

**THE CROSS, THE PLOW  
AND THE SKYLINE**



# **THE CROSS, THE PLOW AND THE SKYLINE**

Contemporary Science Fiction and Fantasy  
and the Ecological Imagination  
(Revised and Expanded Second Edition)

**Ernest J. Yanarella, Ph.D.**



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*The Cross, the Plow and the Skyline: Contemporary Science Fiction and Fantasy  
and the Ecological Imagination (Revised and Expanded Second Edition)*

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## PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS— SECOND EDITION

The impetus for this expanded second edition of a book published in 2001 is severalfold. First, the original book was assigned as a textbook in three iterations (2013, 2015, and 2018) of my undergraduate course on critical political theory and science fiction that was continually updated with science fiction/fantasy novels increasingly drawn from post-2000 releases. Second, as an undergraduate seminar, the course was mostly driven each week by an initial lecture covering each part of the course followed by two class discussions on main themes and critical perspectives opened up by assigned fictional works. As such, it became increasingly evident that the universe of Anglo-American science fiction and fantasy (SF/F) was shifting and the themes and tropes informing the best of the genre from the new millennium onward were changing and taking leave of those prominent in the second half of the twentieth century. While some of the optional texts in each tradition (apocalyptic, pastoral, urban, and ecological) from which students could choose were still ensconced in the preceding century, my enrolled students were inhabiting an evolving twenty-first century world and they—and even I—came to recognize the shifting terrain unfolding around them and coming to inform twenty-first century speculative fiction.

A third motivation for crafting this second edition is more personal. The 2001 book was met by mixed reviews in noteworthy venues where SF/F works and critical scholarly reflections on authors, novels, interpretive studies, and discrete themes in the genre are typically reviewed and given critical analysis. As its scribe, I was naturally pleased with the attention, praise, and commentary by SF writers and journal editors like Brian Stableford and Farah Mendlesohn whose commentary greeted all or parts of the book in their publications. I was appreciative of Eric Otto's push

back on some of my interpretations, since scholarly engagement is really what we academicians hope our professional products will engender.

I was less sanguine, however, with the highly critical comments by other reviewers—at least one of whom characterized my book in his review title as “The Cross, the Plow, and the Switchblade.” The problem for this reviewer and at least one other who criticized my study in noted journal outlets that would get attention and scrutiny was my thorough-going critique of terraforming in Kim Stanley Robinson’s fiction and Frederick Turner’s similarly themed futuristic epic poem, *Genesis* (see chapter 9). As the book made plain, I stood squarely and forthrightly with Wendell Berry and Lewis Mumford in their critical remarks in the compendium on perspectives on space colonization collected by Stewart Brand regarding humankind’s venture to outer space and the terraforming (*terrorforming*, I called the process) of Mars and perhaps other planets in our solar system. More than simply authorial pique, I saw in the words of my book’s critics a blunting of the hallmark of the scholarly craft—critical consciousness and critique—and came to regard their attitude toward so celebrated a SF writer as Kim Stanley Robinson in his imaginings about making over other planets for human habitation as beyond questioning or criticism.

If I have been critical of Robinson’s infatuation of terraforming in the past in the first edition of this book, it is gratifying to me that some of his most recent fiction, especially *Aurora* (2015), has suggested renewed and more sober thinking on his part about the future barriers to so ambitious—and to me, outlandish and foolhardy—an idea emanating from the Horkheimer and Adorno (1972) exegesis on the dialectic of enlightenment and domination and Heidegger’s concerns over Western metaphysics and the technological world picture.

With obscene wealth currently fueling space travel and all but supplanting government direction and the international banning of national corporate and other claims on heavenly bodies (moons, planets, asteroids), the projection of commercial designs and military conflict seems not very far away. The first trillionaire (a space miner) is probably already walking the Earth, unless national commonsense and global cooperation block these frightening tendencies. For one example of such a scenario, see David Wellington’s *The Last Astronaut* (2019). I have written this second edition not to settle scores, but to share with readers the significant rising trends, shifts, and mutations in the science fiction and fantasy enterprise that



I have observed in classroom conversations with my students and through my own reflections about the genre in the early twenty-first century.

Another stimulus has been my gradual departure from Darko Suvin's hard-and-fast distinction between science fiction and fantasy. A truth that any avid fan and inveterate reader of the genre should acknowledge by now is that the line of demarcation between these two porous species of speculative fiction has been—and will likely continue to be—routinely violated by notable and recognized SF/F novelists when the story demands, leaving far behind Suvin's vitriolic dislike of science fantasy and its divorce from science fiction.

By way of acknowledgment, I want to express my sincere gratitude to Jeff Young for agreeing to publish this expanded, revised edition. Brown Walker Press was a fledgling publishing house when my former Ph.D. Michael Dawahare recommended this venue to me and prompted me to work with this book publisher and entrepreneur. So, too, I wish to thank many times over Lynne Glasner for her talent and professionalism as writer and editor and her long experience in turning the dross of garbled prose and half-turned or overly elongated arguments into gold—or at least some other precious metal. This time around, her expertise was particularly appreciated for recommending a radically better format—contrary to my original idea—for weaving the twenty-first century material into the structure of the original edition. What I initially had in mind might have been easier; what she proposed was much more satisfying.

Though not science fiction aficionados, political theorist and public educator Herbert G. Reid and architect and urban sustainability designer Richard S. Levine have been friends, collaborators, and mentors to me for four decades and more. My published scholarship invariably bears their imprint in ways they might not realize, but it is there nonetheless, and better for its traces and markers.

Throughout the composition and construction of this second edition, my spouse, Elizabeth W. Yanarella, has been quite literally close at hand; and, as I have been acting as wordsmith, she has been spinning her artisanship using paper, wood, quilling materials to make the most beautiful and creative products to share with family, friends, relatives, and acquaintances. She never met an instruction sheet she couldn't adapt to make better; she never met a new acquaintance she didn't try to make happier and more comfortable. I dedicate this new edition to her with boundless love and eternal gratitude.

Finally, I wish to thank my students—especially Alex Krupp and my son, Walker—enrolled in the three offerings of my critical political theory and science fiction seminar between 2013 and 2018 when I served as departmental chair. Their presence in these classes took me away from my administrative labors, transporting me three days a week to all the cities and other places populating the SF/F novels we visited to reflect on the real or imaginary past, present, and future—close at home or far away. If they learned half as much as I did facilitating these in-class, campus greens, and office conversations, I will consider those sessions rewarding and successful.

—EJY  
Versailles, KY

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS—2001

This book emerged from a collection of conference papers written over twelve years or more. It is the product of many debts to fellow and sister panelists and commentators who have offered useful insights and valuable perspectives on its subject matter. I am particularly indebted to my circle of intellectual comrades and collaborators—Herb Reid, Dick Levine, and Bill Green—who by example and generosity have made me a better and more catholic scholar. If they fail to discern what they have contributed to this book, I will be happy to point it out to them—chapter, paragraph, and page number. I must express my gratitude, long overdue, to Lee Sigelman, who discovered some years ago our secret lives as closet fiction readers and helped turn that interest into a co-edited volume, *Political Mythology and Popular Fiction* (Greenwood Press, 1988). That first book became the impetus for this book.

I would be neglectful if I did not thank Joe Sanders, Tony Ubelhor, Elizabeth Burton, and Guy Brooksbank, four English graduate students who enrolled in my graduate seminar on science fiction as critical political theory two years ago. They not only provided an engaging intellectual environment for exploring several key texts incorporated into this work, but served as most lively and discerning critics before it was submitted for publication at BrownWalker Press. While I still think they are wrong about the ending of *Riddle Walker*, I deeply appreciate their strong encouragement and critical comments about this enterprise. Their love of literature and respect for the wider cultural role of science fiction buoyed this project at times when it deeply needed a boost.

The writing of this book was leavened by the proximity and example of two noted literary scholars—Wendell Berry and John Cawelti—whose tenure in the Department of English at the University of Kentucky allowed me to test out and borrow from their impressive body of work and ideas that have found their way into this book. I hope this modest work is small repayment to them for all that I have learned individually from

their scholarship and our many conversations about such things as: understanding formulaic literature and its relationship to ideological hegemony, struggling to sustain intellectual and political community, remembering the needs of the body and the Earth, standing by words, respecting the Creation, and living the life and labor of the mind.

I also want to thank the gang—Paul, Bob, Larry, Jim, and David, as well as Bill, Elaine, Diana, Claire, and Gabriel—at Cosmo’s, that “great good place” for coffee, conversation, and cuisine. The last draft and much of the proofing and editing were completed amid fine coffee and spirited conversation with one or more of them.

I would be negligent if I did not say a word of thanks to my editor, Jeff Young, for his foresight and encouragement. I wish him well in his many publishing ventures, not least of all BrownWalker Press. So too must I offer my sincere appreciation to my two reviewers, Michael Zimmerman and Tim Luke. They have set a standard in their books and other writings that I hope this work has approached. In any case, I want to thank them for the advice I took and the recommendations I neglected.

My profound gratitude goes to my family. To John, I extend my deep appreciation for his willingness to lend his computer graphics skills in designing and producing the cover to this book (his second for me), as well as his technical assistance in converting the final version into this electronic form at the next-to-last stage of the publication process as a paperback and e-book. To Rachael and Walker, I express my thanks for their love, understanding, and imagination—resources that contributed to this work in ways they will never fully realize.

In dedicating this book to my teachers, I single out my wife, Elizabeth, and my high school science teacher, George Pearson. Only those couples whose love and stamina have been tested by time and events will know the lessons that each partner learns from the other about marriage, family, work, and the vicissitudes of life. This book would not have been completed and published without the things my wife taught me and the things she unselfishly gave to me. While undoubtedly my favorite science teacher in high school, George Pearson was really my first professor of politics. Though he never neglected his science instruction, he always found occasions to engage us in public matters bearing on our role as future citizens and the world around us. Even when a laboratory period was cut short by an intense discussion of the latest domestic or foreign policy crisis, we students were always richer for it. His deep humanity and care for the

things of the world, especially the downtrodden, set an example for me and so many others for our entire lives. His political consciousness moreover kindled in me a spark of interest and eventual long-term dedication to the still prodigious tasks of the political educator. To both Elizabeth and George, and to all my teachers, I dedicate this book with enduring thanks and love.

—EJY  
Lexington, KY



# INTRODUCTION

This study of science fiction and fantasy inhabits two eras: the modern era from the turn-of-the-century to the end of the twentieth and the new millennium of the first two decades of the twenty-first. To explore these two Anglo-American periods of science fiction writing is to experience a world beset by contradictory feelings of rapid social change and imminent cultural transformation and intractable ideological resistance and formidable sociopolitical blockage. It is also to live through seemingly limitless and breath-taking technological possibilities and imposing political obstructions, powerful global tendencies toward economic concentration and equally potent trends toward national and sub-national fragmentation that speculative fiction writers have assimilated like sponges and strained through their literary imaginations. For science fiction fans, to inhabit such a transitional world is to participate in a postmodern culture at once buoyed by overdrawn hopes and dreams and deeply suspicious of all totalizing ideologies and meta-systems of thought (Dallmayr, 1989; Harvey, 1989; Jameson, 1991). Subsisting in this pyrotechnic carnival funhouse of excitement and horror (Dery, 1999) is to appreciate the humor and savor the irony of the watchword of this uncertain era—Kennard's (1982) adage, "Nothing can be done, everything is possible."

Respecting the many springs and motivations of this confusing and contradictory spirit while simultaneously attempting to transcend it, this inquiry seeks to marry political theorizing with certain assumptions and tools of critical theory, hermeneutics, and deconstruction in order to open up the political possibilities inhering in contemporary science fiction as critical political theory. Not so simply put, I wish to explore the potential of science fiction and fantasy as a popular medium and cultural artifact of our times to: illuminate some of those powerful social forces and tendencies shaping the cultural and political landscape of the dense and never fully transparent present; uncover the utopian and other hopeful potentialities of the uncompleted and ever-changing past; and shoulder the role

of anticipatory consciousness of an open future or field of ambiguous possibilities that in principle always overflows our meager human abilities or seemingly prodigious technological powers to apprehend, control or direct.

That the literary genre of science fiction and fantasy (SF/F), so long considered paraliterature and relegated to the margins of mainstream literature, should fulfill these functions is not self-evident. Despite its growing popularity among general and even high-brow readers and the proliferation of academic courses and literary criticism on the genre, staunch resistance to taking science fiction seriously among conservative gatekeepers in the groves of academia and high-cultural taste makers in the literary world has kept this genre on the cultural periphery even as a few of its leading practitioners like Ursula Le Guin, Ray Bradbury, and (mistakenly) Kurt Vonnegut have been granted passage and admittance into the inner circle of serious twentieth-century authors.

By remaining on the margins of literary discourse and continuing to appeal to a mass cultural audience, SF/F has perhaps served as a better bellwether of shifting cultural moods and inchoate political sensibilities than other genres operating closer to the mainstream or residing comfortably within the towering walls of high culture. Indeed, even before science fiction emerged as a recognized literary genre, its imprint upon serious American writers was felt. As Bruce Franklin's study, *Future Perfect* (1978, p. x), has demonstrated, "there was no major nineteenth-century American writer of fiction [from Cooper, Poe, and Melville, to Twain, Bierce, and Bellamy], and few indeed in the second rank, who did not write science fiction or at least one utopian romance." The pull of the future, whether as utopia or dystopia, has thus been a powerful magnet to American writers searching for an aesthetic appropriate to their times.

In this light, we might consider Frederic Jameson's definition of genre as institution and its implications for science fiction and fantasy, including the relationship between the SF/F novel, the author's meaning and intentions, and the reader's interpretation. Genres, Jameson writes, are "essentially literary institutions, or social contracts between a writer and a specific public, whose function is to specify the proper use of a particular cultural artifact" (1981, p. 106). In considering the import of this definition for assessing the cultural and political relevance of science fiction, we might take note of Herbert Gans' observation that SF/F as low-brow culture is more user (or consumer) oriented than high-brow culture, which he characterizes



as producer oriented (Gans, 1974). Moreover, Northrup Frye (1966) has pointed out that, given its ghetto status, the genre of SF/F has been historically less mediated by the levels of interventions of critics and other taste makers and therefore more closely attuned to the needs and desires of its mass readership. In addition, the relationship between the SF/F writer and his or her readers has been strengthened by institutions like science fiction and fantasy conferences bringing novelist and reader together and generating science fiction clubs and particularly “fanzines” that allow devoted readers to give vent to their creativity and literally participate in the expanding the fictional horizons opened up by their favorite writers.

Reflecting recently upon the vocation of science fiction and fantasy writing, Orson Scott Card (1990) has pointed to the contradictory pulls and tugs impinging upon his profession. Noting how publishers in the last decade or two of the twentieth century have cemented the identity and relations of writers and readers and thereby exerted enormous pressure on authors to remain within tight bounds circumscribing their writing career, Card finds two positive developments to the ghettoizing of speculative fiction. First, its historically marginal status vis-à-vis the literary mainstream has given SF/F writers great freedom within the speculative fiction enclave, making the “categories of science fiction and fantasy larger, freer, and more inclusive than any other genre of contemporary literature”; and, second, this status has made the craft itself “extraordinarily open to genuine experimentation” (Card, 1990, p. 11). The greater freedom for experimenting with form, substance, and style afforded to science fiction artists makes for a genre that responds quickly and creatively to its audience’s appetite for the novel and (e)strange(d), while at the same time liberating SF/F writers (if they choose to) from the tyranny of the stereotypic or narrowly formulaic.

These two features of the science fiction vocation create conditions facilitating the nurture of would-be writers who typically cut their teeth on writing stories for the four-to-six established magazines in the field and then go on to express their increasingly honed talents on novellas and book-length fiction. Most important for our concern, these circumstances make this medium of artistic expression extremely receptive to participating in the cultural exploration of cutting-edge developments in the world and speculating about popular fears and hopes, mass cultural trends and possibilities, and technological daydreams and technocratic nightmares.

## Setting Boundaries, Transgressing Boundaries: Science Fiction as a Literary Genre

By the late seventies, science fiction analyst Gary Wolfe was moved to write in the preface to his book, *The Known and the Unknown: The Iconography of Science Fiction*, that

science fiction in general and science-fiction criticism in particular, is no longer of such narrow interest that every new study of the field need take for its scope the totality of what science fiction means, or where it comes from, or how to teach it (1979a, p. ix).

But even in an investigation like this one where an underlying interpretative framework informs its structure, some preliminary exercise must be made to illuminate the core meaning of this popular genre and establish its lines of demarcation.

So, what is science fiction and fantasy—or, better, what are its defining features? What are its precursors? How do these literary traditions influence its continued development?

According to close students and literary critics of genre, science fiction includes the following key features. First, science fiction is scientifically grounded—that is, the general rule is that a SF writer “cannot contravene a known and accepted principle of science unless [he/she has] a logical explanation based on other known and accepted principles” (Rabkin, 1979, p. 121). Second, works of science fiction are constructed upon the foundations of scientific rationalism and embrace a scientific epistemology that presumes the world is knowable, real, and phenomenal and “is subject to a system of discoverable and codifiable order, in the form of a set of interlocking ‘natural laws’” (Malmgren, 1991, p. 5). This world, moreover, is “radically contingent” and “lacks an overarching teleology or an informing axiology” (p. 5). In other words, that lawful universe fictionally inhabited by science fiction artists is governed not by an omniscient godhead, but by a “blind watchmaker.” Third, the idea of modern science as the controlling cultural myth of our epoch underpins and supports the writing of science fiction. Insofar as “science ... is the real myth of our culture,” then “science fiction is merely the codification and expression of beliefs in that myth” (Wolfe, 1979a, p. 5). Fourth, as Wolfe points out, through the second-order

use of principles of scientific rationalism, science fiction elaborates a powerful dynamic giving impetus to the narrative structure of science fiction. That is, “the transformation of Chaos into Cosmos, of the unknown into the known, is the central action of a great many works of science fiction” (p. 4). Fifth, much science fiction is formulaic, but need not be so. Following John Cawelti (1977), I mean by this that its plot structures, symbols, devices, and icons often take on the form of the conventional and predictable, but always with the deeper intent of estranging the familiar (i.e., re-presenting the everyday world as a strange land) and illuminating the “novum” (i.e., the radically new within the old and familiar). Sixth, as SF practitioner Samuel Delany (1971) has argued, science fiction adopts the subjunctive form, *has not happened*, in contrast to realistic or naturalistic fiction’s subjunctive mood defined by the phrase *could have happened* and that of science fantasy’s subjunctive mood, *could not have happened*.

This study originally worked from the Darko Suvin’s understanding of the definitional center of gravity or core of science fiction as the literature of cognitive estrangement. (Bear with my enunciation of the party line laid down by Suvin and his supportive genre interpreters that I will question later in this introduction.) In his words, science fiction is “a literary genre whose necessary and sufficient conditions are the presence and interaction of estrangement and cognition, and whose main formal device is an imaginative framework alternative to the author’s empirical environment [reality]” (Suvin, 1979, pp. 7–8). Three elements of this definition should be underscored. First, science fiction as literary genre is characterized by the thematic dominance of the double-edged experience of estrangement. That is, it permits one to recognize the phenomenon, but simultaneously de-familiarizes it. The experience of estrangement is commonplace in everyday life, whether in the apparently simple and innocent questions of foreign visitors about one’s city or country, the open-ended perceptions and the profoundly difficult questions of children about aspects of nature, the world, and social relations, the punning possibilities of misspelled words or fractured sayings, or even the simple act of repeating a word many times. In science fiction, as we shall see, this de-familiarization process takes many forms.

This estranging element is counterbalanced in the practice of science fiction by the limiting principle of a cognitive norm or logic. In other words, the force of the cognitive principle requires that the estranging effects of SF remain within the cognitive bounds of the author’s epoch and thus are

subject to empirical validation by the logic of scientific inquiry. Finally, the underlying intent of science fiction as cognitive estrangement is less to predict or anticipate the future than to shed deeper light on the inner workings or operating assumptions on the contradictory present often veiled by social convention or screened out by ideological filters. (For further elaboration on this point, see Jameson, 1984.)

Yet another critical element to science fiction is implicit in Suvin's phrase, the "imaginative framework alternative to the author's empirical environment" (1979, p. 8). This has to do with the hegemonic role of the novum. Because science fiction diverges significantly from naturalistic or realistic fiction, it almost invariably incorporates into its plot structure some version of a novum (the radically new or novel). As we shall see, novums are polymorphous and include as concrete examples such elements as Le Guin's ansible, Lem's sentient sea, Benford's tachyons, Wilhelm's clones, and Asimov's gadgets. Working in complicity, the cognitive norms underlying science fiction, its defamiliarizing effect, and the hegemony of the novum tend to prompt the involved reader to oscillate between the author's empirical world and the estranged SF world, "feed[ing] back into the reader's own presuppositions and cultural invariants, questioning them and giving him/her a possibility of critical examination" (Suvin, 1979, p. 308). As a result, science fiction as critical political theory often issues in a powerful critique of existing social institutions, cultural norms, and prevailing structures of power; in the process, it opens up alternative ways of socially constructing the lived world and disclosing utopian possibilities latent in the present and emergent in that different possible future.

As well, prevailing scientific practice and technological possibilities are frequently interrogated or subverted in the process. As Malmgren puts it (1991):

in part because its discourse is rooted in a scientific epistemology, in part because its novums are drawn from or tied to developments in science, the most significant SF necessarily investigates the dominant scientific paradigm of the day. In a sense, the genre simultaneously affirms and interrogates science, resting as it does on faith in reason and the scientific method while at the same time probing the assumptions, limits, and blind spots of each. (p. 30)

## SF and Utopian Fiction

This study also explores the landscape of the utopian (and dystopian) imagination at the nexus of political theory and contemporary science fiction. Like many of the names in the work itself, Thomas More's ambiguous book title, *Utopia* (1516/2003), is a literary pun, for it plays on the ambiguity between utopia as *eutopia* (good place) and *outopia* (no place). On the other hand, Oscar Wilde (1891/1954) finds a privileged place for utopia as *eutopia* when he argues:

A map of the world that does not include Utopia is not even worth glancing at, for it leaves out the one country at which Humanity is always landing. And when Humanity lands there, it looks out, and seeing a better country, sets sail. Progress is the realisation of Utopias. (p. 34)

Regarding SF and utopian fiction, the simple governing rule that some SF is utopian fiction, but not all utopian fiction is SF perhaps applies. Darko Suvin, on the other hand, categorizes utopian fiction as the "sociopolitical subgenre of science fiction" (1979, p. 61).

Whatever the relation between science fiction and utopia, manifestations of utopian science fiction examined in this study can be placed into at least three categories, outlined in Tom Moylan's *Demand the Impossible* (1986). The first, classic or traditional utopias, like More's *Utopia* (1516/2003) or Campanella's *City of the Sun* (1981), tend to be systematic, escapist, and often located in new and uncharted parts of the world. The modern utopia inaugurated in some ways by H.G. Wells (1905/2006) may be characterized as heuristic or instructional (exposing the reader to the unfulfilled potential of the collective human project), reformist or subversive of modern economic and political arrangements, and oriented toward its realization in the future (often under the auspices of the wonders of modern science and technology). Finally, the critical utopia, making its appearance in SF in works like Le Guin's *The Dispossessed* (1974), Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time* (1976), and Delany's *Triton* (1976), rejects utopia as blueprint while preserving it as dream.

A distinguishing mark of this third category of utopias is that it holds in tension the conflict between the prevailing socially constructed world and the utopian society as open possibility in order to foreground the issue of sociopolitical change. In addition, it dwells on the continuing dialectics of solidarity and difference, order and chaos, the qualitatively better and imperfections within the ambiguous utopia or heterotopia of the future, but without trying decisively to resolve those tensions. In sum, in critical utopias, the utopian narrative is treated as the repository of “unfulfilled needs and wants of specific classes, groups, and individuals in their unique historical contexts” (Moynan, 1986, p. 1) and the utopian society is historicized and placed in a multi-temporal framework where past, present, and future intersect and interact with one another in strange and potentially productive ways. In so doing, utopian science fiction contributes to that pedagogical process Ruth Levitas (1990) sees in the best of utopian fiction: the education of desire.

## **Toward a Critical Hermeneutics of Tradition: Science Fiction as Critical Political Theory**

Perhaps surprisingly, the central organizing concept or focus of this work on science fiction and fantasy as critical political theory is tradition—specifically, the apocalyptic, pastoral, and urban traditions rooted in American literature and politics and more generally in Western culture. I say surprisingly because both the post-modern temperament of our times and the dialectical imagination of critical Marxist theory have tended to weigh in against cultural traditions and heritages for their supposedly conservative, even stifling political and social repercussions. The approach here is to emphasize the ineluctability of tradition and its interpretive spaciousness and political malleability. This issue has been thoroughly debated by Hans-Georg Gadamer and Jurgen Habermas, but need not detain us here. (For an excellent overview of the Gadamer-Habermas debate mediated by Paul Ricoeur, see Piercey, 2004.)

The intent of this work is to interrogate and critically reappropriate deeply entrenched, long-standing, and interrelated literary, political, and cultural traditions—the cross, the plow, and the skyline. Through the medium of contemporary science fiction, these representations are

employed to advance the unfolding political agenda of an ecological consciousness and multifaceted social movement felt around the globe. That is, each heritage is questioned to determine its potential as a political resource in the developing political debate and cultural conversation about the human species, its relationships with nature and the social world, and the possible alternative futures being opened up by the apparently Promethean powers of modern science and technology. Insofar as these traditions can contribute to a more sophisticated rendering of the sociopolitical vision of the ecological imagination, the heritages of the cross, the plow, and the skyline may be critically rehabilitated through the fusion of horizons provided by the normative core of these traditions, their cultural sedimentation in American letters and political life, the consciousness among those elements and remnants of the past who still pay homage to them, and the cultural surplus embodied in present-day articulations of these traditions and in their futuristic expressions in contemporary science fiction.

The ultimate goal is to fashion three elements from contemporary science fictional representations and interrogations of these traditions. First is a complex and sophisticated critique of forces inside modern science and late twentieth-century social existence. These forces are hurtling us toward a future characterized by new and qualitatively more terrifying natural and social catastrophes and by forms of political barbarism and economic bondage barely imagined in early twentieth-century dystopian novels; and, second, a subtle and convincing imaginary of a post-modern ecological world featured by sustainable ecological and social practices and institutions, a pluralistic conception of better, more perfectible communities sub-lating pastoral hopes and dreams with city forms and true urbanity, and a new science and a new technology reconciling scientific specialization with eco-technologies.

These ambitions are guided by the method of critical hermeneutics. As a literary and political approach originally designed to restore meaning to damaged or broken texts, hermeneutics studies the interpretation or significance of texts (signs, symbols, myths, poems, drama, music, and other cultural works) and text-analogues (literary and political traditions, actions, social movements, institutions, etc.). In so doing, it parts company with other supposedly scientific or “objective” forms of analysis and investigation in at least two ways. The first difference stems from the

human sciences' answer to the question: How do we understand meaning? What differentiates science from the humanities, explanation from understanding, is that the latter moves inescapably within the hermeneutic circle—or, simply, “circle of interpretation.”

Epistemologically, the humanities and the process of understanding meaning are indebted to Dilthey's belief that “meaningfulness fundamentally grows out of the relation of part to whole that is grounded in the nature of living experience [and] ultimately is the encompassing fundamental category under which life becomes graspable” (Taylor, 1971, p. 6). So, as we read a text, we always approach it

in terms of part-whole relations: [that is] we are trying to establish a reading for the whole text, and for this we appeal to readings of its partial expressions; and yet because we are dealing with meaning, with making sense, where expressions only make sense or not in relation to others, the readings of partial expressions depend on those of others, and ultimately of the whole. (p. 6)

To appreciate the intent of hermeneutics, we must remember that it began as an exercise of monks who struggled in medieval times to restore partially mutilated religious writings to their original, or at least whole, meaning. This part/whole method of recovering the meaning of broken texts eventually came to serve as a model for literary and cultural scholarship for understanding such products wherever the meaning and significance of texts and text analogues were in dispute. Within the humanities generally and many schools of thought in literary criticism and social and political theorizing today, hermeneutics is accepted as an essential mode of analysis and interpretation. There, literary symbols, cultural myths, and political values are viewed as common or intersubjective meanings existing within a larger matrix of other meanings and symbols—such as a defined fictional genre, common literary tradition, a national or political culture or ideology—partly constituting the rituals, practices, and symbolic actions within those spheres. Moreover, because these symbols, myths, and traditions operate within a temporal frame, accumulating, and even changing meaning over history, the standpoint of the historian or literary critic or science fiction reader is an inescapable part of the understanding of these cultural artifacts.



## SF and Cultural Surplus: From Complex Pastoralism to Political Ecology

Why focus on the apocalyptic, pastoral, and urban traditions? And why imbue these traditions with a utopian impulse? As a political theorist concerned with excavating the meaning structures of American politics and literature as they refract through contemporary science fiction, I would like to suggest that one way to conceptualize political culture (and its informing traditions) is to think of it as providing narratives to its inhabitants about who they are as individuals, citizens, and a nation and what they should want or need or desire. These narratives also tell them who is *We* and who or what is *Other* and what is the appropriate relationship between *Us* and *Other(s)*. While these forms of individual and collective identity (and exclusion) tend to be relatively stable and durable, they are not cultural constants and thus are subject to change, reformulation, and even transformation. Because literary, cultural, and political traditions are institutions of discourse whose meanings and internal relationships are subject to renegotiation and rearticulation within and between generations, they are being continually interpreted and reinterpreted in the light of the pull of new experience and the push of past articulations. Thus, even hegemonic traditions participate in a politics of interpretation, given the spaciousness of the interpretive field of traditions (Kolb, 1990, pp. 81–84; Yanarella, 1993, p. 81). The not-so-simple point is that within the political and social realm there is often a politics of tradition where groups and movements contend with each other over whose interpretation offers the authoritative meaning of that tradition.

Within American culture generally and American political culture in particular, apocalyptic, pastoral, and urban symbols and myths have been deeply sedimented in its cultural narratives. These three cultural streams became inscribed in our dominant cultural narratives, not so much as discrete and autonomous cultural forms with their own separate histories and impulses, but more so as mutually interpenetrating elements embedded for the most part in the biblical roots of our largely Protestant culture as well as in more secular roots stemming from nonreligious and even anti-religious springs like the Enlightenment nourished by overlapping or convergent sources. Literary and cultural critics like Sacvan Bercovitch (1975, 1978), Warner Berthoff (1994), and Emory Elliot (1986) have argued that