

My Lamp at Midnight Hour

I first read and enjoyed John Milton's twin poems, "L'Allegro" and "Il Penseroso," so long ago that the torrents of literary and classical allusions in them swirled as far over my young head -- and beyond my vision -- as the Great Nebula in Andromeda. (Now in my state of venerable wisdom they are only as obscure as Centaurus II.) I don't think I read an annotated version of the poems till I encountered them again in high school.

Milton wrote both poems in 1631 (some say 1632) when he was only 22 (or 23), and they were printed in the Poems of 1645. "L'Allegro" describes the ideal days of

a cheerful man who is, among other things, a lover of light and of mirth. "Il Pen-

seroso" shows the ideal life of a contemplative man who is a lover of darkness and of solitude. "...Hail, thou Goddess sage and holy, Hail, divinest Melancholy," he writes at the start of the latter poem, celebrating the pleasures of the studious and meditative life.

The name of the second poem, shorn of its article, has often struck me as an ideal fanzine title. If you're like me, you squirrel away possible fanzine titles for use in the misty future. I have a list of them dating back at least 23 years, mostly unused, and new possibilities constantly occur to me. Penseroso is one of these. It is a good fannish title because, unlike the title of its companion poem, it is a coinage (although an unintentional one), an idiosyncratic term peculiar to Milton alone. According to the entry "Penseroso, Il" in The Oxford Companion to English Literature: "The title suggests, as Dean Church pointed out, that Milton at this time had not attained full proficiency in the Italian tongue; the word, which is intended to mean 'contemplative,' should be 'pensieroso.'"

The fannish life partakes more of "L'Allegro" than of "Il Penseroso," perhaps. Fan conventions, parties, and meetings are at present more typically fannish than any other activity. But one aspect of fannishness that still exists, although less centrally than before, is most certainly "penseroso": fan publishing, or as Dave Rike calls it, "fmz-fanac." It is basically a solitary, meditative task, best carried on -- if the rest of the family will allow it -- at midnight hour. Sitting alone, writing one's ramblings or mailing comments, hammering them into a familiar old Sure-Rite stencil, or twirling the tail of a Gestetner: that is fine poetry indeed. And it must be a rewarding one. Art Rapp tells me that about 39,000 pages have been published in SAPS over these 36 years. Think of the number of hours of labor, creative and physical,

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that were expended in the production of 39,000 pages! "The happiest of all lives," Voltaire said, "is a busy solitude." A good argument in favor of lots more fmz-fanac.

"The Greasyblue Aroma" and Other Smells

Returning to fan publishing in SAPS after a lapse of two years and more, Nancy Rapp wrote (Ignatz, April 1980) that she had forgotten "what stencil-smell was like! Tonight, as I sit here in the kitchen frantically trying to beat a SAPS deadline again, my nostrils are sucking in the greasyblue aroma of Heyer stencils...."

I don't think that the magical exhalation of fanzine materials has ever been sufficiently celebrated. And yet surely these perfumes are as delicious to the nose of a fan publisher as the aroma of fine cognac or rare claret, or of Bel Paese or Pont l'Eveque, to connoisseurs of a different stripe. The bouquet of mimeo stencils newly exposed to the air and lying pristine and unworded in their package deserves a sonnet, at least, or a notice in Brillat-Savarin, perhaps. Stencils smell good enough to eat: raw, with a dash of salt and some freshly ground pepper.

The pungence of corflu (or as we used to call it in antique days, obliterated) has often been remarked, but opinion seems equally divided whether it is pleasant or an abomination. Gretchen, I remember, was of two minds about it. She didn't enjoy the smell, but often said she liked the waft of it in the house because it indicated that I was working on a fanzine, an activity she heartily approved of and encouraged. I myself have always esteemed the winy emanation of corflu that quivers forth almost visibly from bottle and brush. The odor of it is as wondrous as the thick blue color of the fluid in its half-ounce bottle, jewel-bright and vivid as a hyacinth. Obviously, however, the smell is not to everybody's preference, and its pungence aside, it could be a depressing thing, for it is not indicative of successful and efficient fanac. The little bottle is uncapped only to repair an error.

Mimeo ink, too, has its distinctive aroma that rolls forth like the heavy reek of equatorial blossoms. Few odors are more familiar and pleasant. Unlike corflu and stencils, its particular effluvium seems to depend on the brand of ink and also on whether it is fluid, semi-paste, or paste ink. Fluid ink smells oily, but it is a wonderful oiliness like that of canned tuna or a pot of Texas chili. The thicker inks have a spicy smell -- or is it only an imagined resemblance to toothpaste flavored with mint, in a darker shade and in a Brobdingnagian tube?

Even lettering guides and styluses (I said styluses, not styli) have their own faint but detectable scents: the ordinary smell of plastic goods, perhaps it is, tintured a little in the styluses by the corroding metal that forms the nibs. I have chewed the plastic handles of many a stylus, partly of course only as a matter of convenience, to hold the instrument momentarily while I straighten the stencil on the mimeoscope, but -- it may be -- also to savor briefly the essence of such unlikely tidbits, crisp like celery stalks.

And what perfume in the world compares with that of mimeo paper? As the wrapper of a fresh ream is ripped open and the ends of 500 tight-

ly packed sheets are exposed, the trapped fragrance, redolent of northern Wisconsin or Canada, gently exudes and caresses the nostrils. The scent of cellulose, sulfate, and rosin artfully mingled is an exhalatory experience that is unsurpassed this side of paradise. Feeding the paper through the mimeograph is like pressing aromatic herbs to concoct green Chartreuse. And mixed with the subtle vapor of the ink that is impressed upon each sheet, the fragrance lingers in the finished product, the fanzine that evolves from the conjointure of all these pungent masterworks of forest and factory. Do the staples that hold together these ambrosial pages also have a dim silvery sweetness of their own? Perhaps it is only a fannish diablerie, but I fancy that they do.

And this wonderful bouquet is something that we will lose -- mostly if not entirely -- if we all take up the dulcet (but expensive) dalliance with the Xerox at the local copy center. It will be a pity if all fans forgo traditional fan publishing methods. The fragrances that mingle in the process of producing a fanzine are the aroma of creativity itself.

New Adventures Among Old Magazines (1)

● "The World of the Red Sun" (Clifford D. Simak), Wonder Stories, December 1931.

Among old magazines one finds a zone of repose, a place of retreat in the strictest sense. When we take up an eldern copy of Astounding Stories or Miracle Science, ragged from wear and neglect, brown and brittle from the light of many spinning decades, we find ourselves transported from our age of anxiety to another age, buried in gentle dust. It may have been a time almost as awful as our own, but we are only visitors there, little touched by the tribulations we would face if we actually existed then. It is peaceful and amusing. We read slowly, for densely set grey print on decaying pulpwood is not made for speed reading. The excesses of the Institute of Reading Dynamics would put, not eyetracks, but grooves, in these fragile pages.



Untroubled by the breadlines, the rise of gangsterism, the gathering of war clouds in the 1920s and '30s, we are free to pleasure ourselves in perusing the Charles Atlas ads, the Hugo Gernsback editorials, and of course the stories themselves. Delightful fare it is, too. Delightful, nostalgic, crude, quaint, and often inept and ridiculous, but at least different from anything we find in the books and magazines of the here and now. There's a good deal of comfort in that.

Take Clifford D. Simak's story, "The World of the Red Sun." Simak was always at his finest, I believe, not as a novelist, but as a short story writer. In this, his first published yarn, he wrote a story that remains extremely readable even after 50 years, although I don't think it was ever reprinted. Among its other distinctions it is the first story (so far as I know) in which anyone foresaw one danger that a time traveler might face: that of materializing inside the wall of a structure that had been built between the time of his departure in the past

and his arrival in the future. In Simak's story the time machine is placed in an airplane flying high above the earth so that the temponauts are "safe from all that might occur beneath them in the passing centuries." Simak used the same idea at least once more, in "Sunspot Purge" (ASF, Nov 1940).

Few science fiction writers can compare with Simak in the not-inconsiderable achievement of dealing with big "superscientific" concepts in commonplace human terms. It is like viewing the hectic and dangerous Indianapolis "500" in a light of terrible beauty, discerning the stillness and sadness at the heart of it. Simak sees a vision of millenium reflected in a pool of rustic quiet. Perhaps the best example was his novel "Cosmic Engineers" (ASF, Feb-Mar-Apr 1939). It was a space "epic" inspired, I suppose, by Doc Smith's "Skylarks," but overshadowed and enhanced by a mood of sad melancholy and cathedral calm even in the middle of colliding galaxies. We are transported to a morning at the far edge of the universe, but even here we are given (as it were) a whiff of freshly brewed coffee. Such small things are part of the eternal verities, but I don't remember Kimball Kinnison ever pausing to relax over a cup of Yuban.

As an aspect of this vision Simak sometimes sees the future with a Stapledonian eye. "The World of the Red Sun" ends in a mood of elegaic calm that contrasts impressively with the usual prospect of Gernsback era "scientifiction." Back then sf, as fiction, was not a jot advanced from "East Lynne," and as prophecy of things to come might have been proclaimed by George Folansbee Babbitt himself. Simak's story takes "a sober colouring from an eye that hath kept watch o'er man's mortality." The last paragraph of the story, describing humanity's end, reads: "Over the rim of the amphitheater the huge red sun hung in a sky devoid of clouds. A slight wind stirred the sand at the base of the statue." The author of "Ecclesiastes" ("all are of the dust, and all turn to dust again") would admire that passage, and even Shelley's "Ozymandias" achieves no more compelling effect.

A Tiny Tribute

During part of last winter and spring I found blossoming in the front yard a wildflower of considerable beauty and persistence for something so small and delicate. In the dappled shade of the geraniums it thrived a long time after being awakened by the winter rains. It had six petals of deep lavender rather than blue, with a central patch of yellow and a stamen and pistil of gold. It had no fragrance; its colors were enough. The flower is called Blue-eyed Grass. Now isn't that a wonderful name? If you don't think so, you're reading the wrong fanzine!

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