

REFLECTIONS

TRANSLATIONS

Robert Silverberg

The January 1987 issue of *Asimov's Science Fiction* featured a novella of mine called "The Secret Sharer," the title of which I had borrowed from a story by Joseph Conrad. In an introduction to my "Secret Sharer" written for a collection of my stories soon afterward I said that I had "translated" the famous Conrad story into science fictional terms. In one basic sense that was true: Conrad's story is about a ship captain who quite improperly provides sanctuary in his cabin for a stowaway who has hidden himself aboard his ship, and so is mine. But I was uncomfortable with that word "translated" all the same, for I felt that it was not quite the appropriate term for what I had done. What I believed I had done was to find a purely science fictional *equivalent* of Conrad's basic story situation and produce something that I think represents completely original work, however much it may owe to the structure of a classic earlier story and insofar as completely original ideas in fiction are ever actually possible. (More about that latter point later on!)

The term "translation" in the sense I've used it here first showed up as a derogatory word in the uncompromising critical vocabulary set forth by Damon Knight and James Blish in the 1950s upon which I based much of my own fiction-writing esthetic. They defined a "translation" as an adaptation of a stock format of mundane fiction into SF by the simple one-for-one substitution of science fiction noises for the artifacts of a mundane story. Blish, in a famous essay eviscerating a story of Robert Sheckley's—and Blish specialized in eviscerations—wrote, in 1955, "As usual, the problem is 'solved' by pulling three rabbits out of the author's hat, though of course he doesn't call them rabbits—they look like rabbits, but if you call them smeerps, that makes it science fiction." To this day, "calling a rabbit a smeerp" is a phrase used by critics to describe this kind of lazy science fiction.

Blish and Knight weren't the first to denounce the technique. In the fall of 1950 an impressive new science fiction magazine called *Galaxy* commenced publication, and on the back cover of the first issue, under the heading, YOU'LL NEVER SEE IT IN GALAXY, were these two paragraphs printed in parallel format, the work of *Galaxy's* brilliant, tough-minded editor, Horace L. Gold:

Jets blasting, Bat Durston came screeching down through the atmosphere of Bblizznaj, a tiny planet seven billion light years from Sol. He cut out his super-hyper-drive for the landing . . . and at that point, a tall, lean space-man stepped out of the tail assembly, proton gun-blaster in a space-tanned hand.

"Get back from those controls, Durston," the tall stranger lipped thinly. "You don't know it, but this is your last space trip."

Hoofs drumming, Bat Durston came galloping down through the pass at Eagle Gulch, a tiny gold colony 400 miles north of Tombstone. He spurred hard for a low overhang of rim-rock . . . and at that point a tall, lean wrangler stepped out from behind a high boulder, a six-shooter in a sun-tanned hand.

"Rear back and dismount, Bat Durston," the tall stranger lipped thinly. "You don't know it, but this is your last saddle-jaunt through these here parts."

"Sound alike?" Gold asked, below. "They should—one is merely a western transplanted to some alien and impossible planet. If this is your idea of science fiction, you're welcome to it. YOU'LL NEVER FIND IT IN GALAXY."

Gold, who had served his literary apprenticeship writing for the pulp magazines of the 1930s, knew all about such stuff. Change "Colt .44" to "laser pistol" and "horse" to "greeznak" and "Comanche" to "Sloogl" and you could easily generate a sort of science fiction out of a standard western story, complete with cattle rustlers, scalplings, and cavalry rescues. But you didn't get real science fiction; you didn't get anything new and intellectually stimulating, just a western story that has greeznaks and Sloogls in it. Change "Los Angeles Police Department" to "Drylands Patrol" and "crack dealer" to "canal-dust dealer" and you've got a crime story set on Mars, but so what? Change "the canals of Venice" to "the marshy streets of Venusburg" and the sinister agents of S.M.E.R.S.H. to the sinister agents of A.A.A.A.R.G.H. and you've got a James Bond story set on the second planet, but it's still a James Bond story.

I don't think that that's what I did in my version of "The Secret Sharer." The particular way in which my stowaway Vox hides herself aboard the *Sword of Orion* is nothing that Joseph Conrad could have understood, and arises, I think, purely out of the science fictional inventions at the heart of the story. The way she ultimately departs from the ship is very different from anything depicted in Conrad's maritime fiction. The starwalk scene, in which Vox and the captain take a virtual stroll into interstellar space, provides visionary possibilities quite unlike those afforded by a long stare into the vastness of the trackless Pacific. "Together we walked the stars," I wrote. "Not only walked but plunged and swooped and soared, traveling among them like gods. Their hot breath singed us. Their throbbing brightness thundered at us. Their serene movements boomed a mighty music at us. On and on we went, hand in hand, Vox leading, I letting her draw me, deeper and deeper into the shining abyss that was the universe. Until at last we halted, floating in mid-cosmos, the ship nowhere to be seen, only the two of us surrounded by a shield of suns." And so on. "The Secret Sharer" by Robert Silverberg is, or so I believe, a new and unique science fiction story set, for reasons of the author's private amusement, within the framework of a well-known century-old masterpiece of the sea by Joseph Conrad.

As for calling rabbits smearps and horses greeznaks, that is not only lazy conceptualizing but can be irritating and distracting to the reader, and I had my own say on that in the introductory note I wrote for the novel *Nightfall* (1990) on which I collaborated with Isaac Asimov: "Kalgash is an alien world and it is not our intention to have you think that it is identical to Earth, even though we depict its people as speaking a language that you can understand, and using terms that are familiar to you. Those words should be understood as mere equivalents of alien terms. . . . So when the people of Kalgash speak of 'miles,' or 'hands,' or 'cars,' or 'computers,' they mean *their own* units of distance, *their own* grasping-organs, *their own* ground-transportation devices, *their own* information-processing machines, etc. . . .

"We could have told you that one of our characters paused to strap on his quonglishes before setting out on a walk of seven vorks along the main gleebish of his native znoob, and everything might have seemed ever so much more thoroughly alien. But it would also have been ever so much more difficult to make sense out of what we were saying, and that did not seem useful. The essence of this story doesn't lie in the quantity of bizarre terms we might have invented; it lies, rather, in the reaction of a group of people somewhat like ourselves, living on a world that is somewhat like ours in all but one highly significant detail, as they react to a challenging situation that is completely different from anything the people of Earth have ever had to deal with. . . ."

Note that phrase, *a world that is somewhat like ours in all but one highly significant detail*. A science fiction story needs to have some underlying speculative concept, or it isn't science fiction no matter how many smeerps and greeznaks it has. And it hardly matters whether the people of the planet Kalgash have streets in their towns or gleebishes in their znoobs, so long as no specifically science fictional situation is presented in the story.

Long ago, Poul Anderson and Gordon R. Dickson dealt with that problem in a classic series of comic masterpieces (eventually collected in 1957 as *Earthman's Burden*, about an Earthlike planet called Toka inhabited by Hokas, intelligent creatures resembling teddy bears, who in the early years of Toka's contact with Earth had seen some old Western movies and had decided to recreate the cultural milieu of those old Westerns on their own world. So they wear red bandannas and ten-gallon hats, and greet some visiting Earthmen with, "Howdy, stranger, howdy. . . I'm Tex and my pardner here is Monty."

It's all wildly funny, and the perfect inversion of Horace Gold's "You'll Never See it in GALAXY" back-cover advertisement. Anderson and Dickson did indeed make use of all the clichés of the Western story in the first of the Hoka stories (appropriately called "The Sheriff of Canyon Gulch"), but everything in the story is conceptualized in a legitimately science fictional way, as one would have expected from those two masters of the genre. "If the cowboys are teddy bears," one of the Earthmen asks, "then who—or what—are the Indians?" And they soon find out: they are reptilian creatures, "big tall beings, bigger than I am, but walking sort of stooped over . . . tails and fangs and green skins, and their talk is full of hissing noises. . . ."

Later Hoka stories played with the Don Juan legend, with Sherlock Holmes, with the pirates of the Caribbean, the romance of the Foreign Legion, and several other familiar standbys of classic mainstream fiction. Should these stories be considered translations of mainstream material into science fiction? Of course. Their very titles signal that. ("The Adventure of the Mislaced Hound." "Yo Ho Hoka!") But they are something more than that, much more, because they depend on an underlying science fictional postulate: *Suppose an alien species decides to imitate Earthly story formulas in real-life existence*. Here's a case where the teddy bears are called Hokas, all right, but that isn't just smeerpism, teddy bears hiding behind a funny name: they are genuine alien beings set in genuine science fiction stories.

Still, they look like teddy bears, and they have redesigned their world to look like this and that bit of what could just as well be movie scenery. Real science fictional thinking went into the Hoka stories, but they are based—deliberately and gloriously so—on Earthly predecessors, just as my "Secret Sharer" novella is a set of science fictional equivalents of Joseph Conrad's story, set aboard a fantastically imagined starship plying the galactic depths instead of a nineteenth-century sailing vessel working the Gulf of Siam. Most science fiction, under close examination, turns out to have some degree of smeerphood about it. Is true conceptual originality possible at all? Let's look at that next issue.