**Introductory Essay**

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Every fantasy writer is a sorcerer and each has his chosen field of magic. Each has the recipes he blends most skillfully.

My own novels, for example, happen to be satires with a touch of what Kingsley Amis has called “the comic inferno,” such as A Specter Is Haunting Texas and The Silver Eggheads, or tales of danger and the shadows, such as Conjure Wife, The Wanderer, The Big Time and Gather, Darkness! When I write of love, it is a bright, dangerous and lonely thing, a diamond in the dark. I mention this much about myself to indicate the basis of my knowledge.

And I say that the field to which Robert F. Young has many times proven his claim is that of romantic love. The magic potion of which he is master creator is the love philter. Not harsh, uninhibiting alcohol, reality-cooling weed, nor mind-blasting LSD, but a far more delicate yet paradoxically more potent essence.

In the novel Magic, Inc. Robert Heinlein’s brisk and charming elderly witch, Mrs. Jennings, explains:

“I just had to set a love philter off the fire—that’s what took me so long.”

“I’m sorry—”

“'Twont hurt it to wait.”

“The Zekerboni formula?” Jedson inquired.

“My goodness gracious, no!” She was plainly upset by the suggestion. “I wouldn’t kill all those harmless little creatures. Hares and swallows and doves—the very idea! I don’t know what Pierre Mora was thinking about when he set that recipe down. I’d like to box his ears!

“No, I use Emula Campana, orange, and ambergris. It’s just as effective.”

Such, figuratively, is the delicate, heady philter that was sipped by Nicolette and Aucassin, by Heloise and Abelard, by Juliet and Romeo, by the Girl From the North Country and Bob Dylan, and which Robert F. Young dispenses in these often drear current days.

Yet his stories are not set in the Middle Ages, but chiefly in the far future, when spaceships traveling faster than light have carried mankind and girlkind to planets circling a thousand stars: new homes of civilization, lairs of decadence, pioneer planets, all with evocative names—Forget Me Not, Dior, Iago Iago, Black Dirt, Golden Grain, Potpourri, Ciel Bleu—the bright litany is long. It is also a future haunted by military dictatorship, by commercialism run riot, by hearts hardened against beauty, innocence, and any life that can’t outgun the hunter.

In our times the story of romantic love is passe, supposedly. Although I first read Young’s “The Dandelion Girl” in The Saturday Evening Post, it remains ironic that most of his stories have made their initial appearance in magazines of science fiction and fantasy rather than in magazines for lovers, and for girls and women. Perhaps the editors of the last believe that their readers are chiefly interested in heroes with big bank accounts, secure yet promising positions in blue-ribbon companies, or who are at least making their entry in Playboy’s bright, cynical sports car and junior-executive, ribbon-necktied uniform of charcoal gray, rather than a poet’s rainbow tatters or an idealist’s shining armor. It is a ridiculous paradox that a writer’s stories should be too romantic to suit those who are hucksters to women. And it is also a pity, yet one for which lovers will shed no tears.

For romantic love today has at most put on a mask—a small black velvet mask framed by two Cupid’s bows aiming up and down—and speaks softer than ever, even wordlessly. Among others, and whether they (especially the young men) know it or not, and in spite of all their paganism, or perhaps because of it, the hippies are honoring and seeking romantic love. Why else the guitars, short robes and pageboy’s hair? Why else the slim girls in their simple shifts, hair straight, longer still, a fine blonde, brown or black reedy curtain to be parted for the eye of a nymph?

Nor have the truly great novelists forgotten. In Jules Romains’ The Seventh of October, the 27th and final volume of his panoramic Les Hommes de Bonne Volonth (along with Wassermann’s Kerkhoven trilogy the last of the great, clear-visioned novel series, before obscurantism and grimness and the psychedelic jangle began closing in), Pierre Jallez, poet and journalist, centralmost of the multi-novel’s heroes, speaks to Francoise Maieul, his destined true love, whom he has been unknowingly seeking ever since her birth:

“I had a vision—I can’t tell you exactly what it was, but it had to do with a man and a woman, lovers, walking slowly on the canal bank, with their arms round each other’s waist, with thoughts for nothing, for no one else, oppressed by the whole weight of the universe, and knowing that they were so oppressed. It wasn’t that they were defying the universe so much as that they were conscious of a mood of exaltation produced in them by the nearness of unplumbable depths, by an almost religious sense of the miracle that they and their love represented in the swirling nothingness of the infinite . . . . ”

Or, from the penultimate volune, Francoise:

“Imagine two persons, meant to meet from all eternity, but born, by some foolish twist of fate, a hundred years apart . . . .

This is the sort of amorous impasse which Robert F. Young delights in solving, especially if the hundred years are a thousand, or else a thousand light-years.

“Solving” is an important word here, for love stories with happy endings, if they are not pure cliche, are problem-solving stories. And problem-solving stories are the finest that science fiction has to offer us.

Downbeat stories, tales of social degeneration and atomic disaster, for instance, and almost all supernatural-horror stories, leave us at best with a thrilling shudder and a warning. The characters meet their problem, fail to solve it, and perish, unless the writer relents and lets one or two stumble dazedly away.

Howard Phillips Lovecraft, this century’s profoundest writer of supernatural-horror stories (perhaps necessarily at its best a downbeat form), has written both of science-fiction and weird tales, “All that a marvel story can ever be is a vivid picture of a certain type of human mood. The moment it tries to be anything else, it becomes cheap, puerile, and unconvincing.” And I find myself wondering whether, even with the word “marvel” omitted, writers as great as Chekhov and Katharine Mansfield might not have agreed with him. Of course Lovecraft’s definition leaves out character exploration and development—and Lovecraft might have answered, “They are out of place in a marvel tale,” or “In exploring my characters in such a story, I explore only myself, my mood.”

Perhaps problem-solving is the more important element which Lovecraft did not see (fatalists and pessimists tend to be blind to it), or perhaps he dismissed it as “cheap and puerile"—the element which rescues people, worlds, or in the case of Young’s stories, lovers. Young’s youth and girl can be dashing toward inescapable destruction, infallible doom, yet he almost always finds some ingenious way to pluck them to safety at, or even after, the last moment. Or they, or one of therm, discover the way and find the strength. See especially in this volume such tales as “L'Arc de Jeanne,” “Wish Upon a Star,” “On the River,” and “Little Dog Gone.”

Young has the skill and willfulness to snatch a happy ending from the core of the blast of an atomic bomb.

Since he writes of honest lovers Young, like Tolkien, concerns himself with what is noble and youthful in mankind, rather than what is old and mean. Tolkien’s bosom topic is friendship and the comradeship of adventurers. Young’s is romantic heterosexual love. And sometimes when he writes wistfully of the long voyages between planets and the delight of touching earth again, he makes one recall Thomas Wolfe’s nostalgia for lonely night trains and locomotive whistles sounding across the prairie.

Of Young’s lovers, as in life, the girl always seems a little more important, representing the glamor and the ideal, while the young man carries the desire and the loneliness. Young portrays her with unfailing delicacy: her hair is like “a handful of sunlight.” “Her cheek was cold as moonlight, soft as a flower.” “She was light and shadow, leaf and flower; the scent of summer, the breath of night.”

Is this jejune? I think not. Pierre Jallez describes Francoise Maieul in this fashion,

“She’s like a lovely flame,” he thought, “a black flame that draws to a white tip . . . or a Florentine statue walking at my side with just a touch of flamelike undulations. She is my little living flame, my poem in flesh and blood.”

Romantic writers have a shared poetic language unchanging as moonlight, the ripple of water, the whisper of wind in the grass, and the pulse of young blood.

Young always finds the right word for his girl. If she be Russian, as she is in one of these tales, he refers to her as “dyevitza,” a slimmer and more delicate word than the oftener seen “dyevooshka.”

Young uses words skillfully, even cunningly, though never at the expense of clarity. Note the many uses “arrow” and “arc” are put to in the story “L'Arc de Jeanne.”

And when the story demands, he becomes a prose poet fine as Ray Bradbury, but with a difference. Consider this passage from “To Fell a Tree,” perhaps the best story in the book.

Good morning, madam, I’m in the tree-shade business. I deal in rare tree-shades of all kinds: in willow-shade, oak-shade, apple-tree-shade, maple-shade, to name just a few. Today I’m running a special on a most unusual kind of tree-shade newly imported from Omicron Ceti 18. It’s deep, dark, cool and refreshing—just the thing to relax you after a day in the sun—and it’s positively the last of its kind on the market. You may think you know your tree-shades, madam, but you have never known a tree-shade like this one. Cool winds have blown through it, birds have sung in it, dryads have frolicked in it the day long—.

There has been little romantic love, beyond cliché, in science fantasy. One recalls some episodes by H. G. Wells, particularly the haunting novelette, “A Dream of Armageddon.” Stanley Weinbaum decorated his ground-breaking interplanetary adventures with romances, and there is Lester del Rey’s memorable “Helen O'Loy,” besides several tales by Bradbury. Zenna Henderson and several others have done good work.

But it was left for Robert F. Young to develop to the full this area of fantasy and science fiction, the latter of which is—make no mistake—the literature of the future, if only because it takes into account modern technology and the impact of scientific advance on our lives, topics pointedly avoided by more highly touted writers, from Faulkner to Malamud to the 1967 Nobel winner Asturias. Fiction at its best involves all of society, all of the world—see Dickens, Tolstoy, and once more Romains—not merely some cultural or subjective backwater, some swirling “inner space.” Perhaps, as Sherlock Holmes said, Niagara can be deduced from a drop of water, but my admiration is for the man who tackles Niagara, figuratively going over the falls in a barrel to do it.

Here is a good spot to note that romantic love is by no means Young’s sole futurian preoccupation. He is a staunch conservationist, taking a firm stand against the pollution and waste of natural resources. This is one of the elements that makes “To Fell a Tree” such a great story, and one should not miss in it the fine counterpoint of the buffalo. Young is also an enemy of conformism, TV education, the growing power of the Pentagon and the population explosion, where every nation knows the tragic results of uncontrolled breeding and world-wide industrialization, yet no nation has the nerve to call a halt.

But even when Young deplores the engulfment of the countryside with tract housing, it is particularly because this will deprive lovers of the forest bowers, hilltops, brooks, lonely beaches, and other spots uncontaminated by exploitation for their meetings. He would, I am sure, sympathize with the sentiments of the nature-loving hero of Rogue Male, that towering adventure novel by Geoffrey Household:

My arrival was noticed only by a boy and girl, the inevitable boy and girl to be found in every dark corner of a great city. Better provision should be made for them—a Park of Temporary Affection, for example, from which lecherous clergymen and aged civil servants should be rigorously excluded. But such segregation is more easily accomplished by the uncivilized. Any competent witch doctor could merely declare the Park taboo for all but the nubile.

Yes, it is “the inevitable boy and girl” and their happy love that are the center of Young’s fictions, whether the pair begins as youth and waif, or tramp and stripper (as two and a half of Young’s heroines do in this book) and whether their final Eden be a whole new planet or the jobs of waitress and short-order cook in the same dingy restaurant.

As you read this book, think of

. . . the lovers, their arms

Round the griefs of the ages,

for whom Dylan Thomas made all his poems. Think of Thisbe and Pyramus, Chloe and Daphnis, Beatrice and Dante, Bess and Porgy, Jessica and Lorenzo, Annabel Lee and Poe, Elizabeth Barrett and Robert Browning, Shelley and Mary Wollstonecraft, Catherine Earnshaw and Heathcliff. Think of Edna St. Vincent Millay writing

Small chance, however, in a storm so black,

A man will leave his friendly fire and snug

For a drowned woman’s sake, and bring her back

To drip and scatter shells upon the rug.

or,

Not with libations, but with shouts and laughter

We drenched the altars of Love’s sacred grove,

Shaking to earth green fruits, impatient after

The launching of the coloured moths of Love.

Still better, turn this page and let Young tell you.