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R. Sh Akhmedov

Gulistan State University, akhmedovraphael@yandex.ru

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SOUTHERN SCIENCE FICTION IN THE LITERATURE OF THE USA

R. Sh. Akhmedov

Gulistan State University

E-mail: akhmedovraphael@yandex.ru

The South has played a strong role in American fantasy, but not so in science fiction. Southern settings seem, in the mind's eye, to have an almost automatically fantastic glaze. Readers readily call up images of brooding purple ruins, green corpses, melancholy figures shrouding a dread secret that reeks of musty shadows. Edgar Allan Poe, the first great Southern writer, started it all – along with the detective story and, indeed, the short story itself. But it is a difficult task to find a literary critic who dare to consider the South and science fiction/fantasy literature together. No discussion of Southern literature that includes science fiction or fantasy as a sub-genre – Southern gothic, certainly, but not full-on science fiction. No discussion of science fiction or fantasy that includes the South as a major setting or cultural influence. We may conclude that the two worlds just do not overlap at all. Or perhaps that any example is an outlier, a blip on the radar, an intriguing setting for a fantasy novel or a minor work in an author's oeuvre (for example, Charlaine Harris's "True Blood", or Eudora Welty's "The Robber Bridegroom"), but nothing really influential in either field. And, because I am both a fan of science fiction and a researcher of this genre, I can tell you that a lot of other people have written science fiction and fantasy about the South. And I keep finding examples. Why is that? Why do we talk about Southern literature and its various genres without mentioning any of these works? Why do we talk about science fiction and fantasy without mentioning the South as a setting or influence? Is it really that minor, or is there something else going on here? Is there something that researchers and readers can learn about the South, and about science fiction, by considering all of these disparate works together? So here is what this research is aimed for.

Research Methods and Approach

The research is based on theoretical methods. One of the main methods used is comparative one, as a set of various literary works representing American science fiction have been analyzed and the motif of the South has been taken as a core element of the comparison. Interpretative approach has been also used in the course of the research in order to synthesize facts which are derived mainly from secondary sources, and which are qualitative in nature.

Analysis and Discussion

The dominance of fantasy in American literature is a bit curious, considering that one of the distinctive inventions of 20th century American literature has been modern science fiction, a jury-rigged genre put together in the same era when the South was undergoing its own great cultural renaissance. Between 1930 and 1967, the era marking science fiction's rise, the American South had 21 Pulitzer Prize winners, 8 of the 24 New York Drama Critics' Circle winners, 9 of 32 National Book Award winners in poetry and fiction, and of course William Faulkner won the Nobel Prize. But science fiction got nothing from the Southern Renaissance. That genre was and is dominated by what many classic critics termed "cultural imperialism". (Ares 2019) It's easy to see a deep reason for this, stemming from that 4-year "moment" when the South was a distinct nation, the Confederate States of America. The war itself did not change Southern culture very much – people were too busy fighting and dying – but, in a profound irony, the South thereafter was more powerfully influenced by the Lost Cause mythology than by dimly remembered Confederate realities. The region's response to battle, defeat, and shaky Reconstruction spawned a myth-history that ennobled the great catastrophe. Somehow, in the minds of millions, the Southern cause was not only undefiled by defeat, but the colossal bloodbath actually sanctified the values and ideals of the Old South. And all this was done by the people themselves, not by "cultural imperialism" or falsified history. As Gregory Benford notes in his article, "I am a son of Alabama and thus steeped in that swampy culture. I feel it a dozen times a day, but I can't explain it. It's in the blood. Long a resident of California, I find that I can now only dimly fathom the intricacies of Southern manners and indirection. I love the tones and sliding graces of the language still, south of what we call the Mason-Diction Line. How odd, then, that I became a part-time writer of science fiction, a genre devoted to technology and tomorrow?" (Benford 2000)

The Southerner's identity rests firmly on events now shrouded by more than a century of misty recollection and outright fabrication. Science fiction is about the future. Frequently it has been molded by a

fascination of Robert Heinlein with the winners, the doers. Much of the best Southern literature is fixated on the long recession from that ringing defeat. The frontier looms large in sf as a place to be confronted, pushed against, defeated, expanded. The South was definitely not a frontier. Instead, from early on, it was a wilderness already enclosed by the still-expanding nation.

Much of 20th century American literature can be seen as a conversation between the Southern sense of the wilderness and the image of frontier. Such subconscious elements have a deep influence on all the arts, often without our realizing. To its loss, science fiction has learned little from Southern concerns and literature, a deep facet of American culture. Americans are embedded in a rich and fruitful past, none more deeply than Southerners; but the genre keeps its beady gaze firmly fixed on the plastic futures authors so glibly devise. Yet much of history is dominated by inertia, not by the swift kinetics of technology. The greatest casualties, though, came to American literature from their war against themselves – a point any futurist should remember. That distant war also left the deepest wounds; despite all the talk of the New South, the region has not yet fully recovered. The South came quite close to winning; only timidity made the Confederates not immediately follow up on the northern disaster at the first battle of Manassas. The South outfought the North for years; indeed, it is still something of an embarrassment to historians to explain why a nation outnumbering the South by better than two to one and possessing far greater resources took four years to win. That is where science fiction author Harry Turtledove excels, exploring the delicacy of history. Of all alternative historical themes, it is remarkable that variant outcomes of the Civil War are only slightly less numerous than variations on World War II. Harry Turtledove shows why: it is a fruitful fulcrum for history's blunt forces. Few historians have ever written speculative fiction. There seems a natural contradiction between the precise inspection of the past and the colorful, evocative envisioning of the future. There are notable exceptions, of course: the entire subgenre of alternative history flows forward from the early nineteenth century. This method of inspecting the currents of history has produced such masterworks as Leon Sprague De Camp's "Lest Darkness Fall" (1941) and Ward Moore's "Bring the Jubilee" (1953), an artful vision of another outcome of Gettysburg. To tinker with history and test one's ideas is enticing, endlessly attractive. But most practitioners of alternative history are earnest amateurs. Harry Turtledove is the real thing, with a Ph.D. in Byzantine history. Indeed, by some critics he is considered to be the 1st historian to become a professional practitioner of the organized imagination known as speculative fiction. He took up a fantastic alternative outcome to our Civil War in "The Guns of the South" (1993). His "How Few Remain" (1997) begins with a less fantastic possibility, however, one touching upon a perpetually debated point of military history: why did Lee perform so badly in the Gettysburg campaign? Even without the error invoked and corrected by Harry Turtledove in his very first scene, Lee's failure of imagination and even of conventional military craft in his most important campaign is an enduring mystery. The fact that such historical details can still animate a dinner-table conversation seems odd, in the glare of sf's future-fascination. Yet perhaps we can learn from such basic emotional facts. Even though looking backward – and looking away, Dixie land – is common in recent speculative fiction, particularly in alternative history, why do we seldom recall that Richard Meredith's "We All Died at Breakaway Station" (1969) was a striking tale of dying for a cause written by a Southerner in 1969? that Daniel Galouye in "Dark Universe" (1961) wrote a major novel about conceptual breakthrough from blindness to sight, a Southern metaphor one sees similarly in William Faulkner's "Light in August" (1932)? And that though of Gregory Benford in "Against Infinity" (1983) is still in print after nearly 2 decades, few view it as a Southern novel, even though it is clearly written in the storytelling cadences. Perhaps because of Edgar Allan Poe's vast influence, the rise of modern prelapsarian fantasy – Tolkien's European nostalgia for a better past grafted onto the American wilderness, in uneasy genetic marriage – we arrive at the sensibility of the US fantasy culture, with its unending trilogies. To my taste, these novels reek of a past imagined by comfortable suburbanites who have never hoed a row, ridden a work horse, tilled a dusty field, or done any of the grunt labor that filled the true human past. They don't feel like earned experience. The Tolkien world was one of magically easy life, of comfy leafy greenery where nobody much toiled and lifted: the ground without the grunt. Most modern fantasy seems phony precisely because it is ignorant of what science and technology have meant in modern times – liberation for the great masses from numbing work. Yet in science fiction writers' comfy time they yearn for meaning beyond ease – for context. Science gives a large frame, but for most, not a personal one. For that science fiction writers must return to their deepest connections. Perhaps science fiction writers of the American South miss this salient point because they believe that Southern fiction generally should merely concern the eternal return, a cyclic view of life immersed in that great Southern preoccupation: family. Fair enough, but not enough. No one wishes to return to slavery, yet those writers must revisit it to fathom how it still acts in our time. That war isn't really over, after all.

Southern speculative fiction embraces several aspects: concern with continuity and thus history; landscape as a shaping force; and voice embodying moral authority. And science fiction writers of the American South must never forget that eternal return does not imply no progress: nothing is more alien to the spirit of science fiction than that other hallmark of their history, slavery. Yet even here moderns forget hard facts. The entire US had legal slavery when it began, barely a half century before the Civil War. There are slaves in Africa still. The past isn't over; as William Faulkner famously remarked, it isn't even past. Science fiction can learn from that. Science fiction writers of the South have made progress, but part of them still lives back there. Perhaps a way to creep up on the weight of the past is to consider the manner of telling – long a crucial element in Southern fiction. Style is crucial because land and past must speak in their own tones and idioms. Robert Heinlein's importance came in part because he found a combo style of Ernest Hemingway terseness and cracker-barrel folksy, which rather weirdly appealed to the cross-section of American readers: Midwestern science fiction. His cultural savvy seldom gets remarked upon, but was crucial. He spoke for a technocratic worldview, one far from the mainstream, one needing its own bard. His readers felt that immediately, in the gut. So here is a further commonality between science fiction and the South: both are outsiders. Though the South has dominated conventional culture to an impressive extent, and science fiction is the champion American genre (still alive in the magazines, and ruling Hollywood), they profit from taking an exterior angle. For a Southerner this is automatic. That feeling of perspective born of remove is essential to science fiction, and more visceral to a Southerner.

Though the first men on the moon left from the South, and the civil rights movement was invented in the South (winning us a Nobel for Peace), the South is fundamentally not about innovation and technology. So of course it may seem odd that, for example, Gregory Benford is a Southern science fiction writer, because he is usually described as a hard science fiction type, and literary critics state that such writers are relentlessly pitched forward on the cutting edge of the new. True – but the South remembers that a lot of the new is just fancied-up old. That is why most science fiction writers of the American South set their works on distant places, like a moon of Jupiter, where a crucially Southern distinction comes into play. Again, the South historically was born into a wilderness. Most northern science fiction is about pushing back the unknown, building galactic empires (such as Isaac Asimov's, thinly covering its anxieties about the USA, with Rome still looming large in memory), and subduing. Science fiction writers of the American South, for example - Gregory Benford – wrote about humanity recapitulating an old mode: going out from their settlements to hunt the Aleph, a thing out of prehistory, alien and unstoppable and still coming, despite all human efforts to either kill it or understand it – clearly, it didn't matter which. But the Aleph cannot be killed forever. It returns in the last pages of the novel, whose last phrase is "...and he knew he would remember." (Williams 2018) That is what makes it a Southern novel, amid all the high-tech trimmings. The past is not over.

Another way to think of science fiction in our time is to echo that sensibility through a cultural take on Newton's second law: $F=MA$. Force drives Masses to Accelerate. Science fiction is big on F, the hammering march of progress through science to technology to jarring social change. To get that heady acceleration, A, that mainstream readers find jarring (never mind the science, too), science fiction minimizes the mass, M – that is, social inertia. Writers dream of a singularity coming soon to a theater of the mind near the readers – Vernor Vinge's Northerner fantasy of the moment when mind-computer linkage takes some of readers off into utterly incomprehensible mental realms. This image of freedom from both history (conceptual breakthroughs) and from bodies (uploading) is quintessentially Northern. $A=F/M$. Note that even the cerebral Arthur Clarke's love of intellect and desire to shuck readers' skins, from "Childhood's End" (1953) onward, does not also abandon history; he uses analogies and references to the deep past, from Babylon and Olduvai Gorge.

Results and Conclusion

The results of this specific research reveal the essence of the South in American science fiction and define what is Southern science fiction in American literature. According to these results, Southern science fiction is writing with an appreciation for the magnitude of M. In this sense Southern science fiction is not regional, though its approach often stresses landscape. It can be seen in some British science fiction, from J.G. Ballard's acceptance of inevitability in his early disaster novels (1962-66) to Brian Aldiss's sense of the ponderable weight of time in his "Helliconia Trilogy" (1982-85). It is there in novels that trace the failure of hubris to overcome, such as Tom Disch's "CampConcentration" (1968) and Daniel Keyes's "Flowers for Algernon" (1966). Novels with a great weight of landscape give this sense, as in Kate Wilhelm's "Where Late the Sweet Birds Sang" (1976) and George R. Stewart's "Earth Abides" (1949) – a Southern title indeed. That is

the sense the South can give to speculative fiction, no matter how broad and distant its technological ramparts. The rise of alternative history as a subgenre may express a growing perception in American culture that F is too big and American readers need more M, because they do not like the A they are experiencing. If this is reactionary, make the most of it. It is the place of genres to lead, and if they like, to secede. If so, there will be more Southern spice and flavor in American future literary cuisine.

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Аннотация

АҚШ АДАБИЁТИДА ЖАНУБИЙ ИЛМИЙ ФАНТАСТИКАСИ

Р. Ш. Ахмедов

Тадқиқотда АҚШнинг Жанубий илмий фантастик асарларининг ўзига хос хусусиятлари, уларнинг адабий ва тарихий келиб чиқишлари ва илмий-фантастик ёзувчилари томонидан Жануб мотиви қандай қўлланилиши таҳлил қилинган.

Таянч сўзлар: илмий фантастика, Жануб, минтақавий, халқаро, кишлок, пасторал.

Аннотация

ЮЖНАЯ НАУЧНАЯ ФАНТАСТИКА В ЛИТЕРАТУРЕ США

Р. Ш. Ахмедов

Данное исследование посвящено особенностям произведений Южной научной фантастики США, их литературному и историческому происхождению и анализу того, как мотив Юга используется писателями-фантастами.

Ключевые слова: научная фантастика, Юг, местный, международный, сельский, пасторальный.

Summary

SOUTHERN SCIENCE FICTION IN THE LITERATURE OF THE USA

R. Sh. Akhmedov

The research is dedicated to specific features of Southern science fiction in the USA, aiming to reveal its literary and historical origin and analyze how motif of the South is used by American science fiction writers.

Key words: science fiction, South, regional, international, rural, pastoral.