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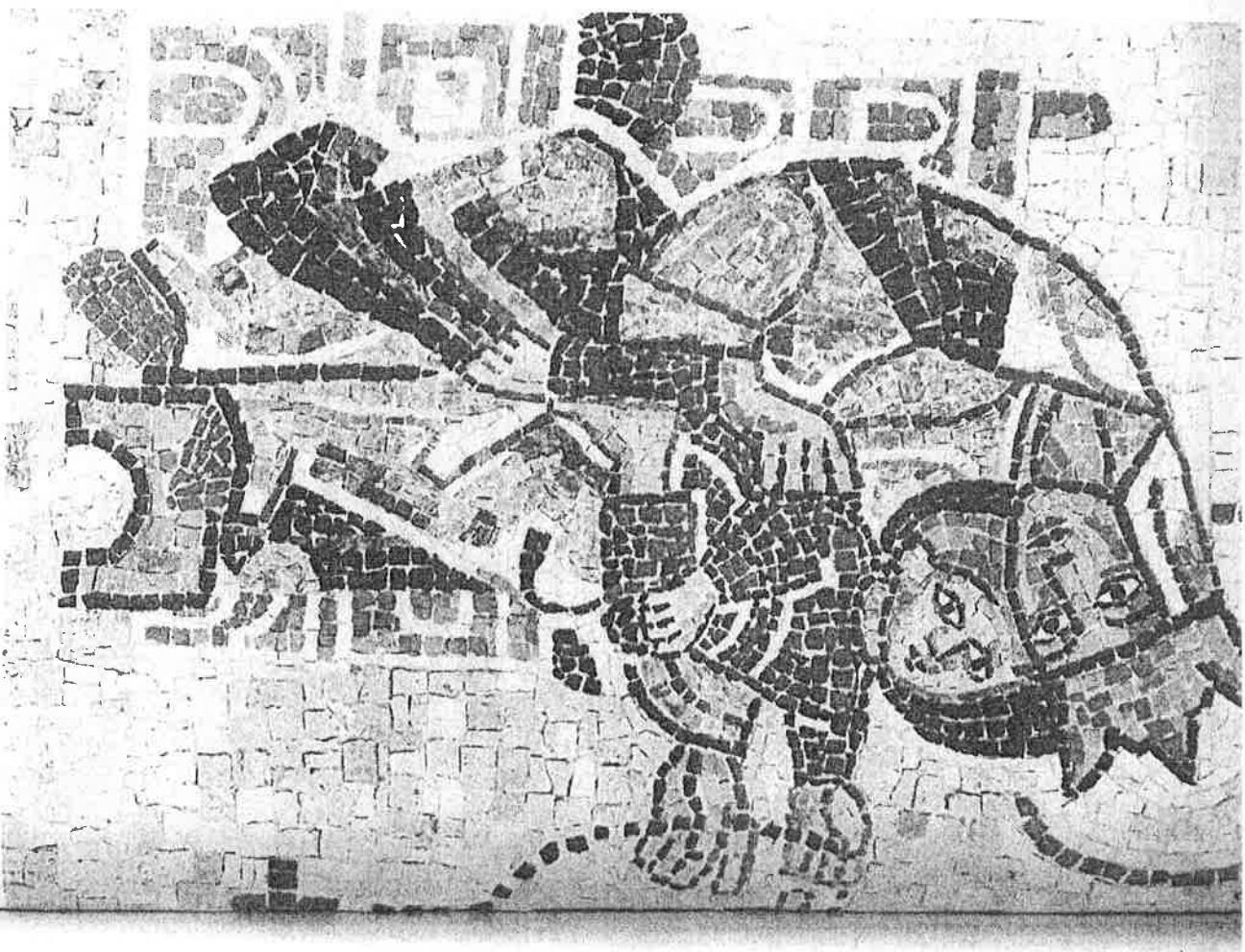
Prophets and Mirrors

Science Fiction as a Way of Seeing

Using films, novels and stories in religious education is nothing new, and materials of all kinds are increasingly available outlining various ways of doing so. But somehow, in all this development, the broad category of science fiction has generally been neglected — except, perhaps, for the very obviously Christian novels of C. S. Lewis: his trilogy for adults, (Out of the Silent Planet, Perelandra, and This Hideous Strength, and his Narnia stories for children). One of the reasons for this neglect is mentioned in this article: many people are unaware of the modern developments of science fiction from its mainly crude beginnings. But another reason why many Catholics shy away from any serious consideration of it may be that it seems to challenge such traditional christian teachings as that of man as lord and crown of creation—doctrines which certainly need rethinking in the light of our present realization of the implications of the ecological crisis. But science fiction has a very large audience, including many of our adolescent and adult students. We need to introduce them to it as a “way of seeing” reality—a way which can be very valuable. This article, by an outstanding science fiction writer, we hope may incite our readers to investigate this varied and fascinating genre of fiction for themselves, and open out its possibilities to their students.

We read books to find out who we are. What other people, real or imaginary, do and think and feel — or have done and thought and felt, or might do and think and feel — is an essential guide to our understanding of what we ourselves are and may become. A person who had never known another human being could not be introspective any more than a terrier can, or a horse, he might (improbably) keep him-

Detail of mosaic in the Dominican monastery in Venlo, The Netherlands



self alive, but he could not know anything about himself, no matter how long he lived with himself. And a person who had never listened to nor read a tale or myth or parable or story, would remain ignorant of his own emotional and spiritual heights and depths, would not know quite fully what it is to be human. For the story — from *Rumpelstiltskin* to *War and Peace* — is one of the basic tools invented by the mind of man, for the purpose of gaining understanding. There have been great societies that did not use the wheel, but there have been no societies that did not tell stories.

Now a science-fiction story is, by definition, a tall tale—a whopper, preferably. It is not "true." And many people ask what possible understanding of reality, of oneself or one's fellows, can be gained by reading about space-ship jaunts to imaginary planets, and encounters with imaginary alien beings. It's a fair question.

Some people dislike fantasy. They cannot abide the farther fetches of the imagination. For such people, indeed, there is no profit in science fiction. But others, including almost all children and maybe 75 percent of adolescents, like fantasy and thrive upon it. And those who keep this liking into adulthood will find, somewhere in science fiction, a book in which they may meet with a kind of insight, a way of seeing, a mirror of moral or spiritual reality, more vivid, for all its strangeness, than that provided by most realistic novels. For fantasy is akin to poetry; and there is more shock of reality in one line from *The Tempest* than in all the sordid annals of *Peyton Place*.

Most serious readers, however, are shy of science fiction. Perhaps they feel that fantasy, even when technologically and factually sound and based on scientific theory, is, after all, for kids. Perhaps they used to read science fiction as teenagers and remember it — quite rightly — as being most often crudely presented and badly written. Or perhaps they are not interested because they have been misled by the claims made by science fiction for itself. The genre is often represented not as a means of understanding, a mirror of the real, but as a modern form of prophecy, a set of predictions about what's going to happen to us next. In fact, a lot of us, when you come right down to it, would rather not know. We trust that tomorrow will take care of itself, if — and only if! — we can figure out how to take care of ourselves today: that

there's no use asking where we're going until we know better who we are.

Now, science fiction, I believe, is not a prophetic literature. To be sure, Verne "invented" the submarine, and Wells and Kipling the airplane; and the atomic bomb was so aptly described in a story a year before it was first tested that the poor author of the story got investigated by the FBI; but this sort of thing is not prophecy. If one knows a technological or theoretical field well, one can guess what comes next; and, given the rate of scientific advance, any intelligent guess is likely to come true. Indeed, these days, it is likely to be overtaken. I made up a handy little variation on the electro-encephalograph for a story set in the 21st century, and then discovered that the Russians had invented the thing in 1952 and have been using it busily ever since. Prediction has to run to keep ahead of reality on the plane of the material, in the realms of science and technology.

In the realms of the moral and spiritual, science fiction as a whole has even less claim to be prophetic, or even predictive. If you want a wry laugh, look at a science-fiction story set in 1968 but written in 1938. Writers write for their own time, for living readers. They wish to communicate the way they see life. The strange devices and metaphors used by science-fiction writers — the spaceships faster than light, the weird worlds and alien beings, the intolerable or utopian societies, the dooms envisaged, the glories imagined — all these may be entertaining toys for the fancy, but they may also be ways of seeing reality now. They are the medium used by certain serious artists to describe what all artists try to describe: this world, ourselves, the way we go.

For in art the thing that is said is the way it is said. If the mirror seems to distort, to give a fantastic image, it is because the reality seen by the artist strikes him as distorted, as incredible. . . .

Of course, science fiction has been used as a vehicle for prophecy, and effectively: one thinks of *Brave New World* and 1984. These books are *warnings*, written (Orwell's especially) with terrific moral earnestness and urgency. 1984 is a political fantasy; its ancestor is *The Time Machine*, in which H. G. Wells projected an equally terrifying society based on the trends he saw in his own. But Wells, at the happy beginning of our century, thought we had more time and set his anti-utopia thousands of years in the future, whereas Orwell gave us less than forty

years' grace. Zamiatin's splendid novel, *We*, is a similar vision through Russian eyes; and so are many lesser works: speculations, warnings about what might happen if . . . if we use nuclear weapons again? if we keep up the production-acquisition cycle indefinitely? if we breed till there is standing room only? if we idolize youthfulness till everyone is put to sleep by the Humane Society on reaching the age of thirty? if we pollute the earth until we strangle in our own garbage? — and so on. Many superb stories have been written on such themes, and many silly ones; but all are alike in one way: A trend or phenomenon of our present, actual society is taken and pressed to its logical (and usually distasteful) extreme. Most such works are not really predictive in intent, but satirical. They don't say, "This is how it will be," but — by singling out and exaggerating a certain aspect of reality — "This is how it is." Even Orwell, who was a genuine prophet, burdened like Cassandra or Jeremiah with the terrible gift of foresight, even he is said to have intended to call his book, *1948*.

Thus, without pressing the paradox too far, I should say that those science-fiction books which seem most prophetic often are the least so, because they are written by people intensely concerned with the here-and-now, committed people, deeply worried about the present political-social-moral state of affairs. They are no more descriptive of the future than *Gulliver's Travels* is of the South Sea Islands. They are social satires, and their relevance is immediate.

This satiric kind of science fiction is one of the two kinds discussed by Kingsley Amis in his popular study of the field, *New Maps of Hell*. The other is the technological variety: the sort of story dominated by theories and/or machinery, populated by cardboard figures in the black and silver uniform of the Space Fleet, and read mostly by intelligent adolescents, by engineers, and by scientists on holiday. This kind of science fiction still exists (notable in *Analog* magazine); and Mr. Amis's book is perceptive, but it is badly out of date. All kinds of bizarre growths were springing up around him when he wrote it, which he chose to ignore but which have flourished mightily in the decade since. It is they which justify a request to serious readers to take a look at science fiction now, in case it isn't what they thought it was. It has produced novels of character; novels of manners; psychological dramas; aesthetic experiments; theological investigations; mystical ex-

cursions. It remains a literature of ideas, for idea is its essence; but the ideas have grown. The writers have tended to turn away from social satire and technological sycophancy to investigate the nature of man himself. Using the same devices, the space-ships and time-machines and monsters and all the rest, the writers of science fiction have immensely enlarged the field, and the seriousness, of their fantasy. Where they used to ask at most, "What are we doing?" they have been asking, lately, a larger question: "What are we?"

Such writers as C. S. Lewis and Olaf Stapledon were, of course, precursors of this trend. But it has become much more general lately, and with it the aesthetic standards and the quality of prose to be expected in science fiction have risen steeply. Those put off by Lewis's allegoricism or Stapledon's philosophical biases might well find a contemporary writer more congenial to them, handling the same large subjects. Indeed, the ways of asking the question, "What are we?" and the answers given, have been wildly various. I shall try to discuss a few of these answers, those that happen to interest me most. So, then, what are we? What is man?

1. *Man is doomed.*

This, if I understand it, is the message of Walter Miller's admirable *Can'tile for Leibowitz*. Subtle, complex, and humorous as the book is, it ends in ruin relieved only by a grotesque and dubious gleam of divine grace. Not only will we blow up our world, says Miller, but we will spend centuries hauling ourselves up out of the radioactive rubble — in order to do it *again*. Refugees — children, priests, and nuns — are sent to another planet just before the second holocaust, but there is nothing to prevent them from repeating it there, given time. This is the doctrine of Original Sin in the Form of Technology, and it runs as a broad black stratum through much of the landscape of science fiction.

2. *Man is doomed but can be saved by somebody else.*

Sometimes it is our technology, our inventions, that save us: kindly robots, for instance. Sometimes it is helpful types from outer space, who intervene on the eve of Armageddon (here, by the way, and only here, does science fiction have any link at all with the people who believe in Flying Saucers). Sometimes we are saved by our children,

mutated by accident or design to higher intelligence; though these usually turn out to be revoltingly self-righteous, and I for one would much prefer to be saved by a Ganymedean slime-mold. (It is in one of Philip K. Dick's novels that you will find the slime-mold, a charming person, whose name is Lord Running Clam.)

3. *Man is the fore-runner of God.*

Arthur Clarke's peculiar and yet poignant mysticism in *Childhood's End* and in the closing scene of the movie *2001* exemplifies this idea. It has been an important one, though seldom directly expressed, in many science-fiction stories. There is little short-term optimism in the field these days, but hope will not down; and so the hint of a very long-term and more or less mystical belief in a future transcendence often can be found, if you look for it beneath the dazzling gimmickry.

4. *Man is God.*

I find this idea implicit in those stories wherein men "take over" the Galaxy and "run it" their way. It becomes more explicit in tales wherein a character, or a group, is portrayed as omnipotent, immortal, and fully cognizant of Good and Evil. 'Superman' himself doesn't qualify, because he is too innocently witless, but he points the way. Robert Heinlein, a masterful story-teller much preoccupied with the idea of the superior man, came to grips with the subject in his famous *Stranger in a Strange Land*. I found the book's message confusing; the greeting used to all others — human or not — "Thou art God," implies a profound perception of the Divine Omnipresence, but then elitism enters in, for it appears that thou art effectively God only if thou canst grok, disincorporate, and do other things not easily mastered by us common folks. The book's hero is certainly a god, or a kind of Christ-figure; and whether one is convinced or embarrassed by him depends pretty much on one's taste in divinity.

5. *Man is superior to God.*

Stories on this theme exist, though I haven't read any good ones. In one of them God appeared as a pink slug, which was exterminated by some public-spirited citizens. Science fiction is no more exempt from silly vulgarity than any other form of popular art.

The last two "answers" to the question *What is man?* that I have chosen to mention are a little different in scope. One concerns our essential nature, and the other our importance. The first of them says that — no matter what we may be now —

6. *Man can be changed.*

And this, the most probable of the answers, is the hardest to make. It is indubitable that men change somewhat as their society and culture change, and it is quite likely that men will intentionally change themselves, by biological or chemical or genetic tinkering. There is the probability. But the fact remains that it is hard to imagine people who are truly, radically different from everyone we know. It is hard for you and me to imagine, vividly and sympathetically, the feelings and thoughts of a naked aborigine, or a catatonic schizophrenic, or even a Chinese field-hand. But this is nothing to the difficulty of imagining the feelings and thoughts of a sane, fully-clothed, middle-class American of the twenty-second century.

Most science fiction simply evades the question and assumes that, whatever life may be like on Tau Ceti III in the year 2870, the people there will be essentially like us: human nature will not change radically. It's a fair assumption, since—if one defines "human nature" with some tolerance and charity—it appears never to have changed, so far.

Even when extrasensory powers are added to the human brew — telepathy, precognition, and so on—they don't seem to change the flavor much. A few writers are able to show how reality might appear to those who perceive it differently because their perceptions are, by our standards, derailed or paranormal; the most successful of these writers, Philip K. Dick, arrives in his finest books at a genuine reappraisal of reality. But most of us just stir in a little ESP or whatever, and proceed as before.

But when purposive manipulation of man's psycho-physical being is envisaged, the questions cannot be evaded; and they are endless. What if drugs were used methodically to control our destructive, aggressive drives, as Arthur Koestler seriously proposes? How would a tranquilized humanity behave? Or, what if eugenics were applied to breed an elite of physically and mentally superior persons? One can guess how the non-elite might feel towards them, but how would they

feel? Or, what if the cloning process (now limited to carrots) were extended to human cells, producing sets of identical persons, like identical twins, but as many to a set as one wanted, a dozen, a hundred, a thousand? I wrote a story trying to imagine how it might feel to be one of ten oneselves. Or, what if the human lifespan were to be prolonged by decades — centuries — indefinitely? Would a race of immortals be "human" at all?

Stories that try to answer such questions seriously are hard to write, and often hard to read, for they ask the imagination to stretch beyond what is comfortable. Yet when the writer can give even a hint of the strangeness of a radically changed humanity, he has done something worthwhile. For the scientists and politicians who may be responsible for bringing about such real changes in the human make-up, too often lack the imagination and the moral self-discipline that would make them look at what they're planning, and ask themselves whether they know, in fact, what they're doing. If they won't think about it, we had better do so.

The final "answer" or attitude towards humanity and human destiny here considered has to do with our place in the universe, and I think is best summarized as—

7. *Man is less important than he thinks.*

This idea is implicit in the many stories of the sixties about very distant futures, very remote worlds, very alien beings. Many changes have been rung on it, but the dominant note recurs: Men are not the center of creation, nor the apex of evolution, nor the only recipients of grace. We are one element of a creation inconceivably complex. We must learn to see ourselves as post-Copernican man had to learn to see the Earth: as a part of Infinite Creation, no more its center than any other part.

A negative and pessimistic cast is given this idea by some of the British writers: Brian Aldiss in *The Long Afternoon of Earth*, where men have lost the evolutionary race to trees and fungi; J. G. Ballard, through whose tragic hallucinatory landscapes men drift, impersonal shadows of despair.

The Americans, whom the British accuse quite fairly of romanticism, are mostly less bleak, and more ethical. Robert Silverberg's recent

Downward to the Earth is an earnest lesson in racial humility — by racial I mean human. So is Judith Merrill's story "The Homecalling," in *Daughters of Earth*. Frank Herbert's *Dune*, written long before "ecology" became a chic word for politicians, shows how a world and its life-forms make and shape one another, forming one whole, from which the character and spirit of man is not exempt. Jack Vance's fantasies, like archetypal myths, pit man against dragons and krakens who may be his own creations but are his equals. And Cordwainer Smith, in all he ever wrote, showed all living creation held in a strange, striving harmony, men and beasts alike.

Indeed, this idea of what might be called human relativity is so pervasive by now that there are not many stories left of the Brave Space Fleet Captain Saves Galaxy type, or the Muscular Nordic Hero Outwits Tentacled Monster type, which between them used to constitute about 97 percent of science fiction. The genre is outgrowing its adolescent daydreams and is trying to face the human condition straight on. It is turning away from simple wish-fulfillment, from childish-heroic arrogance concerning man's capacities and destiny, towards a vision far more complex and more mature.

This turn surely reflects the spiritual current that runs now in our whole Western world, the changed way of seeing. If we are willing to think at all, we can no longer see Man as lord and master of the earth and all upon it. We can no longer believe in "inferior" species and "backward" races. We are beginning to realize that we cannot manage everything and that our attempt to do so has led us to disaster.

Some of us face this chastened vision of humanity with fear and despair, others with relief and hope. Some think we will not survive at all without intervention by the superhuman, whether from Mars, the future, or a test-tube; others think we might get by if we discipline our actions to charity. Some feel only the hand of God can save us, some think we must become gods; others think it might be enough if we just stopped pretending to be gods. All these moods are faithfully, if fantasically, reflected in the mirror-worlds of science fiction.

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