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Invited Talk, *Science Fiction: The Interdisciplinary Genre,*
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Four Hundred Years of Rob Sawyer

No doubt you are as pleased as I am to be participating in this conference. I am particularly pleased to be invited to deliver one of its opening addresses. On this occasion what I have to offer is not scholarship or analysis but some perceptions and appreciation. I hope you will keep these words in mind, if only because I will do the same ... and I would not want you to be led astray, expecting forceful Final Words on our subject. Instead, expect some suggestive First Words!

The acquisition of Robert J. Sawyer's literary papers reflects well on McMaster University, as does the sponsorship of this conference to celebrate at midpoint the career and accomplishment of this remarkable writer. His fonds reside in Mills Memorial Library, not far from where we are meeting, where they will resist the incursions and erosions of time, alongside papers by Bertrand Russell and J.R.R. Tolkien and other writers of note. (Let me add that they also reside alongside the papers of John Robert Colombo, which the library acquired in 1969. I am still awaiting the conference to mark that occasion!)

Parenthetically, I will note that the decision concerning the acquisition of literary papers rests in the hands of enlightened librarians, and McMaster has had a number of these. For instance, I dealt with the chief librarian, William Ready, a tweedy Welshman. He was a personal friend of a little-known author named Tolkien, as well as the contributor in the 1950s of several delightful fantasies that appear in the pages in *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*. I have written at length about ghosts and spirits, and while I do not believe in ghosts, I do accept the existence

of spirits, or at least the spirit of Dr. Ready, which to this day inspires the archivists and librarians who work at Mills Memorial Library.

In another way McMaster is a leader, as I discovered in my work as a “quote collector” – not for nothing am I known as John “Bartlett” Colombo. I publicized the fact that one of the most important quotations of the late 20th century – globally – was coined on this campus. I have in mind the following three words: “evidence-based medicine.” That formulation is now a byword in scientific and medical circles, and it was first used in Fall 1990 by Dr. David Guyyatt of the Michael G. DeGroote School of Medicine. The words are powerful ones, as they distinguish between “evidence” on one hand and “experience” or “eminence” on the other – between science and word of mouth. The approach of McMaster is, if nothing else, down-to-earth, practical, scientific, certainly evidence-based.

There is little that is practical about my presentation. I may well be the only presenter who refers to Robert J. Sawyer as “Rob,” his nickname. I take this liberty because my wife Ruth and I have known him and his wife Caroline Clink, the talented poet, and her brother David Clink, also a talented poet, for almost thirty-five years. The reference to “four hundred years” is a key reference, one that Rob will recognize, as it recalls the title of the illustrated talk “Four Hundred Years of Fantastic Literature in Canada” which I delivered on a dozen occasions over two decades. It aims to link the literary and subliterary works of the imagination inspired by this part of the world into a narrative, not a *cause-and-effect* continuity, of course, but a *casual-and-effective* literary history.

The narrative of the talk begins in 1657, during the days of New France, with the crash-landing outside Quebec City of the swashbuckling hero and author Cyrano de Bergerac, the so-called “swordsman in space.” Cyrano, our earliest astronaut, blasts off from Paris en route to the Sun and the Moon but crash-lands in Quebec. Aboriginal legends and myths and European fantasies about the Polar North to one side, that crash marks the beginning of Canadian fantastic literature. The next epochal event occurs in 1866, with the publication of Jules Verne’s *The Adventures of Captain Hatteras*, which describes how the North Pole is “attained” at the very moment that it erupts, the Pole itself being a magnetic volcano.

I could continue, but the point I want to make is that readers of Canadian literature will be familiar with the following names of writers who have produced fantastic fiction with Canadian

content – Cyrano de Bergerac, Jules Verne, James De Mille, Grant Allen, Robert Barr, Algernon Blackwood, Frederick Philip Grove, Stephen Leacock, Hugh MacLennan, William Weintraub, Margaret Laurence, Phyllis Gotlieb, Hugh Hood, Yves Thériault, Michel Tremblay, Phyllis Gotlieb, Margaret Atwood, Gwendolyn MacEwen, Judith Merrill, and so on – and their familiarity permits me to make the following point:

The most memorable fantastic literature of Canadian authorship has been written by known and often by well-known Canadian writers, mainstream authors rather than by writers who are identified with the genres of science-fiction, fantasy-fiction, and weird-fiction. The only early writers with any degree of name recognition who emerged from the genres in more recent years have been A.E. van Vogt, Spider Robinson, William Gibson, and now Rob Sawyer.

In fact, Rob is the key figure here, and perhaps the sole one who has been influenced by this chronology which extends from the prehistoric past to the post-historic future. It was the late Northrop Frye who observed that given the topography of Canada, like the iconography of the country, two eras co-exist – the Precambrian and the Postmodern. For the Precambrian era there are prehistoric creatures as well as tribes of primitive men, courtesy Sir Charles G.D. Roberts's *In the Morning of Time* (1919). Now there are clever Neanderthals and intelligent therapods, thanks to two of Rob's trilogies: "The Neanderthal Parallax" and "The Quintanglio Ascension." For the Postmodern era there are any number of scientists and inventors, telepaths and astronauts ... aboard rocket ships, space ships, and star ships.

I am stressing Rob's Canadian background, aware that his readership is North American, indeed, international, if only because other presenters here will place his work in their appropriate contexts. Yet Rob has always been clear in his mind that he is a writer who is a Canadian and a Canadian who is writer, and that the two converge. I will resist the temptation to suggest that there are some themes to be found in his work that may be considered "particularly Canadian," if only because I took a stab at trying to isolate the four characteristics of our national SF literature in the anthology *Other Canadas*, published thirty-four years ago, when Rob was but nineteen years old, enrolling at what is now Ryerson University.

Observers have long been impressed with Rob, who has made no secret of what excitements him – science, science fiction, science-fiction fandom, the science-fiction scene, and the prose and poetry of his fellow science-fiction writers, so that the work of no novice or veteran writer every

goes unappreciated or unacknowledged. Under the auspices of a university press, he has lent his hand to the task of publishing the fiction of fellow writers both younger and older than himself. Observers have also noted that Rob is a fully professional writer. Right from the first he took the professional rather than the amateur or the artistic stance because he takes his own work seriously. It has paid off and influenced many a younger writer. The NHL – the National Hockey League – has a category of award for Builders or Boosters of the national game. Is there a Hugo Award for Builder or Booster? If not, there should be, and Rob should receive that honour! He is extraordinarily appreciative of the work of other writers and of the merits of literary works unlike his own.

Let me offer a minor instance of his appreciation, his professionalism, and his prescience. In January 1993, I commissioned lists of books for *The Writer's Map of Canada*. I asked Rob for one to be headed “Robert J. Sawyer’s Favourite Canadian Science Fiction Novels.” Rob accepted the challenge and contributed a list. The choices were made twenty years ago, yet they stand up to present-day scrutiny. I will simply list the novels with authors’ names in alphabetical order, without his perceptive annotations.

1. *The Handmaid's Tale*. Margaret Atwood.
2. *Neuromancer*. William Gibson.
3. *A Judgment of Dragons*. Phyllis Gotlieb.
4. *Stardance*. Spider and Jeanne Robinson.
5. *Slan*. A.E. van Vogt.
6. *The Silent City*. Elisabeth Vonarburg.

What I like about the list is that it covers hard and soft SF, it appreciates historical and regional writing, it recognizes women writers, it has a place for Quebec, and it earmarks the works of both established authors and new writers. As well, it appreciates quality, variety, and historical importance, including the importance of feminism. I am particularly pleased to see the inclusion of *Slan*. The full entry for this novel runs as follows: “*Slan* by A.E. van Vogt, then a resident of Toronto (1946). One of the all-time classics of SF; a fast-paced story about mutant humans with psychic powers.” Indeed, even today, if I had to recommend six novels written by Canadians, I would begin with this list. Let me add, there is not one novel included here that even remotely resembles a novel that Rob could have written. The author as compiler shows *prescience*, a word that coincidentally includes the word *science*.

The list's early recognition of the importance Atwood's dystopian novel is of interest if only because Rob is one of the few writers to enter into a debate with "La Atwood" about the status of her novel *The Handmaid's Tale* occasioned by remarks she had made upon the publication of the first book in her "Oryx and Crake" trilogy.

Here is the background. Rob asserts his identity in his email address as "sawyer @ sfwriter.com." It irritates him that people like Peggy eschew the label "science fiction" and opt instead for the descriptor "speculative fiction," a term endorsed, if not introduced, by another Torontonion, the late Judy Merrill. The suspicion here is the suggestion that there is something pejorative or prejudicial about the label "science fiction," as it smacks of Precambrian genre writing. As well, the suspicion here is that in the merchandising of Peggy's novels the term was avoided in favour of the Postmodern "speculative writing." The women who purchase her novels – women purchase most novels, by the way, and are not noted to be buyers of works of science-fiction – might keep their distance from them, a fact known to the author but even better known by her agent and publishers.

Peggy is certainly knowledgeable about genre SF – and all other works of the fantastic imagination, it seems. At the same time there is the irritation that works of science fiction are held to be instances of genre writing, whereas works of so-called speculative fiction are held to be contributions to Literature with the L capitalized. There are economic consequences to this distinction. For instance, in this context her works are automatically considered to be eligible for major, mainstream literary awards, whereas Rob's are not automatically so considered, despite their quality.

Rob has written two articles on the subject and reprinted them in his collection *Relativity*, which express an uncharacteristic churlishness: "Margaret Atwood doesn't like to be called a science-fiction writer. Tough beans, says I. When she writes a novel set in the future that purports to be firmly rooted in contemporary scientific thought, she is indeed writing science fiction." Then he comments, somewhat negatively, on the quality of her work *as* science fiction.

I can only allude to this interesting debate, one that I hope will be addressed by some contributors to this conference. In the meantime, Rob has been brave – and right – to beard the lioness in her den.

I am going to introduce the word *historicism* here because I believe Rob to be an *historicist*. The “ism” may be defined as the belief that social and cultural phenomena are determined by history, or the allied belief that historical events are governed by laws, social or even scientific ones. One thinks of Karl Marx, Oswald Spengler, Arnold Toynbee, and even Court Korzybski. Maybe we should include Newton’s and Einstein’s laws as well. Yet Rob embraces historicism in a most contemporary way – in an allusion to the subheading of this conference, he does so in a way that is “interdisciplinary.” He accepts in his work the ideas and insights of the traditional sciences, specifically paleontology and anthropology, ethnology and sociology, biology and neurobiology, astrophysics and cosmology.

No one does this better than Rob. Indeed, to read his fiction is to be informed about cutting-edge advances in these sciences and to be infected with his characters’ enthusiasms for these disciplines – and also the author’s excitement. All this is to the good. But not included in the mix, I am reluctant to add, are advances being made in the softer disciplines, including philosophy, psychology, symbology, mythology, etc. I know that Rob is both a Rationalist and a Humanist, but the two “ists” are non-congruent. At times I think the Rationalist dimension of his nature is more developed than the Humanist dimension. The Humanist has a broader canvas than the Rationalist. Let me illustrate what I mean.

I am going to compare Rob’s writings with that of Arthur C. Clarke who is an author especially admired by Rob. I am going to do so based on the following fact. Almost fifty years ago, the eminent critic Edmund Wilson made an interesting admission in his study titled *O Canada: An American’s Notes on Canadian Culture*. Wilson famously wrote about the neglect of the writings of Morley Callaghan: “The reviewer... is now wondering whether the primary reason for the current under-estimation of Morley Callaghan may not be simply a general incapacity – apparently shared by his compatriots – for believing that a writer whose work may be mentioned without absurdity in association with Chekhov’s and Turgenev’s can possibly be functioning in Toronto.”

To compare Rob’s writings with those of Arthur C. Clarke may elicit the same initial reaction. Yet both authors are serious thinkers about the advance of the sciences and careful writers who inhabit the same “arm” of the Milky Way Galaxy, their lives overlapping by forty-eight years. There is no question that scientific foundations underlie the fictions of both writers, yet Clarke’s

inherent humanity – his sense of playfulness as well as his grasp of the psychological depths of man’s “sense of wonder” – have led him to add an extra dimension or topping to his works of fiction, whether short or long.

I will give two instances. There is his famous story “The Nine Billion Names of God” with its riveting last sentence: “Overhead, without any fuss, the stars were going out.” There are the last chapters of his great novel *Childhood’s End* with its wholly unforeseen vision of the future of mankind in terms of the next generation of youngsters. Here is a prophetic pre-configuration of the Hippies, if there ever was one; here is the anticipation of the digital generation, which is now upon us, marked by a psychical interconnectivity of consciousness – not digital, but psychical, though the differences are (perhaps) minimal. Clarke is not being false to the spirit of science in these visionary depictions, only to historicism and scientism. Without sacrificing the science, he is being a truthful witness to the divided nature of man and the equivocal nature of the cosmos.

In the text of his important speech “The Future Is Already Here,” also included in his collection *Relativity*, Rob makes a curious remark about Clarke’s characters. “As much as I admire Arthur C. Clarke – and I do, enormously – the most unrealistic thing about his fiction is how darn reasonable everyone is.” I know what he means – a Clarke character does seem to be “good Yorkshireman” – but beyond this there is a view of the cosmos which is not so reasonable because it stretches the imagination beyond mathematics and calculation without undermining the importance of those disciplines.

Rob is an *historicist* in that the laws of the universe, not what humans or non-humans think about them, constitute reality. That is a practical approach, but human nature is more than what is grasped by the rationalist ethos. An expression of the rational and practical view is Tom Godwin’s remarkable short story “The Cold Equations” which appeared in *Astounding Science Fiction* in 1954. It is “hard” SF in the best sense of the word. On a larger canvas scientism does not fare so well. Historicism lurks behind the Nexilist views of Dr. Elliott Grosvenor in *The Voyage of the Space Beagle* by A.E. van Vogt. It also informs Isaac Asimov’s “Foundation Series” with its entertaining yet spurious “psychohistory.” Despite the sweep and interest of these works, they have dated badly, mainly because of the explanation that “one size fits all.”

In the same text, Rob writes with approval about a definition by Isaac Asimov: “Indeed, even Isaac Asimov, known for a rather perfunctory approach to characterization, knew full well that

SF was about the impact progress has on real people. His definition of science fiction was ‘that branch of literature that deals with the responses of human beings to changes in science and technology.’” This is true, as far as it goes. Yet there are as well changes in society and in human nature that are not known to be caused by scientific and technological change.

Interestingly, in this talk, Rob quotes from what he calls “my favourite review of my own work.” His thoughtful novel *Flashforward* was reviewed by the journalist Henry Mietkiewicz in *The Toronto Star*. Rob quotes the following sentence: “Sawyer compels us *to think rationally* about questions we normally consider too metaphysical to grapple with.”

An excellent observation. Yet I wonder about the words “to think rationally.” Literature deals not just with thoughts that are rational but also with feelings, emotions, and intuitions that are inherently or at least currently held to be inchoate, irrational. Perhaps one day Mietkiewicz will have occasion to write as follows: “Sawyer compels us *to feel emotionally* about questions we normally consider too metaphysical to grapple with.”

I doubt that I am alone in expressing the opinion that Rob’s work is advancing developmentally beyond that of the rationalist to that of the humanist, embracing those *post-historicist* elements of the world-view that are to be found in the major and mature works of Arthur C. Clarke and other SF masters, works that leave room – a little, often as an aside or as an afterthought, a “stage whisper,” so to speak – for the vast mystery that co-exists with knowledge. and for human destiny as well as for man’s fate. Rob has already written works which anticipate such a quantum leap. *Fossil Hunter* is one of such novels, for it takes the reader to the threshold of *Gitchi Manitou* (the Algonkian words for not “god” or “spirit” but *Great Mystery*). Here is the seat of the celebrated “sense of wonder.”

The *post-historicist* approach became apparent to me when I pondered the following passage from the novel *Solaris* written by the Polish engineer and author Stanislaw Lem.

IN THE INTERESTS OF BREVITY, I WILL NOT READ A PASSAGE IN “SOLARIS” ABOUT THE SHAPE-ASSUMING “SYMMETRIADS,” NOR THE PARALLEL PASSAGE ABOUT THE “SCROLL” OF CREATION THAT INTRODUCES ROB’S NOVEL “FOSSIL HUNTER.” INSTEAD I WILL QUOTE THE WORDS OF THE GEOLOGIST TOROCA IN THE LATTER NOVEL. THEY SUGGEST THE COSMIC SWEEP OF HISTORY AND PRE

AND POST-HISTORY (IT SAVES NINETY SECONDS, AND I AM NEARING THE END!):

In the passage the nature of the “symmetriad” is being discussed, a unique form of liquid matter created by the “sentient sea” of the planet Solaris as observed by Kris Kelvin and other astronauts aboard the orbital observer that circles the planetary sea or marine planet whose intelligence proves to be as evasive today as it was four hundred years earlier.

Any number of attempts have been made to transpose and “illustrate” the symmetriad, and Averian’s demonstration was particularly well received. Let us imagine, he said, an edifice dating from the great days of Babylon, but built of some living, sensitive substance with the capacity to evolve: the architectonics of this edifice pass through a series of phases, and we see it adapt the forms of a Greek, then of a Roman building. The columns sprout like branches and become narrower, the roof grows lighter, rises, curves, the arch describes an abrupt parabola then breaks down into an arrow shape: the Gothic is born, comes to maturity and gives way in time to new forms. Austerity of line gives way to a riot of exploding lines and shapes, and the Baroque runs wild. If the progression continues – and the successive mutations are to be seen as stages in the life of an evolving organism – we finally arrive at the architecture of the space age, and perhaps too at some understanding of the symmetriad.

Generations of theorists have dismissed the thesis of Averian, but for a flimsy reason: “It is evasive and illusory, and side-steps the central fact that the symmetriad is quite unlike anything Earth has ever produced.” It is argued that the human mind is unable to hold all these ideas simultaneously or successively. Yet the intelligence of Solaris is such that it senses each astronaut’s failed relationships and recreates mouldages, or replicants, of lovers, with lives of their own. The Averian thesis may be problematic to the philosopher, but to the writer as creator of new forms reflective of old forms it is rife with productive and reproductive value.

Scientists concerned with the conditions of life on a planet like Solaris, the composition of which is 100 percent water, resemble science-fiction writers who are concerned with the status of life on the planet Earth, which is 70 percent water and 30 percent land.

The passage from *Solaris* resembles the Prologue of Rob’s noteworthy novel, *Fossil Hunter*. You will remember it begins with a recital of “The First Sacred Scroll” which describes in veiled

terms the origin of “the first intelligent saurians.” (Here one may recall the “animal stories” of Sir Charles G.D. Roberts.) Here are the opening sentences of the recital:

Five thousand kilodays ago, God laid the eight eggs of creation. When they hatched, the world was born.

[All eight eggs are described.]

“But even with all eight eggs hatched, God was not pleased. She wanted something else, something that would think and pray.”

What follows is the recitation of the arresting, eight-part genesis of the species, as recorded in the first of their sacred scrolls. Close to three hundred pages later (metaphorically three hundred scrolls later), we hear the speech of Toroca, the geologist who shares his scientific knowledge and speculative intelligence with his fellow dinosaurs:

LET ME SUMMARIZE:

“Evolution accounts for all the diversity of life,” said Toroca. “Of that I’m sure. You see that lowest of the white layers in the rocks near the top of the cliff? The one we’ve called the Bookmark layer? That name is more apt than we knew: it marks the beginning of our story here, on this world, but by no means the real beginning of the saga of the Quintaglios. That book, as I’ve said, is elsewhere. We used to think the Bookmark marked the point of creation, but it does nothing of the kind. It merely marks the point of *arrival*. Life originated elsewhere, evolved elsewhere.”

“We’re not just going to the stars,” he said, his voice full of wonder. And then he tipped his muzzle down and nodded at his friends. “We’re going home.”

Like the Quintaglios, we too are living in a “Bookmark layer.” The geological strata offer revelations that are distantly related to the origin of life in the heavens – that is, the galaxies of stars and the cosmos. So “Bookmark” is a suggestive word for all of Rob’s writings. Prehistory and post-history are so close it hurts. Arthur C. Clarke would approve!

There are a number of such “Bookmarks” in Rob’s fiction and I predict that there will be many more. Rob’s work will be read as long as serious science fiction is appreciated. Indeed, it will be read four hundred years hence – in A.D. 2413, [twenty-four ... thirteen] to be precise – and it will

be appreciated alongside the “imaginary voyage” of Cyrano de Bergerac which first sent Canadian SF into orbit.

I am able to make this prediction with complete confidence because we know that the full texts of Rob’s writings – including all of his remarkable stories and novels, stimulating articles and essays – will be preserved, at least until the year 2413, in the stacks of McMaster University’s Mills Memorial Library.