

# REFLECTIONS

Robert Silverberg

## WRITING UNDER THE INFLUENCE

“Nothing comes from nothing,” said the Greek philosopher Parmenides, 2500 years ago. He meant that everything in the Universe has an antecedent in some preexisting form, be it the Moon, Mount Olympus, or the merest snowflake: things did not simply appear out of nowhere. The Roman poet Lucretius said it again five centuries later: “Nothing from nothing ever yet was born.” King Lear agreed: annoyed that his daughter Cordelia can’t express her love for him in words, he angrily retorts, “Nothing will come of nothing,” and thereby starts a great deal of trouble for everybody.

What is true for mountains and snowflakes is true for novels and short stories, too: no work of fiction ever sprang into being without some predecessor to inspire it. Sam Moskowitz, that indefatigable historian of science fiction, made it a special point to sniff out the literary influences that helped to shape the great SF writers. In *Seekers of Tomorrow*, a 1967 collection of essays, he showed how the reading of a novel by one C.E. Scoggins, *The Red Gods Call*, was instrumental in creating the moody, poetic style, so different from his earlier work, in which John W. Campbell wrote the classic stories he published under the name of Don A. Stuart. Moskowitz found the stylistic influence of Hemingway and Thomas Wolfe in Ray Bradbury’s fiction, and Bradbury’s influence in that of Richard Matheson, Charles Beaumont, and a whole host of other writers. He saw H.G. Wells hovering over the novels of John Wyndham, A. Merritt and S. Fowler Wright in the early work of Jack Williamson, echoes of the technique of Clifford D. Simak in that of Isaac Asimov.

Moskowitz never delved into the literary antecedents of the work of Robert Silverberg, but I could have told him exactly what they were. In college, already looking toward a career in science fiction, I made a careful study of the novels of William Faulkner and the plays of Sophocles, to my immense benefit. And as a fledgling SF writer I looked just as closely at the methods of such writers as Henry Kuttner, Jack Vance, Alfred Bester, Philip K. Dick, A.E. van Vogt, and Robert Sheckley. But one book in particular, one that few modern-day readers have heard of, has been a powerful influence over my writing all my life, leading me onward toward no less than four vastly dissimilar novels between 1969 and 1992.

I mean the English poet Walter de la Mare’s *The Three Mulla-Mulgars*, a magical novel that I discovered in my boyhood, some sixty-five years ago. It is a wonderful fantastical romance, dating from 1910, that tells of the adventures of three young Mulgars—the novel’s word for “monkeys”—of royal blood who, driven from their forest home, set out on a vast and adventurous trip across the heart of Africa. Their goal is the Arakkaboa Mountains, where, so their mother often had told them, their dead father’s brother Assassimon reigns in splendor.

“It will be a long and dreary journey, my sons,” their mother had warned them. “But the Prince Assassimon . . . is great and powerful, and has for hut a palace of ivory and Azmamogreel, with scarlet and Mamausul, slaves and peacocks, and beasts uncountable; and leagues of Ukka and Barbary-nuts; and boundless fields of Ummuz, and orchards of fruit, and bowers of flowers and pleasure.”

The Biblical cadence of de la Mare’s prose sang to me, even then. I knew nothing yet of his models in the King James translation of the Bible (“The merchandise of gold, and silver, and precious stones, and of pearls, and fine linen, and purple, and silk, and scarlet. . . . And cinnamon, and odors, and ointments, and frankincense, and

wine, and oil, and fine flour, and wheat, and beasts, and sheep, and horses, and chariots, and slaves, and souls of men. . . .”), nor did I know of that other great source of his from which the exotic special words of his book had come, the journal of the Elizabethan mariner Andrew Battle that had given him such words as M'keeso and Zevvera and Ollacondie, Dondo and Sharambba, and Imbe Calandola. But the powerful rhythms of de la Mare's style and the strangeness of his three Mulgars' journey through nightmare forests and formidable mountain passes exerted a powerful hold on me. I read *The Three Mulla-Mulgars* again and again when I was young, and I have read it now and then ever since, and it has never lost its beauty and wonder for me.

My first conscious use of *The Three Mulla-Mulgars* as a source for fiction dates from 1969, when I wrote *Son of Man*, the strangest of my novels, not so much a novel as a kind of surreal prose-poem set in the very distant future. The primary inspiration for the tone of *Son of Man* came from S. Fowler Wright's *The World Below* and David Lindsay's *A Voyage to Arcturus*, but I summoned memories of *The Three Mulla-Mulgars* at least twice. *Mulgars*, as I have noted, is a quest novel, the tale of the three monkey brothers who trek across much of tropical Africa in search of the wondrous kingdom of Assassimon, and early in their journey they are startled to find themselves in the midst of a snowstorm, hardly a common event in tropical Africa. (“Never since birds wore feathers—never had hoar-frost glittered on Munza-mulgar before.”) *Son of Man* also takes place mainly in tropical territory, but at one point my protagonist, a twentieth-century man named Clay, finds himself in a series of “districts of discomfort,” one of which is a place called Ice, where eternal winter rules: “Like a leprous spot on a tender cheek,” I wrote, “is this incongruous segment of the old Antarctic, somehow mortared into a kinder globe.”

In the final pages of the de la Mare novel, the Mulgars do indeed reach the kingdom of Assassimon, and in my own book Clay's journey ends at the marvelous Well of First Things, where all the world's history is stirred together in a mystic blaze. Here I borrowed nothing specific from *Mulla-Mulgars*, but only the climactic mood, the sense of a goal long sought and now about to be attained. The kinship between the two scenes would be recognizable only to me.

A later book of mine is much more explicitly derived from it. There is only one human character in *The Three Mulla-Mulgars*, who enters into the book briefly in its middle section. He is Andy Battle, who lives by himself in a hut in the forest, and who catches the youngest Mulgar, Nod, in a trap he has set up for snaring game. Battle proposes to keep Nod as a pet. He takes the skinny, preternaturally intelligent Nod to his hut, ties him to a pole, gives him a little soup and a bite or two of meat, and in his loneliness begins talking to him, explaining that he is no cannibal, but a God-fearing English sailor cast away in this remote and alien land, who has spent “years and years in this here dismal Munza. Man-eaters and Ephelantoes, Portingals and blackamoors, chased and harassed up and down. . . . What wouldn't I give for a sight of Plymouth now!”

Never did I think that “Andy Battle” was anything other than a fictional character. But then, about 1962—fifteen years or so after I first had read *The Three Mulla-Mulgars*—I began to do serious research into the great narratives of the Elizabethan voyagers; and one of the books I acquired was *The Strange Adventures of Andrew Battell of Leigh, in Angola and the Adjoining Regions*. At the sight of the name of Andrew Battell there leaped instantly into my mind the “Andy Battle” of Walter de la Mare's novel, a work still as vivid to me as *Alice in Wonderland* or *Peter Pan* or any of the other books of my childhood.

I began at once to read *The Strange Adventures of Andrew Battell*. And I had not read more than a few pages when I began coming across words out of the special *Mulla-Mulgars* vocabulary so deeply emblazoned in my memory and my imagination—

spelled differently, sometimes, but of the same sound. Here was the Ollacondie tree, and here was M'keeso, meaning a spirit, and here was the chieftain Imbe Calandola, and many more.

So I knew that Walter de la Mare must have come upon the narrative of Andrew Battell long before me, and had drawn upon Battell's account of his African adventures for many of the details and much of the vocabulary of his own fantastic novel. But he had not chosen to devote his book to Battell's own story, only to make him an incidental character in the shimmering work of imaginative beauty that he would write.

I jotted a note to myself, there in 1962: "Tell the story of Andrew Battell yourself."

And what a story! Battell's account, dictated in his old age, spanned only sixty-one pages, but it amazed me with its richness and power. It is the first record of European travels in the African interior. Battell had sailed for Africa in May 1589, had been captured by the Portuguese and used by them as a pilot on trading vessels traveling along the coast of Angola, and had eventually escaped and spent several years living among a cannibal tribe before making his way, after twenty years, back to England.

I resolved to write his own memoir at full length, filling in all that this simple seaman had left unsaid, and much more that he would never have dreamed of saying. The appeal to me was a three-fold one. On one level I would pay homage to that book of Walter de la Mare that had been so essential in the shaping of my childish imagination. On another, I would be recreating the lost world of British sixteenth-century maritime exploration and discovery, in which I had so passionate an interest. And, finally, I would be writing a kind of science fiction novel, in which I would be inventing not the future but the past, and bringing to life an alien civilization every bit as strange as those that had been imagined by the great science fiction writers.

The idea remained with me, year after year; I gathered collateral material for it, accounts of other travelers in the Congo and adjacent regions and all manner of anthropological and ethnographic lore; and early in 1982 I began at last writing the book I called *Lord of Darkness*. I incorporated virtually every word of Andrew Battell's short account in my own manuscript of nearly nine hundred pages; but I vastly expanded and transformed his tale in the course of trying to recreate his personality and the intensity and quality of his strange experiences in Africa. And I speckled its pages with words out of *Mulgars*—"babbaboomas," "zevveras," "m'-keeso"—by way of tipping my hat to that great fantasy novel of my childhood.

Twice more in my career I have allowed *The Three Mulla-Mulgars* to serve as an influence on my work. In *At Winter's End*, which I wrote in 1987, I took winsome little Nod, the most intelligent of the three royal monkeys, and turned him into Hresh, for whom I have the greatest affection of any of my characters: the protagonist of my novel about the adventures of a band of highly evolved apes in a post-apocalyptic Earth. And in *Kingdoms of the Wall*, written in 1992, I adapted a scene in which the *Mulgars* are climbing a mountain by way of a ledge no more than two paces wide, they and their companions tied together with ropes of grass, and produced a similarly vertiginous scene in which each climber grasped the backward-pointing staff of the one in front of him.

At my age I don't think I have any more novels in me. But *The Three Mulla-Mulgars* has done its work well for me, guiding my imagination across three decades of my writing life. Its beauty and wonder still burn in me. The book is very much worth seeking out. And, if you happen to be a writer, you may very well find its dazzling imagery seeping into your subconscious, as it did into mine, and putting its mark on your work thereafter.