Watto's Wisdom

zine & con writing by

Ian Watson

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Ian Watson’s Fan Writing for Zines & Cons

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Original Appearances

Dedication

Fondly for Greg Pickelhaube who began this along with the canny hinny from Cullercoats, Catherine.

A Few Much-Needed Inventions

Scene: a chance encounter at a party or in a pub or on a train.... An ordinary encounter.

"And what do *you* do for a living, Mr. Watson?"

Well, what do I say? "I'm a..." Science Fiction writer? I can tell you what the next question is likely to be. It's one guaranteed to make any SF writer wish that he/she had a zap-gun to reach for.

"Really? How interesting! Where *do* you Sci-Fi writers get your crazy ideas?" (Which in itself is actually quite easily answered by saying: I occasionally read the newspapers and a magazine or two and watch the news on TV – it's the world that's crazy, not me. Unfortunately, that's what numbers of people in mental hospitals tend to say; so even though they might be right it's better to avoid *that* answer.)

Until recently I had an alibi, I could say, "I'm a lecturer in Future Studies." (Which I was.) And I was safe. Most people are at least reasonably aware – courtesy of the Energy Crisis – that the Future is being intensively studied: by Governments, Institutes, Universities. An institutional answer, it gave me unassailable status. (The fact that SF writers know far more about the Future than Governments is quite irrelevant; I'm speaking of ordinary encounters – not encounters with those extraordinary people, SF readers.)

However, since I gave up my job to become a full-time SF writer my alibi is lost. So I've dreamed up another. I say, "I'm an inventor." Now this is perfectly true in the sense that any SF writer worth their salt invents worlds. However, our friend in the mental hospital who insists he is Napoleon is also in the business of inventing worlds... so it's better not to explain my inventing along those lines. I need some solid practical mechanical inventions (patents pending) to my credit, which I can instantly reel off, thus proving that I am indeed a real inventor.

I'm going to confide some of my inventions now.

First of all, I've always been furious whenever a train stops at a station. Not because I secretly want to leap off it at a hundred kilometres an hour clutching my bags, in the best spy movie tradition, but because the train has to *start* again. Now it's a very heavy thing, a train; and I am appalled at the vast amount of energy wasted every time after every station in getting the train up to the right speed again. Obviously we want to store the kinetic energy of the train's motion, while it is standing in the station,

then release this energy to accelerate it on its way. Why has no one thought of this? But what to use? Fly wheels? Thick rubber bands that wind up due to the process of slowing down, and unwind again to speed the train on its way. No. Think of all the ghastly delays while broken bands were replaced. I have come up with a properly scientific solution. Nothing gimcrack here. It's the whole concept of brakes that is wrong. And it's wrong because all they do is brake; and nothing else. They must be replaced immediately with piezoelectric brakes. Now, piezoelectricity is the electric current generated by the effect of pressure on certain crystals; so piezoelectric brakes will generate electricity in the act of braking, and this electricity will then be used to speed the train up again. Consequently entropy will be defeated on the railways, and huge energy savings made.

Now for another invention which I confidently expect to ameliorate the world population crisis by preventing male chauvinist husbands, who yearn for a son and heir, yet who in apparent defiance of statistics produce daughter after daughter after daughter. (Lucky people, if they only knew it; but sexist prejudice prevails!) To prevent them from littering the world with unwanted, despised progeny, all for the sake of a son, John Postgate, a microbiologist at Sussex University, has made an eloquent plea for a "Male Pill" which will favour fertilisation of the human ovum by sperm bearing Y chromosomes coding for males. But no such pill is available.

Well, I have solved the problem by yoking science to sexual fetishism. Male and female-producing sperm are of a slightly different weight from one another. A centrifuge, as you all know, is a rapidly rotating machine for separating out heavier from lighter substances. Male-producing sperm are lighter, faster, but feebler; while female-producing sperm are heavier, slower but tougher. (Or is it the other way round? No matter! A detail.) Sperm centrifuges will be mass produced, small enough to be worn comfortably without causing marital friction. (Or perhaps the more friction the better? I have a catalogue of "French Ticklers" before me which assures me that such extra adjuncts are guaranteed to "make ladies insane with delight". [Presumably, by analogy with "French leave" – *filer à l'anglaise* – "French Ticklers" should be translated as *English* Ticklers?]) On the principle of the pump-action spinning top, the husband's exertions will set the centrifuge, which he is wearing, spinning (proportionate to his zeal). Upon ejaculation, the differently weighted sperms will be centrifuged apart and the male-producing sperm thus given a head start. Male offspring can be guaranteed; or your money back. Judging on current prices of "sex aids", the Watson Sperm Centrifuge will make a small fortune – not to mention doing its own little bit to save us all

from having to stand on Zanzibar amidst unwanted, rueful daughters.

A few more inventions, about which I must be brief: such as the urine hot-water bottle for use in winter to warm your bed during power cuts; or the beer cube (have you ever wanted a cold beer and forgotten to put one in the fridge – yet you can't bear the idea of putting ice cubes in your beer? Simple – you fill the ice cube tray with beer, not water. Thus too with Scotch on the rocks. If you like the chill, but don't like the dilution? Obvious answer: whisky cubes.)

However, my finest invention to date is the Alien Embassy. I am establishing my house as the Extraterrestrial Embassy on Earth – in the confident anticipation of accreditation as soon as communication with extraterrestrials is confirmed, or as soon as They land here. Undoubtedly the Sirians or Vegans or Arcturans or whoever they are will be delighted that someone has taken some forethought about this. Issued with diplomatic passports, which I am busy printing, and with extra-large CD plates to fix to their flying saucers, they can park anywhere they like in central London, Paris, Brussels – without getting parking fines. And of course I too can park a car anywhere. The Customs can't search *my* bags for cigarettes, whisky, hashish and perfume. I shall claim diplomatic immunity. And, of course, I will have another alibi. What do I do for a living? Why, I'm an Extraterrestrial Chargé d'Affaires of course.

But, come to think of it, this sounds rather like another way of saying that I'm a Science Fiction writer. Maybe I'd better stick to Inventor.

Until *They* come....

Winter 1977

The Crudities of Science Fiction

I wrote science fiction for a reason. Being a good European (culturally, if not politically) I sought for a theory of what I was doing....

During the last decade the best Anglo-American SF has grown up. The bounds of the so-called genre "ghetto" have burst. Its puberty is past; sex and human relations can be freely discussed. There is a reasonable awareness of political and social dimensions. Today's new vintages (as opposed to the *vin ordinaire* which continues to be pressed out) are – to be paradoxical – mature ones. University presses aren't ashamed to print critiques of SF; on the contrary. And these critiques deal with SF as a literature, not merely a peculiar sociological phenomenon. Meanwhile, many of the "best" writers increasingly condemn the commercial classification "SF" – so convenient to publishers, so artistically constraining to the writers. Thus Harlan Ellison refuses to let the term "SF" appear anywhere on the covers of his books; Malzberg quits the field because he feels that the label and the preconceptions implicit in the SF format hamper the imagination impossibly; Silverberg ceases to write since he considers that his best books haven't, and by definition can't, be appreciated within the field. There is a round of applause whenever a "superior" SF novel is marketed as a novel for the general reader. The best future is seen as one where SF is simply part of general literature, where general literature (already borrowing devices and metaphors from SF) absorbs its prodigal son – ghettoised by the devilish Gernsback and other pulp magazine editors – back into its body, till there is again simply literature, fiction, in all its multifarious diversity. (The term "SF" may be kept on, perhaps, as a convenient label for Perry Rhodan and suchlike adolescent immaturities.)

SF writers are supposed to be pleased about this. But I for one am not very pleased.

Why not, when we obviously have a new improved SF? Well, let us compare the old SF with the smart new literary model. Compare, for instance, the grandiose cardboard inanities of E.E. Smith with the artistic kind of story that often appears in original anthologies these days (I think particularly of Silverberg's *New Dimensions* series). In Smith, bright young heroes invent starships that skylark through the cosmos, saving

kidnapped girlfriends from falling into dead stars (by firing morse-code messages through space by machine gun) followed by valiant cuddles in space armour. Blasters roar, crypto-science jargon jangles evocatively, galaxies collide. It's gawkish stuff. Yet there is such sheer passion for science, discovery, space; such wonder (even though the human and social dimension is missing and the stuff is frankly unreadable beyond the age of 14 with its lumpy style, minimal characters and histrionic plots) that I turn with some sadness to some more obviously mature, adult, artistic SF of today.

Take a typical *New Dimensions* story. The piece is called "The Mothers' March on Ecstasy"; it is by George Alec Effinger. In it the resident anti-hero proclaims:

> "Oh, that I could enjoy anew the conscienceless freedom of those long-dead days. But I am sure it is impossible. I am not a scientist now. Perhaps you have noticed from the loveliness of the words that I have become a poet. It happened overnight...."

This story is rather symptomatic of what is happening in SF today, now that the ghetto walls are tumbling down. Sadly, the science ideas of genuine SF, and science itself too, become all too often a form of stylish kitsch, reflecting a self-indulgent Western disillusion with science, wonder, hope, the future, and their replacement by a sophisticated Silver Age rococo. Wry tragedy glitters. The future – that is all too rapidly becoming the present – is kitschified, as SF dons its laurels of respectability. (So Vonnegut – not that he would wish to be termed an SF writer! – reduces alien communication methods to farting and tap-dancing, and Malzberg's entire opus is almost all parody.) This is not true of all writers, certainly. Le Guin is writing authentic exploratory SF that is mature, literary, politically relevant and positive towards our future. Philip Dick *believes* – perhaps hectically, perhaps crazily; but he has vision. John Brunner cares. Frank Herbert too. Yet the autumnal Silver Age elegance is there in Silverberg's later books – which are far from being kitsch themselves, yet the imaginary cultural museum is being paced by a fine connoisseur before the barbarians breach the gates, before Death's sickle reaps. It is there in Chris Priest's *The Space Machine* – accomplished exercise in literary nostalgia that it is. It is there in Brian Aldiss's recent *The Malacia Tapestry*, again not kitsch certainly, but a patrician private world. (And of course the barbarians are within *us* too). This is a literature of personal aesthetic statement, the solution to the founderings of the Western episteme being sought in sophisticated private craft, in formalism

rather than idea content. However, SF is founded upon the exploration of ideas, rather than stylistics. It is a community of ideas; in its sum, it composes what one might call an "idea-myth", the idea-myth of man in the universe, of future-humanity (alien to ourselves at present), of the alien future, of life other than we yet know it. When, long ago, Michel Butor ("The Crisis of Growth in Science Fiction", 1953) remarked that "The power of SF writing is based upon one common dream" yet bemoaned the incoherent disagreements about the shape of the future, proposing a conference to sort things out, he was wrong in proposing such a syllabus for the future – for the very strength of SF lies in its contradictoriness, its multiple vision – yet he was quite right in seeing SF as a powerful mythology of potential liberation; and in reality such a conference did already exist – in the shared conceptual outlook of the genre. SF is already a mythology, in total; though unlike the hieratic mythologies of antiquity, it is a multiplistic mythology, with as many worlds, futures, heroes, Gods as there are writers (the sources for these), though with certain shared structural motifs: the sense of future time, the sense of future humanity, the sense of radical change, the sense of the alien. SF is a mythology of change – which we sorely need today. The old mythologies, as Mircea Eliade points out, were ones of cyclical renewal of the *same* world. And it is the very content-centred-ness of SF that makes it this mythology; the communal act of thought about future and change.

In *Myth and Reality* Eliade discusses the survivals of myth amid the secularisation of the present day. In humanity resides a deep urge to generate myth, to apprehend the universe and to renew one's being within it. In fiction (one such myth survival – for when old myths are exposed as fictions, fiction may become myth) the reader steps outside of normal time into a foreign universe, a mythic universe, the universe of sacred time. The urge to novelise, even though it arose amid the bourgeois enlightenment and typically concerned itself with things of this world, nevertheless reflects man's (thwarted) mythic thinking. Yet we are now emerging from a period of this-worldly secular myth (perhaps one should call it anti-myth) – into a time of ecological awareness, future consciousness, consciousness expansion; we must, or our world crashes. We are at a transition threshold – from secular, national man to planetary beings, to man-in-cosmos: a return to the old concern of myth, you may say, *except* that there is no possible return to primitive, static thought processes where all events of importance occurred in the beginning. Technologically mediated, the new episteme must concern itself with vital future events brought about by our own scientific activity.

Mainstream art which senses this new, barely definable episteme (as opposed to mainstream art which merely perpetuates the realist tradition of the past two centuries) seeks a tabula rasa upon which something new may be inscribed, seeks a new personal language of expression, a new metalanguage of reality, a reduction of discourse to its minimals to cleanse the dialect of art (Joyce, Beckett, Abstract Art, Action Art, Stockhausen...). Yet this project remains largely a private aesthetic one, wherein the artistry is sanctified rather than the matter. For the "myth" of general literature is ourselves; while the myth of SF is the other, the alienness confronting us. Other beings, other times.

SF, because of its subject matter – and despite its crudities – has a vital and serious collective mythic function, which I see as socially and imaginatively healthy (even though the politics of some SF writers may leave something to be desired). Yet it is not an aesthetic thing-in-itself, a private communion. For SF writers to hope to become individual writers within general literature, creating their own personal masterpieces, would be a false sublimation of the genre from which they emerge – injurious, after a time, to their own creativity, to their ability to create significantly; a sucking of energy into the maintenance of an artistic and psychological status quo, in this time of changes. Plainly market pressures and reader expectations tend to force the SF writer to support a consumer status quo of mere entertainment and formula; yet at the same time I believe that the genre has a different, and deeper effect within society by presenting the idea of future man, future alien experience, as something conceivable, encompassable. Collectively, it generates myth – of our future.

In a recent newspaper interview, British novelist John Fowles remarked that all novelists are sick, obsessive creatures who have experienced some infantile trauma that generates but one thing in common: the need to create an alternative world. The SF writer, I would suggest (perhaps one should speak hesitantly, after reading Malzberg's *Herovit's World* on the sickness of the SF pulp artiste!), is in a healthier situation, despite all the moans; is less isolated since he is engaged in this communal mythic creation, is engaged in something that undoubtedly *matters* – for the future certainly matters.

Yet what of the immaturities, the childishness and crudities of the genre? Franz Rottensteiner jibes (aiming at Philip José Farmer in particular) that SF creates whole worlds and universes – and what does it do with them? It plays billiards. It uses them all too frequently as ping-pong balls in a shooting gallery. What is SF doing, though, but creating myths which are games and toys? Let us not sneer at games and toys. They

are very necessary; and we must admit that humanity is still in its infancy. What do children do but play with toys? *And learn from them*. SF – the collective myth of SF – is such a learning toy. To strike out for a spurious sophistication within the bosom of general literature is to place these toys in a connoisseur's art gallery, at the very time that epistemic shockwaves are shaking the foundations of the gallery.

This is why SF can have its crudities – and still be of great value; why the creation of SF *as SF* is a collective enterprise which we cannot, perhaps, properly grasp the importance of, as yet. Why SF, strangely – given its economic market background – is a revolutionary literature.

Of course, this is no reason to praise its being written badly or carelessly! A horse runs best when it runs most elegantly, most stylishly. (Yet it must still be a horse.) SF should be written as well as is in the writer's power; and I am aware that market and genre pressures frequently make this hard – though frankly I would say that there is a lot of rather good SF around, much better than one would expect. The cry for the acceptance of SF within general literature and the erasing of the label appears at first to be a plea for culture against barbarism (the barbarisms of 3 cents a word, deadlines, garish packaging, inane blurbs, a forced catering to cardboard adolescent power fantasies – "How I saved the Universe in my spare time with one hand tied behind my back"). Yet, underlying this, is a dangerous rejection of the positive well-springs of this mythic literature. SF should be written with a respect, rather than a loathing for the genre; and there is a bit too much loathing of it about now.

Perhaps this reflects the years we are living through. The Seventies, so far, have been an austere and gloomy, if still prolific period. One would like a safe haven, free from storms – and personal art (by our cultural conditioning) is apparently such a haven....

Yet of course Art was not a private haven in the past, before the Romantic view of the Artist stamped it as such. SF is really akin to older literature, before literature was sanctified as a thing-in-itself. It is mythic – and didactic; it is content-directed, as Art traditionally was. It is the collective conceptual framework of SF that counts, and gives strength to the individual works. Within that framework, one should obviously write as well as one can; but one must not forget the framework, since it is this that lends SF its strength and potential, not yet (let it be added) fully realised.

Personally I look forward to the SF of the 1980s: a fiction that acknowledges it is science fiction. It is this that will be relevant, socially and humanly.

March 1978

UFOs, Science, and the Inexplicable

In 1979 Cutty Sark Scotch Whisky, in association with New Scientist *magazine, offered a prize of £1,000 for the best "scientific paper" on any aspect of the UFO phenomenon – as well as a prize of £1,000,000 to anyone who could produce any artefact acceptable to the Science Museum in London as of demonstrable alien manufacture. The winning essay was a predictably sceptical assessment of Ufology. This was my attempt to win a million Pounds.....*

The notion of a "scientific paper" on the UFO phenomenon begs a couple of important questions. Firstly, we're to suppose that this phenomenon will yield to scientific investigation as generally understood. We're to suppose that the evidence can be collected, sifted and analysed to yield an irreducible core of data (or even no authentic data at all, in which case success comes early!) and a hypothesis developed which will succeed in "explaining" the phenomenon and even perhaps provide grounds for experimental or observational verification.

One can imagine a number of excellent scientific papers, and one could even write these – though they would be rather like reviews of imaginary books. Here is the meteorological explanation, or the plasma cloud explanation. Here is the antimatter particle explanation. Here, even, is the explanation in terms of actual alien spacecraft powered by gravitational field inducers which produce ionisation effects. When even the BBC nature programme *The Living World* chips in with its own hypothesis (namely, clouds of bud-worm moths) it's obvious that everybody can see the matter quite clearly from their own special angle – no less so the "alien spacecraft" aficionados, though since their own particular obsession lies outside the bounds of current conceivable technology to explain the data they must extrapolate or invent a possible future technology and attendant scientific theories of gravity, space-time, lightspeed constraints. (Yet why not indeed, when one can talk blithely on the fringes of "real" science – as does Adrian Berry in *The Iron Sun* – of diving our starships through the midst of toroidal black holes?)

Obviously, if we don't provide an explanation of this order – whether it be bud-worm moths or gravity drives – can what we are suggesting be

rightly labelled “scientific”? Science, as we all know, strives to explain things. Science unravels the DNA; it takes us back to the first microseconds of the Big Bang; it analyses the basis of matter as a dynamic interplay of quarks and gluons. Some day science will explain everything, and already we know the right sort of questions to pose. It’s our scientific duty to explain this phenomenon too.

But – and here the second question is begged – does science really operate this way? As physicist Geoffrey Chew has pointed out (“‘Bootstrap’: A Scientific Idea?” in *Science*, 23 August 1968), the whole history of scientific endeavour is one of an increasingly close approximation to the “truth”. The number of *a priori* concepts embedded in scientific theories may certainly lessen as time goes by, yet *a priori* concepts as such – something taken for granted; some unquestioned framework – are essential to science as we understand it. All natural phenomena are ultimately interconnected, yet science only works by a partial approach – provided, of course, that the part currently being ignored is sufficiently small for the partial approach to work. Thus we have today a cosmology that ignores quantum effects, a particle physics that ignores gravitation, a natural science that ignores the mechanism underlying consciousness; and so on. “Semantically,” as Chew says, “an attempt to explain all concepts can hardly be called ‘scientific’.” May we presume that one day the *a priori*, taken-for-granted elements will diminish to zero by scientific attrition? Not so. For a “total self-consistency” approach would inevitably involve the concept of observation and thus the enigma of consciousness itself – and it would thus move outside physics into a domain “that will not even be describable as ‘scientific’.” Capra concludes thus, too, at the end of his book *The Tao of Physics* when he declares that we will one day move beyond a “theory” to a “vision” of Nature – and this isn’t something that is definable along the rational, analytical lines of science as we know it.

How about making a start on the groundwork for this “vision of Nature” now? For it happens that the two questions which are begged may in fact answer one another. The necessary incompleteness of scientific method and the unidentifiability of the UFO phenomenon may perhaps be brought together fruitfully in a new approach which does not so much seek to “solve” the UFO problem as to use it as a probe into the necessary incompleteness of our approach to physical reality – an approach, moreover, which draws into the equation a theory of that consciousness which, in the long run, must be “bootstrapped” into our understanding of the nature of reality.

How to proceed? One sure feature of the UFO phenomenon is its unidentifiability. Another is its ubiquity. Here, we must side with the "revisionist" Ufologists (such as Jacques Vallée, Aimé Michel, or a recent addition to their ranks, Bertrand Méheust). We aren't simply talking about "flying saucers" – apparently alien craft – which have been buzzing around the Earth and even landing on it since 1947 or so. We're also talking about the rash of phantom rockets seen over Scandinavia in the Thirties. We're talking about the dirigibles observed over the Middle West of America in the 1890s – sightings all of craft that were conceivable within the "belief structure" of their period, yet which were technologically somewhat outside of it. We're also talking about flying ships that snagged their anchors in church steeples in the Middle Ages and aerial battles witnessed then – events outside of normal reality yet compatible with the belief structures of the time.

We're also talking about the menagerie of Ufonauts reported by UFO contactees, people who prove under hypnosis to have sincerely experienced something. We're also talking about the structurally similar encounters with fairy folk – who abduct, as do the Ufonauts; who promise great things then cheat and hoodwink, just as the Ufonauts offer evidence which evaporates into trash and nonsense. We're talking about a phenomenon with many guises – sedulously adapting itself to the belief structure of the time, which today in our consensus world of CETI and space travel presents itself in terms of alien visitors from the stars.

We're talking about a phenomenon which has been collectively experienced – mutating sociologically – for a very long time, and which is thus of the psyche, yet which is also of the objective physical world since it leaves actual traces such as radiation burns, marks in the soil, or blips on radar screens. We're talking about a phenomenon which bridges "reality" and the consciousness that structures reality for us. In so doing, it questions what existence is: what the relationship might be between consciousness and reality.

A fascinating analysis of the problem appears in Méheust's (as yet untranslated) *Science Fiction et Soucoupes Volantes* – which I am happy to cite since I arrived at some of the same ideas and extrapolations beyond them independently in the course of writing a novel on the UFO theme entitled *Miracle Visitors*. Méheust's unique contribution to the debate is his proof, from a dedicated dredging of pulp fiction of the past 100 years, that exact details of UFO phenomenology and exact experiences of contactees have been prefigured by obscure SF romancers years before they took place "in reality", in Brazil or wherever, to people who could

have had no access to the long-forgotten “originals”. These filter through into the phenomenon, as per text. But from what do they filter?

Méheust favours the idea of an “objective mythical web” which organises, in the domain of reality, UFO events and in the mythic, psychic domain organises the preferred imagery from which the fictional tales arose. He relates this back to the archaic substratum of human thought from which arises dream imagery and likewise the transmutational symbolism of alchemy so aptly analysed by Jung.

Jung insists in *Psychology and Alchemy* that a “symbolism as rich as that of alchemy invariably owes its existence to some adequate cause, never to mere whim or play of fancy.” The alchemist “projects” his inaccessible unconscious – with which he is striving for union – upon the objective world (upon his retorts and alembics and chemicals) which will simultaneously validate his projection for him, and deny it ultimate proof since it is only a projection. Rumours of success abound, of course. Like the UFO contactee, the alchemist is widely known to have succeeded, but no one can prove it.

Yet alchemy was “only” a projection. What are we to make, then, of the objective evidence left over by UFO events? The answer to this takes us even further into the process of projection of unconscious forces onto the outside world – to a zone where the observer actually modifies reality, or more exactly where a symbiotic interplay occurs affecting both domains.

As Méheust shows, UFOs do obey rules. Hard evidence and duration of sightings vary inversely with the possibility that observers can get close enough to pin them down. “Holes of impunity” would seem to be known to them in advance. Yet they continue to show themselves, and it has been demonstrated statistically (by the astrophysicist Poher) that the observing consciousness is “necessary” to them.

Impossibility of proof, coupled with ostentatious intrusions, is therefore an essential characteristic. What scientific theory can tackle this inherent indefinability?

We may genuflect here to Kurt Gödel with his proof that the axioms of a particular system cannot all, by definition, be validated within the terms of that system. A metasystem is required; but it too will carry its own inbuilt logical restriction. We may nod at Geoffrey Chew with his statement about the necessarily partial nature of science.

Yet an avenue is open by which we can approach this particular psychophysical enigma – not from the mystical side, though there are techniques there, in Sufi thought particularly – but closer to our rational

scientific paradigm: namely in a discipline that is in its own (highly fashionable) infancy – the study of altered states of consciousness, or transpersonal psychology.

American psychologist Charles Tart is the pioneer in this field, and in his *States of Consciousness* he sets the groundwork for the analysis of discrete states of mind which diverge from ordinary baseline consciousness (in which we normally operate and where, perforce, we perform the work of science – *pace* the dream discovery of the structure of Benzene by Kekulé). These are states of mind which are wholly "irrational" and aberrant from the viewpoint of baseline consciousness, yet which possess an internal consistency and coherent logic *while one is within them*. What Tart hopes to develop is a method for working *within* these states rather than, as heretofore, from without them objectively. A means may exist since there may be overlaps between some of the mental structures of one ASC (Altered State of Consciousness) and those of another: between, say, certain trance conditions under deep hypnosis, and certain structures within an LSD experience; or between mystical apprehension and, say, ethyl alcohol intoxication. A stepladder of intersecting states can perhaps be erected – and thus a reportability achieved across the psychic boundaries, so that the investigator can bring genuine internal information back to the baseline.

I would suggest (as indeed I do in my novel *Miracle Visitors*) that here is a potential way to tap into this UFO phenomenon which is partly of objective reality and partly of the psyche. Let us suppose that there exists a hitherto unrecognised ASC which I shall term "UFO-consciousness". This is an ASC in which UFO experiences – of sightings, landings, contact with "aliens", abduction by them, instruction by them – occurs. It is an ASC that is very far from ordinary baseline consciousness, yet it is one into which we can – as yet inadvertently, yet often collectively – transit. Let us probe its boundary conditions and internal structure by "states of consciousness" techniques, and it may become one into which we can *experimentally* transit, even though its validity will necessarily remain suspect in baseline terms – just as mystical apprehension does.

UFO-consciousness is an ASC, I believe, which is tied into the roots of our cognition – our "construction" of reality, and thus the roots of the world as we can possibly conceive it. We exist in a participatory universe which is as it is because we are here to observe it, and in it the activity of the experimenter must have an actual physical effect upon the reality under investigation and can never be divorced from it. So that we here enter an area of exploration of the actual intersection of mind and reality which, in

the case of UFO events, is upon a macroscopic rather than upon a microscopic scale.

Might there be a *reason* for UFO events – along with their insistence coupled with their observational impunity? Perhaps higher orders of consciousness – reflecting, as they evolve, a more precise convergence upon an understanding of the universe – evolve *because* of the "suction" of the psychophysical unidentifiability which is embodied in UFO manifestations? Maybe here is the hint of an evolutionary dynamic towards higher orders of awareness?

If it is true that reality cannot wholly be known to any discrete level of consciousness, then this fact may well be reflected in our own psychic structures which have evolved within this reality – as indeed it is in the fact that consciousness arises from preconscious psychic structures which, by virtue of being unconscious, cannot come within the domain of conscious scrutiny. And yet unconscious structures project themselves upon the outside world constantly, in a dynamic aimed – in Jungian terms – at reintegration. Just as, in mystical or theological terms, the universe represents a separation of a "God" from Himself – a theme which accurately projects our own psychic dilemma.

And yet the UFO phenomenon cannot consist solely of projection, since evidence (of an elusive nature!) is indeed forthcoming. UFO events may then be, not merely a key to the evolution of our own psychic structures, but also to the "trans-scientific" problem (in Chew and Capra) of the actual interplay of mind and reality.

If techniques of ASC research can be developed to embrace the psychophysical zone that I have called "UFO-consciousness", then here – without prejudice to my point about inherent unprovability – is an idea that is potentially testable. If we could set up experimental conditions to transit into, evoke and explore UFO-consciousness, to be flippant for a moment, then one could even win £1,000,000 from Cutty Sark by producing a demonstrably alien artefact – summoning it, as it were, into existence.

Only it would not be an alien artefact – it would be something far stranger. This will not be a research area that can be tackled from baseline consciousness – in the way that UFO "research" has been so far. It will have to be undertaken somewhere up the "transit ladder" from baseline consciousness to UFO-consciousness, within the logic structure of the latter state. However, the tools for thinking about this project do exist, and it may bring us one step closer to Capra's "vision of Nature", as well as one step closer to our psychic reintegration with the hidden areas in ourselves.

It would be a scientific enterprise necessarily leading outside of "science". It would be a psychological exploration that would lead beyond the individual mind. It would not be an enterprise that could "succeed" in the sense of nailing down once and for all the will-o'-the-wisp of the UFO. It would, however, open a door into a possible future science of transpsychic reality, one that would integrate and subsume so much that has eluded us, yet constantly nagged at us too, like a toothache. It would be a genuine way, available to us all as we are here and now, of thinking about the unthinkable (what a pity that Kahn captured this phrase for his megadeath scenarios), and operating within the inexplicable – not "explaining" it, but envisioning it and reporting back, as the benighted contactees who are snatched up for a "saucer flight" report back, but this time with our eyes open, aware where we have actually been.

November 1980

One Finger at a Time

Up until my last novel I wrote all my books in longhand in blue A4 Feint ruled books purchased from Smith's. I got into this habit because I wrote the first drafts of my earlier novels on the rocky morning train, commuting from Oxford to Birmingham; and it occurred to me that greater spontaneity and freedom of flow was achieved this way, since I couldn't very easily read what I had just written – which was sometimes a bit of a problem when I got to the second draft stage, of decoding these cryptic manuscripts on to the typewriter, at the same time reorganising and rewriting them considerably. Since my last novel (*Deathhunter*, due Autumn 1981) I have been composing directly on to the typewriter, though the first draft remains very far from neat, if considerably more legible.

Stage two is typing up a second draft, revising as I go along. Then I go over the whole of this second draft in ink, revising it. And then I type a third draft, which I am convinced is perfection, so I mail it. (To John Bush at Gollancz, not to my agent – I haven't clicked with any agent yet, and my most recent flirtation with one left me hugely unimpressed.)

Gollancz get a reader's report, and read the book themselves – in *great* detail – and suggestions emerge, to my initial surprise, but they all turn out to be dead on target. A while having passed since I finished the "perfect" draft, I now see that it isn't quite perfect after all, so I set to and make it perfect this time.

Actually, I've been having to do much less to that final draft in the last couple of years, as the suggestions have been fewer and less extensive; and I quite miss those editorial evenings at the Bushes' home over a bottle of whisky when the book was on the dissecting table for total surgery. Now it only requires a few amputations and grafts, minor surgery which can be performed over lunch, or even by letter. Still, John assured me that *Deathhunter* could be revised quite easily with a bit of pen work on the typescript, and I rewrote the whole darn book anyway from beginning to end. I think the moral is (as someone said) that a novel is never actually finished; you just stop writing it. And as I'm a Protestant Work Ethic workaholic I rewrite my books rather a lot, doing about six times as much as is asked, in the end. But I work quite swiftly (or at least so I'm told; it never seems so to me.)

Schedules? Yes indeed, and on the whole I manage to keep to them. *Deathhunter* was even finished a week ahead of my own schedule, at all

stages. I'm very orderly; I don't see the life of Art as a life of mess. I work Mondays to Saturdays, 7 a.m. to midday, with excursions now into the afternoons, partly because new things are piling up to be written all the time, partly because of the recession made ten times worse by the insane Tories.

Plot outlines? I did use pretty tight plot outlines for my earlier books, and even card-indexed them. Latterly I have increasingly been seeing what develops of itself out of the initial situation. And of course when I *had* a tight plot outline, things would still go their own way as they willed – which is as it should be. Weird things always happen; for instance in *God's World* a murder occurred, and I remember writing on the manuscript, "who the hell killed him?" and staring at this sentence and realising that my dear heroine must be the killer, and raging at this, and arguing it out with myself on the page, because your heroine *can't* be a sex murderess, and deciding to play along with this, and yes, it was the true answer.

I typed all my books up until *Deathhunter* on a faithful old Hermes Baby Portable, which usefully had French accents; now, when I write a French letter (as it were) I have to cover it with inky crow's feet. The Hermes packed up a few months ago, shortly after the publishing industry sank on to its knees, and immediately after I'd lost a windscreen on my car, burst a tyre, snapped off the window winding handle, and run into a Volvo. I replaced the Hermes with a manual Olympia Regina de Luxe for about the same cost as repair estimates for the Hermes. Its only sophistication is a tabulator key, which saves time for indenting for new paragraphs, thus encouraging more use of dialogue (cf. Marshall McLuhan on the impact of technology on art).

Actually I'm quite mediaeval compared with all these writers with self-editing visual display IBMs, agents and accountants. I work out my VAT in my head, probably to compensate for a traumatic episode in my youth when I worked in a shipping office in Newcastle briefly after leaving school, and got five different answers when I was totting up a portage account. Yes indeed, Chris Priest is not the only ex-accountant in our midst; I too was one, for three weeks! But actually, I owe my current skill at numeracy to playing darts most evenings.

Research? This is why I moved from central Oxford to the countryside: to stop myself from doing too much research, and to encourage free invention and the fantastical imagination. But yes, I have researched things in great detail in the past. I have reams of paper on the Cetacean central nervous system, the grammar of Quechua (did you know

that was what the aliens were speaking in the bar scene in *Star Wars*? True Fact: they were talking the language of the Incas, to the astonishment of all Bolivian and Peruvian peasants who have since seen the film), the vegetation of Sakhalin, mediaeval Islamic metaphysics, the orbital characteristics of 61 Cygni (which I wish I had never discovered, since once I had, Mike Bishop and I had to locate *Under Heaven's Bridge* in a different star system entirely – we both being scrupulous individuals – thus losing a sale to Dave Hartwell, the editor at Pocket Books, who is fond of 61 Cygni. But I haven't got time to go into the Cygni incident here, owing to the savage space constraints which the editors of *Focus* have imposed upon me, save to say that too much research can be bad for you).

In fact, I have developed a much more effective method of finding out what I need to know than research – a kind of Zen technique of hitting the bull by not looking at it. (Curiously, this doesn't work when I'm playing darts.) The method is random serendipity accompanied by willed intention. I will walk into a library and at random, without searching, I will find exactly what I need to know, and even what I didn't know that I needed to know. I realise that this is a paranormal talent, but I assure you that it's true. Other writers have experienced this too. It's probably very common.

Turning to my preferred reference works, listed below, you will notice that these are scrappy in the extreme, apart from *The Merck Manual*, the Bible of the American medical field. The *University Atlas* is 20 years old, left over from the time when I ran the University Bookshop at Dar es Salaam pending the appointment of a full-time manager (who turned out to be a fascinating chap, Charles McKinnon, Laird of Dunakin, author of the *Observer's Book of Heraldry* and under various pseudonyms of a dozen Romance novels). *The English Duden* is useful at times for reminding me what things look like, and which widgets are attached to which sprockets. (Actually, there's a story on every page of *Duden* and I heartily recommend it to John Sladek, whose short story "A Game of Jump" is built so hilariously upon, and only upon, the vocabulary of a *Ladybird* book.) *Duden*, published in Germany, significantly omits all references to War in any form, which is why my characters increasingly shoot each other with Hunting Equipment such as The Carbine employing The Telescopic Sights. *Duden* is useful too in lieu of an American-English Dictionary for transatlantic terminology. ("He lined up the alien in his sight graticulate" becomes "He lined up the alien in his cross-hair diopter".) And I use the *Penguin English Dictionary* to rein in and simplify my huge vocabulary, since it had become obvious that I was using too

many long and exotic words. (“He pared his words to points like stars / Leaving them pure but very few” – Lawrence Durrell’s poem about Horace.) *The Concise Atlas of the Universe* is pretty useless. All it says about 61 Cygni is that it is “the faint star 61 Cygni, in the constellation of the Swan, was found to lie at 11 light years”. And: “A visual binary with a comparatively great proper motion”. That’s a fat lot of use (even leaving aside the etiquette of referring to a visual binary as “the star”): nothing about the separation of the components or their spectral class. The trouble with the *New Larousse Encyclopaedia of Mythology* is that you have to know the mythology already before you look it up. The only real reference book I have is *The Merck Manual*, 11th edition, 1850 pages of Bible paper, an indispensable tool when your characters fall ill.

With these tools and techniques, and with one finger – none of my other fingers knows how to type – I conduct my career. In an orderly way. One finger at a time.

Spring 1981

Down the Mine

The Recession Strikes Back! The jam disappears from one's bread and butter, soon followed by most of the butter. How long will the bread last...?

Last week I received a fan letter from George Turner in Australia, about my novel *The Gardens of Delight.*

A fan letter from George Turner is an unparalleled event, and must be recorded in the annals of the universe, or at least of my own universe.

Now, *The Gardens of Delight* appeared from Gollancz under the rubric "Gollancz Fantasy", and George duly noted that "despite the Gollancz pigeonholing it does fulfil the most necessary qualifications of sf, though it stretches them to the limits." While Brian Stableford, reviewing the same novel in *Arena 11*, wondered why "the author and/or publisher should have chosen to distinguish it from his earlier novels." Because, of course, the book does possess a perfectly solid sf rationale.

So why, then, is *The Gardens of Delight* labelled "fantasy"? From the publisher's angle I would surmise that, having established a fantasy line, it is necessary to bring some books out in it. While I must confess to having been seduced by the prospect of a real live illustrated dust jacket.

When the novel went out to reviewers, however, great and perhaps predictable confusion ensued. The "straight" reviewers, who can count fantasy within their domain, were sorely puzzled. "In *The Gardens of Delight*" wrote one, "Ian Watson has unwisely forsaken SF for FF (fantasy fiction)." A second, seeking a neat antithesis, wrote: "Watson has already written a string of science fiction but this is his /// strangest and most compelling tale to date." (The phrase following the slash marks is, sigh, merely lifted verbatim from the jacket blurb.) While *The Observer* opened with a whole column discussing the nature of fantasy before deciding that, by virtue of being fantasy, the novel under review "transforms itself into something more interesting than 'ordinary' SF."

An interesting case study in confusion, this. And incidentally it resulted in the least favourable bunch of reviews I've ever had, for a book which George Turner, doughty critic, says makes him "jump for joy." But George Turner, of course, knows perfectly well what sf is.

At a time when a fair few writers and critics deplore the existence of the label and the category sf, one might feel inclined to draw the moral

from all this that the label and category are no bad thing. This wasn't a case of an sf book being let loose in the wider world to take its chances, and succeeding or failing, whichever. Rather, it was a case of the mainstream critics desperately trying to understand it *by means* of a label, and failing utterly – establishing false antitheses, proclaiming it to be worse than sf because it was fantasy, or to be better than sf for the same reason. The "outside" critics actually yearned for the label, and simply couldn't understand what they were reading when it didn't fit the label. Particularly, none of them – while making knowing noises about sf – knew enough to say: this *is* sf.

So should we simply call an sf novel "a novel" – or even perhaps "a book"? The confusion would probably be worse compounded then, since the critics wouldn't even have the term "sf" or "fantasy" to react against. Yet again, if *The Gardens of Delight* had simply been labelled "a novel" I'm fairly sure that the reviews would have read quite differently: "Now we turn to a science fiction offering which has slipped into the pile..." Because the novel has a spaceship and an alien planet in it. So now it could have been mis-reviewed, with all prior prejudices intact. (At this point I fantasise about issuing normative definitions of the universal, multifarious plenty which we know as sf, to all newspapers and weeklies.)

But this is really a rather obvious, first-stage thought about the current anathema regarding the genre label. What I want to write about in this particular column, instead, is what the writer who writes and loves sf ought to do, particularly in a time of economic recession, to pay the bills and maintain him or herself as a writer.

For one immediate hope, or temptation, is to diversify. We are wordsmiths, after all; and words can be written about anything at all.

Surely we can dash off a quick Romance (under a pseudonym, of course). And how about all these horror novels which now seem to share the shelves 50/50 with sf? (Last year it seemed more like 25/75, in favour of sf.) I refer to *The Squirming*, *The Slithering*, *The Foreboding*, *The Presage*, *The Yucking*. How about a quick children's book? And how about TV? Or how about a quick ook, rather than a book? Supposedly publishers are on the lookout for writers with a good track record of published pages, who haven't made it big, with a view to hyping them into orbit through an artificial book, an ook. How about contributing to other kinds of artificial books, "marketing books" such as *Great Interstellar Dreadnoughts of the Sirius Class*?

I have the information sheets for one such current project before me, kindly sent by a friend in California who heard that I was broke. It is

undoubtedly a nobler venture than *Alien Criminals to Beware Of*, but it's still a wholly artificial book. It's *The Dune Encyclopedia*, and the idea is to invent fictitious entries on everything mentioned by Frank Herbert in the *Dune* books, from the Aba Hood through to Zombie-Katrundo, without ever mentioning the name Frank Herbert. Thus the result should seem to be a genuine encyclopedia of facts.

I admit to being tempted, since it would be quite easy to pull down from my shelves books on Islamic theology and Sufism, and write entries for *Baraka* or *Dar al-hikman* or *Fiqh* or *Urn*, giving these a cosmic future twist, and so performing a double displacement of the original material which Herbert drew upon.

One deterrent is the fact that his project is a "Work for Hire" which means that you give up your copyright on your own words immediately. But the other deterrent – working against the prospect of $40 per 1000 words payable immediately upon acceptance – is the thought: Why the hell? Why the hell write marginalia to the *Dune* Quartet instead of writing fiction of one's own?

Likewise, why the hell propose to write *The Yucking* or *Spock Goes Schizo* or *A Guide to Extraterrestrial House Plants*?

One mistake, if I did this, would be to try to do it fairly well. To take too much time over it. (Perhaps any time taken is too much?) Actually to care for it. To believe in it 100% at least 5% of the time.

And the book would just drown. Vanish.

There *are* nuggets of gold in the midst of crappy hack projects. Take Laser Books, universally scorned. I read one pretty good Laser Book: Jerry Sohl's *I Am Aleppo*, and one really stunning one: Ray Nelson's *Blake's Progress*. And what mention is ever made of these? They are tainted.

Even in the Marvel Novel Series – another way of picking up extra cash by novelising the superheroes – number 7 is pretty good. The cover proclaims: STAN LEE PRESENTS: DOCTOR STRANGE, MASTER OF THE MYSTIC ARTS // IN A NOVEL BY WILLIAM ROTSLER (much smaller capitals) // NIGHTMARE. I bought this because I was always intrigued by Doctor Strange, and knew Bill Rotsler's name, and thought that he would turn in a rather good book; and he did.

And who cares?

Yet as advances sink to historic lows, not always paid in advance, one needs the money.

So, in the past year or so, I've been tempted by several bright ideas for diversifying.

The first lightbulb lit up overhead when *TV Times* announced that

they had run out of Roald Dahl stories for the *Tales of the Unexpected* series, and were offering a prize for a story. Not much. About £200, I recall. But I reckoned I could blitz Anglia TV at the rate of two pretty good 1500-worders (this being the limit) per day. After all, I had watched the series – which I always thought ought to have been renamed *Tales of the Expected*. So I sent in six specially written rural horror stories with suitable twists in the tail (or perhaps they were unsuitable: too unexpected?) A year later I can say with a fair degree of objectivity that they were all rather good. And I heard of another sf writer who sent in fourteen stories.

As I should have realised in the first place, this was an utter waste of time. What news value was there for *TV Times* if they handed the cash over to a full-time writer? With no disrespect intended, the winning entry just had to be a first story by a chiropodist's secretary.

My next foolish project was to try to float an ook, about our feathered friends who fly around my windows, in the great tradition of epics about rabbits, moles, barnyard roosters, cockroaches and earwigs – and get paid to write it. I wrote a bloody good chapter and outline, and these were really well pushed for me at the Frankfurt Book Fair. And nothing happened. (Thank God.)

So then I launched into a brief children's book. And nothing happened.

By now friends across the globe were working furiously for me, trying to hook projects. Thus in due course I heard that Playboy Paperbacks were really keen to consider *The Woman Factory*, which has only appeared in French so far (and in Portuguese, I believe, but the publisher has defaulted on the second half of the advance, any complimentary copies, and the copy of the typescript which I loaned him). I hauled out the last surviving blurred xerox of the typescript, and decided with the hindsight of ten years that it could well do with being entirely rewritten. So I typed out the first eighth of the book as it was, as a sample, and outlined the rest and my further plans for it, and airlifted the package to Playboy Paperbacks, who were so keen. Silence. The silence continues, despite enquiries.

I also wrote the story for a proposed film maker, at his request. Gratefully acknowledged, then silence.

Now all this may seem par for the course when one is trying to hack it as a wordsmith. (I suppose I had better except *The Woman Factory* from that, since I wrote it with full commitment originally. But is the book *actually* clamouring to be written – rewritten – ten years after?*) And no

doubt I should have hustled a lot more, in a lot more places. But anyway, after quite a lot of working hours wasted here and there, I decided: sod it all – and went into an sf story blitz. The repressed material erupted like Etna. *Fantasy & SF* bought, *Omni* bought... Out of the blue came a phone call from Germany asking for SF stories.

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* (The silence has now been tentatively broken. After a mere six months. Immediately a new and greater *Woman Factory* blooms in my mind, with a larger and even more dramatic plot, which I could fully commit myself to, as a fresh writing experience within science fiction. Will there now be another silence, equally long?)

(*Footnote, added three years later.* And lo, the novel was rewritten, and bought enthusiastically by Playboy Paperbacks. And lo, the Playboy empire lost its gambling licence in London, and got rid of PP to Berkley; who refused to publish. Currently, publishers are passing the typescript from one to t'other like a hot potato or live hand grenade, warmly wishing it luck elsewhere, and murmuring that if *they* published it, they would get their lungs torn out.)

So there's a moral here, to me at least. It isn't the moral that one should write the same darned old stuff as ever, stuck in the same faithful genre groove. (Since in fact I feel that my fiction is altering, mutating.) But it is an argument, to me at least, for writing *organically*, out of oneself, rather than arbitrarily – as a wordsmith of any old thing due to economic pressures. Somehow one survives. Usually. One hopes.

"Depend upon it, Sir," said the redoubtable Doctor Johnson, who knew all about the effects of poverty on the author, "when a man knows he is to be hanged in a fortnight, it concentrates his mind wonderfully." I would add that it is important to concentrate on the right things.

In a publishing scene where relatively easy money can be picked up from *Dune Encyclopedia*s and novelisations of *Blake's 7* or whatever, and where an original creative act is much less certainly rewarded, there's a great temptation to pick up on these peripherals, or to generate others – ooks *et al* – to survive as an independent writer. Though if someone offered me a UFO film novelisation tomorrow, what would I do?

Down in the hot dark mine of the creative process, labours the miner with little job security (since someone might close his mine down or foreclose on the loans to run it). He works a long day, carving out ore or coal or whatever for pay that just ensures the roof over his head and a pint of beer or three; but not always. The ore or coal or whatever is trundled off, and the value and energy are transmuted presently into highly-advertised profitable toys of the moment, from which the miner receives

little joy. One day the miner is offered a job in the secondary-products factory. Then all the other miners are offered jobs there too. And lo, the secondary factory proves to be self-sustaining, even without the original ore and coal. The products circulate through an abstract causality loop, and no longer need the raw materials. One day the first miner has saved up enough to return to the true mine. But he has forgotten how to find the veins of ore, and can only dig up fool's gold and cardboard coal – which still glitter and burn, though.

And one day all the secondary products fall to pieces because they've been getting thinner and thinner, less and less dense, the space between their atoms greater. Or else: they do not fall to pieces, because the very same thing has been happening to the consumers of them. These people too are now ghosts – ghosts of the beings they originally were. But no one notices.

A fanciful analogy, no doubt; but then, writers think in fanciful, displaced images. And indeed I perceive that here is the germ of a story: *Down the Mine*.

Maybe it won't write itself as easily as it otherwise might, since now I know the meaning of the story in advance. But I hope that I can allow the organic story to override this pre-programmed meaning. (The most interesting of van Vogt's stories, to me, is "Process". It is about a potent yet stupid super-forest, with a forest-consciousness of violent instincts. Periodically an impervious starship lands and steals riches from the forest by goading it to quarry uranium to pile around the intruding starship as a bomb. This short story is a perfect analogy for the process of artistic creation in one writer at least – with the masterful consciousness plunging, well-armoured, into the tangled, hostile unconscious to extract necessary wealth. I also believe, though I may be wrong, that it is a completely unconscious metaphor on van Vogt's part.)

Next week, or the week after, or in a year's time when it has gelled, I really must write *Down the Mine*. Then the story might show me what the real analogy to the present writer's dilemma is.

Summer 1981

The Nuke Standard

> We are privileged to print here for the first time a startling address which was delivered behind locked doors at the recent meeting of the International Monetary Fund in Barbados. It will be recalled that Russian and Chinese observers were present by invitation for the first time in the history of the IMF. The speaker remains unidentified but is believed to belong to a well-known Think Tank.

Gentlemen, and perhaps I should add, Comrades: In this time of inflation, recession and international crisis two main disaster scenarios menace all our futures. One of these is the likelihood of a nuclear war. The other is the imminent collapse of the world monetary system.

The second of these two events – even if it didn't automatically trigger off a global conflict – certainly wouldn't limit its effects to the so-called Capitalist World. I see you all nodding agreement. We are realists here. The world is far too interlinked nowadays for "our" system to collapse without "yours" collapsing too – or at least degenerating into a pitiful shadow of its present self. Must I mention the massive investment loans by the West in the Communist blocs? Or the urgent need for Western technology to spearhead development: technology which must be sustained by profit feedback?

Yes, it's no secret that the whole Western money system is in grave danger. How can you plan ahead on an international scale when currencies fluctuate wildly against each other?

In the Communist blocs the economies are said to be planned scientifically, by contrast with our own reliance on free market forces. But we all know that there is little genuinely scientific in the true sense – if at all – about Marxist economic theory. Marxism is just a product of the industrial revolution phase of human development. And here we all are now in the midst of the third phase: of global electronic and cybernetic revolution.

It's crystal clear that we need to adopt a genuinely technological and scientific basis for our money dealings to keep in pace with this new phase.

We've had to do it for the measurement of time values. We could still measure time well enough till quite recently by the old industrial

revolution clock methods. But when computer decisions occupy only millionths of a second a unit of time like a “second” is hopelessly out of date. So instead we have developed the atomic clock – which, as you know, defines one second as 9,192,631,770 vibrations of the microwave radiation emitted by caesium-133 atoms organised in a particular way. That is electronic, cybernetic time – the today time.

We need something as basic to the world of physics – as constant and unchanging – for the new standard of our money system too.

And what do we have? Like some barbaric king three thousand years ago, we still have a crazy reverence for... gold. Fort Knox is filled with barbaric gold, notionally to back our currency. Oh, I know that many of us talk in terms of “weighted baskets of currencies” and “reserves of convertible currency”, but still people feel this yen – if the Governor of the Bank of Japan will pardon the expression – for a tangible basis to currency.

Gold! People are *mystically* attracted to it. Look how you French hoard private stocks of gold. Look at the market for Kruger Rands.

Yet what inherent use-value has gold got? Compared with a pellet of uranium? Or a pint of oil? (Oh, I know the oil is running out – so any Arab notions of an oil-backed currency are a dead duck.) Well, gold is fine for filling teeth, and it has its other uses. But its monetary value is *irrational*.

And precisely this kind of irrationality has helped to dump us into the present recession.

Of course, there’s one great historic cure for recession. I refer, gentlemen, to *war*. War was how we climbed out of the trough of the Thirties. War boosts an ailing economy like nothing else. Full employment, new weapons systems that force breakthroughs in technology with commercial spinoffs... just you name it!

Unfortunately we don’t believe that we can simply *simulate* a global war footing, without the shadow boxing leading to real bloody blows. And unfortunately, unlike 1940, the world would be entirely destroyed by a genuine conflict.

Still, please bear in mind that money and the tools of war do fit into the same economic equation....

Okay, then, we can’t spend our way out of recession, but neither can we safely fight our way out of it.

And this brings me back to my previous point: We have to develop a standard of value for the world economy which is as physically demonstrable – as *atomically* guaranteed – as the units of time are by the behaviour of the caesium atom. Instead of something like gold as the

standard of value, we must have... an *atomic* standard, with the equivalent of a Fort Knox to back it up.

Gentlemen, don't you see? We already have this in our various countries – already partly regulated by treaties which fix the exchange rate.

I speak of nothing less than our nuclear weapons – in the Fort Knoxes of their missile silos and submarines.

A kiloton or a megaton can't change its value. One kilogram of Plutonium will always have an energy value of 10^{14} joules. That value remains the same all over the universe. It's defined by atomic physics.

Gentlemen, to turn a recent military saying inside out, I propose to you: Better bucks – and francs and roubles and yuan – per bang.

Are you worried that radioactive decay will eat away at the new wealth as inflation eats away at paper money? Do you fear the reverse alchemy whereby the new "gold" will eventually transmute into lead? Just consider the half-life of Plutonium: 24,000 years! Consider, too, our proven ability to top up the new Federal Reserves to the agreed level.

Or do you fear a new gulf developing between rich and poor nations? Don't worry: Nuclear proliferation is already well under way. I assure you that there'll be a far speedier dispersal of nuclear currency to the Third World than there would ever be of old-style assets.

Gentlemen and Comrades, let me propose for your consideration: The end of irrationality. Let me propose the scientific successor to the old Gold Standard. I give you: The Nuke Standard.

Adopt this and we gain one other immediate boon to add to the benefit of perfect currency stability.

Under the new economic order – with currency backed by our nuclear weapons, with the thermonuclear-dollar and rouble and pound – who would ever wish to start a war? It would be just like burning money.

It's been said, flippantly, that nuclear weapons have no use – unless they're used. No longer true, friends, no longer true! With one stroke of the pen – with the adoption of the Nuke Standard – we can change all that. And ensure prosperity, plus peace.

Thank you all for your attention.

Summer 1981

Up the Pole

My first real experience of Socialism was in Tanzania; and Julius Nyerere remains for me a hero of integrity. Subsequently the social offensiveness of Thatcher's Britain, and the nuclear threat to Humanity (not to mention to everything else on our planet, which might possibly be the only abode of life in this galaxy), a threat made worse by a new Cold War, forced me into active politics....

This column is meant to concern itself with matters science-fictional. Maybe, therefore, a more suitable title for the current column would be "Up the Pohl" – rather than "Pole," as in the pole up which I am driven by various events that occur outside of the charmed circle of science-fictiondom, events such as dogmatic monetarism and inequality and the new Cold War. ("What have *they* got to do with SF?")

Maybe, indeed, the proper title should be "Up the Poll"? Since this is where I am aimed, at the moment of writing: towards the County Council elections, in which I am standing* as a member of the Labour Party to try to do something to halt the wreckage of this country by ill-conceived economic dogmas, savagely applied. (In this rural area where I live, it is a Tory safe seat that I'm contesting, so I'm quite unlikely to win. Nevertheless, for the curious, results will be added below.)

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* Have you noticed that in Britain candidates stand for office; but in America they run?

But wait. In fact, "Up the Pole" has a secondary resonance at this moment, in the wake of the Solidarity events in Poland. In SF terms, this title perhaps sounds a plea to supply duplicators to Poland – as indeed happened at the most recent British Eastercon in Leeds, prior to which fans were exhorted by fanzine fliers to stop reading this rubbish and *do* something....

Yet actually, *Finnegans Wake*-like, all these different connotations for the spoken, audible phrase (as opposed to the written-down, defined phrase) cohere and intermingle pungently in my mind, as though designed for each other not by a mere accident of homophony but rather by historical necessity and metaphorical cross-infection – something which James Joyce favoured in words.

Up the Pole. Up the Poll. Up the Pohl. All these connect up. (Though,

in the last case, “Pohl” is merely synecdoche – which is not an American city, of course, but the rhetorical use of the part for the whole.)

At this year’s Eastercon, where I was Guest of Honour, a panel discussion was held on the theme: “Should SF support causes?” In my GoH speech, during which I expressed the need for a political commitment by SF fans to ensure that there *would* be a future about which, and in which, to read SF, I had already made the point that, commitment notwithstanding, overt propaganda and art do not make very happy bedfellows; so this was not for me the point at issue. And it seemed to me that the panel was shaping up as yet another lively, stimulating, useless debate without any practical consequences whatever – when the prime cause today is undoubtedly to ensure the survival of life on Earth; or at least civilisation.

So I proposed on impulse that the audience should vote on a proposal to call on the British government to abolish nuclear weapons unilaterally.

And the roof blew off.

Interesting, indeed, it was to hear Author X portentously accuse me from the floor of bringing GoH status into disrepute by dragging politics into SF. And noteworthy it was to hear American Mrs. Y declare in fury that I ought to walk out in disgust at this insult, and that speaking as an American she wanted the filthy weapons removed. Illuminating it was, too, to hear Author Z agree absolutely that Britain is an occupied country, under the thumb of a foreign (American) army of occupation, and insist that we mustn’t do anything about this because we would be punished. What’s more, if we acted in this way, we would Sever Our Historic Ties With The British Commonwealth! (What price that sovereignty, upon which these ties depend, if we are run behind the scenes by an army of occupation?)

Many of the audience supported the motion, a much smaller number disagreed – and a large number were passionately against there being any such motion at all because we would thereby be polluting the precious bodily fluids of SF. The beer which we sup in harmony at the bar, toasting our beloved genre, whether we are left wing, right wing or have no wings at all, would thus turn foul and sour. An additional objection, voiced by quite a few people, was that we should not draw attention to ourselves by making a political statement (which isn’t actually a *party* political statement, but simply one in favour of sanity, and of the future of civilised life on Earth) *when we are science fiction fans*. Because people laugh at SF. SF is regarded as a joke. So we don’t want the media to laugh at The Cause, by associating ourselves with it.

And this, in a sense, answered the question posed for the panel, in a peculiar and distressing way – at least from the point of view of some of the audience. If SF supports causes, those causes are thereby diminished; so said several voices.

Tom Disch, present as American Guest of Honour, remarked to me afterwards that this was for him the saddening and surprising feature of the discussion from the floor. The heartening aspect, for him, was the articulacy and cogency of almost everyone who spoke from the floor. You wouldn't get this at an American SF convention if the same thing occurred, said he. Yet at the same time no one in America would feel ashamed to be identified or presented in the media as an SF person. SF people in America can demand and expect public respect. The image of SF is a positive one, not a negative derisory one. No one is worried about drawing attention to themselves. Thus, paradoxically, even though the level of debate at this British convention seemed to him far beyond that at an American convention, nevertheless a significant proportion of the audience – cogent and articulate though they were – at the same time displayed what he could only identify as a deep sense of insecurity, a guilty defensiveness about the subject they love.

And this, frankly, drives me up the pole.

Black Power – in its widest sense, of dignity and pride – wasn't possible until people were proud of being black, and insisted publicly on their dignity. Nor (varying the focus of the pride) were Gay Liberation; nor Women's Liberation. Some SF people obviously need to learn how to be proud of being SF people, and to insist on respect, and to demonstrate they they are capable of making informed statements, as SF people, about the world at large. (Lord knows, they're technically better informed than the majority of people, and their horizons are larger!)

True, the media in Britain will continue to play up the Fancy Dress aspect of SF – but might not the reason for that be that insufficiently intelligent things are being said, and said repeatedly, to the media? Defensively, the SF fan or organiser can always make jokes about gafiation, crudzines et al, to the visiting journalists; and ham it up. (Yet, on the other hand, John Baxter was present at Leeds recording material for a BBC programme on SF, and he was *delighted* at the new political dimension in evidence.)

True also, many "responsible" political messages in America – associated with support for space research – have deeply capitalist, free enterprise, America-first associations. But at least they're saying it. And they're being listened to. As is Harlan Ellison, when he campaigns for the

Equal Rights Amendment. Showman that he is, he means it, and gets heard. And whatever we think of the Trekkies, by applying pressure they got a shuttle named *Enterprise*.

(But of course Harlan Ellison would be horrified should I associate the term SF with him. How he inveighs against the "true believers" – lunkheads, all of them. Personally I regard this as a pity; and I made the point on my election leaflet of describing myself as a writer of science fiction, and not – diplomatically – merely as an "author". I'm not worried that the cause of the Labour Party might be diminished by a "science fiction writer" standing in an election. On the contrary.)

If SF people become known for speaking sense (as well as for having fun) they will be listened to... after a while. SF imagery is now deeply rooted in British society; the coinage is in circulation all over. Who shall maintain the standard of that currency, and fight against its debasement, but those from whom it is being mined (to revert to the metaphor of my previous column)?

Another curious feature of the wrath stirred up at Leeds, against "dragging politics into SF", was the fact that under the auspices of the Convention some overtly political activity had *already* occurred in the hotel before the nuclear weapons vote – namely the "Dupers for Poland" auction held to raise money to provide duplicating equipment for the Polish free trade union. This, somehow, was an innocently "unpolitical" affair – whilst a resolution to save all our lives through nuclear disarmament seemed to many to be militantly political. Paradoxical, indeed!

Now, why should "Dupers for Poland" be innocent and unexceptionable activity, whilst opposition to nuclear weapons is so disruptive?

Could it just be that, *whatever* the inherent merits and "just cause" of Solidarity, it is a cause which has been strenuously supported in the Western media *to a large extent as part of the rhetoric of the new Cold War*, and has been duly programmed into the minds of everyone as something self-evidently good, and in a sense *anti-political* – "political" equating with Communist hegemony and State control? Support for the Poles is an article of faith, because by implicit definition this defends freedom and strikes at the tyrannical Russian bear which is so self-evidently poised to gobble up everywhere (despite the USSR's obvious, and reiterated, reluctance to do anything of the sort – unless goaded unendurably). And why, pray, do we have nuclear weapons, and American weapons stationed on our soil, *not* under our control, and permitted by *no*

British law, Act of Parliament or anything else? Why, because the bear must be resisted, even if Britain and all its people have to be sacrificed in the process – in a war that might conveniently be fought in Europe, with Britain as Airstrip One, the floating aircraft carrier and launch pad. Poland, good; anti-nukes, subversive... as Napoleon Pig might have put it. But they are actually part of the same equation, in so far as the Polish situation has been used and manipulated – *whatever* the case for Solidarity. Yet we do not realise it.

I would suggest that many people at the Leeds Convention who attended the Dupers auction were engaging in political activity already, but unconsciously so. A huge amount of media activity has normalised Poland as a brave and obvious cause – which no doubt it is for the Poles. A similar media blitz has *not* been directed at American nuclear weapons on our soil, or at Britain's nuclear submarine pretensions. Thus, when asked to act with regard to Dupers for Poland, no one batted an eyelid.

Yet when asked to act against the expensive schemes for the destruction of civilisation promoted by the Establishment, immediately many in the audience felt with instinctive annoyance that it was not the right way to behave. Because it was political. The moral of all this would seem to be that, whether one wishes it or not, one is operating on political premises even when those premises happen to be an SF Con hotel; but in some cases unconsciously so, because of attitudes that have been imprinted. And surely it is better to be conscious than unconscious (or dead)?

Let us consider, in passing, another unconscious attitude which seems on the surface to be merely escapist fun, yet which may actually be intimately bound up with the nuclear weapons threat. I refer to the love of heroic fantasy – in its various permutations from novels through role-playing games to fancy dress hijinks with broadswords and axes. Don Wollheim remarked to me at Leeds that it seemed to him, alas, than an increasing number of fans are mentally equipping themselves thus for Life After The Bomb, in the new primitive world of tribal warfare, conquest, barbarian rituals, rape and mayhem – in a neo-primitive society of "heroes". These fans are training themselves for the new life style, after civilisation has folded up; and they believe that they will be better equipped to survive and even enjoy themselves – *because* they have trained in the heroic fantasy arena. For them, fantasy will transmute into reality, and the Golden Age of yore will be succeeded by an even more luminous age: the Plutonium Age. And this is an utterly crazy fantasy, of survival, sick at heart. In its acceptance of a nuclear holocaust, this too is

covertly political.

Speaking of sickness, I saw a pregnant sheep in Banbury a few weeks ago, attempting to give birth in the back of a van. A vet, up to his shoulder in her birth canal, was trying to extricate the contents of her womb. Which stank. From ten yards downwind, how it stank, with the stench of foetal death and rot. That would be the smell of the holocaust. And of the survivors. Who would not romp around in golden breast-plate, with broadswords slapping against their mighty thighs. But who would stink. And starve. And kill and injure, and be injured, meanly and lingeringly, not nobly.

Coincidentally, not long after I watched the misery of this sheep, BBC-TV was showing *Bread or Blood*, an adaptation of W.H. Hudson's *A Shepherd's Life*, in which the shepherd similarly, though more swiftly, delivered a lamb and then by the same method his wife, of a son. The TV film was intensely, shall we say, "earthy"; though it couldn't convey the smell, or the droppings tumbling out of loosened bowels. But this all puts me in mind of another sort of "pole": namely, the greasy pole of traditional rural fairs. If you could climb the greasy pole, you got the piglet. Once upon a time.

Once upon a time, too, in the Hudson tales of circa 1830 the countryfolk rioted for two shillings wage to feed themselves. So they were sentenced to death or transportation as evil criminals.

Today, going round the rural villages canvassing for the election – and driving in short space from some fairly wretched council houses to stone mansions with paddocks full of ponies – I hear the poor described as evil criminals again, because they are unemployed. And a few people in those Council houses are still going to vote Conservative. They are going to vote for their own impoverishment. Because they *know* from the media that unions and Lefties are evil.

Just so, quite a few people at Leeds knew that it was not proper behaviour to oppose nuclear weapons at an SF convention. Or they rationalised this feeling by arguing about procedure – always a convenient way out of embarrassing situations.

Because they have been told for many years that politics is something we can do without. We can do without it in local government; we can do without it at SF conventions. Politics is something which spoils: rugby tours, or cricket tours, or England's green and pleasant land and the chance of all pulling together to get us out of our present crisis (politically created, of course), or which spoils the gentle art of getting on together (some on top, many underneath), or which spoils Art, or Science Fiction....

But these people are already leading political lives, unaware, even at an SF convention. And it is highly convenient to the Cold Warriors in power that they should refuse to acknowledge the fact. And abstain. And try to keep politics out of SF.

Election Results (Helmdon Division of Northamptonshire):

Tattersall (Conservative): 1860

Watson (Labour): 927

1982

Believing SF

Yorcon II (1981 UK Eastercon) Guest of Honour Speech

Friends and Fellow Fen...

I stole that opening from Ken Bulmer, who impressed me mightily with this amiable and impassioned piece of oratory at the first Convention I ever attended, at Birmingham in 1973. He also impressed me greatly by tearing up his prepared speech... then finding the real one in his other pocket. Alas, I can't afford to tear up paper today owing to the dire straits that Tory policies have reduced this country to. So the verbal echo will have to suffice, to remind me of that fatal day in November 1973 when I first became addicted to attending science fiction conventions... and look what has happened to me now: up here in the firing line, about to deliver what Progress Report number 4 described as my Quest of Honour speech. I think they confused me with Jerry Pournelle....

Of course, I had become addicted to sf itself at a much earlier and more tender age. I blame Dan Dare for it – and don't we all! As soon as I saw the green faces of the Treens, I knew that this was for me; and curiously enough, nowadays when I get up for breakfast in the morning at a convention I notice that my face, and the faces of many of those around me, for some reason seem to be a delicate shade of green.

But of course Dan Dare was kids' stuff. Foolishly tossing away my bundles of old *Eagle*s, which I could have sold for a fortune today, I graduated to pulp novels such as the famous *Antro the Life Giver* by the immortal Jon J. Deegan. And trust Peter Nicholls to ruin my golden memories by publishing an encyclopaedia revealing that this was only a house name.

I remember clearly the newsagent's shop where I bought this remarkable work, and several others, with my pocket money. In the window a little yellow plastic ostrich bobbed its head in and out of a glass of water all day long, as an example of perpetual motion; and it says something about the emptiness, barrenness and deprivation of the Tyneside of my childhood that this plastic ostrich was a thing of wonder and amazement, a star attraction. Since there was little else of wonder or amazement in the vicinity, I cast up my gaze to the actual stars instead, and

fantasised. Which demonstrates that sensory and environmental deprivation do have some connexion, at least in my case, with the genesis of science fiction. And if that's true for me, then how many future cartographers of the cosmos or of inner space are being compelled to dream right now, as this country is forced back by economic madness to the deprived condition of my childhood?

But in case you feel that this speech is becoming politically one-sided, I must – speaking as an sf writer – say one thing in favour of the Conservative government. They have invented time travel. They have successfully built a time machine, which takes us right back to the Nineteen Thirties. Unfortunately, that's the only place that it does go to. And it can't travel into the future. In the best tradition of van Vogt, they are busily constructing a *radioactive* barrier to prevent any access to the future.

But now that I have mentioned van Vogt, I must confess that I moved on from pulp novels by the immortal Jon J. Deegan to even more immortal, or at least reprinted, things – namely the *classics* – though little did I know then that they were classics (I thought Virgil's *Aeneid* was), and little did I know that I was living through the Golden Age.

I discovered "mature" books, with hard backs on them. (That's what mature books are – like trees.) And it was obvious to me at once, finding these in the local library amid the works of Graham Greene and D.H. Lawrence and Jane Austen; it was obvious from a mere glance at the authors' names on the spines that, compared with Greene or Lawrence, writers with names like A.E. van Vogt or Isaac Asimov or editors called Groff Conklin were far from ordinary. Obviously they must possess alien wisdom.

Now, I have entitled this speech "Believing SF". And first I wish to talk about *readers'* beliefs – remembering my own epiphany (which my dictionary defines as "a moment of manifestation of supernatural reality") when I first espied the name Groff Conklin.

Frequently readers do believe intensely in what one is writing – which means that an awesome responsibility rests on the shoulders of us science fiction writers. I can demonstrate this from my fan mail.

But far be it from me to brag about my fan mail. So in the modest and self-effacing spirit of the editorial matter in *Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine... [Laughter]* Now, let us not joke about *IASFM*: I've heard pointed references to it several times, but I think it's a good thing because they bought a story from me a few weeks ago. In fact the contract came in the post, and Judy said, "Hey, let's have a read of the story." So I got down

the carbon copy for her, and a while later she shouted, “Hey, Ian, you’ve got two page nines – both the same.”

“Oh,” I said. “That means one is the carbon copy, and one is the top copy. That means that *Isaac Asimov’s SF Magazine* has just bought a story with the last page missing!” What was funnier was that we read through the story carefully, and there was a damned sight better ending at the bottom of page eight. Well, you may complain about editors intervening: sometimes the Editor in the sky takes a little reach into your pile of sheets, and disarrays them, and you sell to *Isaac Asimov’s SF Magazine*. So remember that. If you’ve got unsold stories, just take the last page off and send them out again.

Anyway, the reason I mentioned that was my fanmail. I want to read you a postcard which I received a while ago from an American soldier stationed in New York State. It was sent to me, care of Ace Books, postmarked “Army Postal Service” – and if you believe I’m making this up, I have it right here.

> “Hey Ian! I been reading your books, man. Far out! Like, where do you get your dope, man? The Amazon? East Africa? Do you snort it man, raw. Chapter 13, *Alien Embassy* can only come from mainlining! I bet you do that tantric fucking too, huh man, keep it hard for hours, right? You got an old lady, man? I bet she’s a fox. Any kids, any whole chromosomes? Were they born with their brain sticking out of their heads?” (This is a literary allusion to *The Embedding*, showing that this guy is deeply read in my works.) “Hey, do you know Jerry Pournelle left ‘The Event Horizon’ out of his book *Black Holes*? You got screwed, man. You sure know your needles, man, i.e. ‘Thy Blood Like Milk’. Sicko. But I liked it!!! I like all your shit, man. Does that make me nuts too? How you know about the seedy side of Hamberg [sic], GER? Send me some info like Heinlein and Herbert did, huh? and I’ll buy another book and you’ll get back the money for the envelope and stamp!”

Of course, out of politeness I did reply to this card, providing my eager correspondent with the appropriate addresses of cocaine shops in Brazil and brothels on the Reeperbahn.

Yet it is *not always* a good idea to reply to such things. I replied to one person in America who wrote to me that he had made love to a dolphin and was in telepathic communication with a sperm whale, and thought I had stolen *The Jonah Kit* from him... This wasn’t completely

fair, actually, as Scribner's in America published *The Jonah Kit*, while two years earlier Gollancz had published it in Britain. And this guy had written his book about how he made love to dolphins and was in telepathic communication with sperm whales; he'd mailed it to Scribner's and they turned it down for some reason. I don't know why. Anyway, he assumed that, because Scribner's then published *The Jonah Kit* a couple of months later in an American edition, they had quickly got onto me as someone slick and sadistic who could turn his humanitarian and uplifting work into a bit of slick, commercial sci-fi... using his experiences and selling them. They'd just airmailed the manuscript over to me, and I'd done a quick job on it. I did write back, which was my initial mistake in corresponding with him; and pointed out that it was originally published in a different country, called England, which some Americans have heard of – a couple of years earlier. The ultimate upshot of all this was a five-page letter in dramatised form fantasising about how he would visit me in Moreton Pinkney (if he could find it!), slash the telephone wire, and beat my face to a pulp, because I had, quote, "mindfucked" him... so I ought to get something back in kind.

Risky business, "mindfucking" people – writing stuff that interferes with their belief structures, affecting them deeply.

Alas, John Lennon found this out, and I will always bear in mind the statement made by his assassin: "I understood the words, but I didn't understand the message."

In a sense, the only equivalent impression you can make on an artist who has affected you deeply is to kill him. (*[Audience noises]* Ah – well – you can get him to sign books if you go to science fiction conventions, but otherwise –) For some it is the ultimate, total act of commitment. Which raises the spectre, in some alternate or future world, not of autograph hunters but of scalp hunters. And in that world, no doubt, Maxim Jakubowski's smash-hit of last year from Virgin Books, *Rock Stars in Their Underpants*, is entitled *Rock Stars in Their Coffins*.

And, of course, dead artists are usually preferable to living artists – which must be the reason why the Government has crippled the publishing industry, and in the process writers too. (Indeed the Government seems convinced that a dead population is better than a living population – a curious philosophy for a government, unless this is the only way they can think of to remain in power... forever.)

Yet some aspects of the publishing industry deserve a little bit of censure too.

Recently, a curious thing happened. Bob Sheckley bought a story

from me – no, that was not the curious thing. The story is called “Bud” and appears in his anthology *After the Fall*. It’s about the difference between sexual and asexual reproduction. So when I received a copy of the British edition, I looked through my story with the usual nervous anticipation – having already noticed at an idle glance that the name of Roger Zelazny was misspelt four times in the book....

And just here I must insert an aside to the effect that when paperbacks are costing £1.50, £1.75, some editorial staffs could possibly take a little more care in producing them. Have you noticed the back cover of John Varley’s *Wizard* in the UK edition? (A rather fine book, I think, since Varley has bravely done the opposite of what everyone expected.) “Isaac Asimov has compared John Varley to the young Robert Heinlein and George R.R. Anderson called him...” Now, ordinary hype I can put up with – though it is getting out of hand – but who the hell is George R.R. Anderson, and do the publishers even care? I shouldn’t be surprised to find jacket endorsements, soon, by Ursula K. Le Sheckley, or Philip José Holdstock.

Anyway, I looked within my story and found that in the crucial sentence which explained all, the word “asexual” had been printed as “sexual”. Thus making the story slightly difficult for readers to understand. After gnashing my hair and tearing my teeth for a while, I despatched a letter to the paperback house in question, and received in reply an apologetic letter saying: “We’ve no idea how it happened, we’re terribly sorry, please accept any free book from our catalogue, enclosed....” Rather as though I had complained about a bad pack of sausages.

Scanning through the catalogue of this leading British paperback house I came upon the sf list and discovered that roughly 88 of the titles were by American authors and only 6 by British; and of these 6 titles, only 3 were by living authors. (I would be tempted to suggest that the others died of starvation, but actually H.G. Wells passed away for different reasons.) So I wrote back saying: “You’d better send me a free copy of your edition of *Repairing Houses*, as we’ll jolly well have to repair our own, given this kind of purchasing policy.” To which a letter came back, saying: “You know, actually our list *does* seem rather disproportionate. Thanks for pointing it out.”

But actually, can one really blame the publishers for spelling authors’ names wrong? This is the upshot of straitened circumstances, high interest rates and fear. It’s more expensive and less efficient to be poor. This applies right through from heating one’s home to publishing a book.

And of course publishers are going to take fewer risks publishing

intelligent or original books, and simply pump out old Asimov reprints, when they're scared out of their minds by falling sales (as more and more potential buyers tramp into the dole queues) and by interest rates which are still far too high and by a level of the Pound which must make Margaret Thatcher's manhood swell with pride.

So, if you want good fresh quality sf, you should know how to vote at the next election. And if you happen to believe in the future which we all write about, or if you want a future at all, ditto.

And need I mention, too, that you won't be able to borrow much new sf from the libraries, either, because the libraries have had to stop buying books. And because of that, in Britain at least, the publishers who rely on library sales are going to search their souls, and need a lot of faith, before they risk publishing any new home-grown science fiction. This applies particularly, and devastatingly, to hopeful new writers – of whom, no doubt, there are quite a few in this audience. With the Tories in charge, you've got a cat-in-hell's chance of having your first novel accepted. (I shall leave aside the possibility of a spending spree leading up to the next election. It's quite possible, but it does cost an awful lot of North Sea oil revenue to dismantle industry instead of boosting it, to pay to make three million people unemployed, and to buy all the Trident missiles and bigger nuclear submarines that we need... like a fish needs a frying pan.)

Sf may in many respects be an escapist literature – though personally I would argue otherwise, at least regarding my own – but, if you do like escapism, you're going to have to make a political commitment to fight for even that, down here on Earth in Merry England.

How does all this affect a writer's belief in what he or she is doing? Aside from the fact that it has compelled me finally to join the Labour Party and to devote time and energy to standing as a candidate in the coming County Council elections, I have noticed a curious phenomenon in my writing over the past year, including the novel which I'm currently working on. (This particular novel, of course, will not be the next one to be published. Writers are usually some way ahead of the book currently due to be published; so that, by publication day, the novel which is brand new to the readership is already part of the writer's ancient memories.) I have noticed that I have begun to write comedy. Or what I think of as comedy. The themes remain connected to my previous themes, but now they are receiving comic treatment. Or what I think of as comic treatment.... Perhaps this is a natural progression for a writer – an expansion of the range of voice – and would have happened anyway. But perhaps at least partly circumstances are dictating it. Horace Walpole, Fourth Earl of

Orford, wrote in 1776 in a letter to the Countess of Upper Ossory (which sounds like a title of nobility straight out of Jack Vance): “The world is a comedy to those that think, a tragedy to those that feel.” Though I wouldn’t deny that I have thought before, now I have been compelled increasingly to act on thoughts, to put thinking into practice.

Actually, I consider that all of my books to date have been examples of putting thinking into practice in the fictional domain. But now I have to apply that thinking to what is at the moment, unfortunately, the real world.

And so should we all – if we are thinking clearly about the real causes of what is happening these days, and not just reacting emotionally and instinctively, seeking consolation in sabre-rattling about supposed Russian threats, or in hatred of “greedy” workers and gratitude that they are at last being stomped – which, translated into actual terms, means that the real producers of the wealth of this country are being destroyed, body and soul, and that the next generation is being ruined in advance in terms of health, housing, education and morale, thus laying up fearful problems for the future. A house which is deliberately encouraged to fall into ruins – here we are back at house repairs again – a house neglected to save money on the upkeep costs vastly more to put to rights later on – if it can be put right. And the same applies to a country: a country within which we hope to be able to go on reading sf and creating it and attending conventions such as this one.

Last year *Fantasy & Science Fiction* published a short story by me, “The World SF Convention of 2080”, which was reviewed – enthusiastically – as a triumph of black sarcasm. Well, yes. But again, it was also something of an affectionate tribute. I feel a great deal of affection for those who could go on attending sf conventions, in pursuit of their dreams and their joy in life, even if they had to hike there across a savage terrain, pursued by wolf packs, and even if the high point of the banquet is squirrel stew – though come to think of it, maybe squirrel stew might win out over Supreme of Chicken Dragonara *[the main dish served at the Yorcon II banquet – Ed.]*. Or maybe Supreme of Chicken Dragonara *is* squirrel stew!

But I would much rather that this delightful institution of sf conventions carries on without our having to drag our crutches around the luminous bomb craters or through the new hunger marches, and when we arrive at the tent in which we can afford to stay, finding that the only exciting novel this year exists in just two copies, both handwritten in the author’s blood.

Comedy, at such a time! Should I not be writing fictional polemics –

instead of merely delivering them as a Guest of Honour speech?

In fact, downright polemical fiction is too often a crime against art; and worse still, a bore – so that it is also a crime against the very ideas that it is trying to put over. This is true of right-wing polemics, though these are pretty well doomed in advance, since people of a right-wing cast of mind rarely possess a coherent philosophy. They tend to react instinctively, not intellectually, no matter how fluently they rationalise these instincts – and of course our instincts are still concerned with the desire for power and prestige, acquisitiveness, defence of territory and supposed territory. In an age of nuclear weapons, and of increasing competition for resources, one dare not trust to instinctive reactions. But it's true of left-wing polemics too. Orwell's *1984* works as well as it does because it is *not* a polemic; it is a work by a politically committed writer of non-fictional polemics, now very angry at the betrayal of the hopes embodied in those polemics and at the corruption of language and thought infecting the writings and actions of those whom Orwell had once thought to be on the side of the angels. And the same applies to *Animal Farm*. If an overtly left-wing apologist is in difficulties here, a right-wing apologist is in double trouble.

Whatever one's prior vision of a book – one's pre-programming of it – if the book is to be any good at all, it has to grow organically as a separate living entity. It has to make its own decisions, rather like a child growing away from the parent.

And this raises strange questions about the relationship of the author to the world which he or she creates and which establishes its own independent existence: questions about the responsibility of the author towards his or her creations, and questions about the relationship between the book-reality created and the consciousness of the author. These are questions which are perhaps at the root of artistic creation-and which, if we posit for the moment the existence of a God, must be a fundamental dilemma at the root of His own cosmos-creation.

I must introduce a side-note here, to the effect that as soon as one mentions the word "God", associative lightbulbs start popping on in people's heads automatically. The predictable question, "So do you believe in God?" – expecting the answer "Yes" or "No" – is as meaningless as the question "Do you believe in UFOs?" The questioner already knows in advance exactly what a God or UFO is, in his estimation – but he doesn't quite realise this. I would answer that question "Do you believe in God?" simply by saying that a number of my books are devoted to exploring the question of *what a God might be*, with different possible

answers, or approaches to answers. There is one "God" in *God's World*. There is an entirely different kind of "God" in *Under Heaven's Bridge*, which I wrote with Michael Bishop. There is yet another entirely different kind of "God" in the novel I've just finished writing – and it's a God, let me assure you, that no one has thought of to date.

Anyhow, Godly creation – whatever a God might be – and artistic creation do have in common the paradox of the relationship between one's creating consciousness and the reality created: a paradox which is becoming increasingly central to the cutting edge of modern Physics, by the way, and to scientific attempts to explain the universe coherently.

Sf, which includes in its domain attempted explanations of the nature of the universe, and of mind and of reality, is in fact particularly well adapted to address this problem central to artistic creation. Hence, indeed, there are many novels and stories which concern themselves with the reality problem – from such as Daniel Galouye's *Counterfeit World* through to most of the works of Philip Dick. Obviously I would include my own books in this category. In a sense, quite a lot of sf is already meta-fiction: fiction about fiction.

The reality problem, by the way, provides a perfectly good rationale for one feature which most offends some readers of sf: namely, the fact that in book after book, it always happens to be the darned hero – even if he is a nitwitted thug, or someone marooned on a rock near Arcturus, or somebody stuck in a space ark or a deep cave who starts out filled with the most absurd notions about the nature of the world – it is this idiot who turns out to be central to (a) the explanation of the universe, (b) the rescuing of space/time from collapse, (c) the salvation of the human race, (d) the detection and defeat of the ravening mind-horde from Ursa Major. How often, and how arbitrarily, does the central enigma of the cosmos thus converge upon the central character, whatever his qualities! This, if one wishes to apologise for it – and sometimes it needs apology – is perhaps rather more than just a genre cliché. It is a reflection of the reality problem and of the artistic problem, tuned up to fever pitch in sf precisely because in sf one can evoke the whole of the rest of the universe. And precisely because this central problem is tuned up to fever pitch, and sometimes exaggerated almost to parody or absurdity, we may find the writer beating his brow and expostulating: "How the hell can I *believe* this shit I'm writing?" Precisely what makes some sf unbelievable, even occasionally to the writer who is producing it, is one of the most potentially valuable and productive aspects of sf: the attack on the reality problem. This is why there is often gold amidst the ghastliest dross.

The writer who grows aware of this, during his or her career, is of course faced with a meta-problem: the need to incorporate his awareness of the problem into his texts which reflect it. Or he can try to ignore it entirely. Or he can hit the bottle, to stave off impending insanity and disconnexion from the real world. (This is the case of Jonathan Herovit, in Barry Malzberg's novel – and is indeed a dominant theme in Malzberg's work.) Or he can refuse fully to believe it, as a deliberate strategy for carrying on – whilst accepting it in practice. (Thomas Covenant the Unbeliever is able to function because of chosen, sustained unbelief – which is why Donaldson's books are so powerful, sustained and successful. Donaldson addresses the reality problem very skilfully and honestly.)

Thus, in my own books, I note that by the time I came to write *Alien Embassy*, the aliens had become fictions, simulations. They were pretend aliens, constructed by some of the characters in that world to fool the others in various ways. And indeed I feel, in retrospect, that I was able to invest more reality, and inventiveness, in the three alien races because of this.

By the time I wrote *Miracle Visitors* the problem of the reality of events themselves demanded to be explored. And this seemed to me best explored through the UFO mythos – wherein events seemingly occur which hover tantalisingly between reality and irreality. Through the triple viewpoint of that book – with three principal characters experiencing UFO events, yet choosing ultimately to react in quite different ways – I was able (thanks to my characters, who willed these choices) on the one hand to wind back into the baseline reality of the constructed world again. With, as it were, the middle hand I was able to sustain the fantasy events imposed on this reality. And finally, on the other (or third) hand, I was shown the way right outside all this into a meta-reality which the world of the novel could not enter. I say "I was shown" this, since I write my books hoping to be shown things by them: things I did not know before – and hoping, too, to show these things to the readers of them.

By the time I wrote *God's World*, the journey to the stars in that book was presented (and presented itself to me) necessarily as a journey *through imaginative space*. And I was able to reach an actual, "objective" alien world in that book precisely because I envisaged the physical journey to it in a starship as also being a journey through the imagination – a journey which the characters had to create for themselves, as much as the author himself had consciously to create it. If the characters had suffered a failure of imagination, they would not have reached their destination. Thus, in a

sense, the problem involved in the cry "How can I, the writer, possibly believe this?" was shouldered by the characters themselves. Thus I, and they, arrived at journey's end; and returned.

The Gardens of Delight involves another alien world, but this time, in order to reach it, its own inhabitants – who are the creators of that world, and of themselves – must use their imagination to construct, out of their own being, a human starship to arrive and explore the nature of their own reality. This is the situation of *God's World* turned inside out; though I only see this in retrospect.

And in my forthcoming book *Deathhunter*... but I must not give the plot away in advance; and perhaps I am not yet quite far enough from that book to know exactly what its place is in this progression, what exactly its statement is about the reality problem, for the author.

I only became fully aware of the reality problem while writing *Miracle Visitors*. In this sense, though there is a strong continuity of themes with my four earlier Gollancz novels, those first four were "innocent" books. *Miracle Visitors* embroiled me in the problem, because this was where my exploration was leading to; and for that reason it was the most worrying book I have written. The worry was not merely caused by the fact that I had just given up my job as a Senior Lecturer to write full-time; nor by the fact that while I wrote this book about UFOs, the local newspaper was filled with reports of UFO sightings thirty miles away, then twenty-five miles away, then twenty miles away.... It began to seem as though I needed to finish the book quickly before they found me.

And actually, we were visited by a Man In Black. I don't know if you know the UFO mythos, but after you've seen a UFO – or generated one – you get visited, if you're American or rich, by a Cadillac with two men dressed in black, who threaten you or warn you, and suggest that they're from Army Security or something. And they usually do something in your house. Well, this was just Britain, so we were only called on by one Man In Black. He knocked on the door; he was dressed in black; he claimed to be a commercial traveller, and asked if he could use the toilet. This was a funny request, because there's a pub just down the street and a toilet round the corner – public variety. But we said "Come in," – we knew about Men In Black, so we watched him very carefully – and we have constructive proof that he did something in the house. Now this wasn't the only worrying thing about writing a book on UFOs. Another worrying thing was being invited to talk to UFO groups... but I mustn't describe, here, my visit to the British UFO Research Association two weeks ago.

The main worry was caused by the fact that if I couldn't solve the

reality of this book – which was about the undermining of reality – then of course the novel could never be finished; nor perhaps any other honest novel, since this was the book that, at the moment, required itself to be written. And I had to trust my characters to do this for me; which they did in the end by winding back into the ground-reality of the book, while at the same time winding out into the meta-reality, into the imaginative zone from which the book came, and linking the two together even though there was no simple common ground between them.

I think that sf writers who decide that they are no longer really writing sf, or are no longer interested in writing it, or who can no longer bear to write it – sf writers who can no longer convince themselves of the authenticity of what they are writing – are in fact suffering from an unresolved reality problem; and this will be much more acutely evident in sf writers – particularly the best and most thoughtful of these writers – than in writers in other fields... precisely because of the nature of science fiction itself.

That sf presents this problem of belief at its very heart is not, for me, a cause for criticism of the deficiencies of the genre; but rather of elation at the prospect of tackling the problem. Because it is a problem that is at the heart of art. And it is a problem that is at the heart of the existence of the physical universe itself.

One cannot exactly *solve* the problem – any more than one can define the nature of God, or pin down an actual UFO. There is no ideal sf novel which balances all the terms of the equation self-consistently and demonstrably, like Gustave Flaubert's ideal of a novel which could sustain itself entirely by the power of style alone. Perhaps mainstream literature can produce the perfect novel, time and again. And perhaps by definition sf *cannot*, ever.

But one can try to edge closer to the problem all the time, by varying one's tactics – and my most recent approach, in the book I'm writing just now, is (as I've said) a comic one. Because that is the way the characters – who are engaged in reinventing themselves, in body and mind – wanted it to be. Not comic, I hasten to add, in the sense of sending up the genre. To me, that is rather like stealing sweets from children and selling them back to the children again, with the wrapping turned inside out. But simply, a tactic of hilarity.

And by the time the current book is published, in what – to the writer – always seems like the distant future, I hope and expect to be somewhere else... in the literary sense.

The writing – and the reading – of much sf sometimes seems rather

like the performance of a record on a turntable. The stylus moves ever onward (whilst apparently standing still), making much noise, and always in the selfsame track. And sometimes the stylus really does get stuck, and the same phrase is repeated over and over again throughout the rest of the writer's career. Or the reader's career. But, by and large, the stylus of sf moves on inwards – or will do so, if I have anything to do with it – towards the central point, from which all else radiates: the point of fusion between the inventing mind and the invented reality, between creation and consciousness.

Of course, it will never reach the central point, any more than Achilles will overtake the tortoise – and occasionally it might appear in the case of sf that it is the lumbering tortoise which is chasing the unattainable and ever more remote Achilles. But I would say that the stylus is heading in the right direction. And what wonderful tunes will it play on the way?

What more can we ask?

April 1982

Hype Hype Hoorah!

Something is rotten in the State of Denmark, alias the SF publishing scene, which simultaneously develops anorexia nervosa and elephantiasis....

In a recent issue of *Vector* my eye was caught by a handsome full-page advertisement by Pan Books for *Lord Valentine's Castle*.

How pleasant, in these straitened days, that a publisher is paying for a full page in *Vector*! One's joy turns to ashes, though, when one learns that Pan Books were spending the majority of their SF advertising budget on promoting this one book. And very little on promoting anybody else.

In a way, this ad is a collector's item. After explaining that Bob Silverberg has made a fortune from writing, and how a frantic publishers' auction took place as soon as he had scribbled the idea for this book on the back of an envelope, and how the opening sentence subsequently came to him like the lines of *Kubla Khan* to Coleridge – lucky for him that California is far from Porlock! – the ad then presents some quotes hailing this book as a magnificent Behemoth, et cetera. (Funnily, this particular quote is from the supposedly left wing Labour Party newspaper *Tribune*, who regularly leave their political acumen at home whenever it comes to reviewing SF; *Lord Valentine's Castle*, of course, is a book in praise of the Divine Right of Kings.)

Yes indeed, it is the Day of the Behemoth – and the lesser animals get trampled.

And it is the day of hype... which can indeed be hilariously funny, if one has a black sense of comedy.

Essential to the best grand hype is an array of ecstatic pre-publication quotes from one's authorial peers, destined for the cover of the brand new book; and thus publishers are currently turning authors – whose specialty is supposed to be freshness, sincerity and originality in thought and utterance – into a new breed of hectic copywriters, determined to persuade you, with glowing fervour, that this book washes whiter.

At which point I might toss out a proposal for the Non-Book of the Year: namely, *The Book of Hype*, which will gather within its pages all the best examples of this species from the book covers of the last five years. There will also be a Do-It-Yourself section, with multiple choice lists of suitable syntactic structures, comparisons and superlatives – to save

authors some trouble, yet not to offend the publishers who may also issue their own books, or may do so in future. Really, this proposal should save authors quite a bit of time, and rescue them from being forced to think like copywriters every few weeks; and probably no one would notice the difference.

This could even become something of a game, instead of what it is now becoming: an embarrassment, and a periodic degradation of a creative artist's brain. (In the good old days, this is what *critics* were for.) "Hey, how did you rate Fred's new book?" "Gee, I tossed the dice and came up with a sixteen, an eighty-four and seventy-niner." Those possessing word processors could simply slot in a tape of *The Book of Hype* with instructions to print out a randomised letter of appreciation.

For it *is* getting embarrassing, as one's author-peers grope for new and decorative, heartfelt metaphors and similes to describe the overwhelming readerly experience they have just undergone, staying up two nights running to finish the book, shocked and exalted, slavering with frustrated appetite for the sequel. Pocket/Timescape did all authors in this fix a service recently, and laid a foundation stone for *The Book of Hype* by distributing *The Pocket Fanzine* with a range of exemplar letters from authors in it, which I cannot, alas, quote "in whole or in part in any form." I think I might mention, however, that statistically the lead metaphor seems to be shaping up as that of a *tapestry* – lots of gleaming threads, pulled tight....

Actually, it *is* getting difficult to come up with fresh metaphors for science-fictional achievements – and for the field itself; as I realised in the bar at a recent convention, faced – just five minutes away – by a panel discussion boldly entitled "The Edges of SF", and wondering what on earth these were. Joe Nicholas, newly returned from Australia, happened to mention that the population level down under is pegged by the limited availability of fresh water. (Or was it the amount of beer they could brew?) Whereupon I remembered the old Rand Corporation plan, now funded by the Saudis, for towing Antarctic icebergs northwards; and the image sprang forth, fully formed, of genre-SF as a great big iceberg carved from the Gernsback Glacier being towed through the equatorial mainstream, and melting at the edges....

Yet this metaphor was quite overtaken by another panellist who proposed that in a couple of hundred years' time, or less, the immortal science-fictioneers of today, playing variations upon their song-book of themes, may well be regarded as exactly akin to medieval French court poets, and will attract as little attention as those poets do today – for the

book itself as an artefact will be obsolete.

In the Darwinian struggle for survival of this panel, the emblem of medieval court poetry quite trounced that of the melting iceberg – though I still retain a soft spot for the latter.... At a subsequent convention, once more hunting for the elusive Snark of an appropriate metaphor – in this case for the nomination-worthy, Best Anthology-worthy, consensus type of short story – I stumbled upon Jellied Pig's Head. (For Günter Grass wrote a witty and grotesque poem of this title which while nominally a sleeves-rolled-up-to-the-elbows paean to Grass's beloved art of cookery, is also a fine biting satire on the recipe for writing a politically correct poem.)

In these circumstances, and notwithstanding the ruthless Darwinian combat of new metaphors – tapestries wrapping up icebergs, as in the game of Stone, Scissors, Paper; with medieval court poets leaping aboard, to be drowned in a pan of simmering pig's head; now a parable takes shape to round off this column. For new Behemoths are rearing up on the horizon, while the banners of hype unfurl.

Lo, here comes *Majipoor 2* – and how can we possibly wait, cries an anguishedly hyping authoress, for the second volume of *The Saga of Pliocene Exile*? And now it transpires that *The Snow Queen* is actually part of a trilogy. And, et cetera....

Let us entitle this parable:

Of Ground, and Ocean, and Sky

Ocean, Ground and Sky met together one day, to discuss the recent upheavals.

"New masterpieces are arising all along the boundaries of the old," declared Ground, shaking with anticipation. "Other books are going under. We three should get up an expedition to be present at the eruption of the next new work."

"Shall we take gifts with us?" asked Sky. "Such as gold, and incense – that sort of thing?"

Ocean shook his wavy head.

"No, I imagine there'll be plenty of gold and incense."

"We ought to take something, though – if only as a peace offering," said Sky. "There are such grindings and rumblings when a new fiction bursts forth. All the fault lines of the other writers tremble."

"When the engine of the imagination turns over," observed Ground,

“there is always much screeching and vibration. Yet without this disturbance there would be no fresh deposits of the Imaginary on the planet’s surface. The older peaks would wear down after a while. Everything would go flat.”

“Will this new arrival be a novel?” asked Sky innocently.

Ground did his best to explain to her.

“It isn’t as cut and dried as that, my dear Sky. Novel, novella, novelette, short story – the one category thrusts up into the next by a natural process of evolution. The Himalaya of the novel, with its sparkling crown of lucite, grows up almost of its own accord out of the foothill of the novelette – quite rapidly, too, in some cases. I imagine we will see a novelette born, or even a short story. But this will grow and grow, volcanically, with much steam and smoke, within a few weeks....”

Ground hesitated.

“And yet?” prompted Sky.

“And yet it *may* be a whole novel all at once – or even the Pelion piled on Ossa, of a trilogy. A whole range of mountains may emerge instantly from underground.”

“What shape will it take?” asked Sky. She was busily sculpting her clouds into castles.

Ground pondered for a while.

“It will be full of strata of relationships. These will fold over and under each other, cunningly.”

“And what will the scenery be like?”

“Ah, there will be plenty of surface beauty for your eye. There will be exciting gorges and pitfalls, too. Adventurous crevasses and ledges to cling to. And perhaps some long meanders. Yet the folds underneath will change the meaning of what lies on the surface – for those who look beneath the surface. Though, for those who don’t look too deeply, the surface will be colourful enough.”

A gale of petulance blew down from Sky.

“It isn’t my fault that I can’t see all the complicated folds under the surface!”

“Ah, but in *this* case everybody will want it to be known that they have seen beneath the surface. So there will be a convenient network of caves, with an easily navigable subterranean river.”

“Excellent,” said Ocean. “The story will flow easily, then.”

“This won’t be too *dense* a product of the imagination,” continued Ground. “Massive, but not dense. Rule One of Tectonic Success: he that rises to the surface must be twenty-five per cent lighter than the others.”

“When shall we set out?” asked Sky, excitedly. Her hair blew out in long streamers.

“Right now,” said Ground. And slowly he revolved himself on his axis, to bring himself closer to the source of the new eruption.

Ocean launched himself along a powerful current.

Sky blew in the appropriate direction.

The three friends passed by a number of older mountains, still massive, though now gone cold inside. They also passed an aborted volcano, whose initial gush of lava had solidified in its throat after the first eruption – though substantial puffs of steam still issued from vents around its sides. And they passed many hills and lesser mountains, still actively thrusting themselves upwards – though already these were being jostled by the new disturbance.

“There! I can see it!” called out Sky – since she could see further than Ocean or Ground, although Ground felt all the deep vibrations. “The earth’s splitting open!”

Ground groaned in sympathy.

And from out of the hot bowels of the imagination there flowed a new hill. The surrounding hills and mountains all nodded to it, since it most definitely broke new ground. It expanded their territory.

“It’s a novelette,” said Ocean.

“Wait,” cautioned Ground. “It’s still growing. It’s going to be a novel.”

Presently, Sky brushed across the new peak.

“Why, it’s a hundred thousand words high already! A moment ago it was only ten.”

Ocean reared up on a high wave.

“Fine exciting terrain, there.”

“Good deep caves beneath,” commented Ground. “Simple but convincing. Only a few of them are empty air pockets.”

“It’s... stopped.”

“No, it hasn’t – there’s a sequel!”

Beside the first mountain there rapidly arose an even higher peak.

“Two hundred thousand words high, that one,” marvelled Sky. She was quite out of breath at its height.

“But it’s the same shape as the first one,” objected Ocean. “It’s just bigger, that’s all.”

“Going for the trilogy, now!” shouted Ground.

The third and highest mountain reared up and up, till it reached the very fringes of space. And this mountain looked quite different at first

glance, but actually it was a mirror image of the second mountain.

Nevertheless, incense arose from fumaroles all around, and a rain of gold filled a hollow between the two latest peaks, brimful.

But even as Ocean and Sky were politely applauding the new trilogy, Ground cried out. More seismic shocks had reached him.

“Another eruption? So soon? Surely the engine of the imagination will seize up with the heat!”

Even so, another eruption was already taking place, not far away.

Another novelette appeared from nowhere and swiftly swelled into a novel of splendid girth, shouldering the new trilogy range aside.

Ground sensed disaster. Just in time he warned Ocean and Sky.

And a few moments later the whole crust of the world lifted off its roots, turned over and thumped back down again. Young mountains, foothills and even mature ranges tumbled. Catastrophic oscillations shook the land. Before very long, there was only one vast plain of debris.

Sky loomed over this flattened plain, searching in vain for signs of activity. Ground settled himself beneath it, patiently to await the advent of some future geological epoch. And Ocean flowed away. He felt bitterly cold. For a long time there was an ice age.

June 1982

April in Paris

Most science fiction isn't written in English....

This April my French publishers Calmann-Lévy flew me over to Paris for the "Salon du Livre" book fair, and to do a string of interviews about *Le Monde Divin*. (Which, I hasten to add, is the French edition of my novel *God's World*, not a theological newspaper....)

So, economic prisoner of the recession and Thatcherism for the last few eternities, with one bound I broke the chains attaching me to my typewriter and drove to Birmingham airport.

Something else broke, too, on the way there, namely whatever cable connects up the clock which counts the miles. If you're ever driving along a deserted road alone on a dark morning, and hear a sudden raging squawk like the Night Stalker leaping on you, fear no evil; that's probably all it is, the clock clocking off....

From Birmingham Airport to Charles de Gaulle; along half a kilometre of switchback moving walkways through tunnels and glass tubes to the taxi rank; and off to my hotel, near the Opera. Then out for the first major event: lunch with my French editor, in a Lyon specialty restaurant. Which, it goes without saying, is quite a different kettle of *poissons* from a Lyons corner house. A couple of bottles of wine later, packed with deliciously sauced *jambon* and buttered spinach – though I sternly declined the veal on grounds of cruelty (*my* pig lived and died happily, as I could tell by the taste) – it was round the corner to the offices of Calmann-Lévy. Their building, with a huge brassbound door down an arched courtyard, quite resembles Gollancz in its creaky antiquity, though it is rather vaster and even more of a veteran. For here trod Baudelaire, clutching his newly-minted *Fleurs du Mal*; and Flaubert, bearing *Madame Bovary*....

Surrealism commenced with the first big interview, scheduled to take place at "X", a mysterious rendezvous. Off I was driven to a road junction in the great spread of the Tuileries Gardens with no obvious buildings near, only an access tunnel leading deeply and steeply down into what looked like a subterranean carpark, the sort where you just *know* from a hundred TV movies that a car engine will suddenly rev, there'll be a screech of tyres and it's bullet time.

But actually this was the entrance to the underground stronghold of the post-telecom people, buried far and wide beneath the surface of the

gardens; and the TV director who was orchestrating my interview wanted a futuristic setting for the recording. So we all descended further by lift into measureless concrete and electronic caverns and found a hall which suitably resembled the bridge of a starship, which was then floodlit in green and red and orange, for me to pose Saganesquely (Carl, not Françoise) while I answered questions about the malady of heroic fantasy, and about SF metaphysics and economics.

Perhaps even lower down in the bowels of Paris beneath my telecom starship, were nuclear bunkers? If there were, no one seemed particularly interested. “What’s that?” I was asked the next day, about my CND badge. And it turned out that people hadn’t even heard of the women of Greenham Common, though they are big news in Japan, America and Germany; and the French were aware of recent anti-missile demonstrations in Germany. But not in England. How peculiar.

After the TV recording, it was off to the “Salon du Livre”, held in a stone and wrought-iron palace the size of Paddington Station (but far more beautiful) just off the Champs Elysées. About 450 French publishers had stands there, with lawns of green carpet in between; and *Le Figaro* commented the next morning that the French publishing industry was certainly *behaving* as if all was well with the world, whatever the harsh reality was. Certainly the champagne flowed freely enough at the *Magazine Litteraire* cocktail party and the Calmann-Lévy soiree later on. In between these two pleasant bibulous, bibliophilic events I squeezed in an interview or two, and was whisked outside for a walk around with a photographer – whose son had gone to study engineering in Lancashire and, *horreur*, declared that he was going to settle in Blackburn forever. Her stand at the “Salon” was hung with her photographs of Nabokov, Barthes, Borges and other writers; and she posed me in various locations around the Champs Elysées standing on plinths and caressing stone dolphins. Ah, magnifique. Perhaps I can become a fashion model if the world stops reading books.

Back to the soiree, where author Philippe Curval – *Brave Old World* (Allison & Busby), a lovely book – was very keen to try out Paris’s recently opened Irish restaurant.

What, an *Irish* restaurant? In Paris? Visit Paris to visit an Irish restaurant? The mind boggles. But at this point I recollected that *The Observer* had devoted two sprightly columns to this brave new venture, a couple of weeks earlier. The fact that in Moreton Pinkney, deep in the empty quarter of Northamptonshire, I happened to have read a long critique of the new Irish restaurant in Paris struck Philippe as equally

bizarre; so obviously we had to go there, all piling into the car of Marianne Lecomte.

And oh my gosh, was it *good*. The *assiette de fruits de mer*, piled with smoked and raw oysters, smoked and cooked salmon, Dublin Bay prawns. The beef and pepper stew....

There seems to be a lot about food in this column, even unto the newly-minted *Fleurs du Mal* (which was quite unintentional, I assure you). And even so I've left out the Savoy-style restaurant, and my trip under my own steam to a vast crowded low-cost eating hall walled with many large mirrors (not forgetting the enormous painting of a stone stairway in a chateau garden with implausibly big roses or perhaps camellias) where the waiters out of Toulouse-Lautrec did all the correct things like scribbling the bill on the paper tablecloth, and where a beautiful young Englishman out of *Brideshead Revisited* at the next table was trying to talk his older French *amie* into putting up the finance for an erotic movie. The place was wine-stained, crumb-scattered and elbow-jostling, but the *truite aux amandes* was almost as good as anywhere else. But I promise that I'm not, this time round, auditioning to be a cook. It's just that SF events in France automatically become gastronomic events too; and there's quite a difference between this and staggering out of a British con hotel for a gut-blaster Vindaloo curry.

Bon appetit! La vie est bonne....

But how is life, in harsh economic reality, for French science fiction writers?

Well, there are problems.

The first problem of course is that the world SF market is dominated by books written in English; and if we in Britain are frequently and generally the poor relations of American science fiction – economically speaking – the French are the poor relations of all us Anglo-Saxons. Where can their books be sold? Belgium, Luxembourg, a bit of Switzerland, Quebec. How can they get translated? It isn't easy. There are a handful of exceptions, but on the whole British publishers can't afford to pay a translator for a French SF book, and US publishers haven't got anyone who can read French – should they even care. Patrice Duvic sold a story to *Omni* a few years back, but by writing it in English; and there's a whole world of sweat between writing a short story in English, and writing a whole novel, if indeed anyone could contemplate such a mad project.

Add on to the problem of the dominance of English language SF, other problems which crop up in Anglo-Saxonia too. First of all, rubbish sells a lot better in France than good stuff. Conan books go like a bomb, as

do space operas from Fleuve Noir – many of these hacked out by good French SF writers in between doing more serious books.

Then, the good French SF writers are not very popular or well-known in their country, they say....

I digress. Actually, the print runs of the French equivalent of hardbacks (expensive trade paperbacks) are quite a lot bigger than equivalent UK print-runs and the numbers generally sold would gladden the heart of a British publisher; but even so. I have a theory about this, which brings us back to cookery. Several times I've heard British publishers complain that we Brits will not fork out the price of a hardback book when we would be quite willing to pay the same sum for a meal in a good restaurant. But perhaps we Brits at heart are just gluttons, not gourmets – how else to explain the popularity of Berni Inns? Whereas in France a meal is also an intellectual event, and a good meal is seen as of equivalent importance to a good book (at least among readers); this, due to a unification of sensibility between belly and brain, a recognition that the mouth which eats also utters intellectual discourse. To translate the British publishers' complaint into Newspeak: "Britreaders unbellyfeel Ingbooks".

Anyway – end of digression – the best French SF authors don't feel that they're all that popular in their native land; and while it was slightly gratifying (of course) it was also rather horrifying to be told that *I'm* rather better known in France than they are.

But then, in our own fair land, are not Messrs. Watson and (oh well, I'd better not add any more names, out of respect for my colleagues' feelings), Messrs. Watson and others less well known than... about 50 American SF writers?

Which, in this study of hierarchies, leads on to the interesting question: in America, which outsider, which alien, is better known as an SF writer than *American* SF writers?

Maybe Borges could come to our aid here by inventing (as in his tale "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius") the works of an imaginary major SF seer – who would obviously not be Kilgore Trout – who would gradually supplant all the native authors, thrusting them into second place in public esteem....

Or perhaps here we have an analogical proof of the existence of God; a rebuttal – in the SF dimension – of Gödel's disproof of self-validation within any enclosed system. For there seems to exist, in the SF world, a category of supreme beings, greater than whom are no others. The hill of skiffy has an actual, non-infinite summit. Olympus, USA.

But hark, I have just thought of one candidate.

Arthur Clarke. Oh dear, I did not intend in this column to prove by remorseless logic that Arthur Clarke is God....

What's special about Arthur Clarke, incidentally? Well, he doesn't have a nationality in any narrow sense of the word. He has transcended himself. He's unidentifiable (like certain phenomena in his Mysterious World). He's a world-citizen. (Please stop reading this, Arthur, if you are. This is no good for your moral character, modesty etc.) He's, um, a man of the world. As it were.

Whereas the French are imprisoned by their language and nationality, and so are we Brits on the whole (though I myself tried to mutate into a Japanese for several years). Whilst the Americans, on the other hand, know for certain that their own country *is* the world. Which is just as trapping for them, even though it equips one with the illusion of Super Powers: general cultural edge-of-the-future perceptiveness and whatnot.

And maybe, just maybe, science fiction has run slam-bang into a cul-de-sac not merely because of malign commercial forces encouraging unoriginality and drivel, but because in absolute objective terms (economically and global-culturally) American SF *is* the zenith, but in America SF discourse has begun to recycle itself in a closed circuit – by contrast with the brave initiatives not so long ago, of Delany, Zelazny, Le Guin etc. – precisely because there is nowhere else mentally to go. Meanwhile, too – and let's not underestimate the effect on consciousness – history is repeating itself malignly, with a second Cold War, a second Depression, a second mini-Vietnam in Central America, a second-rate actor in the White House.

We're all looking out eagerly for the book that is truly *other*. (We even keep on trying to write it, too!) Unfortunately, what seems to be other often turns out five minutes later to be more of the same. (I mean, *is* Gene Wolfe's *Book of the New Sun* entirely an enormous breakthrough in discourse... or is it a sword and sorcery novel without a plot written by someone supremely literate?)

If SF is to break out of its current mental logjam, somehow we've got to become *other, autre*; and I don't just mean migrate into the mainstream. We've got to become somebody else; and in my next column I hope to explore a bit further the notion of becoming somebody else.

June 1983

Some Cultural Notes and Pest Control

I never did finish exploring how to become someone else. But never mind. In an alternative universe, I am a market gardener....

It occurs to me that running through my life as a writer is a strong horticultural theme. Years ago I used to collect cacti and succulents avidly; and actually my first four paid publications were columns in the pages of *Amateur Gardening* and *Popular Gardening*, written when I was fourteen or fifteen. At the moment I'm looking at the only one I still have a copy of: "Growing the Sacred Cactus," *Amateur Gardening*, 19th September 1959. This was about the peyotl cactus, producer of mescaline (which reminds me of another dawning interest). There were earlier articles as well, about the Cochineal Cactus, *Nopalea cochinilifera*, the Crown of Thorns, *Euphorbia splendens*, and "living stones", of the Lithops clan.

Given the resources, I would gladly have grown orchids too, and bonsai. As it was, though, I stuck to succulents and cacti. I was even thinking of specialising – in Stapelias, that intriguing species which produce flowers that look and smell like rotting flesh, to attract the blowflies which fertilise them.

But then I gave up.

Yet did I really? When I was putting together my recent collection *Sunstroke & Other Stories*, it occurred to me that maybe I had never stopped at all, but instead had set out to breed my own species, by verbal rather than genetic engineering. Therein the book were my queens of the night and bitter aloes, my crown of thorns, my fly traps and pitcher plants, my bonsai of the mind. More than a few had spikes or trapdoors or sticky tendrils, or otherwise played tricks; for such are the kinds of plants I would have grown.

Then again, I've written a novel called *The Gardens of Delight*; and here I am sitting in Moreton Pinkney while the Autumn rain pours down, with the silver cup for best front flower garden still on our mantelpiece for the second year. (Richard Cowper tells me that *he* won the cup for best vegetables; but, say I undaunted, we are self-sufficient in double asters and floribunda roses!)

Yes, the chilly October rainfall. And I can see black soil again in the

garden, now that a lot of succumbing plants have been hauled out and trucked to the tip in our garden-refuse wagon of a car. The dahlias are still busy, the Rudbeckias have flowered incredibly all Summer long and are still at it; and the firethorn Pyracantha is covered with bright red berries. But otherwise it's pretty well over for the year. The lawn has been raked, and spiked, and just awaits a top-dressing. The houseplants are all in from the tubs, and the downstairs windows are curtained not with net and Draylon but with chlorophytum and geranium, yucca and ivy and begonia. There's a huge Crassula, the Tree of Happiness, on my desk, managing to look remarkably like a bonsai forest. The first chapter of a new SF novel lies on one side of it, and on the other side are letters about the correct thickness of tug-of-war ropes, and the Inter-Village Quiz sponsored by Avon cosmetics; as I'm secretary of the village hall.

Outside, the farmers are transhumancing their sheep down Weston Lane, to pastures new.

Transhumance: I never knew this word till the other night at the village hall, when we held a quiz to select the Moreton Pinkney team for the Avon quiz. Neither did anyone else but the question master, a teacher from the grammar school in Towcester who drinks in the Red Lion and who had tackled the setting of the questions with gleeful relish. Baffled farmers stared in amaze as he revealed the true name of what they are up to: seasonal movement of livestock.

What do I see from my windows? Out there, between the ironstone-walled vegetable allotments, with the Old Fire Station tucked away in them (from the days when a cart and horses trundled forth to quench any blazes); and the Scottish baronial gates of the Manor House on the other side? It's lively. There are non-stop events: teams of penny-farthing bicycles, vintage cars heading for rallies, tractors towing bales of hay, combine harvesters, flour lorries, scrap metal lorries, low flying war-planes screaming just above the trees, the local millionaire's helicopter, autogyros and hot air balloons wandering from the Silverstone racing circuit (we can hear the engines revving up like faint thunder ten miles away), local riders astride their horses, racers from the Towcester race course being exercised, packs of (apparently) Vietnamese bicyclists, car loads of Japanese tourists, parties of ramblers in stout gear, herds of cows, cats, squirrels, geese, a pony and trap, the Hunt off to annoy the farmers. (Not quite all at once.)

This is the "village of pigs and paupers" of the 19th century – at which time it had five pubs, now reduced to one. Since then it has upmarketed a bit. Here lives the aged president of the Bronte Society, with

his library in the old stone forge on the lower green; here lives an ex-librarian from Camden, ex-member of the Communist Party, Jewish atheist who married a black man – along with her nuclear physicist sister. Here lives an ex-rally driver and after-dinner raconteur; and a USAF ground controller currently with bright red eyes due to a collision between US metabolism and ale. Here lives a Canadian spy; why else did he say he was going on a course in cryptography before being sent to Mongolia? Here live those who sell sheep-shearing clippers, and motorcycles, and rubber bits for cars; and who are likely to be off to Moscow or Melbourne at a moment's notice. In the largest house in the village, The Grange, lives the local taxi driver. There's no policeman within miles, so the local pub stays open till... but I'd better not divulge that, save to say that now I know why people in the radio soap opera *The Archers* only drink half pints, which I always thought a bit soppy; it's the only way to stay conscious long enough.

And here we garden. And natter over the hedge. And weed, till there are no weeds left; and zap the pests and parasites – which unfortunately, as regards the lawn, has to include worms, since worms are mole-food. (This confession quite distressed the Vicar, who cited Darwin's early treatise on earthworms. Of the Vicar, incidentally, it is written in the *Northampton Independent*, this county's version of *Country Life*, that his old sprawling vicarage "has become an incubus" for him. Being interested in erotic demonology, I must seek more details.)

Weed. And deadhead. And zap parasites. Or the garden of delight will not flourish.

Being a great believer in sermons in stones, and tongues in trees (and duly mindful of the quip about Wordsworth that he found those sermons in stones, which he himself had put there), at this point I feel moved to a few remarks about other kinds of parasites and weeds: namely, literary ones.

After I gave up growing cacti, for a while I became an academic, of the Eng. Lit. variety. So naturally I wrote criticism. Here are some products of that period: "Nothing else to live but sins: Jean Genet's Africa", *Transition*, Kampala 1967; "E.M. Forster: Whimsy and Beyond", *The Rising Generation*, Tokyo 1969; "Elias Canetti: the One and the Many", *Chicago Review*, 1969; "For Love or Money: Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice*", Japan Women's University theatre programme 1969....

Perhaps these titles, though actual, read a little like parody? Such as we might find in one of those university novels which feed new solipsistic grist back into the academic mill?

But, then, criticism is itself parody. It is a travesty of the original words in new and condensed form: Campbell's Rhetoric Soup. It is parasitical on original creativity, something secondary. It imitates the creative act, as weeds imitate the seedlings they grow beside (in an effort to strangle them).

No harm, of course, in writing reviews and criticism as an amateur ("out of love": love of the subject). But there is a whole parasitical sub-worlds, in love with itself, of the middlemen of art – academics, critics, pundits, personalities, those who sit on committees for the arts – which actually harms art; and which drains resources therefrom.

This came home to me strikingly at a one-day conference I attended at the London Institute of Contemporary Arts in March this year, entitled "Focus on Fiction," supposedly designed to enquire into the health of the contemporary novel, high and low, genre and literary.

I shall pass over the morning's activities, commencing with a dowager empress opening address by Marghanita Laski – who took it upon herself in passing, by a kind of parenthetical imperial fiat, to exclude pornography from the ranks of fictional art high or low; later a puzzled questioner said, "But when I was reading *The White Hotel*, I suddenly realised that a lot of it *was* pornography, and that was why it worked so powerfully...."

I shall likewise pass over the succeeding college tutorial circa 1955, concerning the Grand Tradition, a further exercise in rampant twee, further establishing the sense of *haut* snobbery and sophisticated social nicety.

I will not allude to the slights, both implicit and overt, suffered by the invited representatives of the Romance genre; though I almost felt inclined to rush out at once and buy a few Mills and Boon books out of solidarity. And I will pass directly to the nub of the matter: the afternoon Writers' Forum, supposedly a panel discussion in which various authors would present their own points of view, and expound their reasons for choosing a particular literary form, to be followed by questions from the audience.

On the panel were Salman Rushdie, representing the "art" novel, Jessica Mann for thrillers, Jeffrey Archer for best-sellers, Roberta Leigh for romance, and myself as skiffyman.

So we five authors duly presented ourselves, each clutching a crumpled page of notes about something that we particularly wanted to say.

And they changed the format. With one bound, we were chained. Hey Presto, Frank Delaney, literary lion tamer extraordinary, was brought on stage to interview us all as *specimens* of authors. While the critics were

allowed any amount of time to flute on, and hold forth whither so ever they wished, the authors were not even permitted their promised ten minutes of free speech, but instead must have their words rigorously controlled by standard questions. The authors – the producers of the primary product without which the whole conference, and criticism itself, couldn't have existed – were to be kept locked in cages, exhibited, put through their paces, then dismissed. Each with their page of notes – about things of desperate import to the authors themselves, as authors – still clutched unused, or crumpled up in sheer frustration.

When it came to my turn to be interrogated, I asked if I might make a comment on the format; and pointed out that the assumptions implicit in this format, and implicit in the rest of the conference too, so far – of the supremacy of the secondary mediators of culture, over the primary producers – in fact vitiated the whole supposed purpose of such a conference. Salman Rushdie promptly inveighed, likewise. And Roberta Leigh, too, who had been lured along (till then, under false pretences), because she actually had something original to say about Romance, from the point of view of a practitioner of that genre. The circus animals rebelled. And at least the audience enjoyed the fray.

Alas, this episode is all too symptomatic of something rotten in the State of Creativity. The ivy thrives, but not the tree.

Consider a piece in *The Observer* (13 June 1982) entitled "The Critic as Undertaker", by Peter Conrad. It's a survey of the first batch in a new Contemporary Writers series of books, from Methuen; assorted critics holding forth on Saul Bellow, John Fowles, Joe Orton, Thomas Pynchon *et cetera*. The preferred metaphor of almost all the critics turns out to be that of an autopsy conducted on the authors and their *oeuvre*; plus a reckoning up of what they have "bequeathed" us in their literary testaments. In the general background Roland Barthes conducts the funeral service, proclaiming the death of the author, negated by his text, which makes possible the birth of the critical reader. And attempts are made, in the case of authors who haven't yet literally flaked it, to diagnose fatal symptoms: thus John Fowles is detected to be "falling off".

A shared metaphor cropping up simultaneously so many times can only unmask the actual vested interests of such critics, who really have little in common with creators yet who are competing in the same ecological niche, for the same slice of the cake of life, the cultural slice – and for the icing upon it.

Consider, finally, the Arts Council's advertisement for Writers' Bursaries 1982/83: "It is emphasised that writers of non-fiction works of

literary merit, including those books *which are in any way a support to literature*, are eligible." (My emphasis.) This is a bit of a new departure. So public tax money may now be spent on funding those people who are in any way a support to literature – rather than on supporting the creation of literature itself! What is this but a charter for parasites?

One does not of course doubt the probity of the Arts Council, who administer the national largesse for the arts. Did not the out-going Director, Sir Roy Shaw, deny that he had "been offering prominent people in public life large sums of money to become directors of a new private leisure complex in London", and then change his mind and admit it? (*The Observer*, Pendennis column, 14 March 1982.) But as to their concept of supporting the arts by supporting people who support the arts in any way, ho ho hum. Someone has got their priorities seriously mixed up; though is that really surprising when one considers how many members of the supporters' club are knit together by mutual obligations, sponsored conferences and the rest of the circuit of metropolitan supportiveness? (Oh dear, the football team have got no boots – but the supporters club is doing fine.)

Not only do authors have to put up with being at the wrong end of the publishing process, financially. Not only do they have to put up with the engulfing and axing of the publishing industry by corporate conglomerates practising bottom-line economics. Not only do they have to put up with the wholesale warping of the profession of literature by media hype, best-sellerdom, film tie-ins, ooks (artificial books), and the rest of the phony circus. (And all the while sweat and brood and work like hell to conceive and bring their works into the world.) But they have to put up with parasites waxing strong on their bodily and cerebral juices.

Little can be done by most authors to make themselves into powers within publishing. Damn all can be done to persuade Gulf Oil that they owe a duty to that micron of their empire which spans, say, original SF anthologies.

But the sub-world of parasites is closer at hand, elbowing authors in the very same socio-economic niche.

Gardeners: zap that weevil. Authors: squash a parasite today.

December 1982

The Journey to Chekhov

The editors of *Focus* have asked me for a piece on what kind of research I did before writing *Chekhov's Journey*, a book which presumably involved a certain amount of prior spadework.

In fact there's quite a fat file of notes, and I think the best way to answer this request initially is just to go through the file.

What do we come to first? A scribbled map of the part of Siberia around Kramoyarsk, with notes such as "To Yeniseisk, district town of 12000, 330 versts = 219 miles by steamboat, generally flanked by rocky banks." *Steamboat*? Was I perhaps planning a great steamboat race to Tunguska? Ah, this is from *Baedeker's Guide to Russia*, which Dolores Jakubowski tipped me off about. An edition published just before the First World War was reprinted about twenty years ago; though of course I had to subtract the effects of the Trans-Siberian Railway, built in the interval since Chekhov visited the region.

Next page: more from *Baedeker*, on the hotels and restaurants in Krasnoyarsk. ("Hotel candles are included in the bill; separate charge for bed-linen and towels.") Actually, I ignored most of this when I wrote the book.

Next: a photo of the central sports stadium in Krasnoyarsk, clipped from *Soviet Weekly*, to which I subscribed for six months.

Followed by: sixteen pages of notes on Hingley's *A New Life of Chekhov*. Twenty-five pages of notes on *Selected Letters of Anton Chekhov* edited by Hellmann. Four pages of notes on a book called *Chekhov's Leading Lady*. (Did you know that in 1900 Chekhov was wearing long woollen underwear manufactured by Jaeger?) Then: a photocopy, "Konstantin Tsiolkovsky and his Work on Interplanetary Travel", which Brian Stableford kindly furnished me with. Next: two pages of notes on Siberian Shamanism, from Mircea Eliade's *Shamanism* which, in fact, I already used in connection with *God's World*. Followed by more on Tsiolkovsky (also courtesy of Brian Stableford); then a pull-out centrefold of Siberian heavy industry from *Soviet Weekly*. An article from ditto on the Biotechnology Institute in Krasnoyarsk. Next, a letter from the Novosti Press Agency inviting me to use their picture library... but I never went. (I don't *like* doing research in libraries... though I did pop down to the Bodleian in Oxford to check out *Baedeker*.) Another map, of Siberian rivers. Forty pages of photocopies of letters of Chekhov covering

the period of his real Siberian journey. Alas, I wasn't able to lay hands on the actual travel articles he wrote.

Onward: notes on a couple of books on the Tunguska phenomenon. (The reincarnation by hypnosis stuff stems from a couple of books about "psychic research behind the iron curtain" which I read a few years back.)

Next: historical notes on world events in 1889-1890, about the only one of which I used was "Eiffel Tower built". Nobly I refrained from mentioning in the book that the "Red Flag" was written in 1889 in London after a dock strike.

Notes, next, on Tsiolkovsky's *On the Moon*, and on early Russian rocket pioneers in Bainbridge's *The Spaceflight Revolution* which George Hay gave me years ago. (Thanks, George. I used it.)

Oh God, did I really do all this? Now it's Yuri Semyonov's *Siberia: Its Conquest and Development.*

Stanislavsky. The Trans-Siberian Railway. The topography of Kansk. Another biography of Chekhov. Oodles of notes on most of Chekhov's short fiction and all his plays.... (Woven into the narrative of *Chekhov's Journey* are quite a few allusions. But the point of such allusions is to convey the right flavour, not so that some Slavic scholar can leap up and cry, "Nice one, Sir!")

Heavens, I'm exhausted just looking through this file.

The last scrap of paper says: "Letter style chapters enables one to leave out junk." Quite. That's why some chapters are written in epistolary form: in order to dump excess baggage which had accumulated. (Not dump it into the narrative; dump it by not mentioning it.)

Actually, all this research suggests some kind of Master Plan. But it wasn't really that way. The way the book came about in the first place was by sheer serendipity. I was thinking of ironic juxtapositions, as in my short story "To the Pump Room with Jane", where Jane Austen collides with eco-catastrophe. (I like to think of that story as *Stand on Zanzibar*, as written by Miss Austen.) Wouldn't it be nice – Judy and I tossed the idea around, in between tossing darts at the board, above the cats' toilet, and tossing pints down – wouldn't it be nice to juxtapose something cataclysmic, *Lucifer's Hammer* and all that lot.... Ah, Tunguska! Nobody's had a go at Tunguska. Now, who on earth could I juxtapose Tunguska with? Dostoevsky? Dostoevsky was in exile in Siberia. Yes, but that wouldn't be much of a juxtaposition. Dostoevsky is a sort of literary cataclysm anyway.

Aha. Chekhov. The Jane Austen of Russian Literature! As it were.

Now in the past Chekhov always sent me to sleep; he wasn't really on

my wavelength. Yet a few weeks later I was *loving* the man, and totally identified with him; he seemed to reflect all my own sentiments. He came totally alive, as a brother. (This, perhaps, reflected in my choice to resurrect him by hypnosis and refract him through past, present, future.)

Anyway, let's check Chekhov out, thought I... and bless me if to my complete surprise the man hadn't made an epic journey all the way across Siberia – quite out of the blue, quite out of the context of the rest of his life, and writings, to all appearances; the biographers are still a bit puzzled.

In fact, "research" is often like this, for me at least. In retrospect it seems to possess logical coherence and inevitability; but often it wasn't like that at all. It's full of lucky accidents, things that just fall into your hands at the right time (and maybe never would if you went painstakingly bulldozing for them), which of course means that something – a pattern, a fictional fabric – is coming alive, organically.

And, of course, this isn't always the way it is. For my previous novel, *Deathhunter*, the only "research" I did was to consult a couple of books on the psychology of death and dying. The novel itself stemmed from a completely spontaneous short story, "A Cage for Death", a story which just wrote itself, from the title onwards. The title came into my head. I wrote it down; the rest followed.

It's nice when this happens; but it's also nice doing "research". You plunge into something which may never have particularly interested you before with a committed fervour. And this expands you a bit; it's like undergoing a change of personality.

But then you have to cry, "Enough", ignore most of what you have learnt, and start to write the book. Which has to be fiction, your own invention.

Autumn 1983

Shrines and Ratholes (Part I)

Although Africa made me aware of the Third World, and of politics, it was Japan which dosed me with future shock and made me become a science fiction writer. Thirteen years after leaving Japan, the French magazine Actuel *asked me and other writers to answer the following two questions. Which place has been magical in your life? And which was the worst rathole you visited? Here is my answer to the first question....*

Just outside Kyoto is a remarkable and magical shrine: the Fushimi Inari Taisha Shrine, set upon Mount Inari in Fushimi Ward.

Well now, *many* Japanese shrines are remarkable places (not least the Shrine of Gratitude for Penis, at Tagata near Nagoya – which is full of enormous polished wooden phalluses!). And in a sense all Shinto shrines are magical. For in Japan two entirely different religions coexist (just as so much else which is apparently contradictory coexists there merrily). One is Shinto, an earth-religion, with its shrines. The other is Buddhism, a religion of the psyche, with its temples. The first is bodily, superstitious, mythic, "primitive". The second is abstract, transcendental; and people switch from one to the other, as need be. It's rather as though Europeans were Christians on Sunday, Wednesday and Friday, and paid offerings to the Devil, of the old religion, on the other days.

This Inari shrine at Fushimi is dedicated to the gods of human prosperity; so at the Industrial Festival held there every April the Hall of Worship is full of offerings of industrial products: TV sets, video games, whatever... But the really mind-blowing thing isn't the shrine buildings, nice as they are. Nor the sideshows and stalls selling barbecued sparrows, china foxes, masks with phallic noses and TV monster masks. It's the 10,000 *torii* gateways, painted bright vermilion, packed shoulder to shoulder in a stone corridor that leads up the mountain and then around the top in a 4-kilometre-long circuit – through trees with a host of white paper bows tied to them for good fortune, like flocks of butterflies.

Climbing this mountain up the red stone corridor, with the sun shafting through, was a totally numinous experience for me. It was like being a corpuscle flowing through my own bloodstream externalised: a sensory event of far more impact than the calm elegance and aesthetic trance of the Buddhist Golden Pavilion in Kyoto itself; and during the 3

days of the New Year prosperity festival nearly two million people visit Fushimi, and this red corridor is dense with human corpuscles.

But I don't like large crowds. But I don't much care for earth-religions, which remind me of national soil and Nazism. But I have never actually set any story in Fushimi.... So why is this place so numinous, and luminous, for me?

It's because, while living in Japan, I found myself as a writer; and for me the shrine at Fushimi is a quintessence of Japan.

Japan switched me on to writing science fiction, the metier in which I found myself. I began writing SF as a psychological survival mechanism, for there in Japan (at the end of the Sixties) were all the seductions and all the terrors of the 21st century;

Tokyo where I lived was the science fiction city.

But more importantly, in a deeper sense – I see now – Japan has a genius for making contradictions coexist (as Shinto and Buddhism coexist) – not least the contradiction between traditional past and futuristic present, between the calligrapher and the cyberneticist. Such places as the Inari shrine forced me to perceive analogies, to yoke together contradictions in a paradoxical knot – while at the same time deranging my senses through sheer visual impact.

Didn't the New Year festival, with a "toothpaste tube" of people squeezing up Mount Inari through the bloodstream corridor, resemble rush-hour on the Tokyo underground? Didn't people accept the crush of life in megalopolis because the pursuit of economic growth had a quasi-religious flavour? Didn't the Japanese accept the transformation of their land from a place of calm, beauty and nature, into a materialistic science fiction fantasy, precisely because there were deep traditional spiritual forces at work in this? Wasn't the psychedelic art of the advertisers not simply a borrowing from the West, but a reincarnation of the garish fairground colours of Shinto?

In the first three books which I then set out to write, there were two features in common, as regards structure and flavour. Each book contained three very diverse, but intersecting plot-lines. And each book (or at least two of them – Japan itself features in the other one) juxtaposed the ancient or traditional (Amazonian Indians, the Incas) with something hypermodern (alien visitors, a trip to Mars).

The fusion of contradictions! And the reincarnation of ancient traditions in a futuristic setting!

I'd say that Japan rewired my brain to think this way – and rewired my emotions too, since to comprehend a place like the Inari Shrine cannot

simply be a cerebral experience but must also be a sensuous and bodily one: a realisation that this corridor of red gates is indeed a living bloodstream, belonging to an alien culture, true, but also at the same time for a while it was my own.

So perhaps I can say that Japan helped me to become an alien, by giving me a blood transfusion.

Let's try my hand at a sort of *haiku*:

A Fushimi
Le sang montant
Vers les étoiles.

December 1983

Shrines and Ratholes (Part II)

As I mentioned earlier, "Shrines and Ratholes" was written for a high-circulation, glossy French magazine at the behest of its editor, Jean-François Bizot. After I'd written the piece, total silence ensued, despite several letters from me en français. *Early in 1984 a French fan sent me a copy of* Actuel *dating from the previous summer with my piece in pride of place, leading off Alberto Moravia, William Styron, Richard Brautigan and others on the theme of earthly hells and paradises. My words had been edited very creatively, and I was tagged as an Irish author. Maybe, without revealing himself, Monsieur Bizot had been lurking in Paris's new Irish restaurant on the night when I visited it? (See "April in Paris".) He certainly hasn't revealed himself since. But at least my basic message was correctly conveyed.....*

I guess the ideal rathole to describe would be a bug-infested brothel in El Salvador or somewhere else exotic (exotic, so long as you don't have to live there yourself!). But thanks to the world financial crisis, the savageries of our mad British monetarist government, and the way publishing – particularly in the USA – is being run by corporate accountants who couldn't care a piss for art, I've been an economic prisoner in my home island for what seems an eternity.

So I nominate for worst rathole my cursed idea for a brief idyllic holiday last summer with wife and daughter and our three cats (quite a Noah's Ark) on a narrow boat on the South Oxford Canal, and the specific location of the rathole Upper Heyford village in Oxfordshire.

Of course in the context of waterways a "rathole" ought to be quite a sentimental thing. Here in England we're reared on the picnics and escapades of Ratty and Mole in the classic children's tale *The Wind in the Willows*. So, abandoning the overdraft, the mortgage, days chained to the typewriter, and exclaiming "La chair est triste, hélas, et j'ai lu tous les livres (or even perhaps: j'ai écrit tous les livres); fuir la-bàs, fuir!" away we fled to be caressed by the douce brise humide, on a rural canal, where rat-holes are the homes of happy little furry animals.

Hélas, we did not get too far as regards "fuir" but the "la-bas" bit was true enough. Canal boats (steered by me) blunder about like bemused

elephants; Victorian locks are bloody exhausting to crank by hand, and the very first lock was the deepest on the whole canal, a descent into a dripping stone abyss out of Dante by way of Gustave Doré. Surviving this first ordeal with the help of cans of strong beer, we then got drowned from the sky by one of many lashing thunderstorms; though the arctic gales did dry us out quickly afterwards. Meanwhile, of our three cats, two went catatonic with culture shock; while the third leaped ashore while we were choking down our lunch and killed 23 mice in an orgy of murder, leaving corpses littered along the towpath, finally becoming so excited that he tumbled off the boat into the canal; whereupon he did not so much learn to swim, as to launch himself out of the water like a Trident missile, racing back inside the boat to splatter the whole interior with litres of canal water.

Mooring near Upper Heyford, nerves too frayed to try another lock that day, we were of course directly under the flight-path for take-off from Upper Heyford US Air Force base – rubbing home one basic fact about much of the idyllic English landscape which was never known to Rat and Mole when they played around in boats hereabouts: namely that behind every second cow there lurks a radar dome, a microwave transmitter, an air-base – and soon, soon, we can look forward to cruise missile mobile control centres and launch trucks too, ambling through country lanes.

This was Upper Heyford, so here it was F-111s which hurled themselves thunderously overhead every few minutes, at an altitude of 200 feet or so, preparing for the Third World War, while the US and British governments crank up the Cold War in preparation.

Every year at the "Promenade Concerts" held in the Albert Hall, London, they finish the concert series by singing William Blake's poem *Jerusalem*: "...and we will build Jerusalem, in England's green and pleasant land!" But the land is pockmarked with the ratholes of the next war, pockmarked with transplanted enclaves of military America where the US army of occupation eat their burgers and play 10-pin bowling, in between jockeying their jets. (Army of occupation? Is that accurate? Well, what will happen if a future British socialist government tries to carry out its promise to expel all US military bases? How long will that government survive, before the country is destabilised?)

Walk up the lane from the canal, through Upper Heyford village, and you arrive at a Peace Camp outside the airbase gates, of women living in battered little caravans and under plastic sheets on a tiny patch of bridle-path. (Just as at Greenham Common, where 40,000 peace women recently encircled another camp, hand in hand, and where peace women blockade the entrances by tying themselves together in spiders' webs of knitting

wool.) Of course, the local councils try to expel them and take them to court; while Margaret Thatcher inveighs against the decline of family life, with mothers quitting their homes and husbands to demonstrate for survival.

Just beyond the Upper Heyford peace camp, behind the wire, commences a slice of Texas or Alabama – and of course the peace camp is a dirty, cold, unhygienic rathole, with its denizens looking like female tramps, while the US base is very neat and prosperous and domestic, God-fearing and elegant. But I know which is the real rathole. It's the foreign warbase in the green and pleasant land, where Rat and Mole and Toad of Toad Hall used to wander and where Rat once exclaimed, "Believe me, my young friend, there is *nothing* – absolutely nothing – half so much worth doing as simply messing about in boats."

Actually, exhausted by lock gates and soaked to the skin, I don't quite agree with Rat's sentiment, but what really put paid to the proposed idyll was the thunder of the F-111s, presaging the thunder of the H-bomb.

Fuir, là-bas! Hélas, I only escaped to reality.

December 1983

Touchstones: "Where Ignorant Armies Clash..."

Perhaps the most legitimate "touchstones" are those passages, sentences, or phrases which you can genuinely remember verbatim (or almost verbatim) all these years later. This is where the authentic frisson occurs; and maybe another way of viewing this touchstone exercise is as an attempt to codify what constitutes a touchstone moment in SF so that we too can create an assured touchstone and become immortal.

But beware, beware. Most readers discover these touchstones when they're quite young and ignorant; when Knowledge and Power appeal to us. So, if we're honest, some of our touchstones may be quite false.

I well remember a short story which appeared in *Astounding Science Fiction* some time during 1952, when I was nine years old. I've no idea today what the story was called, or who wrote it, but I do know that Kornbluth's "That Share of Glory" shared the same issue, as I recall the Kornbluth story clearly too. Unless my memory has been cheating me for years – which just might be the case! – this was the only science fiction magazine that I ever bought during my boyhood.

The story in question was about a trip in frozen hibernation through hyperspace. The ship broke down in hyperspace (or was there a murder?), and the protagonist awoke, where one should not awake. Subsequently he performed an EVA, and beheld hyperspace itself, raw. He found himself standing, as I recall, upon "an infinite plane". Bingo: the frisson pierced my bones forever.

Unfortunately, at age nine, I was hardly aware of the geometrical meaning of "plane"; or if I was aware, I didn't make the connection. What I struggled to see in my mind's eye, instead, was an infinite plane as in "airplane". No reason at all why spaceships shouldn't have wings; plenty did, in the comics of the time. Thus I imagined a spaceship in the cold, black void... with wings – which stretched out infinitely into the distance on either side of the fuselage, like a long, long road. (Obviously the body of the spaceship couldn't have become infinite, since we'd just been walking around inside it. But the wings, ah the wings.) That was why hyperspace was so fearful: because it warped the shape of reality.

Or else a touchstone can be cued by something external to the text.

Crystalman is but a shadow on the face of Muspel.

David Lindsay's *A Voyage to Arcturus*, which is one of my classics of metaphysical fantasy, was dramatized at length by the BBC round about 1956. About three hours' length, with eerie and appropriate music; and the touchstone sentence in the sidebar entered my consciousness as a kind of mystic incantation. It was some while before I realized that *Arcturus* wasn't a play, to be found in the drama section of the local library. It was years before I understood that touchstone in context; its actual meaning in the novel.

Also, you can find a touchstone in a book which you would never want included in your list of personal classics.

You can fly. But we control the lightning.

These two lines from *Lucifer's Hammer* by Larry Niven and Jerry Pournelle – the lines are Pournelle's – are a real touchstone; but I'm definitely at odds with the ethos of the novel, and wouldn't rank it as a classic. Yet it contains a touchstone for sure. Actually, I cheated here. What I *remembered* was the more grandiose lines, "You control the sky. But we control the sun." In the sidebar is the reality, which is subtler.

Vorga, I kill you deadly.

Found in my local library during the hunt for *Arcturus*, once I'd identified it as a novel, was Bester's *Tiger! Tiger!*

He was one hundred and seventy days dying and not yet dead.

I reread the book recently, and it holds up. In fact, this one's a whole string of touchstones knotted together.

NOW: Rigel in Orion.

The whole of the Prologue, up to "but twenty per cent jaunted", just for starters.

Another early discovery with a couple of touchstones in it was Will Stewart's *Seetee Shock*, by Jack Williamson. One touchstone that there had been *contraterrene* aliens. The other was the triumphant speech delivered when free beamed energy is switched on.

"People of all planets!"

I haven't reread *Seetee Shock*, but I read *Seetee Ship* not so long ago, and it – alas – creaked. A classic of memory, this; not a classic which will persist.

There are several touchstones in Clarke's *Childhood's End*; but the one I remember most clearly is structurally identical to Bester's "Rigel in

Orion" – an extrasolar epiphany.

> *"Sideneus 4 and the Pillars of the Dawn," said Rashaverak, and there was awe in his voice. "He has reached the centre of the Universe."*

James Blish created various touchstones; and as an admirer of James Joyce he knew what an epiphany was. A moment of revelation, of reality of a higher order.

> *I say unto you, Angel of Perdition: depart, depart, depart!*
> *...Suddenly the whole of Lithia began to swell, like a balloon –*

Joyce's most telling epiphany is perhaps the final sentence of "The Dead": "his soul swooned slowly as he heard the snow falling faintly through the universe and faintly falling, like the descent of their last end, upon all the living and the dead."

> *What city has two names, twice?*

In the sidebar is a definite touchstone; but what can one say about the prose? Here is a list from a star catalogue.

> *...like voices from history: 40 Eridani, Procyon, Kruger 60, Sirius, 61 Cygni, Altair, RD-4°4048, Wolf 359, Alpha Centauri... these challenges were almost like being hailed by ancient Greece or the Commonwealth of Massachusetts.*
> *The Vegan orbital fort....*

How does one reconcile "Absent thee from felicity awhile" with "RD-4°4048"?

Yet surely one must, if the touchstone method is valid? Perhaps the true touchstones of SF, or some of the major ones at least, cannot be removed from the context. The context builds towards them. We know they are there, awaiting us, like a theme in a symphony; but on their own, perhaps some of them will seem weird indeed,

> *The Goat laughed, spoke three words, and vanished...*
> *God is dead!*

And, just as disconcertingly, and with full touchstone authority, the opposite occurs in Frank Herbert's *Destination: Void*.

> *"You must decide how you will worship Me."*

Dare one say that an SF touchstone often capsulates the following

characteristics: Displacement – the sudden leap into a physical, or metaphysical, beyond; Portentousness; Simplicity; Banality – "like a balloon"; a wonderful Naivete?

William Tenn's "The Liberation of Earth," probably his finest story, and certainly a classic, establishes for me its idiosyncratic authority right at the outset, with a touchstone which locates itself in a grand tradition of invocatory story telling, and at the same time forges its own invented future tradition, as SF quite properly should. A narrative device as touchstone is a distinct exception – though it does invoke, with brio, a future disaster zone where the inhabitants need to suck air in order to survive.

> *"This, then, is the story of our liberation. Suck air and grab clusters! Heigh-ho, here is the tale!"*

Here is the only comic touch amongst all my touchstones, though the comedy is black indeed. Also, this is the only example which really plays games with language. Perhaps here is an exception to the rule of the displaced, portentous simplicity? Though certainly it's an instance of wondrous naivete, on the part of the narrator!

Here are two final touchstones. The first, from *A Maze of Death*, seems the quintessence of Philip Dick: false reality, plus transcendence. But it is broader.

> *"No," the figure said, "I am not the Walker-on-Earth. I am the Intercessor."*
>
> *"But we invented you!"*

Note how it parallels, obliquely, the jaunty Bester touchstone. Here a mysterious grace, rather than a welling up of paranormal talent, intervenes. But it still springs from the depths of the mind. Note how it parallels the Frank Herbert Touchstone, for that matter – with a compassionate irony rather than a cybernetic chill.

Finally, J.G. Ballard's *The Drowned World*.

> *So he left the lagoon and entered the jungle again, within a few days was completely lost, following the lagoons southward through the increasing rain and heat, attacked by alligators and giant bats, a second Adam searching for the forgotten paradises of the reborn sun.*

Why, the last two words practically give rise to a whole Gene Wolfe tetralogy! And here is verbal magic too... surely?

But actually, isn't there something of a qualitative difference between the epiphanic Joycean touchstone quoted earlier, and this example, as regards its poetry and vision? Joyce's sentence from "The Dead" is so carefully balanced that Arland Usher considers that "only for one slightly over-precious verb [it] would rank among the most magical passages in English prose."

Ballard's touchstone also is undeniably magical, compares interestingly with Joyce in motion and flow, and even counterpoints it in theme (the one in the realm of snow, the other of primeval summer). Yet, if truth be told, Ballard's is mispunctuated (in my edition, at least), contradictory (he can't be lost, if he's successfully navigating southward), and banal ("a second Adam"). And...

Well, here is *the* touchstone of New Wave SF. Indeed, indeed. And what do we find but a man in an almost alien jungle, being attacked – ye Gods – by giant bats! Oh, *Planet Stories*, play that tune again! For actually, as an SF reader should realize iconically and instinctively, we are suddenly on Venus, the Venus of *Planet Stories* with its jungles, monsters, and fierce heat – miraculously translocated to the South of England.

The more one analyses this Ballard touchstone – as one might analyse the Joyce – the weirder one feels about it, and the more dubious about the validity of the touchstone method as applied to SF.

It is no doubt naughty – but irresistible! – as this critical debate gets under way, with Matthew Arnold presiding, to recall what is undoubtedly *the* touchstone of Arnold's own poetry, a certain line from "Dover Beach".

Where ignorant armies clash by night.

February 1986

British Weather

Once, a postcard arrived from New York State from a guy in the American armed forces. I quote:

> Hey Ian! I been reading your books, man. Far out! Like, where do you get your dope, man? East Africa? The Amazon? Do you snort it, man, raw? Chapter 13, *Alien Embassy*, can only come from mainlining! I bet you do that tantric fucking too, huh man, keep it hard for hours, right? You got any kids, any whole chromosomes? Were they born with their brain sticking out of their head? You sure know your needles, man, i.e. "Thy Blood Like Milk". But I liked it!!! I like all your shit, man. Does that make me nuts too??

I certainly hope that this soldier fan of mine isn't in charge of too many nuclear weapons.

A while later I got a letter from a fan in Florida who told me that he was in telepathic communication with a sperm whale and had made love to a dolphin. He had written a thousand-page novel about his cetacean romance which he had submitted to the same American publisher who issued my own book *The Jonah Kit*; he wondered whether that publisher – who rejected *his* book – had sent me all his ideas and experiences, photocopied, to put into my own novel in a coarser, more commercial form. I wrote back assuring him that *The Jonah Kit* was originally published in England before he ever sent his masterpiece to the American publisher. He wrote back amiably, enclosing a photo of a Wilhelm Reich orgone machine which he'd helped build in order to photograph UFOs, and asking whether the whales had imparted any information telepathically to me for *The Jonah Kit*. I told him that the whales hadn't been in contact with me – *The Jonah Kit* was a work of my imagination.

Later, a guy wrote to me from Australia that he had just read *Miracle Visitors* for the fourth or fifth time while cycling through the desert on his way back from the Opal mines; he had recently been studying shamanism in the Philippines. (The fan letters I receive often come from people who could easily be characters in my own books.)

There is a fair amount about shamanism in *God's World* and in *Chekov's Journey*, and this fan wondered how much personal experience I had of shamanism at first hand, because my descriptions rang so true to

him. Actually, once again – just as I imagined the whales – so I imagined shamans.

The poet William Blake, who lived a fairly quiet life – except in his own mind, where visions rioted – once wrote that "Imagination is not Memory". And I guess that is true for me too. I hardly write any autobiographical fiction – hardly any "fiction of memory". What I write is "fiction of imagination". I empathise with whales, with aliens, with Anton Chekov, with shamans, but I don't know them. I generate them in the engine of the imagination. This can be disconcerting to readers who imagine that all fiction must be based upon experience, upon fact and memory.

Personally I prefer this kind of art rather than art which is squeezed out by torturing oneself and torturing the other people round about one by twisting one's own life, by martyring oneself in an anguished life-long quest. I do *appreciate* such work, but I think myself that that the fiction of imagination is just as true, sometimes even more so. Take the example of horror fiction. British horror author Ramsey Campbell, whose imagination plumbs ghastly abysses, is himself a sunny, jolly person. Indeed, if Ramsey Campbell experienced his own novels – lived them – he would be destroyed, or inside a mental hospital by now. The insanities of his work are the truer because he himself is sane.

In this year's April issue of *Fantasy and Science Fiction* the critic Algis Budrys turned his focus upon horror, and decided that something interesting is going on. I think he's right. At its best the horror genre is becoming a home for experimental writing. Also, the concept of Evil – that mainstay of horror books – is being employed as a vehicle, a conduit, for the irrational, for those subconscious forces which actually power the engine of the imagination. Possession by Evil is akin to possession by madness – and madness is akin to inspiration. Nowadays genius is staking out its claim within the charnel fields of horror. Might I recommend the most recent novels of Ramsey Campbell, such as *Incarnate*; the six *Books of Blood* by Clive Barker; *Vampire Junction* by Somtow, and *Voice of Our Shadow* by Jonathan Carroll?

Horror fiction at its best can also be intensely contemporary. In literary terms it's the LSD of the nineteen-eighties, where all the trips are bad trips. But it does transfigure. The best horror isn't escapism at all. A while ago I was standing in a grim little English industrial town – like something preserved from the slump of the Thirties – and I thought in despair: How can I, as a science fiction writer who dreams of the stars and exotic alien worlds, tolerate being in this dirty brick street? How can I

imagine anything here? But as soon as I changed my science fiction lenses for horror lenses, immediately everything changed.

The place suddenly glowed with potential significance – intellectual, emotional, visceral. Horror liberates my viscera.

I'm becoming interested in writing horror fiction myself, and have recently sold long horror stories to *Fantasy and Science Fiction* in America, and to *Interzone* in England. My next short story collection, due from Gollancz next Spring, uses one of these horror tales as the title story: *Evil Water*. Currently I'm working on a full-length horror novel, of a slightly unusual kind (though I don't wish to specify exactly what; a writer can lose a book by talking about it). That is the way the wind has begun to blow, inside myself.

There is a meteorology of the imagination. There are sunny days of fantasy, mad March breezes of comedy, huge wide-open skies of planetary adventure, and grim hurricanes of horror. A writer disobeys the weather forecast of his subconscious at his peril.

In the past I suppose I've been rather doctrinaire at times about science fiction – wanting to guard the purity of the central domain of science fiction against those barbarians on the borders: fantasy, and horror. But actually there is a whole spectrum of imaginative writing, a rainbow of colours including the yellow of fantasy, the deep purple or ultraviolet of horror. This rainbow arches over the flat landscape of mundane writing which grows brightest where the rainbow touches it, where non-speculative writers borrow colours from that rainbow to invigorate their work. Needless to say, that mundane landscape appears more solid and substantial, more genuine than the rainbow overhead, which seems by comparison illusory, almost a conjuring trick. A dream, compared with being awake. A dream or a nightmare. That is why, in Britain at least, the mundane literary landscape is more valued by the arbiters of culture. But I prefer the rainbow. And in that rainbow I find myself on the move these days from from colour to colour. Purple at the moment. Ultraviolet.

Personally I tend to be rational, sceptical, pragmatic, political (in the past few years I have fought two elections as Socialist candidate in the area where I live). Yet in my books often the rational, pragmatic world becomes strangely distorted, is mutated, invaded by irreality which proves stronger than the real, and supplants it. This for me, I believe, represents the welling up of the irrational, the subconscious dream-power which fuels the engine of the imagination – so that one can perceive the real world of politics and economics, of human striving and suffering, fresh perspective which allows one to see the world anew, as a child or an alien might see it.

And, seeing it anew, to try to alter it.

There's a psychological phenomenon known as habituation: you become numb to a stimulus which is repeated many times. You do not really perceive what you are very familiar with. You take the world for granted, and your life for granted. Ideally, imaginative literature, speculative writing, de-habituates us – by means of wonder, of magic, of terror. of the unreal. Ideally!

Nowadays, in genteel literary circles, we hear much about "metafiction" – fiction which is about fiction; fiction whose true subject matter is fiction itself. Indeed it is even suggested in some American universities and in some British literary magazines that the only authentic fiction remaining is metafiction, fiction which has grown self-conscious about its own construction. Other forms of fiction are obsolete: dinosaurs and dodos.

Flaubert used to dream of writing a book which would sustain itself by the power of its style alone without connection with Paris, Rouen, the bourgeoisie, the nineteenth century. In the twentieth century we are witnessing such novels – except that they sustain themselves by the power of their *structure* alone.

Yet within the broad spectrum of speculative fiction, and especially within the heartland of science fiction, there exist solutions to the literary problem of metafiction.

For speculative fiction can concern itself as subject matter with the nature of reality itself: alternative realities, alternative histories, the dilemmas in physics of quantum theory, its metaphysical implications, "many-reality" theory, alien consciousness and future types of higher consciousness, mindscapes and cyberscapes, and the integration of the human mind with machine intelligence.

Within speculative fiction reality can become very fluid, and can reconstruct itself. In a sense, science fiction is already metafiction.

I am excited, and my imagination takes fire, when I hear signs of reality melting and a new reality forming when something familiar and normal suddenly becomes upside-down or inside-out. A few months ago I was listening to a radio programme about politics in Africa, when I heard this sentence:

"Mali, which used to be close to the Soviet Union, has been moving steadily towards the West."

A statement about political alignments, of course. But what if it were literally true? The continents change position over the course of millions of years. They drift. What if individual countries could do this quite

rapidly? What if countries were all afloat? And what if they obeyed political currents? So that a right-wing victory would propel a country in actual fact in the direction of America? So that a Socialist triumph would send a country sailing towards the Soviet Union? What if Nicaragua had detached itself physically from the body of Central America, making a hole in the middle, and was drifting away across the Caribbean – while the government of Ronald Reagan was trying to harpoon Nicaragua and tow it back?

I recently read the following comparison:

> If the Universe filled a sphere, one kilometre in radius, then our Galaxy, the Milky Way, with its hundred billion stars, would be about the size and shape of an aspirin at the centre.

That's something to think about. Our whole galaxy is only a little aspirin inside a sphere two kilometres in diameter. All the volume of stars we see in the sky at night – which it would take us decades, or centuries, of travel to reach if we could approach the speed of light – are tinier than the smallest grain in that single aspirin.

But of course, if the universe wasn't as big as it is, life wouldn't have had enough time to evolve. If the universe wasn't as large as it is, there wouldn't have been reasonably placid places where a planet could give birth to life.

And possibly, just possibly, our planet is the only planet in that whole sphere of clusters of aspirins and empty void where intelligent life has evolved – life which now learns to look at the universe and try to give it meaning, even though we don't yet know what that meaning is.

Whatever I am writing, I like to remind myself of the rest of the universe from time to time. This is my equivalent of a Buddhist mantra.

For one must never forget the universe, the stars, the galaxies. These are the measure of our existence, our evolution, and our future.

Summer 1986

Breakthrough

An epiphany: a magic moment of illumination. That was James Joyce's word for it. Well, I had an epiphany just recently when I went into a sensory deprivation flotation tank. That was during a lightning trip to San Francisco, for the Sercon convention. But passenger jets don't travel like greased lightning: the Pan-Am direct flight takes 10 hours, so it was obvious that to avoid jet-lag I must put myself into a coma during the trip. Accordingly I took on board some cans of Everard's magnificent Old Original Ale. When the cocktail trolley came around I thought I'd do the decent thing and buy one beer first. Alas, they had vile Long Life, which I refuse to drink on principle. So I said, "I'll just have the glass, please." The stewardess fixed me with a beady eye and replied, "You have your own supplies, don't you? Under Pan-Am regs I'm supposed to confiscate those." However, she had a nice Irish accent, and went on: "If you're discreet... I'll look the other way." Thus I clamped the open can of Everard's between my thighs and covered it with the courtesy napkin that came with the empty glass. Alas, there was a spot of turbulence. Droplets of ale kept bouncing out of the can on to the underside of the napkin, leading soon to the impression that I had a bad case of incontinence and needed a nappy-change.

Fast forward: to the inside of the black silent coffin three-quarters full of Epsom Salts at body heat. This being my first time in a tank, I didn't get near the interesting stage of hallucinations, where the brain starts conjuring up its own input of voices and visions. But I did learn how to become extremely relaxed. You need to, if you're going to enjoy floating in a black coffin; and time speeded up. On the plane flight back I found I could go into the same mind state, and the journey zipped by in a couple of hours; so that I was amazed when Scotland appeared, below the windows.

This certainly made me think and feel anew. I'm going to be using it somewhere, somehow, somewhen. What a pity that Paddy Chayevsky got in there, with *Altered States*! Yet an epiphany often affects an artist askew, sideways of what you'd expect off at a tangent. And epiphanies may be tiny things; a glimpse of light through branches and twigs, say, suggesting the whole of fractal geometry as applied to multiple universes or to one's own existence – as something experienced personally and perceived, not just something read about as a theory. It doesn't necessarily need to be a dramatic experience – except internally. It's the discovery of the Magic as

the filters of banality slip aside for a moment. It can happen in a darkness and silence that might otherwise seem empty of anything. It can begin with blobs of ale spotting a paper napkin. And the world changes, inverts itself, melts and reforms. And time alters pace, so that one asks oneself: what is time, and why?

August 1987

The Masters of the Golden Ball

Arkadi Natanovich Strugatski was born in 1925, and his brother Boris in 1931. Arkadi, who now lives in Moscow, became a translator for the Japanese, both of technical material and of medieval prose works, while Boris (who continues to live in their native Leningrad, though he was evacuated during the Nazi siege) became a computer mathematician in the field of observational astronomy, in which he has authored scientific papers. Boris has also helped script the USSR's recent, first film about nuclear war, *Letter of a Dead Man*. Otherwise, as regards SF, for the past 30 years the two brothers have always collaborated, writing literally side by side during their frequent reunions.

Arkadi has said that Russian SF and fantasy writers trace their origin to such as Pushkin's *Queen of Spades* and Gogol's *The Nose*, rather than to the novels of Jules Verne; and there is in much of the Strugatskis' work a spirit of the satirical-fantastical as in Gogol. This may strike a strange note (or come as a breath of fresh air!) to readers in the West, especially when allied with such themes as scientific laboratories.

There is also in their work a sense of the miraculous – not in the mystical but in the imaginative and fantastic-satiric sense – which would have been appreciated by H.G. Wells, who himself wrote of "The Man Who Could Work Miracles": endowed with a super-gift, yet himself a crass mediocrity. In the Strugatskis' view, scientific and technological progress which delivers genuine miracles (as well as some dystopic anti-miracles) has numbed the sense of wonder, stripping it of glitter and sticking it in a filing cabinet (beloved of bureaucrats, a favourite target of theirs). Or else the miracle takes the form of an equation which only three people in the world can understand. Yet the mental thirst of people for miracles remains unfulfilled. Hence the contemporary fascination with pseudo-sciences such as UFO research and parapsychology.

The Strugatskis thus strive to fire the imagination with what is vivid and often inexplicable, within a humane and ironic context which has its own deep roots in Russian literature as well as in the folk-tale tradition, lifeblood of any Russian, where Baba Yaga rides in a mortar, where mermaids live in an oak tree while a cat in a golden cage tells stories, where houses stand on hens' legs.

Unlike the Gernsbackian boggling at super-machines, but more akin to H.G. Wells, they investigate – and sustain – the psychology of wonder,

within its social context. Here is the terra incognita they explore: the consequences of an invisible man, a mysterious message from a super-civilisation, or the leftover rubbish from one – the fabulous penetrating into mundane reality, forging a new alloy, of realistic fantasy, allied to rational humanism.

The Strugatskis' first "period" was utopian, with extrapolative future history and interplanetary adventure in a socialist solar system. *The Land of Purple Clouds* (1959), *Destination Amalthea* (1960), and *Space Apprentice* (1962), as well as *Noon: 22nd Century* (1962) were unusual and notable for their lifelike characters, and their vivid, varied, realistic backgrounds.

With *Far Rainbow* (1963), where a destructive Black Wave menaces a cheerful, creative society, they began moving into their second phase, producing parables of conflict. Thus in *Hard to Be a God* (1964) a disguised emissary from a classless Earth encounters military stupidity and social entropy on another planet, yet "historical textbook" solutions fail when brought to bear. The intervention of the strange in the familiar (or vice versa) is a common Strugatski theme, as increasingly was the subject of entropic, rigidified, debased power structures which they went on to tackle in folktale-like parables. Thus, in *Monday Begins on Saturday* (1965) where bureaucracy blights and charlatanises science amidst the investigation of inexplicable phenomena; in *Snail on the Slope* (1966) where a nightmare forest of weird phenomena and aberrant behaviour is juxtaposed with a Kafkaesque Directorate; in the *Tale of the Troika* (1968) where what was originally a committee for investigating plumbing has usurped total power in an imaginary country of weird phenomena and now exploits these anomalous natural events but is unable to cope with the wonders of the future represented by an alien visitor; and in *The Second Martian Invasion* (1968) where the invaders don't use heat-rays but corruption and misinformation.

Deploying black humour and spoof (not least of the debasement of language), the Strugatskis' work shows anguish about the human condition – together with the ever-present hope of the marvellous, which might revivify human dreams and produce an actual golden future if bureaucrats, exploiters, and corrupt power-mongers can be defeated.

In *Roadside Picnic* (1972), which Tarkovsky filmed as *Stalker*, this tension of dream and anguish burgeons into an actual alien artefact, a golden ball which can make dreams come true, eagerly sought for in the anomalous zone where a super-civilisation has left its picnic litter; whilst outside of the zone the manipulative bureaucrats hover.

More recent work by the brothers includes the winding-up of their "Maxim trilogy" which commenced with *Prisoners of Power* and now ends with *The Waves Calm the Wind*; and their latest novel, *Lame Destiny*, a more contemporary story with fantasy elements *à la* Bulgakov (of *The Master and Margarita*), which contains a novel within a novel, though magazine serialisation pruned much of this.

Quoted as epigraph to *Monday Begins on Saturday* is an ironic passage from Gogol: "But what is the strangest, the most incomprehensible of all, is the fact that authors can undertake such themes – I confess this is altogether beyond me, really.... No, no, I don't understand it at all." Arkadi and Boris Strugatski are authors bold enough and imaginative enough to tackle the strangest and most anomalous events and intersect these humanely, satirically, and passionately with the dark, the reactionary, the pettifogging, the corrupt; and in the dark forest or the littered wasteland of human history still to seek not simply the crystal ball of prediction but the golden ball of dreams, dreams which could with honesty and honour become future fact.

August 1987

How Not to Hide a Dinosaur

The first time I ever heard about Birmingham was when I was at school many long years ago, and the news hit the headlines that a dinosaur had been dug up there. A poem appeared in *Punch* or somewhere:

> In Brum
> Spake the drum
> Of the Triceratops....

Triceratops! The three-horned-face monster lizard! Herds used to graze Birmingham. And indeed there's still one there in effigy. Who, scrutinising the emblem in the Bull Ring, can believe that it is a mere modern male cow? Obviously it is a Triceratops – and the heart of Brum should rightly be known as The Triceratops Ring.

Brum is not a mere product of the industrial revolution, a giant junior among cities. It has a more ancient, primeval, secret history going back to the Cretaceous Era. It has its own dinosaurian elder gods, like something out of Lovecraft.

Just as Trekkie fans campaigned to have a space shuttle christened *Enterprise*, so should the SF fans of Brum be campaigning to have the Bull Ring renamed the Triceratops Ring. Just as Glasgow has Cretin Fandom, so should Brum have Cretaceous Fandom.

Organise! Campaign! Wear horns! Munch leaves! Make the sign of the three horns when you meet each other!

October 1987

A Lot of Fog

A contribution to Chris Evans's Conspiracy Theories, *a symposium on the obtrusive presence of L. Ron Hubbard's enterprises (New Era, Writers of the Future, Author Services) at Conspiracy '87, the 1987 World SF Convention held in Brighton.*

My own first contact with New Era was when I realised that I hadn't enough sponsorship money for the SFWA hospitality room which I was organising at Brighton – owing to the lunatic corkage charges and iron security fist of the hotels. So, approaching the eleventh hour, I phoned around other UK publishers whom I hadn't already solicited money from, and cried, "Help!" Robert Springall kindly carved £200 out of his own New Era budget to support the SFWA room. He didn't ask for any publicity or for any Hubbard/Writers of the Future promotional material to be on hand in the SFWA room, whatever.

Lisa Tuttle had already asked, on behalf of New Era, if I would be one of the writers who spent a couple of hours at the WOTF stand simply to advise any novice writers who came to meet a professional and ask for advice; and I'd agreed, for the offered fee.

When talking to Robert on the phone about the SFWA funding problems, he asked if I would be a tutor along with Algis Budrys for the WOTF workshop preceding the convention, held in Charles Dickens House in Doughty Street; and I accepted. At the workshop Algis emphasised that the WOTF programme was being run absolutely separate from any Scientology connexion, and that none of the participants would ever be contacted by the other side of the Hubbard organisation. As opposed to other writing workshops where all participants chip in with their penn'orth, this one was based on a structured manual abstracted from Hubbard's own essays on how to write stories (published in the 1930s in U.S. writers' magazines), plus Algis's own practical experience, and whatever I chose to in-put from my own point of view.

Regarding the Hubbard (pre-Scientology) bedrock of the workshop: based on Hubbard's experience as a pulp writer, Algis asked participants to suspend their disbelief and simply try the method out as a discipline. Go away afterwards and ignore it, if you choose, but maybe you'll have picked up something useful about how to structure stories that sell.

Nothing malign going on here. One may or may not want to utilise Hubbard's story methods on an experimental basis – as *guest* tutor I wasn't asked to push them – but I can't see the rationale of these WOTF-sponsored workshops without that basis; nor can I see the generation of Hubbard clones as the outcome. True, the person who *leads* such workshops is obliged to stick to the manual, and prove that they have stuck to the manual (by the initials of the "students" against each item in their copies), but this isn't quite the same as signing one's soul over in blood; nor is *Mission Earth* a set text.

Nothing malign about the WOTF stand at Brighton, either. The points at issue, as I see it – the suspicion of an invasion of the SF heartland by a well-heeled, sinister organisation – pivot upon three events. One is the sheer presence on the Hugo ballot of *Black Genesis*. Though this would be time-consuming (and I don't know how practical it is) I would be interested to know how many of the people who nominated the Hubbard novel in the first place are identifiable as known SF fans and/or regular convention attendees. If this is too onerous or impossible a bit of research, then: Did all those who nominated *BG* in the first place merely have supporting memberships – suggesting that the only reason for buying the membership was to nominate BG? Furthermore, how many of the people who nominated *BG* only nominated *BG* and nothing else? If we could discover this information from Paul Kincaid then we might have an indicator of whether *BG* was in fact "bought" on to the ballot. Until we know, it does remain possible that legitimate fans actually did nominate and vote for the book. Surprising, perhaps, but always possible. I think one should avoid a witch-hunt based on surmise. Conspiracy '87 should be asked to provide as detailed an analysis as possible of the nominations and final votes for *BG* along the lines I'm suggesting – not just a bald statistical analysis of the progressive arithmetic of the Australian voting procedure as published in Locus. Since a good deal of controversy has been stirred up, and since the Hugos should be "sacrosanct", I believe this should be done. Let's have some concrete factual evidence.

The next point at issue is Algis Budrys's use of his keynoting of the Hugo ceremony as a commercial for WOTF and Hubbard. This was a Bad Idea. Question: when Conspiracy accepted a lot of money from New Era to completely pay for the programme book, was there a quid pro quo that Algis Budrys, as masthead of WOTF, would keynote the ceremony? Or was he invited to do this simply because it was the first time he had been able to travel abroad, and thus as a nice gesture? – which, alas, he misused, in my view and in the view of many people present. Equally, did Algis do

so sinisterly (when he is so emphatic about keeping WOTF decoupled from the other side of Hubbard) or was he motivated by sheer gratitude to the WOTF programme which has given him a considerable role in fostering new talents such as this year's Campbell Award winner, Karen Joy Fowler, and which has also given him a lifeline to conventions, and in this case brought him abroad at long long last out of his Lithuanian confinement within the borders of the U.S.A. An emotional moment, then. Did he just goof?

I hear that Scientologists were approaching fans on the sea front, though not in the hotels, with a view to recruitment. Last time I was in Brighton, pre-WOTF and *Mission Earth*, I recall being approached by a Scientology scout in the street; no connexion, on that occasion, with SF whatever. Is there a Scientology base operating in Brighton? Did Scientologists ship themselves in specifically to target fans, or not? If the approaches that were made to fans were routine and random ones, do we blame New Era/WOTF for these? Could we expect New Era/WOTF to have told resident Scientologists to take a holiday elsewhere during the convention, if in fact New Era/WOTF are not in direct cahoots with the mainline Scientologists?

Finally there's the matter of the Hugo winners photo session at Brighton, which I hear of as being "hijacked" by New Era. I don't know the ins and outs of this at all (though I'm aware that some photographers were apparently excluded), but in this instance I'd like to know from the Conspiracy organisers why the venue was being chopped and changed at the last moment (various notes to this effect were passed to Peter Nicholls during the course of the ceremony itself) and at whose initiative? I'd be a bit wary of blaming New Era for circumstances which New Era was actually invited to set up – and then by extension crying, "This is exactly how Scientologists behave!" New Era is *likely* to use the opportunities to advertise Hubbard and WOTF, where the ghost of Hubbard acts as a patron to upcoming writers. (Though in the case of the SFWA room, New Era didn't make the slightest attempt to exploit their shared sponsorship, like some invasive virus.) And New Era has ample money, from we-know-where, though apparently with binding guidelines not to let Scientology and SF interpenetrate. But what would we expect New Era to do, other than to promote Hubbard as author and Hubbard as patron of talent. Keep quiet about him? Murmur embarrassedly, "Here's a few thousand quid, but let's not mention Hubbard, hmm?" And are we to regard New Era's money as being "laundered", as I've heard said? As well as being a Scientologist, Hubbard *was* an actual SF writer, and eleven giant novels

(whatever we think of their quality) say that he *still was*. Rather an energetic laundry exercise, this. We surely know the saying about something making a good servant but a bad master. So, as regards the whole photo session, how much rope was New Era given, and by whom? Before hanging them, let's know all the actual facts from the Conspiracy committee. Meanwhile there's a lot of fog about.

November 1987

Dancing on a Tightrope

I was born in 1943 and brought up in the North of England, a rather depressing area. Common conversational gambits would include: “My, it’s treacherous today,” “Ee, you’re looking sick,” and “Don’t fly too high!” I clearly remember the newsagent’s shop where I bought my first pulp sf novel (which was *Antro the Life-Giver* by the immortal “Jon J. Deegan”). In the window a little yellow plastic ostrich bobbed its head in and out of a glass of water all day long; and it says something about the general emptiness of the Tyneside of my childhood, and of the early 1950s for that matter, that this toy ostrich was a thing of wonder, a star attraction. Since there was little else of wonder or amazement in the vicinity, I cast up my gaze to the actual stars instead, and fantasised. Presently I moved on from the immortal Jon Deegan to even more immortal (or at least subsequently reprinted) things, namely *the classics* – though little did I know then that those were classics (I thought Vergil’s *Aeneid* was) nor that I was in fact living through a Golden Age. I discovered “mature” sf books with hard backs on them, and it was obvious to me at once, finding these in the local library shelved amidst the works of Graham Greene and D.H. Lawrence, that compared with Greene or Lawrence writers with names like A.E. van Vogt or Isaac Asimov or editors called Groff Conklin were far from ordinary. Obviously they must possess alien wisdom. Yet I knew in my heart that what I must aspire to was the Greene and Lawrence sort of thing. Real literature. Mind you, *Zola* was a fairly weird name too; and I devoured the Rougon-Macquart novels. Perhaps I vaguely sensed that these were science fiction in disguise: fiction designed to explicate a genetic, social-science theory as colourfully and even luridly as possible.

Incidentally, for some reason I only ever laid out my pocket money on one sf magazine, a copy of *Astounding Science Fiction* which deeply puzzled me with a story set in hyperspace where a character stepped outside of the ship and perceived “an infinite plane”. Oblivious at the time to the geometrical meaning of this, I imagined a space-vehicle distorted by hyperspace so that *very long wings* stretched out on either side, a momentous concept. Quite a few of my own subsequent stories have been inspired by wilfully misinterpreting some common or garden phrase, so as to turn the world upside-down and inside-out. Indeed this was a procedure used by the surrealist Raymond Roussel in concocting his stories. Roussel was to prove a great influence on my first sf novel, *The Embedding*,

leading – in part – to it becoming prize-winner in France. Thus the strands of life unwind strangely.

I escaped Tyneside quite early, for the gilded pleasaunce of Oxford, on a scholarship to read English. (I was quite bright and hard-working at school, and had left by the time I was sixteen because there was nothing more to do. In between school and university I worked for a few ghastly weeks in the accounts office of a dockside shipping company, only kept sane by reading *Gormenghast*, then quit and hitch-hiked from Rotterdam to Vienna.) Oxford with its meadows, rivers, gardens, bookshops, seemed like Paradise; though it was also a trap, of indulgent pretension and aesthetic frivolity, where I happily indulged myself, and pretended... yet while with my right hand I turned the pages of decadent poets, with my left hand I still clutched *The Voyage of the Space Beagle* schizophrenically.

I was married in my second year at Oxford. Judy also came from Tyneside. A painter, whom I'd met while we were both working as Christmas temporaries in a post office, she had escaped the Northern wilderness too, in favour of St Martin's School of Art in London. My college was quite abusive about our getting married, on academic grounds; but "Sod you," said I, and went ahead and got a 1st class Honours degree. This meant that I could automatically collar a grant to do research, thus I launched into a Bachelor of Letters thesis (for the Oxford equivalent of a Master's degree) on the monumentally marginal topic of "Walter Pater related to some Nineteenth Century French writers: Stendhal, Mérimée, Gautier, Flaubert, and Baudelaire". Still, this did give me the opportunity to read a lot of French literature in the original, something which stood me in good stead, quite unexpectedly, when I started being invited to French-speaking sf conventions later on.

While at Oxford I wrote a couple of bejewelled novellas and a pair of contemporary novels, one of them about pregnancy – bits of which resurfaced in a very different setting in *Alien Embassy*. However, I didn't really have a reason for writing, aside from a consuming urge to be a writer. Oscar Wilde's aunt once asked him, while he was at Oxford, "What will you be when you grow up, Oscar?" To which he replied, "A writer." "And what will you write about?" asked the aunt. "My dear aunt," said Oscar, "one doesn't write about things. One just writes." That was really me at Oxford.

I finished the thesis in 1965, and after precisely one job interview we took off with gay abandon and little money on an open-ended trip round Europe. I was vaguely dreaming of sitting writing in Tyrolean meadows,

like D.H. Lawrence. Broke in Ravenna some while later, I remembered that interview, phoned and discovered that I'd become a lecturer in Literature in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania. So off we went to Africa.

On the one hand this was a politically enlightening experience in a developing socialist country in the third world, amidst an "alien" ethnic culture – and with a war of liberation going on in neighbouring Mozambique. It was an adventure, too, amongst elephants, lions, fossil sites, coral reefs. On the other hand the university was the ivory towers of Oxford transplanted into the tropics, so that we spent most evenings playing darts with car mechanics in town to escape the niceties of dinner parties and soirées; and East Africa was something of a cultural desert – voices were even raised in protest about *West* African cultural imperialism. As a junior lecturer I was rather poor (not of course compared to the Tanzanians), but Judy had a job as a commercial artist in town and won 50 gallons of petrol in an Esso painting competition, thus funding us to explore the Ngorongoro Crater and Olduvai.

We left Tanzania after two years and I applied for a job in the Cameroons, was interviewed, informed that they really wanted someone with brain damage for that post, and was offered a lectureship in Tokyo instead.

We stayed three vivid and mind-blowing years in Japan, where science fiction was daily reality; and I began writing something real at last. Tokyo seemed the disaster area that sf warns about: a world of overpopulation, pollution, seismic shock, as well as being vibrant with the electronic high jinks of the 21st century. Japan was a thrilling mating of traditional culture, consumerist images and brand-names, the cybernetic cool of Buddhism, the Coney Island of Shintoism. I started writing sf as a psychological survival strategy to cope with future shock. Indeed, I hear tell (though not very loudly) that cyberpunk might stem from an article about Japan which I wrote for *New Worlds* in 1970...

I also had my first short book published in Japan: *Japan: A Cat's Eye View*, a simple English reader with reams of notes by a Japanese professor, that was a lot of fun to write. This was a kind of contemporary version of Natsume Soseki's Meiji-era classic, *I Am a Cat*, and it sold steadily for years. We had flown our monstrous, long-haired tabby cat out with us to Japan, and brought him back when we returned in 1970; alas he died a year later of an iliac thrombosis.

We departed Japan for Hamburg on a non-stop German cargo boat, a voyage of surreal purgatory which no one ever believes in the telling (but which features in my story "The Flesh of Her Hair"), and for the next ten

years we lived in Oxford, where our red-haired daughter was born. Meanwhile I commuted the sixty miles to Birmingham a few days a week to teach futures studies and science fiction to art students, writing novels in wild longhand on the early morning train. I'm not sure whether I was teaching the first full-time sf course in higher education in Britain, but it was surely one of the earliest; and for me it was highly educative as regards social anthropology, psychology, semiotics and such, due to the small band of friendly colleagues I worked with there. (Oxford had taught me nothing of the science of linguistics, only how to translate Middle English texts about nuns' underwear.) Likewise illuminating were my encounters with LSD, which showed me a lot about the structure of my perception.

Directly after returning from Japan, and while Judy was contributing comix strips to the remains of the underground press, such as *Oz*, I wrote one novel of radical, satiric, deconstructive pornography, *The Woman Factory*, partly stimulated by the innovating Essex House novels, most of which I had picked up in a toy shop in Tokyo called Kiddieland. (While mothers and kids from the U.S. bases were occupied with the toys upstairs, the Dads headed down to the basement to the pornography racks.) The history of this manuscript, which only ever appeared in French, is wildly chequered. Next, I wrote what was to be my first published novel. *The Embedding* appeared in 1973 (as did daughter Jessica) and took off in a way which I didn't realise at the time was a little out of the ordinary, placing as runner-up in the John W. Campbell Memorial Award and winning the French Prix Apollo. Its use of "soft sciences" (linguistics, anthropology) was perhaps timely. The next novel, *The Jonah Kit*, won a couple of awards too, and in 1976 I resigned from the School of History of Art to write full-time, to cries of "You'll starve!" – though alas my former colleagues were soon having their own problems due to the advent of Thatcherism and the academic night of the long knives.

The fool's paradise of a cheaply rented house in central Oxford fell apart by the end of the Seventies (as it did for Oxford professors too). Rocketing property prices crazed our college landlords with greed, and exploiters moved in, ruining a once valid neighbourhood. We ended up by protesting actively and were both arrested for criminal damage. I defended us in court successfully; we were even congratulated, on the quiet, by the Police Prosecuting Officer for the presentation of the case and for having committed criminal damage in this particular circumstance. My legal training amounted roughly to sitting in on the previous case to observe how matters were handled, then acting out the right role. It's a life of

fiction... And after lecturing to 250 Japanese students through a loud-speaker, and negotiating with revolutionary Zengakuren leaders so that I could teach the first half of a class if they could teach the second half, a British courtroom seemed sedate.

À propos the student revolution in Japan (to protest the renewal of the U.S.-Japan security treaty) who knows but I might have become an espionage author? The British Embassy in Tokyo made a vague attempt to recruit me to find out whether the radicals intended to attack the Embassy compound. My would-be spymaster, an upper class twit of the year, was being expensively coached in Japanese by a private tutor, so I asked why he didn't visit some campuses to find out for himself, only to receive the protest, "Oh that's much too dangerous!"

Oxford had become poison, and the Japanese had just bought rights to several books, so we were able to buy out – into the little Northamptonshire village of Moreton Pinkney. Shortly after, we joined the Labour Party, and before long I was fighting an election as Labour Party candidate in the area. Here, another possible alternative world branches off, for in this very blue neck of the woods with not many socialists on the ground it is loosely possible that a few years later I might have become a parliamentary candidate, and after losing locally, have moved on a few years later to a winnable seat.

Village life became very involving, with myself as seemingly permanent secretary of the village hall – helping organise fêtes and quizzes and barn suppers – and we also got ourselves deep into gardening, winning the silver challenge cup three years running in the horticultural show for best front flower garden.

Village life! Garden shows! It sounds like a plateau of stability, up out of the floodwater. But I don't believe it. Every time a jet fighter screams overhead practicing low level attacks in this empty quarter, every time a nuclear-capable F-111 drifts by, I fail to believe it. Once out in the countryside you begin to notice elements of the war machine hiding behind every other herd of cows – with an unbelievable 140-plus American facilities crammed into this little island smaller than most U.S. states, never mind the British facilities. At present we're all under sentence of death, not just personal death but collective species death. This I object to. If a meteorite strike does us in, so be it. But for us to do this to ourselves on our garden planet, which may *possibly* be the only abode of conscious life in the universe, would be madness, folly, and evil.

Hence we became active too in the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, leading to such events as entering the local communications

base (where Big Ear awaits the word from Mystic Rose, alias the man in the White House) to hold a strawberry picnic beneath the technological totem poles of the third world war. Such episodes led to my first horror novel, *The Power*, about evil, nuclear war, bases, and the peace people.

What is my own work? It's many things by now. It's metaphysical sf about the possibilities of higher consciousness. It's adventure. It's fantasy. It's comedy and satire. It's horror. The strands weave and unweave.

Being a freelance writer rather resembles walking a tightrope – without visible end – stretched over a dark abyss. Sometimes you're up on the rope; sometimes you're hanging on by your fingernails. But while you're up, you got to dance on that rope. You got to dance.

What next? I don't know. So I dance along the rope into the darkness, to find out. One day the darkness will grab me, but I hope that along the way I shall have lit up a few things, for myself and for other people in the world.

December 1989

The Bishop File

I know Mike Bishop rather well. Though, on the other hand, I don't know him at all...

I'm looking at a file of letters from Mike to me. It's two inches high and stretches back to early 1975 – goodness, that's over fifteen years ago. (This sounds rather like Wordsworth struggling to express his amazed sentiments at encountering a pond. "I measured it from side to side. 'Twas six feet long and three feet wide." Or whatever the exact dimensions.) The file doesn't contain any carbons of letters from me to Mike because I don't keep carbons. In fact I don't keep very much at all. My work room somewhat resembles the cockpit of an F-111 – small and crowded and held together with rubber bands as it were. But I've kept every letter that Mike ever sent me – recognising from the outset that there was something special about those letters, and something special about Mike too.

Those letters – all scrupulous in their syntax (unlike my own letters), all crafted with that blend of conscious diction and quirky colloquialism which characterises Mike's stories and novels – are a record – ahem – of writerly striving for the sublime, of *human* striving, of activity for his community (I'm a sucker for that sort of unpaid carry-on too), of helpfulness, courtesy, humour, wit, persistence, and courage. Browsing through the Bishop file, I realise that I'm in danger of being caught like Br'er Rabbit by the Tarbaby, and will never complete this present little piece about Mike at all unless I wrench myself free. The browsing's just too interesting.

I mention Mike's courage because, to the outsider, it might look as though he has progressively marched upward – book upon book, via the occasional Nebula award – towards eminence as a major established author who can feel (justifiably) secure in his position and his future. However, it hasn't actually been that way. Frequently it has been for Mike (as for me) quite a struggle for survival. But all the while he has continued to envision, to kindle in the imagination, and then to craft work of the highest possible excellence.

Yes, he's been true – and remains true – to his own vision.

Cares take their toll on a person – those grinding mundane economic cares – but they have never taken their toll of the artistic care that Mike lavishes on any project.

I've been lucky enough to join in on two projects with Mike – the

anthology *Changes*, and a transatlantic novel collaboration, *Under Heaven's Bridge*. I remain amazed and delighted at how smoothly, fertilely, and semi-telepathically Mike could synch with a writer living in another country entirely. All done by letter, without us even speaking to each other once on the phone, let alone squirting stuff at each other in computerised modem intercourse. A bit of a miracle, really.

A writerly miracle, and a miracle of human relations.

Mike can work such miracles.

And we've still never met, and only spoken once on the phone (about some urgent Nebula anthology business). What he wrote me back in 1975 remains true. "...photographs can't be trusted, and I'd probably walk right by you if you showed up in the Pine Mountain post office."

How peculiar in our interconnected, travel-shrunk world. So really I don't know Mike at all. Though at the same time, through his letters, I seem to know him intimately as one of my best friends and closest colleagues.

Maybe it's a dumb idea for us to ever meet now... Yet I envy your chance to meet Mike here in Philadelphia.

And the books? And the stories? You already know those, don't you? What wonderful, compelling titles Mike's stories have! From "Death and Designation Among the Asadi" to "The Gospel According to Gamaliel Crucis (or The Astrogator's Testimony)" to "Apartheid, Superstrings, and Moredecai Thubana". I *envy* Mike his titles, so redolent of strangeness, poetry, and, yes, wisdom. And I envy him the contents of those stories, and the stylish yet colloquial narrative art they display, and the quirky, believable, passionate, characters. His novels – likewise unique, beautiful, strange, and compellingly human – have addressed alien societies, human societies of the near and further future which suffer from peculiar belief structures (yet strive for joy and fulfilment), our own prehuman past, prehumans in the present day, and the scourge of AIDS, the last intercut with ailing unicorns from a parallel Earth which might equally be a metaphysical dimension, though perceptible on a miraculous television set, a uniquely Bishopesque, a uniquely episcopal, conjunction. Who else, in another story, would have sent gypsy caravans though a doorway of the imagination to cross the dust seas of the Moon?

And of course, as a Bishop, Mike has many times set off with his metaphysical, his science-fictional, his fantastic harpoon in quest of the Great White Whale of God, whatever a God might be – and in one story the Godhead is an alien preying mantis.

Which are my favourite books of his? This morning I think the

answer is *Transfigurations* – that splendid extension of an already splendid story about enigmatic aliens who communicate by colour-coded eye-flashes; an extension which resolves the enigma without in the least diminishing the sense of mystery, an achievement which is real art. Oh yes, and also *Who Made Stevie Crye*, a contemporary horror novel unlike any other, a trickster kaleidoscope that is at once parody, meta-horror, and a deeply compassionate, witty tale full of serous playfulness and love. But those are only my favourites this morning.

Mike's alien Cygnostikoi in *A Little Knowledge* also have fascinating eyes: hourglass eyes that perceive at once the mundane world, and the supernatural, the numinous domain. While the eyes of other aliens are jewels, organic crystals. But of course. For Mike is a writer of vision.

As well as being a writer whose *love* for the characters he has created shines out brightly.

But you already know all those wonderful characters – who invariably have wonderful names to match. You already know all those books and stories.

If not, or if you have missed out on one or two... what convention is without a bookroom?

Put down this program book and *buy now*. Unlike a lot of authors, Mike writes a neat signature.

I know. It figures hundreds of times in my own unique epistolary text by Mike: the Bishop File.

November 1990

Roots of a Writer

Once, it was all one – for me at least.

Fantasy, horror, and science fiction.

Rather like in the early universe, come to think of it, before the strong force and the weak force split apart, before gravity and electromagnetism ruptured asunder, generating a universe responsive to several seemingly distinct forces.

That was back in the Nineteen Fifties.

And my cosmos only really re-united itself – reintegrated itself psychologically – in the late Nineteen Eighties when I wrote my science fantasy horror novel, *The Fire Worm*, so as to exorcise the landscape of my upbringing, on Tyneside back at the end of that age of post-war austerity. I'm writing now about the "roots of a writer", and I did think of *The Fire Worm*, when I was composing that book, as my own version of *Roots*.

Let me explain. It has to do with ostriches. We have just had our house refloored, by Britain's first ostrich farmer. He is also a builder and farmer who has already begun to fill one Northamptonshire meadow with the Big Birds. The money for reflooring pays for flying in (in crates, I suppose I ought to add) four more married ostriches from Bophuthatswana.... But this is definitely another story.

Anyway, when I was little, life on Tynemouth seemed fairly bleak, to such an extent that I still remember a dusty shop window which contained little else than a miniature plastic ostrich, which spent all day long dipping its head into a glass of water and raising its head again. And dipping. Ad infinitum. (We'll come to infinitum in a minute.)

That ostrich seemed a spectacle of wonder. I also stared at moss on garden walls, imagining viridian jungles.

Oh, and I gazed at the sea breaking on the rocks (underneath Jingling Geordie's Hole at Tynemouth Castle) and thought Big Diffuse Thoughts – fixing the moment in memory as a talisman, and indulging in the Pathetic Fallacy of suffusing my psyche into nature. But that didn't lead anywhere much.

Influences...

Dan Dare in the *Eagle* comic was epochal – and soon he was on Radio Luxembourg too. Now I could gaze up at the stars as an escape route. The first issue of the *Eagle*, with Dan Dare en route to Venus to

confront the Mekon, appeared on 14th April 1950 – and even though I immediately ordered the comic at our local newsagent, it was quite a few frustrating weeks, I recall, before the print run overtook the huge demand and I could actually collect my own copy. At first, there was rationing of *Eagle*s – just as there was still wartime rationing of confectionery. The landscapes of alien planets and portrayals of alien habitats in that comic always fascinated me rather more than the Mekon himself, who seemed just a little absurd; so my favourite early story was the "Red Moon Mystery", wherein the big-brained green generalissimo played no role.

It Came from Outer Space, watched through red and green 3-D disposable glasses of plastic and cardboard, in one of those beautiful cinemas of yore designed like Egyptian temples crossed with ballrooms, with multi-coloured lights dappling the oh-so-pleated curtains, vast bowls of gladioli, and *Charmaine* oozing from the speakers. And what came from outer space? A monster. A monster with an aura of *superior alien mind* about it.

A Voyage to Arcturus, hauntingly dramatised for three hours one Sunday afternoon in 1956 by the BBC Third Programme, imprinting its gnomic utterances forever upon my mind. "Crystalman is but a shadow on the face of Muspel..." What did it all mean? I would find out. The book (in a war economy edition from some publisher called Gollancz, reprinting the original 1920 edition) was actually in our local North Shields library. Metaphysical SF; though the author, David Lindsay, would hardly have described it as such.

Journey into Space... Oh yes. SF – and scary too.

Monstrous minds on the Moon, and Mars. Recently I reviewed the reissue on cassette tape for the BBC Kaleidoscope programme, and the whole thing still worked evocatively well.

Once a week I would call in at my Grandmother's bungalow for tea on the way back from school. She had been blinded in one eye, long since, by a hook while gutting herring on the North Shields fish quay. She had an ancient wind-up phonograph on which I played 78s of the *William Tell Overture*, *Hearts and Flowers*, and *In a Monastery Garden*, while poring over the serialised adventures of the Golden Amazon and her henchmen from Jupiter in newspapers mailed by Canadian relatives. The comic page also featured Mandrake the Magician, and I can still visualize one strip where vast, barbaric giants stomped into a city of high-tech little people, who recessed all the buildings down flat so that the giants had nothing to get their fingers on. Except that... "the power has failed in Sector Seven!"

This led to the pursuit, of other American comics, of the *Ghoulish*

Tales variety.

And to a purchase of *Astounding Science Fiction*, in which I was boggled to read a story set on a ship adrift in mind-warping hyperspace. Right now, I have no idea who wrote this story or what it was called; though I was recently Guest of Honour at a SF convention in Philadelphia and happened to mention this tale to George Zebrowski, who is fairly sure which issue of *ASF* I'm referring to and is going to send me a copy. (Will the mysterious tale survive the raw light of 1992?) At any rate, at one point in the story the hero climbed through the airlock and perceived "an infinite plane". Oblivious to the geometrical meaning of plane, I visualised him as standing on the hull, seeing the wings of his space-plane stretching infinitely in both directions. (Come to think of it, a lot of my stories have been inspired by taking things utterly literally or wilfully misunderstanding something. Credulity is a great Geordie characteristic, along with withering scepticism, and I've written quite a few sceptically credulous tales.)

Actually, the same copy of *ASF* with the infinite plane in it also featured Kornbluth's linguistics story "That Share of Glory", which made quite an impression on me at the time... and my first SF novel, *The Embedding*, was to be about linguistics.

Infinite planes... giants stomping on Lilliputian cities... ghouls... the ravening aliens from a dimensional gateway beyond the blue planet of Van Maanen's Star trudging so slowly and with such deadly purpose towards us... a tentacled alien beastie rampaging around Antarctica... It was once all one, before the governing forces split apart.

I subscribed to *Wide World Magazine* – ah, its Amazonian green hells, and shark-infested waters! – and decided to become a cactus collector in the Arizona desert. The cacti I grew would mostly never bloody well flower (with the exception of the peyotl one), so I abandoned that notion, though not before selling several articles to *Amateur Gardening* and *Popular Gardening* at age 14.

I decided to become a chemist, but swallowed lots of methylated spirits during the "O" Level practical while misperforming a titration experiment, thus (hic) I opted for English Literature instead – which, coupled with being at Oxford, inaugurated a certain reign of cultural snobbery, though I still clutched Van Vogt schizophrenically behind my back.

Several splits occurred: between fantastic literature and real literature. Also, between SF and fantasy/horror.

The lost scientist in me – and lost spaceman, and lost Indiana Jones of

the cactus world – continued secretly to devour Asimov and Van Vogt (who were obviously, from their names, possessors of alien wisdom), but I never read a word of Tolkien, apart from his *Beowulf* lecture.

I made an exception for Mervyn Peake, who kept me sane just after leaving school when I worked for four stultifying weeks as an accounts clerk in a shipping office, until I decided that it was preferable to hitchhike through Europe.

But Lovecraft, ghosts, hobbits... no, no, no. I wanted my aliens and superior alien minds kosher, and located in the "real" universe, not allied to a *Necronomicon* or rune-song. (The "real" universe being that plausible metaphorical construct underpinned by science, as we understand science presently.)

Well, I decided to be a writer, but I didn't have anything much to write about (beyond indulging in jewelled Flaubertian artistry) until I went to work as a lecturer in literature in Tokyo. Future Shock impacted upon me in the 21st century Japanese city. Here was all the effervescent techno-whiz of the future – and also all the "disaster area" elements that SF warns about: the overpopulated megalopolis, superpollution, new environmental diseases, proto-robots, the sickly cherry blossom nourished by a nutrient drip. What did Jane Austen have to do with such a locale? My first published SF stories – a direct reaction to the experience of living in Tokyo – appeared in 1969 and 1970 in *New Worlds* magazine during its last months as a regular A4 publication. By the end of 1970 I had returned to Britain.

Writing SF became a psychological survival strategy to cope with the environment; and my first published novel, *The Embedding*, published by Gollancz three years later, was SF. Hard SF. Though concerned with the "soft" sciences of linguistics, social anthropology, and semiotics – which I picked up while working subsequently as a born-again lecturer in Futurology and SF in Birmingham Art and Design Centre.

Early efforts to find my own writing "voice" were decadent, fantastical (though in contemporary vein), and experimental too. When at Oxford I wrote three contemporary fantasies, and while in Africa I wrote a *nouveau roman* quasi-detective story influenced by Robbe-Grillet – the only remaining trace of which is in a short story called "The Flags of Africa". Structurally, the tripartite plot-lines of my first three published SF novels owe a good deal to Graham Greene, I'd say.

In *The Embedding* a British research group are trying to teach groups of children, reared in isolation and doped with tailored drugs, to speak artificially designed languages so as to test the relationships between

language logic, brain programming, and ultimate reality. A French anthropologist working in Brazil discovers a tribe who use a hallucinogen to articulate a highly complex, "self-embedded" sacred language. Aliens arrive who are shopping around the galaxy for living brains programmed with language, so as to construct a kind of panlingual biocomputer which might probe the ultimate nature of reality.

The influences on this book (which weren't your usual sort of SF influences at the time) were the structural anthropology of Claude Lévi-Strauss, the "universal grammar" theories of Noam Chomsky, and a certain embedded poem, *New Impressions of Africa*, by the French surrealist Raymond Roussel. The novel promptly won the French Prix Apollo (in translation) and second prize in the John W. Campbell Memorial Award in the United States. Which somewhat launched me. It wasn't particularly a best-seller in the instant megabucks sense, but perhaps one can call it a slow best-seller, since it has had oodles of later editions in various languages.

Thereafter I wrote quite a number of SF novels, mainly exploring the relationships between consciousness and reality, between the cosmos and our perception of it. *The Jonah Kit* was about the intelligence of whales (perceived from inside the whales) and about cosmology. *The Martian Inca* was about a Martian organism which potentiates the human brain, a flawed way-stage towards superhumanity. *Alien Embassy* was about a global conspiracy to evolve transhumans in a seemingly benign "green" post-industrial world.

These early novels were all rather serious and sometimes pessimistic affairs – quoth the critics, at least, who perceived a new lightness of touch entering my working around about *Chekhov's Journey*, my novel intersecting the Russian playwright with the Tunguska explosion... leading to *The Book of the River* trilogy, a feminist Utopia (yes!). In *Converts* I adapted a slapstick comedy approach to the theme of superhumanity.

Which of my quintessentially SF novels would I recommend to readers (before they try all of the others)? Maybe *Miracle Visitors* (recently reissued by Gollancz in paperback), the only science-of-consciousness approach to the flying saucer and abductee phenomenon. The only novel which contains a testable scientific methodology for exploring this can of worms. Though on the other hand *The Embedding* (also recently re-released by Gollancz) is quintessential me, and being concerned with structural anthropology, also to a certain extent reflects the way in which I continue to structure fiction, the underlying patterns of idea, character and setting. Structural anthropology relates kinship patterns

to mythological patterns to codes of garment and cuisine, all as quasi-linguistic expression of the meaning of life for a tribe; and I tend to think in similar structural terms, so that a piece of fiction contains a subtext of significance as well as the adventurous surface events. Actually, we're told that all fiction contains a subtext, of which the author is often unaware – an inner meaning hidden, as it were, behind an event horizon. I like to write fiction which knows itself.

What really started me in on a bout of horror/fantasy was the experience of moving out of the town into the blissful pastoral countryside – where, behind every other herd of cows, so it seemed, well out of sight of city dwellers, lurked some piece of paraphernalia for nuclear war. This, coupled with the rural scene in general (animal Auschwitzes, pub talk about BMWs and lotsa money, old lingering legends, fox hunts, the Tory mind-hordes, and having to be Secretary of the local village hall) led to a swathe of rural horror yarns, and to my two "political" horror novels, *The Power* and *Meat* – which I now see as a preparation for the exorcism novel *The Fire Worm,* which did at last deal with my roots way back, and which also bonded horror together with SF, of a medieval alchemical stripe... set on "the frontier where science fuses with horror", as I myself wrote on the Gollancz dust jacket blurb. (I suppose at this point I should boringly enter the disclaimer that I didn't actually go in for buggery when young...)

And after this tryst with horror – spurred just somewhat by remarks that I had given up SF in favour of horror, though motivated rather more in the strategies of the imagination by what James Joyce referred to in *Finnegans Wake* as the "commodius vicus of recirculation" I wrote a fairly throughgoing science fiction novel, *The Flies of Memory*. About aliens. About Mars. About the Renaissance Art of Memory. In a recent interview in *Interzone* Paul McAuley welcomes me back into the science-fictional fold....

And yes, I suppose that *The Flies of Memory* marks a return to my original writing roots. Though I refuse to predict what I will write next.... But I had certainly better write a clutch of fantasy/horror stories, because *Weird Tales* want to devote a special issue to me in a couple of years or so.

I suppose I'm at a sort of career crossroads at the moment, so it isn't a bad time to look back at my roots – and the compost they grew in. I definitely tended to regard my early SF novels – the first five or six of them – as a kind of research programme, in narrative form, into... the meaning of the universe. Into the relationship between consciousness and reality. If Hugo Gernsback was keen to encourage readers to wire up radio sets, I wanted to suggest to readers what it was like to rewire minds.

Most recently of all, I spent months on end working with Stanley Kubrick as a soothsayer and dream interpreter. And you'll have noted that I did some novels for Games Workshop, to the surprise of some people. Not only that, but I put my own name on them. I enjoyed the hell out of writing these grotesque, Gothic, crackpot, bizarre volumes (which I would have loved to read when I was fourteen). An act of treason towards literature? Well, I really cannot abide pompous snobbery – and there's a fair bit of this about, with so many genre authors aspiring to win respect as authors of proper literature pure and simple. Once upon a time, aesthetic snobbery almost scuppered my own career before it even got started.

Anyway, who first devised the rules of wargaming, from which *Warhammer* and its kin derive? One of my favourite reviews, highly suitable for quoting on book covers, from the *Times Literary Supplement*, says this on me: "A phenomenon, a national resource to be conserved, Ian Watson resembles H.G. Wells in invention and impatience." And the *Daily Mail* waded in with "the most exciting science-fiction writer since H.G. Wells". Who else but H.G. Wells himself, in his gaming manual *Little Wars*, published in 1913, forged the exact template for Warhammer-gaming with Citadel Miniatures? With the moral being that once you have experienced the chaos of little wars, you'd be a fool ever to go in for Big War in reality... So actually H.G. Wells was a presiding angel peering over my shoulder when I wrote *Warhammer 40,000: Inquisitor*.

My roots, I guess, were mostly vulgar. Those real roots. The roots that let my imagination really flourish. *Dan Dare*. *Journey into Space*. *Astounding*. *Antro the Life Giver*, by Jon J. Deegan (Who?). So let's hear it for the vulgar roots – which are still down there at the base of the tree of books, from which the metaphysical foliage deploys. Actually, some people regarded my excursion into horror fiction as a vulgarity, too... For snobbery nests within snobbery.

Oh, it is so nice to be respectable. So therefore it is a good to remember one's roots, which are often fairly vulgar. Forget those, elegantly, and perhaps one loses touch with oneself.

Meanwhile, here I am at a crossroads, looking in at least six directions; wondering.

Perhaps I can reunite the terrain – and create a grand unified narrative of everything.

After all, nothing is ever lost.

August 1992

Read This: *The Conscious Ear*

A treasure of maverick scientific autobiography published in 1991 by Station Hill Press is *The Conscious Ear* by Alfred A. Tomatis (originally *L'Oreille et la Vie*, Editions Robert Laffont, 1977).

Tomatis's quest of scientific discovery was bizarre indeed. When Alfred was an infant, his father regularly hung him outside on the washing line so that Dad could practice singing in peace. Dad then dispatched Alfred to Paris at the age of eleven to live home-alone, and be taught by Jean-Paul Sartre. It was all in one ear and out the other – and just as well, too, since Sartre's guru charisma drove many of Alfred's fellow classmates to drugs and suicide.

A pair of anaesthetists swindled Alfred out of his patents in an episode straight out of Kafka. Having married, Alfred sent his young daughter away to live with her grandparents so that he and his wife could focus fully on holistic family therapy using the Electronic Ear he had invented, for the benefit of children everywhere. (The daughter broke off all family ties at the age of 18.)

But hark, what is this Electronic Ear?

You must realize that the ear is the earliest functional bodily organ and actually the most important. What the foetus hears in the womb determines its destiny. Contrary to previous opinion, the ear isn't a differentiated bit of skin. Our whole skin is a differentiated offshoot of the ear. Nor do the bones of the ear transmit sound – they cause the entire cranium to resonate. This was proved by friends of Caruso, who tapped him upon the skull.

What's more, a major purpose of the ear isn't just to aid balance but to charge the brain with energy. High-frequency sounds act on the Corti cells of the inner ear to increase the brain's electrical potential.

In life, we must lead with our right ear if we hope to function successfully. Orators are advised to speak to the sensitized patch of skin between their right thumb and forefinger so as to be persuasive. The reason why champion cyclists have such hollow voices is that they are addressing their legs.

Left-handed people can be retrained by the Tomatis method. The Electronic Ear, pioneered by our hero, filters out adverse frequencies and imposes beneficial ones through headphones. For it is the ear which governs the voice. The larynx can only emit the harmonics which the ear

can hear. You can only say, or sing, what you can hear. Such is the primacy of the ear that it's perfectly fair to say that a visual artist paints with his ear. When a painter loses his richness of palette in the blue and green range, that's because he's becoming deaf to higher frequency sounds. (Maybe Van Gogh encountered this problem?)

French citizens find it much easier to learn English from Americans than from Britons because each nation has a characteristic frequency range. The selectivity range of French is from 1000 to 2000 Hertz, of North American English from 800 to 3000 Hertz, but of British English from 2000 to a hefty 12000 Hertz. So it's hard for the French to hear the British unless the Electronic Ear is employed. This explains a lot about centuries of misunderstanding between the cross-channel neighbours, and is due to the atmospheric environment which varies from country to country, and of course within countries too. Meteorological impedance is the reason why identical cicadas sound more nasal the nearer you get to Marseilles.

Woe betide well-meaning French parents raising a school-age child in Britain and speaking English to it at home to be helpful. They will still be employing the frequency range of their native tongue, and their offspring will end up stuttering.

As acceptance of Tomatis grew, colleagues from abroad camouflaged themselves in cloaks the same colour as the walls of his clinic so that vindictive French physicians would not notice their visits to him.

Tomatis tackled galloping obesity by a regimen of one week without food alternating with one week without drink, then by more rigorous fasting until he could only console his disgruntled tailor by ordering a whole range of suit sizes, to cope with accordion-like expansions and contractions.

Alas, all those accusations of charlatanry – and all the false friends who schemed against Alfred! However, the love of a good woman, his Renaissance-man range and sense of mission, a near-death encounter due to exhaustion, and finally God saw him through – till today there are certified listening centres all over the world employing the Tomatis method for the benefit of singers with voice problems, children with learning difficulties, stutterers, the dyslexic, the autistic, and practically everybody else.

What a gem this book is. Tomatis writes with such verve and wit, and quite a few chips on his shoulder. He's particularly excellent on the phenomenology of autism, quite Sartre-esque in fact.

If Alfred Jarry had continued as a scientist instead of co-founding the

theatre of the absurd, this is a book he might have written.

August 1996

From the Oracle’s Mouth

Early last summer I was at Kirby Hall, a redoubtable National Heritage ruin near Corby in Northamptonshire, watching the largest contingent of Roman soldiers to assemble since the legions left Britain over fifteen hundred years ago. I must say it was very decent and serendipitous of the British and Dutch re-enactors to mount this spectacle so close to where I live just after I started to write *Oracle* – which is about a Roman centurion who is inadvertently brought forward in time, approximately twenty miles from Corby as the eagle flies (or indeed the cawbie, since Corby is full of Scots).

Just at the moment when I needed to know things, here were the very folks *libens*, *volens*, and *potens* to tell me (in the words of the Past Times T-shirt), nay, to exemplify Romans regenerated in the present day. Which is why *Oracle* includes an acknowledgement to Bucco, this being the nickname of Quintus Helvius Bucconis, an actual soldier whose gravestone is in Mainz, whose modern avatar is Bill Allen of Chesterfield, of the crooked spire.

The other two good people to whom *Oracle* is dedicated are Agnes and Graham Andrews (well known to *Vector* readers as a reviewer), Belfasters of Brussels. Can it be a coincidence that my Roman is picked up and sheltered by a Belfast couple? No connection with living persons intended, honest M’lud! (And the fact that a chap working for the novel’s time-probe project, who has a religious bee in his bonnet, is named Dave Trimble was definitely a Freudian slip of my ironic subconscious. At the time when I was writing the book a certain Ulster politician wasn’t in the news at all. It was Graham who pointed out the coincidence to me.)

Plot-logic in which Stanley Kubrick gave me a nine-month crash course a while ago required a speaker of Latin, and what might be the logical background of one such? A former candidate for the priesthood, long since lapsed. Lapsed, *why*? Because of what personal trauma? Events homed in on one another like bees converging on the hive bringing pollen to make honey.

(A nine-month crash course sounds like a bit of a contradiction, but it is not actually a misnomer for my adventures in plotting at Kubrick Castle. Crash, vroom, skid, crash, okay forget the kiddie market we’ll keep the robot gigolo, vroom, skid, but how much does it weigh for God’s sake, and can the manager of Macey’s really see a statue of a horse in the street

outside...?)

I mentioned that while I was writing *Oracle* the politics of Ulster was not especially prominent in the news (the mainland British news at least) compared with the hotting-up, cooling off, hotting-up of the past few months. Here comes publication day, and as in the novel the Continuity Army Council (who intend to continue until British sovereignty ends) are rumbling in the background like a minor Vesuvius, though mostly ignored, while honeyed words are spoken or snarled about decommissioning weapons. To most people in this sceptred, as opposed to emerald, isle the Northern Irish situation is an incomprehensible mess. Indeed it's astonishing to what extent over the past many decades English governments themselves have behaved like blinkered idiots, blind to the mind-sets of bigotry. This came urgently to me, the more I found out about the novel I was writing (for writing a novel should be a process of discovery).

The zealots in Judaea in the first century map persuasively on to their contemporary equivalents in Ulster, as I only began to realise while the elements of the novel clicked into place. So: contemporary Ulster events, and the world nineteen hundred years ago – connection or coincidence? Exploitation, or illumination? it's risky writing something up close to what's going on. Did anyone notice how Stephen Leather's thriller *The Long Shot* stars Carlos the Jackal as master assassin – but unfortunately half way through the process of writing in real life the French nabbed Carlos, leading to a mid-story tap dance of "Does anyone know how Carlos escaped from the French?" Ian McDonald's remarkably good (in my opinion) *Sacrifice of Fools* puts joint Anglo-Irish sovereignty over Ulster just a little way ahead. He might even be right, though there's an old Ulster saying, "Hope for the best but expect the worst."

Anyway, I have barged in where angels fear to tread, since I found myself impelled to say a few things about Ulster and English perceptions and about the behaviour of our security services, as well as a few other matters – my Roman being in the present, after all, because of a security services operation.

There are always a few other matters. Which is why I am now deep in another novel, starring a female member of the security services who is extremely manipulative. Since I belong to the method acting school of writing (deep identification with my characters during my six or nine month seance with them) maybe I am now trying to manipulate readers of *Matrix* by writing about *Oracle*?

Alternatively, Chris Terran *[then editor of* Matrix*]* kindly asked me to

write a piece, and this is what has come from my Amstrad planchette. I wish you all discoveries, and a good read. I was interested in the review in *Locus* of *Oracle*, suggesting that it is two overlapping books, which would become one if I engineered a sequel. Actually, the sequel is up to (or down to) the reader's own imagination, since the closing situation has many ramifications if one thinks clearly about the implications.

Looking through this piece, I realise the extent to which I have discussed narrative considerations rather than stepping upon a soapbox to pronounce upon the Troubles. I think that would be a bit of an impertinence. I would rather my characters exemplify positions. Oh, and watch out for two amusing compositing errors which I'll swear I corrected, but which uncorrected themselves, drat it. Cryptic clues (cue Dylan): "She makes love just like a roman." Also: "The universe consists of spare-time."

September/October 1997

Review of *The Encyclopedia of Fantasy*

The Encyclopedia of Fantasy by John Clute and John Grant. St. Martin's Press, 1997, hardcover, ISBN 0-312-15897-1, 1,049 pages, $75.

You don't often expect, on opening an encyclopedia, to feel that you have stepped through the back of a wardrobe into a vast land where you must engage in a vital quest for the truth or that the book has dragged you into itself, as in Michael Ende's *The Neverending Story*. Yet that is the case here, for the editors have scripted the book not only to inform their readers but also to initiate them in an almost magical and ritual sense.

Back in 1993, John Clute produced with Peter Nicholls (and many contributors, of course) *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*, massive and authoritative (or at least so far as was realistically possible). At first glance, *The Encyclopedia of Fantasy* appears to be the twin sister of that earlier volume. But all is not as it seems. The earlier mammoth commenced with a pre-flight checklist of 210 themes, alphabetically from Absurdist SF to Women SF Writers. Apparently the original plan was to do likewise here, as regards the "motifs", as themes are now termed, more in common with folklore. No such catalogue presents itself. Instead, the reader must discover the meaning of the book for him/herself by using it, setting out upon a revelatory journey – exactly as in a fantasy tale itself – from any starting point whatever. In a sense, here is a "Choose Your Own Adventure" multi-narrative, within the context of critical theory and enlightenment not only intellectual but emotional and ethical – almost, you might say, political, since there is such a strong thread of subversive purpose.

Is fantasy escapist? Far from it. It is essentially for escapist reasons that the majority of Jane Austen's fans read her sensible, realistic novels nowadays. Fantasy, by contrast, subverts our normal world and worldview, leading us to psychological redemption by showing us how to perceive and altering our perceptions and the *Encyclopedia* perfectly mimics this method.

Much of the terminology is brand-new, or is used in a new sense. Wainscots, sheltered by Polders, dissolve into Water Margins. In other words, a hidden society may lurk behind the walls or underneath a city or in a forest. Spiritual dykes guard its health. At the edges of this heartland

are unmappable regions. Typically, Thinning – a blight upon integrity – menaces the hidden society. A hero must bring renewal, alias Instauration.

By following clues along the quest-route we learn the meaning of Stemmata and Godgames, Pariah Elites and Liminal Figures, Taproots and Cauldrons; and the act of learning is important because Instauration must be learned – it cannot simply be picked off the shelf. Likewise, Fantasies of History (those stories which disclose the Secret History of the World) need to be "unlocked, or subjected to unpacking, rather than merely read". The scrupulously scholarly style throughout is sinewy, sprightly, and frequently eloquent, but few words are neutral or present as mere grace notes. A mention of a book about Cultural Icons (such as James Dean or Elvis Presley) who exemplify "the carnival of 20th-Century life" leads, via Carnival, down a rabbit-hole of cross-reference, to Topsy-Turvy Wonderlands, and from there to Masques, then to Masks. From Masks we pop through Portals, and cross Thresholds to find Uther Pendragon. Thus does a fantasy text entice its readers to co-inhabit the story, not merely consume it like an airport thriller.

Literary critics this century have tended to pooh-pooh Story as something unrefined and primitive. But the correct term should perhaps be "primeval," because the meaning-generating structure of the human brain is what gives rise to stories. This is why "the Thought Control Police" of our own century, and previous centuries, fear raw story because of its liberatory power. So saying, the *Encyclopedia* shows its purposeful teeth.

Consequently, writers of fantasy have obligations. Nowadays, the cutting edge is Instauration Fantasy. This is "the place where Fantasy has no excuse not to be".

At times, it seems this vast book may be an actual wainscot behind which depths lurk – as when an entry concerning Ocean of Story discloses an 11th-Century Kashmiri encyclopedia of stories nested recursively within. And I can't help feeling a Borgesian suspicion that there might exist an unfindable entry. What are "the various recensions of John Drinkwater's *Architecture of Country Houses*", about which there is no further elucidation? And in the list of acknowledgments, what role was played by The Wandering Jew?

Oh, yes, there are oodles of detailed entries concerning quite a few members of SFWA. But there is also an illuminatory agenda for all who write fantasy, so that they can become ascended masters, if not already. An ocean of data deploys itself, but the experience of using this book is as significant as the contents. Here is a Godgame, as in John Fowles's *The Magus* (where the presiding impresario Mr. Conchis was a code name for

Consciousness).

Plunge all 10 fingers in this book, and prepare to ascend.

Autumn 1997

What Is SFWA?

Well, after a lot of brouhaha it is currently “Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America”, and the official acronym is SFWA (not SFFWA). pronounced “Sef-wa” or “Ce Fois” in a Maurice Chevalier voice.

Starting with a nitpick about the exact title and acronym of the organisation epitomises the downside, which has turned some members off SFWA in the past: a lot of finicking and bickering about rules and definitions and minutiae (such as whether authors of sharecrop novels set in the *Star Wars* milieu should be eligible for the coveted Nebula award, or should be banned).

The upside is that SFWA is a really effective writers’ organisation, with teeth which it uses to good effect, so that other American writers’ organisations regard it with envy and learn lessons from it. Sharp persistent teeth are increasingly necessary given the dictatorial caprices of the publishing conglomerates: pernicious contracts which try to seize all imaginable rights through Byzantine corporate accountancy, and other tricks which try to turn writers into slaves.

Past battle honours include forcing an audit of Pocket Books and resisting a new grab-all contract introduced by Dell Magazines. who were then obliged to divide this into a page you had to sign and a page you could sign voluntarily, if you were silly enough. Combat continues, with SFWA’s Grievance Committee ready to take up cudgels on behalf of members, and scouts issuing warnings of malpractice.

Dear me, doesn’t it sound confrontational? Well, if push comes to shove, SFWA is equipped and ready to shove. Meanwhile, on a regular basis, SFWA provides a lot of market information and advice and other material of interest to writers in the SF and Fantasy fields, and organises social events (if you are in the right place, such as in New York in the Autumn for the Authors/Editors Reception in a classy hotel), not to mention the computer gossip networks. There are about 900 members. Currently the annual dues are $50 for Active and for Associate members. An Active member must have sold either a novel or 3 short stories to professional paying markets in America. (An American edition of a novel first published in Britain counts, but not the British publication on its own.) An Associate non-voting member need only have sold one short story professionally and can upgrade as further sales come along. You prove your credentials by sanding a photocopy of the page or first page of

contracts, with a request to join (but no money yet) to Peter Dennis Pautz. Exec Sec. SFWA, 5 Winding Brook Drive #18, Guilderland NY 12084, and await developments. The dues year runs from 1st July, so Summer is the sensible time to join. British members can pay dues renewals through me in Sterling equivalent according to the prevailing exchange rate, plus £1, so that there is only one collective international money order to be paid for.

Active and Associate members receive six times a year the eyes-only *Forum* where skulduggery is unveiled, organisational business is debated, and including pages of recommendations for the Nebula awards. 10 recs equals entry to the preliminary ballot. Eager contenders with a % besides their listing will modestly rush you a free copy of their work. Also mailed to members four times a year is *The Bulletin*, the glossy-cover public face of SFWA, including features about the art and craft of SF and Fantasy, business trends, and up-to-date market reports. I have been the European Editor of *The Bulletin* for quite a few years now, and British authors featured in its pages recently or upcoming include Paul McAuley, Stephen Baxter, Simon Ings and Ian McDonald. Despite being avowedly SF Writers of America, SFWA has always been overseas-friendly and eager for foreign members. (Russian and German literary agents find it useful to join as Affiliates, for $35, for access to market reports and to the Directory of members, which everyone receives: 60 pages of names, addresses, phone and e-mail numbers, agents, etc. American members benefit in turn by the international linkages when, say, a rogue agent or publisher misbehaves in Europe.) The reality is that the vast majority of members are Americans (and a large proportion of the swelling ranks are relative newcomers to the field), so the designation *America* is more honest than World would be, as in World Series. But it is not meant restrictively (despite fraught episodes in the past, such as stripping Stanisław Lem of his honorary lifetime membership because he proceeded to write a rude article about the SFWA).

As with the BSFA, almost all the work of the SFWA (and there's a lot of it) is carried out by volunteers, for the collective good, ahem. Despite occasional glitches it's surprising that the wheels turn as smoothly as they do.

Other publications of SFWA are the *Handbook* (controversy as to whether the new edition should be given free to all members, or sold) and the annual *Nebula Awards* anthology, edited for three-year stints, most recently by Pamela Sargent, and next by Jack Dann. Arguably this particular "best of the year" always arrives a bit late on the scene since the

process can only begin after the results of the Nebula awards are known, months after other anthologists have compiled their “best” lists, but it is a classy product. (Okay, the Nebula beauty contest is also a personality award, and shameless campaigning seems ever more essential to victory, but the *Nebula Awards* editor can include any also-rans she/he chooses, so the result is a balanced, judicious product.) SFWA is 31 years old, 3 years older than *Locus*, and like *Locus* it has grown hugely and glossed. Just as well, since without SFWA quite a few SF and Fantasy writers would be finding themselves up various creeks without paddle or compass in today’s hectic harsher turbulent publishing world.

November/December 1997

With Eyes as Big as Saucers

So how would any extraterrestrials get to Earth, to engage in trading (or abducting and molesting)? In flying saucers? The sheer volume of reported close encounters, especially in the religious USA, suggests that either Earth is the crossroads of the universe (unlikely), or that something else is the cause. I explored a few phenomenological ideas in Miracle Visitors *but here is some biochemistry instead.*

Two million Americans claim to have had close encounters with aliens. Under hypnosis, many of these remember being abducted from their bedrooms or their cars, and being taken on board flying saucers for intimate medical examination.

Some awful past event was niggling at the backs of the victims' minds, perturbing their lives. The incident had been so traumatic that amnesia drew a veil over it – and maybe the aliens waved a wand of forgetfulness too. The episode became a buried memory. Now, thanks to hypnotherapy, they discover the truth – alien abduction.

Dark Skies, the latest UFO conspiracy series showing on Channel Four, knows precisely why aliens abduct people. It is in order to insert a parasitical crayfish into people's brains to control their behaviour. The pilot episode of *Dark Skies* showed a classic abduction experience: the hero's terrified girlfriend beset in her bedroom by blurred visitors with big eyes and uncanny powers.

Let us dismiss the parasitical crayfish theory as slightly implausible – warning, I am being compelled to deny this – ahem, might there actually be a sensible explanation for the UFO abductions which so many Americans remember?

The recovery of buried memories by hypnotherapy is losing a bit of credibility these days. The human mind has a wonderful knack for embroidering, and for fitting data into a plausible framework. Police forces are no longer quite so confident about using hypnotism to enhance witnesses' memories of a crime. Witnesses do remember fuller details, and are utterly convinced that such-and-such is what happened, but these details can be purely imaginary, based on cues that the witnesses have inadvertently picked up.

And consider the epidemic of accusations of child sexual abuse,

particularly in America. Visits to a hypnotherapist result in a patient remembering being abused, when a girl or a boy, by a parent. Yet now it is beginning to appear that many of these recovered memories may in fact be false memories.

Human memory seems to work by the mind rewriting its memories as time goes by – editing them with a view to what is most important to a person nowadays. Thus the dominant cultural framework has an influence on how we interpret our memories. In the field of family relationships, child sexual abuse became a trendy topic; and hey presto.

Another highly influential cultural framework is the whole business of flying saucers and alien intruders and conspiracies to conceal The Truth, which powers such popular shows as the X-Files.

Let's suppose that people who claim to have had close encounters did indeed at some time in their lives undergo a highly traumatic, confusing, and awesome experience. This experience left a very deep mark upon them – so deep, indeed, that it is usually hidden by amnesia, until a few helpful sessions of hypnotism tease out the truth.

To be pulled from your warm soft bed or your car, to be snatched away and to find yourself helpless, blinded by bright lights in a cold gleaming environment, subject to probing by invasive instruments, half-seeing blurred alien strangers who are almost featureless... To breath strange, acrid odours. To be bound, and to have your sex organs molested, and samples taken from you. To be separated from comfort, and examined by cold intelligences for an indeterminate period of time before finally being restored to comfort and security...

Actually, hundreds of millions of people, particularly in the developed countries, have experienced this terrible shock, and have forgotten about it until the memory is restored to them.

This experience is known as being born, especially in a hospital.

What an overwhelming impression this "first contact" with another world has upon the impressionable infant intelligence. Thankfully, as with many big shocks, such as a car crash, the memory is suppressed.

The principal hormone which a mother secretes during labour and birth, in her pituitary gland, and which she releases to induce uterine contractions and lactation, is oxytocin. For the mother, oxytocin serves as a muscle regulator. However, oxytocin has a major side effect. Oxytocin causes amnesia.

Under the influence of oxytocin, trained laboratory animals forget how to carry out tasks. During labour, oxytocin floods the little baby's system. And thus we forget this traumatic episode...

...till, years later, after we have been exposed consciously and unconsciously to hundreds of media accounts of alien abductions, hypnotherapists get to work on us.

Really, most of us are abductees. Maybe the miracle is that only two million people in America insist that aliens abducted them, rather than the folks in the delivery room.

November/December 1997

An Idea Is Born

This little essay is really an attempt to work out how to write a story which I've been thinking about for a while, but which seems to have too many possibilities ever to get written.

The basic idea is: *what if* you are reincarnated in the body of a newborn baby – with full memories of your previous life? What strategy would you be best advised to adopt?

When I say "full memories" I mean memories which are as good (or as bad) as mine of my own life up to date. Of course this hardly amounts to perfect memory. I once knew enough Classical Greek or Algebra to pass school examinations, but I would certainly fail those same examinations today.

Though how long would it take me to get to a stage where I *could* pass those examinations? If necessary I think I could manage in a month or so, rather than in the couple of years I needed when I was at school. In later life we acquire different ways of marshalling and understanding information. In school, for instance, I wasted weeks waiting for the true value of "x" in equations to be revealed to me, not realizing what a variable is!

Twenty-five years ago I could speak reasonable conversational Japanese, but through lack of subsequent practice I am very rusty. Again, give me a month, and I'm sure I'd be back where I was.

Our newborn baby only knows as much as I do right now, not what I knew at peak times of proficiency in the past.

Since I try to think through story ideas with remorseless logic (before discarding the logic and going with the flow of metaphor and imagery) there are a few preliminary problems.

A newborn baby is still busy wiring up its brain. In a sense we're all born prematurely – otherwise we'd be too big to get out of the womb. In fact the baby wouldn't have the neural patterning to accept the load of an adult mind. It has programmes for acquiring skills, but couldn't become endowed with those skills instantly before the pathways are established and reinforced.

I'll ignore this problem totally. I'll wish it away.

Secondly, the baby isn't born blank, awaiting the invasion of the body-snatcher. Formation of a person has been occurring for many months. However, the reincarnated mature mind can hardly jump on board

at too early a stage, I don't suppose unless it can hang out in some imaginary dimension, equipped with all of its intellectual faculties, while loosely attached to a mass of multiplying, differentiating cells whose activities it experiences from a detached viewpoint. So is the reincarnated mind dispossessing a proto-person from its body? Is this a hijacking?

This opens up a whole can of worms, including theological theories about souls.

Here is another cluster of problems which needs to be sent into oblivion for the sake of the story which actually interests me: namely, you are born, you become conscious at that moment, you know exactly who you are – or rather, you know who you were when you died; so what is the best game-strategy to adopt?

Quickly (cue smells and sensations and noises, blurred sights and big looming perspectives, and feeble physical floppiness) you deduce that you are a newborn baby. Is this a reasonable deduction to make immediately? Or might you assume you have had a massive paralytic stroke and are emerging from a coma?

Let us have you deduce fairly quickly what you are. So what do you do about it, given your almost total physical incapacity?

With your wealth of experience, will you be able to co-ordinate your twitching limbs and tone up your feeble muscles a bit faster than an ordinary baby? Will you be able to focus faster because you do not need to learn what you are seeing? Will you be able to force your mouth to utter comprehensible words? Could you communicate meaningfully within an hour, a day, a week?

What language are they speaking round about you? Is it your own native language? One that you can at least understand? Or is it Burmese or Ukrainian or Hokkien?

Whereabouts in the world are you? And how much time has passed since you died? Might it be a thousand years later?

Presumably the world at large would be highly interested in the revelation that someone has provenly survived death and been reincarnated. To a certain extent this revelation is time-sensitive. The sooner made, the better. If you wait until you're walking and talking and six years old before revealing your past life, there could be other explanations. Things you had found out. Inadvertent telepathy. You're a genius with an overactive imagination.

Of course, if you merely pretend for a few years to be a normal infant you're liable to be bored senseless with your plastic rattles and soft toys.

And oh God, all that liquid food, that diet of baby meals. But your

stomach isn't yet equipped for Madras curries. Or is it? In Mexico, do they wean kids straight on to hot Jalapeno peppers? Otherwise, how can there ever be those chilli pepper eating contests? (Memo: conduct paediatric research re Mexico.)

Anyway, the boredom... You want to get back on the Internet fast. Due to physical limitations being a reincarnated infant could have been very unfulfilling before cyberspace came along. Incidentally, do you wish to contact your grieving relatives, assuming that you can sneak a look at a calendar and establish that you were reborn not too long after your death? What's the position regarding your financial estate, if you had one?

Are you in danger? You're completely helpless. You're reliant on – let us assume – a maternity hospital (for a day or so) and then upon an unknown family (let us assume there's a family). Might you be smothered as a monster before you can establish some kind of security for yourself? And how would you set about that? Wait until you can crawl, and are left alone, and somehow phone a newspaper offering your story for a whole lot of money providing that the newspaper abducts you, and sets you up with bodyguards, and starts a legal action to establish your own independent rights as an adult who happens to be in a baby's body?

Suppose you manage to lisp to someone in authority (such as a doctor, checking you for possible postnatal jaundice), and supposing that she or he does speak the same language, what do you say? "Doctor, Doctor, I have been reincarnated! Protect me from outbreaks of hysteria by my mother or by other hospital residents. Call Security. Set up a press conference. Hire me a manager to sell my story. Notify scientists. Can I have my milk flavoured with smoked salmon?"

Maybe you're due to breast-feed. What are the infantile sexuality repercussions? Surely you don't need a psychiatrist already! Do I remember in *Gulliver's Travels* our hero being suckled by a giantess?

Are you prepared to cope with a planet-wide media sensation? Though by the way, apart from the stunning fact of reincarnation, what is the fundamental interest in your past-life story? Your past-life was fairly ordinary. What makes you unique is being reincarnated complete with memories. So why should this have happened to *you* in particular? Time to wheel on the brain-scanner. Time to exhume the corpse of your former self (if still available) for microscopic dissection. Any evidence of hitherto unknown brain structures? Signs of invasion by secret prototype nanotechnology?

Perhaps, after all, the best strategy is to reveal nothing, and to endure growing up again, but always with a bit of an edge – you should find

schoolwork a lot easier. PhD by the age of 10, that sort of thing. Of course, this assumes that society hasn't altered so radically that what you knew previously doesn't actively hamper you – which is a definite possibility. You might be an intellectual dinosaur, a living fossil. Perfect insight, but it's all in the rear-view mirror. No foresight at all. Do you seriously think you're clever knowing how to *read*, in a world where literacy is obsolete (depending on what year it is)? How retarded you are.

Increasingly it becomes obvious that this is not a story which can easily be written. Perhaps it can only be written in the manner of a "Choose your Own Adventure" story, with multiple options. Yet this would inevitably exclude many other possible options.

In fact, I now realize, this is probably the ideal subject for a theme anthology by a collection of different writers. *Reborn*, edited by Ian Watson, published by Wonder Books (New York)...

A fitting companion, perhaps, to the actual anthology *Afterlives*, edited by Ian Watson & Pamela Sargent, published by Vintage Books (New York) in 1983. Subtitled "An Anthology of Stories about Life after Death".

Reborn would be an anthology of stories about life after life. Should be quite popular with the past-life therapy and hypnosis brigade. The brief for writers would be quite strict. Nothing about remembering your supposed past existences as a high priestess in Ancient Rome, or as a Borgia or Leonardo da Vinci or Napoleon. An ordinary past-life, which ended just recently. Indeed these could be the actual lives of the authors themselves, imagined to have just ended. This could be quite revealing, although I doubt that many writers would dare write such a story (or would be wise to write such a one), unless – such as, say, Harlan Ellison – they have a taste for flamboyant self-flagellation.

Safer simply to specify: any life, recently ended.

This proposal would probably sell to a publisher. But do I really want the grief of editing another anthology?

In the case of *Afterlives* there was quite a bit of grief for Pamela Sargent and myself. No grief whatever between us, but in regard to the publisher's hot-shot editor, and to one or two of the contributors... wow.

Would you believe an editor telling us, on delivery of half the accepted and paid-for stories, that one story was grossly unfair to Hemingway and couldn't possibly be printed? This matter was only resolved after the author of the story sent what was virtually a PhD thesis abstract citing chapter and verse for every damn reference to Hemingway...

Would you believe an author whom we proudly launched in the book repaying this by suing *Twilight Zone* for an alleged infringement of his copyright and wasting weeks of my co-editor's time in legal proceedings...?

There were other unmentionable disasters too, on the route through the minefield to publication. Do I want such grief again?

Maybe all you will ever hear about *Reborn* is right here in this little essay... Or maybe not.

Once an idea gets into an author's teeth, no dental floss will easily remove it.

August 1998

Read This: *The Jew of Linz*

In the early years of the 20th century Adolf Hitler and Ludwig Wittgenstein attended the same school in Linz, Austria, though Wittgenstein was two years ahead in class. On the dustcover of *The Jew of Linz* [by Kimberley Cornish] is a school photo highlighting both boys within touching (or punching) distance of each other; yet hitherto historians have been blind to the awesome consequences of this schoolboy proximity, not least of which was the Holocaust. Australian philosophy postgraduate Cornish is very persuasive that this encounter is central to understanding major aspects of the twentieth century. A hypothesis, true, but the circumstantial evidence is great.

A racially Jewish (though nominally Catholic) homosexual with a truss, son of one of the richest assimilated families in the Austro-Hungarian Empire, patrons of the arts, totally well-connected, him with his outspoken talk of princesses and servants – and uncultivated, provincial Adolf: what could these two possibly have in common, even at the Realschule in Linz? Well, for one thing, philosophy. Not many twentieth-century politicians have been able to quote pages of Schopenhauer by heart, but Hitler could, and Schopenhauer's concept of Will was crucial to Hitler's thinking. With roots in Indian (ahem, Aryan) thought, this is also the central influence on the whole of Wittgenstein's own philosophy of "no-ownership" of Mind, arising from a quasi-mystical revelation Wittgenstein experienced as a schoolboy.

The individual Self is an illusion. A person owns the thinking process but not the thoughts which articulate themselves through him. Instead, each person is an inlet to the same shared universal mind. Rather than thought giving rise to words, the reverse is the case: language uses human instruments as the vehicle for its own expression, the Proposition (in Wittgenstein's terms) speaking through the mouth of the person. This is very much the stance of contemporary consciousness maven Daniel Dennett, who banishes any Cartesian switchboard operator, any autonomous central self, from the brain. Language generates thought.

Climactic enlightenment consists in apprehending this no-ownership, thus gaining access to the common mind, an empowering fission with the World/Divine Mind; which is why Hitler's idol Wagner, deeply influenced by Schopenhauer, has both Tristan and Isolde sing together, "selbst dann bin ich die Welt" ("then I myself am the world"), which anticipatorily sets

to music proposition 5.63 of the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*.

Music is another close Hitler-Wittgenstein link. Which two other Linz schoolboys regularly went to the opera? Hitler knew the libretto of *Lohengrin* by heart; Wittgenstein likewise with *Die Meistersinger*. Wagner's anti-Semitic wife Cosima hated the name Wittgenstein because her blood-father Franz Liszt had an adulterous liaison with Princess Carolyne Wittgenstein, of Jewish ancestry and related to Ludwig's family who adopted the Wittgenstein name.

And by the way ("What's in a name?" we might say!), the saviour of St. Petersburg by a sneaky ploy from Hitler's other idol, Napoleon, was none other than Prince Ludwig Adolf Wittgenstein, which may explain why Hitler's orders for Operation Barbarossa included that Leningrad should be razed to the ground as a permanent witness – except that Wittgenstein the philosopher was to prove instrumental in thwarting this.

Art is another link. The Wittgensteins grandly financed the "decadent" Vienna Secession movement (and Klimt painted Wittgenstein's sister) while Hitler was prowling Ringstrasse nursing frustrated artistic ambitions – although he gained access to the co-founder of the movement thanks to an introduction from a mysterious "friend in Linz". *Mein Kampf* alludes to an unnamed Jewish schoolboy of Linz who first fired Hitler with anti-Semitism. Hitler especially assails rich Jews-in-Christian-Camouflage, and his first speech after taking over Austria, given in Linz, wished that "some of our international seekers after truth whom we know so well" could be present to witness his triumph. Assuming that Hitler wasn't simply ranting, the one candidate for this category is Wittgenstein, by then in Cambridge. Although Cornish doesn't draw the inference, is it too far-fetched to suggest that maybe young princely Ludwig, who uniquely shared so many philosophical, artistic, and musical interests with Adolf, might have made a homosexual overture at school to the younger "pauper" lad?

The *Tractatus* can be viewed as a theoretical book of spells serving through logic to apprehend Higher Truth. Hitler adopted the practical course: suspension of thought, act of Will, the imposition of words and thoughts upon the mass-mind in a quasi-magical but perverted fashion. The perversion consists in the belief that different races have different mass-minds, that there's a superior Aryan mass-mind and a degenerate Jewish mass-mind. As to the magical aspect, forget about invocation of demons and witchcraft; even set to one side the demonstrable links between Wittgenstein and Madame Blavatsky and the Theosophists. Far from being a scientific positivist opposed to the possibility of magic, in his

Remarks on Frazer's Golden Bough, Wittgenstein "defended an account of magic and thought it to reflect something very deep in human beings connected with the nature of representation", in Cornish's words. Exactly so with Schopenhauer (himself quoting Paracelsus): magical mumbo-jumbo serves to focus the will – whereby a particular proposition will impose itself upon individuals via the common mind. Hence Hitler's "sorcery," his discovery of "the key to history" avowedly made as a schoolboy in Linz. Hence the orchestrated panoply of the Nuremburg Rallies; hence Nazi ceremonies at Wewelsburg Castle. The prolonged German Hitlerian spasm links up perversely with the central philosophical problem of the nature of consciousness.

Yet Wittgenstein is not merely the loathed theoretical counterpart and flip side of Hitler. At Cambridge Wittgenstein was beavering away to combat the psychopathic Führer in the most practical political way he perceived. Why, at the height of the Stalinist terror, did Lenin's old alma mater offer Wittgenstein its Chair of Philosophy, unless he had performed signal service for the Soviet Union? Why else but because, as Cornish demonstrates very plausibly, Wittgenstein was the founder and presiding genius of the homosexual communist Cambridge spy ring, himself recruiting Philby, Burgess, Maclean *et al*., alone possessing the almost magical charisma to carry this off – not to mention greatly influencing Alan Turing in his development of the Enigma decoder. Turing duly brought classified materials back to Cambridge to discuss with Wittgenstein and, via the spy ring, decryptions of German army plans reached the Soviet defenders of Leningrad faster than they reached the German field commanders.

The ghastly irony is that the assimilated Wittgenstein, who so focused Hitler's envy and hatred as to lead to the Final Solution, once declared that his philosophy was 100 percent Jewish (all that Rabbinical analysis of words), but actually it was the diametrical opposite and very Aryan indeed, since alone among the major theistic religions Judaism rules out any kind of mystical union of Godhead with Man as surely as it bans mediumistic means of whatever sort for attempting this or for focusing the universal will to attain mastery over the world – the Golem of Prague, created *in extremis* to defend Jews from pogrom, being the legendary exception. Out of Linz came the greatest pogrom the world has ever seen, yet also the espionage tools to defeat its initiator, albeit too late for millions of victims.

February 1999

Science Fiction, Surrealism, and Shamanism

In 1993 and 1994 Gollancz published an 1,100-page science-fantasy epic by me, divided into two volumes, *Lucky's Harvest: The First Book of Mana* and *The Fallen Moon: The Second Book of Mana*. (No American edition, drat it, although going great guns in German and French, with the duo divided into three volumes in those languages.) I wrote the Books of Mana in a kind of verbal ecstasy sustained for two years – with breaks for trips to the pub and for other mundane matters – and my inspiration was the Finnish national epic, the *Kalevala*.

Away on the fringes of Europe, Christianized Finland still had a living shamanic tradition in the nineteenth century, which was also the time when national identities were being newly asserted across Europe. Under Swedish and then Russian rule, Finland was sorely in need of a sense of identity, and Elias Lönnrot – district medical officer, philologist, folklorist, and latterly Professor of Finnish – supplied this by collecting oral poetry from remote villages and jigsawing these verses together with mythological stories to produce a reasonably logical narrative in the metre that Longfellow was to borrow for *Hiawatha* (with his own aim of creating a Native American equivalent of the *Kalevala*). The full version of the *Kalevala* appeared in 1849, and Lönnrot went on to compile a masterly Finnish-Swedish dictionary, which helped to give Finnish status as a literary language.

Basically the many-stranded *Kalevala* is about a quest for a device called the Sampo which may be a magical mill or a magical furnace – no one knows for sure what the Sampo is and, in any case, it gets broken and lost after being stolen. Many and long are the magical shamanic incantations woven into the narrative along the way, for Word rules the World. You can't make a seaworthy boat unless you know the appropriate words to chant. You can't make a sword unless you can describe the origin of iron, and thus empower yourself. If you can find the right words or formulas, you can acquire power over reality.

This is a theme I had been plugging away at in one guise or another ever since my first novel *The Embedding*, in which Amazonian tribespeople express a higher state of consciousness through an extremely complex language which they can understand only during a ritual drug

trance. To what extent does Word represent the World, or conceal the World from us? Might there be a Chomskyan "general grammar of the universe" which expresses fundamental reality and thus gives access to reality itself, and control over reality? (See my "Read This" piece in *NYRSF* 126, February 1999, for Wittgenstein's take on this, via Schopenhauer's *The World as Will and Idea*, and Hitler's horrendous practical political application of shamanism derived from the same source; the idea is not as fanciful or detached from reality as one may initially assume.)

Parallel with the great theme of Word and World in the *Kalevala*, all the main characters are driven by rivalry, vengeance, erotic frenzy, and other high emotions as if possessed, which makes for an exciting tale, but also means that the epic is secondarily about the control (or lack of control) of consciousness, and about its enhancement, another pet theme of mine.

The word "mana" comes from the islands of the South Pacific. Thanks to anthropologists, we're fairly familiar with the term as meaning "a supernatural force emanating from a person, a place, or a thing." By sublime coincidence, in Finnish Mana is the "God of the Otherworld" or simply the "Otherworld" itself. Manna from Heaven, you might say! After I had been to an arts festival in 1991 in Jyväskylä, Finland, that country's then-Queen of Cyberpunk – with whom I shared a fish dinner, not in Memison, but in Helsinki – sent me a collection of poems by Eino Leino (1887-1926) beautifully translated into English by British poet (and Knight, First Class, of the Order of the White Rose of Finland for services to Finnish literature) Keith Bosley. Leino's statue stands in one of Helsinki's main streets leading towards the harbour, with his back to a coin-operated superloo in a stretch of park. His masterpiece, *Whitsongs* (*Helkavirsiä*, 1903), consists of condensed jewels in the vein of the *Kalevala*. Reading these gems while en route to an sf convention in Philadelphia, I saw how marvellously the themes meshed with my own interests as a writer. Vague ghosts of characters and situations began forming in my mind and in my notebook on the plane, and I knew that I had to experience the whole of the *Kalevala* as soon as possible.

Unfortunately the first translation I tackled was in the same metre as the original – the "By-the-Shining-Big-Sea-Water" metre reused for *Hiawatha* – and while this might sound splendid, flexible, and lyrical in Finnish, in English after ten minutes of tumty-tumty-tumty-tumty you tend to go into a trance. But then I got hold of Keith Bosley's translation, in much freer verse. The difference is remarkable.

Here are the first four lines of the old translation:

I am driven by my longing
And my understanding urges
That I should commence my singing
And begin my recitation...

And here is the Bosley translation:

I have a good mind
take into my head
to start off singing
begin reciting...

Immediately there is urgency, vitality, a muscular voice. As I read this version my ghosts of characters and ideas became more substantial – and Eeva, the Queen of Finnish Cyberpunk, had also sent me a cookery book, so my characters would have something to eat.

Essentially the *Kalevala* is a magical work. Magical spells play a central role. My Mana books are set on a realistically described planet of another star and feature a certain amount of high technology – but there are also what you might call magical phenomena. Certain characters known as Proclaimers can "bespeak" and sway others to carry out their will.

Personally, my attitudes are rationalistic and scientific, although in fiction I will usually follow my fantastical instincts and let my narratives be powered by symbolism, metaphor, and imagery. My basic orientation is rational, but what happens in stories of mine can frequently be quite bizarre and weird (rendered persuasive and believable, I hope).

So this huge story of mine set on the world of Kaleva – and a couple of slipstream novelettes which did appear in America, in *Asimov's*, "The Tragedy of Solveig" (December '96), and "The Shortest Night" (May '98) – have a science-fiction feel to them, yet intrusions of the irrational seem to debar them from being classed strictly as sf. On the other hand, these texts aren't exactly fantasy, either; they're located in the universe of discourse of science fiction, written in the language of sf rather than fantasy. I have never much liked the term "science fantasy"; this suggests to me science fiction written by people who don't know too much about science or the universe we inhabit, people who use science as decoration. Perhaps my Mana texts are examples of ss, "Science Surrealism"...?

One of the main inspirers of that first novel of mine, *The Embedding* – alongside the scientific investigation of the nature of language as

pursued by the human race and by aliens visiting Earth – was the French surrealist Raymond Roussel.

In 1932, Roussel published his long embedded poem *Nouvelles Impressions d'Afrique* (*New Impressions of Africa*). Phrases are nested within phrases within phrases like matrioshka dolls. "Embedding" is the name for this type of nesting. Embeddings within embeddings put a great strain upon the mind which is trying to comprehend the complete sentence. Roussel dreamed that a machine for reading his poem might be built, consisting of a circular table with two tops. The text of the poem would circle around the fixed lower top. Slots in the revolving upper top would expose far-removed parts of the text, and thus un-embed the syntax. Then his poem could be read straightforwardly – though perhaps even more confusingly than on paper! Roussel's poem was what first sparked my imagination to find a science-fictional framework for the linguistic theories of Chomsky and the question of to what extent language represents reality – Chomsky believing that on a deep structural level, acquired as part of our evolution, all human beings share a "general grammar". Do the patterns of language, therefore, reflect objective physical reality on some deep level? (Language is deeply metaphorical, in a hidden way. Words are almost always concealed metaphors which have become arbitrary symbols for objects.)

Roussel was one of this century's great eccentrics. He inherited a large fortune and used it to satisfy his whims. He once sailed to India, on his own fully crewed yacht. During the whole voyage he remained in his cabin, writing. Finally, one day, the captain reported to him, "We are in sight of the Indian coast." Roussel stepped on deck and gazed at the distant smudge on the horizon. He declared, "Ah, so I have seen India." He immediately ordered the ship to turn around and return forthwith to Marseilles.

In fact, *whim* isn't quite the right word. Despite general ridicule of his plays and other works, staged and printed at his own expense, Roussel was convinced of his own genius. He was devoted to literary glory – and he sought this glory by what one might call scientific rather than artistic strategies. A piece of fiction was a game with strict rules. He would take a phrase from a poem or a nursery rhyme, and transform its meaning, even though the sound remained almost the same. Thus the phrase, "Napoléon, premier empereur" ("Napoleon, the first emperor") became "Nappe, olé, ombre, miettes, hampe, air, heure," in other words a tablecloth, a cry of "Olé", shadow, crumbs, a pole or handle, air, and hour. The result is Spanish dancers on a table so brightly lit that crumbs cast shadows, plus a

clock powered by the wind. Roussel then set out to invent a narrative which would satisfyingly and imaginatively link these elements, and many other elements produced by the same method. The initial bits of information should be as far removed as possible from one another; and no event, however absurd it might seem at first sight, should lack a logical place in the final narrative.

Creatively, this is a little similar to the way I have written quite a number of my own stories and even novels – by bringing together facts, theories, situations, and images which at first sight seem completely different from one another. "What other people see as a coincidence," a critic once remarked, "Ian Watson sees as a connection."

When Roussel eventually revealed his method in an essay entitled "Comment j'ai écrit certains de mes livres" ("How I wrote some of my books"), fans of his surrealistic imagination were infuriated by the mechanistic method he had employed. Where was the free and unfettered inspiration in all this? Actually, Roussel was fascinated by machinery. His works often feature scientist-inventors and bizarre contraptions. Indeed, the surrealists as a group were enthralled by new equipment and by new games. The aim was to stimulate the mind out of its routine habits and evoke a totally imaginary, non-mundane, non-human world, so that new myths could be born. *New* myths – yet nevertheless *authentic* ones. The surrealists were pursuing a magical, myth-creating quest to evoke the alien, the other, the elsewhere, the different. Roussel had no particular belief in the supernatural, yet he sought for marvels. I too am basically a rationalist without superstitions, using the toolkit of science for a kind of magical purpose: an imaginative, consciousness-expanding purpose.

And what else are the alien worlds of science fiction, and the aliens invented by science fiction, but a kind of fulfilment of the surrealist quest for imaginary nonhuman worlds? Roussel was particularly attracted to what you might call childish, populist art forms. He wasn't interested in High Art, but in Low Art. With its origins in the pulp magazines with their dramatic, colourful, comic-book covers, the popular genre of sf seems the ideal surrealist playground; and it's hardly an accident that the works of A.E. van Vogt were translated into French by the surrealist Boris Vian, to great general acclaim. To many native speakers of English van Vogt's style seems quite clumsy, and his ideas rather lunatic. After Boris Vian did for van Vogt what Baudelaire did for Edgar Allen Poe – namely, produce a translation much more luminously beautiful than the original – van Vogt's works were viewed as great literature of the surrealist school.

With Roussel, language itself became a creative force, an agent of

creation, rather as it is in the *Kalevala*. In the case of shamanism: find the words to make the boat or the sword. In Roussel's case: find the words, and then the events of a story can occur, compelled by necessity. The surrealists were the shamanists of the industrial, technological twentieth century.

I feel a great sympathy with all of this. The surrealists sought euphoria – rapture, *jouissance*, vision, revelation – by an exercise of the intellect. Anglophone critics have sometimes put me down as rather an "intellectual" author. Indeed, ironically, my *Book of the River* trilogy, which went on to be a Science Fiction Book Club choice in America (entitled *The Books of the Black Current*), was turned down in France on the grounds that it wasn't "intellectual enough." I intend there to be passion in my stories, vivid emotion and vivid characters in a rich setting, yet I do realize that that my own approach to rapture is, initially, through intellectual activity.

The surrealists also put a high value on automatic writing, so as to tap the energies of the subconscious. I myself believe in letting the internal sovereign dynamics of a story dictate the events, even if my rational critical mind sometimes cries out in alarm. If something bizarre begins to happen, arising out of images and metaphors, I will let it happen, trusting that a reason for the event will reveal itself, and that the event will fulfil a necessary function. On the level of narrative structure this is a little akin to automatic writing. In my Books of Mana there are some rather strange persons and events and objects, arising from my transmutation of the original source, and from the associations that arose in my mind, letting word and imagery steer the boat of the book. A boy grows from birth to adolescence in just a few months. There's an alien female golem. There's a brass dwarf. Bikes jump from place to place. Science-Surrealism, perhaps, though these persons and devices evolve to fulfil functions, dramatically or emotionally or mischievously; I love mischief in a book, and glee, and sly hilarity. In my case the Sampo – the magic device which can create whatever one wishes – is obviously a nanotechnology machine, though controlling it is a problem.

Incidentally, the creative dominance of Word – of what speaks forth, rather than the speaker himself or herself – is at the heart of Daniel Dennett's tentative explanation of consciousness (as in *Consciousness Explained*, 1991). Why do we talk to ourselves? Ordinarily we can't maintain uninterrupted concentration on a particular problem for more than a few tens of seconds, yet we tackle problems requiring vastly more time. Human memory is not innately designed to be super-reliable fast-

random-access, so the immediate contents of the stream of consciousness are very soon lost unless we fix them. Describing to ourselves what we are doing – telling ourselves what is going on – is a way of committing material to memory. Children talk to themselves openly; adults do it more privately.

But how do we choose the words we use? In a very real sense the words choose themselves. Our brain has no central controller busy operating a switchboard. We consist of numbers of systems, each semi-independent and semi-intelligent, acting in unison. A range of possible words compete for the chance of being publicly expressed: lexical Darwinism. Thus language is not something we invented as a species so much as something that we *became*: not a construction *by* us, but something that constructs us, and constantly continues reconstructing us. We produce our "selves" in language, each of us being a kind of fictional character in the narrative which we are forever relating to ourselves. Everyone is his or her own novelist, and our existence depends on the persistence of narrative. Good news for writers! Rather than being mere entertainment compared with the serious business of real life, the telling of tales in the broadest sense is at the root of our being and our knowledge. Tales aren't the product, but the source of consciousness. Incessant storytelling and story-checking – some tactual, some fictional – is how an advanced entity keeps track of its physical and mental circumstances. Word rules our World, indeed.

Of course you may say that neither surrealism nor shamanism is the *intention* behind sf. Yet at this point let me commend a book by Rogan Taylor entitled *The Death and Resurrection Show* (1985), about shamanism as the root of popular art forms and entertainment. According to a brief item I caught by coincidence on the radio a few weeks ago, Rogan Taylor is currently Professor of Football Semiotics, or something similar, at the University of Liverpool or thereabouts.

In my most recent, as yet unpublished novel *Mockymen*, I came up with a matter-transmission device for sending people to the stars which, subjectively at least, tears them apart agonizingly before reassembling them at their destinations. This isn't a totally original idea. David Langford's *The Space Eater* had its travellers pumped through a one-inch aperture, and in Dan Simmons's *Endymion*, crew and passengers on the Vatican's super-fast starship are excruciatingly smashed flat by acceleration, then reconstituted at journey's end. This tearing apart is also what a shaman experiences on a spirit journey, which is in essence a journey to another world, and I think my people-transmitter derived from a

subconscious gut feeling, rather than from Langford or Simmons. (My novel *God's World*, back in 1979, borrowed from shamanism for a journey through "High Space" to another star system.) Through suffering, power is gained; the journey can only be achieved by an ordeal.

Consider the Indian Rope Trick, which isn't specifically Indian; the performance was popular not just in India but also in China, Java, ancient Mexico, and medieval Europe. In the full version of the trick the conjuror not only sends his apprentice up a rope to vanish but then, armed with a knife, climbs up after the lad and tosses down dismembered parts of the apprentice's body. The conjuror returns to terra firma, arranges the limbs, and gives them a kick, which puts the apprentice back together again, alive. Literally the master "re-members" the novice, and the lad who had ascended to the upper world is back in the middle world, ours, again. This trick is plainly a shamanic initiation rite, or at least it is a memory of one; however, magic in the old sense has become magic in the modern sense: a conjuring spectacle, a piece of theatre.

The existence of disease (and dis-ease) is one of the main reasons for religions. Primarily a shaman is a healer and therapist, whose power to heal is the reason for his importance. Now, a shaman typically performed not on a stage at a safe distance from the audience, but in full all-round public view in the open air or in the middle of a crowded tent. It was by his movements and principally by his voice that he conveyed his vision. He bespoke other worlds directly to his witnesses, who proceeded to perceive those other worlds. In preliterate society the power of the spoken word was originally very potent – as witness the *Kalevala* where voice and word control reality – and this can still be so in literate society. Hitler, working himself into a fever and intoxicating his audiences, was a sort of evil shaman, not only on a mass scale, but even person to person. Hard-bitten German generals arriving to announce disaster and imminent defeat would emerge from Hitler's presence convinced of victory, as if mesmerized.

In 1931, a Russian named Anisimov (not "an Asimov"!) went on an expedition to Siberia and described in great detail how the sheer torrent of sound which issued from the mouth of an Evenki shaman actually set the buttons on the visitor's coat humming.

The bard is one successor to the shaman. The shaman dealt in ecstatic trips into unusual dimensions of mind; the inspired poet-singer was doing something similar, except that by now the mental journeys were disguised as accounts of actual travel to places far away in the real world (those far away places, of course, being partly or largely fantastical).

With the rise of religions, such as Catholicism, that brooked no rivals,

the shamanist mind-set went further underground. It disguised itself, mutating into popular entertainments such as the Italian Comedy. Harlequin is one further successor to the shaman, a divine yet demonic clown. His spangled costume shows his paradoxical nature.

He is an acrobat who speaks in strangely poetic tongues and seems to suffer in a frenzy. Harlequin can fool his way into Hell and get back out again. His first literary appearance is in two sixteenth-century poems, in one of which he descends to the Underworld to save a trapped soul by amazing King Pluto with his wit and dexterity – he is Orpheus, and he is a shaman, exactly as Orpheus was – and in the other of which he ascends to the Sky. In *Harlequin's Account of His Trip to the Moon*, six starving vultures carry him as an astral voyager to our satellite: proto-sf, no less. Mutated shamanism is the ultimate source for the magic show, the circus, drama, opera, and even (one might even say especially) twentieth-century pop stars. However, the performer closest to being an actual shaman, even though he never consciously connected himself with the ancient tradition, was Harry Houdini. In the course of shamanist healing-magic, escapology was one of the feats most often performed. Bound in our bodies, how can we escape? This is the meaning of such stunts. Houdini was enacting an ancient healing rite, illustrating the successful escape from madness and death. Entranced, Houdini's audiences felt that they were participating in a miracle, deeply therapeutic in nature; and oddly, Houdini himself felt that the miraculous was involved – he could not himself understand one trick he had put together, and had the distinct impression that he had actually left his own body. On the other hand, Houdini was a downright rationalist, and deeply scared of madness. On the third hand, as it were, he spent a lot of time attending seances in the hope that one day he might discover an authentic medium.

Mad Scientist! Pandora's Box! Atom Bomb! Radiation! Perils of Genetic Engineering! Artificial Intelligence takes over the World! The popular attitude to science is deeply ambivalent because scientific knowledge is a transformational power, altering the world, and traditionally transformational magic is "hellish" – its roots are in the Underworld. Thus, though we now possess powers which would once have seemed magical, people feel that the tricks have taken us over and that we're no longer in control.

I wonder to what extent science fiction, with its journeys to the stars, its encounters with fabulous beings – sometimes Godlike, and sometimes demonic (as, emblematically, in *Alien*) – is actually, deep down, despite the framework of rational technology, a mutation of shamanist imagery

and impulses. Perhaps the fantasy genre, by ignoring rational science and directly invoking magic, is the truer expression of this (this could be the real reason for Fantasy's greater popularity), but the astronaut may, in a sense, be a re-embodiment of the shaman. My own science fiction contains a lot of transformational magic. Altered states of consciousness, alien consciousness, after-death experiences, evolution, and mutation – the treatment of these themes is generally within a rational, scientific framework, but the impulse may be as old as the hills: shamanistic. On my web site <www.kdsi.net/~dmackey/watson.htm> is a short essay I wrote ten years ago about my life as a writer. It's entitled "Dancing on a Tightrope"*. When I wrote the piece I was thinking about the precariousness and unpredictability of earning a living as a full-time writer. Yet really the title is truer in a deeper sense. It now evokes for me the Harlequin/Clown, the acrobatics of the shaman. My work has sometimes tended to mix genre conventions. The Books of Mana are on the boundary of fantasy and sf. *The Fire Worm*, about a medieval alchemical experiment going wrong, intersected sf and horror. My two most recent novels, *Hard Questions* and *Oracle*, blend the technothriller with sf. The shamanic Harlequin is in essence an "amphibian" creature, passing from one medium to another; hence his motley garment. Those are motley novels, as it were.

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* The web site is long gone, though preserved by the Internet Archive. "Dancing on a Tightrope" appears elsewhere in this collection. [Ed.]

You might say that there's an element of special pleading in the above. Thus do I consequently devise a theory which, on the surface, appears to have little relevance to what we all know, from a thousand examples, sf is really about: the exploration of how advancing technology and scientific theory intersects with the human species, and our hopes and fears for the future. Yet I suspect that the shamanic connection is worth thinking about. We carry with us – anatomically, neurologically, psychologically – the freight of our past. We may regard ourselves nowadays as freshly minted, the new constantly displacing the old, but until (and if) we actually rewire and rebuild ourselves, altering our hardware and our software, and thus become posthumans – and in a sense, therefore, aliens – the deep reasons why we do things may sometimes be quite different from what we suppose.

June 1999

Eyes Wide Shut – A Sort of Review

Sun glaring through pollution-haze, 80 degree heat on an early September evening, and throngs of people on every street and alley. At Leicester Square crowd-control barriers were going up along the various approaches to the Warner Village cinema complex, seeming of themselves to generate a host of spectators, with nothing as yet to spectate except police and barriers and crowd and photographers elevated by stands and ladders. Part of the sea of people filling Charing Cross Road had diverted itself to become so many voluntary extras at this spectacle, the making, almost, of a movie entitled *The U.K. Premiere of Eyes Wide Shut.*

Even the invited audience would have to wait quite a while, although in rather more comfort. The film was premiering in three separate auditoria. All seated by 7:30, the audience in dark suits and dresses soon resorted to the bags of popcorn and bottles of cooled Buxton Spring Water supplied with each seat, as time passed and passed: half an hour, then an hour. Excerpts from the sound-track played occasionally, puzzling out of context. *Strangers in the Night*, plangent piano chords.

After about an hour and a half of waiting a spotlight came on, and at last Tom Cruise and Nicole Kidman whistle-stopped down to the front. Four cities in four days for four premieres, with more upcoming – and three appearances this evening in London itself on account of the three auditoria. Christiane Kubrick and others arrived at the top of the auditorium. Tom Cruise managed to say some nice things coherently about England. Nicole Kidman looked much thinner and whiter than with her clothes off in the movie itself. Her sentences deconstructed, perhaps not surprisingly.

The film was deeply peculiar. Script writer Frederic Raphael complained how Stanley seemed intent on removing any idiosyncratic flavour from the dialogue. The resulting simplicities, and repetitions of simplicities, are positively surrealistic: “Did you say... a man and and woman?” Pause. “A man... and a woman.” Pause, cocking head to one side. “A man... and a woman?” Long motionless stare in close-up. “A man... and a woman.” Well, not these words exactly, but similar.

Surrealistic, and funny too: several times, ripples of laughter came from the audience.

Surrealistic, too, was the knowledge that a lot of the New York I was seeing on screen was actually London dressed up. Quite peculiar was the amount of cash the naïve doctor carried around on street routinely, so that he was able to fork out hundreds of dollars from a seemingly bottomless wallet. Apparently a few people mentioned this oddity to Stanley, who replied, "I'm not making that sort of movie." Quite. He was filming a dream-story, one where reality becomes seriously undermined for the characters, and also for the viewers. In a dream, if you need a walletful of money, you have it.

Was the woman who overdosed at the party really the same as the woman dead in the morgue later on? Their faces looked different to me. The orgy-scene (not principally an orgy but more like an arcane mystic ritual) was incredibly powerful and sustained, and deeply weird was the length of time devoted to dialogue by persons wearing full-face masks – oh such masks! – so that although actors were speaking their faces were utterly motionless. Who the male celebrants were – "some of the most powerful people in America" – remained, of course, a complete mystery, and on balance their wives were unlikely to be the many nude, tall, slim priestesses. All hookers? Hardly. This was a frequent rite, evidently often enacted in different vast mansions. Apparently Hindus are enraged at the accompanying music being a hymn from the sacred *Bhagavad Gita*. So what cabal rules America? Or were we in dreamland?

The pace of the movie is considerable. Despite the strange slow crypto-conversations, how fast it all flowed. Running time, two and a quarter hours or so? It seemed to be over in an hour and a half.

To an amazing extent, in this movie nothing momentous actually happens. Nicole Kidman relates a fantasy. Tom Cruise has weird encounters, but after he ignores the first threat from the powerful secret orgiasts he merely receives a slip of paper repeating the warning. The pianist may indeed merely have been sent back to Seattle with a bruise on his cheek. The woman in the morgue may not be the same woman who redeemed Tom Cruise after he was unmasked. Maybe this is why some young drunks bump Tom Cruise into a parked car and then shout, quite unaccountably in the circumstances, "Faggot! Get back to San Francisco!" At least here is one moment of on-screen violence, though it seems to have no rhyme or reason – quite as in a dream. A jump-cut from a quiet passage to a taxi driving through the city, with road noise, seems shockingly dramatic, but hell, it's only a trip in a car.

The movie finished at eleven. Four hours on, crowds were still packing the barriers outside. Were these the same crowds or new crowds?

The temperature was still 80 degrees. The *Blade Runner* (minus the drizzle) streets were packed. Transvestites wandered about. Hardly any taxis existed. My companion and I headed through the surge to Tottenham Court Road tube station, watched families of mice scampering about under the subterranean rails, and disembarked at Lancaster Gate, due north from the Serpentine Gallery in Kensington Gardens where the post-premiere party was happening. A glance at the black darkness of the empty park deterred anyone in their right mind from strolling due south (though I wasn't sure if I was quite in my right mind after the movie), but empty taxis were plentiful – as were police and security and people wired up with microphones outside the hundred-yard footpath leading, lit with flaring mini-flambeaux, to the rather neo-Classical Serpentine Gallery which had undergone a vast marquee extension. The white minimalism of the domed rooms of the Gallery, inside, was the more so with precisely one painting on view, Stanley depicted by Christiane, plus some vases of abstract arrangements evocative of lilies and tilted lumps of white glass, along with a grand piano where a pianist (not blindfolded as in the movie) played until 2 in the morning mainly to nobody, which was also fairly surreal – the hundreds of guests had fairly soon filtered through the garden to the giant marquee. Endless supply of chilled Veuve Clicquot. Help-yourself booth of caviar and smoked salmon and scrambled egg to heap on to bits of muffin or dark bread. Two Tapas booths where whole cured hams were being constantly shaved, bracketing a booth of cheeses. A constant patrol of caterers carrying inventive and ever-varying canapés: Thai chicken curry on a stick in miniature galvanised buckets, hot mini-doughnuts filled with green pesto. What next, what next? After an hour or two the enormous marquee had its own micro-climate of cigarette smoke drifting into the garden. There were armchairs for the exhausted. The Veuve Clicquot flowed forever. Finally we wandered outside. The taxi we had booked pulled up. Polite police questioned the driver then escorted us to it. "That was the best pick-up I've had all night," the driver commented. We felt tempted to reply, "Did you say the best pick-up?" Next morning we found ourselves still engaging in the same bizarre dialogue as in the movie, staring at each other slowly with heads cocked.

"That was... a strange movie." "Did you say... a strange movie?" "Yes... it was strange." *Eyes Wide Shut* stays in our heads.

November/December 1999

Plumbing Stanley Kubrick

For almost two decades Stanley Kubrick was obsessed intermittently by a project for a science fiction movie, featuring a robot child, originally known as *Supertoys* and subsequently called *A.I. Artificial Intelligence*. The inspiration was a brief story by British author Brian Aldiss entitled "Super-Toys Last All Summer Long", first published in a special issue of *Harper's Bazaar* in 1969, the year not only of the first Moon landing but also of the release of *2001: A Space Odyssey*.

Back in 1969 I myself was a young lecturer teaching literature at a couple of universities in Tokyo. Watching that movie from a cramped bucket of a seat in a Japanese cinema, how I admired the sheer spaciousness of Kubrick's Orbital Hilton and of the spaceship *Discovery* bound for Jupiter – not to mention the breadth of his and Arthur Clarke's vision.

Seven years later I became a full-time writer of science fiction. Early in 1990, in my cottage in a little English village sixty miles north of London, the phone rang. Stanley Kubrick's assistant, Tony Frewin, introduced himself and said that Stanley wished to talk to me. Why me? It transpired that Tony had phoned various specialist SF book dealers to ask who they rated as a writer with lots of bright ideas, and several of my story collections, such as *Slow Birds* and *Evil Water*, were duly delivered to Stanley.

Tony offered me a chauffeured ride to (and back from) the manor house just outside St Albans twenty miles north of London where Stanley had lived in enigmatic seclusion for years, very far from Hollywood. Coincidentally St Albans, the Roman town of Verulamium which Boadicea burned to the ground, was my birthplace, although I was raised in the north-east of England. In preparation for my visit I should read a story which would be sent to me promptly by motorbike courier. (As I was to discover, Stanley's interest in a project might lapse for years on end but as soon as it re-awakened things must happen instantly.) Unable to elicit any further clue as to what my visit would be about and feeling a certain frisson, of the entering-a-lion's-den variety, I opted to drive there in my own car. A few hours later the courier arrived and handed over a package containing nine sheets of flimsy fax paper bearing the text of "Super-Toys Last All Summer Long", faded as if retrieved from an ancient file. I was aware from magazine gossip that Northern Irish writer Bob Shaw had

recently been working with Stanley on “a science fiction project”, and this must be it. Bob was the inventor of fictional “slow glass”, which allows owners to look out of their windows nostalgically upon sights from the past, and he had moved from strife-torn Ulster to the northwest of England, 150 miles by railway from St Albans.

The Aldiss story, which was either highly contradictory or ambiguous depending on one’s point of view, proved to be set in an overpopulated future society. To control breeding, pregnancy is only allowed if you win a permit in the weekly lottery run by the Ministry of Population. For several years childless Monica has been yearning to win permission. As a stopgap child-substitute she has a synthetic toddler, David, together with a robot teddy bear. Pathetic puzzled David frets about whether he is real and whether Mummy loves him, while the simple-minded interactive teddy bear helps out with lame-brained advice.

Duly instructed on how to find the manor house, a few days later I turned off one of the main roads out of St Albans into a private parkland, harbouring a dainty mini-village of homes originally built for estate workers by the former owner of the spread, millionaire racehorse-owner Jim Joel. Stanley had bought the manor house of between fifty and a hundred rooms – estimates vary – and the immediate grounds. I headed along a half-mile lane through paddocks and pastures till I reached a modest security gate. Pushing the button of an intercom on a post, I identified myself to Tony. The low gate duly unlocked and swung open. Past masking shrubbery I drove round a corner to a lodge-house, Tony’s own bailiwick beside the gateway to a gravelled courtyard, across which a horseless stable block faced the front of the manor.

Author of *One Hundred Years of Science Fiction Illustration* published in 1974, Tony had worked with Stanley on *2001* and later became his personal assistant. He proved to be a droll friendly chap of wide-ranging and recherché interests, with a detestation of Edith Sitwell (who happens to be buried in the village next to mine).

My memory of that first meeting with Stanley fades into untold other meetings, but the impression which abides (since his appearance never changed) was of a quizzical scruffy figure, bespectacled eyelids hooded, receding hair and beard untidy, dressed in baggy trousers, a jacket with lots of pockets and pens, and tatty old jogging shoes – and with a quirky amiable dry humour and an intensity of focus which could flick disconcertingly from one topic to another far removed.

I never mastered the topography of even part of the ground floor of the house, but its labyrinthine grottos included a mini-movie theatre where

Stanley could study the latest screen releases in darkness and privacy, a large sepulchral computer room where two cats who never saw the light of day glided like wraiths, a subtitle control room (as I thought of it – more of this anon), a billiard room minus billiard table devoted now to books and armchairs where Stanley and I were to sit brainstorming for untold hours, with occasional excursions to twin toilets along a gloomy corridor – and the much cheerier huge kitchen, giving on to the patio and herb garden, where I was to share the first of many lunches with Stanley before we decamped to that billiard room.

That first lunch was a Chinese take-out ferried in from nearby Harpenden by Stanley's Italian chauffeur Emilio d'Alessandro whom I was to come to know well, and who was to become my guide to Stanley's quirks and my sanity-prop on several occasions, just as Tony was to wise me up to certain house rules designed to preserve Stanley's happiness, such as never mentioning *A Clockwork Orange* unless Stanley himself raised the subject. If I didn't need to know what Stanley was up to, then Tony didn't know either, even if he knew full well. ("Dunno, moosh" – or might this be *mouche*?)

At our first meeting Stanley skated briefly over some of my stories which he had read. Since I hadn't seen *Full Metal Jacket*, released three years earlier although not yet on general sale in video shops but only for hire (extremely careful economic management of his movies being quite obsessional with Stanley), he gave me a videotape. Also, a copy of Carlo Collodi's *Pinocchio*, about the puppet who yearned to be a real boy but who gets into such naughty scrapes, and a book about artificial intelligence by Hans Moravec, *Mind Children*. The movie was to be a picaresque robot version of *Pinocchio*, spinning off from the Aldiss story, but the plot-line had bogged down. Aldiss had worked on story development around 1982, and again recently, so it seemed. (Later, Tony told me that Aldiss was fired for faxing "banal crap".) Bob Shaw was then hired but only survived for six weeks. The story-line had ramified – global warming flooding New York and an ice age setting in, but Stanley did not wish me to see any of my predecessors' material apart from the seed-story. Instead he wanted me to write an original 12,000 word story, doing whatever I liked with the Aldiss tale and the main ideas to date. When I mentioned that Aldiss happened to loathe me, Stanley said dismissively, "Don't bother about *him*. I own the story." (Much miffed, Aldiss was to tell a fan magazine, "Not only did the bastard fire me, he hired my enemy instead." Taking fright at his indiscretion, he then browbeat the magazine's editor into recalling copies and reprinting the relevant page.)

During the course of our conversation Stanley discovered that I supported the Labour Party, then in its 11th year of opposition, and especially figures on the far left such as Tony Benn and Ken Livingstone – lover of newts and of science fiction, about which I had interviewed Ken at a World SF Convention in Brighton – and that I had even stood as a Labour Party candidate. (Instead of running for office as in America, in Britain people stand, although the electorate no longer avails itself of this opportunity to chuck rotten eggs.) Stanley greeted my political views with incredulity. "If the Labourites ever get in," he vowed, "I'll leave the country." He feared being ruined by tax-the-rich policies – though he never did quit Britain, doubtless because New Labour, finally elected in 1997, no longer bore much resemblance to a socialist party.

So, in March 1990, I was hired for $20,000 to write 12,000 words. Three weeks later I mailed the result, and Stanley wished to meet me again. Illusions that I had devised a usable story-line evaporated a few minutes after I arrived at the manor house to partake of another Chinese take-out. My story was no use for the project – bye-bye story, then and there, never to see the light of day – but Stanley did like the way I had gone about writing it. Would I work with him on story development on a week-by-week basis? Warner Brothers would phone to make me an offer.

Warner Brothers duly phoned next morning, but instead of proposing a fee as I'd been led to expect, unexpectedly asked how much I wanted to be paid per week. "We don't know how to rate you. Are you low? Are you high? Are you in the middle?" (Actually, I'm five foot six.) "I'll have to think about that," said I, and hastened to phone Bob Shaw. Bob was an old friend from many encounters over pints of beer at British science fiction conventions where Bob was much in demand for his spoof "Serious Scientific Talks" which always had audiences rolling in the aisles. Big and beefy but more shy than he seemed, Bob was sacked half way through his brief tenure with Stanley for presuming to pop off to an SF convention without asking permission. People working for Stanley must devote body and soul, full-time. Reinstated, Bob only remained for three more weeks. He told me that he simply could not cope with the constant mind-shifts and wished me better luck. Warner's offer to him had been $600 per week, sweetened by a bonus of $40,000 if what Bob wrote substantially resulted in a movie, which his literary agent had promptly accepted without quibble since Bob needed cash. In view of the $20,000 I received for my story, $600 a week sounded a bit meagre, so I phoned Warner back and said I would need to consider how much I might earn if I spent one week writing a story of my own and sold it to, say, *Omni* magazine which would pay

around $1500; then there would be future reprint and translation income, none of which obviously could materialise in the case of anything written for Stanley's eyes only. An hour later Warner phoned back: Stanley had ordered them to offer me $3000 a week right away because he wanted me to start as soon as possible; and the bonus carrot would be $100,000.

For eight more months from May 1990 till January 1991 I was to be Stanley Kubrick's mind-slave, writing scenes in the morning to fax around noon for lengthy discussion by phone in the evening, or being collected from home by Emilio to arrive in time for lunch and an afternoon of mental gymnastics with Stanley.

Because Bob Shaw lived further away from Stanley than me, he had needed to use trains to get to story conferences. Bob confided that he always took a train an hour earlier than the one he claimed to be on, so that he could fortify himself with a few stiff whiskies in the bar at St Albans train station before Emilio met him (until one day, his curiosity piqued as to how Bob could exit from a platform so speedily, Emilio arrived early and the ruse was rumbled). I was more upfront about wanting some preliminary alcohol in the sub-title control room to set me up. This room was where shaven-headed Leon Vitali presided. Leon played the role of Lord Bullingdon in *Barry Lyndon*, then he went off to Sweden hoping to become a Bergman, before returning to work for Stanley. As the ultimate perfectionist, Stanley oversaw the presentation of all of his movies in all countries on Earth. If a movie was to be screened in Hungary with Hungarian subtitles, all the subtitles must be vetted by a hired expert to ensure that they were faithful. The dilemma of the most suitable Korean title for *Full Metal Jacket* occupied weeks on end.

A notice pinned up in the same room announced, "Here we snatch catastrophe from the jaws of mishap" – for perfection sometimes broke down. Stanley had initially asked whether alcohol would leave me in a coherent state, but I assured him that beer was necessary to my thought processes. When my presence was announced thereafter, a hospitable crackle might come over the short-wave radio, "Bucket of beer for Ian!" Since the manor house was large, communications with Stanley were often by radio. I had been sitting nattering with Tony and Leon and drinking Grolsch lager for almost an hour one day when Stanley walked in and glared. "You're supposed to tell me when Ian gets here." "Your radio isn't switched on, Stanley..."

Stanley would lead me through to the kitchen to fix lunch. Or, in his case, breakfast. After over twenty years residence in Britain Stanley still slept American time except when the exigencies of making a movie

interfered with his preferred schedule, and he liked the same menu each and every day until it palled on him. After a few weeks of Chinese take-outs served from foil containers came the era of the hired specialist vegetarian cooks, until the realisation that they couldn't cook very well, were not personally vegetarian, and were stealing from the freezers. After that: big salmon steaks all the way, poached in milk by Stanley in the microwave oven, a skill of which he was proud.

While we ate, the television in the kitchen was invariably tuned to CNN, a background and stimulus to conversation. Large floral arrangements decorated the light airy long room, subjects for the paintings of his wife Christiane, some of which hung there and in the adjoining salon. These were truly beautiful, quite comparable to Bonnard in their vivacity, colour sense, and luminosity. When Christiane dropped by one lunchtime, the matter of *A Clockwork Orange* did crop up. One reason why the Kubricks had moved to Britain was that Britain seemed a lot safer than New York City. (Nevertheless, while a local policeman was paying a visit to the manor house one day, Stanley tried to find out how fast an armed response unit could turn up if necessary, although the policeman avoided giving a precise answer.) Following the British release in 1971 of *A Clockwork Orange* with its ultraviolence some copycat incidents ensued, perpetrated by hooligans dressed as droogs, resulting in much hoo-ha in the press accusing the movie of inspiring thuggery. An exhibition of Christiane's work to raise money for charity went ahead on condition that reporters focused only on art and charity and asked nothing about the movie. Of course, a reporter did ask, and seized on the only comment she would make to come up with the headline, MY MAN IS NOT A BEAST, SAYS CLOCKWORK ORANGE SPOUSE. All very upsetting. Stanley banned further showings of the movie in Britain and any sale of videos in the country forever after. Forewarned by Tony, I refrained from mentioning to Stanley that pirated Dutch-subtitled videos of the notorious movie were reportedly on regular sale in London outside Camden Town tube station.

Next stop: the billiard room. Even ordinary conversations with Stanley were a bit disconcerting since he would suddenly shift to an entirely different topic, as if he had forgotten or lost interest in what was of consuming interest a moment earlier. When we were discussing the story line itself, these veerings became not merely ninety-degrees but three-dimensional – we weren't just into lateral thinking; this was Escher mind-space. One moment: what if our teddy bear has a kangaroo pouch to keep things in? Next moment: so will the Labourites introduce currency controls

immediately they gain power? After a few minutes of politics: forget Teddy, how about a café where other robots hang out? Eventually I decided that Stanley's intention, whether deliberate or purely instinctive, was to maintain mental intensity hour after hour, never mind how exhausting this might prove – a way of sustaining and heightening my performance, and his own too perhaps, which has left people who worked with him feeling drained dry. If as a consequence your brain turned into scrambled egg, as did mine on a few occasions, Stanley would seem genuinely surprised. What he wanted, he did not really know, and it was up to me as soothsayer and dream-interpreter to guess – though he could be remorselessly logical in finding loopholes in lovely proposed scenes, little hair-cracks which could rapidly widen into uncrossable chasms.

Story conferences were akin to building a precarious castle of wooden blocks or a house of cards, often doomed to collapse towards the end of the afternoon when I was hoping to make my departure with definite scenes to write up the next morning from my pages of scribbled notes. Jerome Bixby once wrote a story entitled "It's a *Good* Life" about a child of paranormal powers whose wishes become reality and who compels adults to carry out any whim. Sometimes I felt that I was trapped in that child's nursery, although Stanley was far friendlier than that dreadful little boy. Cuddly, even – like a shaggy teddy bear himself, though with claws in those paws; and the claws could hook and squeeze till you might turn into a limp rag. True, this was only because he wanted the best, and more and more of it, and believed that plugging away remorselessly at something about which he had an instinct would eventually bear fruit. Was it 58 times that Stanley reshot Jack Nicholson crossing a street in *The Shining* in the hope, as he told me, that something interesting would happen? In face of this I resolutely needed to sustain my own identity – if that eroded, there wouldn't be many bright new ideas – and to establish a cordon I had made it clear from the start that I would only work weekdays, leading to subsequent sallies from Stanley about trades unions and productivity agreements. Stick and carrot still lurked in the background (although bothering about either of these could have been fatal to creativity). Once, when a plot mishap escalated into a catastrophe, Stanley eyed me gravely. "There's a lot of *money* in this for you, Ian" – referring to the pie-in-the-sky bonus. Distraught at the latest débâcle and a suggestion that maybe I should work all through the weekend or not go to bed, I retorted, "There's no point in threatening me with money. I'm not mainly motivated by it." (Ah, the Labourite fights back!) Stanley gaped at me in bewilderment. Mind you, by five in the afternoon, we could both be

fairly wiped out. We shambled towards the sub-title control room, where Stanley stared blankly at Leon. “Do you know where Leon is?” he asked. “I *am* Leon,” said Leon.

Even when the story-line had not crashed, converting my notes into a scene next morning could be problematic. Sometimes my notes, whilst perfectly accurate, consisted of lines such as “She says, ‘Blah-blah,’ so he says, ’Blah-blah,’” because neither Stanley nor I had the foggiest notion what the characters could say in the circumstances, though we knew they had to say something.

To maintain pathos, dialogue between robots needed to be particularly literal-minded and simple. The movie might be about machine-intelligence but here there were no fast-track cybernetic intellects out-thinking the human race. I must watch Peter Sellers as the retarded childlike gardener in *Being There*.

Heigh-ho: “You are beautiful. I have a clean dick.” (“That’s more like it,” Stanley told me over the phone.)

“You are a goddess. May I sit in your car?” (“Stop writing dialogue! Just describe it!”) (“No, write it all in dialogue!”) I was beginning to feel like a deranged robot myself. A Robo-Scribe, with contradictory programs running. Would I go the way of HAL, losing control of my language and my mind?

Sometimes, what I faxed to Stanley positively pleased him. “You’re on a roll, Ian. Carry on. God bless you.” This was after I introduced a male sex-robot to accompany David and Teddy around on their travels and travails. By themselves the artificial boy and robo-bear were fairly naïve and incompetent, even if David was obsessive about becoming a real boy. “What we need,” Stanley had informed me, “is some GI Joe character to help him out.” “How about a gigolo-robot,” I had suggested, and duly wrote scenes. Stanley’s response: “I guess we lost the kiddie market – but what the hell.”

On other occasions he would chastise me over the phone. “It’s like you’re writing a B-movie for a moron,” was one of his pithier castigations. This meant that we needed another story conference the very next day. After a run of scenes which seemed fine to me but which were savaged by Stanley, he called and conceded, “It happens to read well today.” “Maybe it isn’t an accident that it reads well,” I suggested. “I know you’re trying to befuddle me,” came the reply. Ah, he had seen through me! If what I was writing was fine, that was because I was being particularly sneaky, deliberately writing trash then startling him with pages of splendour, my own version of stick and carrot presumably.

Of course, writing which found favour would just as easily result in another conference since I had sewn that aspect up, consequently we needed to attack the story from a new angle.

Often it was as if each morning I began writing an entirely new short story which I was obliged to abandon the same evening, only to start another one next day. This could be irksome to an author, though as Stanley said to me when I attempted to defend a scene, “The trouble with you writers is you think your words are immortal.” Well, on the inside of the manor house door was a notice: DO NOT LET DOGS OUT. (Those were the three or four clone-like Golden Retrievers which each had its own cushion under the main kitchen table.) As I prepared to depart that afternoon, Stanley paused by the notice and growled, “It should say writers too.” Fortunately Tony had already told me the movie director’s favourite joke. A dumb European starlet arrives in Hollywood. To further her career, who does she sleep with? “The studio doorman?” I suggested. Tony had grinned. “No, worse! She sleeps with the writer!”

Irrespective of the status of writers, Stanley was in his own unique way much preoccupied with the welfare of dumb animals. I might have deemed it a raw deal for the computer room cats never to venture into the garden, but Stanley was worried that the Golden Retrievers would tear the cats to pieces, not knowing who they were, and at least the cats drank the best Evian water. When we were passing through the computer room Stanley noticed that the cats’ water bowl was empty and proceeded to replenish from a nearby bottle, though since he did not bother to bend down the cascade proved messy. Emilio told me that arguments had raged in the past about Stanley himself feeding the pets and using the Spode china as food bowls. “*You do not use the Spode, Stanley!*” “But I only want the best for the animals,” Stanley had protested. To avert such contretemps it had become Emilio’s job to feed the dogs every morning including even Christmas Day, a bit of a chore when Emilio lived in North London miles from the manor house, though the alternative could be a catastrophe. A third cat lived permanently upstairs at a climate-controlled temperature of 80 degrees Fahrenheit or so, and each day Emilio dutifully cut a trayful of fresh grass from the garden for that cat to roll in; then he would vacuum up the grass.

When Stanley became convinced that the birds in the manor house grounds were starving, said Emilio, he took to throwing whole loaves of bread out of the windows. Before long the birds were becoming so stout that they could hardly take off. Inevitably one of the obese starlings fell down a chimney. The fireplace in question had been boarded up. Behind

the board the bird fluttered frantically. Soon a mishap was heading towards an expensive catastrophe as Stanley phoned animal welfare and rescue organizations in Britain and America.

"Look," said Emilio, "all I need is a saw and a clear plastic bag. I cut through the board, I hold the bag over the hole, the bird sees the daylight and jumps into the bag." "I don't know," said Stanley, "you might harm it." "But," exclaimed Emilio, "it will die of exhaustion while you phone all these organizations!" Despite deep reservations, Stanley allowed Emilio to proceed. Rapidly, the bird was in the bag – which Emilio held aloft. "Now, Stanley, do you want to phone Harley Street for a bird psychiatrist?" "Well maybe," began Stanley, "we ought to – " Hastily Emilio opened the bag out of the nearest window, and the bird flapped down to the lawn to gorge on more loaves.

The project was derailed for days on end when Warner Brothers phoned to inform me that the upstairs cat had died. Extreme grief for a dead cat is entirely understandable to me, yet it did rather seem as if Warner Brothers itself had ground to halt. I recall Emilio revealing that he had built a Retriever-size coffin to keep out of sight on the premises as a contingency.

Long-suffering Emilio, whose dearest wish was to retire to his vineyard south of Monte Cassino! A deserter from the Italian army after five days' service, he had headed for London and via garage work became a racing car test driver in the same team as Emerson Fittipaldi and James Hunt. Squeezed out of this job, he spent an unenjoyable interval in the ice cream trade in Wales for a while before signing up back in London with a mini-cab firm, which contracted him out to Stanley who was then shooting *A Clockwork Orange*. Stanley noticed how this new driver was willing to work all hours day and night, so he sacked his own ageing chauffeur, and presently Emilio became much more than merely a driver. Short, dark, and wiry, he had kept practical matters ticking over at the manor house for many years, playing a major role in trying to steer catastrophes back into mere mishaps.

When you're invaluable to Stanley it's difficult to escape or to have a life.

Although Emilio lived in North London, he was never out of touch. A special dedicated phone line was installed – Emilio's English wife would not allow Stanley to call their ordinary home number any more because Stanley could become too demanding.

One day Emilio was driving me down the M1 motorway in the charcoal-coloured Mercedes en route to the manor house. "Ian," he said,

“Stanley phoned me on Sunday afternoon, even though he promised I could have Sunday afternoon to myself. ‘I need some string, Emilio,’ he told me. Stanley likes to tie things up with string. Ah but Ian,” continued Emilio, “I know about these things by now. So I said, ‘Stanley, where are you?’ ‘I’m in the computer room.’ ‘All right, Stanley, do you see the wall with the shelves? On the middle shelf in the middle there is a ball of string.’ ‘I can see it!’ ‘Wait! Go directly to the shelf, and come back here with the string, and tell me you have it!’ ‘Ian,’ said Emilio triumphantly, ‘I have string in every room for situations like this. And I also have *extra* balls of string *hidden* in each room as well!”

So there were ways of coping.

This particular Mercedes was not the original one with a sunshine roof. During the filming of *The Shining* Stanley’s favourite food for several weeks on end had been Big Macs. Finishing one of these in the car while Emilio was chauffeuring him, Stanley crumpled up the rubbish, spied the open sunshine roof, and threw the wrappings out. The wind promptly tossed them back in, all over him. “Fuck,” said Stanley, “this car isn’t much good.” A joke, or a genuine grouse?

Could it be that Stanley had become slightly detached from reality? When Emilio was driving him to a computer fair in London, Stanley became puzzled. “Why are all there all these cars on the road?” “Because people go to work, Stanley.” “Why don’t they work at home?” “Why are *you* in a car, Stanley?”

Stanley’s white Porsche, on the other hand, had stood almost unused for three years because Emilio refused to drive it. When Stanley moved to the manor house from a residence nearer Pinewood Studios, he took Emilio aside. “Look, I don’t want any removal men touching my things. Take two weeks over it, Emilio. Borrow someone from the set. But shift all my own stuff yourself, will you?” Because of little obstacles such as union regulations Emilio could not of course borrow anyone, so he shifted tons of Stanley’s paraphernalia personally – and hurt his back.

Being a low-slung car to climb into, the Porsche was not used by Emilio for a very long time, although once a week he dutifully switched on the engine to charge the battery and check that everything was in working order. Eventually a letter arrived from Porsche UK: *Dear Mr Kubrick, We are distressed that you are abusing our fine engineering product by not having it serviced regularly...* Brandishing this letter, Stanley confronted Emilio. “Why are you abusing the Porsche, Emilio?” “What do you mean, Stanley?” “It says here you are abusing the Porsche.” “But no one uses it! I am trying to save you money, Stanley! Save you £400 minimum service

fee when the car needs no service!" "Well, I don't know. It says here..." Seizing the letter, Emilio rushed to phone the head of Porsche UK. "Do you know my name?" he demanded. "I was Emerson Fittipaldi's driving partner!" Emilio was duly recognized. "And do you know how many miles are on the clock of our Porsche after three years? Three thousand miles! Does that tell you something?" "You aren't using it." The head of Porsche UK needed to write a personal letter to Stanley before the catastrophe relapsed into a mere mishap.

Just as well that Emilio had a sense of humour, or of the absurd! When *Barry Lyndon* was being filmed in the Irish Republic in 1973, members of the large film crew began consorting with the local maidens. Since contraception was banned in Ireland it became essential to fly in a large amount of protection. Being an Italian Catholic himself, Emilio told me that he knew naught about such matters. Without Emilio being told what he was to act as courier for, he was sent over to England to bring back a big wrapped box. As soon as he went through the electronic security gate at Heathrow Airport bound for Ireland carrying thousands of aluminum-wrapped condoms, the gate and the security staff went crazy. "Put that down! What have you got in that box! "I don't know," said Emilio. He was hustled to a distance, the area was cleared, the bomb disposal robot trundled in. Delicately the robot snipped a hole in the box. Carefully it reached in and lifted out... a condom.

Everyone burst out laughing, except Emilio. "What is it, please?"

"You're flying to Ireland and you don't know what *those* are?" "But I don't," protested Emilio. "What are they?"

Emilio and I got on so well together during our regular trips that he reactivated the Porsche for me, and I even started learning Italian from him. "*Stanley è nostro zio,*" we would chorus: Stanley is our uncle. It was Emilio who resolved my puzzlement as to how Stanley could always be wearing exactly the same clothes, which whilst rumpled had not yet become filthy. When Stanley found something he liked, it transpired, he bought many spares. He was not in fact dressed in the selfsame jacket and trousers but in identical replicas all in much the same used state. His scruffy trainers, however, were the one and only pair to which he was deeply attached. Christiane had tried to smarten up his image by buying him a new pair, which he dutifully wore for a few days before begging Emilio, "Look, lose these you, will you?"

Stanley did adore acquiring things (and people too, you might say).

"Do you know what the essence of movie-making is?" Stanley asked me. "It's *buying lots of things.*" The Labour Party was responsible for the

fact that nothing bought in Britain worked properly, so he preferred to buy from a distance such as Düsseldorf or California. When *Full Metal Jacket* was being filmed in England a whole plastic replica Vietnamese jungle was air-freighted in from California, so I was assured. Next morning Stanley walked on set, took one look at it, and said, "I don't like it. Get rid of it." The technicians shared out the trees, giving a new look to gardens in North London, and a *real* jungle was delivered instead, palm trees uprooted from Spain.

Maybe because a Porsche turned up so often at our house, we were burgled. No big trauma; the intruders needed to tidy the house a bit in order to steal anything. But one essential thing they took away, in which to haul our video recorders, was the canvas bag I used to transport my increasing mass of mutually contradictory printouts whenever I went to see Stanley. The intruders obligingly stacked the printouts on the floor; but I was bagless. Fortunately I discovered in Boots the Chemists a highly suitable bag, a free gift with each purchase of a £15 bottle of French Caractère aftershave. Personally I disdain aftershave, but the bottle would serve as a present for someone. When next I visited Stanley he admired the bag, since he has an affection for bags as well as string. The time after, he admired it even more. "That is a *very* good bag, Ian." "Well, you can't have it," I told him, "unless you buy a bottle of French aftershave." Promptly he picked up a phone. "Tony, call Boots the Chemists in St Albans..." This was done. Two bottles of aftershave and two bags remained in stock. "Buy them both, Tony. Drive into St Albans and get them *now*." Half an hour later Tony delivered two bottles of aftershave and two bags to our story conference in the ex-billiard room. Happily Stanley ripped the cellophane off one bag, and patted it. Two months later bottles and bags still rested in the same place on the carpet.

Although I was a "Labourite", I did adore the general air of caprice. One day, apropos flooded New York, I mused what you might see by way of statues or such from the window of Macy's. Within moments Tony had the Public Relations Manager of Macy's on the phone for Stanley.

"This is Stanley Kubrick. I'd like you to go to the window and tell me what you can see."

The man's description wasn't too good. "That's the trouble with this positive discrimination," Stanley grumbled. "They employ *retards*."

So Stanley phoned the New York office of Warner Brothers to tell them to send a photographer right away to take pictures all around Macy's, these to be sent to us immediately by air-express. On my very next visit those photographs were waiting, and I suppose we looked through them

for at least thirty seconds. Two months later, they still lay fanned out in the same position.

What a magpie Stanley was, seizing on whatever I might mention. A book I owned about *The Criminal Prosecution and Capital Punishment of Animals*: he must borrow it. Papal Indulgences; and I was faxing him information. I had written a novel entitled *Inquisitor* set in the wacky far-future world of Games Workshop's Warhammer 40,000; he wanted a pre-publication printout right away. "Who knows, Ian?" he mused. "Maybe this is my next movie?" I arranged for Games Workshop to send him samples of their games and artwork and obtained for him from fantasy artist Ian Miller a portfolio of drawings of monsters. Anything could be grist to the mill, now or at some future date.

What seemed to me caprice was perhaps perfectionism, the exploring of every possible avenue that cropped up. "We need some sort of weird landscape." "Surreal, like Max Ernst?" Immediately Tony was despatched in the Merc to London's Charing Cross Road to buy every single volume about Max Ernst in stock at Zwemmer's art bookshop. Taking the pile home, I wrote surrealistically and faxed for a couple of days. "It's just a woman in a flowerpot," sighed Stanley. "Forget it."

After a couple of months of working on the project I bought a new car, which I drove to the manor house because after that particular Friday's story conference I would be heading directly for Cambridge to be guest at a science fiction convention (with Stanley's knowledge). He asked me to open the car door so that he could sniff inside; he loved the smell of new cars. "The Merc's getting old," he announced to Tony and Leon. "We're going to have to make a new movie soon, guys."

Then Tony went astray. Warner Books was producing a handsome volume of Christiane's flower paintings, but Stanley took a dislike to the binding, sumptuous though it appeared to me. Accordingly Tony was despatched the 350 miles to Edinburgh in the Mercedes to supervise total rebinding. Late at night he phoned in, distressed – half way through the wilds of Northumberland he had run out of petrol; *what should he do?* It was too far to send Emilio to rescue him. Catastrophe had struck again.

And yet again: I was writing my scenes on an Amstrad PCW which copied to 3-inch diskettes. Stanley's grown-up computer only accepted 3½-inch disks. We were electronically incompatible. I bought a full-blooded PC, but Stanley forbade me to use the new machine in case I lost precious text due to unfamiliarity. Since he could not keep track of the accumulating faxes and since we seemed to be getting somewhere, by July it became vital to have all my files on hard disk in his own computer. At

this juncture my mind turned to my good old friend Dave Langford, award-winning editor of a science fiction news-sheet named *Ansible* famous for its wit, and presiding cyber-guru of a software service for writers based in Reading, the town midway between London and Oxford where Oscar Wilde served his gaol sentence of hard labour.

Yes, of course, twittered Dave, he could convert files from a PCW diskette on to IBM-clone disks and forward those to Stanley.

Time rolled onward to August. On the 2nd of August Iraq invaded Kuwait and five days later America began deploying Desert Shield in Saudi Arabia. Stanley became much preoccupied by the psychology of Saddam Hussein and global strategy, as the director of *Dr. Strangelove* well might. "Caught between Iraq and a hard place," he predicted over the remains of our salmon.

The end of August saw the World Science Fiction Convention in The Hague, where I was arranging the hospitality suite for Science Fiction Writers of America Inc., me being the European Editor of their *Bulletin* and their officer closest to Holland. I took care to book a week's unpaid leave from the project, and Stanley was graciously supportive. Afterwards the *Sunday Times* reported that Aldiss had played a robot teddy bear on stage at the convention. Stanley fumed. "He must have gone insane." Leon phoned to tell me that Stanley wouldn't be calling about my daily fax. Instead he had gone to his gun club "to shoot targets to pieces." Did he take a model of me along? "No," came the comforting answer, "just of two previous collaborators."

October arrived: mellow fruitfulness and chilly nights. We were sitting in the kitchen over salmon remains, door open on to the sunlit patio, when I spied a bee on the floor. "There's a bee on the floor," I pointed out. "Will it sting me?" Stanley asked immediately. Mortality worried him, which is why he would never fly in a plane, although he once qualified for a pilot's licence, an experience which convinced him how dangerous flying is. I rose to inspect the bee more clearly – it looked worn out. "Don't kill it, Ian! Sit down!" He must have thought that any left-wing Labourite would stamp remorselessly on bees. Bravely he said, "*I'll* put it outside." So he found a crystal dome and a sheet of card and manoeuvred the bee under the glass. "You stay here," he ordered, in case I might sneak after him, intent on doom for the bee. Presently he returned proudly from the herb garden. "I found a place for it."

A mischievous imp prompted me. "You know," I said, "the nights are frosty." "Do you mean you think the bee might die?" "It might, Stanley, outside." "Now you've made me *guilty.*" Back into the garden he headed,

clutching glass dome and card while I got on watching CNN. Many minutes passed till he reappeared, bee under glass once more. “I found where I put it. What do suppose bees eat?” “I think maybe *honey*,” I suggested. So we raided the larder for a big pot of honey, and he spooned out a volcano-like mound to sprawl next to the bee. Then we needed to explore the unused rooms of the house to find a place for the bee to sit upon the card with its honey throughout the coming winter. Only once this was sorted out could we tackle the problems of the little lost robot-boy and teddy bear.

Saddam continued to cause concern. If he nerve-gasses Israel, will the Israelis nuke Baghdad?

It was Emilio who held my hand (figuratively speaking – he was a very safe driver) when escalating demands for story conferences interfered with my own domestic equilibrium. Twice a week, fine. Three times, well okay. Four times a week was definitely disruptive and mental turmoil finally caught up with me. Given free rein, Stanley would progressively become more demanding until he could turn you into a drained husk. At this rate I would be visiting every day of the week. “You have to tell him, Ian,” said Emilio. “Be firm.” So I refused a story conference. When next I turned up, Stanley said plaintively, “I thought you liked coming down here.” “I do,” I said, “I just need to get my confidence back.” “Ian, you are very confident,” responded Stanley, though I didn’t feel so at the time. And we resumed.

I faxed, I disked. Disks went from me to Dave to be converted, and onward to Stanley. But a Bermuda Triangle was beginning to emerge, linking St Albans, my home to the north, and Reading to the east – a zone in which disks and secret text could *go astray*, otherwise known as Stanley losing things. Catastrophe struck in early November. One morning I was at my desk conjuring up enough words to fax when Tony phoned to report that Stanley had lost another of Dave’s disks. Wishing to carry on working, unthinkingly I told Dave’s phone number to Tony, which was a foolish error since this was Dave’s unlisted friends-only number, the reason being that Dave is deaf. My own high-pitched voice comes over clearly through Dave’s phone amplifier, whereas Tony talks in a more laid-back fashion, with long enigmatic silences between sentences – while, for his part, Dave has a distinctly whimsical tone to his utterances. Tony concluded that Dave was insane and phoned me again, concerned that I was employing a lunatic as a go-between. Shortly after, Dave phoned to complain about releasing his number to this peculiar person whom he couldn’t understand. I phoned Tony to tell him never to use Dave’s phone

number again. If anything needed communicating, the message must go through me, because Dave could only understand me.

Stanley became intrigued and concerned about this bizarre computer wizard with the ear trumpet, through whose hands the sacred disks were passing.

"Who *is* this Dave Ansible?" he demanded.

"An ansible," I explained, "is an imaginary instantaneous interstellar communication device invented by Ursula le Guin. It's an anagram of lesbian."

"Really?" retorted Stanley. "Do you trust this Ansible Dave? Sounds like a cowboy's name."

"I trust him with my life," I avowed.

"And with our disks," he muttered.

Paranoia deepened. Stanley insisted I tell Dave that as soon as he had copied disks he must erase all our text from his equipment. Dave groaned compliance.

A week or so later, Stanley phoned to say he had lost another disk. Would I ask Dave to send him a copy?

Dave obliged – and Stanley pounced. "How can Ansible Dave send a copy if he deleted the files?"

Slightly grumpy by now, Dave explained that so as to avoid delay he had unerased the files on his hard disk by a laborious and tricky process; he wouldn't make the mistake of being spontaneously helpful again.

"What if," demanded Stanley, "he's selling all our material to East European science fiction writers?"

Could anyone but myself and Stanley conceivably understand the Library of Babel that was being faxed and disked? No matter. "Ian, tell Ansible Dave he must get rid of the stuff off his hard disk by *compressing* it."

Only permitted to work on a PCW at the time, I scarcely understood what this meant. Stanley began to talk semi-jocularly of a dawn raid on Reading by Mercedes to compress Dave's hard disk. Dave took mild umbrage at the whirlpool of paranoia now sucking him in, and dug in his heels. Why should he suffer? Did I work inside a locked bank vault and send my disks by security courier? Did Stanley really lie awake at night worrying about a few deleted files?

Oh yes he did. "Of course he can compress his hard disk," Stanley informed me. "He's bull-shitting you! Ask him if he's ever heard of... *Norton Utilities*!"

More and more of my writing time was taken up in arcane

negotiations and invoking computer deities of which I knew little at the time.

To avoid Norton Utilities being targeted on Reading, Dave wrote some software of his own and compressed the ghosts of erased files out of existence. Catastrophe diminished back towards mishap.

Eventually, at the end of the year, Stanley told me to write the whole story up in ninety pages, omitting, on his orders, some of what I thought were the best bits. “I hope there’s some emotion in it, Ian,” he confided. “Put some vaginal jelly on the words,” an invaluable tip not often entrusted to writers. At times during the project I couldn’t help but feel that the unfolding story was ridiculous, and that maybe the long delay since *Full Metal Jacket*, and the endless permutations of *Supertoys*, were because Stanley was leery of tossing his cap back into a ring now dominated by the likes of Steven Spielberg. Blessedly, the resulting ninety page story seemed to read pretty well; and at least it made sense at last.

Alas, Stanley became despondent; and parting was such sweet sorrow, conducted in a melancholy though civilised way over the phone. Weeks later Stanley remembered the fax machine, which he had bought to lend to me in the first place, and Emilio was sent to collect it. I got on with my own writing.

Three months later, just when I thought it was safe to answer the phone, Stanley called. “Ian, you know that story you wrote for me?” How could I have forgotten it? “Well,” he went on, “I lost it.”

“You lost it,” I repeated numbly. I thought desperately. “It’s on disk too.”

“I, um, wrote over that disk.”

“You wrote over the disk,” I muttered. “It was you who told me always to write to clean disk.” And no, it wasn’t on his hard drive.

I supplied a replacement printout and disk.

“This,” declared Stanley, “is one of the world’s great stories. Would you write a short synopsis of it I can show to people? And don’t forget the vaginal jelly.” I was rehired for a week to write twenty pages. Emilio came to return the fax machine. I faxed, I disked.

“It’s great,” said Stanley, before uttering the fatal words: “I might just tinker with it a little...”

A year went silently by. *Ring-ring*: Stanley had suddenly remembered about the project and discovered that he had lost all the material again. Up the motorway came Emilio.

“What’s Stanley been doing for the past year?” I asked.

“Mainly, Ian, he has been sitting in a room watching a dog die.”

If his dog could die, so might Stanley too some day. Special pills were flown in from California to keep the dog alive. “I had to sit in that room too,” said Emilio. “The dog stank. For ten days it could not eat. It could not shit. Stanley kept feeding it the miracle pills.”

When the crisis occurred, at eight one morning, Emilio hastened to waken Stanley. “Stanley, you must get up.” “What’s it dying *now* for?” Stanley complained.

Obviously Stanley couldn’t *only* have been nursing a dog all that time. He kept so many balls in the air, generally out of sight of one another, like a dark star with numerous satellites hidden from one another but sustained in orbit by his powerful gravity. Preliminary work on *Eyes Wide Shut*, based on Arthur Schnitzler’s *Traumnovelle* – in which Stanley had been interested since the late 1960s – was also ongoing, Warner Brothers funding both it and *AI*.

Emilio announced: “Ian, I have given notice to Stanley at last. I am quitting.”

“*What?”* I cried.

“Yes... I have given him three years notice.”

Three years, hmm?

Another year passed and the phone rang again. Stanley was really anxious to get on with the project. Unfortunately (all together now), he had Lost The Material.

Stanley ignored Emilio’s countdown. One year to go, Stanley. Six months. Three months. “You must pay attention, Stanley – you must make other arrangements.” Stanley would not listen. Zero hour arrived; Emilio had already sold his house. Stanley refused to let him go and rented a house for Emilio to live in for another six months. At last, at long last, Emilio escaped to his vineyard.

In early 1994 British fantasy artist Fangorn, who work had illustrated the cover of my Games Workshop novel *Inquisitor*, was hired for two-and-a-half years to fax to Stanley futuristic images he wanted to see regarding *AI*. Since Fangorn (in real life, Chris Baker) would be at another World Science Fiction Convention, this time in Glasgow in August 1995, Stanley warned him that he might meet a certain sf writer there, and if so he must not speak to me. Paranoia, forever! Or could it be compartmentalization? Assemble the jigsaw in the dark, with only Stanley possessing the night-vision glasses. When a certain sf writer did discreetly waylay dapper young Fangorn, Fangorn was the soul of good-natured discretion.

In 1994 too, Scottish-born Sara Maitland, whose stories give a sharp dark slant to such fables as “Hansel and Gretel”, was brought in until the

second half of 1995 to provide a feminist fairy-tale focus. Although she asked Stanley who else had worked on the saga, he refused to tell her, and she only found out after his death. With her, he always referred to the project as “Pinocchio”.

At that same convention in Glasgow Bob Shaw became engaged to a wealthy widowed American woman, Nancy Tucker, a friend of long standing, in a poignantly romantic sunset scene (both metaphorically and literally) slightly reminiscent of *Cocoon*. Bob’s wife Sadie had died suddenly in 1991; Bob had tried to drink the world dry, then suffered cancer and a year’s sickly aftermath. Damnably, scarcely had the gates of happiness re-opened than Bob himself died in February 1996. Meanwhile, Fangorn very nearly took up full-time residence with Stanley; but then came the end of the course for him too because *Eyes Wide Shut* was under way and Stanley could not keep both balls in the air at once.

Throughout the 1990s disinformation (or wishful thinking) appeared in the press or on the Internet. Stanley was about to start filming the life of Coco Chanel. He was probably about to start filming in Bratislava a movie set in the aftermath of communism featuring a boy and a young woman – this came as a considerable surprise to the director of media liaison for Slovakia whom I happened to bump into at a convention in neighbouring Moravia, unless the chap had signed an oath of secrecy or was lying. Special effects wizards in Hollywood had built a robot boy for Stanley, who was about to begin filming *AI* in Ireland. (And maybe a robot boy is indeed palely loitering to this day in the billiard room, having proved to Stanley that computer animation was the real key to filming *AI*.)

Setting *AI* aside temporarily, Stanley filmed – rather protractedly – the parallel project, *Eyes Wide Shut*. Rumour on the Internet was that he agreed to do this for Warner so that they would release vast sums of money for *AI*, to realize his true dream.

And then Stanley died.

In retrospect maybe the artificial intelligence – perhaps one should say limited intelligence – movie *is* potentially one of the great tales of the world, having been nursed and goaded by Stanley far from its origin. Warner Brothers soon began trying to salvage the accumulated material, and the hot tip emerged that Steven Spielberg would be the director. “Stanley Kubrick’s *AI* directed by Steven Spielberg” will inevitably be a different movie from what Stanley would himself have made, but posthumously Stanley may still cast his sway. *A Clockwork Orange* is being re-released in March 2000 to coincide with the first anniversary of Stanley’s death. To coincide with the second or third anniversary, aha...

Looking back, I feel a great affection for Stanley – or am I as bemused as the little lost robot boy about what is real and what is not? Shortly after Stanley's death I was a guest at the Eurocon held in Dortmund, Germany, and I did a TV interview about Stanley in the street outside of the convention centre. A chalk mark was made on the very edge of the kerb for me to stand on, very erect (a bit difficult after all the liquid hospitality) otherwise any passing Mercedes would slice off my rump. A brisk wind was lancing across my eyes, another cunning piece of positioning by my interrogators. By the time I came to sum up my feelings about Stanley my eyes were watering, so that I seemed to be weeping for him on TV. How real was this? It certainly felt real.

In the wake of secretive Stanley's death a spate of memoirs appeared in newspapers and magazines – to the extent of being satirised in an amusing piece in *The New Yorker* by Alex Ross entitled "Stanley Kubrick Was My Friend, Too" (August 2nd 1999). So many people suddenly seemed to have known "the real Stanley", and blew their own trumpets noisily – and quite sourly in the case of Frederic Raphael, who was brought in to script *Eyes Wide Shut*. Stanley did tend to use people and drain them in the process, and this could ruffle egos after the initial flush of excitement. As a supreme and obsessive *auteur*, why shouldn't he? To pursue the drainage analogy, defining Stanley's modus operandi for me especially apropos Frederic Raphael, Stanley's brother-in-law remarked, "What do you do if you want something fixed? You call the Plumber!" (He was quite annoyed by Raphael in his diary-book *Eyes Wide Open* mis-describing the twin toilets as a row of urinals, as if the house incorporated a public lavatory.) Various egos did not like being treated as so many plumbers. Still, everyone had kept mum until Stanley died because there was always the hope of more money.

I myself never signed any confidentiality clauses, as did other hired plumbers. I think Stanley simply forgot about this in his eagerness to get on with *AI*. With *Eyes Wide Shut* in protracted production, and with media interest quickening, I decided to write the first version of this memoir and approached *The New Yorker* in the Autumn prior to Stanley's death. *The New Yorker* made it an assigned piece, I delivered a revision, the release date for *Eyes Wide Shut* was postponed yet again, and time rolled by at a stately pace. Suddenly Stanley died, and *The New Yorker* e-mailed me that they couldn't use my piece because Stanley's death happened "too suddenly" for them – peculiar reasoning, I thought, since I would have regarded having a memoir in house right then as a bit of a scoop. However, they asked if they could use a few bits and pieces in their "Talk of the

Town" section. These bits and pieces speedily appeared, much edited in-house – why on earth change "starlings" to "sparrows"? Are there no starlings in America? And they paid for these pieces plus a kill fee for axing the complete memoir. After a flurry of e-mails I sold the reverted memoir to *Playboy*, which published about half of it. Soon after *The New Yorker* had axed my piece, they rushed into print part of Frederic Raphael's *Eyes Wide Open*, "fruity musings beyond the scope of parody", to quote a review in *The Daily Telegraph*, and based upon meeting Stanley in the flesh less than a handful of times. Obviously *Eyes Wide Shut* was a sexier topic than *AI* – but gosh, Raphael and his agent did get on the job quickly; and how naughty of *The New Yorker*, I feel. Though how decent of *Playboy*.

So here at long last is the entire memoir, along with a few afterthoughts. Having read numerous other memoirs in the meanwhile, it's evident to me that I regarded the episode of working with Stanley as a surreal comedy – for which I surely had the very best director. And obviously I did not know the whole of Stanley, even after months on end. Now that his aversion to publicity is no more, his family have at last become free through exclusive privileged interviews on TV and in the pages of *Sight and Sound* to present the lovable, normal, caring side of Stanley, a brighter and lighter vision of life at Childwickbury. In one interview I read that Christiane was annoyed at people comparing Stanley to a teddy bear. Oops!

I remain sad that he's gone.

May 2000

Postscript *(2012). When I finally saw the film, a decade after I last saw Stanley, I believed that Spielberg himself had added the Flesh Fair scenes, the carnival of destruction of the robots, thus to provide more action. But then in 2007 or 2008 Jane Struthers, Head of Publications at the University of the Arts, London, where the Stanley Kubrick Archive had been deposited, got in touch for an interview. Along with Jan Harlan she was preparing a volume that would turn out to be sumptuous indeed when Thames & Hudson published it 2009 as* A.I. Artificial Intelligence: From Stanley Kubrick to Steven Spielberg: The Vision Behind the Film, *with many concept illustrations by Chris Baker. Lo and behold, Jane revealed what I had completely forgotten: that among the many scenes I'd written for Stanley, but which Stanley had rejected as part of the story*

which I would finally write up – scenes which Spielberg had nevertheless gone through – were multiple versions of the Flesh Fair. When I burrowed among my own little mountain of printouts there it all was in essence, the moon-balloon, any old iron, and so on.

Me and the Hanover

On the 2001 UK Eastercon Hotel

About 15 years ago Judy and I were driving along the A5 when in the middle of nowhere we spied this strange oasis and palace beside the road. Thirsty for enlightenment and for a beer, we went in – and promptly found ourselves at an Eggers convention.

Eggers are those craftspeople who, with tiny saws and manicure scissors and emery boards (and miniature hinges and cords of silk gimp and diamond dust and seed pearls and ribbons and lace and velvet, etc), convert hen and goose and ostrich eggs into bedecorated latticed grottos where cherubs pose pertly or Fragonard ladies sit on a swing. Or into a bit of Disneyland. Or whatever. Kitsch run rampant.

Now, at the time, I was working on what became my tripartite story called "Stalin's Teardrops", about the KGB department which falsifies maps and about how areas of alternative reality come into existence. What would the third, concluding part of the story focus on? Eyeing the products of the Eggers, I quickly spotted the Russian connection – for did not Carl Fabergé, court jewellers to the Tsars, create bejewelled golden eggs? Soon I was writing my conclusion, "The Cult of the Egg", about Russian Egger-witches, all thanks to that quirky event at the Hanover.

A decade later I found myself wondering – as one does – what would happen if, while driving around, you saw by the roadside a Roman centurion displaced in time. This led to my 1997 novel *Oracle*.

What more suitable road to find your Roman by than the A5, Watling Street, the old Roman road stretching from London to North Wales? What better time should the Centurion hail from than 60 AD? That was when Boudicca's revolt was suppressed, the big battle probably taking place quite near to, let's see, present-day Hinckley.

If you meet a Roman it's quite a good idea to be able to speak a bit of Latin. Invoke a conference funded by Brussels money about the prospects for machine translation. All sorts of linguists are present, including my main chap, a lapsed Catholic from Ulster who might have entered the priesthood (so he learnt Latin), and a Finnish woman devotee of Latin (the Finns actually broadcast the news once a week in Latin). Where would you hold a conference somewhere near Hinckley? Bingo, Chapter 2 of *Oracle*

is set in what I call the Hinkley Pool Hotel. Yes, dear reader (and proofreader), despite the umpteen times I have looked at roadsigns etc etc, I left the “c” out of Hinckley. (Well, it is quite a long way from the sea. Though there’s that massive statue of Poseidon in the lobby...)

What observations did I make about the Hanover in *Oracle*? Page 11: “Damned uncomfortable little chairs in the bar, like padded buckets which cramped you tight...”

April 2001

Personal Appreciation of John Brunner

In the climax to *The Sheep Look Up*, published in 1972, the citizens of America set fire to their country so as to purge the obscenity of a runaway capitalism which has raped and poisoned the environment and the citizens themselves.

Here we are 30 years later. At world economic summits anti-globalisation protesters riot. America consumes an ever larger slice of the cake of resources and firmly asserts its right to do so. The World Trade Center has fallen because terrorists from the Third World perceive America as an imperialist Satan.

Whatever your take on capitalism, or on America by now being the only global super-power, John Brunner's major novels are of utter relevance today, with their fierce dystopian critiques, their pleas for togetherness and sanity.

Stand on Zanzibar, John's cutting-edge masterpiece about overpopulation, has come back into print, yet that's about it as regards an *oeuvre* of dozens of books.

The twin limbos of out-of-print and unable-to-find-a-publisher haunted John during his final decade. Even before that, to adapt the title of one of his books, you might call him A Writer at The Wrong End of Time. Ahead of his time, he fell behind.

His innovative novel about a South American dictatorship, modelled on a chess game, *The Squares of the City*, took 5 years to reach print. Penguin Books rejected *Stand on Zanzibar*, the longest SF novel hitherto, with scope and vision to match its size. Doubleday paid peanuts for it, $1500. A decade later, feeding frenzy for big SF would have attracted bids of $1.5 million. Later, John tried to make his fortune with a historical saga set on the Mississippi. By then he was ill. He took too long researching then writing. George Martin's *Fevre Dream*, intersecting steamboats with vampires, was a best-seller. John's own *Steamboats on the River* fell flat and wasn't even published in his own country.

John was so utterly in key with the happening world intellectually and emotionally, yet so far as his career is concerned he was sadly out of synch. This did not prevent him from being a *bon viveur* and a wonderful presence at conventions throughout Europe – a bit, I often thought, like

King Babar. When Marjorie was alive, my wife and daughter and I would spend Christmas with the Brunners, alternately at their place then at ours. John was such great company. Certain, shall we say, idiosyncrasies could present problems at times, not least in his search for a replacement consort and its disastrous outcome. Yet these were Brunnerisms, traits of a unique and very special individual – one who wrote many very special books. Even his “entertainments” were very respectable accomplishments.

July 2002

A Tale of Two Fandoms

Long ago, fandom safeguarded my sanity. It must have been round about 1980 that I received an invitation to address BUFORA, the British Unidentified Flying Objects Research Association, at a hall somewhere in London. That was because of my novel *Miracle Visitors*, which advances the notion that UFO experiences are a peculiar altered state of consciousness rather than objective encounters with ETs arriving in flying saucers.

Never before had I been near an Unidentified Flying Objects Research Association, so I thought I might need a mental bodyguard to accompany me, a sort of Mindguard. (I always wanted to have a Mindguard ever since I read in Stephen Donaldson about that chap "Banner of the Blood Guard".) This was in case I succumbed to delusions – or in case I was abducted and experimented on, probes inserted into me, cerebrally or elsewhere. Strange things happen in UFO-land. Look at Jenny Randles being sued by an American UFO researcher because she was *misquoted* in a newspaper.

Look at Whitley Strieber with whom I was on the TV programme *After Dark* (along with Buzz Aldrin, and an Irish sceptic, and others). The format of *After Dark* was that the guests all sat in a small corral of black sofas around a table laden with booze and cigarettes. The programme was open-ended – it could last for three hours, six hours. Ideally you would get very drunk and say things you didn't ought to. But on this night for ages nobody took nary a sip except of Evian water. Caution prevailed; and just as well.

After an hour or so, choosing my words very carefully because Strieber had trained as a lawyer and Americans are litigious, I suggested that he had undergone a quasi-religious experience. Strieber's countenance darkened. He pierced me with a glare and said, "I get very angry when people say such things to me..." Then obviously legal clockwork revolved in his brain for he continued: "such things as indeed you have *not* said to me, Sir."

Mike and Kathy Westhead volunteered as Mindguards, and Roger Perkins too, I believe, and a couple of other fans – time dims the exact details. And we sallied forth from the Westheads' house where I would stay the night.

As soon as we entered the foyer of the hall hired by BUFORA, the

Secretary of the organisation (or was it the Treasurer?) accosted me, holding up a thin black strip which I took to be three film negatives.

"This is *very* exciting," she said. "One of our members took these photos last week on her honeymoon on Salisbury Plain." Or was it on Dartmoor?

Eh, what? I thought. A honeymoon on Salisbury Plain? (Or on Dartmoor.)

"Look," she said, "those on the left and right are blank, but there's a speck of light on the middle one!"

I peered. Maybe there *was* a speck of light. Isn't there a big military exercise area thereabouts, where the army might let off a flare or so?

"We're going to send this for computer enhancement," declared the Secretary (or Treasurer).

Ah wait, I have just reconsidered my memories, and a detail might well be slightly wrong – just as the memories of UFO abductees could conceivably be slightly askew. A negative of black darkness ought to be white, oughtn't it? And a speck of light should be a dark speck. What she was actually showing me was exposures, photos of a moonless night fired off on honeymoon (at random?), presumably from the honeymoon tent or Dormobile. I simply assumed that the exposures were negatives, for who in their right mind would take pictures of darkness on the off-chance?

Anyway, the next moment a very elegant woman of Spanish appearance, dressed in an expensive fur coat, swarmed up to me.

"Meester Watson," she said, "about the UFO landing two months ago in the River Parana... I wrote to the American Embassy in Rio seeking more details, but they have not replied to me. Can you tell me why this might be?"

"Madam," I said judiciously, "the post is very unreliable these days."

As we progressed into the hall itself, which was thronged, I became aware that the Latin woman's expensive gear was the norm rather than the exception. Everyone was very poshly dressed. By comparison, I and my Mindguard seemed rather on the scruffy side, although previously I thought we looked normal enough. I guess you ought to dress smartly if as Earth's representative at any moment you might encounter an extraterrestrial.

So I gave my talk, about how UFOs are probably a manifestation of human consciousness, then prior to question time I buzzed off to the toilets. Almost immediately I was joined there, about six inches to my right, by a smartly-suited dwarf with a German accent whose hair had been cut by a lawn-mower.

He leered at me. “Mister Watson, I can *understand* your theory but I cannot believe it because *you do not believe in God*.”

“But,” I protested, trying not to pee on my shoe, “I said nothing in my talk about God.” I had been careful not to. Take not the name of the Lord in vain.

“I *know* you do not believe in God,” came the firm response. “Therefore your theory is wrong.”

I hastened away from this impeccable logic back to the hall.

The Chairman (or was it the President?) personally kicked off question time. He too could understand what I had said – but, ah, he had perceived a fatal flaw.

“If what you say about consciousness is true, Mr Watson, how then do you explain that *primitive natives* in Africa with *unevolved minds* are *also* able to see UFOs?”

I muttered something, as one would, about Chomskyan psycholinguistics demonstrating that all human languages are of equivalent level of complexity and therefore arise from equivalently complex minds. I exchanged glances of panic with my Mindguard.

And I felt a surge of gratitude for how well-informed and intelligent SF fandom is compared with UFO fandom. We may look a bit informal at times to mundane eyes, but at least we can think sensibly. Fortunately the Mindguard and I were able to escape fairly soon to the nearest pub.

April 2003

H.G. Wells in Timişoara

For a couple of years (but not constantly) I dressed up in period costume as Bertie Wells to give talks in his own voice (as it were) and from his viewpoint at various SF events in the UK and in Romania and in Italy. In Timişoara, Romania, none of the organisers knew where the key to the locked dressing room was, so I had to change in a small dark uncouth toilet; and then the room where I spoke became hotter and hotter until poor Bertie was almost melting in his heavy costume borrowed from the Opera House, yet how could he cry out, "For mercy's sake turn on the air conditioning!" when Bertie himself knew nothing about aircon? I must remain in character. After decades of dictatorship, Romanians didn't spontaneously change the status quo unless ordered to, even though the revolution against Ceauşescu had indeed begun in Timişoara. In Fiuggi, Italy, by contrast, the organisers presented me with a Pierre Cardin dress shirt, cufflinks, and a bow tie to take away afterwards.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am not who you think I am. You see before you the body of Mr Ian Watson, but I who occupy this body am none other than Herbert George Wells, a name which may be rather better known to you than that of Mr Ian Watson.

In fact, this situation has happened to me *three times* before, and on each occasion the body of Mr Watson has been involved! This happened in 1987 in Birmingham, and in Portsmouth in 1995, and yet again in Glasgow in the year 2005. Ah, I see a face which I remember from Glasgow in 2005 – that of Mr Vince Doherty, if I am not mistaken. After a stimulating evening of conversation with some writers from America you, Mr Doherty, showed me the nighttime delights of Sauchiehall Street and in the company of two adventurous young ladies whom we encountered we – let me simply say that men such as myself have certain amorous needs which must be fulfilled.

Mr Doherty, you look as if you wish to deny what happened! Ah, but wait. Someone told me earlier that this is the year 2003. Here is one of the problems with time-travel. From your point of view, Mr Doherty, those incidents in Glasgow have *not yet* occurred. They are part of my memory,

but a part of your *future*. This raises the conundrum that in 2005 you must surely remember what I am now saying here in 2003. Therefore I presume that you will be a willing – yet discreet – accomplice in our exploits two years hence, otherwise you could easily avoid taking me to Sauchiehall Street, knowing in advance what will transpire.

A common thread links these manifestations of myself in Portsmouth and Birmingham and Glasgow and now in Timişoara. I found myself – and I find myself now – at something called a *science fiction convention*. How peculiar that such things should exist, and that I am apparently responsible for their existence, because of the fantasies I wrote early in life, books such as *The Time Machine* and *The War of the Worlds*. At the Book Room of the science fiction convention in Glasgow I saw an extraordinary number of books about an extraordinary number of imaginary wars between the inhabitants of our planet and those of other worlds far out among the stars, with titles such as *Alien*, and *Aliens*, and *The Forever War*.

Can the popular scribblers who perpetrate such so-called science fiction not imagine anything more uplifting than endless interplanetary warfare between supposedly intelligent species? I tell you, if I had realised the consequences, I might have had second thoughts about launching *The War of the Worlds* upon the world. Apparently all the important works of education and science and politics and sociology which I wrote are out of print, and of no apparent interest today, but people still dote upon, and copy, and exaggerate, the wilder speculations of my youth.

Not that some of my speculations were wildly inaccurate! In "The Land Ironclads" did I not predict ten years in advance the trenches and the tanks of the 1914 to 1918 world war? Admittedly my tanks were powered by steam and used many feet fixed around the rims of wheels to propel them forward. Did I not foresee the Atom Bomb as early as 1914 in my novel *The World Set Free*? And in *Tono-Bungay* the perils of radioactive pollution from industrial uses? In 1899, in *When the Sleeper Wakes*, did I not describe what you now call television? I used the term Kineto-Tele-Photography.

Perhaps this name is a little big for the mouth, and the mind. I believe that many people nowadays simply refer to this device as "the Telly".

In my story "The Crystal Egg" I anticipated what I believe is now known as the theory of "quantum entanglement".

Indeed, my doctoral thesis for the University of London which I presented in 1942, was entitled, "A Thesis on the Quality of Illusion in the Continuity of the Individual Life in the Higher Metazoa, with Particular

Reference to the Species Homo Sapiens". Few people have read this thesis, because I published it as an appendix to a book deliberately limited to 2000 copies, and priced high at 2 Guineas so that it would only reach the élite of thinkers. Nowadays, so I hear, "consciousness studies" are all the rage, with Professor Daniel Dennett at Tufts University in Massachusetts leading the field. Professor Dennett has developed very similar ideas to mine about how the integrality of the Self (our belief that we have a constant, unified Self, or soul) is only a convenient biological delusion, and how we ourselves actually consist of many loosely linked behavioural systems, and how we tell ourselves stories to hold ourselves together. I myself am well aware that I have many different personalities. Apparently Professor Dennett has never heard of my thesis.

And in *World Brain* I advocated the linking of all libraries and information services throughout the world into an integrated system, a "world encyclopedia" covering all areas of knowledge. This, at least, now exists – known, I believe, as the World Wide Web, or the Internet. Alas, I am told that a huge number of "sites" purvey pornographic pictures. Personally I find the warm living reality of a beautiful woman to be infinitely more rewarding, and I can only advise people who misuse the world encyclopedia for such purposes, in a colourful American phrase, to "get a life".

I believe I should draw a careful distinction between such technological predictions of mine as the Atom Bomb and the Telly and such flights of fancy as a society of insects living on the Moon, or an invasion from Mars, or an Invisible Man. In those works by me which are now given the name "scientific romances" and which supposedly gave rise to "Science Fiction" I was simply substituting scientific patter – the quick-witted talk of a conjuror, using words from science – for bits of magic or sorcery, so as to give a basis for my story. *Fiction*, such novels certainly were. *Science,* oh no! Not, at least, in my scientifically trained opinion. I would advise writers of so-called Science Fiction today to be aware of the distinction between science and magical fantasy.

During the 1930s, when people of the political left were concentrating on the perils posed by Naziism and Fascism, I was rebuked for saying that Fascism was only a temporary phase, but I was right – and I was right to say that we must think of how to build a post-war world even in the midst of war, unlike during the previous global conflict – which led inevitably to a second conflict because we did not *think* at the time. My advocacy of a United Nations, with Human Rights enshrined in its constitution, and of a European Economic Community, have both become reality.

I am finding it pleasantly easy to address you today. In my own body I admit I am rather an incompetent speaker. I fiddle with my tie – Mr Watson does not seem to own a tie. I drop my notes. I lose my place. My voice fades. I squeak. I panic. The poet Rupert Brooke referred rather cruelly to my "thin, little voice". Mr Watson, like Mr Bernard Shaw, must find it easier to present himself in public.

In private, of course, I have always been able to present myself perfectly well, particularly to young ladies. I see one or two attractive ladies present here with whom I would be very happy to become better acquainted later on, over a cup of tea, or even something alcoholic – if you would do me the honour. This body I am in seems to have something of a thirst for beers and wines.

I am rather concerned as to what Mr Watson is doing with my own body at the moment. I hope he is not over-indulging in alcohol, and leaving me to cope with the consequences, namely a hangover. He should be giving my body regular exercise and fresh air and a carefully controlled diet – since I am, or was, a diabetic. He may be finding my own body's sexual urges somewhat troublesome. If so, he would be advised to seek out an attractive and intelligent member of the opposite sex with whom to give those urges some relief. I emphasise the word *intelligent* – though I also emphasise the word *attractive*.

One of the reasons for Mr Watson's path and my path crossing in this peculiar way on several occasion may be that I wrote *The Time Machine* and he wrote, so I am told, a short story entitled "The Very Slow Time Machine". Presumably this was intended as a flattering homage to my own work, but I really do wonder about his level of intelligence. The whole point about time machines is that such machines would move *very quickly*. How else could I have journeyed across billions of years into far futurity, and witnessed the old age of the Sun?

Actually, it is a little difficult for me to fit into the body of Mr Watson, because in my later years my girth grew just as the sun itself will grow much bigger – and redder in the face!

Apparently a reviewer of one of Mr Watson's books in the *Times Literary Supplement* wrote that Mr Watson, I quote, "resembles H.G. Wells in both invention and impatience". I do not know about his powers of invention if he thinks that a time machine moves very slowly! But as for the accusation of impatience I was always quite irritated when reviewers spoke as though I tossed my books off impetuously, and far too many of them. Just because I wrote for the ordinary reader in a popular style, unlike a pompous self-proclaimed artist of the word such as Mr Henry James, this

does not mean that I did not take great pains over writing and rewriting. I did! However, when I think of the *results* of the much-vaunted artistry of Mr Henry James, and its significance in the history of human evolution, I am put in mind of a hippopotamus skilfully picking up a pea.

Another seeming similarity between myself and Mr Watson is connected with all the imaginary warfare I mentioned earlier. In the Dealers' Room at Glasgow I saw an extraordinary number of miniature models and games, mostly concerned with conflict. *Star Wars*. *Space Wars*. In particular my eye was caught by a game called, I think, *Warhammer 40,000: Space Marines* set in the year 40,000 and produced by a company called Games Workshop. There was also on sale a novel of the same title – if novel is the appropriate word for such a work – written by Mr Watson. Apparently he has written several such books in order to pay his grocery bill.

I picked up a ten-year old guide to those Games Workshop games, costing a ridiculous amount of money, and I was astonished to discover in this book photographs of a model for a battle between space marines and green-skinned aliens named Orks entitled "The Battle at the Farm". This model of the farm, and the title itself, were almost identical to those in a chapter entitled "The Battle of *Hook's* Farm" in a book which I myself published in 1913! I refer to my book *Little Wars, a game for boys from twelve years of age to one hundred and fifty and to that more intelligent sort of girl who likes boys' games and books; With an Appendix on Kriegspiel.* The photograph in the Games Workshop book could almost have been copied from photographs which I myself took to illustrate my own book. And nowhere was there any mention of my name. No acknowledgement at all.

I – H.G. Wells, none other – was the chief inventor of war-gaming, and no credit comes to me – although when I looked at those Games Workshop games I doubted if I would *want* any credit. Part of my point in inventing war games to be played on a carpet or table or lawn was to show that Great War, real war, is the most expensive game in the universe and is a game out of all proportion. Not only are the masses of men and material and the suffering and inconvenience too monstrously big for reason but the available heads we have for it are too small. Never yet have I met a military man, with whom I have played my model game, who did not get into difficulties and confusions even with its elementary rules.

To the blundering insanity of war I oppose the striving for utopia. This world is for ample living. We want fine things made for mankind – splendid cities, open ways, more knowledge and power. Excitable self-

proclaimed patriots and adventurers should be locked up in a room, out of the way of mankind, to play my game to satisfy themselves.

What the human race needs, my friends, is not generals and patriots and short-sighted politicians but capable, operative, and administrative men who will gradually combine into an élite by means of an open conspiracy and who will progressively take power to govern mankind for its own good. I have called such scientifically trained and capable men the Samurai.

I find that I am in Timişoara in Romania. I have travelled very widely, both in space and time, so it is possible that I am confused, but I am almost certain that I was here when the Mayor of your fine city together with that fine lady the Countess of Banat first turned on the street lights. You will surely remember that your city was the first to employ electricity for street lightning. Yes, several miles – or rather, kilometres – of street lightning. A great achievement, and a foretaste of the future. It was Timişoara that gave me an inspiration for the idea that one day we might see entire underground cities powered by electricity, protected from the rain or snow or summer heat of the surface world.

Yes, Timişoara was an augury of the future I hoped would come to pass – and bringing about such a world, of scientific order and inventiveness and plenty and political peace and freedom, was my mission on Earth more than the simple desire to be “famous” as a writer of literature.

I am aware that a number of books and many essays have been written about me, and I feel that in many respects these commentaries as a whole present a misleading impression of me because they are written by artistic gentlemen – by literary men whose criteria are literary criteria. The way that my many books have been assessed by such critics is nothing short of a disgrace. It is as if you would go to a pet show, where dogs are on show, and cats are on show, and rabbits, and birds, and hamsters and guinea pigs – only to discover that all of the judges are dog fanciers! How can such people appreciate a cat or a guinea pig? Instead, they declare that the cat is inferior because it is not a dog. The dogs in question, the subject of obsession for my literary critics, are my scientific fantasies. Nothing else I did seems to matter. Even my ambitious novels about contemporary life are ignored like old hats compared with the experimental productions of Miss Virginia Woolf or Mr James Joyce – although I knew a trick or two when it comes to experimenting with narrative. Everything, to me, was a continual experiment – even my *Autobiography*. Sometimes, of course, experiments fail or lead nowhere; for such is the scientific method.

First and foremost I see myself as possessing a scientific mind. I am an evolutionary biologist. I was trained, profoundly so, by Thomas Huxley in the great tradition of Charles Darwin. I was imbued with all the social implications of Darwinism, the realisation – so shocking to many educated people in the era of my youth – that Man, Homo Sapiens, does not possess any privileged status in the world of nature. So when I write about the future decadence or extinction of the human species I am not being pessimistic, as many assume, but merely scientifically realistic.

It is a scientific truth that, over hundreds of millions of years so far, no dominant species has ever been succeeded by its own descendants. Let us not imagine that a Homo Sapiens Superior will follow Homo Sapiens if we fail. A descendant of spiders is much more likely to inherit the Earth.

I will admit to a tension in myself between the scientist and the creative artist, but fundamentally I am a scientist by training, an artist perhaps by intuition. Benjamin Disraeli spoke of there being two nations in England, the upper classes and the workers. This certainly influenced my portrayal of the Eloi and the Morlocks in my *Time Machine*. I understand that a certain C.P. Snow later spoke of England possessing "two cultures" in conflict – the artistic and the scientific. The fact is that the English ruling class is fundamentally illiterate in science, and even snobbishly hostile to science. I understand that since my time only one person trained in science – strangely enough, a woman! – has ever become Prime Minister. I believe her name was Margaret Thatcher, but she was only a mediocre chemist concerned with the flavours of popular confections – and her greatest claim to fame is as a war leader, a Boadicea in a conflict I would scarcely have believed possible in my wildest imaginings – an Armada launched against Argentina.

I can scarcely believe, either, that apparently a socialist leader is Prime Minister of England at this moment, a Mr Blair, yet that he *too* recently launched a war – this time in the Middle East. My great dream of socialists and scientists organising the affairs of the world for the benefit of all mankind is mocked! All my life I dreamed of an ordered and spacious society, an educated and disciplined world – the alternative to which is catastrophe, imminent extinction. Ladies and Gentlemen, the world continues to follow a blind and suicidal path, misusing science and unguided by science.

We must encourage people to think, and to think beyond themselves. Even without a time machine we are all moving towards the future. It is up to you, through your writings and your actions, to shape the future. I beg you, do not forsake this responsibility. And if people fail to listen to your

words, they are ghosts. Quite literally. The human race will pass away. In ten thousand years' time nothing will remain of the human race – except perhaps some radioactivity.

Despite the huge systems of knowledge I marshalled in *The Outline of History* and *The Work, Wealth, and Happiness of Mankind*, perhaps I am not a totally systematic thinker – but more of a *creative* thinker. I admit to contradicting myself on a number of occasions, yet this is because often I started to explore an idea entirely afresh from the ground upwards instead of rebuilding on old foundations. I write in order to *explore*, not merely to rephrase old ideas and give them new clothing. I urge this method upon you in your own writings, for this is the means of evolutionary survival – constant adaptation to change!

Adaptation, yes! I was wrong, in my youth, to say that the coloured people would have to go, to disappear. The white races are not superior. But I never wasted time saying, "I was wrong about this, I was wrong about that." *Press on*, instead. Reformulate! Launch oneself yet again into the fray, ever optimistic and *busy*. And if in the end my optimism became pessimism, I was only merely speaking as I saw – and as I still see today, alas.

I feel that I am beginning to withdraw from this body of Mr Watson's. I believe he is trying to regain this body of his, and although his mind is undoubtedly inferior to mine he has a long familiarity with his own body.

I may be able to reoccupy his body temporarily because of my admiration for this fine city and its inhabitants, particularly those of the female gender. If so, you may find yourself unsure whether you are in the company of Mr Wells or of Mr Watson! It may be that Mr Watson may say something or do something indiscreet which he will then blame upon me, pretending that I am responsible! I suspect that in fact Mr Watson is jealous of me. Why else would he have intruded into my life on four occasions now? Probably he would be happy to blacken my reputation, for that is how such people behave. I think of false admirers, such as Mr Bernard Shaw. Oh there is so much more that I wish to tell you, but –!

Author's Note: With thanks for inspiration to Patrick Parrinder, Jonathan Cowie, and Warren Wagar.

2004

East Is East

Recently I've become addicted to attending SF conventions in Eastern Europe. In the past year and a half I've been to a con in Romania, three in Hungary, and also to the recent Eurocon in Bulgaria this August. Undoubtedly I'll go to the 2005 Eurocon in Kiev, and who knows what else in between.

This all began because Jonathan Cowie and other members of the Concatenation team who were organising The 2nd International Week of Science Fact and Fiction at Timişoara in Romania in May 2003 asked me to take part. This event was largely paid for and organised from England so that Romanian fans, who don't have much money. could enjoy some contact and stimulation.

I went as myself and also as the Ghost of Honour of H.G. Wells, for which purpose the wardrobe department of the Timişoara opera house provided an ancient suit with tails. The building we were using rejoiced in a changing room, although since nobody had thought to obtain the key I struggled to become Bertie Wells in a hot wet toilet. Disconcertingly, I found that it took several hours to return to my previous personality, but maybe actors often experience this.

The week-long event was steered by the Concatenation crowd and by local fans with what a newspaper described as German punctuality mixed with British humour – things actually happened when advertised. Aside from Romanians, several British fans attended, not least Vince Doherty as Fan GoH hot-foot from Nigeria (but looking very cool, perhaps because of the Fan). Also there were two Hungarians who had come out of curiosity, and a Danish Spaniard, while Italian Roberto Quaglia presided throughout with splendid surrealism. Searing sunshine, requiring much resort to the lovely local beers, alternated with occasional thunder and lightning. Guided tours of Timişoara (gorgeous architecture in need of much heritage fund restoration before it crumbles further) disclosed that it was the first city anywhere to have electric street lighting and that non-Euclidean geometry was first devised there, not to mention that it was a major shipping port although very far from the sea. All this was a bit of a revelation to me, who hadn't heard of Timişoara beforehand. Romanian TV boggled viewers nationwide with its coverage. Such fun. And numerous new friends...

...including Hungarian Peter Michaleczky – who invited me and

Roberto to Hungarocon in June, held traditionally in the second ugliest and somewhat out-of-the-way town in Hungary, Salgótarján. SF conventions are an ideal way to visit places that one otherwise wouldn't!

To be viable, such conventions often need the presence of an actor or actors from *Star Wars* or *Star Trek* or *DS9* or *Xena*, consequently I met Darth Vader who became a bit irked at me and Roberto for spending too much time with fans – which we thought was the point, but priorities are otherwise in medialand. "Some idiot expected me to continue an interview *after* the closing ceremony," quoth Lord Vader to one of the organisers who happened to be one of the idiot's best friends.

Two more Hungarian conventions followed in quite short order, both of them Átjárócons named for the SF magazine *Átjáró*, which means "portal" or "passageway", both held in a cinema complex above a beautiful shopping centre in Budapest. By now I loved the Hungarians, although Roberto and I have needed to establish The Vergil Award for worst native guide, Vergil having guided Dante into Hell.

We decided to rendezvous in Budapest at the end of July – Roberto driving from Genoa by way of France with his Italian friend Big Max and me with Bob Sheckley flying from Stansted by Air Berlin which delivered me to Budapest exactly 24 hours late, ahem, so we could drive in convoy with Peter Michaleczky via Romania to Plovdiv for the first ever Bulgarian Eurocon. (Even though I have by now been to Plovdiv, this still sounds to me like a fictional name for an imaginary East European city – travel broadens one's sense of surreality.)

While in Budapest Peter was showing a few signs of Wrong Direction Syndrome, as if intent on winning the Vergil Award, but Zsuzsa made a heroic bid by guiding us "completely reliably" in English and fluent Italian to a fine drinking place on the long island in the middle of the Danube, choosing the wrong bridge, and marching us along the dark island for an hour, taking us to the edge of insanity, exhaustion, and hypothermia. However, Peter was to drive impeccably all the way from Budapest to Plovdiv and back again (merely being robbed of chocolates by corrupt Serbian border guards), only to be fined by police in his own home town at his own front door for the first time in his life for exceeding the speed limit by 5kph.

The fact that the Romanians neglected to stamp my passport, and Peter's, on the way in made us inexplicable unpersons when we tried to exit, but fortunately by then we had collected Dragosh (phonetic) from Budapest, an expert expediter, and undoubtedly a graduate of the Bene Gesserit Voice Academy, who explained, "First I announce my name with

a strong manly middle tongue, don't give him time to think or be important. Then I name my function, such as EU Development Officer for Romania. Then I say I am the guide of these companions who are very important international delegates to a conference in Bulgaria, etc." Very effective.

But first we needed to traverse Romania itself. Entering Romania from Hungary was like going back 50 years. Or longer – hoping to take a short cut, we found ourselves on what looked like an original, unrepaired Roman road made by Trajan. We stayed in a home-made hotel with beds out of Goldilocks. Next day Peter's walkie-talkies prove very useful for overtaking on blind bends. "No vehicles for 500 metres. Go now!" Romanian driving is mad. "Romanians are unaware of consequences."

Central Bucharest was bulldozed and rebuilt by Ceauşescu in megalomaniac majestic style, although relics of villages remain in weird counterpoint. He copied the Champs Elysées to lead to his enormous palace. Tens of thousands of stray dogs doze and roam everywhere, but here is the only private educational TV station in Europe, and you can Google anywhere from a mobile phone – the poorest shall be the most advanced in info-tech.

I'd thought that Bulgaria would also be a poor country, but it seemed much more modernised and prosperous than Romania. At last we could understand money again because 2 Leva equal 1 Euro instead of millions of Romanian Lei.

The Eurocon was taking place in a huge Stalinist building (but with jolly cafés just outside), the Syndicalendom na Kultura. We thought we had come a long way, but Imants Belogrivs, a Latvian publisher with wild white hair. had driven non-stop with a friend for 48 hours from Riga to Plovdiv; check *that* out on the map. A true enthusiast, he carried photos of every con he had been to in every land.

This Eurocon was combined with Bulgacon, the annual Bulgarian SF con, and with Gamecon featuring the Balkan tournaments of *Magic: The Gathering* and *Warcraft 3: The Frozen Throne*. *I, Robot* had its European premiere. Many side events happened, and talks about science, mythology, fantasy, by cosmonauts, scholars, philologists, writers. Bob Sheckley was particularly popular because his blend of satirical humour was allowable during the Communist era, so he was massively translated behind the Iron Curtain.

People from 18 nations were present, a record for a Eurocon. Such a feeling of international *family*. Among the Spanish sextet it was great to meet once again Léon Arsenal, whom I last saw at the 2003 Madrid Book

Fair – now he was the first winner of a fiction prize worth a whopping 15,000 Euros newly established by Ediciones Minotauro of Barcelona. And to meet again German writer Eric Simon, whom I first got to know by letters when he was editor at the former East German publisher, Neue Berlin Verlag. Eric was already familiar with Bulgaria, and Bulgarians with him, because it was a country he was allowed to visit during the Communist era. And to see again Pascal Ducommun and meet Patrick Gyger, Pascal's successor as Director of the Maison d'Ailleurs, the museum of SF, utopia, and extraordinary voyages in Switzerland, the Francophone world's equivalent to our Science Fiction Foundation.

More of my friends from Hungary turned up, including Jun the Japanese-Hungarian who looks completely Japanese but can't speak any.

The Conan of Bulgaria kidnapped me for lunch in a park, to meet Bulgaria's leading SF publisher who had just produced a handsome 190-page bibliography of Bulgarian SF, so much unknown to me.

And I scarcely had a chance to speak to the Russians, although two of them invited me to Moscow in February for vodka and snow. It would have helped quite a bit if there had been any badges showing everyone's name and country – apparently this would have cost too much, though in hindsight the plastic sleeves could easily have been brought in from another country as a gift. One other wee thing that went slightly wrong was scheduling a certain huge restaurant as an evening venue for dinner without telling the restaurant that 150 people would turn up – to share the services of one waitress and one menu. Our meal arrived exactly 3 hours late, by which time we'd gone through all the stages of hope, anxiety, disbelief, panic. rage, despair, and sheer ironic resignation to fate.

And beware the taxi drivers of Plovdiv! Many would drive out of town at suicidal speed then back in again, to add a few extra Leva to the fare. Our taxi driver, on the way to the restaurant with one waitress, was definitely psychotic, a raving gesticulating bantam, a loop video in the middle of his dashboard showing cars crashing as he raced maniacally in the wrong direction. Only the two Serbs with us could control him somewhat by shouting threats in Serbo-Croatian which he could semi-understand if he chose to...

Eurocon in 2005 is part of the WorldCon in Glasgow, but for 2006 the vigorous, vivacious Ukrainian bid by Boris Sidyuk easily beat a Moscow bid uttered in hushed tones. "Speak up!" Dave Lally exhorted the Russian, to no avail. So it's onward to Kiev the Golden (www.interporal.info). I vow never to miss another Eurocon. They're an adventure, and an international family gathering, in interesting places.

More UK fans ought to go. Insane taxi drivers and other perils and perplexities only add savour to the memories.

November/December 2004

A Daffodil Jacket, or The Misadventures of Sebastian in Kyiv

Never before had the European Poetry Association held its yearly convention as far east as Kyiv. The EPA wasn't a very big body; 70 attendees annually was about average. In western Europe we'd be lucky if a local mayor turned out, but here in Kyiv the opening ceremony in the Sportyny Exhibition Centre near Olympic Respubliansky Stadium was thronged, and graced by two government ministers. Not to mention a whole row of TV cameras. A pop singer in a slinky black cocktail dress sang beneath a welcoming banner, and finally the Ukrainian national anthem boomed out from giant speakers, jerking everyone to their feet.

"That was bad," said the Italian poet Ricardo Evangelisti afterwards as a group of us acquaintances descended towards the lobby.

"What was bad?" I asked.

"The national anthem."

"But it sounded wonderful!" protested Sebastian Dugdale, who came from England, as did I. "Heroic, very moving."

"No but you see," explained Ricardo, "this politicises the convention. Half of Ukraine wants to join the EU, and half is pro-Moscow. I hear several Russian-speaking Ukrainian poets and publishers are keeping away, pretending they're ill or broke. You saw those government ministers? They think the EPA being here is a foot in the door of the EU." The Italian laughed and pulled a funny face. Shaved bald, he had mischievous mesmeric eyes. Burly, he looked like an international drug dealer with a sense of humour.

"Well, blow me down with a feather," said Sebastian, whose slang was often quaint, and used without him realising its impenetrability to foreigners. "I never suspected."

"No, Sebastian," said Ricardo. "You rarely suspect *anything*."

Sebastian looked so innocent. Tall, skinny, and bespectacled, with curly fair hair, he wore a lightweight daffodil-yellow jacket as if he was at a garden party in an English village; perhaps the youthful vicar. Although he was almost 50, Sebastian seemed in his early thirties. Myself, I was wearing a black leather biker jacket, and Ricardo a thick workman's jacket

with lots of pockets. Sebastian stood out. *Vulnerable.*

"Wait, wait!" we heard. It was our translators. Or some of them. Sebastian had suggested to the convention organisers beforehand that it would be a good idea to recruit some students who could act as guides and practice their English. English was the working language of the EPA. At poetry readings the audience would have in their hands an English prose translation of whichever poems as well as the texts in the original language, and of course many attendees, apart from Sebastian, understood several languages.

The organisers had duly recruited, from schools in Kyiv which taught in English, one translator for every non-Russian-speaking visitor. My translator was called Sasha and I still could scarcely believe – if she didn't have braces on her teeth – that tall, laid-back Sasha was only 15. She was the second-best English speaker of any school in Ukraine, and her companions were likewise extremely fluent, and mostly tall.

That evening we discovered the pizzeria close by on Chervonoarmiyska Street. Convention goers need a good base for conversations and drinks. The place was actually a café with cakes and ice cream out front and a sizable beer hall cum restaurant at the back. Italian menu, big wall fresco of the Black Sea coast, draft Chernihivsky lager – the only Danish poet present, Olav, a walking encyclopaedia of world beer, approved. An ideal place to hang out in. Other attendees soon made the same discovery. We got quite drunk because us poets hadn't seen each other for a year. Ricardo took a lot of photos of his very pretty translator, Elena. Our Hungarian poet friend Attila tried some flaming absinthe. Sebastian borrowed money from me because he'd brought unpopular Pounds to exchange. He ought to have looked at a guide book, not behaved like Phileas Fogg cramming a bag – or rather, his daffodil jacket – with Sterling banknotes before setting out from London. Me, I had Dollars and an ATM card.

Next morning, conference time. The programme was a bit heavily weighted with items in Russian which eluded most of us westerners; evidently there'd be ample spare time for tourism. In the lobby of the exhibition centre poetry books in Cyrillic were on show, a woman handed out a free newspaper which appeared to be about Kabbalah, and an inspired lunatic manned a stall loaded with graphs whereby he proved – according to Sasha – that Ukrainian geniuses arose chronologically in a regular rhythm, and that he himself was the latest prodigy. Ricardo and Attila and I soon went off with our translators to visit the centre of town by a metro with the longest, fastest escalators I'd ever ridden on. The contrast

between old women sitting on subway steps hoping to sell a few buns, and a de luxe subterranean shopping mall, was notable, especially when Ricardo took a photo of the latter and the next moment Security arrived to put a hand over his camera lens.

That night was to be the Night of the Cushion.

After finding a good Ukrainian restaurant with a pet pig snoozing in a pen, and an advertisement for *Penthouse* in the beautifully tiled toilet, quite a lot of us ended up at the pizzeria once more for a drink. Attila and I, who were sharing a room in the Sport Hotel opposite the convention centre, went off to bed about one, leaving numerous poets and editors boozing, including Attila's three Hungarian chums.

When Attila and I surfaced next morning, it was to discover that the other Hungarians had been awoken at 3:00 a.m. by Security from the pizzeria and also from the hotel, seeking Sebastian's whereabouts. CCTV cameras in the pizzeria had recorded a tall thin bespectacled person making off with a cushion.

We found Sebastian in the conference centre.

"I say," he exclaimed, "that wasn't me! I don't want the rozzers hunting for me." (Rozzers being obsolete British slang for police.) "What do I do?"

Ricardo said, "We all go to the pizzeria right now and sort this out."

This, a bunch of us proceeded to do – missing an interview with Ruslana Rogovtseva, whoever she was – only to discover that early in the morning a mystery person had thrown the missing cushion in through the doorway of the pizzeria and immediately run away.

As we returned to the exhibition centre, I hauled the distracted Sebastian out of the way as a Bentley came driving along the wide pavement. Even if a Bentley weren't almost silent, any engine noise would have been drowned by the bouncing rush of tyres upon the cobbles of Chervonoarmiyska Street, a swooshing thunderous noise. Maybe by using the pavement the owner of the Bentley was protecting his expensive vehicle from vibration. Ah no, he stopped in front of a casino. Kyiv seemed to boast a remarkable number of casinos – as well as a remarkable number of banks, usually close to one another.

"You know," said Sebastian, "sometimes I think the universe conspires against me! On the whole it deals me a pretty decent life, but now and then it throws me a wobbly."

Back at the exhibition centre, a Russian poet was already very drunk, weaving from side to side. "He's the most famous," a magazine editor confided via one of our interpreters, and I wondered if the second most

famous could only become equally drunk after lunch.

The explanation of the cushion mystery came later in the day when the French bibliographer of poetry, Jean-Claude Larochelle, admitted with a wry Gallic shrug that he had borrowed the item because he was sleeping on someone else's floor in the Sport and wanted to be more comfortable. Jean-Claude was thin and wore glasses – a darker, less noticeable version of Sebastian.

"Bloody Frogs," Sebastian muttered.

The lovely mature schoolgirl Elena was playing with a metal tube, a hook on the end for opening cans and bottles. As Ricardo snapped photos, Elena unscrewed the end of the tube, and turned the device into a wicked-looking knife.

"For protection," she explained, "if I'm out alone at night."

"Do you –?" I mimed sliding that knife inside her boot; and she nodded. Of course she must carry the blade ready for use. If someone attacked you, you hadn't time to unscrew a tube.

"Phew," said Sebastian, wide-eyed, "that really takes the cucumber."

Attila nudged me, and I whispered, "I don't know what it means, either."

"You ought to look tougher for protection," Jean-Claude advised Sebastian. "Wear black leather and dark sunglasses."

"Oh, and I suppose I should tattoo KILL and HATE on my knuckles?"

Another Gallic shrug. "It's an idea." Jean-Claude delved in his bag and brought out a vicious spiked mace made of darkly painted varnished wood. "I went to see the Caves Monastery yesterday. Bought this from a souvenir vendor. It was a symbol of authority in Ukraine."

"In Hungary too," said Attila.

Even though a souvenir, that mace could have done severe damage to somebody's skull.

We went to give loyal support to our beloved zany Imants who was presenting a volume he'd published of new Latvian poetry, and then to the first business meeting of the EPA to nominate writers and magazines for awards; also to hear presentations from Holland and from Budapest and Moscow for the EPA convention two years hence. This was Moscow's big chance because so many Russians were present in Kyiv, though us westerners were all rooting for Budapest in June rather than Moscow in early March when it would still be minus-one. Only one Dutchman had turned up, so the Holland bid seemed irrelevant. Due to our system of national delegate voting, Budapest seemed a cert to win.

In the afternoon a lot of us went to see the huge weird house designed by architect Vladislav Horodetsky. An admirer of Gaudí, Horodetsky erected the residence on a steep hillside as a challenge – five floors on one side, three on the other – and adorned it with protruding elephants' heads and rhino's heads and other creatures. He'd been a passionate big game hunter. Giant frogs squatted along the parapet. Several of us scribbled notes for poems.

Descending, we found ourselves in the monumental and gloomy Pasazh where artistic people used to hang out. Half way along we came upon a metal statue of Horodetsky seated at one of two metal chairs alongside a metal table bearing a metal coffee cup and a metal copy of his book about adventures in Africa. Ricardo encouraged Elena to do a lap-dance – fully clad – squeezed upon Horodetsky's metal knee, while he took many photos.

In such respects, our interpreters were useful. Yet they were becoming a bit of a financial burden. They flocked to accompany us, and since they were only schoolkids we needed to pay for them at coffee bars and restaurants. Not that the kids were greedy, but Kyiv seemed an expensive city, unless you were an old woman with a bag of buns to whom Dior and Bentleys were irrelevant. Soon Attila and I resorted to another ATM for 500 more Hryvna and I had to lend more to Sebastian, whose cache of Her Britannic Majesty's Pounds continued to be unwelcome.

And so to the final day of our EPA convention. Attila did a reading in Hungarian, which nobody else in the world can master. Then came the disaster of the second business meeting, presided over by our Irish poet president. The EU refused to recognise Belarus because of its dictatorship, so should the EPA allow Belarus to vote? Yes, decreed Seamus O'Brien, full of bonhomie. If so, what about – let's say Absurdistan, which had sent representatives to Kyiv? "Sure, let's be welcoming," said O'Brien, now standing on a chair.

The upshot was that national delegate votes tied 50/50 for Budapest and for Moscow. Consequently the votes of non-delegate attendees at the meeting – mostly Russians and Ukrainians – were counted, and Moscow won. All thanks to that delegate vote by Absurdistan. This meant that in two years' time the vote for a subsequent EPA convention would happen in Moscow at minus-one, where even fewer western Europeans might be present than in Kyiv. A bid might win for anywhere in the Russian Federation, perhaps even in Vladivostok, almost next to Japan. That would extend the concept of Europe!

And then O'Brien decreed a party at the pizzeria to thank this year's

organisers. These amounted to just three people, who had worked like Trojans, but then O'Brien added, "And our wonderful translators too."

An incensed Sebastian rushed from the splendid closing ceremony, including multiple prize-giving, to a nearby Internet café, to google the exact definition of a "European" country.

When he finally arrived at the pizzeria with a printed list of countries which could potentially access the EU, of course Absurdistan wasn't one of them. Sebastian and O'Brien exchanged heated words. But by then the party was in full swing – minus half of us westerners, who may have glimpsed a warning light, and minus Russian and Ukrainian poetry people who were probably holding a vodka contest elsewhere to decide who was the best of them. Nor had the organisers turned up; they were too exhausted. But all the interpreters had brought their girlfriends and boyfriends. Tables had been pushed together to make four mega-tables.

Sinister Silviu, from Bucharest, said to Ricardo, "I am bloody angry at all this."

"Me too," agreed Ricardo. He gestured to a waitress and said, "Separate bills for each table! Understand?"

Joining us, Sebastian slung his jacket over a chair, and told us, "I'm going to get a bit Brahms tonight." (In Cockney rhyming slang, Brahms and Liszt equals pissed equals drunk.) O'Brien was at a table crowded with interpreters and their friends, doing tricks of some kind to entertain them. Other interpreters were at another table, laughing happily and chatting on their mobile phones. Interpreters to right of us, interpreters to left of us, into the valley of Death....

Ricardo became a bit paranoid. "Look, they're laughing at me for taking so many photos of young girls."

Eventually all the interpreters went away since we didn't want to accompany them to a disco. The pizzeria's Security was observing us carefully from the doorway. Four bills arrived at the four tables.

O'Brien promptly brought his table's bill to our table and said buoyantly, "I propose we add the bills and us westerners divide the total between ourselves, hmm?"

The total was quite a few thousands of Hryvna.

An indignant dispute broke out, cut short by people tossing their remaining Hryvna on to the table. An amiable American, who was at the EPA event out of sheer curiosity, threw in a generous sum in Dollars.

Having no more cash, Attila and I went back to the Sport to sleep. I had to get up very early to share a taxi to the airport with Sebastian and O'Brien.

At 6:00 a.m. O'Brien was waiting in the lobby of the Sport.

"Bejesus, did you hear what happened to Sebastian last night!"

After Attila and I left, Sebastian discovered that the wallet, in his daffodil jacket left over that chair, had been emptied of money. First Sebastian blamed the pizzeria for being in league with a pickpocket, whom they'd pointed in his direction – then he decided that the thief might be one of the boyfriends who'd seen where he kept his wallet. He insisted the police be called because he'd need a statement for insurance purposes.

"Upshot is that Olexander" – Olexander was the main organiser – "has to be roused out of bed and come by taxi. Police don't turn up for an hour then insist on taking Sebastian off to the police station. Ricardo and I go along too for company, and just as well – bloody police accuse Sebastian of trying an insurance fraud. We only got back here ten minutes ago...."

One of the Sport's Security men announced that our taxi had arrived, so O'Brien rushed to the lift to hurry Sebastian.

On the way to Boryspil, a weary Sebastian said many things, including, "I think the universe conspires against me."

The police had been so unhelpful. Deliberately misinterpreting what he told them. Ignoring the computers standing idle and insisting on handwriting his statement only in Ukrainian. Only grudgingly making a photocopy to take away.

"Olexander was a gem, bless him –"

What Sebastian said failed to make sense to the Sherlock Holmes in me. He'd lost some Hryvna and 30 Pounds, not hundreds. The hundreds, which were deep in his other inside pocket in an envelope, remained.

"They saw which pocket I used, so they went for that one –"

Why bother to put back the wallet, which still contained tickets and other stuff?

"I told the police to take the tapes from the pizzeria's CCTV, but they wouldn't. They said the tapes were private. The police were in league! They didn't want evidence –"

It seemed to me very possible that, in the heat of the dispute about bills, a tiddly Sebastian had emulated others by throwing, in his case, Pounds upon the table and then he'd forgotten due to confusion and due to being Sebastian.

After we went through the metal-detector gate, while our luggage was being scanned, an airport Security man stopped Sebastian, and only Sebastian, either because the universe had it in for Sebastian, or because of his daffodil jacket.

“How much money you taking out of Ukraine?” Security demanded.

“None!” cried Sebastian. “I was robbed!”

Security smiled, and moved away.

Then I saw the man take out a mobile phone and make a call.

It couldn’t be, could it, that airport Security were in league with the police who were in league with pizzeria Security who were in league with thieves? I decided not to torment Sebastian by suggesting this.

2008

The first European SF Convention (alias Eurocon) to be held in Kiev, Ukraine, here mutates into a very similar convention of poets with most names changed to protect the innocent (as well as the guilty) but all the incidents are related faithfully. I avoided visiting the thriving game reserve of Chernobyl, but those who did go for a tour were given their used protective costumes afterwards to take home as souvenirs complete with dust. Kyiv is Ukrainian for Kiev, a capital of the Vikings who sailed down the mighty river Dnieper from the north.

Three Kinds of Close Encounters with Comics

I'm looking at a photo of myself reading a copy of *Marvel Tales*, which my wife Judy took in 1968 or so in Tokyo. Behind me similar comics spill off the bookshelf next to a Mao doll and pin-ups of the Beatles. I bought some of those comics in a long narrow English language bookshop on the Ginza – where I would break my subway journey to Keio University, for a beer and roast eel and rice. The others I bought in a toyshop near the Imperial Palace, called Kiddieland, largely catering to the American armed forces. While Moms and kids were occupied with the toys, Dads headed for the basement which stocked comics and pornography.

On the pornography shelves I found copies of highly innovative, deconstructive, radical hardcore porn novels with a lot of dystopian science-fictional and fantasy aspects penned by poets such as David Melzer and Michael Perkins, published for a year or so by Essex House. (When the parent company realised what was going on, Essex House promptly ceased.) Reading those Essex House novels had quite an influence on my first novel, *The Woman Factory*, a satiric subversive hardcore female liberation novel, which I wrote after returning to England and while listening to Judy Collins and Traffic's "In a Chinese Noodle Factory". This novel, which only appeared in French, entitled *Orgasmachine* (but which is about to be published in Japanese in a much superior version), owed quite a bit to comics too, or rather to *comix*, the underground counterculture sort, which I was to discover just after leaving Japan in 1970 – and that was to be the third phase of my relationship with comics.

The first phase, ah... for any British chap of my generation, that had to be the *Eagle*, starring Dan Dare, Pilot of the Future, who debuted in April 1950 a year before the Festival of Britain with its futuristic tapering rocket-ship Skylon and its giant-UFO Dome of Discovery which the *Eagle* anticipated visually. I remember the sheer frustration, as a boy just turned 8, of having to wait *several weeks* before I could get embroiled in the mission to Venus because not enough copies of the *Eagle* were available to meet demand at our newsagent, Mather's, on the Coast Road from Newcastle to Billy Mill where I lived (not in the derelict windmill itself, but a few hundred yards away) then onward to Tynemouth where I

attended school. Getting off the yellow double-decker Number 11 bus on my return from school on Friday afternoons I would hasten into Mather's to collect my *Eagle* so that it wouldn't get crumpled by being delivered, though I wasn't clutching a threepenny piece in my sweaty palm because the cost went on my parents' newspaper bill. Ah, the rocket ships, the alien cities and vegetation and beasts. The slippery slope to becoming, ultimately, a science fiction writer!

I wasn't quite so interested in the other stuff in the *Eagle*, Sergeant Luck of the French Foreign Legion and plucky Corporal Trenet ("Courage, mes braves!") or the portly detective Harris Tweed or Black Bob the shepherd's dog, so as copies of the *Eagle* mounted high in my room eventually I tore off and retained just the front Dan Dare pages. Such vandalism, such a loss of future value! Though perhaps anticipating the Deluxe Collector's Editions of *Dan Dare* which now sit on a bookshelf here.

Copies of the *Saturday Evening Post* (I think!) arrived regularly at my Grandmother's from Canada and I devoured Mandrake the Magician. A respectable lady friend of the family somehow came into possession of a few American horror comics (titles utterly forgotten), which she handed over to me. Very scary and sinister and interesting – a Lovecraftian monster menacing an island in the Pacific, a creature called The Heap, and so on. The lady promised me more of those but when I went to collect them the supply had dried up. To console me she gave me two shillings to buy some substitutes, and I duly bought some *Superman* and adventures of Billy Batson – but these lacked the same frisson, being distinctly wholesome compared with the eldritch horrors I had glimpsed.

By the time I was a lecturer in English Literature in Japan my take on that fascinating country was not an aesthetic one – Kabuki and No drama and Zen Buddhism – but a science fictional dystopian vision plus a love of the vermilion garishness of Shinto cut with Japanised American pop psychedelic culture. Japanese comic strips appealed to me, and, imported in Kiddieland or down on the Ginza, I discovered *Doctor Strange* whose transdimensionality and the swirling psychedelic artwork very much turned me on. Consciousness-expanding, almost. Much more innovative than the Hulk and Spiderman, fun though those were – the mutations into superhumans and alternative beings excited me. This was phase two.

And then I discovered underground comix: wonderful Robert Crumb's strutting Rough-Tough Cream Puff. Or should that be Ruff-Tuff? I'm writing this all from memory. I seem incapable of hanging on to things that I ought to hang on to. I sold the best of my comix collection to a

Davenport's Beer-at-Home delivery guy and comix-head some time in the Seventies. I sold my Essex House titles to Maxim Jakubowski to hang in a hammock of books suspended from his ceiling....

And Robert Crumb's A Gurl, sinking her teeth into the windowsill as she gets her rocks off, and Victor Moscoso's mechanical Mickey Mouses and bendy geometries, and S. Clay Wilson's orgiastic female pirates and his Sistine Chapel Roof, The International Fuck-In & Riot Orgy. Ah, *Zap Comix* and all those others! By now, the early 70s, my wife Judy was publishing cartoons in *Oz* and *Cyclops*, and had completed a marvellous underground version of Ambridge (doing for the Archers what *Schoolkids Oz* did for Rupert Bear), but *Oz* collapsed and they never returned the artwork, try as we might to retrieve it.

Since *The Woman Factory* hadn't found an English language publisher – Olympia Press wanted it but promptly went bust – I moved on and wrote a straight SF novel, *The Embedding* featuring psycholinguistics, drugs, mind-expansion, head-hunting alien traders, the eccentric French visionary Raymond Roussel, and the Amazon. Prizes occurred. My course was set.

Yet always at my back I hear, not time's wingèd chariot, but:

He takes no guff when he struts his stuff, didderump didderump dump dump didderump. And: *By the hoary hosts of Hoggoth!* And: *Treen fighters astern!*

September 2009

My boyhood encounters with comics were certainly influential, but I soon moved my allegiance to novels, SF and otherwise. The Fifties was the real Golden Age of SF, but I'm still amazed that as a boy I found such hardbacks as Tiger! Tiger! *and* Slan *in my local library in dull North Shields, and which I alternated by reading Zola, for instance. Writers with exotic names such as van Vogt or Zola must surely possess arcane wisdom, and I too was towards the end of the alphabet. (The "Shields" were grotty shelters erected by benighted locals along the banks of the River Tyne once upon a time.)*

A Truly Generous Chap

I'm looking at a painting by my wife Judy, who died in 2001, created as a Christmas present for John and Marjorie Brunner to hang in The Square House in South Petherton. And hang it did indeed for about 40 years until this Spring of 2011, when Li Yi Brunner, John's Chinese wife, went about selling The Square House, whereupon under the terms of John's will the painting should be returned. As it was, beautifully packaged, Li Yi being an artist with paper and card, and accompanied by a package of typewritten letters and carbons exchanged between John and me during the 1970s.

It was on a platform of Newcastle Railway Station following Tynecon in 1974 that I spied a solitary John eyeing Judy and me speculatively, a look in his eye suggesting that we might become friends. I'm not sure by now if we actually said anything to each other during the convention. Tynecon was my first Eastercon, following publication of my first novel,

The Embedding, the previous July. (My first con ever was Novacon 3 in November 1973, which I was well-placed to attend, since I was working – in a manner of speaking – at the School of History of Art & Complementary Studies in a converted canal side warehouse in Brum's Summer Row a mere stone's throw from Rog Peyton's Andromeda, which alerted me to the Novacon. I remember being impressed by GoH Ken Bulmer's speech commencing with "Friends and Fellow Fen!" and by young Chris Priest's long rock-star hair.)

And lo, friendship with the Brunners was to transpire, and quite soon too, because the first of those letters in the package, dated 27 November 1976, from St John Street, Oxford, where we then lived, has me asking Marjorie if I might dedicate my 4th novel, *Alien Embassy*, to her; as indeed happened. (The letters run from then until 22 March 1979, with 2 more letters a decade later.)

That first letter mentions us having been to a pub, then a caff that served delicious mash, probably in Somerset, and Marjorie applauding something I did in Liège (which has to be the Belgian national convention in July '76), and that John and I had both been at the '76 Novacon. The second letter (10 December '76) discloses that John and Marjorie had visited us in Oxford on Boxing Day 1975 on their way back from spending Xmas with John's mother in Watlington, Oxon.

The reason for letters, by the way, was that we had no phone in St John Street, "...telephones, how I hate them," I confided in a sort of pretentious aesthetic Oxfordy way. Alas, we couldn't accept a kindly invite to spend Xmas at The Square House in 1976 because the car hire company in Oxford (*the* company) had lost its Maxi, wrapped around a tree, and only a Maxi would accommodate a child seat for Jessica (born May 1973). So instead John and Marjorie must revisit us on Boxing Day '76 in company with the dogs, which apparently Jess was desperate to see. (Those dogs were Domino and Vriskite, both very amiable, having been trained by Marjorie – let's not go into their successors, the hounds from hell which John obtained much later from the Queen's breeder, "bred for beauty rather than brains". Oh really?)

I'm wondering if we'd already visited The Square House for Xmas 1975. John over-ovened something Italian for starters, and Marjorie's authentic local partridges rattled a bit with lead shot. Then a walk to the pub in the next village on Xmas day, to bring back a turkey cooked by the baker who devoted his ovens on Xmas morning to mass-roasting of fowls for the whole neighbourhood. John had laid on a pin of local real ale, which was excellent – apart from a pin being 4½ gallons, virtually

impossible to finish off during 2 days and a bit when we were also going to pubs, causing on departure a minor strop: “Well, I’ll just have to pour it away!”

But never mind a mild strop: John was a truly generous chap. I recall him telling me once, back when his fortunes were better, “You can tap me for a thousand if you ever need it.” And he and Marjorie did set up and pay out of their own pockets for the Martin Luther King Memorial Award, for works likely to advance race relations. This certainly ran for quite a few years, and I think the prize was a hundred quid, a decent sum in those days.

In April 1978 we were about to attend the South Petherton Folk Festival, of which John and Marjorie were both on the committee; I think squabbles erupted in some other year. For folk music fans, Marjorie writes back to me that they’re putting up in The Square House “the Ian Campbell Folk Group, Eric and Audrey Winter (mentioned by the Spinners last Sunday on radio) and Mark Childs with his west highland terrier, ‘Alpina’.”

I still recall a singalong outside The Crown, featuring “*All around my hat I will wear the green willow...*” Marjorie anticipated that Frank Herbert might come to South Petherton for the folk festival, but he never turned up. And she was having some trouble with sciatica.

In October ’78 a trip to Greece on the part of the Brunners to spend pleasant days with Judy Blish and Takis (her chap after Jim died) resulted in them selling *The Squares of the City*, discovering the devious behaviour of German agent Gerd Plessl, getting irritated by the Master Race on the beach and swarming around Athens, irksomely having, in Marjorie’s words, to “stress everywhere in Greek that NO we were not Germans WE WERE ENGLISH.”

“Normally we just go around carrying our World Citizen passports,” she wrote. “Then suddenly we are pushed into stating our patriotic status. It spoils things... We came home via Venice, Milan and Paris where we spent time with friends. *[In Paris that would most likely be the charming Claude Avice and Mme Avice. Claude, who wrote SF as Pierre Barbet. Or maybe it was Gérard Klein, whose* The Overlords of War *John translated.]* We have more or less given up the idea of building John’s dream house (after he has written his best seller of course) *[that would be* Steamboats on the River*]* in Greece. I am now settling down to learn Italian again. If we have the funds, we hope to go back to our little Italian beach next year.”

After they got home, a friend’s neurotic starved greyhound bitch

cornered and killed their cat Suki right in The Square House, to be replaced by a redpoint Siamese tom called Puck.

In March 1979 we were due to rendezvous with the Brunners in Metz for a French con in May, and a PS handwritten by me on the letter says "Card Just Came – Friday for Lunch, *Fine!*" Also in March '79 I notice that it was apparently Marjorie who turned us on to the idea of buying a house in a village. Moreton Pinkney in Northants as it turned out, because MP was quite close to Oxford as regards house hunting. "Next stop maybe," say I, "in another couple of years perhaps, the West Country." To be closer to John and Marjorie, I guess. Here I am still. It's tedious moving house, and we only did it in the first place because... but that's a long story, involving myself defending myself eloquently in court on a charge of criminal damage (well, the Police Prosecuting Officer congratulated me afterwards on committing the crime), et cetera, and this is about Brunner, not me.

I'm sure we spent Xmas with the Brunners four times in all (twice in South Petherton, twice in Oxford). Which exact years, I'm not positive. However, the painting featured on the cover, displacing Giles* gadzooks, must have been a present given in the early 1980s. That's because the CND march in question is visibly a pretty big one, to judge from just that one street in central London. Between 1979 and 1984 the membership of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament zoomed back from 4,000 to 100,000, rekindling the glory days of the Sixties. The October 1981 peace march through London numbered quarter of a million. Very likely the painting depicts 1981.

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* Peter Weston, editor of the fanzine *Prolapse*/*Relapse* where this first appeared, regularly used Giles cartoons with new fannish captions as cover art. [Ed.]

John had been active long before that. CND's marching anthem, sung on the first Aldermaston march in 1959, was written by John: "*Don't you hear the H-bomb's thunder/ Echo like the crack of doom?*" What's more, he wrote a novel, *The Days of March*, inspired by his earlier CND activities, travelling with CND caravans to propagandise, attending the Moscow Peace Congress of 1962 (where he met Yuri Gagarin) as a CND observer, much in company with Marjorie whom he married in 1958 after meeting her through the personal column of a newspaper. By the time we met John and Marjorie they were veterans of the struggle for sanity, although I believe the novel was only finally published in 1988 by Jim Goddard's Kerosina.

Judy's painting was based on a photograph, perhaps taken by Allan Boyd-Newton of South Petherton. I'm not sure if John and Marjorie joined a CND coach from Yeovil, or whether they tootled down to London in John's pride and joy, his yellow Triumph Stag sports car in which they also buzzed around Europe. The chap on the right was in fact a complete stranger, and young Jessica was added, but since she looks about 8 years old this also fits with 1981. From left to right: Judy, John, Marjorie, me, and the dog is Domino.

Finally the Triumph Stag became unreliable, causing John to replace it with a second-hand Lancia. "Very *you*, Mr Brunner," John related his local garage-man as having declared when John drove the car there to display it, or maybe just to get some petrol.

That was after Marjorie had died, by starving herself to death in hospital. A stroke paralysed her. Always she'd vowed that if she was reduced to a vegetable condition she wanted to have life support switched off. I think she had formally documented this. The hospital refused to go along with her wishes and when Marjorie realised – since she was still aware – she began refusing food and drink. According to John, the hospital retaliated by denying Marjorie pain killers, until almost her final hour. I believe it took twelve days for her to die, paralysed and in pain, but defiant. Marjorie was very strong-willed, personally as well as politically, as befitted the consort of John Brunner.

Autumn 2012

Science Fact and Science Fiction

I do applaud Henry Gee of *Nature* for including an SF short story at the back of that august journal for years on end now; this is one delightful way that science fact and science fiction interact. Meanwhile, out in the mundane British world, how often we see daft comments in newspapers, or hear them on the radio, along the lines of "this is sheer science fiction", regarding some scientific notion that seems a bit far-out at the moment, or conversely "this isn't science fiction; it's real", if some formerly far-out notion has attained practical reality. We SF writers labour cheerfully under this double-edged sword of dominant cultural perception in Britain. Damned if we do; damned if we don't, as it were. Every month the witty SF news magazine *Ansible* gathers examples of inanities in its "How Others See Us" section. (An "ansible" being an instantaneous interstellar communication device dreamed up by Ursula le Guin.) No, on the whole we don't write about dragons and flying saucers. In other countries the situation can be different. In France, SF is a valid form of intellectual activity, ever since the surrealist poet Boris Vian translated the works of the American A.E. van Vogt, which to us might seem somewhat crazy and clunky, doing for them what Baudelaire did for Edgar Allen Poe a century earlier. And in the wake of 9/11 I hear that the CIA called in SF writers to discuss future terrorist scenarios.

Now it isn't actually likely that SF writers are going to envision future scientific breakthroughs or future technology accurately, although on the scattershot principle occasionally this might happen. But I remember when Stephen Hawking announced that micro black holes must exist, and SF writers enthusiastically wrote stories using these as garbage disposal energy generators, or as perfect murder weapons, until about 18 months later Hawking completed the sentence with, "but they evaporate in 10 to the minus 23 of a second", or some such. And I remember when the experimental division of British Telecom organised a conference of British SF writers to forecast future developments, and were mildly unhappy that we weren't far-out enough. And I remember researching the climate of Mars very carefully for a novel, so that I knew the polar caps were frozen carbon dioxide, until the day when the proofs of my book arrived to correct and simultaneously *New Scientist* with its cover proclaiming WATER ICE ON MARS! I'd have been better off blithely assuming all along that a polar cap obviously contains frozen water, rather than getting

it right, which turned out to be wrong. Fortunately, while I was tearing my hair out, there came a knock on the door and by amazing good fortune there stood Gregory Benford, plasma physicist and SF author, who had been at JPL a few days earlier and was privy to the latest findings.

So let's say that there's a complex dialectic between science fact and science fiction. A recent, undoubtedly short-lived school of thought, Mundane SF, wishes to stick to the facts and eschew any flights of fancy such as starships or aliens. How very boring of them, say I. What, no zany thought experiments? Zaniness is an important part of SF, as well as operating within a certain framework of rationality, as opposed to the "rules" of magic which prevail in fantasy novels – though not forgetting Arthur Clarke's adage that any sufficiently advanced technology might seem to us akin to magic. And the universe may still turn out to be fundamentally stranger that we suppose even yet, although I'd like to think it isn't stranger than we can suppose. These are thrilling times, for skin after skin of the onion of what we thought we knew is constantly being stripped away, revealing deeper hidden skins – as it were, I should add; for SF is nothing if not metaphorical in essence, seeking metaphors for the impact of knowledge, and applied knowledge, upon us human beings, incarnating our hopes and fears regarding the future which arrives so rapidly these days. And if the future which swiftly becomes the present invalidates the bases of SF books, such as the one-time oceans and jungles of Venus, to take one extreme instance, this doesn't invalidate the power and pleasure of such bygone texts, any more than *Gulliver's Travels* is invalidated by GPS.

Recently some SF has increasingly been looking back, as if nostalgically, to alternative pasts, "steampunk" variations upon, say, the Victorian era with Babbage analytical engines in full swing, almost as if the future has become too complex and multi-faceted to contemplate. Is this a kind of treason to the original "progressive" vision of SF? (Though let's not forget all the dystopian visions.) No, I'd say; it's just another part of the rich metaphorical tapestry. SF, too, has been somewhat eclipsed for years now by Fantasy literature, as though science has failed us, becoming the bogeyman responsible for ecological disaster, climate instability, nuclear weapons, potential designer plagues, and such. Possibly, if an "impossible" time machine could be invented, one should burn down Tolkien's house just after he finished *Lord of the Rings* rather than trying, say, to assassinate Hitler. Yet in fact we are ever more pledged to science as solution rather than cause of woes. And what times we are living in, with the Large Hadron Collider on the one hand, and on the other Nick

Bostrom’s very logical argument that we’re actually living in a simulation operated by an advanced future civilisation. Plenty of scope for the imagination! Imagination is what makes us unique – for the moment, unless we do ever contact alien life that is comprehensible. Creative imagination of one kind is at the root of the best science, while a different, though allied kind, is at the root of the best science fiction.

Of course, if we do ever find imaginative and scientific aliens, it’ll be interesting to know if they write, or ever wrote, science fiction.

21 August 2013

Hollywood Halloween News from Ian Watson

Sci-Fi Film to Be Put on Ice?

Steve Spellborg's proposed sci-fi movie *The Silent Ones*, due to feature hundreds of Emperor Penguins awaiting the return to Earth of superscience birdlike aliens, has enraged environmentalists.

Crowds of Emperors, the tallest of penguins, stand motionless on the ice for several months during the snowstorms of the Antarctic winter while incubating their eggs with their feet. In Spellborg's story they're all standing expecting something – the return of a mother ship, which duly arrives, and on to which they all will waddle, rather as in his 1981 blockbuster *Abductions of the Third Sort*. In *The Silent Ones* an obsessed ornithologist, haunted by dreams, will battle his way to the frozen south with his ufologist girlfriend.

Conservationists protest that all the light and heat produced by the film crews may poach the penguins' eggs, or make those hatch prematurely, and fear that the puzzled penguins might become psychotic.

In a press statement released yesterday at 6:30 p.m. Hollywood time, Spellborg declared his determination to commence location shooting by Christmas, and insisted that no penguins, nor their eggs, will be harmed physically nor psychologically during the making of *The Silent Ones*. To minimise disturbance and ecological impact, the living quarters of the location film crew will be in a nuclear submarine which the US navy has now pledged to put at his disposal, and which will stay submerged as much as possible.

28 October 2013

Moon versus Sun

This is a retrospective look at Duncan Jones's much-lauded 2009 film *Moon*, with a wee bit concerning Danny Boyle's slightly less lauded 2007 film *Sunshine*, written with the innocence of ignorance. In other words I'm ignoring all the wealth of background info available to anyone who googles Wiki, and just going on my original first impressions.

In *Moon*, Earth is dependent for its power resources on Helium-3 scraped off the surface of our satellite by big mining machines (vaguely plausible) and sent to Earth in space torpedoes. Supervising all of this lunar activity is precisely one chap called Sam who lives in something the size of a modest shopping mall, under the illusion that he's on a short-term contract. (There's another nifty mall in the *Doctor Who* "Waters of Mars" episode: enormous empty pressurised spaces for running through in panic, that must weigh hundreds of tons, although allegedly cargo space on the Mars-bound spaceship was so limited that they couldn't even take a bicycle with them to cover the unnecessary distances from A to B and C and D and E.)

Sam non-communicates with his loving wife back home by recorded videos – none of that one-and-a-half second delay real-time communication nonsense such as has been popular since Apollo first landed.

As a companion in his solitude Sam has a clunky mobile Cyclops-eyed Artificial Stupidity which often advises him to visit the infirmary. (Cue Hal from *2001*: I – do – not – recommend – that, Sam....) For lo, unbeknownst to Sam, he is a clone with implanted false memories *à la* Phil Dick (think *Total Recall*); and his body will fall apart before too long – whereupon another clone will be awoken from the many in storage in the off-limits basement of the mall.

Evidently nobody in their right mind would ever wish, for scientific or any other reasons, to be paid to live on the Moon in a luxurious mall (especially when the mall benefits from normal Earth gravity, unlike outside where you need to move in lunar slow motion). No, obviously you'd supervise Earth's vital energy supply by using up, one by one, solitary clones that fall apart. Cloning technology and cryo-storage of umpteen spares is so economical.

When Sam has an accident outside, the Artificial Stupidity mistakenly thinks he's defunct and awakens another Sam, which leads to poignant

Solaris moments of existential bewilderment, while melancholy celestial music *à la Gattaca* plays at great length to establish a philosophical mood. After a bit of a stand-off, Sam and Sam start playing ping-pong, which justifies the mall already being provided with a ping-pong table which usually requires a player at each end.

A discovery! The torpedo which would supposedly send a Sam back to Earth after his stint is actually a highly efficient incinerator; there's just a tiny trace of ash on the floor, which the Artificial Stupidity failed to completely vacuum up.

Moon so tries to be stylish and cool, but the problem is that the story is deeply silly. Viewing the film as an unintentional farce from the outset will enhance one's experience quite a bit. I recommend *Moon* parties with a prize for the funniest catcalls.

Sunshine has a slightly dodgy idea too, namely that you can rekindle a dimmed sun by chucking a lot of our world's fissile material into our star in the form of a superbomb. I fancy you could toss the entire Earth into the sun without making much flicker of a difference to solar output, but never mind that. *Sunshine* is so stylish and hot, as well as cool, that this doesn't matter a hoot. Without going into details, since I don't have enough time today (rather as Fermat scribbled in a margin that was too narrow for his Last Theorem) and since I feel metaphorical rather than analytical, *Sunshine* pushes all my buttons of, ahem, illumination. Emotional and dramatic and visual insight, rather than dimness, especially of wits.

11 November 2013

Some Advice for Budding Writers

When I used (past tense) to visit places to give workshops for just an hour or two, here is some of the advice I would give....

Write about a violent incident (robbery, fight, quarrel, accident, or whatever) from the point of view of a blind person – because we often ignore the senses other than vision. Smell, touch, sound, etc. The other senses are important to add flavour, though we don't want to go over the top.

To practice compression and leave out irrelevancies, write a story that is exactly 100 words long (excluding the title).

"16 year old John, an only child whose father had just died, was knocked down by a bus. An ambulance rushed John to hospital, where he needed an immediate operation. As John was wheeled unconscious into the operating theatre, the surgeon looked down at John's face and exclaimed, 'Good heavens, it's my son!'" How could this be? Write similar stories that reveal latent gender expectations.

The author knows what she means but the reader only has the words on the page. What is vague to the reader? What is confusing? What is ambiguous? If you reread your own story after a few weeks and feel the slightest momentary hesitation somewhere, something is wrong there.

English words can often mean more than one thing. This can cause unintended ambiguity, which the writer doesn't notice because she knows what she means. "The woodpecker is a boring bird," said so-and-so.

"She flew in from London..." – in an SF story anything can be literally true. This can cause temporary misunderstanding of the text.

Get events in the right order. People often write down an event than add on something additional they think of. "He tiptoed into the room after taking off his shoes." The reader's mind has to jump back. This is irritating after a while.

Choose 3 words from a dictionary by opening at random and sticking your finger on the page, and write a story logically but subtly linking the 3 words.

Be specific, to give a feeling of reality. "He walked through the park. Flowers were blooming." What sort of flowers? What colour? However, one specific item implies a whole context. If the flowers are daffodils, the

story must take place in Spring. (And therefore you do not need to state that is Spring.) At the same time you don't want to cram a story with irrelevant details. Ideally everything mentioned should help the story along, as setting or atmosphere or part of the plot.

Can the viewpoint character actually hear and see what is being described? Just because the author knows does not mean that the character is aware of something.

A writer sits still and describes action. Sometimes the action is physically impossible. Act out in your mind instead of just writing words. I have read total rubbish by published authors who not only don't know how to change a tyre (fair enough) but seem never to have been in a real car on a real road in the country they themselves live in. A story must be thought, and felt, not just written.

If you have a viewpoint character, don't suddenly veer to a different point of view for a while, or include a different character's point of view however briefly within the narrative.

Unless you are writing in the first person, keep your own personal likes and dislikes out of a story. The reader won't necessarily like and dislike the same things as the writer. Though we are interested in the likes and dislikes of the characters.

Vary the structure of your sentences. Instead of: "I walked down the High Street. I went into the chemist's..." try: "The High Street was busy. I went into the chemist's..." Do not start successive sentences with the same word or phrase, unless for special emphasis, or you will be monotonous.

Prefer active to passive constructions. Instead of "The field had been flooded by rain" – "Rain had flooded the field." This has more immediacy.

Never misuse "careen" to mean "career" as in "he careered along the corridor". To "careen" is to turn a boat on its side to scrape off barnacles, for instance.

Never misuse "actinic" to mean a lurid, eldritch, achingly blinding light. It only refers to the action of sunlight upon something, which is usually very minor.

If you don't know for sure exactly what a word means, even though it seems suitable, look it up.

Long sentences, with many parentheses and multiple synonyms for nuance (such as "it was boring, tedious, and mind-numbing") are the norm in most Romance languages (French, Spanish, Italian, Romanian etc) and seem more sophisticated to the reader of those languages. In English these are waffle and lack focus. English has a bigger vocabulary than, say, French, and can usually provide a single perfect *mot juste*.

Wage war on the word “it” which is almost meaningless. Prefer a noun where possible. Count your “it”s and get rid of as many as possible.

Likewise wage war on “There is / are / was / were” as a starter for sentences. “There was a blazing fire in the hearth” is lazy and abstract compared with “A fire blazed in the hearth”.

“with” is often a meaningless connective. “A man with red hair came in, with a red scarf around his neck” should be “A red-haired man came in, a red scarf around his neck”. Purge unnecessary words.

Have fun!

13 January 2014

The Biggest SF Bookshop in Europe

Beautiful Barcelona now has the biggest and most beautiful SFF bookshop in Europe, right up there with all the Gaudí architecture, the Picasso Museum, and the Boqueria food market as must-visits, for SFF fans certainly – with almost 2 kilometres of elegant and ingeniously designed wooden shelving, including several hundred metres of books in English. Move over, London's Forbidden Planet!

Gigamesh bookshop is the dream made reality of Alejo Cuervo ("Alex Crow"). At school Alejo was convinced of the power of SF when three bullies menaced him while he was reading Asimov's Foundation; Alejo quoted the wisdom of the Mayor of Terminus City at them – "*Violence is the last refuge of the incompetent*" – and the bullies turned away, defeated or bemused.

Alejo started out by selling secondhand SF from a street market stall. After a few years he moved to share a shop with his mother's ceramics, and began inviting authors; I was the lucky second one, in 1987, to launch *El jardín de las delicias*, the translation of my *The Gardens of Delight* set in the triptych of Hieronymus Bosch, published by Martínez Roca in an SF series directed by Alejo.

To publicise his shop, he set up the SF magazine Gigamesh (its title a homage to the epic Gilgamesh but with Giga instead of Gilga because he was thinking big – oops no, it's a homage to the part of Stanisław Lem's *A Perfect Vacuum*, reviews of non-existent books, which takes the piss out of academic analysis of texts). After some while he himself started publishing excellent translations of SFF, choosing only what he most liked personally rather than aiming for best-sellers. He was there at the starting line in appreciation of George Martin long before *A Song of Ice and Fire* was even dreamed of.

Move on twenty years and, even before the HBO televisation, successive volumes of Martin's epic published by Alejo became so popular in Spain that 10% of all books by GRRM in all languages including English were being sold on the Spanish mainland. And then the TV series happened... Between one year and the next, Gigamesh (publisher and bookshop) jumped from being officially classified as a small business to being a big business just like Iberia Airlines, completely leap-frogging

the medium business status.

Being a literary, political, and economist idealist, as well as by now rather well-heeled largely due to GRRM sales, Alejo specified that big retail outlets such as the giant upmarket department store chain El Corte Inglés – "The English Cut", as in tailoring – should order at least one copy per store of his other smaller-selling titles along with their orders for hundreds of thousands of a new GRRM plus reprints of previous GRRMs – even extending this courtesy to "rival" small SFF publisher Alamut whom Alejo offered to distribute. When mighty El Corte Inglés only ordered vast numbers of GRRMs, and nothing else, they spent one Christmas season without any GRRMs. Duly chastened, El Corte Inglés changed their policies, and became once again the best and biggest Spanish chain-bookstore. Currently the FNAC chain is having its account shut down for the same reason. Alejo also refuses to supply outlets such as supermarkets, so as to support bookshops little and large.

Gigamesh is a perfectionist publisher which employs not only top-notch translators but professional correctors too, a role which I wasn't aware of before I came to Spain. No translation is printed without extreme and prolonged textual scrutiny of nuances (including by Alejo) and this continues as aftercare even once a book is published. Just for example, if a dwarf rides on a pig's back in Vol 1, and years later in Vol 4 GRRM reveals the animal to be female, reprints of Vol 1 will change *cerdo*, male, to *cerda*, female. Some other SF publishers don't take so much care – La Factoría de Ideas is said to have destroyed the reputation of quite a few Anglo-American authors, whom fans simply won't read another book by after enduring the first mangled one. 28th and 29th March saw the Grand Opening of new Gigamesh into which Alejo has lovingly poured lots of his own money, accompanied by mass signings, masses of journalists, masses of fans, and masses of Cava and tapas. Alejo's hair and beard are white; his eyes are bright blue, as if he has taken Spice from *Dune*. For the occasion he dressed as a cardinal, a prince of the church of SFF, consequently "masses" is the appropriate word. The altarpiece is a cinemascopic mural by genius Enrique Corominas who does the cover art for the GRRM volumes in Spanish, and whose recent illustrated hardback adaptation of Oscar Wilde's *The Portrait of Dorian Gray* is a gorgeous book well worth buying even if you can't read either the Spanish original or the French translation. A single piece of artwork from this recently sold at a Christie's auction for $24,000, way beyond the estimate.

Unlike London's Forbidden Planet, where first you're principally confronted by toys and merchandising, its SFF literature being banished to

the big basement, BOOKS is the major impact of Librería Gigamesh. Games and their manuals, models, *Magic: The Gathering* cards, and comics are also on hand in abundance, but BOOKS are what greet you, and mainly accompany you around the shop. Different areas are named in honour of great Spanish SF editors past and present. There's also a fun poster-size guide to all akin shops in this smallish area of rather elegant boulevards – near the Arc de Triomf just beyond the medieval Gothic Quarter – known to fans as the Friqui Triangle, since Friquis (="Nerds", also spelled Frikis) is what Spanish SFF fans like to call themselves. Alejo is perfectly happy to display a guide to rival shops, united by Friquidom. Be not afraid to be a Freak in Barcelona.

The shop is at number 8 Carrer de Báilen street. Its website, with photos, is http://www.gigamesh.com/libreria.html. The "subtitle" of the shop, *Vicio y Subcultura*, means "Addiction & Subculture". Our love of SFF is an addiction, isn't it? Gigamesh has a few mini shopping trolleys in case addiction gets out of hand, out of the grasp of one shopping hand anyway.

Oh, and regarding games, I don't only refer to SFF games – Gigamesh stocks the largest number of Go manuals in the whole of Spain, because Alejo likes Go.

On hand from the UK for the opening, joining a host of Spanish authors, was Lisa Tuttle with Colin Murray. Many were the munchy bibulous meals, the highlight being the Calçotada Friki on the Sunday. Calçots are giant sweet spring onions – no resemblance to little shallots – cooked barbecue-style and sometimes served in newspaper. Wearing a big and necessary bib, you peel off the carbonised outer leaves, dip into a sauce made of peppers, tomato, garlic, olive oil, and almonds, then lower the long calçot into a mouth best positioned agape horizontally. After half a dozen of these to warm up (or easily fill up), giant plates of meats appear, grilled chops, sausages, thighs.

Alejo gave away to all celebrants free copies of his own first book, *Exégesis* ("Exegesis") specially printed for the occasion, enshrining the rationale of his professional life, a historical survey of the Gigamesh catalogue, some fiction by him, and poems he has translated from English to Spanish, in both languages. Alejo himself translates the songs and verses in the saga which everyone now just calls *Game of Thrones*, while my beloved Cristina translates all the prose.

Alejo also took the opportunity of the Grand Opening to launch an ambitious and innovative digital platform, LEKTU, offering books at really affordable prices in many formats, without DRM, giving the users

freedom and control – as distinct from Kindle, where you never actually own what you think you bought (but merely rented) which can be erased at the push of a button by mighty Amazon without any recourse, as if a bookshop manager could break into your home and take back without compensation all the books you've bought. Users of LEKTU will not be regarded as potential criminal pirates. Already a dozen significant publishers have signed up to join the Gigamesh digital catalogue – including its translations of GRRM. The name LEKTU combines Read, Electronic, and You, with the E taking the form of the I Ching trigram for Creative Force. Power to its elbow.

The big airy conference room at the back of the shop, lined with glass cases of models, is already much in demand by other Spanish publishers to launch new SFF and horror titles. Gigamesh bookshop is the place to be in Barcelona, a cardinal point; and amiable Alejo, fluent in English and Spanish and Catalan, makes an excellent Pope – an alter ego bestowed upon him years ago in the now enormously popular comic *Fanhunter* as a lunatic ex-librarian possessed by the spirit of Philip K. Dick who blows up Vatican City to become the villainous Pope Alejo 1.

By the time this is published you'll be able to explore the inside of number 8, Carrer de Báilen, Barcelona, using Google Street View. There aren't many bookshops you can say that about!

Summer 2014

Goldilocks and Little Green Men

In the fairy story, in the bears' home, Goldilocks tastes three bowls of porridge. One is too hot, one is too cold, and one is just right.

The "Goldilocks" zone around a star, such as our Sun, is the zone where water on a planet will be liquid. Too close to the sun, and the star's heat will boil the water away; too far, and the water will be frozen ice. We assume that liquid water is essential for life as we know it, so we hunt for planets around the Goldilocks zones of their stars.

Does this mean that a planet in the Goldilocks Zone will certainly have life in the way Earth has life, including creatures with complex brains who can think? Not in the least! The processes of chemistry suggest that such a world may well have microbes, but not necessarily anything more complicated. The existence of life today on Earth is like winning a lottery twenty times over. Just for instance, we have a giant moon, which stabilises the tilt of the Earth (at about 23 degrees). Without this stability, we might have Summers when our seas boil, or Winters when the whole Earth freezes. The likelihood of such a moon seems very low – and this is only one of the lotteries that have to be to be won. *Rare Earth* by Peter Ward & Donald Brownlee, published in 2000, details many other lotteries. In fact the unlikelihood of complex life on Earth is considerable. It even seems plausible that micro-organisms first evolved on Mars billions of years ago when conditions on Mars were less hostile than now, to be blasted into space within a rock by an asteroid impact, falling to Earth many years later – yet another level of lottery!

The universe contains billions of galaxies which each contains billions of stars, consequently some planet somewhere is likely to win all the lotteries. Complex life might indeed also evolve elsewhere than Earth, but the nearest ETs might be so far away that we could never know that they exist, or did exist in the past. So much for flying saucers.

Warm water and some sort of life may also exist within some of the moons of the giant worlds of our own solar system, Jupiter and Saturn. Far from the Sun, these worlds of gas and their solid moons are very cold; but, as the moons orbit the gas-giants, the gravity of Jupiter and Saturn, very much stronger than Earth's gravity, constantly pulls at the insides of the moons, causing heat which can maintain oceans of warm water under the crusts of ice many kilometres thick. If intelligent life evolved in those oceans, it could probably never know that beyond the thick ceilings of ice

there is a distant Sun and other worlds and stars – unless we go there and drill a borehole 50 or 100 kilometres deep, which we may indeed do. But imagine explaining cosmology to an alien squid, intelligent in its own way.

Really, we are all very unlikely to exist (merely not impossible). So we should enjoy life, and beer, and trying to understand the universe, while we can. People sometimes say they wish they'd been born elsewhere or elsewhen, but this is nonsense. Even with exactly the same DNA (astronomically unlikely) you yourself would become quite a different person if born a few hundred years ago in London, or a hundred years from now. You are here, you are now.

13 October 2014

Characters Must Eat

1

One of the inspirations of my 2-volume science fantasy saga “The Books of Mana” (*Lucky’s Harvest* and *The Fallen Moon*) was Finnish cookbooks because now my characters would have something to feast upon. More recently myself and my beloved Cristina (cookery author as well as Spanish translator of George Martin’s “A Song of Ice & Fire”) co-wrote a cookbook about 50 meals named after famous people for the 50th anniversary of the leading Spanish book club Círculo de Lectores (Readers’ Circle). After a while meals began to cross-reference as though a secret history of the world was emerging gastronomically. Here are the histories of a couple of “named” dishes, in English for the very first time.

Oysters Rockefeller

In 1840 Italian immigrant Antoine Aliciatore founded America’s oldest family-run restaurant in culturally French New Orleans after lack of success in New York. In 1899 a shortage of imported French snails caused his son Jules to turn to the local oysters, resulting in a dish which he named after John D. Rockefeller (1839-1937), America’s first billionaire, because Jules’ sauce was very rich too.

The sauce was also green, a purée of green vegetables famously scorning any use of spinach, though its exact ingredients were kept a family secret. Since Antoine’s has sold 3.5 million Oysters Rockefeller between then and now, many chefs attempted copies, often courtesy of spinach. In 1986 apparently a laboratory analysis showed the presence of parsley, puréed celery, chives, and capers as well as olive oil – one must imagine a diner suddenly running out of Antoine’s with an Oyster Rockefeller clutched in his hand and escaping in a waiting car to that laboratory.

Rockefeller grew rich by revolutionising the petroleum industry, and he was a pioneering philanthropist, endowing much medical research and two universities. He was also a teetotaller, whereas Jules’ sauce was said to benefit by a dash of “the Green Fairy”, absinthe, the preferred tipple of many French artists of the time. So Rockefeller may never have tasted his namesake dish, or at least not in its full original glory....

Chicken Marengo

On 14 June 1800, having taken his army over the Alps into northern Italy like a latterday Hannibal, Napoleon brilliantly triumphed over the Austrians at Marengo, after which in a nearby farmhouse his cook Dunant improvised from the few items available a meal of chicken – diced by a sabre! and fried in olive oil – plus a tomato-based sauce topped with crayfish and fried eggs, a dish which became immortal, and a symbol of France.

Except for some awkward facts such as that... Dunant only began to work for Napoleon two years later, Napoleon didn't eat in any farmhouse or old inn but went back to his headquarters, olive oil hardly existed locally, and Napoleon was extremely lucky to win, with huge casualties on both sides.

A master of spin, Napoleon had official maps of the battle destroyed and redrawn to conform with his vision, and was still revising the facts years later in exile. A recent book in English, *Napoleon's Chicken Marengo: Creating the Myth of the Emperor's Favourite Dish* (2011) by Napoleonic expert Andrew Uffindell, reveals fascinatingly how the name Marengo was spun for political reasons, as well as the meal itself till "Marengo" was simply a title covering a huge range of variations in the competing newfangled restaurants of Paris in the 1820s where a clever owner could make a fortune within 5 years. In 1988 the first French astronaut took tinned veal Marengo, adjusted for zero gravity, to the Mir space station, carrying this mythic meal beyond the Earth.

2

Following on from Napoleon's famous chicken, we have Napoleon's nemesis putting in the boot....

Beef Wellington

According to a British Earl memorialising 20 years of conversations with Arthur Wellesley, Duke of Wellington (1769-1852), Wellington's favourite meat was mutton, not beef; and when at war he often notoriously only ate cold meat and bread (however, the Sandwich had already been christened...) so attaching the name of the commander who beat Napoleon at Waterloo to beef in puff pastry may have played a victorious British trump to Napoleon's propagandist Chicken Marengo – a robust rosbif reply to the stylish caprices of French cuisine even though it stole an existing French filet de bœuf en croûte.

After service in India, Wellesley rose to prominence during the

campaign against Napoleon in Portugal and Spain, became British ambassador in Paris (and the first Duke of Wellington) following Napoleon's fall, then finally put paid to Napoleon in 1815 with Prussian help after the escape from Elba. Wellington became one of the few Prime Ministers to fight a duel while in office, and famously responded to a greedy prospective publisher of memoirs by a former mistress with: "Publish and be damned!" Wellington certainly devised the boot named after him, and sliced Beef Wellington can somewhat resemble a battlefield amputation of a booted leg. Like Chicken Marengo its contents can vary – to salmon, to sausage meat, and to lamb which would probably have pleased the "Iron Duke" best.

Which we follow with beef completely uncooked and unbooted in the form of:

Carpaccio

During the 1920s the manager of the fashionable Hotel Europa in Venice encouraged his waiter Giuseppe Cipriani to become a barman, since Giuseppe was good with languages and with people. Thus Giuseppe became well acquainted with a young man from Boston, Harry Pickering, who was in Venice with his aunt, trying to overcome alcoholism – mainly by spending time in the hotel bar. However, Harry quarreled with his aunt and she left Italy, taking her cheque book with her. Giuseppe took the risk of lending Harry 10,000 Lire ($5000 at the time). In 1931 surprisingly Harry reappeared and repaid Giuseppe 50,000 Lire, so that Giuseppe could open his own bar, for which "Harry's Bar" might be a good name.

Giuseppe converted part of a rope warehouse, at the end of a cul-de-sac so that only select clients would patronise it, not just passers-by; and soon the guest book held the signatures of Toscanini, Marconi, Charlie Chaplin amongst many of the rich and famous, while habitué Hemingway boosted Harry's Bar in his writings. In 1950 Countess Amalia Nani Mocenigo stopped by and told Giuseppe that her doctor wouldn't allow her to eat cooked meat. So Giuseppe elegantly served thinly sliced raw beef, and named the dish after the Venetian painter Vittorio Carpaccio (1465-1525), since Giuseppe had just seen a major exhibition and been struck by Carpaccio's fondness for the colour red in his exquisitely detailed paintings.

3

Parmentier Potatoes

(with mince, cheese, white wine, milk, butter, oil...)

The Spanish conquerors of the Inca Empire introduced the potato into Europe in the 16th century, but it was a long road from there to chips and croquettes. In fact until 1772 in France it was illegal to eat potatoes because potatoes were believed to cause leprosy. Potatoes were food for pigs. Only in poverty-stricken Ireland, out of all Europe, were potatoes generally eaten by people. Around 1760 Antoine-Augustin Parmentier (1737-1813), a French army pharmacist, found himself a prisoner of war in Prussia, forced to eat potatoes... and he survived the experience in good health.

Back in Paris Parmentier researched the nutritional benefit of potatoes, then staged publicity stunts such as celebrity dinners (of potato dishes) and hiring armed guards for his potato patch but ordering the guards to accept bribes and also withdrawing the guards at night so that people could steal what was obviously of great value. Thus did the potato enter the European menu.

Parmentier became Inspector General of the Health Service under Napoleon, inaugurating the first compulsory vaccinations against smallpox, and he was a pioneer investigator of refrigeration to preserve food, but his fame is inextricably linked with the potato, for which we should all be grateful. To this day visitors to his grave in Père Lachaise Cemetery, Paris, place potatoes on it as a tribute, not even in the hope that he will cook them.

Romanoff Strawberries

(with vanilla ice cream, Grand Marnier, et cetera)

The original recipe for Strawberries Romanoff was created by August Escoffier when he was chef in charge at the posh Carlton Hotel, London, from 1899 to 1920 – after Escoffier was dismissed from the de luxe Savoy Hotel along with the future founder of the equally luxurious Ritz Hotel (which created smoked haddock omelette for Arnold Bennett; never say this blog isn't literary) on account of huge thefts of wines and spirits and for accepting bribes from suppliers. We might suppose that Escoffier named this dish in honour of the Russian royal family, but in fact Escoffier called it Strawberries "Americaine Style". The dessert was then purloined and renamed in honour of himself by "Prince" Mike Romanoff (1890-1971), becoming a huge hit at Romanoff's restaurant in Beverley Hills, Los Angeles, its fame soon spreading far.

This Romanoff, who claimed to be a secret son of Tsar Alexander III though actually born in Lithuania as Hershel Gezuzin, was a confidence man and impostor so charming and inventive that he truly became close

friends with stars such as Humphrey Bogart and David Niven in a Hollywood where everyone knew that the Prince was fake and nobody cared if he ever really was a Colonel of Cossacks, or escaped deportation from the USA by swimming from Ellis Island through icy water, or perfected his British accent due to time in the UK's high-security Broadmoor psychiatric hospital; and innumerable other exploits. Strawberries Romanoff immortalises a great and genial personality.

17 November 2014 to 16 February 2015

Dinah’s Mancunicon Con Report

Mancunicon took place in a corridor. I could see quite well both ways from my tableland, or mesa which I know is a Spanish table. Opposite me was Ops, which must mean opposite. So I wasn’t too confused, although humans of different sizes suddenly vanished and other humans suddenly appeared instead. I often have gaps in existence.

Most humans were good at rubbing me under my chin and on top of my head and along my back the way I like it. One human put a bright pencil labelled Barcelona in my mouth instead of my food-leaf or my tug-of-war stone. Barcelona was okay to bite.

The humans vibrated lots of noises and sometimes fed each other chocolate or pieces of Catalan sausage which must be made from cats. I could see into a big room where the humans swapped small sheets of coloured paper for blocks of paper with all sorts of signs on them. Sometimes a human asked another human to put his name inside a paper block, near the front.

My name is Dinah because I am a baby dinosaur. I am a girl dinosaur. There were both Mans and Womans at Mancunicon, and small humans too. I sensed that I was on a tableland with precipices on all sides. A

human called this Roar-aima. So I roared. And I panted.

Outside of Mancunicon was a hurricane of rain and wind. Maybe an asteroid caused this. Humans at Mancunicon vibrated about asteroids, and androids. I do not like asteroids.

Half of my mesa was named Barcelona. The other half was named New Orleans. After a while I trod in the swamp of New Orleans.

Behind my mesa on the other side of a cliff was a very big cave, with chairs. Humans crowded into the big cave to hide from the hurricanes and asteroids.

There were also small caves. Caves are not for dinosaurs. My parents went into a small cave with a big friend to vibrate about Spanish Si-Fi. I live in Spain. My parents have no tails. Maybe my tail will fall off when I stand up tall like my parents. I watched Godzilla. I roared and panted.

I came to Mancunicon in an airy plane named Easterjet. In the airy port my parents woke me to prove I am not a jihad bomba. I roared and panted. But in the airy plane I must sleep in case I harm the lektronics of Easterjet.

When I am older and fifty feet long I will fill the Mancunicon corridor. I do not want fifty feet because that is half a centipede. I am Dinah. I was at Mancunicon. This is my con report.

5 April 2016

Mancunicon was the 2016 UK Eastercon (our national SF convention), held in Manchester on 25-29 March that year. [Ed.]

Fantasy City!

By “Fantasy City” I allude loudly in large letters to BARCELONA, where the 2016 Eurocon will happen on 4, 5, and 6 November in the very centre of the city, not shuffled away in some suburb.

Dragons are quite the thing in Iberia right now, what with the Game of Thrones books being filmed in several locations, but especially dragons preside over Barcelona. A sizable scaly Art Deco dragon writhes out from a shop on the famous Ramblas street leading to the sea where the statue of Christopher Columbus high on his column points which direction to sail to get rich. A big Japanese fan sits on the rear of that dragon, because in the mid-19th century lots of artists were seduced by Japanese art. In the other direction, Gaudí’s Casa Batlló house sports a roof resembling a dragon. Go further, to Gaudí’s Güell Park and a mosaic salamander called *El Drac* (“the Dragon”) greets you just inside the entrance. Head a different way, and the gate to the Güell Pavilions rejoices in a fierce dragon gate.

St George is the patron saint of Catalonia, as likewise of England, and on the day of Sant Jordi (his Catalan name), the 23rd of April, lovers and their lasses – and anybody else – present their beloveds with a book or a rose. Traditionally the ladies received a rose and the lads received a book. Nowadays, liberatedly, women too can receive a book; in fact they’d protest loudly if they only receive a flower. Umpteen books and roses are sold; so it’s a good time to launch a new book, Sant Jordi’s Day.

This book and rose festival has been happening ever since 1926 on the 23rd of April, to commemorate that day in 1616 when Cervantes died. Oddly enough, Shakespeare died on the very same day, 23rd April 1616. This is a slightly weird coincidence considering the pre-eminence of the Bard and of the *Don Quixote* author respectively as regards English and Spanish literature. Probably Doctor Who is not to blame for this, even though death dogs Doctor Who’s travels.

Barcelona’s greatest architect, Gaudí (among several other great architects less famous), was fairly obsessed with dragons, doubtless due to the St George connexion since Gaudí was pious, although in Barcelona it sometimes seems as if the dragon won the fight, rather than Sant Jordi. About 25 years ago I myself had a story in Asimov’s, called “Gaudí’s Dragon”, in which Gaudí’s still-unfinished Sagrada Familia (a Basilica & Temple, technically speaking) is completed holographically.

Anyway, Eurocons are a way for fans and professionals from

different parts of Europe to mingle stimulatingly. These “European Science Fiction Conventions” have been happening for 40 years now, moving from country to country, always with English as a common language, and always in conjunction with the national convention of that country. Gentle Reader, there is usually much Fantasy too!

Yet never until now has there been a Eurocon in sunny Iberia (I say “Iberia” just in case Catalonia secedes from Spain in the meantime, though that will make no difference to the convention and con-goers will be living in interesting times.) The weather in Barcelona should be quite pleasant in early November.

Even aside from Gaudí, Barcelona’s Modernist architecture is stunning, for mile after mile. An open-top, hop-on-hop-off tourist bus is a fine way to see this, since the most ornate floor of apartment buildings is at bus-top level. At street level is the Bajo or bottom floor which is often a shop. Above is the Entresuelo, or mezzanine floor. On top of this is the Principal where the prosperous live or lived. Only then do we come to the First Floor; so someone who lives on the Second Floor is a long way up a building; fortunately elevators were part of the Modernist plan. Formerly, servants lived at the very top, which has now gone way up in the world as regards cost.

The Barcelona Eurocon will be in a hotel just a couple of minutes from the main downtown square, Plaça de Catalunya (where the buses from the airport deliver their passengers) as well as in the almost adjacent Centre of Contemporary Culture. These venues are in turn just a couple of minutes from the big medieval Gothic Quarter of deep narrow shop-rich lanes.

A stroll through the Gothic Quarter, preferably past the sublime Palace of Catalan Music, leads towards Europe’s biggest SF & Fantasy bookshop, Gigamesh, which has two hundred metres of books in English. The motto of Gigamesh bookshop is “vicio y subcultura” – “vicio” in the sense of “addiction”; we are all addicted to fantastic fiction, aren’t we?

Gigamesh is at the heart of a triangle of shops specialising in fantasy of all kinds, games, comics, anime, miniatures, and alternative culture shops – such as Freaks with a wealth of books imported from all over the world; topped off by the alternative costumier, Madame Chocolat, with Steampunk and Gothic gear.

Just beyond the triangle, is the imposing Modernist Arc de Triomphe built in colourful Moorish-inspired brickwork that was the gateway to a fair held in the large and pleasant Parc de la Ciutadella, where parakeets fly wild, as part of the Universal Exhibition of 1888. This leads to an

excellent zoo, the first zoo in the world to be open-plan, so open that in 2014 a former police chief, turned far right activist, and self-styled "survivalist", was able to jump into the lion enclosure. Strangely, he survived; the lions only played with him, a bit roughly, until firemen arrived with hoses.

Speaking of water, the public supply in Barcelona is completely safe but citizens say they don't like the taste, so for drinking traditionally everyone buys bottled water, available in umpteen cheap grocery shops and supermarkets, or for three or four times as much in price from street stalls for tourists. The city has many public fountains, all safe to drink from if you forget to buy a bottle. As with three coins in a fountain, if you drink from La Font de Canaletes at the top of the Ramblas – a fourfold lamp post rising from it – you'll be destined to return to Barcelona; not a bad fate. Another joy of the Ramblas is La Boqueria, one of the best food markets in the world, a treat for the eyes (and for the mouth, *la boca* in Spanish and in Catalan too, though this is a false etymology).

Turn down a short lane off the Ramblas, and you're in the sizable Royal Square (Plaça Reial), with tall palm trees, and a lovely bar selling draught Voll-Damm, embedded into the Gothic Old City – in the Cathedral courtyard of which are white geese.

Voll-Damm is the malty German-style beer brewed in Barcelona. A few minutes from the convention there's a big gastro brewery of the competition, Moritz.

Oh, did I mention the Picasso Museum? Or Mount Tibidabo, with its funicular railway and funfair, for brilliant panoramic views? Did I mention Gaudí's masterpiece house, Casa Milà, alias La Pedrera (the Stone Quarry), perhaps ten minutes' walk from the convention? There's not a straight wall in that building; everything undulates. The chimneys, which you can walk amongst, are nicknamed Witch-Scarers, and the balconies are of intricate wrought iron. When I first visited Barcelona in the late 1980s, my merry hosts told me that it was quite cheap to rent an apartment in La Pedrera because no tenants wanted such balconies which would rip their sheets hung out to dry. I slipped this bit of local colour from the horse's mouth in to my "Gaudí's Dragon" story, prompting hilarity in Barcelona after Asimov's published this. Fortunately, feeling guilty, my hosts then confessed, so I was able to erase that bit in time for the reprint in my *Stalin's Teardrops* collection! At least I think I did...

Regarding the Ramblas – from the Arabic word for a dried-up seasonal river bed – La Rambla (singular) is actually one long leafy avenue but traditionally it was divided by functions into the Rambla of the

Florists, the Rambla of the Bird Sellers, and so on; hence the plural Las Ramblas.

Among the 2016 Eurocon's Guests of Honour are Richard Morgan, Aliette de Bodard, Poland's master of heroic fantasy Andrzej Sapkowski, and games creator Rhianna Pratchett. For lots of info and pictures of the Progress Reports, go to http://www.eurocon2016.org/.

Hop on a dragon and fly to Barcelona!

(Or use EasyJet, for instance.)

2016

Stanisław Lem: One British Writer's Response

The first science-fictional Lem I knew about was actually called Lemmy. Lemmy was the radio operator on board the rocketship *Luna* which went to our Moon in the popular BBC radio series *Journey into Space*, commencing in 1953, a big influence upon the 10-year-old schoolboy who I was at the time. *Journey into Space* was the last radio drama in the UK to have ratings figures higher than television.

Lemmy was a nickname derived from Lemuel, Christian name of the protagonist of *Gulliver's Travels*. Lemmy could be brave when the chips were down, but he was easily spooked when eerie alien music came over *Luna*'s radio. Scarily, UFOs render the *Luna* powerless on the Moon. This certainly prepared me for when Stanisław Lem's hubristically named *Invincible* meets its come-uppance on Regis III.

The next LEM which I encountered was the Lunar Excursion Module which took Armstrong and Aldrin down to the surface of the Moon in 1969. I was teaching in Japan at the time, and while the landing was in progress on black and white television in my house I was also attempting to improve the English pronunciation of my Japanese professor's daughter and a friend, both about 12 years old, a surreal juxtaposition.

The Eagle has landed –

"Say: London."

"Rondon. Rondon."

"No, London."

That's one small step for man –

"London."

"Rondon."

– one giant leap for mankind.

"Rondon. Rondon. Rondon."

The word "Lem" became closely associated in my brain with space travel.

Lem's 1964 novel *The Invincible* appeared in English in 1973, the year of my own first SF novel, *The Embedding*, and I read the book quite soon after, a hardback borrowed from Oxford public library. I had returned from Japan to Oxford where I had been a student and then a postgraduate student, so I knew how to go about getting a flat in the centre of the city,

and Oxford was a nice place to live. (Borrowing *The Invincible* from that library may be a false memory since amongst my books I just found the Penguin paperback edition of 1976, the spine cracked by being read and with an index card of notes in my handwriting tucked inside.)

I wasn't sure what to make of *The Invincible*. To tell the truth, I didn't exactly enjoy the book, but it did stick in my mind powerfully while memories of other novels faded away. *The Invincible* seemed to be an anti-adventure compared with the American-style SF that was mainly to my taste at the time. As with any glib generalisation, there are many exceptions to this, which I shall not explore here. Suffice it to say that the younger me liked to read interstellar adventures – involving aliens, for instance. And I still enjoy such stories, although by now I'm very sceptical about the likelihood of advanced alien life anywhere in our galaxy, let alone relatively – relativistically – nearby.

The masses of micromachines on Lem's world of Regis III did not exactly push my button of sense-of-wonder, though they damned well ought to have done, as I see in retrospect. Evolution need not lead to individual intelligence, a very important insight arrived at by scientific logic; these days I am much more interested in such questions.

Solaris also passed me by somewhat, for similar reasons. Too enigmatic, for my taste, as though the author was deliberately avoiding writing a "proper" SF novel, or unable to. I view my reaction now as akin to the irritation recently voiced through megaphones by the so-called "Sad Puppies" and "Rabid Puppies" in America who have wrecked the Hugo Awards by steam-rollering space adventures on to a ballot which they view to be increasingly unrepresentative of popular tastes and biased towards towards lefty "literature". (Though note that the Hugos are voted for by SF fans.)

Compare and contrast the dismal "Lem Affair" of 40 years ago – the expulsion of then honorary member Stanisław Lem from Science Fiction Writers of America because he was critical of American-style SF. Maybe the most bizarre aspect of this witch-hunt was a psychotic letter from Philip K. Dick to the FBI warning them that Lem was probably the collective name for a committee of Polish communists intent on subverting the West by corrupting SF readers. Since Lem uniquely praised Dick as a writer and even brought about the publication of Dick in Poland – leading to Dick complaining about not being paid properly – this fully vindicates the saying "No good deed should go unpunished." I myself also had trapped Zlotys, which became devalued due to my not visiting Poland soon enough to spend them, so I assigned them to the excellent Dorota

Malinowska to pay for alcohol at a party for Polish fans. Cheers!

I never met Dick himself, though I would have done so if I had gone to a notorious French SF convention held in Metz in 1977, but I didn't go there; probably just as well, since by then Dick was in his late period, of – shall we say? – mystical insights. (However, one of Dick's epiphanies – namely that we live within a computer simulation – is nowadays accepted by several authentic physicists as at least plausible and, what's more, even testable. This is a bit surprising.) I treasured up many of Dick's "classic" novels, anticipating rereading them with joy in my old age. Unfortunately, a few years ago, I was invited as a panellist to a "celebration" of Dick at a university, so I reread those same books – including *Ubik*, which Lem recommended for publication in Poland. Oh dear me. So badly written, most of them, so fundamentally idiotic. Dick knew nothing and cared less about science, physics, planets, moons, what they are, where they are, why they are. *The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch* did stand up as a novel on rereading. But *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep*? A living animal is the most precious thing in the post-apocalyptic world; so, if you're fortunate enough and rich enough to own one, you keep it on the *roof* of your apartment block where radiation blows past like sleet? Dick had no idea what radiation is; even aside from that, what a gigantic *non sequitur*! Well, I said so at that university symposium, and this went down like a lead balloon.

Perhaps it may seem that I am participating in this celebration of Lem in a similarly unenthusiastic way. But no! I feel likewise, but in reverse, about Lem: books which I formerly put aside are presently going to illuminate me!

For reasons of cultural (or uncultural) patterning, I have to confess that Lem wasn't the writer most influential upon my own work, at least not overtly (though who knows about below the surface?) – until *The Cyberiad* came along. *The Cyberiad* absolutely enchanted me. These collected tales of the two cosmic constructor super-robots are a witty and wonderfully inventive masterpiece of world literature. And the wordplay is sublime – at least as it comes to me in the translation courtesy of the ingenious genius of Michael Kandel. I expressed my enthusiasm in a story which I wrote about Trurl and Klapaucius for a British volume of tribute to Lem initiated by the Polish Cultural Institute in London. This project underwent significant mishaps before it ended up as *Lemistry* published by Comma Press, of Manchester, in 2011. I wrote my story in the style of *The Cyberiad* (at least the style as Englished by Michael Kandel), and I was pretty pleased with the result – as a text that Lem himself *might* have

written – but seemingly this wasn't much appreciated by reviewers in the UK who ignored my story while highlighting many other contributors. I may be deluded about the virtues (or otherwise) of my homage to Lem, but I would much rather that that story was here in this present booklet in Polish instead of this series of evasions. Yet, as George Washington apocryphally told his father about cutting down a cherry tree, "I cannot tell a lie." My response to Lem may at least be symptomatic of one Anglo-Saxon SF writer's experiences.

10 October 2016

Where would our eternal Roman Empire be without coffee?

What if the Aegyptians had never established trading contacts with the Horn of Africa? For the Aegyptians to venture so far southward in inferior ships, at risk of piracy! All the way down the Sinus Arabicus, a greater distance than from the port of Roma to the Pillars of Hercules! Whatever the allure of frankincense, ebony, and myrrh, as well as of ivory and animal skins from the interior of Africa...

What if Augustus Caesar had not amazed Rome by wedding Queen Cleopatra, and then conveyed Roman cargo vessels and naval escorts by way of the delta of the Nilus and the Sinus Heroopolites into the Sinus Arabicus, thence to the Horn of Africa?

What if the rulers of the Horn hadn't yet realised the efficacy of the bush whose burnt berries provide the most remarkable stimulus to body and mind?

Why, the legions of Rome mightn't have been invigorated century after century to rise and shine and – full of beans, you might say – conquer the whole of Arabia and Barbaria and Parthia and Britannia and Hibernia and Germania and Dacia and Sarmatia! The thinking of our Emperors might not have been so perfectly clear and sharp.

Even more inconceivable, what if Hero of Alexandria had not adapted his steam-powered aeolipile thing into the espresso machine, that symbol of eternal Roman civilisation all the way from the Oceanus Atlanticus in the west to the river Indus in the east, from Scandia in the boreal north to the sources of the Nilus and the mouth of the Niger deep in Africa?

What if? is what I ask.

Winter 2020/2021

Original Appearances

- “April in Paris” first appeared in *Vector* #114, June 1983, ed. Geoff Rippington.
- “Believing SF” first appeared in *Drilkjis* #6, April 1982, ed. David Langford and Kevin Smith.
- “The Biggest SF Bookshop in Europe” first appeared in *Vector* #276, Summer 2014, ed. Alex Bardy, Glyn Morgan and Martin Petto.
- “The Bishop File” first appeared in the *Philcon 90 Souvenir Book*, November 1990, ed. Darrell Schweitzer.
- “Breakthrough” first appeared as part of a symposium of short essays on this theme in *Frontier Crossings*, August 1987, edited by Rob Jackson – souvenir book of Conspiracy ’87, the 1987 World SF Convention.
- “British Weather” first appeared in *Fisheye* #4, Summer 1986, ed. Ian Deeprose and Simon Ings.
- “Characters Must Eat” first appeared in three parts on the Northampton SF Writers Group blog, 17 November 2014 to 16 February 2015.
- “The Crudities of Science Fiction” first appeared in *Arena SF* #7, March 1978, ed. Geoff Rippington.
- “A Daffodil Jacket, or The Misadventures of Sebastian in Kyiv” first appeared in *Celebration: a taster*, 2008.
- “Dancing on a Tightrope” first appeared in *Australian Science Fiction Review Second Series* #22 (vol 4 number 5), December 1989, ed. Janeen Webb and others.
- “Dinah’s Mancunicon Con Report” first appeared on Ian Watson’s website (www.ianwatson.info), 5 April 2016.
- “Down the Mine” first appeared in *Arena SF* #12, Summer 1981, ed. Geoff Rippington.
- “East Is East” first appeared in *Matrix* #170, November/December 2004, ed. Tom Hunter.
- “*Eyes Wide Shut* – A Sort of Review” first appeared in *Vector* #208, November/December 1999, ed. Tony Cullen.
- “Fantasy City!” first appeared in *BFS Journal* #15, 2016, edited by Allen Stroud.
- “A Few Much-Needed Inventions” first appeared in *The Spang Blah* #13, Winter 1970, ed. Jan Howard Finder.

- “From the Oracle’s Mouth” first appeared in *Matrix* #127, September/October 1997, ed. Chris Terran.
- “Goldilocks and Little Green Men” first appeared on the Northampton SF Writers Group blog, 13 October 2014.
- “H.G. Wells in Timişoara” first appeared in *The H.G. Wells Society, the Americas Newsletter*, 2004.
- “Hollywood Halloween news from Ian Watson” first appeared on the Northampton SF Writers Group blog, 28 October 2013.
- “How Not to Hide a Dinosaur” first appeared in *Novacon 17 Programme Book*, October 1987.
- “Hype Hype Hoorah!” first appeared in *Vector* #108, June 1982, ed. Geoff Rippington.
- “An Idea Is Born” first appeared in *Altair* #2, August 1998, ed. Robert N. Stephenson and others.
- “The Journey to Chekhov” first appeared in *Focus* #8, Autumn 1983, ed. Chris Bailey, Dave Swinden and Allan Sutherland.
- “A Lot of Fog” first appeared in *Conspiracy Theories*, November 1987, ed. Chris Evans.
- “The Masters of the Golden Ball” first appeared in *Frontier Crossings*, August 1987, edited by Rob Jackson – souvenir book of Conspiracy ’87, the 1987 World SF Convention where the Strugatskis were guests of honour.
- “Me and the Hanover” first appeared in *Paragon: The Programme Book*, April 2001, edited by John Dowd – souvenir book of Paragon, the 2001 UK Eastercon.
- “Moon versus Sun” first appeared on *The Ultimate Adventure Magazine* website, 2013; revised for the Northampton SF Writers Group blog, 11 November 2013.
- “The Nuke Standard” first appeared in *Science Fiction Review* #39, Summer 1981, ed. Richard E. Geis.
- “One Finger at a Time” first appeared in *Focus* #4, Spring 1981, ed. Chris Evans and Rob Holdstock.
- “Personal Appreciation of John Brunner” first appeared in *Readercon 14 Souvenir Book*, July 2002, ed. Michael Matthew.
- “Plumbing Stanley Kubrick” first appeared partially in *The New Yorker* and in *Playboy*, 1999, then fully in *The New York Review of Science Fiction*, May 2000, ed. Kevin J. Maroney and others.
- “Read This: *The Conscious Ear*” first appeared in *The New York Review of Science Fiction* #96, August 1996, ed. Kevin J. Maroney and others.

- "Read This: *The Jew of Linz*" first appeared in *The New York Review of Science Fiction* #126, February 1999, ed. Kevin J. Maroney and others.
- "Review of *The Encyclopedia of Fantasy*" first appeared in *The Bulletin of the Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America*, Fall 1997.
- "Roots of a Writer" first appeared in *Dark Horizons* #33, August 1992, ed. Phil Williams.
- "Science Fact and Science Fiction" first appeared heavily cut on the BBC website as part of an sf authors' symposium, 18 March 2009; text restored for the Northampton SF Writers Group blog, 21 August 2013.
- "Science Fiction, Surrealism, and Shamanism" first appeared in *The New York Review of Science Fiction* #130, June 1999, ed. Kevin J. Maroney and others.
- "Shrines and Ratholes" first appeared in *Vector* #117, December 1983, ed. Geoff Rippington.
- "Some Advice for Budding Writers" first appeared on the Northampton SF Writers Group blog, 13 January 2014.
- "Some Cultural Notes and Pest Control" first appeared in *Vector* #111, December 1982, ed. Geoff Rippington.
- "Stanisław Lem: One British Writer's Response" first appeared on the Northampton SF Writers Group blog, 10 October 2016.
- "A Tale of Two Fandoms" first appeared in *Easterwine: A Fanthology for Seacon '03*, April 2003, ed. Claire Brialey and Mark Plummer.
- "Three Kinds of Close Encounters with Comics" first appeared in *Fantasycon 2009 Souvenir Programme*, September 2009.
- "Touchstones: 'Where Ignorant Armies Clash...'" first appeared in *Fantasy Review* #88, February 1986, ed. Robert A. Collins.
- "A Truly Generous Chap" first appeared in *Relapse* #20, Autumn 2012, ed. Peter Weston.
- "UFOs, Science, and the Inexplicable" first appeared in *Arena SF* #11, November 1980, ed. Geoff Rippington.
- "Up the Pole" first appeared in *Arena SF* #13, 1982, ed. Geoff Rippington.
- "What Is SFWA?" first appeared in *Focus* #32, November/December 1997, ed. Carol Ann Kerry-Green and Julie Venner.
- "Where would our eternal Roman Empire be without coffee?" first appeared in *Shoreline of Infinity* #19, Winter 2020/2021, ed. Noel

Chidwick (also issued as a story on a coffee mug).
- "With Eyes as Big as Saucers" first appeared in *Matrix* #128, November/December 1997, ed. Chris Terran.

Publisher's/Editor's Note

Profuse thanks to Ian Watson for kindly giving permission for this collection and unearthing much of its contents. Likewise to all those who got behind and pushed with suggestions and help: Sandra Bond, Kim Gibbs, Rob Hansen, Steve Holland, Rob Jackson (who proofread the whole book), Kevin J. Maroney of *The New York Review of Science Fiction*, Catherine Pickersgill, Greg Pickersgill (whose enthusiasm about several of these essays inspired the collection), Andy Richards of Cold Tonnage Books, and Allen Stroud.

A small number of these pieces were previously reprinted in *The Book of Ian Watson* (Mark V. Ziesing, 1985) or *The Uncollected Ian Watson* (PS Publishing, 2014). All those from the first and some from the second had new introductory notes or endnotes, duly included here. Meanwhile, a note on one *Uncollected* essay *not* included here adds a coda to that repeated memory of the hyperspace story in *Astounding*:

> Regarding *Astounding*: knock me over with a feather, that issue was January 1952! I was only 9 and three-quarters.
>
> False memory alert! I've just obtained (no expense spared for these Notes!) that January 1952 issue from a dealer in Canada to verify the hyperspace story, and... the story isn't there. Maybe I ventured to buy a subsequent *Astounding* which perplexed me?

David Langford
February 2025

The End

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