The Protocols of Science Fiction

by James Gunn

A conversation on a 1996 Internet newsgroup questioned the existence of science-fiction reading protocols. Up to that point I hadn't thought they needed explanation, since they seemed self-evident when Samuel R. Delany introduced them at a Modern Language Association meeting two decades ago. His remarks, along with others amplifying his insights, have since been reprinted in various journals, including his 1984 collection Starboard Wine. They seemed so illuminating to the processes that I had found myself going through and through which I had guided my students that I adopted them myself, perhaps in ways that Delany might not approve, including an exercise in my SF class in which I lead the students through a line-by-line reading of Philip Jose Farmer's "Sail On! Sail On!"

In his MLA presentation, Delany was talking about the problems he had encountered in the universities he had visited, as well as elsewhere: many people can't read science fiction—much of the text simply didn't make sense to them. He cites a couple of sentences as an example: "monopole magnet mining operations in the outer asteroid belt of Delta Cygni" and "[He] inserted his credit card in the purchasing slot; his bill was transmitted to the city accounting office to be stored against the accumulated credit from his primary and secondary jobs." I won't go through Delany's explanation of the difficulties his non-SF readers had with those concepts, but I might quote his final answer to the question (Should science fiction be taken seriously?) he poses in "Some Presumptuous Approaches to Science Fiction": ". . . yes. It is a fascinating language phenomenon, and its intricate differences from traditional `literary' language sustain its interest."

And to the question "Does science fiction work in the same way as other literary categories of writing?" he answers: ". . . no. Science fiction works differently from other written categories, particularly those categories traditionally called literary. It works the same way only in that, like all categories of writing, it has its specific conventions, unique focuses, areas of interest and excellence, as well as its own particular ways of making sense out of language. To ignore any of these constitutes a major misreading—an obliviousness to the play of meanings that makes up the SF text." As if to pay tribute to the play of meanings to which he referred, he wrote an entire book, The American Shore . . . , about a close reading of Thomas Disch's short story "Angouleme."

Earlier in the essay, Delany refers to the fact that "the conventions of poetry or drama or mundane fiction—or science fiction—are in themselves separate languages," and in other essays call the process by which one approaches and reads those languages as "protocols." As I thought about it, I realized that good reading is a matter of learning the protocols and applying them with understanding and sensitivity to a particular genre: poetry, for instance, is not read with the same protocols as prose, or an essay, as an article, or a short story, as a novel, or any of these, as drama. Similarly the sub-genres or categories have their own protocols—the mystery, for instance, the western, the gothic, the love story, fantasy, and science fiction. In each case one must identify the genre and then apply the appropriate protocol. If one doesn't know the correct protocol or misidentifies the genre, one is likely to misread something—in

the sense, at least, that there is a "best" or even a "good" reading based upon the author's intention or a consensus of experienced readers.

Misapplying protocols is illustrated in James Thurber's classic sketch "The Macbeth Murder Case," in which a husband accustomed to reading nothing but mystery novels finds himself without anything to read on the Caribbean-island vacation on which his wife has dragged him, until the Thurber-like narrator suggests he try one of the few books in the resort's library, a volume of Shakespeare's plays. The mystery-reader reads, and reports to the narrator each day, his misapplication of the mystery's protocols to Macbeth. He discards Macbeth and then Lady Macbeth as too obvious and ends up deciding the porter did it.

One could cite numerous other examples. If one should try to read Alice in Wonderland as if it were a science-fiction novel, one would ask skeptical questions about how Alice could fall down a rabbit hole without hurting herself or where the mass came from to make her grow so tall (or how her bones could support her) or where the mass went when she shrank. All these are inappropriate questions, of course, but if fantasy is approached skeptically, it evaporates; one cannot read it. On the other hand, if one should read hard science fiction without asking skeptical questions, as if it were fantasy (a much more common event), the reader would miss the most important aspect of hard SF, the fact that it creates a functional world that is different from but consistent with the world in which the reader lives. Of course there are many SF stories and novels that operate in worlds that have been inherited from prior writings or in which the construction of that world requires little imaginative participation by the reader. We call them science-fantasies sometimes, or adventure SF, like Edgar Rice Burroughs or A. Merritt novels, or most space epics, and even, in some ways, to choose an example from the best, Frank Herbert's Dune, some of which is world-building and other parts of which are best read as palace intrigue or Greek tragedy.

Most SF movies, because, as John Baxter suggests, they come out of another tradition than SF, or they derive their inspiration from earlier generations of literature or film (with the possible exception of Wells's Things to Come and Clarke and Kubrick's 2001: A Space Odyssey) may best be viewed with other than SF protocols: Star Wars as fairy tale or E.T. as Lassie, Come Home.

In a 1996 series of articles in The New York Review of Science Fiction, Delany decried the attempt to define science fiction as both impossible and undesirable. Without getting into that debate, let us admit that SF is difficult to define and get on to what SF, at its most typical, does. Since it deals with a change in the circumstances of everyday reality by introducing one or more significant alterations, an SF short story or novel constructs a plausible world in which that alteration or those alterations can exist. The science fiction work, then, introduces the reader to that world, all at once, or bit by bit. Sometimes the way in which the reader is introduced to the world is part of the story's appeal, or even central to the story itself.

Robert A. Heinlein developed some unusual techniques to create his worlds, not by explanation but by artifact ("the door dilated") or by scene of social transformation (in Gulf the protagonist walks into a drug store and a stripteaser is "working her way down to her last string of beads" and he is able to buy

drugs or sex). Other writers picked up on it. In Pohl and Kornbluth's The Space Merchants, Mitch Courtenay says in the second paragraph "I rubbed depilatory soap over my face and rinsed it with the trickle from the fresh-water tap." One wonders what readers unaccustomed to the protocols of SF reading get from those sentences or scenes.

Of course one doesn't have to wonder. When mainstream writers venture into SF, they usually (not always) do it unskillfully and inexpertly—although their much larger audiences apply to it, no doubt, the protocols of mainstream novels. When Margaret Atwood says that The Handmaid's Daughter isn't science fiction, she may mean that she didn't intend for it to be read with SF protocols, and the praise it received was generally not from SF critics. Much mainstream criticism of SF falls into the same category; when SF is read with mainstream protocols it is not likely to fare well. Robert Scholes pointed out more than a dozen years ago that "as long as the dominant criteria are believed to hold for all fiction, science fiction will be found inferior: deficient in psychological depth, in verbal nuance, and in plausibility of event."

Years ago, in a column in The New York Review of Books that I remember because it included a favorable word or two about Alternate Worlds: The Illustrated History of Science Fiction, a critic objected to the "funny names" in Ursula K. Le Guin's The Left Hand of Darkness and said that the only proper attitude for a SF writer was Roger Zelazny's "tongue-in-cheek."

My decision to offer my students a close-reading of "Sail On! Sail On!" was based not upon the belief that students had to be taught the SF reading protocols, but that the teaching of all literature is the teaching of reading skills. People can pick them up on their own, and often do, but the principle of teaching (even of fiction writing) is that reinvention is not the quickest or even the best way to approach areas of skill and that the insights of professionals can shorten the process. Moreover, one of the principles of my SF class is that the uninspected opinion is not worth holding and the uninspected reading process may represent more pure, naive reading pleasure, but sophisticated reading has its own (and maybe superior) joys.

So we begin with the first sentence of "Sail On! Sail On!": "Friar Sparks sat wedged between the wall and the realizer." We speculate about "Friar" and "Sparks" and "realizer." Readers inexperienced in the ways of SF may be put off by the fact that they don't know who Friar Sparks is or what order he belongs to or why he is called "Sparks," and they may put the story aside because they think the author doesn't know what he is doing or is putting unwarranted demands upon the reader. But the SF reader, I point out, files this information away, confident that it is important information that will be explained (and fitted into this different world) in time and that "the realizer," when it reappears in fully developed form, not only will be critical to the creation of the world in which it can exist but will involve additional, "eureka," joys.

The rest of the paragraph mentions the Friar's forefinger tapping on a key, and the toldilla in which he crouches. In this case Farmer tells the reader that the toldilla is "the little shanty on the poop deck," and we come to the conclusion that he is on a Spanish ship. In the third paragraph we discover that there is a "single carbon filament bulb" above the monk's tonsure. But in the second paragraph we are told that beyond the railing bobs "the bright lights and dark shapes of the Nina and the Pinta."

I won't continue with the analysis. By now the experienced SF reader has put together enough clues to determine that this is probably an alternate history scenario in which Columbus's first voyage included a telegrapher and an electric light. It is essential that the reader understand this and understand, within a page or two, that this world came about because the church embraced Roger Bacon and his ideas rather than excommunicating him and that Friar Sparks belongs to the order of Rogerians, because Farmer is going to transform the reader's expectations (and make him or her inspect his own opinions in the process) before the story is over.

I have used other stories that make similar demands upon the reader's attention, Michael Bishop's "Rogue Tomato," for instance (where the clues are more literary), but "Sail On! Sail On!" is short and deals with familiar events and is packed with details about which important questions can be asked. Most of us read carelessly, and care is unnecessary for most of the reading we do. Science fiction demands a different kind of reading—a kind of interaction with the text that may be required, in other circumstances, only by the most difficult literature, Joyce's Ulysses, say, but most SF readers believe that the pay-off of SF is greater, or, at least, more satisfying to their particular desires.

Does teaching SF, or teaching the protocols of SF reading, matter? Some critics would say no, and would urge, with Dena Brown, that we "put SF back in the gutter where it belongs." I can't speak for all SF teaching, but I still remember the mature student who came to me at the semester conclusion of one class and said that he had been reading SF for some twenty years but now he was reading it differently. "Better?" I asked. "Oh, yes," he said.

I don't take the credit for that—or, at least, not all the credit. I've been reading SF for some 60 years and I've thought about the process in much greater depth and at greater length than most people have time to do or care to do. Although my reading may not be privileged, it clearly is informed, and the background that I can bring to any story or novel may put that work, or the process, into a more informed context.