

## James Blish, 1921–1975 (1975)

August has brought the sad news of the death at barely 54 of James Blish, of a long and serious illness. All who had the privilege of knowing Jim knew also just how long that illness was; how serious the operations and treatments he had been undergoing for a decade or so; how much they had impeded a full continuation of his triumphant debuts in SF novels, stories, and criticism; and how heroically he had toiled on in spite of all.

Dr. Mullen has written on James Blish and is proud to have been of some small help to him for the final edition of the *Cities in Flight* tetralogy. I have translated one of his books into one of the many languages in which Jim is known and appreciated all over the world, and am proud to have been, in a minor way, his friend these last seven years, ever since a discussion on the floor of a smoke- and fan-filled room in a New York City hotel that ensued when I tactlessly challenged the ending of his perhaps most famous book, *A Case of Conscience*. The memories of many subsequent sparkling discussions in Trieste, Marlowe, and Harpsden, on subjects ranging from his SF through music and witchcraft back to the theory and history of SF will remain permanently with me. For Blish in person was much more than even an assiduous reader of his works can gather: a polyhistor, one among the few authentic self-made Renaissance or Medieval men in the SF community – or at least as good an approximation to such a “universal man” as the present hectic, affluent, and yet penurious times will permit. He had worked as a scientist, and he always remained a scientist in the sense of his Roger Bacon: a *doctor mirabilis*, a man to whom no knowledge, especially in its recondite branches, was uninteresting or foreign. But alongside this openness, not unknown among SF writers, he was also many other persons: for example, one of the world’s leading authorities on Cabell, and an erudite on writers like Joyce and Pound (the source of his “Atheling”

critical pseudonym), and on musicians like Richard Strauss (the hero of one of his most significant short stories, "A Work of Art").

This is not the place for an appreciation of Blish's work, but there is no doubt that such a (here sketchily suggested) spread of favorites amounts to a fully formed – and in comparison with a solid majority in SF rather idiosyncratic – taste. As his preoccupation with witchcraft and the Middle Ages, with a universal religion and what he semi-seriously called his fascist (but what should properly be called his collectivist) leanings, all testify, he was in full retreat from contemporary bourgeois liberalism. His taking up permanent abode in England was as clear an expression of his feelings toward the condition of his native USA as was Joyce's leaving Ireland. All these will be precious indications for an understanding overview of his work – and we hope one of our readers embarks on it soon.

In the meantime, we have to say goodbye to Jim. Dr. Mullen's life and mine, and the lives of all his friends and readers, have been the richer for him. We were happy to have him as an *SFS* consultant and contributor, and we grieve to think that we shall not now receive further, already promised contributions from him, not read further stories by him. I like to think of him as carrying on his discussions in Elysium with the grave shade of Thomas of Aquinas, the systematizer of believing reason, and the ironic shade of James Branch Cabell, the chivalrous Virginian escapist; and since it is Elysium, there must be a typewriter around, many books, and at least three cats. Down here, in the sublunary world, James Blish will be remembered. By each of us in a different way, in his or her own "common time." By one of us, at least, as somebody much like the hero of his "Surface Tension": an indomitable man who stuck his neck and head out of the elastically tough limits of his inherited world; he got severely burned for it, but it was worth it.