CHAPTER 10

On Ursula K. Le Guin

Note 2020: I was asked to discuss U.K. Le Guin's first great SF novel by the Catholic Thomas More Institute, and the audience was largely from a course on literature in it. It was published by Seldon's Plan, a well-known fanzine edited by Cy Chauvin at Wayne State University in Detroit.

SF and *The Left Hand of Darkness*: An Interview with Darko Suvin

This discussion-interview with Darko Suvin was conducted by Cathleen Toiny and Madlyn Ferrier of Thomas More Institute, Montréal, on March 20, 1973.

Q. We were wondering where science fiction (SF) fits into the context of your other interests in literature and drama, Dr. Suvin.

A. Well, if you define SF as a literature that happens in a radically different time or place, or with characters radically different from those you could meet walking down the street, it is as old as literature itself: then it is present in folk tales, and ancient Greek literature, and all the way down to the present. However, SF developed into a consistent commercial branch of literature about the time of Jules Verne and H.G. Wells. On the other hand, I am also very interested in the possibilities of models for different relationships. Most modern drama deals with that implicitly, and SF deals with it explicitly. So it seems to me that there is a link.

Q. Different models for styles of life?

A. Different possibilities of human relationships (in SF they don't even have to be human, just relationships of intelligent life-forms). That of course is a great part of what modern literature is about, and in some ways it is most clear in both these forms – in modern drama which has to concentrate things because you have to present the world in a brief space and time, and in modern SF which has chosen to concentrate on a different type of world, or on a different type of human figure in our world that makes our world different too. So, though it doesn't look that way, they really have some affinities. Also I find that strangely enough, many critics of SF – since this is not a profession that supports its man, you can't really be an SF critic and nothing else – are also drama critics. Knowing a number of these people, their first violin is writing about drama. In drama the world is presented to you on the stage, which is not so very much dissimilar from the "whole world is a stage" idea in SF.

Q. What in contemporary drama would you think of as an example of such a link?

A. Most clearly it should be such people as Brecht, who even use some of the same terms about their work. Brecht uses the term *Verfremdung* in German, which translates as "making it strange" or "estrangement," and that is what SF is all about. It shows you certain strange things which should then boomerang back and make you understand your immediate present better, because it is most difficult to see your own nose. But if you look through a system of prisms or periscopes, then you can see the back of your own head, which is even more difficult than your own nose. This type of estrangement is to be found also in people like Shaw or even Beckett or Genet or any modern playwright worth his salt – I don't mean Broadway playwrights. So that one is in a bit of a privileged position if one can apply insights which have been formed while discussing modern drama to a discussion of SF, including utopian fiction.

Q. Could we ask whether the interest in SF is recent with you or contemporary to your discussion of modern drama?

A. My generation usually got hooked on SF in our early teens. Practically everyone I know has picked up a magazine with garish covers when he was eleven, twelve, thirteen.

Q. So that's where the prejudice of ours starts to associate it with the adolescent trying to escape. You are saying that historically that is the origin of the interest.

A. The origin of the interest is adolescent. This is bad when it remains adolescent all the time, even when you are 40 or 50 …

Q. Then you become an SF critic.

A. If you become a good critic, by definition you stop being adolescent. If you are an adolescent and an SF critic, then you are a bad critic, I think. Now whether it is an escape: I think some of it is and some of it isn't – in the sense that you go away from your real present-day problems and present-space problems and never come back to them. In significant SF – for example in this book [the audience was told to read Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness* in preparation for this meeting], you go away in order to gain a vantage point from which you can understand better what is going on around you. Of course in bad SF, you go away simply in order to forget that you are living badly, that you are feeling bad, that you have problems. But this happens in all literature, not just in SF. It happens in the psychological novel: 90 percent of psychological novels have no lasting value, just as 90 percent of SF novels are worthless. Except that in SF we don't really know which is which, and in the psychological novels we have 200 years of critics who have told you that Balzac and Tolstoy are ok, but Margaret Mitchell or Herman Wouk are only half ok.

Q. That's part of the fun as a critic, making new path in criticism and trying to discriminate on your own, without a history …

A. Sure, you are a jungle investigator, really, if you are an SF critic you are a kind of Darwinian collector. An awful lot of SF gets produced; I calculated a couple years ago about 200 new books in the US per year. If you take the rest of the world and the comics, you get into astronomic figures.

Q. What about the rest of the world? Would the highest production of SF be in North America?

A. Quantitatively, definitely, yes. I'm not sure about the quality; perhaps if you count the British. But even without the British, there is some very good European SF writing. The best SF writer I know today is a Pole, Stanisław Lem, who has just begun to be translated into English. One novel of his is out, called *Solaris*, and he is to my mind superior to everybody else. But there isn't such a depth in Europe. The Americans have twenty or thirty second-rank people. The Poles have one first-rank person and then nobody until the fifth rank. So, sociologically, there is a US domination in SF.

Q. We don't know yet what your criteria for excellence would be. Could we get to it by means of this book? I believe you recommended it as a good or representative example of some of the better things.

A.: I'm not sure how representative of the average SF it is. *The Left Hand of Darkness* uses some of the usual gimmicks of SF – you get to a strange planet, you find a strange climate, you find a biologically strange people with strange customs – in this case the basic difference is their biological sexual nature. This is as old as the folk-tales of the dog-headed people or Thomas More's *Utopia* or *Gulliver's Travels*. You get into another island, planet, galaxy, whatever; you find an either politically or biologically or in whatever other way different situation; and by going through the different situation you see either your own situation exaggerated or the contrary of your own situation – a better contrary or a worse contrary, a utopia or a dystopia or whatever. Mrs. Le Guin adopted this kind of framework, but then I think that what she does with it is better than run-of-the-mill SF, which makes out of the strange novelty a yellow-press type of sensation: there is some analog to the bug-eyed monsters, and aren't they going to eat us up or rape the beautiful astronaut girl or whatever they are going to do, and it really doesn't progress further than a kind of adolescent thrill.

Q. I should have noticed that you had given us a criterion in the boomerang business: that the story could be so set up that there would be a boomerang rather than escape.

A. In a way, though, every book boomerangs back, whether the author wants it or not, even the pure escape, but that boomerangs back by reinforcing your prejudices and your unwillingness to face reality. However, what I meant when I was talking about the good boomerang, so to speak, as against the bad boomerang, is that it enables you to tune into more wave-lengths (to change the metaphor to radio). After you have read the book there are more wavelengths you could tune in than before you read the book, therefore you can cope with more information. I think one of the criteria that I would apply is that the basic reason for the existence of SF (except to pay the bill of the writer and so on, so let us say the basic philosophical reason for its existence) is to tell you something new. If they give you a Western story in astronautic costume – you have the good guy, the bad guy, the rich heiress or schoolmarm or whatnot, and you just transport them to Sirius, and instead of a Colt you have the ray-gun – they really aren't telling you anything new. In fact they are mystifying the possible novelty and, as you know, *corruptio optimi pessima*, the corruption of the good is the worst. I don't mind a Western – as a boy I was a fan of Max Brand and Zane Grey – but I do mind a Western masquerading as SF. So I think one of my criteria would be whether the story has a true novelty, that is, some kind of increment in knowledge and understanding. I would take this fairly widely. I don't mean that the work must tell us something new about cybernetics – though this may not be bad, something new about the robot – but not as hard facts necessarily. This may also be a legitimate function of SF, but in general, what all literature is about is human relationships, even if you call your *dramatis personae* intelligent sponges – the only way you can think of them as intelligent is something like human intelligence. Now, presupposing that an SF story has the basic criteria for any literature – that it is literate, that the characters are consistent, and so on – given that, then the criterion for significant SF would be: does it have some kind of real novelty to show us?

I think that in Ms. Le Guin's book the basic novelty is not the strange climate with Winter conditions, because that's roughly like the Eskimos or something similar. We know about that or we can read about that without going to SF. The basic novelty is what happens when biology makes it

impossible for a society to entertain sexual roles, and how does this reflect on everything else in the society, such as politics, religion, etc. And I don't really see how you could pose this problem in any other genre except SF. You could pose it in an essay, of course, in non-fiction, but most people don't read essays, so if you want them to understand you've got to write SF, and fiction has some pleasures of its own. I think that the juxtaposition of the inhabitants of Gethen with the human ambassador finally amounts to a kind of parable about coexistence, if you want a political term, or about understanding, if you want a philosophical term: how can you coexist with people that touch a very basic prejudice, that are so unlike you that you really have trouble meeting them – even in the case of the best intentioned representatives such as Genly Ai and Estraven? This whole comedy of errors between them represents what happens with the *best* people – an ambassador is supposed to be trained to cooperate with foreign cultures and not have prejudices – but you can't cope because your society has set up certain norms. It says this and this is normal, and if someone is bisexual he or she is abnormal. He is either homosexual or this or that, and therefore you behave toward him as if he were abnormal. But what if he/she is the norm for his space and time and planet? Well, then you get into some questions which are here discussed in a quite interesting way.

Q. The success of it imaginatively would be how well we can get into the viewpoint of the Gethenians and look at the Terran man from their point, as an oddity.

A. Right, and not necessarily only at the Terran man in the book but at Terran man outside the book, at ourselves. The technical trick of this book is that most of the time you look through the eyes of the Terran ambassador, and he is the readers' ideal representative in the book. He is not only the ambassador of Terra in the book but also of ourselves as it were, and although he is a bit more highly trained, he has the kind of reactions that one would assume the average member of this audience or of, say, North America in the 1960s would have, which is, "Well I'm trying hard, but it is really difficult to understand these people." It's something like an anthropologist's reaction. Of course, Ms. Le Guin is the daughter of perhaps the most famous anthropologist of them all, Alfred Kroeber, and

of a fairly famous lady, Theodora Kroeber, who wrote a great book, *Ishi in Two Worlds,* about the last Stone-Age Indian in California – so she's fortunately predisposed towards this type of anthropological SF, which I think is one of the most worthwhile types.

Q. What about the science part? Do we learn anything new from a scientific viewpoint? Certainly that business about the ice trek does imaginatively occupy the larger space in going through the novel. Is it like a National Geographic thing which, as you said, we could read somewhere else, or are we really learning anything about the problems of travel over a great expanse of ice?

A. The answer to that depends on what you mean by science. I'm not trying to quibble but if what you mean is natural science, that is one type of science. If you mean human sciences, *sciences humaines*, such as psychology, sociology, anthropology, then there is another type of answer. Historically, SF started as a confluence of several interests, and one interest was the popularization of science. You had a popular radio-magazine, and it would run an SF story where the hero invented this superb TV set and flew up to Mars, and so on. But SF also started from the utopian literature, from the adventure story, from several such impulses, and I think that significant SF, say after Jules Verne, really does not popularize science. There are better ways to popularize science: you read a good science book, which at the time didn't exist so you had to write novels in order to popularize science. But if you read Ritchie Calder today, and in the nineteenth century you read Thomas Huxley or Friedrich Engels, you got to know about science. So if you are asking me whether SF has got to be scientific in the sense of physics or chemistry, I think no, not necessarily.

Q. That is part of its mystification, though, is it not? That hardware sciences are least known, most mysterious to the greater number of readers?

A. Then you are speaking about *the human uses of natural sciences*, and the moment you do that you are in psychology, philosophy, anthropology, sociology, politics, economics, and so on. For example, the ice trek is interesting not because of the ice but because of the two people on the ice who are different, and who, however, when faced with this bitter form of nature – as a Greenland or Antarctic ice-cap trek would be,

roughly – find that the outer reality forces them to cooperate. And by cooperating in the fight against nature, they come to really understand each other, by starving together, by pulling the sleigh together. This is really a symbolic gimmick to say: well, how do you really understand people – it's not by *talking* together but by *working* together with them, by fighting together with them, by facing difficulties together with them. This seems to me to be an extremely realistic psychological, sociological, even political insight. How do you really get to understand people, and all this business about communication difficulties? Well, if you got to pull a sleigh together there are no communication difficulties – you either do or you don't, because that language is understandable to everybody. The sleigh either moves or it doesn't move, if you want to call this a language. And it seems to me that the whole Winter background is a metaphor – the coldness in nature is parallel to the coldness in human relations, first of all between Terra and Gethen, secondly between two states on Gethen. One is a kind of police bureaucracy, the other is a kind of decadent monarchy, and there are vague echoes of our Terran situation there – very vague, very discreet, I am glad to say.

Q. The only thing is that, as you were saying, one can get that kind of symbol from many sources, from many descriptions of snow and cold. I suppose I expected that if one gets it here under the guise of something scientific or geographical, it is going to be a better or at least a different symbol insofar as it is better in what it is suggesting. It's a wonderful account of an ice trek and of what shadowlessness could be and so on, and that's the way to get symbolic power, by being good and not just interchangeable with a poem about snow.

A. The one non-interchangeable part is the effect on two persons from different biological species or whatever you want to call it. The ice is the ice – you can't do much about it; as long as you have an oxygen-water planet the ice is going to be the same. Of course, if you get a methane-ammonia planet then the ice is going to be frozen methane and then you are going to have other problems – you've got to wear a spacesuit, and you can't breathe the air, and so on.

Q. Could you tell me what you suggest to students when they say "What do I do with things like ansibles?" What do you suggest to them? Obviously if we can't get something that we associate with rather safely in what we know …

A. Well, that's a super-radio, this seems clear … My answer would be: read more SF, you're going to get used to these things and you're not going to notice them. An ansible is simply an instant communicator which spans the whole galaxy, and that's a super-radio or something similar.

Q. I'd hate to stop noticing them because I was thinking that much of the fun was in trying to understand them by some association of something I knew. Isn't that part of the fun? Would you really stop noticing as you read?

A. You would really stop noticing them *as problems* which would impede your reading. No, of course you wouldn't stop noticing them. If you stop noticing them, either the book is bad or the reader is bad. Now linguistically, this is a very interesting problem. SF must have neologisms; it must have new words coined either for new objects such as ansible, or new relationships such as shifgrethor. What shifgrethor is seems clear – it's kind of a code of honour which has been known in many peoples – the Japanese *bushido*, or the *pundonor* in Spain, or in any tribal society. But it's a peculiar type of honour: it's loss of face as they would say in Asia, or something like that. So you must have these new terms and that is part of the game.

Q. It is just that it is not quite the Japanese thing but something else.

A. Insofar as Gethen is not Japan, it is bound to be something else. This planet has got different premises. Basically, the hypothesis of the novel is that the whole society is conditioned by their biology, by this interchangeable gender of the Gethen people, and it seems extremely interesting how the Meshe religion is a variant (a co-variant, Einstein would say) of the Christian religion. Meshe is something like Messiah – phonetically, if you listen to it (or Moshe, the proper Jewish way to say Moses). Then there is the other esoteric religion of the Foretellers, this group that the ambassador goes to ask for counsel, which is something like a Delphi oracle but

in the appropriate variant of a kind of telepathic group made possible because of their biological constitution – they can have this kind of rapport which would presumably be impossible in a split bisexual society. Now whether you agree with this or not is your business, but at least it will make you think about it.

Q. That was one of the points in my own reading where I came across something similar to what you said before about the tiresome, the mystification that really is not something. Faxe turned out to be both weaver and woman at some moment. I said, "Well, that's too predictable, that's a too familiar identification."

A. At the back of this is a lot of anthropological literature about the ritual clowns and the role of the sexual role-swapping, say among the North American Indians or the Polynesians. The ritual clown, the trickster among the Winnebago or Pueblo Indians, is usually this kind of ambivalent bisexual person, but then the ritual clown is also the saviour in some way. So I don't think this is unfounded. On the other hand, surely one could discuss whether by itself this is anything new – and I'd say that this is one of the most difficult passages of the book, this visit to the religious brotherhood, to this kind of predictive monastery. Whatever one might think about it, its novelty would surely lie in the combination of these peculiar powers with the social institution of the monastery and with the biological fundament on which they rest. In itself, I don't know how much it would say. As a part of the whole, though, I think if you left out the religion of Gethen, there would be a gap somewhere because it would not be clear what holds them together.

One of the bad gaps in this book is that there is no political economics in it. You've got politics, you've got the biology, you've got the religion, but you haven't got their economics. They're supposed to be something like a medieval society – fifteenth or sixteenth century – but it is never really explained how this interacts with anything else, and I think is a typical North American kind of failing, if I may be snooty. Either "economics is not spiritual enough to talk about" or you are a businessman, and then in your free time you contribute to the orchestra or something uplifting

but your left hand and your right hand never meet: you would never do as an orchestra-goer the things you do as a businessman. I taxed Ms. Le Guin with it, and she replied that she simply couldn't read the economists because they write so badly. She tried Keynes and she couldn't get through ten pages of it, being a poet and a writer. Maybe there is some justification there.

Q. She needs someone to do an "economics fiction," to help her get interested in the field.

A. Maybe she needs to read some classical economists before Keynes: Smith, or Ricardo, or Marx. If you compare this to the classical utopias or Balzac's novels, they could all deal with economics in great precision without bad writing. Somehow, of course, we all know and feel that in our daily lives economics is a kind of first approximation to destiny. What SF deals with is some variant of destiny, some kind of power-relationship – not necessarily political power, it could be psychological power. So to leave out our basic experience of destiny seems to me to leave a fairly bad gap in the book. I really don't think though that it would be fair to blame this particular book or this particular author. This is a failing of the whole genre in the last twenty or thirty years. Of course, there were people who did deal with political economics – Jack London's *Iron Heel* for example – but that was long ago. Now such a book, even this one, is like a picture which is blurred somewhere in the center. This does not detract from the beauty of the part of the picture which is not blurred, but I wish to god it were not blurred in what I consider the center. So, to come back to religion, the best explanation of what holds the book together you really get in the sphere of beliefs and ideology, in the discussion between Estraven and Genly Ai, and also in formal religious systems as they are presented to you.

Q. In the *New Yorker* article on SF somebody, I think his name was Clareson, made the distinction between the kind of literature that the novel falls into, which becomes dominant at times of social upheaval, helping the individual to integrate into society, and this kind of writing, fantasy and utopian, which helps in psychic integration. And I think one

of the phrases used is "it gives us a chance to alter our lives, gives us a possibility for coping with change." Do your students ever express this kind of insight into their contact with SF? Your classes are, from what I understand, very popular – always over-enrolled. Are they just looking for something new? Do they say the kind of things like this article says "I've found my world and it's in literature, too?"

A. Well, there are several types of students – a number of them are students from outside the Arts Faculty who have to take one English Literature or Arts course, so this is the least repugnant one. Then there are three or four other groups who have various interests. You've got people who are interested in psychology, who are interested in R.D. Laing or god knows what, and who are attuned to strange psychological kicks. There are Science and Engineering students, who are interested in hardware. There are also people who are interested in SF as a branch of literature. This is a strange new type of writing – I don't know how new and strange it is by now, but let's say that it is new and strange to them – and among those are some extremely bright ones. So they tend to be funny classes. You have this distribution, that on the one hand there are some who are very little motivated, and on the other hand, there are some of the brightest students I've ever had – people with great interest in philosophy and sociology and anything else you can imagine. I'm not sure that I've answered your question.

Q. What happens to the people who do come from the sciences? I'm thinking of *The Double Helix* which we were reading early in this course, and I was asking Margaret Corey who came to speak about it, and was excited about the work, whether she learned any biology from it. She said of course not, but what was exciting was what was going on among the scientists who were at work on the project. But what for example would people who are into radio-transmitters, think about Ms. Le Guin.

A. I don't know. All I can say is that I would hope, if they read this book carefully enough – and I try to make them read it carefully enough by giving them a paper to write or something like that – their interest in radio, which is very respectable and to be encouraged by all means, would however be subsumed under an interest of *what do you want to use the*

radio for – why do you communicate by radio, from whom to whom and so on. I think "science fiction" in the sense of fiction about technical, natural science is a misnomer. By now the name is here and we are stuck with it. But if there is any sense to it, it means "human-science fiction" so to speak, or "social science fiction." I think this is well illustrated by the ansible situation in this book. The ansible is in it totally useless. The point about the communication in this book is that you have to get from Genly Ai to Estraven, otherwise there is no hope whatsoever. It's a kind of optimistic book. You do get through, though the price is high – Estraven has to die. This seems to me to be realistic too: the price usually is high. If somebody is so fanatic about radio, or ansible as the case may be, that he doesn't want to think about anything else in the world, then probably sophisticated SF really doesn't hold much for him and he should stick to wiring diagrams. On the other hand, if he ever wants to get into communication, and even if he is this great genius, he's going to go to the Royal Bank and get a loan or something – then he should be interested in this kind of writing. So, probably, even in his own best interest, even if he is a radio nut, the course is worthwhile.

Q. Well, now the student who comes to SF – I think this is also in the *New Yorker* – never mind analyzing the book, the characters, the great thing is that it prompts these questions which you have mentioned – like the boomerang effect about what it is to be human and the kind of relationships. Looking at it in that way, is it a handicap to have a background in mythology? If I didn't know about the little bits of Homer and Gilgamesh and things that I could see in the book, then I would certainly have a different experience and maybe come to a different, freer view of this kind of thing.

A. Let me just say to begin with, that I am of course not responsible for anybody else's declarations about SF, say in that *New Yorker* article. I would tend to disagree with most of them, as a matter of fact. I don't really believe that you can get at this boomerang effect – the strange novelty – without going through the plot and characters of the book. I don't know how else you are going to understand what is happening, so I don't think these are two different things. Even if you care about the ideas,

if you haven't read the book you can't understand the ideas which are its upshot. Now, about the mythology: this is a very long story and I'm not sure whether I want to start off on it, but if the book works well, then your previous knowledge should be of secondary importance. If in order to understand the book you must go back and read James Fraser or *Gilgamesh* or whoever, then there is something wrong with the book. In the present state of affairs, each book is an individual unit. This is the type of civilization we are having, that each book should be read on its own. Maybe this is bad, I don't know, I'm not enchanted with it, but that's a fact, so each book must stand on its own.

On the other hand, there are many people going around saying that SF is a new mythology; I think this is true only if you use the word mythology in a very loose way, by which time it's lost most of sense it had. It's a new telling of tales, if that's what you mean, yes. But if you mean by mythology precisely what mythology means, which is something to do with the supernatural – SF has by definition no supernatural beings or events which cannot be explained (even though with a very small probability, but still supposedly explained) by natural premises. Often those explanations are far in advance of our present-day knowledge; still, the situations are explained as natural, and not supernatural. The moment they cannot be explained as normal, you are not in SF, you are in "Fantasy" as a special genre of its own: the horror story, the weird story, the ghost story, or whatever. And though this is often published under the same cover and called SF, that is really misleading because there is a basic difference in the whole ethos, in the whole attitude, in the whole atmosphere of a book which says "yes, things are in principle explainable and to be understood if you only take enough pains," or "no, there are some supernatural things that you are never going to understand." The atmosphere of these two books, the one that says yes and the one that says no, is going to be totally different. Now, some formal patterns may be similar. The hero encounters certain obstacles, as in *Gilgamesh*: he goes to this terrible place and then he comes out into the nice place and so on. But that is all.

Q. Are there stocks in trade, to use the least rich word for it, of SF? I mean that in connection with the mythology question, because of the

cumulative effect of the oral tradition. Is there a new set of cumulative effects of the oral tradition kind? Is there a new set of cumulative images?

A. Yes, if you want to call SF a kind of folklore of the industrialized or urbanized readership, I wouldn't object. It is a kind of folklore and it has its gimmicks. For example, the ambassador comes to a new planet. This was present in *The First Men in the Moon* by H.G. Wells, or *Voyage to the Center of Earth* by Jules Verne, and earlier: you've got a representative of ourselves coming to a strange situation and trying to understand it. This is one of the basic gambits, so to speak, or openings of SF. In that sense, there are many stock features in SF, but I think they exist in almost all literature. You have the young man coming to conquer Paris in novel after French novel. This is the opening gambit and then you develop differently, and the endgame is different of course. And that in fact I rather like. I think of literature as a collective entity, and I think that if every writer had to start from zero every time, nothing would ever get written. I think that he or she must be able to stand on someone's shoulders in order to reach further.

Q. Do you ever see this kind of thing as a caricature of novel writers and readers? I wondered at a point where the lengthy descriptions were going on in a slightly unrecognizable terminology. I thought that perhaps this was the kind of detail that Melville could count on his readers going through patiently and I wondered if it could be in any way a parody of that process.

A. I wouldn't call it a parody in that sense. Certainly, the SF novel is written within the context of a general readership sense of what a novel is, which is based on Tolstoy or Faulkner or whoever is being generally read around. I would say more on Margaret Mitchell than Tolstoy, or perhaps on Grace Metalious or whoever is at present the equivalent of Margaret Mitchell. You are going to write an adventure story, which is the usual backbone of SF in order to keep things moving. This book is also an adventure story: the police clap you in a concentration camp and you escape, so that you go through all this on one level, which is not very important to the book but it is the basic or zero level so to speak. Then, of course, there are certain patterns which have been used in adventure stories since

time immemorial and they are very difficult to avoid because they are logical in that you first get into trouble and then you get out of trouble and there are not many ways you can do that.

Q. But not being able to avoid would be very different from deliberately setting out to have fun with or even make fun of. You say you see it more as the first.

A. I think so. There are some novels which deliberately take the plot of a "mainstream" novel, which is what SF people call everything else in literature.

Q. And they play it in a different key?

A. Yes, but I think these are not the best works, because instead of starting from their own theme and letting this determine the composition, they take a predetermined composition and then try to fit whatever they can into it. Usually this is called a space opera. The term comes from horse opera – and perhaps soap opera? – it's a Western translated into space. I think most of the 90 percent that I was talking about in the beginning is space opera.

Q. That certainly relates to when Ms. Ferrier was asking about the recognizable frame.

A. Right, but not necessarily recognizable in terms of Melville. It's just recognizable in terms of Max Brand or Dashiell Hammett.

Q. And less successful, you are saying, for that.

A. Usually, unless you are very clever about it.

[Questions from the floor]:

Q. It seems to me that the book is based on the idea that these are androgynous people, but you don't get to know what kind of people they really are. All we get to know is that they have a certain period when they are in kemmer, but outside of that it's very vague and whereas you say that the important part that this author left out was the economics, I think what she left out was really the important part of the book – what the biology of these people really was. They don't seem to be any different from ordinary people.

A. Well, the ploy used in the book is that they are basically human stock changed by some experiment. So they wouldn't be all that different from us except for the androgynous aspects, which are explained, first of all in the report straightforwardly, and secondly in the legend of Terek and Arem which is a kind of Romeo and Juliet of Gethen – these two people of different clans falling in love with this terrible tragic ending. Perhaps most importantly, it is explained by Genly Ai's experience with all of them, the politicians in both countries, and finally with Estraven on the ice cap. That is I think as much as you can get into this kind of format. Perhaps one is so fascinated by it that one would like to have more. One would have liked to see them cook or play billiards or whatever their equivalent is. But there is a commercial limit to it in that SF publishers will not publish a novel longer than say 60,000 words, so there are practical difficulties. In order to fit more in you would have had to find another publisher, who might say "that's too much like SF for me," and so on. Now practical difficulties are no excuse in art; maybe they are for many other things, but there is no excuse in art. However, I think the excuse would have to be found inside the book, and the excuse is in everything else, in what we do know. Whether that excuse wears well with you or not, I don't know. That is partly a matter of each reader's sensibility. I wouldn't have minded having a bit more too, but I don't feel very badly about it.

Q. I'm wondering why you are recommending this book called *Solaris*. In other words, what is your standard that makes that book superior?

A. That's very difficult to say since you haven't read it. I can't really talk about it, it would get too long. Try to read it.

Q. I've read some of the John Wyndham books, and I think they are much more accurate than this book. How would that compare with this book?

A. John Wyndham is a Wells imitator – which is not a swearword. So if you want to have the real quality of Wyndham you would go to Wells, which is into these peaceful normal British surroundings, suddenly, lo and behold, some new and threatening thing comes in. It's like "murder in the vicarage" – it's the English model of SF which is good but has its limitations. It's usually limited to some kind of catastrophe which

happens right tomorrow or in the next fifty years. That's what Wyndham writes about in *The Day of the Triffids, The Kraken Wakes, The Midwich Cuckoos,* and so on. This is extremely enjoyable. I like Wyndham and I've taught Wyndham, and I've even translated Wyndham, but it seems to me that the furthest limit of knowledge of this model can reach is nearer to us than the furthest limit of *The Left Hand of Darkness*. The model of Ms. Le Guin is wider than Wyndham's. Now whether she uses her model to its utmost limits is another question. But in principle I think the marvellous novelty of the biologically different humanity supplies a greater increment of possible information, doubts, thinking, than the model of a catastrophe from the sky or something like that. Partly, of course, all these judgements are ideological judgements, based on what we think about the world and what we think is a real novelty and so on. I don't think there is an absolute answer to that. If you say, well, after all the explanations that you can give me I still like Wyndham better, then I say ok.

Q. When you said biological difference between Ms. LeGuin's androgynous type and the Terran man, did you also mean also the psychological interest? That I found a fascinating part.

A. Yes, I should have said so. It's a socio-psychological-based-on-biological difference.

Q. Thank you very much Dr. Suvin. Actually that book was delightful. As I first read it I found it very hard, and then I dropped it and read it again.

A. Well, that's the way to do it really.

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