CHAPTER 23 (WITH MARC ANGENOT)

On "Post-Modernist" Political Impotence and the Horizons of Fiction and SF: A Response to Professor Fekete's "Five Theses" (1988)

0.

When we prepared this response to Professor Fekete's "Theses" in November 1987 we had not been shown the italicized preamble now on its first page. Since that preamble characterizes its text as "occasional" and "deliberately provocative," our response may look as an over-reaction. Furthermore, some nuances in the formulations we replied to have been changed in places. However, we decided to let our reply stand for several reasons. First, because John Fekete, whom we knew and helped as a student, is here only the mouthpiece of a trend dominant in contemporary "Western" literary criticism (what he rightly calls a "classical deconstructive maneuver"), which we therefore have to take seriously. Second, because a demand for potentially useful debate and controversy should not be left unheeded.

We are not sure that we always understand Fekete's essay, adrift on the ocean of simulacra. However, from our other readings in this type of polemic, his central position seems fairly clear, mediated as it is by references to Jean Baudrillard's vision of the world as simulacrum. We also wish to say once for all that "Fekete" in the rest of this chapter is not exactly the individual teaching at Trent University, etc. but – as befits an intellectual dialogue – a metonymy for the author of a number of texts (in first place the text we are responding to); the individual we personally tend to like, and even the author has a fairly great advantage in at least expressing in an extreme form what a number of other people vaguely think but do not bother to shape. In however roundabout ways, he is therefore cognitively useful (if properly estranged).

1.

We take Fekete's central positions to be as follows:

(a) You cannot say anything about the world because it has always already been put into discourse or modelled. The final horizon of this stance is that the world is only my representation, so that it is purely by an act of unanchored will (coming from nowhere in particular except from "the will to will") that I can be led to do anything in this kind of imagined rather than real world – for example, write SF or an essay on SF. This gets to Baudrillard as an embroidery on Schopenhauer by his master of thinking, Nietzsche. In Fekete this is, as it were, fourth-hand – or fifth-hand if we take into account the filiation of Schopenhauer from Buddhism. Indeed, it is only within the ideology of classical Buddhism that the simulacrum of *maya,* the fake and bad illusionism of fleshly existence, for the first and only time makes perfect sense. The incongruous fusion of Schopenhauer and the language of scientific epistemology (models, paradigms, etc.) makes no discernible sense: a model is by definition a model of something external which is referred to by being modelled.

(b) SF is particularly apt to produce endless centrifugal models that reprocess the eternal impossibility of going beyond a model, of contacting the empirical reality. It is therefore exclusively a self-regarding and playful generic intertext, which has the great merit of foregrounding the impossibility to represent the real – a re-presentation that Fekete unfairly, in the well-known polemic procedure of procuring for your positions a straw man or dummy opponent who is then easily routed, simplifies into an illusionist "cognitive mission to reproduce the empirical." This follows the thesis by Nietzsche (mediated by Paul Veyne) that it is true to say that no discourse is true and the only absolute position is that all is relative.

It would follow from this that Marxism – which was for Fekete a Gothic novel about the horrors of capitalism, an eschatological romance about the redemption by the proletariat, and a utopia about the classless society resulting from these two – was in its time perhaps (as he graciously concedes) not bad SF. Nonetheless, there was a basic fallacy in it: "It presupposed the real as the referent for its representational montage"! Let us immediately plead guilty to being exactly this kind of Marxists: we do presuppose that, whether any of us like it or not, there exists both a personal and a collective reality, a Being There or a Sartrean Situation in which individual and mass bodies get hungry, tired, sleepy, exhilarated or sick; paid, frustrated, working, oppressed and often exploited; and so on. And when we want (as we do) fully to use the lightest cognitive way we know, art, this for us means investigating precisely what may be this referentially referred to real reality as well as investigating how this reality is referred to (both in order to intervene into this reality and in order to enjoy the mediating steps in cognitive, including artistic, playfulness). Now we do share Fekete's doubts about an absolute ultimate reality independent of humanity as a whole, etc. – a notion quite some time ago rejected by the more intelligent Marxists (e.g., Gramsci – cf. Suvin, "Two").

Let us also, by the way, deplore the ignorance about Marxism in its enemies (and friends). Reagan thinks the Sandinistas are Marxist because they are against United Fruit Company. To descend from rarefied to pedestrian ridiculousness, an article in *Extrapolation* of 1985 chastised one of us (Suvin) in the following way: it first "reconstructed" Marxist epistemology by using one sentence from one of Marx's early works (written together with Engels), not heeding the huge debate among philosophers about the relation between early Marx-Engels and the mature Marx, plus one sentence from one of Lenin's philosophical books, and then criticizing the extrapolated mishmash as Suvin's position, not heeding the fact that Suvin had published three essays doubting or outright rejecting those very same positions. Many Ph.D. students have been rightly failed for such disregard of elementary rules of philological evidence. In other words, Marxism is at least as complicated as Christianity, and we doubt the editors of *Extrapolation* would have let pass an essay criticizing, say, Lafferty for being a Calvinist or Quaker, or Heinlein for being a Roman Catholic.

Of course, Fekete is much better than the above examples. Nonetheless, even he often mixes up the equivalent of the Pope or the Inquisition with Thomas of Aquinas or Duns Scotus. He ought really to know that you can be a Thomist and put the Pope into Hell (as, e.g., Dante did), and that to condemn Catholicism without saying which Catholicism (never mind which Christianity) is intellectually not very respectable.

Thus, whether an absolute reality exists seems – at least for this historical epoch – a non-problem to us. Our position is that a relative but quite sufficiently precise reality (i.e., the dominant notions thereof, which are enough for practical intervention) is always referred to by art and literature, but that the referring comes about in ways so complex (roundabout, indirect, refracted) and so differing from each other in particular groups of texts that deconstructionists à la Fekete have – for all his lip service to Delany's complex seeing – despaired of making sense about and by means of it.

(c) SF critics up to Fekete (he mentions Suvin, Angenot, and Delany) have all presupposed the existence of the empirical world. Suvin talks about cognitive estrangement: yet in order to have estrangement there must be something one is estranged from (not to mention his rationalist sin of believing in incremental rather than free-floating cognition). Angenot talks about an absent paradigm: but the paradigm can only be absent in comparison to a presence (say in non-SF novels). Even Delany, whose novels Fekete has analyzed so ably because they seemed to him so centrifugal and polymorphically perverse, speaks about a literalized metaphor: yet a metaphor presupposes that there is a non-metaphoric background against which it may be perceived as metaphor and into which it may be literalized. All three have for Fekete tried to deal with the pleasurable potentialities of SF through a central inconsistence because they have refused to acknowledge that it is enacting non-referential models, models which simply refer to and engender other models, so that like the Swiftian flea they "Have other fleas to bite' em/ And so ad infinitum." In other words, SF should have taught Suvin that there is no such thing as

cognition, Angenot that there is no such thing as presence, and Delany that there is no such thing as non-metaphoric locutions, words or indeed worlds.

2.

But what if Fekete's major – and alas nowhere argued – premise from (a) above is wrong? Then of course the whole of his indignation does not follow, and Marxism remains as a central problem barring all roads toward his horizon. Let us see how this premise really (oops, here we blundered into the taboo word again!) looks.

We might start with what is a relatively small and playful contradiction, simply an exercise in attempting to get sound logic out of a deconstructionist (now this is really fun!). For, any position similar to Fekete's is immediately vulnerable to the answer "you too" – let us call it the *tu quoque* boomerang. Namely, why could not this absolute plumping for relativism also be relativized? The only consistent deconstructionists in politics, the Catalan Anarchists, have tried to do this. The reader may remember their statutes (and also their failure in real-life politics, symmetrically obverse to the failure of the Stalinists, which together led to Franco's victory):

Para. 1. There is no absolute rule.
Para. 2. Para. 1 is not necessarily true.

If Marxism is for Fekete based on the value opposition between One's good and true and the Other's bad and false positions – for example, science vs. ideology – is not his own opposition of the illusionist rigidity of Marxism to the playful modeling of modern SF structurally identical to this horrible dogmatic procedure, in fact another horror fantasy? Is it not equally Manichaean and polarized? As different from Fekete, we do not blame our Other (here him) for this: for does not any true dialog have to posit, with more or less intelligence and enmity, such a radically different Other? Are we (Angenot and Suvin) not such an Other for him? We do not mind, we are in some ways even flattered, but does not his Marxist past

show here? Would not a true Nihilism demand (as in Catalonia) to stop arguing and simply go for the pure act of will? Fekete is much too much an ex-left-wing intellectual to go for this; but his logical horizon would seem to entail that he stop writing essays.

Even more weightily: the root of the whole deconstructionist syndrome is *panic when faced with the inertia of power*. The year 1968 has come and gone, imagination did not come to power, the Powers That Were are still in power, with bigger and better computers and a more crowded sex-life (or at least more talking about it): what do we do now except beat our breasts and proclaim how wrong we – that is, the silly Marxists – were to try anything at all? But panicky passengers sink the boat, and some questions must be asked of them. For example, is it consistent with Fekete's radical relativism or cognitive nihilism to appeal to and adopt the present state of affairs (by which he probably means a defeat of the Leninist experiment within Marxism in the USSR and the highly developed capitalist countries, and therefore the resurgence of technocratic monopoly capitalism) as his ultimate validation and argument, the locus of all of his values? Assuming that he were right and Marxism – even so-called Marxist minimalism – "misses the whole [twentieth] century" (by which he cannot properly mean anything but his own lifetime), would *might* begin to make *right*? Why is a contingent, even if painful and for our personal lives probably not fully reversible defeat for Fekete so ethically and axiologically impressive that it must become the source of all judgments and attitudes? Did not one of our philosophical founding fathers say "A thousand years of something being so does not necessarily make it right"? (*No* this was not Marx, it was Kant; but maybe Fekete rejects him too as corrupted by Enlightenment referentiality?)

3.

What then is SF's, and Fekete's, mandate? Who or what gives them a mandate? We believe that Fekete has only a partial mandate, but that SF might potentially have a full mandate which as a rule it does not fully carry out.

As to Fekete, paradoxically (it is the paradox of the Cretan liar), at best his is a mandate to say what the child in Hans Christian Andersen said: that in a world without mandates, the mandate of SF (and Fekete is its prophet) is to show there is no mandate but only polymorphous playfulness. Now far be it from us to be against playfulness: many philosopher-kings are indeed naked, from Descartes to Heidegger. We are against the seriousness of the priest (some overtones of a liturgic voice we find in Fekete's essay too, here comes the Boy Bishop riding his ass backward); we are even – in art at least – against the seriousness of the surgeon cutting up the patient. But this playfulness is not opposed to seriousness, let us say the seriousness of the actress simulating Mother Courage. What it is opposed to is automatized rigidity; some kings still wear workable, if patchy, blue jeans. So, seriously, who gives Fekete his mandate? "Under which flag, Bezonian?"

We can see two answers here. Either (first) nihilism leads to crass pragmatism: in a society of technological simulacra whatever is, is right. If so, then SF has a Darwinist adaptive value, socializing youngsters still under the illusion that something can be changed into proper cyberpunks who have understood that sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof, and give us our daily fix, O whichever Lord Thou Art – multinational corporations, as a rule. Or (second) the nihilist becomes a privatized hedonist: society can go hang, the political humanity, the citizen, and humanism are dead, long live the Playful Man, *homo ludens*, the Marquis de Sade, and SF as the literature of that kind of Schizoid Man!

Let us repeat then that Fekete – like all Nihilists beginning with Nietzsche – sees well, even if belatedly, that God is dead; there are no absolutes left; Marxism is the heir of Enlightenment and Enlightenment is not sexy anymore. Gladstone too is dead (or if you wish Engels): we today, rulers or oppositionists, are certainly not the summit of human history toward whom the saber-toothed tigers have been pointing since Neanderthal times; more likely, we are one of the troughs. But from this it does not at all follow that in any significant, given pragmatic situation – that is, with given people speaking and acting in given ways toward other people for given reasons and given interests – there still do not exist rights and wrongs, oppressors and oppressed, powerful and powerless. The problem is centrally one of how is knowledge and understanding arrived at, what is it born from? The

European Middle Ages believed that Truth was the daughter of Authority (to be found by interpreting the Holy Writ); the Renaissance opted for Bacon's Truth as the daughter of Time (to be found by experiments plus induction/deduction). All of humanity's investigations have historically oscillated between these two ideal poles, and in the best case have negotiated and spanned them. As all other major theory-and-practice systems, socialism and the labor movement has had major problems, crises, even grave and sterilizing failures – most clearly in Stalinism but also in Social Democracy – in achieving the proper balance between the two parents of Truth, father Authority and mother Time. But Fekete's ilk is proposing to us Truth as a clone of a clone of a clone: coming from nowhere, going nowhere; or perhaps more accurately, coming from despair, going into impotence. We refuse this unholy couple and trajectory.

We wish to preserve from the Marxist tradition the notions of social relations of production; of classes; of unquenchable contradiction based on capital's expropriation of labor; and therefore, finally, of the necessity for a radical break between human relationships as they are today and those in a new society rid of irreconcilably antagonistic classes – a necessity desperately necessary for the naked survival of our species and planet. There are no guarantees that this break will happen; there is no sanctified history – much less nature or epistemology – in which a Savior (e.g., the proletariat) will appear to effect it. All depends on people: on how we orient ourselves in given, contingent power relations. Does the revision mean that the Marxian problematic and project is done for? No. Instead of simple, primitive, childishly malicious deconstruction (let's pull out the hands and pull off the head of the old toy we have grown tired of), we need the superior old dialectics of deconstruction plus reconstruction. This will then provide the framework for situating and properly understanding the (alas, only too real) simulacra also.

4.

As to SF, it may have a number of mandates, good bad and indifferent. We cannot enumerate them here. We shall discuss what Fekete thinks about it, and then proceed to a probe of our own.

For, in the second half of his paper, Professor Fekete (having denied that SF can offer any horizon alternative to that of technocratic capitalism) laudably attempts to find out what it still can do. To his mind, it is to reveal "the silent edge of the model where the very conditions of the system of modelling are exposed …" In other words, the power system is not yet (but we would then ask first: why not? and second: for how long will it not be?) "in full possession of the technological society it encircles." A modest and increasingly threatened mandate this, but possibly still one. Let us then check up on it and ask who precisely (or as precisely as we can say) is the bearer of this mandate, who is speaking and spoken to, and what is the speaking in SF about.

Let us focus on writers such as Dick, Delany or Disch as nearest to Fekete's preoccupations and – at least Delany – dearest to his heart. First, what do they say, in the depths of their works? The narrative agents in their representative works are, no doubt, caught within a grim universe, openly explained as a concentration-camp universe in Disch's eponymous novel or in some of Dick's works but sometimes simply a claustrophobic or metamorphic planet, city or spaceship. Within it, the agents are still ineradicably marked by what Fekete might think of as the old-fashioned pathos of needs and desires: they are denied their bodily – economic and emotional – wants, they suffer in prey of anxiety; the playfulness often present in these works is usually a defensive one, the only way of attempting an escape from overwhelming and insidiously internalized pressures of the technocratic (it would be better to add capitalist) power structure. The attempt is on the one hand very welcome, but on the other hand rather limited – unsuccessful and/or compensatory. The strongest works are those in which such attempts are themselves critically looked at and their limits discussed, for example, in *Triton*. In this light, even much of the later work of Delany – who is to our minds the writer of one of the most coherent, sustained, and therefore valuable SF opuses in the USA today – is largely caught in the same bind. His probably most accomplished work, the *Nevërÿon* trilogy, is even formally located in a barbaric and mythical past. It most interestingly reclaims Conan's fantasy landscapes for a bohemian and polymorphously enjoyable worm's-eye's view. Gorgik's liberation of slaves is important in it, and the brutality of the class system is taken for granted, but slavery is anyway not important in Nevërÿon anymore and that same system can be "played" from the inside by those with know-how.

Perhaps the best emblem of Delany's bind (and we hope it is clear we are not blaming any individual author for it) is the mysterious plague in *Flight from Nevërýon*. It is an openly acknowledged parable of AIDS in the New York gay community (talk about lack of referent!); it permits a first view of changing human relationships in it, through the estranging detour into Nevërýon; but does it permit a deeper understanding of the specific social nature of AIDS? We doubt it, for this is an illness deeply involved with the age of imperfect – political but not economic or cultural – decolonization (e.g., in Africa and the Caribbean), multinationals, jet travels, and today's sexual ideologies between permissiveness and the Moral Majority. Thus, even the important liberating feat of human relations in the age of AIDS being openly – if often indirectly – discussed in fiction leaves Delany roughly in an isomorphy to his portrayal of Gorgik's liberation movement: in a halfway house between the public and the private.

Delany's accomplished opus is (with Disch's much undervalued masterpiece *334*) clearly most talented. Most works in this vein remain much more limited by the contradictions of installing oneself comfortably within the technocracy, of finding sources of intermittent and polluted but nonetheless possible pleasure under the gaze of Foucault's panoptic surveillance; this goes right down to the interesting cyberpunk of William Gibson. The SF to which Fekete refers therefore seems to confute him in two ways. First, the narrative agents, quite clearly representing suffering little people caught within a universe of simulacra, are shown as doing their best to dismantle this supposedly enjoyable universe. Second, it is welcome but insufficient to say with Fekete that in this SF "the possibilities of human autonomy are at stake": its best texts do not so much show possibilities of human autonomy as desperately call for it while being very ambiguous about its realization (perhaps this is what Fekete really means by having them "in play"?). The exhilaration that Fekete isolates as SF's exclusive trait seems to us to be in fact colored black, a gallows-humor – masterfully rendered by Disch, for example – subject to the framework of oppressive power held by large alienated corporate entities, whose bad collectivism largely escapes any effective control by the traditional liberal and socialist means of public scrutiny or popular democracy.

If anything like the above is correct, then – furthermore – from which positions do these writers speak? We lack, as Fekete rightly remarks, much

further knowledge about the social groups dialogizing in the present-day USA and in particular in its SF. Nonetheless, let us hazard a working hypothesis, based on such previous work as that of Klein, Fitting, and the "Sociology of SF" issue of *SFS*. For all the differences between the writers mentioned (and such British homologues as, say, Ballard, directly responding to the winding down of the Empire), it would seem possible to locate their horizons at the intersection of the classical bohemian "free-floating" intelligentsia and the contemporary new white-collar class of people in the tertiary (service) field of the economy. Such people are indeed largely living in a world of computers and other ways of simulating reality, that refer to it distantly, through many mediations, with much internal independence and free-wheeling, or often (seemingly) not at all. But the recent Wall Street crash is a very good example that these simulations finally do have very real consequences: a lot of individual and collective bodies – for example, some of our universities – suddenly found themselves nearly bankrupt and all of us will have to suffer smaller or sometimes radically large changes in our concrete lives as a result of this simulacrum-world crash. Suddenly the simulacra began referring to and indeed impinged on the real world of financial, legal, and other threats affecting not only our representations but also our bodies, a world which is surely not totally imaginary for any of us, including Professor Fekete?

Now this ambiguous class or group or stratum or congeries of fractions, within whose horizons much of the best modern English-language SF is written, has a very ambivalent position toward the technocratic modernization within the existing power system and economic structure. It has been largely created by this system and structure, and it knows how to behave within it. It is also fed with the crumbs off the table of capitalist prosperity. While the cycle is on the upswing, this may be OK and to a degree (a fairly hysterical degree) even exhilarating, since the gigantic cake being turned into table-wastes at least materially compensates for the moral indignity of being thrown crumbs; but when the meals get scarce the crumbs become grudgingly tiny. That is why, perhaps, some of the best US SF in these last twenty years fall within a – let us hastily label it – *discontent but contained* horizon, which ends up recycling the traditional model of the populist novel, for example, of Dickens or Sue: some general protestations against

the unjust social order, which carry the pathos of the text, are at the end reduced to no change in the general order or values but salvation for our protagonist (Oliver Twist or Louis Sacchetti or the protagonists of what we have called the "plateau trilogy" of Dick in the early 1960s). Changes in the social order or value-system as a whole are envisaged only by some "radicals," that is, feminist or womanist SF writers (from Russ through Piercy or Charnas to Cherryh; and of course Le Guin, a law and force unto herself). This remarkable homology or parallelism would suggest to us that the referentiality from SF texts to social ideologies and constructions of reality is not only still existent but all-pervasive and quite inescapable. Further, as soon as one starts narrating (even in the dubiously so-called post-modern age) a final success or failure, some kind of salvation – what Fekete sneeringly calls an "eschatological romance" – is the encompassing horizon of narration. Even Kafka's or Beckett's horizons are those of a grim non-salvation, felt as painful and unbearable precisely in comparison to a hypothetically possible and needful coming to the Castle or of Godot. Now of course, the mindless Hollywood happy ending of the Reaganite Star Wars is not at all what significant writers could write or critics should ask for. Yet the empirical escapism of Hare Krishna or Club Med tourism has a parallel in middle-range SF when it contents itself with private oases within a community that has vanished not only as a fact but even as an ideal horizon.

Thus, if we were to speculate to whom SF speaks, we would say that it speaks to the youth of its own social horizons, to those young people who may grow into the ambiguous free-floating territory between old-fashioned intellectuals (say writers or teachers) and newfangled service middle-class (say computer programmers or the semi-employed university graduates hopping between jobs and sexual partners within the affluent economy). Their limited, subjective experience of freedom is that interstices, oases, or intermundia may be found and enjoyed for a time, precisely on "the silent edge of the model." A privatized *jouissance* à la Barthes (more point-like enjoyment than permanent tenure) exists here within the horizon of a general diffuse anxiety, which condenses into acute attacks of anxiety at times of recurring crisis. By the way, in modern bourgeois society the position of sexual minorities, for example, of homosexuals, has always been emblematic for this ambiguous "edge" position, partly private and partly

political – which is why so many leading theorists and practitioners of this whole syndrome, from Barthes and Foucault on, have been gay; this holds for US SF in spades, so to speak (just as it has for a long time held in US theater). This structure of feeling is in Marxist terms one of a new petty-bourgeois anarchism, without the heroic horizons of old anarchism; it accounts for a lot of contemporary SF, and for Fekete's criticism. To call somebody a petty bourgeois of such-and-such a kind is not a curse, it is an identification or naming of potential strengths and limits, sometimes in great writers; but neither is it a solution, it remains a problem. The two of us writing are also petty bourgeois: but then the whole scope of SF is that of a tug-of-war as to where the crucial "middle" classes, those between the immediate producers and the controllers and disposers of the means of production, will turn to.

5.

At the end, there is no need to map all possible routes for such turnings, that is, for SF and SF criticism. We would be sufficiently happy if we have successfully suggested that there do exist other routes than the somewhat mindless endless drift of exhilaration in political impotence.

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