

About 5,750 Words

Samuel R. Delany, "About 5,750 Words." *The Jewel-Hinged Jaw: Notes on the Language of Science Fiction*. 1978. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2009. 1-15.

Every generation some critic states the frighteningly obvious in the *style/content* conflict. Most readers are bewildered by it. Most commercial writers (not to say, editors) first become uncomfortable, then bluster; finally, they put the whole business out of their heads and go back to what they were doing all along. And it remains for someone in another generation to repeat:

Put in opposition to "style," there is no such thing as "content."

Now, speculative fiction is still basically a field of commercial writing. Isn't it obvious that what makes a given story SF *is* its speculative content? As well, in the middle and late sixties there was much argument about Old Wave and New Wave SF. The argument was occasionally fruitful, at times vicious, more often just silly. But the critical vocabulary at both ends of the beach included "... old style ... new style ... old content ... new content ... " The questions raised were always: "Is the content meaningful?" and "Is the style compatible with it?" Again, I have to say, "content" does not exist. The two new questions that arise then are: (1), How is this possible, and (2), What is gained by atomizing content into its stylistic elements?

The words *content*, *meaning*, and *information* are all metaphors for an abstract quality of a word or group of words. The one I would like to concentrate on is: *information*.

Is content real?

Another way to ask this question is: Is there such a thing as verbal information apart from the words used to inform?

Most of the vocabulary of criticism is set up to imply there is. Information is carried by/with/in words. People are carried by/with/in cars. It should be as easy to separate the information from the word as it is to open the door of a Ford Mustang: *Content* means something that *is contained*.

But let us go back to *information*, and by a rather devious route. Follow me:

red

As the above letters sit alone on the paper, the reader has no way to know what they mean. Do they indicate political tendencies or the sound made once you pass the *b* in *bread*? The word generates no significant information until it is put in *formal relation* with something else. This formal relation can be with a real object ("Red" written on the label of a sealed tin of paint) or with other words ("The breeze through the car window was refreshing. Whoops—red! He hit the brake").*

The idea of *meaning*, *information*, or *content* as something contained by words is a misleading visualization. Here is a more apt one:

Consider meaning to be a thread (or better yet, the path) that connects a sound or configuration of letters called a "word" with a given object or group of objects (or better, memories of those objects). To know the meaning of a word is to be able to follow this thread from the sound to the proper recollections of objects, emotions, or situations—more accurately, to various image-modes of these objects/emotions/situations in your mind. Put more pompously, meanings (*content* or *information*) are the *formal relations* between sounds and images of the objective world.**

Any clever logic student, from this point, can construct a proof for the etymological tautology, "All information is formal," as well as its corollary, "It is impossible to vary the form without varying the information." I will not try and reproduce it in detail. I would like to say in place of it, however, that "content" can be a useful word; but, again, it becomes invalid when it is held up to oppose style. Content is the illusion myriad stylistic factors create when viewed at a certain distance.

When I say it is impossible to vary the form without varying the information, I do not mean any *formal change* (e.g., the shuffling of a few words in a novel) must completely obviate the entire informational experience of a given work. Some formal changes are minimal; their effect on a particular collection of words may be unimportant simply because it is undetectable. But I am trying to leave open the possibility that the change of a single word in a novel may be all important.

*I am purposely not using the word "symbol" in this discussion. The vocabulary that must accompany it generates too much confusion.

**Words also have "phonic presence" or "voice" as well as meaning. And certainly all writers must work with sound to vary the rhythm of a phrase or sentence, as well as to control the meaning. But this discussion is going to veer close enough to poetry. To consider the musical, as well as the ritual, value of language in SF would make poetry and prose indistinguishable. That is absolutely not my intention.

"Tell me, Martha, *did* you really kill him?"

"Yes."

But in the paperback edition, the second line of type was accidentally dropped. Why should this deletion of a single word hurt the reader's enjoyment of the remaining 59,999 words of the novel . . .

In my second published novel I recall the key sentence in the opening exposition described the lines of communication between two cities as ". . . now lost for good." A printer's error rendered the line "not lost for good," and practically destroyed the rest of the story.

But the simplicity of my examples sabotages my point more than it supports it. Here is another, more relevant:

I put some things on the desk.

I put some books on the desk.

I put three books on the desk.

I put three poetry books on the desk.

I put Hacker's *Presentation Piece*, Ebbe Borregaard's *Sketches for Thirteen Sonnets*, and Wakoski's *Inside the Blood Factory* on the desk.

The variations here are closer to the type people arguing for the chimeras of content call meaningless. The information generated by each sentence is clearly different. But what we know about what was put on the desk is only the most obvious difference. Let's assume these are the opening sentences of five different stories. Five tones of voice are generated by the varying specificity. The tone will be heard—if not consciously noted—by whoever reads. And the different tones give different information about the personality of the speaker as well as the speaker's state of mind. That is to say, the *I* generated by each sentence is different.

As a writer utilizes this information about the individual speaker, his story seems more dense, more real. And he is a better artist than the writer who dismisses the variations in these sentences as minimal. This is what makes Heinlein a better writer than Van Vogt.

But we have not exhausted the differences in the information in these sentences when we have explored the differences in the "I . . ." As we know something about the personality of the various speakers, and something about what the speaker is placing down, ranges of possibility are opened up about the desk (and the room around it) itself—five different ranges. This information is much harder to specify, because many other factors will influence it: does the desk belong to the speaker or

someone about whom the speaker feels strongly; or has she only seen the desk for the first time moments before laying the books on it? Indeed, there is no way to say that any subsequent description of the desk is wrong because it contradicts specific information generated by those opening sentences. But once those other factors have been cleared up, one description may certainly seem "righter" than another, because it is reinforced by that admittedly vague information, different for each of the examples, that has been generated. And the ability to utilize effectively this refinement in generated information is what makes Sturgeon a better writer than Heinlein.

In each of those sentences the only apparent *formal* variation is the specificity of what I put on *the desk*. But by this change, the *I* and *the desk* change as well. Both the fictive subject and the equally complex (and equally important for science fiction) fictive object are rendered differently by these supposedly minimally different details. The illusion of reality, the sense of veracity in all fiction, is controlled by the author's sensitivity to these distinctions.

A story is not a replacement of one set of words by another—plot-synopsis, detailed recounting, or analysis. The story is what happens in the reader's mind as his eyes move from the first word to the second, the second to the third, and so on to the end of the tale.

Let's look more closely at what happens in this visual journey. How, for example, does the work of reading a narrative differ from watching a film? In a film the illusion of reality comes from a series of pictures each slightly different. The difference represents a fixed chronological relation which the eye and the mind together render as motion.

Words in a narrative generate tones of voice, syntactic expectations, memories of other words, and pictures. But rather than a fixed chronological relation, they sit in numerous inter- and overweaving relations. The process as we move our eyes from word to word is corrective and revisionary rather than progressive. Each new word revises the complex picture we had a moment before.

Around the meaning of any word is a certain margin in which to correct the image of the object we arrive at (in the old grammatical terms, to modify).

I say:

dog

and an image jumps in your mind (as it did with "red"), but because I have not put it in a formal relation with anything else, you have no way

to know whether the specific image in your mind has anything to do with what I want to communicate. Hence that leeway. I can correct it:

Collie dog, and you will agree. I can correct it into a *big dog* or a *shaggy dog*, and you will still concur. But a *Chevrolet dog*? An *oxymoronic dog*? A *turgidly cardiac dog*? For the purposes of ordinary speech, and naturalistic fiction, these corrections are outside acceptable boundaries: they distort in much too unusual a way the various images that we have attached to the sound "dog." On the other hand, there is something to be enjoyed in the distortions, a freshness that may be quite entertaining, even though they lack the inevitability of our big, shaggy collie.

A sixty-thousand word novel is one picture corrected fifty-nine thousand, nine hundred and ninety-nine times. The total experience must have the same feeling of freshness as this turgidly cardiac creature as well as the inevitability of Big and Shaggy here.

Now let's atomize the correction process itself. A story begins:

The

What is the image thrown on your mind? Whatever it is, it is going to be changed many, many times before the tale is over. My own, unmodified, rather whimsical *The* is a grayish ellipsoid about four feet high that balances on the floor perhaps a yard away. Yours is no doubt different. But it is there, has a specific size, shape, color, and bears a particular relation to you. My *a*, for example, differs from my *the* in that it is about the same shape and color—a bit paler, perhaps—but is either much farther away, or much smaller and nearer. In either case, I am going to be either much less, or much more, interested in it than I am in *The*. Now we come to the second word in the story and the first correction:

The red

My four-foot ellipsoid just changed color. It is still about the same distance away. It has become more interesting. In fact, even at this point I feel vaguely that the increased interest may be outside the leeway I allow for a *The*. I feel a strain here that would be absent if the first two words had been *A red . . .* My eye goes on to the third word while my mind prepares for the second correction:

The red sun

The original *The* has now been replaced by a luminous disc. The color has lightened considerably. The disk is above me. An indistinct land-

scape has formed about me. And I am even more aware, now that the object has been placed at such a distance, of the tension between my own interest level in *red sun* and the ordinary attention I accord a *The*: for the intensity of interest is all that is left with me of the original image.

Less clearly, in terms of future corrections, is a feeling that in this landscape it is either dawn, sunset, or, if it is another time, smog of some sort must be hazing the air (. . . *red sun* . . .); but I hold all for the next correction:

The red sun is

A sudden sense of intimacy. I am being asked to pay even greater attention, in a way that *was* would not demand, as *was* in the form of the traditional historical narrative. But *is!* . . . There is a speaker here! That focus in attention I felt between the first two words is not my attention, but the attention of the speaker. It resolves into a tone of voice: "*The red sun is . . .*" And I listen to this voice, in the midst of this still vague landscape, registering its concern for the red sun. Between *The* and *red* information was generated that between *sun* and *is* resolved into a meaningful correction in my vision. This is my first aesthetic pleasure from the tale—a small one, as we have only progressed four words into the story. Nevertheless, it becomes one drop in the total enjoyment to come from the telling. Watching and listening to my speaker, I proceed to the next correction:

The red sun is high,

Noon and slightly overcast; this is merely a confirmation of something previously suspected, nowhere near as major a correction as the one before. It allows a slight sense of warmth into the landscape, and the light has been fixed at a specific point. I attempt to visualize that landscape more clearly, but no object, including the speaker, has been cleared enough to resolve. The comma tells me that a thought group is complete. In the pause it occurs to me that the redness of the sun may not be a clue to smog at all, but merely the speaker falling into literary-ism; or at best, the redness is a projection of his consciousness, which as yet I don't understand. And for a moment I notice that from where I'm standing the sun indeed appears its customary, blind-white gold. Next correction:

The red sun is high, the

In this strange landscape (lit by its somewhat untrustworthily described sun) the speaker has turned his attention to another gray, four-

foot ellipsoid, equidistant from himself and me. Again, it is too indistinct to take highlighting. But there have been two corrections with not much tension, and the reality of the speaker himself is beginning to slip. What will this become?

The red sun is high, the blue

The ellipsoid has changed hue. But the repetition in the syntactic arrangement of the description momentarily threatens to dissolve all reality, landscape, speaker, and sun, into a mannered listing of bucolica. The whole scene dims. And the final correction?

The red sun is high, the blue low.

Look! We are worlds and worlds away. The first sun is huge; and how accurate the description of its color turns out to have been. The repetition that predicted mannerism now fixes both big and little sun to the sky. The landscape crawls with long red shadows and stubby blue ones, joined by purple triangles. Look at the speaker himself. Can you see him? You have seen his doubled shadow . . .

Though it ordinarily takes only a quarter of a second and is largely unconscious, this is the process.

When the corrections as we move from word to word produce a muddy picture, when unclear bits of information do not resolve to even greater clarity as we progress, we call the writer a poor stylist. As the story goes on, and the pictures become more complicated as they develop through time, if even greater anomalies appear as we continue correcting, we say he can't plot. But it is the same quality error committed on a grosser level, even though a reader must be a third or three-quarters of the way through the book to spot one, while the first may glare out from the opening sentence.

In any commercial field of writing, like SF, the argument of writers and editors who feel *content* can be opposed to *style* runs, at its most articulate:

"Basically we are writing adventure fiction. We are writing it very fast. We do not have time to be concerned about any but the grosser errors. More important, you are talking about subtleties too refined for the vast majority of our readers who are basically neither literary nor sophisticated."

The internal contradictions here could make a book. Let me outline two.

The basis of any adventure novel, SF or otherwise, what gives it its

entertainment value—escape value if you will—what sets it apart from the psychological novel, what names it an adventure, is the intensity with which the real actions of the story impinge on the protagonist's consciousness. The simplest way to generate that sense of adventure is to increase the intensity with which the real actions impinge on the reader's. And fictional intensity is almost entirely the province of those refinements of which I have been speaking.

The story of an infant's first toddle across the kitchen floor will be an adventure if the writer can generate the infantile wonder at new muscles, new efforts, obstacles, and detours. I would like to read such a story.

We have all read, many too many times, the heroic attempts of John Smith to save the lives of seven orphans in the face of fire, flood, and avalanche.

I am sure it was an adventure for Smith.

For the reader it was dull as dull could be.

"The Doors of His Face, the Lamps of His Mouth" by Roger Zelazny has been described as "all speed and adventure" by Theodore Sturgeon, and indeed it is one of the most exciting adventure tales SF has produced. Let me change one word in every grammatical unit of every sentence, replacing it with a word that "means more or less the same thing" and I can diminish the excitement by half and expunge every trace of wit. Let me change one word and *add* one word, and I can make it so dull as to be practically unreadable. Yet a paragraph by paragraph synopsis of the "content" will be the same.

An experience I find painful (though it happens with increasing frequency) occurs when I must listen to a literate person who has just become enchanted by some hacked-out space-boiler begin to rhapsodize about the way the blunt, imprecise, leaden language reflects the hairy-chested hero's alienation from reality. He usually goes on to explain how the "SF content" itself reflects our whole society's divorce from the real. The experience is painful because he is right as far as he goes. Badly written adventure fiction is our true antiliterature. Its protagonists are our real antiheroes. They move through unreal worlds amid all sorts of noise and manage to perceive nothing meaningful or meaningfully.

Author's intention or no, that is what badly written SF *is* about. But anyone who reads or writes SF seriously knows that its particular excellence is in another area altogether: in all the brouhaha clanging about these unreal worlds, chords are sounded in total sympathy with the real.

"You are talking about subtleties too refined for the vast majority of our readers who are basically neither literary nor sophisticated."

This part of the argument always throws me back to an incident from the summer I taught a remedial English class at my Neighborhood Community Center. The voluntary nature of the class automatically restricted enrollment to people who wanted to learn; still, I had sixteen- and seventeen-year-olds who had never had any formal education in either Spanish or English continually joining my lessons. Regardless, after a student had been in the class six months, I would throw at him a full five-hundred-and-fifty-page novel to read: Dmitri Merezhkovsky's *The Romance of Leonardo da Vinci*. The book is full of Renaissance history, as well as swordplay, magic, and dissertations on art and science. It is an extremely literary novel with several levels of interpretation. It was a favorite of Sigmund Freud (Rilke, in a letter, found it loathsome) and inspired him to write his own *Leonardo da Vinci: A Study in Psychosexuality*. My students loved it, and with it, lost a good deal of their fear of Literature and Long Books.

Shortly before I had to leave the class, *Leonardo* appeared in paperback, translated by Hubert Trench. Till then it had only been available in a Modern Library edition translated by Bernard Gilbert Gurney. To save my latest two students a trip to the Barnes and Noble basement, as well as a dollar fifty, I suggested they buy the paperback. Two days later one had struggled through forty pages and the other had given up after ten. Both thought the book dull, had no idea what was about, and begged me for something shorter and more exciting.

Bewildered, I bought a copy of the Trench translation myself that afternoon. I do not have either book at hand as I write, so I'm sure a comparison with the actual texts will prove me an exaggerator. But I recall one description of a little house in Florence:

Gurney: "Gray smoke rose and curled from the slate chimney."

Trench: "Billows of smoke, gray and gloomy, elevated and contorted up from the slates of the chimney."

By the same process that differentiated the five examples of putting books on a desk, these two sentences do not refer to the same smoke, chimney, house, time of day; nor do any of the other houses within sight remain the same; nor do any possible inhabitants. One sentence has

nine words, the other fifteen. But atomize both as a series of corrected images and you will find the mental energy expended on the latter is greater by a factor of six or seven! And over seven-eighths of it leaves that uncomfortable feeling of loose-endedness, unutilized and unresolved. Sadly, it is the less skilled, less sophisticated reader who is most injured by bad writing. Bad prose requires more mental energy to correct your image from word to word, and the corrections themselves are less rewarding. That is what makes it bad. The sophisticated, literary reader may give the words the benefit of the doubt and question whether a seeming clumsiness is more fruitfully interpreted as an intentional ambiguity.

For what it is worth, when I write I often try to say several things at the same time—from a regard for economy that sits contiguous with any concern for skillful expression. I have certainly failed to say many of the things I intended. But ambiguity marks the failure, not the intent.

But how does all this relate to those particular series of corrected images we label *SF*? To answer that, we must first look at what distinguishes these particular word series from other word series that get labeled *naturalistic fiction*, *reportage*, *fantasy*.

A distinct level of subjunctivity informs all the words in an *SF* story at a level that is different from that which informs naturalistic fiction, fantasy, or reportage.

Subjunctivity is the tension on the thread of meaning that runs between (to borrow Saussure's term for 'word':) sound-image and sound-image. Suppose a series of words is presented to us as a piece of reportage. A blanket indicative tension (or mood) informs the whole series: *this happened*. That is the particular level of subjunctivity at which journalism takes place. Any word, even the metaphorical ones, must go straight back to a real object, or a real thought on the part of the reporter.

The subjunctivity level for a series of words labeled naturalistic fiction is defined by: *could have happened*. (While various levels of subjunctivity can be defined by words, those words themselves define nothing. They are not definitions of certain modes of fiction, only more or less useful functional *descriptions* of different modes of narrative.) Note that the level of subjunctivity makes certain dictates and allows certain freedoms as to what word can follow another. Consider this word series: "For one second, as she stood alone on the desert, her world shattered and she watched the fragments bury themselves in the dunes." This is practically meaningless at the subjunctive level of reportage. But it

might be a perfectly adequate, if not brilliant, word series for a piece of naturalistic fiction.

Fantasy takes the subjunctivity of naturalistic fiction and throws it into reverse. At the appearance of elves, witches, or magic in a non-metaphorical position, or at some correction of image too bizarre to be explained by other than the supernatural, the level of subjunctivity becomes: *could not have happened*. And immediately it informs *all* the words in the series. No matter how naturalistic the setting, once the witch has taken off on her broomstick the most realistic of trees, cats, night clouds, or the moon behind them become infected with this reverse subjunctivity.

But when spaceships, ray guns, or more accurately any correction of images that indicates the future appears in a series of words and mark it as *SF*, the subjunctivity level is changed once more: These objects, these convocations of objects into situations and events, are blanketly defined by: *have not happened*.

Events that have not happened are very different from the fictional events that *could have happened*, or the fantastic events that *could not have happened*.

Events that have not happened include several subcategories. These subcategories describe the subcategories of *SF*. *Events that have not happened* include those events that *might happen*: these are your technological and sociological predictive tales. Another category includes *events that will not happen*: these are your science-fantasy stories. They include *events that have not happened yet* (Can you hear the implied tone of warning?): there are your cautionary dystopias, *Brave New World* and *1984*. Were English a language with a more detailed tense system, it would be easier to see that *events that have not happened* include past events as well as future ones. *Events that have not happened in the past* compose that *SF* specialty, the parallel-world story, whose outstanding example is Philip K. Dick's *The Man in the High Castle*.

The particular subjunctive level of *SF* expands the freedom of the choice of words that can follow another group of words meaningfully; but it limits the way we employ the corrective process as we move between them.

At the subjunctive level of naturalistic fiction, "The red sun is high, the blue low," is meaningless. In naturalistic fiction our corrections in our images must be made in accordance with what we know of the personally observable—this includes our own observations or others' that have been reported to us at the subjunctive level of journalism.

Considered at the subjunctive level of fantasy, "The red sun is high, the blue low," fares a little better. But the corrective process in fantasy is limited too: when we are given a correction that is not meaningful in terms of the personally observable world, we *must* accept any pseudo-explanation we are given. If there is no pseudoexplanation, it must remain mysterious. As fantasy, one suspects that the red sun is the "realer" one; but what sorcerer, to what purpose, shunted up that second, azure, orb, we cannot know and must wait for the rest of the tale.

As we have seen, that sentence makes very good SF. The subjunctive level of SF says that we must make our correction process in accord with what we know of the physically explainable universe. And the physically explainable has a much wider range than the personally observable.* The particular verbal freedom of SF, coupled with the corrective process that allows the whole range of the physically explainable universe, can produce the most violent leaps of imagery. For not only does it throw us worlds away, it specifies how we got there.

Let us examine what happens between the following two words:

winged dog

As naturalistic fiction it is meaningless. As fantasy it is merely a visual correction. At the subjunctive level of SF, however, one must momentarily consider, as one makes that visual correction, an entire track of evolution: whether the dog has forelegs or not. The visual correction must include modification of breastbone and musculature if the wings are to be functional, as well as a whole slew of other factors from hollow bones to heart rate; or if we subsequently learn as the series of words goes on that grafting was the cause, there are all the implications (to

*I throw out this notion for its worth as intellectual play. It is not too difficult to see that as *events that have not happened* include the subgroup of *events that have not happened in the past*, they include the subsubgroup of *events that could have happened* with an implied *but didn't*. That is to say, the level of subjunctivity of SF includes the level of subjunctivity of naturalistic fiction.

As well, the personally observable world is a subcategory of the physically explainable universe. That is, the laws of the first can all be explained in terms of the laws of the second, while the situation is not necessarily reversible. So much for the two levels of subjunctivity and the limitations on the corrective processes that go with them.

What of the respective freedoms in the choice of word to follow word?

I can think of no series of words that could appear in a piece of naturalistic fiction that could not also appear in the same order in a piece of speculative fiction. I can, however, think of many series of words that, while fine for speculative fiction, would be meaningless as naturalism. Which then is the major and which the subcategory?

Consider: naturalistic fictions are parallel-world stories in which the divergence from the real is too slight for historical verification.

consider) of a technology capable of such an operation. All of this information hovers tacitly about and between those two words in the same manner that the information about *I* and *the desk* hovered around the statements about placing down the books. The best SF writer will utilize this information just as she utilizes the information generated by any verbal juxtapositioning.

I quote Harlan Ellison describing his own reaction to this verbal process:

... Heinlein has always managed to indicate the greater strangeness of a culture with the most casually dropped-in reference: the first time in a novel, I believe it was in *Beyond This Horizon*, that a character came through a door that . . . dilated. And no discussion. Just: "The door dilated." I read across it, and was two lines down before I realized what the image had been, what the words had called forth. A *dilating* door. It didn't open, it *irised*! Dear God, now I knew I was in a future world . . .

"The door dilated," is meaningless as naturalistic fiction, and practically meaningless as fantasy. As SF—as an event that hasn't happened, yet still must be interpreted in terms of the physically explainable—it is quite as wondrous as Ellison feels it.

As well, the luminosity of Heinlein's particular vision was supported by all sorts of other information, stated and unstated, generated by the novel's other words.

Through this discussion, I have tried to keep away from what motivates the construction of these violent nets of wonder called speculative fiction. The more basic the discussion, the greater is our obligation to stay with the reader in *front* of the page. But at the mention of the author's "vision" the subject is already broached. The vision (sense of wonder, if you will) that SF tries for seems to me very close to the vision of poetry, particularly poetry as it concerned the nineteenth century Symbolists. No matter how disciplined its creation, to move into "unreal" worlds demands a brush with mysticism.

Virtually all the classics of speculative fiction are mystical.

In Isaac Asimov's *Foundation* trilogy, one man, dead on page thirty-seven, achieves nothing less than the redemption of mankind from twenty-nine thousand years of suffering simply by his heightened consciousness of the human condition. (Read "consciousness of the human condition" for "science of psychohistory.")

In Robert Heinlein's *Stranger in a Strange Land* the appearance of God Incarnate creates a world of love and cannibalism.

Clarke's *Childhood's End* and Sturgeon's *More Than Human* detail vastly differing processes by which man becomes more than man.

Alfred Bester's *The Stars My Destination* (or *Tiger, Tiger!* its original title) is considered by many readers and writers, both in and outside the field, to be the greatest single SF novel. In this book, man, intensely human yet more than human, becomes, through greater acceptance of his humanity, something even more. It chronicles a social education, but within a society which, from our point of view, has gone mad. In the climactic scene, the protagonist, burning in the ruins of a collapsing cathedral, has his senses confused by synesthesia. Terrified, he begins to oscillate insanely in time and space. Through this experience, with the help of his worst enemy transformed by time into his savior, he saves himself and attains a state of innocence and rebirth.

This is the stuff of mysticism.

It is also a very powerful dramatization of Rimbaud's theory of the systematic derangement of the senses to achieve the unknown. And the Rimbaud reference is as conscious as the book's earlier references to Joyce, Blake, and Swift. (I would like to see the relation between the Symbolists and modern American speculative fiction examined more thoroughly. The French Symbolists' particular problems of vision have been explored repeatedly not only by writers like Bester and Sturgeon, but also newer writers like Roger Zelazny, who brings both erudition and word magic to strange creations generated from the tension between suicide and immortality. And the answers they discover are all unique.) To recapitulate: whatever the inspiration or vision, whether it arrives in a flash or has been meticulously worked out over years, the only way a writer can present it is by what he can make happen in the reader's mind between one word and another, by the way he can maneuver the existing tensions between words and associated images.

I have read many descriptions of "mystical experiences"—many in SF stories and novels. Very, very few have generated any *feel* of the mystical—which is to say that as the writers went about setting correction after correction, the images were too untrustworthy to call up any personal feelings about such experiences. The Symbolists have a lesson here: the only thing that we will trust enough to let it generate in us any real sense of the mystical is a resonant aesthetic form.

The sense of mystical horror, for example, in Thomas M. Disch's extraordinary novella, *The Asian Shore*, does not come from its study of a particularly insidious type of racism, incisive though the study is; nor does it come from the final incidents set frustratingly between the su-

pernatural and the insane. It generates rather in the formal parallels between the protagonist's concepts of Byzantine architecture and the obvious architecture of his own personality.

Aesthetic form . . . I am going to leave this discussion at this undefined term. For many people it borders on the meaningless. I hope there is enough tension between the words to proliferate with what has gone before. To summarize, however: any serious discussion of speculative fiction must first get away from the distracting concept of SF content and examine precisely what sort of word-beast sits before us. We must explore both the level of subjunctivity at which speculative fiction takes place and the particular intensity and range of images this level affords. Readers must do this if they want to fully understand what has already been written. Writers must do this if the field is to mature to the potential so frequently cited for it.

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