CHAPTER 4

The SF Novel in 1969 (1970)[1]

Writing about "the Science Fiction novel" of 1969 one must start by defining one's terms – such as SF – and particularly what they exclude. There is no way around a critical Credo about this genre, buried as it is in a genealogical jungle. All the bleached bones of foolhardy explorers trying to arrive at a definition of SF cannot obviate the necessity of trying to cut through this jungle, in order to arrive within sight of the Sleeping Beauty of SF.

Whatever else it might also be, SF is the *literature of cognitive estrangement*. If we envisage a spectrum of literary subject-matter, running from the ideal extreme of an exact reaction of the author's empirical environment to an exclusive interest in a strange newness, then the literary mainstream of Euro-American civilization had from the eighteenth to the twentieth century been nearer to the first of the two above-mentioned extremes. But at other times, the concern with the domestication of the amazing has been stronger. Early stories about amazing voyages into the next valley – where dog-headed people were found, and also good rock salt which could be taken or at the worst bartered for – catered to hopeful or fearful curiosity about the unknown beyond the next mountain range (sea, ocean, solar

1 I cannot forbear adding the note with which Blish introduced this review in the *Nebula Awards Stories Five* book. It may be (I trust innocent) vanity, but it meant a lot to me:

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system …). In them, the thrill of knowledge joined the thrill of adventure. An island in the far-off ocean – including the ether ocean – or a valley beyond the mountain range became the goal of the SF voyage: the sparkling island/valley of Terrestrial Paradise and the dark island/valley of the Dead are both already in folk tales and *Gilgamesh*. Verne's island of Captain Nemo or Wells' valley of the *Country of the Blind* are still within the liberating tradition that contends that the world is not necessarily the way our present empirical island/valley happens to be, and that whoever thinks his island/valley is the world, is blind.

The approach to the imaginary locality practiced by the genre of SF is a supposedly factual one: taking off from a fictional ("literary") hypothesis, SF develops it with cognitive ("scientific") rigor. The factual reporting of fictions confronts a set normative system, a closed world picture, with a point of view implying a new set of norms. In literary theory, this is known as the attitude of *estrangement*. This concept was first developed by the Russian Formalists (Viktor Shklovsky), and most successfully underpinned by an anthropological and historical approach in the work of Bertolt Brecht. While working on a play about the prototype scientist Galileo, he defined this attitude in his *Short Organon for the Theatre*: "A representation that estranges is one which allows us to recognize its subject, but at the same time makes it seem unfamiliar." For somebody to see all "normal" happenings in a dubious light, "he would need to develop that detached eye with which the great Galileo observed a swinging chandelier. He was amazed by that pendulum motion as if he had not expected it and could not understand its occurring, and this enabled him to come at the rules by which it was governed." Thus, this look of estrangement is both cognitive and creative, and "one cannot simply exclaim that such an attitude pertains to science, but not to art." Why should not art, in its own way, also contribute to the great social task of furthering Life?

In SF, the attitude of estrangement has become the formal framework of the genre. I have argued elsewhere at some length that SF should therefore be defined *as a literary genre whose necessary and sufficient conditions are the presence and interaction of estrangement and cognition, and whose main formal device is an imaginative framework alternative to the author's empirical environment*.

This definition entails some rather clear consequences. If the approach of estrangement differentiates SF from the "realistic" literary mainstream of the eighteenth to the twentieth century, its nucleus of cognition differentiates it with equal decisiveness from myth, the fairy tale, and the horror Fantasy. Based on a lenient interpretation of these criteria, and on available bibliographies, I have calculated that about 160 novels first published in the US in 1969 might qualify as SF. This includes borderline political SF, but excludes sword-and-sorcery fiction and most, though not all, "juvenile" and "sex" SF as being, respectively, Fantasy, juvenile fiction, and pornography using some SF trappings for mimicry.

Obviously, this domain of 160 novels is both too large and too narrow for this chapter. It is too narrow because it does not include other countries – most notably, some British SF novels not published simultaneously in the USA, and Russian SF: my attempts to lay hands on some of the 10–20 SF novels published yearly in the USSR in time for this chapter unfortunately failed. On the other hand, the domain is too large because it includes a number of pseudo-novels which are really long stories (e.g., many Ace Doubles), or collections of stories provided with a frame (e.g., Fred Saberhagen's *Brother Assassin*); but more to the point because I have not managed to read anywhere near 160 novels. Yet as a sampling of salient tendencies, which was both random (by availability) and weighted (by nominations for Nebula awards), I think it will do.

With these presuppositions explained, one can try to make sense out of the 1969 SF novel. If SF is a genre with a field of possibilities of its own, the criterion of excellence in it is – beside the one of basic literary competence – how close any work comes to using its specific possibilities. In that respect, most of Roger Zelazny's writing is eclectic mythological Fantasy and not SF. If we discard metaphors like "SF is the mythology of a technical age" and similar pouring of new wine into old bottles, mythical estrangement is a ritual and religious approach diametrically opposed to SF. Where SF sees the norms of any age, including emphatically its own, as unique, imperfect, changeable, and subject to a cognitive glance, myth conceives men's relationships to other men and to nature as fixed and supernaturally – that is, non-cognitively – determined. Where myth claims to explain once and for all the essence of phenomena, SF posits them first as problems and then

explores where they lead to; it sees the mythological static identity as an illusion, and usually as a fraud. Thus, to dig into religious archeology for relationships between Egyptian, Greek, Buddhist or other deities, and then to transfer these relationships to a setting midway between Lovecraft and SF, may in the hands of Zelazny's effortless verbal craftsmanship provide some euphoria for teenage readers, which one surely should not begrudge. But his *Isle of the Dead* is clearly strained by the basic incompatibility between the mythical plot and the SF setting and tone. On the one hand, there is an attempt at cognitively explained SF gimmicks such as longevity, planet-forming, and personality-recall tapes in the stock van Vogt manner. On the other hand, the underlying conflict of the novel is built on a combination of, I guess, Voodoo deities and a classical Hellenic nether world. I do not mind Voodoo deities in Andre Norton, but it will not do to have them switching their human incarnations erratically in mid-plot for some (symbolistically unclear) needs of Zelazny's, and then try to cover up for it by "realistic" or cognitive SF hints. A spaceship-and-sorcery Fantasy, possibly interesting to those who like to sympathize with that sort of thing, is thus contaminated with possibly fine SF, to the detriment of both. Yet this unresolved opposition is perhaps clearer here than in earlier works by Zelazny. Maybe such hesitation means that he might soon openly opt for either Fantasy or SF, which one could only welcome.

To my chagrin, I found similar discrepancies, only stronger, in Philip Dick's *Galactic Pot-Healer*, which after a standard dystopian beginning flounders to a stop in fairly second-hand symbolistic Fantasy (the sunken cathedral, etc.), and in Michael Moorcock's *The Black Corridor*, though the latter comes near to validating his "spaceship universe" situation by the ingenious trick of narration through a paranoiac stream-of-consciousness. Finally, both novels are cop-outs as cognitive SF – or they are Fantasy rather than SF. To my mind, these alternatives are synonymous; but even if one does not share this point of view, the lumping of Fantasy that reduces all possible horizons to Death into the same category with SF appears as a sociopathological phenomenon of the present moment of "western" culture, and as a grave disservice to SF (and possibly to adult, Kafkaian Fantasy too).

At the opposite end – but extremes sometimes meet – is Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.'s, *Slaughterhouse 5*, which draws together various preoccupations from a

number of his earlier novels. By devices like making their main characters into marginal characters in this novel, Vonnegut tries to shape a fictional universe of its own – a trick stemming from Balzac (or indeed any coherent mythology) through a great number of others, including SF writers. What powers – gods or laws – rule the Vonnegutian universe? As nearly as one can make out, a sardonic Chance caring exceedingly little for human values. His heroes – here Billy Pilgrim – accept what it brings factually, but remain stoically removed from its absurdities. The privileged Vonnegutian protagonist is an observer, existing in his own imaginative time, who walks through life's horrors like a Dostoevskian Idiot, opposing to it a weary resilience. Billy Pilgrim actually ends up in an American Valhalla, a zoo in another star-system where he is mated with a Hollywood sex-star, and the precognition of which sustains him in his Babbitt-like everyday life (in describing which Vonnegut is at his best).

Ever since *Player Piano*, Vonnegut has been trying to escape SF typing, waxing rather sarcastic about the SF of the 1940s personified for him in "Kilgore Trout" (and having apparently absorbed little SF since). He has in the process made some telling points about life in the SF ghetto, but one wonders whether he hasn't simultaneously spent much ingenuity on building his own ghetto halfway between Sinclair Lewis and Kilgore Trout. I confess I like *Player Piano* better than *Slaughterhouse 5*: it might have been less original, but it was also less weary and certainly no more faddish. Where Paul Porteus could still rebel against Ilium, Billy Pilgrim can only oscillate up-time and down-time from it – an "inner emigration" if there ever was one. On the level of craftsmanship too, I fear Vonnegut is becoming repetitive within his canon and even within this novel (e.g., the tag "So it goes" grows increasingly irritating); *Slaughterhouse 5* leaves an impression of thinness compared to the earlier novels. I wish I knew how many Nebula votes were cast for it simply to embarrass the author with an SF prize.

Traditional SF continued extolling individual ingenuity and decency when faced with a hostile set-up (Harry Harrison's *Captive Universe*), or *Homo sapiens*'s ingenuity and toughness when faced with other races (Gordon Dickson's *Wolfling* and *Spacepaw*); or going in for Andersonian sword-and-sorcery-which-is-really-a-superrace's-science (Keith Laumer's

And Now They Wake). Whether of the liberal, middle-of-the-road or blood-and-berserker variety, the trouble with this type of SF is that its ethos was fresh and solutions interesting from *A Connecticut Yankee at King Arthur's Court* to the mid-1950s. By now, it has receded – as any *ancien régime* will – into comfortable regions perilously close to fairy tales and juvenile literature. The exciting action is elsewhere, with a group of writers emerging in these last years whom I would like to dub the "New Left" of SF. This has to do with sensibility and world view much more than with personal politics: Delany, a new Brunner, and Silverberg come to mind as examples, also a rejuvenated old master – Fritz Leiber, in his much underrated *A Specter Is Haunting Texas*. The common denominator of this rather disparate group is that they question the Individualist ideology: that is, whether a stable system can be built upon a sum of individual, Robinson-Crusoe greedinesses as the measure of all values. They are dealing with a post-Berkeley, Vietnam War society of youth revolt, mass media, and big city breakdowns. As different from, say, Asimov or Pohl and Kornbluth, whose masters of thought were Mill and Spengler in philosophy of history, Dreiser or Sinclair in literature, and Franklin Roosevelt's "fireside chats" on the radio – they deal with their changed environment in a perceptive form for which Joyce, Dos Passos, Malraux, Faulkner, Brecht, and intermedia in art, or Marcuse and Mao in philosophy of history, have already happened.

Bug Jack Barron explicates this tendency most immediately. It has the "New Left" intoxication with verbal interfaces and the cynical look at power realities (Bester blazed these trails), the touchingly naive post-*Lady-Chatterley* scenes of sex as the last refuge from the wicked world, the confusion between social regeneration and perceptive reorientation, and so on. It is not only Jack Barron's life which is wrapped up in his mammoth TV-show; the disenchanted, "baby Bolshevik" politics of the book finally also float off into game theory and showbiz rather than into revolutionary action. There is undeniable power in the central strand of the book, the account of Jack Barron's oscillation between the love-game and the power-game in a world of tigers. There is also some overwriting and a characteristically faulty ending. But Spinrad has managed to transfer the "baby Bolshevik" atmosphere into SF; he has significantly contributed to

restating the central preoccupation of SF with emerging human relationships in terms of the present young generation.

John Brunner's *The Jagged Orbit* does something similar in terms of a cooler, more European and constructivistic tradition, with "camera eye" sequences rather than formless overflows of impulses. He also postulates a USA of the near future that has rejected rationality and cut off the Blacks in segregated "Bantustans," but his political economics of corporate power are far sounder than Spinrad's Faulknerian melodrama of titanic heels. Brunner's protagonist is "the socialization of paranoia" rather than one outstanding character. Instead of the self-questioning of radical Individualism, he portrays the breakdown of its ethos "each for himself and the devil take the hindmost" taken to its logical extreme in the mad "mental hygiene" of Elias Mogshack and universal private armament. A seed of rebirth in the final union of Xavier Conroy (neglected reason) and Lyla Clay (abused emotion) is the only hope of overcoming the schizophrenia of humanity vs. society – "Division Street, Earth" as Brunner calls it (a subplot has the same resolution for Matthew and Celia Flamen). Where Spinrad's basic model of the near future is showbiz, Brunner's is a grimmer, and to me more convincing one of a huge armed madhouse, of which showbiz (personified in Mikki Baxendale and Flamen) is just an intensified offshoot. Better planned and less "gutsy" than Spinrad's, Brunner's novel deals with a similar dystopian future by a similar refusal to despair.

Thomas Disch's *Camp Concentration* model – a Dantesque underground concentration camp for criminals and political prisoners who are, during a US nuclear and ABC war in Malaysia, used as guinea pigs for disease-induced mental experiments – is both a deterministic madhouse of "ethically neutral" natural sciences, and the theater for conchie writer Louis Sacchetti's comedy. The inmates perform *Dr. Faustus* as well as a rejuvenation put-on, Sacchetti writes *Auschwitz: A Comedy*, and there is an incomplete rebirth at the end closer to an SF gimmick than to Dante. Except for that, it is a fine piece of work, baroquely convincing in its erudition, poetry, and manic-depressive tone, all of them well motivated by the nature of the experiment. Though Disch declined the Nebula nomination, he must be put right up there with Brunner and Spinrad.

I have remarked that these last three novels have each some defect in the denouement: the impact of the children's glands, the switch in the robot Madison-Gottschalk, the *deus ex machina* "mind reciprocation" are all slapdash devices permitting formal terminations rather than thematic solutions. This collective Achilles's heel cannot be accidental: the outcome of a novel is the time by which puzzles and tergiversations are impossible, the place where truth will out. But the "New Left," though unique in its desperate realization that human politics are everybody's destiny, was as a rule still groping for clear ways out from the political mess it is battling. A writer sharing its sensibility has to shop around for some improvised, as often as not mystical, way out.

The most memorable novel of the year is Ursula K. Le Guin's *Left Hand of Darkness*, and I am happy that it received the Nebula Best Novel award. It is a parable of coexistence and understanding, both personal and political, told as the illumination of Genly Ai, first envoy of the galactic union to the planet Gethen. By the end of the novel, aided by the courage and insight of his Gethenian partner Estraven, Ai's political problems have become meaningful as personal insights into the dialectics of death and life, darkness and light (light being "the left hand of darkness"). The different social structure and culture of the Gethenians is caused by their bisexuality and monthly sexual cycle with about six days of "heat." These periods of overriding passion – in any of which any individual may, according to influences of mutual attraction, become male or female – alternate thus with longer periods of erotic indifference. There is no rape and no war. Most importantly, there is no male or female role or expectation of it: "One is respected and judged only as a human being." Even the unusually well-trained and well-meaning Ai has great difficulties in accepting this "appalling experience."

This all adds up to a truly civilized parable on human love and trust independent of (though deeply concerned with) maleness or femininity. It is developed through a series of rich and beautifully controlled binary oppositions, operating on all levels of the novel. Any petty personal and political loyalty – including Ai's one to the galactic union – pales before the higher love of humanity: such is the message of the book, condensed in the interpolated little politico-personal legend of Arek and Terem,

which one might call the "Romeo and Juliet of Gethen." The deceptive simplicity and lucidity of Mrs. Le Guin's writing matches the quality of human relations shown. Even the opposition between the collectivistic, police-ridden bureaucracy of Orgoreyn and the moody, loose unpredictability of Kerhide which is fast converging with the Orgoreyn model, though slightly suggestive of an USSR-USA juxtaposition, is far superior to the ugly Cold War sneers of "Us" and "Them" in the manner, say, of Laumer's Retief stories. When one compares *The Left Hand of Darkness* with other 1969 offerings on a similar theme, say (in ascending relevance) with A. Bertram Chandler's *Spartan Planet,* Hughes Cooper's *Sexmax,* Edmund Cooper's *The Last Continent*, and even Anne McCaffrey's competent and appealing *Decision at Doona* – Mrs. Le Guin's qualities blaze forth. In a way, she could be claimed as a major victory of the "New Left" in SF: for a literary stream is really victorious only when it has permeated the center of its genre. Mrs. Le Guin is less flashy and abrasive than the "New Left," but her novel shares their unsentimental warm concern with collective humanism. Saying "yes" to new rather than just "no" to the old values, she is right at the center of SF relevance, allowing us to recognize our central concerns through a detour of estrangement. Her novel speaks – to use her words – to our "strong though undeveloped sense of humanity, of human unity. I got quite excited thinking about this."

Finally, I want to mention a book which I should theoretically dislike, based as it is on astrological metaphors, but which seems too significant to be passed over in silence. This is Piers Anthony's *Macroscope* (Avon), a bulky novel starting from a new instrument of knowledge and expanding into wondrous, almost Stapledonian or Doc-Smith-like adventures of a spaceship crew singlehandedly saving the galaxy. If this sounds indigestible, let me say it is served with a bewildering succession of very well-composed sauces derived from the doctrine of correspondences. But the correspondences are followed through with impressive consistence, ingenuity, lyricism, and exuberance (too much exuberance, one sighs around page 400). If the book is symbolistic, it is at least vividly and precisely so; and it says some worthwhile things about our savagery and responsibility, personal and collective. The first task of the critic, cutting across any theories he might cherish, is still to respond to a powerful imagination. Piers Anthony may

be a name to watch – especially should he turn to liberating rather than hierarchical metaphors, to alchemy rather than astrology.

All in all, it has not been a bad year. Compared with the seven lean years after the Sputnik, when only isolated flashes relieved the gloom of Anglophone SF, one could even say that it was rather good. Perhaps we are seeing the beginnings of a widening sense of formal and social urgency, not to mention of some elementary logic. Should such subversive ideas spread, we might even live to see a really good year. Never say die.