Reflections

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WE ARE sojourning on Earth,

Berenice and I, on the littoral

of one of the fresh-water lakes that

have recently reappeared on the

north continents, we

sleep late mornings and loll

through long afternoons; evenings

we dip into a perma-chest of an-

cient writings unearthed by visitors

like ourselves and left behind. The

chest contains numerous and di-

verse examples of this lost art—

probably they were gathered to-

gether by some dedicated eccentric

who had no better purpose in life.

Some of them are unique indeed

and have to do with the future as

some of the more literate elements

of the then society foresaw it, at

that time the earth was

green, not as green perhaps as

it once had been but green enough

—they had a complex about this

greenness, these writers did, they

knew, or thought they knew, that

some day it would be gone and

this worried them immensely.

They wrote endlessly of how green

the earth was and how blue were

her skies and carped constantly at

their contemporaries for defiling

the one and

polluting the other—they wrote

about space, too. Space and space-

ships, spaceships built of dreams

and metal—they thought, you see,

that travel to the stars would be

accomplished by means similar to

those employed to reach the moon.

Oh, such ships they wrote about,

these little literary men! Elongated

leviathans carrying whole popu-

lations to the stars (usually after

Earth gave up the ghost), tons and

tons and tons of steel plying the

immensities—they

wrote about aliens, too—aliens

from "Alpha Centauri III" and

"Far Procyon IV" and, unavoid-

ably, they wrote about us. It's fun

to read what someone who died

millennia before you were born

thought you were going to look

like and how he thought you were

going to think, although it's an-

noying also, because these writers

lived during an age sickened by

sex (among other things), and they

could not see human relationships

in their proper perspective; hence

their future travelers were little

more than spaceborne troglodytes

carrying cudgels in the shape of

ray guns and dragging four-

wheeled carts behind them—carts

filled with misdeeds, misconcep-

tions and mistakes. But, for all

their apprehensions,

Earth is still a lovely place to

be, especially now in spring—and

it is still green ... I wonder what

these writers would think to see me

sitting here with my true love Ber-

enice, reading what they wrote so

long ago. They would not be able,

though, to see us as we really are

but only as reflections. The hu-

man race has changed incalculably

since they walked upon the earth

and we are vastly different from

them. But they were vastly differ-

ent, too—were they not?—from

the apes who preceded them and

who could not write at all, so our

being the way we are should not

surprise them overmuch. Never-

theless, it would, and our reading

what they wrote would surprise

them even more and perhaps em-

barrass them. I

turn to Berenice, I say, "Why

did they write about the future

when they could not even under-

stand the present?" She answers,

"That is why—because they

couldn't understand. If they had

tried—perhaps they could have

penetrated the suffocating fog of

self-importance that lay thickly

over their land and have glimpsed

part of the truth." "Perhaps

you are right," I agree. "But I

doubt that very many of their con-

temporaries read what they wrote,

so their insight wouldn't have done

the world much good." "Probab-

ly,”

Berenice remarks, "they

wouldn't have recognized the truth

even if they had glimpsed it. They

lived in an age that History later

referred to as the Age of Hypoc-

risy and in an age of hypocrisy

there can be no truths—only ma-

jority opinions—and these can be

bought by men rich and clever

enough and

even the hardiest of seekers af-

ter truth are invariably led astray,

and these were not the

hardiest."

Nor were they being honest—

that which you cannot find in your

own today you will never find in

someone else's tomorrow. "Sol"

they called the sun and Earth,

"Sol III." How quaint. Sol or sun

—its rays are warm upon us now,

although this is immaterial to our

comfort, for our bodies are inde-

pendent of temperature; but Sol/

sun's rays are warm upon us just

the same as we loll on the shore of

our blue lake, soon, though, Sol/

sun will set and the darkness of

Earthnight will creep like death

across the land, though death to

us, of course, is no longer a valid

concept, even though it will come

to us some day. But it will not

come darkly or disdainfully as it

came to our ancestors—the way

the Earthnight will shortly come

when Sol/sun has set—I would

not have wanted to live in those

dim days.

Our interest is not confined sole-

ly to those writers in the collec-

tion who wrote about tomorrow—

we are also reading those who

wrote about the times in which

they lived. Some of them wrote

very well—they reflected their so-

ciety and if this be a criterion of

good writing the Age of Hypocrisy

was not lacking in this respect, nor

were the ages which preceded it.

There was one writer in particular

who reflected his time exceedingly

well—he was like a mirror held up

to the world and the glass was

tinted in some magic fashion so

that the world was reflected with

poignant overtones that linger on

long after you have read what he

wrote—it is writers like him we

read when we would know about

the past, the

future we already know about

because we live in it—but it is in-

triguing nevertheless to read what

those other writers thought it

would be like, thought space travel

would be like. The

days pass swiftly here and Ber-

enice and I have so much living to

do. I say living, although it is not

really that, not in the sense it once

was understood—that kind of liv-

ing was a fretwork of contrasts, of

play and work, of pleasure and

pain, of feast and famine, all over-

shadowed by the imminence of

death. No, that is not the sort of

living I refer to as I sit here in the

Earthdusk, letting my mind roam

free, our kind of living would have

been incomprehensible to the hu-

man race before it attained ma-

turity. I say

"maturity" when what I really

should say is "present stage of de-

velopment—" for I, like all hu-

mans before me, am afflicted with

the smug conviction that the age in

which I live is the culmination of

all the ages that preceded it (this

is the truth Berenice referred to so

short a time ago). I suspect that

those malefactors of ancient

days who were beheaded for their

crimes believed even as the axe

descended upon their naked necks

that theirs was the best of all pos-

sible worlds. I

wouldn't be surprised--indeed,

I know this to be the case from

reading what they wrote—that

the poor souls living in the Age

of Hypocrisy (for all they may

have said to the contrary) be-

lieved ardently even while they

sank ever deeper into the mire

of deceits, lies and self-decep-

tions they had created for them-

selves that all that had gone be-

fore them had paved the way for

them—truly,

man is a prisoner of his times,

incapable not only of seeing what

his prison looks like from with-

out but of discerning what it is

really like within.

Now the night that is like dis-

dainful death is upon us, and

Berenice and I withdraw beneath

the canopy of boughs we have

fashioned for nostalgia's sake and

light a small fire at our feet, not

to keep us warm but to keep the

past at bay. Beyond its little

flames the darkness gathers in—

beyond the darkness burn the

stars—soon we shall be back

among them, Berenice and I,

where we belong, we

can remain upon, a planet only

for a little length of time, which

makes us wonder why those writ-

ers of so long ago arbitrarily con-

cluded that life that originated

in the sea would consummate its

evolution on the land—that land

was a final, rather than a second-

dary, step—even when they put

us in space they made us carry

part of the land with us in those

ponderous phallic ships that they

invented. I

tend, though, to be hypocritical

in my evaluation of my ancestors,

though no more so, probably, than

they were in their evaluation of

theirs. Theirs climbed into trees,

they climbed down from them, we

climbed into

heaven, Homo sapiens was not

destined to live forever like an

ape, nor Homo astralis like a

man, no

one dwells upon the Earth now.

It is no more than a resort which

we indifferently maintain—a

park to which some of us return

at sporadic intervals to reflect

upon what we are and what we

were, it is a big green picnic table

hanging in space, one of many

others like it, some of which are

inhabited by apes. Berenice and

I are sitting at the big Earth Ta-

ble now, others have sat here be-

fore us, others will sit after—the

fire flickers, I add more wood,

the stars recede. I would like to

be a mirror so that I, too, might

reflect my times—we are far

more than star-travelers. We are

a part of the stars and yet the

mirror would show only empti-

ness, the emptiness of space, for

alas, I am no Scott Fitzgerald. I

can only touch a truth here and

there and then only in my

thoughts and I am not sure, per-

haps the biggest truth of all

eludes me still. Certainly it can-

not be as simple as that we are

the ultimate purpose of life. I

think I see it sometimes, though,

hiding in the lines of my true

love's face as she sleeps beside

me in the night, iridescing in the

distant sheen of her hair. But in

the morning it will be gone, and

in a little while we will be gone, too, and the truth will have vanished in the night.