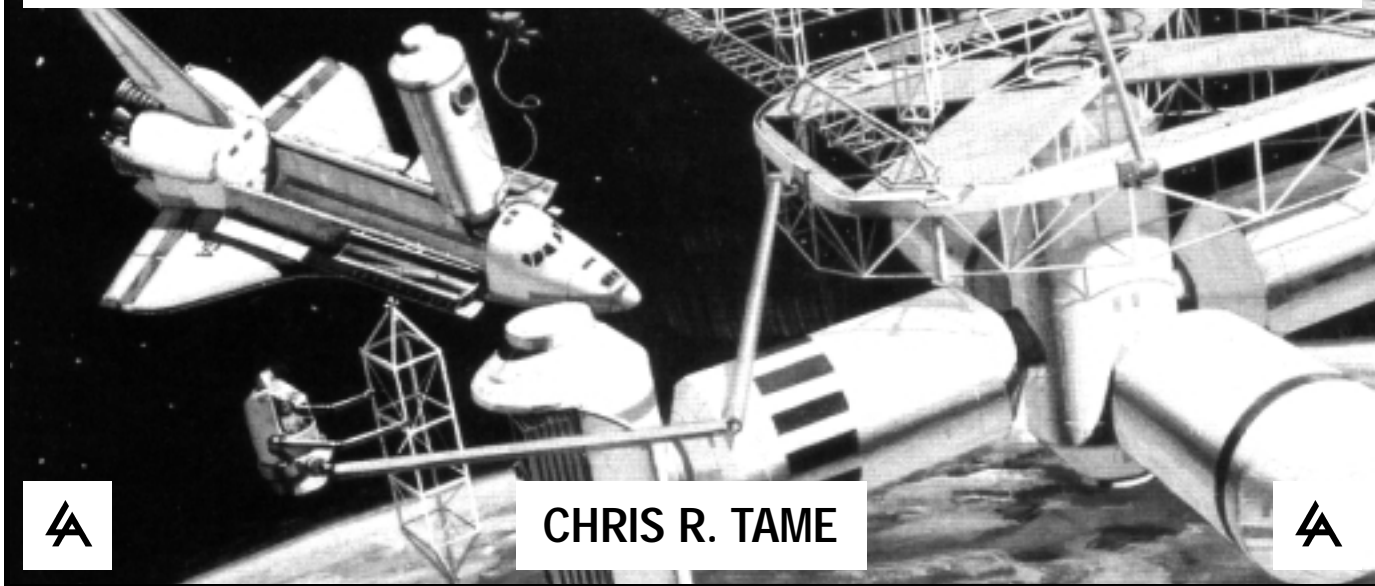


# LIFE, LIBERTY AND THE STARS: THE IDEOLOGICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF SCIENCE FICTION



CHRIS R. TAME

*“It is in the methodology of scientific thought that the salvation — if any — of humanity rests.” — Isaac Asimov<sup>1</sup>*

The very name “science fiction” is no accident, no mere matter of semantic contingency. As the author of one critical history of the genre has put it, “science fiction ... is really not so much a literary genre as a point of view”<sup>2</sup> and that point of view is overwhelmingly a scientific and *metascientific* one.

The unifying feature that runs throughout most Science Fiction is not a *literary* characteristic, involving matters of style, form or symbol, it is primarily an *ideological* one, a nexus of values and views regarding man and the universe. Cohn Wilson has summed it up incisively in his *The Strength To Dream: Literature and the Imagination*:

Science fiction sprang from the progressive beliefs that are the essence of science. The spirit of science is a spirit of enterprise ... [Science Fiction] is an attempt to communicate the authentic vision of science through fiction.<sup>3</sup>

I have employed the term *metascientific* deliberately, since Science Fiction is not merely a literary exploration of particular scientific, cosmological or technological ideas, extrapolations of the individual or social effects of particu-

lar inventions or social trends (although it can be all these things) but because it embodies what Peter Medawar has called “the new spirit”, the intellectual outlook which can be “thought of not as scientific, but something conducive to science”<sup>4</sup> It embodies the Faustian or Promethean impulse, the spirit of individualism, of self-confident rationality, of bold conjecture and refutation, the assumption of the accessibility of reality to human intelligence and the possibility and desirability of enhancing human existence.

It is no accident that Science Fiction emerged as a distinct genre (or, rather, was perceived as such) while “mainstream” literature became fixated upon delineations of character, the novel of manners as an aesthetic *summum bonum*, or upon doctrines of “naturalism” and “realism” which consigned the individual to the role of a victim or plaything of forces beyond his control. Literature became dominated by the ethos of an “Age of Defeat”, in Colin Wilson’s phrase, of either “the unheroic hypothesis” or the “discussion of triviality”.<sup>5</sup> Literary and stylistic experimentation seemed devoted only, as one American has put it, to “disillusionment, cynicism, disgust and gnawing envy” or in “making delicate picture-puzzles out of the butt-ends of life”.<sup>6</sup> So called *avant-garde* forms increasingly reflected “the flight from reason” and “disgust ... with the idea of science”,<sup>7</sup> dominated by, and evoking, epistemological and perceptual chaos.

While a voluntaristic and rationalistic image of man was preserved to some degree in what Ayn Rand had called “bootleg” forms of romanticism, in adventure, detective and thriller genres, these forms were generally intellectually — and sometimes aesthetically — second rate. Only Science Fiction was characterized by a concern with higher intellectual horizons. It is most accurately defined as, in John J. Pierce’s phrase, “eschatological romanticism”, an intellectual orientation to “first and last things”.<sup>8</sup>



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**FOR LIFE, LIBERTY AND PROPERTY**



It is important to realize that even the crudest sub-forms of Science Fiction, the so-called “space opera” adventure story as found in the “pulp” of the 1930s and 1940s and still with us today, is not without philosophic significance. The characteristic of “action, conflict and suspense” are reflections of the Aristotelian, volitionist view of man, in which “purpose”, as Science Fiction author Jack Williamson has put it, is “the distinguishing quality of life”.<sup>10</sup>

### I: In Defence of Science

Many Science Fiction authors and critics have been quite explicit in their commitment to science and the voluntaristic concept of man. Critic P. Schuyler Miller has put it as follows:

In the present mode of mainstream fiction (Everyman) is a symbol for a humanity to whom the world — society, the system, the Establishment — does things. He may struggle; he may fight back; he will certainly scream and make speeches; but he is essentially passive a born loser. The Everyman of science fiction, on the contrary, does things to the world. He is the subject, not the object of the action. He schemes, he fights, and he may talk too much, but he assumes that he can and will win ... and usually does.<sup>11</sup>

Robert A. Heinlein was even more scathing in his rejection of the “sick literature being peddled by the ‘mainstream’”, and emphasized the didactic value of Science Fiction in encouraging rationalist attitudes:

[Science Fiction] preaches the need for freedom of the mind and the desirability of knowledge; it teaches that prizes go to those who study, who learn, who soak up the difficult fields such as mathematics and engineering and biology. And so they do! The prizes of the universe go only to those able and equipped to reach out for them. In short, science fiction is preparing our youngsters to be mature citizens of the galaxy ... as indeed they will have to be.<sup>12</sup>

Against the prevalent mainstream literary themes of “alienation” and “I am a stranger and afraid in a world I never made”, Heinlein replied:

Not true! I am not a stranger and I am not afraid in a world I am happy to make ... and I am damned from here to eternity only if I abandon my human intelligence and, sheepishly, give up the struggle! That is the answer of science fiction, and that is why it is alive when most of our current literature is sick and dying.<sup>13</sup>

Similarly, Isaac Asimov has argued that while Science Fiction can and does explore dangers in science and technology and progress, its fundamental attitude is still constructive:

Knowledge has its dangers, yes, but is the response to be a retreat from knowledge? Are we prepared then to return to the ape and forfeit the very essence of humanity? Or is knowledge itself to be used as a barrier against the danger it brings?

Whether individual scientists are treated as heroes or villains, Asimov continued:

[S]cience and intelligence, as abstract forces, are represented sympathetically. Scientific research is presented, almost invariably, as an exciting and thrilling process; its usual ends as both good in themselves and good for mankind; its heroes as intelligent people to be admired and respected.<sup>14</sup>

### II: Political Rationalism

“A conscious or unconscious conception of human nature underlies every choice of social or political values,” declared political philosopher Ellen M. Wood in her book *The Mind and Politics*.<sup>15</sup> It is hardly surprising, given Science Fiction’s philosophic orientation that political themes have boded large, nor that these themes have generally been of a liberal, or libertarian, sort. Although, of course, the rationalist outlook can express itself in the form of a technocratic socialism (as in H. G. Wells, for example<sup>16</sup>) most Science Fiction authors have recognized the pseudo-scientific or “scientistic” nature of the politics of “social engineering” and “planning”,<sup>17</sup> and the link between science and freedom, the “open mind” and the “open society”.<sup>18</sup>

In Robert A. Heinlein’s voluminous work there is a constant exploration of the issues of individual liberty versus the “parasitic” and “fumbling” state, rationality versus religious dogmatism and theocratic politics, individual merit versus racism, individual happiness versus anti-sexual pathology (“the most mammoth hoax in history”<sup>19</sup>), and constant opposition to the myriad doctrines of the “organic society”, whether in its left or right wing forms. There is a strong note of pessimism in Heinlein’s work, an awareness of the fact that there is only an “extremely tiny fraction who think regularly, accurately, creatively, and without self-delusion”.<sup>20</sup> He has thus never ceased exploring different political and institutional means to encourage individual freedom and responsibility, from the “armed citizenry” of *Beyond This Horizon*, the restricted franchise of *Starship Troopers* (which attempts to link “ultimate authority” to “the maximum responsibility”) and the “rational anarchy” of *The Moon Is A Harsh Mistress*.

The note of pessimism is more pronounced in the work of H. Beam Piper, whose own fictional “future history” is one of the cycle of the rise and fall of civilizations, the apparently inevitable abandonment of the responsibilities of rational citizenry and the rise of the

... barbarians ... the people who don’t understand civilization, and wouldn’t like it if they did. The hitchhikers. The people who create nothing, and who don’t appreciate what others have created for them and who think civilization is something that just exists and all they have to do is enjoy what they can understand of it — luxury, a high standard of living, and easy work for high wages. Responsibility? Phoe! What do they have a government for ...?<sup>21</sup>

Poul Anderson has also made his commitment to classical liberal and libertarian views explicit and explored the endless struggle between irresponsibility and irrationalism and responsibility and rationalism. Thus he has declared:

Collectivism, under whatever name, is as old as the neolithic god-kings; while it was a mere two centuries ago that Thomas Jefferson wrote of “life, liberty and

the pursuit of happiness” as being human rights ... I have an intellectual suspicion that the 18th century British-American idea of government by contract is so profoundly revolutionary that a thousand years would scarcely serve to exhaust its potentialities, and that it might conceivably move us onto an entire new level of social evolution.<sup>22</sup>

What are the social contexts most conducive to liberty, rationality and responsibility? Frontier conditions like the asteroid based society of *Tales of The Flying Mountains* seem to be one. But it takes “toil and grief” and the conscious practice of “keen and critical science” to both defend or extend “the unnatural state called civilization and freedom” against the “revolt of the primitive mind”.<sup>23</sup> For Anderson there seems to be no foolproof guarantee for the preservation of civilization. The enlightened liberal social engineering of the Psychotechnic Institute in one series of “future history” stories, the mercantile civilization of the “Polesotechnic League” stories — all social and institutional forms have their distinctive weaknesses and seeds of destruction. “Why has every free human society been so short-lived?”, the question he asks in his short story *The Master Key*, thus remains the constant question throughout Anderson’s work.

In recent years the work of the Russian-born American novelist and philosopher Ayn Rand has had a major influence on Science Fiction writers, as it has done on a growing number of philosophic and political thinkers. Rand has developed an extensive systematic neo-Aristotelian philosophy, attempting a radical defence of reason, science and individual liberty, which has been the principal impetus to the modern libertarian movement.<sup>24</sup> Amongst the younger writers influenced by her work one should note F. Paul Wilson’s “La Nague Federation” novels, *Healer* (1976) and *Wheels Within Wheels* (1978), L. Neil Smith’s “North American Confederacy” novels, *The Probability Broach* (1980), *The Venus Belt* (1980), *Their Majesties Bucketeers* (1981), and *The Nagasaki Vector* (1983), J. Neil Schulman’s *Alongside Night* (1979), and *The Rainbow Cadenza* (1983), and David Houston’s *Gods In A Vortex* (1977) and *Wing Master* (1981). The libertarian and rationalist ideas explored in such works are more vigorous, more optimistic and more militant in tone than most of the older writers.<sup>25</sup>

### III: Applied Science Fiction”

It is significant that most Science Fiction authors and critics have taken a strongly “activist” view on the role of the genre. “Science Fiction”, as John J. Pierce has put it, “is not only speculating about the future, but helping to create it”. In a period in which a large number of writers are stressing the alleged “limits of growth”, and calling for the abandonment of reason, science, and the open society in favour of the allegedly more satisfying life of the “organic society”, mysticism, and despotic tribal society,<sup>27</sup> a large number of Science Fiction authors have explicitly joined battle against this “anti-industrial revolution”.

In the UK, George Hay has been in the forefront of the advocacy of what he calls “applied science fiction”, working through such organizations as The Environmental Consortium, The Science Fiction Foundation, and The Free Space Society as well as in literary exposition to encour-

age the recognition of the “illimitable New Frontier” of scientific research and space exploration:

[In] a Caesarist world such as ours, one increasingly falling under the influence of intellectual and political thugs, it is inevitable that increased responsibility must accrue to any body insisting that futures exist or can be created ... The writer’s role is precisely to dramatise the leading edge of his society’s unuttered but potent thoughts. Science fiction writers did not cause man to reach the moon but they legitimised in the minds of millions of taxpayers the notion that it was desirable for them to do so.<sup>28</sup>

In America, this revolt for reason has gone much further and has become well organized. The monthly journal *Claustrophobia*<sup>29</sup> reports on the wide range of pro-technology, pro-science, life extension, pro-space research and space industrialization writings and projects. The L-5 society and the Sabre Foundation both promote and explore commercial development and exploration of space by governmental and free market initiatives.<sup>30</sup> Many Science Fiction authors have involved themselves in the explicitly political activities of the Libertarian Party and the Libertarian Futurist Society.<sup>31</sup>

Jerry Pournelle’s work is a paradigm case of such applied Science Fiction. In such fictional works as *Lucifer’s Hammer* (1977) and *Oath of Fealty* (1981), the central themes are the conflict between hysterical and coercive environmentalists and progressive technologists and scientists and the dramatization of the choice:

[B]e good peasants, safe peasants, superstitious peasants — or have worlds to conquer again. To control the lightning.<sup>32</sup>

Pournelle has written a number of non-fiction expositions of science and libertarianism, such as his *A Step Further Out* (1979). He has also been active within High Frontier, the campaign both to develop a space-based defensive system for the West, and to commercially explore and develop the resources of space.<sup>33</sup>

### IV: The Choice for Humanity

In their work *The Sociology of the Future* the American sociologists W. Bell and J. Man explicitly commented on the role of images of the future as determinants of the future.<sup>34</sup> The historic role of Science Fiction is, in an age when forces of irrationalism, mysticism, and tyranny have never been so close to extinguishing the ideals of science, progress, and the open society, to hold aloft, to dramatize those ideals. When a large portion of the academic intelligentsia has embraced reactionary and anti-scientific values, Science Fiction still offers the vision that our establishment intelligentsia has so fatefully abandoned. Will it be the poetry of Science Fiction that becomes an unacknowledged legislator of the world, or will it be the siren songs of reactionary, tribal nostalgia?

As Ray Bradbury has put it:

Challenge and response. Response and challenge. Toynbee’s voice ghosts us down the years ahead. What do I hand you now, traveller? A suitcase stuffed with spirits to last beyond Alpha Centauri? Or a shovel for your grave? Choose one. Move or dig.<sup>35</sup>

## NOTES

1. *Jerusalem Post Magazine*, 30 September 1977, p. 9.
2. Sam J. Lundwall, *Science Fiction: What It's All About*, Ace Books, New York, NY, 1971, p. 24.
3. *The Strength To Dream*, Gollancz, London 1962, pp. 106-108. Science Fiction can be found as the short story, the novel, the poem, and even the song! It can dispense with many of the literary characteristics considered essential by 'mainstream' literature and critics. For example, characterization can be relegated to second place or no place at all — in stories in which the idea is 'hero'. Attempts to define Science Fiction in purely literary or aesthetic terms in hence rendered nugatory.
4. Peter Medawar, *The Hope of Progress*, Wildwood House, London, 1974, p. 117.
5. Colin Wilson, *The Age of Defeat*, Gollancz, London, 1959, pp. 17-19.
6. Henry A. Murray, " 'In Nomine Diaboli' ", in T. Hillway and L. S. Mansfield, eds., *Moby Dick: Centennial Essays*, Southern Methodist University Press, Dallas, Texas, 1953.
7. John Weightman, "The Concept of the Avant Garde", *Encounter*, July 1969, pp. 13-14.
8. For the most systematic philosophic critique of "serious" literature and its values, and a defence of what she terms "Romanticism" (an orientation to voluntarist and individualist metaphysical and moral values), see Ayn Rand, *The Romantic Manifesto: A Philosophy of Literature*, New American Library, New York, 1977. For a detailed application of this perspective to science fiction see John J. Pierce, "Science Fiction and the Romantic Tradition", *Different*, 3(3), October 1968 and "The New Eschatology", *Renaissance*, 1(4), 1970. The latter has also been reprinted in *Foundation* (The Science Fiction Foundation), No. 1, March 1972. These two essays are perhaps the most important and penetrating ever written on the genre.
9. E. E. Smith, "The Epic of Space", in L. A. Eshbach, ed., *Of Worlds Beyond: The Science of Science Fiction Writing*, Dennis Dobson, London, 1965, p. 92.
10. Jack Williamson, "The Logic of Fantasy", in *ibid*, p. 48. Science Fiction author Algis Budrys has also commented on the "spirit of rational nobility" to be found in adventure oriented Science Fiction. See John J. Pierce, "Science Fiction and the Romantic Tradition", *op cit*, p. 20.
11. In a review in *Analog*, February 1968, quoted in J. J. Pierce, *ibid*, p. 21.
12. In his essay "The Science Fiction Novel", quoted in J. J. Pierce, *ibid*, p. 24.
13. *Ibid*, p. 32.
14. Asimov, *op cit*, p. 32.
15. *Mind and Politics*, California University Press, Berkeley, 1972, p. 2.
16. See William J. Hyde, "The Socialism of H. G. Wells in the Early Twentieth Century", *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 17(2), April 1956.
17. See Karl Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1945, Vol. 2, pp. 227-228; F. A. Hayek, *The Counter-Revolution of Science*, The Free Press, New York, NY, 1955; Murray N. Rothbard, "The Mantle of Science", in H. Schoeck and J. W. Wiggins, eds., *Scientism and Values*, D. Van Nostrand, Princeton, New Jersey, 1960.
18. For a more detailed exploration of the epistemological and metaphysical roots of totalitarian doctrines of both "left" and "right", see Leonard Peikoff, *The Ominous Parallels: The End of Freedom in America*, New American Library, New York, 1984. In Peikoff's words: "When the power of reason is rejected, then, in social issues, the power of force takes its place. The epistemology of instinct is completed by the politics of brutality. Or, in philosophic terms: irrationalism generates statism", "Nazism versus Reason", *The Objectivist* (New York), October 1969, pp. 6-7.
19. *Glory Road*, New English Library, London, 1965.
20. *Stranger in a Strange Land*, New English Library, London 1965, p. 396.
21. From *Space Viking*, quoted in John H. Costello, "H. Beam Piper: An Infinity of Worlds", Pt. 3, *Renaissance*, 5(2), p. 1.
22. Poul Anderson, "Freedom and Science Fiction", *New Libertarian*, 4(3), May 1978, p. 12; *idem*, "The Profession of Science Fiction", *Foundation*, No. 5, January 1974, p. 49.
23. Poul Anderson, *UN Man and Other Novellas*, Dennis Dobson, London, 1972, p. 97.
24. Rand's ideas can be found in such non-fiction works as: *For the New Intellectual*, New American Library, New York, 1963; *The Virtue of Selfishness*, New American Library, New York, 1964; *Capitalism: The Unknown Ideal*, New American Library, New York, 1967; *The New Left: The Anti-Industrial Revolution*, New American Library, New York, 1971; *The Romantic Manifesto*, New American Library, NY, 1977 and in such novels as: *Atlas Shrugged*, New American Library, New York, 1960; *Anthem*, New American Library, New York, 1973; *The Fountainhead*, New American Library, New York, 1960. Critical discussions can be found in Douglas J. Den Uyl and Douglas B. Rasmussen, eds., *The Philosophy Thought of Ayn Rand*, University of Illinois Press, 1984; Robert Nozick "On the Randian Argument" and D. Den Uyl and D. Rasmussen, "Nozick on the Randian Argument" in Jeffrey Paul, ed., *Reading Nozick: Essays on 'Anarchy, State and Utopia'*, Basil Blackwell, Oxford, UK, 1981, and the forthcoming biography *The Passion of Ayn Rand* by Barbara Branden.
25. In the space available I have only been able to touch upon the evidence for my thesis as to the ideological character of Science Fiction. There are also, of course, exceptions to this dominant temper. Frederick Pohl and C. M. Kornbluth, both jointly and individually, wrote a number of works in the 1950s directly based on anti-capitalist premises. Clifford Simak's novel *A Choice of Gods* (1973) is explicitly "organicist" and anti-individualist, attacking the "fatal disease" of property, profit and the conquest of nature. The short-lived "New Wave" school of science fiction of the late 1960s and early 1970s was also consciously conceived as an attack on "traditional" Science Fiction. It attacked "naive rationalism" (Judith Merrill) and "reactionary mechaporn" (Michael Moorcock) in favour of avowed mysticism, wallowed in the alleged "universal miseries" (Willis E. McNally) of life, and called for the "retribalization" (McNally) of humanity. The novels of J. G. Ballard were paradigmatic of this approach. They featured "dissolving heroes" who, in the face of mysterious natural disasters, do not fight, but seek, literally, "absorption" and extinction. In *The Wind From Nowhere*, for example, we find a quite explicit statement that "man has no right to assert his innate superiority over the unreason of the natural world". This "New Wave" receded remarkably quickly in the UK, however, in spite of the infusion of Arts Council subsidies, and is now largely limited to a small coterie of critics.
26. "The New Eschatology", *op cit*, p. 3.
27. See, for example, out of a huge literature, Robert Heilbroner, *The Human Prospect*, W. W. Norton, New York, 1974; William Irwin Thompson, *Darkness and Scattered Light*, Doubleday, New York, 1979; Theodore Roszak, *The Making of a Counter Culture*, Faber, London, 1970.
28. George Hay, "For The Record: What the Science Fiction Ought to be About", *Foundation*, No. 5, January 1974, pp. 63-66; *idem*, "A Science of Fiction", *Foundation*, No. 3, March 1973, p. 42; and see also his "Science Fiction: Thinking or Dreaming?", *Ad Astra*, 1(4), April 1979; "What Then, Comrades, Should Be Done?", *Arena*, No. 5, 1977; *idem*, "Space Colonies: Our Tomorrow, A Symposium on Mankind's Future", Faculty of Environmental Studies, North East London Polytechnic, 11 March 1976; "Applied Science Fiction", address to the Libertarian Alliance, London House, 30 October, 1984.
29. *Claustrophobia*: 5047 SW 26th Drive, Portland, Oregon 97201, USA.
30. The L-5 Society, 1620 North Park Avenue, Tucson, Arizona 85719, USA. The Sabre Foundation, 325 Pennsylvania Avenue, SE, Washington, DC 20003, USA. See also the papers delivered to the 1979 meeting of the American Astronomical Society: Robert Poole "Free Space", J. Peter Valk, "No More Doomsday", G. Hudson and P. K. Chapinan, "Gateway to Space", published in *Reason*, April 1979, 10(12) and Michael Gilson, "Man and the Stars: A Libertarian Proposal to Get There", *New Libertarian*, Nos. 5-6, January 1980.
31. The Libertarian Party: 21715 Park Brook Drive, Katy, Texas 77450, USA; The Libertarian Futurist Society: 121 McKinley Street, Rochester, New York 14609, USA.
32. Larry Niven and Jerry Pournelle, *Lucifer's Hammer*, Futura Books, London, 1978, p. 835. Another major work in this contemporary school of militantly progressive Science Fiction is G. C. Edmondson's *The Man Who Corrupted Earth*, Ace/Grosset and Dunlop, New York, 1980. This novel portrays a last-ditch — and successful — struggle of private entrepreneurs to expand into space against the coercive opposition of state privileged corporations, fanatical anti-science environmentalists, and "the total amorality of government", p. 280. As Edmondson states: "The only ones who complain about Western technology are Westerners ... every Third Worlder carries a ballpoint and a transistor while he struggles to climb from moped to limousine ... The old guard can still hurt us. We won't be safe until we have factories and farms off planet." (p. 267)
33. High Frontier, 1010 Vermont Avenue, NW, Suit 1000, Washington, DC 20005, USA.
34. Russell Sage Foundation, New York, NY, 1971.
35. Ray Bradbury, "From Stonehenge to Tranquillity Base", *Playboy*, December 1972, p. 324.