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***Pardon this Intrusion:  
Fantastika in the World Storm***

Leon Marvell

John Clute. *Pardon this Intrusion: Fantastika in the World Storm*. Essex, UK: Beacon Publications, 2011. Paper, iv + 369 pages, \$40.00, ISBN 978-1-870824-60-6.

THE TITLE OF THIS NEW COLLECTION of John Clute's essays derives from Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein; or, the Modern Prometheus*. The monster, which has not previously uttered a word, approaches the hovel of a blind man. When the blind man within bids him enter, the monster announces his entry with: "Pardon my intrusion...I am a traveler in want of a little rest." This moment of encounter becomes the escutcheon of this collection of essays. The words of the monster are "the first words of the new century," and the blindness of the old man "tells us literally that he cannot understand the nature of the new order of things looming above him" (14).

Perhaps more than any other collection of Clute's writings, *Pardon This Intrusion* intensifies and consolidates the insights, themes and program (that is, how we should approach the literature of the fantastic, where it came from, and what we should do with it) that he has been elucidating since the turn of this, another unfortunate century. Of course, Clute has been writing about

the literary fantastic since the 1960s, but, as this collection makes abundantly clear, it has been the nexus of self-supporting skeins of real-time events and fantastical constructions in literature since 2001 that has galvanized his thinking concerning the function, purpose and import of *fantastika*, as distinct from the history of fantastical narratives.

The first section of this collection gathers seven essays concerned with the World Storm (Clute's characterization of the last two hundred years or so), including the important work, *Fantastika in the World Storm*, an address first delivered at the Centre for the Future in Prague, in 2007. This piece is important because it defines exactly what Clute means by his use of the term *fantastika*. All nations and all times (seemingly) have had their fantastical stories, but it was not until the end of the 18th century that a particular form of literature arose in Europe: a literature which sought to "consciously subvert the world above," which "apes and mocks decorum, uncovering from within the terrible true understory of the world we in the West have entered" (22). This uncovering is what *fantastika*—whether Horror, Science Fiction or Fantasy—accomplishes for the world that Shelley's *Frankenstein* perhaps first so damningly announces; the world the blind man is incapable of seeing, and which the Monster embodies: the "new order of things looming above" as Clute succinctly puts it.

What distinguishes this collection of essays from other contemporary considerations of Science Fiction, Horror or Fantasy (or any subheading of these) is that with this book we are privy to the culmination of what can only be described as the philosophical development of a writer. Each essay, written for differing purposes between 1985 and 2011, with no thought of ultimately taking the shape they do here, and with no particular philosophical through-line that might argue for an ultimate telos, nevertheless adds up cumulatively to reveal a world-view and a hermeneutic that are both exacting and profound. In many ways this is Clute's most breathtaking account of the state of things, a philosophical whole much greater than the sum of its parts. The "breathtaking" aspect comes about from the audacity of what may be regarded as an ontological commitment: there is "a terrible new intimacy between works of the imagination and the reality of things" (3). Writing just after the events of 9/11, Clute can conclude that the "portents of terrible change" that SF in particular commits itself to seem to have been imagined and written—written on the world, in the case of 9/11—by

both SF writers and the terrorists themselves such that "in 2001 that story is a story which is not only told but is the case" (5).

As always with Clute we find within these essays an uncompromising commitment to *story* and the storying of our world. Again, this is because of the inevitability of his ontological commitments; he is arguing not about a literature that *represents* the world, but one that *presents that which is the case*: what you see is what you get, as he says. This presentational view of storying immediately precludes any fancy postmodern ironizing or meta-reflexive ploys that may be discovered or utilized by the critic:

What we have to do...is to obey the tale: which means that, in the end, we do not ironize our reading, we do not condescend, we do not doublethink the telling. When we accomplish this simplicity, we may find that the story by itself supplies all the doubleness we could dream of. (7)

Clute ranges over a wide compass in this collection. Not only do we find meditations on key texts such as Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, Crowley's *Aegypt* and the work of Silverberg, Disch, Wells and other luminaries but we also encounter diversions on Philip Glass's soundtrack to Reggio's *Koyaanisqatsi*, the music of Alban Berg, Bergman's film *The Serpent's Egg*, *No Country for Old Men* (both the book and the film) and Georges Simenon's Maigret. And I have touched only the surface in this eclectic list. If one ever thought that the art of the cosmopolitan essay is dead or dying then this book is certainly the cure for such an illusion.

I used the word "cosmopolitan" above as a deliberate index of the breadth of Clute's writing but also as a kind of pun. There is certainly a knowing urbanity inhering in all of Clute's writing, but that is not only what I was pointing towards. The writings collected within this book indicate a "citizen of the cosmos" (if I may be allowed to put it in such a SF-nuanced clichéd manner), someone who cares deeply about our place in the order of things, and about the order of things *themselves*. It is not a jaundiced, posthumanist eye that surveys the literature of the fantastic here, but rather it is a sensibility that is unafraid to look steadily at the dark Engine of the World and to trace its lineaments in the stories we tell ourselves. Clute's dedication to the critical life is thus both unflinching in the face of the horrors we endure and unwavering in its belief in the continuing value of keeping our illusions at bay.

*Pardon This Intrusion* is a book that any scholar of

the fantastic should look to for key critical tools necessary for an understanding of story and the particular literatures that have emerged in the West since the late 1700s. It is also a book that, perhaps inadvertently, narrativizes the development of a philosophical sensibility that is presently at the peak of its critical scanning of the world we inhabit.

In his essay on Lindsay's *A Voyage to Arcturus* (collected here) Clute notes that "the fantasy writers of the 1920s shared a defiant refusal of the official daylight world, and of the fictions that celebrated it. They refused to skate over the shame and poison of aftermath, refused to make life easy for survivors" (256). This is quite a fitting description of Clute's approach to his subject matter as well; we can clearly see whose side he is on, and why he is still enthused about the *fantastika* of the past two hundred years. Finally, one finds within these pages no academic certitudes, no empty scholarly methodologies that will leave one safe and asleep—here is a passion for the strange, turning gears of the cosmos, and for our stories of a world caught within them. ■