

2021 ♦ 1



Barnicle
Clarke
Gerencsér
Goldberg
Hancock
Herzog
Hilton
King
Jones

Lau
Lechner
Lugones
Martín
Rodríguez
Mina
Piñero
González
Roth

CONTENTS

- 3 Editorial
- 4 « The Curriculum Vitae Of Simon»
Richard Lau
- 6 « The Furry And The Damned»
E.E. King
- 8 « The Minotaur's Rebellion»
Ben Roth
- 10 « Sokath, His Eyes Uncovered!”, or, Is The Universal Translator A Myth?»
Mina
- 15 « The Existence Of God»
Leopoldo Lugones
Translation by **Álvaro Piñero González**
Introductory note by **Mariano Martín Rodríguez**
- 18 « Some Facts Regarding The Temple Of The Bearded Man At Chichen Itza »
Paul Goldberg
- 21 « Sailing The Seas Of Time: What If We Took Alternative History Seriously?»
Jim Clarke
- 28 « Should Murder Be Legalized?»
Carlton Herzog
- 33 « Infinity Child»
James Hancock
- 37 « A First Look At Post-National Olympics In Science Fiction»
Madeline Barnicle
- 40 « Until The Bubble Pops»
Robert L. Jones III
- 44 « The Rise And Fall Of Collective Consciousness»
Anthony Lechner
- 47 « Black Hole»
Alicia Hilton
- 49 « Yesterearth's Morrow»
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Editorial



Lectori salutem.

Science-fiction, like any drama with existential implications, is better read from the safety of a couch than 'lived'. This is felt all the more keenly by some on the editorial team and SPJ crew who once again experienced the life-affirming miracle of becoming parents in the weeks leading up to the present issue going to press.

Alas, as we continue to drift through the interminable litany of Belgium's precipitous spring days, we may grow accustomed to look at the world outside our immediate bubble, mediated through artifices like the news, connected devices and (anti-)social media, as real but distant. Something in which we no longer partake, but digest with the same receptors we use for reading fiction. Lest we become saturated with the vicarious tedium that is Terra in 2021, let us therefore cast our mental eyes, if not away from the screen or paper, at least to subjects far from present concerns.

We promise you that our first issue this year will be entirely free of pandemics and untainted by the arcane politics of former British colonies across the Atlantic*. We like dystopian plague tales and discussing elections as much as anyone, but in order to renovate our mental furniture dulled by yesteryear's gloom, we have hand-picked every tale in this issue with a view to amuse, to divert, perchance to fuel daydreams (or nightmares).

Our stories and essays (and the grey zones between them) range from the sacred to the profane, in styles from the epistolary to the challenging. Like every first

issue of the year, the line-up closes with a story penned by our co-editor Ádám reflecting, as usual, on some specific niche concept we rarely see addressed in submissions.

Encouraged by the positive reception of our [2020 thematic anthology issue on immortality](#), we are happy to announce that we'll be publishing another one in June 2021, this time dedicated to 'xeno-anthropology and the end(s) of the universe'. Thereafter, Sci Phi Journal will be open for submissions again in July, so if you'd like to read more from specific authors, encourage them to keep sending us their work!

Stay safe, speculatively yours,
the co-editors

~

* Absolutely no offence intended. We just really cannot bear to read yet another story riffing on the finer points of North American governance. Let's broaden horizons! If you want fictional elections, why not set them on the Faroese Islands for a change, or in an alt-history Babylonian Republic, or on Alpha Centauri?

The Curriculum Vitae Of Simon

Richard Lau



Dear Prospective Employer:

My name is Simon Peter. I am currently unemployed and hoping to obtain a position with your company.

Here is a chronological listing of my previous occupations with brief descriptions of each.

Fisherman – along with my brother, caught fish to feed family and others.

Part-time Lifeguard – acquired temporary certification for absolute buoyancy.

Church Organizer – assisted church founder in leading a team of eleven others.

Pope – Appointed first Bishop of Rome, which led to a long successive string of others holding that prestigious office.

Security Officer – screened incoming personnel.

I would like to note two things about my last position as a security officer.

First, while a transition from Pope to Security Officer might seem like a downgrade or demotion, I must stress the action was indeed the opposite. As the one and only security officer, I was given the greater responsibility of granting or forbidding admittance to company headquarters. In essence, I was given “the keys to the company.”

Second, I am no longer holding that position through no fault in my performance. For further details about my performance and my dismissal, please refer to the attached glowing reference from my co-worker and immediate supervisor Gabriel.

Ironically, it is my former responsibility as gatekeeper that makes me a perfect match for your advertised opening.

While you do not currently have an official gatekeeper, you do have long lines of those awaiting entry, which I have tremendous experience in handling. You do have signage, but I believe as a living (so to speak) gatekeeper intoning, “Abandon all hope, ye who enter here,” I can add immense value to your brand (pun intended).

I took the initiative to perform some market research, and I realize you have a very different company culture from my previous employer. However, I am flexible and a quick learner. I go back to my experience as a fisherman and ask: “Is casting a fishing line and flicking a whip all that different?”

In the spirit of full disclosure, I have spent some time in prison, but I think you may regard that as another positive asset in my favor.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Looking forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely yours,

Simon Peter

#

[Note from Human Resources: The attached scroll of papyrus is glowing, literally.]

Reference for Simon Peter by Angel Gabriel

To Whom It May Concern:

My name is Gabriel, and my title is Archangel. Not to toot my own horn, but I have been with Heaven, Inc., for a very long time and have worked with many born -mortals.

It is without reservation that I say Simon Peter is among the best of them.

The line of applicants to our company headquarters is long and never-ending. His duties included politely and professionally greeting visitors, looking up their names in the Book of Life, and assigning them to their appropriate destination. A great and heavy burden to be placed on such small and frail human shoulders.

I worked beside him during our eternal shift and never have I seen him falter, act inappropriately, or bring shame to the high standards our brand puts forth. No matter what or who he encountered, he always behaved like a saint.

Unfortunately, our company decided to upgrade and automate its entry system. Visitors are now identified by retina scan and facial recognition software. Information about each prospective entrant is now gathered and displayed through Google Search. Yea, the Book of Life is now truly “in the Cloud.”

I hope you will find a position for this fine human and worker.

Please feel free to contact me if you have any questions.

Gabriel

~

The Furry And The Damned

E.E. King

Gerald was a sculptor, gifted with the fires of creation, cursed with fathomless canyons of despair. Unable to extricate himself from a lightless, twisting passage somewhere in his frontal cortex, he shot himself.

He'd come back as a graceful tortoiseshell cat. The thing was... it was after all, the Island of the Damned ...he knew he still had it in him – the ability to mold a hunk of clay into something beautiful, something alive ...if only he'd had opposable thumbs.

Many were trapped on the island. The furry and the damned - thumbless painters, caterwauling sopranos. Dogs and cats searching the island for inspiration and other prey. There was danger in every bite. There was no way to be certain who a rat might be. What undiscovered Milton lay behind sharp, yellow incisors? What Michelangelo peered from small rodent eyes? It was bad enough not to be able to create...but to destroy by dinner was both horrible and banal.



Once, after picnicking on a particularly feisty, russet mouse, Gerald remembered that the mouse had been missing its left ear. What if he had just eaten Van Gogh? Gerald had always worshipped Van Gogh's mad, vibrant brush strokes, his almost sculptural dimensionality, his vibrant hews. He recollected a crazy, starry look in the mouse's eyes.

Gerald lay awake on the cold gritty sand, stomach, and heart aching. The next day he was a wreck. He needed at least fifteen hours of sleep a day just to feel feline.

He became a vegan, dining on sea grass and kelp. But his stomach growled and his vision dimmed. Gerald recalled reading, when he was still able to read, that cats lacking the taurine found in meat and fish go blind. Gerald's whole world was form and light and color. Blindness was worse than death, worse than murder. Also, the sea grass made him vomit.

That very night he went hunting. Limping on cooling sands at twilight in search of sustenance, Gerald did not hear the soft padded footsteps behind him. He was grabbed so quickly, and was by then so weak, that at the first pierce of needle teeth, this heart gave out. He did not even have time to notice, before final darkness descended, that the hungry, red furred, coyote who snatched him was missing its left ear.

~

The Minotaur's Rebellion

Ben Roth



The Journal of Mediterranean Archaeology

University of Athens

Greece

March 15, 2020

To the Editors:

Please find enclosed a submission to the journal concerning the myth of the Minotaur and the Labyrinth, in light of recent archeological discoveries on Crete. I am well aware that such radical findings, coming from an unknown scholar such as myself, will be received with skepticism by the academic community, but I trust that your anonymous peer reviewers will examine the evidence presented carefully and dispassionately.

Title: The Minotaur's Rebellion

Abstract: According to mythology, at the behest of King Minos, Daedalus built the Labyrinth to imprison the Minotaur, the offspring of Minos's wife Pasiphaë and a white bull. Each year, seven young men and seven virgin women from Athens were forced into the Labyrinth, to be eaten by the Minotaur. Evidence from a recent archaeological dig near the Palace of Knossos is presented. Comparing the layout of the site to historical descriptions, it is argued that it is a plausible candidate for the long undiscovered site of the Labyrinth. Analysis of the extensive site's middens reveals that it sustained a sizable population, and included open-air farming areas and fresh water sources. Reinterpreting certain artistic representations and offering possible translations of fragments of Linear A, it is hypothesized that the Minotaur's father (i.e., "the Bull") was actually a political dissident, his son imprisoned rather than killed by the king both out of deference to his wife and out of fear of fueling revolt. Over the course of multiple generations, the supposedly sacrificed Athenians, led by the Minotaur, created a self-sustaining community within the Labyrinth, which took up the Bull's political cause. More speculatively, it is suggested that an eventual conflict between this community, emerging from the Labyrinth, and the surrounding one in Knossos might have contributed to the still unexplained decline of Minoan civilization.

Word Count: 9,752 words and eleven figures.

Thank you for your time and consideration. I look forward to your decision.

Sincerely,

Nolan Robinson, Ph.D.

Adjunct Instructor of
Anthropology

Western Massachusetts
College

USA

~

“Sokath, His Eyes Uncovered!”, or, Is The Universal Translator A Myth?

Mina

author, Douglas Adams, was involved in all of these versions, but they are far from identical to each other, and it is best to see them as a collection of leitmotifs. I am ignoring the 2005 film, which feels like a huge “mistranslation” (even if Adams was briefly involved in it before his death), missing the point on several levels – it is an attempt to turn HG2G into a PC, action story with a romantic subplot, dumbed down to the lowest common denominator, obsessed with Vogons and not at all true to the original radio/TV series or to the early-1980s-Britain pastiche that was so much fun. This sense of fun is very present in one leitmotif, the Babel fish described by the “book” as:

“The Babel fish is small, yellow, leech-like, and probably the oddest thing in the Universe. It feeds on brainwave energy received not from its own carrier, but from those around it. It absorbs all unconscious mental frequencies from this brainwave energy to nourish itself with. It then excretes into the mind of its carrier a telepathic matrix formed by combining the conscious thought frequencies with nerve signals picked up from the speech centres of the brain which has supplied them. The practical upshot of all this is that if you stick a Babel fish in your ear you can instantly understand anything said to you in any form of language.”

There are two series which have coloured our collective consciousness when we think of the concept of a universal translator: *The Hitchhikers Guide to the Galaxy* and *Star Trek* (in all its guises). As a linguistic aside, “hitchhikers” was initially spelled in various different ways (hitch hiker, hitch-hiker, hitchhiker, with or without the apostrophe) until it settled as “The Hitchhikers Guide” in around 2000 (even the abbreviation has various forms: HG2G, tHGttG, HHGTTG, etc.). One wonders how many pitfalls communication may involve if one word can have so many variants within one language.

HG2G began its life in 1978 as a BBC Radio 4 series. This was followed by five novels, with a TV series sandwiched between novels two and three. The

I can always hear the voice in my mind of Peter Jones as the “book” narrating this passage in both the radio and original TV series (the “book” is almost a character in its own right). The description goes on to state that it was a “mind-bogglingly” useful invention and there is a hysterically funny passage on how it was used to disprove the existence of God (incidentally, a whole generation of SF nerds integrated “mind-boggling” and “I don’t give a dingo’s kidneys” into their everyday vocabulary due to this passage). Although the Babel fish makes it possible for the most unprepossessing human to ever travel the galaxy, Arthur Dent, to understand and communicate with aliens, the Babel fish is also dangerous:

“...the poor Babel fish, by effectively removing all barriers to communication between different races and cultures, has caused more and bloodier wars than anything else in the history of creation.”

Star Trek (ST) does not have a “Babel fish” but it does have a “universal translator”. It begins its life in Gene Roddenberry’s original ST as a handheld device and by *Star Trek: The Next Generation* (STNG), it has been incorporated into the communicator pins all Starfleet personnel wear on their uniforms. All Starfleet vessels are also equipped with a universal translator. Although *Enterprise* is seen as a poor cousin to other series in the ST canon, it is actually the only series to look in depth into the development of the universal translator that is mostly taken for granted in the series and films that take place “later” (if we look at the ST universe chronologically). In *Enterprise*, we actually have a skilled linguist on the crew, Ensign Hoshi Sato. We see that new languages have to be added to the universal translator by gathering enough data to build a “translation matrix” (a data construct facilitating the conversion of symbols and sounds from one language to another). And Hoshi Sato does not just use this translation matrix, she improves upon it, inventing the “linguacode” translation matrix to anticipate and speed up the conversion of new and unknown languages. She is a main character whose linguistic skills are used time and again to get the crew out of thorny situations. I cannot stress how unusual this is in an SF (or any) series. We will come back to the idea of “training” a universal translator and translation

matrices later when we look at Machine Translation technology today.

Not everyone sees a universal translator as a good thing in the ST universe. There is a scene in ST *Discovery* between Burnham and a Klingon (Kol), where Burnham sees the universal translator as a means of communication and reaching a peaceful accord, and Kol sees it as another attempt by the Federation to subsume Klingon culture. In fact, my husband was annoyed by the fact that the Klingons in *Discovery* speak Klingon all the time; I actually rather enjoyed the series’ courage on this point, as subtitling puts off some viewers, but I think Klingons speaking amongst themselves should speak Klingon. Interestingly, Klingon began as gibberish but was later developed into a language by Marc Okrand for ST III: *The Search for Spock* in 1984 based on some phrases originally developed by the actor James Doohan (Scotty) in ST: *The Motion Picture* in 1979. Okrand developed a grammar and expanded the vocabulary and, should you be so inclined, you can actually learn Klingon online through the Klingon Language Institute. It is fascinating to see interest from both the producers and viewers in a constructed language yet, at the same time, most of the series hinges on the existence of a universal translator.

FIRST OFFICER *(to others, amazed)*: Sokath! His eyes open! *(thank God, you understood)*

PICARD *(continuing)*: The beast of Tanagra. Uzani. His army. *(shaking his head)* Shaka, when the walls fell. *(explaining how Dathon died and his regret at Dathon's death)*

FIRST OFFICER: Picard and Dathon at El-Adrel. *(a new metaphor enters the Tamarian language to signify successful communication between two races who were strangers to each other)*

The universal translator is shown to have its limits in the STNG episode *Darmok*. This episode is based on the premise that a universal translator cannot make sense of a language based on abstraction and metaphors, deeply rooted in culture, myth and history. Stranded on a planet with a Tamarian captain Dathon (a Child of Tama), Picard struggles to learn enough about Tamarian metaphors to communicate with Dathon as they face a common enemy. The Tamarian language is described by Troi as a language based on narrative imagery, with reference to the individuals and places which appear in their mytho-historical accounts, much like using “Juliet, on her balcony” as a metaphor for romance. Picard slowly learns to communicate with Dathon who tells him the story of “Darmok and Jalad, at Tanagra”. In exchange, Picard reframes the earth myth of “Gilgamesh and Enkidu, at Uruk” for him. The whole episode is an absolute delight for anyone interested in languages, communication, linguistics, logic and alien thinking. At the end, Picard has learned enough to successfully communicate his regret for the death of Dathon to his first officer and that he and Dathon reached communion or true communication before his death:

TAMARIAN FIRST OFFICER: Zinda! His face black. His eyes red— *(expressing anger)*

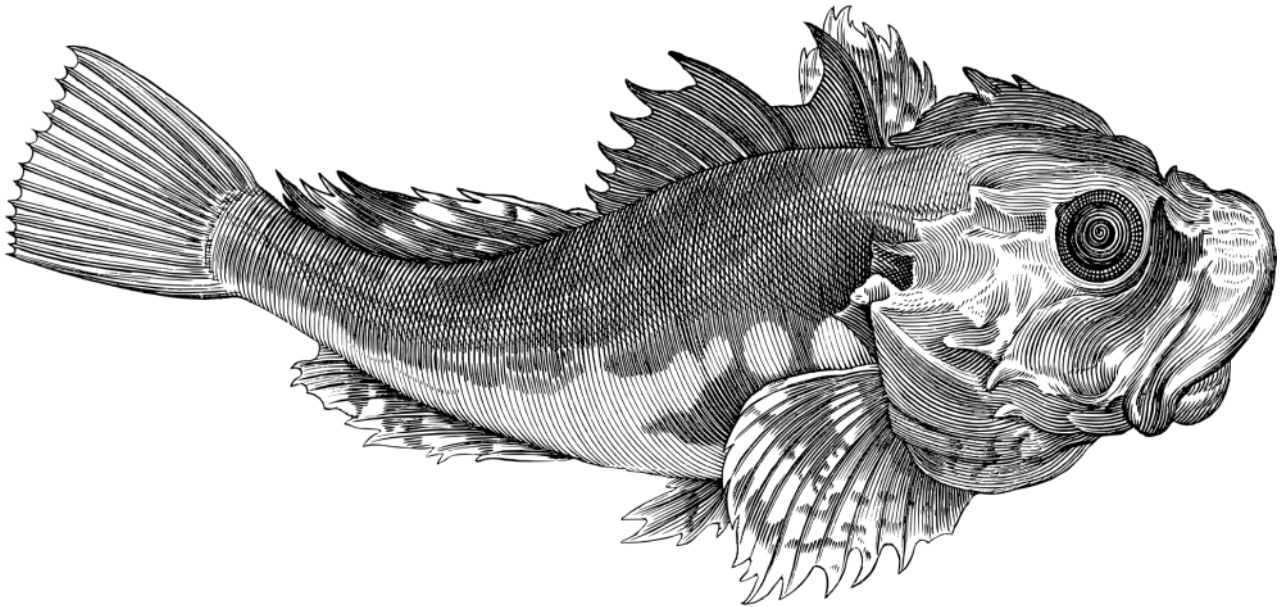
PICARD: —Temarc! The river Temarc. In winter. *(asking for him to be silent and listen)*

FIRST OFFICER: Darmok? *(asking if his Captain's plan was successful)*

PICARD: ...and Jalad. At Tanagra. Darmok and Jalad on the ocean. *(the plan of two strangers working together to fight a common threat was successful)*

I have added the “translation” in brackets after each utterance but the lovely thing about this episode is that, having accompanied Picard and Dathon on their journey at El-Adrel, the viewer can understand the entire exchange without help.

In his [article](#) in The Atlantic, Ian Bogost feels that the episode has its shortcomings because it tries to limit the language of the Children of Tama to our understanding of how language works, i.e. using our familiar denotative speech methods. Bogost stresses that the Tamarian language works more like poetry or allegories, which replace one thing with another (rather than simply comparing one thing to another like metaphors do). But, he argues, the Children of Tama are not replacing one image with another, they are using the familiar logic (the intention) behind each situation to which they refer to communicate in a manner that is almost computational, i.e. procedural rhetoric takes precedence over verbal and visual rhetoric and dictates their immediate actions. Whether or not you feel that *Darmok* lends itself to this level of analysis or that Bogost is right or wrong, the whole episode serves to demonstrate a completely different linguistic system and logic.



you read it, in a novel - “Oh, that’s criminal!”, where I consider your taste in wallpaper a travesty - or an article - “David was arrested for his criminal activities”, where David really did commit a crime).

How close are we to such a universal translator? How effective are Machine Translation (MT) tools? The best-known MT tool is Google Translate, which has moved from being just a Website to also existing in App form for mobile phones, and from just translating text to also translating text contained in images and translating speech. How accurate is it, for example, when translating into English? As a linguist, I can tell you that it depends on the language combination. It copes reasonably well with Romance languages where the syntax is not too dissimilar from English, less well with German where the syntax is quite different, and not at all well with Estonian, where the syntax and logic of the language are very different (and it is a small and rare language with a more limited dataset). MT currently needs to be used with caution and with a clear aim in mind: it can be very useful if you want to know the gist of an article, for example, to run it through an MT tool to obtain a rough translation. However, it is dangerous to rely on an MT of a medical or legal text where precision is vital. MT can sound very convincing until you get a native speaker to check its accuracy, since MT has to cope with languages being flexible and ambiguous, with meaning being derived not just from a word but also its co-text (e.g. collocations) and context (e.g. a word where the meaning changes depending on where

That said, how MT works has changed over time: early rule-based systems (using lexical, syntactic and semantic rules that hit their limits at the sheer number of exceptions and variables required) were replaced in the 1990s with statistical methods (using a large corpus of examples but which were divorced from context, thus often leading to errors) and, more recently, we have moved towards neural MT (NMT). It is NMT that most resembles the language matrices of the universal translator mentioned in *Enterprise* and where fiction and reality begin (on a humble scale as yet) to converge. In NMT, the input is a sentence in the source language, with source language grammar, and the output is a sentence in the target language, with target language grammar. In between, we have an algorithm, which is an application of deep learning in which massive datasets of translated sentences are used to “train” a model capable of translating between any two languages. For example, it must be able to cope with all variants of the word “hitchhiker”.

One established NMT structure is the encoder-decoder architecture, composed of two recurrent neural networks (RNNs) used together to create a translation model. Textual data is transformed into numeric form and back into different textual data (its translation):

“An encoder neural network reads and encodes a source sentence into a fixed-length vector. A decoder then outputs a translation from the encoded vector. The whole encoder-decoder system, which consists of the encoder and the decoder for a language pair, is jointly trained to maximize the probability of a correct translation given a source sentence.”

(<https://machinelearningmastery.com/introduction-neural-machine-translation/>)

This architecture has problems with long sequences of text which is why we now have an “encoder-decoder with attention” model. The system learns to only focus on the “relevant” part of the sequence to translate each individual word, so that length is no longer a problem. Google Translate uses this architecture and feeds it with millions of stored sentences. It is a system that still has its problems, however: the training and inferences speed is still too slow, it can be ineffective dealing with rarer words (it struggles with large vocabularies and a myriad of contexts) and it sometimes fails to translate a word it does not recognise, simply leaving the source-language word in the target-language sentence. MT initially focused mainly on the written word, but work is now being done on the spoken word as well.

So is a universal translator possible in our world? (N) MT will continue to improve, that is for sure. Whether it can ever fully replace the need for a human linguist remains to be seen. It cannot yet do what is one of our biggest strengths of the human mind: it cannot make inferences and assumptions based on context, background knowledge, culture and an instinct for which rules can be broken and which not. It cannot spot mistakes, decipher bad style or pick up nuances of embedded, deeper meanings. MT is based on algorithms and probability, it works with separate units (numeric representations of words) and even

with the development of “attention” and “deep learning”, it cannot yet get a quick overview when examining a large sequence of units or adjust to circumstances when making a decision. It is not yet truly flexible. It is possible that one day, computers will imitate the way the human mind makes connections (and recreates the intention of the communication in the source language in the target language) so closely that we will not be able to tell the difference. The operative word is imitate: we are still a long way from a “sentient” computer able to think autonomously rather than applying a set of complex mathematical rules. That does not mean we will never get there but we are not yet at a point where the computer can translate the full meaning of “Picard and Dathon at El-Adrel” into other languages.

~

The Existence Of God

Leopoldo Lugones

Introductory Note by Mariano Martín Rodríguez

There are several modes in speculative fiction, even if we limit it, as we should, to fictions underpinned by a modicum of science and where imagination appears, therefore, in a guise disciplined by reason, even in the many instances where it does not look very reasonable. One of those modes is theological fiction, i.e. fiction based on the study of Theology as a science. This ‘queen of sciences’ is, indeed, a scholarly discipline, since it has its own systematic methods of investigation in order to rationally reach its conclusions and present them using a particular form of scientific discourse. Although its subject is not quantifiable, nor can it be proven or disproven through experimentation (as it is the case in the so-called hard sciences) or documentation (as in History and other human sciences), Theology still has a sounder basis than, say, Metaphysics. This is because it applies reason to pre-existent materials: the scriptures of any religion and their religious teachings formally deduced by scholars in the matter of God, both inside and outside of established clerical institutions, or concerning other divine entities and its (or their) ways in the universe and our world.

This divinity is seen by theologians as an abstract entity, rather than a sort of superhuman endowed with special powers, as the gods of mythology. For this reason, Theology usually finds its proper fictional expression in allegories rather than in myths. Its characters are not (super)people but concepts endowed with agency. In order to illustrate this, we only need to compare the Hebrew creator god, who is a male particularly subject to fits of anger and needful of rest after work, with the abstract and philosophical God-Logos of the first chapter of the Gospel of Saint John. The former can inspire mythographies and mythological fiction, the second is at the heart of allegories or theographies, if this neologism may be allowed, as well as theological fiction. From a literary perspective, the latter can embrace different literary forms and discourses.

In modern times, there have been numerous outstanding examples of purely fictional approaches to Theology, such as historiographical accounts of imaginary doctrines and heresies, of which Jorge Luis Borges is just the most famous modern inventor, or new and allegorical accounts of creation, such as Ian Watson's very short narrative poem entitled "Let There Be Darkness: An Origin Myth" (collected in *The Lexicographer's Love Song and Other Poems*, 2001). Fictional essays and dialogues have also been used to convey original theological concepts intended as literature, not as contributions to scientific theological debate. Among them, Guillaume Apollinaire's "L'hérésiarque" (*L'Hérésiarque et Cie*, 1910) deserves mention, which has been translated into English as "The Heresiarch" in the volume entitled *The Heresiarch & Co.* (Exact Change, 1991). A further theological fiction written as a dialogue, this time among the dead instead of the living portrayed by Apollinaire, is the very short piece by Leopoldo Lugones (Argentina, 1874-1938) entitled in Spanish "La existencia de Dios," or "The Existence Of God" in the below translation into English. It was first collected in a collection of short parables from 1924 titled *Filosoficula*, with the Spanish title using a Latinate neologism meaning 'Little Philosophy.'

It might seem odd that its two sole characters, Epicurus and Voltaire (here named 'the patriarch of Ferney') are notorious critics of established religion but, as a science, Theology does not need to be confessional. Moreover, their dialogue seems faithful to the teachings of both philosophers and their intellectual struggle against the mythological gods and the theological one, respectively. Voltaire, the deist, is shown by the old Greek philosopher as having demonstrated rather the existence of the Devil, the anti-God whose work is all too obvious on our planet for its existence to be denied. Epicurus argues the

inexistence of both the divine and the anti-divine supreme personal principles, for a reason readers will find convincing, or not, when reading it below. But this debate does not seem the literary point of Lugones. His prose adroitly hides a paradox when Epicurus states that he has extensive infernal experience, thus confessing the existence of the afterlife as it is taught by most theologies, not only the Christian and Muslim ones. Epicurus is then shown as a sophist denying a basic theological concept (God, or the Devil for that matter) while affirming another theological concept derived thereof.

Another possible reading would perhaps be too deeply pessimistic to be seriously considered, although it would be suited to the decadent world-view permeating the *Fin de siècle* literature to which Lugones historically belongs. Contrary to contemporary theological teachings suggesting that hell does not exist (or that it will not exist in the future, which amounts to the same from the perspective of Eternity), his Epicurus would imply that only hell exists in the afterlife, whereas God and the Devil would be mere figments of the human imagination. Finally, for religious persons there remains the possible consolatory conclusion that heaven exists - but that the two philosophers are excluded from it. The literary-minded, meanwhile, may at least enjoy the pleasure of Lugones' elegant irony.

#

THE EXISTENCE OF GOD

Leopoldo Lugones

Translation by Álvaro Piñero González

Epicurus, noticing his illustrious colleague, approached him and gracefully offered him a rose from the garden.

“If only I did not wish to pester you with the contradiction,” he said, “I would venture to remind you just how ingeniously you have demonstrated, despite being a deist, the monstrosity of God in the light of good judgment and logic. That monstrosity alone would suffice to prove God does not exist, were it not because it merely reflects how boundless human vanity is.”

“I feel inclined to believe so,” answered the patriarch of Ferney, “I must admit to finding the Devil ever more likely than God...”

“Because of my own infernal experience, much more extensive than yours, I would like to offer you this revelation: the Devil does not exist. It is yet another chimera of deism: the monster seen from the back. It is all man’s doing. Look at this flower: it does not need to know about the Devil or God to be perfectly beautiful. Look at that bird chirping beside its nest: it knows nothing of the Devil or God and yet it is perfectly blissful. I propose this simple philosophical experiment to you: assume for a moment man does not exist – God and the Devil cease to exist forthwith.”



~

Some Facts Regarding The Temple Of The Bearded Man At Chichen Itza

Paul Goldberg

Some Facts Regarding the Temple of the Bearded Man At Chichen Itza

By Lester Tell'

At one end of the Great Ballcourt at Chichen Itza is the North Temple, also known as the Temple of the Bearded Man. On the back wall of this structure is a portrayal of a tall, fair-skinned, bearded figure that differs from the typical portrayal of Mayan warriors and priests. Through the years there has been speculation as to the origin and meaning of this image. It is known that the priests portrayed here are associated with the feathered serpent Kukulcan.²

E.H. Thompson³ attributed the figure to a legendary Toltec chieftain who conquered the Yucatan. He was said to have been fair-skinned and bearded. His symbol was the feathered serpent. Other stories have come down through the years that spoke of visitations by fair-skinned bearded divinities.

We have come into possession of a document that suggests another possible explanation for the image at the North Temple. This document is comprised of fragments of a letter written by an obscure Kabbalist, Jacob Levi of Burgos, Spain. Jacob Levi was known later in life as Jacob the Blind.

Little has come down to us regarding Jacob Levi. He was born in 1098 in Leon; the date of his death is unknown. His name has been associated with

Abraham Abulafia, a proponent of ecstatic Kabbalah. From descriptions found in the small amount of extant writing available, it appears that Jacob Levi was able to enter a mystical state by the contemplation of various combinations of Hebrew letters while exercising control of the breathing. This trance-like state was believed to result in one's soul leaving the body with the ability to undertake a journey.

Jacob developed a small circle of followers, one of whom was Avner of Burgos. Avner was considered to be a Neo-Platonist. As is seen in much Neoplatonic writing, he speaks of reality as being generated by a series of emanations from the godhead. The Sephiroth—the Kabbalistic term for these emanations—were frequently imagined as taking the shape of a tree.⁴ In Avner's one surviving piece of writing there is the following reference to his teacher, Jacob the Blind:⁵

“Towards the end of his life, after the blindness overtook him, the master would speak of souls of the righteous taking flight and attaching to the tree.⁶ As Jacob Levi, blessed be his name, spoke these words he would be overcome with ecstasy and wonder.”

Some theosophic aspects of Avner's thought regarding the nature of the Sephirot appear to have been taken up by the Zohar, but the ecstatic aspects which Avner received from Jacob Levi were forgotten.

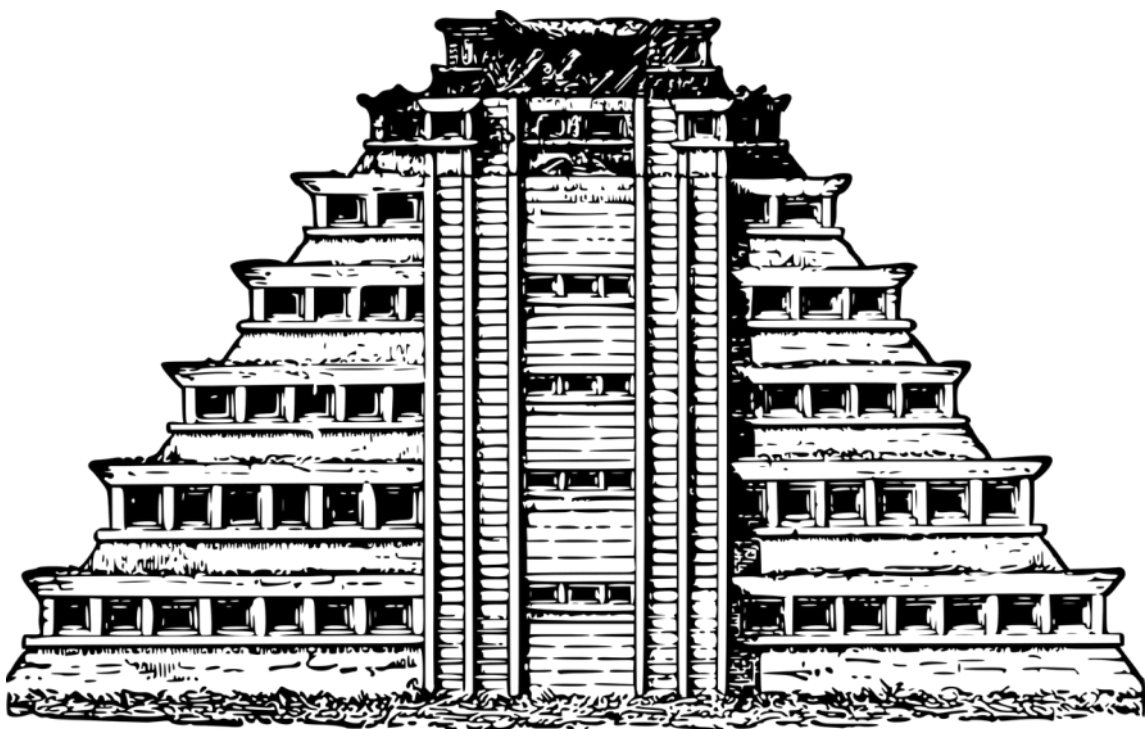
Jacob Levi most likely wrote the above-mentioned letter around 1130 C.E.⁷ The contents illuminated some of Avner of Burgos's comments regarding his master. It unexpectedly added another possibility as to the origins of the Bearded Man image on the North Temple at Chichen Itza.

Below are the salient parts of the material:

"In the year 4890 in the month of Elul with the help of the Holy One, may His Name be exalted, while contemplating the sacred letters in a certain way with the breath, I accomplished what I had long hoped for. My soul was separated from my body and I flew through the heavens as if in a chariot and visited a peculiar country. It was hot and steamy; overrun with greenery. In the city of this wondrous place was a pyramid such as existed in the land of Egypt from whence our Teacher Moses, blessed be his name, brought us forth."

He goes on to describe his time in Chichen Itza where he encounters Kukulcan, the feathered serpent whom he associates with Samael, the serpent in the Garden of Eden:⁸

"I sojourned there for 40 days and came to know the priests of the people of the city of that pyramid and saw many things, some wondrous, some evil. The city is large, filled with myriads of buildings and temples. Like the Moabites, the people engage in idol worship. There is a feathered serpent who flies through the air like Samael who descended into the Garden of Eden [may the Holy Name protect us from evil]. There are sacrifices made on an altar at the top of the pyramid and in a body of water. Heaven forbid that the words to describe the horror of these sacrifices should pass my lips."



Presumably, Rabbi Jacob is referring here to human sacrifice which was known to have occurred both in a chamber in the pyramid [El Castillo] at Chichen Itza and in the ‘sacred cenote’.⁹

“We sat under the heavens and the priest told me that the bright band of stars across the night sky that we say is the river of fire from Daniel’s dream¹⁰ was to them a tree where the world began. From this tree came forth all things that men know. When I heard these words, I looked up and saw the heavenly lights glittering with color. They began to swirl and dance and then there came into being a magnificent tree which we know to be the Sephiroth—the divine emanations of that which is beyond thought and words. This I saw with my own eyes.”

Jacob the Blind’s vision of the night sky is a representation of the Sephiroth as a tree. This is, as noted, a commonly occurring motif in Kabbalistic material. On the back wall of the temple is a representation of an elaborate tree said to be the Mayan version of the axis mundi—the ‘world tree’. Some Mesoamerican scholars believe the Milky Way, when in vertical position, was thought by the Mayans to be this ‘world tree’.¹¹

The images inscribed on the temple wall are believed to portray a narrative of the ascension of the rulers of the city.¹² If Jacob Levi did indeed encounter the priests and inhabitants of Chichen Itza, the occasion of his visit might well be memorialized as the bearded man pictured on the wall of the North Temple.

The events related above, had they occurred, indicate a contact between Spain and the New World several hundred years before the era of the Conquistadores. Such events might also imply a Judeo-Mayan connection heretofore unrecognized.

Footnotes:

1. From *The Modern Antiquarian*: 49, pp. 140-144 [1994]. This communication was published by Dr. Tell in what was apparently the final issue of this journal. [P.E.G.].
2. The Aztec god Quetzalcoatl.
3. *Journal of American Antiquities Society*; October 1933
4. See e.g. Sholem, G: *Kabbalah*, Keter Pub. House, Jerusalem, 1974.
5. MS 127: Rider University Library.
6. See *Sefer Bahir* 119 where similar language can be found
7. Tell, L: *Modern Antiquarian*; 43; 1989, pp. 34-50.
8. He [i.e. Samael] flies through the air [Targum to the book of Job]: *The Jewish Encyclopedia*, 1906.
9. For example see J. Eric S. Thompson: *Maya History and Religion*, 1970; University of Oklahoma Press. Norman, Oklahoma. A cenote is a naturally formed sinkhole found in abundance in the Yucatan. Human remains and other sacrificial objects have been recovered from the ‘Sacred Cenote’ at Chichen Itza. Note: J. Eric S. Thompson is not to be confused with E. H. Thompson—see above. Both men were noted Mayan Scholars.
10. Daniel 7:10 i.e. the Milky Way.
11. Freidel, Schele, Parker: *The Maya Cosmos*. 1993; Quill, William Morrow. NY.
12. Ibid. Freidel, Schele, Parker.

Sailing The Seas Of Time: What If We Took Alternative History Seriously?

Jim Clarke

Let's sail back in time for a moment, to the first century AD. Here we find Livy at work on his one great historical text, *Ab Urbe Condita*, which he intended as a history of Rome from its foundation to his time of writing, when it had become an empire under Augustus. Primarily it is a history of the Roman Republican era therefore, but as with historians then and now, Livy was prone to the occasional digression.

In Book IX, despite insisting that he wished “to digress no more than is necessary from the order of the narrative”, he spends a considerable time considering the question, “What would have been the results for Rome if she had been engaged in war with Alexander?” Livy, being a good patriotic Roman, and having spent his entire life during one of its peaks in power, assures us that Rome would have resisted the man known as Conqueror of the World.

Let's then follow Livy back to the fourth century BC. Early in the century we find Rome under siege from the Gauls, who sacked the city and besieged the inner capitol for seven months, before being bribed to leave. By the time Alexander was born, in 356 BC, the Gauls were still raiding Latium, modern Lazio, the province in which Rome is located.

It's worth remembering, too, that Alexander didn't hang about. He was 20 years old when he assumed the throne of Macedonia. By that time Rome was slowly rebuilding from the Celtic Gaul invasions and beginning to retake towns in Latium and Etruria it had previously held. As Alexander embarked on his extraordinary 12-year career of conquest, Rome was embroiled in its own backyard, fighting the Samnites in a series of wars in Campania.

When Alexander died, aged 32, in the palace of Nebuchadnezzar II in Babylon, having routed the Persians, sacked Persepolis, conquered Egypt, founded the biggest city in the world, crossed the Hindu Kush and taken Samarkand, Rome was still battling the Samnites. It was even humiliated by them in 321 BC at the Battle of the Claudine Forks. This is the force Livy would have us believe would have defeated the Philosopher King. It is not an especially plausible claim, and one wonders what might have happened in reality had Alexander turned West from his Persian campaign rather than continuing into Asia.

It is, in short, one of those apparent hinges of history, a moment in time around which the entirety of the subsequent timeline appears to be contingent. What would our world look like had Alexander taken Rome 23 centuries ago, and had he lived long enough to consolidate a Macedonian empire of the Mediterranean? Livy, by inviting such speculation, bears the honour of inventing alternative history.

Alt-history today has an uneasy relationship with science fiction more generally, though is generally lazily subsumed within its capacious borders. Nevertheless, alt-history has some characteristics which set it apart, not least of which is its interdisciplinary relationship with history, wherein it is known primarily as counterfactual history, or

economics, wherein it becomes cliometrics.

Counterfactual history functions as a historiographic approach, restricting itself to hypothetical alternatives to real events, and aims to measure or examine the importance of those events by speculating on the effect of removing or changing them. Cliometrics similarly examines such hypotheticals, but from the perspective of measuring economic, industrial or fiscal impact, as in Robert Fogel's seminal *Railroads and America's Economic Growth* (1964), which speculated that improved canals and roads would have filled the gap economically had there been no railroads.

It may be that the relationship with SF stemmed from the sheer volume of alt-histories written by SF writers in the early to mid-twentieth century, but in fact it has always appealed as a mode of writing to the literati, too. SF historian and novelist Adam Roberts has identified Louis-Napoléon Geoffroy's 1841 *Apocryphal Napoleon* as a seminal text in the genre, and is right to do so for a number of reasons, not the least of which is to underline the fact that uchronic speculation extends far beyond the Anglophone world. Among English-speaking writers alone, however, we can trace the tradition back to Nathaniel Hawthorne, and forward to notables like George Steiner, Kingsley Amis, Gore Vidal, Ian McEwan, Peter Ackroyd, and Jonathan Lethem.



As a speculative mode it is not restricted to genre any more than it is to language. It has attracted playwrights such as Noel Coward, Tom Stoppard and Michael Frayn, generated TV and cinema productions, and inspired a whole constellation of journalists, [myself included](#). Intriguingly, one can trace an upswing in counterfactual reportage to the disputed election of George W. Bush in the US Presidential election in 2000, which literally and figuratively hinged on the validity of chads on votes cast in Florida. As a result, journalists rushed to hypothesise what an Al Gore presidency might have looked like, especially in light of the 9/11 attacks soon afterwards, as well as Gore's noted involvement in environmental causes.

In fact, the 21st century to date might well be considered a high point for uchronia. Journalistic what-if articles proliferated vastly, to the extent that they now appear in publications like *Guitar World*. And such is the splintering of political perspectives globally that the concept of alternative facts, as accidentally introduced by US Presidential Counsellor Kellyanne Conway in 2017, seems almost to have superseded the concept of alternative histories.

Uchronic conditionality is now seeping into our present. It manifests as the secret histories and conspiracy theories to which so many are beholden, and is deconstructing and decentring any coherent understanding of world events. Perhaps the best example of this is Vladislav Surkov, advisor to Russia's President Putin, whose background as an absurdist theatre director has enabled him to reconstruct Russia's political and public sphere as one large absurdist theatrical performance.

We can see this trend in current alt-histories. William Gibson's *Agency* (2020) is an allohistorical sequel to *The Peripheral* in which Hilary is President and Brexit never happened. There is a certain element of wish fulfilment in such narratives of course, but it also expresses what Jacques Derrida (and later Mark Fisher) referred to as hauntology, the experience of being haunted by futures which did not occur.

Hauntology now saturates our present, as a result of pervasive alternate histories warring over the past. Like time travellers seeking to change the course of events, today's political class seek to impose their narratives, myths and ideologies upon previous events, up to and including overt lying. As a result, journals like *The Atlantic* openly speculate whether Americans in particular are now living in an "alternative" history, while [physicists at CERN have been forced to issue denials](#) of the widely believed rumour that their experiments with the Large Hadron Collider projected us into an alternative reality. (Speaking personally, I feel that if we are in an alternative timeline, the first evidence of it was Leicester City winning the EPL soccer title in 2016.)

If counterfactual history and journalism seeks to review the present in light of past contingencies, thereby exploring roads not taken in order to re-examine the significance of events which did occur, SF is not so constrained. Murray Leinster's seminal story "Sidewise in Time" (1934) introduced to a popular audience the concept of the multiverse, an ontology in which all possible timelines in some sense co-exist and could hypothetically influence one another. This idea had been depicted earlier, not least in HG Wells's *A Modern Utopia* (1903), but not to the extent that Leinster mined the idea, with Roman soldiers appearing in Missouri, or ships containing Vikings or Tsarist Russians approaching the US coastline.

Multiversality and parallel universes have remained a popular SF trope, though in the vast majority of instances, authors prefer to present a single variant, a narrative set in a world with a Jonbar point, or moment of deviation from our own recorded history. Like historians, SF authors have tended to gravitate to deviations which explore political or military alternatives to recorded events, though they are also more prone than historians to what we might call the Carlylean 'big man' theory of history, given fiction's need for protagonists.

Some concerns are more local and specific. American alt-histories heavily feature Confederate victory in the Civil War. One of the earliest such speculations was [a counterfactual written by Winston Churchill](#). Indeed, prolific uchronist Harry Turtledove must have written at least a dozen, and an entire volume on Alternative Battles of Gettysburg exists. American alt-history also features concerns over its own existence, featuring timelines in which the USA does not exist, either because it became Amerindian, or Aztec, or Chinese or Viking instead, or because the American Revolution never occurred. Another common trope of a more utopian bent is John F. Kennedy surviving assassination and the subsequent extension of his presidency, a form which expresses very similar aspirations as later journalistic treatments of an Al Gore presidency.

Cultural specificity extends further. In addition to Nazi domination fears, English alt-histories feature communist regimes or isolation in the face of a unified Europe. French alt-histories dream of Napoleonic victories, global domination or German invasion, Nazi or otherwise. Russian ones fantasise about Tsarist or White Russian defeat of the Bolsheviks. Israeli ones imagine defeating Rome at Masada, alternatively located homelands or defeat in the Six Day War. Polish ones have nightmares of Soviet takeover (as do the Swedes and Finns), and Brazilian ones dream of alternative World Cup soccer results.

A spectrum exists in alt-histories, ranging from the great man narratives, such as those which pivot around the existence or otherwise of Jesus Christ or Hitler, and its opposite, which posits a history predicated on huge social and historical movements and trends. Counterfactual historians gravitate much more commonly towards the latter. SF has the additional freedom to collide timelines as in Leinster's story, and even introduce fantastic elements, such as the ongoing existence of dinosaurs, or alien visitations, or have time travellers seek to interfere with timelines.

In examining alt-histories, certain themes come up again and again, exposing a range of cultural anxieties. Probably by far the most common hypothetical is a Nazi victory in WW2, with very mainstream novels such as *Fatherland* or *Dominion* sitting comfortably alongside much more science-fictional treatments like *The Man in the High Castle*. This theme has not only crossed into factual TV (the BBC have addressed it at least twice) but also can be found in fiction from nations such as Spain, Russia, France, Norway, Israel, and further afield.

Other major streams of alt-history seek to undo or sustain predominant cultural forces in global history. There is a whole sub-genre of uchronia in which Christianity, for some reason, fails to take root, or Christ does not exist. Another fantasises about the persistence of the Roman empire, complete with slavery and crucifixion, into the modern era. A latent fear of Islam has perhaps inspired some of the many narratives in which Charles Martel or Charlemagne are not victorious, or in which the Moors retain Spain or the Ottomans take Vienna.

Perhaps due to its linguistic isolation, Hungarian alt-history is intriguingly diverse, iterating a wide range of common uchronic tropes including the earliest known Nazi victory uchronia in global literature, as well as examples of Catholic hegemony and national success in revolutions, but also features uniquely Magyar visions, such as the existence of a Hungarian fascist African colony in a Nazi-dominated world. [Ádám Gerencsér's authoritative article](#) delineates this particular national progression through alternative timelines.

The historical fantasies of different cultures thus express both latent societal anxieties and utopian aspirations left unfulfilled. Only by taking such a macro-view are the real secret histories unveiled. The prevalence of alt-histories which unwrite the Reformation, depicting theocratic global oppression by the Vatican, identify Anglophone SF's generic anxiety about Catholicism in particular, and revelatory forms of knowledge in general, [as I've written previously](#).

What is interesting in relation to this vast welter of alternative histories is the relative lack of identity politics or marginalised identities in uchronic fiction. Almost none deal with, for example, the idea of decriminalisation of homosexuality in earlier decades or centuries. And while African-American concerns, often manifested in terms of earlier slavery emancipation or civil rights, can often be found, Africa itself as a geographic region and collection of cultures remains as politically marginalised and economically depressed in alternative timelines as it is in our own. Afrofuturism may be one of the most vibrant of recent SF sub-genres, but its ideas of a black imaginary do not appear to have yet manifested significantly in terms of alt-histories relating to African success.

Within SF, which has historically been a significantly male-dominated enterprise, alt-history seems to be an exceptionally male interest, with few female creators operating in the mode. Nevertheless, feminist concerns have fared marginally better. One intriguing phenomenon is the significance of Hilary Rodham Clinton in such narratives. The protagonist of *Rodham*, last year's alt-history by Curtis Sittenfeld, in which she forges her own legal and political career without Bill, is simultaneously the repository of other aspirations, such as Pamela Sargent's vision of Hilary as astronaut, or David Bean's more prosaic imagining of her as presidential candidate in 2008 instead of Barack Obama.

Mike Resnick's excellent collection *Alternative Presidents* envisages not one but two separate female presidents in the 19th century, ushering in a much earlier era of universal suffrage and female emancipation. And back in 1983, Neil Ferguson imagined an alt-history which features Marilyn Monroe as president.

Beyond US politics, feminist alt-histories tend towards the darker end of uchronic possibilities. Michael Grant's *Soldier Girl* series imagines a universal draft during the Second World War, for example. Joanna Russ's highly influential *The Female Man* (1975) goes further again, including a world in which a plague wiped out men, thus leading to female hegemony and autonomy. This likely influenced the creation of Fumi Yoshinaga's *Ōoku*, a long-running manga series in which Japanese women lead politics and industry following the death of most men from a plague during the Tokugawa shogunate in the 17th century.

global Reich, we become better equipped to understand both the contingencies which led to its rise to power, and the contingencies which defeated it. We are also reminded of the dystopian potential in our own past which was averted. Similarly, the utopian potential of alt-history, the reminder that we could have brought ourselves to a better present, refocuses us on the fact that the future starts today, and as Hemingway once wrote, “what will happen in all the other days that ever come can depend on what you do today.”

Samantha Mills once wrote [a wonderful short story, entitled “Strange Waters”](#), which was not an alt-history but rather was set on a planet where the ocean is temporal and keeps washing the protagonist's fishing boat up in the same port but in different years. Alt-history is our own version of her boat in strange waters, allowing us to sail the seas of time back to Livy, to Alexander, back even to timelines in which Neanderthals rather than we Homo Sapiens inherited the earth.

Russ's novel, of course, is on the cusp of alt-history and slipstream, as it features both alternative timelines (Jeanine comes from a world where the Great Depression never ended) and other worlds. Its multiversal hybridity is what permits Russ to explore a multiplicity of gender-related encounters, and by extension identify potential directions in our own world.

The lack of gay or African alt-histories may in fact be because, like Russ, authors have found it preferable to explore hypotheticals in a slipstream rather than strictly uchronic mode. Certainly, Grace Dillon has written about Native American slipstream narratives which date back to Gerald Vizenor's reconstruction of George Custer from hero to imperialist in a narrative featuring literal rebirths.

William Faulkner is believed to have once said that “the stupidest words in the language are ‘What if?’”, but it is worth recalling that all fiction is, in a sense, an exploration of hypotheticals, including his own. The inherent appeal of alt-history is in part the guilty pleasure of exploring the roads not taken, but it is also, as historians and economists have found, a useful mode of inquiry as well as creativity.

In imagining the nightmare of living in a victorious

Alt-history reinforces the miraculous contingency of our existences, perhaps best expressed by Doctor Manhattan in Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons' *Watchmen* (1986), when the godlike superhero realises that the likelihood of his former lover Laurie's very existence is so preposterous that it counts as a “thermodynamic miracle”, and if her existence is so miraculously contingent, then so is that of all humanity.

There is of course a frisson in envisaging our own destruction, especially if it extends to our entire society or culture or way of being. This is the warning of alt-history, that latent in our present are the dark pasts we have averted. But equally latent are the glorious utopian presents we failed to realise. From those we can take comfort and inspiration. And there is always the possibility, expressed in fictions like *The Man in the High Castle* or R.A. Lafferty's clever short story "The Three Armageddons of Enniscorthy Sweeny" (1977), that the alternative histories we can imagine may in some way ultimately affect our own present and futures.

In such reflexive alt-histories, multiversal timelines intersect and clash. This offers us a way of thinking ourselves out of our own contemporary impasse, where alternate timelines seem to exist in the realities described by opposing politicians, a phenomenon sometimes referred to as "one screen, two movies". Often, as in Stephen Baxter's *Time's Tapestry* series or Keith William Andrews's *Freedom's Rangers* novels, it seems as if warring factions are trying to delete one another, and their perspectives, from history itself. And, as in Joanna Russ's novel or *The Man in the High Castle*, SF alt-histories suggest that what we might consider to be psychosis may actually transpire to be a mode of enlightenment.

By considering the contingency of our own history, and questioning consensus narratives, especially echo chamber consensus, we need not plunge into the morass of fake secret histories or conspiracy theories. Instead, alt-history teaches us how to question our own assumptions about our centrality in our own histories, and attain the critical distance to examine our timeline objectively. What we find offensive or anxious about alt-histories can help reveal what people from another timeline might find appalling about our own. This is a route to a better future, though we will have to navigate choppy and strange waters to get there.

~

Further Reading

Stephen Baxter, *Time's Tapestry* series, 2006 onwards.

Philip K. Dick, *The Man in the High Castle*, 1962.

Grace Dillon, ed., *Walking the Clouds: An Anthology of Indigenous Science Fiction*, 2012.

Robert Fogel, *Railroads and America's Economic Growth*, 1964.

William Gibson, *Agency*, 2020.

Louis-Napoléon Geoffroy, *Apocryphal Napoleon, 1841*.

Michael Grant's *Soldier Girl* series, 2016 onwards.

Robert Harris, *Fatherland*, 1992.

Karen Hellekson, *The Alternate History: Refiguring Historical Time*, 2001.

R.A. Lafferty, "The Three Armageddons of Enniscorthy Sweeny", 1977.

Murray Leinster, "Sidewise in Time", 1934.

Livy, *Ab Urbe Condita*.

Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons, *Watchmen*, 1986-7.

Glyn Morgan and Charul Palmer Patel, eds., *Sideways in Time: Critical Essays on Alternate History Fiction*, 2019.

Salvador Murguía, ed., *Trumping Truth: Essays on the Destructive Power of "Alternative Facts"*, 2019.

Mike Resnick, ed., *Alternative Presidents*, 1992.

Joanna Russ, *The Female Man*, 1975.

C.J. Sansom, *Dominion*, 2012.

Curtis Sittenfeld, *Rodham*, 2020.

J.C. Squire, ed., *If It Had Happened Otherwise*, 1931 (Contains Churchill's alt-Gettysburg, as well as uchronias by G.K. Chesterton, Hillaire Belloc and Andre Maurois).

Brian M. Thomsen and Martin H. Greenberg, eds., *Alternate Gettysburgs*, 2002.

Gerald Vizenor, "Custer on the Slipstream", 1978.

H.G. Wells, *A Modern Utopia*, 1903.

Fumi Yoshinaga, *Ooku*, 2005 onwards.

Should Murder Be Legalized?

Carlton Herzog

INTELLIGENCE SQUARED DEBATE,
August 21, 2064
QUESTION: SHOULD MURDER BE
LEGALIZED?

Arguing for the motion, Carlton Herzog, Professor *Emeritus*, Miskatonic Institute for Social Philosophy.

Arguing against the motion, Cardinal Clarence Dowd, Vatican Institute for Social Justice.

Moderator: “Gentlemen, please proceed with your opening statements.”

Professor Herzog: “Black’s Law Dictionary defines murder as the unlawful killing of one person by another. One must infer from such a definition that prohibitions against killing are situational rather than absolute. Voltaire famously said, ‘all murderers are punished unless they kill in large numbers and to the sound of trumpets.’”

“Voltaire implied that humans have been hardwired to embrace mass killing. To confirm that truth, one need only follow the Darwinian vapor trails streaming behind the brutal blood-soaked killing fields of modern warfare to the penumbral days of our ruthless, often cannibalistic, ancestors.”

Cardinal Dowd: “All life is God given and therefore sacred. To deny that truth is to condemn mankind to a life of butchery and madness.”

Professor Herzog: “The prohibition against murder rests on the legal fiction that killing is wrong. That fiction does not enjoy the same inviolable status as physical constants, such as the force of gravity and the speed of light.”

“We live in a nation where the national pastime is mass murder. Does my venerable adversary forget that the United States dropped two nuclear bombs on Japan, firebombed Dresden, and carpet-bombed North Vietnamese civilians? If life be sacred, then how does he explain half a million souls dying in the American Civil War, fifteen million in World War I, and another fifty million in World War II. Let us not forget the Rwandan and Serbian genocides, the two Iraq wars, and the Syrian civil war. Killing is as American as apple pie whether it be by school shooters, gang members, abortion clinics, or Kevorkians. Killing is baked into American DNA.”

Cardinal Dowd: “Our debate tonight focuses on the legalization of murder by private citizens, and not the justifications or lack thereof for armed conflict. To grant all your citizens the right to use deadly force for good reason or no reason flies in the face of common sense. Look no further than Chicago’s inner city with its poverty and gang violence to see the fruits of unrestrained lethal behavior. The area has fragmented into warring tribes trapped in a never-ending cycle of retribution.”

Professor Herzog: “Then what of MAD, or mutually assured destruction, employed by nuclear states. The fear of an equally devastating retaliation from the target has kept the nuclear peace for 75 years. The desire to kill one’s enemies is balanced by the fear of being killed in kind. Therefore, the practical benefit of a homicidal society would be a massive reduction in military spending. Only a nation of suicidal fools would dare attack America.”

Cardinal Dowd: “Legalized murder cheapens human life, reduces people to things, and insults God.”

Professor Herzog: “When potential victims can sidestep a police investigation and a lengthy legal process to mete out speedy justice, potential criminals have a powerful incentive not to offend. Further, the assertion that God is offended by killing is palpably absurd. The Abrahamic God was more than willing to eradicate all of humanity with the Flood, the righteous and the wicked alike, including children. In Revelations, He promises to do the same with fire. In between those two divine apocalypses, lies the rampages of God’s genocidal bagmen Joshua and Moses. Their conversion methodology relied heavily on the mass extermination of entire populations including their domesticated animals. It is that same hideous morality that informed the butchery of the Islamic conquest, the Mongol Invasion, the Mayan death cult, and ultimately the Soviet gulags.”

Cardinal Dowd: “I commend the Professor on his artful logic. But it is insensitive to the essential dignity of man as a creature fashioned in the image of a loving God. To be sure, the fragile clay of human nature lends itself to perversions of the most heinous kind. Yet, it also produces, if not murdered in its sleep, the most beautiful and profound things. It is as, the great Abraham Lincoln once said, we must cultivate “the angels of our better nature” and not be led astray by our inner devils.”

Professor Herzog: “When I look in the mirror, or at another man, I do not see the angelic. Instead, I see the stamp of an irrevocable expiration date. To paraphrase Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*, life is an exercise in futility, a tale of sound and fury told by an idiot who struts and frets upon the stage and is seen and heard no more.”

“If that nihilistic arc seems extreme and inhumane, then it would be well to consider that at bottom man is 90% water and two dollars-worth of drug store chemicals. Those chemicals combine to produce cells, 90% of which belong to non-human organisms, such as bacteria, fungi, and viruses. Indeed, when the ontological drill bores deeper, it finds that human existence is a haphazard temporary organization of molecules. In the grand scheme of things, one human killing another is merely the shifting of electrons from a coherent phase state to one more chaotic and open-ended. To borrow from Empedocles, ‘Already have [we] been a boy and a girl. A bush and a bird, and a silent fish in the sea.’”

“Let us give Darwin his due. Genetically, our closest common ancestor is the murderous, sometimes cannibalistic chimpanzee. That we are not a consistently reasoning animal, that our heads contain dark animal impulses, and that our brains are imperfect instruments should come as no surprise. The shadow of our checkered evolutionary past often falls and elongates over our so-called civilized lives. For despite our trousers and phones, we remain beasts of the dark woods and caves. The hairy and elongated canines may have shrunk, the screeches and ululations may have given over to language, and ballistic fecal matter may be a thing of the past, but we remain intimately tied by our very chromosomes to those voiceless souls we cage and medically exploit. We treat them as meaningless nobodies. What then is the great truth that elevates our worth over theirs other than the strong dominate and exploit the weak?”

Cardinal Dowd: “I cannot share your dim view of life as an exercise in futility. Even if one accepts the rather demoralizing truth of evolution, one can marvel at how far we have come from the simple single-celled organisms that floated in the primordial sea. We became fish, and those fish grew legs and walked on land, and later evolved into primates going on all fours. Then we walked upright and looked to the horizon of our possibilities. Now we have walked on the moon and Mars. I submit that those are far from nothing. They are everything.”

Professor Herzog: “At the most fundamental level, killing is the driver of evolution, helping to eliminate suspect adaptations from the gene pool. With the advent of agricultural abundance and medical technology, humans in the more advanced nations have grown soft. The civilized demographic is addicted to passive entertainment. We have become nations of lookers, watchers, gawkers, and spectators whose life experiences are vicarious thrills obtained through digital feeds. Compounding the matter is the infantilizing effects of intrusive paternalistic governments that insist on protecting the citizenry from itself.”

“Lacking any real existential challenges, our so-called civilized man is devolving into a bipedal jellyfish, lacking the grit and spine of his hardier ancestors. In short, civilized man has no skin in the game of his own existence. He has become a vain decadent thing with an undeserved sense of entitlement. It is that lack of any real humility and perspective that accounts for his wanton disregard for the environment and contempt for nature.”

“Legalizing murder vaccinates the public against the disease of apathy and self-satisfaction. Man’s greatest achievements have occurred when the risks were greatest, and the outcomes were uncertain. To legalize murder is repurpose lethal killing into a focused driver of human evolution and enduring achievement. Survival is that much sweeter when it is earned by dint of our evolved cunning and intelligence, rather than a guaranteed government hand-out.”



Cardinal Dowd: “I am sad that you have such little regard for your own kind. It must truly horrible to be a self-loathing human. I must wonder what childhood trauma caused such a twist in your personality.”

Professor Herzog: “*Ad hominem* attacks on me, couched in pseudo psychology cannot hide the truth that legalizing murder would be an economic boon. First, it would relieve the overburdened criminal justice system of investigating capitol cases and housing offenders for life while their appeals drag on for decades. Second, a state licensed and taxed murder for hire industry would contribute enormously to government coffers. Third, the legalization of murder would spawn any number of new businesses: murder insurance, corpse disposal, murder protection academies, and deadly arts academies. Finally, the dagger, explosives, gun and poison industries would enjoy a long-awaited rebirth.”

Cardinal Dowd: “Your argument makes as much sense as sawing the portion of tree limb between where you are sitting and the trunk. What do you suppose will happen when corporate heads, doctors, and lawyers wind up at the end of a loaded gun barrel? The day-to-day operation of society would ground to a halt without their coordinating and essential influences. What is to stop a would-be murderer from strolling into an operating room and executing the entire team during an operation? Or a disgruntled air traveler from stabbing a pilot, an irate felon from strangling a judge? If murder be legal, then it makes little sense to outlaw any lesser offense. The nominal benefits flowing from the increased commercial traffic would be more than offset by the rampant chaos. You seem to forget that group cohesion and other eusocial behaviors are the driving force behind the rise of civilization. If man had opted for killing members of his group, there would have been no one to hunt or gather food, or care for children. Cooperation, the very glue of civilization, would cease to hold things together.”

“I cannot accept the premise that no natural constraints on lethal conduct exist outside man made law. Most mammals operate in groups, from wolves to whales, elephants to chimpanzees. Rarely, if ever do members of the same animal group murder one another, however ferocious their interpersonal combat for dominance make take. Foraging and hunting are a collaborative effort. If we accept as true your premise that we live in coldly indifferent and random universe, then carving out a modicum of certainty in human affairs is paramount to our personal and collective sanity. If individuals can only feel secure when they sleep with one eye open, pistol in hand, then paranoia and schizophrenia will be the hallmarks of the human condition.”

Professor Herzog: “In an ideal world, there would be no need to legalize murder. But man is still very much a prisoner of his aggressive animality. Until his emotional architecture attains equilibrium with his intellect, he must find a way to redirect his inescapable lethal impulses along more constructive lines. In his *Civilization and its Discontents*, Doctor Freud observed that laws forbidding man’s primitive desire to kill give rise to discontent and mental illness. Though shackled, such desires do not evaporate but manifest in the more accepted practice of war. To legalize murder is to offer society an alternative to global conflict and eventual extinction.”

“The Cardinal wrongly assumes this is a moral issue in an amoral world. Rather it is the application of Trolley Problem Logic where priority is given to the needs of the many over the needs of the one or the few. It is the same social arithmetic that decides who gets in the lifeboat first, who goes to war and who stays behind.”

Moderator: “That concludes our debate. Those who want murder legalized should press one on their pads, those who do not press two.”

~

Infinity Child

James Hancock

Death isn't so bad. Okay, when you're alive and don't know any better, it can freak you out. Trying to figure out what happens next, but having no clues, can be frightening. Not knowing what's going on behind the curtain. But, take it from me, it's no big deal. At first dying can be quite a thing, especially if you go in a grisly way, but even that is over and done with pretty quickly, and after a few seconds the inevitable kicks in and you find an odd kind of peace to see you through the rest of it. As far as dying goes, it really is no big deal. Just part of the process. How would I know? I've died one hundred and sixty-three times, and I don't even consider the *how* anymore; it's all about the *when*.

We have our group of primaries that all need to be free at roughly the same time if we want to keep together, and then there are the secondaries; nice if we can add as many as possible, but understandable if not... after all, they have their own primary groups to consider. I'm not making myself clear. Right, let's put

aside matters of planets, space, time, and memory. Let's deal with the real. We are beings, and we inhabit a place that isn't defined by where or when. Some call it Heaven; and why not? Heaven is as good a name as any. It's nice here... in Heaven.

Is there a God? Yes, of sorts. God is the great organiser. The heart of the universe. The one who knows all the details of all the ages and all the people. That's quite a lot of knowledge. And who are we? We are the travellers. We look at a place and a time and a people, and we are born into it. You see, lives and people are merely shells; things to occupy for a time. Therefore, each shell can have been occupied many times by many people, and with an infinite amount of alternative decisions that lead on to many different outcomes. It's not scripted, but there is an element of 'one's destiny' involved. There are a few significant set things which will happen to some shells, or lives, if you will. If you want to be Hitler you must be aware that you'll start World War Two, bring about the mass extermination of Jews, and end your own life at the age of fifty-six. The rest you can play out how you want.

twenty-nine? They didn't form many relationships, so it's ideal. Back just in time to be born into the huge family group which you'd signed up to. The removal of one costume before trying another. And there are so many fantastic costumes to try.

Or just wait it out and share stories with others who are also waiting to join a life.

But most take a brief journey whilst they are waiting. You see, we all love being human. We are addicted to it. We need the feeling of belonging to something, or to someone. There's something amazing about a mother. We all have one, and they have a special bond like no other. The greatest gift to any life is beginning it with the person closest to you. And the beauty of the human connection is that my daughter is also somebody else's mother. And on and on; linked to the great circle.

When you live a life, you are ignorant to it all, but soon enough you're back and reminiscing with others involved. Kids, grandkids, friends, all spending time together and revisiting emotions. Without limits. Humans are limited to their memories by thought, but in Heaven we can revisit the exact feelings and experience them again in full. Many glorious moments in many fascinating lives are within our personal collection. Emotions and pleasures to be dipped into and had again and again.

The problem is you need to get all your primaries to agree and accept surrounding roles; or as many as possible. You think organising an Earthling family dinner is tricky? It's nothing in comparison to a group of more than a hundred humans organising their next life plan.

Let's say you want to experience life in a Scandinavian barbarian tribe, battling in the age of the Roman Empire. Now you have to convince everyone else to come on board. The wife will want to be the wife again, which makes sense, and the children will need to be the children, and then their children... etc. However, there are also brothers, sisters, best friends, and all of their significant others to consider. By the time you've got everyone organised, there's usually three or four hundred involved, with hundreds more to join later. And that's where God comes in. God will find the best time and family group for you to start in, and the rest is history... or the future. As I say, there is no 'time'.

Some primaries or secondaries might sit out of a big group visit, as they want to get involved in something else that's going on. Some will have to wait to be born, and will find something else to do whilst they wait. Got to wait thirty years, then why not live the life of this nineteenth-century scientist who died aged

And then there's the reward structure. To maintain a balance, those that die old must be matched with a similar number that die young. Who'd want to come back as a child who died aged five? No time to do anything, or understand anything. Well, if you do, you get a reward point. It's the same if you pick someone who goes out in an upsetting way; you get a reward point. The points are then used to add something significant to another life plan. Something good. For example, I really enjoyed my life on a farm in sixteenth-century Denmark. I never settled down, but I was good-looking and had a lot of fun, if you know what I mean. So when I revisited it a few hundred years later, and relived it again, I added the reward point I had earned by living the life of a murder victim. When I went back to live my farm life again, I chose to be much wealthier. A simple change in that I owned my farm, rather than paying rent. In fact, I was the son of a landowner and I owned several farms. I had just as much fun the second time around, only I lived a more luxurious life and indulged in more than just sins of the flesh. I had a lot of what some call *déjà vu* in that trip.

Always remember to keep it as simple as possible, and to keep with as many primaries as you can, or know exactly where and when they are. That way you avoid upset. Yes, Heaven has upset too; well, to a certain extent. I've known people to take their main wife or husband into a life where she or he dies halfway through, and then they remarry. It happens a lot. Emotional attachments are made, and afterwards you find yourself with two spouses trying to get involved in the next visit. God is good there though, and often steps in and finds a way where everyone can be happy. Why not be a Mormon? That said, jealousy is a human condition, amplified when visiting Earth, and between lives we understand that love is shared, and a connection made with another doesn't lessen yours in any way. There is more understanding in 'Heaven'.



So huge is our family that many millions are living and many millions are in waiting, but all are connected. Drops in the ocean. Parts of a whole. And time is a constantly expanding circle that loops around, repeats, and has infinite other circles springing off from it at every possible point. So when I say God is an organiser, it is quite a small word for something that knows every place, every person, and every point in time; and all the changes as they are made, and how they affect other timelines, people, places... etc. Yes, God is impressive!

Seventeen thousand, four hundred and eighty-eight years ago I became. I can't remember 'not being' before that point, and I don't how it happened, but I know that God, who is the universe, brought me into existence. I'm not going to question the universe's plan, if it wanted to create us and learn from our actions, or if it was just bored, but twenty billion white stars expanded, faded, and became a collective life-force from which we sprung. Each of us a child of the universe; part of it, born to experience its wonders for all eternity.

'Humans will rule the earth for five hundred millennia, and you are they'. The universe had spoken. 'You can live any life from any time, and you can enjoy it again and again should you wish to. My gift to you is eternity. Now travel it together. Learn everything there is to learn and share your findings. Enjoy love, suffer horror, and understand that although you are many, you are also one. We are one. I have created you from myself, and you are part of me. Only together are we whole.'

Together, we are the universe. Together, we are God.

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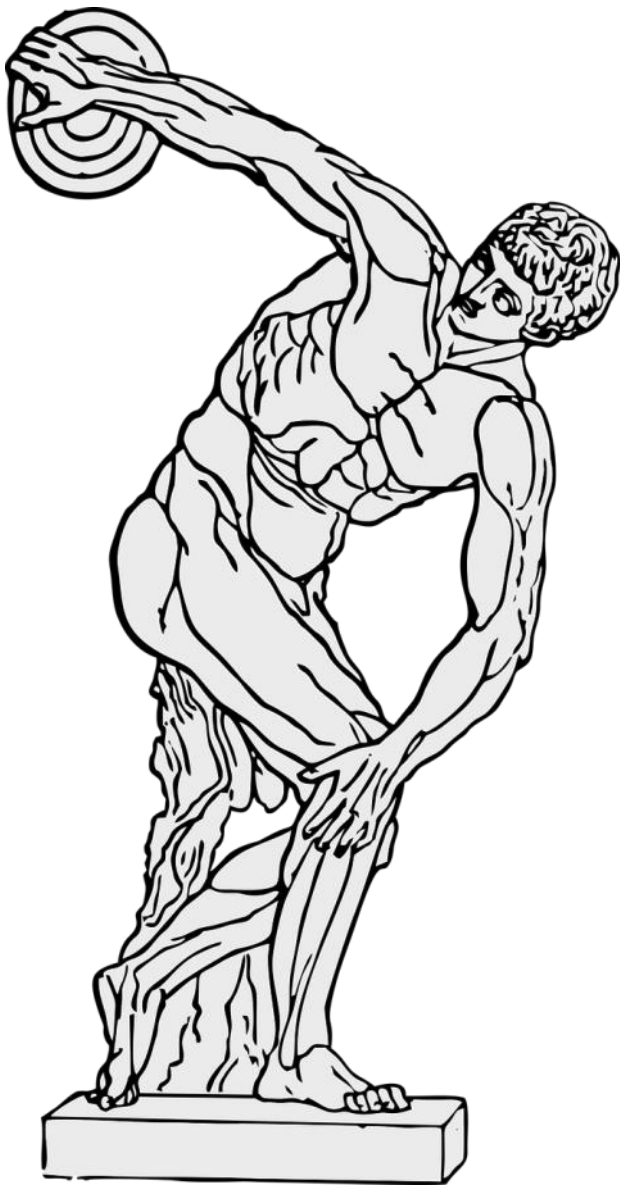
A First Look At Post-National Olympics In Science Fiction

Madeline Barnicle

The ancient Olympic games of Greece honored Zeus, caused truces between warring city-states, and became a unit of measuring time. The modern Olympic movement may bill itself as a competition among individuals, rather than pitting nations against each other. But in practice, international conflicts often color or overshadow the games, from world wars preventing competition (the opposite of the ancient truces) to boycotts to terrorist attacks. However, our current geopolitical system is far from the only way to imagine world society. Without the modern nation-state, what does the future of the Olympics look like?

Two science fiction series that touch on this question are Ada Palmer's *Terra Ignota* and Malka Older's *Centenal Cycle*. Both are set in future versions of Earth where governmental systems no longer correspond to geography. In *Terra Ignota*, there are seven major "Hives" which span the globe. There is not as much balance of power as one might hope, since the Hive leaders tend to be closely related to each other by adoption and familial relationships, but each society is represented throughout the world. In the *Centenal* books, the planet is subdivided into many small "centenals," small geographic regions of population about 100,000 each. Each centenal votes for its own "government." While some governments only contest a few regional seats, many others are world-spanning super-corporations that may serve hundreds of millions of constituents without geographical constraints. If residents don't like their centenal's new government, it's not hard to pack up and start anew elsewhere.

In both cases, the efficiency of transportation is what helps make the world "small." When routinely travelling among continents is sustainable and affordable to the masses, one's birthplace tends to have little impact on their culture and preferred system of government.



Though the governments of the Centenal Cycle are not geographically contiguous, they still come different orders of magnitude, which means today's tensions between small and large countries play out along similar lines. In the third book of the trilogy, two characters use the Olympics as a proxy for conversations about their different home cultures:

"Maryam and N ria are lying in bed, watching a projection of the rock-climbing at the Olympics. 'Listen to them,' Maryam says. 'One athlete from Resilient Tuvalu wins and the announcers can't stop yammering on about how that proves it's not all about money, how the games aren't unfairly tilted towards the big governments. Just because one supremely talented person is able to break through. So hypocritical.'" (State Tectonics, Chapter 18)

Like the present day, the announcers attempt to extrapolate and draw geopolitical meaning from competitions between a few elite individuals. A few pages later, we have: *"the Olympic compiler had fallen into a long run on the tragi-triumphant backstories of the two leading climbers, and if there's one thing Maryam and N ria agree on, it's that they hate that stuff."* In our world, fans who want to watch competition in the moment may resent attempts at forcing narratives or looking backwards to justify some athlete's success. In the future of the Centenal Cycle, this is even more striking, because the tendency to perceive order or connection even in unrelated events has been semi-pathologized as "narrative disorder." Characters with this condition attempt to think twice before jumping to conclusions or trusting their intuition. So while trying to find nuggets in Olympians' past that retroactively explain their rise to power may be considered frivolous, it may also be a way to satisfy the heuristic-driven, pattern-seeking aspects of the human brain in a setting without major political repercussions. Ultimately, despite many efforts at political and informational reform, *"people still care more about their friends, and clothes, and sports, and what to eat for dinner, and whether they can find a better job or where to go on vacation than about any question of governance."* (Chapter 27)

In Terra Ignota, the Olympic movement played an important role in the establishment of the Hive system. Three centuries after "Renunciation Day," world leaders observe the anniversary by re-enacting the speeches and events that led to a new political order. The Olympic committee was, as of the fictional 2131, one of three organizations with an established worldwide mass transit system; *"there were almost a billion subscribers who trusted the Olympic Transportation Union to clear their flights as they jaunted from continent to continent for the World Cup, or the Winter Games or work."* (Too Like the Lightning, Chapter 8) In a world that had been scarred by religious warfare, the Olympic chairman, along with his peers, asked the people of Earth to affiliate with a global organization rather than a nation-state.

The series is set three hundred years later, by which time new Hives have risen, fallen, and merged. For instance, the Mitsubishi corporation has merged with Greenpeace to become by far the largest Hive by land ownership. *“The Olympian Hive, which lived for sport, merged with World Stage, which lived for concert and spotlight, to form the ‘Humanists,’ united by the passion to excel, achieve, improve, and constantly surpass the past limits of human perfection.”* The Humanist Hive’s system of democracy allows for either concentrated or diffuse systems of power. *“Detractors call it a cult of charisma, but the Humanists themselves use aretocracy, rule by excellence.”* (Chapter 10) While the early 20th century saw cultural competitions alongside the athletic portion of the Olympic games, Terra Ignota’s Olympians have adapted by fusing themselves with other cultural institutions to remain a global force even when *“the Humanist President has more important work on Renunciation Day than assuring a bored audience that there will still be sports teams in this brave new world.”* (Chapter 8)

Most inhabitants of the world of 2454 perceive even oblique discussion of sex or gender as taboo, referring to each other as “they” rather than “he” or “she” in dialogue. The narrator bucks this trend, describing another character, “Sniper,” by saying *“the delicacy of his build and tightness of his muscles makes it impossible to guess whether this torso is naturally male or an Amazon, a common enough practice among female Humanist athletes who aim at mixed sports early in life, so have the doctors prevent breasts from developing, opting out of their varied inconveniences.”* (Chapter 11) Chapter 18 expands on that by mentioning that some women, or developing girls, “aiming early at the Olympic open divisions, chose to grow no breasts.” The existence of “open divisions” suggests that there may be other competitions restricted based on sex. While Olympism may provide a symbolic link to the past, it might also create tension by reminding people of aspects of the past they’d prefer to move past.

The Olympic Games become more of a plot point in the 3rd book of the series, “The Will to Battle.” I have not read that one so I won’t try to summarize it, but [Paul Di Filippo’s review](#) in Locus Mag reminds us that the Humanists and all the other Hives were not created from scratch, but were the results of mergers and struggles among many existing organizations. As a society that has lived in peace for centuries prepares for conflict, Sniper’s name indicates his fitness for war as well as for athletic pursuits. And the supernatural arrival of “Achilles” reminds readers how the traditions and cultures of ancient Greece and Rome continue to influence the present and future.

While not sports-related, one other similarity between the Hives and the Centenal governments stood out for me; in both futures, some version of the European Union has survived into the timeframe of the books. In State Tectonics, EuropeanUnion (one word) has *“some odd old ideas, but they’re pretty good about protecting the environment, people’s rights...”* (Chapter 11) In Too Like the Lightning, “Europe” is one of the seven hives, having been founded with the original Renunciation groups even though it still represented the geographical EU. In the imagined 2060s, the EU *“instituted floating citizenship, so children of mixed parents would not be compelled to choose between several equal fatherlands,”* and by 2131 had moved onto *“offering floating citizenship to any citizen who wants to leave America or any other geographic nation.”* Both of these societies look to the multi-national success of the EU as a jumping-off point to imagine the successors of our current states.

The EU example reminds us that history is not a one-way march of progress. The convoluted Brexit process has illustrated the power and influence of both supranational, centralizing forces and local, nationalistic ones. Today’s Olympic movement borrows symbolism and ritual from the ancient Games, while trying to balance differences in politics and culture on a scale vastly bigger than the Greek city-states had to deal with. Whatever form sports take in the future, both the Centenal Cycle and Terra Ignota suggest that humans will continue to be captivated by the quest to go faster, higher, and stronger.

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Until The Bubble Pops

Robert L. Jones III

On Wednesdays I clean the bathroom. Such is the routine nature of this task that it compresses my awareness of time. Whenever I begin, I feel as if I just finished, and if life is a grammatical sentence, mine seems to lack punctuation. My name is Norman Brinster. It's Wednesday, so I'm cleaning the bathroom. I'm cleaning the bathroom, so it must be Wednesday.

I pour the cleanser into the toilet and begin brushing. I must have used too much, because the surface of the water foams excessively as I brush. The foam is fascinating, a microcosm of unknown significance. I'm intrigued by how the bubbles form, converge, and pop. It's all so ephemeral. I glance at my watch.

The brush is no longer in my hand, and I'm no longer in the bathroom. This strikes me as odd once I realize it. I'm somewhere unfamiliar, but where I am paradoxically has a familiar feel to it. Somehow, I know this environment is not a physical structure or place. I've been here all the time, but now I can see it.

I'm inside what looks like a sphere whose boundary is a bit out of focus. It's dark in here, but I can see the boundary in all directions. I drift toward it. Where is the light coming from? As I approach the boundary, I can see that it's made up of smaller spheres. I'm in a sphere of spheres. They seemed out of focus from farther away because they're pulsating, which leaves them slightly out of round at any point in time. I just said "time" again. I wonder if time matters in here.

My watch is not around my wrist, and the spheres appear unstable. Their surfaces are opaque in some areas and translucent in others. Small spots become transparent, and the patterns are constantly shifting. What are these spheres? I examine one more closely, and I'm inside it.

#

Life can be difficult. Hard work doesn't always pay off, but everything works out in the end. Everyone is at least a little dishonest whether they know it or not. I'm brilliant. I'm going to be an elite scientist, and I'll cure cancer. I'll win the Nobel Prize. My name and my picture will be all over the world. I don't know who my wife will be, but she'll look like an actress or a supermodel. Money won't be a problem. With her career and mine, we'll have plenty of that, and our home will have a great view of the mountains.

Here I am, at the center again, and this is frustrating. People can't be trusted until they prove themselves trustworthy. Things don't always work out, at least not the way I planned. I've lost a few jobs for unjust reasons, but the job I have is a pretty good one. Very few people know or care who I am. Sometimes, the game is rigged. It takes discretion and tact to play it. I'm married to Naomi Brinster, and she has to work, too. We live in an apartment. I may not be able to provide her with everything I'd like to, but she'll never have to clean the bathroom. Should I try one more sphere?

No, that's enough. I need to see more, but I don't need to see more of this. I've spent too much of my life scheming on the fickle, shifting crust of reality. What I thought I knew turned out to be shine and tarnish. The underlying substance is here, somewhere in the substratum. My name is Norman Brinster, and on Wednesdays I clean the bathroom. There must be more. Tired of putting off the inevitable, I feel a sense of outward acceleration, and the boundary rushes past me.

#

I have ideals. People are honest because they should be honest. Karla Farmington is going to be my girlfriend, but she doesn't know that yet. We'll get married, take long road trips, and sleep in motels. We'll visit scenic wonders like the Grand Canyon, Yosemite, the Redwoods, and Crater Lake. I have the ability to be a great athlete, and I'll win a gold medal in the 100-meter dash at the Olympics. Hard work pays off.

This sphere is mine, or it was. Suddenly, I'm back outside, back at the center, and looking at the curved, poorly focused boundary. Along with the sphere I've just examined, I see the other spheres. They're all mine, and this is my sphere of spheres. That's right: mine. Relaxed and curious, I drift back and try another.

People aren't always honest. I'm not fast enough to be a world class sprinter. I'm going to be a great musician instead. Mary Richardson will be my wife, and we'll be in a band together. We'll tour the country in a van and play gigs to appreciative audiences. Our home will be a cabin in the woods, and we'll own lots of land.

I'm back at the center, and this is a bit disorienting. It looks like I'd better try another sphere.

Going out was coming in, for I've moved into a much larger metaphysical space. I'm in a greater sphere of spheres. I've deduced this from the curvature of its margin, but this margin extends in all directions until I can no longer see it. As one can't see the opposite shore of an ocean, I can't see the opposite side of the sphere. I'm near its periphery.

Examining the constituent spheres, I recognize mine even though I've never seen it from this perspective. The rest are not mine. They remind me of the bubbles in my toilet, and new ones form as others pop. There are so many. They are too numerous, and I can't begin to count them all. Within this context, I'm overwhelmed.

Who am I? My name is Norman Brinster, but what does that mean? Maybe it doesn't matter. Maybe it does. I continue to relax and drift. I still don't know where the light is coming from, and I'm drifting away from the spheres. Is it Wednesday in here?

#

The ephemeral shore is no longer visible. I turn to look in the other direction, and there it is. This sphere is larger than the others. I believe it's at the center of the great sphere of spheres. It's all I can see in the void through which I drift. It doesn't pulsate. It's completely transparent, but I can't see inside because of the intensity of its light.

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Now I know the interpretation of the spheres.

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The central sphere is perfect and stable. This is reality regardless of how accurately anyone perceives it. I suspect this perspective encompasses those of all the other spheres, so it must see and understand everything.

The lesser sphere of spheres is my personal sub-reality. This is the lens through which I perceive the universe, and it was formed from perception, desire, experience, and limited understanding. It includes the various sub-realities I've inhabited throughout my life. The sub-realities of my past inform my sub-reality in the present.

The greater sphere of spheres is composed of the sub-realities of everyone living on this planet. The ones I saw forming were those of people being born while the ones that popped were those of people who were dying. That the sub-realities are distinct and separate means they aren't the same. Everyone sees things differently to one degree or another.

We are destroying the planet. The planet is going through cycles as it always has. One political solution is best, but so is a different political solution. You can't legislate morality. Yes, you can. In fact, you must. Life is good. Life is miserable. Things are getting better. No, they're getting worse. We were created for a reason, and we go on living after we die. We are the products of random evolution. We die and rot, and that's the end of it.

Our sub-realities aren't the same, but there must be at least some overlap. Otherwise, we would be unable to communicate. Everyone has his or her sub-reality. I left mine back in the bathroom, speaking of which. . .

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I glance at my watch. The brush is in my hand, and no time has elapsed. I flush the toilet. Life runs its course until the bubble pops.

#

I took a philosophy course when I was in college, and we argued about determinism and free will. Some of us came down on the side of free will because we liked the idea that it's entirely up to us. Others who thought they understood quantum physics and variational principles favored the deterministic nature of time, and they said what's going to happen has already happened. Then we quibbled about randomness and teleology. Looking back, I think both sides were right, which made both sides wrong -- or partly right and partly wrong.

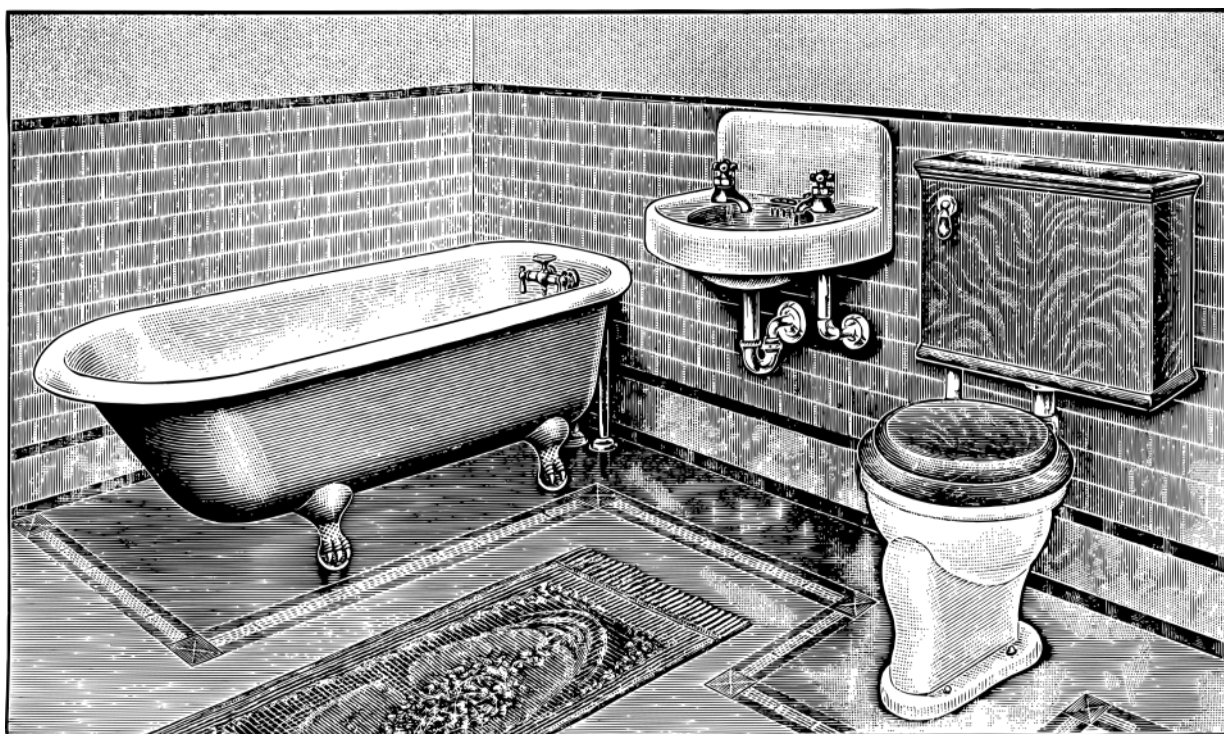
How many events in anyone's life seem random in real time and contrived in retrospect? All of this could make logical sense if there's a personality outside of time, some intelligence that bends every decision, every action, toward a mysterious, inexorable conclusion. Okay, I'll go with that.

If this is true, the script has been written, but that's okay with me as long as it's a good script. We follow it by the choices we make. That leaves us free to fulfill what's going to happen, and that's a horrifying relief.

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Now I can finish cleaning the bathroom.

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The Rise And Fall Of Collective Consciousness

Anthony Lechner

An Annotated Bibliography

The Antiquity of God Particles by Rene Pliggins

In this dry, yet fascinating history of what the ancients called mass particles or material existence (what we understand as monada, they crudely called matter), Pliggins explores a variety of competing theories that attempt to explain the nature of being. The 20th through 21st centuries developed a model of understanding that explored a variety of forces or fields consisting of electromagnetism, gravitation, strong interactions, weak interactions, and even a field where the rapid decaying of energy created material particles. Though it seems obvious why now, they were

never able to unite all of these theories into one functional theory, I surmise the main problem with the ancients' lack of understanding regarding the nature of existence rests in their myopic view of reality. Rather than exploring the internal structure and causation of consciousness, they were exploring the external effects of consciousness. It is like a child being distracted by pretty much anything within their field of vision. They focus on the phenomena rather than the internal components of what makes observation possible. Because they didn't understand consciousness, they reduced it to brain chemistry without recourse to the common understanding of interdimensional ontology that is known today. Yet, the experimentations the ancients did with subatomic structures opened the door to the discovery of quark decimals.

In this historical analysis, Critus argues that the discovery of quark decimals single-handedly started the movement of social justice. I admit, it is difficult to think of a conception of reality where QDs are not the starting point. QDs started the process of collective consciousness. QDs provided evidence that the universe continuously folds and unfolds itself endlessly. Like the notion of pi being a number whose decimal place is non repeating and infinite, the existence of consciousness is infinite (in both parts and whole). Although at this point in history, the understanding of monada was half a millennium away from being discovered, the implications of QDs in the creation of synthetic half protons is undeniable. After all, it was the union of these conscious particles that led to the half proton. To think there was a time that people believed in some sort of unconscious substance is absurd. Unconscious is the wrong term here, more like non-conscious. They actually believed consciousness was a myth. How is a civilization supposed to overcome the plight of pains, poverty, sickness, narcissism, and all the other long, lost and forgotten causes of everything wrong with society by believing that consciousness is a myth? It is a wonder how much sooner science would have progressed if ancient scientists weren't so opposed to reality being consciousness itself. I conjecture the problem was within what they called the uncertainty principle. Ancient scientists failed to see commonality within various functions. They were too obsessed with difference to fully grasp the similarities within wavefunctions. There were not two non-conscious entities, but rather entities bonded through consciousness. There is no such thing as without. There is only within.

The Modernization of Synthetic Half Protons by Sagorny Simone

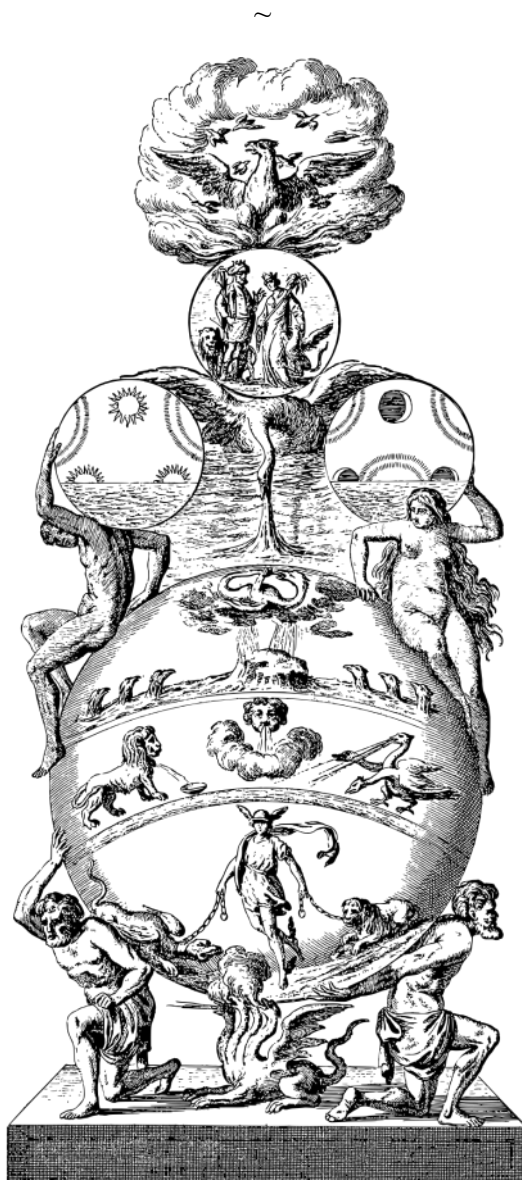
Simone's history of this time period is refreshing. While it is hard to believe there was once a time of violence, conflict, and misunderstanding, Simone shows the reader how the transformation, really the evolution, occurred. I can only imagine what it must have felt like to live in the first generation of the synthetic half proton users. To instantly feel the consciousness of not only the whole collective existence of humanity, but more specifically those in your immediate vicinity, especially in a time where pain, poverty, and persecution existed. These generations cured so many social injustices. It is one thing to speculate about the right way to live, and quite another to fully experience the consciousness of others and their lifeworld. While there was resistance at first to the mandates regarding synthetic half protons, the benefits outweighed the fear of losing one's self. In fact, just the opposite happened. Individuality was heightened because there were no more marginalized people. Each life was experienced and celebrated. Personal freedom and growth needs the collective in order to properly come into fruition. Too much of history is shadowed by and rooted in fear. It wasn't until all members of society installed the synthetic half protons that the concept of ethics became a historical triviality. It was the equivalent of having what the ancient's called a *divine* mind. This is what they should have called the god particle, even though it was created by the work of humanity.

Over 1,000 years (that's over 40 generations) of collective consciousness passed by before the work of GVN brought forth the monada and undeniable existence of interdimensional beings. Even as a first-year secondary student, I am able to grasp what GVN called the horizon of monada. I perceive it more as a silent presence. The monada is the link between the other dimension, and I am almost there. It is consciousness itself, as far as I can interpret. GVN talks about the seeing. I've always imagined it is like seeing a big eyeball in the sky watching you, but I know that is not the case. And though I can perceive what my elders have experienced, I have not experienced it myself. I speculate there are levels of the synthetic protons, but I am not sure if they are activated by thoughts, biological age, or other worldly experiences. The monada is the link to the interdimensional being that is conscious of our existence - or perhaps created our existence. (This connects to Critus' thesis that there are an infinite number of worlds.) When we become aware of the interdimensional existence, we become part of the unfolding, which is discussed in the last book I read for this project.

The Unfolding of Cosmos Generating: What It Means to Be Created by Ching Dao

While the concept of a cosmic deity has existed since time immemorial, Dao became one. Dao was the first to create their own universe. At least the first human to do such. Dao argues that monada are more like units of consciousness that can be shaped or molded at will. The trick is in the unfolding—the way in which monada transverse through dimensions. The monada that make up our reality are the same monada from the interdimensional, which are the same monada Dao used to create

a new universe. Creation is transformation, the union of opposites. Dao writes there is no precise location where left turns into right, large into small, or up into down. In like manner, there is no precision between the collective and the individual. From the collective we rise, and toward the individual we fall, only to rise again. The monada bind the opposing forces of consciousness. There is no existence without perception, and because of this truth, Dao affirms that each monada is capable of creating its own universe. Dao managed to unfold a billion years of creation from only 60 years of his own monada. The destiny of being created (being transformed) is to become the creator. I feel better equipped, after reading this book, to transform my monada into my own personal universe and watch it unfold.



Black Hole

Alicia Hilton

weapons behind. Follow me, through the airlock, each step brings you closer to humanity.

Do you hear the voices? Your hosts eagerly await your arrival. Yes, it is safe to remove your helmet. Breathe deeply, the air is fresh and clean, scrubbed and purified by ultra-fabulous extraterrestrial technology.

Goodness, your complexion has a greenish tinge. Follow me into the command center, and I shall serve you a refreshing beverage.

You do not like the metallic taste? It is a nourishing solution, perfectly concocted with electrolytes and vitamins blended with blood from your enemies.

Which enemies? Do I see a smile on your face? Tsk-tsk, all the promises you made, your talk of regret and forgiveness was fake? Don't you feel ashamed?

Would you care for another glass? There's plenty more in the fridge. Step back and I'll check.

Yes, just as I thought. Two jugs left. Would you prefer parental unit or significant other? I hear your former lover has a spicy flavor.

This is the space station in the galaxy of your nightmares, the last bastion of Earthly civilization. There is the hatch. You have permission to approach.

Not so fast! Engage reverse thrusters, slow your speed!

Yes! Connection achieved. You may breathe a sigh of relief.

Stop shivering. There is no need to fear. Leave your

What's the matter, feeling a bit queasy?

If you must vomit, use the waste tube! Don't spew bilious fluid on the floor!

How revolting, what a horrific stench, you humans really do have an inferior digestive system, and your lack of self-control is pitiful. Have you learned nothing from your interactions with my species?

Oh well, a little hurl isn't the end of the world.

What's the matter, you don't appreciate my sense of humor? You've become a dreadful bore; I don't know why I keep you around.

Ah, now I remember. There's no need to cry. Wipe your tears and give me a kiss and cuddle.

Very nice. Doesn't physical connection make you feel more secure?

Of course, I am happy to oblige with another kiss, mouth open. The texture of your tongue is so unique.

Take my hand, darling, and I shall lead you to a little slice of paradise.

Duck your head, watch the protruding pipes, as we pass through sick bay, don't be distressed by the whistling sound and the screams, it's only memories of the missiles that blasted your dreary old planet.

Not much further to go, be patient, darling. Why are you sweating? Suffering from a bit of the old PTSD?

No, that's not your parental unit yelling, it's just a recording.

Look, at the end of the corridor. Do you like your special surprise? I knew you would adore them!

Yes, I am aware that the androids are missing their genitals. Lovely lower abdomens, perfectly smooth and unblemished.

Recline on the cot and close your eyes. You need a little push? Of course, I'm happy to oblige.

The manacles are for your protection. The slightest flinch could result in utter disaster.

You want a last kiss before your nap? Of course, how could I refuse a final request?

Lovely, your tongue tastes of recriminations, so savory. Do you recall the last words you said to the ones you once loved? The final meal you consumed

that did not come from a tube?

Portobello mushrooms and red wine? Fascinating.

It's time. Yes, we mustn't tarry. They are waiting. Open your mouth. Breathe deeply.

I know the gas has a strange flavor, but it will pass, along with your struggle. Embrace the dark. Do you see stars flickering?

With a bit of patience, everything passes, even radiation.

~



Yesterearth's Morrow

Ádám Gerencsér

Singapore Straits Times – 1st July 1947

Readers with any interest in current affairs will scarcely need reminding that today is the first anniversary of the appearance of those strange phenomena that marked the gradual unravelling of time as a constant and steadfast quantity, the steady progression of which all previous generations could rely on so safely as to take it for granted. This view is now considered obsolete, and rightly so, but it bears repeating how nigh impossible that would have seemed just over a year ago. Over the course of the past twelve months, thanks to the rapid advances of modern science and skilful observations made by vessels of the Royal Navy, we have gained a better understanding of the new role that the International Date Line has come to play.

I have taken the liberty to compose this recollection and offer it to our esteemed editor on account of my rather immediate proximity to the longitude in question. Not only as correspondent of the Straits Times in the Crown Colony of Fiji, documenting both momentous and provincial events as they unfold, but also as a simple resident who experiences daily the disturbing effects that still have the ability to startle as much as they did at their initial onset.

It started on the 1st of July 1946 (or the 30th of June, depending on one's whereabouts) east of the Marshall Islands and gradually spread north and south thereof, fanning out like elongated ripples along the date meridian. Within a brief period that could not have taken more than a week, or two at the most, we found ourselves confronted with a novel and hitherto unimaginable reality: anyone crossing the international date line roughly along the 180° longitude eastwards no longer cuts across a mere imaginary division, but finds himself an additional day further in the past, or rather, on a past incarnation of the Earth that is now independent of the present. The traveller may then engage in any form of interaction with the inhabitants of that past world, a Yesterearth so to speak, without perturbing in any way the future time he had left behind. After interfering with the events on the other side of the date line, one may return to the present by simply retracing his journey and realise that nothing has changed on account of their actions, other than the fact that time has moved on during their absence. On their subsequent visit to the world of two days past, however, they will notice that their interlocutors remember them well enough and any seeds of future consequence they had planted there have come to fruition.

A world map based on Mercator's projection distorts the proportions of the surface areas of the continents, by making landmasses at extreme southerly and northerly latitudes, such as Antarctica or Greenland, appear much larger than their actual size would merit compared, for instance, with Africa. So, when we wish to achieve a more proportional representation, we divide the map into equidistant segments that are thicker towards the Equator and thinner at the poles, as if peeling the skin off an orange, and lay it out flat. Our hypothetical map now stretches from Alaska in the West to Siberia in the East, and we know that, just as the gaps between segments of the Earth's 'skin' are imaginary, the edge of the map is no true boundary, but in fact loops around and connects to the opposite end. Thus, in the world as we had known it until 1946, it was not possible to stray off the map of the globe, since a resolute straight line would take one around in circles, returning to the self-same point with each circumnavigation.

That, alas, is no longer the case. Beyond the eastern margin of our map lies the western edge of someone else's. Of course, in a manner of speaking, our world is still round, and we may be so bold as to argue with some conviction that our present time is unique and one of a kind. For it has become evidently clear that while ships and aeroplanes making their way over the surface of all preceding Earths may travel both backwards by crossing the dateline eastwards and also forward in our direction by traversing the same line due west, the same is not true for vessels in our time. We can regress by two days on the passage from Suva to Samoa, but we may not proceed into our future, as it were, giving us the impression that we stand at the pinnacle of time's arrow. That is to say, the future is not yet existent, or certainly not accessible, until we unlock it day by day as we stride forward in tune with our calendars.

Being first among equals (and some in the colonial administration would indeed dispute even that proposition), our position brings great opportunities, but also imposes significant responsibility upon our statesmen. The lives of nations and empires now unfold in an entirely separate manner on all contiguous Earths, and the next general election back in the British Isles, to be held in 1950, might yield wildly different results in our continuity compared to the Earth of the day before yesterday. It is therefore eminently possible that the cabinet of our Empire might find itself at loggerheads with the British government elected in our immediate temporal neighbourhood. In fact, His Majesty of today might disagree with policies that are received approvingly by His Majesty of two days ago. The fact is that the political realities of life in the Dominion will inevitably develop very differently across every successive Earth each two further days down the line.

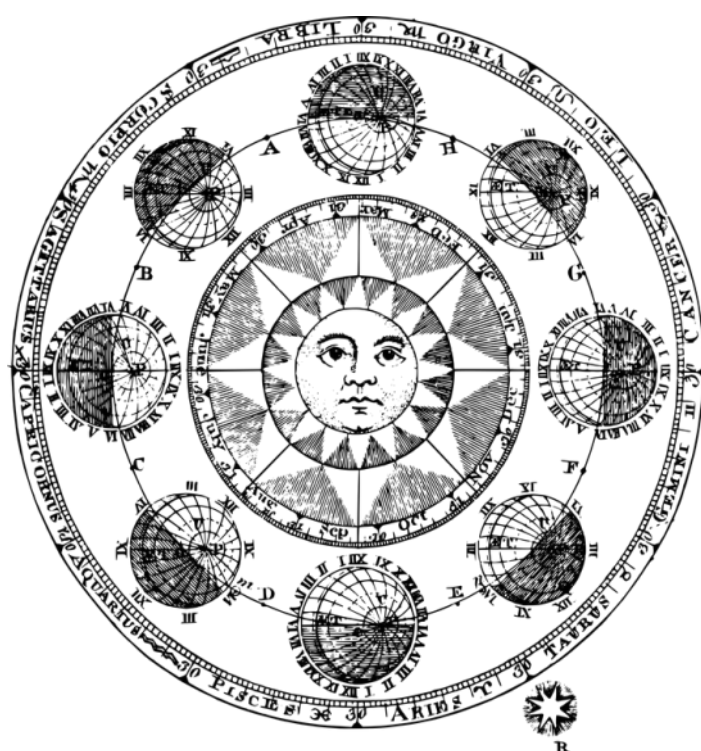
Your correspondent here admits to having made an involuntary, yet naïve attempt at bridging the date meridian and exploring some of the strangeness of the most immediate past just east of his stationment. In the spring I had received a telegraph dispatched by my former self from the world of two days ago. It had been transmitted to Samoa, which by itself was no mean feat, as communications across the Pacific have become impossible lest one was interested in sending messages across time. Telegraphs and mail to one's contemporaries from an island west of the date line to another speck of dry land just east thereof have to ferry westwards around the entire globe, rendering a journey that formerly took less than a day into a voyage of Magellanic proportions. It is therefore incomparably easier to reach the French Polynesia of the day before than that of today. Laborious as it may be, the telegraph drafted by the man who is my equivalent in the neighbouring past was delivered by the post boat that makes the weekly crossing from Samoa. Without indulging in the tedious details of our exchange, which was hampered by delays caused by both dimensions of time and space, suffice it to say that our correspondence was short-lived and we finally agreed never to meet in person, but to live out our respective lives to the best of our conscience and abilities.

Not all contact is, however, this consensual. One hears all kinds of anecdote around the archipelago and beyond: of people trying to find their near-contemporary selves and bring them back voluntarily or otherwise to share their work or exchange places with them, of investors travelling back and forth with the intention of effecting parallel financial transactions and reaping the same profits several times, or of bereaved families striving to find their loved ones killed in accidents on a previous Earth where the same accident has not yet occurred and might never happen. The world market in commodities and resources has become confusing and at times almost untenable, and prices across near-past worlds may fluctuate in an unsustainable manner due to a potentially inexhaustible supply of material from across the datelines, while for the same reason scarcity may beset another globe. It is not unthinkable that in the future, some catastrophe or another great war could send millions of refugees fleeing to the next available future or past Earth.

On an encouraging note, one must not forget that there are those enterprising spirits who see Yesterearth's developments as the opening of a new, endless horizon, the gateway to the exploration of the past – and not just one, but countless possible pasts. As far as we can ascertain, endeavours to traverse a long succession of datelines near the Tropics of Cancer and Capricorn, where distances are smaller but travel is unhindered by excessively cold climate, are limited only by the durability of the mode of transportation, the ability to procure fuel and, ultimately, by the life span of the traveller.

We can only hope that our relative advantage of chronological primacy shields us from the worst excesses of the chaotic insecurity that must eventually arise on Earths further in the past, which are flanked on both sides by another world each two days ahead or behind them. Although news of full scale inter-temporal war have yet to be reported from anywhere, it is not inconceivable that one day the menacing powers of barbaric despotism and fascist banditry, which the valiant Allies so gallantly fought to defeat in this our last Great War, rear their ugly heads from the depths of the past and gather enough tenacity to conquer hundreds of planets up the chain to the present day, growing in strength and ferocity with each new acquisition. Should that day come, we do hope that our past compatriots would send warnings across the dateline well in advance, fully trusting in the brotherhood of free nations holding together steadfast even across several zones of time. And rest assured that the Royal Navy would be first to do its duty in the defence of Singapore, Malaya and the Crown Colonies dispersed throughout the East – whether in our time or that of Yesterearth. For we will surely not hesitate to deliver a pre-emptive strike across the meridian, for King and country, should a menace arise from the Pacific of a bygone day!

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