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Arthur B. Evans

The Fantastic Science Fiction of Maurice Renard

Written during the latter half of that “Golden Age” of French speculative fiction which stretched from 1880 to 1940, the sf of Maurice Renard (1875-1939) occupies a rather paradoxical niche in the history of sf. Not only has it received starkly unequal treatment by literary critics in the US and in France, but also its highly heterogeneous character tends to challenge our more modern theories of genre specificity when defining the sf canon.

For example, most European and French-Canadian sf scholars generally hold the work of Maurice Renard in very high esteem: Versins calls him “the best French sf writer of the years 1900-1930” (734), another critic describes Renard's short stories as “among the most gripping in French literature” (Bridenne 211), and another notes that Renard was “the first French author of the genre to see himself cited in René Lalou and Henri Clouard's *History of Literature*” (Van Herp 110). In contrast, Anglo-American sf critics have to my knowledge *never* written a single serious article on Maurice Renard, apart from those brief entries in various sf histories and encyclopedias.¹ Why not? Doubtless in large part because of the lack of decent English translations of his works. Like those of many other foreign sf writers, the English translations of Renard are either non-existent or very poor in quality.²

But it also seems within the realm of possibility to attribute this lack of scholarship on Renard to another cause. For the average Anglo-American sf scholar, Renard's oeuvre itself may prove to be somewhat disconcerting: as I have argued elsewhere, many if not most of his works reflect a kind of “fusing together...of speculative Wellsian sf with Hoffmannesque horror” (259). Modern critics may ask: “Where do we classify such hybrid fictions? In what historical, generic, or theoretical context do we discuss them?” Of the major French sf writers of this period—including Albert Robida, Rosny aîné (the Elder), Gustave Le Rouge, José Moselli, Régis Messac, and Jacques Spitz—the science-fiction works of Maurice Renard seem to be the least “pure” in terms of how we have come to define sf. Reminiscent most often of the tales of Edgar Allan Poe (who had a huge influence on Renard as a youth), Renard's fiction seems continually to cross the line into Gothic horror, mythological fantasy, detective fiction, and the fantastic in general.

First, I will begin this overview of Maurice Renard's “fantastic sf” with a discussion of his life and his literary ideas. Next, I will examine his sf novels (which are, as a rule, more science-oriented) and his many short-story collections (which are often more supernatural in content and tone). Lastly and in conclusion, a reevaluation of Renard's oeuvre as a whole will be offered, along with a selected bibliography of primary and secondary works by and

about him. In this essay, for the sake of brevity, I will not discuss Renard's abundant poetry, his non-sf essays, detective fiction, historical romances, or other writings which do not directly pertain to sf (broadly defined).

Renard was one of many French sf writers of the early twentieth century who was both a journalist and a prime contributor to the thriving pulps of the period. But contrary to most, he lived neither in social obscurity nor exclusively by his pen. The son and grandson of well-to-do bourgeois attorneys, Maurice Renard was born in Châlons-sur-Marne on February 28, 1875 into a family that was rich in property and well respected in Third Republic French society. During his pampered childhood he lacked for nothing. But he frequently managed to chagrin his elders with his unrestrained impetuosity, his rebellious nature, and his passionate taste for the unusual. It is said that, in his teens, he one day discovered the tales of Edgar Allan Poe (masterfully translated by Baudelaire in 1856), and it changed his life forever. In the words of one of Renard's biographers:

And all those unbridled fires of his youthful imagination suddenly find their counterpart in these masterpieces of the Strange by the American genius. He is swept away...and becomes obsessed with tales of the supernatural. ...he reads Hoffmann, the Scandinavian storytellers, Erckmann Chatrian. From this early age, the literary destiny of Maurice Renard is fixed.³

But Renard's subsequent dreams of a career in literature—much like those of a youthful Jules Verne some four decades earlier—were temporarily put on hold by his family who demanded that he follow in the footsteps of his father and become a lawyer. Accordingly, Renard was sent to law school in Paris where he worked hard, received his diploma, and eventually entered an established law firm as a young attorney. And it wasn't until his mid-twenties, after returning from his required military service, that Maurice Renard decided to abandon law and consecrate himself wholly to his writing. Throughout the ensuing years he collaborated in theatrical plays, composed poetry and poetical essays for a variety of literary journals, became a seemingly indefatigable *feuilleton* writer for several pulp magazines and local newspapers, hosted a “literary salon” in his home (frequented on a regular basis by the likes of Colette, Montherlant, Henri de Régnier, and Rosny aîné), and ultimately wrote more than eighteen novels and hundreds of short stories—in a wide variety of genres—from 1905 until his death on November 18, 1939.

If Maurice Renard became one of those few French sf writers who was even minimally “recognized” by the literary elite of early twentieth-century Paris, he was also notable as one of the few science-fiction theorists of the period. In several newspaper and journal essays published from 1909 to 1928, Renard sought to explain and to proselytize what he termed *le merveilleux scientifique* (the scientific marvellous) and this “new literary genre” devoted to it which he dubbed *le roman merveilleux-scientifique* (the scientific-marvellous novel). During an era when the only two widely-accepted terms for this sort of writing were the British “scientific romance” and the post-Vernian “anticipation novel,” Renard's new nomenclature enjoyed for a time a certain popularity in France. But perhaps even more intriguing is that

Renard's theoretical postulations in these science-fiction essays not only predate by many years similar yet more celebrated efforts in America—e.g., those science-fiction codifications of Hugo Gernsback *et al.*—but also seem strangely prophetic of much more recent 20th-century sf theory. Consider, for example, the following selection of excerpts from two such essays by Renard: his 1909 article titled “Du Roman merveilleux-scientifique et de son action sur l'intelligence du progrès” (On the Scientific-Marvellous Novel and Its Influence on the Understanding of Progress) and his “Le Merveilleux scientifique et *La Force mystérieuse* de J.-H. Rosny aîné” (The Scientific Marvellous and *The Mysterious Force* by J.-H. Rosny the Elder) published in 1914. Incidentally, this is the first time to my knowledge that these essays have been even partially translated into English.

If it isn't premature to discuss things at the moment when they have just come into existence, the scientific-marvellous novel is now ripe for critical study. The present times permit us to define it. The inevitable product of an era where science dominates but does not extinguish our eternal need for fantasy, it is indeed a new genre which has just come into its own....

I say a *new* genre. Until Wells, one might well have doubted it. Before the author of *The War of the Worlds*, those rare portrayers of what would later be called the “scientific-marvellous” did so only from afar, on occasion, and (it seems) as a game. Cyrano de Bergerac...Swift...Flammarion...Edmond About.... It was Edgard [sic] Poe...who was the true founder of the pure scientific-marvellous novel, in the same way as he had invented the detective novel.... He had some famous descendants in Villiers de l'Isle-Adam who wrote *The Future Eve*, in Stevenson with *Doctor Jeckyll* [sic] and *Mr. Hyde*, and then finally in H.G. Wells.

With Wells, the genre began to flourish in all its full amplitude....

So here is a definition, as vague as it might be, but one with which we must content ourselves until such a time as another, more precise one emerges from some deeper examination.

How does one generate a scientific-marvellous novel? Where do its subjects come from and how are they treated? What is the technique of this new art-form? In fact, it is the contemporary literary genre which is most akin to philosophy—it is philosophy put into fiction, it is logic dramatized. Born of science and reasoning, it attempts to foreground one with the aid of the other....

We...search for our novelistic themes either in the unknown or the uncertain.... We must act exactly like a scientist who seeks to solve a problem: we apply to the unknown or the uncertain the methods of scientific method....

This general procedure used to construct the framework of a scientific-marvellous story can assume an infinite variety of forms. Examples: we can accept as viable certain scientific hypotheses and then deduce the direct consequences of them (e.g., life on Mars...*War of the Worlds*). We can substitute one idea for another, give to one the properties of the other...(e.g., give the qualities of space to time...*The Time Machine*). We can apply methods of scientific exploration to imaginary objects, beings, or phenomena through rational analogy and logical assumptions (e.g., a study of extraterrestrials...[Derennes'] *The People of the Pole*).... It's all about *extending science fully into the unknown*, and not simply imagining that science has finally accomplished such and such a feat currently in the process of coming to be. It's all about, for example, having the idea of a time machine to explore time,

and not about a fictional protagonist who has managed to construct a submarine at a time when real engineers are hot on the trail of such an invention. And I strongly assert that this, in essence, is what differentiates Wells from Jules Verne.... Jules Verne never wrote a single sentence of scientific-marvellous....

The influence of the scientific-marvellous novel on [our] concept of progress is considerable. Being forcefully convincing by its very rationality, it brutally unveils for us all that the unknown and the uncertain perhaps hold in store for us.... It opens up for us an immeasurable space outside of our immediate sense of well-being.... It fragments our habitual lifestyle and transports us to other points of view outside of ourselves. ("Du Roman merveilleux" 1205-13)

In so doing, the scientific-marvellous novel exerts a very valuable influence on our thought processes. In imagining what might or can happen, we better conceive what is happening; in visualizing what can be...we see more clearly what is....

When we close a scientific-marvellous novel after reading it, when our eyes turn away from this magnifying lens of conjecture (the only one we can apply to the immense unknown), we do not see things in the same way. The fiction has created in us a feeling of alienation. ("Le Merveilleux" 1225)

Although his use of the awkward portmanteau phrase *romans merveilleux-scientifique* (scientific-"sense of wonder" novels) would prove to be a rather unfortunate choice of terms and did not catch on, Renard nevertheless exhibits an astonishing level of prescience in identifying what science fiction is, where it came from, and how it is distinct from other literary genres. In his discussions of sf's generic ancestors, his assertion that true sf is about "extending science fully into the unknown," his explanation of the essential difference between Verne and Wells, and his reader-response descriptions of the psychological effects of science fiction, Renard appears to be an sf theorist well ahead of his times.

The publication of Renard's first sf novel in 1908, *Le Docteur Lerne* (Doctor Lerne), gained him rave reviews and launched him into the limelight of Parisian literary circles. Although strongly derivative of Wells' *The Island of Dr Moreau* (1896)—an influence openly acknowledged by Renard in his dedication—*Le Docteur Lerne* extrapolates the notion of biological engineering much further than Wells, all the way into the fantastic. After years of experimentation in grafting animal parts to plants and vice-versa (producing at times some quite amazing results), Dr Lerne begins interchanging brains between animals, between humans, and even between animals and humans. As a result of these experiments, he ultimately learns how to project his own mind and spirit into other animate (and not-so-animate) objects like people, trees, and even an automobile. The narrative itself is recounted in the first person by Dr Lerne's visiting nephew Nicolas: he gradually (in detective-like fashion) uncovers the truth of his uncle's experiments, and his reactions to them range from morbid curiosity to outright horror.

Part of the originality of the tale, however, is not in the sometimes outlandish plot sequences, but in the manner in which they are told. The originality of this novel is two-fold: in its sf eroticism,⁴ and in how it portrays the mind-body split through narrative point of view. One example: Nicolas is

forced to have his brain exchanged with that of a bull. Following the surgery, the young man must now struggle to acclimate himself to the alien: not only to his new bovine body and instincts, but also to seeing his old self as the “other”—especially when the latter makes overtly sexual advances toward “his” mistress. Another example: later in the text, after receiving his own brain back again, the narrator is in the throes of a steamy sexual interlude with his aforementioned mistress when he suddenly feels the presence of another person's identity intruding into his mind and taking over his body: it is Dr Lerne who, gazing through a peephole nearby, decides to become a more-than-first-hand observer to the proceedings. Such risqué subject matter and offbeat points of view in *Le Docteur Lerne*—continually oscillating as it does between the vicarious and voyeuristic—make it a quite original sf text and one that foreshadows other erotic science-fiction works by writers like Philip José Farmer, Robert Silverberg, and Kate Wilhelm published over a half century later.⁵

Of course, if one were to judge Renard's *Le Docteur Lerne* from its only-available English translation, *New Bodies for Old*, one would never have the opportunity to read such passages. They are not there. In fact, this translation seems to aptly exemplify the marketplace strategy known as “bait-and-switch.” On its intentionally provocative dust jacket, after the title “Maurice Renard's Startling Novel, *New Bodies for Old* or *The Strange Experiments of Dr. Lerne*,” the publisher chooses to quote the most enticingly suggestive portions of the author's dedication to Wells: “When Fortune...allowed me to discover the subject of this allegorical novel, I felt bound not to set it aside because of a few audacities which a faithful rendering involved. Far from desiring to arouse...instinct in my reader and amuse him with scandalous descriptions, my work is addressed to the philosopher...” But when one then reads the actual narrative, one discovers that *all* such “audacities” and “scandalous descriptions”—i.e., all passages of sexuality like those I have discussed—have been thoroughly and meticulously excised. Despite its cover's subtle promises of titillation, the content of Renard's book has been truncated so as not to offend its anglophone audience's supposed sense of moral propriety.

Renard's next novel, *Le Péril bleu* (The Blue Peril) published in 1911, is perhaps his most consummate work of sf and, according to one critic, “still reads as well as when it was originally published” (Jakubowski 415). Although never translated into English, it may well have been the inspiration (by way of Charles Fort) of other such Earth-unknowingly-occupied-by-superior-aliens sf stories like Eric Frank Russell's *Sinister Barrier* (1939).⁶ Once again, the originality of Renard's text lies in its unusual perspective. The *Sarvants*, an ethereal alien race, explore what for them is an vast ocean covering a new world: they bring up unusual specimens of those indigenous life-forms living in its depths; their scientists study them, dissect them, classify them, preserve them, and exhibit them in museums; and it is only by accident that they eventually discover that these subaqueous creatures are capable of both suffering and rational thought. And so, magnanimously, the *Sarvants* decide to cease their experiments: i.e., they no longer “fish” for these odd two-

legged mammals in the thick atmospheric seas of the planet Earth. *Le Péril bleu* is thus noteworthy not so much in its portrayal of the possible existence of superior alien life in the universe, but rather in its early *anti-anthropomorphic* treatment of this traditional sf theme. In the words of one human protagonist from this novel:

“How foolish we are! Pitiful beings submerged in a gaseous ocean who think themselves the masters of Earth! Not even suspecting that another species, much more advanced than ourselves, not only exists above us but is hardly even aware of us! Another species who gives us as much credit for intelligence as we give to crabs!” (§11:195-96)

In 1920 Renard published what would prove to be his most popular and most translated novel: *Les Mains d'Orlac* (*The Hands of Orlac*, 1929). Easily recognizable to most readers and movie-goers of the sf/horror genre, it is the tale of a celebrated pianist who loses his hands in a train wreck, has them surgically replaced with those of an executed murderer, and later begins to assume the personality of his appendages' psychopathic donor. The book was made into a movie on several occasions: the two most famous being the one in 1926 by Robert Weine (creator of *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*) with Conradt Veidt as Orlac, and the one in 1935 by Karl Freund with Peter Lorre in the title role (inexplicably titled *Mad Love*). And Hollywood's apparent fascination with this theme has continued over the years in low-budget thrillers based—albeit often very loosely—on Renard's original premise: e.g., *The Beast with Five Fingers* (1946, also with Peter Lorre), *The Hands of a Stranger* (1963), and even the more recent *Body Parts* (1991, with Jeff Fahey).

One interesting side-note to Renard's *Les Mains d'Orlac* is the fact that the surgeon portrayed in the novel, a certain Dr Cerral, was patterned on a real French surgeon of great renown during the early 1900s. His name was Dr Alexis Carrel (1873-1944) and his experiments with biological transplants and grafting procedures earned him the Nobel Prize in 1912. Both *Le Docteur Lerne* and *Les Mains d'Orlac* thus closely reflect Renard's awareness of and interest in the scientific advances of his time—especially in the areas of biology, psychology, and physics—which he then directly transposed into much of his sf fiction. Renard seems to have been particularly obsessed by altered modes of human perception: how certain physiological modifications to the human body would allow one to more fully experience the “beyond.” And his next novel, *L'Homme truqué* (*The Altered Man*), is yet another case in point.

Published in 1921, Renard's untranslated *L'Homme truqué* was no doubt partly inspired by two authors whose sf works he both knew well and admired greatly: Wells's “The Remarkable Case of Davidson's Eyes” (1895) and Rosny aîné's “Un Autre monde” (1895, “Another World,” 1962). In contrast to these stories, however, Renard's protagonist is a WW I French soldier named Jean Lebris fighting near Strasbourg who, after being blinded by an exploding cannon shell and captured by the enemy, is taken to a top German scientist called Dr Prosope who is conducting advanced ophthalmological

research. Lebris is fitted with experimental *electroscopic eyes* which allow him to perceive things far beyond the normal spectrum of human vision. In addition to its strange effects of synesthesia (“seeing” sounds, smells, etc.), his artificial eyes now enable him to see electricity, magnetic fields, the movement of the wind, and all forms of radiation, among other things. Unfortunately for Lebris, these new powers ultimately prove to be a curse because he is unable to block out such visions. And, after continually observing what appear to be invisible, electric *beings* who coexist—unknown to humanity—on the same plane with us, he eventually falls into a coma and dies.

As is the case with most of Renard's sf tales, *L'Homme truqué* is configured as a kind of mystery story, narrated in the first person by a physician and friend of the central character. But its technological *novum*—extending the human senses via the implant of some high-power prosthetic device—was to become a staple of much pulp-era science fiction during the 20s and 30s. For example, one such sf work (which was probably a direct spin-off from Renard's novel) was Alexander Beliayev's “Invisible Light” (1938)⁷ in which a blind man is fitted with artificial eyes and is then able to see electricity. On a more somber note, Renard's *L'Homme truqué* also foreshadows certain physiological experiments conducted in Germany during the Second World War in that infamous period of human brutality which we now call the Holocaust.

Renard's most detective-like sf narrative—perhaps patterned on Poe's *The Murders in the Rue Morgue*—was published in 1925 and carried the title *Le Singe* (curiously translated as *Blind Circle*, 1928). It was co-authored with Albert Jean and, like most of Renard's fiction, originally appeared in *feuilleton* format (in 62 episodes) in a Parisian pulp journal. Its plot concerns a police investigation of the mysterious presence of multiple dead bodies—all of the *same* person, a certain Richard Cirugue. After innumerable twists and turns in the narrative, the mystery is finally solved: Richard is actually still alive. Using his recent discovery of an electrolysis procedure to duplicate (but not animate) animal and human tissue, he had fabricated lifeless clones of himself and scattered them around Paris as a publicity stunt to attract investment capital for his scientific research. In an even more bizarre twist, Richard subsequently dies (for real) but his spirit manages to survive and ultimately inhabits the cloned body of his brother, whose wife he lusts after. Needless to say, apart from its somewhat Frankenstein-like motif of creating synthetic bodies out of a chemical vat, *Le Singe* is less a science-fiction novel than, as one critic has said, a “comedy of manners, sex, [and] mystery in the manner of Gaston Leroux” (Bleiler, 620).

Much more interesting is Renard's 1928 untranslated *Un Homme chez les microbes* (A Man Among the Microbes), a witty sf novel which predates by almost three decades Richard Matheson's more celebrated *The Shrinking Man* (1956; filmed 1957 as *The Incredible Shrinking Man*). Although not the first to make use of this traditional sf theme,⁸ Renard nonetheless succeeds quite well in combining the lighthearted tone of early imaginary voyage and

plurality-of-worlds narratives with the realistic observations of more modern fictional variants. One witnesses vestiges of the former, for example, in a visit to the invisible utopian realm of *Ourrh* (with the requisite “estranging” descriptions of the life and customs of its antennaed inhabitants) and in the large doses of tongue-in-cheek humor that are present in the text (repeated literary and sometimes self-referential plays on words, Voltairian satire, libertine innuendo, and a general playfulness in characterization). Of the latter, one witnesses such elements as detailed portrayals of altered perceptions during the shrinking process itself (gigantic house furniture, being stalked by the family cat, etc.), fears of the unknown (“How would all this end? Where would this shrinking take him? Would he simply vanish into nothingness?” [§6:64]), and various scientific observations on the passage of time in microscopic versus macroscopic worlds, the functions of the thyroid and pineal glands, etc. The final result is, in the recent words of one pair of literary scholars, “a journey into the microcosm with more sophistication and verbal wit than those of Ray Cummings” (Clute/Nicholls, 1003).

What’s more, the quintessentially surrealist conclusion of Renard’s *Un Homme chez les microbes* is one of the most surprising of any sf novel. The hero, Fléchambeau, has finally returned to his normal size, has completed the account of his adventures, and has gently fallen asleep in the presence of his philosopher-scientist companion, Pons. The latter begins to meditate on the moral implications of what he and his friend have experienced. The novel then concludes:

“Puppets,” murmured Pons. “We are but small, helpless puppets that a philosophical author makes dance on a plate. With one breath he can blow us into the dust of the void.”

The wind then began to rise, growing into a strong gale.

Pons looked over at the bed. Fléchambeau was no longer there. Everything was shaking from the powerful gusts. The village of Saint-Jean-de-Nèves and its neighboring mountain, carried I know not where, were swept away like straw at the mercy of the tempest. A mysterious mouth was blowing on the entire decor as well as on these little fellows that a whimsical hand had earlier shaped. As if to confirm to himself his opinion that he was, in truth, nothing at all, Pons began to exclaim:

“Just as I was saying!”

But the author had already removed from him all voice, movement, and thought.

THE END (§9:192-93)

Having evoked in this unusual narrative elements of the 17th and 18th century utopian novel, characteristics of 19th century realism, and references to early 20th century physics, Renard now concludes his fictional “microscopic” sf journey in a manner closely comparable to the most meta-recursive novels of post-modernism. In light of this comically self-referential finale, it seems apparent that the real “Man Among the Microbes” of this tale is the author *himself* grappling with his own fictional creations.

Renard’s final sf novel, *Le Maître de la lumière* (The Master of Light), also as yet untranslated, was published in serial format in 1933. It was later reprinted in volume format, posthumously, in 1947. Somewhat similar to his

earlier novel *Le Singe*, it is an odd and rather eclectic mixture of soap-opera romance, family vendettas, detective-cum-Gothic horror, and adventure, with just enough scientific speculation to be classified (marginally) as sf. The plot takes place in 1929-30 and revolves around the murder, a century earlier, of a Napoleonic navy officer named César Christiani during the unsettled times immediately following the July Revolution. Charles Christiani, his descendant and the young hero of the story, eventually comes to discover the identity of the true murderer of his great grandfather with the aid of a special plate of glass that had originally hung in the window of the deceased's home. This mica-like glass, brought back by César from the jungles of an uncharted Indonesian island, possesses the unusual property of reflecting the images of events occurring long before. The scientific principle behind this "slow glass"⁹ is explained as follows:

"These window panes are of a composition through which light is slowed down in the same way as when it passes through water... You know well, Péronne, how one can hear more quickly a sound through, for example, a metal conduit or some other solid than through simple space. Well, Péronne, all this is of the same family of phenomena! Here is the solution. These panes of glass slow down the light at an incredible rate since there need be only a relatively thin sheet to slow it down a hundred years. It takes one hundred years for a ray of light to pass through this slice of matter! It would take one year for it to pass through one tenth of this depth." ...

...There exist many studies and many technical treatises about this substance that Charles Christiani had just discovered, or rather *rediscovered*, and which he baptised "*luminite*".... Let us simply remember that *luminite*...is a material which produces the following result: light passing through it is greatly *slowed down*, and one can thus actually witness the past. The thicker the glass, the more distant the past. (§6:93)

Needless to say, with the help of this glass composed of "luminite," Charles manages to dispel the local superstitions about ghosts in his ancestral home, to clear his family name, to win some celebrity for himself in the scientific community, to identify the real culprit of the crime (who just happens to be the great grandfather of his rival), and finally to marry his sweetheart.

Unfortunately, the latter years of Maurice Renard's life from 1930 to 1939 were consumed with writing "popular" novels of this sort—the result (among other factors) of sudden financial and emotional upheavals in his personal life during the decade prior to his death. Fortunately, however, he is not remembered for them. Even more than for his several sf novels described above, Renard's literary reputation is founded on his many short stories which most often portray the darker and more mysterious sides of the fantastic.

Renard published six major collections of short stories during his lifetime: *Fantômes et fantoches* (Phantoms and Puppets, 1905, cited in what follows as *FF*), *Le Voyage immobile* (The Stationary Voyage, 1909, *VI*), *Monsieur d'Outremort* (Mr d'Outremort, 1913, *MO*), *L'Invitation à la peur* (Invitation to Fear, 1926, *IP*), *Le Carnaval du mystère* (The Carnival of Mystery, 1929), and *Celui qui n'a pas tué* (He Who Did Not Kill, 1932). In addition, a posthumous collection from those hundreds of short stories originally written

by Renard during the 20s and 30s for the Parisian daily newspaper *Le Matin* (The Morning), amusingly called *Mille et un Matins* (Thousand and One Mornings, *MM*), appears as one section of the Renard omnibus volume, *Romans et contes fantastiques* (Fantastic Novels and Stories, 1990).

As one scholar has observed: “It is dangerous to attach narrow labels to the works of Maurice Renard which are, most of the time, a mixture of fantasy, the supernatural, science fiction, and detective fiction” (Baronian 176). And this is perhaps nowhere better exemplified than in Renard's many short stories which range in time from the prehistoric to the prophetic, in style from the baroque to the burlesque, and in subject from the mythological to the pathological.

The “purest” sf in Renard's shorter works can be found in certain extrapolative stories like his 76-page novella “Le Voyage immobile” (1908 [VI], The Flight of the Aerofix, 1932). Giving material substance to certain imaginary voyages like those expressed by Fontenelle in his *Entretiens sur la pluralité des mondes* (1686, *Conversations on the Plurality of Worlds*, 1715), Renard proposes an experimental anti-gravity flying machine called an “aérofixe” which, by remaining stationary in the sky, “moves” from one location to another as the Earth spins below it. Another short story “M. d'Outremort, gentilhomme physicien” (1913 [MO], Mr d'Outremort, Gentleman Physicist), portrays a deceptively gentle scientist who, in his family castle, conducts experiments in *telemechanics*, described as “the science of operating machines at a distance, without connecting wires, and exclusively by the manipulation of hertzian waves” (456). When ferociously attacked by his town's superstitious villagers, he activates—with his remote control—the family roadster (now specially equipped with scythe blades) and massacres them without pity. Finally, Renard blends black humor with extrapolative science in “La Grenouille” (1926 [IP], The Frog), where a physics teacher succeeds in giving his dead mother the semblance of life by applying the electric-shock procedures of Galvani to her corpse.

True to his strong interest in varying modes of human perception, Renard also wrote many short stories which foreground the dual themes of invisibility and mirrors. For example, in a satirical critique of Wells' *The Invisible Man*, Renard's humorous “L'Homme qui voulait être invisible” (1926 [IA], The Man Who Wanted to be Invisible) attempts to set the record straight: human invisibility necessarily creates total blindness in its recipient. In Renard's tale, a certain eccentric scientist named Patpington believes that he has invented an invisibility machine; he activates it, becomes temporarily blind, and, believing himself now to be invisible, promptly engages in all sorts of untoward behavior like walking around nude in his in-laws' house. The “humor” in this story (similar to that in *The Emperor's Clothes*) revolves around the fact that the machine didn't work, and Patpington remains perfectly visible to his friends who kindly accommodate his eccentricities.

In another variant on the invisibility theme published several years earlier, Renard's “L'Homme au corps subtil” (1913 [MO], The Man with the Etherized Body) portrays a scientist named Bouvancourt who has also invented

a machine to produce temporary invisibility—but in so “etherizing” his body, he now tends to pass *through* the objects around him. As the plot unfolds, an evil scoundrel forces Bouvancourt to make him invisible (to better perpetrate his felonious deeds), and Bouvancourt reluctantly agrees. Once the operation is complete, however, the latter promptly falls to the center of the Earth: throughout all his experiments, Bouvancourt had *never* “etherized” his own *shoes*. Now finally realizing the fatal potential of his invisibility machine, Bouvancourt decides to destroy it. Renard's somewhat tongue-in-cheek treatment of his fictional hero in this story becomes even clearer when one realizes that, in an earlier short story appropriately called “La Singulière destinée de Bouvancourt” (1905 [VI], The Strange Destiny of Bouvancourt), this same character supposedly discovers a way to enter a mirror, becomes a prisoner within a world of reflections, and ultimately *dies*. Thus, through his unexpected authorial reincarnation of Bouvancourt several years later, Renard appears to be deliberately adding to his fiction yet another paradoxical twist to the recurring presence of the visible/invisible motif.

Finally, two other Renard narratives which belong to the science-fiction category are his prehistoric tales: the novella “Les Vacances de M. Dupont” (1906 [VI], Mr Dupont's Vacation) and the short story “Le Brouillard du 26 octobre” (1913 [MO], The Fog of October 26th). In the first, a recently discovered cave in southern France is found to contain huge dinosaur eggs. Due to a variety of climatic and geologic factors, they have been perfectly preserved. The eggs unexpectedly hatch, and the giant sauriens promptly wreak great havoc not only on the surrounding countryside and on the paleontologist studying them, but also on the mild-mannered Dupont who had ironically decided to be spend a quiet vacation on his friend's rural estate. In the second story, a strange and unnatural fog suddenly envelops a geologist and a botanist while they are working near the Ardennes forest. When the fog lifts, they realize that they have been inexplicably projected back millions of years to the Earth's Cenozoic era. They begin to explore and eventually encounter a tribe of *winged* prehistoric apes—a branch on the evolution tree never before suspected by modern Science. Suddenly attacked, the two scientists are forced to shoot one of these creatures who, before dying, grabs a gold pocketwatch dropped during the fracas. The eerie fog then returns, and the scientists find themselves back in the 20th century once again, wondering if their experience had been some sort of strange hallucination. But nearby they come across the ancient remains of an anthropoid skeleton with a bullet hole in its skull and a fossilized gold pocketwatch grasped in its bony fingers. While Renard dedicates this latter tale to Edgar Allen Poe and his “Tale of the Ragged Mountains,” it also seems largely derived from his friend Rosny aîné's prehistoric “La Contrée prodigieuse des cavernes” (1896, The Extraordinary Land of the Caverns), a lost-world narrative portraying a civilization of humanoid, highly intelligent vampire bats.

Within the (admittedly) very broad category of fantastic/horror and fantasy fiction, Renard's narratives seem to touch upon almost all the basic ingredients. For example, recalling in many ways stories like Poe's “The

Masque of the Red Death,” there are highly baroque tales of plague and murderous courtly intrigue like “Mystification” (n.d. [MM], The Hoax), “Le Lapidaire” (1905 [FF], The Gem Cutter), “Le Balcon” (1926 [IA], The Balcony), and “L’Affaire du miroir” (1926 [IA], The Mirror Affair). There are stories about new species of ocean life, like “Le Requin” (n.d. [MM], The Shark) in which mutated sharks have learned to hunt in packs, and like “Jeff le scaphandrier” (n.d. [MM], Jeff the Diver) where an undersea diving machine suddenly seems to take on a life of its own. There are stories of strange extrasensory phenomena and hypnotized zombies like “Un Mirage” (n.d. [MM], A Mirage) where the ghostly image of the Eiffel Tower materializes before the eyes of a French *paysan* who later learns that his son, at that exact moment, had leapt to his death from the heights of this Parisian monument, and like “Le Rendez-vous” (1908 [VI], The Appointment) where—in “Valdemar” fashion—a woman mesmerized to show up for a weekly rendezvous of illicit lovemaking, suddenly dies and is buried, but persistently returns from the grave each week at the appointed hour (much to the horror of her ex-lover, who cannot escape her). There are many tragic-misunderstanding stories like “L’Ogre” (n.d. [MM], The Ogre) where a young girl murders a kindly old man because she believes him to be an ogre, like the one in her favorite fairy-tale. There are stories of mythological fantasy, like “La Mort et le coquillage” (1907 [VI], Death and the Shell) where a musician puts his ear to a conch shell, is captivated by the strange ocean sounds he hears within it, and promptly dies for having listened to the voices of the Sirens, and like “La Cantatrice” (1913 [MO], The Soprano) where a mysterious young opera singer with an incredibly lovely voice turns out to be a captured mermaid. And there is even one rather self-reflective story which targets the rapport between the writer of fiction and his own creations, “La Fêlure” (1905 [FF], The Crack), where a paranoid novelist meets in person his own fictional villain and must quickly erase a chapter in his book to avoid being murdered himself.

But it is in the time-honored genre of ghost stories that Renard’s versatility and imaginative breadth is best illustrated, ranging from his Sherlock Holmes-like accounts of the deductively dismissable to his terror-filled tales of the palpable but inexplicable. For example, in his detective story “Le Spectre photographié” (n.d. [MM], The Photographed Ghost), snapshots taken inside a supposedly haunted factory clearly show a skeletal phantom roaming the premises; but they are finally discovered to be simply those of a local burglar whose was photographed by an automated security-system camera erroneously wired to an X-ray machine. In a more spiritualist mode—patterned on the well-publicized efforts of both Edison and Houdini to contact the dead¹⁰—Renard’s “Aux Ecoutes des ténèbres” (1926 [IA], Listening to the Shadows) portrays a World War I soldier who receives a long-distance telephone call from his comrade at the front, only to learn that his friend had been killed days before. In the traditional Gothic vein, empty yet sentient suits of medieval armor and mysterious whispered voices are found in the “Château hanté” (1913 [MO], Haunted Castle). In the romantic and sentimental ghost

story titled "Au-delà" (n.d. [MM], Beyond) a young widower has difficulty getting over the loss of his spouse, until he is consoled by his dead wife's spirit. And even the legend of the ghost ship known as The Flying Dutchman has its Renardian variants in stories like "Brouillard en mer" (n.d. [MM], Fog at Sea), where a fatal collision on a fog-bound sea is averted by the sudden astral materialization of a sister ship which had sunk years before in that exact same location, and like "La Damnation de 'l'Essen'" (1926 [IA], The Damnation of the "Essen"), where a satanic German captain and his murderous ship are transmuted into the spectral realm where, as the Devil's emissaries, they can now stalk the high seas forever.

As most readers will immediately surmise, a great many of these short stories by Maurice Renard have been continuously recycled by authors of speculative fiction since the early decades of the 20th century. Some of them have become films or individual episodes on American television shows like *The Twilight Zone*, *Tales from the Dark Side*, and *Tales from the Crypt*. I have outlined here only a representative sample of Renard's total short story output; a detailed intertextual analysis of literary and cinematic borrowings from them would necessarily require much more space than can be afforded in this brief introductory article.

But two facts seem clear. First, if current Anglo-American science-fiction scholarship is to ultimately move beyond its own restrictive ideological and logocentric boundaries, it is imperative that more (and better) translations become available of foreign-language sf authors like Maurice Renard.

Secondly and lastly, in the evolution of the sf genre, Maurice Renard's place is an unusually polyvalent and trans-historical one. As one critic has observed, he "is at the junction of two eras" (Fauchereau, 25). I would go one step further and describe Renard's works as the bridge between two entire *worlds*: not only in terms of chronology (the nineteenth *fin-de-siècle* and the twentieth century) and of esthetics (the Goncourts and the Surrealists), but also in terms of those two fundamental sides of the human psyche—the rational and the irrational. While his works of *merveilleux scientifique* may owe a great deal to the speculative fictions of H.G. Wells and J.-H. Rosny aîné (and very little to the scientific fictions of Jules Verne), much of Renard's oeuvre owes an even greater debt to that master of the fantastic, Edgar Allen Poe.

PRIMARY WORKS. The following is a chronological list of the novels and short-stories published by Maurice Renard which can be described as predominantly Science Fiction [SF], Fantastic/Horror [FH], or Detective fiction [DF], ending with two edited collections published in 1990.

Fantômes et fantoches (Phantoms and Puppets). Short stories. Paris: Plon, 1905. (Signed with pseudonym Vincent Saint-Vincent). [FH]

Le Docteur Lerne, sous-Dieu (Doctor Lerne, Undergod). Novel. Paris: Mercure de France, 1908 (Paris: Crès, 1919; Paris: Tallendier, 1958; Paris: Belfond, 1970; Verviers, Belgium: Marabout, 1975). Trans. (anon.) as *New Bodies for Old* (NY: Macaulay, 1923). [SF]

Le Voyage immobile, suivi d'autres histoires singulières (The Immobile

- Voyage, followed by Other Strange Stories). Short stories. Paris: Mercure de France, 1909 (Paris: Crès, 1922). Trans. (anon.) as *The Flight of the Aerofix* (NY: Stellar, 1932). [SF/FH]
- Le Péril bleu* (The Blue Peril). Novel. Paris: Michaud, 1911 (Paris: Crès, 1920; Paris: Tallendier, 1958; Paris: Belfond, 1974; Viviers, Belgium: Marabout, 1976). [SF]
- Monsieur d'Outremort et autres histoires singulières* (Mr. Outremort and Other Strange Stories). Short stories. Paris: Michaud, 1913 (Paris: Crès, 1921 with the title *Suite fantastique*). [SF/FH]
- Les Mains d'Orlac* (The Hands of Orlac). Novel. Paris: Nilsson, 1920 (Paris: Plon, 1933; Paris: Belfond, 1970; Verviers, Belgium: Marabout, 1978). Trans. and adapted by Florence Crewe-Jones as *The Hands of Orlac* (NY: Dutton, 1929; London: Four Square, 1961 [film version]; trans. by Iain White, London: Souvenir, 1981). First published in 58 episodes in *L'Intransigeant* (May 15-July 12, 1920). [SF/FH]
- L'Homme truqué* (The Altered Man). Novel. Paris: Crès, 1921 (Paris: Tallendier, 1958). The Crès edition also includes two short stories: "Château hanté" (Haunted Castle) and "La Rumeur dans la montagne" (The Murmur in the Mountain). The Tallendier edition includes *Un Homme chez les microbes* instead of the short stories. [SF/FH]
- Le Singe* (The Ape/The Fake). Paris: Crès, 1925. Novel. Trans. Florence Crewe-Jones as *Blind Circle* (NY: Dutton, 1928; London: Gollancz, 1929). Co-authored with Albert Jean. Originally appeared in 62 episodes in *L'Intransigeant* (April 15-June 19, 1924). [SF/DF]
- L'Invitation à la peur* (Invitation to Fear). Paris: Crès, 1926. Short stories. Both reprints of this collection (Paris: Tallendier, 1958 and Paris: Belfond, 1970) carry the original title, but do not contain the same short stories. [SF/FH]
- Un Homme chez les microbes* (A Man Among the Microbes). Paris: Crès, 1928 (Paris: Ed. Métal, 1956; Paris: Tallandier, 1958). Novel. The Ed. Métal version includes the short stories "L'Image au fond des yeux" (The Image in the Depths of the Eyes) and "L'Homme qui voulait être invisible" (The Man Who Wanted To Be Invisible), whereas the Tallendier edition includes the novel *L'Homme truqué* as noted above. [SF]
- Le Carnaval du mystère* (The Carnival of Mystery). Short stories. Paris: Crès, 1929. Several of these short stories—and some from the collection *L'Invitation à la peur*—are reprinted in *Le Papillon de la mort* (Paris: Nouvelles Editions Oswald, 1985). [FH/DF]
- Celui qui n'a pas tué* (He Who Did Not Kill). Short stories. Paris: Crès, 1932. Many of the short stories in this collection were first published in *La Petite Illustration* in 1927-31. [FH/DF]
- Le Maître de la lumière* (Master of Light). Novel. First published in 54 episodes in *L'Intransigeant* (March 8-May 2, 1933). Reprinted posthumously in volume (Paris: Tallandier, 1947). [SF]
- Contes des "Mille et Un Matins"* (Stories from "A Thousand and One Mornings"). Short stories. Collected and published posthumously (in

Romans et contes fantastique, 1990). [SF/FH/DF]

Romans et contes fantastiques. Paris: Laffont "Bouquins," 1990. Contains five complete SF novels (*Le Docteur Lerne*, *Le Pêril bleu*, *Les Mains d'Orlac*, *Un Homme Chez les Microbes*, and *Le Maître de la lumière*) as well as a wide selection of his better SF and Fantastic/Horror short stories. This edition also contains various essays of literary criticism written by Renard, testimonies on Renard by a few of his contemporaries, a brief biography of the author's life, and three bibliographies (all of Renard's literary works, and subsequent film and television adaptations made from them).

NOTES

1. Cf Maxime Jakubowski 408-09, 428; Everett F. Bleiler 619-20; John J. Pierce, *Foundations* 73-74; and most notably John Clute and Peter Nicholls 1003. All translations from the French are by the author unless otherwise stated.

2. E.F. Bleiler, for instance, characterizes the translations in the only-available English versions of Renard's novels (dating from the 1920s) as "barbarous" and "bad, both as translation and as English" (620). Having read Renard's works in the original French, I recently borrowed and perused a copy of *New Bodies for Old* (the quirky English translation of *Le Docteur Lerne*) to see just how bad it was. I was both perplexed and appalled: the anonymous translator, while overly fastidious in his/her word-by-word rendering of Renard's prose, had nevertheless chosen to *radically censor* the primary text. More on this later.

3. Pol Neveux, "Maurice Renard rémois," *Vient de paraître* (avril 1925), quoted by Jacques Baudou, "Biographie de Maurice Renard." *Romans* (Renard omnibus cited above), 1242.

4. Cf Jean-Marc Gouanvic, who points out "Maurice Renard, in contrast to Wells, presumes that the question of brain transplants has been resolved: his *Doctor Lerne* starts up where *The Island of Dr. Moreau* leaves off. Further...what interests Wells is the social and ethical behavior of this 'parody of humanity.' Renard, on the other hand, makes use of this theme...in a manner that is essentially erotic in nature. The brain transplants provide the occasion for reversals of roles and sexual conventions" (113-14, my translation). These observations are from Gouanvic's 1983 unpublished Ph.D dissertation titled "La Science-fiction française: 1918-1968," one of the best critical treatments of French sf that I have seen to date—and one which I inadvertently neglected to mention in the bibliographies of my earlier article "Science Fiction in France" (SFS 16:254-76, 338-68, #49, November 1989).

5. See, for example, Philip José Farmer's "The Lovers" (1952; *The Lovers*, 1961), Robert Silverberg's "In the Group" (1973), and Kate Wilhelm's "Baby You Were Great" (1967).

6. Cf Pierce, *Great Themes of Science Fiction*, 126-27.

7. Cf Pierce, *Foundations of Science Fiction*, 73.

8. Before Renard, other early sf writers of the microscopic include, for example, Fitz-James O'Brien's "The Diamond Lens" (1858), Edwin Pallander's *The Adventures of a Micro-Man* (1902), and Ray Cummings' series beginning with "The Girl in the Golden Atom" (1919; *The Girl in the Golden Atom*, 1921), not to mention those earlier well-known contributors to the genre: Swift, Voltaire, *et al.*

9. The term used in Bob Shaw's (much more interesting) short story "Light of Other Days" (1966) as well as in his anthology *Other Days, Other Eyes* (1972).

10. Cf Van Herp, *Panorama de la science-fiction*, 217.

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ABSTRACT

Although one of the most prominent writers (and theorists) of science fiction in France throughout the period of 1900-1930, Maurice Renard has heretofore received very little critical attention outside his native land. His neglect among Anglo-American literary scholars is most likely the result of two factors: first, very few English translations of Renard's works exist (and those that do are of inferior quality) and, second, the basic nature of Renard's sf tends to challenge our more modern notions of genre specificity when defining the sf canon—i.e., his stories appear to continually cross the line into Gothic horror, mythological fantasy, and detective mysteries. This article presents a brief synopsis of Maurice Renard's life and literary ideas (e.g., the "scientific-marvellous"), and offers a detailed discussion of Renard's many novels and short stories, which, often resembling a kind of cross-hybridization between Wells and Poe, can together perhaps best be labelled "fantastic sf." (ABE)