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The Global Province

James Gunn, ed. *Around the World: The Road to Science Fiction, Volume 6:* White Wolf (800-454-9653), 1998. 656 pp. $14.99 paper.

Franz Rottensteiner, ed. *View from Another Shore: European Science Fiction.* Liverpool UP (fax: 0151-794-2235), 1998. xvi + 256 pp. £22.50 cloth; £11.95 paper.

In sf, as in US culture generally, the 1970s and early 1980s were a period of heroic, aggressive internationalism. The Baby Boom had reached college, and the Civil Rights and anti-war movements inspired in them an almost romantic solidarity with other cultures. Publishers felt that not only European but Latin American and even Japanese and African literature had markets. In sf, too, there was a mini-translation boom. Macmillan was committed to publishing several Soviet sf novels, and it seemed that the whole Strugatsky *oeuvre* might soon appear in English. Seabury, and later Avon, published Lem as though he were the Polish Borges. As the new branch of sophisticated sf inaugurated by the British New Wave became established in the US, it appeared that literary sf from Europe and the USSR would come to share in its glory.

But even then there were troubling lacunae. Where were Japanese and Chinese sf, which we knew existed but seldom saw in translation? Was there no sf in the Third World? Anthologies of Japanese and Chinese sf did finally appear in English, but they are the last such gatherings listed by James Gunn in his introduction to the new global sf volume of *The Road to Science Fiction.* The past ten years have seen a drastic decline in US publication of "foreign" sf, and looking back from 1989, there hadn't actually been that much non-Anglo sf published in English after all. Aside from the Strugatskys, Lem, and the Macmillan Soviets, what was the tally? In terms of novels (by then the main medium for sf), a few by Gérard Klein, another few by Michel Jeury and Pierre Boulle and Robert Merle, a handful by Wolfgang Jeschke and Herbert Franke, one by Sakyo Komatsu (abridged), Kobo Abé's *Inter Ice Age 4* (1959; US 1970), and perhaps a few others. Some classics were re-translated (Verne, Čapek, Zamyatin, Bulgakov) or appeared for the first time from university presses (Villiers de l'Isle-Adam, Alexander Bogdanov). But that was it.

The state of the art in 1999 is wretched. Almost all the international anthologies and stand-alone novels are out of print and/or inaccessible. Gunn's volume 6 of *The Road to Science Fiction*, entitled *Around the World*, and Franz Rottensteiner's reissue of *View from Another Shore*, originally published in 1973, are recent attempts to keep non-Anglo voices alive in English. Each book has its virtues, but ultimately each merely underscores how completely Anglo sf has consolidated its dominance over the genre.

Gunn's anthology is an interesting addition to his big project of collecting

exemplary stories from every period, and now every major region, of sf. Its superlatively classy cover displays a list of some of the most illustrious writers ever associated with sf: Abé, Borges, Calvino, Čapek, Carlos Fuentes, E.T.A. Hoffman (sic), Kafka, Lem, García Márquez, the Strugatskys, Verne, Ye Yonglie. The selections inside are arranged according to regions: France (Verne, Albert Robida, J.-H. Rosny Aîné, Boris Vian, Philippe Curval, and Gérard Klein, with Elisabeth Vonarburg representing Québec), Germany (Hoffmann, Kurd Lasswitz, Kafka, Herbert W. Franke, Wolfgang Jeschke, Erik Simon), Scandinavia and Finland (Svend Åge Madsen, Sam J. Lundwall), Eastern Europe (Čapek, Lem, Josef Nesvadba, Alexandr Kramer, Ovid S. Crohmălniceanu), Russia (the Strugatskys, Kirill Bulychev), Italy (Dino Buzzati, Tommaso Landolfi, Italo Calvino), Spain and Latin America (Teresa Inglés, Borges, García Márquez, Fuentes), India (Laxman Londhe), China (Zheng Wenguang, Ye Yonglie), and Japan (Abé, Komatsu, Tetsu Yano)—with an appended biographical mini-essay by Elisabeth Vonarburg. Obviously, it is an impressive gathering, but the ultimate effect is of a well-intentioned mélange of pre-, proto-, para-, and pulp sf that has little theoretical or practical coherence.

But what should the purpose of an anthology of "international sf" be? Should it show that other, more literary traditions produce works of science fictional beauty? Should it show that "foreign" writers write sf distinctive of their language-cultures? Should it show that sf is a global phenomenon, that the pulp formulae travel everywhere, and that Sturgeon's Law is universal? How should one define "international sf" when the most popular and prolific forms come from a single culture, and the rest of the globe constitutes the periphery?

Whatever criterion an editor might use, the sad fact is that non-Anglo sf does not sell. Gunn offers cogent reasons for this commercial failure; the main one, curiously enough, cuts across his gallant intention "to recognize other traditions and, by bringing them together into a kind of gestalt of foreign SF, to provide a corrective to the illusion that all SF is American" (10). The problem is that Gunn's overall conception of the field seems almost calculated to justify true fans' distaste for "foreign" sf, since the "truth" is it's not really sf at all.

In every volume of *The Road to Science Fiction*, Gunn offers a most elegant definition of the genre. Sf for him "deals with the effects of change on people in the real world as it can be projected into the past, the future, or to distant places. It often concerns itself with scientific or technological change, and it usually involves matters whose importance is greater than the individual or the community; often civilization or the race itself is in danger" (16). For sf the world is knowable; human existence is an evolutionary outcome; and, armed with that knowledge, human beings are capable of influencing their further evolution. These qualities explain, to Gunn's mind, the great aesthetic and cognitive differences between sf and "mainstream" literature—or, as it eventually becomes, *literature* itself. "Mainstream" literature is preoccupied with the present, and concentrates on social interaction as if "the only important ... aspect of existence is the way in which people relate to each

other" (20). In the course of his argument, Gunn imperceptibly elides his definition of sf with "American" sf—with its characteristic pragmatism and problem-solving—and his sketch of "mainstream" literature with European, and ultimately all non-Anglo, sf. The latter are "other" than US core-sf because they have been tied to the "literary" tradition rather than the pulp tradition that constitutes the distinctive formative environment of US sf. Non-US literature of the "serious" kind was congenial to the fantastic of all types, even sf, and so sf in more traditional literary cultures could not free itself from the constraints of archaic values that dominated traditional literature. Gunn cites good historical reasons for this (uneven development, the social fallout of the great wars, etc.)—but the fact remains that sf outside the US has been unable to develop those qualities that define "real" sf. It is more prone to social concreteness, to present-centeredness, to stylistic affectation reflecting psychological or literary complexity, and to a fatalism in the face of history. Though Gunn does not want to state it, the conclusion is clear: the American sf fan cannot enjoy that "foreign stuff" because it isn't the real thing.

And of course he may be right. Most of his selections certainly do nothing to refute this idea. By choosing to organize the stories exclusively by region, Gunn avoids confronting the fact that most of his examples require a broader definition of sf—as, say, a class of fantasy writing that uses scientific ideas and fictive inventions for a myriad of metaphorical purposes, and of which the problem-solving heroism of the American pulps and Soviet socialist-futurism is a mere subset. Gunn could have chosen only sf texts consistent with his theory; instead, he collects several fine examples of literary fantasy that clearly elude narrow generic boundaries. Some writers, such as Borges, García Márquez, Kafka, Abé, and even Calvino, might be considered writers of *anti-sf*—rational fantasists who reject and deprecate the moral and aesthetic conventions of Gunn's problem-solving genre. There are also some examples of inventive, original sf by anyone's definition (such as Curval's "An Alien Behind the Wine Bottle," Jeschke's "Loitering at Death's Door," and Tetsu Yano's lovely, lyrical "The Legend of the Paper Spaceship"). Organizing by regions and countries is merely a convenience—Gunn does not consider how the languages of national literatures might affect sf, and literatures for him run together as a sort of monolithic pre-scientific institution. So the only thing that national divisions can reflect in his scheme is a vague sense of "history." Accordingly, the historical examples—Verne, Robida, Lasswitz, Rosny Aîné, Hoffmann—might be useful, but only if they are placed specifically in the context of historical antecedents of sf. Moreover, such a collection would have to include more texts of obvious historical (as opposed to literary) significance: e.g., works by Konstantin Tsiolkovksy, Alexander Bogdanov, Alexei Tolstoy, Maurice Renard, Stanislaw Witkiewicz, Imre Madách, etc.

RTSF 6 does not purport to be a purely historical anthology, nor even a theoretically consistent one. Still, "gestalts" don't just happen; they emerge from history and theory. As a result, Gunn's anthology is a grab bag of texts with different relations to both sf and "the world," selected to fill certain niches—nation, generic history, literary status—that do not really complement

one another. In the end, Gunn never does provide a rationale for why these stories, and not others, should have been included.

Perhaps even more distressing than this theoretical confusion, the bibliographic apparatus (limited to an "Acknowledgments" page) is a mess. Sometimes translation dates are given, but not original publication dates; sometimes original publication venues are given, sometimes not; publication sites are absent altogether. Occasionally some of this information is supplied in the introductory comments before each selection, more usually not. In some cases, no information at all is provided about the translations (e.g., the selections from Verne, Robida, and Kafka). The edition from which Gunn has culled the translation of Hoffmann's "The Sandman" is given, but not the name of the translator. Because of this bibliographic chaos, it is also unclear how many of the selections were translated specifically for this volume. I can guess that all the entries "reprinted by permission of the author" and lacking English publication dates were commissioned (but what about Kafka's "The Hunter Gracchus," which is not listed at all in the "Acknowledgments"? Could Gunn have actually commissioned a new translation of this canonical Kafka story without mentioning it?). Another clue is that these particular stories (by Franke, Jeschke, Simon, Madsen, Nesvadba, Crohmălniceanu, and, yes, Kafka) were all "adapted by James Gunn"—though there is no explanation of what this "adaptation" entailed.

Elisabeth Vonarburg's short biographical appendix, "US, SF and Us," details her creative journey from an initial exposure to sf via the French *Fleuve Noir* series, through her increasingly fraught relationship with Anglo sf, complicated by her emigration to Québec. It is a rich and interesting story, but Vonarburg's ideas are surprisingly confused. For Vonarburg, sf, like science itself, "transcends cultural barriers"—partly because these barriers are breaking down under global Americanization, but also because the genre has a universal thesaurus of concerns and themes. She rejects the notion that authors or works of sf can have "cultural specificity" (654); yet on the next page, she speaks of the "fundamental originality and uniqueness of each writer's voice in her or his own language" (655). Language—how different languages and literary norms can define the boundaries of what a culture is used to imagining, and the challenge of making sense *against* those norms—is the factor that does not come up in Gunn's speculations, or for that matter in Vonarburg's. She does make it clear that all non-Anglo sf writers must adopt a complex attitude, working both *with* and *against* the dominant Anglo tradition. Yet she is very sketchy about how French and French-Canadian writers specifically work within fraught cultural traditions. The main problem, it seems to me, in Gunn's —and the US sf establishment's—approach to the question of non-Anglo sf is that they do not think very deeply about language and how it may affect thought. This is a perfectly understandable (if lamentable) attitude on the part of the new lingua franca, Satellite English, as it drives other tongues to extinction.

Franz Rottensteiner is well aware of this anglophone juggernaut. In his revised introduction to an old collection, Rottensteiner updates the condition of

European sf since the fall of the Soviet order. The once-dignified (and subsidized) Eastern European alternatives to US models have been swept away by the tidal wave of inexpensive translations of American pulps. Publishers there (as here) know that there is no money in the native product, and the object of desire is whatever works in the US market. But if Rottensteiner's goal in 1999 is the same as it was in 1973 when this anthology originally appeared—i.e., to demonstrate the quality and vitality of European alternative-sf—it is poorly served indeed by republishing essentially the same selection of stories as in the original edition. Only a single story has been added, Wolfgang Jeschke's 1986 tale "The Land of Osiris"—significantly, one of the volume's finest selections. What other recent gems did Rottensteiner see fit *not* to include? It makes little sense that one of the leading editors and anthologists of European sf should not have found equally good or better stories written during the past twenty-five years. Far from demonstrating vitality, the book seems to say that European sf remains frozen in a sort of Golden Age. The stories are generally of much higher quality than those in Gunn's volume, but they do not represent a living tradition of European sf.

More bothersome than the apparent nonchalance of Rottensteiner's (non-) selection of stories is his introduction. After providing a solid explanation of sf's changed social situation in Central and Eastern Europe after the fall of Communism, the piece degenerates into a nearly *ad hominem* attack on Stanislaw Lem. The 1973 introduction had praised Lem highly (Rottensteiner was Lem's agent at the time for the anglophone regions), but now this praise has been replaced by scorn, perhaps reflecting the bitter controversy that has divided the two men in recent years. Rottensteiner blasts Lem on so many fronts that a reader coming to the subject for the first time would be simply clueless. What's the sense of expending several valuable pages trashing a writer whose reputation as a major artist few can contest, a reputation few have done more to build than Rottensteiner himself? Nothing in Lem's art has changed, no matter how grave his personal flaws may be, or how misanthropic and misogynistic his world-view. Nor does it make much sense to offer the Strugatskys as virtuous countermodels—especially since there are no Strugatsky stories in the collection.

Even with its rancorous introduction, its limited scope, and its anachronistic selections, *View from Another Shore* is still a better *read* than Gunn's anthology; but it does nothing to establish whether current European sf is a vital and evolving body of literature. Indeed, both anthologies show us only this: that there was once a branch of scientific-rational fantasy that national writers pursued in their own way, without anxiety about the power of American sf to control the world's science-fictional imagination as its political economy dominates the nations. But the real question of the moment is: how are the world's scientific fantasists responding to metropolitan American sf (diffused through the multinational film industry in the "international style" of sf-spectacle production) as it saturates once-national public cultures? What we really need to know is the state of the art in the global provinces, *right now*. On this crucial question, Gunn and Rottensteiner are mum.