

Metafiction, Transcendence and the Extended Present: Three Keys to Post-Galactic SF

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During research at the interface between futures study and education I have often been surprised at how people tend to associate the former with prediction. I suspect this indicates a need for reassurance, a search for security, a response to the disintegration of contemporary structures and meanings. But neither futures study nor speculative literature have been concerned to predict the future, or even to forecast it. Rather they utilise a range of views of the future as a means of elaborating the present.

The future is radically uncertain and the images and meanings read onto it at one time appear to serve the needs of that time only to be falsified at a later date.¹ One generation dreams of multi-level megacities, personal helicopters and tourist trips to the moon while a later one dismantles its high-rise accommodation, addresses the world from an armchair at home and cultivates the eastern arts. The future that became the present has always differed from what was expected or feared. Only fragments of yesterday's anticipations became our 'now' and, in this particular sense, the future never arrives. (In a much more fundamental sense it remains an epistemological constant permeating the unbounded mental present, but I will return to this below.) Forecasts are nearly always wrong and futuristic images collectively cover a far wider imaginative range (individually, a much narrower one) than the subsequent course of history.

Yet something of a crisis has occurred within SF as traditional genre materials have been rendered imaginatively obsolete by real-world developments. Furthermore, the rise and rise of low-grade fantasy is widely perceived as a 'disaster' for SF, the assumption being that the latter is somehow a superior form, or at least was, or could be. There is some justification for such a view: the disciplined imagination is surely superior to unbridled wish fulfilment. Yet it is useful to recognise that, as Algis Budrys has suggested, both science fiction and fantasy arise from the speculative imagination.² While the former does lead in different directions, and while I will have cause to comment on some of the implications, my main interest resides in the latter. In that connection I want to suggest that 'post-galactic' speculative fiction, or something very much like it, could represent a new stage of development that may resolve the long-standing boundary dispute between science fiction and fantasy by transcending that boundary and that dichotomy. While the present exhaustion of ideas and images may indicate a temporary loss of confidence and creative insight, there is no evidence to suggest that the speculative capacity itself is in decline. It is rather that external conditions have changed rapidly over the past decades and have exerted a heavy toll upon the inner life. Far from plotting a 'safe course into the future', as some apologists have argued, science fiction and fantasy authors are very much caught up in the turbulence of the times.

As we near the end of the Twentieth Century, we are witnessing a series of fundamental shifts in our values, perceptual categories, social and economic structures. While many of our leaders and leading institutions assert a 'business as usual' approach, millions of

ordinary people, particularly those without work and without prospect of work, know that we are near the end of an era, the so-called industrial era. Even the well heeled cannot insulate themselves from deep-seated changes in inherited structures and meanings. The uncertainty - the feeling that the world is 'shifting on its hinges' - is unavoidable. Many of the core assumptions that underlay the social landscape have now run their course and no longer appear self-evident and compelling. As one distinguished observer wrote, 'the structures of this civilisation, interdependent work, bargaining, mutual adjustment of individual ends, are beginning to be felt not as normal and best suited to man, but as hateful and empty.'³

Much the same could be said of the assumed beneficence of science and technology, the ideology of continuous economic growth, patriarchy, the autonomy of the nation state, the earth viewed merely as a collection of inert resources to be exploited without limit.⁴ Whereas once a measure of consensus about underlying assumptions prevailed, albeit one imposed from above, there now exists open conflict and a series of seemingly irresolvable dilemmas. I stress the world 'seemingly' because dilemmas only appear irresolvable when viewed from within the web of commitments of the culture and worldview that produced them. As the world changes we are free as never before to revise assumptions and re-negotiate commitments. For good or ill, speculative writing is deeply involved in this process (as reaction, innovation and much else between). It holds before us the possibility of discerning new levels of integration, new modes of knowing and being, new or renewed systems of value and belief.

This is not simple idealism. For during the present period, an hiatus between more settled times, the speculative imagination keenly experiences all the stresses and contradictions of contemporary life, yet finds the common reality-avoidance devices of the time largely unavailable because they are revealed as the false solutions of yesterday. That is to say, clear-headed speculation requires both a deep insight into changing conditions and a mastery of controlled modes of defamiliarisation that reveal the underlying *provisionality* of accepted social norms and beliefs. But such a balancing act can clearly lead to numerous pathologies not least of which is the regression to substitute satisfactions, to the many available forms of induced mindlessness that dull the critical faculties. It is in just such conditions that regressive fantasy thrives.

As noted above, fantasy represents a vital part of our imaginative repertoire and may even display a certain subdued radical potential.⁵ Moreover the more insightful and literate forms cannot be dismissed as mere escapism. Le Guin's *Earthsea* trilogy is a case in point.⁶ Similarly, the psychological value of fantasy-as-therapy has been argued by Bettelheim and others.⁷ Yet fantasy rapidly deteriorates when it is not subordinated to some higher purpose or principle. The rows of interchangeable pseudo-medieval trilogies and series now weighting the bookshelves across the western world are little more than formulaic commodities designed precisely to ease the burden of selfhood, of individuation, not to extend the latter in useful ways. While the value of escapism has been defended by Stableford and others, this kind of material is invariably disappointing. It draws us away from an *engagement* with our world, our deepest needs and our highest selves.⁸ Few people can be truly refreshed and invigorated by such trivial diversions;

they are more likely to be subverted by ‘the exotic lure of modes of life that have already been examined long ago and found wanting.’⁹ The need is rather for a fruitful balance between different needs. Robert Scholes put it well when he suggested that:

we require a fiction which satisfies our cognitive and sublimative needs together, just as we want food which tastes good and provides some nourishment. We need suspense with intellectual consequences, in which questions are raised as well as solved, and in which our minds are expanded even while focused on the complications of a fictional plot.¹⁰

I do not mean to imply that speculative fiction is, or need be, merely an intellectual resource. Much of the heart-searching by those who have transcended the banalities of formula fiction is fundamentally a search for significance that passes beyond the purely rational. That, really, is the point: the direction of this movement is what is at stake in fiction. If the reader is driven back to the irrational, to magical and pre-rational modes of consciousness, there is clearly a regression to simpler, less inclusive, forms of knowing. If, on the other hand, the movement is toward the super-rational and the transcendent, then more truly advanced forms of integration can take place. It is a fact that more highly evolved beings have dwelt, and do dwell, among us but they have very little in common with the clichéd super-heroes of fantasy and science fiction.¹¹ I'll return to this point below.

In this search for significance, one is bound to turn toward speculative fiction as a major source of insight and meaning. No other branch of literature deals centrally with those shaping forces of the Twentieth Century: the subversive realities and potentials of science and technology. But innovations quickly turn into cliché, harden into orthodoxy, when writers retreat from the leading edge of social consciousness. Though it seems almost heretical to say this, my reading of Ballard's striking novel *Empire of the Sun* suggests to me that much of his fiction has, in part, been a kind of therapy for the writer, a slow working-out of fearful adolescent obsessions engendered by the cruelty of warfare. Can it be that Ballard's skill has seduced us into overlooking that entropy, ruin and derangement are but variations upon a single theme: the celebration of disaster? It is certainly no crime to be fascinated by temporality and the fall of all man-made structures into ruin. But, in the absence of a creative balancing principle, such a diet may only feed the wellsprings of depression and despair.¹² It may be no accident that the nearest Ballard comes to achieving such a balance is in *Vermilion Sands* which, until *Empire ...* was widely considered to be among his best work. The canon continues with new writers like Geoff Ryman and William Gibson who bring considerable writing ability and a surface brilliance to similarly oppressive themes.¹³ We are entitled to ask why the good news appears to be so indigestible. Dystopia may well be close at hand (and I'll suggest below that it has its uses) but it is too easy, too simplistic and certainly unnecessary, despite the terrors of the Twentieth Century, to see the future only as ‘a kind of continuing catastrophe.’¹⁴

Certainly a great deal of contemporary science fiction is irredeemably reactionary. In the context noted above, of breakdowns in meaning and purpose, writers who seek to retrieve

the past, to re-animate the galactic empire, the mad scientist, the World War Two space dogfights, the one-dimensional supermen and so on, are missing the chance to participate in the renewal of meanings which underlies our sense of significance in the present and our hopes for a livable future. In other words, science fiction which embodies dated worldviews and assumptions, and that fails to deal with perennial human concerns as they appear to us at this historical moment, is likely to remain moribund. There is thus a distinction to be made between socially shared needs for fictional futures which reveal aspects of our particular present, and the narrower, basically critical and academic, task of re-assessing earlier work. This paper works toward a fruitful dialectic between those needs and those tasks such that each may illuminate the other.

It will be suggested below that our present reality is by no means restricted to the 'here and now.' It necessarily incorporates aspects of yesterday, fragments of past aspirations and imaginings; and there are, of course, many items of value that transcend their time and period. To some we accord the accolade that they were 'ahead of their time' and hence a valued part of ours. But our main interest now is in the world we inhabit and construct. Thus, fiction that seeks to nourish our sense of significance must grow from this present world and reflect the nascent problems and potentials inherent within it.

False dawns have occurred before in the history of speculative writing and, no doubt, they will happen again. The Panshins' attempt to say *Goodbye to Yesterday's Tomorrow* seems to have been universally ignored.¹⁵ All I would venture at this time is to say that the potential exists for writers to participate in negotiating our transition between cultural eras. JT Fraser is right to suggest that 'it is the artistic gifts of man that are first to meet all worlds, and it is through the community of moods that these new worlds first reach other minds.'¹⁶ Today the impact of technicism and instrumental rationality has rendered the status of that symbolic community somewhat problematic. Yet, while it is death for the writer of fiction to descend into overt didacticism, there are within our own multiplex reality, more issues, images, dangers and opportunities for transcendence than ever before. It can hardly be doubted that regressive elements will persist and even appear dominant. The primitive power fantasies, formula hackwork, literary wet dreams will be made available so long as there is an audience sufficiently out of touch with itself to demand them. But those who are alert to the newness in and around them will write, and read, books which expand the boundaries of SF, and hence of contemporary awareness.

It is significant that in the *Helliconia Trilogy*, Brian Aldiss, ever the innovator, draws on advanced notions of temporality, recent debates about the 'Gaia Hypothesis' and the possibility of a nuclear winter. The standard props of science fiction largely occupy the background. In the foreground we witness the rise and fall of cultures upon Helliconia. Here we have a framework to speculate upon the nature of cultural change, a mirror in which to view our own anxieties and fears and a metaphor of mortality itself. Nor is the work simply a re-telling of Gibbon's well-known theme.¹⁷ Work of this quality permits an imaginative grasp upon our contemporary world that can be gained from few other sources.

Much of the best contemporary speculative fiction would hardly be called SF by those addicted to the norms of Van Vogt and EE Smith, though I hardly think that this matters. The speculative imagination is not merely the wellspring of science and fiction but of philosophy and social movements too. It pre-dates the organised search for external understanding and control by millennia. Hence I am attracted to Lewis Mumford's view that 'tool-technics ... is but a fragment of biotechnics: man's total equipment for life.' He adds,

to consider man ... as primarily a tool-using animal is to overlook the main chapters of human history. Opposed to this petrified notion, I ... develop the view that man is pre-eminently a mind-making, self-mastering and self-designing animal; and the primary locus of all his activities lies in his own organism, and in the social organisation through which it finds fuller expression. Until man had made something of himself he could make little of the world around him.¹⁸

Such a view has consequences both for the present enquiry and for our understanding of how, or where, to 'situate' science and technology within culture. Stableford is quite correct to note that 'for SF writers ... machines are spectacular sources of value'.¹⁹ But the deeper point is that, despite their evident power and surface attractions, despite the way they have transformed human life and its prospects, they are but *secondary* sources of value and meaning that are fundamentally dependent upon, and derivative of, human capacities. The reversal of this relationship is one of the greatest pathologies of the age and it is one that many writers of science fiction and fantasy have fudged, or worse, unwittingly promoted.²⁰

Critiques of technicised culture are therefore of inherently greater interest than naturalistic accounts of journeys to the galactic core. They are 'post-galactic' in the sense that the former confront repressive ideologies, while the latter tend to domesticate and sustain all that is taken-for-granted within the present social order. As Ken Wilber and others have shown, there is much to work through and understand in our own cultural past and present, before routine space travel and colonisation becomes a real and compelling option. Until we have mastered atavistic drives, resolved what Hardin called 'the tragedy of the commons' and refused the archaic misrepresentations of the arms race it must be doubted if there is any real prospect of a viable future in space. At present this is largely a diversion sustained by techno-military imperatives and American frontier myths. I do not agree with George Hay that 'the urge into space is religious at base.'²¹ It is rather a debased expression of the urge to transcendence, and the latter has nothing whatever to do with rockets and physical journeys to distant places. If, and when, we evolve to the point where the inner world of humankind can mediate the outer in benign and sustainable ways space travel may then acquire practicability and higher meaning.

Part of the present struggle to transcend more primitive modes of consciousness is the feminist critique of patriarchy. Works such as Sally Gearhart's *The Wanderground* and Marge Piercy's impressive *Woman at the Edge of Time* reveal new sensibilities at work: re-negotiating accepted meanings and revising common notions about ourselves as social

beings. Piercy's subordination of science-fictional devices to her strictly human concerns is well achieved. Similarly, her evident disinterest in the banalities of fictional violence represents a telling contrast with 'macho' writings generally and certainly with the slow-motion amplification of simulated savagery on TV and in films like *Blade Runner*.²²

There is also a deeper project. The metafiction of Borges, D.M. Thomas and John Crowley (to mention but three) function not merely to comment on the external world, but to interrogate the categories by which it is known. Crowley's novel *Little Big* flopped on the American market and did little better in the UK. Yet, in my view, it is a true masterpiece. It tells a story to be sure, yet also discourses without preaching on time, causality, memory, reality itself. For me the focus of the work is the sheer unlimited recursiveness of human identity and meaning. It therefore deals with issues of major importance in a period of gross technological overkill and incipient reductionism.

One 'attraction' of reductionism is that it permits simple views of complex phenomena (though at the cost of confusing ontological levels; that is, of placing the 'lower' over the 'higher'). Yet as EF Schumacher and many others have pointed out, no upper limit to human potentials can be discerned.²³ Works of fiction that reflect this openness are therefore of greater interest and value than those that try to effect an arbitrary closure upon the reader, thereby constructing inadequate models of personhood. Yet a good deal of speculative writing and criticism has fallen into just this trap: the power and insight of metafictional approaches have been widely overlooked in favour of naturalistic narratives of worlds which never were, twice removed from social reality (i.e. fictions of fictions). Much has been written about the 'suspension of disbelief', the attempt to seduce readers into setting aside their critical awareness in favour of an illusion woven of words. But as Eco has noted, 'it is impossible for there to be *a* story'.²⁴ Texts are inherently plural and 'a novel is a machine ...' (I would prefer to say a structure) '... for generating interpretations'.²⁵ Budrys equates fiction with lies.²⁶ But fiction is construction. To understand this is to begin to notice that naturalistic writing obscures its own constructedness and assumes readers who will passively accept the author's interpretations. This is a major reason why speculative writing can be irredeemably regressive and even patronising since, by undermining the interpretive autonomy of the reader, the latter is impelled back toward child-like states of dependence. If that is what people want, we need to understand the kind of game we are in.

On the other hand, writers have genuine concerns about the fact that 'it is hard enough to get the reader's attention without distracting him/her with technicalities.'²⁷ This is certainly a problem if one is operating according to naturalistic conventions and the 'model reader' in the author's mind is passive and disabled in the manner noted above. Such a view, however, does lead the writer into commitments he/she may not wish to uphold: one-way 'communication', superiority of viewpoint, a naive, commonsense view of language and meaning which no longer holds. It's hard to see how the reader's search for significance can proceed along these lines. All that can really happen is that certain taken-for-granted categories and ideological positions can be displayed and reinforced. This interpretation calls the bluff of functionalist analyses of literature that appear to look kindly upon what have been called 'restorative and maintenance functions'.²⁸

It is arguable whether or not authors can be held responsible for the needs and tastes of their readers. What has happened is not a conspiracy. It is rather that the often self-referential world of SF has become bogged down in certain assumptions and marketing conventions. Far from being ‘the only authentic mirror to the predicament of contemporary man in the whole literary spectrum’, the field has not kept up with wider developments.²⁹ Patricia Waugh suggests that ‘the materialist, positivist and empiricist world view upon which realistic fiction is premised no longer exists.’³⁰ But it may be nearer the truth to note that, sad to say, it does exist and continues to exert a range of malign effects. It *has* been superseded. In other words, writers are as prone to culture lag as anyone else, particularly if they are caught up in the business (I use the term advisedly) of replicating spurious futures. Those who continue to market naturalistic fiction without irony, and without signaling that their choice of a realistic mode is a conscious and intentional one, will increasingly be seen to be ‘out on a limb’ supported only by conventions that have been overturned. It matters not at all that subject matter or surface content is ostensibly set in the future since ‘the concept-space of the science fiction story has always been purely hypothetical.’³¹ Fictional futures are spurious to the extent that they invoke dated epistemologies and regressive notions of personhood.

The insight that ‘at every turn we run into patterns of shaping force that have gone unobserved by our instrumental approach to the world’ is, by now, no longer new. Scholes is also correct to state that ‘it is because reality cannot be recorded that realism is dead. All writing, all composition, is construction. We do not imitate the world, we construct versions of it. There is no mimesis, only poesis. No recording. Only constructing.’ Hence, he adds, ‘we are free to speculate as never before.’³² Yet the more freedom, the more responsibility. The more advanced the organism, the more ways it has to fail.³³

I do not know if writers of naturalistic fiction inhabit a different universe or time stream. But is evident that, in attempting to conceal its own status and constructedness, realism pursues an impossible quest. All works cannot but reflect the author's hand (eye, brain), preferred conventions, ideological commitments and intertextual meanings.³⁴ Yet, as Waugh notes, ‘metafiction is not so much a sub-genre of the novel as a tendency within the novel.’³⁵ This provides a basis for resolution. For, rather than suppressing such a tendency, it may be revealed and enjoyed. The question is not one of metafiction *or* realism, but one of balance, awareness and intentionality. Of course one may cite examples of work in which the metafictional elements are crude or mannered.³⁶ But there remain infinite subtle ways that writers can address readers not as passive observers but as co-authors wholly capable of calling forth meaning, purpose and insight. The distinction is crucial. It is the difference between object and subject. While naturalistic stories may perform a range of soothing operations upon the naive and dependent reader, this is achieved at a considerable price.

Many of the most interesting questions are, indeed, epistemological and metaphysical in nature - a fact understood best of all, perhaps, by James Blish.³⁷ But this does not mean that their embodiment in speculative fiction has to be heavy or laboured. Some of the

most resonant SF classics are set in alternative worlds. They permit almost unlimited opportunities for speculation upon a number of levels, and only the rashest critic could believe that their potential is exhausted. The reverse is probably true. For the well-constructed alternate world can satisfy Scholes' criteria by engaging us with a fictional plot while, at the same time, undermining the taken-for-grantedness of the world we assume to be real. By setting up an alternative now it demonstrates how the context of our own knowledge and experience could well have been drastically different. It usefully re-opens what conventional, linear and retrospective views of history domesticate as 'natural' and unproblematic. This world is *in fact* only one of many alternatives and the spectrum of options handed down from above in regard to the future would be farcical if there were anything remotely funny about it. Yet the 'unfreezing' of historical and temporal perspective gives each person the opportunity to stand at the centre of his/her own history as an agent, not a spectator. Furthermore, we begin to understand our lives in a broader, long term, context and in relation to future generations whose reality is grounded in, and depends upon, our own. This extension of concerns beyond the alienation and narcissism of the narrow 'here and now' represents a movement toward maturity which contrasts strongly with the regression to the 'creature present' induced by inferior work.³⁸

Fictions involving temporality may also invoke the wider world which we share with past generations, the living and those yet unborn. In Western linear time the notional present has been continuously sub-divided such that it seems to vanish beneath perceptual thresholds. Yet this rather old-fashioned physicist's conceit is very misleading. The boundaries we have erected in space, time and human relationship are neither natural, nor are they ultimately necessary. Rather, they are part and parcel of an instrumental worldview which extends back through Newton and Bacon to pre-history. Linear time is an artifact of an alienating mode of consciousness. It may have been overthrown conceptually by Einstein but the notion (and the way of life which flows from it) is held firmly in place by cultural, ideological and psychological forces.³⁹ Writers of speculative fiction often appear to be as much caught up in this dilemma as anyone else. But their playful, half-serious attempts to roam at will among different temporalities and moods reflects biological and metaphysical truths. Namely that, as Fraser has pointed out, the processes of life *insert* a meaningful present into the pure succession of the inanimate world and, in so doing, *erect no firm boundaries*. Similarly, 'the *nunc fluens*', or passing present, returns to the *nunc stans*, or eternal present'. Wilber is emphatic that 'this present is no mere slice of reality. On the contrary, in this now resides the cosmos, with all the time and space in the world.'⁴⁰

It is clear that the tripartite division of the tenses plays cruel tricks. I have argued, for example, that school curricula cannot be understood merely as derivations from past culture.⁴¹ Virtually all human activities are grounded in the past, enacted in the present (however defined) and inherently oriented toward futures. In other words, past and future are enfolded in a broader present which touches infinity. Hence *The Holographic Paradigm*,⁴² David Bohm's *Wholeness and the Implicit Order*⁴³ and, indeed, the Perennial Philosophy itself. George Hay was right to see this as the bedrock, 'the wisdom which underlies all religious and metaphysical systems.'⁴⁴ The challenge for serious

writers of speculative fiction is to represent these relationships, this much wider canvas, in ways that are appropriate to the historical now but which reach far beyond it. Such an enterprise is no mere conceit. The Perennial Philosophy teaches that we participate in the 'all' as unbounded spirits and intuit this in moments of clarity. But even without venturing that far, it is clear that simply as incarnate beings we are caught up in a series of change processes that may alter, or eliminate, sentient life upon the earth. In other words, the *nunc stans* is our primary frame of reference, not the *nunc fluens* as is commonly assumed.

It is sometimes frustrating to see the richness of temporality dissipated in unsuccessful paradoxes.⁴⁵ Again, writers have tended to assume that time is unitary, a single process that can be mapped unproblematically through accepted modes of discourse ('he sat in the time machine and travelled into the future'). Stories like Tiptree's *The Man Who Walked Home* and Ian Watson's *The Very Slow Time Machine* indicate more fruitful possibilities. As does the work of J.T. Fraser. His hierarchical scheme of distinct temporalities that correspond to the Umwelts of integrative levels in nature makes a brave bid to unravel aspects of the micro structure of time. I cannot say if Fraser has 'solved the problem of time,'⁴⁶ but he has certainly resolved a number of classical paradoxes and offers an impressive body of interpretation about time and culture. If I have any real reservation about his work it is that the perspective falters as it moves from past to future. Yet this is precisely where Wilber's analysis of distinct stages in the evolution of consciousness takes over.⁴⁷ Taken together, these writers provide a framework for intelligent speculation that appears to go well beyond anything yet on offer.

One use of such a framework may concern the much-maligned utopia.⁴⁸ It's about time this under-rated form was re-habilitated and given new life; not in a classical, stifling, form but as an imaginative rehearsal of plausible and sustainable futures. Callenbach's *Ecotopia* provided one view of a 'New Age' culture but there must be a whole range of solar-age futures to be explored and falsified. The latter may involve plausible reactions against the new orthodoxies of wind, wave, solar power, methane digesters and neo-Gaian Earth people. More importantly, writers might want to look seriously at the kind of psycho/spiritual innovations which I have hinted at above and which could foreshadow entirely different cultural forms. While there are many distinguished exceptions, it remains a matter for serious concern that the zeitgeist of American SF remains so firmly grounded in paranoia, reality-avoidance and regressive fantasy. I had started to wonder if, under the collective influence of writers like Benford, Le Guin, Schenck and Tiptree (Sheldon), some sort of a 'sea change' had not occurred. But the evidence is just not there. Peruse any serious review of recent novels and the same picture emerges. Along with the seemingly endless repetition of fantasy trilogies and series set in stereotyped pseudo-medieval settings, one finds the same juvenile concern with 'total war in space' and suchlike much in evidence. Perhaps this will continue. But, because genre fiction is basically substitutive it remains deeply unsatisfying to writers and readers alike. Others will have to judge the extent to which this is merely the result of cynical marketing. The point I want to emphasise is that *there are other creative options*. Options that, far from driving the reader back into juvenile dependance, open up new paths and perceptions about the self and its relation to the whole.

Lem hit the nail squarely on the head more than twenty years ago when he wrote in *Solaris* that ‘man has gone out to explore other worlds and other civilisations without having explored his own labyrinth of dark passages and secret chambers, and without finding what lies behind doorways that he himself has sealed’.⁴⁹ It could not be put more plainly. The reason why speculative fiction often tends to be genuinely regressive and unhelpful is that it overlooks the nature and the primacy of the inner life and stimulates habits and modes of consciousness that prevent individuals from coming to know their deeper selves. Advanced technology and exotic locales are simply no substitute for the perennial concerns shared and intuited by us all. When the latter are by-passed, both readers and writers are on a hiding to nothing. Or, more precisely, to earlier stages of human consciousness. Wilber is very clear about what is going on here. He writes,

because man wants real transcendence above all else, but because he will not accept the necessary death of his separate self-sense, he goes about seeking transcendence in ways that actually prevent it and force symbolic substitutes. And these substitutes come in all varieties: sex, food, money, fame, knowledge, power - all are ultimately substitute gratifications, simple substitutes for true release in wholeness. This is why human desire is insatiable, why all joys yearn for infinity - all a person wants is Atman; all he finds are symbolic substitutes for it.⁵⁰

If there have been any major American novels (other than those cited) dealing with true psycho/spiritual developments, I would like to hear about them. Gibson's award-winning *Neuromancer* seems to me to move in an entirely different direction toward surfaces, techno-nihilism and depersonalisation: concerns which, as Lewis Mumford long ago pointed out, were disastrous when they first appeared in pre-history. Olaf Stapledon, CS Lewis and James Blish, among others, indicated a different kind of enterprise that seems to me to be even more important today than it once was.⁵¹

On a more mundane level, a significant proportion of speculative work will probably continue to act as a kind of informal technology assessment literature. I have always enjoyed this ‘widgeit SF’ in its own terms, particularly in the hands of a master like Philip K. Dick. Yet I do maintain that technology per se is a secondary issue. Speculative writers have had very little to say about the realities of scientific innovation and technological development, the social relations, ideological commitments and conflicts of R & D in the real world. With a very few exceptions, such as Gregory Benford's *Timescape*, few have attempted to look seriously at how scientists actually function. Yet much has been learned about these processes in recent years and a whole field of study, often called Science, Technology and Society (or STS), has developed complete with a supporting literature. This could be utilised to substantiate and inform future work.⁵²

A literature of speculation is at its strongest when it draws on living cultural sources, is keenly alert to the changing concerns of the times and is focused upon human qualities and needs. If machines have been regarded as ‘spectacular sources of value’ much remains to be stated and discovered about their creators. The inversion of man/machine

relations is to be deplored and fictions which naively subordinate personhood either to machines or to magic (both of them stand-ins for the dominant social order) may well be parasitic upon the shared symbolic order. A major category error is committed when meanings derived from intersubjective human discourse are either 'read upon' or, worse, attributed to, machines or irrational powers. Insofar as this false transference is achieved in stories and agreed to by readers, the latter participate in undermining their own expressive autonomy. Yet works that look beneath the surface to the deepest strivings of the human mind and spirit may serve quite different ends. Such a literature stands in no danger of dying out. Indeed, writers who avoid the seductive simplicities of regression, ennui and escapism can participate in the wider renewal of meaning and purpose by generating images of futures worth inhabiting. Such images are deeply involved in the processes of cultural continuity and change, and we will continue to need Dystopian visions to depict what we may wish to avoid. Dystopias are not invariably depressing unless they exert a false closure upon the reader, driving one back toward resignation and despair. *The major creative task, however, is to move decisively away from the celebration of disaster to the exploration of that spectacular plateau of achievement where human capacities and purposes on the one hand, and technical skills on the other, achieve harmony with each other and with the natural world in which they are located.* Such a balancing of incommensurable forces is bound to be only temporary and beset with numerous conflicts and practical difficulties. It therefore provides fertile ground for the imaginative writer.

What might such a plateau look like? We cannot know for sure, though there are indications in several of the works cited.⁵³ What seems certain is that it will involve that which is most uncertain and problematic in the present order. Thus a literature of speculation can usefully highlight what Fraser calls the 'metastable interface' (i.e. the transitional phase between different Umwelts, or worlds of reference) rather than glossing it over in misguided allegiance to the status quo. It, Utopia and Dystopia can be transcended within a larger, more inclusive, vision.

To summarise: my central proposition is that speculative fiction only need admit an identity crisis insofar as it is identified with a set of obsolete images, meanings, purposes and techniques. The progressive dis-integration of belief systems underlying industrialised ways of life help to account for the crass, unhelpful, nature of some SF. The public taste for reality-avoidance, however, is stimulated by commercial factors within publishing and by writers who either do not know better or do not care. It is not so much that space fiction and fantasy are no longer appropriate forms of expression, far from it. Rather, the all-too-common preoccupation with conquest, domination, depersonalisation and psychological regression is part of a common syndrome that has been superseded. Existential fear and anxiety cannot be resolved this way - they are merely soothed and repressed. Yet when shifts toward the subjective are informed by higher knowledge they pass beyond mere narcissistic indulgence. Though it is still not yet widely understood in the West, the Perennial Philosophy provides a basis for recognising that subjectivity conceals a universal objectivism: the ground of being, that which is, Atman, the *nunc stans*.⁵⁴ Such knowledge and insight does not usher in the Millennium. That will take much longer. It does suggest that the growing sense of dis-orientation,

conflict and fear can be reinterpreted, transcended and finally dissolved. But boundaries are protected by ancient cultural taboos and no atavism is readily given up. In this context, the present rapprochement between Eastern and Western modes of perception (and indeed that between 'Northern' and 'Southern' modes) can inform and energise new developments in fiction, as in the wider culture that it models.

Within such a culture lie many unexplored potentials. We remain a very long way from understanding novel interactions (and here the dual meaning is appropriate): computer networking, gene splicing, higher states of consciousness, tropical de-forestation, expert systems, the near-universal pollution of land, sea and air, disarmament, gender shifts, green politics, monetarism and so on. It seems quite clear that we are taking part in an unprecedented global experiment that requires serious and sustained attention, and which implies unpredictable (but not unimaginable) outcomes. What I most want to emphasise is that, far from attempting to 'escape' into fantasy, the past, or spurious futures, the only *real* escape is by way of a deeper engagement in the extended present. That involves a high-level commitment to each other and to future generations to achieve this dangerous transition toward a more sustainable way of life.

I am emphatically not suggesting that the speculative imagination be shackled to present concerns. One of its most notable features is the way it can rise above the latter, leaving a trail of awkward questions to nibble away at the conventional wisdom of the day. But it can draw on new sources of inspiration and knowledge, some of which have been wrongly dismissed as esoteric, the property of restricted groups, and also on notions of personhood that recognise the unbounded nature of the human spirit. It is here that decisive rejoinders to the false gods of a grasping and fearful culture may be found. Nor do I believe that the best use of SF is to armour us against moral relativism, for that god has already tumbled.⁵⁵ The urge to transcendence has been widely overlooked though it is present in every intentional and expressive act. Far from living alone in the cramped confines of an alienated present and mocked by the dark immensities of an uncaring universe, we can choose to awaken to a world without boundaries brimming with meaning and significance.

If, therefore, we are approaching the time when supra-human states of integration and consciousness become more widely attained, we may see a steady decline of interest in technical feats as such and progressively greater interest in human evolution. Thus, I would not be at all surprised if much of the gaudy hardware of early science fiction, along with the relatively primitive worldviews it sometimes represented, were superseded by some little practiced use of the human mind and spirit. This is foreshadowed in the lives of great spiritual leaders and echoed in contemporary movements toward integration and wholeness.⁵⁶ Moreover, speculative writing has a part to play in the process. But to have any chance of achieving a 'destiny among the stars,' it will be necessary to resolve some ancient difficulties here on Earth. Otherwise we shall only carry the contagion with us. That, perhaps, is the underlying subtext of all those wearily warring galactic federations and empires. Until we have mastered the inner world, control of the outer will remain elusive. The central task is to understand, synthesise and transform the impulses and habits of perception inherited from our forebears.⁵⁷ We need to understand that

technology is but a means to ends and not an end in itself. It may give us much in the way of tools to live with, but nothing to live for. Human purpose and intentionality occupy a higher ontological level than any physical artifact or any collection of things whatever. Higher still are trans-personal purposes, meanings and potentials. Here lies wholeness and answers to all the questions about the ambivalence of science which have plagued the present century.

If writers so choose, what I have called post-galactic SF can be a step on that road. Fantasy is not invariably regressive when it expresses a higher vision, when it is subordinated to higher principles than escapism and wish fulfilment. Science fiction need not remain lost in the desert of naive realism, propagandising on behalf of earlier worldviews and ideologies. It can develop reflexivity, insight, prodromic power. It can look beyond mere technicism, simple dichotomies and boundaries that have been falsely inscribed in space and time to the constitution of significance in a wider, common, world. Who will produce the first anthology or novel along these lines? Speculation is not a trivial pursuit. It is about the constitution of things as they are and as they might be. Thus, finally, speculative fiction is less about galactic empires and external machine technologies (though these have a place) than it is about the human spirit exploring its ontological status from the vantage point of a particular location in space and time. At its best it prefigures an enterprise that takes us beyond the need to be ‘fussing about in the world of time looking for the timeless.’⁵⁸ As our view has shifted, as we move from the known and bounded toward the less known and the unbounded, so the world in which the bulk of SF was produced becomes increasingly remote. Hence, the present exhaustion of ideas and images signals only the decline of speculation within a particular cultural matrix, not the end of the speculative capacity itself.

The latter is a permanent attribute of civilised life and one that interrogates the new era even as it is shaped by what it perceives.

Notes and References

1. See Clarke, I.F., *The Pattern of Expectation*: Cape 1979.
2. Budrys, A., Literatures of Milieux, *Foundation* 31, July 1984, 5.17.
3. Taylor, C., Hermeneutics and Politics, in Connerton, P. (ed.) *Critical Sociology*: Penguin 1976, 189-90.
4. See Henderson, H., The Entropy State, in *Creating Alternative Futures*: Berkley 1978.
5. So argues Jackson, R., in *Fantasy: the Literature of Subversion*: Methuen 1981.
6. Here the elements of fantasy are disciplined both by internally coherent ‘laws’ and, crucially, by forms of higher knowledge within our own reality.
7. Bettelheim, B., *The Uses of Enchantment*: Thames and Hudson 1976.
8. See Stableford, B., The Needs and Demands of the Science Fiction Reader: A Sociological Perspective, *Vector* 83, Oct. 1977, 4-8. Also, Notes Toward a Sociology of Science Fiction, *Foundation* 15, Jan., 1979, 28-40. The question about what people are escaping from and to is begged in these papers. See below.
9. Fraser, J.T., *Time as Conflict*: Birkhauser Verlag 1978, 245.

10. Scholes, R., *Structural Fabulation*: Notre Dame Press, Indiana 1975, 41.
11. See Wilber, K., *Up From Eden: A Transpersonal View of Human Evolution*: RKP, 1983, particularly chapters 18 and 19.
12. As Panshin notes: 'His inert inner landscapes of the imagination are an expression of Ballard's hatred of the postwar universe of sterile plastic. But his stories offer no alternative to the Future History of Heinlein and the others. They offer only exaggeration of sterility, ennui and death.' *Farewell to Yesterday's Tomorrows*:, Berkley 1976, 209.
13. See The Unconquered Country, *Interzone* 7, Spring 1984.
14. Stableford, B., "Man-Made Catastrophes in SF", *Foundation* 22, June, 1981, 77.
15. op cit., note 12.
16. Fraser op cit., 296.
17. Aldiss rightly believes that SF should not merely re-capitulate past history.
18. Mumford, L., *Technics and Human Development*: Harvest/HBJ 1966/67.
19. Stableford, B., Marxism, Science Fiction and the Poverty of Prophecy: Some Comparisons and Contrasts, *Foundation* 32, Nov. 1984, 10.
20. See Rucker, R., *Software*: Ace 1982 for a particularly blatant example. ('Cobb Anderson's brain had been dissected, but the software that made up his mind had been preserved. The idea of 'self' is, after all, just another idea, a symbol in the software': p. 179).
21. Hay, G., "Sleep No More", *Foundation* 24, Feb. 1982, 75.
22. See Lewicki, S., Feminism and Science Fiction, *Foundation* 32, Nov., 1984, 45-59.
23. Schumacher, E.F., *A Guide for the Perplexed*: Cape 1977.
24. Eco, U., Reflections on The Name of the Rose, *Encounter*, April, 1985, 15..H 1975, op cit., note 10, 37.
25. Ibid, 7.
26. Budrys, A., op cit., note 2, 13.
27. Paraphrased from a conversation with Greg Benford, YORCON 3, Leeds 1985.
28. Stableford, B., 1977 op cit., note 8.
29. Stableford, B., Icaromenippus or the Future of Science Fiction, *Vector* 81 May-June 1977, 26.
30. Waugh, P., *Metafiction*: Methuen 1984, 7. Also see Belsey, C., *Critical Practice*: Methuen 1980.
31. Stableford, 1977, op cit., note 29.
32. Scholes 1975, op cit., note 10, 37.
33. See Fraser 1978, op cit., note 9, 96-7.
34. Eco writes: 'Books always speak of other books, and every story tells a story that has already been told', op cit., note 24, 10.
35. Waugh, 1984, op cit., note 30, 14.
36. For example, John Fowles, *Mantissa*: Cape 1982.
37. This is implicit in novels like *Doctor Mirabilis* and, indeed, in the others of the After Such Knowledge tetralogy. D. Ketterer renders the point explicit in The Last Inspirational Gasp of James Blish: The Breath of Brahma, *Science Fiction Studies* 11, 1 March 1984, 45-49. It is also worth noting Nicholls' view that 'sf may derive its muscle and sinew from science and sociology, but much of the

- time its heartbeat derives from the intellectual drama of metaphysics', *Encyclopedia of Science Fiction Granada* 1979, 397. Ian Watson is one of the few contemporary SF writers to take this "drama" seriously.
38. Elise Boulding argues convincingly for the notion of a '200 year present' stretching 100 years in each 'direction'. See *The Dynamics of Imaging Futures, World Future Society Bulletin* 12, 5, 1978, 1-8.
 39. See Wilber, 1983, op cit., and Mumford 1966/67, op cit., note 18.
 40. Wilber, K., *No Boundary*: Shambhala 1979, 69.
 41. See Slaughter, R., *Futures Study in the Curriculum*, in Skilbeck, M. (ed.) *Readings in School-Based Curriculum Development*: Harper & Row 1984.
 42. Wilber, K., (ed.), *The Holographic Paradigm and Other Paradoxes*, Shambhala, 1982.
 43. Bohm, D., *Wholeness and the Implicate Order*: RKP, 1980.
 44. Hay, G., 1982, op cit., 76.
 45. For example, John Varley, *Millennium* (Sphere 1985) contains some excellent and evocative writing. But it badly fudges the central paradox of the story and has a crude deus ex machina ending.
 46. A brief 'off the cuff' comment by Brian Aldiss at Seacon, April 1984, Brighton, UK.
 47. Wilber 1983, op cit., note 11.
 48. See Segal, H., *Appropriate Visions: In Defence of Utopianism Today*, *World Future Society Bulletin* 18, 2, 1984, 24-29.
 49. Lem, S., *Solaris*: Berkley 1970 (orig. Polish 1961), 165.
 50. Wilber, 1983, op cit., note 11, 13.
 51. Cowper, R. Piper at the Gates of Dawn, in *The Custodians*: Gollancz 1976, represents a high point in this tradition.
 52. See, for example, Mulkay, M., *Science and the Sociology of Knowledge*: Allen & Unwin, 1979.
 53. See Wilber, 1983, op. cit., 336.
 54. A fine introduction is Steiner, R., *Higher Worlds*: London, 1923.
 55. From the viewpoint of this essay, Stableford's belief that SF is 'basically a literature of reassurance' which is appropriate to 'a universe of moral and philosophical relativity' (op cit., Oct. 1977, 7) reflects an unacceptable and inadequate epistemology.
 56. See Wilber 1983 op cit., especially chapter 18 and 19. The women's movement, the peace movement and diverse 'new age' cultures are not without their difficulties and critics. Yet the underlying impulse is toward integration and wholeness: precursors of transcendence. A useful summary is provided by Capra, F., *The Turning Point*, Fontana 1983, and Caldicott, L. & Leland, S. op cit. 1979.
 57. See Assagioli, R. *The Act of Will*, Turnstone, UK, 1984, and Whitmore, D. *Psychosynthesis in Education*, Turnstone, UK, 1986.
 58. Wilber, 1983, op cit, 336.

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