THE CONVERGENCE OF POSTMODERN INNOVATIVE FICTION AND SCIENCE FICTION

An Encounter with Samuel R. Delany's Technotopia

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I

Recent science fiction, particularly in the works of Samuel R. Delany, has become increasingly pluralistic and, to use Delany's own term, "multiplex." The criticism of science fiction needs to be similarly diversified and synthesizing, not only in terms of individual works, but also in its approach to the genre as a whole. My intention here is not to argue against current attempts to establish a criticism of science fiction as science fiction, but rather to offer an alternative perspective on the orientations of contemporary science fiction criticism. I am interested in reading recent science fiction not so much in terms of its historical relations to previous types of science fiction and proto-science fiction, but in terms of its relation to the dominant episteme and aesthetics of advanced technological societies — a stylistic and epistemological development that I have called the "aesthetics of indeterminacy (Ebert, 1978). It seems to me that integrating science fiction with other aesthetic modes of expression of the postmodern consciousness, rather than looking at it as an isolated genre developed in an aesthetic vacuum, will reveal new aspects of the literary activities in technological societies. I therefore intend to discuss science fiction in the context of one of the major literary manifestations of the new sensibility, namely postmodern innovative fiction — the writings of such fictioneers as John Barth, Ronald Sukenick, Steve Katz and Raymond Federman as well as the works of less formally innovative, but no less contemporary, writers such as Thomas Pynchon.

Increasing pluralism at all levels of experience on the one hand, and extreme polarization on the other, are the complementary sides of the manifold complexities of advanced technological communities. Aesthetically this paradoxical diversification and polarization has resulted in a generic

reconfiguration of contemporary narrative literature — both science fiction and the "mainstream" novel.[1] As far as science fiction is concerned, in contrast to the relative structural and thematic homogeneity of traditional science fiction, recent science fiction has become highly variform, creating an unprecedented multiplicity and consequent polarization in the genre. Among the various kinds of science fiction which are being written today, one can differentiate (perhaps with some simplification!) three distinct "streams."

In the middle is traditional science fiction which is based largely on the rhetoric of believability: it employs the mimetic conventions of the bourgeois novel with its preoccupation with socio-psychological realism and its commitment to a causal interpretation of the universe. (This obsession with causality usually manifests itself in the form of well-defined, linear plots.) The aim of traditional science fiction is to "extrapolate" from the present givens of contemporary science and technology and predict, in a believable fashion, the effects of science on human destiny. On one extreme side of this middle form of science fiction is a type of writing which is energized by the sudden popularity of science fiction among a new class of readers. This is in fact an adaptation and updating of the old-fashioned space-opera type of science fiction for the tastes of middle-class consumers whose passion for gadgets is inexhaustible. It is interesting to note that this type of science fiction has the tendency to leave the literary domain altogether and move into T.V. serials, films and comic strips. I shall call this mode of science fiction, "parascience fiction." The opposite extreme, which is the one that concerns me here, is what I shall refer to as "metascience fiction": the science fiction that moves beyond thematic extrapolation and formal

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[1] I am, of course, aware that the generic model I am suggesting is open to qualifications. There will be some critics who will point to cases which are "exceptions" and thus seem to reduce the explaining power of my theory. However, my model, like any of the other paradigms that map the emergence of new modes of discourse (literary or otherwise), should be tested not merely in terms of its absolute empirical applicability but also in the light of its ability to offer a new organizing perspective for the nascent contemporary literary consciousness. The arguments of those critics who believe all literary and cultural theories should be built upon a purely empirical study of available data is itself open to many methodological as well as practical questions. The case against purely empirical research in genre theory has been stated best by Tzvetan Todorov (1975:3–4):

> The notion of genre immediately raises several questions; fortunately, some of these vanish once we have formulated them explicitly. The first question is: are we entitled to discuss a genre without having studied (or at least read) all the works which constitute it? The graduate student who asks this question might add that a catalogue of the fantastic would include thousands of titles. Whence it is only a step to the image of the diligent student buried under books he must read at the rate of three a day, obsessed by the idea that new ones keep being written and that he will doubtless never manage to absorb them all. But one of the first characteristics of scientific method is that it does not require us to observe every instance of a phenomenon in order to describe it; scientific method proceeds rather by deduction. We actually deal with a relatively limited number of cases, from them we deduce a general hypothesis, and we verify this hypothesis by other cases, correcting (or rejecting) it as need be. Whatever the number of phenomena (of literary works, in this case) studied we are never justified in extrapolating universal laws from them; *it is not the quantity of observations, but the logical coherence of a theory that finally matters.* (emphasis added)

mimesis in order to celebrate the fabulatory human imagination in-and-for-itself. In metascience fiction the entertainment or story-telling function that dominates traditional science fiction is backgrounded, and the literary and aesthetic functions are foregrounded. Metascience fiction energizes the genre of science fiction at a time when scientific explorations of other planets have made news from outer space a regular part of our daily information, and future studies have become an integral part of our academic curricula. Metascience fiction acquires its narrative force from laying bare the conventions of science fiction and subverting its transparent language of mimesis and believability. Instead of using a language which is only a means for achieving other ends, such as telling an appealing and suspenseful story, it employs a self-reflexive discourse acutely aware of its own aesthetic status and artificiality. Not only language but also other components of fiction such as "character," "plot," and "point of view" are handled with aesthetic selfconsciousness in a manner that makes it impossible to take them for anything but what they actually are: created literary characters, made-up plots and so forth.

The full emergence of metascience fiction in recent years is the outcome of a radical generic reconfiguration which may be described, in Roman Jakobson's terminology, as a shifting of the dominant in postwar narrative literature.[2] What this means is that the overall shape of narrative genres have changed and a new aesthetic hierarchy has been established within them. This is largely a result of the pressures from both within the literary tradition (namely the "automatization" of certain devices) and outside it (that is to say, forces in the culture such as the development of high technology and the consequent changes in the immediate environment of the author and his/her audience). In pre-World War II years, for instance, the "dominant" in science fiction was the pseudo-mimetic exploration of outer space. This "dominant" has been displaced because internally, in terms of the writing conventions of science fiction, it is no longer effective — it has become "automatized" — and externally, in the context of the culture at large, it does not generate the imaginative energies it used to — the development of space technology has made it an almost routine *real* thing! The "dominant" of postmodern science fiction, consequently, has shifted, and a new aesthetic and thematic hierarchy has been established within the genre according to which the very "fictivity" of science fiction is its primary element. It is perhaps important to emphasize that during the course of such a change none of the (older) components of science fiction is completely lost. Obviously, they all still exist. But they are placed in a new order, and their relationship to one another and to the generic system as a whole has changed. In metascience fiction outer space explorations do exist but the relative position of this narrative element in the aesthetic structure has changed: it serves now only as a background against which, to borrow a term from Raymond Federman, "real fictitious" discourses take place.

[2] Jakobson, 1971. For other perspectives on genre theory (essentially after Northrop Frye) see David Richter, 1974; Todorov, 1975; Brooke-Rose, 1976; Todorov's reply to this essay, 1976; Scholes, 1969.
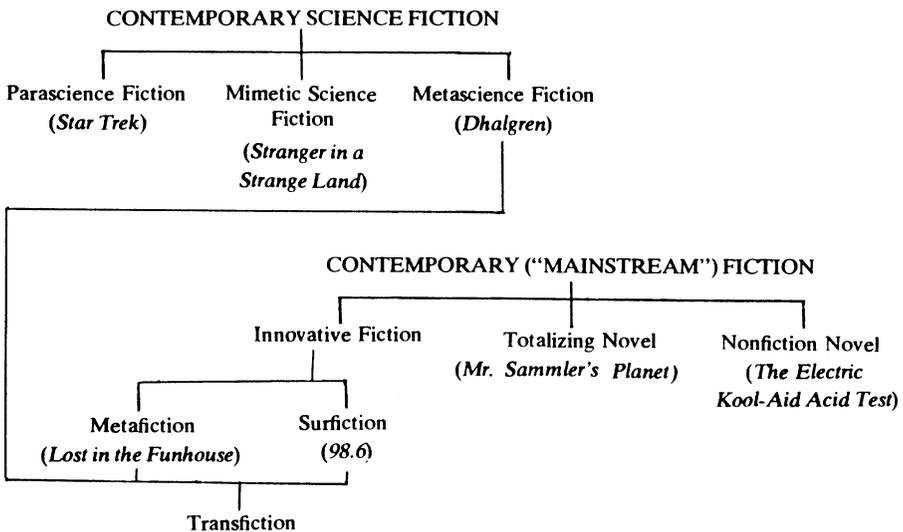
Among the most significant metascience fiction novels today are the writings of Samuel R. Delany, especially his aesthetically mature works of the 1970's, *Dhalgren* (1975) and *Triton* (1976). Although Delany may not be one of the most innovative metascience fictionists (he has even tried to convince me in one of his letters that he is not as innovative as Heinlein, for example), I believe that the full aesthetic realization of his works renders Delany's fiction an apt paradigm for metascience fiction on the basis of which one can construct an exploratory model for dealing with the transformations that are taking place in postmodern narrative literature.

Before discussing Delany's two major novels, however, I would like to briefly examine a second line of developments which have been taking place in contemporary "mainstream" fiction. In post-World War II fiction, as in science fiction, one notices a breaking up of the traditional novel into a number of sub-genres. The middle of the generic spectrum in mainstream fiction today consists of the works of writers such as Saul Bellow, Joyce Carol Oates and John Updike, who are continuing the tradition of mimetic fiction.[3] Their work is dominated by a quest for an aesthetics of verisimilitude. Their fiction employ an orderly, resolvable linear plot (indicating the writer's belief in a causal, rational and orderly universe) and deals with fully-developed characters (an expression of the writer's faith in a coherent human identity and integrative selfhood) in a very clear and transparent language (which is a sign of the author's trust in ordinary language as a mediator among all members of a speech community). The major epistemological function of this type of fiction is, to use the term of a recent critic, to "totalize" human experience (Zavarzadeh, 1976:3) in other words to seek coherence, meaning and order behind the unruly empirical experience of humankind. The most radical forms of narrative in recent years have renounced "totalization" of experience as being inauthentic and have moved beyond it to celebrate either unadorned human experience or the shapefulness of the fable-making human imagination. In the first instance we have the "nonfiction novel," which is a transcription of actual experience — a phenomenology of the extreme situation. The other reaction to the totalizing novel are such various modes of innovative fiction as "surfiction" and "metafiction." Again it is postmodern innovative fiction with its post-mimetic narrative techniques and its delight in constructing self-referential fables which concerns me here.

The result of these two lines of developments — the changes in mainstream fiction, on the one hand, and in science fiction, on the other — is the blurring of boundaries between those modes of writing which are on the edges of literary experimentation, namely innovative fiction and metascience fiction. It is, for example, rather difficult to classify Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* either as straight mainstream fiction or as science fiction. Delany's narratives in certain

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[3] The "mainstream" novel, however, should not be regarded as a monolithic genre. It is, rather, a multilayered kind of writing which includes such sub-genres as popular fiction (James Michner, *The Source*), the feminine novel (Doris Lessing, *The Summer Before the Dark*) and, of course, the ethnic novel.

sections are hardly distinguishable from passages in the works of postmodern innovative writing. One such parallel can be found by comparing chapter VII of *Dhalgren* with part I, "Frankenstein," of Sukenick's *98.6.* This convergence of metascience fiction and innovative fiction into what Mas'ud Zavarzadeh has called "transfiction" (1976:38), heralds a new break-up and a new synthesis in narrative in post-industrial communities similar to the developments narrative literature underwent after the Renaissance. According to Robert Scholes these transformations resulted in reconciliation of the "empirical" and "fictional" impulses that finally shaped the totalizing novel (Scholes and Kellogg, 1966: 15). Transfiction is a product of the post-novel synthesis: it is the narrative of the consciousness that has moved beyond the "two cultures" (Zavarzadeh, in manuscript).

CONTEMPORARY SCIENCE FICTION

Parascience Fiction   Mimetic Science   Metascience Fiction
   (*Star Trek*)   Fiction   (*Dhalgren*)

                (*Stranger in a
Strange Land*)

CONTEMPORARY ("MAINSTREAM") FICTION

Innovative Fiction   Totalizing Novel   Nonfiction Novel
               (*Mr. Sammler's Planet*)   (*The Electric
Kool-Aid Acid Test*)

Metafiction   Surfiction
(*Lost in the Funhouse*)   (*98.6*)

Transfiction

II

One interesting phenomenon which, I believe, indicates the formal and thematic "osmosis" that is taking place between innovative fiction and science fiction is the change in relative importance of technology as a fictional element in these two kinds of narrative. There seems to be an active give-and-take going on here. The function of technology in metascience fiction has been *backgrounded* relative to its function in traditional science fiction, whereas in innovative and contemporary fiction technology has been *foregrounded,* in comparison with its function in the traditional mainstream novel. Specific technological innovations, most notably rocketships, computers and cyborgs, which are the dominant motivating elements of plots and characters in traditional science fiction, lose their importance in metascience fiction and instead become enmeshed in the landscape, the environmental matrix of the novels in which the authorial and readerly imaginations move. Regardless of whether one examines the dysfunctional and inexplicably erratic technology of failed postindustrial society

in *Dhalgren* or the hyper-efficient and omnipresent technology of *Triton*, the technology is largely unspecified and taken for granted; technology functions in both as the matrix of "things" through which the characters move. In the novels of Barth or Pynchon, on the other hand, rocketships, computers, cyborgs and gyroscopes and endlessly enumerated objects and hardware motivate the plot and characters; in Barth's *Giles Goat-Boy* and Pynchon's *V.*, for instance, the central figures, Giles and V. are indeed cyborgs. In these novels as well as in the less technologically dominated novels of such writers as Sukenick, the landscape of the fictions through which the characters move is enmeshed in technology. It seems that an equalization of sorts has taken place and now in both narrative modes the very texture and substance of the fictive worlds and even the language and narrative structures of the fictions, whether Delany or Sukenick or Pynchon, are woven out of the complex and multiple web of science and technology.

The forces behind the change in the function of technology and the consequent shift in the thematic and aesthetic concerns of recent science fiction become more evident when we examine the primary modes of thought informing Delany's work. The traditional ideational influence on science fiction, namely physics, specific technologies and psychology, are replaced (although not dispensed with) in Delany's writing, by linguistics, symbolic logic, mathematics, cybernetics, biology (particularly neurology and genetics), ecology and sociology. Among these linguistics, mathematics and symbolic logic assume a privileged position and overshadow the *science of substances*. Delany's epistemology, in other words, is largely a "structuralist" one, in which the relationships between things, whether synapses, phonemes or organic/inorganic systems subsume the individual or the unique. Above all, Delany is concerned with the relationships and patterns generated by words and language as a whole.

This structuralist preoccupation with the fundamental relationships among words is clearly articulated by Delany in his critical essay, "About Five Thousand Seven Hundred and Fifty Words" (1977), in which he states that "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-over-weaving relations (1977:36). He is concerned with the "microleaps," the interconnections, between words that create meanings and the fundamental ways in which technology can transform both the relations among words and their generative meanings in the verbal matrix of metascience fiction. Science fiction, according to Delany in his essay, "Shadows," is "a way of casting a language shadow over coherent areas of imaginative space that would otherwise be largely inaccessible" (1977:133–4). By "language shadow" Delany means the imagination's ability to form patterns in words that enable it to express the relationships it perceives between entities that are disparate, multiplex or temporally discontinuous in order to create areas of meaning. In describing how these lingual and ideational patterns are aesthetically realized, Delany states that

> in science fiction, 'science' — i.e., sentences displaying verbal emblems of scientific discourses — is used to literalize the meaning of other sentences for use in the

construction of the fictional foreground. Such sentences . . . leave the banality of the emotionally muzzy metaphor . . . and through the labyrinth of technical possibility, become possible images of the impossible (*Triton*, p. 337).

Science and technology, in other words, have become in metascience fiction the structural vocabulary and stylistic devices through which the aesthetic vision is shaped. To illustrate this point, I would like to examine two sentences from *Dhalgren*, a narrative in which technology as a motivating force of the plot all but disappears.

I. Some mesh, flush, terminal turned here through the larynx's trumpet.
II. The articulate fear slips, which we try to measure, but come away with only the perpetual angle of distortion, the frequency of an amazed defraction (p. 185).

The vocabulary is densely technical and specific and yet intensely metaphorical in its impact. Delany has totally energized that "banal and emotionally muzzy metaphor" — "fear caught in his throat" — by rendering it in specific scientific and technological terms that give it concreteness, substance, depth and a fresh vividness. The conscious attempt to measure the articulate fear turning in the "larynx's trumpet" before it slips away only results in greater fear, namely the knowledge of uncertainty, the impossibility of ever correcting the "perpetual angle of distortion, the frequency of an amazed defraction." By embedding the imagination's "language shadow" in a technologically charged verbal matrix, Delany constructs totally new patterns of meaning that dislodge an idea or emotion from the commonplace and relocate it in the very center of the epistemological crisis facing contemporary man — the complete indeterminacy of existence. Delany's technotopia is this *process* of using the aesthetic function of technology to vividly render the multiplex and uncertain landscape of the postmodern imagination.

This particular aesthetic function of technology is not unique to Delany, although he has given it its fullest articulation; it is the essence of the verbal matrix in nearly all recent innovative fiction from Pynchon to Sukenick. It functions similarly in these works to reconstruct the patterns of language in order to concretely express the crisis of contemporary consciousness and the imaginative possibilities that are thus opened up.

This concretization of language through technology that informs transfiction as a whole foregrounds language itself, making it opaque, an object, thereby destroying the transparent, mimetic function of language in both the classic mainstream novel and traditional science fiction. In these works the reader peered through language, as if looking through a glass window, to find a plausible and realistic world, whether present or probable. By foregrounding language, transfiction transcends mimetic forms and celebrates a self-reflexive language that draws attention to itself through various means (in addition to the aesthetic function of technology) that range from Federman's typographical playing with the very physicality of the word in works such as *Double or Nothing* to Barth's regressions *ad infinitum* in *Lost in the Funhouse* and *Chimera*.

Like most transfiction Delany's prose is highly self-reflexive. He attempts to

create multiple layers of relationships which evoke resonances of meaning in the text by such devices as repeating words, phrases and even scenes several times in different contexts. Such repetitions contribute to the text an almost unconscious, imagistic density as words reverberate and echo in the reader's mind. Each new context transforms the meaning, adding to the fluidity and flux of Delany's verbal landscapes. The multiplicities of meaning that are thus created emphasize the relativity and mutability of relationships which are continually being restructured in Delany's texts as in reality, but more important they enact the profound complexity of the imagination.

Perhaps even more significant in terms of defining Delany's works as metascience fiction is the fact that his texts reverberate with the verbal and generic conventions of the genre of science fiction itself. An interesting example, although one that is unsuccessful owing to the obstinacy of Delany's publisher, is the title of his work, *Triton.* According to his interview with Darrell Schweitzer, Delany had intended to call it *Trouble on Triton* in order to have a book with a "title that sounded like twenty-seven other science fiction novels ... that would evoke a sense of 'haven't I heard this before?' and the title would sort of slip between your fingers before you could actually grasp it" (1976a: 17–18). And indeed there is a 1930's short story, "Trouble on Triton," at least three novels called *Trouble on Titan* that Delany mentions including Kuttner's, and a Simak novel called *Trouble with Tycho.* In the repetition of one image, or name, or word from one text to another, whether it is the transmutation of "Bellona" from *Dhalgren* to *Triton,* from Earth to Mars, or red suns and colonized moons from other science fiction texts, Delany transcends the mimetic function of traditional science fiction. The very act of creation of his fictive texts and their relation to the larger questions of language and literary traditions, both science fiction and mainstream, become central aesthetic concerns of his fiction. In writing metatexts, Delany parallels the works of other transfictionists, most notably Barth who constructs elaborate fictions reflecting on the artistic act itself and the relation of the work to its aesthetic heritage, particularly, in both *Lost in the Funhouse* and *Chimera.*

The metatexts of transfiction operate not just on the level of verbal matrix and fictive use of the generic conventions. More important, they function on the level of the structure of the fictive discourse. The open-ended, irresolved structuring of such metascience fiction, especially *Dhalgren* and *Triton,* displaces the mimetic function by a dominant aesthetic one that is largely self-reflexive in form. A prime example is *Triton* itself in which the main narrative, with its ambiguous, broken-off ending and highly uncertain resolution of the plot, is followed by two appendices. Each appendix simultaneously continues and moves beyond the characters, themes and devices of the text and in fact transcends the text itself through the multiple layers of self-reflexivity in the narrative discourse. The first appendix to *Triton* is taken verbatim from Delany's critical essay, "Shadows," which was published originally in *Foundation* and then later collected with his other essays in *The Jewel-Hinged Jaw: Notes on the Language of Science Fiction*; the essay in turn is constructed from Delany's

personal journals and reveals the discontinuity of disparate entries. To compound the levels of self-reflexivity here, the passage itself, both as it appears in the essay and in *Triton*, is a continuation of the scenes in the novel where the character, Sam (obviously, a reference to the author's own name), attempts to explain the gravity failure. As part of that dialogue, Sam discusses science fiction. The layers multiply when the narrative makes several discontinuous jumps. all discussing science fiction — its definition and function of its verbal matrix — in the authorial voice of the critical essays and journals. This moving away from a "fictive text" to an "essayistic text" and then to a "diary text" is one of the characteristics of postmodern narrative. It is a practice, however, that was rejected by Henry James and other modernists who believed the purity of a fictional text should not be violated by the impurity of discursive writing.

The complex referential dimensions of the narrative increases when one moves to the second appendix in which Delany elaborates on the life and ideas of a philosopher only mentioned in passing in the main narrative — Ashima Slade. Not only does this appendix continually echo characters and ideas from the main narrative as it develops its own distinct ideas and sequence of events, but it also refers specifically to the same essay, "Shadows," in several places citing the original source, "*Foundation*, issue six and the double issue seven/eight" at least twice. Delany then mocks himself as "a writer of light, popular fictions" and author of "'Shadows' a nonfiction piece written in the twentieth century" (*Triton*, p. 357), and warns the reader against drawing too many parallels between the two texts. But the fact is that many of the ideas in the second appendix appear in embryonic form in "Shadows," and by the very nature of the transmutation of ideas from one text to the other, offer some insight into the genesis and development of Delany's fiction — although any conclusions can only be speculative. The important thing here is the multiple layers of self-reflexivity and their impact on the structure of the narrative. Thus, the fairly straightforward and largely sequential structure of events in the main narrative of *Triton* is subverted by being denied closure and resolution. This negation results from the ambiguity and indeterminacy of the plot ending and the continuation of the narrative beyond the plot into two distinct appendices with multiple self-reflexive resonances that move between two appendices; then back to the main narrative; outside to the author's critical essays, personal journals and actual existence as a science fiction author, and from there to the science fiction genre as a whole, including specific works by Heinlein and Bester, as well as to such modes of contemporary thought as the poetics of the Prague Circle, linguistics, symbolic logic, calculus and aesthetics.

This subversion of the mimetic plausibility and causal resolution of plot is accentuated in the fictive discourse of *Dhalgren* in which the self-reflexivity, circularity and indeterminacy of the narrative are much more deliberately integrated than in *Triton*. In *Dhalgren* Delany transcends the restricting didactic and entertainment function of mimetic science fiction in which a convincing story plausibly evolves out of the sustained development of a linear sequence of events. In *Dhalgren* he looks beyond the Newtonian world view of causality and

absolutes and attempts to aesthetically realize the reconceptualizaton of reality brought about by Einsteinian relativity and quantum physics. *Dhalgren* does not tell a story so much as it enacts the experience of living in a space-time continuum of technotopia in which absolutes and causality are shattered and the characters wander uncomprehendingly through various spheres of space, each with its own register of time. The surface of discourse itself subverts linear arrangements and acts out the confusion and uncertainty of experiencing a relativistic reality through a collage of fragmentary images and nonsequential events. In doing so Delany utilizes an artistic strategy which is favored by postmodern writers and roundly condemned by the humanist critics of the mimetic tradition as "imitative fallacy" (Winters, 1947: 41). The essential characteristic of imitative or expressive form is that the artist acts out in the shape of his artifact what seems to him to be the actual form of experience. Chaotic experience is directly enacted through a rather chaotic discourse without the mediation of "aesthetic distance." The artist, in other words, does not talk about reality being chaotic, but lets the reader experience it by exposing him to *post-orderly* texts. Postmodern fictioneers from Barthelme to Katz and Sukenick have refused to follow the dictates of the mimetic tradition which maintains, as Yvor Winters puts it, that the author must endeavor to give form or meaning to the formless, otherwise he will destroy form itself. They have attempted to aesthetically act out the indeterminacy and acausality of experience by means of various disjunctive devices. *Dhalgren* is no exception, and the narrative jumps from thoughts, image or event to another in a discontinuous, acausal and often circular manner, related only by the fact that they are all perceived by "Kid" as he moves through different spheres of space in a "timeless city."

The characters in *Dhalgren* move through a technotopia that is literally timeless in that time is completely relativized and changes according to the participant's position in space. Thus, in the Einsteinian landscape of Bellona, which is itself a city in a distinct space-time continuum from that of the rest of the world, the measurements of time, such as days and years, no longer hold and are instead arbitrarily set by a mysterious head-of-state, and Kid finds himself moving with the "scorpions" in a space that takes up one day relative to the five-day span for other characters. But more important, the city itself burns in relativized time and space, which means that the topography of the city and its destruction do not occur in a linear progression in the narrative, but rather take place in circular, multiple and repeating segments that vary for each participant within his own space. Thus, a store that is vandalized or burned down for one character is fully stocked for another who is in a different space-time continuum, and the city as a whole is able to witness the catastrophe of a red sun without being destroyed, since the city and the sun are moving in separate spaces at different times. Although blocks of the narrative in *Dhalgren* seem at first to have a certain linear progression and surface realism, the underlying acausality of reality emphasizes that events in the narrative do not have any rational explanation and are fundamentally nonsequential and circular in occurrence. This point is underscored by the narrative structure of *Dhalgren* in which the last

chapter is ostensibly Kid's journal. The journal itself breaks with the surface linearity of the preceding discourse and, through a typographically varied and disjunctive collage of fragments of events and images, repeats previous events and ideas in new patterns of relations while extending and adding new occurrences and meditations to the narrative. The journal, like the appendices of *Triton*, is highly self-reflexive as it echoes and repeats bits and pieces of the previous discourse, the narrative ends where it begins in a cyclical inversion of the opening initiation rites as Kid presents an oriental woman, who recalls the image of the woman in the first pages, with his "orchid" on the bridge in an exchange that ritualistically repeats his receiving the "orchid" from another woman on the bridge near the beginning of the narrative. Since the city's destruction happens in a different space-time continuum for each individual, each person enters and leaves the city at a different stage in its decline, thus suggesting that the city will continue its cataclysmic existence in a continual cycle until the convergence of its space-time continuum with that of the destruction of earth itself.

The circularity and self-reflexivity of the discourse, combined with the discontinuous and acausal structuring of the narrative, prevent any closure of the text or resolution of the plot. The narrative stops but it is not completed. The open-ended nature of the narrative in *Dhalgren*, as in postmodern fiction as a whole, is nontotalizing and subverts the mimetic ideal of a work of art as a self-contained, self-sufficient and finished product. The discourse has been destabilized to such a degree in *Dhalgren*, and so successfully disrupts the mimetic conventions of totalizing and closure, that it leads me to expect that the incomplete, fragmented and cyclical nature of the themes and narrative events of the discourse may have been extended to the actual physical nature of the text itself, leaving it an unfinished published product.

In fact my speculations were confirmed by another critic, Algis Budrys, who wrote in *Fantasy and Science Fiction* that

> obviously, what is important about this book is what it has to teach Delany, who is still writing it. Bantam, and Fredrick Pohl, Bantam's SF editor, are letting Delany make running changes in the text as they occur to him (1975:53).

In a footnote, Budrys adds, "Pohl tells me the changes are not massive but persistent. They will not be identified as changes. You may simply assume that later printings are variorum editions of the earlier ones, collectors please note" (ibid.). Thus one can speculate that the fluidity and flux of the narrative are extended to include actual variations in subsequent printings of the text. These additions and deletions destabilize the text and emphasize its postmodern preoccupaton with the on-going "process" rather than the finished "product." Such variations indicate that each text exists in a separate space-time continuum by relativizing the actual physical production and existence of the text itself. This raises the question of whether the texts of *Dhalgren* thus become serial in the same sense that a minimalist painting by Frank Stella is serial. In other words, the text of *Dhalgren* has been deabsolutized with the unidentified changes in

subsequent printings, and therefore each text must be read in the context of every other text in order to experience the full aesthetic relativization of the text itself and the discourse as a whole. The text has been diversified; each text is unique and distinct only in relation to all other texts, and no longer does *Dhalgren* exist as a mass unity — a culmination of same texts. Although these speculations are not fully supported by the printing history of *Dhalgren*,[4] I think the fact that Budrys and I both found the discourse so successfully destabilizing that we extended its incompleteness, for different reasons, to the text itself is significant testimony to the disruptive nature of Delany's nontotalizing vision.

Most postmodern fictioneers use serialization as a contra-mimetic convention to relativize the discourse. However, few if any have extended it to the actual production and physical existence of the text. Serialization in postmodern texts, such as Sukenick's *98.6* or (if we regard "shuffle novels" as a form of serialization) B. S. Johnson's *The Unfortunates,* is a technique generally used to deabsolutize characterization or narrative point of view. The relativization of the discourse in *Dhalgren* is largely contingent upon the serialization of character. As I suggested earlier, the only narrative device holding the discontinuous fragments and nonsequential events of the narrative together is the fact that they are perceived by the consciousness of the protagonist, Kid. But the character of Kid is contradictory and serial. He has no name and no identity, nor does he ever find one in the process of the narrative events. Instead, he is given the generic appelation of "Kid" which underscores the problem of even identifying him physically since he claims to be twenty-seven but looks about ten years younger. The age confusion reinforces the relativity of each person's experience of time, on the one hand, and lack of identity and personal history, on the other. Lacking any central identity, Kid takes on the roles and personalities of the various situations through which he moves, shifting from poet to gang-leader, from hero to tough-guy. The idea of a knowable, stable core of self that enables the coherent continuation of a consistent personality is questioned in a relativistic and indeterminate world, and Kid's chameleon character, with its personality shaped and molded by each situation, aesthetically acts out the ruptures of self in technotopia. In a world in which the most common elements such as the time of day or even the sun are displaced, Kid is unable to fit the pieces and fragments of his existence into any kind of meaningful whole on which he could base a sense of himself or a framework for reality. Denied even the rudimentary aspects of self, a name, a sense of continuity, or place, or time, or history, Kid assumes the stereotyped roles imposed on him by the contingencies of each situation. When reality forcefully impinges on his senses, he records and reflects it in his poetry; when he begins "running with the scorpions," he stops writing and reacts to each event in terms of the conventions and stereotypes of his role as a gang-leader. There is no development of self, no self-realization, only a chameleon switching of serial selves. Thus, the narrative is held together,

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[4] Delany has informed me, however, that these speculations made by myself and Budrys are incorrect. Evidently the changes amounted to about sixty-five typographical corrections.

not by a synthesizing consciousness that orders and interprets the chaos, but by one that flows and changes with each shifting pattern of eve..:s. The discontinuous sensibility that is Kid serves to further destabilize the discourse and increasingly undermine the mimetic conventions by being in flux itself.

Although Delany discusses the "psychological veracity" of characterization in some of his critical essays (1977:171), in an interview he describes *Triton* as "a book about people trying to lead their lives by cliches" (1976a:18). This contradiction between the detailed texture and realism of the surface actions and behaviors of the characters and the negation of personality that an incomprehensible and multiplex reality creates are even more strongly delineated in *Trition* than they are in *Dhalgren*. The behavior of the protagonist in *Triton*, Born Helstrom, is carefully and fully described in rich concretized sentences that pervade the verbal matrix of Delany's fictions. But it is the rhetoric of the discourse, and not the personality of the character, that is emotionally charged. Born is a flat, psychologically colorless stereotype — a caricature of the 70's white male chauvinist — who is unable to adapt to the permutations and multiplexities of technotopia. It is a society so changeful that the serialization of character and roles are the institutionalized norm; technology makes possible any kind of transformation of self from sexual preference to sex type. A hollow character who reveals little ability to understand himself or others, Born responds to reality with stereotyped responses that are only facilitated by the fact that he can change roles, planets or sex at will, especially if the contradictions of one should become too much for him. Thus, Born's sex change is not a result of any insight or realistic psychological motivation, but the exchange of one limiting role with all its stereotyped responses for its opposite. And although the ending of the narrative is ambiguous, it is highly improbable that Born will achieve any kind of synthesis or understanding because her reactions as a woman are just as limiting and conventional as when she was a man.

To say that the figures in Delany's fictions are serialized characters exchanging one role and identity for another, whether it is changing from a man to a woman in case of Born, or from a poet to a gang-leader with Kid, and to add that the characters are largely flat stereotypes, even at times bordering on caricatures as with Mrs. Richards in *Dhalgren*, is, of course, not to say that these fictions are not charged with considerable emotional and imaginative energy. They are. It is the discourse of Delany's recent fictions which is self-reflexive and charged with vitality, not the characters. Here one can clearly see how Delany is moving beyond traditional humanism and bases the center of his narrative on a system of signs out of which his discourse is woven. The space and setting of his fictions are also more cities of imagination than habitats of actual human beings. They are, to quote from *Dhalgren* (p. 716), "apocryphal cities, the cities of speculation and reconstituted disorder, of insemination and incipience, swept round with dark." In a sense it is this landscape itself which is technotopia: a sphere in which the imaginative potential of the postmodern mind is fully actualized through the aesthetic function of technology.

Delany has stated in his interview with Darrell Schweitzer that "just in terms of Bradbury, Bester, and Sturgeon you have more exciting language being done in science fiction in the fifties than you have in all of the serious mainstream put together" (1976a: 18). This leads me to speculate that as the currently emergent transfiction becomes a fully mature and dominant literary genre, we will be able to see more clearly that the extension of modernist fiction into the years after World War II in the works of such writers as Bellow, Malamud and Roth will not prove to be the generic mainstream, but rather the tail-end of the socio-psychologically realistic novel begun with Richardson, Defoe and their contemporaries. It will then, I believe, become apparent that the roots of transfiction lie in its creative synthesis and transmutation of the elements of the literary traditions of *both* the traditional novel and science fiction, and that science fiction may, in the end, prove to be the more central generic influence on the evolution of transfiction. Whether my brief typology of the literary evolution of transfiction proves true or not, one thing which is certain is that the works of Samuel Delany, particularly his fictions of the 70's, will play a very crucial role in shaping the new tradition.

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