John Clute
Pardon This Intrusion: Fantastika in the World Storm
(Beccon, 2011, 369pp, £16)
978 1 870824 60 6

reviewed by Paul Kincaid

We begin in the middle: 'pardon this intrusion' is, as Clute tells us on several occasions, the first thing said by the creature in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818), and comes roughly at the mid-point of that novel. We end with introductions, some of which, the introductions to Robert Silverberg's *Dying Inside* (1972), H.G. Wells's *The Shape of Things to Come* (1933) and Christopher Priest's *Inverted World* (1974) in particular (the two postmortem introductions to works by Thomas M. Disch are too painful for us to notice the insight), are among the best things in this collection and full of the sorts of insight for which we still habitually turn to John Clute.

Forgive me, therefore, if I begin this review at the beginning, with an extended discussion of the short essay, 'Next', that opens this collection, especially as that essay has already been reprinted in *Scores* (2003). But the essay lays out quite baldly Clute's notion of what fantastika is, and so highlights my disagreement with him.

Clute argues that fantastika began with the 'becoming visible of the engine of history, round about 1800, when the future began' (3). I think the future began sometime between 1492, when the shape of the world changed, and 1649, when the shape of the political order changed. Certainly the first fiction consciously set in the future would appear in 1648, and the engine of history had been visible since the Black Death, the fall of Constantinople and the subsequent explosion of learning across Europe. The points Clute picks up on from 1800 are the French Revolution and the discovery of geological time, though the one didn't reinvent society (the execution of Louis was in its way less of a shock to the social and political order than the execution of Charles had been) and the other didn't invent the idea of a past and our subsequent role within a continuity. But both are persistent starting points in a Marxist interpretation of literature.

What did flow through the consequent literature was a sense of dread, expressed in the gothic. So Clute arrives by different means at Aldiss's starting point for our genre. But this is to define sf and fantasy as a literature of dread, to identify horror as the paterfamilias of the genre. Dread is certainly a part of the genre, unease at the shape of the world is a starting point for much of the literature. But also integral are a confidence in the future, an insistence that the world might be changed, excitement, exhilaration, hope; utopia is at least as dominant in the substructure of the genre as dystopia. And if works of the fantastic before the gothic tended to be more confident than anxious, I cannot see that this is either a necessary or a sufficient condition for them to be excluded from our conceptions of the genre. Which is why I differ from Clute (and from Aldiss) in seeing gothic as a stage in the history of fantastika but not as an origin, not as a parent.

Of course, 'Next' was written in the immediate aftermath of 9/11 so some sense of anxiety at the workings of history might be excusable, but this is the fantastika that underlies all these essays. Certainly, in many of them, particularly the more recent, he seems more comfortable, more engaged, writing about horror (though he prefers the term terror – Thomas M Disch's *The M.D.* (1991) is 'more distressingly original in its structuring of anticipation (which is to say in the creation of Terror) than it is in its presentation of the visceral effect of the accomplished Wish (which is Horror)' (316)) than about sf.

This notion of the anxiety underlying genre is the closest we get to a theoretical position in these essays. Clute has positioned himself determinedly outside the academy, so although we might get an occasional reference to Northrop Frye or Tzvetan Todorov or, via Darko Suvin, a suggestion of a Marxist approach to the genre (after all, it is the dominant critical response to science fiction), he takes no thoroughgoing theoretical position. Rather, these essays, like his reviews, reflect an unfailingly personal approach to the work he discusses. Hence the essays are illuminated by an unexpectedly large number of personal anecdotes, there are times when it feels this could develop into a disguised autobiography. Even in a quasi-academic discussion of fantasy art (a paper for one of the Eaton Conferences) he says 'It comes as something of a relief to be able to say this' (111), as if the point is not so much the art as what he can or cannot say about it.

Like the encyclopedist he is, Clute has a habit of throwing up terms, often commonplace words used in unexpected ways, which he then defines by a long list of examples. But the term that is, perhaps, most closely associated with him is Story. It crops up here in practically every essay: fantastika is a storied genre, a literature necessarily self-aware of its place in the artifice of story. It is Story that makes fantastika the literature best placed to cope with the world storm, the onward rush of events: 'maybe the coming role of sf ... will be to remind us of a time when it was possible to make storyable arguments about the world' (150). Which is a grand claim.

But, in Clute's formulation, a story is only Story (with the initial capital) if it is Twice-Told, a part of the megatext, if it bounces off the rest of fantastika. This is what he means by calling the literature self-aware, though it does lead to the reductive notion that fantastika can only exist if fantastika already exists for it to relate to. We used to adumbrate this notion by saying that sf was a conversation, a notion I have found myself less comfortable with the more I think about it. Yes, there is always a conversation, but it is not always with itself, indeed it is mostly and most productively a conversation outwith the genre. (As Clute acknowledges with his frequent references to Conrad's 'Heart of Darkness' (1899), and a brilliant reading of *The Count of Monte Cristo* (1844-5) as a precursor to Superman.) So I find the idea if the Twice-Told tale that recurs throughout this collection an uncomfortable one, it may narrow fantastika down to definable proportions (which may be its purpose) but it doesn't open up the expansiveness of genre that I look towards.

It may seem, by the way, that all of this is a critical attack upon Clute's book. Far from it. Real critical engagement is an argument, and I know of no sf critic who can be argued with more fruitfully than John Clute, and never more so than in this excellent and long-needed collection of his essays. And there is much to be argued with productively in this volume.

This review originally appeared in Vector #268 – Autumn 2011