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Clogging Up the (In)Human Works: Harlan Ellison's Apocalyptic Postmodern Visions

OSCAR DE LOS SANTOS

> There is only one end to creation. What is created is destroyed, and thus full circle is achieved.
>
> Ellison, "The Region Between"

> . . . the search for your soul in a soulless world requires special maps.
>
> Ellison, *Deathbird Stories*

■ As the decade draws to a close and we approach the end of the twentieth century, virtually every mode of artistic expression is projecting its own version of apocalypse via works that contemplate the end of humankind. For many authors, however, this is not a new investigation. Such is true of Harlan Ellison, who focused on apocalyptic themes in his first sold short story ("Glowworm," 1956) and who has frequently returned to this theme throughout his career. In much of his fiction, Ellison struggles to project warnings about humanity's demise even as he celebrates our past accomplishments and potential.

Whether writing one of his many essays, television or motion picture scripts, or short stories (a body of material comprised of over 1,200 separate works thus far), Ellison most frequently channels his energies into works of science fiction, fantasy, and horror. When he does turn to speculative fiction, one of his most frequent principal characters—a character who appears in many guises but who embodies the same qualities from story to story—is the trickster: the angry, feisty, marginalized underdog; the little guy who won't go down without a fight, who wishes to clog up the works of (in)human conformity and make a race rise above mediocrity. This character will fight apathy and submissive attitudes in others even when he believes that he himself no longer wishes to live. Ellison

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has said that an author must cannibalize his existence in order to find the material about which to write. We can also take this to mean, as is fundamentally the case, that an author is all of his/her characters. Certainly this is very true of Ellison and his underdogs. When we examine the great body of work that Ellison has produced in an effort to effect changes in the attitudes of readers, fellow writers, and humanity in general, we find that Ellison is himself a marginalized fighter—for just as his fictional constructs often fight to stave off global or cosmic apocalypse, Ellison himself engages in less fantastic but no less daunting battles: to kick humanity out of its apathetic complacency and to elevate his chosen profession—writing, especially that produced in the field of speculative fiction—to new levels of quality. Indeed, the goals of many of Ellison's principal characters and Ellison himself are very similar: to prevent different forms of apocalypse. In his fiction, Ellison's underdogs struggle to prevent the death of (in)human life; in his life, Ellison fights to prevent the death of good writing.

Anyone who reads a book or two of Ellison's—fiction or non-fiction—quickly realizes that he seldom shirks from brutal, scathing critical assessments of his subject matter. Maybe that is why he has been called "probably the most controversial writer ever to hit science fiction" by fellow science fiction writer and critic Lester Del Rey (183) and why most science fiction fans have heard of Ellison, whether they read him or not. Most people have very strong positive or negative feelings about Ellison the writer, but even stronger feelings about Ellison's fiction: they either love his work or they hate it. Those who love it admire Ellison for shoving a textual mirror in society's face and exposing its hypocrisy, neuroses, and shortcomings with stark objectivity; those who hate it often do so for the same reason and for its abrasive tone and negativity. While it is true that a great deal of "doom and gloom" may be found in the Ellison canon, it is also true that Ellison frequently undercuts his often dystopic settings and his cynical characters with the actions taken by those characters. If it is true that actions speak louder than words, as the old cliche tells us, then it is valuable to analyze a few of Ellison's principal characters, assess their actions, and see if what they *do* contradicts what they *say*, or what they seem to think about themselves and their respective environments. Doing so yields a better understanding of the tension that is inherent in so many Ellison tales and that resides in the author himself. Ellison's characters may rant and rave; they may purport to be on the brink of giving up on themselves and/or their fellow humans—but they seldom do so. Time and again, we see characters and author fighting the good fight: helping out their species (human or alien) and committing themselves to take some form of positive, life-affirming action rather than simply giving up. For Ellison's characters, such actions are diversified, but many involve great struggle against virtually impossible odds; indeed, the stakes are often of apocalyptic proportions.

In an essay called "True Love: Groping for the Holy Grail," Ellison confesses, "I find that the only thing worth the time and energy is the company of

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others; people are my business and I cannot conceive of ever having discovered all there is to discover about the human heart in conflict with itself (as Faulkner put it). I would much rather sit and talk to someone than alienate myself by watching a ballgame" (363). However, time and again readers find Ellison at odds with humanity: "I swear to God," he has said, "just one day I'd like to get up and not be angry . . . at the world" (Groth 72). If we use his fiction as a gauge, we find that Ellison's anger is largely derived from humanity's willingness to settle for mediocrity rather than strive to reach its fullest potential in all facets of its existence. In its desire to settle for the easy solution, humankind sets up traps for itself by relinquishing control of its destiny to debilitating constructs or power-abusing governing systems. And yet, even as he warns us that we are on the brink of destroying ourselves either by doing nothing or by doing the wrong things, Ellison points the way to right actions via his characters. A close examination of several of his marginalized creations provides further evidence of the internal struggle between optimism and pessimism that fuels so much of Ellison's fiction.

One of the best examples of the Ellison underdog is the impish trickster at the heart of "'Repent, Harlequin!' Said the Ticktockman." "'Repent, Harlequin!'" explores a future in which humanity has literally imperiled its own existence as a result of an ever-increasing obsession with punctuality and time. Ellison shows that in our efforts to manage our time with greater efficiency and to better our lives, we have become enslaved by time. Thus, the existential angst resulting from the knowledge that we are responsible for what we do or fail to do as the minutes go by, is replaced by a new worry in a perceptive few: that we have doomed ourselves to living aesthetically dead, stagnating lives by placing our destinies in the hands of powers that measure success and value solely on an individual's ability to keep strict schedules and meet deadlines.

The Harlequin (or Everett C. Marm, his real name) is the only character brave enough to stand up to the Ticktockman, the only one willing to tell this dictatorial megalomaniac to "Get stuffed." Everyone else seems to have forgotten that humanity created the Ticktockman—the precise schedule runner and Master Time Keeper. Everyone else now lives in fear of the power they have allowed the Master Time Keeper to possess: he can shut off any individual's internal biological timepiece permanently with the flick of a switch, a radical punishment induced for repeated tardiness and general ineptitude when it comes to punctuality. Everyone lives with this fear except the Harlequin, who realizes that a society that relinquishes control of its existence to one entity or one small governing body—mechanical or otherwise—is in grave danger of becoming extinct. This is especially true of a society that forgets how to stand up for itself and work to correct its mistakes, or is too frightened or too lazy to do so. Ellison reminds us of our "straw man" shortcomings when he quotes Thoreau's *Civil Disobedience* at the beginning of his tale: "The mass of men serve the state thus, not as men mainly, but as machines, with their bodies. . . . In most cases

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there is no free exercise whatever of the judgment or of the moral sense; but they put themselves on a level with wood and earth and stones; and wooden men can perhaps be manufactured that will serve the purpose as well" (*Essential Ellison* 877). The role reversal is striking as one reads more of the short story: in Ellison's world, a machinelike government now governs human beings, and most individuals accept the situation. Ellison describes the governing body, the culture and its leader mechanistically: "The Ones Who Kept The Machine Functioning Smoothly, the ones who poured the very best butter over the cams and mainsprings of the culture . . . the Ticktockman and his legal machinery" (878). The author's descriptions emphasize the automated nature of the future world. It may be alive, but it is a vacuous, artificial life. Except perhaps, for Everett C. Marm, the Harlequin, who goes out of his way to discombobulate the efficiency of his world in the most absurd fashion possible, swooping over individuals on a mechanical flying device and creating mayhem with one of the most innocuous of products: jelly beans, a hundred and fifty thousand dollars' worth, to be precise, dropped onto a crowd and throwing off all activities for seven minutes: "The System had been seven minutes' worth of disrupted. It was a tiny matter, one hardly worthy of note, but in a society where the single driving force was order and unity and equality and promptness and clocklike precision and attention to the clock, reverence of the gods of the passage of time, it was a disaster of major importance" (880).

The Harlequin is caught in the end, turned in by a woman he knew, someone who didn't like her punctuality and be-told-what-to-do-and-when-to-do-it world disrupted by an upstart, even if the upstart was her boyfriend. And though Marm never buckles under the Ticktockman's interrogation, he is eventually "worked . . . over" and made to appear on the "communications web" and admit that he was wrong about trying to fight the system. But in the end, he may have made a difference after all, because the Master Time Keeper is three minutes late to work one day and throws the society's entire system slightly off schedule. Thus, Ellison's trickster succeeds in changing a seemingly unchangeable system, and even though the change is minor, as Ellison's narrator observes, "if you make only a little change, then it seems to be worthwhile" (886).

Ellison's "'Repent, Harlequin!'" is a short story with a subdued apocalyptic theme at its core. A story that deals with the subject more blatantly is "The Region Between." Ellison breaks new ground in this tale, whose principal character, William Bailey, gives up on life and elects to commit suicide, then finds his core essence—his soul—kidnapped by a soul dealer known as the Succubus, who proceeds to place him in the physical shells of a number of entities who are being enslaved by larger power structures. "The Region Between" is an apocalyptic story in a radically exponentiated sense of the term: its main character manages not only to commit suicide, but to take the whole planet and indeed, the universe itself, with him. Moreover, it is a story in which Ellison uses science fiction, cyberpunk, and fantasy to posit that many of us would rather pros-

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titute ourselves and become mindless slaves of the Other in order to avoid engaging in introspection and spare ourselves the potential anguish that can result from an attempt to validate our own existence.

Bailey, who wanted nothing more than to be rid of a disappointing life, finds himself a spiritual being unable to be merely someone else's instrument of investigation or destruction or consumption. As the Succubus thrusts Bailey into one life form after another—life forms destined to be pawns or gophers in the power games of stronger entities—Bailey continuously undermines the psyches of his hosts and gets them to rebel against the injustices to which they are being subjected. As a result the Succubus takes note, but too late to do anything about it, for Bailey turns out to be an insane god who awakens from an ages old slumber and destroys himself and the entire universe. In the end, Bailey destroys all, but not before his spirit demonstrates a tremendous instinct to live and right wrongs and not before Ellison's narrator tells us that "Godness lies dormant . . . in everything" and fuels our desire to enrich our existence; however, this instinct is often perverted by a desire to empower ourselves at the expense of others (170). Because of the text's radical construction in its latter portions—sentences spiral around to form a large circle, in tiny print no less—many readers may overlook some of the most important and candid lines in the Ellison canon. Indeed, these lines go a long way to explaining the unbalanced power structures we see manifested time and again in Ellison's texts and characters. In this passage Ellison tells us:

> The universe moves toward godhood. It started there and it wishes to return there. It is driven around in the greatest circle toward there. Godness lies dormant yet remembered in every thing, every smallest thing, in every puniest creature. Every living thing must of needs, play at godness. It is built in, in the basic fiber, in the racial memory, in the pulse of the blood or thought they remember all the way back to when there was nothing! Yet none of them are God. Thus it becomes a universe of things struggling ineptly to be God: a universe of manipulators, of users, of petty handlers who push and hover lesser, less god-driven races around in alien patterns, forcing them to dance to tunes they never knew, can barely comprehend, in pain and hopelessness, deprived of light or joy. From the sleaziest legislators of ethic and fashion and morality to the greatest pawn—movers of entire cosmic races, everything, *everyone*, scrabbles blindly toward the memory of when it was once god-blooded. All things try to govern the lives of all other things. And in turn, those Gods are used by other Gods. And those Gods are manipulated by Greater Gods. And on and on. Domino tanks of puppet masters, to infinity and beyond. It is a universe of mad deities, one more selfish and corrupt than the one that went before. For none of them *are* God, they are merely circular pieces of the all-memory of what was godness at the beginning. (170)

Of course Bailey proves to be *the God* who destroys all, and "The Region Between" deals with a myriad of races that inhabit the universe, but if we narrow the focus of Ellison's story and the context of the above passage, we find that it

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mirrors humanity through the ages, as we have moved from one power struggle to another and fought, more often than not, to defeat and enslave one another in limited egocentric, solipsistic factions rather than worked to better each other as a race.

William Bailey turns out to be a mad deity but he is still a wonderful Ellison character because he shows that each one of us is godlike and can work to improve or destroy our collective lives. Further, like Everett C. Marm, Bailey shows us that we should rebel against injustices and dictatorial governing bodies.[1] Indeed, William Bailey's apocalyptic confrontation with the Succubus is a cosmic version of the battle between man and computer—Ted and AM—that Ellison chronicled two years earlier in "I Have No Mouth, and I Must Scream" (1967). As Darren Harris-Fain has noted, Ellison imbues Ted with a paradoxical mixture of godlike qualities and psychological weaknesses: "The narrator of 'I Have No Mouth, and I Must Scream' . . . embodies the image of God despite his human, all too human limitations and flaws." Yet, despite these shortcomings, Ted should not be discounted because he "exemplifies the potential of the human spirit" (154). Thus, while mad computer AM is still no more than sophisticated artificial intelligence, "neither fully human nor fully divine, Ted is both, and through this displays a moral superiority which makes this tale, as Ellison intended it, 'a positive, humanistic, upbeat story'" (154). The same might be said of most of "The Region Between" despite its disturbing conclusion.

"The Region Between" was first published in 1969; in 1973 Ellison published "The Deathbird," in which he continued to explore similar subject matter. The short story eventually became part of a collection in which Harlan explored deistic concepts over the years and called for a need to question age-old concepts of godhood, as well as those icons and ideas contemporary culture had elevated to godlike status. In his introduction to *Deathbird Stories*, Ellison observes that "Gods can do anything. They fear nothing: they are gods. But there is one rule, one Seal of Solomon that can confound a god, and to which *all* good pay service, to the letter: When belief in a god dies, the god dies" (xiv). As Ellison turns our attention to the earth's new gods and new demons, he attempts to show that our very concepts of godhood are self-serving and solipsistic: that we are worshiping those ideas and ideals and commodities that best serve our individual interests. Contemporary gods include "the rock god and the god of neon; the god of legal tender, the god of business-as-usual and the gods that live in city streets and slot machines. The God of Smog and the God of Freudian Guilt. The Machine God" (xv).

Once again, Ellison exposes the vices that in his estimation lock us into a thruway to destruction. Moreover, he posits that we create our own traps and enslave ourselves when we elevate hedonistic, less than worthy men and women to positions of deistic, dictatorial authority and allow them to govern us. Empowering and paying homage to such tarnished gods—pop culture figures, corrupt political leaders, abusive governments—is tantamount to furthering not

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only an individual's own destruction but humanity's. For this reason, Ellison warns us to "Know them now" because these gods "rule the nights through which we move":

> Kitty Genovese met one of them, as did the students of Kent State University. Black men have known them far longer than white men, but have been ill served by them.
>
> . . . .
>
> Worship in the temple of your soul, but know the names of those who control your destiny. For, as the god of Time so aptly put it, "It's later than you think." (xv)

Essentially, "The Deathbird" by Ellison's own admission, is "a rewritten Genesis, advancing the theory that the snake was the good guy and, since god wrote the PR release, Old Snake simply got a lot of bad press" (*Deathbird Stories* 265). This time, Ellison focuses on Nathan Stack, who is also the original Adam, and his quest to confront and liberate himself from his creator, God. The Devil (also known as Dira or Snake in the story), is Stack's assistant in this undertaking. No evil being at all, Snake is rather part of a race who lost a diplomatic debate with the entity who came to be considered the earth's creator and deity, a creator who was mad and who allowed death and destruction to go unchecked and the planet itself to be abused to the point that it is on the brink of destruction. Snake must assist Nathan Stack in recognizing the same thing that William Bailey recognizes at the end of "The Region Between": that each of us is godlike and that inherent within each of us is the capability to empower the Other, as well as the power to work toward his/her/its removal if that entity is more of a hindrance than a help to our existence. Via "The Deathbird," Ellison implores us to question ourselves, our beliefs, our heroes, our deities, our mode of behavior. To do nothing is akin to accepting whatever fate a few dictate for us, however grim it may be.

The ending of "The Deathbird" is almost as disturbing as the ending of "The Region Between": the universe is still alive at the end of the former, but earth is dead and "the stars wait . . . for the cry of the Deathbird to reach them so final moments could be observed at last, at the end, for the race of man" (295). It is true that Stack gains tremendous wisdom shortly before the end, but when he runs into the earth's god, now in the form of "an old, tired man" he knows that revenge is fruitless and the planet is doomed. By allowing his character to recognize the folly of an unchecked, unquestioned belief system, Ellison is elevating humanity and warning us to engage in the constant spot-checking of our beliefs; but by having the earth and (wo)man succumb to apocalypse at the end, Ellison is once again emphasizing what he told us at the end of "The Region Between"—"There is only one end to creation. What is created is destroyed, and thus full circle is achieved"—and what he stressed in the introduction to *Deathbird Stories*: "It's later than you think" (xv). Here again is the contradictory tension that runs through so many of Ellison's stories: the call to rebel and better ourselves, juxtaposed with the notion that we are ultimately powerless to

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do anything to alter final apocalypse: "Stack found the mad one wandering in the forest of final moments . . . and Stack knew with a wave of his hand he could end it for this god in a moment. But what was the reason for it? It was even too late for revenge. It had been too late from the start" (962–63).

In 1974 Ellison published *Approaching Oblivion: Road Signs on the Treadmill Toward Tomorrow*, and his position on humanity seemed to have swayed to new extremes of pessimism. His January 1974 introductory essay to the collection seems to indicate that he had once and for all decided to give up on his fellow humans:

> Had I done this book in 1970, as originally planned, you'd find in this space a clarion call to revolution, a resounding challenge to the future. But it's four years later, Nixon time, and I've seen you sitting on your asses mumbling about impeachment, I've gone through ten years waiting for you to recognize how evil the war in the Nam was, I've watched you loaf and lumber through college and business and middle-class complacency, pursuing the twin goals of "happiness" and "security."
>
> What fools you are. Happy, secure corpses you'll be.
>
> You're approaching oblivion, *and you know it*, and you won't do a thing to save yourselves.
>
> As for me and you in this literary liaison, well, I've paid my dues. Now I'm going to merely sit here on the side and laugh my ass off at how you sink into the quagmire like the triceratops. I'm going to laugh and jeer and wiggle my ears at your death throes. And how will I do that? By writing my stories. (16)

If nothing remotely optimistic came from Ellison after 1974, then we could accurately assess that he had indeed given up on the human race, but the fact remains that there are many stories that come afterward, that he dedicates *Deathbird Stories* to "True Love" the year following the publication of *Approaching Oblivion*, that many of his stories still continue to champion humanity and still continue to project hope and optimism. Indeed, one of his strongest impulses in this direction can be found in "The Man Who Rowed Christopher Columbus Ashore," a story initially published in *Omni* and eventually selected as one of the *Best Short Stories of 1993*. This story focuses on a time-traveler named Levendis ("which is a Greek word for someone who is full of the pleasure of living"[93]), who takes a "sidestep" between earth's present, past, and future in order to help men and women in distress. Levendis is a classic Ellison hero, doing "At Least One Good Deed A Day, Every Single Day." The acts range from helping a cantankerous old arthritic woman cross the street (77), to "creat[ing] a cure for bone-marrow cancer" (81), to attacking a bunch of skinheads who themselves were in the process of attacking an interracial couple (86–85) to "correct[ing] every history book in America so that they no longer called it The Battle of Bunker Hill, but rather Breeds Hill where, in fact, the engagement of 17 June 1775 had taken place" (90). Levendis is perplexing to many who encounter him, his deeds often puzzling. When someone asks him if he is good

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or evil, he quickly replies "Good, of course! there's only one real evil in the world: mediocrity" (79).

Levendis's battles are the battles of many other Ellison characters: to change the world for the better. His methodology is diverse; at times it involves lectures, at others, he resorts to violence. Levendis is frustrated that he is "an unlimited person living in a limited world" but he continues to struggle for the betterment of humanity. No age group or faction is spared his presence. At one point he lectures to a convention of country-music fans (79); at another, he takes a bus load of "art ignorant" schoolchildren to gaze upon the "*Spiral Jetty*, an incongruously gorgeous line of earth and stone that curves out and away like a thought lost in the tide" (86); and on still another occasion—on a Sunday—he drives around Raleigh and Durham, North Carolina in a rented van and "remind[s] somnambulistic pedestrians and families entering eggs 'n' grits restaurants . . . that perhaps they should ignore their bibles today and go back and reread Shirley Jackson's short story, 'One Ordinary Day, with Peanuts'" (87).

Levendis nudges—sometimes pushes—people in positive directions, but ultimately, he wants humanity to implement the major improvements for itself. For example, he goes back in time and inoculates a part-time prostitute, Poppy Skurnik, with a syphilis vaccine, thus giving one of her future grandchildren the chance to "sav[e] the lives of millions of innocent men, women and children" (90).[2]

And yet, for all his noble attributes and commitment to the betterment of life, Levendis remains an enigmatic, even frightening character. Levendis's seemingly unwavering goal, like his creator, Ellison's, seems to grow skewed at times. For example, the first night he encounters skinheads hurting an interracial couple, he simply elects to watch the incident. Another time, he kicks a cat so hard that he embeds it in a tree. And on still another occasion, "Having most of the day free . . . he then ma[kes] it his business to kill the remaining seventeen American GIs being held MIA in an encampment in the heart of Laos" (91). In the case of the skinheads incident, perhaps we can argue that Levendis does nothing to defend the imperiled couple because he is trying to determine how to best defend them against their racist attackers. However, given the proficiency for physical combat that he exhibits the next night, this argument seems flimsy. Moreover, the next two incidents are far more disturbing. They reveal that Levendis cannot fully govern his temper and that he channels aggression upon the innocent. In the case of the GIs, it seems clear that Levendis is frustrated with the United States for its failure to negotiate a release for these persecuted soldiers. However, if we consider the supernatural powers that Levendis displays at other times in the story, a miraculous rescue of these men would not seem beyond his capabilities. Instead, it seems that Levendis elects to punish us for not taking better care of each other. A problem arises when we consider that his punishment involves the killing of the helpless.

Levendis is a problematic character—a trans-historical righter of wrongs—whose educational methods are at times, noble, at others, unorthodox, and still

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others, disturbing and infuriating. He is also not immortal and must answer to a higher authority called "The Front Office." It seems Levendis's superiors are also disturbed by his methodology: they believe that he has "been having too rich a time at the expense of the Master Parameter" (a system that sounds like a more potent kin of the Master Timekeeper in "Ticktockman"). He is apparently reassigned, but he remains enough of the typical Ellison trickster to keep doing things in his own perplexing way: "no one higher up noticed that on his new assignment he had taken the name Sertsa" (the Russian word for soul) (93). Ultimately, despite his paradoxical characteristics and questionable methodology, Levendis is and has sertsa.

There is less of an overt apocalyptic threat in "The Man Who Rowed Christopher Columbus Ashore" than in some of Ellison's older works. The potential for our demise is still present. Levendis seems mad at times; he commits disturbing acts. It is clear that if he were to allow his frustration with humanity to consume him, the results might prove catastrophic. However, more often than not, the traveler manages to subsume his aggression beneath the positive actions he takes on humanity's behalf. Levendis is kin to the Harlequin and Bailey—he wants to stir us up, for the better—and if he resembles mad Bailey more than Everett C. Marm, then he serves to remind us that each of us has the potential to improve the world simply by being conscious of the fact that all of our actions—however minor—have the capacity to affect others.

Thus far I have provided a brief overview of the manner in which some of Ellison's characters fight the good fight. Now I would like to focus on the author's methodology for fighting complacency within his profession. Ellison's speculative fiction has often deviated from the fiction of many of his fellow SF/horror authors in its atypical narrative construction and content. Indeed, the construction of many of Ellison's stories parallels the works of the postmodernists in contemporary literature.

David Hartwell observes in his excellent study of science fiction that readers of the genre will often forgive bad writing if the ideas that are presented are interesting. (See *Age of Wonders: Exploring the World of Science Fiction.*) Many science fiction fans are less tolerant of textual experimentation. They want to get to the ideas of the story and they do not feel that the actual construction of the text should be a part of the ideas they must assimilate in order to understand the story. The postmodernist, on the other hand, relies on textual construction to further elucidate her/his ideas for the reader. Indeed, the fully committed reader will often be conscious that s/he is engaged in the act of reading and will study both ideas within the text *and the text itself* in order to discover the ways that the body of material further illuminates the ideas being articulated by the writer. That's part of the postmodernist's game. It is also a game that many readers refuse to play; it is a part of postmodernism that, for many, makes its stories seem more chore than pleasure. But it is this aspect of postmodernism that Ellison has embraced and often relied upon in his attempt to battle mediocre writing in

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speculative fiction. If anything makes Ellison resemble one of his underdog characters it is the fact that he writes science fiction, fantasy, and horror in a manner that demands extensive work from his audience.

Norman Spinrad observes that "the science fiction writer isn't as interested in a deterministic detailing of how the past created the present—quantum mechanics assures him this is impossible anyway—as he is in examining the current situation with a view towards pondering what may evolve next" (219). Indeed, "what science fiction *should* be is one of our culture's main means for pondering not only the future consequences of what we are doing now but the effects of these inevitable, unpredictable changes on the human spirit" (222). Of course, a quick assessment of the volumes in the science fiction/fantasy sections at any large bookstore–offerings that will include scores of trilogies and film and television series tie-in novels—is indication enough that more serious writing efforts in the field are always threatened by commercialization and that the writer who is committed to exploring humanity's future via science fiction struggles desperately for shelf space and often loses to more lightweight products. This happens ever more frequently to writers such as Ellison who push the envelope with their unusually constructed texts.

Ellison's textual experimentation is nothing new. As part of the New Wave movement in the science fiction genre in the sixties and early seventies, Ellison chose to push science fiction in directions often left alone by most others. More than ever before, characters and stories were privileged over scientific extrapolation. Isaac Asimov explains:

> Pre-[John W.] Campbell science fiction all too often fell into one of two classes. They were either no-science or they were all-science. The no-science stories were adventure stories in which a periodic word of Western jargon was erased and replaced with an equivalent word of space jargon. The writer could be innocent of scientific knowledge. . . .
>
> The all-science stories were, on the other hand, populated exclusively by scientist-caricatures. Some were mad scientists, some were absent-minded scientists, some were noble scientists.
>
> To be sure, there were exceptions. . . .
>
> Campbell's contribution was that he insisted that the exception become the rule. There had to be real science *and* real story, with neither one dominating the other. (*Dangerous Visions* viii)

Asimov's assessment is accurate except that many would agree that Campbell and most of the writers working for him greatly privileged the scientific ideas in a story more than its plot and characters.

Ellison and the New Wave of writers largely reversed that equation and did so by penning stories that privileged characters and story over science. Like John Barth whose "Literature of Exhaustion" essay and postmodern *Lost in the Funhouse* short story collection largely contributed to the wave of sixties

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postmodernist experimentation in mainstream fiction, Ellison, working as both writer and editor, challenged science fiction readers with the narrative complexity of "The Region Between" and the atypical stories collected in *Dangerous Visions* and *Again, Dangerous Visions*.[3] In his introduction to the former, Ellison asserts that the anthology "was constructed along specific lines of revolution. It was intended to shake things up. It was conceived out of a need for new horizons, new forms, new styles, new challenges in the literature of our times" (xix). A substantial number of the stories in the first collection were penned by respected veterans of the science fiction field who agreed to take Ellison's challenge, to stretch their creativity in new directions. Both *Dangerous Visions* and *Again, Dangerous Visions* were groundbreaking collections and succeeded, at least to some extent, in revitalizing speculative fiction. That these atypical science fiction works were accepted by many is indication that the field was ready for a change. William Spanos notes that "The most immediate task . . . in which the contemporary writer must engage himself . . . is that of undermining the detectivelike expectations of the positivistic mind" (*Repetitions* 48). Ellison has frequently made such attempts to prevent his chosen field from becoming stale, and he has frequently succeeded in his efforts.

Narrative experimentation is also an integral part of finding a mode to adequately express apocalypse. Brian McHale notes:

> The final image of Thomas Pynchon's postmodernist masterpiece *Gravity's Rainbow* is that of a nuclear warhead uncannily poised the last incalculable sliver of time and space above the roof of the theater in which we, the readers of the book, presumably sit. Metaphor for the imminence of nuclear holocaust, this immeasurably narrow gap is the space in which we have lived since 1945. But Pynchon has not only given us a definitive emblem of life under the nuclear threat; he has also done so in a way which recapitulates (or anticipates) many of the strategies by which postmodernist writing has endeavored to represent the unrepresentable scene of nuclear apocalypse. (159)

It would be fair to say that science fiction, along with horror fantasy, may be lauded as a genre striving to represent the unrepresentable more frequently than other genres. But what Pynchon succeeds in capturing so successfully in *Gravity's Rainbow*—global apocalypse—Ellison succeeds in exponentiating when he captures cosmic apocalypse at the end of his radically constructed "The Region Between." No less important is the actual narrative construction of the novella. Ellison includes illustrations in the form of impressionistic wood carvings; these complement the action in the story, as do the author's atypical constructions of the printed pages. Sometimes text runs sideways across a page; sometimes two or more columns of text are placed facing each other from opposite pages, thus underscoring the notion of confrontation between thoughts or characters. In other words, Ellison uses text as illustration to underscore the meaning inherent in his written discourse. He "draws" with words, and these word illustrations

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further illuminate the story's subject matter. Certainly this is the case with the most radical page of text we encounter in the story: the long body of sentences (from which I quoted earlier) that takes up the bulk of one page and that spirals around to form a circle of words and sentences that eventually loop onto the next page.

The construction of "The Deathbird" is, in some respects, more challenging. From the beginning Ellison as author seems to address the reader directly, warning her/him that the story is actually "a test"; he advises us to "Take notes" and says that the numbered sections of the story "may be taken out of numerical sequence" and invites readers to "rearrange to suit yourself for optimum clarity" (267). Throughout the story, Ellison relies on the postmodernist's tools to ensure that the reader engage deeply with "The Deathbird" but that s/he never forget that s/he is reading a story. Ellison provides us with an essay within the story (a tribute to his dog Ahbuh, who was the inspiration for the dog in Ellison's famous short novel, *A Boy and His Dog*); at other times he interrupts the main story to provide us with a partial interpretation of Genesis 3:1–15, "Topics for Discussion," and "Questions for Discussion." All of these extras are designed to illuminate—and complicate—the principal themes at the heart of "The Deathbird."

Though less experimental, "The Man Who Rowed Columbus Ashore" is not completely free of narrative and textual experimentation. Each paragraph of the story might be seen as a self-contained story—beginning with the name of the main character, Levendis, followed by the date (day and month) and a summary of the character's actions on that given day. The story is told in partial chronological order, in the sense that it is set in the month of October; however, not one particular October is covered, but many, as Levendis "sidesteps" (to use the traveler's term) back and forth through the centuries. Lyotard tells us that "the postmodern would be that which . . . denies itself the solace of good forms . . . that which searches for new presentations, not in order to enjoy them but in order to impart a stronger sense of the unpresentable" (340–41). Ellison very much strives to achieve that end. Moreover, by moving his character through time, Ellison emphasizes the long-term nature of our ills and illustrates that we continue to be in need of assistance.[4]

One last staple of the postmodern movement that is worth mentioning is the insecure, self-conscious narrator that is prevalent in postmodern texts. Though most people would readily recognize that Ellison speaks with angry authority, his *position* on our capabilities seems tenuous, and his overall *assessment* of humanity is ever-vacillating. From story to story, certainly, it can be argued that Ellison is insecure: he wants very much to share with us his formula for right living, but he is constantly dubious about our potential for success.

Of course, positive and respected results are not always the most fruitful. Ellison is generally acknowledged to be somebody who cares about his field, but his methodology for improvement is often seen as too radical, too abrasive.

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Established masters who indulged his attempt to take the science fiction field in new directions and contributed unorthodox stories to Ellison's *Dangerous Visions* collections did not, for the most part, continue to experiment with their writing after those projects. Indeed, Asimov himself chose not to contribute a story because "I will not hide from you the fact that *I* mourn the past. It is the First Revolution [Campbell's] that produced me and it is the First Revolution that I keep in my heart" (xii). As for Ellison, he has produced some sixty books over the years; most of them are out of print.[5]

Ellison is still angry with us, still fighting the same battles he began decades ago, still casting reflections of himself in his texts, still fighting through the challenging narrative construction of his fiction, still fighting through his non-fiction. Recently, he returned to challenge the old mind numbing enemy—television—that he warned us about in *The Glass Teat* and *The Other Glass Teat:* the title to the introductory essay of his recent fiction and non-fiction collection, *Edgeworks,* is "Good Morning, Folks; I am not Kathie Lee Gifford." Bad cinema is also seen as an enemy because "Reality has become fantasy; fantasy has become reality. 35 mm constructs have more substance than your senior congressmen" (*Deathbird* 229), but because of television's greater accessibility, it is ultimately perceived as the worst enemy. As Ellison observes, "Television is, in sad fact, the new reality. What happens on the tube really happens . . . what goes down in the perceived world is iffy: maybe it's real, maybe not" (358).[6] Finally, Ellison is also greatly suspicious of the ultimate value of computers and the Internet. He concedes their potential value for some uses but finds that they make it too easy to churn out bad writing:

> Making it easier, I think, is invidious. It is a really BAD thing. Art is not supposed to be easier! There are a lot of things in life that aren't supposed to be easier. Ridding the world of heart attacks, making the roads smoother, making the beer better, but not Art. Art should always be tough. Art should demand something of you. Art should involve foot-pounds of energy being expended. . . . That's . . . one of the disadvantages of the Internet. . . . It becomes remarkably easy for anybody in the world to become not only a writer, but a publisher, and a salesman. . . . When they say "Gee it's an information explosion!", no, it's not an explosion, it's a disgorgement of the bowels. . . . Every idiotic thing that anybody could possibly write or say or think can get into the body politic now, where before things would have to have some merit to go through the publishing routine, now, ANYTHING. (Wyatt, "Gutenberg in a Flying Saucer")

Earlier I quoted Ellison quoting Faulkner. I will end this examination of Ellison by returning to Faulkner's inspiring Nobel address because I believe that in some ways, Faulkner's assessment of humanity parallels Ellison's view of (wo)man and apocalypse. In his speech, Faulkner says, "I decline to accept the end of man" despite the fact that for many writers and people, "There are no longer problems of the spirit. There is only the question: When will I be blown

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up? Because of this, the young man or woman writing today has forgotten the problems of the human heart in conflict with itself which alone can make good writing because only that is worth writing about, worth the agony and the sweat" (723). It is clear that Ellison also declines to give up on humanity. Instead, he populates his stories with characters that do more than whine: they *act* and *strive to better their environments and their existence*, as their creator does via his fiction and essays. Faulkner believed "that man will not merely endure: he will prevail" (724). I believe that Harlan Ellison struggles to maintain that same belief. Ellison and his underdogs may be tough on humanity, but they go on fighting apathy and complacency and stagnation out of a wary suspicion that we may be worth the fight, after all.

Notes

1. Is it mere coincidence that William Bailey shares a last name with George Bailey, the underdog hero who fights power-hungry businessman Potter in Frank Capra's *It's A Wonderful Life*?
2. Though left unnamed in the story, the grandchild may be Jonas Salk, who is indeed responsible for saving the lives of many, thanks to his development of the polio vaccine.
3. A third volume in the series, *The Last Dangerous Visions*, has long been forthcoming; its impending appearance has become a running joke among Ellison fans.
4. Several of Ellison's books seem to embrace a postmodernist framework by virtue of the manner in which the author blends fiction and non-fiction into his texts. The result is a pastiche of fiction, essays, and illustrations.
5. At the time of this writing (January 1997), White Wolf Publishing has just released the second volume of *Edgeworks*, a series that will reportedly bring most of Ellison's works back in print.
6. Ellison would likely agree with Baudrillard, who believes that today's world is being hindered by "a whole pornography of information and communication" that is nonsensical and superfluous ("The Ecstasy" 130). Baudrillard finds that we live in an age of electronic-image overload, and that our reliance on images for information compromises our ability to deepen our subjectivity and prevents us from formulating all but the most superficial of identities. What else is possible, when the images themselves are mere copies—echoes—of the more substantial originals: "perhaps at stake has always been the murderous capacity of images, murderers of the real, murderers of their own model . . ." ("The Precession" 346).

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