CHAPTER 5

Against Common Sense: Levels of SF Criticism (1972)

Note 2020: This was a review article commissioned by The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction; I forget how this came about. It appeared with a heading identifying the books discussed thus: – More Issues at Hand, William Atheling Jr. [James Blish], Advent, $5.00; The Universe Makers, Donald A. Wollheim, Harper & Row, $4.95; Science Fiction, What It's All About, Sam J. Lundwall, Ace, 95¢; The Mirror of Infinity, Robert Silverberg ed., Canfield Press.

No literary field or genre, let alone SF, exists without criticism – oral or written, gossipy or scholarly, and so on. This chapter in reviewing SF criticism will take it as axiomatic: (1) That criticism ought to clarify its premises so that they can be evaluated, improved, and if necessary demolished; criticism which is conscious of its methods is – other things being equal – more valuable than impressionistic gossip and bio-bibliographical chronicling (though the latter is always indispensable and the former sometimes amusing); (2) That methodologically explicit criticism, that is, criticism which deals with the theory of SF – of how its forms developed, what its basic devices are, how its models are organized, and what sociological function they fulfill – is particularly imperative for this genre, in order to identify it and so make rational inquiry into it possible in the first place. As Atheling-Blish puts it, "before we undertake to shoot down bad SF, we ought to know what kind of animal we are gunning for."

Definitions and basic views of this field are still a dime a dozen. Is Tolkien SF? Or the later Ballard? Or *Stranger in a Strange Land*? Or Kafka's "Penal Colony" and Borges's "Library of Babel"? Or sword-and-sorcery? Is SF a sub-variety of romance? Of myth, fairy tale, and fantasy? Of utopia, adventure story, and scientific popularization? All or none of these? Criticism

which proceeds to book-length syntheses and overviews without explicitly discussing any of the above questions is prejudiced blather. Blather, because in the present highly complex state of the genre, where currents, generations, ideologies, and forms are intermixing and mutating into each other, it is as impossible to approach any view of it without carefully developed instruments as to advance cancer research without electronic microscopes: the naked eye won't do it. Prejudiced, because people like Moskowitz (one of the incarnations of gossipy positivism in Anglophone SF criticism) tacitly assume they have solved all the questions by divine afflatus, which turns out to be some makeshift construction based on their personal common sense ("Don't we all know what SF is? – such and such?" – well, no Virginia; we do not). Such people proceed then to write books giving equal prominence to Wells and Murray Leinster, presumably because both are read by a lot of SF fans. Their basic assumption is, thus, that on the whole whatever is, is right – diametrically opposed to the basic assumption of all criticism and scholarship, which is that whatever is, is questionable. Instead of personal common sense, we need a communal uncommon sense: we need a critical community doing what scientists call fundamental research.

In brief, we need many more reliable bibliographers and reviewers; but before all we need "meaty" critics willing and able to attack the fundamental historical and formal parameters of SF. Once these are at least approximately established, writing monographs about writers and forms, historical surveys, and cross-references between SF and anything else you wish (science, sociology, or futurology) is a matter of application and field prestige. Both application and prestige seem to be rapidly rising in the universities and outside of them; but the "meaty" critics are still very few, though one is heartened by signs that some are appearing.

In fact, critics engaged in fundamental research into the intimate structures of SF can be counted on the fingers of two hands. Here is the list compiled in my graduate seminar at McGill University (very similar to ch. 2 of *More Issues at Hand*, the best introduction to book-length SF criticism I know of): J.O. Bailey's pioneering *Pilgrims through Space and Time*, which stops before Heinlein and Asimov, and never synthesizes the atomized aspects found; Kingsley Amis's equally pioneering *New Maps of Hell*, witty and illuminating but even more resolutely one-sided and

one-dimensional; challenging glimpses in three essays from *The Science Fiction Novel* edited by Davenport, and half a dozen essays from *Modern Science Fiction* edited by Bretnor; Damon Knight's *In Search of Wonder*; and of course, "Atheling's" *The Issue at Hand*. There are also scattered prefaces and books on particular topics such as Richard Gerber's *Utopian Fantasy*; most notable among them are Mark R. Hillegas's *The Future as Nightmare* and Alexei Panshin's *Heinlein in Dimension*, lucid and of general methodological validity. Nonetheless, as the yield of twenty years of organized thinking in the two world empires producing most SF and most critics, it is really slim.

In this dearth, *More Issues at Hand* is an event to be met by cheers. Blish is, with Knight and a few others of smaller output, that rare SF critic occupying the vital middle ground between applied and fundamental research. He is equally at ease with concrete texts and closely argued generalizations or overviews going beyond the text. He discusses Heinlein by focusing on the first-person narrator-protagonist, which is not only formally but also ideologically the key to Heinlein the radical individualist (strange how Heinlein's weaknesses and strengths elicit the best in SF criticism, including Panshin, Knight, and the best essay in Moskowitz's *Seekers of Tomorrow*: perhaps his qualities are central to American SF of his period). Blish notes that US magazine SF has not qualitatively changed between 1940 and 1961, since it did not take the logical next step of infusing genuine emotion or music of language into SF (pp. 60–61), the basic reason being SF readers' response, the immature fannish standards (p. 14). He demonstrates incisively and persuasively that some of the all-time commercial favorites like Merritt (ditto C.A. Smith and Lovecraft) are unreadable (ch. 7); he shows with chapter and verse that a magazine like *Astounding-Analog* was by 1957 mostly unreadable – and I would add almost wholly so by the mid-1960s; and he includes in that analysis a rare self-criticism in SF that is both seriously meant and making some sense (Chapter 8).

A few judgments of Blish's I would demur from. I think his introductory disparagement of historical and evaluative criticism is justified only because by evaluative he means a critic who has ahistorical absolutes in mind, and by historical one "who detects trends and influences" between literary works or a work and its time. But if we – more properly – call that

critic evaluative who applies standards of his own to a work regardless of what its writer or readers believe, then the whole of Blish's criticism is evaluative: there is no way to say that Sturgeon is a better writer than Merritt without extrinsic evaluation. Similarly, Blish concedes that the historical critic is necessary when readers are unfamiliar with the artistic conventions or preoccupations employed. As a devotee of Joyce, he knows that most significant works in our time – and certainly all significant works of SF – employ partly unfamiliar themes and conventions: the present has become history too, not to be accepted as given but explored as unique. In fact, Blish is engaged throughout this book not only in evaluative but also in historical criticism. Often, he goes about it quite explicitly, as when he convicts Heinlein of he-man neo-Romanticism; or when he identifies parts of *Venus Plus X* as being in Southern Agrarian taste (a brilliant stroke and possibly a key to what is weak in Sturgeon); or when he sketches a convincing sociological explanation of SF pessimism in the 1960s (p. 103).

His mistrust of "historical," or better, positivistic criticism sometimes leads him to overreact, for example, when he questions the canonical position of Cyrano in SF by asking the "common sense" question, which SF writer read him (p. 26)? The answer to that is Swift, who adapted some of Cyrano's basic devices and approaches in *Gulliver's Travels* (the full filiation runs More-Rabelais-Cyrano-Swift): and of course, almost all SF could be called "Sons of Gulliver." All this is independent of positivistic who stole-from-whom snooping, of chronological common sense. Culture and literature develop by creating and breaking down paradigms, just as science does (see T.S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*): and SF has not broken the Swiftian paradigm yet.

Finally, Blish has a certain number of privileged concerns and wavelengths, and he can, though very rarely, be curt with people who do not at all fit into them. This is the case with Judith Merril and Samuel Delany in his chapter 10. Miss Merril is one of my favorite people to disagree with, but her evolution seems more complex than sketched here, and far from over; for example, her essay "What Do You Mean: Science? Fiction?" is one of the most useful views of US SF extant. Blish's antagonism to Delany is perhaps as extreme as the hosannas of the admirers; for me, Delany's is the most interesting name in his age group, a writer of major promise in

sensitivity and intelligence who has yet to justify that promise. My strongest disagreement with "Atheling," though, is chapter 5, where, laudably impatient with the proliferation of hollow SF, he created his own book out of what *Rogue Moon* might have been had it not been vitiated by Manhattan cocktail-party Freudianism – and then proceeded to praise it to the skies. I am not sure he fully believed it himself: there is an anxious tone of special pleading here, evident in the telltale notes or the sleight-of-hand glossing over of immature human relations in the novel. Evidently, its hoped-for horizon of "Death and the Beloved" – beautifully identified – hit a responsive chord in Blish, so that he shut his eyes to Budrys's "thin execution" (as he says of a story by the same author twenty-five pages later).

However, my objections are quite secondary in face of the value of *More Issues at Hand*. Besides the chapters on criticism, Heinlein, Merritt, and magazines, there is a masterly sketch of Sturgeon's many-sided loves, from erotics as a theme to his love affair with the English language, and the especially admirable chapter 9 on "Science-Fantasy and Translations." This is one of the best pieces of ethico-esthetical hygiene in a long time, on a par with Knight, Lem, or Joanna Russ's article on "Dream Literature." The "science-fantasy" section shows why this is a non-viable hybrid and insists that, whatever the writer's view, he must respect basic cognitive possibilities if he pretends to be writing science-anything. Ascending from the particular to the general – and thus to what I have argued is the most valuable level now – the "translations" section points out that a contamination of literary models (when fairy tales, Westerns, etc., are dressed up as SF) leads to third-rate writing. Such is also the conclusion of the most interesting critics outside the US and Britain, Foyster, Rottensteiner, and Lem; I can only say Amen. Finally, the chapter on the New Wave gives the best sketch yet of that movement. Though I indicated some of my reservations, I subscribe to everything Blish says about blind "mytholatry," adding that it is simply a flight from history into the treacherous wombs of the past and the unconscious – a complementary reaction to Gernsback-Campbellism, as red is complementary to green. Finally, I regret "Atheling" did not develop some of his aperçus: that no author in American SF has more than one masterpiece (p. 77), that there are difficulties in hybridizing SF and the detective story (p. 110), that critical terminology is not surface

rhetoric but basic (p. 117), etc. Dare we hope that his third critical book could be a piece of sustained writing instead of a gathering of issues that happened to be "at hand"? I think Blish owes that to us and to himself.

The Universe Makers operates on a different level. It is a personal credo and memoir, an approach to SF publishing, fandom, writers, and themes by a well-versed man for whom SF is "a world philosophy" (p. 3). I do not believe that any literary genre can stand in for a philosophy, but Mr. Wollheim's SF is resolutely linear, extrapolative, futurological, and progress-oriented; which is, of course, a "philosophy" or more accurately, ideology. Mr. Wollheim's definition of this genre hinges on its being motivated as scientifically possible, which makes the same novel SF or Fantasy by changing "one paragraph or two" (p. 13); what I think of this rule of thumb can be seen in the discussion of Blish's Chapter 9, but it has been the relevant commercial – that is, social – context of "reservation" SF. As for Mr. Wollheim's sub-classes, he himself acknowledges that most writings pertain to several of them. One could continue with objections: research on Verne has shown him to be a much more complex and varied writer than is usually believed, with a definite ethos and symbolic system, as well as a "social content." Or, one of the less desirable by-products of Mr. Wollheim's admirable onward-and-upward view of SF as a genre essentially in harmony with man, society, and science is that its worth is judged by its sales: this may be tried commercial ideology, but it really does not, for example, refute Knight's strictures on van Vogt (p. 46). But such cavils do not truly matter here – Mr. Wollheim rejects any claim at writing a history of SF or at being interested in esthetics. Although he gives us interesting glimpses of many works, the main thrust of the book is toward explaining the optimistic or scientistic view of US SF from 1920 on. *The Universe Makers* is, together with some articles by Asimov, the best introduction to that view, its ethos and pathos.

No wonder the nova in or pivot of Mr. Wollheim's man-made universe is Asimov's *Foundation Trilogy*. This is eminently logical: if SF is thought of as an empire (a publishing empire?) developing by gradual colonization of unknown reaches of space starting from a center, then Wells is the center, Stapledon the first scout to reach the rim, and Asimov's Trilogy not only the final unification of that empire but in its very form

the supreme model for it. Galactic Empire equals SF, and all slumps, renegades, or misguided New Waverers are but the Mule arresting its post-Depression recovery in vain. I have always felt psychohistory is Asimov's coy (Rooseveltian?) substitute for a deterministic pseudo-Marxism as understood in the incredibly ill-informed Depression USA, and Mr. Wollheim happily confirms this (pp. 40–41 – he is not better informed about Marxism today either). Indeed, when reading Wollheim or Asimov one is often reminded of some more sophisticated Soviet comments on the glories of Science in the service of all-conquering Man: "socialist realism" and "capitalist realism" (if I may coin a phrase) are quasi-utopian cousins, at least. *The Universe Makers* is a very readable account of "A Life for (such) SF," and it will remain a sociological treasure-trove of data and attitudes for a long time to come. I wish we had more books of this kind – by Campbell, Boucher, Gold, Pohl, etc.; and indeed the second book Wollheim hints at. Only when all data and attitudes are public possession can this all-important social context be properly understood, and the development of SF interpreted.

Mr. Wollheim supplies a cover quote to Sam J. Lundwall's *Science Fiction: What It's All About* which claims it is "as fascinating as a dozen interplanetary epics." True, the book uses a similarly "epic" sweep or pan across dazzling SF vistas, but its ambition is greater – no less than touching all the significant past and present bases of the field. Mr. Lundwall's main strength lies in his wide knowledge of SF, and his weakness in the cheery rapidity of his agile skimming. Most fundamental questions are elegantly dodged. For example, Mr. Lundwall has conflicting views at various points of the book on whether SF is or is not a branch of fairy tale and myth. Or, his knowledge of European as well as US literature enables him to see the importance of utopias and their quest for power as one major source of SF; but his commonsense pragmatism leads him to equate utopias with Mickey Spillane's escapism (I'm really not making this up – pp. 49–51)! He too approaches SF by themes and not by differential structural models. This is not good enough: it makes him treat, for example, *Flatland* in the same breath with *Pinocchio* and *Castle of Otranto* as a "magic unreality." Many of his capsule summaries are economical and just (I like especially the one on Tolkien, p. 111), and he has a nice line of wit – say, in the

pointed remarks on women in SF. One could continue praising things such as his glance at the institutional context of SF. Or, alternatively, one could make a long list of objections to his individual judgments, to bad gaps (*The First Men in the Moon* and several other works by Wells do not make the index, nor do stories by Campbell, Clarke, Knight, and Blish, Bester's *Tiger, Tiger*, Borges, etc.) and mistakes ("Cor Serpentis" is by Yefremov, not Lem; the assessment of the Strugatsky situation on pp. 236–37 is factually wrong; etc.). But more importantly, Mr. Lundwall's view of SF seems to me shapeless: it marries Poe and Heinlein, or – in the same chapter! – Asimov and Bradbury. This can be commended as tolerance, but it does not tell us "what SF is about."

Indeed, my main critique of the book is that it has a subtitle "What It's All About" – assuming the "all" it would have to prove. Despite the superior breadth of Lundwall, who has read de Sade, knows several languages, and is a movie buff, this assumption is a wittier variant of Moskowitz's pragmatism: these writings are "all" read by consumers of commercial publications sporting the name of SF, so they "all" must be SF; packaging is taken for the product. This readable book (though the names and quotes from foreign languages are in dire need of proofreading) assembles much useful data and provokes many chuckles. Regrettably, the eminently capable Mr. Lundwall has not used his unique position at the crossroads of US SF and European traditions to fulfill the promise in the subtitle. Wollheim managed to write both for fans and students; Lundwall's book is for fans rather than students of SF.

The Mirror of Infinity is "A Critics' Anthology of SF," where thirteen SF writers, academics, and critics at large in happy juxtaposition introduce as many stories, popularizing SF while contributing to its understanding. This most useful idea is very successfully executed. The editor has assembled a group of critics who are at their best stimulating and enlightening, and at worst harmless. They – or the editor – have picked good stories to present, covering the entire Anglophone SF range from Wells and Campbell to Ballard. Three cavils: first, Borges is the lone foreigner. Second, there are some notable US omissions, such as Pohl and Simak. Third, even the erudition of Professor McNelly did not convince me that Ellison's story is anything but classical Fantasy, nor the elegance of Mr. Panshin that "All you

Zombies–" is Heinlein's best story. But a score of eleven out of thirteen is astoundingly near perfect for any anthology. It is the most useful resource book of its kind for a classroom. Mr. Silverberg is to be congratulated on it. I can only hope some publisher will be enlightened enough to follow it up with "A Critics' Anthology of International SF."