

## Parenthetically Speaking

by James P. Blaylock

Titles have never been easy for me, but they were a special problem twenty or thirty years ago when I was writing my Steampunk stories. Chekhov once stated that he could write a story about anything – that if a person asked him to write a story about a bottle, he'd do it, and he'd call it "The Bottle." I, on the other hand, would set out to write a story about a bottle, and before it was done it would also be about apes and severed heads and doughnut-eating skeletons, and the simple title wouldn't work. One day a couple of lifetimes ago I was sitting around at Fullerton College, where I was teaching at the time, and I happened to be holding a copy of Homunculus, which had just recently been published – a novel that had come dangerously close to being titled (on Tim Powers's recommendation) And Your Winged Crocodiles, a phrase that Tim had found in a poem by Byron. A woman sitting nearby tried unsuccessfully to puzzle out the pronunciation. "What's it mean"? she asked. "It means 'little man,'" I told her. "In Latin." She nodded and asked if I'd written any other books, and I

told her that my previous book had been titled The Digging Leviathan.

“And what does that mean,” she asked (unimpressed), “big man?” “Pretty much,” I said, and it came into my mind that if I combined the two into a third novel I could call it Little Big Digging Man, except that it might be confused with the Thomas Berger novel unless it was rendered into Latin. Maybe a novel about a time-traveling beatnik: Little Man Digging Big...

It was about then that Susan Allison, my editor at Ace, began to have serious second thoughts about allowing me to title my own books. Probably she was right. Almost certainly she was. I was awash, however, with wild ideas for titles, including my favorite – one that I had borrowed from Tim: “Uncle Hinky Beards Fat Billy Winger in his Den.” My idea was to write a 20-page chapter under this title and mail it off to Susan as a sort of joke, assuring her that I was hard at work on further chapters. The nifty thing was that throughout those 20 pages Uncle Hinky would be asleep in his armchair. Proust, after all, had taken 60 pages to have his man turn over in bed. I saw no reason at all for my character to wake up – ever. There was something stunningly postmodern in the idea. I killed two days writing the 20 pages, and then called Tim, laughing like an idiot, to tell him my “plan.” Tim convinced me not to mail the 20 pages to Ace, for which I almost certainly owe him my career.

None of that actually has much to do with Steampunk, but neither did I, really – not at the time, at least. Homunculus was simply a variety of historical novel that I had written largely because I was crazy for The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde and because I had grown up reading Jules Verne and H.G. Wells, and my idea of science fiction had always had to do with backyard scientists and fabulous submarines and spacecraft that housed onboard greenhouses. And of course no one had heard the word “Steampunk” (or Cyberpunk, either) back when Tim, K.W. Jeter, and I were first writing our Victoriana. The term hadn’t been coined yet, and wouldn’t be for years. And certainly we had no idea that we were inventing a sub-genre of science fiction. We were merely writing stories that amused us, and we often had an equally amusing time recounting to each other aspects of the amusing stories that we intended to write.

I remember a fairly typical afternoon involving popcorn and beer at O’Hara’s Pub in Orange sometime in 1977. (I’ve written about this particular afternoon before, but I wonder now whether it’s particular at all, but is instead a sort of archetypal afternoon that lingers in my mind, a couple of dozen afternoons run together.) I was working back then as a finish carpenter for a room addition contractor and had recently begun teaching composition classes in the evening. Tim was employed at a Tinderbox

tobacco store and had sold his first novels to Laser Books, as had K.W., who, if I remember correctly, was working nights at the local Juvenile Hall. I had already written ‘The Ape-box Affair’ (which I’m going to insist was the first published Steampunk story. If there’s evidence to the contrary, let me know.) I had it in my mind that Langdon St. Ives would be a series character, although I hadn’t given much thought to his further adventures, because I was spending most of my literary time rewriting a novel that I had been working on for a couple of years by then, currently titled Sanctity of Moontide (which title, according to Phil Dick, was the worst ever conceived). Previously I had called it The Chinese Circus (which ranks pretty high on the worst title list.) The unfinished (and unfinishable) novel was to be a modern Tristram Shandy, narrated by a man who might or might not be a lunatic and who had certain knowledge of a pending cataclysm that would be triggered when a mechanical mole burrowed through the earth’s crust. I had recently finished reading all of Proust, winding up with his letters and his early novel, Jean Santeuil, and my head was full of Proustian language as well as characters who slept too much. Why not, I wondered with a thrill of artistic anticipation, revise the novel so that it was a hybrid of Proust and Laurence Sterne, but was set in Glendale and Eagle Rock and involved Bulgarian acrobats, the mechanical mole, and a dairy that was

manufacturing faux milk out of plaster of Paris? (I've read that deranged people are sometimes fundamentally happy, because they're utterly certain that they're correct in all aspects of their thinking, whereas the rest of us are unhappily certain that we're very often wrong. In that sense the inspired lunacy of early artistic insight is a lot like madness, because a writer in the grip of the muses is often certain that he or she is engaged in an endeavor of great genius.)

So there we were at O'Hara's Pub, talking about something vital, with a fresh bowl of popcorn, a pitcher of beer, and an empty afternoon before us.... (And just as none of us knew that we were about to write the first "Steampunk" stories and spawn a literary movement, none of us knew that we were rapidly using up our cardboard carton full of empty afternoons. These thirty years later I can see the looming shadow of empty afternoons in my future again, but of a decidedly different sort.) K.W. rolled his eyes at something I'd said (something involving "science") and suggested that given my curious notions of science I'd be likely to write a story in which someone plugged a black hole with a Fitzall Sizes cork. After a momentary silence I asked him whether, with all due respect, he was willing to let me have that idea or whether he wanted it for himself. He said I was welcome to it, and I went home and wrote "The Hole in Space" and sent it off to

Starwind magazine, which closed its doors a week after accepting the story and mailing me the forty dollar check. I never sent the story back out, and it languished in the drawer for over 25 years before it saw daylight again. But it was writing that second St. Ives story that somehow made it inevitable that I write more. A conversation at Roy Squires's house in Glendale (as well as a bottle of Laphroaig scotch) inspired "The Idol's Eye," and an article in the Los Angeles Times about a local comet chaser gave rise to a lengthy, unpublished, plotless story that turned out to be notes for Homunculus. "The Ape-box Affair" was also the result of my love of Robert Louis Stevenson's work (something that still hasn't worn off) and you can find its beginnings and the beginnings of Homunculus in Stevenson's The Wrong Box and in the stories that make up New Arabian Nights. Langdon St. Ives's last name came from the Stevenson's St. Ives, although it was perhaps the only Stevenson novel that I hadn't read and still haven't. (I don't know whether the "St. Ives" of the novel is a person or is the place from which the man with seven wives was coming. One of these days I'll read the book and find out.) Langdon St. Ives, by the way, is a distant forebear of Edward St. Ives, who would make his appearance years later in The Digging Leviathan, which was the novel that Sanctity of Moontide turned into once I got rid of Proust and Sterne and figured out how to write it.

Meanwhile, K.W. and Tim Powers contracted with Roger Elwood to write books in a series that would involve the reincarnation of King Arthur throughout history. The series was scrapped before their novels were published. (I submitted a proposal for a novel involving a plot against George III involving poisoned snuff and William Blake, not knowing that Ray Nelson was already writing Blake's Progress, the first book in the series. Elwood sent me a rejection letter complaining that I was apparently making a mockery of his project. I wasn't, actually, and I remember wondering whether it was a good thing or a bad thing that my writing seemed so effortlessly to make mockeries of things. It wouldn't, alas, be the last time the problem surfaced.) At about that time K.W. met Elwood in Los Angeles to discuss the project, and when the waiter took their drink order, Elwood asked for a "Vanilla 500." K.W. said he'd have the same. The drink turned out to be milk on the rocks, which, K.W. told us at O'Hara's later that same afternoon, contained neither vanilla nor 500. K.W.'s Arthurian novel, Morlock Night, was published by Daw, and Tim's novel, The Drawing of the Dark, was published by Del Rey. The Drawing of the Dark wasn't Steampunk in its setting, but it was Steampunk in spirit, and of course it would be followed up with The Anubis Gates, which is arguably the best novel of the genre.

Late in the 1990's I received a letter from the University of Bologna inviting me to speak at a conference that was to be put on by the Department of Utopian and Dystopian Studies. The subject of the conference was Steampunk, and there was to be a day (out of three) dedicated to my work with me as keynote speaker. My Italian publisher, Mondadori, would host a party. I'd be the talk of the town. I was pleasantly bowled over. I imagined Umberto Eco reading Homunculus with his eyes bulging out – perhaps the scene in which Dr. Narbondo (a name I had borrowed from Borges) tries to animate the skeleton of Joanna Southcote with a bladder full of chemical gas. Eco, of course, would see immediately that the episode was not only a subtle nod to Borges, but to Flaubert, also – to Madame Bovary's lengthy and fairly hilarious death scene. With tears in his eyes he'd wave me onto the stage: thunderous applause, chants from the audience (rendered into Italian) of “Steampunk! Steampunk!”

Unfortunately the University could only offer me several million lire to pay for the trip, which turned out to be about thirty dollars, give or take fifty cents. I couldn't afford to go, which was just as well, because my memory of Umberto Eco goggling over my books, by then fixed in my mind, has remained unsullied all these years since. Certainly that was the



best conference I never attended. It was also my first inkling that Steampunk was “big in Europe” and apparently still is.

Lord Kelvin’s Machine is my most recent effort (although ideally not my final effort) to write out another episode in the life of Langdon St. Ives. It’s hard to believe that I wrote that book fifteen years ago, a time of great change in my own life. As ever, I didn’t foresee the change or perceive it occurring (although I can see its shadow in the novel, now that I reread it). Coming to understand change is always a matter of looking back, which is just what I’ve been doing in this afterword, with no other motive, really, aside from nostalgia.

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