

# Life in the Groove

Ian Watson

*Part of the charm of the 45 r.p.m. single - or part of the reason for junking it in favour of those shiny CDs - is the subtle degradation of its sound, the rising hiss and the occasional snap or scratch as some piece of debris is forever bonded into the vinyl by the pressure of diamond chip against plastic. And because 90 per cent of dust in the home is dead sloughed human skin, that means that most of those snaps and crackles and pops are due to a part of yourself becoming One with the music.*

*Here, in what might be considered the ultimate discworld story, Ian Watson provides a more catastrophic view of the progress of a stylus down a spiral scratch. Self-confessed sufferer of tone-deaf-ness, Watson says that to him all music, from the Red Army Choir to Wagner, tends to resolve towards its paradigmatic form - 'Telstar'. That's perhaps one reason why he took such an elliptical approach to the anthology's subject matter, although we should expect nothing less from British SF's most iconoclastic talent.*

*A retired gardener, Watson is author of some thirty novels and short story collections, the latest being *The Flies of Memory and Stalin's Teardrops*. He is also fascinated by body piercing and the fetishisms of the *Modern Primitives*, as is made abundantly clear in this story. His favourite song (apart from 'Telstar') is Kate Bush's version of 'Rocket Man', mainly for her plaintive and surrealistic interpretation of the line 'I'm not the man I used to be'.*

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## S

o Fulque Darien at last proudly dis-played the orrery We had commissioned him to make. He whipped up the purple silk that was shrouding his device and swung the sheet aside like some conjuror converting a crouching slavegirl into a pig, or a minotaurador flourishing his cape to bamboozle a razor-horned ape.

Swankily, indeed!

Light streamed through the arched, mullioned windows of Our seclusium, illuminating a thousand motes of dust which Darien's dramatic unveiling released - as if to demonstrate his molecular theory of matter, that all the world was made of minute particles glued together by magnetism, which a strong enough shock could wrench apart. Darien had begged for funds to prove this.

However, We weren't interested in the mikrokosm, only in the makrokosm, as befitted a ruler who must have large concerns.

Darien sketched a bow, drawing back his short green cape.

'Here it is, Hautarch. After much trial and error. After many tests ... It appears to correspond perfectly with the celestial motions.'

The gaunt, one-eyed fellow tugged at his greying caprine beard as if he had just remembered some missing component. He squinted, then nodded, reassured. The other eye had been lost to a splash of boiling lead during experiments at transmogrification on behalf of Our treasury. The eye-patch was silver. Visitors to Our court sometimes took Fulque Darien at first for a legendary mutant mage, one of whose eyes was organic and the other crafted of precious metal.

His orrery consisted of several dozen little brass finger-cymbals instantly identifiable as those employed by temple prostitutes during their gyrations to the Spiral Spirit - as well as by less exalted dancing whores in bordellos along the waterfront. We wondered which source of supply Our court savant had used! Darien had erased any sacred or pornographic motifs from those digital percussion discs, and superimposed on each the astrological symbol of a particular world.

Each cymbal was held up in midair by a long, thin, jointed arm which branched from the intricate clockwork of the base. A protective cage enclosed the maze of gears and toothed cogs - the reticulations somewhat blurred the details.

This clockwork was belt-driven so as to dampen vibrations and the motive power occupied an adjoining cage mounted above an alcohol lamp. When the alcohol was lit, a cunning series of little mirrors would focus the lamplight upon the central luminary crystal rising on a slim glass spike in the midst of the array of cymbals - representing our lustrous sapphire sun.

We pointed a stout, ring-clad finger at those mirrors.

‘A homage to Our signalling system, Fulque?’

The savant nodded eagerly, and his one-eyed gaze flicked towards the nearby window as if to underscore this subtlety.

Way beyond Our beloved city of Majiriche, hugging both banks of the million-mile river here in the Forever Valley, far beyond the agricultural levels and the forests rising above those, Mount Sinister continued soaring upwards towards its peak at a steady inclination of forty-five degrees. Above the treeline the slope became snowclad. Above the cloud-line, where the air was so thin, it was stark. Hardly indented by any cols or gullies, the massif cut an almost perfectly straight line through the sky, except where intervening cumulus smudged the view.

Up there on the summit-ridge shone the visual pinpricks of a couple of mirrors - seemingly minuscule yet actually quite sizeable.

At the moment those shone steadily. No signals were winking.

It had been one of the culminating triumphs of Our reign to mount those messenger devices upon Mount Sinister, leftward bastion of Our valley, and upon Mount Dexter, the rightward valley wall. My great-grandfather had begun the breeding program to cultivate slaves with barrel-chests and shaggy coats of hair who could breathe in such high regions and avoid hypothermia. How unhappy such persons were in the warmer, thicker atmosphere of the Valley when they descended even as far as the tree-line to collect their supplies of meat and fish and oatcake, which guaranteed their obedience!

Of course, Mounts Sinister and Dexter were one and the same in reality, being the opposite sides of one another - a fact which Our common people often found hard to visual-ise, despite the explanatory dances in the temples of the Spiral Spirit.

Heroic river journeys in the age of Our elder ancestors - voyages of three thousand, of ten thousand, of twenty thousand leagues - had established the truth that the inaccessible Silver Empire over the other side of Mount Sinister was also several thousand leagues downriver of us beyond a hundred intervening khanates, republiks, demotopias, and barrens - and that the selfsame Valley spiralled around the whole of our world from the circum to the centre, its chevron cutting deep into the slate of our planetary surface and thus raising to left and right that long dual mountain.

In mirror-code we now communicated with the Silver Empire on one side, and with the Hegemony on the other - as well as trading diplomatically with the upstream Fisher Kingdom and the downstream Sensualists.

The motive power of Fulque Darien's device - within that secondary cage - was a sleek, tawny-furred leeming-rat.

That too was a clever homage.

Why else were those mirrors set up there on the mountains? Not merely to exchange philosophical speculations or so that We could play prolonged games of Tchak with the Silver Emperor remotely by mirror.

'When you light the alcohol flame, Hautarch, the cage floor heats,' explained Darien. The blind rat runs into the little treadmill, and thus propels the gears - swiftly or slowly, depending upon the height of the flame.'

We nodded appreciatively. A little hopper contained pellets of oatcake to feed the ever-ravenous beast. A flask with suction-spigot, water. A chute deposited its nuts of excrement in a tray beneath.

We were determined that this particular leeming-rat should enjoy plentiful exercise, turning the arms of Our orrery.

Unpredictably, every century or so, hordes of leeming-rats would burst forth as if from nowhere and rampage - aye, they would *flood* in a snarling, devouring, copulating, blind tide - through kingdom after khanate after republik. It was as though the rats reproduced apace somewhere within the fabric of the mountains themselves, perhaps engendered within a vast rock-eating queen. This devastating tide might flow for ten thousand leagues till finally it piled up upon itself from sheer excess of bodies, which would block the Valley, the vermin now devouring one another.

Those mountain mirrors could give early warning of such a flood, if it began sufficiently far away. The wealth and populace of Our Hautarchy could be transported up to the forested slopes where the leeming-rats never ventured.

Already the Silver Emperor and the Hegemon were eagerly breeding suitable slaves to staff mountain mirrors of their own, so as to communicate with lands beyond.

Eventually, mirror messages might pass all the way from the fabled centre of our world out to the ultimum circum within mere days.

Thanks to past heroes of exploration we knew rather more of the circum than of the centre. That final, vastest, outer-most stretch of Valley led around in a perfect circle rather than a spiral. Reportedly it was utterly barren and dry, for it lay beyond the first tricklings of the rain-fed stream which presently became the million-mile river.

We tapped Our nose. 'We imagined you might use golden Oricks to represent the worlds rather than those finger-cymbals of whores. We think we even mentioned something of the sort.'

'*Then* I should have been obliged to erase your royal countenance, Hautarch! Besides, if the treasury cannot afford to support a simple test of my molekular theory . . .'

We glared at him.

'Light the flame,' We ordered. 'Warm the rat. Let the orrery rotate.'

And so he did; and so it did.

In elegant complexity, the sixty-eight miniature worlds swung around their orbits. Amidst the cavalcade, We admired the cymbal marked with the antlered chevron which symbolised our own world of the Forever Valley.

'Do you suppose,' We enquired idly, 'that valleys similar to ours exist on all the other worlds too?'

As that chevroned cymbal turned, We caught sight of its rearside, where the tip of the thin arm was soldered. Around that little blob of joining alloy, Darien had engraved a query mark inscribed in the old script.

This was rank impertinence!

'Darien! We are not - We are never - going to order Our slaves to attempt to dig a shaft down through the floor of Our world!'

'To be sure, to be sure,' he demurred, making it sound as though he was simultaneously agreeing with Us yet at the same time offering a defence of such a project.

'To be sure about *what?* That our world is flat and two-sided just like all those other discs in the sky? What else should it be? Half a sphere? A hemisphere?'

'I think that is unlikely, Hautarch. Yet maybe . . .'

'Maybe what?'

He glanced at the rotating orrery. 'Maybe several other worlds are forever hidden beneath the plane of our planet. Maybe my toy does not present the whole picture?'

'Pish and tush,' We said. 'That isn't why you'd like to examine the arse of our world. Tell Us the real reason!'

He shuffled. 'My Hautarch, it was only in attaching the arms to the cymbals that I finally asked myself the question: of what nature is the arm which supports our own world in space? Plainly, no visible arms sustain the other worlds, or else we would perceive those as thin threads illuminated by solar radiance. Yet *something* must hold all the flat worlds in their orbits, and move them. Some physical manifestation. The gravitic theory of my predecessor is inadequate, since according to the hero explorers our own bodily weight remains constant whether we travel towards the centre or the circum. I have reworked Burgo Corvin's equations, and they fail.'

'So you'd like to tunnel through the world to see whether there's an invisible arm arching away from the other side? Ha! We were always of the opinion that ethereal, perfect *music* governed the dance of the worlds. We are sad that Our orrery does not play that music - though it might produce a tinkling clatter indeed, if whore cymbals are involved!'

The lamp burned. The leeming-rat toiled in the monotonous mindless fashion of its species, responding exactly to stimulus. The worlds swung around in silence.

'What harmonious tune *should* the worlds play, Hautarch?' Darien begged, almost pathetically, crestfallen from his earlier pride. 'Merely tell me, and I will add a musical box which the rat will also activate.'

That would tinkle out such a paltry tune. It would not even begin to ape the solemn, sonorous melody of worlds in motion.

We hummed to Ourselves a stately nocturne.

Iridescent hummingbirds hovering outside Our window to sip at the nectar nipples mounted on the sill squeaked stupidly, feebly.

*Their* humming came from the flutter of their well-nigh invisible wings.

‘The motion of worlds makes the music,’ We announced to Darien.  
‘And the music moves the worlds.’

‘That is ... profound, Hautarch,’ he said respectfully. In fact we were only echoing the old religion - which had been inspired by ... *what?* By what titanic event or observation on the part of our primitive ancestors? Alas, previous migra-tions of leeming-rats had erased all records and all clues. The current cult of the Spiral Spirit, to which We lent state approval, was - to Our taste - a shade decadent. A dance of doxies, in the twin sense: of dogmatic praise, and of holy harlots. Yet it pleased the people.

‘In airless space,’ murmured Darien, ‘surely no one can hear you play a tune...’

We ignored him. On the whole We were content with Our orrery. While We brooded over state decrees and accounts here in Our seclusium, or pondered the next move in the current game of Tchak with the Silver Emperor, Our model of the worlds would turn harmoniously, and the rat would race, and We would hear soothing melodies within Our mind at least. We would feel that We were ruler of Our whole world, and of all the worlds, at least in miniature.

\* \* \* \*

We awoke from a perplexing dream in which the High Priestess of the Spiral Spirit visited Our bed for copulation - though not with *Ourself*, exactly. Here language becomes deficient. How can We explain without resorting to lese-majesty? In the dream We - that is to say, *Ourself* - were afflicted with a Tsiamese Twin attached to Us back to back so that the two of *Ourselves* - Us, and He - when viewed in the silver mirror above Our bed somewhat resembled a peculiar, portly playing card. The two of Us must needs sleep side by side, and in advance of slumber we would toss a coin, a golden Orick, to decide which body would sleep on its leftward side all night, and which on the right.

When We had tossed the Orick that evening, it had balanced, standing up on end. Thus We - that is to say *Ourself* - lay face down on the silken sheet upon the mattress stuffed with hummingbird feathers. And Our twin lay upright.

When the High Priestess climbed into our chamber, instead of distributing her favours to each twin laterally, first from the left side then from the right, she merely mounted Our twin, and rode him so fiercely that We were pressed down stifflingly into the mattress.

She sang (or wailed) wordlessly, but We moaned like a grampus in Lake Bogak - Our Hautarchy's only lake, where the river opens out widely to provide a habitat for those watercows. We groaned not in any ecstasy but from the simple effort of drawing breath.

Then We awoke alongside her tattooed nude body in reality.

For naturally she was with Us that night - being the eighty-eighth of the year. Naturally no twin infested Our body. Yet the moan and the wail remained.

Almost wholly subaudible, or almost wholly superaudible.

The noise set Our teeth on edge and vibrated deep within Our bones.

'Sister Espirilla!' I exclaimed. 'What are those sounds? Do you hear them?'

She hoisted herself on a hand tattooed with whorls and curlicues, and harkened.

Most of Espirilla's body, revealed by soft blue alcohol-light reflecting from the silver mirror overhead, writhed with patterned serpents - a maze of snakes through which We had often tried in vain to find our way, tracing with a finger. Her nipple and navel and labia rings glinted, bereft for the time being of the little cymbals which usually hung on each; and she gripped each ring in turn, to release it after a squeeze, as though engaged in some private erotic sacra-mental rite.

Our own hand strayed to assist her - for We were intrigued; but with a frown she slapped Our hand away. Capricious etiquette forbade her to utter words in Our presence unless attired in her cymbals of sacred office.

As Espirilla scrambled from Our sheets to retrieve these bronze 'worlds' from the marble parquet, where she had discarded them clangingly after unrobing, We felt Our own organ being teased, and it swelled.

We realised that Our ampallang was stimulating Us, unbidden. The slim silver bar which pierced the head of Our glans through the



spongeosum as retainer for two prominent gold studs - that miniature dumb-bell which Our penis would hoist - was throbbing subtly, resonating to the deeper timbres of the elusive, enigmatic sonics.

Evidently Espirilla was being stimulated similarly, at nipple and navel and venereal cleft.

She hooked her cymbals upon her rings. Their weight plainly served to damp those vibrations. Dangling cymbals jangled somewhat as she flexed herself, and coughed to clear her throat, and cocked her head.

'Hautarch,' she said, 'I hear those sounds - far off. Yet I *feel* them - close by. The world has become strangely sonorous.'

For a moment we feared that in rhapsodising about the harmonics of the worlds, and in activating Darien's model of those worlds, somehow We had summoned that unheard music.

Our ampallang vibrated teasingly. By now Our other head - Our little head between the legs - was cocked too.

Espirilla resumed her saffron robe, embroidered with golden undulations.

'I must go and dance till dawn! For the night has assaulted me.'

She paced towards the casement.

Yet once there, she uttered a little cry. 'Hautarch! Look at the heavens!'

Hastily We quit Our bed and joined her.

The moan may have been more clearly perceptible in the elevated quietude of Our palace bedchamber. Alerted by it, and by the twitching of Our erogenous zones, We - by whom We mean the two of Us, she and Ourselves - may have been the first people in Our whole Hautarchy to observe the alteration.

Inexplicably, the stately procession of nearer and further worlds in the welkin appeared somewhat further away than before - somewhat diminished. And for the first time in Our knowledge all those other worlds presented an *oval* profile as though all had canted askew.

'No, they can't all have moved!' I exclaimed. 'Our *own world* must have shifted aside!'

We clung to one another in perplexity, she and Ourselves, my ampallang butting her willy-nilly as though seeking sanctuary.

Presently, over-zealous watchmen began trumpeting reedily from towers - as if there were any virtue in bring-ing alarmed citizenry spilling into the cobbled streets of our blessed Majiriche. Temple gongs began to bong.

'I must dance till noon!' she cried. 'I must take twenty lovers!'

After she had climbed down the ladder of assignation to slip away past the guards, We brightened one of the alcohols and carried it through into Our seclusion - there, to heat up the rat and to curse Fulque Darien, since a Hautarch could not by law be blameworthy.

Darien might be best advised to flee to the nearest khanate or risk having his own flesh tested to see whether it was composed of molecules.

We wondered whether to smash the orrery. Or to slay the rat. Or somehow compel it to run backwards.

\* \* \* \*

Petitioners crowded Our audience chamber next morning, and Our guards were on high alert. The whole of Majiriche throbbed perceptibly now. Under Our ermine robe, Our ampallang evinced a definite will of its own.

Thus it was with constant and involuntary priapic stimulus that We faced the crisis. The air was noticeably warmer. The luminary appeared fatter in the sky, though *it* was not swelling any further. Unlike Ourselves.

Finally We were obliged to summon Our physician and retire for an hour. With much difficulty due to the engorgement, ancient Dr Larkari fumbled with tiny spanners. Eventually he unscrewed the little golden balls from the silver spindle and removed that pin from my pulsing glans.

Gonads aching, We returned to our audience - to espy Fulque Darien there in the forefront, hopping impatiently from foot to foot. He clutched a maroon leather-bound volume.

'Darien!' We roared.

Hastily Our savant knelt.

'Hautarch, I believe I understood how the worlds might make music!'

'You do not believe in that music,' I growled.

'We are starting to hear the evidence, are we not, Hautarch?'

I cocked my ear to the low quivering drone. '*That* is music? *That* is harmony?'

'In so far as we can hear it with our tiny ears. Or feel it in our bones. Most of the frequencies escape us. Yet in truth the main volume of the music must be directed elsewhere. It must project far away from our world, towards the greater ear of God.'

'Explain!'

He was sweating. So were We in Our ermine. So were most of the petitioners and all of Our guards in their breastplates and chain-link hosiery.

'The ancient inexplicable Monolith Inscription gives the key, Hautarch! The inscription which the slaves found high up Mount Sinister where the air is too thin for us valley dwellers. Which they copied by rubbing charcoal on a sheet of parchment and sent down to us -'

'We do recall it, Darien. That is one of the enigmas of Our Hautarchy.'

On a slanting rocky slab above the cumulus, close to where one of Our signal mirrors was now installed, someone had carved a bizarre poem in archaic language, the very words now seeming almost worn away by wind.

As We were well aware.

However, Our prostate gland felt congested. Our mind was distracted. 'Remind Us of the exact text, Darien.' He recited:

*'Snout-tipped Monolith,  
Towering from the sky ...  
Who sees if clearly?'*

*It scours the valley,  
And we are deaf.  
The river only lubricates the tip.'*

Oh, how Our own tip cried out for some lubrication at the moment.

'Most scholars have argued, Hautarch, that this refers to a terrible previous migration by leeming-rats which stripped our valley of a primitive early civilisation. Those billions of rats are envisaged as one single gigantic rat; hence the snout . . . No one can clearly perceive such a monstrous mass of rats. Their shrill squeaking deafens everyone ... J do not think so! I think this refers to a ghostly yet at the same time very substantial and immense artefact - of the self-same nature as the arms which hold the cymbals in position in your orrery.'

'This artefact descends from the sky. In appearance it resembles an inverted monolith tipped with a pyramid of the same contours as our valley. This abrades the slopes of our valley, sweeping away habitations and human beings like dust - and the vibrations of its passage are the Godly, celestial *music* which we discussed, Hautarch, and which we now hear in the guise of that moaning drone . . . approach-ing us. I believe we should evacuate Majiriche immediately.'

'Evacuate Our city, Darien?'

'Before Majiriche is destroyed, Hautarch. Before we are swept away by something vaster than any rat-horde.'

'Evacuate . . . ?' Why, the panic and chaos would be immeasurable. 'How soon,' We enquired archly, 'till this . . . supposed doom by Monolith?'

He shrugged. 'To determine that, I should need to build a model of such a monolith poised above our world, with its pyramidal tip engaged in the groove of the Forever Valley, travelling inward from the circum. I would need to ascertain the rate of progress by means of mirror signals sent from distant arcs of the spiral. . . Maybe from our own mundane point of view the monolith travels slowly - thus we hear the music shifted downwards in scale towards basso profundo . . .'

We laughed scornfully.

'Already you have built an orrery - and Our world has shifted away from its proper position. Would you compound your misdemeanour?'

Would you have Us play double or quits? Nay, Fulque Darien. Besides, Our mirror network does not yet extend quite so far.'

A fact, which he was obliged to acknowledge with a blush - at his oversight.

'Abandon Our city, and flee above the treeline? Are We a slave, Darien? Let gongs drown the moan! Let firecrackers explode! Let the holy whores dance, their labia clanging, till they drop!'

\* \* \* \*

Alas, We little guessed how close Our doom was - by which We refer to all of our dooms.

Only a few days passed - days of intensifying, grinding vibration, and of crazy drunken carnival and orgy - before the mirrors on Mount Sinister blinked.

The message from the Silver Emperor was brief indeed.

*Beware! Monstrous -*

That was all. Yet on their own initiative Our slaves up on the ridge-peak added more - describing the deafening obliteration of the Silver Empire which they viewed from a stance of comparative safety.

Even in the heart of Our own Hautarchy we heard the rumble. Tiles fell from roofs, and windows shattered.

High beyond Mount Sinister we spied the sky-monolith pass by - ghostly, and not of this world - heading around the sacred spiral through khanates and kingdoms.

\* \* \* \*

We wait, in the deepest dungeon, in the lowest oubliette beneath Our palace reached by several hundred spiralling stone stairs.

We - Ourselves - and Darien, whom We had already consigned to this depth as a penance, and Sister Espirilla whom We summoned in haste before the ultimate hour, and some guards with panniers of black bread, smoked fish, and wine and water, and picks and shovels.

Blood drips from Our drum-cracked ears, but We feel the approach of the monolith vibrating in Our bones and in the damp stones of the oubliette; and We gesture by the light of a single alcoholamp with incoherent signs.

What We are trying to convey to Espirilla is a terrible realisation. If Our valley was scoured in the distant past, and if thus its people were exterminated - an event recorded only by witnesses up there on the ridge-peak, persons who must have been specially bred to inhabit the top of Mount Sinister by order of a former ruler of genius with motives identical to mine - and if those witnesses then descended, hungry and barbaric, to repopulate Our valley . . . why then, We Ourselves must be a distant descendant of *slaves!*

Is Our oubliette deep enough?

Will the monolith scrape Our palace away so that We can escape upward afterwards?

If so, We can restore life *nobly* to Our devastated Hautarchy.

We - by whom We mean Ourselves and Sister Espirilla.

Ah, yet some watercows and razor-horned apes and other beasts large and little must have survived the previous passage by the monolith. Irregularities in our Valley - nooks and caves - must give random shelter to creatures, who will flee instinctively.

If beasts, why not people too? Some people must survive ...

Yet beasts are instinctive, not rational beings. Rational beings such as men and women can be driven mad by something titanic and terrible. All human survivors may well become insane save for the slaves on Mount Sinister.

Save for ourselves here in the oubliette.

\* \* \* \*

I fear that Darien is going insane. He holds his head, and his single eye bulges. He gasps, and Espirilla genuflects to him sinuously with reverence - as if My savant is in the throes of a revelation, receiving a message directly into his mind from the Spiral Spirit itself.

Darien tugs a writing stylus from his tunic and dips it in his ear, in that inkhorn of welling blood.

On his palm he writes: *Our Kosmos is a Joke Box.*

He stares at his open hand, as bewildered as Ourselves by this cryptic oracle.

May the Spiral Spirit aid Us. Even in extremis, with blood leaking from their ruptured ears, Our guards are eyeing tattooed Espirilla thoughtfully, each perhaps dreaming of founding a dynasty.

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