

We've Met the Aliens and They Are Us: Weinbaum's Parables of Class (1993–2010)¹

Note 2020: As evidenced by the years in the title, this chapter has had a lengthy history since its inception as a lecture in the 1990s, after which it was left aside for more urgent matters and finished from copious extant notes. Its first version dovetailed into Darwinism, which has here been cut.

– In memory of Dieter Hasselblatt, SF writer and critic

I am fascinated by ... that other large area of 'science fiction' – the very best of it anyway – in which what I see happening is a structure of feeling formed as some alien life and environment [emphasis added]. Often this stands out more sharply than the structure of feeling ... which ... has been saturated in known and recognizable and connecting detail ...

Raymond Williams (265)

- 1 Weinbaum is one of the SF authors about whom I've been planning to write for the longest time, ever since I read what was available by him in the 1970s. In 1979 I had a discussion in Munich with the SF writer and critic Dieter Hasselblatt after listening to his adaptation of "The Lotus Eaters" as a German radio-play, broadcast – and later printed – by Bavarian Radio; we became friends, thus the dedication in this chapter.

But then I sank into writing about drama and other SF, though I did a paper on Weinbaum at the SF Workshop of the April 1984 Rome meeting of the European Association for American Studies. In early 1993 I started planning a long chapter on the whole of his work for a book of essays, read the then available secondary literature, briefly corresponded with his widow Margaret Kay, with her representative Mr E.L. Davin, and with Temple University where his archives were stored but not yet catalogued. Though I made copious notes, and read at the Rimini symposium "Viaggi in utopia" in March 1993 the paper "Weinbaum and His Aliens: Utopia &/or Parable?"; my book did not come about, nor the essay. I was in the midst of a sweet shipwreck on the shores of Japan and in those years worked more or less exclusively on Japanese material (including an essay on cyberpunk written while there). Finally, in November 2010 I seized the invitation to the conference "Darwin and the Scientific Imagination" at the State University of Milano to write a lecture on Darwin, Stapledon, and Weinbaum's "A Martian Odyssey"; my thanks go to the friendly organizer Carlo Pagetti, without whom this full chapter would probably not have come about. They also go to Hal Hall for his ever-available bibliographical help, and to Rich Erlich.

O.

I propose this first depth discussion of Stanley Weinbaum as a case study parallel to the one about Stapledon in “Darwinism and SF.” When speaking of aliens and “biological SF” one should, of course, begin with H.G. Wells, the fountainhead and major influence on all who came after, but I have done so in several earlier attempts (see *Metamorphoses* and “Science Fiction Parables”), which I believe feed into and dovetail with this continuation. While I shall return to a brief parallel with Stapledon in the conclusion, I shall here focus on Weinbaum as another of Wells’s earliest and best continuators, though not followers.

I. On Weinbaum’s Stories of Aliens

I.o.

Stanley G. Weinbaum, who lived in Wisconsin and died of lung cancer at age 33 in 1935, is an unduly neglected “golden oldie,” a writer formed in the 1920s and the Depression, whose work has not been adequately researched yet. Except for a fannish memorial volume after his death and one novel in 1939, his novels and stories were only published in book form after World War II. Dribbles from his opus were still being published in the 1990s, and I am unaware of any encompassing survey that would do him even halfway justice – say by considering all the main facets of his work. I can here only offer a contribution to such a consideration, dealing with what Weinbaum is justly famous for in SF, as the first creator after Wells and Stapledon (and still one of the best) of truly interesting, that is alien, aliens. Even his biography,²

2 All citations from Weinbaum’s stories refer to the page of the 1974 collection in the Works Cited. I append to this article as Appendix 1 and 2, in the interest of future researchers, a sketch of Weinbaum’s literary ascendancies and a secondary bibliography on him. No. 1 is based both on no. 2 and on reading his opus.

while its outline has been clarified by the meritorious pioneers listed in my Appendix 2, has scarcely been used to illuminate his texts, and so far as I can see not at all inserted into the US 1920s–30s ambience, culminating in the New Deal.

I have chosen to look at five pioneering short stories of his, all published and almost certainly written in 1934–35. SF fans and fannish critics often classify them by their protagonists or their planet but I think this is misleading in the case of parables (since in that logic the parables of rabbi Jehoshua in what the Christians know as the *New Testament* would have to be classified as Palestinian agriculture). While I agree that Weinbaum's loci are indeed important, I wish to redefine this importance. I shall approach these texts as two pairs of linked stories – *Pair 1*, “A Martian Odyssey” and “Valley of Dreams,” in a “desert” locale, *Pair 2*, “Parasite Planet” and “The Lotus Eaters,” in a “jungle” locale, and finally discuss the somewhat aberrant “The Mad Moon” (I cite them as MO, VD, PP, LE, and MM).

In all these stories there are three groups of narrative agents: humans, “furniture” aliens, and significant aliens. The humans tell and comment upon the story, they are important for the intended reader's introduction and assent; the “furniture” or background aliens are important for the feel of exuberant reveling in alienness as exoticism. The humans are rather stereotyped, they are young male go-getters with 1930s' pulp SF dialogue, their clichéd exclamations and professional as well as national attributions going back at best (say in “A Martian Odyssey”) to Verne's Moon novels. The often endearing “furniture” or background aliens – such as the biopods and walking lawns of “A Martian Odyssey” or the Jack Ketch, Friendly, and Pharisee trees, the uniped, and the blind mass of “doughnut” protoplasm in the thickly populated “Parasite Planet” – were path-breaking and encouraged most of the following writers, from Vance and early Lem on. But the real novum of Weinbaum's are *the significant aliens*, those important for the narrations' parabolic tenor and depth meaning.

In both pairs of his stories there is to my mind a more important one and a good but secondary one preceding or following it. I shall proceed in the above chronological order.

I.I. A Magnificent Overture: "A Martian Odyssey"

In Pair 1, the important story is "A Martian Odyssey," and I shall use "Valley of Dreams" only for explaining it. Its parable progresses through four alien species encountered in the clear desert of Mars. One of the central points of Weinbaum's is that they are – especially when compared to the clichéd adventure-story humans – puzzling, strange, interesting on their own as other possibilities of life. This is biologically explained in "Valley of Dreams" as their being neither plants nor animals but a third possibility with some characteristics of both (and the non-humanoid aliens of the other stories are similarly explained). Our narrator encounters first an intelligent ostrich-like being who has language and tools, and is dubbed Tweel: the uses for communication to which Tweel puts the few words of human language he immediately learns (while the human cannot learn any of his!) are most ingenious and not matched until the best of next generation SF and its semiotics. Our explorer protagonist rescues Tweel by shooting the "dream-beast," a scantily described, disgusting, tentacled monster attracting his prey from a hole in the ground by reading the brain's innermost desire and simulating its presence. Next they encounter a row of little pyramids going on for miles and enlarging from 6 inches to 10 feet, in the last of which their builder, a single silicon creature, is found at work – as it has been probably for the last half a million years – excreting bricks, not breathing or thinking. A final alien intelligence is found around a mound-city of mud, in the shape of a series of barrel-like creatures with a tight diaphragm on top capable of booming out words and rows of eyes around it, running with little copper carts to load chunks of rock and plants. Their group mind reproduces the sounds made by the human but has no interest in others until our friends enter the subterranean labyrinth in one mound, lit by electric rods, containing machine wheels which grind the carts' contents for their food, and at the end a fluorescent egg emitting hard radiation, which the human steals.

I interpret this series – friendly alien Tweel and three incommunicable with, truly alien aliens – as analogous to the rabbinic "one good – three bad" model found in Jehoshua's Parables of the Kingdom, for example, the

seed that falls on three bad plots and one good plot. (It is irrelevant here whether Weinbaum consciously used the analogy or not.) The silicon creature is depicted as an unthinking automaton, reproducing through little spores or eggs with an acid gas inside, an immortal mechanism. I think the tenor is here, to begin with, unthinking – not intellectually active – human life consisting of repetitive mechanical tasks, not too dissimilar in intent from Chaplin's satire in *Modern Times* in the same years (1936). The creature consists of a big grey body with one arm and a mouth-hole at one end and a tail to stick into sand (and presumably another aperture) at the other. It is a modern, indeed futuristic bio-equivalent – overspecialized on the order of Wells's Selenites – of the slaves that built pyramids in the sands of Egypt; in other words, it figures forth manual workers in capitalism³: with an intellectual's disdain, such manual work is seen as equivalent to excreting.

The barrel creatures also perform repetitive tasks in order simply to eat, but they have a mechanical civilization. They are derived largely from Wells's Morlocks, with maybe a hint of Wells's "Crystal Egg" (which also deals with a strange Mars), combined with exotic stories of dangerous tribes or East Indian populations worshipping jewel idols with strange rays. The tenor is more difficult to determine in this mishmash assembly,

3 I found a strange passage satirizing a Fordist future in Sherwood Anderson's *A Story Teller's Story* (1924): "... a great machine moving slowly down a street and depositing cement houses to the right and left as it goes, as a diarrhoeic elephant" (<www.books.google.com>, fragment on p. 197). I cannot prove that this is the "source" of the silicon creature, but it seems probable Weinbaum had read this famous fellow-Midwestern writer. I mention this in part to buttress my Appendix 1 thesis of how important mainstream literature was for Weinbaum, and in part to draw attention to his varying it, which might work in favor of my decoding the silicon creature as worker instead of entrepreneur – though Fordist production reposed on a Gramscian "historical block" between capitalists engaged in mass production with new technology and some strata of better-paid working class. But perhaps my decoding should be restricted to "manual workers in capitalist conveyor-belt production"? This could only be decided in a full-scale confrontation with the US literature and culture in the 1920s-30s, which could also provide significant buttressing for my hypothesis of Weinbaum's class vision as a whole.

where dangerous copper-age lower classes or “races” distinctly inferior to our civilization are, incompatibly, also engineers using electricity and in part indeed superior to us (the crystal egg cures cancerous warts). The fight with them is a stand-off, and the presentation uses here, as well as for the dream-beast, some horror suspense techniques. This powerful but inferior civilization, quite alien and not to be communicated with except in battle, can be interpreted, I believe, via Weinbaum’s overt discussion in the fill-in story of three types of social systems: autocracy, communism, and democracy (VD 44). In that light, it is a cross between early Hitlerian Germany, Stalin’s USSR of the Five-Year plans, and exotic barbarian set-ups. The barrel creatures reproduce by budding and their intelligence is “the property of the whole community – like an ant-heap [without individuality]” (VD 32): this is a system of undemocratic or impersonal unanimity, symbolized in their incessant Stakhanovism, their suicide for community, and their booming out “We are v-r-r-riends! Ouch!” (By the way, Weinbaum seems to share the 1930s’ US Left ambiguity toward the USSR, as in “Valley of Dreams” the secondary narrator is a sympathetic Frenchman living in Communist Paris; but the ideal society, with some qualifications, is seen to be Tweel’s Anarchy.)

Thus, the three creatures encountered by friend Tweel and the narrator grow, as he notes, in strangeness and in menace – though the most dangerous dream-beast is for dramatic reasons met with twice, adding at the end the narrator as intended prey. Significantly, what he “sees” as lure is a sexy woman-friend, a “vision entertainer” (I guess Weinbaum meant by the ambiguous “vision” a twenty-first century super-movie-cum-TV), beckoning him on, presumably to erotic bliss. This is expanded in “Valley of Dreams” to a whole colony of dream-beasts, the fight with and again narrow escape from which leaves the humans thoroughly shaken, since they’ve experienced both “Heaven and Hell” (out of their Freudian Id) in those powerful visions. They function as a super-Hollywood, often called then a “dream factory,” so that the tenor is to my mind the whole system of fusing advertising with performance into *persuasion by abuse of desire*, at that very time powerfully developing in the USA by grafting pop Freudianism on the Barnum hype tradition. It is compensatory satisfaction for alienated labor, manual or intellectual, and operates – as here – by a shaping of affectual investment to reject any reality constriction of one’s

desire, which leads to death: my name for it is Disneyfication (see much more in Suvin "Utopianism").

All of this together seems to me to amount to a Weinbaumian hypothesis, possibly not fully conceptualized in the text, a hypothesis about US class psychology and politics held by Weinbaum. The silicon beast is brainless but productive and immortal, like a jaundiced version of Bakhtin's joyously immortal people in his *Rabelais* exegesis just a few years later. The mindless busyness of the barrel creatures is a dangerous step upward, a unanimous and fanatic technocracy with electricity and hard rays. The dream-beast is the most dangerous because rooted in Weinbaum's society (analogous to its lurking under the surface of Mars): it stands for the lure of consumer capitalism making for death of the intellect. This semantic and allegorical space is a social topology seen and evaluated from the stance of an individualist intellectual, whose ideal – if it could only work among the human "emotional, highly competitive race" – would be Emerson's government "that governs least" (VD 44). It is of a piece with the view of a male intellectual in a puritanical society: for the Tweels are not only the first intellectuals (they invented writing and gave it to the Egyptians using the name Thoth) but also sexless. Weinbaum's is a distinctly ambiguous view of woman as alluring, powerful, and dangerous unto death – in "A Martian Odyssey," but also in "Parasite Planet" and "The Mad Moon," and further in his writings not aimed at the sanitized S-F pulps ("The Adaptive Ultimate," *The Black Flame*, etc.). The Thothes' ideal anarchism, without wars and with co-operation instead of competition, is thus an ideal almost as impossible for humans beset by sex and competition as emulating Swift's Houyhnhnhms, the Noble Horses, was for Gulliver, but a good compromise would be the friendly alliance and trade which is the wished-for horizon of "Valley of Dreams": we give them our competitive know-how (atomic energy) to survive, they give us lessons in civility and understanding. The humans, with their mixture of the protagonist-narrator's understanding and the supporting narrative agents' obtuseness, their self-conceit, and their atomic power, are thus finally not only what the parable signifies but also openly shows: a fifth species, potentially the most dangerously aggressive one.

1.2. *The Cognitive Breakthrough: "The Lotus Eaters"*

In Pair 2, the secondary story "Parasite Planet" precedes the main one and therefore acquires some independent characteristics which give it, alongside the function of introducing "The Lotus Eaters," a greater importance on its own. I assume, from what we know about Weinbaum writing quickly and not correcting his SF stories (cf. Davin and Kay) as well as from the internal narrative evidence, that this was a deliberate inversion and expansion-cum-variation in respect to the immediately preceding Pair 1. It is possibly based on the experience Weinbaum had from it that this readership needed to have his new and somewhat challenging locales explained more thoroughly than was possible in one single short story (one account has it that "Valley of Dreams" was the refurbishing of an earlier and looser draft of "A Martian Odyssey").

In "Parasite Planet," the jungle of Venus Hotlands, much fiercer than the Terran Amazon or Congo ones, differs from Mars by an incomparably higher level of energy, explained by its nearness to the Sun, with an abundance of oppressive humidity and of parasitic "avid and greedy life" (185) – life visibly arising from and causing immediate death. This is well exemplified by the omnipresent menace of spores and molds, as well as by the giant mud-spouts from below and crawling "doughpot" masses which punctuate the plot. Where the desert was clear, flat, and dry, the jungle is a thickly inhabited world, running riot with slimy rapacious creatures of multiple legs and mouths avid for ingestion, vegetable omnivores, tumultuous climate, impassable rivers, dangerous mountain ridges, and the smallest misstep means death.

After its first third, consisting of description and our protagonist Ham's fleeing through the menacing jungle, the story proceeds as a love plot between disdainful Englishwoman Pat and our Yankee engineering hero (a hint of Mark Twain's *Connecticut Yankee* here?). Ham is a trader-adventurer buying pods for rejuvenation treatments on Earth from natives, a somewhat more grown-up hero from boys' stories melded with the explorer from exotic stories – say by London, maybe Conrad, and so many others. Pat is a post-flapper girl, active, self-confident, and professional (thus better characterized than almost anything in pulp SF before the 1950s), but

there is also an aspect of taming the soon melted shrew, with retardatory misunderstandings, rather too many menacing emergencies for propelling the plot, and a silly happy ending. The rather irrelevant US-British conflict, soon appeased, is analogous to those in the Klondike gold rush or in the Antarctic. The brief appearances first of an approachable native and then of a savage but intelligent species, the *Trioptes* with a “slanting, malevolent, dusky visage” (208), are clearly taken from colonial stories or travel books, possibly from Malraux's *La Voie royale* (*The Royal Way*, both original and translation published 1930).

The story is in comparison to Pair 1 much more urgent, both because of the deadly wars of each against each amid the dangerous teeming life and because subtended and strengthened by a series of binary oppositions: the much more endangered protagonists become a couple and will go on fully as such in the following story “The Lotus Eaters”; the locale is polarized between unbearably hot and bearably cooler, low jungle and high mountains.

Whence this change? I think it comes from a concurrence of collective social factors in the depths of the US Depression and personal factors of an increasingly sick author, both making for increased menace. I shall confine myself here to the autobiographical aspect, and take a cue from the fleetingly named river on Venus, Phlegethon. It was a river of fire in the Hellenic Underworld, but it seems more to the point that in Dante's Hell it is a river of blood that boils souls, in the Seventh Circle where are punished those who committed violence against their fellow men (see Canto XI, 34–39). Though I am not sure how well Weinbaum knew Dante, the similarities here seem too pat for chance. Not only does Ham call the jungle “Hell of a place,” not only is the river in Dante guarded by centaurs while Venusian Natives also have four legs and two arms. Most important is the suggestion of blood and heat coupled with the all-pervasive disgust at fleshly rot by invasion of spores, molds, and fungi, both of which would naturally occupy the mind of a feverish cancer patient (indeed, when describing the destructive “doughpot,” cancer cells are overtly mentioned, and coupled with the name of Proust – a quite possible disguise for the author, oriented toward French literature). Also, the rejuvenation treatment for which Ham supplies materials is in an inverted Swiftian vein seen as buying youth but not staving off dying.

“The Lotus Eaters” is to my mind – though possibly less homogeneous than the clarity of “A Martian Odyssey” and the *tour de force* of “The Mad Moon” – Weinbaum’s most important short story. It takes place on Venus’s ice fringe, a darker place lit by a baleful greenish glow: the warmth and fullness of life from “Parasite Planet” has been left behind. I shall continue calling it a jungle world because of its cruel Social Darwinism, but it is a frozen and freezing jungle, excellently symbolized by its specimens repeatedly turning to a putrid mass when brought to normal human temperatures. Its venues are reached by quick rocket hops quite opposed to the difficult inching through dangers of “Parasite Planet.” Though the two stories are of approximately the same length and a somewhat similar macro-structure, their argument proceeds differently. I shall introduce it by means of a little table (the numbers indicate pages in *The Best of SW*; my length estimate and formulation of themes is approximate):

These two stories are a very well-wrought study in unity of opposites: though opposed in the narrative vehicle, they both culminate in the menacing tenor explicated and decisively brought to a head in “The Lotus Eaters,” which subsumes the warm under the bitterly cold parasitic competition working toward the zero point of genocide or extinction. As suggested in Table 4, the tenor appears already in the initial recap, which correctly forecast that life has arrived to this extremity from the warmer, more feverish loci of “Parasite Planet.” In “The Lotus Eaters” the introduction can, in spite of the recap, be briefer, and immediately get at the actual problem and tenor of intelligence vs. survival because of which, in my hypothesis, Pair 2 acquires a full meaning as a whole (whether Weinbaum planned it as such or discovered this by working through it). As shown in the somewhat strange and concerned – “nervous” – little apologue or fable of Pat’s about the lizards who did and the fish who didn’t develop intelligence, for Weinbaum “all life tends to become intelligent” (LE 217). One could, and I think should, read this also as “life culminates in intelligence.” Without such a perspectival vanishing point “Parasite Planet” would have remained an impressive but secondary genre-painting of a feverish locale, clumsily intertwined with an adolescent love story.

The break between introductory preparation and discovery in “The Lotus Eaters” clearly comes about when Pat and Ham leave the rocket and are hit by what they step into: “[N]ow it was actually around them, and the

Table 4: Narrative Structure of Weinbaum's Pair 2

STORY TITLE	<i>Parasite Planet</i>	<i>The Lotus Eaters</i>
Section I	181–90 = 10 pp., introduction to locale	211–18 = 7 pp., introduction to locale and to problem of intelligence
Section II	190–99 = 8.5 pp., quarrel H-P	218–30 = 12.5 pp., discovery of Trioptes and Oscar
Section III	199–210, 12 pp., H-P separation and reunion	230–40, 10 pp., discussion with O, conflict with Tr, full realization of problem
Purpose	presentation of strange locale with competition run crazy	presentation of survival problem in modified strange locale of competition
Narrative dominant	plot-oriented	problem-oriented

cold breath and mournful voice of the underwind proved definitely enough that the world was real” (LE 218). True, the limit between sections II and III is clearer in the mainly plot-oriented “Parasite Planet,” but anyway my sections are not meant as watertight compartments, previews and recalls abound. However, even in the mainly problem-oriented “The Lotus Eaters,” these two sections can be differentiated as two stages of understanding the collective “Oscar situation”: first, that this “warm-blooded, mobile vegetable” (229)⁴ is highly if differently intelligent, and second that its superb

4 In truth, “Oscar” is not a very mobile plant, just enough to give the impression of a being akin to animals.

I have not been able to find the source for the quote on p. 246, “And tore the bleeding mandragore.” It’s obviously a line of iambic verse, and the two periods of *mandragora* or mandrake popularity in the UK have been the Elizabethan and the Victorian age. But in spite of uses by Shakespeare, Marlowe, and Jonson in the former and of Barrett Browning and Wilde in the latter case, an internet search did not find the verse. It might rather be from one of Weinbaum’s favorite writers such as Hecht or Cabell in the USA or the “decadents” such as Swinburne or Fletcher, or from one of his uncollected poems (it is not in his *Lunaria*).

speculative imagination utterly lacks desire and a sense of loss, so that it sees its own coming species extinction with full indifference.

The culminating conflict in Pair 2, which subsumes the other binary oppositions mentioned in “Parasite Planet,” is then the one between the supremely philosophical but supremely inactive Oscars and the “fierce, bloodthirsty, barbaric” (LE 220) Trioptes who feed on them. The template here is the awful warning given to the reader by the Eloi and Morlocks from *The Time Machine*, but instead of Wells’s effete and childlike Eloi, supposedly devolved from a decaying upper-class aristocracy, the Oscars, a collective being, in my hypothesis stand in for a peculiar variant of powerless intellectuals. It is about and to them the awful warning of Weinbaum’s is addressed. As Pat had explained in the significant “preview” of section I (also a device of Wellsian origins, see Suvin, *Metamorphoses* 213), intelligence has – although “you Yankees worship [it]” (LE 216) – in strictly Darwinian terms little survival value, since even today worms and insects (and, one may carry over from the preceding story, fungi, molds or perhaps one-celled beings) are as species better at survival, though Pat concedes *Homo sapiens* has, for the long present moment, supremacy on Earth (and Venus). And the discussions between the two humans and Oscar establish two significantly dissimilar oppositions to intelligence: first, survival, and second, power or the Will to Power (in pop Nietzschean terms). Indeed, the final argument of the humans to Oscar is: why don’t you make machinery and arms? – and his/their answer is a quasi-Buddhist refusal or impotence of willing it.

But what is here meant by intelligence? Its identification with the Yankee use of machinery and weapons means it is what the German tradition from Hegel and Kant through Weber to Marcuse and the other Frankfurters would call *Vernunft* not *Verstand*, that is, pragmatic technological reason as practiced in the capitalist social formation – and allied with or depending on private or State bureaucracy and financing, witness “The Lotus Eaters” rocketship expedition “spending government money” (213). The refusal of this kind of reason by the cosmically savvy Oscars means then, to my mind, that these passive intellectuals are as a class (since species, I contend, always stand for certain facets of class in the post-Wellsian tradition of aliens) unwilling to practice it, for it would bring about, equally,

their death as intellectuals. For them, the life of intelligence means cognitive reflection about life's mysteries, in the age-old tradition of Old World philosophy, pre-Baconian in its refusal to "vex nature," possibly in part latching on to the rabbinic tradition of meditation. Their extermination by savage and aggressive predators is the fate of such independent intellectuals as a social class – engaged in understanding rather than immediate power and profit – in the clutches of practical Social Darwinists, the US businessmen (replicated "in a state of highly inflamed distension" by today's mega-corporations and mega-bankers), who are excoriated as monsters in a long US tradition (see Hofstadter and Suvin "Darwinism"). This was also the tradition of Weinbaum as an intellectual.

Beside and in a way beyond the Oscars-Trioptes conflict there is the enhanced role of the human characters. They are no longer, as in Pair 1, safely retrospective commentators. This can be seen in two ways. First, in the planetary adventure narrative surface or vehicle, they're themselves endangered by the hypnotic gas warfare of the Trioptes – an upgrading of the dream-beast telepathy from "A Martian Odyssey" to World War I gas warfare – and almost succumb to the same "lotus-eating" listlessness and lack of meaning as the Oscars. They escape from becoming the Trioptes' prey in the nick of time, through Ham's animal desire for eating (i.e., for survival). But in the parabolic tenor, this partial link serves to point unmistakably out that the Oscars stand for human possibilities. We humans – you too, gentle reader, insofar as you are an intellectual – are in this story faced with the quandary: either supremacy (success, power) without the proper use of intellect, or the proper use of intellect without power and survival as a class; either to be a true intellectual, the obverse or downside of which is to be collectively passive and finally die out, or to be active and dominant but have no intellectual values. On the bright side, I may add, intellectuals can also produce cognitive stories such as these, which allow us to critically dissent from the inevitability of pessimism. This dissent is prefigured in possibly the most pregnant remark in "The Lotus Eaters," that the Oscars are both Lotus Eaters and Lotus: that is, they are self-drugged or drugged by what they are. The escaped humans and we readers might possibly learn a lesson.

This reading of "The Lotus Eaters" and Pair 2 underlines its underlying scheme or skeleton, which powerfully determines its values and horizons.

The Trioptes – perfect Hobbean predators, cunning, pragmatically successful, and victorious – are the US go-getters, centrally sparked by the businessmen who had just led the country to Depression and ruin at the time of Weinbaum’s writing (and are also satirized in his realistic trifle “Graph”). Thorstein Veblen, a great favorite of the New Dealers, had already a generation earlier concluded that the US business class was essentially predatory, and described the character of “the ideal pecuniary man” in terms fitting for moral delinquents (237–38, and see Hofstadter 152–56).

The Oscars – who resemble an upside-down basket and have lots of eyes – are upside-down visionary beings who have no desires but obey plant necessity: “[Oscar has the] intelligence of a god but he hasn’t the will of a worm” (235). They cognize the universe as subject to senseless chance. Their universe of sudden and overwhelming catastrophes wrought by the predatory, capitalist Social Darwinism is clearly of a piece with the Oscars’ refusal of the “fight for [life]” (238), and it is possibly also symbolized by the librating Lesser Eternities on Venus where the story takes place; the fact that it’s astronomically incorrect to show Venus as divided, like the Earth’s Moon, into bright and dark hemispheres only underlines that Weinbaum had powerful other meanings tugging at him. All of this would account for this story’s threatened, indeed plangent note.

Such an approach can also answer the seemingly minor question: how come the Trioptes are simultaneously three-eyed and light-shy? Three eyes may go arithmetically together with hexapodic limbs – you simply augment human numbers by half again – but the third eye is both biologically weird and incompatible with their Morlock-like dread of light (it comes from monsters like the Cyclops and/or esoteric legends of a third eye). We have here either surface sensationalism tending to nonsense or a strong intended meaning pulling the surface narration toward it. I am in favor of the latter hypothesis as more economic and kinder to the author, in which case it reposes on the age-old association of light and understanding to reason (say in Oedipus or Lear). If we read Trioptes as US businessmen, surely they have – beside lots of will-sapping technology – lots of pragmatic cunning (*Vernunft*), a very good eye for the main chance, thence three eyes; but in this optic of class horror and antagonism, they also dread the real light of human and cosmic understanding (*Verstand*).

Some elements or facets of “The Lotus Eaters” are however not accounted for by this allegoresis, and I shall mention one, the sexual element. Ham finally saves the human pair because his hunger is stronger than the hypnotic effect of the Trioptes’ gas. This may be taken as a gag, comic relief for the teenage reader after all the heavy debates. But it cannot be taken as only a gag: the hunger is in the story explained as an animal quality, opposed to the plant-like Oscars, who do not know sex, love or fighting, and it is associated with maleness bordering on macho (Pat would have been gassed). A further discussion would here be due, I think, about Darwinian Sexual Selection and its relationship to the class allegory, and in particular to the collective – that is, class – reason for Weinbaum’s pessimism. This differs from and subsumes the autobiographical reason explicated in my analysis of “Parasite Planet,” possibly because Weinbaum had dealt with it there and could now subordinate his, no doubt continuing, fear for life to his reason for living.

The collectively overarching pessimism of the Oscars’ suggested cosmic philosophy mingles in somewhat pell-mell ways the Stoic *amor fati* (being in love with one’s destiny), the Buddhist Nirvana, and a kind of Schopenhauerian pessimism. I don’t find meaningless the little discussion between the humans at the outset of “The Lotus Eaters” of having arrived to “Nowhere” (212) and even less so the rather unfortunate praise of the “Malthusian law” toward its end. As for Schopenhauer, he is quite clearly mentioned in *The New Adam* (73), Weinbaum’s interesting novel of superman as lonely intellectual (though to my mind all superman novels fail insofar as they want to cognitively show a being we cannot by definition understand). In that novel much is made of conflict between intellect and sexuality, including strong misogynous and indeed sex-denying elements. Thus, if one wanted to take this conflict into full account, these stories should be read together with the novel – especially if one were to twin this conflict with the opposition between hot and cold, quite important for “The Lotus Eaters” where it measures the degree of competition and aggression – but this goes beyond my theme here. Weinbaum was heavily influenced by Symbolist poets and writers, and his writings unfold as quite well-developed and often well-handled symbolic systems, so that we are

not allowed to simply forget what doesn't fit our critical grid. The grid has to be flexible enough to allow for expansion.⁵

1.3. *A Well-Wrought Retreat: "The Mad Moon"*

I shall be brief about Weinbaum's last alien story, "The Mad Moon," an amusing grotesque comedy. Its tropical jungle heat is expressly equated with the Venusian Hotlands, but it is also distanced from that locale by being sited on Io. It is situated in the twenty-second century, after "the gold crisis of 2110 had wiped out [the hero's] fortune" (81), a transparent allusion to the Great Depression of 1929; this dating may also indicate, compared to the twenty-first century of the first four stories, a displacement of interest. Of the two alien species, the smart man-like rodents "slinkers" (imported from a brief mention in "Valley of Dreams," their six-inch size and villages possibly suggesting aggressive Lilliputians) remain an unexplained though interesting devilish menace, used as plot propellers – as were the menaces of the preceding four stories. The inefficient and giggling "loonies" turn out to be another decadent or degenerated remnant of a great old civilization – like the Thoths of Pair 1 or Malraux's Khmers. Both are deftly sketched in but cannot be communicated with and remain on the periphery. The boy-gets-girl love story, situated (literally) within an exhausting fever, is even more anemic (not to say prim, with the feeble titillation of the girl's clothes being snipped off by the slinkers) than the Ham-Pat one: it is love at first sight or, even worse,

5 I wish to note here, also for future researchers, that in some of his non-SF Weinbaum is clearly also using the tradition of strange beings as allegories of sexual and psychic states, a technique taken from the earlier Decadents and Cabell and buttressed by his knowledge of Freudian procedures. As testified even here by the Thoths in "A Martian Odyssey" and the "loonies" in "The Mad Moon," Weinbaum was much exercised by civilizations with high intelligence falling prey to decadence. And of course, in some cases where an author's writing slackens, there is no single explanatory grid or model to be found, s/he is engaged in bricolage or do-it-yourself. The rage for unity has a solid basis but should also have solid limits.

mediated by newspaper fame: the rich society belle forming a perfect pair with the top sportsman.

The story's strength lies in an excellently sustained feverish atmosphere that creates a tight correspondence between the planetary locale and the lovers' clouded perceptions, which makes of "The Mad Moon" perhaps the most homogeneous of these five stories. This correspondence is efficaciously reinforced by the seemingly meaningless interjections of the parrot-like pet "parcat," using Weinbaum's knowledge of Freud's dream analyses and perhaps a dash of Surrealist automatic writing. Thus in the first part it's unclear to our lovers what is real and what illusion, what outer and what inner. This too brings to a head Weinbaum's constant preoccupation with hallucinations (in "A Martian Odyssey," "Valley of Dreams," "The Lotus Eaters").

In sum, Weinbaum recycles here many already used elements, resulting in interesting and in places charming depictions divorced from any consideration of aliens as human possibilities. Here, the aliens are not us, rather we are love-story clichés. I would rate it as an honorable retreat to vivacious superficiality that concentrates on tight execution, probably enforced by his real bouts of fever and failing health.⁶

2. Pointers to a Conclusion

2.1.

Many cognitive and narratological objections are possible to what emerges from these five stories as a common denominator: an in places flimsy and in places quite vanguard allegorical sketch of Weinbaum's. Yet to write

6 Another story with "planetary aliens," "The Planet of Doubt" published in *Astounding* for October 1935, should be mentioned here because it shares the protagonist couple of my Pair 2. However, the strange creatures are only a kind of super-caterpillar, used for menacing suspense to boot. As always in Weinbaum, the story has some charmingly grotesque aspects, but when compared to those discussed here it is a sad falling off. I hope it paid some bills for the ailing author.

four stories that invite to be read as sophisticated parables where aliens are a vehicle for various class tenors, and centrally for endangered intellectuals such as the author, is astounding and outstanding in writings aimed at a juvenile SF audience in the New Deal effervescence of the early 1930s. The pioneering status of his significant aliens and their cognitive, at their best almost overtly political, value are remarkable.⁷ To mention just the most obvious vectors, the ethico-political point of the “desert Mars” Pair 1, equally in the ideal anarchist co-operation and in the competitive aggressiveness of the humans (the latter extended to the whole animal realm in Pair 2) points forward to such SF classics as Le Guin’s *The Dispossessed* and *The Word for World Is Forest*. In the “jungle Venus” Pair 2, the much greater danger incurred by the protagonists signals the heightened urgency of the problem of Social-Darwinist competitiveness and its final horizon of (literal) genocide. The main breakthrough is the head-on collision in “The Lotus Eaters” between intellect and either power (politically speaking) or survival (cosmobiologically speaking). Mars was a stymied or dying world, but as represented by the noble and friendly Thothes, it had the opportunity of being rejuvenated by a new infusion of human energy. Venus is a world of perverse life or death-in-life, in both the hot “Parasite Planet” and the cold “Lotus Eaters” variant, and its aliens are either totally feral and savage or doomed to extinction, which casts its potential shadow on humans too. The urgent collision was met by new narrative devices, including the Shavian technique of mingling explicit philosophico-political explanation with events having just occurred. Though Weinbaum was very far from politics, his stance seems to me rather near to G. B. Shaw’s: urbane, engaged, and pointedly critical but not revolutionary.

- 7 It might be sobering to compare any of these stories by Weinbaum with a standard SF product of the time. If we were to take as average example John Taine’s *The Crystal Horde* (*Amazing Stories Quarterly* 1930), its vague “crystal life” menaces are seen as the “blind Nature” of Social Darwinism in a racist and imperialist melodrama. I choose it not only because Taine is one of the three new SF names Weinbaum mentions but also because some critics (cf. Moskowitz and Pierce) have compared it to Weinbaum’s stories, while it is exactly what he superseded and outclassed – that is, made cognitively though alas not empirically unrepresentable.

While “The Lotus Eaters” has not had the critical acclaim and well-deserved fame of “A Martian Odyssey,” it seems to me richer, deeper, and much more radical. The only one of these stories without a happy-ending splint either of a new discovery or of the *amor vincit omnia* (love triumphant) kind, it disdainfully refuses US go-getting pragmatism, technocracy, and weaponry, not to mention religion (“we were all atheists” reminisced his widow, in Davin and Kay 79): it signifies a veiled but radical dissidence. As in “A Martian Odyssey” but more richly, its protagonists not only behave as two anthropologists in, say, New Guinea, but the point of view or stance of the narration itself is anthropological: we have to describe strange new ways of living, how does one do it, how does one go about it (language), how are we to evaluate it, what sense does it make? In that way, “The Lotus Eaters” prefigured and helped to bring about the great anthropological SF wave and golden time of about 1961–74, from Oliver and Sheekley to Dick and Le Guin, and its continuation today in Cherryh, K.S. Robinson, Slonczewski, Amy Thomson, and others. Beyond the surface of a pulp narrative (the adventure plus love story) with its clichés, beyond even the Kantian gradation of planets by age, the stories leading up to “The Lotus Eaters” form the deep structure of a post-crash, New Deal individualist intellectual’s parable being slowly worked out. The travel on imaginary planets is here the estranging prism of the author’s own inmost class (political, gender, etc.) problems, discursively verified by getting to them and through them.

I am not sure my hypothesis can, or should, explain all in the discussed writings by Weinbaum. He was, after all, just hacking his way toward clarity and attaining it in less than a half a dozen stories and perhaps one novel amid perpetual haste for financial and health reasons, before succumbing. Some of his stories – in SF, for example, “Smothered Seas” – are indeed smothered by pulp writing and/or knee-jerk patriotic ideology (probably in cynical lip service). But at his best, he managed to convey the painful stresses, both sexual and in a wide sense of the word political, of a Midwest intellectual who matured in the 1920s and was living through the Depression. There, he carved out for himself an impressive stance between the cluttered fever of competition-cum-sex and the cool clarity of contemplation.

2.2.

A parallel to Stapledon's *Aliens*, discussed in my "Darwinism" essay and Chapter 32 in this book, may be helpful. The stance of these two authors has a great deal in common, especially in what they oppose. Of course, one deals in mega-constructions and the other (Weinbaum) in mini ones. Yet the conclusions to be drawn from the latter's stories looked at here are not so far from what I found for Stapledon's *Last and First Men*: constructively, in Pair 1, a melding of good ole Yankee know-how and European – perhaps even young Soviet – civic values, and destructively, in Pair 2, a warning against aggressiveness and abuse of desire in cahoots with atomic energy, and against the doleful prospect of species (which I read as class) extinction. The main differences may lie in Stapledon's stress on the horizon of individuality-in-community, addressed to a savvy UK reading public, as opposed to Weinbaum's unease with this concept, from which he is therefore easily sidetracked into a fascination with erotics, both because of his more endangered position and because of a teenage pulp target audience. However, identifying in both cases a possible and supremely important parabolic tenor can lead us to a fertile discussion about how to treat SF with more respect in our highly endangered times, where huge and radical choices are on the existential agenda and the role of the independent critical intellectual and his/her cognition or understanding may again be growing crucial. As suggested above, the clear Martian desert is a forerunner of Le Guin's anarchist Anarres, for me possibly the most pertinent US SF so far, whose much richer clarity and novel-length articulation dispenses with biological aliens.

My parallel to Stapledon points to the fact that in some significant cases Natural Selection and the Struggle for Life can be used as justifications within an SF plot, but that this very rarely hinges upon a specifically Darwinist justification nor does it significantly inflect the plot's upshot (there are brilliant exceptions, of which Bradbury's "A Sound of Thunder" [1952] springs immediately to mind). Unlike Stapledon, Weinbaum was fascinated by natural sciences and especially biology, so that he followed the work of de Vries, of Weisman, and of Morgan on fruit flies (all mentioned in "The Adaptive Ultimate"). His stories discussed here may point

to the fact that the various species' ways of coping and interacting have provided indispensable jumping-off points or vehicles for the plot. Yet his work is quite free from the usual banal racism, where the Struggle for Life is reduced to human intelligence as cosmically superior or inferior and a competitive will allied to sexuality. Should this distance from Darwinian concepts in the narrow sense be confirmed by further, more numerous probes, Darwin's supposed two main laws would be shown as fictionally dispensable.

However, Darwin remains supremely pertinent in two ways. On the positive side, his ecological or population thinking has permeated the best SF at least as much as Freudianism has permeated its lower reaches. Both Stapledon and Weinbaum use an open parable form within a more or less improvised, impromptu doctrine, which may also be called a semantic topology. Since they do so from rather differing stances, utopian communism and cosmic mentalism in the first case, and dissenting individualist intellectualism in the other, I would claim that my hypothesis of SF as centrally a parable mode has been much strengthened. As different from the narrations in the *New Testament* or, say, in what Lévi-Strauss analyzed as the South American Natives' myths, the parables' vehicle is adjusted to an age where believability is bound up with the sciences, in particular the natural ones – such as Darwinist evolution. Yet the tenor is, as (I think) always in culture, some alternative of human stances for living together and surviving.

On the negative side, feral Social Darwinism is incessantly reborn from the deepest springs of capitalism and therefore incessantly recurs within it (I've attempted to face it at length in the dominant strand of "military SF" following upon Pournelle and Niven, cf. "Starship"). This was equally abhorrent to Stapledon and Weinbaum. But Stapledon finally shrugs it off in somewhat Olympian ways, by allowing the unethical aspects to overwhelm several epochs of *Homo sapiens* until the species acquires the wisdom and the good fortune – in the aftermath of the Martian invasion – to improve itself biologically. At least in "The Lotus Eaters," Weinbaum faces it squarely and with memorable success.

I do not share Weinbaum's pessimism (nor Stapledon's million-year optimism) but that is not the point. The point for me is not whether the

horizons of a narration coincide with my horizons, for I am not engaged in such militant criticism, but instead with what can be understood or cognized for our straits through the roundabout route of fiction. Here, in SF and in our political situation, an intelligent pessimism is up to a point quite indispensable, and it can, if proper consequences are drawn from it (Walter Benjamin would quite rightly say: if it is properly organized), grow into a powerful lever for countering this Social Darwinism.

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Weinbaum's Literary Ascendancies

Weinbaum wrote that his interest in SF dates from his earliest memories. He explicitly mentioned the Motor Boys series of 1906–24, Verne, Wells, Poe, Shelley's *Frankenstein*, Bellamy's *Looking Backward* (whose scope and purpose he held up as exemplary for SF), E.R. Burroughs, and Conan Doyle (presumably the Professor Challenger series, one of the models for Weinbaum's Professor Van Manderpootz series). However, while he knew well popular fiction – not only, as attested, Zane Grey and H.P. Lovecraft but also love stories and detective stories – Weinbaum knew, probably even better, “mainstream” prose and poetry, though his “Autobiographical Sketch” mentions only *Robinson Crusoe* and *Candide*. His relationship to contemporary writers is almost entirely obscure, but it is to my mind important that he read the nearby Ben Hecht (in Chicago), who had by then published a dozen books of prose and with whom he shared a significant admiration for the Decadents and Satanists such as Huysmans. Also significant for him, and also quite unexplored, was the “Orientalist” vogue in English verse from (say) Fitzgerald's *Rubaiyat* to Swinburne, Fletcher, and other minor Symbolists. This equally holds for the realistic tradition in prose, often including its “fantasy” forms as in Stevenson, Hecht or Cabell (cf. Robert Bloch 303). He was interested in drama, and knew the criticism (and most probably the plays) of G.B. Shaw as well as the daring novelities of Wilde and O'Neill. His reading of not only the older but also the contemporary SF, of which he mentions Keller, Breuer, and Taine, and elsewhere Lovecraft, allowed him to absorb the framework of “genre memory” in the pulps.

My impression from reading the whole of Weinbaum is that his most important ascendancies were the “mainstream” generations writing ca. 1880–1910 and then his contemporaries. I would especially stress his very good grounding in French literature, from Villon, Rabelais, and Voltaire

to the *poètes maudits*; just for one example, the title of his novel *The Black Flame* seems derived from Racine's play *Phèdre*, where *la flamme noire* is explained as *amour coupable* (guilty love). His aliens owe something to the only writers to have envisaged in some detail vegetable and mineral ones, Flammarion (whose speculations he knew, see *A Martian* ... 273) and possibly Rosny Aîné.

My hypothesis would be that much of Weinbaum's innovative stance can be explained by situating him at the crossroads of some "mainstream" – semi-realistic and semi-modernistic – preoccupations, to which he owed his deepest loyalties, and the existing genre models of SF which he considered only a temporary and second-best outlet for his writing. The true anecdote that he was furious with his wife for sending "The Martian Odyssey" to the SF magazine under his own name rather than a pseudonym confirms that: "Now my name is ruined for good! Nobody will ever read anything I write. I want to do serious writing!" he had cried (Davin and Kay 89); and his widow adds "he said it was pretty sad that none of the authors knew how to write English." No doubt, this pertains only to the pulp magazines, and not to the tradition of Bellamy and Wells, which he defined in a very appropriate fashion as the genre's "critical possibilities":

[Science fiction] is the ideal medium to express an author's ideas, because it can (but doesn't) criticize everything ... Western stories, for instance, have no critical possibilities because they deal with conditions fifty years dead. Romance has only a few opportunities in sociological fields. Adventure is equally limited, but science fiction has no limits. It can criticize social, moral, technical, political, or intellectual conditions – or any others. It's a weapon for intelligent writers, of which there are several, but they won't practice its use.

Oh, a few have tried it ... [But] by far the most of this sort of writing, when couched in the usual form of satire, is heavy, obvious, and *directed at unimportant targets*. No one has attempted it on the scale of Bellamy, *who actually did criticize world social conditions in the form of a science fiction story, and presented a sort of solution*.

... [S]cience fiction is, or at least ought to be, a branch of the art of literature, and can therefore quite properly argue, reject, present a thesis, proselytize, criticize, or perform any other ethical function ...

("An Autobiographical Sketch," in *A Martian* xxvii-viii, emphasis mine)

I take this declaration of Weinbaum's, for all its haste, as a key for understanding his SF writing. This chapter is an attempt to verify in how far it is critical of the main social knots, and how far its roundabout, non-obvious, and elegant obverse of satire is directed at the important target of, if not as Bellamy presenting a solution to "world social conditions," then at least implying one by contraries. This would involve defining what the solution was about, but also who the solution was for.

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Appendix 2: Secondary Literature on Weinbaum and His SF Context (Selected)

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