

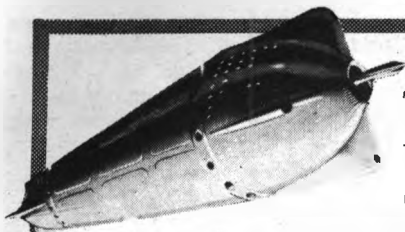
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# Science Fiction Advertiser

is published at

1745 Kenneth Road, Glendale 1, Calif.

THIS MAGAZINE HAS CHANGED ITS NAME FROM....

*Fantasy Advertiser*

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# Deux Ex Machina:

A Study of A. E. van Vogt

by

Arthur J. Cox

(first of two installments)

A

Diamond hard and bright - this is the thought van Vogt's style calls to mind. Metallic words, crisp phrases, compact sentences. His writing is arhythmic. It has about it no fluidity, no softness, no near-poetry. Van Vogt has no sense of the beautiful phrase, no love for the subtle image or the gentle allusion. His descriptions are literal and to the point. He uses few similes, fewer metaphors; rarely, a figure of speech.

Yet, out of this poetic barrenness he has created a peculiar and rewarding prose. He has fashioned a style which, despite its faults, represented the most distinctive science fiction writing published during those years that van Vogt's creative efforts were at their height.

A brief example should refresh our sense of its unique nature. A passage from 'The Rull', chosen because its meaning does not derive from the direct narration of the story's action, is sufficient to the purpose:

'The will to death is in all life. Every organic cell ecphorizes the inherited engrams of its inorganic origin. The pulse of life is a squamous film superimposed on an underlying matter so intricate in its delicate balancing of different energies that life itself is but a brief, vain straining against that balance.

'For an instant of eternity, a pattern is attempted. It takes many forms, but these are apparent. The real shape is always a time and not a space shape. And that shape is a curve. Up and then down. Up from the darkness into the light, then down again into the blackness.

'The male salmon sprays his mist of milt on the eggs of the female. And instantly he is seized with a mortal melancholy. The male bee collapses from the embrace of the queen he has won, back into that inorganic mold from which he climbed for one single moment of ecstasy. In man, the fateful pattern is repressed into quadrillions of individual cells.

'But the pattern is there. Waiting.'

Several elements disturb our appreciation of van Vogt's writing. A noticeable factor is his poor grammar - the use of singular pronouns for plural objects, and so on; a science fiction editor told me a few years ago that van Vogt was unfamiliar with the conditional clause, writing 'If it was--' for 'If it were--', so that he had to go through the manuscripts and correct them. These are symptoms of what seems to

be an uneven education. We find other evidence of it in his peculiar use of popular colloquialisms, words like 'innards' startling us by appearing suddenly in the middle of one of his typically precise, antiseptic paragraphs (twice in the magazine version of 'World of A', chapters four and twenty). Then, too, his use of slang shows that he has no real sense of its meaning: in the above-mentioned chapter twenty we also find the following paragraph:

'The elevator they entered had distance-devouring qualities... Gosseyn's intestinal fortitude strove to climb into his throat, and settled into position again only reluctantly as the acceleration ended.'

Italics mine. Along with this quasi-American slang (embedded in statements characterized by a German fastidiousness) we find British phrases - not to mention such unusual words as 'ecphorizes', 'squamous' and 'engrams', used in our quotation in its pre-dianetic sense. ...A pedantic schoolmaster trying unsuccessfully to play the regular fellow.

One of Damon Knight's more interesting observations on van Vogt is that he is a writer without a sense of form. It is true that his stories do not have an organic appearance. They do not seem to be artful elaborations on spontaneous fantasies or interesting situations. Van Vogt says of his writing, in his contribution to the science fiction writing symposium, 'Of Worlds Beyond':

'I write a story with full and conscious knowledge of technique. Whenever my mind blurs, no matter how slightly, on a point of technique, there my story starts to sag, and I have to go back, consciously think it over, spot the weakness, and repair it according to the principles by which I work.'

Van Vogt's stories derive what form they do have from his mechanical methods of construction. He thinks of his story in terms of (what he calls) scenes of approximately 800 words each. Each scene has a specific purpose to accomplish, and the purpose of the first scene is usually the purpose of the story - the story initiator. The story is over the moment this initiating factor is solved or resolved. The second sequence introduces the first sub-plot. Every story, van Vogt argues, even a short story, has at least one sub-plot. Longer stories have more, growing out of 'character, atmosphere, and science.' Nearly every such scene may introduce a new sub-plot. He feels that this gives the story richness of content and variety, but another result is that his story loses all resemblance of order, all unity of appearance. His novels are usually unwieldy masses of words, events, atmospheric contrivances and pseudoscientific explanations. His short stories, on the other hand, contain in far lesser degree the objectionable features of his writing, a few of them (in particular, 'The Monster') being exceptional pieces of work.

His first serial, 'Slan', does not suffer so much from the defects inherent in his other novels for the major reason that it has a more or less uncomplicated story line. Also, van Vogt wrote it as a series of alternating chapters, one series following the adventures of the hero, the other those of the heroine. Van Vogt used the same pattern in his second novel, 'The Weapon Makers', a chapter dealing with Captain Hedrock alternating with one dealing with Dan Neelan. But this time he was less successful, for in the case of 'Slan' the shape given the story by the alternating chapters had a definite meaning derived from the emotional relationship between the boy and the girl; the reader senses this and is pleased long before they meet. In 'The Weapon Makers', however, we simply have two stories taking place against the same background and connected by a variety of minuscule, meaningless themes. Our major impression is a sense of disorder.

It is van Vogt's habit to include in his story every idea that occurs

to him as he writes it. This is a part of his 'complication technique'. For our purposes as analysts, this habit gives us a peculiar point-of-'vantage': for it enables van Vogt to easily embody in his story (and he makes use of this facility) those embarrassments and tensions created by the writing process, itself, thus permitting us to view at unexpected and sudden times frozen, candid image of the author in the act of creating his story. Most often, these moments are merely expostulations by one or another of the story's characters on the incredibility of the happenings in the story (as in the 'improbability speculations' in 'Discord in Scarlet' and the amazement of our hero as to the villain's naivety in the climactic scene of 'The Chroniclers'), but occasionally there are expressions of deeper self-consciousness.

After 'World of A' in 1945, van Vogt abruptly began writing a different type of story. This type was represented primarily by a new, lengthy series of stories featuring a non-superman mutant, Clane Linn. It was during this period that the first serious inroads into his popularity were made. But the series, though generally considered to be dull, did attract some attention. Van Vogt was accused of having plagiarized Robert Graves' historical novel, 'I, Claudius'. A local writer declared that van Vogt had copied it 'scene for scene', and a friend told van Vogt that Theodore Sturgeon had charged that the business was 'scandalous'. Van Vogt's answer was, 'Tell Sturgeon that Roman history is not copy-right!' On looking over van Vogt's library we see that he has in it many, if not most, of those same sources upon which Graves based his account. We see that Graves ostensibly had nothing uniquely his own which van Vogt must have stolen to have written the Clane Linn series. But it would be foolish to maintain that he wrote the stories independently of 'I, Claudius': he was obviously strongly influenced by the book. Both are written, so to speak, in the same tone of voice, van Vogt's style, never too dissimilar to Graves', apparently being modified, whether intentionally or otherwise, closer to that in which 'I, Claudius' was written. The first two stories in the Linn series, though written in the third person, had brief terminating sentences in which the impersonal, omniscient narrator reveals himself as Clane Linn, himself. This seems to be an extension of Claudius's habit of speaking of himself for lengthy periods in the third person, then switching back to the first person.

With the exception of four pieces, this period (during which he was trying to write 'human' stories, I understand) was very unrewarding. These four exceptions, published in a row, were extraordinary in their quality: 'Centaurus II', 'The Barbarian' (though the weakest link in the chain, the strongest story in the Clane Linn series), 'The Rull', and 'The Monster'.

During this period, van Vogt began divorcing himself from the magazine which had so long been the sole publisher of his stories, Astounding Science Fiction. His work began to appear widely in other sources. The interesting thing about these stories is their lack of interest. A horribly dull novel appeared in Startling Stories, 'The Shadow Men', much of it a re-hash of some of his ideas in an almost equally poor novel, 'The Players of A', which was published previously in Astounding. His short novel, 'The Weapon Shops of Isher', in Thrilling Wonder Stories, was not bad but it seems to me that that small popularity accorded to 'Project Spaceship' in the same magazine was largely an expression of self congratulatory joy on the part of those who had previously never been able to understand a van Vogt story. And I found 'Rogue Ship' in Super Science Stories too contrived to be enjoyable. These magazines, themselves, were extremely enthusiastic about the stories: 'A. E. van Vogt!'

But poor as these stories were they were still not defective in body

and spirit as was some of his still-later work, such as 'The House That Stood Still', 'The Star-Saint', 'Haunted Atoms', and 'This Joe'. The last-named is one of the only two stories of his I know of which contain a direct contradiction on the visual level: Our hero is wearing an atmospheric pressure suit, yet when the wind gets cold he pulls up his collar more tightly about his ears (page 70, Marvel Science Fiction, August 1951). The other story is a late novelette in Astounding, 'The Green Forest', June 1949: Our protagonist, after his captors are disposed of by mutual enemies unaware of his existence, gets up off the ground and walks away - a difficult task, as his hands are tied to his feet and van Vogt has forgotten to undo him.

I am not sure what was responsible for this decline in the quality of his stories. I suspect that a major factor may lie in what was at one time his growing discontent with his former methods of writing. After the van Vogts moved to Southern California ('Hollywood') to live, he met several writers of what might be termed 'a more professional character' than himself. For example, Richard Sale, who, I am told, turns out about a million salable words a year - van Vogt was writing about one or two hundred thousand words a year. He was shaken. At some talks given in 1949, he described a new method for producing stories he was using: He would get an idea for a story; but instead of developing it immediately, he would let it germinate in his unconscious for a couple of days. Then, plucking it forth into the daylight of his scrutiny, he would discover that it had grown somewhat, that it had solidified. He would spend all that morning out in his backyard, talking the idea out to himself, elaborating on it, explaining it. Next, that afternoon, he would outline it in the greatest detail possible. Then, the story was all set up; all he had to do, was to write it. I got the impression that this was merely a matter of two or three days work for a short story. He seems to have been pleased with the results of the method. These easier-written stories sold, receiving in at least one case a higher rate than Astounding had ever paid him.

Van Vogt's magazine appearances have been few these past several years, largely because he has spent such a great amount of time revising his serials for book publication and weaving connected novelettes of a series together to form a single novel. Comparisons between the magazine versions and the books are usually unfavorable to the latter. A particular case in point is the book version of 'World of A', which according to the publisher's jacket blurb was 'revised and expanded'; it was revised beyond doubt, but the only expansion discoverable is the adding of the article 'The', before the rest of the title. It's about fifteen thousand words shorter. Van Vogt went through this ninety thousand word novel and cut out about every third sentence, and then added various scenes here and there, all with the purpose of explaining certain mysteries and contradictions in the story which had confused so many readers of its magazine form. The chief result was a negative one. To anyone who had read the story previously with care, it now appeared butchered. Then, too, the basic lack of plausible motivation in this otherwise interesting novel was somewhat obscured in the book by the vast invisible areas in the story: the very lack of explanations gave a quasi-plausibility to everything. The explanations undid this.

A noticeable habit of van Vogt's, in revising a story, is to dilute the strength or extremity of original statements and ideas; further explanations and justifications are sometimes added. These modifications detract from his story, just as his ability to modify so drastically shows what little real power his story as a whole holds over his imagination; one suspects that it couldn't have sprung from too deep a feeling. The most interesting example (of dilution) which comes to mind is the case of the ending of 'The Seesaw'. Van Vogt presupposes as the story's premise that forces are opposite and equal in time as well

as space. In the far future, a great building, a Weapons Shop, has been dislocated from its true time-position; to get back into it, it needs a long lever with a balance as the other end. The balance turns out to be a reporter from the twentieth century, McAllister. He is on one end of a seesaw of time, the Weapons Shop on the other - so that as it works back into correct time-position, by swinging back and forth in smaller and smaller arcs, the unfortunate McAllister on the other end of the seesaw is swinging back and forth in arcs of greater and greater dimension, his dangerous time-energy-mass increasing. Finally, he sees where this is going to end: 'He would not witness but he would cause the formation of the planets.' When the story was incorporated into 'The Weapon Shops of Isher', this was changed to-- 'He would not witness but he would aid in the formation of the planets.'

## B

In the foregoing section we have discussed the more obvious aspects of van Vogt's writing. To a great extent, they are the characteristics which have been pointed out by nearly every observant person who has written or spoken about him at length. Now, we can forget about them and turn our attention to other matters.

In writing the present essay, I have the following problem: My observations about van Vogt divide themselves into what are, more or less, two general sections, each of which, ideally, should serve as a background for the other. However, as they cannot be printed simultaneously (running alongside one another like marginal comments upon each other) I have to decide which to present first. These two sections are, first, a description of his ideas and work in terms of a method invented by Kenneth Burke and, second, an investigation into his character as a person based upon that evidence afforded by his writings as well as first-hand experience. I have determined to present them in the order mentioned. The 'investigations into his character' is the longer one, and practical considerations suggest that it should be published separately. Then, too, for dramatic reasons, it should serve as the conclusion for our study.

Burke's pentad is one of those remarkably simple devices which serve as a key to a complex world. The pentad is a method of grammatically classifying and examining men's statements concerning the nature of things, whether those statements are part of a formal philosophy or merely expressions of an unsystematized attitude towards the world. It is explained and used by Kenneth Burke in his book, 'A Grammar of Motives'.

Most complete statements of an occurrence contain five descriptive components: Where it happened; what happened; who caused it to happen, or who it happened to; how it happened; and why. In short, the five questions every school child is taught to ask himself when he writes a composition: Where, what, who, how, and why. And they are what are generally stated by any person who describes an event in detail, whether he is a Marxist or a Roman Catholic, a student of Goethe or a country store philosopher. To state the five terms another way, they are - Scene (where), Act (what), Agent (who), Agency (how), and Purpose (why). That is Burke's pentad: Scene, Act, Agent, Agency and Purpose; these five words are the only technical terms you have to remember in this discussion.

What Burke points out is that different men emphasize different members of this pentad. One man might consider the Scene of an occurrence very important - that is, the environment, situation, or context in which the Act took place. But another might tend to ignore Scene and emphasize the Agent involved. He further pointed out that people in their analysis of events usually state or imply a special re-



relationship between one of these aspects and another. For example, in describing the event one person might feel that the Act was in accordance with the nature of the Agent. Another person might automatically assume a connection between the Agent and the Purpose. Still another might act as if the Act reflected the nature of the Scene. What makes this observation significant is that a given person generally tends to consistently make such an emphasis, or assume such a connection. This consistency gives us a basis for studying the origin and by-products of the attitude, and to make predictions about future actions and reactions.

A person who always considered the Scene in accordance with the Act might be termed a Scene-Act thinker (placing the terms in the order in which they occurred in the original stating of the pentad) and a person who assumed a connection between the Act and the Agent might be said to show an Act-Agent attitude. I repeat that though all people 'know' that all events contain these five components, they usually ignore all but one or two; and this one or two which they emphasize form their basic attitudes toward the world, the foundation of their philosophy. If we use all the possible combinations of the five terms, we find that there are ten such 'basic attitudes'.

Two things should be noted about these systems. First, the hyphen which wordlessly expresses the ambiguous relationship between Act and Agent (Act-Agent) or Agent and Purpose (Agent-Purpose) can generally be interpreted as an expression of motivation. That is, the Scene-Agent thinker (the Marxist, for example) thinks of the Agent (person, object, and so on) not merely as being in accordance with the Scene (environment, situation) but as being motivated by it. Second, these correspondences should be noted between the separate terms of the pentad and various general philosophies: Where we find Scene stressed, there we find materialism; where we find Act, there we find realism; where we find Agent, there we find idealism; Agency, pragmatism; Purpose, mysticism. And the combination of the terms can often be said to hold true - Scene-Agent thinking being materialistic-idealism or, if you prefer, idealistic-materialism.

A. E. van Vogt is an Agent-Agency thinker.

We find such a rich abundance of material with which to demonstrate this conclusion that it's difficult to know just where to begin. I suggest that we commence by examining the term, Agency. I have found some sixteen synonyms for it - the most common ones being such words as instrument, medium, technique, and the most unlikely ones being such terms as catalyst, organ, and weapon. An Agency is a thing, act, or event whose purpose it is to accomplish an end. A machine is an agency: Even when we're interested in it as an object, we realize that its value lies not in itself but in something it's designed to do. And if we look at something but have a strong consciousness that it is a means to something beyond itself, we are thinking of that thing as an Agency. And if one is so inclined, he may see anything as having no basic value in itself, but only in its relationship to something else. That is the nature of Agency thinking in general, and Agent-Agency thinking in particular. Here, we shall use the two terms interchangeably.

In 'Grammar of Motives' (page 287), Burke writes:

'Once Agency has been brought to the fore, the other terms readily accommodate themselves to its rule. Scenic materials become means which the organism employs in the process of growth and adaptation. The organism itself is a confluence of means, each part being at the service of the other parts. Reason becomes a means of adjustment. Empiricism can conform to the genius of Agency, in that the senses play a mediatory role

as we likewise come upon the mediatory in reducing everything to relations...'

As we shall see, these words are a remarkable description of van Vogt's intellect.

Most of van Vogt's scientific ideas in his stories are systems: Nexialism ('M33 in Andromeda', 'Voyage of the Space Beagle'), Psycho-medicine ('The Rulers'), No-manism ('The Weapon Makers'), and so on; they are the fictional counterparts and extensions of some of his real-life interests which have also been embodied in his stories - general semantics ('World of A', 'The Players of A'), the Bates eye training methods ('The Chroniclers', 'The Players of A'), and so on. All of these systems are either techniques for developing the potentialities of the human organism or intellect or come under the more general heading of agencies for adjustment and survival.

His more specifically described inventions and theories in his fiction are also cast in the Agency mold. In 'The Chronicler', we find an example. Slade, our protagonist, is flying through the sky by use of a mysteriously simple mechanism, a metal bar with handles:

'Strong as metal, the flying device rode above him. But it was only a catalytic agent, affecting his body, not transporting it. His body flew with the machine, was of the machine...'

Passing over whatever suggestions of a psychoanalytic cast the combined elements of rod, flying, et cetera, bring to mind, we see that the description is like a transportation metaphor upon Agent-Agency thinking, itself. We might consider it evidence of a connection van Vogt makes between mechanisms, both material and insubstantial, and those that use them. Bear in mind the word 'catalytic' used in the quotation; it's an important key to the understanding of this particular novel.

We find another interesting passage in the same story, this time an example of a theory:

' "...Light! The people of the two-eyed world must have a definition of light as something materialistic, something eternal.'

'She stared at him so demandingly that Slade nodded and gave the wave and corpuscular theories of light.

' "Light," said Lear triumphantly, "is a perception of the reactor, not an activity of actor. Out there in space is a great body we know as the sun. We and every object in this room, whether organic or inorganic, are aware of the presence of that sun. We all react to its presence, just as it reacts to ours. But it sends us no heat, no light, nothing. The awareness is inside ourselves, inside the molecules of this table and that chair. To us, that awareness manifests as a perception which we call light." '

Here, we recognize the Agency attitude through a subtle factor: the 'great body' can effect its result only because of an activity, a purpose, in that which is affected. In a sense, a catalytic agent. This is opposite to the attitude of the Scene-Agent thinker who would see the light coming from the outside to the passive object.

Van Vogt has another theory to offer about suns in his story, 'Far Centaurus':

' "How are planets formed?"'

' "A sun must balance itself in the space that it is in. It throws out matter as a sea vessel does anchors... Without such a balance, the sun would fall out of this space." '

Once again, Agency is clearly implied: The Act is seen, but its Purpose is stamped upon the very terms in which it is seen.

Van Vogt's interest in the Bates' eye-training methods has been mentioned. But his attitude towards eyes, which is representative of his feelings towards all body organs, is demonstrated much earlier in his fiction than the appearance of 'The Chronicler' and 'The Players of

**A**. In 'The Storm', in an opening scene, our hero is examining from the ground a giant spaceship hovering over the city. Van Vogt writes, 'He unfocussed his eyes from the spaceship and looked away,' which strikes us as an excessively deliberate description of what is usually a natural, unconscious act. In 'Child of the Gods', we receive the impression again in even more definite terms:

'The Lord Leader.....was gazing out over the city. It was a misty day, and his left eye no longer had normal vision, so the haze of distance and the blur in one of his vision centers hid the further suburbs.'

This description seems to be ego-alien, as if his sight were in some way partly divorced from him; if this is so, then mechanistic terminology is appropriate as it's easy to speak in mechanical terms of those things we wish to dissociate from ourselves - as witness the folk-words for the sex organs, which speak of them as tools. Though van Vogt's stories are usually narrated in the third person, they are subjective in the sense that events are depicted very closely as they are seen and experienced by the protagonist; that is, we're on the inside looking out. Usually. Occasionally, we are startled by an external view of the hero, occurring in connection with the words 'his body'. As, for example, in 'The Players of A':

'...Gosseyne wandered disconsolately along the brightly lighted corridors of the underground city. The vastness of what had once been the secret base in the solar system of the Greatest Empire swallowed his body.'

This sudden impersonal view is illustrative on a larger scale of his objective attitude towards body parts.

Van Vogt treats the human body as an aggregate of organic mechanisms, all composing one larger mechanism, which is the body, itself. In 1948, he gave a series of lectures at the Institute of Religious Science in West Los Angeles. He was not sponsored by the Institute, incidentally, merely using their hall. His subject was (naturally) techniques. The techniques of driving a tank, learning to play the piano, improving your voice, hypnotize, learn a foreign language, see better without glasses, survive in this uncertain world, and so on. He began by giving an analogy which demonstrated his attitude towards the senses. He said, 'Imagine a man sitting alone in a darkened room. Before him are two translucent windows, out of which he can dimly see. On either side, are openings which conduct sounds to him... He extended this, but the metaphor is clear, as well as his sense of being in long-distance communication with the world. ('mediatory role of the senses') He also spoke about eating. It would be surprising if van Vogt didn't have the Agency attitude towards food - 'nutrition' - and he fails to surprise us in this instance. He advised Yami Yogurt. He didn't emphasize this much because, he said, he was afraid of being taken for a faddist.

Van Vogt is well known as a writer of 'superman' stories. The typical van Vogt-'superman' is an ordinary van Vogt-type of person, who has a single extraordinary ability. The ability to read minds ('Slam'), regenerate lost limbs and rejuvenate his body ('toti-potentialism', 'The Changeling'), win at gambling ('callidity', 'The Weapon Shops of Isher'), control other people by seizing their minds ('The Storm'), and teleport himself and objects over a distance (as in several stories). The one major exception to this is Clane Linn, a mutant, the nature of whose mutancy is never clearly defined. He seems merely to be deformed slightly, as was his real life counterpart, Claudius Caesar. Often, the ability is acquired by training of some sort. As the protagonist's psycho-medicine in 'The Rulers', a system by which he can read minute changes in attitude in another person by involuntary physical and facial changes.

These may seem merely to be simple paranoid fantasies, but on examining them we see that they have rigid formal characteristics pertinent to our examination of them in Grammatical terms. For example, in 'World of  $\bar{A}$ ', our protagonist has the ability to transport himself or any object seemingly instantaneously over great distances. At first glance, the Agency aspect of this might not seem apparent (perhaps one might think that the Act of teleportation was merely in accordance with the nature of the Super-Agent), but at the beginning of 'The Players of  $\bar{A}$ ' the Agency attitude is made definitely explicit: We discover that Gosseyn's head is one sixth larger than the average head because of the presence of 'the extra brain' which makes the teleportation possible. This actual physical attribute shows the organic-mechanical regard with which van Vogt invests the ability.

Teleportation is a favorite theme of van Vogt's. It has appeared in such important stories of his as 'World of  $\bar{A}$ ' and its sequel; in 'Wizard of Linn', 'The Purpose', 'The Monster', and in several lesser stories as personal abilities of the characters; as accomplished by mechanical aids, it has appeared in still other stories. He is fascinated by the thought of being able to pass through walls and effortlessly dispose of other restrictions and being able to control 'energy flows'. (What, I wonder, do the two story errors mentioned previously--the wearing and not-wearing of the atmospheric suit, the being and not-being bound--mean in the light of this?) The only suggestion I can see at the moment for the appeal of these things to van Vogt is that it grows out of his complete lack of interest in Scene, perhaps we should say, his annoyance with and attempted subjugation of Scene.

Scene never plays an important part in his stories, except that it provides the inescapable stage for action. Sometimes, the scene of a van Vogt story may be used as a limiting factor in its action (as in 'The Rull', which takes place on a flat-topped mountain on which a man and a deadly enemy, a rull, are trapped), but usually it merely provides erratic bursts of background color, dissociated more or less from the story line. He does have a fondness for cities ('--big city life, so essential to the well-being of intellectual man...', chapter six, magazine version, 'World of  $\bar{A}$ ') and those stories of his which take place in cities seldom give us a sense of background dullness, unlike those which take place in a rural or semi-rural setting, as in 'The House That Stood Still'.

We find an interesting clue to van Vogt's attitude towards Scene in 'World of  $\bar{A}$ '. In the magazine version, chapter nine, he describes Gilbert Gosseyn's excursion into the roots of the giant tree on Venus which contains Eldred Crang's home: 'There was a drabness about his surroundings that permitted thought.' In 'The World of  $\bar{A}$ ', chapter eleven, book version, this appears as: 'There was a drabness about his surroundings that dulled thought.' I suspect that van Vogt made this slight change in order to avoid what might seem to be a contradiction in his development of Gosseyn's attitude. For, gradually, Gosseyn awakens to the wonder of these gigantic and incredibly extensive roots. And this awakening certainly has more point if he had previously found his surroundings dull, than if he had already been wondering and speculating. It is his ability to make such a change in Gosseyn's reaction to the setting, as well as his having permitted the situation to happen in the first place, which demonstrates his casual attitude towards Scene.

Leeear's explanation of light, quoted previously from 'The Chronicler', shows not merely a casual regard for Scene, but a partial subjugation of it. 'Scenic materials become means which the organism employs in the process of growth and adaptation,' said Burke of the Agency attitude. Van Vogt's story, 'This Joe', is based on the supposition that Andean Indians might be able to survive in the rarified atmosphere of Mars. Our protagonist-narrator has a plan by which the descendants

of himself and some friends can live on Mars. He is currently living at an 8000 foot elevation in Colorado; his community and himself are going to build a village for their children at a 15,000 foot elevation, and their children will be able to live on Mars. In other words, van Vogt believes that the acquired trait of becoming accustomed to a rarified atmosphere can be genetically passed on to one's children so that that atmospheric pressure is normal to them and they, in turn, can accustom themselves to an even rarer atmosphere, which trait will be passed on to their children. At first, this seems to be a Scene-Agent idea (as is Russia's Lysenkoist-revision of genetics), but I think it's more probable that van Vogt's feeling is that the organism uses the environment to change itself - just as the physical cultist uses mechanical apparatus to improve his muscles.

We see something of the same thing in 'The Enchanted Village': The lone survivor of a spaceship wreck on Mars stumbles across a deserted Martian village which has all the comforts of life - for Martians, that is, though none now exist. This village is a single, gigantic maternal organism looking for a chick. His problem is to make it adapt itself to his needs, by his mere physical presence ('the catalytic agent', again). The adjustment is made - but it's not the village which changes, it's the man; he becomes a contented, crocodilian Martian, thinking that the village has adapted itself to him. This is a concept which would disturb the soul of a biologist.

Those systems to which van Vogt has subscribed are such seemingly disparate ones as Spengler's historical philosophy, Bates' eye-training methods, Korzybski's general semantics, and Hubbard's dianetics. They are united, of course, by his Agency approach to all things.

Let us consider general semantics. The Agency attitude stresses use, and the Agency aspect of language lies in its social role of communication and in its personal role of evaluation. This is the emphasis in general semantics. Korzybski's intent was to set forth a body of techniques, a formalization of the scientific method, which would enable a person to better adjust to the world about him. Therefore, he seems to have thought, language had to be the object of his attention as it was the primary medium of 'thought'. His favorite analogy ('the representative anecdote', Burke would call it) was the map-territory relationship. He compared language to a map, the physical world to the territory depicted by the map. General semantics was supposed to be a method of preventing oneself from confusing the map with the territory, a habit which he believed to be the source of most, if not all, social and personal ills. He tried to accomplish this by promoting 'consciousness of abstracting' through the use of 'semantic devices'. (And in general semantics everything is 'reduced' to relations - a popular quotation being C. J. Keyser's 'To be is to be related'.) This was set forth at great length in an incredible book, 'Science and Sanity'.

In a talk before the Pasadena Chapter of the General Semantics Society, June 25, 1948, van Vogt said:

'... "Science and Sanity... was a milestone in my life. It made an intellectual conquest and has remained with me ever since. My doubts were intellectually resolved; it did away with the conflict between positivism and uncertainty within me...

'...I read "Science and Sanity" early in the 1940s. It was quite a while later that I tried to solve the problem (of bringing general semantics to wider attention) by writing "World of A". The story illustrated basic premises of general semantics, but I coined my own phrases in the story. I didn't want to give the reader the impression I was propagandizing so I refrained from mentioning "Science and Sanity". There was a boom in the sales of "Science and Sanity" during the months of August, September, and October (1945, when "World of A" was running as

a serial in Astounding), however.

'But it, too, I found was not the answer. Such an undertaking was too intricate.'

'World of A' did bring general semantics to a wider audience, but the reception wasn't always favorable, though the novel was enthusiastically received by some readers. One of the more interesting controversies about the novel was published in 'Shangri-La' #13, a debate between Jack Catherin, A. E. van Vogt, and Bryce Walton. Catherin and a friend, Jacques Fresco, had appeared at two meetings of the Los Angeles Science Fantasy Society, enthusiastically expounding what seemed to be a variation on technocracy, with dialectic materialist overtones. Catherin's review of the book was entitled 'Semantics and "The World of A"'. We easily discover that he is a Scene-Agency thinker:

'...All this ('The World of A') is a negation of what is well known today regarding the conditioning of the human mechanism. Man is a product of his environment. Change the environment and you change man... Today we live in a dark dismal jungle. We must behave in accordance with the laws of this jungle in order to survive.'

He finds in 'The World of A':

'---the same old environment, surrounded by the same unsane people, who are impelled by the same dreary motives of want and insecurity, and as part of this mess, we find the same tawdry spirit of competition, as exemplified in the "Games"...

Van Vogt answers from the Agent-Agency viewpoint, his opening gambit being:

'I noticed immediately that he (Catherin) had merely used (his review) as a medium for giving further expression to ideas of his own...'

Van Vogt continues:

'He is against all this nonsense of people going in a hundred and forty million directions. What we want - if Mr. Catherin's ideal is to be realized - is a means of hitching them together so that they all move in the same direction. Because this has not happened by 2650 A.D. in "The World of A", he dismissed the era as merely an extension of 1949 A.D. The same beasts were operating in a slightly different environment.

'Actually, the crux of Mr. Catherin's system is his belief that there is but one basis cause for all our problems, and therefore one solution to it...'

What van Vogt fails to realize is that to Catherin they are all hitched together by the environment which has created them and which, in turn, they create. If this environment is bad, it is impossible for one individual with insight into the situation to do much about it, as an individual. The best he can do is bring his information to as many people as possible, making it a common factor in their situations, so that a mass movement can change the environment. All this is a formal elaboration on an unconscious and very potent feeling that our internal selves are but reflections of the external world.

To van Vogt, however, every individual is unique; each has his own techniques for dealing with reality. The problem, as he sees it, is that the overwhelming majority of people do not understand the arbitrary nature of their methods and believe that their ideas are absolute. The only criterion for accepting ideas lies in their ability to promote adjustment and survival. We see part of this attitude in some of his remarks in his contribution to the previously-mentioned science-fiction writers' symposium, 'Of Worlds Beyond':

'Hundreds of thousands of stories have been written by people who knew nothing about technique, but did have a good "ear". Many thousands more will be written in the same way by talented

people. There is one major fault with this method by itself, without any accompanying knowledge of technique. It is not consistent in its results. People who write by "ear" sell spasmodically.

'This is not to say that a writer who knows his technique does not have failures, but my own development is evidence, to me at least, that a knowledge of craftsmanship is a prerequisite to consistent sales. At the beginning, when I knew very little about technique, my sales were few and far between. Now, it is the other way round.'

(Note that he even refers to a lack of method as a method.)

Van Vogt continues in his reply to Catherin:

'...Let us in one paragraph - a woefully, limited space - examine just why things may go wrong in any Utopia. We start with baby, who has no convictions. He is easily frustrated by busy parents. The growing child suffers a thousand shocks of which his parents are not aware. There is next, the situation with other boys and girls, and with adults. And above all there is the fact that a young person's cortex is not physically fully grown. He is incapable of understanding emotionally what is happening to him. Unsatisfactory patterns are established. And this is just the beginning. Without proper training, even the fully grown cortex becomes easily "tangled". It is hard to believe that two billion parents will successfully prevent such development towards neurosis until General Semantics has been spread to the furthest possible degree.'

He is affirming here his belief that our conflicts have an individual genesis and development. His ideas are socially-oriented, only in a very narrow sense of that phrase. The use of the word 'training' shows his Agency attitude clearly, just as does his interest in the ideas of 'nervous system', 'cortex', and 'thalamus'. The Agency tendency is to particularize (just as the Scene tendency is to generalize) and the Agency thinker in considering human personality emphasizes psychic and physiological mechanisms. In general semantics, the 'nervous system' and the 'cortex' ('discriminatory apparatus'), and the 'thalamus' ('center of affective reactivity to stimuli') are stressed. Read for 'cortical', intellectual, for 'thalamic', emotional.

But these neurological theories, if they can be called such, have little correspondence to neurological facts. I was informed of this at some length a few years back, and though, at that time, I was reluctant to believe that Korzybski could have made such a basic mistake, I had no choice but to accept the facts - that the cortex is as fully developed as the rest of the nervous system throughout our growth, that it's not the intellectual center, that the thalamus isn't the source of emotional reaction. More recently, Russel Meyers, M.D., gave a talk before the Third American Congress on General Semantics at Denver, Colorado, July 23, 1949, in which he exploded the belief. I was present at a meeting of the Los Angeles Chapter of the Society for General Semantics shortly after this, when a wire-recording of Meyers' talk was played. The reaction was one of shock. After it was over, the Chapter President rose to his feet and made a remarkably fatuous statement: 'One of the Pillars of General Semantics has been destroyed', he said, 'but the structure is still standing.' The Meyers talk was subsequently published in 'ETC.: A Review of General Semantics' for Winter, 1950, under the title of 'The Fiction of the Thalamus as the Neural Center of Emotions.'

Speaking from the Grammatical standpoint being considered in this section, we find in dianetics most of those same characteristics which enabled van Vogt to accept general semantics. Dianetics offers an even more detailed mechanization of the human being. In it, we find

ourselves composed of 'monitor cells', 'engram banks', 'demon circuits', and so on. The dianetic method, itself, is cast in as mechanical a procedure as possible, with mechanistic terms being used to describe it - 'auditing', 'processing', 'reducing engrams', et cetera. The representative analogy of dianetics is what it discerns as a similarity between 'thinking machines' and human beings.

These ideas reflected van Vogt's feelings about himself and others. The robots appearing in such stories of his as 'Asylum' and 'World of A' are notable for the difference between them and the general science fictional depiction of robots. Instead of being humanoid, they were shaped like radios, planes, and buildings; they spoke with no 'mechanical stiffness', but as freely and spontaneously as van Vogt does. There is a good reason for this. Van Vogt doesn't have to create machines in the shape of men, because he sees men in the shape of machines. Computo, ergo sum: I compute, therefore I am. This is his inner proof of his own existence.

Thinking back over those instances in which I recall van Vogt offering a psychological explanation for a certain behaviour on the part of someone, I note that he always stressed compensatory and justificatory mechanisms. Examples are - his analysis of Evelyn Waugh's 'bitterness' offered in a talk given before the Los Angeles Chapter of the General Semantics Society (that Waugh was attempting to resolve the conflict between his reason and his Catholicism by satirically destroying everything but Catholicism, thus making it important in comparison with the debris); his description of why a character in 'Film Library' always thought of himself as 'Mister' (in compensation for a psychic disaster he had suffered when he entered into a neurotic relationship with a woman); and Gosseyne-Ashargin's lengthier analysis of what holds power groups together in 'The Players of A'.

Psychology is an invention of the Act-Agent thinker; it had to be brought to the attentions of the Scene, Agency, and Purpose thinkers (whereupon, they immediately began revising it to conform with their own outlooks).

A word of explanation: I have mentioned Scene and Scene-Agent viewpoints quite a few times. I did this because the Scene aspect differs more radically from Agency than does Agent - at least, it's easier to show how it differs radically - and so the contrast helps us to understand the Agency viewpoint (even while there are interesting similarities between the two). I would like to show briefly another contrast between Agency and Scene, pertinent to our subject: Another writer who has written at length about robots and thinking mechanisms is Isaac Asimov. Asimov is a Scene emphasize, and so his handling of a subject is interestingly different from van Vogt's. As a good example, take the terminating story in Asimov's robotic series in 'Astounding', 'The Evitable Conflict'. The situation in the story is that certain great computing machines, very much like van Vogt's The Machine in 'World of A', are subtly dominating mankind - 'having, as they do, that greatest of weapons at their disposal, the absolute control of our economy'. The machines never appear in the story, and for good reason, as Asimov never presents them as individuals or Agents, but rather as an aspect of the Scene in total. The story is divided into five sections, each detailing a scene (in the play sense) which takes place in a different scene, in the geographical sense. As Asimov switches from one setting to another, the atmosphere changes, in accordance with Scene-Agent logic which demands that a change in scene be accompanied by a change in feeling (though, here, it is modified by the fact that even if each scene takes place in a different section of the Earth, they are confined to offices and sitting rooms). The conclusion which the story reaches is that nothing can be done about the situation. And, logically, it is not necessary to do anything:



"But you are telling me...that Mankind has lost its own say in its future."

"It never had any, really. It was always at the mercy of economic and sociological forces it did not understand - at the whims of climate and the fortunes of war."

A rationalization in Scene terms. But, Asimov doesn't feel this way about the situation and he lets us know this by atmospheric effects embodied in the background (again, response evoked through Scene), such as:

'And the fire behind the quartz went out and only a curl of smoke was left to indicate its place.'

Asimov's characters are motivated by Scene-Agent relations; their actions grow out of their surroundings and their positions; their feelings are reflections of the external world they see about them.

Similarly, we find that van Vogt's characters are motivated by the Agent-Agency relationship; or, rather, we can see their motivation in those terms.

In the 'In Times To Come' department in Astounding proceeding the publication of 'The Players of A', Campbell says of that story:

'And Gosseyn, more than any other, found that some still unknown force was manipulating him - and, apparently, manipulating even the forces of Galactic politics. The Chess Player remained unknown--'

'The Players of A' deals with that - with the forces that were making the whole immense powers of the Galactic culture dance to their tune. And with Gosseyn, who was the instrument on which that tune was played.'

As good a description as any. In many van Vogt stories, the protagonists are the unwilling or unwitting pawns of other or of unknown forces. They are instruments, until a certain point in the story is reached and they transcend their roles as Agencies and become Agents in their own right. In 'World of A', this point occurs at the beginning of the third installment (chapter twenty-three in the book) immediately following the destruction of The Games Machine. We see at least one reason for this change at this point: Previously, Gosseyn had been manipulated by two opposed forces. The first was a negative one - the Hardy-Thorson gang, who were trying to take over Earth. The second was a positive one - The Machine, working for the cause of sanity. It was the positive force in the conflict and its destruction meant that this had to be presented through a different medium; in short, Gosseyn himself. And, conversely, it might be felt that for Gosseyn to graduate, it would be necessary to remove the Machine's influence over him. Now, it so happens that after this Gosseyn is still moved about by various forces in the remaining third of the story, but in a different way than previously. He is moved literally by inanimate objects such as the Distorter, which quite accidentally transports him to the Galactic base underlying Crang's home on Venus. He is also accidentally caught in a trap not necessarily intended for him - these are devices van Vogt finds necessary to use to keep the story going. Deux Ex Machina. And when Gosseyn is forced to do something, van Vogt, for reasons ostensibly embodied in the story, makes it a point to show that he is going willingly. (See chapter twenty, magazine version.) In this section of the story, the writing, atmosphere, is different than in the previous parts: It is firmer, more decisive, active.

As has been pointed out before, the key word in 'The Chronicler' is 'catalytic agent'. Not only do the inventions and scientific theories presented in the story follow this pattern, but the story line itself does. Our hero precipitates himself into another world (another plane) by a change in his visual-attitude towards the world outside him; this change in attitude causes a, to him, physical change in the world about him. He is being controlled by an unknown person, though he is una-

ware of this; his very presence is intended as a factor to bring certain changes into effect in a certain dramatic situation described in the story, even though he is not supposed to take any action as such. And his presence, in the climactic tower scene, is supposed to be the factor which will destroy the antagonist.

In this story, Slade, our hero, has three eyes; he acquired the third eye because of a mutation artificially introduced into him by Leear, the immortal woman of the other plane, who has controlled him since birth so that his destiny will be to fulfill those very functions which he does fulfill in the story. This idea, of complete control, fascinates van Vogt. In weaving his 'Black Destroyer' series into the novel 'Voyage of the Space Beagle', he made a significant change in the history of Couerl, the great black cat-thing which is the hero-villain of what was the first novelette. In the novelette version, Couerl had been the survivor of a grim and proud race; in the novel, he is revealed as an accidentally-surviving product of a biological laboratory ('an organic robot') once present on the now-desolate planet on which they find him. Eph Koenigsberg has criticised this with evident feeling, stating that it detracted considerably from Couerl's dramatic stature. And something which van Vogt himself has pointed out is even more interesting: That it was John W. Campbell's idea to have the Slans be natural mutations. In his own original version of the story, they had been deliberately created by the biological experimenter, S. Lann.

We are approaching the conclusion of our study of van Vogt's ideas in terms of Burke's Grammar. A couple of questions remain to us, however, though perhaps both are one. The reader may have been bothered by the distinction between Agency-thinking and Purpose-thinking. (All our five terms are ambiguous to a certain extent, of course, but in this case anyway, it is not a failing, but rather a resource.) In Purpose-thinking, the emphasis is on the end, not the means; the opposite is true of Agency-thinking. But the ends imply means and means, ends; this is their similarity.

Van Vogt thinks in mechanical terms. He uses ideas and opinions, materials and feelings and beings, as though they were means to ends. He has taken the machine as the model of logic; of scientific logic (for the machine was produced by science) which does not recognize mysticism. The formal use of laboratory instruments as analogies upon which to base a philosophy was advanced enthusiastically by the physicist, P. W. Bridgeman. He called it 'Operationalism', its purpose being the elimination of purpose from our semantic attitudes. But Burke points out:

'Though our laboratory instruments may transcend purpose, they exist only as a result of human purpose. And we might even say that they can perform satisfactorily without purpose only because they have purpose imbedded in their structure and design. An instrument like a thermometer has its purpose so thoroughly built into its very nature, that it can do its work without purpose, merely by continuing to be itself.'

'Operationalism' is part of what might be called the general semantic constellation of attitudes. The above quotation is from page 281. On page 283, he writes:

'Instruments are "essentially" human, since they are the products of human design. And in this respect, the...featuring of agency seems well equipped to retain a personal ingredient in its circumstances of motives.'

And on page 289:

'All told, of the five terms, Purpose has become the one most susceptible of dissolution.. But once we know the logic of its transformations, we can discern its implicit survival...

'(Purpose) is ... implicit in Agency, since tools and methods are for a purpose - and one of the great reasons for the appeal of pragmatism today, when the materialist-behaviourist reduction of scene has eliminated purpose, may reside in the fact that it retains ingredients of purpose in the very Grammatical function that is so often taken as a substitute for it. (It is a substitute; but we are suggesting that part of its capacity for such work resides in the implicit retention of what it is often said explicitly to reject.)'

Van Vogt's Agency-thinking is, as we have implied, essentially pragmatistic in its nature. Agency is Pragmatism. (General semantics, incidentally, might be called 'pragmatistic nominalism'.)

I believe that in the above suggestion by Burke, we can perceive the Grammatical history of van Vogt. The history of a mystic who has made a compromise with reality. I suspect that in van Vogt's formative years, he was a Purpose-thinker, but after experiencing various intellectual traumae, in a conflict with the external world, his viewpoint became modified in this respect: Act-thinking is realism, for an act is real by its very nature, and the process of acting is a process of making real, if it's only on a kinaesthetic level. It affects, in however limited a fashion, the world. (And Agency is acting with the Act having a Purpose beyond itself: thus Purpose is retained implicitly, perhaps unconsciously.) One often receives the impression when van Vogt speaks admiringly or disapprovingly of someone's attitude, of their cynicism or optimism, of their anger or uncertainty, that what he is admiring or disapproving of is the potential results of that attitude, both for the person who bears it and for others. When you assume an attitude or make a statement for the effect it will have, either immediately or eventually, you are using expression and expressions as agencies. In this way, one could accept the non-absoluteness of morality, for instance, as a general semanticist must, and yet feel that it had a basis in reality; for by acting in a moral fashion, one influences others, and they, in turn, still others, so that a chain reaction of good-effects is created. This, I think, is the cornerstone of van Vogt's conscious morality.

Van Vogt's thinking was profoundly influenced by Oswald Spengler's magnificent but suspect work, 'The Decline of the West.' As the reader is probably aware, Spengler divides the history of a 'world' (used in the sense of 'the Western world' or 'the Classical world') into two parts: Its 'culture' phase and its 'civilization' phase. In the first, idealism and morality are the keynote of the period; in the second, there is emptiness of soul, cynicism, and guilt, and the search for power. In the first, myth and religion dominate the intellect - the arts flourish and men feel whole; in the second, there is a merciless questioning of everything previously held sacred - and science is the intellectual power of the time. Spengler says, page 38:

'He who does not understand that this outcome is obligatory and insusceptible of modification, that our choice is between willing this and willing; nothing at all, between cleaving to this destiny or despairing of the future and of life itself; he who cannot feel that there is grandeur also in the realizations of powerful intelligences, in the energy and discipline of metal hard nature, in battles fought with the coldest and most abstract means; he who is obsessed with the idealism of a provincial and would pursue the ways of life of past ages - must forego all desire to comprehend history, to live through history or to make history.'

At his talk before the Pasadena Chapter of the Society for General Semantics, 1948, van Vogt said:

'When the great cultures commenced their disintegration, when the great crises of history appeared, people like you and

me...retired to their walled-in gardens and their books of poetry. They felt there was nothing they could do. And to a certain extent they were right...for they had no method...'

Here we see the pattern: The sensitive soul living in a dynamic, changing world which threatens him from without, can survive through the use of techniques and methods which enable him to 'dominate his environment'. Purpose becomes Agency. The inwardly-mystic becomes the outwardly-realistic.

At this point, I'd like to bring one fact to the reader's attention: If my thesis about van Vogt's Agency-thinking is to have any meaning, any pertinence whatsoever, the reader must accept my belief that his basic impulse is towards honesty and sincerity. The fraud, the psychopath - whose relations with others are somewhat impaired by his complete lack of genuine feeling - has value judgments which are not disturbed by abstract conceptions of honesty, sincerity, or truth. He has but one goal, though many a goal: Self-promotion - money (for which read 'power') and position (for which read 'relative security from the attacks of others'). Every thought, act, and statement is a means to that end. He manipulates money, words, and people in order to obtain it - and so, in that sense, he treats everything as if it were an agency, (I did have in mind an example of such a person, but whoever it was has slipped my memory, on advice of counsel.) It is my thesis that van Vogt's Agency-thinking grows out of a more complex psychic phenomenon than that: It represents an attempt to resolve an emotional dilemma, involving on the one hand an idealist morality and, on the other, an urgently-felt need to meet the dangers threatening him from the 'external world'.

I don't think it would be books of poetry van Vogt would retire to, incidentally. Rather it would be the great books of the religions...the Bibles, Talmuds, Korans, and Baghavad Gitas; however, his consciously anti-religious attitudes do not suggest this possibility to him. But I suspect that five hundred years ago, half of that, maybe less, van Vogt would have worn the robes of a priest. Today, he feels comfortable only in the white smock of the scientist, the nearest he can get to those robes and still preserve both his respect for his intellect and the requirements of his essentially mystical nature. Not 'God as All', but 'God as Machine'.

#### ADDENDA

The quotations from van Vogt's speech before the Pasadena Chapter of the Society for General Semantics, June 25, 1948, are taken from a written report of the speech appearing in 'Shangri-La' numbers 8 and 9. Van Vogt made his talk without preparation; the article was composed of notes taken by Kenneth Bonnell and Leland Sapiro, and edited by myself. The title of Mr. van Vogt's answer to Jack Catherin in 'Shangri-La' number 13 was 'A Review of a Review'. Bryce Walton's contribution was entitled 'And This Goes On--'; his remarks were made from an Act-Agent standpoint, and he was arguing against both the previous writers. I embarrassedly omit any reference to a fourth, belated contribution to the debate. Mr. Kenneth Burke's book, 'A Grammar of Motives', is the first of a trilogy being published by Prentice-Hall; it was published in 1945. 'A Rhetoric of Motives', the second book, was published in 1950. The third, 'A Symbolic of Motives', is yet to be published.

About Spengler - van Vogt's attitude towards Spengler has been modified, I suspect, by Korzybski's remarks about him in 'Science and Sanity', page 49: 'From this point of view, his achievement is momentous, a great description of the childhood of humanity... "The Decline of the West" implies the birth of a new era, perhaps the adulthood of

humanity...' A null-A adulthood, of course. Evidence that van Vogt's regard for Spengler has become qualified since his early years of science-fiction writing seems to lie in his remarks on cyclic history, page 136 of 'The Voyage of the Space Beagle'.

IN THE NEXT ISSUE Arthur Cox continues, in a more informal fashion, his study of A. E. van Vogt. He describes the writer's experiments with hypnosis, he co-founding of a 'church', and his association with L. Ron Hubbard and dianetics. And he attempts to discern behind van Vogt's actions the pattern which gives meaning to them.

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# In Defense of

## SPACE OPERA

by

Carolyn  
Gaybard



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to recognize

The first  
stories is fail-  
entertain, and  
ship to literature

is not to say that either Science Fiction Adventure or folk ballads are in any way written to amuse the illiterate or the immature, nor is this to say that the content of these fields is valueless, for there is, in both these fields, a certain nearness to basic truth and thus a certain inborn greatness. Yet despite this innate greatness it is just as unfair to compare Space Opera with a serious, or 'sociological' science fiction work as it would be to compare 'Barbara Allan' with a Mozart string quartet, for the two are written with different purposes in mind and employ almost entirely foreign sets of rules. One would not expect a folk tune to be as carefully developed as a quartet, and were it so developed it would no longer be folk music but would have become something entirely different. It is perhaps true that the results might have higher musical value, but what could one hum in the shower if all popular tunes were as complex as a string quartet? Likewise, what might a science fiction fancier read for sheer relaxation if all science fiction demanded the careful consideration necessary in reading such a work as Orwell's '1984'?

These stories are pure adventure and should be criticised as such. Therein lies the second error of criticism, failure to realize that this type of story is simply a modern development of the ancient art of relating an interesting adventure.

'Space opera' has long been a recognized idiom in the world of science fiction, and it is here used in its more general meaning, that is, a term designating that type of action story which takes place in space or on another planet.

Much bitter criticism has been written concerning this and much of it has been unfair, perhaps through failure its relationship to the general stream of literature.

error made in the criticism of Science Fiction Adventure ure to realize that these stories are written simply to

for no other reason. They bear the same relation- as do folk ballads to classical music. This, however,

error made in the criticism of Science Fiction Adventure or folk ballads are in any way written to amuse the illiterate or the immature, nor is this to say that the

content of these fields is valueless, for there is, in both these fields, a certain nearness to basic truth and thus a certain inborn greatness. Yet despite this innate greatness it is just as unfair to compare Space Opera with a serious, or 'sociological' science fiction work as it would be to compare 'Barbara Allan' with a Mozart string quartet, for the two are written with different purposes in mind and employ almost entirely foreign sets of rules. One would not expect a folk tune to be as carefully developed as a quartet, and were it so developed it would no longer be folk music but would have become something entirely different. It is perhaps true that the results might have higher musical value, but what could one hum in the shower if all popular tunes were as complex as a string quartet? Likewise, what might a science fiction fancier read for sheer relaxation if all science fiction demanded the careful consideration necessary in reading such a work as Orwell's '1984'?

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These are the same tales told around campfires from the stone age to the present.<sup>1</sup> The language of the tales changes, the dress and the mores evolve, but the characters and the basic situation remain the same: a brave and good man faces a great adventure which he meets with super-human courage and ingenuity.

Adventure Science Fiction as an extension of the earlier forms of the adventure story is discussed by Robert Butman in his honors essay, 'Modern Mythological Fiction'<sup>1</sup> and by Clem Dane in 'American Fairy Tales'.<sup>2</sup> Recently Holcomb summed up this same idea thusly: 'Science Fiction deals with man's dreams and fears, which, in days gone by, found expression in poetry, myth, or fairy story.'<sup>3</sup>

Butman's essay compares science fiction, and especially adventure science fiction, with mythology, showing that this type of work is simply mythology in modern dress, magic having been replaced by science. He points out that the 'Golden Bough' which formerly sailed the Mediterranean has now become a space ship bound for the farthest star, that sorcerers are now scientists, that Cenaturs, Cyclops, and dragons now appear as 'half-goats, worms, fish...or long-armed Martians.'<sup>1</sup>

In Dane's essay science fiction is compared with fairy tales, with science fiction adventure being called mechanized fairy tales for a mechanized nation. Even though America could never be deluded by old world magic, which denies every ounce of applied science upon which America is based, yet she must have her fairy tales, for there is present in the new world that certain yearning to be deluded. How better, Dane asks, could this yearning be satisfied than by science fiction?<sup>2</sup>

Undoubtedly the first adventure story (and thus the first ancestor of Adventure Science Fiction) concerned mighty tribal hunters, for such episodes are outlined in many cave drawings. Then came stories of natural phenomena personified as gods, and from this arose mythology. Perhaps almost contemporary with this were the first fairy tales, the dreams of men fulfilled by magic. Based upon these two forms the heroic tales of tribal and national supermen evolved...stories of men who conquered against all odds by superior strength, great intelligence, magic or aid from the gods. From this group came Homer's 'Odyssey', the Arthurian Legend, Beowulf, the Cid, and their many adventurer-brothers. The pattern thus established furnished material for the creators of almost all subsequent adventure stories. Adventure Science Fiction has simply added to the qualifications of a hero a superior knowledge of science and has thus eliminated the necessity of magic. What need have we for Merlin today when any number of technicians could easily 'baffle' him in mere seconds? Yet, though science replaces magic, the ancient concept of a hero adventurer remains unchanged.

Failure to realize this leads criticism to a third error, a condemnation of the sparse characterization of Adventure Science Fiction.

If characters tend to resemble one another it is for the very good reason that adventure stories have always tended, by repetition and by their basic concepts, to become allegorical, to personify bravery, in-



telligence, and righteousness contrasted against lust, pride, and temptation.<sup>1</sup> Today the cleancut spaceman and his fair companion are what every reader might well wish to be, while his enemies are the epitome of that which is loathesome. The two groups of characters personify

good and evil, and personification by its very nature requires that a single character represent a group. Were characters to take on individualism, personification could not exist, nor could allegory for such individualism would require the reader's attention to be shifted from the struggle between good and evil to the characters themselves, thus weakening the allegory beyond the point of reason. The spaceman of Adventure Science Fiction must remain as he is for the same reason Fiers Plowman could not appear as a 'living' character: a character well developed would result in an entirely different type of literature in either case.

The same may be said for plot structure. In adventures

of any type only a variation in detail is allowed, for the basic structure must remain stable in order to accomplish the same purpose in each tale or the story is not an adventure. The hero must succeed in his battle with evil whether the tale be a myth, a fairy story, a western, a whodunit, or a Space Opera.

If Adventure Science Fiction must be criticised (and of course it must in order to grow), then let it be criticised for poor diction and for poor internal structure, but let it not be crucified for belonging to the field of adventure stories.

If more serious flaws are found then let them be pointed out in the adventure field as a whole rather than in one isolated corner of the whole.

1. Robert Butman; 'Modern Mythological Fiction' (an honors essay), in 'The Reader and Collector', v. 3, n. 5-6, v. 4, n. 1-2, October, 1945, through October, 1946.
2. Clem Dane; 'American Fairy Tales', 'Fortnight', 145 (n. 139) 465-470, April, 1936.
3. C. Holcomb; 'Science-Fiction Phenomenon in Literature', 'Saturday Review of Literature', 32:9-10, May 28, 1949. Page 9.

("In Defense of Space Opera" is an excerpt from a thesis now in progress at the University of Southern California.)

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## Notes From the Editor

There isn't space this issue to present reviews on our usual scale. Until just before going to press the plan was to skip them entirely. But, rather than postpone mention of several interesting recent titles, the editor will try his unpracticed hand at reviewing.

The new anthologies include **SCIENCE FICTION OMNIBUS**, a reissue in one volume of Bleiler and Dikty's 'Best Science Fiction Stories: 1949 and 1950. The stories were drawn from a wide variety of 1948 and 1949 sources. Recommended to all who missed the original volumes. (Garden City, over 600 pages, \$2.95.)

And Frederik Pohl has collected 19 stories for a paper-bound Permapbook edition (35¢), **BEYOND THE END OF TIME**. Original publication of most was 1950 & 51; a few are drawn from scattered dates in the '40s. Longest and perhaps best is 'Scanners Live in Vain' from a 1948 Fantasy Book.

But the biggest anthology news yet this year is of **TOMORROW, THE STARS** (Doubleday, 249 pp., \$2.95), edited and with an introduction by Robert A. Heinlein. I wouldn't say that you should buy this book for its introduction alone, but if it contained nothing else it would be worth the price to me. My enthusiasm finds its cause in Heinlein's neat presentation of my side of a controversial matter on which I have recently found many of SFA's readers holding opposed views. Outstanding in this collection of none-less-than-good stories are Tucker's 'Tourist Trade', perhaps the best humorous s-f yarn I've read in several years; Leinster's 'Keyhole', Kornbluth's 'The Silly Season', and Kuttner's 'Absalom'. Perhaps you read the recent Avon paper-bound, **Post Fantasy Stories** with as much disappointment as I (but for the presence of one, at most two really good yarns, I might have been prejudiced against the entirety of slick fantasy and s-f). There are several in this collection from **SatEvePost** and **Colliers** that tend

to redeem those magazines in the eyes of the s-f initiate.

At that period of my reading history when I thought of Merritt and Stuart as accomplished 'styl-ists', John Taine was one of my favorite s-f writers. Since, of course, there have been modifications to my literary taste, and, too, the average level of s-f writing has shown a gratifying rise. Both these phenomena have caused an attenuation of my enthusiasm for Taine. However, there is that in his books which I still find enjoyable. This man, you know, is a mathematician of note. Among his friends and associates are many eminent workers in several fields of science. He tells a good story, defects in characterization, etc., notwithstanding, and the sort of thinking you would expect of such a man does show through. Recently published of his are **THE IRON STAR** (Fantasy Pub. Co., Inc., 312 pp., \$3) and **SEEDS OF LIFE** (Fantasy Press, 255 pp., \$2.75).

The inadequacies of his fiction, by the way, do not have their counterparts in his more serious writing. I hope sometime to write a rave article about his ten non-fiction titles. In the meantime, I want to recommend without qualification to all who share the 's-f view of life' those of his books that are currently in print: **The Magic of Numbers** (which is not what other books of similar titles might lead you to expect here, but rather is as fine an account of the thinking of Pythagoras and his successors to the present day as you'll find) and **Mathematics: Queen and Servant of Science**. The author here, be it noted, is E. T. Bell. These books are thought inducers. Nevertheless, they read easier than his novels and display a degree of wit seldom found so well integrated in a serious work.

The New American Library has reissued van Vogt's **Voyage of the Space Beagle** as **MISSION: INTERPLANETARY** (25¢). This is a novel compounded of short

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stories of which some have been considered among vV's best. Beyond that, I refer you to A. J. Cox, Professor on Pause (semantic).

Best recent novel, to my taste, is Wilson (Bob) Tucker's absorbing and unusual CITY IN THE SEA (Rinehart, \$2.50). A story of the far future. Unconventional, restrained, believable. Tucker has previously offered a handful of detective novels. Let us hope that his first s-f book will be followed by others.

William F. Nolan (4458 56th St., San Diego, Calif.) has performed a signal service for collectors with his publication of RAY BRADBURY REVIEW (50¢). He has filled 64 pages with commentary on the subject author's stories, a biography, three articles and an obscurely published story by Bradbury, a detailed index, and original artwork. A very neat job and one which Mr. Nolan plans to repeat with such subjects as Kuttner, Heinlein, Sturgeon, and van Vogt. This program deserves the support of all of us.

The January 26th issue of Publishers' Weekly was the one carrying the 'spring announcements' of all (well, almost) U.S. publishers. On the off chance that you'd be interested in knowing what I found interesting in these 105 finely printed pages, I'll mention a few of the titles (s-f and others) announced for publication in Feb. through June.

Atmospheres of the Earth and Planets is announced in a revised edition.... Alan Barth's Loyalty of Free Men, which I found to be a particularly sane treatment of a subject seldom so handled, is now due out in a 35¢ paperbound... From Greenberg we may expect Jack of Eagles by James Blish, vV's The Weapon Makers (this could affect the market value of the Hadley edition either way), and - hold onto your hats, boys - Hawk Carse... A two-bit edition of The Illustrated Man... Anthologies from each of 3 magazines, Galaxy, Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction, and ASF..... Another Bleiler and Dikty anth., Imagination Unlimited, this

time from Farrar, Strauss, and Young...P. W. Bridgeman, Nature of Some of our Physical Concepts. ...Autobiographical stuff by Cabell, Quiet, Please...SFAdvertiser subscriber Rudolf Carnap has Continuum of Inductive Methods coming from the press of his employers, U of Chicago...Gnome Press offers a US 1st of Clarke's Sands of Mars - now you've no excuse for missing it...And Harpers follows his Interplanetary Flight with The Exploration of Space.

Conklin's 2nd Vanguard anth., Invaders of Earth....d'Abro, Rise of the New Physics (in print and recommended of his are Evolution of Scientific Thought and The Decline of Mechanism in Modern Physics)...Five Adventure Novels of Haggard in one volume...A reissue of J. Frazer's The Golden Bough, 13 volumes (must include Aftermath), pre-publication price is \$45, \$55 thereafter...A.L. Furman, Teen Age S-F Stories...Cyril Judd, Outpost Mars.....Psychology and Alchemy, vol. 1 in the Collected Works of Jung....Negley (ed), Quest for Utopia, an anthology of imaginary societies (the same old stand-by's)....Neugebauer, Exact Sciences in Antiquity.

Kuttner has a suspense novel', Man Drowning coming from Harper...Nininger, Out of the Sky: Introduction to Meteoritics...Wollheim, Prize S-F For 1952, from McBride.....Schrodinger, Science and Humanism: Physics in Our time....Urey, The Planets: Their Origin and Development....Weyl, Symmetry.

Martin Greenberg has edited Five Science Fiction Novels, to come, of course, from Gnome.... and someone else has done something similar for one of the regular trade publishers, but, dammit, I can't now find it listed.

Charles Lee Riddle, publisher of PEON, tells us he is "going broke paying forwarding postage" and wishes note to be made of his new address: P.O. Box 463 Church Street Station New York City 8

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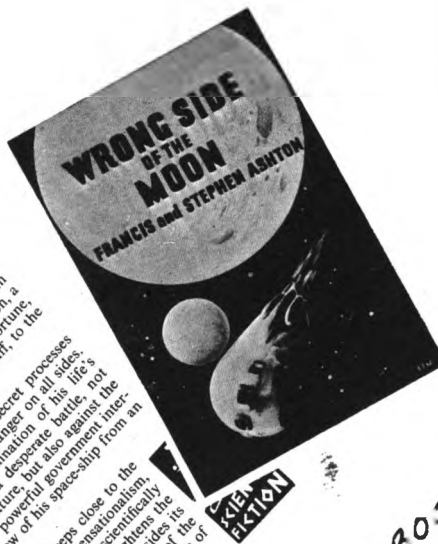
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-40-

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