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Introduction

Why Politicians, and Producers,
Should Read Science Fiction

This article began as a talk delivered at Mexicon, in Scarborough, on 29 May 1993. It was published in *Interzone* 88, again in the Dutch literary journal *File*, and in a final revised form in *Foundation* (all in 1994). It counts, then, as one of those pieces of mine that have attracted most attention within the sf world. However, and probably not coincidentally, it also led to a clash in the literary world that forever terminated a not-very-beautiful relationship. As I recall, I had been invited to talk on the BBC radio literary programme *Kaleidoscope*, and got there to find that I was on trial for only having included one female author (Ursula Le Guin) in my *Oxford Book of Science Fiction Stories*. This actually was not true, in that a glance at the notes in the back would have shown that ‘Raccoona Sheldon’, alias ‘James Tiptree Jr.’, was really Alice Sheldon, while ‘Lewis Padgett’ was a blend, the proportions still unknown, of Henry Kuttner and his wife C.L. Moore. And, furthermore, a number of the stories selected, notably those by Sheldon, Schmitz, ‘Cordwainer Smith’, Wolfe and the end-piece by David Brin, were strongly female-oriented and female-dominated. Still, there is no denying that in early sf, as in most pre-modern literary genres, female authors were under-represented and often obliged to disguise themselves under initials and pseudonyms, like ‘George Eliot’ and the Brontë sisters: the past did not play by our rules.

Anyway, the smoke from this exchange of views was just about clearing when the lady moderator, perhaps a bit anxious about the social situation, began a long burble (in a markedly upper-class accent, and with the characteristically British upper-class iteration of ‘one’) about how *unfair* it was that people *criticised* programmes like this, and the Booker *award* business, just because one *always* found oneself interviewing people one couldn’t *help* meeting at dinner-parties, because they were the ones who wrote the most interesting *books*. Not at all, I replied. The accusation is that you ignore people who write much more
interesting books, just because you don’t meet them at dinner-parties. Like, for instance … And this led into a long rant on the virtues of Geoff Ryman’s ‘Was …’ (1992), which I had just read and which should have been a cert for the Booker Prize if there was any justice. Subtle, sad, relevant, deeply affecting, working on almost a mythic level. What more could one ask? I have never been asked back on to Kaleidoscope, though it is true I did go off to America almost immediately after. It is an exclusion I have borne with fortitude, as the BBC clearly thinks academic riff-raff should turn up for the honour and glory of it, paying minute appearance fees and then short-changing you on the expenses.

That said, I think the most admirable feature of most of the works discussed here is their even-handedness. Robinson and Ryman in their different ways present devastating criticisms of American icons and American realities, of the kind that (if directed against one’s native land) would get you locked up or worse in most of the countries belonging to the United Nations. Even Heinlein is well able to see such criticisms, and mounts equally aggressive if again quite different ones in other works (see item 15, below). Yet at the same time they can see the power of the icons, as does Brin in the novel discussed just above, and all the authors, Disch included, leave you unsure which way sympathies should go. Little Billy Michaels is, yes, a mass-murderer, but so are the people he comes in contact with like the cigarette-marketer, and you can see that what he is trying to do is teach people a lesson. It is a grim lesson and there are (one hopes) in reality other ways of learning it: the best one being, reading books like these. If only more people did … But the literary caste and the major media spokespeople are too happy in their own habitus (see item 1, above). Or addicted only to gesture politics (see item 2). Or maybe sf and fantasy modes are too unfamiliar (see item 8).

Finally, one aspect of the coming-of-age of sf is surely, as mentioned in the piece that follows, the increasing complexity of structure in sf novels. It is always very risky to say anything about what makes an author do anything (see pp. 48, 132, above), but Robinson’s Pacific Edge (1990) does look as if it might be a response to arguments like Greg Benford’s (see Benford 1987) that Utopias are just not writable any more. Greg has a strong point: most of the modern Utopias I have read, from Wells’s A Modern Utopia (1905) to Callenbach’s Ecotopia (1975), and taking in Le Guin’s Always Coming Home (1985), have been, if not unwritable (because written) and not quite unreadable (I read them), at least rather dull.¹ But Robinson worked out how to get conflict, and

¹ Many more Utopias are considered, more sympathetically, by Edward James (2003).
movement, into what could easily be a static non-story. It is a *tour de force*, and it could not be done outside sf. Alas that such works are not more generally recognised ... They are not just entertaining, it would do everyone good to read them, critics and politicians included.
As with many people of my age, much of my early science fiction experience came from reading the works of Robert A. Heinlein, both his widely distributed ‘juveniles’ and others. It might be more respectful, and would certainly be more unusual, to try to identify the reason for Heinlein’s appeal at that age, rather than point out the many failings that appear as years go by for both author and readers. However, I would like to begin by pointing out a peculiar feature in Heinlein which is not something recognised later on, but which I can remember finding both peculiar and irritating even when reading his books as a teenager. This repeated plot feature is what I used to label mentally as ‘the Heinlein switch’.

A clear example of what I mean comes in the Heinlein juvenile *Tunnel in the Sky* (1955). The basic situation of this is that a group of high school students is dumped, as a part of their survival training, on an alien planet, only to find itself accidentally marooned. In this situation the central character, Rod Walker, soon shows himself in true Heinlein style to be an able leader. He is practical, decisive, survival-orientated and fair. He is indeed what Alexei Panshin calls ‘the Heinlein Individual, Stage 1’ (1968: 169–70) – and just to rub Panshin’s point home we see Walker at the very end of the book translated to the Heinlein Individual, Stage 2, a figure from the pioneer past, complete with pinto pony, fringed buckskin and Bill Cody beard (though without six-shooters, as a result of a Heinlein thesis developed in the book about armaments). Yet, for all his potential competence, Walker loses the election for leadership

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1 See the sensible caveat of H. Bruce Franklin (1980: 176), in which he remarks of Heinlein’s much later work that it is no good stigmatising it as ‘unreadable’ in the face of sales figures. If people, even if they are not professional critics, demonstrably find Heinlein’s work readable, then one has at least to search for ‘the nature of its appeal’.
of the stranded group to one Grant Cowper, whom Heinlein, again in characteristic style, consistently presents as the archetypal administrator/bureaucrat (a highly recurrent feature from the American present, often set in opposition to the Heinlein Individual and/or the American past). Cowper is impractical, corrupt, personally lazy, ‘all talk and no results’, fascinated by committees and by the mechanics of government, which to him is ‘the greatest invention of mankind’. His political abilities ensure he wins the election against Rod. But Heinlein’s plot ensures victory (and moral superiority) for the right. Cowper rejects Rod’s warning to move camp from an evidently unsafe site; finds the camp under attack from migrating lemming-like carnivores; and is killed as a result of his own error and self-confidence.

At this stage the logic of the story would seem to demand a cry of ‘I told you so’ from Heinlein-author, Walker-character, or both, followed by a prompt removal from the camp. Instead, at the end of chapter 13, Rod Walker declares that he will not give up Cowper’s ill-chosen and dangerous site to the carnivores:

‘no dirty little beasts, all teeth and no brains, are going to drive us out. We’re men ... and men don’t have to be driven out, not by the likes of those. Grant paid for this land – and I say stay here and keep it for him!’

In the next chapter we find a memorial to the inept Cowper set up in the village square.

At this point Heinlein is doing something which Panshin picks out (1968: 112–13) as ‘break[ing] out a bugle or a violin’ – later on it is the ‘fife and drum’ – namely, appealing for a paragraph or two to sentiment, and then getting on with the story. But while the tactic may be basically ‘shoddy’, one has to concede the deliberateness, and the apparent narrative redundancy, of the strategy. One should reflect furthermore that a plot device which merely expedites story may be there just to save the author time and trouble. One which reverses or stalls the plot, however, is likely to be there just because it has such high significance for the author that he cannot bear to leave it out. One has to ask, then, why Heinlein should carry out ‘switches’ of this kind, not once but repeatedly? In a similar sequence in the non-juvenile Magic Inc. (first published as a novella in Unknown (May 1940), appearing in book form ten years later), the State Senate, set in this story in an alternate ‘world where magic works’, is about to pass a Bill which will make magic in effect a monopoly run by diabolic powers. Heinlein describes with gusto the apparently ludicrous way
in which state governments conduct their business – based clearly on the real mechanisms of US government – and leads up to the sudden and unexpected passing of the disastrous Bill, against all kinds of assurances that it would fail. Next day the central characters see the State Governor and explain their justified fears. He turns down all their pleas – on grounds of pressure of business:

‘Mr Fraser, there you see fifty-seven bills passed by this session of the legislature. Every one of them has some defect. Every one of them is of vital importance …’

One would think that invasions from Hell would take a certain priority even so, but just where one would expect someone to say as much, Heinlein again switches sympathies:

I made some remark about dunderheaded, compromising politicians when Joe cut me short. ‘Shut up, Archie! Try running a State sometime instead of a small business and see how easy you find it!’

I shut up.

This scene is immediately followed by conclusive evidence that the main instigator of the Bill is indeed a demon, but it does not alter the rebuke. Heinlein appears to be saying, in a curiously unsceptical way, that government is so difficult that only professional governors can cope with it. Some would feel that there are more small businessmen who could run a state than professional Governors who could run a small business, but Heinlein – on this occasion anyway – is not among them.

Behind both these odd but typical incidents lies a fascination with, and a deep respect for, the mechanics of government, and specifically for the government and Constitution of the USA. One of the most surprising details in *Tunnel in the Sky* is the revelation that Rod Walker’s group contains not one but two members who not only have read the Virginia Bill of Rights, but have memorised it: Heinlein does not indicate this as unusual. This fascination shows itself also in scene after scene dealing with the details of debate procedure, points of order, points of privilege, motions to adjourn, ‘cinch bills’, riders, legal fictions, etc. These all seem wildly out of place in conditions of elementary survival; the story and the author insist they are not. Heinlein comes over as presenting simultaneously extreme and convincing criticism of the incompetence of democratic government; and total acceptance of its necessity, in spite of that incompetence. It is this apparent double
standard which I identified as a teenager as shocking. I resented not only the author's assumption that he could flick his readers' emotions on and off with a blast of the bugle or an appeal to the fife-and-drum; but also, at some deeper level, a perceived contradiction in the thesis the author was propounding. One thing I was sure of was that this disagreement had something to do with being/not being American.

In a sense, the contradiction I have indicated has preoccupied most critics of Heinlein. Damon Knight, in an early commentary, provocatively entitled 'One Sane Man', nevertheless identifies Heinlein as both radical and conservative: conservative about the US Constitution, one might say, radical in his awareness of how it needs continuous non-constitutional rescue (Knight 1967: 76–89). H. Bruce Franklin meanwhile points to repeated clashes between, for example, love of the American Revolution and strong monarchic impulses (Franklin 1980: 41); extreme individualism and an ethic of 'social co-operation' (87); desire for individualism and veneration of authority (88); Darwinian worship of the 'fit' elite and a belief in the brotherhood (or at least the neighbourliness) of thinking beings (77); and so on. It is easy to make out the case that Heinlein spent much of his energy as a writer trying to reconcile the irreconcilable. Nevertheless, he clearly did not find these urges irreconcilable, and the commercial success of his fiction suggests that he went a long way towards persuading others of his position: as long, I suspect, as they were American others. I would agree here with Franklin's later summary statement that Heinlein's fiction encapsulated 'crucial aspects of modern American ideology and imagination' (1988: 141).

If I were now to try to explain 'the Heinlein switch' to my earlier self, I suppose that I would put it like this: Heinlein's primary urge certainly lies in dramatising 'the competent individual', the pioneer who will survive under the most extreme conditions. This is one aspect of the American self-image: the hardy pioneer, the Minuteman whose right to bear arms is enshrined in the Constitution. But another part of the American Constitution is its commitment to elementary democracy: one man, one vote, with extensions which Heinlein specifically endorses for race and gender, and with no qualifications at all about 'fitness' or vetting by higher authority. Now, if all democracies were composed of Minutemen, there would be no problem, for Heinlein. Since they are not, the question becomes how to square a Darwinian ethic with the much-venerated Constitution: must the right to vote be earned, or is it inalienable? Have the people the right to elect incompetents?

Heinlein's answers to these questions vary from book to book and
period to period, but in the cases of *Magic Inc.* and *Tunnel in the Sky* his answer to the latter question at least would be that the people do indeed have the right to elect incompetents, but that this will rebound on them. In the end, the right people will come to the top (Walker lives, Cowper dies); or the system will correct itself (private citizens and the FBI do what the State Governor cannot).

One of the things that Heinlein is trying to say, accordingly, is that the American system is self-correcting. That indeed is its glory. Local incompetences are merely ripples against the tide. But while the American system may be presented as self-correcting, Heinlein’s presentation of it – and this I think was the true source of my early annoyance with ‘Heinlein switches’ – is also self-validating. Just because of its integration of accusations of failure and incompetence, one might say that, in classic American science fiction of the early Heinlein era, belief in American ideals was so dominant as to make any sustained critique of America, no matter what the surface of the story might indicate, literally impossible.

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Nearly sixty years later the situation had become very different. Yet science fiction authors continued to show their debt to science fiction tradition, and to Heinlein in particular, at one and the same time rejecting him and arguing with him in true parent–child style. At once the most and the least Heinleinesque of contemporary authors is Kim Stanley Robinson. One of his major works is the brilliantly conceived ‘Orange County’ trilogy, consisting of *The Wild Shore* (1984), *The Gold Coast* (1988) and *Pacific Edge* (1990), each of them a near future story set in the same location, Orange County, California, and presenting quite clearly different ‘time lines’ for America: post-holocaust primitivism (*The Wild Shore*), dystopian capitalism (*The Gold Coast*) and utopian socialism (*Pacific Edge*). The last of these, of course, seems about as far from Heinlein as one could get, and on one level it is. It presents the story of a modest hero, Kevin, trying to preserve a patch of land from development in a largely autonomous community in California,

2 Particularly contorted and problematic is the case of Heinlein’s *The Moon is a Harsh Mistress* (1966), in one sense a grossly sentimental rewrite of the American Revolution on the Moon, but one which is opposed within the world of the book by Americans. See Panshin 1968: 110–16 and Franklin 1980: 159–71.
sometime next century. Kevin’s opponent is the town mayor, Alfredo: one might note that ‘mayor’ is the title given to Rod Walker’s opponent Grant, and that the autonomous nature of the community in which they live leaves Kevin and Alfredo almost as isolated in their battle as Heinlein’s high school students on an alien planet. Alfredo, again like Grant Cowper, is good at politics, if personally corrupt, and eventually, if not with the drama of Tunnel in the Sky, has his more honest if less political colleague Kevin outmanoeuvred. Very like Heinlein’s businessman-hero Archie Fraser in Magic Inc., Kevin then goes to see a more professional politician to get her on his side; only to have her tell him (just like Archie’s wiser friend Joe in the excerpt above) that he cannot fight the system. The irony is that Robinson’s politician is a Green, just like Kevin, and so in theory committed to his cause of conservation. But there are some issues you cannot win, she declares; it is impossible to fight every case; in effect paraphrasing the State Governor of Magic Inc., she declares that in the press of business there are issues more important than Kevin’s. ‘Politics is the art of the possible’, she tells him (Pacific Edge, chap. 9).

At this point, if Robinson’s Kevin were a Heinlein hero, he would bow to superior authority and the mechanisms of government; actually, Kevin loses his temper and walks out. The significance of the walkout and the hero’s rejection of ‘practical politics’ is underlined by the background figure of Tom Barnard, Kevin’s grandfather. He appears in all three of the works in Robinson’s trilogy. In The Wild Shore he is an ‘Ish’ figure (the name is taken from George Stewart’s classic Earth Abides (1950)) – a hangover from the past who explains America to a disbelieving younger generation in a primitive future. In The Gold Coast he is a marginalised old man dying in a hospital. In Pacific Edge he is the substitute narrator, the creator of the novel’s utopian world. But in Pacific Edge the marked-off sequence of scenes in which he is the central figure is there to show us (a) how Utopia arrived and (b) the dystopia that could have happened instead. For most of Barnard’s life in Pacific Edge the world is evidently sliding, not towards Kevin’s Californian Utopia, but to a familiar dystopia: rigid controls, paranoid American isolationism, death camps for dissidents, AIDS used as a pretext for ever harsher government control. Barnard has lived through all this, trying to write a fictional Utopia as he does so. But, at one point, in despair, imprisoned within a dissidents’ camp on false charges of carrying AIDS, he tears up his book. This book-within-a-book, in a sense, is the world of Pacific Edge; if it had stayed torn up, the book Pacific Edge could not have been written. What saves Barnard, and the Utopia, and Pacific Edge, is a characteristic American phenomenon, namely, release from the camp
by a lawyer on grounds of ‘procedural irregularity’. But the *advocatus ex machina* goes further and recruits Barnard for a serious and ultimately successful attempt to reform the USA from the inside (presented to us at the start of the book’s very last chapter):

> Look, Mr Barnard, he said. Tom. It takes more than an individual effort. And more than the old institutions. We’ve started an organisation here in Washington, DC, so far it’s sort of a multi-issue lobbying group, but essentially we’re trying to start a new political party, something like the Green parties in Europe.

> He described what they were doing, what their program was. Change the law of the land, the economic laws, the environmental laws, the relationship between local and global, the laws of property.

> Now there are laws forbidding that kind of change, I said. That’s what they were trying to get me on.

Would Heinlein agree with this scene? Yes, in that it presents the practical thing to do as lobbying and litigating. No, in the declared opposition to ‘the old institutions’. In the same way Kevin’s education in practical politics is highly Heinleinesque. But his refusal to accept that education is not. At least twice in *Pacific Edge*, when the Green politician tries to educate Kevin, and when the lawyer gets Barnard released, we have the situation for a ‘Heinlein switch’; but both times the characters refuse to bow to *Realpolitik* or accept the *status quo* – rejecting Heinlein, and criticising America, as they do so. It might indeed be said that the appearance of the lawyer in the death camp shows the same kind of ultimate trust in self-correction which Heinlein so often presents; but this self-correction does not come from politics or from government, but from subversives opposed to the (present) law and the government.³

The key to Barnard’s reforms in *Pacific Edge* is reform of American corporation laws. Utopia is the result of forced legal decentralisation, with a concomitant new balance between individual and corporate power. What could happen if this radical step were not taken is presented vividly in *The Gold Coast*, the most realistic and least science-fictional

³ One of Robinson’s strongest points is his refusal also of the classic idea of a static Utopia. He insists, via Barnard, at the start of chapter 4, that Utopia has to be a process, ‘a dynamic, tumultuous, agonizing process, with no end. Struggle forever.’ In making this statement he responds to the arguments of Greg Benford about the impossibility of static Utopias, in ‘Reactionary Utopias’ (Benford 1987: 73–83).
of the works in this science fiction trilogy. In this book corporate capitalism and the defence industry continue to run California; and for much of the time we find ourselves being educated in the realities of Washington power politics and (especially) defence procurement.

This is a world in which Robert Heinlein figured not as an author but as a real political influence. The relationship between science fiction writers, Heinlein included, and the Strategic Defence Initiative (SDI) of March 1983 is detailed by H. Bruce Franklin in War Stars (1988: 200–3). To this one should add the further story of Arthur C. Clarke and ‘the bucket of nails’. Briefly, a key feature of SDI was the idea of placing laserarmed satellites in orbit with the capacity to knock down Russian missiles. Thirty years on, we know that the whole idea was technological fantasy, in fact, science fiction. However, even at the time, in a guest editorial in Analog, July 1983, Clarke – the only living hard-SF author comparable in eminence to Heinlein, and the man who first proposed the idea of a geosynchronous orbit for communications satellites – pointed out that the answer to such a satellite (even if it could be built and armed) was a bucket of nails launched into the same orbit but orbiting in the opposite direction. ‘Sooner or later’, Clarke pointed out, some piece of this ‘barrage of space shrapnel’ would strike the laser-satellite ‘at 40,000 kilometers an hour’ (1983: 163). Clarke and Heinlein met at a meeting of the Citizens’ Advisory Council later that year, and, tiring of mere argument, Heinlein reached once more for the revolutionary bugle and told Clarke that as an Englishman it was pure arrogance for him to venture any criticism of US government policy.

Accounts of this scene vary considerably,4 but all of them strongly confirm what was said above about the Heinlein generation being unable to imagine, or to tolerate, a critique of America. It can be no coincidence that five years later Robinson in The Gold Coast repeated exactly the same argument about the satellite and the bucket of nails, but put it in the mouth of a disillusioned SDI or ‘Star Wars’ scientist:

‘Even if we could get it to work, all the Soviets have to do is put a bucket of nails in orbit, and wham, ten of our mirrors are

4 I have heard the story from Greg Benford, who was present. There is a very different account (in which Heinlein is absolutely right and Clarke self-confessedly wrong even about the technology) in Patterson 2014: 445–6, but this book is so hagiographical that I am inclined to distrust it. Patterson supports his account of the Clarke confrontation with many footnotes on pp. 630–1, but the reference to Clarke in n. 31 is wrong; and he makes no mention of the fact that SDI did not work, and could not work – as some besides Clarke realised at the time.
gone. Talk about cost-effective at the margin! A ten-penny nail will take out a billion-dollar mirror! Ha! ha! So we defend those mirrors by claiming that we will start a nuclear war with anyone who attacks them, so it comes right back to MAD to defend the very system that was supposed to get us away from all that.’ (Gold Coast, chap. 42)

Robinson in fact presents with a mixture of empathy and horror the surreal world of the California defence industry: at the centre of his story are a father and son, the son (Jim) a committed anti-war saboteur, the father (Dennis) a senior executive in Laguna Space Research. With the ‘fabril’ bias so characteristic of science fiction, The Gold Coast makes it hard for its readers not to sympathise with the latter, the weapon-maker. Dennis McPherson’s problem is this. He has developed a successful weapon, ‘Stormbee’, a pilotless computerised missile launcher which can on its own put an end to the threat of the ‘Big Contingency’ (a Soviet armoured attack in central Europe). No tanks could live with Stormbee. Stormbee, however, is a ‘black program’, commissioned by the USAF, but only on a disavowable basis. Dennis’s firm is meanwhile commissioned as part of the SDI to develop another program, ‘Ball Lightning’, a method of destroying Soviet ICBMs in space with lasers. Ball Lightning is essentially non-feasible. The only way it could ever have been sold to the USAF and to the government was by a pilot study test; unfortunately, the test was a ‘strapped chicken’. Robinson says here, dropping out of science fiction into historical fact, that:

the strategic defence program has a long history of such meaningless tests ... they blew up Sidewinder missiles with lasers, when Sidewinders were designed to seek out energy sources and therefore were targets that would latch onto the beams destroying them. They sent electron beams through rarefied gases, and claimed that the beams would work in the very different environments of vacuum or atmosphere ... and they set target missiles on the ground, and strained them with guy wires so that they would burst apart when heated by lasers, in the famous ‘strapped chicken’ tests. (Gold Coast, chap. 23)

To return to McPherson’s problem: the USAF decides to punish his firm for poor progress with Ball Lightning by disavowing Stormbee – thus

5 For discussion of this word (it is not my coinage), see Shippey 1992: ix–xiv, and items 1 and 2, above.
leaving Laguna Space stuck with the research and development costs and no way of recouping them. This problem could apparently admit two solutions: one, a technical one, develop Ball Lightning; two, a political one, expose the USAF’s deceit and force it into honest bidding and contracting. The technical solution is in reality impossible. Can the political solution work (as it does in *Pacific Edge* via Barnard’s reforms, and as it would in a Heinlein ‘juvenile’)?

The answer in *The Gold Coast* is certainly ‘no’. But once again the possibilities are put in highly Heinleinesque terms. As Dennis’s friend Dan, the disillusioned scientist, rants at the folly of pitting satellites against nails, at the craziness of the whole industry, and at the immense waste of capitalist competition in defence, Dennis (both pragmatist and idealist) tells him:

‘That’s the way it is’ ...

Dan stares at him dully. ‘It’s the American way, eh Mac?’

‘That’s right. The American way.’ (*Gold Coast*, chap. 42)

The phrase is picked up a hundred pages later, as it seems that the USAF will be legally compelled to play fair:

The air force tried to assert that it was above the system, outside the network; now the rest of the network is going to drag them back into it. It’s the American way, stumbling forward in its usual clumsy, inefficient style – maddening to watch, but ultimately fair. (*Gold Coast*, chap. 67)

We are close here once more to a ‘Heinlein switch’: an assertion that while much of the action has been maddening in its incompetence, nevertheless the mechanisms of government will work properly in the end, while the end will show that the frustration and incompetence were unavoidable, even essential, all parts of ‘the American way’.

But again, that is not what happens in Robinson’s presentation. Practical politics, the art of the possible, force Dennis’s firm to remember that in this industry the US government is the only employer. It cannot be antagonised. Even when proved wrong, it has to be allowed to be right. Dennis is ordered to withdraw, his successful programme is closed, and he is fired. The ‘American way’ turns out to be what his impractical sponger of a son always argued, a kind of ‘group hallucination’. In this story, the capable and efficient person, Dennis, the Heinlein Individual, the hero-in-potential, does not make alliance with the politicians, excuse their failings and subscribe to their beliefs, as in *Magic Inc.* or
Nor is he saved from them by legal quibble or force of sentiment, as in *Pacific Edge*. Instead, the politicians destroy him; and to make humiliation worse his useless son, who cannot even hold a nut steady without grotesque accidents – a character who would be ruthlessly eliminated in a Heinlein world – his son is given the ultimate best of the argument. What *The Gold Coast* seems to say is that Heinlein, Robinson’s authorial ancestor, was wrong about, in succession, (a) *Star Wars*, (b) ‘the American way’, (c) ‘the art of the possible’, (d) the qualities needed for survival. *The Gold Coast* and *Pacific Edge* between them show what America does wrong and what it could do right. Between them they mount a fierce and positive critique. Yet in their deep interest in political manoeuvring and their concern for more than technical solutions both books show a deep engagement with Heinlein. Both of them allow space for Rod Walker/Archie Fraser views to be expressed, and to be refuted. For their critique of America to be possible, Heinlein’s refusal to entertain one had to be absorbed and overridden.

The two latter volumes of Robinson’s trilogy are distinguished by their close, detailed and informed realism, even within the science fiction mode. The first volume of the trilogy, however – as I have argued in item 13 above, see esp. p. 264 – works to some extent by a process I call the ‘disfigurement’ of icons. This is actually a very familiar mode on the covers of science fiction books and magazines: one takes a recognised icon – the Statue of Liberty is a favourite, see again item 13, but the White House or Nelson’s Column would do as well – and shows it ruined, buried, altered, visited by alien tourists, its current iconic force denied (along with, by implication, the civilisation which conferred that force). It is interesting that this mode of operation has been very strongly taken up by two further contemporary critiques of America, both works of great power, both written by established science fiction authors but neither readily classifiable as science fiction, and neither of them as far as I know considered for any literary award in spite of their merits – a sign of how hard it still is for authors to climb out of the science fiction ‘ghetto’ or erase the science fiction stigma. These two works are Thomas M. Disch’s *The M.D.* (1991) and Geoff Ryman’s ‘Was…” (1992).

It is significant that I cannot explain the plot of the latter without also explaining its structure, a constraint till now rare in science fiction; the complex structure of Ryman’s novel in a way mirrors the careful typology of its title, ‘Was…’, and may have something to do
with the decision of the literary editor of the *Guardian* initially to reject my review of it, on the grounds that he ‘did not know what category to put it in’. Just so. *One* way of explaining Ryman’s novel, however, would be to say that it starts off from L. Frank Baum’s children’s classic *The Wizard of Oz* (1900), and puts forward the premise that its heroine, Dorothy Gael, was not fantasy, but real: a real girl, living on the real Kansas prairie, who was not snatched up by a tornado from her dull grey home and transferred to Oz, but lived on in Kansas. If this were true, Ryman proposes, she could have met the real Baum in 1881, and fired him to write his ‘modernised fairy tale, in which’ – as Baum says in his 1900 preface – ‘the wonderment and joy are retained and the heartaches and nightmares are left out.’ Baum meant there the ‘heartaches and nightmares’ of the traditional fairy-tale, but Ryman applies the phrase to the heartaches and nightmares of nineteenth- and twentieth-century Kansas. The story he tells of Dorothy Gael is one of diphtheria, loneliness, physical abuse from corporal punishment at school and sexual abuse from ‘Uncle Henry’ at home. In this story Baum’s attempt to help the real Dorothy, while a teacher at her school, by believing her accounts of sexual abuse, leads only to him being fired and her being ostracised as a case of sexual hysteria. Dorothy lives on as a crazy prostitute, to be discovered 75 years later as a very old woman at the Waposage, Kansas, Home for the Mentally Incapacitated – where she finally sees the film *The Wizard of Oz* on television. Only she knows it isn’t true. Not the Oz bits, the Kansas bits. For one thing, she knows quite well that her dog Toto was not allowed to live on as her inseparable companion, but was killed by Auntie Em and Uncle Henry for being a nuisance.

Meanwhile, the book Baum wrote, and even more the 1939 Judy Garland film based on it, have reached iconic status in the USA, becoming a traditional part of the American family Christmas. Ryman explores, however, the reality of the film: ‘Judy Garland’s’ real name (Frances Gumm), her relationship with her mother (who actually sued her daughter for support before dying in poverty), the sad story of her father (a movie theatre manager whom Ryman presents as continually forced to flee from one place to another by his homosexuality, of course greeted with no tolerance in the California of the 1930s). In ‘Was…’ the Hollywood world meanwhile produces an actor who makes his fortune by working in horror movies of child murder, contracts AIDS, 

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6 Ryman offers a bibliography in support of parts of his story in the sections ‘Reality Check’ and ‘Acknowledgements’ at the end of his book; see ‘Was…’: *A Novel* (1992: 350–6).
and spends the last weeks of his life obsessively trying to find the reality behind the Oz story, as if searching for a lost innocence; in this he is assisted by the psychiatrist whose life was changed by meeting the real Dorothy Gael dying marginalised in a hospital (like the Tom Barnard of Robinson’s The Gold Coast). Another way of describing this multi-stranded novel would be to see it as a progressive exhumation of the real past from beneath multiple layers of concealment; and it is worth noting that all three of the novels in Robinson’s trilogy begin with the characters *digging something up*.

Yet a third way of describing ‘Was...’ would be to say that it is a study of an American icon: The Wizard of Oz as book (a book for many years banned, ignored or censored by libraries and scholars); as film (a film which, to begin with, lost money, only to be rescued by television rights and the custom of showing it on television at Christmas); and as cultural signifier – the work which above all tells American children that ‘home is best’ and that the colours of Oz/fantasy should in the end be left behind for the greyness of Kansas/reality. In an interesting afterword, Ryman counterpoints realism or history, on the one hand, and fantasy, on the other, and says we should distinguish them carefully, ‘And then use them against each other’ (‘Was...’: 353). In a way, his ‘history’ of Dorothy Gael is an assault on an American fantasy. But then of course his history of her *is* fantasy (entirely made up, if grounded in real history and sociology), while the Oz fantasy has come true (at least as a commercial phenomenon). Just the same, a very blunt paraphrase of Ryman’s book would be to say that it is an attack on an icon and on the self-satisfying beliefs that icon has served. It points to a real tragedy, a real corruption, spreading from the American heartlands to the Hollywood of Robinson’s Orange County; the corruption is concealed by the icon made in Tinseltown.

Ryman’s presentation of this hidden corruption through the image of AIDS in my view challenges comparison with Solzhenitsyn’s Cancer Ward (1968), in which the spread of cancer via primary and secondary tumours is seen as an image of corruption working its way through the entire body of Soviet Russia. A similar metaphor runs through Thomas M. Disch’s The M.D. The subtitle of this work is A Horror Story, and the elements of fantasy in it are stronger than in any of the books considered so far (the whole action is initiated, for one thing, by a vision of Santa Claus). Yet the last third of the book takes us into familiar, quasi-realistic science fiction territory in which America, as in sections of Robinson’s Pacific Edge, has become a land of death camps, refugees, draconian government control abetted (as in Robinson’s Gold Coast) by private but government-fattened companies with names like Medical
Defense Systems. The reason for this version of military law is not AIDS but the plague for which AIDS was only a warm-up: ARVIDS, or Acute Random Vector Immune Deficiency Syndrome. ‘Random Vector’ here means that this version of the disease, instead of needing direct blood contamination to be passed on, is transmitted casually, like a cold or ‘flu. Anyone can get it, and no one knows why.

Within The M.D., though, the cause for ARVIDS is identified as a fantastic one. Sister Mary Symphorosa, in a Catholic primary school, told little Billy Michaels there was no Santa Claus; he was a false god who must not be worshipped. As if in denial, a true god appears to Billy in the image of Santa Claus, and gives him a gift of curse and blessing, via a magic caduceus: the symbol of Mercury, also of the American medical profession. Billy uses his caduceus to reduce his stepbrother to a vegetable (Colmar’s Syndrome); to make a disapproving teacher pathologically foul-mouthed (Tourette’s Syndrome); to inflict strokes, baldness, tooth decay or asphyxiation on those who annoy him. He also uses his gifts to confer health, for the odd thing is that Billy does not come over as an unsympathetic person. His actions are often provoked by his strange but no longer particularly untypical family circumstances. Disch uses as his epigraph for the novel a soothing statement from the New York Times:

The young murderer doesn’t come from a typical American family. The average American parent doesn’t need to fear being murdered.

What is average? What is typical? In the saccharine world of American television, where everyone watches The Wizard of Oz at Christmas – we find Billy’s father crying over it on page 39 – the American family is what it always was, father, mother, two or three children. In Billy’s family, marked by divorce, as is now normal, there are six parents or step-parents (counting, for example, his mother’s second husband’s first wife and his father’s second wife’s first husband), with four children, some of them half-siblings, but some with only legal relationships (like Billy’s stepmother’s daughter by another father). While there is nothing implausible about the characters’ marriages and remarriages, the result of them all can probably only be grasped by modern minds with the aid of a diagram. Nevertheless, this complexity of family relationships is mirrored by the tortuous nature of economic ones. Billy is brought up by a stepfather, Ben, whose daughter, Judith, is passionately in favour of social causes, including public health. Her father’s research, however, is largely funded by the American Tobacco Association; he has to be polite and hospitable to public relations men who professionally deny any link between smoking and cancer. Billy reacts to the falsity of the
situation by putting a curse on the tobacco executive's lighter: anyone who smokes a cigarette lit by it will get lung cancer.

One can see that Billy has a strong sense of justice denied by his family's way of life. There is a terrible fairness about (some of) what he does. Yet he is a murderer; he does come, regardless of the New York Times, from a 'typical American family', even if that family does not fit the family icon; and in the end he gets his M.D. and becomes, like most American M.D.s, extremely rich. Billy is especially rich, though, because he controls ARVIDS. We do not find out the mechanism till late on in the book, but what Billy has done is to put a curse on a prize bull:

‘Let the meaty steers you breed
At the end of ten full years
Infect with plague, infest with tears
One half percent of those they feed.
Once this contagion has occurred
May it only be wholly cured
By my hand, my work, my word,
Upon receipt of the fee agreed.
Now to your task, and breed, bull, breed.’

(The M.D., chap. 81)

The name of the bull – and I return here to my early point about the significance of plot items, like the 'Heinlein switch', which are both redundant and unpredictable – is American Pride. Disch could obviously have called the bull anything. Calling it 'American Pride' sends an unmistakable metaphoric signal; more unmistakable even than presenting the cause of ARVIDS as eating hamburgers.

The M.D. begins in this way to look like an allegory: an allegory of what has rotted society, which is (and in reverse order of their appearance in this paraphrase): (a) nationalistic pride; (b) individual medical profiteering; (c) utterly dishonest public relations; (d) domestic and sexual breakdown; (e) refusal (see the New York Times quotation above) to admit any of the above. This is an extremely damning indictment. Yet it all stems, I repeat, from a source, Billy Michaels, whom it is hard to see as simply evil. He is, rather, an individual economic unit doing the best he can for himself, as he is supposed to under orthodox economic ideology.

Disch's critique and Ryman's link through the image of AIDS. Disch links with Robinson in their shared vision of a death camp future. Ryman links with Robinson geographically, in their shared view of Orange County as the place where the American dream and the American reality (Hollywood and the defence industry) are in closest
juxtaposition. All three authors are writing very specifically, sometimes using the exact phrases, about ‘the American way’, ‘American pride’, American icons, the American dream. What they have to say, one realises, would be intolerable and unspeakable to authors of an older generation like Heinlein, with his veneration for American history/American myth, for ‘constitutionality’, for the ideology of freedom and government, check and balance. Yet Robinson at least is very strongly in a Heinlein tradition, with his combination of severe criticism of America and deep affection – ‘We were a good country’, protests Tom Barnard in *The Wild Shore* – as also in his concern, if an exasperated concern, with practical politics. In chapter 51 of *The Gold Coast* Jim McPherson, the shiftless son, recalls:

Johnson’s ultimate test for literature, the most important question: Can it be turned to use? When you read a book, and go back into the world: *Can it be turned to use?* How did it get this way?

Jim finds history useful in answering the last question; so does Ryman in his ‘exhumation’; Disch uses a different mode, fantasy or allegory, to answer the same question. But one could ask the penultimate question, ‘Can it be turned to use?’, of all these science fiction or fantasy works. And while it could be argued that science fiction has had only limited or doubtful success in the real world – motivating NASA, but also motivating ‘Star Wars’ – it still seems to have a collective faith in the bedrock proposition of its founding father, H.G. Wells: ‘If the world does not please you, you can change it.’[7] Frederik Pohl has since given a convincing account of how democracy could be rescued by technology (by getting rid of the mayors and the power brokers, the Cowpers and the Alfredos; see the first section of his *The Years of the City* (1984)); Robinson has suggested that the key point is corporate law, and that this could be changed from the inside by the traditional route of litigation from Washington. Both these points would be recognised at least, perhaps even accepted, by a resurrected Heinlein. Even in the dystopian analyses of Disch and Ryman, American authors – Ryman is actually a Canadian – are trying to persuade their fellow citizens not to like what they’re told to like; and to change it. As the disillusioned scientists of *The Gold Coast* tell each other, this may not work obviously or at once, but it is still, and not ironically, the American way.

7 Wells, *The History of Mr Polly* (1910), start of chap. 9.