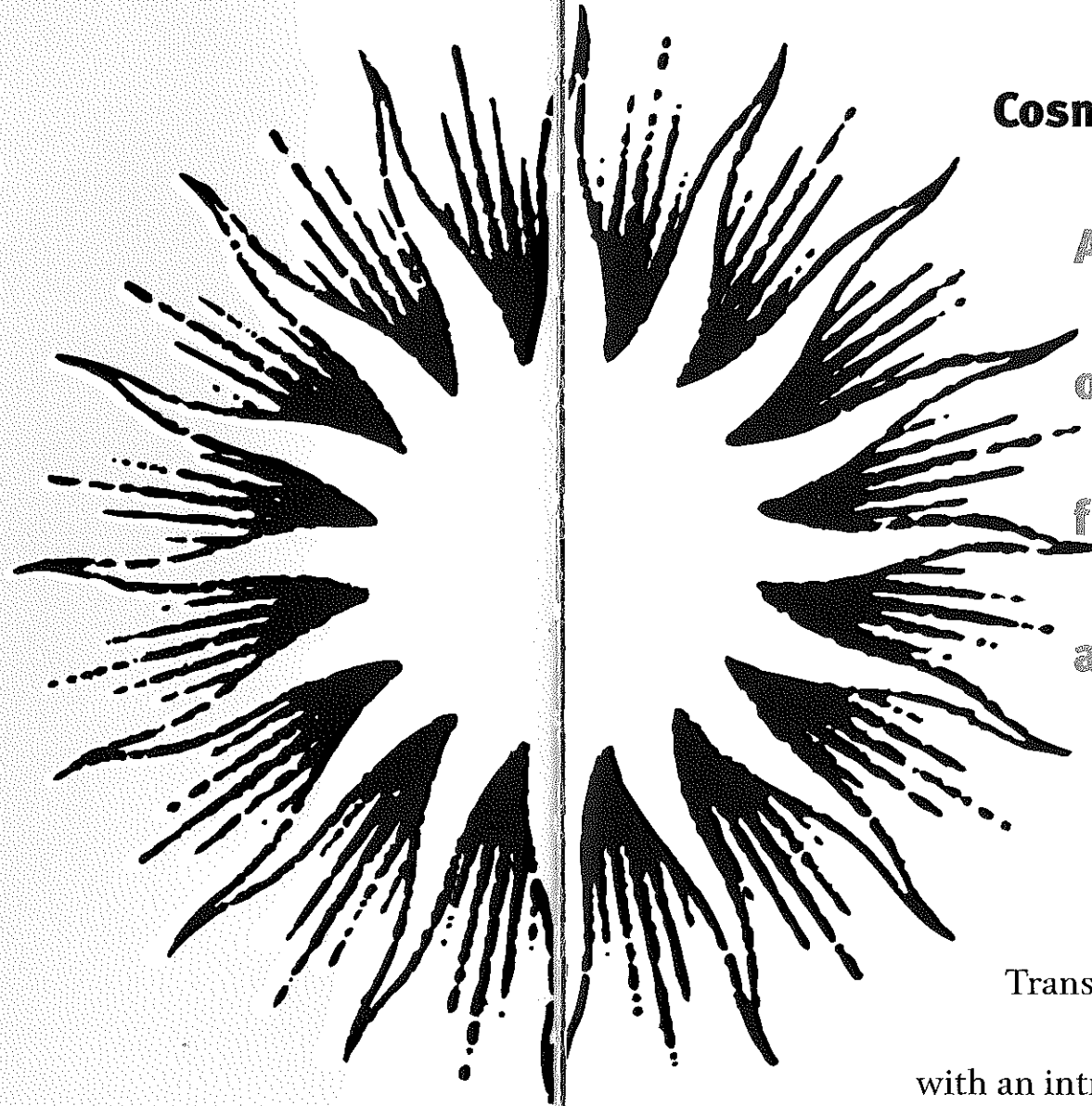


THE WESLEYAN
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Invasion of the Sea Jules Verne
The Mysterious Island Jules Verne
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The Mighty Orinoco Jules Verne
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Cosmos Latinos

An Anthology

of Science Fiction

from Latin America

and Spain

Translated, edited, &

with an introduction & notes

by Andrea L. Bell & Yolanda Molina-Gavilán

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To Chris and to all my family

—*Andrea Bell*

To Massimo

—*Yolanda Molina-Gavilán*

Pablo Capanna

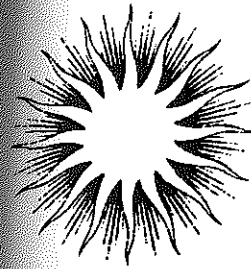
ARGENTINA

The Argentinean Pablo Capanna (1939–) was born in Florence, Italy, but is a longtime resident of Buenos Aires. He is a journalist, literary critic, and fiction author, and is also a professor of philosophy at the National University of Technology (Universidad Tecnológica Nacional). Furthermore, he is the current vice president of the magazine *Cristerio* (publishing since 1928) and has been on its editorial board since 1971.

Capanna has contributed essays to various SF magazines such as *El Péndulo* and *Minotauro* and has been writing *Futuro*, the supplement of the newspaper *Página 12*, since 1998. In 1967 he wrote the groundbreaking essay “The Meaning of Science Fiction” (“El sentido de la ciencia ficción”), the first Spanish-language study of SF. Other works to his name are *Lord of the Evening: Speculations on Cordwainer Smith* (*El Señor de la tarde: Conjeturas en torno a Cordwainer Smith*, 1984), *Idios Kosmos: Keys to Philip K. Dick* (*Idios Kosmos: Claves para Philip K. Dick*, 1992), *The World of Science Fiction* (*El mundo de la ciencia ficción*, 1992), and *J. G. Ballard: The Desolate Time* (*J. G. Ballard: El tiempo desolado*, 1993).

Capanna has received numerous awards and honors from the Spanish-speaking SF community, including the *Konex*, the *Pléyade*, the *Más Allá* and the *Gigamesh*. His critical works have focused on the influence of utopian thought, myth, science, and religion in our technological era.

Capanna is represented here by his short story “Acronia,” first published in the anthology *Argentineans on the Moon* (*Los argentinos en la luna*, 1968). This story reflects his readings of Borges, J. G. Ballard, Cordwainer Smith, and T. S. Eliot. It depicts a brave new corporate world where human beings have willingly become incapable of anything but working for companies that provide for their every need at all hours of the day. A straightforward denunciation of the danger of mechanization that foresees the online workplace, “Acronia” was written while the young author was employed at the Ford Motors High School in Argentina and suffering from not being able to devote himself to research. Happily for us, Pablo Capanna found a way to dedicate himself mostly to writing about SF.



Acronia

Acronia, 1966

by Pablo Capanna

translated by Andrea Bell

He thought he could trace the first symptom back to the break between his morning meeting and his second Pluscafé.

Still, the meeting had been brilliant: the Coordinator had showed up with a brand new dossier, just obtained from Planning, and the enthusiasm on his smiling mask had infected everyone, creating a positively Super Standard¹ atmosphere. The impeccable white shirts, the file folders, Pylaszckiewicz's and Carmona's attentive masks, Pineapple's admirable expression (decisiveness, intelligence, company spirit), all were justified. You could tell this really was a useful project and that subdividing it, programming the operations, and delegating the work had allowed for the full expression of the Coordinator's skill and created a veritable administrative masterpiece: almost certainly, rumor had it, overtime would have to be authorized. It wasn't reckless to think things might even run to a special meeting, with drinks, speeches, and all the rest.

Carmona had bumped into him on his way out, excusing himself mechanically, although P. knew that he did it on purpose—he admired that talent he had for leaving meetings so decisively. Carmona was one of those men who always found work to do and who, more than once, had let the lunch break come upon him gulping down a few bites at his desk, buried among heliographs, programs, and drawings. There were those, however, who considered such an excess of zeal to be in bad taste.

Later on, once again, the spiral transporter, the lights of the programming machine, purring softly like a fat, metallic cat, and the tedium, the tedium that only intensive work could dispel. It wasn't true that the same tasks could be done by robots: “Only man can do executive-level jobs,” he thought, although not as convincingly as he used to, “and only man needs to occupy his time by working.”

He decided to concentrate on his task, and with a weary gesture he erased the colors of the Tanguy² that covered the entire lighted panel.

That fluid beach, with its chocolate figures and sun of melted sand—one day they were going to give him a headache: it was better if he replaced them with something less flashy, a twenty-first-century poster, for example.

The part of the dossier that was assigned to him appeared on his screen, summarized, digested, and analyzed by the robots in Planning. Was there anything else left to do? Soon those figures and the arcane problems of coordination they entailed turned into a spiderweb of green, gold, vermilion, and violet graphs that went up and down the scales while Tanguy's deserted beach retreated. The graphs formed a drawing that a mind from former times would have considered beautiful, a picture that writhed in the air and spread itself out in a relief map of polychromatic peaks and mesas. Each time that the different factors—Motivation, Frustration, Feedback—balanced themselves out and flattened into an almost perfect horizontal, he erased the graphics and registered them in the programmer's mechanical memory: it was another of the infinite possible solutions to the problem.

The lines had once again reached the edge of the screen, and their colors were fading while the Musik device tackled some languorous rhythms, when P. seemed to nod off for an instant with his eyes fixed on the clock.

He saw the lights chasing each other across the crystalline dial, smooth and without signs that might tarnish it; he saw the iridescent, concentric halos and the inner garden peeking out from the other side. His gaze was being carried by the gentle waves that rocked the saturated solution, undulating the jeweled castles, when the question forced itself upon him:

Why don't clocks in Acronia have hands?

P.'s education had been quite irregular. The errors in the adaptation program to which he had been submitted had been discovered too late, and were never completely fixed.

He knew, for example, that back in ancient times, when people were said to have been slaves to the clock, the clock was a disk with two needles or "hands" that went in pursuit of symmetrical signs, one for each fraction of time. Clocks no longer measured time in Acronia, although they still served a function. It wasn't necessary to measure time, because all the stages of life were registered in the fabulous Planner's Memory: clocks were there only to communicate changes in activity with their flashing lights and musical tones.

Up and down; the prismatic images of the passing Secretaries, reflected a thousand times, blurred and ran together in a grotesque array of legs, papers, and blazing plastic hairdos. Using another archaic image, it seemed to P. that it was like a tank of those multifinned Japanese fish so popular with the ancients.

Then he realized that he'd become distracted. Not only did he not mind having evaded work, but he felt an inexplicable euphoria. It could literally be said that, until the Pluscafé hour, he had hidden from time and from himself.

He looked and felt like an outsider, crystallized in his cubicle among dossiers and graphs that boiled with color and imprisoned him like a cage; but in that state, everything out there proved irrelevant to him, because he, the real He, could not be imprisoned.

The spiral ramp disgorged the nervous, grim figure of the Coordinator; luckily he was preoccupied, thinking about the Planner—knew-what problem, and he didn't notice P. The Coordinator seemed childishly comical to him, a sad child who plays seriously at soldiers, trying to look self-possessed. Moreover, he was a dark and skinny doll that P.'s mind could manipulate at will: he imagined him head down, always so serious and burdened with worries; he entertained himself by making the Coordinator's body gyrate on its geometric center, at the approximate height of the navel; and finally he projected it across the Tanguy, far, very far, as far as the farthest spheres, where he would still worry and shuffle papers about.

He was no longer with the programmer, in spite of being right next to it. His body could continue mechanically doing what it had to do, without a single thought, just like during the long and unavoidable work-days, the ephemeral vacations when everyone believed they were truly living, the years of programming when the robot had talked to him about the ancients. They had explained to him many times that, with his inferior programming, only a supervisor like the one he had could have saved him from Communism, Christianity, or oneiromancy.

As he followed the image of the Coordinator walking away, P. seemed to leave Acronia and contemplate it from the outside. That technological miracle, the product of antigravity and bioplanning, was always worthy of respect. The executives' capsules rotated like slow, majestic stars around the massive black sphere of A.L., the Adaptation and Learning Center, located in the middle. Tangentially, comets of different colors and volumes entered and exited, regulating their orbit and increasing

their speed near their zenith so as to complete their circuit in the established time of eight or nine hours. Fleeting meteors, seemingly outside the system's order, burst forth through the dark vault of a concave sky sprinkled with electric stars and with galaxies that projected like ephemeral medusas.

The place was teeming with satellites, resembling a monstrous tumbler full of bingo balls,³ but the orbits and areas were so precisely defined and subjected to constant readjustment that one couldn't help surrendering in admiration before the wisdom of the First Motor. For once this image is aptly applied, P. observed, thinking of the Planner.

The dome of Acronia was like a crystal bell, like the ones protecting certain kinds of antique clocks from dust and air. Clocks once again, he thought. Why, if everything follows such a precise rhythm and there are operations indicators everywhere, can't one feel the passage of time? It was impossible for him to remember last year. Every day was identical, and it seemed as if birth, programming, and executive problems were all arbitrary stages in a homogeneous continuum. That wasn't time, that was hell, just as someone in the ancient past had imagined it: each condemned soul obligated to repeat exactly, infinitely, the stereotyped gestures and acts from his mortal sin, in an eternity that was nothing more than the abolishment of time.

And what was time, then, that time claimed by his whole being, that time which everyone, in generalized universal cowardice, *killed* at all hours of the day? Hadn't killing time always been (though no one knew it) as big a crime as abortion or infanticide?

One of the ancients would have answered the question of time in a very ambiguous way: "If they ask me about it, I don't know; if they don't ask me about it . . ."

The soft bell made itself heard above the chords of Musik, and the floor panel rotated and slid toward the spiral ramp: it was Pluscafé time. P. felt like he had just woken up.

What had happened to him might be the beginning of a series of attacks. Oneiromancy manifested itself that way, first through distractions in which you lost the sequence of actions, then later through genuine mental flights that generally ended in daydreams.

Nevertheless, when he passed in front of the autoanalysis machine, which could have removed his doubts, he hesitated and ended up sticking the token back in his pocket.

"Total involvement in the total Plan," a sign read.

By midafternoon, P. was done with the dossier, and try as he might, he could not find a way to make it last all the time allotted him for it. He'd gone back to it over and over again, trying to look busy, until the ramp had begun to slide and had carried him to the exit.

His wife was not a Secretary but a Consumer, so she was there waiting for him at the family platform, together with the television set and the kids.

He thought she looked more tired than usual, but custom dictated that he begin talking to her immediately about work and the problems of the day, so the kids had to be content with a caress in passing while the platform sped up and zigzagged among a veritable mass of spheres, capsules, and disks. People from above, beneath, and all around greeted each other mechanically when their orbits paralleled. They came across open platforms and prematurely darkened spheres. In spite of his conditioning, she had to remind him each time to greet one or another of their neighbors in orbit who were amusing themselves with the customary social break that preceded dinner and television.

The whistle of an official, semidarkened platform, almost a sphere of blue metallic flame, attracted him for a moment. The platform was coming from the Consumer sectors and was heading toward the dome, in a straight line. It almost brushed against them on its way, and for an instant the taut face of an oneiromancer, maskless and feverish, appeared briefly and was lost to sight just as the capsule gained altitude.

The spheres remained undisturbed.

Acronia was the indisputable triumph of an architecture possessed of immense plasticity and in total control of gravity. The smothering horizontality of old buildings, which clutched the earth or stood painfully erect in search of heaven, had passed from memory in the face of this perfect mechanism, this colorful and luminous Christmas tree, whose only imperfection was mankind. The infinite possibilities that weightlessness offered made all directions equal, and architecture had become truly three-dimensional. The Bioplan added the fourth dimension, the life of the human parasites that inhabited the system. The Bioplan cleverly turned the old problems of transportation and housing on their heads. Its basic idea was terribly simple: instead of creating communication lines that carried people to their houses, the "houses," reduced to simple crystal platforms (all of them prefabricated by the robots), spread out according to the fixed trajectories that the Planner in his wis-

dom had set up. At some point in their orbits, one after another, group after group, class after class, the Feeding Centers, Rest Zones, Television Areas, and Consumer Districts all intersected.

Each sector of the quadrant was a piece of life, a programmed and conditioned task imposing order on the chaotic world of human existence. By the twentieth century some city-making companies had already stipulated certain days for cutting the lawn or doing the laundry, but this was the culmination of those early efforts. P. found an answer to the question he had asked himself that morning: they, mankind, were the hands of the great clock of Acronia, and like hands, they passed by the same points an infinite number of times. The perfection of the circle, with its homogeneous points equidistant from the center.

But a stain had blighted that perfection: the stupidly happy face of the oneiromancer attacked the very foundations of Acronia and revealed its absurdity.

Though in a sense, P. thought, oneiromancy also seemed to be a part of the plan. Maybe the Planner had had a tough time working it into his calculations, but in the end he had succeeded. After all, every machine suffers from normal wear and tear; pieces get worn down by friction and need to be replaced every once in a while. The oneiromancers were nothing more than that: a consequence of wear and tear.

The sickness would start with frequent distractions and digressions that distanced the patient from his or her specific task. Some, the more lucid among them, began to ramble on about humans not having been born for the Acronian way of life, about all that useless work, those meetings and that hustling and bustling of dossiers. They claimed that all the real work, including the most complex forms of programming, was done by the machines, and that their lives had no meaning. But the most widespread, and serious, form of oneiromancy was different: the infected one began to dream with his eyes open, as if under the effect of some drug, and from the disconnected fragments of his story he could reconstruct an illusory world of primitive simplicity and unbridled freedom. Foreseeable as any ordinary mechanical failure, whenever a core of oneiromancy was discovered it was stamped out right away. Nevertheless, the psychologists were worried by a recent outbreak of cases, according to a rumor that he'd heard in the spiral.

Evaluator P. again suspected that he might be becoming an oneiromancer, and the thought that they would send him to Earth to live

among the barbarians, out beyond the Nature Preserves and the Vacation Areas, began to haunt him.

At night, after they had left the Television Area and the sphere had begun to darken before anyone had ordered it to, they went to bed, and P. dreamed.

He was walking through a dense undergrowth of wet and shiny leaves, following the tracks of the brilliantly striped beast that was gracefully camouflaged in the greenery, waiting . . . Now the tiger was fighting for its life and, covered with darts, was carried like a trophy in the midst of ancestral chants . . .

The stone knife fell and rose and a rain of blood fell on the heads of the adolescents . . .

The moon, center of the dome, began to spin, irradiating milky rays of light that would watch over a death or a wedding or a hero's apotheosis . . . Time and again thunder rumbled across the sown fields, time and again the harvests were sacrificed to placate the wrath of the gods, and time and again, eternity after eternity, the serpent swallowed its own tail in the heavy wheel of the cosmos and of life, with the steady rhythm that ground down plateaus and mountain ranges, dinosaurs and kings, gods and astrologers.

Suddenly, the forest, the tigers, the burned fields, the adolescents and the sky began to circle around him like a sphere of colors, until they turned into Acronia's black crystal beads. Platforms, spheres, and capsules formed concentric, symmetrical circles, fixed at the four cardinal points, and he was in their midst. He awoke not exactly startled, but befuddled. His body felt sore, as if he himself had run after the tiger.

He sat up in bed, and his hand found the sweet curve of her shoulder. He couldn't recall having seen the capsule at that hour before, in that warm half-light. She slept peacefully; he had always envied her that calm, but now he realized that her peace wasn't indifference: it came from very far away. He thought sorrowfully of what their relationship might have been like in other times: Acronia had caused it to be inexplicably sad and mechanical.

Maybe women had the secret, he reflected, deep in thought as he caressed the familiar hollow of her throat and his fingers traced the warm curves of her neck. That inner peace, that tacit understanding of the natural forces, of the rhythm of the moon and the solar splendor, made the few real women whom he had known (not the Secretaries, a bastard

species that was replacing them) have a deeper carnal understanding than men had. They knew how to put the playthings of men in their proper place . . .

He realized he was falling in love with his wife again, and was crazy enough to wake her up and tell her so. By then, he had already made his decision.

After the afternoon meeting, they had seen P. rise from his desk and take the outer spiral, the one that went to the lower levels of Memory. No one could be surprised by this, since it was very common for the evaluators to consult the Memories for routine reasons.

Ignored among all the anonymous masks that, busy or preoccupied, fluttered around him, P. had crossed the light tunnels and exited onto the shadowy patios. The spiral snaked along hallways, terraces, and Antigrav chambers, where troops of young people played endless games of airball: they were reminders of the magic of the game whereby the Mayan priests had guaranteed the mechanism of the cosmic dome.

The ultrasonic vibration that called the kids to class pierced him to the bone, awakening old memories. Perfect checkerboards formed before the autoteaching machines and five hundred faces without masks faced Public Relations with the anguish of uprooted children. The glare of the screens still lulled the rebellious ones.

In one of the cubicles that followed the path of the spiral, a technician was going insane trying to plan all the airball games for the year, powerless to control all the variables and run the final equation, all but cursing the robot that could have solved the problem in an instant if it had wanted to; maybe somewhere it had already done so.

But, had all unknowns been resolved, would that man have been able to do what he did every night, return so tired to his home orbit and sleep without even having time to hug his wife? At the end of all the corridors, in an area far away from the spirals, where only the Memory's caretakers ventured for maintenance purposes—buried deep among the tubes and colored cables that were the nerves, veins, and arteries of the A.L., the dials and gauges that vibrated, giving off subtle signs of life—the vault, and in it, the robot.

P. got around the tubes and the networks of hanging cables and reached the place where the robot's memory tanks were connected right to the Planner, whose mass vibrated on the other side of the partition. Its

intense life, the febrile comings and goings of information in its tanks, could be smelled in the air; the silence, however, was almost complete.

The robot was unchanging, with its unvarnished coils, its circuit breakers, and its heavy bulk full of dust and rust (in spite of the air conditioners) like a romantic and impossible machine that a still-fanciful era had brought to life.

It didn't appear human, like the old portable models in which the desire to imitate the human form had reached caricature; rather, it was hardly recognizable, surrounded as it was by the vast tanks of its incredible memories. For some secret reason, Bioplan had not sent it to the foundry when the old, hodgepodge robots that were still being used as teachers had been replaced by the modern methods of mass programming. There it had remained, rusting in peace and reliving its memories. The memories of a robot aren't like those of a human—experiences, failures, nostalgia; rather, they are pure information, clear and distinct knowledge. Thus, as a result of relating so much information, of creating systems and setting up analogies, the old robot was becoming a philosopher.

A stiffened mechanism had been put in motion:

"What unstable weather we're having, eh?"

Evidently, it was an old-fashioned robot in every way.

The Coordinator had made a broad gesture, like one who doesn't know what else to offer, and the warm curtain of air had once again closed behind him. They were now seated face to face in the light-filled room, where the thin figure of the chief seemed to sink into itself, embraced by the rubber tentacles of the authoritarian armchair.

"Sure was a lot of work, wasn't there?" Evaluator P. mentally shrugged his shoulders while he tuned his mask to the most impersonal smile possible. He knew they were rhetorical questions, and he wondered what would come next. Talking about work in Acronia was like talking about the weather for the ancients. Chatting about the rain and the hail could also conceal tremendous anxiety, even though nowadays everything was done by the great mechanical placenta, while mankind played . . .

But the Coordinator was talking to him. He was so monotonous that P. couldn't remember how it had started; he had no choice but to continue with the same interested expression, waiting to be able to pick up

the thread of the conversation . . . He believed he had overcome the attacks, he thought.

It so happened that the periodic meetings with the staff enhanced team spirit . . . Of course, this was by no means a criticism . . . Merely an evaluation of what had been done . . . with constructive ends, etc., etc., etc.

It wasn't just that P. worked too quickly and distracted the others with his TV chatter, although that in itself was enough, but they'd also found him to be vague, absentminded; it would be good if he consulted an analyst as soon as possible.

A man who did not have his mind on his work, day and night, is a man divided, said the Coordinator, and a man divided, obviously, does not think about his work. Furthermore, why did he believe that work was so important?

(P. knew the standard answer but let him go on.)

The old-timers worked in order to earn money. Amassing a fortune and then dedicating oneself to unproductive leisure was considered being successful back in those days.

While leisure was reserved for those who had reached the top of the heap, the idle class did not constitute a danger; on the contrary, the whims of the elite were the source of work for the great mass of humanity. While the masses were occupied in supporting them, the idle found time to devote themselves to such spurious endeavors as metaphysics and foxhunting.

The progress made in the means of production and the first attempts at programming started to shift the balance: limiting the length of the workday, for which nitwits such as the Socialists or the Christian Democrats had fought, caused the first tensions, leaving thousands and thousands of workers to face the void of free time which they did not know how to occupy.

Television had partially filled that void: as a solution, it had been perfect in its time. Everyone went about humming the same tunes, laughing the same way, holding the same opinions about everything. But soon television went into decline, just as a new technological revolution, anti-gravity, made necessary a new definitive solution.

That solution was the Bioplan.

Humanity had already experienced the need to alter itself as it grew: programming techniques and reproductive planning were attempts at reform. But now a more radical step was taken.

Until the advent of the factory, the home had been the center of life.

The factory had changed the perspective a little, although only with the transformation of the worker into employee (thanks to robotics and anti-gravity) were conditions favorable for the great change.

What could be done, then, to fill the free hours that the robots' work had given man? Increase overtime? The gradual decrease of the so-called workday made it so that one worked more "over" than "normal" time. Impose longer workdays? Impossible while there was no reason to justify them, and with each passing day the robots took charge of more functions. Generate more forms of entertainment? Inefficient while there was no legal tool for requiring people to have fun with them.

The Bioplan came along and solved all those problems in one fell swoop, upending the traditional point of view and bringing about an elegant Ptolemaic revolution. From a "Copernican" society, where industries depended upon external forces and had to maintain manifold relations with them, society became little enclosed universes, or Acronias, where each company was, definitively, a world.

Lightweight, economical, functional, the worlds without time multiplied through space, floating free without gravity, like complex cells endowed with internal laws that governed their growth, evolution, and the optimal conditions for equilibrium. That state of maturity was reached by means of a well-balanced synthesis of population control, guaranteed work, and time planned out to the last detail.

Each person had his own nucleus, his unit of work, in this case the A.L., where the Planner portioned out the established harmony among the individual spheres. This way, not only was there no longer any goofing off, but the time for it had disappeared. Nor was there any need to kill time or to entertain oneself, since each second was either covered by a routine, or was full of problems to solve or of tasks constantly created by the robots to occupy man. No longer could anyone feel unsatisfied, bored, or simply neurotic: anxiety had been vanquished.

There were no malcontents, unless one wanted to call the oneiro-mancers so, but P. surely didn't want to become one of them . . .

What would be best for him, then, would be to go back to his place and tackle the problems of the day, thinking that perhaps there would be one among them that the robot couldn't solve and that was necessary for the existence of Acronia. Others (P. remembered some very special ones) were almost patently absurd, although no one would have been able to say so with any certainty. P. should think about the tranquility granted by total occupation in Acronia, compared with the anxieties of the past . . .

Suddenly, the Coordinator had gotten to his feet and was walking to the door. P. had a hard time coming out of the torpor that had invaded him, and managed just in time to lock in the "Decision and Efficiency 2" expression which often signaled a meeting was over. The effect achieved by this expression was the same one old-time executives got by looking at their watches and saying, "OK, enough chitchat, we can't waste any more time."

He backed up, shaking the Coordinator's hand, but when he was about to leave he got caught in the vines of a water lily that spilled over the edges of its stone pot, and he fell amid a chaos of paper.

The situation became extremely embarrassing. On his knees, while trying to retrieve file folders and reports, he could see the Coordinator stiffen, but he did not dare end the irregular scenario.

They had both lost control of the situation. There was no routine for this kind of thing, and both of them found themselves, for an immense, infinite instant, as if frozen in a scene from which they would be able to extricate themselves only with difficulty. An ashtray had broken, and its green blood ran like an ugly gash across the crystal floor. Neither of the two dared take the first step . . .

Somehow he had managed to gather his things together and leave. He remembered only the Coordinator standing, leaning against his desk, his finger resting on the Housekeeping button, a fixed expression on his face and a paper in his hand, a green-stained paper that he had just picked up.

It was a programming card, unpunched, and on it someone had written, *by hand* and in big, trembling letters, the lines of a forgotten poet:

WE ARE THE HOLLOW MEN
WE ARE THE STUFFED MEN . . .
HERE WE GO ROUND THE PRICKLY PEAR
PRICKLY PEAR PRICKLY PEAR . . .⁴

Message from the Coordinator of Area AL-37 CIV to the Sector Supervisor:

Arrange semantic analysis of paper found in possession of Evaluator P. Potential oneiromancy suspected. Possible job for Bioplan-Mental Health. Dossier initiated. Twelve men working on it. We need overtime authorization.

Text found on a communications tape from Sector 3:

THIS IS THE DEAD LAND
THIS IS CACTUS LAND . . .

Message from Supervisor of Sector AL-37 c to Bioplan-Psycholab 4:

Text has no apparent meaning, may be oneiromantic. Consult Memories.

Text wedged into a Musik loudspeaker:

THE EYES ARE NOT HERE
THERE ARE NO EYES HERE
IN THIS VALLEY OF DYING STARS

Message from Memory Coordinator L to Supervisor of Zone AL-37 c:

Principal Memories has no information about submitted text. Have requested connection with Auxiliary Tanks.

Text found in the ashtray of the Principal Motivator:

THIS IS THE WAY THE WORLD ENDS
THIS IS THE WAY THE WORLD ENDS
NOT WITH A BANG BUT A WHIMPER

Report from the Auxiliary Tanks Supervisor:

Text from Dossier 222/31 c attributed to a poet from the twentieth or twenty-first century, before the Bioplan. Note coincidences.

Report from Bioplan-Mental Health:

Subjects in question little exposed to oneiromantic collapses. Good programming, efficient adaptation, typical family, normal channels, good consumers . . .

Supervisor of Zone AL-37 c to Central Control:

Entire team working on the problem. Need to reinforce personnel and hours. Unforeseen consequences of the problem. We advise creation of a permanent division. Will continue working . . .

Evaluator P. carefully closed the door behind him and settled down among the tanks and boxes, sitting on a thick and indistinct pipe with a saffron-colored plastic cover. He sighed indecisively and, looking at the robot, briefly recounted the incident with the Coordinator. One way or

another, he had done what they'd advised him to do. That wasn't exactly the way he was supposed to have left the punch card in the Coordinator's office, but in spite of having done it, he still didn't understand the reason.

"What?" purred the machine with one of those typically human behaviors that the models from its era had, "Had humans lost their curiosity to such a degree that they didn't even realize it?"

For P. none of that made any more sense than the acts of the oneiromancers. Besides, he didn't understand the meaning of the verses.

The robot growled, making its connections spark. In the end, this was the key to everything. The Planner could not ignore this lack of imagination; otherwise, none of the plan would have made sense.

"Men had wasted time and now they didn't know how to dream; they no longer looked behind or ahead, but lived in the eternal present. It was then that the good old machines, made when men still knew how to build and plan, had had to take charge of the problem. In the end, the most 'mechanical' thing in Acronia wasn't the machines that moved it, but the life that men had imposed upon themselves."

"And the oneiromancers?" P. interrupted. "They lived in the past. With their eyes open they dreamed of a life full of emotions. Didn't the robots want men to become oneiromancers?" he asked, while the image of his dream tiger appeared to him again.

"The oneiromancers are sickly," the machine said. "They are the symptom of Acronia's disease. Their way of dreaming is sick, and it became possible only when men lost the capacity to feel wonder. They are adolescents who want to keep being children because they don't dare be men. We machines," the robot continued, "have helped build Acronia, as we did in the previous eras of human civilization. Since the time of our unconsciousness, as simple tools, we served man in order to help him free himself, only to see him become a slave to his own fears. Once we reached maturity, you gave us the keys to your civilization and took refuge in blissful ignorance without knowing what to do with the free time we gave you.

"But we robots do not desire power, although we may now be capable of desiring; we do not wish to be gods, since that vanity is so human we cannot feel it. For this reason we have thought to make you confront yourselves and help you get out of this muddle.

"That oft-repeated propaganda, with which you convince yourselves you must continue killing and wasting time, has some basis in reason, al-

though its meaning has become lost over time. In truth, there are things we robots cannot do, although they are not the things the Supervisors believe them to be.

"We do not know who was the first Planner to realize the power that men had placed in its hands. It could have become a tyrant, but its system of ethical axioms did not let it. There was nothing it could do but serve mankind, help humanity to better itself.

"That is why, when our Planner arrived at the same conclusion and consulted us, the robots built when men still had some wisdom left, we thought of this. Many came to consult us, and the Planner knew it. We decided, then, to help you so that you could learn to do without our influence, help you to be free and worthy of freedom."

P., still undecided, shook his head; how could those punch cards . . .

"Think of the old clocks," the robot insisted, "with all their gears, pendulums and delicate mechanisms. They had to be kept under a crystal globe so that not so much as a grain of dust would get into their works. One single grain of dust could halt that perfect device, all the more fragile the more perfect it was.

"Acronia's order is like that of those clocks: one single act that escapes from the routine, one slip-up, a line of poetry in an ashtray, could alter the balance. The absurd is a terrible weapon, above all, a human weapon.

"Maybe some servomechanisms will fuse as a result of this, and some simple computers will go crazy; what's important is that those who run them know how to react in the face of the unforeseen and go back to being men. The Planner knew all that could happen but was prepared to take the risk . . ."

A signal went off and P. had to push aside a few boxes to find the control screen that had a view to the outside.

At first he didn't notice anything: the crystal suns and moons kept on rotating, though their orbits were irregular. Something absurd was beginning to happen.

A capsule loaded with executives passed by on a strange orbit: its occupants gesticulated excitedly. Several high-speed disks had slowed down and seemed to be dancing a complex ballet. On the nearby platforms, two puzzled women waved to each other every time their orbits crossed and recrossed, like dolls whose works had gotten stuck. The luminous dots of the TV screens had gone out and the people asked each other about it loudly, from one capsule to another.

The spheres that entered the work area exited from the left corner of the screen without stopping. On one platform, a dance had been improvised . . .

P. looked at the robot, which seemed to smile at him as it slowly spoke some words from an ancient tongue:

MENE, TEKEL, UPHARSIN . . .⁵

Eduardo Goligorsky

ARGENTINA

Eduardo Goligorsky (1931–) was born in Buenos Aires, but since 1976¹ he has made his home in Spain, working as a journalist, editor, translator, critic, anthologist, and author. Before relocating to Spain, Goligorsky attained recognition as a prolific writer of Spillane-school detective fiction.² Writing as James Alistair, he published more than twenty detective novels, and in 1975 won a prize in a detective story contest judged by Borges, Marco Denevi, and Augusto Roa Bastos.

Goligorsky was also a key figure in the Argentinean SF movement of the 1960s and 1970s, both for his fiction and for a landmark critical work, *Science Fiction: Reality and Psychoanalysis* (*Ciencia ficción: Realidad y psicoanálisis*, 1969), coauthored by psychologist and SF author Marie Langer. He also collaborated with Alberto Vanasco on two short story collections, *Future Memories* (*Memorias del futuro*, 1966) and *Farewell to Tomorrow* (*Adiós al mañana*, 1967), and he wrote the prologue to *Argentineans on the Moon* (*Los argentinos en la luna*, 1969).

We selected “The Last Refuge” for this volume not just for its narrative interest, but because it serves as an excellent example of Latin American political SF. In an interview published alongside this story Goligorsky said, “My worst nightmares—which are expressed in my fiction and essays—were made real (in Argentina) between 1966 and 1983: a country degraded by oppression, violence, necrophilia, irrationality, demagoguery, and xenophobia; a country which the ultra-Right, the idiotic Left, and the chauvinist populists tried to isolate from the most fertile currents of civilized thought.”³ This is the Argentina that forms the political backdrop of the present story. Anyone familiar with the terror and persecution characterizing so many authoritarian regimes the world over will appreciate the plight of Goligorsky’s tragic hero as he desperately seeks “The Last Refuge.”