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Arthur B. Evans

Futures of the Past

Paul K. Alkon. *Origins of Futuristic Fiction.* Athens, GA: Georgia UP, 1987. xii + 341pp. illus. \$30.00 (cloth).

Here is a most welcome addition to current SF scholarship: a seminal study of heretofore unknown and/or largely ignored European authors from the 17th through the 19th century who wrote futuristic fiction--i.e., "prose narratives explicitly set in future time" (p. 3). No other study, to my knowledge, has attempted a literary-archaeological investigation of this sort. Professor Alkon examines, in more or less diachronic fashion, a wide variety of European writers and works before Verne: Jacques Guttin's *Epigone, histoire du siècle futur* (1659), David Russen's *Iter Lunare: Or, A Voyage to the Moon* (1703), Thomas Burnet's *Sacred Theory of the Earth* (1648), Samuel Madden's *Memoirs of the Twentieth Century* (1728), Louis-Sébastien Mercier's *L'An 2440* (1798), Louis Geoffroy's *Napoléon et la conquête du monde/Napoléon apocryphe* (1836/1841), Cousin de Grainville's *Le Dernier homme* (1805), Restif de la Bretonne's *Les Posthumes* (1802), Jane Webb's *The Mummy! A Tale of the 22nd Century* (1827), and (perhaps most importantly) Félix Bodin's *Le Roman de l'avenir* (1834). Bodin's text is of special interest to Alkon: highlighted both at the outset of his study and in his conclusion, it serves as a theoretical matrix to his chosen subject, offering the "first literary criticism of works set in future time as well as the first poetics of that genre" (p. 4).

Alkon characterizes futuristic fiction as a literary genre distinct from all others, the origins of which are of "great relevance to the history of literary forms" (p. 5) and the importance of which, in his opinion, has been all too neglected:

In this book I describe the most important eighteenth- and early nineteenth- century forms of futuristic fiction taking shape in contexts that deflected--and still deflect--attention from the significance or even the fact of its emergence as a distinct genre. Those very few previous investigations which do not entirely overlook this new literary development have dealt with fictional resort to future time either as a notable, though puzzling, episode in the long history of utopian thought and science fiction or as an opportunity for tracing the ways in which technology has shaped visions of the future. I shall concentrate instead on the structure of some key works chosen not for what they betray of past expectations but for what they reveal about the formal problems that had to be resolved before tales of the future could achieve their full power....What I argue for in the following pages is that issues of causation and cultural context, though relevant, should yield priority to matters of form until the forms we seek to explain have been more adequately identified. It is to such identification of futuristic fiction's formal attributes that I primarily address this study of representative works. (pp. 5-6)

The opening chapter of Alkon's study, "Temporal versus Spatial Imagination," serves both as a general introduction to the book and as a detailed discussion of Jacques Guttin, "the first writer who explored the advantages of using an imaginary future to enhance effects expected from an existing genre" and who "invented a type of future history that is still perfectly viable...future fantasy" (p. 18). According to Alkon, prior to Guttin's fanciful romantic adventure, "the future was reserved as a topic for prophets, astrologers, and practitioners of deliberative rhetoric" (p. 3). Consequently, "[w]orks that break the taboo against tales of the future are a significant development marking the emergence of a form unknown to classical, medieval, and renaissance literature" (p. 4).

Since the first half of this chapter is devoted to defining the phenomenological and structural character of futuristic fiction itself (with lengthy references to Bakhtin), to outlining its historical repression as a literary genre (quoting everyone from Aristotle to Darko Suvin), and to discussing selections from Bodin (citing, for purposes of comparison, Robert Scholes's *Structural Fabulation*), it goes without saying that a separate introductory chapter would have been a more appropriate vehicle for presenting all this material as a prolegomenon to the book as a whole. On the other hand, the author's very lucid style, his logically developed arguments, and the impressive breadth of his sources go far to mitigate the negative effects of such organizational weaknesses. Further, the endnotes

for each chapter are extraordinarily rich and function so as to offer extensive documentation without overburdening the book's internal exposition.

In examining his chosen "representative works" of futuristic fiction throughout the ensuing chapters, Alkon is always careful to anchor his analyses solidly to the texts themselves; he invariably provides lengthy plot summaries and liberal doses of (translated) excerpts of the more important passages. Such an "old fashioned" critical methodology might seem to some at odds with the author's more formal narratological objectives as outlined above. But it is the necessary and unavoidable consequence of a book that seeks not only to demonstrate certain theoretical hypotheses about the evolution of this particular literary form but also, and simultaneously, to familiarize the reader with the basic writings themselves--mostly unknown "precursors" in the SF tradition and prose fictions which, more often than not, remain unavailable to the reading public today. To my mind, this constitutes one of the major strengths of *Origins of Futuristic Fiction*. I may not (and, in fact, do not) entirely agree with a number of Alkon's theoretical assertions in this book, and yet I can unreservedly recommend it as a valuable and exceedingly well-documented critical springboard to a reassessment of these hard-to-find literary works.

From the future treated as atemporal "imaginary space" in Guttin's romance, chapter 2 explores the notion of "An Aesthetics of Extrapolation": how public opinion vis-à-vis future extrapolation evolved during the 17th and early 18th centuries and how that was expressed in Russen's *Iter Lunare* and Burnet's *Sacred Theory of the Earth*. More specifically, Alkon explains how Bible-based religious prophecy, as one of the only traditionally acceptable modes of conceiving of and talking about the future, tended to impede the development of futuristic fiction. Here, as elsewhere throughout Alkon's book, I have some qualms about the author's conception of the cause/effect ideological rapports between various historical periods and the literary works produced during those periods--recalling, in another vein, early Marxist-derived socio-criticism and its premises of "reflections" and/ or "homologies." But however questionable his methodological presuppositions are at times (they are definitely, and I might even add

quite thankfully, pre-postmodern), Alkon's subject-matter is refreshingly engaging and his analyses are intelligent and convincingly presented.

Whereas the first two chapters of *Origins of Futuristic Fiction* are labeled by the author as "Prehistory, 1659-1703," the following four ostensibly target this genre's true "origins" and are grouped under the title of "Starting Points, 1733-1827." Similar to the heterogeneous character of the opening chapter, chapter 3 begins with a discussion of theory--a narratological definition of futuristic fiction versus SF, with particular reference to Suvin's *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction*--before going on to discuss Samuel Madden, who "created a viable form in the shape of a tale of the future that could work perfectly well as a framework for futuristic fiction in any of its modes" (p. 93). Madden was "the first to write a narrative that purports to *be* a document from the future," and he thus "deserves recognition as the first to toy with the rich idea of time-travel in the form of an artifact sent backwards from the future to be discovered in the present" (p. 96). The artifact in question in Madden's *Memoirs of the Twentieth Century* is a collection of letters written by several history-conscious diplomats in the 1990s, presented along with a series of narrator "prefaces" which serve to explain them, to comment on them, and to underscore the entire book's implicit satiric intent as a "mock genre" of the "dire millennial predictions" so common during the previous century. The first of many such future-tale experiments during the 18th century, Madden's book is also noteworthy, according to Alkon, because his was "the first prose narrative to adopt the central technique of those modes of futuristic fiction formally distinct from previous traditions by virtue of inviting readers to imagine themselves looking backwards from a far future to their own present and immediate future, which are thus also to be regarded as the past" (p. 109) and because "[b]y noting that unpredictable change is a distinctive corollary of the accelerating pace of scientific discovery... Madden derives a new canon of probability and accordingly a new test of verisimilitude that applies especially to narratives of the future: acceptance of the implausible...as the most likely shape of things to come" (p. 111).

Chapter 4, "From Utopia to Uchronia," treats the future as alternate history and spotlights Mercier's well-known *L'An 2440* and Geoffroy's *Napoléon et*

la conquête du monde (retitled *Napoléon apocryphe* in the second edition). Alkon's discussion of Mercier's text builds upon a relatively large corpus of utopian scholarship, from which the author quotes at length-- Raymond Trousson, Frank and Fritzie Manuel, Alexandre Cioranescu, and others. After attempting to clarify the generic difference between "predictive" versus "investigative" fictions of the future, Alkon considers how the latter (exemplified by Mercier) "liberated utopia from the futility of gratuitous speculation without subjecting it to the constraints imposed on works that actually aspire to the status of prophecy, even secular prophecy" (p. 126). According to him, Mercier's *L'An 2440* is significant also in that it "changes utopia from a demonstration to a project," initiating "a new paradigm for utopian literature not only by setting action in a specific future chronologically connected to our past and present but even more crucially by characterizing that future as one belonging to progress....Mercier's twenty-fifth century transforms the uchronic utopia's time to that of universal history shaped by progress..." (pp. 126-27). Geoffroy's uchronia, on the other hand, speculates (as per its title) on what the world would have been like had Napoléon not met his Waterloo but had conquered the entire world and established a "universal monarchy." Summarized by Alkon, "Geoffroy's main question is how the world might have benefited--or might yet benefit --from pushing to their logical extremes and *then* implementing Napoleon's plans for a new political order....Consequently the first uchronia of alternate history is, like Mercier's futuristic uchronia, very much intended as a new kind of utopia...alternate history as rhetorical device" (pp. 146-48). Commenting on the historical and literary importance of Mercier's uchronia of future history and Geoffroy's uchronia of alternate history, Alkon contends:

Both forms compel serious speculation about the possibilities of shaping real events. Both prevent the game of imagining past or future utopias from being played without attention to the historical realities that constrain or facilitate actual implementation of utopian ideals....Neither form of uchronia resorts to the lateral time of voyage utopias disconnected from the flow of events in our world. Neither form resorts to allegorical sequences....Neither form resorts to the mythic past of fabulous history and epic or to the 'once upon a time' in so many varieties of romance....Before the emergence of futuristic fiction in the eighteenth century... there was no precedent for any form allowing radical displacement of fictional time away from the present while also allowing for insistent speculative connection of the

imagined time to the possible shapes of real history. The absence of alternate past histories from Western literature before 1836 is as striking as the total absence of futuristic fiction before 1659.... (p. 153)

Although his treatment of Mercier and Geoffroy makes for very informative reading, and although their contributions are important as chronological and generic firsts, it is nonetheless regrettable that Alkon did not discuss more fully Charles Renouvier's *Uchronie* (1876). Such a lapsus is somewhat understandable--Alkon's primary intent was to target those texts that could be identified as "origins" of futuristic fiction. And, despite the fact that it was Renouvier who coined the word "uchronia" in an 1857 essay of his so titled, the novels of Mercier and Geoffroy had already initiated (if not fully established) this literary tradition several decades earlier.

Focusing next on an example of eschatology's influence on the genre, chapter 5 discusses what the author terms the "Secularization of Apocalypse" and, as an example of that phenomenon, Jean-Baptiste Cousin de Grainville's *Le Dernier homme*. Here Alkon cites the work of Mark Rose, Robert Galbreath, M.H. Abrams, and David Ketterer, and voices some skepticism as to these critics' demonstrations of "continuities between older and newer kinds of apocalyptic literature" and the implication that such apocalypse-oriented writings necessarily facilitated other brands of future fictions. Agreeing rather with Bodin, Alkon considers "apocalypse as more of an obstacle than an asset to futuristic fiction" (pp. 160-61) insofar as the former's rigid doctrinal bias severely constrained more imaginative approaches to portraying the future. *Le Dernier homme*, he contends, represents a significant breakthrough in this regard because Grainville was the first writer "to achieve anything like a credible novelistic portrait of the phenomenology of apocalypse" by requiring the reader's "imaginative involvement with the experience of particularized characters...rendering them vividly as well as plausibly..." (pp. 167-68). Further, in terms of narrative structure, "Grainville's crucial step is to adjust the flow of apocalyptic time to accommodate the tempo of human experience" (p. 168); in other words, "for readers, episodes are...organized and mentally assimilated with reference to a chronological structure of plot time rather than a scenic succession" (p. 177), thus rendering "Apocalypse in a narrative

mode" (p. 179). As a conclusion to this chapter, Alkon briefly outlines other such apocalyptic tales like Mary Shelley's *The Last Man* (1826), A. Creuzé de Lesser's *Le Dernier homme* (1831), Elise Gagné's *Omégar ou le dernier homme* (1859), and Camille Flammarion's *La Fin du monde* (1894)--a rich comparative exposé of post-Grainville authors that fleshes out a 19th-century overview of this literary variant and, incidentally, makes one wonder why Alkon did not adopt this satisfyingly comprehensive approach for every chapter in this survey.

Chapter 6, "Fantasy and Metafiction," seeks to clarify various patterns of mimesis and verisimilitude in early futuristic fiction. In particular, Alkon examines what he sees to be the genre's dual penchant for fantasy and discursive self-consciousness. As he explains it:

The transformation of utopia into uchronia is not the dominant pattern for early futuristic fiction. Neither is the secularization of apocalypse or the satiric future history....However much ideas of progress and the facts of accelerating cultural change are reflected, as they surely are, in the emergence of tales of the future, it is also the continuing appeal of fantasy within the system of literature itself that shapes new forms of futuristic fiction. In tales of the future, moreover, fantasy very often signals a movement toward metafiction--that is, toward the various techniques by which a text may invite rather than discourage awareness of its own fictionality and its relationship to other books. (pp. 192-93)

Beginning his discussion with Emile Souvestre's *Le Monde tel qu'il sera* ("which so brilliantly inaugurated the French dystopian tradition" [p. 194] --in 1846), Pierre-Marc Gaston Duc de Levis's richly intertextual *Les Voyages de Kang-Hi, ou nouvelles lettres chinoises* (1810), and several other early-19th-century examples of this more fantastic brand of futuristic fiction (and acknowledging the work in this realm of Eric Rabkin, Scholes, I.F. Clarke, Marc Angenot, and others), Alkon then proceeds to a detailed analysis of Restif de la Bretonne's *Les Posthumes* (1802) and Jane Webb's *The Mummy!* (1827). He justifies his choice of Restif's tale because "of what it shows of the interaction of realism and fantasy within early futuristic fiction...how fantasy and realism could enter new relationships by resort to future time" (p. 206) and because "[i]n it we see for the first time...a sustained attempt to interweave fantasy and fact within a narrative that is insistently metafictional" (p. 207). He then investigates Restif's "wavering"

use of preterite-tense narration when discussing future events, his Illuminist-inspired portrayals of "spiritual flights" and cycles of reincarnation, his "cosmological and biological fantasies" geared to an imaginary future millions of years distant, his practice of "looping back through time" to the recent past, and his persistent editorial commentaries throughout *Les Posthumes*. As a bottom-line conclusion, Alkon argues: "The significance of *Les Posthumes* as an important step towards effective forms of futuristic fiction resides precisely in Restif's hesitant but unmistakable creation of a structure that invites readers to view a specific historical event of their recent past from the estranging perspective of an imaginary future-- a future that is explicitly presented for readers to evaluate less as prediction or utopia than as outright fantasy" (p. 231).

Alkon identifies the principal originality of *The Mummy!* as two-fold: in its self-conscious fictionality (Webb wishes only to "invent a new kind of hero in a new kind of fiction") and in the degree to which its depiction of the future "is more consistently portrayed in its everyday details and more thoroughly subordinated to novelistic action than of any previous future fiction" (p. 234). Similar to Guttin's *Epigone* insofar as it is basically a heroic romance taking place within an exotic future setting, Webb's book also mixes in a dash of gothic horror by choosing, as the tale's central protagonist, the Egyptian pharaoh Cheops, who has just been resurrected by a galvanic apparatus. More importantly, the text's first-person narrative structure allows the reader to experience directly "Cheops's revival as he experiences it--stressing his guilt at some past crime (later explained) and his bewilderment at trying to understand a scene that does not correspond to his notions of this world or the afterlife" (p. 239).

Whereas the first two chapters of *Origins of Futuristic Fiction* are devoted to what Alkon calls "Prehistory," and the next four to "Starting Points," the final chapter stands conspicuously alone as "Part Three": "The End of the Beginning." It showcases (again) *Le Roman de l'avenir* (1834). According to Alkon, the importance of Bodin's work in the development of futuristic fiction is decisive--not because he succeeded in establishing the acceptability of the genre nor because he was the first to write an

unquestionably "successful" novel of this type but, rather, because he was the genre's first theoretician. In Alkon's words:

Consideration of the works discussed in previous chapters underscores Bodin's originality in articulating an aesthetic ideal for futuristic fiction well before anyone had fully exemplified the genre's potential as imaginative literature....No writer of futuristic fiction before Bodin actually created a novel whose elements all worked coherently to elicit a sense of the marvelous within a plausible framework of realistic setting and action. Nor did Bodin succeed....It remained for H.G. Wells and his followers to prove that Bodin truly understood the potential of futuristic fiction. Whether his insight was inevitable as early as 1834, and I think not, what is most noteworthy now is its accuracy. In *Le Roman de l'avenir* Bodin provided a poetics of futuristic fiction. For that he deserves the highest praise. (pp. 245-46)

Alkon then outlines in detail the somewhat idiosyncratic structure of Bodin's *Roman*, examining in succession an introductory epigram, a dedication to the past, a preface, an introduction, the incomplete novel itself, a postscript, notes on the preface, a discussion of mesmerism, a survey of imaginative literature about the future, and a brief essay entitled "Saint Malachy and the End of the World." More important (to the question of the "poetics" of futuristic fiction) than this extensive paraphrasing of the work's contents, Alkon concurrently highlights various theoretical statements implicitly or explicitly expressed by Bodin throughout this "Novel of/about the future." As an example:

For Bodin, futuristic fiction should not primarily be concerned with predictions for utopian speculation. Above all, its task is to recapture, in appropriate images agreeable to the modern world, imaginative equivalents of older sources of poetic emotion that can no longer serve as material for the novelist's art. Aesthetic effects must have primacy over speculative content. Readers must be moved, not simply instructed. (p. 253)

In other words: "Utopian, predictive, and philosophical elements [must] remain subordinated to the requirements of plot, characterization, and...the picturesque appeal of a future designed to capture the reader's fancy as well as stimulate speculation about what may be or should be" (pp. 264-65).

Aside from these largely thematic recommendations, Bodin also endorses certain specifically narratological ones as well. For example, commenting on Bodin's stricture that the future is more effectively portrayed via past and present tenses, Alkon points out that "this too is an important part of

Bodin's explicitly articulated poetics for futuristic fiction....[H]e clearly defines a kind of temporal doubling of narrative viewpoint which is in fact unique to futuristic fiction and crucial to many of its effects" (pp. 263-64). Further, "to avoid the tedium of actionless utopias wherein every last detail is recounted (usually in dialogue of excruciating length that contributes nothing to character or plot development), Bodin deliberately includes passing allusions to intriguing technological and social developments that are not fully explained" (p. 274). And finally, Alkon cites Bodin's reluctance to orient his proposed *littérature futuriste* to end-of-time scenarios: "such conceptions, I [Bodin] say, would have had the inconvenience of damaging probability and interest too much and hindering the vast majority of readers from seeing what pleases them most, characters with whom they find something in common, and with whom they sympathize, and above all whom they understand" (quoted on pp. 274-75). Although Alkon does not explicitly say so, the very heart of Bodin's theoretical proposals seems to argue the need to increase, in a variety of manners, and through the narrative structure itself, as well as thematically, the overall phatic content of this form of writing.

Completing his very--and, some might say, excessively--thorough account of *Le Roman*, Alkon then second-guesses its author's familiarity with other literary experiments of this sort, lists his probable "sources" and "influences," and analyzes (at length) Bodin's interest in mesmerism. To the average reader expecting a more succinct and less meanderingly biographical treatment of Bodin's "poetics of futuristic fiction," such discussions may tend to seem superfluous and a bit drawn out. The problem, to my mind, is essentially an organizational one in the book as a whole: since a good number of Bodin's more salient observations about futuristic fiction were posited at the outset of Alkon's study (as well as periodically throughout it), the conclusion necessarily appears anti-climatic, rather strained, and lacking the focus needed to synthesize the chapters preceding it. In an otherwise excellent study, the conclusion (like the missing introduction) of *Origins of Futuristic Fiction* is generally disappointing.

As to its published format, this 341-page text is fully indexed and liberally illustrated with "futuristic" drawings taken from the 1846 edition of Souvestre's *Le Monde tel qu'il sera*--an addition that enhances the book's aesthetic appeal as well as pictorially supplementing its message. And the extensive section of endnotes is (as already hinted) a documentary treasure-trove for scholars wishing to further their studies of this topic. Despite its over-weighty start and its weak finish, then, *Origins of Futuristic Fiction* is a solid and valuable piece of SF scholarship. Rescuing from obscurity a number of 17th-, 18th-, and 19th-century texts and integrating them into SF's "genealogical" past, Paul Alkon's book provides a great service to all literary historians of this genre. As such, it is sure to stimulate a host of additional studies (typological and others) of these almost-forgotten "futures of the past."