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**Painwise in Space:
The Psychology of Isolation in Cordwainer Smith and James Tiptree,
Jr.**

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Throughout the 1950s and into the 1960s, Cordwainer Smith was the mystery man of science fiction. His stories were among the most talked-about in the field, but his peculiar pseudonym hid his true identity until shortly before his death in 1966. A fan's research revealed him as Paul M. A. Linebarger, a political science professor and psychological warfare expert.

Less than two years after Linebarger's death, a new mystery man emerged in science fiction: James Tiptree, Jr. Tiptree managed to conceal his true identity for a decade while publishing a series of popular and often award-winning stories. Finally, as with Cordwainer Smith, a fan's detective work penetrated the pseudonym. James Tiptree, Jr., was really a woman named Alice Sheldon, a talented artist with a Ph. D. in experimental psychology.

As more information has emerged on the lives of these still influential writers, striking similarities in their backgrounds have become evident. David Pringle recently summarized the most obvious similarities in the *Ultimate Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*:

Consider this scenario: an individual born in our century's second decade is raised by globe-trotting, talented parents in many foreign lands. Growing up to specialize in psychological studies, this person builds an impressive career partly in the shadowy fringes of the US government. In early middle-age, this person becomes a writer of sf under a pseudonym which eventually comes to displace their [sic] original identity. The stories produced by this writer frequently depict the ignored daily agonies of tiny individuals pinned to a much larger dispassionate canvas.

In a nutshell, this is of course the biography of both James Tiptree—born Alice Sheldon [sic]—and Cordwainer Smith—born Paul Linebarger. . . . Such parallels hide the vast differences in style and focus between the two. Yet it is curiously instructive to ponder the fates and forces of our time that channeled two such similar careers. [Pringle, 1996, p. 234]

While we ponder these biographical parallels, we might also consider certain deeper psychological parallels, before we go on to the vast differences. Both Paul Linebarger and Alice Sheldon (actually born Alice Hastings Bradley) were not only partly raised in foreign lands—China, Germany, France, and other locations for Linebarger; Africa, India, Southeast Asia for Alice Bradley—but both children were

often put on display by their admiring parents during these travels. Paul, en route to China for the first time at age five, was stood up on the ship captain's table and made to deliver a speech endorsing the revolutionary teachings of Sun Yat-sen. Alice, en route to Africa for the first time at age five, was dressed up like a doll by her mother, who then tucked her in a box to be exhibited at a costume contest. Paul, throughout his childhood, was presented to audiences and journalists as his father's little comrade in the great Chinese revolution, posing at times side by side with his father in traditional Chinese dress. Alice remained on exhibit throughout her childhood, in words and photographs and Alice's own drawings, as an extra added attraction to her mother's travel books. One advertisement for Mary Hastings Bradley's book *On the Gorilla Trail* says flatly, "Besides its value as a picture of a great gorilla hunt, this book has unusual interest because of the presence of the author's six year old daughter with the expedition" (Bradley, 1922, p. 273). Recognizing the unique appeal of her daughter and traveling companion, Mary Bradley soon featured Alice in her own books: *Alice in Jungleland* and *Alice in Gorilla Land*.

Little Paul and Little Alice evidently enjoyed such attention from adults. But they resented it as well, and suffered from the effects of the attention and the travel. Paul later wrote of his childhood isolation from his peers:

Whenever I went from one country to another, little colloquialisms and local slang eluded my understanding. . . . I learned early that the surface meaning of words was not their real meaning. The thing to look for was the stance behind it: the moral gesture, the emotional posture. Sometimes the interpersonal meaning was conventional, sometimes individual. When I missed it, I missed comradeship or blessed obscurity or praise or whatever else I sought at the time. Often I got mockery, kicks, tweaks, threats, jokes, exclusion, dupery. [Quoted in Elms, 1984, p. 270]

Likewise, Alice later wrote:

This future writer was plunged into half a world of alien environments all before she was old enough to be allowed to enter an American movie house, and as with places, so with people. . . . And finally, she was exposed to dozens of cultures and sub-cultures whose values, taboos, imperatives, religions, languages, and mores conflicted with each other as well as with her parents. And the writer, child as she was, had continuously to learn this passing kaleidoscope of Do and Don't lest she give offense, or even bring herself or the party into danger. But most seriously, this heavy jumble descended on her head before her own personality or cultural identity was formed. The result was a profound alienation from any nominal peers, and an enduring cultural relativism. [*Contemporary Authors*, 1983, pp. 443-444]

Along with this alienation from their peers, and the concomitant exposure to diverse adult worlds, both Paul Linebarger and Alice Bradley learned from an early age that much of the world's population existed in misery. For Paul Linebarger, such lessons produced an enduring empathy for the Chinese masses, and by extension for underdogs and undercats of many other kinds. For Alice Bradley, similar lessons led to an enduring

empathy for the plight of women throughout the world's societies, and by extension for laboratory rats and other suffering creatures. Here first is Paul's description of his lessons, written soon after his observations at age 16 of the common people of Nanking:

I beheld vast masses of men in the bondage of pain. I experienced wild hatreds and sympathies that destroyed my detachment and egotism and set my brain on fire. I was nauseated in making my first acquaintance with violent death. I had but to look out of my window to see people beyond the walls of the mansion starving to death in mud huts. Everywhere I went I encountered misery. . . . Though later the unpleasantness passed, though I grew more accustomedly callous to the human suffering about me, none the less the memory of the moods rather than the thoughts haunted me. [Quoted in Elms, 1991, p. 178]

Similarly, here is Alice Bradley Sheldon:

I remember the streets of Calcutta, which I saw at age nine. As we went for some morning sweet cake, we'd step over dying people with dying babies in their arms, each living their whole lives on one square yard of sidewalk. . . . [In Africa] The first people I ever saw dead had been accused of witchcraft or thievery. . . . These two people had first been tortured, and then crucified, on horrible little bushes stuck through their vitals, and flies were crawling over them. At age nine or ten, this makes an impression. [Quoted in Platt, 1983, p. 261]

When describing the "adults of every color, size, shape, and condition" that she met on her childhood travels, Sheldon begins with lepers, but focuses on

above all, women: chattel-women deliberately starved, deformed, blinded and enslaved; women in nuns' habits saving the world; women in high heels committing suicide, and women in low heels shooting little birds. . . . women, from the routinely tortured, obscenely-mutilated slave-wives of the 'advanced' Kikuyu, to the free, propertied, Sumatran matriarchs who ran the economy and brought six hundred years of peaceful prosperity to the Menang-Kabau; all these were known before she had a friend or playmate of her own age. [*Contemporary Authors*, 1983, p. 444]

These early observations did indeed make an impression both on Paul and on Alice.

Another common element in the earlier and later lives of both writers was repeated suicide attempts. Alice Bradley made her first attempt at age 12 with razor blades, and subsequently engaged in, by her own account, "a great deal of experimenting with getting killed" on the railroad tracks (quoted in Platt, 1983, p. 262). In her later years she often thought again of suicide, and finally succeeded at age 71. Paul Linebarger first tried suicide at age 17, when he was studying the Chinese language in Peking. There he fell in love with a Russian émigré named Irene, who was in her late twenties. Their relationship grew until Paul's father ordered him home, at which point Paul and Irene took overdoses of sleeping pills in a suicide pact. They were taken unconscious to a hospital, where their stomachs were pumped and they were released. Two or three days later they tried the same thing again, with a similar outcome. Paul and

Irene parted and never saw each other again. Seventeen years later, when Paul's marriage to his first wife collapsed, he seriously considered suicide again—seriously enough for his psychotherapist to put him under an informal suicide watch for several weeks. Paul's outlook gradually brightened; he met and married his second wife; and he eventually died of natural causes without trying suicide again.

Given their suicidal histories, might we best begin our psychological evaluations of Paul Linebarger and Alice Bradley Sheldon with a shared diagnosis of clinical depression? Sheldon herself spoke of experiencing repeated periods of depression, but their severity and whether she was ever treated for them clinically is unclear. She does not appear to have suffered from the classic manic-depressive pattern. Linebarger was surely situationally depressed at those times when he tried suicide or thought seriously about it, but depression was not a characteristic state for him. One or another of his several successive psychotherapists diagnosed him as delusional or even as schizophrenic, but for reasons I won't discuss here, I think those diagnoses were wide of the mark. Severe psychological isolation is not a condition you'll find listed in the DSM-IV, the official diagnostic manual of the American Psychiatric Association; but I think it describes both Paul Linebarger and Alice Bradley Sheldon better than any official diagnostic category.

Given that tentative diagnosis of severe psychological isolation, we should not be surprised that among the few things their fiction shared in common, both Cordwainer Smith and James Tiptree, Jr., wrote about severe psychological pain as experienced in outer space, and about the emotional deadening necessary to cope with that pain. Smith's first published science fiction story, "Scanners Live in Vain," describes what he called "the pain of space," a psychological condition experienced by space travelers—a pain so intense that it drives people to madness or death when it is directly confronted. To cope with this pain of space, most space travelers are placed in suspended animation, and the only individuals left conscious during the trip are the Scanners, whose sensory nerves have all been severed except for their optic nerves. Similarly, in one of Tiptree's most effective early stories, "Painwise," the first sentences are, "He was wise in the ways of pain. He had to be, for he felt none." "He," in this case, is a human guinea pig whose pain receptors have been rerouted to his visual pathways, and who is then sent to planet after planet to collect information on the local environment's effects on the human body. During his long travels he yearns to escape his isolation, he yearns to go home, he even yearns to experience the reality of pain once more.

In these and several other stories, both Smith and Tiptree express the ambivalence of their circumstances during the worst times of their lives. Their isolation in psychological space is so severe that they must somehow protect themselves, whether by total death or by emotional deadening; but if they are to live on, the death of all emotion is as distressing as pain itself. In this regard, the diagnosis of severe psychological isolation strikes me as more useful as well as more accurate than any of the standard clinical diagnostic categories. But it is nonetheless limited in its applications. Both Paul Linebarger and Alice Sheldon found some relief from their isolation, especially in their second marriages. The fiction of both writers continued to express a great deal of pain, but the pain was not always set in outer space, and other themes were incorporated into their work as well—themes that diverged considerably in the work of the two authors, despite all those similarities in their personal backgrounds.

How can we best consider the differences in the psychological patterns of Linebarger and Sheldon, as well as in the influence of those patterns on the work of Smith and Tiptree? There are some obvious differences in personal background that could account for differences in their work, starting with gender—though the gender differences might not be as obvious as you'd think, given that Alice Sheldon masqueraded as a male author with a male pseudonym for a decade, and given that Paul Linebarger wrote his first two published novels from a female viewpoint and wanted them published under a female pseudonym. Perhaps we could differentiate Linebarger and Sheldon in terms of the individual vagaries of their Oedipal development, or the degree of their narcissism, or the expression of their favorite archetypes, but I don't think any of those approaches are especially promising. Instead I'd like to propose that we look at our two authors and their distinctive patterns of personality and fiction in terms of a relatively new theoretical perspective: the script theory of Silvan Tomkins.

Tomkins was a personality psychologist who had earlier been trained in playwriting and in philosophy. He was also a slow writer and an elliptical one. His theory of personality, now generally referred to as "script theory" though there is much else to it, is one of the few broad psychological theories of any importance to emerge during the last several decades. But at the time of his death in 1991, few psychologists had read much of Tomkins' work, and fewer still understood enough of it to use it. Only recently has it begun to become accessible, through two edited volumes of selections and commentary (Tomkins, 1995a, 1995b) and through a series of explicatory papers by Rae Carlson (e.g., Carlson, 1988).

I won't try to summarize much of Tomkins' theory or to claim expertise about it. For our purposes here, the essentials of the theory are these: a) that each individual not only experiences a variety of strong emotions from birth onward, but begins to *think* about these emotions; b) the individual comes to develop a set of psychological scripts, ways of organizing these emotional experiences into meaningful patterns; c) the individual tries to deal with new emotional experiences through the repeated application of certain preferred scripts.

Tomkins discussed many kinds of scripts, but the two to which he gave most attention are what he called the *nuclear script* and the *commitment script*. A nuclear script is one in which "a very good scene [in a person's life] turns very bad," at which point the person tries "to turn the very bad scene into the very good scene again. [The script] succeeds only partially and temporarily, followed invariably by an apparent replay of the nuclear scene in which the good scene again turns bad" (Tomkins, 1995a, p. 376). The powerful attraction of the very good scene and its repeated failure can easily come to dominate an individual's life. As Rae Carlson puts it, "nuclear scenes/scripts are nuclear because they pervade a life in a special way: a 'nucleus' that essentially colonizes experience by rendering anything relevant to a personal, core issue" (1988, p. 109).

Then there are commitment scripts. According to Tomkins, "Commitment scripts involve the courage and endurance to invest and bind the person to long-term activity and to magnify positive affect . . . by absorbing and neutralizing the various negative costs" (1987, p. 167). In the simplest language, a nuclear script keeps telling the person that "good things turn bad," while a commitment script tells the person that "bad things can be overcome" (Carlson, 1988, p. 111). As Tomkins adds, "In contrast to nuclear scripts which are conflicted and ineffective, commitment scripts are unambivalent, evoking

courage and negative-affect absorption rather than cowardice and negative-affect intimidation. . . . they are *cumulative* in their progress rather than *oscillating* between progress and retrogress" (1995b, p. 189).

Now, what do these psychological patterns have to do with Paul Linebarger and Alice Sheldon? I'd like to suggest that much of Alice Sheldon's life and fiction followed a nuclear script, while much of Paul Linebarger's life and fiction followed a commitment script. Both Linebarger and Sheldon surely developed other scripts as well, and their fiction can usefully be discussed from a variety of other perspectives. But I think the nuclear vs. commitment script contrast will highlight some of the essential differences between their fictional perspectives, and may help us to appreciate some of the origins of those differences, in spite of the striking similarities in the writers' backgrounds.

First let's consider the fiction of James Tiptree, Jr., beginning with a key story, "Her Smoke Rose Up Forever." The story begins with an occasion of joy, as a young man goes hunting on the opening day of duck season. But his duck hunt turns to disaster, momentarily returns to joy, then moves to even worse disaster. From there he rapidly proceeds through a variety of other joy-to-disaster sequences, never able to pull any of them back into solid joy. He finally realizes that he is dead, that the entire Earth is dead, and that he and others are merely being revived temporarily by alien creatures or machines to re-experience their most intense emotions. He asks himself, in one of the grimmest passages in all science fiction, "Was pain indeed the fiercest fire in our nerves, alone able to sustain its flame through death? What of love, of joy? . . . There are none here." The story continues:

He wails voicelessly as conviction invades him, he who had believed in nothing before. All the agonies of earth, uncanceled? Are broken ghosts limping forever from Stalingrad and Salamis, from Gettysburg and Thebes and Dunkirk and Khartoum? Do the butchers' blows still fall at Ravensbruck and Wounded Knee? Are the dead of Carthage and Hiroshima and Cuzco burning yet? Have ghostly women waked again only to resuffer violation, only to watch again their babies slain? [Tiptree, 1974/1990, p. 410]

"Her Smoke Rose Up Forever" may be the perfect fictional depiction of a nuclear script, with every attempted positive outcome condemned to an eternally negative sequel. But much of Tiptree's fiction throughout her career follows the same path: "Painwise," "The Psychologist Who Wouldn't Do Awful Things to Rats," "The Screwfly Solution," "Your Faces, O My Sisters! Your Faces Filled of Light!," "Backward, Turn Backward," and so on. One well-known story embodies the nuclear script in its very title: "Love Is the Plan the Plan Is Death." The occasional story that doesn't quite follow the pattern may end optimistically but with disaster as an open possibility. For example, in Tiptree's best-known story, "The Women Men Don't See," two women escape the pain of living in a male-dominated world by going off in an alien spaceship they have accidentally encountered. They appear optimistic that the alien society will be better than what they've experienced, but their optimism is unearned and they have no way to know what their fate will be.

Cordwainer Smith, on the other hand, rarely wrote a story with a strongly nuclear script. "Alpha Ralpa Boulevard" is perhaps as close as he came, with the very good

scene of the opening—a renewed society, a new love, the anticipation of new adventures—soon turning into a very bad scene: evil encountered, terror experienced, the loved one dead. But even that bad scene gives clear evidence of the protagonist’s commitment to doing good toward even the lowliest creatures. Most of Smith’s stories follow a strong commitment script throughout, with the protagonist insistent upon correcting the evils of society or protecting others from extreme danger or returning to a loved one over vast distances. The pattern is followed from the earliest works, “Scanners Live in Vain” and “The Game of Rat and Dragon,” through all the underpeople stories, to such late work as *Quest of the Three Worlds*. One of Smith’s best-known stories, “The Ballad of Lost C’mell,” is perhaps as quintessential a commitment script as Tiptree’s “Her Smoke Rose Up Forever” is a nuclear script. In the story’s central action, the human government official Lord Jestocost commits himself to join the cat-woman C’mell in a risky plot to win greater freedom for the underpeople, even though he is not an underperson himself, and even though he must conceal his love for C’mell for the rest of his life.

Where did these scripts come from? Alice Sheldon, in her various interviews and reminiscences, recounted a lifelong sequence of very good scenes that sooner or later turned very bad. Her childhood was golden in certain regards, with her wealthy and talented parents giving her a great deal of attention, offering her many opportunities for the praise and admiration of others, and showing her much of the world. But the world travels ended abruptly when the family nearly died of thirst in an African desert, and her isolation from her peers led Alice to her first suicide attempt. Her first marriage and her only pregnancy went quickly bad; her successful career as an artist eventually led to her realization that she was second-rate. Her volunteering boldly for the WACs in World War Two led initially to a career only as a uniformed waitress; even her pioneering effort to become the first female in the Army Air Force Intelligence School led mainly to a high-level clerical job, until she married her commanding officer. That marriage was one of the highlights of her life, but it ultimately ended badly as well—so badly that her husband’s deteriorating health led her to kill him and then herself. Before that happened, a late career in psychology, so promising at its beginning, went bad too, with her physical and perhaps her psychological ill health combining with unpleasant occupational demands to force her quick retirement. Even her career in science fiction, perhaps the other highlight of her life, went suddenly wrong from her perspective when her true identity was revealed. Her stories had made her famous and respected within the relatively small world of science fiction, but the repeated nuclear-script plots of those stories did not enable her to work through her own psychological problems. More likely, the stories only reinforced her real-life nuclear script.

Paul Linebarger’s early life provided him with the essential ingredients of a nuclear script as well. His father was an alcoholic womanizer; his mother was a frustrated neurotic who was intrusive and controlling toward her children. I’ve already mentioned how these parents put little Paul on public display, much as Alice Bradley was displayed by her parents. Again, this display was welcomed by Paul at one level but led to his isolation from all peers. There were other kinds of good scenes gone bad in his childhood and later: childhood play that resulted in the loss of an eye; his doomed adolescent romance with the exotic Irene; his first marriage that ended in a year of near-psychosis and near-suicide; and so on. But Paul could also see, from his early childhood

into his late twenties, a remarkable example of a commitment script: his father's devotion to the cause of Chinese independence. The father had pursued an early career as a lawyer and political hack in Chicago, had been rewarded with an appointment as a U. S. Federal judge in the recently annexed Philippines, and there had undergone a radical conversion to the cause of Sun Yat-sen's impending revolution in China. Little Paul was imbued with the ideals of the Revolution from the time he could talk. His father promoted himself shamelessly at the same time that he promoted the Revolution, and Paul realized as an adolescent that much of his father's talk was bluster. But his father really did carry out important missions for the Revolution in spite of his personal failings, and remained devoted to the Revolution's goals to the end of his life—and so did Paul. When Paul's own scholarly efforts in support of Free China were frustrated by American academic politics, and when his intelligence activities in support of Free China were compromised by the corruption of the Chinese Nationalist Government, Paul continued to develop his commitment script through his science fiction, in the struggles of Lord Jestocost and Lady Alice More and C'mell and D'joan and Casher O'Neill and the rest. Alice Bradley found it difficult to break out of her nuclear script because her mother always seemed to have attained greater success than Alice could aspire to, even as a writer. In contrast, Paul Linebarger was able repeatedly to see his commitment script as leading him to greater personal success than his father had ever achieved in any area, or at least to a more honest and meaningful success—as a scholar, as a propagandist, and finally as a writer.

I should note here that discussing Tiptree/Sheldon primarily in terms of a nuclear script and Smith/Linebarger primarily in terms of a commitment script does not hold any necessary implications regarding their relative quality as writers or their overall success or failure as human beings. Some of the greatest writers have organized their personal experiences and written much of their fiction in terms of nuclear scripts. Rae Carlson's primary example of a nuclear script is the life and work of Nathaniel Hawthorne. Nor is the contrast between Alice Sheldon and Paul Linebarger meant to imply that nuclear scripts and commitment scripts tend toward some kind of gender specificity. Rae Carlson's primary example of a person who pursued a lifelong commitment script in spite of great difficulties was Eleanor Marx, the daughter of Karl Marx and a major socialist activist in her own right. Eleanor Roosevelt lived her own strong commitment-script; many other examples from both genders can be found in a variety of fields.

Finally, I want to remind you that Paul Linebarger died at age 53. It was an age when he could still manage to look optimistically at what he might yet achieve if he got past his next health crisis, which he didn't. At the same age, Alice Sheldon had only just started her career in science fiction, and that career developed simultaneously with her declining health as well as the even more rapid decline of her older husband. By the end of her life, Sheldon had very good reasons for the reinstatement of a nuclear script, a script that told her even the best parts of life give way ultimately to tragedy and death.

And yet—scripts as Silvan Tomkins saw them are not strictly situational, swinging here and there with illness and job failure and other current life events. Scripts are built up over many years, through repetitions of experiences and through the individual's imposition of patterns on those repetitions. Linebarger's and Sheldon's primary scripts had been established much earlier than their early fifties, had been written into their psyches much more deeply than a late-life illness or a late-life success could

really reach. The current events of Sheldon's and Linebarger's lives, the ongoing tragedies and enthusiasms, were often incorporated into the fiction of James Tiptree and Cordwainer Smith. But it was the lifelong scripts that gave each writer's fiction its essential direction.

[Bibliographic note: The complete published science fiction of Cordwainer Smith can be found in two volumes, listed below: *The Rediscovery of Man* (shorter fiction) and *Norstrilia* (a novel). The science fiction of James Tiptree, Jr., remains somewhat scattered; all the stories cited herein can be found in three collections as listed below: *Ten Thousand Light-Years from Home*, *Star Songs of an Old Primate*, and *Her Smoke Rose Up Forever*.]

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