Review of *Corroding the Now: Poetry + Science | SF*

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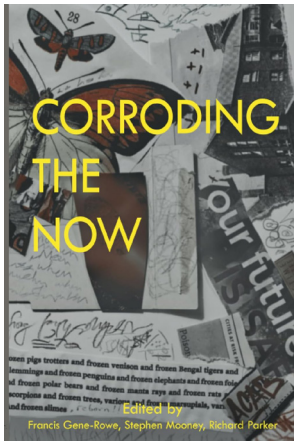
Gene-Rowe, Francis, Mooney, Stephen and Parker, Richard (eds) *Corroding the Now: Poetry + Science | SF*. Crater Press, 2023. Trade paperback. 288 pg. $20.00. ISBN 1911567462.



Corroding the Now is a chapbook, based upon the conference of the same name held at Birkbeck College, London in 2019, and consisting of essays on a wide range of SF-related topics and linguistically innovative poetry. These are not the kind of poems that might feature on the Rhysling Award or which we might associate with the genre of SF poetry (as, for example, in the work of Steve Sneyd and Jane Yolen). Instead, they are in direct descent from such avant-garde groupings as the Black Mountain School and the Cambridge School, in particular such complex poets as Charles Olson and J.H. Prynne, whose verse intersect multiple discourses – political, sociological, economic, technological, historical, and ecological. On occasion, the worlds of SF and linguistically innovative poetry have rubbed shoulders: Philip K. Dick was friends with both Robert Duncan and Jack Spicer (the latter a big SF reader); Samuel R. Delany was inspired by John Ashbery to write *Dhalgren* (1975); and J.G. Ballard's friends in later years numbered the poets Jeremy Reed and Iain Sinclair.

However, as co-editor Francis Gene-Rowe argues in their introduction to the book, the affinity between SF and linguistically innovative poetry should go much deeper than that: both actively desystematise habitual ways of thinking which, in their routinisation, replicate the hegemony of a "Now" that Gene-Rowe characterises as "a tawdry work of dystopian science fiction". This desystematisation is posited by the editors as a "corrosion" and ultimately a re-worlding; a dissolving of current political and intellectual regimes in order to unearth a latent utopianism. Although the approach here is thoroughly aesthetic, it complements wider attempts to decolonise the curriculum and to use science fiction as a survival tool as in the recent essay collection *Uneven Futures* (2022). By necessity, though, such an approach is selective: it's hard to see what the military SF of Neal Asher would have in common with the kinds of SF represented here, while much of the poetry tends to side with the neo-Marxist rhetoric of Prynne's successors: from Andrew Duncan and Ben Watson to John Wilkinson and Keston Sutherland. As with any anthology, there were pieces I preferred more than others, a tendency exacerbated by my sense that responses to poetry are more emotionally subjective than responses to prose. I will admit, therefore, that my preference in linguistically innovative poetry tends towards the less

doctrinaire—poets such as John James and Douglas Oliver—and to the great wealth of women's experimental poetry, beginning with such writers as Denise Levertov, Elaine Feinstein and Veronica Forrest-Thomson, all of whom encountered antagonism from their male-dominated coteries.

To that end, the editors are mindful of the historic biases within the experimental poetic tradition, and their contributors present a range of genders and sexual orientations, as well as abilities and ethnicities. Although there is no strict order to the contents, the arrangement displays a number of intersectional interests, ranging from neurodiversity to climate change to gender politics to Afrofuturism. Indeed, one of the stand-out sequences is "We Spiders" by the writer, artist and composer Amy Cutler, whose rhizomatic piece, consisting not only of the main poem but also a series of footnotes followed by a further poem that acts as a commentary, embodies both the interdisciplinarity of her work and the book's intersectional aims. As Gene-Rowe suggests in their introduction, *Corroding the Now* constitutes an act of deterritorialization: a reclaiming of SF from its precorporation into technomodernity and a repositioning in terms of a poetic artifice that foregrounds process, fragmentation, dialectic, permeability and situatedness. This is a mighty claim, but it is pleasing to see a poetry anthology in step with contemporary protest movements, inspired by such poet/activists as Sean Bonney, rather than the backs-against-the-wall negative dialectics of the 1990s.

A suite of poems by, amongst others, Charlotte Geater, Jonathan Catherall and Chris Gutkind introduces the dystopian Now that the book seeks to corrode, often via metaphors drawn from the worlds of finance and computerisation. Iris Colomb's visual poem and Suzie Geeforce's AR text offer other ways of embedding and appropriating technological systems as poetic resource. These are followed by the first of the essays, Naomi Foyle's wide-ranging proposal of an ecotopian SF poetics and Peter Middleton's analysis of autism in poetry by Ron Silliman and science fiction by Ann Leckie. Foyle, inspired by such critics as Vicki Bertram and poet/activists as Sandeep Parmar, delineates a binary opposition (at least in the public imagination) between poetry as "soft" and "feminine" and SF as "hard" and "masculine". She argues that an ecotopian, as opposed to utopian, SF practice could exist somewhere between these binaries, deconstructing their opposition in the process. Middleton's account, superbly detailed and sensitively written, is one of the book's highlights and, I would suggest, essential reading for all further attempts in thinking through disability both in poetry and SF. Drawing in particular upon the work of Erin Manning and Laurent Mottron, Middleton suggests that autism might be best understood as "an entirely different processing system" that produces a "complex network" of sensory perceptions. Using this model of autism as a critical lens, Middleton applies it brilliantly to Leckie's *Ancillary Justice* (2013) and the characterisation of Breq, a ship-sized AI downloaded into a single human form. Middleton then finds a similar conceptual framework at play in Silliman's sequence *Ketjak* (1978) before concluding that the conceptual schema, which we call poetics, could be regarded as being already a science-fictional discourse.

The next set of poems takes a more political turn. Verity Sprott offers an Acker-esque sexual fantasy; Jo Crot (presumably another pseudonym for Jo Lindsay Walton) really, really hates Ian Hislop, editor of *Private Eye* and establishment satirist. Co-editor Richard Parker also offers a surreal fantasy but one in which anarchic notions of community are juxtaposed with genocidal images of state oppression. The following essays focus on the politics of the Anthropocene. Josie Taylor compares Fritz Leiber's "The Black Gondolier" (2000) with Philip Metres's poetry sequence, *Ode to Oil* (2011), in which both texts figure oil as a living, sentient substance. Meanwhile, Fred Carter explores the landscape poetry of Wendy Mulford, a key figure in the development of linguistically innovative poetry during the 1970s and 1980s, and a writer, like Olson, drawn to the history, politics and geography of place, not least the abandoned tin-mines and fragile coastline of Cornwall or the glacial impact upon the shaping of Somerset. Although at first glance Carter's essay might have little to concern the SF reader, his superb examination of how Mulford handles differing timescales and the relationship between the human and non-human, as in Taylor's essay, has much to say to SF's treatment of alterity. Moreover, whereas so-called "new nature writing" has been dominated by the solipsism of male explorers such as Robert Macfarlane or by Mark Fisher's neo-Marxist rendering of "the weird and the eerie", Carter points to a woman writer in Mulford who preceded them both and who approached the subject of landscape from an explicitly materialist and feminist perspective.

The essays of Carter and Taylor announce an ecocritical turn in the following poetry by Cutler, Kat Dixon-Ward and Liz Bahs. Kate Pickering's "Plot Holes", meanwhile, subjects the Biblical story of the Garden of Eden to the quantum mechanics of Max Planck, playing upon the serpent's intervention as a singularity—a wormhole—in space and time, which also suggests the possibility for a heretical reading of this key foundational narrative. Pippa Goldschmidt, too, commits a kind of heresy in recounting how she dropped out of astrophysics but discovered another way of making sense of phenomena in the form of poetry. Goldschmidt and Pickering's contributions inaugurate another shift in the collection towards questions of space, where the radically indeterminate yet entangled relations of quanta (as indicated in Allen Fisher's somewhat opaque series of prose and poetry observations) are contrasted with the instrumental usages of space travel for personal gain as embodied in the figure of Elon Musk. Unfortunately, although there is much to be criticised about the proposed new era of space exploration, I find that the poems in this section, as well as Robert Kiely's polemic on SF and poetry, tended towards the doctrinaire and to playing to the gallery. To be really effective they required more of the elegance that Jo Crot displayed (*à la* Wyndham Lewis) in his take-down of Hislop as a "pseudo-Enemy".

Instead, a more thorough riposte to the new space economy is advanced in the book's final essays on Afrofuturism. Sasha Myerson and Katie Stone alternate in leading the reader through the poetry of Sun Ra in order to reveal the unity of thought that emerges through his written fragments, and in their oblique relationship to his wider body of work. Matthew Carbery, too, takes Sun Ra as his starting-point to reflect on the roles of time, history and futurity in the work of the Black Quantum Futurism collective, and in Camae Ayewa's solo work as Moor Mother. This

excellent pairing of essays not only expertly contests the instrumental ownership of space travel but also ends the collection on an optimistic note, by arguing that there has always been, and will always be, Black people in the future no matter the entrepreneurial visions of a Musk or a Bezos.

Overall, then, *Corroding the Now* is, as in the nature of a chapbook, a somewhat idiosyncratic affair which nevertheless captures a moment where we might see SF and poetry as sharing a common "taproot" (in John Clute's terminology) or conceptual schema in Middleton's vocabulary. Despite the attempts of the editors to supply an overriding thesis, readers may tap into either the poetry or the essays, or roam freely between them. Either way, there is much here to enjoy and be stimulated by; it is much more than the curate's egg that it could have been. In particular, academic readers of SF criticism should note how little the contributors refer to what we think of as our common critical tradition—no mention at all of journals such as *Foundation*, *Extrapolation* or *Science Fiction Studies*—but, instead, they take their inspiration from sources far wider than what we assume to be the critical domain. Indeed, as SF expands into the cultural field, its tropes becoming indivisible from the lived contradictions already experienced by writers, artists, filmmakers, and musicians from genres not traditionally regarded as "SF", so we should also pause and reflect on the continued relevance of some of our most cherished critical shibboleths. Although Delany is approvingly cited on several occasions, not once does Darko Suvin appear. Who needs cognitive estrangement when life, as lived, is already sufficiently estranged and in dire need of an art various enough to represent it?

Paul March-Russell is editor of *Foundation: The International Review of Science Fiction* and co-founder of the feminist imprint Gold SF. In another life, he was Curator of the Eliot Modern Poetry Collection at the University of Kent. He is currently writing a study of J.G. Ballard's *Crash*.