Intellectual

Dick Ellis*

*Iowa State College
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Abstract

John Jacob Carlson was an unusual man. I used to look at his face reflected from an amber puddle of beer on the cracked red enameled surface of one of the old tables in the “Bucket.”
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JOHN JACOB CARLSON was an unusual man. I used to look at his face reflected from an amber puddle of beer on the cracked red enameled surface of one of the old tables in the “Bucket.” I looked at his reflection and it was distorted. It was hardly a face at all, only a blob with a high-lighted nose and a dirty black crack running across his eye line. I looked at the reflection and I looked at the man himself and I wondered which was the more real. On hot August nights when the odor of the dirty old Maryland beer parlor hung in the stale air, John drank gallons of beer and expounded his philosophy to a credulous skull. She, the skull, parchment skin stretched taut over angular cheek bones, vacuous-eyed, indolent, would lean one large hip on our table and listen with the solemn dignity of a tired cow. John would tell her that, after all, she couldn’t prove she was leaning on a table. Then another customer would run dry and she would leave, only to return when she had served the beer, return and stand with the same hip against the same table and again listen intently, all the while not knowing whether John had spoken ten words or two hundred during her absence. John told her that she didn’t really know that she was leaning on a table. He said that, and Don and I wondered, but she didn’t seem to find the idea strange. John said, “I am sitting here at this table and I can dig my fingernails into it and I can feel the old red enamel curl under them. I can feel the enamel and I can pound this table with my fists and feel pain. Scientists tell me that I am pounding eons of little worlds, but I say there is nothing. I say that the table exists only in my mind. Suppose,” here his eyebrows would rise slightly, arching above the dirty crack running through the puddle of beer, “suppose that in your home a hundred years before you were born your great-grandparents had believed that there was a tree growing through your front room floor. Suppose they had been as firmly convinced that the tree was there as you are of the existence of this table. Then suppose, too, that your parents from their first moment of awareness were told that this tree existed and then finally suppose you yourself had always believed that
the tree was there. The tree would be there for you, just as surely as any other existence.

Here John would pause and once again his eyebrows would fall back into the dirty line on the table. The skull would cut through the thick haze to serve more beer. John would continue, not noticing her absence. “It therefore occurred to me that, since all matter is fluxion, why should I not create a world of my own? This table I have before me is the table to which I have been conditioned, but I may, if I desire, create another table on top of this one. I may place chairs around this table. I may even by a supreme mental effort remove myself from this plane to the one above it which I have created. This new world is yet to me one of halation, but I am convinced that after sufficient practice it can become as concrete as our present one.” The eyebrows descended even below the murky damp line in the table. John would be silent for a moment, then continue: “The machinations of man fade bitterly. Long, long do red stars whirl through the miasmatic mist. My manumission is complete. My feet rest on mercury. Sempiternal freedom is mine.”

Once on the high cat back of August night, lascivious night, we asked the skull why she listened to John. “Oh, I don't know,” she said, “he's different.”

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The Outlaw
Bruce Weiser

“MISS ROGERS, bring in Martin Eldrup's file!” As I went into the inner office with the manila folder, I noticed that Dean Hamilton was so upset that he had even forgotten to turn off the dictagraph, and the Dean was a man of frugal habits. I was pleased, for the Dean in anger becomes garrulous, and though I had heard of Martin Eldrup many times since coming to work for the Dean, I had seen him only twice, once as he went into the office and once as he left with an air of amused indignation just before the sharp buzz of the speaker interrupted my typing.

Unobtrusively I stopped the noiseless cutting of the dicto and sat down.