, the trouble with the Golden Rule is that “Do unto others as you would they should do unto you” is a much less specific guide to conduct than most people suppose. Like Kant's Moral Law, all it really amounts to is an exhortation to be consistent. Two duellists (or two gangsters) exchanging shots could be said to be fulfilling this requirement: each accepts that the other is doing to him exactly what he would do to the other. One can easily construct systems which are decidedly non-Christian or non-loving but perfectly consistent in that the participants do no more to each other than they accept may be done to themselves. Consistency alone is not much of a moral guide.

It would be a mistake (as it usually is) to make this an all-or-nothing choice, but as a counter-balance there's an old Spanish saying: Take what you want and pay for it. True, this too could be used as justification for practically any kind of behaviour at all. but at least there is no vagueness about where the responsibility lies. If you step out of line, do the wrong thing, and a ton of wet concrete thereafter descends upon your head from a great height it's your own damnfool fault, with no one else to blame. You've taken what you wanted, and you've paid for it. This seems to me to be a fair and

proper arrangement – and a fair and proper summary both of the KTF ethos and my own approach to fanzines and fandom. I do unto others no more than I am willing to have them do unto me – I take what I want and I pay for it. If the consequences are bad, that's my risk and my responsibility. As it happens, I don't like being called names any more than anyone else, but, like the duellist, I accept that if I take a shot at someone else then I can expect them to shoot right back at me. (And there's no reason why either of us should stop until we run out of ammunition, or simply get bored.) Opponents who are, so to speak, bona fide duellists, are rarely great objects of animosity. My real hostility, as mentioned before, is reserved for those who wish to have their cake and eat it, to claim the tribute of good opinion by abolishing any opinions other the favourable, to take what they want but not to pay for it.

– Yes yes (you say), but what has all this moralising (or anti-moralising) got to do with the contents of the present volume. Well, perhaps not a lot, directly, since the articles are reasonably self-explanatory. But I would not wish you to be under any false impression. The most recent piece included here was written in 1990, and it did occur to me that without a re-affirmation of the basics some readers might perhaps assume that the views of five or ten years ago were of merely historical interest and that I was reprinting them largely for their nostalgia or curiosity value, as a sort of sentimental keepsake. This is not the case. Obviously enough, the passage of time has turned some of the events described into old stories, and some of the characters (such as John Jarrold, now a heavyweight publisher) have moved on to other spheres, but much of the material still has a bearing on present (and quite possibly future) concerns. These words were true when written, they are true now, and they deserve to be pondered at leisure. Fanzine articles do not always get the full attention of the audience on their first outing, and these are commended to your notice for a second look. But (once again) do not let the dates lead you into the error of supposing that today I am a changed (or reformed) character. The work I do for fanzines now may indeed take a different form, but I am still very much an unregenerate, elitist, hardcore, hardline fanzine fan. I'm not just taking a trip down Memory Lane here – I'm reminding you of the original manifesto. And it still applies.

As most readers will be aware, my fanzine contributions in recent years have consisted more of artwork than of writing. The original plan was to include some of these drawings here, but doubts soon set in as to the compatibility of such disparate material, and after an extended period of

vacillation it was decided that text alone would be more satisfactory. No distraction from the austere printed word. (The illustrations to “The Secret Diary of Nigel E. Hedgehog” are included since they were produced as an integral part of the original.) Other material selected but later dropped was “Artwork for Fanzines” (*Lip* 3, 1988) and “Video Futures” (*Critical Wave* 17, 1990). The former was judged unsatisfactory for technical reasons but may eventually appear in revised form. The latter was abandoned altogether (at least in its original conception) since the continuous developments in the field of electronic media seemed likely to keep it forever out of date.

– And perhaps I should pause here and give a meaning cough or two just to draw the attention of readers to the fact that these two articles were very virtuously practical, helpful, and even constructive. Indeed, once one gets down to close examination, it turns out that I have produced a quite substantial amount of reasonably amiable and non-condemnatory writing. (Perhaps I should go easy on the assertions of my KTF inclinations.) Some of it, such as “Artistic Licence” and “The Usual Routine Brilliance” might even be described as verging on the laudatory. (By British standards, that is. I believe some Americans were rather doubtful about my piece on Langford, feeling that a Worldcon Guest should be treated with a much more marked and properly slavish respect. Next time I must remember to include instructions on when to laugh.) And after writing “The Secret Diary of Nigel E. Hedgehog” I was decidedly surprised to realise that I had written a piece of fan fiction, a form previously much derided. (The title, of course, is a mild dig at fellow *Lip* contributor Nigel F. Richardson, but the character of the flea-bitten Nigel himself can be taken as autobiographical, if not universal.) Well, this is how fiction *should* be done for a fanzine – as burlesque rather than as a solemn and jejune attempt at imitation of the professional. Similarly, “Quoth the Raven” can be taken as epitomising all my views on the way con reports should be written. (Michael Ashley complained that it was just like the 1979 “Convention Death Wish”, but this was not felt to be much of an objection, since both articles succeed very well on their own terms: they do exactly what they are intended to do.)

“Shock of the New”, “The Real Thing”, “Then and Now” and “The Main Event” all have a good deal to say about the theory, practice and history of fandom and fanzines. (There is some overlapping and repetition, but this may be no bad thing, given the struggle some people seem to undergo in grappling with the most basic propositions.) It would be nice to report that

the later additions to Rob Hansen's fan history project (as reviewed in "Then and Now") showed some improvement, but alas, little has changed. (Even the parts which mentioned my name seemed as dull as ever – an awful indictment in fannish terms.) Still, the Hansen effort does have a certain value simply as a list of fan events in approximate chronological order. What the Worldcon may be good for, on the other hand, no one knows.

As I write, the hour of doom for Glasgow in 1995 is fast approaching, and the majority of readers will doubtless know the outcome before they read these words. I suspect that most of the criticisms in "The Main Event" will be confirmed as amply justified. (Whether anyone will take any notice is, of course, another matter.)

–And so, finally, to the two most autobiographical pieces, "A Clear Sight" and "Bloody Moon", It is curious to reflect that in some ways the former includes the key to a large part of my life in less than one page, whereas the latter's forty pages is not enough to do more than scratch the surface of its subject matter. But despite the fact that "Bloody Moon" is actually too short, the usual parrot-cry was heard: "Needs editing." A peculiar and invincible stupidity seems to descend upon some fans when confronted with "long" articles in fanzines. It's all rather baffling. They read books, don't they? Or do they? One sometimes wonders, considering all the pissing and moaning, all the exclamations of pain and astonishment, whenever anything over six pages appears in print.

Bearing in mind the old adage "Never complain, never explain" I should perhaps say nothing at all, but I cannot resist pointing out that there is nothing in the least accidental about the way in which "Bloody Moon" is written. Often enough I am recording random thoughts, impulsive behaviour, erratic changes of mood and general confusion, but there is nothing random, impulsive, erratic or confused about the way in which the recording is done. Every line, and the whole structure, digressions and all, is entirely and carefully deliberate. Of course, it is still open to readers to find fault, but they may perhaps discover that they gain more from their reading if they approach the work on the basis that there are definite aims and purposes behind every word I write. I mean, gimme a break here you guys – you think I'm just pissing around with *no idea at all*? You want I should send for Bert and Ludwig to straighten out your dumb ideas?

– But that was then and this is now and Fannish Time has run its strange looping course again and there's this Worldcon next week (just like 1987)

and another fucking heatwave right now (just like 1987) and my brain has turned into a particularly small and wizened walnut (just like 1987) and here I am trying to get to the end of another stupid fucking Introduction (just like 1987) and some fucking insect just bit me on the leg (just like 1987) and –

– Argh. And I just wanna lie down. Just like 1987 and every other fucking year I can remember. But when I get up again it will still be all there to do, looming away at me, words to write and pictures to draw... Oh, it's all the same, the same... Is there no end, no end at all?

– Probably not. Or not for a while. And I still don't know whether to feel cheered up by these late-flash oh-so-random thoughts or to bust out crying. (There's just no pleasing some people.) Meanwhile, the rest of you can get on and read the damned book. It's certainly given me enough trouble.

– 19th August 1995

# Shock of the New

Have a fun time over Christmas and the New Year, did you? Lots of mince pies and turkey, paper hats and crackers, booze and general self-indulgence? Fine, fine. Me, I ended up 1985 by separating from my wife and murdering lots of mice.

Well, win some, lose some. I guess it was just tough luck on the mice that I had to move in with them. Fifteen of the little bastards was the final score by way of traps, plus one that fell in the sink and committed suicide by trying to escape down the plughole. No, I don't like the creatures at the best of times. In the past I've been known to beat them bowlegged in single combat (with the coal shovel) and I was all set to do it again. I even considered buying Mal Ashworth's old air pistol and sitting up at night for a few Mafia-style hits. But money was somewhat short and the end of the season came first. (Can't shoot mice unless there's an M in the month. Why, son, everybody knows *that*.)

So there I was, killing mice. And outside it was all dark winter: frost, a little snow, icy rain, mist pressing down on the hills, night falling by mid-afternoon and then the sky an evil sulphurous yellow as the clouds reflected back the sodium lamps. Out the front was a warehouse, out the back a cobbled street and another row of stone terraces. Grim, but kind of quaint. Maybe I could charge American tourists for a look round? They could admire the colourful mould on the walls, the picturesque spilled dustbins and the genuine Olde Englishe Dogshit. Not to mention the Authentic Yorkshire Housewives in their traditional saris and gold-spangled shawls. Meanwhile, I sit by the gas fire and shiver.

This was/is Keighley: a smallish town ten miles north of Bradford, four miles up the road from my old home in Bingley. The last outpost of industrial Yorkshire, really; further on there's only Skipton (which is more of a country market town) and then nothing much at all except scenery and stuff till you reach Carlisle. The Aire and Worth valleys meet here, and the smoke-blackened streets rise steeply to open moorland. Haworth, where the Brontes lived, is just four more miles up the Worth, so you can read *Wuthering Heights* for a full dose of the appropriate atmosphere. I don't suppose the weather has changed. There are more buildings now, of course, but not many

very new, and much of the area still strikes a nineteenth century note: an industrial Arkham, far gone in stony decay. The inhabitants are certainly as rough as they ever were (see Mrs Gaskell's *Life of Charlotte Bronte*), the favourite Saturday night recreations being kicking in shop windows and mass brawling.

Me, I stay home. (Home? 87 Bradford Street, Keighley, West Yorkshire, BD21 3ED) No television, so I sit and look at books. God knows, I've got quite enough of the fucking things. There are boxes lying in every room, piles more scattered about the bed. Trouble is, I don't really want to read any of them. The back kitchen, where I spend most of my time, is dark. Try to draw the curtains and they simply fall down. So I leave them closed and the light on all the time. Huddled over the fire, I feel as though I'm living in a cave. In the perpetual winter twilight nothing much seems very real or important any more. It's like one of those after-the-bomb stories: all the old world has been destroyed and the survivor is simply going through the motions of an existence that is now meaningless. There's no strong emotion, just a general vague querulousness at what seems to be an endless series of petty inconveniences. The cold – cleaning up after those damn mice – propping up the rotting back of the sink unit – the trouble of cooking when I find I've forgotten the plates – stopping up the worst holes in the walls – repairing the broken chair I found in the cellar – all the shifts and substitutes I have to make in place of all the things I left behind. And kind of dull and lonely. I go out a few times with the Ashworths, and over to Leeds to see the usual crew, but my only local social contact is Mr Hussain, who turns up every week without fail to collect the rent.

A pleasant enough guy, Mr Hussain, but definitely not ideologically sound on the mouse question. Mind you, I had an advance warning of the situation when I first came to view the property. We were looking at the smaller of the two bedrooms and he was pointing out the many splendid appointments and fixtures.

“Bed,” said Mr Hussain in his slurred, soft mumble. “Chest of drawers. Heater. Wardrobe.”

At this point an indisputable rodent emerged from behind the wardrobe, and ambled briskly across to the chest of drawers.

Mr Hussain's smile did not waver. “Mouse,” he said, and made a gesture of casual deprecation, as of one who modestly declares: I do not wish to boast, but this house has absolutely *everything*.

Damn right. Those fucking mice must have been sitting around socialising and watching TV with the Hussain family every evening. They had nests in the bottom of the gas cooker and under the sink, and judging by the number of tiny skulls and bones I found in odd corners whole generations must have lived in undisturbed prosperity to reach a peaceful old age.

Well, just one of those cultural differences, I thought. But when I turned back a corner of the kitchen carpet and found yet another corpse there – quite well-preserved but squashed exceedingly thin and flat – I did have the unliberal idea of sticking a stamp on the thing and mailing it to Mr Hussain's new address. Pressed flowers is one thing, but I didn't really fancy starting a collection of pressed mice. After all, I had other things to do.

Like simply surviving. But surviving in these circumstances is something for which I am naturally equipped: being constitutionally indolent I just lie around the place till things get better. I never worry much about the indefinite; only appointments get on my nerves. After all, sooner or later everything either improves or (in the words of William Burroughs) comes to some kinda awful climax.

So the time passed and I kept on being alive and even began to take a faint, wan interest in such inconsequential matters as Simon Ounsley's new fanzine. Couple of conventions coming up too.... But what about all those sodding articles I was supposed to be writing?

Ah. Yes. Well.

Easy to take care of the Fan History thing. (Not just an article, actually, but a whole bloody book.) Announce it cancelled forthwith – nervous collapse of author due to domestic misfortune. (Sod off, old farts.) but what about the Big One – the latest mighty thirty-pager revealing the Cosmic truth about absolutely everything? Well, what about it? (Fucking fan articles. Who needs this shit?) Got enough on my mind already, mumble mumble. Why, there's even yet another Gollancz/Sunday Times SF Competition, just like one that got me sneaked into print ten years ago. (Fucking Science Fiction. Who needs this shit?) Really ought to do something about that.

But better still to fall back on standard Avoidance Technique: if threatened with being forced to *do* something, discover an alternative which obviously is so much more important that it has to take over the top spot on the list. This gives one a fresh start on a whole new cycle of procrastination. (Never put off till tomorrow what can be put off till next week.) It was really a shame I didn't buy that air pistol: I could have been thinking about doing

the fannish equivalent of George Orwell's classic "Shooting An Elephant". Heavy literary stuff to wow the punters. Still, there must be plenty of other subjects.... Like, this thing about electricity....

As you may gather, I was finding concentration rather difficult. These days just about everybody seems to have split up with a partner at least once, but for me the whole business was strange territory. I couldn't settle. There were too many things to think of – or *not* to think of – and my mind kept sliding away at odd tangents. And lateral thinking has never been too difficult for me, the real problem being to keep myself on a straight line for more than five minutes at a time. So I was making all kinds of weird connections. Like electricity....

Yes. Well, Electricity is one of those things I've been intending to check up on for years. I mean, how does the stuff actually *work*? I must confess that I've always visualised it as a coldly glowing bluish liquid – a sort of gaseous mercury which somehow manages to treat apparently solid wires as small-bore tubes, and zips up and down like a high-pressure water jet. You wouldn't think such a thing could be possible, would you? But it's really impressive the way you can press a switch and the light goes on *immediately*. Fucking incredible. It *is* possible.

"Shit," I mutter to myself. "You better watch your step here, boy. This Electricity is *fast*."

So I'm always very careful when changing plugs and so on. I know that, unless I follow the prescribed rituals, that evil blue fluid is going to come leaping out and shoot right up my marrowbone. Obey the Electric Law, or the Electricity demon will get you.

Seems to work OK. After all, it's not strictly necessary to know *how* a thing works provided one can accurately predict the end result. In describing the intermediate stages metaphor will do just as well as fact.

"Look," says the Acolyte, "the Great God Wug says that Man Was Not Meant to Fly. Anybody who tries it will be severely punished by the Wrath of Wug."

"Rubbish," says the Scientific Person. "It's all due to the Law of Gravity. Anybody who tries to fly will descend to earth at sixteen feet per second." (Or whatever. Having just invented Wug I know more about Him than about Gravity.)

They both look up at this high building, on which stands an *Interzone* editor. He is distractedly shredding a huge pile of manuscript and dribbling

the pieces into the breeze.

The Scientific Person shakes his head. “Third Charles Stross story this week” he says. “You got to hand it to the kid, he’s a trier.”

“I can fly! I can fly!” shrieks the *Interzone* editor. He jumps. Naturally, he goes splat. (Being an *Interzone* editor demands selfless dedication, iron nerves and rugged mental discipline. There is a high wastage rate. The awful truth is that There Are Some Things Man Was Not Meant To Read. *Interzone* editors have to live with this terrible knowledge *every issue*.)

“Wrath of Wug,” says the Acolyte rather absently. He has been watching a distant airliner. Contrary to Wug? Well there are always exceptions.... No problem for an experienced fan writer....

“Law of Gravity,” says the Scientific Person.

Each smiles pityingly on the other. “This proves it,” they say in chorus, and go their separate ways.

So there you are, two very different points of view, but identical in terms of accurately predicting actual consequences. And it doesn’t much matter to the *Interzone* editor which one is “true” – either way, he’s still as flat as the mouse under my carpet.

Just the same....

Just the same, there’s no denying that it would be nice to *know*. Fables that fit can be useful – since while any one explanation is dispensable, to have *some* explanation is indispensable – but it would still be preferable to have a few hard and irreducible *facts*. After all, real knowledge is not so much a matter of large sweeping statements (which by explaining everything in general are too loose to explain anything in particular) but of narrowly focused *limited* classifications. Yes....

Besides, by this time the feeling of The Pointlessness Of It All is wearing off. A couple of weeks after Christmas I get an urgent phone call from Ann to come back to Bingley and unblock the toilet. Gosh – I am *needed*. Yes, even a mere coarse insensitive male with dubious habits and a list of character defects as long as your arm can still contribute something to the realisation of the Cosmic Plan. (Anatomy is destiny, as some famous old fart used to say, and being coarse and insensitive certainly helps if it is your destiny to go diving down U-bends.) I try not to laugh too much. Hah! Stupid Universe – think you can keep *me* down for long? With an insouciant sneer upon my lips I duly unblock the toilet, pass a few pleasant remarks on what a shame it is that the credibility of female independence has now been set back

two million years or so, and return to Keighley much cheered and refreshed.

(I suppose it's not so surprising we broke up. I must be a fairly aggravating person at times.)

Anyway, I check up on Electricity with a book from the library. It goes something like this: *Volts* measure the strength, while *Amperes* represent the quantity and *Watts* the consumption, and *Ohms* are a measure of resistance – which is to say, how easily it all gets up the pipe.

And at this point it comes to me – in a blinding flash, naturally – that this is just yet another fannish analogy.

The Electric fluid is, of course, the vital ingredient *booze*, with voltage representing strength of same. This goes neatly with the fact that whereas Britain operates on 240 volts the poor benighted foreigners struggle along on a feeble 110, less than half. Hardly surprising they never amount to much. Likewise, when one thinks in terms of amps and watts (Wattage= volts x amps) certain disparities become graphically obvious. 15 amps of 240 volt beer will certainly get you more lit up than half an amp of a one volt Coca Cola. And is it any accident that some fans shine at 150 watts while others merely give off the weak flicker of a dying bicycle lamp? Science has the answers.

Then there's Ohms: it doesn't do to burn out your system by shooting too heavy a load of volts and amps straight through, so one needs a certain measure of resistance. Persons with a low (or even 0) Ohm rating are apt to be summarily dismissed by the more coarse and macho high-voltage fans "Fucking wimp can't take his fucking liquor – must be some kinda fucking homo."

Yes, it all fits. Several fans are known to blow their fuses frequently, some get their wires crossed, and one or two should have been disconnected years ago. Furthermore, the question of why American women keep coming over here and stealing all our men is solved at last. Apparently, too many American male fans have become hopelessly addicted to cheap low-voltage thrills – stick it in the light socket and turn on the juice for an instant buzz. After a few jolts they are hooked, and enter the terrible and degrading downward spiral of GEIS (Gross Electrical Instant Stimulation). Many lose the use of their limbs and have difficulty walking more than a few yards, others develop speech difficulties, become anti-social, or display obvious signs of brain damage. (The real burnt-out degenerates can be recognised at conventions by the packs of batteries swinging from their belts. Next time

you see someone wearing a so-called personal stereo, be careful to check where those wires go.)

In virile 240 volt Britain, however, sheer survival demands that we manly hunks practice strict Clean Living and Save Ourselves till the Right Connection comes along.

Socket to me, baby....

Well, it's a theory. Well, all right, it's *another* theory and I'm up to the fucking armpits with theories already: in fact, I might just as well stop pissing about, get it over with, and unload the gist (at least) of the latest West Unified Field Theory Of Fandom. The world is about due for other one anyway, like it or not. Clears out the brain.

As is usual in my case, the thing drifted together from a number of different directions. The first inspiration came from the now well-known "Being Different" by Ann Warren (now Ann Hammill – it's getting as bad as these damn fanzines that change titles every issue). This, as you may recall, was a (largely autobiographical) development of the idea that the essential characteristic of fans is their *differentness*, this usually being defined chiefly in terms of rejection of social rituals, somewhat solitary habits, reluctance to accept received ideas, tendency to mild eccentricity, and chewing candles. (No, sorry, that came later.)

Ah, the wacky, zany, wonderful world of fandom, as Nigel (Sarcastic Sod) Richardson likes to say. Indeed, none of this was really particularly new, being essentially a (more literate than usual) recasting of the old Fans-are-Slans routine – outsider-mutant-unappreciated-secret-genius lives obscurely in the interstices of a basically hostile society. (It is a proud and lonely thing to be a fan. Chiefly on account of I have all these spots and nobody ever says a bloody word to me. But one day –) Considered as the work of a professional psychologist, the reasoning was distinctly slack: as Malcolm Edwards pointed out, all Hammill had really done was take some of the more acceptable traits she found in herself and her friends and declare them to be those of fandom in general.

Sloppy reasoning indeed. This was the equivalent of saying: I like my cat; my cat is ginger; therefore all cats are ginger. (And if it's not ginger it's not a cat, and I probably don't like it anyway.) Credibility was also not much aided by the general air of Gosh-aren't-we-wonderful-for-being-so-different that hung over the next issue of the Hammill fanzine, which detailed various Hammill family eccentricities and also the unusual diet of Margaret Welbank.

The self-congratulation reached its climax with the sublime compliment paid by the editor to her friend. On meeting Margaret Welbank a year or two ago at an Eastercon I had assumed that her somewhat laboured vocal delivery was either just one of those personal quirks (like a slight stammer) or perhaps a legacy of the kind of affliction people tend to pick up at Cambridge. But no – according to Hammill, this hesitance is explained by the fact that whereas lesser people have Little Thoughts which they speak quickly, Margaret has Big Thoughts which she speaks slowly.

After this, I'm rather surprised not to hear that Margaret Welbank has started biting lumps out of carpets, never mind chewing a few candles.

Anyway, in the meantime I was doing some mumbling and chewing of my own, turning over in my mind both Hammill's first thoughts and Malcolm Edwards's suggested alternative. This latter had dropped psychology in favour of anthropology, and sought to describe fandom in terms of life in a Village, said Village being a place where the neighbours all know one another, shared the social life, worked for the local (SF) industry and so on and so forth. (Look, I'm doing all this from memory, most of my fanzines being still in Bingley.) Unfortunately, since fans do *not* all live in one place the analogy needed rather a lot of stretching to fit the reality. An attempt to do this was made by declaring the Village to be simultaneously a "Global Village" (as from Marshall McLuhan) but since the two terms refer to completely different things this seemed too large an internal contradiction to be swallowed. Like my own "Fandom as Electricity" burlesque of a couple of pages ago, this was really more of an exercise in ingenuity than a theory to be taken very seriously in itself.

Still, the mention of the "Global Village" was interesting. The essential difference between an ordinary village and the "Global Village" is that, in the former, your neighbours are, so to speak, a fixed fact of life: you do not have any great choice in the matter of who or what they are. In the case of the "Global Village", however, the whole world is your neighbour (theoretically) and your channels of communication can be entirely self-chosen: you can avoid what you don't like, and seek out what you do. Thus the Edwards analogy was accurate on at least one point: fandom is a "Global Village" in the sense of consisting of widely scattered individuals with a certain common cultural basis who communicate and associate with each other on purely voluntary terms.

An insight – but a rather obvious insight. On the other hand, it certainly

knocked out anthropology as the most appropriate discipline for the study of fandom. The main concern of anthropology, after all, is with the investigation of social and cultural frameworks which, as far as the individual is concerned, are not chosen but given. One might be born into a particular race, tribe, clan or family, but one had to *choose* to be a fan. In fact, this is virtually one of the first principles: a fan is someone who declares himself to be a fan or who knowingly behaves in such a way that he will be recognised as a fan by others.

So what else could be put in the definition? Hammill's attempt to define fans in terms of psychological (or social) profile was always hopeless. A look at the real evidence (in the shape of the fans themselves) would come up with an exception to every projected rule in two minutes. Fans are extrovert, introvert, fat, thin, clever, stupid, talented, dull, educated, barely literate, shy, sociable, right-wing, left-wing, authoritarian, liberal, neurotic, well-balanced and so on and so on and so on. In the end, the real question – the only real *answerable* question – has to be not *who* fans are, but *what* they are: a definition neither psychological nor anthropological but sociological. In other words, what is the functional role of fandom in society today? (Discuss in not less than fifteen pages. Use both sides of your brain.)

And at this point I was provided with the final ingredient by our very own Michael Ashley.

Every few years in fandom there seems to be a sort of tacit agreement that some particular person should become the common butt and target: if you can't think of anything better to do, make a rude joke about X. In the seventies it was Ian Williams; later, Joseph Nicholas came into his own. Very little has been heard from Ian Williams for a long time and these days Joseph confines his famous sentences to the occasional brief rant about the lickspittle running dogs of the fascist Thatcherite Junta (otherwise known as The Fucking Tories or The Friends Of Ken Lake). The Number One man to hit over the head right now is Michael Ashley. Whenever he starts into his unemployed-Rock-existentialist-dying-of-boredom routine (like a particularly morose Nigel Richardson with gout) I quite approve of fetching him a whack or two, but even so, a few hard-to-please miserable bastards are always handy to have around (just to keep everyone on their toes) and he does come up with an interesting piece of writing once in a while.

The one that got me going was a piece in Pam Wells's *Nutz* entitled (approximately) "My Date with a Bisexual Hairdresser from Surbiton". (Or

maybe it was Croydon. Anyway, I ought to point out that Ashley himself is *not* keen on this kind of carry-on.) The title was a fair summary of the contents. A real nostalgia trip, it was. One moment here, next wafted back to those golden days when I too used to get propositioned by strange men when waiting for the bus or otherwise innocently engaged. Ah, youth, youth....

(Long pause while I struggle to think up a joke involving Walt Willis, a madeleine, and Proust. Preferably something fairly pointed, on account of a certain restiveness caused by Willis writing what looks like exactly the same super-bland goshwow letter of comment to just about every damn fanzine in sight. Maybe a headline? PROUST BITES MADELEINE – WILLIS LASHES OUT WITH LOC. Oh, to hell with it. (Fucking culture. Who needs this shit?) Consider it this issue's Competition. Answers on a postcard to the BSFA, W. Willis, or M. Proust.)

Anyway, the chief thing to come out this trip down memory lane (a phrase which probably looks a lot better in French – that Marcel, he certainly knew how to con the critics) was a reminder of just how *strange* the whole business was. I mean, there you are on an ordinary day in an ordinary street, thinking of nothing very special, and all of a sudden you're confronted with the explicit revelation that the world is not what it seems. Under the surface – the very ordinary surface – all kinds of decidedly extraordinary things are going on.

It threw me every time. It was as though I'd been told the Martians had landed and suddenly knew it was true. This is not fear, or repugnance, or anything like that – more confusion and a sort of amazement. I never quite got used to it. (And then, of course, it stopped happening. My appeal these days is a bit too subtle to be spotted in less than a whole weekend. Win some, lose some.)

I suppose that what I experienced was the thing commonly known as Sense Of Wonder: that livening up of the organs of awe and excitement that we're supposed to feel with SF. Personally, I have to say that it is a long time since I had much from that quarter: the only really powerful jolts I've been given in the last twenty years have come from either sex of one sort or another, or fairly mundane stuff like scenery or brand-new babies. SF itself has a lousy record.

Still, I know it then I see it and this reminder was enough to make the connection. So here you are: SF fandom is a socially deviant group and the other most similar socially deviant group is that of homosexuals. (Why son,

everybody knows *that*.)

This is the Sociological Theory. “Deviant” is a much used sociological concept which refers not just to sexual variations but to a whole range of activities and persons, some of them at odds with the Law and some of them merely subject to varying degrees of social disapproval. In fact, the best short definition is probably “someone who causes trouble by not fitting in”. The “trouble” can range from mild embarrassment to violent conflict, and the “not fitting in” may be either inadvertent or intentional. And it’s all strictly relative: the “deviant” of one society may be a perfectly normal and respectable individual in some other society. This means that “deviance” is one of those labels which contains a circular and self-fulfilling prophecy: deviants are deviants because they are deviants. In other words, “deviance” has no real existence except in the terms created for it by society. It is as artificial as snobbery and as unreasoning as racism.

(A good clear account of all this can be found in *Stigma* by Erving Goffman, available in Penguin. Goffman himself avoids using the “deviant” tag, since as he dryly observes: “Just as there are iatrogenic disorders caused by the work that physicians do (which then gives them more work to do), so there are categories of persons who are created by students of society and then studied by them.” Ah, just like fanzine reviewing....)

The obvious two main categories of deviants are the intentional and the unintentional. Persons who are “disqualified from full social acceptance” (in Goffman’s phrase) by reason of some bodily variation (physical or mental handicap, racial identity) or inadvertent position (extreme poverty, illegitimacy) are unintentional deviants, persons who choose to behave in ways not socially approved are intentional deviants. However, the line between “unintentional” and “intentional” is often not very clear: quite apart from disclaimers of responsibility (“I was born this way” or “Society is to blame”) most “intentional” deviants, being well aware of society’s disapproval, make efforts to conceal (if not abolish) the visible signs of their deviance. They may have chosen their *actions* (as criminals, as homosexuals, as fans, even) but most have not chosen their *label* and they are not happy about the stigma. Two courses are possible: to conceal their deviance and attempt to pass as “normal” or to admit the condition but attempt to argue that it *is* normal.

Only a minority follow the active crusading route. Most deviants simply accept that they already fall into one of two further sub-divisions the

“discredited” and the “discreditable” (meaning, respectively, persons already identified as deviants and persons *at risk* of being identified as deviants). The best they can do is to keep themselves inconspicuous or invisible.

This is the position of most homosexuals. The notion that these days homosexuals are everywhere tolerated and accepted is a liberal fantasy. Outside certain enclaves their social position is always somewhat precarious: they may be accepted or ignored – or violently rejected. (This is not really surprising. Homosexuality only became legal in 1967, and at least ten more years went past before the general public had registered so much as this basic fact.)

Discretion being the less-wearing alternative to a semi-permanent state of militant martyrdom most homosexuals are “discredited” some of the time, but “discreditable” most of the time. That is, some of the time their deviance is known, but most of the time they try to keep fairly quiet about it.

My, my, just like the fans.... Well, who among us has never experienced a certain discomfort or embarrassment at being identified as *one of them* – the ray-guns and flying saucer people? Who has not nervously attempted to explain that SF (or fandom) is not *really* like that, and it may *look* a bit silly, but in fact it’s perfectly respectable, awfully serious babble babble babble.... ? And who, learning discretion, has not simply evaded the whole dirty issue and kept quiet about all our weirdo deviant tastes and activities?

(And does anyone out there really and truly think that SF is fully respectable and accepted? That being a fan is perfectly normal *in the eyes of others*?)

The ostensible subject-matter of fandom is SF, and the ostensible subject-matter of homosexuals is sex, but members of each group are also drawn together by another, simpler reason: the sheer relief of being with people to whom it is not necessary to explain. This is the great bond: all deviants together. The common link between deviants is not so much a matter of Being Different, more just of Being There. Individually, deviants may share few recognisable characteristics with each other, but they all share the same *situation*. Deviance is a *place*, not a condition.

There is no fannish “type”; there is no homosexual “type”. Like fans, homosexuals come in every variety. Also, like most fans, most homosexuals are part-timers: this is *part* of their lives, not the whole, and it may be kept completely separate. (SENSATION – MP REVEALED AS FAN) And, like some homosexuals, some fans are rather ashamed of what they do.... (If only

I could break the habit.... maybe if I got married?.... Dear Marje Proops, I have this uncontrollable urge to go to conventions and dress up in funny clothes....)

By the way, just for the benefit of people who like leaping to the wrong conclusions, I must point out that I am not suggesting that all fans *are* homosexuals. On the other hand, though I'm never likely to have the statistics to prove it, I would guess that fans are somewhat more *likely* to be homosexual, and that the percentage of homosexuals in fandom is therefore higher than in the general population. The main reasoning behind this is that forms of deviance tend to go together: if you have one social black mark already then another may not make much difference. (Anxious parents should note that this cuts both ways, so if they have any homosexual kids they can start worrying about them turning into fans.)

Of course, the two scenes are not identical. (For one thing the disparity in numbers is too great; at the most there are no more than a few thousand fans in Britain, whereas there are at least a million homosexuals.) Still, you might like to try working out all the correspondences: the uneasy attempts at self-justification, the co-opting of famous names from the past (Leonardo da Vinci was the first Gay SF illustrator), the internal divisions (serconist Gay Rights activists sneering at frivolous old fannish queens), the delusions of superiority (we are more intelligent/artistic/sensitive/aware), the way a few "acceptable" faces become media-tokens (OK boys – wheel in Arthur C. Clarke), the cliquishness, the self-absorption, the way the scene shades off from the brazen hardcore to the closet SF reader....

And the basic impulse towards self-destruction.

For the essence of the deviant situation is that the deviant individual is placed in a cruel and impossible position. So long as he remains deviant he also remains, by definition, *defective*. Therefore he cannot ever be a complete success in the non-deviant world ("quite good – for woman/black/ etc") but also – the worst of it – he cannot ever be a complete success *as* a deviant, since most of his fellow deviants see "success" only in terms of acceptance in the non-deviant world.

The SF writer cannot have a real success outside SF itself (because SF is disqualified from full acceptance in non-SF literature) but a success gained within the SF field is valueless (because real success means being accepted on the terms of non-SF literature).

(The bitter saying: If it's good it can't be SF, and if it's SF it can't be

good, is a perfect summary of the deviant dilemma.)

The fan writer.... Well you get the idea. To succeed the deviant must suppress or conceal his deviance and abandon his own identity, to do the thing well he must stop doing it at all. The dream of an SF novel which is also Great Literature is like the dream some homosexuals have of a partner who is perfectly heterosexual: the values involved are mutually exclusive.

(Pause while Chris Priest tears up his copy of *The Graudian*. “But they told me it was Literature!” he screams. Well.... not bad... for an SF novel....)

And us poor fans – scum of the literary earth – what do we do? Well, there’s really only one answer: if you’re going to be a deviant then go ahead and *be* one – all the way. Less of this cringing Uncle Tom routine – be shameless, do what you feel like doing, and stop hankering after some other stupid value-system. Anybody out there doesn’t like it – that’s *their* fucking problem. Come on, come out.

Only *do* bear in mind that fans are not “different”, not “special”, not geniuses, not anything in particular. Except fans. And deviants.

And *do* bear in mind that as far as the rest of the world is concerned being a fan means being defective. It explains a lot.

One fan who certainly needed a lot of explaining was Richard Bergeron. (No, no, wait – there’s a moral in this.) He it was, you may remember, who suddenly went berserk and started accusing Avedon Carol (at that time US TAFF Administrator) of fixing TAFF, forging votes, fucking goats, and generally conspiring to bring about the downfall of civilisation as we know it. Bergeron managed to cause an immense and protracted (and very tedious) row mainly because, in the beginning, nobody could figure out *why* he was being so extremely nasty. There being no obvious reason, the intuitive argument went that there must be something in the guy’s charges, or why else would he be so excited?

In fact there are at least two possible explanations for Bergeron’s behaviour, and – singly or together – they are interesting as illustrations of the fan/homosexual/deviant thesis.

Firstly, there is the theory that Bergeron is, in the local phrase, as bent as a nine-bob note, but that being one of those homosexuals who likes to keep it quiet (the “discreditable”) he was upset by Avedon Carol’s casual reference to his Puerto Rican friend Cesar Ignacio Ramos (“I don’t know whether or not Cesar is gay....”) and fandom’s probable interpretation. The rest was simply a rather spiteful revenge.

However, nobody *knows* that Bergeron is homosexual – this is just a widespread assumption based on his avoidance of face-to-face contact with other fans and a few rather ambiguous pointers. The assumption is not too extravagant, and the theory fits the facts, but I think it just as likely that Bergeron was enraged not so much by the implications of the remark as by its *casualness*. (“Thirty years a Secret Master, man and boy, and this rotten bitch doesn’t even seem to think it’s *important* whether or not I’m a fucking queer!”.) Add to this the fact that Bergeron’s Highly Influential opinions on the TAFF election didn’t seem to have had the slightest effect on the result (and that Ted White had made some rather tactless remarks about said influence) and it becomes less surprising that he reached for the hatchet. With his self-image at stake he needed to reassert his own significance even at the cost of simultaneously destroying its value in the eyes of others.

The interesting point here is how readily interchangeable the two explanations are – and how readily interchangeable are the two roles of fan and homosexual. The role-playing, the ambivalence, the simultaneous pride and self-contempt, the life compartmentalised into public and secret, the importance of self-image co-existing with the urge to self-destruct, the desire for acceptance alongside the revenge for rejection.... all are common to both. Each could be the other. Each *is* the other. For all I know, Bergeron may be entirely and perfectly heterosexual, but his behaviour in the TAFF affair was real screaming-queen-bitch stuff – and just what you’d expect from a really *fannish* fan....

(Anyway, even if he *is* a totally unscrupulous and completely untrustworthy evil old queer, I can’t bring myself to dislike him with any great force. In fact, despite strong disapproval of his behaviour I keep catching myself experiencing odd twinges of fondness for the guy. Perhaps this is because all he did, in the end, was push fannish game-playing to its slightly sinister but absurd logical conclusions. All very reprehensible, but it had a certain mad style. My real contempt is reserved for his parasitical followers: people like Dave Locke and Jackie Causgrove, a pair of cowards and hypocrites who have made a special study of the Disownable Smear (“But we didn’t actually *say* that the signature was a forgery....”) and who jumped on Bergeron’s cynical bandwagon of High Principle and Righteousness solely in order to pay off old scores and inflate their own flabby self-consequence. Those two have no style at all.)

But meanwhile – just by way of Compare & Contrast – what about

someone completely different, the one and only Dave Bridges? Or is it someone completely deviant? Or completely daft? A bit of all three, one would have said two or three years ago, but things have changed. For the worse.

Much of Bridges's output in the last couple of years has gone to apas (only a few of which I've seen) but he's also put out a (rather erratic) series of multi-part general-circulation fanzines. (Sometimes you get them this year, and sometimes you *may* get them next year.) The latest of these turned up last month, a massive two-part doorstopper with a title I've forgotten.

And that's the trouble. I forgot almost everything about the thing virtually as soon as I'd read it, except a general impression. The general impression was that it was rubbish.

Bridges is such an amiable guy that one always wishes to say something nice about him and his work. After all, he is a person completely devoid of conscious malice. Unfortunately, he now seems to be damn near devoid of conscious *anything*. He's regressed to the point from which most writers start: great unedited lumps of self-absorbed stream-of-consciousness. He has a few stylistic mannerisms left, but they're all bad ones – not bad in themselves but bad because they've become kneejerk reflexes: misapplied, scattershot, arbitrary and thoughtless. I was reminded – not so much on style alone as on general attitude and approach – of the work of Bill Bowers, editor of the US fanzine *Outworlds*. Bowers.... is the guy who is really.... nuts on.... dots. He also likes.... short sentences.

And paragraphs....

For....

Dramatic effect....

(Apparently Bowers does all his typing in front of a set of mirrors. With a word processor, any pause longer than four seconds means his dots print automatically, giving him time to perfect a new pose meanwhile. It's unlikely he'll ever change his habits since he now has permanent brain damage from walking into things while trying to admire his own profile. Still, in the USA he is a real Big Name Fan. Win some, lose some.)

The Bridges version of the dot-dot spurious-melodrama routine is not quite so pronounced – in fact I probably do more in that line myself – but he does have patches in which he grievously overplays the short sentences and paragraphs. He also tends to fall into a heavily laboured use of Very Simple Words such as might be considered appropriate for conversation with a

bashful three-year-old. The result is that in places he sounds like some senile retard with a terminal case of the Cutes talking to his teddy bear. Unless you happen to be a member of the Soft Toy apa, with a brain which has turned into an extremely small ball of fluff, this is not really very attractive.

OK, so all these techniques have been used by other people (myself included) quite often fairly successfully. But only in moderation, only *in moderation* and only with a bit of thought behind them. Ernest Hemingway went for the simple prose, so did Kurt Vonnegut; so does famous TAFF Candidate Simon Ounsley (OFFICIAL PLUG). But the point is, all of these people at least *attempted* to use some craft in the way they went about things. Bridges, on the other hand, seems to have abandoned craft altogether, and to be approaching the typewriter in a spirit of pure fatalism: if it comes, it comes, and if not, it's nothing to do with me. I presume he was ready to take the credit, so he'll have to be ready to take the other thing: the current Bridges output is, considered as prose, fucking *awful*.

(Pause for a moment. Yes, all right I quite agree that I am well known to pull all the same stunts as Bridges, I just think I do it better – and I think I do it better solely because I *work* at it. And perhaps the examples of writers given above are not the best in the world. Hemingway (who, for somebody who fancied himself a tough guy, was really a bit of a wanker; another instance of the sin of Conanism) often teeters on the edge of self parody, as does Vonnegut at times. As for Ounsley.... (see those dots?) well, since I seem to be doing most of the typing here I was thinking of slipping in this little article: 101 Confused Things To Do To Yourself With A Carrot While Still Sick. But maybe I won't be able to reproduce all those subtle nuances. Tough business, writing. All the more reason to put some thought and effort into it.)

Bridges ought to realise that the apparent artlessness of “informal” writing is all on the surface: underneath lies a firmly disciplined framework of artifice. Defective technique can make even the extraordinary seem boring. It's not much use having something to say if no one can reach it under the mountain of useless verbiage.

But *has* Bridges got anything to say? I'm beginning to doubt it. He seems to have fallen victim to the whole “Being Different” syndrome in its most virulent form: the belief that being a wacky, zany, wonderful person is enough in itself to take care of all these minor artistic problems. Unfortunately, the hard truth is that it takes more than an erratic lifestyle to

deliver the goods. I wish he'd wise up a little and realise that an *explanation* is by no means the same thing as an *excuse*. His head may well be in a bit of a mess as he often explains, but this is wearing rather thin as an excuse for his apparent failure to *try* to straighten out his thinking. Poncing around uttering little cries of wonder at his own mental muddle and incompetence is not the answer.

A bit callous, eh? Well, having done the navel-watching bit myself I know that after a certain point it becomes much more healthy to go watch TV or wash the dishes. Introspection too easily turns into self-fixation and those who are not ruthless with themselves tend to be ruthless with other people – all very innocently, of course, but the people concerned may well feel that the effects are just the same as they would have been with any old unaware, insensitive selfish bastard. And for a guy with such a sweet nature and so much childlike innocence Bridges does seem to be leaving a few bodies behind him.

Anyhow, speaking as a mere reader, I would rather like to see something a bit more *readable* coming from the lad. At the moment it's strictly monkeys-and-typewriters: we *may* get the Complete Works of Shakespeare but what we usually get is California Crap in a Yorkshire edition – Sheffield Shit. This isn't doing anything for us, and I rather doubt it's doing very much for *him*.

Maybe the real nature of Bridges's problems-with-his-head (and hence his writing) showed up in a discussion we had a couple of years ago. He was arguing (on a point of principle) that since sex between adults and children was really just a matter of mutual pleasure-giving there was no proper reason why paedophiles "should be so terribly persecuted". My reply was simple enough: if I came across any instances of paedophile practices myself I would probably bash first and be sympathetic some other time, because in *this* world sex with children is not quite so harmless as it might be in some other, hypothetical, ideal world.

Yes, said Bridges, but it *ought* to be harmless....

Well maybe, but it's not and that's the end of it. Until it *is* harmless, *somebody else* suffers for *your* principles. Better to live in the real world.

Still, to be fair, Bridges is by no means the only fan with a tendency to confuse hypothetical or ideal worlds with the tatty old real thing. Plenty of people live their whole lives showing little or no ability to distinguish between what *is* true and what *ought* to be true (by whichever standard they

happen to favour). The trouble with this is that sooner or later reality and fantasy tend to collide, sometimes with rather painful results.

Again, better to live in the real world. For one thing, it's a damn sight more *efficient*. The great defect of knowledge which is only ideally or metaphorically true (like electricity as a fluid, gravity as wrath of Wug, or the Class Struggle) is that it can't be extended without collapsing into ridiculous errors. Literal truth is always preferable if you want to avoid doing daft things like buying (literal) water taps to run your (metaphorical) Electric fluid.

Similarly, if you're a fan it *does* help to be able to distinguish between facts and ideals and between the literal and the metaphorical. Like, for instance, it's a fact that though I've been shedding blood (metaphorically) all over the place in this article none of my victims has suffered any (literal) physical harm (unless Good Queen Bergeron has flown into another royal passion and gnawed off some more of his own toes). In the (ideal) world of some fans, such (metaphorical) bloodshed simply never happens, since All Fans Love One Another. However, when despite the ideal it *does* happen (and these alternate universes have a curious trick of being able to reinstate previously ignored realities whenever it suits them) it's as terrible a thing as if all those poor people really *were* torn limb from limb (literally). The ideal, the literal, and the metaphorical finally get so mixed up that the result is a kind of magical thinking: stick critical (metaphorical) pins in X's image (fanzine) and X, being wounded (metaphorically) will surely sicken and die. And if he doesn't die – well everybody will still carry on as if he had....

(Oh boy. Goshwow. These fans may be a little confused, but they certainly know how to have fun.)

Maybe it was this sort of little local difficulty with the brain cells that got into Patrick Neilsen Hayden when he wrote his piece for John Jarrold's *Prevert*. I suppose we should be grateful to PNH for his discovery that American fandom is not very inspiring and British fandom is "where it's all at", but since this has been true for at least the last ten years the compliment falls rather flat. (It's like announcing that Ted White has this marked tendency to write whole articles – or what seem like whole articles – on topics like How I Crossed the Road, or How I Opened The Door, or (an old favourite) How I Mailed My Fanzines. Yes, yes, we *know* that. Tell us something new.) After this momentous discovery of Britain comes the Big Proposal: since American fandom is now hopelessly fragmented and fairly

boring (or fairly fragmented and hopelessly boring) the few enlightened US fans should get together with British fandom and create a new International Golden Age. Hands Across the Galaxy. Glory, glory. (I forget whether Legendary Irish Fandom was mentioned. It usually is.)

Well, well. And a fine idea it is, to be sure. Or might be, if it didn't seem a bit perverse to moan on about geographical separation and fragmentation and propose to cure these ills by uniting with fans who, if not fragmented, are certainly geographically separated, and don't necessarily have any more in common with the fannish emigrants than the folks back in the USA. PNH seems to be labouring under a certain delusion here, namely that the closing of ranks during the idiotic TAFF business signified some sort of blood-pact of eternal peace, friendship and mutual admiration between British and (his) American fandom.

Not so. The TAFF war *did* have its instructive moments. It indicated, for instance, that Avedon Carol should not spend too much time planning a career in politics, that Ted White should be physically restrained from writing 15 page letters while bombed out of his skull on dope, that rich brown (rich brown *what?* I always ask myself) should be physically restrained from writing anything at any time, that Eric Mayer is the kind of lawyer who would get his clients the death penalty for a parking ticket, that Marty Cantor (who? what? eh?) is a donkey, that Dave Locke (a Conanist if ever there was one – Meanest Dude Wimp In Town) and Jackie (the Living Prune) Causgrove probably have sex by taking it in turns to dress up as a Supreme Court Judge and sentence the other one to Cruel and Unusual Punishments on charges of Suspicion of Conspiracy to Fail to Return a Library Book On Time (what fun, and afterwards you feel so *good*) and that Richard Bergeron was absolutely *longing* to fuck Cesar Ignacio Ramos but daren't in case he turned out to be one of Ted White's spies (damn that fiendish Ted White! His spies are *everywhere*) and.... a few more things I mercifully forget.

But all that solidarity, you must understand, was purely *temporary*. I mean, the really annoying thing about the whole business was that it became impossible to utter a normal hard word about, say, Ted White, for fear that some supreme scrotum like (one last time) Dave Locke or Jackie Causgrove would come writhing out from under their stone, wrench half a sentence out of context and start screaming THIS PROVES IT!

I wasn't all that keen on being quoted by rich brown, either. In fact, the whole damn thing was so fucking stupid that by the end of it I was wishing

everybody concerned would just strap on all their horrible bits of “evidence” and take a good long walk into the middle of the Atlantic. (I guess this was the result of over-exposure to all that grisly DNQ correspondence that everybody was perpetually photo-copying and sending round. There was such a huge file it was practically an apa on its own – APA DICKHEAD, I suppose.)

It was all *temporary*. I mean, I now feel free to say that the only good thing about American fandom is that it isn't Australian fandom. (That *would* be a bit discouraging for a bright young spark like PNH.) Mind you, Australian fandom is a wonderful thing in its own way. There was this letter in Irwin Hirsh's *Sikander* which calmly announced that people who wrote novels about social problems and stuff like that only did so because they couldn't think up good plot ideas. Everybody else seemed to think this was too obvious to need further comment, and my brain was pleading self-defence, so I decided to leave Australia to Ted White.

(Is this what International fandom is all about? And can I leave now?)

Ah, shit, Patrick, haven't you learned *anything*? There seems to be some extremely primitive thinking going on in New York. “Goshwow, guys, these Brits have really got something after all – let's all go rub up against them and hope it's contagious.” This is smart? It's fucking *pathetic*. Also, what it looks very like is a not-so-cunning use of good old Avoidance Technique – let's solve the problem of our own shitty backyard by going away and fouling up someone else's. Meanwhile, regardless of any contact with the British, American fandom is not going to improve till the *Americans* do something about it. (Half the British couldn't care less, and I don't suppose any American of even minimal spirit would let the other half change things much.) Pissing around over here, inventing Great British Fanhistorical Traditions to be followed with everlasting fidelity and devotion isn't any sort of a solution. It's not even a *bad* solution – just a completely negative piece of evasion. All this “International” nonsense has about the same significant life-expectancy as those Flavour-of-the-Month apas – and for much the same reason, namely that there's no real purpose or meaning behind it.

The chief point that British and American fandoms should have in common is that they should both be *interesting*. This doesn't mean that they should both be *the same* – or even very similar. They come from different cultures – and it's the differences which may well offer the most interest. If American fanzines are somewhat less than interesting in practice, it is, I

think, due to the basic American inability to get past the notion that there is some kind of magic formula for literary creation: do it like Secret Master X because that's the way it has to be done.

Like hell it does. You can do it any way you like – so long as you make it *good*. But *making it good* always seems to get changed by American fans into *not making it bad*. In other words: mediocrity is always preferable to the risk of failure. Play safe. Think Team. Consider group opinions: if you do X or Y someone might not like it. Thus the sad difference between the two fandoms is that if you say to a British fan “You can't do that”, he will probably say “Why not?” laugh, and tell you to piss off; an American fan will probably nod solemnly and fill you in on the other six reasons it can't be done.

American fans, it grieves me to say, are basically a bunch of spineless wimps waiting around for their orders. In the jargon, they have an external locus of control: it may be the Land of the Free, but there's always someone else, somewhere, who is the *real* authority. American individualism is a myth (at least as far as American fans are concerned) – and the American Dream is to reduce risk-taking – even metaphorical risk-taking as in fandom – to the absolute minimum.

Ah, stick it in the light socket.

And is PNH going to be any different? He's a nice sharp lad, but (as I think I remarked to Teresa at the time) he looks like he should be some sort of junior College lecturer – assistant in Eng Lit, or whatever. Maybe it's the glasses and the little moustache. Anyway, it's not altogether a great compliment. Junior lecturers, too, are something of a subject race. To get ahead they have, in effect, to submit themselves to the authority of others: both recognised “experts” and all those old farts who happen to have been around long enough to get a grip on positions of influence. Even the most liberal of Liberal Arts departments isn't really all that keen on originality or independence of thought – what they want is embroidery round the edges of a solid frame composed of paraphrases (duly credited, of course) of the words of the *real* experts. (X is the authority, so if X said it, it must be so. And if X never said it, where is your authority?) That's the formula, so follow as directed. Nothing very surprising will come out of it, but if you keep piling up the points assiduously enough you'll be a *sort* of success – meaning that you won't be a visible failure.

Well, personally I prefer the occasional shock of the new – anything for

a good line and damn the consequences. (And damn the references, sources, footnotes and bibliographies as well.) But does PNH? Or is he just a more culturally upmarket version of the standard US herd-minded fan, instinctively casting about for an authority and a set of rules which will release him from the terrible burden of choice? (FANDOM BY NUMBERS – We provide the canvas with full instructions! Just fill in the spaces as directed and create a genuine work of art of your very own! Absolutely no skill required!) Well, he knows all the critical moves – the way bright Eng Lit lecturers *do* know all the critical moves – but how does he handle the idea that he can ignore *all* the rules, and that he can do anything he wants, even *not* admire British fandom? (A great waste of time admiring British fandom anyhow. I mean we did have this Magic Fannish Formula, but John Jarrold had another little accident and now nobody can read the bloody thing. Besides, that was *last week*.)

Some while ago Moshe Feder did a review of my *Fanzines in Theory and in Practice* in Stu Shiffman's *Potsherd*. It was reasonably perceptive on most points (though rather solemn) but he had a lot of trouble with the book's price: £6 UK, \$25 USA. It bothered him that a fannish publication should go in for such crude exploitation. Well, it wasn't really crude exploitation – since as expected I made much the same as I would have done selling more copies at a lower price – but it *was* a fairly crude message: You poor bastards need me more than I need you.

I suspect he knew this. His real problem was coming to terms with the possibility that it might be true. And here's a nice piece of irony: if he'd persisted in asking himself *why* I would say such a thing – true or not – he would have come up with that Heart's Desire of American Fandom, the Magic Fannish Formula. Well, why not?

But it's all too late at night – too cold, with the snow coming down again outside – and I think (as Feder will probably point out in another masterly analysis of Continuing Themes In the Works Of West) that I've said most of these things before, in one way or another. Well, not quite *all* of them. There's a few new bits here and there. But quite enough.

(In another two minutes I shall fall apart completely and metamorphosise into Dave Bridges. Or Ted White. Or something. This business of typing stencils half the night probably explains *everything* that's wrong with fandom: by the second night you cease to have any brain at all. Better get back to the prepared text. Instant stuff not my line.)

Right. One last time (with great effort): better to live in the real world.

And in practical terms what this means is very simple: recognise the facts of your own situation. That, if you like, is the whole moral of this article – together with a few observations on what the facts of various situations look like from my position. The aim – insofar as there is any aim other than satisfying my pattern-making instincts – is to stir up all your brains a little. The activity thus provoked may then (possibly) produce some more pieces for me to start playing jigsaws with. The process goes on: the war is endless. Still, at least I know what I want. Do you?

Deviants are deviants because they're deviants. Fans are fans because they're fans. These are circular statements: they should also be truisms. They embody the older truism: you can't have your cake and eat it. In other words: make up your mind what you want. If you want to be a fan, then *be* a fan – and stop chasing ends and ideals which cannot be realised unless you *cease* to be a fan. This is a point the Americans seem unable to assimilate. At heart – despite all the lip service to fannish uniqueness – they see fandom as simply a miniature: a little copy of some larger original. And a copy, virtually by definition, can never be as good as the original. This is what makes the quest for a formula so hopeless: right from the start the failure is built in. The deviant is looking for success *as* a deviant, but in terms of those non-deviant values which ensure automatic disqualification. For deviants – for fans – the only real success comes on their own terms. And those terms – to be genuinely their own, and not someone else's – have to be *new*.

But maybe it's all too much. New, after all – really and truly new – means there are no proper precedents, no proper authorities, no proper rules. Hell, there's that awful possibility that the thing might not succeed – that people *might not like it*. (Though you can always rely on Walt for a nice supportive letter of comment.) Kind of unnerving, the possibility of having to think for yourself, all alone. I mean, you can't even rely on *me*, and I'm the one who's handing out the whole line.... (Why, son, everybody knows *that*....)

OK, that's settled. Now, I've murdered all the mice, and I need a new interest. Maybe I should take up fanzine reviewing? No, it would be too much of an anti-climax. At least with mice you get genuine blood. Guess I'll go back to drawing pictures and stuff like that. Leave the heavy literary end to somebody else. One of these different, deviant, electric whizkids. After all, there's a lot of them about.

## Artistic Licence

Pete Lyon looks like an artist. His grey hair is wild, and he has an even wilder eye, like someone telling a funny story against the clock. Sometimes he forgets to shave and grows another stubble of grey beard. Staggering into the pub he looks more than ever like some ageless hippie newly evicted from his squat in a tumble drier. But after a quick look round he pulls himself together, buys me a drink and rolls himself a cigarette from out of my tin. As usual he's sold some more artwork but has forgotten to lay in any tobacco.

Still, he's doing quite well these days. There's even enough money for a new car. And perhaps the replacement is not held together with bits of string and masking tape. But I don't really like to ask. The old model suggested some sort of Homage to Alternative Technology: how to build your very own automobile from flattened-out biscuit tins and parts of an abandoned lawn mower. On one occasion we were driving back from a convention when he suddenly pulled in to the side of the road. Guessing that his trained ear might have detected some subtle tonal variation portending trouble amidst all the usual groans, creak, clangs and rattles I turned towards him enquiringly, but he was already out and racing round the car, scowling fearfully and muttering curses. It was a relief to learn that it was nothing worse than a flat tyre. For a moment I had thought that he was counting the wheels, and that we might have to go all the way back to Newcastle to pick up the one that had fallen off in the car park.

And then there was the time we drove to the Brighton Eurocon in the hired van. It was quite a frisky little van when we started – cornered nicely, accelerated briskly, and all the rest of it – but after about ten hours of zigzags across the country picking up screens for the Art Show, computers, duplicating equipment, boxes of artwork and other miscellaneous lumps of deadweight (such as myself and Chris Donaldson) it was distinctly shortwinded, limping, and ready to settle right down on its haunches and expire with one final shuddering twang. Also, it was dark, midnight was coming on, we were nearly out of petrol, all the garages seemed to be shut, and there was some doubt about our exact location. So naturally we were stopped by the Police.

And where were we going and what were we carrying at this time of

night? Chris and I lurked in the shadows, blinking nervously in the flashes of the Police car's revolving blue light. Pete gave them his best Crazy Dopefiend grin. We were on our way to Brighton to a Science Fiction Convention with a load of screens for the Art Show. He opened the van door with a flourish. There. The officers carefully examined our enormous load, their expressions neutral. I was conscious of looking more than usually furtive, criminal and guilty. In a moment we were all going to be hauled off to the nick on suspicion of hijacking this valuable load of whatever-it-was and we would spend the rest of the night sweating it out under the bright lights and appealing unsuccessfully for our lawyers. The Law was not about to be fobbed off with some unlikely story about Art Shows and Science Fiction Conventions.

Then the Policemen switched their gaze back to Pete and gave him the extra-careful scrutiny. Wild grey hairs. Manic grin. Crumpled teeshirt. Faded jeans. Scuffed trainers. They seemed to make up their minds.

Screens, eh? For an Art Show? At a Science Fiction Convention? Well, it was odd, but it wasn't really illegal

So they gave us directions to the nearest garage, said a polite goodnight, and took their flashing blue light away down the road. And half an hour later we were safe in Brighton, driving up to the Metropole, free and unarrested.

Obviously, it helps a lot if you look like an artist.

# Quoth The Raven

I swear, I swear –

Well, let's not go through the whole list *again*. I mean, you probably all know the basic rhythm by now: won't do this – won't do that – positively *the last time* – Holy Mother of God how could I ever have–? and so on and so on and so forth. The old, old story....

Nevermore. Fucking hell, no. (Or do I mean yes? Or what?)

Anyhow, the old, old story. And the old, old question: why do we do it? And why do we keep *on* doing it?

Meanwhile, up in Glasgow....

Meanwhile, up in Glasgow the present tense is noon on Friday, March 28th 1986, and already I'm sitting in the basement bar of the Central Hotel socking back a few pints in the company of Famous Fan Guest of Honour John Jarrold. A fast opening for an Eastercon, but gritty determination on the part of Mal Ashworth (plus a suitable stiffener of ephedrine) means that an amazingly early start enables us to dodge the holiday traffic and make the two hundred mile trip in record time.

I feel zapped-out already. Still, bad sign or not, this seems somehow appropriate. After all, a convention isn't meant to be some kind of damned *health cure*. There are people who will give you whole reams of earnest blather about the improving time one can have meeting famous authors, attending instructive programme items, and forging valuable links with warm and wonderful fellow computer-persons, but fertiliser like that is strictly for the vegetables. "Rational enjoyment", indeed. As any fool knows, the purpose of attending a convention is to get *totally wrecked*, whatever whitewash of lies, evasions, qualifications and self-justifications one puts upon the business afterwards. ("Moderation" means that one should try not to fall out of the windows on the fifth floor. "Moderation in all things" means that one should also try not to fall down the lift shaft.) Conventions have no moral, intellectual or educational value whatsoever, except perhaps in the most brutally direct experiential sense of the chance insights provided by the reckless release of impulses which are normally kept under more careful control.

"Fucking hell, *right*," I croak. "Action, action".

“I’ll drink to that,” says suave and sophisticated Famous Fan Guest of Honour John Jarrold, flexing his glass-lifting muscle, then refolding the cuffs of his leather jacket. Yes, we both know there will be some tough moments before this thing is all through, but as veterans of cafe fandom it behoves us to put up a good front and show no signs of weakness in front of the natives. We prepare for duty by immobilising our upper lips with several more drinks.

A little later, I find myself (rather dizzily) wandering the streets of Glasgow, a passive victim of the Ashworth compulsion to seek out pubs selling Real Ale. Personally, I have small ability to discriminate in these matters, but it’s all booze, so I figure I’ll give it a try. Also, though already somewhat confused as to what day this is – it feels like a Sunday, but what was I *doing* last night? – I still retain sufficient sense to let someone else make all the decisions. (Every time I try this Independent Thought stuff I just get my balls caught in the mangle.) Hazel and I struggle breathlessly in the rear while Malcolm bounds ahead, sagely sniffing the air for the distinctive scent of Grimly’s Unspeakable Triple X or Slagthwaite’s Very Old and Peculiar. Unfortunately, he seems to have found the one direction in the city which leads to no pubs at all, and after half a mile or so the desperation of thirst forces a detour down a side-street and a period of recuperation in the first place available. It may not be Real, but at least it’s Ale.

Glasgow pubs are certainly different. In part this is a matter of an indefinable general ambience – the people, the accents, the strange names of drinks (sixty shillun, pint of heavy), the *foreignness* – but undoubtedly something is also due to the architecture. Some sections are filled by the commonplace and modern, but much of Glasgow city centre is given over to what can only be described as Weirdo Victorian Skyscraper Gothic. The buildings seem immensely tall and narrow: half as wide yet twice as massive as normal in the weight and ponderousness of their ledges, crenellations and fantastic decorations. Vast, dingy and grandiose, they have an air simultaneously boastful and secretive, as though their looming and megalomaniac exteriors are merely sham frontages concealing hollow darkness. One cannot imagine people actually *living* there; the interiors behind those sinister casements must surely be occupied only by dusty echoes and a few furtive ghosts.

Yet live there they do. The pub – like the Central Hotel – has rooms with ceilings so high that they threaten to disappear in shadow. A wan submarine light filters through the brown glass of the tall windows. Immense

brass curtain rings gleam high above; the weight of the dull crimson drapes is such that they are supported on what looks like a small flagpole. Down at ground level there are small black iron tables; on each one stands an uncorked brandy bottle. This is puzzling, until finally we figure it out as the water supply for whisky drinkers. But it does seem to be rather tempting fate to leave so many heavy blunt instruments around. When I was a barman myself I always took care to stow all bottles out of reach as soon as possible, thus reducing the likelihood of inflamed customers using them to brain each other (or, more important, me). Still, perhaps this is a perfectly respectable joint, even if all those characters leaning on the bar do look like they could lend you a nicely sharpened razor. In another country these things are hard to tell.

We repeat the excursion on Saturday, though this time to a place definitely less refined in nature. This one has a low ceiling and a generally chipped and battered air; if it ever possessed a jukebox the customers have long since kicked it to death for daring to make a noise out of turn. There is even a (rather depressed looking) member of the proletariat selling copies of *The Morning Star*, which enables me to bring forth my old boast of having had a short story printed in that very same paper (when it was it called *The Daily Worker*) at the age of eleven. Yes, I was a Boy Genius right from the beginning....

(Ah, the days when I was so Politically Conscious and Ideologically Sound I made Joseph Nicholas look like a lobotomised Fascist.... Yes, let no one ever underestimate the power of propaganda. Having a Stalinist father, my early reading matter consisted not only of the *Worker* but of various more lavishly produced English-language periodicals put out by the USSR and various satellites. These were full of amazing statistics on the glorious overfulfilment of the five-year plan for pig-iron production, and featured many illustrations of Slavic Musclemen wrestling tractors or juggling enormous spanners. (I often wonder whether all this did something to my subsequent sex-life.) Not until I was almost twelve years old did I begin to have faint suspicion that these people might possibly be more than somewhat full of shit. (The fact that I only got five shillings for the story may have had something to do with it as well.) And these days, of course, I am well aware that any really authentic left-wing regime would move quickly to have me liquidated as an anti-state parasite and general social disease. Ah, the idealism of youth.. The disillusionment of old age....)

But why am I abandoning the convention like this? Well the sad truth is that (on Friday and Saturday) the whole thing feels rather *dull*. There are bars, and there are people in the bars, but nothing much at all seems to be happening. There is no spark, no real life. It's a curious fact that although the total membership finally tops the thousand mark there are few moments when the hotel seems to contain more than a couple of hundred people. In part this is geography – three bars all on different floors, and function rooms widely spaced at the ends of long corridors – but it is also a reflection of the essentially *passive* character of Scottish fandom. With a few exceptions (such as the people who are actually running the convention) the Scottish fans are chiefly *consumers*, and their participation in events is limited to herd-like movements from one programmed item to another. Thus at any particular time one can be sure that two-thirds of the attendees are immured in some private hole devoted to films, war-gaming, computers, Star Trek, Dr Who, or whatever. Well, if that's what they want.... But where are the *real* people?

Yes, yes, it's that old familiar elitist arrogance once again: the attitude that while all fans are equal, some are a damn sight more equal than others, and who needs all these fucking spearcarriers anyhow? Trouble is, members of the fannish elite seem to be a bit thin on the ground. Many Southern fans have not made the trip, and quite often the Fan Room bar is virtually empty – an astonishing sight in any normal circumstances. It's a vicious circle: people wander in, see nothing very lively going on or even in prospect, and wander out again. (Matters are not helped by the occasional invasion of grunting persons enveloped in flab and fur rugs, members of that strange sub-species who go around dressed like barbarians and behaving like morons.) It's all so quiet that one might even welcome Simon Polley and his dying walrus imitations. But there's never a dying walrus around when you really need one and I get so bored I devote whole minutes to thinking about attending the programme.

But perhaps it would be better to try and eat something. This is a point I often tend to neglect at conventions, and an exclusive diet of beer can have unfortunate effects on the intestinal tract. (SMALL EXPLOSION IN GLASGOW – NOT MANY DEAD) So, where to? Well, no point in wasting time and money on inessentials, so I fall down the stairs and out into Central Station itself. Sure to be some kind of cheap food-substitute at a rail terminus.

My my my – what a huge concourse – what shiny marble floor – what vast springing arches – what confusion of pillars, girders and birdcage

ironwork. And what great shafts of sunlight beating down upon my undefended head. (And does the ground *really* slope so much?) The public address system booms and mutters. Pigeons swoop and wheel, covertly eyed by milling crowds of hungry-looking Glaswegians. I flounder towards a distant sign that promises CASEY JONES BURGER BAR. Either it is further than it looks, or my limbs are not quite working to full capacity. Over the loudspeakers come the usual unintelligible announcements interspersed with what sounds like early rock'n'roll and/or Russian patriotic music. So do I get down and do the gopak, or just stick with the old Chuck Berry routine? (Go Johnny, go Johnny, GO GO GO! And fuck you too, lady.)

Junk food. Well, what can one say? Yes, those chips *do* look rather like bleached earthworms with the edges squared off. A variation on “St. James Infirmary Blues” comes to mind:

I went down to Central Station,  
And I saw my dinner there,  
Laid out on that long white marble,  
So cold, so pale, so fucking expensive  
considering how short a time it stayed down.

Damn right. Why can't the Fast Food industry show some *class* for a change? Forget about all these *peasants* and go for the *elite* end of the market?

I can see it now: DR JACKSON'S BRAINBURGER BAR – CRISPY FRIED GREY CELLS – IQ LICKIN' GOOD. Menu: the quarter pound Beconburger – 40p; the half pound Cretinburger – 80p; and the Supercolossal Really Gross Pickersburger – estimates given. Every helping with Added Intelligence! Guaranteed free from Harmful Thoughts! Improve your mind NOW! Yes, see that satisfied customer – once he was merely a FAN, but after a DR JACKSON BRAINBURGER he is a GENIUS!

“Son of a bitch, boys, this really works – I feel smarter already! Elbow my left tit, baby!” (Falls over and lies on the floor foaming with intellectual excitement.)

No no – that can't be right. One must not tamper with these age-old mysteries. (Like, why does anybody *ever* eat this shit?) Besides, I still don't know what day it is, and would a Brainburger help with *that*? Maybe I should start writing it all down in a notebook, Like, TODAY: (whatever it is) and ATE FOOD: (whatever it was). Get organised. Keep track of things. Maybe even fulfil my long-held ambition of writing a con report in which events are

recorded *in the order they actually happened*. Trouble is, I'd probably wind up with at least six notebooks, due to inability to remember whether or not I'd bought one already. (Not much good writing *that* down.)

But I feel a great need to become horizontal. Back to the hotel.

I have floor-rights in Artist GoH Pete Lyon's room. There's plenty of space – one gets tired merely walking to the bathroom – but there's a slight drawback in the number of drug-addled persons who are always wandering in and out. If it isn't a semi-catatonic Phil Palmer drifting in to roll yet another Winston Churchill joint, it's a speeded-up Jimmy Robertson bounding about delivering machine-gun lectures on topics of vital sociological importance. Or a gaunt Alan Ferguson switching through all the TV channels in quest of esoteric media stimulation. No peace.

No peace at all. The dour Scots obviously do not believe in effete Southern refinements like soundproofing, and all night long we are battered by the roar of traffic and the happy cries of passing drunks. (On the other side of the hotel, of course, one would be battered by the roar of trains and the happy cries of station announcers.) In the morning we know it's eight o'clock when the pneumatic drills start up.

"Easter Sunday," Jimmy Robertson observes sourly. "Christ rose from the dead. And no fucking wonder."

I tell you, I keep having to go back to the bar just to get some *rest*. Anyhow, breakfast is never something I can face till afternoon. On Sunday this is probably just as well, since if present at the table I would probably feel inclined to emulate James (*Public Enemy*) Cagney and shove a grapefruit up Caroline Mullan's nose, or brain Brian Ameringen with a piece of toast. The recollection of the Becon "party" does not inspire charitable thoughts.

Well, would *you* believe a programme note for a Saturday night party that promised "No music, no sexism, just good clean fun?" Must be a joke. Surely? I mean, while I was at Bradford University there was this attempt to put on what were described as "Nonsexist Discos" but students (bless their little pointed heads) are more or less *supposed* to be out of their fucking skulls. (I shared a common room with some of these people – woolly-looking wimps with bumfluff beards and hefty persons with pink triangles – and I used to listen to them arguing as to whether if men changed the records it was an instance of Male Oppression or if when wimmin did it this was Female Exploitation. The frontiers of the mind certainly got pushed back some distance, but it was all rather academic in view of the distinct shortage of

people who liked Non-Sexist Discos.) Bloody hell, couldn't we at least have some Morris Dancing? (USA style: Chuck Berry and his Dingaling.) Or *something?*

No, strictly good clean fun. Intelligent conversation. Rational enjoyment. (Fucking *hell*.) Despite mass petitions headed by Indignant of South Ealing (aka G. Pickersgill, who doesn't actually *dance*, but derives an old man's simple pleasure from seeing other people making fools of themselves) and even a request from GoH Joe Haldeman (who was allowed to look at Hazel Ashworth's legs as reward) the ban is inflexible. No music. After all, for those who insist on such non-intellectual pursuits there is the Ceilidh, is there not? (In a spirit of morbid curiosity I go and look at the Ceilidh. Yes, sort of Country-and-Sporran. Very ethnic. Very clean. Holy shit.)

A real down-home Basildon/Cambridge (Becon) rave-up must be quite an experience. According to reports Becon fandom is interested in opera, computers, and food, and the intelligent conversation in Becon circles therefore ranges widely over food, computers, and opera. (Sometimes they play charades as well, but this activity is waning in popularity due to the difficulty of ever thinking of more than the same six book titles.) What they all do for heavy excitement is not known. It is also a little hard to imagine.

Well, if they *like* that kind of thing.... And there's always the Contravention party on Sunday night....

But meanwhile there's the rest of Sunday. (Well, probably. If I had a notebook I could tell you these things and be sure I wasn't making it all up. Well, fairly sure.) Feeling rather short of sleep, I do actually go and attend a programme item. When I regain consciousness Joe Haldeman is telling a joke. Laughter. Bob Shaw tells a joke. More laughter. John Brunner tells a joke. It is a long joke, slightly longer than the silence that follows while the audience tries to work out which was the funny bit.

Well, so much for humour. I wander back down the corridor to the head of the stairs, where a row of registration desks awaits the unwary and gullible. Here you can sign up for Conspiracy or Consept or even Conception. (This ingenious abbreviation of "convention" to "con" is obviously an idea whose time has come.) I have a sudden attack of virtue and take a place behind the Conception desk. After all, this is a Leeds convention (Feb 87 – Join NOW) and my initial doubts as to its purpose, meaning, and practicality (not to mention aversion to the idea of a whole year spent

listening to people talk about it down at the pub) have given way to resigned acceptance of its historical inevitability. (Allah has fucked me, Allah the almighty – great is the name of Allah.) The bloody thing is going to happen anyway, so I might as well do my bit.

A newly-risen Hazel Ashworth also appears and comes to sit beside me, thus providing the punters with a living illustration of all the delights conventions have to offer. By this, of course, I mean that she has such a case of the shakes that piles of fliers keep falling over, and I have to buy her several quick drinks in succession to save the whole table from collapsing.

It is on one of these trips to the bar that I encounter a tall dark woman with glasses and a gap between her front teeth. My mental card-index (“tall dark women with glasses and gaps between their front teeth”) immediately identifies her as Allyn Cadogan, but offers no further information.

“Greg was telling me what you were saying about spare Americans,” she says. “When you say ‘spare’, do you mean tall, lean, slender?”

Ah. Yes. Well. I remember now. I believe I did make a few remarks the previous day to the effect that it was about time a spare American was provided for my benefit. (“Everybody else has got one – why don’t I have one then?” Sniff sniff, pout pout, whimper whimper.) I may even have said a few things about the potential spareness of this particular American. I wonder how coarse I was? Greg could probably tell me. He seems to have told everyone else.

“Ah, yes, well,” I say. “Tall, lean, slender, that’s right. Ho ho.” She looks at me doubtfully. “Ho ho, yes, well, Americans do have funny names, don’t they? When I first saw yours I thought you were a man.” She looks at me even more doubtfully, then moves away. I wipe my brow and decide that this is not one of my better days, witticism-wise. Or even ordinary-word-wise. These people who actually get spare Americans obviously have something extra. Like a spare brain.

Meanwhile Famous TAFF Candidate Simon Ounsley is lurking nearby, intermittently trying out his usual Hard Sell on passing voters.

“Vote for me,” he says. (Apologetic cough.) “I’m your TAFF candidate”.

A howling baby is carried down the stairs.

“A voter! A voter! Quick, get in there and kiss it!”

Ounsley wavers, his characteristic expression of confusion even more pronounced than usual. Now if I’d indicated a *Brussels sprout*.... But a

*baby....?*

“All right,” I snarl, “if you won’t do your job properly you can at least kiss a few soft toys.”

“This is too degrading,” he mutters, but nonetheless seizes a couple of the fluffy objects lying on nearby tables and pecks cautiously at each button nose. The acolytes of the Soft Toy Apa make fond clucking noises at this enlightened and courageous example of inter-stuffing tolerance.

Ugh. At heart I am inclined to agree. This is indeed politics at its most sordid and self-demeaning. Better that these fur fetishists should all vote for Woofie Bear or Maverick Mole or Cheeky Teddy. Such is the quality of the glutinous whimsicality and icky infantilism involved here that very soon one inevitably starts thinking wistfully of some kind of Texas Soft Toy Massacre: line the little buggers up and give it to them with an extra-fast, extra-sharp chainsaw. Let the fur *really* fly. (At least, dear God, stop them carrying on this way *in public*. Hell, you’d think any halfway sane adult person would want to keep an aberration like that *quiet*.)

Time wears on. I sell no Conception memberships, but snare one Ounsley-for-TAFF voter in the form of Ashley Watkins, who recklessly fills out the form exactly as instructed and then hands it back to Linda Pickersgill. This is not tactful, and a little later he is seen being remonstrated with by Gregory. (A man of strict principles, Greg only threatens to kill wrong-way voters *after* they have cast their ballots. He has taken the TAFF election much to heart, and declares that he will go along anyway, even if he loses. This is nice, since it means that anyone else who goes to the USA can be sure of being made to feel right at home by the familiar screams of rage and invective coming from the back of the audience.)

Back to the bar. Suave and sophisticated Famous Fan Guest of Honour John Jarrold is much in evidence, having gin-and-tonics delivered on a conveyer belt and exchanging esoteric quips with a blonde girl who seems quite able to match his knowledge of second assistant directors of obscure *film noir* movies. Jarrold is having a good convention. A generous and selfless person, he recognises that it is the inalienable right of every human being to hear and see him being John Jarrold, and he therefore has no objection at all to appearing on at least fifteen programme items. (In the intervals he autographs copies of Clive Barker’s books.)

I join this circle of wit and erudition and negligently drop a few epigrams of my own. (When no one picks them up I furtively kick them

under the table.) References to Shakespeare, Proust, Conrad and Humphrey Bogart fly back and forth. We quote poetry. (Unfortunately, I can no longer recall more than the first four lines (and the last word, of course) of “The Raven”, and have to switch to Longfellow, who is rather easier to make up as you go along.) Momentarily, life begins to show signs of existing. I almost think I might be enjoying myself. Yet at the back of my mind lurks the knowledge that the convention is *unfinished*. There are extremes which are still to come: I have been bored and I have been entertained, but I have not yet plumbed the depths of the authentic fannish Heart of Darkness. The Unspeakable, the Unnameable, the Nigel E. Richardson Blues – all these await me.

(Mistah Lovecraft, he dead. But have you seen Hans Loose recently?)

And meanwhile, what day is this, anyhow? Look, the inability to remember events in the correct order – the device of reassembling them as scrambled cinema – the writing-up of it all in the present tense – is by now virtually a cliché of convention reporting (meaning that I’ve done it before), but as a perceptual mode it isn’t something I ever need to work at: the experience is like that for me *at the time*. Sitting in the bar, I struggle with a strong suspicion that some of last night’s (apparent) events actually happened in 1983.... or was it 1980? (I’ve certainly been here before.... strong sense of *deja vu*.... Or should that be *deja bu*?) Yes, I really must get that notebook.... Or did I have it already? Why is life so fucking *complicated*? (But I did go to a room party somewhere, didn’t I? I distinctly remember sitting on a bed and making a joke about a vile green liquid being consumed by Caroline Mullen. “Creme de Meths,” I said. Even John Brunner laughed, and I fell off the bed.)

So is it Saturday that I go to the fish and chip shop down the road and take my bag of food back into Central Station? Must be. Yes, there I am, watching the crowds go by and vaguely trying to identify the loudspeaker music (a Bulgarian version of “Sweet Little Sixteen”? The Red Army Choir with “Baby Love”?) when two of the roughest looking women I have ever seen come up, give an introductory mutter, and start rummaging through my bag of chips. Neither one is more than twenty years old, but somehow they give a profoundly *geological* impression: it would be no surprise to discover rare fossil ferns among their jungle tresses, and from an examination of the eroded strata of their makeup it would certainly be possible to date (within a year or two) the last time they had a wash. Judging by the voracity with which they devour my supplies they have come straight from an orgy on the

Corporation Rubbish Tip, having had no time to grope the dustbins for breakfast. I sit baffled by the suddenness of the invasion and by the impenetrability of their accents. Just what is going on here? Am I being offered depraved and extraordinary native Glaswegian delights? Are they proposing that we withdraw to some secluded spot where they will massage my fair white body all over with greasy chip papers, and stimulate my jaded appetites by unusual applications of fried scraps? What unrepeatably chance am I missing? This certainly suggests new meanings for the phrase “on the batter”, but it would be a help if I knew exactly what they were talking about. Eventually, I pick out the demand “Gie us fifty punce fer something tae eat.” Mutely, I hand over the depleted remnants of my meal. They slouch rapidly away, exchanging what sound like coarse remarks, though it is unclear whether these are literal comments on the limpness of the chips or more metaphorical references to my general sexual inadequacy. Well, if this is the best offer I’m going to get all weekend I may as well stick to studying the underwear advertisements. Much more hygienic. Back to the hotel.

And if it was Saturday *then*, it is certainly Sunday *now*, and time for action in the fan room. This is the Contravention Losers Party, though due to factors already mentioned and to a plethora of somewhat unlikely Eastercon bids earlier in the day I am uncertain which year they are celebrating losing. Still, it’s a bit more lively than the Becon *conversazione*: free booze has attracted a large crowd, and there is even music, and people dancing. Paul Oldroyd looms round the place made up as a particularly pallid Count Dracula. (I show him the joke on my matchbox about the Irish vampire who bites Dolly Parton on the neck, but he is not amused.) For reasons best known to herself Chris Atkinson appears disguised as the Virgin Queen. (Someone remarks that she and Malcolm tossed up for who was to make the trip, and Chris lost.) Two Nazi officers do the usual Nazi officer routine, mincing around in a manner which suggests that their underwear is far too tight. (As military expert G. Pickersgill takes great pleasure in pointing out, one of them is actually a member of the Finnish Air Force, his swastika being set at the wrong angle.) Oh, fun, fun, fun. All we need is a few Rocky Horror enthusiasts in suspenders and fishnet stockings to recreate the lurid terminal decadence of Visconti’s *The Damned*. Hot stuff, eh?

And it won’t do. All through the weekend people have been regretting the absence of Nigel E. Richardson, without whom no cretinously dull or chronically boring convention can be said to be complete. What wallowings

in weltschmerz have been neglected! What opportunities for biting sarcasm and searing satire have been missed! But now the Garforth Gloomster is here with me in spirit, and I regard the merry revellers with a mixture of loathing and despair. The terrible Convention Angst sinks its iron claws deep into my soul. Oh, the horror, the horror.... The dull beat of the drums reverberates through my brain.... Mistah Kurtz, he finally got me.

I am just contemplating whether to throw myself down the lift shaft or out of a fifth floor window – fuck this “moderation” crap – when Debbi Kerr coils herself round me in particularly sinuous fashion and attempts to writhe us both bodily onto the dance floor. Despite an indiscriminate shower of embraces and various interesting anatomical pressures I repulse her unmaidenly advances with sullen sternness. The moment for such fripperies is past. This music is awful – don’t want to dance – have a headache – feet hurt – feel sick – nobody really loves me – sniff sniff, pout pout, whimper whimper.

Simon Polley is astonished to see me reject the advances of his nubile young wife.

“Bloody hell,” he says. “I thought I was getting a bit past it myself, but I didn’t know *you* were so far gone.”

Alas, it is all too true. I am but a broken shell of my former self. Snarling morosely, I make an excuse and leave. Time to lie down again for half an hour or so. I shall brood on the folly and vanity of existence (first ten minutes); on the many failures, disasters and deficiencies of my past life (next ten minutes); then finally on the sheer impossibility of ever getting in a really good uninterrupted sulk while Jimmy Robertson keeps bursting in to top up his drug dosage and deliver yet another lecture on False Consciousness and the Class Struggle (last ten minutes).

No peace, no peace. Yet does one really want to be left to sink in this murky swamp of self-analysis and self-pity? And does the world at large care to be bothered with all the depressing details?

No. In my own case – as in everyone else’s – the personal facts underlying angst-attacks of this kind are either mundanely boring or none of your damn business. Convention blues are yet another cliché: the almost inevitable result of excess alcohol, lack of sleep, general physical exhaustion and overdose of people. Push the body too far and the brain will surely start to fray as well....

So just because I’ve got no job, no money, no prospects, am separated

from my wife, have turned forty, and generally have not been scoring too well for the last twenty years or so, is really no reason to start getting all pettish. I repeat to myself the cosmic mantra: Things may be bloody awful, but they could be a fucking sight worse. Damn right. Like, I'm not dead yet. Something could turn up. (But why is there never a Boy Scout around when you really need one?) Yes, I still have the eternal idiot optimism of the true gambler: one chance in a thousand is rather poor odds, but any bet is better than no bet at all.

Action, action....

Back to the bar. While not exactly cheerful, I am restored to a sort of dismal fortitude: gonna have a good time (maybe, eventually) and fuck *you*, Universe. I look in upon the dancers with austere disapproval – foolish, drunken persons – and go to sit in the adjacent room with the Ashworths. Time for some of that intelligent conversation I've heard so much about. Rational enjoyment. Sane, sensible, good clean fun. After all there's nothing wrong with *me*.

As if on cue (“Well, well, emotional lability, excessive dependence on alcohol, lack of motor co-ordination, erratic and impulsive behaviour, absence of social inhibition, disturbance of affect, schizoid withdrawal, disorganised thought patterns – send for a shrink to get this fucking loony bent back in shape”) Dr Robert Jackson appears on the scene, and we fall into a discussion on the correct definitions and differences between psychotic and psychopathic personalities. The disputation soon goes briskly, since Mal Ashworth is a man who will continue arguing even when everyone else agrees with him, and he is not deterred by small details like wise old Doctor Rob's professional psychiatric qualifications. (He has already straightened out Pete Lyon on a few points of the Theory of Art.)

Meanwhile, I meditate on whether or not I do have some kind of awful mental problem. After all, Ian Watson *did* once call me a psychopath.... but that was after I'd shaken him up and down by the collar for a few minutes in a bid to collect the Astral League subscription, so maybe his opinion was not entirely objective.

I am distracted by a passing glimpse of the Glasgow (Fake) Bob Shaw. Now *there's* a man with a few problems.... Such is his controversial status that only the previous night members of the committee were still debating whether or not he should be allowed to attend the convention at all. Indeed, everywhere he goes he seems to be shadowed by two large and fleshy guards,

though it remains unclear whether these are his own personal minders (doubtless recruited from Glasgow's brutal sci-fi underworld of Star Neddies) or agents of the committee hoping to be given some good excuse to hurl him out of the nearest window.

Well, I've got troubles of my own. Disappearing words, for instance. Large portions of my vocabulary seem to have vanished altogether, and even larger tracts have become wholly unpronounceable. Also, my arms, legs and head appear to have been replaced by rather inefficient prosthetic devices constructed out of squishy rubber. I wouldn't mind so much – after all, I've been in more or less the same condition since Friday afternoon – if I didn't otherwise feel completely *sober*. I mean, damn it all, I've been paying *good money* to get like this, and I want some *fun* out of it....

"Dance," says Hazel.

Creaking and protesting, I am led into the next room. Since by this time the free booze has disappeared so also have most of the dancers, and there is sufficient room for me to stagger to and fro without too many embarrassing collisions. After the initial popping and crackling of joints has subsided I even begin to think this might be some sort of reviving influence – all the jiggling and leaping around either develops a healthy thirst or brings on a nice refreshing puke. Whichever way it goes, the whole system is born again.

Indeed, this proves to be the case. By a not uncommon irony, now that the convention is almost (officially) over I start to enjoy myself. The secret reserves of alcohol my body has accumulated suddenly release their intoxicating elements. I feel cheerful. I even feel drunk. Fucking hell. In all probability I fall over. (How should *I* know?)

Monday. Breakfast in the bar. The glass keeps rattling against my teeth, and I ought to be feeling terrible, but instead I am merely tranquilly decrepit. Sunday night was the turning-point: I have passed through the fire and into the timeless zone. For me, this convention will never end. Whatever happens now, I am ready for it. (The only problem is this damned *sunlight*. Couldn't they draw the curtains or arrange for an eclipse or something?)

What happens, of course, is that I sit in the bar all day. And a good idea too: who *needs* all these other distractions – life's fretful fever and the vain pursuit of programme items? (Well, if you *like* that kind of thing....though it might help if the programme ever ran to time.) Yes, this is the spot to stay for the next thousand years.

("Fucking hell," says Greg Pickersgill. "Fetch me some butyl nitrate.

Ring room service for more hot and cold running women. Can't stop now."

"I'll drink to that," says suave and sophisticated Famous Fan Guest of Honour John Jarrold.)

Amazingly enough, I even have some money left. One consistently agreeable feature of the weekend, in fact, is the way in which complete strangers keep stepping up and pressing fistfuls of cash into my unresisting hand. These contributions are not (as you might be expected to think) spontaneous tributes to my general wit, brilliance, nobility and beauty, but payments for various coloured prints of mine which are on sale in the Art Show. For obscure organisational reasons customers cannot purchase copies on the spot, but are obliged to seek me out in person; I take their money and then direct them to go back and lift whatever they fancy. It seems an odd way to transact business, but since the pound notes keep on coming in I make no complaint.

And, of course, this is not the only business being done. Those repressive persons who frown upon the frivolous nature of convention-going should not forget all the time and effort which is directed towards the development of *serious* new projects. This is a field, after all, in which the right *concept* can be worth a fortune.... Thus, as the day draws into evening, immense vistas of hitherto-unexplored possibilities are ranged over by the cosmic minds of the assembled ambitious entrepreneurs.

Linda Pickersgill and John Jarrold decide that Noo Orlins must be subjected to the *Invasion of the Giant Catfish*. They begin work on the script immediately: "Freckle-faced boy in a straw hat and blue overalls – bamboo fishing rod and small white dog – river flowing smoothly past – boy sets down rod and turns to fiddle with bait tin – sinister ripples on water – small white dog whines and scratches – 'Why, Patch, what's the matter?' – sinister ripples come closer – boy begins to turn – tremendous boiling and frothing in water – boy's mouth open in horror – explosion of water – small white dog barking – river bubbling and whirling – long shot of small white dog alone on bank as river runs smoothly past – da da da DUM – roll titles."

All this hinting at unseen horrors strikes me as being far too underplayed, and I suggest that there should be at least one full frontal of the vile monster twiddling its whiskers and sneering in appropriately villainous fashion. But apparently that would violate formal genre conventions (or the dramatic unities or somesuch) and is not to be considered. Feeling slightly piqued, I begin to develop my own scenario, in which San Francisco is the

victim of the *Invasion of the Giant Gerbils*. But why be cheap about this? If you're aiming to shock and horrify, go all the way. So make it *Invasion of the Giant Gay Gerbils*. Or even *Invasion of the Giant Gay Commie Gerbils*. (A bit close to *Attack of the Pinko Faggot Hamsters*, but never mind.)

I can see it now: the Giant Gay Commie Gerbils come leering and lolloping out of their carrot-shaped spaceships – they eat the Mayor – they eat half the population – the other half swoons – the whole Bay Area becomes a Bad Neighbourhood – grim faced generals tensely confer in the Pentagon – “My God, men, we have to fight back! Send for Linda Lovelace! These things aren't *normal!*” – out on the street Clint Eastwood stands alone, with slitted eyes and gritted jaw – slowly he raises his enormous Magnum – “Okay, gerbil, make my day.”

Yes, this has real possibilities. Naturally there are also the obligatory chase scenes, with Giant Gay Commie Gerbils rocketing up and over the rollercoaster San Francisco hills. (Whee THUD scrabble scrabble vroom vroom WHEE thud scrabble scrabble vroom VROOOOOM.) Never mind all this European pseudo-intellectual rubbish. Don't get clever with *me* kiddo. My tastes are simple. All I want is a good, fast, *real American* movie. Lotsandlotsandlotsa gerbil-crashes.

“Holy shit,” says Greg Pickersgill, “mine's a triple vodka. Vasectomies desensitise your balls. Can't stop now.”

“I'll drink to that,” says suave and sophisticated FGoH John Jarrold.)

Meanwhile, examination of her own booze (or a sudden *Attack of the Giant Spots Before the Eyes*) has convinced Hazel Ashworth that there ought to be such a thing as Beer Snails: ecologically sound little workers who would crawl round inside your glass industriously scraping up unnecessary particles of gunge. Suspicious as ever of the Big Breweries, husband Malcolm immediately founds the Campaign for Real Snails. But it is the media prospects which are the most exciting: not only would *Invasion of the Giant Snails* accommodate an almost infinite number of sequels (Part One: The Snails Start Entering the Spaceships, Part Two....) but many written classics of the SF field could be given a new lease of life by judicious modification. *When Snails Collide.... Snail Wars* (a tie in).... *The Snails Look Up.... Snailship Troopers.... Neutron Snail.... Inverted Snail.... Capella's Golden Snails.... Do Androids Dream of Electric Snails* (Book of the Film *Snailrunner*).... the list is endless.

“We could make *millions!*” shouts Hazel. “All we need is a producer.

Send for Steven Snailberg!”

Beguiled by this prospect of fabulous financial success everyone begins feverishly buying more rounds of drinks. A general disinclination to the vertical prevails. Linda Pickersgill removes her socks and immediately auditions them for leading roles in a new drama series. (Is this the birth of a whole new genre: Sock Opera?) Life is suddenly a glorious prospect of dazzling possibilities.

“Argh wozzle zuzzum,” says Greg Pickersgill, “Can’t stop now.” He lurches away out of the bar in quest of fresh zuzzums.

“I’ll drink to that,” says suave (etc etc) John Jarrold.)

And so it goes. The bar is a capsule world outside normal space and time. In due course we will all fall down in some corner (or otherwise go to bed); in due course a snoring Pickersgill will be extracted from the Gents and carried off, and in due course it will all be over. But for the moment it has no ending.

Fairly takes it out of you, though. Gets harder and harder to accomplish those necessary small movements. Like, when I make an incautious attempt to relight a very short cigarette with a rather fiery match, I wheeze too heavily in the wrong direction and suddenly find my nose enveloped by a large atomic fireball.

“Come, come, West,” Jarrold says severely. “You can’t sleep in my room if you’re going to make noises like *that* all night. You’ll have to go out in the corridor, you know.”

This boy is all heart. But in a few minutes he relents enough to take out his camera and invite me to have another cigarette any time I feel like it. I am duly appreciative of his generosity and buy him several drinks. Or he buys me several drinks. Or everybody buys everybody else several drinks. I forget.

And not much later – or is it several *years* later? – I am in the bathroom of the Jarrold suite, muttering at the strange dishevelled figure I see in the mirror and trying to work out what I am *doing* here. (Pete Lyon’s tenancy must have run out.) The cold water tap emits the shriek of a sexually-abused gerbil. Holy shit! Send for more sellotape! Jesus, why is there never a Boy Scout around when you really need one! (Mother of God – am I really saying all these things out loud?)

I become unconscious.

And that, more or less, is it. The next day is all partings – final grunts of farewell. I spend a couple of hours with the Ashworths, driving round

Glasgow in large circles (having been given duff directions by our Famous TAFF Candidate) before meeting with Ounsley and Lilian Edwards for a last session in the pub. And then it is South once more – Ounsley drives fast, and in no time at all we have passed through the brown and empty borderlands and are back in familiar territory.

How dull it all seems. Home again. I barely manage to open the front door before my landlord is there, smiling politely and reminding me of little details like last week's rent. Somewhat confused by this sudden attack of the mundane I can think of no good excuses, so borrow a fiver from Ounsley and pay the man. I have less money left than I thought. Indeed, it is only half an hour later that I realise there is no more than fifty pence in my pocket. No money in the house, and nothing at all to drink. I begin to shake all over. Mother of God, what do I do *now*? (Oh, the horrors, the horrors....)

Well, nothing for it.... have to start writing a con report.

So what else is there to do? Until the next time, that is. Until the next time. Because, after all, what do those damnfool birds know about it anyhow?

Can't stop now....

# The Real Thing

Any anthology of fanwriting is almost certain to suggest a paraphrase of those famous words of Abraham Lincoln: You can please all of the people some of the time, and some of the people all of the time, but you can't please all of the people all of the time, the cheap nitpicking sons of bitches.

Damn right. Whatever the editors (poor bastards – and don't look at *me*, none of this is *my* responsibility) put in, and whatever they leave out, someone somewhere is sure to start mumbling and whining, if not screaming and shouting. The inclusion of X is a bad joke! The exclusion of Y is a monstrous injustice and an unforgivable insult! Holy Mother of God, the entire vile pustular stinking mess is a complete and utter *travesty* of the True Meaning of Fandom!

And so on and so forth. That's the way it goes, because that's the nature of the beast. Fandom is full of people who get their rocks off being bloody-minded, and fans in general are notoriously prone to work up an argument, even despite (or perhaps because of) the fact that at least half of them are still under the impression that the words "Use logic" are some sort of advertising slogan for a new brand of soap powder.

Well, as veterans of these gruesome affairs will already have realised, the only reason I myself am appearing in this damnfool publication is so that I can get in my very own pre-emptive strike against all the incredibly dumb misconceptions that the very existence of the thing seems sure to bring into being. I am already on record elsewhere as saying that I think *all* fanthologies (apart from such dazzlingly wonderful exceptions as collections consisting entirely of my own works) are an absolutely lousy idea both in principle and in practice, and I see no reason why I should exempt this one. It could have been a lot worse, and it does have one or two small points in its favour, but I still think it should carry some sort of Government Health Warning in very large letters: THIS COLLECTION DOES NOT CONTAIN THE BEST OF ANYTHING OR EVEN THE MOST REPRESENTATIVE SELECTION OF ANYTHING AND AS AN ILLUSTRATION OF THE NATURE OR CHARACTER OR MEANING OF ANYTHING IT IS NO MORE THAN A VERY PARTIAL AND INCOMPLETE OUTLINE AND THAT'S BEING REALLY FUCKING DIPLOMATIC ABOUT IT.

Sigh. Groan. I suppose that now I'll have to struggle to explain myself. But don't worry, I'll keep it short. I've let this deadline run right into summer, and now it's far too hot, I've got a headache, some unnatural insect just bit me on the ankle, I think I'm developing another ulcer, my sex-life appears to consist largely of an occasional hollow laugh, and I'm worried that there must be something seriously wrong with my brain, since how else could I even have *thought* of agreeing to write this piece? Unfortunately, people keep phoning up and nagging me a lot, so I guess I'll have to do something. Even though, to quote the immortal words (probably not reprinted here, but how should *I* know?) of Greg (the Abraham Lincoln of South Ealing) Pickersgill, I just wanna lie down.

Right. But meanwhile, being semi-vertical for the moment, let's run through a few basic concepts, since it seems reasonable to assume that at least some of the readers here have little or no experience of fanzines in general, while the (notionally) more knowledgeable visitors from overseas may well be labouring under a misconception or two concerning the nature of the specifically British product. (The crassest error of all, apparently widespread in some sections of US fandom, is the innocent but extremely dopey notion that British fandom is simply a sort of provincial offshoot or copy of the Great American Original. Not so, boys. There may have been some very small percentage of truth in this about thirty years ago (to the extent that the two fandoms then had much closer links) but British fandom *always* had its own separate history and identity, and by the 1970's it was very definitely the USA that seemed (from here) the distant, vaguely remembered colony: perhaps worth occasional mild casual interest, but neither central nor indeed at all essential. It doesn't greatly matter which you think is *best*, but it would certainly be a very good idea to get it straight that British fandom is *different*).

Meanwhile, back at the main point, it also seems like a very good idea to have mercy on my labouring brain by just re-running large chunks of what I said back in 1984 (in the Introduction to *Fanzines in Theory and in Practice*). A few precise definitions of terms certainly won't come amiss, since otherwise any attempt to discuss what fanzines and fanwriting are all about is very apt to disappear in a fog of fuzzy generalities. Experienced fans (ie those who can recognise The Same Old Shit when they see it coming) may now leave the room, but all others should play close attention, on pain of being totally bemused if they don't.

Fanwriting, obviously enough, appears in fanzines, but it has to be emphasised that when I refer to “fanzines” I have in mind a quite narrowly defined and limited category. (And just to get you *really* worried: not all writing which appears in fanzines is necessarily fanwriting – but more on that in due course.) The term as used here does *not* automatically include either those publications which *call* themselves fanzines (such as various music-oriented titles of recent years) or even all those which are published without any intention of making a profit (and hence are labelled “amateur” rather than “professional”). To take the name of something is not necessarily to become that thing, and while it is certainly one of the characteristics of a fanzine that it is published for love rather than money – out of enthusiasm rather than commercial calculation – this is by no means the whole of the definition. There are many publications which are *like* fanzines in one or more respects (or perhaps it would be more accurate to say that fanzines are like *them* in one or more respects) but the qualities distinguishing the genuine fanzine remain unique.

Magazine publications as a whole can be divided into three categories:

(1) *PROZINES* (“Pro” from “Professional”)

Magazines published as business enterprises which make or aim to make a working profit sufficient to support either publisher or editor. Contributors are usually paid.

(1.1) *Wholly self-supporting prozines* (eg *Analog*)

(1.2) *Partly self-supporting prozines* (ie what are usually called “semi-pro” publications – in effect struggling prozines)

(2) *SUBZINES* (“Sub” from both “Subscription” and “Subsidy”)

Magazines published to be sold, either directly or as part of the return for a subscription to some organised body, but which do not make a working profit and are subsidised by their publishers or by some outside agency. Contributors and/or editors may or may not be paid.

(2.1) “*Little*” magazines eg *Interzone*, and all other non-academic publications supported by Arts Council (or equivalent) grants.

(2.2) *Academic Journals* eg *Foundation*, *Science Fiction Studies*, and all other learned (scientific, medical, legal, etc.) journals published with University or equivalent Institutional support.

(2.3) *Club and Trade Journals* eg the BSFA’s *Vector* and *Matrix*, and all Club, Union, or Trade Association publications produced wholly or

principally for a readership consisting of the members of such bodies.

(3) *AMZINES* (“Am” from “Amateur”)

Non-profitmaking publications which do not pay contributors and are published and edited by individuals wholly at their personal expense. Sometimes sold but often given away free.

(3.1) *Non-SF subject-oriented amzines* eg small Poetry, Arts or other special-interest-oriented publications not in receipt of any subsidy.

(3.2) *SF subject-oriented amzines* ie what are commonly known as “sercon” SF fanzines: publications devoted to the discussion of Science Fiction in any or all of its aspects, but not including any strong personal element.

(3.3) *Self-oriented amzines* ie “fannish” fanzines – The Real Thing – not restricted to any particular subject area and highly self-referential and personalised.

(Of the above terms, “Prozine” has long been in general use; “Subzine” and “Amzine” have occasionally been seen, though without ever being very clearly defined. “Sercon” and “fannish” are terms which are almost impossible to understand fully except through direct personal experience. As a crude illustration: the sercon fan will want to talk about Arthur C. Clarke’s latest novel, whereas the fannish fan will want to talk about Arthur C. Clarke’s sex life. However, bear in mind that this polarisation is scarcely ever fixed and absolute.)

It will be noted that the picture here is rather like a painter’s shade card, with bands of colour side by side but sometimes overlapping and merging into each other. Moving across this irregular spectrum it is obvious that there are definite differences – that the shades are by no means all the same – but it is not always easy to say where one ends and the next begins. It is also difficult to find absolutely pure primaries: everything seems to have a touch – or more than a touch – of some other colour. Thus *SF Review* is certainly a prozine (1.1 or 1.2) but has many amzine characteristics (3.2 and even 3.3); *Locus* is also a prozine (1.1 or 1.2) but has often claimed amzine (3.2) status (particularly, until recently, at Hugo-voting time) although its real character is more that of a Trade Paper (2.3) for SF groupies; *Interzone* is a subzine (2.1) but has the ambition, appearance (and word-rates) of a prozine (1.1) although in true amzine style (3.1, 3.2, 3.3) its editors are not paid; *Matrix* is certainly a subzine (2.3) but both its editors and its readers often treat it as an amzine

(3.2 and 3.3).

Some publications seem to straddle two or even all three of the major categories, and within these categories the differences are often even more blurred. However, while it is often difficult to say what specific publications *are* within the terms of these definitions, it is usually possible to form a fairly accurate estimate of what they *want* to be. In other words: forget legalistic quibbles – go by the spirit rather than the letter – and take a look not at where a publication *is* in the scale, but *which way it is pointing*.

In most cases the desired direction will be *up* – up from amzine to subzine, from subzine to prozine, from *small* prozine to *big* prozine. A certain number of publications – Trade Papers and Learned Journals – may be fairly content with their lot, but even these probably cherish dreams of a rise in status if not in circulation. If the magazines don't have ambitions for themselves *as* magazines they invariably have ambitions for their subject-matter – they want to push their trade, their expertise, their special interest.

And here the fundamental strangeness of fanzines (3.3) finally stands revealed: *fanzines do not want to be anything but fanzines, and they exist for their own sake and not to promote any outside end*. To the outsider this is the most baffling thing: fanzines are not *about* anything in particular – they are not subject-oriented and they don't make money – so what on earth are they *for*? Subject oriented amzines (3.1) may be casual or eccentric in presentation, but they are still generally understandable since they are in effect imitations on a smaller scale of known forms: subzines or prozines. Even if the subject-matter is so specialised or esoteric that no equivalent subzine or prozine actually exists, the approach and purpose are recognisably the same.

Fanzines are different. Although fanzines are amzines, amzines are not necessarily fanzines. The confusion that arises between what are really two very different breeds (3.1 and 3.3) is due to the ambiguousness and ambivalence of the category (3.2) that separates them: the SF subject-oriented amzine, or, as fans invariably call it, the sercon fanzine.

The sercon fanzine is subject-oriented, certainly, but not quite in the same way as the non-SF subject-oriented amzine. Whatever the serconists may piously hope, there is always a greater or lesser tendency to wander into fannishness (ie personalities and self-oriented concerns), if only because the readership of fannish fanzines has a considerable overlap with that of sercon fanzines, and the same people are often active in both fields. (Witness the

surprisingly large number of fannish fans who have, or have had, commercial involvement with SF.) Also, there is the rather peculiar nature of SF-as-subject.

Fans make up a very diverse bunch of people, but the one characteristic they have in common with each other and with SF is what might be described as *a belief in other possibilities*. In a word, they have *vision*. This “vision” is not necessarily either very admirable or even very sophisticated – in fact it may be cheap, tawdry and generally unpleasant, as in all those sex-and-power fantasies in which SF becomes the vehicle for costume dramas of the Fourth Reich – but it is unusual in being both a very recognisable distinguishing feature and at the same time completely non-specific. The SF fan wants to *extend* reality in some fashion – but in associating with fellow enthusiasts he is drawn to them by the instinctive recognition of the same shared desire rather than by any particular common concrete goal. As a genre, SF is unusual in its scope: it can include practically anything, whereas the other genres are restricted to a comparatively limited range of appropriate interests. (Western fans stick to cowboys, horses, guns and so on; crime fans to detectives, forensic science etc. The Mainstream (ie non-genre fiction) is too varied and diffuse to catalyse any common interest groups except by way of an equally narrow genre-type interest in specific authors.) The interest SF fans have in Science – their supposed “subject” – is usually more nominal than real. What the fans like about Science is not so much the nuts-and-bolts detail as the whole *idea*: the vision of Science as Opener of the Way to all their own (often unacknowledged) dreams and desires.

This explains both why people become *SF* fans and why even when they have largely ceased to bother with the SF product itself they may still remain *fans*. As several critics have pointed out, enthusiasm for SF is very like a kind of religious belief: the convert experiences a blinding revelation – a nebulous but tremendous moment of cosmic insight – and thereafter he *knows*. This is *it* – the Real Thing. Then the poor sod actually reads the bloody books and the initial fervour cools off a little. (Twenty-five years ago I would have been ecstatic at the sight of *a whole shop* filled with SF. These days the realisation of the dream produces nothing more than a rather queasy feeling of depression. Jesus, all those fucking hack novels – all that brainless crap about Galactic Empires....) But even if the enthusiasm for SF *as* SF wanes, the enthusiasm for the SF *idea* often remains – and in the meantime, of course, the victim has fallen into the company of likeminded individuals, if only

because these are the only people who have the remotest idea what he's talking about, and don't need to have the whole business explained to them over and over again.... And this is what fanzines are all about: an extension – however crude and clumsy – of the possibilities of life; a reflection of an intuitive, elusive, shared belief that there can be something more than what is normally on offer.

(Sounds good, don't it? You'd never think all this high-flown talk had any connection with some of the sleazy, scurrilous, foulmouthed and deranged gossip-sheets you may have come across. But it does, it does. Anybody who tries to tell you fanzines are *respectable* is a fucking liar. At least, I certainly hope so.)

In essence, the fanzine idea is the SF idea – with or without the SF. Fanzines are always distinguishable from subject-oriented amzines (3.1) by the fact that they are reader-directed, not subject-directed, and their aim is not to provide an object for passive consumption but *to fill a part in a dialogue*. The function of a fanzine is to act as a vehicle either *for* response, or *as* response. All non-fanzines, on the other hand, are characterised by the producer-consumer relationship they have with their readers: *we* produce the text, and *you* pay the money or pay the attention and that's all. The publisher/editor leads and the reader follows: response is either not required or is dictated in terms of the chosen subject. A Poetry amzine is about Poetry; a Stamp Collecting amzine is about Stamp Collecting. Unless you've got something to say about Stamp Collecting (the Subject) or Poetry (the Subject) your response is irrelevant. *The rest of your life* (apart from the Subject) is irrelevant....

In a fanzine, it's *all* relevant – if it's remotely interesting or if the writer can *make* it remotely interesting. (Dullness is dullness, in any context, and there is no sort of moral obligation on anyone to pretend otherwise). The Subject of a fannish fanzine, in fact, is no more or less than anything and everything contained in the consciousness of its producers and readers. Non-fanzine publications either want their readers' money (pay up and we'll entertain you) or their readers' attention (sit quiet and Teacher will improve your mind). Fanzine publishers don't care about the money, and they certainly don't want an audience that sits quiet. They want the readers to say or do something interesting in return.

That's the payoff. The *direct* response (ie letters of comment) to any particular fanzine is rarely very high – 20% would probably be considered

good – but this is not of vital importance. Though composed of individuals who are often independent to the point of egomania (or paranoia), the fanzine world is a communal enterprise in the sense that response to a part is apt to be seen as a contribution to the whole. One way or another, everybody pays their dues by participating – even if only by turning up to an occasional convention and buying the editor a few drinks. There is a sort of Fannish Credit System which makes elastic allowances for both past and potential performance. “Real Soon Now” is an old joke, but it is also an acknowledgement that eventually some return contribution *will* be made, directly or indirectly.

There are two important points to be made about all of the above: first, that this is a description of how things *are*, not some idealised notion of how they *ought* to be, and second, that this state of affairs results not from any set of rules, principles or ideological dogmas, but from purely functional and practical considerations. To put it another way; fanzines and fanwriting are as they are simply because it would be a waste of time and effort for them to be anything else. Given certain aims – and a lack of concern for other aims – the forms they take are actually quite logical. Thus, since fanzines are not at all concerned with the profit motive, not only is it absurd to bother collecting the trivial sums that setting a price on them would provide, but it is also absurd to seek to fashion their contents as if for a paying market. This is not so much a question of *quality* as of *kind*. The commercial aim is to appeal to as wide a range of people as possible in order to get their money; the fannish aim is to appeal to the very limited number of people who are sufficiently in tune with a certain way of thinking to make some sort of direct or indirect response. Fanzines don't *want* to appeal to a wide range of people and therefore the complaint that they are often unintelligible outside a small circle is essentially meaningless. Fanzines are *meant* for a small circle – this is the most basic part of their nature. There is no deliberate policy of exclusion or secrecy; it is simply in the whole nature of things that outsiders either have to make the effort to learn the language themselves or must stay on the outside.

This is the basic flaw in the whole concept of anthologies of fanwriting: they are attempting to repackage something highly personalised, specialised, and aimed at an informed, limited audience, in a form which is sufficiently generalised to be acceptable in a market economy geared to passive consumption. The process is self-defeating, since the whole point of fanwriting is that it provides something which is so fashioned around individual personalities that it is *not* available anywhere else, and *not* a mere

object of consumerism. The most “saleable” parts of fanwriting – those which *are* completely and readily understandable to a non-informed audience – in fact represent its least characteristic and least essential aspects.

This has little to do with the technical quality of the writing. From time to time one hears it said that such and such a piece of work is “good enough to be published anywhere”. This is meant as praise, but in the context of fanwriting it is a somewhat ambiguous compliment. Works so described may indeed be technically accomplished – but if they are so devoid of any special content that they could be published anywhere, what is the point of publishing them in a fanzine? To do so is to turn the fanzine into nothing more than a minor imitation (or, at best, very low-level rival) of publications already available elsewhere in considerably better-produced form.

Hardly seems worth the effort, does it? Indeed, it’s *not* worth the effort. (As the readers – if not the producers – of fanzines devoted largely or wholly to fiction usually realise quite quickly.) True, you can publish anything you like in a fanzine, but what the advocates of “good enough to be published anywhere” fanwriting seem unable to grasp is that if such work ever came to form the major element in fanzines then the field would soon be virtually dead. The quality of the writing might go up – but the personal interest would go down. One would feel no more personal involvement – no more need to comment or respond – than one does with a Sunday paper or a book borrowed from the local library. The fanzine would become just one more (literary) consumer object and by virtue of its inevitable production weaknesses, one at the very bottom end of the consumer market.

This is the insoluble problem which faces the fanthology editor: to choose between being incomprehensible or inauthentic, between being baffling and being misleading. On the whole, the first option is always to be preferred. It seems rather futile to entice people into fandom on a false basis – it simply postpones the moment of puzzlement.

To its credit, this collection has largely turned its back on the pursuit of any lowest common denominator of accessibility. Many of the references (and perhaps even the basic attitudes of mind) will be more or less incomprehensible (at first reading) to any newcomer. This is altogether as it should be. We will not deceive you, folks: British fans are a bunch of elitist bastards – elitist, that is, in the sense that they are concerned only with the opinions of those who are willing to participate in their particular game. This, too, is entirely as it should be: no-one is compelled to join, and no-one is

excluded by force or by rule, but it would not be reasonable for anyone simultaneously to claim membership and to reject most or all of the interests and practices which bind members together. To behave in such a fashion would be rather like joining a cricket club and immediately demanding that the pitch be dug up for a golf course. Some people approach fandom in much the same way, and then when their demands are (quite reasonably) ignored or dismissed, they proceed to develop persecution mania and to elaborate immense Conspiracy Theories.

Well, to be a fan it is only necessary to take some part in the activities recognised by other fans as falling within their special sphere of interest. If this does not appeal, or if (for whatever reason) no-one seems very interested in your efforts, then the simple and sensible answer is to go and do something else. If You don't like the game – go start your own. There is nothing either unfair or oppressive about this, since fans, after all, have no powers whatsoever of either compulsion or restraint. Anyone can publish a fanzine and anyone can attend a convention. The only real test or measure is the extent to which other fans want to know you or your work. True, if you are a dull person with little talent and few social graces it is unlikely that you will be received with great enthusiasm – but this is also the case in virtually any social setting. Fandom is not some kind of charity aimed at providing group psychotherapy, and (as already remarked) there is no moral obligation on anyone to pretend to like you or your work any more than they think you deserve. It's sad, but if you can't make it in the wider world it's very unlikely that you'll do much better here. Fans are more tolerant in some areas, since fannish values have less than the usual concern with standard social measures such as wealth or occupation, but the other side of the coin is a much greater readiness to air differences of opinion with a freedom and disregard for politeness which to newcomers is likely to seem both drastic and ruthless. This, too, is a reflection of the peculiar nature of fanzines and fanwriting. Fanzines do not improve your career, your bank balance, or your social standing (outside fandom), so there's no real reason why you shouldn't cut the crap and say exactly what you think. You may get a rough ride in return – since everyone else has the same freedom – but it's certainly a liberating experience.

All this may sound like the old, old story to the experienced, but it seems worth repeating for the (possible) benefit of new arrivals. After all, this collection is being produced for a Worldcon which will have perhaps five

thousand attendees – and of these one can guarantee that about eighty per cent will never have heard of more than one or two of the writers included here, while perhaps fifty per cent will have had little or no exposure to this sort of fanwriting. For many people “fandom” chiefly means the kind of convention circus that revolves around SF professionals and their works, and they neither know nor understand anything about writing which is neither market-oriented nor intended as a cheap imitation of commercial or academic forms.

Well, everyone to their own taste. My own view is that fandom (even in the widest sense of the word) would have about the same durability as the following of any second-rank pop star, were it not for the continuity provided by fanzines and the hardcore of those who write and publish them. God knows, fanzines are ephemeral and temporary enough, but the mark left by any convention fan is very much a case of footprints on water. It is worth noting – just to give the lie to the absurd claim that there are “convention” fans who do all the work, and “fanzine” fans who merely sit around and complain – that every single one of the contributors here has either been involved in convention organising or has made frequent contributions to convention programming. But will they be remembered for that, or for their writing?

(Disrespectful answers may be addressed to the individuals concerned. You know very well that was a rhetorical question).

Perhaps all this hammering-away at old points is unnecessary, and I should simply let the work speak for itself and let the reader sink or swim. I hope no-one would seriously claim that the writing here is “the best” British fandom can offer, but it’s not *too* bad. Many equally good (or perhaps even better) writers have been omitted – not entirely the fault of the editors, since a number of items have already been reprinted, and the intention was, in any case, to limit the selection to the period from the last British Worldcon in 1979. The past eight years have been no more or less a Golden Age than any other legendary era but much of the good material has been very firmly embedded in its context indeed: excellent in its time and place, but deprived of half its impact and meaning by being extracted. Several of the articles finally included here *are* good fanwriting (and all are at least competent as writing) and so I suppose some fans will consider this quite a good anthology. Being a man of iron peevishness I am not so easily mollified. The basic problem remains inescapable: considering each in isolation one could

make a case for the merits of each and every item – but each and every item appears here as a section cut out of the canvas of the whole scene. And one thing I hope I *have* made plain is that fanwriting, perhaps more than any other form of writing depends for its full success and meaning on the web of shared background knowledge that binds together the author and reader.

Enough, enough. Dig too deep and too often into these critical theorisings and you end up more than a little deranged, babbling of Secret Masters and the Protocols of the Elders of Fandom. That's the kind of fate which befalls those who become so blinded by visions of Perfect Fannishness that they write Histories of Fandom in which the Second World War appears merely as a period in which postal services were somewhat disrupted, thus causing serious delays

There are two famous fannish acronyms: FIAWOL (Fandom Is A Way Of Life) and FIJAGH (Fandom Is Just A Goddamn Hobby), but the truth lies somewhere between them in the form of FIAPOL (Fandom Is A Part Of Life). For functional reasons fandom does have its own unique peculiarities, but at the same time the character of what it produces in any age is very largely a reflection of the much wider world outside. There is a paradox here in that fanwriting is very much about individuals and personalities, but in reality no single individual or personality has any great importance. A true historical overview would acknowledge the fact that even the dull, the incompetent and the obnoxious have had their parts to play. (After all, what sort of a soap opera is it that has no villains and no extras for the crowd scenes?) The tendency to mythologise the lives and works of particular fans, turning them into Giants without whom the field could scarcely have existed, does indeed form something of a barrier to acceptance for anyone who has retained a less narrow and blinkered perspective. (Anthologies like this one don't help, with their implicit suggestion that by virtue of being *chosen* the authors and works featured are somehow special and significant. Not that one could grade merit any better any other way – all fan polls are more or less ridiculous, and the Fan Hugos are a complete farce).

The truth is that fanwriting is always much more influenced by what is produced *outside* the field than within it. (A Great Fannish Innovator is someone who introduces into fandom some technique or approach which has been commonplace in the rest of the world for at least ten years. For people who like to think of themselves as citizens of the future fans have a rather sad tendency to be a *long* way behind the times). Something to bear in mind is

that fanzines probably represent no more than five per cent (at the most generous estimate) of total media input for any fan, and that they form a practically invisible percentage of the total social/cultural environment. Take an example: it is readily observable that American fanzines have had no effect whatsoever on British fanwriting for the last fifteen or twenty years, but during the same period American (non-fan, non-SF) writers have had a very marked influence indeed in some quarters. Likewise, the emergence here of a markedly higher proportion of active female fans is much more a reflection of general social change than a specifically fannish development. (Well, perhaps I should qualify that by acknowledging the factor of the stimulus provided by the large group of US female fans now resident in Britain. Though quite why American women seem so keen to come over here and steal all our men is still something of a mystery. Is it that British male fans are more cultured, more depraved, or just thinner? Maybe it's our cute accents.) Anyhow, it is said that History is bunk, and it should also be said that most Fan History is complete garbage.

Ah hell, who cares anyway? Sensible people probably stopped reading this about six pages back, knowing very well that it was going to turn out to be another of those thrilling demonstrations of how to use a sledgehammer to put a really savage dent in a defenceless peanut. You'll all just have to do the best you can. You have a sort of Zen conundrum here: for as long as you need to keep asking the questions you are not ready to understand the answers. And that's not a putdown – it's just a reflection of the fact that in the end the reasons for liking (or rejecting) fandom, fanzines and fanwriting remain somewhat inscrutable. Perhaps the only sensible summing-up is to say that there's more to all this nonsense than may first meet the eye. Not a *lot* more, perhaps, but assuming you've got nothing better to do it might be worth your while to persist.

Personally, I quite like it, even though I think it's all fairly daft. But then – what isn't? And besides, I'm well known to be a notoriously perverse and irresponsible individual, erratic and unstable in behaviour, and with what many consider to be highly inappropriate ideas of which parts of life should be taken seriously. (Actually, this is all a pack of lies put about by my enemies. In reality I'm a very sweet person, famous for my charm, wisdom and thoughtful erudition, and I was recently voted Most Eligible British Fan in a secret poll. And let me tell you, kid, that's a damn sight more *use* than winning one of those fucking metal rocketships).

Anyhow, just don't say I didn't warn you. Now read on.

## The Usual Routine Brilliance

One of the several surprises likely to be experienced by the innocent visitor to these shores is the discovery that although the natives speak a sort of English, many of them will insist vehemently that they themselves are *not* English at all. It has to be remembered that while Brighton is certainly a part of England, England itself is merely one constituent of what is officially titled The United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. Even British citizens tend to become confused about this, but most do know better than to call a native of Scotland, Wales or Ulster by the despised title of *Englishman*.

The fact is that Britain is not one country but several, and although comparatively small (by non-European standards) in terms of total geographical area it contains a vast and varied collection of tribal groups, each with its own local loyalties and peculiarities of speech and custom. And the British are a xenophobic people in a quiet sort of way: they are disposed to feel quietly superior for having been born in their own particular heartland and to look down on outsiders with a mixture of pity and mild disdain. It is axiomatic that all foreigners talk funny, but in Britain there are so many regional accents that the speech of the overseas visitor is likely to be regarded as little more peculiar than that of the interloper from the next county.

All of this is to explain in part why my early impressions of Dave Langford were somewhat ambivalent. Britain is certainly not one homogenous whole, and even in England itself there are marked divisions, particularly between North and South. Those who imagine that all Englishmen sound like Noel Coward or Laurence Olivier and behave in the manner of Jane Austen or Georgette Heyer are the dupes of media fantasy. What is seen on the screen and depicted in novels is in most cases what might be called the Official South East English Image. Only actors ever spoke like that, and only a select few ever lived like that, so the persistence of this false and foolish ideal has long been a cause of resentment in the dour North, where men are men and converse in slow and virile grunts.

Thus when I first encountered Langford at a convention in 1976 I was inclined to view him with the beady eye of tribal suspicion. I knew that he lived in Reading and was therefore some kind of effete Southerner; he had an evident penchant for fancy language; and he had taken his degree at Oxford,

that bastion of Southern social hegemony. And he did indeed show a tendency to babble at very unNorthern machine-gun speed, to utter a peculiarly high-pitched laugh (a sort of falsetto snigger) and to display a general air of being too clever by half. There was a doom-laden suggestion of that most tiresome of Oxbridge types: the weightily self-consequential Young Fogey who affects a jocular pseudo-pomposity, has secret yearnings for sprigged waistcoats with watch and chain, and is bibulously noisy in the sublime confidence that his every honked word of facetiousness or cultural namedropping is hung upon by an admiring audience. In other words, a colossal pain in the arse.

And he wasn't really like that at all.

Well, none of us is perfect. And the British Class system is a truly wonderful thing – far too complex, ambiguous and irrational to be explained in less than several volumes. Suffice it to say that it was gradually borne in upon me that my initial antagonism was (as usual) based on attitudes and emotions which were somewhat discreditable, if not downright ignoble.

To put the matter in context: I myself have always belonged to the Brooding Layabout Class, a social sector distinguished chiefly by slothful scepticism and the general rejection of all ambitions involving work, respectability or success (on the grounds that we already have quite enough trouble getting out of bed in the morning). Thus the factors of regional and social hostility were mere incidental rationalisations of a more fundamental prejudice. In truth, I had to accept that I hated Langford simply because he was *superior*. Not only was the bastard *taller* than me, but probably *cleverer* as well. (He actually understood what to do with semi-colons, by God!) And, most terrible of all, he was certainly a damn sight more *industrious*. Yes, he wrote articles, he produced fanzines, he organised conventions, he appeared on programme items, he sold short stories, he even sold *whole bloody books*. Like every idle dabbler who has occasionally thought of doing something (some time) in the Art or writing line I was once more being cruelly reminded of my own inadequacies. (The years go by... Well, Conrad didn't start till he was nearly forty... Damn, I'm forty two... Well, how about Grandma Moses? That gives me thirty years breathing space – I might get lucky and die before I have to do anything.) How could he manage it? It wasn't *fair*. The guy was obviously some kind of awful mutant. Who did he think he was, being so much better than the rest of us?

But let justice be done – reality was not as black as first appearances

suggested. True, Langford lived in the South, but I had to admit that some of my best friends lived there too (poor buggers), and in any case he was really a Welshman. And he'd been to Oxford, but only for a degree in Physics. (It could have been so much worse – English Literature at Cambridge, for instance.) Also, as least *some* of his literary expertise was tolerable, since he'd spent part of his University career programming a computer to write in the style of H.P. Lovecraft, and attempting to seduce young women by reciting the whole of Edgar Allen Poe's "The Raven". (As is well known, British fans take a keen interest in bodily functions, and since Lovecraft's frequent references to nameless mephitic stench and unspeakable green ichor suggest that he spent a lot of time taking laxatives and picking his nose he is regarded as basically okay. Likewise, Poe is approved of for having been generally miserable and having died of drink. Any objections to poetry are practical rather than ideological: many British fans have trouble articulating their own names and addresses, let alone whole lines of verse .)

And the Cosmic Balance always re-asserts itself, reminding us that for every gain there is a loss, and that for every purchase there must be a price. In the beginning Langford was indeed the widely and highly praised Boy Wonder – but that was before the trap of escalating expectations closed around him. The better one performs, the better still one is expected to perform. It is not enough to surpass others: one must also surpass oneself – every time. Of course, there is still a certain amount of resigned and grudging recognition to be gained: this very year (having worked up to it with lesser prizes such as the Fan Writing Hugo he picked up in 1985) Langford somehow managed to carry off the Leeds Conception's prestigious Ova Award for Most Erudite Fan. Rather unaccountably he failed to respond with the expected remarks on Nietzsche and the Triumph of the Ova Man, but it was still success of a kind. The assembled fannish elite applauded with tolerant cynicism. Most erudite fan? Why, son, everybody knows *that...*

Yes, my passions are soothed and consoled by the knowledge that in the end it has been Dave Langford's cruel fate to come to be taken for granted. Good? Of course he's good – why isn't he *better*? A new Langford article appears and the fans flip casually through its pages –

"Huh," they say, "the usual routine brilliance. Why can't Langford give us something *new*?"

Thus it is that I am finally purged of all base envy and jealousy: Langford gets the plaudits, but I get the easy time. How much more sensible

of me to do so little, thus ensuring that people fall about the place in paroxysms of astonishment if I do anything at all! Poor Dave, on the other hand, has to keep feverishly labouring to reach greater and greater heights merely to maintain a precarious place on the ladder of critical approval.

So be kind. Show compassion. Buy the man a drink and let him cry on your shoulder. (Actually, this will take several drinks, since he has a disgracefully large capacity.) After all, despite being very funny and a good writer and winning all those awards and all the rest of that stuff, it has to be admitted that Dave Langford is not so bad. He's not *really* a Southerner, and he *did* make a sort of attempt to blow up Oxford one time. So I don't really mind him being such a famous success. Not more than you'd expect.

# A Clear Sight

When I was seven my eyes were tested, and as a result I was given my first pair of glasses. Thirty five years later I can still remember the astonishment and wonder with which I saw the world closely for the first time. I was and am very shortsighted, unable to see distinctly for more than a distance of six inches. Life was a soft-edge blur of ambiguous shapes and colours, like a particularly fuzzy Impressionist painting. I took this formlessness for granted; I knew nothing else. Then, instantaneously, the lenses reveal detail and intricacy I had scarcely imagined existed: a dazzling sharpness that burst upon my consciousness like the revelation of a divine order of being. That is no exaggeration; I have never quite ceased to marvel at the miracle of clear sight. And it required no very sophisticated intelligence to understand from the very beginning what this most literal of transfigurations must imply: under a coloured fog of first impressions the world might be so much more than it seemed.

Since that moment of discovery I have never been able to accept received wisdom without question, and I have had no use at all for obvious lies, pretences, or wilful obscurities. I have always wanted to see *more*, and to see more clearly. Life is too short for any delay in this attempt, and my first seven years were already lost by an accident of physiology. Ten years later a different kind of accident confirmed this sense of priorities: I lay bleeding in the tangled wreckage of a car crash, wondering if I was dying. Contrary to popular notion, the prospect of death does not concentrate the mind wonderfully. I was sick, afraid and confused. Yet this muddle of pain and fear did produce one hard abiding thought: as I stared at a patch of very pale blue sky through the inverted shattered windscreen I understood that death made a nonsense out of all personal vanities and ambitions. Life was strange, mysterious, and infinitely precarious; to worry about the details of comfort or status or conformity was absurd. Once personal survival was assured, everything else was merely a matter of adjustment according to individual taste or convenience.

These early perceptions have not led or spurred me to any great triumphs. Indeed, it could be said that they are responsible for my general lack of interest in worldly success, since I have never been able to feel that

most of the things other people consider important are anything except fantastic games – personal idiosyncrasies arbitrarily elevated to the status of universal laws. That statement is neither a claim for merit nor an excuse, simply an observation. Facts exist whether one likes them or not, and truth is the ultimate fascination.

# Bloody Moon

or

## Sweetness, Light, Eclipse

It's all in the stars. What else? Here down below we *think* we're in charge, and go busily to and fro, full of the vast self-consequence of our own affairs, but meanwhile other gears and levers are shifting, and all our febrile diligence is silently mocked by the inexorable grind of the Great Machine in the Sky....

(And so? So, a well-known Professor of English gets brained with a wine bottle; I myself am somewhat impolite to this other guy, and he takes a few shots at me with a pistol; a visiting SF writer comes close to having his head unscrewed; a Guest of Honour goes completely apeshit crazy. Plus the usual stuff. Fever, madness, paranoia – and where's the blame? Must be the moon, the bloody moon. What else?)

But in the beginning it's Friday October 17th 1986, and darkness is falling as I sit on the train to Leeds. I stare out at the lights slipping past in the dusk, but my attention is unfocused. This is no new journey: I must have made the trip one or two thousand times. But the very familiarity of the experience brings a sense of dislocation from reality. Like the endless repetition of some mantra this rerun of landscape numbs meaning and abolishes time; the distinction between *then* and *now* wavers and grows thin. Without an effort of concentration I am uncertain whether my reveries encompass the present world at all, or whether they are merely revivals of old memory loops, duplications of the phantasmagoria of the past. I am here now, I have been here before, but am I experiencing fact, memory or dream?

Perhaps this is merely the byproduct of fatigue. I recollect another occasion as a tired traveller when I surfaced from a period of inattention and realised, with detached mild interest, that I no longer knew anything at all about who I was or where I was going. For perhaps half a minute I could see quite clearly that I was on a train somewhere rushing through the night from one place to another, but the rest was blank. And I remember feeling that it would be rather awkward if I failed to pick up some clue as to my own identity and purposes before reaching the unknown destination. Total

amnesia is so embarrassing....

The memories came back, of course. Or did they? For me, this sometimes feels like a serious question, not just another conceit of the literary imagination. Every night I sleep, every night I dream, and quite often I have woken in the morning perplexed as to which of my memories are of the daytime world and which are of that other place.

That *other* place.... Because it is evident that there *is* some other place, if only in my head. This sleep-world becomes tattered and dispersed on waking; it fades away to still-real but indefinable fragments, like memories of a touch or a scent or the emotion produced by a burst of music. But always it *continues*: it has a submerged serial existence that resurfaces again and again, so that to dream is not merely to fall into arbitrary novelties but to *return* to a strange yet essentially familiar sphere of perception and being.

Yeah, yeah, right – fucking fine writing, eh wot? (mutter mutter). Look, don't get metaphysical with *me*, kid. This is all nothing but tiredness; pure and simple. Yes indeed, 1986 has been a wearing kind of year – just one damn thing after another – and a succession of shocks and bizarre turnarounds of fortune has left me feeling bruised and buffeted, permanently trembling on the edge of small hysterias. Hell, every time I think I've hit a calm patch, something *else* comes along, and then I'm back to being bent out of shape all over again. It's no wonder my resistance is low and I have trouble holding the line between cool reason and these twilight wanderings.

So I look out into the blue dark and see fleeting images: aimless, distorted, fragmentary yet significant. This is the through train from Carlisle, and consists of a dozen old-style side-corridor coaches rather than the usual two-car diesel set. There is a double association here with the steam railways of my childhood in general, and with a particular childish fancy that any night journey always inspired. Like so many others of my generation I was first drawn to SF by the adventures of Dan Dare, Pilot of the Future, in the old *Eagle* comic. In those days of innocence spaceships were not the shiny, sterile, hightech artifacts they later became – they were exciting, yes, but not impossibly distant from everyday reality. Thus I knew that the train hurtling through the night was also the rocket to Venus; the same flickering wan lights, the nose-tickling smell of smoke and oil, the roar and sway, the illimitable blackness rushing past. (And did spaceships really have stained wood panelling and webbed-string luggage racks? But of course! Ask any fifties fan.)

To Venus, to Venus! But Venus was a Planet of Peril: deadly rays girdled its mysterious face, and ship after ship failed to break the barrier, shuddering and disintegrating under the frightful stress of malignant cosmic powers.... Only Dan Dare and his small but intrepid band of loyal companions (“I loved the Captain in my own way although he was insane the poor bastard this was only partly his fault the conditions were intolerable this will never –” Oh, shut *up*, Malzberg) survived to thwart the unspeakable schemes of the sinister Mekon and his hordes of green-skinned Treens.

Yes, very science-fictional. But even more science-fictional are the memories of earlier in the week: the shiny slippery polished floors of the hospital’s empty corridors at two am; the silent white-coated attendants wheeling machines loaded with cylinders and gauges; the net of wires and tubes centred on my father’s bed, the green glow of the ECG screen, with its wavering line and flickering figures acting out a heartless parody of some pointless and interminable video game.

Well, I was heartless enough myself. Mostly I just wished for it all to be over, for a release from waiting and for a final discharge of all the frozen tension of anticipation. Too long, too much, too long.

In life, my father had an unfortunate tendency towards discursive and exhaustive elaborations upon even the simplest statements. One could foresee the actual message long before its painstaking and painful final delivery, and it was often necessary to repress an urge to shout at him to get the damn thing over and done with. Watching him die, I fretted under much the same cruel desire. I wanted to yell: Oh, get on with it, get *on* with it. It seemed that his sad talent for unendurable prolongation was staying with him to the last. Would there never be an end? Arrival and departure – false alarm – arrival and departure – returning once more to sit by the bedside, stiff and aching, stinking with the peculiarly acrid sweat of dread and exhaustion – this grim ritual played and replayed and played again. In all it lasted only four days, but by the finish sunlight seemed a strange artificial phenomenon: a fleeting and temporary unnatural break in endless night. And then finally, at three o’clock on the Wednesday morning, I was called for the last time, and found it was true what was often said: a dead face does indeed look waxen.

And so back to the train, to my spaceship roaring through the night – the one eternal black night, though now the moon is rising. But an odd kind of moon – I am sure it was almost full when last I looked, yet now it seems a lumpish sort of crescent: not the usual smooth sickle, but rather a disc with a

great bite taken from one of its lower quarters. I stare, and even as I watch it seems that more of the white face is gnawed away. Strange. The effect is not produced by clouds – the sky is slightly hazy but fairly clear. So what is going on?

Eclipse. Vaguely I recollect a mention seen in some newspaper. On every orbit, of course, the moon must fall into earth's shadow, but this is one of the less frequent occasions on which the event will be visible to us in Britain. I feel slightly relieved by the explanation – in this current state of disequilibrium my stream of consciousness is sufficiently murky already without being further muddled by mysterious signs and portents.

Leeds. As I walk down the platform and through the ticket barrier the clangour of the station echoes only dully, as though half-muffled by a heaviness of the air. It is like the moment before a storm: the lights, too, have that grisly quality of being strained through roiling masses of brown and yellow cloud. In a moment the violet glare of the lightning flash will split these umber shadows, branching down from Heaven like the illuminated vein of God, all its capillaries ablaze....

Fucking hell, but it's becoming more and more obvious that I could do with a drink. And there, to my great relief, are the Ashworths standing outside the Station Bar with glasses in their hands, watching the moon be eaten alive. (Yes, I certainly need a drink and I could also do with some company before I start quoting bits of the Book of Revelations and screaming prophecies about the Opening of the Seventh Seal and the Pouring Out of the Vials of Wrath.)

I join them with a pint of my own and we stand together on the pavement watching the final moments of the moon's overshadowing. Taxis hoot and growl past a few feet away and passengers hurry in and out with no more than an incurious glance, but we are Science Fiction people and we know an SF event when we see one.

Indeed it is an event which has that unique flavour of the alien and the strange that is the mark of the almost-forgotten authentic SF experience. Above the city lights the haze is tinged with a faint yellow ochre reflection of the sodium streetlamps, and as the Earth's umbra eats away its satellite's final quarter the sphere becomes a kind of ghostly Blood Orange: a pallid, swollen fruit mysteriously suspended in the dark forest of the sky. Then the eclipse is complete – but the disc does not disappear: it still shows as a weakly glimmering outline, like a globe of smoked glass whose inner surface runs

with thin blood. The effect is curious: a suggestion of something infinitely distant and feeble, yet also infinitely sinister.

We watch, and if they too have any thoughts such as mine no one mentions them except as fragmentary exclamation. Instead we exchange the usual gossip. It seems an appropriately lurid moment to tell them the news of a recent party in London: as a result of some altercation Kate Solomon has socked Tom Shippey over the head with a wine bottle (causing much gore and general excitement but no permanent injury). Hazel is duly shocked but Malcolm is merely amused. After all, he says, as an expert in Anglo Saxon and Viking weaponry savage old Prof Tom ought to be ready to deal with a mere battleaxe, and he who swears by the sword should also be sufficiently quick on the draw himself. Personally I take a rather less casual line, since I find it hard to minimise an act which could easily have been fatal. On the other hand, I do know from experience that Shippey is inclined to be both irascible and rather drastic in his own responses: more than once he has settled an argument by turning me upside down and dropping me on my head. (Not particularly hard – the worst of it is when all the loose change falls out of your pockets and hits you in the face.) So very likely there are two sides to the story. And, equally likely, in a case of this sort the rights and wrongs of the affair will never be fully resolved.

Meanwhile, to callous souls such as Malcolm and I it is a choice piece of gossip: a gory but interesting addition to the lore and legend of local fandom. Yes, in afterdays by the firesides of the cold Northlands they will unfold the Saga of Shippey Shippeyson, and to the story of Burnt Njal will be added the tragic tale of Bonked Tom.

And so at length we leave the eclipse and pass on to the pub. It is the usual Friday meeting in the West Riding: a random selection of anything from two to ten of the locals gathered together to drink, argue, insult each other, and talk about fanzines, conventions, and even occasionally Science Fiction. This evening is nothing special, but for a while I enjoy myself, though I am aware that this is no more than a temporary remission. The fact is that every nerve in my body has been scraped, stretched and twisted to such a pitch of painful tension that I feel I will first vibrate then snap if anyone so much as touches me. Attempting to soothe this inner rawness I put away even more beer than usual and by the time the Ashworths leave to catch their early train I am well afloat. Not that it seems to do me much good. This is the sort of drunkenness in which one feels to have gone straight from dry

sobriety to the most dismal of hangovers without any intervening period of enjoyment. In fact, scarcely ten minutes later I'm suffering all the murderous despair of a trapped stoat, since the computer freaks have switched the conversation into the channels of their jargon-ridden fancy. Even in less fraught conditions I would find this tedious, but in present circumstances it has all the oppressive horror of one of those nightmares in which one struggles against deadly paralysis while some loathsome, shapeless, black *thing* draws inexorably closer.

Abruptly, I stand up and leave. If I stay I will only start shouting at everyone or do something even more deplorable. Outside, the sky has clouded over and the moon is no longer visible. I walk round City Square to the Station. Once again, the lights and clamour of the night seem somehow subterranean, strained through thick veils of heavy darkness. The passers-by are white-faced worms on two legs: hateful and detestable. At the Station I look in the Bar, but it is crowded – no room to sit down. There is no train for half an hour yet. I return to the West Riding.

No one has noticed my absence, and I sit and sulk for a while over a fresh drink. Eventually, making an effort, I rejoin the conversation.

The short interlude has calmed me somewhat, but my general vileness of temper is probably still all too obvious, so I attempt to make a joke of it by remarking that it's a good thing Steven Glover isn't here since I feel like killing someone, and he would be a natural first choice.

The others agree. Glover is a recent arrival on the Leeds Group scene, and his presence has not inspired strong sentiments of approval. As with fandom in general, the way in which newcomers arrive and are assimilated is always slightly mysterious: people just seem to turn up and hang around until either they become a regular face or they disappear for good. Contrary to all the stories of closed-circle exclusiveness, the process is mainly one of self-selection. In a small group, strangers are a welcome diversion, and they are encouraged to speak until it is established whether they are potentially interesting, or just surplus driftwood cast up by freak or mischance. The obvious dimwits and the otherwise out-of-place (like the Blake's Seven enthusiast who *would* retell the plot of every episode, and the UFO nut who modestly confessed to having written this five hundred word novel in which the earth is overrun by aliens disguised as apartment blocks) are not hurled forth bodily, but they are encouraged discreetly (by benign neglect) to piss off some place else. And so they usually do, since even the least alert

eventually realise when they are not making much of a social hit.

Ah, would that it were so simple in the case of Glover. Unfortunately, he seems impervious to the politer sort of snub, and it is becoming apparent that nothing short of beating him round the head with an iron bar will convince him that he is not the world's number one conversationalist, complete with a mission to educate everyone within a ten foot radius. His presence is a kind of aural blight, like that created by those people who *will* insist on sharing their taste in radio and records with everyone else in the street. Originally from Ulster, he is curly-haired, bearded and wears glasses – a rather taller version of the Glasgow (Fake) Bob Shaw, and with much the same natural charm.

(“Oh, he’s not *that* bad,” I hear someone say. “Come on – be fair.” But why? If I can’t stand him, I can’t stand him, and what has fairness got to do with it? Perhaps he practices Secret Virtues in the middle of the night, but so what? Fair or not, I know he arouses feelings of deepest antipathy in me. I have no very concrete reasons for disliking him (except his appearance, his manner, his conversation, and the fact that he exists at all) but why should I *need* pretexts? It is, as they say, just one of those things, and there’s no arguing with *that*.)

It is just at this very moment, when everyone is remarking cheerfully on his absence, that the man himself appears in the doorway. He flashes a complacent smile of greeting on all within – Yes folks, your evening is now complete: I am here at last – and turns back towards the bar. Although there is still half an hour of drinking time for the Leeds residents suddenly everyone agrees that it is time to go. There is a precipitate mass-retreat through the side door and I am left alone.

Well, fucking hell, this is too much. Abruptly I am filled with an immense rage. Why should this smug-looking bore have the power to empty the whole room? True, I was leaving anyway, but I am maddened by the thought that now this is more of a flight than a mere departure. We are being driven like sheep – and not by some wolf, but by a kind of conversational equivalent of the Speaking Clock. To hell with it. To fucking *hell* with it.

I walk down the long bar to where he stands waiting to be served.

“Listen” I say, tapping him on the shoulder, “why don’t you do us all a big favour and just *fuck off*.”

“What?”

“Just *piss off*. And don’t come back.”

I walk to the main door and out. Well at least I've said what was on my mind – one small cause for good cheer

I am standing on the pavement, summoning up the co-ordination of brain and limb necessary to cross the road, when I hear a couple of sharp cracks. I look round, vaguely expecting to see the sparks of fireworks. (A few weeks before Bonfire Night some fool always seems to start tossing bangers around.) Another explosion sounds, right beside my ear, and I turn round fully.

Sweet Jesus, it's Glover, hopping from one foot to another in a perfect frenzy and loosing off shots from a pistol at my head. For a moment I am too astonished to move.

"Next time you insult a real person, make sure they don't have real bullets!" he shouts. The gun is merely clicking now, and he swears at its failure to fire.

What? Well, come to think of it, if those *were* real bullets I'd undoubtedly have had my skull blown off by this time. And it certainly looks like a real gun. But how would I know? Britain is a country where you can pass your whole life without setting eyes on a genuine weapon outside a museum or on a TV screen.

At this point my primary emotion is total stupefaction. Having just purged my own feelings of aggression I have no impulse to react violently. Indeed, if anything, I feel slightly embarrassed, being aware that I am the one to blame for this wildly improbable display. Holy shit, the guy's gone completely round the twist – what have I done?

More or less on automatic pilot I begin to walk across the street. This whole business is so unbelievably daft I cannot assimilate it, and the only thing to do seems to be to get as far away as possible. I need to lie down till my brain recovers. Glover lopes beside me, gabbling excitedly, but what with the drink and the gun-shock I pick up no sense. All the way to the Station he follows me, snapping his pistol and cursing because it still won't fire. I feel decidedly awkward, like a person who has been singled out for attention by some particularly loud and obvious street-crazy.

(It's fortunate that no Police happen to be in the area at this moment. In these days of jumpiness about the IRA the spectacle of an Irishman shouting and waving a gun around in a public place would probably prompt very drastic action, with all the questions being asked afterwards from beside the hospital bed.)

Finally, Glover gallops off into the night. All this time he hasn't touched me, except with a few flecks of sprayed saliva. I'm left to board my train, still half in a trance, but with the occasional giggle of nervous hysteria breaking out. Fucking hell what a thing. What a fucking thing. What a fucking hell of a thing.

Totally bemused, I return home. In the days that follow I relive my bizarre experience. Back when I was a TAFF candidate I used to have morbid fantasies about going to America and being shot by a mad editor who didn't like my views of US fanzines. I often wondered how I'd handle it – how I'd react to the threat of the gun – whether I'd try to jump the bastard or just go down grovelling and yelling for mercy.

Well, now I know: my reaction is neither heroism nor cowardice but simply dumb astonishment. For a few seconds I really think it's happening: a man with a gun is trying to put a hole through me. And, naturally, I am so mesmerised by honest-to-God sense-of-wonder that I just stand there and don't do a damn thing.... The only consolation is that this seems like another good reason to be eternally grateful I didn't win TAFF. In the USA they *do* have real bullets, and even some zitbrained American fan could hardly miss from that range.

More days pass, and life drops down again to the mundane. In particular I'm worried by my health. Very likely the pain I'm experiencing reflects no more than the kind of disordered digestion that stress usually provokes in my system, but my father's death, not surprisingly, has made me more conscious than usual of intimations of mortality. When I reach the stage of taking my pulse every ten minutes I decide to get sensible, and pay one of my rare visits to the Doctor.

"Probably an ulcer," he says, after the usual poke-and-prod session. "You've got the build for it"

Tough shit, eh? Those short fat characters merely get heart attacks, but us long and elegant types have to get a bloody ulcer. Still, at least it means I'm not going to drop dead before Novacon.

Pete Lyon drives me down to Coventry. On the way we stop off for a conference with his collaborator on a video game called *Karate Kid*. As already indicated, computers do not exactly enthral me, and video games are only marginally more appealing. Pete's colour graphics are nice, but the game itself looks like the usual zap-and-dodge reflex-response routine. Just like a William Gibson novel: the construction is clever, the pacing is fast, the

action is continuous – and the whole business is so fucking brainless it bores me into a coma.

Ah hell, I'm only jealous because I can't handle all that speed. Truth is, my own reflexes are so lousy that the Space Invaders usually swarm all over me inside thirty seconds. And could I do any better faced with the real thing? Not on recent evidence. The best I can hope for is an undeserved posthumous reputation for bravery, on account I'm too damn slow to start running before I get shot.

Well, I never was too sharp in that direction, and now time has not so much dulled the edge as snapped off half the blade. Suddenly, I feel stricken with years. Arriving at the De Vere, I am reminded that it was only nine years ago that I turned up here for an Eastercon with no more than a fiver and some sandwiches in a paper bag, and got by on about eight hours sleep (on the floor) for the whole drunken weekend.

But now I have to have a room and a bed of my own, because I know all too well that my decrepit old body is going to need plenty of resting-up just to survive at all.

I am sharing with one of the convention team who has a strange sounding name (something like Dev Revelov) which he assures me is not Estonian (or whatever) but merely the Hebraic version of a piece of ordinary English. Anyway, neither one of us is acquainted with the other, and apart from a few polite exchanges it stays that way, since he is usually rushing off somewhere else being brisk and dynamic. This suits me fine, since I am not feeling capable of explaining myself and I wish to indulge in certain unspeakable practices demanding strict seclusion. Consuming Weetabix with powdered milk is not the kind of thing I like to do in front of an audience.

Yes, I have succumbed to a valetudinarian concern for my health so far as to adopt a sort of dietary plan. A combination of junk food and beer is always rather hard for the interior, and with an ulcer it is likely to be even more wearing. So at regular intervals throughout the weekend I retire to pacify my stomach with this rather unappetising but solid cereal. There is a certain melancholy satisfaction in labouring through the task – a feeling of moral duty sternly fulfilled – but there is also a slight prevailing undertone of self-pity. Bloody hell, the old principle of going for broke and living a life of reckless abandonment and excess is all very well, but where does it get you? Stuck all alone in some lousy hotel bedroom, eating Weetabix, sucking your false teeth and listening to the whine and rattle of your insides – that's where

it gets you. Twenty years of gay dissipation, and then your guts are totally fucked-up for good. Oh, the horror, the horror....

And in keeping with the prevailing theme this particular Novacon has more than a touch of dark gloom and desperation – shades of which are reflected from the start in the face of Chairman Tony Berry. A concatenation of organisational foulups has resulted in half the featured speakers being unlikely to appear, plus even more than the standard crop of minor disasters. Berry's opening speech of welcome is so defensively doom-laden and cringingly apologetic that one expects him to conclude by offering everyone double their money back, then hurling himself out of the nearest window. Afterwards, I try to cheer him up by promising that as a former member of the Leeds Group he can absolutely rely on the convention being given a report which is no worse than usual.

(The story bang up to date: maddened almost beyond endurance by carping criticisms, Chairman Tony finally snaps when an American fanzine publishes what purports to be an assessment of “Eligible British Fans” in which he is described as “squeaky clean” and “terminally boring”. As a result of this, for his next public appearance his name will be changed to Tony Stallone, and each bulging bicep emerging from his sleeveless JJJ (John Jarrold Jerkin) will be tattooed with the portrait of a striking cobra with machine gun and the legend DIE, MOTHERFUCKERS. You wanna make something of it?)

Well, whether or not the programme items have their promised speakers is not a matter of compelling importance for me, since I see no reason to vary my usual routine of hanging round the bar and becoming steadily more and more paralytic. All that one needs to make this wholly satisfactory is the company of one or more cronies with whom to exchange mordant observations on life, art, absent friends, present shitheads and all the other topics of the hour. On this occasion my convention soulmate turns out to be Vanessa Toulmin, she of the long blonde hair, most often seen in the company of John Jarrold. The man himself fails to appear this time, either because he is still saving money for his trip to America or because he forgot what he was supposed to do next when he came home from the pub. Vanessa is therefore impelled to fall back on Jarrold-substitute West.

(Well, we *do* bear a very slight passing resemblance, though my profile is generally considered more distinguished. Also, I don't sing as much. But did you know that in other respects JJ is so public spirited that he carries a

Kidney Donor Warning Card? Live long and prosper, John. The thought of all your internal organs being sealed up in so much reinforced concrete is somehow just too depressing.)

Being the offspring of a practising White Witch, Vanessa is naturally well-versed in much occult lore, and thus in addition to the usual subjects we are able to pass the time agreeably in esoteric namedropping and the exchange of a few minor spells and talismans. (Must try harder, girl, that bloody wart is as big as ever.) However, after a while I become conscious of.... something. There is a *presence*. My aura-detector informs me that close at hand lurks a force not entirely favourably inclined towards me. Narrowly I scrutinise the immediate neighbourhood, and after a couple of sweeps it registers that the palefaced dark-bearded fellow with the committee badge has, in fact, been hanging round us for some considerable time, apparently for no particular reason.

The next moment I feel a thrill of excitement, and turn to gaze admiringly at Vanessa with a new and heightened respect. Can it be – indeed, it *must* be – that this is her *Familiar* present here in what one might call Company Form, such being a more discreet and socially acceptable alternative to the usual shapes of horned toad or fleabitten old moggy?

“Oh, *him*,” says Vanessa. “I’ve no idea. He just keeps following me around.”

Well, win some, lose some. If the bearded stranger does not turn out to be a manifestation of occult powers at least he turns out to be an agreeable prop to my vanity. Throughout the weekend we play a sort of silent game of musical chairs: every time I leave Vanessa’s side to go to the bar, the toilet, or elsewhere, he edges in to take my place. Sometimes he merely hovers, palely loitering, other times he actually takes my seat and even says a word or two. On my return, however, he invariably slides away again, ceding the place.

Gosh, if I had less trouble with details like standing up and sitting down (not to mention walking around) I would feel positively macho. This is real Male Territorial Dominance stuff, and I have to restrain the impulse to snort, paw the ground, and let out a few bullmoose bellows. (I’m not going to take risks like hitting myself on the chest.) However, the upswelling of masculine conceit is somewhat restrained by basic realism. I know that as an archaeology student Vanessa has a professional interest in old bones, and besides, she probably finds it convenient to take shelter from an excess

supply of rather gauche young punks (with no small talk) in the shadow of a degenerate (but conversational) old fart like myself. As she doubtless knows, my intentions are no more honourable than anyone else's, but neither are they very serious, given my general decrepitude and mood. This is a convention at which I am expecting nothing and looking for nothing beyond a little light diversion.

Just the same, it *is* pleasant to sit at ease with a goodlooking woman and enjoy a completely relaxed and idle conversation. Sex, after all, is not merely confined to the climactic instant of fucking; there are subtler moments and less tangible pleasures which can be savoured without either heavy engagement or prejudice to existing commitments. One of the insights of growing older is that the apparently extreme limitations of (say) the Victorian era are revealed as less hopelessly constricting than originally supposed. One should have at least the *option* of all possible outlets, of course, but there is no single obligatory and fixed channel for eroticism.

(Well, what the hell, there's no use talking about it – my sex life has never been quite the same since I got false teeth. These damn dentures float around so much that either they're half way down your throat or you get so confused about what's where and which is which that you end up gnawing lumps off your own tongue. See why I occasionally think wistfully of something a bit more refined?)

Anyhow, back on the sordid fannish level, I guess a good part of the pleasure does lie in the faintly malicious satisfaction of being proved a companion to be preferred over younger but less ept competition. Just goes to show, kids, after a lifetime of doing it wrong, you too may finally start picking up a few hints on how to make yourselves agreeable. (By which time, of course you'll probably be too damned old to care. Which was the whole secret in the first place.)

Ah, *si la jeunesse savait – si la vieillesse pouvait*, as I should have remarked at the time. (Translation: If you young buggers only knew it, and if us old pooves could only do it.)

And that's the kind of convention it is: mostly a case of sitting around feeling frail and elderly, meditating on the classier kind of *Readers Digest* aphorism and putting together a few foggy thoughts of my own. "Foggy" is the right word, since the curious feeling that I am living in perpetual twilight still persists. Even the daytime landscape is subterranean: an underground world in which someone is momentarily shining a larger-than-usual lamp....

Though a modern hotel, the De Vere, too, has a cavellike atmosphere, with its low ceiling, windowless rooms and shadowy lighting. And not much in the way of either heating or ventilation. The management seems to be pursuing the economical policy of allowing the temperature to be set by the guests' own body-heat, so that one either swelters or shivers in accordance with the number of the room's occupants. Still, perhaps this is subtle indication from on high that there *is* a place for the dimmer sort of neofan in the Cosmic Plan: a well-organised Con Committee would keep a flock of such cattle penned up in one corner of the room and herd them in or out whenever the temperature needed raising or lowering. Yes, in this Universe of ours *nothing* need be wasted.

Oh, what dreadful elitism.... Still, this is the invariable effect of the sight of fans gathered together en masse. They are not an edifying or attractive sight, and one feels a sort of helpless, fascinated horror at being stuck in the middle of such a set of foolish, flabby, hairy, strangely dressed weirdos. Fans, to put it bluntly, are neither beautiful nor impressive. In fact, they're a bunch of rather seedy-looking wimps.

On the other hand.... Well, on the other hand, the fact that fans are wimps does have certain compensations. They get noisy but they hardly ever get violent, and there is a complete absence of the sort of physical threat that is always more or less present at gatherings where alcohol and strangers mix together for any length of time. If, for instance, one put a group of the kind of customers I used to serve as a barman into a convention situation, they would probably start killing each other before the weekend was over. (They are inclined to do it often enough even with limited opening hours.) Fans, fortunately for us, don't think in such terms, but it should perhaps be kept in mind that there *are* many people for whom the possibility of violence is so commonplace as to be taken for granted. I used to move in that kind of company myself – more by the chances of a somewhat varied career at the lower end of the socio-economic scale than from any great sense of self-identification, but maybe I am thus more aware than some others of what can happen.

But surely *everyone* knows about violence? It's in the papers and on the TV screens every day of our lives. Quite so – and the result is that for many people the endless repetition of such images merely has a distancing effect: violence is something that happens somewhere else to some other person. The subject becomes disconnected from reality and shifted into a kind of

fantasy dimension. We watch actors pretend to be killed or beaten up *for entertainment* – even though anyone who has been within a mile of such experiences knows how horrible they can be.

I am not at all romantic about physical damage. I have managed to escape the real stomp-your-face full treatment (so far) but I have been knocked about a bit (including being hit so hard it took me a week to recover), and from a couple of road accidents I also know the pain of other injuries. It all *hurts*. In fact it hurts like hell. Physically, I am a coward. Whatever fortitude I possess is purely mental – my body just doesn't want to know. When threatened, about the best I can manage is to stand still and not run instantly away.

It seems to be difficult or impossible to improve upon this beyond a certain point: one can toughen the mind but the body will still cringe. I had a recent demonstration of this when having a drink in a local pub. I was standing at the bar when a fight broke out behind me, a dozen feet away. There are two kinds of pub fight: the ones in which the combatants are trying to do each other serious injury, and boozers' squabbles. This was the second sort: a couple of drunks grappling, making rather ineffectual attempts to pummel one another, and finally falling over a table and breaking a few glasses. Nothing much: all over in thirty seconds and not even any blood. Yet when I turned back to the bar I had to put my hands in my pockets: they were shaking so much I couldn't pick up the glass. I was in no personal danger and was not conscious of fear or even excitement, but my body had picked up the cue regardless.

It seems that the physical and mental components of the effects of violence (or its threat) can be quite separate. Apparently, I myself am doomed always to suffer a kind of physical stress reaction, but I long ago became accustomed to the *idea* of physical injury being deliberately inflicted. For many people, however, this is the great revelation which delivers a far worse shock than the bodily pain itself. They think they live civilised lives in a civilised world and then suddenly they are confronted with something purely atavistic, a harsh reminder that peace and good order are always provisional, and that preservation from disasters may be much more a matter of blind chance and dumb luck than a divinely ordained certainty.

Well, life *is* precarious, and those who recognise this truth are somewhat better placed to handle its vicissitudes. If they get hit they fall down (like anyone else), but they have less trouble getting up again without a nervous

breakdown. The last time I was knocked flat I remember being chiefly grateful that my assailant neglected to go on and kick my head in as well. (Incidentally, the sound of a skull being booted has an oddly wooden note. But perhaps that's only natural in the case of most of the local thugs.) Otherwise, it was merely case of: Oh shit – here we go again....

And back at the convention I wonder why my mind should be dwelling on such sober topics when I'm supposed to be getting drunk. Perhaps it's because it occurs to me that I'm in what, given other company, would be a classic pre-violence situation: here am I getting cosy with this woman, and here's this other guy, obviously wanting to do the same and wishing I would drop dead.... If he wasn't a fan he'd probably do something about it, then one thing would lead to another, and it would soon reach the stage of here we go again.... But because he is a fan the possibility doesn't even occur to me.

Come to think of it, the possibility of violence with Steven Glover doesn't even occur to me either, when I encounter him in the hallway.

"Got your real gun with you this time?" I snarl giving him my best Ozymandias lip. He seems rather discomfited, and mumbles something about apologising for over-reacting. I walk back to the bar. It looks like I'll escape getting a perforated ulcer the hard way, but apologies from either side seem out of place. After all, I *did* tell the lad to fuck off – scarcely a friendly act – so why should *he* apologise? On the other hand, my own antipathy has not lessened, and I feel no inclination to scale down the message by any softening of attitude. The only reaction I really want from him is a complete and permanent disappearance from my sight.

(Later I hear via Linda James that Glover claims his weapon was not, as I had supposed, one of those snazzy replicas sold to people with a gun fetish but merely a toy for his offspring which he happened to have in his pocket at the time. I don't know whether to believe this, and I also don't know whether being blasted with a cap pistol makes the whole business even dafter or less daft than before. I give up.)

Of course the whole contretemps with Machine Gun Steve only took place because we came together in a somewhat limited area with no avenues for escape. At a convention there is no great problem: the people one dislikes are fairly easily avoided or ignored.

Putting this profound insight to work, one person I avoid at Novacon is the American SF author David Brin. This is more a matter of prudence and foresight than the result of some awful personal experience. It simply seems

like the most sensible thing to do, considering that at intervals throughout the convention I keep encountering people who stagger up with the crossed eyes and glazed expression of those who have just been given a frontal lobotomy with a bicycle spoke.

“My God,” they say, “have you met David Brin? Have you *met* David Brin?”

From the broken and fragmentary reports of those victims I gather that Brin is one of that breed of political fundamentalists who are gifted with an absolute belief in the truth and certainty of their doctrines, all opposition and counter-arguments being brushed aside as the pitiful and foolish delusions of mere unenlightened dupes of the System. This does not sound appealing. In fact, I can hear my stomach making warlike noises already. Bile and acid production seem set to go out of control unless I’m careful. Yes, I’m a sick man – I don’t need this sort of aggravation.

Greg Pickersgill, however, is not the person to turn away a spot of aggro looking for a home, and late one evening we are treated to the spectacle of a Pickersgill-Brin debate in the bar. Chris Evans is also there, throwing in the occasional word. From a certain careful blandness of expression it seems unlikely that he agrees entirely with what Brin is saying. In fact he probably thinks the guy is completely bananas. But so what? With the detached ruthlessness of the true writer he is able to see even the outpourings of some fucking loony as a potential source of useful material. Pickersgill, on the other hand, feels a more personal involvement, and as Brin grinds ever onwards, remorselessly repeating his simplistic points with all the maddening patience of one instructing a backward child, he grows visibly more and more inclined towards an outbreak of absolute fury. The beard parts to reveal a feral snarl, the bristling hair becomes even more electric, and the voice sinks to the strained whisper of someone barely suppressing an ear-shattering scream of rage. He is standing to one side of Brin’s chair, and it seems almost inevitable when he reaches out and lays hands on the back of the talking head. Brin finishes his paragraph. (Is this man terminally brain-damaged, or just a Secret Master of Self Control?) Then, as one slightly pained by this new evidence of the irrationality of the opposition, he asks to be released – but receives in return a negative shake of his own head. Pickersgill resettles his grip. For one moment it seems that Brin is to be given, quite literally, a whole new twist and a different way of looking at things. The audience is so moved it almost stops drinking.

Then it is over: a swollen and bloodshot-eyed Pickersgill stamps off to the bar to dampen down his homicidal impulses, while Brin, faintly frowning at these unseemly diversions from the True Path, resumes his interminable discourse.

And a good thing too, eh? Just goes to show: even old Macho Fan himself manages to stick to the principle that fans do not tear each others' heads off. Not in the flesh, that is. What you do with words is something else, as the next incident in this moral tale shows.

One can get tired even of sitting in the bar (particularly when nobody *does* get their head torn off) so Vanessa and I decide to go in search of further excitement elsewhere. After trampling a few bodies in the corridors and on the stairs we come to rest in what seems to be a reasonable room party, with enough people, drinks, snacks, and (thanks to the hotel's no-heat policy) not too high a temperature level. Inserting ourselves into the crowd we find a place on the bed and begin to play the Golden Dawn version of Snap with some cheese biscuits which come in a variety of suitably astrological shapes. This is fun, but after a while I become aware that we have positioned ourselves next to Novacon Guest of Honour E.C. Tubb, and that Tubb has developed what can only be called a phase of extreme loudness.

Tubb is talking (or more accurately, shouting) at a woman I don't know, though from the familiarity with which he treats her I assume (perhaps incorrectly) that she is some sort of old acquaintance. So far as I can pick up the threads they see to have been talking about their tastes in music. The woman mentions the Beatles, those venerable stars of my own teenage years.

"Beatles!" yells Tubb. "Don't talk to me about the fucking Beatles. They're trash, fucking trash! All this modern stuff is trash! What's wrong with the old songs – the *real* old songs – something like 'Roll out the barrel'?" And he begins bellowing:

"Roll out the barrel,  
Roll out the barrel,  
Let's have – a barrel – of fun"

The audience twitches uneasily. Blinking, the woman says "Well, all I said was that I like the Beatles."

"Beatles!" screams Tubb, "You fucking bitch! It's cunts like you that are the fucking problem! Fucking social workers, always trying to tell us what to think! If I mention marmalade you'll call me a fucking racist, because

there's a fucking golliwog on the fucking label!"

The woman protests feebly, but Tubb rants on. It seems that there is an international conspiracy of fucking social workers, feminist cunts and (non-specific) fucking bitches who are bent on telling Ted Tubb what to do, what to think, and how to live his life generally. They are all in it together, the fucking cows (etc. etc.), and Ted Tubb will not fucking well have it.

No one knows quite what to do about this. It seems unlikely that a polite remonstrance will have much effect, and there appears to be no other way of shutting Tubb up short of applying the Judgement of Solomon and hitting him with a wine bottle. For some reason, despite the party, the room's actual tenants are not present and thus there is no one who has an obvious claim to assert authority. (Fans, remember, are wimps. I'm not feeling too tough myself.) People start to slide away. This is no longer fun. After suffering the onslaught for a minute or two longer, Tubb's victim departs, somewhat shaken but apparently still in one piece. The outflow continues, and since Vanessa and I do not relish the thought of being the sole audience of this demented Volsted Gridban we also prepare to leave.

"Going, are you?" snaps the great author, pouring himself another tumblerful of whisky. "All right, fucking well sod off then."

And so we do, leaving our GoH to his solitary sour reflections until (some time later and with some difficulty) he is ejected into the night and obscurity by the returning rightful occupants. The rest of the convention seems comparatively mild and uneventful, though still there is this curious impression of *murkiness*. Despite the modernity of the hotel, despite the city outside, the mental feel is of a kind of barbarian gloom, as though we are huddling in some savage mead-hall, quaffing our horns of drink by the sullen light of flaring torches, while outside lies a stygian darkness peopled only by monsters. This image of primitivism is reinforced by reports which keep coming in of the strange behaviour of the rude local peasantry. Apparently many of them suffer from the Godiva Plague and have this compulsion to flash bits of their bared anatomy at anyone who stands still for twenty seconds. These frolics are particularly prevalent outside the nearby Pizza Parlour, where some of the exhibitionists merely unzip themselves; but others press their naked arses up against the window. ("Not a lot to choose between the backsides and the pizzas," remarks Jackie Gresham.)

Strange, all very strange. And murky, indeed. I wonder what it was that inspired Tubb's frenzy? Surely it was not a matter of drink alone, though he

did seem rather well-oiled. Perhaps there was some longstanding grievance – some half-conscious bitterness at his rather low status as a writer and at the mirroring of this poverty of fame in his own appearance at a minor convention where no one seemed to give him very much special attention. Or perhaps it was a simple matter of stress and exhaustion, as in the case of my own outburst against Glover

Well, I can hardly be too judgemental, considering my own behaviour. Though rather more succinct, I suppose I was just as offensive. But do I regret what I did?

Not really. The event was uncharacteristic, since I rarely set out to insult people in any serious way face-to-face. (I am available enough at conventions if anyone else wishes to confront me, but I find verbal exchanges based on nothing more than personal animosity tedious. There are more entertaining ways of spending the limited time on social occasions.) However, though an aberration in some respects, in any deeper sense what I did was perfectly authentic: I acted in accordance with my real feelings. I still don't like Glover and it seems silly to pretend otherwise.

Ah, what the hell, this is all very trivial. No one suffered any real injuries and provided Glover and I stay out of each other's way we can all be perfectly happy with no further problems. The only casualty, as usual, is the rose-tinted myth that All Fans Love One Another, being Just One Big Happy Family.

Well, perhaps that's a little unfair. Does anyone *really* believe such nonsensical pieties? Surely not. "See how these Christians love one another," remarked the Third Century Roman writer Tertullian, making a rather dry comment on an age in which the supporters of rival Bishops used to settle their theological disputes with knives and large clubs. And the history of fandom is rather like the history of Christianity: the fine display of high principles doesn't always fit too well with the record of rather low practices. Rub off the gloss of nostalgia and one might discover that there was almost as much feuding, fighting, backstabbing, bitchiness and spite in those Golden Olden Days as there is now.

So what's new? Nothing, really – except maybe the thought that (as in the case of the "Victorian Values" once so lauded by Margaret Thatcher) the concept of fandom as a family perhaps contains rather more truth than some might wish.

From time to time one sees in the newspapers that such and such a

person, having been abandoned on someone's doorstep as a baby, is making efforts to discover their parents and other relatives. The more cynical readers of these stories probably reflect that if the poor buggers had any sense they'd be positively *grateful* for their relation-free condition. Yes, the sad fact is that any extended family is rarely so happy or so united as the sentimental ideal would have us believe. Kinship makes for a connection, certainly, but the bond is as likely to be one of loathing as of love. A great many people have relations who they privately consider would be greatly improved by death – and even when the feeling is less extreme it is often much less than enthusiastic. To maintain the image of the Family in its idealised form one needs a large dose of either hypocrisy or self-deception.

Exactly how far the reality of Family Life can diverge from the dream-ideal has been highlighted recently by the press reporting of cases of child sex-abuse. These make depressing reading, perhaps particularly so for me since they bring to mind some experiences of my own. As a small child I was sometimes bathed by my father, and when he was drying me he would give me what he explained to me was a sort of medical examination, but which might more accurately be described as a Good Grope or a Fatherly Fondle. “Sexual abuse” seems rather a harsh and heavy term for something which was quite harmless (and which I accepted perfectly casually at the time), but the hard fact is that it can be called nothing else. And by the time I realised, many years later, the nature of what had taken place I was also beginning to realise that my father was deviant in other respects. In fact, as far as sex was concerned, he was distinctly twirly in several directions.

Well, all deviants together, eh? After all, I turned out to be something of a weirdo myself, so it would indeed seem harsh to condemn my old dad for having a twist or two of his own. He wasn't a bad man, and (bath-night aberrations aside) he made every effort not to be a bad parent: he always tried his best, within the limits of a somewhat narrow and rigid personality. But that was the trouble: we were very different in character, but he had virtually no capacity for understanding any other view outside the precise formulas he had established for himself. And eventually I realised that not only did he know nothing about anyone else, he knew little or nothing about himself. As far as those incidents of “sexual abuse” were concerned one would have to bring in a verdict of Not Guilty, because I'm sure that he really and truly did not know what he was doing. However, he certainly knew – in some indistinct and confused fashion – that things were not quite as they should be.

He knew – but he never really knew what to do about it, with the result that much of his life was distorted and limited by the barriers he erected to conceal these frightening and inadmissible impulses and by the compensatory attempts he made to establish a “normal” identity.

(Perhaps I should make it clear that the knowledge of my father’s deviancy is not merely speculative theorising. Some of the less obvious signs I probably picked up earlier due to the insights provided by my own sexual kinks, but other indicators were so unequivocal that (given the same information) even the most innocent and orthodox observer would have come to the same conclusion sooner or later. Also, I must emphasise that I have no sexual interest in children myself. My attitude on this is fairly conventional: what consenting adults do together is their own business but the desire to have sex with children is one of those urges which can only be satisfied by exploiting (and probably damaging) someone who is not in a position to give informed consent, and therefore society is entirely justified in condemning it. Besides, as one of Hunter Thompson’s buddies once put it. “Why should I fuck with children? They’re too *small*.” I’m always astonished (as well as revolted) that some people will actually fuck *babies*, let alone young kids. It must be like having sex with the backdoor keyhole – and a Yale lock at that.)

Looking back, most of this now seems transparently obvious, but of course in earlier times the totality was far less clear. Eventually we reached the tongue-twister position: I knew, and he knew I knew, and I knew he knew I knew – but neither one of us ever broached the subject. It was too late. His life had settled into certain protective patterns of self-deception and substitution which enabled him to handle what could not be faced directly, and it would have been merely cruel to start prising off the armour. It seemed a truly savage irony, though, that on virtually the only serious subject where we shared at least some common ground nothing at all could be said.

Well, all over now. By the time he died I didn’t love him and quite often I didn’t even *like* him very much. About the best I could manage was a somewhat strained polite tolerance (which, since he was not at all perceptive, I hope he took for something more affable). But the gap between us saddened me, and in a way the fact that I had so little affection for him made his death even more depressing. Intellectually I am aware that there is no real moral obligation for blood relations to love one another – since the connection is chance and involuntary, rather than chosen – but I am not quite so detached as not at least to *wish* it could be so. And it seemed unfair that all his

conscientious (though flawed) attempts to be a good and kind parent should mean so little to me. But this is the hard truth of human relationships: good intentions are not always enough, and there is no guaranteed return on an investment. Love is not a Stockmarket, and emotions can be neither compelled nor created to order.

What dampened spirits most in all my dealings with him was not a burden of guilt but a burden of *knowledge*: something very like that rather horrible weight of unrevealable inside information one carries when talking to a person who is cheerfully unaware of suffering from an incurable illness. I could see all too clearly what was wrong with him, but there was no way I could ever talk about it, because after so long the condition lay in his very bones, and to attempt to change anything would be to gut him like a fish. And so I suppose I did feel guilt of a sort: the guilt of the survivor. We'd both been caught in the same accident – and he'd been crippled for life, whereas I was walking round with no worse than a few scars and a slight limp.

This is the main point: both my father and I were sexually deviant (in somewhat different ways, but close enough for comparison) but by failing to come to terms with the fact he caused his whole life to be distorted by it, whereas by recognising reality I was able to act much more from *choice* than as the driven victim of unacknowledged desires. The paradox of repression is that in seeking control it actually *prevents* control, because that which is driven underground and out of sight passes beyond reach of being directed or limited and is all too apt to resurface either as some form of twisted attempt at compensation or as an unrestrained explosion. I am as deviant as I ever was, but this long ago ceased to bother me because I know who and what I am. Once sexual idiosyncrasies are admitted they are put in their proper place: items in the long list of other things to do or not do – a part of life, not the whole. My father, unfortunately, never reached the happy position of casual (or even resigned) acceptance, and in consequence his deviant inclinations were a weight of unresolved business that dragged virtually the *whole* of his life out of shape.

The moral here is that those who fail to recognise reality are dangerous to themselves and to others: either they will bypass rational behaviour and operate on impulses straight from the unconscious or their false perceptions will require propping up by further falsifications – and so on and so on till truth itself is the most feared and dangerous enemy.

Or – if you prefer to leave morals out – put it this way: recognising

reality is the best course simply because it is the most *efficient*. As soon as you start inventing things you have to invent *more* things to cover the bits that don't fit with the undeniable facts, and it all goes on and on, uselessly and wastefully, until the contradictions are finally inescapable and the whole damn mess comes crashing down.

Unfortunately, reality rarely is exactly what one might think it ought to be. Thus, for example, family life is not invariably wonderful – and fans do not always love one another, But it should also be said that one does not discover truth by jumping from one extreme to another, from black to white. Life, after all, mostly comes in shades of dirty grey: both good and bad are apt to be heavily qualified by ambiguities. My father, for instance, might be classed by some as a Bad Man (or even a veritable Monster) for having sexually abused me, thus causing all kinds of frightful damage to my psyche and so on and so forth. (Right at this moment I expect that some smug dolt who once read a couple of paperbacks on Freudian Analysis is getting ready to tell the world how This Explains Everything.) But those incidents have real significance only as symptoms of one particular defective area: in most other respects he honestly tried to behave as well as he could, within the limits of his understanding. In the catalogue of reasons why I grew up with my own set of deviant inclinations his gropings don't seem very important – one more minor factor among many others. (For a couple of much more significant events in my life see a short piece which should be appearing in the Worldcon Programme Book.) Doubtless other less direct manifestations of his sexual confusion had some effect on me (if only by way of reaction) but I am not disposed to lay any great blame at his door. Maybe he *is* responsible for the fact that I don't like appointments or timetables (or programme items at conventions) and that I am prone to regard the approved images of masculinity with a cynical eye – or maybe not. Why does one child grow up to be a criminal while another born in the same circumstances becomes a solid and respectable citizen? It seems self-evident that life is too complicated for simplistic single-answer explanations, or for the kind of reductionism that arranges facts in straight lines, with every one forming a neat line in the causal chain. That old Ray Bradbury story of the time-traveller who alters the whole future by treading on a butterfly is a good pointer towards the folly of being dogmatic about historical causes. Every action may indeed be momentous or trivial in its consequences – but how the hell do we ever know the difference? Since a deterministic explanation of existence leads only to an

infinite regress of cause and effect we are obliged to assume both free will and some responsibility for our actions, but even so there are large areas in which assessments of guilt or blame are simply irrelevant. Very often what happens is a result of too great a complication of factors for any such verdict to be useful. In the end, everyone does the best they can: and most of the rest is the luck of the draw. Some days you blow it, or the Machine in the Sky cranks out your number for a hard time, and other days you get lucky. In most ways, and on most days, I've been very lucky, and if I've also been less than a brilliant success that's strictly my own fault.

The beginnings of wisdom (or of plain common sense, if you want to be less sodding elevated) lie in perceiving that if you want to get any place at all it is as well to have an accurate picture of where you're starting from. In other words, know the truth of who and what you are yourself, and what the rest of life is really like. Forget what *ought* to be true and concentrate on what *is* true.

Well, fine, fine. These certainly sound like solid principles and general good ideas with which no one could seriously argue – but they also sound like the kind of requirements which could be satisfied by writing off for that course in Cosmic Consciousness the Rosicrucians (AMORC) have been plugging for so many years. Or maybe, since us fans are slightly more awake than *that*, we could go in for some study in psychology and sociology and all suchlike stuff, plus perhaps an encounter group or two to shake out the hangups. (California Crap here we come.) And then we will all be ready to understand and explain anything and everything.

Yes indeed. When I was at University myself, a few years ago, I used to play a rash sort of game in the Philosophy tutorials: with my brain creaking and grinding like a second-hand cement mixer, I would try to dream up a philosophical idea – *any* philosophical idea, daft or otherwise – which our Professor couldn't identify within five seconds. I didn't expect to discover anything truly original, but I did have hopes of at least forcing the erudite bastard to pause in his tracks for a moment or two. No such luck: every single time it turned out that some fucking Greek had thought of it already back in two zillion BC.

And as one of these same Hellenic spoilsports observed, another definition of the beginnings of wisdom is the moment when you start to realise that you know sweet fuck-all about anything.

Well, University students are notoriously prone to the delusion they

know all there is to know. A certain amount of such nonsense is knocked out of them when they re-enter a world in which the abstract is valued rather less than the practical, but even so, many clever and well-educated people tend to retain a somewhat false estimate of the limits of their own knowledge. The less clever and the less well-educated, on the other hand, while not without their own defects of misperception and dogmatism, do have a certain advantage to the extent that although they may not fully understand the world, *at least they cannot explain it away.*

The curse of all intelligent people is the ability to rationalise: to take words and symbols and use them to *conceal* rather than illuminate the surrounding darkness. Intellectuals have an appalling tendency to jump straight from the tentative proposition that everything may be explainable to the foolish certainty of the conclusion that everything is explained – or will be as soon as they get round to the mere details. Such complacency (or arrogance) is disturbing simply because it is so vulnerable and so precarious: a house of straw whose construction has ignored the possibility of either a chance puff of wind or an unfriendly Big Bad Wolf. Those without any great facility with words are quite often better placed to recover from the shock of life's reverses. They already know that much of the world is a mystery to them, and therefore when events are beyond comprehension they may either curse or shrug – but either way must simply *accept.*

There are three great Powers of Darkness which lurk beneath the surface of our conscious, rational lives: sex (in all its shapes and forms of affiliation), violence (including all impulses to dominance and/or destruction), and that varied spectrum of urges to create order and meaning out of chaos which might most conveniently be summed up as Art. Nobody really knows exactly how these things work. Everybody knows that they are there, and everybody, to a greater or lesser extent, tries to forget the less obvious aspects of their existence, and the probable extent of their influence. It is neither comfortable nor flattering to one's self-esteem to realise that much of the course of one's life may be settled, as it were, behind closed doors.

On the other hand.... Well, I have a non-fan friend dating from the period of my schooldays. A year or two ago he confessed himself to be, as he put it, "a severely repressed old queen." This came as no great surprise, since I (and probably most of his acquaintances) had assumed as much for years, but the secret not kept from others had been kept too long from himself. Now he saw a psychiatrist every week, was heavily dependent on tranquillisers,

and drank an average of half a bottle of spirits every day. I haven't seen him for some time now and would be unamazed to hear that he is dead.

Looking back at my own history I am sometimes mildly surprised that I managed to shuffle through it all in not-much-worse-than-average psychological condition. (All right, smartarse – do try not to be *too* predictable will you?) If someone else's name headed the list of failures, shocks, traumas and kinks it would seem quite credible as a page from the case history of the victim of nineteen nervous breakdowns. Some people, in fact, are carried off to the nuthouse with far less obvious reasons for their collapse. (And some, of course, survive far worse without even writing articles about it.) It's a puzzle. All this shit, and I don't appear to suffer from anything greatly worse than a tendency to throw up a lot at moments of crisis. My unfortunate stomach seems to be my most sensitive part, with the result that all the frightfulness does comparatively little to my stolid and calloused psyche, and just whizzes straight past to expend itself in a nice refreshing puke. This can be somewhat inconvenient and it's always decidedly unglamorous – but as a mechanism for bending rather than breaking under strain it seems vastly preferable to the kind of neurotic or hysterical reactions described in the textbooks. I throw up, do a little mumbling and whimpering, then go back to the usual sluggishly persistent pursuit of my goals. I am neither quick nor energetic – and only occasionally well-organised – but I always stay reasonably functional.

I can't claim any merit for this ability to survive. It all seems to be a matter of luck: hope for the best and work with what you've got. A certain cantankerous obstinacy (fuck *you*, Universe) which keeps me moving on when less bloody-minded persons might have given up is probably some sort of innate characteristic, and all my learned abilities must be credited to the pure chance of environmental influences. I have been fortunate in being exposed to both theoretical and practical approaches to dealing with human affairs. As learning processes each can offer useful instruction, but the most useful lessons of all come from comparing the two and understanding their respective limitations.

As I mentioned, when I was younger I used to associate with quite a number of people for whom violence was an accepted part of life. Many of them were not particularly disreputable (though some were indeed out-and-out thugs, apt to show up regularly in chipped and battered condition, or disappearing for periods in jail) but for all of them violence was both an

option and a possibility that always lay close at hand. Some were quite intelligent enough to see the joke in the John Wayne attitude of “A man’s gotta do what a man’s gotta do”, but fundamentally they shared the same philosophy. Pride and custom set certain limits on behaviour, and anybody who crossed the line was in trouble. For instance, in this part of the world swearing publicly in front of women – let alone *at* them – is definitely cause for action. I have seen fights start over this principle several times. (On one occasion in my local when a stranger had got himself thumped on this account, the landlord as a matter of course threw *him* out, not his assailant.) Ted Tubb would have been warned inside ten seconds to shut up or get his head knocked off – and the threat would certainly have been carried out.

In this environment I was to some extent out of place both because I was, as I said, a physical coward, and also because I had little real identification with the image of masculinity it represented. However, these weaknesses were also advantages, since they meant firstly that I was not inclined to take risks, and secondly that I had far less shame than usual about chickening out of potentially dangerous confrontations.

There are interesting parallels between human and other animal forms of aggression – also a few vital differences. As many a sententious moralist has noted, humans are exceptional in the extent to which they are willing to kill or seriously injure members of their own species. The usual pattern in intra-species fighting is for combat to cease as soon as the superior strength or ferocity of one participant has been clearly established. Quite apart from flight there are often special submission signals (such as baring the throat) which trigger an instinctive ceasefire response. Human beings, on the other hand, will not necessarily stop beating the shit out of you even if you do lie on your back and wave your legs in the air. However, that is the most extreme end of the scale. On the more usual level, fights (or pre-fight situations) do follow an animal pattern of escalating challenge and counter-challenge, with actual engagement only taking place if one party fails to back off. One can see this in its most extended and ritualistic form with young children who start with an exchange of verbal insults and defiance, move on to threatening gestures, then to shoves and very tentative sparring, and only work up by degrees to a full assault. Adults usually proceed at a somewhat faster pace, but the pattern is essentially the same.

In these circumstances anyone with a little nerve and no shame can often thwart aggression simply by refusing to react in the prescribed fashion. If you

neither counter-attack nor run away, very often your opponent will be baffled. In public situations most people seem to have an inhibition against hitting anyone in, as it were, cold blood. They need to have their aggression warmed up by degrees. I doubt that there is any universal human equivalent of the animal submission signal (since in my experience cowering is likely to provoke *more* aggression, not less) but one can certainly exploit what seems to be a programmed inability to proceed without the correct responses. On several occasions people have got to the stage of giving me preliminary slaps or punches – and then been unable to proceed further because I showed none of the appropriate reactions .

Another triumph for slimy intellectual low cunning, eh? Well, in some of these cases a second factor probably had certain amount of influence in preserving my skin. In Bingley I was a familiar enough figure to be accepted – but also someone who was, for many people, slightly alien. Since I'd spent a couple of years working in a betting shop (and several more years hanging round bars) the thugs knew that I was not exactly a pious churchgoer, but they also knew that I'd worked in the Public Library – that I was, in fact, the kind of person who regularly read books. Why, they even consulted my expert knowledge occasionally.

“Ein Poot In” said Darren. “There was this fella, he was a Black Magician and he started the Russian Revolution and invented the atom bomb for the Nazis. There was this girl with big knockers in it as well – she was Tsallerina or a Princess or something, and he used to hypnotise her under a goat. I remember he was called Ein Poot In. But what was the name of the book?”

Obviously, not a lot of people would know this. After giving the matter some heavy thought I was eventually able to suggest that he might possibly be thinking of a novel or novels by Dennis Wheatley – *They Used Dark Forces* and some other pile of crap I now forget – though there seemed to be a slight confusion here between Albert Rasputin and old Greg Einstein.

Darren was impressed. “Bloody hell,” he said, “you don't half know some stuff. And you haven't half read some books.”

Yes, in Bingley anybody who has read not one, but *two* whole Dennis Wheatley novels is undoubtedly an intellectual. The effect of all this was to shift me sideways in the social scale. I wasn't precisely an outsider, but in this particular war zone I was only doubtfully a combatant. The thugs obviously weren't quite sure whether it was allowable to thump me: it might

be too much like a soldier shooting an unarmed civilian – easy enough to do, but on the whole something to be frowned upon. I was viewed with that curious mixture of slightly puzzled respect and mild contempt that non-reading practical persons reserve for all those who have not turned their intelligence into hard cash. To have brains and education, but just to piss around with books – well, poor buggers like that obviously can't be real men....and quite right too. Still, although Darren might have had a few justifiable doubts about my readiness to arm-wrestle grizzly bears and generally be the proper sort of lumberjack, he was prepared to give me due credit for the talents I *did* possess.

“The thing is,” he said, “you're smart. You sit there, you don't say much, but you're keeping it inside, so when you do say something there's a bit in it. This lot” – and he gestured round at the usual collection of drunks, geriatrics, ex-cons and headcases – “they shoot their mouths off all the time, so it doesn't mean anything. There's nothing smart left – they just piss it all away.”

Bloody hell. It was my turn to be impressed. Out of sheer natural shrewdness Darren had uncovered a profoundly important scientific principle: the Law of the Conservation of Smartness. Obviously, Smartness lay all around us, omnipresent as Deep Meaning in a D. West article. It lurked in dusty corners and lay flaccidly under bar stools. It was in the air everywhere. If one could only exercise iron self-control and sit quiet for a while, it would begin to ooze forth from its hiding places and trickle into the open pores of the brain, there slowly accumulating, layer upon nacreous layer, as the core of yet another pearl of wit or wisdom. Holy shit, all I had to do was keep my mouth shut nearly all the time and I could be a star.

Alas, later reflection suggested that this was not a great and unique discovery but merely another Greek job: the principle had been known to fandom for generations, if only intuitively. As history showed, the venerable old farts of yesteryear, dimly sensing the imminent paralysis of their punning powers and the decline in the quality of their quips, would gafiate for a decade or two; then, having replenished their stocks of Smartness, they would return to wow the world as rediscovered Secret Masters or Born again Fifties Fans. (Rather a pity, though, that human life is so short.... I could name several fans who would scarcely have enough time to make a significant improvement in their Smartness quotient if they gafiated next week.... One hundred years of solitude? Tough shit, kid – that's not too many.)

Well, win some, lose some. At least the long years of imitating a stuffed fish allowed me to build up just enough Smartness to be aware that knowing a thing or two does not necessarily see you right every time. In some circumstances cleverness will do nothing at all to prevent life putting the boot in. Like, it has to be recognised that if someone really intends to go for you, you have only two options: fight or flight. I take the second wherever possible, having usually come out on the losing end of the first.

Most serious fights are effectively over in the first five seconds. If they do last longer, then (other factors being more or less equal) victory will go to the combatant who is most ready to inflict injury *without hesitation*. This is the dividing line which separates those who are used to violence from those who are not: the former will strike without thinking, whereas the latter will just as automatically hold back. I wouldn't bet half a packet of peanuts on the chances of the average Martial Arts enthusiast against the average thug: the Karate Kid would still be getting his hands and feet sorted out when his opponent kicked him in the balls or hit him with a beer glass. Even an expert has only a notional advantage, given the fact that he has been trained in what is essentially a set of gymnastic exercises, and in most cases also trained *not* to damage his opponent. Self-defence training is by no means useless, but it is always limited by the fact that its guaranteed effectiveness really depends on the ability to show unrestrained nastiness. Probably everyone knows that if you stick a finger in someone's eye they will tend to lose interest in anything else – but how many people can do this without pausing for too long?

Another of the local toughs, Dick, once told me an illuminating anecdote. He was at work on a building site when one of his mates suddenly came running up to him. Dick promptly felled him to the ground, since as he explained, he didn't know what the other fellow was intending to do. The joke of it was, of course, that the guy had merely come to tell him he was wanted on the phone.

In actual fact, I don't suppose my reflexes are very much worse than average. However, what I do *not* have – and what most other people do not have – is the mental attitude which permits (or commands) Dick's kind of instant instinctive response to possible threat. Having considered the matter coldbloodedly I know that if backed into a corner I would have no scruples about inflicting serious injury on an attacker, and that in self-defence I could kill someone with no remorse at all. I don't like being hurt and I am not a

sadist, but I am not squeamish. The position is simple: I will not attack anyone else, but if anyone else attacks me then they themselves are responsible for whatever happens. However, this is a theory that has never really been translated into practice, since I have always either escaped the situation or been knocked flat before my response worked its way up to that particular point of commitment. Again, like most people, quite apart from flinching physically I always want to wait a moment to check out that this is the Real Thing.

And a good job too. Certainly there are moments when it would be convenient to be a James Bond character, and leap lithely into action to demolish the opposition, but if everybody acted like that all the time the streets would be blocked with bodies. Civilisation is based on the *avoidance* of instant violent reaction. We have to be able to trust each other at least provisionally, or the result is anarchy. On the other hand, it remains a fact that there *are* circumstances in which violence may be judged necessary – because in a less than perfect world not everyone is going to co-operate in settling their differences in a fair and peaceful manner. Highminded persons who abjure the use of force for any cause whatsoever may give themselves a fine glow of self-righteousness, but in effect all they are doing is transferring the responsibility for resisting an aggressor or predator onto the shoulders of those who *are* prepared to fight back. If they are not halted by force then the Bad Guys will always win by default, since (being Bad Guys) they are not greatly impressed or deterred by fine moral principles.

In the end I suppose it all comes down to a question of where to draw the line. Fans, wimps and civilised persons do not think of resorting to violence except in the most extreme circumstances, whereas my rougher acquaintances set the mark at a comparatively low level. I usually thought they were wrong, but on the other hand, although they might be mistaken (or even stupid) at least they were honest. They acknowledged the fact that society is ultimately based on the use or threat of force, and in a way their crude code of behaviour was a sort of social contract: they accepted that what they did to others could be done to themselves. This was why I was (to a limited extent) less at risk than average: they recognised that I was not really in the same game – that either I didn't know the rules or that I couldn't be assumed to have agreed to them. Other considerations aside, I suppose the thugs felt for me the same sort of thin tolerance I felt for my father: Don't be too tough on the poor bastard – he doesn't really know what's going on.

(Bear in mind that you only get this kind of indulgence from people who know you. With strangers you are unlikely to be given the time to hand out a couple of Reading Lists establishing that you're just one of them harmless poofers that messes around with Art and suchlike. As in the example of Dick's incautious friend, if there's any doubt at all you just get felled.)

It is a mistake to assume that persons who go in for violence have no principles. A few real psychopaths aside, it's simply a case of the principles being *different*. And at least you know where you are with them: there's nothing ambiguous about a crack on the jaw. Violence may be deplorable but it's also straightforward. Likewise, it may well be a mistake to assume that persons who reject violence do so out of any moral superiority. This is certainly not the case with me. I keep out of fights (when I can) because I know that (quite apart from other possible injuries) either fear or rage will literally make me sick. Also, as a matter of calculation – not principle – I see nothing good coming from such broils: losing is obviously painful, but even winning can only lead to *more* trouble of one sort or another. Nine times out of ten flight before fight is what serves my selfish interests best.

You could say that I take a purely pragmatic view. Doubtless others do the same. However, I sometimes wonder how often the reaction to violence is based neither on principles nor pragmatism but instead merely on a failure to grasp the reality of what is happening. I suspect that many people are virtually incapable of self-defence simply because the use of violence is, to them, something completely *fictional*. The idea of actually *hitting* someone no more occurs to them than does the idea of leaping into the nearest telephone booth and changing into Superman costume. They've seen it on the screen and read about it a few thousand times – but, damn it, that's a *story*, a piece of make-believe.

These days I suppose that the concepts of the unconscious and repressed desires can be taken for granted as general knowledge. The trouble is that – for all but specialists – sex has cornered the whole of the market: it is also taken for granted that anything repressed or unconscious has to be sexual. Everything else, it is assumed, is right out there in plain view. Thus comparatively little attention is paid to the possibility that the urge to violence may be as universal as the urge to sex, and not merely the preserve of savages, social delinquents and sado-masochists. After all everybody may *know* about it, but most people don't actually *do* it, do they?

True, but most people do spend quite a lot of time *looking* at it. Perhaps

this is why they assume that the subject has no hidden depths: so much is on display that there can't be anything left to hide. The reasoning seems to be that because there is no *secret* about violence – because representations of it are openly and freely available everywhere – what is on the surface is the whole of the story. The glib phrase “The pornography of violence” is occasionally wheeled out, but even those who use it seem to be unsure of its full implications. Divested of highminded blather, objections to pornography have either an aesthetic or moral basis. Some people simply find sex disgusting – or, if they are prepared to grant a license to certain limited forms of behaviour, they wish to suppress less restrained or more unorthodox possibilities as being offensive to the good taste of all right-thinking persons. Such would-be censors may reasonably be regarded as oppressive and unjustified, since personal taste is a matter for personal choice, not legislation, and it is scarcely equitable to demand that acts which are not illegal in fact should be illegal in fantasy. However, where the acts depicted *are* illegal (as in the case of, say, sex with children) a case of a sort can be made for censorship on the grounds that the portrayal of the act may encourage performance of it. But when has this principle ever been seriously applied to violence? Most acts of violence are against the law, but like the opponents of sexual pornography the critics of the “pornography of violence” are essentially concerned more with good taste than with good morals. They know perfectly well that the urge is there – and always will be there – and they merely want to ensure that those aspects they find too gross or too disturbing are kept within the bounds of their own limited preferences. In effect, like those who seek to suppress images of sexuality, they are victims of that classic kind of self-delusion which attempts to abolish the undesirable by pretending it does not exist.

These days any “liberal” is prepared to acknowledge the reality of sexual urges – but far less prepared to acknowledge that a preoccupation with violence may be just as close to being universal. It can be admitted that sexual pornography is a *product* (rather than a cause) of interest in sex, but it can *not* be admitted that the same applies to the so-called “pornography of violence”. We are back with the old “depraves and corrupts” routine: nobody would ever think of doing these things if it weren't for the wicked characters who put the ideas in people's heads.... The possibility that the ideas in question might already be in place is too uncomfortable to be considered. Hell, no, if that were true then even *I* might not be so wonderfully pure in

heart....

Quite so. Persons who take a very high moral tone always have to proceed on the rather questionable basis that they themselves are somehow immune to the temptations and corrupting influences which they castigate. On a more earthly level, however, it seems probable that those who become most excited in opposing particular forms of behaviour may do so, at least to some extent, as a reaction against their own inadmissible yearnings for the same forbidden fruit. Sexual abuse of children, for instance, undoubtedly arouses extreme heat partly because it forces people to confront the horrifying possibility that they themselves might have or have had similar urges. The loathing felt towards the alleged perpetrator is self-loathing turned inside out. (Those acquainted with fan history might remember the Walter Breen affair of the 60s in which several of Breen's most self-righteous accusers were themselves unadmitted deviants.)

Reflections such as these tend to come to mind every time there is a revival of the campaign to ban boxing. What is the big objection? True, boxers are liable to injury or even death – but the same is the case for many other sports, some of which are in fact considerably more hazardous. (Broken bones are so routine for steeplechase jockeys that they are scarcely worth mentioning, and any jump-jockey has a far higher chance of being killed or crippled than any boxer, since he will very probably have more rides in a month than the boxer has fights in the whole of his career.) Those who object to boxing do so not on humanitarian grounds but because it is, quite simply, just too damned *blatant*. In terms of violence it is the equivalent of a live sex show: here's these two guys set on beating the shit out of each other, and there's no pretence and no concealment about it. Boxing is *naked*. No polite euphemism or coy excuse can pass it off as anything else except what it really is: pure violence.

The absurdity of seeking to ban boxing is that it is an attempt to forbid one of the few permitted outlets for direct physical aggression while simultaneously ignoring the fact that society as a whole is aswamp with representations of the same thing. It's like attempting to bar sex – sex of any sort – when every newsagent in the country still has its racks of flesh magazines. Even the most fanatic of moralists might see this as not entirely sensible and consistent.

Neither the permissive nor the prudish care to talk about it very much, but the main purpose of pornography is to provide a means of focusing

generalised sexual urges onto something more specific in order to facilitate release of tension through masturbation. Like, it's all so you can have a wank. Publications such as *Playboy* and *Penthouse* attempt to pass off the sex as simply one ingredient in a package of sophisticated hedonism, but the glossy trappings are merely a tactful device permitting the customers to maintain the face-saving fiction that they're more interested in the rest of the flash gear, because getting the women is *no problem*, any time at all squire, ho ho yes.... Who knows? It may even be true occasionally. But the point is, whatever the truth for any individual, sexual relief of one sort or another is available for all.

It's an odd situation. Images of violence are more explicit and more widely purveyed than images of sex, yet most people have vastly more real physical experience in the latter field. (At least I hope so, otherwise they must be having an *awful* time.) Looked at in the light of the standard psycho-analytical concepts of frustration and/or repression this seems positively alarming. What happens to all these unreleased urges? Where *do* they surface? Sexual fantasies, after all, are comparatively civilised: they may be gross or perverse but their scope is limited to particular areas, activities, or objects of desire. The emotions accompanying violent urges can seem to have no limits at all. The idea of a sexual urge directed towards the whole world – towards every material object – is merely absurd, but the idea of *destroying* the whole world is uncomfortably credible.

The tendency to explain all irrational (or unaccountable) behaviour and thought in terms of sexual impulses is probably largely the result of our over-reaction against the obscurantism of earlier days. It is easy to forget how *recent* a phenomenon the general public awareness of sexual matters really is. Though not quite the sexual Dark Age which was responsible for crippling my father, the period in which I grew up was still narrow and unenlightened for most people. Homosexuality was only legalised (partially) in 1967, and even heterosexuality needed the *Lady Chatterley* obscenity trial in 1960 before it could start to come out of the closet entirely. Even the sternly scientific (and positively *dull*) Kinsey Reports on Sexual Behaviour in the Human Male and Female (1948 and 1953) were attacked as “statistical filth” and “an assault on the family as a basic unit of society, a negation of moral law, and a celebration of licentiousness” and one Divorce Court Judge even declared that “I think the good doctor is wasting the funds of my old alma mater exploring the writings on the public toilet walls when what we need so

badly are some good stalwart halfbacks to furnish good clean mayhem on fall Saturdays”. (All quoted in *An Analysis of the Kinsey Reports* edited by Donald Porter Geddes, 1954.) Books on sex published twenty five years ago now often seem as quaint and old fashioned as tracts of the previous century. One can practically hear the authors taking a deep breath as they summon up the nerve (or the medical gravitas) to be tremendously outspoken and declare that such and such a practice is.... well..er.. nothing to be *too* ashamed of, assuming it’s not *overdone*, that is....

It seems like another world, but for most people it was then the only sort of world that could be openly acknowledged. Anything else was purely private information – particularly what should be the most obvious fact of all, that sex can be both unserious fun and something to be taken casually. The textbooks preferred to talk about “sexual hygiene”, a dismal phrase that always suggested the rather solemn use of lots of soap. And they weren’t telling you *any* of these things just so you could have a good time fucking your brains out. Hell, no – it was so you’d be an Informed and Responsible member of society, all cleanminded, well-adjusted, and so on and so forth.

Well Jesus, I ask you – what could any boy of spirit do in these circumstances except rush out and become a homosexual transvestite fetishist, then get his girlfriend pregnant as fast as possible? Damn right. Fucking experts – what did *they* know?

And what *did* they know? As usual, a part but not the whole. Purely as an academic exercise, try inverting the more common point of view and consider sex as an expression of violence, rather than violence as an expression of sex. Myself, I don’t consider this entirely plausible in general (though there are particular instances, such as many cases of rape, where it certainly seems valid), but one *could* construct an all-encompassing theory out of it – just as (putting it crudely) Freudians or Reichians build an all-encompassing theory upon sex, and behaviourists do so upon reflexes and operant conditioning.

Well, all those ideas probably have pieces of the truth, but it seems doubtful that any one of them has *all* the truth. Also, it remains unclear how any one of them can explain how and why apparently widespread interest in violence can co-exist with a social structure in which actual instances of such violence are expressly forbidden. Like everybody’s crazy about sex, and nobody’s allowed to do it? Looks like an explosive situation, so what holds it together? Where’s the safety valve? And what’s the cost?

Perhaps one can sort it out by granting that while sex and violence sometimes overlap (as in sadism) the two are still fundamentally separate: violence is not basically sexual, but it is *like* sexuality in some ways. This permits the drawing of certain parallels.

If one looks at the public attention given to various forms of sexuality – disregarding the strictly illegal, such as paedophilia or incest – one can identify a sort of hierarchy of acceptability. In the number one spot, unsurprisingly, is heterosexuality which has almost (but not quite) reached the position of requiring no special justifications. After that, however, the balancing act starts between medical excuses and moral disapproval. Top of the second division are the transsexuals, whose inclinations are so drastic that they obviously have to be judged by the medical standard. Next are the less uppity homosexuals, then the transvestites, and finally a rabble of fetishists and devotees of minor kinks. (And remember, mild forms of fetishism are virtually universal among men, the male speed of arousal making them very prone to such associative conditioning.) As one descends this scale, the initial poor-buggers-can't-help-it attitude may change to disapproval or actual hostility (towards homosexuals) or distaste (towards transvestites) and finally to contempt or indifference (towards miscellaneous weirdos). Look at it another way: heterosexuals take legitimate actions; transsexuals break the rules but can't help themselves; homosexuals are delinquents who may or may not have a good excuse; transvestites *play* at breaking the rules; and fetishists (etc) sit around fantasising about it. Translate it even more explicitly in terms of violence: heterosexuals use force in circumstances sanctioned by society; transsexuals break the law but under extreme pressure and with extenuating factors; homosexuals are all the bad boys who regularly knock each other about, with or without much reason; transvestites are a bunch of rather dirty sportsmen (and no, I'm not sure whether this is more insulting to the TVs or to rugby players), and the rest.... well the rest is everybody else you, me, us.... the majority who rarely *do* very much, but certainly don't mind a good Charles Bronson movie with lots and lotsa cheap punks being blown away.

Without forgetting that this is a parallel (and *not* a literal description) one can push things further still. Setting aside the matter of orgasm, violence-fetishism and sexual fetishism are very similar. In both cases the source of arousal is a limited symbolic part rather than the whole real thing, and in both cases the fantasies which are indulged in may never have had any counterpart

in the real experience of the fetishist. Take, for instance, the common male fetish of stockings and suspenders. Before the advent of tights and trousers this was, so to speak, a *natural* fetish, having an obvious connection with actual sexual experience. But these days it is quite probable that there are younger men for whom it is wholly artificial, actual direct experience (if any) having *followed* rather than preceded the establishing of the fetishistic interest via pornography. In the same way, many people – perhaps a majority – are connoisseurs of violence despite having rarely or never experienced the real thing in any direct way. They are turned on by images, conditioned by symbols. Or rather the basic urge has become *identified* with certain images or symbols as a sort of fantasy substitute.

And where's the release? Well, in the case of fetishism both the stimulation and the satisfaction (to some extent) may be contained in the same package. Sex does have an obvious climactic discharge of tension in the form of orgasm, but this in itself is merely a kind of summing up, a concentration of a much wider and more diffuse range of feelings. Orgasm is not *essential* to eroticism – it's more a matter of it being a convenient full-stop, a punctuation mark dividing the sexual and nonsexual. Fetishism in particular is very much a case of sex-in-the-head, and as such it is not inconsistent for the sexual satisfaction to be more mental than physical.

Well, here's the population, all (except *you* of course) mildly or wildly strung out on the fetish of violence, and getting their rocks off (metaphorically, *not* literally) on images of the same – so where's the problem? It doesn't sound any worse than wet dreams – a self-adjusting mechanism.

Yes. Possibly that's all there is to it.... except that violence is *not* the same as sex in having a specific physical channel for the discharge of the urge. With sex all you need is a bit of friction in the right spot and you get a guaranteed result. Violence, on the other hand, has no such single sure escape route, and if unexpressed directly must presumably dissipate itself by more roundabout paths of sublimation and substitution. It is this very diffuseness and lack of focus that make one wonder how much and in what ways our lives are subtly altered by these submerged impulses. Complicated as it is, sex seems comparatively simple, but the full workings of the urge to violence remain opaque and mysterious. Civilisation has drawn the curtains to keep out the dark, but the primitive night still surrounds us and it may be unwise ever to forget this fact.

And having made this formal acknowledgement of perplexity, perhaps one can do little more than fall back on the position of Wittgenstein: That whereof one cannot speak, thereon one must remain silent....

(But isn't that bloody typical eh? Fucking Greeks and philosophers – they make a career out of poncing around pretending to produce theories that will Explain It All, then casually announce that the whole business is more or less a waste of time. And in any case, though credited to Wittgenstein, that particular phrase was actually lifted by him from his pal Bertrand Russell. As is shown in recently published diaries, Wittgenstein's chief amusement during his time at Cambridge was going out to watch a couple of cowboy movies then (since Kentucky Fried Chicken had not yet been invented) returning home and completing the evening with a good wank. Russell, on the other hand, was a regular demon for the women – a sort of Rob Holdstock of his time – and used to race around like a rabid ferret having it off with anything that was hot, hollow, and squishy. He would then come staggering into Wittgenstein's rooms at two a.m., all shagged-out and extremely smug, and somewhat maliciously enquire how his colleague had been scoring himself. “Wovon man nicht sprechen kann, darüber muss man schweigen, eh Ludwig?” he would say. “Ho ho ho. Tough shit, baby.” Wittgenstein's actual words (not often quoted) were in fact: “Fuck you too, Bert, you big prick.”)

Ah hell, this is hopeless. Here I go, misrepresenting Freud, ignoring Adler, and zipping straight past all the social psychologists and sociobiologists who have written on dominance and aggression. But what's a poor boy to do? There's so *much* material. If I try handling all the stuff mouldering in libraries I'll be here forever (and some *other* fucking Greek will leap out and get me at the last minute anyhow). So I have to forget what people maybe *ought* to know and stick to skimming what (to all appearances) they *do* know. Dig deep enough and very likely one will find that violence (or aggression, or whatever you want to call it) is an effect, not a cause – but the full explanation is probably too complex to be very useful. For practical purposes one might as well take it that the urge is simply *there* – never mind how – and the real question is what happens next? Like: if you're flat broke you don't need a Marxist analysis of the Capitalist system, and if you're queer you don't need a treatise on psychosexual development – what you need are the kind of crude answers that enable you to *handle* the bloody situation. Cut the crap and get *on* with it all.

(Jesus. I think my brain will never be the same again after trying to

squeeze so much into such a limited space. Why should I fuck with articles? They're too *small*.)

Well, sod all those experts, anyhow. There's at least one thing that can be said on this topic of the secret world of violent impulses: a lot of people can't tell the difference between the symbolic and the actual, between the metaphorical and the real. For them, the fetish is not merely an emblematic part but the realised form of the whole.

Getting right down from the solemn to the ridiculous, consider how it is with fandom. Obviously enough, it was A Good Thing that Greg Pickersgill didn't *really* tear off David Brin's head. Likewise, it's just as well that the woman Ted Tubb was abusing didn't follow Kate Solomon's example and brain him with a bottle. After all, the only injuries being inflicted were verbal, not physical – and there is a very large and very real difference between the two. But for many fans this distinction has become hopelessly lost in a kind of semantic confusion. Because a rude remark can be said to be *like* a crack on the jaw, then it *is* a crack on the jaw – same words same meaning, with the result that *both* concepts become disconnected from their underlying realities. Genuine physical violence has become completely symbolic, as in a Dungeons and Dragons game, and while the players still know *in theory* that real violence has real effects, they have become considerably muddled as to where fantasy ends and reality begins.

In a way the whole business is summed up in my encounter with Steven Glover. I insulted the guy, but he didn't either shrug it off or knock me down – instead, he assassinated me with a toy gun. He didn't do it as a joke – he did it because *it was as good as the real thing*. Luckily, it worked out to my advantage on that particular occasion, but in other circumstances I could have wound up dead, thanks to such a lack of discrimination between the metaphorical and the real. Given the fact that there *are* fans who like to fool around with real guns I'm somewhat surprised that no one has been shot already. It will probably happen, sooner or later, for the simple reason that too many people just do not know the difference between blood that comes out of an artery and blood that comes out of a ketchup bottle.

The possibility of physical injuries aside, does any of this matter? After all, looking reality squarely in the eye can be rather a wearing business, and perhaps people *need* a few illusions, and a few games of let's-pretend just to help them get along? Well that depends on the illusions, and the extent to which they affect efficient functioning. You can believe that the earth is flat

and that the moon is made of green cheese without greatly messing up your life – but if you believe your neighbours are beaming Cosmic Rays at you, or that you yourself are Jesus Christ, or Superman, this may lead to a few problems because you may try taking action on the basis of these ideas being true. To be sure, you may manage to co-exist with your fantasies quite nicely for years on end – but the truth is always lying in ambush, and so you must either waste a great deal of energy on dodging or suppressing reality, or suffer the inevitable collision of fact and fiction. Perhaps it would be too extreme to go round offering to give people a kick in the balls so that they can learn to discriminate between real pain and the effects of (say) a bad review, but the principle of knowing the difference between the two things remains sound. The shock of learning the hard way can be too sudden and too severe for safety.

What the hell, maybe I've just been brutalised by too many unfortunate experiences. Yet my life hasn't been so very extreme. In talking about violence and violent people I have telescoped the events of twenty five years, so that (even at this low level) it probably seems far more lurid than it ever really was. As with sex, it's actually somewhat embarrassing to consider what a quiet and uneventful existence I've had for most of the time, and I know that life in a Yorkshire small town hardly compares with what goes on in (for instance) some parts of America or even our own inner cities. The locals didn't make a habit of regularly carving each other up with razors and bayonets as in Jimmy Robertson's Glasgow. Fists, boots and beer glasses were the weapons, and mostly only potentially so. Just the same I was always aware of the things that *could* happen, and from time to time I was forcefully reminded that they could happen to *me*. Being a coward makes one very alert, and also very quick to learn even from relatively undramatic material. I have a strong survival instinct, and in other ways, too, the dangers of failing to face uncomfortable facts have been impressed upon me. So perhaps I do have a small edge of extra insight which has been more or less forced upon me by circumstances. It's not all nothing but theory.

But who cares, eh? That was *then* and this is *now*, so bye bye Rosebud. Time for a counterbalance to all these sordid reminiscences and seamy speculations, so let's lighten up and try a dose of the Power of Positive Thinking, as purveyed (of course) by none other than Walt Willis. In *Pulp* 5 (edited this issue by Vince Clarke) the man has a few things to say which are, in their way, confirmation of my old mate Darren's great discovery.

After a few remarks on the way in which certain comedians have been able to base much of their humour on a body of familiar references and background knowledge shared with the audience Willis draws a comparison with what he calls “Gestalt fandom” which is “... the kind of fandom I myself like: it consists of people whom I know (though I may never have met them) and regard with amused affection, who know each other in the same way, with whom you know you can be honest and unguarded without having your motives maligned. I know there are other fandoms, and I have not a word of criticism of any of them. They all have their merits and there is room for us all.” Gestalt fans “... are in no way inferior to pros; to suggest otherwise, because they get paid for their writing and we don’t, is as silly as to suggest that lovers are inferior to prostitutes.” This approach is contrasted with the “profanzine” which is “... based on the assumption that fanzines are inferior to prozines: fan writers are just disappointed pros in the same sense that Joyce defined a pier as a disappointed bridge. They can however be improved by criticism.”

This all sounds reasonable enough – familiar, even, since I remember devoting several pages to a demolition of the idea that fanzines are inferior imitations of prozines in an article written ten years ago (“The State of the Art” in *Wrinkled Shrew* 7, 1977 – the same piece even mentions “gestalt fandom” as well) and I’ve been repeating the point once or twice a year ever since. But it seems these “profans” are the people who write all the nasty reviews – who make the gutters flow with blood – and this is rather puzzling.

I mean, who *are* these people? In my experience those who see fanzines as merely imitation prozines have always been the *least* enthusiastic about any sort of criticism that is less than anodyne or complimentary. The savage comments have almost always come from fans who accept that fanzines *are* just good as any other literary form, and therefore act on the (doubtless deranged) principle that criticism should be equally stringent, with no special allowances or lowering of expectations. There are critics, and there are profans, but where are the profan critics?

Jesus, you don’t suppose he means *me*? There does seem to be an oblique sort of hint that way in the remark “... the sad fact is that malicious reviews are far easier to write than the kind D. West stigmatises as ‘supportive’.”

No no, can’t be so. Quite apart from my anti-profan remarks on record (and the fact that I haven’t written any fanzine review since 1980, and not all

that many letters) there's the reassuring evidence of a couple of Willis paragraphs in a recent *Quinsy* (a kind of informal apa run by Chuck Harris).

"The newest member of our household, the Golden Retriever pup called Max is far from being house trained yet but already he has given me a new insight into English fandom. The human being in our household who is up first, usually me, must as first duty let the pup out and observe his behaviour. The next member to come down, usually Madeleine, duly asks, 'Has he performed yet?' This morning a small light dawned on me. 'Performance?' I said. 'Now I understand the writings of D. West. He creeps out of Skipton, craps on our flowers, and creeps back again. The results may be unsightly but one may hope for more fertile soil eventually.'"

"A fireworks display in honour of Bingley's most prominent fan took place yesterday evening at Bingley Recreation Grounds and Civic Amenity Site. The display was somewhat dampened by continuous heavy rain, with the result that there were very few bangs or colourful displays. However, the organisers valiantly persisted, and fizzing and sputtering continued at irregular intervals until a late hour: indeed no one was quite sure when it had ended. The Mayor of Bingley apologised afterwards that things had not gone quite as well as he had hoped, but local literary circles were delighted. 'We thought it was just like one of D. West's articles,' said one of his admirers."

What a relief. Obviously, I *must* be a member of Gestalt fandom, because if I were in some other fandom Walt would have not a word of criticism of me. (See how these fans love one another?) All the same, I'm a little hurt that he couldn't find the time to toss off a couple of rather higher quality pieces of amused affection. These do look rather like the first efforts of someone who was given a Ted White Insult Your Friends Starter Pack for Christmas and has just managed to struggle through the instructions. (But I mustn't grumble – at least I did better than Joseph Nicholas, who was favoured with a particularly inscrutable Chinese joke about vacuum cleaners.)

Anyway, though remaining somewhat vague on the identity of the offending person, Willis is in no doubt that we should all curb these vile impulses towards "malicious jibes" and stick to loving one another. "We are simply amateurs: we do it for love. That's what 'amateur' means. All sorts of conclusions follow from that. One is that commenting on a fmz is neither conferring a favour nor performing a painful duty but a little labour of love. If you don't feel that way, don't bother. Another is that goodwill is everything. Not only do writers write better in a congenial atmosphere, the reader enjoys

the fanzine more.”

Right, right. So the next time you feel like suggesting some innocent fan’s latest work is just another pile of dogshit or a bundle of damp squibs remember these words and repent your evil ways before it’s too late. Of course, Walt can’t actually *do* anything to you (since he’s too much of a Nice Guy ever to say something nasty, and the days are long gone when fans trembled at his slightest frown or fell over pissing themselves with fright when menaced with a wry quip) but you *will* have to contend with the full weight of his moral authority.

All the same, since old habits die hard, it would be good to have a really convincing reason for all this mandatory Loving Kindness. “Writers write better in a congenial atmosphere....” Yes, I suppose so – if by this is meant that there’s more chance for their self-conceit to flourish undisturbed. But “Writers are sensitive creatures – otherwise they wouldn’t be writers – and good writing cannot flourish in a climate of hostility. It is a bit like finding the secret police at your Party meeting”?

Holy shit. Enough is enough., and at this point I run out self-control and reach for the bottle. What is this, some kind of TV advert for toilet rolls? You know – all fragrant petal-softness, cute little puppies lolloping around the sunlit garden, half a jar of Vaseline on the lens for that melting focus.... then suddenly you see the menacing shadow of the Secret Policemen.... Jesus; you get more realism than this in the works of Enid Blyton. What kind of world has Willis been living in? Was he stolen from the cradle by leprechauns and brought up in some sort of Irish Disneyland? Has he never actually *read* any writers’ biographies? If he had, he’d surely be more inclined towards the (false but understandable) notion that it’s practically *obligatory* to have a hard time if you want to be a writer.

I think if I lived in a part of the world where the Secret Police really did overshadow life I would find Willis’s comparison rather offensive – too much like complaining to an Ethiopian peasant that one is having *terrible* trouble getting the right sort of caviar. As it is, I find it offensive that writers – and in particular fan writers – are apparently regarded as being such neurotic weaklings and emotional cripples that they are in permanent need of being patted on the head and fed soothing syrup to prevent their shrinking little egos from shrivelling up entirely. What a contemptible bunch of snivelling, whining, ineffectual poltroons we must be if this is true. Yes, being given an unkind word is like being beaten up, losing your job, being

evicted, being ostracised by your neighbours, being harassed by the Police, imprisoned, exiled, starved to death....

Well no, he didn't really say that. Though by a remarkable coincidence all these things *have* happened to writers (just as they've happened to many other people) and strangely enough the writers have been too insensitive to stop writing. However, on the whole the scribbling classes have fared no worse than anyone else – it's just that their hard times have always tended to be better documented. And the hard times are better documented not because the writers are more sensitive but because they are more self-centred: they have an incurable habit of imagining that their experiences, perceptions, desires, grievances and fantasies are all somehow so important that other people should take a look at them.

Writers are neither admirable nor heroic nor even particularly sensitive. The one essential quality they do possess is *tenacity* – and this is nothing more than that monomaniac persistence which is characteristic of pure selfishness. They moan a lot, they suffer from doubt, insecurity and depression, they throw awful tantrums, they mess up their own lives and the lives of other people – but basically they are as tough as old boots, otherwise they wouldn't be writers. They'd be the sort of people who have a notion that it would be *nice* to be a writer, but who never actually produce very much more than displays of artistic temperament. Too sensitive, you see..

If you are a writer you are a *volunteer*. You aren't doing the world any sort of favour – you are indulging your own rather eccentric passion for words and images, and any benefit others may derive from the result is purely incidental. And the world doesn't owe you a living, *or even a hearing*. What's so special about *you*, you obscure little turd, that we should all sit up and pay attention? *Who do you think you are*, eh, snotnose? You want us to look, you'd better make it *good* – and even if it *is* good we don't have to give it more than a glance and a sneer.

All writers are out there on their own, and consequently they need the basic ruthlessness (or recklessness) to go ahead in the face of the possibility of complete failure. No one else can do the work, and no one else can supply the will and self-belief to carry it through. Even the most successful author begins his career as the only person who has faith in his own destiny, since no one ever believes that genius is found among their own acquaintances.

Being a writer is rather like being a rock-climber: you can spend a long time fussing round making preparations, checking your equipment, testing

the first holds – but sooner or later you have to go ahead and do it, or else forget the whole idea. If you want the success you must run the risk of failure, of falling off and breaking a leg or even your neck. And that’s only the *private* satisfaction. If you also want the applause of an audience you must run the second risk that those dumb bastards out there will not be very impressed, will be looking the wrong way entirely, or will be too pig-ignorant to appreciate the amazing skill, ingenuity, daring and accomplishment of your efforts. It’s a hard life, sweetie.

“Sensitive creatures” my arse. Well, if they’re so fucking sensitive, they can curl up and die for all I care. The thought that some such delicate flower may be cut off by a few hard words before reaching full bloom does not move me in the slightest. Anyone who wants public praise has to take a chance on public criticism, and if they can’t face it or can’t take it then they are in the wrong game entirely and should look elsewhere for their supportive crutches. To use another illustration, writing is like making a bet: if you win, fine; if you lose.... well, you’re allowed a certain ration of screaming and shouting and complaining you wuz robbed (since that’s only natural) but *you still don’t got your money back*. If you take a gamble you have to accept the result. (Do you feel lucky, punk? Come on, make my day....) If you can’t face losing – don’t bet. It’s as simple as that. Take the risk or don’t take the risk, but you can’t have it both ways.

Writing is a gamble, but for fan writers it’s a very soft gamble, since there’s no financial gain or loss involved, and not even any great difficulty about achieving publication. Few if any, fan writers are so extraordinarily and extremely bad that they can’t find someone somewhere daft enough to publish their work. Likewise, there are no restrictions on distribution and readership. Since fanzines are mostly free the least-known can reach exactly the same number of readers as the most famous. No one controls or limits the size of the audience: it is as large or as small as each publisher wishes to make it. In these circumstances writers have only themselves to blame for the success or failure of their work, since what the critics say has no effect upon its availability or circulation.

But what *is* success? Obviously this must be measured in terms of *quality* rather than *quantity*: there are no “bestsellers” in fandom. The external rewards come not from sales figures but from favourable reader-response and as the ego-satisfaction of gaining recognised prestige and status. Whatever deprecating noises some fans make, this is a competition in the

sense that those taking part are measured against each other and ranked above or below each other. This happens whether anyone likes it or not and fans who claim that their own efforts are not competing with those of anyone else are merely declaring their own uninterest. The audience will go ahead and rate them anyhow. This is such a natural and automatic process that it seems fatuous to argue that it should not happen. Everyone has their own particular tastes, opinions, prejudices and preferences, so the plain fact is that judgement is inevitable – unless one is to refuse to have any discrimination at all. The only real question is how much importance should be attached to the verdicts and criticisms of the audience.

There is no such thing as objective literacy (or artistic) criticism, because there is no such thing as a fixed formula for works of art. There may be a loose consensus of opinion on certain points and this is often taken for granted *for the sake of convenience only* but in the end a critic's reaction is always more or less a personal opinion. The most that can be attained is not objectivity but impartiality and consistency: the application of a set of standards in a way which is both evenhanded and free from internal self-contradiction. What the standards *are* is of less importance than that they should be applied in this way. The whole value of criticism lies first of all in its possibilities for enlarging or illuminating the meaning of the work being considered, and secondly in providing a measure against which the author and other readers can set their own perceptions of the work's effectiveness and appeal. Writing for one's self may be considered self-expression, but any writing intended for publication must also be considered as *communication*, and hence some account must be taken of the audience's reactions. One does not necessarily need to aim to give the readers what they want – but one must certainly aim to make the readers want what they are given.

Success, however, consists of something rather more positive than the mere avoidance of complete failure, since it assumes that there *is* a real difference between the two things. Those who refuse to make comparative judgements in effect deny this difference: nothing is really bad work, therefore everything is more or less good work – and thus the concept of “good work” becomes virtually meaningless. Critics who can not or will not discriminate between the good and the bad do no service to anyone at all: they provide neither aid nor information but merely flattery. In this they insult those concerned far more seriously than the users of hard words and cutting phrases. If one man climbs the Matterhorn and another walks up two

flights of stairs it is no favour to either to rate their achievements on the same level and no credit to the critic who does not make the difference between the two plain. What passes for kindness is in fact nothing more than a shrinking from the truth: disagreeable though it may be, some pieces of writing are good, and some are not good at all. Anyone who wants to pretend that this is not so is trying to live in a fantasy world, and the more they try the more painful they make the inevitable collision with reality. What is going to happen to the over-praised bad writer when he meets less indulgent critics?

Writing is a ruthless business, and it's silly (and even cruel in the long run) to seek to give writers the special care and consideration reserved for small children and the mentally handicapped. We may owe a duty to the undeveloped and the unfortunate, but nothing out of the ordinary is owed to people who *choose* to be what they are. True, it would be a sorry world without Art, but no individual artist is indispensable, and the idea of an individual fan writer being indispensable is downright hilarious. I didn't join fandom to be a social worker or a nurse, and I don't imagine many other people did either. If I ever call someone an idiot (or a moron, or a cretin) it's not because I think they really do have an IQ of only forty, but rather the opposite: I'm assuming that they've at least enough basic intelligence *to know better*. I also assume that fans are sufficiently un-neurotic to be able to receive a few critical knocks without going into total nervous collapse. If I'm wrong on this perhaps it would be a good idea for someone to start compiling a regular listing of Sensitive Creatures – persons to whom one must never ever speak a hard word. This Intellectually Disabled Register could be published in *Pulp* as a Public Service, and then we'd all know who to leave to fester in perfect peace.

But sometimes it seems that *whatever* you do, someone somewhere is still going to complain. Criticise the bastards and they whinge and moan something awful, but ignore them and they *still* stamp their little feet and throw temper tantrums.... I'm thinking here of such as Paul Skelton and Eric Mayer, who seem to exist in a state of permanent sulky resentment over fancied slights and injuries put upon them by certain sections of fandom. Apparently I myself am one of their persecutors – or so I judge from the unfavourable mentions I've been given by both. This is rather odd. I haven't commented on either of them more than once or twice in the last ten years, and they can't say I've been churlishly ignoring their fanzines, since neither of them actually sends me the things. So what are they so pissed off about? I

mean what do they *want*?

The reputation I seem to have in some quarters of being a vicious destroyer of fan writers and fanzines is undeserved. Much of the time, work which might *deserve* unfavourable comment simply gets no comment at all. I prefer to concentrate my limited energy on the matters which interest me, and I have no particular desire to run a non-stop crusade against bad writing. (Besides, this is one of the very few problems which *can* be solved by ignoring it: either the dumb bastards get better or they just get lost. If not .... Well, there's no hurry.) I don't think I'm doing anyone a favour when I do comment on their work – I'm merely following up some point which *does* interest me. Mayer's and Skelton's productions have never really got a grip on my attention. I find them neither particularly good, particularly bad, nor particularly interesting. Both are reasonably competent writers, but Mayer is too bland and suburban (and occasionally rather twee) while Skelton seems addicted to the kind of humour which depends for its effect upon spinning out the joke to such inordinate length that the audience greets the punchline with laughter out of sheer hysterical relief that the damn thing is finally finished.

Well, no problem there, you might think. There are plenty of writers I don't greatly enjoy, and this is not necessarily a condemnation of their ability. I don't like the work of Henry James, for instance, or (to give you an SF author) Robert Silverberg, though both are highly rated by others. People *do* have different temperaments, outlooks and tastes and it's not to be expected that any one writer will appeal to absolutely everybody.

– Except that Skelton and Mayer seem to have some such notion. So far as I can figure it, they are apparently unable to handle the idea that their work might be regarded with indifference for any other reason than as a deliberate attempt to deny them their *right* to universal praise. True, each has his little coterie, and thus there are people who seem to like what they do and are willing to say so – but there are also people out there who are saying *nothing at all*. IT'S A FUCKING CONSPIRACY!

Yes indeed, these poor boys are being *persecuted* by wicked critics who pay attention to *other people*, and by an all-powerful (but completely unrepresentative) minority clique who prefer to gossip about each other rather than give Great Art the homage which is its inalienable due. Mayer's remarkable "Cafe Fandom" article in *Holier Than Thou* laid it all out – though he never did explain quite how the Cafe fans managed to wield so much power or why he himself should be so concerned about anything such

trivial minded persons might think, say, or do. More recently, Skelton has come up with the cunning notion of an anthology of fan writing which will be selected by poll, thus bypassing the prejudiced personal opinions of ideologically unsound critics and obtaining a *true* measure of merit from the Silent Majority. (Translation: this anthology will include works of Skelton and Mayer and/or the sort of thing they prefer). Though usually no great enthusiast of fanthologies I feel this project should be supported to the full, since either the two will finally get what they want (and shut up) or if (as actually seems rather more probable) the voters *still* won't vote right (and the critics won't critic right), then at least the rest of us will get another good giggle. (Maybe I *am* a bit of a sadist after all.)

Well, what *do* they want? There are people who like their work, and *say* so, so why on earth are they so angst-ridden over marginal characters (such as myself) who just say nothing at all?

In the past ten years I've written something over two hundred pages of fanzine articles. In the same period I've also produced several hundred cartoons, illustrations, covers and comic strips. I should think the entire response to the artwork could be printed on about four pages. Add to this the fact that some of the articles drew little or no remark and that quite a high proportion of the comment on the rest was unfavourable or extremely superficial and you may wonder why I persist.

Well, why not? I enjoy the work. I like drawing pictures and I like writing articles. Several people don't approve of what I produce, and a considerable number never say very much about it at all, but a few *do* show appreciation and that is quite enough to satisfy the desire for applause. It would be tough to keep going with absolutely no audience at all but, so long as *one* person out there likes me it's no problem. I have never been such an idiot as to imagine that my work would be universally popular, so I do not take it as a personal affront when what I write is ignored or rejected.

"We do it for love" says Willis. Quite so, but in my case the "love" is love of writing, not of my fellow fans. Some I like, some I tolerate, some I don't know and some I can't stand. This all strikes me as perfectly natural, and since I assume that others have the same range of feelings I wish that we could have an end to the tedious pretence that fandom is some sort of International Fellowship of Love, with every member sworn to prop up every other member's shy self-esteem. Even the people who preach this nonsensical gospel are apt to contradict its pious fictions by their own all-too-human

behaviour. I don't mind them being human, but it does make the Holy Joe routine rather ridiculous.

Perhaps Skelton and Mayer would have fewer self-inflicted problems if they were clearer about their own purposes and priorities. They denounce cult-of-personality fannishness at the same time as pursuing the decidedly personality-oriented goals of fame and egoboo for themselves; they complain about "stardom" not so much because it exists as because it seems able to exist quite happily without them. So do they really want to be good writers, or is their main aim simply to secure the *status* of being good writers? Do they do it for love of it, or for love of the prestige they think their writing should bring them?

I write because I have the urge to write. Any benefit to others is incidental, and even much of the entertainment from the fannish games of status and oneupmanship is incidental also. The episodic nature of fan activities tends to give a false impression of their importance: we see the concentrated moment of the convention or the fanzine and forget that this is no more than a small fraction of life. In reality the fannish fame-game is never much more than a tease, an entertaining pastime for an otherwise idle moment. Being nominated for a Hugo, for instance, is gratifying chiefly as a piece of passive showmanship: with no extra expenditure of effort I have momentarily managed to upstage the other players in the fannish farce and can enjoy a grin at their expense. (At least ninety per cent of the Worldcon's attendees will never even have *heard* of me, which makes it all the funnier.) Some other time the joke will go in someone else's favour – whatever, the affair is never very serious. The real business is *doing the work*, and doing it *for its own sake*.

This attitude is nothing more than common sense. The pursuit of fame (on any level) as a primary goal is a sad and foolish dream which can never be satisfactory or satisfied, and which is always poised precariously on the edge of painful collapse. (Kid, I know I said you were gonna live for ever – but that was *last week*.) Vanity, thy name is *Locus* – and all those rather pathetic photos of jolly authors in dinner jackets presenting each other with scrapmetal awards and going crosseyed trying to hold their stomachs in. One almost feels like buying their books out of sheer compassion: the poor bastards put so much effort into it they deserve *some* consolation.

The work is the thing – the rest is trivia and gameplaying, fantasy and self-delusion. The fame of authors has much the same life-expectancy as the

fame of actors: the memory starts fading as soon as the performance ends, and in no very long time it will be gone for ever. And so will we all – so the best performance is the one in which we act *for ourselves*.

“Art for Art”’s sake’ is not so much a prescription as a description. Anything else – Art for moral instruction, for education, or for whatever – is a rationalisation or an excuse. Other factors may indeed be involved in any specific case, but the basic urge is self-contained and self-serving: the extraction of pattern and meaning from chaos. Perhaps if one goes far enough back one can identify the source of this urge in the instinct of curiosity, a very necessary trait for human beings, since survival has always called for the ability to explore and exploit potentially hostile environments. But taken on its own, the survival value of Art is by no means clear, so it must probably be regarded as secondary rather than primary. However, though more of an effect than a cause, it does seem that Art has acquired its own separate status as one of the motivational forces underlying human behaviour. It may be a luxury, but it is now so much a part of our culture that it is a *necessary* luxury, if only in the same indirect and fetishistic form as the urge to violence. (We don’t all paint pictures or write novels, but almost everybody has some urge towards adornment and pattern-making, in the shape of such things as personal appearance or interior decoration. The impulse is the same: it goes unrecognised as Art precisely because it is so commonplace.)

Throughout this article I have referred to “violence” and “the urge to violence” rather than “aggression” or “dominance” or Ardre’s “territorial imperative” or Adler’s “will to power,” even though I am aware that any of the latter group of labels probably has a better claim to describe the basic drive or instinct involved. The point is that all these other terms refer to urges which are discernibly *functional*, whereas the urge to violence *as it exists now* has become detached from purpose, just as most sexual activity has become detached from the purpose of reproduction. The real thing has become a symbol; the actual object of desire has become a fetish. In a very similar way Art has become detached from the functional purposes of curiosity: it exists not to promote some other field but solely for its own sake. Like pornography, like the pornography of violence, like fetishism, it contains the stimulus and the satisfaction in the same package.

As with masturbation, you can do it to please just yourself or, as with partnered sex, you can do it to please yourself *and* someone else. Either way, you ought to be clear that the whole deal is largely for your own benefit, and

not for the good of mankind, or for posterity, or for some other hightone abstraction. Believe me, kid, real Art is basically kinda *squalid*, so *boasting* about it is a little too much like handing out all the details on your twelve inch dong, or whatever other no-class claim to fame you may possess. *Wanken man nicht sprechen kann* – best to maintain a gentlemanly reticence, like what I do.

– But Jesus, the strain of all this Deep Meaning is giving me the shakes. Or maybe it's the Art. Anyhow, I definitely need a drink. Back to Leeds, then, but this time to the Griffin Hotel, the West Riding having been abandoned as overcrowded and not too hot on the swift service demanded by brain-damaged thirsty fans. The usual people are there, plus a visiting Lilian Edwards. Naturally, the talk turns to fanzines. (Fuck Art, let's get *serious*.) After congratulating Lilian on her revival of the concept of the Ensmallled Fanzine – a forty page issue of *This Never Happens* – I drop a word or two about *Lip* and the piece I am writing, casually sketching its general outlines. Simon Ounsley shows his usual instant grasp of fannish essentials.

“What do you mean, you haven't even *mentioned* me?” he bellows indignantly.

“Well, it's only a *short* article. You don't think I've got room for absolutely *everybody* do you?”

Ounsley scowls and shifts uneasily in his chair. Even the elite of Cafe Fandom tend to be haunted by the terrible fear that behind their backs people are hatching plots to ignore them into oblivion. Relenting slightly I tell him I might give him a line or two if he immediately does something interesting.

“Like what?”

“Well it's about violence, so I suppose you could hit Graham James.”

He blanches, only recovering when Lilian kindly points out that Leeds fandom's Number One Terminator is not actually present.

“Ah, don't worry about it,” I tell him. “I've got quite enough material already.”

Too true. I'm up to the fucking *eyeballs* in material, and if I turn my back for one moment the stuff starts to *breed* – ideas madly humping each other like rabbits, and theories frantically multiplying like self-fertilising frogspawn. The Law of the Conservation of Smartness is finally catching up with me: I've accumulated too much of the bloody stuff for my own good. Any minute now my skull will blow its hinges and there'll be Smartness splattered all over the ceiling, a glistening mess like a crashed kamikaze snail.

Or maybe not. Sherlock Holmes had this theory about the mind being like a lumber-room: space was limited, and after a while nothing new could go in unless something old came out. My mind certainly seems to bear a strong resemblance to an attic full of junk, but I rather doubt that I've ever managed to clear anything out of it. In fact, I suspect I have not one but *several* attics up there, though the doors to the more distant rooms long ago disappeared behind the accumulated stacks of rubbish. Every now and then I venture in and make an attempt at creating some sort of order, but it's as bad as sorting out the fanzine collection after moving house: I start putting things in piles, then the piles fall over and in no time at all it's a case of: Ah fuck it – might as well go to the pub....

And in the end that's the whole of the story. Art is longwinded, but life is short, and one can't be forever farting around with these involved explanations and finer points of theories. Sometimes one has to say: Never mind the agonising, kid – get on with the fucking action. Life is by no means simple – what do you think this whole article is about? – but sometimes one has to *make* it simple. This applies both to one's self and to one's relations with others. Some questions have answers which are endlessly fascinating in their intricacy and complexity, but one must balance the urge to dig up first causes against the practical necessities of getting on with living. It has to be recognised that the *Ah, fuck it* principle is a very strong factor in human affairs. To know all is not necessarily to forgive all, or even to make a sober and sensible choice. One may have perfect understanding of the other side of any argument and still say: Damn the objections and damn the consequences – *I know what I want*.

I remember a conversation some years ago in which Chris Priest remarked that he had calculated that he would only live long enough to read about six thousand more books, and that therefore he was going to be discriminating. The same consideration applies to life in general: the total number of options theoretically available may be large, but the number which can in fact be taken up is comparatively small. So make your choice – or waste the only chance you may ever get by living to the pattern of someone else's choices.

There are a great many people in the world, and I don't give a damn about most of them. I think it proper not to seek to injure them and also proper to aid the less fortunate, but I reserve the right not to love (or even like) anyone at all. Freedom is the right to say *No*, and this includes the right

to say *No* to other people. The principle is one of equality, not selfishness: I too can be the loser.

As far as I am concerned everyone is free to pursue their own goals, ideals and desires – provided they are prepared to stand the consequences, and provided they recognise that everyone else has the same entitlement. This is not an attempt to justify lawlessness or social anarchy or even *laissez faire* capitalism. Purely on a basis of enlightened self-interest it should be obvious that some form of ordered society is to the benefit of all, and also that an economic system which creates a whole class of desperate losers is neither efficient nor well-grounded. The point is simply that human affairs on every level are always and inevitably liable to some degree of conflict of interest, and even with goodwill there may be no way to reconcile opposing points of view. It is useless to deny or resent or attempt to conceal this truth: it must be accepted. Similarly, it must also be accepted that when one is directly faced with such opposition there may be only two choices: to give way or to fight back.

In practice, most people's lives are arranged as a series of tradeoffs: they make and receive concessions to strike a balance between what they want and what the rest of the world is prepared to allow them. In making this bargain most people are aware that they have no divine right to have *everything*; they are less aware that they have no special right to have *anything*. The Machine in the Sky has no favourites and no notion of fairness or fair shares – except as distributed by the averaging out of random chances. We all live under the gun – always and for ever.

I suppose I am a fatalist, at least in the sense that I am prepared to accept events and existing realities as they are and not as I (or anyone else) might wish them to be. This does not mean that I am passive: whenever possible I act from choice, and whenever possible I act in pursuit of my own goals. It means that I make my bet: if I win, good; if I lose – well, I waste no time on complaints or recrimination, but merely go on to consider what to do next. (Quite probably I will make the same bet again: sometimes there is no alternative which makes sense, regardless of any probability of losing.)

As mentioned, I have been knocked about more than once, but such experiences have left no legacy of resentment or bitterness. Why should they? Either the people who hit me were merely acting in accordance with their natures, or I myself had walked into the line of fire in full knowledge of what might happen. I refuse to feel more pity for myself than I feel for

anyone else. We all have to take our chances as they come.

I see this as being true also in the fannish arena: everyone has the right to promote their own point of view, and they can do it any way they choose – provided they accept that what applies to others applies also to themselves. For me, any fannish clash is like a boxing match: certain low blows (such as outright lies) are forbidden, but once in the ring I am going to make every effort to knock my opponent's head off, and I accept that he will do the same to me. There's no particular animosity involved: it's just the way the game is played. Like boxing, it's a little too naked for the tastes of some people: this kind of thing should be given a respectable suit of clothes before it's allowed out in public.

Well, I see no reason to give way to the opinions of those who deplore this metaphorical violence. Again, why should I? In my view their objections are based on false perceptions of reality – and am I supposed to humour the delusions of every stray loony I ever encounter, all for fear of hurting their feelings? It always seems a strangely onesided arrangement, and thus I remain unabashed by the possibility that there are Sensitive Creatures who may feel my occasional figurative blows as acutely as real ones. That's *their* problem. Of course, it may turn out to be *my* problem if they ever get real bullets for their real guns, but until then I'll stick to worrying about more mundane concerns.

I remember another remark of Chris Priest's – a double score which must surely make him a Secret Master of Something or Other – to the effect that writers spend the first half of their lives finding out who they are, and the second half trying to come to terms with what they have discovered.

Well, I'm not much of a writer – being notably prone to loaf around the place *thinking* about it rather than actually *doing* it – but I have enough of the writer's point of view to appreciate the grim truth of this. In a way, all writers – even think-writers and dilettantes such as myself – are like people under a curse, doomed to wander the world of the imagination as unquiet spirits never able to attain the serene peace of untroubled thoughtless certainty. They are the vampires of experience, sucking the blood of life's complexities and simplicities to feed their own perverse hunger for meaning and pattern. There is no rest and no release. To a writer *everything* – every thought, every act, every dream – is *material*.

(What if....?)

And perhaps it *is* all there, all stored up in these spidery twilight attics of

the mind. Some odd discoveries have been made in surgery: an electrode inserted in brain tissue can spark total recall of events the patients would have sworn were gone and forgotten for ever. And what of my own strange serial dream world, that Other Place which I know only as a ragged memory of a memory during my waking hours, but which comes seeping back – tendrils of mercury groping the skull’s fine patina of cracks – when my eyes finally close? In the daytime, too, there are moments of synaesthesia to remind me: a sensation of something dry, rough, smoky; a coarse fur of ashes or burnt black twigs in a stony landscape beneath a cobalt underground sky. Music. Dust.

(What if....?)

Ah, to hell with it. Who needs this shit? But who can ever escape it? You tell me, Rosebud. This is the terror of existence: it goes on, and on, and on, and there is *no explanation*.

Endless night. And now the clangour of my heartbeats echoes only dully, as though half-muffled by a heaviness in the air. It is like the moment before a storm: the light too, has that grisly quality of being strained through roiling masses of brown and yellow cloud... In a moment the violet glare of the lightning flash will split these umber shadows, branching down from Heaven like the illuminated vein of God, all its capillaries ablaze...

I think of these things as I lie in the dark: of the wrinkled grey mass of the brain, pallidly quiescent, disturbed only by a single small worm of light which turns and turns, tracking slowly across the rounded peaks and valleys of the cerebral hemispheres. Where this glowing wire touches, memory flares for a moment in a flash of frozen clarity. Memories, memories, dreams, crude or subtle symbols of thought, cruel or gross fetishes of the unknown worlds of sex, violence and the creative order – who can make sense of them all? Let me out – let me go back – let me float away.

Above the city lights the haze is tinged with a faint yellow-ochre reflection of the sodium streetlamps, and as the earth’s umbra eats away at its satellite’s final quarter the sphere becomes a kind of ghostly Blood Orange: a pallid swollen fruit mysteriously suspended in the dark forest of the sky. Then the eclipse is complete – but the disc does not disappear: it still shows as a weakly glimmering outline, like a globe of smoked glass whose inner surface runs with thin blood. The effect is curious: a suggestion of something infinitely distant and feeble, yet also infinitely sinister.

# The Secret Diary of Nigel E. Hedgehog



## The Secret Diary of Nigel E. Hedgehog

TRANSCRIBED BY D. WEST

**JAN 15** An interval of semi-consciousness. It is truly amazing how, despite all one's best efforts, inanimate objects seem to conspire against one and constantly seek to relapse into chaos. A large twig was pressing uncomfortably against my most tender parts (i.e. my nose) and drops of very cold liquid were striking me repeatedly in the small of the back. Profoundly dissatisfied, I made efforts to improve my situation, but was greatly hampered by the profusion of mouldy leaves, grasses and other detritus which appeared to fill my resting place. Besides, a glimpse of the exterior world seemed to indicate that it was snowing, so I was obliged to resign myself to my unquiet couch for a further indefinite period. (Resolution for the New Year: to tidy my bedroom.)

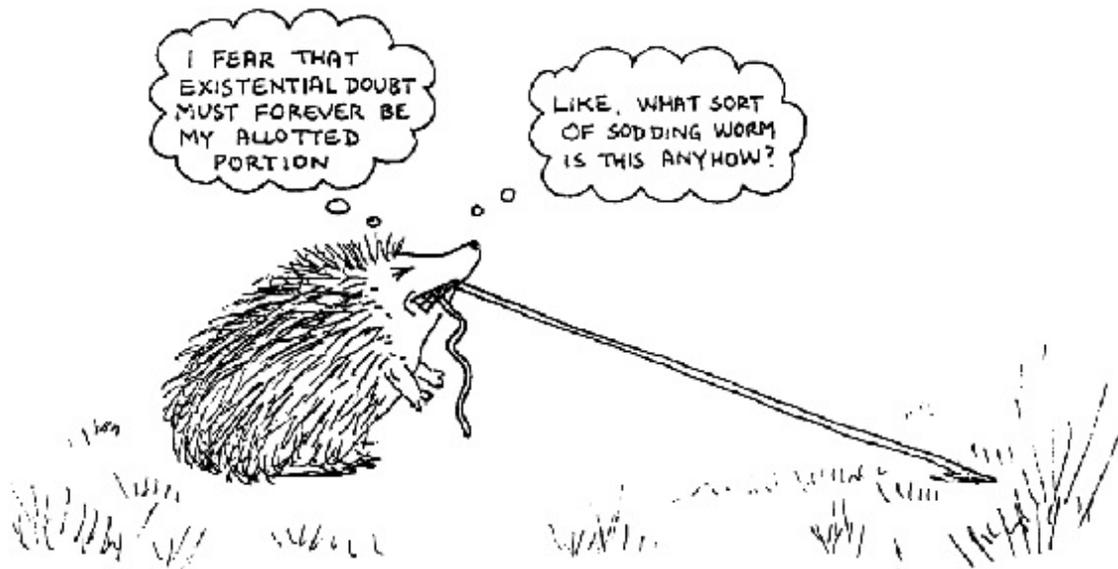
**FEB 4** Still unable to get comfortable. Really, I would prefer to rise immediately, but one is so much the slave of habit and convention in these matters. I do not wish to be dismissed as a flighty eccentric. Also, to be honest, one has to consider the likely availability of breakfast.

**MARCH 8** Almost woke up. My nose informs me that the yearly cycle of existence is once more burgeoning towards fecund fruition. From the miasmatic darkness of decay a fresh new life springs up in vibrant renewal. Or perhaps this is merely the way my bed normally smells. Fortunately, I do not have many visitors.

**MARCH 14** Definitely woke up. Once again I must shoulder the burden

and challenge of the daily round. For a few moments, indeed, I was almost exhilarated by the prospect of the many new and enlightening experiences that may lie ahead, but this excitement was somewhat qualified when I walked into a tree. I had forgotten how random these things are.

**MARCH 18** Much occupied by the replenishment of my depleted stores of energy. While I shall endeavour to note all matters of importance (whether mundane events or intellectual insights) in this journal, it must be confessed that my sphere of activities does not always afford material of great significance. One day – or rather – one night, is much like another: I ramble through the woods, absently sniffing out and devouring such slugs, beetles, worms and other lesser creatures which may fall in my way, but although various thoughts of a general nature do occur it cannot be said that these are of a quality truly worthy of record. I yearn for greater things, but in this provincial and rustic milieu my opportunities are undoubtedly restricted. Oh that a hedgehog's aim should so exceed his grasp.



**APRIL 2** Encountered a particularly long worm last night, but when after prodigious straining I managed to extract it from its lair, was somewhat disconcerted to discover that it was merely a length of discarded plastic clothesline. The appearance of things is not always consonant with their inner reality and hope is merely a prelude to disillusionment. When will I learn to accept this awful truth? Some people have no respect for the environment.

**APRIL 6** Much troubled by fleas. These seem to be more numerous than is socially acceptable and render me acutely self-conscious. Is this normal for someone my age?

**APRIL 10** Not a good day. Walked into a tree again. Later, encountering an unexpected declivity, fell for some distance and landed on my head. Fortunately, my spines preserved me from injury, but the number of times I bounced was extremely embarrassing. Flea count still high.

**APRIL 14** Sometimes I feel like a motherless child, a long long way from home. Well, I *am* a motherless child, my *unfeeling* parent having shown scant interest in my welfare almost as soon as I could move fast enough to catch my first slug. Perhaps many of my difficulties are due to this deplorable instance of social breakdown. On the other hand, the path of Art is never smooth, and the Artist must expect to endure a certain measure of isolation. I would certainly welcome being isolated from these fleas.

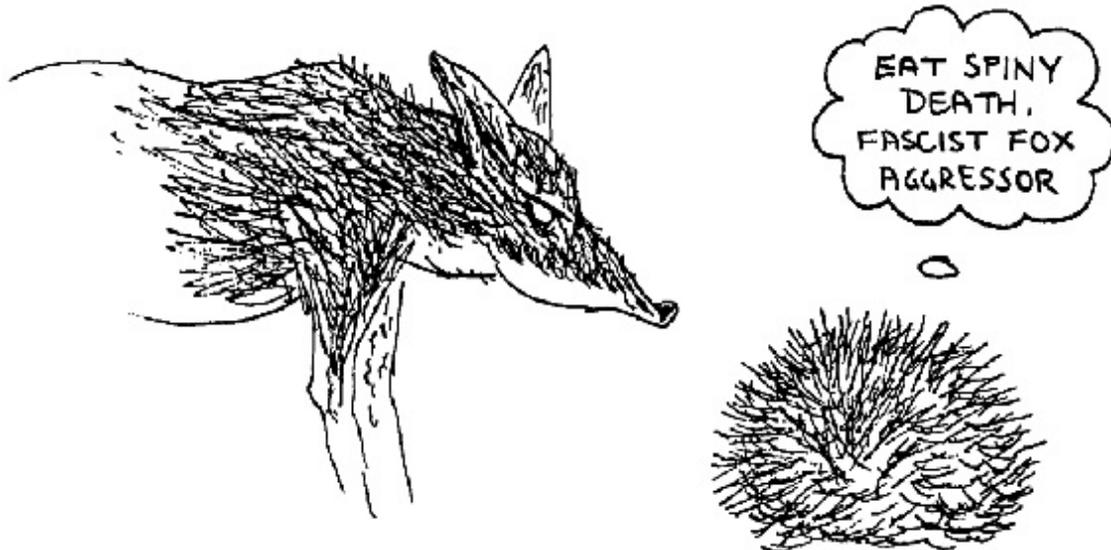
**APRIL 26** Foraging further afield than usual wandered into unfamiliar territory and unexpectedly encountered a carelessly placed garden pond. The shock of entering the cold liquid momentarily disordered my senses and I swam round in circles for some time without any clear idea of how to remedy my predicament. A particularly goggle-eyed and repulsive frog viewed my struggles with complete lack of concern or sympathy. It occurred to me that in some ways this situation could be taken as a metaphor for the whole Hedgehog Condition: an essentially meaningless immersion in overwhelming forces while an uncaring universe adheres to its own mechanical determinism. However, before I could elaborate on this profound insight I started sinking and was obliged to abandon ontology for action. Perhaps there are some things hedgehogs were not meant to know. I shall eat that frog the first chance I get.

**MAY 2** A midnight drama. Wandering abroad on my usual mundane concerns was much alarmed by the sudden appearance of the feral features of that Public Enemy the fox. Being no friend to antisocial violence I immediately assumed the morally superior position of Passive Resistance and stuck my nose well up my rear end. After an interval of frustrated pawing and snarling the vile marauder was thus obliged to go his ways with his opprobrious designs unsatisfied. This triumph of Intellect over Brute Force so cheered me that my thoughts immediately arranged themselves in the following lines:

A hedgehog's life is full of ease  
(Except for all the bloody fleas)  
He dines each night on worms and bugs,  
And catches even speedy slugs

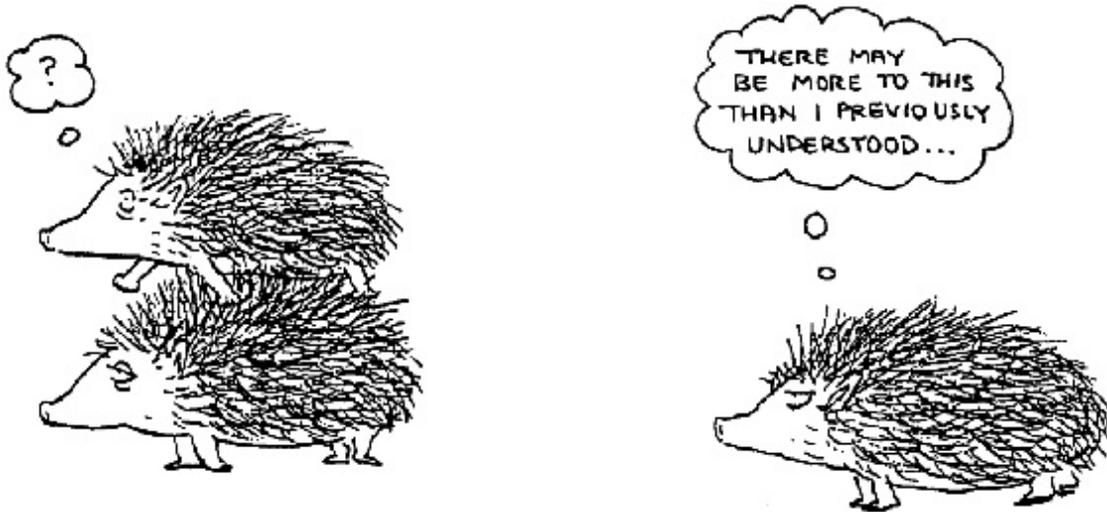
The fox may sniff, but dare not bite –  
The hedgehog is the King of Night.

It is my ambition to become a professionally-published writer.



**MAY 4** Conscious of an inexplicable restlessness. Is this the call of fleshly desire? After all I *am* a male person, and though my legs sometimes strike me as being a trifle short, I do have a rather handsome nose. Unfortunately, I also have a rather bad case of fleas.

**MAY 5** Still haunted by carnal preoccupations. Is this an unhealthy interest? Last night I was the half-unwilling spectator of an encounter between two members of my own species. Is that really how it's done? Much disturbed, I was leaving the scene of my voyeurism when I scented the presence of an unattached female, potentially my own. Ruthless honesty compels me to record that I fled precipitately. But perhaps it is all for the best: A close encounter of that kind might lead to the picking up of strange foreign fleas, and one can't be too careful these days.



**MAY 10** After a severe struggle I have resolved to remain celibate. My vocation must be for the Life of the Mind. Yet am I being entirely consistent? The other night as I was chewing a worm it occurred to me that earthworms, too, are individuals: solitary, self-engrossed, delvers in dark and secret places. (Silence, cunning, exile – who said that? I often feel the need of a really reliable Dictionary of Quotations.)

**MAY 11** A decision: I shall become a vegetarian. The eating of flesh has become morally repugnant to me, and my ideals no longer permit me to live by double standards and hypocrisy. I already feel hungry, but I must be strong.

**MAY 12** Very hungry. Living for principle is a trying business. Did Marcel Proust have these problems?

**MAY 13** Ate twelve slugs, twenty four woodlice, five worms and a number of lesser bugs. Vegetarianism may be ideologically sound, but in the rugged struggle for existence one is obliged to be sternly realistic. Unless I eat properly my career will suffer. It is the mark of the truly mature individual that he is able to make compromises.

**MAY 15** Another bad day. Walked into two trees. Why is life so empty? Why does success seem so far away? Why do I keep walking into trees?

**MAY 16** I have Done It. It is, after all, the duty of the writer to experience all facets of life in order to enlarge and improve his Art. Though I must say, there does seem to be rather less material than I had supposed in this particular area. It was slightly disconcerting when the female of my choice continued to munch a slug throughout our encounter, and seemed to take a remarkably casual (not to say indifferent) view of my fiery passion.

This lack of appreciation is enough to make anyone a misogynist. Well, love 'em and leave 'em.

**JUNE 25** After the earlier rush of incidents I seem to be rather neglecting this Diary. The truth is, I appear to have settled into a very routine bachelor existence, now that I am no longer troubled by the importunities of designing females. I have even stopped worrying about my fleas. So it could even be said that I have joined the bourgeoisie. After all, Art is not everything.

**SEPT 20** Have I Sold Out? The thought occasionally troubles me, but of much more concern is the fact that the slugs seem to be getting faster. And I am undoubtedly a more mature and balanced individual than I used to be, but why do I still keep walking into trees? This hurts my nose. Life is so inscrutable.

**OCT 15** Very slow. More and more, the daily struggle seems a vain illusion, and I begin to yearn for the peace of perfect solitude and total inactivity, bedded down in a comfortable pile of leaves. This is the answer: one must learn that there is a truth beyond Art and mere Intellectuality. I shall make the supreme gesture of renouncing the world and staying in bed for six months. I can always become a Famous Writer next year.

**OCT 16** I will return. Zzzzzzz.



# Then and Now

The first British Science Fiction convention took place in 1937 at the Theosophical Hall, Leeds. Not surprisingly, the turn of a half-century of fandom (or, strictly speaking, of a half-century of conventions, since the first fan groups and fanzines appeared several years earlier) made 1987 a year for celebration, and the round number was duly commemorated both by another Leeds convention and by Rob Hansen's *The Story So Far* ("A Brief History of British Fandom"), published for the 1987 Brighton worldcon. Though not precisely a runaway success (perhaps because the cover illustration rather unaccountably portrayed what appeared to be a pick-up scene between two badly-dressed homosexual midgets) this was sufficiently well-received to encourage attempts to fill in some of the acknowledged gaps in the first version with *Then 1* (covering the period from earliest times to 1949) and *Then 2* (the 1950s). Further parts are projected to bring the account up to the present day, the intention being ultimately to issue the whole as one complete volume.

Anecdotal personal reminiscences have featured often enough in fanzines, but apart from Harry Warner's sideways look from the USA in *All Our Yesterdays*, there has been little previous attempt to approach the history of British fandom in any extended systematic way. Peter Roberts produced his *British Fanzine Bibliography* (Part 1: 1936-1950; Part 2: 1951-1960; Part 3: 1961-1970) in 1978-79 and wrote his "A Short History of British Conventions" (chunks of which can be found in the Hansen text) for the Seacon '79 Progress Reports, but he regrettably became inactive not long afterwards. At the moment Rob Hansen has the field to himself, and since his version of events therefore stands some chance of being accepted purely for lack of an alternative, it seems appropriate to ask: does the Hansen effort provide (or even seem likely to provide at some future completion date) a full, true and meaningful account of British fandom?

The blunt answer is: no, it does not. It may as well be firmly stated at the outset that what Rob Hansen's work provides is not a history (or instalments of history), but a lopsided, disorganised, biased and incomplete ragbag collection of rather less than half the materials on which a genuine history might be based. The intention may be honest, but the execution is so deeply

flawed that the end product gives a picture of the past which at best is extremely suspect and at worst amounts to falsification.

In mitigation, it must be said that the task facing any historian of sf fandom is a large one. The complete documentary evidence available for examination must total something over 60000 pages (from over 1,000 fanzine titles). Although now somewhat rare, dusty and ragged round the edges, both old fanzines and old fans do survive, even from the distant past. However, extracting essence and meaning from the chaos of detail they can supply is likely to be no easy task, especially when one considers fandom's known tendencies towards invention, exaggeration, mythmaking and extreme partisanship on behalf of particular groups, individuals or points of view. The problem is not so much a lack as an excess of material. The real challenge, therefore, lies in the organisation, selection and presentation of facts in such a way as to give a balanced and coherent account which does not merely list events but shows connections between causes and effects.

It might be said that the obvious first step for any historian is to gather data: names, places, events, figures, dates. True, but to assume that a history consists of nothing more than a chronicle of "the facts" is a simplistic fallacy, since it begs the question of *which* facts are to be chronicled. History is never entirely given, never entirely objective. Even before a single word is written, the historian must apply subjective value-judgements in deciding which avenues are worth exploring and which items of information should be sought out as being potentially significant and therefore important. In other words: one must have a theory. Like a good scientist, a good historian will apply his theory with an impartial hand and will always be ready to abandon or modify hypotheses which fail when tested against reason or reality; but he will always *have* a theory, since otherwise he would be proceeding completely at random.

Kindly reason insists that Hansen must have a theory; harsh reality insists that the theory is rather hard to find. At first sight, the Hansen conception of history seems to consist of very little more than a fuzzy notion that *post hoc* means *propter hoc*: if one thing happens after another, then the two must be connected, and this is all that anyone will ever need to know. His only order is chronological; his only method consists of attaching lists of names to dates; his only impartiality is provided by making the lists include as many names as possible. Despite an endless flow of quite mind-numbingly trivial details, the narrative somehow manages to convey scarcely any

meaningful information. Why are we being told these things? Perhaps there is a nugget of significance buried somewhere in this featureless slab of dates, but how is one to find it? Conventions, fan groups and fanzines are relentlessly catalogued in order of appearance, but for all the explanation or analysis which is offered, the record might as well be as random and arbitrary as a list of scores from successive throws of a pair of dice.

One almost gets the impression that Hansen thinks someone else has already written the *real* history, and that his own job is merely to supply a series of inflated footnotes deploying all the minutiae of names, places and dates which were too unimportant to be included in the main work. Certainly, he makes some very large assumptions about the background knowledge of his readers. Even veterans of the scene might consider it useful to have a few solid definitions of fannish practices and purposes simply to set the terms of reference. (One cannot distinguish a change unless one has a clear idea of the original.) No such definitions are provided. Anyone without extensive previous experience of fandom is likely to be more than a little baffled. It is evident enough that there once existed (in some mysterious and murky region entirely apart from the rest of the universe) certain strange beings known as “fans”, and these “fans” published “fanzines” and attended “conventions”, but the rest is darkness. The purpose and meaning of the whole enterprise is left to be guessed at. There are hints that the business may be (occasionally and marginally) connected with science fiction, but it could equally well be devoted to stamp collecting or growing cucumbers.

This absence of any clear focus is all the more remarkable when one considers the extreme narrowness of Hansen’s vision. Though this is never openly expressed, it is obvious he sees “fandom” as something entirely self-enclosed and self-sufficient, a form of Freemasonry sealed off from every other event or influence beyond its own small sphere. The rest of the world exists only as and when it forces itself upon fandom directly and inescapably. This gives much of the narrative a surreal and dreamlike quality, particularly in *Then 1*, where the Second World War is treated almost entirely in terms of the nuisance it caused by interrupting fanzine production and forcing fans to change their addresses (page 23: “For a while it seemed as if the Luftwaffe was intent on destroying what remained of British fandom.”) The first use of atomic weapons in 1945 does not rate so much as a passing mention, presumably because there were no British fans in Hiroshima or Nagasaki and hence no address changes.

A moment's thought might suggest that since both the form and the content of fandom and fanzines have to come from *somewhere*, and that since even the most obsessive and active fan cannot remain wholly beyond the touch of mundane reality, some attention should be given to possible outside factors and influences. After all, even if one had received and read every single British fanzine of the 1950s this would still have amounted to no more than an average of 1,700 pages a year, the equivalent of one rather thin book each month. To suppose that this small offering could somehow completely outweigh (and be completely unaffected by) the much larger and more varied (not to mention more proficient) cultural input of books, magazines, newspapers, films, radio and television (plus general social contact) is to strain credulity to the limit.

Even basic economic conditions are given only the most perfunctory attention. Hansen refers to the generally lower income levels, but he fails to point out the extent to which this shaped early fandom. The written word ruled because there was no real alternative. Few fans could have afforded more conventions, few owned telephones or cars, and hence communication by fanzine or letter was as much a matter of necessity as of choice. (It wasn't entirely a matter of money. In the 50s, science fiction had plenty of readers, but its general reputation was so low that most of them never even considered taking the subject seriously. Later, the public acceptability went up, and more people had more money, so first the size and then the number of conventions increased. But the point to note is that fandom merely reacted to changes, and the changes were *outside* fandom, not within it.)

As for differences in general social background: I was born in 1945, but when I tell my own children (aged between 17 and 23) about my youth it is obvious they regard me as a relic of the 19th Century. Indeed, the whole economic, social and cultural infrastructure of the 1950s was very, very far removed from the world everyone under the age of 35 has grown up taking for granted. In those days, the streets were lit by gas, trains ran on steam, the sky was black with the smoke of 20 million coal fires, wages were low, consumer goods were scarce, and one could recognise older members of the working classes, like H.G. Wells' Morlocks, simply by their stunted physique. Technological marvels such as videos, microchip circuitry, computers, photocopiers and word processors were still science-fictional dreams. Hansen does quote Sid Birchby's characterisation of the 1930s as "an age of humbug", but he might have noted that humbug extended well into

the 1950s. Human nature was much the same as always, but vast areas of human experience had no official existence at all. Sex was something to be kept under covers and feminism was barely thought of. Stirrings of change were already visible (rising incomes and expectations, the beginnings of a separate “youth culture”, greater adventurousness in the Arts, a general disposition to question received values in all areas), but one has to move on to the pop culture/satire/underground explosion of the '60s before reaching recognisably modern times. 1969 and 1989 are visibly connected, but 1969 and 1949 are whole worlds apart.

None of this has anything to do with the history of fandom? Well, what does? Hansen doesn't even offer a few rudimentary details on changes in the technology of fanzine production (photocopiers and word processors now, manual typewriters and stencil duplicators then – different process, different appearance, different audience-appeal). Stranger still, science fiction itself receives scarcely a mention, unless (like the bombs which so disastrously destroyed Sid Birchby's notes for “a detailed history of the SFA”) it impinges directly on vital fannish concerns. Thus the sf magazine *New Worlds* appears chiefly because it was financed by fans, and *Nebula* and *Authentic* also slip in by virtue of the fannish connections of editors and/or columnists. (Hansen seems to have overlooked a research source in *Vargo Statten Science Fiction Magazine*, published under variant titles during 1954-56, which included both a series of fan profiles and a fan news and reviews column. One would also like to know what became of the Vargo Statten Science Fiction Fan League, whose “handsome enamel badge (price 1/6d)” must now be a rare collectors' item.) Most of the other magazine titles (and all the books) are simply ignored.

By this time, the reader may have worked out that since absolutely nothing else (including the rest of the world and science fiction) is judged relevant to the Hansen notion of fan history, then by a process of elimination all that is left is the fans themselves. This in turn implies that the fans in question must be *fannish* fans, since *sercon* fans are those benighted souls who maintain an interest in sf. Furthermore, fannish fans being notoriously prone to cliquishness, schisms and heresies, one can expect that only certain elite specimens will be fully recognised, while others will be discarded (or at least downgraded) as Not Ideologically Sound.

And so, in fact, it does turn out. The bias is not immediately obvious, chiefly because, despite the everlasting parade of factoids, the prevailing

characteristic of Hansen's work is its sheer coma-inducing vacuity. Every item of information is delivered with the same anaemic lack of colour, the same absence of any distinguishing mark of quantity or quality which would enable some judgment to be made on its relative worth. The quotations used have neither literary merit nor liveliness, nor even much content as illustrations. Every name gets a mention – and every name slips out of memory into oblivion two minutes later. There is a sort of spurious negative equality about it: everything is equally dull. Indeed, from wondering what connection this feeble nonsense has with any real world, one moves to wondering what connection it has with any real fandom. The whole thing is as empty bland as a local newspaper report on the Methodist Old Age Pensioners' Party: a dutiful list of who made the tea, who handed out the buns, who proposed the vote of thanks. Were the '50s fans *really* so cataleptic, so dimly preoccupied with the trivia of inane fan hoaxes and petty quarrels about TAFF voting qualifications? Did their passions never rise beyond senile querulousness? Did they *never* do anything much more exciting or naughty than squirt each other with water pistols ("zap guns")?

Well, no, this *is* rather less than the whole story, as one might suspect from seeing the most lurid scandal of the period compressed into the anodyne phrase "personal problems", and as one might confirm by a few samples of fanwriting. Take, for instance, Joy Goodwin: "When we had tired of drinking among our own crowd, we descended to the Liverpool Group, where Ina Shorrocks and Pat Doolan, dressed as space girls à la Bergey, gazed at a near-nude Terry Jeeves involved in strip poker." That's from a con report in *Eye 2* (ed. E.C. Tubb, A. Vincent Clarke, J. Stuart MacKenzie, 1954) which goes on to describe a party (that "was certainly a party") which ends (after the beds were "covered with a seething mass of humanity") in the early hours of the morning with 50 empty bottles being hurled out of the hotel window into the nearby canal. Nothing very tremendous, to be sure, but considerably more lively than anything found in Hansen's prim rendering. Some '50s fans may have been rather less free and easy on a few subjects (such as sex, drugs, rock 'n' roll and KTF fanzine reviewers), and they may have favoured a style of humour rather too gung ho for today's more saturnine tastes, but on the whole they were not quite the bunch of drivelling old fogies *Then 2* suggests.

Trouble is, Hansen thought he was making them look good. This is history, perhaps, but in the end it is a history devoted more to the spirit than to the letter, and the spirit is Golden Ageism. In the Hansen (tacit) Theory of

Fan History, the 1940s were merely a prelude, and the '60s, '70s and '80s an aftermath and a falling-away, but the 1950s were the Main Event, the Golden Age of fannish fandom. And one can't show Bad Things in a Golden Age. Hence the general smoothing-down to facelessness, the overall vagueness, which can be justified as the virtuous historian doing his duty to impartiality by not indulging in sordid measures of quantity or quality which might tend to imply degrees of merit based on mere facts. And this in turn permits the historian to shove his own candidates for greatness up front (on the basis of divine revelation) without having to bother about trifling arguments.

Well, measures of quantity or quality (or fact) are just not the Hansen forte, as he demonstrates with his declaration on page 108 of *Then 2*: "After the 1950s fans in Britain could never again achieve the same level of activity."

One almost feels that anyone who can make such a breathtakingly false statement with so much casual confidence (and absolutely no support at all) deserves some sort of prize, if only as a consolation for having parted company forever with his few remaining brain cells. This man is supposed to be a historian?

Consider the facts. Of the 14 conventions listed for the period 1951-1960, some were smaller than weekend parties I've attended and the largest was the 250-member London worldcon in 1957. Total attendance for the decade: less than 1,000. With only one regular convention per year, there was no very marked increase in the 1960s, but from 1971 (Novacon 1) and then 1976 (Fancon, Silicon and others), figures shot up. Several conventions (the 1979 and 1987 worldcons, the 1984 Euro/Eastercons) have each had more attendees than the whole of the 1950s. Also in the '70s and '80s, the number of clubs and groups listed for one year has often exceeded the total for the '50s, and the BSFA membership has several times been around the 1,000 mark. None of this counts? Well, as for fanzines: in the period 1951-60, there were 933 issues of 264 titles for a total of 16,728 pages; in 1961-1970, there were 1,097 issues of 251 titles for a total of 20,176 pages. "Never again"? The decade after the '50s in fact saw a very slight drop in titles, about 100 extra issues, and over 3,000 more pages – that's an average of ten extra 30 page fanzines per year. (Figures laboriously extracted from the Roberts' *Bibliography* and not guaranteed absolutely accurate. However, I think the margin of error is well within the ten percent that would be necessary just to level the scores. A conscientious historian could doubtless check and do

better. But then, a conscientious historian *would* have checked and done better...) Figures are not available for the '70s and '80s (another task for the conscientious historian) but my own guess is that totals would not be substantially lower and could easily be higher. Fanzine production is always episodic and spasmodic (as the producers egg each other on) and the greater diffusion of fandom these days may tend to cloak the level of activity. (Or maybe not. Moral for historians: check it out.)

Meanwhile, back on the opening page of *Then 2*: “When Walter Alexander Willis first appeared in fandom there was little to indicate how important and influential a figure he would become. Belfast was far removed geographically from the fannish mainstream but Willis and the other fans in that city were to make Irish Fandom the most celebrated fan group of the 1950s.” And just by way of balance, on the last page: “At certain times in fandom certain groups of people appear whose talent, energy and, most importantly, written output in the form of articles and fanzines, is such that they form almost a central axis around which the fandom of their day seems to rotate. They become, in fact, a fannish focal point. By the beginning of the 1960s Inchmery Fandom in general, and *Aporrheta* in particular, had achieved just such a position.” (“Inchmery” from Inchmery Road, London, where Vince Clarke had a house and where Sandy Sanderson, the editor of *Aporrheta*, also lodged for a time).

Well, that’s telling us. Never mind all the lukewarm lines about the bit-players – here’s some real enthusiasm for a change, and here, obviously enough, are the real heroes. (In fact, they’re the “Never Again” crew, the ones whose departure or lapse into comparative quietude after 1960 led to the terrible decline in fan activity mentioned above. Well, you know very well that all those other so-called fans don’t *really* count.) But is it just coincidence that several of the leading figures of this Irish-Inchmery axis (Walt Willis, Vince Clarke, Chuck Harris) are also among Rob Hansen’s leading sources of information on the period? It is cynically said that history is written by the survivors. It is also said that every little fan group tends to regard itself as the centre of the universe – which is understandable enough, so long as they remember every other fan group probably has the same idea. It’s all natural prejudice, but in this case one feels that Hansen has taken the prejudices of his consultants as proven fact, without bothering either to gather supporting evidence or investigate alternative possibilities. As so often in his work, he commits the cardinal sin of simply assuming what he should be

proving, then doubles the offence by expecting his readers to be equally gullible.

There is no doubt that the members of the Irish-Inchmery axis (which also included Bob Shaw, James White, John Berry and Arthur (“Atom”) Thomson) *were* active and prominent fans of the period, but they were certainly not the *only* such persons. Quite apart from other individuals up and down the country, a Liverpool-Manchester axis (including such fans as Eric Bentcliffe, Terry Jeeves, Ron Bennett and Eric Jones) could probably put in just as good a claim to eminence. They published just as many fanzines (in some instances more, as a check of the *Bibliography* shows), and were highly active in many other ways. (The Liverpool group in particular was famous for its parties.)

However, it is not my aim here to make a case for or against any particular group or individual. The real point is that if a case is to be made at all then it should be accompanied by evidence or argument, not left to float unsupported in a kind of reverential fog. Hansen very obviously has certain prejudices, but he never backs them up with anything more than flat assertions. It is not good enough just to say that Willis was “important and influential” and that his *Hyphen* “would go on to become perhaps the most influential fanzine of all time” (page 58); one would like to know something of the *what, how, why* and *who* of all this – what this so-tremendous influence was, how it worked, why it worked, and who it worked upon. Instead, Hansen doesn’t even give us a page count, let alone an idea of the contents (quantity may not be quality, but it makes a very good starting point, particularly for a historian). Considering that Willis is his great hero of the ’50s, it is extraordinary how little we are told about what he actually *did*. The impression newer fans are likely to carry away is that Walt Willis had something to do with fanzines and was mostly famous for being famous. (With friends like historians, who needs reviewers?)

Still, it hardly matters. This is the enclosed fantasy world of the Secret Masters of Fandom, in which Ancient Wisdom is supposedly handed down to trembling neophytes who could never otherwise get the bright idea for themselves of doing a James Thurber imitation or New Yorker pastiche. This gibberish has nothing to do with reality at all. The description of *Hyphen* as “the most influential fanzine of all time” sums up the whole immense silliness of the Hansen approach to fan history. The persistence of “influence” is one of the great fannish myths. Common sense alone should

indicate that since fanzine copies are few, and even fewer survive, their scope for effect is rather limited. As a 1954 fanzine review (in *Eye 1*) reveals, *Hyphen* had 200 US subscribers and 50 in Britain. In other words, it wasn't even going to all the British fans of its own period. Thirty five years later, I doubt that one in 20 fans has ever set eyes on a copy, let alone ever been "influenced" by it. Anyone who can believe in that kind of mystic linkage would benefit by swapping brains with a Halloween turnip.

In every era, fandom has its stars. You could make a list: 1940s, J. Michael Rosenblum; 1950s, Walt Willis; 1960s, Pete Weston; 1970s, Greg Pickersgill; 1980s, Dave Langford. You could then start to argue, cross out all the names and insert new choices. It doesn't really matter. The point about stars is that they are made by the system, not vice versa. Stars are simply those individuals who, being in the right place at the right time and with the right modicum of ability, happen to encapsulate some significant aspect of the spirit of their age and thus win the approval of the audience. They come, they go. The individual's talents may be real (and admirable) enough, but the star status is not unique and special to that individual, since, if he ceased to exist (or had never existed), it would merely pass to the next in line. (It's a dirty job, but....)

All of this serves to make the point that the history of fandom has far less to do with individuals than might be supposed, and nothing at all to do with Secret Masters handing down Ancient Wisdom. Given godlike retroactive powers, one could eliminate any number of BNFs (stars) without significantly altering fan history. Indeed, one could go further and wipe out *the whole of fandom* before any particular date (1955, 1965, 1975, 1985...) without real loss to the present – all for the very simple reason that 90% of fandom's content comes from *outside* fandom, and the other 10% is a purely pragmatic response to the peculiarities of the fannish situation which could (and would) be reinvented from scratch in a couple of years.

In the true historical perspective, fans *reflect* history – they do not make it. This is not to deny merit to individual displays of brilliance, but to put the status accorded to such efforts in proportion. Fandom is a sideshow: virtually all its acts, techniques and basic ideas are handed down from the main programme held outside. This is nothing to be ashamed of – one can be a good musician without necessarily ever writing music – but on the other hand, common sense suggests the musician should not start imagining he invented the whole orchestra.

In the end, this is what *could* make fan history interesting: tracing the feedback loops between fandom, sf, literature in general and the world at large. And that is the only real history. The rest is just old gossip, hollow boasts, plain lies and fannish fantasy.

# The Main Event

I read my first fanzine in 1961 or 1962, but another fourteen years passed before I made it to my first convention, the 1976 Eastercon in Manchester. Since then I've been to over forty cons – anything from two to five a year every year – but after attending all the Eastercons from 1976 to 1986 I dropped the date from my calendar. I wasn't in Birmingham in 1987, in Liverpool in 1988, or in Jersey in 1989. I won't be in Liverpool in 1990, and it seems unlikely that I'll be in Glasgow in 1991. These days the Eastercon is strictly for the birds: the annual weekend for laying another egg.

So what changed? Why is the convention which used to be the Main Event now something to be set aside with no more than a faint twinge of regret?

Lack of money? Lack of interest? Well, although conventions can be both expensive and exhausting I still like going to them, and although a chronic cash shortage has often demanded precarious balancing acts on the edge of insolvency it has never been an insuperable problem. When I really want to go I usually manage somehow or other. In 1977 I went to Coventry with £5 and a paper bag full of sandwiches. In 1984 I went to Brighton with a box full of copies of *Fanzines in Theory and in Practice* (now out of print), but having forgotten the sandwiches was obliged to borrow 50p from Pete Lyon until I could start hawking the goods and raise the price of a crust. Most of my Eastercons have been financed in some similarly opportunist fashion, relying on sales of artwork to seekers after culture, disposal of books to auction bidders with more money than sense, or just plain good luck with the gambling. (It's a real test of True Grit when you know that your poker hand had better not be second-best or there will be trouble with the hotel bill.) But in 1987 and 1988 an inheritance meant that I could perfectly well have afforded to attend both Eastercons in style with no worries at all. (To dispel any rumours of great wealth I must point out that the money is long gone now. It was the usual story: I spent some of it on drinking, gambling and chasing women, and wasted the rest.) Instead, though I went to other conventions (including the 1987 Worldcon) I spent my Easters at home.

Again, why? The short answer is that these days an Eastercon seems to offer only doubtful prospects of providing value for money. (Yes, I haven't

been since 1986, but remember that the agents of the Leeds Group are everywhere.) It's sure to be expensive (and for those on low incomes even attending on the cheap means that one is spending money which more properly should be reserved for tedious things like food and electricity bills) but it's far from sure to be worth it. Dire necessity aside, I am in fact fairly casual about money, but like most people I object to being taken advantage of. The cost is the same, but there is all the difference in the world between buying someone a drink and having the same person pick the price out of your pocket. To put it bluntly: at an Eastercon I feel that I'm being exploited – that I'm spending a lot of money, but that most of it is going for the benefit of others, and that any enjoyment I myself experience is likely to be incidental. Indeed, personal enjoyment has become almost irrelevant: the whole business is partly a meaningless tribal ritual (origin forgotten and purpose now obscure) and partly a rather expensive way of furnishing ego-gratification to the comparatively small group running the event. Somewhere along the line what used to be a party given for everyone's enjoyment has changed to the sort of Public Relations event which is run not so much for the attendees' pleasure as to demonstrate how very wonderful are the organisers. Unlike most PR image-building exercises, however, this is one for which the guests themselves have to pay at the door.

The Eastercon has become a lunatic game locked into its own tail-chasing spiral of absurdity: ever-larger numbers of people must be brought in to finance an ever larger programme which is necessary to bring in the ever-larger numbers of people necessary to finance an ever-larger programme... and so on ad infinitum and ad nauseam. The whole enterprise is becoming completely pointless except as a means of feeding the sterile power fantasies of the persons in charge: it is action purely for the sake of action, like the obsessive and profitless pursuit of ever-higher scores by those addicted to games machines. Few of those currently associated with Eastercons seem to have any clear idea at all as to *why* they are so involved. The rationale they present in public (and even in private) is often self-contradictory, usually based on very questionable (but never questioned) assumptions, and invariably self-serving. Beneath all the vague and confused flourishes of sales-talk and self-justification the real message is depressingly simple: we want *you* to spend lots of money so that *we* can have fun playing around as organisers. In other words: cons are for conrunners, and the punters don't matter so long as they furnish the numbers to keep the game going.

The predictable response to these assertions is likely to come in three main forms: indignation, obfuscation, and vituperation. It will be said that I am unjustly maligning a fine body of public servants: that Eastercons are not run for personal glory but for reasons of pure and shining altruism upon which also depend the health (or even the survival) of SF and fandom; that a survey taken at 2a.m. in the bar on Easter Sunday proves beyond doubt that Eastercons are perfect and that everything is for the best in this best of all possible worlds; and that in any case what does a rotten, arrogant, cliquish, elitist, fannish fanzine fan know about these things?

What indeed? The difficulty with discussing cons and conrunning is that for many people the whole subject is always liable to disappear in a fog of muddled reasoning, personal resentments, defensive paranoia, inaccurate history and plain ignorance. In particular, a kind of conrunning theology has developed which seeks to sanctify its own prejudices by assigning stereotyped roles which by circular argument are then used as “proof” of the original assumptions. (Only true believers can know what is true; anyone who denies this is not a true believer; therefore they cannot know what is true. This proves it.) On the one side (supposedly) are the “fanzine fans” or “fannish fans” (a bunch of malevolent cliquish idlers who do nothing but complain and would plunge fandom into a hell of elitist literacy if given half a chance), while on the other are the “convention fans” or “conrunning fans” (the Good Guys who do all the work and without whom conventions and fandom would collapse). This murky jungle of mythology and twisted terminology needs some clearing before the real issues can even be understood, let alone debated in any useful way. It is true enough that “fanzine fans” and “conrunning fans” do represent often-diverging strands of active involvement (as distinct from largely passive consumption) in fandom but both their roots and their differences need to be looked at in a way less tainted by preconceived ideas.

It would be absurd, however, to pretend that this article is written from a viewpoint of Olympian detachment. I have no ambitions to feature at conventions either as an organiser or as a performer, and I have no vendetta against any of those who do, but it should be obvious enough that I am far from being on the side of those who classify themselves as conrunners. I have therefore made no attempt to exclude expressions of personal feeling and no attempt to employ those tricks of style which try to suggest a greater degree of objectivity than really exists. After all, one of the main points I am seeking

to make here (and one you should note carefully now, in order to make what follows more intelligible) is that too many fans are deceiving themselves (or attempting to deceive others) with the claim that they are acting out of altruism, or in the service of some (not very clearly specified) Higher Cause. In fact, most of their motives are far more personal. So are mine. The basis of fandom is the individual, not the collective. We will all get along a great deal better when this truth is acknowledged.

The first acknowledgement to make, then, is that I myself am a fanzine fan. As mentioned, I spent fourteen years reading fanzines (and meeting only half a dozen fans) before my first convention, and though I have no wish to renounce congoing I know that fanzines will always form the strongest element of my attachment to fandom. On the other hand, involvement with fanzines has not excluded involvement with conventions. In 1979 I was on the committee of the first Yorcon, and during a fit of temporary insanity I even mounted an unsuccessful Eastercon bid of my own (on which more later). Experience suggested that committee work did not suit me (and vice versa) so I have declined any such openings ever since, but I have worked for conventions by appearing on programme items (half a dozen times), providing written or drawn material (for fifteen or more conventions, including the 1987 Worldcon), and even performing such lowly tasks as putting things in envelopes, general gophering and sitting at registration desks.

My record is not too dissimilar to that of many other fanzine fans. In fact, I can think of few fanzine fans who have not “paid their dues” by assisting on or running one or more conventions. This should not be a surprise, since a fanzine fan is an active fan by habit and almost by necessity. You can’t stay involved with fanzines very long unless you make some sort of contribution, and it is no more than natural to extend this to include conventions. The only surprise is that anyone should state or imply (in the teeth of both history and current experience) that fanzine fans are nothing more than critics speaking from the sidelines, or that their connection with conventions has been entirely given up to others.

Yet this is the story which seems to pass for gospel in some conrunning circles. This Martin Easterbrook (co-chair of Eastcon) declares in Abi Frost’s *Chicken Bones*:

Fanzine fandom became inward-looking when it felt itself swamped by the influx of new fans after Seacon 79. Many of the

best fan writers became inactive after Seacon, and a rather self-important style of writing became fashionable, which was very off-putting to newcomers, and, I suspect, to some of the previous generation of writers. Seacon also introduced a lot of new people to conrunning.

In the following years, a conrunning fandom began to emerge, having less contact with fanzines. Within fanzines, there is a tendency for new generations of fans to displace the old. Fanzine fans seemed unilaterally to decide that the conrunners were attempting to do this, and in response slunk off into the wilderness to die amidst general wailing and self-pity. This left the surprised conrunners as victors in a battle which never took place – but still subject to general sniping about the lack of skills which fanzine fandom had taken with it into exile. Far from exulting in the situation, conrunners were reduced to trying to lure back any fanzine fan they could as fanroom organiser or fan GoH.

This version of events is worth looking at as a sample of the way in which perceptions can be twisted out of shape both by preconceived ideas and choice of imagery.

For such an inward looking bunch who were swamped by the influx of new fans the fanzine fans certainly did astonishingly well by promptly winning the bid in 1980 for Yorcon 2. Even more surprisingly, there then followed Yorcon 3 (1985), Conception (1987), Lucon (1988), and Iconoclasm (1989), all heavily infested by the strange cult of elitist worshippers from that darkest of all fannish hells, Leeds (Easterbrook's phrase), not to mention the three Mexicons (1984, 1986, 1989) and the Silicons (early 80s) and many Novacons (throughout the decade), all likewise infested with fanzine fans. Still, I suppose that one sees here all the fine subtlety of the Higher Conrunning Criticism. Low and vulgar persons might suppose that the definition of "fanzine fan" would remain more or less constant, but apparently it is subject to considerable variation according to the Slunk Factor. A non-slunk fan (as for example one who ran a convention instead) obviously does not count as a fanzine fan at all. Similarly, Easterbrook himself is not now and has never been a fanzine fan (well, *he never slunk, did he?*) despite writing for *Chicken Bones* and publishing *Small Mammal*. It all goes to show that life is much more complicated than us simple folk ever realised.

Reverting to less stratospheric levels, however, it must be said that the fanzine fans' mass slunk does seem to have been limited to no more than a decline in enthusiasm for the Eastercon. It must also be pointed out that running conventions is only *one* of the things fanzine fans do, and that not being in charge of all the Eastercons would hardly count as a crushing blow, as it might do to those having no active interests beyond conrunning.

Easterbrook sees it differently, declaring that many of the best fan writers became inactive after Seacon. The implication here (together with "swamped") seems to be that this was directly linked to the "influx of new fans", which for some reason caused the fanzine fans to turn their backs on the rest of fandom or leave altogether. But exactly how many is many and to what extent does it exceed the dropout rate for any other period? After all, good fan writers also became inactive in the 50s, the 60s, and the 70s, and in each case (as in the 80s) good *new* fan writers came along to fill the gaps. Fans come and go all the time, but the reasons for going are usually more personal than related to any particular event in fandom itself. The traumas of running a Worldcon (or any convention, for that matter) may well give people a distaste for further involvement, but in most cases it is at least as likely that those apparently thus killed off were already on their way out and simply made the convention their last appearance either as a final gesture or because they had been hanging on to fulfil their obligations. Where there is not even a single pivotal causatory event (as with the fanzine fans slunking off into the wilderness to die) the language seems even more fanciful and absurd.

This paranoid notion of fans being somehow "driven out" does surface regularly in fanzine fandom itself, as when it is alleged that the saintly martyr W has been forced into retirement by the dastardly persecutions of X and Y. Apart from wondering why W is such a spineless wimp (when all X and Y can do is make rude noises) one also wonders why there is such a very long list of fans who have dropped out despite being widely praised and admired. Adverse criticism may sometimes be the final straw, but common sense suggests that fandom is a part of life, not the whole, so there is nothing very extraordinary about a shift of interest and activity to other areas. It is a very blinkered view that assumes effects in fandom can have no causes arising elsewhere.

Quite apart from common sense, what about statistics? I am always rather puzzled by stories of the vast hordes of new recruits brought in by the

Worldcons. Are these people being kept hidden in a secret cold-storage vault somewhere? Eastercon membership figures have been going up (somewhat erratically) since the mid 70s (see the list in *Conrunner* 9) but comparison of the totals for 1980 and 1988 with those for 1978 and 1986 shows rises hardly higher than might have been predicted for any non-Worldcon period. (There is naturally a dip in the growth curve for Eastercons held in the same year as a British Worldcon.) It is quite possible that the Worldcons recruited nobody at all, and that the thousand or so “new” fans who turned up on each occasion were once-only visitors drawn from the minimally involved fringes or from media fandoms, to which in due course they returned.

Certainly the impact of those few (perhaps 100?) who did come back next year was so slight as to be practically invisible. Who cares about a few more faces in the crowd? Where passive consumers are concerned the exact total has little significance except in terms of overcrowding the bar.

Easterbrook’s tabloid headline version of history (FANZINE FANS FLEE INTO EXILE – CONRUNNERS SWEEP TO VICTORY) has been dealt with at length because it seems representative of a certain kind of confused thinking. In essence, this consists of arguing in terms of metaphors, then taking the metaphors as being literally true. Fandom is presented in military or political images as a series of battles, invasions, revolutions or power struggles involving groups who seize or lose both tangible assets and totalitarian systems of control. The mention of a “battle which never took place” is not so much an indication of realism as a confirmation of the underlying dominance of metaphor. The “battle” never took place, indeed, but the writer is unable to avoid thinking in terms of opposing armies, and the terminology dictates the shape of his perceptions. The pictures evoked by such use of language are misleading, if not completely false. (It is doubtless news to many fanzine fans that they are in “exile”. Doing something else is the equivalent of going to Siberia?) The result might not be so bad if the metaphors were at least well chosen, but they are careless cliches. Reality is being rearranged by sloppy rhetoric.

Fandom is not some sort of monolithic corporate body or State with the power to direct or limit its subjects’ actions. There are no armies which fight battles, capture territory, defeat enemies, and conquer whole populations. Fandom is a free market in which the customer can always say No and go somewhere else. There is no military or political discipline and there are no alliances except the personal. Membership of such sub-groups as

conventions, local clubs and the BSFA, is purely optional, and these bodies have no real powers and no real assets other than the voluntary subscriptions of the members, which are subject to change of mind and cancellation at any time. There is no central funding, no central reserve, no central taxing agency, and no central system of compulsion or constraint. In short: there is no Government. All fans are free agents, and there is no mysterious mechanism of control which can be seized by one party to compel the obedience of the rest. The only limitations placed on any fan's actions are the general rules of society and the limits of the fan's own talents, energy, finances and time available. The only sanctions one fan (or group) can apply to another are criticism or neglect. Say No to someone with *real* power and you may risk being deprived of your job, your property, your liberty, or even your life. Say No to other fans and you risk nothing worse than rude words or being ignored. "Power" in fandom is an illusion which depends on nothing more substantial than force of personality. In other words: fans are controlled (if at all) only by threats to their personal vanity.

Apart from semantic confusion, a major factor promoting delusions of fandom-as a-State is probably the practice of Eastercon bidding. This might be called the General Election Fallacy. Group A's bid gets more votes than Group B's bid, therefore Group A has won the election and swept to power, whereas Group B is powerless, impotent, forced into exile, etc etc. Unfortunately, the parallel is a long way from being valid. Under our very wonderful parliamentary system of elected dictatorships the Party which wins a majority in a General Election can do more or less as it damn well pleases, and everybody else has to pay taxes and follow orders or go to the wall. The winning side comes into command of real assets and real mechanisms of control. Under our somewhat farcical system of convention bidding the group which wins the bid can do more or less as it damn well pleases – but so can everyone else. An Eastercon bidding session settles nothing at all except which group of bidders (or their co-opted successors when the originals drop out) has the majority approval (of those present at the bidding session) to put on a convention (somewhere or other, God and hotel managements willing) billed as "The Eastercon" at some time (probably Easter, though some Eastercons have been held at Whitsun) in the year after next. The losers of the bid (and the much larger group of fans who didn't even vote) are not thereby debarred from exercising free choice in every other area. Indeed, they can stay at home if they feel like it, or they can mount an alternative

convention of their own (such as Elydore) on the same date. They might even call it “Eastercon”, since the legal position on exclusive rights to the name (the only asset) is by no means clear.

An Eastercon bidding session is not so much a General Election as a piece of consumer research: a rather arbitrary opinion poll taken to establish whether or not there is enough basic support to make a particular project viable. The weaker bid drops out because in theory its defeat indicates that market forces are not running in its favour and therefore withdrawal rather than direct competition is the more sensible choice. In practice a low turnout of voters and/or a close result has often suggested that it would be just as sensible (and fair) to decide by tossing a coin. Whatever the method, the only really important point is to get a clear result and thus avoid wasteful arguments, delays, or duplications of effort.

Common sense alone should indicate the very limited significance of convention bid voting, but there still seems to be a notion in some quarters that to win is to be handed some kind of mandate to speak for or make demands upon the whole of fandom. In his Worldcon bid promotion piece (or Eastercon bid writ large) in *Conrunner* 12 Vince Docherty provides a sample of this line of thought:

There is a matter of trust when you take on a project like this, people believe that they must support it in order to “keep the side up”, some for purely personal reasons, others because they believe a bad Worldcon will give them a bad name as well.

Whatever the reason, if we choose to bid, then we also choose to take a large part of British fandom with us, willingly or not. (I know that this is one of Ian’s criticisms of the bid, libertarian soul that he is.) So when we choose to bid we have to be sure that we have taken account of that trust.

However I am not saying that we don’t have the right to direct so much of fandom in one direction. On the contrary, it is our “right” to bid if we want to, running conventions isn’t democratic. We are doing what writers do when they write, or the people who started the BSFA did – we are trusting that what we want to do is actually what other people want to do or to see. And we are also trusting that if they don’t want us to do it, that they will tell us and stop us.

This passage suggests that Docherty is wasted in fandom. Only a born politician (or a born dickhead, if that isn't a tautology) would have the effrontery to present such a farrago of empty nonsense, simultaneously prating of "trust" and soliciting support to keep the side up while declaring that everyone will be dragged along willingly or not in any case, and too bad if they don't like it, because running conventions isn't democratic. However, though he has certainly picked up the politician's style, he may be lacking the politician's ability to sense just how far one can go in insulting the intelligence of the voters. With promotion like this I don't expect to see another British Worldcon this century (yes, this is me returning the trust and telling him I don't want him to emulate all those writers and BSFA people just for my benefit) so there seems no need to do more than fervently endorse the objections already raised by Ian Sorensen.

The main point to note here is the assumption that a winning bid can claim (and by implication deserves to claim) an almost automatic support from fandom. Apart from being offensively presumptuous this is also foolhardy, since it assumes an authority which does not exist, even in terms of moral obligation. People may go to a particular convention (whether a Worldcon, an Eastercon or media con) because it appeals to their tastes, but they are never compelled to go, and it seems unlikely that they go as a matter of principle. Where's the obligation, unless they specifically pledged their support? As Ian Sorensen has pointed out, the fate of any Worldcon bid is decided by American votes. Only a very small proportion of British fandom has any say in the matter at all. British Eastercons are not much better. There are just 70 people who may feel morally obliged to support Speculation next year because they voted for it. Again, this is the General Election Fallacy: the winning bid sweeps to the seat of all power, and even the non-voters must go along.

Lisanne Norman has a similar idea when rebuking critics of Eastcon in *Conrunner 12*:

If people are prepared to put such an effort into knocking us and persuading folks not to attend, then it says very little for their opinion of a democratically elected convention. Obviously they put their personal sore loser values against the wishes of fandom. This is just the sort of tactics that the Mary Whitehouses of the world employ with their attitude of "I know better than you what is good for you." Why should small factions of fandom hold the rest of us

to ransom? if they feel so strongly that Eastcon is not for them, surely they realise the proper and democratic way to change things is to put their energies into getting a bid for '92 together and presenting it to fandom at Eastcon.

There seems to be a certain lack of self-awareness (or a double standard) here, since those small factions of fandom who hold the rest of us to ransom with their attitude of “I know better than you what is good for you” sound remarkably like convention committees in general and the Eastcon committee in particular. The wishes of fandom are invoked, but why should those who did not vote for the bid favour an outcome which does not represent their wishes at all? And why should they keep quiet? Even our winner-take-all parliamentary system permits the losers to complain and criticise. (In fact, that’s what they’re *supposed* to do. Opposition MPs have not just a right but a positive duty to get up and make themselves obnoxious to the Government of the day.) The system favoured here by Norman is not democracy at all, but what the old Communist Party used to call “Democratic Centralism”: the Comrades dutifully raise their right arms for the Central Committee’s policy recommendations and thereafter keep their mouths shut and follow the Party line with no deviations at all, none whatsoever. Something similar is still practised in milder form by Trade Unions, where it goes under the name of “solidarity”.

So when did we all join the Union? Or the Party? If one does join such an organisation then one may indeed make an agreement to follow certain rules and accept certain limitations on behaviour (such as acceptance of majority decisions and curtailment of completely free speech) but neither I nor anyone else ever made such an agreement on coming into fandom. As a fan I act as I please, I speak for myself, and no one at all tells me what to do or not do. Obviously, if I behave in certain ways I may make myself unpopular and suffer the consequences, but neither the offence nor the punishment is defined in any rule book. One might refer to the usual practices of fandom as “rules” or “standards” or “traditions” but they are really nothing more than pragmatic responses to the requirements common to those involved in a particular situation. For example, the practice of giving away fanzines for “the Usual” (meaning letter of comment, contribution or trade) is simply a recognition of the fact that the return being sought is reader-response, not cash. Nobody swears an oath to do this, and no high moral or ideological principle is involved – it’s just common sense used to satisfy

personal needs in a practical manner.

As the quotations should indicate, the most marked characteristic shared by Easterbrook, Docherty and Norman is their tendency to treat fans in collective rather than individual terms. Up to a point this is legitimate, since one could hardly make any general statements at all without using terms of this kind (and I'm doing it myself in this article) but once again there is a danger that figures of speech will be confused with facts. This is not unimportant, since the way in which fandom is perceived inevitably sets the pattern for the way in which fan activities are approached.

The fatal mistake here lies in the assumption that the sharing of one or more interests, tastes, preferences or practices necessarily implies some form of group solidarity, common policy and collective identity. Inevitably, group classifications and labels are used as a matter of convenience, but the very limited significance of such labels needs to be clearly understood. Fandom has plenty of factions, cliques and ingroups of old pals, but these are *personal* alliances, and very often cut across the lines dividing categories such as "convention fan", "fanzine fan", "media fan" and so on. It has to be repeated (again and again and again) that these categories (and fandom as a whole) are not political parties, not Trade Unions, not armies.

Naturally, one can hardly be called a fan of any sort if one never has any involvement with one or another aspect of fandom, but this common-sense qualification aside, membership of fandom is largely self-bestowed and self-defined. This does not mean that one cannot discuss (and criticise) points of view ascribed to labelled groups within fandom, but one has to bear in mind that one is addressing a group of opinions held by individuals (perhaps) rather than a group which is in any real sense united and bound together by an oath of allegiance or a rigidly defined code of principles. The label is more the title of a rather nebulous collection of abstract ideas than a reference to an actual organised body with fixed rules, policies and objectives.

To a fanzine fan it always seems rather odd that (routine paranoia aside) anyone should ever see fandom in terms of disciplined power structures. After all, even the most organised of conrunning fans would probably have to admit that the course of fannish co-operation rarely runs smoothly (see the latest collapsing con committee), while fanzine fans themselves are notoriously a bunch of self-centred egomaniac prima donnas who can rarely refrain from savaging each other and throwing screaming fits of artistic temperament every five minutes. One has to take a look back into history for

explanations both for the myth of fandom as a unified group and for its current actual divisions.

Those people born after 1965 or thereabouts probably have only a vague appreciation of the changes which both SF and fandom have undergone. Until the launch of Novacon in 1971 there was only *one* regular convention (of any sort) per year, and the 1965 Worldcon could attract no more than six or seven hundred fans. The present situation is not much more than twelve or fourteen years old. Media fandom began its growth in the early 70s, but it was not until the second half of the decade that conventions of all sorts (and attendance figures) really multiplied. This expansion had less to do with the conventions themselves than with changes in social conditions (notably a widespread rise in disposable income) and an improvement in SF's public image. SF still tends to be treated dismissively in some quarters, but before the 1960s it was on much the same level as the sleazier sorts of pornography. (Not entirely unfair, since some SF publishers also handled soft porn.) Various factors promoting greater acceptability included: basic credibility provided by the space programmes (Sputnik in 1957 to Apollo in 1969) and other technological developments (computers, micro circuitry etc. from the 70s); endorsement by respectable critics and publishers (Kingsley Amis 1960 Faber, Gollancz etc); widespread exposure via TV (*Doctor Who* from 1963, *Star Trek* from 1966, Gerry Anderson from 1965) and cinema (notably *2001* and *Star Wars*: both completely cretinous but visually impressive and taken seriously by the public because they cost a *lot of money*); and above all the expansion of further education and the whole Pop Culture explosion of the 60s which eroded the distinction between High and Low culture. (The Beatles deserve as much credit as Michael Moorcock and New Worlds for the development of 60s British SF.)

As the various dates indicate, there was a certain time lag before all these influences took effect; a reminder that *social* history is not a matter of sudden and decisive events (battles won, monarchs dropping dead) but of overlapping trends and gradual changes which (being undirected and unconscious) may not even be recognised as such at the time.

In all of this fandom was a follower not a leader of developments. In the beginning fans were few – a couple of dozen growing to a couple of hundred – isolated, and self defensive. They had one convention a year; few had cars; even fewer had telephones. Inevitably they produced fanzines: partly just to maintain contact, partly because in the early days scarcely anybody outside

the SF magazines gave SF any attention at all. In the beginning virtually all fans were fanzine fans.

Here I must point out that there is in fact a difference between a fannish fan and a fanzine fan. In practice (today) the two are most often one and the same, but in theory it is quite possible to be one without being the other. Apart from its general use as an adjective for anything pertaining to fans in general “fannish” has a special sense signifying an inclination towards non-solemn forms of activity involving social contact with other fans (whether in print or in person) but not necessarily having any overt connection with SF. Fannish fans go to conventions and spend the whole weekend in the bar getting drunk and exchanging scurrilous gossip. Fannish fanzine fans do the same but then go home and write an article about it including all the witty remarks they only thought of three days later. Sercon fans (from serious and constructive) on the other hand disapprove of such follies and when not attending programme items engage like-minded persons in earnest discussions of the latest epic by Arnold Tharg, or sit in corners actually reading the bloody thing. Sercon fanzines (now seen much less frequently) contain a con report summarising the programme, a set of safely-dull book reviews and an editorial stressing the importance of convincing the world that SF is Serious Literature.

As with fanzine fan and convention fan the distinction between fannish fan and sercon fan is somewhat one sided. Virtually every fan *starts* as some kind of serconist – and virtually every fan who stays around for more than a year or two acquires at least a touch of fannishness. There’s not much alternative: continuous undiluted consumption and discussion of SF is enough to rot anyone’s brain. It’s an observable fact that strictly sercon fans very rarely last: either they move on to the professional level, become more or less fannish, or simply give up altogether. However, because fannish fans have adopted a more casual attitude to SF it should not be assumed that they have abandoned it altogether. All that has happened is that they have exhausted the more obvious possibilities and become more selective consumers. SF may be a literature of novelties, but after a while (as convention programme organisers must discover every year) it becomes more and more difficult to think of anything very new to say about it. For fannish fans, it is no longer *necessary* to talk about SF all the time: the subject has become assimilated into the background of their lives and can be taken for granted. (Hence the existence of fanzines which never mention SF at all. But

it's there, it's there.) Unfortunately, this is one of those mysteries which is not easy to explain (since if you need to ask the question then you are unlikely to understand the answer) and it tends to give rise to a mixture of bafflement and resentment among those who certainly don't want to join such a rotten club anyhow, but object to feeling somehow not qualified. (Elitism! Barriers! Closed circles!)

The one thing all fans *do* have in common, and the one thing which inspires them to seek each other out, is that they are faced with an uncomprehending world. Contact with other fans is necessary because these are the only people who know what one is talking about. SF has often been described as a ghetto, and since not all SF readers are fans it could be said that fandom is a ghetto within a ghetto. This sense of being set apart, of sharing the kinship of an oppressed minority struggling for survival in a hostile universe, has always tended to promote the notion that fandom *is* the kind of collective organisation whose members have (or ought to have) a commitment and a duty to serve both certain causes and their fellow fans.

The trouble with this point of view is that it confuses a taste in common with a cause in common, and raises personal preference and personal convenience to the level of moral principle. One more time: fandom is not a "Trade Union", a political party or an army. Fans have as much and as little in common as homosexuals. As individuals deviating from the social norm they tend to associate with each other partly in pursuit of their objects of desire (more readily available in like company than elsewhere) and partly because only among their fellow deviants can they cease to be forever on the defensive. (It's always a relief to come out of the closet.) Likewise, neither co-operative enterprises, nor friendly relations, nor recruitment of new members is really anything other than a reflection of self-interest. Certain social arrangements are just common sense, and getting along with your neighbours is less exhausting than perpetually quarrelling, even where the less-than-lovable are concerned. Similarly, being pleasant or helpful to new fans is not much more altruistic than a salesman being pleasant or helpful to potential customers. Whether specific persons do fandom much of a favour by joining may be open to question, but it is certainly true that neither do they owe it any special debt of obligation. If newcomers receive a benefit it is only because this suits everyone's purposes: fans need other fans, whether as accomplices, audiences, victims, or just plain old extras for the crowd scenes. However, it is important to note that while fans certainly need *some* other

fans, there is no reason whatsoever to assume that this means they need *all* other fans. On the contrary: no one is indispensable and there is no obligation to treat them as if they were.

Fanzine fans, and particularly fannish fanzine fans, have always had a somewhat clearer perception of fandom's essentially self-centred nature, perhaps because a fanzine is very obviously nothing more than a vehicle for expressions or assertions of real or assumed personality. (It may also be Art, in a small and ephemeral way, but what else is Art except a more refined version of the same self-conceit?) Sercon fans can continue to delude themselves that their efforts are All For SF (or whatever) but no such refuge is available to the fannish fan, who has largely abandoned any overt concern for the supposed subject matter. Very evidently, what goes on in fandom is a game which provides enjoyment to the individual players but serves no more exalted purpose. Fandom, as I once put it, is about Performance: the game played with style.

Still, even when fans know all this, the half-buried (but never quite obliterated) heritage of the ghetto and of their first innocent sercon enthusiasms always tends to push them towards more or less spurious lines of self-justification. Yes, I blush to recall that even I have played the hypocrite and spoken up for SF as Serious Literature, despite a secret conviction that Ursula Le Guin is really rather boring. We are all guilty. One result is that many people are introduced to SF fandom under what amounts to false pretences: it is sold to them as a kind of cosmic fellowship of like-minded souls all working together both for each other and for the greater glory of Science Fiction. The reality being rather different, some new entrants are rapidly disillusioned and make an early exit. (That plaintive voice asking why nobody seems to want to talk about Isaac Asimov must be familiar to everybody.) Some people, however, never quite get the difference between fact and Public Relations fantasy sorted out, perhaps because to maintain their self-esteem they require the continued support of justifications which are seen as intelligible and acceptable to as many others as possible.

To put it bluntly, many fans are half-ashamed of their connection with fandom. They are aware that to outsiders their interests and activities may seem laughable or childish or downright idiotic, and in self-defence they feel obliged to lay stress on actions and motives which can be presented in a more favourable light. Any unusual pleasure indulged for its own sake is apt to be disapproved of as a vice and inspire feelings of guilt. Such things are only

respectable if everyone does them or they're part of a new diet or they give you cancer. Life is *serious*. (You think you're here to *enjoy* yourself?) Not many people are ready to brazen it out and admit openly that yes, silly or not, they are fans, and it's all purely for their own selfish pleasure, and sod the good of SF and the good of everyone else.

Such an admission would have been regarded as rather letting down the side in the early days of fandom, when it was felt that fandom's duty was to boost SF, not to endanger its already precarious status by frivolous and unseemly behaviour. This attitude still persists to some extent, but has undergone various shifts over the years. The 1950s saw a considerable outbreak of fannish fanzines, followed by something of a sercon reaction in the 1960s, when "New Wave" SF set the ideal. By the mid 1970s the purely sercon fanzine (such as Pete Weston's *Speculation*, which folded in 1973) was in decline, having been overtaken by events. SF had become mentionable, if not respectable, and the appearance of critical forums elsewhere (such as *Foundation* from 1972) meant that although SF criticism never entirely disappeared from fanzines it lost its central role as provider of a public rationale for the existence of fandom. Consequently, the onus of such justification was perceived as having shifted to conventions, and since there was no longer a sercon channel of introduction into the more esoteric areas of fanzine fandom the new fans (always initially more sercon than fannish) were doubly motivated to turn any urge for active participation in that direction.

Martin Easterbrook dates the emergence of conrunning fandom from after *Seacon 79*. Strictly speaking this may be true if the reference is only to those who acknowledge the label themselves, but there were certainly a number of fans in the 70s (such as members of the Birmingham group) whose principal or only involvement was with conventions. There was also the Glasgow group fronted by Bob (fake) Shaw, which ran the first Scottish convention in 1978. This was the really significant event (if you *must* have one) since it was run by (and for) people who were outside the faction (consisting largely of fanzine fans) which dominated most other conventions of the 70s. In effect, conrunning fandom was born in Glasgow.

And what were the fanzine fans doing meanwhile? Being arrogant and elitist, of course, as any conrunning fan will tell you. And perfectly true, too. Fanzine fans *are* arrogant and elitist, if by that is meant that they are indifferent to the opinions of those outside their own particular game, regard

themselves as the only complete fans, and believe in the application of critical standards to all forms of SF, fandom and fanzines. Yes, fanzine fans think they are the best. The rotten bastards.

Quite so. It is interesting to note that whereas fanzine fans will sneer at conrunners as limited, ignorant, incompetent or lacking in critical discrimination, the counter attack most often takes the form of accusations of arrogance, pretentiousness and elitism. The first group is self-confident enough to attack the other's range of abilities, but the second group tends to evade the issue of competence and concentrate on Bad Attitudes. This suggests that a problem for conrunners is that while they certainly do not like the fanzine fans' assumptions of superiority they are not at all certain that these assumptions are unwarranted. They know too well that the fanzine fans can do all that they can do – and more besides. This is not comfortable knowledge, and leads on to the awful suspicion that, as in the old cartoon, they are in the position of the man on the couch being told by the psychiatrist: "Well, you *are* inferior."

This kind of basic insecurity is the key to a great deal of fans' behaviour. Every fan has the problem of coming to terms with the position of being a member of a low-status minority. Consciously or unconsciously, there are two ways in which this can be handled: aggression and appeasement. The aggressive (or out-of-the-closet) line is in effect a counter-claim of superiority: fan values represent true enlightenment and the rest of the world is just plain stupid, ignorant, and not worth bothering about. The appeasement line, on the other hand, starts from the assumption that fandom is simply the victim of misunderstanding and misrepresentation: the world would love us if only they could be brought to see that we are *really* just normal people – admittedly with a few unusual tastes, but basically worthy citizens and not freaks and nutters at all.

Obviously, this is a simplification. The two responses are not always mutually exclusive. (Also there is a wide range of variations according to personal factors: some people are more insecure than others, and some are just too dumb to notice.) Paradoxically, the situation was simpler when SF's reputation and acceptability were much lower. Early fans knew beyond doubt that they were mutant outsiders: perhaps superior, perhaps misunderstood, but certainly isolated. This meant that (like it or not) appeasement was a long term ideal rather than an immediate option, and they were forced into the somewhat schizophrenic position of seeking possible future validation in

non-SF terms (SF as Serious Literature blah blah blah) while at the same time developing a purely fannish set of values and measures of status. This dichotomy has been complicated rather than resolved by the rise in SF's public acceptability and the consequent rise in the number of fans. SF is rather more acceptable than it used to be, but being a fan is still not something so commonplace it needs no further validation. When fans were few there was at least the satisfaction of knowing that to join fandom was to step into an exclusive society: *every* fan was a member of an elite. (Though it was always the case that some were more elite than others.) Nowadays a fan can easily be no more than just another anonymous face in a crowd of passive consumers – a position which does nothing to raise the sense of personal worth. Many people do, in fact, drift along merely as consumers, treating their involvement as no deeper than that of spectators at a football match, but there is always a significant minority for whom this is not enough: they want not only to be *at* the game but to be *in* the game as players. Active fans have *two* problems: they must validate their activity first to the outside world, and second to their fellows in fandom itself.

Bearing in mind that this is a large generalisation I would suggest that conrunning fandom developed because those concerned saw this as their main (or even only) option both for validating their participation in non-fan terms (appeasement) and for raising or establishing their status within fandom itself (aggression). Conventions may have their bizarre aspects, but the *organisational* side is intelligible enough: it's just normal, respectable *work*. Non-fans can be expected to understand this, and they can also be expected to understand that those who do this work are Important Persons, and that the conrunners' hierarchy (from Chair to gopher) is a reflection of their position as an elite set above the undifferentiated herd of mere members. (Hot damn, made it to the Big Time!) When the conrunners first came into fandom (in most cases in the late 70s or the 80s) the fanzine fans were spread rather thin over a fan population which had grown to the point of being able to sustain more and larger conventions. Hitherto, making a name in fanzines had been the only readily-accessible route to a more-than-local reputation. Now, conventions seemed to offer such an opening. It would be too much to suggest that all conrunners are fanzine fandom rejects, but certainly there seems to have been a strong element of reactive jealousy involved. (There was also the fact that many of the newcomers had media enthusiasms – as in Glasgow – which did not fit well with the heavy fanzine bias towards print.)

Hostility and general paranoia about “barriers” and “closed circles” is not at all new; the only difference here is that instead of getting over it (or getting lost altogether) the conrunners were led by a combination of circumstances and their own inclinations into setting up a status system of their own.

Rotten elitists – won’t let us in your club? So we’ll start our own!

Yes, *everybody* has a Bad Attitude. The trouble is, though, that there’s a large difference between the Bad Attitude of someone who runs a fanzine and the Bad Attitude of someone who runs a convention. The former is easily taken care of (at no cost) by hurling the offending object straight in the bin, but the latter has its effects (at considerable cost and for a considerable number of people) over a whole weekend. The motives of those who produce fanzines may be good or bad, but either way they’re of no vital significance to others. The motives of conrunners, however, are liable to be of much greater, more direct and more widespread concern.

So why are they doing it? (At last) Why are conrunners running cons?

The first reason often given is that conventions promote the good of SF. This is nonsense. The SF industry would not be affected in the slightest if there were no conventions at all. At the most generous estimate there are perhaps 2000 congoers in Britain. This probably represents less than one percent of the SF market. Naturally, publishers (and authors) don’t mind taking advantage of the chance to drum up a little extra business, since conventions do offer an unusual concentration of customers in what is generally a widely spread and hard-to-reach market. (It’s also a good excuse to spend a weekend getting pissed on expenses.) Pushing the product at conventions may be cost-effective, but it’s a long way from being vital, except perhaps to some of the book dealers. As for wider public promotion, anyone who thinks conventions give SF a better name is living in a dream world. The press and TV never manage to get much further than Bug Eyed Monsters, flying saucers, and females wearing four square inches of tinfoil.

The second reason given is that conventions are vital to the continued existence of fandom, since they are the only source of new fans. This is a rather dubious half or quarter-truth. “We’re all aware that conventions are almost the only source of new fans” says Vince Clarke in *Conrunner* 12, blithely passing over the question of where they all sprang from in his own early days. In fact I’m sure that conventions are not a primary source of recruitment at all. Autobiographical notes in the last Novacon Programme Book reveal that not one of the six committee members attended a con until

*after* they had had some other form of contact with fandom, and this seems typical. So far as I'm aware, I don't know a single fan whose original contact was made by attending a convention. Conventions are a *second* stage, not a first. This makes sense when you think about it: not many people are likely to chance jumping straight into a rather expensive event they know nothing about. (Note for con organisers: advertising directed at the general public is almost certainly a waste of time and money.) SF cons are ill-defined: they don't have an easily conveyed brand-image or a single clear selling line that will appeal to those with no previous information. As far as pulling in the members goes, one Guest of Honour is probably as good as another, since they may all have their admirers, but no single person has guaranteed universal appeal. (The position is probably different with media cons, where the much narrower focus means that the principal figures assume a far greater importance. Seen one SF author, seen 'em all, but Spock is presumably something else.) This is a chicken-and-egg situation, and undoubtedly there is a feedback effect, but I would say that the expansion of fandom in the last fifteen years has been due to recruitment by personal contacts, the BSFA, local groups (particularly University SF societies, many of which did not exist till comparatively recently) plus some crossover from related areas (Tolkien, fantasy, media) which did their own basic recruiting. The function of conventions is not to recruit, but to consolidate the new fans' involvement by introducing them to a wider range of acquaintances and giving them a general good time. How this should be done and how effective it may be (when it is evident that there is a considerable yearly turnover) are other questions.

Finally, there is the most contentious (and confused) claim of all: that conventions are run as a public service. At this point argument is apt to become very tangled. On the one hand, it is certainly true that many people enjoy the pleasures provided by conventions. On the other hand, these pleasures are by no means free, but are bought with the attendees' own money and quite often depend on the attendees' own efforts. On the third hand (this is SF, remember) the cost of a convention is partly subsidised by the unpaid labour of the organisers and programme participants. And on the fourth hand, if any conrunners try to tell me they do the job solely out of altruism and the overflowing kindness of their hearts I will flatly call them liars or refer them to medical attention.

Nobody runs conventions as a public service. Conventions are run

because running conventions satisfies certain needs of the convention runners. The real question is how far the satisfaction of the conrunners' needs is compatible with the satisfaction of the needs of everyone else.

For me, this is far less a matter of efficiency than of attitude. A convention is primarily a fairly informal social event (no? you want a formal non-social event, perhaps?) and such events depend far more upon the guests' faith in the good intentions of the host than upon a perfect delivery of the entertainment. If you go to eat at a fast food joint then the service had better be good and the food right because the place has no other claim to consideration. If you go to eat with a friend the food may be nothing special and half an hour late, but such deficiencies are not of the first importance. Yes, efficiency always helps (and an outright disaster is no fun at all) but *efficiency as an end in itself* can actually be counter-productive when it leads to organisers seeing members simply as raw material to be processed through the machine: grab them off the streets, feed them whatever crap keeps them happy, sign them up for next year. Why should anyone bother with that kind of thing? If a convention's business is nothing more than the slick delivery of a package of SF-related items to an audience of passive consumers then it isn't offering much of a bargain. For the price of an average convention I could buy a dozen hardbacks or thirty or forty paperbacks or go out and get drunk every night for a couple of weeks. Or I could be really cheap and just stay home, read a book of SF criticism and watch a few SF movies on video.

The odd (if not completely crazy) thing about the conrunners' approach to conventions is that they are treating a non-profitmaking event as if it were a commercial enterprise. (I am not suggesting, here or anywhere else, that conrunners derive any personal financial gain from the cons they run. I did suspect one case several years ago, but later information suggested that this was just another instance of the usual financial fecklessness rather than anything actively dishonest. Conrunners may have aspirations towards commercial style, but they're often a little careless with the commercial substance. Well, it's not their money.) UK CONVENTIONS Plc would naturally try to drag in as many people as possible, on the principle that more members means more profit, but without this motive there seems no sensible reason why conrunners should favour an expansion in numbers. More members simply means more work and more risk. (Deficits for the 1984 Eurocon and the 1987 Worldcon.) There are no real economies of scale. A larger con demands a larger (more expensive) hotel, and the masses have to

be fed a larger (more expensive) programme. The latter is a very dubious benefit, since over-expansion in the attempt to provide something-for-everyone simply means that everyone also gets a large allowance of material that doesn't interest them at all. Even in the unlikely event that they love the lot, it remains physically impossible to be in more than one place at one time. Multi-stream programming is rather like being invited to pick a meal from a very large menu then being told you have to pay for every other item listed as well. The claim that large conventions are desirable because they provide more opportunities for a better programme needs translating: large conventions are desirable because they provide conrunners with more opportunities to enjoy themselves expanding the programme, and never mind anything else.

This is rather sadistic, but I'd quite like to see Vince Docherty and Henry Balen (or any other group of dedicated conrunners) try mounting a large non-bid British or European convention (as Ian Sorensen suggests). They could call it BEUROCON. Or BUREAUCON. (Memo: form a sub-committee to consider the appropriate spelling.) In particular, I'd like to see them test their organisational genius against the hard facts of commercial realities, with their own money at risk.

A British SF convention run on a profitmaking basis looks a very shaky proposition. It might be done *once* – because once is surely all it would take before the unpaid participants realised they were being ripped off and demanded a share of the loot. (There were a couple of commercial ventures in the 80s which simplified matters by collecting memberships for a while then just disappearing.) The subsequent escalation in costs would make a repeat impossible, particularly in the face of competition from cheaper amateur events. Still, I have to confess that something very like this horrible idea occurred to me back in 1979 when I floated a bid for an openly profit-making Eastercon. (Proposed site the Bradford Norfolk Gardens Hotel, site of a Star Trek con later this year.) After eleven years I am a little hazy on the details of both motives and methods, but I think that (apart from the cash) I was chiefly inspired by impatience with approaches to conrunning which seemed to feature all the limp vices of amateurism with none of the compensating virtues of dedication and imagination. It is now impossible to know, of course, but I doubt that my convention would have been an outstanding improvement on most others of the time, and by virtually making an institution of the us-them producer-consumer relationship it would certainly

have been a retrograde step. Fortunately, the bid was rejected. (I wasn't even there, being confined to the bathroom with a severe case of Convention Dysentery. I was certainly ill, but I have since wondered if this was my body's way of attempting to kick some sense into my brain and save me from myself.)

In its way there was a certain daft logic to my proposal to sharpen up conrunning by introducing the profit motive – but only if one accepts that the main aim of a convention should be to run on efficient and business-like lines. But what logic is there to a convention which aims to run on such lines not for the sake of profit, not for the sake of the attendees, but only in order to gratify the organisers' passion for the act of organising itself?

Consider this: whatever you say about fanzine fans (and whatever you say I've probably said something worse myself) the undeniable fact is that *they pay for their own pleasures*. Fanzines go to the recipients for nothing, and if they are of no interest they can be hurled straight in the bin. (And there's never any necessity to hold fundraising events to bail out bankrupt fanzine publishers.) Running conventions, on the other hand, demands that a lot of people (not just the organisers) lay out a lot of money. A convention committee will have the spending of around £15,000 for an Eastercon, and something over £100,000 for a Worldcon. But the true cost of a convention is not just the amount a committee has at its direct disposal but the total of all the spending *without which the convention would not take place*. Conrunners are asking not just for £15 or £20 for registration, but also for whatever you spend on travel, the hotel, and the amount you lash out on sandwiches and glasses of mineral water. If 800 Eastercon attendees spend a further £120 each on their weekend the total goes to £100,000: if 5000 Worldcon attendees spend £200 each, the total shoots past £1 million. I reflect on this, and then reread the pieces by Vince Docherty and Henry Balen in *Conrunner 12*: these guys want over a million quid spending so that they can have the pleasure of fooling around with flow charts. That's the Worldcon. The Eastercon is the same thing on a smaller scale. Either one, conrunning is rather an expensive hobby. Expensive for other people.

Yes, but it's a hobby with benefits for other people, isn't it? Well, in a way. There's an operation in stockbroking known as "churning the account". This consists of using a client's account to buy and sell as many stocks and shares as possible. The client may incidentally benefit, but the real aim is to give the broker a good return in the form of dealing charges and

commissions. When conrunners promise bigger and better conventions with ever-wider-ranging and more elaborate programming they are simply churning the account, the return in their case being the imagined enhancement of their own importance.

That's a metaphor, but there are times when I wish that they *were* literally putting money in their pockets. It would be less ludicrous and degrading than the spectacle of people playing at being amateur bureaucrats. Conrunners in action, running round in a sweat of excited self-importance, are a disheartening sight. There is something deeply distasteful about people who *want* to be cast in the role of petty officials in an authoritarian hierarchy, ordering around those below and deferring to those above. Least attractive of all are the "security" persons, whose main aim in life seems to be the acting out of some peculiar fantasy involving much meaningless use of walkie-talkies and the repeated harassment of all persons not wearing their badges pinned between their eyes. The nadir was 1984, when the "security" goons were completely useless for everything except hassling the attendees. (The only consolation was that they even did it to a couple of committee members.) My attitude to security at conventions is similar to my attitude to bouncers in bars: if they're really necessary I don't want to know the customers, and if they're not necessary at all then I certainly don't want to know the management.

Then there's the dark mysteries of Tech Ops. "Yes we ARE professional in our approach" sternly declares Pat Brown in *Conrunner* 12, but rather spoils the effect by ending:

Finally it has just occurred to me that whilst the tech crew is there to serve the con, the con is also there to serve the tech crew as much as it serves the other special interest groups. We get as much fun out of being techies and having the opportunity to play with all sorts of interesting kit as e.g. costume fans get out of their particular interest.

Anything less like a "professional" approach than this would be hard to imagine. Fancy telling a customer that only jobs involving "interesting kit" could be considered, because anything else would be an infringement of the "professional's" right to be served by the customer. A tech crew is a "special interest group" like costume fans? Well, one must point out that costume fans provide their own costumes. In my innocence I always supposed that

microphones and such stuff were there for the limited purpose of making panelists audible to the audience, not as a programme item in their own right. But apparently technical gear must be provided for techies to play with – just as walkie-talkies must be provided for “security” people to play with, and whole conventions must be provided for conrunners to play with.

No chance of running out of raw material, either, thanks to good old two-year bidding. By Christmas this year the ardent conrunner will have three prospective Eastercons to fool around with: Speculation in 1991, the already-bid-for con of 92, and the upcoming bid for 93. This is the sole function of two-year bidding: to keep the nonsense going full blast. Of course, there are a few side effects: two years later the convention itself may have a new site, a new committee, a new Guest of Honour, and a new programme. In fact, if it bears any resemblance at all to the original bid this is likely to be counted as no more than a happy coincidence. Two-year bidding is such a stupendously daft idea from any practical point of view that perhaps I should stop crediting conrunners with a desire for efficiency. Plainly, all they are really after is the generation of more and more *activity* – and never mind the sense of it all.

Ostensibly, the main purpose of two-year bidding is to enable hotels to be chosen and booked well in advance. This gives the committee a whole extra year to sit around doing nothing particularly useful (since there is nothing particularly useful they *can* do with no hard information on numbers and possible participants) except worry about earthquakes, price rises, and the possibility of the hotel finding a better customer. Big hotels are run by Men in Suits, who prefer to handle bookings from other Men in Suits (such as the annual conferences of the Social Demerol Party or the Amalgamated Union of Test Tube Blowers) rather than a bunch of weirdoes and scruffs. SF Cons are good for bar-takings, yes, but they demand low room rates, and more respectable patrons (who are charging it all to expenses rather than paying personally) could well be more profitable. So, if something better comes along, the hotel suddenly discovers that the person who made the original agreement was not authorised, that due to unforeseen circumstances costs have gone up 50% and so on and so on, until the convention finds itself in the street. (Sometimes, as with Eastcon, they don't even bother much about excuses.) The hotel doesn't worry about legal action. They know very well that the con committee, as a temporary partnership, has neither the means nor the will nor the incentive to sue unless the convention date is so close that

there's no time to find another site. Unlike the real corporate customers they won't even be in business next year, so who gives a shit?

Still, two-year bidding does give the conrunners that extra year to haunt all the other cons, signing up as many people as possible. Here's another vexed question: is this passion for members due to hard necessity, a reflection of some form of confused but sincere idealism, or just another manifestation of the conrunners' compulsive urge to maximise numbers in order to maximise their own importance?

The claim of necessity can be dismissed out of hand. Plenty of conventions with only a few hundred members (Mexicons, Novacons, Eastercons before about 1975) have been able to feature varied programmes with a good supply of professionals and all the amenities. The test question for any programme items ought to be: if it costs so much money, why is it so necessary? Expensive items are scarcely ever necessary at all. A small convention will often have a sounder financial base than a large one for the simple reason that it is in a better position to get good terms for function space and does not have to pay for the duplication of equipment and facilities demanded by multi-stream programmes. Large conventions have larger totals to spend but this is no great gain when they simply squander the money on expensive set-pieces or subsidies for every last "special interest group". (Not that they ever throw any money to Hanging Out in Bars Fandom, damn it.) Cash is not a substitute for imagination. (And it's not much help if you're financially incompetent in the first place – just increases the scale of the deficit.) Putting blind faith in "production values" and spending piles of money may be all very well for Hollywood, which can recoup the lost millions from later and more successful ventures, but conventions get no second chance. (Or should we be permanently ready to receive the begging bowl?) No competently run convention should ever go broke, and no competently run convention *needs* more members. If members have to be hunted out of hiding and press ganged off the street then the convention plan was wrong in the first place.

Conrunners also tend to promote the Eastercon as the convention with a place for every kind of fan and every kind of fandom and the one occasion on which fans of all sorts are encouraged to come together and share an event (Helen McCarthy, *Conrunner* 12). Underlying this idea of fandom as a group-minded collective (rather than a collection of bloody-minded individuals) there is a quasi-evangelical tone: the Eastercon must save souls

by bringing the unenlightened into the Blessed Church of Fandom. No one ever seems to look beyond this semi-religious reason to explain *why* it is such a wonderful thing to have a convention which includes not only friends, acquaintances and people you might reasonably want to meet, but also six or seven hundred complete strangers.

In *Conrunner* 11 McCarthy (perhaps worried in case she is falling in her moral duty to fandom) takes several pages to reject Bob (fake) Shaw's idea that conventions should make a special effort to recruit from ethnic minorities. As she indicates, this is a daft idea and also somewhat condescending (since it assumes that the said minorities can't manage for themselves) but the irony is that Shaw is really doing no more than push McCarthy's own line of thought to its absurd but logical conclusion. If Fandom is Salvation then *everybody* should have a crack at it. Get out there and drag those sinners in off the streets! Spread the Divine Light and Mercy! Let them all be washed in the blood of the Eastercon Lamb! Glory, Glory!

Perhaps the notion that fandom is a kind of moral crusade is perfectly sincere. Perhaps it's just more muddled thinking. Either way, it certainly fits very nicely with the conrunners' urge to go empire-building, since it positively affirms both that bigger is better and that Eastercons have an obligation to include absolutely everybody. Myself, I didn't join fandom as either a social worker or a missionary. I'm quite prepared to agree that I'm in it strictly for myself. So why should I care whether or not the masses are saved? By all means turn no one away, but why go out looking for all these unnecessary extra bodies?

Because fandom is all about *sharing*, and that includes even media fans? Well, I see no reason at all why I should be expected to feel any bond of kinship with such people, or why the Eastercon should be expected to make concessions to their narrow, limited and fundamentally low-grade tastes. What have I in common with these aliens, or they with me?

Like the distinction between "fanzine fan" and "convention fan" or "fannish" and "sercon" the distinction made between "straight SF fan" and "media fan" is somewhat onesided. Virtually all Straight SF fans are at least familiar with what media fandom's originals have to offer. (I missed *The Prisoner*, which must have been shown on a night when I was always at the pub, but otherwise I think I've seen the rest.) Media fans, on the other hand, often give the impression of knowing (or caring) very little about anything outside their own idolised speciality. In 1979 I went to a Star Trek con in

Leeds and in a spirit of scientific enquiry spent some time talking with several Trek fans. They apparently considered Star Trek to be some kind of cross between the Bible and Shakespeare – or rather, they might have done if they had ever read anything except Star Trek novelisations. People like this have about as much breadth of outlook and discrimination as collectors of Bubblegum cards. Either they maintain a special set of standards for their object of worship (a matter of necessity when measurement by the generally applied rule would show it falling woefully short of perfection) or their belief in its ideal character rests upon a lack of knowledge of anything except material which is even worse.

TV SF has rather less intellectual and artistic merit than the average soap opera, since it lacks even the basic qualification of having some slight connection with probability or reality. There is no compensating element of extra imagination. The ideas are old, tired and secondhand. The stuff is simply junk, and derivative junk at that. Media SF is certainly not good Art, and as far as I'm concerned most of it isn't even very good entertainment. These confections have so little real content that they are critical nullities: any discussion is simply an endless recapitulation of trivial details. One either sits around swapping the cards and worshipping the amazing bubblegum concept, or one walks away.

Media fans have had their own conventions for years. Fine – what consenting adults wish to do on their own territory is no concern of anyone else. But by the same token, what gives the media fans a claim on anyone else? One never hears of, say, Star Trek fans making a special effort to appeal to those who aren't interested in Star Trek. Quite reasonably it is assumed that if you go to a Trek convention then Trek is what you want and what you ought to get.

If media fans want *only* media content then they are being short-changed when the Eastercon is sold to them on the something-for-everyone basis that it includes their interests. If, on the other hand, they *do* have inclinations towards a wider outlook then it is unreasonable for them to expect any special treatment. If the Eastercon really is a general interest convention then it has no more duty to satisfy media-admirers than it has to satisfy the admirers of specific authors. So, unless the Eastercon *is* a media convention, the media fans are being taken for a ride, and the recruitment of Eastercon members by the promise of media content is nothing more than a piece of shabby opportunist salesmanship. I suspect a good many Eastercon attendees come to

realise this, which is one reason for the turnover. The media fans are disappointed to get less than they were led to expect, and the Straight SF fans are irritated by the dilution of the programme and the introduction of large numbers of people with whom they feel little in common. The only real benefit goes (as usual) to the conrunners, who have bigger numbers with which to play bigger organisational games.

Some years ago, in conversation with one of the Glasgow conrunners, I asked why Glasgow cons always seemed to have such a heavy media element. "Ah well, that's to attract the local walk-ins who won't come unless we have media stuff." But why were the walk-ins so necessary? "Well, if we didn't get the walk-ins we wouldn't be able to afford the media stuff."

There, in a couple of sentences, is the whole pointless, circular vacuity of the conrunners' philosophy. Running conventions is an end in itself, therefore the only real consideration is what will maintain or expand the conrunning process. Satisfying the attendees (often revealingly referred to as "punters") is necessary only to raise the numbers and ensure repeat business. Conrunners prefer to present themselves as public servants, but it would be much more accurate to describe them as public parasites: like tapeworms their one desire and function is throughput.

In the olden days (when I were a lad and cons was cons) a convention was simply a festive occasion, a party for the renewal of old acquaintance and for entertainment in the form of debate and exchange of ideas on the subjects of SF and fandom itself. Doubtless the organisers were always touched by factors mentioned earlier (i.e. vague ideas of promoting the Good of SF and the need to validate their own membership of fandom) but they were not organising for the sake of organising. The work was considered relevant and necessary only insofar as it served the purpose of promoting the enjoyment of convention members. Indeed, in those earlier times the people who ran conventions were often not particularly enthusiastic about their involvement: it was a case of rather resignedly taking on a job *someone* had to do, like going to the bar to fetch the drinks. This sometimes led to a rather lackadaisical approach, but it had the merit of honesty: the organisers did not prate about high motives while simultaneously servicing their own egos. Helen McCarthy (again) has some interesting words on motives in *Conrunner*:

One of the problems which dogs any form of organisation in fandom is that, however much we organising bodies may protest

that we're there to get the job done most of us aren't – we're there for the same reason everyone else is in fandom, that we want an emotional response from it. We want to be loved, or admired, or looked up to, or even feared; we want to be part of the inner ring, parade our influence, delicately point out how people will put themselves out just to help us and how we can bring a unique importance to this fanzine, this con, this party. Some of us are conflict junkies, never content unless we're fighting some desperate battle: some of us are so unwilling to risk revealing a hint of inadequacy or vulnerability that we hide behind a shield of cool, contempt, or indifference, occasionally flinging a barbed shaft over the edge but never emerging to allow any involvement or admit any responsibility.

As an outline of the basic situation of almost any fan this is admirably lucid, but unfortunately it is the kind of self-knowledge conrunners seem to keep locked away in a sealed compartment without ever considering the full implications. In effect, McCarthy here acknowledges (despite many words elsewhere implying collective duty and identity) that the real roots of fandom rest on the satisfaction of personal selfish desires, but she falls to grasp that this affects conrunners rather differently from (say) fanzine fans.

The point must be made yet again that the selfishness of fanzine fans costs no one else a thing, whereas the selfishness of conrunners costs other people rather a lot. Also, while fanzine fans are well known for occasionally “flinging a barbed shaft” it matters very little whether or not they “admit any responsibility” since they don't *have* any responsibility. Conrunners, on the other hand, *do* have a (self-chosen) responsibility, and if they abuse this responsibility by putting their own passions and needs (as listed by McCarthy) above the need to get the job done then they betray their trust. It's really very simple: if money is paid on the promise of certain services then there is a contract, and if those services are not delivered then the contract is broken. Nobody pays fanzine fans, and there is no contract which lays down what they have to deliver, but it ought to be clear that if I pay my money for a convention then I am paying for *my* enjoyment, not the enjoyment of the organisers. Conrunners can't have it both ways: if they want to pose as public servants then they have to *be* public servants and run conventions strictly for the attendees, and not to satisfy their delusions of bureaucratic grandeur, their fascist fantasies of “security” or their penchant for fiddling with

microphones. Otherwise. I'd like a rather better explanation as to why I and everyone else should continue to put up the money which makes all their funny little games possible.

In the end, conrunners are in a rather sorry position. Running conventions is hard work. It is also a generally thankless task, and those who think conrunning gives them an elevated status are sadly deluded. Fanzine fans are never particularly impressed, partly because most of them have done the trick themselves and partly because such activities are rated as secondary to fanzines (and Performance) anyway. Most of the consumer fans are also prone to take the organisation for granted (except when they want to complain). Probably half the attendees at an Eastercon would have trouble identifying the committee (let alone those in lesser roles, who really deserve more respect, since they do dull jobs for even less chance of ego-satisfaction) and they will probably have forgotten the lot in a month. Sensible fanzine fans (if you can imagine such a thing) know that their reputations are transient and confined to a small, specialised group; conrunners should realise that their own fame is even more limited and ephemeral.

Perhaps they feel that this is the best they can do. At least as conrunners they have the comforts of titles, job descriptions and places in an ordered hierarchy. Like the Civil Service it seems to offer the sort of career structure in which diligence rather than talent is the main requirement. Learn the rules, follow orders, keep your nose clean, and you too can join the elite of conrunning fandom and blithely drop phrases such as "on the chart" and "punter satisfaction". Fanzine fandom, on the other hand, is nothing but a jungle with no rules at all. If you do nothing they ignore you; if you do the wrong thing they sneer at you; even if you manage to show talent some jealous bastard will try and tear your head off on general principles.

Alas, poor conrunners – nobody really gives a toss about them except their own kind. All their mighty triumphs exist only in their own minds and, like footprints in water, are lost and gone almost in the moment of realisation. Rather humiliatingly, if they want to be memorialised they have to rely on those dreadful people who write things down, the fanzine fans. It's unfortunate that conrunning requires such expensive and cumbrous machinery. Even the smallest convention is not something which can be created extemporaneously and casually to suit the mood of the moment, like a fanzine. Anyway, the natural inclination of conrunners is always towards the larger, not the smaller. Where conventions are run for the pleasure of the

attendees there's no incentive to push up the figures, since once over a certain (quite low) level there is no increase in enjoyment but a steady increase in work (Novacon understands this very well, and at one time even considered restricting memberships. Rotten elitists.) Where conventions are run for the sake of conrunning, however, a small convention is just the launch pad for ambition. Conrunning as a way of life means multiplying the functions for conrunners, and the easiest way to do this (and to rationalise it at the same time) is to discover that there is a "need" for more and bigger conventions, then make this a self-fulfilling prophecy by signing up everything that breathes and shows the slightest sign of potential interest in SF. (If it's a media fan it doesn't even have to breathe.) And as the ultimate prop to self-esteem one can throw in a convention devoted to the running of conventions: the perfect closed circuit of self-validation.

Too bad that the trend for convention membership figures in the next few years looks likely to be downward. The assumption that Eastercon totals would automatically rise every year was never exactly safe, and it must now be considered downright foolhardy. I expect the Eastcon total to be no higher (and possibly lower) than Follycon two years ago (same site), and the Speculation total next year to be lower than the 1986 Albacon (same city). Right or wrong on the first part of this prophecy it might be a good idea for the Speculation team to take a look at the gap (both for Contrivance and Eastcon) between the number of people who joined and the number who actually turned up. One can expect some of those who are joining but not attending to stop joining at all. A lot of people have found themselves caught in a credit squeeze in the last year or two, and this is liable to get worse, not better. Poll tax, increased charges from privatised industries, rising inflation, high interest rates (which I expect to see rise again before Christmas, ho ho), all put the pressure on non-essential spending. Doubtless the Government will be looking to discover a pile of money to hand out just before the election in 1992, but they may not have enough left by then to make the voters feel any richer. German reunification, full entry into Europe, the decline (and possible collapse) of the Japanese stockmarket, and factors at present unknown – all these may conspire to bugger up the happy scenario. Economic prediction is about as accurate and reliable a science as astrology, but one must say that the stars don't look too propitious. Also, any time now the dip in the demographic curve plus the economies in further education will start to bite: less school-leavers and less students with less money.

No, this is not a Death of Fandom prediction, more a Zero Growth of Fandom prediction, with natural wastage possibly making for a decline. The picture will be clearer in a year or two. The snowball effect whereby more and bigger conventions offer more and bigger chances to pick up new members may start to melt away quite quickly. The primary sources of recruitment (local groups, BSFA etc) may be less affected, being cheaper, but congoing itself is likely to become much more selective, with the smaller cons in a stronger position both because they have more financial flexibility and because they have more claim on the loyalty of their members.

Large conventions do not promote a sense of allegiance. They are events conducted on the us-and-them basis of producers servicing consumers, and they inspire as much loyalty as a chain store. They can be intimidating or alienating even to those familiar with the milieu, and newcomers lacking some additional source of support or point of entry on the social side may feel disinclined to repeat a rather uncomfortable and lonely experience. (I am not particularly gregarious or socially adept, but I had no problems at my own first convention simply because although I had never met most of the attendees previously I knew a large group through fanzines.) Those who are treated simply as customers will feel no compunction in taking their business elsewhere as soon as they see a better bargain.

To treat the Eastercon as a commodity to be marketed is to make a fundamental error about its nature. It is not, and cannot be, the same in detail from year to year, and therefore if one sells it on the basis of details (inclusion of this or that “special interest”) in one year then one must do the same next year and the year after – all this directed at a market which may change its interests or shift its custom to other alternatives. Putting the Eastercon on a targeted sales-appeal basis deprives the Eastercon of any special status whatsoever: in any one year it will be only as good as the package it has to sell, and if the organisers have picked the wrong ingredients, or better and cheaper offers are made elsewhere, then there is no reason to expect continuing customer loyalty. Selling Contrivance on the strength of Jersey’s charms as a holiday resort may have worked in the short term, but it may come to be seen as not such a wonderful move when people stay at home on other occasions because they consider Birmingham or Liverpool don’t have the same tourist attractions. Start to live by the market and the market sets *all* the rules – a situation which may be acceptable when the aim is profit, but which is positively insane when the profit motive is

absent, and doubly insane when one considers that every Eastercon is a one-off event risking its neck with no reserve from the past and no potential gains from the future to guarantee solvency.

The Eastercon used to be the Main Event (even after other cons came along) partly by sheer weight of tradition, but mainly because it was the most extended meeting (effectively three days against Novacon's two) run for the enjoyment of SF fandom. It inspired loyalty not because it included specific elements or items (whether media content or a fan room) or even because it was particularly flash, but because it was an event one could attend in the reasonable confidence that whatever the defects there would be a sincere attempt to give satisfaction on a fair and equal basis. Eastercons were not run for the benefit of organisers – they were run so that everyone could have a good time.

There is a very real distinction here which the conrunners of today either do not see or choose to ignore: the difference between service regarded as part of the cooperative give-and-take which is the basis of all social relationships, and service supplied in the commercial spirit of businessmen seeking to sell products and create markets in order to maximise the returns to themselves. The returns for conrunners come not as cash but as obscure forms of ego-gratification, but the ripoff is the same.

The conrunners may, of course, indignantly reject every word I have said – but they ought to be aware that they do have what politicians euphemistically refer to as “A problem of presentation”. I speak only for myself in this article, but I am quite sure that there are others who share at least some of my views. In its present form the Eastercon has ceased to command any special loyalty or esteem: it is merely a larger-than-average convention which has come to depend on a fresh sales-pitch every year. Sooner or later the sales-pitch will be misjudged (or will have lost all credibility) and the event will take a nosedive. And what will the conrunners do then, poor things, poor things?

That may be my answer: sheer entropy will sort out the whole mess. Conrunning for the sake of conrunning is a dead end: it has too little real ideological content and too limited a range of possibilities to survive indefinitely. When one takes a photocopy from a photocopy of a photocopy the image degenerates a little more with each step. The decay of conrunning fandom might be even more rapid: natural exhaustion, the staleness of repetition, personal rivalries, loss of faith and the disillusionment of one big

bad convention all gone wrong – the collapse could come quite suddenly.

Well, that's their affair, not mine. I may be arrogant, but I'm also realistic, and I don't anticipate that on reading my strictures the conrunners will necessarily fall about the place with cries of concern and sobs of guilt. ("Gosh, D. West doesn't like Eastercons! We must repent and seek the One True Way immediately"!) I wrote this article partly because I enjoy this kind of analysis and partly because it might just possibly have some effect in nudging others towards the kind of fan activities (and conventions) I happen to prefer. (Novacon is fine, but Mexican is only once every two or three years, so I'd quite like another convention I can rely upon with a regular date.) However, if my words have no effect at all I shall merely shrug and go about my usual business. Every fan has the right to push for his or her favoured views, but every other fan has the right to say No. I would prefer the conrunning faction to spend their energies on something I regarded as less wasteful and more entertaining – but I can still follow my own interests regardless of what they do.

This, after all, is the great attraction of fandom: everyone can choose their very own Main Event. What the conrunners should reflect upon, however, is that their Main Event depends entirely on the support of others, a support which could be withdrawn at any time. The conrunners would then find themselves on the same level as the mug punters, obliged to pay for their own pleasures. Does the Conrunner Philosophy have anything to offer which will sustain them in such an hour of trial? If not, they might be best advised to start looking around for some other line of work. A fanzine fan without a convention is like a fish without a bicycle, but a conrunner without a con is like nothing very much at all.

# Postscript

Like many another veteran fan, I no longer read very much new Science Fiction. A great deal of SF is, was, and probably always will be, nothing but junk, but in the earlier stages of addiction one is carried along by the gaudy charm of novelty and the play of reckless fancy. Later, the tinsel and the spangles lose their lustre, repetition and familiarity dim the glamour, and enthusiasm dies down to a more temperate selectiveness, plus a fondness for a few tried and trusted old favourites

One of these, in my case, is G.K. Chesterton's *The Napoleon of Notting Hill*, first published in 1904. Chesterton is not always recognised as an SF writer, but this is a work which deserves to be numbered among the classics of the genre, partly because of its uniquely imaginative dramatisation of the timeless conflict between change and human nature, and partly because of the antidote it provides to the solemn idiocies of the futurologists.

You should read the whole book for the story (which is old-fashioned enough in some ways, but surprisingly up-to-date in others) but the section relevant here is the preliminary chapter, "Introductory Remarks on the Art of Prophecy". The opening paragraph says it all:

The human race, to which so many of my readers belong, has been playing at children's games from the beginning, and will probably do it to the end, which is a nuisance for the few people who grow up. And one of the games to which it is most attached is called, "Keep tomorrow dark", and is also named (by the rustics in Shropshire, I have no doubt) "Cheat the Prophet". The players listen very carefully and respectfully to all that the clever men have to say about what is to happen in the next generation. The players then wait until all the clever men are dead, and bury them nicely. They then go and do something else. That is all. For a race of simple tastes, however, it is great fun.

Apparently prophets ninety years ago proceeded in much the same way as they do now, namely "... by taking something they saw 'going strong' as the saying is, and carrying it as far as ever the imagination could stretch." Sounds familiar? Yes, it's the old SF device of extrapolation by multiplication: the

invention of the aeroplane means that everyone will have their own aeroplanes, the invention of robots means that everyone will have their own robot – and so on and so on, ever onward and upward to reach the sky...

No, of course it doesn't work out quite like that – but it's surprising how many SF writers and fans still subscribe to such narrow and fallacious reasoning. Heaven knows, SF's own record of wildly inaccurate predictions ought to have put them wise long ago, but still they go on falling for it: some stunning new wonder-gimmick is invented – therefore the said wonder-gimmick will inexorably and inevitably take over the world, send all previous models straight to the scrapheap. Like: books will be destroyed by radio, radio will be destroyed by television, theatre will be destroyed by film, film will be destroyed by video... and so on and so on – always something new, with the old cast into total oblivion...

It does seem almost a shame when the people prove awkward, fail to cooperate, and go and do something else. But there you are – as Chesterton says, Cheat the Prophet is a game with perennial appeal.

New technology *does* sometimes cause casualties – the hand-delivered telegram, for instance, but it should be noted that it's the dull stuff – the shitwork element – that gets eliminated. As often as not, the new thing will take over *some* of the old's functions and territory, but there will remain parts which cannot be taken over simply because they are unique to the original model.

– And so it is with fandom, fanzines, and their much-hyped electronic future. (Yes, you might have seen this coming.) I ought to be careful here, because if I say that computers bore me (except as superior typewriters) and that I have no interest in e-mail or in becoming part of the Information Superhighway (ugh) I am likely to be called a Luddite, a reactionary, and other even more opprobrious names. Perhaps my only hope of defence is to make it clear that my attitude is one of indifference rather than outright hostility? I do not care about these things simply because they strike me as none of my concern. I am perfectly ready to acknowledge the wonderfulness of the computer in its own particular fields – but those are not my fields. I have other business, and life is too short to be thrown away on pursuits which are neither entertaining nor essential.

You want electronic fandom? You can have it. I'm a fanzine fan, and my idea of fanzines is lots of bits of paper with words and pictures printed on them – physical objects which one can pick up, put down, move around, and

leave in piles which will still be there years later. Warnings that this devotion to the antique will see me left behind – on the periphery, marginalised, member of the tiniest of minorities – are unlikely to move me. As a natural lurker in the shadows the thought of being out of fashion – when was I ever in? – holds no terrors. My sort of fandom has always been a minority taste, so what's new? Doubtless the exact form and membership will change – but once again, what's new? I do not think fanzine fandom (in the old style, if you insist) will die out, simply because the (old-style) fanzine has charms which are, and will remain, unique. And, wicked unbeliever that I am, I even think that the New Golden Age of the computer will turn out not quite as predicted. The poor Prophets will be cheated yet again, and some of their followers may be disillusioned enough to turn elsewhere. Just like the life cycle of the SF reader...

– But since all this is supposed to be no more than a parting word I will not take this sketch of an argument any further. Obviously, the whole topic is destined to attract much more than enough wordage in the future.

– Which is almost the one sure thing I *do* know about the future. Except that never again will I get myself stuck with a project like this damnfool reprint volume. Never, ever, again. No, never, no more.

– But I said that last time, didn't I? And in any case, what am I going to do with myself, now it's all over?

– Damned if I know. But I expect I'll think of something. Even without a computer.

– 20th August 1995

## **The End**

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