## Some Parameters...

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*I wrote this piece in response to a request from Jim Baen that I do a guest column for* Galaxy, *which he was then editing.*

###### SOME SCIENCE FICTION PARAMETERS: A BIASED VIEW

I remember the seats and the view: hard wood, with corrugated metal high above, television monitors below on the ground, ready, a big clock scoring the seconds; in the distance, a narrow inlet of calm water reflecting a grayness of cloud between us and the vehicle. A couple places over to my left, Harry Stubbs was taking a picture. To my right, a young Korean girl was doing the same thing without a camera. She was painting a watercolor of the scene. In the tier immediately before and below me, with occasional gestures, a European journalist was speaking rapid Serbo-Croatian into a plug-in telephone. On the ground, to the far left, the brightly garbed center of a small system of listeners, Sybil Leek was explaining that the weather would clear up shortly and there would be no further problems. When the weather did clear and the clock scythed down the final seconds, we saw the ignition before we heard it and the water was agitated by a shock wave racing across in our direction. Apollo 14 was already lifting when the sound struck, and the volume kept increasing until the metal roof vibrated. A cheer went up around us and I kept watching until the roof’s edge blocked my view. Then I followed the flight’s progress on the monitor. I remember thinking, “I’ve waited for this.”

I was not really thinking about science fiction at that moment. I was thinking only of the event itself. Yet I would not have been waiting at that spot at that time had it not been for my connection with science fiction. It was in the calmer hours of later evenings after that that I did give some thought to the manner in which science fiction has touched me over the years, trying to fit a few of the things that seemed part of it into some larger perspective.

I was raised and educated in times and places where science fiction was not considered a branch of *belles lettres.* As I was exposed to critical thought in other areas of literature, it did seem to me that science fiction was being shortchanged, in that when it was mentioned at all it was generally with reference to the worst rather than the best that it had to offer. Unfair, yet this was the way of the world.

Recently, however, the situation changed, and science fiction has been a subject of increasing critical and academic scrutiny. The reason, I feel, is partly that a sufficiently large body of good science fiction has now been amassed to warrant such consideration, but mainly that those who felt as I did in earlier times and then proceeded to follow academic careers have taken approximately this long to achieve positions where they could do something about it. Therefore, I have been pleased whenever I have been asked to address a university audience on this subject, not simply because it seems to represent some vindication of my tastes, but because I feel comfortable with those who worked to effect the change in attitude.

Yet, this generated a new problem for me. Every time I spoke, I had to have something to say. It required that I examine my own unquestioned responses to science fiction and consider some of the forces which have shaped and are shaping it. When I was asked to do this piece, I decided to draw together the results of these efforts and display whatever chimera might emerge, both because I am curious to see it myself and because I wish to get in a few words before the amount of science fiction criticism surpasses the amount of science fiction and I am less likely to be noticed.

The Apollo-sized hole filled in my psyche that day in Florida had been excavated more than twenty years earlier, when I had begun reading tales of space travel. This was a part of it—certainly not all; but emotion is as much a part of meaning as thought, and since most longtime fans began reading the literature at an early age, the feelings it aroused were generally the main attraction. What do they really amount to? Pure escapism? A love of cosmic-scale spectacle? The reinforcement of juvenile fantasies at about the time they would normally begin to fade? All of these? Some? None? Or something else?

The term “sense of wonder” gets considerable mileage in discussions such as this, and I have sought this feeling elsewhere in literature in hope of gaining a fuller understanding of its mechanism. I have experienced it in two other places: the writings of Saint-Exupéry on the early days of air travel and the writings of Jacques Cousteau on the beginnings of underwater exploration with scuba gear. The common element, as I saw it, was that both stories share with science fiction a theme involving the penetration of previously unknown worlds by means of devices designed and assembled by man, thereby extending his senses into new realms.

Turning backward, I felt obliged to classify the myths, legends, scriptural writings and bits of folklore which have always held a high place in my imaginary wanderings as contributory but different. There have always been storytellers of a speculative cast of mind who have taken some delight in playing about the peripheries of the known, guessing at the dimensions of the unknown. It might be argued that this is a necessary ingredient of the epic—dealing with the entire ethos of a people, up to and including that open end of the human condition, death itself, in a fashion transcending even the grand visions of tragedy and comedy. True epics of course are few and historically well spaced, but that slightly more mundane ingredient, the speculative impulse, be it of Classic, Christian or Renaissance shading, which ornamented Western literature with romances, fables, exotic voyages and utopias, seemed to me basically the same turn of fancy exercised today in science fiction, working then with the only objects available to it. It took the Enlightenment, it took science, it took the industrial revolution to provide new sources of ideas that, pushed, poked, inverted and rotated through higher spaces, resulted in science fiction. When the biggest, most interesting ideas began emerging from science, rather than from theology or the exploration of new lands, hindsight makes it seem logical that something like science fiction had to be delivered.

Of course, the realistic novel was also slapped on the bottom and uttered its first cries at that time, an event that requires a glance at the differences in endowment. Basically, as I have said here and there before, the modem, realistic novel has discarded what Northrop Frye has classified as the higher modes of character. It is a democratic place, without room for heroes, rash kings, demigods and deities. Science fiction, on the other hand, retained and elaborated these modes, including mutants, aliens, robots, androids and sentient computers. There is a basic difference in character and characterization as well as the source and flow of ideas.

And what of those ideas? It has been persuasively argued that *Frankenstein* was the first science fiction novel. To simplify, as one must in these discussions, there seems to be, within the body of science fiction, a kind of Frankenstein-versus-Pygmalion tension, an internal and perhaps eternal debate as to whether man’s creations will destroy him or live happily with him forever after. In the days when I began reading science fiction I would say that, statistically, Pygmalion had the upper hand. The “sense of wonder” as I knew it was in most stories unalloyed with those fears and concerns that the unforeseen side effects of some technological usages have brought about in recent years. The lady delivered purer visions involving the entry into new worlds and the extension of our senses. Now the cautionary quality is returned, and the shadow of Frankenstein’s monster falls across much of our work. Yet, because this is a part of the force that generates the visions, it cannot be destructive to the area itself. Speaking not as a prognosticator or moralist, but only as a writer, my personal feelings are that a cycle such as this is good for the field, that if nothing else it promotes a reexamination of our attitudes, whatever they may be, toward the basic man-machine-society relationships. End of digression.

Science fiction’s special quality, the means by which it achieves its best effects, is of course the imagination, pitched here several octaves above the notes it sounds elsewhere in literature. To score it properly is one of the major difficulties faced in the writing of science fiction; namely, in addition to the standard requirements encountered in composing a mundane story, one has the added task of explaining the extra plot premises and peculiarities of setting—without visibly slowing the action or lessening the tensions that must be built as the narrative progresses. This has led, over the years, to the development of clichés (I would like to have said “conventions,” but the word has a way of not working properly when applied to science fiction), clichés involving the acceptance at mere mention of such phenomena as faster-than-light travel, telepathy, matter transmission, immortality drugs and instant language-translation devices, to name a few. Their use represents an artificiality of an order not found elsewhere in contemporary letters—excepting individual poets with private mythologies, which is not really the same thing as an entire field holding stock in common. Yet the artificiality does not really detract and the illusion does work because of the compensatory effect of a higher level of curiosity aroused as to the nature of the beast. Literally anything may be the subject of a science fiction story. In accepting the clichés of science fiction, one is also abandoning the everyday assumptions that hold for the run of mundane fiction. This in some ways requires a higher degree of sophistication, but the rewards are commensurate.

These are some of the more obvious things that set science fiction apart from the modern realistic story. But, if there must be some grand, overall scheme to literature, where does science fiction fit? I am leery of that great classifier Aristotle in one respect that bears on the issue. The Hellenic world did not view the passage of time as we do. History was considered in an episodic sense, as the struggles of an unchanging mankind against a relentless and unchanging fate. The slow process of organic evolution had not yet been detected, and the grandest model for a world view was the seeming changeless patternings of the stars. It took the same processes that set the stage for science fiction—eighteenth-century rationalism and  nineteenth-century science—to provide for the first time in the history of the world a sense of historical direction, of time as a developmental, nonrepetitive sequence.

This particular world view became a part of science fiction in a far more explicit fashion than in any other body of storytelling, as it provided the basis for its favorite exercise: extrapolation. I feel that because of this, science fiction is the form of literature least affected by Aristotle’s dicta with respect to the nature of the human condition, which he saw as immutable, and the nature of man’s fate, which he saw as inevitable.

Yet science fiction is concerned with the human condition and with man’s fate. It is the speculative nature of its concern that required the abandonment of the Aristotelian strictures involving the given imponderables. Its methods have included a retention of the higher modes of character, a historical, developmental time sense, assimilation of the tensions of a technological society and the production of a “sense of wonder” by exercises of imagination extending awareness into new realms—a sensation capable, at its best, of matching the power of that experience of recognition which Aristotle held to be the strongest effect of tragedy. It might even be argued that the sense of wonder represents a different order of recognition, but I see no reason to ply the possible metaphysics of it at this point.

Since respectability tends to promote a concern for one’s ancestors, we are fortunate to be in on things at the beginning today when one can still aim high and compose one’s features into an attitude of certainty while hoping for agreement. It occurs to me then that there is a relationship between the entire body of science fiction and that high literary form, the epic. Traditionally, the epic was regarded as representing the spirit of an entire people—the *Iliad,* the *Mahabharata,* the *Aeneid* showing us the values, the concerns, the hoped-for destinies of the Greeks, the ancient Indians, the Romans. Science fiction is less provincial, for it really deals with humanity as such. I am not so temerarious as to suggest that any single work of science fiction has ever come near the epic level (though Olaf Stapledon probably came closest), but wish rather to observe that the impulse behind it is akin to that of the epic chronicler, and is reflected in the desire to deal with the future of humanity, describing in every way possible the spirit and destiny not of a single nation but of Man.

High literature, unfortunately, requires more than good intentions, and so I feel obliged to repeat my caveat to prevent my being misunderstood any more than is usually the case. In speaking of the epic, I am attempting to indicate a similarity in spirit and substance between science fiction as a whole and some of the classical features of the epic form. I am not maintaining that it has been achieved in any particular case or even by the entire field viewed as a single entity. It may have; it may not. I stand too near to see that clearly. I suggest only that science fiction is animated in a similar fashion, occasionally possesses something like a Homeric afflatus and that its general aims are of the same order, producing a greater kinship here than with the realistic novel beside which it was born and bred. The source of this particular vitality may well be the fact that, like its subject, it keeps growing but remains unfinished.

These were some of the thoughts that occurred to me when I was asked to do a piece on the parameters of science fiction. I reviewed my association with the area, first as a reader and fan, recalling that science fiction is unique in possessing a fandom and a convention system that make for personal contacts between authors and readers, a situation that may be of peculiar significance. When an author is in a position to meet and speak with large numbers of his readers, he cannot help, at least for a little while, feeling somewhat as the old-time storytellers must have felt in facing the questions and the comments of a live audience. The psychological process involved in this should be given some consideration as an influence on the field. I thought of my connection as a writer, self-knowledge suggesting that the remedy for the biggest headache in its composition—furnishing the extra explanations as painlessly as possible—may be the mechanism by which the imagination is roused to climb those several extra steps to the point where the unusual becomes plausible—and thus the freshness; thus, when it is well done, the wonder. And then I thought of all the extracurricular things that many of us either care about because we are science fiction writers or are science fiction writers because we care about.

Which takes me back to the stands at the Cape, to the vibrations, to the shouting, to my “I’ve waited for this.” My enthusiasm at the successful launching of a manned flight to the moon perhaps tells you more about me than it does about science fiction and its parameters, for space flight is only a part—a colorful part, to be sure—of the story we have been engaged in telling of Man and his growing awareness. For on reflection, having watched the fire, felt the force and seen the vessel lifted above the Earth, it seemed a triumph for Pygmalion; and that, I realized, had more to do with my view that day than the fire, the force or the vessel.