

Allegories of Injustice: **Social Engagement in Harlan Ellison's** **Short Fiction of the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s**

Rob Latham

Over the course of his five-decade career, Harlan Ellison has published pathbreaking work in a number of different media and genres, including not only the science fiction for which he is best known but also fantasy and horror, crime fiction, critical essays and reviews, memoirs, and film and television scripts.¹ He has won three Nebula Awards and eight and a half Hugo Awards, as well as an Edgar Award from the Mystery Writers of America, and an unprecedented four Writers Guild of America awards for outstanding teleplay. He is one of only three authors—the others being Fritz Leiber and Michael Moorcock—to receive lifetime achievement awards from the Science Fiction Writers of America, the Horror Writers of America, and the World Fantasy Association. This remarkable record of success is due not only to the range and power of Ellison's writing but also to the author's unparalleled willingness to grapple with concerns of public moment, to engage charged social issues and cultural debates that other writers might shy away from as too dangerous or potentially inflammatory. Though writing largely in genres perceived by some as "escapist," Ellison has produced work that fearlessly confronts the darkest and most disturbing of historical realities, such as political repression, racial discrimination, urban conflict, and war. His handling of these themes, while often displaying a fury born of despair, has also consistently manifested an undaunted commitment to social justice.

Ellison's most successful early work, during the late 1950s and early 1960s, was "social problem" fiction that addressed widespread public concerns about juvenile delinquency and gang violence. Some of this material was frankly "exploitational"—that is, it sensationalized and exaggerated the topic for popular markets dealing in cheap shocks—but most of it was strong, honest reportage based on a lengthy

and hazardous “undercover” stint with a Brooklyn street gang. The novel *Web of the City* (originally published as *Rumble*, 1958), the stories gathered in *The Deadly Streets* (1958) and *Children of the Streets* (originally published as *The Juvies*, 1961), and the memoir *Memos from Purgatory* (1961), while clearly apprentice work, have an immediacy and emotional vivacity that one recognizes in Ellison’s later, mature fiction. All four books mine the author’s personal experiences for powerful tales of angry, alienated children desperately seeking some form of belonging—recognition, if not redemption.

“Kid Killer,” which ran in the March 1957 issue of *Guilty Detective Story Magazine* and was gathered into *The Deadly Streets*, encapsulates the basic themes of this early body of work. A puny Polish teenager, Petey Cosnakof, moves to New York City from Detroit with his weak, unemployed father and mentally disturbed mother. Given no guidance by these neglectful parents, whom he despises, Petey is at a loss as to how to deal with the ethnic slurs and casual beatings he suffers from members of a local youth gang. Finally he arms himself with a pistol and, cornered in an alley, shoots and kills their leader, Snake. Filled with crazed bravado, he then confronts the gang and demands to be made their new “president”; a melee ensues, the police arrive, and Petey is shot dead while trying to escape. Bullied, harassed, filled with frustrated machismo and a longing for vengeance, this misguided boy convinces himself that in order to be respected—to prove himself a “cool stud”—he has to have “guts enough to kill” (117). Yet all this ersatz courage earns him is a mean death in the street. In an introduction to the collection, titled “Some Sketches of the Damned,” Ellison bemoans the plight of these lost kids who have learned only to “get your stomps before they stomp *you*” (19). Yet he affirms that, underneath the tattered leather jackets and jaded tough-guy poses, they are “basically honest and decent. . . . All they need is a chance” (20).

These early “juvie” tales, published in hard-boiled detective digests and as paperback originals by small presses such as Ace and Pyramid Books, show how open such down-market venues were to fiction that

engaged pressing social issues, albeit often in a caricatured way or with a moralizing tone. Ellison's work does not always escape these pitfalls, but it possesses an undeniable dynamism and a sincere note of humane outrage that would become characteristic of all his output. It is only a short step from these stark, depressing, if admittedly sometimes hackneyed stories to such later classics of urban violence as "The Whimper of Whipped Dogs" (1973). Based on the true story of Kitty Genovese, a young woman stabbed to death by a maniac on a New York street in front of dozens of uncaring neighbors who made no move to help her, this Edgar-winning effort transmutes the basic crime-story materials of Ellison's early fiction into something altogether more horrific and profound. Its graphically naturalistic opening shades into a tale of the ambiguously supernatural, with the girl's seemingly random murder serving to feed the appetite of a callous urban deity, "a deranged blood God of fog and street violence. A God who needed worshipers and offered the choices of death as a victim or life as an eternal witness to the deaths of *other* chosen victims" (19). The rough-and-ready materials of Ellison's youthful work here give way to a more polished and subtle treatment, which the author would select to head up probably his most accomplished single collection, *Deathbird Stories: A Pantheon of Modern Gods*.

Ellison's socially conscious work of the early 1960s included some brave approaches to the fraught issue of racial conflict, forces then in the process of rending American society. A strong proponent of civil rights, Ellison participated in a freedom march in Alabama to protest segregation, where he was confronted firsthand with naked racist hatred on the part of white southerners, "the frenzied and hideous *doppelgangers* of Hitler's storm troopers" ("From Alabama" 111). As Ellen Weil and Gary K. Wolfe observe, his fiction from the period depicts this ugly reality with a "visceral documentary power" (97). "The Night of Delicate Terrors" (1961), for example, is a compelling story of an African American family traveling from Georgia to Chicago during a dangerous blizzard. The father, McKinley Hooker, finds himself ex-

hausted after long hours of driving, but he is unable to stop for rest because all the restaurants and motels along the route serve whites only. The festering irrationality of racial prejudice is captured in literally chilling terms, as the desperate family is turned away from a diner that won't even let them use the bathrooms. Back on the highway, battling blowing snow that threatens to upend the car, Hooker finally reconciles himself to his decision to join a secret black militia group—his destination in Chicago, as it turns out. “He had been uncertain before, because he was not a man of violence . . . but suddenly, it was right. It was the way it would be, because they had forced it this way” (255). Here the yearning for vengeance that characterizes little Petey Cosnakof is given a broader, more apocalyptic twist, since the bully in the story is institutionalized racism itself and the put-upon protagonist a representative of an entire downtrodden community.

The ideological complexity of racial struggle during the civil rights era is the theme of “Daniel White for the Greater Good” (1961), probably Ellison’s most sophisticated take on the topic. The eponymous character is a young black man entirely lacking in conscience who, after raping a white girl and now faced with the prospect of a lynch mob, is smugly certain a representative from the Georgia NAACP will protect him. But as the mob violence starts to spread and target the larger African American community, this representative advises the local black leaders to allow White to be lynched, arguing that in death he will be more useful to his people than he had ever been in life, as a martyr whose grim fate will rally supporters to the cause. “It was a double-edged sword that slicing one way would tame the wrath of the mob beast, and slicing the other would make a path for more understanding, by use of shame and example” (69-70). According to Weil and Wolfe, “Daniel White for the Greater Good” stands out from most of Ellison’s early social-problem stories in depicting such a “tangled moral parable” that it is impossible to discern what the correct decision should be: to save the individual and sacrifice the community, or vice versa (96).

It was likely this ethical complexity that led Dorothy Parker, in her

review of the 1961 collection *Gentleman Junkie, and Other Stories of the Hung-Up Generation* in *Esquire* magazine, to single out “Daniel White” as “the best presentation I have ever seen of present racial conditions in the South and of those who try to alleviate them.” This review gave Ellison a much-needed boost at a critical juncture in his career, convincing him that his work, though published in obscure outlets far from the arenas of literary respectability (“Daniel White” had appeared in the men’s magazine *Rogue* before being collected in *Gentleman Junkie*), were reaching serious readers and critics. As a result, Ellison’s fiction of the mid-1960s began to grow markedly more ambitious: rather than producing stories to accommodate existing markets, he sought instead to transform those markets to fit his own artistic and social vision. Specifically, he returned with renewed vigor to his earliest literary love, science fiction (SF), a genre that had significantly atrophied during the late 1950s and early 1960s, when hosts of magazines died off and major talents fled the field.

Just beginning to recover in the mid-1960s, as paperback publishers discovered the genre in earnest, SF nonetheless remained artistically stalled, the intellectual energy that fueled the boom of the 1950s spent and that decade’s major themes played out to exhaustion. Sensing an opportunity, Ellison leaped into the breach with typical flamboyance, releasing a story in the December 1965 issue of *Galaxy* magazine, “‘Repent, Harlequin!’ Said the Ticktockman,” that almost certainly could not have been published a decade earlier, given its almost surreal tone and fragmentary form. The tale went on to win both the Hugo and Nebula awards, Ellison’s first major recognitions within the genre, and has since been translated into most major languages and anthologized more frequently than any other modern SF story.

Most interestingly, what “‘Repent, Harlequin!’” accomplished, aside from helping to refresh a moribund field, was to extrapolate the theme of ideological conflict so pronounced in the author’s earlier social-problem fiction in such a way that it converted mere topical relevance, the congruence with contemporary headlines, into a universal

allegory of rebellion against tyrannical authority. Set in a totalitarian dystopia where time is regulated with brutal efficiency, the story pits the dour, rigid Ticktockman, agent of this remorseless order, against the Harlequin, a mercurial prankster whose persistent acts of surreal sabotage undermine the well-oiled precision of the state. Opening with a long quotation from Henry David Thoreau's 1849 essay "Civil Disobedience," the tale manages to combine a didactic antiauthoritarian message with a freewheeling, anarchic atmosphere; at one point, the Harlequin drops a load of candy onto the express slidewalk that takes commuters to and from their work shifts: "Everyone was summarily dumped thisawayandthataway in a jackstraw tumble, still laughing and popping little jelly beans of childish color into their mouths. It was a holiday, and a jollity, an absolute insanity, a giggle. . . . The shift was delayed seven minutes" (134). As this passage suggests, Ellison's prose, released from the constraints of the hard-boiled crime genre, achieves a fresh lyrical energy, and the tale delights in coining strange words: "swizzleskid," "minee," "Flash-O," "fallaron." Though the Harlequin is captured and compelled to repent, the story ends on an enigmatic note of hope, as the Ticktockman is apparently infected with the trickster's wayward spirit, showing up late for work while humming a merry tune.

Ellison wrote "'Repent, Harlequin!'" while attending a writers' workshop in Milford, Pennsylvania, hosted by SF author and editor Damon Knight, and he has reported that response to the story at the workshop split right down the middle: one group deplored its outright daffiness and seeming formlessness while the other appreciated its whimsical brilliance and clever skewering of autocratic pretensions. Among the latter crowd was Frederik Pohl, then editor of *Galaxy*, who bought the manuscript on the spot (see Ellison, "A Time" 29), but Ellison would come to have problems with Pohl as well, when his later story "I Have No Mouth, and I Must Scream"—another scathing denunciation of tyrannical power—was censored, upon its appearance in *Galaxy*'s sister magazine, *If*, in 1967, because of its sexual frankness

and religious irreverence. “I Have No Mouth” is a much darker tale than “Repent, Harlequin!”: gone is the airy lightness of tone, replaced by the cynical, desperate, brutalized voice of a nuclear-war survivor trapped, by a despotic artificial intelligence, in a computer-generated hell. The story fuses the fantastic imagery of Ellison’s SF with the stark violence of his crime stories in a savage commentary on the unfeeling brutality of a technocratic system that suppresses freedom and punishes individuality, “with the innate loathing that all machines had always held for the weak, soft creatures that built them” (26). Despite Pohl’s peremptory edits, Ellison was vindicated when “I Have No Mouth” won him his second Hugo Award for best short story; however, the push-back against his efforts to expand SF’s thematic and stylistic repertoire on the part of the field’s major editors convinced him that a more radical intervention was in order.

In a combative speech delivered at the Nineteenth Annual West Coast SF Convention in San Diego, California, on Independence Day, 1966 (later published as “A Time for Daring”), Ellison declared his own independence from the genre’s hidebound rules and blinkered sense of its own possibilities. Decrying the elitist snobbery that had kept science fiction segregated from the literary mainstream, Ellison also lambasted SF writers and fans for falling into a compensatory “ghetto” mentality that rationalized this marginalization. Refusing to change and adapt, they clung to familiar subcultural rituals and formula stories while the larger world passed them by. “We’ve been leaching the vitality out of our best writers,” he proclaimed, or else forcing them to flee the field because “they’re too big and too talented to be constrained by our often vicious, often ungrateful little back water eddy” (33). While postmodern authors such as Kurt Vonnegut and William Burroughs were already pushing the borders of speculative fiction into surprising terrain, SF fans remained content to read “the hacks” who “give us a nice technological thing that we can play with and toy with and masturbate with. . . . we like that a lot. But when they really demand something from us, when they write something re-

ally new and fresh and different and inventive, we don't know where they are" (33). With this pugnacious speech (which featured snippy banter with a cantankerous audience), along with similarly polemical pieces published in professional and fan magazines, Ellison sought to build the constituency for a more experimental, more adventurous brand of science fiction, of the sort that he was currently producing himself. But in order to give this kind of work a prestigious showplace, the author was compelled to become an editor, shepherding into print the publishing event of the decade, the anthology *Dangerous Visions* (1967).

A compendium of thirty-three mind-bending stories by SF writers both old and new, *Dangerous Visions* was nonetheless unmistakably an Ellison production: every story came complete with a breathless editorial preface, and the book also featured a lengthy, barn-burning introduction that trumpeted the volume's "new horizons and styles and forms and challenges," its "fresh and daring ideas," and its fearless trampling of taboos surrounding sex, politics, and religion ("Introduction" xxi). "No one has ever told the speculative writer, 'Pull out all the stops, no holds barred, get it said!' Until this book came along" (xxiv). *Dangerous Visions* was one of the first, and was certainly the largest and most visible, all-original anthologies ever published within the genre, and its purpose was to compel the magazines to liberalize their editorial policies by showing what could be possible absent traditional constraints on idea and expression. If Ellison's calculated rabble-rousing—his aggressive flaunting of stories of atheism, "deviant" sexuality, and ultraviolence—may seem a bit dated today, this is testimony to just how effective his editorial program was in shaking up and helping to transform the field, since these themes no longer seem so unthinkable, quite so beyond the pale.

While the volume was unsurprisingly controversial among hardcore Old Guard types (fan author Ted White called it "an ugly book, and a disaster" [34]), it sold extremely well and was showered with awards: two Hugos and two Nebulas for its fiction, and a special Hugo

plaque to Ellison for editing it. In a response to his critics, Ellison claimed that *Dangerous Visions* “accomplished everything I intended”: it “forc[ed] the closet reactionaries to voice their musty opinions in an undisguised manner that revealed them for what they are” while simultaneously “creat[ing] a more liberal atmosphere in which the stylistic innovators emergent these last few years could have their work accepted” (“Final”).²

Dangerous Visions has been described as “the starting gun of the War of the New Wave in America” (Dozois 13), a conflict that had already been raging for several years in Great Britain. The so-called New Wave was a loosely affiliated movement of writers, editors, and fans who, like Ellison, were convinced that SF of the early to mid-1960s had grown embarrassingly stale and needed an invigorating jolt of creative and intellectual energy.³ Ellison himself has dismissed the term as misleading, declaring that there was “no conscious ‘movement’ by any one group of writers”; rather, if the New Wave refers to anything meaningful, it signals “a reflection of what was happening in the world during the Sixties. A dawning social consciousness, the youth rebellion, the civil rights movement, the rise of Third World powers, a reaction to the repressiveness of established governments, a time of involvement and turmoil” filtered into the seemingly sealed-off world of SF, setting off “tremblors that shocked our younger writers and our more adaptable older writers” (“A Few” 42). Another way to put this, of course, is that the genre had finally managed to catch up with Harlan Ellison, since his work had been addressing many of those concerns since the late 1950s. However one formulates the issue, there is no question that, once the furious debates over the New Wave—and the countercultural trends it reflected—erupted in the United States, Ellison threw himself into the fray with gusto, churning out a prodigious stream of fiction, essays, reviews, and letters to editors that cheerfully grappled with some of the most contentious questions of the times. Indeed, the period of the mid-1960s to mid-1970s was the most productive of the author’s career, and there can be little doubt that the

ardor and intensity that marked the struggles of that era served as galvanizing forces for his best, most vital work.

Some of Ellison's voluminous output during this decade continued the social-problem emphasis of his earlier fiction, now extrapolated to countercultural concerns. "Shattered Like a Glass Goblin" (1968), for example, is a tale of lost youth similar to those gathered in *The Deadly Streets*, though hippies and psychotropic drugs have supplanted juvenile delinquents and gang violence. Set in an urban crash pad amid a tatterdemalion crew of wasted stoners, the tale centers on the efforts of a recently discharged serviceman, Rudy, to save his former girlfriend, Kris, from a hideous descent into addiction. As he is drawn into her weird twilight world, Rudy feels himself metamorphosing into a fabulous creature, the eponymous glass goblin, surrounded by much more fearsome and dangerous beasts that represent the terrors of uncontrollable dependency. With its psychedelic haunted-house imagery, "Shattered" is much more aligned in tone with horror fiction than with SF, giving voice to the author's lifelong abstinence from drug and alcohol use in a forthright and (it must be admitted) rather heavy-handed way. Still, it stands apart from his earlier "juvie" stories in the greater expressiveness of Ellison's mature style: baroque as opposed to spare, lyrical instead of hard-boiled.

Much more successful, in its fusing of social-problem fiction with the modalities of the fantastic genres, is "Basilisk" (1972), an antiwar story of considerable subtlety and power. After being seriously injured by a pungi stake, American corporal Vern Lestig is captured by a nameless Asian enemy that is clearly a stand-in for the Vietnamese. Discovered in the ruined enemy camp, his captors butchered by some mysterious agency, Vern is rescued by his countrymen, but the fact that he confessed to the enemy under torture leads to a court martial and dismissal from the Army. Returning to his Kansas town as a pariah, he is shunned by his former girlfriend and persecuted by the locals, who despise his "treasonous" cowardice. As thus summarized, the tale would seem like a straightforward, realistic effort to depict the mani-

fold injustices of the Vietnam conflict, but Ellison adds a characteristic twist: the pungi stake that wounded Vern had been anointed with the blood of a basilisk, a “great black gap-mawed beast . . . stepping down through mists of potent barriers erected to separate men from their masters” (81). Like this mythical monster, Vern now possesses the ability to kill with a look or a breath, as his Vietnamese captors discovered to their horror. Now goaded beyond endurance, Vern lashes out at his Kansas neighbors in an orgy of bloodletting that achieves, albeit in a grimly ironic way, the antiwar movement’s goal of “bringing the war home.” The basilisk, we discover at the end, is the tamed pet of Mars, Roman god of war, who is much pleased to see the carnage expanding to the American heartland.

Ellison’s depiction of the Kansas denizens as a mob of angry, benighted “patriots” lashing out at a convenient scapegoat echoes his earlier portraits of racist southerners, smug in their moral superiority and eager to prove it through recourse to righteous violence. An even more scathing treatment of Middle American bigotry and closed-mindedness can be found in the novella *A Boy and His Dog* (1969), another Nebula winner and perhaps the author’s single finest story. It is certainly one of his most science fictional, set in the aftermath of a nuclear conflagration that has driven whole communities underground while gangs of survivors wander the shattered wastelands. The narrator, Vic, a “solo” unaffiliated with any of the “roverpaks,” is partnered with Blood, a telepathic dog descended from brain-boostered animals adapted for the battlefield. Vic hooks up with Quilla June, a young woman from “Topeka” (one of the subsurface cities), and after defending her from a band of marauders in a pitched battle that severely wounds Blood, he follows her underground. There he finds a sealed-off world living a dead fantasy of 1950s normalcy: “Neat little houses, and curvy little streets, and trimmed lawns, and a business section” (243); as one of the town leaders affirms, “It’s nice down here. Quiet, orderly, nice people who respect each other, no crime, respect for the elders, and just all around a good place to live. We’re growin’ and we’re prosperin’” (243-

44). Unfortunately, after a generation underground, the population is no longer reproductively viable, and they need outsiders like Vic to infuse their stagnant gene pool with new energy. Horrified by this claustrophobic false utopia, Vic escapes, choosing a dangerous, rootless freedom with Blood over the bleak, reactionary stasis of “Topeka.” One is left to conclude that the real-world Topeka was no less sterile and soul-killing, and atomic armageddon history’s just verdict on its vacuous inanity.

While many of Ellison’s stories from this period display a similarly barbed satirical thirst, skewering the sacred cows of American middle-class life, some of his most powerful and searching efforts are more elusive allegories that, while still offering sharp commentary on the social realities of the day, do so with a distanced irony and in a highly symbolic fashion. Probably the most brilliant of these is “The Deathbird” (1973), a Hugo-winning tale that provides the title for Ellison’s most thematically cohesive collection. Like several of his most ambitious stories from this era, such as “The Beast That Shouted Love at the Heart of the World” (1968) and “Adrift Just Off the Islets of Langerhans” (1974), “Deathbird” is a conflation of generic tropes culled from science fiction, fantasy, and postmodernist literature that strain for—and at their best achieve—the potency of a kind of pop-cultural myth.

An assemblage of fragments of narrative, autobiography, and quotations from the Bible and Friedrich Nietzsche, framed as a “test” for the reader complete with topics for discussion and a multiple-choice exam, “Deathbird” retells Genesis as a science fiction fable in which the snake who led humankind astray is actually the hero, while the villain is an insane, petulant, vindictive, patriarchal God. Impossible to summarize neatly, the story shifts through a range of rhetorical voices with dizzying virtuosity, by turns hectoring, mocking, coaxing, and exhorting its readers. A reverse theodicy, the tale indicts the biblical deity for all the evils of history, including the nuclear holocaust that has culminated it, offering an alternative cosmology in which tutelary

aliens, represented by the biblical snake (here named Dira), have sought to awaken humanity from the thrall of a despotic false Creator. In its pitting of humane possibility against overbearing authority, “Deathbird” is a more sophisticated version of ““Repent, Harlequin!””; indeed, this perennial conflict is perhaps Ellison’s most abiding theme. The story’s God is the distilled essence of all the vicious racists, closed-minded Middle Americans, and self-righteous autocrats who people his earlier fiction, as well as being the very face of the Establishment opposed by the 1960s counterculture. Yet the final confrontation is distinctly anticlimactic, as the representative of humanity, Nathan Stack, after climbing a mountain and enduring horrible trials to reach His throne, finds only “an old, tired man” whining “in the voice of a cranky child. . . OH, PLEASE, I DON’T WANT TO GO TO BED YET. I’M NOT YET DONE PLAYING” (333).

“Deathbird” is the capping entry in *Deathbird Stories*, a collection of nineteen tales that depict, according to the book’s subtitle, “a pantheon of modern gods,” including the remorseless god of war of “Basilisk” and the god of self-destructive addiction of “Shattered Like a Glass Goblin.” Released in 1975, at the end of the remarkable decade of productivity kicked off by ““Repent, Harlequin!”,” it reveals Ellison as not only one of the most compelling and versatile of contemporary SF authors but also its most fearless battler against social intolerance, an enemy of false idols and mindless dogma. In an interview with Paul Walker conducted in 1972, Ellison claimed to see himself as “only a storyteller”—a claim that may seem surprisingly modest until the author explains his vision of this role: “There are messages in everything I wrote, but they are there to satisfy *my* needs as a thinking individual; I hope a *committed* individual. The *story* is there for the reader” (293). For readers willing to grasp for the messages underlying these stories—messages of hope, of despair, and of baffled but persistent struggle against injustice—the experience of encountering these at once deeply personal and profoundly social documents offers both a challenge and a delight.

Notes

1. This essay, while covering some of Ellison's most important and characteristic short fiction of the late 1950s through mid-1970s, can barely scratch the surface of his vast oeuvre. For an exhaustive—and superb—overview of Ellison's entire career, see Weil and Wolfe.

2. A follow-up volume—*Again, Dangerous Visions*, published in 1972—was even bigger, featuring forty-two stories, and it too was a success, garnering a Hugo and a Nebula for its fiction. By this time, all-original anthologies had become a thriving market within the field.

3. For a fuller discussion of the New Wave phenomenon, see my essay “The New Wave.”

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