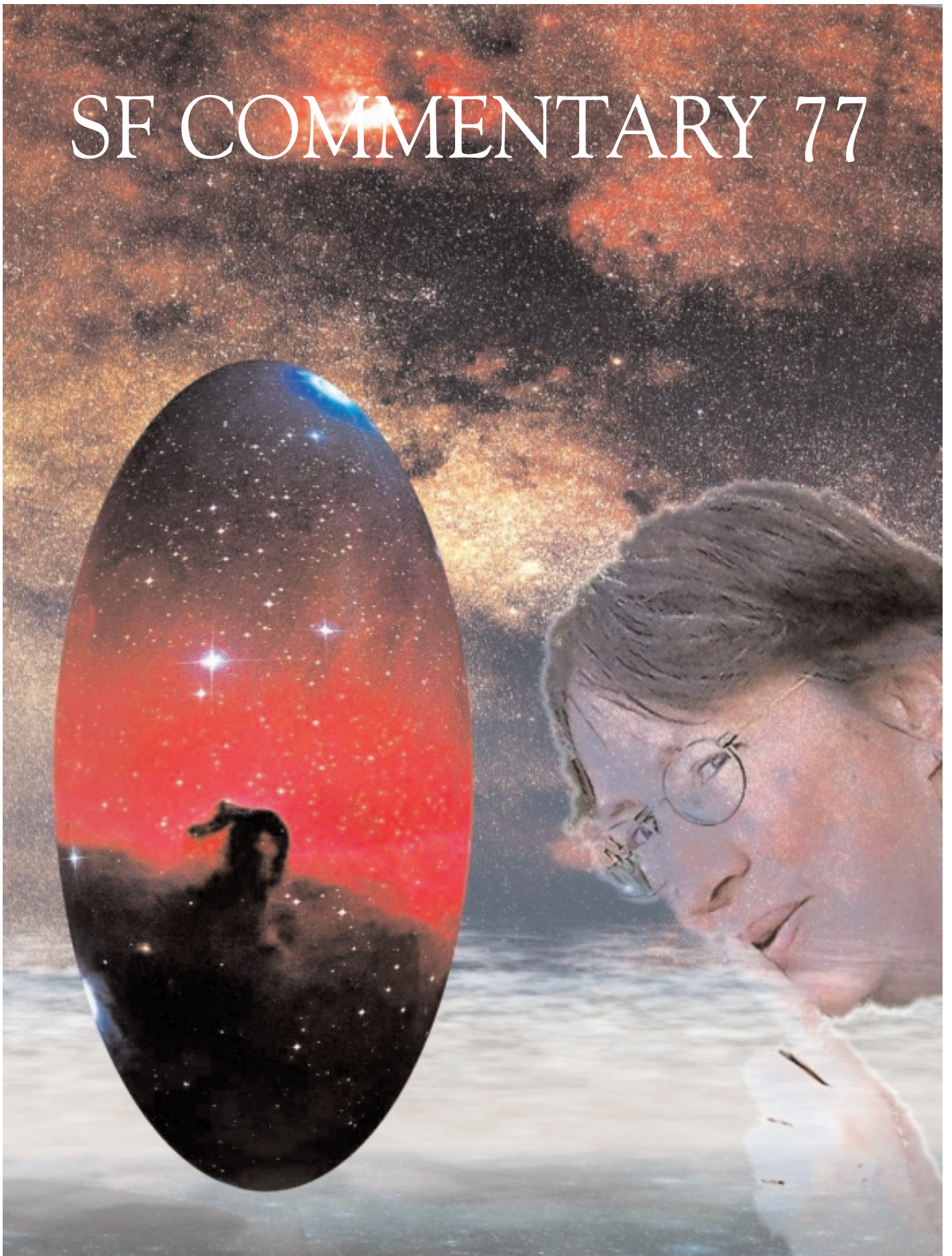


SF COMMENTARY 77



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November 2001

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COVERS

Notes by the cover artist, Ditmar (Dick Jenssen)

Front Cover: 'And on the Seventh Day She Rested'

God, as we all know, is omniscient, omnipotent, loving, caring, wise and — above all — powerful. God must therefore be a woman. The cover image depicts Her after the six-day labour of the Creation, admonishing Her works, in all their forms, to rest and reflection. The background is a Universe out of which our own has been generated as an ovoid bubble, soon to expand into that which we experience, and soon to loosen its already tenuous links to its genitor.

Technical notes:

The Universes were generated in Bryce 4, using astronomical images given away with *PC World*: the photo of Elaine Cochrane was then merged into the graphic using Adobe's PhotoShop.

Back cover: 'Polar Orbiter'

An image entirely generated within Bryce 4. The view is from a polar orbiting satellite of a ringed planet closer to the centre of the Milky Way. Complications arise since the moon has its own satellite — a much smaller fragment which broke away (but was then recaptured) after the collision which thrust the moon into its eccentric and rare orbit. Evidence of the generating cataclysm is to be found in the heavily cratered foreground.

Graphics

Elaine Cochrane, using DJ Fractals (pp. 28 and 65), Joe Szabo (p. 46).

Photographs

Elaine Cochrane (pp. 13 and 14), Cath Ortlieb (p. 19), Richard Hryckiewicz (p. 24), unknown (p. 52), Yvonne Rousseau (pp. 38 and 39), Gary Hoff (p. 39).

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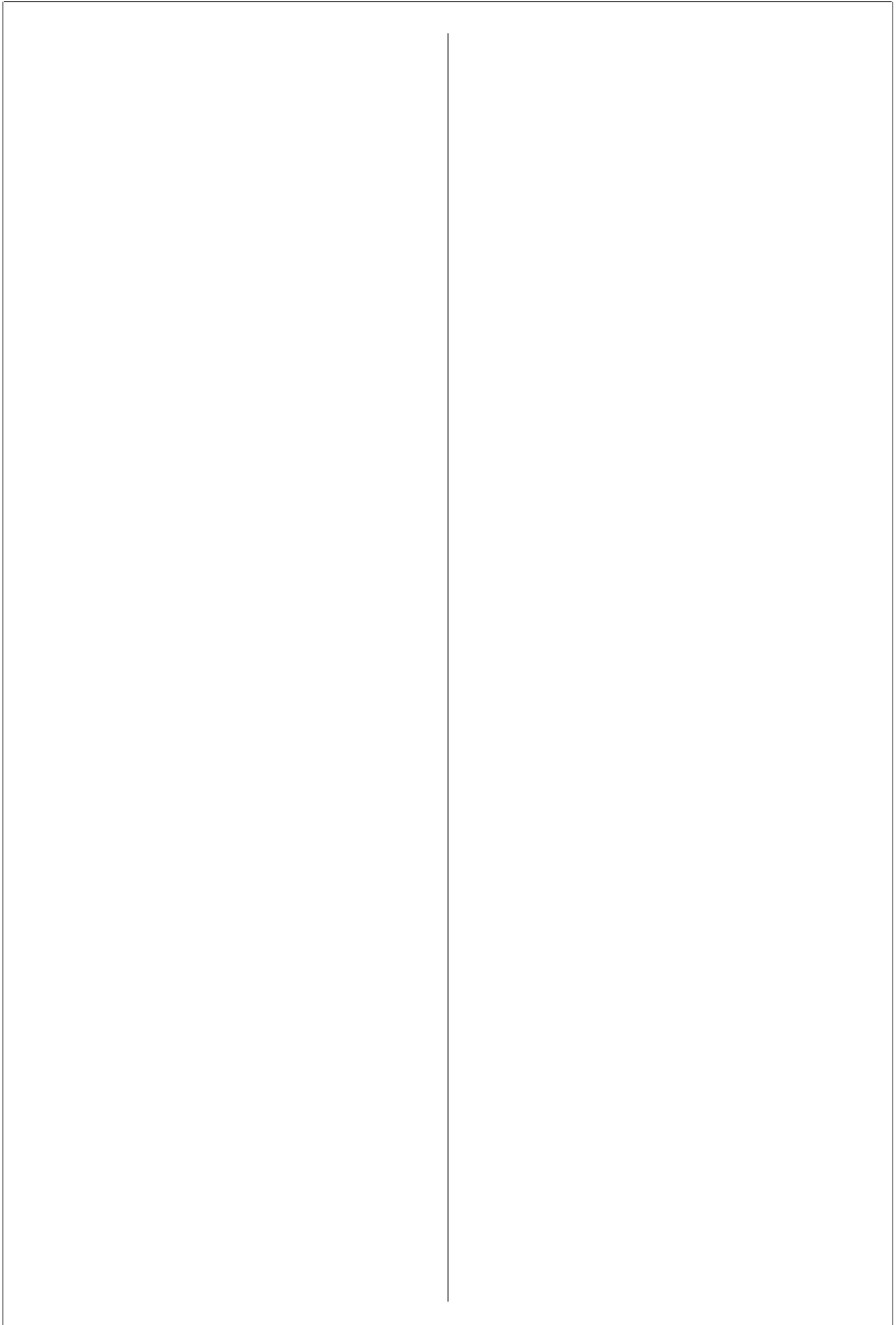
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Four reasons for reading Thomas M. Disch . . .

1. To learn why Minnesota needs pyramids

The American Midwest is dull. The landscape is under endless intensive cultivation, the way a clinically dead person can be under endless intensive care — never allowed to die, but not exactly full of life, either. L. Frank Baum described it in 1901 as:

nothing but the great gray prairie on every side. Not a tree nor a house broke the broad sweep of flat country that reached to the edge of the sky in all directions.

He immediately whisked Dorothy off to Oz and pleasanter adventures, and that pretty much sets the pattern. Midwestern writers had to get their characters out of the Midwest and off to Mars or Oz or somewhere. Anywhere would do:

the Middle West now seemed to me like the ragged edge of the universe — so I decided to go East and learn the bond business.

F. Scott Fitzgerald, of course. A Minnesota boy, like Thomas M. Disch, and like Sinclair Lewis. Lewis noticed more than the greyness; he set the prairie with ugly little towns and filled the towns with hicks. His Carol Kennicott would have no escape into Oz, no journey to the East. Yet she did escape for a moment (and with the aid of science fiction). Looking at the child that tied her down to *Main Street*, she said:

Think what that baby will see and meddle with before she dies in the year 2000! She may see an industrial union of the whole world, she may see aeroplanes going to Mars.

What so many writers have recognised, without always spelling it out, is that the Midwest is more alien, more hostile than Mars. Even the pastoral idylls of Ray Bradbury, at their best, show this uneasy recognition,¹ though he too balked at making it plain.

Thomas M. Disch made it plain in *The Genocides*. Here the Martian ‘aeroplanes’ are coming the other way, and humans are trapped in alien territory.

This is the bare plot: extraterrestrial aliens have taken over the earth, planting it with giant alien corn. Cornstalks 600 feet high are draining the lakes and wiping out all other plant life; pests such as man are taken care of by a systematic extermination.

The aliens never appear, though humans sometimes glimpse their gardening equipment (as when it is incinerating a city). Human survivors are driven from large cities to small, then to farms, then into the corn forests. Their morale descends to levels where murder and cannibalism are commonplace.

The dwindling bunch of survivors discover that the roots of the giant plants are hollow and lined with a sweet, edible substance like candy floss. They descend the roots, gnawing away like worms or mice. Eventually they must surface again. There are fewer of them, and they are defeated as a species.

What matters more than the plot, however, is who gets defeated, and how. Characterisation in any disaster story is

a problem: the temptation is often simply to let the disaster throw together a handful of stereotypes, then call them archetypes. Disch resists this temptation. His people are of course thrown together for survival, and they could be easily classified (city mouse and country mouse, intellectual and idiot, religious fanatic and moral monster). But few are simple enough to be types.

The two city mice, for example, Jackie and Orville, first appear fleeing a burning city and at the same time cracking jokes. Irony is all, as Jackie notices how the alien incendiary machines look like early Volkswagens.

‘Well, goodbye Western civilization,’ Jackie said, waving at the inferno, unafraid. For how can one be afraid of Volkswagens?

Bravado? *Mrs Miniver*? For Jackie (an actress) perhaps, but for her companion there is something deeper:

Like everyone else, Orville pretended to hate the invasion . . . but secretly he relished it, he gloried in it, he wanted nothing else. Before the invasion, Orville had been standing on the threshold of a gray, paunchy middle age, and suddenly a new life — life itself! — had been thrust upon him. . . . Would it not be true for the other survivors as well? Did they not all feel this clandestine gladness in their hearts, like adulterers together secretly in a strange town?

Throughout the book, Orville becomes deeper, more complex and more sympathetic. He begins as a technocrat, snobbish and selfish, becomes a leader in the fight for survival, and ends up discovering that he still belongs to the human species.

Anderson, the rural patriarch, could easily become a stock figure, with his humourless religion, his violent pride. Yet he is allowed to mourn his dead children and to love those still alive — even the monstrous Neil — and it is his shrewd intelligence that keeps the little band going until his death.

Neil is a type, a model comic villain. He will not become a solid person in *The Genocides* (but we’ll see more of him elsewhere). Neil is the man of pure impulse, untroubled by morality or even thought. His half-brother Buddy describes him as brutish, dumb, mean and dangerous, and so he proves: the group is as much endangered by his stupidity as by his malice. And yet:

Buddy envied Neil’s mulish capacity just to *do* things, to spin the wheel of his cage without wondering overmuch how it worked.

The ‘squirrel-cage’ problem, how to spend time without actually thinking, turns up often in Disch’s stories. Here the solution is easy, since Neil is really little more than a walking, talking reflex.

Alice Nemerov RN is a good angel, an unselfish middle-aged nurse who goes on helping the sick while perfectly conscious that her efforts are futile (the squirrel-cage again).

She tends a man dying of gangrene, she delivers a child for which there will be no milk. After watching over the dying, she dies needlessly herself.

Futile gestures abound, as do pointless deaths. A woman rushes into a burning building to rescue a Bible in which she no longer believes. Dozens of people fall victim to cannibalism, while an undiscovered food supply is close at hand. A pretty woman, fond of dancing, develops a terrible gluttony and dies a monster.

In the Underworld, the group encounters a colony of rats. Anderson, the leader, is unable to think of a solution, so Orville supplies it. Even at the moment he agrees to the plan, Anderson pointlessly kicks out at a rat, is bitten, and develops a fatal infection. Orville's plan accidentally kills someone else.

Of the thirty-one persons who go into the underground maze, only five come up again. The species is extinct.

To some, *The Genocides* seems bleak and over pessimistic. One Swedish critic² mentions 'self-contempt', and reads it as simply a war of the worlds in which our side loses. It seems rather an attempt to conquer bleakness and pessimism, the kind of real self-contempt that leads to real genocide.

It should be remembered that *The Genocides* was published in 1965, coincidentally the year napalm was first used in Vietnam. The news photos of real genocide had not yet begun to march nightly across American TV screens, but the principle was clear. The *Genocides* was oddly prophetic in many details: the overwhelming jungle; airborne machines that turn living children into living flames; the impersonal memos of the conquerors; even the body counts are there.

By another coincidence, 1965 marks the middle of a decade during which the Midwest began to die. The censuses of 1960 and 1970 (body counts again) show a massive emigration. At the same time the principal Midwestern crop, corn, was found to be killing the land — stripping the topsoil and preparing the way for a new dust-bowl.

Since Disch could not know of a future census, could not have seen pictures of burning children on TV, his insights must have come from what he knew: that genocide comes from bleakness of spirit, from spiritual poverty, that this spiritual poverty, wherever else it is found, is common in the Midwest, in that landscape of desperation. (A decade later he would write, for *Harper's*, 'Pyramids for Minnesota', an unserious proposal to give people something to do, something to believe in, and something to look at.)

What's wrong with the Midwest is not flatness or greyness but people. It was just as flat when it was a home for the Sioux, a pasture for their buffalo. It did not become boring until a peculiar breed of genocidal people took over. Their lives were flat and rectilinear, as the straight and narrow path to the Heaven they believed in. Accordingly they cut the Great Plains into squares, setting rectilinear boundaries for states, counties, farms and fields.

Even their corn ('maize', as Europeans still insist on calling it) is planted not just in rows, but in ranks and files, so that each stalk stands at the corner of a tiny square. Their recto-aesthetic sensibilities must have been gratified, too, by noticing that kernels of corn are rectangular, set on the cob in a satisfyingly military formation. *Squareness* and *corn* have become synonymous with Midwestern hickdom.

Corn grows to a human height, then puts out a tassel. The tassel is a sex organ and, from the plant's viewpoint, is the purpose of life. Ideally the tassel will dry and fling out pollen. The pollen will fly over the squares to some piece of cornsilk, the object of its desire. To prevent this, great numbers of

men, women and children go out into the fields each summer to castrate the corn. They emerge covered with sticky sap, sunburned and richer.

Thomas M. Disch naturally knew about detasselling, that great struggle of the human species against its own hybrid corn. The last human settlement in the novel is called Tassel. Sticky sap flows through the story in a living stream, carrying survivors along from one adventure to another (as the living Mississippi carried Huck Finn). The alien Plants are in many ways just a hundredfold magnification of corn. They are seen only from below, then from deep inside the roots (where the corn-borer worm lives).

When they emerge at the end, the crop has been harvested and a new crop sown. The five survivors are figures on a landscape.

But these figures were very, very small. The landscape dominated them entirely. It was green and level and it seemed of infinite extent. Vast though it was, Nature — or Art — had expended little imagination upon it. Even viewed closely, it presented a most monotonous aspect. In any square foot of ground, a hundred seedlings grew, none prepossessing.

2. To learn why your country needs you

I met someone who was a child in Nazi Germany. He doesn't remember much about how his mother was taken off to a death camp. What he remembers is the exhilarating music, the pageantry. For most children, that's the first introduction to military life, a parade. The spectacle of a mass of sane men dancing in unison down a street — the fancy dress and the thrilling music — boy! No doubt in Spartan days when the army marched past, parents held up their boys to see, explaining that they would have to eat up *all* their vegetables if they wanted to grow up to be big, strong hoplites.

Military life continues to fascinate grownups, and not just those grownup children who make it their lives, but nearly all grownups. If nothing else, there's fascination in wondering how men can give up their bodies and minds to such a tawdry institution. To want to be a killer may be natural (for some). But a killer robot? A killer robot with shiny shoes? That's — fascinating.

Thomas M. Disch had his life complicated by the problem early. He was sent to a military academy run by the Christian Brothers, an order possessing all the military fervour of the Jesuits, but none of the Jesuit respect for the intellect. As if in anticipation of the model soldiers it was expected to turn out, the place was called Cretin. Disch writes again and again of military life, its fascination, its mind-crushing grimness.

An early novel, *White Fang Goes Dingo*, approaches the problem obliquely ('by the oblique' as the marching order goes). An alien race has dominated mankind by means of something called the Leash, a method of total control over mind and body. Men are, in effect, pets of the Masters. As much as they are loved, trained and cared for, so long as they continue to accept the Leash.

As in *The Genocides*, the aliens are never seen, though their influence is everywhere. They can bring man not only all that he needs for physical survival, but aesthetic pleasures otherwise closed to him. For example, one pair of human pets are taken into space, where they dance a *pas de deux* free of gravity. This amounts to working through the old Jesuit paradox: only as God's slaves do we find true freedom. Here the argument is almost too convincing. For if you were

ensured a life free from drudgery, guaranteed a beautiful body and an informed mind, and given happiness without pursuing it, could you honestly turn it down?

Every Heaven has its discontents, of course, and here the rebels seem curiously militaristic. They are suspicious of beauty, they rely on simple slogans and icons, they are thorough Roundheads. It is hard to sympathise with them, since they offer nothing but freedom (i.e., self-mastery).

I include this novel among Disch's military souvenirs, for it does seem to set out the paradoxical argument: by pledging blind obedience, the soldier gets certain freedoms and privileges. He is guaranteed physical well-being and freedom from want. He gets comradeship, adventure, a taste for power. He gets to join the great *corps de ballet* in the next, highly choreographed, big show. He gets away with murder.

In *Echo Round His Bones*, the army is real enough, and so are the murders. Captain Nathan Hansard has frequent nightmares in which he sees civilians herded behind barbed wire, a child incinerated. He has in fact killed a five-year-old: 'I incinerated him in self-defense,' he says, in the greatest piece of self-justification before Nixon.

The murder has also killed Hansard's inner life and made him a misfit. This army is less suited to him than to our old friend Neil, who turns up here as the mindless, mean Sergeant Worsaw. Neil's only skill was hunting; Worsaw's first act is to shoot at a rabbit.

The army is using a 'manmitter' to send men to Mars in preparation for a war. Hansard is so transmitted and discovers a curious side-effect. As his real self is sent to Mars, a second, ghostly Hansard is created at the transmitter — an echo. Free of the army, and of the conventional world, his adventures begin.

The book is more wonderfully conceived than executed, for it becomes necessary to explain the nature of echo-existence in great detail (Milton has the same trouble with his angels — what do they eat, etc?). In brief, the real world is visible but insubstantial to the echo-person, who is wholly undetectable to real people. Thus Hansard₁ (in the real world) could be seen, and could even write messages for Hansard₂ (the echo). The echo can read the messages but not pick up the paper it is written on. Food, air, etc. have to be echoed to keep him alive, which means that someone in the real world has to take his existence on faith and send supplies. There are also echoes of echoes — a Hansard₃ and so on.

Hansard's ghosts meet the ghosts of Professor Panofsky, the kindly crippled inventor of the machine, and the Panofsky's ghostly wives. Or are they really married? Can ghosts be held to marriage vows? They have a lot of Thorne-Smithian fun with the idea.

Panofsky explains all, giving fine Jesuit arguments to prove that echoes are free, not only of the world, but of sin. Redeemed, the echo Hansard lives happily ever after.

Echo Round His Bones works well enough as a wonder-tale; any deeper intentions in the book must be taken on faith. It does seem to bring in once more the notion of physical constraint (and how to get rid of it): freedom from the body is freedom from sin; Panofsky (wholly cerebral and living in a wheelchair) is a balletomane; his real Hansard has to die before the happy ending.

On reflection, both *White Fang Goes Dingo* and *Echo Round His Bones* seem to carry on from *The Genocides*. It too begins in physical constraint, in the harsh discipline of a Puritan settlement among the alien corn. As in real life, unthinking obedience to discipline may be necessary for survival, but only physical survival. Obedience can only carry a person so

far. The point comes (entry underground, loss of the Leash, echo-life) where he is on his own. He must then find enough anarchy in his soul to begin real life. In a way, these three novels are all about growing up.

In that way, the military is all about remaining a child. Both Neil and Worsaw are hopeless egomaniacs, both have underdeveloped consciences, both are thoughtless and violent. Both are model soldiers.

Disch went on to find out whether model soldiers could be human beings, in two short stories, '1-A' and 'The Death of Socrates'.

'1-A' takes up the case of the simple inductee who wonders, in a vague way, what army life will be like. He is gradually enlightened (in a vague way) by the anecdotes of others, but a sadistic drill sergeant and by a Field Manual:

From the earliest times, it has been considered a privilege to be permitted to bear arms in the defense of one's nation or people.

Army life turns out to be simpler than he could have dreamed, for it is death. The inductees are bullied and marched and drilled for a few days, then mown down on the parade ground.

The second story (which forms a part of the novel 334) digs deeper. The conscript is Birdie Ludd, who begins as a college student in twenty-first-century New York, with love problems. No one can marry (i.e., have children) by law unless they have enough points awarded by the government. The system is complex, apparently in a tremendous bureaucratic effort to make it absolutely fair: points are awarded for grades, for IQ and creativity tests, for individual creative effort, for a family history of good health and character. They are also awarded for attending college (so he attends) and, as a last resort, for enlisting in the Armed Forces as a 'gorilla'.

The story takes Birdie in detail through disaster after disaster. He is pathetically stupid, bored with classes, a born loser who cannot be reconciled to his loss.

He sat down to study the History of Art. He stared at the picture of Socrates in the bad light. With one hand he was holding up a big cup; with the other he was giving somebody the finger. He didn't seem to be dying at all. The midterm was going to be tomorrow afternoon at two o'clock. He really had to study. He stared at the picture more intently. Why did people paint pictures anyhow? He stared until his eyes hurt.

My eyes too, watching Birdie Ludd slide downhill, all the way. He enlists finally in the US gorillas, end of story.

Not the end of Birdie Ludd, however. Though he does not appear elsewhere in 334, this persistent character lives on, outside the novel. I believe he is the kind of character critics call 'authentic', the kind readers remember long after they have forgotten where they read his story.

3. To learn why the squirrel needs to keep running

Thomas Mann and Thomas M. Disch both worked in insurance companies. I don't emphasise this, but there it is, if anyone wants to base a PhD thesis on it ('Writers Who Think About Death a Lot', or maybe just 'Under Writers'). Probably most writers think about death fairly often. After all, the spontaneous overflow of emotion recollected in tranquillity usually involves quite a lot of sitting still (bad for

the heart, as any actuary can tell you). Besides, writers are in solitary confinement. If prisoners and monks think about death a lot, why not the lifers of the typewriter?

Sooner or later, most writers get to thinking about what they're doing. They write about writers sitting alone writing. Poets in particular succumb to the iterative beauty of the iterative beauty. Novelists try a variety of strategies: finding MSS, making journals or only imaging imprisoned writers (e.g., Samuel Beckett's *Molloy*) who wonder what they are doing (besides starring in a novel).

Thomas M. Disch has worked on this a few times. His early story 'Descending' sets a character on a succession of down escalators, apparently endless, treadmills with a dark purpose of their own. Much later, in 'The Joycelin Shrager Story', a person is finally 'captured' on movie film, so that his privacy is public, his essence is ephemeral, his soul is a flickering shadow. While neither story is explicitly about writers, both are hoist-by-his-own-petard systems: a man who steals from department stores is trapped in one. A film critic gets his life criticised by a film.

Between the two stories, Disch wrote 'An All-Day Poem' (its first criterion being that he actually stayed at the typewriter all day, working on it) and 'The Squirrel Cage'. The latter is about a character named Disch who sits typing at a keyboard. He is unable to read the words, or even to be sure that they are registered by the machine. He considers a story about a man in a zoo, with several possible endings. He considers a pogonophore, a curiously futile-sounding creature. He considers futility.

At one point he holds an imaginary conversation with whoever it is that holds him prisoner ('Horrorshow monster, Bug-Eyes, Mad Scientist, Army Major, who prepares the wedding bed of my death and tempts me to it'). For the writer, the usual captor is of course the body, for though the mind may imagine itself racing away to freedom, isn't it possible that it's only spinning the cage?

Camp Concentration takes up the problem of the imprisoned writer in earnest. It is a solitary story, a prisoner's journal spun out partly for himself, partly for his audience of jailers (they include a horrorshow psychologist, a mad scientist and an army general, by the way).

It is also a Faust story, frankly modelled on Thomas Mann's *Dr Faustus*. In both novels, what is contracted is not merely a bargain, but a case of syphilis, an arrangement that brings genius, madness and death. Both novels ask: by what magic equation, by what alchemy, can we separate creative genius from corruption?

Louis Sacchetti is a thirty-five-year-old poet, jailed for conscientious objection. He is prepared to spin the cage for some years to come. Then suddenly he is moved to Camp Archimedes, a peculiar underground establishment where the prisoners, geniuses all, are provided with every amenity (books, music, paintings, *haute cuisine*) and expected to do nothing but pursue their various muses. Gradually he learns that other prisoners have been injected with Palladine, a drug derived from syph. It elevates their genius to new levels, but brings rapid physical decay and death within months. It is understood that he too will eventually be offered the Faustian choice: god-like knowledge for death.

One of the jailers is General Haast, a mindless, happy-go-lucky man (like Neil grown older, but still a healthy animal). Haast happens to believe in alchemy, so has allowed one of the other prisoners, Mordecai Washington, to attempt a Magnum Opus: an elixir of life!

Mordecai is, I believe, Birdie Ludd. He had dropped out of high school and into the marine corps, assaulted an

officer and gone to the brig. Now, at Camp Archimedes, he once more meets Sacchetti, the bright classmate he'd envied in high school:

And when you wanted to, you could really put *down* people like Squinlin [a teacher]. Me, I just had to sit there and take their shit. I knew it was shit, but what could I do? They had me coming and going.

Birdie Ludd hears a lecture as:

'Gibble-gabble Rauschenberg and blah, blah, the hell that Dante describes as timeless. It is the hell that each of us holds inside his secret soul.'

Shit, Birdie thought to himself with great precision.

It was all a pile of shit. He wrote *Shit* in his notebook, then made the letters look three dimensional and shaded their sides carefully.

This time the loser has been given another chance. Mordecai is now on a par with Sacchetti (indeed, far ahead of him) thanks to Palladine.

The alchemical experiment is readied, while Mordecai grows worse. He enters the tertiary stage of the disease (when brain functions start to go). At one point he demonstrates a childhood skill, tap dancing. The dance (to 'I'll Build a Stairway to Paradise') turns into an epileptiform seizure.

The Magnum Opus, it is thought, could save him yet, and at the same time give General Haast the eternal youth and life he has always pursued. It consists of a series of bewildering rites, some alchemical, some possibly scientific. The two men drink something, and both are placed under hairdryers hooked to electronic stuff. Mordecai dies of heart failure (Palladine has weakened that, too). Haast lives, but is unchanged.

That night in a terrible dream, Sacchetti realises what he has known all along: that he too has already been infected with the Faustian virus. Book One ends.

Book Two is more than ever solitary, chronicling his mental ascent and physical collapse. His preoccupations of old (Aquinas, Rilke) now possess him, his prose is a palimpsest, almost beyond decipherment in places, painfully lucid in others.

Meanwhile the virus has broken out of Camp Archimedes to infect the population at large; it moves the world. Sacchetti sees all his fellow prisoners die, he sickens, he goes blind. When, with a group of fellow prisoners, he meets to discuss curing the world, the meeting is seen as a mutiny and the Mad Scientist prepares to execute him. Inexplicably, Haast saves his life.

Haast then explains the inexplicable: he is Mordecai, really, in Haast's skin. The alchemical experiment was a blind for a real test of 'mind reciprocation', in which Mordecai and Haast changed minds (or bodies). Haast, finding himself in a dying body, had been shocked; his shock had killed the body.

In a repeat of the Magnum Opus, Sacchetti is likewise saved. The group (of healthy guards' bodies containing the minds of genius prisoners) now set out to try saving the world.

The epigraph, from *Pilgrim's Progress*, would suggest reading *Camp Concentration* as a spiritual exercise on the same lines: reward after trial, immortality after death. No Cross No Crown, etc. That reading would be a mistake. The importance of Bunyan's allegory here is that it is a dream. The narrator is not only the prisoner Bunyan, but the mind of

Bunyan, his unimprisoned part. The distinction is not as trivial as it may sound, since freedom of thought was what got Bunyan (and Sacchetti) into prison bodily; the body-mind problem is no idle preoccupation for the prisoner of conscience.

Bunyan's mind makes a progress. Does Sacchetti's only make its cage revolve faster? Throughout the book, he seems almost the antithesis of the vigorous Pilgrim, for (having chosen prison) Sacchetti has given up making choices.

He does not choose to be taken from prison to Camp Archimedes in the first instance — though he acquiesces, by keeping his journal. He does not choose the evil sacrament of Palladine — though he comes to accept its gift of intellect. He finally does not choose to be rescued from his decaying body and installed in the healthy body of a guard — though

I am overcome by happiness as by some gigantic benevolent steamroller, crushed by Goodness.

Whence this spiritual inertia? Is it simply that Palladine has reduced him to a zero, a self-devouring mind inside a self-digesting body? I suspect that Puritans might read this rather as a cautionary tale: one cannot get a super-intellect without paying for it with one's freedom, one's identity.

In any case, Sacchetti is a zero. Though he speaks convincingly of his personal triumph and despair, discoveries and losses, the collapse of his body and the ascent of his mind — though his voice remains real throughout the Palladine changes and his body-change — he just isn't there. In the closing pages, he discovers his own absence:

Valery is right! Finally the mind *is* destitute and bare. Finally it is reduced to the supreme poverty of being a force without an object.

I exist without instincts, almost without images; and I no longer have an aim. I resemble nothing . . .

This kind of freedom sounds more than ever like prison. So it is. Karl Popper's 'paradox of freedom' seems appropriate here:

In any democracy, Popper explained, men must be free to choose a tyrant. There is always a risk that they will actually do so, giving up their freedom. But to abolish that risk is to impose a tyranny. The risk must remain.

The life lived wholly in the body is a kind of tyranny. It is a life of numbness, routine, mindless instinctive behaviour. It leaves neither time nor scope for thought. The alternative is freedom of thought. But there is always a risk that the free mind will choose to become (say) a Thomist, endlessly engaged in pointless disputation, endlessly revolving the same meaningless propositions. This too is a tyranny of routine. Indeed, the free-wheeling mind is never far from the squirrel-cage.

The paradox is apparent in writers. They pursue a sedentary, body-destroying occupation in order to gamble on immortality. They avoid human company and sit alone in order to gamble on communicating something. Only in solitary confinement can they manage to dream of freedom.

Disch writes frequently of prison, but his prisons are seldom static. Surrealist examples include 'Descending' (endless down escalators) and 'Let Us Hasten Quickly to the Gate of Ivory' (lost in an infinite cemetery), in *The Genocides* human mice are trapped in an endless cycle of the seasons. In 'The Asian Shore' a man is trapped into a life, but even as it closes about him he makes frantic ferry trips to and fro across the Bosphorus. In 'The City of Penetrating Light'

someone (a little like Birdie Ludd) is trapped in the pursuit of happiness, or rather, fun. The title refers to a dance hall, the pivot of his ever-turning 'well-rounded life'.

How to distinguish such lives from death is one more reason.

4. To learn why New Yorkers and others need to dress up nice

Death as a way of life has probably kept more writers writing than any other subject. There is probably an infinite number of ways of showing the skull behind the face, and an infinite number of reasons for doing so. An early story of Thomas M. Disch's, 'Now Is Forever', introduces the Reprostate, a machine that can be programmed to copy anything (given the materials). People use it to remain immortal; they set the controls to reproduce themselves, then use their own bodies for material. The copy produced is always the set age. Immortality through daily suicide? A squirrel-cage life.

The characters of Disch die often enough, and as often change their skins: their bodies, their personalities or their uniforms. That alchemy is required in *Camp Concentration* calls to mind that ancient vicious-circle symbol of alchemy, the snake biting its own tail. Could be that it's only trying to shed its skin.

People shed their bodies in the above-mentioned stories, go naked into the Underworld in *The Genocides*, and divest themselves of physical form altogether in stories like 'The Colors'. On *Wings of Song* the soul might escape the body, only to be trapped in a different squirrel-cage. The vicious circle of 'The Colors' is whiteness:

A rainbow, revolving, would be white: white, the harmony of all colors, their resolving chord, unprism'd light.

Skin-changing of one kind or another is a strong recurring image in many of his stories. At the simplest level it is *mutilation*: tattoos in 'Displaying the Flag' and *On Wings of Song*; dismemberment in 334 ('Bodies') and *The Genocides*; surgery in 'Concepts'.

Elsewhere it occurs as a *change of social status* (i.e., uniform): '1-A' and 'The Death of Socrates' (army induction); 'Thesis on Social Forms and Social Control in the USA' (temporary slavery); a new job in 'Death and the Single Girl'; in 'Casablanca' the reduction of a prosperous tourist to a hunted refugee; or the delightful problems of 'The Man Who Had No Idea' in a world where one needs a licence to talk. In 'The Asian Shore' a man finds himself not merely going native but assuming the identity of a specific stranger.

Again it occurs as *escape from the body*: in *Camp Concentration*, *Echo Round His Bones*, and *On Wings of Song* the escape is absolute; in 'Concepts' it is via the kind of total-perception transmitter that works two ways between planets; in 'Everyday Life in the Later Roman Empire' the escape is from New York monotony into a satisfying dream (via drugs) in which the barbarians will never quite conquer Rome.

334, of which the last-named story forms a part, gets under the skin of a dying city. The title is the address of a giant government dwelling unit (3000 occupants) with which each of the novel's characters is somehow connected. Birdie ('The Death of Socrates') loves Milly, a girl on the eighteenth floor. Alexa (the Roman matron) works at an office responsible for the building. Milly's father Ab ('Bodies') works in a hospital morgue and sells corpses to those who like a certain kind of fun. Milly marries Boz Hanson (same floor) who, through a miracle of modern

surgery, is able to suckle their child himself (in 'Emancipation'). His niece and Alexa's son both attend the Lowen School (a kind of dancing academy for bright kids unable to find any other toehold on the city). They form a street gang in 'Angouleme'.

Since *334* is New York extrapolated, it is natural to look for some 'gimmick', some line of extrapolation that defines the book (as others have been defined by Overpopulation, Police State, Urban Decay, etc.). There is no such gimmick. Indeed, at first New York seems almost unchanged. Extrapolation has been invisibly woven into the stories so that it all seems slightly odd but familiar. The population is still largely black, largely poor. Lifts still don't work, people are still born, live unhappily and die. And yet . . . hasn't something changed?

This is the way real cities are seen. Buildings and people may come and go, but the city's face remains unchanged. Only gradually do we notice the absence of certain familiar landmarks. I was well into this book before I noticed that its New York has almost no violent crime.

The reason (the gimmick, if there were one) is a welfare bureaucracy which has plodded its way through to a few solutions:

Housing is strictly rationed. The drinking water contains a contraceptive, so that couples planning a child must both take an antidote pill provided by the state. Welfare can be lived on.

Sexual freedom is wider, enhanced by school demonstration lessons and by the media (e.g., a TV channel devoted to 'art movies'). A menu of new, safe drugs has been developed, and is widely used in place of heroin, coffee and tranquillisers.

Nevertheless, New York is still dirty, crowded and enigmatic. It still seems like a super-intelligence test on which all mere humans necessarily score zero. As always, the city seems to stand outside time: faces and problems change, but there is always a surplus of both.

Even telling the story of such a New York can't be easy. A diagram in *334* shows the title story crawling through different lives, different times and different narrative styles. It might be a maze of worm-tunnels in the Big Apple.

But the worms have style. Style, that seems especially right in New York (any New York). Its citizens seem to put on faces and clothes, seem to speak and act and possibly think, always with the awareness of being on stage. They know they are seen, and that's important. In fact, it's hard to think of a New York without style: Damon Runyon people or Kojak in a hat, Nick and Nora Charles or just someone observed by a New York poet, say, Frank O'Hara:

. . . First down the sidewalk
where laborers feed their dirty
glistening torsos sandwiches
and Coca-Cola, with yellow helmets
on. They protect them from falling
Bricks, I guess.

Disch, too, understands that New York is New Yorkers. Their lives are 'life styles'; they are ready for the question: Who do you think you are?

Birdie Ludd dresses up, all in white, for his important two o'clock exam. He sings:

Slam, bang!
Why am I so happy?
God Damn,

I really don't know.

But it's a summery March day, so he dawdles in Battery Park. After noticing an old panhandler who looks just like Socrates,

He glanced at his wrist but he'd left his watch in the locker as it didn't fit in with today's all white color scheme. He spun round. The gigantic advertising clock on the face of the First National Citibank said 2:15. That wasn't possible.

Earlier, he daydreams of Milly:

The first time he'd come to Milly's apartment he'd walked up these stairs behind her, watching her tight little ass shift to the right, to the left, to the right, and the tinsel fringes on her street shorts sparkling like a liquor store display. All the way to the top she hadn't looked back once.

In the next story ('Bodies') Milly's father Ab walks down the street one April day, feeling good:

Ab felt like an old movie, full of songs and violence and fast editing. Boff, smack, pow, that's how Ab was feeling now, and as the opposite sex approached him from the other direction, he could feel their eyes on him, measuring, estimating, admiring, imagining.

One, very young, very black, in silvery street shorts . . .

In a later story ('Angouleme') a member of the Lowen School street gang has come to Battery Park to murder an old panhandler, one July moon:

He looked at his wrist, then remembered he'd left his watch at home. The gigantic advertising clock on the façade of the First National Citibank said it was fifteen after two. That wasn't possible.

So it isn't. The clock face says nothing; it is as unreliable as the faces of New Yorkers, and as timeless. Even the planned murder (by a boy steeped in the theatre) is too stagey to believe.

Even more theatrical (than Birdie's all-white colour scheme, than old movies, than scenes set by the Roman matron or the Raskolnikov of the Lowen School) is the story of Lottie, Shrimp and their mother, Mrs Nora Hanson. This is the title story of *334*, cutting back and forth in time, point of view and narrative style. It resembles a film in that the story goes forward even during retrograde cuts and Tristram-Shandy squiggles of digression. Each of the many characters goes through turns of crushing disappointment (and even total destruction of the façade) alternating with hopes and plans (the new structure begun).

Lottie finds her ten-year-old son playing with makeup; she is not horrified (this is AD 2026) and indeed helps him create a new face. But the mask she has drawn is her own face:

this was the whole portion Mickey stood to inherit, nothing but these marks of pain, and terror, and certain defeat.

Mickey is later incarcerated in a medical institution, where he decides what he really wants to be, a ballplayer.

'Okay, Mickey, it's your life.'

'God damn right.' These words, and the tears on which they verged, were like a load of cement dumped into the raw foundation of his new life. By tomorrow morning all the wet slop of feeling would be solid as a rock and in a year a skyscraper would stand where now there was nothing but a gaping hole.

Mrs Hanson builds her façade of furniture. The familiar things of her apartment are 'her secret weapon' against eviction (there being too much stuff to clear out) and against the hostile city in general. There is for example her sofa with the missing leg. In another story she and son Boz sit on it watching the 5:15 puppets on TV. In this story she watches them with Mickey, her five-year-old grandson (both enjoying the 'Slam! Bang!' catastrophes), then sits alone doing the same.

Then a young man shows up to read aloud to her from a popular novel. He is a PhD candidate studying 'The Problems of Ageing'; Mrs Hanson (aged fifty-seven) is a case study. The novel he reads is popular because it is pornographic.

What was embarrassing was that the whole scene took place on a sofa that was wobbling because one leg was missing. The sofa that she and Len were sitting on also had a missing leg and wobbled, and it seemed to Mrs Hanson that some sort of comparison couldn't be avoided.

She falls in love with him and dyes her hair bright carrot orange. That enterprise is doomed, of course, and so is her avoidance of eviction. Her furniture ends up in the street, and she sets fire to it. Lottie returning (she thinks) home, finds

Her mother running off through the flames like some opera star going out for a curtain call.

Lottie can only follow such an act by burning the contents of her own suitcase, the clothes on her back, then herself. She is saved for the mental hospital, where she says

'The end of the world. Let me tell you about the end of the world. It happened fifty years ago. Maybe a hundred. And since then it's been lovely. Nobody tries to bother you. You can relax. . . .'

The life style best suited to New York, then, is death. Its citizens may try out changing roles, new makeup, tattoos, vain efforts to somehow get noticed before they die, but finally they will die as they lived, unnoticed. They are to the city no more obvious than the single bricks in a great façade.

Works discussed in this essay

The Genocides

White Fang Goes Dingo

Echo Round His Bones

Camp Concentration

334, a novel made up of stories:

'The Death of Socrates'

'Bodies'

'Everyday Life in the Later Roman Empire'

'Emancipation'

'Angouleme'

'334'

Stories from *Under Compulsion (Fun With Your New Head in USA)*:

'Descending'

'Now Is Forever'

'The Squirrel Cage'

'1-A'

'Thesis on Social Forms and Social Controls in the USA'

'Casablanca'

Stories from *Getting Into Death*:

'The Asian Shore'

'The Colors'

'Death and the Single Girl'

'Displaying the Flag'

'The Joycelin Shrager Story'

'Let Us Hasten Quickly to the Gate of Ivory'

Other stories:

'The Man Who Had No Idea'

'Concepts'

On Wings of Song

Notes

- 1 Ray Bradbury's Midwest turns up on Mars in 'The Third Expedition' of *The Martian Chronicles*. The explorers find a complete replica of the wonderful home towns they knew, full of the sweet old grandparents and parents, the old-fashioned bric-à-brac of childhoods. It all turns out to be a hypnotic dream created by aliens with sinister motives.
- 2 Sam Lundwall, in *Science Fiction: What It's All About*, New York: Ace, 1971.
- 3 Dr Michael J. Tolley in a letter has pointed out to me that the ending of *Camp Concentration* may be more 'open' (and less gloomy) than the 'Valery' quotation suggests. 'That statement of Valery traditionally cuts both ways in s.f. treatments of the superhuman: the superman dies as a man but is born as a genius. Cut off from his roots, he may be aimless and despair; but this is not yet (if ever) the condition of Mordecai and Sacchetti, who have companions, mission, a set purpose and a job to offset the despair. The Valery mood is surely only temporary,' he writes, citing two other, more buoyant passages also in the closing pages of the book.

It might also be argued that the buoyancy is only temporary, at least in Sacchetti's case. The final three sections, numbered 98, 99 and 100, swing from optimism to despair to optimism. But of such manic-depressive cycles, as of any vicious circle, there is no clear starting point, no clear end.

Sacchetti himself seems to give up trying to analyse his own condition and, in section 100, quotes Mordecai: 'Much that is terrible we do not know. Much that is beautiful we shall still discover. Let's sail till we come to the edge.'

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