

Environmentalism in the Realm of Science Fiction and Fantasy Literature

Environmentalism in the Realm of Science
Fiction and Fantasy Literature

Edited by

Chris Baratta

**CAMBRIDGE
SCHOLARS**

P U B L I S H I N G

Environmentalism in the Realm of Science Fiction and Fantasy Literature,
Edited by Chris Baratta

This book first published 2012

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

12 Back Chapman Street, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2XX, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Copyright © 2012 by Chris Baratta and contributors

All rights for this book reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the copyright owner.

ISBN (10): 1-4438-3513-7, ISBN (13): 978-1-4438-3513-8

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction	1
--------------------	---

Part I: Industrial Dilemmas

Chapter One.....	11
The Secret Life of <i>The Death of Iron</i>	
Frederick Waage	

Chapter Two	31
“No name, no business, no Precious, nothing. Only empty. Only hungry”:	
Gollum as Industrial Casualty	
Chris Baratta	

Part II: The Natural World, Community, and the Self

Chapter Three	47
Seeking Spaces: An Analysis of Environmental Solutions in Science	
Fiction and Utopian Literature	
Annette M. Magid	

Chapter Four	59
Nature, Community and the Self in Octavia Butler’s <i>Parable of the Sower</i>	
and Nicola Griffith’s <i>Slow River</i>	
Susan Bernardo	

Chapter Five	69
Sugared Violets and Conscious Wands: Deep Ecology	
in the <i>Harry Potter</i> Series	
Melanie Dawson	

Part III: Materialism, Capitalism, and Environmentalism

Chapter Six	93
The Literary and Literal Dangers of a Flawed Valuation System: Reading Karen Tei Yamashita's <i>Through the Arc of the Rainforest</i> through the Political Lens of Hannah Arendt Audrey Golden	
Chapter Seven.....	111
The Pedagogical Potential of Margaret Atwood's Speculative Fiction: Exploring Ecofeminism in the Classroom Sean Murray	

Part IV: Dystopian Futures

Chapter Eight.....	129
Destroying Imagination to Save Reality: Environmental Apocalypse in Science Fiction Keira Hambrick	
Chapter Nine.....	143
Linguistic Disintegration in Cormac McCarthy's <i>The Road</i> Dawn A. Saliba	
Chapter Ten	157
Ecofantasy and Animal Dystopia in Richard Adams' <i>Watership Down</i> Chrissie Battista	
Select Bibliography	169
Contributors	171
Index	173

INTRODUCTION

CHRIS BARATTA

The Earth faces environmental problems right now that threaten the imminent destruction of civilization and the end of the planet as a livable world. Humanity cannot afford to waste its financial and emotional resources on endless, meaningless quarrels between each group and all others. There must be a sense of globalism in which the world unites to solve the real problems that face all groups alike.

—Isaac Asimov¹

To speak truly, few adult persons can see nature. Most persons do not see the sun. At least they have a very superficial seeing. The sun illuminates only the eye of the man, but shines into the eye and the heart of the child. The lover of nature is he whose inward and outward senses are still truly adjusted to each other; who has retained the spirit of infancy even into the era of manhood. His intercourse with heaven and earth, becomes part of his daily food. In the presence of nature, a wild delight runs through the man, in spite of real sorrows.

—Ralph Waldo Emerson²

The idea for this collection began with the creation of a panel for the 2011 NeMLA convention. And, it was a combination of factors that led me to develop the focus for the panel, which was titled *Environmentalism in the Realm of Science Fiction and Fantasy Literature*. As a child, I, surely to the surprise of my parents and siblings, balanced the traditional childhood activities of baseball and *Star Wars* with a more intimate activity: my love of reading. I remember shuffling through my father's *National Geographic* magazines to satiate my love of nature and wildlife; at first, I was content with the photographs of landscapes far different than my suburban environment, and of photos of cheetahs, giraffes, and great white sharks. But as my curiosity grew, I began reading the stories of scientists and activists who were able to travel to these distant lands. My

¹ Isaac Asimov, *I, Asimov: A Memoir Paperback* (New York: Bantam, 1984), 129.

² Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Nature," in *The Selected Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Brooks Atkinson (New York: Random House, 1968), 6.

love of reading grew, and I soon came across Margaret Weis and Tracy Hickman's *Dragonlance* tales, given to me by a neighbor. Using these novels as a starting point, I soon ventured into the world of *Forgotten Realms* and, of course, into Middle-Earth. I remember the first paper that I wrote for 9th grade English: an analysis of R.A. Salvatore's *The Crystal Shard*. A non-traditional choice, indeed. But, other than reading Thoreau's *Walden* in high school, it wasn't until graduate school that I encountered nature writing and ecocriticism. I was introduced to the works of Annie Dillard, Barry Lopez, and Gary Snyder, among others. I dived headfirst into a study of ecocriticism, captivated by the philosophies put forth by John Muir, Murray Bookchin, and Harold Fromm, to name a few. And it was at this point that I started to connect the world of science fiction and fantasy literature to environmentalism. I haven't looked back—though I continue to search for my paper on *The Crystal Shard*—and I continue, like science fiction and fantasy literature, to look forward to where the current environmental crisis is taking humanity. It is my hope that my continued research in the field of ecocriticism will yield some solutions to the many problems we face today. Many of these solutions, as well as the problems they need to resolve, can be found in science fiction and fantasy literature.

My attempt to articulate the need for ecocriticism in literary studies would simply fall short compared to what Louis H. Palmer has already said: "I take on one of the most vexing issues in the overlap between literary and environmental studies—the questions of stake"³. Some, those who may not be so inclined as to acknowledge the importance and the necessity of literature or environmental studies, might dismiss the notion that anything is "at stake" in literary studies. These individuals are mistaken; what is at stake—according to Palmer, and according to the contributors of this volume and the authors they have studied—is nothing less than "the ultimate survival of life on Earth."⁴ An ecocritical approach to literary analysis has shifted, to a degree, the critical angle that has dominated literary studies from an anthropocentric view to a more biocentric view. Ecocriticism urges us to embrace the fact that the study of the nonhuman world is just as important a study of the human world when we investigate current social and cultural constructs of civilization.

Science fiction and fantasy literature has been the one of the beneficiaries of the emergence of ecocriticism. Ecocritical study urges an

³ Louis H. Palmer, "Articulating the Cyborg: An Impure Model for Environmental Revolution," in *The Greening of Literary Scholarship: Literature, Theory, and the Environment*, ed. Steven Rosedale (Iowa City: Univ. of Iowa Press, 2002), 165.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 165.

individual to embrace new ways of thinking about the natural world, and, more importantly, the relationship between man and nature. The objectives of an ecocritical study are to usher in a new way of seeing and understanding the consequences of the destruction for the natural world, humanity's impact on the environment, and the possible solutions to environmental degradation. On one hand, ecocriticism incorporates the study of empirical knowledge and the methods of scientific observation. On the other hand, it embraces the humanities, with its ability to probe "discursive constructions of experiences and ideology in the shifting seas of language and subjectivity."⁵ As any work of literature must do, ecocritical texts demand that a reader not only understand his philosophical and ideological anchors, but also understand the possible flaws in his moored way of thinking. In order to achieve success in this endeavor, an ecocritical study must do two things: disconnect the reader from the culturally and socially constructed systems of thought that are grounded in the man/nature binary and establish a connection between the reader and the natural world. This is a difficult task, obviously, but it is necessary in order to achieve an understanding of the stakes involved in the current environmental crisis. Science fiction and fantasy literature has been fulfilling these two goals for almost a century; and, the emergence of ecocriticism as an important critical theory has once again highlighted the importance of science fiction and fantasy. If we bring together a study of environmental writing and ecocritical texts with science fiction and fantasy literature, we can find answers to some important ecocritical questions: How is a text raising awareness on an issue? How is a text embracing a new consciousness? How is this new consciousness a paradigm shift in human thought?

An unfortunate aspect of science-fiction and fantasy literature that is lost on the casual reader (or the non-reader) is its importance as a genre to serve as a reflection of reality. Art, especially literature, has a unique ability to show an individual what he or she cannot see, even if it is right in front of his or her nose. Science fiction and fantasy literature brings us to new worlds; we meet new creatures, new heroes, and new villains. We are introduced to new mythologies, and we witness new atrocities and new wars. But, despite the fact that what we encounter in the text of a fantasy novel is indeed new, we should not be shocked to discover that underneath the surface, these creatures, mythologies, and atrocities are quite familiar. Science fiction and fantasy authors draw inspiration from the reality that surrounds them. And even though science fiction and fantasy literature

⁵ Ibid., 165.

wrenches us from our daily doldrums and propels us into unfamiliar lands, we really never leave our own reality.

In a 1999 interview, Ray Bradbury stated that “Science fiction is a depiction of the real.”⁶ Science fiction writers have tackled a myriad of issues concerning humanity and environmental destruction. For example, Bradbury’s “There Will Come Soft Rains”, which offers a stark warning for humanity’s reliance on technological progress, depicts a society that has disconnected itself from the natural world in favor of a life that resembles the warnings and consequences of technological determinism—a theory that states that a society’s technology, and not its people, drives the development of its social structure and cultural values. Science fiction chronicles changes and advancements; it presents readers with an alternative view of social, technological, and industrial progress. As humanity continues to progress, building more, exploiting more, consuming more, science fiction writers became aware of the detrimental effects that humanity’s progress is having on the natural world. Olaf Stapledon, an early 20th century science fiction writer and influence on Arthur C. Clarke and Isaac Asimov, once stated that humanity’s overconsumption of natural resources would lead to its inevitable demise. This was stated in the early 1900s. In his biography on Isaac Asimov, Michael White notes that the “problem of how humankind was mistreating the environment and creating problems for the future”⁷ was of particular interest to the legendary science-fiction author.

Patrick D. Murphy, in “The Non-Alibi of Alien Spaces: SF and Ecocriticism,” cites the central themes of detachment and estrangement in science fiction literature as a corollary to ecocriticism and its role as a critique of current environmental practices. Ecocriticism acknowledges this detachment from the natural world in its critique of an anthropocentric worldview, and pushes forth with its biocentric and/or symbiotic critical approach to bridge this gap. Murphy states that “the writing and reading of SF [science fiction] are intimately linked to, and based on, getting people to think both about the present and about this world in which they live.”⁸ Combining this sentiment with the goals of science fiction and fantasy writing can provide the foundation for a new environmental awareness,

⁶ David O’Leary, “An Interview with Ray Bradbury,” *The Weekly Wire*, December 1999.

⁷ Michael White, *Isaac Asimov: A Life of the Grand Master of Science Fiction* (Cambridge: Da Capo, 2005), 254.

⁸ Patrick D. Murphy, “The Non-Alibi of Alien Spaces: SF and Ecocriticism,” in *Beyond Nature Writing: Expanding the Boundaries of Ecocriticism*, eds. Karla Armbruster and Kathleen R. Wallace (Charlottesville: UVA Press), 263.

one that is needed for a new understanding of not only how humanity is connected to the natural world, but also to what created our disconnect. And, since science fiction writing can be dystopian in nature, we can see—through the power of allegory—into the future: we can see what could happen if we succumb to the dangerous and reckless behaviors of our current anthro-dominated commodification and destruction of the natural world.

Chris Brawley discusses the power of mythopoeic imagination in fantasy literature, which he states “provides readers with a quasi-religious experience often termed wonder.”⁹ With regards to this “wonder,” science-fiction and fantasy literature can help in two ways: it can, through creativity and awe, raise awareness for an issue in a way that reality is unable to and it can force an individual to turn bring this awareness back to the mundane world in a re-evaluation of the role of nature.¹⁰ Fantasy literature has an ability to bring reader’s out of their comfort zone—away from the daily intrusions of the media, jobs, political dysfunction—and into a world where the landscapes and characters are unfamiliar, thereby placing them within a world outside of their current modes of knowledge. In doing so, fantasy literature stirs the imagination and asks readers to step outside of prescribed, anthropocentric constructions of knowledge and into new, unfiltered modes of experience and knowledge. Brawley refers to this as “a shift from an anthropocentric paradigm to an ecocentric or biocentric paradigm.”¹¹ This is a key point where ecocriticism and science-fiction and fantasy literature converge.

This collection will discuss the environmental and ecocritical themes found in works of science fiction and fantasy literature. Through an analysis of these literary works, we can see and understand how they address the environmental issues we are dealing with today. More importantly, we investigate the solutions that these works present to ensure the sustainability of our natural world, and, in turn, the sustainability of humanity. In the section titled “Industrial Dilemmas,” industry is the focal point in a shift from environmental consciousness to one of industrial and technological “progress.” These essays look at technology as the tool that separates man from nature, and in doing so, marks a significant shift in human consciousness. Fred Waage’s “The Secret Life of *The Death of Iron*”, discusses a lesser known 1931 work written by Serge-Simon Held, an author who, it is speculated, wrote no other works. *The Death of Iron*

⁹ Chris Brawley, “The Fading of the World: Tolkien’s Ecology and Loss in *The Lord of the Rings*,” *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts* 18.3 (2007), 292.

¹⁰ Ibid., 292.

¹¹ Brawley, “The Fading of the World”, 294.

(*La Mort du Fer*) recounts a “fatal flaw” of chemistry found in iron which causes all built structures on earth to disintegrate, throwing human civilization into chaos and savagery from which emerges a new mystically-bound society respectful of nature. Waage establishes the significance of the novel as a work of ecological science fiction, and sees it as a generational successor to Emile Zola’s *Germinal*, in which nature itself rebels against its abuse by technology and industrialism. “‘No name, no business, no Precious, nothing. Only empty. Only hungry’: Gollum as Industrial Casualty” looks at Sméagol/Gollum as the representation of the tortured soul, torn between his natural self and the corruption of industry, symbolized by the One Ring, an entity that breeds a lust for power and an abandonment of nature. The paper analyzes the struggle of the individual as he is confronted by the external battle of the natural and the industrial, posing the question: Where and how do we see ourselves—as individuals, as a society—in Gollum?

The essays in the section titled “The Natural World and the Self” envision a time where individuals are forced to examine their identities in a world where environmental disasters, due in large part to human activity, have forced society into a new way of being and a new way of functioning. Annette Magid’s essay “Seeking Spaces: An Analysis of Environmental Solutions in Science Fiction and Utopian Literature” explores the interface of nineteenth century communal thoughts, environmental determinations and gender issues juxtaposed with twenty-first century concerns for community survival. She looks at gender roles in the utopian and communal ideals of writers and philosophers, such as Robert Owen and Gene Rodenberry. In “Nature, Community and the Self in Octavia Butler’s *Parable of the Sower* and Nicola Griffith’s *Slow River*”, Susan Bernardo examines how nature and narrative come together in the novels *Slow River* and *Parable of the Sower* to illustrate the importance of a symbiotic relationship with the natural world. She analyzes how the novels illustrate ways that water and its availability shape and sustain both individuals and the societies they live in, while also laying the groundwork for a society that respects and harvests natural resources and helps people to flourish. With an analysis of the diverse backgrounds of each novel’s main protagonists, Bernardo connects the struggle for earth’s most valuable and sought after resource—water—and the enduring challenge to gain and regain and understanding of the self in the setting of an ecological crisis. Melanie Dawson’s paper, “Sugared Violets and Conscious Wands: Deep Ecology in the *Harry Potter* Series”, explores the presence of deep ecology in the *Harry Potter* series. She argues that J. K. Rowling’s works present the importance of comprehending

a deeply individuated set of coexisting consciousnesses, an importance set within its battle between good and evil. She analyzes the ecological importance of an important theme in the series: living in the wizarding world – successfully – requires a deep understanding of evolving strategies of coexistence, once one's eyes are opened to the presence of an intertwined system of laws governing all forms of life.

“Materialism, Capitalism, and Environmentalism” contains contributions that look at the damaging effects of the capitalistic order on the environment and on those forced to reside within its economic and ideological systems. In this section, scholars investigate the effects of the machinery of capitalism on the social bodies and on humanity. In “The Literary and Literal Dangers of a Flawed Valuation System: Reading Karen Tei Yamashita’s *Through the Arc of the Rainforest* through the Political Lens of Hannah Arendt”, Audrey Golden examines Yamashita’s novel alongside Arendt’s postwar political-theory texts *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951) and *The Human Condition* (1953). The connection is made to illuminate the ways in which a misunderstanding of materiality and the capitalist valuation system can result in environmental destruction and, ultimately, near apocalypse. Positing that Yamashita’s novel can be read as an allegoristic warning to practitioners of materiality, Golden analyzes the literary treatment of superfluity and its connection with specific characters and objects throughout the text, which are all described through the language of commodification. In “The Pedagogical Potential of Margaret Atwood’s Speculative Fiction: Exploring Ecofeminism in the Classroom”, Sean Murray looks at how Atwood’s dystopian fiction—*Handmaid’s Tale*, *Oryx and Crake*, *The Year of the Flood*—offers a unique pedagogical opportunity to analyze the thematic unity of the three novels, while involving students in an investigation of the solutions to the environmental destruction and gender inequality found in the three works. Using an ecofeminist approach, Murray sees the novels as a critique of patriarchal power and feminine subordination; this abuse of women, Murray posits, goes hand in hand with environmental degradation.

“Dystopian Futures” offers three contributions concerning the consequence of environmental destruction. In “Destroying Imagination to Save Reality: Environmental Apocalypse in Science Fiction”, Keira Hambrick argues that environmental science fiction allows readers to explore the possible outcomes of current ecological crises. Her essay exposes and investigates how the novel’s environments reflect and engage with such contemporary concerns as climate change, overpopulation, and food production. Dawn A. Saliba proposes that Cormac McCarthy’s post-apocalyptic novel *The Road*, presents the collapse of both the natural

world as well as human culture and language brought on as a direct consequence of a nuclear-winter cataclysm. In her essay titled “Eco-Linguistic Disintegration in Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road*”, she discusses the concurrent disintegration of language and the ecological, and posits that *The Road* serves as warning, not just of an environmental decay, but of a moral one as well. Saliba analyzes how McCarthy creates a world that, though fictitious, reflects the non-illusory teleological, if not eschatological, folly and destructive nature of humanity. Christine Battista’s essay “Ecofantasy and Animal Dystopia in Richard Adams’ *Watership Down*”, looks at the ecological implications of Adams’ 1972 novel. She sees the novel’s ecocritical value in its ability to shift its point-of-view from one that is anthropocentric to one that is more focused on—and more connected to—the nonhuman world. Told through the eyes of a family of rabbits, Battista argues that the novel allows us to embrace a shift in our ontological connection to nature.

The strength of this collection is the interdisciplinary approach that each essay takes in order to investigate and analyze the environmental issues threatening human existence. It is not limited to ecocriticism and environmentalism, but instead uses these two fields as the foundation for an in-depth look at many issues that society, both nationally and globally, faces today. Margaret Mead once stated, “We won’t have a society if we destroy the environment.” The works discussed bring to light the consequences of humanity’s irresponsible destruction of the natural world, and, in turn, its own existence. They also yield a keen understanding of these consequences and the solutions needed to avoid them.

PART I

INDUSTRIAL DILEMMAS

CHAPTER ONE

THE SECRET LIFE OF *THE DEATH OF IRON*

FREDERICK WAAGE

The purpose of this paper is threefold: to discuss my search for Serge-Simon Held, the mysterious author of a 1931 French ecological science fiction novel, *La Mort du Fer* (*The Death of Iron*); to discuss the cultural context in which it was written, with a view to establishing its significance; and to introduce the reader to the novel itself. My particular emphasis will be on *La Mort du Fer* as a generational successor to Emile Zola's *Germinal*, in which nature itself rebels against its abuse by technology and industrialism.

I. The Quest

I first became acquainted with Serge-Simon Held's novel *La Mort du Fer* when preparing an environmental study of Ross Lockridge Jr.'s *Raintree County*. In his biography of his father, Larry Lockridge says that during his convalescence from scarlet fever, shortly after graduating from Indiana University in 1935, Ross Lockridge—who had spent his junior year in France—“read an obscure 1931 French novel, Serge Simon Held's *La Mort du fer*—“The Death of Iron”—that would bear strange fruit a few years later.”¹ This fruit would be his epic and never-to-be-published poem, *The Dream of the Death of Iron*, partly inspired by his own disease; its “main narrative source,” however, was Held's novel: “He initially thought of writing a poem as “a series of fragments” based on this novel in which French [and ultimately world] industry is mysteriously debilitated by a phosphorescent rot in all its iron and steel leading to apocalyptic social dislocation and collapse.”² Larry Lockridge believes that this disease of metal came to figure “materialism,” and that his father came to see “the growth of industry as spiritual illness and literal blight. The fiery iron mills

¹ Larry Lockridge, *Shade of the Raintree* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1994), 159.

² Lockridge, *Shade*, 185.

[of Held's novel] were like diseased hearts and the contagion spread deep into the ground and into people's skin and bones. The antidote to all this was a renewed spiritual link to the body and the natural world. He had emerged from his sickbed a worshipper of nature."³ In later correspondence Larry Lockridge says "there is no underestimating the impression that it made on him," and it "was instrumental in seeding the environmental values of R[aintree] C[ounty]."⁴

I thought that to have such a strong environmentalist effect on (in my view) a great writer, Held's novel must, for all its current obscurity, have impressive powers, so as well as getting a copy to read (there are only five in U.S. libraries),⁵ I went questing for information on the work and its author. The fruitlessness of this quest, so far, has been astonishing.

From the Bibliothèque Nationale catalogue, one learns that *La Mort du Fer* was published by the preeminent entre-deux-guerres house of Arthème Fayard in 1931, and that it was "imprimé" (printed) by the press F. Paillart in Abbeville--a city on the English Channel in Northeast France, near the locale where the novel is set.

In the International Speculative Fiction Database (isfdb) I learned that the novel was published in the pioneering pulp sci-fi anthology *Wonder Story Annual*, 1952, in an English translation sci-fi novelist Robert Silverberg explains was originally made—by another notable writer in the genre, Fletcher Pratt—for the Otto Gernsback serial *Wonder Stories*, beginning in September, 1932.⁶

Held is not even present in Dreher and Rolli's exhaustive *Bibliographie de La Littérature Française, 1930-39*. Jacques Sadoul's *Histoire de la Science Fiction Moderne, 1911-71*, repeats, in a footnote, the information about Pratt's translation in Gernsback's *Wonder Stories*, and notes "a disquieting similarity in theme to *The Metal Doom* of [British novelist] Dr. David H. Keller, which was serialized starting in May, 1932. Sadoul asks "Did the good doctor perhaps know French, and did Gernsback [perhaps] want to "make reparation"?"⁷

³ Ibid., 185

⁴ Lockridge, Larry. Email to the Author. 3 Mar. 2011.

⁵ Lockridge, Larry. Email to the Author. 11 Mar. 2011.

⁶ Silverberg, David, "Reflections: The Death of Gallium," in *Asimov's Science Fiction*. Silverberg says he learned of the novel from Donald Tuck's *Encyclopedia of Science Fiction and Fantasy*.

⁷ Jacques Sadoul. *Histoire de la Science-Fiction Moderne (1911-1971)* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1973), 82. David Szondy's blog "Tales of Future Past" refers to Held's work and reprints a cartoon of urban chaos possibly from Pratt's translation.

I found a living French writer, Claude Held, who wrote that he had no knowledge of Serge-Simon Held, but suspected the latter was, like himself, of Alsatian origin: Held is a common name in Alsace, and many residents of Alsace and Lorraine fled to Paris in 1870, when the Franco-Prussian war resulted in their cession to Germany.⁸ So far, genealogy sites for Alsace have not yielded my author, although I learned that “Held,” “hero” in German, is often used by Jews as an “ornamental surname.”

Months after my initial searches I was startled to find a new online reference to Held’s novel in the blog “Stalker: Dissection du Cadavre de la Littérature” (“dissection of the corpse of literature”), conducted by French literary controversialist Juan Asensio. Asensio bewails that the work is both “remarkable” and “perfectly forgotten, even unknown, as though it had never been published,” despite being short-listed for the Prix Goncourt.⁹ He praises the “realism” of Held’s narrative, within which the novel develops a theory that “iron is a form of life, susceptible to an infection which, in its development, resembles that of a real [i.e. organic] virus,” killing the “aged body of a France paralyzed by the collapse of its metal industry.”¹⁰ Asensio emphasizes the realistic localization of its action, in the North of France—a geographical specificity which aids in understanding the cultural context of its creation.

Given this endorsement, I found it astonishing that my survey of French periodicals of 1931-32—a limited one to be sure—such as *L’Europe* and *La Revue Bleue*, found no mention of *La Mort du Fer*, with one exception: André Thérive’s book review column in *Le Temps*,¹¹ which devotes one surprisingly derogatory paragraph to it:

There has been much talk of *The Death of Iron*, by M. S.-S. Held, which attaches itself clearly to futurism [“anticipations”] à la Wells, and which bears the characteristics of a novelist. You will recall in reading it *The Age of Lead* by M. Henri Falk and several analogous works: and you will speculate that the subject would have enchanted Paul Adam. But the book is very poorly put together: a very awkward alternation between private intrigues and “historical” narratives, the poorly-paced sequence of the story, sometimes detailed, sometimes rushed, and especially an irritating composition which constantly retools the subject, rendering it ultimately

⁸ Claude Held, email to the author, 15 Dec. 2010.

⁹ Juan Asensio, “Au-delà de l’Effondrement 28: La Mort du Fer de S. S. Held,” *Stalker*, (17 Nov. 2010).

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ André Thérive, “Les Livres,” *Le Temps* 18 (Feb. 1932), 3.

schematic, expressed arbitrarily and cursorily . . . All you need to know is that, a mysterious disease attacking iron, our civilization collapses without anyone being able to find other metals to replace it. In such fables, absolute credibility is difficult to sustain: one constantly discerns the author's tricks for controlling his fiction or directing it too conveniently. M. Held has the advantage to paint knowledgeably the life of engineers and the intrigues of metallurgy. The catastrophe he imagines has the power to overcome and surpass the wishes ("vœux") of Georges Duhamel. It is to be noted (p. 86) that a Moroccan doesn't ["want to bear"?] the title of *bey*.

The reviews by Asensio and Thérive, so contrary, suggest paths to travel in investigating the cultural/historical environment into which Held released his novel.

II. Place and Time

Early 1930's France, effected by worldwide depression, was filled with ideologically creative tension: capitalism and communism were both under attack in the political realm, in the shadow of unremediated World War I trauma, syndicalist unrest, and a problematic colonial empire. In the literary realm one finds a similar tension, which might be seen as between the physical and the metaphysical given that then the "realist" or "proletarian" novel shared ground in France with speculative fiction.

One can find both in the novels of Georges Duhamel, who Thérive suggests would be gratified by Held's vision of the future. Duhamel was finishing his sequence of novels featuring the protagonist Salavin (homophonic with Held's engineer Sélévine), and was probably related to Held by Thérive because of his current book *The American Menace: Scenes from the Life of the Future* (1931). Many French intellectuals demonized both the U.S. and the U.S.S.R. at the time, for different reasons. The U.S. was in France symbolized by the captain of industry Henry Ford, and capitalism was called "le péril Ford."¹² Duhamel's book is based on a tour of the U.S. meant to evidence the claim that its technology was leading to a destructive and dystopian future. Duhamel anticipates Held's iron mills in describing Chicago's *abbatoirs*:

It all smoked, panted, and spat. Everything was the color of coal, with huge signs, pipes, footbridges, towers, skeins of cables, lamps burning livid

¹² John Hellman, *The Communitarian Third Way: Alexandre Marc's Ordre Nouveau, 1930-2000* (Montreal: McGill-Queens UP, 2002), 32.

under the light of day, and an unimaginable odor of burning animal waste, of the washhouse and of warm intestines.¹³

In one mode, Duhamel pits the industrial against the moral and spiritual; although this opposition is not the same as Held's opposition between the industrial and the natural. A very similar view of technology as antihumanistic, and embodied in the modern factory, can be found in Alphonse Séché's *La Morale de la Machine* (*The Morality of the Machine*) [1929]. Here, the factory has "soiled the splendor of the day":

The factory with its blind walls, its glassed-in workrooms, its tar-paved hangars, its roof-peaks like saw teeth, its brick and cement chimneys—
infernally steeples belching black incense—with its pyramids of waste and
blast furnaces which spit fire—cathedrals of the modern world.¹⁴

The periodical press had of necessity a different take on the "Ford peril," on the model of Julien Benda's *Trahison des Clercs* (1927), since its audience was not the restless, overeducated, bourgeois youth, of Alexandre Marc's "Ordre Nouveau,"¹⁵ but the literate masses. The industrial complex employed (and disemployed) the workers who ultimately would rather have jobs in Duhamel's "realm of scientific death" than starve. You can see, for example, in the socialist newspaper *L'Humanité*, no attack on (e.g.) the iron and steel industry in itself, but on the way its "grands patrons" conducted it. For example, a serial novella by Tristan Rémy, "L'Usine" ("The Factory") personifies the factory as an entity coeval with its managers: "the factory, like a gleaming, spoiled beast, holds beneath its heavy paw the [miner's] house which it can erase with a single blow whenever it wants."¹⁶

Reports from the main regions of French mining and metalworking industries (the "pays noir," "black lands" of the Belgian border, and Lorraine) in *L'Humanité* emphasize the interdependent victimization of their workers: "Miners of iron and other metals are tightly bound. . . bound to their exploitation by the same masters."¹⁷ Lorraine is described as a "military camp," full of paramilitary organizations subsidized by the steel

¹³ Georges Duhamel, *America the Menace: Scenes from the Life of the Future*. Tr. Charles Miner Thompson (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1931), 96.

¹⁴ Alphonse Séché, *La Morale de la Machine* (Paris: Malfère, 1929), 9.

¹⁵ The adherents of Marc's "Ordre Nouveau," characterized by Hellman as full of "spiritual yearnings, irresolution, self-questioning, interest in the absolute, and unfocused righteousness" (30).

¹⁶ Tristan Rémy, "L'Usine," *L'Humanité* 6 (Dec. 1931), 6.

¹⁷ "Parmi les cités d'acier: rationalisation et chômage," *L'Humanité* (25 Oct 1931), 5.

magnates.¹⁸ While *Le Temps* is concerned with the plunging market for steel products,¹⁹ *L'Humanité* visits the steel mills themselves:

Heat, noxious dust, nauseating odors, this is the atmosphere. Sombre workrooms filled with smoke: black earth, beaten soil, blackened pools of water. . . And black dust, always the dust, which chokes the throat, stains the workers' eyes so only their whites show.²⁰

The “popular press” thus manifested two seemingly antithetical but in Held’s words complementary tendencies of French literature 1930: an idealized vision of a new world order following apocalyptic events, and a gritty, painful, “realistic” view of the capitalistic labor system. But what if it is not the iron and steel barons but nature itself, taking an ecologically proletarian position, that creates the cracks and weak spots in the iron and steel, hoisting the capitalist system with its own pétard? Doesn’t this dualism, carried further, become a proletarian science fiction?

The author embodying both the terms above most completely in his work is the novelist Pierre Hamp, described by one reviewer as “the poet of jobs,” whose fundamental concern is “the point of contact between the man and the thing, the way the man relates to the thing.”²¹ Hamp calls himself “Brother Hamp, Priest of Labor.”²² Hamp’s *La Laine*, published almost simultaneously with Held’s, in his series “The Pain of Men,” is set near Denain in Roubaix/Tourcoing on the Belgian border, and, like *La Mort du Fer* centers on factories, in this case woolen mills, and on their patron’s enlightened son, René Blanséau, who, like Raymond Leclair in *La Mort du Fer*, gained his formative work experience in colonial Morocco. Hamp portrays the factory owners with profound cynicism: “no stronger bond united the great industrialists’ families than the battle with their workers.”²³ One of them says “if we had done our job right, there would be no socialism and everyone would go to mass.” René replies “Without the misery of our workers, many of us would be poor.”²⁴

If Hamp is a proletarian realist, what is one to make of another factory novel published nearly at the time of Held’s, and by an Academician no

¹⁸ *L'Humanité* (11 Jan. 1932), 5.

¹⁹ “Etudes Financières: Aciéries de Longwy,” *Le Temps* (5 Oct. 1930), 4.

²⁰ “Dans les fonderies où la mortalité des ouvriers est accrue,” *L'Humanité* (3 Oct. 1931), 5.

²¹ Review of Pierre Hamp’s works, *Nouvelle Revue Française* 37, (July-Dec. 1931), 539.

²² Pierre Hamp, *Mes Métiers* (Paris: Gallimard, 1943), 15.

²³ Pierre Hamp, *La Laine* (Paris: Flammarion, 1931), 39.

²⁴ Hamp, *Laine*, 44-45.

less, André Chamson's *Héritages*? Chamson, whose proletarian sympathies might be considered a form of attachment to the local, rural culture of the Cevennes rather than urban and political, nonetheless creates a situation remarkably similar to Held's. Georges Caverac, who has left the small town of St-André, where his family is generations old, to get a cosmopolitan education as an engineer, is sent back to his hometown by his company. His job is to "set up an entire factory"²⁵ there, and the *patrons* feel he'll be especially suited for this task because of his family connections. Unfortunately, his former comrades, grown, spurn him, and Georges's factory plan is actually greeted by great hostility: "he wants to sell his homeland to businessmen."²⁶ He understands this when, looking down from the mountains, he sees a "natural harmony, this great human architecture intimately mingled with that of the earth."²⁷ He comes to understand that neither he nor the factory can become part of the nature or culture of St-André, and refuses to go forward. The Director says: "you must never mix numbers and human relationships;" Georges needs to be separated from his "sentimental, good-will preoccupations."²⁸ He will be reassigned, and the factory will be built whether the townsfolk want it or not: "Great abstract lines seemed to fall on the earth like shadows."²⁹

Just as technology was placed in bad odor by the literature of labor and realism, so it was often the culprit in the *entre-deux-guerres*, "the 'golden era' of French SF."³⁰ A governing motif of much sci-fi then was somewhat analogous to the socio-anarchistic narrative: machines destroy humanity in its current form, and it is reconstituted, or other beings take over, in a postapocalyptic time.³¹ As the Lofficiers say, after World War I science fiction in France was the locus of a battle between conservatism and progress.³² This is a paradoxical battle, since anti-machine futurism can be construed as profoundly conservative, like Chamson's St-André residents who feel threatened by progress; yet true conservative Catholics, for example, abhorred both the genre of science fiction and the technological progress it so often criticized. Stableford argues that post-World War I

²⁵ Chamson, André, *Héritages* (Paris: Grasset, 1932), 11.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 128.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 137.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 286.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 296.

³⁰ Arthur B Evans, "Science Fiction in France: A Brief History," *Science-Fiction Studies* 16.3 (1989), 259.

³¹ E. M. Forster's short story "The Machine Stops" (1909) is a brilliant employment of this motif, as is J.-H. Rosny's *La Mort de la Terre* (1910).

³² Jean-Marc and Randy L'officier, *French Science Fiction, Fantasy, Horror, and Pulp Fiction* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2000), 361.

disillusion destroyed the less-conflicted science-based “marvel fiction” represented by such significant writers as Maurice Renard and Gustave La Rouge.³³

I don’t agree. Perhaps “marvel” fiction extolling Wellsian inventions positively was less prominent after the war, but sci-fi in that period actually thrived on technological apocalypticism. The Lofficiers mention a number of pre-Held works which partake in this paradox. José Moselli’s *La Fin d’Illa* (1925) posited “a technologically advanced race who lost their will to fight and their feeling of humanity.”³⁴ There were many doomed cities of the future, dominated by technology, and many fictions which involved the kind of matter-animation that besets Held’s world as the “Blue Sickness.” Raoul Bigot, among others, used this device in *Le Fer Qui Meurt* (1918).

In Denain, the industrial city where the first two-thirds of *La Mort du Fer* is set, Held had a ready-made industrial dystopia, whose phenomenology could represent both the factory world of literary realism and the hallucinatory sense-distortion of a science fiction realm. Denain had an important role in French commercial history and in the issues of labor and capital between the world wars. In the early 19th century, it was a major inland port for the north of France, by virtue of its position on the navigable river Escaut. Its importance increased when mines were established there in mid-century, particularly those of the Enclos de la Compagnie d’Anzin and the Fosses Renard. Close upon the mining ventures came the associated iron and steel foundries, of which the most notorious was Usinor (founded 1848) and longest lived Cail (1844).³⁵

Guy Cattiaux has vividly described the displacement of agrarian space by these operations: “little by little, work in the fields disappeared, and the plains gave way to immense factories.”³⁶ After 1838, when the rail line was opened from Anzin to Denain, it was the center of a complex construction and transport system: rail transported coal and iron to foundries, and products thereof to wholesalers or to the canal traffic beside the Escaut. Adding to this overdevelopment was the location there of *casernes* for the French military (very handy when strikes got out of

³³ Brian Stableford, “In Search of a New Genre: Jarry, Renard, and Attempts to Categorize and Promote ‘Scientific’ Fiction in France, 1902-1928,” *New York Review of Science Fiction* 22.1, (2009), 12.

³⁴ L’officier, 363.

³⁵ “France, le trésor des régions: Denain.” 10 Jan. 2011.

³⁶ Guy Cattiaux, *Denain: Des Hommes d’Acier, Un Région à Sauver*, (Denain: G. Cattiaux, 1980), 14.

control), which permitted the ready presence of army units in Held's novel.

Denain developed a "new" and rough company town, "des corons" (generic for "industrial slum"), next to the old city center, and with new rail lines in the 1880's, "Denain became a black city, smoke-filled, built of bric-a-brac [a pun in the French] without any symmetry, and devoted to utilitarian and practical ends rather than aesthetic;" it was surrounded by coke furnaces, "whose reddish flames glowed sadly in the night."³⁷ Miners' strikes began in the 1820's and became violent and chronic in the 1880's and 1890's; several times the city was under martial law, especially in 1906, when 1,200 miners died in a cave-in, and workers fought the cavalry in the "Battle of Haveluy."³⁸ Denain became such a flash-point that Jean Juarès visited it in 1914, days before his assassination. Cattiaux concludes "Denain was one of the cradles of mining syndicalism and socialism."³⁹ However, literarily, the most important source for the revenge of nature over technology in *La Mort du Fer* is Emile Zola's *Germinal*, which, despite Zola's lack of familiarity with mines and mining, is rich in the intimate details which only a true miner could experience. It is not by accident that you can find *Restaurant le Germinal* on *Rue Emile Zola* in Denain, because he visited the mines of Denain and Anzin in early 1884, traveling with the region's socialist deputy Alfred Giard, disguised as Giard's secretary.⁴⁰ Zola's visit was inspired by the Anzin strike of February, 1884, over firings and expanded workloads, which followed a strike for similar reasons at Montceau-les-Mines in 1882, resulting in Zola's novelistic "Montsou," which is, in effect, Anzin.⁴¹

But more to the point, and what *Germinal* gives to Held is the consciousness of nature and the earth being violated by humans, who themselves are being violated by the bosses who extort unremitting and unrewarded labor from them. Held, I feel, has taken Zola's warfares--

³⁷ Cattiaux, 35.

³⁸ Cattiaux, 86, 106. For more coverage of workers' conditions in Denain in the later 20th century, see Guienne, Raymond and André Pierrard. *Denain: Un Crime Signé Usinor*. Condé-sur-Escaut, France: G. Blondel, 1979.

³⁹ Cattiaux, 389. The works of miner poet Jules Mousseron (1868-1943), who wrote in Rouchi, the dialect of the *pays noir*, has fascinating connections with Held and Emile Zola. See Mousseron, Jules. *A L'Fosse: La Mine et les Mineurs*. Ed. Jean Dauby. Valenciennes: Famars, 1975.

⁴⁰ F. W. J. Hemmings, *The Life and Times of Emile Zola* (New York: Scribner, 1977) 120-122.

⁴¹ Richard H Zakarian, *Zola's Germinal: A Critical Study of its Primary Sources* (Geneva: L. L. Droz, 1972) 18.

humans against nature, humans against humans—and placed them in an even more encompassing war: that of supposedly inanimate matter against collective humanity.

To some extent, Zola gives nature the agency of revenge: when the mine, Le Voreux, sinks into an abyss, leaving only a “muddy lake, like those lakes beneath which lie evil cities destroyed by God.”⁴² Here one can feel that nature has healed a wound on its ferny surface. Yet we know, by way of dramatic irony, that the anarchist Souvarine who has committed sabotage, weakening the mine shaft so that the gathering waters beneath will collapse and engulf it and all its works (surely it is no coincidence that Souvarine plays the same role, in action and ideology, that the homonymic Sélévine does in *La Mort du Fer*). Hemmings points out that Souvarine became a fictional patron of early 20th century anarchists, and *Germinal* gained “an unexpected and sinister prestige.”⁴³

However, although Held’s and Zola’s anarchists are powerful, if destructive, visionaries of a post-apocalyptic utopia (for Souvarine it is “the primitive and formless community, . . . a new world”),⁴⁴ it seems that it is more Zola’s sensitivity to the violation of nature that influenced Held. For example, in *Germinal* we find Le Tartaret, a piece of sterile, wild moorland, beneath which a coal fire forever burns. “The dark red calcined rocks had taken on an efflorescent coating of alum, like leprosy. On the edges of fissures sulphur grew like yellow flowers.”⁴⁵ Le Tartaret is associated with a local mythology of damnation, but, perversely, in its midst, is the “Green Hill,” with “its grass for ever green, the leaves of its beech-trees forever new, and its fields where as many as three harvests ripened.”⁴⁶ This is exactly the sort of perversion of nature’s natural course that Held so sensuously evokes.

III. Death Itself

It must be understood that the interiorized technological spaces, where the first half of *La Mort du Fer* is mainly set, are repugnantly un-natural. They represent a violation both of nature and of human nature, as conveyed in the novel’s very first sentence: “Raymond Leclair, having established the unlikely result of the measures he had taken, didn’t attribute them to science, which was [to him] above suspicion, but to

⁴² Zola, Emile. *Germinal*, Tr. L. W. Tancock (Baltimore: Penguin, 1968), 453.

⁴³ Hemmings, 200-203.

⁴⁴ Zola, 236.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 291.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 202.

fallible human nature.”⁴⁷ Raymond Leclair, the primary protagonist of the novel’s first half, is a quality control engineer in a steel plant in the [real] industrial town of Denain, near the Belgian border in northern France. The adventure that will engage him, and, initially, the factory as a whole, demonstrates repeatedly the fallibility of human nature, and, in consequence, the fallibility of human applied “science,” which can neither understand nor control non-human nature.

Raymond, who is thirty and has been previously an engineer on dam-construction projects in Morocco, has been hired away eight months earlier by the Denain factory’s director, Morain. He works closely with, and under orders of, the applied engineer Pierre Sélévine, who will become his ambiguous rival and eventual usurper in the story. Unlike Chamson’s Georges, Leclair and Sélévine are not native to the place (nor is, in truth, the factory that employs them), and thus both observe the industrial overlay on an agrarian landscape with bemused disgust. Through the windows of their office they can see “the magnified orb of a

red sun enfold itself in a sky of clouds and smoke. Beneath this mournful vault an industrial town displayed its proud works. . . .you could see confusedly the workers’ quarters over which hung the river fog, and the factories of Denain, presenting in the drizzly fog their compact cubes and their skeletons of iron.”⁴⁸

Raymond, who is not a sensitive soul, nonetheless detests this “corner of the earth rendered ugly by industry,” devoted to “the conquest of inanimate matter [and] construct[ion] of the arms which gave feeble mankind its power.”⁴⁹ The real concern of both engineers however is Leclair’s “unlikely” findings from his study of “*acières sauvages*” (literally “savage steels”), those which don’t act the way steel should, losing at a certain point their internal cohesion and crumbling for no apparent reason.⁵⁰ He has discovered what would seem impossible: within certain (presumably molecular) crystalline structures “something unforeseen, something as variable as life [itself].”⁵¹

With these words Leclair has launched the novel’s main premise, that what humans consider inanimate, nonliving—and therefore subject to scientific analysis and control—is actually a form of life, with the mutable traits of an organism. This paradoxical life of the nonliving is repeatedly

⁴⁷ Held, S. S. *La Mort du Fer*. Paris: Fayard, 1931: 4.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 9.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 12.

emphasized in factory scenes through Held's astonishing sensory imagery, both precise and hallucinatory. In the foundries, for example,

the radiant skin of metal elaborated itself. Fire reigned under these deep naves. . . It took the most diverse forms, appeared, in its different modalities, in purple tongues, in rufescent vapors, in gems, in the flowers of dreams.⁵²

When the first machine breaks, the foundry foreman, ignorant of what Leclair and Sélévine know about the “*aciers sauvages*,” suspects that the accident “did not happen by chance but was provoked.”⁵³ Thus begins a chain of misinterpretations, based on social conditions and the assumption of human agency: since the works of technology cannot be inherently fallible, their breakdowns must be due to sabotage. Leclair himself promotes a theory of industrial warfare based on patriarchal absolutism experienced in Morocco.

Held, I believe, distances himself from this patriarchal attitude of his protagonist while initiating a close analogy between disorder in social systems and in molecular systems. Whatever the causes of either, disorder in the objects of labor is transferred to the laborers, particularly in the perspective of those whose livelihood depends on the labor.

The evening of the above accident, Leclair traverses Denain on his way to a social gathering at Morain's, and observes the habitat of the potentially fractious laborers: He passed through the hamlet of Tréchy, where the whole working class population was piled: narrow streets, slovenly houses, brick ghettos whose smoky walls were lighted by flames trembling in lamps . . . a succession of buildings, sheltering behind glass and steel a frenetic and deafening life. Bridges vaulted the segments over the waters of a canal. Crossed by parallel cables and wires, electric moons spread their milky clarities.⁵⁴

Leclair's goal is the other side of Denain and the other side of the social divide: Morain's estate, Ronceraies, which is surrounded by a park bordering the Escaut River. Leclair has the hots for Morain's young wife Renée, whom he can see there along with a trinity of representative intellectuals: the doctor, Levysson; the painter, Bréval; and the dominant personality, the polymath scientist Fontaine, who doesn't believe in science but loves it for “its subtle games suitable to distract an honest man

⁵² *Ibid.*, 18-19.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 22.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 26.

on the road to the grave.”⁵⁵ Fontaine professes himself a humanitarian, like Tolstoy, but also a materialist, and is very skeptical of Sélévine’s view, as described by Morain, that metals have a “slow life, a sort of obtuse consciousness and sensibility. . . phenomena in common with the basic body and the living cell,”⁵⁶ but they all agree that iron is “the primordial element” and “in a way the structuring agent of modern civilization.”⁵⁷ Fontaine, however, is what one might label a “human triumphalist:” no life form can equal the human intelligence, an “organic machine;” humanity’s superiority is based on its power to “invent and construct tools and automatic [devices].”⁵⁸ The future, he declares, belongs to the material: “The absolute rule of metal is near.”⁵⁹ Remarkably, the unnatural, fabricated future of Bréval’s admired “precisionist” painters and Fontaine’s materialist vision is present *in ovo* down the street in Denain. To some extent Fontaine recognizes, but does not oppose, the actual suffering that would be caused by his version of an industrial utopia: suffering is inevitable, “certain miseries are irreducible.”⁶⁰ Sélévine, who has joined the group, is skeptical of this stoicism in the face of “social iniquity.” “We must relieve immediate miseries without being preoccupied with far-off consequences unknown to us. This society you admire is based on a monstrous paradox. But beware, its stability is only apparent!”⁶¹

Knowing as much as Sélévine knows, the reader is aware of this whole conversation’s irony: it is based on unexamined assumptions about permanence in the human condition—assumptions which the engineers’ researches have brought into question.

Following this evening, other mechanical malfunctions occur in the factory and are attributed by the foreman, as before, to sabotage, now given an identity: “communist.” One of the most powerful scenes in the novel occurs in a solo overnight confrontation between Sélévine and his machines. In one of them, he discerns an irregular heartbeat: “From this heart of copper and iron, energy like a mysterious blood flowed through the cables.”⁶² He looks for the source in the foundry where “monster gestating, larvae drawn from the depths of the earth slept in anticipation of

⁵⁵ Ibid., 29.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 32.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 33.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 34.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 35.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 44.

⁶¹ Ibid., 45.

⁶² Ibid., 53.

the creative forces which would animate them.”⁶³ Returning to the main factory, Sélévine raises his eyes and sees through its windows the stars

like another fiery dustcloud punctuate the vault of night. His gaze lost itself in space, where the gods are dead and which alone fills the immense desolation of cold and silence. [He thinks] “no aid could come from there any more; an eternal desert bathed all parts of the globe where nature [had] become self-conscious only to hate itself. The adamantine constellations, which had seen man cross the primitive threshold and seen him die, ridiculed this obstinate insect working in his glass cage. He [would have] only the time of a heartbeat if he were to prevail. O foolish hope, laughable vanity! So much pain and so many delicate sorrows thrown into nothingness! Ah! Rather than this deception, to forget oneself, to live like a beast!”

Sélévine’s melodramatic nihilism here is in profound contrast to the smug intellectualism of Morain’s guests, but it cuts much closer, I believe, to the environmental claim Held’s novel makes. Sélévine predicts humanity caught in paradox: escaped from instinct only to be able to return to instinct embodied in automatism. With or without iron, humans and the nature they inhabit are bound for destruction, “the vain efforts of humanity seeking [freedom] from itself and destroying itself through the instruments constructed for its liberation.”⁶⁴

Over the next months, the steadily increasing breakdown of machines and mortality caused thereby are routinely attributed to worker sabotage: milling machines and other hard tools soften, a leprosy eats at their “compact tissues,” workers refuse to repair them out of fear, and then have to fear factory shutdowns and unemployment. As similar phenomena spread to other factories and mines in the North, Leclair comes to believe that Sélévine was right: “A contagion was raging among the accumulations of steel, passing rapidly from one metal to another. All his reason was repelled by this incredible conclusion”⁶⁵—that his “sickness” was spreading in the way germs are spread among living creatures.

At this point the *mal bleu*, “Blue Sickness,” goes viral: the French government takes note but will not bail out the steel and mining companies; the media are all over it; the prefect of the North department preventively sends soldiers to Denain. The Blue Sickness attacks new technologies—shipping and electric generation—and spreads along rail lines to reach the electric stations, where their monstrous turbines, “the

⁶³ Ibid., 54.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 60.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 80.