

A Brief Valedictory on Stepping Down (1981)

After 22 issues and a couple of thousand pages, this is the first issue of *Science-Fiction Studies* which I shall not be co-editing. My decision to resign (for reasons I mention later on) has been only narrowly averted at least twice before. If anyone had forecast in 1971, when in a Des Moines bar after a particularly dismal SFRA day I dared Dale Mullen to launch *SFS*, that the new journal would be around ten years later, I would have been amazed. For it was clear from the start that *SFS* would be worthwhile – perhaps there is some point in saying this now – only if it utterly refused both horns of the dilemma facing a cultural periodical in our age. First, it would have to refuse being a mailbox into which sheets of written paper are dropped by a number of individuals and haphazardly selected for reproduction by a smaller number of other individuals, in order to achieve promotion and tenure (for the droppers) and that miserable amount of social power which a small cultural journal might be able to have (for the selectors). Whatever the sins of commission and (especially) omission I have been party to in *SFS*, I am very happy that it never became such a sin-against-the-holy-ghost, uncritical and unthinking reflection of our readers. I say this in all personal humility, for the learning experience that *SFS*, I believe, has been for its contributors and readers has benefited no one as much as its editors (or myself, to keep to the first person singular): but the whole point of the *SFS* endeavor has been to pool and mutually induce the best in our potential readers' understanding, to bring it to bear upon SF, and to hope the example will be contagious. Second, *SFS* would have to refuse becoming a mini-orthodoxy, inevitably reproducing in complementary form some of the worst features of the orthodoxies it was combatting; and for all the manifold temptations, on the whole *SFS* has (I believe) never had

and I trust never will have such an orthodoxy. Of course, it would be disingenuous not to note that instead – to paraphrase Leavis's valedictory to *Scrutiny* – a number among the most interesting contributions to *SFS* have certainly evinced a largely overlapping conception of the function of criticism at the present time and of the proper horizon for a critical journal. What this conception and horizon have up to now been was largely spelled out in the Angenot-Suvin Editorial to *SFS* no. 17.

On ending *Scrutiny*, Leavis further complained that “if, holding that each number must be something more than a miscellany, you at the same time exact a high standard of work, you will not in the most favorable circumstances find that there is a large choice of suitable contributors.” All depends, of course, upon what one means by a large number. In the case of *SFS*, in any relative sense Leavis's complaint would apply; but in absolute numbers, I do not feel disappointed. Perhaps North America and Europe in the 1970s were richer in “suitable contributors” than Britain in the 1930s–40s, perhaps the subject-matter of SF tends to counteract the elitism which Leavis's Cambridge, even at its most nonconformist, was prone to, and perhaps there are (probably there are) other factors I am too near to perceive; but in retrospect, the combination of academics and non-academics, US and non-US, and then history and theory-oriented contributors that *SFS* has assembled in these years seems to me not too far from the optimum available given the time, money, ideological climate, and other factors determining the *SFS* context.

It would also be disingenuous not to reveal here what many people already know, namely that *SFS* has also incurred powerful enmities in the little world of SF criticism. This probably includes some people whose contributions were not accepted, but it would be only fair to say that it includes also ideologico-political objectors who pretend or sincerely believe that non-Americanism is anti-Americanism (and that the *SFS* move to Canada was therefore not a logistic necessity but a sinister plot), and that tolerating and indeed encouraging Marxist and semiotic approaches together with the positivistic ones makes the mildly left-of-center *SFS* a hotbed of radicalism (would ‘t were true!). In tried repressive fashion, the enemies of *SFS* have not come forth to debate its merits and demerits in any aboveboard and falsifiable way. The only visible tip of the iceberg is a

letter by a well-known SF writer-cum-critic published in *College English* for 1973 warning its readers that my own criticism is suspect because it comes from a Yugoslav Marxist. However, the bulk of the iceberg is more secretive and anonymous and is to be found in whispering campaigns and – most dangerously – untruthful letters to potential funding bodies. All of this is not particularly savory, but having been the lightning rod involved, I believe I ought not to take my leave from either the *SFS* readers or from my fellow-editors without letting some light into it: this is the context of the journal you have been reading and the reason it might yet, one of these years, have to cease publication.

One hopes that, with the excellent editors remaining to guide its fortunes, with public scholarly testimonials both to *SFS* as such and to work published in it getting warmer and more numerous almost monthly, and with the support not only from the editors' three universities but also from the SSHRC of Canada, this will not happen for some time yet. Indeed it is ironical for this to be envisaged while in at least three European countries efforts are under way to found journals on SF whose promoters write us that they have been emboldened by the *SFS* example. Thus, this valedictory is not a cue for depression or a statement that the grapes are sour. If I can afford them and if I do not feel I should boycott them because they are from South Africa, many kinds of grapes are still very sweet. But after eight years it is perhaps permissible for one's interest to change from white to black grapes or – to drop the viticultural metaphor – from editing an S-F journal to concentrating on one's own writings, on SF or otherwise. One can thus be fair to the contributors and readers (who will have the benefit of fresher eyes at the helm) as well as to oneself. At the same time, one can practice the democratic anti-individualism one preaches, while being virtuously rewarded for it by avoiding the corruptions even this small power inevitably brings.

My parting salute goes first of all to Dale Mullen and then to my co-editors (now the present editors) who have made it possible to carry on mostly without business manager or publicity, to achieve a circulation nosing into four digits, and to produce twenty-two issues of a useful journal. But further, it goes to the literally scores of contributors and consultants with whom I have corresponded and debated *SFS* matters. They

not only made the journal what it is, they made me the inestimable present of sharing the joyous learning which is the main thing making life in our dark age worth living. Their critical friendship, *SFS* itself, and this partial leave-taking all contribute to preventing Auden's awful example of:

These had stopped seeking
But went on speaking,
Have not contributed
But have diluted ...
Wishing no harm
But to be warm
These fell asleep
On the burning heap.