

THE LAUNCHING PAD

■ Several hours ago I sat in our living room, gnawing my fingernails and watching autumn light color the afternoon. Now, both before and after dinner, I've been staring at this typewriter. My basic problem goes back to the same difficulties which I mentioned in *The Launching Pad* for the Summer 1985 issue. Incidentally, to the final specific question that I asked then—"how many members of SFRA and how many readers of this column have read A. Merritt?"—I received a single answer, a note from Gene Wolfe.

Perhaps you may recall that in that column I referred to the articles of Algis Budrys and Roger Schlobin in the Winter 1984 issue of *Extrapolation*; both articles still trouble me. Since then I have received a second letter from Damon Knight, with permission to quote from both, as well as an unsealed letter to Patricia Warrick which Damon said I might read. I

forwarded it but did not read it. When I wrote the Summer column I suggested that the articles/letters of the three men might possibly serve as my point of departure for an editorial. Almost but not quite. A number of things have happened recently which have made me want to avoid addressing the trio of articles/letters directly. I have no wish to quarrel with any one of the three writers. Each speaks sincerely and, I believe, very subjectively. And, to a large extent, they speak accurately.

As I said, a number of things have caught my attention, not the least of them being John Barth's lecture at Wooster in mid-September. Then came several conferences off-campus. More specifically, an attack upon the treatment of "fantastic literature" in the classroom echoes through the GOH speech given by Gene Wolfe in Australia. (I thank him publicly, as I have privately, for the exception that

he made.) Secondly, in the issue of *Fantasy Review* which I received this week there appears what seems to me an unnecessarily harsh critique of a writer's first book-length work. But, most importantly, in *Choice* for September 1985, in an appraisal of Michael P. Jones's *Conrad's Heroism: A Paradise Lost*, P. Keil, College of Staten Island, CUNY, makes a most provocative observation: "This is a refreshingly honest book about an easy-to-understand, yet deep, idea within Conrad criticism. One notices without surprise that it was written as a thesis over ten years ago, and that it is therefore free of the recent turn of criticism to be the subject of its own inquiry and statement."

At what scholarly meeting or after reading what scholarly book/article do you wish you had said that? Be truthful.

I should like to suggest that over the last decade—at least the last decade—literary criticism has increasingly turned in upon itself and, in careless, largely self-satisfied rapture, has chattered to itself in an evermore opaque jargon which remains essentially meaningless even among its most ardent "practitioners" (to steal a word from Algis Budrys).

Certainly there is no simple explanation for what has occurred; nor, in all probability, is there a single explanation. In a sense it results to some degree from the politicizing which took place in the late 1960s and early 1970s, one effect of the impact of Vietnam on America. (Do you remember the afternoon of December

29, 1968, in New York City when the MLA Forum "Science Fiction: The New Mythology" was delayed? Two days earlier, December 27, Samuel R. Delany had presented "About Five Thousand One Hundred and Seventy-Five Words" at the MLA Seminar on Science Fiction.)

In terms of science fiction and fantasy, I think a part of the cause of this inward convulsion resulted from the *oh, so very proper* academic desire for respectability. If for whatever reasons, the academic hierarchy (that phrasing is jargon, let's face it) permitted some of its younger (?), ardent (?), idealistic (?) members to give serious attention to forms of "popular literature"—including what Wolfe called, for convenience, "fantastic literature"—did those men and women who undertook such studies somehow feel that they *simply had to* be highly respectable and *so* professional in order to advance themselves in the academic ranks? Or at least to sound as though they were?

Go back to 1972, for example: *Science Fiction Criticism: An Annotated Checklist* (Kent State University Press) shows that there had been no drought of articles about science fiction in the widely circulating magazines, nor was there a total absence of books studying some phase of fantastic literature. Perhaps the most vivid memory I have of *Science Fiction Criticism* is the admission that it was in no way definitive and that at least two companion volumes were urgently needed: a

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book which annotated as many of the so-called fanzines as possible, and another which did a thorough search of continental sources for studies of the field. Despite the lip service given to both the Continent and Asia by some recent scholars, where are those two books which would provide us with a needed historical perspective? And perhaps what is equally important at this point in time: who would publish them?

Let me suggest still other causes. I think we are now in the midst of a backlash in that some of the initial enthusiasm directed toward the study of popular culture—intended here as an umbrella term—has cooled. Still another cause: financially, most colleges and universities have had to make strategic retreats. And the courses in the humanities have often suffered as a consequence. How many of you tell stories of how students—to say nothing of administrators and department heads—have insisted that they want a *practical* education which will help them to get jobs in the fiercely competitive world market? And finally, something which especially bothers me, what is this assertion that popular literature belongs in the gutter and academicians either must not deal with it at all, or must somehow raise it to an enshrined pedestal separating it from the readers and writers?

Enough speculations, none of which are original at this moment. Let's try analogy. When I was an undergraduate at the University of Minnesota under such teachers as Joseph

Warren Beach and Robert Penn Warren, the survey course required of English majors stopped with the works of Thomas Hardy because (so student gossip had it) someone long ago had decided that the lasting reputations of such writers as Joseph Conrad, James Joyce, and Herman Melville were not yet secure. In fact, until the essay by Robert Penn Warren and the introduction by Malcolm Cowley to *The Portable Faulkner*, the fiction of William Faulkner was not readily available for study in the classroom. It was out of print. Later, at the University of Pennsylvania, Robert E. Spiller told stories of the difficulties that he and others had had in getting American literature accepted as a part of the college-level curriculum. And now I am told by various colleagues throughout the country, Hemingway was not really an important writer after all. Highly overestimated: probably merely a popular writer.

I am not certain when the process began in the humanities—or the study of literature, to be more specific—but frankly I grow tired of hearing the demand for a new methodology which in some way, supposedly, will make the study of literature—of fiction—more precise, more exact, like the study of chemistry, biology, physics.

When as a group are the teachers/students of literature going to acknowledge that change (in form, in taste, in perspective) is a (note that I didn't even say *the*) cardinal law both for writers and for literary critics, as it is for the physical universe? There are

no absolutes; there is only historical perspective emanating from a set of specific circumstances (time and place). And perhaps decidedly more important than that, if there is no communication between writers, readers, and critics, to say nothing of nations and generations, then we may as well stop the presses and the cameras. (Please note that I did not say that writers, readers, critics, nations, and generations must agree, only that they communicate.)

I have had to interrupt this column to show Frank Capra's 1937 production of James Hilton's *Lost Horizon* to an audience made up, primarily, of students in my Introduction to Popular Culture course. I wonder how, tomorrow, I will be able to help them understand the differences between the film and the novel.

I spent the weekend of September 20–22 in Cleveland at Earthcon V, a most enjoyable encounter with a group of younger fans, most of them devoted to *Star Trek* and *Star Wars* and costuming and horseplay. Some of them wanted to see the latest version of the slide show on early science fiction that I first gave at SFRA at Midland, Michigan. Some listened to my appraisal of Fred Pohl. I took a raincheck on Earthcon VI because Alice and I will be on leave, but I'd like to attend Earthcon VII. The following weekend, September 26–29, Alice and I spent at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute in Troy, New York, at the Tenth Annual Conference on Utopian Studies. Mickey Abrash chaired a most enjoyable conference despite hurricane Gloria. I

hope to attend next year's conference in California.

After the banquet on Saturday night at Troy, when I based a talk on part of the chapter dealing with utopia and dystopia in *Some Kind of Paradise*, I proposed several assumptions which I think are appropriate to include here as the starting point for a continuing forum on the role of the critic of fantastic literature and on the relationship among critics and writers and readers. My hope is that as complex individuals sharing both a common concern for the memory of things past and an imagination which dreams of a humane future, we can attempt to understand one another.

The assumptions I proposed are:

(1) Instead of a literary mainstream, of which there are a variety of troubled backwaters and swamps, two equal traditions have co-existed and intertwined throughout the history of narrative: the analysis of the interactions of a group of characters in everyday, familiar life, and the exploration of the unknown, be it psychological, geographic, or interstellar. One can deal with either tradition in terms of heroic, symbolic action (in which case the conflicting motives within the human mind are less important) or in terms of "realistic" details (in which the social and psychological workings of the individual as a member of an "everyday" society may be of primary importance). Of course the writer may choose to deal with the past, the present, or a possible future.

One phase of this assumption needs special emphasis. Some characters, like Beowulf, King Arthur, Lancelot,

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Guinevere, Paul Bunyan, Pecos Bill, and Tarzan, Lord Greystoke, are only important for the actions which they perform or fail to perform. I am not interested in any of them as three-dimensional, rounded characters. In like manner, other characters—in utopian fiction, for example—have no importance other than as guide or informant.

(2) Unlike such writers as William Dean Howells, at times a utopian novelist himself, and subsequent literary realists and literary naturalists, no writer and no critic in the 1980s believes that we can so replicate the world (“outer space” or “inner space”) on the printed page (or the silver screen or the tube) that we can capture

reality. We speak of dealing with fables, with fictions. Whatever the bias of the writer or the critic of those fictions, the result is that we produce and examine distortions, which at their best have symbolic value. I am not certain what the acceptance of this assumption does to our cognitive powers. But may I suggest that when we base our analysis of literature primarily on critical works—often in a prescriptive, oversimplifying manner—we deal, as I infer from P. Keil’s observation, with distortions of distortions. Let us deal, instead, with at least the visions themselves, whether of the past, the present, or the future(s)—and let us speak with tongues not fouled by jargon.

T.D.C.