Immortality, Talking Ostriches, and the Apache Who Stole the Atlantic: Science Fiction and the Gernsback Ideal

Michael Montgomery

Writer's Comment: I got into science fiction in middle school. (One of my clearest memories from sixth grade drama class was reading Frank Herbert's Dune in a corner backstage.) Later, through June visits to the Ray Bradbury section of my local library and July pilgrimages to Powell's City of Books, the musty smell of sci-fi paperbacks became synonymous with vacation. When I saw Dr. Saler's class about the history of science fiction, my immediate reaction was: No, science fiction belongs to free time; wouldn't want to taint that with school. How wrong I was. Far from taking the fun out of it, learning about the genre in an academic setting rekindled my interest. Before long, I found myself writing essay-length papers—they were supposed to be informal responses—on a weekly basis; the one selected here kept me up till 3:29 in the morning. In an otherwise hectic quarter, this retreat to the summer world of sci-fi kept me sane. And fittingly, it also gave me ideas for something more concrete: a summer reading list.

Instructor's Comment: Michael Montgomery's essay is characteristic of nearly all the weekly essays he wrote for my class on the History of Science Fiction. First, it's a polished work, which was not what I had requested; the students were asked to turn in informal responses to a question about each week's readings. Second, it was more than simply a formal submission: it had original ideas, apt citations to a whole range of cultural references, and a wry, sparkling style that kept the reader engaged. Finally, it was longer than all the other informal responses I received. Michael took as long as he needed to do justice to

his arguments, including the selection of revealing passages from the stories he analyzed.

Of course, I failed him for not following my instructions to the letter. In another universe. In ours, I was delighted by his weekly insights and creative prose. Each week, I looked forward to reading his latest essay. Michael is a budding literary critic who illuminates and entertains simultaneously, as this example shows.

—Michael Saler, Department of History

Four thousand years ago, the Egyptian pharaohs approached a semblance of immortality; in 1934, Stanley Weinbaum's Martian pyramid builders achieved the real thing. Weinbaum's creations aren't human. They aren't even really alive. Yet they live forever. These strange rock creatures need nothing but silicon dioxide to function, and they do nothing but build interminable rows of pyramids. Like the Great Pyramid of Giza, they cause us to reflect on the passage of time and the brevity of most human accomplishment. But more than that, they force us to rethink our very definition of what is and what is not "alive." That's heady stuff for mere science fiction.

Silica-based rock beings made their debut in Weinbaum's classic short story, "A Martian Odyssey," in which a chemist on the first manned expedition to Mars recounts his recent adventures to the rest of the crew. When the story was published, science fiction was still in its early stages, and Weinbaum's scientific accuracy and inventive Martian life forms blew the genre's possibilities wide open. Yet even if "A Martian Odyssey" transcended the derogatory perceptions of pulp science fiction, the story couldn't—and arguably wouldn't want to—shake the influence of the pulp pioneer who first published it: Hugo Gernsback.

At the time, Hugo Gernsback was the genre's biggest promoter, an editor of pulp magazines that had such an impact on the field that its most prestigious award, the Hugo, is named after him. For a decade or so, Gernsback's ideas about what science fiction should and should not be went largely unchallenged. And right from the beginning, he made these ideas explicit, with an editorial in the inaugural issue[1] of

1 Gernsback founded *Amazing Stories* in 1926. It was the first magazine

Amazing Stories: science fiction (a term he coined) was to be instructive, inspiring, and, at some point in the future (looking back to the present), historically relevant. Authors would combine science with imagination, blend "charming romance" with "scientific fact and prophetic vision," and "[blaze] a new trail, not only in literature and fiction, but in progress as well" (Gernsback 1). "A Martian Odyssey" epitomizes these ideals perfectly; other stories fall short. But holding them all to Weinbaum's high standard gives us key insights into the genre's development, both on and off Gernsbackian lines.

A prime example is the work of Clare Winger Harris, one of the genre's first women writers, who earned Gernsback's early approval with her 1927 story "The Fate of the *Poseidonia*." The plot centers on a successful Martian plan to remedy the Red Planet's diminishing water supply by stealing from Earth. By extrapolating Earth's diminishing natural resources to another planet, and framing an environmental crisis from an extraterrestrial point of view, Harris fulfills Gernsback's "inspiration" requirement. Her Martians may be evil, but they're not really all that different from humans; with their weird feather headdresses, they even "[bear] a general resemblance to an Indian chief" (Harris 68). As a consequence of this family resemblance, the drastic means they use to save their planet serve as a warning and call to action for us back on Earth. "Be careful," Harris may be saying. "This could one day be you." Her story also takes on an air of reverse colonization, in that this time it is the "Indians" who are doing the conquering.

On the whole, however, Harris's challenge to colonialism and environmental negligence is undercut by a lack of empathy for the dying Martians. Even the professor's words at the beginning take on sinister undertones: "'But always, as Terra's resources have diminished, the mind of man has discovered substitutes. There has always been a way out, and let us hope our brave planetary neighbors will succeed in solving their problem'" (Harris 64). In light of what follows, the irony of this statement becomes ever more apparent. The Martians aren't brave; they're thieves. Their survival means our detriment—not exactly the hallmark of good neighbors. Overall, Harris paints a rather one-sided picture, and readers

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devoted exclusively to science fiction, or, as he called it at the time, "scientifiction" (Gernsback 1).

are just as relieved as the narrator when Martell the Martian's "malevolent face" (Harris 75) finally disappears from the communication screen.

Not surprisingly, interplanetary acts of thievery make easy subjects. Harris's thieves pull their heist off; Edmond Hamilton's tentacled cone monsters aren't so lucky. Like Harris's Martians, Hamilton's aliens are doomed. And like Harris's Martians, they turn to Earth for a quick fix. Actually, this time it's our sun they're after, hence the name of Hamilton's short story, "The Star-Stealers" (1929). These thieves are inhabitants of a dying, cooling star that is somehow drifting aimlessly through space (Newton's First Law gone horribly wrong, perhaps?). Hoping to acquire a new source of warmth, the cone people have modified their own behemoth's trajectory so it will gracefully sweep up our sun in its massive gravity. In explaining this dastardly plot, which also involves incinerating Earth and the surrounding neighborhood in "the fires of the sun itself, to increase its size and splendor" (Hamilton 90), Hamilton goes a bit overboard with his scientific pretensions. He does didactically what Stanley Weinbaum does effortlessly: teaches his audience something about science. Compare Hamilton's tiresome explanation of mechanics—"You know that it is gravitational force alone which keeps the suns and planets to their courses" (Hamilton 90)—with Weinbaum's energetic description of a Martian revolver:

> And by the way, that crystal weapon of Tweel's was an interesting device. . . . The propellant was steam—just plain steam! . . . When Tweel [an ostrich-like Martian] squeezed the handle . . . a drop of water and a drop of the yellow stuff squirted into the firing chamber, and the water vaporized—pop!—like that. It's not so difficult; I think we could develop the same principle. Concentrated sulfuric acid will heat water almost to boiling, and so will quicklime, and there's potassium and sodium . . . (Weinbaum 120)

In the end, of course, Hamilton's intrepid heroes save the day, and "The Star-Stealers" concludes with a celebration of science's exploratory spirit that would make Gernsback proud: "We would be star-rovers, she and I, until the end" (Hamilton 96).

And star rovers they were, until they were blown up on Venus by a master race of feminine socialists. Well, not quite. But enterprising Earthlings much like them do indeed find themselves in that situation in Leslie F. Stone's 1931 story "The Conquest of Gola." Like Harris, Stone uses reverse colonization to critique imperialism, this time from an alien's

perspective of an Earthling invasion. Stone also presents a reversal of gender stereotypes, with Venusian females being the dominant sex and males their simple-minded playthings. First-person narration gives readers a glimpse into these aliens' thoughts, but it has its limitations, and Stone eventually turns a perfect opportunity for "cognitive estrangement"—science fiction's ability to force a reevaluation of modern society from a broader cosmic perspective—into a polemic about the evils of capitalism and sexism. For what it's worth, she does accomplish a fair amount of instruction and critical thinking along the way, mostly concerning the possibilities of telepathy and the ills of capitalism.

For his part, Gernsback shied away from this type of sociopolitical pamphleteering. Novelty for him came in one form and one form only: technology. Ironically, this left his novel *Ralph 124C 41+* (1911) bereft of the very things he esteemed so highly in others: believable and engaging narrative, thought-provoking ideas, and an educational use of science. In their place, Gernsback—a lifelong inventor—spins out gadgets and impossible technology. Most of his made-up science isn't even workable—his recipe for resurrection, for instance, involves replacing one's entire circulatory system with "Radium-K Bromide" (Gernsback 241). But remarkably, some of his imagined gizmos did actually materialize. Take the following passage, in which Gernsback predicts a radar-like mechanism thirty years before radar's invention:

> A *pulsating polarized ether wave*, if directed on a metal object, can be reflected in the same manner as a light-ray is reflected from a bright surface or from a mirror. . . . A small part . . . would strike the metal body of the flyer, and these waves would be reflected back to the sending apparatus. Here they would fall on the *Actinoscope* (see diagram), which records only reflected waves, not direct ones. (Gernsback 236)

Making up for what he lacks in style and character development with numbers and the occasional diagram—the above parenthetic mention is his, not mine—Gernsback then proceeds to throw his hat into the ring of space travel. The narrative he chooses, interplanetary kidnapping, rounds out what is so far an unoriginal trifecta alongside Harris's and Hamilton's interplanetary thievery and Stone's interplanetary conquest.

Non-combative exploration, such as in Stanley G. Weinbaum's "A Martian Odyssey" (1934), was a new direction even for Gernsback's "new sort" of story (Gernsback 1). Most authors found it easier to transport

human clichés to outer space: intergalactic navies, unsuspecting natives. Weinbaum's premise of peacetime observation and extraterrestrial friendship required more imagination. Instructionally, his story's merit is immense, from factual geographical names and a reference to Schiaparelli (discoverer of the Martian "canals") to the challenges of interspecies linguistics and the details of Martian ecosystems. As for inspiration, its protagonist's remarkable observations and amicable outlook are nothing if not stimulating, his adventures nothing if not page-turning. And when it comes to the question of historical relevance, Weinbaum more than proves his worth. The crew of his expedition is international. What's more, it's interdisciplinary, consisting of a German engineer, a French biologist, an English (possibly American?) captain, and an American chemist (the narrator). In this way, Weinbaum predicts both the internationalism and academic diversity that will likely characterize a future mission to Mars.

As a result of all this, Weinbaum's landmark story garnered a wide influence, all the way down to Anne McCaffrey's 1978 novel *Dinosaur Planet*, which also features "a silicate life form, much like rock and extremely durable, and though not immortal, certainly the closest a species had evolved toward that goal" (McCaffrey 5). Doubtless she stole this directly from Weinbaum, whose "pyramid monsters" eternally excrete silica bricks and "[live] by a different set of chemical reactions [than ours on Earth]. [They were] silicon life . . . living creature[s] half a million years old! . . . Blind, deaf, nerveless, brainless—just a mechanism, and yet—immortal!" (Weinbaum 117). The difference between McAffrey and Weinbaum is that Weinbaum came first; plus, he actually explains some of the chemistry. Silicon, like carbon, can form bonds with four atoms simultaneously, which makes it a very real candidate for extraterrestrial biology. Having studied chemistry in college, Weinbaum knew this, and by incorporating it into his prose, he was doing exactly what Gernsback wanted. Unlike the scientific facades of Harris, Hamilton, Stone, and even Gernsback—for all his tinkering—Weinbaum's verisimilitude is no gimmick.

His Mars is no paper moon either. Its nuanced aliens challenge readers' preconceptions in every way; nothing here is so tame or cartoonishly schematic as Indians in space, telepathic cone-shaped baddies, or a battle of the sexes. Instead, Weinbaum's Martians force readers to call into question their own intelligence and morality. When praising Tweel's knack for communicating complex ideas with a limited

vocabulary, Jarvis challenges the captain to do the same with "only six words of English" (Weinbaum 119). At this point, readers ask themselves: could *I* have done it in six words? Later, when Jarvis recounts his and Tweel's last stand against the hostile mound-builders (another strange race of Martian), we can't help but be moved by the bird's self-sacrificing loyalty: "I said, 'Thanks, Tweel. You're a man!' and felt that I wasn't paying him any compliment at all. A man! There are mighty few men who'd do that" (Weinbaum 123). Once again, readers probe their own response. Like all good adventure stories, "A Martian Odyssey" tests its protagonists and its audience at the same time.

If that weren't enough, the fantastic wanderings of Weinbaum's latter-day Odysseus also happen to be an epic fully within the Homeric tradition (and told orally, no less), complete with a reference to the Shrine of Tophet, a ship—the *Ares*—named after the Greek precursor to the eponymous Roman god of war, and a beguiling tentacle beast (the extraterrestrial equivalent of a siren) luring men and star-crossed ostriches to their doom. Like its titular inspiration, and the very best of science fiction as conceived by Gernsback, "A Martian Odyssey" is a homeward journey that brings readers back to a home (like Odysseus's Ithaca) they no longer recognize, an Earth whose imperfections, like pesky suitors, have been cast in a new light and can at last be taken care of. For all its novelty, "A Martian Odyssey" isn't really about Mars. Bizarre to the point of unintelligible, yet always solidly grounded in chemistry, ecology, and—most telling of all—humanity, Weinbaum's Mars is a world where your fantasies are your undoing, your enemies insist they're your friends, and animals are your only true companions. Sound like anywhere else in the Solar System?

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