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Science Fiction Studies

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Nouvelle Anthologie of Old Science Fiction

Monique Lebailly, ed. *La Science Fiction avant la SF: Anthologie de l'imaginaire scientifique française du Romantisme à la Pataphysique*. Paris: Editions de l'Instant, 1989. 226pp. 98FF.

This delightful collection of 19th century French SF, published in oversized softcover format, contains a wide selection of short stories and excerpts from the works of many "mainstream" authors in France who, while not known as having written SF, nevertheless dabbled occasionally in the genre. And some of the entries are quite surprising. For example, included are not only certain novelists who have often been associated with SF, like Robida and Villiers de l'Isle-Adam, but also unexpected ones, like Théophile Gautier, Alphonse Daudet, Guy de Maupassant, and Alfred Jarry. Certain famous poets of the French canon find their way into this collection as well: Alfred de Musset, Alphonse de Lamartine, Victor Hugo, and even Stéphane Mallarmé. The renowned philosopher Ernest Renan makes an appearance, as do a variety of other lesser-known novelists, journalists, and historians of 19th-century France: Erckmann-Chatrian, Samuel-Henri Berthoud, Auguste Franklin, Marie-Ernest d'Hervilly, Eugene Mouton (Mérinos), Charles Cros, Alphonse Allais, and Jean Richepin.

Not surprisingly, in her introduction to this unusual anthology, Monique Lebailly states her preference for a more broadly inclusive definition of SF—one that is thematically less restrictive and historically less straitjacketed: Did Homer need...cybernetics in order to imagine, in Book 18 of the *Iliad*, that Hephaestos had in his service golden androids who could think...?

This is why I believe that there are SF texts long before the advent of technology. But don't expect me to define the word 'science fiction'; numerous specialists of the genre have already worked up a great many definitions for itI instinctively distrust definitions:

maybe because of that final period which concludes them--which encloses the defined object in a tight net from which it cannot escape. I prefer images, and I would say simply that conjecture and hypothesis are the two driving motors of SF, and that 'if...' is the roadway upon which it travels... (8)

Explaining why she has chosen to include a selection of (admittedly atypical) texts from some of the most respected names in the history of French literature, Lebailly says:

Here then are some hilarious, serious, and disturbing examples of SF taken from this extremely fertile period of conjectural literature known as the 19th century....I hope that this anthology will please fans of SF, and that some of the famous names cited herein will serve as a lure to those individuals who still hesitate buying a book which carries this *infamante* label of SF. (9)

But what is interesting here is that, while openly and humorously describing her editorial tactics, Lebailly has also (perhaps inadvertently) identified a serious and continuing problem for the SF genre itself in France: its uphill fight for social legitimacy in the rigid, tradition-bound, and hierarchical world of French Belles-Lettres.

Be that as it may, *La Science Fiction avant la SF* does contain some fascinating texts--despite the fact that the SF purist might find a number of them too utopian and/or fantastic in nature. For example, the four excerpts of poetry from Musset, Lamartine, Hugo, and Mallarmé which begin the anthology are all grouped under the heading "Lyrical Futurology" [*Futurologie lyrique*]. Musset's, a passage from his *Dupont et Durand* (1838), is a biting satire of the utopian genre itself--which he sees as inherently repressive. A portion of Lamartine's *La Chute d'un ange* (1837) describes the flying machines of a technologically-advanced yet decadent civilization thriving in the pre-dawn of history. In the poem called "Vingtième siècle" in his opus *La Légende des siècles* (1883), Hugo, too, sings the praises of hypothetical human flight, evoking its mystical implications. And

Mallarmé's prose poem titled *Le Phénomène futur* (1864) paints a gloomy end-of-the-world scenario where Beauty is a long-forgotten remnant of the past.

Although a bit too taxonomic and quite superfluous to the volume as a whole, each of the remaining authors in this collection is assigned a separate rubric: e.g., the two short stories by Erckmann-Chatrian are classified as "Scientific Fantastic," that of Auguste Franklin as "Futuristic Archeology," those of Charles Cros as "Humor and Science," that of Maupassant as "The Presence of the Other," those of Jarry as "The Science of Imaginary Solutions," and so forth.

But the texts themselves are most often well chosen and do indeed give an idea of the virtual kaleidoscope of (non-Vernian) speculative fiction written in France during this period. For example, in the fantastic vein, one finds Erckmann-Chatrian's rather Hoffmannesque tale of *L'Oreille de la chouette* (1860), Alphonse Daudet's brooding, sentient forest in *Woodstown* (1870), and Jean Richepin's horrifying *La Machine métaphysique* (1876), which prefigures a similar machine later imagined by Kafka. As for utopias and dystopias of the future, one finds Samuel-Henri Berthoud's *L'An deux mille huit cent soixante-cinq* (1865)--an interesting and technologically-updated derivation of Mercier's earlier work on the subject--and Auguste Franklin's wryly comical *Les Ruines de Paris en 4875* (1875), which features several post-cataclysm archeologists poring over ancient monuments (the Louvre, the Arc de Triomphe, etc.) and conjecturing--in Samuel Madden fashion-- about how their ancestors must have lived 3000 years earlier. Time travel and anachronistic comedy are fused in Robida's *Jadis chez Aujourd'hui* (1890), as an eccentric scientist manages to resuscitate Louis XIV and his entire Versailles court into the Third Republic world of fin-de-siècle Paris. An excerpt of Renan's *Dialogues philosophiques* (1876) predicts--in somewhat Flammarion fashion--the evolution of the human species into a single, omniscient intellect expanding into the universe, whereas Eugène Mouton (Mérinos) in his more pessimistic *Fantaisies* (1883) imagines the total cessation of life on Earth as a result of progressive spontaneous combustion. Alien life-forms are the subject of Guy de Maupassant's UFO tale called *L'Homme de*

Mars (1865) and of Charles Cros' fancifully humorous *Le Caillou mort d'amour* (1886). Extrapolated technology is the central theme of Théophile Gauthier's *Une Visite nocturne* (1848), which presents a unique flying machine (one of the first to include an oxygen headmask); of Cros' wildly satirical *Le Journal de l'avenir* (1880), where newspapers outbid each other to purchase the best metallic brains to write their columns; of Alphonse Allais' sardonic cadaver-dryers in *Une idée lumineuse* (1888); of Villier's sadly pervasive sky advertising in *L'Affichage céleste* (1873); and of Marie-Ernest d'Hervilly's lighthearted parody of Edison's inventiveness in *Josuah Electricmann* (1883). And, lastly, the absurdist science of Alfred Jarry's *Pataphysique* completes the collection with excerpts from his *Gestes et opinions du Docteur Faustroll, Pataphysicien* (1911)--in particular, his "Commentaire pour servir à la construction pratique d'une machine à explorer le temps"--along with a tongue-in-cheek short story titled *L'Aviation résolue* (1901), which proposes the common umbrella as a means to conquer the skies.

Monique Labailly's anthology *La Science Fiction avant la SF* chooses to take the less-traveled road. It does so in two ways: by eschewing the SF "greats" of 19th-century France like Jules Verne, Camille Flammarion, J.H. Rosny, et al. in favor of more unknown (yet just as imaginative) SF writers, and by reminding us that even the most highly consecrated authors of the French literary tradition dabbled in SF from time to time. In this respect, Labailly's collection resembles somewhat H. Bruce Franklin's study of 19th-century American SF titled *Future Perfect* (1966, 1978)--although it lacks the critical depth and incisive commentary of this justly well-known and seminal work. But *La Science Fiction avant la SF* does succeed (perhaps even more than Franklin's book) in underscoring to what extent SF was (and is) a supremely polyvalent narrative form--how it can span the generic boundaries of poetry and prose, commingle the disciplines of philosophy and science, and supersede the artificial distinctions of "high" versus "popular" literature.

--ABE