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A NEW LITERATURE FOR THE SPACE AGE

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Foreword

Technological developments, just as social changes, economic processes, or political events, make their impact on the literature of a nation, a culture or an era. The reverse, of course, is also true: man's many and diverse activities are influenced and shaped by what is said about them. This paper attempts to project the trend, as well as some of the developments, of this culture-technology interaction in the foreseeable future.

Definition

Literature, as broadly defined, is anything written or printed, including labels on tin cans, want ads, mail order catalogs or erotic declarations on washroom walls. This paper, though, will confine itself to formal fiction: novels, short stories, drama, poetry and whatever fictional forms that await invention.

On one level of perception, literature for the space age can be categorized as follows:

1. Literature About Space
2. Literature From Space
3. Literature Influenced by Space

About Space

The bulk of space literature in the near future will be about space; that is, it will use space or space activities as settings and scenes for telling stories. Much of this literature, in turn, will be a continuation of what is now called science fiction.

Much of science fiction is really a projection of science fact. Some savants have suggested that anything man can conceive he can also realize, and support for this belief can be found in the science fiction of yesterday that is the science fact of today.

Useful as science fiction is in permitting us an occasional glimpse into the future, from a literary viewpoint it hardly measures up to most forms of fiction. Its forte is a strong story line and the introduction of provocative and profound ideas. There is little time or space for plot, character development or a proper treatment of the social, political and economic implications of ideas introduced in this type of fiction.

Science fiction characters tend to be two dimensional and devoid of detail. Their emotions and passions are lightly drawn, and their bodily functions are practically non-existent.

With all its shortcomings as a literary medium, science fiction will continue its role as a prophet of scientific discoveries and technical developments.

Generally regarded as a literary cut above science fiction is the adventure story. Rather than predicting and projecting theoretical situations and environments, adventure fiction utilizes geography that has already been explored, if often remote and unsurveyed. And the characters operate within a plausible, perchance improbable, set of circumstances.

Adventure fiction restricts the framework of action; the moons and planets of our own solar system will be the arenas, rather than speculative planets of distant suns.

This form of fiction is already well advanced, and its leading practitioner in the English speaking world is Martin Caidin, a prolific writer who resides here in Cocoa Beach. Caidin works with known and demonstrable natural laws. A character in one of Caidin's novels will react to a particular space environment the way a real person would have to. In this respect, his work is a primer for real and imminent adventures in space.

More important from a literary viewpoint than his technical accuracy, is Caidin's treatment of his characters. They react to each other and to the environment, often passionately and fiercely. They sweat, bleed, eat, excrete and make love (though not necessarily in that order).

It is this type of fiction, what Caidin calls the non-fiction novel, that will dominate the literature about space in the predictable future.

From Space

Virtually all of the space pioneers will continue to be technicians rather than philosophers or poets. For this reason it is a safe assumption that early literary efforts originating from elsewhere than earth will be of the "Gee Whiz" or "Wow" variety. Such fiction will glorify the hardware of space, just as a form of fiction after World War I spoke lovingly and even rap-

turously of Spads and Fokkers. This kind of fiction is at a literary level somewhat below science fiction, and is initially tolerated because of its novelty and the death of literature from a frontier environment.

This rudimentary fiction will be followed by the chronicle or heroic saga. A space age Beowulf may emerge, larger than life if not space, to delight earth-bound readers with his valorous deeds. Only this hero will battle environmental villains. What is an ogre or a giant compared with radiation belts or meteorite showers?

To continue the analogy, the space age equivalent to Beowulf could be followed by a 21st century counterpart to Chaucer. But instead of pilgrims traveling to a religious shrine, we might have a group of space workers and administrators gathering together at a central space station or depot for a trip to earth. Sooner or later someone will be sent into space who isn't a 100% American (or Russian) boy. When space gets a little more crowded, it will also get its share of dissidents, malcontents, profiteers, neer-do-wells, clowns, gluttons and lovers. Space literature will then be a little less heroic and a lot more human; or, heroes are alright in their place, but...

Eventually, and this may require the presence of a generation born and reared in space, literature from space will be able to treat space as any other environment, as a backdrop and a stage for the human drama, of man's quest to understand himself, his origin and his destiny. Only then will appear a Dante, a Shakespeare, a Hesse or a Faulkner.

Influenced by Space

Before the appearance of literary titans from space, the really significant literature in the space age will be the fiction influenced and shaped by the glorious fact that man has at last broken away from earth, his ancestral home.

Fiction writers not preoccupied with space or space hardware, and perhaps not even overjoyed or greatly impressed by the prospect of a man on the moon by 1970, are already being influenced by space, whether they want to or whether they realize it. They must account for space, because it cannot be ignored; no matter which way they turn, it's looking over both shoulders. It invades the office, factory, jail and boudoir. Even if it's never mentioned, it's out there, lurking. Of course, it was always there, but the literary shades were down, and its presence could be obscured or avoided.

Means

The type of literature enjoyed or endured by any society is determined to a great extent by the media that displays or transmits it. A society dependent on the quill pen for original manuscripts, and for all copies of those manuscripts, would necessarily have a different literature than a society with typewriters and printing presses. The difference becomes even greater if the former society must transmit its literature by horse and barge.

In America today we enjoy or endure the greatest proliferation of media in history: books, magazines, newspapers, radio, television, telephones, motion pictures, and computers. Most of these media compete with each other for the eyes and ears of a population already bombarded, distracted and sometimes bewildered by a surfeit of data.

The word data is intentionally used rather than the word information. Information implies a voluntary selection of media content to be retained or applied for specific purposes. Data is much more descriptive. There it is, take it or leave it. But if you leave it you can't entirely ignore it, because it confronts you everywhere. You would have to turn off the television, phonograph and car radio, leave the newspapers unopened, drive with your head straight to avoid billboards, and not answer the telephone. Even then you would be vulnerable to sound truck exhortations, electronic traffic instructions and panel advertising.

Authors of all ages and cultures have had to consider the medium that would best serve as an agency between themselves and their audiences. This is more true of contemporary authors, and will be even more relevant to tomorrow's Space Age authors. While providing more latitude of choice, it requires a closer identification with the medium itself.

Marshall McLuhan, a Canadian educator whose ideas have strongly influenced contemporary sociology, claims that the medium is the message, that the logic of linear print is making way for an instantaneous and intuitive mosaic of communications; that books contain the reader, while TV involves the listener; and that electronic communications are taking man back to the decentralized and tribal society of pre-literary times.

McLuhan's viewpoint may afford some explanation of the phenomenal success of Playboy Magazine when some older and entrenched "slick" magazines floundered. Playboy involved the reader with situations and people with whom he could identify. And it was highly visual. When Playboy was still somewhat of a novelty (before its present respectable position in the Ameri-

can home next to TV Guide), a friend of mine explained his purchase of the magazine to his wife by saying that "he liked the articles", and then added, "and the reading material isn't bad, either." Oh, those articles.

A new literature for the space age will account for and identify with the new media. It will utilize computer techniques, new photographic processes, and new recording methods. It may even have a new language, a computer talk that all nations can identify with, a literary equivalent of the metric system. And, if some way is found to transmit three-dimensional articles into the home, even Playboy may become obsolete.

Form

Assuming that the new literature will originate from both spatial and terrestrial environments, and that the media for its transmission and absorption will be more visual and tactile, we still haven't considered the real question: What form will literature take? Without an answer to the question, other speculations and considerations are meaningless. Or, to sub-divide this question: What will writers write about? How will they structure their writing? What facets of human behavior will writers emphasize? And what role will this new literature play in the Space Age?

About What

If electronics is creating a tribal society on a global scale, then literature may be expected to reflect tribal attitudes and attempt a reconciliation of inter-tribal differences. In this regard, individual nations can be likened to families whose ultimate loyalty is to the tribe. Thus, while the Russian family may sulk over American successes in space, and the American family may resent Russian space spectaculars, the tribe is neutral; it stands to gain both ways.

Another trend of Space Age literature will be continuation and elaboration of the existential viewpoint. The idea that "Existence Precedes Essence", in combination with the theory of relativity and McLuhan's tribal society, is particularly adaptable to a space environment - both geographical and philosophical. Present generations of Western man have already discarded the idea of a personal and omnipotent deity whose essence preceded the creation of all existence. This rejection is more evident in the actions of people than in their utterances; it takes a long time to break the habit of incantations.

Existential literature of the near future, where so labeled, will be characterized by loneliness and honesty. It will emphasize that man is alone in the universe, but will add: "So what?" And the honesty will be prompted by a "Why not?" With no deity around, any deception would be self-deception, and any betrayal would be self-betrayal.

Along with the rejection of a personal deity and the growing acceptance of the existential outlook, will be another and seemingly contradictory literary trend: a new interest in and awareness of nature.

The contradiction is illusory. With the retreat of essence and divinity already underway, there is a corresponding return to and interest in the nature religions and philosophies which view man as part of nature. They say, in part, that man rejects nature to his peril, because he ends up rejecting himself. The present interest in Zen, mysticism, extra-sensory perception, and prophecy is just the beginning of a trend.

All very well, this stuff about tribes, religion, philosophy and nature. But how will Space Age literature treat such things as love, sex, crime, alcoholism, drug addiction and all that good jazz? As tribal, existential, natural subjects, of course.

The eternal conflicts of individual and collective man will continue to be the grist from which fiction writers will develop their works: man against man for a woman; woman against woman for a man; man against woman for the upper hand; one generation against another; race against race; and culture against culture. The latter two, though, are not truly eternal, since the tribal society could eliminate race and homogenize cultures.

Writing will probably be less moralistic. Motivations will be explored, but judgments will be tentative, relative and restrained. This because a natural tribal society does not see things in absolutes, in black and white. Evil will be seen as the necessary adjunct to good and sin as the precondition for virtue.

The restraint in judgment will, in turn, be a cause of, and result of, a more relaxed and tolerant environment for individual man.

Structure

The "look-at" instantaneous literature of electronics will improve its relative position to the "read and relate" literature of print. Television, perhaps the most intimate of all media, with its audience potential in the hundreds of millions, will be a voracious consumer of literary output. The trend will accelerate when movie tapes can be run through and shown on home television sets.

The live theatre should flourish. A population conditioned to images could find the theatre a diverting extension of that imagery - in three-dimensional and exciting natural flesh tones.

Poetry, in decline in recent years, may make a comeback. The present popularity of folk singing could presage a poetic renaissance.

Novels should continue the present trend away from a strong story line with a well defined beginning, middle and end. Conclusions will be more tentative, villains less vile, heroes less heroic, and situations more real. There will be more books like "In Cold Blood", which depict real events as fiction. Lawrence Durrell's space-time continuum, wherein the same events are portrayed from different vantage points, will influence the Space Age novel. And Henry Miller's rambling stream of consciousness style may be more meaningful to future generations than it was to his shocked and offended contemporaries.

Novellas and short stories will be similarly affected. Because it is short, the short story may enjoy a rise in popularity with a population that shows every sign of using its increased leisure in unlesurely ways.

Some things will remain the same: Future English students will sweat over Lunar Lit I and Venusian Verse II, while graduate students engaged in serious research will pore over well-thumbed copies of Space Erotica and Planetary Pornography.

Prospect

The new literature will serve the same purposes it has in the past. It will entertain, inform, criticize, titillate, divert, exhort and seduce. The emphasis will change, though, and so will the direction.

As man pushes his environment further into space, he will also enlarge the frontier of the unknown. This, if nothing else, should intensify literary introspection. Concomitant with the exhilaration of space exploration will be the humble feeling of "What the hell are we doing here?" In order to find out, man will have to look inside himself and literature can help in finding the right answers.

There will be less concern with technology, per se, and the engineer, who has enjoyed unprecedented prestige since World War II, will resume his traditional role of implementer. The literature will reflect this, just as it will mirror the frantic efforts of the behavioral sciences to catch up with the applied sciences.

The social scientist, psychologist, anthropologist and political scientist will have their chance. And the writer will be standing nearby, with pencil or computer, to chronicle their success or failure - as a glorious saga or as a script for the Too Late Show.

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