

Historians of the Future

BY DAVID PAUL REBOVICH

Science fiction, the literature about the future, is a genre of considerable age and distinguished lineage—or so say its practitioners and aficionados, who have inducted Plato, Thomas More, Campanella, and Poe posthumously into their ranks. This can be seen as a charming historical corrective, but it is more: an invocation of great minds of the past to draw attention to serious discussion of the future and make it worthy of our consideration.

If science fiction has a past in more traditional philosophy and literature, it owes its greatest debt to the versatile and compelling Englishman Sir Francis Bacon. Bacon's *The New Atlantis* (1627) speaks of a world to come, a utopian-like state infused with knowledge obtained through science and the power afforded by technology. *New Atlantis* satisfies substantive and stylistic prerequisites of contemporary science fiction. It informs us of science's capacity to liberate man, intellectually and materially. It projects—indeed, propagandizes—the great powers of science. It tells us about the social implications of science, the type of society that the pursuit of science entails. And it shrouds its message in the very aura of initial fear and of engaging, revealing mystery that we associate with modern science fiction.

But from the perspective of contemporary efforts, Bacon's achievement is limited. If comparisons with him put science fiction in legitimate intellectual company, his work does not define the genre. Bacon's discussion of science is propagandistic, his vision of the future perversely utopian, his message alarmingly elitist. In *New Atlantis* science is pursued by an élite who only occasionally, and then carefully, reveal themselves and their knowledge to a public that enjoys the fruits of science without necessarily comprehending it. And Bacon also seems to suggest that the need for science fiction ends with the pursuit of real science; science generates and creates a world in which the issues and problems that justify a speculative and didactic fiction are overcome.

Modern science fiction is above all else a corrective of this Baconian perspective on science and its meaning

for man. Like Bacon, many modern writers seek to popularize science. But even more than Bacon they aim to make scientific knowledge, the scientific impulse and aspiration, more accessible to the common man. Most important, modern science fiction self-consciously democratizes, bringing to the public the issue of science's current and ultimate meaning for humanity. Bacon seemed to envision science as a solution to man's plight; today's writers see it as raising questions of such importance that they warrant a specific literature to stimulate, sensitize, and educate the public.

By several accounts modern science fiction has succeeded in its mission. It has improved in substance and literary quality, and the genre enjoys increasing intellectual acceptance and popularity. But its popularity raises a problem, one that someone like Bacon would appreciate. While science fiction has "grown up," its audience—paradoxically, the denizens of an increasingly scientific and technological world—has not matured as rapidly, particularly in the ways that science fiction writers would hope. Bacon knew the dangers of putting science in the hands of the common man, and his elitism is a form of social security. What today's writers admit only grudgingly are the dangers posed by an overly popular genre.

Popularity in contemporary America often means trivialization and exaggeration; in the case of science fiction, it means a disregard of the issues and an emphasis on romantic escapism or power worship. We are right to lament a public that cannot render the multiplication tables but knows the layout of the Starship Enterprise. We *do* require some kind of antidote to science fiction, but we err, I suggest, if we off-handedly dismiss it. What is required is a serious consideration of science fiction itself, lest we mistake the cure for the disease.

For what do we look, however? Science fiction has been defined in a variety of ways, and practitioners have not been reluctant to discuss their art. Reginald Bretnor, a promoter and writer, calls it "fiction based on rational speculation regarding the human experience of science and its resultant technologies" (*Science Fiction: Today and Tomorrow*, 1974). Paul Carter, who has reviewed magazine science fiction, expands the definition to "...an imaginative extrapolation from the known into the unknown." It is fair to say that over the years the purpose of science fiction has not changed dramatically. But its themes, points of emphasis, and the scope

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of its concerns have changed. The readily transferable allegories popularized by Jules Verne and H. G. Wells remain, but for the most part contemporary science fiction seeks to expand man's consciousness by juxtaposing the known with possible futures. As "thought experiment," science fiction indirectly prepares man to deal with a universe of change and the question of adaptation. In some cases it provides an education in the future in a way that may be relevant to present issues and decisions, particularly those dealing with science and progress and how these affect man and his culture, society, and politics.

There are dangers in carrying the latter perspective too far, as Frank Herbert, author of the acclaimed "Dune" series, notes. For Herbert science fiction is to be valued principally for the questions it asks, the problems it states. As practitioner, Herbert abjures the role of oracle in favor of the posture of educator, a teacher of the metaphysics of the infinite who examines the never-ending unknown. Science is and ought to be an integral part of the future, but neither science nor science fiction solves the problems of tomorrow. Science fiction, as it depicts the knowledge man may possess, should point to its limitations and reveal the ultimate paradox: that as man and the universe change, man's cures for his problems can result in greater problems. A mature science fiction would admit the progressive aspects of science and technology and be cognizant of the social and political implications of scientific knowledge, progress, and human creativity.

These topics have indeed found expression in the corpus of science fiction, but it is not clear that a large audience actually associates profound metaphysical discussion or social analysis with the genre. The legend of Jules Verne, a technological optimist, remains strong. Americans, thanks to films and TV, are enamored of H. G. Wells's fantasies rather than his social concern and commentary. "Serious" science fiction is hardly new, as those familiar with Karel Capek, Evgenii Zamyatin, William Olaf Stapledon, and Aldous Huxley will attest. But these writers, from the perspective of science fiction as a distinct tradition of discourse, suffer—ironically—from a strength they all share. Their most famous novels are about science and politics—more accurately, the antipolitics of a misappropriated science. Their common theme is that science can become a malevolent tool of the state, ending politics as we know it. Rendered powerful by political events in the '20s and '30s in Europe, their works are now read through post-Orwellian eyes as political allegories about European totalitarianism; the serious questions about science and modernity are suspended by an America that presumably understands science better and is more committed to freedom.

In America it has taken time for science fiction to be considered serious literature. John W. Campbell, the ambitious editor of *Astounding* magazine, is credited with fostering a more literate science fiction, one with an expanded self-definition. Campbell defined science and thus science fiction broadly enough to include technology, engineering, and also psychology, anthropology, sociology, and cybernetics. He encouraged and published writers who would popularize science fiction

and initiate a significant maturation of it. For the last forty years, Isaac Asimov, Frank Herbert, Robert Heinlein, Theodore Sturgeon, and Jack Williamson have brought attention and respectability to science fiction in America. Their efforts have created a situation that affords science fiction the opportunity to act as a forum for discussion of the future, of the meaning of science for man, the social and cultural implications of science, the politics of science, and metaphysical and theological speculation. An examination of some recent publications of note reveals the diversity of treatment and emphasis of these issues and lends a cumulative richness to the genre that is not necessarily appreciated by reading any single work.

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

Ray Bradbury has compiled a hundred of his short stories in an unpretentious but expensive volume, *The Stories of Ray Bradbury* (Knopf; 884 pp.; \$17.95). Most are adventures, but not all are science fiction. Bradbury offers diverse settings—Ireland, Mexico, the Midwest—as the backdrop for his excursions into a "twilight zone," where sometimes science, but most often fantasy and the imagination, are featured players. Bradbury presents a self-tribute that compels us not to revel in the insights of the author but to open ourselves up to the "different," the "unusual," even if they initially inspire fear or awe. Bradbury's characters, as in most of his works, are frequently victimized by the unknown but seldom rebel. Their triumph takes the form of experience and understanding that evoke the innocent, and sometimes the good, in us. Some readers will be content with this sentiment and the message that certain human sensibilities are not vanquished by the intellectual and scientific pursuit of the unknown. Bradbury uses science fiction and fantasy to teach us about our emotions and the need for a certain liberality of the mind. But to the question of how man utilizes science and controls it for praiseworthy purposes, Bradbury has never devoted much time. His science fiction and this collection are unambitious but a useful point of departure.

Robert Heinlein is not so tame. If Bradbury's liberalism and melancholy are unfulfilling, Heinlein's aggressiveness can be disarming. He has utilized science fiction to ask the big questions about man, the future, science, and politics and has attracted a large readership for his meticulous, intelligent works. *The Number of the Beast* (Fawcett paperback; 512 pp.; \$6.95) continues the adventures of Captain John Carter in a future universe of innumerable possibilities and impediments. Heinlein has tired of simply projecting man's experience of the future. He is more interested in making us cognizant of the obstacles man will confront and what ought to be done to overcome them. Once again it is the competent but far-from-perfect person whom we are to admire. The imperatives of the future, according to Heinlein, are Darwinist—natural and social. He is unembarrassed to write one more tale with this message.

For those who confuse Heinlein's self-mocking style with his serious message in *The Number of the Beast*, it is useful to examine his *Expanded Universe* (Ace paperback; 582 pp.; \$8.95). Here Heinlein offers a compila-

tion of fiction—most of it science fiction and not reprinted—and essays that presumably inform us of what Heinlein really has been saying all along. *Expanded Universe* reveals that Heinlein the essayist is aware of a crucial limitation of science fiction: It is understood by the public as the public sees fit, not as the author intended. So much for constructive dialogue between reader and author about the future of man! Heinlein wants us to know that he has written a science fiction with an ostensible moral lesson—the universe is such that man ought to pursue survival as his primary goal—and a political science fiction aimed at mobilizing the public around this goal. If at one time Heinlein could be justifiably praised for posing prescient questions about the future, he ought now be chided for reducing those questions to a few uncreative answers.

Creative answers to broad questions are precisely what Doris Lessing advocates and pursues in *The Sirian Experiments* (Knopf, 388 pp., \$11.95). Lessing writes about a future that does not overcome the foibles of the politics we are familiar with today. Lessing's protagonist, Ambien II, is a political ruler and potential heroine who sees herself as acting for the good of all but whose decisions are moderated by the sin of pride. All five of the planet's rulers are inflexible, with the result that the daring creativity necessary for a good and proper society is not allowed. *The Sirian Experiments* is about the education of Ambien II in the ways of democracy, a politics that allows for philosophical and physical pluralism. The book seems to be about liberation, but, as the title suggests, it speaks more about intellectual and social experiment. No specific solution to the problems of the future or today is offered, since that would undercut an important philosophical teaching of the book. If Lessing informs us of the need to open our minds to avoid being seduced by power and conformity masquerading as progress and social peace, she tells us little about the dangers of experiment and the self-destructive optimism of man's idealistic fantasies.

What is most noticeably unresolved in Lessing's book is the tension between the demands of the state—the good of the whole—and the freedom seemingly required for true human liberation. Lessing uses her science fiction to warn us of the intellectual ossification possible in "advanced" societies, but she does so at the expense of politics and of a carefully articulated collective purpose.

Frank Herbert speaks more to this point in *God Emperor of Dune* (G. P. Putnam's Sons, 416 pp., \$12.95), the most recent volume of his series. Herbert's fictional future contains conflict, drama, and obstacles, but a powerful subtheme of the *Dune* books is interrelatedness, the links between the physical and metaphysical, nature and the mind, the present and the past. *God Emperor* explores these topics along with Herbert's own version of heroic action and sacrifice. Leto, the protagonist, is being transformed into a sandworm—not as an experiment, but as an exercise in transcendence. The sandworm is superior and the transformation praiseworthy because he, in this form, is a repository of the noble traditions of the past and of the knowledge necessary for a more authentic society.

Herbert speaks of rebirth, but not of man reborn in

the future; it is the rebirth that may be necessary in a world treading between technology and mysticism. Leto leads his brethren back to the desert in a seeming return to the past and a partial rejection of the future. The point is more subtle, however. Herbert is making a case for the considerations of harmony, balance, and genuineness in what we are as individuals and in our future environment. He sees Heinlein's plowing through the future and Lessing's politics of experiment as naive and incomplete. One ought not abjure knowledge or avoid the future but have the courage to resist its temptations in the name of values that have social, collective relevance. What Herbert suggests is that the past—our memories—may teach these lessons better than any bold expedition to an unknown future.

REAL HISTORY

Recent science fiction endeavors to teach us about a multifaceted future and, in the process, something about ourselves and our condition. It is in fact a literature of exaggeration, an attempt to envision tomorrow through the myopic perspective of today. We are wrong, also, to expect science fiction writers to be predictors of the future; rather, they highlight tomorrow's opportunities and challenges, generating interest in the future and man's role in shaping it today.

Yet this is precisely where science fiction gets into trouble. Teaching the lesson that the future is mysterious, that man will encounter the unknown, competes with the equally important notion that man, through science, can create his own future. As conveyor and popularizer of these messages, science fiction unintentionally may encourage man's seduction by the mysteries of the future or by its seemingly unbounded creative possibilities. But the best science fiction—including some of the works mentioned here—teaches us that man must work creatively and comprehensively, and delicately. Science fiction presents a history of the future that is not only a story of material and intellectual progress, but of conflict, calling for decisions that have philosophical, social, political, and moral relevance. In fact, science fiction addresses issues that have always been topics in literature. Its uniqueness lies in discussing them in the context of the future with science. This is one more reason to regret—as do science fiction writers, I suspect—a generation that will know the history of the Empire in *Star Wars* but is ignorant of the Empire of Rome.

The solution, however, is not to jettison science fiction or debunk it. All of us would be well-served by a science fiction that uses its large audience as a forum in which to broach the questions that have been raised again and again in our history, placing them within its particular context. This is, after all, what Francis Bacon had in mind himself when he wrote *The Wisdom of the Ancients*, and it does much to explain why the society he created in *The New Atlantis* is unacceptable as utopia. Science's liberation is always partial; the problems it generates are as important as the progress it offers. Bacon learned this by thinking about science and man's past. Science fiction writers would do well to emulate him. After all, there have been few better historians of the future. 