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**THE VARIANT TEXT IN SCIENCE FICTION**

SCIENCE FICTION — that erratic literature concerned with the expression of scientific ideas in human terms — has long been the Cinderella of contemporary writing. Until recently, it was regarded as unworthy of serious study, because the term 'science fiction' had been associated with the worst of popular literature. Academic study of the better writing in the genre is slowly changing this attitude.

The interest in science fiction at an academic level (for instance, the 1977 *Research Guide to Science Fiction Studies* listed 412 doctoral theses on the subject) has led to an increase in serious criticism. Nonetheless, it has been noted that 'the standards of academic sf criticism are not notably high'.<sup>1</sup> A common failing in literary criticism at large is that the critic does not know the standing of the text. Works of literature are protean, subject to printing accidents and revisions. Treating the text as immutable has led to embarrassing gaffes, like F. O. Matthiessen's notorious commentary on a Melville misprint.<sup>2</sup> The aim of textual bibliography is to prevent these errors: ignorance of the text produces bad criticism. As regards variants, the situation of science fiction is no different from that in other forms of creative writing. Science fiction texts occur in different versions, and should be thoroughly examined before criticism is embarked on.

In fact, there is considerable need for the procedures of textual bibliography to be applied to science fiction, because the genre exhibits great textual variation. This complexity is partly due to the publishing history of science fiction. Successively, most writings classified as science fiction have been published in book form (nineteenth century), in books and magazines, the latter both high- and low-brow (turn-of-the-century), popular 'pulp' magazines almost exclusively (1920s to the end of the Second World War), hardback and the pulp magazines (1950s), and paperback (early 1960s to the present). This varied history has meant that the better science fiction has been continually reprinted in different formats. In itself, the publishing diversity offers ample opportunity for variants.

Because the pulp magazines were for so long the only science fiction outlets, their editors were in a position to be autocratic. Additionally, the prevalent attitude towards manuscripts among the publishers of popular fiction verged on contempt for the text, as the following illustrates:

At the end of each day Margulies [the editor of *Thrilling Wonder*] would call the junior geniuses in and require them to display their day's production. He didn't read the stories. He glanced at the pages and compared the number of penciled alterations with the original typed copy. If too high a proportion of the author's own words survived, the editor was admonished to try harder.<sup>3</sup>

As a consequence, much of the fiction published in the magazines was rewritten to suit the editor's tastes. John Campbell, who edited *Astounding*, the most famous magazine in science fiction, reportedly would not publish any stories that depicted aliens superior to human beings.<sup>4</sup> Reprinting offered authors the chance to restore a story to its original form, which many of them took. Variants between the magazine text of a story and its subsequent republication are something of a rule in science fiction.

However, even outside the enclave of science fiction, writers have been cursed with meddling editors. A prime example was Ursula Le Guin's well-regarded novelette 'Nine Lives', first published in the November 1969 issue of *Playboy*. Over 800 changes were made on an editorial level to the 10,000 word narrative, of which few, if any, benefited the text. In reprints of the story, where Le Guin had control of the publishing, the original (pre-*Playboy*) version has been used.

Another result of the publishing history is that the predominant form in science fiction is the short story, which is suited to the magazine format. However, book publishing favours longer narratives (except for anthologies). Therefore, a common practice in science fiction is to rewrite short stories (up to 6,000 words), novelettes (up to 15,000 words), and novellas (up to 25,000 words) as novels.

There are several methods by which short narratives may be brought to the appropriate length. One of these techniques is to expand the story. James Blish's award-winning *A Case of Conscience* (1958) was produced by simply continuing the narrative. The resultant novel was inferior to the original novella; in particular, the continuation was carelessly written. However, it is also arguable that novels produced in this manner are habitually flawed. This tendency is perhaps not due to the peculiar applicability of small packages to science fiction, for there are inherent difficulties in extending a self-contained short narrative. The short story is by definition brief, intense, an encapsulation — with no loose ends that can be used to continue the tale.

The second technique by which short science fiction texts are converted into

novels is the 'fix-up', defined as 'a book made up of stories previously published [independently], but altered to fit together . . . with the addition of new cementing material'.<sup>5</sup> The first science fiction fix-up was A. E. van Vogt's *The Voyage of the Space Beagle* (1950). This novel was compiled<sup>6</sup> from three novellas originally published in *Astounding* over a period of four years. As all three shared a setting, they were highly suitable for transformation into a novel. Van Vogt wrote two further novellas to bring *Voyage* to the desired length. One of these, 'War of Nerves', was sufficiently self-contained to be printed separately, some months before the novel was published. The other novella joined all the component stories together, in the manner of a string linking the beads of a necklace. The weakness of the fix-up is that the resultant novel tends to read as a series of episodes rather than a unified narrative. *Voyage* is typically discontinuous, yet achieves cohesion through the similarities between the separately published novellas, which were all written to a recognizable formula. For this reason, it is an unusually successful fix-up.

Science fiction is currently in a period of transition, as the magazines, long its staple form of publication, are declining in circulation, if not actually moribund. With the all-but-inevitable demise of these magazines, much of the textual variation within the genre will disappear. It is likely that the publishing opportunities for short science fiction will diminish, forcing authors into book-length narratives. Fix-ups and expanded versions will therefore cease to exist. Similarly, if the academic study of the genre creates a greater respect for authorial intention on the part of publishers, the likelihood of variants between first appearance and reprint will be lessened.

There are, though, two types of textual variant which are unlikely to vanish from science fiction. The first is authorial revision for stylistic reasons, which is found in all forms of literature — given the author who continues to polish. The second is authorial revision for scientific and technological reasons. This variant may be unique to science fiction, or at least more likely to be found there than in other literary genres. Science fiction has a certain didactic function, as a populariser of science, and therefore its authors feel an obligation to present accurate information. Unfortunately, science is not static, as its boundaries are human ignorance. Given the ever increasing rate of scientific discovery, revision to accommodate new data is quite common in science fiction.

Probably one of the first cases of scientific revision was H. G. Wells's *When the Sleeper Wakes*, published in 1899. Wells was interested in the contemporary experimental aviation, and included in his novel a detailed description of flying in the twenty-first century. Four years later, the Wright brothers achieved the world's first powered flight, along somewhat different lines from what Wells had envisaged. Wells revised the novel in 1910 (changing its title to *The Sleeper Awakes*) and attempted to make his fictional aviation consistent with reality. *When the Sleeper Wakes* reads in part like a collection of aeronautical howlers; Wells's 'aeropiles' are powered by a miraculous substance called 'fomile', and

somehow land without wheels. Additionally, the deadly strychnine is prescribed for altitude sickness. In preparing *The Sleeper Awakes*, Wells removed many of his factual errors, but not all — it was too large a task. He no doubt also realised that future developments in aviation would quickly render his descriptions obsolete again.

If the science fiction classics are to be seriously studied, their textual variants cannot be ignored. There exist as many (if not more) textual pitfalls in science fiction as in other literatures. Patrick Parrinder, for example, took the construction of Walter M. Miller's *A Canticle for Leibowitz* (1960) to be typical of the science fiction cyclical history;<sup>7</sup> the work is a typical fix-up.

It is probably reasonable to assume that variants in science fiction reprints are the rule rather than the exception. As this article has shown, five different types of textual variant, not including misprints, are common to the genre. The implication for literary criticism is that considerable care is needed with science fiction. Before examining a short story, for instance, the critic of science fiction should check that it has not: been originally published with an editor's amendments and subsequently corrected by the author; been expanded, or combined with other narratives into a fix-up; had its science revised, or its style. Having established that variants do or do not exist, it is only then that the critic of science fiction, and of any other genre of writing, can commence a literary analysis.

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#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Peter Nicholls, 'SF in the Classroom', in *The Encyclopaedia of Science Fiction: an Illustrated A to Z*, ed. Peter Nicholls (London, 1979), p.524.

<sup>2</sup> Fredson Bowers, 'Textual Criticism and the Literary Critic', in his *Textual and Literary Criticism* (Cambridge, 1959), p.30.

<sup>3</sup> Frederik Pohl, Introduction, *Science Fiction of the Forties*, ed. Frederik Pohl et al. (New York, 1978), p.11.

<sup>4</sup> Isaac Asimov, *In Memory Yet Green: The Autobiography of Isaac Asimov 1920-1954* (New York, 1979), pp.255, 262, 276.

<sup>5</sup> John Clute, 'A. E. van Vogt', in *The Encyclopaedia of Science Fiction*, p.627.

<sup>6</sup> Clute's term, p.627.

<sup>7</sup> Patrick Parrinder, 'Science Fiction as Truncated Epic', in *Bridges to Science Fiction*, ed. George E. Slusser et al (Carbondale, 1980), p.102.

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