

SAMUEL R. DELANY

Occasional Views

Volume 1

"More About Writing"
and Other Essays



Occasional Views,
Volume 1

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The Towers of Toron (1964)
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Samuel R. Delany

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For

Iva Hacker-Delany

Mischa Adams &

Peggy Delany

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Occasional Views,
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1

More About Writing

The Life of/and Writing

“The Life of Writing” is a phrase we associate with the eighteenth-century writer, Dr. Samuel Johnson—responsible for compiling the first comprehensive English language dictionary. He also wrote a fantasy, *Rasselas*, that now and again appears from various contemporary paperback houses attempting to add some tone and history to their science fiction and fantasy lines.

When Dr. Johnson used the phrase, the life of writing, it meant, of course, the literary life—and referred to the kinds of things an eighteenth-century writer might be occupied with in the course of an eighteenth-century day, from sharpening goose quills, grinding ink stones, and debating in coffee shops what historical material would or would not make successful subject matter for a profitable poetic tragedy, to negotiating with booksellers (what the eighteenth century had in place of publishers) as to what percentage of the costs you might put up toward printing your most recent profitable poetic tragedy—as all publishing at the time was more or less vanity publishing—though most of your time, money, and energy might be reserved for putting out polemical pamphlets on any subject from the foppery and decadence of women, the nobility, or the young to meditations on taxes, fashions, or God, for which opinions you risked fame, notoriety, or (sometimes) jail.

The life of writing has changed drastically in three hundred years.

But, as the phrase fades into the memory of literary antiquarians, it passes through a strangely luminous moment, when, as its historical meaning verges on the obsolete, it opens up to a host of other possible meanings, comic,

surreal, suggestive: in 1970, the poet Judith Johnson Sherwin published a book of experimental short stories with Atheneum, *The Life of Riot*, the title of which clearly takes its resonances from Johnson. And it does not take much for us to read in the original phrase, *The Life of Writing*, the notion of what, in any piece of writing, makes that writing lively: the life (or liveliness) in writing. And if we look at “life,” not as referring to general liveliness, but to the range of everyday life, then, with only a little catachresis, we can read “the life of writing” as meaning the way everyday life is reflected in writing. Thus, as we multiply and survey the possible—if sometimes improbable—interpretations we can unpack from this most unassuming phrase, finally we have to admit that, buried in its text is pretty much every possible relationship that we can conceive as existing between “writing” and “life”—that is, “writing” in any of its meanings and “life” in any of its.

Sometimes I try to suggest that range and multiplicity by taking that weakest of English prepositions, “of,” and placing behind it a slash, that, like a slant mirror, reveals that what can be hidden in that loose and lax preposition is the strongest of English conjunctions, “and.” Indeed, the “of” and the “and,” on either side of that virgule, mirror each other and, I hope, problematize our original phrase out into an infinitude of possible relations between world and text, word and world, action and articulation:

“The life of/and writing . . .”

What are some of these relations?

Teaching at various writers’ workshops for more than forty years now, certainly I can remember when some of the complexities of this relational complex were first brought home to me.

A young writer of seventeen or so had handed in a story that struck me at once as both extremely talented and deeply flawed.

In the course of the tale, a young man (of seventeen or so) goes walking along a beach one evening. He comes across a group of some dozen bikers and, there, laughing and being hugged now by one, now by another is . . . his girlfriend!

The young man pauses a moment, then calls to her to come to him. She looks at him scornfully—and laughs. Angrily, he marches in and tries to pull her away, whereupon the bikers proceed to beat the living daylight out of him and, leaving him bloody on the sand, get on their motorcycles. With the young woman on the back of the leader’s, they ride away. Painfully, the young man goes to the water, washes his face in the sea, and limps off.

The successes of the story were in the physical evocation of surf and sand and evening light. Its failure was in—how shall I say?—a certain emotional extremity. An intelligent, slender young man of seventeen—with glasses—usually does not throw himself into such an obviously suicidal fray quite

so easily, quite so unthinkingly, even under the goad of love. It just wasn't believable.

When, in conference, I pointed this out to young Shakespeare, he pulled his manuscript sharply back into his lap, assuming a position of overtly Freudian self-protection, and declared: "This story is true. And if it's unbelievable, that's just because—I guess—sometimes reality is unbelievable. It all happened. And I put it down just like it was."

What could I say?

As is so often the case, I didn't think of anything to say until three hours after the conference was over. Nor did I get a chance to say it until the young man handed in a second story. This one was an SF tale—and was just as talented, though it still had some problems.

"But I want to go back," I said, "and talk about your first story for a minute. Maybe we can throw a little light on the believability problem in general—that was the one about you, and your girlfriend, and the bikers on the beach. Now this, you say, is your account of something that really happened. I want you to think back to the original incident. And tell me *exactly* what occurred."

"Sure," said unsuspecting Sophocles. "It was on the beach—it's on part of Lake Michigan. I was there last summer. And it was evening. I was walking along, when I saw my girlfriend. She was down the sand, with some guys." Here he fell silent.

So I asked: "How many of them were there?"

After another few moments, he said: "Two."

"Bikers," I said. "With motorcycles."

"Bicycles," he said. Then, after another moment: "One of them was wheeling a bicycle."

"Two," I said, "with one bicycle. What did you do?"

"I didn't do . . . anything. I just stood there."

"Was she laughing and having a good time?"

"She had her back to me—so I couldn't tell. The three of them, they were just walking on the beach . . . like I was."

"What was she wearing?"

"White shorts, I think. And a bathing suit under it. Blue, maybe green. Well, I guess she wasn't *really* my girlfriend—I'd talked to her a couple of times in town . . . so maybe she was just my friend." Then he said: "But I'd *thought* about her being my girlfriend! A lot! And one of the guys had a beer can—or maybe it was a soda. I wasn't too close."

"Did she see you? Did you say anything?"

"No," he said. "I don't think she did. I just turned around, after a couple of seconds, and went the other way. . . . But then I got real upset—like I couldn't breathe, or I was going to cry or something. So I went down and washed my face in the water." After another few moments, he said: "But you

see, it's based on the truth, on something that really happened—*basically* it happened.”

“Basically,” I said, “the twelve bikers, this supposed girlfriend of yours, her scorn, the fight, and her laughter, are a lie. They're a lie you've told yourself to make you feel better about having gotten upset. Now there's nothing wrong with telling lies in fiction. That's what it's all about. I just want to point out that in this case you happened to tell one I didn't believe. And it's often when we're lying to ourselves that we tell the most unbelievable whoppers. You have to watch out for that in your writing. It's possible—though I can't guarantee it—you might have had a better story if you'd told about what you really saw, what the young woman's relationship to you really was, and how that got you upset when you saw her with two of her friends—then how you went and washed your face.”

“I thought,” he said, “I did . . .”

But of course the language, which is far more truthful than we are, often reflects more things about those of us who use it than we are prepared to show: sometimes it reflects whether we are lying or speaking the truth; or (which I believe is more important than either, because it has not an easy, but a critical, relation to both) whether we are working to put together a rich and rewarding tale.

The notion of language as a mirror has a venerable history in the life of writing (if we may unpack still another meaning from our parent phrase: the life of writing as the history of writing). One of its most famous moments is from Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, Act III, scene ii, when Hamlet exhorts the players who will be speaking his lines, “to hold, as 'twere, the mirror up to nature, to show virtue her own feature, scorn her own image, and the body of the time his form and pressure.” It's worth noting here that the Elizabethan audience would have probably heard the word “pressure,” in this context, specifically as a printing term, meaning (here) imprint or printed illustration—that is, the term, through typography, comes from the life of writing. Perhaps the second best-known moment is when the French novelist Stendhal borrowed Shakespeare's image and gave back his own reflection on it, his own interpretation of it, when in the 1830s he declared that the task of the novelist was to hold the mirror up to nature as one traveled along the road of life.

Of course, what is missing in both of these moments for us today is that mirrors in the 1830s, and even more so in Shakespeare's day, tended to distort.

What about the mirror's—or the mirroring virgule's—slant?

What kind of distortion is invariably involved with, and inescapable in, the artistic process of reflection, is built in to the very notion of reflection? For even while we sit, giving out our writerly advice to young Balzac to cleave more closely to truth in the tale of his epiphany on the beach, no writer who has examined her or his own process can fail to see something of her- or himself in that very young and very talented liar.

So that even for me to recount the tale of our Clarion conference as I did above is finally to tell a lie to myself—a lie that says, even for the moment of the tale, that in my greater knowledge I am somehow distinct and different from him; I am his opposite, as left is the opposite of right, as a reflection in a mirror is the opposite and the inversion of what is there in life. For it is precisely in the words with which I suggest this that I am obscuring the troubling truth that, again and again and again (indeed all too often), I am, in too many ways, his double.

Certainly one of the finest meditations on the relation of art to life in the last century is the dense and articulate prose-poem, “Caliban to the Audience,” the centerpiece of W. H. Auden’s *The Sea and the Mirror*, a 1944 poetic meditation on Shakespeare’s *Tempest*. In that prose-poem Auden returns, for a moment, to Shakespeare’s mirror, Shakespeare’s pressure (that is, Shakespeare’s illustration), having his audience through the voice of Caliban address the ghost of Shakespeare:

You yourself, we seem to remember, have spoken of the conjured spectacle as “a mirror held up to nature,” a phrase misleading in its aphoristic sweep but indicative at least of one aspect of the relation between the real and the imagined, their mutual reversal of value, for isn’t the essential artistic strangeness to which the sinisterly biased image would point just this: that on the far side of the mirror the general will to compose, to form at all costs a felicitous pattern, becomes the necessary cause of any particular effort to live or act or love or triumph or vary, instead of being as, in so far as it emerged at all, it is on this side, their accidental effect?

In the world of art, because pattern and plot, economy and purpose are the method, all incidents are selected (or rejected) with some attention to pattern, order, meaning.

In the world of reality, when pattern or its handmaid insight emerges at all, it is the accident, an excess, mere happenstance.

Thus, because the context of the two worlds is entirely different, the meaning of every incident in an art work is subtly shifted, so that—on the level where it counts—there is finally no possibility of congruence between the meaning of an incident in an art work and its meaning in the world. Art is rich and strange, and we shouldn’t even try to deceive ourselves by searching in it for the familiar, much less the truth; in art, truth (in the sense of truth-to-life) is the happenstance, the excess, the accident.

For isn’t the world of art, Auden tells us in that same prose poem, “a world of freedom without anxiety, of sincerity without loss of vigor, feeling that loosens rather than ties the tongue”?

After all, the world of art is the world in which a young man calls to his beloved, fights for her (or his own) honor against ludicrous odds, and—chastened

by defeat and disillusion—looks out over the water, tears and the sea indistinguishable on his cheeks, with new and ineffable knowledge.

The world of art is—certainly—the world of this essay, where I can dispense writerly advice to young Kafka with all the eloquence of hindsight, but without stuttering, without having to begin half my sentences over, without having to scratch my ear violently in the middle, and without being so concerned with what young Hemingway before me is feeling—about me, about his story—that I lose my train of thought three times and only manage to mumble something to which, out of kindness or terror, he nods, blurts, “Yeah—I see,” and hurries off, in a welter of misunderstanding, to nurse his fear and incomprehension at my fear and incomprehension.

Yet, somehow, sometimes, both in life and in writing, ideas emerge that resonate with eloquence and force, even when they are ideas about hesitation, disillusion, and failure.

Picasso said: “Art is the lie that makes the truth bearable.” Some years later, science fiction and fantasy writer Ray Bradbury put much the same point into a poem: “We have our arts so we won’t die of truth.”

Me, I’ve always found this a shocking idea. Possibly because I’m a writer, and because writing takes place in time, I’ve preferred to see art as a self-corrective process, a process of self-vigilance, in which we go back and rethink the tale again, even as we tell it. I sometimes think that process, alone as it is reflected in language, is what constitutes the “truth effect” of language. That, along with beauty, is its greatest worth.

Just after the start of the Great War, two very different thinkers in two very different situations came up with remarkably similar statements about the relation of art to life. In his first book, *The Theory of the Novel*, the twenty-five-year-old Hungarian critic Georg Lukács wrote, “The novel is the only art form where ethics *is* the aesthetic problem.” And a year later, in 1916, the year *The Theory of the Novel* was published, the twenty-seven-year-old philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein, while on a vacation trip to Norway, jotted down in his notebook, on the 24th of July, “Ethics and aesthetics are one,” a comment he retained two years later, in 1918, for the single book he published in his lifetime, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, which appeared in 1922, the same year as the greatly publicized discovery of Tutankhamen’s tomb, the same year T. S. Eliot published his brooding construction of fragments, *The Waste Land*, the same year James Joyce published his episodic novel of a single day in Dublin, *Ulysses*, all of which helped to usher in the period of High Modernism, with its highly problematic relation to history and the past.

Up till now, the slant of our mirror has generally emphasized a fundamentally playful relation between life and writing. But when we turn to look at statements such as, “The novel is the art form where ethics *is* the aesthetic problem,” and

“Ethics and aesthetics are one,” we enter a field where it is all but impossible not to begin to overvalue the relation between writing and life.

In Western Europe what is generally considered Lukács’s greatest book is *History and Class Consciousness*, comprising essays he had written from 1918 until shortly after, and which in 1930 Lukács was forced by the communist party to disown. And Wittgenstein only wrote for publication one other book, *The Philosophical Investigations*, which by the year of his death, 1951, he’d not yet managed to shape into a form close enough to what he felt was the truth to publish, though he had worked on it diligently and continuously. Clearly these were two men who held the relationship of writing and life to be extremely important—as we might guess from their separate statements, if not from their later experiences.

Till now, we have been playing, however seriously, with an argument that must invariably lead to the impossibility of any ultimate congruence between life and art. But now we turn to an argument which, just as seriously, just as playfully, establishes an inseverable link between them. It does so through another pressure, another imprint, another printing term.

In eighteenth-century France, typesetters who were hand setting type for contemporary newspapers, noticed that writers used certain phrases again and again. Thus, in order to increase their speed, they would set a number of these commonly used words and phrases beforehand, in special clamps or “clutches.” Then, when the phrase came up, they would simply reach over for the clutch containing the pre-set phrase, release the clamp, and slide the type into the typeframe. In French, the word for one of these pre-set clamps was “cliché.”

If clichés were good for printers, as soon as we pass the 1850s, with writers like Flaubert and Baudelaire, it became the general aesthetic consensus that clichés were bad for readers. Indeed, the cliché soon came to be seen as writing without any life at all.

The argument we are talking about here hinges on a paradox, or seeming contradiction, of aesthetic psychology. On the one hand, what tends to move us the most is that which, over the course of our lives, is most familiar to us: it is the poems our parents recited to us when we were children that, when we re-encounter them as adults—no matter how mawkish or, indeed, cliché they are—will bring tears to our eyes or send chills down our spine. (Can one talk about such effects *without* clichés . . . ?) But at the same time, the phrase or the idea or the plot that has been repeated to us so often, especially recently, which when we see its opening signs we can immediately supply its ending, is what evokes from us the groan—or the dismissal of aesthetic displeasure.

The cliché is the basis for the modernist notion of bad art. The goal of avoiding the cliché joins the idea of quality in art to the idea of originality. Avoidance of the cliché in the quest for clarity is the sign of craft in art; and the avoidance of the cliché, whether or not clarity is achieved, is the sign of talent.

But the cliché has another field of existence, where it is equally important, and that is the field of politics. When we say today that statements such as:

“Blacks are shiftless and lazy.”

“Women are lousy drivers.”

“Gays are emotionally unstable.”

are respectively racist, sexist, and homophobic, what we are saying in effect is that they are political clichés. That they occur in life and work as part of the linguistic stabilizers for complex and oppressive material and economic systems is what makes them ethically abhorrent. That they are repeated so frequently is what makes them aesthetically abhorrent. But they are still easily pre-set lengths of language that can be put aside on the print-shop shelf; and sooner or later some situation will force us to take one down and use it—if only to decry it. But because certain clichés are abhorrent ethically and aesthetically, the cliché (or, rather, its avoidance) is precisely the place where “Ethics and aesthetics are one.” And to the extent that certain plot tropes are in themselves clichés, this becomes the field in which the novel (or any other narrative art) is a form in which the ethics of avoiding political clichés is, in fact, one with the aesthetic problem of creating a new, lively, and vigorous—while still moving—tale.

The easy answer so many people, appalled by political clichés, reach for to solve this problem is one style or another of censorship. And while I am all for censuring clichés, wherever we find them—whether they are the uplifting and positive ones, or the demeaning and insulting ones—I am never for censoring them.

There is something fundamentally wrong with the argument: Because I don’t want to have certain clichés in the work I write—or in the work I read—then I forbid you to use them in *your* work. First of all, the relation between the cliché and the deeply moving, as we have already seen, is close and complicated. The relationship may be different for every one of us—with those of us who have had the widest exposure to art generally (another paradox) the most critical of, and at the same time the most accepting of, clichés. And while I might emotionally and ethically approve of certain positive sentiments, expressed in the most hackneyed language, in a political speech, I don’t want to find them in a poem! Despite Lukács and Wittgenstein, in practical terms, the identity of political ethics and aesthetics only goes so far.

The West really has only two widely accepted models for the way art relates to life. One is Plato’s—and it is a depressing model at that. The sole use of art, Plato reasoned, was to provide positive examples of behavior for the people. Plato was as quick to see as anyone else that the artists of his age spent an awful lot of time telling how their heroes called to their loves and fought twelve bikers to win her; even worse were the ones who told the unhappy truth—that nothing was ever really going to work out right: the biker you happened to

do in would turn out to be your old man; and your lover was probably your mother anyway; and when you found out, neither she nor you was going to be terribly happy about it.

What kind of example was that?

Artists were, at their best, liars; and when they were any better, they were substantially worse. In his ideal Republic, Plato banished them with an argument not so far very different from the one with which Senator Jesse Helms attacked the Robert Mapplethorpe photography exhibit not so long ago.

When confronted with such an argument, what is there to appeal to except the truth in art? In the same way that we all take for granted that truth is a good in politics, when art is politicized in this way, we have nothing left to fall back on except the truth art may contain. And, as we search for that truth, the argument of Lukács and the suggestions of Wittgenstein suddenly look even more important, as they appear to locate the place where truth, art, and life really connect. And the endless play of value reversals and the problems of representation, or verification, or exhaustiveness that we began with in our Shakespeare-Stendhal-Auden house of mirrors suddenly seem a hopeless embarrassment as they suggest that here, even at this most solid-seeming spot, all is still illusion—and Plato was right.

The next major theory of the relation between art and life came only a generation after Plato from his student Aristotle, who proposed that tragedy, at least, rather than simply setting a bad example, functioned to draw off unhealthy emotions from the audience. Aristotle called it catharsis.

The modernist critic Kenneth Burke called this “the lightning-rod theory of art.”

Certain bad examples, then, if they were noble enough, taught us humility—rather than encouraged us to go out and pursue sex, drugs, and rock and roll.

And although our modern examinations of the relation between art and life so often start out with the most modern, if not postmodern, of intentions, it’s a little unsettling how often the argument ends up with our liberal critic defending his lightning rod against intransigent old Plato.

My own opinion is that neither Plato’s theory of examples, good and bad, nor Aristotle’s defense of certain bad examples (noble or not), is to the point. Nor do I think we can find any way out of the house of mirrors that the prison house of language has turned out to be. Rather I seek my answer in the print shop, from which Shakespeare took his “pressure” and which named for us the cliché—and I take just a bit of my answer, as well, from drugs, if not from sex and rock and roll.

Are clichés dangerous?

Yes. They are dangerous to thought, art, and life. But the reason they are not dangerous enough to justify censorship is because, by the time they have become clichés, they have already done their damage.

There are two kinds of drugs. There are drugs like aspirin, called cumulative drugs, which the more you take, the stronger their effects. There is another type of drug, like Darvon, called a titrating drug. Titrating drugs, if you don't take enough of them, don't have any effect at all. At a certain dosage, called the titration level—usually depending on your body weight—they suddenly become effective. After that, if you take more, their effect doesn't really become stronger, at least in terms of pain-killing. Their effect doesn't go up or down. It simply turns on or off.

People who espouse censorship have not necessarily fallen for the Platonic argument (although they may have) so much as they have uncritically assumed that the harm political clichés do, when encountered in art, is cumulative. The more frequently you encounter them, these people feel, the stronger their harmful effects. But I maintain that the danger of clichés, when they arrive in an aesthetic field (even if they start out as political clichés) is titrative. And the proof that the titration point has been reached is precisely that we recognize them as clichés.

The political cliché does its damage during the five or fifty or five hundred times (depending on your "body weight") you encounter it without really recognizing it as a cliché. But once it is recognized, even if it's a cliché you believe in, it cannot do any further harm. Of course sometimes what for one group is a repellant political cliché is for another a deeply moving theme. This is a more unsettling situation, certainly, yet is still a matter of psychic/material economies, rather than semantic content. But I shall come back to this pivotal point in a moment.

I said that I seek my answer in the print shop.

The problem with clichés—with the whole shelf full of pre-set phrases, thousands and thousands of each example, up there in a pile on the shelf—is how much type they use up.

When I gave a version of this argument a couple of years back at the 1987 Sercon in Berkeley, I said that the pathos of clichés was the vast area of silence they imposed around themselves—a silence in which almost nothing else could be said or heard. But here I can say, with another metaphor, if less poetically, the same thing: clichés simply take up too much room on the social print-shop shelf—or too much room in what has come to be called the universe of discourse.

Every time a cliché is said or heard, a live and insightful observation about the world-that-is-the-case is not being said or heard. And while that universe may be relatively infinite for society, for each individual it is limited.

That sense of limitation, along with the incorrect assumption of clichés' cumulative damage (and a sneaking suspicion that perhaps Plato was right), is another reason, if only from the feeling of exhaustion it evokes, why well-intentioned people who otherwise uphold the Constitution finally find themselves condoning censorship.

It's very important to remind people again and again and again—and also to remind the best-intentioned people, because they forget this too—that what makes statements like “Blacks are lazy and shiftless,” “Women are lousy drivers,” or “Gays are emotionally unstable” racist, sexist, and homophobic is the vast statistical preponderance of these particular statements in the general range of utterances of most people most of the time. That statistical preponderance makes it almost impossible to say anything else about blacks, women, or gays. Again, it's the silences in the discourse such statements enforce around themselves that give them their ideological contour. But this is why you have to correct the statistical imbalance. And it is the titrating aspect of the damage clichés do that makes it futile for people to try to censor such statements in an attempt to right oppressive wrong. You don't right the imbalance—the inequality—by suppressing discourse. What you have to do is allow, to encourage, even more: You must intrude new discourse into the area of silence around these statements and broaden the field of truth. Then such statements just become comments about one or a few observed individuals, statements that are either right or wrong, silly or interesting.

Language, and the political clichés that fill so much of it, whether that language comes in novels or barroom chatter or boardroom discussions, is not the oppressive system itself. Language is merely a stabilizer of those various systems. As language stabilizes, other language de-stabilizes. And that is why, if you are fighting at the level of language, it is best to fight language with more language—more accurate, more logical, more convincing language.

Remember (and here I'm back to what, I suspect, is the most difficult and controversial point in my whole argument): It is not the content of the statements that makes them offensive. Nor is it even the intention of the speakers.

Take the statement, “Blue-eyed people are irresponsibly morose.” That's not a racist statement because it's not among the first three things you'll hear about blue-eyed people in any bar or coffee klatch as soon as the topic of blue-eyed people comes up. It's not a racist statement because it's not part of the stabilization system for an economic matrix that assures blue-eyed people will average incomes 30 percent lower than the rest of us. It's not a racist statement because 80 percent of all the artistic representations of blue-eyed people, from folk operas to genre paintings to popular novels, do not automatically portray them as mooning away (irresponsibly) while catastrophes bloom around them; nor do the other 20 percent of the representations—the liberal ones—portray them as overcoming that moroseness with a mindless and wholly unbelievable vigor. It's not a racist statement because it's not part of a system that encourages three-quarters of the blue-eyed population, whenever they feel even vaguely down, to search immediately for possible irresponsibility—who then feel, if they don't find it, that this itself is probably proof they're irresponsible.

What is the statement, “Blue-eyed people are irresponsibly morose” today?

It's a phrase that might appear in a mildly surrealistic poem; a phrase with a vaguely ironic cast; a phrase that may mildly amuse. It's a phrase whose interest is, in short, almost wholly aesthetic. But such a statement could become part of such an oppressive system. And there are many blue-eyed people (many of them rather morose over the past few decades' protests from blacks, women, and gays, as well as over blacks', women's, and gays' changing position in our society) whom one would like to remind just how the process of making such a statement racist works—and whom one would like to see be just a little more responsible in their analysis of what is getting them so down . . .

In terms of you and me, however, whether in the house of mirrors that is art, or in the often equally confusing house of mirrors that is the world, each of us has to seize the cliché down from the shelf, dismantle it to the letters, and, along with the rest of the type in the type box, use those letters to write something else.

After listening to all this, some of you might still want to ask: "Well, what about the other story?"

What other story?

The other story young Heinlein turned in, back at workshop: the science fiction story that you said he handed in after the first one about the guy and the girl and the bikers on the beach. What about the relation between art and life in SF?

I'm sure I don't have to tell you that everything I've said here I feel applies just as strongly to SF.

But what about what makes SF special—what makes it exciting, different, a genre of its own, with its own special delights? Don't those features—the rockets, the ray guns, the imaginative scientific extrapolation—make it less like reality, and therefore more susceptible to the Platonic argument of "bad example" or "no example at all"?

They certainly do; and it's an argument you will hear again and again leveled at science fiction, often by critics who started out proclaiming how sympathetic they were to science fiction.

But there's one more aspect to clichés that we haven't touched on. It's a place where the term "cliché" is probably not the proper one: rather the term "genre convention" is more appropriate—though what we are speaking of bears a strong structural relation to the clichés of language, in the same way that plot tropes do. But it is as hard to distinguish a genre convention from a cliché as it is to distinguish what, from childhood resonance, moves us to tears and chills from what, in light of adult sensibility, bores us to distraction. Why one cliché should become a deep and resonant theme that, when we discern it in works from any number of genres, moves us profoundly, while another, when it slides across the surface of a text, should be a sign of everything that is

trite and dull and unthinking, and while still another should become an almost invisible convention that helps hold a given genre stable—this is one of the mysteries of art. The only thing I will hazard here is to suggest that, as is the case with political clichés, it is not the content that controls clichés’ meanings or affects, but rather the different larger economies into which each has been drawn.

Although they don’t usually sit around in their own clamps, genre conventions are nevertheless real, recognizable, and articulate. It’s worth noting, then, some of the things they say.

The overriding convention of sexual excess that characterizes pornography says, for example, that any and every social situation, by just the slightest pressure, can become overtly and rapturously sexual. The overwrought conventions of modern romance, or “bodice buster,” says that any and every social situation can, with equally little pressure, become overtly and rapturously romantic. Both are lies. But I’m not sure which lie is the more pernicious.

The conventions of the old-fashioned mystery tell us that crime, however random and violent it looks, is the product of intelligence, cunning, and planning; and that the solution to the crime is therefore always more intelligence, cunning, and planning. The more modern procedural absorbs the intelligence of the detective into a pre-operationalized set of tasks, which, if we follow them mechanically, will get us our man—or woman.

Both tell major lies about crime, for the vast majority of crimes today still go unsolved and are often spontaneous, violent, and all but without motivation of the sort a court might recognize. As a genre, I have no doubt that the range of crime fictions tells far more pernicious lies than does either pornography or romance. But I staunchly oppose censorship for any of them.

Science fiction . . . well, as many have said before: its first message to us is that there will be a future. And the range of possible futures the genre presents suggests that the future is not deterministically predictable. That range also tells us that specific choices we make today will be a factor in determining which of those futures arrives—an interesting comment for writing to make about life.

Now whether or not the promise of a future, or our part in bringing it about, is another generic lie, I don’t know. Certainly I hope it’s the truth—which is one reason I like science fiction.

Another SF genre convention whose message I have always been drawn to is the one conveyed by the topological convention of the space opera.

The Copernican Revolution succeeded in striking humanity from its place at the center of the universe. With its panoply of worlds a-swirl around a galaxy of suns, those suns all a-swirl around each other in their cloud of galaxies, the space opera goes on to strike the notion of a fixed centrality from the armamentarium of our thinking.

There are only constantly relative, forever moving centers; and everything

from our technology to our sociology, from passion to intellect, can potentially be revalued in such a field.

The apprehension of the physical field in which, on a vaster and vaster scale, we are constantly and repeatedly decentered, and the concomitant reevaluation of woman, man, and mind that takes place there, we call the sense of wonder. It moved me greatly when I was a child. And I still try to explore those revisions of values with accuracy and insight in such a way that the wonder may still assail. As an adult, I've looked across a great and ragged canyon gap in the sun-glazed noon. A week later, at dawn, I've looked out over the aluminum-colored sea. And a few nights later I've stared up at the precise and distant glimmer of the stars in all that black. Now anyone can see these as three examples of immensity. But what science fiction has done for me is given me an immediate sense of the vastly differing order of immensity each represents—canyon, sea, and stars. There is your sense of wonder; there is your decentering field, within which all that is human is always up for reevaluation.

Science fiction of course tells lies too. Like so much art it tends to suggest the world is simpler than we know it to be. But whether we respond to that as a remediable aesthetic problem that may be overcome, at least partially, by the next SF story or novel we read, or a reprehensible political problem fundamental to the SF Weltanschauung, will probably have a lot to do with whether or not we like SF.

The young writer I spoke of in my early anecdote went on to publish two SF novels—one of these two years after he was out of Clarion and one a few years after that. As I said, he was immensely talented. And by the time the first appeared, he was over his believability problems. Then he went off and got a PhD in linguistics and moved to the west coast for a decade and a half to work with vocal data input as a programmer for an electronics company. I really thought he was lost to SF as a writer forever. About five days ago, however, I got a package from him.¹

(This story is true. It all happened. And I'm putting it down just like it was.)

It contained the MS of a new SF novel.

It's at home on my work table. I haven't read it yet. But getting it in the post, opening up the tan book-mailer, and reading his long accompanying letter—and anticipating reading his novel—is certainly one of the great pleasures of the life of writing.

—1973/2010
New York City

NOTE

1. Jean Mark Gawron, author of *Dream of Glass* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1993); *Algorithm* (Berkley, 1978); and *An Apology for Rain* (Doubleday, 1974).

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