

Nice Distinctions 13

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Time for another issue. As usual, most of it started out as posts in livejournal, which I realize has the image of a hangout for overemotional teenage girls. (Why are Livejournal® lawns so popular? Because they cut themselves.) OK, so I lied on the application.

Health report: I continue to submit to the dictates of nutritional correctness. I check my blood sugar every morning, and it's always between 90 and 120. (When it's 93, I say, "Eat what thou wilt shall be the whole of the law.") My cholesterol is likewise acceptable. I go for a walk every day, usually at least half an hour. I even did so the day of the big snowfall. (By late afternoon there was relatively little actual slogging through snow.) As necessary bodily activities go, it isn't bad, and my resentment of it is *pro forma*. We have a treadmill, but I would hate to use that because I would have to keep agreeing to do it when I could stop. This way I commit myself once (or actually each time I could cut the trip shorter). I feel healthier, and if there is a Rapture of the Nerds, I'm likelier to be there for it.

Junonia catalog

How awful it would be
To think they're huge and gross.

After the first four issues of my zine, back in 1978, I decided to go along with the prevalent idea that zines should be illustrated, so I wrote to some of the best fanartists, such as Alexis Gilliland. Alexis sent me several drawings, including one I used as the cover of nextish: a running man saying, "Holy shit! I just won a free sex change!" Shortly thereafter, I went to a fan group meeting and met someone who'd done just that—won enough money on a TV game show to pay for gender reassignment. (My favorite comment on the news was, "From what to what?")

Now UNICEF has attempted to give me a free sex change, or at least they sent me two sets of address labels identifying the sender as "Ms. Arthur D. Hlavaty." I used some of them in sending out the previous issue, but UNICEF's powers seem limited and I still have the same sort of genitals I always did.

The Rohrabacher Reverse

Thirty years ago Dana Rohrabacher and I were both libertarians. Now I'm a liberal and he's a congressman, and he has been sounding very enthusiastic about Bush's snooping and spying, which is the sort of thing that made me hate government. I've thought of a possible explanation.

In Spider Robinson's *Lady Slings the Booze*, there is a discussion of the idea that a pacifist committing acts of war will fight particularly dirty. It's an ugly bit—he's channeling Heinlein at his crankiest—but it makes a valid point: To play fair, you have to respect the game. Heinlein characters see war as an exciting experience, and they go forth to play it with a positive sense. A pacifist, one who believes that war is vile, who is forced to engage in it, will do so in the nastiest spirit possible to get it over with. I know I would, and I'm not even a pacifist, just someone who hates violence and aggression.

When I first had karate described to me, I was surprised by the extent to which it included activities I had been

taught to think of as “dirty fighting.” (Of course, karate is a competitive sport and a spiritual discipline, but it also includes rabbit punches and crotch kicks.)

Clean fighting is a game; the participants voluntarily eschew at least some of the tactics that would be most effective. On the other hand, anti-rape defense classes for women go beyond karate to eye gouging and other such tactics. They’re for when it isn’t a game, when survival is the issue.

In war, the nation being invaded is usually the one that fights dirty. The British noticed this in the 1770s; the Americans in the 1960s. They don’t play by the rules, perhaps because they don’t want to play. Our classic image of two sides playing war by the rules is World War I—specifically the part of it the British and the Germans were fighting in Belgium.

In the same way, libertarians tend to see government as an armed gang, even when it’s healing the sick and feeding the hungry. If we have to resort to such a vile and repulsive form of organization to defeat terrorism, then of course it will behave thuggishly.

Out There

George Bush continues to make it difficult for satirists to outdo fact. To quote a book he claims to love, “I received of the Lord that which also I delivered” (I Cor. 11:23); in other words, what goes around comes around. When he wanted to turn over some American port operations to a company from the United Arab Emirates, there were complaints about security, though it probably wasn’t a danger. (There is a certain amusement in watching Michelle Malkin accuse Bush of insufficient distrust of dark-skinned people.) Dubya replied in that quaint native idiolect Yale could not erase, “I want those who are questioning it to step up and explain why all of a sudden a Middle Eastern company is held to a

different standard than a Great British company.”

Because you’ve been telling us to. Last I heard, we weren’t sure we trusted the French, let alone a country with *Arab* in its name.

Then Dick Cheney became the first sitting vice president since Aaron Burr to shoot someone. I’m not going to join in the Lawyer Shooting jokes, and I’ll cut him a little slack because he didn’t mean to **shoot an old man in the face**, but I do like the term *Cheneyquiddick*. Obviously an accident, but there’s something familiar about the cover-up and the delay in reporting, presumably until the alcohol is out of the perp’s system.

Bush has warned against the danger of “human/animal hybrids” and other forms of science he doesn’t understand. Steve Green suggested that he is about to demand UN sanctions against the Island of Dr. Moreau.

Then there was the Bush appointee who falsely claimed to be a Texas A&M grad (I’m not saying a word) and wanted to make sure that NASA spoke about the Big Bang as a Theory.

It would be really nice to have a functioning opposition party. With a few exceptions (mostly African Americans with safe seats such as John Conyers and Charles Rangel, who said of our president, “I really think that he shatters the myth of white supremacy once and for all”), the Democrats are submitting like happy patrons of Madame La Bondage’s School of Strict Discipline. Senator Feingold suggested an official statement of censure for Bush’s gross violations of the laws against snooping on Americans, and the Democrats are afraid that may be a bit extreme. They could wind up with no better alternative to Rick (Man on Dog) Santorum than Mighty Casey, who strikes out on women’s ownership of their own bodies and gratuitously supported Strip Search Sam Alito for the Supreme Court when those

who are not transpolitical Republicans born in the bodies of Democrats (Joe Lieberman is still hoping for reassignment surgery) wanted to filibuster.

A worthy cause

I keep hearing, “Won’t someone give Bush a blowjob so we can impeach him?” If everyone who feels that way pledges a dollar, we should have no trouble meeting Jeff Gannon’s price. When I presented this idea on lj, someone wisely suggested doing Cheney first. We could afford that, too.

Texts

Deborah Martinson, *Lillian Hellman*

Lillian Hellman was fascinating. She showed admirable courage in the face of HUAC, but might have admired it a bit less herself. She loved the truth and told some awesome whoppers (“Julia”). She was a leftist all her life and did a mink coat ad. Some of her work is dated. (She wrote *The Children’s Hour* when lesbianism was an unspeakable horror and bravely treated it as a speakable horror.) And of course she was a human being trapped in the body of a woman when that was even more of a straitjacket than now. Martinson gives us a perceptive and balanced account, but one that should have been copy-edited and/or proofread better. Two examples: Eugene was the good McCarthy, and there never was a “George McBundy.”

Samuel R. Delany, *About Writing*

Largely about how to be a fiction writer. If I hadn’t decided years ago that I lack the fiction-writer nature, this book would have convinced me. That’s a good sign, but I’m sure it limits my ability to judge the book. Delany loves detail, and the book both supports and exemplifies that approach. There is much else here I found fascinating and important, such as his critique of Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* and the interview about canon near the end of the book, with its fascinating

account of Stephen Crane’s career and repute.

K. Anthony Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism*

Appiah may have found a way not to be an absolutist about relativism. He also understands that there’s no such thing as race and people get punished for being the wrong one.

John Gregory Dunne, *Regards*

I have long been a John Gregory Dunne fan, to the point where I resisted reading James Wolcott for too long because he and Dunne loudly disliked each other. This book is a Greatest Hits nonfiction collection, and I highly recommend it. Goodies:

- the famous demolition of Pauline Kael;
- the hilarious “Tinsel,” in which we learn, among other Hollywood nuggets, that a studio executive who is offended by the line “BOBBY: You dumb bitch” can be mollified by changing it to “BOBBY (*engagingly*): You dumb bitch”;
- “An American Education,” in which an unfriendly witness to the Hollywood witch hunts reinvents himself 20 years later as a young Chicano writer;

and much more. The only article I would add is the one where he called an earlier Secretary of Defense a REMF.

Roy Hoopes, *Cain*

James M. Cain may be the writer with the most precise numerical rating of all. Some say Raymond Chandler was the best *noir* writer, and some say it was Dashiell Hammett, but almost everyone ranks Cain third. He is also known for one particularly reasonable remark: When a friend bemoaned how Hollywood had “ruined” his books, Cain gestured at his shelves and said, “They’re still there.”

Roy Hoopes has written a thorough, competent, and workmanlike bio, including Cain’s marriages, his dealings with Hollywood, and the brief revival of

his fortunes in the Sixties when Tom Wolfe used him as a stick to beat Norman Mailer with.

Hoopes later used this material for a novel, *Our Man in Washington*, in which Cain and his mentor, H.L. Mencken, investigate criminal goings-on during the Harding administration. That too had the minor virtues, though my petty copy-editing brain will not let go of the bit where one of the characters quotes Lefty Gomez. Lefty did say what the character said he said, but not at the time the book is set, when he was 12 years old.

Honoré de Balzac, *Eugénie Grandet*

47 years ago, my prep school told us to spend the summer before our senior year reading. They gave us a good list—that was my first shot at *Ulysses*—but there was one book on it I really despised: *Pere Goriot*, by Honoré de Balzac. As the years passed, the specifics vanished, and while I hated it so much that I wouldn't be surprised if it pushed one or more buttons, all I recall is a vast wodge of tedium and ugliness.

This semester I signed up for a noncredit course at NYU, and after I signed up, I learned that they'd changed the entire list and the first book on it was Balzac's *Eugénie Grandet*. So I decided I'd give old Balz another chance...

And I don't like it. I read the whole thing, and I don't like Balzac, I don't like his characters, and I don't care about them or what happens to them. Perhaps the only thing that has changed is that I am less sure that it's All His Fault.

One other thing, though: This is a complaint I often hear about mimetic fiction from sf readers: unpleasant people doing dull things, and who cares about them? I'd say it's overgeneralized as a complaint about the whole genre (or absence of genre), but I'd have to concede that it applies to *Eugénie Grandet*—also to another book I like significantly less than many intelligent people do, *The Great Gatsby*.

[I wound up switching to another course because the time of the lit course was inconvenient. The one book in the syllabus that I hadn't read and wanted to was *Middlemarch*, and I read it anyway. Superficially, you could make similar complaints about the characters in that book, but George Eliot is a remarkable writer, and she made them interesting.]

Nate Blakeslee, *Tulia*

The war on some drugs meets the war on some races. Forty black people in small-town Texas convicted of drug peddling on the unsubstantiated word of a crooked white cop who turned out to be untruthful, violent, racist, paranoid, and overly armed even by Texas standards (and the prosecution knew most of it when they went to court). Eventually as much justice as possible under the circumstances was done.

Not forgotten

Octavia Butler 1947-2006. I loved her books, particularly *Mind of My Mind* and *Kindred*. I knew her slightly, having met her at Contraption many years ago when she was GoH and I was Fan GoH. An awesome talent.

Two admirable people who fought for what they believed in: **Betty Friedan** and **Coretta Scott King**.

Pickett & Puckett: **Wilson Pickett** met his own *Midnight Hour*, and the Other Team struck out **Kirby Puckett** forever.

Malach Hamovis, showing his usual unwholesome sense of humor, almost simultaneously took **Bernie "Boom Boom" Geoffrion** as he was about to have his number retired by the Montreal Canadiens and **Slobodan "Bang Bang" Milosevic** as he was about to be convicted of genocide.

I don't like discussing my feelings. As David Steinberg said about a similar activity, "I feel guilty about masturbation because I'm not very good at it." Still, I don't always dislike it enough to refrain from doing it. (Maybe livejournal does give one emo cooties.) Years ago, when I did a number of different zines, I had a title for those in which I was spilling my guts:

Mishima

Ontological incorrectness

In the 1970s, I attempted to read economics books, finding as Ursula Le Guin's Shevek did that they resembled "someone interminably recounting a stupid dream." One thing I noticed was that John Kenneth Galbraith insisted that free-market economics was the Establishment, while libertarian economists were equally certain that the Establishment was Keynesian.

It is always possible to feel marginalized if one puts one's mind to it. Richard Nixon considered himself a brave fighter against a power structure that hated him even when he was president, and he was not entirely mistaken. To me it is orthodoxy that we are nothing but functions of the raging, doomed, evolved animal we are fastened to, and any attempt to draw a mind/body distinction is unrealistic, antisocial, sexist, and probably Republican.

Christopher Hitchens says that one of the great developments of the 20th century is the realization that "We don't have bodies; we are bodies." Speak for yourself, Hitch. I *have* a body, just as I *have* a dick and an asshole.

While I do not accept either the Autism or the Asperger's label, I am seriously introverted, and I am realizing more and more how much of my approach (such as my loathing for communism) comes from wanting/needing to deal with life from as safe a distance as possible. I prefer digital

to analog devices because they afford more psychic distance; I hate it when digital devices become analog, such as push buttons that have to be pushed enough (or even worse, just enough). The whole point of push buttons is that they're two-valued, on or off. (The true Null-A slant knows that there is a time for two-valued Aristotelian logic.)

I also hate GUIs, which make computers into what I want to use computers to deal with. I am one of the few people who think of double-clicking as a physical task that one runs a risk of doing wrong. There was a new online autism/Asperger's/introversion quiz. I'm sure I'd score high, but I haven't taken it because it's in Flash, which I don't have installed because it's too interactive.

There is a theory that some psychoses are caused by a nasty bug called *toxoplasmosis*, found in cat poop. It's a scary idea: parasites in our heads making us do crazy things. Then I recall that as evolved animals, we already have chemicals (such as DNA) running through our systems telling us to engage in sex and violence. (And other activities. Materialism, followed consistently enough, says that *all* our behavior is the product of such chemicals.)

There is a book called *The Alphabet vs. the Goddess*, by Leonard Shlain. I don't like it. He blames alphabetic thinking for EVIL, particularly patriarchy and sexism. He believes that linear abstraction is a masculine trait, and that holistic visualization is feminine, and we must turn away from the former. Several things come to mind: One is that I wrote a similar essay, blaming mathematics and mathematical thinking for inequality, but I was being satirical on purpose. Another is that it's unfortunate that Mr. Shlain cannot take a treatment that would relieve him of that nasty sort of thinking forever, just as I prefer Origen's way of dealing with his unwanted desires to Fred

Phelps's way of dealing with his. But what seems the most obvious problem is that believing in the inherent masculinity of linear thought is patriarchal sexism. It's like the theories that equate woman with NATURE and LIFE and all that other wonderful stuff, and are no more true than that the Jews are BANKING. (I believe that male/female is two different kinds of meat, not the essential mind/meat distinction.)

Girls are starting to do better than boys in the classroom, so some ass hat wants affirmative action for boys because they do not take well to following rules. But rules are every bit as much a product of linear abstraction, so alphabetic thinking is antimale, as well as antifemale.

I like that. Alphabetic/numeric thinking, which I love because it's a way of dealing with life (which some say is bad, as opposed to living it) and because I find it inherently delightful, is neither masculine nor feminine. It is unnatural, queer, trans, and perverted.

I have thanked my parents for not giving me a proper sense of gender identity. This may be a bit greedy on my part, but I find myself wishing that they had also given me a greater awareness that we live in a primitive culture (the Nacirema) that expects one to have such a thing.

In addition, while I am familiar with George Bernard Shaw's remark that a barbarian mistakes the customs of his tribe for the laws of the universe, it is also possible to make the same mistake with the customs of one's family.

I like the alphabet and other such systems as ways of handling life from a distance, and I tended to assume that the feeling was all a matter of fear.

To say that is to be insufficiently ~~but~~ masculine by the rules of our culture—more manly to feel anger than fear—and I was not as aware of this discrepancy as a better socialized individual would be. It isn't accurate either. Thinking further about it, I realized that

my desire for distance really comes more from anger than from fear, but in my family anger was a much more taboo emotion than fear, and I am more indoctrinated to follow my family's rules than my culture's.

But a light has gone on. I do not have a sustainable way not to feel angry, or even not to feel angry about feeling angry. (Drugs enabled me to dissociate from my anger and other undesired feelings, but they are not sustainable, and dissociation, like modesty and sleep, cannot be approached directly.) But at least I don't have to complicate the second-level feeling with guilt that if I were a better person, I'd feel afraid instead.

One of my irrational anger triggers is materialism. If materialism is correct, then everything I love in myself and others is a transitory delusion and, at least from my point of view, nothing really matters. But that is no reason to get angry at those whose religion it is.

My current strategy for dealing with anger is trying to recognize that when the body gets angry, it's doing its job, and I should just thank it and not take the feeling personally. It's like leftist guilt-trippers who try to drag me into their crusade by saying that those of us who are not oppressed are *by definition* privileged and thus have a duty to keep fighting the oppression until it ends or (more likely) we do. It's not their job to shut up; it's my job to ignore them.

I now have the means to produce .pdfs of each issue. If you'd prefer those, let me know.

Excelsior,

Arthur