

## The Embarrassments of Science Fiction

Embarrassment is in itself an embarrassing subject. Like beauty, it is all too apt to have its source in the sensibility of the beholder. Why should I be made uneasy by someone else's faults unless I fear to see my own mirrored in them? A capacity for embarrassment implies, at the very least, a lack of that loftiness and high cool that we all try to pretend is natural to us. No one, for instance, blushes at the blunders in a school play, for it is easy to see children, even one's own, in their eternal aspect. The point of having them on stage is for the charm of their inevitable failure in filling out their grown-up roles. If it were, instead, one's husband or wife who were so publicly failing, embarrassment would be hard to avoid—though there might still be charm for others in the audience.

Sophistication requires one to have no friends, or only those who can be counted on either never to fail or never to venture forth. In the quintessentially sophisticated world of Proust's novels there are no moments of embarrassment: his artists are first-rate, his aristocrats know better than to *do* anything, and everyone else is a provincial. A provincial is any person who *would* be embarrassing if he were a friend or a member of the same club.

Science fiction writers are the provincials of literature. We have always been able to embarrass each other, but to the world at large our *gaucheries* are generally accounted a major (if not the entire) part of our charm. If the critic Leslie Fiedler could end a speech in praise of science fiction with the sincere hope that sf should not lose "its slapdash quality, its sloppiness, or its vulgarity," so might a countess lavish praise on the ruddy health and unaffected manners of milkmaids. Samuel Delany wrote a long and satisfying essay taking Fiedler to task for his condescensions and pointing out that milkmaids acquire their complexions and their fetching rags as a consequence largely of the conditions they must work in and the pay they receive. I can't do better, by way of moving on, than to quote Delany: "Slapdash writing, sloppiness, and vulgarity are, no matter how you catch them, fat, diseased lice."

So much for our relations with the mainstream. While we remain provincials, it will not be possible to command any other kind of attention from the capitals of art. It is for us to take ourselves seriously and to

consider the uncomfortable question of whether we ought to be permitted out into company. Many of the failings of provincials—their clothes, their manners, their accents—are easily correctable or else forgivable, but others, such as ignorance and complacency, are rooted in the provincial condition. My purpose in this essay is to consider the degree to which science fiction has its source in its own most flagrant faults.

Late in 1970, I made a suggestion in the bulletin of the Science Fiction Writers of America that I thought satisfactorily accounted for most of what is radically wrong with sf, as well as a good part of what is right. I suggested that science fiction is a branch of children's literature.

Let me count the ways.

In my own case, and in that of almost all my contemporaries who admit to a taste for it, that taste was acquired at around age thirteen. Often earlier; seldom much later than fifteen (though I have met a woman of mature years who became an avid reader of sf at age forty, during a long period of hospitalization). The taste may persist throughout life, but it seldom again exercises the addictive force it possesses in early adolescence, except among science fiction fans (concerning whom I shall have more to say by and by).

Consider, too, how many classic novels and stories in the genre are about children of exceptional wisdom and power. There was an early anthology, *Children of Wonder*, which I doted on, devoted to this sole theme. There are, as well, van Vogt's *Slan*, Sturgeon's *More Than Human*, Wyndham's *The Chrysalids* (*Re-Birth in America*), Pangborn's *A Mirror for Observers*, and major novels by Clement, Clarke, Asimov, and Blish—in all of which the protagonists are children. May it not be safely assumed that one reason for this is that such books were written for children?

To say that a book is written for children is not a condemnation, of course, but it is a limitation. It is limiting intellectually, emotionally, and morally. To consider those limitations in that order:

The intellectual limitations of sf are the more remarkable by virtue of the degree to which many of its readers and writers seem to regard their involvement with the genre as a badge of intellectual distinction, like membership in *Mensa*. This sorts oddly with an engrained anti-intellectualism and repeated demands that sf should stick to its last and provide only escapist entertainment—and yet many of the elder statesmen of the field are capable of such seeming self-contradictions. In fact, if they could but state it, their position is demonstrably consistent, and in fact, like all our opinions, is essentially a rationalization of their practice. Briefly, they would allow writers to deal speculatively with whatever materials might be introduced into a beginning course in the physical

sciences, while disbarring irony, aesthetic novelty, any assumption that the reader shares in, or knows about, the civilization she is riding along in, or even a tone of voice suggesting mature thoughtfulness. Sf obeying these rules is called hard-core sf, and some purists would have it that it is the only kind that matters. A classic hard-core story, many times reprinted, Tom Godwin's "The Cold Equations" concerns an eighteen-year-old girl stowaway on a space ship who must be jettisoned because in calculating the fuel needed for landing no allowance has been made for her additional mass. Much is made of the fact that at an acceleration of five gravities the girl's one-gravity weight of 110 pounds will increase to an effective 550 pounds. As a specimen of English prose, of character portrayal, of sociological imagination, the story can only be judged as puerile; yet within its own terms, as a fable designed to convey to very young people that science is not a respecter of persons, it is modestly successful.

The emotional limitations of children's literature are even more restrictive. There are, here and there, children bright enough to cope with the *Scientific American* or even the *Times Literary Supplement*, but crucial aspects of adult experience remain boring even to these prodigies. At the cinema children fail to see the necessity for love scenes, and if a whole movie were to prove to be about nothing else, then they would just as soon not sit through it. No less an authority than Kingsley Amis has pronounced sex and love as being outside the sphere of interest proper to science fiction. Other subjects commonly dealt with by mainstream writers are also presumed not to be of interest to sf readers, such as the nature of the class system and the real exercise of power within that system. Although there is no intrinsic reason (except difficulty) that sf should not venture into such areas, sf writers have characteristically preferred imaginary worlds in which, to quote Sprague de Camp, "all men are mighty, all women beautiful, all problems simple, and all life adventuresome."

The moral limitations of a literature built on such premises should be immediately apparent. Evil is seen as intrinsically external, a blackness ranged against the unvaried whites of heroism. Unhappy endings are the outcome of occasional cold equations, not of flawed human nature. There can be no tragic dimension of experience. Even a tentative expression of pessimism is regarded as grounds for dismissing a work out of hand. Compare sf to mysteries in this respect. Every mystery, however misbegotten, assumes that men are all capable of any degree of evil. That is, all characters are suspects. Such an assumption is essentially foreign to the experience of children. This is not to say that children are innocent, but only that they suppose they are.

Having put forward these reasons for considering sf to be a branch of children's literature, I must confess that something essential remains lacking—chiefly, an explanation of why it is read by so many adults. Further, science fiction has other failings and limitations that this theory fails to account for. I am left with an interesting and only partially valid observation, whose chief merit is that it has been a small annoyance to various people I don't like.

Let me approach the problem from a different direction—the problem, that is, of who reads sf and why. And let me explain, as a kind of belated preface, why the nature of science fiction's readership is so crucial a consideration.

Genre fiction may be distinguished from other kinds of writing in being shaped by the (presumed) demands of its audience rather than by the creative will of its writers. The writers accommodate their talents to the genre's established formulae. These formulae exist in order to guarantee readers the repetition of pleasures fondly remembered. It is no more reprehensible for a writer to seek to gratify such expectations than for a restaurant to do so; and it may be done, in one case as in the other, with more or less skill. This emphasis on replication rather than creation does explain why cookery—and hack writing—finally must be considered as crafts rather than as arts. Indeed, the very mention of "art" is apt to bring a manly sneer to the lips of the hack writer, who prides himself on his craftsmanship, his competence as an entertainer meeting the demands of an audience. It follows that we may learn more about any genre by examining its readership than by studying its writers.

As an example of such an approach let me quote an article in which I sought to account for the conventions of the gothic romance:

Gothics are mostly read by housewives or those who see a life of housewifery looming ahead. In gothics, the heroine is mysteriously threatened and wonders whether it was her husband/fiancé who tried to drop the chandelier on her. . . . Few of the ladies who devour gothics are in serious danger of being pushed off a cliff in Cornwall for the sake of their legacies, yet the analogue of the brand of fiction they buy to their real predicament is close. Every gothic reader must ask herself whether her marriage is worth the grief, the ritual insincerity, the buried rancour, and the sacrifice of other possibilities that every marriage entails. To which the gothic writer replies with a resounding Yes! It is worth all that because down deep he really does love you. Yet to the degree that this answer rings hollow the experience must be renewed. Poor Eleanor must return to the dark castle of her doubts, and the doubts must be denied. And then again.

Is there an analogous model of the representative reader for the much broader and more complex genre of science fiction? I believe there are probably several. One such might be a precocious fourteen-year-old, impatient with his education, anxious for economic independence, with a highly developed faculty for daydreaming and little emotional or moral sophistication concerning the content of his daydreams. That is a fairly accurate portrait of myself at age fourteen, when my passion for sf had reached its height. Now, not just any daydream will serve for such a reader. It must be one to suit his circumstances. Try this, for instance. I quote from the back cover of a paperback:

Somewhere in this world there are six people who—together—can do anything. Some day, perhaps tomorrow, they will put their power to work and the world will be transformed. In the meantime they are waiting quietly. They look—and often behave—like people you know. But with a difference: they think of themselves as “I”—not “we”—because in a curious way they are One.

Add to this that the central figure of the book is a schoolboy of prodigious intellectual gifts desperately trying to pass himself off on the world as the boy next door. This book, as every sf reader will recognize, is Theodore Sturgeon’s *More Than Human*. It is a book that even today I cannot praise highly enough. Among its many excellences is the fact that it uses its considerable power as a *daydream* to inculcate ethical values and spiritual insights usually entirely absent from genre writing. For instance, the book’s insistence on mutual interdependency (and, by implication, on psychic integration) is in sharp contrast to the legion of stories in which the hero discovers the fate of the world to rest in his sole power. Another theme of the book—the need to bide one’s time—is of obvious utility to any fourteen-year-old. But the largest subliminal lesson is latent in the fantasy of possessing secret mental powers. What this represents, I believe, is an assurance that there is a world of thought and inner experience of immense importance and within everybody’s grasp. But it is only there for those who cultivate it.

So long as one stands in need of such assurances and exhortations, so long will sf remain a source of solace and of strength. That is why sf is *par excellence* the literature of students, and why, usually, once you’ve got your degree and begun to lead a livelier life in the wider world, your need for the intellectual cheerleaders of sf slackens. However, if for any reason you don’t get the degree, or if the degree doesn’t get you what you thought it would, then you may be doomed to spin the wheel of this one

fantasy forever. These, the second especially, are large qualifications. Few expectations worth the having are likely to be entirely fulfilled, and so there remains in every foolish heart appetites that only fantasy can assuage.

That is one model of the science fiction reader, and essentially it is an elaboration of my first theory—that sf is written for children. There is, however, another kind of science fiction reader, more typical formerly than now, who is drawn to the genre by distinctly different needs. His preference is for a different sort of sf than that I've been considering till now. He regards the Golden Age of sf as the thirties and forties. He is an admirer of E. E. Smith, of Edgar Rice Burroughs, of A. E. van Vogt, and, at the farthest stretch of his imagination, of Robert Heinlein. This is the science fiction “fan,” and he exercises, by the preponderant and inarguable weight of his purchases, a major influence on the genre.

Since I cannot frame a description of this reader in terms that do not betray my bias against him, I should like to defer to John W. Campbell Jr., who in 1952 wrote this description of his conception of the average reader of his magazine, *Astounding*:

Reader surveys show the following general data: that the readers are largely young men between 20 and 30, with a scattering of younger college students, and older professional technical men; and that nearly all the readers are technically trained and employed.

The nature of the interest in the stories is not economic, not love, but technical-philosophical.

Now, as an example of what Campbell's technically trained élite was enjoying in those days in the pages of *Astounding*, I'd like to quote a brief passage from A. E. van Vogt's *The World of Null-A*, which Campbell has called “one of those once-in-a-decade classics.” In this passage the hero and his girlfriend have gone to a giant computer to be tested on their understanding of the principles of a new all-purpose science called General Semantics:

“Now that I'm here,” said Teresa Clark, “I'm no longer so sure of myself. Those people look darned intelligent.”

Gossey laughed at the expression on her face, but he said nothing. He felt supremely positive that he could compete right through to the thirtieth day. His problem was not would he win, but would he be allowed to try.

The story proves his doubts to be justified, for he is beset on all sides by mysterious and implacable enemies. Thanks, however, to his grasp of non-Aristotelian logic he does win through. Concerning the virtues of this new philosophy, van Vogt had this to say in his introduction:

Every individual scientist is limited in his ability to abstract data from Nature by the brainwashing he has received from his parents and in school. As the General Semanticist would say, each scientific researcher "trails his history" into every research project. Thus, a physicist with less educational or personal rigidity can solve a problem that was beyond the ability (to abstract) of another physicist.

What can be inferred of a reader for whom van Vogt's sentiments and the situations of his fiction are persuasive? First, I think, that education is a subject of profound ambivalence. On the one hand, success is equated with passing a test administered by a computer that shares the author's reverence for non-Aristotelian logic. There is some apprehension as to one's competitors, for they look "darned intelligent." On the other hand, we (of the real world) are apparently "brainwashed" in school, and physicists with less education may be better qualified to solve certain problems than their better-educated peers. While I have my own reservations about the educational system, there is a ring for me, through all of this, of dead-end jobs and correspondence schools (whose come-ons regularly grace the back covers of sf magazines). The technical training and employment that Campbell speaks of are all too often likely to be training in the use of the soldering iron or even the crowbar. Van Vogt and Campbell speak all too clearly the language of lower-middle-class aspiration and resentment, nor are they alone in this. By far the greater part of all pulp science fiction from the time of Wells till now was written to provide a semi-literate audience with compensatory fantasies.

This aspect of the social origins and provenance of sf, though seldom spoken of, will not come as a surprise to the seasoned reader of the genre. The pulp magazines that arose at the turn of the twentieth century had, as a matter of survival, to cater to the needs of the newly literate working classes. Inevitably, it shows.

Sf is rife with fantasies of powerless individuals, of ambiguous antecedents, rising to positions of commanding importance. Often they become world saviors. The appeal of such fantasies is doubtless greater to one whose prevailing sense of himself is of being undervalued and meanly employed; who believes his essential worth is hidden under the

bushel of a life that somehow hasn't worked out as planned; whose most rooted conviction is that he is capable of *more*, though as to the nature of this unrealized potential he may not be too precise.

Another prominent feature of sf that is surely related to the naive character of its audience is its close resemblance, often bordering on identity, with myth, legend, and fairy tales. Throughout the twentieth century a large part of the American urban lower classes, from which the sf audience was drawn, were recent immigrants from what is commonly called the Old Country—that is to say, from the place where folk tales were still a living tradition. Indeed, except for the stories of their religions, this was likely to have been the only literary tradition familiar to these immigrants. Thus few of the first sf readers were more than a generation away from the oral tradition at its most traditional. Think of that sense of wonder that is the touchstone of the early pulp stories: could it not be, in essence, an analogue of the sense of wonder all country mice experience at their first view of a modern metropolis? Doubtless, the twentieth century has had some surprises even for sophisticated city mice, but it is part of *their* code not to let on to this. Surely they will not erect wonder, novelty, and the massive suspension of disbelief into first principles of their aesthetics. Sophisticates require the whole complex apparatus developed by two centuries of realistic novelists in order just to begin enjoying a made-up story. But for a naive audience, as for children, it is enough to say, “once there was a city made all of gold,” and that city rises up in all its simple splendor before their inner eye.

A less beguiling feature we may expect to find in a lower-class literature is resentment. Resentment, because it has its source in repressed anger, usually is expressed in indirect forms. Thus, the chief advantage of the ruling classes, their wealth and the power it provides, is dealt with in most science fiction by simply denying its importance. Power results from personal virtue or the magic of machines. It is rather the personal characteristics of the wealthy that become the focus of the readers' resentment—their cultivated accents, their soft hands, their preposterous or just plain incomprehensible ideas, which they refuse to discuss except by their own ornate rules in their own tiresome language. Most maddeningly, they hold the unswervable and utterly unfair conviction that because they've had the good luck to be better educated they are therefore smarter. In a world full of doltish university graduates, this assumption of superiority is in the highest degree exasperating to any moderately intelligent machinist or clerk. But what is to be done? To attempt to catch up could be the work of a lifetime, and at the end of it



one has only succeeded in becoming a poor copy of what one originally despised—an effete intellectual snob.

Happily, or unhappily, there is an alternative. Deny outright the wisdom of the world and be initiated to a secret wisdom. Become a true believer—it matters not the faith, so long as it is at variance with theirs. All millennialist religions have their origins in this need for creating a counterculture. As religion loses its unique authority, almost any bizarre set of beliefs can become the focus of a sense of Election. Whatever the belief, the rationale for it is the same: the so-called authorities are a pack of fools and frauds with minds closed to any but their own ideas. Just because they've published books doesn't mean a thing. There are other books that are in complete opposition. Beginning with such arguments, and armed with the right book, one may find one's way to almost any conclusion one might take a fancy to: hollow earths, Dean drives, the descent of mankind from interstellar visitors. For the more energetic true believer there are vaster systems of belief, such as Scientology. I select these examples from the myriad available because each historically has been a first cousin of science fiction. And for this good reason: that sf is a virtual treasury of ways of standing the conventional wisdom on its head. Only sophisticates will make a fine distinction between playing with ideas and adopting them. For a naive reader the imaginative excitement engendered by a new notion easily crystallizes into faith.

As this begins to sound like an indictment of sf and its readers, I should like to point out that these class-associated features of sf should not be considered as faults. They are essentially neutral and may be employed to good or ill effect, according to the gifts and goodwill of any given writer. Fantasies of power are a necessary precondition of the exercise of power—by anyone. One cannot do what one hasn't first imagined doing. The upper classes possess a great initial advantage in discovering while still young that the world is in essential agreement with *their* fantasies of power. Princes have a great resource of self-confidence in knowing that someday they'll be kings. Self-help books, from Samuel Smiles through Dale Carnegie, all agree on the crucial importance of hyping yourself into a state of self-confidence. Without that, there is little chance of competing against the toffs who got their gleaming teeth and firm handshakes, as it were, by inheritance. As a device for schooling the mind in what it feels like to be a real go-ahead winner, a few novels by Edgar Rice Burroughs could be quite as effective as an equivalent dosage of Positive Thinking. To denigrate the power fantasies of sf is very like laughing at cripples because they use crutches. A crutch that serves its purpose is to be admired.

As to the kinship between sf and fairy tales and legends, I should not think it would be necessary to make apology. What more fertile soil could any fiction sink its roots into, after all? If individual artists have not always been equal to their materials, that is their loss. It is our gain as readers that often, even so, their botched tales retain the power to astonish us. Even in a cheap frankfurter pork tastes good.

Finally, as to resentment, who shall say that there are not, often enough, good grounds for it? Anger and defiance may be healthier, manlier modes of expression, but when the way to these is barred, we must make do somehow. "Cinderella" and "The Ugly Duckling" are fantasies inspired by resentment, and they possess an undeniable, even archetypal, power. When we are compelled to recognize that our allegiance is owing to powers, whether parents or presidents, whose character is flawed or corrupt, what shall we feel in acquiescing to those powers (as we all do, sometimes) unless resentment? The lower classes may feel their oppression more keenly because it is more immediate and pervasive, but resentment to some degree is part of the human condition.

However (and alas), this does not end the matter. Resentment may be universal, but it is also universally dangerous, for the political program of the resentful inevitably savors of totalitarianism and a spirit of revenge. Once they attain to political power the know-nothings can have a sweet triumph over the know-it-alls by *declaring* that the earth is flat, or Einstein a heretic. The books of one's enemies can be burned or re-edited. I am by no means the first to observe and deplore this fact of political life, nor yet to note its bearing on a certain variety of science fiction. For a fuller consideration of the fascist lurking beneath the smooth chromium surface of a good deal of sf, I recommend Adolf Hitler's remarkable novel, *Lord of the Swastika*, also known as *The Iron Dream*, by Norman Spinrad.

This aspect of sf is only alarming to the degree that the jack-booted variety of sf writer can make good their claim to speak for the field as a whole: which today, surely, is far from being the case. However, this side of sf does remain an embarrassment so long as sf is regarded as a unitary phenomenon, an extended family whose members have a general obligation to notice each other's existence. In the larger world of mainstream literature, matters are ordered otherwise. The better sort of writers simply ignore the productions of their inferiors, even as they crowd their own off the bestseller lists. They do this in much the same way that the gentry arrange their lives so as to be able to ignore the scowling faces of the lower orders. This has its inequalities, as when good writers have the misfortune to be tagged as "popular entertainers" and fail to receive the critical attention their work merits. But it is undeniably a convenient

arrangement, and for good or ill, it is happening right now to sf. It is stratifying into the same three-deck arrangement of highbrow, middlebrow, and lowbrow. A new variety of reader has sprung up beside the older fandom and the ever-replenished ranks of juvenile readers. This new readership has its own distinctive needs and preferences. Being one of the trees, my own view of the forest is not necessarily to be trusted, and so I will not try to characterize these readers, except to call them—us. My only reason for bringing up the matter at all is to pose the question of what our relation to them should be.

In my first notes for this essay I had a kind of half-aphorism that I haven't been able to sneak in anywhere along the way. It was this: sf bears the same relation to fiction that Scientology bears to science. It works for some, but it won't bear looking at. Essentially the question that remains to be asked is whether such a statement—that it won't bear looking at—is justifiable or wise. When it is said that the poor shall always be with us, too often the implication is that one may therefore ignore the poor, and that listening to their grievances is a waste of time.

The alternative to letting sleeping dogs lie is to risk being bitten. That is to say, for me to speak candidly about the books of certain of my colleagues in the field is to invite their hostility and to wound the feelings of many readers who've enjoyed these books; and this without any expectation of entering on a fruitful dialogue, since I have no confidence at all that we share enough common assumptions about life and literature to enable us to undertake a meaningful discussion. "Fan," after all, is a shortened form of "fanatic." Moreover, as I've indicated, in many ways I have no quarrel with these books, just as I have no interest in reading them.

Nevertheless, I feel that my subject requires me to offer at least one specific instance. Recently I had occasion to read Robert Heinlein's *Starship Troopers*, a book that surely provided Norman Spinrad with one of his models for *The Iron Dream*. Thanks to Norman it isn't necessary to say much concerning Heinlein's politics. I'm sure that Heinlein himself would reject the label so many of his critics would pin on him, that of "totalitarian." He might, after a bit of qualifying, go along with "authoritarian" since his story does make such an issue of implicit obedience to authority.

What is embarrassing to me about this book is not its politics as such but rather its naivete, its seeming unawareness of what it is really about. Leaving politics aside and turning to that great gushing source of our richest embarrassments, sex, I find *Starship Troopers* to be, in this respect as well, a veritable treasury of unconscious revelations. The hero is a

homosexual of a very identifiable breed. By his own self-caressing descriptions one recognizes the swaggering leather boy in his most flamboyant form. There is even a skull-and-crossbones earring in his left ear. On four separate occasions, when it is hinted in the book that women have sexual attractions, the only such instances in the book, each time within a single page the hero picks a gratuitous fistfight with the other servicemen—and he always insists on what a lark it is. The association is reflexive and invariable. Sexual arousal leads to fighting. At the end of the book the hero has become a captain and his father is a sergeant serving under him. This is possible because his mother died in the bombing of Buenos Aires by the Bugs, who are the spiritual doppelgängers of the human warriors. In an earlier captain-sergeant relation there is a scene intended to be heartwarming, in which two men make a date to have a boxing match. Twice the hero makes much of the benefits to be derived from seeing or suffering a lashing. Now all of this taken together is so transparent as to challenge the possibility of its being an unconscious revelation. Yet I'm sure that it was, and that moreover any admirer of the book would insist that it's just my dirty mind that has sullied a fine and patriotic paean to the military life.

So why bring it up at all? For two reasons. The first is that such sexual confusions make the politics of the book more dangerous by infusing them with the energies of repressed sexual desires. It may be that what turns you on is not the life of an infantryman, but his uniform. A friend of mine has assured me he knows of several enlistments directly inspired by a reading of *Starship Troopers*. How much simpler it would have been for those lads just to go and have their ears pierced. The second related reason is that it is a central purpose of art, in conjunction with criticism, to expand the realm of conscious choice and enlarge the domain of the ego. It does this by making manifest what was latent, a process that can be resisted, but not easily reversed. And so even those who dislike what I have had to say may yet find it useful as a warning of how things appear to other eyes, and be spared, in consequence, needless embarrassment.

At the beginning of this essay I pose the question whether the faults of sf are extraneous to its nature or intrinsic. In looking back at what I've said, my answer would seem to be that they are intrinsic: but then so are its characteristic strengths. Sf deals with the largest themes and most powerful emotional materials—but in ways that are often irresponsible and trivializing. Altogether too many of us, even the true giants like Philip Dick, are willing to trust our powers of improvisation untempered by powers of retrospection and analysis. We accept the interest paid to the overriding fascination of our subject matter as a tribute paid to our tal-

ents, which in few cases have been exercised to anything like their full extent. It would be gratifying to add, by way of rounding this off on a mellow note, that none of this much matters—that lousy books don't survive and good books do. And why not, after all, end on that note? It may not be entirely true, but it must be an article of faith for anyone who wants to write good books. I believe it. So should you.