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As the Wall Crumbles

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For some time in literary circles-or circles with literary pretensions it has been possible to acquire virtue automatically by uttering hostile noises at the mention of science fiction, with the vehemence of the noises in direct proportion to the noisemaker's ignorance of the subject. I regret to report, however, that this particular path to meritorious eminence is becoming beset with pitfalls for the unwary. There are people around who have read the stuff and are just militant enough about it to challenge such casual remarks. Something is going on here, of which this change in behavior is a symptom. The wall between sf and mainstream, between fans and critics, is coming down. It is not coming down all at once, like the walls of Jericho in that old sf tale about the sun standing still. Oh, no. It is being dismantled brick by brick, and the whole job may never be completed. But holes are appearing here and there, and communications are being sent back and forth. From my point of view, as an "academic critic" (a man who likes to talk about books and accepts money from universities for doing so) the great benefit of all this is that the literary riches inside the wall are becoming more accessible. And a lot of what's in there is too good and too important to be left to the "fans." The rest of the world needs it too.

When people ask me, more or less politely, "What's so hot about science fiction, huh? "-and they do ask, more and more, all the time I answer, more or less politely, "Literary quality

and ideas that we need to hear." That's the short version of my= reply. The long version might fill a book-and as a matter of fact it has. Another version, of intermediate length, will occupy these few pages in the tenth volume of Nebula Award Stories. Most readers of this volume, of course, don't need to be told that sf is interesting. Their interest is no doubt the thing that has brought them to the volume in the first place. But even for the initiate I may be able to put this interest into a broader perspective, as an aspect of the whole literary situation at the present: time, which is itself an aspect of the entire system of literature.

If we think of all fiction as a kind of separate territory within the domain of literature as a whole, we can see that this territory. is subdivided into smaller sections, sort of like pieces of real estate. The divisions are fictional (like real-estate divisions) and: subject to revision, though some of the major boundaries, like that between realism and fantasy, seem based on natural features. First of all, the boundaries are continually shifting, and no two surveys ever coincide exactly, though there may be some agreement from one to another. Also, the value of different" tracts is subject to change from time to time. What we have learned to call science fiction was a neglected comer of the' territory of fantasy until the past century, a kind of swamp or bog,,,, that defied productive use. But after Wells and Stapledon and a--. few others blazed some trails through it, people went to work: draining, clearing, building, mining. It will never look like Kansas (as Dorothy observed to

Toto), but too many folks have struck oil on this land now for the establishment to continue ignoring it. Land values are going up, and the critics, publishers,. and academic investors are trying to buy in while they can. In fact, sf is doing a land-office business.

There you have it, in the form of a fable, but let me also put it in more explicit and academic terms. Science fiction is attracting ` the attention of the literary establishment because it has qualities that are needed, which other forms of fiction cannot provide. Some of these qualities are purely literary. They have to do with the ability of sf writers to tell stories. Pleasure in fiction is rooted in our response to narrative movement-to story itself. This is a fundamental kind of pleasure, almost physical, and closely connected to physical sensations like those of motion and sex. Above all, our sexual experiences exhibit a narrative structure: a beginning, middle, and end-a tension, climax, and resolution. .
Much modem fiction in the "mainstream, " especially that most admired in academic circles, has encumbered this pure fictional movement with such a weight of analysis and subtle refinement of consciousness that as fiction it has become overburdened. We may read it with interest and enlightenment, but we do not get from it the pure fictional pleasure that lies at the heart of our need for narration.

One result of this situation is that many people may resort, more or less guiltily, to "lesser" forms of fiction-outside the mainstream of serious literature-for a narrative "fix, " a shot of joyful storytelling. A world in which values are clear (with heroes and heroines, villains and villainesses), and action is fast and furious, has extraordinary appeal for people enmeshed in lives of muddled complexity. But such fiction may be so empty of meaning, so far removed from the concerns of experience, that we feel more and more guilty about indulging in it. Thus, what most people need in fiction is something that satisfies their legitimate desire for the pleasures of storytelling, without making them feel ashamed of having some childish and antisocial impulse. We need recreational texts, good stories that leave us refreshed without any feeling of guilt. We need stories that are genuinely adult in their concerns and ideas while satisfying our elemental need for wonder and delight.

Science fiction at its best answers this need better than any other form of contemporary fiction. And it does more. The ancient epics satisfied this same need by telling stories about the distant past: an age of heroes and monsters. And the great novels of the last century satisfied this need by telling dramatic stories of ordinary people in present time or the very recent past. And both of these great literary forms, the epic and the novel, also served to make the values of their culture explicit and available for their audiences. These fictions were a moral force as well as an entertainment. But, as it happens, the major moral problems of our age are centered in the future. The great questions are how we shall leave the earth for future generations, how we shall shape our environment, our genetic heritage, and our intellectual imperatives, so that our descendants may live decent lives. Of all our present actions, especially those involving large political decisions about population control and food distribution, or the spread of scientific knowledge and technological skill, we must ask not whether our ancestors would approve, nor even whether

it is right for us now, but how it will affect them-the unborn, unconceived, uncreated. Thus, to act morally we need to know them, which means to imagine them under various aspects, as they might be if this should happen or that. We need, as Olaf Stapledon tried to tell us, to act in the light of our best knowledge, to imagine the world as being better than ourselves might see it. To do this is to raise the consciousness of the whole human race.

For the past half-century or more, the single group of people who have done the most to achieve this beautiful and perhaps impossible goal have been the writers of science fiction. Only they, of all men and women of letters, have made a real and consistent effort to give us living images of the future consequences of present actions. Only they, by conceiving parallel and alternate universes, have helped to sharpen our perception of our own world as a thing not necessary and inevitable but brought into being by the actions of innumerable men and women. "Things might be otherwise!" That is one of the great messages of science fiction. And another one is, "If you keep on doing this, they will get worse." These messages are optimistic in the best sense. They restore our faith in human power to act in the world and remind us that we have some control over our collective destiny. But they also remind us that some choices come only once; some doors, once opened, may never be closed; some processes, once begun, may never be reversed.

As the epic claimed the past and the novel the present, science fiction claims the future as its literary domain. It offers us imaginative feedback on the future consequences of present: actions. It does other things as well, of course, not all of them important or admirable. It offers us idealized versions of fascist states. It gives us the same old adventures, over and over again, with only the costumes and scenery altered. And in various ways it fails frequently to live up to its high potential. But so does every other form of fiction that has ever existed. The "mainstream," too, has been choked with sewage from time to time, and in ancient days there must have been plenty of bad epics being sung that have not survived the winnowing of the ages. But sf should not use this as an excuse. At present, this form of fiction is so alive, so accessible, that its writers and readers may form an uncritical club devoted to mutual admiration. Hence the real value that Hugo and Nebula awards have held over the past
decade or so. They suggest that there are standards, even within the protective walls of the sf community. And these standards are not low. In the area of full-length fiction, for instance, the past twenty-five years of Hugo Award winners compares very favorably to the list of Pulitzer Prize winners over the same quarter of a century. But it is beginning to get more difficult to tell which books should be considered for which award, as the dividing wall comes down and the territory is reorganized.

The new "discovery" of sf by the academic and critical community is going to have some effect on the whole situation of science fiction. I hope that ultimately some good will come of this, in the form of better rewards and recognition for sf writers. At some point in time academic critics like myself may be able to persuade the major reviewing media, like the New York Times Book Review, to treat the strongest Arks of sf as they would treat any other valuable works of fiction, instead of relegating all sf to a "Department" as if it were mere entertainment. It pains me that major efforts of the recent past, like John Brunner's The Sheep Look Up and Ursula K. Le Guin's The Dispossessed, were not reviewed seriously on the front page of the Book Review. So the battle is far from won, though victory is sure to come, ultimately.

On the other side of the question, we may well ask whether the academic and critical "discovery" of sf may have any bad side effects. It is likely to produce a rash of unnecessary anthologies for classroom use, but this is not a serious problem. It may also perhaps inevitably-lead writers into a greater solemnity, so that their writing begins to resemble more closely those mainstream fictions that it has been defined against. As the mainstream borrows concepts and literary strategies from sf, science fiction itself is in some danger of accepting the cumbersome properties of realistic narration discarded by mainstream fiction. When fiction gets too analytical, too

introspective, too big and heavy, it goes the way of the dinosaur.

But the literary situation will not stand still. And for those who have loved sf as a sub-literary kind of fiction, there is no real alternative now. The ghetto walls are coming down whether the ordinary fan wants them to or not and whether the literary critics want them to or not. The strength and vitality of science fiction, which is bursting with new ideas, vividly imagined by a host of

talented young writers, is in such marked contrast to the exhausted situation of the novel of psycho-social analysis that the machinery of the marketplace alone would be sufficient to bring sf to the center of our literary consciousness. The contrast between the two situations is so great that an enormous potential for exchange of energy has been established. Already there has been serious leakage from sf into mainstream fiction. Writers like Golding, Burgess, Lessing, Burroughs, Barth, and above all Pynchon have borrowed techniques, strategies, and ideas from science fiction. And there has been some exchange in the other

direction, too. Brunner, Dick, Disch, Delany, and Le Guin, for .example, have all written passages that, except for their settings in future or alternate locations, could be taken for parts of realistic or naturalistic novels. At some point, probably in the very near future, it will no longer be possible to maintain the distinction between "mainstream" and "sf"-because sf will have taken over the center and become the mainstream.

And what will this do to those pleasant aspects of ghetto existence which have made the world of sf such a remarkable place to inhabit, where fans and writers mingle at conferences, where fans become writers themselves, without losing their ability to admire the work of their fellows, where costumes and high jinks share the spotlights with serious reports on the future of the biosphere-what will become of all this if sf and mainstream merge? Honestly, I don't know. But I'm worried. The fact that the world of sf has had enough tolerance for freaks in Star Trek T-shirts to rub elbows with philosophers of the future has been important as well as charming not just because tolerance is a great virtue presently in short supply but because the vitality of sf as a literary form has been based in part on this vital interaction between fans and writers, philosophers and freaks. No writers in the world have had the kind of immediate and vigorous feedback from audiences that sf writers enjoy. And this must continue if sf itself is to retain its vitality. Still, as the wall around the sf ghetto is dismantled, and the major talents in the field receive more recognition from the larger world of letters, the spirit of comradery which was based in part on isolation and a sense of common indignities shared is bound to diminish. Perhaps, in the future, sf itself will become a tired form of fiction, self-conscious and cumbersome, ready to be pushed aside by some vigorous upstart who has gained strength while protected by another wall around another ghetto. This is the way the system of literature works, and if we who love science fiction can't accept the processes of change, then we love it in vain and haven't learned one of the great lessons it teaches. The "popular" forms of literature always grow in strength until they are ready to challenge the mainstream forms and displace them from the center of attention and acclaim. Right now, sf is moving in on the mainstream and is ready to take over from the traditional novel. Let us who love science fiction for once turn our eyes away from the future and concentrate on the present. So what if some day sf itself will be old and tired. Now it is young and strong and about to win big. For those who have suffered the indignities of the ghetto, there are some scores to be paid. This is going to be fun.