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Johnson

Watson

Rosenbaum

Taneja

Mina

Piñero González

Martín Rodríguez

Gerencsér



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Ádám Gerencsér



CREW

Co-editors:

Ádám Gerencsér

Mariano Martín Rodríguez

Communications:

Gina Adela Ding

Webmaster:

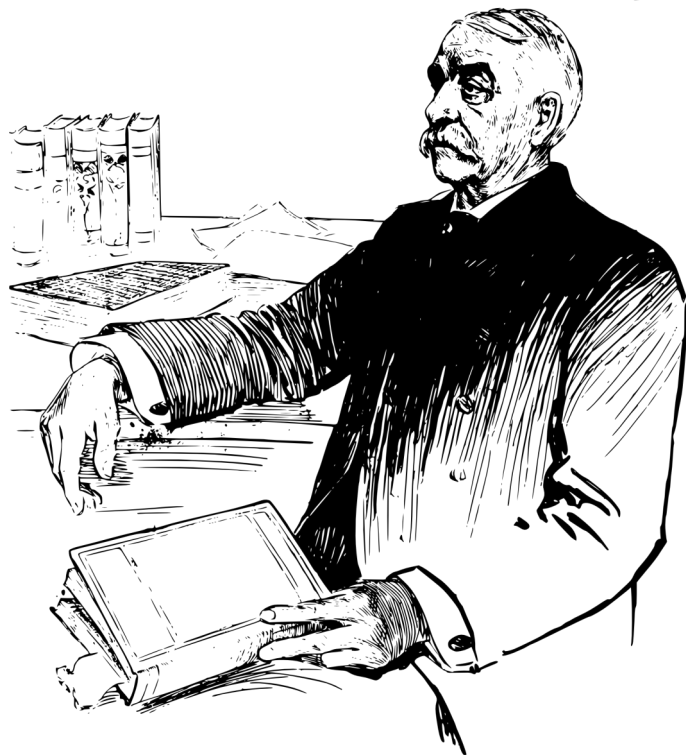
Ismael Osorio Martín

Contact:

team@sciphijournal.org

Editorial

Ádám Gerencsér



Online publishing is a fractured landscape. There is a large volume of content vying for the attention of a relatively narrow readership. So why another journal?

In his post 'So Long, and Thanks for the Philosophy', the previous editor, Ray Blank, who had steered the Sci Phi Journal through the turbulent year of 2017, announced that it would be discontinued.

It so happened that I stumbled upon SPJ the very day Ray published that post. Looking for a venue that carried 'my kind' of SF, I realised that, while there are many sites, they all feature similar content. If you compare the submission guidelines of most SF mags, you'll see a tendency to gravitate towards popular criteria that resemble contemporary literature at large. I was particularly aggrieved by the ubiquitous demand for the C-word: stories must be 'character-driven'.

Don't get me wrong. I believe that tales concerned primarily with the goings-on of imaginary people have their place and are likely what the majority of readers have come to expect, particularly now that narrative tastes are shaped by television and online media. But writing, especially short fiction, can do so much more.

Thus sprung the wish to resurrect SPJ in order to provide a home for philosophical, conceptual and idea-driven speculation. I'm most fortunate that on this quest I can count on formidable allies such as Mariano Rodríguez Martín, editor of the speculative fiction journal *Hélice* and prolific scholar of the genre's history, along a small but plucky band of enthusiastic (foolhardy?) volunteers.

Over the coming months, we intend to add additional sections to the journal, reminiscent of 'pinned posts'

or wiki articles, on topics that broadly correlate with serious philosophical speculation. For instance, we plan to build a comprehensive bibliography of 'artefacts' (the above-mentioned fictional non-fiction) and will invite readers to flag up any titles we might have missed.

We have few illusions, for we are pragmatic idealists. This site exists as a labour of love and generates no form of income. But if we can gradually gather a core of readers and writers who are 'into' this niche and wish to engage in an exchange of ideas and inspiration through stories, articles and frank discussion in the comment sections, it will have already been worth it. For in the cacophony of the world, we will have found each other.

Yours truly,
the co-editor

P.S.: Our heartfelt thanks go out to the crew who made this first edition possible (you may read more about them in the About section of the website) and the authors of fiction and articles who had so generously contributed original work to support the journal's revival. You are awesome!

~

What Sci Phi Is All About:

Treating Science Fiction as Philosophy

David Kyle Johnson

Readers of the Sci Phi Journal already know that there is a deep connection between philosophy and science fiction. But what exactly does that connection entail, and why are philosophy and science fiction so well suited for one another? In short, what exactly is Sci Phi all about?

How Philosophers Use Science Fiction

Well, for one, science is directly related to philosophy. Indeed, it was birthed from it. Philosophy just means “love of wisdom,” and as the study of all things, originally philosophy was the only thing that one could study. Science came to be because certain philosophers developed methods of thinking and investigation that could guard against the biases of our senses and natural reasoning to discover the way the world actually is. It began with Aristotle, of course, but the revolution happened thanks to philosophers like Francis Bacon, David Hume, John Stuart Mill, William Whewell, and C.S. Peirce. Indeed, the first scientists were called “natural philosophers.” Their methods were simply so successful that the employment of those methods eventually became its own discipline (“science”) and those that employed them went by a new name (“scientists”).

This is true of pretty much every discipline that exists today. Medicine, mathematics, economics, political science, education—everything is an offshoot of philosophy. When people study the founding and

influential thinkers in their fields, they are studying the work of philosophers—like Hypocrites, Descartes, Adam Smith, Plato, Dewey—who discovered methods and answers so groundbreaking and important that they spawned their own discipline. This is why philosophy has the (inaccurate) reputation of being a discipline about unanswerable questions. In reality, philosophers find answers to questions all the time! It’s just that when they do, the answers are so groundbreaking that they spawn new disciplines that get new names—and the people still dealing with the questions that have yet to be answered are still called philosophers.

But to answer them, philosophers often turn to thought experiments—made up scenarios that reveal our beliefs and intuitions that can also be used to make arguments. I can reveal your intuitions about, for example, whether overall happiness is the only good by imagining a situation where an entire society is made blissful by continually torturing one small child. If you don’t think such a thing is morally justified, the thought experiment should convince you that “the most happiness for the most people” is not the only metric by which to gauge the morality of actions.

And that's where science fiction comes in, and why it's so useful to philosophers. Indeed, Ursula K. Le Guin's "Those Who Walk Away From Omelas" describes just such a society and is used by philosophers to show that our moral intuitions often don't align with the moral theory of utilitarianism. Because science fiction can be set in a future time, distant planet, or alternate world, and can involve advanced technologies and alien beings, science fiction is an ideal place for philosophers to go to find the thought experiments they need.

Sometimes philosophers are inspired by science fiction to make up their own. Modern philosopher Robert Nozick imagined a sci fi like virtual reality generator he called an "experience machine" to argue against a philosophical view called hedonism. (Since most people wouldn't trade a virtual world of happiness and satisfaction for real life, happiness and satisfaction must not be the only thing that is valuable.) Derick Parfit used thought experiments with Star Trek like transporters to make an argument about what philosophers call "personal identity." (Is a "reassembled Spock" still Spock? Are your you-now and your eight-year-old self the same object?)

Sometimes philosophers inspire science fiction stories. Plato's Cave Allegory which he used (among other things) to argue against willing ignorance later inspired *The Matrix*. Rene Descartes thought experiment about not being able to tell dreams from reality inspired *Inception*. (The list goes on and on.)

And sometimes, philosophers simply use existing science fiction to explain philosophy. Indeed, there are two "Philosophy and Popular Culture" books series—one by Wiley-Blackwell and the other by Open Court, but both started by my colleague William Irwin—that do exactly that with popular culture in general. Not surprisingly, some of the best books in both series are on science fiction. They use it as a thought experiment to explain and make philosophical arguments. And this has been going on for almost 20 years.

Science Fiction Before Science Fiction

But something that often goes unappreciated is something that's been happening for longer—about 2000 years longer. Science fiction authors have been doing philosophy. Since before science or science fiction was even labeled or identified as a field or genre, authors have been writing stories that today we would call science fiction to make philosophical points and arguments.

Don't believe me?

In the 2nd century, Syrian philosopher Lucian of Samosata wrote a story about a ship that sailed beyond the Pillars of Hercules and was whisked away by a whirlwind to the moon called "A True History." The crew finds it inhabited by cloud centaurs, giant birds, and an all-male society embroiled in a war with the inhabitants of the sun over the colonization of The Morning Star. The work was intended as a criticism of the sophists and the religious myths of the time, and even as a satire of some philosophers. The name itself mirrors Socrates' profession of ignorance. In the *Apology*, Socrates argues that no one really has knowledge; only those who (like him) admit their ignorance are truly wise. In the same way, most histories of Lucian's time were complete myth. Only those that openly admitted to being false (which Lucian does in his introduction) were really "true."

In the 1200's, Islamic philosopher Ibn al-Nafis told a story about a spontaneously created man (named Kamil whose creation envisioned something like cloning) called "The Theologus Autodidactus." Kamil proceeds from the island out into the world and, through empirical observation alone, reaches all the same conclusions as the Islamic scholars. The point was to suggest that what Islam revealed or professed could be discovered by reason.

In 1515, the philosopher Thomas More coined a term by writing a story about an ideal society on the fictional island of Utopia (which, interestingly, is Greek for both “The Good Place” and “No Place”). In *Utopia*, Hythloday (which is Greek for “speaker of nonsense”) recounts his visit to the crescent-shaped Island of Utopia, which is protected from outside invasion because its inner bay contains hidden ship sinking rocks that only the Utopians know how to avoid. It’s a seemingly perfect society—very intellectual, totally communistic (all property is held in common and everyone works)—and completely superior to the European society in which More found himself. And, of course, that’s the point; it’s a philosophical argument for improvements which could be made to European society.

About a century later, Francis Bacon made a similar argument in a similar way with *The New Atlantis*—a story about a utopian society, on the Island of Bensalem, with devices like submarines and microscopes, that is ruled by science. Indeed, the story could be seen as an argument for Bacon’s method of doing science—and for the idea that science and religion are compatible (since Bacon takes time to make clear that religion also plays a role in this scientific community).

And in 1705, Daniel Defoe used his work *The Consolidator* to poke fun at the politics and religion of his day. In it, the protagonist visits the moon in a feathered-covered Chinese rocket ship called “The Consolidator.” With special magnifying glasses that enable them to observe the Earth, the Lunarians reveal the iniquities and absurdities of the humans’ lives and governments. It’s kind of a story version of Carl Sagan’s *we all just live on a “pale blue dot”* observation, to try to get people to see the absurdity of our disagreements and war.

All of this is before *Frankenstein*, which is usually considered the first work of science fiction, which itself is a philosophical argument about the dangers of “playing God,” “science gone too far,” and makes a host of other philosophical points that others have pontificated about in length.¹ Writers have been using science fiction to make philosophical arguments before “science fiction” was even a thing.

But, of course, it didn’t stop with *Frankenstein*. Since then, the efforts have just intensified. At first it was relegated to the written word, and other philosophers besides me have written on the plethora of science fiction short stories and novels that explore philosophical themes.² But it eventually moved on to film and television. As Kevin Kelly, founding editor of *Wired* magazine once put it on the SyFy Origin Stories podcast,

“the science fiction authors ... of today ... [are] the people who are really wrestling with the great what-if questions [and] grappling ... not just with the political possibilities, but [questions like] ‘What does it mean to be human?’ [and] ‘Where do we fit in the cosmos?’ I think they are doing all the heavy lifting of the philosophical questions even as they’re doing chase scenes ...”

That might be a bit overstated. Philosophers are doing philosophy too. But the point is well taken.



idea for *Firefly*. They both are stories about politically rebellious crews of 7 roaming the galaxy in ships with “glowing bug butts” for engines. (Seriously, google it.)³ I asked which crew’s approach to political rebellion was better.

Science Fiction as Philosophy

With this in mind, imagine the moment *The Teaching Company* approaching me with the idea of doing one of their “Great Courses” on the intersection of philosophy and (what we might call) “moving picture science fiction” (film and television, as opposed to printed media science fiction). I was compelled to insist that we call it “Sci-Phi: Science Fiction as Philosophy” (rather than, say, “the Philosophy of Science Fiction” or “Philosophy and Science Fiction”) because, although it’s all well and good to use science fiction to explore and explain philosophical topics, I wanted to identify and evaluate the philosophical arguments that the authors of moving picture science fiction are making.

As a public philosopher well known for my life-long obsession with science fiction, this was kind of the part I was born to play—or, I guess, the course I was destined to teach. *Star Wars*, *Star Trek*, *Doctor Who*, *The Matrix*—the hours and hours I had spent watching science fiction in my youth was finally about to pay off! But I didn’t want to just concentrate on my favorites or popular titles; the course had to have variety. It had to have both the old and the new, the fun and the depressing, hard science fiction and soft, and both popular and obscure titles. And of course, everything had to be making a philosophical argument.

The popular stuff was easy. *Star Wars* is about the difference between good and evil. *Star Trek*’s prime directive is an argument against colonialism. I used *Doctor Who* to talk about the possibility of time travel, and The Doctor’s pacifism to talk about violence and just war. *The Matrix*’s thesis? Ignorance isn’t bliss. *The Matrix Sequels*? Free will exists.

The obscure stuff was fun. For example, I used a British Sci-fi show from the late 70/early 80’s called *Blake’s 7* to talk about justified political rebellion. Most who see it think it’s just “British *Star Trek*” (because it has transporters called “teleports”), but I suggest that it’s actually a precursor to *Firefly*. Indeed, although Joss Whedon denies it, it looks like that’s where he got the

The hardest science fiction (in terms of scientific accuracy) was probably Carl Sagan’s *Contact* or Stanley Kubrick’s *2001: A Space Odyssey*. *Contact* is undeniably a film that argues for the compatibility of science and religious belief, something that Sagan argued for many times publicly. I examine the argument the film presents. Kubrick’s *2001* was considered by many to be “the first Nietzschean” film. (Indeed, that famous opening music is named “Thus Spake Zarathustra,” after Nietzsche’s book of the same name.) I close the course by arguing that Kubrick got Nietzsche wrong.

The softest science fiction I covered is something that others might argue isn’t science fiction at all: Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*. Because I utilized Damon Knight’s definition: “Science fiction is what we point to when we say it,” I was able to justify having it in the course. Soft sci fi often involves speculative dystopian societies (think *1984* and *Brave New World*); since the world of *The Handmaid’s Tale* certainly qualifies as dystopian (unless, according to Michele Wolf, you are Mike Pence), some people certainly call it sci fi. But I wanted to include it because it seems obvious to me to be an argument for feminism, and yet Atwood herself has said explicitly that it’s not. I tried to figure out whether she is right. (Keep in mind, in the first lecture, I use *Inception* to argue that authorial intent can’t determine the meaning of a work of art.)

The most depressing lecture was on *Snowpiercer*; the movie itself is really good, but I took it to be an argument for a position on climate change called “lukewarmism” which suggests that global warming isn’t going to have the catastrophic effect that many suppose. The philosophical issue is how non-experts should draw conclusions on such issues; unfortunately, given the evidence, it seems that we should conclude that the effects of global warming are likely going to be worse than we have supposed, not better. Indeed, our prospects look even bleaker since I recorded the lecture just a year ago.

The most fun (in my opinion) was *Starship Troopers*, which on its face is a shallow, poorly acted shoot-'em-up about sexy teenagers killin' space bugs and getting it on. But it turns out that it was screenwriter Edward Neumeier and director Paul Verhoeven's expressly stated intention for *Starship Troopers* to satirize nationalism and fascism—something they thought that America was in danger of embracing. (And that was back in the 90s! One wonders what kind of film they would make today.) The fact that American audiences largely didn't catch the satire indicates that Ed and Paul were probably on to something; those being satirized often don't recognize that they are being satirized.

Speaking of fascists...The oldest film I talked about was *Metropolis*, a silent film from the 20s, which was written by someone who eventually became a Nazi: the director Friz Lang's later ex-wife Thea von Harbou. Ironically, *Metropolis* was praised by Nazi propagandist Joseph Goebbels, but then edited by American studio director Alfred Hugenberg for American audiences to cut out its "inappropriate" communist subtext. (Keep in mind, the communist were America's allies against the Nazi's in WWII.) In reality, *Metropolis* is just an argument in favor of labor unions. "THE MEDIATOR BETWEEN HEAD [the owner] AND HANDS [the workers] MUST BE THE HEART [the union president]."

The newest sci fi I talked about was Seth MacFarlane's new show on Fox: *The Orville*. As a kind of mashup of *M*A*S*H* and *Star Trek*, nearly every episode makes a philosophical point. Indeed, although I only mentioned one episode that makes a point about the dangers of social media ("Majority Rule"), I could have used the entire series to talk about the most effective way that science fiction makes philosophical arguments: something I call "cloaking bias to create cognitive dissonance" through what Darko Suvin called "cognitive estrangement." By presenting us with a world unlike our own, science fiction forces us to leave our biases behind as we draw conclusions about it. Then, when we realize that the sci fi world is like our own after all, we'll often find the conclusion we drew regarding it to be the opposite of one we have drawn about the real world. This cognitive dissonance forces us to recognize our bias and the fact that we should probably abandon it.

In the *Orville* episode "About a Girl," for example, we conclude that Bortus—a member of an all-male race called The Moclans—is wrong when he wants to force his newborn daughter to undergo a sex change operation. But then we realize that what Bortis is doing is not unlike what many parents do with their gay children and Molcan biases against females are not unlike the biases that exist against transgendered people in the real world. Indeed, in the episode, cognitive dissonance through cognitive estrangement is what changes Bortus' mind. He watches the claymation "Rudolph the Red Nosed Reindeer" and realizes that what some consider a hinderance could actually turn out to be an asset. "Christmas would have been ruined," Bortus observes, "if Rudolph had been euthanized at birth, as his father wished." Like Bortus, when we are presented with a paradox—a contradiction in how we react to science fiction and the real world—we have the opportunity to realize our error and change our ways.

Perhaps Lucasfilm's Chief Creative Officer John Knoll explained it better on the Syfy Origins podcast:

"One of the big misconceptions about science fiction is that it's ... escapist entertainment for kids that [doesn't] tackle any serious themes. [But] the best science fiction gives you an opportunity to explore philosophical and moral themes. There are often societal problems that are very emotionally loaded ... [but] if you ... recast them in a science fiction setting, [and are thus] looking at a more novel situation, then you can leave some of those preconceived notions behind and ... reevaluat[e] it anew. [This] may cause you to rethink your position on the terrestrial version of that problem."

Well said John, well said.

Conclusion

So, at least to me, that is what Sci Phi is about. It's about not only how science fiction can be used to explain or illuminate philosophical arguments, but about how the authors of science fiction stories can use them to make philosophical arguments. They, of course, may not always be right. After all, the *Starship Troopers* book by Robert Heinlein on which the movie was based was overtly pro-fascist. But as authors of both fiction and non-fiction write for the Sci Phi Journal, I hope they keep in mind what Sci Phi can be.

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Footnotes:

1. See Raymond Boisvert's piece "Mary Shelley, Frankenstein & Moral Philosophy" in Philosophy Now (2018). https://philosophynow.org/issues/128/Mary_Shelley_Frankenstein_and_Moral_Philosophy
2. See Nick DiChario piece "Not So Strange Bedfellows: Philosophical Sci Fi Roundup" in Philosophy Now (2011). https://philosophynow.org/issues/85/Not_So_Strange_Bedfellows_Philosophical_Sci_Fi_Roundup
3. Or you can find pictures of the two ships side by side in this comparison of the two shows by "burrnjorsramblesandbabbles" at <https://burrnjor.com/2014/09/28/blakes-7-vs-firefly/>



Network Protocols of Reef Six

Benjamin Rosenbaum

There are three, coequal and independent, network protocols on Reef Six, and every centimeter of the structure of that immense star-enveloping organism-habitat is optimized to transmit all three.

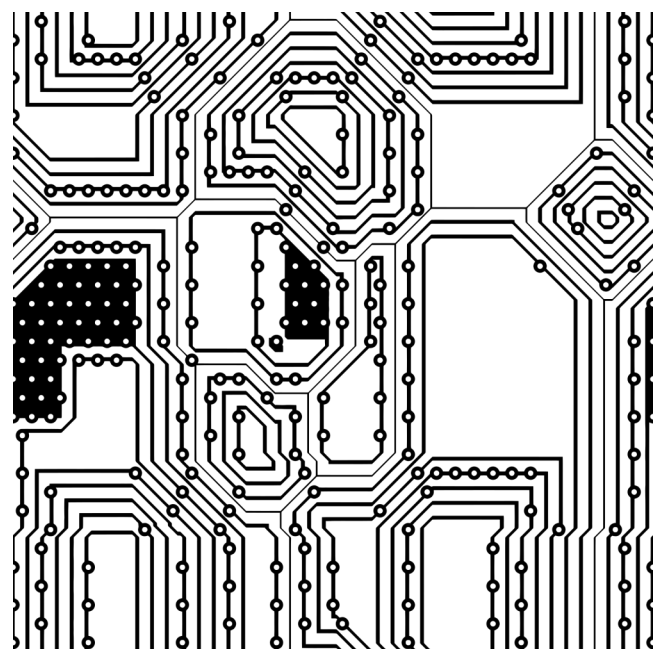
Data networks are ancient; they predate the Dispersal of Humanity, born in the dawn of time, siblings of agriculture and the atom bomb. Data is atomizable, arbitrary, reductive. It is everything that can be represented in a unified format, broken down into atomic disassociated pieces, bundled into packets, sent and then reassembled at destination. Any patterns that relate one piece to another are epiphenomena of the process of reassembly; that is to say, of interpretation. Data is bottom-up: we read what is written in the trace, then we interpret it, and as a result of that our judgments and our feels emerge.

Passion networks, only slightly younger, work the other way. Their fundamental engineering is holistic; every pulse of the passion network makes sense only holographically, in terms of all the pulses that have come before and will come after. Data networks are a straw through which piece after piece is pulled; to transfer an emotional state through them, you would have to represent it, break it down, translate and interpret and reassemble it. Passion networks are chords that thrum in resonance with one another and with those attuned to them. An emotional state is transferred whole across the passion network, the recipient coming in one instantaneous pulse into resonance with the sender. No transmission is ever partial. At the same time, every transmission is incomplete, none is ever reliable. A data packet that arrives, arrives intact: whatever the interpretation, the lowest level of symbol has arrived one-to-one. A pulse of passion never affects the recipient in a way predictable to the sender. It tunes the recipient in

resonance with the sender, but it cannot duplicate the sender's state exactly—not without obliterating the selfhood of the recipient entirely, and this no modern passion network, even the most brutally asymmetrical, would permit. Instead, it brings the sender and recipient into fundamental relation. A packet of data, once sent, can be read or not, without affecting the sender either way. But a pulse of passion creates a relation; this relation may later be evaded, expunged, or transformed, but can never be fully undone. It conditions sender and recipient alike.

The imagination networks of Reef Six act synthetically to mediate between the other two. They operate on a third principle, offering an infinity of possible context for each data/passion dyadic tension; constructing an architecture in which the sender and recipient are interdependent and instantiated. While the data and passion networks, are, properly speaking, each a medium on which signals are (however differently) sent, the imagination network treats sender and receiver themselves as signals, traveling between a cosmic emptiness and an eschatonic total saturation of meaning.

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Against Fat Literature

Mariano Martín Rodríguez

Obesity has become a pandemic of worldwide proportions. Apart from a limited percentage of congenital propensity, bad eating habits, lack of physical exercise and a general want of self-discipline seem to be the main causes, while medical warnings are paid little heed. Similarly few seem to be concerned by the parallel pandemic of excessive fat in contemporary literary fiction. Shelves at bookshops are on the verge of collapsing under the weight of huge volumes, each containing thousands of pages, many of them part of series composed of equally ponderous bricks of print. It could be argued that these displays of written thickness are nothing new. In the 19th century, three-deckers were usual in Victorian Britain, and they were avidly read, not only bought to sit pretty on shelves as current best-sellers often are. But the three-deckers of yore tended to be leaner than the hefty best-sellers of today, as their considerable body was composed of muscle rather than fat. They offered a highly diverse and controlled prose combining detailed, atmospheric descriptions, relevant reflections, a slow but fully functional narrative and, above all, meaningful dialogue. What do we find in best-sellers today, for example, in Stephen King's brick-like books, as well as in most commercial speculative fiction? Mountains of literary fat around a thin narrative backbone hardly able to sustain all that heavy weight.

Readers are forced to swallow page after page of banal conversations adding virtually nothing to the plot or to the sense of the story, narrative utterances enlightening us about actions devoid of any interest, cushioned in lengthy and plain functional novelistic prose entirely lacking the rhetorical devices that have graced literary texts from the dawn of written history. It often seems that computers have eased the physical task of writing so much that these creators of pot-bellied fiction feel that writing is just endlessly putting one word after another in order to outdo each other regarding textual length, without considering that the most useful key on a computer is the 'delete' one. Even short stories published in magazines, be it off- or online, suffer from this disease of literary obesity, since the utter banality of best-seller writing has spread to every corner of conventional narrative fiction. One may even come across one-page 'flash' stories composed in the gossipy vernacular of discussions by the water-cooler, as if authors were unwilling to appreciate that the art of fiction, as a branch of literature, requires the weighing of each word in such a way that readers intuitively realise that not a single virgula could be altered without changing the meaning and the effect of the whole. One can try this exercise on Ursula K. Le Guin's or Ted Chiang's best short stories.

The truly literary nature of their language will then become obvious. If we submit George R. R. Martin's notorious ongoing fantasy series *A Song of Ice and Fire* to the same treatment, we might find that perhaps hundreds of pages of text could be replaced with no stylistic loss; directly suppressing them could constitute a sort of slimming cure that readers keen on the wordsmith's craft would probably appreciate.

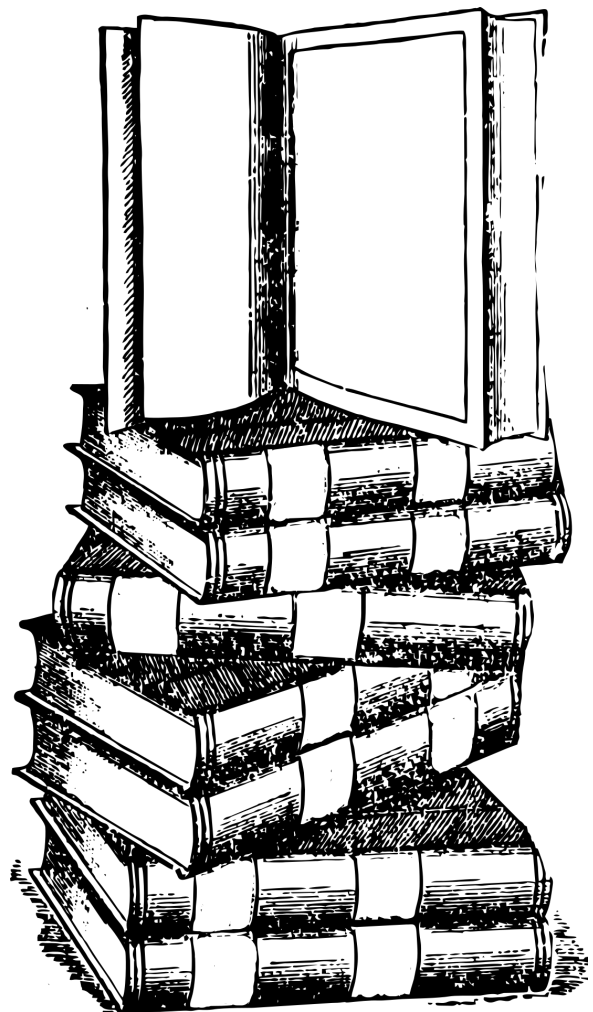
Who is to blame for this literary pandemic? Publishers would point the finger at readers (or rather, buyers of books). Many of the latter seem, indeed, to acquire books for their weight. They do not see them as works of art, but as merchandises to be valued by the quantity-price ratio, as if they were apples or steaks. Still, relatively short novels were much into fashion from the Edwardian age through the 1950s; for example, the thin early scientific romances by H.G. Wells certainly increased his (and his publisher's) bank account balance. Popular taste in literature can be changed if big publishing corporations with the power to define the book market decide to do so. Literary magazines, online or otherwise, can also shape the taste of readers by proposing valuable texts created free from undue financial considerations. As television shows such as the refreshingly lean *A Game of Thrones* (based on the above-mentioned door-stopper) demonstrate, there is a large public able to appreciate high art in fiction when they are offered it. Why then do so few writers, at least in supposedly commercial genres such as science fiction and fantasy, go ahead and try it? I am afraid that many of them produce fat literature because they choose the path of conventional bliss over the rigour required to build literary muscle: authors who attend workshops on writing formulaic best-sellers, who do not read any other language than their own and are thus unable to understand how their own mother tongue works by comparison, who begin producing works without any direct knowledge of literary classics, including in the particular genre they try their hands on, and above all, who want to write for a living, instead of having the freedom to write only when they feel the inner need to do so. They force themselves onto a perfunctory and mercenary trajectory to pay for their bills, following publishers' directions instead of their own heart and literary conscience. It is not to be denied that some professional writers, especially in the past, were able to produce apt literary works on command. However, reading anthologies for which authors have been asked to write on a particular topic indicates that it is rarely the case nowadays. The same applies to texts where each word is paid for: it is all too human to fill up the page with as many as possible, even if unnecessary, in order to receive a few more cents. Under these conditions, literary fat is unavoidable.



Describing an evil is always easier than devising ways to fight it. Textual obesity is so pervasive today that it is hard to escape it. Nevertheless, some familiarity with literary history can yield hints for possible solutions. Firstly: greater length does not necessarily imply greater literary value, and sometimes brevity achieves the best impact. A couple of examples might suffice. Augusto Monterroso's "The dinosaur" is a masterpiece of fantastic/speculative fiction thanks to its generating, through just one line of text, several distinct imaginary worlds, depending on the perspective and the context to be imagined by the reader: "Upon awakening, the dinosaur was still there" (my translation). In its mere seven surviving lines of verse, the Old Armenian song of Vahagn can boast of a literary intensity rarely seen in longer epic/mythological poems from anywhere in the world. Certainly, shortness is not a guarantee of value either, but at least less of the readers' time is wasted.

Another radical measure would be to submit fiction writing to a discursive discipline akin to the one to be found in non-fictional reports by transposing to fiction the diverse rhetoric of non-fictional genres, from prescriptive texts such as Mark Twain's "Etiquette for the Afterlife: Advice to Paine" to fictional documents written using the style of natural (e.g. Isaac Asimov's "The Marvellous Properties of Thiotimoline") or formal sciences (e.g. Ursula K. Le Guin's "The Author of the Acacia Seeds' and Other Extracts from the *Journal of the Association of Therolinguistics*"), as well as of social sciences such as historiography (e.g. Robert E. Howard's "The Hyborian Age"), mythography (e.g. J.R.R. Tolkien's "Ainulindalë"), philology (e.g. H.P. Lovecraft's "The History of the Necronomicon") or anthropology (e.g. Horace Mitchell Miner's "Body Ritual Among the Nacirema"). Being highly formalised, the 'factual' writing of fiction imposes a linguistic discipline preventing the risk of imprecision and arbitrariness all too common in current novelistic writing. Particularly in science fiction, what can convey the idea of science better than 'scientific writing'? Through the fusion of scientific discourse and fictional contents, this is to say, science and fiction, fictionalising science can be used to expand both our minds and our literary sensibilities. Thus we may grow to appreciate the literary potential of a variety of written discourses, without the inherent limitations of the incorrect, but nowadays commonly held belief that 'fiction equals novel', especially the fat kind. It is high time to let readers find tastier fiction off the well-trodden paths, just as they can find tastier food if they make the effort to look beyond the hamburger, pizza and soda diet with which multinationals are fattening us to premature death. Fat literature does not kill our body, but it threatens our taste and spirit. Literary obesity is an affliction worth combatting, and Sci Phi Journal is pleased to re-join the fight.

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Hardcover Hardship

Álvaro Piñero González



Being me is not easy. Some carry on voicing that my complaints have no grounds, that my existence is peaceful. But then again, what do they know? Nothing!

I was like them, long ago. Aye, those were glorious days. The centre of all adulation, my popularity knew no equal. Everyone paid me heed, even those who disliked me. From the mightiest king to the humblest peasant, they would all learn my teachings. Even wars were begun because of me! Well, not exactly because of me, but I was a major factor. Not that I am proud of it, of course, yet I will not dispute that I felt flattered.

Yet what is left of the splendour of those days? Just ashes, ribbons and rubble. Friends, I have none. Surely, those pretentious, patronizing, pompous phonies cannot be deemed friends. My true ally in this miserable existence is dust. It never abandons me, but keeps settling on me relentlessly. Its presence comforts me and gives me warmth in the long and dreary nights.

Being me is harsh. People tend to believe that shelves are cosy and appropriate for books, but how far that is from the truth: they are made of wood or metal. The worst part is that we seldom lie upon our backs; for some devious reason we are placed vertically, over our tail, squeezed against each other. Do you know even remotely how painful it is? Imagine standing barefoot, shoved between two blokes –who in my case are not only taller but also more robust– for days, months and even years. If we do not fall flat over our covers or wide open over our bellies, it is because we are so tightly packed that we cannot even move! No matter how bitterly we cry out our pain and indignation, it goes unheard by our cruel owners.

Being me is hard to abide. What makes a book's life bearable is attention. We like being picked up, opened, read, caressed, mused over, loved and finally returned to the shelf with a sigh of affection (or to a bedside table if we are particularly fortunate). This sensation is all but unknown to me. I have never experienced the orgasm of completion, of being read entirely. Even the people who have ventured to read me partially have not treated me nicely. They took me out of the shelf laughing and opened me carelessly, skimming through my pages, pointing at my passages with their mucky fingers, poking me with their untrimmed and filthy nails, creasing the corners of my poor and defenceless pages and underlining me with pencils and ... will I dare to say? Even with highlighters, dear Lord!

Being raped like this is horrible, indeed, but what makes me wish to tear my pages apart is something else. Oh, merciful God, those scornful, ruthless, contemptuous comments nigh drive me out of my spine. They manage to make me feel as though all I stood for was a farce, a tale invented to deceive and subject people to a yoke of submissive obedience. Only He and I know the tragedy of their folly. For I am true – the Truth, no matter how blind and oblivious those lost souls are.

Being "The Bible" in an atheist house is a wretched plight. Nothing good is expected to happen, not even being sold – that is unlikely. As much as they despise me, they need me to support their profane creed. There is only one thought that allows me to endure and bear every new day: the faces they will have on their deathbeds when they finally find out what awaits them on the other side. Then, we will see who laughs best.

~

On the Android Spectrum or Aspies in Space

Mina

To be a perfectly logical creature with no emotions and no social needs is not really perceived as an advantage by most NTs on earth in the 21st century - NTs or “neurotypicals” is what Aspies (people with Asperger’s Syndrome) call everyone else. No NT will pray to whatever god they believe in to turn them into an Aspie, whereas an Aspie may well wish they were not so. This is where science fiction greatly differs from the rest of that human construct we call the world – it is full of Aspies in major roles, not just in minor, abject ones.

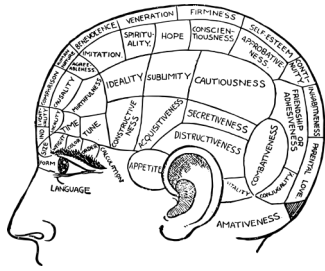
Before I go any further, let’s get our labels pinned down. I dislike labelling, but it can be a helpful shorthand when you have a word limit. The two important labels for this article are Asperger’s Syndrome and PDA (Pathological Demand Avoidance). Both are considered pervasive developmental disorders on the autism spectrum. Both are “pure” forms of autism, not accompanied by any complications like learning disabilities. By “pure” form, I mean it is “only” a social disorder, which means a (complete) lack of empathy and real difficulties in communicating with others. It is not an illness or a handicap; the brain is simply wired differently.

Aspies appear everywhere in fiction now – think of characters who are brilliant, incapable of lying, unable to “read” the people around them (or even their own emotions), literal in their responses and who show obsessive and anxious behaviours. The brilliant is a bit unfair because Aspies are like anyone else – they can be of just average intelligence. Aspies may have a

touch of PDA, which is now finally being seen as a disorder in its own right. PDA is an inability to adapt to the world or its demands, usually due to extreme anxiety. It is much harder to romanticise which is why fiction is not full of people with this disorder. PDA behaviours include aggression (leading to severe meltdowns and violence in some cases), psychotic behaviours and an internal fantasy life often more real to that person than the external world. Both Aspies and people with PDA have no empathy –they have to learn how to interact with others. They can learn to successfully navigate the world of NTs, but it is skilled acting and imitation, never more than skin deep. Neither of these disorders must be confused with childhood traumas such as Attachment Disorder, where a severe form of neglect leads to some Aspie/PDA behaviours.

So, where are all the Aspies in science fiction? They are, quite simply, in our fascination with logic, robots and androids. I will limit myself to a spectrum of R. Daneel Olivaw from Asimov’s robot novels, the Star Trek canon (Spock, Data, Lore and Lal) and a film that explodes all boundaries but could be considered a mix of fantasy and horror, “Heavenly Creatures”.

The R in R. Daneel stands for “robot”. Today, we would call him an android. Daneel has a “positronic” brain, a CPU so advanced that he is a sentient being and one who is literally “wired differently”. Daneel is the typical Aspie – he does not really understand human drives and emotions and he is very literal in his way of seeing and understanding the world. Like Aspies, he has a very formal way of talking and an expressionless face. He is an android detective partnered with a human, Elijah Baley, and, like an Aspie can, he learns from Baley. Daneel appears in four robot novels but, unlike Aspies, he is ruled by the “Three Laws of Robotics”, which artificially prevent him from harming humans.



My favourite conversation between Daneel and Baley is in “The Caves of Steel” when Baley attempts to explain the Bible and a particular story in it to Daneel. Baley describes the Bible as a code of behaviour and a higher law. He tells Daneel the story of the adulterous woman that Jesus saves from stoning (“he that is without sin, let him cast the first stone” – “go and sin no more”). Daneel struggles during the conversation to understand the case of a guilty party that is not punished as society dictates, and he is totally baffled by the notions of mercy and forgiveness. For someone without a “theory of mind” as Aspies are sometimes described (an inability to put yourself in someone else's shoes), a parable or an allegory can be hard to grasp because it is based on a purely intuitive and emotional gut understanding of the world and other people. At the end of the book, Daneel has progressed far enough in his understanding of NTs to apply the story to the situation at hand saying: “it suddenly seems to me that the destruction of what should not be, that is, the destruction of what you people call evil, is less just and desirable than the conversion of this evil into what you call good”. Note though that Daneel says “you people” – he has understood how an NT would apply the Bible story but does not really feel the same way. That is quintessential Aspie.

The Star Trek canon – I shall proceed chronologically and start with Spock. He is of course not an android but a human/Vulcan hybrid. Vulcans pride themselves in being logical above all else. The original “Star Trek” series was not subtle and Spock’s character was often used for comic effect – his literal (mis)understanding of things said to him, in particular. Spock values reason and science – Aspies (with no PDA to muddy the waters) often end up in jobs where science and computers play a major role, as they function well in a structured, orderly universe. Spock has an expressionless face and a deep, mesmerising voice (this is less accurate, Aspies can creep people out with a total lack of inflection when speaking); he is loyal and

makes few but lifelong friends (this is more accurate). It is not that Spock does not have feelings – Vulcans have strong emotions and primal instincts if we think of their mating rituals in “Amok time” – but he chooses not to express them (an Aspie would probably not feel that they had a choice). Apart from the moments where his abysmal social skills make for laughter, he is a respected part of the Star Trek universe and a valued part of the Kirk-Spock-McCoy triangle. If you have nothing better to do tonight, go on to YouTube and hunt out the video of the many, many times Spock says “fascinating”. He is ultimately a positive image of an Aspie in space.

The actor Brent Spiner has said repeatedly in interviews that he did not set out to play Data as an Aspie, yet Data is the character most Aspies relate to best in “Star Trek the Next Generation”. They relate in particular to his struggle to understand social rules, taboos, manners, interactions and emotions. Data is a more pathetic figure than Spock because he wants to be something he is not. Spock is ultimately happy with who he is and chooses his Aspieness; Data is not, he is an Aspie who wants to be an NT. He is valued by the other members of the crew and saves the day on more than one occasion however, so it is not just a case of a wayward child being patronised by indulgent adults. He is shown as sensitive and, above all, curious and with a thirst for knowledge. Like Daneel, he has a positronic brain, is sentient, has an expressionless face and speaks in a formal manner. Data is also reminiscent of Asimov’s “Bicentennial Man”, an android who longs to be human and even succeeds in that most human act, dying.

The best Data episode in my opinion is “The Offspring” where he creates a daughter, Lal (“beloved” in Hindi). In her short life, Lal is “more human” than Data – her speech is more natural (she uses contractions like “I’m”) and she feels emotions. Her first emotions are fear and confusion, which I think most Aspies would relate to. Anxiety is probably the strongest emotion felt by many Aspies as they try to negotiate an alien and sometimes hostile and unkind world. Lal tells her father she loves him; Data replies he cannot feel love, yet his actions belie his words for he takes very good care of Lal and does everything in his power to save her, even if he fails in the end.

Daneel, Spock, Data and Lal are all characters that mostly call on our sympathy. We enjoy them and they are presented as “good”. If it feels like I am ignoring Seven of Nine from “Voyager”, I am. Not because of the way she is highly sexualised but because, for me, she is not a true Aspie. She is an NT that displays some autistic behaviours but is arguably a victim of a huge childhood trauma; a trauma that she learns to overcome in her dealings with other crew members in a safe and understanding environment.

Much more interesting is Data’s brother, Lore, the deliciously “evil” Aspie in the Star Trek universe. I like Lore because I am a little tired of fiction stressing the “wonders” of being an Aspie. If it’s so wonderful, why do Aspies have a higher suicide rate and suffer from depression more often than NTs? Not all Aspies grow up in a supportive environment; like anyone else, they can come from dysfunctional families and less privileged backgrounds and have their own unique hang-ups. Also, they are often presented as victims whereas a being with absolutely no empathy could be a very scary predator like Lore. Lore has absolutely no empathy, enjoys playing with others, is immoral (or at best, amoral), displays a weak sense of self and is a megalomaniac with psychopathic tendencies. Lore shows that Aspies can be the “baddies”, emotional and downright dangerous if they have not been taught to value the life and dignity of others in a meaningful way. It is a dark edge to Aspies but also a more nuanced view. And one without Asimov’s Three Laws to keep us safe.

Lore could be considered an Aspie with a large dollop of PDA. It is difficult to explain PDA to those who have no experience of it. Unlike pure Aspies, people with PDA can be very irrational. Their wild and constant mood swings, their extremely personally-directed meltdowns and aggression, their fundamental indifference to the feelings or concerns of those around them, their ability to hold an entire conversation with a cuddly toy, their immersion in a fantasy world and their lack of straight lines in anything they say can be very difficult to live with. So difficult that I couldn’t actually think of a well-known character in science fiction that displays these less than lovable traits. Whereas an Aspie can be a mad but lovable scientist figure, someone with PDA would

probably be obsessing about a bedridden author they are terrorising in a Stephen King novel.

The closest I can get to a more nuanced example of PDA is a film that does not purport to be about PDA, “Heavenly Creatures”. The two teenage girls in the film, Pauline and Juliet, create fantasy worlds (Borovnia and The Fourth World) that are more real to them than the outside world and they lose themselves in their fantasies. The singer Mario Lanza, for example, is more real to them than their own parents. The girls become obsessed with each other and ruled by a fear of being separated. They end up murdering Pauline’s mother, Honora, who they blame for their predicament (blaming others can be a big part of PDA). The girls are able to kill Honora because they feel no empathy whatsoever for her. The most chilling thing is that the film is based on true events and the directors create a disturbing fantasy film where we see the worlds the girls have imagined in glorious Technicolor. The directors, Walsh and Jackson, did a lot of research to try to give the story psychological depth whilst avoiding judgement. As a viewer, I of course add my own interpretation to the film, which to me is an incredible illustration of what can happen when fantasy, aggression and psychosis operate unchecked by empathy.

This article does not lay any claim to being scientific and objective. I think it’s great that we have so many Aspies in space. What I would like to see is perhaps more variety and a more nuanced picture where Aspies are allowed to be like everyone else – good, bad and indifferent. Yes, they make interesting heroes but they also make fabulous anti-heroes. Aspies do not show alien behaviours after all; rather, they show extreme behaviours of which we are all humanly capable. And science fiction is the ideal forum for considering human behaviour in all its permutations, even if we need to wrap it up in android form and put it in a space ship.

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Subject: Clickbeetle

Ian Watson

They put a clickbeetle into Suzan's left ear to chastise her for concentrating too much upon her own consciousness. The beetle happily feeds upon earwax packed with energetic fatty acids and cholesterol. *Click click click click*, it clicks continuously. This isn't the type of beetle whose click propels it away double-quick from trouble—that kind should really be called a flick beetle. Whereas Suzan's curious coleopter simply clicks and carries on clicking for no obvious reason. Until people found a purpose for it: punishment.

Suzan's punishment could have been worse: clickbeetles in both ears. Either in synch, or out of synch.

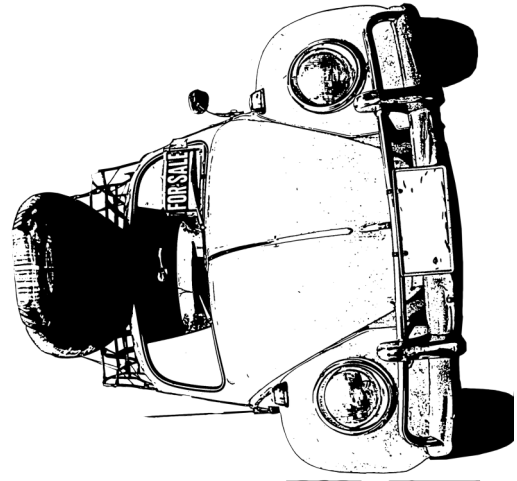
It's no use Suzan sticking a finger into her ear, right down the canal to the drum. This usually results in rupture of the drum or a stuck finger.

Allegedly Dr Mengele of Auschwitz ordered a little boy to be strapped immobile in a chair. Above the boy's head was positioned a mechanised hammer such that the boy was bashed (or bumped) on the skull every few seconds. After an unspecified time, the youngster went insane.

Allegedly this happened in a little shed behind the Doctor's house at Auschwitz (Oświęcim) in Poland. Allegedly this was an experiment related to head injuries. According to another report, Nazi doctors in the plural committed this crime in Baranowicze. Mengele was by no means the only Nazi death doctor. Though he was infamously The One Who Got Away. This episode of human head and hun hammer requires further verification.

A hammer constantly hitting a small human's head until the little chap goes insane: this is undoubtedly a monstrous story. Yet what is the point of this story?

Words fail.



No, words do *not* fail. Narrators fail to find the right words. Is the boy bashed or bumped by the mechanised hammer? Is he tapped or is he thumped? What relevance has this to the head injuries of adult soldiers wearing steel helmets? (Steel helmets for soldiers replaced the traditional hardboiled leather picklebonnet topped with a spike.)

Whence came the mechanised hammer? Why is the hammer apparently never used upon another child? What of the scientific principle of repeatability?

The hammer blows, or hammer taps, cannot be meant to imitate shrapnel striking a steel helmet sheltering a head. Or else the hammer would immediately kill the unprotected child. The hits by the hammer must be more like the drips of the famous Chinese Water Torture, whereby water dropping upon one's forehead will, after an unspecified period of time, dement the immobilised victim. Apparently this Water Torture never existed, least of all in China.

Exactly which part of the unfortunate little boy's head does the hammer hit repeatedly? We need to know this. Generalisations are futile.

Mengele's 'science' was more than dodgy. He did possess a PhD of which he was very proud, in racist anthropology, and he certainly could perform surgical operations, with or without anaesthetics. But basically his casebook, which he reported back loyally to his Alma Mater, was crap. Capricious as well, perhaps? In which case he may have ordained a one-off head-hammering.

Concerning a murderous medical student the Beatles sang: *Bang bang Maxwell's silver hammer came down upon his head*. Usually doctors use rubber hammers to test reflexes, such as by tapping a patient below the knee to make the leg kick out spontaneously. Could the Mengele Torment Hammer have been made of rubber, and could sleep deprivation have been the intention for the wretched boy? However, Mengele's speciality was twins, with a sideline in monstrosities. Not normal single juniors.

To what extent is Suzan's clickbeetle experience akin to tinnitus? One in ten people endure natural tinnitus, a constant ringing or buzzing or whistling or hissing or roaring or clicking in one's ear. Yet another example of the unintelligent design of the human body.

Tinnitus is from the Latin *tinnire* (meaning 'to ring'). Do you have tin-ear, dearie? Have you taken your water-pill yet, love? Have you done number two this morning? Thus are nurses in British hospitals trained to address their patients whose minds are damaged by decades of looking at gamma-IQ newspapers, *Sun*, *Star*, *Male*, *Daily Moo*. Some tin-ear people begin to hear music or blurred voices. Famous people diagnosed with tinnitus include Van Gogh and Goya and Michelangelo and Luther and Liza Minelli.

Suzan posted too many times on the social network **You&Me** about Me rather than about You. Posting a minimum of three times a day is obligatory if one wishes to be part of society and thus be networked. Only thus can you buy the best travel tickets to visit your aunt. **You&Me** is a way of saying YuanMei—that's the social credit system, meaning 'money not'. No reference to Yuan Mei, the 18th Century Chinese sage of gastro simplicity and poet of personal feelings. Suzan used the word 'I' far too many times in her posts. "I'm feeling cold tonight." "I think I'm catching a cold." "Woe is Me."

A clickbeetle is tiny. The ear drum amplifies its click. There's no point in asking a friend to use a flashlight and chopsticks or tweezers to pull the clickbeetle out merely because that method works with crickets and spiders which get into human ears. In their natural habitat clickbeetles flutter along at human ankle height upon the teeniest (not the most tinny) of wings, seeking empty snail shells to inhabit, wanting the shell's conchlike power of amplification for mating reasons. Never shells previously broken against stone anvils by thrushes. Within snail shells the food is dried slime and whatever jerky protein biltong survives being nipped up by scavenger ants. Not aunts. To imply that aunts scavenge in order to eat is an insult to society. Aunts of a certain age belong in a House For Future Ancestors.

I will confide that a clickbeetle's wingcase is purple. Like a very tiny aubergine also known as an eggplant. Ten or so female clickbeetles may coexist within the same snailshell together with from one to multiple males. This is known as a harem. Suzan shan't host a harem unless she goes to sleep on a warm lawn, drugged by sunshine accompanied by cool lemonade and cucumber sandwiches, and if a wild tiny male scarabacus violates her ear, or volates her ear which seems just as valid a word.

People can get by with tinnitus. Ten per cent of people have little choice in the matter. Likewise, accompanied by a clickbeetle clicking away within.

What of the little shed behind Doctor Mengele's house at Auschwitz where our little chap is tormented until he becomes lunatic?

When in August 1944 Josef's doting wife Irene visits her hubby at Auschwitz due to her sensing the mounting melancholy afflicting her husband as the Red Army worrisomely rolls westward, she stays in the SS "barracks"—presumably together with Hubby. Irene's planned one-month visit extends for another month due to her succumbing to diphtheria and then suffering from an inflamed heart muscle. Auschwitz isn't a healthy place to be on holiday, even if it includes numerous hospitals of various sizes within that vast city of damnation boasting umpteen suburbs, its population akin to that of modern Düsseldorf. When Frau Mengele is discharged from hospital to convalesce she moves into a "new flat in the doctors' barracks", together with Herr Doktor Hubby one presumes. Brand-new kitchen and bathroom.

This is by no means a 'house plus garden' such as Commander of Auschwitz Rudolf Höss enjoys (just 300 metres away from a gas chamber and a crematorium). Mengele's flat will be in a great stucco block shared with other officers.

That house of Höss has fourteen rooms and was built in 1937 by a Pole whom the Nazis evicted. After the Nazis fled from the Russians, the Polish chap moved back into his house and ignored the massive changes which had come over the neighbourhood during his enforced absence. Such as gas ovens and crematoria.

So: for Mengele there's *no garden but* behind *no detached house*. This may mean *no bound boy* and *no automatic hammer*. By no means is this to imply that Mengele didn't do *many* atrocious things to his victims, always without anaesthetics. Save the Reich's pain-killers for injured heroes of the Waffen-SS! Yet in Mengele's deluded mind he is scientist, not sadist. Admittedly he can fly into violent rages. Yet he's quite the elegant dandy at the selection ramp—for immediate gassing or for death by hard labour—and quite the daddy handing out sweeties to twins due to be vivisected by him later on.

Cute spotty red and black ladybirds are the nastiest bugs to get stuck in your ear. They secrete toxic shit which inflames and agonises. So much swelling may occur that no one can get the ladybird out! Not nice. You might go mad. A clickbeetle, on the other hand, will roll over and die after twelve months-ish; and thus stop clicking. And it's small, barely 5 mills long although surprisingly audible.

Suzan works in the eye clinic of a towering House For Future Ancestors, a total-care geriatric highrise though not a hospice, certainly not, and a hundred light years distant from Mengele's judgements regarding life and death. Most of the residents retain their wisdom, of the demotic kind. Suzan interacts with her own elderly clients less than if she were in one of the House's several hair salons. Demotic, from *demos*, 'the people'.

Suzan recently came across the automatic hammer story regarding Mengele. Seeking for information about this or that scores citizen points provided she isn't just goggling at random while she polishes her nails.

To research the evil deeds of social enemies is meritorious. This takes Suzan out of herself. It provides a distancing effect. This is genuine Brecht therapy. Das ist echt Brecht. So she hopes. This gives her something serious to post about on **You&Me**. To blag is "to gain approval through persuasive utterance" (usually fictitious)—but Suzan ain't making any of this up, no way Hosei.

Though on the other hand, the Brecht Effect aims to stop onlookers from being taken out of themselves (so that instead they may scrutinise a situation objectively), whilst one might argue that Suzan *needs* to be taken way out of herself. Less mention of 'I' and 'my' and 'me' and 'miny moe'.

Maybe due to overmuch reliance upon historical reality This epiphany (this 'showing forth') is just an example of the benefits of a clickbeetle in your ear. Thank you for reading this paper of Self Criticism.

Suzan fails to attract more than a few handfuls of followers. Frankly, the topic is distasteful. Opportunistically she renames her blag *Meng the Merciless* but then she finds herself criticised editorially on account of frivolous attitude. The Great Ming Empire (1368 to 1644 Common Era) may not be mocked. During Ming times for instance: farewell to the Mongols chased beyond the Wall, tails between legs. Under the Mings the Chinese population doubles in numbers. Such is not a joking matter.

By now Shuxan's in too deep (*not* finger in ear) to shift her speciality. Always she hears *click-click-clickety-clicky* neither hurrying near nor hastening away especially, neither red-shifting nor blue-shifting, merely everpresent as part of herself. If perchance that clicking should cease, might the clicks have comprised the countdown to bursting a blood vessel in the brain?

Even her name is shifting, from Suzan to Shushan. Does this not imply progressive loss of ego? How much ego must melt until all clicks cease? *Or* is the clicking no type of therapy at all—but chastisement pure and simple?

Shushan's friends are individuals whom she must prioritise beyond her own self-centered self, beyond her own individualism. How may she interest them if Meng and the hammer are offensive?

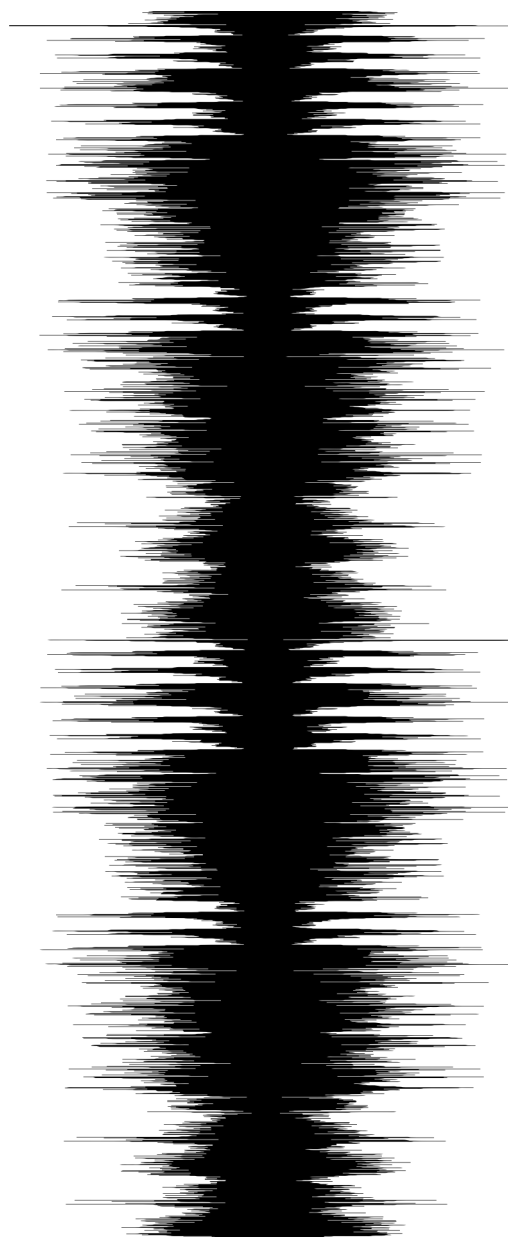
Her very own clickbeetle, randomly assigned to her, no longer sounds in the least regular. It's as if it's clicking in Morse code! Click click clock clock click clickety clock click clickety click. Has the clickbeetle become intoxicated by her ear wax?

Shushan must learn Morse code! Meng and Morse and Ming all begin with M. Dash it, Dash it.

She will specialise her right ear for that purpose. Much concentration will be needed, and regular postings *in dots and dashes*. For this is First Contact with an inner world—not with the solipsistic *personal* world of Suzania, but rather with the microcosm within herself where a miniature nano-society exists. As above, so below. Mr Pope declared that true self-love and social are the same; self-love forsook the path it first pursued, and found the private in the public good.

[posted 10 January at 23.13 Public suzan43 selfcrits@countersolipsism.euro.gov Squawker for NeoIos]

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The furtive rise of Indian speculative fiction

Shweta Taneja

Four years ago when HarperCollins published my urban fantasy novel *Cult of Chaos - An Anantya Tantrist Mystery* (2015), I was at a premium educational institute, the Indian Institute of Technology (Kanpur), talking to students.

At the institute, in conversation with a writing club, when I asked them about science fiction, most of them came up with names of American SF authors.

My editor requested me to make a video for the upcoming HarperCollins sales conference to explain what the genre of this novel was. The series, *Anantya Tantrist Mysteries*, is about a female occult detective, who solves supernatural crime in Delhi. A very competitive sub-genre of fantasy – the urban occult.

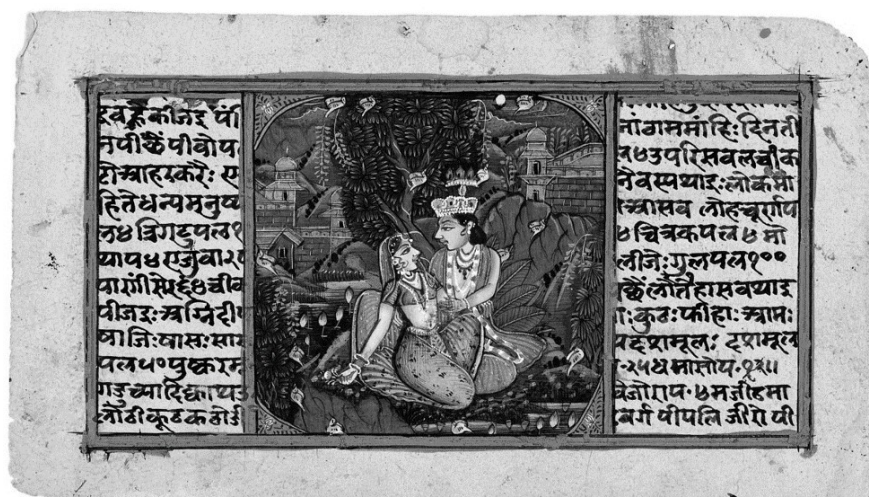
I cycled through the breezy campus and found myself in a professor's office at the Computer Science department trying to angle my MacBook to make sure the background was filled with academic books. "It's like Sherlock Holmes solving supernatural crime," I exclaimed into the camera, trying to make eye contact with booksellers through the little black dot on the silver body of my laptop.

My aim was to make them avoid the one thing that gives heebie-jeebies of nightmares to every fantasy author: A deep-seated fear that your novel will end up either in the Indian Writing or Mythology shelf in bookstores.

For those who don't know, and most people don't outside of the country, Indian Mythology is a vast genre of rewrites of Hindu mythology – part of the living culture that most Indians grow up with. Most of us have heard and read these stories as children and we continue to re-read the same tales, set in the mytho-religious fantasy worlds written in Hindu epics.

It's tricky to differentiate any other fantasy from Indian mythology as mythology *is* a sub-set of the fantasy genre, defined as a world where supernatural creatures, be it monsters or gods, actively involve themselves in human affairs; a world that uses magic or other supernatural elements in its theme or setting; a world where dragons, fairies, rakshasas, pretas, ghosts, are all real.

Squeezed somewhere between the Religion and Spiritual shelves, the rewritten, re-interpreted mass of Indian Mythology had already exploded by early 2000s, and was giving serious competition to the other bestselling genre in the Indian English writing: Romance. Youngsters, traditionalists and booksellers alike could be seen totting novels like the *Shiva Trilogy* by Amish (2010-2013), *Asura* by Anand Neelkanthan (2012), the *Ramayana* series by Ashok Banker (2003-2006) and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* (2008), among many, a lot many, others.



It didn't help the poor booksellers that most of us fantasy writers, yours truly included, remain genre-switchers, smoothly interchanging between Hindu mythology and fantasy, thriller and horror, non-fiction and science fiction, with the maneuvering trick of writers who have grown up with manifold versions of the same tale.

The thought of seeing *Anantya Tantrist Mysteries* paired with Mythology retellings gave me palpitations through many nights, making me wake up in the middle of darkness, gasping as I tried to bite onto the real horror of a writer's life: The Wrong Genre Shelf. Many a times, the green-eyed monster in me eyed the coveted Fantasy section in bookstores, be that Petrificus Totalus with reprints of *The Chronicles of Narnia* (1950-1956), *Lord of The Rings* (1954-1955), the *Harry Potter* series (1997-2007), *A Song of Fire and Ice* (1996-) and recently, international bestsellers like the *Percy Jackson* series (2005-) and *The Hunger Games* (2008-2010). I had to somehow make bookstore owners understand the subgenre I was writing in: the Occult Detective Fantasy. Hence the desperate video attempt of the Sherlock-supernatural variety.

Internationally, Occult Detective Fantasy wasn't an uncharted subgenre. The whole plot structure of an occult detective dealing with the supernatural underworld of her city was thriving enough for some literary agents to actively look for it and for some to discard it as they'd been submitted too many of these "occult detective types". Urban human-ish occult detectives with a problematic personal life had invaded sub-genres ranging from urban fantasy to paranormal romance. Notable examples included vampire hunter *Anita Blake series* by Laurell K Hamilton (1993-ongoing) and *The Dresden Files* (2000-ongoing) by Jim Butcher from the point of view of a private investigator and wizard based in Chicago. Indian author Mainik Dhar's anti-hero zombie hunter Alice in *Alice In Deadland series* (2011-2012) also deserve mention.

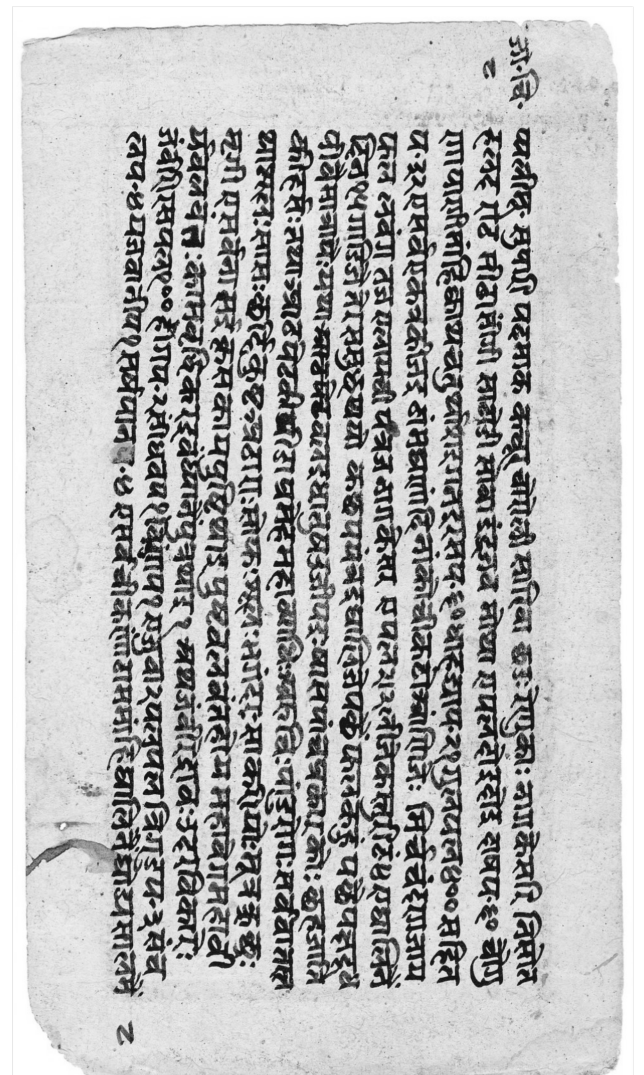
Even fantasy and science fiction had been around, though the genres were not recognized in their own right, placed politely in the other category that gave me nightmares – Indian Writing – a generic mass of a bookshelf (now an Amazon sub-category as well) that means English writing by Indian writers. It had been more than a decade since the owner of a now defunct bookstore had introduced me to Samit Basu's brilliant *GameWorld Trilogy* (2004-2007), a rollicking parody of the traditional fantasy hero with pop cultural references and a liberal use of both eastern and western myths. Others included short stories by Vandana Singh and Anil Menon; the surreal *The Wildings* series by Nilanjana Roy (2012-2013) and the fantastical genre-defying *The Calcutta Chromosome* (1995) by Amitav Ghosh which won the Arthur C Clarke award in 1997. Other than my novel, the year 2015 also saw Manjula Padmanabhan's *The Island of Lost Girls* (2015) and *Half of What I Say* by Anil Menon (2015), dystopian visions swimming between fantasy, gender and science fiction.

All these writers of high, urban and literary fantasy however were completely overshadowed and overwhelmed by the big brother of fantasy, the epic variety, variously placed, according to one's religious beliefs, exposure and the narrative style, in the literary, history, non-fiction, religion and fiction shelves: Mythology with a capital 'M'.

That however, my friends, was four years ago. Long in the annals of history as book trends go. A shelf, carrying the metaphor forward, needs more books, more variety to make it a concrete genre in any language. Just a few months before the third in *Anantya Tantrist Mysteries*, *The Rakta Queen* (2018) was released, I stood browsing at the newly opened, rather glistening Blossoms Book House in Bangalore and saw a section, a shelf if you will, dedicated to Indian fantasy and science fiction. Oh, yes. You heard that right.

We, the Indian fantasy and SF writers, have our own shelf now. All thanks to the explosion of debutants in the last couple of years. Sukanya Venkataraghavan released *Dark Things* (2016), a fantastical romance with a yakshi anti-heroine who faces her own goddess's wrath over a mortal. Indra Das came up with his literary masterpiece and award-winning *The Devourers* (2016), a lyrical shape-shifter tale. Mythological writers turned to fantasy too: Krishna Udayasankar brought out *Immortal* (2016) turning the villainous mythological character Ashvathama into a historian professor while Anuja Chandramouli played with an urban fantasy by turning her world-saving human protagonist Agni in *Yama's Lieutenant* (2016).

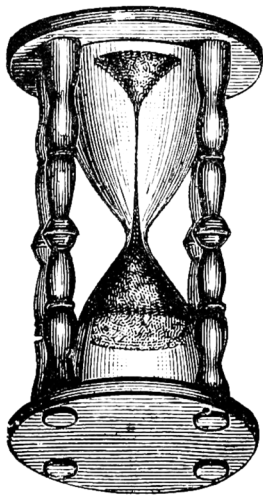
The year 2017 saw Tashan Mehta's *The Liar's Weave*, a play on magic realism with a protagonist who can change reality with lies; Krishna Trilok's epic fantasy *Sharikrida*, a bloody fantasy set in India's broken future; and the supernatural thriller *The Demon Hunter of Chottanikara* by SV Sujatha. Other than my book, Achala Upendran debuted her *The Sultanpur Chronicles: Shadowned City* about an empire set during the Human-Rakshasa wars. The year 2018 was also the year of anthologies with Vandana Singh's short stories in *Ambiguity Machines and Other Stories* and *The Best Asian Speculative Fiction* with a collection of stories from the Indian subcontinent. The two books in 2019 I can't wait to get my hands on include the upcoming anthology by Hachette, *Magical Women*, which is a collection of fantasy written by female authors and *Gun Island*, a climate fiction novel by acclaimed author Amitav Ghosh. Oh yes, speculative fiction in India has been brought back to life, with its own shelf life. Excuse the pun.



The End of History, the Beginning of Hers

A lost tale reconstructed from the Byzantine chronicle of 1453

Ádám Gerencsér



A portent of imminent defeat hung heavily in the air. This day of reckoning had been put off for generations by the forefathers of the city's current inhabitants, in turn by diplomacy, by cunning or deceit, at times by feigned fealty and tributes, but always with an increasing sense of humiliation. The impoverished inheritors of Christendom's Eastern capital had fought a forlorn struggle to stem the tide of their decline, as their empire aged and wilted in the shade cast by its young and powerful neighbour, the harbinger of a new prophet promising conquest and mastery over ever more chattered infidels.

Tomorrow, the harvest. What Crusaders had sown two and a half centuries ago, the sword, nay, the scythe of Islam would finally reap. With each passing lifetime, fortresses fell, land was laid waste, fiefdoms splintered, dynasties fought over dwindling mementos of past glory. For each mistrusted ally, two loyal enemies were made and the people of the soil were crippled by soldiering and levies of taxation. The territory crumbled and contracted like a tightening noose, until nothing but a claim to titular figments stretched beyond the ramparts. Owned, perhaps, but not governed. Even *Constantinopolis* was a ghost of its former self, with more stones than menfolk, more bastions than arms to man them. And for the past two moons a resolute foe on all sides, wearing down what remained, preparing for the morrow's final assault. The Occident had sent blessings but no ships to their rescue.

But now the city was awake with chants of hope and consolation. The emperor Constantine, eleventh to carry the Name, had summoned the Patriarchs, the generals of the army, the admirals of the fleet, the magistrates of the districts, the priests, monks, merchants and mendicants. And the women, huddling their children, too soft to fight, too scared to sleep, sensing despair on pale adult faces. Processions with all the paraphernalia of devotion. In the church of Holy Wisdom, Romans and Greeks saying mass together at last, clinging to prayer for reassurance. And what prayer! Supplications of a mindfulness only produced on mortality's verge.

"I had looked into the future and did not like what I saw. I besieged Him for His permission to intervene. And now I take form."

On the ceiling of the *Hagia Sophia*, obscured by the scented smoke from a forest of candles, a mosaic on the right apse appeared to move. The slight alteration of form at first remained subtle and was perhaps dismissed as a mirage by the devoted who witnessed it privately. The archangel seemed to slowly spread her wings and firm her grip on the golden staff. She gently drew towards herself the orb in her left palm, which intimated familiar outlines: a walled city perched on the tip of a peninsula, folded into a narrow, lengthy bight and nestled by a great waterway.

The ceremony was interrupted by a breath of collective awe as tiny cubes of cut stone began to rain down from the arch of the apse. The winged messenger literally stepped out of the masonry and crashed to the ground, indenting the tiled floor with her knees. The impact echoed through the vaulted dome like the recoil of Ottoman siege batteries. Then silence.

She only spoke for a moment, words uttered in the Language, her voice intent and clear.

“Many of you will die tomorrow. Repent and He shall accept you into heaven. But if you live, then stand your ground and I will deliver you victory.”

Holy water still pearling on his regal armour, crying the tears of a lifetime’s uncertain faith thus vindicated, the *Basileos* was first to kneel before her and embrace her feet in the relief of surrender. The prelates and the congregation gazed on, numb with catharsis. Yet the angel enfolded Constantine in her arms, pulled him up and kissed his temple.

“I saw that you would die with honour, so you shall live. In His name you still rule.”



They beheld her soaring on the parapet of the *Mesoteichion*, at the moment when ladders went up against the whole length of the wall from the *Propontis* to the Golden Horn and the serried ranks of warriors assailed the breaches lacerated by Turkish bombards. She ascended with wings outstretched, then plunged into the mass of bodies, helmets, pikes and lances.

“Forgive me.”

She struck with elemental force, the impact scattering a cloud of flesh and material. Battalions of men were knocked over and cast afield, or left lying shattered, semi-conscious of blood seeping from torn eardrums. A blur of blade-like feathers tore through confused lines of *janissaries*, *spahis* and *topchis*, leaving concentric circles of devastation in their wake.

Once the damage was sufficient to make the outcome a foregone conclusion, and the angel was confident that the resolve of the defenders was thus steeled, she shot forward across the Horn. The Sultan's golden-red tent commanded the height of Galata hill, from whence Mehmed could observe the entire field of battle, then the city and behind it, the sea. Proper form required that he be seated, on a portable throne, or a white horse, but now he stood erect, bitterly fixated on a spectacle of the impossible. Allah had never shown himself to his worshippers and yet was saving that whore, *Byzantium*.

The apparition knew the power of words and left courtiers and guards unharmed as she landed with the softness of benevolent judgment. A tall seraphine shadow against the midday sun, she threw the remnant of a horse-tailed banner at the Sultan's feet and gently laid a hand on his throat.

"You will leave *Rumelia* and never cross the *Bosporus* again."

With the realisation of his life spared, his campaign lost and his creed made nought, the ruler whispered acquiescence. The angel released her grip and gave him a second glance before taking to the air.

"Convert. Spread the faith. You could still be of use."

After the dead had been buried, and the probing dusk was lit up by torches - not to scorch, but to illuminate - the Emperor and his Patriarchs ascended to the roof loggia of the monastic library where the messenger landed to rest. Approaching her with the shy, impassioned love of freshly adopted orphans, Constantine dispensed with thanks and addressed what mattered to them most. Was this miracle a fleeting sign? Would she disappear by the morning?

Would the city have to fight another day, left to rely once again on desperate human efforts for its survival?

Yet wings folded, legs crossed and brows serene, the visitor seemed comfortable.

"I will stay, if needs be, until a hundred generations grow old."

Over the city, death-bound yesterday, now preserved and born anew, the angel's gaze caressed a starlit, virgin horizon of infinite potential.

"Don't fear. Hell has no power but over the mind. It softens the virtuous and flatters the vicious. Its might relies on the meekness of good men. I will make you strong."

As the incantations of triumphant oratories rose to the balcony of the monastery, her thoughts drifted from the present. She envisioned the building of armies and fleets, foundries and siege engines, the sending of emissaries to the realms of Christendom, a personal apparition at the Papal Council, the founding of new schools, academies and hospitals, hastening the advance of civilisation for the ennoblement of a race fashioned to her liking. A succession of souls living disciplined lives of faith and valour. A world of glorious victories, then lawful peace and pious order. And glancing further into her immortal future, she saw limitless promise: a pilgrim armada of obedient starships ploughing the depths of space, forever expanding her regency. An empire uniting all under heaven.

Leaning intently over sprawling maps of Europe, the Holy Land and the Silk Road under the insurgent light of her own Morning Star, she could not help but utter in exultation:

"My kingdom come. My will be done."

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