Introduction

This Element is a small book about publishing and the canon of science fiction (SF). It concentrates on the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, although there are some excursions into later twentieth- and twenty-first-century SF. This small scope, however, entails some large problems. Both the question of what constitutes science fiction and the question of what we mean when talk about 'the canon' are complex and involved, and their mutual overlap here adds further eddies of complexity to the debate. Discussion here is mostly limited to the period reaching from the nineteenth century though to that literary periodisation known as Modernism, although I have elsewhere argued at length that science fiction starts considerably earlier (Roberts, *History of Science Fiction*).[1] Certainly it not only continues to grow after the Modernist period but expands exponentially into the twenty-first century. Since what I want to argue is that the material conditions of production of what is called 'scientific romance' determined key aspects of the form going forward, and therefore shaped important aspects of contemporary SF, what follows

[1] In my *History of Science Fiction*, I try to make the case that 'science fiction' as such separates from much longer-standing traditions of Fantastic storytelling and art around 1600 and suggest that the first SF novel is Kepler's *Somnium* (probably written *c*. 1600, although not published until 1632). My larger thesis is that SF is a cultural consequence of the Protestant Reformation, not in a strictly sectarian or religious-affiliative sense, but as an index of the way in which a new broadly materialist 'science' – from whence 'science fiction' in the modern sense becomes meaningful – emerges. My position on this remains an eccentric one where the community of science fiction scholarship is concerned: most critics who work in the field argue that SF 'begins' either in the nineteenth century or else – a less popular position – in the 1920s, when Hugo Gernsback coined the term 'science fiction'.

frequently looks forward to later works. The focus of this study, however, is largely last decades of the nineteenth century through to the First World War.

I have a thesis that I propose to develop, but I am of course conscious of the damage arbitrarily chosen parameters can do to the plausibility of an argument. To that end, I would like to start with some pointers. In terms of SF, there are two especially important centres of gravity around which almost all critical engagements with the mode have oriented themselves. One is Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818), which is often taken as the first SF novel. Brian Aldiss distinguishes it from previous stories containing fantastical elements because the central character 'makes a deliberate decision [and] turns' to 'modern experiments in the laboratory' in order to achieve his fantastic results (Aldiss, *Billion Year Spree*, p. 78). Contextually, Shelley's novel comes towards the end of the prominent vogue for Gothic fiction that began with Hugh Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (1764) and which had largely dissipated by the 1820s (see Hogle, *The Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction*).

The other 'centre of gravity' relevant here is the latter end of the century, and the rise to fame of two of science fiction's most prominent names: Frenchman Jules Verne, who published SF from *Voyage au centre de la Terre* (1864) through to his death in 1905; and Englishman H. G. Wells, whose debut novel *The Time Machine* appeared in 1895 and who continued publishing through to his death in 1946. These dates show that Verne and Wells come from different generations, and indeed the two men never met, even though their reputations are strangely interwoven.

It is from the 1880s, and especially the 1890s, that we can date the expansion of SF, its shift from being a niche form of cultural production, with small print runs, limited readerships and a marginal place in publishing, through a rapid commercial expansion based around cheaper books, and (especially) magazines – 'Pulps' – into cinema and TV and, finally, to our

present state of affairs, in which SF and Fantasy, especially in 'Young Adult' (YA) writing and superhero modes, has a greater cultural penetration, and flat outsell all other forms of cultural production.[2] The period under consideration here, in other words, figures as a hinge point in the larger narratives of genre.

In between these two broadly indicative points of chronology, Shelley at the beginning of the century and Verne-Wells at the end, anglophone and francophone book publishing developed in several key ways. Of course, limiting myself to the British and French traditions is another selectivity that needs to be acknowledged. In a book of this scope, one cannot cover everything, and although there were important SF traditions developing in other cultures – especially in Poland, Spain, Italy and of course the United States – by the beginning of the twentieth-century, SF as a genre had, largely speaking, yet to take hold in South and East Asia, South America or in Africa. Many Russian readers spoke French – Hetzel, Verne's publisher, applied pressure to change the text of *Vingt mille lieues sous les mer* (*Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea*, 1869–70), shifting the motivation of his submariner Captain Nemo from an anti-Russian to an anti-British stance so as not to alienate his large Russian readership (see Martin, *The Mask of the Prophet*). The most widely translated and best-selling fiction in Russia between the 1860s and the 1930s were the works of Verne, Walter Scott and to a lesser extent those of Conan Doyle and Wells (Ruud, *Russian Entrepreneur*). In other words, these were writers who were read across the world, as well as writers

[2] On the rise of SF as a cultural idea, see Westfahl, *The Mechanics of Wonder*. On the Pulps, see Ashley, *The Time Machines*. My *History of Science Fiction* (Roberts, *History of Science Fiction*, pp. 479–512) provides some data to support the claims about today's dominance of SF and Fantasy, although few today can be blind to the extraordinary contemporary success of the *Star Wars* franchise, the Marvel Comics Universe movies and spin-offs and the *Harry Potter* series, as well as the many Young Adult dystopias.

who had a direct impact on the way in which the genre developed through the twentieth century. So whilst the English- and French-language foci of this study is limiting and even to a degree distorting, they may not be *fatally* distorting. Given that one of the aims of this study is to explore the ways the practical specificities of book production in nineteenth-century SF fed through into the broader cultural logic of the mode then *and* now, it will be important to keep an eye on continuities.

Across the century, then, many thousands of SF books and stories were published, and from that larger body it is possible, by triangulating contemporary popularity and latter-day critical interest, to hypothecate a potential 'canon' of nineteenth-century SF. It is worth doing this in order to make plain the sorts of assumptions the underpin the argument being developed in this study (the meaning of the term 'canon' is explored in more detail later; for more detailed discussion see Gorak, *The Making of the Modern Canon*).

Observations of the 'such a list can never pretend to objectivity' kind are rendered supernumerary by their very obviousness. Still, and even though it might easily be augmented, or even, with more difficulty (I think) reduced, I am going to set out the following list of titles. We could hardly omit Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818). I shall also add E. T. A. Hoffman's *Der Sandmann* (1817), the first story of an automated human, which would later come to be called a 'robot', as well as Auguste Villiers de l'Isle-Adam's *L'Éve Future* (1886), which is a celebrated, though more misogynist, later iteration of the same idea; Adam Seaborn's hollow-earth fantasia, *Symzonia* (1820), which was taken as fact by some; Jane Loudon's *The Mummy! A Tale of the Twenty-Second Century* (1827), the first 'Egyptian mummy' novel; Louis-Napoléon Geoffroy's *Napoléon et la conquête du monde* (1836, revised as *Napoléon Apocryphe* in 1841), detailing Napoleon's defeat of Russia and conquest of the whole globe, generally taken to be the first 'alternate history' novel; the various works of Edgar Allan Poe, especially perhaps the cod-lunar adventure,

'The Unparalleled Adventure of Hans Pfaall' (1835) and the mysterious voyage tale, *Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* (1838); Charlemagne Ischir Defontenay's *Star, ou Psi de Cassiopée* (1854), a story of humanoid aliens living in the constellation of Cassiopeia, taken by some to be the first space opera; *Achille Eyraud*'s interplanetary adventure, *Voyage à Venus* (1866); Edward Bulwer Lytton's *The Coming Race* (1871) about superhumans living underground whose advanced society is powered by a force called 'vril', from which the beef-spread Bovril took its name; astronomer Camille Flammarion's interstellar sense-of-wonder masterpieces, *Lumen* (1872), *Stella* (1877) and *Uranie* (1889), Albert Robida's trilogy of lavishly-illustrated futuristic extrapolations, *Le Vingtième Siècle* (1883), *La Guerre au vingtième siècle* (1887), *Le Vingtième siècle: la vie électrique* (1890) and Edwin Abbott's brief, mathematical fantasia, *Flatland* (1884). These books enjoyed modest print-runs, and appealed to a relatively small early-century reading public.

The question of popularity is germane, since around the time the latter few titles listed above were published there was a distinct step-change in the level of popularity of SF. Somewhere around the 1870s and 1880s, a post-*Frankenstein* body of cultural production began to 'take off' commercially, in both Britain and France, buoyed by the general increase in publishing volume, readerly competence and disposable income.[3] Jules Verne's career began slowly – 1863's *Cinq semaines en ballon* (*Five Weeks in a Balloon*) and 1864's *Voyages et aventures du capitaine Hatteras* (*Voyages and Adventures of Captain Hatteras*) were modest commercial successes – but by the 1870s he had become

[3] 'In the early years of the nineteenth century, novels were rarely produced in print runs of more than 1000 or 1500 copies. By the 1840s editions of 5000 copies were more common, while in the 1870s the cheapest editions of Jules Verne appeared in editions of 30,000 and were often reprinted' (Lyons, 'New Readers in the Nineteenth Century', p. 341). See also Lyons, *Readers and Society in Nineteenth-century France*.

one of the best-selling writers in the world. His breakthrough work, *Vingt mille lieues sous les mers: Tour du monde sous-marin* (*Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Seas: A Tour of the Underwater World*) was serialised 1869–70, and sold especially well in its 1871 octavo reissue. Verne's reputation and sales built steadily through the 1870s and 1880s (Butcher, *Jules Verne*).

And Verne was not alone. Marie Corelli's melodramatic work of space-spiritualism, *The Romance of Two Worlds* (1889) became one of the century's best-selling titles, despite being a notably poor piece of writing.[4] George Tomkyns Chesney's short novel of a future German invasion of the UK, *The Battle of Dorking* (1871), was a huge hit and became a political talking point: after appearing first in Blackwood's magazine it created such demand that the issue in which it appeared had to be reprinted six times; issued as a sixpenny paperback volume, it sold an unprecedented 20,000 copies a week. Similarly in the US, Edward Bellamy's utopian future extrapolation, *Looking Backward 2000–1887* (1888) galvanised a movement. Bellamy's book was a phenomenon: it sold in the millions. Indeed, in the whole American nineteenth century, only *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) and *Ben-Hur* (1880) sold more copies than *Looking Backward* – and had a direct impact on American society. Over 150 'Bellamy Clubs' to discuss the book's ideas were formed, and a new 'Nationalist' political party was established to contest the Presidency. In literary terms it inspired a whole genre of future-extrapolated utopias and dystopias, amongst them William Morris's *News From Nowhere* (1890) and H. G. Wells's *When The Sleeper Wakes* (1899).

Edward Everett Hale's *The Brick Moon* (1869–70) cannot match these titles for sales, but often appears in histories of SF as the first work about a man-

[4] Annette Frederico notes that 'on average a Corelli novel sold 100,000 copies a year' in the 1880s, a figure that had risen to '175,000 copies a year' by the turn of the century (Frederico, *Idol of Suburbia*, p. 2).

made orbital satellite. And indeed, works often become 'canonical' in terms of the history of SF because they are taken to be the first iteration of something that would prove important in later SF. Much of Wells's own *oeuvre* figures in this way: his *The Time Machine* (1895) still has the best claim to be the first work about time travel as a practicable, material business; *The Island of Doctor Moreau* (1896) is the first work to relocate the talking beasts of fairy tale and fable into the idiom of science (or pseudo-science); *The War of the Worlds* (1898) is the first and still one of the best accounts of alien invasion, and the aforementioned *When The Sleeper Wakes* (1899) put in play a whole range of conventions about future dystopia.[5] Another marker of cultural influence, and therefore of canonicity, is the number of adaptations to stage, film, TV and other media of any given title. Wells scores highly, so to speak, by this criterion, as do some, though by no means all, of Verne's many titles: the subterranean *Voyage au centre de la Terre* (1864), submarine *Vingt Mille Lieues sous les mers* (1869–70) and globe-spanning *Le Tour du monde en quatre-vingts jours* (1872) have all been many times adapted. In terms of commercial success and cultural penetration, Verne and Wells vie with one another for dominance in terms of the development of science fiction going forward.

This sketched-out canon of nineteenth-century SF is not likely to be particularly controversial. Matters become harder to narrow down as we move through the twentieth century and the river of textual production broadens and deepens into a swift-moving delta of interconnected sub-genres and styles. Historians of the genre talk of the age of 'Pulps' (broadly the 1920s and 1930s),

[5] Mark Hillegas argues that *Sleeper* provides the basic template for subsequent iterations of this kind of story with a whole series of now-familiar story-props, conceits and settings: 'the enclosed super-city, the disappearance of the family, the elimination of privacy, the degradation of the working class, the use of "kine-tele-photography" and "babble machines" for propaganda, pleasure cities, euthanasia, and mental surgery' (Hillegas, *The Future as Nightmare*, p. 108).

the 'Golden Age' of the 1940s and 1950s, the 'New Wave' of the 1960s and 1970s, but these are broad brush attempts at categorisation, incapable of apprehending the explosion in the variety of work being produced. These works are both 'high-brow/literary' as pulp, as likely to be visual texts – comic books, films, TV, latterly video games – as verbal ones. By the time we reach the 1980s, extending right to the present day, critics can do no better than gesture towards prominent subgenres within the larger logic according to which SF frames cultural production as a whole – cyberpunk, YA, superheroes, alt-history, military SF, dystopia. In short, SF has become, by the 20-teens, a climate rather than a focused genre.

This study cannot follow the development of the genre too far into this intriguing contemporary fecundity. Its ambition is, by contract, almost risibly modest: to argue that one iteration of SF's protean variety, known to critics as the 'scientific romance', is as much an artefact of a shift in the underlying logic of commercial publication at the very end of the nineteenth century and beginning of the twentieth, as it is anything else. I shall argue, in other words, that scientific romance flourishes during a particular hiatus, after the older dominance of circulating libraries had become largely obsolete but before the newer commercial restrictions of the Net Book Agreement had come into force. I shall stress, furthermore, that this state of affairs is not a coincidence, rather that the form of this type of SF actually directly expresses that underlying cultural-economic substrate. In some sense, this window, shaped by a set of particular exigences to do with the manufacture and sale of fiction, generated the 'scientific romance' as we now understand it.

One qualifier might be added, which is that if this thesis is a correct assessment of the determining forces of 'scientific romance', then a corollary follows: if these social and cultural circumstances proved, albeit indirectly, so very important for the way SF evolved through the twentieth century, then it is

clear that the material circumstances of book production and reception in the later nineteenth century feed directly through into the later development of genre.

How these matters interact with the questions of the 'canon' are also complex. Preferring one text to another as a possible member of a canon of 'classics' or 'important works' inevitably constitutes the erection of a hierarchy. In the case of SF, this brute truth manifests on two levels: in-genre and metagenerically. To prefer a selection of (for the sake of argument) straight white male authors as canonical over, let us say, a selection of queer female writers of colour is to reinscribe inside genre the larger malign hierarchies of worth that structure society as a whole, and as such is surely to be deplored. The SF and Fantasy Writers of America organisation appoints certain highly regarded writers as 'Grandmasters', not 'Grandmistresses', while Victor Gollancz's series of canonical SF novels are published under the rubric 'Masterworks', nor 'Mistressworks'. These may seem trivial infractions, but at least indicate that the nomenclature of in-genre canonicity is not neutral.

Of course, *any* selection, by silencing some voices and preferring others, is in a sense prejudicial. And the series of choices that arrive eventually as the canon within science fiction replicates a larger-grained exercise that happens between genres, where 'literary fiction', 'serious poetry', 'drama' (or some of it) is preferred to debased and populist 'genre' writing such as Science Fiction, Romance Fiction, Crime and the Western. This latter cleavage opens up properly in the twentieth century, when a group of arbiters of taste strove to establish a canon of literature as such, and that high-status, academically endorsed body of literary experimentation across a variety of modes called Modernism is sharply distinguished from mere 'reading-matter', that extruded entertainment product of Pulp and genre writing, which is dismissed as inartistic pabulum. That figures as different as Q. D. Leavis and Theodor

Adorno can be bracketed together in this respect speaks to the intellectual incoherence, or at least the conceptual *oddity*, of this approach.

In fact 'High Modernism' (as the movement is sometimes called) is just as penetrated by science fiction as are more popular modes like dime novels and Pulp magazines. This is a claim about more than the obvious titles – Huxley's *Brave New World*, Hesse's *Das Glasperlenspie* – where scholars and teachers of Modernism may begrudgingly concede room on their syllabi for unusual examples of SF. It is also a claim about Modernism itself, a movement radically determined by its fascinations with technology, time, new modes of apprehending space and the 'make it new' logic of the novum. What is *À la recherche du temps perdu* if it is not a time-travel story?

This argument perhaps runs the risk of appearing merely polemical, not least because the narrative of split between 'High Art' and 'popular culture' is so ingrained in the way we look at the twentieth century. Mozart can compose crowd-pleasing musical spectacles like *Die Zauberflöte*; Dickens can be the Victorian period's most popular entertainer and a conscious artist in the novel form; but as the twentieth century develops, artistry and popularity part company. There is another sort of canonicity in this fact, too. But before proceeding to examine this, more clarity is required to explain and theorise what 'canonicity' means for the purposes of the current study.

Notes on the Concept of a Canon

The science fiction canon proposed earlier lists a tiny percentage of the thousands of separate works of SF that were published throughout the nineteenth century, almost all of which have fallen into readerly desuetude, remembered if at all by specialist bibliographers and completists in search of the obscurities of genre. To say so is to approach a thumbnail definition of the 'canon' as such, of course. Whatever else it is, the canon is what is left over