

Big Ideas and Dead-End Thrills: The Further Embarrassments of Science Fiction

In his lecture “From Poe to Valéry,” T. S. Eliot characterized science fiction’s most venerable American ancestor in a manner that describes the genre quite as aptly as the author:

That Poe had a powerful intellect is undeniable: but it seems to me the intellect of a highly gifted young person before puberty. The forms which his lively curiosity takes are those in which a pre-adolescent mentality delights: wonders of nature and of mechanics and of the supernatural, cryptograms and cyphers, puzzles and labyrinths, mechanical chess-players and wild flights of speculation. The variety and ardour of his curiosity delight and dazzle; yet in the end the eccentricity and lack of coherence of his interests tire.

Eliot could have continued, even more damningly, in the same vein by noting the respects in which Poe’s representations of sexuality are typical of those adolescent rakes and roués whose information on the subject derives from the library and a theoretical fascination rather than from experience or actual desire. The Poe who, in his early twenties, wrote “Berenice,” wherein the soulful, aristocratic Egeus develops a passion for the teeth of his affianced cousin Berenice, is a kind of adult impersonator, a teenager grossing out the grown-ups by reducing their lusts to an absurdity.

“The teeth!” Egeus famously raves, “—the teeth!—they were here, and there, and everywhere, and visibly and palpably before me; long, narrow, and excessively white, with the pale lips writhing about them. . . . In the multiplied objects of the external world I had no thoughts but for the teeth. For these I longed with a frenzied desire.” In the tale’s denouement, with wonderful celerity, Berenice dies in an epileptic fit; she is buried, and a menial whispers to Egeus “of a violated grave—of a disfigured body enshrouded, yet still breathing—still palpitating—still alive!”

I cannot resist quoting Egeus/Poe’s last breathless paragraph in full:

He [the menial] pointed to my garments: they were muddy and clotted with gore. I spoke not, and he took me gently by the hand: it was indented with the impress of human nails. He directed my attention to some object against the wall. I looked at it for some minutes: it was a spade. With a shriek I bounded to the table, and grasped the box that lay upon it. But I could not force it open; and, in my tremor, it slipped from my hands, and fell heavily, and burst into pieces; and from it, with a rattling sound, there rolled out some instruments of dental surgery, intermingled with thirty-two small, white and ivory-looking substances that were scattered to and fro about the floor.

In 1975 I gave a talk on the theme “The Embarrassments of Science Fiction,” in which I developed a notion I had first advanced in 1970, in the bulletin of the Science Fiction Writers of America: that science fiction should be accounted, as best can be understood, as a branch of children’s literature. I noted how often a taste for sf is acquired in early adolescence—the golden age of science fiction, our tribal wisdom has it, is thirteen. I pointed to the number of classic stories about children of preternatural wisdom and power. And I deplored, at some length, the limitations that result from the genre’s readership demographics. Implicit in my critique was an agenda for an aesthetically and intellectually mature science fiction, written by grown-ups for grown-up tastes; the sort of science fiction I supposed that I and some few of my friends were writing at that time—the writers, as we advertised ourselves, of the New Wave.

Well, the New Wave is ancient history now, most of what we wrote out of print and all of it out of date—for there is nothing so ephemeral as yesterday’s thoughtful predictions, whether in the op-ed page or in sf magazines. The predictive imagination is driven by archetypes; it demands Big Bangs, stunning upsets, Vistavision. History arrives incrementally and often by the side door. Consider how, in the twenty-three years since 2001, the space program has dwindled away to insignificance, a victim of public apathy, bureaucratic gigantism, and systemic corruption. Consider in that same film the anthropomorphic HAL, a melodrama villain disguised as a computer; consider all sf’s failures to imagine the cybernetic age, despite the easy-to-follow instructions of Alvin Toffler and like pundits, until we were actually living in it. Consider such dreaded transformations as those that are threatened by the greenhouse effect or the destruction of the ozone layer or AIDS. Consider the new geopolitical imbalance of power. Consider all these things, and then ask what sf has had to say about them.

Almost not a word. Yet science fiction has never been more popular than in these past fifteen years. Beginning with *Star Wars*, in 1977, sf movies have been a major component of the Hollywood product—no longer grade-B entries for the drive-in crowd but big-bucks extravaganzas, which, often enough, have been remakes of earlier, drive-in movies such as *The Fly* and *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*. At the same time, sf titles have begun to appear regularly on bestseller lists, to the degree that in recent months a quarter to a third of best-selling fiction titles on both hard- and soft-cover lists have been sf or else of the kindred genres of horror and heroic fantasy.

Nearly without exception, the genre works that have enjoyed such popularity have been of the type that I characterized in “The Embarrassments of Science Fiction” as children’s literature. For while I had faint-heartedly bemoaned the genre’s juvenility, more farsighted souls—editors, notably Ballantine’s Judy-Lynn del Rey—had taken the same estimate of the situation and seen an enormous untapped market. Del Rey and those who followed in her footsteps discovered and groomed writers like Stephen Donaldson, Terry Brooks, and Piers Anthony, who could scale down Tolkien or Asimov from the seventh- or eighth-grade reading levels of the overeducated fifties and create tetralogies suitable to the diminished reading skills of today’s children.

Other publishers pioneered the sf equivalent of franchise merchandising, issuing series like the ongoing *Star Trek* paperbacks, a practice that minimizes the risks, costs, and unpleasantness of having to deal with “name” writers. (Editors know better than anyone that authors at this level of production are not irreplaceable. Indeed, for a hack writer it is a liability to have too identifiable a voice.) Finally, as part of a recent innovation, the most marketable of the older name writers, Asimov and Clarke, have been persuaded to become generic labels, by expanding classic short stories or undertaking “sequels” to the work they wrote before this high-rolling era. The actual work is subcontracted to “co-authors,” including such onetime aspirants to menu-A status as Robert Silverberg and Gregory Benford (both of whom have undertaken collaborations with writers of still lesser clout).

These market forces have had a predictable effect on writers, who have had to adapt or die. Few veterans have succeeded at adapting. Silverberg wrote a gargantuan heroic fantasy, *Lord Valentine’s Castle*, by way of atoning for the elitist sins of his New Wave days, but it was not quite enough; somehow his audience could hear a Galilean murmur, beneath his formal recantation, of “*e pur se muove*.” With his *Book of the New Sun* tetralogy, Gene Wolfe succeeded at the seemingly impossible task of making

literature of the mongrel subgenre of science fantasy, but the work's very excellences told against it in the current sf market. Brian Aldiss experienced a similarly disillusioning *succès d'estime* with his "Helliconia" trilogy.

Conventional publishing wisdom has it that the midlist title is doomed to extinction at most trade publishers, and with it that middle rank of novelists who scrape along by selling fifteen thousand to twenty thousand hardcover copies. Publishing houses, under the dominion of their accountants, no more have a compelling incentive to subsidize the middle rank's scraping along than General Motors has to sustain the existence of Flint, Michigan.

Just as the wiser residents of that city abandoned their homes before they were evicted from them, so a goodly number of the more sensible and prescient science fiction writers have departed the field for other genres or for the traditional haven of the literary writer, academia. Samuel Delany now heads the department of comparative literature at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst and devotes most of his writing energies to criticism and other forms of nonfiction. J. G. Ballard made his entry into the big time with a memoir of his adolescence as a POW in China, *Empire of the Sun*, a work that became a Steven Spielberg epic. John Sladek, whose novels about robots were so long without a U.S. publisher, has become an executive in a firm that designs real robots.

Hollywood and television have proved more eager to assimilate sf ideas into film and video than the writers originating those ideas. It may well be that a different degree of professionalism is required, or (if this is not a tautology) of cynicism. Would Philip K. Dick's two posthumous hits, *Blade Runner* and *Total Recall*, have succeeded at the box office if they had not been dumbed down by show-biz pros? At least in Dick's case, as in that of Arthur Clarke, some credit is given to the original. The great majority of the sf movies that have been hits in recent years—the *Star Wars* series, *E.T.*, *Alien* and *Aliens*, *Back to the Future* parts 1, 2, and 3, and so forth—have been written by director-writer-producer teams who have dealt with sf as a pool of imagery, tropes, and plots in the public domain, which can be cobbled together as well by one creative team as by another. The success of these movies, and dozens of others, has proved them right, and the unhappy consequence for sf writers is that success within the genre is seldom a stepping-stone to any larger success generated by adaptation to film. The significant exceptions in the past decade have been writers of horror fiction, since in that field there is not that disjunction, characteristic of sf, between what readers will read and what audiences will buy tickets to see.

Dinosaurs versus New Wave versus Cyberpunk

Market forces, though they are powerful, don't explain everything. SF writers of diverse generations have maintained a steady creative pace throughout their careers with no thought of the main chance or ordinary prudence. Increasingly, as he grew older, Robert Heinlein wrote books that defied the conventions of pulp fiction (and almost every other kind), and they became bestsellers. Dick followed his instincts just as single-mindedly though he was legendarily ill fated and undervalued (admittedly, much of the legend was created by the author, who was an ace self-mythologizer). Frederik Pohl has been producing novels with clockwork diligence for half a century, and enjoying a modest prosperity without ever producing a "crossover" novel. But such continuous, career-long productivity is unusual.

More often there is a gradual tapering-off or a complete cessation, as with Theodore Sturgeon, Ray Bradbury, Judith Merrill, Walter Miller Jr., Alfred Bester, John Wyndham, Algis Budrys, Damon Knight, James Blish, Robert Sheckley, Joanna Russ, and Harlan Ellison (to mention only those considered of the first rank). Diverse as their gifts were, graphs of their creative-energy expenditure would have roughly the same shape, and in few instances, to my knowledge, can these writers offer extrinsic reasons for their diminished production (extrinsic, that is, to the life of the imagination). A happy few continued to produce memorable work, though at a slower rate; others ground out ever more dismal hackwork; a few retired from the field at the height of their powers, sometimes mumbling of a magnum opus in the desk drawer.

Doubtless all the arts have a high attrition rate. If one were to divide all the art in the world, in whatever medium, into that created by those under thirty-five and that by those over thirty-five, the former, I would wager, would be the richer lode. Advance the dividing line to age forty (which is the Yale Younger Poets criterion), and there is little doubt. Work produced before age forty includes everything by Byron, Shelley, Keats, most of Shakespeare, the best of Wordsworth; all of Raphael, Van Gogh, Mozart, Bellini. Even where death or mid-life burnout did not close accounts, even where the highest talents continued in spate into old age, the defining work was usually done by age forty, especially in those arts where innovation is at a premium. Cubism, Impressionism, Jugendstil, the modernist movement in poetry—these were all creations of people in their twenties and early thirties.

The same has been true of science fiction. Indeed, the New Wave of the sixties represents the first generational opposition in science fiction. I

remember how at a 1969 sf convention I spoke dismissively of the “dinosaurs” then impeding the proper appreciation of young mammals like myself. Twenty-three years later all but a couple of the dinosaurs I had in mind remain the commanding presences in the field, at least from a marketing perspective, and some of my fellow mammals now look more and more like dinosaurs themselves, even those who have not retired to the pastures of the backlist.

Like the elder dinosaurs—Clarke, Asimov, Bradbury—these newly old writers tend to recycle the same imaginative raw material. Ballard is Ballard still, and even in the act of renouncing her earlier fiction Ursula LeGuin perpetuates it. In terms of an individual artist’s career track such continuity may be inescapable and even advantageous. But it has been the tacit mandate of science fiction that its writers should create a kind of consensual future, a map of both what we’ve agreed to wish for and what we collectively dread. The vision of the Asimov-Heinlein generation was the cheery Buck Rogers universe of space travel and infinite economic expansion, an imaginative landscape that mirrored the socioeconomic ideals of America from 1948 through 1962.

The next consensual future, that of the New Wave, sprayed graffiti on the edifices it inherited. Norman Spinrad, in *The Iron Dream*, re-imagined Heinlein’s oeuvre through the eyes of Adolf Hitler. Fear of the bomb and distrust of the System were the order of the day. At the essential task of creating a period vision or style—defining images like the rocket ship, the robot, the Gotham City of art deco skyscrapers—the New Wave scored near zero. The magazine *New Worlds* under Michael Moorcock promoted a brand of pop art that montaged Carnaby Street with affirmations of existing pop icons like highway signs and consumer packaging, but pop art celebrated images that were already retro in their day; the “future” in the sixties existed only in quotation marks, as a form of camp and an abandoned faith. This antiquarian quality of the “future” was epitomized by the cover of the 1979 *Science Fiction Encyclopedia*, on which, beneath a giant cantaloupe that, at second glance, may be the moon, an ocean liner is washed up against a tumbling Empire State Building. For the New Wave writer of the sixties, the characteristic future landscape was the ruins of what the thirties and forties had dreamed of.

The next generation in sf is that of the Cyberpunks, whose works are still in progress and so not yet within hindsight’s advantaged purview. One thing that can already be said of the Cyberpunks, however, is that they have created a distinctive consensual future with a look all its own, a look consciously adapted from Hollywood set designs, notably those for *Blade Runner*, and from computer graphics. It is a funky look that might be

seen as an affirmation of the graffiti the New Wave writers scrawled on the city of the future they inherited, as though to say, “Well, yes, the future is a mess, and a lot of it is in terrible repair, and the rest is mostly an electronic illusion, but you might as well enjoy it while it lasts.”

That sense that the future may not last for long is often assumed to be a prerogative of youth, the dialectical complement of another misconception the young are noted for—the conviction that they are immortal. The punk component of the Cyberpunk aesthetic celebrates the fecklessness of youth and its preferred risks: drugs, sex, and macho aggression. But how could it do otherwise in our culture? I think it is more significant that today’s older generations share the Cyberpunk vision of a disposable future of diminishing options, to which the logical response is hedonism and the idea that problems can be solved by denying that they exist. Is there a hole in the ozone layer? Does the federal deficit relate to anything real? Just say no.

My sense of the moral dimensions of Cyberpunk was confirmed by an op-ed piece by Lewis Shiner, himself a sometime Cyberpunk, in the *New York Times* of January 7, 1991. In the course of turning in his official resignation from the movement, Shiner delivered this summing-up: Cyberpunk “offers power fantasies, the same dead-end thrills we get from video games and blockbuster movies like *Rambo* and *Aliens*. It gives Nature up for dead, accepts violence and greed as inevitable and promotes the cult of the loner.” Shiner began that piece with a simple but telling observation: “I’m 39 years old.”

Of course, it is not inevitable that one’s aesthetic becomes tender as one’s arteries harden. William Burroughs, a patron saint of punk in all its varieties, cyber included, is an author whose prophetic vision has altered scarcely a whit since *Naked Lunch*, of 1959 (when Burroughs had reached the astonishing age, for someone in his actuarial class, of forty-five). He’s still going, each new novel as dependably like the last as those of Terry Brooks and Anne McCaffrey, and he has been the most popular bad boy of his era, the discovery of each countercultural generation since the Beats, never more popular than among the Cyberpunks. The secret of Burroughs’s appeal is that he is consummately yucky, a living gross-out than whom there is none grosser. His novels wearily recapitulate the same doubtless sincere masturbatory images of young men achieving orgasm at the moment of strangulation while old creeps, dazed with opium, look on. There is also a lot of playful surgery that calls to mind those dental instruments that rolled out of Egeaus’s little box. And by way of avant-garde authentication, a portion of Burroughs’s oeuvre is given over to verbal montage produced by intercutting existing texts in a ran-

dom fashion, a method of composition that anyone can emulate (but that no one except the terminally stoned will be likely to read in any quantity). Finally, there is the testimony of the man: a long-term heroin addict, a pederast of sepulchral uncomeliness, a wife-killer, and an unfailing source of trendy paranoid delusions. Surely the man was not of woman born but rather formed from ashes and cerements plundered from the tomb of Edgar Allan Poe.

I exaggerate, but only with regard to the matter of his birth, for Burroughs was, like many of Poe's heroes, a scion of wealth; indeed, the family business has evolved into Unisys, a multinational defense contractor of the kind that rules the Cyberpunk universe. Perhaps there is a hidden blessing in the fact that Burroughs's vocation was for heroin and literature rather than the family business: he might have been just as successful in putting his vision to work for Unisys.

Youth, Too Often Callow

Between them, Poe and Burroughs represent a paradigm of what is most gauche, most deeply and painfully embarrassing, in science fiction, including that of the New Wave. I speak here of youth, not childhood—for childhood, from an adult vantage, is not an embarrassment, and that part of science fiction that recommends itself to the tastes of pre-teens is charming or, at least, harmless. Once such a taste has been acquired, it may be exercised long afterward, as teddy bears may live long secret lives hiding in closets or behind pillows. I came to understand this recently when a student in a writing class passionately protested his readerly loyalty to one of my *bêtes noires*, Piers Anthony. A sophomore, intelligent and socially couth, he could not find any principle on which to base his liking. The author's sense of humor was the student's last bulwark, but there was no single joke or whimsy in the text which he could point to as being actually amusing. I realize now that we were fighting over a teddy bear, which he, quite rightly, refused to surrender or renounce, though he could offer no rationale for his loyalty. What can one say in such cases but "He's my teddy, and I love him!" Piers Anthony's work accomplishes its purpose exactly to the degree that an adult taste can't tolerate it: his silly puns and patchwork plots stand like toy soldiers forbidding all grown-up entry into his never-never land.

In youth the most awkward age—the one that gives us the most to blush for—is the one we have just quitted. College students have a horror of being mistaken for high-schoolers; those in their mid-twenties wince

at the gaucheries of college years. Thereafter, embarrassment is not so much a matter of maturity as of social class. Those who write embarrassingly may do so in ignorance of, or despite, generally understood rules of decorum. Usually naivete combines with rashness, as when suburban teenagers write sad tales of the deaths of inner-city hookers, or Bret Easton Ellis imagines what it would be like to be an amoral and well-dressed sex maniac. The new candor that came to science fiction in the seventies (and to the culture at large, for the New Wave was only part of a larger confluence of forces), the liberty to speak of sexual matters in barracks language, has yielded a richness of embarrassments, from Heinlein's first-person pronouncements on female sexual fulfillment to Ballard's solemn but equally hypothetical pontifications in the New Wave mini-classic *The Summer Cannibals*. I quote a typical unit of his prose:

A Krafft-Ebing of Geometry and Posture. He remembered these pleasures: the conjunction of her exposed pubis with the polished contours of the bidet; the white cube of the bathroom quantifying her left breast as she bent over the handbasin; the mysterious eroticism of the multi-storey car park, a Krafft-Ebing of geometry and posture; her flattened thighs on the tiles of the swimming pool below; her right hand osculating the finger-smear panel of the elevator control. Looking at her from the bed, he re-created these situations, conceptualizations of exquisite games.

That passage does elicit some of science fiction's traditional sense of wonder, but after the fashion of one white teenager solemnly misinforming another about the sexual peculiarities of Asian women. Take two mental steps back from "a Krafft-Ebing of geometry and posture," and the author's portentousness just looks silly and self-important, a failed effort to pump significance and glamour into vacation snapshots of the Spanish coast near Alicante, where, Ballard later wrote in a footnote to *The Summer Cannibals*:

I once pushed my tank-like Armstrong-Siddeley to 100 mph on the beach road, and where my wife died in 1964. The curious atmosphere of the Mediterranean beach resorts still awaits its chronicler. . . . It has a unique ambience—nothing, in my brief experience, like Venice, California, or Malibu. At present it is Europe's Florida, an endless parade of hotels, marinas and apartment houses, haunted by criminals running hash from North Africa, stealing antiquities or on the lam from Scotland Yard.

There is nothing wrong with helping the tourist industry glamorize its wares. Writers of all sorts and every degree of sophistication are constantly about such business. What gives Ballard's testimony its ring of callow youth is the arrogance of his assumption that he is the first person ever to see his favorite stretch of beach the way it really is—that he is the chronicler Alicante has been waiting for.

Self-importance is commonly the armor of the insecure. Poe wrote "Berenice" in the meanest of circumstances, unemployed, living in the garret where his brother had died, supported by the charity of an indigent aunt who went round to relatives to beg for groceries. And this is how his narrator describes his circumstances:

My baptismal name is Egeaeus; that of my family I will not mention. Yet there are no towers in the land more rime-honored than my gloomy, gray, hereditary halls. Our line has been called a race of visionaries; and in many striking particulars—in the character of the family mansion—in the frescos of the chief saloon—in the tapestries of the dormitories—in the chiselling of some buttresses in the armory—but more especially in the gallery of antique paintings—in the fashion of the library chamber—and, lastly, in the very peculiar nature of the library's contents—there is more than sufficient evidence to warrant the belief.

Again, the impulse to compensate for the indignities of poverty by fantasizing about the lifestyles of the rich and famous is a universal trait. What is characteristically youthful in Poe's performance is his ingenuous confidence that he's taking us in.

I feel a particularly keen twinge of embarrassment for Poe at such moments because I can read in all too many passages of my own work exactly the same threadbare pretensions. Recently I learned that an Italian publisher intends to reprint "5 Eggs," a story I wrote at age twenty-three, when I was living in decidedly mean circumstances. The story is a string of embarrassments large and small, but I think this paragraph best captures its tone:

Standing in the dining room where appetizers, salads, and sauces were spread on the great mahogany table amid the plunder of his mother's cupboard—the gilt-edged china, the heavy silver, the crystal—he stared out the French windows at the bleak, moonlit autumn hills that lay beyond his watered lawn.

And there is this picture of high society a page later:

Mrs. Shreve with her husband was the next to arrive. Shreve was his publisher. Mrs. Shreve received the news of [his fiancée's] desertion politely, as she might have received the news of a friend's bankruptcy, with an invitation to dinner, with the understanding that as long as the friend's evening clothes and composure were intact the invitation stood. Mrs. Shreve had brought along galleys of his latest book, and they talked business and drank.

Nothing in my own prose can match the glory of "the chiselling of some buttresses in the armory," but clearly the same compensatory mechanism is at work. Perhaps it is no accident that the plot of my tale, like Poe's, features a tragic romance of a sort that only young men of pristine inexperience and perfected amour propre have ever imagined. And who should their readership be but other such young men, for whom the authors' inauthenticities are more solacing than a lifetime subscription to *Connoisseur*, from which they would learn only the true dimensions of their exclusion from the frescoed saloons and tapestried dormitories of the rich.

The final and most excruciating callowness of youth is what sf readers particularly prize: Big Ideas. Now, there are some ideas that genuinely are big, which is to say, full of implication and repercussion. Copernicus's remodeled universe is such an idea. But an idea need not even be valid to be big: Spengler's *Decline of the West* is as big as all history, and its central thesis is pure twaddle. But when I was twenty-five, I revered Spengler, and I was willing to accept any amount of twaddle on faith for the sake of his system, the wonderfully lucid pattern that provided a pigeonhole for every datum of history.

There is nothing that so militates against the sense of one's own vast ignorance as adopting some such Big Idea, and the young, whose ignorance is largest and rawest and most exasperating, have a natural predilection for Big Ideas. Marxists, Ayn Randers, Scientologists, and deconstructionists have one thing in common: they tend to have been recruited young. Once in the fold, they may remain there indefinitely and turn into fossils, but twigs are bent in the teens and twenties.

To a certain degree sf provides a natural playground for the harmless exercise of Big Ideas, even those that are radically unsound. Utopias that could never be implemented in the real world are fun to explore in simulation. Witness the utopian sf novels by writers of such diverse temperaments as LeGuin, Suzy McKee Charnas, Heinlein, Larry Niven, and Jerry Pournelle. The Gaia hypothesis is also a natural for science-fictionalization. Indeed, sf anticipated it, in many stories, including Richard

McKenna's 1963 work "Hunter, Come Home." However, not all writers approach Big Ideas in a spirit of intellectual playfulness. Some come to believe in their privileged wisdom and become intolerant of contradiction, and this can happen at various levels of sophistication. The most gullible can simply report to the local Scientology recruiting office. Others dope their sf hobbyhorses with an ideological fix. Ursula LeGuin promotes a return to the wisdom of a Native American never-never land. Michael Moorcock has become an advocate of Andrea Dworkin. The tendency is always to venture toward the current ideological limit as an inherently more dramatic situation, which is also, however, inherently silly.

Ideological silliness is an affliction more tolerable in the young, and, for reasons I've tried to lay out, exactly the same may be said of a taste for science fiction. This is not meant to be my way of abjuring the field or declaring that I am not now nor have I ever been a science fiction writer. I have been and I continue to be. I will even go on reading and reviewing the stuff, as long as some small portion of what is published continues to suit my taste. But I won't act as a booster for the genre as a whole, which has become, as a publishing phenomenon, one of the major symptoms of, if not a causal agent in, the dumbing-down of the younger generation and the lowering of the lowest common denominator.