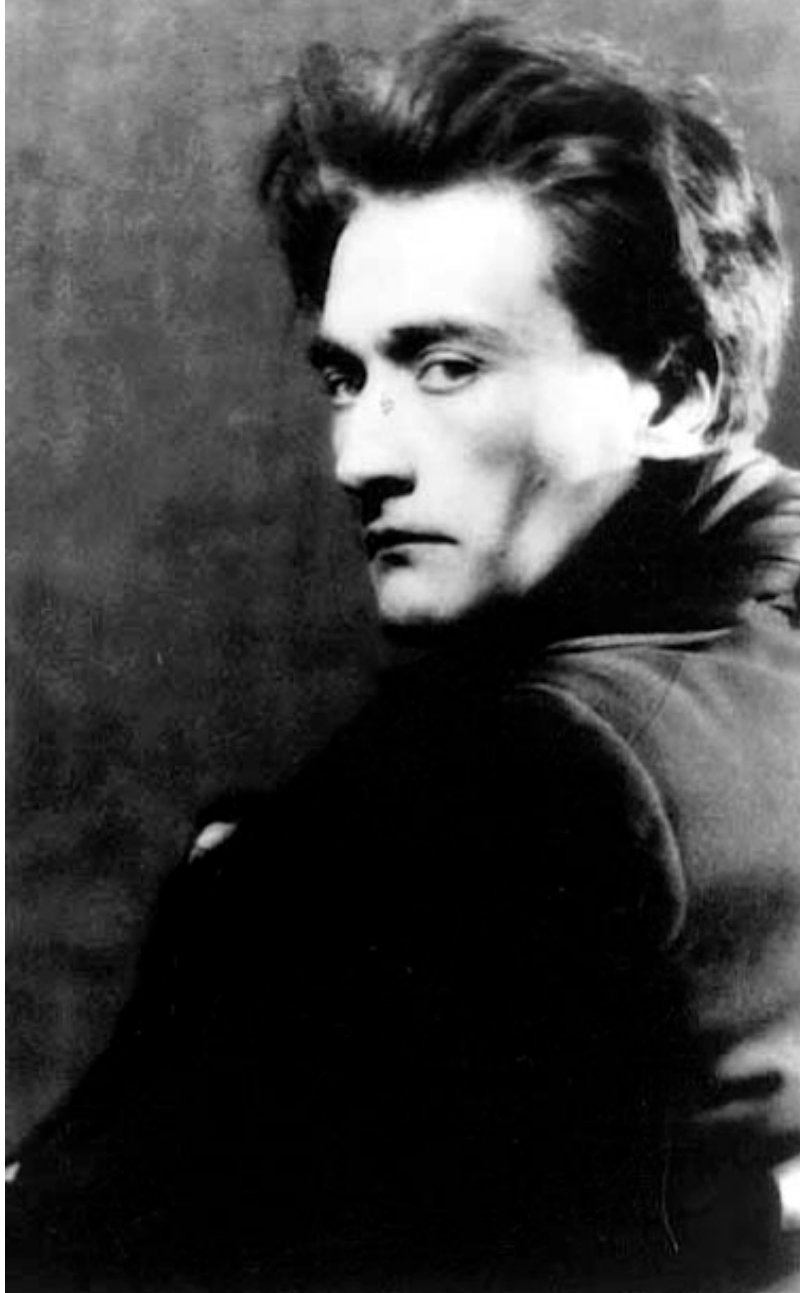


{...}

Breton on Artaud



“He carried around with him the landscape of a Gothic novel, torn by flashes of lightning.”

{...}

The Phantom Creeps (1987)

Fade in upon a pacific scene: the exclusive suburb of Panglossburg, built, one cannot doubt, upon blood, toil, tears, sweat, backstabbing, tax dodges, and insider trading, but quiet now, serene, self-satisfied, its contented stillness broken only by the occasional purr of a sixteen-cylinder engine, the soft pop of a champagne cork beside a heated pool. Here the city motto reads, "This is the best of all possible worlds, since we hold thirty-five percent."

Why then this sense of foreboding? this premonitory quiver in the woodwinds?

Suddenly a meteor hurtles from the sky and obliterates the country club!

A somber voice is heard: "Unquestionably this is the work of the Phantom."

Strong men gasp. Women clutch their children to their breasts. Superstitious peasants avert their eyes and cross themselves. A strange gypsy woman with a weird light in her eyes nods knowingly and laughs. "He'll show you..." she says. "He'll show you all!" She cackles, and lights a cigar on the smouldering¹ remains of a Mercedes convertible.

The Phantom stands in his secret laboratory, pouring the contents of one beaker into another. They foam convincingly. He smiles a mad smile of satisfaction. "Just as I expected!" he exclaims. His assistant watches.

¹ This is the spelling in Dr. Johnson's *Dictionary*, and I'm sticking with it.

The Phantom's assistant is named Gnork. His features are simian. His teeth are green. He drools uncontrollably, and must change his lab smock often. He has a shambling walk. He went to Caltech, and still hisses reflexively whenever he hears the name of Boltzmann.

The Phantom enjoys this. "Boltzmann!" he whispers. Gnork hisses.

At the Directorate for Integrated Analytical Preprocessing of Security Assessments, Literal And Metaphysical: Adjoint Tactical Arm, three Agents don trenchcoats and light unfiltered cigarettes. They have read much Kierkegaard, and they are full of woe.

"This Phantom is bad news," says the first.

"This Phantom is some mean dude," says the second.

"This Phantom is a metaphor for the condition of modern man," says the third.

From the balcony of his mountain fortress, the Phantom speaks:

"Fools!" cries the Phantom. "They do not know my power!"

"Yesh mashter," says Gnork. He wipes his chin.

The Phantom grins, posing for a moment with his wild hair blowing in the wind. His assistant takes snapshots. He explains his plan for world domination: "My self-reproducing robots," he exclaims, "shall girdle the globe, their numbers doubling daily! Should any remain to oppose me, then" —he laughs madly— "I

have my disintegrator ray! before which none can hope to stand!”

“Yesh mashter,” says Gnork. He wipes his chin.

The robots are awesome. They are all two meters in height, and they look like Schwarzenegger wrapped in aluminum foil. Their skins glow with a metallic luster. Their eyes are bright with nuclear fire. They’re hung like horses. They crush steel in their bare hands.

Their wants are simple. “They eat sand and like it,” says the Phantom.

Their software is portable. “I wrote it in C,” the Phantom explains. “Of course the graphics routines are in assembly.”

Once a day each robot pauses to take itself apart and puts itself back together again. When its reassembly has been completed, it has doubled. “It’s a corollary of the Banach-Tarski theorem,” says the Phantom. “I think. I was really fucked up when I made this part up.” Thus one robot becomes two...two become four... four become eight... . “1,073,741,824 become 2,147,483,648,” says the Phantom. “You get the picture.”

The disintegrator ray stands six stories tall. It takes the glue out of gluons.

In a Washington Office, the three Agents meet with the Secretary to discuss the menace of the Phantom.

“He threatens peace,” says the first.

“He threatens liberty,” says the second.

“He threatens the free exchange of ideas which is essential to scientific progress,” says the third.

The Secretary spreads his hands and shrugs. Even his shrug is distinguished and MidAtlantic. — “Well,” he says.

The three Agents confer.

“He threatens our access to foreign capital,” says the first.

“He threatens the availability of cheap Hispanic labor,” says the second.

“He wants our clean white women,” says the third.

“Gentlemen,” says the Secretary firmly, “this is indeed a grave menace. Every resource of my Office is at your disposal.”

As if by magic a stack of reports appears on the Secretary’s desk. Apparatchiks dash in and out, shouting and waving memoranda. A press conference is called to unveil a gigantic organizational chart which reveals the seriousness with which the Office regards the threat to civilization. A wing of word processors is placed on full alert.

“Congressional hearings are scheduled for the morrow,” says the Secretary.

Meanwhile the Phantom’s robots enter Toledo.

The three Agents are assigned to brief the girl reporter:

“The Phantom’s origins are shrouded in mystery.”

“He is a legend among hackers.”

“‘Shade’ is a byword for code devised with particularly fiendish ingenuity.”

“His icebreakers have cracked the security of Livermore.”

“His graphic effects have been used in half-a-hundred video games.”

“His malevolent viruses strike only at IBM.”

“He has broken the trapdoor codes of uncounted banks.”

“He robs from the rich and gives to the poor.”

“His accountants insist that he keep a percentage.”

The girl reporter’s name is Eva. She used to be a belly dancer.

“Kowabunga,” mutters the first Agent.

“Whoa Trigger,” mutters the second.

“Come in Rangoon,” mutters the third.

Eva is Czechoslovakian, and speaks with an accent.

“Must ask,” she says. “How can stop Phantom?”

“Uh,” says the first Agent.

“Duh,” says the second.

“Dunno,” says the third.

As an adolescent the Phantom was sensitive and withdrawn. He was mocked by his peers: “Dork!” they cried. “Weenie!” He had no date for the prom. In the dank cellar in which he performed his early experiments, he would sit for hours listening to the music of the Beach Boys.

The Phantom has a fine voice, and can sing all the parts in “California Girls.”

Again the Phantom’s robots enter Toledo.

The Phantom talks about his relationship with Elvis:

“He was a real inspiration to me when I was starting out in Vegas. I thought I had it dicked, you know, working my disintegration act, all those showgirls. But we’d get together after the last set was over and just stand around the piano, singing harmony, talking about our dreams. He told me Vegas was nowhere, that I should really try to make something of myself. He scored great Peruvian flake.”

The Agents patrol the streets of Los Angeles in a rented vehicle. It is a Ford pickup, and they sit stiffly in the front seat three abreast. After dozens of unprofitable interviews with pimps, prostitutes, and computer salesmen, by chance they spy a red Ferrari with vanity plates reading “Nemesis.” It is the Phantom!

A chase ensues: ignoring traffic signals small furry creatures little old ladies with shopping carts and all other motor vehicles, they

hurtle at one hundred miles an hour through the streets down the alleys up the sidewalks into the shopping malls about the piers round the runways past the yachts out of the entrance ramps into the exit ramps over the wrong side of the freeway to the Playboy mansion, through which they careen randomly at somewhat reduced speed the better to appreciate the havoc they wreak amid tennis courts private screening rooms saunas mossrock fireplaces and also the better to ogle the scattering shrieking nubile young wenches in varying states of undress, finally pursuing the Phantom to the topmost level of a ten-story parking garage, on which the Ferrari does a completely impossible smoking-rubber wheelie from one edge of the roof to the other before flying out into space! into the bay of a waiting helicopter piloted by the faithful Gnork.

By prior agreement the principals are replaced by stuntmen for this last shot. The four stand by and watch from the edge of the roped-off area, smoking cigarettes, drinking coffee, exchanging shoptalk. They applaud appreciatively at the denouement.

Again the Phantom's robots enter Toledo.

The Phantom calls a global interrupt and hand-enters new instructions. The robots loop on Muskegon. "Shit," says the Phantom. He spends a week with his face in the debugger.

Gnork meditates:

"What ish the aim of thish fiend? what purposhe can he find, in sheeking the dishintegration of all matter? the return to a shimpler time, in the early momentsh of the univershe, before baryonsh were formed, when all wash quark shoup? Ish the Phantom then a consheervative? Or are hish aimsh radical? Doesh he sheek that inevitable entropic chaosh that liesh at the

end of time? Why then musht I wire hish motherboardsh and go for hish pizzash? And what doesh he mean when he shaysh, The finite can achieve completion only by embracing itsh negation?”

Gnork’s soliloquies are rare, and require that he keep a bucket between his knees.

The Phantom has known love. In his early years his heart was captured by a dancer, a shameless vixen who feigned interest only to spur his adoration and then to reject him. At the last she mocked him for sending her dandelions. No doubt she has forgotten him long since. But he keeps her portrait by his bedside, next to his table of integrals.

“We see her as a deceptive will-o’-the-wisp. Beautiful as sin, seductive as perdition, blessed by her great art, she pulls the wool over the eyes of the innocent, chaste youth who pleads for her love, pleads in vain, and yet later on receives the love of all mankind.” [Carola Belmonte, *Die Frauen im Leben Phantoms*, Augsburg and Berlin, 1905, p. 50.]

The Phantom understands the position of his landlord: “You used to be able to get a secret laboratory for three-fifty a month in this town. Now every yokel fresh out of graduate school is moving in and bidding up the price of space. These days everybody wants to rule the world.”

Other inventions of the Phantom include the meteor cannon, electronic drywall, and a gas that turns everyone into an existentialist. “I considered invisibility,” he says, “but the near-term returns were insufficient to maintain positive cash flow.”

The three Agents walk through the financial district of San Francisco, hands in their pockets, their keen eyes observing everything from behind their mirrored sunglasses.

“A line has formed on the sidewalk,” observes the first.

“Someone is signing autographs,” observes the second.

“It is the Phantom!” observes the third.

Pulling Uzis from beneath their trenchcoats, they fire several hundred warning rounds into the air. The crowd scatters, screaming. A crew of windowwashers and a deflated blimp tumble from the sky and land in the street. Fortunately their wounds are superficial. The Agents pursue the Phantom through the lobby of a bank. He pauses to make a withdrawal. “This will just take a minute,” he promises. The Agents take the opportunity to wave the Uzis in the faces of a few bank officers, and negotiate loans at very favorable rates of interest. Resuming the pursuit, they corner him finally in the rumpus room of a brokerage house.

“Now fiend you hack your last,” says the first Agent.

“Prepare to meet thy systems administrator,” says the second.

“Reach for the sky,” says the third.

The Phantom laughs his maniacal laugh. He raises his hands above his head, and smiles his number-three smile. (This is the one that appeared on the cover of the *Enquirer*.) With a motion too quick for the eye to follow, he seizes a rope dangling from the ceiling, and tugs upon it, releasing the trapdoor on which the Agents are standing.

They plummet into nothingness!

Robots enter Fresno. They walk stiff-legged, holding their arms straight out before them. Uttering inarticulate cries, they fell the city with clumsy gestures.

Robots enter Modesto. They bend their knees and flex their elbows. Their vocalization displays an increasing complexity, though no meaning can be discerned. The city crumbles in their path.

Robots enter Bakersfield. Their movements have balletic grace, and they whistle arias from Verdi at their work. The city is devastated, but critical notices are favorable.

The Phantom's lawyer advises him on his legal position: "I'm concerned with your exposure on this one," he says. "We're in a gray area here."

The Phantom is a patriot. "Only in a country like this one could a boy grow up to reduce it to its prehadronic constituents."

The Phantom works out regularly. He runs many miles a day, and frequents an athletic club. He uses the machines, but prefers to work with free weights. His pecs are awesome, even better than Doctor Doom's.

The Phantom has views on the relation of noumenon to phenomenon: "Celebrity is not a principle," he says.

After two days swimming through the sewers of San Francisco,

the Agents emerge in the sunlight, blinking.

“Gaah,” says the first.

“Argh,” says the second.

“At least we got his autograph,” says the third.

At the physics library at Berkeley, Eva explores the early work of the Phantom. “Is strange,” she says. “Why should theoretician of such caliber have believed S-matrix theory adequate foundation for relativistic quantum mechanics? And what means paper on zeta function in Ising model?”

Stretching, she looks around. “Why keeps everyone clipboard in lap?”

Amphibious robots storm the beach at Santa Monica. After a fierce party, they are subdued. Captives are made to don roller skates, and paraded down the pier at Venice clad in Lycra. They are forced to play volleyball, and to appear in rock videos.

The Phantom’s accountants advise him to write off the loss of the amphibious brigade for the second quarter.

The Agents brief Eva again:

“The Phantom’s paper on the string-theoretic basis of the disintegration effect has been submitted to *Physics Letters [B]*.”

“It cites previous work of Polyakov, Manin, Volovich, and

Freund and Witten.”

“It has been refused by three referees.”

“They all met with mysterious accidents.”

“They disintegrated.”

“The Phantom has a poor attitude toward peer review.”

“Oh,” says Eva. She wrinkles her nose. “Have cut cheese?” she asks.

Abruptly Gnork accepts an offer from a competing megalomaniac, and leaves without giving notice. “Ah well,” sighs the Phantom. “That’s Silicon Valley for you.”

The Phantom advertises for a replacement:

“Assistant wanted for mad scientist bent on world domination. Requires doctorate in mathematics or physical sciences and 3-5 years experience structured programming in UNIX environment. Preference given to candidates with names that sound like the noise you make when a piece of food gets caught in your throat.”

“UNIX is a registered trademark of AT&T.”

For days the Phantom’s campaign of destruction is held in abeyance while he reads through several hundred resumes. “A good cover letter is essential,” he notes. He interviews the final candidates. Not all are adequately qualified. “I need a personnel

department,” he admits.

The Agents trail the Phantom to the secret cave which houses the meteor cannon. They surprise him as he prepares a capsule for launching. A lively swordfight ensues! Left arm behind his back, the Phantom drives the three back through a forest of bubbling retorts to a railing overlooking the electronic catapult. With a single sweep of his blade he disarms them! They fall backward in confusion over the railing into the open capsule! The cannon fires! They are propelled halfway across the continent!

Fortunately they land upon their heads.

Eva attends the Phantom Retrospective at the DeYoung Museum in Golden Gate Park. Sipping white wine, she converses with many who are familiar with the nuances of his work. “Such a sense of space,” says one. “Such analytical rigor,” says another.

Spontaneous mutations begin to appear in the reproduction of the robots. Divisions of them are observed in polyester suits, carrying cheap briefcases. The function of the briefcases is unknown.

The Phantom’s new assistant reports for work. His name is Phlegm. He is a hunchback. His countenance is covered with large warts. He comes from the University of Paris, where he was a student of the great Grothendieck. He does not drool. “One can’t have everything,” the Phantom sighs.

“What is your will, master?” asks Phlegm.

The Phantom broods. “Reduce Madagascar!” he declares at last. “And send out for pizza.”

Robots begin to appear at sales conventions, singly and in pairs. They are all named Eddie, and they like to party.

Gnork’s memoir, *My Life With the Phantom: I Kiss And Tell*, is rushed to publication and hurtles to the top of the *New York Times* bestseller list. It is a scathing indictment, a personal betrayal.

The Phantom is stunned. “The electrodes *are* functional,” he insists.

Thousands of robots wearing headbands gather on a farm in upstate New York to smoke dope and listen to psychedelic music. No casualties are reported.

At a midmorning meeting in the Office of the Secretary, a decision escapes before anyone can stop it. Chagrined at this faux pas, the Secretary instantly appoints a blue-ribbon commission to investigate.

The decision is to bombard the Phantom’s fortress. Munitions are in short supply, despite the best efforts of several investigative committees to determine the reasons, and, accordingly, the Office will resort to psychological warfare: the Phantom will be assaulted with the first draft of the preliminary report on the menace he presents, which now masses several tons. It is not known whether such action will violate the Geneva conventions.

A warplane is readied with this grim burden.

The Phantom does a benefit concert with Bob Geldof for victims of the American educational system.

He goes three rounds with Stallone for charity.

He is featured on "Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous."

In an interview for MTV, he reflects upon his life and work. He explains that he misses the Sixties, and that if he could, he'd just disintegrate the last couple of decades. He discusses his peers: "Gell-Mann, perhaps; I suppose Witten." He dismisses the rest with a wave of the hand: "They try." He reflects on the imperfection of his disintegration apparatus, and shrugs a Gallic shrug: "A work of art is never finished, only abandoned," he says.

Sipping cognac, he leafs through his fan mail. Appeals have reached him from the Pope and Hulk Hogan. The Phantom is flattered by these attentions. "When someone of the stature of the Hulkster attempts to touch your better nature, you have to listen," he says.

After numerous delays caused by the staging of photo opportunities, the warplane is dispatched to wreak its dread vengeance on the Phantom. Security is lax, and no one notices when Eva stows away.

Nor had anyone noticed earlier when the Phantom's henchmen secreted a canister of gas with a voice-actuated valve in the passenger compartment.

Eva is quickly discovered, but saving the world is lonely work, and the Pilot welcomes companionship. The conversation turns to statistical mechanics:

“It’s an exponential distribution,” the Pilot is explaining, “of the form first given by ...”

... he shouldn’t say it

“... Boltzmann ... ”

Instantly a hissing noise is heard from the back of the plane.

Sometimes the Phantom’s jokes are unbearably cryptic.

The effects of the gas are felt immediately:

“The being of the mountain is the in-itself,” says the Pilot dreamily, referring to the peak which looms before them. “The in-itself exists in opposition to the for-itself, purposeful existence, which it would transform to the by-itself, the embedded-in-itself, or perhaps the scattered-all-over-itself. —A dread fascination seizes me! I must grasp the in-itself as noumenon! I must confront brute unfeeling existence directly!”

He aims the plane into the mountainside.

The impact is awful!

The Pilot survives, but must spend months in painful metaphysical therapy.

East-Europeans are immune to existentialism. Seizing a parachute, Eva has leapt from the plane in the nick of time.

She lands in the fortress!

Mysteriously her clothes have all fallen off during the descent, and she must confront the Phantom wrapped in the remains of the parachute.

“Am affiliated with agents who seek your destruction,” she says. “But first perhaps exclusive interview.”

“Hey, dig it,” says the Phantom. “Have some pizza. This is my assistant, Phlegm.”

“Gack,” says Eva.

“Nice accent,” says Phlegm. “You want mushroom or pepperoni?”

As an afterthought they confine her in a tower cell with a television set that only gets talkshows.

Robots in conservative dress swarm the Office of the Secretary itself. After vicious hall-to-hall infighting, it is discovered that they are prodigious typists and can generate reports copiously illustrated with charts and graphs with phenomenal rapidity. They are all hired with the provisional rating of GS-12.

In her captivity Eva resumes the practice of bellydancing. She dances by the window of her cell.

This arrests the attention of the three Agents, now encamped in the woods opposite with their binoculars trained on the fortress.

“Kowabunga,” mutters the first.

“Whoa Trigger,” mutters the second.

“You want mushroom or pepperoni?” asks the third.

In consequence they fail to notice the ominous glow that has begun to gather about the base of the disintegration ray.

Disguised in gray suits and hornrimmed glasses, robots infiltrate the corporate headquarters of IBM and depose the management in a bloodless coup. No one notices.

The Phantom negotiates the sale of his own memoirs. Preliminary offers run to seven figures. His agent is talking about a package for the movie sale. “We want Arnold,” he is saying.

The descent is precipitous, five hundred feet sheer into a slimy moat which has become the repository for unfortunate genetic experiments involving tentacles, but Eva can climb 5.13bc, and anyway there comes a time when death would be better than another day with Phil Donahue. Belayed uncertainly by a rope she has woven from the spaghetti in some old FORTRAN the Phantom has carelessly left within reach, she makes her escape.

“Gack,” she mutters. “Was wretched code.”

Elvis appears to the Phantom in a dream. “Financial opportunity beckons,” Elvis says. “Romance, travel highlighted. Virgo, Taurus may figure in your plans.”

As part of the promotional campaign orchestrated by his agent, the Phantom issues his ultimatum:

“People of the Planet Earth:”

“For five billion years this little orb has circled round the sun. In these five billion years primordial organic slime has taken form, crawled from the sea, stood erect, and hired lawyers. After lengthy researches aided by extensive supercomputer simulations, I have determined that this was all a mistake.”

“The void beckons. Eat shit and die.”

“[signed:] The Phantom.”

“Oh Eddie,” she sighs.

“Yes Janet. Yes.”

“Oh Eddie can he really mean it? To destroy the Earth and everything upon it, all that ever was or might have been, popcorn, cephalopods, model trains, Merv Griffin, the ontological argument ... Is there nothing, nothing we can do to stop this fiend?”

“We can stop him. We must stop him.” His jaw knots.

“Oh Eddie,” she sighs. “Kiss me. Kiss me as if this were the last time.”

He crushes her in his arms and calls an ambulance.

At dusk a mob surrounds the Phantom’s fortress. They bear torches, and their mood is ugly: “Dork!” they cry. “Weenie!” A

reinforced armored division is moved in to support them. Spotlights stab through the night. The Beach Boys are rushed to the scene. They play “Little Deuce Coupe,” “Be True To Your School,” and “In My Room.” Concession stands spring up, selling organic hot dogs and frozen yogurt.

The Secretary arrives in a limousine. He seizes a megaphone. “Phantom!” he exclaims. “We’ve got Brian Wilson out here!”

Within the Phantom sits at his controls, his face lit by the eerie glow of a hundred antique vacuum tubes. He smiles, revealing newly bonded teeth. “Wovon man nicht sprechen kann, darüber muss man schweigen,” he says. With a negligent gesture, he destroys the Earth.

But no! There has been a mistake!

At an apparently inconsequential point in the half-million lines of code that constitute the device driver for the disintegration apparatus, the Phantom has called upon a machine instruction to perform a right shift on the contents of a data register! He has assumed that this will be shift right logical, but the default has been modified in the new release of the compiler, and an arithmetic shift is performed instead! In consequence the left half of the machine word fills with ones, not zeroes, and the disintegrator ray annihilates the planet Neptune!

The explosion is tremendous!

Bite-sized chunks of frozen methane rain down upon the Earth, like so many fart-flavored popsicles.

One outsized chunk the size of an iceberg hurtles toward the

Phantom's mountain fortress. It must mean his obliteration. It comes closer...closer...

The Phantom is seen standing upon a buttress, shaking his fist at the heavens. "Shift right logical!" he cries. The shadow grows upon him.

The collision is monstrous!

Eva walks through heaped rubble and thawing slush, holding her nose. Casting a single dandelion into the smoking crater, she sighs. "Surely this was end of Phantom," she says.

Three toads are sitting on a rock. Somehow it comes as no surprise that they address her:

"It's us!" croaks the first.

"An unfortunate side effect of the disintegration ray!" croaks the second.

"Kiss us and we turn into theoretical physicists!" croaks the third.

Gnork and Phlegm appear, now both tall and handsome: the deformed transformed. They are hand in hand. They appear to have taken a fancy to each other. "Boltzmann!" whispers Phlegm in Gnork's ear. Gnork hisses softly. "I love it when you talk dirty to me," he says.

Eva regards the toads.

"Will think about it," says Eva.

As the credits roll to the plaintive strains of “Little Surfer Girl”, enigmatic laughter is heard off camera.²

² I haven't generally harbored any illusions about my ability to write anything someone would be willing to pay for, but on advice of counsel I did try to shop this one around, of course to no avail. I retain few details, but do remember that when I got the rejection from *Omni* I immediately turned around and mailed it back to the editor, attached to another letter which read (roughly): "Dear Ms. Datlow: Thank you for your letter of the nth inst., which please find attached. Unfortunately my correspondence is so extensive that I can't find room for this in my files at the present time. I'm sure you'll be able to place it with someone else. Thanks and good luck. Yours sincerely [etc.]" — To this I received no reply.