

Science Fiction and the Renaissance Man

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It's always been a policy of mine to measure a man's opinions against his background, and if I don't know what he does for a living, I ask him. This, by the way, is a heinous crime on the continent. A Parisian or a Roman will discuss his intimate sex life with you, his religion, politics, prejudices and sins—but he is offended if you ask questions about his business. Here in the States, it's the other way around; which places me in an awkward position because I intend to discuss both the religion and the business of science fiction. I wish I could discuss the sex, too, but there isn't any sex in science fiction . . . a deplorable state of affairs.

First, a little about myself so that you can have a yardstick with which to measure my opinions. I'm forty-three years old, married, no children. I was born and raised in New York City . . . on The Rock, as we say . . . meaning on Manhattan Island itself. We have an informal and make-believe snob club of real native New Yorkers. You ought to hear us sneer at the lesser breeds: "My dear! She was born in Brooklyn and raised in the Bronx. She's positively a tourist!"

I was educated in New York public schools; was a science student at the University of Pennsylvania; then a law student at Columbia University. But I was obsessed with the ideal of the Renaissance Man, and spent half my time electing courses in music and art, and slipping my disc winning varsity letters. Naturally I bit off more than I could chew, and never made high enough marks to go on with science and law . . . for which the doctors and lawyers of America have never stopped thanking me. Those were the grim specialist days of the early thirties, before the University of Chicago and St. John's at Annapolis taught our educators to respect and encourage versatility.

I remember I used to rush from the comparative anatomy lab to the art studio, and stink out the life class with a stench of formaldehyde and cadaver. And when I left qualitative analysis for my class in composition and orchestration, bringing with me the sweet scent of sulphur dioxide—! Oh, I tell you, those were miserable days for an amateur Charles van Doren . . . and for his friends, too.

After finishing school, I drifted into writing. Drift is the only word. Put any man at loose ends and he invariably starts to write a book. As a matter of fact if you put a man in jail he also starts to write a book. I don't know if this parallel is significant, but I do know that there are many authors I'd like to see in jail.

The writing that I did was, of course, science fiction. Like every other chess-playing, telescope-loving, microscope-happy teenager of the twenties, I was racked up by the appearance of *Amazing Stories* magazine, Mr. Gernsback's lurid publication. The ideas of fourth dimension, time travel, outer space, microcosm and macrocosm, were fascinating, and I read and loved science fiction until its dissolution into pulp fiction in the thirties disgusted me. It was not until John Campbell rescued it from the abyss of space pirates, mad scientists, their lovely

daughters wearing just enough clothes to satisfy the postal authorities, and alien fiends, that I was able to go back to it. Loving science fiction, steeped in it, and imagining that it was easy to write . . . isn't it astonishing how many people are deceived in this . . . it was only natural that I should attempt to write it. I sold half a dozen miserable stories by the grace of two kindly editors at Standard Magazines who enjoyed discussing James Joyce with me and bought my stories out of pity. When they went over to *Superman* comics, they took me with them. We hadn't finished *Ulysses* yet. Those were the early days of comic books and they needed stories desperately. I had to forget James Joyce, buckle down and learn to write while they trained me, hammered me, bullied me unmercifully.

But I became a writer, by God! They trained me so well that they lost me. I went over to radio and spent seven years writing and directing clambakes like "Charlie Chan," "Nick Carter," "The Shadow" and so on. When the switch to TV came, I went over to television for another three years, and wrote scripts until I began to dream in camera shots. During all these years I never read science fiction. I had neither the time nor the inclination for it. Make a note of this point. It's important. I'll get back to it later.

The rest of my background is short and hectic. I was contract writer on the Paul Winchell show when Horace Gold phoned me. I had known him casually in the Squinka days . . . Squinka is the name Manly Wade Wellman invented for the scenarios we used to write for comic books . . . Horace had just started editing *Galaxy* and asked me to write for him. I laughed hysterically. I knew only too well what a dreadful science fiction writer I'd been; and anyway I was putting in a ten day week on my comedy show . . . they're always a bitch to write . . . and hardly knew what science fiction meant.

Horace kept calling every week or so, just to chat and gossip, I thought; but before I realized what that fiend was up to, he'd maneuvered me into the position that somehow I was obligated to write something for him. Have you noticed that there's a kind of Machiavelli who can always put you behind the eight-ball? You're minding your own business, and the next thing you know you're busting a gut to do something for the fiend while your common sense is screaming: "What am I doing here? How'd I get into this?"

The upshot was, I got fired off the Winchell show, went out to our house on Fire Island, and spent the summer surf-fishing and writing *The Demolished Man*. I'd read no science fiction in ten years; I'd written no respectable science fiction in my entire life; I was convinced I was writing a dog. The reception of the book surprised and flattered me. But I felt it was unfair to the professional science fiction authors. I was (I still am) a science fiction amateur.

After that I wrote a dozen stories for Tony Boucher and then another novel for Horace Gold: *The Stars My Destination*.

That brings me up to date. I should add that I've tired of TV now and am making another transition to contemporary novels and plays. I earn my bread and butter as a columnist for *Holiday* magazine and *McCall's*, and writing an occasional Spectacular. Other available data: I'm six-one; weigh two hundred pounds; am a manic-depressive; a powerful surf-fisherman; collect 19th century scientific instruments, am always a sucker for a pretty girl, especially if she wears glasses, am emotionally left of center in my politics—and am still trying to live up to my ideal of the Renaissance Man.

One of the most difficult things to teach people outside the arts . . . and in the arts as well . . . is that the important ingredient in the artist is not talent, technique, genius or

luck—the important ingredient is himself. What you are must color everything you do. If what you are appeals to your public, you'll be successful. If what you are communicates with all publics through all time, you'll become an immortal. But, if your personality attracts no one, then despite all crafts and cleverness, you'll fail. Perry Lafferty, who directs the Montgomery Show, sums it up bitterly. Perry says: "I'm in the Me business, is all."

Actually this isn't limited to the arts. It extends all through life, and one of the milestones in the maturation of a man is his discovery that technique with women is a waste of time. No matter how he dresses, performs and displays himself, it's only what he really *is* that attracts.

Hamlet, speaking to the player king, suggests that the goal of the actor should be to hold the mirror up to nature. Actually, no matter what any man does, he holds a mirror up to himself. He continually reveals himself, especially when he tries hardest to conceal himself. All literature reveals authors and readers alike . . . and especially science fiction.

The history of science fiction reflects this. The early *Amazing Stories* magazine was padded with reprints of the work of mature men like H. G. Wells and Jules Verne. This, in part, accounted for the early success of the magazine. Gernsback broke in a half dozen writers who were maladroits as fiction writers but mature experts in one aspect of popular science or another. The maturity of these stone-age science fiction writers was another source of the early success of science fiction. Still another source was the maturity of their themes which were in no way original. Most of their ideas had been waiting around for years for exploitation. Does any reader know the publication date of *Flatland*, by A. Square? Certainly it was centuries before the expression "a square" took on a more sinister meaning.

Within five years science fiction exhausted the reprint field and the prefabricated concepts, and, alas, fell into the hands of the pulp writers. It was then that the great decline set in because science fiction began to reflect the inwardness of the hack writer, and the essence of the hack writer is that he has no inwardness. He has no contact with reality, no sense of dramatic proportion, no principles of human behavior, no eye for truth . . . and a wooden ear for dialogue. He is all compromise and clever-shabby tricks.

For nearly ten years science fiction wallowed in this pigsty while the faithful complained pathetically. The fans pleaded with the editors. They also berated the editors, never once realizing that the inwardness of the writers was to blame . . . not their stories, which were sometimes well-made, with every clever-shabby trick known to the craft . . . but their empty inwardness. Many empty men wrote clever, gimmicky stories that still left the readers feeling dissatisfied. They had nothing within themselves to communicate.

Now you mustn't confuse inwardness with purpose or a message. When I say a man has nothing to communicate, I don't mean he has no message to preach, no. I'm referring to a quality we sometimes call character or charm . . . a point of view, an attitude toward life that is interesting or attractive. And remember that everybody has character, in varying degrees. Also remember that only the unique individuals have charm for everybody else. How often does an Audrey Hepburn come along? Or, if you prefer, a Rosemary Clooney? Or, for the ladies, a Rex Harrison? No, most of us must be content with a Charm Quotient . . . a CQ . . . of less than one hundred.

Back in the thirties we used to wonder why we enjoyed Doc Smith's space-operas so much. We usually felt guilty about it. Now I realize that Doc Smith had charm for us then.

There was something inside him, reflected in his stereotype blood and thunder, that appealed. How many times, writing and directing my own shows, have I seen the same miracle transform actors . . . miserable technicians with no acting talent at all, and yet exuding a charm that was worth all the deficiencies. Fellow-sufferers, if you ever have the choice between a high IQ or a high CQ, I urge you to settle for charm.

John W. Campbell, Jr. was the man who rescued science fiction from the emptiness. Now Campbell is a strange man . . . from all reports. I only met him once, when he was embarking on his Dianetics kick, and my experience with him was laughable and embarrassing. But strange though Campbell may be, he's a man with a forceful inwardness which immediately shone through the pages of *Astounding Science Fiction*. I think in Campbell's case, the inwardness was character rather than charm.

Later came Horace Gold of *Galaxy* and Tony Boucher of *Fantasy and Science Fiction*. Like Campbell, Gold and Boucher are strange men; also like Campbell, both have a forceful inwardness which is reflected in their magazines. And remember, there aren't so many men who have forceful inwardness, strange or otherwise.

Campbell gave science fiction character; Gold and Boucher broadened its horizons. The hack writers began to disappear; the honest craftsmen who had been forced to hack in order to conform were able to do honest work again; new writers emerged. Science fiction began to create new concepts because new minds, minds in depth, so to speak, were attracted to it. It began to appeal again because new personalities, personalities in depth, were communicating through the stories . . . Heinlein, Kuttner, van Vogt, Sturgeon, Asimov, Kornbluth. These men fascinated us . . . but how much, really? Now I come

to the heretical part of this essay. All traditionalists and royalists should be cautioned before reading further.

Do you remember my telling you that during the ten year period when I was writing and directing shows, I lost all interest in science fiction? Let me describe how and why.

Picture to yourself a Monday in the life of Me. I'm writing a show called . . . oh, say, "Secret Service." Monday morning at 9:00 o'clock I finish a 48 hour drive without letup to complete my script for the show three weeks from today. The network has been badgering me for the script which was due last Friday, and threatening to hire another writer. I call a messenger service to rush it down to the network and suffer because it's the only copy. I was too rushed to type a carbon.

The client on "Secret Service" calls to tell me that the script for the show two weeks from today has been unconditionally rejected by his wife. I fight desperately to salvage something out of the disaster. The advertising agency calls to tell me that next week's show must be postponed because of an advertising promotion they've dreamed up, and I have to get a new script written in three days. Also it must integrate with the promotion. The casting director of "Secret Service" calls to announce that one of the bit-players for tonight's show is out with a virus and they can't recast and rehearse on short notice. Can I write the part out?

I go down to the network and rewrite, fighting haggardly with the director, a compulsive man who can't feel comfortable unless he's dominating all situations, but who can't respect a colleague unless the colleague fights him to a standstill. I walk a neurotic tightrope with him while I try to make sense out of a script minus a character.

In the studio during rehearsal I discover that a dramatic turning point in the story can't be done because of a jurisdic-

tional fight between the stagehands' union and the carpenters' union. I'm a strong union man myself, but at this moment I would cheerfully set fire to the A. F. of L. But after losing a fight with the shop stewards, I restrain my fury and try to come up with something valid and dramatic to replace the device that only took me two weeks to figure out.

At dress rehearsal, the director and cast begin screaming at each other and at me. "You let us down!" they wail. If a show stinks, it's the writer's fault. If it's a success, it was despite the script. When in doubt, persecute the writer. I'm too weary to defend myself, and besides, the client's wife, a bright woman who knows she could write brilliantly if she only had the time, is busy discussing Kafka with me. I loathe Kafka, but I have to be polite. I even have to listen.

I drink too much after the show, out of relief and hysteria. I hear rumors that we're going to be cancelled, and I suffer. I go home and find a letter from my accountant. I owe more money to the government. I'm too overwrought to sleep. I take two sleeping pills and settle down with a science fiction magazine . . . And make the strange discovery that I'm not a damned bit interested in a make-believe story about an inventor who tries to ride a rocket to the moon and only succeeds in destroying the Earth, and worries that now he's Adam but there's no Eve to help him repopulate the world, only he does it all by himself anyway.

In the entertainment business, life is constant conflict . . . all tension and dynamics, which is why we consume so many Miltowns, Nembutals and head-doctors. But all life is conflict, tension and dynamics. You must go through what I go through; perhaps not so often, perhaps not continually, but it happens to you. The point I'm making is this: When I'm most at grips with dramatic reality, I have the least interest in

science fiction. I suggest the same is true of yourselves . . . of everybody.

This doesn't hold for all literature. I don't mean that when one is closest to reality one gives up all reading entirely. On the contrary, some books become more necessary than Milton's when one is deeply embroiled in conflicts. What I'm suggesting is this: that science fiction is a form of literature palatable only in our moments of leisure, calm, euphoria. It's not Escape Fiction; it's Arrest Fiction. I use the word "arrest" in the sense of arresting or striking attention . . . to excite, stimulate, enlarge. No one wants to read Arrest Fiction when he's already excited; we can only enjoy it when we're calm and euphoric.

Euphoria is a generalized feeling of well-being, not amounting to a definite effect of gladness. I use it here with particular reference to adults. To be blunt, only a man who's known adult troubles can know the meaning of euphoria. Young people—and I was a young person myself once—know all the agony of youth and experience moments of relief; but that isn't adult trouble or adult euphoria.

Young people often withdraw into unadulterated escape fiction, including science fiction. They also engulf science fiction along with everything else as a part of the omnivorous curiosity of youth. Arrested adults . . . that is, arrested in development, also withdraw into unadulterated escape fiction, including science fiction; but we're not discussing the youthful and/or withdrawn readers of science fiction here. We're discussing the mature fans who enjoy science fiction just as they enjoy hi-fi, art, politics, sports, escape fiction, serious reading, mischief and hard work . . . all in sensible proportions, depending upon opportunity, season and mood. I contend that science fiction is only for the euphoric mood.

I think the strongest support for my contention is the fact

that women, as a rule, are not fond of science fiction. The reason for this is obvious . . . at least to me. Women are basically realists; men are the romantics. The hard core of realism in women usually stifles the Cloud Nine condition necessary for the enjoyment of science fiction. When a woman dreams, she extrapolates reality; her fantasies are always based on fact. Women's magazines . . . and I speak as a *McCall's* writer . . . devote themselves to fantasies about love, marriage and the home, not contra-terrene matter. And the writers who appeal to them are those writers whose inwardness reflects an attitude about love, marriage and the home that is attractive to women.

What, then, is the inwardness of science fiction writers that appeals to fans when they are calm and euphoric? Let's immediately dismiss all notions of serious social criticism, valuable scientific speculation, important philosophic extrapolation, and so on. These are the pretences of science fiction and they're really worthless. But since I know you won't let me dismiss them as externals without an argument, I'll speak about them for a moment before I go on with euphoria.

So far as the philosophic contribution of science fiction is concerned, I cite the gag that made the rounds last fall about the couple that'd been married fifty years. You all know it, but I'll tell it anyway; I've got you trapped. They were interviewed and the husband was asked the secret of the happy marriage. He said: "When we got married we decided that my wife would make all the little decisions, and I'd make the big decisions." The interviewer asked: "What are the little decisions?" "Oh, what apartment to rent. How much rent to pay. Should I keep my job. Should I ask for a raise. What school to send the children to . . . Things like that." "And what are the big decisions?" "Oh . . . who to run for president. What to do about the Far East. Should we help Slobbovia."

Translating this into science fiction, it's my claim that when it comes to social criticism, philosophy and so on, science fiction is usually making the big decision. It knows little and cares less about the day-to-day working out of the details of reality; it's only interested in making the big decisions: Who to run for galactic president? What to do about Mars? Should we help Alpha Centauri?

So far as the scientific contribution of science fiction is concerned, I'm going to tell you the Pshush Story whether you like it or not. During the war, an Admiral was going through some personnel records and on one man's sheet he found the entry: Civilian Occupation-Pshush-Maker. In those days everybody was looking for a secret weapon, so the Admiral called the man in and said: "It says here you're a Pshush-Maker. What's a Pshush-Maker?" The man said: "I can't explain; I'll have to show you, sir." The Admiral said: "What d'you need?" The man said: "Fifty-seven men and a corvette."

So they gave him the fifty-seven men and the corvette, and he spent three months sailing around the world gathering rare materials . . . copper, silver, platinum, rock crystal, aluminum ore, and so on. Then he gave a top-secret demonstration up in Baffin Bay. The Admiral was there and more top brass, and they watched the fifty-seven men put all those materials together into a huge contraption on the stem of the corvette. Then they lit blow-torches and heated it white hot. And then they pushed it over the stern . . . and it went: PSHUSH!

The science in science fiction is usually Pshush-Making. We gather rare materials . . . the theories, ideas and speculations of genuine scientists . . . we put them together in strange contraptions . . . we heat them white hot with the talent and technique of the professional writer . . . and all for what? To make a huge Pshush! If the Admiral had gone into a serious

conference with his top brass to discuss the military value of Pshush-Making, it would be no more ridiculous than discussing the serious scientific aspects of science fiction.

But there's a silver lining . . . or should I say a Pshush-Lining . . . to the cloud, because it's my contention that this is the essential charm of science fiction. I said before that men are the romantics. Unlike women, we can't find perpetual pleasure in the day-to-day details of living. A woman can come home ecstatic because she bought a three-dollar item reduced to two-eighty-seven, but a man needs more. Every so often, when we're temporarily freed from conflicts . . . euphoric, if you please . . . we like to settle down for a few hours and ask why we're living and where we're going. Life is enough for most women; most thinking men must ask why and whither.

In England men have the pub for this. You can spend a few hours in your local, talking up a storm with other men about why and whither. Alfred Doolittle, Bernard Shaw's dust-man in *Pygmalion* is the supreme example. In France they quonk all day in the street cafes. In Italy they have the coffee bars, and in Vienna the weinstubes. Here in the States the thinking man has nothing. After the joys of the college bull-session (Is it still called bull-session?) there's nowhere to go. Nobody talks in American saloons; everybody's too busy trying to imitate Steve Allen or Arthur Godfrey. And anyway, too many American men are compulsives, too driven by their hysterias to be capable of euphoric talk. What other outlet does the thinking man have in his hours of reflection but science fiction?

No . . . If you love me and if you love science fiction, deliver us both from all implications of scientific significance. Deliver science fiction from any necessity to have purpose and value. Science fiction is far above the utilitarian yardsticks of

the technical minds, the agency minds, the teaching minds. Science fiction is not for Squares. It's for the modern Renaissance Man . . . vigorous, versatile, zestful . . . full of romantic curiosity and impractical speculation.

Haven't I just drawn a picture of the inwardness of the science fiction writers who appeal to you? What have any of them contributed to modern science, philosophy, sociology, criticism? Nothing, thank God. They've been writing Arrest Fiction, which strikes your attention, excites, stimulates and enlarges you when you're in the mood to be excited and stimulated . . . when you're in the euphoric mood and eager to be excited, stimulated and enlarged.

When I want an education, I don't go to Heinlein, Kuttner, van Vogt, Sturgeon, et alios. I go to grim texts by experts and learn while I work and suffer. But when I want the joy of communicating with other Renaissance Men, I abandon the Squares and go to Heinlein, Kuttner, van Vogt, et alios. These are the men I love to speculate with in my local pub, while my wife is home counting the laundry.

Let me be specific. I am, as I indicated, an amateur in science fiction. My real writing trade lies in other fields. I've only met a few of the leading science fiction writers, but their characters bear out my argument in their work. Bob Heinlein's extrapolation of the future of our civilization is ingenious, imaginative and worthless. But Bob has a dry, wry approach to life that is reflected in all his writing and is a joy to be with. You can say what you like about his science, but the fact remains that he's the Will Rogers of science fiction, and an ideal companion for a pub.

Ted Sturgeon is an imaginative, sensitive poet who can write about human emotions with so much power that he's wasted in science fiction. His science is plausibly makeshift;

his fiction is unique. His understanding and approach to human beings . . . his CQ, if you please . . . makes him too touching to be endured. Like Heinlein, Sturgeon has within himself too much to be squandered on a form of fiction which, by its very framework, is dedicated solely to our hours of euphoria.

What about me? Alfie Bester. Now we get down to basics. What made *The Demolished Man* an appealing book, whereas the stories I'd written ten years before were appalling drivel? The answer is: Ten years. I was ten years older; ten years more experienced. Ten years of hard work at grips with hard reality crystallized something within me and gave me an attitude. I didn't realize it then, but ten years had turned me from a boy into a man.

I think I understand what you liked about *The Demolished Man*. Outside the tricks and gimmicks which any good craftsman can come up with . . . what you liked was what was within myself; my attitude toward people and life. It wasn't my thinking that you liked, no matter what you tell yourself. I can't think my way out of a telephone booth. It was my formed emotional attitude that communicated with you. I told you I was emotionally left of center in my politics; the same is true of my attitude toward people.

I believe that everyone is compelled, but no one is bad. I believe that everyone has greatness in him, but few of us have the opportunity to fulfill ourselves. I believe that everyone has love in him, but most of our loves are frustrated. I believe that man is the unique creation of nature, but am capable of believing in an even more perfect creation. I believe that every hope and aspiration, and every weakness and vice that I have, I share with all my brothers in the world . . . and all the world is my brother.

All this is emotional, without validity and without value to anyone looking for scientific data and rules to regulate his life. But I feel I'm the kind of guy you wouldn't mind spending a few hours with in a saloon, talking up a storm about anything . . . Exactly the way you'd like to spend time with a Heinlein or a Sturgeon. That's the appeal of *The Demolished Man*. Not what I say, but what compelled me to say the things I said.

I speak to you now as a brother in a rather unique position; I'm capable of honesty. The only things that stand between a man and honesty are the symbols of his youth which must be fulfilled and discharged. A hungry man can't be honest. I've been fortunate enough to have purged myself of most of my adolescent obsessions. I can afford to be honest today because I've been lucky enough to have had all those things that can only be obtained through dishonesty. I've had them and I'm through with them. Only integrity remains. Now then:

Should we take science fiction seriously?

No more or less than we take television seriously.

Why?

Because both are of limited framework; and any art form of limited framework calls to itself limited artists and is worth only limited consideration.

What is the purpose of art?

To entertain and/or move the audience.

Can science fiction entertain?

Yes, when we're in certain receptive moods.

Can it move us?

No.

Why?

I can only answer that question by committing the heinous

crime of discussing your literary religion. And the best way to begin is to mention Ignatius Donnelly, the patron saint of American readers . . . although very few know his name. Donnelly wrote a book called *The Great Cryptogram*. Does that ring a bell? It was Mr. Donnelly who tried to prove that Bacon wrote Shakespeare.

He's the patron saint of American readers because few American readers really believe that Shakespeare wrote Shakespeare. Few Americans can comprehend or understand artistic genius. Faced with unique achievement in the arts, Americans always poke around behind the scenes, looking for ghost writers, the unknown collaborator, the hidden power behind the throne. It never seems to occur to them that once they've found the hidden power, they'll come up against the same problem all over again, and have to poke around ad infinitum.

Now it's interesting that Americans never feel this way about science. No one has ever written a book trying to prove that somebody else invented Edison's inventions. Nobody ever digs up Morse's grave to see if he really invented Marconi's wireless. There's an ancient superstition that an unknown Negro writes Irving Berlin's music, but no one dreams that a Japanese invented the airplane for the Wright brothers. Oh, it's true that scientists sometimes get into priority hassles, but no American is ever incapable of comprehending scientific genius.

The reason is that we're a nation of amateur mechanics. We're simpatico to science and invention, and can identify with mechanical genius. Four Americans out of every five are nursing a secret invention, and take this dream quite seriously. I'm still convinced that da Vinci is a popular painter with us mainly because of the appeal of his beautiful mechanical drawings. I'm also convinced that photography became a passion

with us because it made it possible to simulate creative results through purely mechanical means.

I hope you don't know the story about the two amateur photographers who met in a darkroom. One said to the other: "Gee, I saw a pathetic sight in the park today. It was an old beggar, with a long white beard and shaggy hair. His clothes were torn; he was dirty and starved; and the hand he held out to me looked like a claw." The second amateur said: "What'd you give him?" "Oh, a fiftieth of a second at f 3.5."

In a sense this is the American attitude toward the human scene. We're interested in aperture and shutter speed, time and temperature control. We're interested in the mechanics of the human being . . . his anatomy, morphology and psychology; the statistics of his life, death and mating habits . . . but we're not really interested in human beings as humanity . . . as fellow creatures. It's this fact, by the way, that accounts for the perennial popularity of the so-called situation comedy in stage, screen and television. I don't have to point out that situation comedies concentrate on the mechanics of a situation rather than the human beings involved in it.

Since art, literature and poetry are concerned with the human being as a fellow creature . . . almost a part or reflection of ourselves . . . we're not very sympathetic to them or to their great craftsmen. This is why we find it difficult to understand the artistic genius. It is also why we prefer our science fiction to concentrate on the mechanics of life and leave human beings alone.

Science fiction rarely, if ever, deals with genuine human emotions and problems. Its science ranges from the 20th to the 50th century A.D. Its characters usually remain back in the 16th century A.D. They are drawn in the two-dimensional style of the Morality Plays, and they face problems of horse-opera

depth. When science fiction attempts comedy . . . which is the essence of humanity . . . it only succeeds in belaboring itself with empty bladders.

Any art form which studiously avoids human reality as a subject can't hope to move its audience. Science fiction can entertain and intrigue us, stimulate and enlarge us with its novel ideas and ingenious extrapolations, but it can rarely move us to pity and terror. There are exceptions, of course . . . but in general, science fiction suffers from high emotional vacuum.

You may argue: "Granting what you say is true, what difference does that make? Must literature move its readers to pity and terror to be respectable? Isn't there such a thing as escape, or arrest-fiction?"

I answer: "You're absolutely right. There is such a thing as escape fiction, and I'm not pretending to pass on the respectability of any form of literature. I'm merely trying to place science fiction in terms of authors, themes and readers, with emphasis at this point upon the reader."

A drama professor of mine once asked our class what we thought was the central fact, the essence of the theater. We suggested the stage itself . . . the actors . . . the author's script . . . He told us we were wrong. The essence of the theater is the audience. The audience shares a play in its making. The theater is never a living thing until it is shared. Anyone who's ever been to the theater or worked on stage knows this is true. You must have experienced that sharing communication between cast and audience that brings the theater to life. This sharing is the crucial reason why radio, television and motion pictures tire an audience, whereas the theater does not. You can't communicate with un-dead things, they exhaust you. Only communication can inspire and energize.

There is, alas, no such communication between novelist and reader, but there is a form of it existing between a school of literature and its followers. The school of science fiction and its fans do communicate with each other, influence each other, and even to some degree by telepathy, or diabolic possession . . . but I know it does happen.

I've had this in mind all the while I've been speaking so frankly about science fiction; not . . . so help me . . . in order to preach a message and turn you into crusaders for the betterment of the craft. I wouldn't know which direction was the direction myself. No. I've been quonking like this in hope that it will enable us to understand ourselves and share each other a little better . . . authors and readers alike.

Science fiction, like all the arts, like every living act of man, is a mirror of ourselves. If we can understand science fiction, without delusions, recriminations, attacks and defenses, we may be able to understand ourselves . . . and vice versa. That old Renaissance cat that I'm always dangling before my conscience tried to understand without judging. We should do the same.

What are we, then, in terms of science fiction? What is science fiction in terms of us? Let me piece the picture together for you; and remember that it's only a part of ourselves. It's a picture of a passionate young romantic who runs away from his soul and focuses his passion on the objective world . . . a romantic with the courage to entertain daring and complex concepts, yet who is afraid of the perplexities of human behavior . . . a romantic full of curiosity, yet curiously indifferent to half the marvels around him . . . a romantic; vigorous and honest in his speculations, yet often deluding himself as to the value of his speculations . . . a charming romantic, but a withdrawn romantic . . . a Renaissance romantic, but a neurotic romantic.

This is my picture of science fiction, of you, of myself. If you don't like the portrait, you can argue with me, of course; but I'd suggest instead that you use a line reported by S. N. Behrman. When Behrman was a boy in Providence, Rhode Island, one of the most eminent men in the city was Dr. Bradley, president of Brown University. One afternoon, Behrman took a trolley car in town and saw Dr. Bradley sitting down the aisle. In front of the doctor stood four orthodox rabbis, examining the embarrassed gentleman and arguing furiously in Yiddish whether this was the great man or not. Finally they turned to Behrman and one of them asked: "Is that man the brilliant scholar, Doctor Bradley?" Behrman said it was. The rabbi started in disappointment and then said: "Well . . . If that man is Dr. Bradley, then anybody could be anybody."

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