

Don't Leave Me

Barrington J. Bayley

Never take pop culture too seriously - after all, look what happened to Woody Allen and Paul McCartney. Luckily for us, there's no better writer to prick the vacuum bubble into which too many critics have retreated than Barry Bayley, whose witty, transsurreal stories have ornamented SF since the early days of New Worlds. We're particularly pleased to present one of his stories here, because, with novels such as The Zen Gun and The Rod of Light, he is a link between the fine old days of New Worlds' trippy gedanken experiments in literary speculative fiction and the ideological gurus of the current radical SF fringe. Here, he deconstructs the deconstructionists in a sly, intelligent and above all funny story about the consequences of taking pop lyrics a smidgen too seriously.

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xtremely little is known of the period and civilisation to which the artifact belongs. Found as the result of a deep excavation, it may have been thrown on a rubbish tip consisting mainly of organic refuse, which has degraded to a peat-like substance, though the artifact itself is made of an artificial hydrocarbon resistant to attack by bacteria. It is a miracle that it was not chewed to shreds by the excavator, and a second miracle that it was ever noticed.

Black in colour, the artifact takes the form of a thin disc a little less than a hand's span in diameter. One side has been abraded by some accidental process, and it is not known if it ever contained anything of interest. For twenty years the disc lay in the Leveropolis Museum of Antiquities as a curio or uninteresting relic. For most of that time it was believed to be a decorative wall plaque, the perforations - consisting of a central hole surrounded by quarter-circle slots - present to help fix it in place. The symbols on the inner smooth part of the disc were identified as the phonetic script of the Roman Empire, and the Leveropolis Museum speculatively dated it as belonging to the late period of Rome's three to four thousand year history.

Although some of the languages represented by Roman script have been deciphered in varying degrees, the significance of the legends on the disc remained unknown. It was Expertiser Had-Frakshelis-Suissperrer, making an inspection tour of Politan Museums, who first suggested that the disc might be a store of information. He partly based his suggestion on the fact that a word which, with various derivatives, occurs five times in the disc's script, could be translated as 'record'. The original translators had interpreted this word as 'pattern', thinking it to refer to the moulding of the disc, which the Romans presumably thought visually appealing. The text of a current translation of the legends is reproduced below, though without their full artistic arrangement:

All rights of the manufacturer and of the owner of the recorded work reserved. Unauthorised public performance broadcasting and copying of this record prohibited.

LONDON

American Recordings

Made in England 45R.P.M.

Recording first E/T
published 1959

A UNITED 45-HLT
ARTISTS 9013
Recording

Jobet Music

DON'T LEAVE ME
(Gordy, Brianbert, Robinson)
MARV JOHNSON

The legend 'Jobet Music' was, it was true, an argument against Expertiser Had-Frakshelis-Suissperrer's contention, 'Music' being a Roman term for 'artistic arrangement' and obviously referring to the layout of the disc. Also, information storage methods employed in the late Roman Empire were known to be extremely primitive, demonstrating a lack of consideration for future historians and archaeologists fairly typical of early civilisations. Magnetic storage was the technique most commonly used, a medium which degrades even more rapidly than inked tree leaves or bark. Consequently the only Roman records surviving were fragments of writing

in the Roman phonetic or 'alphabetical' script, and shards of hard material on which had been etched rows of microscopic pits. After much analysis the latter yielded a binary code from which, with much trouble, bits of photo-graphic images have been reconstructed.

The black disc is made of non-magnetic material, and so could not have been used for magnetic storage. However, Expertiser Had-Frakshelis-Suissperrer pointed out that binary pit-rows were sometimes found in the form of arcs, possibly broken sections of circles, suggesting that the code might have been read in rotary fashion. Could the black hydrocarbon disc be a variant carrier of image code?

Close examination of the roughened area of the disc, where it had been scored with narrow circular grooves, revealed a surprise: there was but a single groove, running in a close-packed spiral - though broken in many places where the disc had been scratched or otherwise damaged. The groove was, however, smooth, without pits or anything which could comprise a binary code. Expertiser Had-Frakshelis-Suissperrer then learned the unwisdom of publicising an idea before it has been tested. He was severely ridiculed for having attached significance to what was no more than a decorative pattern, designed to break up the light. His career and standing were badly damaged, and in a short time he elected for early voluntary death. Some may remember the brief fad for imitation 'Roman wall-plaques' which followed, various imaginative groove-patterns being scored on discs of moulded black hydrocarbon.

The disc continued to fascinate scholars, and despite the fate of Expertiser Had-Frakshelis-Suissperrer the notion that it was a recording device persisted. Knowledgeian Partners Harporse-Shem-Kwismave and Burve-Gomweenlos-Gurtererver were the next to examine the spiral groove through a microscope, and were the first to notice that the groove was not quite even, but meandered slightly in irregular fashion. Could the deviations be another type of picture code, per-forming a function similar to pit-rows? The prospect was exciting, since if so then a complete Roman picture or even set of pictures was available for the first time. Entranced by the prospect of gazing upon a Roman scene, and ignoring warnings that the meanderings of the groove could simply be due to the crudity of the tool used, the knowledgeians obtained from Central Funding an appropriation of two hundred and fifty thousand social wealth units to finance the attempted decipherment of the image code.

Despite an investment in expensive analysing equipment and much time, no pictures were ever discovered. The meanderings appeared to be random. As is well known, Knowledgeian Partners

Harporse-Shem-Kwismave and Burve-Gomweenlos-Gurtererver were subsequently punished by public surgical decapitation, for non-productive use of social funds.

Yet the efforts of these brave martyred scholars have not, in the end, been without result. I, Expertiser Swilansone-Kurep-Bifo also pondered the phenomenon of the wander-ing groove. One day in my laboratory I made a metal reed vibrate by being blown in a stream of air, later examining its recorded motion at leisure on an oscilloscope. Watching the waggly line traced by the beam on the phosphorescent end of the tube, I suddenly thought of the Roman artifact, and an idea blossomed full-grown in my mind. If something were made to run at speed through the meandering groove, it would waver just like the spot on the oscilloscope!

Knowledgian Partners Harporse-Shem-Kwismave and Burve-Gomweenlos-Gurtererver, I recalled, had tried to derive a digital code expressing light and shade, by measuring the groove's amplitudes of variation. Could they have overlooked something so stunningly simple that no one would normally think of it? Not wanting to share their fate, or that of Expertiser Had-Frakshelis-Suissperrer before them, I moved cautiously, and depended on my own resources alone. First I had to persuade the Leveropolis Museum of Antiquities to loan me the disc. This I did on the pretext that I intended to make an exact survey of its measurements. I also sought the Museum's permission to restore the disc by repairing the breaks in the groove's walls. The curators were glad to allow this, not having been able to contemplate such a meticulous project themselves, and hoping that we might then see the full original effect of the disc as a wall plaque.

The job of restoring the groove, using microscopic tools, was indeed a long and difficult one. Once accomplished, I began to consider how to convert the groove's meanderings into vibrations of a metal reed.

At first I proposed to construct a framework by means of which I could run a small metal probe in a spiral path, tracking from the centre out, but this seemed difficult in practical terms. I therefore thought of a simpler solution. The disc's central hole reminded me of the axle hole of a wheel. I therefore made a rotating rubber 'pad' on which to rest the wheel, with a central spindle to hold it in place. By rotating the disc, the problem of running a probe through the groove was very much simplified. For the probe itself, I rejected metal in favour of a splinter of diamond, first making sure that this would not damage the disc too much. This I fixed on the end of an arm whose other end was hinged, so that it was able to move in an arc. By merely placing the probe in the groove, the movement of the disc was sufficient to carry it through the spiral!

A re-examination of the groove convinced me that this was how the Romans actually used the disc, and also that I had been wrong in proposing to run the probe from the inner part towards the periphery. On either side of the close-packed spiral are smooth areas through which the groove continues to run but in widely spaced turns, and these turns of the groove, moreover, are without meanderings. If the probe were run from the centre outward, it would eventually fall off the disc. On the inner shiny area, however, the spiral turns into a closed circle, and if travelling inward the probe eventually remains safely in this until it is removed.

Initially, the variable-speed rotating pad was set at fifty rotations per chronodegree. I placed the probe in the groove, set the disc rotating, watched the probe run into the close-packed meandering spiral, then bent my ear close to the metal reed which I had welded on to the stylus holding the diamond splinter. Sure enough, the reed was audibly vibrating.

I confess that I had expected to hear, at most, nothing but white noise. What I heard instead was - faint, but definitely structured, sound.

The mystery of the Roman disc was solved! It was a recording device after all - but a device for recording *sound!*

But a simple reed was obviously quite inadequate as a resonator. I set to work again, converting the stylus into a kind of little microphone which produced varying electric current controlled by the vibrations of the diamond. This current I used to modulate a much stronger current in an electronic amplifier, finally using the strong current to work a loudspeaker such as are employed to issue daily instructions in the public squares.

This arrangement, in all probability, matches that used in Roman times.

Now that the disc's signal had been fully recovered, the question of the correct speed of rotation could be tackled. This might have been impossible but for the presence of a human voice on the recording. I judged, after some experimentation, that the disc should be spun at somewhere between one hundred and twenty and one hundred and fifty rotations per chronodegree. (Recently it has been suggested that the inscription '45 R.P.M.' which appears among the disc's legends stands for '45 Revolutions Per Minute', so that we now have a value for this Roman time unit.)

It is scarcely possible to convey, to one who has not heard it, the

bewildering volume and turmoil which issues from this little disc. Great rhythmic thudding sounds, skirlings, chimings, voices, unexpected interventions, all creating together an organised pattern which, though with a certain compelling quality, is virtually incomprehensible to the modern mind.

For that reason we concentrated our attention on the single voice which speaks in the foreground of the sound-message. Though a fairly large written vocabulary exists for the Roman language of the legends occupying the central portion of the disc, no Roman voice had ever been heard before, and the problem of matching the spoken with the written word was a serious one. It was solved after nearly a year of study.

A full transcription of the message text follows, the one expression to defy translation being included in parentheses:

*Don't leave me, don't leave me, don't leave me
Baby, baby, baby, don't leave me
Oh no, no, no, don't. . .*

*(Woah, woah) I-I-I had a dream last night
When I awoke I found myself crying.
I dreamed that the girl I loved told me
That our love was dying.*

*(Woah, woah) she said, she said
That she was falling
Fa-a-alling, for a buddy of mine
And she said that everyone knew
And how could I be so blind.*

*I woke up and called my baby
She said no matter how ill it seemed
She would always be mine and losing her
Was something that I had dreamed.*

*No, no, please don't leave me, baby
It's just a dream that made me cry
I know that if I lost you
I-I-I would surely die.*

*Don't leave me, don't leave me, don't leave me
Baby, baby, baby don't leave me*

Oh no, no, no, don't, baby ...

What must be mentioned is the agonised feeling with which these words are spoken. Also remarkable is their extravagant intonation, in which the tonal variations of normal speech are altered and exaggerated to a manic degree. Three examples have been loosely indicated in the transcription, but the written word cannot give any adequate idea of the weirdness of the effect. For instance, the word 'crying' at the end of the fifth line is voiced using no fewer than six consecutive tones.

The sociological information contained in the text is most surprising. The speaker tells of his intense love for a girl, and his fear that her love for him is being transferred to his 'buddy' (that is, his friend). We can safely assume that this love is sexual. Yet we are continually reminded throughout the text that the girl is his 'baby', that is, his own very young child - Marriage between brother and sister was practised in the civilisation preceding the Roman, namely the Egyptian, but this is the first knowledge we have that in the Roman world procreation proceeded between parent and child. The intensity and enthusiasm displayed for the arrangement is striking. Since such a custom would lead rapidly to genetic degeneration, we may have here the explanation of the collapse and total disappearance of the Roman Empire.

We can congratulate ourselves that in having combined what were once two sexes into a single epicene human type, delegating procreation to the amniotic tanks and assigning the upbringing of the young to the offices of the state, we have avoided all such dangers, and have also removed a source of emotional disturbance.

The day came when I invited my colleague Expertiser Stomlees-Win-Axalos discreetly to review the findings of myself and my assistants. Stomlees-Win-Axalos is probably the greatest expert on antiquities in the world, and in the ante-room to the laboratory I read out the text to him. I did not attempt to reproduce the eccentric vocalisation, I described it to him as best I could. He nodded impatiently.

'That is the meaning of the Roman word "singing". Both that, and the mysterious background noises you refer to, would appear to be examples of sonic music which was popular in early civilisations. It was based on rhythm, tonal variation and timbre, and no doubt would be bewildering indeed to anyone hearing it for the first time. Sonic music was, as a matter of fact, still being performed in our own civilisation up to about five centuries ago, when it was abandoned as being inimical to a balanced education. It would be as well if the playing of this disc were restricted to

Expertisers and their prepared staff.'

I readily concurred.

'Well,' Expertiser Stomlees-Win-Axalos said irritably, 'are you going to keep me waiting much longer?'

I led him into the laboratory. He barely glanced at the disc which lay on the turnpad. He had, after all, been one of the first to examine it upon its discovery. I set the disc to spinning at one hundred and thirty rotations per chronodegree, and carefully placed the diamond-tipped stylus where it would automatically be trapped by the run-in groove. I turned up the amplification so that Expertiser Stomlees-Win-Axalos could experience the full glory of the ancient recording, and hear at full volume that long-dead voice.

Expertiser Stomlees-Win-Axalos stood transfixed, his jaw dropping in astonishment as the playback proceeded to fill the room with loud sounds. The stylus tracked across the recorded area of the disc, ending, in place of silence, with an intermittent 'snap' and a continuous crackle as it ran in the safety loop.

His eyes shone. 'Fools! Do you not know what you have uncovered?'

Then: 'Play it again!'

On the second time the esteemed Expertiser listened to the disc with an even more determined concentration. Finally, as the needle again crackled out its spoiled silence, he turned to me.

'Forget about the verbal text for the time being, though your sociological interpretation is, I dare say, quite correct. No, listen to the sound constructions which back and support the "singing", like a cradle, like a boat - the tones resembling shrill bird calls, incidentally, may have been produced by an instrument called a "flute". This sound construction is, in turn, supported by something far more profound. Let me explain. The Romans built a marvellous type of timber ship, called a trireme, with three banks of oars. As you listen to this record, you can see such a ship very vividly in your mental imagination. You can hear the thudding of the oars as it pulls across the harbour. On the deck is a choir of "singers"; flutes are playing, and perfume is in the air.

'Do you not see what this means? *The Romans knew how to record mental images, and to play them back into the mind of anyone present.*'

With an effort he controlled his excitement. He made a casual gesture. 'Up until now you may have been impervious to this scene, not knowing of the existence of triremes.'

Expertiser Stomlees-Win-Axalos's announcement left me stunned. At first I had trouble believing it. But when we played the disc a third time, I also began to see the scene he described.

Since then I have played it hundreds of times, and with each re-hearing the image becomes more compelling. The energy! The power! The thudding of the three banks of oars! the flute, the choir, as the beautiful trireme pulls across the shimmering water into perfumed mist.

And when one considers all three layers together - the mental image, the sound construction, the words of the 'singing', acute questions arise. There is, in this artistic construction, not only extreme vigour, but also an air of extreme degeneracy. Just what is taking place on the deck of the trireme I am not yet sure; but the 'singer', whose name we may deduce is 'Marv Johnson', is adamant in pursuing his deviant emotions. In the same way that the trireme propels itself across the harbour into scented darkness, he unwittingly describes how the Roman world headed into decadence in its search for pleasure and emotional intensity. Would the Romans have acted differently if they had realised the consequences for their civilisation? Having steeped myself in the mentality of the disc, I am forced to conclude that they would not, an attitude which we, with our quiet, placid lives, can scarcely understand. Indeed, Marv Johnson at first feels anguish, but then joy because his perverse way of life can continue.

But all this is insignificant as compared with the really great discovery: *the Romans knew how to record mental images*. How they managed to do this on what appears to be a fairly simple artificial hydrocarbon is as yet unknown; but it is a facility which we must learn to copy. Expertiser Stomlees-Win-Axalos and myself, Expertiser Swinlansone-Kurep-Bifo, are proud to announce that to that end we have obtained from Central Funding a disbursement of forty-five million social wealth units, a sum commensurate with the magnitude of the task.

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