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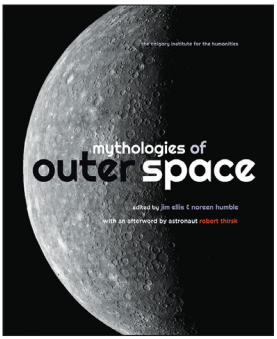

MYTHOLOGIES OF OUTER SPACE

Edited by Jim Ellis and Noreen Humble

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TIME
science fiction that might have been, or the outer spaces of the gibson collection of speculative fiction

stefania forlini

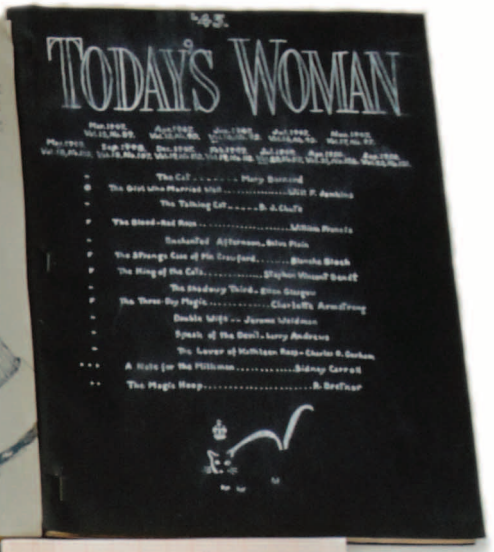
Pile of Gibson Compilations featuring Gibson's own numbering (photo: Stefania Forlini). With thanks to the University of Calgary's Archives and Special Collections for permission to reproduce these images.

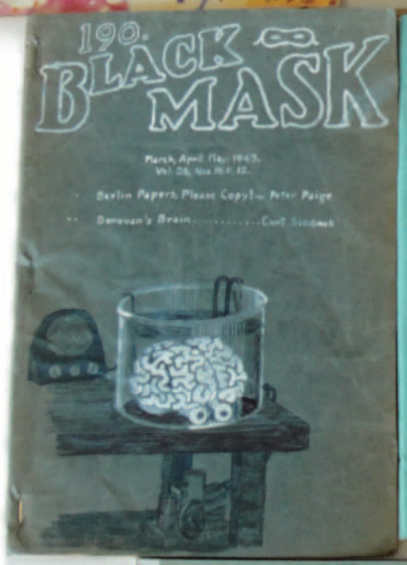
Gibson Compilation no. L83

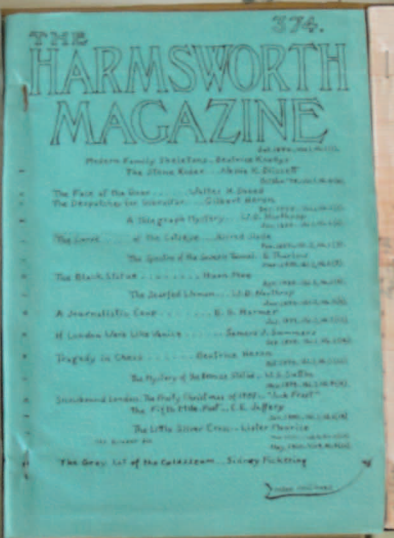
Among the many odds and ends in the massive Bob Gibson Collection of Speculative Fiction held at the University of Calgary, there is the cover of a 1952 issue of the Canadian edition of *Time* magazine with the caption "SPACE PIONEER: Will man outgrow the earth?" The cover illustration is a familiar one even if you've never seen it: a large three-legged robot appears to explore an unknown planet with strange rock formations on its surface while a ringed planet (perhaps Saturn) looms large in the sky above. The caption ties the image to a tradition of science fiction entangled in colonial expansionism and assumed technological mastery over the future of "mankind." Culled from the original magazine for inclusion in one of the more than 880 hand-crafted anthologies of speculative fiction produced by Gibson himself, however, the image is also recontextualized. It now lives in a collection that features the "stereotyped imagination" (Gibson n.d., Compilation no. 49) of science fiction (sf) and related genres as well as science-fictional oddities at the outer edges of one of the most popular, enduring genres of modernity.


CAVALIER


THE SATURDAY EVENING
POST


TODAY'S WOMAN

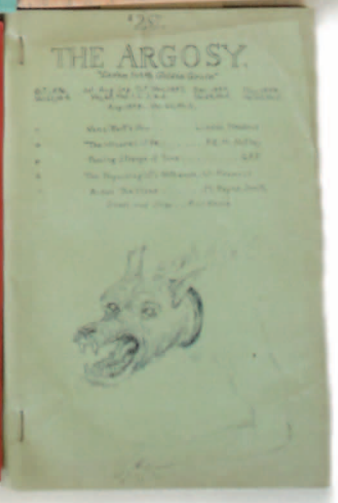

190.
BLACK MASK
March, April, May 1943
Vol. 26, No. 4, 5, 6.
Berlin Papers, Please Copy! — Peter Paige
Donovan's Brain — Curt Siodmak


374.
THE HARMSWORTH MAGAZINE


367.
IDLER


READER'S DIGEST
CONDENSED BOOKS


Short Stories


THE ARGOSY

For those unfamiliar with the Bob Gibson Collection of Speculative Fiction, it is worth noting that his more than 880 hand-crafted anthologies[1] are but a relatively small—if also unique—part of a much larger collection of more than 30,000 items, including hard- and softcover books and complete runs of hundreds of pulp magazines. The fanzine-like anthologies constitute a kind of homemade archive; they are instances of "reading with scissors" in the vernacular practice of scrapbooking (Garvey 2012, 11). Collectively they exemplify the carefully curated work of a collector with "scavenger sensibilities" (Leslie 1999, 89), one who sees value in preserving things others would simply throw away. Gibson was not a collector of fine first editions; a Calgarian of modest means, he was an avid, lifelong collector of the everyday—that is, the everyday ways science-fictional modes of future-oriented speculation infiltrate cultural imaginaries.

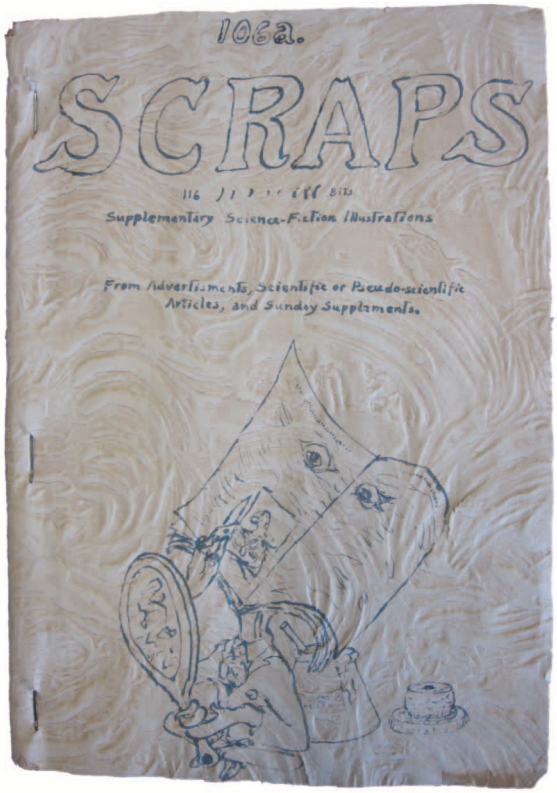
As is apparent in his anthologies (and the marginalia sprinkled throughout them), Gibson read through hundreds of popular British, American, and Canadian periodicals from the 1840s through to the 1990s, carefully cutting out specimens of sf and related genres. He reorganized his cuttings with other pieces similarly harvested from the same (or similar-sized) periodicals, then bound them with glue and/or staples complete with scrap-paper covers of whatever paper he may have had at hand. The covers are adorned with bibliographical details in a handwritten table of contents and often (though not always) with Gibson's own hand-drawn illustrations. Though most anthologies bear the title of their source periodical(s), two of them named "Scraps" (following page) perhaps best showcase what they all have in common: their collection of scraps that gesture beyond themselves literally and figuratively.

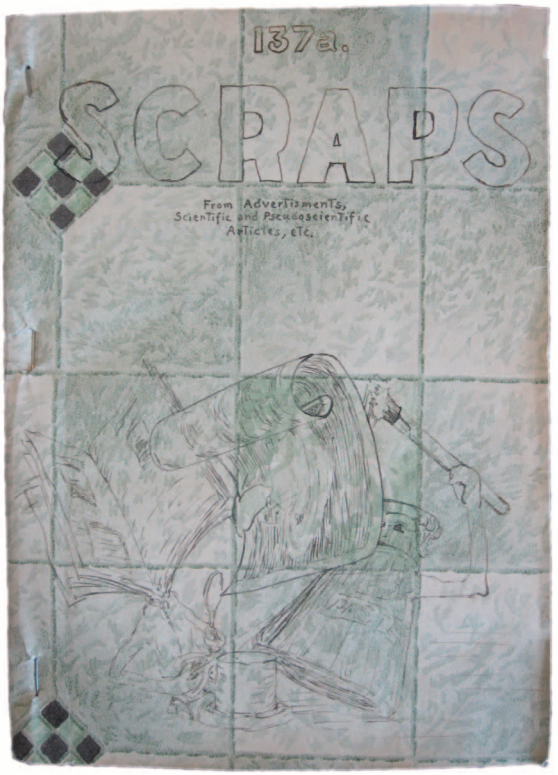
Among these scraps, there are treasures that refract dominant tendencies in the science-fictional habit of future-oriented speculation and its testing of "horizons of possibilities" (Csicsery-Ronay 2008, 1). Consider, for instance, some particularly compelling instances in which Gibson justifies (as he sometimes does by writing in the margins of his anthologies) his reasons for including a particular piece in what he refers to as "the province" of his collection (Gibson n.d., Compilation no. 87). Among the carefully gathered and curated scraps, there is a work labelled as "a science fiction tale that might have been." This note is written in the collector's own hand about a story by early feminist author of fantasy and sf C. L. (Catherine Lucille) Moore that he collected from a 1935 issue of *Weird Tales* (see p. 101).

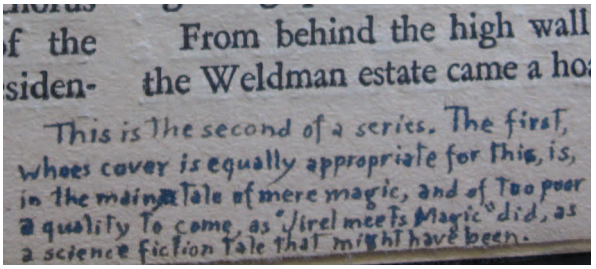
Selected Gibson Compilations featuring the titles of the source magazines (photo: Bridget Moynihan).

Left: Pastings on *Tomorrow's City* folded out of 137a.

Below: Gibson Compilations no. 106a and no. 137a. *Scraps.*

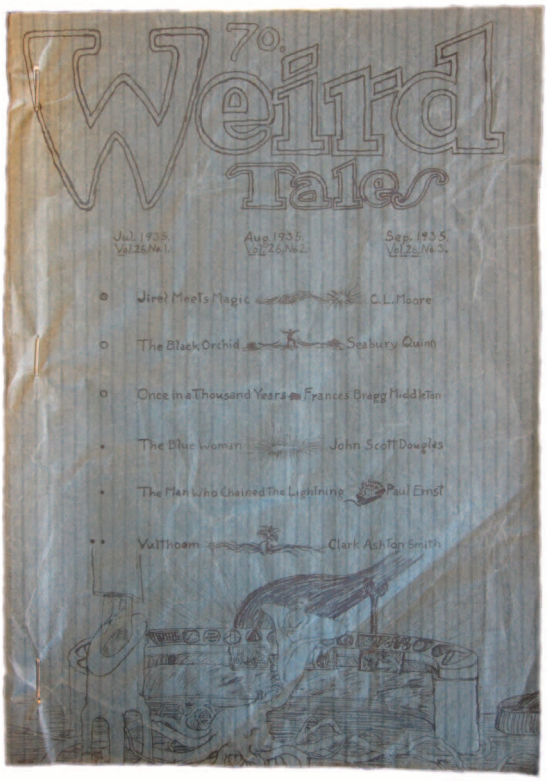






The story "Jirel Meets Magic" is one of a series with all the tell-tale signs of a particular tradition of fantasy. It features magic, wizards, and battles in medieval-like settings. So why would Gibson, a highly knowledgeable and particularly industrious sf fan, select it as a specimen of "a science fiction tale that might have been?". One can only speculate based on the clues available. Perhaps the most compelling of these appears at one point in the story when Jirel, a "warrior lady" intent on wreaking revenge on a wizard who attacked her people, enters a strange room in a sorceress's castle whose walls are studded with "innumerable doors" (41). Each door appears to open onto an alternate world, alien being, and/or alien experience. From the "terrifying glimpse of starry nothingness" (43) shown through one door to the "denizens of . . . strange worlds" (47) she glimpses in others, Jirel stands on the threshold of outer space, each door a portal into "other lands and times and worlds" (43) full of "alien things, shapeless monsters, faceless, eyeless, unrecognizable creatures from unknowable dimensions" (48). The view from each door suggests innumerable other possible stories that readers might begin to imagine as Jirel pauses at each threshold.

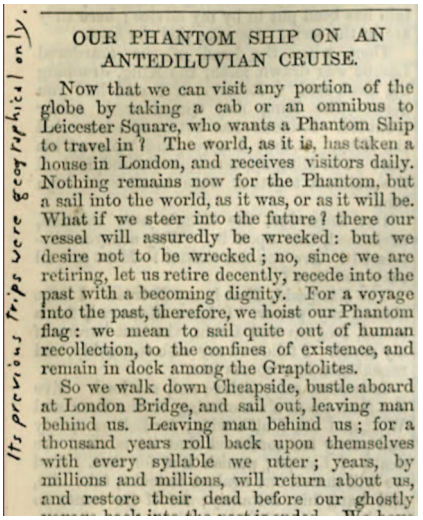
Gibson Compilation no. 70.



Is it because she glimpses but does not step into these strange worlds that this is sf that might have been? Or is it because these portals that provide access to other worlds are the implied work of magic (rather than some concoction of science and technology)? Or is it because the other worlds are neatly stored behind doors in the first place? After all, an sf fan like Gibson might well suspect that the starry nothingness of outer space, the alien beings of alternate worlds, and/or alternate times are never neatly encapsulated and often intrude without warning or perceivable threshold into the present world as we

think we know it. The thresholds in this scene of the story appear clear-cut, a doorway, a clear division between here and there, this world and that, but in the world of the story and the world of Gibson's collection (and possibly in the world of literary history more broadly) thresholds are messy places, tangled brush in tangled woods, and the tangles are rich with stories and unexpected crossovers. Gibson may appreciate the view from the threshold between fantasy and sf that Jirel's pauses afford him, but he also seems finely attuned to the ways that sf often untidily mingles with other genres—fantasy, detective fiction, horror, the weird, to name a few. Gibson's collection helps preserve this generic richness in this and thousands of other pieces.

Take for instance another (misleadingly simple) threshold moment highlighted by Gibson, this time from the pages of Charles Dickens's popular weekly periodical *Household Words* (1850–9). In the margins of "Our Phantom Ship on an Antediluvean Cruise" (1851), Gibson leaves a note that appears to identify an unexpected but momentous literary-historical leap when a serial travel narrative turns into one of time travel: "Its previous trips were geographical only." Clearly Gibson had read the whole series, spread across several numbers of *Household Words*, but he selected only this last episode for inclusion in his collection, specifically for its foray into time travel. So, what launches the Phantom Ship whose "previous trips were geographical only" into time travel for its last voyage? From its first line, the piece explains that the ship had no choice but to try something new since it finds itself suddenly outdated: "Now that we can visit any portion of the globe by taking a cab or an omnibus to Leicester Square, who wants a Phantom Ship to travel in?" (492). The Phantom Ship had been outdone by a competing popular visual display of the Earth: Wyld's globe, a massive globe built to scale (ten miles per inch), originally intended for the Crystal Palace. Because it was too big(!), it was instead set up in Leicester square (Black 2000, 29), precipitating the Phantom Ship's final voyage.


Its previous trips were geographical only.

OUR PHANTOM SHIP ON AN ANTEDILUVIAN CRUISE.

Now that we can visit any portion of the globe by taking a cab or an omnibus to Leicester Square, who wants a Phantom Ship to travel in? The world, as it is, has taken a house in London, and receives visitors daily. Nothing remains now for the Phantom, but a sail into the world, as it was, or as it will be. What if we steer into the future? there our vessel will assuredly be wrecked: but we desire not to be wrecked; no, since we are retiring, let us retire decently, recede into the past with a becoming dignity. For a voyage into the past, therefore, we hoist our Phantom flag: we mean to sail quite out of human recollection, to the confines of existence, and remain in dock among the Graptolites.

So we walk down Cheapside, bustle aboard at London Bridge, and sail out, leaving man behind us. Leaving man behind us; for a thousand years roll back upon themselves with every syllable we utter; years, by millions and millions, will return about us, and restore their dead before our ghostly

In this scrap, we glimpse how common narrative forms (in this case a travel narrative) branch off in new directions under market and intermedial competition of the broader media ecology of science spectacles popular in Victorian Britain. Because "the world as it is, has taken a house in London, and receives visitors daily," readers are told that the Phantom Ship has "no choice" but to travel into the future or the past (492). If the ship finally decides to set sail on an

antediluvian cruise into the distant past, it is, readers are told, because a Phantom Ship is unlikely to survive the future. It is perhaps the very possibility of travel in time that appeals to Gibson; maybe more specifically this initial tantalizing teetering on the pivotal decision between travel into the future or travel into the past compels Gibson, a reader with scissors, to snip this piece out for his scrapbook archive of sf. The moment is one to savour, even if it is perhaps more meaningful in retrospect than it may have been for its own time when the ship's decision to go back in time appears a clever and pragmatic one, rather than one with implications for the emergence of the then new genre of "science fiction"—a term whose first recorded use appears the same year (1851).[2] As interesting as this unexpected foray into time travel might seem in retrospect, the full import of the Phantom Ship's final voyage cannot be appreciated out of the context in which it first appeared.

The Phantom Ship's previous trips (earlier episodes in the series that Gibson had clearly read but chose not to include in his collection) were to explore "remote" places, including parts of Africa, Central America, the Arctic and Antarctic, China, and Japan. In these previous voyages, which read like a cross between guided tours and capitalist surveying of opportunities for "civilizing commerce," the Phantom Ship is a device used to bring the world "home" to a British audience; it functioned much like the great world exhibitions such as the Crystal Palace, or even individual exhibits such as Wyld's globe, which offered the British opportunities to "[master] the globe in an afternoon" (Luckhurst 2012, 388). The mastery promised in the Phantom Ship's earlier voyages is, however, undermined by the final one in which readers recede in geological time to the very edges of the "bounds of life" and the "bounds of knowledge" (495). The piece brings readers to the farthest reaches of the then known history of the world and its species and allows them to peer out toward what they *cannot* know, *cannot* master, what they can only speculate about. Here, much as at the thresholds of Jirel's many doors, readers glimpse the edges of something beyond which the narrative does not go, but to which it nonetheless provides an opening. Such incidental, anonymously published periodical-based works such as the Phantom Ship series are unlikely to get even a marginal mention in histories of the genre of sf, but because Gibson gathers such seemingly one-off instances by the thousands, the weight of aggregation shifts received histories of the genre that for a long time traced major authors and major works while neglecting all the small ways the genre co-evolved with emerging mass audiences.

In selecting works Gibson seems to recognize that sometimes related genres contain the potentiality of branching in new directions such that sf may appear lodged like a

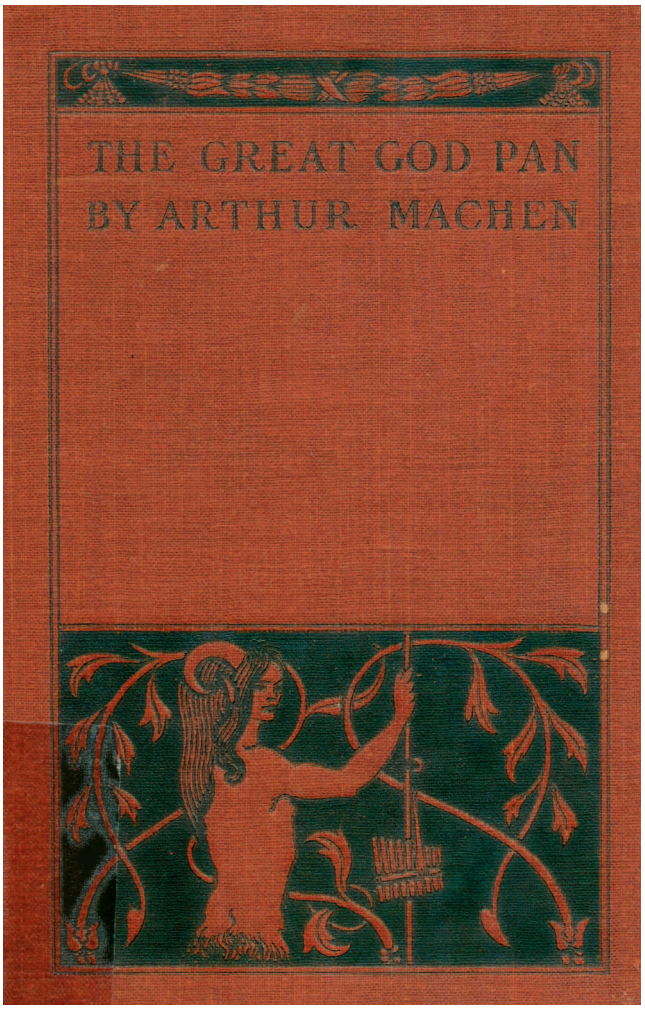
simultaneously extraneous and endemic fragment in fantasy, travel narratives, and other genres, as much as the future (and past) can appear lodged in the present, estranging what we think we know about it.[3] If sf becomes known for its visions of how things might have been—or might yet be—otherwise, it often appears itself otherwise in unexpected places and times. If science-fictional tendencies appear at times incidental, entwined with colonial and market pressures, it is because at least in a British context (and arguably in American and Canadian ones that Gibson's collection also focuses on), they are. Genre evolution is a *bricoleur*, responding to the exigencies of a particular moment by making use of what's available and sometimes launching something new even as it leaves some paths less explored than others. Repetition solidifies a sense of genre's "stereotyped imagination," and unexpected offshoots promise the possibilities of something else entirely.

What Gibson does with the textual scraps he gathers, he also does with illustrations, tracking the stereotyped visual imagination of sf together with stranger, more liminal specimens of the science-fictional tendencies embedded in related genres. The anthologies not only contain a wide range of textual genres (with short stories appearing next to poems, novels in serial or reprint, non-fictional works popularizing science, speculative essays forecasting the future, author interviews, letters to the editor, and even advertisements), they also include a wide range of illustrations, including cartoons, featured illustrations embedded within fictional works, cover illustrations and incidental illustrations that appeared even along the margins of popular magazines. As one critic points out, a defining feature of collectors with "scavenger sensibilities" is that they "promote a profoundly democratic attitude to the world of material" (Leslie 1999, 89). In Gibson's anthologies well-known, forgotten, anonymous, prolific, and occasional authors and illustrators rub shoulders even as seemingly distinct (but nonetheless related) genres blend into each other. For instance, while the anthologies contain images from well-known sf illustrators, they also contain images from illustrators associated with fantasy, the weird, and late nineteenth-century British Decadence, as these edge into speculations of their own. Here the avant-garde Decadent artist Aubrey Beardsley (1872–98) rubs shoulders with illustrators of pulp magazines of the early to mid-twentieth century, and indeed with Gibson himself as an active fan artist whose illustrations appeared in fanzines of the 1940s[4] and whose own hand-drawn illustrations adorn many of the anthologies in his collection.

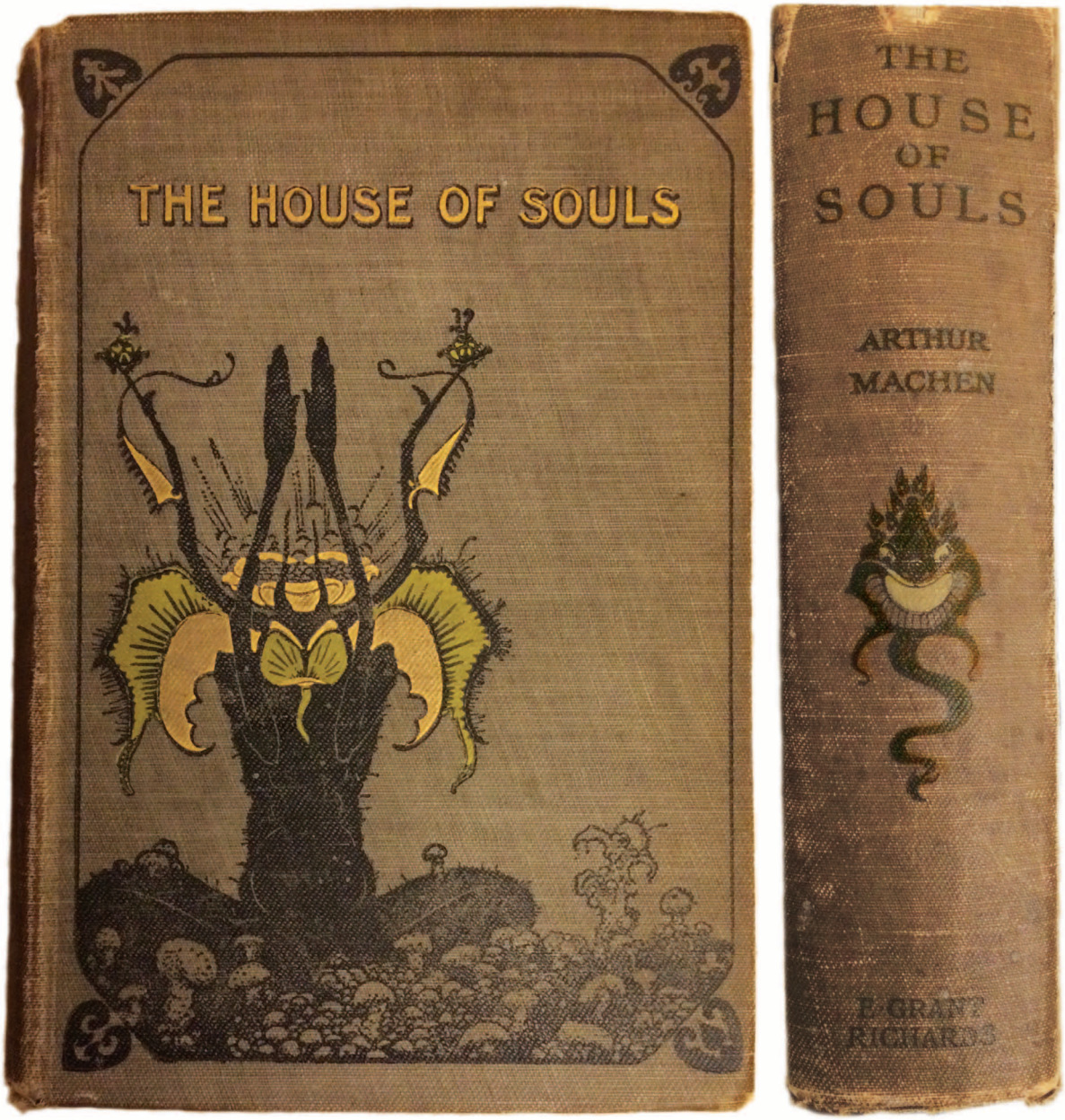
Sprinkled through numerous anthologies, the under-studied and underappreciated S. H. (Sidney Herbert) Sime (1865–1941) helps establish the link between Decadence,

Beardsley cover design for Machen's *The Great God Pan* (1894).

horror, the occult, and the weird that remains sometimes at the core and sometimes at the edges of much sf. Sime's illustrations are sprinkled throughout numerous anthologies because many of his works appeared in several popular periodicals harvested by Gibson. Heavily influenced by Beardsley, Sime went on to become a notable illustrator in his own right, and (much like Beardsley before him) also designed book covers, including for works by fantasy author Lord Dunsany (1878–1957) and supernatural horror/weird/proto-sf author Arthur Machen (1863–1947), whose early, more Decadent works had been adorned by Aubrey Beardsley. Here the scraps of Sime we find gesture in multiple directions, including beyond the Gibson collection into other unusual collections.



In addition to some incidental flourishes that adorn the edges of works in certain periodicals harvested by Gibson, Sime's works appear as part of a feature article, "Mr. S. H. Sime and His Work," that Gibson culled from a 1908 issue of *The Strand*. Of note are the images reproduced in this article that were originally published in *The Sketch* in 1905. The common practice of borrowing and reprinting of works across different periodicals and/or into book form was a type of repetition that helped solidify the "stereotyped imagination" that would come to define the genre. The original series of images first published in *The Sketch* was known as the Sime Zoology of "Beasts That Might Have Been," a collection that would later be expanded and published as *Bogey Beasts* (1923) with lyrics by Sime and music by Josef Holbrooke (1878–1958). These are bizarre, sometimes morbid, fantastical beasts reminiscent of the play of sense and nonsense of Lewis Carroll (1832–98). The beasts in Sime's


THE HOUSE OF SOULS
THE
HOUSE
OF
SOULS
ARTHUR
MACHEN
E. GRANT
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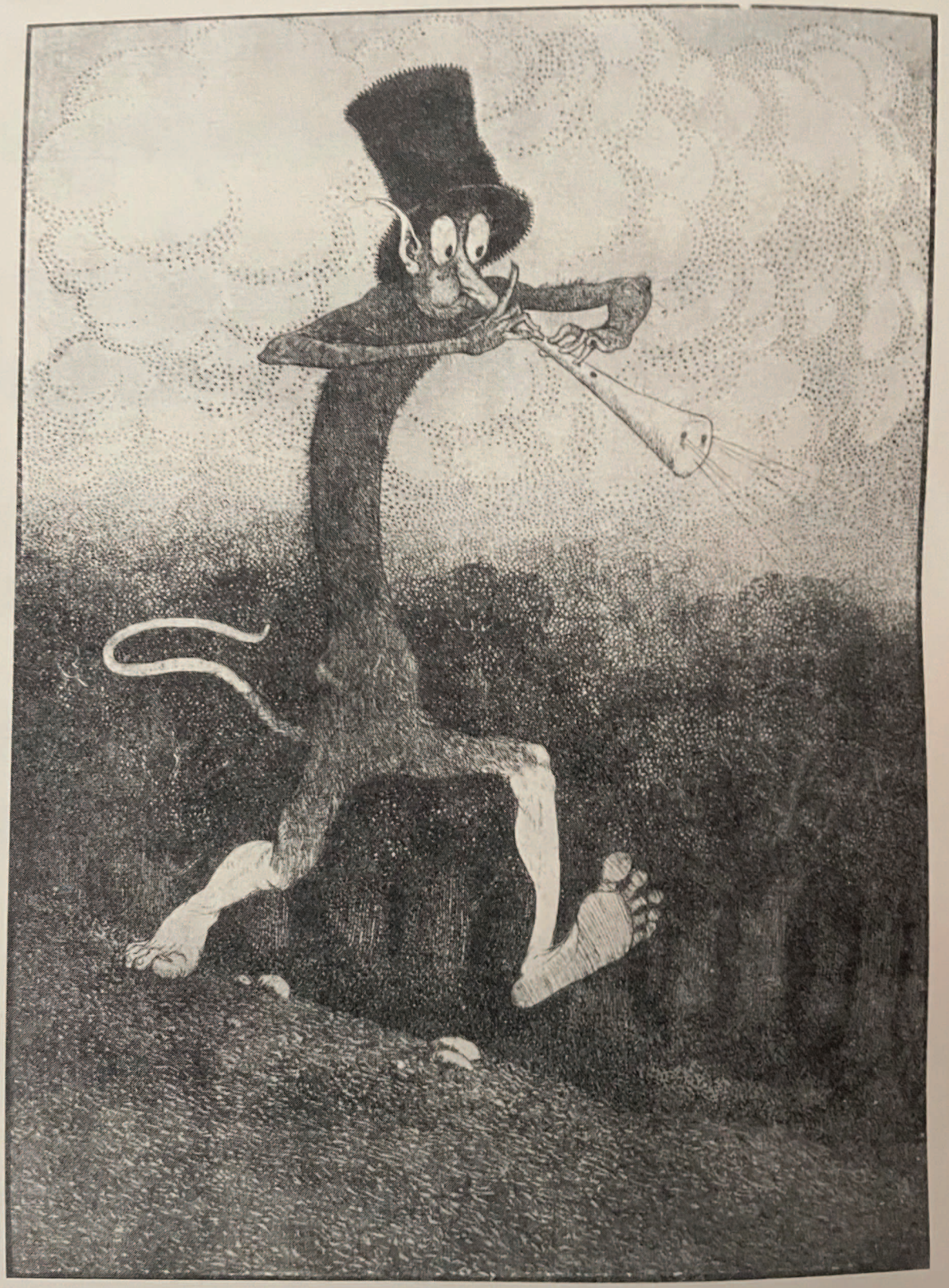
Zoology include, for instance, the Zoom (included in Gibson) as well as the Two-Tail Sogg, who prefers to remain in "Regions / Of Fancy / Remote," or the Snaitsh, who seems no less a beast of fancy but whose "fossil debris" might be found on "the Priamaeval Shores / On an Eocene Sea / or / In slabs / Of the old / Miocene." If this mingling of fantastical and evolutionary beasts in Sime's Zoology seems a quirk of Sime's, it is worth noting how common it was in Victorian Britain to see fantastical elements in science and to reconsider fantastical beasts as having their basis in evolutionary science. It is something of a stock theme of the early works collected by Gibson, the earliest of which come from *Chambers' Edinburgh Journal*, a cheap weekly that sought (among other things) to bring "the treasures of scientific knowledge to the people at large" (Chambers 1832, 130) at a cost even the poorest labourer could afford. In these earliest works that Gibson harvested, there is evidence of writers stretching science writing in the directions of popular fiction to help engage a largely uneducated audience in the "wonders" of science.[5]

If Sime's Snaitsh appears at the intersection of science and fairytale, the Wily Grasser might seem a resident of wonderland: he "Sit[s], / Where / The Wuffle Wood / Leaves a lot / And Barks / A Bit / Like a grown wood should" and asks "with an air / of doubt— / Can you tell me true / Tell me / When the light goes out / Where / It goes out to? / Tell / Oh tell me / What the Days / Change to / When they're done, / Tell me / Where tomorrow stays / While / It's unbegun," before moving along on his way without waiting for an answer.

The similarly elusive Moonijim is doomed to wander "in a remote dimension" such that he is "neither here nor yonder." Moonijims "dawdle / Only in those outer spaces / So far apart / From all the other / Places, / That lie / Outside / Your furthest thought / Between / The Is and Not. / Oh! / Things / Crawl there / That never dare / Seek / Any other spot." The lines "Between / The is and not" could be one way to think about where sf lives, and sf illustrations provide glimpses of who and what might be found there.

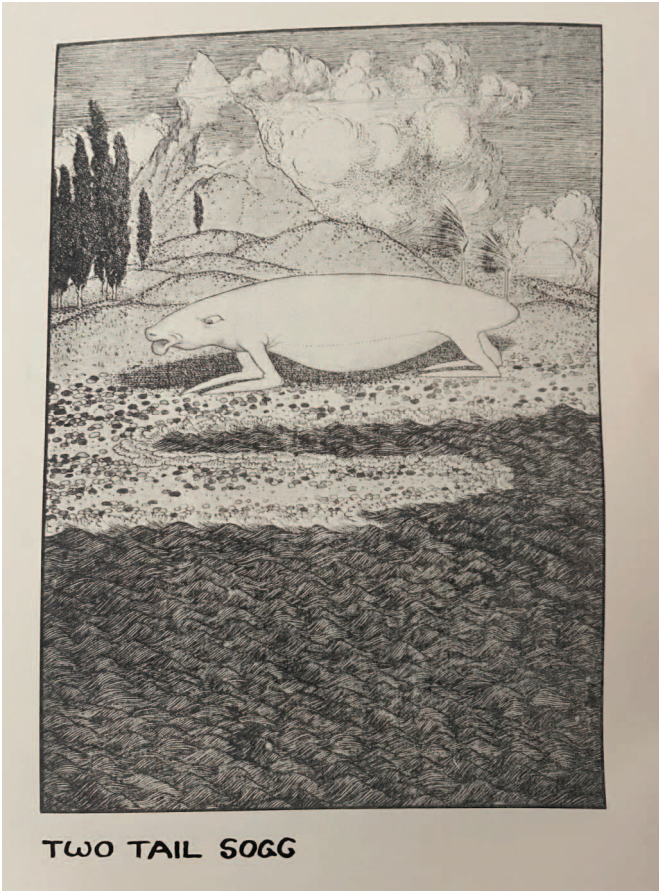
Here now we've gone from the outer spaces of the collection into works beyond it, but this may be part of the value of scraps for a collector with scavenger sensibilities such as Gibson. Each scrap may be a piece of detritus from another time, but it is also a whole world unto itself, or a wormhole to an unexpected dimension of story and/or literary history. The works contained in pulp magazines such as *Weird Tales* or cheap weeklies like *Household Words* and *The Sketch* were not meant to last; they were inherently transitory, printed in a disposable, cheap, machine-made-paper format for mass consumption. Gibson not only diverted these works from their planned obsolescence, but

Sime's cover and spine design for Machen's *House of Souls* (1906).



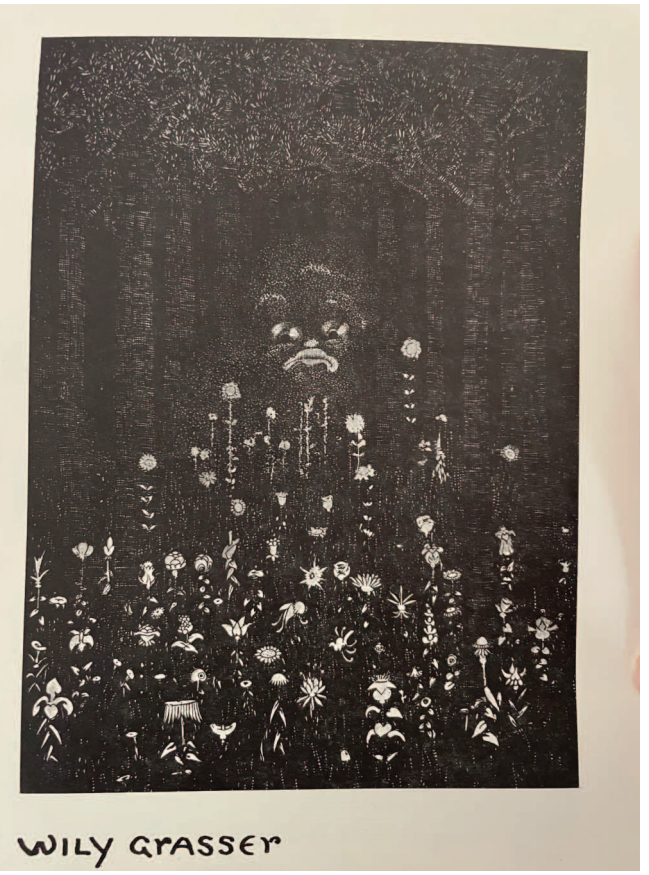
Zoom

MOONIJIM



TWO TAIL SOGG

SNAITSH



WILY GRASSER

revalued, repurposed, and transformed them—such is the work of the scavenger collector like Gibson who sees and preserves the value inherent in the science-fictional offshoots in the outer spaces of a stereotyped imagination.

Some critics claim the "science-fictional" is part of a late stage of sf genre development in which it overspills its bounds into everyday life, becoming a "way of thinking about the world" (Csicsery-Ronay 2008, ix) based in an awareness of technological change and the testing of "horizons of possibilities" that such change suggests (Csicsery-Ronay 2008, 1). However, others claim the science-fictional is not symptomatic of a late stage of the genre, and that instead it has been there from the very beginnings. This may be why it appears in explications of scientific knowledge and discovery (contained in the earliest works harvested by Gibson from the 1840s onward), a time when, as Melanie Keene has shown, fairy tales were "made to look a lot like science," even as science could look "a lot like fairy tales" (2015, 6). As scientific discoveries—or, more accurately, the broad and unprecedented dissemination of scientific discovery in a language accessible to most who could read or be read to—estranged the world as people thought they knew it, genres blurred to help make sense of it all.

There is in these transitional moments a letting go of a world in order to grasp it in a new way—and in that letting go all the exhilaration and fear of being ungrounded, untethered, and free, but also dangerously precarious. Marshall McLuhan once claimed that "the spoken word was the first technology by which man was able to let go of his environment in order to grasp it in a new way" (1964, 57), but since then many more technologies, real and imagined, have offered such an opportunity. You might picture this transition as swinging from vine to vine in some imagined jungle—you have to swing and let go of one vine in order to move toward and grasp the next, but for the briefest of moments you are suspended mid-air with no tether, no palpable ground and only the very real possibility of falling. This moment is a kind of opening, the loss of something not yet fully felt, the start of something not yet there, a crack in the everyday in which something else entirely might enter, shifting, refracting all our befores and all our afters. Of course, the swinging-from-vine-to-vine image doesn't really work since, when it comes to human experience, one never really let's go of anything, but brings it along; our world is the messiest of archives. Scraps of earlier worlds are everywhere, whether or not we are attuned to read them. Every new way to grasp the world must for a time contend with all the old ways and transform and be transformed by them in turn. It's a messy business much more akin to a process of mutation, contamination, transformation into something none of the befores could predict but without which they could not become something else.

Preceding and left illustrations, from S. H. Sime and J. Holbrooke, Bogey Beasts (London 1923), pp. 10, 22, 30, 46, 50.

notes

1. While officially referred to as "Gibson Compilations," I employ the term "anthologies" to accentuate the curatorial and editorial work performed by Gibson as an "expert amateur" (Hayles 2012, 36).

2. Critics often note (and just as often dismiss) the fact that the first instance of the term "science fiction" appears in William Wilson's *A Little Earnest Book upon a Great Old Subject* (1851), which defines "science-fiction" as a kind of writing that employs fiction "as a means of familiarizing science" (137) by interweaving the "truths of science" with "a pleasing story which may itself be poetical and true—thus circulating a knowledge of the Poetry of Science, clothed in a garb of the Poetry of life" (138–40). While this definition seems unfamiliar by twentieth- and twenty-first-century understandings of the genre, it points to a kind of writing that was very common in the nineteenth century and may point to one of the many "origins" of the sf genre. For details, see Forlini 2022.

3. Drawing on the work of Ernst Bloch, Matthew Beaumont argues that "effective sf can demonstrate that an inchoate future is already germinating in the present, changing it, and making it other than itself" (2006, 230). I suggest that such germinating change appears in genre transformations as well, with familiar genres containing within themselves new generic possibilities harnessed for the needs of particular moments, such as when the Phantom Ship tries to keep readers' attention when in competition with Wyld's globe.

4. In a 2008 issue of *WCSFAnzine: The Fannish E-zine of the West Coast Science Fiction Association*, Bob Gibson "of Calgary" (The Graeme 2008, 13) is identified as a well-known, influential fan and fan artist of the 1940s.

5. Details about these early attempts can be found in Forlini 2022.

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