

SAMPLE PIECES FROM

WHAT IT IS WE DO
WHEN WE READ
SCIENCE FICTION

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**10/10 MAY/MAY:
SINGLING OUT THE DUPLICATIONS
IN *THE SEPARATION***

When you read any of the later novels of Christopher Priest you are never entirely confident that you trust what is going on. Traditionally this would be because the narrators were unreliable, but I don't believe that (with the exception of Gordon Sinclair in *The Quiet Woman*, who is probably mad) Priest has written a single unreliable narrator. It is not the narrators who are unreliable, but the worlds that they narrate.

One of the consistent ways by which Priest has undermined our confidence in his worlds is the presentation of alternatives, worlds operating in parallel but with the membranes between them porous at best. Wessex and the present day in *A Dream of Wessex*, the dream archipelago and contemporary London in *The Affirmation*, the realm of the glamorous and mundane reality in *The Glamour*, the world as seen by Borden and the world as seen by Angier in *The Prestige*, virtual reality and consensus reality in *The Extremes* all operate this way. The viewpoint characters move between these worlds with increasing fluidity, but the more easily they penetrate the parallel world the less easy it is for them, and for us, to tell exactly when one world ends and the next one starts.

The Separation seems on one level to fit this paradigm precisely. You have the twins, J.L. Sawyer (Jack) and J.L. Sawyer (Joe); and when we follow Jack's story the Second World War follows much the course we know from our history books, but when we follow Joe's story, the war ends in 1941. But although there is this very obvious pairing of worlds, in another sense the novel does not seem to fit the paradigm because the worlds do not seem to be porous, there is no overt movement from one world into the next.

What I want to suggest is that there is in fact movement between the worlds, and it is not just two worlds. This is, I think, Priest's most complex novel to date and there are at least four parallel worlds, probably more, and the membranes are so porous that we are moving between them constantly throughout the novel. Indeed, I would further suggest that it is this movement which explains what is perhaps the most problematic aspect of the whole novel, the ending in which Joe apparently relates his own death.

We begin with popular historian Stuart Grattan being handed a manuscript by Angela Chipperton. This is the first indication of how porous the membranes are, because Stuart and Angela cannot exist in the same world. When Stuart has 'a fleeting illusory sense that he had seen her before' (5) it is understandable, they are

effectively the same person. Angela is Jack's child by Birgit in a world in which Joe was killed; Stuart is Joe's child by Birgit in a world in which Jack was killed. Throughout *The Separation* there are doublings: Joe and Jack, Birgit and the twins' mother who are both German, the real Churchill and the actor with whom Jack tours bomb-damaged London, Hess and his doppelganger who flies to Britain on 10th May 1941 on a mission of peace. These suggest a duality in the novel, but it is the hidden duplications, such as the identity of Stuart and Angela which is never made explicit, that are far more significant in suggesting a multiplicity of worlds and signalling the movement between them.

The manuscript Stuart is given is Jack's memoir. In part this is an account of Jack and Joe winning a bronze medal for rowing in the Berlin Olympics. During the course of this they meet Hess, who is fascinated by their likeness – 'We never try to deceive anyone' (93) Jack tells him, a hostage to fortune – and who also seems to be sexually attracted to Jack. At the same time, Joe is arranging to smuggle the daughter of their Jewish hosts out of Germany; this is Birgit, whom Joe will marry but both will love. This part of the story is unproblematic, Joe's accounts also will look back to the same events. The split in history must occur later than this, but unlike most authors of alternate histories, Priest never specifies a moment when the split occurs, by the time we pick up the wartime portion of the narrative the split has already happened.

Jack's account of the Olympics is punctuated by memories of the moment he crashed his Wellington bomber, following a raid on Hamburg on 10th May 1941. (This is a pivotal date, it is the date, among other things, when Hess flew to Britain, when Stuart dates the end of the war, when Stuart was born and when Joe witnesses the signing of the peace treaty.) Jack repeatedly breaks into his memoir with accounts of this moment which always begin 'Five years later...' (40). The uncertainty which surrounds this event is curious, marked by phrases such as 'a fog of amnesia' (40, repeated 50) or 'like fragments of a dream' (50). The sense that Jack is actually creating the memory rather than reliving the experience is suggested when he says, for example, 'I worked backwards to find the memories I needed, learning as I went' (41), or later: 'I must have been in shock. I was confused then, I was confused when I tried to remember it later, I am still confused all these years on.' (48) He returns to this moment four times in all, each time starting the memory a little earlier and continuing a little longer, before, on the fourth iteration which begins much more precisely: 'At the end of June 1941, nearly five years after ...' (76), it eventually acquires enough substance to move the story forward. But the repetitions are interesting, because of the small discrepancies that creep in. In one version the crew definitely bail out, in another he can't remember if they jumped; in one version the shrapnel seems to hit behind Jack, in another it hits forward of him throwing him backwards; in one version it is Kris who reports that Levy has been wounded, in another Lofty does so. This is not enough to suggest that we are not witnessing the one central event, but it suggests the unreliability of memory and sets us up for the far more radical discontinuities in Joe's accounts later.

Another thing that these recurring memories do is cut us loose from time. Jack's subsequent account will wander achronologically backwards to his affair with Birgit and forwards to his time as an aide to Churchill and his meeting with Hess's doppelganger, the fluidity of this movement making it not always clear when these events are taking place. At the core of his account, however, is the raid on Hamburg, and in particular a strange scene recounted only during the fourth iteration. As Jack and his crew approach the German coast they see an ME-110 being shot down by four ME-109s, then, moments later, another lone ME-110 is attacked by four more ME-109s, but this time the lone plane escapes and the four attackers head back in the direction of Denmark. It is Hess's flight to Britain, and that of his doppelganger, a duplication which signals a split in time.

When Jack's account is concluded, there is a brief interlude during which Stuart discovers that Angela does not exist in his world, then we get another account of that raid on Hamburg, this time from the navigator, Levy. Although the account matches Jack's in broad outline, in detail it is significantly different. In this world Jack and Birgit are married and expecting the child who is presumably Angela. When they spot the duplicate Messerschmitt attacks the details are identical, except that it is the first group of four raiders who return to Denmark. And when the plane crashes, Jack is killed.

This is the third distinct timeline in the novel. Because he belongs to Angela's world, this cannot be congruent with Stuart's, and it clearly differs from Jack's. It also differs from Joe's world. But the membranes are most permeable to documents, because Levy provides Stuart with a body of print-outs, mostly taken from the internet, which constitute the final portion of the novel. Central to this portion is Joe's own account, or rather, accounts: as I will show, there is a curious discontinuity in what follows.

The account begins straightforwardly enough: we see Joe register as a conscientious objector, start to work for the Red Cross in Manchester, and then go to London to help in the Blitz. This is where things start to go awry. In Jack's world, Joe is killed during the Blitz when his ambulance is hit by a bomb; here Joe isn't even in the ambulance at the time, but goes missing and is found some days later suffering concussion. Up to this point we have been reading extracts from the diaries of J.L. Sawyer held at the Collection Britannique, Le Musée de Paix, Genève; now we start to read extracts from the holograph notebooks of J.L. Sawyer, University of Manchester, Department of Vernacular History. We have shifted, unheralded, into yet another timeline, and it is marked by one of the most significant passages in the book, which occurs when Joe is being taken by ambulance back to Manchester:

I was inside a Red Cross ambulance, shocked into reality when the vehicle jolted over an uneven patch of road. I braced myself defensively against the knocks and bumps I was receiving, but my waist and legs were held gently in place with restraining straps. I was alone in the compartment with an orderly, a young Red

Cross worker I knew was called Ken Wilson. It was difficult to talk in the noisy, unventilated compartment. Ken braced his arms against the overhead shelves as the vehicle swung about. He said we were well on our way in the journey, not to worry. But I was worried. Where were we going? (303)

Why is that passage significant? Because almost 300 pages earlier this passage is used, word for word, by Jack when he is being taken from hospital to the rehabilitation centre after the Hamburg raid. It is a point of very deliberate duplication. There are others through the novel, though none so long or so far apart, and I think it is worth looking at in some detail.

For a start it contains the notion of being 'shocked into reality', and Priest is careful to stress the idea that reality is something to wake into, or something to be recreated the way Jack recreated his memories of the crash. Within pages of this scene Joe goes on to say 'the world was suddenly in focus' (303) and 'Concussion creates a sense of unfilled blankness behind you ... unreachable by memory. Discovering what is there in your memory, and what might not be, is a painful process.' (304) He concludes: 'My conscious life began again, there and then.' (305) This heavy emphasis on the reality of the world he wakes up to in the ambulance actually serves to undermine that reality, and as we discover in the following pages this reality is a very fragile and uncertain thing.

There is the importance also of being in an ambulance. In Jack's reality Joe was killed in the ambulance he was driving in the Blitz. In the earlier version of Joe's reality there is an enigmatic letter to the driver of the ambulance Joe is travelling in, a letter which talks of a serious crash though it contains no details. That crash does not feature in Joe's notebook, another clue to the fact that time shifts part way through Joe's portion of the book. The ambulance itself, therefore, is a symbol of death within Joe's narrative.

As a duplication, the passage itself signals a time shift. It is, after all, practically the first thing we read in Joe's notebook, and elsewhere in the book duplication of incidents or of phrasings are used as signals that reality has moved slightly.

And because it duplicates an experience of Jack's, it is indicative of a growing identity of Jack and Joe. When the twins are together at the Olympics, they are fiercely defensive of their separate identity; as Jack says: 'What you want, what you crave, is to be treated as a separate human being ... You want an independent life' (44). But once they are separated, during the war, they more and more come to take on each other's identity. Jack tells how, during his affair with Birgit, he allows himself to appear as Joe. Joe tells how he finds an Air Force uniform in his wardrobe, and when he puts it on seems for a moment to become Jack. These are just cosmetic instances of a developing cross-identity; in a very important sense this is not a novel about separation but about unification.

From this moment in the ambulance onwards, time fractures into so many shards that it is difficult to keep track of what is going on. As Jack repeatedly revisits variant

experiences of the Hamburg raid until it coheres into one story that makes sense, so Joe seems to be persistently trying on alternative futures to find the one that works for him. He returns home to find Jack and Birgit together; then wakes back in the ambulance once more. 'It was as if I had slipped suddenly back in time, out of one reality into another, but which reality, now, was the one I should believe in?' (310) This is presented as a metaphor, in fact it is a concrete representation of what is going on in *The Separation*.

All of these 'lucid imaginings', as Joe terms them, keep bringing Joe and Jack together like colliding atoms: finding Jack with Birgit, finding Jack's uniform and trying it on, discovering that Jack is the pilot of the plane taking him to the Red Cross peace negotiations, the testy inconclusive meeting between the brothers at the airfield. This last is another instance of Priest's use of repeated passages. Each time the meeting is replayed we are told: 'as soon as I saw him I felt a familiar surge of many of the old feelings about him: love, envy, resentment, admiration, irritation. He was still my brother.' (383, repeated 390) That these repetitions indicate a shift in the substance of reality is indicated when we are told twice: 'We kept drawing on our cigarettes, using them like punctuation, for emphasis' (387, repeated 393), yet when Joe emerges from the second of these lucid dreams and finds himself back in the pub bedroom, 'I felt stray tobacco strands sticking to my lips.' (394) The supposed fancy of the lucid imagining has had a measureable effect upon reality.

Throughout these fractured realities, Joe the pacifist is working towards an end to the war, which he eventually achieves. But on his return home he finds that Birgit has already had their baby, a boy named Stuart that neighbour Henry Gratton is taking a possessive and fatherly interest in. And then Jack, supposedly seriously injured but not killed in a raid on Hamburg, suddenly appears. In that moment Joe falls, cracks his head on the floor, and finds himself back in the ambulance. This is something he has already foreseen. As he became aware of the lucid imagining he had wondered: 'Was everything I thought of as real in fact another more subtle and extended delusion, a lucid imagining of forked alternatives, while in reality, real reality, I lay in the back of the noisy Red Cross ambulance, still being driven slowly across benighted England?' (330) It is a return, therefore, for which we have been prepared. Perhaps in this world that crash which so mysteriously never happened, will occur. After all, there is a doom-laden quality to Joe's final words: 'ahead of me lay that life which was obscurely rejecting me' (463)

But if Joe is indeed recounting his own death, how could he do that? And how can he die at this moment before the peace that he is instrumental in bringing about, and that earns him the measure of fame which will get historian Stuart Gratton interested in him in the first place, and so set this entire novel in motion? Because the worlds are porous and the multiverse of the novel has resolved itself into the history we know; Joe has disappeared from a reality rejecting him, to receive the death scheduled for him in Jack's world, which somehow allows Jack to survive.

FALSE DOG

Nineteen seventy-two was an exceptional year for short science fiction stories. Stories such as 'Eurema's Dam' by R.A. Lafferty, 'Hero' by Joe Haldeman, 'Painwise' by James Tiptree Jr, 'Nobody's Home' by Joanna Russ, along with most of the contents of *Again, Dangerous Visions* edited by Harlan Ellison, show that this was a vintage season. But one novella stood out. 'The Fifth Head of Cerberus' by Gene Wolfe was almost immediately recognised as a classic, establishing Wolfe as one of the key authors of the decade and setting a tone of mysterious reminiscence that he would repeat at the end of the decade in *The Book of the New Sun*. 'The Fifth Head of Cerberus' is a much anthologised, much discussed work; what I want to do in this essay is pick at the layers of artifice in which the story is wrapped.

Artifice is clearly one of the primary impulses in the novella; its dramatic climax rests on the revelation that the narrator is a clone, one in a series, a family of clones, that he is a made being. Throughout the story there have been questions raised about the narrator's individuality: we are repeatedly told how much he looks like his 'father'; when he kills the slave during the abortive robbery attempt he sees his own face in the surgically-debased slave; indeed earlier during the break-in he sees his own reflection in a mirror and 'felt the momentary dislocation that comes when a stranger, an unrecognised shape, turns or moves his head and is some familiar friend glimpsed, perhaps for the first time, from outside.' (*Orbit 10*, p.45) In other words he is a stranger to himself: we know little about what individualises him (we aren't even told his name), but we learn a lot about how he reflects others (all we are directly told about the name is that it is the same as his 'father's'). But these hints as to the narrator's reality are only part of a complex web of artificiality which runs through the story.

There is the matter of the narrator's name, for a start. We are given hints early in the story: the narrator's home at 666 Saltimbanque (the number presumably a conscious reference to the number of the beast) is popularly known as La Maison du Chien after the statue of Cerberus which guards the door and which 'may have been a reference to our surname as well.' (p.10) Much later he makes this reference more explicit when he speaks of 'the iron dog with his three wolf-heads:' (p.62) We can guess he is called Wolfe. This is backed up (though less clearly than is sometimes assumed) in the library where the narrator seeks out books by his father. There, in the highest recesses of the dome, presumably at the end of the alphabet, he finds none, only 'a lone copy of *Monday or Tuesday* leaning against a book about the assassination of Trotsky' (p.6) – or thus it appears in the first version of the story, in subsequent editions this is amplified to add 'a misplaced astronautics text, *The Mile-*

Long Spaceship, by some German' and 'a crumbling volume of Vernor Vinge's short stories that owed its presence there, or so I suspect, to some long-dead librarian's mistaking the faded *V.Vinge* on the spine for "Winge":¹ These references to Kate Wilhelm and Vernor Vinge, both writers who had appeared with Wolfe in previous volumes of *Orbit*, despite references to one volume being misplaced and the mistake in the name of the other, tend to put the narrator's surname closer to WI in the alphabet than the WO of Wolfe. As to his forename, all we know is that when Mr Million calls the roll, 'my own name always [comes] first,' (p.7) and since his 'brother' is David we might assume that, alphabetically, the narrator is neither Gene nor Eugene.

It has tended to be popularly assumed that Gene Wolfe hid his own name in 'The Fifth Head of Cerberus' but, as we can see, Wolfe is both more ambiguous and more complex than that. By hiding the narrator's name he indicates that lack of individuality is important to our reading of the character; by misdirecting the reader towards his own name, he subtly suggests that this is a work about creativity and that what is being created within the story as much as by the author is the narrator.

The big question, of course, is how much more of the story can be accepted. Artificiality runs right through every aspect of the story: the setting, the family, even the very people who flesh out this narrative. Wolfe – either author or narrator – has created a densely visualised account, one that demands belief by the very weight of detail, by the solidity of the minutiae, yet the more we examine the account the more we are led to question its reality. Nothing is quite what it seems, everything is artificial. The setting, for instance, is Port-Mimizon, a prosperous town which may be the main city on the planet Sainte Croix, which is twinned with the planet of Sainte Anne. They are former French colonies, but the French are no longer there and what remains, beyond the names, has no trace of their presence. This may not be surprising since we learn that the planet 'has been inhabited less than two hundred years,' (p.32) a remarkably short time for a colony to be established and for the original colonists to leave, but Dr Marsch notes how all the buildings seem old and the narrator responds that 'there are less people here now than there were fifty years ago.' (p.32) In other words, the colony appears to be both recent and long established, to be successful and failing.

These contradictions are seen elsewhere also: the narrator's mother – from five generations before – is seen in a sepia photograph; the library, as we have seen, contains volumes by Kate Wilhelm and Vernor Vinge as well as a book about the assassination of Trotsky. This is what we might expect of a story set here and now, not some hundreds of years in the future. Of course, this apparent stasis is significant: as Dr Marsch explains, cloning leads to what is called 'anthropological relaxation': cloning does not progress. The whole of the society on Sainte Croix reflects the stasis within the Wolfe family – but it is only the Wolfe family in which successive generations are cloned.

But if the setting shifts in and out of reality so it is difficult to grasp how much we might accept, how much more must we struggle with the family the narrator finds himself a part of. The first person we meet, other than the narrator and David, is Mr Million, whose artificiality is blatant: he runs on large wheels, his face is a screen. Yet the name is deceptive – names so often are in Wolfe’s fiction, and in ‘The Fifth Head of Cerberus’ particularly – and it turns out he is really ‘M. Million,’ a ‘ten nine unbound simulator,’ (p.32) a simulation of the narrator’s ‘great-grandfather,’ or in fact himself, the original from which the narrator is the fifth-generation clone. So what starts out as a robot is revealed to be in some ways the progenitor of the narrator. Then there is the aunt who is also sister or daughter – cloning over generations in this way disrupts relationships, and the way we can speak about them, which is the point of course – who moves on some sort of anti-gravity device:

When we reached the stairs, however, this smooth gliding became a fluid bobbing that brought two inches or more of the hem of her black skirt into contact with each step, as if her torso were descending each step as a small boat might a rapids – now rushing, now pausing, now almost backing in the crosscurrents of turbulence. (p.16)

When they descend the spiral staircase she floats down the central well, so that she is a flesh-and-blood person whose movements are curiously suggestive of a machine. And again there is trickery over the name, for when the narrator first meets her they talk about Veil’s Hypothesis yet it is only later, when Dr Marsch visits, that we learn the aunt is herself Dr Veil, author of this Hypothesis. Then there is the ‘father’ who is, of course, the narrator himself since the one is cloned from the other. Here, again, there are contradictions: a severe, apparently private man who runs so vital and sociable an enterprise as a brothel. That the elder Wolfe conducts biological experiments, changing the appearance and character of his girls to suit the desires of his clients, is an early hint that he will experiment upon his ‘son,’ the narrator; and these experiments are echoed in the narrator’s own experiments in cloning animals. How much this echo is in fact repetition only becomes clear when the narrator visits his ‘father’ intent on murder, only to discover that the ‘father’ nursed exactly the same intent towards his own ‘father.’ Whether this intent was actually carried out is never explicitly stated, but we are left to assume that it was, that the narrator is blindly following in the footsteps of his earlier self, that Marsch’s ‘relaxation’ has condemned the cloned family to live within a closed loop. Certainly by the end of the story the narrator, released from prison, has set out upon exactly the same path followed by his ‘father.’

At every stage, therefore, both in the wider world of Port-Mimizon and in the narrower confines of La Maison du Chien, there is the suggestion of artificiality, of nature denied, of things that have been made to be not quite what they seem. This, of course, is most dramatically seen in the character of Dr Marsch. He arrives midway through the story as an anthropologist from Earth, here to consult the authority of Dr

Veil. As with so many characters in the novella, something is not quite right about Marsch from the start: he wears inappropriately heavy clothing, a full beard that is not in the current style, and his face is 'so colorless a white as almost to constitute a disfigurement,' (p.29) though these could be no more than the mark of an off-world stranger. The narrator has heard that 'a star-crosser from Sainte Anne had splashed down in the bay yesterday' (p.29) and assumes Marsch was aboard, which Marsch denies – though if a 'star-crosser' from Sainte Anne was such an event, one from Earth would have been even more noteworthy and it is curious that the narrator has not heard of it. The reason why becomes clear late in the story when it is revealed that Marsch is, in fact, a shape-changing aborigine from Sainte Anne, passing himself off as human.

This is not just another deception, another artificiality, it is a significant revelation about the nature of this world. The original inhabitants of both Sainte Croix and Sainte Anne are supposed to have disappeared, but 'the first explorers' descriptions differed so widely and some pioneers there had claimed the abos could change their shapes.' (p.19) If Marsch is, indeed, an aborigine it proves that they are not extinct and also proves the supposition about their shape-changing abilities. If so, this suggests that Veil's Hypothesis might be correct.

Veil, the narrator's 'aunt':

'supposes the abos to have possessed the ability to mimic men perfectly. Veil thought that when the ships came from Earth the abos killed everyone and took their places and the ships, so they're not dead at all, we are.'

'You mean the Earth people are,' my aunt said, 'the human beings.' (p.19)

This suggestion is made early in the story and immediately undermined: 'The imitation could hardly have been exact, since human beings don't possess that talent and to imitate them *perfectly* the abos would have to lose it.' (p.19) Thereafter it isn't mentioned again until the climactic revelation about Marsch: the characters all think as humans, behave as humans, to all intents and purposes they are humans. But that, of course, does not negate the Hypothesis. And if no one in the novel is what they seem to be, if the whole world is mimicking humanity, it would explain the social stultification, the lack of cultural referents, the failure to advance that has bound the whole world. It also explains the artificiality that Gene Wolfe – as author and as narrator – has been at pains to point up throughout the novella.

And if this artificiality provides the key to the story, then the enclosed, encircling trap which condemns the narrator to recapitulate his 'father' becomes more than a personal tragedy – it becomes a metaphor for the tragedy of the entire world of Sainte Croix.