Preface

Winding up a radio interview in Berlin that never aired, I relented in my scouring of German history – the Trump presidency was already upon us – and allowed that there was “der andere Patient,” “the other patient,” namely, the United States, a patient, however, still finding protection in denial, the protection denied Germany in the world at large. This volume did not become “The Other Patient,” although one of its overriding themes, the wish for fame, can be considered a symptom of American culture and its ubiquitous reach for the stars.

I saved up Edmund Bergler, another analyst in the canon of the psychopathology and poetics of the daydream, to read and perform the symptom picture featured in this volume. His obsessive theorizing makes him candidate or casualty of the wish that he sees underlying all neurosis, all fantasy. Staggered by a relay of defenses and defenses against defenses, the wish to be denied, the bottom line according to Bergler, wasn’t a candidate for integration in my *Phantasiermaschine*. But like Gilles Deleuze’s philosophy of masochism, in which Bergler was assured a place, the theorization of the wish to be refused can match a specific work, in particular if its abiding focus is on the fantasy of never-lasting fame.

In Palm Springs, I learned that there is “the desert version” of everything “Hollywood,” beginning with the lookalikes of the named stars on Hollywood Boulevard’s Walk of Fame stamped into the sidewalks along Palm Drive. But it’s not the same names, not the same stars. At dinner our waiter confirmed what we thought we saw in the large poster up against the wall that he
had indeed been on “Dancing with the Stars.” Then his colleague added from across the room – it was like an exchange in a sitcom – but it was only “the desert version.” A leftover from the time when Palm Springs was, at least for a season, Hollywood in the desert, the pairing up like Don Quixote and Sancho Panza of the realized or deluded fulfillment of the wish for fame with the locally more accessible version of falling short would be truly utopian. In childhood any little one could grow up to be a star. But then you just keep getting older – way older than your promise. The striving for fame is the very measure, measured in reverse, of the abyssal falling away of the recognition values that make up our continuity in memory.

“Hollywood” and “the desert version” don’t sum up the wish for fame, its fulfillments and unfulfillments. I offer instead by way of intro a work by Samuel R. Delany in which the best intended content together with a consummate mastery of form cannot outfly the denial of originality. To finance his first trip to Europe, Delany, a New Yorker, wrote *Empire Star* in 1965, a novella that’s also arguably a *Bildungsroman*. Thinking about Europe and that means German history and *Kultur*, Delany composed within the borderlands of fantasy and science fiction an allegory of the East Coast’s recent past as the future curse upon the universe.

It’s on a backwater planet boasting a relocated or replicated Brooklyn Bridge, in other words out West, that the bildungsroman opens, tying a boy’s development to the mission he accepts or which befalls him, the mission to journey to Empire Star and deliver an unknown message. The protagonist, the boy named Comet Jo, is a blond beauty straddling both coasts, Germany and California.

Self-reflexivity, German literature’s romance with itself, enters the looping of sci-fi’s variation on doubling, time travel. When a spaceship crashes nearby and he goes to check it out, “it was only when Comet Jo was kneeling and the figure was panting in his arms that he realized it was his double.” The double-thing melts and then there was Jewel: “The thing was multicolored, multifaceted, multiplexed, and me. I’m Jewel” (6). He’s the omniscient

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narrator and a character in the story, a multiple-thing coextensive with the looping novella. To protect the transmission of the message, Jewel crystallizes on the spot, which means he becomes “just a point of view” (8). Jo pockets Jewel, the POV accompanying him on his Bildungs-journey.

The novella’s emphasis in the course of Jo’s education and formation appears to be on harvesting strong emotion, even if the harrow is made up not of wishes but the defenses against them. Delany introduces the universal enslavement of the Ll through a division in the belaboring of affect whereby unbearable grief is the unremitting lot of the slave owners. Because the Ll alone can rebuild entire planetary civilizations (including their ethical systems) in the aftermath of total wars, they are under the empire’s protection. Any contact with them leads without exception to extreme grief, which is not what they are feeling, but which is the gist of their defense.

“Why don’t they turn ’em loose?” Jo asked, and the sentence became a cry halfway through.

“How can ya think ’bout economics feelin’ like … this?”

“Not many people can,” Ron said. “That’s the Ll’s protection.” (27)

Along his yellow brick road, Jo meets Lump, a linguistic ubiquitous multiplex, “built by a dying Ll to house its disassociating consciousness” (44). But because Lump is half-machine the other half forfeits the protection and Jo doesn’t feel the grief. Communicating through an idiom of allusions to American popular culture, Lump makes it clear that the Ll stand for the heirs to enslavement in US history. When Jo invites Lump to come along, the sort-of computer warns that if found out a half-Ll free agent is free game. Jo shrugs it off, saying that Lump should identify as a computer. “Like I said, I wouldn’t have known if you hadn’t said anything.” And Lump responds defiantly: “I do not intend to pass” (44). Looking at photographs of Delany, it appears he qualified for the caste of blender idols like Lena Horne or Adrienne Piper, and faced passing as unintended option.
When the poet Ni Ty visits Lump and Jo, doubling and looping displace the Bildungs-ideal of empathizing with the Lill. Ni Ty was apprenticed to an older Lill poet who was his same-sex amour. Then he safe-deposited this chapter inside Lump. Now that his better half is gay Black American, the computer half of Lump’s blender idol status travels both the no passing and the passing lanes in Delany’s 1965 bio.

More twist-off than twist, doubling stays in the lead to the finish line. Ni Ty’s gay apprenticeship lies outside Jo’s biography to date. But everything else that happened in his life has also happened to Ni Ty. Jo can feel the curse of doubling seizing his life, which in a bildungsroman counts as a work, one that has thus been plagiarized.

He felt as if something in him had been raped and outraged. “You can’t steal my life!”

Suddenly Ni pushed him, Jo slipped to the deck, and the poet stood over him, shaking now. “What the hell makes you think it’s yours? Maybe you stole it from me. How come I never get to finish anything out? How come any time I get a job, fall in love, have a child, suddenly I’m jerked away and flung into another dung heap where I have to start the same mess all over again? Are you doing that to me? Are you jerking me away from what’s mine, picking up for yourself the thousand beautiful lives I’ve started?” (62)

In Delany’s novel, plagiarism isn’t a transitive transaction but a trauma that befalls innocent bystanders. Even the omniscient narrator or author Jewel was recognizing his own lines in what Ni Ty was saying (60). Comet Jo is only starting out on his journey of becoming-who-he-is, which transposed to the logic of the loop means becoming his doubles, catching up, for instance, with his life as Ni Ty.

Towards the close, befitting a course of Bildung, Jo arrives at a more adult and tempered understanding of the doubling going through him and the poet: “He lets you know how much of your life is yours and how much belongs to history” (87). What follows the apprenticeship phase of Bildung is the phase of renunciation.
or fitting in, but not for the author, not for Goethe, whose name was heard to resonate nearer to God.

In 2017, Delany named Alfred Bester and Theodore Sturgeon his precursors, submitting writing well as the literary ticket. This volume of Critique of Fantasy opens with Bester’s two tele-novels, followed by analysis of the masochistic wish underlying writer’s block, illuminating an impasse that Bester struggled to breach. We’ve already touched on the case of Sturgeon, who enjoyed a second career as laugh-track cameo in Kurt Vonnegut’s psy-fi satires, which P.J. Farmer carried forward. Sturgeon’s fix-it masterpiece More Than Human is ready for its closeup reading at the close of this volume. That at one point its author was the most anthologized English-language author is, however, another way of saying the he was hard pressed to break free of the short form.

Delany brings up these precursors in the course of dismissing P.K. Dick’s growing literary reputation (he might have included J.G. Ballard’s renown as well). He refers to the eccentricity of his reading practice, in other words, his apparent immunity to trends. But what underlies this errant path is his remarkable acumen in recognizing the motive force and shortfall of the wish for fame. Delany attributes the recent phenomenon of Dick’s acclaim to the import of politics, if not for Dick then certainly for American academics wishing upon their own stardom.

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