

## The European Circuit

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Of the major figures associated with the British New Wave and *New Worlds* in particular, Brian W. Aldiss has received the least attention in terms of literary criticism, much less than J.G. Ballard and Michael Moorcock. In Colin Greenland's *The Entropy Exhibition* (1983, repr. 2013), Aldiss is given one of the chapters devoted to a single author (the others are Ballard and Moorcock), though Greenland begins with a rather diagnostic manoeuvre: he quotes a letter from Aldiss to Judith Merrill from 1966 in which Aldiss complains

I feel I am no part of the New Wave; I was here before 'em, and by God I mean to be here after they've gone (still writing bloody science fiction)!

(Greenland 1983: 69).

As Greenland notes, however, Aldiss's relation to the New Wave was rather more ambiguous than that. Of his work in the later 1960s, particularly the novels *Report on Probability A* and *Barefoot in the Head* (both 1969, but both largely published in *New Worlds* before book publication), Greenland writes that they were 'two polar masterpieces of the new sf' (Greenland 1983: 70). Perhaps just as importantly, as reported by Moorcock in his Introduction to *New Worlds: An Anthology* (1983), 'Aldiss, who had begun by being extremely sceptical of *New Worlds*'s policies, now worked energetically on the magazine's behalf. [...] Aldiss contacted various well-known writers and critics and asked them to approach, with him, the Arts Council. He hoped that a grant would save both magazines' (Moorcock 1983: 19). This hope bore fruit, and what Greenland calls 'the 1966 rescue operation for *NW*' (70) was a success, the magazine receiving £150 per issue towards the costs of production, which

was not enough to cover costs but which did allow the magazine to find another publisher.

So in the same year that he offered a strong disavowal of the New Wave – or at least, of his identification with them – he worked hard to preserve the magazine most associated with their work. This ambivalence, one should note, is not modulated by Aldiss's relation to science fiction per se: he has no hesitation in avowing that he will be still writing 'bloody science fiction'. This is particularly noteworthy considering the avant-garde forms of both *Report on Probability A* (which Moorcock suggests that 'had found no publisher anywhere but which I had enjoyed a great deal', before its publication in *New Worlds* (Moorcock 1983: 19)) and *Barefoot in the Head*. Writing on Aldiss's *Non-Stop* (aka *Starship*) (1958) in a 1973 article, Fredric Jameson suggests that this earlier novel

stands rather in the mainstream of literary experimentation [as] may be demonstrated by a comparison with the structure of the French *nouveau roman*, and particularly with the stylistic and compositional devices of Alain Robbe-Grillet, whose work Aldiss has himself ranged in the SF category, speaking of *L'année dernière à Marienbad*, where the gilded hotel with its endless corridors – *énormes, somptueux, baroques, lugubres* – stands more vividly as a symbol of isolation from the contents of life than any spaceship, simply by virtue of being more dreadfully accessible to our imaginations.

(Jameson 1973: 64)

Jameson's reading of this earlier novel, which does not show the explicit marks of literary experimentation in the same way as Aldiss's New Wave-era stories and novels, places it in a continuum with fiction whose formal apparatus produces the effect that the 'expressive capacity of words and names that is called into question

and subverted, [...] not within but from without, by imperceptible but momentous shifts in the context of the description' (Jameson 1973: 64). What Jameson goes on to state is a commonality between modernist literature and science fiction in enjoying 'a privileged relationship with such effects'.

A 'unifying' of the text 'from without' by its formal capacity to refer to the 'unity' of the "real" objective outside world [which] serves the basic structural function of unifying the world from without'; but when this referent is abandoned, as in science fiction, 'the fundamental formal problem posed by plot construction will be that of finding some new principle of unity'. Where some kind of myth is not used,

there remains available to SF another organizational procedure which I will call *collage*: the bringing into precarious co-existence of elements drawn from very different sources and contexts, elements which derive from the most part from older literary models and which amount to broken fragments of the outworn older genres or of the newer productions of the media (e.g. comic strips). (Jameson 1973: 65)

This can serve as a very accurate description of much of the fiction published in *New Worlds* in general, but the use of 'older literary models', particularly literary modernism (and its connects to science fiction that Jameson suggests) will inform my approach in this article. Although I will concentrate on the two 1969 Aldiss novels, one which draws explicitly on the *nouveau roman* (*Report on Probability A*) and the other from Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* (*Barefoot in the Head*), Jameson's article is particularly useful in suggesting that this 'experimentation' and formal emphasis long precedes the New Wave in Aldiss's work. Where, in *Non-Stop*, Jameson diagnoses 'the predominant formal characteristic [as being] the way in which each new section projects a different kind of novel or narrative, a fresh generic expectation broken off

unfulfilled and replaced in turn by a new and seemingly unrelated one', necessitating reading strategies which foreground genre expectation and narrative structure, he implies a kind of continuum with the later work. In *Non-Stop*, this is the formal incapacity of the narrative to complete itself, which is raised to an imagistic and thematic principle in the protagonist Complain's journey through the corridors of the generational starship. In *Report on Probability A* and *Barefoot in the Head*, this is both generic and textual discontinuities produced by recourse to experimental literary techniques drawn from European Modernism.

As we have seen, Colin Greenland calls these two novels 'polar masterpieces', in that they are remarkably different approaches to the suturing of science fiction to Modernist techniques. In the light of his own thematic emphases, Greenland suggests that they are the 'classic novels of both entropy and exhibition' respectively, *Probability A's* controlled and recursive scenarios tending towards a textual 'heat death' and stasis, while *Barefoot's* efflorescent and exuberant inventiveness threatens to explode the generic parameters of the fiction entirely. One can certainly fit them into a formal and thematic binary: one is about watching, immobility, lack of agency; the other about kaleidoscopic (hallucinatory) vision, speed, and a kind of perverse dynamism. There are strong continuities, also, which I will explore in the course of this article.

The connection between New Wave writers and Modernist experimentation is explored by many critics. James Gunn, in the Introduction to *The Road to Science Fiction: From Here to Forever*, notes that

Experiments in style became commonplace. [...] The experiments may not have been particularly new – John Brunner looked to John Dos Passos's *U.S.A.* (first volume 1930) for the style of *Stand on Zanzibar* (1968), Brian W.

Aldiss to Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* (1930) for the style of *Barefoot in the Head* (1969), and J.G. Ballard to more contemporary anti-novelists, typified by Alain Robbe-Grillet, for his 'condensed novels' – but they were new to science fiction. (Gunn 2003: xix).

Although Jordi Costa, among many others, has noted that Ballard was fascinated by *L'année dernière à Marienbad*, Michael R. Collings makes an even more direct connection between Aldiss and Robbe-Grillet, perhaps the most well-known of the French New Novelists of the 1950s and 1960s. Collings writes that *Report on Probability A* 'was completed in manuscript by 1962 [the year after the release of the film of *L'année dernière à Marienbad*] but rejected when Aldiss approached his publishers', and only after serialization in *New Worlds* (in 1967) was it finally accepted (Collings 1986: 32). Collings cites Richard Mathews' 1977 book *Aldiss Unbound* in positing the influence of Robbe-Grillet and Michel Butor in describing 'Aldiss' avowed intention to discard many literary convention and to concentrate on a "lean, hard-surfaced" style' (Collings 1986: 32). Gunn is rather suspicious of this 'newness', tending to view it as a stylistic innovation which although '[a]t their best they were effective in saying what could not be said in any other way; at their worst they were distancing, distracting, and obscure' (Gunn 2003: xix). Collings' focus upon the development of style tends to downplay the radical emphasis on *formal* experiment in both *Probability A* and *Barefoot in the Head*: that as Gunn suggests, they could not have been told in any other way, asserting a profound connection between form and content rather than simply a stylistic playfulness.

*Report on Probability A* corresponds to the kind of fiction proposed by Robbe-Grillet in *For a New Novel* (1963; trans. 1965), though if Collings is correct about the

date of the manuscript's initial drafting in 1962, it would have been written before the articles collected therein were published together. Robbe-Grillet states that

Instead of a universe of 'signification' (psychological, social, functional), we must try, then, to construct a world both more solid and more immediate. Let it be first of all by their *presence* that objects and gestures establish themselves. [...] In the future universe of the novel, gestures and objects will be *there* before being *something*; and they will still be there afterwards, hard, unalterable, eternally present, mocking their own 'meaning', that meaning which vainly tries to reduce them to the role of precarious tool, of a temporary and shameful fabric woven exclusively – and deliberately – by the superior human truth expressed in it. (Robbe-Grillet 1989: 21)

For Robbe-Grillet, the 'style' of the New Novel – description of surfaces, things, without metaphor, involving a reduction in the proliferating chains of signification – has a purpose, an informing philosophy. 'To describe things [...] is deliberately to place oneself outside them, confronting them. It is no longer a matter of appropriating them to oneself, of projecting anything on to them' (Robbe-Grillet 1989: 70). The method of the New Novel is then to re-arrange the relation between subject and object, between 'human' and world, to refuse anthropomorphism or the possession of the material through language. 'To describe this surface is merely to constitute this externality and this independence [...] [making] no claim to defining any special essence of it' (Robbe-Grillet 1989: 71-2) he asserts, proposing an *ethical* rupture in literary mimesis. The world is described but remains *as it is*, prior to and external to human experience. Several times in *Report on Probability A* (as it does in Ballard's late-60s 'condensed novels', particularly *The Atrocity Exhibition* (1969) [and in Moorcock's Cornelius novels](#)) this takes the form of the list:

Also in the room was a cupboard of unpainted wood, in which G kept several small toilet articles; a copy of Hugh Walpole's 'The Cathedral'; some neatly folded bandages; a crumpled handkerchief belonging to Mr Mary's wife; a bowl with a rose pattern in which lay rusting curtain hooks; a penknife, and a pair of spectacles that belonged to an uncle of G's; a candlestick; some candles; string; several strangely shaped stones found in the garden; a white china cat with the name of a seaside town printed on its stomach; some mending things; a round 1 oz. tobacco tin and holes punched in its lid, in which G had once intended to keep a lizard; and some groceries. (Aldiss 1969b: 14)

There are similar long lists on pages 52 and 102. The effect, however, is different to Ballard's work. Where, in *The Atrocity Exhibition*, the objects become icons or symbols, signifying a particular pathological psychology, in *Report on Probability A* they correspond much more to Robbe-Grillet's precepts as *things in themselves*. Even here, though, the text cannot resist falling into signification. Certain objects, such as S's telescope or C's periscope made from tin cans, certainly embed themselves into discursive or thematic structures which are not simply directly representational: both the telescope and the periscope extend the motif of watching, of multiple and recursive voyeurism or surveillance, which striates the novel.

This is particularly identified in the second (middle) section of the novel, 'S The Watchful', with what is described as the 'circle of vision'. This is a direct description, in some senses, of the delimited visual range afforded by the telescope:

As S inspected the milk bottle through the telescope, a slight wash of colour and light spread over the bottle and over the step, so that the bottle took on a gleam along its sloping shoulders. At the same time, a dead leaf whisked

through the circle of vision, over the step, and was gone into the darkness that always surrounded the circle of vision'. (Aldiss 1969b: 59)

Over the next few pages, and then throughout the middle section of the novel, the 'circle of vision' is insistently repeated, but tends to become dislocated from S, the 'watcher' who uses the telescope. Thus, 'the circle of vision moved away from the house' (Aldiss 1969b: 60); 'the circle of vision inspected the long windows of the dining-room' (Aldiss 1969b: 61). Agency is then afforded to the mobile 'circle of vision' itself. This is intensely cinematic, as though an irised camera is presenting the scene to the viewer/ reader; the occluding of S places the reader in the position of watcher. The text thereby implicates the reader into the circuit of watching and being watched in the narrative. However, as the text progresses, from narrative focaliser G (for Gardener), to S (for Secretary), to C (for Chauffeur), male subjects ensconced in outbuildings of the house and garden owned by Mr and Mrs Mary, it becomes clear that this primary diegetic level is itself being watched by others in different spaces, universes or planes of existence. These are presented in the narrative in inserted italicised prose sections. These *en abyme* narrative levels indicate that the text operates on what Brian McHale, in *Postmodernist Fiction* (1987), would call a 'chinese box' structure, worlds within worlds within worlds. Implicated in this structure is of course the *extra-textual* world of the 'real', that of the reader, suggesting that we too are subject to unseen surveillance. [This reference to postmodernist techniques suggests that Aldiss's fiction, like that of Ballard and Moorcock in the late 1960s, operates in a zone of intersection between \(late\) Modernism and nascent Postmodernism. Moorcock's list of those writers celebrated in \*New Worlds\* – 'Burroughs \[...\] surrealists, romantics, imagists, allegorists \[...\] Borges, Hesse, Peake, Calvino, Kafka, Wyndham Lewis, Vian' \(Moorcock 1983: 14\)](#)



– precisely articulates this zone, although his dismissive judgement of contemporary American postmodernists is telling: ‘Pynchon and Barth [...] were clumsily, by means of long-winded parody, trying to achieve results already achieved in *New Worlds*’ (Moorcock 1983: 15). While not directly adopting a Modernist tactic of shock and confrontation, the formal experimentation of the New Wave in the 1960s can be read as the emergence a kind of parallel postmodernism, despite Moorcock’s insistence on the distance (as well as similarity) between the two, in which experimental literary techniques expose and explode genre sf.

The first of these italicised interpolations features one Domolodossa, who is reading the ‘report’: the primary narrative diegesis, which becomes an inset object in a secondary world. In discussion with another operative, Midlakemela, it is revealed that the primary world of Mr and Mrs Mary, G, S and C is the ‘Probability A’, a different ‘continuum’ from their own. Midlakemela argues that “‘*Probability A [...] is closely related to our continuum, which I like to think of as Certainty X. Nevertheless, even superficially, Probability A reveals certain basic values that differ widely from our own. It is our first duty to examine those values*’” (Aldiss 1969b: 16, italics in original). Further on in the narrative, however, it is revealed that Domolodossa and Midlakema are themselves subject to surveillance by the Distinguishers in another continuum, and in turn they are being watched by Joe Growleth, Charlock and Corless, who perceive Domolodossa’s continuum to be a “‘*sub-atomic world [...] startlingly like our own!*’” (Aldiss 1969b: 111). The text then presents the relations of world to world as one of scale, with time moving at different rates in each world. By the end of the novel, worlds and watchers are inset in an abysmal image:

*Of course, Domolodossa was unaware that he was being scrutinized by the Distinguishers on their rainy hillside. They, in their turn, were being watched*

*by the grave men in New York. They, in their turn, were being watched by two young men and a boy who stood in an empty warehouse staring at the manifestation in puzzlement.*

*“What is it, Daddy?” asked the boy.*

*“We’ve discovered a time machine or something,” the father said. He leaned farther forward: it was just possible to make out Domoladossa reading his report, for the New York screen showed the hillside manifestation revealing him at his desk. (Aldiss 1969b: 125, italics in original)*

The worlds intersect almost as a set of gears, turning at different speeds. The passing of time, which is narrated as a set of co-present narrative continuums, is paradoxical, for the formal apparatus of the novel does not allow for the direct presentation of these differential speeds: there is no ‘slow motion’ or ‘speeded up’ motion possible within the framework of the novel (unlike cinema, for instance). Time passes ‘normally’ in each of the scale worlds, and the reader experiences them as operating in the same narrative time; the reader is therefore both a watcher *outside* the world and *projected into it* to experience time in the same way as G, C, S, Domolodossa or Joe Growleth in their different continuums.

The formal recursiveness, material descriptions, lack of narrative event, and deliberate repetition suggest a readerly experience which stages the kind of alienation inhabited by the watchers, and indeed Michael R. Collings’ reading of *Probability A* emphasises the potential for readerly frustration. ‘Aldiss seems intent on forcing his readers to draw conclusions,’ he writes, ‘even though they have “no key to scale”’ (Collings 1986: 33). The novel ends, as Collings notes, with another recurring image or reference in the novel, Holman Hunt’s painting ‘The Hireling Shepherd’, which is described several times during the course of the narrative. Collings continues: ‘Aldiss

concludes the novel by moving into the painting itself, concentrating on this frozen moment. The novel ends in stasis, in a world of unexplained phenomena and unseen futures' (Collings 1986: 33). The figuration of the painting is then a symbol of the text's global ambiguities, its openness to interpretation. What Collings does not emphasise here is the *erotic* nature of the scene, its ambiguous sexual content. The painting is also a symbol of the relation to the watching *men* and Mrs Mary, the object of their gazes, the 'circle of vision'. In a telling passage, Domolodossa, I reading the report, becomes '*almost breathless with the thought of the happiness of the alien woman, a happiness that the impartiality of the report seemed to heighten. He considered the passage he had just read extremely erotic*' (Aldiss 1969b: 46-7). *Report on Probability A*, like Robbe-Grillet's *L'année à Marienbad*, is suffused with a displaced and frustrated eroticism, a desire contained within and half-repressed by the formal structures of the novel. If the final stasis is not quite a sexual interruption, it perhaps marks the point at which literary representation, in relation to the seductive nature of material reality, reaches its limits. The text cannot touch, cannot find completion: it can only 'watch'.

Where *Report on Probability A* stages containment of desire within language, *Barefoot in the Head* presents its world through a language riotously disrupted from within by an excess of signification that Robbe-Grillet, as we saw above, sought to limit. If *Probability A* is about and embodies containment, *Barefoot* is about and embodies *eruption*. Both, however, are concerned with perception and description, related to the 'circle of vision' that denotes the subjective gaze. *Barefoot in the Head*'s linguistic eruptions seem much more indebted to the Modernism of James Joyce, and in particular *Finnegans Wake* and its punning, shifting, neologistic shifts across registers and allusions to other texts. However, a precept from Robbe-Grillet's

essay 'New Novel, New Man', collected in *For A New Novel*, suggests that *Barefoot* can equally be seen as an energetic and explosive extension of the central concerns of the *nouveau roman*:

Not only is it *a man* who, in my novels for instance, describes everything, but it is the least neutral, the least impartial of men: *always* engaged, on the contrary, in an emotional adventure of the most obsessive kind, to the point of often distorting his vision and producing imaginings close to delirium.

(Robbe-Grillet 1989: 138).

Michael R. Collings suggests that Aldiss's 'concern with how language may be interpreted [...] creates the novel, far more than the plot. There is indeed less of a single plot than a series of possibilities dependent upon how one interprets words used to define them' (Collings 1986: 36). This 'staggering abundance of possibilities' again directly implicates the reader into the text, which becomes a textual system requiring decoding and unravelling by the reader. The first chapter, 'Just Passing Through', concerns one Colin Charteris (who appropriated his surname from the author of the series of thrillers featuring 'the Saint', Leslie Charteris) as he arrives in the city of Metz in the Alsace, having driven 'twenty-two hundred kilometres from Catanzaro down on the Ionian Sea [...] in thirty hours, sustaining on the way no more than a metre-long scar along the front off-side wing' (Aldiss 1969a: 13). The novel begins:

The city was open to the nomad.

Colin Charteris climbed out of his Banshee into the northern square, to stand for a moment stretching. Sinews and bones flexed and dainty. The machine beside him creaked and snapped like a landed fish, metal cooling after its long

haul across the turn-pikes of Europe. Behind them the old cathedral,  
motionless though not recumbent. (Aldiss 1969a: 13).

The novel begins, then, with an almost surreal visual dislocation produced by the unusual simile – the car ‘creaking and snapping like a landed fish’ – and the figure of the cathedral motionless but upright: how could it be ‘recumbent’? As narrative focalizer for the discourse, Charteris’s perceptions seem somewhat odd, compounded further on the same page when the sun is described as fading ‘pale and low over St-Étienne into the fly-specks of even turn’ (Aldiss 1969a: 13). How does the reader interpret this unusual discursive manoeuvre? Are the fly-specks on the windshield of Charteris’s Banshee, the sun fading as the car makes an ‘even turn’ past it on the autoroute? Another clue comes shortly afterwards, when images from the journey (the past as ‘yesterday’s bread’) seem to come to Charteris’s consciousness:

Outside Milano, one of the great freak-out areas of all time where the triple autostrada made of the Lombardy plain a geometrical diagram, his red car had flashed inches from a multiple crash. They were all multiple crashes these days. (Aldiss 1969a: 13)

The literal and entirely appropriate *collision* between the discourse of drug hipdom – ‘the great freak out areas of all time’ – and the geometry of the autostradas reveal a kind of kaleidoscopic consciousness, one in which the image of the crash ‘continued to multiply itself over and over in his mind, confusing sense, confusing past with future’ (Aldiss 1969a: 14). In fact, the novel reveals that Charteris is mildly affected at this stage of the narrative by the aerosol hallucinogens deposited into the atmosphere of Western Europe by Kuwait during the ‘Acid Head War’, a catastrophic event which leaves Europe as a kind of riotous carnival: ‘Life was so short, and so full of desolating boredom and the flip voluptuousness of speed-death’ (Aldiss 1969a:

21). The autostradas and motorways, as well as offering the ‘victims’ a stage upon which to ‘fornicate with death’, is also one in which they can connect with life through the proximity of the automobile accident, the crash.

When he arrives in Britain, Charteris, speeding down a country lane, is still more affected by the hallucinogens, whereupon we have this extraordinary passage:

Round the next corner FOR YOUR THROAT’S SAKE SMOKE a van red-eyed – a truck no *trokut!* – in the middle of the guy running out waving bloody leather – Charteris braked spilling hot words as the chasing thought came of impact and splat some clot mashed out curving against a wall of shattered brick so bright all flowering: a flowering cactus a christmas cactus rioting in an anatomical out-of-season. (Aldiss 1969a: 56)

This kaleidoscopic scene, a compressed and violently telescoped collision of images and sensations, uses various grammatical devices to produce its effects: the signage in capitals, intrusions of direct thought expressed by the dashes, the long unpunctuated clause as Charteris braces for impact, the disjunctive image of the flowering cactus as emblem of the human body hit by the speeding car. Compare this scene in a later novel, J.G. Ballard’s *Crash* (1973), which is of course equally invested in the symbolic freight of the automobile crash:

Taking my eyes off the road, I clasped Vaughan’s hand in my own, trying to close my eyes to the fountain of light that poured through the windshield of the car from the vehicles approaching us.

An armada of angelic creatures, each surrounded by an immense corona of light, was landing on the motorway either side of us (Ballard 1995 (1973): 199).

Ballard's language is controlled, its rhythms restrained and smooth. Aldiss's description is violent, eruptive, dislocating. The narrator Ballard's syntax is unaffected by the hallucinogen he has taken; Charteris's hold on language threatens to break apart.

The novel's capacity to shift between the material 'real' and its perception in passages such as this is thematized early in the text.

He saw the world [...] purely as a fabrication of time, no matter involved.

Matter was an hallucinatory experience: merely a slow motion perceptual experience of certain time/ emotion nodes passing through the brain. No, that the brain seized on in turn as it moved round of the perceptual web it had spun, would spin, from childhood on. Metz, that he apparently perceived so clearly through all his senses, was there only because all his senses had reached a certain dynamic synchronicity in their obscure journey about the biochemical web. Tomorrow, responding to inner circadian rhythms, they would achieve another relationship, and he would appear to 'move on' to

England. Matter was an abstraction of the time syndrome. (Aldiss 1969a: 22)

Just as Charteris 'passes through' the landscape of Europe via its web of autostradas and motorways, his perceptions of the world 'pass through' the neural network in his brain, biochemical or electrical impulses, but understanding of this leaves Charteris with an attenuated sense of the material 'real' itself: 'Only the perceptual web itself was "real"' (Aldiss 1969a: 23). His sense of himself as a self-identical subject is also disrupted: 'the autostrada was a projection of temporal confluences within him, perhaps a riverine duologue of his entire life. France? Earth? Where was he? What was he?' (Aldiss 1969a: 22-3). While 'inner' and 'outer' are consistently disrupted throughout *Barefoot in the Head* through this interrogation of the 'perceptual web' (as

crucial a phrase as ‘circle of vision’ had been to *Report on Probability A*), individual subjectivity also comes under scrutiny. If Charteris moves *along the riverrun* in his perceptual Banshee, then self becomes flow, a proliferation of selves across the time-axis akin to Duchamps’ famous Modernist image of the *Nude Descending a Staircase* (1912).

*Barefoot in the Head*, for the most part, was originally published in *New Worlds* and its sister magazine *Impulse* (formerly *Science Fantasy* and sometime *SF Impulse*), before Faber published the novel in hardback in 1969. The chapters were not published in magazine form sequentially. The first to be published was ‘Just Passing Through’, in *Impulse* in February 1967, which became the first chapter of *Barefoot*; the next, ‘Multi-Value Motorway’, in *New Worlds* 174 (August 1967), is chapter 4. Then followed ‘Still Trajectories’ (*NW* 175, September 1967), chapter 5; ‘Auto-Ancestral Fracture’ (*NW* 178, Dec 1967/Jan 1968), chapter 6; and ‘The Serpent Kundalini’ (*NW* 179, February 1968), which is the second chapter of *Barefoot*. Two chapters, ‘Drake-Man Route’ and ‘Ouspenski’s Ashtrakhan’ were not published serially. What also marks a considerable difference from the *New Worlds* versions and the book of *Barefoot in the Head* are the poems that Aldiss appends between chapters. Some poems inhabit more traditional poetic forms in terms of line length and layout. The final stanza of ‘Time Never Goes By’, the first of three poems between ‘The Serpent Kundalini’ and ‘Drake-Man Route’, runs:

It’s still the same old story  
Characters change events rearrange  
Plot seems to wear real thin  
Coffins call for running men  
Hated or adored  
Everything goes by the board  
But Time Never Goes By



NOVA SCOTIA TREADMILL ORCHESTRA (Aldiss 1969a: 52)

The strong echoes of ‘As Time Goes By’, the song best known for its rendition in the film *Casablanca* (1942), indicate this poem’s playful allusiveness but the inversion of its sense of time passing, and the running out of narrative dynamic – ‘Plot seems to wear real thin’ – seems a self-reflexive reference to the kind of temporal stasis or recurrence that forms a major structural principle for the *nouveau roman*. Robbe-Grillet writes, of *L’année dernière à Marienbad*:

The universe in which the entire film occurs is, characteristically, that of a perpetual present which makes all recourse to memory impossible. This is a world without a past, a world which is self-sufficient at every moment and which obliterates itself as it proceeds. [...] There can be no reality outside the images we see, the words we hear. (Robbe-Grillet 1989: 152)

He then goes on to explicitly state what I have suggested about the importance of the reader in Aldiss’s fiction to decode or instantiate the novel, with regard to the spectator of the film: ‘the only important “character” is the spectator; *in his mind* unfolds the whole story, which is precisely *imagined* by him’ (Robbe-Grillet 1989: 153).

Other short poems offer a much more experimental approach to form, using typography and the space of the page, such as ‘Topography of an Unrealised Affair’:

          C  
  H E L L O  
  E   O   O  
  A   V   L  
S T R E S S

(Aldiss 1969a: 80)

Such diagrammatic texts return us to the ‘triple autostrada [which] made of the Lombardy plain a geometrical diagram’ (13), again indicating the collision of a geometric or spatial sensibility (or conception of the text, in which ‘time never goes

by’) with the riverine flow presented by the Joycean overflow of language and allusion. Later in the novel, the hallucinatory language spoken by the characters in the text becomes indistinguishable from the narrative discourse itself:

Yet Marta has her own unopened chambers of possibility the locked door  
calling to my quay my coast Bohemian coast my reefs that decimate  
steamships. On the piston of this later Drake lost in spume rankest alternature.  
[...]

‘Oh entropise human detestiny!’ Angeline was washed and white like  
concentrate campallour, still calculating against the aftermaths of warcalculus,  
still be the chemicals not too treblinkered. ‘I don’t want to know if you  
slacked because I know if you slacked you slackered Marta tonight last night  
every night and I just damned won’t stand it, so you just damned fuzzy-settle  
for her or me! None of your either-whoring here!’ (Aldiss 1969a: 153)

This scene of domestic conflict is indicative of the textual fabric later in the novel, with its puns (‘either-whoring’), neologisms (‘warcalculus’) and allusions (‘treblinkered’). It also returns the novel to one of Aldiss’ key interests in this period, ‘fuzzy logic’, a mode of thought that explicitly abandons binaristic thinking. In the words of Bart Kosko: ‘All facts were matters of degree. The facts were always *fuzzy* or vague or inexact to some degree. Only math was black and white and it was just an artificial system of rules and symbols’ (Kosko 1994: xv). Or, as Charteris explains in *Barefoot in the Head*: ‘Think in fuzzy sets. There is no either-or black-white dichotomy any more. Only a spectrum of partiallys. [...] We have to think new. Find more directions make them. It’s easy in this partially country’ (Aldiss 1969a: 86).

The narrative of *Barefoot* finds direction through motifs of automobility. As we have seen, the novel begins with Charteris arriving in Metz after a 2200-kilometre

drive north from Italy. Thereafter, he journeys to Britain and organises a messianic, carnivalesque ‘autocade’ back across Europe, with himself at its head as a psychotropic ‘saint’ spreading the gospel of the ‘think new’. Charteris thereby becomes one of the recurrent messianic figures found in New Wave science fiction, from Michael Moorcock’s ‘rock and roll messiah’ Jerry Cornelius, to the often self-deluding or malignant messianic figures found in J.G. Ballard’s fiction. Charteris encourages his disciples to follow him towards some kind of apotheosis, although Angeline expresses both her fear and scepticism about the journey and its end:

I too have my presentiments to express and he could have been stark to the fanaticides of marching menschen a word of leadership the old ambitions gleam its better a ruined mind than old agonisms [...] ‘Colin you take that escalating way into the capital with clouds of cheering fantiks and they’ll crucify you. [...] Don’t jeer at me who’s in the family way by you you’ll go the way of all saviours and they’ll crucify you. They always need another crucifixion. There’s never enough for them!’ (Aldiss 1969a: 242)

Ultimately Charteris, a very different kind of Saint to the one imagined by his namesake, is not crucified, but his revelation – ‘All possibilities and alternatives exist but ultimately/ Ultimately you want it both ways’ (Aldiss 1969a: 264) – suggests a kind of defeat, an inability to hold on to the ‘multi’ as an open possibility and, if not a collapse back into binarism, into a kind of bad faith: ‘you want it both ways’. The very ending of the text reveals the place where he delivers this revelation has been turned into a place of pilgrimage or, less positively, into a tourist site: ‘later still tourists came metalboxed driving down from the north to stare and forget whatever was on their minds’ (Aldiss 1969a: 264). Messianism in *Barefoot in the Head*, like the psychedelic ‘revolution’ of the late 1960s, cannot achieve its ends because the

psychotropic dislocations that are its condition also secure the impossibility of its success. The Acid Heads will inevitably ‘forget whatever was on their minds’.

In *Psychedelia and Other Colours* (2015), Rob Chapman suggests that 1960s [British](#) psychedelia has a very different flavour to that produced in the United States. He suggests deeper roots than simply a trans-national cultural shift in pop music, fashion, artistic production, or even consumption of particular drugs. The 1951 Festival of Britain, Chapman argues, involved both a rediscovery of Victorian artisanal and industrial design and decoration, and a celebration of modernity: ‘Futuristic architectural constructions like the Skylon and the Dome of Discovery and displays of the very latest radar and television technology happily rubbed alongside the quaint and the commonplace’ (Chapman 2015: 469). Drawing upon this post-war development, he argues, English psychedelia looks backwards and forwards at the same time, back to the vernacular, ‘fairgrounds, amusement arcades, tattoo parlours, waxworks, taxidermists, high-street shops and seaside piers’ (470), and forwards to a ‘dream vision of an Americanised consumerist future’ decorated in the colours of ‘polyurethane paints, dyes, soluble acrylics and primary-coloured plastics’ (475). The particular energies of the 1960s, Chapman suggests, are the result of productive tensions between divergent vectors. ‘[O]ne movement or one way of thinking has never completely swept away another,’ he suggests; ‘A certain displacement might have occurred periodically but what generally happened is that a multiplicity of cultural tendencies learned to coexist and coalesce’ (Chapman 2015: 478). This productive tension, between past and future or Empire and America, it seems to me, is much more closely associated with Moorcock’s Cornelius texts or his Nomads trilogy than Aldiss’s late 1960s work, despite *Barefoot*’s imaginative presentation of a psychedelic sensibility. The formal experimentation of both *Report on Probability A*

and *Barefoot in the Head* instead aligns Aldiss closely with variants of European Modernism and traditions of experimental writing, attempts to ‘think new’ about the social and cultural fabric of post-war Britain and Europe. It may be most fruitful to think of both texts as themselves constituting a kind of ‘fuzzy set’ of *formal* responses to post-war Europe and its cultural shifts, one which, as Fredric Jameson suggested on writing about *Non-Stop*, has deep roots in Aldiss’s work.

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