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The Madman's Embarkation: The Ship of Fools and Richard Paul Russo's *Ship of Fools*

This paper presents an overview of Richard Paul Russo's novel *Ship of Fools* (2001) as a non-mimetic treatment of the eponymous trope, exemplified in literature by Sebastian Brant's 1494 poem *Das Narrenschiff*. My analysis construes this trope both as a particular theme in European Renaissance culture and as the historical reality that, taking its moves from allegory and cultural representation, transformed them into an everyday occurrence on the waterways of central Europe during the fifteenth century. From this rich historical and cultural inheritance, Russo weaves a tale of the abyss, giddily suspended between science fiction and horror – horror at the awful discoveries staining the heart of the plot and at the characters' insane response to those discoveries.

Early on in *Ship of Fools*, the novels' first-person narrator and protagonist bluntly illustrates the dilemma facing everyone on board the generation starship *Argonos*. Long out of contact with other human colonies, the *Argonos* has finally discovered a habitable planet in a remote solar system, but instead of galvanizing its crew, the news only seems to deepen a preexisting sense of anxiety:

> [T]he ship was in crisis – we had not made landfall in all these years, and we had no unified mission. We were traveling almost at random through the galaxy, had been for decades, if not centuries, and there was no consensus of purpose or goal. This had always been the case, at least during my lifetime, but we had never gone quite so many years without landfall of one kind or another. Uncertainty and a deep restlessness, which had spread throughout the ship in recent months, was now intensifying as we approached our new destination. (11)

Because it is a generation starship – a man-made, self-sufficient, tech-nologically advanced worldlet capable of traveling through space for cen-turies or millennia without need for a support infrastructure – the *Argonos* is at once a vessel and a nation, its crew composed of the human popula-tion that is born, lives out its lifespan, and dies inside it.[1] Its people are each other's country, region, city, town, block, and family. There is nothing to aspire to beyond what the *Argonos'* inhabitants have wished for, which means that its mission statements can only originate from their collec-tive desires. If those desires are at odds with each other, or if they have been forgotten, then the ship has no direction and no purpose. Thus, when the *Argonos* approaches landfall, strife and discord emerge among the crew, breaking out from long pent-up tensions. Absent a clear sense of what to do once they arrive, the destination itself becomes a source of anxiety, a Rorschach test of sorts whose appearance reveals more about the sociologi-cal makeup of the *Argonos* than it does about the destination. The power struggle pitting the ship's captain, Nikos Costa, against the structure of the Church, headed by Bishop Bernard Soldano, involves everyone in a terminal state of uncertainty.

This dramatic premise shapes the first of the three parts comprising *Ship of Fools*, ominously entitled "Insurrection," and it is here that the title of the novel begins to resonate with the cultural, historical, and literary tradition of Europe from which it draws its subject matter – because, as we shall see, the *Argonos* is indeed a ship of fools.

When, in 1494, the German humanist Sebastian Brant published the original *Das Narrenschiff* (*The Ship of Fools*), a satirical poem utiliz-ing the trope of an insane sea voyage toward a nonexistent place as a way of excoriating humanity's vices, the allegorical representation underlying the idea had been present in the collective imagination of Europe at least since the middle ages. The ship of fools was the symbolic representation of a nation, a country, or a society adrift, devoid of effective captains – or captains, period – and thus inhabited by deranged, delusional people running around the confines of their prison, oblivious of reality and its consequences. When Brant reprised the idea and codified it into the shape of an actual work of fiction, he was following a relatively common trend in Renaissance Europe. "The *Narrenschiff*, of course, is a literary composi-

tion," writes Michel Foucault, "probably borrowed from the old Argonaut cycle, one of the great mythic themes recently revived and rejuvenated…. Fashion favored the composition of these ships, whose crew of imaginary heroes, ethical models, or social types embarked on a great symbolic voyage which would bring them, if not fortune, then at least the figure of their destiny or their truth" (7-8).[2] It is a powerful notion, to see the life of a society – or of sections of a society – as a metaphorical sea voyage toward reward or punishment, satisfaction or disillusionment, depending on the worth of the captains chosen to steer the ship itself. In Brant's case, the ship becomes a whole fleet of vessels headed toward "Narragonia" (literally, the land of fools), which none ever reach, and the proliferation of ships probably indicates the author's suspicion that, for a voyage toward – and organized by – foolishness, one single ship would not be enough to embark a sufficiently large sampling of the trait.

But there is a fundamental difference between the ship of fools and other similar tropes. Unlike those, it is both a literary phenomenon and a historical reality:

> [F]or they did exist, those boats that conveyed their insane cargo from town to town…. The custom was especially frequent in Germany; in Nuremberg, in the first half of the fifteenth century, the presence of 63 madmen had been registered; 31 were driven away; in the fifty years that followed, there are records of 21 more obligatory departures…. Sometimes the sailors disembarked these bothersome passengers sooner than they had promised; witness a blacksmith of Frankfort twice expelled and twice returning before being taken to Kreuznach for good. Often the cities of Europe must have seen these 'ships of fools' approaching their harbors. (Foucault 8)

At once places of exclusion, confinement, and pilgrimage, imbued as they were by the belief that insanity and madness were somehow connected to a form of preternatural apprehension, those ships of fools plied the waterways of Flanders and of the Rhineland, customary visitors to the communities living by their shores. Sometimes they took on their strange cargo, sometimes they delivered it, but always they transported it to some other place, some unguessable and unplanned destination dependent more on the vagaries of the madman's condition than on the decision-making

processes of the ship's crew or of its captain. Thus history at once aped and informed literary creativity, binding the allegory of the voyage of the mad and the reality of the sanitary vessels into a common form of cultural expression.

And indeed, throughout its meaningless, often funny peregrinations in the mind of European civilization since Brant's times, the ship of fools has become the ship of state, and its passengers, hapless and stumbling, have become shorthand descriptions for us all. Like them, we are people without purpose, masks without a face underneath, and we parrot functions – both public and private – whose meaning we have lost, if we ever knew it to begin with. Also, as John Clute points out, it is worth considering that "ever since 1494 every ship that sails, and every tale of every ship that sails, has carried within its bones a doppelganger ship of fools, a mocking Dies Irae whose main target – often disguised for fear of reprisal – has always been the owners" (317). Clute here echoes the dual identity of the ship of fools – the historically true event of a vessel that comes to grief because of mismanagement on the part of the captain, and its fictional counterpart, which often takes its incipit from the original occurrence. This is why Clute mentions James Cameron's *Titanic* (1997) as an example of ship-of-fools narratives: the story, set against the backdrop of real-life miscalculations and mistaken assumptions that turned the ocean liner's maiden voyage into its last, "offers nothing but contempt for those at the helm, and for the first-class passengers who assume rightly … that there will always be an exit door nearer to them than any exit door is near to us, and alarmed for them alone" (Clute 317).

The legacy of Brant's poem has proven enduring. Together with Renaissance 'folly' literature – for example, Erasmus' *Praise of Folly* (1509) – it has inspired many works of fiction: some, like Coleridge's *Rhyme of the Ancient Mariner* (1798), Melville's *Moby-Dick* (1851), and Lewis Carroll's *The Hunting of the Snark* (1876), tap into the ship-of-fools motif without making the borrowing explicit. Others do make it explicit, like Katherine Ann Porter's *Ship of Fools* (1962), a novel literalizing the madman's voyage as a trip from Mexico to Europe in the year 1931.[3]

The reiteration of the idea and the thematic concerns of ship-of-fools narratives, however, have not remained the province of mimetic or allegorical fiction alone. The non-mimetic genres – science fiction in particular –

have also had a stake in utilizing the trope for their own reflections on the state of the world we inhabit, the possible futures that humanity's tenure on Earth seems to be on the verge of creating, and the solutions – or lack of same – that we the passengers can bring to bear on the risks inherent in both. By and large, the main difference between a mimetic and a non-mimetic treatment of the ship of fools lies in the literalness of the premise: a mimetic treatment, even a direct one like Porter's, is inevitably shackled to the baseline symbolism of the trope – a ship is not a country and its passengers are not citizens, and therefore the larger significance of the journey itself must remain clustered around symbolic and figurative meanings. Non-mimetic fiction, on the other hand, displays a literal approach to the matter it treats because it can afford to – in science fiction, a ship can *be* a country; it can come to constitute its own self-governing, self-sufficient micro- or macro-world, roaming the depths of space for centuries or millennia, either alone or as part of a larger space-based commonwealth. Science fiction novels and short stories that can be described as ship-of-fools analogs, potential or actual, are John Brunner's *Sanctuary in the Sky* (1960), Cordwainer Smith's "The Game of Rat and Dragon" (1955) and "The Lady Who Sailed *The Soul*" (1960), Samuel Delany's *Nova* (1968), Gene Wolfe's *The Urth of the New Sun* (1987), and Michael Flynn's *The January Dancer* (2008). This list is nothing more than a small set of examples. Again following Clute's point, every SF narrative featuring some form of space travel could be seen as a ship-of-fools narrative, and it is usually the outcome of the voyage that establishes whether that is indeed the case.[4]

It took until 2001, however, before a science fiction writer devised a narrative premise directly and explicitly based on the history of the ship of fools. In a recent interview with Actusf.com, Richard Paul Russo described the origins of his Philip K. Dick Award-winning *Ship of Fools* in these terms:

> One of the earliest adult science fiction novels I read was Brian Aldiss' *Starship* (or *Non-Stop*), when I was eleven or twelve, and it made a huge impression on me. For some time I wanted to write a book about a colony starship that had lost its way, or its sense of purpose – not in imitation of Aldiss, because I wanted to explore the ideas in my own individual way, but certainly inspired by my memories of those early reading experiences … the result was *Ship of Fools*.

The term 'colony starship' is here synonymous with generation star-ship, and British writer Brian Aldiss' novel *Non-Stop* (1958)[5] constitutes one of the key texts in this sub-genre. Generation-ship narratives perhaps constitute the SF story pattern most easily identifiable with that of the ship of fools, chiefly owing to the circumstances in which the trip takes place. First imagined in 1928 by Konstantin Tsiolkovsky, the Russian pioneer of space flight, the generation starship began as a testament to hope in the face of a seemingly insurmountable verdict – that nothing in this universe could travel faster than the speed of light. When, in 1905, Einstein's theo-ry of special relativity disappointed our hopes that we could one day reach indefinitely high speeds simply by flooring the accelerator, it seemed that we would forever be stuck in here on Earth, or at most within the confines of our solar system. The light-speed limit combined with the sheer magni-tude of interstellar distances make the prospect of traveling to the planets of other suns a virtual impossibility.

Then came Tsiolkovsky, who articulated the concept of a self-sustain-ing, man-made pocket world populated by hundreds or thousands of peo-ple who would be born, live out their lives, and die onboard the ship while it travels on its centuries or millennia-long voyage to its destination. Those who begin the trip, and their offspring for dozens of succeeding genera-tions, will never see its end, and will die ignorant of whether their vessel is a ship of dreams, successful and fulfilled in its aspirations, or a ship of fools, doomed from the start to come to grief because the ambitions of those who designed the ship and organized the voyage far outstrip their distant de-scendants' ability to bring it to fruition.

We are stuck inside the ship of fools, then, and it must indeed seem to us that only the foolish would embark on such a trip. What possible driving force could meaningfully sponsor the construction and equipment of such a vessel? Not economics, certainly, because the generation star-ship would not come back for centuries (if ever), and not empire-building or colonization in the classical sense of those terms, for pretty much the same reasons. In fact, generation starship narratives have pervasively been preoccupied with providing strong justifications for the trip, precisely so that we would not preemptively and automatically conclude that those onboard the vessel are, really, fools. Exploration for its own sake (scientific

knowledge or contact with other species, for example) has been one of the main engines driving the plot of generation-starship narratives;[6] also, the abandonment of a ruined Earth in the wake of a nuclear conflict or natural disaster;[7] and finally, because it's worth putting our eggs in more than one basket, just in case anything awful happens to Earth, there is colonization.[8] But in most narratives, things go wrong on the generation starship, which inevitably becomes a ship of fools: throughout the long generations spent in flight, the original mission becomes moot and the distant descendants of the original crew refuse to carry it out, opting for a ship-bound existence; or, a disaster on board damages the ship and degrades its society's world-view until everyone forgets they are inside a man-made construct, believing instead that the universe ends at the bulkheads; or, the crew becomes so terrified of leaving the ship that they remain inside even after planet-fall.

Or, finally, the inhabitants of the generation starship forget what the mission was supposed to be and, incapable of coming up with a new one, endlessly travel through interstellar space in an aimless search for something they themselves cannot define. Such is the fate of the people onboard the *Argonos*:

> No one knew where the ship was first built, or first launched…. Many suggested Earth, the legendary birthplace of humankind…. But returning to Earth was not an option, either. We had already tried that once, years before I was born. All they found was a toxic, irradiated world, in ruins and abandoned. The Bishop, on the other hand, claimed the ship had *always* existed – a "Mystery" that was usually a large part of his conversion sermons, a large part of his basic theology. A large part of his nonsense. (11-12)

As the ship of fools approaches its new destination, which the Bishop has christened Antioch, tensions brew among its people. The social order onboard the vessel is established along a tripartite division: the Crew, the Church, and the Downsiders. The Crew constitutes at once the Aristocracy and the command echelon of the *Argonos*. Nikos Costa is the prime member of the most powerful among the Crew's families, and thus the Captain. Bishop Soldano's Church is now trying to wrest his position of primacy from him in a series of intrigues gradually coalescing around

the highly anticipated landfall on – and exploration of – Antioch. The Downsiders, on the other hand, are by far the most numerous social class onboard the *Argonos*, and those that allow the ship to run: they are mechanics, botanists, farmers, scrubbers, and so on. They are also utterly powerless, confined to the bottom levels of the ship in a twilight world of badly running air scrubbers and dim, infernal illumination from which they are forbidden to escape. The Downsiders' periodic revolts have all been easily crushed by the First Families, which have full control of shipboard functions and can therefore cut the rebels' air supply at will. This class system is not the product of a chance decision on Russo's part. It mirrors with a good degree of precision the large-scale social world of the times of Sebastian Brant and the ships of fools plying the waterways of Flanders and the Rhineland. The choice of names for the many characters in the story further reinforces the link to medieval and renaissance Europe: Nikos Costa, Bernard Soldano, Margita Cardenas, Rocco Costino, Susanna Hingen, and so on. There is an air of counter-reformation to the sound of those names, and behind some of the people lurk uncomfortable historical memories – Bishop Soldano's figure, for example, carries more than a hint of Tomás de Torquemada. Also, this social arrangement effectively sets up the scenario for a ship-of-fools narrative, a story contemptuous of owners because owners are fools.

And then there is the protagonist and narrator of the story. His name is Bartolomeo Aguilera, and he is Nikos Costa's consigliore. He is also deformed, having to walk around in a powered exoskeleton, and for that he is shunned and despised by most people onboard the ship. Bartolomeo's only friend is a Downsider, a dwarf by the name of Pär Lundkvist, and here we find yet another of Russo's nods to the times of the ship of fools: the dwarf's name comes very close to that of Pär Lagerkvist, the Swedish Nobel Prize-winning author of *The Dwarf* (1944), a novel featuring an eponymous first-person narrator/protagonist serving as an invariably hated consigliore at the court of an unspecified Italian city-state during the Renaissance. As John Clute observes, it is easy to infer an explicit thematic connection between Bartolomeo and the nameless dwarf in Lagerkvist's novel (who also happens to have as his only friend a man named Bernardo) (317). Both are shadow figures, powerful but despised men who managed to rise to their

position 1) through their friendship with the ruler and 2) despite their physical blemishes.

But while the cynical, misanthropic narrative voice of *The Dwarf* finds a measure of forgiveness in the historical distance between the time in the novel and the time of the novel's composition – the past is the past, and we can comfort ourselves with the admittedly problematic belief that things are now better – no such solace attends Bartolomeo Aguilera's account of the events in *Ship of Fools*. Quite apart from the troubles already mentioned, the most damning piece of evidence for considering the *Argonos* a ship of fools is the utterly unnecessary nature of its predicament. The viability of a concept like that of the generation starship is understandable only if one postulates the absence of FTL travel and of other human worlds besides Earth, but with both available, it becomes hard to understand the crew's choice to live in virtual isolation for centuries. Early on, Bartolomeo makes it clear that the *Argonos* is indeed equipped with a form of FTL propulsion, which he calls "subspace jumps" (12). This piece of information, delivered as a matter of course rather than as a revelation, combines with the existence of extrasolar human settlements to make the entire generation-starship scenario a socio-cultural choice rather than a physical and technological necessity. Over the course of centuries, the people onboard the *Argonos* have gradually come to the decision of shutting themselves away from their kin, living inside a tiny world whose confined spaces, with the passing of the years, ended up fostering the formation of an inbred worldview[9] – the ship's function, now forgotten by all, is actively reaffirmed only by one of the villains in the story, and then only as the function of an evangelical program of religious conversion whereby the planetary colonies must bend to the will of the shipboard Church. Given the nature of Church's tenets, the notion is ludicrous; like Foucault's ships of fools, the *Argonos* travels across space in a senseless pursuit of an insane goal, its crew rejected as madmen by the communities it encounters.

Thus, the *Argonos*' fate is sealed even before the narrative proper begins. All the events discussed so far happened in the distant past from Bartolomeo's point of view, and some of them – like the great civil war that wiped out a great deal of books and other data-storage instruments – took place centuries before his birth. As the ship approaches Antioch, the expecta-

tions of the crew are determined not so much by the potential nature of the planet itself, but rather by the significance it may hold for the power struggle between the Church and the Captain. Again, the raw matter of outer space (the void itself as well as the physical bodies it contains) has become a Rorschach test – the canvas for an utterly blind, solipsistic contemplation of a limited future inside a limited space, with no room for breakaway alternatives. The only people to see Antioch as anything more than a casus belli are the Downsiders. Their new response to the malaise affecting life on the *Argonos* is no longer mutiny and open struggle – it is escape.

The ship arrives in orbit around Antioch, guided by a mysterious automated signal broadcast from somewhere on the surface. As the Captain's eyes and ears, Bartolomeo accompanies the team that investigates the source of the signal, and what they find marks all of them for life. Upon arrival, they find a conglomeration of strangely shaped buildings, alien in proportions and geometry, and inside one of them, in a huge, windowless chamber, they witness a scene of abiding horror:

> Bones. Hanging bones. Skeletons rattling and clattering in the air currents; tightly woven ropes knotted on large and vicious hooks embedded in the ceiling, then noosed around the nearly fleshless necks of discolored skeletons with skulls grinning and staring at us from shadowed, empty sockets…. Looking more closely now, I saw that some of the bones were broken, crushed, particularly the fingers and toes, digits missing or barely hanging on with bits of cartilage or ligament. But there were occasional signs of damage to the larger bones, too, and, more rarely, to a few of the skulls…. But we were still not prepared for the final sight … the ruined skeletons of twenty-five or thirty infants. Bloodstained hooks protruded from the infants' chests and necks, through shattered ribs and throats. Crushed fingers and toes. Charred flesh and bone. Broken teeth and desiccated eye sockets and wisps of torn and delicate hair. Babies. (63-65)

Traumatized by the discovery of the fate of Antioch's colonists, haunted by the horror of the gigantic torture chamber where not even the most innocent have been spared, the team returns to the *Argonos*. By then, Bartolomeo has decided to help the Downsiders with their attempt at escape – which is duly discovered and suppressed – and has fallen hopelessly in love

with Father Veronica. Veronica is the exact counterpoint to the Bishop: where he is calculating, cruel, and utterly self-serving, she is generous, honest, and openhearted. Soldano's faith is nothing but a pretense, which he himself eventually admits (265), but Veronica's is true and carefully considered – something for which she pays with periodic bouts of despair when confronted with such manifest evil as the chamber. And in true fashion for someone who comes as near to a saint as anyone in this novel is likely to, she also becomes a martyr, doomed to die in Bartolomeo's stead when one of the Bishop's schemes goes badly awry.

Months later, the *Argonos* finds an alien vessel in the wastes of interstellar space, seemingly dead and deserted, and sets about exploring it, but the various attempts at making sense of it invariably turn to disaster – many people die in bizarre, grisly accidents that defy understanding, and of those who go into the ship and come back out, several manifest progressively worsening signs of mental imbalance. As a result, the *Argonos* has indeed become a ship of fools, both metaphorically and literally. Everyone on board is a fool, and everyone acts accordingly. Margita Cardenas reveals to Bartolomeo that the finding of the ship wasn't a chance occurrence: shortly after Bartolomeo and Father Veronica had entered the chamber of horrors on Antioch, "the transmitter at the original landing site sent off a long, highly directional signal burst. It stayed on long enough for Communications to chart its path" (151), and its path led the *Argonos* directly to the mysterious derelict. Also, and more distressingly, the alien ship is exerting, through means unexplainable by anyone, an attractive force that pulls the *Argonos* ever closer to it, so that the Captain has to periodically order the use of the thrusters to reestablish a safe distance between the two (149). And yet, nobody was informed of the circumstances of the finding, and nobody was told about the attractive force – Cardenas, who is the Chief Engineer, has been able to find out on her own, but no one else knows. And no one knows about the trips the Bishop took to the ship, by himself and for reasons of his own.

Russo's writing is masterful in these scenes: he manages to clearly portray the idiocies at the heart of the decision-making processes of everyone in power onboard the *Argonos* – from the Captain and the Bishop to every member of the Crew – without souring the pleasure of reading what quick-

ly becomes a truly gripping, suspenseful story. It is highly likely that, by now, we readers have figured out the dangers of the ship and the probable end of all attempts to explore or use it, for the same reason we already know what will happen when a group of teenagers walks into an old house with a bad reputation in the dead of night. It's a horror story Russo is writing, and it is science fiction too, but now that the horror elements gradually start taking over from the science fictional ones, we begin understanding exactly how foolish the owners are. Nobody has given any thought to the reality that they are walking into a trap, that the alien ship is anything but empty or dead, and that a fate identical to the one that befell the poor souls on Antioch looms over all of them now. As before, every piece of evidence that connects the powerful on the *Argonos* to any sense of an outside to their claustrophobic world is either ignored or reinterpreted as just another piece in an internal game of power. Even the most perceptive, most intelligent characters cannot escape this selective blindness. When confronted by the presence of the alien ship, the usually cynical, supremely practical Pär tells Bartolomeo that the *Argonos* "is *filled* with freaks. We don't know how to live normal human lives anymore. Living from birth to death inside this hunk of metal is unnatural, and I think it's done unnatural things to us" (128). However, Pär's solution – to explore the alien ship because "it's something different, and … it's got to do something for us, got to *change* us" (128) – seems absurd in the face of what he just declared. Why trade one metal coffin for another?

Inevitably, blindly, the exploration continues, and the death toll mounts: mental illness, suicide, and strife stain the relationships among the members of the team and frustrate their attempts to understand the alien vessel, and even the discovery of an old, apparently insane woman living in a previously unseen corridor deep into the ship's interior (195-200) fails to turn up any substantive amount of information. At this point, faced with constant casualties, one deeply damaged refugee, a group of aggressively insane crewmembers, and nothing else to show for it, Bartolomeo persuades the council to make a fatal decision: the *Argonos* must dock with the alien ship and take it to a planetary colony whose inhabitants will be able to help with its exploration. "We need to rediscover civilization" (235), he tells the council as he makes his case for the *Argonos*' return into the fold

of humanity with the alien ship as a present, and indeed, that would be the end of the ship of fools. Its people could return to bigger skies, longer horizons, and larger contexts.

But the alien vessel won't let the ship of fools go: immediately after the *Argonos'* docking Bartolomeo discovers yet another chamber of horrors. The same torn bodies, the same broken bones stare at him from the walls of a chamber far larger than the one he had discovered on Antioch, and by the time he has informed the council, it's too late for the *Argonos* to escape – no expedient can free them from the docking clamp's grip. At the same time, the woman they rescued from the alien ship turns out to be a monstrous, clawed thing of enormous strength – another trap for the *Argonos'* hapless people. Now desperate, the Crew hatches a final plot, again thought up by Bartolomeo: the vast majority of the people onboard the *Argonos*, Down-siders and Crew and Church members, will escape with the shuttles and head for Antioch, while a skeleton crew comprised of the Captain and a few others will institute a subspace jump, taking the alien vessel with them. In a handful of tightly plotted, tense pages, the shuttles leave the *Argonos* while the alien vessel, somehow aware of the humans' escape ploy, reveals itself in all its terrible aggressiveness. The shuttles do manage to escape, however, and the last they see of the *Argonos* and the alien ship is the image of the subspace jump that takes both to unknown parts of the universe, locked together in the docking mechanism's embrace as the alien ship, now desperate to free itself from it, vainly tries to break the connection. The novel ends with Bartolomeo's final entry before planetfall, offering a degree of hope in the prospect of a new life on Antioch and in the reality of the alien ship's disappearance, but even that feels a little like gallows humor, because the people onboard the shuttles "are all as desperate as he, with nowhere to go but Antioch, which may be a very bad destination. For the torture chambers remain; and everyone is a Fool" (Clute 319).

However, to the extent that the consolations of story can come from sources other than the explicit unspooling of the plot, there may be reason to believe in mercy. There is something in Russo's prose, something in the steady gaze he aims at his characters through the eyes of Bartolomeo Aguil-era, that leavens the burden somewhat. This is a story of fools, and everyone is indeed a fool, but fool and stupid are not the same thing; many of the

characters are people we might well like – especially Bartolomeo himself, who tells his story with brutal honesty toward himself and his own failures, without obscuring even the most painful experiences. The Captain too is a complex character, at once ruthless and damaged by the burden of command, of which he cannot free himself even when it threatens to destroy him. In the end, that's precisely what it does, but this one last time Nikos' decision to stay is not sustained by greed or politics, but by self-sacrifice. We may not feel it appropriate to cheer his self-destruction, but we can at least salute it with a clean heart.

There is also another consideration that might save the people of the *Argonos* from excessive contempt on our part, and that is the extra-textual consideration common to all ship-of-fools narratives: that we are all, potentially, fools, and that the voyage of the *Argonos* may well be our own one day – or maybe that it already is, because the captains of the ship of state we have been electing for centuries have often proven not just inadequate, but destructive as well. We do not have a happy history of choosing who will steer us toward the future, and the ship of fools, both in its historical reality in Renaissance Europe and in its fictional reenactments in the many worlds of science fiction, may yet prove to be a prophylactic against the excessive myopia that so frequently mars our vision of the world to come.

Notes

[1]   For further information on the generation starship as an engineering and scientific endeavor, see Kondo et al. For a history of generation starship narratives in science fiction, see my own *The Generation Starship in Science Fiction.*.

[2]   Thus, together with Brant's poem, the period between the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries saw the composition of, among others, Symphorien Champier's *Ship of Princes and Battles of Nobility* (1502) and *Ship of Virtuous Ladies* (1503), as well as Jacob Van Oestvoren's *Blauwe Schute* (1413).

[3]   The various characters on board Porter's vessel are all hopeful that the world they are sailing toward, pre-WWII Europe, will compensate them for the disappointments in their lives thus far. Time and the unbearable events surrounding the onset of the worst conflict in world history show their dreams up for what they are.

[4]   Two useful general-purpose entries on the ship of fools appear in the online *Encyclopedia of Science Fiction* (http://www.sf-encyclopedia.com/entry/ship_of_fools) and in the *Encyclopedia of Fantasy* (1997).

[5] *Non-Stop* was published in the United States as *Starship*.

[6] Robert Heinlein's two-part "Universe"/"Common Sense" (1941), John Brunner's "Lungfish" (1957), and Frank M. Robinson's *The Dark Beyond the Stars* (1991) belong to this category.

[7] Examples include Arthur C. Clarke's "Rescue Party" (1946), Frank M. Robinson's "The Oceans Are Wide" (1954), Chad Oliver's "The Wind Blows Free" (1957), and Edmund Cooper's *Seed of Light* (1959).

[8] For instance, Don Wilcox's "The Voyage That Lasted 600 Years" (1940), Aldiss' *Non-Stop*, Samuel Delany's *The Ballad of Beta-2*, Gene Wolfe's *Book of the Long Sun* (1993-1996), and Ken MacLeod's *Learning the World* (2005).

[9] The danger of actual genetic decay does not loom large in the story – Bartolomeo tells us that thousands of people live onboard the ship. However, since the First Families and the Downsiders do not mix in any way and the Downsiders are far more numerous than any other social group, there is a hint of inbreeding – implied rather than openly stated – in some of the members of the Crew we meet through the narrative.

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