

MOSTLY FAMILIAR TOMORROW, WITH A DASH OF YESTERYEAR

The specious, mercurial science of memetics has at least given us a potent cultural model: disease. *Project Jupiter*, the first effort from newcomer Anson Spanner, is perhaps less elegant or captivating in its preference for tubes. Society is in place, a vast network of dynamic conduits, and we are, most horrifyingly, within it—drifting, washing, clogging, climbing or lowering or struggling vainly to be free. Comfort is necessarily fluidity, and any other sensation is compromised by it.

Self-absorbed, with truncated ideas and characters, Spanner's novel is, stylistically, an embodiment of that restiform fiction which barely manages print in the age of the internet, hip in its sobriety more than its literacy or (worse even) relevancy. *Project Jupiter* stays faithful to the crossover aspects of popular science [by a whisper] fiction: a protein-punk, dangerously near future with cloying care assigned to the mental welfare of its inhabitants—changed ever so slightly from the today, a intermittent sentence or paragraph from being completely contemporary, realistic fiction. But rather than trodding the *New Yorker*-safe guides of *Slab Rat* or *Amnesiascope*, Spanner's style evokes the descriptives of Gibson and the beaverishly-paraded work ethic of Stephenson. His New York North (I almost mistakenly wrote New New York) is an overgrown sprawl of minimal design and Lexan-plated strip malls, of disposable silverware and disposable people.

Yet when we are presented with this archetypically arid, style-ruled void of the future, the characters are granted concessions. Though we may never find love, friendship, or happiness (how old-fashioned these sentiments even seem to mention!) in the future, we have cool cars, cool gear, cool jobs. Gerald Pecora, our timid, physically defeated protagonist, is given a quite interesting way to make a living: he screens the dreams of coma patients, relaying prognosis to uncaring, often ineffectual doctors. The omnipresence of non-healing persons in Green Arbor Hospital is shown pointedly, and Pecora is supremely unappreciated: his daily intake of gripping images, fed through a headset and pair of glasses, and prodigious M.O. go nearly unnoticed.

Pecora rides the subway, railway, and aeroway—his tubes—with complete indifference, noticing nothing circumstantial. Instead, we are given his daydreams—impersonal, aleatoric combinations of New York North's ineluctable holographic media and his headset's sensory "jazz," alternately mundane, esoteric, and jarring. Particularly well-wrought is a heated aquatic detention center which Pecora imagines himself justly trapped in, where the prisoners' main constraint is their own immersion-energated bodies.

When Pecora is elicited for a high-security client (plum opportunities such as this happening impartially, accidentally in N.Y.N.), he discovers an entire hidden, coexisting component of societal change, which, as a contractor, he is inclined to illuminate despite his directive and the occupational hazard deviating from it would pose. He is given hope in the form of the Tea Drinkers' Society, a ritualistic organization considered by its members to be older than history and preserved in the minds of various ramshackle centenarians, which Pecora [sometimes humorously] interviews. In seeking the purpose of this Society, he is charged to harvest and interpret their memory fragments. Pecora exhibits a hidden reserve of cleverness in prefiguring the motives of his omnipotent employer/foe, the corporation Mascon Quantum, "a division of SEI which is a branch of G-Spec Tagmemics which is a partner of some corporation largely ignored because they apparently don't make anything."

The Mascon job is privilege, luxury, and constructive enterprise; the Tea Drinkers' Society is union, open conspiracy, and the past, all of which are deliciously alien to Pecora. A subject's apartment, which is visited in its near-perfect replication with Pecora's VR instruments, is the crossroads of the mystery. Baffled by its Victorian sensibilities, he notes: "Everything is way too big, and nothing fits. Nothing matches, nothing's organized, there's no sort of sweeping design to it, which demeans the quality of the individual objects." Anything before 1951 is exotic, and Pecora is hypnotized by what he calls "the absorbed worlds," or the ideologies and psychological currents that constitute the non-electronic past.

Pecora's continued ramming against the archaic objectives of the Society (told in well-researched episodes and appended in onomastics: a prodigiously tough fin-de-siecle Serb, nicknamed the Black Mark, being one example) is a blunted metaphor for the historian—he is trying to read the past, which is completely, or

reflexively, obscured in itself. The innumerate, unstructured items of the investigation gradually diffract—Pecora could be searching for a set of volumes, a derelict hidden in a suburban arroyo, a way to travel back in time...

It is a game with no rules or action, and Pecora's narrative seems to evanesce as, in his communion with the Tea Drinkers' society (or, rather, the idea of it), he becomes less aware of scale. Identity is variable and inconclusive: the sought item is constantly mutable and unmarked. It is locatable and perhaps not worth locating. It is a book called *Project Jupiter* that could be found at ease with the assistance of a Barnes & Noble clerk, one that is decaying between the reader's hands even at the point of realization. Yet it is the felicity of reading and especially owning this found object, in a tale where minor corporalities come between the protagonist and his destiny, that is intended to satisfy. This dream (that the critic, the collector, the lover of obscurities that he alone is privy to, dreams) of the found item becoming a sort of esoteric savior—delight in the obscure raised to profundity... incapable of gestalt motion, but peppered with forgotten, beautiful moments, is what the book is meant to embody. It does not altogether succeed.

As to the well-worn trope pertaining to the direness of the future, one last quote: "The story of a man's complexity is told in the volume of his secrets, which may prove inexhaustible..." True for our solitary adventurer Gerald Pecora, but profoundly sadder that his book of secrets will never be opened. Change, forget, lose—tubes...

Project Jupiter. By Anson Spanner. A Vintage Title. 381 pages. \$12.95.