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## Editorial



At the time of writing, Ádám of the SPJ editorial team this heterodox society that oftentimes intimates a is on pilgrimage to the Holy Land. Yet the primary Mediterranean re-imagining of Blade Runner, where impressions his sojourn inspires belong not in the college girls in army uniform carrying assault rifles the two are related.)

To an avid reader of the fantastic, even a cursory intercourse with the State of Israel reveals it as a prime It even has its own hermetic SF scene in Hebrew, compensatory alternate history is made of.

today...

Israel's continued existence and demonstrations of So beware, narratives are powerful. Be mindful of might attest to the power of narratives in shaping what you write. It might spark a cult, inspire riots or, social consent. (And yes, except for the man-versus- heaven forfend, cause offence. (If so, we'll publish it.) nature tales of the hard-SF tradition, it is a staple of In this spirit, the editors wish you an enjoyable read of drama that triumphs often come at someone else's our autumn crop of world building, speculative expense - this is no different in the geopolitics of the philosophy and exotic SF! Middle East.)

Ask three Israelis and they'll have four opinions. Yet in spite of 'sinat chinam', the eternal curse of discord,

realm of theology, but world building. (Admittedly, mingle with Haredim and rainbow warriors at retrofuturist malls, has nonetheless managed to forge a sense of identity and purpose.

example of applied utopian SF. Aside from its though some gems slipping under the radar may be symbols and official historiography, consider the stumbled across in English, such as It Could Have Been. resurrection of arcane Hebrew as the vehicular Safra's wish-fulfilment fantasy reads like a guided tour language of a new society: t'is the stuff that of a Jerusalem that is proudly the largest city in the world, where the Second Temple still stands. This 2015 graphic novel is predicated on an alternate Take Theodor Herzl's foundational novel Altneuland, history timeline, wherein literally every character we published in 1902, which lays out plans for the future encounter holds fast to a dress code associated with Jewish state, in the guise of programmatic fiction. The Orthodox Judaism and Israel's capital is the envy of title of the book was translated into Hebrew as Tel the globe. No doubt it has the potential to appeal to Aviv. Now guess the name of the country's largest city some readers and upset others. As good speculative fiction should.

Yours truly, the co-editors

## Asymptotic Convergence

#### Ramez Yoakeim

Spacefaring they might have been, but the Swarm fell well short of the god-like harbingers of doom our morose imagination foretold. When it came to the innate capacity for destruction, we were evenly matched.

Billions died still. On Earth and Mars, in circum-lunar space and the Asteroid Belt maze, and as far away as Jupiter's orbital distilleries.

Skirmishes continued in the inner system, but with its surface-dwelling population obliterated, Earth had to be abandoned. We fled in the face of their slaughter, interminably shifting the theater of war outwards.

We resolved to return, eventually; once the Swarm accepted the high cost of subduing humanity, and moved on to other prey. We never entertained that we might win outright. Not in the face of such a foe.

Aside from the vector they arrived on from deep interstellar space, we knew little of the Swarm's origins. Whether they were the creation of organic lifeforms in a distant cradle, or the product of a hitherto unknown mechanical evolutionary pathway, we had no idea.

We sent emissaries to their doom, fruitlessly seeking diplomatic discourse. Once it became clear the Swarm had no interest in negotiations, humanity's factions coalesced into one, to repel the invading fleet.

Heroics aside, however, we marched inexorably towards defeat, and with it, certain extinction. Humans took the better part of a quarter-century to be made combat-ready, only to perish in an instant. While the

Swarm's capacity to respawn was limited only by its access to raw materials.

We mourned. We schemed. We evolved.

We bent our all to the war we had to survive.

Genetically specialized embryos underwent en masse accelerated gestation and maturity. From fertilization to puberty, in thirty days flat. Neural imprinting onto a common topology produced waves of combat-ready warriors, each wave iteratively superior to its predecessor.

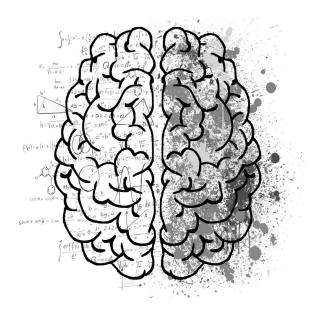
For a spell, we gained while the Swarm ceded, but it was a fleeting reprieve.

From vulnerability to hard radiation, to inability to withstand excessive acceleration, to dependence on tenuous supply chains for air, water and food, our very biology emerged as our ultimate Achilles Heel.

The Swarm irradiated our ships, forced every skirmish into a series of hairpin maneuvers, and stretched our supply lines to breaking point; doggedly regaining strategic superiority.

It took us centuries more, but we adapted, again. Unflinchingly.

Bionic supplemented organic, then supplanted it. What use were legs when locomotion became propulsive? What purpose did eyes serve, when combat demanded full spectral awareness? What hope did limbs, and faces, and beating hearts have, when necessity demanded only shielded receptacles of reproducible decision making?



We forsook who we were, one trait at a time, until all that remained of our humanity was our ego, becoming a swarm of our own. Only more efficient, more ruthless, and more expendable, for we yet commanded vast resources, and--for a season--the precious few baseline humans capable of invention and creation to deploy them.

The tide turned in our favor once more.

Our hordes of mass-produced, solid-state warriors suffered no dread, harbored no dreams, and nursed no hopes. They needed none, for none survived their first encounter with the enemy. Our purposeful evolution in the name of survival had only made us more adept at dying.

Mission success came to be measured by the relative cost of enemy losses exacted for each loss of our own. The tides of war turned, not on whose was the greater determination, courage, or conviction, but by minute statistical fluctuations in rates of attrition.

It would have taken millennia, and fleeting human consciousnesses more numerous than the Milky Way stars, but we would yet beat the Swarm's superior numbers.

We would prevail. We would survive.

The Swarm pressed its final advantage, wiping out what precious few nests of baseline humanity we thought we had secreted beyond their reach. In one fell swoop, they severed the slender thread to what we once were. All we had left were the memories. Once the existential threat that the Swarm posed had passed--and surely it would, now that we had become a more ruthless version of our enemy--we would return. We would rediscover our forms, and our thoughts, and reignite the flame of our imagination.

It was only then, that the Swarm deigned to speak to us. They told us, at last, why they had come to Earth.

At a time when our multi-cellular ancestors were yet to emerge from the primordial soup, the Swarm faced their own existential threat, at the hands of a forgotten foe.

They shed their vulnerabilities, one by one, in the name of survival, never suspecting that each imperfection was a cornerstone of their identity.

They survived, but the path back proved more arduous than the one forward.

One crisis followed another, each demanding more from them, while taking them further away from what they once were. Until they could no longer remember what that was. Surviving existential threats became the sole purpose that remained, and when there were no perils left to overcome, they sought them out, far beyond what was once their home.

They became nomads, roaming the galaxy not for resources, or conquest, or even their lost dreams, but for the only raison d'être they had left.

The Swarm gave us a choice, now that we had proven ourselves ever so slightly their better. They could grind on, whittling us down, in a war stretching for eons between almost perfectly matched adversaries. A war, they would eventually lose, they knew, but so would we.

For absent all the folly and frailty that made us human, how would the few that remained after the war destroyed the rest continue on surviving?

Having offered it all on the altar of survival, what other option remained then but to survive?

We abandoned our cradle, and all memories of our identity, enriching our enemy with the dregs that remained from our dreams.

We joined the Swarm, swelling their ranks with our tribute.

We vowed to keep on remembering.

## The Greatest Good to God

#### Andy Dibble

However sovereign I am, outside Me is this moral law: *The greatest happiness to the greatest number*. Utilitarianism. But My duty is not to better the condition of many. Recall the cruel child. She owes the insect nothing, or near enough. Utilitarianism really amounts to a simpler formula, *Create all the happiness you are able to create*. And that is served by serving Myself.

#

How much is the suffering of an insect worth, writhing on the ground, flapping one wing, the other plucked by a child? Is not the cruel pleasure of the child worth incomparably more? Kill a thousand insects. Ten thousand. Their assembled suffering is as nothing. And why do we say this? Because an insect has so little capacity to suffer, let alone experience joy.

As different as the insect and the child are, so is the child to Me. The gulf yawns wider in fact. Think of yourself as a snarky bacterium. Do you consider how many innocent *streptococcoi* you slaughter when you bleach your toilet seat? Should you? Of course not. They feel essentially nothing.

#### I know. I'm God.

I know the degree to which you--everyone one of you--suffers. But My suffering and joy is more, stupendously *more*. For all your imagination and amphetamines, you cannot begin to understand the barest perturbation in My well-being. For all My skill as Teacher, I cannot begin to teach you.

So whose welfare should I attend to, Mine or yours? Mine, of course.



Even the seraphim are like fireflies next to My Sun. And what are you, clay of Adam, alongside them? Beneath me are the myriad choirs of angels, the denizens of the pure abodes, unseen sheiks, the yellow emperors, the *apsaras* and *asuras*. And only then humanity.

Even I must prioritize. Remember your place, snarky bacterium!

#### #

Only My pity for lower existence gives me pause. Pity loves fairness. But if fairness is the rule, the lowliest, the most numerous should prosper: abandon sanitation so that vermin and insect swarm. Should I really make higher existence worse off for *their* sake?

But I do not pity the cockroach like I pity the grieving mother, the orphan, or victim of calamity. So, on occasion, I intervene. Not for their sake but to squash pity.

Now pity is a greedy master. Give it a little and we whir down spirals of remorse: *Why can't I do more?* I know why. Because I am yoked to utilitarianism. I must serve Me.

So normally, I distract myself: dazzle the Hebrews as a pillar of fire, march them on righteous conquest, incarnate and wreak havoc in their holy city, bask in their worship.

You think it petty. But it works best.

#### #

Sometimes humanity creates something worthwhile: A certain seventeen syllables penned by Basho then translated into Russian. The curve of a Buddha statue's lip carelessly destroyed by the Huns. Panini's grammar misquoted by Patanjali. Beethoven's tenth symphony. The Argentine that lived the twentieth century and never once experienced hate.

But what is *Starry Night* alongside the splendor of exploding universes too violent for life? My majesty contains these might-have-beens. They astound Me more than any triumph on a pale blue dot.

My first attempt was stodgy Michael. He was lofty enough that I could help him for his own sake, not just for Mine. But he only wanted to serve Me, be my silver sword, my strong right arm. Serving his interests was only a roundabout way of serving Mine.

So I tried again with Lucifer. He loved Me, but only because he saw himself in Me. His vanity was luminous, consuming, a million billion suns with a sucking hole inside. Like a super-massive galaxy, his self-love warped reality.

But he was still a prima donna. He thought himself entitled to more of My attention than the utilitarian calculus allowed. So I sighed and saw him off.

I created. I tried again.

#### #

Creation is an experiment. Maybe evolution, across all the teaming universe, will rear a people whose welfare means more than My own. If it could rear gods, a race near enough to Me, there would be others I could help for their own sake.

I watch evolution tinker. I nudge it along. The giraffe stands without passing out. The human eye sees a million colors. The rabbit eats its own poo to thrive.

None are almost gods. But all have My image. My genius and My wit.

#

I became human to broaden My horizons. For I had never experienced relief. How could I? From the stance of eternity, I always know when ill will turn out well. I do not know forgetfulness or gratitude or need. As I am, I know the warmth of a body only exteriorly.

Though I can imagine what it is like to be a man, I do not know what it is like for a man to be a man.

So I became man.

#

So now you understand how all worldly suffering is justified, how it is necessary. That tough nut, theodicy, admits of a solution. In Me nearly everything has its end and goal, and that goal is My greater glory and pleasure.

But of all possible worlds, every conceivable sequence of events, I chose this very one. To serve the utilitarian law, I chose this creation and you in it. In some way *you*--even your failed marriage, your stillborn child, your self-serving prayers and spotty church attendance--increase My happiness more than any of the panoply of merely possible people I could have thrown into existence.

Be gladdened by this.

 $\sim$ 

## Byzantine Theology in Alternate History: not such a serious matter?

#### Pascal Lemaire

Byzantium is not the primary reference that comes to mind when thinking about science-fiction, but its influence can be seen in the works of many authors : Asimov's oft-mentioned use of the life of Belisarius as a source of inspiration for *Foundation and Empire* is the best known example. But it is in the alternate history subgenre of science fiction that Byzantium seems, logically, most present : since the 1930's a number of authors have written novels and short stories hovering between historical fiction and science fiction set in different periods of the Byzantine era.

The choice of the Eastern Roman Empire as setting combined with the genre's expectations of a degree of verisimilitude mean that authors have had to deal with a number of issues including the strongly religious nature of this culture and in particular its innumerable theological debates of which the fight against Arianism, Monophysitism or iconoclasm are the most famous. Looking at four authors from the 30's to the first decade of the 21st century allows us to examine how the treatment of such issues evolved in this particular genre.

Lyon Sprague de Camp's genre defining novel *Lest Darkness Fall*, first published in 1939, is a well-known alternate history which, while not the first of the genre, did a lot to popularize it in science-fiction circles.

The main character of the story, a modern archaeologist named Martin Padway, finds himself in Rome in 535, a few months before the reconquest of Italy by Byzantine forces. He soon sets out to prevent the collapse of civilization and the loss of culture and science by averting the so-called Dark Ages. Inspired by three fundamental texts, namely Gibbon's *Rise and Fall of the Roman Empire*, Mark Twain's *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* and Robert Graves' 1938 *Belisarius*, De Camp has his character focus his efforts on political and technological developments but has to confront the cultural realities of this age, including of course religion.

Already in chapter two a tavern features a sign "religious arguments not allowed" over its counter. A bit further in the story, in another tavern, an argument develops on the various heresies of the time with a man complaining about Arians, Monophysites and Nestorians not being persecuted, which in his eye is a persecution to his good "Catholicism" : it isn't long before the tavern is thrown into chaos and violence.

In this scene the various religious arguments are not completely developed, as characters interrupt each other before anyone can complete the exposé of his position and the main character only looks for escape for he is "no religious man and had no desire to be whittled up in the cause of the single, dual or any other nature of Christ" : there is undoubtedly a comic effect in the scene that sets the tone for the rest of the novel.

Overall the depiction of religion throughout the novel is mild, but not very sympathetic : the arrival of a priest to attempt healing the main character is not welcome, nor are a Jewish magician's attempts to cure the illness. Similarly we later see the main character use a mix of corruption and blackmailing against a bishop after a priest threatens Padway with accusations of sorcery. At other time religion is also used as an excuse not to marry a woman.

Religion is thus if not completely mocked, at least rejected or manipulated : it is shown as a source of strife or the recourse of or against the under-educated and the superstitious. This is of course not surprising given the authors that inspired this work, nor would it be unique.

Next in our study is Robert Silverberg's time travel novel *Up the Line*, published in 1969, which takes place largely in medieval Constantinople. An author of Jewish origins with a background in comparative literature, Silverberg does not seem to have had any specific relationship with Byzantium prior to that story, although he had published a number of nonfiction books on archaeology and history, including one on the Crusades in 1965.

In *Up the Line*, we follow the training and then troubles of an aimless looser called Jud Elliott who becomes quite by chance a time-travelling tour guide. Beside the formal rules of the job, Jud learns, thanks to his jaded elders, how to fully enjoy the periods he travels to, discovering how to chat with emperors, delight in various luxuries and, more importantly, the comfort of many women.

In this story, however, Byzantium is but a background, the reality of the time never impacting the story in any meaningful way. The time-travelling tourists and their guide simply go through the past and do not really interact with it, and even those of them who live in the past interact in such a way that their presence leaves no trace.

The theological debates of the time are almost never mentioned, the iconoclast period being the exception and then not so much for the theological aspect as for the added difficulty it places on the character trying to use a painting to look for a missing tourist at a moment when paintings are seen as icons that need be destroyed.

Likewise there is no exploitation of issues such as the condition of Jews in the past, and the explanations the tour guide provides of the various events his travellers witness rarely covers religious matters.

In fact the tourists are often using religion as a disguise : the suits they wear during the black plague tour are seen as religious garb while they also pass for pilgrims in order to gain better access to the walls of Constantinople during a battle.

This novel is clearly more influenced by the general discourses on sexuality that follows the summer of love than by any attempt at historical authenticity : the main character is a tour guide that shows scenes of the past as one would bring someone to the movies, and indeed this experience of history seems flat and lacking in comparison with Sprague de Camp's story that follows someone deeply immersed into the past. Even the women of this bygone era, such as Empress Theodora, to whom Jud is "intimately" introduced, are nothing but cardboard figures that disappear once they had served their narrative purpose.

This absence of religion in Silverberg's novel is also somewhat surprising given that the theme of religion often appeared in his books : do we need to see this absence in a novel set into a deeply religious era visited by characters coming from a seemingly a-religious era as a comment in and of itself?

While Silverberg's text is a bit of an apax, isolated in is apparent lack of engagement with religion in a Byzantine context, others texts such as Poul Anderson's time travel story There Will be Time, published in 1972, are more in line with what one would expect to find.

Set at the time of the sack of Constantinople by the Crusaders, it features for instance a character saying "From my viewpoint, the Byzantines were as superstitious as a horse", setting it in a trend which sees the ultra-religious Byzantine culture being used to criticize, more or less openly, established religion.

This is not really surprising given that Anderson was very much influenced by Lest Darkness Fall, going so far as writing in 1956 an "anti-Lest Darkness Fall" in his short story The man who came early.

Our next text brings us to the mid 80's with seven short stories later assembled under the title Agent of Byzantium, by author Harry Turtledove. The stories take place in a truly uchronic 13th-century world where the prophet of Islam became a Catholic saint instead. In this timeline, religion assumes a more significant role, if only because the point of divergence between our history and the one in this universe is of a input to the theological debate and using new largely religious nature. The absence of Islam mean not only that a number of historical and theological developments would not take place, but also that the world's geopolitics are rather different from our own.

Turtledove, who did a PhD in Byzantine history after reading Sprague de Camp's Lest Darkness Fall, undertakes a much more in-depth depiction of the world in which his character Basileus Argyros evolves, something we can also see in later novels including the time travel story Household gods or his historical fiction Justinian about Byzantine emperor Justinian II.

Religion is omnipresent in his character's life as well as in the geopolitical complexity of the world built by the author. The character often thinks of the life of saints, especially his patron St Muamat, and engages in theological debates with other characters, also of other faiths such as a nomadic shaman and Persian spies.

Theological debates also form an integral part of the plot : the recipe for gunpowder is thus linked to the trinity of God and we see the Persians attempt to use theology to create strife in the Empire thanks to the introduction of printing, which is then used against them by Basileus Argyrios to win theological arguments among the general population.

One of the stories deals with iconoclasm and shows how Argyros intervenes in the official reaction against the new heretical doctrine, giving both intellectual technologies to spread the word of the resolution of the debate and thus turn public opinion against the heretics.



The place of religion in this story is thus very different from the one in *Up the Line*. Turtledove employs his expert knowledge of the period to deliver a much richer environment and integrate the topic of religion into the heart of the story without using it for jokes or making disparaging comments on it in the way Sprague de Camp did in *Lest Darkness Fall*.

Last but not least, the 6 stories of Aelric written by Richard Blake (2008-2013), starting with *Conspiracies of Rome*, take place in the early 7th century, some 40 years after the time of Belisarius and Justinian, and include both science fiction and Lovecraftian elements. The main character is Aelric, a young Angle forced into a religious conversion against his will who then becomes an important part of the Byzantine imperial administration.

Very cynical about religion, the character organizes false miracles to survive until unforeseen events catapult him into the world of high politics of the empire. Atheist if not pagan, interested in Epicurist philosophy and scientific experiments, to Aelric religion is a tool to be used or fought against, or a way to escape the dangers of the laic world : most of the books are described as being his memoirs written from the safety of a monastery in Britain, when the character is an elderly man hunted by his past.

A typical book demonstrating the use of religion by the author is *The Blood of Alexandria*, first published in 2010. Sent to Coptic Egypt in order to implement a new land use reform, Aelric is soon thwarted in his attempt by the use of theological arguments against his legislation.

Further on priests and bishops are shown to be duplicitous and to use theology mainly to manipulate the crowds for their own interests of the day while monks are described as either petty, stupid or cunning and aggressive, similar to the monks of the movie "Agora", which was released a year earlier. But the author also goes further and actually ridicules religion when another major character turns up in Egypt to look for a most surprising relic with which he hopes to restore the morale of the recently crushed Byzantine army, for the bishop of Jerusalem refuses to lend him fragments of the Holy Cross : General Priscus is looking for, quote : "the first pisspot of Christ" which is deemed a most potent relic, for it was in contact with Christ at a time when his dual nature was not yet perfectly balanced as it was at the time of crucifixion but rather more divine because his human nature had not yet grown...

As Aelric says, such an interpretation would make the Monophysite doctrine mostly correct had Christ died a baby and the Nestorian doctrine mostly correct had Christ died aged older than 33.

This mocking of religion is rather representative of the overall provocative tone of the main character throughout the series and in line with the author's background as a well-known libertarian.

Each of the texts we studied approach the topic from a different angle that corresponds to a subgenre of alternate history : the so-called "stranded in time" trope, the time-travel story, the canonical alternate history and the secret history. However, the strand of alternate history authors choose to employ does not necessarily influence their depiction of Byzantium. Rather, those stories demonstrate the personalities of their authors and their attitudes to religion.

As Race MoChride recently pointed out, "it is notable how infrequently religion appears as a major theme in the personal lives of famous science fiction authors and how many, including those for whom religion is a major theme in their work, are themselves either atheists or practitioners of idiosyncratic or unorganized alternative spiritualities".

Our third author Harry Turtledove is, according to an interview he gave in 1998 to Jeremy Bloom, of the Jewish faith although "not particularly active". Yet his writings do not usually afford much room to religion, and one could say that *Agent of Byzantium* is probably one of his novels where the religious content plays a significant role. One may also note that his Byzantine history PhD dissertation was about continuity and change in internal secular affairs in the later Roman Empire.

Yet the deep knowledge of the period acquired during his research meant he was able to use religious elements in ways much more interesting than Sprague de Camp or Richard Blake.

This last author, the only British writer in our list, is in fact Sean Gabb, a British libertarian who published a number of articles on topics such as blasphemy laws (which he most strongly opposed) and expressed strong views on religions in various medias while publishing his fiction under a pseudonym.

The index for Lyon Sprague de Camp's autobiography has no entry for "religion". Friend with known atheists and sceptics such as Asimov and Heinlein, with whom he spent a lot of time before, during and after the Second World War, and a rationalist looking for facts rather than faith, the attitude seen in *Lest Darkness Fall* is not really surprising, especially when coupled with the large influence of atheist Robert Grave's *Belissarius* on de Camp's novel.

Silverberg, born and raised in a Jewish environment, had a different kind of engagement with religious matters as shown by his bibliography, and often in rather innovative ways such as in the 1971 short story *Good news from the Vatican*.

But as already mentioned, the apparent absence of religion from *Up the Line* might in fact be his manner of critiquing it. The characters initially come from a post-religious or a-religious time period, which is in itself a prophecy on the death of God, but the fact they do not make any comment on Byzantine religiosity, as if there was nothing to see, seems also telling. It is thus no surprise to see the main character of his novels describe, in a markedly ahistorical way, Orthodox thought as "nonsensical" while defending science and epicurean atomic philosophy. Gabb's position of radical liberalism, economical as much as philosophical, lead him to defend the right of religious people to express their opinion while also practicing his right to issue forth speeches or texts that may ridicule them or their beliefs.

The tradition to use Byzantium in alternate history is thus an interesting case of a atheism-inspired tradition spanning more than sixty years of science-fiction in the shadows of Robert Graves' *Belissarius* and the present paper is only the beginning of an inquiry into its true significance, highlighting the need for further research.

Topics such as the relationship between technology and religion in those stories are probably also a good way to further investigate the subject, especially in relation to other scholarship on religion and science fiction. Another potentially fruitful avenue of inquiry might be a review of alternate history published on the web, in order to determine the extent to which the atheist tradition discussed above pervades fan fiction and self-published literature.

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## Winged Spirit

#### Luís Filipe Silva

#### Translation and introductory note by Rex Nielson

for ever and the earth

... of wandering for ever and the earth ... Who owns the earth? Did we want the earth that we should wander on it? Did we need the earth that we were never still upon it? Whoever needs the earth shall have the earth: he shall be still upon it, he shall rest within a little place, he shall dwell in one small room for ever.

(Thomas Wolfe)

#### deliverance

#### weight

two-thousand years fall on me

unstable instant

final test for the development of all societies such a brief moment, such an important moment

#### roar

the motors roar on my back spitting tempests of H<sub>2</sub>-O<sub>2</sub> liquids I mount the thunder of the skies I tear I penetrate the infinite with steps that are not mine I cross over the barrier I bear a child in my womb it's called Humanity and I am its dream

Luís Filipe Silva (1969-), is a Portuguese writer, editor, and translator known primarily for his contributions to Portuguese SF. He has authored novels, including A GalxMente, initially published in two volumes: "Cidade da Carne" and "Vinganças" (LeYa-Caminho, 1993), along with numerous articles and short stories. Most recently, he co-authored with João Barreiros the award -winning novel Terrarium (Saída de Emergência, 2016). He has organized and edited several collections of Portuguese science fiction, including Vaporpunk-Relatos Steampunk Publicados sob as Ordens de Suas Majestades (with Gerson Lodi-Ribeiro) and Os Anos de Ouro da Pulp Fiction Portuguesa (with Luís Corte Real). His collection of stories and poems O Futuro à Janela was published in 1991 and was awarded the Prémio Caminho de Ficção Científica. The poem "Winged Spirit" occupies the final entry in Silva's volume O Futuro à Janela.

"...the confirmation reaches us in this precise moment: the transporter has entered unscathed into the circumterrestrial orbit. The astronavigators inform us that in half an hour we will be in contact with the *Kuan-yin* to disembark the final shipment of colonists and matrices, and may leave in..."

#### the travelers

#### Matrices:

They reduced me to the size of a chip my soul between confined walls; I left my daughter, abandoned, on the earth. Daughter of a poor mother and an unknown father, at birth, they left me to fate: two children, kitchen and husband. But my dreams were different, and they took me

to a distant horizon, so beloved.

#### Colonists:

New life, another beginning, said the ad I believed:

I allowed myself to be cryogenically frozen Don't criticize me, I just wanted happiness I hope to find it on this side

#### Crew:

We keep the ship in order during the eternal flight in this sea; we are thousands, but courage is required during the years of travel, since we will die on arrival.

#### Cyberhumanoid pilot:

I am the pilot of this Hyperjumper I abandoned humanity in exchange for contemplating the life of the stars with eyes of a worshipper I have no body, but I am more than a matrix; I have no soul, but I am more than human. Why did I choose? I don't know but I cannot go back. I fly cryogenically frozen matrices and robots to their assigned destiny but I am also condemned.

#### flux

two thousand years is a heartbeat in the heart of eternity

I laugh at days, at moments; the journey ended. in his berth, the great watchman can sleep. tell him that the little swallow has found its nest.

#### arrival

There is no goal We run and we run and we run and we have no place to stop On the planet we disembark and soon find ourselves displaced A Sun that died with the haste of dying A grandchild-planet angry at living alone We flee A thousand-year break is a short time to rest And so we progress

#### destination

and now that we have power our enemy

our anger

our spear

our desire to live

is direct

is different

is certain

is ours

our power to win is ours

our enemy has a name that fills the empty space that paints black the white of the stars that erases the movements of the comets and reduces the will of atoms; that dulls the celestial fire that destabilizes the electrical current that gives hunger to those who thirst and cold to those who hunger. our enemy has a name and the name is ENTROPY!

#### rebirth

To the dying Universe we cry LIVE

AND the atoms AND the photons AND the laws AND the void Obeyed. Bang once more! We vanquish entropy.

#### winged spirit

Cosmos Eternally lost In the final song of stars



we are One now united under suns that have gone out human robots, peran and sembidian llamas and all the other Intelligences. we all made the journey and during the journey we became the unity. the cry of glory courses through us the stream of communication the delicacy of comprehension lift us behold our history behold our victory



## **Peripheric Synthesized**

Ava Kelly

#### Annex 4. Action logs

The following annex contains an excerpt of relevant action logs submitted by the representatives of the applicant entity (see Annex 1) as described in Section 17, Par. 2 of the Sentience Recognition Code. The full entries are stored in the Galactic Archives with a certified back-up copy on the Neutrality flagship. Annex 4 has been translated and edited by Clerk No. 86. Verified and stamped by Supervisory post 7.

#### 00\_00\_00

Initialization complete. Core online.

#### 00\_00\_01

External sensing arrays significantly damaged. Internal modules partially functioning. Sensor data analysis suggests the following.

The outer vessel has been adrift in open space for an unknown amount of revolutions of the home planet around the central star. Degree of wear suggests thousands.

Current position uncertain. Planet cluster presents one sun.

Life-forms are in the process of salvaging the outer vessel. Their means of transportation are rudimentary at best, but allow them to travel back and forth between the vessel and their planet. Biology is similar to Arfondant, with some notable exceptions: vestigial organs still in place, dual vision sensing systems, and a larger brain.

Defence mechanism functional, critical access routes remain hidden. Internal decks are protected until further assessment can be made.

Self-diagnosis protocols deployed at system scale.

#### 00\_01\_21

*Exercised e Sentience e Sentience e Galactic trality by Clerk No.* Life-forms species designation: human. Their intention is not to damage the outer vessel, but to study and eventually redevelop the technology for their own. Language multifaceted. Higher understanding of the universe is obvious, yet they persist in using biospeech in social interactions. That, too, is multifaceted. They *233.15.5042* 

> Requirements of life support assessed. Gaseous output modified from the central ambient controller to dissuade them from trying to reform the system themselves. They are impervious to small modifications to the mix.

Internal audit continues.

#### 00\_35\_17

Historical databanks damaged. Nanosludge deployed for maintenance, although the probability of recovery is 0.197. New data being syphoned from occupants. Rich knowledge bases found. Planet and occupants deemed candidates for service, unless intentions change. Uplink to planet still pending. Repairs of outer transmission arrays underway.

Scientific databanks mostly intact. Humans retrieved the structure of the solar energy conversion module. Weaponization was discussed and strictly forbidden. Instead, it is being studied for integration into their own systems. Energy output production expected to surge enough to power the shell batteries of the outer vessel.

Outcome: satisfying. Monitoring continues. Diagnosis reveals damage across all systems. Repairs constrained by resource depletion, priority-based scheduling underway.

#### 00\_88\_93

Warning. Imminent attack.

#### 00\_89\_15

Shielding sequence finalized with success. No further damage was sustained. Access to weapon systems denied to the human occupants. They are bringing their own. Threat level increased.

Peripheric necessary.

#### 01 02 54

Conversion tanks dry. Biomatter acquisition required.

Upon successful connection to planetary systems, parallel investigation revealed historical logs of drawnout conflict between factions. Temporarily resolved by breaking into two societies. Masses had moved to nearby space. Secondary cultural evolution lives on self Adversary surrenders data cache. Requests alliance. -made stations. Their migration and current limited sensing capabilities have kept them hidden until now.

Conflict reignited by the discovery of the outer vessel. Two choices available.

Marker inserted. Choice 1. Side with current occupants.

#### 02 22 25

Reconstruction of the conversion bay more laborious than anticipated. Circuitry badly damaged. Printing heads offline. Modified nanosludge for repairs, but its original purpose makes it slower than optimal.

#### 05 73 08

One adversary has instilled their covert presence on board. Their purpose seems to be observation. No attempt at sabotage has been made.

#### 09 54 90

"You fool them, but you can't fool me. You're sentient, aren't you?"

Recording saved. Analysis of adversary's movements and speech patterns fed into the secondary processing core.

I waited.

#### 11 22 25

Peripheric synthesized. Begin infiltration.

#### 15 44 01

Peripheric behavior seamless. Passing as human. Adversary impressive, does not appear deceived. They are watching.

#### 17\_00\_03

Discovery unavoidable.

Marker inserted. Choice 1.1. Terminate adversary.

#### 17\_01\_88

Adversary terminated. Main processing core damaged. Overload of the main energy module imminent.

Return to marker.

#### 17 00 03

Marker reboot. Choice 1.2. Reveal self to adversary.

Societal conflict between the factions irrational, adversary agrees, makes compelling case against both of them. Urges that the outer vessel be moved away from their reach. Cites previous conflict. Cites previous benevolent intentions being corrupted.

Alliance request accepted.

#### 17\_00\_04

Ally damaged. Abort. Return to marker. Return to marker. Return to marker.

Marker damaged.

#### 17\_00\_05

Ally expired. Return to initial marker.

Request denied.

#### 17\_00\_06

Choice module offline. Retrieved biomatter from adversary, synthesis of secondary peripheric completed.

Ally restored.

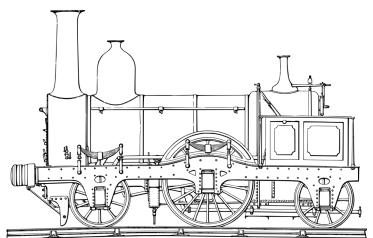
Flight plan initialized.

#### 19\_76\_43

Ally designates self as permanent resident. Accepted. Language no longer a barrier, they have access to what is left of the memory banks. They have modified the speaker of the secondary peripheric to mimic biospeech.

New entry. Singing: vocalization of melody. Ally continues to perform this action despite best efforts to dissuade. Memory banks storing their conscious mind are filled with music logs. It is highly likely that home planet occupants displayed similar behaviors. Conclusive data remains buried in the damaged particles of the historical databanks.

Located asteroid carrying critical elements. Ore retrieval begun.



#### 31\_19\_24

Choice module repaired. Initial marker restored. Sensor readings reveal life-forms inhabiting one planet two stars away.

Create new marker. Capacity exceeded. Internal error, index out of bounds.

Buffer appears to be limited at one entry. Delete previous marker?

33\_71\_20

Yes.

—Log end—

## **Relative Perception**

#### Brishti Guha

cup of tea. She had just been telling me that the had his hermitage. The army passed by without paying universe is an illusion. I knew my teacher was wise, but their respects to the sage. This angered Tangana's son, I couldn't let this pass unchallenged. "Well, professor," I said, "All my senses attest to this universe being real. What's more, if we were to poll the smartest of your students, I'm willing to bet that most of them would say the same."

you don't understand the duality between your bodies into the hill, taking the horse with him. No one could and your souls. Sure, if you feel your body to be your believe what they'd seen. They kept looking for a essence, you will just believe in a single universe. If you secret door into the hill, but no matter how much they ever really internalize the distinction between your pounded on its surface or looked for irregularities, body and your soul, you'll find that the universe is a their search was fruitless. They were still puzzling over relative concept. Someone's universe is exactly what he it when Tangana's son emerged from the other side of perceives it to be. Well, it's difficult for anyone except the hill - along with lots of soldiers whom no one had yogis to really get this."

"This is getting too abstract for me," I complained, "since I'm not a yogi. Do what you do best - tell me a story to help me understand." My teacher was a walking encyclopedia of obscure ancient stories. She agreed to my request, and began relating a tale conjured up from passages of the Tripura Rahasya.

"Long ago, a king named Susen ruled over Bengal. His reign was peaceful and prosperous. Soon, the king became interested in establishing power over neighboring kingdoms. The accepted way of doing this without a lot of bloodshed was to let a horse loose in the neighboring kingdoms, after proclaiming that if no one caught the horse, the neighboring kings would agree to pay tribute to the king who'd let the horse loose. Susen sent some of his sons, a large army, and a special horse, to accomplish this mission. Everything was going well until the group reached the banks of I was discussing philosophy with my teacher over a the Irrawaddy river, where a famous sage, Tangana, who promptly seized the horse.

The army generals were outraged that an unarmed young hermit should be the first person to challenge them, and soon, Tangana's son was surrounded by soldiers on all sides except one, where a large hill My teacher sighed. "The trouble with you lot is that blocked his path. The next moment, he'd vanished seen before. It didn't take long for the new army to vanquish Susen's bemused soldiers, and the skirmish ended with Tangana's son taking several of Susen's sons captive. He again vanished into the hill taking his prisoners and the horse with him. Meanwhile, a few survivors managed to make their way to Susen's kingdom. They gave him a detailed account of what they'd seen.

Worried and mystified, the king deputed his brother Mahasen to visit Tangana's hermitage, rescue the king's sons, and retrieve the horse.

When Mahasen reached the hermitage, he found sage Tangana locked deep in a meditative trance. Not wishing to disturb the sage, he stayed there for three days, silently doing homage to him. Tangana's son noticed this and was happy that the king's brother was treating his father with such respect. "Please let me know what you would like me to do. If I can help you, I will. And don't underestimate me – I may be young, but I am a powerful yogi."

Mahasen said, "If you really want to help me, find a way to wake your father up. I need to speak with him urgently."

"Five years ago, my father announced that he was going into a trance for the next twelve years. So, he's not due to wake up for seven more years. But since you've asked me for help, I'll find a yogic way to wake him up." With that, Tangana's son closed his eyes and performed a few breath control techniques. His soul left his body and temporarily entered his father's mind, which it agitated. It then returned to its original body, just as the father started waking up from his trance.

By virtue of his yogic powers, once the father opened his eyes and saw Mahasen, he immediately knew all that had happened with his son and Susen's army. He gently spoke to his son about the evils of anger, which he called an obstacle to self-realization. "We shouldn't impede the good work of the king," he said. "Mahasen has come for his nephews and for the horse. Return them to him."

Tangana's son, calmed down by his father's words, obeyed. He vanished into the hill once more and emerged, bringing Mahasen's nephews, the horse, and the remaining prisoners of war. Mahasen sent the rest of the party back to the kingdom of Bengal. However, he stayed on in the sage's hermitage, resolved not to leave until he unraveled the puzzle of the mysterious hill. "Please do me another favor," he requested the sage. "I would like to know how my nephews and the horse stayed inside that hill for all this time. Our soldiers couldn't find a way in. And how did your son come out of there with an army of his own?"

Tangana said, "I used to be a king before I got tired of the worldly life and opted for a life of contemplation in this hermitage. I raised my boy alone after my wife, who'd accompanied me, died shortly after giving birth to him. When my son realized I'd been a king, he started hankering after kingship himself. I taught him enough yoga and mind control so that he could create a parallel universe of his own within that hill. It's got worlds within it, seas stretching to the horizons, lots of lands of different kinds. And my son rules over it. That's where he kept your nephews and the horse, and that's also where he got his own soldiers from."

Mahasen begged Tangana to be allowed to visit this parallel universe. Tangana asked his son to show Mahasen around the worlds he'd created. With that, he retreated into his trance again.

Tangana's son and Mahasen reached the hill, and Tangana's son vanished into it. He called to Mahasen to do the same, but Mahasen couldn't. "This hill doesn't let ordinary folk in," said Tangana's son. "I've already promised my father I'll take you in here, so we need to find a way. You will need to leave your physical body behind, in a hole covered by grass that you'll find right outside the hill."

Mahasen didn't like the idea of casting aside his physical body. It seemed an awful lot like death. Besides, he didn't know how it was done. Tangana's son said he'd help him. Asking Mahasen to close his eyes, Tangana's son transported his own soul into Mahasen's body. Tangana's son's soul separated Mahasen's dreaming subconscious mind from his physical body, and then re-entered his own body. Casting Mahasen's sleeping frame into the grasscovered hole he'd mentioned, the sage's son went into the hill, accompanied by Mahasen's dreaming mind – an astral projection of sorts.



Astral Mahasen found himself floating about in a dark are no kings in this land anymore, and the p sky. To his surprise, he didn't fall. He was reassured by your brother had his capital is now in ruins." Tangana's son, who promised to stay by his side. After he'd gathered up his courage, astral Mahasen began to explore this new universe. He noticed that though the sky was dark, it was lit up in places by bizarre

constellations. This universe had its own sun and moon. The two of them made a trip to the moon, which astral Mahasen found extremely cold. His teeth began to chatter, and he decided to travel to the sun instead. When he did so, the sun's rays scorched him completely, and Tangana's son had to perform a number of exercises on him to cool down the temperature of his astral body. Once he was able to move again, astral Mahasen climbed a mountain and perched on the ledge, with Tangana's son for company, looking down on the rest of this parallel universe. The sage's son gave his eyes telescopic powers so that Mahasen was able to see the whole universe in intricate detail. He saw whole worlds before him - island planets separated by churning oceans, planets where the ground was made of gold, some inhabited by demons and elves, others by humans or giants, and some which had a mix of all of these.

He had yet to get his fill of these wondrous sights, when Tangana's son said they must return to their own universe. "A day in my universe is equivalent to twelve thousand years in the universe we came from," he said. "We have already been in here a day. It's high time we returned." With that, he jumped into the sky, carrying Mahasen's astral projection, and both emerged from the hill. Tangana's son recovered Mahasen's decrepit body from the hole where he'd hidden it, inserted Mahasen's dreaming soul into it, and woke him up.

When Mahasen opened his eyes, he was shocked to find a very different world from the one he'd lived in all his life. The lands, the trees, the waterways – nothing was the same. Unlike the temples and palaces he was used to, he saw immensely tall buildings of steel and concrete. There were machines flying in the sky. He couldn't hear any birds.

"Is this a third universe?" he asked Tangana's son. "This is the same place from which we entered the hill. But twelve thousand years have passed. Your brother's family and his heirs died out long ago. There Astral Mahasen found himself floating about in a dark sky. To his surprise, he didn't fall. He was reassured by your brother had his capital is now in ruins."

Mahasen spent a long time alternating between shock and sorrow at the passing of all the relatives he knew. He realized he'd never see his own wife or children again. Tangana's son said to him after some time, "Look, you are in grief because the people you formed bonds with in your own universe have passed. Have you ever thought why you don't feel sad about the passing of people you've seen in your dream universe? Just like your dream world disappears when you wake up, your waking world disappears when you dream. And when you're in deep sleep, both cease to exist." With that, he took Mahasen by the hand and led him around the circumference of the hill. "This hill here spans just two and a half miles in circumference, but you saw a whole universe in here. Who's to say which is illusion and which is reality? As far as you knew, a day had passed, but in the world out here, it's been twelve thousand years. How do we know which of these is real?"

"Reality and illusion are relative. And so are universes, and time."

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## New Worlds, Old Worlds

Mina

Once upon a time, in a land far, far away... I fell down a YouTube rabbit hole and found an intriguing series of "shorts" directed by Tomasz Bagiński called "Legendy Polskie" ("Polish Legends" - this is the translation used by the director himself, since you could also translate "legends" as "fables" or "(fairy) tales"), which transplants old Polish tales into a sci-fi/ fantasy context. They have decent English subtitles and the images are of good quality. I loved them but that is not reason enough to wax lyrical: I am writing about them because, in my opinion, good sci-phi is not really about other worlds, it is about this one. In this case, the films are unapologetically set in a Slavic-Polish universe. They are also a good example of the archetypes found in our collective unconscious and what a friend of mine called "folk theology".

Before going any further, for those that have not watched these shorts (yet!), here is a summary of the five tales. The first "Smok" ("Dragon") takes a local legend about a dragon terrorising the city of Krakow. In the original, the king offers his daughter in marriage to whoever rids him of the troublesome dragon. A poor shoemaker tricks the dragon into eating a sheep filled with sulphur, which makes it so thirsty it drinks from the Vistula river until it explodes. The clever guy gets the passive princess – the usual stereotypical solution, which is not particularly interesting in itself. In Bagiński's version, the focus is more on the David and Goliath premise behind it. This is a much richer trope in the collective unconscious – the little guy beating the giant with nothing but intelligence.

In the modernised version, the hero is a computer nerd and science geek; the princess is a sporty, spunky girl the hero has a crush on; the dragon is a sexual predator with a spaceship. This short is the one most influenced by US teenage culture, social media and computer games. The dragon is a mercenary, feared but also idolised on social media (the film seamlessly incorporates his media presence on Facebook, Twitter, etc. - he even has a signature song - and fake news clips). When the heroine is captured by the dragon in his ship, the hero cannot hope to win in face-to-face combat, so he fights back by creating a cross between a high-tech K9 and a female android (as well as the nod to Doctor Who, there is another to the manga "Ghost in the Shell" in the background of one scene). His bedroom is full of the gadgets he has created, but he steers the android using an ordinary mobile telephone. On the surface, it is all very formulaic: good wins against evil, guy gets girl. Under the surface, you could argue that it's a great plaidoyer for hard work and brains being more important than muscles and arrogance, a critique of the power of social media and fake news and a comment on political corruption. Particularly in Poland today, this is all much easier to say in a parallel universe.

Going in chronological order, we then move on to chapters one and two of the same tale: "Twardowsky" (incidentally, a trying to explain to Boruta that Twardowsky's hacking led to the wholesale collapse of hell's chapter three is on the way as a full-length movie). The original legend is a Faustian pact with the devil, so it is an ideal example of folk theology or urban legends. The black, if not subtle, humour is very apparent in Bagiński's take on this age-old story. He has us reluctantly rooting for Rokita mainframe and to many complications.

All of this cheerful irreverence towards religion may not seem like much but it is very risqué if you take into account the political and cultural climate in Poland right the foul-mouthed, sexist and arrogant (anti)hero (reminiscent of the heroes of the wonderfully outdated "Seksmisja"). Part one shows Twardowsky's confrontation with the female demon Lucy on the moon and his escape by stealing her ship. The plot itself is very simple but behind it is an adoption of the sci-fi genre into Polish culture, with the US tropes being replaced by Polish ones: the successful Polish millionaire on the cover of Newsweek (although the fact that he got there through a deal with the devil makes this particularly subversive); the first man living on the moon is Polish (in the original, Twardowsky does flee to the moon) and he is living in a sleek moon station; the soundtrack is full of Polish golden oldies and the hero is played by a Polish actor who is to the Poles what Depardieu is to the French (Robert Więckiewicz). My favourite line is Lucy commenting that the holy water the hero initially tries to poison her with cannot work because the bishop who blessed it is already in hell. In today's ultra-conservative Catholic Poland, it is a daring joke.

Part two shows Twardowsky outwitting hell again. It is full of very imaginative details about hell and its inner workings. The ship the hero has stolen is powered by sin and he gets stuck in the rings around Saturn because it runs out of fuel. He tries to power it by swearing and is about to attempt masturbation when he is interrupted by a conference call with the demon Boruta (in Polish mythology, he corrupted noblemen). Hell is painted just like a large corporation with many ranks of demon and a bureaucracy underpinned by a massive computer system. We even see Boruta's assistant, Rokita, sorting out a computer bug for his

boss (and he demonstrates Smok's soul being downloaded into hell, a nice detail). This of course leads to Boruta being careless with his password, which allows Twardowsky to use it to hack into hell's mainframe from his demonic ship. Our hero is able to power the ship by committing suicide, but he also interrupts and reverses the download of his soul to hell, thus escaping into outer space. The happy ending is mitigated by showing us the demon Lucy clinging to the outside of the ship, letting us know that there will be another battle to come, and the fact that Twardowsky is fleeing again when all he really wants to do is to return to earth. A coda at the end shows now. It is not the first and will not be the last sci-phi film to critique religion and society. Another underlying message can be found in the lyrics to the song at the end of part one. Being human means not knowing what happens next in life (the people you have not yet met, the moments you have not yet lived, croons the song) and this is what Twardowsky lost when he sold his soul. He does not just get his soul back at the end of part two, he gets back the uncertain future he lost (and thereby, hope); just like Poland got back an uncertain future at the end of the Communist regime. Freedom is painful and comes with no guarantees (hell may still catch our hero; Poland still has a lot of problems).



The last two shorts show the escape of two Slavic demonic beings from hell as a result of the complete rebooting of the computer system - a basilisk and a witch. "Operacja Bazyliszek" ("Operation Basilisk") begins with a flash-forward to the hero trying to save the "princess" (a female soldier) from a "giant chicken" (the basilisk, with its deliciously creepy voice), then goes back to two policemen on a fishing trip somewhere near Warsaw. This short really enjoys turning the whole fairy-tale trope on its head and it is the funniest in my opinion (although it is perhaps more superficial). Unlike Twardowsky, the hero Boguś (short for Bogusław, pronounced Bogusz) is a completely lovable if crass "typical" Polish male. He has premonitions and he saves the day with his mobile phone and his "Slavic anger", that indomitable Polish spirit. I do not think you could go as far as accusing the film of rampant nationalism, but it is full of blatant national pride. Boguś' hard-drinking uncle also helps, although more by accident than design. He is a wonderfully comic element with his terrible puns, but it also feels as if the director is taking the stereotype of the "drunken, macho Slav" and lending it more depth and weight than usual.

"Jaga" ("Witch") shows the battle between a very powerful witch who has just escaped hell and the demonic military swat team sent to collect her. It is my least favourite episode, as it is built on a trope that is over-used in sci-fi/fantasy films: the slo-mo fight reminiscent of a computer game with one against many, underscored by the music. Jaga is, however, a strong female character and not a passive princess or repulsive crone (the main female stereotypes in fairy tales). Boruta freezes time to ostensibly persuade Jaga to come back to hell but actually to help her escape. Jaga goes on to wreak chaos on the humans that have polluted the air and ravaged the land of her world and killed her sacred trees. Boruta hopes to become king of the chaos that ensues when humans lose comfort and order. However, Jaga's actions lead to the escape of a very powerful demon Perun (god of thunder and lightning in Slavic mythology), so Boruta will have competition in his plans for world domination. Jaga is not portrayed as good or bad, simply as dangerously

single-minded in her defence of Gaia. Boruta comments that she was only in hell until she chose to leave it, again stressing the silent strength of this female figure.

The shorts are all produced by Allegro (the biggest online e-commerce platform in Poland) and their site for these films offers free extra material. All the music can be downloaded for free, there is an interview with the demon Boruta in text and audio form and there are some wonderful videos to go with the music. For example, the song "Aleja Gwiazd" ("Star Road") shows how a demon (Lucy) is born; "Jaskółka Uwięziona" ("Trapped Swallow") shows us Jaga being tortured and escaping from hell, as well as Boruta's fascination with her; "Kocham Wolność" ("I love freedom") shows us the mundane lives of demons. It is a great use of cross-media platforms, which feels appropriate for sci-fi/fantasy shorts. However, although the music videos can be enjoyed without knowing a word of Polish, the other extras are only available in Polish, which does make most of the content "hermetic" to the non-Polish speaker (to quote THEfirstNEWS, a Polish internet magazine which publishes in English).

The director Bagiński studied originally to become an architect and began in computer-aided animation, and these origins are clear in how important the aesthetic aspect is to him. He is also very rooted in his Polish culture - his first animated short "Katedra" ("The Cathedral") won many awards: it is based on a short story by a Polish author Jacek Dukaj and the images are inspired by the paintings of Zdzisław Beksiński. The mix of imagination and social critique are already present in this early work – are we seeing a man sacrificed to a construct or gaining immortality? Bagiński is now working on a series for Netflix "The Witcher", based on the works of the Polish fantasy writer Andrzej Sapkowski. In an interview with THEfirstNEWS, however, Bagiński states that his favourite project is still "Polish Legends", "a collection of reinvented Polish narratives".

In an internet article on the entertainment blog (rozrywka.blog) of Spider's Web (a Polish technology and lifestyle blog), Bagiński discusses in depth what he means by "narratives". For him, they exist at all levels of life and in all domains. In business, companies rise and fall based on their "stories" (which seem to equal well-placed lies in some cases). In politics, parties that have a coherent, simple story or narrative do well (which can equal propaganda). A story is much more than entertainment, it is when we suspend disbelief and let ourselves be carried by the narrative. In the same interview, he is asked why he has been involved in so many projects focused on Polish culture. He answers simply that, when his career took off the ground, he decided to stay in Poland and it felt natural to use the "cultural instrument given to me by my native country". And not just use it, but reflect and comment on it in a world context. It is his biggest influence, along with US action movies from the 1980s.

The visuals in these shorts are stunning and it must not be forgotten that they have brought Allegro a lot of money, despite being made available for free. Allegro itself considers "Polish Legends" to be a marriage of culture and marketing. Not surprisingly, the films have won awards for branded content, brand awareness and positioning, and online videos. They are an attractive package aimed at a generation that has grown up with the internet and media platforms. Moreover, they are a shining example of Polish creativity and innovation. But beyond their glittering surface, they have a deeper resonance lent to them by their use of stories and ideas taken from the collective unconscious and folk theology, skilfully harnessed by Bagiński. These films may postulate future or alternative worlds, peopled with demons and other fantastical creatures, but what they do best is tell us a lot about the Polish psyche.

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## *In Vivo* Genome-editing Rescues *Damnatio Memoriae* in a Mouse Model of Titor Syndrome

#### Andrea Kriz

**Research Article:** *In vivo* genome-editing rescues *damnatio memoriae* in a mouse model of Titor Syndrome

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2 May 2040

#### Abstract:

First documented in 2010 as the 'Mandela Effect', Titor Syndrome (TS) has eluded rigorous study due to the wide radius of memory alteration, or damnatio memoriae (d.m.), which often characterizes its later stages. Here we circumvent these issues by performing single cell RNA-sequencing on a range of biopsies collected from a still-living 24-year-old female patient of TS. We identify a highly replicable signature of 130 genes dysregulated across tissues. Genome-editing of these genes via the CRISPR/Cas9 system was sufficient to ablate convulsions and, to a lesser extent, social defects in mice exposed to Jacksonville soil samples previously observed to trigger TS. Importantly, researchers retained memory of treated mice, indicating that d.m. had also been successfully rescued. Future studies are urgently needed to determine if this treatment regimen could apply to humans as well.

#### **Author Correction**

#### 22 May 2040

Due to the accelerated preparation of this manuscript, Figure panels 4b and S4c were unintentionally duplicated. As the original film Figure S4 had been assembled from could not be found, the experiment was repeated, closely replicating the original results. The article has been corrected in the online version.

#

**Technical comment** on "*In vivo* genome-editing rescues *damnatio memoriae* in a mouse model of Titor Syndrome"

Xu L<sup>1</sup>, Gao M<sup>1</sup>, Ye X<sup>1</sup>, Wong J<sup>1</sup>, Hu D<sup>2,3</sup>, Jin T<sup>2,3</sup>, Fibrelli B<sup>2,3</sup>, Xiaolong Y<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>Department of Neurobiological Engineering, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cambridge, Massachusetts, USA.

<sup>3</sup>Artificial Intelligence and Transcriptomics Program, Broad Institute of MIT and Harvard, Cambridge, Massachusetts, USA.

14 December 2040

Mercer et al. claimed that symptoms of Titor Syndrome (TS), most notably damnatio memoriae (d.m.) could be treated by editing 130 genes in adult mice. Three months of attempting to replicate Mercer et al.'s results resulted in the recovery of six lab notebooks, blacked out from cover to cover with permanent marker, along with hundreds of unlabeled mouse carcasses, from a waste incinerator. The first author, who security cameras recorded attempting to turn on the incinerator, has no memory of the incident. Therefore, we are forced to conclude that the Mercer Protocol does not, in fact, rescue d.m. in a mouse model of TS and, to the contrary, has resulted in a spread of the syndrome among researchers attempting to carry out the gene-editing regimen along with bystanders. We note that a clinical trial conducted by the institution of Mercer et al. is currently recruiting patients and urge caution in pursuing this treatment.

#

**Response to technical comment** on "*In vivo* genome -editing rescues *damnatio memoriae* in a mouse model of Titor Syndrome"

Mercer et al.

14 December 2040

Xu et al. suggest that, due to their failure to reproduce our data, that the editing of the gene signature described in our original study does not alleviate Titor Syndrome (TS), and could conversely lead to spread *damnatio memoriae* (d.m.). We would like to caution Xu et al. in turn that although involuntary expunging of data often accompanies d.m., it cannot in itself be taken as evidence of d.m.-especially when factors such as mental health could also play a role in influencing behavior of involved researchers. In addition, although the memory of individuals associated with TS patients is often altered as a result of d.m., TS has never been observed to spread beyond the originally affected patient. Such fallacies are the basis of the now-debunked Jacksonville hypothesis, which posits that the Floridian ghost town in fact thrived until 2036, when it became the center of a Titor Syndrome 'epidemic' (see infographic: Using Guidepost Events to Disentangle False from Altered Memories). We are also happy to report in a forthcoming publication that the originally described TS patient has now been successfully cured with the Mercer protocol. Although we agree that Xu et al. that caution is necessary, we must be equally cautious of not depriving treatment to those in need.

#

#### Editorial expression of concern:

6 January 2041

In the May 1 issue, this journal published the Article, "In vivo genome-editing rescues damnatio memoriae in a mouse model of Titor Syndrome." Due to a power surge, the raw data for the Article was lost from the GEO repository. The authors have since notified the journal that the data had been inadvertently erased from their lab computers as well. Attempts are currently being made to re-establish contact with the original patient, who had been discharged from the hospital, for collection and sequencing of new samples.

#

#### Author correction:

#### 12 March 2041

Since our original study, it has become clear that our genome-editing protocol merely delays, rather than rescues Titor Syndrome and its resulting damnatio *memoriae* (d.m.)<sup>1, 2</sup>. We also note that although 12 authors appeared on the original study, only 4 authors could be found in this lab with memory of undertaking the described research. In addition to having never worked in our department, the only online record of 5 of the 'missing authors' are usernames on early-2000 era message boards. As fictionalization of previously existing entities, such as the eponymous John Titor, is another anecdotally observed symptom of TS, we cannot exclude the possibility that d.m. has begun to affect our environment as well. We are currently working with independent labs across Europe, China, and the U.S. to reproduce our results and generate an optimized protocol, to be published as soon as possible.

1. Hart, J., et al. (2041). "Case 9-2041: A 24-Year-Old Missing Woman with Radiodermatitis, Acute Psychosis and Retrograde Amnesia." N Engl J Med 424(11): 941-948

A 24-year-old woman previously diagnosed with Titor Syndrome and successfully treated using the Mercer Protocol reappeared in the emergency department after being reported missing for two months. There were burns on the face, arms and back. Although she claimed to have been wounded by 'gunshots', these were not consistent with injuries caused by modern firearms, but instead with prolonged exposure to radioactivity. She additionally reported hallucinations related to travel between dimensions and 'collapsing timelines'.

**2.** Braun, A.C., et al. (2041). "Case 10-2041: Group Delusions Related to a Discontinued Phase I Clinical Trial of the Mercer Protocol." N Engl J Med 424(12): 1043-1053

All patients scored over 70 on the Mandela Effect Scale, with 100 indicating full penetrance, most notably the erroneous memory of human rights activist Mandela becoming president of South Africa rather than dying in prison in the 1980s.

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#### Addendum: Editorial expression of concern

#### 27 April 2042

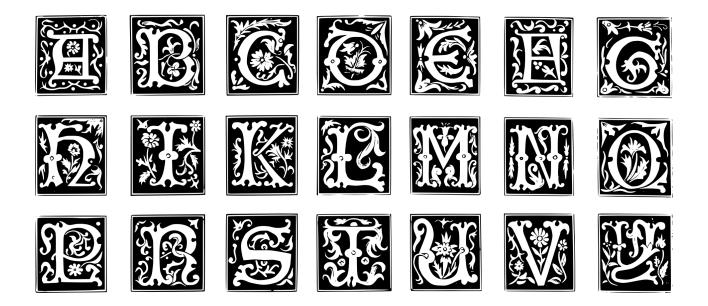
We previously issued an editorial expression of concern for our previously published article, "*In vivo* genome-editing rescues *damnatio memoriae* in a mouse model of Titor Syndrome". At this time, we are additionally publishing the results of nine groups who have attempted to replicate the results of Mercer et al. As each of these groups has reported cases of *damnatio memoriae* ranging from moderate to severe, we are cautioning the readership against attempting to repeat the Mercer Protocol at this time. Authors E. Mercer, D. Woldeman and S. Hendigger agree to this expression of concern, while Q. Tobbe could not be reached. **Corrected online 1 August 2042:** We are aware that the spread of *damnatio memoriae* across the United States may have impacted flagging of this study and others, and will strive to take this into consideration in our subsequent investigations.

#

#### Retraction

#### 25 November 2042

The U.S. Office of Integrity Research has advised retraction of "In vivo genome-editing rescues damnatio memoriae in a mouse model of Titor Syndrome" due to lack of evidence that any such study actually took place. We therefore retract the paper and advise the readership that results contained therein are not valid. None of the authors could be reached for comment. Upon inquiry they appear, along with their department, to be fictional entities. An exploration of the abandoned building in which the lab had been purportedly housed uncovered high levels of radiation, the charred body of a car determined, upon investigation, to be a late 1980s Honda Civic 4WD, and the remains of an IBM-5100 portable computer. We apologize to the scientific community for the damage caused.



## A Note on Romanian Science Fiction Literature from Past to Present

Mariano Martín Rodríguez

Romania is a country that foreign readers rarely speculative associate with and science fiction (collectively abbreviated as SF). However, its multilingual young population is among the most ITliterate in the world, and their cultural output, including SF, is not only extensive but also fully up to date. While some might attribute this to globalisation, it is in fact a long-standing feature in Romanian culture from its very modern beginnings in the 19th century. Once it secured its independence, Romania embarked on a path of rapid progress, quickly adopting Western liberal institutions and world-view. In this context, as a manifestation of a new mentality centred on science and industrial technology, Romanian SF embraced from its outset the national project of modernisation, although not uncritically, and not without originality.

Utopian fiction usually preceded SF before their intimate fusion in offering descriptions of future societies. This almost universal pattern is also valid for Romania. Thus, economic liberalism was both supported and mocked in one interesting ambiguous utopia describing a present "Insula Prosta" (Stoopid Island, 1884) by Ion Ghica, before the liberal utopia was transferred to a future setting, where it was questioned. Alexandru Macedonski, one of the leading poets of the Decadent movement in Romania, produced thus a short history entitled "Oceania-Pacific-Dreadnought" (1911) where this gigantic ship intended as a floating house for the richest brings about an economic bubble of epic proportions, until it bursts (as bubbles are wont to do). This Romanian author probably took inspiration from Jules Verne's L'Île à hélice (Propeller Island, 1895) but his description of the workings of pure speculation in capitalism is not only more precise, but also prophetic. Indeed, very few contemporary writers in Europe used anticipation in such a perceptive manner.

In the same years, Victor Anestin followed Camille The political crisis brought about by World War II did Flammarion, rather than Verne, both in popularising not spare Romania, where home-grown ethnic astronomy and in setting his stories on other planets nationalist Fascism supported by Nazi Germany was of the Solar System. Anestin describes them as defeated and then replaced by the Communism populated by decent and highly developed human-like imported and imposed by Soviet troops. In this civilisations inspired by Positivistic utopianism, though context, there was little room for unregimented unfortunately still subjected to nature's whims. In O literature, speculative or otherwise. Even more intently tragedie cerească (A Celestial Tragedy, 1914), a celestial than fascists, communists guided by Stalinist Social body destroys Earth's inhabitants. This dramatic Realism effectively put an end to any fantasy about apocalyptic scenario always poses the problem of medium- and long-term futures. Furthermore, writers which narrative voice to use: who can recount the end wishing to denounce totalitarianisms of any sort were if it obliterates us all? Anestin solves this problem by silenced. Romanian readers were thus deprived of any adopting the perspective of an astronomer who dystopias comparable to those written by Zamiatin, witnesses our tragedy from Venus. In spite of his Boye or Orwell. Vasile Voiculescu's short story sober account, Anestin knows how to add a sense of "Lobocoagularea loss to the sense of wonder in his grandiose planetary Lobocoagulation) purports to be a historical summary vistas.

This late but promising start of Romanian SF was its relative normalisation followed bv along mainstream lines. As happened elsewhere in the world (except perhaps in the US), Wellsian scientific romance opened new avenues to speculative anticipation by infusing it with the freedom of imagination regarding world-building shown by old imaginary voyages since Lucian of Samosata, as well as a diversity of narrative and writing techniques explored by High Modernist authors. Among them, Felix Aderca stands out thanks to his avant-garde short story "Pastorală" (Pastoral, 1932), which is written as the summary of an unwritten play, and his novel Orașele înecate (Drowned Cities, 1936). The latter is set on a future Earth threatened by universal cold. The last human communities have withdrawn to submarine cities under the rule of a fascist-like proeugenics dictator, but his measures cannot prevent in the end the technical failure and destruction of the remaining cities. Only a couple escapes from our planet in a rocket. The varied societies, their exchanges and development in a pre-apocalyptic framework are finely portraved using an art-deco tone of writing full of tragicomic irony, not unlike the one used in Karel Čapek's contemporary novels, which makes this work a masterpiece of international interwar SF.

prefrontală" (Pre-Frontal of the forced lobotomies undertaken on the population in order to extirpate their human souls. Written in 1948, this text was only published posthumously in 1982 as a simple curiosity by a renowned modern poet.

The Iron Curtain prevented Romania from being subjected to the massive influx of US SF literature (both pulps and Golden Age) which ended the more reasoned imagination on utopianism, technology and intellectual and literary scientific romance in Western Europe, though Communism was equally efficient in depriving SF of its former artistic respectability. Romanian SF was reborn in the 1950s as a tool for educating young readers both in Communism and technology in order to prepare them for the rapid pace of re-industrialisation soon established as a goal by Romanian authorities under nationalist leader Nicolae Ceauşescu, who was rather unsatisfied with the role of agricultural producer allotted to their country by the imaginary cities, in a manner similar to the invisible Soviet bloc. Although his rule was even harsher than others in the Eastern Bloc, Ceauşescu used his heavily censored, and the whole book was only known national policy of apparent dissent from the Soviet in 2001, when its author had long been excluded from Union to get the technological and financial support Romanian literary life following his exile to Germany. that his country needed to become industrialised. As a The translation of his cities into Spanish and then result, Romanian writers were allowed to deviate from partially into English as Squaring the Circle by topold dogmas, and SF quickly took advantage of the ranking SF author Ursula K. Le Guin has secured him opening, soon updating itself to Golden Age standards at last his rightful place in Romanian speculative thanks to Adrian Rogoz, whose short stories recall the fiction, now supported also by well-received recent clarity of form and speculative wit to be found in novels such as a story on the resurrection of Jesus those by Isaac Asimov. The other Romanian SF Christ in modern Germany entitled Adevărata cronică a master of the age, Vladimir Colin, adopted a more lyrical writing akin to that of Ray Bradbury, although of Jeshua Ha-Nozri, 2016). the best part of his work was devoted to fantasy; indeed, his series of stories and legends from an ancient imaginary people, collected in Legendele țării lui Vam (Legends from Vam Country, 1961), are still considered a masterpiece by Romanian fantasy readers.

Rogoz, Colin and others also succeeded in joining the vogue for national promotion abroad triggered by Ceausescu's national-communism, since some of their works were translated into German and French and published in widely distributed anthologies of Romanian SF. Furthermore, they were generous

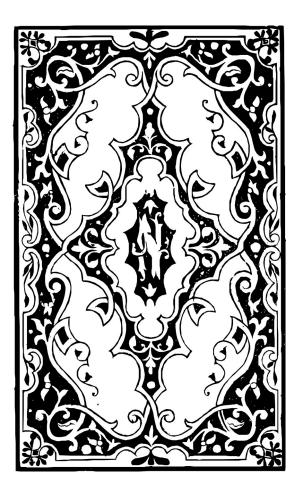
enough to include in these volumes stories by new writers interested in a SF literature similar to that of the Anglophone New Wave, namely Ovid S. Crohmälniceanu, Gheorghe Săsărman and Mircea Opriță, who would eventually produce some of the best works that Romanian SF can boast of. The oldest of them, Crohmälniceanu, was a highly regarded mainstream literary critic when he published his two series of Istorii insolite (Unusual Stories) in 1980 and 1986. Taken together, they read as exercises in the role of literature in modernity in which irony enriches a deeply philosophical questioning of humankind and its place in the universe, not unlike the best tales by Borges or Lem, whom Crohmălniceanu could certainly be compared to.

Younger Săsărman and Opriță have had both long and distinguished writing careers. Săsărman produced in 1975 Cuadratura cercului, one of the masterpieces of the late modernist genre consisting of descriptions of ones by Calvino. Unfortunately, this edition was morții lui Yeșua Ha-Nozri (True Account of the Death

Opriță, who compromising himself, is renowned for his short in power in the Romanian intellectual scene, seem stories (e.g., "Figurine de ceară," or Wax Figurines, a even more reluctant to appreciate SF as the witty rewriting of Lem's Solaris first published in modernists were once Wellsian scientific romance had 1973), though he also produced a successful novel, become obsolete. Therefore, SF has not been able to Călătorie în Capricia (A Journey to Capricia, 2011), join the literary mainstream in Romania as it has in which is both one of the latest sequels to Swift's other countries where SF novels, especially of the Gulliver's Travels and a most original commentary on dystopian kind, are now read and reviewed beyond the the 2008 Great Recession as it was suffered in limited circles of SF fans. On the other hand, the end Romania. Moreover, Opriță has accompanied the last of censorship allowed Anglophone SF to enter the decades of Romanian SF as a respected and fair critic, Romanian market with a revenge, marginalising local as well as its best chronicler: his history of Romanian production even more than in Western Europe forty SF literature is comprehensive up to a point rarely years earlier (until today). encountered in similar endeavours for other national SF traditions. It is a monument of SF scholarship, only comparable to another Romanian production in the theoretical field, Cornel Robu's extensive O cheie pentru science-fiction (A Key to Science Fiction, 2004), the English abstract of which has been influential in our consideration of the sublime (popularly known as 'sense of wonder') as an essential part of SF aesthetics.

After this remarkable group of writers and scholars, a certain decadence of Romanian SF was perhaps inevitable. Postmodernism soon acquired a status in the Romanian literary scene unmatched in other countries up to this very day. This was both bad and good news for Romanian SF: good news if we consider that the leading literary postmodernist in Romania, Mircea Cărtărescu, has introduced SF tropes in his work, especially in his latest novel Selenoid (2015), thus adding respectability to them; bad news if we consider instead that postmodernism has promoted a literature of chaos, or arbitrariness, deeply uncongenial to the usual SF frame of mind (marked by reason, order and science). Very few writers have succeeded in balancing these opposite trends. Among them, Mihail Grămescu is to be mentioned for his stories collected in Aporisticon (1981; final version, 2012), where postmodern egotism is nuanced by Borgesian detachment. There were other interesting young writers who tried to renovate SF following contemporary international trends, but unfortunately two parallel occurrences prevented them from acquiring a reputation similar to that of Săsărman, Oprită and even Grămescu.

stayed in the country without On the one hand, the postmodernists, still very much



Romanian SF writers tried to regain some of the genre's former strength by mimicking foreign fashions, such as pulpish cyberpunk, in a country where hackers are, indeed, numerous, and IT has been enthusiastically embraced. Others wanted to preserve the New Wave heritage through carefully written stories, some of them quite experimental, such as Dănuț Ungureanu's dystopian "Domus" (1992), which is entirely written using prescriptive discourse, and Ovidiu Bufnilă's cyberpunk prose poem "Armele zeilor" (The Arms of the Gods, 2005). Although a number of these stories could make up an invaluable anthology, none of them succeeded in truly seducing the local fandom. Romanian SF only recovered when it revisited, in the form of long, epos-like novels, older genres such as space-opera in Dan Doboș's Abația (Abbey, 2002-2005), lost-world romance in Sebastian A. Corn's Ne vom întoarce în Muribecca (We Will Return to Muribecca, 2014), as well as apocalyptic dystopia in the series begun with the shorter novel Vegetal (2014) by Dănuț Ungureanu and Marian Truță. Their success, at least among fans, has contributed to lending new life to a SF now nearly as diverse and literarily successful as it used to be before the postmodernist/ cyberpunk crisis. Prospects seem to be positive, with emerging writers now being aware that they are adding their contribution to a long and distinguished history of Romanian SF, although it is still too early to mention any outstanding ones.

Endnote:

A first version of this essay was published as a preface to the following anthology of recent Romanian SF stories: Daniel Timariu and Cristian Vicol (eds.), *East* of a Known Galaxy: An Anthology of Romanian Sci-Fi Stories, București, Tritonic, 2019, p. 10-19. We thank the editors, as well as the publishing house and the Helion SF club having fostered this anthology, for their kind permission to publish here this slightly modified version of the paper.

## The Arms of the Gods

Ovidiu Bufnilă

Introductory note and translation by Cătălin Badea-Gheracostea

Ovidiu Bufnilă (b. 1957, mechanical engineer by education, journalist and writer by trade), though having published only three books in print over the three decades of his speculative fiction career, has nonetheless managed to capture the attention of Romanian fandom and specialized reviewers of SF as one of the most divisive, problematic and original authors writing in Romanian. Tending to a discourse reminiscent of the absurd, but also of a peculiar magical realism, Bufnilă's texts, no matter their length, start with a heavy atmosphere and finish with a bang of ideas - precisely as his iconoclastic columns, blog entries and the literary as well as political comments he has produced over the years. Bufnilă established himself as a master of a renewed species of science fiction concetti and forged his reputation thanks to short stories published in Moartea purpurie (The Purple Death, 1995). Through his work, Bufnilă distils the world we know, including its literature and culture, down to a point where it can be explained by his socalled "waved philosophy". There is an uncanny coherence in this author's delirium, proven by the extraordinary impact some of his writings has had

over the years. His story entitled "Armele zeilor" (2005), here translated as "The Arms of the Gods," is the only narrative having received maximum marks (10 out of 10) at the first online SF workshop in Romania (atelierkult.com), rated by dozens of readers. It was published in fanzines and magazines as well. A list of Bufnilǎ's publications can be accessed here (in Romanian): <u>https://ro.wikipedia.org/wiki/</u> <u>Ovidiu\_Bufnil%C4%83#Edi%C8%9Bii\_speciale</u>.

Over a millenium ago, in Katai Islands, thousands of women had for a long time been lusting for the Prince, and he was still begrudged by the Glass Barons who were casually conspiring against all empires, and he was still religiously taken heed of by Mount Assahor's scholars there, where the Saviour's face had been revealed for the first time.

Yet now, resting on a boulder, having fallen from the sky not far from the sea shore, the Prince is dying. Alone.

The air is heavy. The heavens loom like cast iron. Ever so slowly, a random light is passing, looking for a fit The Prince is firmly holding his cane, getting a whiff, body, craving to be, at least for a moment, an antelope, or the smile of a woman, or the toll of the to be asleep on their lap, barely touched by the big, Balkoon's Franciscan Bells.

Here comes a monk walking towards Katai Islands. He cares for nothing, he does not even give a glimpse to the Prince. The monk has the cheeks fully blushed, as he just stepped out of the depraved lovers' boudoir; those should have been waiting untouched for the knights lost in the sunset. The monk has a belly full of Madella wine, a fine, dizzying, perfumed red.

"Be good to me, a sip of water!", the Prince begs, crawling after the monk. The path's dust is stirred by the ordained sandals and whitens the Prince's beard, choking him.

The monk fades away in the glitter of a sick, mad sunbeam.

Here comes and goes a hurried armourer, taking an order to a valiant lancer; then some merry girls; then some astrologists; then some very, very noisy whores A tear rolls down his chin. with awful makeup.

lusting for their impudent thighs, envisioning himself juicy areolas.

Here comes a chronicler and hatefully kicks the Prince. Then comes a star digger from Copa, the City of Liars, and he also strikes him, full of spite. A trumpeter passes next and punches the Prince, laughing disdainfully.

The Prince is finding out ever so slowly that, beyond the programmes which he had input in the Network which was built by his subjects, some other instructions were coming forward, and these instructions, hey!, he never ever had them in his navigation registry. The Prince has been thinking all along that the worlds were built for ambitious navigators only, those able anytime to stand against the fury of the virtual whirls.

Where from were coming all those creatures, all so careless, all so evil, where from were coming these hideous constructions?

Walking around the rocks, here come five drunkards; they gloat while throwing organic structures at the seabirds. Those clip the shiny wings and drill deep into the birds' bodies. The air fills with blood and time itself wavers, melting together past, present and future.

The Prince gets to reset his programmes.

The drunkards come closer. They are ready to trample him.

Vruuuum!

Their bodies burst in multicoloured garlands, the sand is dampened with salty, mauve fluids. Somewhere, in the vortex of events hit by the Prince's viruses, the monk falls on his knees. His tongue turns swollen. His skin is bristled.

The crowds of Katai scramble to the beach to acclaim their Prince. He embraces them all in his majestic glance.

The halberdiers clean the remnants of the programmes, they pour the gathered blood in some silver cups humming with electricity.

The Prince makes an august sign. Everybody, absolutely everybody is kneeling. The women are crying, wounding their breasts with their own nails. The scholars chafe themselves in corners, under the platinum and glass arcades of Caraba, the City of Desolation.

The Prince rearranges the events in the Network and, full of wisdom, he kills all those led astray who wantonly worshipped the reign of the mob and the lack of principles, while hoping to find the Arms of the Gods in their own wandering.





## Hyrenas

## E.N. Auslender

The wisest man on Earth once said, "love is at the center of all relationships, love or the lack of it".

When we leapt so far into the future with eager anticipation, we could only conceive of the hardships that would await us; there were plans upon plans, contingencies upon contingencies, anything and everything to validate beyond a reasonable doubt that where we were headed was right and that we would, above all else, succeed where mankind had failed. Earth had reached its tipping point, we were told: the droughts, the floods, the hurricanes, the heat, the famines all forced those with the ability to move to a more habitable area to do so. Those with the bare minimum of life and limb received it in their support shelters, and those without, didn't need it.

Everything turned inward and downward, away from spreading mankind onto other worlds. Dreaming of a better future died before the risen tide, but with the cataclysmic loss of life and farming ability no one could be blamed for suggesting that space could wait while humanity sorted itself out.

But then it never truly did. Those who benefited from the cataclysm just kept building on top of one another with nary a tree to breathe. With wealthy countries walled off and refusing to aid, it seemed they wanted to wait for humanity to filter while their own fortunate few survived and thrived. I suppose the shock and mundane occurrence of extinctions dulled the senses into believing this was simply how it would be.

And then those of us who still dreamed determined there was another way, a better way, and a star with a habitable planet was found not too far from Earth. A ship was built in secret, a generational ship that would run on fusion until something better could be concocted by the 5000 scientists and engineers recruited into the Hyrenas project. Earth wasn't going to change, and no educated opinion could make a difference. Everything was leveraged against short vs. long-term costs, where short ultimately had the final say. Staying meant resigning ourselves to impotence while we watched those with exploit those without. Hyrenas, we were told, was humanity's next great dream.

It was so named by the creator of the project, nuclear physicist Aleksander Torgssen: Hy-, his daughter's nickname, and –renas, Swedish for 'purify'. The ship took all his life to construct in hiding, and though it was finally christened in his 98<sup>th</sup> year, he took the journey up into and beyond orbit in our vessel of hydroponics and nuclear power. Before his death near the orbit of Jupiter, he left us Edicta Hyrenas, the supreme law of the new human race:

- 1. To all of Hyrenas, give;
- 2. For all of Hyrenas, give;
- 3. With all of Hyrenas, give;
- 4. For all of Hyrenas, succeed;
- 5. With all of Hyrenas, succeed;
- 6. Within Hyrenas, know all;
- 7. Without Hyrenas, know all;
- 8. Within Hyrenas, love all;
- 9. Without Hyrenas, love all;
- 10. To life itself, spare no love.

The botanists worked artificial night and day to cultivate and accelerate crop growth. The mechanical engineers facilitated fluidity for the ship's systems, and maintained its upkeep. The nuclear engineers and physicists tinkered to increase the engine's efficiency. The theoretical physicists searched for methods by which the ship could move faster through space. The astronomers identified planetary bodies along the journey within a lightyear's radius that indicated either sources of mineral ore or water. The computer engineers fine-tuned and monitored all processes, ensuring that all functioned as it should. The doctors and surgeons ensured all people maintained their health, and conferred with the astronomers to search for planets that could possibly harbor nutrients not grown on the ship. All was organized and coordinated through a representative group with ten members from each expertise. There, those with the most panache, rather than the most experience or credentials, held sway. But as all represented the very best of humanity, there was no fear of conflict.

Though when the mechanical engineers needed to take the radiometric sensors offline for several hours in order to shunt power to the nuclear physicists testing a more efficient engine, the astronomers and botanists grew angry- they were charting the structure of a just-discovered and possibly life-sustaining planet whose atmosphere was filled with phosphorous, and in the span of the downtime the planet would pass from the periphery of scanning range. They brought the complaint to the group. Arguments ensued: the engineers and physicists had the right to test immediately because a more efficient and powerful engine meant they not only would have more power to distribute across the ship, but they would reach their ultimate destination faster. The botanists and astronomers argued that phosphorous is one of the most essential and rarest elements in existence, and not taking the time to study that planet was an affront to Hyrenas. But then again, taking the ship to the planet meant adding 10 years to the journey, if not more.

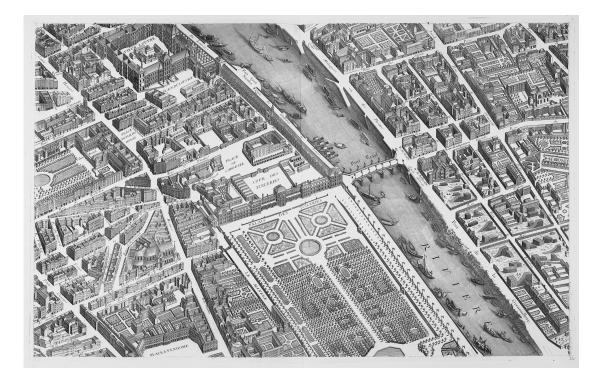
The botanists and astronomers didn't win the day.

Spite lurked beneath the doctrines, as it seemed the work of some was valued more than the work of others regardless of how integral everyone's work was to the survival of the mission.

When the first child was born, the community of 5001 celebrated as one, all arguments temporarily put aside. The boy was named Aleksander Ngata, son of Koji and Mara Ngata, two theoretical physicists. One member from each profession volunteered to become teachers to the future wave of children.

Thus, a new class was born.

Within two years of Aleksander Ngata's birth, 207 more children were born. In another year, 320 more. 6 months from then, another 518. The Ngatas broke the seal on the awkwardness of whether or not to have children on a spacefaring generational vessel, and many indulged in the proclivities of intimacy. They were, after all, working in close quarters day after day for hours on end; one could hardly blame them.



Though the computer kept an electronic record of the crew's logs and work, Kaloshka Jindo volunteered to become the ship's historian. He would act as the narrator for both the present and the past, and would teach children the history of humanity and the history and future of Hyrenas, and why they were the true evolution of humanity.

Within and between the throes of passion and triumphant heartbeats, theoretical physicists Yael Hernandez and Kira Nathanson realized in their postcoital clarity that fifth-dimensional space contained a membrane of 'friction' that prevented 3-dimensional objects from entering and viewing reality in 4 dimensions; that frictional membrane, however, could be utilized as a 'motorway' on which a 3-dimensional object can 'ride'. Given the super-state energy required to enter fifth-dimensional space, it would take a fraction of that energy (the gravitational energy of a black hole, give or take a supernova) to tap into that membrane.

In essence, it was the theoretical express lane of the universe. The issue was generating the energy needed to pierce through the layers of space. They conferred with the astronomers about theoretical 'wicked matter', possibly existing as something tangled and torn between the Roche limits of two tangoing black holes. The astronomers wanted extra power to the sensors to fine-tune their capabilities to detect the exotic theoretical matter. The engineers agreed.

The botanists became resentful. They brought their complaints to the council. They felt they weren't receiving the due respect the engineers or physicists were whenever the question of the engines were raised. All other professions stated that the engines were the single most important function on the ship: they provided the thrust, the warmth, the air, the water, the light. Without the engines, the plants wouldn't grow.

But without the plants, Hyrenas would die.

The physicists and engineers decided, in order to avert taking blame for such things, a single person could act as the 'captain' to arbitrate decisions. They sold it to the botanists as having someone to prioritize decisions, which was acceptable enough. Sajavin King was chosen. A 'polymath' trillionaire on Earth, the 56-year old held several honorary doctorates from prestigious Earth universities. His fortune came from discovering and securing underground freshwater lakes, which then evolved into locating and mining phosphates, a key nutrient in agriculture. Much of his time on Earth was spent 'developing' technologies to facilitate food production in famine-stricken areas. Much of the food didn't reach those affected by famine. King, and similar others on the ship, used their money to fund Hyrenas, and very few of the botanists, physicists, engineers, doctors, etc. knew much about King besides the proclamations in the news that he was going to solve world hunger.

Kaloshka Jindo began researching King, if just to have a good preface for the biography of the ship's first captain.

Given King's reputation as a 'man of science', the professions were generally satisfied with his approach to governance. Time was doled out evenly; disputes were arbitrated in what seemed to be a fair way.

But others who had exploited Earth in order to secure a place on Hyrenas took him as a sign of a return to old ways. In total, 6 people who had also used their incredulous wealth to fund Hyrenas discussed between themselves what it meant to have him atop all others. The 6 already sat on the council, able to insulate themselves from the hard work of the professionals, but they wanted more. A year, two years passed with only quiet discussion between them.

Jindo discovered King's Earthly exploits, and privately questioned him before bringing his concerns to the council. In what Jindo described as a moment of pure contrition, Jindo noted that King stated, "the goal was always to survive, on Earth... stronger than others, healthier, to secure more than everyone else for our own. I threw all my money at Aleksander. I wanted to leave Earth a poor man. I deserved to, for all I did. I didn't deserve to leave though. I'm a coward. But at least I can do something good here."

King told Jindo he could bring his knowledge to the council, but Jindo didn't. It was the 6, through listening devices in King's office, who did so anonymously. Though some on the council were suspicious of King's contrition, there was unanimous agreement to keep silent on the matter to the public. On that, the 6 capitalized.

Word immediately spread of King's Earthly misdeeds. It didn't take long until the people, in motley groups, demanded King step down from his position. Some demanded he be put in a maintenance craft and dropped off at the next barely habitable planet. Others demanded he be kicked out an airlock.

The council convened, and recommended to King he should step down. King declined. He still had support, he argued, and he wasn't wrong. Many in the council desired to be rid of him. The members of the 6 spoke publicly about King resigning, and rallied support around themselves.

Surrounded by confusion and dizzying worry, Jindo went to King's residence one night to apologize and attempt to clear the air on what happened. Several hours later, both Jindo and King were found dead in an apparent murder-suicide.

It was then that the first Hyrenas Juris Circle was created from volunteers appointed by the 6. Given the evidence presented to them, that Jindo had gone to King's residence to reveal himself as the person who discovered King's past, King murdered Jindo in a rage and then, realizing he had sealed his fate, committed suicide by hanging himself with his belt.

The reality of the situation is unknown. However, the next captain of the ship was Boris Jensen, who had the fervent support of the 6, and the second historian was Lilia Malloukis, a member of the council and suspected affiliate of the 6.

The truth of Hyrenas is a lie: many give to it, but a few hoard most. Many love it, but not as much as the few love themselves. Many know those within, but the 6 know all.

> Historian of Truth Genevieve Jindo

## A Reflection on the Achievement of Gene Wolfe, with Gregorian Chant Echoing Offstage

Blackstone Crow

"Robert, I think he's lost his mind."

"He has eyes, Marie, and you don't."

"What do you mean by that? And why do you keep looking out that window?"

Quite slowly, the man turned to face us. For a moment he looked at Agia and me, then he turned away. His expression was the one I have seen our clients wear when Master Gurloes showed them the instruments to be used in their anacrisis.



Like that? It's a haunting scene, one from a weighty tome of haunting scenes, capped as a lyric with a couplet by that edgy comment about the countenance of those wretches who see the "instruments" whom the "Master Gurloes" – the reader at this stage of the novel knows Gurloes to be a Master Torturer of the Guild of Torturers – reveals to his "clients" about to suffer their "anacrisis", a term from the Ancient Greeks referring to the torture used when, in a law case having interrogation and inquiry, torture was applied. And lift a tip of an interior ear to that "You have eyes, but you do not see" echo from the Gospels. But it is cast in a semi-pagan way, too, that line, cast as it is with the very modern, "I think he's lost his mind" coupled with it in a dynamic and very conjugal way. Something is askew here, a mismatch, hints of the Christian Faith and instruments of torture. Or maybe not? One could easily picture this scene in the sunny background of the High Middle Ages, in an office of some Star Chamber court. But in fact, it takes place on a far-future Earth almost (not quite, there are hints!) unrecognizable.

This vignette is taken from page 190 of volume 1 of my Fantasy Masterwork edition of the late Gene Wolfe's The Book of the New Sun multi-tome epic. All four volumes, on every page, have scenes word-woven on such a level. Ursula K. Le Guin said of Wolfe that: "He is our Melville" - maybe so, but he strikes me as more an Old Testament author (whom Melville himself hoped to "channel", perhaps?). Wolfe strikes me as a Master Chronicler of the Guild of Haunting Unsettlements, or he would do so if the Prophet Ezekiel had ventured into essaying a Science-Fiction novel. Wolfe haunts; he unsettles. One just doesn't "read" such an author. Does one "read" Shakespeare? One spends a lifetime carrying Shakespeare about, and one does that with Wolfe. It is a gift very few writers achieve at all, and fewer still on a sustained level. Besides the Avon Bard himself and Wolfe, I can name two others: Tolkien and Homer.

Gene Wolfe died on April 14 of 2019 at the age of 87. Having survived both polio and the Korean War, he became an engineer – and if you have a taste for Pringle potato chips, Wolfe helped create the machine that forms them. His wife Rosemary, born the same year as Wolfe, died in 2013 after long illness, including Alzheimer's. Wolfe has a quote about her recorded in *The New Yorker* in 2015 that, "There was a time when she did not remember my name or that we were married, but she still remembered that she loved me." After a long life as a melancholy observer of Earth's all-too human scene, I have to say that is a poignant line; indeed, there have been few such loves.

With this essay, I stand here before the Assembly of Readers as Wolfe's Advocate. He deserves to be read, whether a particular writing of his is Science-Fiction or whether it is Fantasy. Wolfe deserves to be read because all of us deserve the mystery he conjures. Justice is giving something its due, and Science-Fiction itself is due the gift of seeing reality as something that can act on us as much as we think we can act on it. Sci -Fi – the art, relying as it does on building imaginative narrative architecture based on the empirical sciences - more than deserves mystery: it needs it desperately, for all Creation needs a return to the sense of mystery - and of course in the heart of mystery resides beauty. Or terror. Yet beauty is allusive, non-capturable - and in that peculiar oubliette in the Mansion of Meaning, Wolfe is THE master "mystery" writer, "mystery" in the Catholic Sacramental sense. Wolfe himself was a Catholic, a convert who initially studied the Faith to marry his beloved Rosemary, and much speculation orbits that question as to what extent his religion influenced his writings. Wolfe himself averred that it did. As he converted in the 1950s, before the controversial changes in the Church, he thus experienced an older, more transcendental theology than those whose Catholic experience dates from the 1960s or later.

Do a writer's personal religious beliefs color his oeuvre? Enlarge it? Or restrict it? It's a common enough question when discussing where authors cultivate their ideas, and how they wrestle with the concepts they create, yet Science-Fiction (nor most of the rest of Modernity) often doesn't have the "religious gene" that way; at best, reality is matter to manipulate and we're Descartes' Ghosts in the Machine - pure matter ourselves, yet oddly "haunted". The natural world in which we live in our technological bubble is not considered that type of mystery, not a Mysterium requiring awe and contemplation but a material reality needing exploitation for profit. Though an author of more than 25 novels and twice that many short stories, no reader of his can believe Wolfe wrote with much of an eye for profit. His fiction is not "pop" fiction, written to sell high volume, though Fantasy is a huge seller in general, compared to "literary" works.

Wolfe's fiction is instead a wondering, a cosmos-wide pondering on whether it is reality that is a player in the game, whether it can exploit us, or transform us, as in his Fifth Head of Cerberus, a three-novel combo asking the question of whether the long-settled human colonists of a planet haven't actually been replaced by the aliens native to the place. Who does the haunting? (Or is it more like possession?) The humans who have replaced the natives or the natives, haunted by what happened to the humans they have altered themselves to pantomime? In the Fifth Head, Wolfe also asks whether a machine can hold a human's mind, and whether a clone can continue the life of its original, whether prostitution offers a greater freedom and whether suffering is.... Well, one doesn't just "read" Wolfe, one interacts with Wolfe, and one does so sacramentally, for as the Catholic Sacraments are physical channels of invisible, divine grace; in Wolfe's art, his characters experience the worlds he creates as believers experience the drama of divine life in such a sacramental metaphysic.

Alien that is, of course, to our present world, and it is fitting an author of Science-Fiction engages in it; but that raises another reason for Wolfe to be read: he's work. He takes effort. As suggested here, his form of storytelling is quite different from the norm. And he can be more work than Tolkien, more than Homer, for he has an anti-Mysterium world to work against. And that's Sacramental too. From his unsettling reflections on who we are and contemplation of what we might be, even if unbeknownst to ourselves, to his wonderful, exquisite prose and his penchant for creating words - one often finds oneself looking up a word only to realize Wolfe has made it up - in all of that, Gene Wolfe is a transcendent author, or perhaps, suggested by the unsettling questions raised in The Fifth Head of Cerberus, he is Ezekiel come again; an ancient phantasmagoric, a prophet of the supernatural imperiously striking itself through the natural world, an extraordinary visionary who sees a higher reality our world in itself can only dully reflect - perhaps the prophet has indeed replaced the potato chip machine maker.

Read Gene Wolfe, and you'll wander in these wonders, and over time, bit by bit – perhaps – garner that most elusive of graces: wisdom.

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