

The New Age as a Tour d' Force
The ZanScripts by Celeste Newbrough
 Reviewed by Aaron Feinstein

Celeste Newbrough's *Zanscripts* is an excellent example of what Michael Eskin calls "biographical legend," except that this autobiography is of the soul, composed of fictional characters representing aspects of the author's psyche. The book commingles several genres. Despite its formidable erudition, *Zanscripts* is a romping good read.

The novel is densely philosophical, the theme complex, and the plot unravels at multiple interwoven levels. The core characters of *The Zanscripts* are introduced to us as a homeless savant, a

charismatic transgender (unknown to the mainstream but idolized by a few *avant garde* niches of the American populace), a wandering hallucinogen-popping poet, and her twin brother, a disillusioned rationalist. The characters resonate with those in several other contemporary novels yet the novel puts a new spin onto them and gives us insight into why these personas appear in contemporary fiction.

Like the Bible, which serves as a mock template for *The Zanscripts* own (re)telling, this book can be effortlessly nibbled for enjoyment and edification rather than read through. To carry the analogy further, *The Zanscripts* can be read through twice, thrice or more. A thoroughly uptodate viewpoint on The sacred, the secular, fundamentalism and traditional religion, this "scripture" is a must have book for every independent contemporary spiritualist.

With tongue in cheek, *The Zanscripts* self references as its own "genre" of millennial fiction. The book is a profound commentary on the 20th century and an engaging vision of a surprising future. Described with both gravity and humor. Through the madwoman, Theia, the novel facetiously boasts of being prophetic, and indeed is prophetic given the radical changes such as 9/11 that suc-

ceeded publication of the novel in 2000. Pithy remarks of Theia's have, if anything, gained in veracity over the past couple of years:

I say fact is fiction and fiction is fact—the slogans by which we live are electronically engineered factoid fetuses sired by Wall Street and damned by Mad Ave. Nothing escapes the lecherous eye and despoiled clutch of the corporate glutton...

...

We don't own the future. Uncle Sam thinks we do, but, for better or worse, he ain't the only game in town.

...

We haven't even reached Year-0 and the 21st century is ready for the trashcan. Mad Ave, the great gobbler, wants to chomp up the future like Colonel Sanders at a chicken leg, licking its chops, stuffing the greasy styrofoam wrap in the garbage, and tossing it on the sidewalk.

...

The seeds of the revolution were trampled upon and now only mutant plants grow.

...

Indeed, it's time for the so-called New Age... But more likely the same old same old mutations will revolt, not with words but with pipe bombs. My crystal ball says pipe bombs up the kazoo!

This from a book composed entirely in the pre-911 world.

The experimental style of *The Zanscripts* can be described as harmonically iterative—each phrase begins on a prior chord and segues into an innova-

tive statement Many of the book's passages contain in microcosmic form themes of the book as a whole. A sample of these holographic units is tossed out as an aside by Zan:

It's a novel mystery the self. Perpetrator of acts nefarious and sublime. Often not knowing which is which, the suspect yet commits.

The victim is divine. At least beyond the range of simple murder. The schemes and weapons of extinction may be doomed to failure, as the corpse-self springs forth sporadically anew, always when least expected.

A review of the book would not be complete without reference to the poetry that flows effortlessly in and out of the fiction. Near the beginning of the novel Agatha Agetes, a libertine poet and spiritual seeker writes to her twin, Andrew Wesley as she wanders through India:

Afloat and adrift, Andrew. The river is a ribbon, twisting and looping. Like the genie on the magic carpet, I ride the ribbon up, down, inside out. I slide along the Moebius curve. I worm through the wormholes.

I get up, open the shutters. The air is inky, hushed. I wash my face. The water is yellow, warm. It smells like the corpses in Banares.

and:

**Sometimes through the mirror
Black as night in the dark of the moon
Neither face nor form looks back
Nor candle-lit thought lights up
Nor midnight sun is seen.
Only the dark beyond dream.
Sometimes through the mirror clear
As a pool of melted snow,**

**She who gazes suddenly draws back.
Her bright iris flecked.
Perched on the otherwise
Limpid surface of her eye
An infinitesimal bat. Sometimes
Through the mirror
Pale with a face entirely other
That face peers out through
Her own gaze, an uninvited guest.
A stranger. Or past lover.**

**Sometimes through the mirror
Red as a carmine berry crushed.
Her own soul hovers
Speckled in a utumnal blood.
A white owl's wing—and hood.**

...

The novel can and will be read in various ways by different sets of readers. Neospiritualists will discover a gold mine of symbols and icons of the New Age, from clairvoyance through witchcraft and reincarnation, in this book set in late 20th century San Francisco. While *The Zanscripts* can be read as a New Age novel, the author frequently un.masks as committed to a rational tradition that supersedes new-age platitudes and places its mystical central character, Zan, well beyond the normal crop of channeling diviners. The novelist early avows nostalgia for modernism and the intention to transcend postmodernism and to envision a new "Planetary Era" (also dubbed Neozoic Era and the Era of Zani).

Academics and scientists will be elated by the breathtaking span of knowledge Newbrough imparts in her very erudite novel. The loosely structured format enables her to deliver podium-quality mini lectures without a trace of pomposity. Her extensive footnotes commingle scholarship with imagination, and the knowledgeable reader will be able to unerringly determine which is which.

Sexual rebels will relish the gender-bender plot of the book and its main character, an irreverent yet prophetic hermaphrodite. Feminists and environmentalists will find irresistible the visionary aspects of gender in dialogues on God and nature of the Zani core, who struggle to establish a new ecological world order.

Even traditional religious thinkers, while sure to be offended by the deliberate irreverence of the book, will respect the eclectic religious mythography of *The Zanscripts*, and Newbrough's potent infusion into spirituality of insights and images from science.

Those interested in literature for its own sake will find an obsessive preoccupation with the fate of art in contemporary times reflected with jewel-like brilliance from practically every page of *The Zanscripts*. At the heart of the book is the ecstatic despair of the contemporary artist.

The term "novel" is descriptive more as an adjective than a noun pertaining to this book, and some may consider too thin the veneer of fiction bearing poetry and philosophy into realization. However, the characters (who speak as dramatic actors) are never so hollow that the reader loses interest or caring for their fates, which unravel in a desultory but irrevocable fashion each by each through the course of the novel. The poetry is of consistently fine quality and is indeed the expression of character.

As to the underlying theme of *The Zanscripts*, it is a mythic chronicle of a single life in which the fusion of the author's self and history attains universal appeal. As Dr. Pivar recently remarked, the book is "literature with a capital L".

The Zanscripts is a whale of book, a huge bulwark constructed as a last stand in defense of humanity against the uniformity and commoditization of late capitalist culture. Zan remarks at

the close of the book (57 centuries in the future):

The so-called New Age was a momentary fling for me. The wares I peddled were older than cowry shells. I liked being a prophet and still do. Why not? It's sexy. It makes good cybertronics, sells qweekertooters. In what other role could I, always the medievalist loping toward renaissance, indulge so ardently in the antiquities of revelation, history, art?

Besides those great white elephants the real ones are extinct too I'll take my stand.