American Doppelgängers from "The Gelded Age" : Robert Sheckley's "Comic Inferno"

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*Truth is stranger than fiction, but it is because fiction
is obliged to stick to possibilities, truth isn't.*
Mark Twain

*You have to be able to laugh to stand up and sing,
'My country 'tis of thee, sweet land of liberty.'* That's *a
joke. And if you don't laugh at it, it'll crack you up.*
Malcolm X

The doyen of British sf, Brian Aldiss, in his introduction
to *Speaking Science Fiction,* a collection of papers originating in the
1996 Liverpool conference held under the aegis of the University of
Liverpool and the Science Fiction Foundation, suggested there ought
to be a study, perhaps entitled *The Meanings of the SF Short Story,*
devoted to the stories of Robert Sheckley, William Tenn and Frederik
Pohl, innovators who added brain to the brawn of American sf with
their streak of mordant social criticism.

Hence this brief paper on Robert Sheckley's stories written in
the 1950s, a decade which arguably saw the dawn of science fiction's
"Golden Age" when it seemed that the genre, having launched itself
into the stratosphere of serious fiction during the 1940s, was escaping
the gravitional pull of its pulpy origins that had obscured its intrinsic

value from the purview of serious criticism. These stories established the writer's reputation and are considered by his peers to represent the apex of his artistry.

The parodic title of this paper pays homage to Sheckley's mischievous, leprechaun persona and his alter egos that populate his tales, while also referring to the decade when the nation, cowed by McCarthyism, lost its *cojones*. 'Comic Inferno' was a term coined by Kingsley Amis in *New Maps of Hell* (1960), his groundbreaking critical study of sf, to describe ironic dystopias created by technology gone mad, leaving Man vulnerable to the tender mercy of machines. The epigraphs call attention to the serious intent of a writer called "too funny to be great", i.e., the hermeneutics of Sheckley's sf, and to remind that laughter is a tool of dissent and resistance to the abuse of power.

The zeitgeist of 1950s USA was that of a society whose surface calm, presided over by the grinning Daddy Warbucks-like figurehead of Eisenhower whom cartoonist Jules Feiffer called "the patron of our suffocation" (quoted in Kercher, 246), belied an anxiety-ridden populace suffering from a postwar *Angst* . The malaise underlying the surface slick optimism was the consequence of years of wars: a whole generation whose psychic wounds affected human social relations to a degree impossible to gauge.

But the stress felt by all was undoubtedly occasioned by accelerated urbanization in a rapidly changing, science and technology-driven society, dominated by corporate interests determined to seize control of the media and co-opt the political and military class. A grim-faced Eisenhower in his farewell address to the nation in 1961 warned against "the acquisition of unwarranted influence" by this conjunction of forces spawned by the postwar technological revolution: the

military-industrial complex.

The *e pluribus unum* prescription for national unity began to unravel in the postwar *Pax Americana:* the nation's faltering self-confidence was aggravated by the imploding composition of the national demographic, and the increasingly vocal demands of subaltern minorities hitherto excluded from "the American Dream" began to disturb the sleep of the hegemons of the military-industrial complex and their minions.

The miasma of unease and repressed fear seeped into the national psyche rattled by "the Bomb", the Cold War and the anti-communist scaremongering of the FBI's chief mischief-maker J. Edgar Hoover whose paranoia helped jump-start the country's march towards the vengeful post-9-11 "Fortress Amerika" security state.

Born in 1928, Robert Sheckley quickly hit his stride as a writer in the McCarthy Period, bringing to mind Adrienne Rich's observation that American poetry often emerges from the "point of stress in our society" (quoted in Raskin, xxi). When he died in 2005 he was famous in Russia, but unknown to the general public of the "United States of Amnesia" whose knowledge of sf was limited to *Star Trek and Star Wars.*

Sheckley's status as a neglected author can be attributed to the fact that he wrote entertaining stories that happened to be subsumed under genre sf, even though sf, riding the wave of popular culture studies in the 1970s, had long ago zapped open the gates of academia. DePauw University's *Science Fiction Studies* and Liverpool University's *Science Fiction Hub* comprising Europe's largest collection of catalogued sf materials are respected institutions. However, sf works still bear the stigma of sub-literature, viewed with suspicion by the gatekeepers of the literary mainstream.

Sheckley is renowned as a humorist and has been hailed as the "Mark Twain", or the "O'Henry" of sf. Born in Brooklyn to Jewish parents he apparently evinced little interest in his ethnic roots, but one cannot help wondering if his ethnic heritage predisposed him to the wryly comic, sardonic view of humanity that emerges from his writing. His individualistic bent and hipster inclinations combined with his stint in Korea with the US Army must have colored his Catch-22 view of life and sharpened his awareness of the unscrupulous machinations of those in positions of authority to ensnare and enslave the gullible and unwary in this dog-eat-dog world.

In contrast to Superman, the fantasy hero of pulp sf fans Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster, heroes are conspicuously absent from Sheckley's stories which feature instead bumbling, Clark Kentish protagonists, known in Yiddish culture as the *klutz, nebbish, schlemiel,* who are forever scrambling up or sliding down life's slippery slopes searching for an escape route to some kind of salvation.

Yiddish literature, centered around *luftmenschen* and *dos kleine menschele,* displays a similar anti-heroism whose provenance has been surmised as resulting from the limited world of East European Jews where power-hunger and social-climbing were unrealistic options: *"The virtue of powerlessness, the power of helplessness, the company of the dispossessed, the sanctity of the insulted and injured* ···are the great themes of Yiddish literature (Howe/ Greenberg, 38). The gentle laughter elicited by the conduct of these anti-heroes in their argument and struggle with the world as well as the tone of moral seriousness bear resemblance to corresponding elements in Sheckley's stories, so that one might perhaps conclude that the apple didn't fall far from the tree.

Who then are the protagonists in the Sheckley *oeuvre*? The

author has conceded that they represent aspects of himself, unheroic alter egos or *doppelgängers,* as it were, acting and speaking on behalf of the author. They are contemporary Americans, no matter how far projected into the future, or whatever distant planet or galaxy they inhabit. Even the aliens are hardly distinguishable from earthlings of the type *homo americanus,* with or without their tendrils and tentacles.

Recognizably human traits help us suspend belief in Sheckley's bizarre, topsy-turvy universe of the Absurd, enabling us to follow creaky plots yet identify with the predicament of the main character; even the most unbelievable situations never forfeit credibility. The aplomb with which Sheckley pulls this off attests to his skill in holding the attention of his readers, playing on emotions, surprising by sudden turns in the plot or with unexpected dénouements, and, above all, eliciting laughter with humorous dialog and situations, all of which depend on the smooth flow of the narrative and the "believability" of his main character, the alienated, put-upon all-American Joe.

Before continuing the discussion of Sheckley's narrative technique, it would be apposite to touch on the vexed question of the sf genre, notorious for its slippery, amorphous character that eludes all attempts to impose a definitive description on it.

For an academic definition of sf one might cite the co-founder of the journal *Science Fiction Studies,* and leading representative of the Marxist school of criticism (the most productive in explicating concepts of alienation and estrangement), Darko Suvin: 'SF is a literary genre whose necessary and sufficient conditions are the presence and interaction of estrangement and cognition, and whose main formal device is an imaginative alternative to the

author's empirical experience.' (quoted in James, 107-8) The concept of "cognitive estrangement" originated with the Russian Formalists whose concept of defamiliarization or 'making it strange' was applied to mainstream literature as a device for making us experience the familiar in a new way .

Applied by Suvin to sf this becomes the distinguishing feature of the genre which he defines further: 'SF is distinguished by the narrative dominance or hegemony of a fictional "novum" (novelty, innovation) validated by cognitive logic.' (James, 108) By insisting on *novums* that are based on scientific or logical criteria Suvin wants to distinguish sf from fantasy and horror which employ magic and the supernatural.

The term 'speculative fiction', coined to accommodate fantasy elements within a genre that had prided itself on "hard" sf with its extrapolation and projection of scientific, empirically based facts into the future, may best describe the location of Sheckley's writing on the sf spectrum, including his best novels dating from the end of the 1950s to the 1960s. As "Grand Inquisitor of the American Id", he needed the freedom to fantasize and had little interest in scientific or engineering data. As regards the science he was sufficiently informed about technical details for the sake of a degree of verisimilitude, but extrapolation for the sake of the science, or predicting a future technology-based utopia was not Sheckley's shtick. He was more interested in creating bizarro worlds that possess their own internal logic yet are absurd in terms of our human order and value systems. His famous "Seventh Victim" posits a world where legally sanctioned murder supports social order by satisfying the lust to kill, in contrast to our world where the 6th Commandment is honored equally in the breach.

Hunting humans became a major trope: 'The Prize of Peril' (1958) anticipates TV reality shows', in the novella, *Immortality Inc.* (1958), the inhibition against killing is lost, while in the sharp satire on state tyranny, *The Status Civilization* (1960), the Kafkaesque convict planet Omega has institutionalized killing in a malevolent mirror image of the earth as it used to be.

Even when flouting reality Sheckley is able satisfy Suvin's requisite cognitive estrangement, and he has few peers in producing novums that shock: in 'Watchbird' (1953) aerial drones to 'prevent murder' escalate their kills in a *reductio ad absurdum* that threatens the earth's ecological balance. His *fingerspitzgefühl* for the wacky and the zany provides deadpan humor for witty repartee and greases the wheels of the plot to keep us laughing: 'Bad Medicine' (1956), a Chaplinesque tale of a man who wants to cure himself of a homicidal urge, but by mistake is provided 'machine therapy' for Martians. Psychoanalysis was a popular target at that time

Sheckley's main technique for creating cognitive estrangement is inversion. Stanisław Lem in his essay *On the Structural Analysis of Science Fiction* writes that half of Sheckley's stories are built on inversions citing 'All the Things You Are' (1956), where 'in the eyes of an extraterrestrial we are all monsters.' : ' the odor of human beings is poisonous for extraterrestrials⋯' (Lem, 38) Sheckley wrote other stories from the point of view of aliens, e.g., 'Specialist' (1953), a radically grotesque story of a spaceship travelling faster than light, operated by separate organs, "Eye", "Wall", and anthropomorphized machine parts, "Engine", "Accumulator", "Bi-pedal (novums?). The "Feeder" has tentacles, the "Talker" "communication tendrils". They work together for the "Vast Co-operation of the Galaxy" (the United Nations). The crew lands on "the Pusher Planet" (USA?) where the

primitive inhabitants have developed a mechanical civilization and become 'unspecialized' (= uncooperative, refusing to join the Galactic Co-operation. The alien "Talker", mind-reading the loneliness and fear, commiserates: 'it must be terrible, he thought. Doubting, uncertain, never trusting anyone. If these Pushers didn't find their place in the Galaxy, they would exterminate themselves.' (*The Robert Sheckley Omnibus,* 162)

The meaning of these stories becomes clearer when taken together; patterns of tropes emerge, some clearly parodying and spoofing sf conventions (The Monsters', 1953): contact with aliens, i.e., the Other, means an encounter with the Self, a mirror to the ugly side of humanity ('Diplomatic Immunity', 1953), but others are unmistakable allegories of US society in the 1950s, satires on the foibles of his fellow-Americans: their blind materialism ('Something for Nothing', 1954), the longing for love ('Love Inc.'/ 'Pilgrimage to Earth', 1956), the cowardice of individuals and callousness of the authorities ('Ticket to Tranai', 1955), human belligerence and lust for destruction ('The Leech', 1952). There are allusions to colonialism and the dark chapters of US history: 'First Contact', annihilation of native populations ('The Native Problem', 1956), racism and prejudice against minorities ('Holdout', 1957). Sheckley's dissident farces express his disgust and disappointment at the direction his country was taking in the decade of anti-communist hysteria and red-baiting: the mindless authoritarianism and bureaucracy, the bellicosity of religious dogmatism ('The Battle', 1954) the threat of machines and science ('The Laxian Key', 1954), the rampant desires of a populace addled by a surfeit of choice ('The Cost of Living', 1952) and, cowed by authority, incapable of resistance to the abuse of power ('Skulking Permit', 1954). Sheckley's 'heroes', like avatars from Kafka's universe, by

virtue of their existential struggles at least offer a form of protest and resistance against the constant menace that hangs over them like the sword of Damocles ('The Minimum Man', 1958). These frustrated and threatened individuals are always aided by the sympathy and humor of both the author and the reader.

Liberal satire's resistance to the fear and repression blighting that benighted decade of the 'Miracle Ingredient', the snake-oil which has always been the bane of American public life - HP2x (Hocus-pocus twice multiplied), is brilliantly chronicled in Kercher's *Revel with a Cause*. The latter formula for BS was coined by one of America's great political cartoonists Herblock, who together with Bill Mauldin, Robert Osborn and Jules Feiffer drew 'Truth to Power'. Mike Nichols and Elaine May turned over the rock of American sexuality, Mort Sahl pulled the comfort-blanket off political taboos and Lenny Bruce gave it to the bigots and hypocrites straight up the *keister*.

Robert Sheckley, publishing from the relative anonymity of sf magazines *Galaxy, Fantasy and Science Fiction,* and *Playboy,* the flagship of the "Captain Ahab of American Liberalism", Hugh Hefner, was able to play his part in skewering the absurdities of American life because, as David Seed (127) points out: 'the science fiction of the 1950s...managed to escape the oppression of McCarthyism by presenting a mask of fantasy to the authorities.'

Elizabeth A. Wheeler uses the Cold War trope of 'Containment' to show how urban fiction in postwar America broke out of the straightjacket of repression to become 'uncontained' when the myriad voices of ethnic minorities, women, and sex and gender activists could no longer be silenced. When in 1956 Allen Ginsburg released *Howl,* his testament of rage and despair, followed in 1957 by Jack Kerouac's *On the Road,* they sounded the death knell of the

1950s' cookie-cutter cultural consensus.

It is therefore important to understand that Robert Sheckley, laboring in the sf ghetto, not only made a valuable contribution to American popular culture, but also joined the honor roll of Americans who refused to bend to the tyranny of authority.

Following the same trajectory of mainstream American literature breaking out of the containment of Cold War cultural politics, Sheckley's sf stories showed us the human cost of society's faith in machines and utopian dreams. The 1960s' zeitgeist then made it possible for him, too, to strike a harsher satirical tone as the forces of oppression momentarily lost their nerve in the face of the 1960s' youth revolt.

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