

SELECTED ARTICLES FROM

PARDON THIS INTRUSION

Fantastika in the World Storm

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Pardon This Intrusion

Keynote address for Interstitiality Conference, New Paltz, New York,
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1.

The day before yesterday, I delivered a talk to the seminar Bob Waugh and Ernelle Fife had organized for the SUNY graduate program here in New Paltz. Heaven forbid repeating at length what I said then: but I do want to say a bit more about the implications of a term I used in my description of certain effects Patricia A McKillip achieved in her recent fantasy novel, *In the Forests of Serre* (2003). That term – Recognition – I’ve been using for about a decade now to describe a significant moment in full fantasy texts – like Tolkien’s *Ring* or Peter S Beagle’s *The Last Unicorn* (1968) – when the characters in the drama *abandon denial*, when they begin to shed the amnesia that had been cloaking them, begin to understand that their sight had literally been *occluded* from the Real (the term *occluded* is, I know, cod gnosticism; but it’s as close as I’m likely to get). Slowly or suddenly – sometimes so very swiftly that the transformation can seem to be a kind of *trompe l’oeil* – they remember who they are, who they always were; they remember the story that tells them; they see the Land whole, which itself begins to Return to them. Everything is washed in the light of Recognition.

They remember the War. They remember they are alive.

From McKillip’s fine novel, I selected a moment of Recognition, when a terrifying witch named Brume hears *and obeys* the words of an old fairy tale – the familiar moment when a witch is tricked into climbing into a cauldron to demonstrate to her potential victim that he is small enough to fit inside (and thence be cooked) but as soon as she’s inside the pot her victim slams the lid on her. What was significant here was not so much our (lower case) recognizing of the old tale, but an instant of held breath in its telling, just before Brume loses “a burble of exasperation” and knuckles down to her fate (though she does escape being cooked). She is attempting to get the wizard Gyre into her cook pot, and he has just asked her to show him how to fit inside. In the pause she clammers into the pot in obedience to the law

of the story that is telling her, Brume gives “him a long, opaque look out of her lenses”. And it seems the world holds its breath, only seemingly opaqued in silence: for the heart of fantastika is glowing through her gaze like Galadriel.

That “opaque look”, I suggested the day before yesterday, was a gaze of Recognition. Here I would emphasize again that Brume’s Recognition of who she is and how she must act is what one might call *naked*: fantastika naked: there is no irony here, no excuse, no agenbite of inwit, no scumble of metaphor. Story, at this level, is *literal*. The Stories of fantastika do not shift from world to the proscenium arch of metaphor, but the other way round. At their deepest, magically and perhaps mysteriously liberated by the formularies they adhere to, they are capable of achieving something like a literal gaze at the given.

To repeat, Brume’s gaze upon the cold grammar of the real story in which she lives is a gaze permitted through the formulary of genre – the example just quoted being a segment of story that of course far precedes the slow surfacing of fantastika toward the end of the eighteenth century. It is a gaze that could not have been found in its original iteration as a fairy tale, any more than it could be found in George Eliot. It is a gaze (I think) similar to the gaze of Wozzek, in Alban Berg’s opera, for the naked intensities released in this opera are precisely made possible through the intricate arcs of formula which structure the actual music. [*IT IS THE GAZE OF HUCKLEBERRY FINN AS THE ARCHIPELAGO THAT GIVES HIM AMERICA BEGINS TO BETRAY HIM IN THE PERSON OF TOM SAWYER; THE GAZE OF THE EPONYMOUS PROTAGONIST OF JAMES PURDY’S MALCOLM (1959).*]. True freedom, as Igor Stravinsky once said, more or less, comes when you obey the rules.

The rule of fantasy is: what you see is what you get.

This release of vision is, I think, easily demonstrable. Here are a few sentences from some recent reading. The first is from *Gob’s Grief* (2000), an admirable novel by Chris Adrian that hovers at the edge of the fantastic, but remains, I think, mundane; the second is from *In the Forests of Serre*.

Adrian first. Walt Whitman (here fictionalized) is speaking :

His heart tore [he says, referring to the death of his mad brother],
and I wonder if it was not the accumulated burden of madness and
woe that tore his heart apart as hands might tear a paper bag.

Now McKillip: The wizard Gyre has found an ancient book, which

may open his eyes to power.

All [Serre's] beauty would be his", [says the implied narrator,] its mystery, its treasures and secrets. He [Gyre] felt his own heart try to change shape again, grow to encompass such marvels.

Adrian's language is vivid, but the image of the paper bag is what I just described as a proscenium arch: something draped over the real: a frame of reference: an eloquence. In the end, the paper bag is, as it were, ontological froth, exuding nought. It cannot become real. McKillip's two sentences are not, in fact, markedly eloquent at all. But they are, in fact, *literal*. They constitute a literal description of a recognizable world. The wizard's heart does in fact change shape, as does the world he commands. And wisdom will not come to him until he literally returns to himself.

And one final example of the word made flesh, from the final pages of Elizabeth Hand's [THEN FORTHCOMING] novel, *Mortal Love*. We are at a point when the earth has, in two or three senses, moved. Nothing will be the same again. One of the protagonists looks up and sees

a flare of blinding emerald-white in the center of the eastern horizon like a tear in the world.

The first thing to notice here is that the simile, "like a tear in the world", does not in the end work as a simile at all, but as an utterance of literal reality; as a movement of language from image to world: because the earth *has* moved, and there really *is* a tear in the world this point in Hand's complex tale: a Portal through which a character will move, departing from us.

The second thing to notice is that the buried pun – for we can also read or say "like a 'teer' in the world – turns out to be a form of language designed to reveal two realities in the same Recognition, each of these realities being as real as the other, and similarly *dangerous*, because, at this point in *Mortal Love*, the world does "really" weep for a loss it is about to incur. Severance is a – a teer – in the fabric of reality. They are literally the one thing.

It is a moment of understanding not available in any non-fantastic text.

2.

And now to speak, very briefly, about danger. The kind of Recognition I've been talking about is, of course, dangerous for those who experience it: it can rip the face off. But there is another kind of Recognition, which the final pages of *Mortal Love* come close to

expressing directly. It is something I've been trying to fix into words for some time, though I'm not sure I really know how to describe what I want to mean here, but maybe even a cartoon try at saying what I'm trying to get at will spur someone else into song.

Let us begin at the beginning of things:

A sweet elderly man is sitting in a remote cottage in the middle of a mountain meadow, in the middle of what passed for a state of Nature in the heart of Europe at the beginning of the nineteenth century. This "natural" world "boasts" moments of sublimity – great heights, picturesque abysses, sunsets – but always under the ultimate control of a rational husbandry. Shepherds throng paved prominences. Meadows self-mow. The man – though he is clearly of noble birth, a member of the ruling class, one of those whose perceptions have collectively shaped this world – notices none of this, however, because he is blind. But his blindness has not undermined his faith in the order of things. Even though he has been betrayed and criminalized by evil men who have driven him into exile here in the tame wilderness, he retains his trust in the ordinance of the world.

There is a knock on the door.

He bids his visitor enter.

The door opens.

"Pardon", says the visitor, whom we already know is the monster – the ghost – the doppelganger – the id – the fabricant – the conscience – the robot – the android – the Prometheus – the blank slate – the torso upon two sticks – the creation and dark twin of the man of noble birth who has created him out of galvanized whole cloth, the twin of egregious reality-denier Dr Frankenstein. We are almost exactly halfway through Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein; or, the Modern Prometheus* (1818), page 113 of volume two of the original three-decker [*SEE FRONTISPIECE*]. He, or it, has never uttered a word before this moment. He stands now before the exiled gentleman from the previous world, whose literal blindness tells us literally that he cannot understand the nature of the new order of things looming above him. The Frankenstein monster opens his rusty mouth and speaks the first words of the new century.

"Pardon", he says. "Pardon this intrusion".

I like to think of this sentence as the literal beginning of fantastika,

because it sounds an alarum of change; it proclaims the power of a tabula rasa to inform us that the Emperor has no clothes (the role of naïveté in fantastika seems to have been insufficiently focused upon as an unveiling tactic); and it preludes groupings of genres that are inherently world-driven, that turn on the fire of the present tense, that press to embody that grammatical moment when some change in the case of the world can be told, for an instant [*UNTIL AMNESIA SWALLOWS THE INSTANT*]. Horror and fantasy and sf, and all the subgenres that subtend like fruit from that triad, are a kind of body English of how to recognize the world, recognitions that must, if we hope to survive, be constantly and actively renewed: as a heliotrope recognizes the sun, as a bee dances the road to the hive.

Which is a lot of metaphor – though for me, nonfiction is almost pure metaphor – to pin a butterfly, but in the end everything I have just said boils down to an expansion of what I was suggesting earlier about the witch Brume and her moment of Recognition. Just as her gaze recognizes her story, the shapes of fantastika themselves constitute an array of intrusive Recognitions of the true, changing face of the last two centuries of history in the West.

The costs have been heavy, of course. It is dangerously ambitious to shape a text around a miming of the present tense of things, which is where canaries die. Because fantastika gains its insights through cartoon exaggerations and garish shortcuts, because it inherently embeds aperçus in tabloid signage, and because it tends to eschew the adhesive story-slowness verticalities of character delineation typical of “realistic” fiction, any new utterance within that furnace of formularies is inherently likely to give birth almost instantaneously to tropes of re-creation: golems. But if we can’t stand the heat, I suppose, we should get out of the kitchen: fantastika bottom-feeds the planet in order to get at it.

This sounds a bit like boasting. We are so accustomed – as writers and editors and readers and critics – to studying and critiquing genre against an incessant flow of disparagement from the humanities industry that we sometimes ignore the obvious: that 90% of fantastika is indeed crap; that its grasp of the world can seem palpably and culpably naïve [*SEE “TRUTH IS CONSEQUENCE” BELOW ON ENGINEERING-BASED ADVOCACY SF, P.53*]. So it might be worthwhile to reduce the temperature of assertion a bit, and close with a slightly digressive account, with

examples, of how very badly fantastika dealt with the approach of a planetary catastrophe, World War Two, that we should have been a bit more canny about, a central moment in the suicide of the West that Egon Friedell may have sussed but which American genre writers as a whole did not. It was easy, perhaps, in the 1930s, to think that the coming conflict would replicate our already nostalgia-encrusted memories of World War One, with the addition of sexier weapons, and maybe some poison gas to frighten the horses; easy, but boneheaded. In *The Shape of Things to Come* (1933), H G Wells may have predicted a devastating conflict around 1940 beginning in Poland, but with the honourable exceptions of *The Strange Invaders* (1934) by Alun Llewellyn, and of *Swastika Night* (1937) by Katharine Burdekin writing as Murray Constantine, 1930s writers of fantastika in English did a bad job of recognizing the taste of what was to come. The Future War novels that did appear tended to evoke an antique Yellow Peril which totally failed to anticipate the realities imposed upon the Western World by Japan. When they came to attempt to deal with the problem of Hitler's Germany, a terrible staleness floods the page.

I will suggest as exemplary two novels, both now forgotten, but both typical of the sour wrongness of fantastika when ineptitude becomes denial. *Mr Klein's Kampf; or, his Life as Hitler's Double* (1939) by H Allen Smith applies slick fantasy models derived from Thorne Smith to a tale in which, bamboozled by a New York Jewish mime and his rich Long Island lover, Hitler goes bananas, is retired from the stage, and peace reigns. (The failure of this novel precludes the failure of Charlie Chaplin's *The Great Dictator* (1940), for like reasons.) In the second example – *Adventures of Hiram Holliday* (1939) by Paul Gallico – a similar misapplication of old protocols about how to understand the world generates a similar incomprehension of the nature of things to come. Here the protagonist, seemingly nothing more than a milquetoast copy-editor, secretly becomes a kind of mild superman, a kind of augmented Simon Templar whose paranormal sensitivity to the *timbre* of events allows him to predict the immediate future. What he sees is exactly what H Allen Smith's Mr Klein sees: that Hitler is *silly*. By using his precognitive empathy wisely, Holliday arranges to rescue a Ruritanian Princess from thug Krauts, an act which stymies Hitler's plans to dominate Europe. (Gallico wrote a sequel, *The Secret Front* (1940), which I have not seen, and which *may* have redeemed the

day: but I am guessing not.)

The failure of these two novels – their authors, by the way, did of course both become famous in later years – is not only a failure to look, a failure shared by almost every writer in the West; it is also a failure to use the tool they had to hand, the speculum of fantastika: the instrument that fixes our gaze on what Kurtz saw [SEE DISCUSSION OF *HEART OF DARKNESS* IN “*BEYOND THE PALE*” BELOW, P.127]. The misuse of this instrument is treason.

But still, many decades further on, we may have reached the end of the usefulness of the formularies that used to give us sight, though even World War Two has proved, in the end, after all, to be seeable. Even the nearly unutterable obscenity of the Final Solution has, in recent years, been approached by writers like Thomas Tessier, whose *Father Panic's Opera Macabre* (2001) comes perhaps as close to recognizing/rendering the unutterable as the protocols of fantastika can easily achieve [I'D NOW ADD MICHAEL CHABON'S *THE FINAL SOLUTION* (2004) TO THIS SHORTLIST]. But still, but still, here we are, at the other end of the world from *Frankenstein*, slamdunked into 2004, and it does seem that something like heatdeath may have overcome the old distinctions, the old roller-coaster rides to brief instants of world epiphany. Nowadays, it might be argued, the genres have begun to dissolve into a polymorphous backward-gazing supineness (the inner rhythm of alternate history is lassitude, lassitude), that the bones of genre have become too frail to see with. Shit happens. The old rigours of sf melt into the dissolving acid of virtual reality; the old battlements of fantasy dissolve in the virus of the immersive; and horror defaults to clambake – to a kind of jolly-hockeystick walpurgisnacht, where everything goes, and where – as W S Gilbert put it in *The Gondoliers* (1889) – no one's any-bud-ee.

I suppose a critique of some of the precepts of interstitiality might focus on a sense that there are in fact no longer any real battlements to ride. The walls against which we have ricocheted our interstitial craft are fatally cavitated. The genres are too old, and they have interjaculated all too promiscuously in recent years, for us, any longer, to derive from them rules to obey – much less rules worth breaking.

And the world that the genres of old contorted themselves to recognize has itself, it seems possible, already become too

interjaculary to address in the languages of the past. The world of 2004 gives off a Weimar feel: a sense of great balancing on the brink of being impossible to write about at all, a sense that it is only possible to *narrate the fractures* while they remain only fractures. By narrate I mean to indicate the attempts of writers today to absorb the lessons and challenges of the recent literary past – the deconstructions and reconstructions of post-modern theory – *without abandoning story*. (One could almost say in 2004 that to not abandon story is to write fantastika.) By fractures I mean to designate the incrementing chaos of recent history, the break-up of the reality raft, the osteoporosis in the bones of memory: a sense that endings have become untellable.

So to to *narrate the fractures* may be to presage the passing of the world we were meant to tell, may be to contribute a fuzzy set of last sightings of the extinction events now afflicting the West, rather than a sign of the shape of testimonies to come. A great genre-fixated novel like David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas* (2004) – each of whose six embattled, generic stories provides its predecessor and successor mates with manuscript evidences of the fate of homo sapiens – gives off, I think, a valedictory note, one of great intensity perhaps, but farewell all the same: farewell to the looking-glass, farewell to the mirrors, farewell to the panoptikon of fantastika.

Yesterday, as I have been suggesting, fantastika recognized the world. Today, it may be, the world is eating the fantastic.

We are in the belly of the whale.

LUNCH WITH AJ AND THE WOMBATS

in *Conspiracy Theories* (1987) edited by Christopher Evans

My brief, which is self-imposed, is to describe a lunch. It took place a week after the end of the 1987 WorldCon in Brighton, and came about because of what happened at that Convention. My sense of what in fact did go on at Brighton is not privileged – many of the participants were closer to events than I was at any point – and I’ll say little about those events, except to state that the implications of the collision between sf and its mutant offspring Scientology do continue to seem important to me. (The countervailing view, which in my hearing has been purveyed most forcefully by members of the sf community who’d become involved one way or another with the Writers of the Future programme, was that the whole brouhaha was something of a tempest in a teacup. It is a view which clearly invites an ad hominem response, one which could easily descend to indecorum. Fortunately it is also a view which can be rebutted, and has no doubt been rebutted more than once, in more general terms.) So we can pass on from Brighton itself. The Battle of Britain was over, and the valiant warriors had trooped back to London to display their iodine to the home folk. It was the Thursday or Friday after the Worldcon ended. Peter Nicholls rang.

- I thought you’d like to know that you should expect a call from AJ [ie A J Budrys].

- Why?

- He wants to have a meeting with you, me, Malcolm Edwards and Dave Langford. He wants us to tell him what we think went wrong.

- Come on.

- It’s true. He said he wanted to have the benefit of our advice as Wise Old Men of the British sf scene.

- I don’t believe you. We may be *old*

- They were his words exactly. Wise Old Men.

- WOMs.

- Wise Old Men (Britain And Territories).

- WOMBATS.
- Shy creatures of the wild.
- My beard's being cleaned. Owl shit. *You go.*
- We go together, old son.
- OK. But given the issues involved, we should all go Dutch
- OK.

The call came. The lunch was arranged for the next Monday. Langford showed no interest in trundling down from Reading. The rest of us all met in Malcolm's office at Gollancz, the firm which has published Budrys in this country for decades. I will now call him AJ. Though we'd corresponded for some years, I'd never met AJ in person until the previous week. Throughout the afternoon he exhibited that unflappable and fathomless American courtesy which I (for one) find deeply congenial, but inscrutable; he was of medium height, stocky, almost rotund, pale, serene. Like so many Americans, he exuded a bruising Dynaflo innocence – an innocence not of childhood but of Michaelmas. Peter, as usual, glowed with sartorial embonpoint, as though he had, only moments before, hatched out of a crystal egg; as neat as I know how to be, I resembled a cashiered Mountie; and Malcolm, as usual, looked as though the motorcycle gang had just left him behind in Hamelin. After chatting briefly, we (AJ and the three WOMBATs) then went to lunch at Malcolm's shabby-genteel club.

We began the conversation. As the one among us most intimately involved in the sequence of decisions and requests that led up to AJ's disastrous speech at the Hugo Awards ceremony, Peter led off. He described the inexperience and exhaustion of the members of the Convention Committee who were dealing with AJ's request to speak, and the incrementing momentum of events that kept them off-balance; he gave his own sense that – whether or not deliberately on the part of AJ or Writers of the Future or New Era or Bridge Publications or the Church of Scientology itself – the Committee was ultimately bulldozed into approving a scenario in which the complex of Hubbard-derived organizations would be seen as having sponsored the Hugo Ceremony itself. Advertising (we all said at one point or another) was one thing, and was an accepted part of the Convention scene; but this was something else. It was *sponsorship*. The distinction was simple. When you advertise, you present your product in a context; when you sponsor, your product presents the context. And *your* product (we

said) was L Ron Hubbard.

At this point I interjected what would become – in the four hours we were all together – rather a leit-motif for me. Whatever the legal niceties (I said) separating Writers of the Future from New Era/Bridge Publications and from the Church of Scientology as a formal organization, it was absolutely the case that, for the members of the Convention in specific and for the British SF community in general, Writers of the Future and New Era were *perceived* as being intimately bound into L Ron Hubbard's posthumous empire. The perception was that only from that empire – perhaps in the form of revenue from the highly profitable publishing of Hubbard texts to a tied market – could New Era/Bridge derive the huge advertising budget so much in evidence at Brighton. So when AJ spoke for Writers of the Future at the Hugo Awards Ceremony, he was also speaking for the whole complex of organizations, and in that sense he was participating in Scientology's campaign to purchase the posthumous legitimation of L Ron Hubbard as a central figure in the SF pantheon.

Peter and Malcolm went on to describe in detail the events surrounding that ceremony: AJ's speech; the booing in the hall when Gene Wolfe named Hubbard's *Black Genesis* as one of the books shortlisted for the novel award; the strange confusions about where the photo opportunity for Hugo winners would be held, concerning which Peter (as emcee) was given conflicting messages to read out to the Convention, and which he had finally to announce would be held in what turned out to be the Skyline Room, where New Era/Bridge was giving an invitation-only post-Awards party; the reported attempts by Fred Harris and others to ensure that Hugo winners were photographed under a banner advertising L Ron Hubbard and the organizations which used his name; and so forth. Given Scientology's authoritarian attitude towards the control of information, and their bad relations with the press, it was not surprising (I remarked) that various legitimate members of the press were reported to have been *excluded* from the photo opportunity.

There seemed no doubt that AJ felt considerable dismay at this recital, and said more than once that, as far as he was concerned, nothing like this sequence of events would ever occur again. I said (and I think others said as well) that we were not meeting him at this point to give advice about how the organization he represented could better

accomplish its goals. He then described his purpose in speaking before the ceremony. What he had wished to do (he said) was to dissociate Writers of the Future, with which he identified himself strongly, from any other organization to which it might have been linked. To this end (he said) he did not mention L Ron Hubbard's name.

- But you did mention his name, said Peter.

- Yes, said Malcolm. You most certainly did.

I am myself absolutely certain that AJ genuinely believed he had not mentioned Hubbard, and when both Peter and Malcolm continued to assure him that he had indeed done so, and that there were tapes available which would confirm he had done so, he was visibly bemused. Thus ended the first phase of the conversation.

Interestingly, and at some considerable length, AJ then told us of his gradual involvement with individuals and organizations connected to L Ron Hubbard, then still alive. This involvement came about originally through AJ's professional work as an sf writer/critic. Very briefly, after some initial advice he gave about *Battlefield Earth*, AJ was asked in his capacity as professional critic to read and evaluate the manuscript of the ten-volume novel Hubbard had written next, apparently around 1980-1982, and which is now being serially released by Bridge Publications and New Era, cognate organizations with different market areas (as AJ explained), and both initially founded to release Hubbard texts on Dianetics and Scientology. AJ had read the manuscript and had suggested changes, none of which (he thought) had been made. At around the same time, he became centrally involved with the Writers of the Future programme, and was soon working full-time ("More than full-time", he said) on its projects; this situation continues. The shape of AJ's narrative, and the specific details he gave about the complications of funding Writers of the Future during the six months after Hubbard's death in 1986, were clearly intended to separate Writers of the Future in our minds from any other Hubbard-derived organization. However, though we were in no position to dispute (or to wish to dispute) any of the legal or circumstantial ramifications of AJ's presentation, I don't think I was alone in feeling that we were being given material of only marginal relevance to the issues at hand.

I know I felt that, as a highly skilled professional, himself involved in advertising over the past decade or two, AJ should not have failed to understand the Public Relations implications of his pre-Awards speech,

should not have failed to understand that publicity for Writers of the Future was also publicity for the guru whose philanthropy had brought it into existence; and that publicity for L Ron Hubbard was also publicity for a militant closed quasi-religious organization which had, AJ now seemed to be claiming, over lunch, not the remotest interest, financial or otherwise, in Writers of the Future. And moreover I thought AJ should have at least suspected that his talk, given as it was in L Ron Hubbard's name at the most nearly solemn moment of a Worldcon already inundated with welcome-aboard advertising from Hubbard's scions, must inevitably have been understood by the audience as an attempt to announce the Award ceremony on behalf of the *sponsor*. On matters like these, I did not feel it was my job to teach AJ how to suck eggs. I was not about to think of AJ as a patsy. But on none of these matters – perhaps because he had suggested the lunch in order to hear *our* views – was he prepared to comment.

So what does it add up to? A tempest in a teacup? I continue to think not. There are two issues. One) sponsorship. Two) Scientology. Much of the conversation over lunch with AJ had concerned, directly or indirectly, the first of these, and it may well be the case that all four of us came essentially to agree that a scene as uncoordinated and collegial as an SF convention should not be seen to be sponsored by anyone. (Throughout our conversation I used the term “undue sponsorship”, a regrettable tautology I mention only now. In the context to which we were restricting ourselves, no sponsorship is *due*.) We may have all agreed about sponsorship in the abstract, and AJ may have agreed that appearances were at the very least misleading; but it is certain that the three of us did not persuade him that in fact Scientology et al had a case to answer – that we were not at all foolish in suspecting that there *had* been an attempt to buy-out the convention and to present it as gift from L Ron Hubbard's folk.

Which brings us to Scientology. Perhaps because he felt it was irrelevant to his concerns, AJ did not make any comments on the Church of Scientology at all, beyond disclaiming any connection between the Church and Writers of the Future. As I'm restricting myself to this lunch, neither will I attempt to discuss Scientology in any extended fashion. But (even cursorily) I think a few things can be mentioned. Given the intertwined histories of American sf and Dianetics/Scientology, and given AJ's strongly argued version of the

history of the genre, in which L Ron Hubbard has a central role, I think it both perfectly natural and unexceptionable that AJ should feel a kind of affinity both to Hubbard and to the revanchist longings of his heirs. But this sense of a community of discourse should not extend – and as far as I’m concerned should be *seen* not to extend – to any form of complicity or intellectual sympathy – on AJs part or anyone else’s – either with the tenets of Hubbard’s Church or with the behaviour of the leaders of that Church, insofar as an extraordinary barrier of litigation – funded from a seemingly bottomless purse – permits those tenets and that behaviour to be known. If all the facts were known, Scientology might not prove to be a repellent monolithic faith, a contaminated can-do cod Freudianism which transmogrifies the darkest truths about homo sapiens into imbecile litanies of Popular Mechanics soul-tinkerer’s prattle, user’s manuals for customizing the human machine, as though Thomas Alva Edison had been reborn as Shirley MacLaine; but the facts are not permitted to be known. If all the facts were known, the tactics of the Scientology organizations might not seem authoritarian, paranoid, manipulative, illiberal, claustrophobic, destructive of any sense that those with power should fund not prisons of the human mind but clerisies; but the facts are not permitted to be known. (It is here, incidentally, that one can begin to construct an argument with the tempest-teapotters, by introducing the concept of the *trahison des clercs*.) But none of this was properly aired, and if the lunch with AJ failed, if the WOMBATs felt drained and melancholic as 4pm rolled around, I think our spirits may have been sapped by our failure to address that one central issue.

I have no idea what AJ thinks of Scientology as a system for private adherence or belief, if indeed he thinks about it at all; and perhaps it’s none of my business. More sadly, after four hours with a man for whom I felt a strong liking, I ended up with with no real sense of what AJ thought about anything. We tossed facts, tales, suggestions, hyperboles, accusations and commiserations at him; but it was like lobbing rocks into a black hole. Except for the statement that certain events would not happen again, and the insecure moment about whether or not he mentioned L Ron’s name, he remained, as far as we could tell, fully imperturbable, untouched, untouching. And as far as the lunch went, that was that. But the debate continued internally, at least in my head. It was all well and good (I argued) to grant

Scientology (or Scientology's quasi-corporate compadres) every right to advertise their presence at a Convention and promulgate their views there. Indeed it was germane to sf's sense of collective identity - which was vested in Committee members last August - not to act in an oppressive fashion against a group suspected of themselves acting oppressively against others, for to act as one's enemy was to become one's enemy.

But the principle did not apply (I continued) in the same fashion to individuals. When an individual said Yes to something associated with Scientology and/or its founder (like Writers of the Future), he was speaking as an autonomous person, not a forum. Persons did not accept advertising. They *became* advertising. So when a person said Yes, he gave something of himself to that organization. He gave his name. He donated his virtue. It was a gift which, to mean anything at all, had to have been free. AJ must have been free to work for Writers of the Future. Robert Silverberg and Gene Wolfe and Roger Zelazny and the others must have been free to lend their names to Writers of the Future, and to all that it implied. But being free of course meant being free to say No. Which is what some writers in the field *did* say. When they were asked to lend their names to an organization connected - obscurely but ineradicably - to a philosophy of which they could not approve, they said No. I wished it were not the case, but nothing AJ said over lunch persuaded me (or I think any of us) that there had ever been any good reason for any person not to say No.

***The Golem* by Gustav Meyrink**

Introduction for Centipede Press in 2011.

Several chapters into Gustav Meyrink's masterpiece about an 1890s Prague which is no more, now that a century of war and Final Solution and ethnic cleansing and denuding rationalization have rendered the old city into a Game of Czech, there is a revel. It is a set piece. Several times over the twenty-five years of his active career – whenever in fact he wished to treat Prague as an active principle or numen cloaked in its human denizens – Meyrink defaulted to proleptic visions of communal behaviour as something enacted by fleeing puppets. The revel depicted in the “Night” chapter of *Der Golem* (1915), here reprinted in Madge Pemberton's original 1928 translation, is mannerly compared to the book-long danse macabres that ostinato Meyrink's next two novels, *Das Grune Gesicht* (1916; translated by Mike Mitchell as *The Green Face*, 1992) and *Walpurgisnacht* (1917; translated by Mike Mitchell under the German title, 1993), both tales being visions of World War One in which Prague herself seems to take on something like living form, something like a golem grotesquely bloated into a whorish Cassandra. But *The Golem* was written between about 1910 and 1913, and is set decades before the Great War rendered obsolete the eponymous factotum (or Sorcerer's Apprentice) from the ancient ghetto; and the revel I'm referring to, though it initiates one of the main movements of the novel, is relatively decorous:

Zwakh calls for the waitress. But in the general hubbub he cannot be heard. The scene swims before my eyes, as fantastic as any opium dream.

The Dragoon subaltern clasps the half-naked Rosina in his arms, and twirls her slowly round to the music.

The crowd makes way for them, respectfully.

This is tame enough; but it is still all too much for the narrator, Athanasius Pernath, or “Athanasius Pernath” (his ultimate identity is insecure), who is driven into a trance by the sight and sound and smell

and insinuation of something that might be called Prague – something that seems to be, in terms of the cod gnosticism Meyrink harboured, what one might describe as numen occluded by the enfogging, daimonic offal of “reality” – and can only stare back in its face. What he sees is a basilisk, which is to say the offal of the world *weaponized*: a “ghostly hand” holding a Book whose title Ibbur, the “Soul’s Conception”, is inscribed in damaged gold lettering which in his trance Pernath, a renowned engraver of gems and other precious stones, knows he must repair: or somehow manifest.

Pernath’s friends carry him, still rigid and speechless, back to to his rooms in a warren-like building in the heart of the ghetto, an aliquot sample of Prague seething in its juices, where he awakens. Suddenly before him appears a magus-figure named Schemajah Hillel, who tells him that he has been struck dumb by an incursion of the supernatural, which is in gnostic terms (I think it safe to suggest) no more than a particularly entangling utterance of mere life, which “scratches and burns like a hair shirt”. Hillel then speaks words of calming wisdom:

“A silver mirror, could it but speak, would tell how it suffers pain only, until it is burnished. Once its surface is smooth and shining, it reflects all the images that fall upon it, without pain or grief. Blessed is that man”, he added softly, “who can say to his own self, ‘I too have been burnished’”.

Life, in other words, is torture and occlusion: until the soul becomes capable of reflecting the truth. But what if the truth in the mirror “without pain or grief ” is Golem?

Or what if there is no there there, no God or luminance shining through the burnished or polished self, the self now purged of the drunken soldiery of the real? In a review of Michael Maar’s *Speak, Nabokov* (2010), John Banville in *The New York Review of Books* (15 July 2010) notes that

People in Nabokov’s work, particularly narrators, repeatedly stumble through the looking-glass of quotidian reality into a world where all that had been known is transformed in an instant of ecstatic divination or, on occasion, overpowering terror...

Maar designates this phenomenon the “medusa experience”, taking his lead from the 1935 story “Torpid Smoke”. Nabokov’s narrator, in this tale, experiences reality, when wrought to its uttermost, as though burnished or polished through the rendering luminosity of a medusa.

But in Nabokov's world (and, I would suggest, in Meyrink's world as well, when he is not nattering on about theosophical texts), that rendering luminosity depicts, precisely, naked vacancy: the naked vacancy of a godless world seen unfiltered. Nabokov – as Banville and Maar seem to suggest – created his immense overcontrolled edifice of words in order to filter something like that vacancy: which is to say in order to live. It is natural to think of Nabokov and Meyrink as radically differing artistic personalities (though maybe Meyrink's Prague and Nabokov's Berlin are not in reality so far apart), and we also remember that they inhabit radically distinct moments in the history of Europe: Nabokov's self-achieved heartland being the 1950s America of *Lolita* (1955) and *Pale Fire* (1961), and Meyrink's being the death-fixated Europe of *The Golem* and the two World War One novels already mentioned.

It is not, of course, quite that simple. Only half a decade separates Nabokov's first aftermath-transfixed short stories from Meyrink's three central tales of terror, which envision nothing in the aftermath of war but vacancy and amnesia (Pernath himself, if indeed he is Pernath at all or simply a skull that Pernath's hat fits, is of course an amnesiac: or someone else entirely). Both writers, the great Nabokov and the eccentric but hugely intriguing Meyrink, inhabit the beginning years of the suicide of Europe; both writers exhibit an inherent sweet tooth for transcendence, but both obsessively demonstrate that to gaze through the medusa, or the burnished mirror of the opened self, is to gaze into a cenotaph.

After transacting the deceptive fits and starts and genuine shocks of its surface narrative, readers of *The Golem* will find themselves in the closing pages of the tale having to decide what it is they have just read: an imposture? a dream? a memory? a joust between doubles? an episode in the true literal autobiography of the Golem, who appears once every thirty-three years? All these readings, and others, are possible. I have already telegraphed my own sense of things. I think that the horrific saga of Athanasius Pernath – much of whose drama, including his incarceration for a crime not committed by him, reflects Meyrink's own early life – is best understood as a basilisk whose name is Cenotaph: the life of Pernath, as experienced thirty-three years later by the frame narrator who at last returns Pernath's hat to its now aged owner, is a maze we plumb to reach Prague within, the mirror of the

self within us. We turn inward to Prague when we are sick of facing the world, inward to the entrails and allures of the dance of art, inward to the Golem, who might as well be God. We turn inward because to face tomorrow is to turn to stone.