

Notes and Memories on Science Fiction

Goodbye to Extrapolation (1995)

I learned as an M.Sc. student of the strict limitations of validity for any extrapolation of the kind “If we assume that A, B, C, etc., will be constant, *then* X is inversely proportional to Y” (Gay-Lussac’s Law of Gases, if I remember well). I have therefore always been suspicious of extrapolation in explanations of the Possible Worlds of SF. Though it was a kind of Gernsback-derived orthodoxy very popular when I first came to North America, in the 1960s, it seems simply a crass form of technocratic nostalgia for somewhat refurbishing the *status quo* by making room among the privileged and rulers for a new class of engineers and other applied-science people. Retrospectively, I find I have been too kind in not rejecting it wholly and *a limine* in *Metamorphoses of SF*: I guess because I am myself (as any self-respecting Marxist) a cultural conservative – in the sense at least that I disbelieve in creating new terms to slice up the experiential world unless absolutely unavoidable, as well as in letting go of old terms until they have become absolutely useless.

Now finally, having understood that SF narrations are parables, and parables cannot be extrapolations (though they can be about extrapolation, parables of extrapolation), I find a phrase by Maurice Merleau-Ponty which for me puts the last nail into the coffin marked “uselessness”: “Fundamentally, dialectical thought excludes all extrapolation, since it teaches that there can always be a supplement of being in the being [I guess I’d call that a *novum*], and that quantitative differences tend to transform themselves into qualitative ones ...” (*Le Visible et l’invisible*,

Gallimard, 1964, 128, my translation). There goes a great majority of SF: no supplement of being in its being! (or: a fake supplement – but that would be an essay, not a note).



Some Notes and Memories on Dale Mullen's *Maieutics* (1998)

Note 2020: The title is NOT new, it was originally there, and expunged for unexplained reasons by the SFS editors when they published it.

Dale once jokingly said to me that I might pronounce his laudation at the funeral. Alas, our viscous existentiality made any such thoughts impossible in August 1998; but I hope his shade will accept this surrogate, and smile at me from his poker party with Gene Debs and Sir Thomas More in Elysium.

My first vivid memory of Dale is sitting one afternoon in 1972 in a crepuscular bar on or near the campus of the University of Iowa (?) in Des Moines, where the SFRA was having one of its early yearly meetings. It was if not the heyday then the last fling of the Tolkien books craze, it was before the wide spread of SF teaching in academia; the papers we had heard for the last couple of days seemed to have none of the excitement of early fandom (which Dale knew better, since at first hand, than I knew it from the gosh-wow books by its early chroniclers and the hints by Fred Pohl in Trieste and Red Bank) and yet also none of the precision and proper critical distance of what we both thought of as scholarship. So we had fled to that dim bar for consolation and were commiserating with each other about these standards. We thought this mainly extended to the extant issues of *Extrapolation* too, which had all kinds of missionary merits perhaps but mostly sounded like a gaggle of overaged fans attempting to keep up the glow of their teenage illusions, what Dave Samuelson would in the first article of *Science-Fiction Studies*, punning on Clarke's *Childhood's End*, call "A Median Stage of Adolescence." At some point Dale broke the gloom by

announcing that he feels he should set up another, more serious journal for SF studies, that he has some money saved up, and that he is prepared to devote a portion of it to financing that journal. I immediately rippled with enthusiasm and said I'd like to help and participate in whatever way I can; my imagination caught fire, and I started spinning out loud proposals for possible types of contributions. Probably they included working not only on the post-1945 moment but also on pre-1945 and non-English SF and SF criticism as well as going through all the extant PhDs on it, since that's what I proceeded to do (and Samuelson's work for one resulted from my soliciting him to turn a part of his PhD into that article), but I really forget what I then said. The discussion ended in Dale's appointing me there and then as associate editor of what came to be – after further consultations in Des Moines and later – called, precisely, *Science-Fiction Studies* (Dale was great on precise things such as the hyphen making the difference between adjectival and nominal forms of “SF”).

The name was, I am confident, his invention, I would have probably picked something more flamboyant and Greek-sounding. I'm not sure of many similar details: unfortunately there seems to be little record of letters between us in those pre-computer days, I tended to use the phone an awful lot and charge it to the abundant grants I received in those blessed Welfare State days. I do clearly remember that I then started bombarding Dale with suggestions and materials. At some point before the first issue he told me, with his characteristic acute sense for fairness, that I had already done so much he'd install me as co-editor. And that is how the *S-FS* team got formed. I never contributed a cent to it (except maybe indirectly, by using my research assistants), up to his resignation announced in the last 1978 *S-FS* issue.

Of course Des Moines was not the first time I had met Dale. I was at the time in the throes of a crazy (but not yet totally impossible) encyclopedic ambition to read *all* that was ever and anywhere written about SF, so that I had read with appreciation his three major early essays, the *Riverside Quarterly* ones on E.R. Burroughs and on “Blish, Van Vogt, and the Uses of Spengler,” as well as the *Extrapolation* one on Wells and V.R. Emmanuel. I had particularly liked the Spengler essay: here was a critic who was not only a philologist of the old-fashioned precise kind – which

I liked – but had also the interest in theory of history so rare on a continent that seemed to run, not excluding my New Left friends and hippie students, on Henry Ford’s slogan “History is bunk.” (Jim Blish, whom I’d met in 1966 and visited almost each year after that in England, no mean critic himself, told me he was so impressed by that essay that he changed some dates in his Okie series to fit Dale’s critique.) I surely also met Dale before 1972 at some previous SFRA or MLA meeting, but memory fails me. At any rate, we were much before Des Moines exchanging materials about our common interests in Thomas More and H.G. Wells: I sent him, for example, some roneotype pages on analyzing *Utopia*, multiplied for class use, and his comments were detailed, most knowledgeable, precise, and to the point. Thus it was logical to invite him to an international symposium on Wells and SF at McGill in October 1971. It was the only time I had the pleasure of seeing Dale, already heavy on his feet (which would later trouble him a lot and practically confine him to Terre Haute), at the place I lived. And vice versa, it was only once, risking limb and life amid Reaganite deregulation in the little propeller plane from Chicago and the hurricane season, that I visited Dale and his wife in Terre Haute, and beheld the impressive rows of prewar SF journals waiting for the definitive overview which he’ll now not give us.

Our approach or stance as editors was obviously different but it proved complementary. I very dimly remember that Dale told me he had served in the Second World War, because we discovered we may have been in Italy at the same time. But he didn’t expatiate upon it, and he had not undergone the life-and-death political radicalization of the European intelligentsia in the pressure-cooker of Fascism and war. Therefore, Dale had much more the demeanor of a tolerant gentleman than I did at the time – though I trust both of us conducted *S-FS* affairs with maximum philological openness available to us. He didn’t suffer fools any more gladly, but his stoicism and reticence foregrounded it less. Yet I may disappoint some acidulous poormouthers of this “High Modernist” moment in SF criticism by saying that, having been clear at the outset about what we wanted to avoid (which excluded Fantasy “except for purposes of comparison and contrast”), there was extremely little discussion of overt ideological or political nature between us. So far as I could gather from his laconic self-referrals – I think he held

to Pascal's theory of "the hateful I" in criticism, as refracted through the Positivist scholarship of his formative years – Dale was a "Midwest atheist" not too far from, though much less strident than, the Colonel Ingersoll stamp, and indeed a Debsian, that is, a very anti-elitist or populist socialist. Debs's great maxim "I want to rise with the ranks, not from the ranks" seems to me to have been an overriding maxim for his professional life too.

Thus we were both to the Left of the professional "mainstream" in academia and certainly (with a few exceptions such as Bruce Franklin, just in those years being kicked out of Stanford) in SF studies so far, and I think we had similar reactions of practical solidarity but also theoretical skepticism in relation to the Marcusean campus New Left. And indirectly I surely learned from Dale ideologically or politically too, though I can remember only one instance clearly. At some point, I think in drafting my essay on Philip Dick, I slipped in some disparaging adjective (most likely "petty bourgeois") about shopkeepers to which Dale objected – what's wrong with shopkeepers, he asked me? Reflecting on this, I recalled that my favorite grandfather was a shopkeeper of "colonial goods" (I still remember the yummy smell of the jute bagfuls of raisins and other nuts and fruits in the corners of his small shop), and that my family has always been proud of the probity which led his guild to appoint him the fire-damage appraiser for the whole city of Zagreb (I guess it had ca. 20–30,000 inhabitants then). Modifying the quasi-Leninist cliché I had unthinkingly used, I decided then and there that indeed nothing was wrong with shopkeepers who fulfilled their proper distributory function without exploiting workers. This example may sound faintly ridiculous in today's subsumption of small shopkeepers under big store-chain conglomerates rather than under socialist co-operation, but I give it here as a chronicler of how Dale's apparently commonsense queries could bring critics striving for overarching views, who nonetheless also had ambitions to fuse this with precise interpretation, down to earth; and I'm sure I wasn't the only one to profit.

Thus, I find an inner logic in Dale's publication record, those wonderfully precise and thorough surveys of both primary and secondary literature (on Wells, Haggard, various SF reprint series, etc.). When I was writing my book on *Victorian SF* in 1980–81, one of the principal critical sources I used were his pithy but pitilessly precise annotations to some

of those series. I tried to convey the importance of such work to various SFRA award-giving committees through the years but obviously failed. If I'm not forgetting somebody, he may be the only major name among the Great Ancestors of SF criticism missing from the list of Pilgrim or similar awards, leaving the SFRA with a blot on its escutcheon. This was due to an unfortunate reinforcement between the unquestioned norm of the younger colleagues making up those committees that nobody without a major book is worth a glance, and this (how shall I call it?) modest pseudo-inductivity of Dale's, which hid the light of his general critical positions – for of course he had them – under the bushel of the seemingly pedestrian work – say, of annotating SF fiction and criticism mainly from the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth century.

In fact, with the modesty characteristic not only of him but also of his scholarly cohort before the “publish-or-perish” years, I suspect a major part of Dale Mullen's submerged huge influence in SF studies was the correspondence he kept up with dozens of people in the field. The cohort – people who studied in the 1930s, in the whirlpool of the New Deal – must have been an interesting one: Dale had learned at the university not only French (and he knew his Aristotle well) but also German! There was a stubborn, pre-admass independence to Dale, which one could also call lack of political realism but then one would in the same breath have to add imperviousness to modish sycophancy: our only major clash came when I urged him to apply for a State grant and even supplied the proper papers, and he replied I could resign forthwith if I meant to insist on it ... (I didn't.) I have not met anybody more emancipated from our quantitative reification, necessary for fame in the cruel nowadays of accelerated circulation (I was told in Paris you're nobody if you don't produce one book per year: there's a Derrida or Kristeva 1989, 1990, etc., as there is a Ford 1989, 1990, etc.). I have also met very few people more resistant, in his courtly and exemplary rather than declaratory way, to the ultra-Formalism dominant in critical studies since the 1920s–30s, from New Criticism and the belatedly digested Russian Formalists through the Structuralists to the various self-referential schools of the present.

In that sense, risking again risibility, and begging the reader's indulgence for comparing small matters to large (which is allowable if we take

the large matters as illuminating exemplars), I've always thought of Dale Mullen's position in SF criticism as analogous to Socrates's in Hellenic philosophy. Socrates left even fewer writings, to be precise none. All that we know about him is what a few admiring pupils left on record; he had luck, for one of them was a great poetic narrator and myth-spinner called Plato. But through such pupils, and then the pupils of his pupils (he had luck again, for one of them was Aristotle), his limning of concepts and dialectics of inquiry became all-pervasive in this tradition of "loving wisdom" (*philosophhein*). The analogy with the pupils is not to be sustained: strictly speaking, in these impious and narcissistic days, very few of us have pupils – so much the worse for us and them. But inescapably, some wise people – and my memory of Dale is one of a pondering, soft-spoken, often wryly chuckling sage – continue (as Brecht put it) thinking on in other people's minds.

In the last communication I had with Dale by e-mail, I asked his opinion – as I used to about so many things – about the title I had cogitated for my forthcoming book on SF and utopianism, (where the "Deluge" is meant to represent our present ruling dispensation of Post-Fordist systematic anti-utopianism). Dale's answer ran: "Darko. Arguing with the Deluge is a brilliant title." I like to think this possibly overgenerous judgment defines (as always) the judge, and that the title is what finally his work, persuasive in its quiet brilliance, actually amounts to. And that this has much to do with the reason he will go on thinking in our minds.