Questioning Categories of Science and Fiction in *Fin de Siècle* Magazines

Will Tattersdill

Studies in Literature and Science have so far tended to pass over science fiction (sf), the genre whose very name provocatively situates it on the two-culture divide. There are a number of reasons this might be the case, not least of which is that sf already has a considerable academic community associated with it, and there may be a wariness of repeating work or treading on toes. Equally, Literature and Science is a relatively young field of enquiry, and it may be felt that a focus on canonical figures is necessary to reinforce its legitimacy as a scholarly approach.[1] Despite this, sf and other popular literatures are a crucial part of the public consumption and reinterpretation of scientific ideas, and their study can significantly improve our understanding of science's cultural trajectory. This passage from Paul Fayter's essay on 'Late Victorian Science and Science Fiction' suggests how Gillian Beer's celebrated two-way traffic might be explored in demotic literature:

> Professional scientists not only helped shape science fiction, in many cases their work was shaped by it […] If we pay attention to the content and diverse cultural locations of both science and science fiction, to who was writing it and who was reading it, we will notice a fluid exchange of ideas – not only across national and disciplinary boundaries, but across lines traditionally separating amateur and professional, highbrow and lowbrow, established knowledge and speculation, science and fiction.[2]

Fayter's comments remind us that the study of Literature and Science is, essentially, a study of processes of categorization. Interrogating the boundary between them almost inevitably throws us into contact with the artificiality of other divisions, including those of genre.

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[1] '…science fiction is, rightly or wrongly, not taken seriously as a genre of literature with a capital 'L', and I hope this book might be taken seriously' (Charlotte Sleigh, *Literature and Science* [Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011], p. x–xi).

[2] Paul Fayter, 'Strange New Worlds of Space and Time: Late Victorian Science and Science Fiction', in *Victorian Science in Context*, ed. by Bernard Lightman (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), pp. 256–80 (p. 257).

Fayter's stress on location is also important. It directs us, for the purposes of this essay, to a medium which not only played a crucial role in the emergence of sf as a distinct and commercially viable genre, but which entangled literature and science in a host of unpredictable ways: the general magazine of the *fin de siècle*.

Exemplars of the New Journalism, these publications – referred to by Mike Ashley as 'Standard Illustrated Popular Magazines' – took advantage of breakthroughs in print and distribution technology to appeal to as wide an audience as possible.[3] The *Strand Magazine* (January 1891 – March 1950), published by George Newnes, was the first and remains the best-known of them. However, as the 1890s progressed, a host of imitators surfaced which also shared a publishing strategy depending in equal measure upon a diversity of content and an ability to shape that content into a coherent editorial identity. These magazines necessarily comprised a homogenous range of material that we might today consider incommensurate, a fact that makes them an excellent case study for anyone wishing to interrogate dyadic division in general, and the two-culture separation in particular.

In this essay, I have chosen just two stories from the enormous periodical archive of the *fin de siècle* in order to elucidate one corner of this argument. The stories were both written by the same man, Israel Zangwill, and were published in the same magazine, the *Idler* (February 1892 – March 1911), within a few months of one another. A propensity for retrospective categorisation, however, impels us to estrange them. In what follows, I problematize this instinct, finding the inherent inclusivity of the general magazine's format within each story at an internal level, pointing out that neither tale rigidly conforms to the categories by which it might today be understood, and arguing that this characteristic is both positive and useful. Space prevents me from comparing the stories with the other articles and tales which originally accompanied them in the *Idler*, but interested readers with access to ProQuest's *British Periodicals* database will find both stories reproduced, together with the other contents of the issues in which they appeared.[4] The *Idler* is also held in a number of large research libraries, including the Bodleian Library and Cambridge University Library, whilst

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[3] Mike Ashley, *The Age of the Storytellers: British Popular Fiction Magazines 1880-1950* (London: The British Library, 2006), p. 197.

[4] I. Zangwill, 'The Memory Cleaning House', <http://search.proquest.com/**docview/3351933?accountid=**11862> [accessed 23 November 2012] and I. Zangwill, 'Cheating the Gallows', <http://search.proquest.com/**docview/3335994?accountid=**11862> [accessed 23 November 2012]. All further references given here are to the original print versions rather than these electronic resources.

the British Library has an almost complete set of issues.[5] Viewing these magazines in physical form remains the best way of gaining a hold upon the theoretical issues relating to format and genre which are discussed here.

The first of the stories I have selected is 'The Memory Clearing House', which appeared in the July 1892 issue of the *Idler*, and is a comic tale that turns around the invention of a new kind of thought-reading technology, the noemagraph. This device is initially a boon to its inventor, the politician O'Donovan, who uses it as the basis of a business on the Strand at which memories can be bought and later sold. Initially, only harmless memories (such as addresses) are exchanged, but the technology rapidly becomes used for far more serious purposes, such as erasing recollections of deceased loved ones: 'The inventor himself had not foreseen the extraordinary uses to which his noemagraph would be put, nor the extraordinary developments of his business'.[6] All ends tragically when the story's narrator, a successful novelist, buys the memory of a murder in order to write a more realistic description of a killer's thoughts and feelings. He is arrested for the crime he describes, and at its close, it is revealed that the whole tale is written from prison on the eve of his execution.

'The Memory Clearing House' is officially sf, by which I mean that it is mentioned in the *Science Fiction Encyclopedia* as an '[e]arly Proto sf example' of memory edit, a trope of the genre related to 'selective Amnesia and/or implantation of false memories'.[7] It also receives a mention in Everett F. Bleiler's *Science-Fiction, The Early Years*, an index which proposes to list every sf story published before 1930, and which has lengthy and rigorous selection criteria, enumerated in a lengthy preface that excludes, for example, all utopian writing and most tales with anything approaching supernatural elements.[8] 1930 was an important moment in the history of sf, because it was at around this time (following the appearance, in April 1926, of the American magazine *Amazing Stories*, the first English-language magazine dedicated exclusively to printing sf) that 'science fiction' began to emerge as a term describing a distinct cohort of sub-literary popular writing. It is important to note, as we go on, that Zangwill and his readers could not have considered 'The Memory Clearing House' to

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[5] Comprehensive holdings information for *The Idler* may be found in Mike Ashley, *The Age of the Storytellers: British Popular Fiction Magazines 1880-1950* (London: The British Library, 2006), pp. 99-100.
[6] I. Zangwill, 'The Memory Clearing House', *The Idler*, I (1892), 672–85 (p. 678).
[7] David Langford, 'Memory Edit', *Science Fiction Encyclopedia*, 2012, <http://sf-encyclopedia.com/entry/memory_edit> [accessed 5 November 2012].
[8] Everett F. Bleiler, *Science-Fiction, The Early Years* (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 1990), p. 839.

be a work of sf as we now understand the term, and that all works described in the Bleiler index have had the 'science fiction' label applied to them retrospectively.

Each entry in *Science-Fiction, The Early Years* ends with a short subjective evaluation (a remarkable feature of the index is that Bleiler personally read each of the 3,000+ items he lists in it). These evaluations, which follow bibliographic and plot description and are intended to convey a sense of the work's quality, are typically one or two sentences in length. In the entry for 'The Memory Clearing House', however, we get only a single word: 'Flat'. Bleiler's failure to enjoy this story is easily understood when we approach it, as he does, as an early example of an idea that would later become a staple of sf, explored in an array of fiction across the twentieth century. Memory edit, a concept that is, for instance, at the heart of recent films such as *Inception* (2010) and *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (2004) is certainly something with which Zangwill engages: '…nothing was more pathetic', the narrator observes at one point, 'than to see the humble artisan investing his hard-earned "tanner" in recollections of a seaside holiday'. However, the story seems to fall short of the interrogations of the link between technology and consciousness which this theme might be expected to anticipate (p. 680). The noemagraph itself is not described, nor is the process of its invention; in fact, the device is mentioned by name only twice in the whole story. O'Donovan is a politician, not a scientist (the word 'scientist' is never used), and we neither see the inside of a laboratory nor read even a superficial description of the mechanics of memory transfer. The excuse for the latter omission is provided in the character of the narrator, who, on the one occasion O'Donovan seems set to explain something, reports only that:

> He rambled on about volts and dynamic psychometry and other hard words, which, though they break no bones, should be strictly confined in private dictionaries.
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> (p. 677)

This light, humorous tone, which is characteristic of the story as a whole, is complemented by A. J. Finberg's cartoon-like illustrations, none of which depicts the noemagraph or, indeed, any other technology. In short, the tale seems to glide past opportunities to dwell on the scientific structures that Zangwill is describing, and indeed the philosophical issues behind them.

Approaching the text with this requirement of it, however, is anachronistic. Finberg's illustrations are all of characters (or even caricatures) rather than objects or incidents; the story is centrally concerned with the *social* consequences of the technology, its very title emphasising the locale of the events it describes — the 'Memory Clearing House' — rather than the machine that drives them. Asides on everything from the question of Irish Home Rule to the ethics of after-dinner speaking abound, and the most prominent theme in the story is its commentary on the literary establishment, which the narrator blames for the noemagraph's invention (the link is comically abstract) and, of course, for his own personal downfall, when he publishes the true story of a murder:

> Alas! it was damned universally for its tameness and the improbability of its murder scenes. The critics, to a man, claimed to be authorities on the sensations of murderers, and the reading public, aghast, said I was flying in the face of Dickens. […] Stung to madness, I wrote to the papers asserting the truth of my murder, and giving the exact date and place of burial. The next day a detective found the body, and I was arrested.
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> (p. 685)

This is a social comedy: the lack of detail in the philosophical and technological explorations of the noemagraph are not deficiencies so much as they are symptomatic of a different set of priorities.

If 'The Memory Clearing House' surprises us by being not as science-fictional as we might expect given a summary of its plot, the opposite is true of the second Zangwill story I have chosen. 'Cheating the Gallows' appeared in February 1893's *Idler*, seven months after 'The Memory Clearing House'. Its less melodramatic prose is complimented by George Hutchinson's illustrations, which are more lifelike than Finberg's: a whole-page frontispiece of a corpse being dragged up from the Thames sets the tone for the piece. The story is as follows. Tom Peters and Everard G. Roxdal share lodgings in London. The two men are of entirely different character: Peters is an artistic layabout, whilst Roxdal is the manager of the City and Suburban Bank. One day Roxdal, a man of previously excellent character, vanishes with several thousand pounds. Foul play is suspected, but the man is never found, and it is proposed that he has fled to South America. As the hubbub dies down, Peters grows closer to Roxdal's fiancée. Feeling absolutely betrayed by Roxdal, she has overcome her initial dislike of Peters to the point of being on the verge of marrying him, when a strange dream causes her

to direct police attention to the missing man's room-mate. They find the stolen money and, shortly afterwards, a body is washed up from the river. Peters is executed, but not before revealing in a written statement that he and Roxdal are both the same man. The corpse, whose face was unidentifiable, was a coincidence, and in fact the identities of both Peters and Roxdal had been created by the criminal in the hopes of absconding with the money. The story ends with the condemned man contemplating his fate: 'The only thing that puzzles me, though, is whether the law has committed murder or I suicide'.[9]

'Cheating the Gallows' contains no inventions more elaborate than a false beard and, perhaps in consequence, finds no place either in Bleiler's index or *The Science Fiction Encyclopedia*. A closer reading, however, may justly give us pause. The dream sequence, in which Roxdal apparently visits his fiancée from beyond the grave to warn her off Peters, seems at first solidly in the tradition of the ghost story:

> And she dreamt a terrible dream. The dripping form of Everard stood by her bedside, staring at her with ghastly eyes. Had he been drowned on the passage to his land of exile? […] The wraith's stony eyes stared on, but there was silence. (p. 15)

Although this dream leads directly to the apprehending of the criminal, it is significant that it does not immediately lead to the unmasking of his dual identity. We do not learn the full truth until Peters/ Roxdal himself reveals it to us whilst awaiting his sentence. In fact, the dream is wrong: Peters did not kill Roxdal, and at the time of the dream Roxdal is neither dead nor a ghost. The criminal's own response to this detail — 'I made none of the usual slips, but no man can guard against a girl's nightmare after a day up the river and a supper at the Star and Garter' — emphasises the fact that this story is driven not by the supernatural apparatus whose aesthetic it assumes, but rather by the power of coincidence and, ultimately, a rationalist, scientific view of the world (p. 18). Despite its initial appearance as a representative of the urban gothic, with London fog, double identity, and a prescient dream-sequence, this is a tale that offers a simple, scientific explanation for everything it describes. In this, it resembles a more famous tale of the urban gothic, one that is accorded a place in the Bleiler index: Robert Louis Stevenson's *Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886). This novel also has dual identity at its heart, but is more easily aligned with sf as a genre by

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[9] I. Zangwill, 'Cheating the Gallows', *The Idler*, III (1893), 3–18 (p. 18).

the fact that its central identity shift is chemically, rather than theatrically, induced. Despite the lack of bubbling test tubes, though, 'Cheating the Gallows' is in at least one respect just as science-fictional as Stevenson's book: despite its uncanny trappings, it offers an empirical rather than a magical explanation of the mysterious events that it describes. The distinction between these two different outlooks is at the heart of several definitions of sf, and the grey area between them is the subject of the third (and most well-known) of Arthur C. Clarke's laws of prediction.[10]

Of these two short stories, then, the first contains science fictional elements which seem to recede under examination, whilst the other bears no discernable trace of sf, yet yields up thematic concerns which would later be identified as amongst the genre's defining characteristics. Which, if either of them, is 'really' sf? I submit that this question is less interesting than the observation that a scholar using Bleiler's index (for example) to trace a history of early sf would encounter one, but never see the other. A reading which tacitly assumes the retrospectively-imposed distinction to be essential overlooks the very obvious fact that these stories have much in common; from their jail-cell confessional dénouements to their appearance in the same physical space (the *Idler*) within a few months of each other. They were written by the same author and edited by the same editors (Robert Barr and Jerome K. Jerome), but Bleiler's determination that one of these stories fits in a different category to the other all too readily deemphasises even these most basic similarities. With the two of them back alongside each other, we see a complex interplay of satire, urban gothic, crime fiction, mysticism, and rationalism, which was contributing to the emergence of a new form of popular literature. With the blinders on, and 'The Memory Clearing House' read in isolation, we just see one word: 'Flat'.

We divide things up into categories for good reason. It would be unfair to expect Bleiler to have documented every text that aligns itself with a scientific explanation of the world, and indeed this is not a traditional definition of sf. It is relevant, though, that sf has proven throughout its history extremely resistant to formal definition, and that some critics argue that it is now best understood 'as a fuzzily-edged, multidimensional and constantly shifting

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[10] Arthur C. Clarke, *Profiles of the Future: An Inquiry into the Limits of the Possible* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1982), p. 36.

discursive object' rather than a distinct corpus with a specific set of characteristics.[11] My contention, following Bruno Latour, is that the division between literature and science can also be understood as a notion emerging out of, and retrospectively imposed on top of, a complex history of closely interrelated processes, rather than a fundamental truth from which those processes are a distraction.[12] Analysing these two stories is but to skim the surface of the vast and multifarious entanglements which existed in the periodical press of the *fin de siècle*, with which comprehensive engagement would be impossible in a single lifetime.

Specialisation is an essential part of how we make this abundance manageable, but it is important not to lose sight of the fact that, as Bakhtin puts it, 'the boundaries between fiction and nonfiction, between literature and nonliterature and so forth are not laid up in heaven'.[13] We create the boundaries between these things, and are too often inclined afterwards to treat them as inherent. Literature and science, like Peters and Roxdal, are not the opposites they are made out to be: they may have distinct personae, but they are always united by the body they share, and we deceive ourselves when we pretend otherwise. This essay is intended as a reminder of the complexity which categorisation occludes, and the need to have it at the forefront of our minds when we use pigeon-holes. At the moment of burgeoning scholarly interest in the subject, I hope it also serves as a caution against the creation of (or, at least, dogged adherence to) a pigeon-hole called 'Literature and Science'. Our thinking needs to stay connected.

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[11] Mark Bould and Sherryl Vint, *The Routledge Concise History of Science Fiction* (London: Routledge, 2011), p. 5.
[12] See Bruno Latour, *Pandora's Hope: Essays on the Reality of Science Studies* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999).
[13] Mikhail Bakhtin, 'Epic and Novel: Toward a Methodology for the Study of the Novel', in *The Dialogic Imagination*, ed. by Michael Holquist, trans. by Cary Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), pp. 3-40 (p. 33).