

☐ Contemporary
Literary Criticism

CLC

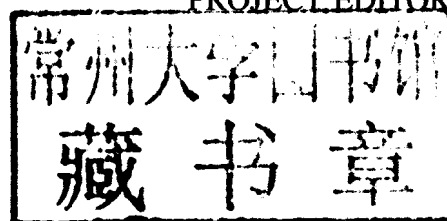
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Volume 313

Contemporary Literary Criticism

Criticism of the Works
of Today's Novelists, Poets, Playwrights,
Short Story Writers, Scriptwriters, and
Other Creative Writers

Jeffrey W. Hunter
PROJECT EDITOR



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Authors are selected for inclusion for a variety of reasons, among them the publication or dramatic production of a critically acclaimed new work, the reception of a major literary award, revival of interest in past writings, or the adaptation of a literary work to film or television.

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Each *CLC* volume contains individual essays and reviews taken from hundreds of book review periodicals, general magazines, scholarly journals, monographs, and books. Entries include critical evaluations spanning from the beginning of an author’s career to the most current commentary. Interviews, feature articles, and other published writings that offer insight into the author’s works are also presented. Students, teachers, librarians, and researchers will find that the general critical and biographical material in *CLC* provides them with vital information required to write a term paper, analyze a poem, or lead a book discussion group. In addition, complete bibliographical citations note the original source and all of the information necessary for a term paper footnote or bibliography.

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- The **Introduction** contains background information that introduces the reader to the author, work, or topic that is the subject of the entry.
- The list of **Principal Works** is ordered chronologically by date of first publication and lists the most important works by the author. The genre and publication date of each work is given. In the case of foreign authors whose

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Wesley, Marilyn C. "Anne Hèbert: The Tragic Melodramas." In *Canadian Women Writing Fiction*, edited by Mickey Pearlman, 41-52. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1993. Reprinted in *Contemporary Literary Criticism*. Vol. 246, edited by Jeffrey W. Hunter, 276-82. Detroit: Gale, 2008.

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Samuel R. Delany

1942-

(Full name Samuel Ray Delany Jr.; also wrote under the pseudonyms K. Leslie Steiner and Richmond Arrley) American novelist, short fiction writer, critic, essayist, and memoirist.

The following entry presents criticism on Delany's career through 2009. For additional information on his life and works, see *CLC*, Volumes 8, 14, 38, and 141.

INTRODUCTION

Delany is considered among the most accomplished of the New Wave writers of science fiction, a group of English and American authors who emerged in the 1960s and favored stylistic experimentation over traditional narratives. Praised as one of the few African Americans working in his field to have achieved both critical and popular success, Delany is known as a brilliant stylist whose complex, often demanding novels and stories have expanded the scope of science fiction. Throughout his oeuvre, he has employed elements of mythology, anthropology, psychology, sociology, history, and philosophy to probe the nature of language, the role of the artist, the intricacies of sexual identity, and such societal issues as racism and sexism. Filled with literary and cultural symbols and allusions, his work strives to provide experiences for the reader that parallel the quests of his protagonists.

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Delany was born in Harlem in New York City to Margaret Delany, a library clerk, and Samuel R. Delany Sr., a prosperous funeral home director. Delany attended the progressive and predominantly white Dalton School in Manhattan. As a teenager, he was enthralled by science fiction writers such as Robert Heinlein, Ray Bradbury, and Alfred Bester; he also admired modernist authors James Joyce and William Faulkner. Although he was a good student at Dalton and later at the Bronx High School of Science, his undiagnosed dyslexia caused his teachers to relegate him to remedial English. In 1961 he married a former fellow Dalton student, poet Marilyn Hacker, and enrolled in the City College of New York. He dropped

out of City College the following spring, however, never to return to college as a student. Delany's wife, an assistant editor at Ace Books, was largely responsible for the publication of his first novel, *The Jewels of Aptor* (1962). Over the next two years, Delany published four more novels. Having established himself as a science fiction writer, he was unable to keep up with the constant output required of the genre and suffered a nervous breakdown in 1964. He changed the pace of his publishing schedule, and his two subsequent novels, *Babel-17* (1966) and *The Einstein Intersection* (1967), won the Nebula Award for Best Novel from the Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America. Furthermore, *The Einstein Intersection* marked the beginning of Delany's incorporation of themes that metaphorically address issues of race and sexuality.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, Delany lived in the Heavenly Breakfast commune in New York City. Taking a break from mainstream science fiction, he performed in a rock band and published the pornographic novel *The Tides of Lust* (1973). During this time he also publicly announced his homosexuality and separated from his wife. In 1975 he made a triumphal return to science fiction with *Dhalgren*, a novel widely regarded as his masterpiece. After holding teaching positions at University of Massachusetts Amherst and SUNY Buffalo, he became a professor of English and the director of the creative writing graduate program at Temple University in Philadelphia. In 1985 he received the Pilgrim Award from the Science Fiction Research Association, and in 2002 he was inducted into the Science Fiction and Fantasy Hall of Fame.

MAJOR WORKS

Delany's fiction places less emphasis on the physical sciences and technology and more on the social and psychological aspects of his created worlds and characters. Thus, his work has expanded the traditional scope of science fiction to include aspects of mainstream, academic, and avant-garde literature. Utilizing nonlinear narratives, shifting perspectives, and allegorical representation, Delany's fiction examines the influence of language and myth on communication

and perception. His critical breakthrough came with *Dhalgren*, the sprawling narrative of a nameless amnesiac wandering through the decimated and isolated city of Bellona in a dystopian future. The protagonist, an artist/criminal known only as The Kid, is ultimately in search of an identity, and his quest brings him into contact with such diverse characters as George Harrison—the mythical rapist of Bellona—and Reverend Amy Taylor, a black evangelical minister bent on redeeming the fallen spirit of her community. The Kid, while involving himself in numerous sexual escapades, eventually gains a sense of self by becoming a poet and gang leader. Nevertheless, he decides to leave the city. Delany's next novel, *Triton* (1976; also published as *Trouble on Triton*), explores a future society structured along sexual lines. The novel is particularly unique in that the female protagonist, Bron Helstrom, is an alienated character toward whom readers are supposed to be indifferent. A man by birth, Helstrom has had his gender reassigned. Unable to fully shake the mindset of a male, however, Helstrom struggles through the course of the novel as her outdated, misogynistic worldview creates friction with the sexual egalitarianism of Neptune's moon, Triton. In the end, Helstrom remains locked within herself, trapped in a state of arrested development.

Tales of Nevèrÿon (1979) marks the beginning of the Nevèrÿon series, Delany's foray into the realm of fantasy literature. A cycle of loosely linked stories and novels told from conflicting viewpoints, the series follows the enslavement of a male protagonist, Gorgik, his education and eventual liberty from bondage, and his leadership of a rebellion to overthrow the institution of slavery. However, the main events of this central story often occur offstage or exist only as allusions to past occurrences or rumors embedded in tangential tales. Thematically, the series is concerned with showing how fact turns into legend and how narrative shapes or alters one's view of history. At the same time, the Nevèrÿon series critiques the entire system of signs deployed within the fantasy genre while tracing the effect of ideas on society and the individual. *Stars in My Pocket Like Grains of Sand* (1984) is a love story set in a world where intelligent life forms are referred to by feminine pronouns, while masculine pronouns refer to beings that elicit sexual arousal. The protagonists—former slave Rat Korga and government official Marq Dyeth—are male lovers from different worlds. After the destruction of Rat Korga's home planet, the two men discover that they are a perfect sexual match. Together, they participate in a hunting expedition, the object of which is not to stalk

and kill prey, but to become subsumed into the consciousness of an alien being, thus bringing about an understanding of the Other.

Described by Delany as a “pornotopic fantasy,” *The Mad Man* (1994) departs from the genres of science fiction and fantasy, offering instead a surreal and grotesque version of modern society. The novel is set in New York City during the early 1980s and focuses on John Marr, a homosexual graduate student. Marr is working on a thesis about Timothy Hasler, a philosopher who was murdered outside of a gay bar in the mid-1970s. The more Marr learns about Hasler, the more his own life begins to mirror that of the deceased philosopher. The crux of this transformation involves Marr's sexual experiences with homeless men as he mimics Hasler's fixation on the secretions and residues of the unclean human body. The graphic rendering of fetishistic sex acts ties in with Delany's interest in pornography as a mode of personal and social expression. In the two long essays that comprise *Times Square Red, Times Square Blue* (1999), Delany recalls the culture of pornography that dominated New York's Times Square in the 1970s. The book contrasts this period with the sterile refashioning of Times Square undertaken in the 1990s, lamenting the loss of vitality and sense of community for the benefit of tourism. Delany has also written a number of other works of nonfiction, including *The Motion of Light in Water* (1988), a memoir of his experiences in New York's East Village, and *About Writing* (2005), which discusses the author's perspectives on the art of fiction via essays, letters, and interviews.

CRITICAL RECEPTION

After the publication of *Dhalgren*, critics have consistently hailed Delany's work as groundbreaking. Some have focused on the symbolic meaning of the city in *Dhalgren*, proposing, as did scholar Todd A. Comer, that “the city along with every subjectival creation is a product of myth.” According to Comer, the novel “interrogates such monumental myths through a representation of the city (and thereby, the subject) as wounded and open to certain ethical possibilities.” Other reviewers have centered on correlations in the Nevèrÿon series and Delany's memoirs that illuminate the author's personal views on sexual identity and subjectivity. Critics have also viewed the Nevèrÿon series as a reflection of the socially aware science fiction that emerged during the 1970s and 1980s. In addition, commentators have applied philosopher Jacques Derrida's theory of *différance*, or the plurality of textual meaning, to *Stars in My Pocket Like Grains of*

Sand. Reviewers have claimed that *Triton* unintentionally preserves the mindset of patriarchal oppression that it attempts to critique, interpreting the novel as an examination of the digressive path toward a utopian society.

Commentators have likewise identified utopian themes in *The Mad Man* with respect to the eroticism of commodity culture. Furthermore, critics have characterized *The Mad Man* as a text that resists the repressive social mores indicative of late-twentieth-century capitalism. Moreover, reviewers have favorably compared Delany to fellow iconoclastic science fiction writer William Gibson with regard to their shared interest in themes of guilt and the past. In his study of *Dhalgren* and Gibson's *Pattern Recognition*, for instance, critic Jason Haslam maintained: "Gibson's and Delany's novels construct a similar tension related to the past and to a largely unspoken sense of a guilt that concerns memories (personal and cultural) of inaction in the face of (cultural and personal) moments of violence. . . . Delany and Gibson use a thematic focus on a past that has gone missing . . . to discuss the ways in which the American national narrative, in order to maintain a self-cohesive vision of the nation, needs to repress its very creation of and relation to a silenced other."

PRINCIPAL WORKS

- The Jewels of Aptor* (novel) 1962
 * *Captives of the Flame* (novel) 1963; revised as *Out of the Dead City*, 1968
 * *The Towers of Toron* (novel) 1964; revised 1968
The Ballad of Beta-2 (novel) 1965
 * *City of a Thousand Suns* (novel) 1965; revised 1969
Babel-17 (novel) 1966
Empire Star (novel) 1966
The Einstein Intersection (novel) 1967
Nova (novel) 1968
The Tides of Lust (novel) 1973; also published as *Equinox*, 1994
Dhalgren (novel) 1975
Triton (novel) 1976; republished as *Trouble on Triton: An Ambiguous Heterotopia*, 1996
The Jewel-Hinged Jaw: Notes on the Language of Science Fiction (criticism) 1977
Empire: A Visual Novel (novel) 1978
Heavenly Breakfast: An Essay on the Winter of Love (memoir) 1979
 † *Tales of Nevèrÿon* (short stories) 1979
 † *Neveryóna; or, The Tale of Signs and Cities* (novel) 1983

- Starboard Wine: More Notes on the Language of Science Fiction* (criticism) 1984
Stars in My Pocket Like Grains of Sand (novel) 1984
 † *Flight from Nevèrÿon* (short stories) 1985
 † *The Bridge of Lost Desire* (novel) 1987; also published as *Return to Nevèrÿon*, 1989
The Motion of Light in Water: Sex and Science Fiction Writing in the East Village, 1960-1965 (memoir) 1988
The Straits of Messina (essays) 1989
They Fly at Çiron (novel) 1992
The Mad Man (novel) 1994
Silent Interviews: On Language, Race, Sex, Science Fiction, and Some Comics: A Collection of Written Interviews (interviews) 1994
Hogg (novel) 1995
Longer Views: Extended Essays (essays) 1996
Shorter Views: Queer Thoughts and the Politics of the Paraliterary (essays) 1999
Times Square Red, Times Square Blue (essays) 1999
 1984 (letters) 2000
Aye, and Gomorrah: Stories (short stories) 2003
Phallos (novella) 2004
About Writing: Seven Essays, Four Letters, and Five Interviews (criticism) 2005
Dark Reflections (novel) 2007

*Books in the Fall of Towers series.

†Books in the Nevèrÿon series.

CRITICISM

Carl Freedman (essay date 2000)

SOURCE: Freedman, Carl. "Stars in My Pocket Like Grains of Sand: Samuel Delany and the Dialectics of Difference." In *Critical Theory and Science Fiction*, pp. 146-64. Hanover, N.H.: Wesleyan University Press, 2000.

[In the following essay, Freedman applies philosopher Jacques Derrida's theory of deconstruction to the display of differences in meaning, identity, and culture in Delany's novel.]

To a considerable degree, the more important critical themes of this chapter thus far—the nature and limits of cognition, particularly with regard to the problem of radical otherness; the indispensability and the contradictions of utopian construction; the problematics of sex, gender, and social marginality—all converge in an analysis of Samuel Delany's most recent science-fiction novel to date, *Stars in My Pocket Like Grains*

of *Sand* (1984).¹ Sometimes praised as Delany's masterpiece—though not yet so amply represented in the secondary literature on Delany as such earlier works as *Babel-17* (1966), *Nova* (1968), *Dhalgren* (1974), or *Triton* (1976)—*Stars in My Pocket* [*Stars in My Pocket Like Grains of Sand*] may well be the most intellectually ambitious work in the entire range of modern science fiction. Like *Solaris*, it seriously attempts to represent otherness (or rather a considerable range of othernesses) and to engage some of the intellectual problems that the attempt to understand otherness raises. Indeed, Delany actually goes beyond Lem in the extent to which he registers these problems not only as manifest content but also in the formal structures of the novel. The result is perhaps the most thoroughgoing use of modernist and postmodernist technique in any major science-fiction novel thus far (with the possible exceptions of several works by J. G. Ballard and of Delany's own *Dhalgren*). Delany, however, is a political artist in a sense in which Lem is not and in which Le Guin and Russ are. Like *The Dispossessed*, Delany's *Stars in My Pocket* is devoted to the wholesale creation of entire worlds and societies notable both in political comparison with and in political contrast to our own. But his text does not present itself as didactic in quite the same way as Le Guin's. Indeed, the phrase that Delany composed, in overt riposte to *The Dispossessed*, as a subtitle for *Triton*—"an ambiguous heterotopia"—applies to the later novel too. For *Stars in My Pocket* is less concerned with the interrogation of particular political theories like anarchism than with the more general critical consideration of ambiguity and heterogeneity as political issues. Like *The Two of Them*, it thereby gives considerable attention to the politics of gender and to specifically feminist concerns. Delany, in this respect, however, casts his conceptual net more widely than Russ, also pursuing a close examination of the politics of sexual orientation and of that entire complex of social marginalities designated in earthly terms by such rubrics as race, ethnicity, and nation. Very few novels, within science fiction or beyond it, have ever tried to do as much as Delany's magnum opus. If the personal interest—strongly expressed in *Stars in My Pocket Like Grains of Sand*—that Delany has maintained in the texts of critical theory makes his work an inevitable or at least "natural" reference point for a study like the current essay, the immense scope of his finest novel makes it an extremely difficult text with which to come to terms.²

If there is a single category of critical theory that might help us to comprehend *Stars in My Pocket*, it is one that must necessarily problematize the very idea of comprehension itself: namely, difference. The major

theoretical provenance of this category, especially with regard to its epistemological sense, is of course the structural linguistics of Saussure. The founder of the synchronic study of language noticed that, because the linguistic sign bears neither natural nor metaphysical connection to its referent—because the sign is, in this sense, unmotivated and conventional—the whole edifice of linguistic signification is guaranteed not by any principle external to itself but rather by the immanent principle of difference that allows one sign to be distinguished from another. A sign like *sand*, for example, is capable of maintaining a reliable, if conventional, relationship to its referent simply because it differs from such alternative signs as *band* or *Sanka*.³ It is, however, in a specifically post-Saussurian and indeed poststructuralist problematic that rather more radical and extensive implications of difference have been traced. Though numerous current instances (and philosophical filiations that reach back to Heidegger and Nietzsche) could easily be adduced, perhaps none remains more consequential than Derrida's deconstruction of Saussure himself.

Derrida effectively criticizes Saussure for failing to draw the most fundamental consequences of his own privileging of difference as a linguistic category. Derrida argues that, far from ensuring the stability of any structure of signification, difference is that which ruthlessly destabilizes all such structures and renders any unproblematic or securely self-identical meaning impossible. In linguistic terms, the point is not only that, as Saussure saw, the sign can never fully adequate itself to its referent. Even more important, the internal composition of the sign by signifier (the acoustic or graphic image) and signified (the psychological concept supposedly tied to the signifier) is also, as Saussure did *not* see, irretrievably problematic. Difference is, in Derrida's famous coinage, always *différance*. Not only does every signifier differ from every other; it also thereby *defers* to every other, in the sense that the differential determination of its own meaning is always to be found elsewhere. Accordingly, meaning—and therefore all thought and all identity—cannot be securely achieved in any particular act of signification. On the contrary, it operates in a fitful, problematic way throughout the entirety of the signifying system—the very systematicity of which is thereby undermined and put into question (or put *sous rature*, "under erasure," in Derrida's own favored phrase). It is important to stress that, contrary to certain widespread misunderstandings, the implications of Derridean difference do not result in any simple skepticism or metaphysical nihilism. The blank absence of meaning and identity would be as suspect a notion for Derrida as their full presence. Meaning and identity do

inescapably continue to operate, but in a flickering, unreliable, and necessarily uncertain fashion that eludes any confident mastery or total comprehension.⁴

At this point, then, and especially in the context of Delany's science fiction, it may be tempting to construct a suggestive parallel between the cognitive uncertainties of poststructuralism and those of quantum physics, particularly with respect to the Heisenberg uncertainty principle.⁵ At least as specifically and technically grounded, in its attention to the measurement of certain subatomic particles, as Derrida's deconstruction of Saussurian linguistics, the uncertainty principle is also at least as far-reaching in its epistemological implications. In maintaining that, on the subatomic level, certain pairs of variables, such as position and velocity, cannot be simultaneously attributed to the same particle in any completely meaningful way, Heisenberg in effect places *sous rature* the entire Newtonian and post-Newtonian project of attaining precise mathematical comprehension of the physical universe. Though we should, perhaps, be somewhat wary of such audaciously interdisciplinary analogies, Derrida and Heisenberg do seem to have at least this much in common: for both poststructuralist philosophy and quantum physics, difference and uncertainty cannot be understood as contingent failures of precision, but are irreducibly intrinsic to the natural and human sciences and thus to the objects that the sciences (problematically) study.

Because difference and uncertainty critically interrogate the stability of meaning, identity, measurement, and representation, any attempt to register the Derridean or Heisenbergian problematic by means of novelistic representation is bound to be riven by contradiction of the most urgent and unavoidable sort. Yet such is—quite self-consciously—the achievement of *Stars in My Pocket Like Grains of Sand*. The central construction of the novel is an almost unimaginably immense world (or rather, universe) of difference. The environment assumed and conveyed by the text comprises about six thousand planets inhabited by intelligent species, each planet at least roughly as large and varied a collection of distinct cultures as our own earth, so that the total amount of cultural difference is staggering. Even something as apparently straightforward as a reliable census of the whole seems to be unobtainable; and, in such a vastness, many familiar concepts that may be reasonably precise in other contexts become, in quasi-Heisenbergian fashion, inherently fuzzy and indeterminate. (For instance, one cannot meaningfully ask for the exact number of survivors of a world that has been destroyed in an era when space travel and interplanetary colonization are

routine). The dialectical point here is one that has long been ignored by many weakly science-fictional texts of the pulp and post-pulp sort, which have posited galactic and even intergalactic civilizations whose size is assumed to present merely technical and quantitative problems. What Delany shows is that quantity and quality are intimately connected, and that size on such an order of magnitude as this text suggests must involve a literally awesome *complexity*. The attempt to think and, even more, to imagine such a huge field of difference is almost impossibly daunting and can result in a sort of mental vertigo. "The Universe is overdetermined" (164), as a quotation apparently familiar to Delany's characters has it.

Communication is of course radically problematic in such a universe; the coexistence and sometimes collision of an almost countless number of signifying systems—so that, to take a small example, the gesture of an upraised hand may suggest "halt" or "full speed ahead" or "I have to go to the bathroom" (180)—results in a riot of *différance* that, among other things, makes political and economic relations among the various worlds extremely difficult. Whereas even a masterwork like Asimov's Foundation trilogy finds the administration of a Galactic Empire to be a *relatively* straightforward project, much of *Stars in My Pocket* is devoted to rigorously confronting the all but insuperable problems posed by any attempt to manage such a nearly unthinkable degree of difference.

The text indicates that such management can be attempted in two antithetical ways: the macrological and the micrological. The former project enjoys some official sanction under the auspices of the Federation of Habitable Worlds, which seems to be the largest superplanetary political structure in the novel. Though the name suggests an allusion to the United Federation of Planets in *Star Trek*, Delany's Federation displays no clear-cut quasi-military organization; its powers and principles remain shadowy and nebulous. It does, however, seem to be the sponsor of the Web, an only somewhat less shadowy interstellar intelligence corps devoted to the control and distribution of information about the worlds in the Federation. It is never clear just what all the functions and aims of the Web may be, but its most widely accessible project is the maintenance of GI, or General Information: a kind of ultracomputerized system that can wirelessly broadcast a constant encyclopedic barrage of facts about the various cultures of the Federation directly into the brain of anyone whose planet chooses to avail itself of the service. One asks questions of GI simply by thinking them, and GI may superficially appear to be the wonderfully utopian achievement of an information

age that far transcends our own computerized environment. But things are not so simple as that. GI is no disinterested technical marvel; it is deeply implicated in the various commercial interests and political conspiracies of the Web. There are numerous gaps in the information available through GI, some of which seem to be deliberate and tactical, but others of which probably result more from the positivistic and undialectical model of knowledge on which GI, with its shotgun blasts of discrete facts, is based. It is, for instance, quite early that we learn that, most tellingly, "History is one area that General Info is notoriously poor in imparting" (68). GI is, I think, best understood as the science-fictional apotheosis of the traditional Western project of undialectical reason: the project, that is, epistemologically to colonize the world through a reductive empiricist mastery grounded in mere facticity. In its Gradgrindian one-dimensionality, GI is, indeed, an exquisite figure of all positivistic, contemplative, ruling-class knowledge. Delany's text is composed in full awareness of the Foucauldian interconnections of such knowledge with power, and it is in both specific tactical ways and large structural ways that GI is always implicated in the vague but evidently ruthless power politics of the Web.

But *Stars in My Pocket* also portrays a more micrological attempt to manage and grasp, to some degree, the immense differences of the universe—a project considerably more modest in scope, and more dialectical and praxis-oriented in character, than GI. This kind of project can be found in the profession of the Industrial Diplomat, or ID, an evidently freelance consultant who is hired on a case-by-case basis to facilitate particular economic and cultural exchanges among the worlds of the Federation. In contrast to the attempts at Olympian comprehension by the Web, the ID works "on the ground," so to speak, both figuratively and (for the most part) literally, in an ad hoc and personally involved way. The Web, which, with its totalistic aims, generally discourages interstellar travel outside its own ranks, takes a particularly dim view of the IDs, who nonetheless seem to have little choice but to maintain a wary but tenable working relationship with the masters of GI.⁶ The central character of the novel (and its narrator after the opening prologue) is the ID Marq Dyeth, who describes his task, in neatly dialectical fashion, as involving not Web-like comprehension of difference (the metaphor implied by the arachnoid image is of course significant) but rather self-reflexive recognition that no such comprehension is feasible: "During my first three years as an ID, I thought my job, [that is, primary undertak-

ing] was not to be surprised at the universe's human variety. Later I realized that it was not to be surprised that nonstop surprises would henceforth be my life" (215).

The ID is, indeed, most aptly understood as a *reader*—an "explicit cultural semiotician," as Scott Bukatman has noted in passing⁷—who can only hope to be as sensitive as possible to the never securely graspable changes of *différance*. "Words, the Web, woman, world—all of these," as Marq says, "have their nebulous position in a cloud of shifting meanings" (366); and the ID must struggle to make as much sense of these shiftings as possible. Accordingly, the ID may be wiser than the Web merely in the Socratic—and, as we have seen, Lacanian and, indeed, in some ways generally dialectical—sense of knowing total or final knowledge to be unattainable.

Indeed, Marq is a quite self-consciously unreliable narrator, who can often do little better than to guess at some of the most intriguing problems that the text presents. What happened to Rhyonon, a somewhat primitive inhabited world that seems to have been destroyed in toto? Why is the Web using various methods, including death threats, to discourage curiosity about that disaster? Was Rhyonon perhaps destroyed by Cultural Fugue? And what exactly *is* Cultural Fugue anyway? We know it to be some sort of very rare but widely feared planetary catastrophe, and an object of considerable concern on nearly every world that Marq visits. He can describe it as what occurs when the socioeconomic pressures on a world "reach a point of technological recomplication and perturbation where the population completely destroys all life across the planetary surface" (70), and he claims to be able to recognize some of the signs of its approach. But it is not at all clear that he understands either the actual mechanisms by which Cultural Fugue operates or its underlying causes. Maybe the Xlv are somehow involved. But who *they* are constitutes the most obscure problem of all. Marq knows them to be the only nonhuman species to have developed interstellar travel; beyond that curious fact, however, the unpronounceability of their name figures a quite opaque otherness. Though the universe of *Stars in My Pocket* is far more information-saturated than that of *Solaris*—given its GI, its brilliant translation machines, and its other like marvels—reliable communication with the Xlv has proved as elusive as with Lem's strange ocean. Yet, in the immensity of Delany's inhabited universe, even such a tantalizing mystery cannot interest (relatively) many. One sense in which knowledge is problematic is simply that in such a vastness there is impossibly much to know. As an ID, Marq is aware

that the Xlv are “truly alien” (93), but he also realizes that their very existence “is simply another little-known fact—because in our human universe, of necessity, *all* facts are as little known as the works of great poets” (141; emphasis in original).

If even Marq Dyeth, with all his professional expertness—he is not only an ID but, from all one can gather, a highly accomplished one—remains ignorant on many important matters, the same is even more true of the reader. The principles of difference and uncertainty do not merely describe the “content” of the novel’s central creation (its universe of six thousand inhabited worlds) but so thoroughly structure the composition of the text itself that, in rigorously Derridean fashion, the traditional binary opposition between form and content is radically problematized and deconstructed. There is virtually no exposition in *Stars in My Pocket* and no didacticism of the Le Guinian sort. Delany is (with the exception of Ballard) virtually the first science-fiction novelist whose principal literary roots are firmly grounded in classical modernism: and *Stars in My Pocket* should be understood as less a conventionally narrative story than a neo-Joycean (or perhaps neo-Proustian) unfolding of extremely various and problematic situations and states of being. If it does not, as we shall see, wholly lack a “plot,” neither, after all, do *Ulysses* (1922) or even *Finnegans Wake* (1939).

Perhaps a more directly pertinent precedent is suggested—or rather invented—by the novel itself. I mean the “participatory works” (130) of Vondramach Okk, a bloodthirsty tyrant and great poet who lived several generations before the time present of the novel. Vondramach, who served as patron to one of Marq Dyeth’s ancestors, and who continues to touch his life in other (perhaps coincidental) ways, used a private language to compose works that demand the maximum attention and participation of the reader. The operative aesthetic maxim seems to be *Poetry is what is avoided as it is surrounded by translation* (130; emphasis in original). Applied to the interpretation of *Stars in My Pocket* itself, the notion of the participatory work helps to illuminate Delany’s all-important handling of *detail* and to indicate how the reader occupies a position analogous to that of the ID.

Perhaps the most relevant contrast here is with more conventionally generic utopian fiction (like *The Dispossessed* or even, to some degree, *The Female Man*) in which all or at least the great majority of details that structure the text’s invented world are carefully selected by the author according to the text’s didactic function, and are thus more or less easily grasped by

the reader in light of their expository significance. But in a more radically modernist and, as Delany might encourage us to say, heterotopic fiction like *Stars in My Pocket*, the details of the text are—in a way that resonates strongly with the Derridean logic of supplementarity—frequently in excess of any clearly controlled logical significance. It is not just that some details may be significant and others not (though that is to some degree true). It is also that, to a considerable extent, the distinction between significant and insignificant detail is itself deconstructed—so that the text solicits the reader’s active participation in significantly accounting for each detail as best she or he can and in making what connections he or she finds most relevant.

Delany, in other words, declines to impose the kind of overarching logical structure that would straightforwardly guarantee the meaning of each micro-unit of the novel. Instead, we are left to be overwhelmed by a massive amount of exceedingly various detail, and we must collaborate with the author in building up the image—or rather images—of this vast universe of difference. A few details, perhaps (such as the functioning of GI, for example) can be pretty securely grasped by an attentive reading—or, more likely, rereading. But even the most attentive reading is bound to find much meaning (perhaps above all that of the Xlv) irrecoverably uncertain and problematic. The text is, in this sense, virtually inexhaustible.⁸ As we have seen, some difference is integral to the process of cognitive estrangement that defines science fiction in general. But it would be difficult to name another science-fictional text that more insistently and micrologically confronts us with difference on a sentence-by-sentence and paragraph-by-paragraph basis. Cognitive estrangement not only functions as an overall effect of the novel; it is infused into the very temporal process of reading. Paradoxically, however, one result of this thoroughly modernist and radically science-fictional literary project is to create a powerful sense of *reality* itself. It has occasionally been noticed how modernism may be in a sense more “realistic” than realism. Just as the transcription of a tape-recording of actual conversation is almost certain to bear a much closer generic resemblance to the dialogue of Beckett or Ionesco than to that of Ibsen or Arthur Miller,⁹ so the process of dealing with and trying to decode actuality is much more like attempting to make sense of *Stars in My Pocket Like Grains of Sand* than it is like reading a more conventionally realistic novel. None of us, after all, ever does attain total certainty. We all really do live in a world of difference, and each of us is, in important ways, precisely an ID. Indeed, the abbreviation neatly suggests how the project of cultural semi-

otics that defines the Industrial Diplomat is inseparable from the (necessarily problematic) construction of identity itself.

But how, exactly and in detail, does the ID manage to comprehend difference with any degree of success at all? What is the dynamic at work that allows the ID's dialectical approach to work more adequately (or less inadequately) than the positivism of the Web's GI? However much Marq Dyeth may be doomed to operate in the universe of Heisenberg and Derrida, the very title of Delany's text does seem to promise that, in some way, comprehension may be achieved. In light of our earlier discussion of *Solaris*, it seems appropriate to suggest that *desire* must play a crucial cognitive role in a dialectical praxis that aims to attain some purchase on a world of difference. But, as we prepare further to address this question directly, it is necessary first of all to give our discussion of difference more concreteness by constructing it not only in the strictly epistemological terms suggested by quantum physics and Derridean poststructuralism, but in overtly political terms as well.

Here, I think, the most useful critical-theoretical reference is to the negative dialectic of Adorno—perhaps the greatest of all philosophers of difference and a remarkably prescient forerunner of poststructuralism.¹⁰ Whereas, however, actual French poststructuralism—whether in Derrida or even in apparently more “social” theorists like Deleuze and Foucault—has generally thought difference in epistemological or, at most, ethical ways, Adorno's perspective is unswervingly political from the outset. For Adorno, the eradication of sociopolitical difference in the triumph of totalitarian domination has been the principal, if largely secret, tendency of Western civilization since its Homeric dawn; and this tendency, which is designated, for certain purposes, as the dialectic of enlightenment, reaches its unimaginably horrible but perfectly logical culmination at Auschwitz. Indeed, it is explicitly as a philosopher of the Holocaust that Adorno, in one of his finest meditations, most tellingly delineates the significance of integration as the antithesis of difference and nonidentity:¹¹

Genocide is the absolute integration. It is on its way wherever men are leveled off—“polished off,” as the German military called it—until one exterminates them literally, as deviations from the concept of their total nullity. Auschwitz confirmed the philosopheme of pure identity as death. . . . Absolute negativity is in plain sight and has ceased to surprise anyone. . . . What the sadists in the camps foretold their victims, “Tomorrow you'll be wiggling skyward as smoke from this chimney,” bespeaks the indifference of each individual life that is the direction of history. Even in his formal

freedom, the individual is as fungible and replaceable as he will be under the liquidators' boots.

The antithesis to genocide—the antithesis to the ultimate uniformity and elimination of difference—would amount to the Adornian utopia; this, in turn, would be a social formation in which individual freedom and desire are accorded maximum dignity in ways consonant with the achievement of social solidarity. The integrity of the whole would not require the leveling of difference among the component members, and this scrupulous respect would extend not only to all men and women but to nonhuman aspects of the social totality as well (among Adorno's many prescient moments were his anticipations of the movements against environmental pollution and for animal rights).

To a remarkable degree, such an Adornian utopia is just what the universe of *Stars in My Pocket* offers. To be sure, the Federation is not in the least politically programmatic. Its various planets are governed by a large variety of political systems, from syndicalist communism to industrial fascism, and most planets do not even have worldwide government at all. Yet on the average—and most notably on Marq Dyeth's home planet of Velm, which is organized according to a predominantly though not purely socialist, egalitarian system known as bureaucratic anarchy—an extraordinary (by earthly standards) amount of sociopolitical difference is able to flourish, especially with regard to the politics of gender, sexuality, and sexual orientation. Adorno, it may be remembered, was one of the first male thinkers since Engels to stress the political importance of gender and sexuality; and his resolute nonidentitarianism bears a strong affinity to the celebration of gender equality and polymorphous perversity that is one of Delany's central themes in much of his fiction and nonfiction, and that is never more powerfully represented than in *Stars in My Pocket*.

Marq's environment is one in which gender differentiation (into three rather than only two genders for some species) is structured, for the most part, by no hierarchy or division of labor, and implies no stigmas or stereotypes of the earthly sort. Indeed, in one of the novel's most cunning strategies of uncertainty, the reader often finds it difficult even to be sure which characters are male and which female, for the very language of gender has undergone a radical transformation. *Woman* is the gender-neutral noun for an intelligent being, with *she* the corresponding pronoun; while *he*, interestingly, is reserved for anyone, regardless of gender, who is considered by the speaker as an object of sexual desire. For the reader, of course, this usage is bound to carry strong connota-