Guest of Honor Speech, Ozarkon 2

Roger Zelazny

Now, I really don’t have a title for my talk. The bases for it are some comments by some other writers in the area, to the effect that Science Fiction writers and Science Fiction fans have a sort of “ghetto” mentality, that Science Fiction is apart from the main current of literature, and that this is really a false notion because we are as much a part of the main current of things as any popular modern novelist we see reviewed in the New York Times Literary Supplement, where we are very seldom seen. They say that Science Fiction writers should attempt to divorce themselves from this notion and realize that they are as much a part of the mainstream as anyone else.

I happen to disagree with this. I believe that we are apart from the mainstream, we’re a separate thing; and, in order to give you my reasons for this, I’m going to have to lay a little groundwork, which, unfortunately, might make me sound like a Freshman Lit. Instructor. But I do want to bridge a few millennia and go back to the basis of Literature as we know it in Western Culture and trace it just a wee bit—and I will bring this to bear upon my subject by and by.

Now, once upon a time there were a lot of gods who had something in common: This was the fact that they died and were mutilated, and were resurrected. Now, they were generally worshipped in the area about the Mediterranean. Their names were...Oh, there were many of them: Attis, Osiris, Tammuz. And the people who worshipped them, according to anthropologists and classical scholars, tended to do this in a rather mimetic fashion. Now, some say that these deities were pretty much a solar myth. That is, that their deaths and their resurrections represented the passage of the sun through the seasons of the year; and that when the winter came and everything died, this, in a sense, was the death of the god. Once spring came, and the green came out again, things lived, and this was the resurrection. Primitive man does have a tendency to personify natural forces, and many gods were born around this area who had this thing in common, who went through this cycle.

Now, the worship of these gods—it would appear, from everything we know about the area today—was, at first, something on the order of a person’s getting up and wearing a mask which represented the god, reciting the story, the story of what had happened to the god. Mimesis. Imitation of an action. This gradually evolved so that in time, there were several people represented, perhaps the person who slew and mutilated the god, as well as the god himself—the protagonist and the antagonist—and a bit of dialogue exchange might have followed. It has been said that a fellow named Thespis wrote the first plays. Unfortunately, nothing remains concerning Thespis but his name and the fact that people say he did this thing. The first fellow to really come on the scene and take advantage of this form of worship and to turn it into something which was still religious in nature, but also possessed literary significance of the highest order, was Aeschylus. He was followed by Sophocles, Euripides, Aristophanes. Now, what happened was that at this point tragedy and comedy came into being. This was done by separating the two portions of the myth of the dying god. The tragic rhythm, which is represented by a certain passion, a certain perception, a certain catastrophe, was removed from this whole cycle and represented as tragedy. The comic spirit, in a technical sense, was the joyous reawakening, the spring-time sensation.

The tragedy normally involved certain supernatural powers, but its protagonist was a man, a very noble man, who had one tragic flaw, one thing about him which could be a metaphor for any and all human flaws. And, as a result of this, all the catastrophic powers which walked the world ultimately came to bear upon him and destroyed him. This was the death of the individual, the greatest tragedy which the individual is capable of considering.

Comedy, on the other hand, represented the continuance, the triumph of life over death. But this was not continuance for the individual; it was continuance for the species. This triumph was not so much a personal one as a racial one. The great tragedies were supposed to produce a sense of catharsis, feelings of pity and feelings of fear which were evoked in the people who watched the tragic action; and this, in a sense, cleansed them. Now, the comedy also produced a sort of catharsis. But this was a different thing. It was a feeling of the joy of continuance, a sort of immortality. In all the surviving comedies we ultimately have some character, who comes out carrying a big phallic pole and places it in the middle of the scene—and everybody then gathers ’round and indulges in an orgy. This, of course, survives in modern literature—even in the most popular media, the motion picture and television—where a comedy usually ends in a marriage. Essentially, symbolically, it is the same notion, changed only slightly for mass consumption.

This cycle, these themes, continued through what I consider the four great turning points in the history of ideas in the western world: those being the Classical innovation, the Christian revolution, the Renaissance, and the Romantic movement, which latter is still with us.

Friedrich Nietzsche claimed that the two spirits which are present in our classic tragedy are the spirits of Dionysus and Apollo, the two gods, the god of order, and the god of chaos and revelry: Tragedos and Comedos. These two spirits inform just about everything we write, everything we read, everything we consider literature, whether it’s Literature with a capital ‘L’ or popular literature. They are sometimes at war, and sometimes one triumphs, sometimes the other. The technical meaning of tragedy is not...well, for an example, if a small child locks himself into a refrigerator and closes it, suffocates to death, people say, “That’s very tragic.” Well, technically it isn’t; it’s, speaking precisely, pathetic—for while it does evoke a feeling of pity or sympathy, it certainly does not produce fear. We don’t identify with the child; we wouldn’t close ourselves into an icebox, ordinarily. A comedy, normally, basically, has a happy ending—whether, it’s Dante’s Divine Comedy which begins in hell and ends in heaven or Tom Jones.

Now, these are the tensions, the rhythms which are present—the tragic and the comic. The tragedy itself reappeared in the time of the Elizabethans—Hamlet, Lear, Marlowe’s Faust—and there is this imitation of the action again, there is this figure who is, in a sense, greater than the ordinary man, who suffers great passion, who comes into an insight, and who subsequently suffers a catastrophe. Now when a figure in a tragedy is dead, he is dead; and that is it: period. There is no more continuance for him as an individual. This is why many people say, and I agree, that the presence of Christianity precludes the notion of tragedy, because a tragedy posits the totality of existence within a specific time and space, and when that existence ends there is no after life; the individual is dead and that is it. There was criticism of the tragedy on this ground when it was revived in Elizabethan times. For it does, implicitly, deny the fact that there is divine justice. This guy is a rat, a villain, a fink, you have to kill him now, you have to make him suffer now, and here. You can’t wait and let him go to Hell to be punished for his crime. There is a requirement that he be slain here on Earth, made to suffer, here and now, and this, of course, is a non-Christian notion.

Now, that I’ve laid this much groundwork, as to the notions of tragedy and comedy and their presence—in whatever attenuated form they may exist—in any literature, I would like to, for, a moment, refer to a work of criticism, a rather weighty tome but worthwhile, rewarding if you take the time to go through it, called An Anatomy of Criticism by Northrop Frye, in which the author sets up a series of categories which I think will be of value to our discussion.

Mr. Frye classifies characters in accordance with four modes he believes exist in any form of literature. And these are the Mythic Mode, the High Mimetic Mode, the Low Mimetic Mode, and the Ironic Mode. Now I’ll tell you what they mean.

In the Mythic Mode the main character, or characters, are greater than men. They’re also greater than the natural forces which control the universe: they are, in effect, gods. They are the characters who occur in myths, in Scriptural writing, and who put in appearances in ethical writing, and occasionally in classical drama.

Now, in the High Mimetic mode we have characters who are greater than ordinary men—they’re kings—but the Greek word used there doesn’t really mean king in the Medieval sense. They’re sort of great land owners, people highly respected in their community, people who exercise some measure of authority, characters who still have a slight trace of the Mythic Mode about them, too, for they are often referred to as having some measure of control over natural forces. In Sophocles’ Oedipus Rex you hear references to a blight being upon the land because something is wrong with the king. This is the sort of character you run into in the High Mimetic Mode; someone who is greater than other people and can sometimes have a reputation for slaying a monster, or controlling some natural force.

Now, the Low Mimetic Mode has been with us since about the nineteenth century in most of our fiction. This is the thing which involves a character who is not superior to other men, who is not superior to nature. He is the character in most of the realistic and naturalistic novels we have with us today.

Now, in the Ironic Mode, the final one to which Mr. Frye refers, we have characters who are not only not greater than natural forces, not greater than their fellow men—they aren’t even equal to their fellow men. They are inferior. These are the people you’ll find in the works of Beckett, Ionesco, Kafka. They are Charlie Chaplin going around a department store on roller skates.

So these are the four categories. Now, there is a strange thing about them. They are not considered a hierarchy but, rather, a cycle. The Ironic Mode—where a character is less than his fellow man—sort of feeds back into the Mythic Mode. You’ll find that when you have a grotesque person who does strange things, and who is kicked about and acted upon, and to whom inexplicable things happen, he strangely assumes the aura of a figure in a myth, of someone who in some way just might be a god-figure, an archetypal image.

I’ll leave this for just a moment now and return to it shortly. It has been said that tragedy and myth or scripture—or, epic—is impossible in a Democracy or a good Socialism because these political systems have built into them an inherent notion that all men are equal. Consequently, this rather precludes considering a figure like Hamlet, King Lear, Coriolanus, Orestes, in modern literature. We normally, since the nineteenth century, have been writing about figures in the Low Mimetic Mode. In recent years we have been going more and more into the Ironic Mode. But we’ve left the other two pretty much out of things in the main current of writing.

The distinction I think is here: Science Fiction has not abandoned the High Mimetic Mode. It is, in this sense, aristocratic. The characters in Science Fiction stories, the backgrounds which are set up, and the worlds explored in Science Fiction are ones in which you can posit gods, if you wish—you can have them operate and affect the characters; also, the notion of the hero has continued in Science Fiction. There was a whole rash of stories some years back involving mutants. These people were able to control physical environment as well as the actions of others about them. They were clearly superior. This did open a way, if anyone cared to try, to write a tragedy in the Science Fiction medium. Someone is going to counter with a question “Why didn’t they?” I’ll answer that, but I wanted to first draw this distinction between the mainstream and that area in which Science Fiction writers work, that area in which maybe a few hundred thousand people enjoy reading, in answer to Harlan Ellison, Ted White and others, who insist that we are part and parcel of the main current of things.

We’re not. It’s as simple as that. We’re writing in a different mode. I don’t say that all Science Fiction stories are in the High Mimetic Mode, but a good percentage are. The British writers are going into exploring the Ironic mode. Good. I consider Ballard of this tradition, and I like Ballard.

Now, I would like to, in a sense, vindicate Science Fiction writers for not having explored the full potential of the High Mimetic Mode, and while I have just said, or sort of agreed, that we live in a “ghetto,” I’m going to attempt to say that this has given us a great potential, yet to be realized, and I will try to point my finger at something at least to show that we are moving in that direction.

Science Fiction, of course, began in the pulp magazines in the late twenties, ran through the thirties, the forties—the Depression, the war years—and, as such, was pretty much a product of the restrictions of the pulp magazines. These restrictions were quite severe. Things like sex were tabu in the stories, and the writers had to write pretty much what the editors wanted—formula stories—if they wanted to sell their stuff. Otherwise, they’d be writing for themselves alone. So they conformed, and they went along with it, in order to write something they enjoyed a bit more than detective stories or westerns. And, after a time, the Science Fiction market burgeoned. There was a great plethora of Science Fiction magazines all over the place, and it was natural that the bust eventually followed. Many of the magazines folded and left us with just a few. But there were many writers who had committed themselves to the area, and the market suddenly became highly restricted and much more competitive than it had been. So, they were forced to resort to the alternative of writing more and more for the paperback books. This was the first step, I think, in the direction in which we are still moving today. They were freed at that point, freed from many of the restrictions which the magazines placed upon them. At first, many of them continued to write the same sort of thing they had been writing for the magazines because they were used to it. Gradually they began to experiment more. Now there are many of them who do not write for the magazines at all. They write for hardcover and paperback books exclusively, and they find that there is freedom, freedom which they didn’t realize they had, all that time, freedom to do whatever they darn please. And now, we also have new writers who came into the area in recent years, who have moved into this medium and inherited this recent sense of freedom; and I believe they have also inherited the means of producing something which may be great literature. I feel that we are going to see some genuine tragedies and comedies, in the strict classical sense of the word, in the area. I can only point at two which, in my opinion, come close to it right now.

I believe that Theodore Sturgeon’s novel More Than Human, with which many of you are familiar, came close to a genuine tragic vision at one point. For those of you who don’t know the plot outline, basically there is a group of mutated individuals, each of whom possesses one particular psychic ability, and when they all come together and work together, they establish a sort of psychic rapport, which, in a sense, turns them into a gestalt—one organization, one entity, with many abilities. The one individual who is the brains of this group, or, the director, I should say, once destroyed a human being, a man who could have been a genius: he wrecked this man’s life completely. How, in the end this man is rescued, brought back to normal by a girl who is a member of the group, who is able to get inside the mind of a man and see exactly what’s there. She forces him to get inside the mind of this man he has hurt. Suddenly, for the first time in his life, this director realizes that there is a sort of morality to which he, too, owes some sort of allegiance. He experiences a genuine pity for this man whom he has destroyed. He comes close to something like a tragic catharsis.

I’m not going to try to rewrite Sturgeon, but I would have done it a little differently myself, for there is hope for that man who was broken: he is on his feet again and he is going to become a “useful” member of society. I probably would have written the scene with the man on his deathbed, and this realization by the director as the last thing before the man’s death. Whatever...

This, I contend, is very close: it’s moving in that direction.

I said there were two works, though. The other one is Childhood’s End by Arthur C. Clarke. Here, again, I’ll just go briefly into the plot. We have a situation where Earth is visited by creatures from another place, creatures who correspond in appearance to the devils out of Christian tradition. They have horns and they have tails. When they appear, though, they’re not malevolent; they’re here on Earth primarily as observers. They’re waiting for something to happen. Actually, what they’re waiting for is the next step in the evolution of the human race. And this does occur in a few generations. A generation of children is born who possess strange abilities. As they mature, they establish a sort of psychic bond so that they share one great mass mind. The creatures who resemble devils are a race who, for some reason which is never explained, are denied this step in their own evolution. They travel around the universe finding races which are about to mature into this next stage and they act sort of as midwives to them at the time of their birth. Now, as it would happen, there is one Earth man who is very curious as to the place of origin of these demon-like creatures. He manages to stow away aboard one of their ships and go to their home planet. He is there discovered, of course, and they explain to him what is about to occur. In his absence the children, who have now reached and passed adolescence, have withdrawn themselves from society into a sort of community of their own; and the old human race, which realizes that something fearful is happening, enters into a series of suicidal wars and pretty much annihilates itself. At this point, the children are about to depart the Earth. They no longer require the physical bodies they inhabit. They unite themselves into one vast golden being, and their last act in departing is to destroy the world, which has now served its purpose. Now the man who stowed away aboard the ship which took him to the planet of the creatures is, at this time, offered the hospitality of these creatures. He may spend the rest of his life on their planet, they tell him. He declines the offer, and he asks to be returned to Earth. He is a concert pianist; he is a Negro; he is a man who realizes what is happening, and he sees no further reason for his own existence. His last act is to set up a piano and to begin playing as the Earth is destroyed. Everything falls apart about him, and he continues; and that’s it. The great golden creatures destroy the world and depart. This is the end of man’s childhood; he has now become this great, golden thing.

Now, in a classical sense, it would be hard to—at least I would be hard put to—say whether it is a tragedy or a comedy. I suppose it would be a comedy, in that it represents the continuance of the species, the triumph over the death-rhythm you see in tragedy. But I can’t really identify with this great creature which destroys people such as myself. So, while it may be a comedy if that creature were writing the story, for me...I consider it very close to a tragic vision when the last man is sitting there playing the piano and realizing all these things. He, of course, fears the end which, of course, is at hand. He, of course, has pity for all his fellows who have perished, who will never exist again. And he is destroyed. That, I feel, is the other example of coming close to what I think is a tragic vision in the Science Fiction area. This obviously could not have been done in what people refer to as the main current of literature. It required an artificial background such as could only be supplied by someone who is writing a “ghetto” story, if you want to call it that. These are the only two I can think of right now, but I think they indicate the possibilities within the area. I think that rather than being a bad thing, our insularity, our appendix-like position in the body of literature is a good thing and I feel that it will eventually result in more stories of this ilk.

Now this, basically, is my whole thesis for today, this my answer to those who say, “We are not apart”: We have the gods on our side.

Notes

Zelazny was Guest of Honor at many conventions where he often gave humorous speeches. Unfortunately, some of his funniest speeches were not recorded and exist only as apocryphal stories from convention attendees—this includes the “Chicken Effect” and “I Am Not Roger Zelazny” speeches.

Given in July 1967 at Ozarkon 2 in St. Louis, this Guest of Honor speech marks the first time Zelazny publicly addressed the theme of the dying/resurrecting god which influenced much of his early work.