

Swinburne University of Technology

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Diminy: conception, articulation & subsequent development

Biographical note:

Eugen Bacon studied at Maritime Campus - Greenwich University, UK, less than two minutes' walk from The Royal Observatory of the Greenwich Meridian. She is now a PhD candidate in Writing at Swinburne University of Technology. Her short story 'A puzzle piece' was shortlisted in the Lightship Publishing (UK) international short story prize 2013 and is published in *Lightship Anthology 3*. Eugen's creative work 'Being Marcus' is published in *New Writing* "The International Journal for the Practice and Theory of Creative Writing".

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LONDINUX, NOVIC PLANET. 1901 AD

‘BETTER BE GOOD,’ Prof. John Bates thought aloud.

One hand rested on the brass clutch of his new Edwardian Mobilis, open roofed and one of 250 automobiles of this brand in high Londinux society, the whole of Novic Planet and the entire universe. Down on Earth, the most primitive of worlds, science – a study newer than the earthling grasp of theology – had just been recognised. The lesser beings were fast learning, and had already conceived a partial concept of the automobile. But they had neither skill nor intelligence to implement it as most extra-solar beings had.

And though the vanishing principle of the cosmic beings was faster – allowing a sweep of vast distances in half a pulse – dawn, high noon or late afternoon sun as now, the mobilis was fashionable this summer.

John Bates’ hand tapped an impatient staccato on a stick handle that served both as a steer and propeller pump. A single-horse carriage aligned itself to his left. Automobile and stallion waited for a lollipop man herding a group of students three-boy thick along the public school crossing; a rowdy bunch howling and laughing with half-formed spaniel voices trapped between childhood and adolescence. Watching them, Bates recalled his own youth. From his mother’s worrisome eyes to his father’s speckled moustache above a most handsome mouth. Pa’s sombre eyes could harden into cobalt icicles that promised nothing but a rod that lay at the top of a chiffonier; a polished cane with ‘John Vogel Bates’ engraved upon it. Bates smiled. A stick with a child’s name. ‘Each punishment executed,’ his father said between strokes, ‘is an act of love.’ When that act was due, Bates had to himself stand upon a stool, stretch and blindly pat until he touched and retrieved the very instrument of love. And, as his mother watched with broken eyes, he would take without whimper the gleaming cane to his father. A single nod would permit the pulling down of shorts, and a bending across a chair, desk or bed for chastisement.

The grey alongside the mobilis leaned towards Bates, sniffed, and swung a retreat. Ears pinned, lips pursed, in seconds he would shake his mane, Bates was sure, nicker if not snort, grunt or trumpet. When the horse’s tail began to swish, the animal reminded him of Peel, Mabel’s rebellious mare with white shoes. She was less manageable now the mobilis was got. Perhaps horses could afford a degree of resentment.

Bates’ intention was not to spook a horse, carriage and gentry into bolting, so he was relieved when the little uniforms were safe on the other side. When the good man, luminous as a seraph, stood at attention with his scarlet sign, Bates let the horse go first. The mobilis glided, staggered and hopped forward.

As he chug-chugged along, Bates thought of other advanced combustion engines already on advertisement but not distribution, and dismissed them. The mobilis was doing fine. He had neither intent nor purse to replace it.

Perhaps, with accolades for his next article, ‘Arousal & Instruction of Infantile Minds towards a Path of Greatness’, funding would accompany universal acknowledgement

of his intellect, and he might allow a trifle indulgence. As for now, rather grave matters commanded his utmost attention.

He steered towards the Science Clinic.

Unfortunately, those matters pertained to one Freudo Brio: a young man who more than worried him excessively. Former student of his, Freudo was precocious, but mad as Nero. He was making waves in Science Institute journals, his articles rousing much dissent and casting doubt aplenty on recognised achievements of peers and instructors alike in the cosmic world. As for his 'clinical trials' ... Only irony would describe the Institute's inner circle as ruffled.

Bates should have known the lad was trouble the moment he stepped into his classroom clasp papers that seemed determined to fly from his hands, armpits, teeth. Jungle eyes, flustered hair and matchstick legs even handmade trousers could not disguise, Freudo was instantly isolated for all manner of puns – until he started asking questions. His arguments left fellow students nonplussed to silence, and lecturers floundering for words if not scratching or gripping their heads. He graduated seemingly in months (or was it days?) and set about stunning the entire scientific world with his novel, usually irrevocable 'findings'.

Not only had Freudo's latest experiments proved Bates' theorem of Cognitive Antecedent wrong (and how skilfully done!): the batty young man had now summoned him for a 'trifle display'. Demonstration or not, today Bates had it measured. He was going to wrap up the young enthusiast and package him to his rightful place.

He parked outside Mall District about the same time that a young female in a summer dress climbed out of a carriage, the one of the crossing, the one with the worried stallion. He stepped out of the mobilis and pulled a monocle from his side pocket. He surveyed a mould of dress that mocked the tiers, drapes, frills and trains of the time. Ocean green in colour, a pattern of water swirls hugged close a nipped-in waist without corset, the element of style both flattering and youthful. The garment was a true headliner if not a scandal. Not that Bates thought so; to the contrary. But many a citizen would raise more than a brow contemplating it.

The woman looked exquisite and utterly chic in that ankle-length piece; a rather snazzy number that set his mind roaming. He felt a melt in his mouth as all exclamation evaporated and he could nought but gawp. The simplicity of that dress, the sophistication of its outcome ... Minimal drapery; silver buttoned shoes, three inch; a choker of pearls on her neck, and the creamiest ankles he had ever seen – the sight was enough to stall a war. The female was almost ethereal, something delicate made in the stars. Behold! Here she was now, recreating the very beginning of him.

Camellias, hellebores and cyclamens invaded his nostrils.

Crack! Crack! Heels down the pavement. Hips drawn back, bosom thrust forward, she switched away under a glorious sapphire sky and a tease of breeze. Crack! Crack! Swagger. Sway. Must have diamonds in those soles, Bates was sure. He stood by the roadside, much distracted, until the hourglass vanished round the corner, parasol, plumed hat and all.

Inside the Science Clinic, the largest laboratory in Londinux, young Freudo was bent at his desk, poring over paper and a fast moving pen.

‘I’m a busy man,’ said Bates.

‘What?’ Freudo Brio. ‘Ah, yes! Professor! Marvellous, marvellous!’

Bates determined that Freudo’s madness was twice bigger than when last they met. He untangled himself from Freudo’s embrace, uncoiled the younger man’s hands from his waist and retrieved his fallen hat.

‘You have an experiment to demonstrate?’ he said, brushing his lapels.

‘Course! Of course, of course. Yes, Professor, I understand your commitments. But this!’ Freudo moved to clasp Bates’ hand and found space, for Prof. had without hesitation tucked it into his waistcoat.

‘I would rather you expounded the idea to me first, Freudo.’

‘Oh, my, yes. Good, good. I can’t wait to show you my findings.’

‘Being?’

‘Relating to your motivation theorem of 1897.’

‘I wrote a few papers that year. Which, pray, do you refer to now?’

‘Eh? Ah yes. Persistent Behaviour, Sir. A gem for sure.’

‘And you have come up with an opposing theorem.’ Bates stated, not queried.

‘Inverted Motivation, good Sir. You made a supposition that response to persistent stimuli, complex or otherwise, is proportional to operant conditioning. Good, good. But an episode, yes, a little trouble, that’s all, in the laboratory, questioned this analogous principle of ecological or other influences –’

‘Show me.’

‘What’s that? Ah, yes. The experiment. Come with me, Professor. Do.’

The laboratory, as Bates remembered it from a visit before his retirement, had contained a practical tally of gadgets. Now, chamber after chamber bespoke psychosis, spilled with equipment Freudo referred to as transmitters, transponders (or was it transgressors?). Wildness, not control, ruled the lab. Rooms held subjects, earthling or otherwise, exposed to various stimulants: alternation of volcanic roar to distant purrs that slipped away; bold wealth in the form of modular furnishings in gold or velvet to bone-hard-seat scarcity; tropical rain, lightning and thunder to blanched sand under blistering heat; amputee trees with gnarled waists alongside fat, healthy ones pregnant with fruit ... something in a glassed compartment wobbled like consommé jelly.

One experiment fed to another, rooms large as stadiums. Bates was not eager to ask how the earthlings were got; more than a rumour indicated human snatchings from

Earth. The developing cells of humanoids made them adequate if not perfect candidates for trialling new concepts.

Bates pointed at two females in what looked like a field. One girl warmed up on the track, as if readying for a race. The other huddled to the ground with pulled knees.

‘Prison camp did this?’ he observed, especially of the bony lass.

‘Ah. Eh. These earthlings have been subjected to the same diet, environment and external conditioning as near as possible. But they have each experienced different motivational spurs.’

‘Spurs?’

Freudo turned a key in the lock. ‘Eh? Yes, yes. The stimulus is implied. Perceived. Come, come.’ The door snapped open. He pushed Bates into the room, led him to a podium with a view to the track.

‘That is Ego,’ Freudo pointed at the girl built like a Spartan. ‘Vabe,’ he indicated the latter who was malnourished, raggedy as cured salami. ‘Each subject is conditioned to respond to exact external stimuli but each carries different perception implants that we turn on and off. Vabe’s metabolism is adversely affected by the stimulus of the most recent trial but that is a temporary adjustment, a pure matter of tissue reload easily remedied.’

He leaned forward with head gear, goggles and ear plugs.

‘Put these on for me, will you now, Professor?’ Freudo fastened the apparatus. ‘Now, we’re going to watch a race.’

Freudo pressed a button. A horn sounded in the field. It was a stimulus that both Ego and Vabe immediately responded to, albeit in different fashion: Ego burst to the starting point, muscles rippling in anticipation. Vabe, a wimpy little thing with shorts keen to gulp her, faltered every two steps to the line.

Bates, in exasperation, fumbled for his pipe.

‘Not here, Professor. Please don’t smoke in my lab. The atmosphere’s controlled. Everything in this experiment bar you and me is controlled.’ He spot-checked his equipment.

Bates leaned back and spread his legs, resigned for the talent drop to amaze him. He pried loose from his thoughts the woman with a sheath dress and dramatic heels.

‘On your marks!’ chimed an automat in the air. The girls responded. ‘Get ready!’ Bow-wow!

Ego exploded from her blocks. Vabe twitched, climbed to her feet and careened. She ran as if reverse motion was her natural propulsion. Ego was already round the East bend and Vabe had barely made two feet.

Freudo flicked another switch. ‘Internal stimulus increase by 170%.’

Ego flew on a new gear. Vabe’s limbs grew more uneven: arms more wild, legs ever desperate. Shoulders drooped, then dragged. Her face drew closer to the ground.

‘She looks just about to collapse,’ observed Bates. ‘You had better stop this experiment.’

Click! Another switch. ‘The stimulus is above threshold now,’ Freudo proclaimed.

Ego, now three quarters of the way down the track, staggered and appeared to slow. Vabe, in turn, lifted from her stoop. Her shoulders broadened, strengthened. The arc of her back went straight. With a new pump of arms, her legs lengthened. She blew down the track, zapped north past Ego and lifted the finish ribbon with her chest.

Bates sat upright, eye straining through the monocle. ‘That is –!’

‘Motivation,’ said Freudo.

‘Please explain,’ said Bates.

‘In order to do so, I must first demonstrate the girls’ stimuli.’

Freudo flicked a switch. ‘This is Ego’s stimulus,’ he said.

Bates found himself viewing a crowd that filled the stands to bursting.

‘Go Champ! Ego!’ they cried. ‘Ego! Ego! Champ! Champ! Ego! Ego!’

‘And this is Vabe’s stimulus,’ said Freudo.

The same crowd but it hollered: ‘Boo-woo! Boo-woo!’ Rotten eggs flew down the stands. ‘Boo-woo!’

Bates lifted his goggles. ‘Very well,’ He said at length. ‘You switched stimuli so that Ego got the rotten eggs and Vabe the cries of ‘Champ’. Negativity blanks motivation.’ He smiled. ‘Nothing is new in that theorem. I wrote it, swelled it, notarised it. The one and only thing that amazes me is the miraculous recovery of Vabe’s muscle tissue. I had miscalculated the supremacy of motivation.’

‘Sir, if I may. The amplified stimuli are not a reversal but the very same that each individual was already subject to.’

Bates swallowed. ‘I do not understand.’

‘The mind is complex, amorphous as an opal. Easily ruined without nurture. One can flirt with it but not fully control it. Amplified stimuli on preconditioned operants result in mental disintegration of those very stimuli; the mind can grow muscles of its own to produce an effect that heartens survival.’

Bates sagged. ‘Please explain.’

‘Eh? Good.’ Freudo rubbed his palms. ‘Any faster, Ego would have died. Her body is not yet equipped for that degree of velocity. Any slower, Vabe would have collapsed. Her mind is not yet accommodated to that level of rejection.’ He paused. ‘What you have witnessed is the application of inverted U-shaped behaviour. The individual can respond to increasing complex stimuli to a point. By augmenting that trigger to above threshold, an inverse reaction occurs to decrease operant conditioning and produce an opposite effect.’

Riding home in his chug-chug under a darkening sky, John Bates acknowledged that the young scientist was more than a showman. The prat had once more disproved him with experiment.

Fat clouds dense with moisture churned in billows.

Bates turned (wheels bouncing) off the main road into a dirt path, headed in a ride of wind for his farm in Varon County. The sky roared and broke loose. The mobilis hopped in an increase of speed as the first eastern droplets chased its progress.

Damn Freudo, he cursed. Damn, damn you!

Thunder bellowed. An orange stick of lightning broke into a zig-zag. Bates thrust his thoughts from Freudo and focused on his wife Mabel. She would by now be worrying for him. Or perhaps trussing yet another of her pies that did little to narrow a waistline once needle thin inside a bunching of bustle and soft fullness of garment. Lately, he could barely clasp half her waist without wishing for hooks and rope. Her attempts at fashion gave her the look of a donkey in Elizabethan petticoats and a corset, a rather tight, polonaise corset. Her very sleeve would fit a stout leg of mutton.

He thought of a thigh-skimming skirt crackling with movement. High inch heels that carried a woman's walk as she swayed, swayed in his head. John Bates would do well in his next life to come half a century later and leave the darn enthusiast of a Freudo to neurotic trials on proven principles as ancient as Rome. Bates had met his match in the young maverick. What Bates needed was a leap into the future, into a career change. Perhaps he could, instead, slip into fashion. He would invent thigh-grazing style, something diminutive, a micro skirt that accommodated a gleeful cha-cha of hips and long, long legs that vanished into steep, ivory boots. Oh, behave!

Diminy. He smiled. He would call it a diminy. He closed his eyes and imagined a black, black dress and kitten heels. Bared midriff and climbing hem. Click! Click! The music of seven inch heels danced in his head.

Clippety-click! Click! Click! Clippety-click! The towering chariot that slammed into the Edwardian Mobilis he did not imagine. Nor did he the shot of pain that carried him to a dark eddy of cloud and white, white stars.

He swirled. A bout of exhaustion caught him. Inside shadows, he heard a voice, one ever so familiar. *Finest, finest, finest* ... Freudo was saying within the labyrinth. *Mind ... mind ... mind*. Bates allowed the cloud to float him. *Rare, rare, rare* ...

Freudo's words faded, leaving Bates with white pain and blinking stars. He tried to isolate the pain, to understand it. But the ache pulsed, and he was not sure what part of his body was broken. His awareness coasted into a burst of luminosity that compelled him to reflect upon beautiful things. *Cha-cha! Cha-cha!* a woman's walk. He was still pondering the movement of hips in a mini skirt above long, long legs when he opened his eyes to a burst of light.

He panicked. Was he in an alternate world? Part of an experiment? Had Freudo set him up? The woman ... the chariot ... were they Freudo's doing? His alarm grew bigger. Was he, Bates, dead?

‘Sir,’ the face of a young girl leaned towards him. Starched cape. White collar. Brown eyes regarded him.

‘How are you feeling?’

‘Is he awake?’ another voice in the distance.

‘Yes, doctor.’

‘Sir,’ sweet brown eyes. ‘Do you remember your name?’

‘Bates,’ he said.

‘Weights?’

‘Bates.’

A man in white, the doctor, approached. He was young. Jungle eyes and flustered hair.

‘Eh. Ah yes. Good, good, for sure. What do you recall?’

Bates’ smile hurt. ‘My name is John Bates. Inventor of the diminy.’

‘Wiminy, Sir?’ the girl.

‘A fashion statement,’ said Bates.

Epilogue

John Bates was a fashion designer who was part of the boutique scene that blossomed in London in the 1960s. He began designing under the name ‘Jean Varon.’ Bates went on to do costumes for Diana Rigg on the TV show *The Avengers*. His designs were often very daring, including see-through PVC or mesh dresses.

There’s long been division in the ranks of fashion historians over who invented the miniskirt. Some insist it was André Courrèges in Paris; others assert it was Mary Quant in London. One authority who was there at the time, however, was certain it was someone else entirely.

Ernestine Carter, while based in London, was an American, beady of eye and unswayed by cross-Channel chauvinism. She was the fashion editor of the *Sunday Times* and, reporting from Paris in 1967, she started her article by confiding how boring it was eternally jotting next to her sketches and notes: ‘But John Bates did that first!’ (Polan 2006)

Research statement

Research background

The focus of this research is on the innovation of science fiction, probing: what is science fiction? The *Macquarie Dictionary* defines it as ‘something new or different introduced’ (2009: 861) and innovative as ‘new and original’ (861). This story experiments with different and newness and technology and variation.

Research contribution

This short story challenges the notion that YA literature must contain a YA protagonist. In ‘YA boundary breakers and makers’, Chris Crowe discusses the effects of pushing back boundaries of conventions to find a voice in art, giving the examples of van Gogh and Picasso who ‘pushed back the boundaries of artistic conventions, broke traditional rules, and produced paintings that redefined “art”’ (2002: 116). The goal of this study is not to recreate van Gogh or Picasso, but to attempt to stretch, and even break, the boundaries of literature for adolescents by capturing the imaginations of teenage readers in cross genre narratives without spotlighting a protagonist aged between 12 and 18. Texts do play a role in the development and awareness of adolescents, and this understanding is valuable to promote professional development in educators (Bach, Choate and Parker 2011: 198).

Research significance

Diminy: conception, articulation & subsequent development explores possibilities in science fiction for young adults, irrespective of place or setting. It has been accepted for publication in a reputable refereed journal.

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