Books in Review

Gavin Miller
Science Fiction and Psychology
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Science Fiction and Psychology closely examines how science fiction literature across a range of political types and temporalities uses psychological discourses to construct defamiliarizing novums that "alienate taken-for-granted features of our social life, which then are perceived, in the ideal case, as contingencies that may be open to historical praxis" (30). The bulk of the book is divided into an introduction and five chapters, followed by a summarizing conclusion that stands in defiance of "the boundary work that might aim to segregate science fiction from scientific practice" (258). Primarily working within Darko Suvin's definition of science fiction, Miller delivers an original and compelling contribution to the increasingly interconnected fields of literary and scientific criticism at the fresh intersection of science fiction studies and the medical humanities.

The well-organized and comprehensive introduction restricts the "period of literary history under examination" in the book to the start of the late 19th century to just before the rise of neuroscience (13). According to Miller, this choice in scope is because the rise of industrialization in the West gives form to both science fiction as a genre and psychology as a discipline, the latter of which he defines as a field "that extend[s] methods to knowledge of the soul, self, or mind" (12). The introduction proceeds to five chapters that carefully avoid readings that simply apply a psychological theory to a text to illustrate its supposed "truth" (82). Instead, Miller illustrates how science fiction texts "wittingly or unwittingly, thematize, endorse, and/or challenge psychological knowledge" (39). These chapters show how science fiction deploys the values, rules, and laws apparent in the representative discourses of six types of psychological science including evolutionary psychology, psychoanalytic psychology, behaviourism and social construction, existential-human-istic psychology, and cognitive psychology. In each of these internal chapters, Miller first provides a smartly compact overview of the history and hermeneutics of the psychological school under consideration before going on to successfully discover "neglected psychological meanings" within a wide survey of science fiction works (11), including classic examples like H.G. Wells' *The Time Machine* (1895) to New Wave gems like Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Word for World is Forest* (1972). Miller concludes the book with a brief set of examples that show how psychological science itself specifically deploys aesthetic techniques and narrative strategies from science fiction, such as Steven Pinker's reliance on science fiction extrapolation in his "popularizing, journalistic rhetoric" (247). Miller's conclusion addresses an important "human science" gap in a long critical tradition that studies the rhetoric of the physical and natural sciences as literature—a tradition stemming from Evelyn Fox Keller's germinal analyses of the gendered metaphors used in biology and physics, for example.

Miller effectively argues that science fiction reflects how "psychology... emerges in the late 19th century as a pre-eminent technology of the human" (8). In other words, partially expressed and spread through the popularizing medium of science fiction, various psychological discourses function as utopian and dystopian myths that likely continue to "discursively shape the self with far greater intimacy than the natural sciences" in our specific historical moment (237). Arguably, the ecological sciences have had an immense impact on the construction of human identities and values, at least according to studies in the environmental humanities. But regardless of which side one takes on this minor point, Miller's book was published at the start of 2020 just before borders started closing due to the pandemic, and could not be more apropos

Books in Review, continued

now, as we desperately grapple over what we think the best psychic, sociopolitical, and environmental parameters should be for the human species living in a "new normal." Miller explains that these discussions are important because psychological "[b]eliefs about human nature have ethical implications in part because of the meta-ethical presumption in favour of the right to express one's supposed nature" (38). Miller's careful study of the historical deployment of psychological discourses by science fiction can help to illuminate how the rhetoric of the "new normal," across and outside of academia, can often be reduced to oppositional worldviews regarding how and what human nature *should* or *can* be in pseudo-psychological terms. In the context of late-capitalism, these mistakenly polarized worldviews can often be distinguished between approaches to the world and "human nature" as structured by systems of power and oppression or as structured by "nature." What they have in common is a belief in universal determinism and a penchant for overconfidence in their calls for diverse variants of what amounts to social, cultural, or material (re)engineering with loci of intervention at wildly different scales ranging from individual genes to the population systems. The historical scope of Miller's book humbly cautions and reminds readers that like the re-formulation of narratives about human nature accompanied the discoveries of Darwin and Freud, so too will new "science fictional" mythologies and ideologies spring forth from ongoing conversations about how to live "a good life" in the context of the Anthropocene, now marked by the rise of a novel virus in the era of late-capitalism, crushing inequality, and environmental collapse. Beyond studying texts containing only dystopian-tinged caution, however, Miller does cover several texts that offer a toehold for creative visions of hope and meaning, such as Vincent McHugh's "proto-existentialist" novel *I Am Thinking of My Darling* (1943). Miller claims that the "utopian function of existential psychology is important, since it reveals that inward dimensions such as personal authenticity are now as important to any vision of a better society as the traditional concern for material justice" (200).

What Miller's book so presciently shows the reader is that now more than ever, we may need a deep historical consciousness of the psychological narratives that continue to circulate in popular and scientific culture, and that purport to control, explain, or speculate about the mutually shaping influence of the human mind and the environment. Despite the pressures of living in a dystopian present, Miller's close examination of texts like Naomi Mitchison's *Solution Three* (1974) suggests that we need to responsibly temper naïve, universalizing utopian impulses and equally misguided fatalistic pessimism in our approaches to imagining "human nature" and our relation to the world so that we are more able to avoid recycling worn out narratives, and instead more effective at co-creating truly newer and humane "science fictions" for our shared and impending futures. Perhaps we should follow the lead of the writers Miller considers to have written high quality science fiction narratives and cultivate the creative skill of holding in mind two or more contradictory ideas and values at the same time to critically imagine pluralistic models about the "nature of the human subject" (13) that are workable for our complex world, and which may prevent the reification of lively, "tentacular thinking," to use Donna Haraway's formulation, into the dead-authority of fog-divided camps of common sense or folk wisdom. Miller's study inspires the reader to think that imagining an alternative to our troubling times will require psychological literary and scientific constructions of a consciousness like that imagined in Nietzsche's essay "On the Use and Abuse of History for Life," a consciousness that is simultaneously critical, archival, and creative. When envisioning the future, this consciousness would be able to juggle a "certain kind of knowledge of the past, now in the form of monumental, now of antiquarian, now of critical history" (77). In other words, it is important to ensure that "the better, if not perfect world, imagined by critical utopia, and indicated also by dystopia, must accommodate a pluralism of communities and identities. The diverse traditions into which we are born and raised become an analogous resource to the biodiversity of the natural world" (165).

Books in Review, continued

Finally, Miller's volume also indirectly engages with Peter Nicholls' classic distinction between "soft" and "hard" science fiction. Acknowledging that genre rules are always violated to some capacity and that there are no universally-agreed upon definitions of science fiction, some scholars have suggested that soft and hard science fiction are defined with respect to their scientific counterparts. Whereas hard science fiction texts draw primarily from the "hard sciences" (e.g. physics, chemistry, engineering, etc.) to imagine future technological developments, soft science fiction texts draw from the "soft sciences" (e.g. psychoanalysis, sociology, ecology, psychology, anthropology, etc.) to supposedly develop more themes on the relations between the individual mind and social and nonhuman environments. Other scholars of science fiction have controversially claimed that the primary difference between hard and soft science fiction texts lies in the former genre's uncompromising commitment and almost religious faith in scientific principles (usually from physics or astronomy), as evident by these texts' supposed mimetic depictions of technological gadgetry in the service of an infallibly objective scientific method. Disputes about definitions may ultimately amount to debates about what is science fiction "proper," and may also tell us something interesting and problematic about how gender, class, and race play a role in our different "tastes" for scientific literature. For example, how has a scholar or reader's identity historically influenced the way that so-called soft science fiction is often problematically ignored or dismissed due to its association with a pejoratively feminized and fanciful focus on speculative societies while hard science fiction is preferred for its supposed deep penetration into the so-called real issues of hypothetical extrapolative strategies of scientific and technological domination? Miller's comprehensive overview of the historical dialogues that have existed between science fiction writers and a wide variety of discourses from the psychological disciplines, makes a convincing case for the view that "soft" science fiction is clearly not any less scientifically or culturally significant than "hard" science fiction. In fact, *Science Fiction and Psychology* provides a timely corrective to the overinvestment in hard science fiction by glossing such claims like "'soft sciences' can therefore most probably better serve as a basis for SF than the 'hard' natural sciences; and they have in fact been the basis of all better works in SF'" (Suvin qtd. in Miller 3). Indeed, Miller's book "wittingly or unwittingly" encourages a well-deserved shift in attention to marginalized science fictions and sciences.