

The Feast of St. Bradbury

Annually at sunset on August 22 (the great man's birthday), editors, book reviewers, and workers in related trades celebrate the feast of St. Bradbury. On that day they gather up all the books they have been unable, despite their best intentions and firmest resolves, to read all the way to the end, tie them in bundles, and take them to the local book-burning facilities. There, amid cries of "Boring!" "Pretentious!" "Trashy!" and "Inept!" they roast weiners and barbecue chickens over the offending volumes and experience that sweet tristesse peculiar to the Feast of St. Bradbury: that mingling of relief at the onerous task at last abandoned—and horror that so many writers have written and publishers published in vain, all in vain.

Battlefield Earth by L. Ron Hubbard is to other, ordinary dumb books what a Dyson sphere is to an ordinary lampshade—awesomely much bigger, though not different in kind. Page by page, it's about on a par with the latest ersatz quest-adventure by Philip José Farmer or with most hack writing of the pulp era—the Golden Age, as it is known to those who were young then (as what age is not?). Which is to say it's about what you'd expect from the author of *Slaves of Sleep* if, instead of leading a religion for the last thirty years, he'd been cryogenically frozen, then resurrected and given a year to produce the longest dime novel of all time—one that contains, as Hubbard writes in his introduction, "practically every type of story there is—detective, spy, adventure, western, love, air war, you name it. All except fantasy; there's none of that."

A book will usually let you know if it's meant for burning within the first few pages, and *Battlefield Earth*'s seven pages of introduction are a little treasury of self-incriminations. Here's Hubbard on his early career: "I was what they called a high-production writer, and these fields were just not big enough to take everything I could write." And: "I had, myself, somewhat of a science background, had done some pioneer work in

Review of *Battlefield Earth*, by L. Ron Hubbard; *No Enemy But Time*, by Michael Bishop; *The Transmigration of Timothy Archer*, by Philip K. Dick; *Friday*, by Robert Heinlein; *The Engines of the Night*; *Citadel of the Autarch*, by Gene Wolfe; *The Void Captain's Tale*, by Norman Spinrad; *The Birth of the People's Republic of Antarctica*, by John Calvin Batchelor; *White Gold Wielder*, by Stephen R. Donaldson; *Medusa: A Tiger by the Tale*, by Jack L. Chalker; and *Dream Makers, Volume II*, by Charles Platt.

rockets and liquid gases, but I was studying the branches of man's past knowledge at that time to see whether he had ever come up with anything valid." Then, a little later, on these same themes of science and intellectual history: "But I do notice every time modern science thinks it is down to the nitty-gritty of it all, it runs into (and sometimes adopts) such things as the Egyptian myths that man came from the mud, or something like that." And finally for sheer reverse verbal bravura, consider the following pronouncement: "man, currently, has sunk into a materialistic binge."

Battlefield Earth is such a cornucopia of boners, groaners, and macro-clichés (such as the ineffably klutzy destruction of the planet of the evil Psychlos by atomic bombs, which turns it into a "radioactive sun") that many readers may be tempted to spare it from the flames of St. Bradbury and place it on that shelf of the immortally goofy anti-classics of the genre, such as *Zarlah the Martian* and *The Bell from Infinity*. Despite all this, or maybe because of it, I'll wager that *Battlefield Earth* will be a strong contender at Hugo time. If not, what are disciples for?

It should be noted that nowhere in the introduction or the press releases for *Battlefield Earth* is the word "Scientology" used. The nearest Hubbard comes to frankness is this: "Some of my readers may wonder that I did not include my own serious subjects in this book. It was with no thought of dismissal of them. It was just that I put on my professional writer's hat. I also did not want to give anyone the idea I was doing a press relations job for my other serious works." To his credit, those parts of the book I read seemed no more partisan on behalf of Scientology than, say, C. S. Lewis's trilogy is on behalf of the Anglican church. An allegorical interpretation is possible in both cases, but the reader is not being overtly recruited.

There is another way in which the sf and the historical imagination may cross-fertilize, and that is in stories of time travel into the past. Since Mark Twain invented the idea in 1889, it has become almost an sf genre in its own right. The drama of time travel lies in the collision between a historical civilization and a consciousness formed in our own time; between, as well, the sense of history as an inalterable fact and the effort of some Connecticut Yankee to make his mark on it—or not to, if the time traveler observes the decorums of field anthropology. The second possibility gets around the paradoxes involved in introducing microwave mousetraps into the court of Charlemagne, but drama is hard to come by, since the protagonist-time traveler must keep such a low profile.

All of this preamble to explain the particular excellence and originality of Michael Bishop's *No Enemy But Time*, a time-travel novel that does it the

hard way and succeeds. Bishop's hero is born in Seville in 1962, the bastard son of Encarnacion Ocampo, a mute Morisco "whore and black marketer," and a black enlisted man in the Strategic Air Command. Adopted into the family of another SAC staff sergeant, he becomes John Monegal and grows up in a variety of stateside Air Force bases. The milieu of career servicemen is one that Bishop, an Air Force brat himself, knows like the back of his hand, and his novel shares the virtue of so many of his best stories in portraying that milieu realistically and sympathetically, but without the Alamo psychology of the School of Heinlein.

Through his childhood John Monegal has dream visions of Pleistocene Africa, and as a young man he is recruited as a time traveler to that era and area, when *Homo sapiens* was only a twinkle in the eye of the ape-like *Homo habilis*. The core of the story's science-fictional excitement lies in John's life as an assimilated member of a tribe of habilene hunters, and in these Pleistocene chapters, which alternate in a strict A-B-A-B pattern with chapters recounting John's growing up, Bishop has created a vicarious treat of three-scoops-and-a-cherry dimensions, a kind of Tarzan for the eighties, based on sound paleontological evidence and shrewd anthropological extrapolation, but no less fun for being well informed.

The remarkable thing about Bishop's book is that the story of John's growing up through the sixties and into the eighties always holds its own dramatically against his adventures among the habilenes. As in LeGuin's *The Dispossessed*, the alternating time schemes are tightly interlocked so that present and past illuminate and elucidate each other. As in Benford's *Timescape*, the chapters set in the recent historical past serve as a kind of litmus test of the author's ability to tell home truths about real people. The clarity, sanity, and truthfulness of these essentially "mainstream" chapters give the author's more imaginative flights an authority and verisimilitude all too rare in genre sf. Like both LeGuin and Benford, Bishop is determined to write about human goodness without resorting to the mock heroics of formula adventure stories. There are no villains in the book, even among the habilenes. The central and absorbing drama of the book is the hero's growing love for the pre-Rhematic habilene Helen. (The Rhematic period is, according to the Oxford English Dictionary, the first period of specifically human history, when language came into being.) Looming behind this love story is a larger theme, the formation across the entire span of history of the Family of Man, a phrase that becomes, as the novel ripens to its conclusion, no mere liberal piety but a fully realized dramatic affirmation.

This is not to say the book is flawless. As with most time-travel stories,

the rationale for “how it’s done” is embarrassingly unconvincing. Better to offer no explanation than one that leaks this badly. But that’s a small exception to take to a large achievement. After *No Enemy But Time* it would be an insult to continue to speak of Michael Bishop as one of science fiction’s most promising writers. The promise has been fulfilled.

That this trying out of every possible idea to see if it would fit finally destroyed Tim Archer can’t be disputed. He tried out too many ideas, picked them up, examined them . . . some of the ideas, however, as if possessing a life of their own, came back around the far side of the barn and got him. That is history; this is an historical fact. Tim is dead. The ideas did not work. . . . One thing, however could not be obscured. Tim Archer could tell when he was locked in a life and death struggle, and, upon perceiving this, he assumed the posture of grim defense. . . . Fate, to get Tim Archer would have to run him through. Fate had to murder him.

That paragraph, from the twelfth chapter of Philip K. Dick’s last novel, *The Transmigration of Timothy Archer*, seems an uncannily well-tailored epitaph for the man who wrote it. No doubt one ought to resist the impulse to mythologize a writer’s life as soon as his death has made its shape certain, but Dick’s last three novels are singularly difficult to consider apart from their author and his legend. Indeed, the first of the three, *Valis*, is one of the most remarkable, not to say strangest, self-portraits in all literature, and *The Transmigration*, although based on aspects of the career of Dick’s friend James Pike, the Episcopal bishop and celebrity author, is (surely not unconsciously) in essential respects another self-portrait, and one that succeeds better at capturing certain characteristics of its author than does *Valis*. Sometimes it helps not to study the mirror too closely.

Before these books are mined for what they may contribute to Dick’s myth or the shape of his entire oeuvre, they should be considered on their individual merits. Are they engrossing stories told with intensity, economy, and wit? Do they take us somewhere Dick’s earlier novels did not explore? (The better the author and the more prolific he’s been, the harder it becomes to “make it new” each time he goes to bat.) Finally, what can be said for their claim to be considered a trilogy: is the whole more than the sum of its parts?

Valis, which Bantam published in 1980, is the unique example of an autobiographical novel in the literature of science fiction. Think about it. Who could, except by writing a novel in the future tense, write a science fiction novel based on the events of his own life? Dick, who has written so many accounts of alternative and subjective realities, managed to do so in

Valis, but at the considerable psychological risk of busting through those thin partitions that proverbially divide madness from great wit. Valis is an unsparing account of a period in Dick's life when he underwent what may be described as either visionary experience or psychosis. While the novel differs in many artful particulars from its raw materials (as known from conversations, letters, and even public speeches), the essential drama of a mind divided between a savvy rationality and a grateful and credulous receptivity to otherworldly inputs is soundly based on Dick's experience.

The Divine Invasion, now in paperback, would seem at first glance to have little more in common with the preceding novel of the "trilogy" than a concern for the wilder shores of theological speculation, where the Talmud and the Gnostic Gospels form love knots in the locks of Holy Wisdom. The story is set in that grungy, starveling, astro turfed future common to many Dick novels, wherein a bumbling Unholy Alliance between the Papacy and the Kremlin acts the role of Herod vis-à-vis a new Messiah being smuggled by spaceship to the Bethlehem of Earth. Readers expecting a replay of the traditional gospel tale will be pleasantly surprised (or perhaps dismayed) by the direction the story takes following these Nativity sequences, for Dick's mythmaking is as revisionist as his theology. As in other of his best novels (*The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch*; or, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*, which served as suggestion box for the movie *Bladerunner*), the plot is so devious as to defy synopsis. Instead of finding it a page-turner, I tended to set *The Divine Invasion* aside at intervals of twenty pages in order to catch my mental breath. Far from being a liability, I consider this a sign of the book's rare excellence. True originality shouldn't come across as popcorn. When Jacob encountered the angel, they had to wrestle. By the end of the book I had no doubt that it was one of Dick's finest accomplishments.

The Transmigration of Timothy Archer strikes a fine synthetic balance between the "case history" tone of Valis and the phantasmagorical high jinks of *The Divine Invasion*. It can also claim the dubious distinction of being the first unequivocally mainstream novel to be published under an sf imprint. Dick wrote many mainstream novels, most of which lie cryogenically frozen in a California university library. One earlier mainstream novel was published in 1975 by Entwhistle Books, *Confessions of a Crap Artist*. While it compelled my interest, *Confessions* struck me as lacking both the force and the flair of Dick's best sf. By contrast, *The Transmigration* I found to be the most vividly engaging of the three last novels—perhaps in part because it is also, aesthetically speaking, the least adventuresome and the surest-footed.

Like the historical Bishop Pike, the book's hero allows his better judgment to founder in grief and guilt for a son's suicide; he becomes involved with spirit mediums and writes a book in defense of spiritualism. Later, realizing he's been led into error by his overactive imagination (see the first paragraph above), Archer tries to resist the whirlpool of self-destructive impulse impelling him to a quasi-suicide in the Dead Sea Desert—but his resistance is too late and too little. Note the similarity between this plot and Dick's ambivalent feelings about his own visionary experiences, as chronicled in *Valis*. Here, however, art is more firmly in command, and the plot is resolved with a *coup de théâtre* that has the explosive power of his best sf without compromising the book's grounding in a Balzacean realism. The unwritten moral at the end of the trilogy (or "trinity," as I would rather term the nonlinear unity the three books achieve) is an affirmation of the vision received with a chagrined appreciation of the folly inherent in too hot pursuit of any grail; with maybe, one step beyond this quixotic polarity, a sheer unqualified love for any fool who has the courage of such folly.

If there is a silver lining to be found in the unalterable, sorrowful fact of Philip Dick's death at the age of fifty-two, it is surely that his last three books do such honor to his genius. Fate at least allowed him to exit in style.

Robert Heinlein's new novel, *Friday*, offers a similar though by no means sorrowful cause for rejoicing, for *Friday* is quite the best novel he's written in years (sixteen, if you liked *The Moon Is a Harsh Mistress* greatly; twenty-one, if *Stranger in a Strange Land* is your touchstone). His last three novels went from bad to worse and developed elephantiasis in the process. Even his most faithful admirers found themselves hard put to exonerate, much less praise, *The Number of the Beast*, and readers who'd never taken oaths of fealty simply looked the other way in polite dismay (knowing quite well that their attention would not be missed by the author, whose books prospered in the marketplace in almost inverse proportion to their merits).

How cheering, then, to be able to root once again for an old master at the height of his form. *Friday* is probably not Heinlein's best novel, but it can lay claim to lesser superlatives: oddest, drollest, most comfortable, and (in some ways) most original. Its oddity derives from the paradox that while the story seems to zip right along, page by quick-turning page, it never (in terms of simple narrative) goes anywhere in particular.

This supersonic meander opens with a narrative hook big enough to land a Spielberg shark:

As I left the Kenya Beanstalk capsule he was right on my heels. He followed me through the door leading to Customs, Health, and Immigration. As the door contracted behind him, I killed him.

(Let us note, in passing, the homage to one of his critics, S. R. Delany, who has cited Heinlein's sentence "The door dilated" as the *locus classicus* of all science fiction.) The narrator, Miss Friday, proceeds to stuff the resulting corpse and a pesky Public Eye into a luggage locker, then uses its credit cards to cover her tracks electronically. One might suppose from such a beginning that *Friday* is to be a futuristic James Bond adventure. It's not, though the *action* is often of that ilk. However, the action is rarely anything but icing on the cake and rarely serves to advance the plot.

There is a plot, though the author contrives with great grace to let it all take place in the reader's peripheral vision. Thus, a great many chapters are spent following the heroine as, having just knocked off a cop who'd been wanting in good manners, she tries to get back to home base during an international crisis that has sealed the borders of a balkanized North America. She caroms about the map without reaching her goal; we never do learn what the crisis was really about, or whose side she would have been on had she got home, since the organization she serves is so security-conscious that it never discusses its ends, only its means, of which Friday herself is one of the best. Observe how neatly, by this method, Heinlein finesses those critics who are disposed to argue about his politics on the macroscopic level of history and headlines. Miss Friday is as innocent of politics as Lassie, another heroine whose overriding concern is to find her way home.

So it is too with the politics of sex, which is (as one may surmise from the delightful dedication page, with its harem of thirty-one dedicatees, including, among others, Betsy, Bubbles, Judy-Lynn, Pepper, Rebel, Ursula, Vonda, and Yumiko) the theme about which Heinlein's subtext is organized. In many ways *Friday* fulfills the demands of many feminist critics for a macho heroine and beyond that for a world in which macho heroines may rumble with other macho heroines, then take a quick tumble in the hay, and proceed on their way to fresh adventures in the spirit of picaresque daydreaming that boys of all ages have so long enjoyed. Heinlein, who can be as fair-minded as he is cantankerous, readily acknowledges the right of women to equal wages and equal fun, and some of the book's drollest moments are a result of casting women in traditionally male roles, as when Miss Friday is recruited into a mercenary army by one Sergeant Mary Gumm, who is as tough as they come, and

who, when she makes a pass at Miss Friday . . . ah, but that would spoil the fun.

This is not to say that the feminist contingent, and others, won't be driven up various walls by one or another aspect of the book—its wry denouement in particular—but that Heinlein has exercised all his novelistic wiles to embody his argument in a story as devious as an eel—so that even if one disagrees there can be great sport in doing so. This, by contrast to the hectoring and bloated monologues of recent memory, is a good reason to get the book and to pass it along. It's one of those that will sustain hours of arguing as to what the man is actually getting at. Such postmortems can be, with books as with parties, half the entertainment.

The Engines of the Night so candidly asks to be censured that any reviewer is put into the position of the sadist in the classic joke, who, from a more refined cruelty, refuses to grant the masochist the beating he begs for. Rarely does a book appear that is at once so self-loathing (one of the author's favorite characterizations of himself) and so self-serving (a subject on which he is more reticent). The publisher abets its author's desire to make his name anathema by publishing blurbs from two colleagues who evidently disliked the book as much as I did, and the following equivocal praise from Algis Budrys: "Destined to be misunderstood and misused, this cry from the heart will prove once more that honesty is suicidal."

I think, on the contrary, that it's destined to be understood by anyone who bothers to read it and used as a cautionary example of how the practice of hack writing, too long indulged, can sap the character, wilt the judgment, and turn to jelly the prose of writers who can't resist a fast buck. The author (who, as a special, Dantean torment, shall remain nameless in this review) would seem in his own darker moments to endorse even the harshest of these judgments, but he also suffers fits of megalomania when he insists that his career has been peculiarly congruent with the history of all science fiction, and that he embodies a kind of tragic fate that dooms him (and all science fiction) to mediocrity, oblivion, and a pauper's grave. He loves to cover himself with ashes and tell sad tales of the deaths of writers, such times as his word processor isn't on automatic pilot and churning out such portentous piffle as this passage, which is the book's only gloss on its title:

Ah but still. Still, oh still. Still Kazin, Broyard, Epstein, Podhoretz and Howe; grinding away slowly in the center of all purpose, taking us to the millennium: the engines of the night.

(Those names are the critics the author feels particularly neglected by, but as to what the rest of that trans-syntactical paragraph may mean, only the author knows—and he’s not saying.)

Does this seem a mite draconian? Well, judge for yourself. Here’s a less inchoate example of the author in his kvetching vein, with pique in control and self-pity momentarily in abeyance:

The writer—the experienced writer in any event—knows that most editors acquire and publish not in an effort to be successful so much as to avoid failure. Defensive driving. They seek, then, that which they consider safe, and the writers who are at the mercy of those editors function from the same motivation. (It can be presumed that those who feel or function differently find it almost impossible to get their work into the mass market.) . . . Science fiction, like all commercial fiction (and quality lit too although in a slightly different way), can perhaps be best understood in terms of what is *not* written rather than what is. Self-censorship controls. Any writer who understands this at all will know what not to try. As good a definition of professionalism as any other.

If that’s professional, how would you define craven? Such preemptive surrender to the “demands of the market” is all the more reprehensible when one realizes that the author is a man who presently makes his living by selling his own professional expertise, pseudonymously, to fledgling writers.

If the book were only a “personal bitch” (as Alexei Panshin describes it on the back cover), it would not be worth even this much notice, but it lays claim in its subtitle, *Science Fiction in the Eighties*, to have a larger subject. The claim is specious. As a critic, the author is careless, ungenerous, and fainthearted. He praises the work of his friends out of proportion to their merits, especially that of Robert Silverberg, which so often echoes the author’s lamentations on the futility of writing sf. There is scarcely one generalization about sf in the book to which some significant exception cannot be made, either because the author practices defensive reading or because he writes faster than he thinks. And for all his constant insistence on the essential inescapable second-rateness of all sf, he never has the guts to come out and say that any particular book by any particular writer is bad. Indeed, there is scarcely a senior member of the sf establishment that isn’t kowtowed to at some point and scarcely a junior member that gets mentioned.

All in all, a shameful performance. And you can quote that on the cover of the paperback.

At the present moment, the most reliable butcher shop (or florist), science-fictionally speaking, is Timescape Books, which has published Gene Wolfe's *Citadel of the Autarch*. *Citadel* is the fourth (though not quite conclusive) volume in Wolfe's paperback tetralogy, *The Book of the New Sun*, whose popular success has confounded all conventional wisdom, both the Industry's and my own. *The Shadow of the Torturer* won a World Fantasy Award, *The Claw of the Conciliator* a Nebula, and last year's *The Sword of the Lictor* is the likeliest mammalian contender in a field liable to be dominated by four dinosaurs—Clarke, Asimov, Heinlein, and Hubbard. Now we have *Citadel*, and it is possible to take a deep breath and try, if not to achieve closure, at least to figure out what really happens and what it all means.

For rarely has there been a work of genre fiction in which the import of the story is so elusive, to say nothing of the bare facts. Such was its appeal to the literary detective in me that halfway through this last volume I could resist no longer and phoned up my old friend and fellow Wolfe-enthusiast, John Clute, to suggest that we not wait the dozen or so years that even a masterpiece is supposed to age in the cask but set about at once to edit a volume of interpretive essays, supplemented with a glossary and other suitable rites of scholarship. John said, "Good idea," and immediately began to jot down some questions that remained moot after his first reading of the four volumes, but still seemed answerable. As a sample of the fascination of *The Book of the New Sun*, I can't resist quoting (with his permission) from John's list of conundrums:

—"Who is the woman lying bleeding beneath the Matachin Towel whom Severian almost forgets?

—Just how is an Autarch actually chosen? And who is Paeon?

—Are all the khaibits in the novel identified as such? And just how do exultants prolong their lives?

—Is Cyriaca S's mother?"

(After more reflection, John concluded that Cyriaca was not Severian's mother, and he developed an ingenious theory of who, amazingly, his mother might be, which I'm sworn not to hint at here, as John's entitled to dibs for his discovery.)

Do you begin to sense what very odd books these must be that they can leave such questions in the air and still generate such applause and loyalty? Of the four volumes *Citadel* is surely the oddest, for it is almost per-versely anticlimactic in its denial of those pleasures usually associated

with finishing a long epic narrative; there are no confrontation scenes between Severian and the many major characters from the earlier volumes (no accounting, indeed, for many of them), no poetic justice for the villains, no coronal ceremonies for the triumphant hero. The last eight chapters, which show Severian as Autarch, are one long dying fall, as though no music would suit the rites of passage to ethical maturity (for this is what the allegory is allegorizing; that much at least is clear) save the muffled drumbeats of a funeral march.

I realize this is not the stuff that blurb writers' dreams are made of, but most sf readers by now will already have begun to read *The Book of the New Sun* and will know their own taste in the matter. Nor can I imagine that any reader of the first three volumes could be prevented from continuing to the end. At this moment the whole tetralogy seems simply too large for ordinary critical epithets to apply; one might as well scrawl "pretty damned big!" on the Great Pyramid.

Temperamentally no two authors could be more unlike than Gene Wolfe and Norman Spinrad, and few novels could be more disparate in their achievement than *The Book of the New Sun* and *The Void Captain's Tale*. Wolfe is decorous, devious, sacerdotal; one suspects that, like T. S. Eliot, he is an Anglican in his religion, a monarchist in his politics. Spinrad is brash, forthright, profane; his intellectual allegiances hark back not centuries but a mere twenty-five years, to the late fifties, when Spinrad's namesake and role model, Norman Mailer, was in flower.

Mailer's chief significance to writers of my own and Norman's generation can be bounded in the nutshell of two powerful stories from *Advertisements for Myself* (1959), "The Man Who Studied Yoga" and "The Time of Her Time." In those stories Mailer found a new way to turn to account the sexual explicitness that recent court decisions had made possible for American writers. Prior to Mailer, writing about sex tended to fall into two categories—the steamy (a tradition carried on in our time by Judith Krantz, Harold Robbins, et al.) and the risqué, a category broad enough to subsume centuries of bawdry, from Rabelais to the joke pages of *Playboy*. Both modes tend to trivialize sex and deny its sometime sublimity. Mailer found a language that was streetwise without being loutish, eloquent without gushing, a language more true to sexual experience than any of his contemporaries.

Norman Spinrad was the first sf writer to apply the lessons of Mailer to the material of science fiction, and he was rewarded for his achievement by having the book in which he did this, *Bug Jack Barron* (1969), banned from England's largest bookstore chain and denounced in the House of

Commons. Spinrad has written seven novels since then, only one of which departs markedly from a Mailerean rhetoric. The lone exception is the delightfully bonkers *The Iron Dream* (1972), which purports to be an sf pulp adventure penned by Adolf Hitler. In the other novels (excepting the latest), Spinrad was up against the same problem that so often baffled Mailer in his later fiction: the voice he'd crafted for his breakthrough work did not always suit later occasions. *A World Between* (1979), an effort to confront the issues raised by feminism, seemed to me as tendentious and off-target as Mailer's *The Prisoner of Sex*, while *Songs from the Stars* (1980) created a postapocalyptic utopia extrapolated from back issues of the *Whole Earth Catalogue* that shared the problem of most utopias: blandness. *The Void Captain's Tale* represents a new synthesis of Spinrad's main strengths. The earnestness of the metasexual theorizer is qualified by the irony and livened by the playfulness that characterizes *The Iron Dream* and his best short fiction.

The central premise could not be simpler: interstellar flight by means of electronically amplified orgasm. Only female orgasm, however, acts as propellant; the male role is the honorific one of pressing the takeoff button—and therein lies *The Void Captain's Tale*. The *reductio ad absurdum* of the old metaphoric equation, Orgasm = Grail, is elaborated in great extrapolative detail, but the central sexual drama would soon come to seem an absurdity plain and simple if Spinrad had not cast his tale into an evolved lingo of his own invention, a kind of Berlitz for Space Travelers that generates an atmosphere of constant, ever-shifting unnaturalness. It is a language as capable of flights of eloquence as of pratfalls of pomposity. The effect of reading much of it, as with the neo-English of *A Clockwork Orange* or *Riddley Walker*, is that as we learn the language we enter the culture of the book, becoming, in effect, its naturalized citizens. The comparison to Burgess's and Hoban's books can be misleading in one way, however, for the effect of the Spinradical *sprach* is not so much to make commonplace speech richer, stranger, and more poetic, but to signify the artifice of social conventions, to be symptomatic of the central thesis of the book—that the sexual grail is something that words, in their nature, cannot express.

The Birth of the People's Republic of Antarctica, by John Calvin Batchelor, is not published as a science fiction novel, but as a “novel of the imminent future.” Usually I would argue that any story set in the future is by its nature science fiction, but Batchelor's muse harks back to far older traditions, as far back, indeed, as *Beowulf*, though *Moby Dick* is probably a more apt formal comparison. There is the same potent mix of epic adventure

and lofty speculation acted out by larger-than-life figures against a background of global dimensions—in this case, a near-future crisis that has filled the oceans of the world with a multinational diaspora of supremely wretched men and women. (That’s a quote from the book jacket, but I don’t think it’s cheating to repeat it, since it was a quote I wrote.) The book chronicles a Swedish prison break led by the hero’s Ahab-large grandfather; a voyage ever-Southwards through an Atlantic as dismal as the oceans of Poe’s “Narrative of A. Gordon Pym”; then, with uncanny prescience (for this was written and contracted before the actual British-Argentine war), Batchelor depicts a war in the Falkland Islands, which leads to the book’s awesome conclusion in the “ice camps” of Antarctica. Here is a sample of the author’s summing-up of the situation in Chapter the Last:

The wretched in the South, we wretches, we were not all innocent victims of some fabulous conspiracy to disenfranchise lambs. . . . We . . . were the worst possible remnant. The genuine meek, the genuinely wronged . . . they had been left far behind, dead in their hovels, on the beaches, in the sea. We in the ice camps had come through our ordeals because we were tougher, wilder, crueller than our brethren. We were the lucky remnant. We were the most vicious wretched: pirates, killers, thieves, madmen, lost to reason and utterly embittered. As we suffered atrocities, we were atrocious.

. . . We did drink the blood. We did eat the dead.

Batchelor manages to make good on his promise of the highest and widest drama precisely because he keeps a certain distance from his cast of high-voltage characters and handles their passions, crimes, and ordeals with electrician’s gloves. He anatomizes them, as a historian might, rather than presenting them always in cinematically detailed scenes. The danger with this technique is that a certain chill may set in (though it’s scarcely a danger in this book) or that the prose may be infected with the language of contemporary psychology, a sorry fate for any novel. Again, that danger never threatens, since Batchelor took his degree at Union Theological Seminary, and the language he uses in his anatomies of the soul is as timeless as the King James Bible’s or Dr. Johnson’s.

How the time flies. It seems like only yesterday we were celebrating the Feast of St. Bradbury, when, at sunset on August 22, book reviewers gather at great communal bonfires to burn those books they could not bring themselves to read all the way through. But already the year has

turned full circle, and it is time to offer new volumes to the purifying flames. A joyful occasion, surely, but a solemn one as well, for often these unreadable books have been more successful in the marketplace than the books favored by the general consensus of reviewers, and we must ask ourselves why. Why does dreck so often rise to the top of the bestseller list? Is there some merit in these books that their prose obscures, as acne can disfigure a structurally handsome face? Or is it (as I will propose) precisely their faults that endear them to an audience who recognizes in these novels a true mirror image of their own lame brains?

I use that pejorative advisedly—as a reminder that it is often the case that a brain, like a limb, can be “lame,” and by way of apologizing for some plain speaking ahead. The lamebrained may be no more to blame for their condition than those more literally lamed; their condition may in fact be equivalently pitiable, but they are seldom liable to acknowledge their impediment. Indeed, they will even fight to have lamebrainedness written into the Constitution, as in the creationists’ demands for equal time (concerning whom, see below), and to dismiss any evidence of a sound mind as elitism. In their utopia, as in Vonnegut’s classic tale “Harrison Bergeron,” all brains not naturally lame will be lamed prosthetically, and the Olympics shall be conducted exclusively from wheelchairs. It is to guard against that possibility that it is needful from time to time, even at the risk of hurt feelings, to call a dunce a dunce, instead of politely looking the other way.

Let me state clearly at the outset that I am not disparaging “escapist reading” in order to promote serious literature. I have a keen appetite for entertainment novels of almost all kinds. So it’s not because *White Gold Wielder* by Stephen R. Donaldson and *Medusa: A Tiger by the Tale* by Jack L. Chalker are written solely to entertain that I consider them stinkers, but because they set about that task so ineptly. Readers hungry for high fantasy in Donaldson’s vein or for old-fashioned space opera can find literate specimens of both genres in such recent first-quality offerings as Jack Vance’s *Lyonesse* or Keith Laumer’s *Retief* series, books that feature livelier plots, more vivid characters, and infinitely more lucid (and ludic) prose than the stinkers under consideration.

But before I rave on, I must offer examples of what I am inveighing against—the first a descriptive passage by Chalker, the second a crucial confrontation scene from *White Gold Wielder*:

The drawing, a very good drawing by a very skilled artist, was of a stunningly beautiful woman, perhaps the most stunning vision of womanhood I’d ever seen. Rendered in colored pencils, the drawing showed a

dark-skinned beauty with long mixed blond and light brown hair, two very large and sexy dark green eyes, set in perhaps the most sensual face I could imagine. The body was large, lean, sexy, and sleek, but the sexual organs were very exaggerated. The artist had drawn multiple views, including one of the figure crouching, animal-like, like some perfect primal savage, wearing some sort of spotted animal skin. It was an incredible vision, a bestial sex machine. Even though it was only a cartoon in colored pencils, I felt the intent in the artist's skilled strokes and could only whistle.

He raised one hand like a smear across her sight. In his grasp, the band began to blaze. His shout gathered force until she feared it would shatter the mountain.

"Here at last I hold possession of all life and Time forever! Let my Enemy look to his survival and be daunted! Freed from my gaol and torment. I will rule the cosmos!"

She could not remain upright under the weight of his exaltation. His voice split her hearing, hampered the rhythm of her heart. Kneeling on the tremorous stone, she gritted her teeth, swore to herself that even though she had failed at everything else she would at least breathe no more of this damnable attar. The walls threw argent in carillon from all their facets. The Despiser's power scaled toward apocalypse.

Yet she heard Covenant. Somehow, he kept his feet. He did not shout but every word he said was as distinct as augury.

"Big deal. I could do the same Thing—if I were as crazy as you." His certainty was unmatched. "It doesn't take power. Just delusion. You're out of your mind."

It's hard, with Donaldson, to leave off quoting. The passage continues for pages at the same amazingly high density of pratfalls per paragraph, with the same wonderful swings from school-playground bombast to teenybopper psychobabble. By comparison, Chalker's prose is almost stately, in the manner of a fifth-grade book report. There is even a kind of savage, minimalist beauty in his rudimentary description of "two very large and sexy dark green eyes, set in perhaps the most sensual face I could imagine." Quasimodo couldn't have put it any better.

The appeal of Donaldson's prose is less obvious. The original meaning of "bombast" is instructive in his case: cotton wool used as padding or stuffing for clothes, from which it came to have its figurative meaning of inflated or turgid language. Cotton, that's to say, in its inchoate condition, before it's been spun into cloth; language, therefore, not yet formulated into meaning. Further, those parts of the anatomy liable to be aug-

mented with bombast were usually those associated with mature development. The analogy holds for bombastic prose. Donaldson's evocations of emotional experience are at once shrill and nebulous, the miasmatic imagining of an oceanic angst, where any impulse at once elicits an equal and opposite reaction:

Her senses told her things that appalled her. Though his own perceptions were flatly truncated, he felt the potential for hysteria creep upward in her. But instead of screaming she became scarcely able to move. How virulent would Lord Foul be to nerves as vulnerable as hers. Covenant was at least protected by his numbness.

This is not to suggest that Donaldson's work is "depressing" because its characters—the lachrymose and overwrought heroine in particular—have "vulnerable nerves." Indeed, I suspect his books appeal to young persons who themselves are subject to a chronic, unspecific depression—a common condition in this age of Quaalude-gobbling—and who find in Donaldson's beclouded prose an affirmation of their condition, an assurance that such feelings are the stigmata of a noble, suffering spirit. What I object to in *White Gold Wielder* is rather that neither in its moment-to-moment depiction of psychological experience nor in the broader operation of its plot at an allegorical level does it offer effective insights into the *miserablisme* it celebrates. Simply put, it wallows in self-pity, and the diffuse fogginess of the language provides a kind of smoke-screen that allows naive readers to wallow along without the discomfort of self-awareness.

And what is the harm in that? you may ask. If a book serves the purpose of a security blanket, is that such a terrible thing? Possibly not. There are times when all of us would rather flee our problems than confront them head-on with the heightened awareness that genuine art forces on us. For such times nothing will serve but escapism. Yet I can't help but think that a habit of tolerating such bad prose as Chalker and Donaldson offer, sentence by sentence, is more injurious to the mind's general fitness than an equivalent amount of time spent viewing *Magnum P.I.*, or *General Hospital*, or *Star Trek*, escapist entertainments that possess the minimal virtues of formal clarity and a professional execution.

Lest this year's sacrificial victims to the fires of St. Bradbury give the impression that genre fiction is generally sorry stuff, there is a newly published nonfiction book that provides a convincing case to the contrary. *Dream Makers, Volume II*, by Charles Platt, is, like the original, much-

praised first volume of three years ago, a collection of interviews with (in this volume) some twenty-eight writers and editors in the field of sf and just across its boundaries (for instance, there are interviews with William Burroughs, Alvin “Future Shock” Toffler, D. M. Thomas, and Stephen King). The excellence of both volumes lies chiefly in Platt’s Delilahlike knack of eliciting candid and lively responses from people of the most diverse temperaments and attitudes, and secondarily in his skill at compressing the resulting mass of dialogues and observations into a coherent, continuous narrative. The result is a book that provides livelier entertainment than most novels.

A few of the writers in *Volume II* kvetch an inordinate amount, and another few never leave off powdering their personas, though in cold print these evasive maneuvers turn out to be among the more self-revealing pieces in the book (e.g., the Robert Anton Wilson and Theodore Sturgeon interviews). Geographically, Florida would seem to produce sf writers of the highest in-person voltage: Andre Norton, prim amid the sea of her cats; Piers Anthony, speeding about his daily routines like the Road Runner of cartoon fame; Keith Laumer, who turns in a performance that Brando might envy for sheer stark-naked oomph; and Joe Haldeman, who’s led the kind of life that TV docudramas are made of (the inspirational kind). By contrast, most of the Californians seem to have blanded out—except for Jerry Pournelle, who comes off as a one-man band doing a benefit for assertiveness training.