

## Ideas: A Popular Misconception

In recent issues of *Foundation* and other magazines Ian Watson has been reiterating a notion that I finally cannot resist calling into question. His thesis, in its most skeletal form, is that science fiction characteristically treats of Ideas, and that such is the weight, wonder, and significance of these Ideas that the genre transcends mundane literary criteria, which are dismissed as “stylistics.” This argument begs so many questions that it is virtually unassailable. As to his central thesis, that important Ideas are exciting, or vice versa, who will deny it? How, from this vast and fuzzy premise, he comes round to his usual conclusion that sf is the sacred preserve of a muse unlike all others varies from pronouncement to pronouncement, but that is his unchanging moral. I would like, here, to point out some of the ways in which his arguments strike me as wrong-headed, self-serving, and dishonest.

First, let me nod in passing to the old dichotomy of Style versus Content, which will go on being debated as long as there are college freshmen. Old hands at the literary game know this to be a false and spurious distinction, especially in aesthetics. The Ideas in a work of art do not exist independently of the medium that conveys them—whether that medium is language, paint, or musical notes. To plead on behalf of a writer’s ideas while offering excuses for his style is tantamount to confessing a sense of at least the partial inadequacy of those ideas, to admit that the writer in question has not commanded one’s entire loyalty or whole attention. A writer’s strengths as much as his inadequacies prove, when examined carefully enough, to be attributable to his particular use of language—to what Watson would dismiss as “style.” But this line of argument, though so established as to amount to a truism, is too abstract to be appealing. It is more comfortable to speak of books as we remember them (big urns full of Characters, Plots, Ideas) than as we experience them (a modulated flow of language). So rather than scuttle Watson’s case before it’s embarked on the high seas, I’m willing to talk about Ideas and Style.

Let me ask, first, what Ideas are we talking about? Whose Ideas, in which books? I particularly want to know which otherwise meretricious works (stylistically speaking) must be forgiven on account of their good

Ideas? Those of E. E. Smith, perhaps? Watson wrote, in *Arena* 7, of Smith's books:

"Blasters roar, crypto-science jargon jangles evocatively, galaxies collide. It's gawkish stuff. Yet there is such sheer passion for science, discovery, space; such wonder (even though the human and social dimension is missing and the stuff is frankly unreadable beyond the age of 14 with its lumpy style, minimal characters and histrionic plots) that I turn with sadness to some more obviously mature, adult, artistic sf of today."

Does Watson mean to say that there are good Ideas hidden in the dreck? Does it amount to an Idea to say, "Hey, what if there were real spaceships and we could fly them to another galaxy a zillion light-years away!"? Strictly speaking, yes it does—but scarcely an original Idea, even, I would suppose, for the most naive of Smith's readers. This is not to say that it can't be made an exciting Idea, however familiar, by a dramatic presentation—but aren't we talking about "stylistics" at this point? Watson does cite a more original notion of Smith's—that his hero saves "kidnapped girlfriends from falling into dead stars by firing morse-code messages through space by machine gun." An irresistible Idea, in its way, but of the category Dumb Idea. Dumb Ideas are, indeed, the particular delight of the old pulps, and anyone can enjoy a giggle at their expense—or a sigh, like Watson's, for the supposed lost innocence (was it ever really his, though?) that could accept such absurd concoctions at face value. This is what Camp is all about, and Camp, these days, is scarcely an elitist pleasure. Even in my youth, so long ago, *Mad Magazine* was trafficking in Camp. People like Dumb Ideas, even though they know they're dumb; witness the success of *Star Wars*.

But Watson (I assume) isn't defending Dumb Ideas, or only incidentally, insofar as they may be general enough (the Idea of Space Travel, for instance) to encompass an Idea that actually has something going for it, the sort of Idea that a professional scientist or philosopher need not be ashamed of. The question then suggests itself to me—if one has got hold of such a really Good Idea, why not present it to the world in the glory of its naked truth? Why is fiction, in any form, required as swaddling clothes? The most successful Ideas have generally been disseminated in nonfictional form. (Though the fancy immediately suggests an alternative universe in which Newton and Darwin felt compelled to propose their theories in the form of novels or epic poems.) The answer is obviously that fiction is not a suitable medium for presenting Ideas for scientific or philosophical evaluation.

What it is good for, and what it often does, is to take Ideas and systems of Ideas from the cool context of the laboratory and the seminar room and demonstrate their relevance to human life. Insofar as the Ideas of sf are worth taking seriously, they belong to a community of discourse that neither originates within the field nor remains there. Truly original Ideas are few, and most intellectual activity consists in glossing them, cross-referencing them, and restating them more lucidly or more forcefully.

But already I find myself falling into the same slovenly usage as Watson in speaking of Ideas as though they were all of one generic type, like Cats. In fact, when we speak of the Ideas in a work of fiction they are of a radically different nature from the Ideas of science and philosophy.

Consider *The Island of Dr. Moreau*. What is its basic Idea? That animals might be surgically altered so as to become almost like people? Only the most naive reading yields this banality. (Though how often sf critics seem to think it is enough to catalogue the salient nuts-and-bolts of a plot by way of summing up its “Ideas”!) If the book deserves our intellectual consideration, it is rather because it examines human nature in the light of Darwin’s theories and speculates on the degree to which human nature resembles that of the brute creation. Wells, however, is not under the onus of explaining Darwin’s theories to his readers. Rather, he dramatizes the conflict between two views of human nature. He does this with such artistic economy that the uncritical reader is simply swept along by the story—not so much unthinkingly as thinking (with Wells’s help) so quickly and efficiently as not to notice what he’s about. The Ideas are there, by implication, but taken in the context of the ongoing drama they are not particularly striking Ideas. Only when Wells’s art has imparted an intensity and human significance to these Ideas do they become “his” (or as a genre “ours”).

In a word, Wells is mythmaking. Here, for a moment, Watson and I may find ourselves on common ground, for in his essay in *Arena* 7, he speaks of sf as the mythology of the modern age. Our difference may come down to this—that he would emphasize the material being made a myth of, while I would emphasize the process itself. But this shift of emphasis has large repercussions, for it means that Watson wants to believe his Ideas, while I am content to entertain mine.

No doubt that’s disingenuous. I have the same vested interest in my Ideas as Watson has in his (or if not in my Ideas as such, in something I think of as uniquely my own; I’d probably call it my Art). The founding text of the sociology of knowledge, Mannheim’s *Ideology and Utopia*, propounds a very interesting Idea. To wit—that all systems of thought (ide-

ologies) are ultimately no more than special pleading for the ideologue's privileged position. No one, Mannheim maintains, has any Ideas but those that it is to her advantage to have.

To apply this thesis to the present case, artists, when they turn to criticism, are chiefly engaged in expounding the peculiar excellence of their own work as artists, but by proclaiming its virtues and exculpating its faults, Watson, in maintaining the primacy of Ideas in sf and denigrating the importance of "Stylistics," is telling us how we are to read and value his own fiction. It is an evaluation in which other critics have concurred, though not always with the same unqualified approbation.

More than this, however, Watson seems to be demanding that his Ideas be judged on their own merits—not as the elements of a fictional invention but on the grounds of their literal truth. He makes a distinction between science and poetry parallel to that between Ideas and Stylistics. E. E. Smith, for all his failings, is to be admired for his faith in Science, while other writers, manifestly more accomplished, are nevertheless deplored because they worship the false gods of Poetry, Irony, and Skepticism. Of the work of these writers (though he doesn't mention me by name, I trust he would include me in their number), Watson writes:

The science ideas of genuine sf, and science itself too, become all too often a form of stylistic kitsch, reflecting a self-indulgent disillusion with science, wonder, and hope, the future and their replacement by a sophisticated Silver Age rococo.

Science, in its current usage, is that area of knowledge which does not fall under the strictures that apply to Ideology. It is certain, not relative. "Science ideas," thus, are ideas we can believe in, and that is what Watson longs for on the evidence of his own work. The consistent theme of his fiction is that of human transcendence. Transcendence is a religious pre-occupation, and like many other sf writers, Watson uses science fiction as a vehicle for exploring the vast, dim, and undeniably fascinating terrain on the borderland between here and somewhere transcendently else. Faith must be, by definition, in things unseen and unproven—but passionately longed for. There is always a temptation to insist that one has, in fact, seen those things. Gospels are written to this effect, and novels. And yet, maddeningly, doubters continue to express their doubts about one's words of witness, doubters who reflect, to quote Watson again, "a self-indulgent Western disillusion with science, wonder, hope, the future."

I am not suggesting that Watson's Ideas are Dumb Ideas on a par with

those of E. E. Smith. But they are Doubtful Ideas, in that they are not susceptible of proof and so find themselves in the same boat with other Ideologies.

The Ideas of Poetry, similarly, tend to be Doubtful Ideas (and I would even suggest to Watson—and to sf writers in general—that Poetry, willy-nilly, is the business that they're in), but poets have a different relation to their Doubtful Ideas than do true believers. Poetry is the language Faith speaks when it is no longer literal, a language that is, of course, self-indulgent (i.e., playful, provisional, undogmatic) and that is also, perhaps, disillusioned (if the alternative is to be illusioned). It is the language of Ovid, of Dante, and of legions of other poets, and nowadays it is the language of such science fiction as I would care to make a case for. If it smacks of the Silver Age, there is no disgrace in that—for the Golden Age never did exist. Least of all in science fiction.