

TOM SHIPPEY, *HARD READING: LEARNING FROM SCIENCE FICTION* (LIVERPOOL: LIVERPOOL UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2016) ISBN 978-1-78138-261-5 (HB) £80.00 [OKSANA BLASHKIV]

In *Hard Reading: Learning from Science Fiction*, Tom Shippey offers a fine history of SF studies, in the shaping of which he, a professional medievalist, took a very active part. Being the ‘most characteristic literary mode of the twentieth century’ (xi), SF caught academic audiences by surprise, provoking all kinds of reactions, from prejudiced scorn on the part of literary critics to excited cheering on the part of millions of readers. From this perspective, Shippey’s book is an extremely interesting account that expands upon the evolution of SF criticism with an autobiographical touch. The latter aspect makes the book valuable for not only dedicated SF readers, but also literary historians and cultural theorists.

Essentially, *Hard Reading* is a collection of essays initially delivered as conference papers across Shippey’s long academic career. The book is divided into three thematic sections: ‘What is SF?’, ‘SF and Change’ and ‘SF and Politics’. As the headings suggest, the author sets out to not only present SF through the defining moments of its emergence, but also record its capacity to inflect our notions of literature, history and politics. The book opens with an introductory essay in which Shippey postulates his three major arguments: 1) the term escapism should not be applied to ‘the great fantasies of the twentieth century’, as these fantasies, including SF, primarily address ‘industrialised welfare controlled by a resurgent barbarism’; 2) SF is not a simple-minded form but, on the contrary, requires effort, even from well-educated readers; 3) SF is often a threat to the critics who feel entitled to define the meaning and canon of literature (4). These arguments receive a varied degree of exploration. Shippey continually reminds the reader that engaging with SF should be necessarily like reading his book, an uneasy task full of learned trappings. However, when accomplished, this task may be instructive enough to rethink canonicity, convention, the course of history and world politics, as SF has always done. In the first chapter, Shippey maintains that

to read any science fiction [...] one has first to recognise its novums, and then to evaluate them. There is a discernible and distinguishable pleasure at each stage, as you realise how things are different, how they are similar, and go on to wonder, and to discover, what causes could have produced the changes, as also to speculate what causes could have produced the effects of the real

world, the effects with which we are familiar that in most cases they are never given a thought. (12)

The second and third chapters elaborate upon this proposition by investigating the idea of history in relation to the notions of cultural engineering, alternate history, and history ‘where magic works’. The book also deals with US politics, from the period of the Cold War onwards, and looks at SF writing to demonstrate the extent to which this genre heralded certain historic developments. Shippey urges politicians to treat SF more seriously and learn the lesson contained therein. It is quite interesting that the author parallels the fate of science fiction as a marginal genre to H. G. Wells’s debate with Henry James about the novel as a dominant art form, and Wells’s aspirations to anchor himself in the canon of English literature. Shippey claims that ‘science fiction authors and literary readers have been in a sense re-enacting the Wells/James quarrel ever since’ (22).

Shippey’s book refers to Wells and his work more than thirty times. Most of these references are quite cursory; however, the first chapter, ‘Literary Gatekeepers and the Fabril Tradition’, focuses on Wells and therefore presents special interest to Wellsian readers. In this chapter, Shippey tackles the question: ‘Why is there so much critical hostility to and ignorance of SF?’ According to him, SF introduces novelty and thereby poses a threat to the literary tradition, which academic audiences allegedly perceive as just that. He remarks that ‘during my science fiction “lifetime” (1958 to now) being a science fiction reader in academia has been rather like being gay’ (27). However, despite SF ‘coming out of the closet’ and the fashionable interest in novelty among modern literary critics, the author does not register a considerable change in attitude towards SF, and its exclusion from literary discussion continues. Shippey construes this tendency as being caused by the flexible boundaries of what is seen as innovative, on the one hand, and time-tested, on the other; and literary theory has often been guilty of disregarding the new and fruitful propositions coming from SF. To illustrate his argument, Shippey turns to the ‘critical moment in the origins of science fiction’ (29), which is, for him, *The Island of Doctor Moreau* (1896).

Shippey uses *The Island of Doctor Moreau* to explore the ways in which SF displaces the authority of earlier cultural and literary traditions in order to promote scientific truth. Even though the novel alludes to Homer, Milton, and Swift, it does so to highlight their marginal utility in delivering truth value. Consequently, it stands to reason why literary convention refuses to accommodate SF texts, such as *The Island of Doctor Moreau*, in the canon

of English Literature. Literary gatekeepers dismiss the genre of SF as much as Wells's text dismisses the authority of the classics. Further to this, Shippey shows how Wells calls into question the imperialist paradigm underpinning the fabric of the English literary canon, when the latter's novel tells a 'story about gaining power through prowess and losing it by human weakness' (35). In this way, Wells and, by extension, SF envisage the decline of that paradigm in the twentieth century, arguably elided by canonical texts. In an attempt to bridge the gap between the two cultures, literature and science, Shippey enlists the eponymous character of *The Island of Doctor Moreau* as a subverter of the pastoral mode of much canonical writing and introduces a new term *fabril literature* to account for the human-made dimension of both social life and biology. The author refers to Wells's 'The Land Ironclads' (1903) as a 'paradigm story' for the 'fabril man', whose characteristics of the wright, the engineer, and the faber he traces in the works of twentieth-century SF writers. Much as Moreau's practices of vivisection border on the demonic, Shippey connects their transgressive effects to an assertion that 'true humanity resides not in following traditional patterns but in having the skill and character to dominate a new technology [...]' (43). Moreau manipulates living matter, which enables him to oppose social convention. The latter manifests itself in the correctness of Latin used by the educated ruling caste of late-Victorian Britain. For Shippey, this character's controversial experiments initiate an infiltration of SF into the mass media, which additionally disrupts extant notions of canonicity.

In *Hard Reading*, Shippey discusses a wide-ranging variety of authors (Rudyard Kipling, Mark Twain, Lyon Sprague de Camp, William Golding, George Orwell, Paul Anderson, Jack Vance, Kingsley Amis, Ursula Le Guin, Kim Stanley Robinson) whose work has a clearly unacknowledged Wellsian streak: their writing is useful due to its didactic purpose. As a collection of essays written over a period of the past fifty years or so, Shippey's book demonstrates an increasing density and intricacy of academic style and approaches practised in SF studies. Understanding these essays requires not only a deep knowledge of an extensive body of SF novels and short stories written in English, but also a remarkable grasp of literary and cultural theories that have made their way into the canon of theoretical thought of the twentieth century. This alone should testify to the inclusion of SF into the literary canon on equal terms with other classical genres. However, for Shippey, the defence of SF against any injustice seems to remain his primary mission. His book is actually a hard reading, but it is undoubtedly worth the reader's effort as well as admiration.

