

## Nice Distinctions 20

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This is Discordian Regimentation #120, a Church of the SuperGenius publication. In Wile E. we trust.

OK, so I lied. I said I was going to do like the Learned Elders of FAPA and publish one eight-pager a year. But I've been writing more, and so here's another zine, as usual based on my posts on Livejournal and Dreamwidth, on both of which I am **supergee**.

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Everyone should read *Robert A. Heinlein: In Dialogue with His Century: Volume 1 (1907-1949): Learning Curve*, by William Patterson, despite its excess of subtitles and colons.

I read *Stranger in a Strange Land* in 1966, and it blew my mind, "Thou art God" even more than the sex stuff, and more. Much of it remains with me. From the git-go, though, I had some doubts about the book and its author: The strong sexual dimorphism bothered me at the very first reading, and it was soon joined by the put-downs of marijuana and homosexuality, and later more.

So I love the best of his work, but I do not belong to the school that appears to believe that his flatulences smelled like Chanel #5. (Though I think they're a lot closer to the truth than the people who believe he was a fascist.) I like an idea I encountered in the writings of Edward Hall, of a tribe in Mexico that doesn't have global categories of Sane and Insane but believes that some people don't function well in some situations. It works at the top end of the scale, with Heinlein and with the only other writer who comparably influenced me, Robert Anton Wilson, who programmed me in ways that

were not obvious for months or even years, but who from the beginning seemed neither feminist nor elitist enough.

The new bio tells us much about how Heinlein got that way (including sleazo inputs like Ouspensky, Social Credit, and Hinduism that he passed along to me). I'm eagerly looking forward to the second half, promised in two years or less.

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At times it seems that the remaining thoughtful Republicans are wondering how to pull out of a death spiral that will end with the people who believe that Obama is a Muslim from Kenya being purged by the people who believe that Obama is a reptile from space. It would be nice if the Democrats could think of a way to take advantage of this situation.

Once again, I am reminded of the time Adlai Stevenson was told that he had the support of every thinking American, and he replied, "But I need a majority!" There is a sizable demographic that hates the intellectual elite and wants to make them cry by having the wrong person win on *Dancing with the Stars*.

### The Social Network

The movie of that name tells us why Facebook is Like That. (David Wilford calls it the Three Stigmata of Mark Zuckerberg.) I still belong to Facebook and still don't like it. I also note that they are working with Goldman Sachs. I am not sure how those two organizations can be even more evil jointly than severally, but I View with Alarm.

### Highlights

I try not to watch television, and usually I succeed, but I get distracted by it when I'm in public places. The three of us had dinner with my brother-in-law, and I was watching (but fortunately not listening to) the Yankee game. Alex Rodriguez seemed to be hit in the face with a pitch, although he actually got his hand in the way. I swear, they showed that at least a dozen times in the next hour. Of course, it's like the big crowds for the movie mogul's funeral because it gave the people what they want. (A-Rod would probably win a poll for the player most fans want to see hit in the face.) But still...

### **Unfortunate abbreviation**

Borders continues its slow circling of the drain, as *Locus* reports, “Borders Group, Inc. has announced it will be delaying payments to some vendors—including major publishers—while they try to refinance their considerable debt.” Whatever system is used to print part of the story as a teaser and make us click for the rest makes it worse by saying “...while they try to refinance their con”

It has been worse. A sports site reported, “Parents sue coach for jerking their son off [his feet].”

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What organizations, other than the Catholic Church, are most likely to transfer employees caught abusing children, rather than firing them? Governments with strong employee unions.

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### **The peepers**

Just as computers created the possibility of instantly making a mistake that formerly would have taken weeks of effort by a roomful of scientists, so government security agencies create the possibility of new awful acts that could once only have been dreamed of. The latest is committing sexual assault passively.

Those wonderful folks at the TSA, who presumably have not outgrown thinking it would be really neat to be Superman so you could use your x-ray vision to look under girls’ dresses, offer their new device or the alternative possibility of a really thorough manual examination (though I believe it stops short of cavity search). So some bloggers have suggested that men show up for the flight wearing kilts with nothing underneath, and others have called that sexual assault.

But it’s like phone spam. Back before we had opt-out lists and caller ID, I often found myself dealing with an auditory home invader and not being able to get any fun out of verbally abusing him because I knew he was just someone doing a crappy job for low wages and I couldn’t get at the real perps. Likewise, only more so, with passively abusing the TSA workers.

I’m one of the fortunate few who don’t fear the magic scanner. I’m already sterile, and I’m a bit old to be bothered if someone sees me naked, but I’m still agin it.

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### **Keeping them in their place**

One of the great unannounced projects of the 20th century was the abolition of class. The United States ignored it in the hope that it would go away; that worked every bit as well with class as it did with the People’s Republic of China. The USSR tried to smash it; that was just as successful, plus millions of deaths.

So it seems we are stuck with class, and we should think about making it work better. One answer is to cut the ends of the curve: make the uppers less powerful and the lowers less miserable. The other is class mobility, enabling lowers to reach the higher level they belong at. It’s easy to pick on the ways in which lower-class people with the ability to rise are pulled down, by a culture of poverty that says, “Don’t get ahead of yourself” (meaning “Don’t get ahead of us”) and the collectivists (many of them not poor) who turn it into an ideology.

But of course a bigger problem is the way they are pushed down, for irrelevant reasons like race or sex, by the classist assumption that all those born into the lower classes belong there, and by plain stupidity.

### **Funny on purpose**

Satchel Paige said that his old teammate Cool Papa Bell was “so fast he could turn out the light and be in bed before it got dark.” That story appears in most baseball histories; in many of the older ones, we are informed that actually the light was on a timer.

Try to imagine how someone could make a mistake like that. I cannot. I can only assume that the writers telling that dubious tale found it less implausible than the possibility that a simple cullid boy like Satch was actually being funny on purpose.

I’m reading Saul Austerlitz’s *Another Fine Mess*, a history of film comedy with a list of Comedy Greats. Recent events point me to one serious omission: Leslie Nielsen. (Though Austerlitz does have kind words for him in the entry on the Zuckers.)

Austerlitz mentions that there is a theory that Margaret Dumont never really appreciated that Groucho Marx was making fun of her in their many movies. (Groucho himself appears to have encouraged that one.) That strikes me as another example of the idea that They (women) cannot be deliberately funny, the way We can. Or has anyone sug-

gested that the magnificently po-faced Nielsen (perhaps due to Canadian humorlessness) thought all along that he was still portraying a dramatic hero and couldn't understand why people kept laughing?

### **Falling off the shockwave**

Ken MacLeod has complained that the sf community is full of people who hate politics, who want to find a system to solve social problems instead of letting political processes work on them. The Horrible Example might be Isaac Asimov's *Foundation*, in which victory goes not to those with the political virtues—the strongest, best-armed, loudest, most persistent, or most numerous—but to the side that has the best map of the situation.

That's what I love about sf. I have a particularly virulent form of the antipolitical condition. My mother believed that sex is a basically positive natural force, one that is seriously fraught and thus must be handled carefully but is a Good Thing, and that assertion/aggression is a filthy animalistic form of behavior whose necessity reflects very badly on who- or whatever created us. My mother said it; I believe it; that settles it, but in my more lucid moments I realize that while our approach is better than the more common opposite view, it would be still better to accept both.

But I don't feel like the Lone Ranger. Fortunately, the sf community is inhospitable to the theocrats who want the world run by the Fundamentalist God, that elderly Caucasian gaseous vertebrate who made men in His own image and women almost as good and who bitterly regrets His tragic blunder of making the penis convex and the anus concave. We are, however, more accepting of those who want the world run by other Higher Powers: the Holy Dialectic, the Holy Market, or the paradoxical God of Godless Evolution who can be followed by a full understanding of our nature as evolved animals. A more sophisticated view recognizes that none of these views is entirely mistaken and believes that we can create a synthesis, such as Asimov's psychohistory (which, as Donald A. Wollheim said, is like Marxism except that it works). That dream inspired at least one sf nerd (Paul Krugman) to begin studies that led to a Nobel Prize, but we don't have psychohistory yet, and we may never have it.

One consequence of the antipolitical worldview is the dream of the Man on Horseback, the Hero who will ride in, kick ass, and run things right. I am too cynical or realistic (I forget which) to believe in him, but I have some hope for the milder version, the sly Hari Seldon-like agent who cracks open the back door of the power structure and lets the light in. John Brunner's *The Shockwave Rider* is my favorite version of that particular dream.

And now we have Wikileaks, sneaking into America's diplomatic apparatus and offering the delicious promise of doing the same to a major bank.

I love the first 95% of *The Shockwave Rider*. It's got Brunner's usual wit and world-building genius. It's got teamwork. (Brunner and Spider Robinson do the best teamwork porn evar.) Then, as such things do, it winds up with a John Galt speech, though of course much shorter, much better written, and of an opposite orientation. We will have a command economy, with all the problems of a command economy made to vanish by the Magic Computer, and we will sell it to the masses with a Vigerie poll rotated 180 degrees.

(Another suggested analog for Wikileaks is Alfred Bester's *The Stars My Destination*, whose protagonist gives the Secret to the People. I read the book as saying that at the end any asshole with a grudge can destroy a planet, so the only plausible sequel is "Everything blew up.")

Still I'm neither cynical nor realistic enough to assume it has to end that way. Go, Wikileaks, go!

*The Fires*, by Joe Flood, is a nonfiction tale with elements of classical tragedy. Its protagonist is John T. O'Hagan, fire commissioner and then fire chief for New York City in the 60s and 70s. He is a hero who started in the working class and worked his way up through effort and education. He overcame a corrupt system to gain office, he set out to reform everything about dealing with the harm fire can cause—equipment, materials, firefighting techniques, etc.—and he succeeded. Flood tells us that the death rate from fires decreased 75% and O'Hagan deserved more credit than anyone else. He even had an *agon*, struggling with builders to keep them from cutting corners in ways that would increase fire risk. (Flood informs us that both World Trade Center disasters were made

worse by unsafe practices O'Hagan tried to prevent.) And he met Nemesis, as his programs failed to address the problems of the poorer neighborhoods. It was even announced on national television during the 1977 World Series when Howard Cosell proclaimed, "Ladies and gentlemen, the Bronx is burning."

O'Hagan was one of the great overreachers of the 60s, along with John Lindsay, Robert McNamara, and, alas, Robert Moses.

Ever since Robert Caro took Moses apart in *The Power Broker*, the consensus has removed Walter O'Malley from his old place as Third Worst Person Ever, since Moses bears far more of the blame for the departure of the Brooklyn Dodgers. (He presumably still remains behind Hitler and Stalin.) Moses was That Bad, or close to it: maximized his power, ruthlessly destroyed his opponents, and cut the Bronx in half, leaving the South part to die.

And yet I'm tempted to a certain amount of sympathy for the devil Moses when I think of him as a figure of First SF: a future in which people zipped around in nifty vehicles while all the social problems were solved by proper application of The Rules, as determined by Computing Machines. It didn't work for Moses, or for better people. It didn't work for McNamara in subduing Vietnam or Lindsay in subduing New York

And it didn't work for John O'Hagan, whose computers didn't tell him how much more attention needed to be paid to the South Bronx and other poor areas. More's the pity.

### **Attack from Above**

Carlin Romano wonders if God is going for the throat of His sworn foe Christopher Hitchens by giving him cancer. Bad move, if so. Hitchens is doing a fine job of demonstrating that the theophobes can be as intolerant and hateful as the believers. Better He should go after the international pedophile gang that's giving Him a bad name, perhaps smiting a few in the prostate or testicles or some other part they're proud of not using.

### **Apologies to Messrs. Amis & Conquest**

"Fanfic's no good,"

They bellow till we're sick.

But this is good.

"Well, then it's not fanfic."

### **Bungling bigotry**

I look back on the gay bashing I grew up with, and immediately after noting that it made no more sense than racial or religious hatred, I am struck by how inaccurate it was. Liking poetry or pretty colors really does not correlate well with gayness. I don't know if the current generation of haters is doing a better job of actually finding people who are attracted to their own sex, but that's not what matters. Likewise, it would be lovely if all those who think President Obama is a Muslim could be made to accept the obvious fact that he isn't, but it would be better if we could find ways to get across to them that it shouldn't matter if he was one.

### **Bottoms**

P.J. O'Rourke said that when he's called a Nazi, he consoles himself with the thought that no one fantasizes about being tied up and ravished by someone dressed as a liberal, I have come to believe that he is correct only on the most literal level, as I keep encountering a version of the fantasy that has no overt sex but includes the Joys of Submission.

Some masochists who belong to top-dog groups (white, male, Christian, etc.) envy the suffering of those in the underdog groups and revel in the delightful agony of imagining themselves subjected to the same sort of thing by the all-powerful Liberal Establishment, although the actuality is a lot closer to the other way around.

### **Historical note**

When I was growing up, a popular form of Laughing at the Other was the idea that certain non-Anglo names were inherently laughable. The International Standard Funny Italian Name was Bacigalupi.

### **Immigrants**

Perhaps the Pilgrims should have spent the first few hundred years in the country they moved into recognizing their second-class status and not doing provocative things like building a church near where Natives were killed.

### **Living doll**

Man commissions sex toy that resembles his ex, or more precisely, "I want it just like her but with bigger boobs." Wouldn't it be nice if

men who think like that went straight to the dolls and didn't bother actual women?

### **Victim blaming**

It seems to me that one can discuss techniques of avoiding armed robbers without denying that armed robbery is entirely the perp's fault, no matter how many or how few of the techniques the victim took advantage of. This approach strikes me as the only good way to discuss the victim's role in both rape and bullying.

### **I hope not**

From an imagined future:

"Did you know that keyboards weren't always musical? They used to have letters on them."

My vision of a worse one continues:

"Letters? What are they?"

"Part of the silent system the monks use to encode words."

### **A possible fate**

OK, so I danced like no one was watching. Sure enough, someone was. It's on YouTube now. Thanks a pantsful.

### **Deserving each other**

Laurie Fendrich complains that a gallery presenting the work of Jack the Dripper and other abstract expressionists distracted the audience with Yoko Ono's equally artistic random screams. Further evidence that serious visual art committed suicide last century and music threw itself on the pyre in an act of Satie. She calls it "How to Kill Paintings," but I bet they continue to shamle around eating brains.

### **Recommended blog**

Tom Wilson says fascinating things about the continuing influence of Robert Anton Wilson on **RAW Illumination**.

<http://rawillumination.blogspot.com/>

### *Nasty, British, & Short*

How many Android tablets do you have to take to become one?...Oh, never mind.

Liberty, Equality, Fraternity: Pick two.

Sarah Palin is jumping the shark. Will she shoot it from the air?

### **New horizons in body dysmorphia**

Man denies crack in buttocks is his (actual headline).

Governments and corporations tend to treat "What could go wrong?" as a rhetorical question.

I had to give up drugs when they became, like exercise or dieting, something I would have to do every day.

In the greatest NFL Name Story since Jubilee Dunbar was traded for Fair Hooker, the Jets cut Danny Woodhead to make room for David Clowney. (It turned out to be their biggest mistake of the year.)

### **Sorry**

XKCD is the best online comic strip or close to it, but I don't always agree with it. Today's mouseover says, "A universe that needed somebody to observe it in order to collapse it into existence would be a pretty sorry universe indeed." I'm OK with living in a sorry universe like that, and I believe that we all do, though I could be mistaken. To me, a universe in which we were nothing but evolved material beings with no transcendent dimension would be a sorry one, but I accept the possibility that we are in one.

### *Not Forgotten*

#### **Tony Judt**

The author of the brilliant *Postwar* and much other good stuff has died. It's unsurprising to those who've followed his struggle with ALS, but sad.

#### **Isaac Bonewits**

*Real Magic* illuminated me in a number of ways.

I didn't know he was still alive...

And now he isn't. **Vance Bourjaily**. I enjoyed *The Violated* and *Now Playing at Canterbury*.

**Tony Curtis** has gone Up Yonda.

**Dandy Don Meredith** made Monday Night Football a lot more fun.

**Dennis Dutton** created one of my favorite Web sites: Arts & Letters Daily.

I was a Yankee fan, so the Dodgers were Lex Luthor, but one of them I hated the least was **Billy Loes**, who once said that he didn't want to win 20 games in a season because then the team would expect him to do it every year.

**Elizabeth Edwards** was the brains of the team. I wish I lived in a world where she would have been the candidate.

**Bobby Thomson** hit the home run heard around the world

And also **Blake Edwards, Sparky Anderson, Frank Kermodé** (*The Sense of an Ending*), **Phil Cavarretta, George Blanda, E.C. Tubb, Tuli Kupferberg, Ron Santo, Art Tobias, Walt Dropo...**

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After years of neglect, I have been forced to invest time and money on massive repairs of my teeth and my mind. The former is too boring to discuss; here are some thoughts on the latter:

#### **White powder capitalism and me**

Before Andrew Weil was a food guru, he was a drug guru. *The Natural Mind* was a sane look at the chemicals we use to alter our consciousness, in which he pointed out that one reason we have problems with drugs is that we make them too good. Discovering that poppies and coca leaves have properties we find useful, we isolate the parts that have the desired effect and strengthen them by making them into white powders, which we then abuse. (Weil appeared to believe that this was the final stage, but American ingenuity has found a way to turn the white powders into worse substances, such as crack and high-fructose corn syrup.)

In the same way, the market is an essential property of human society, a way of creating value, sometimes at little or no cost. But ideologues have promoted it from a tool to a god: a "rational," self-correcting machine that could run itself and everything else without human intervention. In the Wall Street nonfiction that I devour with the morbid fascination others give to vampire and zombie fiction, I read about how the attempt

to create a perfect market, ever more purely capitalistic, produced a bizarre structure of securities based on securities based on securities...like Alice in Wonderland ("This is what it is called; this is what its name is called..."), totally divorced from the actual goods and services the stock market is supposed to be about. That of course created the recent financial disasters we all know so well. If civilization survives, perhaps the one thing about today that will be looked at with the greatest mixture of condescension and horror will be the way America's economy came to depend on a continuing billion-dollar crap game among guys who thought the best thing one could possibly be was a Big, Swinging Dick.

I have finally been forced to concede that my approach to life is not working and I need professional help. A big part of that is that I have taken the reasonable tactic of getting what one wants for minimum time, effort, and attention and made it into an all-encompassing Rule of Life that poisons everything around it, and I need to find out how to stop doing it.

#### **Living in the present**

Talking to my shrink, I finally realized that Living in the Present is not a right or wrong way to live one's entire life but a tool, a strategy, that can be a good or bad one under specific circumstances. At the Fellowship later (Thursday is my Mental Health Day), I recognized one application: In the present I often want to do drugs. At that point, it is a good idea to get my ass out of the present and start living in the past, where every time I did drugs, I wound up getting greedy and making a mess, and in the projected future, where if I repeat the same actions, I will get the same results.

I'm sure I exaggerated the extent to which I was surrounded by Zen Fascists who insisted that if I wasn't living in the present all the time, I was doing it wrong, but I was probably not entirely mistaken. Being on the introvert spectrum, I am not terribly fond of living in the present, but recognizing it as a tool should help me do it when appropriate.

Excelsior,

*Arthur*