

Afterword

The turn of the 20th century was a time of great highs and abysmal lows. The Paris Universal Exposition of 1900, The Armory Show of 1913, Marie Skłodowska Curie's two Nobel Prizes¹ shared center stage with the Dreyfus Affair, the rise of New Imperialism and the First World War.

Writing from within this maelstrom of history was J.-H. Rosny *Aîné* (1856-1940). This member of the distinguished Goncourt literary academy was the first writer to straddle the line between themes used commonly in mainstream and academic literature and those used in science fiction. He was also the single French-language author who best embodied the evolution of modern science fiction away from the juvenile, one-dimensional scientific anticipations of Jules Verne, or the pulp serials of Paul d'Ivoi, Jean de La Hire and Gustave Le Rouge, to a more mature, literary form of pulp or popular fiction. Needless to say, his genre fiction was neglected by literary scholars.

Many years later, two individuals, one in a smoldering France, the other in McCarthyist America, one a philosopher, the other a writer, picked up the jet-tipped arrows fired by Rosny. They were unknown to one another and yet so alike in their admiration for this sophisticate who wrote pulp fiction, this great miscegenationist who wrote a philosophy book on pluralism that went through two printings.²

Philosophy should be like a type of science fiction, suggested the philosopher Gilles Deleuze (1925-1995) in the preface to his magnum opus *Difference and Repetition* in 1968, for we "write only at the frontiers of our knowledge, at the border which separates our knowledge from our ignorance and transforms the one into the other." Apologizing to future

¹ Physics (1903) and chemistry (1911).

² *Introduction* by Brian Stableford in Rosny, 2010a: 53.

detractors, he adds wryly: “We are therefore well aware, unfortunately, that we have spoken about science in a manner which was not scientific.”

In terms of science fiction there is no writer more indebted to Rosny, and none more worthy of the honor, than Philip José Farmer (1918-2009). From beginning to end, both Farmer and Rosny ceaselessly experimented with alchemical transformations of ignorance and knowledge, writing like men possessed, “so gabby, so sloppy, so pagan, so wild, so cynical, so drunk (should I say, crazed?) with learning.”³

It is a short step from Rosny’s giant bats of “The Depths of Kyamo” and “The Wonderful Cave Country” to Farmer’s humanoid bat-couple, Ghlikh and Ghuakh, in *The Stone God Awakens* (1970), a lost land adventure replete with love affairs of a genuinely cross-cultural and inter-racial nature, fecund worlds within worlds, and a modest even reluctant hero for whom the avoidance of shameful (human) actions is more important than notations of evil in a morally relativized universe. Unlike Ghlikh and Ghuakh, however, Rosny’s giant bats form something of a symbiotic alliance with humans and other animals whose blood they are dependent on. The hosts may not have offered themselves, but the Nature to which they are subject provides the necessary conditions for its will to be done. Save for a lethargy just before and during transmission, there are no adverse side-effects for the hosts. This idea is given a twist by Farmer in *The Wind Whales of Ishmael* (1971) where it is the carnivorous flora that will insert its vegetable probosci into human jugulars, again, with no adverse side effects.

Rosny’s “The Navigators of Space” and its sequel “The Astronauts”⁴ depict human *astronauts* (his term) traveling to Mars in a spaceship powered by artificial gravity and made of an indestructible, transparent material, not unlike Larry Niven’s spaceships. On Mars, the humans come into contact with

³ Farmer, 1999: 32.

⁴ Written concurrently but only published in 1960.

an intelligent and peaceful, six-eyed, three-legged dying race. A young Martian female, capable of bearing children parthenogenetically by merely wishing it, eventually gives birth to a child after falling in love with one of the human explorers, undoubtedly the first romance ever written between a man and an alien female. This colorful, poetic ode to the power of love and plea for understanding between races, was a sharp departure from the xenophobia celebrated by Wells with his *War of the Worlds*.

The most celebrated miscegenationist tale in the tradition set down by Rosny is Farmer's short story *The Lovers* (1952).⁵ Hal Yarrow, a tyrannical, "terrocentric" and "hidebound"⁶ earthman is in the process of breaking out of his spiritual prison in an unprecedented act of apostasy.⁷ Having fallen in love with a woman named Jeannette Rastignac, the two conduct a clandestine love affair. Whilst Jeanette may look human, she is in fact of the species "Chordata pseudarthropoda"⁸ who are also known as "lalitha...Nature's most amazing experiment in [mimetic] parasitism and parallel evolution."⁹ Tragedy almost ends the relationship, but being a mimetic parasite Hal's lalitha is *the* woman he wishes *any* lalitha to be, and Jeannette had sisters...

Farmer and Rosny also shared an interest in substances both synthetic and natural, conveyed by beings organic, mystical, or natural. Stableford notes the appearance of both ama-

⁵ Expanded into a novel published by Ballantine Books in 1961.

⁶ These expressions do not appear in the 1961 edition of *The Lovers*. We are quoting from the Baen Books edition (2008: 84). We have not seen the 1952 magazine version.

⁷ In the Iranian Sufi tradition the word "hal" means "spiritual state," as in divinely inspired agitation (Wilson, 1988: 203).

⁸ Farmer, 2008: 198.

⁹ Farmer, 2008: 201. Lalitha is also the name of the Hindu Goddess *Lalita Devi*, or, the *Divine Mother*.

nita and ayahuasca (DMT) in Rosny's work.¹⁰ For his part, Farmer's *Unreasoning Mask* (1983) features a planet whose atmosphere necessitates the wearing of masks by humans so as to "strain out the psychedeligenic spores."¹¹

Many a strange or violent event in their fiction could easily be read as moments of expanded consciousness due to the ingestion of psychoactive substances. But as a testament to their virtuosity as writers of exceptional vision and daring, these same stories can be read as transliterations of ideas gleaned from specialist areas of inquiry.

An excellent example in Farmer is the short story "St. Francis Kisses His Ass Goodbye" (1989). This story was first discussed by Carey¹² within the context of Farmer's interest in the Sufi mystical tradition. St. Francis finds himself the unwitting subject of a scientific experiment which transports him through time during a violent storm. Once his transposition has occurred, he encounters a mysterious figure known variously as al-Khidr or "the Green One." Carey suggests that this was not a chance meeting in Farmer's imagination, but a creative elaboration of the little known fact that "St. Francis of Assisi had knowledge of Sufi doctrine, and... based much of his own teaching upon it." The limitation of Carey's account however is the implication of his analogy between Elijah and al-Khidr, for Elijah-as-al-Khidr then "is known in eastern European folklore as being responsible for bad weather."

In their *Green Gold: The Tree of Life, Marijuana in Magic and Religion* (1995), Bennett *et al.* note that "Attar and other Sufis are reported to have used el-Khidr (Khizr), the green man, as a hidden reference to hashish and bhang." Given that some forms of hashish have the equivalent effect of a staggering "500 micrograms of LSD,"¹³ the *storm* assumes an

¹⁰ Stableford in Rosny, 2010c: 328.

¹¹ Farmer, 1983: 10.

¹² Carey, 2009.

¹³ Wilson, 1988: 204.

entirely different meaning to that associated with meteorological phenomena.

Al-Khidr (Khizr or Khezr) originates in and appears throughout both mainstream and mystical Islam, with variant spelling and interpretation of function. Wilson describes al-Khidr as the “hidden prophet of Sufism” an “initiator of Sufis who have no human master, a vegetation spirit in whose footsteps flowers and herbs sprout by magic.”¹⁴ This latter extrapolation seems to fit both Farmer and Rosny’s extensive interest in flora as always containing more than itself and being a cipher for alternate “sentient” life. In a later study, Wilson adds that “one of [al-Khidr’s] functions is to convince skeptics of the existence of the Marvelous, to rescue those who are lost in deserts of doubt and dryness.”¹⁵

So this story could easily be seen as a cipher for the effects of the more powerful, hallucinogenic strains of hashish and cannabis manifested through the presence of al-Khidr. But it is equally a thermodynamic mystery/suspense with a potentially explosive pay-off. As Carey puts it, “al-Khidr, calling himself ‘Kidder,’ appears to the shocked friar, helping him make his way to the scientists whose experiment will end in a world wide disaster if St. Francis is not sent back to his past with the exact matter-mass which he brought with him to the future.” In other words, how to reverse the division of matter—that is, St. Francis—in time, so precisely as to avoid the extensive properties of mass and total volume exceeding their ratio with the intensive properties of pressure, density and temperature;¹⁶ or in the words of Kidder, how to avoid a “mass-temporal energy explosion.”¹⁷

¹⁴ Wilson, 1988: 213.

¹⁵ Wilson, 1993: 139.

¹⁶ “Thermodynamic properties can be divided into two general classes, namely intensive and extensive properties. If a quantity of matter in a given state is divided into two equal parts, each part will have the same value of intensive properties as

For his part, Rosny was saturated in the ideas of his age and so it comes as no surprise to read his account of the division of thermodynamic properties in “The Givreuse Enigma” (2010e). Here the setting is closer to the science of warfare than to the mysticism of a violent storm. It is at the moment of an artillery explosion in a First World War battle that Pierre de Givreuse is divided in space, that is, into two contemporaneous bodies in a way we would today refer to as bipartition or cloning. His double is given the name Philippe de Givreuse. What strikes the scientist handling their case is the “anomaly of their density... the respective weight of the young men was no more than 45 kilograms. This weight was in flagrant disproportion to the volume of flesh and bone. According to appearances, Philippe and Pierre should each have weighed about 70 kilograms—and it was known, with utter certainty, that before his departure, Pierre had weighed 73.”¹⁸

Brian Stableford’s trenchant commentary accompanying the preceding 6 volumes of this series bears witness to Rosny’s laboratory of creative inventions and experimentations where transformations of the real, as outlined above, form an unscientific or romantic type of science fiction. In fact, experiments with many different results scatter Rosny’s fiction, making his writing appear strategic and calculating, that is, political, rather than theoretical and didactic. His novels and stories portray scientists battling with problems that challenge and perhaps require the overturning of orthodoxy, rather than portraying orthodoxy being brought to bear on problems and the lives of scientists. In “Mysterious Force,” physicist Gérard Langre, is described as a man leading “a disconnected life,”

the original, and half the value of the extensive properties. Pressure, temperature, and density are examples of intensive properties. Mass and total volume are examples of extensive properties” (Van Wylen in Beistegui, 2004: 369).

¹⁷ Farmer, 1989: 292.

¹⁸ Rosny, 2010e: 48.

one full “of genius, endowed with the stubbornness and skill of great experimenters,” who “worked with such rudimentary apparatus and such restricted materials that he only obtained any results by virtue of the miracle of his obstinacy, his vigilance and his professional acumen. A lofty vision made up for the wretchedness of his laboratories.”¹⁹

Rosny’s understanding of politics was just as doggedly determined or strategic, that is, innate, intimate and global. Justice was an immanent requirement of everyday ethics and not a transcendent right to be applied by The Law from on high. For more than 30 years, from the 1887 “Manifeste des Cinq”²⁰ denouncing Zola, to his American trip of 1927, Rosny would embody, live and write his understanding of politics as a hatred as well as a terror of dissimulation, the masking of truth. It was “dissimulation and hypocrisy that [was] rotting the soul of America” he stated for *TIME* magazine.²¹ For him, dereliction of creative or scientific duty, the perjury of a writer or scientist deserting the imperative of experimentation (personal or otherwise)—all were ciphers for actual *desertification*, the harshest idea informing “The Death of the Earth,” one of his most disturbing works: “The impotence of human beings was structural: born with water, they were vanishing with it.”²²

Listening to Rosny describing the Russian émigré of Paris in 1891 in a journalistic piece he wrote for *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine*, could just as easily be a summation of his own writing: a politics of scientific method (which at first glance does not appear to be very political or scientific): “His life is an exposition of principles or a perpetual discussion,

¹⁹ Rosny, 2010c: 32.

²⁰ Bonnetain, *et al.* 1887.

²¹ Rosny was scathing in his denunciation of what he felt were the “humiliating experiences” suffered by Americans at the hands of their own mores, and social and economic conditions (Rosny, 1927).

²² Rosny, 2010a: 250.

and all the time we spend with him he is theorizing, comparing dates and events, describing a skeleton Russia wherein there seems to be neither men, women, nor children, but only an abstract population of problems.²³

Farmer shared Rosny's sense of politics²⁴ as that which "precedes being" as Deleuze and Guattari put it.²⁵ When Hal "stepped out into the open air of the first habitable planet discovered by Earthmen" dissimulating scientific neutrality and good will so as to hide his mission objective of genocide, he is reminded of Columbus, and wonders if "the story will be the same?"²⁶ Similarly, Rosny's narrator in "The Treasure in the Snow" says: "Nine times out of ten—as I am not the only person to have remarked—one can reach an understanding with savages; the brutality almost always comes from the side of the white man."²⁷

²³ Rosny, 1891: 430. It is of some importance to acknowledge the hidden hand of the philosopher Henri Bergson here: "The idea that problems, even more than theories and concepts, are the genetic element in the development of thought, keeps coming back in Bergson's works suggesting the stronger claim that his philosophy, more than any other in the beginning of the Twentieth-century, may provide the philosophical grounds for a non-positivist conception of problems themselves" (Durning, 2008). See also Chapman (1984) on Farmer: "parallels with Bergsonian vitalism...are fairly obvious" (86).

²⁴ Both Farmer and Deleuze entered politics, so to speak, at around the same time: "After his return to Peoria in 1969... [Farmer] developed a self-defined role as a resident liberal gadfly commenting on political issues" (Chapman, 2009). And Deleuze: "I, for my own part, made a sort of move into politics around May 68" (1995: 170).

²⁵ 1988: 203.

²⁶ Farmer, 2008: 59.

²⁷ Rosny, 2010b: 159.

In 1976, Farmer adapted Rosny's lost land adventure *L'Etonnant voyage de Hareton Ironcastle* (1922).²⁸ As Stableford informs us, Farmer's version stripped away the religion Rosny had placed strategically so as to appease what he believed was a bible-thumping American audience, but maintained the political intent: "our civilization...is the most homicidal that has ever appeared on Earth...we have caused the disappearance of more peoples and populations than all the conquerors of antiquity and the Middle Ages."²⁹

Our uniquely human patrimony is the inheritance of shameful actions, and both writers knew that shame is not always where the consensus says it is. "Better sleep with a sober cannibal than a drunken Christian" reasons Herman Melville's Ishmael to himself when weighing up the prospect of sharing a room and bed with Queequeg.³⁰ This is the same inversion of a dubious morality that prompts Rosny to criticize by appeasement (as in *Ironcastle*) or direct attack (as in "Companions of the Universe"³¹). Farmer's invocation of, and paean to, the great Herman Melville through the words of Captain Ahab in his *The Wind Whales of Ishmael*, acts as a shared conception of this anti-dissimulationist political intent: "All visible objects, man, are but as pasteboard masks. But in each event—in the living act, the undoubted deed—there, some unknown but still reasoning thing put forth the moldings of its features from behind the unreasoning mask. If man will strike, strike through the mask!"³²

²⁸ Farmer and Rosny, 1976.

²⁹ Stableford in Rosny, 2010c: 269.

³⁰ Melville, 1994:43.

³¹ Rosny, 2010f: 205-206.

³² Farmer uses this particular quotation in both *The Wind Whales of Ishmael* and *Unreasoning mask* (perhaps elsewhere, too). In the former though, he substitutes "still reasoning thing" for "still unreasoning thing" (156). Unless this is a misprint, we assume Farmer refers to the nature of time itself

In 2007, *Collapse*, an independent journal of *Philosophical Research and Development* with a print run of 1000 copies per issue, embodying that *largesse* of spirit, invention, principled exposition and perpetual discussion Rosny might well have admired, published an issue titled *Unknown Deleuze*. Filed under “Rosny” was a translation of “Another World” preceded by a short introductory essay on the legacy of the author by the journal’s editor and publisher, Robin Mackay. This short and incisive piece of scholarship introduces us to an equally *Unknown Rosny*, viz., Rosny the Philosopher and his unmitigated centrality to the strange and difficult philosophy of Gilles Deleuze.

Rosny’s philosophical work was published by Félix Alcan, by all accounts a remarkable publisher whose authors, instead of embodying the common ethos of an exclusive or doctrinaire club, “saturated, through a sort of philosophical chromaticism, every philosophical possibility of the epoch offered to the field.”³³ Such a politics of multiplicity—that is, one premised on the compulsion to experiment, to continually overthrow the reign of unity or science with new data, and to begin all over again—is otherwise known as pluralism.

Both Farmer and Deleuze pay homage to a writer for whom the very latest developments in science and philosophy, not to mention politics, always found a voice in his univocal choir—politics, philosophy and science sounding more romantic than political, philosophical or scientific. Deleuze acknowledges Rosny’s central contribution to philosophy,³⁴ one which establishes pluralism (or the multiple) as the manifesta-

as “unreasoning.” Still, the point remains: “That inscrutable thing is chiefly what I hate” (Melville, 1994: 167).

³³ Mackay, 2007: 256.

³⁴ Mackay (2007: 256) cites Jules Sageret’s *La Revolution Philosophique et la Science: Bergson, Einstein, Le Dantec, J.-H. Rosny Aîné*. Paris: Alcan, 1924, to give an idea of the stature of Rosny at the time.

tion of differences (and not the other way around). As Charles Gourlande puts it in “The Givreuse Enigma”: “the individual, wherever it might be, is multiple”³⁵—it is not the multiple which is constituted by already formed individuals (for that would simply be the anthropocentric dream of unity). Such a dream is achievable only through acts of exclusion. Like science, unity ‘continually neglects, totalizes, symbolizes’.³⁶ But unlike science, unity has inherent, structural problems. Racism and xenophobia are the illnesses of anthropocentrism, the biological rites of exclusion applied as some sort of substitution for problems of integration or alliance.

Rosny went so far as to include *inorganic beings* or a “material form of energy”³⁷ as part of his pantheon of fictional “peoples,” giving them equal, “organic” status. Writing in *Le sciences et le pluralisme*, he states that “there is no reason why the terrestrial surface, since it is traversed by immense energies, should not have produced organic systems equal in complexity to our own. No more than there is any reason that it might not produce another organic realm once ours has disappeared. My Xipehuz, Moedigen and Ferro-Magnetics are perhaps pale symbols of anterior and future realities.”³⁸

When Deleuze said of Rosny that “he invents a kind of naturalism in intensity which, at the two extremes of the intensive scale, ...leads into the prehistoric caverns and future spaces of science fiction,”³⁹ he meant that between the bond of primitive alliance displayed in works such as *Helgvor of the Blue River* (2010g) and *The Giant Feline* (2010g) on the one hand, and the *inorganic beings* of “Another World” and “The Xipehuz” on the other, lay the immense creative energy of a

³⁵ Rosny, 2010e: 129-130.

³⁶ Mackay, 2007: 258.

³⁷ Rosny, 2010c: 117.

³⁸ Rosny in Mackay, 2007: 260.

³⁹ Deleuze, 1994: 329.

writer for whom “experimentation indefinitely dominates speculation.”⁴⁰

Rosny wrestled long and hard with many an “abstract population of problems.” Perhaps at times, this “great bad writer”⁴¹ got his facts and narratives wrong, perhaps, late at night, the frontiers of ignorance and knowledge blurred behind the tired eyes of one who believed with the Jesuit philosopher-paleontologist Teilhard de Chardin that “the history of the living world can be summarized as the elaboration of ever more perfect eyes within a cosmos in which there is always something more to be seen.”⁴²

Rosny’s great contribution will be to advance a better idea than unity, an experimental idea par excellence, namely, of alliance between his fictional *peoples* be they animals, plants, aliens or energies. This acknowledgment of the richness of heterogeneous alliance over homogenous, anthropocentric unity (such as colonialism and other declarations of war), is something Deleuze built his philosophy upon, and Farmer, his fiction.

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⁴⁰ Mackay, 2007: 259.

⁴¹ Stableford in Rosny, 2010f: 281.

⁴² 1959: 31.

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