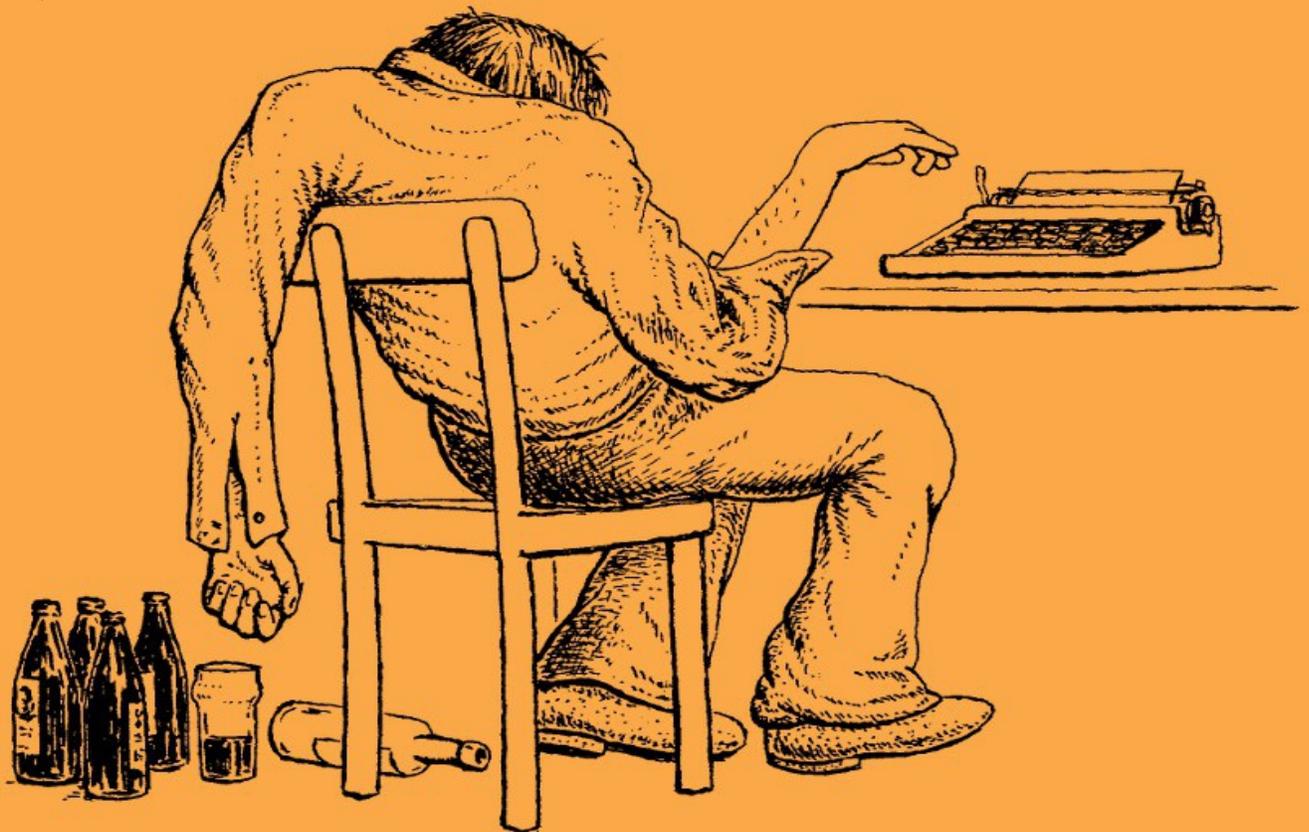


FANZINES IN THEORY AND IN PRACTICE



D. WEST

Fanzines in Theory and in Practice

Collected Articles 1976-1982

D. WEST

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Since Pete Lyon refused to pay his money unless he got a signed, numbered, limited edition there is also a signed, numbered, limited edition of one copy.

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This free ebook version of *Fanzines in Theory and in Practice* is exclusive to the unofficial TAFF website at taff.org.uk. If you enjoy reading it, a donation to TAFF is a fine way to express your appreciation.

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D. West, 1984

Original Appearances

- “Fanzines [1976]”: *True Rat* 8 edited by Roy Kettle, August 1976
- “The State of the Art”: *Wrinkled Shrew* 7 edited by Pat and Graham Charnock, March 1977
- “Fanzines [1977]”: *BSFA Yearbook* edited by David V. Lewis, June 1977
- “Wish You Were Here”: *Stop Breaking Down* 5 edited by Greg Pickersgill, August 1977
- “Bloody Hell”: *Bar Trek* 3 edited by Mike Dickinson, November 1977
- “Fandom and Fanzines”: *Skycon '78 Programme Book* edited by Dave Langford, April 1978
- “Convention Death Wish”: *Seamonsters* 3 edited by Simone Walsh, January 1979
- “Creative Writing”: *YORCON Programme Book* edited by Alan Dorey and D. West, Easter 1979
- “Reviews”: *Foundation* 15 and 17 edited by Malcolm Edwards (reviews editor David Pringle), January 1979 and September 1979
- “Ah, Sweet Arrogance”: *One Off* 8 edited by Dave Bridges, April 1980
- “Beyond Albacon”: *Gross Encounters* 8 edited by Alan Dorey, August 1980
- “The Right Sort of People”: *Foundation* 21 edited by David Pringle, February 1981

- “Closet Zeor”: *Drilkjis* 6 edited by Dave Langford and Kevin Smith, April 1982
- “A Dream of Silicone Women”: *Still It Moves* 2 edited by Simon Ounsley, April 1982
- “Performance”: *Tappen* 5 edited by Malcolm Edwards, November 1982

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David Langford, 2019

Sir, I have two very cogent reasons for not printing any list of subscribers; – one, that I have lost all the names, – the other, that I have spent all the money.

Dr S. Johnson 1781

God's mercy on you swine!

Dr H. Thompson 1973

Introduction

This is a book about fanzines. However, it has little to say about the mechanical details of fanzine production: the cutting of stencils, the layout of articles, the printing and so forth. The primary concern here is with the *ideology* of fanzines; not *how* but *why* they are produced and why certain approaches and strategies are more to be favoured than others. The content of this volume is divided fairly equally between argument and illustration, between exposition of my theories and examples of my practice.

To speak of an “ideology” of fanzines may suggest some system of rules and prohibitions – a doctrinaire and dogmatic insistence that there is a Right Way and a Wrong Way to produce a fanzine. Nothing could be further from the truth. As far as I am concerned the only rule for fanzines is that *whatever works is right*. Fundamentally, the “ideology” outlined here is a pragmatic one, and if any particular method or approach is condemned it is not because it is “wrong” in the sense of breaking some mystical Law of Fanzines but *because it doesn’t work*.

That fanzines and fan writing are less successful than they could be is often due not so much to any particular lack of talent or effort on the part of the fans concerned as to their failure to recognise their own real objectives and to match means and ends. To do any job well one needs to know not only what the job *is* but also which tools are most appropriate to the task. It might be possible to chop down a tree with a spade, but it would certainly be more sensible – and involve less wasted time and energy – to use an axe. Likewise, before setting to work one should know which tree is the target – and whether, in fact one would really prefer not to chop down trees at all, but to go and dig the garden....

This all seems obvious enough, but the great difficulty in the case of fanzines is that there is, so to speak, no real job-description. A fanzine is fairly easy to recognise after the fact – we know one when we see one – but it is very much harder to define in the sense of predicting either content or treatment. One can say what fanzines in general are *likely* to be, but one can never say with absolute certainty what any particular title *will* be. In fact, *there is no magic formula*. This is a point which should be kept in mind at all times, since it is the persistence of a belief in some sort of recipe (carrying a

statutory guarantee of fannishness) that prevents many people from ever quite understanding what is going on at all.

Having said that there are no absolute rules for what one does with and in fanzines I must add that this does not mean that there can be no standards. (Rules are not standards. Rules are fixed statements of what is permissible; standards are provisional measures of what has been accomplished. Rules are judgemental *before* the act; standards are judgemental *after* the act.) The freedom to do anything at all in any fashion does not mean that the finished product is (or should be) exempt from critical assessment. To experiment is permitted – even encouraged – but experiments are not put beyond judgement simply by virtue of being experimental. Some experiments succeed – but some fail, and, in fact, the whole concept of experimentation becomes meaningless unless there is some assessment of the outcome. To put it bluntly, you can't have your cake and eat it. You cannot simultaneously claim that what you have produced is a good fanzine, but that it must be immune from fanzine criticism because it is *not* a fanzine but something else. Such behaviour is pointless. If you want to be part of the fanzine game then you must expect to be rated by that game's standards – and not just when it suits you.

Again, although “standards” may suggest some kind of dogma, the real issues are much more pragmatic. The job of the fanzine critic is to ask all the questions the fanzine producer *should* have asked (but often didn't) such as: What is it *for*? What is the best way of doing it? How well (or how badly) has it been done? Of these questions the most important is really the first, since it is the fan's perception of the nature of his or her fanzine (and perhaps of all fanzines) which determines the practical details of method and approach and hence the greater part of the degree of success or failure. I repeat: you aren't likely to do a job very well if you don't really know what that job *is*.

At this point, perhaps I should emphasise that when I refer to “fanzines” I have in mind a quite narrowly defined and limited category. 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 those which are published without any intention of making a profit (and hence are “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 for 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 profit sufficient to support either publisher or editor. Contributors are usually paid.
 - (1.1) *Wholly self-supporting prozines* e.g. *Omni*.
 - (1.2) *Partly self-supporting prozines* i.e. 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, paid to some organised body) but which do not make a profit and are subsidised by some outside agency. Contributors and/or editors may or may not be paid.
 - (2.1) “*Little*” magazines e.g. *Interzone*, and all other publications supported by Arts Council (or equivalent) grants.
 - (2.2) *Academic Journals* e.g. *Foundation*, *Science Fiction Studies*, and all other learned (scientific, medical, legal etc etc) journals published with University or equivalent Institutional support.
 - (2.3) *Club and Trade Journals* e.g. *Vector*, *Matrix*, and all Club (including “Fan Club”), Union, or Trade Association publications produced wholly or principally for the benefit of members.
- (3) *AMZINES* (“Am” from “Amateur”)
Non-profit-making magazines 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* i.e. small Poetry, Arts or other special-interest oriented magazines not in receipt of any subsidy.

(3.2) *SF subject-oriented amzines* i.e. “sercon” SF fanzines, past examples being Pete Weston’s *Speculation* and Geoff Rippington’s *Arena* (before it began getting a grant).

(3.3) *Self-oriented amzines* i.e. fannish fanzines – the Real Thing – not restricted to any particular subject and highly self-referential.

(Of the above terms “Prozine” has long been in general use; “Subzine” is my own invention used here for the first time; and “Amzine” has occasionally been seen before, though without ever being very clearly defined.)

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) but has often claimed amzine (3.2) status (particularly 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 all 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 (3.3).

(While it is always as well to know the difference between fanzines and non-fanzines this does not mean that one should adopt a rigid all-or-nothing policy of totally ignoring any publication which does not have absolutely pure fanzine status. That would be absurd. *Matrix*, *Vector*, *Foundation* and other similar publications are not fanzines, strictly speaking, but it is obvious that they are sufficiently closely related, to fall within the fanzine sphere of

interest. They are not central, perhaps, but neither are they totally irrelevant.)

Some publications seem to straddle two or three categories, and within the three major divisions the differences are often even more blurred. However, while it is sometimes 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 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 the baffling thing about fanzines (3.3) is that they are not *about* anything in particular – they are not subject oriented, and they don't make money, so what the hell are they *for*? Subject-oriented amzines (3.1) are generally fairly understandable, since they are in effect imitations of known forms; subzines or prozines. Even if the subject-matter is so specialised or esoteric that no equivalent subzine or prozine exists, the approach and purpose are still 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 middle category (3.2) that separates them, the SF subject-oriented amzine or, as fans usually 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. There is always a greater or lesser tendency to wander into fannishness (i.e. 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 (as is reflected in my own work in this volume). 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 a 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 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 fairly limited range of appropriate interests. (Western fans stick to cowboys, horses, guns and so on; crime fans to detectives, forensic science etc etc. The Mainstream (i.e. non-genre fiction) is too varied and diffuse to catalyse any common-interest groups except by way of an equally narrow interest in specific authors.) The interest SF fans have in Science – their supposed “Subject” – is more nominal than real. What they 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 still remain *fans*. As several people 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 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 nothing but SF. These days the realisation of the dream produces nothing more than a rather uneasy feeling of depression. Jesus, all those fucking hack novels – all that mindless crap about Galactic Empires...) But even if the enthusiasm for SF *as SF* wanes, the enthusiasm for the SF *idea* often remains. And this is what fanzines are all about: an extension – however crude and clumsy – of the possibilities of life; a reflection of the intuitive, elusive certainty that there can be something *more* than what is normally on offer.

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 elicit response*. 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* either pay the money or pay the attention. The publisher/editor leads and the readers follow; response is either not required or is dictated by the producer. A Poetry amzine is about Poetry; a Stamp Collecting amzine is about Stamp Collecting. If you've got something to say about Poetry (The Subject) or about Stamp Collecting (The Subject) your response may be recognised. If you've just got something to say – 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 interesting. 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 passive 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.

That's the payoff. The *direct* response (i.e. letters of comment) to any particular fanzine is rarely very high – 20% is probably average – but this is not of vital importance. Though composed of individuals who are often independent to the point of egomania 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 editors a few drinks. There is a sort of Fannish Credit system: “Real Soon Now” is a joke, but it's also an acknowledgement that *eventually* some return contribution will be made, directly or indirectly.

This is a collection of my return contributions. I wrote them all for pleasure, and any high-sounding phrases (like references to “progress” and “advance”) should not be taken as signifying that people ought to do this or that because it is their moral duty. I'm not particularly strong on morality. I prefer enjoyment, and my arguments and polemics simply reflect my belief that making a little extra effort usually increases the amount of enjoyment

available.

On the whole the articles must speak for themselves. Some of the allusions were fairly esoteric even at the time of first publication (and will now be totally opaque) but there's enough continuity between the various pieces to make the essentials clear. Start at the beginning and go on through the middle till you reach the end. Further details of the Historical background you will have to unearth for yourselves, if interested. Just bear in mind that although there are no opinions here I wish to disown – since I have managed to keep a reasonable degree of consistency from first to last – there are various points of detail which have been modified since the time of writing, and changes of circumstances have also affected the importance I now attach to various one-time burning-issues-of-the-moment.

For instance, I still consider that the management of both the Eastercons and the BSFA frequently falls short of the ideal, but I no longer feel this matters very much (and I'm certainly not going to *do* anything about it myself). The great increase in the number of conventions – a very recent phenomenon, it should be noted; as recently as 1975 there were only two cons a year in Britain – means that the Eastercon is only one among several different available options. And, like the BSFA, if the thing didn't exist it would inevitably be invented anyhow, so one might as well resign oneself to its less-than-perfect realisation of the esoteric (and elitist minority) principles of fannish fandom. In fact, there's a good case for arguing that one shouldn't really complain at all, since a perfectly efficient Eastercon or BSFA would undoubtedly be a truly tremendous pain in the arse. If, as I do, you prefer fannish anarchism and independence to some more staid and regular system then a certain amount of chaos has to be accepted as natural and inevitable. Fortunately, the BSFA never manages to climb out of the gutter for very long.

I read my first fanzine back in 1961 – became fairly involved a couple of years later and have been in touch ever since – but it was 1976 before I went to my first convention. With only one con a year (two from 1970, when Novacon was launched) and with other preoccupations (such as a wife and four children) and not much money it was easy to keep procrastinating. (Next time for sure.) But when I finally made it....

Well, in my 1970s incarnation as a fan writer I had certain unusual qualifications: I was fresh to the fannish social scene (having previously met only half a dozen fans) but not new to fanzines; I was thirty years old (well

above average); and I'd been professionally published (in *Gollancz/Sunday Times Best SF*) and so was comparatively free of the doubts and inferiority complexes many fans have about their own abilities. In fact, I was old enough and experienced enough to know my own mind and not to be bothered by the thought that some people might disapprove of my opinions and/or even dislike me personally. After all, I knew that fandom was not the whole world, and that even within its narrow limits the very worst that could happen to me was that I might end up looking a bit of a fool... I also knew that (although a mild enough person in general) when it came to arguments, feuds, and Gonzo Lit Crit I was quite arrogant, vicious and ruthless enough to look after myself....

And I was also very interested in working out *why* fanzines were good or bad, and what fandom was fundamentally all about. I have the kind of mind which is fascinated by a certain sort of problem: I solve (or try to solve) these things just for fun. (At University I had a great advantage over most of the other students; I actually *liked* writing essays.) The long pieces I wrote for *True Rat* and *Wrinkled Shrew* (and the fix-up for *BSFA Yearbook*) reflect my interest in the idea of establishing some sort of unified theory of fanzines. Perhaps they also reflect my (comparative) lack of experience of the fannish social scene. Later, when I had been thoroughly exposed to the world of conventions, parties and local meetings, I began to realise more clearly that social personalities and paper personalities are closely intertwined. "Wish You Were Here" is a somewhat uneven attempt to show this by combining reviews and reportage in the one article. Ultimately this approach was to lead to "Performance", but although I had the general feel of this particular synthesis right from the start (and echoes of it can be found throughout my work) I often had some difficulty in getting past the standard either/or split: *either* criticism and review *or* anecdotal reportage.

Still, I didn't spend all my time trying to be New and Revolutionary. "Fandom and Fanzines" for the SKYCON Programme Book was a straightforward comment on the year's activity, and "Bloody Hell" for *Bar Trek* was simply a pastiche of Greg Pickersgill's "Burning Hell" fanzine review column in *Stop Breaking Down*. (This had the distinction, despite the signature at the end, of fooling several people completely, and an article on fanzines in Colin Lester's *International Science Fiction Yearbook* even used a quotation, credited to Greg. Now I know what a Ghost Writer feels like.) "Convention Death Wish" is also not unusual in form, though perhaps

remarkable in being what I still consider to be my most successful piece of work – “successful” here meaning the best match of achievement with ambition. (“Performance” is probably a better article, but less satisfactory in that it failed to realise its much higher aims. By the same reckoning “Ah, Sweet Arrogance” is my least successful piece: it contains much good material but in too many places strains for effect too obviously.)

The “serious SF” articles for *Drilkjis* and *Foundation*, the Barry Malzberg pastiche/tribute (“Beyond Albacon”) and the short “Creative Writing” (written in connection with a short story competition run by YORCON 1; competitors had to produce a story round any three from eight SF illustrations) are all here either as reminders that I have never entirely lost my interest in SF, as examples of my practice of literary criticism, or as relevant background to the more obviously fannish material. I have never subscribed to the silly notion that “sercon” and “fannish” are mutually exclusive concerns. The one leads into the other, as is the case in “A Dream of Silicone Women”, the natural follow-on from my reviews of the Zeor books and Douglas Hill’s sex anthology.

And so finally to “Performance”. This is the article for which I seem to be the best known, which suits me well enough, since although it is much less than perfect – for one thing it is far too short – it does manage to express most of what I consider to be the essential truth about fandom and fanzines. And if you disagree – well, you can always continue the argument... That, after all, is one of the things fanzines are for.

Fanzines [1976]

Taran taran taran. Roll on drums. Roll on floor. Roll in aisles. Roll in stones. Is there no end to this man's talents? Well, yes, there is, actually.

And so much for the lead-in, a preliminary flourish lifted bodily from an old Graham Hall loc and intended to help this article merge itself at the edges into the surrounding mess of squeaking inanities and hysteric ephemera so characteristic of this publication. It is said that in the same way as pets acquire the characteristics of their owners and vice versa (scratch the back of Kettle's neck and he'll make a noise like a dialling tone; offer Charnock a saucer of milk and he'll start to shake all over) just so do fanwriters acquire the dominant traits of the zines for which they write. At this very moment I feel an osmotic influence seeping through my ever-open pores. I am in *True Rat*. I look at the lines above and begin to bounce excitedly, uttering high-pitched giggles. Were I within the covers of *Stop Breaking Down* I would scowl, sneer horribly, lurch forward with a splintering crash of chair legs and utter a sharp barking laugh not unlike the sound of someone's arm being broken. And for *Vibrator*, of course, I would by now be lying underneath the table, alternately hiccupping and tittering as I made unsuccessful slobbering attempts to bite the legs of nubile passers-by.

But this is *True Rat*. So – even if I make an effort to pull myself together – the setting of the West word machine has been changed slightly and what boils up from the steaming depths will inevitably have some furry taint derived from spoutings of Kettle. As you can see, as you can see.

But I intend to fight it all the way. The first fanzine reviews I did (for *Parker's Patch*) were – like its editor – nasty, brutish and short. Those for my own *Daisnoid* were longer but otherwise similar. Struggling against the deplorably contagious frivolity of TR I may – hopefully – here rise to the occasion and produce genuinely inspired criticism that is tolerant, serious, intelligent, helpful, constructive, good-tempered, modest, friendly and brilliant.

On the other hand, who needs reviews like that anyway?

In the far off olden days when I was an undemolished serious SF reader, BSFA member and halfhearted fringe-fan I used to write locs that were tolerant, serious, intelligent etc etc. Mostly they never got printed, or even

acknowledged. I worked away at such laborious and conscientious correspondence for several years. All to no discernible result. Finally – SPRONG – I snapped. Or – PSZZT – the great flash of illumination. I realised that I was Living A Lie. I didn't really want to spend my time pointing out a few typos here and there – applauding the jejune triumphs of meagre talent – carefully avoiding the deflation of those with no talent at all – respectfully saluting the fake profundities of trufaans addicted to a jungle jargon of grunts and whoops – in short I didn't really want to carry on like a willing inmate of some Golden Twilight Home for Aged Mentally Defective Gentlefolk. What I wanted to do – at least half the time – was to get in there and kick the shit out of them. I decided that Daisy Chain Fandom needed the excitement of an occasional swift boot up the backside to vary the monotony of the non-stop lick. The whole scene should be less like a prayer-meeting in a Tea Shoppe – weak tea, limp sandwiches and pious self-satisfaction – and more of an impromptu cannibal feast – blood, guts, and not a few casualties. So I abandoned my fake personality of niceness – not all at once – it fell away in pieces – and took to writing letters sprinkled with snarls, maledictions and recipes for unnatural methods of self-destruction. Nobody took any more notice than before, but I certainly felt better.

And so I came to fanzine reviewing. For it must be said that one of the great disadvantages of locking a fanzine is that the editor, if he dislikes or disagrees with what you are saying, can simply bin your letter and put you down in the WAHFs. Some faneds are more conscientious than others, and make a particular point of publishing any unfavourable criticism they receive others are less scrupulous and will even chop you from the mailing list if you express opinions that are less than flattering. Review the bastards and they have no escape, and no way to keep up the old facade of universal peace and brotherhood in beautiful mediocrity. Even if they maintain a dignified silence the fact that the criticism has been made publicly is bound to have some effect.

But why bother? After all, isn't fandom all about friendship, and isn't friendship all about being nice to each other?

Well, no. Not quite. Fandom – in the beginning – is all about shared interests, and shared interests don't necessarily make for friendship. Quite often they make for heated argument and a polarisation of attitudes so complete that only a state of armed truce is possible. Members of Parliament, for instance, have a shared interest in running the country (or so the theory

goes, anyway) but that doesn't make them less vehemently partisan and disputatious in their differences of opinion and outlook. Some measure of respect – and even friendship – may be given to able opponents, but few points of view remain unaided through the fear of damaging someone's self-regard. And real friendship, it should be noted, has more to do with honesty than with pandering to conceit and vanity.

Yes, but fandom isn't as *important* as that. It's just a hobby. So why rock the boat? why not let everyone be happy and sit around basking in that lovely warm mutual admiration? Does it matter if bad writing or crippled thinking pass uncriticised or are even commended?

Yes, it does matter. The heart of fandom is the stimulus provided by contact and the exchange of opinions, and unless such dialogue is conducted wholeheartedly and without reservations, evasions, polite inanities, major and minor concessions and compromises with received opinion, and all the other debased coinage of casual social dealing – not to mention downright lies, crooked reasoning and bent logic – then the whole business will have about as much interest, value and importance as a brainless chat about yesterday's weather forecast.

There are only three good fanzine reviewers working at the moment: Greg Pickersgill (*Stop Breaking Down*), Jim Linwood (no fixed abode) and Malcolm Edwards (*Maya*). This is the trio at the top; there are other writers who have the ability to equal their efforts, but not the inclination. Writing good fanzine reviews is not easy; any lack of natural aptitude for the task has to be made up for by a great deal of mental straining and hard work. Most people don't bother – they write mailing comments instead.

Mailing comments are essentially miniature Letters of Comment. Fanzine title – contents checked off with brief yes/no comment – final tag of "liked it"/"not so good this time". This kind of summarising approach – as in Keith Walker's *Fanzine Fanatique* or Ethel Lindsay's *Scottishe* – can be useful for reference purposes or helpful if you're looking for new zines, but has little or no value as real criticism. To be fair, many faneds know this, and make no bones about the fact that their "review" columns are essentially a device for the doling out of shots of that strange fannish drug "egoboo". You send me your zine, and I say something nice – or not too nasty – about what you've done. Everybody who gets a lot of fanzines probably uses this method on some occasion or other when they're pressed for time. It's a useful expedient, but too often leads to a permanent lowering of standards, with

faneds dispensing rubber stamp judgements which would be condemned as altogether inadequate if sent by letter. The longer loc-substitutes which are sometimes passed off as real reviews are little better, the greater wordage simply making room for a more comprehensive catalogue of contents and gut-reaction thereto. They would rarely be considered good letters; they can scarcely ever be considered good reviews.

The basic difference between a letter of comment and a review is – or should be – that whereas the loc is concerned with specific issues raised within the fairly narrow range of a single issue of one fanzine, the review must give a general verdict and bear in mind the whole of the fanzine scene. Good locs and good reviews will often be similar, but even bad locs are better than some of the stuff that is passed off as “reviewing”. Most faneds don’t really want criticism; they want a dose of egoboo – a show of interest – a token of appreciation. The preference for locs is understandable in that (apart from consideration of length) most reviews are simply hasty and indifferent substitutes for genuine appraisal and response. One could effectively make a mockery out of *Fanzine Fanatique* and *Scottishe* by obtaining copies of all the fanzines listed and then responding by sending them the reviews from FF or S cut out and pasted on a postcard. After all, that is what Walker and Lindsay are really offering... That, and the chance to read a collection of sub-miniature locs to other fanzines at the same time. The various fanzines are all considered in isolation, without any save the most perfunctory effort to relate them to each other or to the great mass of fanzines in general. This isn’t criticism, it’s cataloguing, and – as with the phone book – one name more or less would only make a difference in the degree of completeness. Thirty fanzines reviewed separately produce thirty little locs of derisory quality. Thirty fanzines reviewed together should produce one overall picture taking into account the way in which all fanzines are related and act upon each other, and should also offer criticism – not just reaction – on individual items seen within this context.

Complicated – and also sounds rather as though I have some notion of a fannish ideal, a set of standards by which all fanzines should be measured. Not so. Naturally, I have my own ideas on the perfect fanzine, but this is purely a matter of personal preference. My point is that if all fanzines are examined each on its own there will inevitably be a lack of clearly formulated critical standards of *any* sort – personal or general – and response will degenerate to the level of snap judgements based on feelings of the moment.

There is a school of thought which holds that you should always think of something good to say about any fanzine: praise the successes and tactfully ignore or minimise the errors. Whether this approach stems from cowardice, diffidence or genuine kindness the final result is to exalt mediocrity at the expense of talent. To give praise where no praise is due and to withhold censure where *that* is due is to debase the coinage of criticism, to dispense plaudits and strictures with the facile brevity of the mailing comment review is to devalue the currency entirely. Any one article is part of a whole fanzine; any one fanzine is part of the whole scene. To review the parts without the whole, in the manner of checking off items on a list, is about as meaningful as reviewing the separate parts of a jigsaw and failing to comment on the whole picture.

In view of the above Mike Meara may have some justification for his request that *Knockers from Neptune* not be reviewed. KFN is a diary-format personalzine and as such calls for a direct and personal response – conditions that inevitably show up the unsatisfactory quality of the mailing comment type of review. Any review of a personalzine is bound to be a substitute loc; the only alternative is what is essentially a review of the personality of the editor. Neither of these is likely to be very acceptable to someone who just wants a bit of egoboo or a few interesting paragraphs and bugger the clever stuff about his character traits. So though Meara is edging rather close to the “no reviews unless they’re good reviews” line he does have a reasonable point of view, considering the useless stuff he’s likely to get from most directions. Some parts of some issues of KFN are more interesting than other parts of other issues – and that’s about all you can say without getting down to the sort of specifics that are necessary in a loc but redundant in a review. Whether or not you like the whole zine will depend on the degree to which your personality and tastes fit in with those of the editor. That’s not a taboo subject, but neither is it one to deal with in a two line throwaway.

There is, of course, also the matter of writing talent. But where personalzines are concerned this is often of secondary importance. (Within reasonable limits of literacy, that is.) The number one is the editorial personality. Thus, A may be a better writer than B, but B may be a novel and eccentric zany, whereas A is just a solid citizen, and a dull dog at that. On the other hand, B may be someone who *thinks* he’s a novel and eccentric zany and is actually a great pain in the arse...

Personalzines are hell on reviewers, and a challenge I largely decline

this time. There's the Mearas' KFN, Paul Skelton's *Inferno* and *The Zine That Has No Name*, Ian Williams' *Siddhartha*, the Charnock *Vibrator*, David Bridges' *One Off* and Richard McMahon's *Inverted Ear Trumpet*. Like them or loathe them, you have to strain your brain to think of anything to say about them. That isn't even a complete list – there's also *The Grimling Bosch*, *Twll Ddu*, *The Southern Vole*, *Whatsit*, and several others that I've heard of but not seen yet. There's a lot of them, and the dividing line isn't always clear. For example, I include IET although it has an article by Graham Poole, and I could equally well include various, other fanzines that are only marginally dependent on outside contributors. In fact, dammit, I'd better stop drawing lines and say something about all of them regardless.

The Zine That Has No Name is chiefly remarkable for its fanzine reviews. These are of the “Fanzine? What fanzine?” variety and devote a great deal of space to ignoring the fanzines they're supposed to be dealing with. Still, that's the way with personalzines: any point is just a jumping-off place for random thoughts... G. Charnock manages to be rather more concise in *Vibrator*, probably because he knows he'll fall off the chair before he's typed a very large number of pages... Harry Bell managed a similar brevity with *Grimling Bosch* but probably for different reasons... Dave Langford gets ripped off again in Liese Hoare's *Southern Vole*, which includes much material from *Twll Ddu*.... Or maybe it was the other way round... Ian Williams is Ian Williams is Ian Williams... and so on through an infinity of mirrors... *Siddhartha* is a *real* personalzine... You don't hardly see zines like Ken Cheslin's *Whatsit* no more.... Apart from Terry Jeeves's *Erg*, that is... Graham Boak's review (in K) of *Inverted Ear Trumpet* offers a good example of the personality being reviewed rather than the fanzine... and not the editor's personality at that...

And so much for the mailing comments. In another review of *Inverted Ear Trumpet* (different issue, but you wouldn't be able to tell from the review) Skelton mentions all the new fans coming up: “... publishing their fanzines that I've not come across before, mentioning hordes of other fans who have never impinged on my cosmos. They all seem to know each other. They have their own elder ghods, speaking with awe and reverence of such as Keith Walker and Graham Poole.” Well, it's good to tell they're SF fans. The suspension of disbelief implied in any discovery of a divine spark in Keith Walker is far beyond the capabilities of mere mundanes. Graham Poole is marginally more credible in the role of Little Green-eyed Idol from the South

of somewhere or other, but only just. Still, he does seem to have a large number of aides, acolytes and associates. Where his foot falls, a new fan group springs to life; whenever he sleeps, a new fanzine is dreamed up. The exact number of Poole publications is a little difficult to decide due to his habit of including one half of them as inserts in the other half. The latest bundle – principal parts *Spaces* 1 and *Spi* 5 – shows this Organisation Fan diligently at work, exploding with enthusiasm in all directions. One doesn't quite know whether to applaud or to take cover. The roots of this ambivalent response may be found in three quotations from the letter column:

“You seem to be introducing a lot of neos into fnz fandom so give yourself a pat on the back.” (Dave Rowe)

“Yes, for the guy on the street SF still brings to mind hideous BEMs with slimy green tentacles grasping nubile young females and fighting off square-jawed all-American spacemen with rayguns etc.” (James Parker)

“I assume that when Alex says ‘fandom’ he thinks of that larger body of SF readers who enjoy sitting in an audience and listening to the people that write the stories they enjoy reading... To them a con is a chance to meet an Arthur Clarke or Robert Silverberg, get an autograph or two and learn a bit about what the creators of the genre think it is. They are consumers, spectators if you like... The thing is, though, they have no automatic right to be part of my fandom, just because we both happen to read SF.” (Mike Glicksohn)

Yes folks, it's the Fandom Generation Game, or the great Who Do These People Think They Are moan-in. Trouble is, while fandom always needs new faces are these Poole-neos coming too fast and thick? Are they real genuine apprentice fans worthy of the Glicksohn blessing or are they just crudeaters one rung up the ladder from Trekkies, Doc Whosits, and (shudder) comics fans? The trouble with the get-out-and-drag-em-in-off-the-streets approach to recruiting is that you get people who not only think that SF is all BEMs with slimy tentacles etc etc but actually *like* it that way. The result is likely to be a fandom of the sort that pop stars acquire: a bunch of mindless groupies with an insatiable appetite for endless discussion of the trivia of the SF genre. I see somebody's started a Perry Rhodan Club already... Next step, the Chris Priest

Appreciation Society (President: John Brosnan)... In a little while any author without a supporters club will be lying awake late at night worrying, wondering where he went wrong... (Probably used too many long words and too few BEMs.) So is this a Good Thing?

Echo answers Don't Know. Enthusiasm can't be all bad, but when it's the kind that means a lowering of standards that are already none too high ... But on the other hand, what goes down may eventually come up, if the descent into crapathy is survived...

Does it matter? Well, of course it matters to those who see their seniority being made irrelevant by a bunch of upstarts who don't know who the proper BNFs are, for ghodsake. No respect, dammit. And from another point of view it's rather disheartening to see the prospect of the day's more active fuggheads raising up a vastly increased new generation in their own image. But the proportion of lamebrains to bright sparks is likely to remain much the same, so where's the sweat? On the whole fandom does need recruiting agents like Poole. The "familiar whine of the disaffected neo" – to use Graham Boak's choice phrase – does have the merit of disturbing the slumbers of over-complacent oldtimers. As Glicksohn suggests – in a letter some place else – it's only the real tough ones who'll make it anyhow. Natural Selection Rules – you have to have a fairly thick skin to withstand repeated doses of comments like "shows promise", "could improve", "may be worth watching", and "deserves encouragement". This is the kind of largesse Ian Williams distributes in his fanzine reviews in *Spi*. Other reviewers are even more irritating, giving the impression that they see themselves as Broadway critics whose word can make or mar, or talent scouts dangling the prospect of some future contract to greatness. "Yes, he was nothing but a no-account neo till I discovered him and spread the word..."

Blah. If anybody ever said to me, "You've got a lot to learn," I'd be inclined to give him a swift crack around the ear as an indication that he too had a lot to learn if he thought I'd put up with such patronising remarks. However, it must be admitted that the temptation is almost irresistible at times, particularly when one is confronted with such an example of copiously misapplied talents as Paul Ryan's *Oryan* (formerly *Orion*, formerly *Orion Express*)...

Science marches on, and the day of the lithoed crudzine has dawned at last. Admittedly the reproduction makes it readable, but here are all the identifying features – good and bad – of the genus: enthusiasm, ambitious

plans, a hunger for material so indiscriminating that any old junk will do (I've just sent him an article), total blindness to the difference between editing and compiling, complete innocence of the principles of punctuation, new and original ideas on the spelling of various words, a typing finger so palsied and erratic that the most commonplace sentences are transformed into cryptic utterances of oracular significance and mystery, and bad art. The last-named is really the worst failure of all, since it means that the one positive advantage of litho – ease of good-quality art reproduction – has been wasted. Greatly to his credit Ryan does make an effort to utilise the facilities litho offers – there are several full-page illos and numerous smaller ones – but most of his work is flat and uninspired, overstylised to the point of suggesting child art, but without the corresponding sense of vigour. That this is the result of a wrong choice of technique rather than a basic lack of talent is obvious both from various touches in the larger drawings and from one or two smaller and much more freely executed sketches. If the careful but sterile production of substandard graphics could be abandoned in favour of fluid illustration then it is possible that *Oryan* might even become an example for slicker but less venturesome zines – such as *Maya* with its plethora of meaningless fillers – to admire and follow.

That's the basic defect. The rest – lack of editing, poor typing and spelling etc – is not too vital and will probably be put right with practice. One correspondent advises: "Don't be put off by the knockers, however august they may be". Apart from its value as the starting point for yet another soft-porn costume drama ("You presume upon your position, Sir Jasper," she said coldly, and drew back her white-skinned shoulders in a shrug of proud disdain. Cowed by the swell of her august knockers he slunk away, snarling.) this is sound counsel which Ryan should follow. (Though the same letter contains a couple of sentences which must cast doubt on the writer's qualifications to offer advice on any subject: "The frontispiece conjures up thoughts of a 15th century traveller's accountant on a voyage betwixt the spheres in search of the source of music from them" and "the flowerpower era dawnded with pscyodelic turn on music and hard drugs in the van (of course) were the 'Beatles'". Maybe it's his handwriting.) Perhaps *Oryan* should be called a neozine. Neos soon turn into fans; only crud is for over.

And that, unfortunately, seems to connect quite neatly with Dave Cockfield's *Atropos 2*. Theoretically this one could get better, but on the whole it would be more desirable for it to get considerably worse. An all-the-

way crudzine – like the appealing *Ardees* – has a fascination and interest denied to pale and cringing imitations. *Atropos* is just a balloon of a fanzine: inflated size without substance, insubstantial and flimsy material stretched out to the very limit. Cut by twenty pages – the inane article on Rosicrucianism and the abysmal fan-fiction junked, the over-abject editorial trimmed, but the last paragraph of the plot-summary book reviews dropped – it might have been halfway readable as a personalzine, but in its present dropsical condition it isn't worth more than a heavy sigh.

So here goes with a heavy sigh. And thereafter many more heavy sighs are heard throughout the land as various readers ask: “But can't a faned put what he likes in his own fanzine?”

To be sure – that's what fanzines are all about: complete freedom to publish what you choose. But it must be obvious that there's precious little point to publishing your ish in an edition of more than one if nobody's going to read it or the readers are likely to feel that their time might more profitably and enjoyably have been spent on some other activity such as picking their noses. You can publish what you like, certainly, but the rules of the game say you've got to make it readable. The fact that your own material may have a vague connection with SF is not, on its own, enough. Maybe it used to be, but those days are gone.

Yes indeed. Another sigh, this time for that long lost era when I avidly followed the debates on Heinlein in the pages of the sixties *Zenith/Speculation...*

GHAS 1 brings it all back. Gregory, Harvey and Simmons, former Leeds University Group members (LUG would be a better acronym than the Germanic LUUSF) have produced a neat and attractive serious SF zine. There's an editorial that manages to stay modest without becoming servile, yet another interview with Harry Harrison – interesting as such gossipy pieces usually are – and various other articles and reviews, all reasonably well-written. The layout, reproduction and artwork (better than usual) are all satisfactory without being outstanding. A good first issue, and lacking only the usual feedback from the readers. In fact, a good fanzine – of its type. Qualified enthusiasm is the most I can offer since at bottom I can never muster a great deal of enthusiasm for this kind of material. Too much of the sort of criticism featured in *GHAS* has value only on a very abstract level: it's just academic muscle-flexing. David Pringle, for instance, devotes several pages to a carefully reasoned argument on “Science Fiction as an American

Popular Art” but despite the obvious intelligence of his writing the final response is a shrug and a muttered “So what?”. Maybe he’s made his point, maybe not. Who cares? This kind of article is irrelevant in just about every way possible: it does nothing to increase or deepen the enjoyment, appreciation or understanding of the SF reader and nothing to stimulate or improve the art of SF writing. It’s neither use nor ornament. Why, in what is supposedly such a forward-looking medium, is there so much grubbing about in the kipple of the past, such a determined raking-over of Influences, Developments, and all the other compare-and-contrast devices of degree-mongering scholarship? All is grist to the Thesis mill, I suppose. Trouble is, those mills grind slow, and they grind even the chaff exceeding small, so the the resulting dusty flour bakes up into cakes so severely indigestible that even the hungriest culture-vulture might be excused for turning up his beak at them.

In the Old Days – when it was only illiterate engineers and the odd arty-crafty nutter who read SF – the critical scene was much simpler: a matter of self-defensive boosting of ghetto products against the sneers of the outside world. Now SF is halfway respectable and any liberal Arts educated dolt feels safe to burble on about it. Used to be that the writers wrote, the readers devoured, and everybody got on quite happily without giving much of a fuck one way or another about Significance. Too good to last. All kind of dismal donnishness is beginning to rise up.

Gloom, gloom. I’m not against SF criticism as such: some of it – such as Aldiss’s *Billion Year Spree* – is both entertaining and informative. But I fear the onset of a creeping tide of pseudo-erudition. Pringle’s article is well-written, and whatever one thinks of his arguments they *are* arguments and could be debated. But in this case both the literacy and the intelligence are nothing more than camouflage for the worthlessness of the whole exercise. An exercise it remains, and having no great taste for this brand of Art for Art’s sake I wish he had directed his energies elsewhere – to the practical substance instead of the academic shadow.

Tuff luck, D. West – as our editor might cry – gotta move with the times and this critical bit is the Coming Scene. Sour agreement. So am I an evil old reactionary? Bit prejudiced, maybe. Hate these young layabouts with the long hair, for instance...

Not so long ago: bang thump tootle, the Bingley College Rag Procession passed the bottom of the street. Persons in bedsheets and strange headgear

jumped up and down, uttering happy studentish cries. They even came round and conned me into buying a copy of the Rag Magazine. This turned out to be full of jokes about sheep. I know this is a Woollens area, but what the hell – these were *clean* jokes. I felt like making a complaint under the Trades Descriptions Act. Asimov got it wrong: it's not violence that is the last resort of the incompetent, but Bingley Coll of Ed.

Still, why is it that students – apart from the notoriously dim local lot – so often bring on this feeling of mild embarrassment tinged with irritation? It's not simply that I'm getting old; I felt much the same when I was that age myself – one reason why I declined all opportunities of further education after leaving grammar school.

I suspect the reason is that while most students are not lacking in a sense of humour – witness their readiness for all sorts of frivollings and fooleries – they are frequently lacking in any sense of *absurdity*. The readiness to make a fool of yourself in the cause of a joke usually is an admirable trait, indicating as it does an appreciation of the fact that appearances are of little or no importance, but student clowning owes less to such conscious realisation of the irrelevance of convention than to a self-absorption so complete that it simply blocks out the reception of any social disapproval. It's not that they don't care what people think, more that they just don't *notice*.

Ah – you might say – lack of self-consciousness, very good, shows they're developing free untrammelled personalities etc etc. Possibly. But lack of self-consciousness is by no means the same as lack of self-importance. Students will often seem, in the exuberance of the discovery of their own intelligence, to strike attitudes and adopt characters which might be called “posing” or “pretentious”. Such terms, however, imply a certain measure of conscious fraud – the attempt to display yourself as something you are not – and here this does not apply. The only deception involved is self-deception: the face has adopted the mask and the actor lives the part with no perception of the fact that he is being laughed *at* rather than *with*.

So where the fuck – you may be asking – is all this getting us? And why does it have to be done by way of student-bashing, an exercise so popular that it must be All Wrong? Well, I am attempting to describe a certain disease or affliction which has no name, and therefore must proceed indirectly by way of such case histories as best display the symptoms. The malady is endemic among students, being particularly likely to attack those of youthful (or sheltered) high intelligence, and they are picked on hero simply as a group

well-known to all and furnishing a large number of readily identifiable sufferers. And to get right down from the general to the particular, the patients at the receiving end of my experimental diagnosis are Dave Langford and his two fanzines (Kev Smith assisting on the first) *Drilkjis* and *Twill Ddu*.

A delicate operation is called for here: making a separation between real defects and purely subjective dislike of certain stylistic mannerisms. Langford is a very good writer; so good, in fact, that he (or any of his admirers) could probably destroy all my arguments with the counter-assertion that the “faults” I claim to see are actually subtle strokes of an exquisite irony laid on so finely as to escape my coarse perceptions. It may even be true. But to set aside: Langford’s weakness is his constant consciousness of his own talents, unsoftened by any appreciation of the fact that not all his audience may share such undergraduate delight in cleverness for its own sake. His affectations of whimsicality – “The mighty engines surge with power... the fabric of space is rent ruthlessly asunder... and Fred – C registration, MOT (failed) – is whistling up the M6” – continually jar and irritate. Such archness is very well in small doses, but like “camp” (thankfully a jargon that seems to have fallen out of fashion) it becomes tiresome when persisted in. Langford doesn’t keep it up continually – God forbid anyone should – but there are enough spasms, twitches and bubblings of this near-tweeness to diminish the effectiveness of the genuinely witty passages. He indulges too frequently in the peculiarly juvenile antics of the hearty intellectual: the pseudo-dramatic brow-clutchings and exclamations, the assumption that any old allusion can be made funny by emphasis on the quotation marks. There’s the impression that he’s always ready to shout “Aha!” or maybe “‘Zounds, Sirrah!’ he cried” before going into some burbling routine of jocosity replete with references to obscure learning. Silly-clever, in fact.

The first issue of *Twill Ddu* is probably the worst. Here the fanzine’s title goes unexplained. Instead we get: “Next step was a title. Innate prudery restrained me from using *twill d’un*, a Welsh idiom which parallels a French one; the final title is science-fictional enough, with due and necessary apologies to I think the Leeds U clubzine.”

Real cute, that, managing a double dose of foreign language snobbery complete with added hint that he’s so well in there that he even knows the more obscure dirty jokes. Only surprise is that he doesn’t throw in the Gaelic equivalent as well.

Look, Langford, any more of this real hot shit and come the next Marion

Linwood and I will sure as oeufs are oeufs back you into a dark corner where after a brief discontinuity you will be not merely blackballed but no longer intellectual con cojones. Then we drape a placard inscribed LHOOQ round your neck and throw you onto a burning pile of whichever part of the BSFA library is waiting to be auctioned off.

And that's what you get for being the best new fanwriter since Raleigh Evans Multog. Unless, that is, you can produce something original that doesn't lean so heavily on the twin crutches of self-defensive parody and satire and the inward looking eye of intellectual narcissism.

Langford also appears in K, a publication that may be supposed to take its title from the Kitten group, though after reading the first issue Kafka seems to have equal claims. It's a good fanzine – in some ways – with a variety of contributions from Ben Indick, Mae Strelkov, Syd Bounds, Terry Jeeves, Graham Boak and Dave Cockfield. Cockfield springs a real surprise here with a quite readable con report. All hopes for *Atropos* are not lost, it seems. Or maybe it was the result of editing? But surely not; the editorial presence shown in K is so bizarre that one can only attribute the quality of most of the contents to happy chance. Dave Rowe in particular displays such a tenuous grasp on reason, reality, logic and (while I'm at it) grammar, spelling and punctuation that it seems inconceivable he could ever rise to such heights as the editing (in any constructive sense) of anyone else's work. This impression is confirmed by the news that with the departure of co-editor Bernie Peek K will have to fold. Quite obviously while it's Rowe who does the grandstanding in the letter column and elsewhere it's Peek who does the real work and gets it all together.

But here's the man himself in all his remarkable splendour, scratching his head over an unforeseen reaction from Pat Charnock:

“Pat has somehow got herself worked up over the ‘British Fan Editors Award’ parody, where as the covering letter from Gray *Quite clearly* states ‘should you discover the slightest tinge of animosity then pass it on quickly, for it isn't aimed at you.’ No one's getting at her or Wrinkled Shrew, that should be perfectly clear...”

Now, the problem is: should one accept that Rowe is really the complete halfwit he appears, or is it possible that for some strange purpose of his own he is slightly exaggerating his mental deficiencies? To take the conscientious

public servant line, I suppose one must attempt to lighten his darkness by explaining – as to bears of very little brain – or to single-celled organisms of no brain at all – that if you slap someone across the face and then assure them that if they find the slightest tinge of animosity they should pass it on immediately as it wasn't meant for *them*... Well, they will not always be very happy with the situation, or very much inclined to accept subsequent exclamations of innocent surprise and regret for injuries suffered.

Here's another example (all strictly sic) of the Rowe apologia:

“Grays views and criticisms comes from an honest care and regard for fandom, if Gray ever noticed a point of disagreement he'd usually argue it out directly with the person involved either in person or by post, and *not* by an adolescent bad-mouthing campaign. He has always been more interested in seeing fen produce better fnzs and making *helpful* criticisms and if any of the fnzs I've been involved with have ever come to anything, it is because he impressed that on me, at a time other so-called reviewers were either content with any crud that came along or on search of the bigger 'better' sarcasm.”

Come back Bernie, all is forgiven.

Though it must be admitted, he really knows how to tickle your fancy, does our Dave. That bit about “*helpful* criticisms”, for instance. And then the virtuous rejection of the “bigger 'better' sarcasm”... In case you didn't realise, that's Graham Boak he's talking about. The quotation, in fact, is part of a report on Mancon, an occasion on which other reporters than Rowe might have said that Boak was not very noticeably eager to “argue it out directly”. It might even have been added that he'd apparently made the discovery that both “adolescent badmouthing” and the “search for the bigger 'better' sarcasm” were quite fun things (from a safe distance) once you got going. And since he got going he's not shown much sign of stopping...

All this folderol, of course, has its beginnings in the ructions surrounding last year's Nova Award. The organisation of the Nova suggests – at first – some slightly modernised version of the Conservative Party's mysterious method of choosing a leader in earlier days. “Soundings” are taken, there are “consultations” and finally the number one is announced by the “Magic Circle”. But of course, there *is* some sort of vote, so perhaps the American system with all its emphasis on backroom deals, power-broking

and general fixing would be more appropriate as a parallel. On the one hand we have the Forces of Righteousness: Graham “Goldwater” Boak (In Your Heart You Know He’s Right – In our Guts You Know He’s Nuts) and Dave “McCarthy” Rowe (Chairman, Un-Fannish Activities Committee) and on the other hand a rabble of Rats screaming for dope, sex, and the blood of Good citizens. Yes folks, your duty is plain: never mind the fanzines, just follow Boak. Think what a great Chief Executive he’d make...

I mean, unlike Gerald Ford, Graham Boak can not only fart, walk, and chew gum at the same time but he can do all these things on only one foot, the other being firmly fixed in his mouth. However, as he hops erratically on his way, sucking with pious self-satisfaction on a size fifteen fandom bover boot, a message of doubt and disquietude may even now be swinging slowly from branch to branch of the treelike ganglia of the Boak central nervous system.

Why is it – as both the US President and GB must dimly wonder from time to time – that virtue is not rewarded? Why don’t the Good Guys win? Why do people have to keep *arguing*? Why can’t they see the One True Way?

Hardly realistic, I know, to set Gerald Ford and Graham Boak side by side. The first has the potential of bringing about the destruction of a large part of the earth while the second is capable of doing about as much damage as a house-fly banging its head against a window-pane. Still, the insect whine of a local Boak impinges on the consciousness just as much as the elephantine but distant galumphings of a US President. And the bringing together of this Lewis Carroll duo is suggested quite irresistibly by their similarities and their contrasts.

Both are intellectual mediocrities who profess a staunch determination to uphold certain Moral Values and both – despite experience – display the same tactical incompetence in their politicking. The chief difference between the two is in the degree of their innocence. For all his decades in the game Ford strikes one as too dumb to be devious, too transparent to be tricky. Sententious though he may sound, he means what he says. The only problem is pick the occasions on which what he says means anything at all. Boak, on the other hand, is marginally less incomprehensible but very much more disingenuous. A Pax Romana pacifist and a moralist of the Pecksniffian school, he is also a polemicist who takes care to couch his insults in such terms that he can afterwards issue injured-innocent denials of any conscious

evil intent.

Cynic 9 is the latest Boak publication. There's a clever cover by Harry Bell showing – appropriately enough – a bugeyed Don Quixote tilting at a windmill-like spacecraft, an interesting letter column, and some excellent fanzine reviews from Jim Linwood. There's also the editorial writings – interesting in quite a different way. Like *K*, it's a good fanzine in some respects; like *K* again, its editor seems to be a visitor from another dimension: a strange continuum where facts and logic are wholly subjective and not of this earth. Such dottiness might be almost endearing in other circumstances – after all, there are many quite amiable fans who have difficulty with the ordered presentation of their thoughts – but since the Boakian folly is combined with one of the most astonishing displays of self-revealing nastiness ever seen in a fanzine the humorous aspects of the case seem rather insignificant.

Whereas Dave Rowe is merely a noisy, clumsy excitable puppy yapping furiously at his rubber bone of contention, the craziness of Boak is deeper and more serious. Plainly he has long ago passed the stage of wondering whether he's making a fool of himself; possibly he even intensifies his assault on the processes of reason in the hope that the display of such a shambles of false syllogism and specious induction will stupefy his audience into a state of unresisting catatonia and enable him to carry off his lunacies by default. Certainly a substantial section of fandom seems to have been stunned into mute acquiescence. There's such a horrid fascination in the obscenely naked spectacle of Boak squeezing the last unctuous dribblings of weak venom from flaccid reasoning and boneless logic that one feels slightly embarrassed about interrupting. It's like a capsized, half-squashed dung beetle, wallowing in its own noxious emissions as it tries to find a footing: the thing can do one no harm – perhaps only follows the dictates of its residual dirt-picking instincts – but although its continued existence seems a blot on the face of the earth, the thought of the stench and messiness its destruction would release is so distasteful that it seems best to pretend it hasn't been seen.

Unfortunately, it's not likely that Boak will go away if you ignore him. Instead he will continue his self-appointed task of stirring the shit before spreading it far and wide. So whether you regard him as a pusillanimous little prick (and should you discover the slightest tinge of animosity here, pass it on quickly, it isn't meant for *you*) or just plain deranged, it seems best to pay

him some slight attention, if only for prophylactic purposes.

Cynic 9 (which should have been subtitled TABLETS FROM SINAI or PILLS TO PURGE FANDOM) has Boak flailing away with his halo in a manner malicious yet inept, raising a few lumps here and there with the flat of his weapon but mostly shedding blood freely from a multitude of self-inflicted wounds. This wrong-way kamikaze attack is directed at numerous targets: various con organisers (“And *this* shower are hoping to organise Britain’s next World Con?”), Pat Charnock (“After all, no one wanted to insult *Pat*”), Ratfandom in general – Malcolm Edwards in particular – and a selection of others along the way. The Boakian method of sneaking up on a logical argument by way of prejudiced fancy masquerading as fact and non sequiturs dressed up as reason almost defies description. Truly he may claim to be the founder of a new superscience (the Art of Seeing Things Only One Way) and the discoverer of a marvellous philosophical principle (I Think, Therefore It Is So) that supersedes anything fuddy-duddy old Descartes ever dreamed up. Logic there is, of a kind, but it’s the kind that occurs in proofs of the “all cats have tails – grey cats have tails – therefore all cats are grey” variety. Of sense, common or uncommon, there is none whatsoever. Here’s a sample:

“To change the subject slightly I’d like to draw your attention to Malcolm Edwards’ comment on WS in *Maya 10*.

‘It seems to be labelled outside London as a rather in-group Ratfan zine, which is a vast injustice that I hope will evaporate in short order.’

He means, in fact, outside Ratfandom. I know several London fans who think it a Ratfan zine. What he is really saying is that everybody in fandom is out of step except for Ratfandom. Quite why it should be *bad* to think of it as a Ratfan zine I don’t know – Ratzines seem pretty good to me, as a general rule.

His comment set me thinking of the general British Attitude to Londoners. Namely that they are too big for their own boots, to say nothing of their hat-size. Unfriendly, clannish, snobbish, sneering and ignorant of the realities of the country. It is all true of course...”

Of course, of course. This is the Boak technique: wrap your insults round something (“Ratzines seem pretty good to me”) that can be pointed to afterwards as proof of innocence. It’s an objectionable method and mostly

used – as here – on arguments that aren't even remotely tenable. Hardly a case of everybody in fandom being out of Step except for the Rats, more everybody in fandom being out of step except for Graham Boak – the high-minded Brutus, willing to wound and yet afraid to strike without first preparing a good set of excuses.

What a tiresome fellow he is. What a godawful pain in the arse. Long, long ago there was some legitimate reason for complaint: the rather blundering manner in which last year's Nova Awards was presented. Long, long ago such criticisms as were necessary should have been – and were – made and the matter dropped. Boak's claim to any sympathy for his sense-of-outraged-decency melted away as soon as it became obvious that his "issues" were merely pretexts for a mean-minded attack on almost everyone in reach. And now he goes on – and on – and on.

Provides plenty of material for comment, I suppose. Too much. In fact, in the end it just becomes wearisome, like trying to have an argument with a very small, ill-behaved and rather stupid child: you're not likely to lose in the sense of having your points proved wrong, but you may retire defeated by the sheer impossibility of communication.

So who's the villain? The real genuine deep-dyed villain of the piece? The Nova Award itself, of course, the great fannish non-event of the year that wastes so much time and energy and causes so much ill-feeling. Most such awards are slightly silly; fannish awards are positively farcical. The Nova and the FAAN must surely have had their rules framed by the same set of people, since it seems unlikely that there can be two different bodies capable of contriving such amazingly foolish auto-destruct mechanisms. Strange Powers at work. Almost makes you believe in the Secret Masters of Fandom. Trouble is, it looks like they're a bunch of idiots.

Perhaps it's significant that the Nova comes from Birmingham, an area that despite the size of its fan group hasn't produced much in the way of fanzines for several years. One wonders why, if they never bother with the bloody things, they go to the trouble of promoting an award? Guilty conscience?

There's the voice of prejudice for you. Thanks to geographical isolation I'm a fanzine fan rather than a socialiser and can scarcely be brought to regard those who take little or no part in fanzine activities as being fans at all.

And after that, I suppose theoretically I should fall on the one Brummie zine currently available – Kevin Easthope's *Logo* – with cries of joyful

appreciation. Unfortunately it's not a very good fanzine. All credit to Easthope for publishing it at all in the face of the apathy that seems to surround him, but not much credit for the contents. Apart from a Bob Shaw article (reprinted) *Logo* bears a strong resemblance to a sixties PADS zine. There's the same fanzine mailing comments, random filler artwork, rambling letter column, and the same editorial gibberings with the slightly edgy over jokey air of inanity that once seemed so prevalent. Some of the humour does work, but more often it just disappears in a welter of forced daftness.

There is one genuinely and appealingly silly idea: a trade boycott of "secret" fanzines. Apparently it hasn't occurred to Easthope that the restricted circulation of "secret" zines probably means no great loss for those excluded, since work which can't be shown to anyone but your old buddies is hardly likely to be worth reading.

One fanzine which is, if not secret, selective, is Lisa Conesa's *Zimri*. Kevin Easthope isn't the only one complaining about *Zimri*'s apparent reluctance to trade: grumblings have been heard from several directions. Perhaps the editor values her own product more highly than what she's offered in return – justifiable, to some extent, since *Zimri* obviously calls for much more than the usual expenditure of time and money. All the same, it does seem a little excessive to ask contributors to enclose a stamped addressed envelope with their offerings. Either delusions of grandeur are setting in or this is a clever ploy to indicate how everyone is panting to appear in *Zimri*'s pages – competition so fierce that only one out of ten is granted the supreme accolade of acceptance. Hold out for your full rights, boys, and insist on a properly printed rejection slip as well.

Anyway, setting aside these minor editorial vagaries, *Zimri* 8 is an attractive and enjoyable zine. With the exception of two excruciatingly coy vignettes from Edward Lutczyn (which may be to the taste of others) the artwork is good to excellent. The written contributions (including most of the letters) are uniformly good, even the book reviews and some of the poetry being not without interest... (That's the nearest a book review and poetry-hater can get to a compliment without doing himself an injury.) The only overall defect is a certain lack of editorial presence: there's the air of a rather anonymous compilation rather than the sense of some strong personality pervading and drawing together the contents into a unified whole. Despite the duplicating, it feels like a litho zine.

Egladil, on the other hand, actually *is* a litho zine, but manages to look

like rather spotty duplicating. Fannish dedication, I suppose. The fact that the artwork (mostly well-executed but mostly derivative) comes out perfectly indicates that the fault lies with the editors rather than the printer. Other faults that lie with the editors are a predilection for gushing praise, exclamation marks, and the use of such forms of address – apparently in all seriousness – as “dear reader”. There’s also a letter column that prints extracts from seven letters, only two of which are more than four lines, and then lists over forty WAHFs. Either they get some pretty dumb mail or they aren’t using much discrimination. (Alternatively they’re keeping the lid on a whole lot of rude remarks.) Interesting to note that about half the names were unfamiliar. You in your small corner – I in mine. This is Fantasy Fandom, rather than SF.

Myself I stick to liking imaginative literature – which means almost anything not written to a tired old formula. Genre labelling is a critical convenience and a publishing sales device; in every other way such classifying are merely building or maintaining the ghetto walls. Ballantine’s Adult Fantasy series (lauded in *Egladil*) may have been a good thing for Ballantine, but otherwise it’s simply keeping Fantasy in the same grubby niche that SF occupied forty years ago. Instead of attempting something new, aspiring fantasy writers produce purple pastiches of yesterday’s gimcrack rubbish. The real originals are produced in spite of the prevailing trend rather than as a linear development. Ah, be thankful you’re a Science Fiction fan. At least our boys have got round to discovering such new-fangled novelties as James Joyce, and even the (now rather ancient and faded) Modern Movement...

You can tell, can’t you, that I don’t really go for this fey faerie folderol too much. Or even leather jockstrappers like Berk the Barbarian, Conan the Conk (Portnoy should have had REH’s problems – let him complain *then*) and all the other boys with the musclebound brains.

No, much more in my line is something in the Gothic style: blood, terror, death, darkness, destruction, decay, gloom, horror, fear and loathing... Yes, give me some of that good old Pickersgill any day.

Stop Breaking Down has been left till last in these reviews in hopes that a sudden inspiration strike would provide something brilliantly nasty to say about its editor. Nothing turned up, so I have to fall back on the usual line of guff about what a cruel, sadistic, ruthless monster of a faned he is: a sort of fannish King Kong with a taste for creating widows and orphans then telling them in great detail just where it was their old man went wrong. Pity it’s

mostly mythology; you can get some real mileage out of lines like that.

Anyway, the London loup garou has been behaving like some demented fannish whiz-kid recently, zooming out three substantial issues at intervals of only six weeks or so. Anybody would think from such lunatic enthusiasm that he'd just discovered fanzines for the first time. On the other hand, looking at the contents, you couldn't maintain that opinion for very long. Such expert armtwisting of contributors argues long experience.

These days it's music, music, all the time in fanzines: not just Dylan (who used to be a strong favourite in the sixties) but Space Rock and all kinds of LP synthetics I've never heard of. Still, I know I'm always a few years behind the times – it took a while before I caught on that Johnny Cash wasn't the change from a Durex machine – but SBD really brings it home. Here's a Harry Bell cover with an instrument I've never even *seen* before. At first glance it could be a guitar, but whoever heard of a guitar with four frets, an ultra-short fingerboard, ten strings, the sound hole in the wrong half of the body, two bridges and a top made of wood about four inches thick? Maybe the guy that's carrying it – who looks like the result of miscegenation between Walt Disney and R. Crumb – built it himself to take account of his three-finger hands. Nice one, Harry.

Trouble with Pickersgill is he writes these fanzine reviews. They're detailed, they're thorough, they're exhaustive, they're authoritative, and frequently they're definitive. They drive other fanzine reviewers nuts. How can you avoid coming over as a plagiarising yes-man when you're following in Pickersgill's footsteps? You're reduced to picking at nuances, detecting near-invisible and probably unintentional subtleties, or being plain contrary and taking an opposing position just for the hell of it. Maybe it's good for the art, but it certainly makes your brain hurt. Hence the desire to zonk him over the hairy head with some ultimate crusher of savage counter-witticism. It's too much, it really is.

Also too much is the Malcolm Edwards conreport in SBD3. In between eulogies of famous writers (Shaw, Silverberg, Holdstock etc) and criticisms of the Mancon committee he refers to me in terms of such glowing disrespect that I had to go lie down for half an hour. It's not fair, deliberately confusing me with my grandfather Herbert West, and the implication that I resemble something kept in a jar on H.P. Lovecraft's desk is not appreciated.

The real sting, though, came when I read the back page news miscellany and discovered that Little Mal is shortly to take up a position with V.

Gollancz Ltd. Now *that* really has fucked up my plans completely. I had it all settled that Gollancz were to have first chance of my next potential bestseller. But now it looks like by the time I have it written this little creep will be Managing Director. So I'll have to send it to Robert Hale after all. Proof, if ever there was, that the road to Hale is paved with good intentions.

Sod off, Edwards, you nameless brachycephalic spawn of nameless primordial slime-pits. Any more crap like that and I'll have your Astral League membership withdrawn. I got influential friends too, see?

To turn to something less distasteful: SBD also has an Overseas Editor (presumably allowed to lick the stamps for the three copies bound for foreign parts) in the person of Simone Walsh. Her column rambles over various subjects: the difficulties of contending with a perfectionist editor, the deficiencies of various con-sites, and the impossibility of such allegedly male chauvinist con-organisers as P. Weston, who ought to be wary of making jokes about subjects on which his own position is nowhere clearly stated. There's also a poem which – apart from its own merits – has the value of being the inspiration for a brilliant parody in Bryn Fortey's pastiche-zine *Super-Crud* 69. Fortey's position on feminism etc is by no means clear either, but that's irrelevant since he manages to be genuinely funny without sounding offensively patronising.

Simone does at least have a couple of advantages in dealing with the cut and thrust of editorial Pickersgill: she's on the spot to protest in person, and – even if the protest fails – she knows that the alterations will be executed with reasonable competence. Ann West (wife of D. West) has had neither of these consolations, having been dealing long-distance with the notorious (“an editor must *edit*”) Brian Parker of *Parker's Patch*.

PP3 arrived the other day, hot from the presses. Hot indeed, since the high temperatures accompanying its fevered production had caused the ink to behave like rancid butter mixed with soot and the stencils to acquire the characteristics of well-crumpled randomly perforated used fish-and-chip paper. Still, that wouldn't have mattered, but for the fact that the old editorial meddling urge had struck again. The Ann West material originally consisted of three letters, here printed as one article without any explanation or comment on origin, and with a number of cuts made without the knowledge or subsequent approval of the writer. It's a readable piece – apart from a certain lack of punctuation – and it might be argued that the cuts have made it hang together better, but I feel that any editorial alterations to such casually

produced work should only be made subject to the approval of the contributor. The cuts may not amount to much in the way of wordage, but they do make a significant difference to the overall mood and apparent meaning.

Anyway, if he wants to come the editing bit, why doesn't he do something about the rest of the contents? The letter column, for instance, is supposed to be a new improved version, but that means nothing more than that it's a different sort of mess. Even the artwork isn't very interesting. There's a cover which is supposed to contain all sorts of subtleties, but since I've forgotten what these are I can't say it looks like more than a feeble pun.

There's only one really important point about *Parker's Patch*: it's finished me off for writing any more fanzine reviews. What else, after a loc like this (on my efforts in PP2)?

“D. West's reviews were hardly the work of someone closely in touch with fanzine fandom. He admits for one thing that he hardly ever reads an American fanzine. I don't think anyone should attempt extended reviewing of even British fanzines unless he can see them, not in isolation, but as part of the whole field.”

That was a quotation. From Darroll Pardoe. I mean, I'm not making it up or anything.

Sigh. And I did think – for a moment – that I could get away with sticking to thirty or forty British fanzines and not bothering too much about the several hundred American publications. Though really I should have read them all, and also got some background on the Canadians, the Australians, the Swedes, the Germans, the French, the Belgians and the Japanese. But there you are – I'm just naturally a slacker. I figured twenty years of SF and a dozen or so years spent reading a few hundred fanzines might allow me an outside chance to sneak in. Why didn't somebody tell me that it takes more than such a brief and superficial acquaintance to make a real fanzine reviewer?

Of course, I was doomed from the start. Apart from an appalling lack of knowledge of Japanese fanzines, I've never been able to maintain the proper respect for those who talk of “Roscoe” and “Ghu” and “Trufannishness”. And since the exalted beings who dwell in fandom's topmost ivory towers naturally believe in the Tooth Fairy, they are likely to visit the awful doom of their disapproval on all those who are less than wholly reverent.

So this looks like an appropriate moment to retire from the scene, totally cowed, crushed, humiliated and defeated, my hopes blasted, my ambitions brought low, my self-esteem reduced to zero. I am not worthy of this sacred trust. My footsteps falter – my vision dims – others must seize the torch from my palsied hand – the race is not to the swift, not yet the battle to the strong... Insults I can take, indifference I can endure, but against the Olympian gormlessness of Darroll Pardoe there is no defence.

Better luck next time.

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The State of the Art

“No man but a blockhead ever wrote, except for money,” declared that bottle-scarred veteran of the eighteenth century literary scene, Samuel Johnson.

And yet – like every writer who ever lived – he must have known the money was of secondary importance, a writer is a species of obsessive lunatic; the fact that he may receive cash for his efforts is no more than a convenient excuse that can be used to make the whole process understandable to outsiders. Like any man helpless to overcome his own compulsions Johnson cursed and swore, called himself names – and resignedly accepted that since he had this kink for literature he’d better make some money out of it.

Things haven’t changed much; tacitly or openly the view that Art is to be valued by the measure of the rewards that come to the artist – cash or commendation, royalties or reverence – is still the general opinion. A writer who writes but does not sell is like a man who practises snooker shots all day: a fool; a no-good bum, a waster and a layabout, a person irresponsible and blind to the stern duties of Real Life. But let the same writer and the same snooker player begin to make money – the one to pick up advances, the other to rake in tournament prizes – and a sudden respectability descends upon them. Virtually any activity done for money acquires a measure of approval, however despised and disregarded it may be when done for nothing. The amateurs are just idiots pissing about, but the professionals can be taken seriously.

So what are all these blockheaded fans up to, fooling around with their amateur publications, their so-called fanzines? what’s the point of it all?

The five million dollar question, this one, and an evil old problem to wrestle with in that it calls for the examination of areas of murky thought and twisted language where concepts and words have acquired such accretions of secondary meaning and subconscious significance that the possibilities for semantic confusion seem infinite.

Searching in the dictionary for an official definition of “professional” I came across another entry: “*Prokroustes*, lit. stretcher, name of fabulous robber who fitted victims to his bed by stretching or mutilation.” This seems an appropriate word to describe the efforts of a fanzine reviewer, or anyone

else who tries to formulate general theories of fandom. Yes, fact can be made to follow fancy very nicely by such methods, particularly when the meanings of certain key words are cut or expanded to fit within the limits of the Great Plan.

So what is to be done with such mangled horrors as “professional” and “amateur”, both words that have different associations for every person who uses them? Perhaps the formula found in certain commercial literature should be employed: “The terms used in these descriptions shall be taken as having the meaning generally understood in the Trade.” After all, everyone knows that an amateur is simply a person who does for love (i.e. nothing) what a professional does for money.

Used with this strictly limited meaning (as I intend to use them hereafter) the words offer no great difficulties. Unfortunately, no one ever does use them like that. “Amateur” is taken as a term of mild contempt, signifying a dabbler, a dilettante, a person whose talents are too slight to be taken seriously. This is far removed from the meaning the word possessed in times when knowledge of – and participation in – the Arts was not considered solely the province of “experts” and those who made their living by such pursuits. “Professional” has fared even worse. Quite apart from the peculiar undertones of snobbery (professions are occupations with social standing; the rest are just jobs) it has taken on a spurious glamour of the kind which clings round the unsavoury figures of notorious criminals. Nowadays “professional” is frequently used in a sense which is nothing more than a glorification of the crassly mercenary. Innumerable spy stories, thrillers and the like have employed the word with a respectful admiration suggesting that any sordid deed of violence, treachery or deception is somehow attractive and praiseworthy if done strictly for the cash with no emotional involvement.

Trouble, eh wot? Words have a power and influence not always clearly visible.

And hence the Great Curse of fandom and fanzines: the open declaration that fanzines are amateur; the unspoken belief that this non-professionalism means they are not to be taken seriously and cannot aspire to any level higher than that of imitating work which has been paid for.

Now, indisputably fanzines are amateur in the sense that they are not produced for money, but all other associations connected with the amateur/professional dualism should be discarded. *A fanzine exists as a thing in itself – as an original. It is not a copy of something else. As with the*

primitive uncivilised artist who produces his work without thought of measurable reward, so with fans and fanzines: they are operating outside the money system, and value-judgements based directly or indirectly on financial considerations are irrelevant and inappropriate. (Warnings have been issued for years on the dangers of “Pseudo-Campbellism”; perhaps, since some people seem to see the syndrome only in terms of direct imitation in the fiction field, some new name is needed to cover the less obvious criticism/review imitations. Riverside Squitters?)

Anyway, lets come straight out with the horrid truth: fanzines are Art. Folk Art, perhaps, since they are produced in conformity with no very clearly defined theories and without the more powerful pretensions attached to those artforms practiced less for enjoyment than out of a sense of duty to some nebulous god of Culture. But still Art.

Before total incredulity seizes you at the thought of putting some of the backstreet abortions called crudzines into such a seemingly exalted category I must add that very many fanzines are very bad Art. Sturgeon’s Law rules, as usual. As for the Art with the capital A – the reverential awe-struck Culture bit – that is simply the usual insider/outsider con laid down by the people who got to the goods first and want to promote themselves some exclusive status. Art isn’t something floating around in the stratosphere accessible only to a chosen few with wings of genius. It’s nothing more high-flown than ordered creativity. The foolish elitism which has separated Art from Craft (skill in executing ideas not necessarily original) is what has caused many people to fall back on financial reward as the only reliable and understandable measure of merit. What the hell, if it makes money it *must* be worth doing. Since writers are self-compelled to write they prefer to make money out of their efforts, not simply in order to live but mainly to justify their strange obsession to the surrounding majority of uncomprehending non-writers. This is true of even the most mechanical hack. Such a person has merely discarded the more refined forms of self-justification (critical acclaim etc) in favour of the most basic excuse: it makes money.

And if it doesn’t make money – or advance your career or status – it must be a waste of time. Hence the sense of inferiority which holds hack fan writers and editors. We’re only amateurs, what can you expect?

Well, much more than we usually get. Since I reject the notion of the intrinsic superiority of work which is paid for I do not favour the cop-out implicit in the acceptance by so many fans of their supposedly amateur status.

“Amateur” in too many cases does not mean someone whose commitment is based on an enthusiasm which owes nothing to financial reward, it means someone who’s in it for a different kind of payoff (or ripoff, since the system hinges on unearned mutual admiration) and who has a ready excuse for not making any real effort. The notion that you mustn’t be hard on the poor little fans because they’re only amateurs who aren’t getting paid for it is a denial of all self-responsibility. Is it to be assumed that fans are spoiled brats who have to be bribed with sweets before they’ll do anything for themselves? Sure, if one of my young children shows me a piece of not-very-good work – a painting or somesuch – I’m more likely to give praise than harsh criticism. But fans are not young children, and it’s time they grew up enough to stop claiming the forbearance that is solely the prerogative of unformed intellects.

The criticism that is carefully kind – searching out good points, however small, and glossing over faults, however large – is to be avoided not only because it is useless but because it is harmful. Self-delusion and self-indulgence are narcotics most people use now and then; to encourage the switch from an occasional blow to mainline addiction is not to do any great favour. Those faneds who complain of “destructive” criticism are often like schoolkids who refuse to learn their lessons then howl when they get caned. They should ask themselves not only whether or not the merit they see as being neglected in their own work has any real existence but also whether or not when they *do* get “constructive” criticism they ever take any notice of it.

After all, here’s Keith Walker, 23 issues behind him (every one of which probably drew some would-be helpful comment) and *Fanzine Fanatique* is still the same shitty mess as ever. The inventor of corflu lived in vain as far as Walker is concerned, and groans rise from many an unquiet grave at the uses to which he puts typewriter and duplicator. The layout is a farce, the editing is incompetent butchery, the critical judgement is apparently based on tossing a coin – but why go on? Appearance is not of the first importance if the material is good; Walker’s material is not good, and if he had any sense he’d do something about the fucking awful appearance. FF provides a listing of fanzines (if you can read the addresses through the typos) and a sitting target for querulous critics, but that’s the lot. Maybe I should just make some arrangement whereby I come round every five issues and give it a few more knocks for form’s sake. Something like that.

Pete Presford is another who probably won’t change his ways, however sweetly he may be coaxed. His *Malfunction* 9 displays all the many

eccentricities of language and punctuation that have come to be seen as uniquely Presfordian. Perhaps a little self-conscious about his English, he has taken to using Welsh words and phrases. Report has it that he gets these wrong as well. Still, Presford's plurality of errors does not entirely obscure the fact that he is more capable and intelligent than his prose – and taste in poetry – at first suggest. All that is really demanded of a faned is that he does the best he can. The best – not the second-best or some sloppy and half-hearted lazy bid for unearned egoboo. Not everyone has the skills necessary to do the job well in the limited time usually available. Presford does what he can, and while the result is not exactly a model for others to follow it does have a certain individuality and shambling life. A rather ill-favoured, uncoordinated creature, perhaps, but still something more than Walker's crumbling assembly-line golem. *Malfunction* is an authentic fanzine; in the terms outlined above it's Art. Pretty awful in parts, but still Art.

Is criticism like this any use? Both Walker and Presford have been hammered innumerable times; both have failed to make improvements to any significant extent, perhaps because they feel they are pushing hard enough already. The reason must be that fanzine criticism usually takes effect (if at all) indirectly or after a time lapse. Few people will care to lose face by openly altering their editing or writing to suit someone else's ideas. Jumping all over some fanzine isn't really expected to lead to instant repentance and reform. As Dave Langford might put it: fanzine editors are taken out and shot *pour encourager les autres*. For this reason it's worth giving even the incorrigibles like Walker a quick stomping once in a while. Walker himself won't take any benefit from the exercise but other readers will thereby be reminded that if they produce similar inept garbage themselves they needn't expect shouts of joy and hearty congratulations.

Whether Dave Cockfield is another faned who will gain little from criticism – directly or indirectly – remains an open question. He has a tendency to make lengthy apologies for the poor result of his efforts, but until he actually does something to remedy the defects this defensive cringing is unlikely to disarm critics. His third issue was sufficiently better than its dismal predecessor to make me wish I could change an earlier review declaring that *Atropos* was beyond all hope, but – as Bryn Fortey has already pointed out – the whole thing still looks like a collection of pieces from the reject-piles of other more discriminating fanzines. (Yes, there *are* fanzines which reject contributions. Believe it or not.)

It's certainly difficult to believe that *Titan* ever rejects anything. With few exceptions the typical sentence in Geoff Rippington's zine rambles vaguely towards its subject matter, makes a few baffled gestures towards the point it is circling, then abruptly vanishes up its own arsehole with a shriek of despair. *Titan* is not well written.

(On the other hand, there is the occasional gem – like Andrew Tidmarsh's melancholy verdict on Mancon: "I went along to widen my appreciation of Science Fiction and came away with indelible yoghurt stains on my trousers.")

Most of *Titan* is fairly sercon, but the prose is so awkward – at best dully adequate – that it's difficult to take the contents very seriously. There's obviously some thought and a certain amount of intelligence behind some of the articles, but such labour is largely wasted when the writing is so botched that several readings are necessary before the meaning crawls out of its hiding place. It's a pity that Rippington himself is not a better writer. Parts of *Titan* are beyond copy-editing, but attention to the more obvious errors of punctuation and sentence construction would have made a general improvement. He needs a co-editor with a good grasp of English. He also needs a clear policy. Like most vaguely sercon fanzines *Titan* is just bumbling along headed nowhere in particular.

Still, aren't we all? Even including Dave Langford and Kev Smith. But at least the editors of *Drilkjis* know where to stick the semicolons and such. They can even edit Dave Cockfield into readable form, as is shown by his Silicon report in *Drilkjis*. One defect they missed, however, is Cockfield's obsessive concern with his intestinal processes. Like too many other con-reporters he seems to think that what he and everybody else had for breakfast (and how long they kept it down) is a topic of vital importance and tremendous interest. Oral fixation or anal fixation? On the whole (if Tom Perry can get away with this kind of rubbish so can I) his taste in humour suggest the latter. And he missed the opportunity for a great line when the con hotel was invaded by Wild West fanatics: he could have offered to go down and shoot up the sheriff.

Ethel Lindsay's *Scottishe* credits the con report to Kev Smith (she also credits a couple of other articles wrongly, reviews the same issue of one fanzine twice on different pages, and provides the usual lesser errors – special prize for the first three all-correct entries) but the Smith piece was actually a short homage to Ratfandom. From the usual cautious suspicion Smith has

moved to the other extreme of flattery by imitation: his personalzine *Dot* is virtually a bowdlerised version of the Kettle *True Rat*. The other *Drilkjis* editor, Dave Langford, hasn't forsaken all of his old evil ways – the letter column in *D* is credited to “oi polloi”; Greek letters even – but he continues to strengthen his position as fandom's ace gossip columnist with his frequent *Twll Ddu*. (With a title like that it has to be frequent or nobody would ever remember how to spell the damn thing.)

This is Art? Well, yes it is. Part of the picture, certainly.

Fanzines like *Twll Ddu* are the most baffling of all to the newcomer. There seems no point to them – except, perhaps, as a means of narcissistic self-aggrandisement – and the connection with SF is often so tenuous as to be invisible. The new fan – inevitably thinking in terms of amateur/professional – expects fanzines to be inferior copies of professional publications, whether fiction or review. More chatty, perhaps, but surely not so chatty as *this*. Probably he reasons from experience in other fields. SF fandom is not the only fandom; there are innumerable other special-interest groups concerned with some particular hobby, sport, or pastime; some political, social or moral ideal – everything from collecting stamps to swapping wives. There are many publications similar to fanzines: spottily duplicated bulletins devoted to spreading news information or propaganda; promoting social contacts; advertising buying, selling, and whatever other dealings may be involved. Such publications are readily understandable to an outsider since they fulfil obvious purposes and are clearly nothing more than specialised versions of forms which are already familiar in other contexts. Similarly, there are also SF fanzines which will be fairly comprehensible to the outsider, regarding intent at least, if not content. The sercon end of the fanzine spectrum – featuring book reviews, bibliographies, biographies, interviews, critical notes and so on – is all good sound stuff immediately accessible and meaningful to anyone who knows their SF. But – progressing through the infinite shadings between sercon and fannish – as the newcomer explores further he becomes puzzled. There is something at the back of all this, but what is it? What's all this *nonsense* for?

Science Fiction fanzines are a unique phenomenon: not so much a symptom as a disease, not a by-product but an end. The process of understanding – or at least accepting – the rationale of fandom and fanzines (in any sense deeper than the pen-friend and social-club view) works mainly by instinct. No simple or quick explanation is adequate since no wholly

appropriate analogue exists and the vital perception that fandom is both trivial and important, laughable and serious, calls for the swallowing of too many paradoxes to be easily assimilated.

Stick around long enough, of course, and you'll get it figured. But getting into fandom – getting in far enough to know what it's all about, that is – is not always easy. Aside from the incomprehensibility of it all the neofan often has to face a sort of Ordeal by Terror.

It's almost impossible to become very involved with fandom without becoming involved with fanzines to some degree. Since few fanzines (and I may as well say here that unless stated otherwise or obvious from context I'm talking about British fans and fanzines) take subscriptions and many don't even list a single-copy price the only way to be sure of obtaining more than the occasional issue is to contribute in some way or other.

Maybe the neo will be lucky – or talented – enough to hit the right note straight away, but more likely he'll say the wrong thing to the wrong person (very easily done, since many fans are totally insecure or altogether paranoid) or turn in a painfully laboured piece of work that will be either ignored or treated with unsympathetic (or snotnosed) condescension. Since the coming of Ratfandom many fans take for granted the use of a casual brutality that must seem shocking to people who have never seen anything more acerbic than the Answers to Correspondents in the local newspaper. Still, such rough handling is really rather preferable to the fusty repressiveness of those whose air towards the neo is that of a grand seigneur suffering the approach of a particularly ignorant and smelly peasant.

Opinions differ as to the best way of introducing newcomers to the delights (many a merry ho ho ho) of fandom. I have a suspicion that as many young hopefuls are bored by the sercon as are put off by the fannish, but that's probably too subjective and is certainly very debatable. The general opinion is that it's best to break them in gently on the solemn and serious. And where better to begin than with the BSFA? (If you don't like all these sweeping statements – too bad. I have to have some way of dragging this article from one subject to another.)

The British Science Fiction Association now seems to be recovering from that period which prompted Roy Kettle to invent *the Bromley Silent Farting Association* (“We promise you won't hear anything from *us*”) and is even gaining something of a reputation for being alive.

And those are just the sort of remarks to annoy the BSFA's *Matrix*

editor, Tom Jones. Jones feels peevisish about fans who are ungrateful enough to take the generous BSFA's all and then crack jokes and make criticisms after they've left. Bloody hell – says Jones – fandom owes more to the BSFA than vice versa. He shuffles his feet somewhat when reminded by Tom Perry that the original purpose of the BSFA was to act as a recruiting machine and preserver of continuity for fandom. Not so, mumbles Jones. Not so.

What should, perhaps, have been made clearer is that the BSFA is now not so much an introduction to fandom as an alternative. Despite denials there *is* a BSFA fandom. It exists as a parallel body, one of those groups which is on the fringes in the sense that the movement of its members is either towards the fannish centre or out of fandom altogether. This has always been true to some extent: the BSFA is a waiting room where people hang about until they've made up their minds whether to investigate fandom further or whether to head back to the mundane world. The tendency towards a really separate existence probably began when the BSFA ceased to be responsible for conventions, thus relieving itself of all official connection with disreputable drunken carryings-on. (A surprisingly large number of people regard cons with dislike or distaste.) Thereafter the BSFA could be *serious*. This polarisation – fannish frivollers outside the BSFA, ultra-sercons within – has become particularly obvious in the last few years due to the absence of any non-BSFA publications comparable to *Vector* in terms of weight and continuity. Since *Speculation* went into cold storage (waiting for the great day when Peter Weston – like Eric Bentcliffe, Tom Perry, Walt Willis and Dracula – shall rise again) there's been no very powerful competition in the field of serious SF commentary. The editors of both *Drilkjis* and *GHAS* gave some indication with their first issues that they might be heading into Weston territory, but convention bidding seems to have diverted them towards more fannish preoccupations. Assuming a great improvement *Titan* could become a contender, but the only other zine with solid aspirations towards the sercon seems to be the new *Bar Trek* (Mike Dickinson and Lee Montgomerie), the first issue of which displays so little of the editors' personalities that it's hard to predict which way it will go.

It's often said that there is no room for more than one or two sercon fanzines, but this is only true when these same zines have no particular aim beyond the general vague desire to print material about SF. In all probability there's a need for not just one solid SF publication (as an alternative to *Vector*) but a need for several. Fans are not necessarily all-fannish or all-

sercon; the general tendency of British fanzines at the moment seems to be towards the fannish, but a fair amount of sercon stuff still appears.

Unfortunately, such material is so fragmented, so piecemeal, that there is no consistent critical base or point of view, and the result seems as ephemeral and pointless as the dimmest six line review of a crudzine.

There is in Britain today no fanzine with an approach to SF criticism more purposeful than simply taking each book as it comes along and shoving it through the reviewing sausage-machine. No fanzine has a visible editorial point of view. Virtually every critical article or review could have appeared in any other fanzine: they are as undistinctive and anonymous as the meaningless drawings used to fill odd corners of pages. (Not to mention the meaningless drawings used to fill *whole* pages – fanzine art is more unimaginative than you'd think possible, considering the subject matter.) The standard of SF criticism in this country stinks. What passes for debate or analysis is the merest nitpicking: devoid of direction, empty of meaning, as pedestrian as a one-legged asthmatic, and frequently so inept, half-baked, dreary and unenthusiastic as to suggest that the only inspiration was some cloudy notion that suffering purifies the soul. However, spiritual values aside, it's no fucking good, and it's about time it got better.

A concern with the serious SF content of fanzines may seem somewhat at odds with the preference expressed elsewhere for “fannish” material. I haven't given any direct short definition – and I don't intend to try – but one thing “fannish” does *not* denote is the sort of juvenile silliness which insists that any serious discussion of Science Fiction is something for “real” fans to avoid with disdain and regard with derision. At the moment I prefer fannish writing to sercon only because – of what is available – some of the former is invariably better than all of the latter. I like good writing, and I like good writing of all sorts. In the same way that I see the labels of “professional” and “amateur” as having no relevance to the intrinsic merit of a piece of work (since if you think that what's been paid for is *of necessity* better than what came free you're going to have to justify a scale of values that is entirely money-based) so likewise I make no preferential distinction between “serious” and “fannish”. Such narrow-minded apartheid is ultimately self-defeating: all these animals are of the same race.

The concept of a fannish gestalt – a whole scene in which amateur and professional, serious and light-hearted, are seen not as mutually exclusive but as complementary: counterpoint in the same tune – is far from new but is too

often forgotten. Instead, what we are more often offered is the depressing vision of fans as hangers-on: courtiers, groupies, camp-followers, innately inferior beings nourishing their egos on reflected glory and the mutually agreed servility of a pecking-order based on time-serving and acquaintance with the right catch-phrases. Such a picture – which fits certain fans very well – is disagreeable enough to make many people feel that (whatever their secret lusts) self-respect and public image demand making like the more respectable sort of amateur: the connoisseur/student. The stratagem of identifying with what is either clearly a hobby (collecting) or has the moral cachet of culture and self-improvement (analysis and study) establishes a saving sense of virtue. We thank thee, oh Lord, that we are not as other fans – particularly those nasty drunken loonies who are not BSFA members. (Sometime ace BSFA fanzine reviewer Ian Garbutt notes of *Maya* “...with a certain amount of distaste that there’s even more mention of booze in this issue: the pages almost reek of it.” Somebody send him a copy of *Vibrator*.)

Ah well, no sweat, really. This strange puritan BSFA fandom is just taking the long way round. They’ll wind up with the rest of us presently. They’re going their own way because there’s no road across: with no *Speculation* or similar bridge it’s a long jump from the safe rock of *Vector* into the perilous swamp of fannish (or semi-fannish) fandom.

Vector is the BSFA’s heavy glossy; there’s also *Matrix* for the lighter stuff. The division is made partly on the valid grounds of spreading the work load and also in the belief that *Vector* – which is generally available – should be a showcase free from such frivolities and trivialities as might prevent the outside world from taking SF (and the BSFA) seriously. This, too, is reasonable in its way, since undoubtedly it would be tedious to be continually pausing to explain the mysteries of fandom, mild though their manifestations are in BSFA publications.

Trouble is, many BSFA members apparently see *Vector*’s all-sober all-serious approach not just as a necessary compromise but as essential protection against identification with the unspeakable characters in the rest of the fannish scene. This po-faced attitude is one reason why so many fans drop out of the BSFA and afterwards make rude remarks.

Not having been a member for some years (yah boo rotten old BSFA) I know nothing of how the zine shaped under Malcolm Edwards, but in its present incarnation *Vector* resembles the Transaction of a Society devoted to the works of some long-dead author: a collection of materials for a thesis,

often interesting and individually well-written, but with no more unity than that imposed by the general subject. If it can be said to do anything except contemplate its own navel, *Vector* looks back rather than forward. We are offered a miscellany of reminiscence and review rather than any attempt at criticism that will point the way to future development.

This isn't much use. Science Fiction has enough passive chroniclers, enough fossilised Keepers of the Flame, enough conciliatory critics and self-serving apologists. What it needs is people who are prepared to be thoroughly and immoderately nasty not just to individual books but to whole schools of writers; people who will go to work in no half-hearted to clear out all the rubbish that has accumulated ever since the Gernsback disaster brought SF down to the level of genre pulp.

What slight influence fandom and the BSFA possess is probably limited entirely to writers. Publishers are unlikely to give a damn what such an insignificant fraction of their sales figures says (though it is conceivable they might begin to listen if the criticism improved beyond the present goshwow or academic whizkid level) but authors write for more than the money: they want praise too, if they can get it. At least part of the explanation for the poor quality of much SF must be the feeling of many authors that since nobody but a few dimwits and juvenile delinquents is going to give any opinion one way or another there's not much point to making more effort than is absolutely necessary. A little carrot-and-stick – a sign that someone with rather more discrimination than a lobotomised BEM-fancier gives a damn about their work – might have the effect of making some authors feel that the sweat involved in raising the quality of their output was not entirely wasted. The people who won't – or can't – do any better will doubtless get their money same as usual, but there's no reason why they shouldn't get their lumps as well.

But we get the reviews in *Vector* already, don't we? Yes, but Chris Fowler is the sort of greyly anonymous editor – his editorials have less colour and life than those of many a crudzine – who uses rather than inspires his contributors. Material comes at him from various directions; he deals some of it into one pile, some into another – and there's his next couple of issues. All right, all right, maybe he has to chase people to get these same contributions – has to do a lot of work to get them typed up – but there's no stamp of opinion, personality or policy (either Fowler's or the BSFA's or anyone else's) and the whole thing is nothing but a slice of the critical cake cut at

random. One review – one reviewer – alone and separate is not enough; a critical school – a climate of opinion – a state of mind – has to be brought into being. A milling mob can only skirmish; it takes a united charge to win the fight. SF criticism should not consist of pottering round the garden pulling up a weed here and there; it should be a wholesale clearing operation with flamethrowers.

All this violent imagery should be conveying the impression that I do not view fandom as a haven of rest and ease, an elysium of sweetness and light. Too true. Where real differences of opinion exist they should not be sneaked around on tiptoe but kicked out into the open and set forth with as much forcefulness of expression and downright acrimony as seems necessary.

An organisation like the BSFA can't really be expected to go to such lengths. (Though it could do better than its present non-effort in this direction.) The members would first complain, then up and take their subscriptions elsewhere; the publishers might stop sending review copies. This is another reason people drop out of the BSFA: *Vector* can have only one editor at a time, but outside you can do what the hell you like. Also, in however an ineffectual way, you can pursue SF Alive rather than SF respectfully (and Respectably) Embalmed.

Without any sense of permanent loss you could stick *Vector* in a cupboard to pick up in ten years or so – nice to have it around to read sometime, maybe – but *Matrix* demands attention rather sooner. After all, here are letter columns full of the next generation of BSFA dropouts – all quite animated on various subjects – and here's Jones himself, not much of a writer but a capable trouble-maker who keeps things well-stirred. Keith Freeman's fanzine comments – these days everyone seems to shy away from calling them reviews – are no big thrill in themselves but they do give the BSFA virgins some (slight) idea of the libidinous delights of the thousand and one other ways of doing it that exist in the wider world. Jones was a fanzine editor way back when, and it still shows, even though he has (mercifully) stopped printing Brian Stableford's appalling poetry.

So which way are the BSFA bright boys going to take themselves? Some, like David Bridges (*One Off*) and Richard McMahon (*The Inverted Ear Trumpet*) seem to have become fannish almost instantaneously; others pursue strange paths of their own – fanzines heard of but never seen – while some edge cautiously into general fandom via such as *Titan* or Graham

Poole's *Spi*.

Richard McMahon hasn't actually managed to improve *The Inverted Ear Trumpet* – IET is still the same shambling, clamorous, erratic, enjoyable blotsheet – but he *has* gained the penultimate accolade of the cold disapproval of the Master himself, Graham Boak. Coming along there real nice, Richard. Next step is the Big One – the Great Raspberry in the Sky – the unqualified more-in-sorrow-than-in-anger thumbs-down from Graham Poole.

Undoubtedly Graham Poole possesses a more attractive personality than Graham Boak (this is known as Damning with Faint Praise) but unfortunately some of his ideas are even more bizarre. I admire Poole's enthusiasm and energy, but there's no way I can admire his taste and discernment.

The praise of Graham Poole descends on faneds like a Biblical blight: they begin to wilt and sink – to turn black round the edges and slowly shrivel – to rend their garments and gnash their teeth. Crumbling under the burden of the oppressive knowledge that if Pooley is enthusiastic about their product then something has gone terribly wrong, they ask themselves what sins they have committed that deserve such a pouring out of the vials of wrath and such a laying on of the iron rods of punishment.

In contrast, being censured by the same *SF Monthly* and *Space 1999* enthusiast brings orgasmic sighs of relief and a glow of fulfillment. If this boy says your fanzine stinks you can practically start building a shelf for the Hugo.

Latest happy victim to feel the wind of the Poole critical boomerang is David Bridges. Poole is still living in what might be called the pencil-and-slate era of fanzines criticism: everything nice and neat and none of those awful typos and such. Still, after a few stern words on how cruddy *One Off* 1 was (“detested the size, didn't like the differences in paper size (sign of cruddiness)”... wow, wish I'd said that) he gets down to the real goods: “I've heard from one newcomer to the fandom scene whose first ever fanzine, apart from *Vector*, was *One Off*. If I hadn't sent her a copy of *Spi* she could well of been put off fanzines for life.”

Well, do tell what *did* happen to her, won't you?

It took me a while to get over that. It's not so much that the man doesn't have a reasonable point or two about *One Off* (though much of the inane rubbish in the 00 letter columns is from newish fans) as that the thought of *Spi* being presented as the Saviour of the Faltering Fan tends to do things to

my sense of gravity. Apparently it's also done something to my brain, since I can think of nothing much to say about *Spi 6* except to ask if anybody can figure out the system – something esoteric involving random numbers, I suspect – on which the contents were selected. Why, for instance, include this long article by Joseph Nicholas on Comprehensive Education? It's well enough written, but what has it got to do with fans, fandom, or SF? It's the bloody BSFA you're in, Poole, not the PTA.

Ian Williams is not my favourite fan writer. In the last year he's been involved in arguments on *Dhalgren*, Religion, Women's Lib and the Nova Award, and I still have not the slightest idea where he stands on any of these questions. He's such a complete fence-sitter – a leg on the ground at each side, even – that when he does make a definite move he invariably does himself a severe mischief. His vapourings on Mancon (*Goblin's Grotto 3*) for instance, make him appear a complete idiot.

So what's new? Well, he does a rather good column on fanzines in *Spi 6* – so much of an improvement on the sloppy effort of the previous issue that it's evident he not only sat up in bed to write it but took both hands out from under the covers. It's fairly basic stuff, being a summary of do's and don't's for intending fanzine publishers, but it's done well for the readership at which it's aimed. Trouble is, most of it will very likely fall on deaf ears. Poole himself, for instance, was probably too busy thinking up titles for his next six fanzines to pay any attention to the dismissive remarks on fan fiction.

The BSFA penchant for mathematical names always makes me think that they should have a zine called *Obtuse Angle* especially for the efforts of the more painfully earnest and humourless members. As the next best thing they're going in for fan fiction again and reviving *Tangent*.

Unbelievers like Williams dismiss fan fiction as the incapable in pursuit of the unreadable; the devout counter with the assertion that the publication of fiction in fanzines gives invaluable aid to aspiring SF writers. Neither opinion is altogether correct. In a letter to Paul Ryan's *Oryan 4* Chris Priest speaks of the stimulus and encouragement gained from seeing his own (admittedly awful) early work appear in fanzines. Rob Holdstock may be presumed to share this point of view, as may many other writers who have come up through fandom. The fact of such encouragement – of the relief from the sense of total isolation that oppresses unpublished writers – seems indisputable. However, despite this I would argue that the publishing of fan fiction and the encouragement of the writing of it are activities which do

more harm than good.

(A distinction must be made here between fan fiction and fannish or faan fiction. Fan fiction is fiction written by fans in an effort to emulate the professional product; fannish fiction is parody, satire, or fiction about fans, usually with humorous intent. I'm talking about fan fiction here. Fannish fiction is quite legitimate and can be very enjoyable. One point, though: parodies quickly become tiresome after the first page unless there's some story content apart from the object of the parody.)

Most fan fiction is extremely bad. The only good pieces I can recall were written by people who'd already had work published professionally. However, the poor quality of the examples usually on display is not in itself sufficient reason to condemn the whole category. As Dave Langford points out (*Drilkjis 2*) non-fiction material as bad – or worse – frequently appears in fanzines. But such material is usually recognised as bad and berated accordingly – fan fiction is treated as a special case. It's the same old “amateur” routine again, this time in its most extreme form: one set of standards for the pros and another set, very much lower, for the amateurs.

One of the main ostensible reasons for publishing fan fiction is to give the writers the benefit of useful criticism from the readers. But the criticism never is useful. Apart from the aspect of the blind leading the blind (since those with the real know-how usually keep clear) and the lowering of standards referred to above, even the most soundly-based criticisms have no real value since they *merely repeat what the author should have known himself*. It's possible to indicate revisions to improve a specific item (though in the case of fan fiction this usually involves throwing out the whole thing and starting again) but the general improvement of future work is going to depend entirely on the writer's *own* ability to detect the defects. Anyone who seeks to develop as a writer by relying on the criticism of others is like a perfectly fit man hobbling to the doctor on a pair of crutches to ask for some pills to make him able to run.

Yes, you *can* be taught how to write. And then you'll write like whoever taught you.

And this is the awful threat Graham Poole's *Cyclotron*: the prospect of even more trained hack writers being released on the SF scene. *Cyclotron* is devoted – it says – to offering useful information and advice to aspiring SF writers. Yeah. Talk about the Marching Morons – here am I, trying to encourage the extermination of some of the lousy writing there is already,

and here's Poole and associates busy setting up breeding tanks for a whole new generation of duplicate mindless dolts. Do these people understand what they're at? Are they really so simple-minded as to think that writing is a sort of painting-by-numbers box of tricks that only needs the instruction sheet and then You Too Can Produce A Masterpiece?

Apparently so. David Penny, in a special throwaway (do just that) section confides that It ain't easy kids; you have to keep plodding on for years, sending out the stories and such, but one of these days you'll get lucky and make a sale – break into the market – find out what these mysterious editors *really* want.

This view of writing as some sort of giant endurance-testing fruit machine – keeping jerking the handle until you make three cherries and the jackpot drops into your lap – is so remarkably shallow and silly that the first thought is that Poole has fallen victim to yet another hoax. But nobody would dare take the piss in such a painfully obvious fashion. Penny means it: as far as he's concerned a writer is a dumb animal proceeding by trial and error. Like a laboratory rat he wanders the maze until conditioned by the repeated electric shocks of rejection to choose the one safe pathway every time. The Pavlovian conditioned reflex is apt imagery indeed for a process so devoid of intellectuality. The only way *Cyclotron* manages to keep one small squirm ahead of a learning system fit only for the Planarian worm is by conceding the possibility of education through imitation. This jacks their Philosophy of Composition up the evolutionary ladder as far as the Monkey-see-Monkey-do school. (Statements like that are really grossly insulting to monkeys, most of whom never write novels for Robert Hale and are also capable of solving problems by insight rather than mimicry.) Watch real closely, folks, and you'll see how to write Science Fiction that will *sell*. Yes, once you've obtained the Magic Formula – from *Cyclotron* or from the Ancient Wisdom of L. Sprague de Camp – it's all clear ahead for fame and fortune.

There *are* formulas, gimmicks, devices and effects which can be tabulated and taught. Yes indeed. And every other silly bugger too witless to think for himself has been working the same notions to death for interminable years. Maybe it doesn't matter. So long as the shit sells, who cares?

Okay, if you need the money and can think of no more sensible way of screwing people out of it. Just don't imagine that this kind of performance is anything but a deal in dirty paper. Poole's selfless devotion to SF seems more than a little misplaced here; he's promoting what is really an entirely

mercenary transaction: the assembly and sale of sets of standard parts. The “writers” he talks of encouraging won’t even deserve to be called craftsmen – conscientiously following plans and specifications they’ll be nothing but mechanics.

Perhaps the members of such groups as Pieria would not object to this description. After all, they speak of “Writers’ Workshops”, an affectation presumably intended to invest their dealings with some of the solid machismo of heavy manual labour. The term is, in fact, woefully ill-chosen, suggesting as it does a coterie of effete dilettantes mincing through the machinery uttering twitters of creative delight. To the onlooker, the nearest most writers ever came to manual labour was when they had enough strength to jerk off all day. Writing is certainly work – and hard work – but any attempt to identify it with more physical employments is likely to be rejected with disgust and derision.

Still, the Pieria mob aren’t like that – Rob Holdstock has enough hair on his chest for six Irish bricklayers – and Pieria is probably exceptional among writers’ groups for the number of successes its membership can claim. The standard image of the Writers’ Circle – a collection of genteel dabblers deferring to whatever undersized and mangy literary lion is available locally – does not fit here. So surely the objections to fan fiction – that it impedes critical self-awareness and falsifies critical standards – do not fit here either?

Yes, they do. It makes not the slightest difference that the members of Pieria are more talented. The same objections apply even to professional mutual criticism sessions such as the Milford conferences. At best these exercises in criticism are irrelevant and unnecessary, at worst they are harmful. At all times the tendency will be towards that mean of mediocrity inevitably the result of multiple collaboration. Such pressures will be resisted, no doubt, but any abrasiveness in the personalities concerned will, far from guaranteeing the preservation of individuality, ensure that the wearing down to smooth uniformity is all the more thorough. Audience response is valuable to the author only as an indication of how far he has succeeded in pleasing or in conveying his intended meaning. As to the *how* or *why* of success or failure – he had much better make his own valuation unless he wishes to write to someone else’s dictation.

Chris Morgan doesn’t agree. “No writer can be his own critic,” he declares. Well, if he can’t be his own critic, how the devil can he presume to be anyone else’s? Will the prejudices and partialities which allegedly blind

him to the defects of his own work be miraculously removed as soon as his eye turns elsewhere?

Writing is not one of those performing arts in which it is impossible to join the audience. It is difficult to gauge how well you're doing while actually at work, but there is ample time afterwards for objective evaluation. To assert that self-criticism is impossible is to say either that the writer is an infantile egotist so self-centred as to be blind to all possibility of error in himself or that critical standards exist solely in the form of consumer reaction – a sort of cumulative folk-wisdom picked up through sampling the random efforts of the group.

Morgan does not wholly deny the possibility of self-criticism, but he brushes it aside as a rare and exceptional ability: "...as a general rule writers cannot see their own mistakes and shortcomings." But why not? He gives no reasons; the suspicion must be that he can't think of anything very creditable to himself. The line above can be rephrased to include the disagreeable truth: as a general rule writers do not see their own mistakes and shortcomings because they're too fucking idle and gutless to look for them.

Criticising the work of others and mumbling modestly that you aren't competent to judge your own stuff is the coward's cop-out of writing. The simple reason why it's harder to criticise your own work is that the criticism has to be acted on. Whatever nonsense comes into your head will do for someone else's rubbish – any action is *their* responsibility – but you have to be a damn sight more searching, thorough and specific about your own mess since you're going to have to *do* something.

At the risk of typecasting myself as the Ayn Rand of fandom I must once again emphasise the importance of self-reliance: the only true guide for a writer is his own judgement. For any writing above the level of the hopelessly incompetent outside criticism is not an essential but an extra: something to be scrutinised very carefully and acted upon only when absolutely in harmony with the author's aims and intentions. There are enough distractions and temptations holding back the would-be writer from the solid commitment to solitary labour that is finally the only path to achievement. Going out and borrowing a crutch instead of learning to walk is nothing but foolishness. Writing fan fiction develops nothing but the ability to write fan fiction, thus confirming the writer in his bad habits. The activities of groups like Pieria are nothing but time-wasting dodges to defer the evil hour of real work. That the professionals do it is no justification;

professionals are as prone to pissing about as anyone else.

There are only two genuine benefits for the attendees of writers' group meetings: the mental stimulus of meeting others with like aspirations, and the clarification of opinion that may result from general discussion of the criteria on which criticism should be based. The social pleasures are worth having, being of a kind not readily obtainable elsewhere; the critical exercise could be obtained much more effectively through the medium of fanzines. Writing for fanzines is worth doing for its own sake – for enjoyment – but if the Protestant Ethic demands you furnish less frivolous reasons: it's worth doing for practise, for self-improvement, and for self-discovery. For enjoyment and practise, write fanzine articles; for the sterner purpose of clarifying your own ideas – if nobody else's – write criticism. Notions of good and bad in writing are generally absorbed from the general climate of opinion, and a thorough re-examination is necessary to acquire any genuine personal discrimination. Criticism demands clarity, and if the criticism is written, not spoken, then this is a quality which can't be faked.

In an interview printed recently in *Vector*, J.G. Ballard spoke of the much greater homogeneity of the American SF scene: that tendency towards uniformity of style and thought which is the result of a whole generation of writers growing up together in tight-knit and incestuous enclaves of enthusiasm. British writers – Ballard pointed out – were more often comparatively isolated figures; they did not invariably rise through the ranks of fandom – acquiring on the way all the nebulous literary prejudices, assumptions, taboos and conventions that serve many SF writers in place of an original stance – but frequently owed as much or more of their background to the older independent traditions of the pre-Gernsback era. Of course, there are exceptions on both sides of the Atlantic – US authors uncompromisingly themselves and British writers enslaved to the American pulp formula – but broadly speaking British SF does offer more room for manoeuvre, for innovation and for writing to please a literate public than does US SF.

In America the very size of the SF world tends to dictate the general direction by weight and inertia alone. Traditions have become dogmas, and the radicals of twenty or thirty years ago are the fierce conservatives of today. We too have our stern Ancients intent on preserving the Golden Age, but at least there aren't so many of them, and they aren't so united. Indeed, Arthur C. Clarke – our very own Albert Memorial of SF – stands both alone and aloof. Why should he care? He's been around so long that by virtue of

seniority alone he is fixed in the public mind as *the* SF writer, so what need to bother about what the nutty new boys and the fans say or do?

The differences between British and US SF are mirrored in their respective fandoms. International fandom is a myth. In the past a sort of fannish imperialism operated: British fandom was a colonial appendage to the US homeland. And just as at one time the history that was taught throughout the British Empire (areas coloured pink on the map) was British History, just so the legends promulgated in the Fannish Imperium were American legends. With the growth of British fandom and the gradual emergence from universal pulp that began with the decline of the prozines a sort of dominion status was acquired, but independence has yet to progress from de facto to de jure. There are still people who talk as if fandom means American fandom – of which Britain is just one more part. This is not so. If American fandom disappeared entirely, the British fandom would still go on, managing quite comfortably. Many British fans would scarcely notice. It is important to realise this because it means that British fandom – which has the potential to affect British SF – is now in a position to make itself entirely free of the massive reactionary drag of the US SF scene. We don't need the Overseas Aid – the Colonial direction – any more. In fact, they're a positive nuisance, since they inhibit the throwing out of all the old rubbish that impedes advance.

The delusions of internationalism and the subservience to the US tradition to which several fans – notably Darroll Pardoe – are subject are an affront to common sense. Pardoe's insistent declaration that British fandom cannot have a separate existence, that the home of truefandom is the USA, and that without the blessing of the US Secret Chiefs British fandom will sink exhausted and bankrupt into final decline, call to mind the antics of a particularly myopic ostrich, its head well-buried in the sand, squawking that the Dark Ages are upon us. Those above ground pursuing business as usual may well wonder what this strange arse-upwards loony is babbling about. US fandom has been an extra rather than an essential for a decade or more. The US fannish traditions have little or no connection with British fandom of the present day. They linger on only as outdated dogma, and like any rigid structure of beliefs their chief appeal is either to those who seek a readymade pattern of behaviour which excludes the necessity for thought, or to those for whom creative endeavour is less important than the acquisition of status through membership of an established elite.

Fandom is a fossilising process: hold still too long and the steady accretion of Tradition will transform you into a living statue. To speed up the process and embalm yourself in a tradition that isn't even historically relevant any more seems the height of folly. British fandom and US fandom must be regarded as separate entities: neither one should feel obliged to take any part of the other as being sacred beyond question and neither one should approach the other with preoccupations on the nature of what is or is not acceptable fannish behaviour. As far as fandom is concerned, diversity is strength and unity is stultification.

In Britain Peter Roberts produces an excellent fannish fanzine, *Egg*. In the USA Terry Hughes produces the equally excellent *Mota*. Both these fanzines have recognisably the same background. Proof that the old international fandom still exists? Not really, in any meaningful sense. Roberts is the only one of the younger generation of British faneds who knows exactly what he's doing in following the old traditions. Others make gestures in the same direction, but whereas Roberts produces the authentic article they turn out shoddy imitations that capture only the cliches and the catchwords and let slip all wit and originality. There is no objection to genuine old-style fans and fanzines as such – Eric Bentcliffe's *Triode*, for instance, is a good fanzine – but there is every objection to the slavish fakery of wholly inappropriate duplicates. Roberts is not producing a copy; having absorbed the essence of a certain fanzine style favoured in the past he has found it to his liking and is *continuing* that style in an intelligent way. This is perfectly legitimate. The screams of rage come when some lamebrain asserts that the One True Way is the way it was done before, simply because that's-the-way-it's-done-and-always-has-been.

All obvious stuff – or should be. Indeed, practically all the basic subjects of this article have put in appearances before, someplace or other. Fandom is like a giant sprawling novel with certain recurring themes. Characters appear – disappear – seem to be developing leading roles then suddenly drop from view – rise abruptly from obscurity to a brief moment of fame – Warhol's "in the future everyone will be famous for just fifteen minutes" – all against a shifting background of plot, counter-plot, interaction of personality and temperament – abundance of prima donnas – change and development of ideas and characters. It's a great spectacle for those who relish convoluted absurdities – the longest-running soap opera on earth – and has the added attraction that the spectators can get in there and pep up the action if they feel

so inclined.

Just lately we've been having a fair amount of flashback material: nostalgia from various Rats in SBD – the Kettle memoirs in *Wrinkled Shrew* – Terry Jeeves and Ethel Lindsay in *Titan* – others elsewhere. And Peter Weston in *Maya*.

Weston's "Slice of Life" column in *Maya* has been something of a surprise, revealing him as an excellent writer of other than sercon material. As he says himself, he's been typecast as a Serious character for a long time, despite some early efforts – chiefly distinguished by strength of persecution complex – in the fannish field. But now, with one bound, he is free. (And so is *Maya*. All right, all right. I grovel. I abase myself. I am less than the dust etc etc. I take back every gloomy forecast I ever made. The only possible doubtful note left is to ask whether Jackson can manage to produce another issue as good as *Maya* 12/13.)

All the same, there are – as usual – a few points to pick over.

Weston's latest column is concerned principally with the fannish life and crimes of Charles Platt. It's presumably intended as a (long-delayed) hatchet job, and in some respects it fulfils that purpose, but part of it is also an illustration of the way in which two different angles of approach can give two wholly opposite interpretations of the same event. The Willis-Platt clash described here in some detail is to Weston a clear indictment of Platt's character deficiencies; I, on the other hand, am almost entirely in sympathy with Platt and regard the affair as a conclusive showing-up of Willis.

I know a woman who is quiet, gentle, kindly, high-principled, unselfish and devoted to good works. An admirable character, you might say. And so she is in some ways – but she's also a great pain in the neck, since she thinks she's a saint. In one way there is nothing false – she really does behave in an exemplary fashion – but since she is now motivated by the urge to sustain a self-image of herself as the embodiment of virtue – rather than by any true altruism – the whole picture strikes the spectator as being completely false.

All the reports I have ever heard concerning Walt Willis suggest that he is quiet, gentle, kindly, courteous, witty, and in many ways an admirable character. All of his writing that I have ever read suggests that he himself is in full agreement with his admirers. Consciously or unconsciously, Willis long ago adopted the role of Perfect Gentleman. This is not an ignoble ideal to aim for, but even allowing that such model behaviour is praiseworthy the final judgement on this social mask is unlikely to be favourable if one vital

element is lacking: modesty.

Willis has about as much real modesty as a neon sign blushing red. Charles Platt attacked his “falsest of false modesties” and the words are entirely justified. Willis’s every piece of writing declares: I’m not going to come right out with it – my modesty forbids – but I’m The Man, you know, and this is The Word.

Yeah, we know. That’s what got up Platt’s nose so much – that’s what gets up my nose so much. The vaunted modesty of Willis consists of those gestures towards self-criticism that only serve to point up the vast stores of virtue remaining. With a lack of sensitivity that can only be indicative of the blindest sort of egotism Willis even tries to pull this trick in a letter direct to Platt: “I have as it happens read and thought a great deal about techniques of writing humour but I won’t go into that because you would say I was showing off again.”

Yes. Well, as it happens I have memorised the entire contents of the Encyclopaedia Britannica, but let’s not talk about that since I don’t want to seem proud. After all, it did take me a week or two longer than I’d expected. Just goes to show, I’m not quite so brilliant as I thought I was, eh wot?

And so it goes with the Willis line of guff – not often so crude as that, but mostly making it obvious enough in a graceful way that we should all sit still like good little children and await the judicious final verdict of the Master. It’s really too bad that – whatever the intention – repeated intimations to the effect that “Us Older and Wiser fans don’t really mind even if we have seen it all before” are not the modest kindness that some declare them to be but an insufferable condescension more insulting to the reader than the bitterest jibe. Give me an arrogant bastard every time – you know where you are with such people, because they’re honest enough to tell you. The smugness of secret conceit is infinitely more offensive. After reading Willis for a while one feels like kicking him just to unfreeze the rigidity of his wry smile and bring him down from the Olympian heights of his self-admiration. The most serious affront you can offer to anyone is to belittle them, not with rude mockery, but with a patronising assumption of superiority. The self-display of Willis is like an actor turning a noble profile to the audience: the features are real enough (with a touch of makeup, perhaps) but the attitude is contrived and the words are a fiction designed for effect.

Of course, the role of gentleman guru requires a certain amount of co-operation from the onlookers. All goes well enough when the crowd hang on

every word – when the reputation is taken for the reality – but if certain members of the audience happen to find perfect waxwork posing rather tiresome and begin yelling abuse, there’s something of a difficulty in knowing what to do next. The gently pitying word of dismissal will do for some – they creep humbly away, duly obliterated – but others merely grow even more obstreperous and shout all the louder. And if you’re a perfect Gentleman you can’t very well get in there and start mixing it. The only way to deal with vulgar persons who persist in disrespectful declarations that the Emperor is bollock-naked is either to have your underlings work them over or to beat a retreat out of earshot.

Willis had no real defence against Platt. His only armour was his reputation – something Platt regarded with derision – and his only weapons were pained remonstrances. Doubtless – as Weston says – Platt regarded Willis’s attempts at conciliation as an admission of weakness; probably he also regarded them as attempts at a big con, since they were virtually offers of magnanimous forgiveness in exchange for a recantation from Platt. Let’s settle our differences – you stop attacking me and we’ll say no more about it. Not surprisingly, Platt wasn’t going to fall for this. Tuff luck on Walt – he was only equipped to handle people who already stood in awe of his BNF status, and nasty little Plattie wouldn’t play that game.

Willis quit. That’s the only construction I can put on his behaviour, and it suggests very strongly that he cared less about being a fan than about being a Big Name Fan. Outside factors alone could not cause such an arch-fan as Willis to drop fandom so completely for so long. He quit because he didn’t like it anymore; he didn’t like it anymore because he saw his position of BNF of BNFs beginning to crumble. Platt was the final blow; hubris had already taken a few knocks from other directions, as his own account (quoted by Weston) of a chance meeting at a con shows: “It was abruptly clear to me that he was not a neofan at all, he was a BNF in another fandom. What did that make me and my friends? What had we done?”

What they’d done, of course, was found the BSFA in order to recruit new fans. And the new fans had duly been recruited, in large numbers, even. *But the little bastards weren’t paying any attention to Willis.*

Weston obviously sees the passage quoted above as a humorous expression of dismay. I see it simply as dismay. Willis wasn’t appreciated any more – how awful. And then Platt came along and added downright hostility to mere indifference. It was just too much. Willis quit.

Well, it's all so long ago, what does it matter? Not much. It wouldn't matter at all but for the fact that the Willis legend has grown rather than declined in his absence. Willis is the all-time over-rated fannish writer. That he ever attained such a reputation for genius says more about the competition (and much more about the critics) than his own talents; that he continues to be ranked so high is an indication of the power of mythology and the readiness of many people to take their opinions secondhand. Willis's brilliance is all sham: hollow as a gaudy glass bauble hanging on a Christmas tree. The outside is smooth, bright and glittering; inside is only emptiness. He'd have been found out long ago – he *was* found out long ago, by Platt – if he hadn't taken himself off the scene and thus acquired the sort of Late Great charisma that attaches itself to dead pop stars. A talent limited to laboured lightness, style without substance, *Readers Digest* type aphorisms, Public Speakers' quips and the kind of puns Mike Glicksohn regrets when sober doesn't look so hot against today's competition.

The pity of it is that people continue to accept the myth. Platt rightly attacked Willis because he saw him as an obstructive irrelevance, a brake on progress. If Willis was the highest level to which fandom could aspire then there was fuck-all to be hoped from fandom: it was just a bunch of idiots with here and there a bright boy demonstrating how cute he was with the mannered prose.

It would be absurd to declare Willis absolutely worthless as a writer. Obviously, he is good in certain ways – but he is so very *limited*. To set him up as the model of perfection is to put on a very tight straitjacket indeed. Willis's admirers include a number of people who are themselves far more accomplished as writers. They should know better. If only Platt had made a more successful job of his original assault they *would* know better. A nihilist rather than an anarchist, Platt was too careless and indiscriminate in his attacks on fannish sacred cows. He had no real substitute to offer for what he tried to destroy. He found fandom full of idiots, and when none of the idiots would take advantage of the chances for revolutionary change he sought to create, then there was nothing left but to become a sort of Demon King: a fannish poltergeist who broke the furniture, played meaningless tricks and generally shocked the bourgeoisie.

Perhaps the way my sympathies lie is as much a matter of temperament as of reason. Willis's remark (quoted by Tom Perry in *Mota*): "I have never been able to think of anything so important that I had to shout it" arouses

feelings of impatience rather than admiration. Is life to be nothing more than a politely muted mumble? An endless ennui of flaccid gentility? Not for me. Ghod he may be to some, but no god of mine, and if this particular resurrection is to gather many converts then a few miracles will be needed. Not impressed, Boss.

Anyway, I don't see why Dave Kyle should be the only old-time fan to get some stick. Chris Priest really waxes satirical over split-level veneer middle class trendy coffee tables in this review in *Maya*. Something like that. I wasn't sure whether he was reviewing a book or a furniture catalogue. (And he seems to forget that kitsch is really a profoundly civilising influence. The musical toilet-roll holder has brought many enlightening hours to those whose lives would otherwise have been barren of culture.) The few trivial errors in *A Pictorial History of SF* can soon be put right. Dave Kyle has announced that all copies sold in future will include an Erratums slip.

Meanwhile, back on the thesis-farm, what happened post-Willis? Nothing very much, for quite a while. The New Wave and the gafiation of Willis can be regarded as milestones of a sort, but the really significant date doesn't come round till 1970. This was the year of the Rat: *Fouler* was born.

By the end of the sixties the jerky splashings of the New Wave had long settled; the water was flat and on the verge of being stagnant. *Fouler* came when it was most needed. Despite tatty appearance, low circulation and a life of only six issues this bastard offspring of the union of Greg Pickersgill and Leroy Kettle has had more effect on the nature of fan writing and publishing than any other single British title. Other titles have been good of their kind – examples to admire and follow – but they were all refinements of earlier efforts rather than new departures. *Fouler* was the final breakthrough: the vulgar, violent, scurrilous, obscene, serious, funny, kick-in-the-balls that disposed of all the taboos, inhibitions and self-censorship that had existed before. No longer was it a case of “You can't say that!” Now you could. Every faned under the age of thirty owes something to Pickersgill and Kettle. Directly or indirectly – action or reaction – their influence has been felt throughout the whole of fandom. It's something of a tribute to the revolution they brought about that those early writings – which at the time of publication must have had the impact of something wholly new and extraordinary – now seem to be nothing exceptional. Indeed, even *then Fouler* would have been not too remarkable if fanzines had been moving on with the years, and if faneds had been anything but sheep following one another's tails. Before

Fouler fandom was dull. It's never been the same again. It will never be the same again.

Or will it?

It's five years since *Fouler*'s last issue. In the meantime we've had *True Rats* from Kettle, two issues of *Ritblat* and three of *Stop Breaking Down* (with another due any minute as I write) from Pickersgill, and a whole stack of material from people sharing or influenced by that unique state of mind called Ratfandom. Some of the old faces of 1970 have gone and there are many new ones. Time has worked one of its usual tricks and turned the revolutionaries into part of the ruling elite.

At Silicon, copies of a fanzine called *Stop Puking Up* were distributed. Compared to Bryn Fortey's definitive rendering in *Super Crud 69* this attempt at parodying the manner and contents of *Stop Breaking Down* was a pathetic piece of work, its only small success being the achievement of a recognisable copy of SBD's cover art and interior layout. For the rest, it was a juvenile effort giving the strong impression of schoolboys sniggering uneasily at their own awful daring in writing Rude Words on the lavatory wall. They didn't quite know what the words meant, they didn't at all know how to put them together in any meaningful way; but they *did* know what tremendous fellows they were to make this anonymous and furtive gesture of rebellion behind the backs of their superiors. In intention *Stop Puking Up* was offensive, in method it was contemptible, and in execution it was nothing but pitiful. No wonder at all that those responsible preferred not to put their names to it. (I assume at least two persons were involved, since one would be needed to search for the words in the dictionary while the other searched for the letters on the typewriter.) Apparently these people acted on the theory that if certain talented fans are occasionally rude, then those fans who are very rude will be taken to be very talented. This marvel of Boakian reasoning might even have had some slight chance of success – the triumph of effrontery – in the hands of a capable operator, but when the perpetrators are still in nappies there's not much chance of the shit hitting the fan.

Doubtless Pickersgill was not pleased by *Stop Puking Up* – partly because of its obvious spitefulness, but also because it is against this sort of incompetent fan writing that he has for so long campaigned. (It's also ironical to reflect that but for the changes in fandom which Pickersgill did so much to bring about the authors of this botched parody would not have dared to attack in this fashion, if at all.) *Stop Puking Up* is good for only one thing: a

warning sign. The fannish masses no longer see Pickersgill as an iconoclastic revolutionary but as an authoritarian despot.

But wait a minute – what happened to Kettle? Why isn't he in on this and taking some of the heat? Well, after *Fouler* Kettle went his own way. He was – and is – a parodist, satirist and humorist of note, but never to any significant extent a fanzine reviewer. (Lack of confidence rather than lack of talent – his efforts in *True Rat 6* show that he has the requisite ability.) Pickersgill was always the reviewer: the render of reputations, axeman of complacency, scourge of under-achievers. And Pickersgill has always been seen as leader and chief spokesman of Ratfandom: the puppet-master who held all the strings. Conspiracy theories are as popular in fandom as anywhere else, and despite the fact that the Rats devote a considerable amount of time to fighting among themselves they are still regarded in some quarters as a sort of tightly-knit secret society devoted to fannish world-domination. Like Freemasons, Jews, Communists and the Astral League their agents are everywhere: totally ruthless and unscrupulous, totally dedicated to the Cause, totally obedient to the Master.

But what the hell *is* the cause? To many people, Pickersgill's aim is simply that of keeping himself and buddies well on top of the fannish pile, and everybody else well underneath. Same old BNF kick, in fact.

Fans unacquainted with Pickersgill tend to approach him in one of two ways: warily aggressive and ready for instant combat (see Liese Hoare's *Southern Vole*) or shrinkingly fearful and ready for instant attempts at ingratiating (see Kevin Easthope's *Logo*). Pickersgill is no longer the challenge to authority; he is the authority to be challenged – or sucked up to. Where once he might have had allies he now has rivals. Where once he might have had followers – those who like to trail in the wake of the coming man – he now has subjects grown restless at the rejection of their sycophancy. The reaction is setting in. Sooner or later the tide of fandom will turn anew and leave him perched alone: king of a crumbling castle of sand, emperor of an empty beach.

Pickersgill will survive, doubtless, but he's in some danger of becoming less and less relevant to the fannish scene. He's stuck in a rut. *Stop Breaking Down* is a refinement of *Fouler* but not really a significant advance. *Ritblat* was the fanzine that promised most, since there he seemed to be on the verge of developing some sort of unified rationale of fandom. SBD represents a retreat from this ambition to mere rule of thumb. The skills have been

polished but the approach is empirical rather than intellectual: rationalised gut-reaction rather than rational analysis.

Pickersgill is not the best fannish writer. The top positions are prone to switch around every time a good fanzine comes out, but my provisional vote goes to Graham Charnock, since he displays a sense for structure and an economy of phrasing that few others possess. However, there are occasions when accidie, anomie, apathy and alcohol have their way with him and he becomes merely average. A good average, but it lets past such as Roberts, Kettle, Edwards, Holdstock and Brosnan to fight for the Star Spot. (And that's merely to name some of the contenders among the Rats – there's not a few others.)

Take it, then, that Pickersgill is somewhere up around the edges of this top group. To be ranked higher he would have to write more and to write more variously. The writing of reviews results in a concentration on content rather than style, and often enough the medium is sacrificed to the message. Pickersgill is more of a critic than anything else, and though capable of good general writing it is in the field of criticism that he really shines, since it is here that he shows his prime virtue: thoroughness.

Jim Linwood is a fanzine reviewer who is often more brilliant, more vicious, and more devastating than Pickersgill, and yet – despite the fact that he's been active much longer – he's had far less influence on the field. The accusation that Linwood never reads the fanzines he reviews is unlikely to be true, but certainly there is a strong impression that on many occasions he reads hastily and without admitting any possibility of changing preconceived opinions. The story that whenever he thinks of a good strong insult he writes it down and saves it until a suitable victim comes along is an accurate description of his attitude of mind, if not of his actual practice. Linwood is simply a destructive wit. The critical accuracy of his comments is incidental to the main purpose of providing entertainment and inspiring admiration for his pyrotechnic abilities. Pickersgill, on the other hand, not only reads but re-reads, considers deeply, agonises over his value-judgements and in the end delivers the verdict of one for whom fandom and fanzines are much more than an excuse for taking the stage as a purveyor of epigrams. Fanzines being what they are, we always need a few live ones to bury the dead, but we also need a few people who are capable of pointing the merely ailing on the way to recovery.

Pickersgill has gone just so far, but now – having effortfully climbed the

first hill and left behind the swampy miasma of mutual admiration and unimaginative complacency in which the less evolved primitives of fandom still dwell – he’s stopped. He’s parked on the plateau, keeping his eyes averted from the real mountain while he finicks and tinkers with the fine adjustment of his engine.

Must do better. Pickersgill is Famous Monster of Fandom, and though he’s unlikely to go quite the same way as Willis and succumb to the weight of his own legend, his own success is catching up with him. In the beginning he was out there in front pointing the way to greater things and the crowd followed; now they’re up and around him but he’s still running on the same spot.

Stasis means decline, sooner or later. Either fandom is a process of continual change and revolution or it is nothing more than what some would have it be: a retreat for aging hobbyists, a refuge for cheap status seekers and for inadequate personalities craving the comfort of approved mediocrity.

Platt was right, and Platt was wrong. A certain humourlessness prevented him from seeing that while fandom is certainly full of idiots a campaign of destruction directed against these same smug dolts and posturing ninnyes is not, in itself, enough. The substratum of crud will always remain. The real task is to encourage those with talent to build a new city on top of this (suitably pounded down) garbage heap, and not to be forever content with ragpicking among the rubbish. The bludgeon is necessary, but so too are the goad and the lash.

Pickersgill has laid his foundations – now he must build his house. Meantime, he remains an admirable exponent of the Kill-the-fuckers school of fanzine reviewing and fandom continues to need his services to bring the guilty to judgement and the unrighteous to a case of concussion. But as John Hall has pointed out in a letter to Bryn Fortey’s *Relativity*, fandom should be more than just a collection of piss-artists.

True enough, and there has to be some aim more positive than simply making mock. For Hall it’s Lisa Conesa’s *Zimri* which points the way. However, this is SF fandom we’re talking about, and the ideal to which *Zimri* aspires is one which in effect denies SF the claim to any literary merit or significance at all. The poetic prose and prosaic poetry favoured by Conesa and followers so far from raising the standard of SF implicitly assert the impossibility of any such improvement: you can’t *really* have better SF; you have to switch to Mainstream instead. The whole tendency of such

publications as *Zimri* is towards imitation rather than aspiration: the hard road to original development is to be forsaken in favour of a soft ride on the tail that drags ten years behind the fashion-sniffing poodle known as the avant garde.

Despite its many grim and apocalyptic visions Science Fiction is essentially a literature of optimism. Enormous problems are foreseen, but they are regarded as difficulties to be overcome rather than as afflictions under which one can only lie down and die. In SF *nothing* is regarded as being beyond all doubt impossible. The literary expressions of such attitudes are frequently absurd or inadequate, but still much preferable to the Mainstream equation of intellect with ineffectuality, and sensitivity with an inability to look beyond failure. Mainstream is the literature of defeat, of self-pity and self-justification.

Failure of nerve is what it's all about. Science Fiction, Mainstream and fandom all in their different ways turn aside from too many challenges, make too many excuses and dodge too many difficult questions. And there is nothing admirable about the series of whining bums' hard-luck stories with which those who shirk the struggle seek to explain their cowardice.

That good old term "Sense of Wonder" seems to have fallen into some disrepute lately, but the thing itself still exists and has meaning. In the last issue of Peter Roberts's *Egg* there was a short article on H.P. Lovecraft by James Parkhill-Rathbone. At first bafflingly opaque, the thought of the author finally revealed itself with a piercing clarity: "... a permanent feeling that it is strange to be alive at all, that life on earth is not an abstraction of the biologists, a phrase like 'society' or 'ecology' but an experience that is, personally, very surprising."

That's it. Life is very strange, and is something to be investigated, celebrated and enjoyed – not to be laid down in mothballs like best clothes that are to be worn only on special occasions and in the correct formal way. Put a little kick into it, fans. Forget about scandalising the zombie neighbours. You're all going to die – why bind yourselves in the shroud before the time?

First published in *Wrinkled Shrew 7* edited by Pat and Graham Charnock, March 1977.

Fanzines [1977]

Any estimate of the number of fanzines published in Britain during 1976 must be arbitrary. Are publications devoted to fringe interests such as Fantasy, Sword and Sorcery, Comics, Star Trek, Doctor Who and Perry Rhodan to be included? Is it possible to define a fanzine at all, let alone what constitutes a Science Fiction fanzine?

A fanzine is a publication produced at personal expense (i.e. not subsidised by any organisation, whether commercial or non-profitmaking) without the objective of financial gain for publishers or contributors. Other than that, anything goes, and all categorisations are arguable. (The above definition applies only to British fanzines; US fandom and fanzines are omitted from this article since there are considerable differences.) Taking the average, however, anyone actively involved in fanzine publishing probably received about a hundred issues of forty or fifty different titles: something over a thousand pages in all. A real enthusiast who covered the USA, Canada, Australia and the rest of the world could easily find himself receiving a new fanzine every other day of the year.

It's a lot of literature – a whole subworld of communication – and something of a puzzle to outsiders. A newcomer is likely to find himself altogether baffled, and even veterans are often forced to admit that it's easier to recognise a fanzine than to define or explain it. This article is an attempt to convey some idea of what fanzines are about and also – perhaps more important – what they are *not* about. It's a very personal view. Fanzines are very personal things. The anarchism of fandom is one of its great attractions – assuming you have a temperamental inclination that way. Certain vague traditions and notions of acceptable practice do exist, but there are no effective sanctions to impose uniformity, and any restraint on individuality owes more to self-imposed inhibition than outside force. There are no rules – only opinions. The views expressed here, therefore, should not be taken as representing any generally accepted orthodoxy. There is no formula for a quick understanding. I am attempting not so much to explain fanzines as to display some of their possibilities, and also to indicate that these possibilities are so varied that the newcomer should be wary of judging the whole field from a limited sampling. To reject what you fail to understand immediately is

unwise, and to condemn a whole category on the strength of preconceived ideas is similarly imprudent.

Fanzines are irregular publications in almost every sense. Any resemblance between two issues of the same title is likely to owe more to coincidence than design. The only consistency lies in ability: contents and approach may vary, but the better writers and editors usually manage to maintain the same level of performance. However, the extreme variability of fanzines – and the fact that few, if any, ever manage to keep to their publishing schedules – would make any detailed review of past titles useless as a guide to the beginner. It's not improbable that half the fanzines published in 1976 will fail to appear in 1977. Some will disappear altogether, some will change names (a particularly frequent occurrence – most experienced faneds have published several titles) and some will simply hibernate until 1978 or later. "Occasional" is the only accurate description of frequency. Such abrupt changes mean that each issue must be considered as a separate work not necessarily to be taken as a representative example. Some editors, indeed, make this point clear enough by publishing every issue under a different title.

Advice to the beginner is simple: try as many fanzines as you can lay your hands on. Be patient. A sample copy is usually obtainable on request, but most fanzines have short print-runs and you may have to wait several months for a new issue. The first details of current names and addresses can be obtained from the BSFA and thereafter from the fanzines themselves, many of which run reviews or listings of other titles. The judgements of fanzine reviewers should initially be disregarded completely. They are often wrong, frequently fatuous, almost always debatable, and invariably misleading to newcomers. Don't take my word – don't take anybody's word – on the value of a fanzine. See for yourself.

In the first stages many difficulties and obscurities will be encountered. British fandom is not so small that everyone knows everyone else, but the most visible section – those people active in fanzines – does tend to give the impression of being an exclusive club. The consequent lack of formality and the frequent use of private jokes and references may seem a barrier to the outsider. Fans are frequently accused of being ingroupish. Undoubtedly this is true of certain people – those who treat the new fan with the haughty disdain of a grand seigneur being approached by a particularly smelly peasant – but in general such elitist snobbery is more apparent than real. The fact is that joining fandom is more a matter of being converted than of being

recruited. You can't just pay a subscription and expect to be accepted – a whole series of ideas and attitudes have to be modified. The saying FIAWOL (Fandom Is A Way Of Life) is not entirely a joke. Experienced fans tend not to bother with newcomers because they know that the communication gap is too wide. Until the neo has recovered from the first culture-shock and made his own mental readjustments even the most detailed explanation of what-it's-all-about will not necessarily bring understanding. As usual, there's no substitute for experience.

So what are all these crazy people up to, fooling around with their amateur publications, their so-called fanzines? What's the point of it all?

“No man but a blockhead ever wrote, except for money,” declared that bottle-scarred veteran of the 18th century literary scene, Samuel Johnson. Johnson was a professional: a Grub Streeter, a hack.

And yet – like every writer who ever lived – he must have known that the money was of secondary importance. A writer is a species of obsessive lunatic: the fact that he may receive cash for his efforts is no more than a convenient excuse that can be used to make the whole process understandable to outsiders. Like any man helpless to overcome his own compulsions Johnson cursed and swore, called himself names – and resignedly accepted that since he had this kink for writing he'd better make some money out of it.

Things haven't changed much; tacitly or openly the view that Art is to be measured by the value of the rewards that come to the artist – cash or commendation, royalties or reverence – is still the general opinion. A writer who writes but does not sell is like a man who practises snooker shots all day: a fool, a no-good bum, a waster and a layabout, a person irresponsible and blind to the stern duties of Real Life. But let the same writer and the same snooker player begin to make money – the one to pick up advances and the other to pick up tournament prizes – and a sudden respectability descends upon them. Virtually any activity done for money acquires a measure of respect and approval, however disregarded and despised it may be when done for nothing. The amateurs are just idiots messing about, but the professionals can be taken *seriously*.

Semantic troubles? Searching in the dictionary for an official definition of “Professional” I came across another word: “Procrustean; tending to produce conformity by violent methods (from Greek *Prokroustes*, lit. stretcher, name of fabulous robber who fitted victims to his bed by stretching or mutilation).” This seems a very appropriate word for the efforts of a

fanzine reviewer or anyone else who tries to formulate general theories of fandom. Fact can be – and is – made to follow fancy very nicely by such methods, particularly when the meanings of certain key words are cut or expanded to fit within the limits of the Great Plan.

The key words in the case of fandom, and fanzines are “amateur” and “professional”, both of which have different associations for every person who uses them. Perhaps the formula found in certain commercial literature should be employed: “The terms used in these descriptions shall be taken as having the meaning generally understood in the trade.” After all, everyone knows that an amateur is simply a person who does for love (i.e. nothing) what a professional does for money.

Used with this strictly limited meaning (as I intend to use them hereafter) the words offer no great difficulties. Unfortunately, no one ever does use them like that. “Amateur” is taken as a term of mild contempt, signifying a dilettante, a dabbler, a person whose talents are too slight to be taken seriously. This is far removed from the meaning the word possessed in times when knowledge of – and participation in – the Arts was not considered to be solely the province of “experts” and those who made their living from such pursuits. “Professional” has fared even worse. Quite apart from the peculiar undertones of snobbery – “Professions” are occupations with social standing; the rest are just jobs – it has taken on a spurious glamour of the kind that clings round the unsavoury figures of notorious criminals. Nowadays “professional” is frequently used in a sense which is nothing more than a glorification of the crassly mercenary. Innumerable spy stories, thrillers and the like have employed the word with a respectful admiration suggesting that any sordid deed of violence, treachery or deception is somehow attractive and praiseworthy if done strictly for the cash with no emotional or moral involvement.

And hence the Great Curse of fandom and fanzines: the open declaration that fanzines are amateur; the unspoken belief that this non-professionalism means that they are not to be taken seriously (in any sense) and that they cannot aspire to any level higher than that of imitating work which has been paid for.

Now, indisputably fanzines are amateur in the sense that they are not produced for money, but all other associations connected with the amateur/professional dualism should be discarded. *A fanzine exists as a thing in itself – as an original. It is not a copy of something else.* As with the

primitive uncivilised artist who produces his work without thought of measurable reward, just so with fans and fanzines: they are operating outside the money system, and value-judgements based directly or indirectly on financial considerations are irrelevant and inappropriate.

Fanzines are Art. And before total incredulity seizes you at the thought of putting some of the backstreet abortions called crudzines into such a seemingly exalted category it must be added that very many fanzines are very bad Art. Sturgeon's Law rules, as usual. As for the Art with a Capital A – the reverential awe-struck culture bit – that is simply the usual insider/outsider con laid down by the people who got to the goods first and want to promote themselves some exclusive status. Art is not something floating round in the stratosphere accessible only to those with wings of genius. It's nothing more high-flown than ordered creativity. Most people are able and willing to recognise Craft (i.e. skilful execution) but a prolonged overdose of the nonsense of critics has caused them to fall back on the financial reward as the only reliable and understandable measure of merit. What the hell – if it makes money it *must* be worth something.

And if it doesn't make money – or advance your career or job-prospects – then it must be a waste of time. Hence the sense of inferiority which holds back fan writers and editors. We're only amateurs, so what can you expect?

Well, much more than we usually get. Since I reject the notion of the intrinsic superiority of work which is paid for I am not inclined to favour the cop-out implicit in the acceptance of "amateur" status. "Amateur" for too many fans implies someone whose commitment is based on an enthusiasm which may owe nothing to financial reward but which certainly looks for a different kind of payoff (or ripoff, since the system hinges on unearned mutual admiration) and who has an all-too-ready excuse for not making any real effort. Some people are turned off by the apparent self indulgent weakness of fandom, but others are attracted by the very same quality. Fandom can, in fact, be a very soft option: a last asylum and refuge for those who can't raise the ego-massage they crave in any other sphere. Such persons tend to be patronising to newcomers – their own rank being more the result of longevity than of talent – and resentful of those who decline to fall in with the cosy all-hamfisted-pals-together routine.

But the notion that you mustn't be hard on the poor little fans because they're only amateurs who aren't getting paid for it is a denial of all self-responsibility. Is it to be assumed that fans are spoiled brats who have to be

bribed with sweets before they will do anything for themselves?

The criticism that is carefully kind – searching out good points, however small, and glossing over faults, however large – is the sort of pap that inadequate and incompetent faneds love to feed upon. Such people drag down the critical standards of fanzines to the lowest common denominator: everybody has to win a prize, so the mediocre is ranked with the good and the rubbish is declared to show promise. In such circumstances it seems scarcely worth while making any great effort – you’ll get your lollipop and pat on the head just the same whatever you do. The real winners feel cheated, the fakes enjoy the puff to their self-esteem – and everybody loses out. Self-delusion and self-indulgence are narcotics everyone uses now and then, but to encourage the switch from an occasional blow to mainline addiction is not to do anyone a great favour. Those faneds who complain of “destructive” criticism are often like schoolkids who refuse to learn their lessons then howl when they get caned for their ignorance. They should ask themselves not only whether or not the merit they see as being neglected in their work has any real existence but also whether or not when they *do* get nondestructive criticism they ever take any notice of it.

Ruthless fanzine reviewing – operating on the basis of calling a cretin a cretin and recognising pretentious drivel as pretentious drivel – is a fairly recent phenomenon in any widespread form. It really dates back no further than 1970, the year Greg Pickersgill and Roy Kettle published the first issue of *Fouler*, a fanzine that discarded every last one of the self-imposed taboos of fanzine publishing. The daisy-chain principle – mutual gratification all round – was thrown out. *Fouler* was *nasty*, with a callous disregard for faneds’ amour propre. Its influence – disrespectful, iconoclastic, satirical and serious – is still being felt today.

And that’s the way it should be. A fairly substantial part of fandom is composed of people who can be described either truthfully or politely but not truthfully *and* politely. The existence of these dolts and nincompoops – to use the polite description – would be of no importance but for the corrupting obstructive influence they exert upon the more worthwhile sections of fandom. Fanzines and fan writers are not given the heavy critical stick in any hope or expectation that they themselves will repent and reform; they’re taken out and shot *pour encourager les autres*. It’s worth giving even the real incorrigibles a quick stomping once in a while, just to remind other readers that if they produce similar inept garbage themselves they needn’t expect

shouts of joy and hearty congratulations.

But what about the new fan? Inevitably he makes mistakes – frequently the same mistakes that have been made every year by every new intake of fans. (This is one of the reasons why fanzine fans drop out of the BSFA: they weary of the monotonous repetition of errors.)

Well, in the beginning the new fan usually sees fanzines as either amateur fiction publications or “little” magazines of literary criticism. This reflects the general view which divides non-textbook writing into either fiction or essays – the first being recreation and the second being self-improvement. (Since students usually have quite enough essays to write it’s not surprising that the publications of college groups tend to favour fan fiction.) Fanzines by new fans tend to be heavy going. Fan fiction is usually awful (and always useless, since writing fiction for fanzines leads to nothing but a talent for writing fiction for fanzines) and earnest criticism is extremely tedious to all save the most rabid devotee unless it is done by a competent critic. The number of critics capable of holding the attention of the reader – let alone arousing his interest – is small. Indeed, the general standard of SF criticism in British fanzines – new and old – is deplorably low. It’s a sad state of affairs, but one would be more tempted to offer encouragement (rather than insult) if it weren’t for the feeling that much of this wearisome stuff is a result of the authors doing what they feel is *expected* rather than what they have a real interest for. Such submission to received ideas runs counter to the first principle of fanzine writing, which is to do what you’re good at and/or what you enjoy doing. (The second and equally important principle is that you must recognise that what you write should also be enjoyable or interesting for your readers. Otherwise you might as well leave it in the drawer.)

It’s an observable fact that wholly sercon (Serious and Constructive) fans don’t last. Sooner or later they realise that fan fiction is a waste of time and that the school-essay type of criticism is equally pointless. Some of them then make it to higher levels of erudition before realising that the thesis-mongering of academics is also sterile. Disillusioned, they drop out altogether. After all, what’s the point, once the lack of utility becomes obvious? For the departing serconist, fanzines just aren’t worth a damn. Those who stay, however, may discover a little more.

SF fandom is not the only fandom. There are innumerable other special-interest groups concerned with some particular hobby, sport, pastime,

political, social or moral ideal – everything from collecting stamps to swapping wives. Many of these bodies have what could be called fanzines: spottily duplicated bulletins and magazines devoted to spreading news, information or propaganda, to promoting social contacts, to advertising sales, wants, or whatever other dealings might be involved. Such publications are readily understandable to the outsider since they fulfil obvious purposes and are clearly nothing more than specialised versions of forms which are already familiar in other contexts. The newcomer expects SF fanzines to follow this pattern. Indeed, the sercon end of the field *is* cast in this mould: book reviews, bibliographies, biographies, interviews and critical notes all make up a whole that is immediately accessible and meaningful to anyone who knows his SF.

But Science Fiction fanzines are a unique phenomenon: not so much a symptom as a disease; less a means than an end. Fanzines aren't *for* anything in any primary sense. They represent one of the few areas of communication of which it can be said truthfully that the medium *is* the message.

And that, of course, is not much help to anyone trying to penetrate beyond the superficial pen-friend and social-club aspects of fandom. *This* nonsense is what it's all about? The trouble is that no wholly appropriate analogue exists, and the paradoxes of fandom and fanzines being both trivial and important – laughable and serious – have to be taken on trust.

A five minute look will make the weaknesses and inadequacies of fanzines fairly obvious (and I don't mean the print quality) but what are their strengths and values?

These are less readily visible. One point which might appeal to the newcomer (though it might be rejected with scorn by the more experienced) is that in fanzines one finds the work of the next generation of SF writers. Many SF writers – from Arthur C. Clarke to Michael Moorcock – have been involved with fandom at some point in their careers. A number have stuck to the amateur/professional dichotomy and have allowed their connection with fandom to fade away once they've reached certain heights of fame and fortune, but there are others who are still prepared to subscribe to the concept of the Whole Scene – fanzines as a complementary extension of SF rather than a parasitic growth – and maintain contact. Some of the best British fanzines and best British fanwriting come from people who have already made at least some money out of SF, and will in all probability provide many of our future professional writers and editors. Some of them are professionals

or semi-professionals already.

That's a come-on for those who are unable to divorce merit from money, who cannot see that cash is no guarantee of quality. There are also good fan writers who will never sell a thing, but who nevertheless make their own contribution to the SF scene in the form of some additional ingredient for the ferment of argument and mutual stimulation that makes up the background.

Books do not appear out of thin air. They are the product of the lives led by those who write them, and – particularly in the case of SF – of the intellectual influences to which they are exposed. This process can be watched working in fanzines. It's a uniquely fascinating study. Many of the best fanzines seem to have only the vaguest connection with SF, simply because the writers are so far inside that they no longer need to prove their knowledge by writing about the subject directly. The SF is taken for granted. They're writing about their lives – about their thoughts – of which SF is inevitably and naturally a part.

And therein lies the understanding of the whole business. Fanzines are not for people who regard SF as a hobby. They are for those who regard SF – or that state of mind which accompanies SF – as an important part of their lives. This commitment does not have to be explicit, any more than one needs to state a preference for the continued possession of one's own right arm. The thing is *there*, and it will continue to be there. No further proof of existence is needed, no self-justifying muscle-flexings are necessary. A fanzine is an extension of yourself, and what you accomplish with it is dependent only on your own skill and ingenuity.

As with SF, so with fanzines: all things are possible.

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David V. Lewis, June 1977.

Wish You Were Here

The 28th Easter Science Fiction Convention took place at the De Vere Hotel, Coventry, over the weekend of the 8th-11th April 1977. Gollancz's John Bush was Guest of Honour and other SF notables present were Brian Aldiss, John Brunner, Ken Bulmer, Harry Harrison, Robert Holdstock, Anne McCaffrey, Chris Priest, Bob Shaw, Andrew Stephenson, Ian Watson, Peter Weston and James White.

Those are the facts. The rest is lies, damned lies, and statistics of who fell over, passed out, made fools of themselves, scored scandalous sexual successes, hit people with large whips, or failed to hit less-loved acquaintances with beer glasses.

And so much for the only part of the first draft of this con report worth preserving – two paragraphs from about twelve closely-typed sides. Unfortunately, the whole thing was just another Bad Trip report, a classic case of Charnock's Syndrome: fear and loathing, folly and paranoia. Same old Psycho Think-Piece. Took me ten pages of introspective brooding to even *arrive* at bloody Coventry. Two more pages were devoted to attempts to pull my nerve together: sitting in the station buffet for an hour or so drinking cans of McEwans and chewing on a British Rail Egg sandwich. Come page twelve I'd made it to the De Vere, scuttled blindly through a lobby full of menacing hotel staff and total strangers and experienced a vast surge of relief when famous author Robert P. Holdstock lurched from a lift and greeted me with a leer. (Nothing personal, you understand. Famous author Holdstock greets everyone with a leer, his guiding principle in life being Walk Softly And Carry A Big Prick. And compared with the leer of Graham Charnock – Secret Master of the Art of suggesting a jaded familiarity with depravities the like of which you never knew existed – the concupiscence of Holdstock is almost innocent.)

Yeah, well. So much for the character stuff. But the sight of Holdstock looming and swaying above me did bring a certain degree of reassurance: there might, after all, be people at this convention whose presence would make me feel moderately cheerful.

"They're all in the bar, somewhere," said Holdstock vaguely, and hiccupped away, still leering in the slightly glazed fashion of a Greyfriars

sixth-former fresh from his first encounter with *Playboy*.

I went to the bar. You've got all the essential information now; the rest is probably a familiar enough story to anyone who has ever attended a convention. A week or so later Brian Parker telephoned and I was able to get some details on what it was I'd been doing that weekend.

Well, no. That's an exaggeration. Certain incidents did slip my mind till a few days later, but mostly it was a case of losing track of the *order* in which events occurred. A con hotel is a closed world, a hermetic environment in which the time scale of an orderly and ordered routine is overwhelmed by a chaotic cycle of drinking, eating, drinking, falling down, drinking, eating, drinking, and more falling down. The outside world ceases to have any real existence: it becomes a theory, a legend, a dim ancestral memory, something totally irrelevant to the practicalities of con-going existence. If there was a convention that lasted long enough you'd probably see the veneer of mundane life sloughing off completely: there'd be a return to Man's basic primeval pattern of hunting and foraging, nomadic wanderings from floor to floor, inter-tribal warrings. J.G. Ballard's *High Rise* tells the story of what happened at a con in the Fifties (the names have been changed to protect the guilty) and things haven't changed all that much. You can take it for granted that by the second day of any convention most of the attendees are at least part-way out of their skulls.

Some of them start like that. Even before I arrived I wasn't feeling too good. The reasons for that are somewhat complicated but not really important or interesting to anyone except myself. Originally, of course, I planned to go there and come away to write the definitive con report: something so brilliantly and ruthlessly comprehensive, so overwhelming in its portrayal of Total Experience, that ever afterwards all those who attempted to write con-reports would be stricken down by envy, admiration and awe.

Well, you got to think big. But after a dozen sheets my brain started coming together again and I decided that maybe the World was not yet ready for my masterpiece. Not yet ready to read all the way through it, certainly. Something along the lines of a few pages of the usual guff might do better.

It was Pickersgill who first put the idea into my head. He rang up and demanded a convention report in his usual gracious manner ("Howsabout a con report, eh, you big cunt?"). I refused. After some preliminary bickering we agreed to play dominoes for it. If he won I'd write the con report. If I won he'd pay me vast sums of money. I'd still write the con report, but I'd be able

to give it to him with a pitying smile and listen to the grinding of his teeth. Editors are funny people.

What with this and that, the idea dropped into the limbo of some-other-time-maybe-real-soon. This is the wreckage. Being intended for SBD the title is lifted from the Pink Floyd album of the same name. It seemed a good idea at the time, though the relevance may no longer be obvious. Perhaps I should have used something more explicit, like BRAIN DAMAGE. Bossman Brian Parker (yes Master No Master pull my string Master) has already provided the background material to explain that allusion to concussion acquired in the course of duty. His A Bit of the Other One breaks with normal Parker fanzine practice in being so well produced that you can even make out what the words say. (If not what they mean. Is “abyssian” reproduction the sort of print job you get in Ethiopia? Still, it all enriches the language.)

It was a funny con for me. Looked at objectively I should have enjoyed myself. Instead I kept stopping to ask myself why I *wasn't* enjoying myself. Months later I'm still pondering.

But why bother? Stick the stuff I've written into a box and save it for the day when – like Leroy Kettle – I grow old and mumbly enough to want to write memoirs containing the Truth, the Whole Truth, and a few lies to make it more interesting. The Point Of It All can wait. Anecdotes are easier. A list of encounters and conversations – with the occasional Big Think for a touch of class – spreads the misery around instead of keeping it concentrated on myself. After all, in the classic phrase of Simone Walsh: people read convention reports to see if their names have been dropped, and if so, in what.

Well, I did encounter David Wingrove, rising star of BSFA fandom. Wingrove in the flesh tends to confirm the impression given by his fanzine *Kipple*. A week or two before the con I'd sent him a loc in which – amongst other remarks of a more or less derogatory nature – I sarcastically asked why the piece of fiction that had managed to drag in the names of Sartre, Wittgenstein and Nabokov in the first half-page hadn't gone on to mention Camus, Spengler, Marcuse and Kierkegaard.

“But I haven't actually *read* Camus, Spengler, etc etc,” said Wingrove, apparently determined to show what a conscientious chap he was.

Feeling it would be uncouth to get nasty so early in our acquaintance I turned to Maxim Jakubowski and complimented him on his column. After all, in *Kipple* it looked good. Jakubowski, the very model of cosmopolitan

suavity, received my halfhearted tribute with the modest ease of one who knows his own worth.

Somewhat later Wingrove was observed in the main bar, singing songs about Yellow Wimpeys. (This is inexplicable and unlikely, but true.) He was in the company of various acolytes of Bob (FOKT) Shaw. Rob Jackson looked on sourly. "These intellectuals always revert," he muttered.

Bob (FOKT) Shaw is not the same as Bob (Famous Author) Shaw. Bob (FOKT) Shaw is a cheerful-looking extrovert who goes around doing such cheerfully extrovert things as cracking a large whip, telling jokes about Glasgow Pakistanis (apparently inherently funny), shouting "Get FOKT!" (also apparently inherently funny) and attempting to recruit the unwary for a proposed 1978 Scottish convention. FOKT stands for Friends Of Kilgore Trout. What Kilgore Trout might think of his friends can only be surmised.

Various BSFA luminaries were encountered briefly. Somewhat surprisingly David V. Lewis turned out not to wear braces, a celluloid collar, a pinstripe suit and a watch and chain. Lewis is – or was – editor of the *BSFA Yearbook*. At his request I'd sent him an article on fanzines. "Never again," said Lewis, possibly referring to the editorship rather than articles like mine. Publications Overlord and Production Chief Chris Fowler was also reported to be less than enthusiastic about the whole deal. The *BSFA Yearbook* finally appeared at the end of June. So I'm told. I don't really think it's worth paying £4 to join the BSFA just so I can read my own work again. Besides, they may be planning to send me a copy for Christmas.

The ways in which fans in the flesh differ from the images they project on paper never cease to be a source of interest, even when you've met most of the little sods before. Who'd have thought, for instance, that medical genius Rob Jackson would have shown so much doubt and uncertainty when faced by a mere slime-mould from Altair 4? Yet in the battle of wits that followed the encounter the slime-mould won all the way. And how can one reconcile the appearance of Paul Kincaid with the erudite letters he writes to *Maya*? He should look like David Wingrove. Instead he looks like a slimline Howard Rosenblum. (Come to that, how can one be persuaded to believe that the editor of *SONF* could possibly look quite so supernaturally short on the sort of nerve fibre that operates a dinosaur's back end?) What is there to prepare one for the sight of Famous Author Chris Priest making play with a foot-long ebony cigarette holder? What about Chris Fowler and his imitation of a hobbit suffering from anorexia nervosa? Or Harry (words fail me)

Harrison?

It seems like a reversal of the natural order when you discover that David Bridges is really quite sensible and doesn't giggle all the time; that Greg Pickersgill doesn't go round snarling and tearing off arms and legs (not before nightfall, anyway) and that Ian Williams is so big a passing dwarf would have to stretch to pat him on the head.

Only Leroy Kettle lives up to expectations. The whiskers quiver, the nose twitches, the beady eye glitters; a jerky scuttering to and fro and a constant squeaking of jests and quips informs you that here indeed is the veritable editor of *True Rat*.

Then there are all those people who are glimpsed but never properly met, heard of but never seen. They told me Keith Walker himself, founder of Misere Fandom (the fanzine game which is won by the player who spots most deliberate mistakes *and doesn't do anything about them*) was around someplace. In the fan room I seized Roy Kettle by the arm and intoned: "You are Keith Walker, Man of Mystery, and I claim the £5 prize."

"No, no," screamed Kettle. "Let go, let go. I'll give you *anything* if I don't have to be Keith Walker! Please – no – don't do it –" He began gibbering; great drops of sweat broke out on his marble brow. Even his nose grew limp with terror. Thrusting his wallet in my pocket I let him go. It was a knockdown price, but even for a sadist there are limits.

Of course, while you are observing people from afar, chances are that someone else is doing the same to *you*. David Lewis apparently cast his eye over me at the last Novacon, later informing Kevin Easthope that "Don West hangs about like the aftermath of a wet dream." More confusion. Just as I've got used to one picture of Lewis along comes this new insight to create fresh doubt and uncertainty. Who'd have thought that I'd ever be acknowledged – even in these broadminded days – as figuring in Lewis's wet dreams?

Amazing.

Still, not much more amazing than being described as a "Huge Name Fan" (mere BNFs take note) and "Member of the Establishment" in Kevin Easthope's *Logo 4*. Such rapid promotion – all the way to the top from total obscurity in little more than a year of activity – had me luxuriating in dreams of fannish glory for all of several seconds. Then I was pulled back to earth by the sad reflection that anyone who bungles his invective quite so frequently and thoroughly as Easthope must be regarded as an unreliable judge. Despite trying all too hard he doesn't seem to have got the hang of managing his

insults so that they do more damage to the targets than to himself. The Easthope method consists of chopping off both your own legs then waiting for the enemy to faint at the sight of blood. Thus, Huge Name Fan West is first castigated for his destructive criticism – “It doesn’t make any sense at all to be completely destructive when you’re trying to improve things” – and then scarcely a dozen lines later comes the declaration: “I’ve come through on the other side and I think I’m better for the experience.” A more heedful writer would have taken care not to contradict himself until the bottom of the page at least.

Anyway, *Logo 4* is an improvement on its predecessor if only on the grounds that a poor spirit is better than none – or using only half your loaf is better than making a complete cake... or ... or something. Easthope confuses me. He seems to have perfected a method of transferring words to paper without actually reading them first. For instance, he’s got an article by Tom Perry all about “Editormanship”, one aspect of “Fansmanship” or “The Art of convincing other fans that you are a much bigger fan than they are.” Easthope put this thing onto stencil, so you might think he’d picked up some notion of what it was all about. Indeed, the basic principles of this noble science (scoring points in verbal games) are known to every fan of average low cunning. But one is forced to the conclusion that Easthope’s cunning is not so much low as subterranean – every time he tries to put the boot in he loses a few more of his own front teeth – and his understanding is so defective he doesn’t even recognise what his own contributors are talking about.

Still, I enjoyed *Logo*. Not the least part of the enjoyment came from looking forward to the next issue. And Easthope himself has much to look forward to. We’ve never met, but I expect our paths will cross some time or other.

They almost crossed at this last con. There I was, sitting quietly in the bar, contemplating the blankness of my mind, when a jet of water hit me in the face. From behind one of those stupid pillars that cluttered up the floor (and got in the way of my head at least once) Simone Walsh grinned at me. Simone Walsh’s hobby is pouring, throwing, or otherwise debouching quantities of liquid – beer, whisky, water, Old Charnox Southern Catpiss – over anyone with whom she has had some small difference of opinion. Sometimes you get the glass as well, or maybe a non-returnable bottle. I stared at her coldly, and made the water evaporate by thinking about what I’d put in my next piece of fan writing. She seemed slightly disappointed that I

didn't get up and assault her. These women are all the same.

Easthope himself was out of sight. Together with "Dave Bridges, Dave Griffin, Paul Thompson, Geoff Rippington and possibly Merf Adamson" he had declined to fire on grounds that "we're brave lads and true etc, but West is bigger than most of us." (What, even all together? I grow almost fond of the lad, he does me so proud. Not only am I a Huge Name Fan, but King Kong as well – six fans at one bite.) Or, as Simone described it later: "Easthope was sitting there pissing himself with fright." Every boy his own water pistol. Male supremacy rules.

That was Saturday. Or possibly Sunday. Also on Saturday (or possibly Sunday) I met Andrew Tidmarsh, writer of intensely intellectual articles for *Vector* and *Titan*. The same defence mechanism that blots out memories of the articles has blotted out memories of our conversation. If there was any. I seem to recall falling off my chair at one point. Perhaps I was surprised by something he said. Or surprised by being able to understand it.

Meanwhile up in the con hall everyone was having fun. Or perhaps not. I didn't attend enough of the programme to pronounce on its merits as a whole. This is due less to lack of enthusiasm for the content than to a dislike of being lectured at. If I want heavy text I'll read it myself, some time when I'm sitting comfortably and ready to begin. If I want chat I'll stop in the bar. There are occasions when convention programming seems to be based on the theory that if it moves and mentions SF the audience will applaud it. And so they do, so they do.

Most thrilling item was the convention bidding. Would SKYCON carry it off, or would they be overwhelmed by the late entry of Bradford? The matter was settled when – despite the encouragement of all those friends who were hoping I'd get up and make a fool of myself – I found that my mind had gone blank. I decided to hold over the bid. BRADFORD IS HEAVEN THE YEAR AFTER SEVENTY SEVEN now becomes BRADFORD IS GRATE THE YEAR AFTER SEVENTY EIGHT. (Send only 50p NOW!) Just as well I didn't go on with it, really; there was quite enough trouble later on about the frivolities of the Best Award. (Next year I'm going round collecting for the Nobel Prize. Anyone who afterwards wishes to complain that they thought the collection was for the Swedish version of TAFF, or a testimonial inkpot for the famous fannish illustrator Harry Nobel, should hand in their eyewitness accounts, lists of names etc etc before twelve noon on Monday.)

Of course, one troublesome element of Eastercons is that at least half the

attendees can hardly be called fans at all. They are *enthusiasts*: avid readers or collectors of Science Fiction who attend for the overt Science Fictional content. Obviously, it's hard to draw an exact dividing line (and probably not very desirable to try) but it seems clear that the active and essential part of fandom is quite a small minority, perhaps less than a fifth of the whole. Many more people may have passed through, but the hard core of visitors to the Fan Room was never more than a couple of dozen – a subgroup not much larger than the coterie of Dungeons and Dragons players.

Even the fanzine fans might be further subdivided: there's that good old strain rooted firmly in the gutter (where they and I belong) and there's the strange mutant variety developed by the British Science Fiction Androids Ltd. If that organisation ever decided to take over (in best SF style) by cleansing the fair name of fandom of all impurities it would need only the assassination of three or four dozen people to give them the upper hand. Of course, they'd have to repeat the process every three or four years – since fannishness is like Original Sin and prone to breaking out whatever you do – but for a short time at least the British fan scene could be transformed into a beautifully even desert of dullness: a land fit for heroes who want no questions asked that don't have safe, sober, and serious answers.

Why is it that – initially at least – so many SF enthusiasts seem earnest, humourless, narrowminded, complacent, and even slightly stupid? Almost it seems as if these people are driven to seek SF out of some dim perception that it contains elements wholly lacking in their own characters: imagination, vision, invention, and a capacity for interest and excitement (Not that I've ever had all *that* from SF, but I do keep hoping, and running the occasional spot-check.) No wonder, really, that fandom seems so alien and inaccessible. To the outsider, fandom's values are inverted: a fan no longer needs SF. He's started to grow his own.

Outside, the mindless hordes mill endlessly, clutching their paperbacks and craning to catch sight of some famous pro. Inside are the boys who *really* know about time-warps and such, and have made it to another dimension entirely. Yet it's curious to see how the hard-core of fandom manages to impose its values even on those who scarcely understand or sympathise. The caste system of fandom is a thing to marvel at: a maze of ratings and fine distinctions complex beyond belief. Thing is, by some mysterious and esoteric process this “inner circle” hypnotises everyone else into taking it at its own valuation. The Elite is the Elite simply by taking its own Greatness

for granted. The rest just tag along like sheep.

What Easthope and those others who complain of “cliquishness” fail to realise is that the “elitism” of fandom is not something imposed from above: it’s entirely dependant on the voluntary servitude of those who consider themselves less worthy. The “Establishment” is really wide open; the barriers to admission exist only in the eye of the beholder. All that is necessary to be accepted as a fan is to be active in fannish pursuits.

However, acceptance is not the same as immunity from criticism. Fannish ratings go by measures of talent and personality; if you are judged deficient in either or both you are likely to get some knocks Even from friends. The old “Star System” of fandom, with BNFs at the top, fans in the middle, and neos way down under, has undergone considerable levelling in recent years. Just who *are* today’s BNFs? There’s a whole array of talented fans, and who is to be singled out above the rest? Promote one and you’ll have to promote six more; in no time at all you’ll have an array composed entirely of officers. And there’s too much democracy about, these days – too much freedom of speech. You can’t have a BNF (in the old sense, at least) who isn’t treated with deferential respect. But now there’s no fan at all who isn’t liable to get the piss taken out of him pretty frequently. O tempora, o moreso, as Walt Willis might say.

And so it goes. All those nonfans at conventions are just there to fill in the crowd scenes, to provide a background of animated noise, to create a party atmosphere, to feed the megalomania of fannish fans with the unconscious tribute they provide by their very existence. After all, they do co-operate. The fans dominate the show, while the protofans – creatures with no more than the potential of real life, like embryos which may miscarry or be aborted before coming to term – go their ways only dimly conscious of the very existence of these Secret Masters.

Weird carry-on, when you think about it. Not that all this fanciful stuff passed through my brain while I was laid around getting sozzled at Easter. I just felt depressed – something along the lines of “Many are called, but few are chosen, and look what a bunch of arseholes most of *those* are.” As Mike Glicksohn so delicately puts it: there are some convention attendees you wouldn’t cross the room to puke over.

Fuck me, I was paying money to get *bored*?

Well, no. I was paying money to get drunk. When even that began to seem tedious, I took out all my small change and amused myself by throwing

it on the floor. John Piggott and Rob Hansen crawled rapidly around, snarling at each other as they grovelled for pennies. I felt like a character in a piece of New Wave fan fiction: oppressed by the meaninglessness of it all.

Some time later – or maybe sooner – I went and half-heartedly offered to tear Merf Adamson’s head off unless he joined the Astral League. Presumably he did, since I saw him walking about in a state of completeness later on. Ian Watson (must read one of his books some time) called me a psychopath. I was inclined to agree, but felt too listless and apathetic to break his arm.

Oh, what a downer it was. And I wasn’t cheered up on Saturday night, when I happened to close my eyes for a moment and slept through most of the Burlingtons’ performance. Back in the bar afterwards, Graham Charnock was feeling depressed himself, apparently thrown into gloom by consideration of real and imaginary deficiencies in the musical line. Since I myself play guitar in the style of John Cage – long, long silences while I figure out how to rearrange my fingers – such an excess of self-criticism seemed unreasonable. In a burst of generosity I attempted to reinflate his ego by the assurance that I’d always wanted to be a pop star, like what he was. Charnock’s expression suggested he couldn’t decide whether to be sick or to hit me in the face with a broken bottle.

Ah well, the day wore on and the night wore out, and I might have found what it was all about – except that I’d ceased to care. So naturally – following the dictates of my subconscious – what happens but that I go and sign up for a couple more cons? Perhaps this SF has worked a little Scientific Spirit of Enquiry into my blood – I’ll try the experiment again just to check the results. But I almost gave up for good when I found I’d forgotten how to spell my own address. (Bingely? Bingly? Bloody hell, it must be Bingley? Surely?) Many a promising young brain cell gone for ever, obviously.

On Monday morning I remembered that I ought to do something about winning friends and influencing people, so I bought Pater Weston a lemon juice. Some time real soon now I shall send him another story and see if I got his price right. Perhaps I should have paid for the crisps as well.

After that I went home. And as for all the bits I’ve missed out – oh the amazing things I could tell you! – you’ll have to read someone else’s account.

But you should see me at the next con. Having a wonderful time.

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Bloody Hell

Fanzine Reviews by GREG PICKERSGILL

Yes indeed, house-moving time again, and it was the usual boogaloo: Shock/Horror/Fear/Loathing when I realised just how much stuff – books, magazines and the like – I'd have to load up in cardboard boxes, all so it could be laboriously unloaded again and spread round the new place for me to fall back into a coma of unreality, protected from the outside world in my paperlined womb.

Not to mention the fanzines. I mean, I've been shuffling it around, thinking about getting some sort of order and togetherness into things the 77 side of Christmas, and right by my side there's this pile of fan magazines half as high as your armpit. Just the British stuff from not so far back; none of your museum-pieces from *Fouler* days, or any of that limitless American cheap trash. And looking at the sheer *weight*, it's an awesome thought. Here's all these people been banging the typewriters in furies of effort, straining through many a Dark Night of the Soul to turn fumbled phrases into the kind of semi-jewelled prose that will just escape being given the finger by some evil stomp-their-faces mad-dog fanzine reviewer like Linwood or West or myself, and all for what?

What I mean, is this fanzine publishing really worth anything at all, or are you just shooting these sweat-stained sheets into some kind of void where the only response is the echo of a dull thud as your issue makes a wet landing at the bottom of the cosmic slushpile? Yes, it all comes down to that perennial problem of what's it all about, what's it all for, and the like sort of moaning Universal Doubt you get at every wanker's Question Time. Same old story.

But any old how, bad times apart, these are the issues fans should put to themselves more often than once a British Worldcon. There's no substitute for knowing what you're trying to do, even if you don't know quite how to do it.

Some people get it all sussed out early on, of course. Rob Jackson, for example, nakedly and unashamedly wants *Maya* to win him a Hugo. On the principle of one in the eye for the bloody Americans being All Right indeed, I

go along with this as far as I ever would for anything someone else thought of first. But even say so much, and you're still left with the secondary question of *why* does he want a Hugo? After all, what's the point of the fucking thing? Sure enough, it carries a little more prestige than such as the Doc Weir Award (even if nobody does come round and shake a beer glass full of money for it under your nose) but when you get right down to foundation shit why is it so much more worthwhile than being poked in the eye with a bent pool cue?

You tell me. Everybody here knows the answer, of course. I don't say Awards are what fandom is all about – in fact I'm fucking sure they're *not* what it's all about – but I do know that any fan who's been around for more than five minutes will find Jackson's desire for a Hugo entirely normal, understandable, and possibly even praiseworthy. Whereas any outsider will consider the man is off his nut and totally deranged, spending money the way he do, just for some no-cash trophy that doesn't even carry any *professional* weight (for godsake) and has no real importance outside the limited circle of a bunch of loonies.

The point is, any fan can understand Hugo-lust (or even the more modest aim of just putting out a reasonably hot-stuff fanzine on a smaller scale) but it's an *instinctive* sort of understanding, a gut empathy that doesn't have all the pros and cons laid out for your inspection. Fannishness isn't any kind of political creed or religious cult that draws in the converts by force of argument; it's more like some slimy gob of alien protoplasm sneaking up from behind. One minute you're okay and the next it falls wetly all over you like Ian Maule's conversation and you're wondering how you ever felt normal the way you were before and why there's this funny feeling inside your skull like half your brains have been scooped out. But there's no Great Plan. It just happens.

Take Dave Langford, for instance. Only a couple of years back Langford was just another long thin Oxford wanker letting off bombs and writing fan fiction for the University clubzine. A normal, average kid; deafer than most, not so dumb as many, but not regarded as anything more than an extra face in the crowd of dull, boring and slightly silly fringe-fans. Then all of a sudden he gets it together and (after a slightly shaky start) begins turning out regular issues of *Twill Ddu* containing some of the best fanwriting seen for many a long week. And being as he has a degree in splitting atoms or some such and they do tell he adds two and two and makes four without counting on his

toes, maybe in the depths of this throbbing intelligence there are subtle and tortuous reasons – and Good Reasons at that – for such amazingly whole-hearted commitment to fandom. But damned if I know what they are. In fact, Langford seeming to have more than the average allowance of brain cells not on the nod makes it all the more puzzling. It's easy enough to figure out why such as Dave Rowe or Keith Walker come on strong (after their fashion) for fandom: where else are such limited talents ever likely to achieve any sort of applause except in a world of mutual backscratching? (Actually, Walker is the smarter of the two, a fact critic D. West failed to appreciate when he called the man a fucking idiot for failing to do something about the awful appearance of *Fanzine Fanatique*. Preserving – and even emphasising – the cruddiness of FF is the one trick in the book Walker has managed to learn; he's realised that removing the camouflage of total ineptitude of presentation would deprive his sheet of what little gruesome interest it possessed and reveal the actual writing beneath the blots to be so totally boring that even more people would throw the thing away unread.) Okay, so these cretins do it for want of anything better, just as (in a slightly different way, you understand) your average off-the-corner punks like myself, and a few more I could lay the names on, come looking for the cheap thrills they can't get no place else. But why would anybody with any real intelligence (and presumably a career that in some sort offers satisfaction) want to mess with fandom at all?

Well, it don't make no never mind, you might be saying, and putting down the whole deal as just one more piece of academic interest spinoff from all these Agonising Reappraisals I seem to have been enjoying lately. But there I'd have to call you wrong. This kind of question *does* have more than just an idle spacefilling value. After all, it's the people with the brains we want in fandom (plenty of the other sort here already) and believe you me, it's no small or unimportant problem trying to figure out what attracts them in the first place, and how they can be turned on to the right route once they get here.

Being a fanzine reviewer is mostly a slaughterhouse sort of job. You line up your dummies for the bayonet charge, let loose with a few screams of unadulterated rage (for the benefit of the audience) and give it to the fuckers right in their sawdust-stuffed guts. That's how it is – strictly routine. But sometimes these doubts come on whether you you're doing the right thing, going about it the right way, and all so on and so forth. I don't mean to say

I'm mellowing towards giving every little cunt the benefit of some sweetness and light whether he deserves it or not – fuck *that* for a right load of wank – but I do wonder occasionally whether I'm knocking the wrong people on the head and extending the hand of welcome to secret badass sods-in-disguise who may be revealed in a very short time as tedious farts with little or nothing of real value to offer.

Like, what do I do about this David Wingrove character? Now here he is putting out a first issue of this thing called *Kipple*, a largish but very, very badly produced fanzine that's being sent out to a couple of hundred BSFA members and God knows who else besides. Some of the innocents off there are going to be thinking this what *fandom* is about, for fucksake. But this whole grubbily printed bundle is such a complete catalogue of monumental silliness – the man is obviously not entirely without intelligence, but he's certainly short on sense – and old mistakes that I really despair of saying anything that doesn't just sound like the boot goes in again.

Aside from a standard of reproduction and layout that makes *Fanzine Fanatique* look good (and remember Walker *tries* to make his crudzines as ultimately shitty as possible) *Kipple* bears a strong resemblance to a poor copy of a bad imitation of the Moorcock-edited *New Worlds* of the sixties. In other words, most of the writing behind that amazing cover (which would have lowered the tone of *Viridiana*) is pretentious, posturing, self-indulgent, fake-cultured jerking off. Wingrove seems oblivious of the fact that this kind of stolen-from-the-mainstream crap was not exactly great news when it first appeared, and is now looking distinctly fleabitten. It's clever but dire, just like Graham Charnock's *Phile* used to be in his own poncy intellectual days.

And there's the rub. Charnock wrote some astonishing rubbish for *Phile* (I was reminded of this when some copies came up for auction at the Eastercon) but later came on definitely OK. Can't remember whether anyone gave him the Hard Word back in those times, but even so it does tend to make you reflect on the futility of criticism. Same with Langford: if you'd asked me at the wrong moment I'd surely have sworn blind that he was a no-hoper who would never amount to more than Assistant Garden Gnome in Chris Fowler's gang.

Doing a real job on Wingrove may be agreeable exercise (though something on the easy side for airing the muscles) but it probably won't help him to change and may even harden his attitudes sufficiently to delay any advance to the stage where – like Langford, Charnock and others – he moves

on from this witless pap to something moderately entertaining or sensible. On the other hand, maybe he never *will* move on unless he's given a strong poke up the rectum with something bearing a reasonable resemblance to a broomstick decorated with barbed wire. So what's a poor boy to do?

Does this mean the oldtimers like Tom Perry are right with their supercilious line of seen-it-all-before, and fandom really does go by cycles, ages and numbers, like various people with a passion for neatness and order (such as Peter Weston) insist?

Well, I've got my doubts about *that*, too.

In his latest issue of *Quark* Perry devotes a substantial amount of space to working over D. West for his recent article in *Wrinkled Shrew* 7. Most of this is concerned with the Willis-Platt affair that started with Weston's column in *Maya* 12/13, and as this is shaping to turn into a (rather tedious) marathon that will make the Nova Award controversies look like a quick handshake (I'm assuming there are actually people out there who give a fuck what Willis and Platt are supposed to have said to each other ten years ago) I'll pass that part by for now. The relevant bit comes when Perry puts forward the odd little notion that West's attack on Willis is nothing more than a result of West still being only part-way up the ladder of fannish evolution. This is really too simpleminded to be anything but an attempted putdown, but the really interesting thing is the apparent belief in the inevitability of this cyclic business whereby every fan is supposed to start out serious, get progressively looser at the hinges, then finally make it to the state of gibbering idiocy and perpetual punning that Perry seems to regard as the height of fannishness. Poot, poot, indeed. It ain't necessarily so.

Too true, you'll see the same old mistakes in fandom and fanzines with every new intake, but what these new boys move on to is never *quite* identical. People may shape as though they're set to follow some particular fannish model, but you can bet your left tit they don't have any such plan in *their* minds. They're doing just *what they* want to, and don't give any sort of halfhearted fuck for what it was the blue-print laid down. No co-operation, ya unnerstand.

Maybe here in Britain we're about due for some sort of Great Lurch Forward. Maybe not. I dunno. What I *do* know is that any wise old owl who tries to put it about that fandom is nothing but the same old scene come round again (and therefore definitely okay, because *we were here first, boy*) is about to get blasted right out the gum tree. These new people aren't going to care,

and they sure as fuck your elbow won't be told either. Fandom belongs to everybody in it; there aren't any private estates or laws of feudal domain. Nor any nature preserves for the scabby dinosaurs of past fandoms, either.

This maybe makes a big laugh out of all my previous fanzine reviewing, and certainly on reflection there's no way I can kid myself it's any sort of power working like I once thought it was. Still and all, even though I can't cut it like I used to do, there's this persistent thought that the exercise isn't entirely worthless. Somebody got to make the effort. I can't pretend to like the line these BSFA people shoot (though when I first came to fandom what they offer now was exactly what I wanted) but maybe they'll come good given time, and meanwhile I put my trust in example, for what it's worth. Just so long as there's someone showing some kinda crazy alternative the BSFA is going to be stuck with its high membership turnover, that I *do* know, because nobody short of a real android can stay *that* route for ever.

Still, maybe these people really are the Coming Race and there's a new sort of fandom being laid down right before your very eyes. Right this moment there's too much instability and uncertainty to be putting my neck on the block with the Big Truths, the Great Predictions, or even an answer to any of my own questions. One thing about fandom: your curiosity is kept alive wondering what's gonna happen next. And I'm certainly fucked if I can tell ya.

– Transcribed from the Ouija Board of D. WEST

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Fandom and Fanzines

Once upon a time, dedicated researchers uncovered the following variation upon Sturgeon's Law: "Ninety per cent of writers secretly think they are geniuses; the rest admit it openly."

Ever hopeful, fandom follows suit, and the belief that SF enthusiasts are generally more intelligent than the unenlightened dolts who have never watched Dr Who or read a Perry Rhodan paperback is surprisingly widespread. Occasionally even the most sanguine supporters of this theory may experience twinges of doubt when meeting the author of yet another article on the joys of *Space 1999* bubblegum cards, but – as everyone knows – it's the exceptions that prove the rule.

A second common fantasy is that SF fans have a liberal and open-minded attitude towards new and radical ideas. This notion is perhaps based on the mistake of equating novelty with originality. SF enthusiasts enjoy the gaudy glitter of surface strangeness, but they do not really relish the prospect of fundamental changes in the familiar and conventional. In fact, they read SF not so much for the mental stimulation as to run a continuous check on the horrible things *They* may be planning as part of their Conspiracy of the Future. SF writers hop round the edges of paranoia, but SF fans take a running jump right into the middle depths.

1977 was another year in which the fans congratulated themselves – and a few friends – on their intelligence, discernment, discrimination and superior natural talents. They then proceeded to develop selective blindness, deafness and (total) dumbness when crude and irreverent persona screaming vulgar abuse were ill-bred enough to attempt to introduce a note of doubt. Fortunately, in the face of this sort of catatonic complacency even the most ravening and rabid of mad-dog fanzine reviewers – accustomed to chew up the average simpleminded fanzine with all the tact and delicacy of a hungry werewolf – tended to grow weary and discouraged. The communication gap was unbridgable. Argument and insult were not met with rebuttal and counter-jibe, but with the whining complaints of uncomprehending dullards whose dignity had been offended.

In short: an average year, in which fandom marked time in its sideways shuffle towards the millennium (whatever *that* might be) and perhaps even

slipped back a pace or two. Efforts were made to inject fresh life and vitality, but with very limited success. Like the poor, fandom's idiots are always with us, and however wide the seed is scattered, most of it falls straight into a stony silence.

The last and most damaging of the delusions of fandom is this: It's the thought that counts.

Well enough, you might say, if some of the people concerned ever turned up two whole thoughts of their own to rub together. But most of them are trying to raise a flame with the sort of wet rubbish that more discriminating boy scouts threw away years ago. Bubblegum fandom has seen everything and learned nothing. There are still those who believe that effort equals achievement, and that the scanty fruits of their labours are praiseworthy solely on account of the minimal involvement of toil. Such people continue to produce dull fanzines. Some are worthy but dull, products of a dismal Calvinism that holds the serious and the lively to be incompatible; others are merely worthless and dull, the result of muddy perceptions unable to distinguish between silliness and wit.

Fanzines in 1977 ranged from the excellent to the extremely awful. Lack of space luckily permits only a brief mention of a few titles. Dave Langford's *Twll Ddu* had a well-deserved success in the Nova Award. Probably largely incomprehensible to the uninitiated, *Twll Ddu* might possibly tempt an outsider into closer investigation by the very flourish and style of its ingenious jokes and elaborate witticisms. *Stop Breaking Down* (Greg Pickersgill and Simone Walsh) and *Maya* (Rob Jackson) were *Twll Ddu*'s leading rivals, though *Wrinkled Shrew* (Pat Charnock) and *True Rat* (Roy Kettle) would have figured prominently in the reckoning had they published more than an issue apiece in the relevant period. Below these giants of the fannish microcosm some ten or a dozen fanzines of more modest fame challenged for attention. Among those that come to mind are *Dot* (Kevin Smith), *Epsilon* (Rob Hansen), *One Off* (Dave Bridges), *Triode* (Eric Bentcliffe), *Checkpoint* (Peter Roberts), *A Bit of the Other One* (Brian Parker), and *Vibrator* (Graham Charnock).

All the above are fannish fanzines – that is, fanzines devoted to personalities rather than the wholly serious study of SF. A number of other titles attempted to combine fannish and serious material, often a rather queasy mixture. Only Geoff Rippington's *SF Arena* (formerly *Titan*) eschewed fannishness altogether and swung entirely in favour of hardline SF criticism.

Drilkjis (Dave Langford and Kevin Smith), *GHAS* (Carol Gregory and John and Eve Harvey), *Bar Trek* (Mike Dickinson and Lee Montgomerie) and even the Leeds University SF Society's *Black Hole* (Alan Dorey) seemed to want to keep a foot in both camps, a difficult balancing feat which led to a few falls. (Perhaps Rob Jackson might feel that his *Maya* should be included in this division, though after an initial period of vacillation the contents seem to have taken on a definite bias towards the fannish, albeit with articles written by professionals. Still, the classification isn't important – good is good, and *Maya* is excellent, a fact reflected in the several triumphs the fanzine and its contributors scored in the Fanzine Activity Achievement Awards, despite the preponderance of American voters. But those wins are not so surprising when one considers the terminal constipation of the US fanzine scene: anything hot they may have is being held well in.)

There were many other fanzines. Some had their good points, some were inoffensive but forgettable, and some were so extremely bad they are best forgotten. Yes – far, far below the deepest delvings of the critics, the world is gnawed by nameless things. Even Brian Burgess knows them not. They are older than he. Now I have walked there, but I will bring no report to darken the light of day... Besides, the Tolkien zines weren't much good, either.

SF criticism is fairly simple to write badly and very difficult to write well. The objection to the use of criticism in fanzines is not that it is done at all, but that it is nearly always done poorly. Poul Anderson once remarked that the SF writer is competing for the reader's beer money. The flesh is weak, and the SF critic cannot rely on his reader's stern devotion to duty; he has to make an effort to drag the fan's attention away from new and ingeniously libellous accounts of who recently got drunk and groped the wrong wife. In other words: if you want to write criticism: it'd better be good.

Sometimes it *is* good. *Foundation*, the eponymous journal of the North East London Polytechnic's SF Foundation, is not strictly speaking a fanzine (though almost all its contributors are either SF fans or professionals) but it is certainly the best magazine of SF criticism in the world and living proof that seriousness without stupefaction is possible. Peter Nicholls has now relinquished the post of Foundation Administrator to Malcolm Edwards (formerly of Victor Gollancz Ltd, and a one-time *Vector* editor) who has the experience and talents to maintain this high standard, particularly since he will be assisted by the newly appointed Research Fellow, David Pringle, and

by such other regular contributors as Christopher Priest and Ian Watson.

Foundation's less distinguished rival, the BSFA's *Vector*, has been much more erratic. Editing *Vector* is a thankless task, and a good case could be made for turning the job into a paid position. The work is considerable, and the armour of cash – or an ironclad ego – is needed to withstand the impact of continual conflicting criticisms from a large and varied readership. There are plenty of bruises and very few bouquets. By the end of 1977 Chris Fowler had had enough and he yielded the place to David Wingrove.

The main achievements during Chris Fowler's reign were the increases in size and frequency. If the editor was overworked it was often his own fault: little or no control seemed to be exercised over length, relevance, or placing in context of work used. Many individual items of merit were published, but the magazine as a whole suffered from an almost complete lack of editing, and too many contributors were given the latitude to turn what could have been a good short review into a long mediocre article. The overall impression was that of a hopeful marksman loosing off a very large blunderbuss in the general direction of a very small target: a few silver bullets hit the spot, but most of the junk went whistling past.

A similar scattershot approach seemed to characterise the year's conventions. The smaller events, Faancon in February and Silicon in August, were really more in the nature of semi-private parties (Faancon was so private that little or no report has reached the outside world) and their lack of organised structure was both intentional and accepted. (Accepted by most people, that is. There was the now-legendary encounter at Silicon, where certain soberminded attendees were horrified to see Leroy Kettle fall off his chair several times during what they assumed was a Serious and Constructive panel discussion. The shocked visitors also wanted to know why – in the words of Dave Langford – people spent whole minutes not talking about SF. They were told, but they didn't believe it.)

However, the main event of the year, the Coventry Eastercon, was overshadowed by a certain feeling of aimlessness and anticlimax. A comment heard several times was that the Eastercon was simply the Nova-con writ small – a reversal of the natural order of importance. In fact, when it came, the Novacon proved to be more enjoyable on all levels. This was partly due to the more compact layout of the hotel, which promoted a sense of cosy intimacy altogether absent from the Eastercon. The bar, bookroom, con hall, art show and fan room at the De Vere Hotel all seemed to be situated in the

farflung corners of a maze of corridors; with the result that too much time was spent wandering round looking for friends lost an hour or two before. There were many enjoyable moments, but the Eastercon tantalised rather than satisfied, hinting at an excellence that was intended but never quite achieved.

A convention calls for a great deal of work on the part of the organisers. In theory, this selfless devotion is wholly admirable, but in practice there are several drawbacks. The primary difference between amateur and professional lies in the degree of *commitment*. A professional knows he *has* to get it right – for the sake of earnings or for the sake of reputation – whereas to the amateur a triumph would be nice, but anything better than a total flop will do. This attitude – entirely natural and understandable in the circumstances – inevitably leads to a dilution of the drive towards success achieved at whatever cost in time and effort. The unpaid convention worker simply cannot afford to break his back for the purely notional rewards of fannish prestige. He can't afford to assume financial responsibility either, and the result is often the use of shortsighted and false economies negating the good effects of larger sums spent elsewhere.

Much of the work that goes into fandom – whether producing fanzines or organising conventions – is time-consuming labour which is hot in itself rewarding. On a small scale such work is bearable, but fandom has grown. The doctrinaire insistence on total amateurism has become a sacred cow impeding progress. The past history of the BSFA indicates what is likely to follow: a wildly erratic cycle of boom-or-bust, up or down, as key figures grow weary and drop out, or new young meteors flash briefly across the scene.

Still, that's the way of fandom. It's a small world, and individuals have such a great power to influence the course of events that prediction is almost impossible. All that can be said about the next year is that it promises to be interesting.

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Convention Death Wish

or

Totally Surrounded by Fanzines

“So what makes you think you’re sleeping on the floor of *my* room?” demanded John Collick, eyes snapping with teenage menace and aggression.

“So what makes you think I’m writing any God-damn fanzine reviews for you?” I replied.

“Huh,” said Collick, and refolded himself into an awkward pile of limbs among the luggage. Two thirty p.m. on the first Friday in November 1970 and we – and a whole bunch of superfluous extras – were sitting on suitcases in the corridor of the Leeds-Birmingham train. Roaring south for Novacon 8. Ready for a great time, boys. Really gonna have fun.

And I was telling myself: this convention you will be very, very good; you will not get drunk and go reeling about the place bouncing off walls, doors, people, the floor, and anything else that moves or seems to move; you will not leer at strange women or make lewd approaches to familiar ones; you will not pass out in the toilets, fall off chairs in the bar, become so paranoid that you flee gibbering when faced with a member of staff; you will not get involved in dismantling parts of the hotel in furtherance of some demented act of fannish exhibitionism; you will not threaten harmless (if cretinous) neofans with instant maiming if they do not give solemn undertakings to reform their beastly little crudsheets; you will not make jokes which John Brunner does not appreciate; you will not scream obscene demands for action while waiting for delayed programme items; you will not lose track of time and place so completely that you repeat the same question or remark six times to the same person; you will not lapse into morbid recollections of the number of times only natural sloth has held you back from suicide; you will not get drunk you will not get drunk you will not get drunk; you will *behave yourself*.

Then we arrived.

At Novacon 7 the first fan I set eyes on was Bob (FOKT) Shaw – not the famous professional fan from Ulverston but the unknown amateur extrovert from Glasgow. A bad start – like having flights of black cats cross your path,

or sitting down in a wet electric chair without throwing salt over your shoulder. But this time the first fan I set eyes on was Bob (Ming the Merciless) Shaw, Original Brand. He was standing by the registration desk pensively sniffing a glass of whiskey.

“I thought you were in America,” I said suspiciously.

He looked surprised. “No, no,” he said, “I was at the Chicago con, but that was a few weeks ago.”

“Yes, but I thought you were supposed to be at this other thing, this Novacon West, or something.”

I pointed to the advert in the programme book. Fucking Americans – think they can come over here and steal our conventions. Then I looked more closely and saw that the convention in question took place in 1979.

God damn – victim of a time-slip in the first five minutes.

It’s always seemed to me that the only real reason for changing convention sites (apart from hysterical managements etc) is to help con-goers keep their memories in some sort of order. Thus, 1978 was the Heathrow Hotel with flunkies in coats of a particularly vile purple, 1977 was the De Vere with electroshock carpets, and so on. You woke up in the morning, looked at the free stationery, and not only did you know where you were but probably which year it was as well. And – more important – you kept a grip on the present and didn’t go sliding off into the state of uncertainty in which the events of last night *might* be genuine memories or *could* just be just the muddled ghosts of any of the last six conventions. The Royal Angus messed things up a bit by always being in the same place, but at least that meant you always know when you were at a Novacon. One learned to adjust.

Maybe one could even learn to adjust to the Holiday Inn, but at first sight it was a weird-looking joint. From the outside you saw this great glass-fronted monolith with an air of anonymous evil bureaucracy – some stealthy brand of State Security, all tapped phones, bugged rooms and the late-night knock on the door. The inside was even more sinister: plainly laid out for tying prisoners to the wall or hanging them from the ceiling. There were cords and ropes everywhere, and great setpieces of hitching posts and iron rings. The rooms had names like Long Splice and Mainbrace and Slip Knot. This strange pseudo-nautical motif looked like a last desperate attempt at sublimation on the part of some lovesick interior decorator with a fatal passion for the navy. Everybody loves a sailor, but I felt somehow out of place – the only man without either a parrot or a wooden leg.

Indeed, I was not happy at all, standing in the lobby threatened by hostile hotel staff and odd-looking strangers. I'd made Collick carry in my bag, and the little fucker disappeared almost immediately, leaving me alone on unfamiliar territory. I almost lined up and asked for a room out of sheer nervousness. But the knowledge that I didn't have the money to pay for it pulled me together and I went for a drink instead.

The main bar was beside a swimming pool. (Well, it figured; this was probably a symbolic representation of the bilges, or some such.) They were all there: the cream of British fandom. (Scum risen to the surface too, but that's Greg's joke, and he has plans for it.) They started giving me fanzines. The usual vile libels and scurrility. I opened a *Twll Ddu* and immediately my eye fell on the line: "HAZEL: John Collick does look more outwardly wholesome than D. West, but..." Incensed, I sought out Mrs Langford. For once, fandom's number one tricoteuse was not actually at work, although her far-away expression did suggest a mind still dwelling on new patterns (double rib? fairisle?) for woolly atom bomb covers.

"What have I ever done to deserve this?" I demanded, indicating the offending passage.

A steely glint came into her eye. She started to tell me. I made an excuse and left.

I sulked quietly over several drinks. Perhaps it was then that Rog Peyton accosted me. He'd heard I was a secret Gene Vincent fan. "Astounding," said he, "we actually have something in common after all."

Well, no. Unfortunately I'm more of a fake Gene Vincent fan. Or a fringe Gene Vincent fan, at best. I really prefer Chuck Berry and Buddy Holly. A disillusioned Peyton stomped away, abandoning me to my awful heresies.

Music of another sort kept coming out of loudspeakers. There was, indeed, supposed to be a disco on Saturday night. Dancing round the pool, or some such. If so, it wasn't very noticeable. But it's sometimes hard to tell whether congoers are dancing or just reeling and twitching about the place as usual. Likewise, there may or nay not have been an official Fancy Dress item, but all I saw was various people poncing up and down in bits of leather and tinsel. Occasionally they would brandish large swords and strike coyly suggestive poses while slackmouthed photographers stumbled round trying to remember whether they'd put a film in the camera.

Meanwhile, back on Friday night, people gave me more fanzines. I

ventured into the outside world and ate what was probably a piece of dead chicken. Came back and was given drinks and fanzines indiscriminately. Decided to go and watch *Flesh Gordon*, having been lured on by promises of pornography and titillation.

For such a large hotel the so-called conference facilities were unimpressive. In fact, the whole damn place was unimpressive, unless you were a bondage freak. The con hall had the rather claustrophobic air of the basement of a methodist chapel: a windowless cube with lots of hard chairs jammed together between the pillars. No stage or platform at all. (Mike Dickinson was pleased. “Yorcon can’t possibly do worse than this,” he declared rashly.)

I went and sat down next to David Pringle. Various people were fussing round the projector. By this time I’d had a good look at the programme book (“I’m afraid we must apologise for the small size of the Programme Book”) and was beginning to feel a few doubts about the organisational abilities of the con committee. In all likelihood they were trying to get the oil lamp lit so they could start showing magic lantern slides of *A Visit To The Holy Land*.

“Where’s the fucking film, then?” I screamed.

“It’s very hot in here,” said David Pringle, with the slightly nervous air of one attempting to make conversation with a total stranger. Rather absently I agreed with him and took another drink to prevent dehydration.

“What about this fucking film?” I yelled. David Pringle gave up his effort to be sociable and attempted to get comfortable by sliding himself down into a curious hunched-over position. Those chairs were certainly hard.

Eventually the film started, and even turned out to be quite good. But it certainly was hot in there, and afterwards the bar was very crowded.

I met ace guitarist C. Carr Haghonk and his wife, “Bloody hell,” he said. “I can’t talk to you. You’re drunk. I can’t talk to people who are drunk. Every time I see you I can’t talk to you because you’re drunk. You’re *always* drunk.” He’s a bit short on polite conversation, is Haghonk.

At some late hour I went to bed. Collick had asked for a single, but the room had two beds. The other lodger, Steve Higgins, had to sleep on the floor this time, though the selfish little bastard got in first the next two nights and sent *me* to the carpet. (Even after I’d explained about my arthritis, weak shoulder and bad back. These young punks got no respect.)

The next morning Collick was awake and rushing about early, nagging us to tidy up and get the place clean. Apparently he was under the impression

that the beds had to be made and the floor swept or Housemaster would give everyone extra homework and not let them play out. I told him several times to fuck off, and several times he grunted at me. Collick grunts a lot, though perhaps “grunt” isn’t exactly the word – it’s a sort of gruff yelp, as though somebody just stuck a spear up his arse and he can’t decide whether or not he likes it.

Down in the bar I remembered I was supposed to be attending the programme. I went and peered in the con hall. Jack Cohen was shouting and waving his arms about, but the rabble didn’t seem unduly roused. I went back to the bar. Joseph Nicholas reminded me I was supposed to appear on a fanzine reviewers’ panel.

The fan room looked like an appropriate setting for a debate on whether fan rooms were necessary. There were photos stuck on walls, fanzines stuck on tables, and lots of people stuck in the middle of the room looking slightly baffled.

Nicholas declared the panel started and immediately relapsed into paralysed silence. Since he’d passed over my suggestion that at least one token cretin (e.g. Keith Walker) should be included, the fanzine reviewers consisted of myself, Alan Dorey and Greg Pickersgill. We sat hissing “You say something,” to each other. Eventually I ventured the statement that the first aim of fanzine reviewing was to get in there and kick the shit out of the useless sods. Nobody argued. Nicholas remained paralysed. The subject (or the panel) seemed to be exhausted. I picked up a fanzine, tore it in half and threw the pieces on the floor. Still no argument. There are times when talking about fanzines is almost as boring as talking about Science Fiction. What the hell, when you’ve said it all before the only reason for repeating yourself is to demonstrate what a hotshot you are with the lucid wit and erudition. And I was feeling about as lucid, witty and erudite as one of John Collick’s grunts. I gave up and went back to the bar.

(Apparently the meeting got on better without me, since Greg soon found a conversation piece in the shape of Ian Maule: his faults, follies, fanzines and general wishy-washiness.)

In the afternoon the fan room had charades. This kind of stuff is far too esoteric for me, and I began to get bored. I found my glass was empty. “Fetch drink,” I commanded, waving a pound note at Higgins and Collick. “We’re watching this,” they told me. Shock! Horror! Collapse of Secret Master’s power over neos! I fell back insensible in my chair, reviving only when

Darroll Pardoe pressed a pint glass to my trembling lips. As a super-humane person he had actually made an unsolicited trip to the bar for me. This tremendous deed of generosity ensures that no unkind word towards Darroll Pardoe shall ever again be as much as thought of. (There – see how easy it is to win undying favour. Why, if Ian Garbutt had thought to buy me five or six pints I would even now be writing a favourable review of *Tangent*. After all, it would scarcely affect my critical credibility, since nobody would believe it wasn't just another pisstake.)

I met Ian Garbutt later in the evening. But by that time I'd forgotten to eat anything, substituted liquid refreshment, and given up on clever stuff like critical credibility. I had a sort of dim and hesitant memory of the concept, but that was all. Sitting in the bedroom I stared perplexedly at a great pile of fanzines. People kept giving me the fucking things. I was supposed to review them. Or something. Collick kept telling me so, with many grunts and scowls, his single blond eyebrow curling and quivering like a nervous furry caterpillar. But what to do? Nothing... But then Collick would yell at me some more... What was the connection between all these happenings? What was the connection between my brain and the outside world?

I went back to the bar. BSFA Company Sec Kevin Smith fixed me with a beady eye and announced that the auditor had discovered an error here and there – apparently the deficit was somewhat larger than had been announced at the AGM. This wasn't exactly hot news, since for several months I'd been suggesting to the world that the BSFA accounts were about as straight as a dog's back leg. Still, it was mildly interesting to speculate on what new and improved excuses, evasions, and downright lies this revelation might provoke from BSFA officials. In a vague and dreamlike way I recollected that I was supposed to do something about the BSFA. Blow it up, probably.

I approached Ian Garbutt. As reported, he was Scottish, dark haired, lank, and depressingly serious about *Tangent*. In some societies the insane are treated with particular care and reverence, the theory being that they are possessed, by potent spirits beyond the understanding of mere mortals. This sort of approach seemed appropriate for Garbutt, who had all the strange glittering fascination of one touched by unearthly powers. I made a rather feeble attempt to suggest that *Tangent* might be less than perfect, but this was brushed aside with casual ruthlessness. Initiates of the BSFA hierarchy have their own devastating logic which enables them to cut down the most carefully constructed arguments of opponents: “Ah, that's what *you* say, but

it's only *your* opinion.”

The BSFA Vice himself – Tom Jones – was sitting nearby. Maybe he looks like that normally, or maybe he was straining to follow our conversation, fearful that Garbutt might be offering aid and comfort to anti-BSFA conspiracies. Despite many public declarations of love and trust the BSFA committee members are a paranoid bunch – perhaps with good reason, since they seem to go in for even more double-dealing and back-stabbing than the fans. Or maybe he was just waiting in fascinated horror for the moment when I would start screaming obscenities and banging Garbutt's head against the wall. I seem to figure in BSFA mythology as a sort of fannish werewolf: a savage and bestial monster of iniquity bent on the subversion and destruction of all that is good, holy and sercon. (Though I doubt they'd say so in as many words. Such extended tropes are not the sort of thing you can expect to read in *Matrix*.)

Still, certain labels have a way of sticking. Brian Ameringen, for instance, was once described as “vampire with a wooden brain”, a singularly apt phrase, since even in mufti (i.e. without the black table cloth and plastic fangs) his appearance suggests a sort of Transylvanian dopiness difficult to convey in more conventional terms.

Alongside the pool there was an exercise machine. You stood on a conveyer belt and fed the thing money, after which you were obliged first to walk then to run (on the spot) or be hurled off. Ameringen and various cronies seemed to be fascinated by this device. At regular intervals they'd sidle up, one of their number would bashfully mount, and the others would stand around in bashful admiration while the chosen cretin solemnly clomped up and down, up and down. Perhaps they were celebrating the discovery that here, at last, was the Holy Place where it was possible – *for several minutes at a time* – to put one foot in front of another without bumping into something.

The effects of this spectacle on the general audience were quite marked. There was a tendency for conversations to falter, for eyeballs to slide sideways then lock in position, slowly glazing over with doubt and uncertainty. Several people quite obviously made attempts to convince themselves that the whole business was an illusion: it was too alarmingly peculiar to be anything but an early warning of alcoholic brain damage. Others, more philosophical, resigned themselves to the Cosmic Truth: within the warped and twisted space-time continuum of Convention Life this was

just one more example of the breakdown of logic, reason and reality.

This facet of convention experience – the sense of collapsing into a phantasmagoric state in which reality becomes something arbitrary, bizarre, and wholly divorced from the facts of mundane existence – is often overlooked in convention reports. Some people do get the feeling, but dislike it so much they stop attending altogether. Others never notice; they come along in much the same spirit they would attend, say, a conference on Industrial Investment and Economic Growth – serious business with a little genteel dissipation thrown in. And others blame everything on The Drink.

To be sure, a tendency to get pissed out of your skull is doubtless a reckonable factor in any form of derangement, but I doubt that it is anything like the whole story. For me, things start getting out of hand almost as soon as I leave home, never mind after I've hit the bar. Convention time arrives, and the hinges loosen up – all the doors bang open – and out rush the paranoid hooligans, gibbering loonies and rowdy cretins normally kept under decent restraint in the darker cellars of the brain. The convention scene – serious, surrealistic and silly – is just right for these vicious morons of the subconscious.

So I keep on coming. I have this perverse and morbid sense of curiosity: where will I end up, and what in God's name is going to happen next?

Indeed, what in God's name happened on Saturday night?

I almost remember hitting Alan Dorey – perhaps under the impression that he was Chris Priest, or alleged to look like Chris Priest. But was that before or after I tried to get friendly with this woman in a leather bikini and she screamed and stood on my throat? (“What did she have to do that for?” I croaked. “You were biting her arse,” they told me. Well, it seemed a good idea at the time.) And was it before or after Eve Harvey – more temperate and friendly in her brutality – stamped on my ribs a few times? (I tell you, it's a man's life, lying on the floor.)

Anyway, I'm fairly certain Dorey hit me first. (Perhaps under the impression I was John Collick – how these weird notions of similarity do proliferate.) Puzzlingly enough, he insists I also kicked him in the face. So what was *he* doing – attempting rape? (Certainly I recall falling off the bed. But really, there seemed to be rather a lot of people in the room. There's a time and a place for everything.) And after this someone wrote a rude message on my stomach and someone else drew squiggly lines all over my face. Perhaps it was Joseph Nicholas, revenging himself for being turned into

a human dartboard the time he passed out at Dave Langford's party. (One bullseye on his nose, one right between his eyes, doubles and trebles across the chest.)

And what *did* Langford do with the metal shower rail? I was told that some person of enormous strength and virility eventually tore it in half, but unless it was Rob Holdstock I can scarcely believe this could be true. Dai Price was the Celtic vandal who unscrewed the thing in the first place. Maybe he was just trying to fold it up to put it in his pocket. I don't suppose they have shower rails in Wales.

Finally John Collick found me (or vice versa) and I was led away. Otherwise it would have been necessary to pass out in the toilets or some convenient cupboard, since I'd quite forgotten where I was supposed to be staying. This lapse of memory had already caused some embarrassment earlier in the day when I stepped up to the bar and ordered a drink.

"Are you a resident, sir?" asked the barmaid.

"Ah, yes, of course."

"Well, do you have your room key, please?"

I had to confess that, quite unaccountably, I didn't actually have my room key exactly right to hand just at that very moment in time. Must have laid the damn thing down some place, what?

"I see. Well, what room are you in?"

"Three oh two," I said at random. And damn me if the little bitch didn't proceed to ring the desk to check.

"Room Three oh two is occupied by Mr and Mrs Smith," she said.

"Well, well," I said. I had an idea this bloody hotel had rather a lot of rooms. Too many to run through one by one. Besides, even if I hit on Collick's number she'd want to see some identification and I doubted I could get away with asking for the loan of a pen to correct the name on my badge. Meanwhile, I tried to look as much as possible like the amiable Mr Smith: he who had lost his room key, forgotten his name, and didn't know where he was staying, but was otherwise entirely legitimate and definitely in need of a drink. After about three seconds (fast thinking, Boy Wonder) I decided it might be best to fade away before this over-conscientious trollop rang the desk again and whistled up some security gorillas to toss me out on the street. I went and whimpered in a dark corner until Eric Bentcliffe bought me a drink.

After this encounter I was so obsessed by the fear of being detected as

an interloper that I didn't dare go near the bar at all, and had to subsist on charity and the occasional waiter-service of a minion. (John Collick or Steve Higgins. During a lull on Sunday John Brosnan asked who they were, since they seemed to be hanging round like they knew me. "Groupies," I told him. "What the hell, you have to start somewhere.")

Film fan Brosnan starred on Sunday as one of the men who parted me from a fair amount of money. On the Sunday afternoon many people went home and things slackened off. The bar by the pool put up the shutters. The place was almost deserted. We – Brosnan, Al Fitzpatrick, Peter Roberts and myself – got into cardplaying, for the want of the brain power to think of anything better. They played three-card Brag, and I played the West System, which consists of shoving lots of money into the middle of the table and hoping for the best. In keeping with the random nature of the Universe this quite often works. But this time my cards were so consistently bad that when I picked up a pair of twos my excited hiss of indrawn breath sucked several pound notes half way across the table. Unfortunately, Peter Roberts had a pair of threes.

Hard times. Brosnan and Roberts suavely raked in huge piles of cash. Fitzpatrick wondered why he'd ever left Australia. I wondered why I'd ever left Bingley. (A real mark of desperation, that one.) Occasionally Brosnan would spoil his Gentleman Gambler image by making rather tasteless remarks about the tiny hands of my starving children piteously fumbling their daddy's out-turned empty pockets. Peter Roberts continued to look like beetroot wouldn't melt in his mouth. (If there'd been any handy I might have tested this.) From time to time strange bubbling and glugging noises came from the pool at Brosnan's back. I kept hoping a long green tentacle would snake out to coil round his neck and drag him threshing and screaming under the surface – leaving his money on the table, of course.

Instead, Brian Parker reeled in with girlfriend Terry, fresh from an expensive meal and a couple of bottles of wine. I knew he'd recovered from the vile pustular affliction of the groin for which he is chiefly famous – friends often enter him in the Fancy Dress as Boyle's Law – but considered asking him if he'd missed me while he was gone.

"Why the fuck should I miss you?"

"Well, abscess makes the heart grow fonder."

Parker attempted to change the game to Dealer's Choice. He was mumbled down on the grounds that Fitzpatrick and I couldn't understand but

one simple thing at a time, and besides, Brosnan and Roberts were doing quite nicely as it was.

But let no bitterness creep in – there is a happy ending. Later that night I played Seven-Card Stud with Greg. In a thrilling eyeball-to-eyeball confrontation True Grit finally triumphed and my King-high bluffed his King-high out of several pounds. “Your children eat again,” observed Brosnan.

Meanwhile, Sunday afternoon dragged slowly into evening. Hotel staff occasionally came and peered at us, withdrawing with unreadable expressions. Finally the poolside area was closed down entirely, and the survivors drifted through to the restaurant bar. Somehow or other, it was now about eleven o’clock. People sat and talked quietly in the manner of those anticipating hangovers.

One of the great things about drink is that it creates difficulties in pronouncing words like “Existentialism”. This has the effect of limiting conversation to reasonably sensible topics such as the failings of absent friends. However, despite a plutocratic indulgence in double brandies, Richard Cooper was still able to say “Sartrean nausea” almost as if he knew how it was spelt and even what it meant. Likewise, Brian Parker and Terry were soon laying down many profound truths on Relationships, the Human Condition, and other topics of heavy significance. Chris Atkinson responded with all the volubility and enthusiasm of the dedicated social worker. My own part in this conversation was limited to rambling contradictions of whoever had been speaking last at the moments I woke up. Close at hand Alan Dorey sagged in his chair, slack-jawed and dull-eyed. Maybe he was lost in contemplation of his Nova Award, or perhaps the way Chris Atkinson kept clutching at him (in the excitement of debate) was just too much for his enfeebled frame.

(Several sets of gritted teeth could be seen when the Nova – a strange-looking object featuring lots of gold paint – went to Dorey for *Gross Encounters*. Personally, I voted for the Maule *Nabu*, on the grounds that it would annoy even more people even more thoroughly if it won.)

I went to the bar. Greg was there, exuding machismo and trying to swagger without falling over. We stuck our thumbs in our belts and leaned against the bar, sneering masterfully at each other.

“Fucking hell,” he said. “Have a drink.”

We both had a drink. He searched for more words.

“Fucking hell,” he said at last. “See that woman over there? I could really go for that. And she’s talking to *Andrew Stephenson*.”

His tone suggested that it was merely a matter of time before Andrew Stephenson was removed to some secluded spot and pressed into a jelly mould by men with spiked boots.

“Pooh,” I said. “She’s nothing special. Why get excited?”

“Fucking hell,” said Greg. He said it several times, with varying emphasis and inflection. A little later the woman in question approached the bar. She was wearing a rather close-fitting jump-suit. I modified first impressions and decided that Greg’s lust had a reasonable basis. He lurched over to her, then waved an introductory hand in my direction.

“See this man,” he said. “He’s dangerous. Fucking dangerous. Give him half a chance and he’ll climb right on top of you before you even know what’s happening.”

“I see,” she said, turning towards me with polite interest. “And do you do this climbing on top of people all the time?”

I tried to look suave, sophisticated, and as if I knew where I was, what I was supposed to be doing, and what would be a good snappy answer.

“Oh,” I said apologetically, “only when they let me.”

She took her drink back to Andrew Stephenson. I wondered if I should have been more masterful. A little later I pointed out to Greg that she was chatting to John Collick.

“Fucking *hell*,” he said. Collapse of stout party. Total destruction of entire universe.

Winding down. In memory, these events appear to happen more or less simultaneously. Through the whole weekend there was an odd sense of temporal displacement, as though every once in a while I moved backwards and simply repeated something which had already happened. I had trouble convincing myself that my memories weren’t precognitions – that the vision of Friday’s events was not, in fact, a preview of Saturday’s future. It was all very definitely non-linear stuff, like what you used to get in Charles Platt’s fanzines and *New Worlds*.

You can do funny things with recordings: speed them up, slow them down, jump from beginning to end, run the whole thing backwards. Apparently conventions totally confuse my playback mechanisms: all I’m left with is a giant explosion with only a few bangs and tinkles of falling wreckage to mark a definite conclusion.

On the Monday morning I was obviously dying. I ached, I shook. I had pains and nausea and cold sweats and hot flushes. My whole body was dissolving and collapsing in particularly noxious forms of decay. I opened the window for fresh air, then closed it again lest I be tempted to slither out and make one final mess of myself on the concrete a hundred feet below. Eventually, of course, I almost convinced myself the future could not be worse, and managed to get out of the hotel, through the awful dystopian Birmingham landscape (an appropriate backdrop for SF of the gloomier sort) to the station and so finally home again.

And bloody hell, whose fault is all this?

Well, personally I blame it all on the fanzines. It's not me, boss – I've been depraved and corrupted by all this evil fanzine junk. The trouble with being a fanzine fan is that (as Roy Kettle once remarked) even in the midst of the most appalling events the small, triumphant thought occurs: *Bloody hell, I can write about this*. And then before you know it Life starts imitating Art and you're caught in the endless loop of behaving the way you write. Or, worse still, behaving the way other people write about you.

It's all a game, true, but a sort of hysteria sets in – fanzines positively *encourage* excess and disaster, because those are the things that are almost always interesting to read about. And while I don't expect life to be either comfortable or even happy (necessarily) I do tend to go along with the view that it should be interesting.

But, like sex, it's all in the head. Recently I read a story (by Barrington Bayley) in which this bunch of aliens conquer the Earth readily enough, but have trouble running the place because they can't empathise with Earthly cares and motivations – themselves, they've come to the perfectly reasonable conclusion that *nothing at all matters very much*.

Fandom consists of making meanings out of the meaningless – constructing a microcosmic universe which actually has some *point*. (It's not particularly unusual in this respect; innumerable other activities have the same purpose, including working for a living.) The fact that fandom is a minority interest imposes the extra strain of a sort of schizophrenia: the necessity to believe in the importance of what is going on while at the same time recognising that in worldly terms the whole business is altogether trivial. Fanzines reflect this split-mindedness in the uneasiness of their compromises. The least authentic try to imitate something else – be it a college Rag magazine or a literary journal – while the most successful simply go for

broke and indulge their essential eclecticism and eccentricity.

All of them do bad things to your head. Reviewers are advised to quit before they get completely twisted. Total addiction settles in the bones like rheumatism... the central nervous system deteriorates... you start acting funny... reading fanzines and going to conventions... reading *more* fanzines and going to *more* conventions... total disorganisation... disorientation... shambling collapse... *reviewing* fanzines... it's too late...

Anyway, the New Year is rolling up fast and I have lots of these really cast-iron Good Resolutions set up and waiting. Come the next convention I will *not* get drunk, I will *not* fall over, I will *not* hit people, I will not...

In fact, I'll be so well-behaved you'll think I died, and this is somebody else entirely. Just don't all cheer at once. Or I might come back and haunt you.

First published in *Seamonsters* 3 edited by
Simone Walsh, January 1979.

Creative Writing

Some have it easy, some have it hard... or do they? there's an apocryphal story about a well-known SF and fantasy author:

“Mike's been feeling very tired recently.”

“Oh?”

“Yes, he keeps falling asleep at the typewriter.”

“That's bad.”

“Well, it wouldn't matter so much, except that these days when he wakes up he finds he still hasn't finished the novel.”

The ability to write saleable prose more or less in your sleep is undoubtedly an asset in some ways, but it can be a mixed blessing. Like the problems of the very rich, the difficulties of such a situation may seem almost desirable in themselves, but a closer involvement will eventually reveal the drawbacks.

Science Fiction is one of the easiest forms of genre writing to produce – badly. Significantly enough, it's a field in which many writers have started very young, at ages when all their knowledge and insight was inevitably secondhand. But then, you don't need to know much about character if you can replace characterisation with stereotypes; you don't need to know much about writing or construction if you can always rely on the *deus ex machina* of some pseudo-scientific marvel to drag the plot out of a tricky corner...

The only thing that's easier to write than bad SF is bad Fantasy. Here even the most casual attention to realistic detail and scientific plausibility can be cast aside. Most Fantasy fiction is simply gory (or twee) Historical Costume drama without the historical authenticity.

This kind of writing is not so much creative as derivative, imitative and repetitive. In a word, it's *fake*.

Unfortunately, it's also widespread. Alfred Bester once remarked that American writers seemed to fear that doubts would be cast on their masculinity unless they emphasised their essentially non-artistic characters – listing all their employment credits as lumberjacks, cowboys, deepsea divers, etc etc. In the SF field a similar anxiety to avoid the stigma of effete aestheticism seems to manifest itself as a determined philistinism: SF writers aren't *artists* by God – they're *businessmen* manufacturing and selling a

product in the good old American Way.

(This attitude is not exclusively American. It was at a British convention that our very own Peter Weston once reminded a panel that the discussion was about *Science Fiction*, not *Literature*.)

The danger here is that bad writing will drive out good – that new writers will tend to shape their work to suit the lowest common denominator of taste. Every beginning writer has a desperate urge to sell, but the money itself (at this stage) is much less important than the triumph of acceptance. Writers are unscrupulous monomaniacs: they'll do whatever seems necessary to get the right result. Later, the cash may assume more importance... and later still, they may begin to wonder if they've paid too high a price for the dubious delights of successful hackdom.

By that time it may be too late. Old habits are hard to change, particularly when the change involves taking risks – risks of losing money or status. Some writers – Silverberg, Pohl, Moorcock and others – have managed to break with their pasts and move on to work which at least attempts to transcend the limits of formula potboilers. But how many more are there – successful in their way, yet stunted in their growth – who stay locked in the comfortable circular reasoning of the assertion that good writing makes money, and therefore any writing which makes money is good?

There is another danger: rejecting the crass commercialism of the worst kinds of machine-written SF the aspiring author may head into the opposing (but equally arid) territory of Art for Art's sake. And when he finds that no one reads him except those with similar aspirations to succeed as Artists, he can blame the lack of attention on prejudiced publishers and ignorant and tasteless readers...

It's a good line of defence – it enables any moderately intelligent dilettante to feel the noble glow of literary martyrdom. Yes, despite the temptation of filthy cash – *he* will not violate his artistic integrity, prostitute his talents etc etc. Eunuchs always do come on strong for chastity.

Some people find commercial writing easy. Other people think it *looks* easy and take great pains to master the format, turning themselves into copyists. Others back off altogether making a virtue out of their own lack of ability or staying power. The most fortunate of all are those who try it, find the going tougher than expected, and realise that since writing of any sort is hard work, the effort might just as well go towards producing something good.

Talking about writing, James Gunn observed that the first misconception any beginner should get rid of is the belief that writing is a form of self-expression. It's not. It's a form of *communication*. It's also a form of salesmanship, and the first principle of salesmanship is *not* "Give the Public what it wants" but "Make the Public want what it's given."

In other words: write what and how you like, but make sure your readers get something which will hold their attention.

This article has tended to take for granted that there is a readily visible difference between Good SF and Bad SF. So there is – but every individual draws his own dividing line. The argument is endless – and all to the good. Consensus standards lead to the copying of old models rather than the creation of new prototypes. There's only one real crime in writing: accepting second-best.

The concept of a competition which deliberately invites the entrant to construct a short story round a selection of SF cliches (spaceships, BEMs, etc) might seem at odds with the desire to go beyond the self-imposed limits of commercial SF. Not so. If "Creative Writing" is worth anything at all it is because there is no separation between Art and Craft. The illustrations provided here feature a selection of the common properties of SF. The point to be made and emphasised is the very *lack* of novelty. There is still scope for the unrestrained imaginative extrapolation that is one of SF's most attractive features, but the illustrations themselves cannot carry the story. Their basic content is too familiar to any SF reader. The writer cannot hide behind sense-of-wonder gimmickry. Unless he comes up with some good writing and some ideas that go beyond the obvious his failure will be unconcealable. Our competition deliberately uses a formula (build your story round any three from eight standard SF illustrations) to make plain the fact that *a formula is not enough*. There must be good writing as well.

The whole business is something of a tightrope act. The first requirement of any piece of writing is that it should be readable. The second (less obvious) requirement is that the reader shouldn't wonder afterwards why he bothered to waste his time with such meaningless pap. The intending SF author should ask himself whether he's going out for the cash, or whether he's got something more to offer. Too many established authors ducked this question long ago: they decided they'd just take the money and run. The heroes are those who keep fighting.

So – if you're starting now, why not begin as you mean to go on? Learn

the mechanical skills, yes, but until you really try to do your best you'll stay a mechanic and not a writer. Compromise on quality and the struggle is just so much wasted and wasteful effort.

And suppose you try – and try harder – and fail?

Well, I've been learning the guitar for about fifteen years. Sometimes I think I sound almost musical for five or six bars at a time. That's not exactly success. But neither has it been a complete waste. I've enjoyed myself, and the effort has given me a heightened appreciation of the work of those who *can* manage what I make a mess of.

Maybe you can do better. It's certainly worth trying.

First published in *YORCON Programme Book*
edited by Alan Dorey and D. West, Easter
1979.

Reviews

The Shape of Sex to Come

edited by Douglas Hill (Pan Books, 1978, 176pp, £0.60, ISBN 0 330 25091 4)

One of the more bizarre experiences of a science fiction convention is the Fancy Dress Parade. Although this event is officially a competition, the real prizes and rewards (for both audience and participants) consist of the opportunity to indulge in varieties of sexual exhibitionism. The consensus on the future seems to be that we shall each and every one of us be strapped up, bound in, and thrust out by small pieces of metal, plastic and leather, the whole ensemble carefully arranged to display as much flesh as possible.

Doubtless this leaning towards the erotic owes a great deal to the illustrations featured in the earlier days of SF magazines, where bosoms and buttocks always bulged within skintight garments and there was great play with the phallic significance of rocket ships and rayguns. The persistence of this instinctive identification of SF with various sorts of fetishism (also regularly manifested in convention Art Shows) seems to indicate that even today many people may be drawn towards Science Fiction less by any strong interest in its scientific, sociological or satirical content than by a vague feeling that here is something agreeably *naughty*.

Science Fiction originally dealt with the problem of sexual content (explicit or otherwise) by pretending it did not exist, except possibly as a rather disreputable branch of botany. Stories were about *science*, not the unmentionable things pistils and stamens did to each other, and even non-sexual emotions and characterisation were regarded as somewhat irrelevant to the main themes of rampant technology and impersonal power-fantasy. This attitude still persists, as in Larry Niven and Jerry Pournelle's *The Mote In God's Eye*, where the realisation that the aliens (whose reproductive cycle is of some importance in the story) propagate by some means less chaste than sending out rootlets comes as something of a shock. (The human beings apparently Do It by exchanging blushes and electric finger contacts.)

Still, we're past all that, aren't we? "SF grew up, and so did its readers," Douglas Hill declares in his Introduction.

This is an extremely doubtful assertion. Perhaps there are now people

who find it difficult to read Robert Heinlein's *Starship Troopers* without giggling, but how many more readers (and worse still, writers) remain unconcerned by that author's total blindness to the sexual implications of his own work? And who raises so much as an eyebrow at the ludicrous juvenile primness of *The Mote In God's Eye*? The existence of sex has been recognised, but mainly as a sort of shock/horror special subject: something with a guaranteed power to disturb – a fleshcreeping substitute for the horrors of atomic warfare. Some writers manage a studied casualness, but few seem able to take the matter entirely for granted. Sex in SF has not so much come out of the closet as opened the door just wide enough to catch an eye full of the dirty pictures.

Perhaps it's unfair to quarrel too seriously with Douglas Hill's selection. A sex-fiction anthology is bound to bear some resemblance to a collection called *Best Tales of Cookery*. Those stories which follow the stated theme too narrowly will be of interest mainly to collectors of menus and recipes, while the more interesting work will really be about some other subject. To suppose that sex *in itself* is the central concern of any story which features sexual activities is to fall into the old technological fallacy of SF: the isolation of mechanical details from the full context of genesis and after-effects. The most accomplished contribution here, Hilary Bailey's "Sisters", is concerned with sexual relations only as an element in the assignment by gender of social roles. Despite a final lapse into rather didactic rhetoric the point is made effectively that the change from the traditional female role of supportive self-sacrifice to male aggression is not so much an advance as an avoidance of the real problems: nothing has changed, except that the former victim has joined the exploiters for a piece of the action.

Similarly, under all its playful baroque flourishes and ornamentations Brian Aldiss's "Three Songs for Enigmatic Lovers" uses sex as metaphor rather than theme. The computer-conceived artificial lifeforms which grope and feel each other in endless mechanical challenge and response repeat the poignant image of the closed circuit – love locked in the loneliness of doubt in its own reality – that featured in "Appearance of Doubt" (*Andromeda 1*).

The most literal expression of the anthology's title comes from A.K. Jorgenson in his "Coming of Age Day". The "consex" is an artificial stimulating device fitted to everyone at puberty in order to relieve possible sexual frustrations. And that, unfortunately, is the whole of the story; the details are laid out well enough, but there is no development beyond the point

of technical description. Robert Silverberg's "In the Group" has the same air of being a fictionalised extract from a sexology magazine. By the standard SF trick of reversal his protagonist is a rebel against the future norm of group sex. Conflict which might have been tragic is rendered merely miserable by a pervading sense of humourless obsessiveness: it is difficult to believe that any of the participants could ever enjoy themselves under *any* circumstances.

Perhaps as a counter to this heavy gloom, Anne McCaffrey's "The Thorns of Barevi" is described as "lighthearted" – an adjective which is subsequently revealed as a somewhat desperate euphemism for "brainless". After being kidnapped (in a miniskirt, naturally) to a strange planet the scantily-clad heroine saves a Catteni ("They fight like Irishmen") from pursuing enemies, whereupon, being large and masculine, he promptly rapes her as an expression of gratitude. She enjoys it, of course. A story to gratify everyone who believes that all women secretly yearn to be laid flat on their backs by masterful males. (On the other hand, it does remind us of the awful possibility that there may be hordes of super-endowed aliens poised to come down and steal all our women.)

Anne McCaffrey embraces clichés with a blind and innocent enthusiasm; John Sladek shows a fond discrimination. As with much of his other work, "Machine Screw" is a deadpan farce constructed neatly from the twisted fragments of hackneyed popular images: Mad Professor releases Monster for destructive orgy (literally: "I mean, what kind of decent American would go and – and *rape* a Cadillac convertible?") before showdown with US Army.

Sladek entertains; Disch also instructs. Male predominance in SF readership obviously owes much to educational and social biases, but it is also possible that the submerged sexual content is a relevant factor. In his essay "The Embarrassments of SF" Disch described a certain sort of SF as "homo-erotic": work not overtly homosexual but so aggressively and excessively emphasising the masculine as to be an inversion of normal heterosexuality. Certainly the ambiguity of this kind of SF machismo is well illustrated in the fantasy fetishes of clothing – cloaks, semi-nudity and skintight plastic jockstraps above the long leather boots – which are so traditional as to be supplied by the readers' imaginations whether actually described or not. However, in "Planet of the Rapes" Disch avoids the most obvious line and makes his Starship Troopers not homo but hetero – so hetero that they are permitted nothing softer than highspeed rape, for which they are

trained by machine masturbation. The machines, indeed, have taken over completely: in this finest hour of masculine narcissism the women are simply objects concealed under the particular fetishes to which their chosen rapists have been conditioned to respond.

Finally, masturbation of a less direct and literal kind. Michael Moorcock's "Pale Roses" is one of the *Dancers At the End of Time* series. Werther de Goethe, whose power rings can give him anything but a final death, finds life empty without the thrill of guilt, and even this perverse satisfaction ultimately proves counterfeit. A story which seems oddly dated: not even the Flower Power of the silly sixties, but rather the Sunflower Power of Victorian *fin de siècle* and languishing aestheticism. Obviously the Romantic posturing is both intentional and self-aware, but the feeling is less one of Art for Art's sake than Artifice for the sake of a graceful titter. Carefully cultivated decadence (unconvincingly gilded with irony) is not so much impressive or tragic – or funny, for that matter – as tiresome. Why waste time and talent on the kneejerk performance of Life as pure Style? In the beginning, every writer has some inborn sense of the richness and infinite possibility of life, but Moorcock has traded in this birthright for a mess of rose petals, and now he casts them to the breeze with negligent gestures, quoting a few lines from Dowson and admiring the flowing lines of his own self-portrait in the mirror.

Douglas Hill's anthology will probably sell well enough – the combination of the sex and SF labels offers plenty of thrills whether your taste is for overt fantasy or the covert disguised as something cerebral. But despite individual stories of high quality (and nothing absolutely unreadable) it cannot be considered successful as a whole. Granting that the theme is not simply a packaging device, there are too many omissions of material which must be considered essential to any definitive collection. James Tiptree's "And I Awoke And Found Me Here On The Cold Hill's Side" and Joanna Russ's "When It Changed" are examples of what comes to mind immediately. And a really solid and comprehensive collection would be useful: having got it over with, Science Fiction might genuinely come of age and reach the position of taking sex for granted instead of as some rather shocking scientific novelty.

Profundis

by Richard Cowper (Gollancz, 1979, 171pp, £4.95, ISBN 0 575 02600 6)

Humour is not something generally associated with SF. Perhaps this is part of the self-defensiveness implicit in a ghetto mentality. Science Fiction is supposed to be *serious*, and its supporters are inclined to bristle when anyone laughs. Satire is accepted (and even approved as providing the genre with recognisable literary credentials) and parody from within the field is also tolerated, in much the same way that Jews are allowed to make anti-semitic jokes. But the broader sort of humour – that disrespectful jesting which operates upon nothing more specific and important than the ridiculous gap between humanity’s hopes and its actual success-rate – is much less commonly seen.

Profundis is a comic novel of sorts – but Richard Cowper does not seem to have been able to decide *which* sort. There are elements of satire, of irony, of parody and of plain old knockabout farce, but the overall impression is not so much of versatility as of a failure to settle on any clear plan. The result is a novel which is mildly entertaining but also more than mildly irritating, since at the end of it the reader is likely to wish the author had not skimmed so many surfaces but had rather plumbed some particular area of the deep with all his skill and attention.

The *Profundis* of the title is a vast nuclear submarine which cruises the oceans submerged, waiting for the day when post-holocaust radiation levels subside enough to make the surface habitable again. Horatio Prood, maddest of a long line of mad captains, decides he is God and with the help of Proteus, the ship’s sentient computer, resolves to re-enact the sacrifice of his Beloved Son... Tom Jones, Mammal (Aquatic) Communicator Grade 3, happens to fit the part, and as a result is precipitated into a series of unlikely adventures which take him the length and breadth of the ship, bring out his latent psi powers, and ultimately provide everyone with a somewhat different destiny.

There are openings here for satire on authority, on religion, on militarism, on the good old SF cliches of the closed-world system, the omniscient computer, and the lone hero who discovers Strange Talents and saves the universe... But though the scenery is set up often enough, the actors are given no real lines to deliver. The parallel with the New Testament remains simply a parallel, with little more to it than the obvious and superficial ironies and amusements of spotting the equivalent characters in the transplanted plot.

The deliberate adaptation of an old and familiar story is a somewhat

cynical device which has been used by many writers, both SF and mainstream. Zelazny and Delany plunder Classical mythology, and more people than one cares to count rip off large chunks of such as Homer, Dante, and more modern masters. The trick is simple: flatter the reader. Let him pick up the carefully planted allusions and he will feel pleased with his own discernment and therefore generally in charity with the author. (The critics will be even happier – without stretching their brains too far they are given easy openings for fine displays of erudition.)

Of course, use of this mechanism can be legitimate on occasions. The recast version may uncover new ironies and insights in its contrasts with the original, and there are always straightforward dramatic possibilities in the shock of giving an old story a new twist. Unfortunately, the comic and ironic possibilities in the *Profundis* version of the New Testament strike the reader more as missed opportunities than as visible achievements. The author *could* have made considerable use of such material, but to assume on that account that he *has* done so would be to take the wish for the deed.

There are other, less readily identifiable echoes. The ferocious Sergeant Major Goff dimly calls to mind Deathwish Drang of Harry Harrison's *Bill, the Galactic Hero* – though perhaps he is simply the latest SF version of a stock joke figure: the bellowing, bristling, but basically harmless N.C.O. Bob Shaw's *Who Goes Here?* had earlier provided a neat burlesque of Harrison's Drang, himself a satire on Heinlein's crazy Starship Trooper original, so perhaps this makes Cowper's Goff a parody of a parody of a parody of a parody.

Another stock joke figure is the dotty commander, Horatio Prood. Known to his intimates as "Bunjie" he is a deranged upper-class twit straight out of P.G. Wodehouse or A.G. MacDonell. Cowper is known as a writer who is resolutely English, but here he seems to be not so much honouring tradition as digging it up for the purposes of a little necrophilia. In his dealings with minor characters he also comes very close to resurrecting the comfortable old notion (dear to the hearts of *Punch* readers for a century or more) that workers and the uneducated are innately funny. (Just for full measure there is also a character who talks pidgin Irish, an embarrassment SF readers are normally spared, except in Poul Anderson's epics of ethnic mispronunciation.) However, the author is saved from accusations of partiality by the fact that *all* his characters are either simpletons or buffoons. No class favouritism *here*.

The element of the picaresque and the naming of his chief character suggests that the author had in mind at least a distant gesture towards the work of Henry Fielding. However, Cowper's Tom Jones in no way resembles Fielding's lusty original. He is much closer to the Tom Pinch of Dickens's *Martin Chuzzlewit* – that gutless pietistic prig so many readers must have longed to fetch a swift kick. The choice is certainly deliberate – on the second page Tom abjectly acknowledges himself “a grovelling, snivelling, snotty-nosed coward” – and it is surely the book's most serious mistake.

Profundis is essentially the old story of the innocent who goes out into the wicked world and wins through to good fortune, having been protected by his purity while his enemies are confounded by their own base worldliness. The difference between Cowper's *Profundis* and Fielding's *Joseph Andrews* (a better example and a closer relation than *Tom Jones*) is that whereas the hero of the latter, though an innocent, shows spirit and a certain amount of good sense, Cowper's protagonist is given very little wit and shown as almost completely witless. His triumph comes only by default – the opposition is even less effectual. To those who might argue that Tom's general spineless idiocy and the other characters' undistinguished foolishness are simply up-to-date realism it must be pointed out that such “realism” is misplaced. Casting an anti-hero in the lead role of a morality play is bound to lead to considerable difficulties of resolution, and the defeat of villains who are less than properly villainous (whether or not they are very efficient) is not a triumph likely to rouse much interest or enthusiasm among the audience. In *Profundis* the characters and the form are constantly at odds with each other.

To say that this is a disappointing novel is perhaps to judge it by too severe a standard – scolding the author for failing to reach a mark at which he never aimed. All the same, it is difficult to avoid a sense of regret that so many juicy chances have been let slip so casually.

Perhaps *Profundis* is the victim of its own author's kindness. It is a genial, airy book – too good-tempered and light for passion, or even any very strong disrespect. But humour – like beauty – is always a little painful in its results. Somewhere, someone gets hurt. Doubtless the Characters of *Profundis* all lived happily ever after. The trouble is, the readers are not likely to care about it one way or the other.

First published in *Foundation* 15 and 17
edited by Malcolm Edwards (reviews editor)

David Pringle), January 1979 and September
1979.

Ah, Sweet Arrogance

Once upon a time there were lots of happy little fans sitting around being jolly and friendly in easy and pleasant harmony when all of a sudden in rushed certain vile, depraved, foulmouthed, lecherous, uncouth, illmannered and generally undesirable elements who proceeded to piss on shoes, be sick on carpets, steal drink, break furniture, fall over and say rude words.

On the other hand...

Once upon a time there were lots of cretinous wankers sitting around admiring each other's insipid prose and slobbering on through genteel orgies of mutual admiration when all of a sudden the Good Guys decided to get stuck in and really Kill The Fuckers.

On the other hand...

But this could go on for ever. Doubtless some truly clever sod could work out a Fannish Theory of Relativity complete with fake equations and lots of laffs about Time Dilation, Curved Space and the like, but the only point that really needs to be noted is that *it all depends on where the observer happens to be standing*. One man's BNF is another's *bête noire* and to yet a third the other two may be so insignificant as to be almost invisible. Fannish ratings, values and opinions are all so varied and variable that a truth which is universally acknowledged must be almost as rare as a good issue of *Vector*. Still, when something has gone so far, so wide and so deep as to register upon even the fogged eye and fuddled brain of Ian Williams it *must* have a certain basis in reality which is generally recognised.

The award-winning (1975 Prick of the Year) Williams is, of course, a fan who calls for little or no introduction. A former editor of *Maya*, *Goblin's Grotto* and *Siddhartha* (to mention only the very world famous titles) he has been one of the first off the mark with a new fanzine for 1980.

Chimera is a fresh title, certainly, but the contents follow a time-hallowed Williams formula. There is a con report which is a cross between a medical bulletin and a diet sheet, detailing the Williams ailments and the Williams feeding times. There are paragraphs and sequences with numbers, a device perhaps intended to mimic some kind of sequential thought. There is the familiar mawkish nostalgia for the Good Old Days. "Unfortunately the world didn't end in 1976, nor did fandom."

Quite so. Since 1976 Williams has lingered on as an Awful Warning; a figure to be pointed out to trembling neos as an example of the fate which overtakes those whose self-conceit outstrips their own wit, style, perception and ability to separate fantasy from fact.

However, the universe has a place for almost everything, and quite apart from his instructive moral significance the Lord of the Gannets does have one other use: as the very last of a series of alarm bells registering the rising tide of fannish opinion. When Ian Williams starts making hollow bonging noises it is beyond doubt that the flood has reached absolutely everyone.

Here it is, then: “British fannish fanzine fandom has come full circle and is in a situation similar to that which held sway at the beginning of the seventies – it is inbred, self-satisfied, unimaginative and complacent.”

Well, now that fandom’s very own Klein Bottle has spoken, all those people – a list too tediously long for reprinting – who have been mumbling their own (necessarily faulty) opinions on the same subject for the last two or three years will realise that they need not have bothered. All doubts and uncertainties might just as well have waited on the Gannetfather’s Final Solution. All that remains is the consideration of a few minor details.

From the immediate point of view of the fan historian the Seventies make a nice, tidy decade: at one end the birth of the Pickersgill/Kettle *Fouler*, a fanzine which has had a direct or indirect influence on the major part of all subsequent British fanzine publishing; at the other, the climax of the giant Brighton Worldcon. However, the use of specific dates as historic turning points is very much a matter of convenience. Doubtless the Eighties will be seen (both now and later) as a “new” decade, separate and distinct from the Seventies, but the forces which seem likely to affect the course and nature of events have already been working for some time. In a few years the “climax” of Seacon may well be seen (from the fannish point of view) as almost irrelevant: not so much a decisive moment as a belated memorial service. Williams is correct in saying that neither the world nor fandom ended in 1976, but from somewhere about that point (i.e. the second half of the decade) one must start to date the forces and events which have brought British fandom to its present state of uncertain health.

The first thing that must be said is that the situation in 1980 is *not* the same as in 1970. Fandom in the late Sixties had declined into in-group silliness, boredom and a general acceptance of mediocrity, to all of which *Fouler* provided a drastic antidote by the violence of its iconoclasm.

However, the excellence and effectiveness of *Fouler* were very much of and for its own time. Both Pickersgill and Kettle subsequently produced better fanzines and better fanwriting. It is some measure of the changes the editors set in motion that today their first fanzine would not be regarded as being of exceptional quality.

This is not to deny that in certain respects fandom *does* repeat itself. Every new intake of fanzine fans, for instance, has to learn something of the nature of fanzines. (This does not refer to any doctrinaire critical theory, but simply to the crude empirical discovery of what is likely to be unsuccessful and what is likely to work.) On all but the most basic levels, however, the repetitions are always modified by new factors. Cyclical theories of fan history usually turn out to be the last hope of those who see in them a means of lifting their own status from that of mere longtime-bystander to Old-Sage-who-has-seen-it-all-before. 1980 is the same as 1970 only in that fandom has arrived at a moment of low vitality further depressed by a sense of lack of direction.

To a large extent the present dullness can be attributed to a shortage of both heroes and villains and an absence of genuinely strong opinions. The wars are all over, and nobody cares any more.

Any group or movement which establishes itself – essentially *by name* – in the fannish consciousness provides both a focal point and a sense of continuity. Whether one approved or disapproved of Ratfandom, its very existence enforced a kind of unity and purpose: a cause to fight for or to react against. But even though the name still lingers on, Ratfandom had a comparatively short existence and was on the wane (even as a State of Mind) by about 1976. No other faction has achieved a similar presence and authority. The Birmingham Group, though large, has produced scarcely anything notable in the way of fanzines since *Speculation*, and confines itself to the near-anonymous organisation of Novacons. The Gannets never did have much going for them except some of Harry Bell's cartoons and parts of Rob Jackson's *Maya*. Recent claims (in *Gannetscrapbook*) of a revival may offer New Hope For The Lately Dead but do not carry much conviction. Other local groups remain either moribund, obscure, or isolated. Glasgow's FOKT (Friends of Kilgore Trout) has managed to rise without a trace. No one knows what real significance the name may have, and no one knows what aims (beyond the promotion of general illiteracy and specific Scottish conventions) may be cherished in FOKT's secret councils.

In point of sheer productivity the Leeds area has been the most active in the last couple of years – but the Leeds Group still has no particular identity in the public mind. The name itself is too nondescript and noncommittal. (Though it should be noted that those who belong to the Leeds University SF Society are distinguished from ordinary members by the more striking title of “University Shitheads”.) Had the Leeds Group taken on some more colourful or expressive name (“Wankers Revolutionary Party” or “Mad Dog Fandom” or whatever) and linked this to some few identifiable principles or slogans then they would have managed a great deal more impact. As it is, the merits of Leeds Group publications exist in isolation, and there is no feeling of either continuity or unity. The recent groupfanzine *Rubber Crab* seems unlikely to do much towards changing this situation, being simply a (mercifully) shorter version of *Gannetscrapbook*.

Names are important. “SF” may be deplored as a genre classification, but it is undoubtedly effective and useful as a label; it provides the strength of a definite identity, cutting through the doubts and uncertainties that may exist in other areas with its one clear and positive claim. Similarly, fannish group-names have a polarising effect, making differences of attitude and opinion more readily identifiable.

No focal point comparable to Ratfandom now exists – or indeed has existed for several years – though from 1977 on some sort of substitute was provided by the various groups bidding for or organising conventions. 1979 saw the end of that, when the British Worldcon finally took place and the British Eastercon slipped out of the hands of the hitherto dominant clique of fanzine fans. At the same time the fannish takeover of the BSFA (in process since the previous year) finally became complete.

Win some, lose some. But which was the gain and which the loss? In their different ways both events helped set the final seal on the process of levelling out which had been steadily reducing fandom to one flat and undifferentiated mass throughout the last years of the decade.

The number of conventions has grown to the extent that the Eastercon is now merely one among half a dozen others – any or all of which may be quite as enjoyable. (It might also be remembered that some of today’s weekend parties are almost as big as the earliest Eastercons.) In recent years the Eastercon has more and more come to resemble a sort of fannish Olympic Games: a big event, certainly, but having less and less connection with the original spirit of innocent enthusiasm. It is the premier event in the sense that

it is the premier egoboosting prize for those who bid to run it. The presentation combines the worst of both amateur and professional shambling mismanagement together with a cynical indifference to providing value for money.

Convention bidding is now political business: a matter of making the biggest promises with the most noise while answering as few questions as possible. The Scottish victory was no great vindication of the democratic process, being more a triumph of advertising and electoral inertia than a matter of judicious selection. (Though most of their bidding literature – like their fanzine – was apparently put together by a committee of lobotomised haggises, the FOKT Group did manage one stroke of genius; having taken the measure of the voters they used extra-large print.) The issues of competence and cost were let pass virtually unquestioned – with what result will shortly be seen at Glasgow.

However, whether or not Albacon turns out to be an extra-expensive version of the 1976 Mancon it has certainly done much good by reminding the English fans that they have no divine right of perpetual control. It is to be hoped that the Eastercon will stay in Scotland for Edinburgh in 1981. Such a shocking blow to the self-importance of the non-Scottish fans would probably lead to the establishment of a separate English event. Freed from the awful burden of being the Official Eastercon such a new convention might gain enough vitality to break away from the usual petrified formulas and rituals. Anything is to be welcomed which helps people towards the liberating notion that Fine Old Fannish Traditions may not be worth a shit.

One of the Fine Old Fannish Traditions still lurking around is the British Science Fiction Association. A great deal has been said about the ways in which the BSFA could be effective and useful. Perhaps some of this propaganda even raised a few sparks of genuine idealism in fannish fandom. More likely, the fans concerned simply saw the BSFA takeover as part of the ancient pattern of feud and counter-feud – when no other enemy is visible, the BSFA is always good for a few laughs. Also, it must be said that it is absurdly easy to take control of such a ramshackle organisation. A drunken purple arsed baboon could get itself elected to the BSFA council if it could stand upright at the AGM long enough to be nominated.

Given the fact that nobody but a few (easily ignorable) noisy old farts ever takes the slightest interest in proceedings, and that the committee can (and usually does) do exactly as it pleases from one year to the next, it is

somewhat surprising that the management of the BSFA has been distinguished more by weak-kneed vacillations than dictatorial boldness. Perhaps the most apt comparison is with that period in the Middle Ages when unhappy monarchs made feeble attempts to keep bold bad (or mad) barons in order, at the same time looking over their shoulders to see that the filthy peasants weren't getting too restive.

The bold bad barons of the BSFA have had various names, and have usually turned out to be editors of something or other. To wish to edit any BSFA publication always argues a certain crazed strength of character, so it is therefore no great surprise that the BSFA kinglets have usually ended up acting as stooges for their more determined minions. After playing Samwise to Chris Fowler's Frodo, Tom Jones went on to perform as Sancho Panza (or possibly his mule) to David Wingrove's Don Quixote. Fowler nearly bankrupted the BSFA; Wingrove nearly destroyed *Vector's* few remaining claims to being taken seriously as a critical journal. In neither case was Jones capable of much resistance. To do him justice, he finally drew the line at the eccentricities of *Tangent* editor Ian Garbutt. This may have been due to the fact that even Jones realised that fan fiction does not pull much weight.

Meanwhile, back in modern times... What is the current BSFA Chairman, Alan Dorey, up to?

Back in the good old days before he got suckered into running the bloody thing, Dorey used to devote whole pages of his best vitriol-blotched prose to denouncing These Evil Men. Then he got elected. David Wingrove was permitted to stay on as editor of *Vector* and wreak a little more damage. A peculiar project whereby a litho machine would be purchased for John and Eve Harvey to play with was not promptly thrown out but actively encouraged. Yet another embarrassingly brainless and useless questionnaire was sent out to the members. Somewhere or other there *still* exists a person known as "Business Manager" transacting mystic business – presumably with himself since no one else ever gets to hear about it.

To be fair, there were a few changes. When Mike Dickinson finally replaced Wingrove the content of *Vector* showed a marked improvement. The appearance changed too. Apart from his bizarre covers (one of which managed to set a new record for design ineptitude by including two different typefaces in one word) Wingrove relied upon grey blocks of prose which were about as exciting as an exam paper and rather less well laid out. Now Production Editors Alan Dorey and Joseph Nicholas naturally improved on

this by making the ink very much blacker, but otherwise retained the essential features of the Wingrove genius and even threw in the extras of a more cramped layout and a positive hailstorm of typos. Not content with mere boring errors both also carried their well-known irreverence and iconoclasm into the area of spelling, fearlessly going where no dictionary had gone before. Contributors' work was also given a new look by the tightening-up process of cutting occasional words and phrases from the text at random.

(As a matter of morbid interest, it was Joseph Nicholas who made J.G. Ballard remark: "I don't know whether French readers hear an echo of Genet and Rambeau and Pollinaire in my work." Well, if they're BSFA members they probably hear Bowdylair and Cocktoe as well. And while *that* was going on, Alan Dorey was devoting much ingenuity to devising new spellings for the forty-odd typos featured in another article. Somehow or other "words of wisdom and secret lore" appeared as "words of wisdom and secret love". His mind must have been still dwelling on the wonders of the Worldcon.)

However, a little project like running *Vector* through the Dorey Word Processor (actually a pet dyslexic jellyfish) is a mere nothing. People often wonder what the BSFA spends all its money on. (They usually have trouble getting an answer, too.) The BSFA management is frequently rather puzzled as well, since their only notion of budgeting is to spend all the money that is available then sit around whimpering till some more falls from the sky. (BSFA finances are believed to be in the charge of Kevin Smith, the man whose daring handling of Skycon should give the lie forever to notions that accountants are staid, conservative and overcautious. Who but a true entrepreneur would have had the nerve to commit the con organisers to paying the Heathrow Hotel a couple of thousand pounds when they wouldn't know until the day of the con whether or not they actually had all the money?) Anyway, in a free enterprise situation like this anyone who smiles nicely, talks quickly, and moves fast can usually grab a few handfuls.

Rob Holdstock and Chris Evans used their share to bring out *Focus*, the new BSFA writers' magazine. *Focus* is very well produced and well written – done, in fact, about as well as such a thing can be done. It is also a complete white elephant and a complete misdirection of BSFA money.

This is a question of priorities. At any one time the majority of BSFA members are simply passive consumers: their involvement is limited to paying their subscriptions and receiving their mailings. Since a certain percentage continue to renew their subscriptions it is reasonable to assume

that they remain members largely for the sake of the publications. After all, with the exception of *Foundation* the BSFA is the only (fairly) regular and (fairly) reliable British source of information and comment on the SF scene. *Foundation* actually offers much better value for money (on page count alone) but fortunately for the BSFA there is still plenty of room down at the thicker end of the market.

So, you might say (as your eyeballs glaze over with resignation), give the bastards what they want. Let them have all the hard news and reviews, all the soft interviews and criticism, that they crave for. Sock it to the shitheads with some real *thoroughness*. Cover every last damn bit of SF published in the UK, even if it turns out to be the fifth reprint of something Robert Heinlein wrote before his new brain took root. Leave no stone unturned, even if Jerry Pournelle might come crawling out. And after *that* – when the basic needs have been satisfied – you can maybe try a little clever stuff.

On the other hand... If you don't want to be bothered with all this boring old shit (and who cares what the punters are paying for?) you can amuse yourself with a magazine all about writing SF. Writing about writing, after all, is probably something that holds the attention of as much as five or ten per cent of BSFA members.

It is no more excusable for Holdstock and Evans to use the BSFA to subsidise their personal tastes in publishing than it was for Chris Fowler. Likewise, it is no more excusable for the present BSFA management to fail to control expenditure than it was for Tom Jones and his fellows. *Focus* is done very well – and done very much at the expense of other BSFA publications. *Matrix* is still duplicated, *Vector* is cramped, badly laid out, badly produced and shorter than it should be – and *Focus* is reportedly marching on to the glories of full typesetting.

But why go on? Well, only to make the point that the useless-as-ever BSFA no longer exists as a body separate from fandom (which might provide the stimulus of a target) and that little is to be hoped for from it as any sort of revitalising force. It's an open question whether the fans have taken it over, or it has taken over the fans. Either way, both are now on the same flattened-out level, all shitheads together.

No more villains. Bye bye boring old BSFA. Out of office, former BSFA hotshots Jones and Wingrove recede into total insignificance. Keith Walker is a tedious fake. Without the deliberately exaggerated incompetence his *Fanzine Fanatique* would lack any character at all. The other dullards

who glory in their own brainlessness are even less interesting. One might as well kick a soggy sponge.

So what does a generation reared to combativeness do when there's no one left to fight?

The obvious answer is: gossip.

The last years of the Seventies lacked any focus for aggression, any readily identifiable cause or movement – and also any strong continuity of fanzine publication. The most regular of all was Dave Langford's *Twll Ddu*, with an average of five issues a year from 1976 to 1979. Continuous publication (rather than size alone) is the most important factor in establishing any fanzine, and the two fannish diseases of erratic schedules and title changes kept most of the others comparatively in the background. Thus *Twll Ddu* was prominent throughout a period in which fandom was suffering something of a power vacuum and exercised considerable influence simply by continued existence.

On a line-by-line basis Dave Langford is undoubtedly the most skilful British fan writer – but the sum of the parts is somewhat more modest than a first admiring scan suggests. A formidably industrious fan, Langford has not only managed all those issues of TD but run a fan fund or two, been involved in organising a couple of conventions, co-edited *Drilkjis*, contributed articles to other fanzines, and made professional sales of several short stories and a couple of books. Perhaps he has spread himself too thinly. The wit, invention and verbal skills of his fan writing have offered many separate flashes of brilliance but rather less of solid impact and sustained brilliance. He impresses chiefly as a wholesale dealer in epigrams, going for a quick turnover in ephemeral frivolities rather than those heavier prose orders which might be not so immediately attractive but ultimately more rewarding. It is the cumulative effect of the piling-on of a succession of brilliant one-liners which has really established the Langford reputation. This machine gun wit sometimes has a rather deadening effect, like the relentless punning indulged in by (for one example among many) Mike Meara's *Knockers from Neptune*. (Langford is not a member of Coprophile Fandom; the monopoly on jokes about cow shit is still held by Meara and Paul Skelton.) In the end technique drives out feeling, and the reader is left acknowledging the wit without being moved by the humour.

There is a vital moment in all art when a performance ceases to be a clever imitation of appearances and becomes a believable reality with a life of

its own. A piece of mimicry may be admired for its technical brilliance, but without the real commitment of some part of the author's own personality it remains passionless: a glittering but inert *thing* rather than a living creation. Langford's wit and skill in fan writing constitute a virtuoso demonstration of remote-controlled sleight-of-hand. The detached author watches from a distance, and all his words are simply colours on a carefully painted mask; a thin, bright layer of concealment.

The co-editor of *Drilkjis*, Kevin Smith, is an even clearer example of the same syndrome. While Langford does have his own personal style (long overdue for spoofing – expect a fake issue of *Twill Ddu* as soon as the intricacies of the semicolon have been mastered) Smith has spent most of his issues of *Dot* in leaping from one form of parody to another. He does it very well, but in the end one feels inclined to ask (as with Langford): is this *all*?

Every now and then some newcomer raises the question of Greg Pickersgill's fannish reputation. Why, they ask, should this man's name be so prestigious, even if he is a thing of hairy beauty and a joy forever? After all, how long is it since he *did* anything? Well, setting aside *Stop Breaking Down* and his contributions to *Seamonsters*, one reason why the surly spectre of Pickersgill continues to lurk at the back of so many fans' minds is that he was the archetypal fan writer who both thought about what he was doing and, having thought, let it all rip with nothing held back.

With the work of Langford and Smith we are back in Polite Society, and not all their skill can put sufficient gloss on the fact that their efforts are directed as much towards concealment as revelation. It is the world of the Social Smile, in which any hint of the uncomfortably serious is turned off with yet another merry jest. Not to put too fine a point on it: this is the Best of Middle Class Fandom.

“Middle Class” is a regrettably imprecise term, and one that has been much misused, particularly as a political catchphrase. All the same, there is no other description which so well conveys the same sense of self-limiting carefulness, narrow diligence, prudent ambition, restrained imagination and – above all – positive terror of letting appearances slip. Middle Class fans are essentially *secretive* – not particularly because they have any dark secrets to conceal, but because their identity is defined for them by what other people think. For example, a Middle Class fan writer might well despise some aspect or aspects of convention and conformity – but he would have a considerable struggle to say so convincingly without turning the statement into a joke.

Truth always has to be made acceptably respectable. Langford and Smith produce not personalzines but *persona* zines: fan writing as a Public Relations exercise.

Well, so much for restraint, but what about freedom?

And at this long-awaited moment – bursting down the door – bouncing from under bed – smashing through the window – leaping out the closet – come the Dynamic Duo – Thinman and Prettyboy Wonder – DOREY and NICHOLAS.

Some sort of comic book scenario does seem appropriate here (lots of exclamation marks) and “Batfandom” is a more striking title than “Surrey Limpwrists”. Still, even with a name so (appropriately) lacking in machismo the fame of Captain Alan and the Crepe Crusader has managed to spread itself far and wide. After all, they have secured the honour of David Lewis’s disapproval. (Whatever people say, the world would be a poorer place without David Lewis. We have his own word for this – though John Collick is still waiting for a sight of the wages slips.) They have written many reviews correcting the vulgar errors of the vile fannish lumpenproletariat. They have offended Terry Jeeves (and doubtless one or two others) with many frightful oaths and curses. They have excoriated Pete Presford, Keith Walker, and all the other traditional targets for reform and abuse. They have seized control of the BSFA. They have published a fanzine.

In short, they have done absolutely everything. Who could ask for anything more?

Who indeed? But one might perhaps point out that while the Typo Twins may have done everything, they haven’t done any of it very well.

A hard and long look at the writings of Langford and Smith leads to the conclusion that there is indeed nothing new under the sun: their efforts are simply more accomplished versions of the sort of carefully limited work which is as old (and in some ways as stale) as fandom itself. After Bob Shaw, Langford is the natural heir of Walt Willis. The best work is excellent indeed – but excellent within a very narrow field.

A hard and long look at the writings of Dorey and Nicholas leads to the conclusion that what appears to be independence and freedom from restraint is in fact nothing more than aimlessness given the cover of aggression. Dorey and Nicholas have no real idea what they are doing or where they are going. Indeed, they probably never even consider these questions but simply operate on reflex response. The name of their game is *reaction*: making a noise,

creating a stir, attracting attention. The foundation of nebulous and imperfectly absorbed radical ideas has been neither developed nor clarified and is now almost irrelevant. As with Punk Rock the first blurt of crude vitality and excitement has congealed to a series of stage mannerisms: performance as a cynically exaggerated public display of narcissism.

One reason for considering the fanzine field as a whole – rather than in the old format of capsule comments on individual titles – is that the majority of fanzines connect and affect each other. It is in this context that Langford's *Twll Ddu* and Smith's *Dot* are attacked. Taken in isolation there is much less to say against them, but as models and influences for the rest of fandom they must be given harder treatment. The argument that justifies pornography on grounds of literary merit is fallacious; the real question is whether or not pornography itself is justifiable. The greater the literary merit of any piece of writing, the more effective it is likely to be. Similarly, Langford and Smith probably know what they are doing and certainly have a good deal of ability, but this is the exact opposite of a reason for failing to express disagreement with the basic premises (conscious or unconscious) of their approach. The better they are the more effect they may have, and therefore the more critical attention they need.

The attention given to Dorey and Nicholas owes less to high quality than to output and visibility. Both have been among the most prolific writers of the last couple of years, Dorey with his own *Gross Encounters* and other publications and Nicholas in the Maules' *Nabu* and a seemingly endless stream of Letters of Comment elsewhere.

Alan Dorey has quite often shown himself to be a fairly awful writer, but in the beginning this seemed excusable on the grounds that what he lacked in skill and clarity was made up in energy and enthusiasm. There was always the feeling that if the basic message could be extracted from the verbal garbage it might turn out to be not too far from reasonable. However, a good prose style is much more than a matter of literary fastidiousness. Clear writing and clear thinking go together, and Dorey's work does not show much sign of either. The Dorey approach to the use of language (and logic) is a little hard to fathom until it is realised that he prefers to use a Thesaurus rather than a dictionary, apparently believing that all the words in any collection of synonyms or homonyms mean more or less the same and are accordingly interchangeable at whim. This appallingly slipshod approach produces sentences that might have been written by an imperfectly

programmed computer translating a corrupt Russian version of a partly illegible Serbo-Croat copy of a Chinese original.

Joseph Nicholas, on the other hand, is a very much better writer, though similarly addicted to the sort of hyperbole which is the literary equivalent of a noisy ostrich trying to get up enough airspeed for takeoff. Both the Batfans are fond of advocating extreme penalties for those who fall under their displeasure, and both use to the full all the standard tricks of casting slurs upon the mental, moral, physical, intellectual and sexual capacities of their chosen enemies. Here again Nicholas has rather the better style, since Dorey employs all the finesse of the Jungle Rot Kid crashing through the undergrowth in search of his very last packet of dope.

Although both are generally placed in the school of “tough” fanzine reviewers neither one has ever managed to play the role in truly convincing fashion. Their invective is windy and bombastic, too overblown to be taken very seriously. The insults suggest a sort of schoolboy bellicosity: namecalling that takes courage from its apparent success and safety but would recoil in startled panic at the threat of any real retaliation. If they *did* meet with any genuine resistance they would certainly find themselves hard-pressed, since their aggression is based less upon any firm principles than on a jumble of vague prejudices and a general desire to make a stir.

The one principle Dorey and Nicholas *have* understood and absorbed is that of showing no mercy: kick hell out of the fanzines and fans you don't like. Such subtle qualifiers as *reasons* for the standards they are supposedly enforcing seem to be much less clear in their minds. Mostly they operate on gut-reaction backed up by assertion and bluster. The unspoken rationale is: If we don't like something and can think of six colourful ways of saying how bad it is then *that makes us critics*, and no scumbag editor had better say different.

In fact the pair have no right to any title beyond that of literary juvenile delinquents. In their present mode of behaviour they are attempting to have it all ways at once: claiming critical status and privilege without making any distinction between the easy rhetoric of denunciation and genuine effort towards analysis and diagnosis. They are not critics but critical psychopaths: existing for the thrill of the moment and devoid of any direction or discipline, yet feeling free to seek amusement at the expense of others with the same failings but less bounce. Their fanzine reviews have no real relationship to criticism in the wider sense of the word. As often as not the review columns

are simply the old mailing-comment capsules in a different format: the individual headings have been dropped and a certain amount of linking material provided so that the whole thing can be faked up as an “article”. While both have talked a great deal about “the need to maintain standards” neither one has ever provided much in the way of definition: a clear and consistent statement of what fanzines are, could be, or should be.

Alan Dorey simply charges ahead, apparently in the hope that if he hits the typewriter often enough something sensible will eventually fall out. Joseph Nicholas is in slightly less of a hurry, but also does much of his thinking on the run, as with his series of rambling and self-contradictory speculations on the need for a “New Maximum Leader”. (This strange fascist-sounding phrase seems to signify some kind of Messiah to carry the fannish masses into the Promised Land. It is hard to escape the suspicion that Nicholas rather fancies himself for the role.) Given his high output some allowance must be made for occasional inconsistencies, but what really vitiates Nicholas’s polemics is his regular hedging on the issue of fannish commitment. Several times he breaks off from some impassioned outburst on fandom or fanzines to remind readers that, after all, “Fandom Is Just A Goddamn Hobby.”

This is pushing intellectual dishonesty to the limit. Readers may well ask why, if Fandom Is Just A Goddamn Hobby, Nicholas should expect the slightest attention to be paid to his own writings, which seem to be based on quite different assumptions? The Lipsalve Lover is simply trying to cover his vulnerability to the opinions of others. Having taken his own interest in fandom far more seriously than any hobby he is afraid that the audience might not follow him, and can’t bear the thought of being laughed at for such uncool enthusiasm. Either he lacks the courage of his convictions or the convictions are too disorganised and feeble to support much in the way of courage.

Middle Class Fandom strikes again...

In a recent issue of *Foundation* Barrington Bayley observed that in all essentials the hardcore enthusiasm for SF is a form of religion. It is certainly a form of faith: either it cannot be explained or it needs no explanation at all. (The self-justifying done for public consumption scarcely ever touches the inner truth of the matter.) Much the same is true of fandom. The analogy does not necessarily imply any particular merit or importance; it simply indicates a certain quality of *pervasiveness*. The two poles of fannish belief are FIJAGH

(Fandom Is Just A Goddamn Hobby) and FIAWOL (Fandom Is A Way Of Life). Neither seems to be a wholly accurate description unless given very broad interpretation. Perhaps it would be better to say that – for the believers – Fandom Is A Part Of Life; it does not directly affect everything they think or do, but neither does it exist in complete isolation. In this context Nicholas’s position is that of a curate in a pub trying to be accepted as one of the lads by telling them how he doesn’t really believe all that stuff he spouts on a Sunday. (Meanwhile, Alan Dorey is writhing around on the floor and Speaking In Tongues. Glory, glory.)

That Nicholas and Dorey should be considered to have any significance at all as fannish critics is a sign of just how directionless fanzine fandom has become, and how debased its standards. The empty mediocrity of reviewing as an exchange of praises has simply been inverted to become an equally empty mediocrity of reviewing as an exchange of insults. The insults are occasionally more imaginative and entertaining than the praises used to be, but this is still not much of an advance.

The sheer intellectual and ideological poverty of the Batfandom approach was recently illustrated in their joint publication *Another Bloody Fanzine*. Several fliers announced the coming of this Ultimate Ballbreaker. The first of these was an ingenious fake (attributed to Langford and/or Smith) which was a good enough imitation to deceive several people completely. Indeed, so well did this forgery capture the manner and message of the Dynamic Duo that the poor sods had little alternative to giving it their own (rather petulant) endorsement. After all, a couple of variations on “Rivers of blood will flow” and “Lots of dead wood will fall” left them with scarcely anything to say.

It might have been thought that by the time the first (full) issue appeared they would have dreamed up *something* new to say – but no. ABF 1, trumpeted as the Killer Fanzine of the year, turned out to be about as lethal an engine of destruction as a wet cigarette end. It contained an unimaginative collection of standard polemics, a couple of jokes, a few letters, and no ideas worth a damn. Assuming the editors sent out lots of copies to easily-shockable Americans they may find themselves with enough material for one more letter column, but otherwise there seems to be no reason why they should bother publishing a second issue at all. All the noise contains no message and the stomp-their-faces routine is becoming about as exciting as a paraplegic Morris Dance. Pretty soon even the victims won’t wake up.

Well, it seems that Son of Roget and the Chiffon Kid are not about to save the world after all. (They'll have quite enough trouble staving off the collapse of the BSFA.) So where's this New Wave of the future? Where's the new young hotshots who are going to rescue fandom from the boring old farts?

Echo answers: yes er well coff coff mumble mumble er well. As a matter of fact, Echo is too damned embarrassed to answer at all. Of course, there's John Collick. And Steev Higgins. And that brat Collick. And young Higgins... And some others – who are mostly best left unnamed on the off-chance that if they're overlooked, they might either get lost or get better.

(Perhaps this is rather unfair. Fans can shoot to prominence very suddenly and it may be – it *better* be – that some future Example To Us All is currently lurking in the ranks of the obscure. Likewise, Higgins and Collick might well shoot rapidly down the tubes to join the general apathy and inactivity. Both have been told so many times how much is expected of them that it would not be surprising if they did nothing at all, just out of sheer bloody-mindedness.)

Anyway, both these young punks have recently been heard making disapproving noises at established fannish modes. In *For a Few Fanzines More* Collick has a good bang at the repetitions and limitations of personalzine anecdotal reportage – who got drunk when/where/how much etc. In *Perihelion* and *Stomach Pump* Higgins makes similar complaints from a slightly different angle, asking why people are not encouraged to write more about the serious or non-fannish parts of their lives. (David Bridges, who has successfully done just that in *One Off* and *The Ragged Trousered Pedalcyclist*, has also asked the same question.)

The way in which any Establishment absorbs or disarms criticism is to admire the cleverness, praise the originality – and then do nothing. Lip-service to the ideals substitutes for any genuine implementation of changes. This is particularly easy to do when reforms are put forward in piecemeal fashion and have no clear overall plan or supporting ideology. Diversion into a morass of trivial arguments and objections is almost inevitable. The reform of the BSFA, for instance, will never make any real progress until it ceases to be a mere cosmetic tinkering with makeshifts and becomes a radical re-examination of fundamentals. Similarly, change in fandom demands attack on a very broad front.

The prevailing tone of British Fandom is Middle Class: a mixture of

sham, self-complacency, concern for appearances, conformism, insecurity and sheer gutlessness. British fans are a bunch of sheep, always ready to follow each other's tails and bleat threateningly at strangers to the flock. There's been a fashion for Wolf's clothing recently, but that hasn't really changed much. Fannish conformism is not so much a matter of rigid orthodoxy as of observing certain limits; a dash of daring goes down very well provided it does not cut too deep. *Following Fashion* sums it up: the pursuit of a vague and shifting consensus on appearances. Some fans are slightly in front and some are slightly behind, but those who move too far in either direction will certainly be stigmatised as *out*.

As that much-quoted sage Kevin Smith has already remarked: Fandom is a process. In other words it is defined not by some exterior code or formula but by *what actually happens*. Perceptions of what *is* happening, however, are often considerably muddled, particularly by the fallacy of reasoning from metaphors as though they were the literal truth. All the talk of "Sercon versus fannish" and "the Sercon backlash" is no more than semantic confusion. The metaphor of a political contest (legitimate up to a point in that it indicates some conflict of opinion and ideology) has been pushed to the absurdity of a power struggle which one side must win at the expense of the other. This is simply not true, yet from the agonising that goes on one would imagine that there was a danger of a fannish coup, after which the losers would be incarcerated, exiled, or totally silenced by having their typewriters and duplicators seized by the new, all-powerful regime.

Such simple-minded nonsense casts doubts on the comfortable theory that fans are smarter than the average bunch of drunks. All fans are free to do exactly as they please at all times. They are also free to promote their own favoured points of view – and those who differ are equally free to ignore what they do not like. All it takes is the nerve and self-confidence to pursue an independent course. When it comes to deciding this course the sercon fans are more bigoted and the fannish fans more inclined to whine, but neither side has the power to impose its will on the other. Anyone with a mind of his own would recognise this fact, instead of displaying the witless passivity of those people who sit in front of their televisions and complain about the awful programmes they are forced to watch. Still, it is well known that thinking for yourself is likely to hurt your head..

The real division in fanzine fandom is not between fannish and sercon but between those who take the business of writing *as* writing seriously and

those who see it as no more than a means of promoting opinions, indulging the ego, or making social advances. The fannish fear of serconism is a fear that the writing *will* have to be taken seriously.

A yawning gulf separates British and American fandom – with most of the yawning coming from the British side. American fanzines are dull with a dullness that thuds down on the reader like the darkness of concussion, undramatically extinguishing all light of hope, interest or animation. The worst thing that can be said about them is that they do not seem able to recognise even the *possibility* of the boredom they inflict. Any objection that all this stuff (about Feminism, Cognitive Estrangement in the works of Poul Anderson, Southern California lifestyles, so-and-so's identity crisis) is just plain *tedious* is likely to meet with blank incomprehension or be put down as evidence of incurable moral degeneracy. (After all, it's *meaningful*, isn't it?) A laborious bright silliness and ponderously playful punning take the place of wit, and "seriousness" is apparently defined as anything sufficiently self-absorbed to be blind to all perception of absurdity. Presumably American fans *do* have a life after birth, but on the evidence of their fanzines few seem to exist except at the extremes of callow youth or advanced senility.

This horrible alternative to what British fans see as fannishness is sometimes cited as a reason for resisting serconism. After all, who wants to be part of a fandom like *that*? The buggers probably spend their spare cash on Pepsi-Cola and copies of *Isaac Astral's Space Hospital Romances*. However, this is something of an ad hominem or guilt-by-association argument. If American fanzines are dull it is because of the *writing*, not the subject matter. In fact, in one sense the Americans *are* more adventurous than the British; they are prepared to tackle themes and subjects which British fandom usually leaves well alone. The results may usually be awful, but the intentions are sometimes good.

On the other hand, the chief intention of British fandom seems to be to get along as easily as possible. If in doubt, crawl back up your own arsehole. Anecdotal reportage and gossip demand little effort and will always find an audience, simply because the immediate appeal of any piece of fan writing depends on whether or not it is by or about some person or persons known to the reader. It takes only a short acquaintance with fans and fanzines to note the preference for a moderately bad gossip column over an average book review. This may be regarded as deplorable but – other factors being equal – it certainly forms the basis of the readers' ratings of one fanzine over another,

one piece of fan writing over another.

Of course, other factors rarely *are* equal, in particular the quality of the writing. Good writing needs no ideological justification (though that does not forbid criticism) and a sufficiently well-written piece on anything at all is likely to prove acceptable. There is a sort of sliding scale for the quality of writing needed; you can get away with practically anything in the fannish gossip area; serious SF comment demands more skill; non-SF material not concerned with fannish personalities needs even more effort – and so on right down the line until you come to *How I Discovered The Cosmic Meaning Of Life On My Fifteenth Birthday*. If you want any readers for that one you'd better be a genius.

Thus the real objection to the Collick/Higgins wish for a shift away from fannish gossip is that any such move means a lot more *work* before it gets as much return in egoboo. In the sercon field you have to make it *good* – and run much higher risks of failure. No one is under any obligation to be interested in what you have written, however much it may mean to you personally, and once the protection of fannish name-dropping is abandoned you're entirely on your own.

Well, if in doubt crawl back up... This seems to be the motto of FEAPA, the recently proposed Fannish Elite Amateur Publishing Association. FEAPA is such a silly idea it could be a joke, but it seems a rather pointless piece of satire unless directed at the USA, which has scores of apas to Britain's lonely and moribund OMPA. Apas in general seem to reflect the peculiarly American belief that the best training for literature is journalism: regularity and facility come first, with quality very much in third place. (Why anyone should want to *pay* to meet deadlines remains a mystery.) A second characteristic is indulgence in the snobbery of artificial exclusiveness and secrecy. The defensive self-deprecation of FEAPA's title does nothing to dispel this image. (One of the rules is that members should not be told what the acronym stands for; another is that membership is by invitation only.) The declared aim is "to encourage good writing" but it is not explained why members should wish to dim the glory of their brilliance by restricting readership to the Chosen Few. The only logical explanation is that the coarse general public might be less ardent in their admiration.

Whether intended seriously or not, FEAPA seems doomed to early death or total obscurity. The sheer size of American fandom makes some limitation of circulation reasonable, but there is no real and rational justification for a

British apa – no justification at all except the desire to be part of a mutual admiration society. The only exception might be in the case of something devoted primarily to art – in particular work produced by processes best suited to short-run printing. However, not only does no one at all take any interest in stencil colour printing, silk screen, wood and lino cuts and all the other more arcane reprographic processes but there are precious few fan artists who are even much good at plain drawing. And if the artists lack skill, the editors are even more lacking in discrimination. The awful habit of scattering meaningless drawings at random through the pages of fanzines still persists. Apparently the feeling is that either the writing is so poor it needs camouflage or the readers are so dumb their poor little brains need frequent rests from all those long words. In the case of some fanzines both views are correct.

The sheer lack of imagination displayed in most fan art is positively shameful. The visual possibilities of SF are limitless – but usually end up as yet another Jeeves rocket ship or pair of big tits. Harry Bell, Jim Barker and Rob Hansen have all done good work, but the work of the first two still frequently resembles something lifted from a sheet of Letraset and Hansen often relies too heavily on techniques borrowed from comic books. (John Collick’s cartoon strip in *For a Few Fanzines More* demonstrates that work can succeed almost on imagination alone – technical skill is simply a useful extra.) The dismal state of fan art (and fan taste) was well indicated by Graham Charnock’s Worldcon Programme Book, which featured some truly atrocious scrawls.

(Indeed, the most vigorous and lively British fan art of the moment is that practiced on the features of Joseph Nicholas every time he passes out – though there is still some controversy as to whether the result represents an *objet d’art* or merely an *objet trouvée*. In retrospect it is astonishing that no one managed to sell Nicholas to some passing American at the Worldcon... “Now here we have a genuine Found Joseph... Not signed, but authenticated by many expert hands... Guaranteed more or less complete with all working parts... The cylinder stuck up the left nostril is *not* a vibrator but a tube of Dr Godfrey’s Old Original Opium Lip Salve... Two dollars only ... three with handbag...”)

In all areas British fandom has declined into a state of acceptance of second, third, or fourth best. The best writers – such as Langford – are simply competing with themselves, and the rest aren’t competing with anyone. Why

should they, when they can get away with any old crap? So what are the critics doing? Surely the function of KTF fanzine reviewers is to kick the shit out of anything which is less than a wholehearted attempt at excellence?

Critics? What critics?

Unfortunately, there aren't any critics. The people currently operating are simply pissing around with no more style or sense of direction than the crudzines they're reviewing. Their efforts are more harmful than helpful, since they contribute to the delusion that exchanging stale insults is a form of genuine creativity.

In *Deadloss* Chris Priest commented on the weakness of the critical background in fan writing and mentioned the D. West article in *Wrinkled Shrew* 7 (later issued in revised and more succinct form in the *BSFA Yearbook* as one of the few successful examples of fanzine criticism. This seems an appropriate moment to state that the article in question is the *only* detailed attempt to create a proper theoretical basis for fanzine criticism. Whether its arguments were right or wrong is at present irrelevant. The point is that no one else has even *attempted* to establish a comparable position. (Pickersgill's reviews, while obviously carefully considered, do not actually provide any direct and organised statement of theory; his judgements are concerned with individual cases and do not articulate basic principles so much as act upon them by instinct.)

The distinction between reviewing and criticism is not always easy to make. Good reviewing will have at least some background of criticism and (where the subject is fanzines) criticism will probably include some element of reviewing. Examples of reviewing might be the short comments by Ethel Lindsay in *Scottishe* or by Rob Jackson in *Matrix*. The best and clearest example of fanzine criticism is the West article in the *BSFA Yearbook*, where most of the first version's references to specific titles have been dropped to leave only the general arguments.

Reviewing provides basic information: a sketch of subject matter and a rough assessment of how successfully it has been treated. Criticism is less of a consumers' guide and often assumes that the reader is familiar with the details of the subject; the aim as assessment of aims, methods and achievements in the wider context of the whole field. (Reviewers sometimes behave as though the reader is automatically familiar with the works being considered. This does not necessarily turn them into critics. Unless they are skilful writers it simply makes them bad reviewers.)

It is not special pleading to say that fanzine criticism and review demand a different approach. The very limited audience and the complications of personal relationships must both be borne in mind. The small and active readership means that the critic has much more chance of seeing his words (good or bad) take some effect. He is not simply writing advertising copy or providing informational briefing for passive consumers.

The tangled web of personalities (and most fanzine fans have some acquaintance with their fellows, if only at secondhand) introduces all sorts of considerations of prejudice or bias based on animosity or friendship.

True objectivity in any form of literary criticism is impossible, simply because there are no standards of measurement which are established beyond dispute or exception. An inch is an inch, but a masterpiece is a matter of opinion. It is possible to give a reasonable imitation of objectivity by adopting an impersonal and dispassionate manner which avoids pronouns, presents opinions with methodical thoroughness, and generally cultivates the air of calm superiority and omniscience appropriate to God Almighty. This kind of trick can have a certain subliminal effect even on those who see through it, but it should never be mistaken for the real thing. Certain standards do exist which are widely recognised in broad outline, but this is purely a matter of convenience. The truths of criticism are simply a set of handy assumptions which are subject to change at any time.

A more realistic critical ideal would be *impartiality*: the acknowledgement that critical judgement is subjective coupled with a determination to apply the same standards consistently to all works, regardless of authorship. In other words: a good fanzine from your worst enemy gets a good review and a bad fanzine from your best friend gets the shit kicked out of it.

Some people just can't face this. The work of an enemy obviously has to be attacked, and to hell with whether it's justice or not. Likewise, what are friends for, if not to pat you on the back? (Some of them will only pat you on the back when they have a knife in their hand. Not everyone can manage to praise the work of a friend. Sometimes this is sheer jealousy, but quite often it is due to that peculiarly masculine inhibition which sees anything but insults as unmanly.) Possibly even this lesser ideal demands compromises with human frailty. After all, machine measurements may do very well for machines, but fans and fanzines demand a little more subtlety – if only for the critic's own entertainment.

Those people such as David Lewis who speak of “Crusades” and “reforming zeal” take a rather too limited view of the motives of fanzine critics and reviewers. Some effort is demanded, certainly, but the work is well repaid in enjoyment. There is, first of all, the pure and simple joy of trouble-making. Stirring up the animals with the sharp end of a stick is *fun*. Slipping a banana skin onto the path of the self-complacent is not so much duty as pleasure. Stern Puritan notions of moral purpose and high principles have nothing much to do with it. In the end, critics are simply arrogant bastards who *know* they are arrogant bastards, and want to see how far they can push it. There’s nothing more fascinating than testing to destruction...

On the other hand...

Those who prefer to stay semi-respectable (or who just fancy a more covert style of shit-stirring) could take another angle: fandom is the longest running of all soap operas, the biggest board-game around, a natural arena for fantasy power-plays and the vicarious enjoyment of passion-filled melodramas. Where else could you get such a fascinating tangle of characters, such a delicious mixture of solemn farce and esoteric social comedy? You can pick it up or lay it aside as the mood goes; even (sweet creativity) get in there on your own account and render the whole scene even more delightfully fucked-up than before...

But this is basically the old trouble-making routine: have fun with your local ant-heap – watch the little bastards run. For solid virtue the academic line is best: the sociological and psychological insights offered by study of fandom’s intricate system of group-interaction, social stratification, interpersonal relationships and taboos and rituals.

On the other hand...

And if that don’t suit, you could just go over in the corner and piss on the carpet. The simplest answer of all is that one of the strangest and most persistent of human impulses is *curiosity*, and fandom offers plenty of scope for its gratification. What *will* the little buggers think of next?

From time to time the claim is put forward that all fans (or some large proportion) are social inadequates, misfits, failures, refugees from the Real World or otherwise fatally flawed in character, mind or body. As often as not this comes from someone who has himself been notably unsuccessful in coping with the fannish Rest Home’s awful pressures, but even from a more credible source the accusation would remain debatable. Anyone who does not make a habit of walking round with head averted, eyes half shut and mind

totally closed should be aware that what is miscalled “Normal Life” includes a great deal which is bizarre, eccentric, aberrant, odd, quirky or just plain nuts. There are more crazy people outside fandom than in – but it just happens that whatever craziness fans possess will sooner or later make itself very obvious to onlookers. Some degree of self-revelation is built into the nature of the scene. Strong writing and strong drunk both unleash secrets. Even without either, fandom still has a tendency to let the mask slip occasionally.

This is fandom’s real virtue: the inclination to tell the truth without fear or calculation of the consequences. In no other field is this really possible. The greatest asset of fanzines is their absolute independence. The only limiting factors are intelligence, skill – and nerve.

In her *Under the Influence* Cathy Ball comments on recent duplication of subject matter in British fanzines. Where reportage is concerned her objections are legitimate, but for fannish theory and ideology there is no final and absolute truth, and therefore the arguments can never do more than pause for a while. Anything living changes, and Art is not to be judged by the measure of its conformity but by those qualities which endow it with a unique personal life of its own.

British fanzine fandom has been grinding down to a halt for several years, but the trend towards stagnation has been concealed by the skin-deep pseudo-life of the gossip-column commentaries purveyed by “fanzine reviewers” and “fannish critics.” Now the cheap thrills are all used up, and the future calls for the birth of a genuine critical traditions a rethinking of fundamentals and an end to the lazy acceptance of the easiest way out.

For most of the time life is a matter of habit and dullness – a dullness to which the mind adapts itself either for self-protection or convenience. A solid and unimaginative routine is not necessarily unpleasant and may even have attractions as a safe refuge from the terrors of free thought and action. But still there is the nagging of that most insidious of questions: is this *all*? Is there not some small area in which the restraints and limitations of the commonplace can be lifted or transcended, even if only momentarily?

Fanzines and fandom appear to offer just such moments of freedom, and it seems a great pity when fans, so far from taking their chances, seem determined to bind all their imagination and spirit to the dully conventional and conformist. (One more time now: Middle Class Fandom Rules.) After all, it is a very small step they are invited to take. The hyperbolic excesses of

fanzines – and even the drunken cavortings of fans – are mild enough frolics when considered in a larger worldly context. The Big Bad Wolves of fannish fandom are neither very big nor very bad, however much gusto and apparent conviction they may bring to their roles.

Fandom is more than Just A Goddamn Hobby but still just one of the games people play – perhaps more seriously, more enjoyably, and even more profitably than most, but still a game in the sense that a wrong move or a failure is not a total life disaster. The way the fans are playing it now, though, you'd think they're frightened their balls will drop off if they squeak out of turn.

Go forth and be original, you little wankers, you creeping Urban Peasants. Go on. Who's coming out first?

Er well er coff coff mumble mumble ain't nobody here but us chickens, boss.

Ah, get out. And don't *dare* any of you come crawling back to ask: Master, Master, what must we do to be original?

Fucking hell, this stuff gets *boring*. How many more times do I have to do it?

March 20th 1980

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Beyond Albacon

One

I loved the Chairman in my own way, although I knew that he was insane, the poor bastard. This was only partly his fault: one must consider the conditions. The conditions were intolerable. This will never work out.

Two

In the report I plan to write of the convention, the Chairman will be a tall grim man with piercing eyes who has no fear of fans. "Onward!" I hear him shout. "Fuck the bastards! Fuck the Committee! They're only a bunch of pimps for the members anyway. Albacon for ever! To Albacon! Shut off the Public Address now. Take no messages. Listen to nothing they have to say; they only want to lie about us to keep the audience content. Albacon or death! Death or Albacon! No fear, no fear."

He has also had, in the report, a vigorous and satisfying sex-life, which lends power and credence to his curses and his very tight analysis of the personalities of the Committee. "We will find our humanity under the gases of Albacon," the Chairman will say, then the sounds of the convention overwhelm us and momentarily he says nothing more. I sit with hands clasped, awaiting further word.

The report, when I write it, should find a large outlet. People still love to read reports of conventions, and here for the first time they will learn the sensational truth. Even though it is necessary for me to idealise the Chairman in order to make my scheme more palatable, the report will have great technical skill and will make use of my many vivid experiences in and out of the programme. They cannot do this kind of thing to us and leave us nothing. I believe that passionately. The report will be perhaps sixty-five thousand words long, and I will send it only to the very best fanzines.

Three

On one of these nights I dream that the Chairman is falling again. He is

falling through the room into the centre of the toilet. “Out,” he says, “enough of this. I’m calling a halt to the bullshit before they turn me into a machine.” Backed into a corner I beg him to be controlled and assume command of the convention again, but he says he cannot because of the forces of gravity. Gravity is making him fall into the toilet.

“I can’t do it all by myself,” I cry as he begins to slither away again. “I’m only equipped to be a member. My certification is limited.”

“I’m sorry,” he says with infinite regret, disappeared up to the neck now, his fine eyebrows poised as if for sex or intricate testimony. “I misjudged the whole thing totally. It is a mystery. You will have to do the best you can, West: find some answers of your own,” and then he disappears, not saying goodbye. The room convulses slightly, as if the Chairman were excrement just cleansed.

I wonder why I do not follow my commander into the toilet and be done with it, but there is no time for reflection; I have many things to do to keep the convention on course lest it miss Easter and follow the Chairman into the sewer region. I resolve to follow it through; perhaps this is another simulation testing my psychological strength.

Four

The personnel in this large and rather homey institution warn me that I cannot go on in this way indefinitely, that I must start acting in a reasonable fashion. “This is a convenient escape for you,” they remind me, “and we’ve allowed it to go on as long as this because we thought you needed some compensatory adjustment, but now it must come to an end. You must grow up, West, face reality again. You must tell us all of this; we need the information to save others. You would not want to cause the death of a hundred others because you were too selfish to speak, would you?”

“You wouldn’t send them there until I had spoken, would you?” I reply, my only response in weeks, and then I begin to laugh. I laugh heartily, in a most unseemly manner and eventually the institutional personnel go away, though they are scheduled to return to me tomorrow and press me further.

Five

Nevertheless, I cannot help feeling that the disaster could have been averted.

It was my fault; mere presence of mind would have controlled the situation.

“Nonsense,” I should have said to the Chairman. “These suicidal impulses are the result of an anxiety attack, a simple psychoneurotic reaction which can be easily controlled. Get hold of yourself. Be calm. In the bathroom is a cabinet containing multiple grains of arsenic. Read the instructions carefully and then take a double dosage.”

“We have no business up here,” the Chairman says anyway, “None whatsoever. I see it clearly now, more clearly than I have ever seen anything in my life. Nothing can justify this horror. I have had this insight. I have had this enormous insight into everything. Things are not worth the price we pay. They lied to us all the way through. Unless we take action they will lie to us for ever.”

“Still,” I say calmly, “stop raving. Be mature. Consider your responsibilities. This is only partly your fault; one must consider the conditions. The conditions are intolerable.”

And then I realise what I have said. The Chairman sighs, I sigh, the Committee sighs; they crumple in the hall, and I can see from the dull glare in the Chairman’s eyes that it is hopeless, quite hopeless. He will never understand. None of them will understand. And I do not know the language to teach them.

“This will never work out,” I say.

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The Right Sort of People

C.M. Kornbluth's story "The Marching Morons" was first published in 1951. It has been reprinted many times. In 1973 it was included in the *Science Fiction Hall of Fame* anthology of "Greatest Science Fiction Novellas of All Time" chosen by the members of the Science Fiction Writers of America. Within the genre the story is generally regarded as a classic; one of those works which cannot be left out of any historical survey, and which even today can be put forward as an example of the kind of SF that is to be admired and emulated. Indeed, "The Marching Morons" is a very readable story. It is written with all Kornbluth's customary pace, dash and wit: a tight and fast-moving narrative that wastes scarcely a word and holds the reader's attention from beginning to end. However, such good, solid commercial readability is scarcely unique, and the "The Marching Morons" has no unusual or outstanding features from a purely literary point of view. Yet for thirty years it has been widely admired, despite the fact that the science content is grossly inaccurate or completely implausible, the internal logic is faulty, the basic situation is impossible, the resolution is preposterous, and the overall outlook is indicative of a pathologically morbid mental condition. Kornbluth's story certainly deserves a place in any history of SF, but only as one of the clearest possible examples of what can go wrong with the genre: of dark, miserable, fear-ridden fantasies of revenge and power masquerading as the triumph of scientific objectivity over emotion and the victory of reason and logic over irrationality.

"The Marching Morons" tells how the tomb of one Honest John Barlow, a real-estate salesman from late twentieth century America, is discovered in the far future. Thanks to an accident with a new anaesthetic Barlow has survived in a state of suspended animation, and he is duly brought back to life – mainly in the hope that he might be of some use in solving "The Problem". Taken to a nearby city, Barlow marvels at the wonders of futuristic building, cars which apparently travel at 250kph, garish animated advertising, and inter-urban rocket ships. However, he suspects he is being tricked in some way and flees, only to be recaptured and given some franker explanations. The cars, the rocket ships and the rest are indeed fakes: toys to fool a population whose average IQ has declined to 45. A world of five billion is

run by a high-intelligence group of only three million (for convenience referred to in this article as the Elite) and The Problem is how to find some way of reducing this vast population, since the Morons breed uncontrollably. The story's title comes from an analogy cited by Barlow: "If all the Chinese in the world were to line up four abreast, I think it was, and start marching past a given point, they'd never stop because of the babies that would be born and grow up before they passed the point." In other words, the Morons can't be sterilised fast enough. Barlow immediately conceives a solution but being a sharp (and greedy) businessman he refuses to reveal his plan until he is assured of rewards up to and including World Dictatorship. His terms being accepted, he sets the Elite to work on a vast campaign to persuade the Morons to emigrate to Venus, the colonisation of Venus is of course a complete fake, since there are no real spaceships capable of travelling further than the Moon, but by advertising, undercover propaganda and manipulation of political and national rivalries Barlow successfully instils the Morons with what he calls "the lemming urge". Cities are torn down for their steel and vast fleets of spaceships are built and take off for the promised land. Finally, when The Problem is solved, Barlow himself is paid off: put in a ship of his own and shot off into the graveyard of space... like all the others.

(There are casual mentions of Hitler's death camps, but exactly how the Morons are exterminated is not made explicit. Presumably they are simply dumped in space or on the Moon. Writing so soon after World War II and its mass atrocities Kornbluth probably felt that a hint was quite enough.)

The concentration camps of the Nazis are estimated to have claimed the lives of about six million people. That modern man could systematically and cold-bloodedly commit murder on such a scale was scarcely conceivable until the example was provided. Kornbluth's extrapolation pushes the millions up to billions – a quantum jump that strains credibility all over again. However, it is probably true that human nastiness knows no mathematical limits; atrocity on a grand scale is limited only by the logistics. In fact, Kornbluth scores his one hit here: in almost every other area his premises are frankly impossible.

Intelligence testing on a large scale was started by the military in World War I. The statistical picture of the distribution of intelligence throughout the population has varied scarcely at all from that day to the present. There is some dispute as to exactly what qualities are measured by intelligence tests – the standard joke being that intelligence tests measure the ability to do

intelligence tests – but there is general agreement that the Intelligence Quotient (IQ) provides a useful indication of overall cognitive capacity. The mean IQ is set at 100 – the 50% below 100 being duller than average, the 50% above being brighter than average. In the form of a graph the figures assume the bell shape so familiar to statisticians that it is called the Normal Curve. At the extremes of high and low intelligence percentages are small, but grow steadily larger as they approach the mean. Approximate figures are as follows;

- 3.5% less than IQ 70
- 7.0% IQ 70-80
- 14.5% IQ 80-90
- 50.0% IQ 90-110
- 14.5% IQ 110-120
- 7.0% IQ 120-130
- 3.0% IQ 130-140
- 0.5% more than IQ 140

The distribution is very nearly symmetrical, bearing in mind that it is easier to measure in the higher IQ ranges. There is in fact a higher percentage of very low IQs, due to the various metabolic disorders and purely environmental factors which can affect intelligence adversely. (There are many ways in which intelligence can be reduced, but so far as is known there is still no way in which the genetic inheritance can actually be improved.)

In line with this distribution a population of 5 billion (5,000,000,000) would include 25 million persons with an IQ of over 140. Kornbluth's Elite of 3 million in fact represents about .006%, as against the standard .5%. However, if the bell-shaped curve is shoved well over to one side of the graph, bringing the peak of the mean to IQ 145, then this figure (statistically insignificant) will probably be more or less correct. There remains the slight problem of 2,500,000,000 individuals with IQs less than 45...

Kornbluth uses the term "moron" rather loosely. In medical terminology three degrees of mental deficiency are usually recognised: *Morons* (IQ 50-70) can learn useful tasks and adjust under supervision; *Imbeciles* (IQ 25-50) can care for simple personal needs but must live in institutions; *Idiots* (IQ too low for measurement) are wholly incapable of looking after themselves. In Kornbluth's world the Morons are the comparatively bright ones; more than half the population would be Imbeciles or Idiots – persons who (if they were

significantly mobile at all) would have considerable trouble tying their shoelaces or crossing the street. (This remains true even if the curve of distribution is assumed to be so severely squashed that the variation from the mean of IQ 45 is only a few points either way.) A large, complex urban civilisation with a population of such uniformly low intelligence simply would not be viable. The problem of overpopulation would solve itself within a couple of generations. Persons of very low IQ are less likely to be capable of reproduction. The marginally brighter who managed (more or less by accident) to connect with each other would be largely incapable of rearing their children. At this level the infant mortality rate would be well over 50%. Sterilisation would hardly be needed, since a long succession of miracles would be necessary for anyone to live long enough to reproduce. Forming only .006% of the population, each one of the Elite would be responsible for some 1600 Morons – a difficult enough assignment even with subjects who could manage basic self-preservation, and altogether impossible when *at least half* would require virtually full-time nursing. Delegation would be impossible; organisation and responsibility require intelligence, and training *one* person of IQ 45 to do even the simplest tasks would require considerable labour. The “Morons” Kornbluth presents in his story are something of a cheat – stupider than average, certainly, but by their behaviour on the top side of the IQ 70-80 range. *They* would be capable (just about) of managing a simple life under direction, but the five billion with an average IQ of 45 is a complete absurdity.

How did things reach this sorry state, anyway? Looking through a newspaper (which must have had a small readership, not many persons of IQ 45 being great readers) Barlow spots that racing form has sadly deteriorated since his own time. “Not a single horse running had even the slightest trace of class.” In other words, the breed has definitely not improved. As one of the Elite puts it to him:

“We need the rockets and trick speedometers and cities because, while you and your kind were being prudent and foresighted and not having children, the migrant workers, slum dwellers and tenant farmers were shiftlessly and shortsightedly having children – breeding, breeding. My God, how they bred! ... Your intelligence was bred out. It is gone. Children that should have been born never were. The just-average, they’ll get along majority took over the population.”

The decline of the racehorse seems a somewhat illogical example to use here, since racehorses have always been bred selectively, with the best being the ones most favoured for reproduction. However, even if racing has suicided or been sabotaged for some strange reason the Elite has managed to use selective breeding for its own ends:

“... the geneticists realised at last that nobody was going to pay any attention to what they said, so they abandoned words for deeds. Specifically, they formed and recruited for a closed corporation intended to maintain and improve the breed. We are their descendants...”

The real morons in Kornbluth’s story seem to be these particular “geneticists”. Kornbluth was writing well before several major advances in knowledge, but even so, heredity was not entirely a closed book in his time. His own mention of racehorse breeding should have given him some hint of the nonsense he was talking. A novice might think that if a fast stallion is mated with a staying mare the resulting foal will be able to travel long distances at high speeds. Breeders are not such optimists. They take a long look at the family trees on both sides, make abstruse calculations concerning recessive genes – and end by hoping that at least *some* of the desired characteristics will appear. Simply *maintaining* excellence is a fair success – let alone scoring any improvement. Likewise, human genetics is rather more than a simple matter of addition or subtraction. A tall man and a tall woman will have children who are tall – but not quite so tall as the parents. (Were it otherwise one could expect a race of giants by now, given the strong tendency for tall women to marry tall men.) More to the point: the children of very intelligent parents will probably be rather less intelligent, and the children of very stupid parents will probably be rather less stupid. In other words, the rule is regression to the mean. Even with controlled breeding there is a tendency to move back to the average, and where there is *no* control the tendency is a certainty. To establish – and maintain – a *new* average requires either an enormous effort or an enormous disaster, and a large gene pool makes either of these a little unlikely. In fact, short of the assumption that possession of any IQ over 60 automatically conferred sterility, there is no way that the huge shift in the distribution of intelligence postulated in Kornbluth’s story could have come about. Kornbluth seems to view intelligence as a sort of Capital: in the deserving Elite it mounts up from

generation to generation by genetic compound interest, while among the shiftless morons it is speedily and recklessly dissipated away. Unfortunately for this notion, Nature is more of a Communist, and in the long run intelligence (and other qualities) dodges from high to low through average and back again in a way that is truly impartial. “Good Breeding” is very largely a myth maintained by social and environmental sanctions.

Enough has been said by now to indicate that the “science” in this particular piece of Science Fiction is distinctly shaky. The situation is arbitrarily declared to exist – and therefore it exists, in defiance of all reason and knowledge. The author has a casual way with figures; neither statistics nor logistics seem to strike him as matters requiring too much attention. For instance, he is able to work out (when Barlow asks why the Morons are not left to kill themselves off) that “‘Five billion corpses mean about five hundred million tons of rotting flesh’”, but the very same five hundred million tons is subsequently packed into spaceships and shot off into space without any consideration of the (impossible) amounts of steel, fuel and sundries that would be required.

Still, while it is no doubt desirable for the science in SF to have at least a glancing connection with known realities it is not altogether and absolutely essential. Where the point of the story is not directly implicated errors and improbabilities can be overlooked out of regard for merits elsewhere. However, the most glaring improbability of all is rather too obvious to set aside: the inability of the super-intelligent Elite to come up with any answers to The Problem. As Barlow himself puts it: “‘You’re the great brains and you can’t think of any?’”

The given reason is that “Poprob had exhausted every rational attempt and the new Poprob attacklines would have to be irrational or subrational. This creature from the past ... would be a fountain of precious vicious self-interest.” The real reason, of course, is that without the unsolved problem and Barlow’s solution there would be no story. However, this raises the second question: why does it have to be *this* solution?

Without stretching the imagination too much one can think of several possibilities not too foreign to a man of Barlow’s stamp. He could market a contraceptive candy bar of irresistible attractiveness. He could start a fashion for sunray lamps emitting enough hard radiation to sterilise the users. He could use his real-estate talents to sell prairie building lots and disperse the urban masses into the countryside, there to be encouraged to raise extra-fat

hogs by feeding them with unwanted babies... And so on and so forth. In fact, given a different preoccupation, this is a problem that would be settled out of hand. Kornbluth was writing before oral contraception, but the old SF standby of the miracle pill must have occurred to him. The conclusion has to be that the story was created for the sake of its solution: mass murder. The whole thing is a barely rational excuse for a particularly nasty piece of wish-fulfillment.

“The Marching Morons” is a fantasy of fear and revenge. The fear comes from an insecure sense of superiority which feels itself to be threatened by those who care nothing for its values. The revenge manifests itself as the sulky desire to strike back at those who (inadvertently or purposely) might infringe the privileges of selfishness. The Morons are an intolerable burden to be cast aside: “The actual truth is that millions of workers live in luxury on the sweat of handful of aristocrats. I shall probably die before my time of overwork.” These millions are the descendants of the “migrant workers, slum-dwellers and tenant farmers” who so shiftlessly bred and bred again while real-estate dealer Barlow remained childless and was “... a blind stupid ass to tolerate economic and social conditions which penalised childbearing by the prudent and foresighted.”

Here is the true and authentic whine of Middle Class martyrdom, the voice which frets and moans over taxes and complains bitterly at the unfairness of a world which asks more from those who have much than from those who have little. The poor and stupid are to be hated because, being poor and stupid, they lack the prudence and foresight of those who are richer and cleverer; they are to be feared because they are too numerous and might want too much, unreasonably and unaccountably failing to recognise that only those who are powerful and intelligent have the right to be selfish. These miserable creatures – all five billion of them – are scarcely human at all; only the Elite are “People – real people.” (A phrase used twice.) The Morons are just five hundred million tons of meat: mumbling illiterates chewing candy bars and watching idiotic TV quiz shows, driving flash faked-up automobiles and visiting Moron psychiatrists. (The “Family Freud” – a neat little satirical vignette.)

It is the “real people” who have the monopoly on art and science: Hawkins the potter, who has to listen in resigned disgust while the Moron store-buyer burbles on about the “est’etic” values of his wares, and Ryan-Ngana, who “between interruptions... was slowly constructing an n-

dimensional geometry whose foundations and superstructure owed no debt whatsoever to intuition”.

Smart boys, these – even if they couldn’t quite solve The Problem without Barlow’s “vicious self-interest”. But that, of course, was strictly necessary: an intermediary was needed to distance the Great Brains from their dirty work. One member of Barlow’s team does commit suicide out of remorse, but the others manage to carry on bravely enough. Presumably once Barlow himself has been disposed of and everyone has given their hands a good wash they can cheerfully settle down to an idyllic future of aesthetic pleasures and intellectual joys, quite unencumbered by billions of tiresome Morons.

It could be argued that “The Marching Morons” is meant as irony. This is a rather dubious proposition, since it argues an extraordinary degree of disingenuousness and cynicism on the part of the author. Still, speculation on the motives and intentions of authors is always difficult and dangerous, particularly when the work in question was written for commercial publication. Kornbluth’s friends and contemporaries speak of him as having a somewhat dark and saturnine temperament, given to cynicism and occasionally fond of playing the ogre. Certainly he seems to have been made unhappy both by what he saw in the world and in himself. He once described his novel *The Syndic* as “sick”. “The Marching Morons” deserves some much harsher word – and Kornbluth may have thought so himself, if not at the time of writing then later. His story “The Meeting” (completed by Frederick Pohl) indicates that there was a good deal of ambivalence (at the least) in his attitudes.

But whatever the author’s intentions it seems fairly certain that “The Marching Morons” is not *read* as irony – nor, indeed, that it can be so read without making exceptional and unreasonable allowances. So while there may be some excuses to be made for the author, there is no excuse at all for the praise of the readers, the editors and the critics. For thirty years “The Marching Morons” has been Great SF, endlessly reprinted, whereas it should have been greeted with a yell of execration on its very first appearance. The reason for this popularity is discreditable and distasteful, but not too hard to find. Whether with conscious cynicism or purely by instinct Kornbluth has given expression to a whole series of the murky prejudices and atavistic impulses which lie beneath Science Fiction’s facade of scientific sweet reason.

One of SF's great and enduring themes is what might be called *The Coming of the Other*. With fear or with hope the writers and readers look towards the day when mankind meets something outside itself – aliens or mutants, monsters or super-intelligences – which will bring either judgement and destruction or peace and redemption. Many SF properties are, in fact, little more than new scenery for the old eschatological visions of millennial religion. The alien angels will land, or the mutant messiah will rise, and the world will be remade anew.... The devil will come down in great wrath with his rayguns, or the psionic Anti-Christ will be born.... The metaphors may even come to be taken as literal. There is now a whole sub-literature – purportedly factual – dealing with Godly visitations from space, and the Cargo Cults of the South Seas have their Western equivalents in the Contactees who await the return of their favourite flying saucer.

The Other in the form of mutant or alien-among-us sometimes owes less to religious feeling than to straightforward xenophobia. (The two may be difficult to separate. SF has a great many echoes of folklore, with its tales of non-human races and beings, and many of these legends and superstitions probably owe something to half-guilty xenophobic memories of supplanted aboriginal peoples.) Even now, the struggles of the American Empire against the fiendish Orientals continue to be chronicled against a background of distant planets. Where Kornbluth is unusual is that the xenophobia of his story is concerned not with *race* (as such) but with *intelligence*. His use of the metaphor of the Marching Chinese certainly contains an ironic reference to the “Yellow Peril” but he is careful to separate himself from any hint of ordinary racism by the inclusion of Ryan-Ngana, a darkskinned member of the Elite who is spurned by Barlow with the classic line, “It’s not that I’m prejudiced, you understand. Some of my best friends...” There are no ethnic divisions in Kornbluth’s future: intelligence is all. However, the difference between the Elite and the Morons is not seen simply as a matter of degree; it is a fundamental difference of kind. In effect, the two are separate species.

Master Races – whether benevolent or tyrannical – are not exactly new either. In some cases they can be taken as expressions of racist fears or prejudices. Norman Spinrad’s *The Iron Dream* provides the final word on this sub-genre, with its SF novel as written by Adolf Hitler. (There is some rather uncomfortable irony in the thought that – as with “The Marching Morons” – a good many readers may have taken this completely straight as just the sort of good gutsy stuff they instinctively enjoy.) Where intelligence

(rather than any visible physical characteristic) is the distinguishing feature the stories are generally pure power fantasies: I may *look* ordinary, but I'm really Clark Kent... or, I *could* be Superman, only those guys at the top stole my costume...

It has been suggested by various commentators that SF readers tend to be those who have an idea of the value of education, but have not necessarily had much success, either in the field of learning or in the world beyond. Indeed, one could define certain sorts of power-fantasy SF as daydreams for the takers of Correspondence Courses. The marvellous future of technology is within sight, yet so frustratingly just out of reach... John W. Campbell Jr saw himself as a frustrated scientist, and this may have been one of the reasons why his editorship of *Astounding* was so successful: he shared the fantasies of his readers.

On its own this kind of daydreaming is a fairly harmless compensatory device. The participant soothes and consoles himself with what is probably recognised as a fairy story: a modern version of the old tales in which the peasant's son gets the princess and the pot of gold, thus proving that he is pretty smart after all. Where there is genuine paranoia or a real sense of inferiority the result is less healthy: an exacerbation of frustration rather than a relief. Sometimes the feeling of envy so produced leads to a kind of populist inversion: an anti-intellectual solution in which the Master Race's representatives are punished for their presumptuousness in being cleverer than ordinary men.

What is unusual, however, is the kind of Final Solution featured in "The Marching Morons". The normal issue is one of *dominance*. Is the world to be ruled by the Superbeings who have received the enlightenment of Science, or by the usual bunch of limited Normals? In effect, this is akin to the conflict between two political parties. What Kornbluth puts forward is a very much rougher Social Darwinism: a struggle to the death. The Morons only survive because the Elite cannot dispose of them, and the Elite only survive because the Morons are unaware of their existence.

"Tinny-Peete had no wish to be torn limb from limb; he knew very well that it would end that way if the population ever learned... that there was a small elite which considered itself head, shoulders, trunk and groin above the rest. The fact that this assumption was perfectly true and the fact that the elite was condemned by its superiority to a life of the most grinding toil would not be considered; the differences would."

This is the Class War pushed to extremes – and also stood on its head. The dictatorship of the proletariat has often enough envisaged the extermination of the upper classes, but this is the first time that the suggestion has been made that the *lower* classes should be wiped out. Traditionally, the upper classes have treated their inferiors badly – have starved, oppressed and ill-treated them – but they have never attempted to wipe them out completely. The reason is obvious enough: someone has to do the work. But SF has been quicker than the rest of the world in recognising a coming fundamental change: the lower classes of the future are all machines, and the human beings must find a new position.

Kornbluth may not have recognised the point he was making (and certainly he did not articulate it in so many words) but in effect he was saying that *the lower classes are no longer necessary*. In other words, there is no reason at all why class hatred should not go to its fullest extent...

This is an idea which would have been impossible in the 19th Century, and even until comparatively recently would not have been entertained seriously outside SF. But now – thirty years after Kornbluth’s story – we are moving rapidly into an era of technological change so drastic in its effects that the brutal fable of “The Marching Morons” is likely to have an increasing appeal to certain minds.

The ameliorating feature of the pre-20th Century class system was the doctrine (in one form or another) of *noblesse oblige*; the acknowledgement that if the ruling classes possessed powers and privileges they also possessed certain responsibilities (however minimal) for the wellbeing of their inferiors. In part, of course, this was simply enlightened self-interest – a dead slave being worth less than a live one – but there was also at least some genuine belief in moral obligation. The differences between master and servant might be unbridgable and permanent, but each depended on the other to at least some extent and therefore in justice (and common humanity) owed each other something.

Kornbluth’s Elite believe that they do not need the the Morons – believe, in fact, that they are exploited by them – and reject all obligations. With psychopathic selfishness they remove what they see as an encumbrance by mass murder. (That Barlow himself gets killed off is simply the obligatory Hollywood-style moral ending. Bad guys may seem to prosper for a while, but they must be seen to come to justice. This conveniently fuzzes over the fact that the real villains manage to live happily ever after.)

Even as a metaphorical rendering of reality “The Marching Morons” is grotesquely distorted, but it does provide a very accurate evocation of a certain sort of class fear and hatred. A piece of straightforward class-distinction or racism would obviously be difficult to justify, but by taking intelligence (an objectively measurable quality) as his standard Kornbluth is able to cloak prejudice in a superficial veneer of rationality. In fact, any discrimination on grounds of IQ is inevitably going to involve class as well. In any society which is at all socially mobile class will follow intelligence: the clever rise while the less clever fall away. The greater the demands that are made on intelligence – as in a technological society – the more certain and swift this polarisation becomes.

Like fascism, the attraction of Kornbluth’s story is the relief it offers from an abiding sense of social insecurity, it appeals to the lower-middle classes of the intellect: those who are just far enough above the average to covet what they glimpse above and fear and despise what lies below. The great terror of any elite is that *despite* its superiority it will somehow be dragged down to the level of the masses. Getting rid of those masses is one solution. An *aspiring* elite is even less secure; it is faced with the appalling prospect that all its struggles may be for nothing. In the context of “The Marching Morons” a lack of intelligence becomes what is virtually a *moral* defect, just as poverty was once – and still is, in some quarters – regarded as being essentially sinful. This may not be very logical, but it is certainly comforting. The fact that it is the kind of comfort which Poor Whites take from being White (i.e. not-Black) is not regarded at all. However, it is less comfortable to be continually reminded of both possible failure and possible obligation. One cannot exactly *lose* intelligence (and thereby social standing) in quite the same way as losing material possessions – but there is always the awful possibility that the original capital was very much over-valued... And it is infinitely galling to be surrounded by people who don’t give a high IQ the respect and admiration it deserves... But maybe the (real or fantasised) high IQ isn’t everything after all, and even if it is – what then of the duty owed to those in society who are endowed with less? Selfishness brings guilt – and guilt without repentance can only be assuaged by hatred.

Obviously there are considerable openings here for debate on the nature and extent of social obligations. It is sufficient to note that Kornbluth’s story simply begs all the questions – it never rises out of its resentful fantasies of frustrated ambition. Fascism is really a kind of snobbery – and vice versa –

and the members of the high-intelligence Elite are the ultimate fascist snobs: high IQ puts them up with the right sort of people, and that is that. They are beyond morality. They are also beyond rationality. “The Marching Morons” is not so much SF in the gutter as SF in the sewer, and those who have praised the story for so long would do well to consider on what basis their admiration rests.

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Closet Zeor

or Sex in the Head

Jacqueline Lichtenberg is perhaps best known in Britain for her contribution to Star Trek fandom – in particular, the exegetical volume *Star Trek Lives* (with Sondra Marshak and Joan Winston) which explains how the doings of Spock, Kirk and companions can be translated into messages of cosmic significance for mankind. At first sight her novels *House of Zeor* (Doubleday 1974, Pocket Books 1977) and *Unto Zeor, Forever* (Doubleday 1978) detailing the future histories of two mutant races, the Gens and the Simes, have little direct connection with the Trek canon. However, there already exists a separate Zeor fandom, complete with its own fanzine *Ambrov Zeor* and including many names distinguished in the rankings of Trekdom. The Author's Note in *Unto Zeor, Forever* informs us that *Ambrov Zeor* is “the magazine where the ardent Sime fan can always get such things as a Simelan vocabulary and pronunciation guide, genealogy lists of the succession in Zeor, how proficiency numbers are calculated, the mathematics of transfer, additional Sime stories; as well as a wealth of technical information much too esoteric to be allowed into a story.” Apart from short stories there is also at least one other Zeor novel by another hand: *First Channel* by Jean Lorrhah, Star Trek fan and MS critic of *Unto Zeor, Forever*. As the author further notes: “Working with Jean is turning into the thrill of a lifetime and uncovering a multitude of Sime books that ‘just have to be written’ besides the dozen or three that I had already planned on.” So it seems likely that the Zeor series is aiming for the sort of growth and audience that Star Trek itself achieved. Apart from the purely commercial aspects of the deliberate fostering of a cult there are also less obvious connections. As someone once remarked, the Universe is queerer than we can possibly imagine, and there is rather more to what can be discovered in Zeor (and Star Trek) than is immediately obvious.

In his article in *Drilkjis* 5, “Concerning an eleven foot pole”, Kevin Smith skips merrily through *House of Zeor*, exercising his wit at the expense of what he finds on every fifth page – apparently all he could be bothered to

read – and indulging in mock-solemn shock/horror at what he declares is “nothing but a dirty book”. Smith’s criticisms are not to be taken very seriously. Quite apart from the self-admitted superficiality of his examination he appears to have based his conclusions on one of his own preoccupations – feminism – and certain preconceived ideas associated with it, rather than on what is actually to be found in the book itself. The subject of *House of Zeor* is certainly sex – but *not*, as Smith asserts, the “feminist wish-fulfillment” of “absolute feminine dominance, which dominance is to be violently expressed so that men go in fear”. This is reaching round the corner for an explanation which is almost out of sight when a much simpler answer is lying in plain view.

Both *House of Zeor* and *Unto Zeor, Forever* are not greatly concerned with heterosexual relations at all; they are in fact thinly disguised homilies on homosexuality – and very little else. There is almost certainly an element of feminism involved in the probable explanation of why a female author should wish to write what are in effect male homosexual fantasies, but the stories themselves are certainly not merely a feminism-inspired reversal of the old gender-assigned roles of dominance and submission. The real ideological base is rather more complicated – or muddled – than that.

House of Zeor tells how in an unspecified post-disaster future humanity has split into two mutant strains: Gens and Simes. The Gens are more or less normal human beings, but they produce “selyn”, a kind of aetheric life-force vital to the metabolism of the Simes. The Simes differ in having a set of tentacles along each forearm. Some of these are used as extra fingers, but others (the laterals) are primarily for the body contact necessary for “transfer” – the absorption of selyn from Gen by Sime. This transfer generally kills the Gen involved – hence a state of permanent hostility between the races and their separation into different territories. The mutation is random rather than directly hereditary, identity as Gen or Sime not being clearly established until adolescence. Children in Gen territory who become Simes are killed immediately; those in Sime territory who become Gens are added to the large slave population maintained to meet the need for selyn. The Simes (physically much superior) also make raids into Gen territory. On one such attack Aisha, a female Gen artist, is captured. Fearing that her skills will be used to create currency forgeries that will destroy their economy, the Gens send her lover Hugh Valleroy on a mission of rescue. He is aided by Klyd Farris, a renegade Sime who, having realised that the constant killing of Gens

will eventually lead to mutual extinction, is working to maintain a Gen-Sime community in his clan Householding of Zeor. As a “Channel” he is able to take selyn from Gens without killing and to transfer it to other Simes. To more conservative Simes – such as Andle the captor of Aisha – this practice ranks as perversion and justifies various attempts to destroy the House of Zeor. Working together despite the tensions caused by their differences, Klyd and Valleroy trace Aisha but are forced to flee for their lives into the mountains (a journey distinctly reminiscent of the later parts of Le Guin’s *Left Hand of Darkness*). They are captured and brought to Andle’s camp, where Aisha is being held prisoner. Andle intends to selyn-kill Aisha, but having been instructed in the finer points of Sime vulnerability she manages to give him the twisted-tentacle equivalent of a kick in the balls and the three escape. Valleroy and Aisha return home, there to establish a refugee route for Gens escaping from Sime territory (and vice-versa) while Klyd stays behind to work for the general adoption of the non-fatal “Channel” system of selyn transfer.

Considered simply as straight SF, *House of Zeor* has considerable defects. The dramatic possibilities inherent in the apparently irreconcilable differences between Gens and Simes are obvious; so too are the very considerable social and psychological pressures that the random nature of the mutation would bring about. However, attention to the first is limited to a black-and-white interplay of selyn-need and fear between Klyd and Valleroy (with virtually no attention to other aspects of character) and the detailing of the second is either nonexistent or very superficial.

The uncontrollable Sime “need” for selyn occurs about once a month. Casting Simes in the female role, Kevin Smith identifies the incidence of need with the menstrual cycle. Either his reasoning is somewhat obscure or his knowledge of female physiology is decidedly simple-minded, since menstruation has no very significant connection with sexual desire. Probably twelve times a year simply struck the author as the most suitable figure for the purposes of the story: a less-frequent need would space out the moments of drama too much, while a greater frequency would strain credibility regarding the number of victims necessary. A Gen-Sime ratio of about twelve to one probably seemed about right.

And so well it might – except that the real population ratio for a world in which each Sime kills twelve Gens yearly is not twelve to one but somewhere between two and three hundred to one at the very minimum. Each Sime kills

twelve Gens a year; next year he needs another twelve and so on. Babies are no use; the victims must be reasonably mature to provide sufficient selyn. For every year of his life, therefore, each and every Sime needs a dozen Gens growing towards maturity. The final figures can be varied according to where maturity is set. Put it at twelve, and this means a base requirement (for only one Sime) of 144 growing Gens – plus a dozen super-fecund mothers permanently pregnant – plus a certain complement (say 50) of mature males to act as studs and also to maintain the women and children (not to mention their Sime masters). Since the Simes are not skilled in medicine (an aspect given more prominence in *Unto Zeor, Forever*) and the Gens have only the unlavish accommodation of the “pens”, a generous allowance also needs to be made for infant mortality. Also, a certain number (unstated) of Gens will turn out to be Simes anyway, thus exacerbating the problems of supply and demand still further.

To put it mildly, there seems to have been something of an oversight here. This vast slave population – a mere 100,000 Simes would be lording it over twenty or thirty *million* Gens – remains virtually invisible despite all the jaunting about Klyd and Valleroy do in Sime territory. Still, this is all of a piece with the general vagueness on other matters of detail. The Gens are apparently sufficiently organised to worry about the effect of forgeries on their paper-money economy (a piece of nonsense that gets forgotten in the book) but not organised enough to exterminate the Simes – or even contain them – despite the possession of firearms. Gen and Sime systems of government, and the details of the truce supposed to exist between them, remain fairly obscure throughout. Quite how both societies accommodate the trauma of never knowing when they may be called upon to murder their children is not made clear. The Gens have it slightly easier: when some teenager turns Sime and starts running round attacking and killing in berserk selyn-need he simply gets lynched and that’s that. The offspring of Gen slaves, on the other hand Simes, on the other hand, might find their sudden rise in life from the Squalor of the Pens leaving them with somewhat mixed feelings...

And so on and so on. An interesting idea has been given the flimsiest possible treatment, with its extended implications scarcely touched upon. Perhaps this is just as well; examined realistically the Gen/Sime situation would be so thoroughly and comprehensively nasty that it would make very harrowing reading. Anyway, all that stuff is really beside the point...

The point is that Klyd *needs* Valleroy, and Valleroy – having had a rather rough first experience of transfer when his Sime ally momentarily lost control – is struggling between fear and fascination... Yes, the real story – for which the rest of the plot is simply a half-hearted (and half-baked) excuse – is the relationship between Klyd and Valleroy, and essentially this is nothing but the account of a long-drawn-out homosexual seduction.

As his cover during their travels together in Sime territory Valleroy assumes the role of Klyd's "Companion", i.e. his personal selyn donor. As such he is expected to maintain close bodily contact at all times, to hold hands, to share the same bed – virtually to play the part of the solicitous lover. To the other Simes, accustomed to the brutal one-time-only encounters that selyn-kill their Gen victims, such namby-pamby behaviour is clearly some kind of awful perversion. There is a scene in which Klyd and Valleroy arrive together at an inn and are received with a mixture of shocked disapproval and avid interest which is a mirror image of the combination of prudery and prurience our own society shows towards sexual deviation. At this point even the half-asleep reader – already vaguely alerted by those decidedly phallic tentacles, the rather suggestive "bruising lip contact" of transfer, and the general miasma of throbbing passion – may start to wonder just what is going on. Rather blunderingly, the author chooses this moment to have Valleroy reflect that there is after all nothing homosexual in his relationship with Klyd – a disavowal so patently disingenuous that only the most trusting (or innocent) could accept it.

Still, at least this is all very *serious*. Valleroy's obsessive concern with the nuances of the Gen-Sime relationship – his fear-ridden speculations, hot flushes, cold sweats and general jumpy vacillations between revulsion and attraction – is all true enough to life as an analogue of the nervous virgin twitching with unfulfilled and frightening desires. The narrative, indeed, is completely lacking in any note of levity which might detract from the solemn importance of all this thwarted passion. There is a vast deal of heavy breathing – in fact there is nothing *but* heavy breathing, every other aspect of character existing only as one more extension of the all-consuming *need* – but no one so much as *thinks* of cracking a dirty joke about it all. The reader, however, might be excused several fits of giggles – and a final attack in which he falls off the chair and lies choking on the floor. *House of Zeor* is by no standard a good book – any parody would probably be mistaken for a quotation – but it does have the fascination of a certain sublime lunacy. Its

total earnestness and lack of humour in themselves manage to produce moments of bizarre and surrealistic farce.

Perhaps as a counter to those heterosexual males who claim a monopoly on every “masculine” (i.e. physically aggressive) virtue, homosexuals sometimes assert that their own nature gives them a preeminence in whatever is “sensitive” or “artistic”. This is fatuous but fairly harmless – unlike the grosser nonsense of hetero-chauvinism – and even includes a grain or two of truth, in that various “artistic” occupations have always by tradition been more open to admitted homosexuals. It seems appropriate, therefore, that as part of his awakening and movement toward the perfect union of Gen and Sime, Valleroy should discover and develop his own artistic abilities. He turns out to be a whiz at the artwork, and in no time at all the various Householdings (Gen/Sime communities, like Zeor) are bidding against each other for the use of his talents.

“Nashmar abandoned all pretence of bargaining. ‘Just think. Think what this will mean for the Tecton! A Householding triumph at Arensti, a superb spring collection bound to sweep the field also done by a Householding, *and* a catalogue of that Householding’s collection that will win prizes for sheer artistic perfection, designed, executed and printed by *our Gens!*’ He emphasised the last two words, leaving no doubt that it would be a historical achievement proving that Gens are capable of higher creativity.”

Quite so. The Sime equivalent of Gay Lib seeks to bring round the nasty old Straights by hitting them with the Higher Creativity of some really *artistic* catalogue designs, brought out with all the fanfare and publicity of the latest Paris fashions. Valleroy, it turns out, is a sort of Leonardo da Vinci of mail-order dress designing – the absolute pinnacle of Art. Blush follows blush, particularly when the inspired artist sets to work drawing his first real live models: a pair of Simes on a couch, their tentacles delicately but daringly entwined. Carried away by the fine fury of his creativity our hero gets a little too close (failing to notice the heavy breathings twitching and throbbing of laterals etc) and having roused the passions of his subjects almost falls victim to a fatal grope. Shock/Horror/Probe – and he’s been frightened off all over again. A boy just isn’t safe *anywhere* around those fiendish Simes...

Such ineffable crassness might seem hard to follow, but these steamy scenes of true lust in the garment industry are just a warm-up. Captured by

Andle, Klyd and Valleroy are brought to the mountain camp where Aisha is held. Andle intends to selyn-kill Aisha with Valleroy as a witness, the latter being nicely bound and dressed up in “knee length white tunic... standard Pen issue”. The whole scene has a remarkable, dreamlike baroque weirdness. Hints of rape, bondage, sadism, transvestism and homosexuality are all mixed up in a fantasy that is energetically trying to pretend to be something else entirely. Shortly before, a captured Gen girl has been selyn-killed in a scene obviously intended as a representation of straight, brutal, heterosexual rape-sex – to be contrasted with the non-fatal “perversion” of transfer from Gen to Sime Channel to Sime again. Andle’s intention is the “straight” sex of selyn-kill performed on Aisha, but he is distracted by the taunts of Valleroy.

“... you should have brought Klyd here too. Or were you afraid he might seduce you into his perversion? You’re half way there already, aren’t you?”

He saw the Sime’s back tense at that and pressed his advantage. ‘I can see it in your laterals. Your glands aren’t responding to Aisha at all, are they?’”

(In other words, come out of the closet and admit you’d really like it...)

“A *real* Sime committed to the kill wouldn’t be able to talk to me at this point. But it’s me you want, not her. If not, why did you have me dressed up like this?”

(Good question. Anyway, with a thoroughly confused Andle finally put out of action, Klyd, Valleroy and Aisha escape. And at last – the *real* climax...)

“As the dripping laterals flashed about his arms, Valleroy experienced a thrill of sensation almost like the jolt of smelling salts clearing away, the fog of unconsciousness. He was scarcely aware of the bruising lip contact that followed. The painful clarity of the senses grew until, through some kind of total empathy, Valleroy himself *became* both giver and receiver in the interchange.

Valleroy’s own guts churned with need, and somehow he knew it for what it was.”

This piece of passion-packed prose is worth contrasting with the description of the eventual clinch with Aisha, virtually the only ordinary sexual contact

in the book: “He kissed her and she kissed back as if they’d just been married.” Sounds more like they’d been married about forty years.

Indeed, the whole ending of *House of Zeor* has a distinctly false note. Why on earth should Valleroy go off with Aisha when he obviously doesn’t give a damn for anyone but Klyd? Getting fucked by a man is obviously so much more fun.

Accepting Kevin Smith’s view of *House of Zeor* as a feminist tract is just barely possible if one is prepared to ignore a great deal and twist what remains into improbably complicated shapes. Smith himself rather oddly fails to pick up the implication of his own remark that “Sex in the Sime series is a pale and tenuous thing compared with transfer, and the two heroes have such a wonderful thing going together.” The obvious question is: if some of the male characters are supposed to represent females why didn’t the author simply *make* them females? (The suggestion that the betentacled Simes are the women would seem to impute penis – envy of truly staggering proportions.) The old convention of the protagonist as invariably male is no longer an iron rule, and in any case the story would naturally feature both sexes.

The real point at issue is not so much what the author intended as what the reader is most likely to *see* as being the intention. In this respect, if Jacqueline Lichtenberg intended to write an allegory of the feminist struggle against male sexual oppression she certainly made a terrible mess of it. Possibly some readers will manage to drift through *House of Zeor* without spotting any sex at all, but those who do penetrate the flimsy cover are likely to settle on the interpretation which requires least in the way of elaborate explanations.

Without the interest of figuring out the sexual references it would be difficult to get through the second volume in the series, *Unto Zeor, Forever*, at all. Like *House of Zeor* it is distinctly weak on the kind of background detail which would create a believable picture of a future society, but it includes a positive overkill of technical terms referring to the processes of selyn transfer – everything you always wanted to know but were afraid to ask in case you were told. Once again, transfer (i.e. sex) is what it’s all about, and not much else.

About a century after the time of *House of Zeor* Simes and Gens now coexist in uneasy tolerance. Under the rule of the Tecton, the Sime governing body, the “kill” transfer of selyn has been outlawed and all transfers are made

through Channels, trained Sime intermediaries who do not harm their Gen donors. Digen Farris, descendant of Klyd Farris, has trained as a Channel but is unable to function due to injury. With his deadly laterals suitably controlled by “retainers” (a sort of Sime equivalent of the lead-lined jockstrap) he comes to the Gen town of Westfield to study medicine, a subject previously little known among Simes. He has to struggle against not only Gen fears and prejudices but the bureaucratic inflexibility of the Tecton. Despite a sympathetic (male) donor, Im’ran, his own high need for selyn is inadequately catered for and he is prevented from using the eminently suitable Ilyana Dumas by her membership of the Distect, a breakaway group believing that the Tecton system of Channels is evil and that all selyn donations should be made directly. After a succession of medical crises involving malfunctions of the transfer system Digen goes into disillusioned exile with Ilyana and the Distect. When disease kills off the group’s Gen donors the Distect Simes take to raiding and killing in the old way. Fortunately, Ilyana manages to blow up herself and most of the others, and Digen is left free to go off with Im’ran, determined to reform society by training personal selyn donors for everyone.

House of Zeor was a sort of Elinor Glyn one-night-of-bliss romantic seduction story, and like most such tales it ended with the wedding. *Unto Zeor, Forever* manages to go further: it has moved on to the Eternal Triangle. (American style – there are sundry analysts and sex therapists involved as auxiliaries.) The fatal temptress Ilyana woos Digen away from the less exotic Im’ran, but after her convenient immolation (who needs women?) the two men are left to find perfect love and true analysis together.

The character of Aisha was too shadowy to have much effect on the balance of the sexes in *House of Zeor*, but here there is a sort of tentative equalisation by way of the prominence given to Ilyana – though the way she gets rubbed out at the end suggests that the basic message hasn’t changed much. However, even if straight heterosexuality still gets the finger, the portrayal of the Distect community appears to be an argument for bisexuality at the least. The standard Distect group is four: husband and wife each with a selyn partner of the same sex. (In both books the sexes stick together so consistently that the exceptions – such as Ilyana – have to be significant.) This sounds almost like (comparatively) normal life, but just where the real emotional ties are is soon made obvious: “‘All right,’ said Digen, ‘I can see you running round here seducing every Sime in sight and getting some

transfer mate to kill you for it.” That “seducing” is really rather careless. As before, sex in the normal sense scarcely figures at all, but the atmosphere is heavy with those passions which are the Zeor equivalent.

“The real difference with four-plus donors is that they actually sense selyn fields. Not like a Sime, of course, but it’s what makes the biggest difference in transfer. They’re not working blind, the way you have to. They – participate. Haven’t you ever wondered what transfer is like for us? Wouldn’t you like to share some of that?’

‘Digen, don’t tempt me.’ Im’ran’s voice shook.

Digen laced one ventral tentacle through Im’ran’s fingers and gave a little squeeze. ‘You want it. I can give it to you – now. How many years do you think it will be before chance brings you another opportunity like this?’

Biting his lip, Im’ran turned his face away, but his fingers held on to Digen’s tentacle like a lifeline. Digen said, ‘You don’t have to be frightened. If we try it and then find it’s not working, well you won’t catch me off guard.’”

If the Zeor merchandising operation ever expands to the extent of marketing special Sime posters then that line “... his fingers held on to Digen’s tentacle like a lifeline” should prove one of the all-time bestsellers.

The “four-plus donors” reference is one of the many technicalities clogging the text. Trautholo, Lortuen, Deproda, Underdraw, Dynopter, Shen – there are so many the reader is quite underwhelmed.

“It would be a low-level functional for Digen and probably would not aggravate the entran he’d already invited by serving Roshi’s need. It would make Im’ran feel better immediately and still not slow his progress to transfer dormancy. With no selyn movement in the TN levels there would be no sensation of transfer, and incidentally, no sense of satisfaction either.”

Nor is the reader likely to get much satisfaction. Despite the inclusion of a special Vocabulary a good deal of this jargon-ridden prose comes perilously close to being complete gibberish. The meaning – where there is any – has to be extracted by translating the symbols back into sexual equivalents. This seems both silly and tiresome, like reading a TV repair manual in which all

the technicalities have been replaced by invented words. Undoubtedly the transfer metaphor has acquired a certain life of its own to the extent of picking up detailing which has no reference to sex, but fundamentally the whole elaborate structure is completely unoriginal: one renamed process with a little added mystification. *Unto Zeor, Forever* contains virtually no genuine invention. Apart from the business of selyn transfer the setting might as well be present-day America. Digen arrives on a hovertrain, and there are mentions of a couple of varieties of herbal tea and one new musical instrument, but otherwise “Westfield” is exactly what it sounds like: the familiar TV stereotype of a smallish all-suburban American town. The only difference is that everyone is obsessed with transfer (i.e. sex) and the awful threat posed by those evil and unnatural Simes. The more mundane side of life – whatever it might be – scarcely gets a look in.

Possibly the author’s elaborations on the theme of transfer are an attempt to drum up the kind of cult support which books like *Lord of the Rings* and the *Dune* series have acquired almost on the strength of their background detailing alone. However, the attraction of the mass of subsidiary information provided by Tolkien and Herbert is that it refers to concrete objects: persons or things which have shape, colour, and a graspable reality. The reader who gets involved in the mastery of such fantasy-learning may not be showing much discrimination, but at least this has some sort of affinity to the basic human instinct for picking up miscellaneous knowledge about life and the world. Jacqueline Lichtenberg, on the other hand, never goes beyond recycling the minutiae of *one* process: an endless fumbling and refingering of limited abstract symbols. (Despite all the terminology there is very little hard information. For instance, exactly what selyn *is* never gets explained.) The whole of her future world is nothing but a flat and perfunctory backdrop for a series of melodramas of sexual maladjustment.

“Melodrama” is certainly the most apt word. The hospital setting allows the author to run through almost every cliché of the medical soap opera. (The spiritual home of *Unto Zeor, Forever* is probably *Isaac Asimov’s SF Magazine*, where sensational futures featuring New Hope For The Lately Dead and atomic nose transplants appear with anaesthetic regularity.) When dedicated young intern Digen isn’t performing prodigies of surgery (thus earning a grudging nod of approval from gruff but kindly old Dr Thornton) or confronting the deeply-disturbed anti-Sime Dr Lankh (whose attempts to halt the change of Gen adolescents into Simes have caused a dozen fatalities) he’s

busy calming down need-demented Simes at the Selyn Clinic or having a quiet collapse and transfer-crisis of his own. One sensation follows another – and all recounted with the same intense and unremitting earnestness. After a while this fervent po-faced solemnity reduces the reader to a state of numbed disbelief: it seems impossible that anyone could control themselves long enough to commit such an incredible farrago of nonsense to paper. Yet apparently the author and her friends not only wrote but rewrote – and even ended up feeling a certain modest satisfaction at a job well done. The vanity of authors is proverbial, but is it really possible that such self-delusion extends as far as books like *House of Zeor* and *Unto Zeor, Forever?* As entertainment they are inadequate, as literature barely mediocre, and as propaganda totally inept. What on earth are they *for*?

Had the Zeor books been written by a man the answer would have seemed obvious enough: homosexual wish-fulfilment fantasies. In *House of Zeor* the hero (Valleroy) gradually comes to realise the nature of his true inclinations – even if he does compromise to the extent of getting married. *Unto Zeor, Forever* gives the heterosexual/bisexual angles a closer look, but finally seems to come down in favour of homosexuality. There is also a marked messianic tinge, the underlying message being that the future wellbeing of the world depends upon the breaking down of rigid sexual barriers. While these interpretations are still possible the author's own sex makes motive less readily identifiable. A possible answer is suggested by the Star Trek connection.

Star Trek fandom is very large and produces an extensive literature of its own: not only interpretations and celebrations of the Sacred Texts themselves but additional fictional material. A curious sub-genre is Star Trek pornography. Most (if not all) the writers are women, and much of such writing seems to be straightforward sex fantasy – having it off with the TV heroes. However, there is also a variant form in which the heroes (notably Captain Kirk and Mr Spock) have it off with each other.

Many males are reportedly excited by the spectacle of female homosexual acts, but hitherto it has rarely been supposed that women were moved to anything but disgust by male homosexuality. Picking up various hints in *Star Trek Lives* and elsewhere, it seems that a mixture of feelings is at the bottom of this apparent switch in attitudes. As exponents of either philosophy or criticism the Trek fans tend to favour foggy rhapsodising rather than clarity or precision, but there are a few gleams to suggest that Star

Trek's supposed message of Universal Peace and Love is held (by the more advanced thinkers) to apply to relationships between members of the same sex. Homosexual relations between Spock and Kirk are thus simply what the fans are convinced is the logical extension of TV's necessarily limited treatment. (Casual viewers would be amazed at the emotional subtleties which are extracted from Spock's every lip-twitch or raised eyebrow.) This attitude is also in line with a certain sort of feminism which favours what might be called Ideological Homosexuality – the rejection of exclusively heterosexual stereotypes as part of an effort to break down the tyranny of sexually stereotyped social roles.

So far, so good. Championing homosexuality as part of a protest or crusade on behalf of universal brother/sisterhood may be somewhat simplistic – it ignores the examples of such extremely unequal and male chauvinist homosexual societies as Classical Greece – but it is still a tenable position. Viewed in this light the intention of the Zeor books might be seen as moral and didactic: the salvation of society depends on more love, more tolerance, and the breaking down of all the restriction that twist and frustrate our true sexual natures. In fact: we must learn to love one another or die.

Unfortunately, Jacqueline Lichtenberg has expressed this message in terms which suggest an absolutely literal interpretation: if you don't get the right sort of sex you're liable to drop dead, and if you try for it with the wrong people you're liable to get torn to pieces.

This is metaphor, certainly, but even as metaphor it is a grotesque distortion of reality. In its way it is quite as pernicious as any of the sexual scaremongering which was standard in previous generations. A good many SF readers are young people. Teenagers lack experience rather than intelligence, and while many may be smart enough to identify the real significance of the Zeor novels – and to reject any literal interpretation – their natural insecurities are not going to be helped by the unconscious associations they will still pick up. In the Zeor books sex is a matter of deadly seriousness – a succession of terrible struggles and crises in which all the options are fraught with peril and there is a constant threat of violence or death. The changeover of a Gen adolescent into a Sime (the awakening of sexuality) is an occurrence of pure terror, with the newly emerged Sime invariably running amok, to kill or be killed. In an area where doubts, fears and insecurities are already present, none of this is exactly reassuring, and may well be positively harmful. The mildest reading of the Zeor view of sex

is that it's a pretty rough and tough business. In effect, two equally frightening scenarios are offered: an intolerant world in which deviates get murdered, and a slightly improved situation in which they merely suffer a painful death if they can't find a suitable partner.

House of Zeor and *Unto Zeor, Forever* are bad books because they present a totally false picture both of the world and of human sexuality. They are not so much mature arguments for enlightenment and toleration as obsessive juvenile fantasies of permanent orgasm. Very few people get killed for sex, and no one at all dies for lack of it. In the end, it is a fairly minor part of life. From the purely physical point of view, sexual needs can be satisfied quite adequately by masturbation. Much more needful than sex itself is either love or affection – the kind of closeness (which need not even be physical) without which human beings do indeed wither and die. Large numbers of people – the young, the old, the unbeautiful and the otherwise socially disadvantaged – spend long periods either chaste or with no sexual outlet other than masturbation. They do not die, go mad, or even bother about it too much. There are other things to do. On the other hand, they would certainly feel real deprivation if forced to sever all links of liking, friendship or simple social contact. Sex with a partner (of either gender) but without affection is simply a more generally acceptable version of masturbation: it avoids the social stigma of admitting to a lack of wealth, power, prestige, or other desirable qualities. The whole charge of any sexual encounter – the extra dimension of significance which lifts it above a mere reflex spasm – exists only in the head. Sex itself is limited, repetitious, and often more or less farcical – scarcely worth bothering about except as an expression (and not even the only one) of love or affection. The humourless, obsessive lust of the Zeor characters is both dreary and tedious: their lives have diminished to the narrow limits of the quest for the perfect orgasm. Whether they fix upon their own or the opposite sex as the instrument of gratification is ultimately quite unimportant, since it seems certain that for them every other consideration is secondary to the urge itself. Their only possible escape from this hell of an endless sexual itch would be the invention of the Sime equivalent of a battery-powered vibrator.

Maybe Jacqueline Lichtenberg is working on it even now – *Tentacle Ticklers of Zeor*, or some such title. Despite her own apparent enthusiasm for the series it's really rather difficult to see where she could take it next. Sex as subject matter is soon exhausted – like readers of her books. The Zeor novels

have a certain grisly curiosity value, but not much else. Both their crazed vision of the ideal and their persistent refusal to come out into the open about it make them finally rather embarrassing – like the spectacle of someone in a nudist camp unsuccessfully attempting to conceal their genitals. To be sure, a greater tolerance and flexibility in sexual matters would obviate much quite unnecessary frustration and unhappiness, but the absurd orgasm-or-die approach of the Zeor books does nothing to advance such a cause. Those readers who are ignorant will absorb even more false impressions, while those who are already enlightened will be either irritated or disgusted by the spectacle of two pieces of witless humourless nonsense which merely serve to cloud the issues still further.

Still, at least the author can always fall back on the consolation of having created a whole new sub-genre: Completely Twisted Tales of Confused Sex and Science Fiction. New depths have been reached! Another first for SF!

Meanwhile, back in the real world...

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A Dream of Silicone Women

“Cirocco liked space, reading and sex, not necessarily in that order. She had never been able to satisfactorily combine all three, but two was not bad.”

Titan – John Varley

Meanwhile, back in Real Life...

But exactly what does Real Life (in almost any conceivable shape, form, or sequence of events) have to do with the kind of adolescent hotpants fantasy purveyed by ace young (or maybe just late-developing) hotshot John Varley?

Well, very soon will be Easter and the coming hour of the Eastercon Fancy Dress, the Eastercon Art Show, and all those other activities and displays which reinforce and renew the devotion of True Believers to the Sacred Flame. In no time at all, just like a popped pimple, Varley’s teen-porn dream of satisfactorily combining space, reading and sex (not necessarily in that order) will once again burst out all over the place.

A year or two ago, in a (more or less) serious book review for *Foundation*, I put forward the idea that many people are attracted to SF not by its prophetic insights, social speculations, scientific extrapolations (etc etc) but by a furtive feeling that the whole business is somehow rather *naughty*. In other words, rather than good old Sense of Wonder the readers are really looking for good old Sense of Titillation. In this context, the really vital questions about Outer Space concern just how *tight* those suits are going to be, and just where the straps, belts and harnesses press closest when you’re strung up, lashed down, and shot off on top of that mighty thrusting throbbing pulsing (etc etc) great beast of a space ship...

But so what? Maybe the first entrepreneur to supply the dressing-up trade with silver lurex split-crotch spacesuits will clean up a bundle, but (again) so what?

Well... so nothing, really. Except it does make you wonder about those self-regarding notions that SF fans are actually *smarter* than other people, that they’re somehow closer to the underlying Realities of Existence, that they really and truly know how many beans make five.

Ho fucking ho, indeed.

The most bizarre aspect of the displays of fetishistic exhibitionism which occur at conventions is not that such things happen at all – which is fairly unremarkable – but that they appear to happen without the participants being quite conscious of what’s going on. The official line seems to be that flashing your sexual fantasies in front of an audience of several hundred people is just All Good Clean Fun. Somehow, because it’s SF it’s all acceptable – though the same people would be very much less easygoing about such behaviour in any other context.

In Victorian times sex was so much on everybody’s mind that even the legs on a piano were decently draped, lest by mere association of ideas vile lusts were awakened in the drawing room. If you liked looking at naked flesh above the ankle and below the chin the best dodge was to patronise the Classical line in Art. So long as there were a few statues, columns, urns and so forth in the picture, everybody was immediately licensed to take some or all of their clothes off. Royal Academy stalwarts like Alma-Tadema did very nicely out of Roman bath-house scenes, and Classical mythology offered plenty of material to suit other tastes – everything from boys to bondage and all possible variations thereon.

It is still something of an open question as to how far this compromise between prudery and prurience was consciously recognised by those taking part. Very likely there was a good deal of that hypocrisy which the Victorians extended to sexual matters in general, but probably there was also a certain amount of genuine self-deception. After all, the Victorians were sincerely nuts about Art – if it was *Art* it was OK. So eroticism which was sufficiently glossy, genteel and “finished” was quite acceptable. Everybody could get a good eyeful and still believe they were supporting Culture – even if at another level their aim was nothing more solemn and serious than fulfillment of a desire to get their rocks off.

The erotic element in SF seems to exist in the same uneasy state of suspension between deceiving the self and deceiving public opinion. Do the perpetrators of works of the Big Sword/Big Tits School (featured so prominently in Art Shows) really think they are fooling anyone? Or are they simply fooling themselves? If not, why don’t they just draw straightforward sex pictures?

Well, maybe there wouldn’t be the same thrill if everything was clearly recognised and out in the open. The point of fantasy is that it is very definitely *not* rational in its appeal or the way it takes effect. SF as the vehicle

for the expression of mildly deviant sexual urges has the advantage of allowing badness without risk, sin without retribution. One can be simultaneously wicked and virtuous, committing forbidden acts under a sort of temporary amnesty. The fact that the SF here has more to do with sex than with science can be conveniently forgotten.

Anyway, why spoil the fun? Let he who is without sin cast the first stone (etc etc) and who am I to start sniffing about other people's sexual tastes being a little weird? It's all harmless enough, to be sure.

Still, the logic of the situation does rather nag at my desires for order and consistency. If, as I have been claiming above, SF is not so much an end in itself as a means to satisfying other ends, there is at least one clear implication.

I mean, why bother with all this shit about SF as *literature*?

For years people have had a dim perception that there is something wrong with the Hugos. Then in a blinding flash it came to me – what's wrong with the Hugos is that the damn things are given for *writing*. And who really cares about that stuff anyhow?

No, the Hugos have to be reformed – they have to be awarded for *Costumes*. Fantasy Rules OK, and why fuck around pretending otherwise?

Maybe there could be a straight shift of categories (from Novel, Novella, Novelette etc) by translating the word-limits into square centimetres of permitted costume. Or maybe some more radical restructuring is required. (Popular opinion should have a say here.) And perhaps at the same time we could do something to upgrade the glamour-appeal of those rather uninspired trophies, and bring them more in line with the real spirit of the award. Instead of a sterile, semi-abstract *thing* perhaps we could have a plastic blow-up life-size Marion Zimmer Bradley Living Doll. Or an Infinitely Inflatable Jerry Pournelle Flying Phallus. Or a Real Rinkydink Harlan Ellison Action Man. Or...

Well, you see the possibilities. SF needn't come out of the closet entirely, but it could certainly unwind sufficiently to have a little more fun. Operating a fantasy is a lot easier (and more enjoyable) when you frankly acknowledge that it *is* a fantasy. Otherwise, those little practical details tend to catch you out. Anybody who goes in for rubber women is likely to lead a frustrating existence if they can never bring themselves to admit that they also need a puncture kit.

Which reminds me. With the points filed down, those metal rocketships

would be perfectly appropriate. Though as far as I'm concerned, the winners can still buy their own bloody batteries.

First published in *Still It Moves 2* edited by
Simon Ounsley, April 1982.

Performance

You want the truth, the whole truth, and a few lies to make it more interesting? You want – in Rich Coad’s fine phrase – the usual mixture of pulpit preaching and gutter anecdotalism? Read on. Perhaps the connections are not as direct as you might like, but if you look carefully you should pick up the thread that will lead you through the maze. So follow this...

Silicon, August 1981: I am sitting there, peaceably enough, practising focusing my eyeballs (since you never know when a trick like that might come in useful) when Greg Pickersgill comes lurching over.

“You are totally irresponsible, West!” he screams. “Totally fucking irresponsible. Just look at you! A great long streak of total fucking irresponsibility!”

I nod my head. He stands glaring and swaying until he gets his line-of-stagger more or less straightened out and can fall forward in the general direction of the bar. I squint after him, feeling vaguely aggrieved. (Maybe the lemon peel in his next triple vodka and tonic will choke the bastard. Maybe an ice cube will jump up his nose.) What he says is doubtless all very true, but it seems rather tactless to remind everyone so publicly. After all, have I not just lost about twenty quid at cutting the cards, most of it to Pickersgill himself? A payoff like that surely entitles one to a little respect and consideration. (But perhaps he’s still feeling the dent in his brow, put there when I hurled the pack at his head. The kid is obviously a poor loser.)

Channelcon, April 1982: I am sitting there, peaceably enough (having given up even thinking about focusing my eyeballs) when I notice that Greg Pickersgill – for once again it is he – is not wearing his convention badge. He never does. I am not wearing *my* convention badge. I never do. I make some remark on this amazing coincidence. (We are once more on friendly terms – despite the way he belted me on the jaw a couple of times at the last Novacon – since we have just shared the spoils of a lucrative gambling encounter with John Jarrold. Possibly Jarrold is a very good loser, or perhaps his lack of natural reaction is attributable to the intervention of a minor stroke.)

Pickersgill grunts that either people know who he is without any fucking badge or, if they don’t, he probably doesn’t want to meet the little turds anyhow.

“You are totally arrogant, Pickersgill!” I scream. “Totally fucking arrogant! Just look at you! A great hairy streak of total fucking arrogance!”

“Fuck you,” he says, “You’re just the same.”

I nod my head. He nods his head. We sit there nodding our heads – this being the only exercise we can safely take without risk of falling out of our chairs – in mutual peace, harmony, and total arrogance.

Bingley, May 1982: I am sitting there, peaceably enough (and with the eyeballs all straightened out, even, since this is not some kind of damn convention) when I open up a letter from Chris Priest. With a this-hurts-me-more-than-it~will-hurt-you holy gloom spread over its typeface, the missive austere reproves me for failing to take my own stupendous talents as a critic seriously. Apparently I have blown the whole deal with my postscript to the Jacqueline Lichtenberg article (as printed in *Black Hole*), said PS naughtily advising all devotees of Jackie to join the Appreciation Society run by her biggest fan, one Chris Priest.

Very stale joke, says CP – his sniff distinctly audible two hundred miles away. – and furthermore do I not realise that such silly fannish frivolity gravely weakens the seriousness of my otherwise Valuable and Important article?

Well, goshwow Chris – I mumble to myself – you say the sweetest things, but... and I commence nodding my head up, down, sideways, and in circles. Always figured CP was a little on the sober side – which you have to make allowances for, him being a Real Writer and all – but this particular outburst seems to suggest a really bad attack of Moral Meaningfulness in the Higher Criticism zone. (Did his parents ever threaten that a Leavis would get him if he didn’t critic good? This would explain a lot.)

On the other hand... I have been known, myself, to suggest (once in a while) that fan writers should (perhaps) make a little (occasional) effort to (maybe) get past the first dumb joke that springs to mind and give their subject matter some er well coff coff *serious* attention... So it looks like I’m slightly in the shit here, consistency-wise. But with one bound –

With one bound I fall flat on my face and start sinking.

It is the summer of 1982 and for one reason and another *everything* seems to be fairly comprehensively fucked-up. My personal life has reached one of those low points of undramatic depression from which not even the prospect of some liberating cataclysm is visible. I have driven myself even deeper into the mire by writing five or six drafts of a thoroughly tedious and

interminable article purporting to explain The Meaning Of It All. Trouble is: my argument looks perfectly logical, but the implication of the logic is that I should just shut up and never say a word about anything ever again.

(In the beginning this was supposed to be a Silicon (1981) report for *Tappen* – the usual blend of angst, scurrility and Cosmic Truth. I was going to call it “Apocalypse Now and Then” and say oh-so-many extremely profound things about how the self-inflicted wounds of con-going served a valuable catalytic function in facilitating the recognition and assimilation of previously unadmitted cognitive dissonances and all six-syllable stuff like that. Then I got into this heavy routine with the Art and the Meaning. Fuck. Fuck fuck fuck.)

Anyway, here I am at this party at Graham and Linda James’s house (in honour of Leeds locals Mike Dickinson and Jackie Gresham, who are on the verge of fleeing to the purer climes of Italy) and I am feeling really terrible. Even worse, I am telling people about it.

“What is the use of all this crap,” I mutter dejectedly, feebly flapping the seventh unfinished rewrite of my shockamola magnum opus, “if you can’t get to screw the people you like anyhow? I mean, who gives a shit about Art? I only do it to impress the people I want to get off with. It’s all down to personal relationships in the end.”

And I give a particularly dismal groan, indicating my preoccupation with one specific personal relationship which is definitely not paying more than two cents to the dollar. This is no damn fun, and no damn fake either. I feel like I would do just about anything at all to get what I want – and the knowledge that this readiness to go completely bananas is unlikely to make the slightest difference is literally giving me a pain. (In fact, I am evidently more than a little loose at the hinges, since in the normal way I am not at all prone to unleashing such miseries on the general public.)

Still, I don’t throw too much of a blight on the festive occasion. My audience of Alan Dorey and Simon Ounsley merely twitches and sways sympathetically, well-insulated by alcohol against this excessive and unbecoming candour. We are jammed in a corner of the kitchen, surrounded by people who are talking, laughing, eating and drinking – all with the maximum of noise and enjoyment. In fact, everybody is having fun, with the possible exception of Graham James, who looks rather like he would prefer to usher out his guests with a pitchfork. (Maybe the drugs got tired of nonstop abuse and came back with some snappy lines of their own.) I wonder whether

to offer my assistance, but decide the effort would be too much. As it is, I have to stop talking every few minutes because my face aches so much from the strain of not bursting into tears.

“What’s the use,” I whimper, “when I know there’s no reason why anybody should be interested in reading the sort of thing I want to write, and I know I don’t want to write the sort of thing anybody would want to read?”

This certainly sounds like a tough situation, and Ounsley contrives a special compound-meaning headjerk conveying cautious overwhelming support (with reservations) for whatever it is I think I’m talking about. (After all, he’s still waiting for me to write this article for *his* fanzine – the *Tappen* deadline being long gone – and while he obviously has to keep me sweet, he doesn’t want to encourage any daft notions that might mean it never gets written at all.) The more volatile Dorey is so overcome by emotion that he offers me a crisp. I moan refusal and stagger away to take a piss.

Unfortunately, it seems that my brain is behaving like some literal-minded civil servant and has translated the ban on weepiness into a general veto on parting with any liquid whatsoever. I am still having trouble getting started when I am disturbed by much banging and thumping on the door, and demands that I make a personal appearance to prove I am still alive. Apparently a notion has taken hold among those below that I have retired from the public gaze for the sole purpose of stringing myself up with the toilet roll, this is not so, but the interruption so unsettles my already-eneebled powers that I am stuck with an overloaded bladder for the rest of the evening.

Bloody hell, this isn’t *fair*. If I’m going to suffer, you’d think there could at least be something *romantic* about it....

Silicon, August 1982: I am sitting there, peaceably enough, wondering how the fuck it happens that I’m starting to enjoy myself. What the hell, my affairs are in just as much of a mess as ever, my prospects are no better, and plainly I don’t have any right at all to be feeling good, but it seems I just can’t escape a sort of brutal cheerfulness.

Is this masochism? Am I getting some kind of awful *taste* for this low-level-disaster lifestyle of mine? (“Damnit,” I mumble to myself, “us artists are supposed to be *sensitive* – get your act straightened out, can’t you?”) Or is it just some of that good old native irresponsibility come thundering to the rescue?

Who cares? The reason I get cured is that when casting a lacklustre eye

over my detestable manuscript I suddenly wake up to the fact that the scrawls on the back are actually records of the vast sums of money owed to me by *Black Hole* editor Simon Polley. And my oh my – who else has ever lost so much money to me at dominoes? Well, who else has lost so much money to me at dominoes so recently and conveniently? Because, money may not be everything, but it sure as hell gets you to conventions.

In a flash I look upon Simon Polley with the fond eye of pure friendship – particularly after he leaps to stardom in the new role of financial Get Well Man and writes me a cheque. In the generosity of my feelings I even invite him to come along to the con himself, and also offer much good advice on the wisdom of giving up gambling while he is still (comparatively speaking) in front. (Well, I wouldn't want him to lose all his money to the wrong people. I figure I have a responsibility to keep him where I can see him.)

So here I am, having fun and even managing to behave myself at the same time. Arnold Akien has not succeeded in photographing me in positions of an indelicate or indecorous nature, and it was hardly my fault that the manager's favourite picture happened to fling itself down the stairs just as I was passing. I haven't done anything more improper than offer Steve Lawson 50p (a not unreasonable sum) for the use of his fair white body. (He refuses, so I rather spitefully take approximately ten times the assessed value of his scabby hide out of him at dominoes. Next time, kid, get smart.) I am at peace with the universe, and the only mild source of discontent is John Jarrold, who keeps yelling "Badges? We aint got no badges! We don' need no steenking badges!" and laughing uncontrollably.

Enthusiasts of the right sort of films (i.e. the ones I like myself) will recognise this as coming from *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre*. I am annoyed because I had planned to place this quotation at the head of my article – had indeed already done so in various drafts – but must now abandon it, since too many people would associate the line with Jarrold and the latest in-joke, which is Mexican Fandom.

In the best tradition of sexist racist British humour, the basic principles behind Mexican fandom – in honour of which Silicon has become Mexican – ordain a regimen of lying around soaking up the booze until the worst heat of the day is past, then rolling over under your sombrero and fucking a wet tortilla.

"It's all about wearing black trousers with bits of silver down the sides," Greg Pickersgill explains helpfully. I raise my eyebrows. This is a novel

variation on the usual Pickersgill fantasy, which involves wearing white trousers, being Number One Pimp in South Ealing, and riding around in a gold-plated Cadillac all day looking Really Cool. Still, at least it's an improvement on last year's career ambition of becoming a Menstrual Hydraulic Engineer. ("I go around offering to *clean them out*... It's all sort of stringy, like squashed red spiders...") The only merit in *that* was its suggestion of a subtitle for my aborted "Apocalypse Now and Then" article: "The Crotch Vampire Strikes Back".

Anyway, as my contribution to the Hispanic fannish renaissance I offer the only two Words – "hombre" and "arriba" which spring readily to mind, and these are added to the half-dozen or so which are screamed by the Mex faction in quizzes and competitions whenever one of the hombres looks like he might do something remotely useful.

It was a stupid article anyway. Jarrold can keep his rotten quotations. More to the point is the question of *how* and *why* I continue to have fun, despite the various considerations which would surely drive any rational individual into a state of (at least) crying in his beer....

Maybe I'm not so rational as I've always thought... But surely that would imply that I was even more emotional... and in that case ... It occurs to me that fundamentally I must be a really awful person, because apparently I'm so damned callous I don't feel sorry for myself, even. Not much sense, and not much sensibility...

Time passes. Whether it passes forwards or backwards is hard to tell. I am in that familiar convention condition of chronological confusion, prone to surface from moments of fugue uncertain whether my last mental picture was a memory of yesterday or an anticipation of tomorrow. Indeed, I have a strong general impression that I am living in reverse, and that it is only my future I am remembering. Perhaps it is this shaky relationship with time – which extends all the way into the rest of my life – which has prevented the move through the decades from ever rendering me properly staid, sober, and generally seized-up at all the joints of brain and body. I am now thirty seven years old, but for some reason this seems like less than thirty six, and less still than thirty five... Is it arrested development, late development, or just simple brain-rot? I keep wondering whether I ought to make more effort to disapprove of myself – stop being so fucking *detached* – try harder to embrace the appropriate senile respectability... After all – behaving like *that* at *your* age....

I emerge from the fog of introspection to find that the curry-eating majority has gone out for a meal and I am sitting with Alan and Rochelle Dorey and Baby Whatsit. (Listen, I have enough trouble remembering the names of *people*, never mind their protoplasmic offspring.) We exchange desultory remarks. Baby Whatsit, as is the habit of babies, divides the time between yelling, feeding, sleeping, and staring beadily around with an expression of baffled rage. She has a way of flexing her small blobby nose which suggests she can hardly wait to grow up enough to be able to denounce us all to the Authorities for exposing an innocent child to these scenes of vice, degradation and horror. Being well-accustomed to infant egotism I am not intimidated, but merely return her glare with equal venom until she dives angrily back into Rochelle's bosom. (Hah! Got *your* number all right, baldilocks!)

Domesticity has rather slowed down the Dorey dynamism. Things were livelier last year, when Rochelle gave an impressive display of Seated Tap Dancing with Vocal Accompaniment. Thus:

Hup two three four

(tappity tap)

WAY!

(tappity tap; rocks chair; beats out extra rhythm section on knees)

DOWN!

(Tappity tappity STOMP)

UPON THE!

(tappity tap; crashes chair backwards and forwards; pumps elbows; rolls eyeballs)

SWAN!

(tappity tap)

NEE RIVER!

(soft shoe shuffle; trucks chair sideways)

FAR!

(tappity tap)

FAR!

(tappity tap)

RAWAY!

(spins chair on one leg; kicks husband on shin)

SORRY!

(tappity tap)

THAT'S WHERE MY MUMMUM!

(CRASH CRASH CRASH; forgets words entirely; hurls chair around with particular vigour to cover)

EVER!

(tappity tappity STOMP; crosses legs; crosses eyes; raises hands to Heaven; Oh Lordy, dis am trully wonderful)

– But at this point we are interrupted by a request to Shut the fuck up, cantcha? from the other part of the room, where the sterner element is attempting to conduct some sort of serious scientific quiz. Rochelle falls back exhausted, and I move to the bar (which fortunately is only a few feet away) to procure the necessary refreshment. The barmaid is looking rather pale, so I offer her a drink as well. “No no,” she stammers, shrinking back against the wall. “I couldn’t possibly, I couldn’t possibly.” It is evident that she has been given an awful warning of exactly what it is that alcohol can do to a person. (Later, she is to be traumatised still further by the spectacle of an amorous Chris Atkinson beguilingly thrusting a daffodil stem up David Pringle’s nose. Have these people lost all sense of human decency?)

Meanwhile, back at Silicon 1982 not a lot is happening, except that Boss Bob Shaw has put in an appearance. Boss Bob Shaw is the machine con politician from Glasgow – not the well-known writer and fan – and he is chiefly famous for being an incompetent megalomaniac. (Not *generally* incompetent, you understand, just incompetent at being a megalomaniac.) Having more ego than erudition he has never quite grasped the fact that in fandom the successful manipulation of other people depends upon the manipulator being either charming or devious. Considering that he has never shown much sign of being either he has lasted a remarkably long time, but now the Scottish fans have finally rebelled against his autocratic rule and cast him forth from the Glasgow Eastercon committee. This is obviously a terrible shock, since for the last two or three years the impression (assiduously promoted by BBS himself) has been that Boss Bob is the Number One Fan in Scotland, and that all Scottish conventions are more or less his personal property.

But these are stern and savage times and – like many a good paranoid SF hero before him – poor old Bob has been driven into exile by the mindless malevolence of hysterical hordes manipulated by the conspiratorial cabal of a few evil so-called Secret Masters. (Or something like that. See the works of A.E. Van Vogt for further details.) Unable to reconcile himself to his natural

role of deposed Caudillo collecting cobwebs while Waiting For The Call, he is still attempting to rally support for a counter-coup, but the prognosis is not good. For want of more solid backers he is forced to pick up support from among the ranks of innocent little Trekkies – and, indeed, has probably come straight round from the Trek con which is being held elsewhere in town. A word processor is rumoured to be responsible for the innumerable letters which seek to prove to a sceptical world (by esoteric calculations involving taking away the number you first thought of) that the apparent numerical superiority of the anti-Shaw faction is a mere mathematical mirage. Yes, he has the technology – but can he make it work?

Perhaps he is finally running out of people who will stand still for the we-wuz-robbed routine, for he now oozes into a nearby seat and commences giving the Doreys and myself the benefit of his low, sincere, statesmanlike tones. This is rather like being on the receiving end of a soft-sell promotion for an enema machine, and a couple of lines from William Burroughs float to the surface of my mind: “You think I am innarested in hearing about your horrible old condition? Leave me tell you, I am not innarested.” Is Boss Bob not aware that this same Alan Dorey is the very “Paul Randall” who devoted so many unflattering phrases to his person in the *Black Hole* gossip column? Either this is typical Shavian insensitivity, or the man is feeling desperate indeed.

Well, the plight of the failed fan politician is indeed pitiable, but I am not feeling desperate (and not at all innarested) so I decide to leave them both to their horrible old condition and go talk to Simon Bostock. This will qualify as my Good Deed for 1982.

The fifteen-year-old Simon Bostock is a New Fan. Not more than fifty or sixty people attend Silicon, but the event is exclusive only in the sense of being given minimal publicity, thus limiting access to those who are already reasonably well integrated into the fannish scene. The object is not particularly to restrict attendance to an elite – though that is the effect – but to make sure that those who *do* come don’t arrive with expectations (of pro GoHs, serious SF speeches etc) which will not be fulfilled. Thus it is that new people are quite likely to be given more attention than they would receive at more open events, the vague feeling being that they’re probably okay if they’ve made it this far.

However, all approaches have failed to pierce Simon Bostock’s reserve. Every well-meant effort to engage him in conversation has withered and died

in the face of a frozen silence. Bespectacled, long-haired, and clad in black, he rather resembles a mole in a Beatle wig, peering out from under his fringe with myopic suspicion. As I tentatively crash into a seat opposite I half expect to see him begin rapidly retreating into the bowels of the earth with a frantic scraping and twitching of little velvet paws.

No – he just stares at me. I plunge into talk. The result is more of a monologue than a conversation, and I am soon reduced to haranguing him on the necessity of making a little *effort* if he wants to get anything at all out of conventions (or indeed fandom in general).

“Listen kid,” I tell him. “They talk a lot of crap about fandom being elitist and exclusive and a closed circle and all the rest of it. Well, yes, it *is* elitist and exclusive and a bit of a closed circle, but unless you’re a complete fucking moron (or totally paranoid) it’s not all that difficult to get *in*.”

He stares at me rather as if he’s wondering not how to get *in*, but how to get *out*.

“All you got to do,” I say, gesturing oratorically, “is sort of hang around, take a few drinks –” (demonstration; this is making me hoarse) “fall over –” (demonstration; I seem to have had a few already) “make a fool of yourself –” (demonstration; *passim*) “and just generally *show willing*, and people will accept you in no time at all. I mean, look at some of the fucking idiots who made it already, right? But if you come on all hysterical and persecuted, and crouch under the table yelling ‘Nobody loves me! It’s all a fucking conspiracy!’ and so on and so forth, all you’re going to get is the old raised eyebrow and curled lip routine. You got to remember: *we were here first*. So if you want in on the scene you have to make a little effort on the local customs. If you don’t like it – go start your own bunch of elitist wankers. Just bear in mind – nobody owes *you* anything, and they don’t really give a shit whether you approve of them or not. It’s all down to you – join up and have fun *our* way, or fuck off some place else and do things *your* way.”

Pause, as I sag with exhaustion. This is all good sound stuff; though perhaps expressed without great finesse. After five or six drinks a certain crudity of thought and language does tend to assert itself, and after ten or twelve – the present level – it’s rather marvellous that I can speak at all. It’s sad that I can’t hit him with the really clever bits, like my cunning formulations of the Sour Grapes Syllogism and the Loser’s Revenge....

The things that I want are desirable;
If I want a thing I get it;

Therefore if I get something it is desirable;
(Therefore if I don't get something it is not desirable).

That's the Sour Grapes Syllogism. The Loser's Revenge – which is often run in tandem with the SGS – has a different emphasis, and is more readily expressed less formally.

Imagine two men, A and B, who play golf together. As with the majority of games, the rules of golf are framed in such a way that the scoring provides a clear and unambiguous result. Player A has a better score than Player B, so A is the winner and B is the loser. Since this happens every time the two meet, one might reasonably say that A is a better player than B. However, when it comes to life off the golf course positions are reversed: B is more successful than A socially, financially, and in every other way. Therefore – B reasons to himself – B is a better man than A. By definition the better man cannot be a loser. Therefore B cannot *really* have lost to A... and being not really a loser must be a winner... this proves it.

A little reflection should indicate that these are not new ideas. They are in fact very old buddies indeed, and it is probably the case that most fans have at some time or another consoled themselves with one or the other of these fractured rationalisations. In practice, the general muddiness of thought often makes it difficult to identify the SGS and LR as separate entities, but the usual fannish version goes something like this: My fanzine has been criticised as being a bad fanzine – but it's not really a fanzine at all (or it's a *new sort* of fanzine) – therefore my fanzine can't be criticised by the standards of (old) fanzines – and if it can't be criticised it's beyond criticism – and if it's beyond criticism it must be good – therefore my fanzine is a good fanzine. In other words: my game is not the same as your game, so you can't say that I play your game badly, therefore I play my game well, and therefore I play your game well. (My X is not an A but a B; therefore it cannot be a bad A; therefore it must be a good B; therefore it is a good A.)

Trying to unravel tangles of false logic like this is apt to do your brain an injury very quickly indeed, so perhaps its enough to point out that the basic fallacy at work here (apart from the sliding definition of terms) is the mistaken assumption (or dishonest claim) that there is an exact and perfect correlation between success in one area and success in every other area. (Anyone who sincerely believes this to be true is employing magical thinking: the microcosm mirroring the macrocosm, the wax doll sympathetically linked to the person.) This error is compounded when

“success” is also defined in terms of the circular reasoning contained in the Sour Grapes Syllogism, since the proponent of the argument (i.e. the aggrieved party who has not received the love, admiration and respect he feels he deserves) can always retreat to a fresh position every time some nasty person blows down his first flimsy structure of self-justification. (Pushed far enough this reaches levels of lunatic absurdity, as in the case of the now-departed fan who was driven to respond to certain criticisms with the devastating rejoinder that anyhow, he earned *a lot more money* than his tormentor.)

One possible objection here is that the “rules” of fandom and fanzines are hardly as fixed, explicit, and unambiguous as the formal rules of most games and sports. This is certainly true in the sense that fannish “rules” are neither permanent nor very well defined, but nonetheless it *is* the case that *at any one time* there will be a fairly clear consensus on what fandom is (basically) all about. This consensus may be shifted or modified by conscious or unconscious group or individual behaviour, but in any critical approach its existence always has to be recognised *as a starting point*. People may not agree – and may wish to argue – on what fandom *ought* to be, but all arguments will be meaningless unless they are based on a mutual recognition of what fandom actually *is* in terms of current practices. It is entirely futile to attempt to discuss any subject at all when the concepts involved are defined only according to individual caprice and convenience. (This, by the way, is my refutation of those who assert that because fanzine critics – such as myself and Joseph Nicholas – occasionally agree with each other, we are all in a plot to enforce some fiendish “orthodoxy”. One might as well accuse mathematicians of being in a conspiracy against freedom of thought because they agree on the proposition that two and two make four. Without accepting certain statements as axiomatic it is not possible to reason at all.)

Those of you who are still paying attention (I snarl from my pulpit – the preaching is not all done yet) will have noticed that I do not deny that fandom *is* an elite. This is a question that many people (including myself) have strenuously disputed in the past, but more recently I have come to the conclusion that the denial of fannish elitism is itself the result of faulty reasoning.

The only valid objection to the existence of an elite is that the members of such a group are using their position unfairly to secure advantages which would (and should) otherwise be more equitably distributed. This is indeed

often the case when social background, race, education, or sex are used as criteria for determining how life's prizes are handed out. However, the only prizes in fandom are prestige, fame and status. Fannish success confers no material advantages, and not even any power – except the self-reinforcing power of influencing the recognition of fame, prestige and status. The wonderful thing about fandom is that it is the Platonic Ideal Form of a system of pure snobbery: a hierarchical social structure which maintains its rank-order without any material sanctions whatsoever. There's no arguing with the real forces of financial, political and physical ascendancy, but the ascendancy of fannish fame is no more than an agreed fiction depending on voluntary submission. If some people choose to disregard the fannish elite, the most they have to lose is that elite's approval. They won't be deprived of their job, their house or their liberty, and they won't be prevented from meeting, talking, writing or publishing exactly as they please. Thus it is plain that those who complain of fannish elitism are upset not so much by the *existence* of an elite as by the fact that they themselves are not members of it. No one is compelled to play, and no one loses anything by not playing – except a chance to join that elite to which they object so very strongly....

However, the fact that objections to fannish elitism are invariably muddled and self-contradictory does *not* imply – as tends to be assumed – that the existence of a fannish elite is thereby disproved. That the grounds for objection are non-existent does not prove that the thing being objected to is also non-existent.

There *is* a fannish elite. I like it fine. So does anyone else who is a part of it. Everybody in fandom plays the ratings game. Fans compete, and the result of competition is inequality, since some fans do better than others. Quite naturally, the top-rankers are not at all displeased with their position. It would be a gross over-simplification to assert that vying for BNF-dom is *all* that fandom is about – or to deny that there is also a fair amount of co-operative and/or altruistic behaviour – but it would be blind or dishonest to ignore the fact that a great deal of fannish activity is directed towards gaining precisely this sort of ascendancy. (The sporting metaphor requires an extension here, since individual games have definite conclusions; whereas fannish contests are always part of something larger. Perhaps one could say that the fannish ambition is to reach and maintain a high position in the league tables. Or the League tables.)

Still, even if all the above is accepted, this does not altogether dispose of

the question of *how* the elite acquires and maintains its status. The conventional (or Ancient) wisdom, as expressed by Ted White in his *Warhoon* 29 article “The Politics of Fandom” (and at large elsewhere) is that fandom is a “meritocracy” and the merit being assessed is primarily the degree of skill shown in writing, editing, or drawing for fanzines in accordance with traditional practice. The trouble with this notion is that even in his own article White displays a certain defensive awareness that this represents what *ought* to be the case (from his own point of view) rather than what *is* the case. Like, there’s all these shameless characters who are good at *socialising*, and who somehow bypassed the obligatory developmental period of being shy, introverted, spotty teenagers reading nothing but sci-fi and fanzines and writing six locs a day while hiding from er well *girls* in the attic....

Fannish stereotypes die hard. Twenty years ago – and perhaps even as late as 1965 or 1970 – it probably *was* true that the high scores were awarded to those who could project the most effective fanzine image. Most fans were geographically isolated, and with only one convention a year social contact on any large scale was very limited. It hardly mattered if you were a one-legged midget with leprosy and a cleft palate so long as you could fake a lively paper personality, and perhaps for this very reason many fans do seem to have been drawn from the ranks of the socially unsuccessful. In the last ten or twelve years, however, the social element has played an increasingly large part in the fannish scene – to such an extent, in fact, that one could now say that the social image is just as important as the fanzine image.

Quite apart from other differences, British fandom is unlike American in that it consists of a fairly cohesive body of people who mostly know each other quite well and meet quite frequently. The interesting point is that there are few British fanzine fans – and none at all of any note – who are *only* self-projected paper personalities. In terms of internal ranking (i.e. excluding US opinion) the British BNFs of the last decade are all people who have become well-known not only by virtue of their fanzine work but also by virtue of their personal social appearances and activities. The BNF persona developed from this new combination of exposures may well be just a more complex version of the old-style self-mythologising fanzine hype, but the conclusion must certainly be that the “merit” in “meritocracy” now refers to something much wider-ranging than a good prose style or on aptitude for bad puns.

What counts – what has always counted to some extent – in fandom is

not just what an individual contributes to the pages of a fanzine directly but what his (or her) friends – and even enemies – also say about him. When fans actually meet each other fan writing enters a new dimension. Inevitably a good deal of the comment and cross-reference comes to be concerned with deeds as much as words, with physical as much as literary appearances. The paper personality complements the personality in the flesh (rather than substituting for it) and fans become – in the eyes of others – composites of both the unreal word and the real behaviour.

One of the reasons for the split between British and American fandoms is that the two do not meet socially. This seems ridiculously obvious, but it is probably not realised how much the social separation is reflected in the fanzines. Whether or not one recognises the existence of anything particularly good on the US scene it is probably true that many US fanzines are no worse than many British ones. However, a US fanzine would need to be *very* good (or to have a strong British content or reference) before it made much of an impact here, simply because it would lack the background support of the whole web of personal allusions and knowledge on which British fannish fanzines are founded. American fandom is a fandom of strangers dealing in unreal paper mythologies – and it's hard for British fans to see any reason why they should believe or be interested in it. The whole business is probably just a rather dull hoax by Keith Walker.... The Americans, on the other hand, seem to find it much easier to accept British fanzines, probably because they are more used to the idea of fannish relationships which exist almost entirely on paper. This is probably also the reason why they are so much more interested in past British fandom than are the British themselves. From the British point of view what *anybody* did in the past is of little consequence if they're not still active (socially or in fanzines) or if they are not remembered by more than one or two of those who *are* still active.

British fandom is very definitely elitist (or snobbish) on this point: who you know and who knows you are important factors in determining your status. (Get the West Seal of Approval NOW!) To disapprove of this is to miss the point that fannish reputations are made and sustained only on a personal contact basis. I might be impressed by somebody as a *writer*, but I'm not going to be impressed by them as a *fan* if there is virtually no connection, direct or indirect, between their fannish world and my own. The big fish in other small ponds – and the big fish of the Olden Days – are of no consequence at all to the inhabitants of the particular small pond which exists

now.

Fandom isn't static, and fan writing is far from eternal. Considered as *fan* writing the contents of fanzines live only as long as the original readers continue to be fans. After that – when no one knows or remembers the context – the work must be judged by other criteria. The process is gradual rather than instant, but a time does come when one can say that for today's fandom yesterday's History has become irrelevant. Continuity between one era of fandom and another consists solely of *people*. The elite is the elite because it exists in the present and in the flesh – not in the past and on paper. The “traditions” of fandom are not traditions but sentimental fakes if they need to be exhumed, revived and promoted like the meretricious hokum of some Tourist Board. If traditions are useful they will need no special support – and if they cease to be useful then they are already dead.

Fannish Social Darwinism Rules OK....

– But maybe Simon Bostock is going to prove me wrong, and demonstrate that devolution to the Olden Days really is a viable proposition. He's certainly maintaining a stout resistance to this pernicious innovation of social contact.... Apart from an occasional variation in blink-rate his response is not what you call animated. I do manage to learn that he possesses only nine toes – the other having fallen victim to a rather casual operation for ingrowing toenail – but even this meagre quantum of information has to be dragged out of him by close and subtle questioning. (“Hey kid, I hear you're some kind of fucking paraplegic – what happened, the syphilis rot your leg off?”)

I stare at him in despair. New fan, indeed. What does one do with them? I've talked to him – I've even bought him a drink. Bearing in mind that in my own case attending a convention at the age of fifteen would have brought on double incontinence – never mind a certain shyness – I am not entirely unsympathetic, but I figure this is one ailment the patient has to cure himself.

Maybe I'm just the wrong person for this Official Greeter routine. Or maybe I should forget the conscientious bit and just try propositioning him instead? (Well, what *does* one do with them?) But it's really rather difficult to seduce somebody who appears to be in an advanced state of rigid catatonia....

Hah, he's too young. And life is complicated enough already. (Afterwards I feel very moral about my self-restraint – at last I am developing a protective veneer of common sense. Later still, I wonder if I am losing my marbles entirely. *This* qualifies as common sense?) But why do these young

punks have to run to such extremes? Here's Bostock, won't say a bloody word, and last year we had Paul Turner, who never shut up at all until people threatened to hit him. Surely, with all this science lying around the place, some sort of compromise arrangement could be worked out...

SCENE: A dark inhospitable underground chamber, very reminiscent of the Skycon Fan Room. Enter the Evil Transylvanian Mad Scientist, Herr Doktor EVA D. FANGLORD (played by ROZ KAVENEY, who has to get a mention somewhere) and his fat, spotty, and hideous little dwarf assistant IGOR WILLIAMS (played by HIMSELF, naturally).

FANGLORD: (poking at some cages in a corner) Igor! You haff been getting into der gerbils again! All is kaput! Der experiment is ruined!

IGOR: (cringing) Aw Boss, it's not my fault they keep splitting on me.

FANGLORD: Gesselschaft! (Gesselschaft? Must check this with John Brunner.) Oh well, just have to try something else. Bring on the stiffs.

(IGOR wheels in the naked bodies of BOSTOCK and TURNER, their young white flesh glistening palely as the soft glow of the phosphorescent fungi picks out the highlights on their etc etc (insert porno bit). These are followed by the usual equipment i.e. lots of machines with knobs, dials, levers, coils and other twiddly bits, and an assortment of flasks, test tubes, glass piping, and bubbling and steaming vats and cauldrons.

FANGLORD: Hah! (Insert favourite line about spirits from the vasty deep or other cultural bit from Prospero, Faust, Flash Gordon etc) I have rebuilt these neofans from the bottom up (or down, I forget) and by mingling their er coff coff *parts* I hope to produce prototypes for a New Golden Age of Fandom! But first, let us consult certain Secret Masters! (What is this crap? a reject from *Raffles*?) Igor! Give me the instrument!

(IGOR passes him a ouija board, which FANGLORD positions carefully across the two bodies, their soft white flesh etc etc (insert second porno bit). After making a series of mystic passes over his hearing aid he then sings (tune: “Memphis, Tennessee”) to a disco accompaniment of lightning flashes, sparks, throbbing machinery, clouds of pink and green smoke etc)

FANGLORD: Help me information
Using my ouija board,
I am trying to get in touch with some
Of those who’ve gone before,
Cause this is SF writing,
It’s not literature at all –
Pete Weston took the message
And he wrote it on the wall.

I’ve heard from Larry Niven
And from someone else as well,
I couldn’t read a word of it –
It must have been Pournelle;
I’ve heard from Isaac Astral
And from good old Jackie too;
They claim that they’re not dead yet –
But I’ll leave that up to you.

Chorus: Baba Bar Bar Bar Bar Bar Bar
Baba Bar Bar Bar etc etc

FANGLORD: I’ve heard from Barry Bongyear,
And from –
(There is a tremendous flash, the ouija board splits from side to side; out sprang the web and floated wide (more culture needed) – FANGLORD and IGOR shrink back as BOSTOCK and TURNER creakily sit up.)

BOSTOCK &
TURNER: Star Trek Lives!
(They stiffly climb down from the tables and stamp

out, uttering mysterious guttural cries: “Beam me up Scotty”, “yes Mr Spock” etc etc to taste. Or not.)

FANGLORD: (kicking IGOR and screaming) Cretin! Imbecile! I just noticed! They both had ten toes! You have introduced a random factor and destroyed the Cosmic Balance!

IGOR: (cowering) Aw Boss, but I was sure you’d blame me if there was a piece missing...

FANGLORD: (seizing him by the throat) Vile minion! Where did you get that toe?

IGOR: Ngunng – Boss, I swear, it fell off a lorry –

FANGLORD: (kicking him under the table) Wretch! Was it... Was it... No! It couldn’t be! No...

IGOR: (significantly) Boss, there are some things man was not meant to know.

FANGLORD: (reeling back) No! Unspeakable! This is too horrible – too awful – too –

– Too much. But even so, I figure there are *some* secrets I should keep, so you can all wait for next century’s exciting instalment to discover the origin of the dastardly digit which loosed nameless horrors on an unsuspecting world, cracked holes in the space-time continuum, and probably annoyed Chris Priest all over again. (This is *serious*? This is *important*?)

Anyway, back at Silicon 1982 I emerge from my reveries of subterranean sex and sadism to become aware that a strange woman is congratulating me on my *Drilkjis* article on Jacqueline Lichtenberg. This is gratifying enough to make me forget Simon Bostock and pay attention, and after a moment I recognise her as Ann Looker, a Trek fan who is smart enough to turn up at SF conventions as well.

(In case you’re getting confused, the Lichtenberg article – “Closet Zeor” – had the rare honour of more or less simultaneous publication in both *Drilkjis* and *Black Hole*. Smith and Langford had been sitting on the thing for so long that I got impatient and decided to liberate a piece of *Black Hole*’s ample University funding. Such is the fate of taxpayers’ money. Go on, write to your MP.)

Well, Trekkie Ann really pours on the egoboo, telling me what a great

demolition job I did and how it was about time somebody stopped the pussyfooting and hauled a few of these weirdo sex fantasies out into the open. She goes on to speak of a particularly lurid sort of something called “K.S.” At first I think this is a coded reference to Kevin Smith, and I am all agog for revelations of what accountants *really* do in their spare time, but it turns out that K.S. is nothing more than shorthand for Kirk-Spocking, this being the specialised form of Star Trek pornography in which Captain Kirk suddenly gets the point of Mr Spock’s famous ears and everybody has fun. Previously aware only vaguely that this sort of stuff existed, I am fascinated to learn that it is so extensive as to form a sort of Trekkie cottage industry. Maybe these people aren’t so bad after all.

Realising that I may be starting to think that fan writing is actually worth the effort – since people are showing signs of reading my articles *all the way through* – Dave Langford quickly informs me that he has received a letter (from one Joy Hibbert) on this very same piece of work which conclusively reduces me to a little pile of nasty redundant warped male hormones. Apparently non-female critics are allowed to be rude only to John Norman, and I am a deranged chauvinist know-nothing who is barely fit to be set fire to as a second-class sacrifice to the Great Mother. (Later, he sends me a copy and I see that he exaggerates slightly. I am merely “another man who thinks he knows anything about women... another man who is terrified of feminism and homosexuality”. Having thus laid down the True Facts the letter says something like “since I haven’t read the two books I shall just deal with the obvious errors” – but at this point, I swear, everything goes black, the paper slips from my nerveless fingers, and I remember nothing more.)

After Langford’s little cheer-up routine the sequence grows more and more difficult to follow. At some stage I watch a video called THE BLUES BROTHERS – plenty of good raucous music, car chases, and a memorable scene in which about a dozen Police cruisers somersault off the road on top of each other. The audience cheers hysterically – not out of any particular animosity to the cops, but because it’s always stimulating to see so much expensive machinery being thoroughly trashed.

Afterwards, I struggle to explain what a great film it was to Greg Pickersgill.

“Lotsa car crashes,” I tell him, invoking the Higher Criticism with expansive gestures. “Lotsandlotsandlotsandlotsa car crashes. Blooey. Biff. Bam.”

He looks me up and down in wonderment. “Sometimes,” he says, “you really are incredibly *simple*.”

I raise no objection. After all, I’m not exactly sure how to tell him, but I think this is rather a nice thing to say. Being un-simple is such a pain, even if it does mean you occasionally get to write Valuable and Important articles....

And soon enough it is all over. I am sitting playing dominoes with Simon Polley on the train back to Leeds, and feeling not too bad at all considering my average post-convention condition. Despite a single defeat by Polley (at two o’clock in the morning, when I am no longer able to distinguish the spots on the dominoes from the other UFOs) my gambling has been highly successful. My body has not fallen apart at the seams. I have done nothing spectacularly embarrassing. Even my brain is in reasonable shape. (A dehydrated walnut? Well, better than nothing. Certainly better than usual.)

“That kid behind the bar was really cute,” says Polley, simulating a copious drool. (The advantage of dominoes rather than cards in fannish company is that they do not become wilted, obliterated or stuck together by beer, saliva, or other precious bodily fluids.)

“Nah, he was too small,” I tell him. “Be like the gerbils.”

“Well, you can always go back next year and check if he’s grown,” says Polley, leering with so much effort that it almost throws him into the aisle, the cheap son of a bitch is losing again, and this is his pitiful attempt at distracting my attention. I have to put up with this sort of lowdown gamesmanship all the time, but the poor fools never seem to appreciate that compared with gambling, sex is trivial and unimportant. Besides, I’m not always very interested in the first place. Romantic I may be, but also cold-blooded.

“I’ll be back next year anyhow,” I tell him. “Play.”

Bingley, September 1982: home again and (as usual) regretting all the brilliant conversations I might have had. Why does a witticism always take three days rather than three seconds to fight its way into verbal form? And why was I not able to be more coherent in refuting the nonsense contained in that issue of *Epsilon* Rob Hansen was handing out?

I brood upon whether or not to rejoin the BSFA. The obsession with fan history and reprints is reaching lunatic levels, and *Epsilon*’s letter column contains a particularly deranged proposal from Eve Harvey for a yearly BSFA-financed “Best Of” fanwriting anthology. I tell you, turn your back on

the daft buggers for a moment....

This reminds me that I also ought to do something about that letter Ted White sent me last April. However, on reflection I decide to wait for the appearance of Richard Bergeron's *Warhoon* 30. I have committed the multiple indiscretion of a loc asserting that neither Ted White nor Walter A. Willis is particularly hot as a fan writer, that fan history is bunk, that reprint anthologies are a pain in the arse and generally bad thing, that American fandom is a wasteland of self-satisfied and witless mediocrities, and that *real* fannishness (as found only in Britain, of course) consists mainly of being whipped twice a year with liquorice bootlaces. (Or maybe it was three times a year. I forget the exact details.) Anyway, even the sluggish metabolism of US fandom ought to be stirred into some kind of response by these rather tactless truisms, and bearing in mind that the American version of a snappy rejoinder usually runs to at least three pages I figure I may as well save my energies for the difficult task of staying awake through the counter-attack.

Meanwhile, I have received this lengthy but not very exciting refutation from Ted White – “I think you're an asshole too” is about the most convincing line – and also a letter from Bergeron enthusiastically suggesting that I let him fix up a reprint volume of all *my* past fanzine articles.

This is weird. Either the guy is exceptionally devious, exceptionally crazy, or there is a communication gap of truly inter-galactic proportions between us. Surely I made myself plain? Reprinting an occasional article may be reasonable enough, but the Complete Works/Anthology idea is strictly death and petrification. Fan writing is the most context-dependent form of writing I can think of, and the context is not just the single fanzine itself but the whole fannish scene of the period in question. Without knowledge of this background a fannish article is either completely incomprehensible or loses so many resonances that it dies on its feet. The idea that something published in a fanzine which is “good enough to be published anywhere” is thereby good *fan* writing is self-contradictory. Good *writing* such a piece may be, but if it is so readily detachable from the web of personalities and cross-references which give fanzines their unique character, then it is only doubtfully *fan* writing at all. (This is not to say that such work should not be published in fanzines, only that it is *less* representative of what really makes a fanzine than other work which may well be of a much lower quality in terms of its prose. *This* article is undoubtedly fannish in character, but my last long

piece of work – the Jacqueline Lichtenberg article – is at the opposite end of the spectrum of fanzine contents, and only marginally “special” in the sense of being unique to the fanzine form.) But “good writing” I can get anywhere. The local library has about eighty thousand books and a hundred or so magazines and newspapers, and probably ninety per cent of those items are better written than virtually all fanzine contributions. Anyone who reads fanzines for their prose style is a halfwit.

The only proper place for old fanzine articles is in old fanzines. To reprint selectively is to falsify, both because “good writing” is not particularly what fanzines are really about, and because the resulting picture of the past is hopelessly incomplete and distorted. The bad writing is as much a part of the scene as the good – however much it may be deplored at the time – and the casual or inconsequential letter is as valid a part of History as the carefully considered column.

The would-be fan writing anthologist is walking straight into a Catch-22 situation: the people who would understand the material have probably read it already, and the people who haven’t read it probably won’t understand it (because to understand it they would need to be in a position that would mean they had already read it). The only way past this problem is to cheat by using material that has such a diluted (or non-existent) fannish content that it has no dependence on knowledge of context at all – and what on earth is the point of that? As a presentation of either the theory or the practice of fanzines this kind of selection is a complete fraud. Fanzines are about communication – not exercises in style. If they contain only such non-personal communications that their meaning is equally accessible to fans and non-fans alike they have not necessarily *failed*, but there is certainly no reason to judge them on any special or separate basis.

The whole anthology/reprint idea is a retrograde step because it is virtually a tacit acknowledgement of innate inferiority: fan writing as the product of a class in Amateur Journalism, with the less retarded pupils being given lollipops to encourage their efforts. In an open critical market the cruel truth is that even the best fan prose does not rate very high – the “giants” of the field are at the level of competent journalists, and most of the rest range from terrible to barely adequate. But a fanzine is *not* a cheap copy of an expensive original, small – like the “little” magazines – only because it *can’t* be big. Fanzines have limited circulations as an essential part of their nature, since their whole point lies in a personal relationship with (and between) their

readers which would otherwise be impossible. (Anything else *is* Amateur Journalism, and explains why some fanzines are doomed from the start – they are pursuing a pseudo-professional ideal which can never be adequately realised without more resources than most can ever hope to possess.)

Even assuming that the material was worth renting in the first place, reprinting a collection of fanzine articles does nothing except create a sort of anatomy specimen – a corpse for exhibition or dissection. To present an anthology of this kind as having anything to do with fandom *as it really works* is ludicrous. All the connections are missing and all the life is gone. The idea that fan writing has any particular merits apart from its personal elements – which are firmly embedded in the whole background – is a fantasy which has only the most tenuous connection with reality. It's the Loser's Revenge all over again: this piece of fan writing is better written than other pieces of fan writing; therefore it's good writing; therefore it's good fan writing; therefore it's *very* good writing as well... The whole chain of reasoning is a complete mess, since it works only by switching criteria of judgement back and forth as convenient.

However, while I am arguing that “good fan writing” is not primarily *just* “good writing” I do not want to set up a false all-or-nothing separation between the two. A good conversation is not the same as a good lecture, but while fluency, clarity and completeness of explanation are *essential* in the latter, they are also likely to be *useful* in the former. The point here is that the conversation would cease to be a conversation if lecture standards were forced on it to the exclusion of its own unique qualities – it would lose spontaneity, the possibility of an exchange of ideas, mutual stimulation, the interplay of differing personalities, the personal references to shared experience, everything that makes dialogue more interesting than monologue. Fanzines are fundamentally extensions of conversation into the written word, and as such they are only successful when there is reciprocity of communication between speakers and audience. If it is not to become boring, a one-sided conversation requires a high degree of skill on the part of the speaker – the sort of talent which fans very rarely possess. To reprint fanzine articles is to reprint *parts* of a conversation – to turn dialogue into monologue. One might as well try to compile a book of funny stories consisting entirely of punch-lines.

It would certainly be agreeable to see an improvement in the standard of writing in fanzines, but it would be a great – not to say fatal – mistake to

attempt to gain this rise in standards at the expense of precisely those qualities which justify the existence of fanzines in the first place. Fanzines are often accused of being incestuous and inward-looking – too concerned with the frivolous affairs of a small group of fairly obscure people rather than with larger and more important affairs. This is an entirely pointless objection, since personal views and personal concerns are exactly what fanzines are *for*. One might as well complain that people tend to talk to each other more about themselves, their friends, their own activities and shared interests, than about World Politics, Great Works of Art, or Banning the Bomb. Conversation isn't a sort of gramophone record, endlessly replaying the solemn themes of the news headlines and the pronouncements of the self-important pundits of Politics and Culture, in personal terms “important” matters are often of no importance at all, and this is entirely as it should be, unless one wishes to see human beings as robots all programmed to the same end. (It occurs to me that this is one reason why I like Philip K. Dick's novels so much: rather unusually for an SF writer, he creates characters who tend to be more preoccupied with their own trivial – and even crazy – concerns than with some silly business like saving the Galaxy. This is both more true to life and more appealing than grandiose nonsense about Cosmic Whatnots and the Destiny of Man. It's the lunatics who ignore the insignificant and human in favour of the abstract and *inhuman* who cause most of the world's worst troubles.)

The impulse to keep raking over the ashes of dead fannish activities probably arises from the same sense of insecurity and guilt many people seem to have about being fans at all. I mean – it's such a *waste of time*, when one could be doing something *important*... on the other hand, if we can only fake up some kind of *structure* – give it a *History* with full academic hoopla of footnotes, references, bibliographies, and learned arguments on points of detail and dates and eras and periods and influences... Reprint Selected or Complete Works so people will get the idea this stuff matters... Imitate T.S. Eliot's beautiful literary hype of bringing out a volume labelled *Minor Poems* – thus implying that by definition there must be a few around that are Major... Make them take us seriously... Please, God, don't let them laugh...

Ah, Jesus, the whole cowardly routine is so pathetic it ceases to be pitiful and becomes contemptible. Listen, if you like doing something, *go ahead and do it*. Don't piss around with all these frightened little excuses and self-justifications. As Doc Johnson (Winner 1775-1779 The Doc Johnson Dig Fix

Award For Services To Fandom) once remarked: Clear your minds of Kant. You aren't involved with fanzines as some kind of fucking *duty* – it's purely a matter of pleasure, and as such requires no further justification whatsoever. If anybody disapproves of the way you enjoy yourself – that's *their* fucking problem, not yours.

Ever since 1977 (when I wrote “The State of the Art” for the Charnock-edited *Wrinkled Shrew*) I have been pushing the idea that Fanzines are Art. As a corrective to the self-defeating inferiority complex that so many people have about the comparative status of fanzines this is certainly useful, but it is still not entirely satisfactory in that it begs the question of what Art itself is *for*. Any attempt at asserting a sort of aesthetic Categorical Imperative quickly collapses into a circular argument: Art is what is Art, or Art ought to be desired because Art is what ought to be desired. (As Doc Johnson once remarked: Clear your minds of Kant. Guy makes your head hurt.) In fact, the proposition that Art is an end *valuable in itself* devolves not to any tenable argument but to a flat assertion or statement of intuitive preference. (I don't know anything about anything, but I know I like Art.) Art as an end is *contingent* – which is to say that it is an end which is to be desired only as a means to some further end.

It is not necessary to pursue this question of means and ends any further into the whole libraries of philosophy which deal with the subject. Sufficient to say: there is no reason to value one form of Art more highly than any other form of Art – or any activity more highly than any other activity – except in terms of what is ultimately a *moral* judgement on the end or ends which each is presumed to serve. In other words: to say that writing novels is *better* than writing fanzine articles is to imply that the end served by writing novels is *better* than that served by writing fanzine articles. “Better” is being used here in one sense only: as a comparative of moral value. The confusion starts when “better” is used not only as a moral comparative but also as a comparative of skill (or complexity, or effort required) and a claim within one sense of the term is taken to imply an equal claim in the other sense.

This is the Loser's Revenge all over again: I am a winner at my game; therefore I am a winner; therefore I am a winner at your game. However, even taking “better” as being only a comparative of skill, to say that one activity is “better” than another *different* activity is to presuppose that the skill or skills involved are precisely the same in both cases. As has already been argued, this is a very dubious claim indeed, and apt to be shown up as

completely absurd when stripped of its confusions of terminology. Mending a road takes skill, and mending a wristwatch takes skill, but there is no “mending skill” (except in a sense so broad as to be meaningless) which covers both activities completely, and there is no way to say that one sort of mending is “better” than the other except by making a moral judgement on the respective ends being served. (Arguing that mending the wristwatch is “better” because it is more *complicated* simply sets up a new criterion of judgement without answering the question of why one end should be preferred to another. Why should the complicated be preferred to the uncomplicated?)

I write fanzine articles because I *like* writing fanzine articles – not because I feel I *ought* to write fanzine articles. This may not seem a very profound reason, but at least I can be sure that it is genuine. Anything further is merely an elaboration of unnecessary self-justification.

I even like writing fanzine articles which are long, difficult, and cost me considerable labour and effort. This fact – that despite being very lazy I sometimes put a lot of work into what I write for fanzines – appears to perplex many people. Unable to grasp that certain sorts of “work” can be a purely frivolous pleasure, they assume that all this labour must imply a stern moral purpose on my part and that therefore I must be somewhat crazy – because what stern moral purpose could there possibly be in something as trivial and unimportant as a fanzine?

I find this attitude rather like Jacqueline Lichtenberg’s Protestant Ethic view of sex: joyless, humourless, brainless and distinctly depressing. Sure, writing fanzine articles is unimportant in the sense that it doesn’t mess the world about on any large scale, but so what? I like doing it, so what other reason is needed? People don’t go in for sex as a duty to the Cosmos, or the Human Race, or some abstract principle. They do it because they like fucking each other. Any other reason is not a good reason but a damned bad one.

Writing fanzine articles is entirely unimportant, but I like doing it. Writing novels is also entirely unimportant, and recently I decided that I like doing that too. It won’t get me a damn thing that I don’t have already – or could get much more readily in other ways – and there won’t be the slightest merit in being successful, but I think it’s worth the effort for the return in enjoyment.

For far too many years all my efforts at writing fiction have been plagued by the notion that I *ought* to be writing for the fulfillment of some

tremendous purpose. Since I never could quite figure out the exact specification of this mighty goal the only result was a chronic state of confusion and a distinct weakening of the motivation to write at all. What was the point? The visible rewards are so trivial that a preference for writing over not-writing seems completely arbitrary. Short of success at world bestseller level the cash has no particular significance – one can earn much more for less work in other occupations – and the “fame” is essentially a mirage or a piece of self-delusion. I know very well that I’ve had more fame out of being a fan than I’ll ever get out of anything else, however successful I might be. (The novelist’s audience is much larger – but quite likely to remain both silent and invisible, just a figure on a royalty statement. Fandom, on the other hand, is virtually built round the principle of maximising audience appreciation.) So why bother?

Well, because I like writing, because I want more scope than the fanzine form provides, and because I’ve finally arrived at a clearer perception of all the different levels of meaning involved in fame, success, achievement and *performance*....

To think that one’s particular tastes and obsessions are *important* is a common enough human delusion, but writers and artists are exceptional in the degree of success that they have had in foisting their own special brand of craziness on everyone else. Upon all those above a certain level of intelligence and education – and even on many below – there is a tremendous cultural pressure to pay homage to the god of Art. Even those who take a fairly functional view of the Meaning of Life are apt to succumb. The first of the Utilitarians, Jeremy Bentham, remarked that “Pushpin is as good as Poetry” (meaning that both gave pleasure, so what was the big difference?), but his successor J.S. Mill was so upset by the levelling implications of this perfectly logical statement that he got himself into a terrible mess by attempting to distinguish between “Higher” and “Lower” pleasures. After all, one could hardly accept that the 18th century equivalent of pinball was on the same level as *Art*... In the end, Mill’s argument boiled down to the assertion that Higher pleasures are higher (and more to be desired) and Lower pleasures are lower (and more to be given the old raised eyebrow and curled lip routine) because Us Folks Who Know Say So. This has been the basic position of devotees of the Arts ever since. High Culture has never been anything but a browbeating confidence trick practiced by the articulate and egocentric upon their milder and less self-confident and assertive fellows.

(But please note – and note very damn well, because a mistake on this particular point is apt to haul in some very tedious complications – that I am *not* saying that there are no standards on which to base comparative judgements *within* particular Arts or Art-genres. Pushpin may be as good as Poetry, but it is evident that some Pushpin players are not as good as other Pushpin players, just as some Poets are not as good as other Poets. Similarly, some novelists are not as good as other novelists, and some fanzine writers are not as good as other fanzine writers – and a good novelist is not necessarily a good fanzine writer, or a good fanzine writer a good novelist. These are different games, and the only way to win them all is to *play* them all.)

But how liberating it is not to give a damn about the value and importance of Art! How pleasant to be able to remark without either defiance or guilt that (for example) the novels of D.H. Lawrence are those of a prick-crazy wimp (who probably measured himself every morning to see whether it had grown in the night) or that Ursula Le Guin is SF's premier Great Boring Writer! After all, why *should* I feel any obligation to make respectful noises about stuff that just gets on my tits? I know plenty about Art – but I also know what I like, and I don't really care whether or not it's Art at all.

In other areas of my life I decided years ago that if I was just naturally an evil son of a bitch I might as well *be* an evil son of a bitch and stop pretending – to myself or anyone else – that I was otherwise. (I exaggerate for effect. I am really a very nice person. Sometimes.) Life is complicated enough without these tedious and futile deceptions. Truth is apt to break out sooner or later, so one might as well save everybody a lot of trouble and make it sooner. And why make an exception for Art? If this makes me a philistine, then so be it. To conform without conviction, necessity or advantage is so very silly when life is so very short.

On the other hand....

On the other hand, I like playing games, and fandom, life and Art are all games which can be played on more than one level. I may not take fame very seriously – but sometimes I enjoy it. I may satirise fannish role playing – but sometimes I do it. After all, fandom may not be all about prose style, but it is certainly about style in another sense....

Channelcon, April 1982; Saturday night, and I am standing in the shadows with Greg Pickersgill again, watching the bodies gyrate to the beat of Eric and the Maggots, led on guitar by our very own Graham (Daddy

Cool) Charnock. I am doing some small-scale gyrating of my own, since after most of a bottle of rum, six or seven beers, and a few shots of whiskey, it seems like you just can't resist those evil jungle rhythms. In fact, I am feeling so good I suspect I will probably drop dead at any moment, but the anticipation is causing no pain whatsoever. Play the music!

"God," says Pickersgill. "Look at him go. Makes you sick, eh? If I could just do that – just once. Then I could die."

"Right," I agree, pausing between hops to shake my head and heave a sigh.

Because I know exactly what he means. It came to me once before – in one of those moments of insight that pierce you with a kind of heartbreak, because you realise that all your carefully erected defences are just *no good* – that all my mockeries of glamour and glitter and staged exhibitionism were founded on nothing purer than envy, and were merely the revenge of a frustrated desire to go and do likewise....

Nothing else gives the same zap as performance – nothing else is gone so quickly but is so perfect while it lasts. This is the apotheosis of narcissism – the big hit – and something I can only catch glimpses of on the other side of my own slow, grey talent for detached analysis. Now and then – very occasionally – I hit the spot and ride the crest of a wave of style, but it happens so very rarely....

Well, things is tough all over, and perhaps Graham Charnock sees nothing very tremendous in what he does himself. Talent is never satisfied – is never more than an appetizer for an unattainable ideal. Doubtless there is a hierarchy of desires, and everyone is fretted by yearnings for what is just out of reach, and much inclined to scorn what lies to hand. Can't get no satisfaction, kid, just gets harder and harder all the time....

So everybody does the best they can – you think I am innarested in hearing about your horrible old condition? – but much better to be a realist – settle for something within safe limitations – don't go busting your head against the wall in some spectacular failure – prudence caution rationality – and what the hell kind of chickenshit attitude is that? – got no class at all – TEST TO DESTRUCTION, COCKSUCKER!

Play the music....

Unicon, September 1982: bare weeks since the last time, and at it again. No good will come of this. (Well, no, but what kind of fucking stupid objection is that?)

Anyway, this is the University of Keele. Polley is here with me again (or I'm here with him, since he's the nominal proprietor of my floor space) and we've just ridden down in Simon Ounsley and Elaine Goswell's brand-new car. All the way, Polley and Elaine talk about D&D, and I start to have doubts about him. What kind of guy gets strung out on Level Three killer dwarfs and all like that? Little do I realise... as they say in the novels. (I figure I ought to start practising. Gonna be a famous novelist real soon now. Well, soon as the university money runs out.)

I'm certainly glad I went to the University of Bradford. Keele is miles from anywhere at all – let alone anywhere anyone rational would *want* to be – and you can't even *see* the world outside, the campus is situated in what the prospectus probably calls a natural amphitheatre – but which I call a hole in the ground – and the result is a sort of academic prison camp hemmed in by earth fortifications. I keep trying to identify the machine gun nests, and at night I am rather surprised not to be followed round by searchlights.

Still, this is standard convention paranoia, and nothing special alongside the phobic attacks experienced in some of the less-welcoming Eastercon hotels. A couple of drinks will straighten out these warped perceptions of a doubtless quite agreeable reality. The registration desk is reassuringly normal: a jumble of files and boxes, with three or four people scrabbling through each others' papers, borrowing pens from passers-by, and dropping change on the floor. As I wait to pay my money I furtively study the committee members, trying to imprint their appearances on my memory as some sort of insurance against any little difficulties that might arise later. This works after a fashion, but my brain is unable to handle names as well, so I have five or six faces each identified only as the Committee.

"What do you want on your badge – Dave, or just D?" asks the Committee.

"Er um D," I mumble, rather thrown off balance by Elaine having hysterics behind me.

"The famous D. West," she gasps. "Famous..."

Well, bloody hell, I never said I was famous did I? I bare my fangs politely and move to the bar. If I'd had my wits about me I could have told him Dave... After all, I'm not going to wear the damn thing... I thrust it viciously into my top pocket. The pin pricks my thumb. Badges? Badges? We don't need no steenking badges....

(This business of my name – or initial – is an accident rather than an

affectation. It happens to be the form I've always used as a signature, and I saw no reason to change when coming into fandom. The result is that I am called Donald by my family, Don by my non-fannish friends, and D. by the fans – apart from Pete Presford, who ruthlessly persists in calling me Dave, despite yearly corrections since 1976. If he keeps it up much longer it will qualify as a Fine Old Fannish Tradition.)

It's fortunate that Unicon only expects a couple of hundred people, since they appear to have carried in a sort of folding pulpit from the chapel and re-erected it as the bar. Still, the drink comes out of the holy water tap just the same, and there is the bonus of a rather lumpish piece of modern sculpture a couple of feet away which is just the right height for resting an elbow. Since this is some kind of foyer, with lots of wide open floor space and the seating lurking in concealment round the edges, it's rather like setting out to get pissed in the middle of a bus station, but I figure I'll give it the old college try.

Up comes ex-Leeds fan Helen Starkey, smiling toothily, and knees me in the spine. I take this as either a gesture of affection or an act somehow connected with her equestrian garb of jodhpurs and elf-boots. (The Horse of the Year version of Princess Leia?) Other familiar faces also begin to appear. There is even Peter Roberts – so long lost to view that it was rumoured he had been run over by a bus. I cautiously look both ways before speaking to him, having by now acquired a strong impression that this place *is* a bus station. (It's not that I think anyone is out to get me, but accidents *do* happen.)

After the initial trauma of acclimatising myself – about three pints – I begin to feel that this might be an okay convention. Enough people I know are here – plus a number of people who seem to know me, though I could swear I never met them before. This is a little unsettling – since I prefer to set my own pace at socialising, and not have total strangers springing out at me all the time – but I am feeling almost tough enough to cope. In fact, I am generally loose all over already, and prepared for any form of naughtiness which might be available. If I knew how to pronounce it I would invent Decadent Fandom right on the spot.

So is it *Deekadent* or *Deckadent*? (I reject *Decayedent* out of hand – wrong feel entirely.) After a brief interval of thought and another drink I settle on *Deekadent*. This has the advantage of a catchy contracted form: Deek Fandom. (The first principle to bear in mind when inventing a new

fandom is that it must have a name the significance of which is known only to an elite. The non-elite will then get that awful sinking feeling that *something is going on which they are not being told about*. This will (hopefully) make them very bothered and peevish. Elitism is a sort of remote-control sadism: you don't actually *do* anything to the victims – just make sure that they do it to themselves.)

Having fixed the brand name for my product I begin working on my first commercial. A time-slot in the middle of the *Muppet Show* looks good:

KERMIT And here he is. *Here he is!* Yes! Yes! It's – *D. West!*
THE Yaaaaaaaaay!
FROG: (Falls away sideways, waving arms, gibbering, and having tadpoles with excitement. Cut to shot of ME. (That's *me*, not poncy little Malcolm Edwards.) I smile negligently and roll a cigarette from one side of the mouth to the other as the applause, cheers, hysterical screams etc etc continue for about ten seconds. I raise my little finger an eighth of an inch and the applause stops.)
ME: Yes folks! My name's D. West, but my friends call me Deek! Cause I'm here today to tell you about Deekadent Fandom and what it can do for you! Yes, just come up to my room and –

– But here I run into a difficult ethical problem. Am I supposed to pay *them* the traditional 50p, or are they supposed to pay *me*? Who the hell is in charge here? This is definitely a tough one, and by the time I have been thinking about it for a couple of drinks I also have the secondary problem of remembering what the question was. Obviously, Deekadent Fandom's hour has not yet come.

I decide to circulate, and immediately fall into bad company. People at University are supposed to be smart, but this lot have imported Roy Kettle as Fan Guest of Honour. Intoxicated by this triumph – or something – he wants to cut the cards for pound notes. Now, cutting the cards may not sound like anything much, but there is a whole Art in the way you snap the note out of your wallet, flare your nostrils, sniff, hurl the cash to the ground, give your opponent the hard eye, and sneer coldly. Unfortunately, despite my superior

technique, Kettle keeps winning.

“The Good Guys will get you in the end,” I snarl. The Committee raises its eyebrows. Kettle gives a statesmanlike snigger. Our Leroy is a Very Important (well, fairly Important) Civil Servant these days, and keeps his famous nose much more clean (metaphorically speaking) than in former times. I well recall his behaviour at Yorcon, when he positioned himself outside the Ladies Toilets and accosted everyone entering and leaving. The Kettle technique of Female Fascination consisted of giving a hop and a sway from one leg to the other, taking a firm grip on the half-empty bottle of whisky, crossing his eyes, leaping six inches in the air and yelling “I *lust* after your bodeee!” then thumping his chest hollowly. Since at least half the victims of this alcoholic-caveman approach were attending a quite mundane and non-fannish dinner-dance which the management had treacherously inserted into the convention, this display of dynamism was not universally appreciated.

I write Kettle’s name on the list and move over to join a covey of *Black Hole* editors: Tony Berry, Mike Ford and Simon Polley. (Alan Dorey is not present to make up the set. Baby Whatsit probably gave him the evil eye.) Things are looking quite lively now and excitement is taking hold.

“Arriba! Arriba!” yelps Simon Polley. “Hombre,” Tony Berry adds tentatively.

I give them the old raised eyebrow and curled lip routine. “That was *last* week,” I sneer. They are duly abashed. Mexican Fandom has already faded into History. We observe a three second silence as a mark of respect. (Mike Ford looks sulky. I suspect he has been consulting a Spanish phrasebook, and was all set to astonish us. Life at the top is tough.) I wonder whether to tell them about Deekadent Fandom, but decide to wait for a psychological moment (such as some time I can be sure I know what it is). Mustn’t be hasty. The whole Art of Fan Politics consists of seizing the initiative at the precise second nobody else can think of anything better to do.

I have already noticed that Simon Polley seems inclined to be noisy, and pretty soon he is confirming that this is not so much an inclination as an uncontrollable compulsion. He shouts and bawls and screams and laughs; he gives imitations of a bull elephant in distress (or occasionally what sounds like a parrot being gangbanged); he hums and moans and yodels; and he sings old Frankie Laine songs (Frankie Laine? Frankie fucking *Laine*?) all about dying cows, leather fetishists, and other delights of the 1950s. (“Keep them

dogies movin', *Rawhide!*") I can see people looking at him in a way which suggests they are remembering the line about strangling being a very quiet death, and in fact it gets so bad that Pete Lyon goes round apologising.

"He's not like this in Leeds," he asserts nervously. "Never known him to be like this before." His eyes become mildly crossed as he checks that his nose has not started to grow. "Well, not all the time. Well, not more than a few times. Well –" he sidles away, blinking rapidly and mumbling to himself. The Committee raises its eyebrows.

Simon Ounsley and Elaine Goswell seem to be moving around a lot, but every now and then (throughout the weekend) Elaine pauses to tell me something For My Own Good. I reek of alcohol. I shamble too much. I have a vitamin deficiency. I am thoroughly degenerate. I don't eat enough carrots. I need a shave. I don't eat enough wholemeal bread. I look disgusting.

I accept these reproofs without protest, merely smiling politely. (I need to clean my teeth.) Elaine is listed in the Ounsley fanzine as "Political Advisor" and I consider asking Simon what it's like living with a Domestic Commissar. However, Elaine is a big girl, and all the Leeds women are famous for knocking you silly if you try getting clever, so I simply inscribe her name on the list. Being trampled by Chris Atkinson in high-heeled leather boots is one thing, but being smacked round the ear by Elaine would just be degrading.

After a while I think about eating. The catering arrangements at Keele are not marvellous (and Polley and I eventually subsist mainly on cold baked beans spooned out of the tin with pieces of crispbread) but one cannot keep going entirely on beer-based calories. Some sausage rolls are the main offer – gummy looking confections which are rather luridly yellow round the edges, as though the central ingredient has crawled into its hole to die foaming and frothing at all orifices. I am still weighing what the consumption of one of these things might do to my life expectancy when I am accosted by another complete stranger.

"So you're D. West," he says, and gives me a pitying smile which slowly fades to an expression of tense anticipation, as though he is waiting for me to throw a triple back-somersault or turn into a werewolf.

"Yes," I say. "Or maybe no. Excuse me."

I disengage myself by hurriedly purchasing and consuming two sausage rolls. Since I do not immediately need to retire and throw up I am able to congratulate myself on my new-found iron constitution. My social savoir

faire, on the other hand, seems to be much the same as usual. I reflect that in those situations I often have absolutely no idea what I am supposed to do. Being a strategist rather than a tactician I am easily confused by events which I have failed to anticipate. Indeed, this is one reason why I am inclined to spend a fair amount of time lurking in the background, observing the battlefield from a place of safety. One of these days I expect to figure out exactly what is going on. In the meantime, anonymity is more relaxing.

It's for this reason that I never wear my name badge. I dislike being labelled, and somehow the name *is* a label. Much of the time I am embarrassed by my reputation – not so much because it's a little lurid as because it seems rather absurd (and completely out of character) that I should have any sort of reputation at all. I am the mildest of men (as Peter Cushing once remarked before letting loose the ketchup) and my preferred approach is to sneak up on people by slow degrees, rather than overwhelm them with instant charisma. For one thing, I haven't *got* instant charisma, so any expectation of the extraordinary by my audience is enough to make me wish to disappear.

On the other hand, I do have my moments....

The weekend has started. So how does it go on? Well, all Unicon is divided into three parts: the daytime bar in one building, the evening bar in a second building, and the all-night room parties wherever more than three fans and a few bottles get together. (I believe there is also a Programme somewhere or other.) The geographical sprawl means that everyone gets plenty of healthy exercise. Day and night there is always someone wandering around, bouncing off walls and falling over, hoping to reach their destination by a process of persistent random motion. In the morning one hits fewer obstacles but the sunlight is more painful; in the evening one hits more obstacles but the anaesthetic is working better. Either way, this macho outdoor life is so rugged that one is apt to feel quite worn out and in need of a drink.

On Sunday I discover myself with my head under a bed and my legs entangled with a table. This is not too surprising, since I always seem to be waking up involved with pieces of furniture. (The floor is hard and one tends to roll around in an attempt to get comfortable.) However, I am a little perplexed to find that it is Linda Pickersgill in the bed, not Simon Polley. What kind of involvement is *this*? And what on earth is Greg going to say? (Greg has stayed at home, having discovered Zen Fannishness and the

Ultimate Cool of doing nothing at all. As the *real* insiders know, to be famous *for* something is merely vulgar, since it implies that one has had to make an effort. The ideal is to be famous simply for being famous, a triumph of immanence which requires immense subtlety and a complete understanding of the Art of Masterly Inactivity.) And come to that, what on earth am *I* going to say? I feel vaguely alarmed but also rather peevish. I seem to have missed something here... If I'm going to be stomped to death by an angry Pickersgill I ought at least to be able to remember the details....

But in due course memory seeps back and I realise that I am unlikely to be gunned down for violating the Code of South Ealing. All that happened was that Polley wanted to continue a Meaningful Discussion he'd started with a woman, so I got thrown out and had to go knocking on the Pickersgill door at three in the morning.

"Ngaah," says Linda. "Floor. Sleeping bag. Ungh." And she dives back to bed, leaving me to involve myself with the furniture.

To the bar again. What else was happening last night? Isolated incidents keep bobbing to the surface – like beercans in a cesspool – but the Big Picture eludes me. Anything I remember tends to become mixed up with what is happening *now*... I am viewing the present through a shattered hologram of the past – or is it the future? – and it all snaps in and out of focus so many times... Convention strobe....

This will never work out. I loved the Captain in my own way, although I knew that he was insane, the poor bastard. This was only partly his fault: one must consider the conditions. The conditions were intolerable... In the novel I plan to write of the voyage, the Captain will be a tall grim man with piercing eyes who has no fear of space. "Onward!" I hear him shout. "Fuck the bastards. Fuck control base; they're only a bunch of pimps for the politicians anyway. We'll make the green planet yet, or plunge into the sun. Venus forever! To Venus! Shut off all the receivers now! Take no messages. Listen to nothing they have to say –"

This will never work out. Forget the sequence. Forget the smartarse hotshot presentation. Just pick the pieces off the floor at random.

Room parties:

Roy Kettle has severely embarrassed himself by causing an over-emotional neofan to burst into tears. He is now making frantic efforts to convince the sobbing youth that he didn't *really* mean what he said.

"Look, when I told you that it was a fucking stupid thing to say I didn't

mean it was a fucking *stupid* thing to say. Well, it was a bit stupid but not *fucking* stupid. Well, for a stupid question it wasn't stupid at all. Not so you'd notice very much. Only a bit. (Will you stop snivelling, you little cretin?) Well, not a very big bit. A *small* bit. Oh all right, IT WAS A FUCKING BRILLIANT QUESTION AND I'M GLAD YOU ASKED ME THAT. (Now will you shut the fuck up?)”

The neofan stops weeping and smiles tremulously. “Oh thank you, Leroy, thank you. Do you really mean that? Oh, thank you.” He beams adoringly. Kettle scowls, glares, nibbles his beard distractedly, and edges towards the door. He has acquired a slave....

I reflect that this is rather like the facet of animal behaviour known as “imprinting”. When ducklings are born they will follow the first large moving object that presents itself. Usually, of course, this is the mother duck, but if (say) some dopy naturalist blunders in at the crucial moment then *he* is imprinted as Big Daddy Duck and the ducklings will follow *him*. Now, if I could only figure out some simple way of duplicating this process on all these cute little neos I could set myself up in groupies for life....

They do say that you can't make an omelette without breaking eggs, but Simon Polley's version of this appears to be that you can't make a convention without breaking furniture. In the Union bar he and Steve Green are hurling chairs and tables at each other, bellowing inarticulately and crashing to and from amid the wreckage. The bar staff nervously pretend that all this is taking place in some alternate universe. Everyone else is too paralytic to pay any attention at all. It's only furniture. And Polley and Green. All solid wood....

I am discussing sex, life, love, and who should be feeling more miserable with Helen Starkey. (Since I persist in being cheerful she eventually gives up in disgust and transfers to the chameleon-like Polley, who has an uncanny ability to switch from being a noisy mindless cretin to a sympathetic, sensitive and concerned Person Who Cares.) Or maybe this is some other night and I am playing dominoes with Malcolm Edwards. He loses. I get drunker. He still loses. I get drunker and drunker. He loses even more. “Am I doing something wrong here?” he rasps through gritted jaws. I smile foggily. “Not at all,” I tell him. “You only owe two and a bit *Interzone* subscriptions.” I see by his expression that he is already considering applying for an Arts Council grant. It's sad, but these SF magazines are just natural losers.

Room party time, so I stagger out into the night. I am aligning myself in

the general direction indicated by the Party Finding Instinct – and the rather crude neon FUN sign in my brain is just flickering into life – when suddenly a voice from the sky bellows, “ARE YOU D. WEST?”

“Please, God, I didn’t mean it,” I whimper, rearing back violently and going into a three-circle spin before falling over a wall. Fortunately, the earth is not too far beneath, and I remain conscious enough (though at something of a disadvantage, being flat on my back with my legs propped up in the air) to conduct a sort of conversation with this fucking idiot who has hailed me from a balcony. Another complete stranger. I am a little preoccupied with the question of how I am ever going to stand up again, so my half of the dialogue consists of nothing more incisive than occasional mutters of “Fuck me” and “You don’t say” as he goes into the involved details of what is either his life story or mine....

– And without noticeable interval I am sitting in a jampacked room party. Both the clockwise and the anti-clockwise joints have reached me simultaneously, so I figure that just for once I *am* the centre of the Universe... Phil Palmer produces a comics magazine called ROGUE, in which the eponymous hero demonstrates an awe-inspiring talent for reducing a wide variety of young men to slack-jawed and swooning acceptance of being raped by the fourth or fifth frame. (The skydiving colour centrespread is definitely a tour-de-force, though I think my own tastes are more earthbound.) It’s interesting to watch the reactions, and to note that those who express the most shock/horror/revulsion all seem to need to check out the disgusting details a second and third time... The Committee raises its eyebrows.

People, people, music, music. The rooms are full, the corridors are full, there is a haze of non-lawful smoke, drinks in bottles, cans, cups and glasses. In one room there is even a little space, so I begin dancing with a short convex girl. She pummels me with her bosom, generally at stomach level, but bouncing almost to chin height at peaks of frenzy. The Committee raises its eyebrows.

I float into the corridor. “What’s a nice boy like you doing in a place like this?” I demand of several nice boys in succession before my brain catches up with my tongue and I realise that I am using up the whole of my best line. I am left groping for words.

“Just because I let you look at my magazines doesn’t mean anything,” snaps Phil Palmer. What, is there no solidarity among fanzine reviewers? (Stupid question.)

The music is still belting away, and I am still belting away at the drink, all these joints having produced a terrible thirst. Reminding myself that subtlety is wasted on most fans anyway, I try yelling “ANYONE HERE WANT TO FUCK?” With that delightful sang froid for which the British are so famous no one takes any notice. The Committee raises its eyebrows. I am abashed by the thought that I may have violated some finer point of etiquette – perhaps by speaking before we have been properly introduced? Anyway, there are no takers, presumably because they all realise that most parts of my body are so paralysed they would have to do all the heavy work themselves. (Somewhat later I discover that the cold numbness which grips my lower limbs is due to the fact that I am sitting in a pool of beer.)

I move on. Meeting Helen Starkey I offer to massage her chest to cure the asthma. She hits me. Apparently she does not suffer from asthma.

“I was misinformed,” I say with great dignity – but already she is deep in conversation with Pro GoH Richard Cowper. Later, overcome by jealousy, I make some remark about Big name Writers and their groupies. She hits me again. Being a fairminded girl, she also hits Simon Polley when he says something similar. We compare war wounds and decide not to press the matter.

(One of the interesting ways to pass those long boring evenings in the privacy of your own home after a convention is to try to work out exactly where all those bruises, contusions, cuts and scratches came from. The ones that look like tooth marks are a particular source of difficulty.)

Back to the corridor. Malcolm Edwards drifts up just as I am rather laboriously embarking on the What’s-a-nice-boy-like-you-routine once again.

“West, what do you want to fuck that young man for anyhow?” he demands, delicately elevating his eyebrows as if to imply that *this* will never get an Arts Council grant.

Another stupid question, but I am momentarily confounded. (My reflexes seem to be slowing down, and I get the impression that most of my answers in conversation would arrive quicker by letter.) “Because he’s cute,” I finally snarl, but Edwards has already moved on. I discover I have forgotten what I was doing and move on myself.

“So you’re D. West,” someone says. I acknowledge that this is possibly the case, since it appears that he wants to cut the cards. This is a good idea. I have wiped out so many people at dominoes that there are crumpled, pound notes in every pocket, and I feel like exercising my sneer of cold command.

The cash goes back and forth and seems to break about even in the end, but I am revived by the action and begin wandering again. The Committee raises its eyebrows, but I pay no attention. (Fuck off, Committee.)

I move up to this guy who is standing on his own. After the usual social amenities (“Wanna fuck?” “Er, not at the moment”) we drift into general conversation. I have struck a cooling-off period in the night and am starting to have occasional moments of clarity.

“So you’re D. West,” he says suddenly. Rather wearily I look both ways and wonder whether to make a run for it. Having people spring this identity thing all the time is making me jumpy. There’s something sinister in lots of complete strangers knowing your name... a suggestion of dossiers, secret files, and the conspiracy closing in...

“You’re a lot nicer than I thought you would be,” he says. “And certainly a lot nicer than Alan Dorey.”

I brighten up. This is more like it. At last, somebody who recognises my fundamentally sweet nature. (Even if he doesn’t want to screw.) I am tired of being a monster, a big bad wolf. It’s so *silly* – and so accidental and incidental – but it seems to be all that anyone ever notices or remembers. (Thank God that Collick’s video epic was stolen before it could be shown at a convention. I’d have been a waxwork in the fannish Chamber of Horrors for ever.)

I am just settling down to enjoy a dissection of the Dorey character – nothing like a good long listing of the failings of absent friends – when he shoots off at a tangent again.

“You like manipulating people, don’t you?” he says. “In fact, you’re a devious person.”

I am rather taken aback by this, and give him a long, narrow-eyed re-examination. Generally speaking, it takes one to know one, and he seemed like such a nice boy... But I rally my forces and explain that there’s no harm in deviousness, provided that you lead people gently... And if you do it right, of course, they never notice at all. (Misdirection is the key, not concealment. Do everything in the open, but make sure that the audience is watching only the parts that don’t really matter. That way you can slip *anything* past, and by the time they catch on –)

It’s an interesting conversation, and I wish I could remember who he is.

Moving on, I wonder what has become of Polley. Eventually I recall seeing him leave with Amanda, the erstwhile companion of Steve Lawson.

Polley certainly makes a lot of noise, but he also has plenty of energy and persistence... In this case he's managed to cut out not only Lawson but Rob Holdstock too, the famed barbarian charisma having failed to work for once.

Holdstock retires to bed looking sulky. A Big Name Author deserves more consideration... (Where is the Committee?) Malcolm Edwards exhorts everyone to gather round and take turns kicking the Holdstock door and jeering. This strikes me as a form of Russian Roulette, since there is no telling when the Famous Sex Maniac, maddened by unslaked desires, will burst out and disembowel the nearest person with his frightful weapon... I decide to go to bed myself.

The accommodation blocks are grouped round a central quadrangle, and all four look exactly the same. Since I no longer remember which block I am in – never mind which block I *ought* to be in – there may be a few difficulties ahead. Still, the choice is finite... I leave the partying and descend to the quadrangle, accelerating to a fast stagger down the stairs. After making an unsuccessful (but probably interesting) attempt to run the wrong way through a plate-glass door I rest on the grass for a while. (It's such a nice night – all the stars are out.) My position is now slightly worse, since I no longer know which building I came *out* of... I catch sight of Polley and Amanda engaged in earnest discussion and demand directions. (Better get established before I'm evicted to Linda Pickersgill's again.)

"Fuck off *that* way," says Polley.

Thus explicitly guided I find myself in the wrong building, then the wrong building again, the wrong building again, and finally the right one. Then I decide I need a cigarette and restart the whole process... I find a room with people who seem to be moving around very slowly, as though wading underwater... I ask for a cigarette... They pass me a joint... Oh well....

An indeterminate length of time later I return to sleeping quarters. The room is in darkness and I become comprehensively involved with various items of furniture before resignedly falling over. Yelps of alarm from the bed indicate that Polley has imported Amanda. Well, A for effort, kid – I think as I make myself comfortable under the table – but in your condition I'll bet it's strictly Platonic... Sure enough, they are both snoring lustily even before I become unconscious.

The morning is some kind of judgement on us all. We seem to have had more fun of a completely disgusting sort than should be humanly possible. There is a wall-to-wall layer of discarded clothes, baked bean tins, empty

cigarette packets, half-eaten sandwiches, crumpled papers, ash, tobacco, biscuit crumbs, soggy fag-ends, and the remnants of a tin of tuna Polley made a rather unsuccessful attempt to eat at three o'clock one morning. A quantity of spilt rum and orange has been partially soaked up by a couple of fanzines on the table, but the overflow seems to have distributed itself over every part of the room except the ceiling. (How come we missed that?) Twenty or thirty paper cups and several glasses lie around, each and every one of them gummy with the residue of unmentionable liquids. (What were we doing? Drinking nonstop toasts to the Queen?) The smell suggests an amateur taxidermist's unsuccessful attempt to stuff a partially decomposed elephant.

Polley lies on the bed and groans. I lie on the floor and whimper. Amanda appears to be disgustingly fit, and makes a swift departure after bringing us some coffee. I swallow pills, in the faint hope that if they don't make me feel better they will at least prevent me from feeling worse. Someone has drawn all over Polley's face with a felt-tip pen. He has the likeness of a very old and very sick cannibal chieftain who has just eaten a particularly greasy missionary.

The door is unceremoniously kicked open by a cleaning woman. Hardened by long exposure to student debauchery, she is unmoved by the spectacle of this diseased-looking drunk lying on the bed in his underwear, and rips the sheets from under him before he can do more than feebly twitch and moan. I try cooling my brow against the metal table leg. This is *fun*?

Leeds, October 1982. "Good convention, eh?" I remark.

"Ngung," says Polley. As the manager of a medical bookshop he is always being treated to liquid lunches by book salesmen who want him to buy a fifteen volume set of *Diseases of the Urinary Tract*, or two dozen copies of the less-specialised *101 Easy Things to Do with Your Brain*. This probably explains why he has taken to con-going so readily, and why – as at the moment – he often has a certain amount of difficulty in focussing his eyeballs. (All a matter of practice, kid, all a matter of practice.)

We are sitting in the Adelphi, new home of the Leeds group, and I am brooding on the fact that they do not have dominoes here. What the hell did we move for anyway? My finances are suffering... It's all a plot....

Graham James is reading manuscript convention reports: Polley's on Silicon and Ounsley's on Unicon.

"Too many mentions of this D. West," he grunts. "Who's he?"

Indignantly I remind him of the dozens and dozens of cartoons I have

drawn for his rotten little fanzines – particularly scabby old BSFA *Matrix* and quickly follow up by borrowing a pound while I still have the moral advantage.

When I come back from the bar they are discussing who is to be the next *Matrix* editor. The selection process involved here is rather like the old Conservative Party method of choosing a leader: “Soundings” are taken, there are “Consultations” and finally someone “emerges”. In other words, the boys get together and put in the Fix. Little does he realise (hah!) but Simon Polley is the number one candidate. He isn’t even a member of the BSFA, he’s never edited anything but the university-shithead *Black Hole*, and he hasn’t been around all that long – but he’s reliably degenerate and known to the right people....

“Stick with me, kid,” I croak. “I’ll put you right there in the Big Time. Gonna give you *lots* of exposure in this article I’m doing.”

He looks vaguely alarmed, but under the glaze of apprehension I detect a gleam of something else: fannish lusts have been awakened, and there is no turning back....

I study him and shake my head sadly. So young, so gay, so debonair – and in a couple of years he will be a burnt-out wreck, fit for nothing except the Chairmanship of the BSFA. Being editor of *Matrix* is a hard, cruel, dirty job. But – just like Menstrual Hydraulic Engineer – *someone* has to do it. It’s a clear case of Manifest Destiny. (Or is it Manifest Duplicity? The distinction is becoming blurred. Maybe none of this will happen. Maybe Simon Bostock will get the job instead. He’s young – he’ll have time to recover. I am not guilty. *You* are all guilty... Time to go home.)

Bingley, October 1982: I am sitting here, peaceably enough, and thinking of this and that in no particular order at all. The university term has started again and I have sprinted down to deposit my grant cheque in the bank. Unicon costs virtually nothing – thanks to the subsidies provided by Malcolm Edwards and others – but there are other expenses apart from conventions, and it’s nice to feel even halfway solvent again. I am even reckless enough to buy a copy of Dave Langford’s new novel, *The Space Eater*.

So should I do the decent thing and give it a rave review somewhere? Or should I just do the natural thing and say that it looks like a fix-up of a spare Joe Haldeman plot and the research left over from *War in 2080*? This is a tough decision, and if I can’t make up my mind soon I shall actually have to

read the bloody book. (It's not fair – Joy Hibbert never has this problem. Oh, the pain of being a man.)

I wonder how famous Langford feels now that he's a fulltime pro... Probably not very. Most fans are so blase about writers that they practically send them round to the Tradesmen's Entrance. Novels? Novels? We don't need no steenking novels! What happened to that issue of *Twll Ddu*, eh? Get your priorities straightened out, kid.

It's curious that fame should be such a spur when the reality of it is so very small and limited. I suppose it's the *idea* of fame that excites everyone in the beginning – just as it's the *idea* of being a writer (rather than writing) which starts off most authors. And the whole business is pure fantasy – to such an extent that in an odd way fannish fame is not so much a substitute as *the real thing*. For what it's worth....

Bergeron's idea of reprinting my old fanzine pieces is certainly weird, but even weirder is the fact that he has defeated his own object *simply by making the suggestion*. Once I've been given the *idea* that someone thinks such a project is worthwhile I don't really need anything else, since I know very well that the deed itself would be simply an anti-climax.

I've had other reprint requests too – an American Publisher wants to include my *Foundation* article "The Right Sort of People" (on C.M. Kornbluth) in something called *Twentieth Century Literary Criticism*. This makes me grin, since the thought of being solemnly read by academics tickles my sense of irony. Also, there's the money... But again, this is fame entirely in the head, since I'll probably never see the volume in which the article is to appear, and never meet anyone who's seen it. And I rather like it this way – because, after all, the only non-spurious reward my work can give me is the satisfaction that *I* feel in achieving at least a partial domination over my subject matter. *This* is success. The rest is performance....

Yet how attractive it is....

And how hard to resist. I started to write this article with the rather hazy notion that – just for once – I would abandon all discretion and *tell the truth*. But what the hell *is* the truth? I suppose I have succeeded in being truthful in a limited way – bearing in mind the unavoidable distortions imposed by the need to select and compress, the biases introduced by the desire to make my text interesting and/or entertaining, and the fact that a few things have been deliberately omitted as none of your damn business. But all the time I have been aware that this too is a performance, and that while I am perhaps

altering perceptions I am certainly not uncovering any definitive version of reality.

Still, it's a start. I like to play the fannish games – since I find it entertaining to be devious and manipulative, just as my friend at Unicon suggested – but I do find it irksome to be restricted to a sort of drawing-room scenario in which there is a tacit agreement to accept the role-playing as the real thing and never to look any deeper. Very often I have the feeling that the material which appears in fanzines is nothing but a pack of lies, in that writers are presenting a picture of reality which is so skewed by exclusion and omission as to be completely false. Good writers can camouflage this deception more thoroughly than bad writers, for obvious reasons, and the result is that sometimes the best prose has the least value and is the most trivial. In the end, only the truth is very interesting. Lies are *boring*. (Advertising copy can be brilliant prose – but who esteems this triumph of technique alone, apart from other copywriters?)

There is no straightforward alternative to this state of affairs. The American school of let-it-all-hang-out-and-flobber-about (perhaps typified to British readers by the works of Gil Gaier and Arthur Hlavaty) makes the mistake of equating truth with catalogues of personal neuroses. This is what might be called the Stamp Collecting approach: “Gosh, look at this beautiful specimen of Identity Crisis... and here's a really fine Hang-Up...” There is probably some underlying feeling here that self-revelation either is intrinsically valuable or makes the individual concerned interesting in the eyes of others. Unfortunately, I don't choose my friends by their case-histories, and so far from solving problems compulsive self-examination and self-revelation can often *be* the problem. I know a number of people who are addicted to analysing their own psyches and I take good care to stay very well clear of them. (You think I am innarested in hearing about your horrible old condition? Leave me tell you, I am *not* innarested.) A bore is a bore, regardless of subject matter and people who are forever spilling their guts are more boring than usual, simply because they are even more self-centred. (A very good reason for keeping your inmost secrets to yourself is that other people would probably find them quite uninteresting.) Personal frankness is only interesting when it offers some insight into matters of *general* interest. The glib psychobabble found in American fanzines reduces every human problem and emotion to the same low level of value and meaning, and is far worse than an inhibited silence in that it creates a false sense of having made

progress – rather like the habit of producing lists instead of actually doing what is listed.

There is perhaps a cultural difference being reflected here in that psycho-analytical concepts are much more a part of the popular consciousness in America than in Britain. The British preference is for a greater independence of opinion, but more reticence on personal matters. British fans can be extraordinarily rude to each other, but their insults rarely touch on anything emotionally serious, and though frank in the expression of their views they are very selective in the exposure of any real feelings. (The British are not unemotional, but they tend to be very sceptical of any *show* of emotion except in special circumstances. Thus, friendly Americans may find themselves rebuffed simply because, in British terms, their warmth is so unusual it looks suspiciously like a confidence trick. Obviously, this is a generalisation, but I've seen it happen with others and – in retrospect – with myself.)

The acidulous British approach is perhaps preferable to what could be called Caring California Crap – since although it conceals it does not actively distort and deceive – but this does not mean that it is any the less limited and narrow.

Fandom is a performance. That is to say that it is the acting out not so much of a reality as of an invention. There is a difference between invention which is fiction and invention which is lies. Fiction entertains and informs – lies simply deceive. The performance which goes on in fandom and fanzines is essentially fiction, but when it is taken as non-fiction it becomes lies.

This is not a matter of whether some incident described in a fanzine is true in the sense that it “really happened”. As Chris Priest pointed out in *Deadloss*, literal reportage can be less true to the reality of events than an account which includes invented additions or substitutions. Any novel could be called a pack of lies, in the sense that it purports to describe events which never happened – but there is also a sense in which its inventions may be entirely true. There is a literal truth which is assessed by the degree of its conformity with observed reality, and there is also a symbolic truth which expresses itself in metaphorical form. There is a form of lying which is a misrepresentation or concealment of reality, but there is also a form of creative lying which is a new presentation or revelation of reality. Fiction is creative lying, and so is the whole fannish performance: lies which may be truth, truth which may be lies. The danger is that the performers will come to

believe that their performance *is* reality – that it is literally and not metaphorically true....

I am the writer of this article, but I am not the character this article describes – though that character is *part* of the person I am. The “I” of this article is an actor in a performance, like every other fannish “I”. As an actor I am ambitious: I want to out-perform every other actor on the stage. I want this not as something contingent – a means to some other end – but as an end in itself. It is not necessary – and may be impossible – to know *why*. The fact of the desire is its own explanation.

Still, I also like to see good acting from others, and competition is no fun if you can’t ever lose – so I do what I can to encourage a general raising of ambition. Whether the performance is ultimately in pursuit of truth or of enjoyment I do not know, but I *do* know that to hold back – to perform with reservations, omissions and evasions – denies all prospect of success at all.

Well, one can enjoy a soap opera without believing that the characters are real people – but it *does* get confusing when there is no clear separation between the actor and the part, and when a substantial part of the real world is the stage... Next week I’ll be at Novacon: another mighty epic shot entirely on location – with five hundred cameras, five hundred directors, and five hundred star performers.

I wonder what the reviews will be like....

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Postscript

All right, all right, so who needs this shit anyway? And how come a reprint volume reprints a piece denouncing reprint volumes and reprints? And what do we do *now*?

Whimper, whimper.

Well, I probably don't need to tell you this, but after 170 pages (or whatever) I'm feeling kind of jaded, and I can't really work up a tremendous interest in any of these fucking stupid questions. In fact, all the shockamola clever stuff – pages and pages – that was due to appear in this tailender has been junked out of hand. I mean, Jesus, you want *more*?

Go on, *you* do some work for a change. After all, this is supposed to be *interactive* – you aren't supposed to just sit there with your collective arse nailed to the floor like a bunch of fucking *consumers*. Get your brains in gear. Try *thinking*. Yes, I know it makes you feel ill, but don't tell *me* your slimy little personal problems. I have enough troubles already.

There's another damned convention next week, and right now I'm wondering how I'm going to ship all these doorstops down there for delivery to the hordes of eager readers. ("Eager readers" ho fucking ho – most of them were so drunk they've probably forgotten they ever paid for this thing in the first place. If I had more sense and less vanity I'd just keep quiet and not remind them.) Cost me a fortune in postage, though, if I can't make it for personal delivery... And I spent all the money long ago, so I might have to announce *another* reprint volume (Collected Letters? Collected Betting Slips and Final Demands?) just to raise the price of a few stamps....

(Over two months late? Listen kid, that's practically fucking *early*. In fact, in this company it's so supernaturally fast it's like meeting yourself coming back from the bar with the first six drinks under your belt.)

So what *was* I going to say? (That man Borges has the right idea; why bother writing the whole bloody book if you can put it in a review?) Okay, here's a summary: reprinting a piece denouncing reprints is one of those moves like an observation which changes what is being observed; fan History is nonsense because it assumes that the world outside fandom doesn't exist, never did exist, and has never affected the course of fandom (this despite the glaringly obvious fact that ninety five per cent of fan writing is ultimately

derived from sources *outside* fandom and the other five per cent imitating itself is *terrible*); Australian fandom (how did *that* get in?) is like the hick town in Sinclair Lewis's *Main Street* (only duller); American fandom is like the hick city in *Babbitt* (Zzzzzz) and fanzines may be Art, but fuck Art anyway.

That last bit is the only really new thing: another Tremendous Insight. The path to Salvation is now twofold: first forget Money; second, forget Art, Just *do the work*. That's all that matters. Everything else is incidental. This book is incidental. Not to say fucking superfluous.

I denounced reprints because to reprint *someone else's* work is (in the fannish context) to turn it into some sort of spurious icon; to say: This is *Important* – so look properly solemn and respectful. To reprint *my own* work, on the other hand, is plainly just the sort of unscrupulous, opportunist, egocentric, self-aggrandising, manipulative con-job a shameless fan-on-the-make like me is usually trying on for size. So any readers who approach *this* with awe, reverence, and all the rest of that worship-the-Master crap will be clearly seen to be so dimwitted (or demented) that their friends and relations should be keeping them safe under lock and key the whole year round. And with any luck some of the second thoughts this will inspire on the Value of reprints will get back to take the holy shine off all those other dead-end collections. Fair exchange... (I mean, leave us all keep a sense of fucking proportion here, eh?)

The trouble with fandom and fanzines is this: you can break down all the obvious prohibitions, inhibitions and taboos – but that simply leaves you open to subtler and less easily combated inner controls. There's a sort of Ghost Censor – “Ghost” because the form is too nebulous and impalpable ever to be identified very clearly, and “Censor” because the message is always: You can't say *that*. This Ghost Censor has always ruled what (in “Ah, Sweet Arrogance”) I called “Middle Class Fandom” (should have been “Middle Fandom” – the Class bit is a red herring) but it's also ready to work on even the most determined iconoclast. You can't say *that* – because it's Uncool. You can't say *that* – because it's not fannish. You can't say *that* – because “everybody knows it” already. (Just like everybody always knows the Emperor has no clothes – as soon as someone has the nerve to say it in public.) You can't say *that* – because it's not Art....

Any true History of fandom would reveal how secondhand most “original” fan writing really is. If Walt Willis had never existed – we'd still

have had James Thurber and all the *New Yorker* crew. If Ratfandom had never existed – we’d still have had *Private Eye* and the New Journalism. If *I* had never existed – you’d still have had the fifty or a hundred writers (from the 18th to the 20th Century, and including both the New Journalists *and* Thurber) who have had some noticeable influence on me. And so on, and so on. The only real effect fans have (or ever have had) on the forms of fan writing is as taboo-breakers within the small fannish field – winners of small victories against the Ghost Censor. In his day Walt Willis showed that fan writing was not necessarily “amateur” in the sense of being careless and unpolished; later, Greg Pickersgill showed that it was not necessarily polite and bland. What I have shown in my own case I am not quite sure. (I just get restless.) But the Ghost Censor is still in there working.

So why *did* I produce this monstrous thing?

To be rid of it.

Now I can do something else.

– 15th April 1984

The End

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