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Science Fiction Studies

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BOOKS IN REVIEW

Two New Studies from France.

Arnaud Huftier, ed. *La Belgique: un jeu de cartes? De Rosny aîné à Jacques Brel.* [Belgium: a Game of Cards? From Rosny the Elder to Jacques Brel.] Valenciennes, France: Presses universitaires de Valenciennes, 2003. 304pp. 16€.

Roger Bozzetto and Arnaud Huftier. *Les Frontières du fantastique. Approches de l'impensable en littérature.* [The Borders of the Fantastic. Approaches to the Unthinkable in Literature.] Valenciennes, France: Presses universitaires de Valenciennes, 2004. 384pp. 22€.

For our francophone readers, here are two new and very worthwhile books that have recently come to my attention—one featuring a collection of essays on J.-H. Rosny aîné (who might be called the “H.G. Wells of France”) and one focusing on “The Borders of the Fantastic” (in the European sense of *fantastique* à la Todorov, rather than in the IAFA sense of “fantastic” as an umbrella term for horror, sf, and fantasy). Both are published by the Press of the University of Valenciennes located in the extreme northwest corner of France, near Lille and the Belgian border.

As its title would seem to suggest, the first volume seems to suffer from an acute case of thematic schizophrenia—it doesn’t appear to know what it wants to be. Over two-thirds of its content are devoted to the life and works of the Franco-Belgian sf writer J.-H. Rosny aîné. But, curiously, three additional essays on very different—albeit generally Belgium-related—topics (the town of Roubaix, Jacques Sternberg, and Jacques Brel) are

tacked on at the end. Since the latter contributors all list their affiliation as the University of Valenciennes, one wonders if their inclusion in this collection was done as a courtesy to publish the work of graduate students or if there were other motives involved (e.g., perhaps these were the acts of a conference?).

As for the pieces on and by J.-H. Rosny aîné, they are very good—the best collection of articles on Rosny that I have seen in recent years. Arnaud Huftier’s “Rosny aîné et les frontières” [Rosny the Elder and Borders] discusses Rosny as a mainstream writer—who even served as president of the Académie Goncourt—as well as a seminal sf writer. Roger Bozzetto’s “Rosny et ses chimères” [Rosny and his Chimera] focuses mostly on Rosny’s “alien encounter” narratives. Eric Lysøe’s “Rosny, poète de l’impur” [Rosny, Poet of the Impure] defines “impure” as the intentional mixing of genres, registers, and patterns of referentiality by Rosny in his sf texts. Guy Costes and Joseph Altairac’s “Une lost-race ‘nouvelle’... perdue” [A Lost-Race Short Story ... Lost] presents a short prehistoric tale by Rosny that was previously unknown: “La Résurrection de mon oncle Jérôme” [The Resurrection of My Uncle Jerome]. Paul Jamati’s “Le Premier Couple” [The First Couple] is a similar short story published in 1925 by an admirer of Rosny. Arnaud Huftier’s “Déliquescence et déplacement du merveilleux scientifique: M. Renard, A. Couvreur et Rosny aîné” [Decay and Displacement of the Scientific Marvelous: M. Renard, A. Couvreur, and Rosny the Elder] analyzes how these several French sf writers of the 1920s positioned their works within the evolving genre definitions of the time. Gérard Klein’s “Aperçu sur la taxinomie de variétés du roman dans l’œuvre de Rosny aîné” [A Brief Look at the Taxonomy of the Variety of Novels in the Work of Rosny the Elder] examines how Rosny viewed his own writings in the context of specific genre labels and expectations. Daniel Compère’s “Les Déclinaisons de l’aventure chez Rosny” [Declensions of Adventure in Rosny’s Works] discusses Rosny’s many non-sf “adventure” novels—the genre epithet “adventure” being defined very broadly—published during the 1920s. Hubert Desmarest’s “D’un horizon à l’autre : L’Etonnant Voyage de Hareton Ironcastle” [From One Horizon to the Next: *The Amazing Journey of Hareton Ironcastle*] offers an analysis of this

famous 1922 Rosny sf novel, probably his most self-reflexive and synthetic. Jean-Pierre Picot's "*L'Étonnant Voyage de Hareton Ironcastle : un hapax générique*" [*The Amazing Journey of Hareton Ironcastle: A Generic Hapax*] is another analysis of this—at times, Céline-like—novel, which is a “one of a kind” in Rosny's oeuvre. Jean-Michel Pottier's "*Fin de carrière, fin des temps : Les Instincts*" [*The End of a Career, the End of Time: Instincts*] takes a look at Rosny's last novel, published in 1939. J.H. Rosny aîné, "*Hommes et choses. Le Monde contemporain et les instincts primitifs*" [*Men and Things: the Contemporary World and Primitive Instincts*] concludes this part of the book with a very prescient little essay by Rosny on the seeds of barbarism still present in modern humanity (written in 1937-38 during Hitler's rise to power).

As mentioned, in addition to the above—uniformly impressive—essays on Rosny, this collection also features three articles tacked on to the end of the book, all apparently spun off from graduate theses on Belgian topics done at the University of Valenciennes and grouped under the rather elusive heading of "*Varia: entre frontières et cartes*" [*Varia: between borders and maps*]. Chantal Pétilion's "*Roubaix, une 'colonie' belge*" [*Roubaix, a Belgian "colony"*] is a sociological study of the patterns of Belgian immigration in the small French town of Roubaix during the nineteenth century. Delphine Plouchart's "*Le Récit belge de l'absence, ou la thématique de l'Entre-deux, l'exemple de Jacques Sternberg*" [*Belgian Narratives of Absence, or the Theme of Between the Two, the Example of Jacques Sternberg*] analyzes the work of writer Sternberg from a distinctly deconstructionist viewpoint. And Stéphane Hirschi's "*Ce Pays don't Brel a fait tout plat...*" [*This Country that Brel Made All Flat*—referring, of course, to Brel's famous song about Belgium "*Le Plat Pays*" (1962)—offers an interesting discussion of all things Flemish in Brel's oeuvre.

Roger Bozzetto and Arnaud Huftier's *Les Frontières du fantastique*, by contrast, is a book that is both more focused (exclusively on the “fantastic”—there are no pieces on geography or francophone singers) and broader in its thematic and generic sweep (ranging from Poe to Bradbury and from “hard” sf to a fantasy tale by Salman Rushdie). Begun, appropriately, with a series of essays—authored, as throughout the book,

alternately by either Bozzetto or Huftier—on how the “fantastic” seems to be defined in the world today, the remainder of its contents is organized into five “borders of” groupings: religion and myth, reason, science, law, and magic. For example, in the religion and myth section, one finds an article by Bozzetto on “Fantastique et religions” which discusses how gothic fiction recycles and makes reference to—or, at times, refuses to make reference to—certain discourses, philosophies, and “supernatural” iconographies of organized religion. In the “reason” grouping is located the essay “Médecins et fantastique au XIXe siècle” by Huftier on the portrayal of doctors in a variety of fantastic stories of the nineteenth century from Irving’s “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow” (1819) and Hawthorne’s “Dr. Heidegger’s Experiment” (1837) to Stoker’s Van Helsing in *Dracula* (1897) and Conan Doyle’s “The Black Doctor” (1898). In the “law” section, two articles by both editors focus on the character of the detective in fantastic narratives and demonstrate how porous the boundary can sometimes be between the genres of detective fiction and gothic fiction. Finally, included in the “magic” grouping is a delightful piece by Bozzetto on Salman Rushdie’s first novel, a 1975 fantasy called *Grimus*, described as a kind of generic and ideological “melting pot.” The book concludes with an extensive primary and secondary bibliography as well as an index of proper names and titles of works.

For all SFS readers interested in the French sf pioneer Rosny aîné or in the borders of the sf genre that overlap into the “fantastic,” I recommend these two new studies from France.—**ABE**