

more important languages. I know hardly anything of sf in the native countries of von Braun and of Tsiolkovskii, but I should like to give here a very brief survey of the kind written by the fellow countrymen of our old master, Jules Verne.

France is undoubtedly behind the English-speaking countries as far as contemporary sf is concerned (indeed the French have no word for it even), but it was not always so, and the would-be author of a really comprehensive history of the *genre* could not afford to neglect French sources. Without going back to Cyrano—who, I believe, did know what he was talking about—or even to Verne, the father, as we all know, of ‘Type 2’ sf, our historian might, for example, be surprised to discover that Wells’s Martians were not the first true BEMs: they were preceded in 1896 by *Les Xipéhuz*, the invention of a versatile French writer of high standing, J. H. Rosny *aine*. Those ‘prehistoric’ BEMS were prehistoric in more than one sense, for in the book that bore their name they threatened the supremacy of Man not in the distant future, but, more unexpectedly, at the dawn of history.

The ever-recurring triangle of the eccentric scientist, his beautiful and devoted daughter-cum-assistant and his scholarly but wicked rival may also be of French origin (although I am not so sure); they are, anyway, at the centre of a long-winded novel (three large volumes), *Aventures extraordinaires d'un savant russe*, written some time before World War I by an electrical engineer, Henri de Graffigny—and whoever knows his French political history will not be surprised that the nice, absent-minded astronomer with the glamorous daughter is Russian, and his bad colleague English. Nor should the genealogist of the robot family overlook *L'Ève future*, as far removed from Niobe Gay as Barbicane's projectile from the Atlas Mercury capsule, but her legitimate ancestress, even so. Her creator, Villiers de l'Isle-Adam, is a great name in French literature, and while the novel, *L'Ève future* (1886), in which he displays a surprising knowledge of the technological resources of his time, may be regarded as early sf (with a strong erotic basis rarely found nowadays), some of his short or long stories, and particularly *Claire Lenoir*, rank among the best horror tales in any language. Indeed the frontiers between sf and neighbouring fields seem always to have been more blurred in French literature than in Anglo-American; for instance, the gripping novel *Le Singe*, by Maurice Renard and Albert-Jean, while basically rather like W. F. Temple's *Four-sided Triangle*, contains elements pertaining properly to the fantasy tale, horror story and detective novel.

The literary status of Villiers, and to a lesser extent of Rosny, emphasizes another characteristic of French literature: that sf, at least of the Wellsian type (as opposed to the Vernean), has never been looked down upon in France quite so much as in the English-speaking world—presumably because the ‘pulp’ were never a serious menace there. Admittedly Villiers and Rosny (the author of several works of sf and fantasy beside *Les Xipéhuz*) lived before the reign of those, but even contemporary writers like the talented René Barjavel do not seem to suffer any taint because of their excursions in our field; indeed, one of Barjavel's most daring sf novels, *Le Diable l'emporte*, was first published in instalments in a highbrow review of strong right-wing leanings, whose very name suggests an almost idolatrous respect of the French language!

Another point worthy of study would be the influence of Anglo-Saxon literature on French sf, and *vice versa* perhaps. As would be expected, Wells has left his mark. *The Time Machine* has been used by Octave Béliard—physician, Egyptologist and short-story writer—in a story whose exact title I cannot at present remember. The machine is constructed by an Italian scientist; his twin sons, Romualdo and Remo, interfere with it, get thrown back in time without moving from Rome, and—well, you can guess the end of the story. Maurice Renard points out, in his tale *L'Homme qui voulut être invisible*, a snag to invisibility that Wells either did not realize or chose to ignore: that it would entail blindness by making the eyes transparent.

A survey of themes in French sf and of the way they are treated would also be rewarding, and might detect trends and tendencies which could be compared fruitfully with their Anglo-Saxon counterparts. For example, I do not remember reading in English anything quite like a novel by Jacques Spitz, *L'Œil du Purgatoire*. In this book the hackneyed theme of time travel is replaced by a more original conception, which the author terms, not very satisfactorily perhaps, ‘*voyage dans la causalité*’. This means that the hero, thanks to a strange biological discovery, sees present things and people in their future state—walking skeletons and ruined buildings, then, as the process speeds up, crumbling dust and ashes, until the whole world disappears from his view, but not from his other senses. The story is told with real spine-chilling skill.

We are told that sf has come of age and should be regarded as an accepted literary medium: then it should certainly be studied seriously by the methods of comparative criticism, like other literary forms.

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