

Nice Distinctions 12

Arthur D. Hlavaty, 206 Valentine Street, Yonkers, NY
10704-1814. 914-965-4861. hlavaty@panix.com
<<http://www.livejournal.com/users/supergee/>>
<<http://www.maroney.org/hlavaty/>>

Published four times (or so) per year. The print version is available for \$1 (\$2 outside the USA), arranged trade, or letter of comment (e-mail counts). If there is an X after your name on the envelope, send at least one of the above if you wish to receive the next issue. The e-mail version is available on request. Copyright © 2006 by Arthur D. Hlavaty. Staff: Bernadette Bosky, Kevin J. Maroney, Hypatia Dax, and the Valentine's Castle Rat Pack. Permission to reprint in any nonprofit publication is hereby granted, on condition that I am credited and sent a copy. This is Discordian Regimentation #112, a Church of the SuperGenius publication. In Wile E. we trust.

When we left our protagonist, he had been informed that his blood sugar and cholesterol were excessive. Clumsily switching to the first person, I added diet improvement to exercise (20-30 minutes of walking per day).

To my surprise, I feel better. All that sugar (average four Hot Fudge Sundae PopTarts per day, and more) was making me feel tired. I'm having relatively little trouble giving it up. (I have a nasty tendency towards asceticism anyway, though fortunately I am far too selfish to ever try to impose it on others.) I'm now engaging in moderate nutritional correctness, safely short of orthorexia nervosa.

I am now un-anti-depressed, a double negative that is something less than a positive. At my shrink's suggestion I have tapered off Cymbalta, so I am not taking any antidepressants, and yet I don't feel depressed. Medicated or otherwise, I always was more angry than depressed, and as I have complained before, science has not discovered an antipissedoffant, or at least not one that works for me.

Sensawonda

There are at least two flavors of sense of wonder: with and without credibility. I noticed the distinction a few years ago in a rasff discussion with Ken MacLeod. He is a materialist, and he indicated that his sense of wonder is aroused only by

plausible sf, sf that obeys the rules of science. Thus he is not fond of Philip K. Dick's work. I'm somewhat permissive about the scientific accuracy of fiction I read, he understated.

This may relate to a comment from the other side of the playing field, so to speak. G.K. Chesterton once said that a hippopotamus is more miraculous than a unicorn because the hippo exists. I see his point, but I don't really feel it.

Long ago, I studied philosophy (it's what my undergrad degree is in), and we dealt with St. Anselm's ontological argument, which states that if we define God as a being who is greatest in all qualities, then God must exist because an existent being is greater than a non-existent one. Most people find that argument fishy, but cannot say exactly why. Immanuel Kant said it's because existence is not a *predicate*: a quality like "black" or "intelligent." I agree. (I generally think Kant had a good grip on the problems of philosophy and set the stage for constructivism, the approach I now follow.)

It seems that MacLeod and Chesterton are in some sense (or two different ones) seeing existing things as in some way "more" or "better" than imaginary ones, and I don't, which is why I disagree with them about sense of wonder.

That segues into some thoughts I've been having as the sf/fantasy war is showing up again.

I believe that it is impossible to draw a good strong distinction between the two; in fact, I can imagine a Gödelian proof that any rule distinguishing the two could be used to construct a work that belongs to both.

On the other hand, I have long wished that the bookstores could be tricked into attempting to maintain this illusory distinction so that I could seek out books I would enjoy without having to deal with multivolume tales of heroes slogging through pretechnological landscapes in search of plot coupons.

But I remember that what I like is best labeled *speculative fiction*, its images not necessarily from true materialistic science but from whatever forms of satirical or visionary speculation the author can get away with. If nothing else, the insistence on *science* or *cognition* or some other such laudatory term is too easy to coopt to agendas, from both sides. I've heard that Jim Baen denounced as mere fantasy any fiction that includes global warming, while those of the Marxist faith apply the same anathema to works that postulate heritable mental abilities.

Paraquat

A bit of naustalgia: Does anyone else remember Paraquat? It's a defoliant that the US dumped on the Mexican marijuana fields in the late 60s, to protect us from that Killer Drug. Apparently, it didn't kill all the stuff immediately, and some people wound up smoking weed with Paraquat in it, damaging their lungs. (There is no evidence that my respiratory problems came from the stuff, but it could be.)

I am reminded because we've seen two examples of this kind of thinking recently. There is a new vaccine that may be able to kill the human papilloma virus, a sexually transmitted plague that causes much harm. Some wowsers believe that allowing girls and women access to the vaccine "sends the wrong message," the right one of course being that if you have unapproved sex, you are Evil and Deserve to Die.

Then there's Sony's contribution: Mess with their copy protection and you may not get sick, but your computer will, subject to hacker attacks.

There is some evidence that forgiveness and gratitude are actually good for the physical well-being of the individual practicing them. I know people who believe they are exceptions, and I will not argue with them. Those two things seem

to work for me, and on Thanksgiving I wrote:

What I'm Thankful For

1. Bernadette
2. Kevin
3. Some of the smartest, nicest, most interesting friends & acquaintances in the world, specifically including those belonging to my livejournal reading list, my electronic and postal mailing lists, and the three apas I am still in.
4. My body. It's an evolved animal, the product of millions of years of fighting, breeding, and dying, with all the problems that would suggest, but as far as we know, the human body is the only vehicle mind has. I'm thankful for mine in particular because it's a strong one. It has survived 60 years of as little exercise and nutritional correctness as I could get away with giving it, and now requires only moderate amounts of both. It has survived much abuse of assorted substances (and the only one of those I wouldn't do over again is tobacco) and now survives without them.
5. My nation. Like my body, not the ideal place to inhabit, but good as actually existing ones go. My predecessors stole a good land from the natives and gave it good laws, including a constitution that still does much to protect us from the gang of thugs currently in power. When my own forebears came here much later, the immigration laws were tougher, and there were opportunities for people like them, who combined ability with pigmentational correctness, and they there-by flourished.
6. All other minds, past and present: those who created computers to expand my mind and a Net to join it to others, medicines that allow me to survive the previously fatal weaknesses of my body, and words and pictures that have enriched my thoughts, and all those I have forgotten or taken for granted.

XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX

Books

Hammered, by Elizabeth Bear. *Scardown*, by Elizabeth Bear. *Worldwired*, by Elizabeth Bear. This is a trilogy, unless of course you have been negatively conditioned by the word *trilogy*, in which case it's a long novel ripped into three parts by the cold equations of the publishing biz. Whatever it is, it's an excellent one, with a strong but flawed female protagonist, well-drawn subsidiary characters, AIs, really alien aliens, political machinations, many subplots successfully juggled, and pretty much everything I look for in sf. Read it.

Everything Bad Is Good for You, by Stephen Johnson. A good countercyclic book, defending today's mass-market entertainments. I think he's right about at least three things: (1) Television is much more intellectually challenging than it's ever been before, with a multiplicity of concurrent stories and plot arcs that can be developed far more than when every show had to finish its hour or half hour with everybody back where they started. (2) If you look at computer games as a medium, rather than a content provider, they are something new and wondrous. (3) We still need the kind of knowledge that comes only from old-fashioned books, and always will.

Four and Twenty Blackbirds, by Cherie Priest, offers the distinctive form of creepiness known as Southern Gothic (the supernatural flavor thereof) at its redolent best.

What Goes Up, by Eric J. Weiner. Wall Street sucks; this is the oral history.

As one who goes both ways in C.P. Snow's Two Cultures, I welcome Norton's Great Discoveries series: books by literary writers on scientific breakthroughs.

Lavoisier in the Year One, by Madison Smartt Bell, ponders the ironies of the discoverer of oxygen (one of Thomas Kuhn's prime examples of revolutionary science) losing his head to the more traditional sort of revolution. *Obsessive Genius*, by Barbara Goldsmith, is an insightful look at Marie Curie, and how she was able to be a female scientist when those two words were not supposed to go together. My favorite so far is *Incompleteness*, a bio of Kurt Gödel by Rebecca Goldstein, a philosopher, novelist, and designated genius at play in MacArthur's Park. She shows that, contrary to the Newage view (Heisenberg knew that we don't know anything, Gödel proved that we can't prove anything, and Kuhn established forever that all knowledge is transitory), Gödel was a Platonist, attempting to demonstrate that numbers have a reality far beyond that of mere matter.

Early in his autobiography, *Mirror to America*, John Hope Franklin remarks that he couldn't get enough access to books when he was five years old, and his father's Greek and Latin texts were not helpful. This is not the usual image of African Americans in the early part of the previous century, but Franklin was not a usual African American. Here is an existence proof of intellectual development under the harshest sort of oppression (even worse than what Curie faced). Franklin manages to describe his dealings with stupid Caucasians in reasoned and measured tones. That calm may be even more remarkable than the book's eloquence.

I am a Discordian because I believe that one of the most essential distinctions is between Order and Chaos. I am a Discordian heretic because I like Order. Business books tend to be on the side of Order, at least when they are not on the side of Extreme Butchness (*Leadership Secrets of Attila the Hun*). Every so often,

though, someone comes up with a good image of profit from Chaos. Such a book is *The Pebble and the Avalanche*, by Moshe Yudkowsky, which uses *disaggregation* as an image of the breaking of old forms of order that smart people can use to make profits, sometimes but not always by the sly capitalist trick of making better products. The book has some excellent images and tactics, and, as a warning against trying to stop disaggregation in its tracks, one of my all-time favorite chapter titles: "Marx, Lenin, and Gates: Failed Counterrevolutionaries." Of course, one should take a balanced view, recognizing that disaggregation is always followed by reaggregation (*solve et coagula*, as the alchemists said), but it's good to see a book on the side that gets mentioned less.

(By the way, Paul Krugman once wrote a column mentioning *Leadership Secrets of Attila the Hun* and *Make It So: Leadership Lessons from STAR TREK: THE NEXT GENERATION*®. He was not Making Stuff Up; I was paid to copy-edit the latter.)

Fiddlers, by the late Ed McBain, concludes his long and often wondrous 87th Precinct series. It ends with an opening door.

1610: A Sundial in a Grave, by Mary Gentle, is a marvelous work in the Secret History genre, mixing alchemy, conspiracy, and kink, and featuring King James, Robert Fludd, and some fascinating fictional characters.

Gore Vidal's America, by Dennis Altman, includes a line from John Lahr that explains one reason I like its subject: "No one pisses from quite the height Vidal does." Of course there's much more to it than that. Vidal excels at both fiction and nonfiction (the latter more so), uses the language as a weapon of both mass and focused destruction, and knows a lot.

Altman is worthy of his subject, noting for instance that the Great Absence in Vidal's work is race. Mandatory nitpick: We are told that Vidal included a reference to the beating of Rodney King (1992) in *Duluth* (1983).

The gent with the picket fence made of rocket ships, Dave Langford, has been threatened with lawsuit by one Robert Stanek for pointing out without further comment that a number of Amazon reviews (with different signatures) of fantasies have praised them as comparable to the work of, e.g., J.R.R. Tolkien and Robert Stanek, and that those who adduce Philip Pullman and Stanek all spell Pullman's first name with two Ls. I hope the seriousness of the threat can be gauged from the fact that Mr. Stanek's alleged attorney accuses Dave of acting with "malice of forethought."

My family was differently insane. We had Secrets. Of course, if Dad is schtupping Sis or Mom is drinking herself insensible every night, a certain amount of information management is required, but we didn't have anything remotely like that, so we had to put what we had for breakfast on a Need-to-Know basis. And we thought sex was a basically good thing, though powerful enough to need a certain amount of care, whilst assertion/aggression was a filthy animal behavior needed for survival. (Better than the other way around, but nonoptimum.) And money was the filthiest thing of all, perhaps because we hadn't "earned" all of ours.

Travel Psychosis

Harvard professor Jerome Kagan believes that the introvert/extravert distinction is Really Important, which is one of the many reasons I think he is Really Important. I am an introvert, not quite in the autism/Asperger's range, but definitely on the same spectrum. Even sane

people use the expression *to pay attention*. To me the cost is higher than it is to extraverts. I am thus pretty much in favor of anything that enables me to deal with life from a safer distance, from words, numbers, computers, science and other waldos to an economic system that rewards intelligence (my favorite kinds are mathematical and verbal, but I recognize that all manipulation is intelligence) with exemption from the more attention-demanding aspects of bodily maintenance.

Two of the things that require the most expenditure of attention are liminal states, such as travel, and having to look for stuff, by paying attention, rather than figuring out where it is. They feed on each other. I am more likely to lose things when traveling or otherwise forced to pay more attention to my surroundings. This time I lost my glucometer. Liminal states, such as not being caught up in lj, make me feel that the world is broken and it will not be fixed until I am caught up, or home, or otherwise out of liminality.

General Semantics taught me the concept of *metafeelings*, feelings about feelings. As Theodore Sturgeon once remarked, "The old-shoe lover loves loving old shoes." So not only am I angry, but I am angry about being angry, angry about being angry about being angry, etc. ad infinitum ad nauseam. How much better if I could adopt the metafeeling, "Awww, isn't that *cute*—the body is angry."

I was never properly socialized. My parents were admirably cynical about the mass media, and they passed that along to me. I kept finding myself lustfully attracted to women who did not look like those in the media, especially the ads. Of course, I never felt particularly weird about not being turned on by fashion models because there were always guys who agreed with me; we thought that the fashion biz chose women who were far too skinny. (In retrospect, I believe we gave

far too much credence to the influence of the Homintern in all this.) We lived in an allegedly unenlightened time when such women as Marilyn Monroe and Jayne Mansfield, gargantuan by today's standards, were considered attractive.

More than that, though, having concluded that my own chances of attracting a woman who looked like a movie star were not good, I began to notice women considered less attractive and to think lewd thoughts about them.

In the early 1970s, I began to notice an art form that perpetuated the deviant idea that women of many different shapes, sizes, colors, and regularity of features were sexually desirable. I refer of course to hard-core porn, XXX stuff where you can be absolutely sure they are not faking it. I bought a lot of these, and used them in the manner for which they were intended. One of my favorites (I still have a couple of books with her in them) was noticeably fatter than Jayne Mansfield, but I definitely envied her costar. Others I desired were skinny, big-assed, funny-looking (for some values of funny). Of course, as I joined fandom and thus once again had opportunities for two- (or more-) person sex, I realized that personal prejudice and liking further overwhelmed pure aesthetic judgment.

I wonder what it's like now. I've noticed that a lot of the online hardcore porn has women with shaved pubes. (Surely that was not what Senator Rosewater had in mind when he said that the difference between pornography and erotic realism was bodily hair.) Have they gotten as stupid about fat? Can one only find women as fat as my imagined partner (or worse yet, as fat as Marilyn) in fetishized Fat Chick Porn? I hope not.

Not Making This Up

Perhaps envious of soldiers in the War on Some Drugs, who get to knock down doors and charge in shooting in pursuit of Satanic Substances and are not chas-

