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The Experiment of Condensed Fiction in the *Review of Reviews*

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Abstract: The launch of the British *Review of Reviews* in 1890 saw an ambitious attempt by its editor, W.T. Stead, to reimagine the monthly miscellaneous magazine and the role of fiction within it. As the title suggests, its mission was to provide an overview of serial print, and it deployed forms of presentation that indexed, reduced, synthesized, and otherwise compressed large amounts of material for the reader. Like all other print materials, fiction was to be condensed in a bid to offer readers some engagement with fiction, but without the commitment of an extended serial rhythm. Condensed novels were one of the key features in the new monthly, which also sought to unite English-speaking readers across the globe. Stead's vision was of a monthly that circulated far and wide and offered a universal medium through which to channel common ideas. This article explores Stead's brief experiment with publishing condensed novels and notes that the failure of the experiment coincides with the decline of extended serial fiction in the magazines.

Key terms: seriality, monthly magazines, compression, miscellaneity, journalism, fiction, W.T. Stead

The launch of the British *Review of Reviews* in 1890 marked a bold attempt to rethink the format and purpose of the monthly, miscellaneous magazine and the role of fiction within it. Drawing on the combined talents of two of the great innovators of serial print in the late nineteenth-century – George Newnes as publisher and W.T. Stead as editor¹ – the *Review of Reviews* provided various summative forms of a wide range of periodicals from Britain and abroad rather than introduced readers

¹ In fact, Newnes and Stead parted company after only three issues, owing to differences of opinion on the content of the *Review*, with Stead seen as too maverick in his ideas for the more conventional publisher Newnes. On the founding of the *Review of Reviews*, see J.O. Baylen (1979). On Stead's career, see Laurel Brake (2012) and Stewart J. Brown (2019).

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to new and original material. As the title suggests, it ‘reviewed’ and thereby over-viewed a broad expanse of periodical global print. Through selective lists, digests of current events, indices, and other forms of synthesis and compression, the *Review of Reviews* undertook a panoptic view of global print with a particular aim to circulate widely its synthesis across the English-speaking world. Stead’s vision was to create a great unifying medium, bringing together English speakers in the colonies and beyond. Fiction, at the start at least, was thought to be key to realizing this vision.

The cover of the British edition – with its title banner circling the globe – pointed to the ambition of its reach, as did the launch of two subsequent editions which swiftly followed, in America (1891) and in Australia (1892).² While the organizational logic was largely around the geography of nation – focusing on selected extracts from and summaries of, for example, “The German Reviews” or “The Russian Reviews” – its goal was more transnational, to create a join-up vision of English-speakers, of “civilisation” as it was framed, which both acknowledged national boundaries and transcended them through global print media. Stead outlined his “Programme” for the *Review of Reviews* in the first issue, emphasizing its transnational reach amid “the mighty maze of modern periodical literature” and defining it as “an index and a guide to all those already in existence” (1890h: 14). His aim was to produce a “readable compendium of all the best articles in the magazines and reviews” (Stead 1890h: 14) across the world, providing information and news to busy readers who could not possibly encounter the breadth of the global print media without the aid of the *Review* reducing, digesting, and compressing that print for them.³

Monthly, miscellaneous magazines from the mid-nineteenth century onwards had been defined significantly through their serialization of fiction. With the launches of *Macmillan’s Magazine* in 1859 and the *Cornhill Magazine* in 1860, serial fiction became a defining feature – perhaps *the* defining feature – of the miscellaneous shilling monthlies. There were other kinds of monthlies which eschewed publishing fiction altogether, magazines of debate or ‘the higher journalism’ including such titles as the *Nineteenth-Century* and *Contemporary Review*. Still, even a monthly of serious opinion like the *Fortnightly Review* (launched in 1865) carried serial fiction. Indeed, the enormously popular serial novelist, Anthony Trollope, who consolidated his reputation as a serial novelist in the pages of *Cornhill* in the 1860s, was one of the founders of the Liberal-minded *Fortnightly*, sat on its editorial board, and contributed serial fiction to it. Fiction filled the pages of many weeklies

² On the Australian *Review of Reviews*, see Meg Tasker (2004).

³ Often, Stead did not sign his contributions, though often it is clear through the voice that it is the Editor speaking. Scholars generally accept that Stead wrote the “Progress of the World” and “Character Sketch” features, along with the “Book of the Month”, in addition to much else.

and even dailies, so much so that Stead remarks in his “Programme” that “three-fourths of periodical literature consists of fiction” (1890h: 14). The challenge for him as editor of his new monthly, and the question I address in what follows, was: where does serial fiction – or any mode of fiction – sit in a magazine that defines itself through brevity, concision, and compression, driven by condensing news and indexing information rather than through serial narrative? Put another way, what is the role of fiction in an innovative new hybrid format which relies on extraction and reduction as both method and form? One of Stead’s innovations with the *Review of Reviews* was to find a new way of imagining the role of fiction within the monthly magazine, folding the fiction into his broader mission for journalism and thereby making the one subordinate to the other. Furthermore, his vision for and logic of the magazine were bound up in an ambitious reach for global circulation. The monthly format, he believed, was the only format that could speak to a global readership and so his bid to reimagine the monthly was founded on the need to develop a robust global readership of English speakers. At the inception of this bold project, condensed fiction was one of the strategies to achieve that globalist goal.

1 The *Review of Reviews*: Method and Form

Among its strategies to condense and represent the world through print, the *Review of Reviews* relied on methods of extracting from other publications. ‘Extractive miscellaneity’, as I have discussed it elsewhere (Turner 2024), had long been a mainstay of the scissors-and-paste journalism of the nineteenth century, a way to manage and contain the sheer abundance of material in print modernity through processes of selection.⁴ The editorial selection from other publications and the repurposing of material were key features of the ‘miscellany’ as a print format and of ‘miscellaneity’ as a technique and journalistic practice. Extracts in miscellanies were often threaded together editorially in a way that was designed to unify a periodical. A decade before the launch of the *Review of Reviews*, George Newnes had already exploited the methods of extraction in his hugely successful penny weekly magazine *Tit-Bits*, which launched in 1881. “The business of the conductors of *Tit-Bits* will be like that of the dentist – an organised system of extracting”, readers are told in the opening prospectus in the first issue:

⁴ On extraction and miscellaneity, see Turner (2024). On Stead and the abundance of print, see James Mussell (2015). On the scale of print and the *Review of Reviews*, see Helen Kingstone (2023), esp. “An Index to the Scale of Modernity: Big Data Compilations and the *Review of Reviews*” (147–177).

A complete system has been arranged whereby all the most interesting papers and books of England, France, Germany, Italy, Russia, America, Australia, and the Indies will be regularly searched, and whatever is found of interest to the general reader – in short, wherever a tit-bit is discovered – it will be drafted into the new paper. (Newnes 1881: 1)

Newnes's innovative penny weekly made the most of the logic of extractive miscellaneity, relying for repurposed tit-bits or extracts of content from elsewhere, combined with innovative, popular features including puzzles and competitions which kept the readership engaged and the circulation robust.⁵ In the *Review*, the grid, the list, and especially the index were the modes of representing and reviewing the reviews. Stead's project was one of dense compilation, as Helen Kingstone has framed it, distilling huge amounts of print into organized representations of information (2023: 167–177).

The *Review of Reviews* sought to combine something of the *Tit-Bits* model of scissors-and-paste extraction but with a serious purpose. It was less about entertainment, and more about the spread of news and the most significant topics of the day, at least as Stead viewed them through his trawls through global print. He brought to the *Review* a background in daily newspapers and campaign journalism, in particular at the London daily evening paper the *Pall Mall Gazette*, where he pioneered a number of features of what came to be called the 'New Journalism', including liberal incorporation of photography (alongside illustrations) and striking use of headlines, sub-headings, and other graphic features. His program for the *Review* combined something of the topicality and urgency of the daily press with the expansive possibilities afforded by monthly, global circulation, but it required him to rethink the purpose and format of the monthly magazine. Priced at six pennies a month, rather than the customary shilling, the magazine bid for readers in the lower-middle as well as middle classes, part of its wish to make the contents of monthly magazines and reviews more "universally accessible" (Stead 1881h: 14). The hybrid format combined features common in many monthly miscellanies – such as reviews of serial instalments of fiction in other magazines, book reviews and discursive causeries on the month's events – with material more akin to the annual newspaper and press directories, with their extensive lists and indexes of books of serial print.⁶ The *Review* was an information-led monthly miscellany, one that looked very different to others, relying on compressed forms of information rather than original articles and other extended material.

5 On *Tit-Bits*, see Stephen Donovan (2022) and Kate Jackson (1997).

6 On the newspaper and press directories as a genre and format, see Laurel Brake (2015).

Stead acknowledged that the abundance of periodical literature was a problem that defeated readers. “The busy man wanders confused, not knowing exactly where to find the precise article that he requires”, he writes, because “there are already more periodicals than any one can find time to read” (1881h: 14). Being selective was necessary. In a world with an almost incomprehensible amount of regular serial print, circulating across global imperial and other media routes, the *Review* would make judgments about “the best articles in the magazines and reviews” (1881h: 14) and list them or summarize them for readers. “The work of winnowing away the chaff and of revealing the grain”, Stead says, “is the humble but useful task of the editorial thresher” (1881h: 14). Richard Menke suggests that the *Review* promoted “the idea of the journal as cultural filter”, leaving readers with the best that has been thought and said, in a direct reference to Matthew Arnold’s ‘touchstones’ (2014: 562).⁷ Stead’s extracts, like Arnold’s touchstones, provide a kind of cultural cohesion, a unifying function, in a world of print abundance (Menke 2014: 562). The *Review* would reduce and condense the content of global, periodical print to the ‘universal’ essentials, the information which everyone the world over might reasonably be interested in knowing and have access to through its wide circulation.

It was also to be a magazine whose function was to reach and then unite the “race” of English speakers, providing a comforting connection between “home” and “over sea” (Stead 1892: 348). Racial superiority is taken for granted from the outset, as he outlines in an article in the first issue, since the “English-speaking man” already “begins to dominate the world [...]”. Hence our first starting-point will be a deep and almost awe-struck regard for the destinies of the English-speaking man” (Stead 1890k: 15). And as the issues and volumes unfolded in their monthly rhythm and circulation increased to a steady 100,000 per issue of the British edition (Brown 2019: 105), the periodical became a great global publishing success in its own terms. As he reiterates in an address to readers in November 1892:

I am in the unique position of conducting a monthly organ of opinion, both religious, social, political, and literary, which has 200,000 subscribers, almost equally divided between the English-speaking world at home and the English-speaking world over sea. And from first to last, the REVIEW has never ceased to proclaim its faith in the unity of the race and to promote by any means in its power the healing of the great disruption of the last century. (Stead 1892: 348)

Stead was adamant that journalism generally and his new monthly contribution to it, in particular, could become a driving global force: “to promote a fraternal union with the American Republic, to work for the Empire, to seek to strengthen it, to

⁷ I draw on Menke’s discussion more fully in my exploration of miscellaneity in Turner (2024).

develop it, and when necessary to extend it, these will be our plainest duties” (Stead 1890k: 16). There is no denying that the unification of English-speakers was a view that took for granted their racial superiority.⁸

Stead outlined four key features in his “Programme”, which would be achieved through his extractive and synthetic methods: 1) a monthly survey of events at home and abroad, which he loftily called “The Progress of the World”; 2) a catalogue of new books in which “every book of importance will be briefly described”; 3) the inclusion of fiction in condensed form; and 4) a character sketch of “some man or woman who has figured conspicuously before the world in the previous month” (1881h: 14). Incorporating fiction posed the most difficult challenge since publishing fiction (or any other text) serially across issues was against the summative, extractive logic of the *Review*. His plan was to avoid the extended serial in parts and instead to distil or condense a work of fiction each month. “It is impossible to summarise serials”, he admits, while also acknowledging that:

without this element the REVIEW OF REVIEWS would be a very imperfect mirror of its contemporaries. To meet this difficulty, each number will contain a condensed novel, with its salient features and best scenes intact. But no hard and fast rule will be laid down, and if a strange true story of real life or a really good original tale should offer it will not be refused. (1881h: 14)

No “really good original tale” emerged, which is unsurprising since Stead, whose background was in news journalism, was not in the business of publishing fiction in his previous publications. He understood that the monthly magazine market was also a fiction market, and he needed to account for its presence somehow. Furthermore, in his interest to develop new forms of reduction in journalism, the commitment to publish a “condensed novel” in each issue was an experiment in the wider mission to compress and represent vast amounts of disparate material. The experiment to condense fiction was broadly unsuccessful, however, in that he only managed it in the first four issues, after which he focused on non-fiction, somewhat irregularly. What is fascinating, however, is to see his attempt to test the ways fiction might be molded to fit into the journalistic project of the *Review of Reviews*.

⁸ Stead’s views on empire were complicated, but he was a proponent of imperial federation. See Potter (2012) and Brown (2019: 191–192).

2 Periodical Fiction, circa 1890

By the 1890s, the role of fiction in periodicals was already shifting. Once a mainstay of monthly magazines, the serial novel – and the triple-decker volume form that frequently followed – gradually gave way to other, shorter forms of fiction and methods of publication. The end of the triple-decker system connected to circulating libraries is often said to have arrived in 1894, when Mudie's Circulating Library effectively abandoned carrying three-volume novels in favor of cheaper one-volume fiction.⁹ So while Stead is right to remark that “three-fourths of periodical literature consists of fiction” (1890h: 14), the serial model for periodical fiction that had been in place throughout the mid- and late-nineteenth century and which underpinned the three-volume novel was feeling pressure from new models for circulating fiction. As Thomas Vranken has recently discussed, when innovations in publishing began to emerge in the late-nineteenth century:

what might once have felt like shared time and shared experience seems to have splintered, and a number of countervailing voices within the British and American magazine industries pushed back against serialisation as the dominant publication model. Instead of maintaining the traditional practice of prolonging a story over multiple issues, some magazines began experimenting with different kinds of publishing. (2020: 1)

Beginning in 1886, the Philadelphia-based *Lippincott's Monthly Magazine*, for example, adopted the unusual policy of publishing complete novellas in single issues of the periodical partly because, they suggest, readers are beginning to weary of reading extended, serial narratives:

For sixty years past [serialization] has been a prominent feature of magazine literature and one that has benefited publisher and author alike. [However,] magazine-subscribers themselves, especially the male portion, are beginning to weary of the serial reading of fiction. They are too hurried, too busy, they read too much and forget too easily, to care to have their fiction doled out in monthly portions. They do not wish, and many are not able, to carry the details of a story in their minds for an entire twelvemonth. They like to have the option of finishing what they read at a single sitting. The novel itself is shrinking in size before the new demands of the age. (qtd. in Vranken 2020: 2)

In a highly competitive periodicals marketplace, the hope was that the practice of publishing an entire short novel in a single issue helped to distinguish it from other magazines still relying on the longer serial form. Sherlock Holmes was first introduced to American readers when Arthur Conan Doyle's *The Sign of the Four* was

⁹ On the collapse of the three-volume novel and Mudie's Circulating Library, see Guinevere L. Griest (1971), esp. chapters 7 and 8.

published in *Lippincott's* (February 1890), only a few months before Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (July 1890), which was soon followed by Rudyard Kipling's *The Light that Failed* (January 1891) – making it a particularly impressive year for depictions of novellas about Bohemian London in the magazine.

In Britain, the monthly *Strand Magazine*, launched by George Newnes in 1891 after he parted company with the *Review of Reviews*, partly achieved its fame through the publication of its fictional stories, especially Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes stories, which began appearing in July 1891.¹⁰ These joined-up stories are not serial fiction as such, but they are a series of connected stories, in the manner of, for example, Elizabeth Gaskell's *Cranford* stories, which appeared off and on without a regular periodicity in *Household Words* in the 1850s before being published as a novel in book form. The series, rather than the serial, offered readers continuity of reading experience without the demands of an extended time commitment. The *Strand*, which published numerous short stories, some serial fiction, fiction in translation, and a range of miscellaneous articles, achieved great success almost immediately, with a circulation of around 300,000 (and a readership far greater) of its very first issue. Fiction still had the power to drive periodical sales even if it was not serial fiction read across multiple issues. In developing his new monthly based on the concept of saving readers time and offering them the best that has been written globally, Stead sought to include fiction in digested and abridged forms rather than in conventional serial form in ways that aligned the condensed novel with the wider project of the *Review of Reviews* and his vision for journalism more broadly.

3 Condensed Fiction and Journalism

While Stead admits that “it is impossible to summarise serials” (1881h: 14), he does believe that it might be possible to condense them by weaving together selected extracts from the fiction with editorial introductions and summaries that smooth things along the way. Stead's promise to provide a condensed novel in each issue ceased after four months, partly, no doubt, because of the huge labor involved in condensing long works of fiction. But in each of the first four issues there was a condensed novel: Lady Georgina Fullerton's *Ellen Middleton* (January 1890), Mark Twain's *A Yankee in the Court of King Arthur* (February 1890), Ismar Thiusen's *The Diothoas* (March 1890), and Leo Tolstoy's *The Kreutzer Sonata* (April 1890). In May

¹⁰ Sherlock Holmes first appears in the novella, *A Study in Scarlet*, which was first published in a single monthly issue of *Lippincott's Magazine* in 1887.

and June 1890, Stead condensed two works of non-fiction – a collection of religious essays, *Lux Mundi*, and Mathilde Blind's translation of *The Journal of Marie Bashkirsteff* – and non-fiction came to dominate the "Book of the Month" feature in subsequent volumes, quietly replacing the original project for regular condensed fiction.

On the face of it, the four condensed works of fiction seemingly have very little to do with one another. Fullerton's novel is a religious tale which touches on Anglo-Catholic controversies at the time it was first published in 1844, while Mark Twain's recent American satire of British institutions was published only months before. Thiuse's speculative early science fiction novel of 1883 explores the future of electricity, whereas Tolstoy's recent novella focuses on a man who comes to detest romantic love and murders his wife. Taken collectively, these condensed fictions do not appear to send a coherent message, except perhaps to gesture at the international reach of the magazine. However, Stead's plan was never to publish a particular genre or mode of fiction designed to appeal primarily to readers of popular fiction. Rather, his innovation was to carefully fold the fiction into the wider journalistic concerns of the magazine in pointed ways that were shaped editorially. He brought fiction as close as possible to the status of journalism as he saw it – condensing, reducing, and compressing the one in an attempt to bolster the discourse of the other. While Fullerton, Twain, Thiuse, and Tolstoy may not be obvious bedfellows in fiction, their novels were presented by Stead, through synthesis and extraction, in ways that supported the causes and progressive discourses that the *Review* promoted. The international reach of the fiction – two American, one British, and one Russian novelist – speak to the transnational tone and proposed universalist agenda of the magazine tied in with a bid for a large circulation beyond any one national border.

Readers of the first issue of the *Review of Reviews* come across mention of Lady Georgina Fullerton's *Ellen Middleton* in a piece entitled "Conversion and Confession" rather than in the condensed form of the novel which appears several pages later. This article extracts passages of a review of Fullerton's novel by W.E. Gladstone from 1844, which had recently appeared in an issue of the Catholic *Merry England*. The *Review* notes that the 1844 novel, although republished recently in 1884, "has been so generally forgotten that most of our readers will be glad to have a brief *resumé* of its plot with some illustrative extracts, which they will find on a subsequent page" (Stead 1890a: 31). A romance of religious piety, the novel recounts the story of Ellen, who accidentally causes the death of a cousin but fails to admit it, is threatened by blackmail, and ultimately finds absolution through repentance and confession before dying. Fullerton was a High Church Anglican poised to convert to Catholicism only a few years after the publication of the novel, and the novel's concerns with the power of confession owe something to her own strongly held reli-

gious beliefs. Stead introduces his condensation of the novel by quoting an extract from Gladstone's review: "of all the religious novels we have ever seen, it has, with the most pointed religious aim, the least of direct religious teaching; it has the least effort and the greatest force; it is the least didactic and the most instructive" (1890c: 69). He invites readers to see *Ellen Middleton*'s confession less for its controversies connected to Catholicism than for its more general morality. Stead saw his new monthly as a kind of lay Confessional and the force of the novel's non-doctrinal imperative sent a clear message about the moral strength of the magazine, without subscribing to a specific religious position.

"A Practical Suggestion", the article which directly follows the condensed *Ellen Middleton* on the same page, further draws the novel into his vision of the *Review of Reviews*. Here, Stead uses the fiction to segue into and introduce an appeal to his readers to enter into greater communion with him and each other. "What Ellen Middleton needed", Stead writes, "was not a priest in a confessional, but a sympathetic, level-headed friend to whom she could have told her trouble", and he goes on to ask:

Are there any among the readers of the REVIEW, who feel the craving for counsel, for sympathy, and for the consolation of pouring out their soul's grief? If so, may I ask them to communicate with me? If there be, as is possible enough, numbers who reject priestly guidance, but who, nevertheless, long for friendly counsel, that is a human necessity which ought to be met. (Stead 1890g: 76)

Stead will be the reader's friend. The names of correspondents will be kept confidential, but their cases and queries will be considered by "such competent and skilful advisers as I am able to gather round me from amongst the best men and women in the English-speaking world" (Stead 1890g: 76). Stead's aim is to build an intimate communication loop with his readers, with him at the center. The condensed version of *Ellen Middleton*, long forgotten since its first publication forty years ago, provides an opportunity to embed the discourse of the novel into the project for his journalism.

Building readership as community – communicating through the magazine as medium – was one of the chief goals for the global project of the *Review of Reviews*, and it is one reason that a robust circulation was necessary, beyond mere commercial considerations. Also in the first issue, Stead posits the idea for what he later calls an "Association of Helpers", readers deeply and meaningfully connected to the magazine and willing to engage in (mostly unspecified) civic-minded work. In "A Word to Those Who Are Willing to Help", Stead writes: "The secret power in all journalism, daily, weekly, or monthly, is the establishment of close touch between the Editor and his readers, and the creation in the minds of the latter of a consciousness that their co-operation is essential to the success of the former" (Stead 1890l:

53). And he goes on to say that he wants “to make this REVIEW a medium of inter-communication throughout the whole English-speaking world”:

What I want is to get into more or less personal direct communication with a picked body of men or women, if they are earnest enough, who will not hesitate to work for the REVIEW and the ideas which it upholds as zealously as hundreds of thousands are working for the ideals of churches and the shibboleths of parties. I want to get to know in every community in the whole English-speaking world, the name and address of the thoroughgoing individual who can be relied upon not to spare himself or herself in working with me on the lines of this REVIEW for the well-being of English-speaking folk all round the world. (Stead 1890I: 53)

It is a vision for a kind of Salvation Army through the medium of journalistic print.¹¹ He published a pamphlet for the “Helpers” called “How to Help”, which includes a reprint of his important manifesto-like article from 1886 on “Government by Journalism”, in which he argues that journalism has the potential to be a greater force for reform and for good than politics (1886b: 653–674).¹² “The wielders of real power will be those who are nearest the people” (1886b: 663–679), he writes, which underscores his genuine interest in being in direct contact with his readers. While the ambitious plan for Helpers never manages to develop into the great social and civic force that he envisioned, he managed to highlight various reformist causes connected to the *Review* through the project.¹³ Condensing *Ellen Middleton*, then, was a part of a number of connected and well calibrated editorial decisions in the first issue which sought to draw readers into Stead’s vision of a global community of like-minded reformists, underpinned by a common moral commitment.

We see a similar use of fiction to buttress the project of the periodical in the version of American writer Ismar Thiessen’s *The Diothoas: or, a Far Look Ahead*, condensed in March 1890. Here, Stead uses the recent popularity of a different American writer, Edward Bellamy, whose futurist, utopian novel *Looking Backward* (1888) had recently been published, as a reason to condense Thiessen’s earlier novel about “the Electrical Age”. While Bellamy’s novel is “as dull as ditchwater”, Stead recognized “the historico-prophetic form of romance as a new popular vehicle for infusing these ideas into the public mind” (1890e: 230). In other words, Bellamy’s novel may have been boring, but its popularity makes it significant because its ideas reach the widest number of readers.

¹¹ On Stead’s admiration of the Salvation Army and his use of it as a model for the Association of Helpers, see Elizabeth Tilley (2012: 72).

¹² For more on Stead’s views of journalism, see Stead (1886a: 663–679) and Brake (2012).

¹³ See, for example, Alexis Easley, who notes how in later issues of the *Review* Helpers were called upon to support women’s suffrage and other women’s rights (2012: 53).

Stead understood that new literary forms like the speculative fictions of Bellamy and Thiessen provided new ways to communicate ideas. Fiction could be a kind of medium in itself. “The old poets are one by one dying out”, Stead writes, and “the new era awaits expectant a new race of bards, who will give poetic expression to its aspirations and sing the psalm of its coming deliverance” (1890e: 230). The Age of Electricity is upon us:

What the revival of learning was to the Renaissance, what the discovery of the new world was to the Elizabethans, what the steam-engine was to the century of the Revolution, the application of Electricity is to the New Generation. (Stead 1890e: 230)

And electricity is particularly important to Stead, writing in his secular prophet voice, because it is a key technology that will drive global connection in the future:

We are standing at the day-dawn of the Electrical Age. The thunderbolt of Jove has become the most puissant of all the servants of man. It has annihilated time, abolished space, and it will yet unify the world. By making all the nations in all the continents next-door neighbours, it has already revived the ideal of human brotherhood, and it is the destined agent by which Europe will be freed from militarism and war banished from the world. (Stead 1890e: 230)

According to Stead, electricity will bring us all closer together; indeed, it already has, as the very fact of a magazine like the *Review of Reviews* implicitly suggests. Stead condenses Thiessen’s novel not for its literary merit – “as a work of art [it] is not of the highest”, he says – but because it is an “ingenious speculation by an original thinker upon the probable political and social results which may be expected to follow the general utilisation of this universal force” (1890e: 230). The novel’s future-looking progressivism and its subject matter are made to align neatly with his own journalistic mission to unify global readers, in part through harnessing new technologies and media.

Stead’s idea of condensing fiction, then, was not a literary project, but one that sought to mobilize readers’ desire for magazine fiction in the service of journalism, a discourse he valued more highly than fiction. When he condenses Mark Twain’s recent novel *A Yankee in the Court of King Arthur*, he does so somewhat controversially since the novel is a broad satire on British institutions which few British reviewers admired or even noticed. But Twain was, of course, one of America’s leading writers with an international presence, “one of the few American authors whose writings are popular throughout the English-speaking world” (Stead 1890f: 144). He puts Twain alongside Edward Bellamy, seeing them both as important progressive and even revolutionary writers and he particularly admires Twain’s huge popularity:

what our critical class has failed to appreciate is that the Education Act has turned out and is turning out millions of readers who are much more like the Americans in their tastes, their

ideas, and their sympathies than they are to the English of the cultured, pampered, and privileged classes [...]. [This reader's] literary taste is not classical but popular. He prefers Longfellow to Browning, and as a humourist he enjoys Mark Twain more than all the dainty wits whose delicately flavoured quips and cranks delight the boudoir and the drawing-room. This may be most deplorable from the point of view of the supercilious aesthetes, but the fact in all its brutality cannot be too frankly recognised. (Stead 1890f: 144)

Whereas the British Aesthetes who were ascending the heights of literary culture in London by 1890 are seen to be a “small clique” of “superfine literary men”, a writer like Twain “gets ‘directlier [sic] at the heart’ of the masses” (Stead 1890f: 144). Stead's version of Twain's novel is “condensed from a volume of over 500 pages into less than thirty columns of this REVIEW” (Stead 1890f: 144), but its purpose is to help illustrate key principles of the new magazine – support for greater Anglo-American alliance and engagement with the masses of global readers rather than the few. Stead threads Twain through the early volumes, ensuring that he maintains a high profile in reader's minds. His autograph is included in May 1890, for example, along with a note thanking Stead for condensing his novel, and volume four includes a discussion of Twain and telepathy, arising out of the publication of his short story “Luck” in *Harper's Monthly* (August 1891).

In the way Twain's fiction is made to promote a pro-American agenda,¹⁴ Stead's condensing of Leo Tolstoy's novel, *The Kreutzer Sonata* (April 1890), was part of Stead's generally pro-Russian stance and his support for an Anglo-Russian alliance. Stead was a great admirer of Tolstoy's, and in introducing the condensed version of the novella (for which he had commissioned a translator), he recounted a recent week-long visit to Tolstoy at his country home. The introduction to “Count Tolstoi's New Tale” comes with a striking photograph of the novelist and another of his daughter, Tatiana, which was more evidence of Stead's interest in using personality and international literary celebrity to promote the magazine. But, as with previous condensed fiction, Stead deploys Tolstoy for reasons that support his own broader aims:

It gives me the greater pleasure to be able to present to the public of England and American this advance sketch of the latest work of the great novelist of our time, because the REVIEW OF REVIEWS is itself to some extent the off-shoot of a long conversation which I had with Count Tolstoi as to the possibility of establishing a universal world's library [...]. In the REVIEW I am humbly endeavouring to carry out as best I can the same principle, limited, however, in its application to the best thoughts of the best men of our own time. (Stead 1890b: 332)

¹⁴ On Stead's interest in America, see Helena Goodwyn (2018) and John Nerone and Kevin Barnhurst (2012). In the early twentieth century, Stead was an advocate of the reunification of Britain and America, as he discusses in a Christmas supplement to the *Review of Reviews* entitled *The Americanization of the World* (1902).

Stead again expresses his desire for a carefully selected, universal global culture with his publications as a driving force. Still, Tolstoy's new novella, which had been banned in Russia, is a controversial choice. Even while Stead praises the author in his introduction, he also suggests that in his rage against marriage and romantic love, Tolstoy "sees nothing but the purely animal, carnal, brutal, and, in his own words, 'hoggish,' in passionate love" (Stead 1890b: 333). Stead had hoped to reproduce the novella in full but could not possibly have done so given its frankness and "often coarse and brutal" expression (Stead 1890b: 333).

J.O. Baylen suggests that Stead's desire to publish *The Kreutzer Sonata* was one reason for the breach between him and George Newnes after only the first few issues. Baylen writes:

Stead had commissioned Dr. E.J. Dillon to translate for publication in a condensed but unexpurgated version in the *Review*. Not only would this be a journalistic coup, but (to Stead) would provide Tolstoy with a means of foiling Russian censorship and of reaching "a vast and appreciative circle of readers" outside of Russia. When Newnes objected to the publication of Tolstoy's latest work on the grounds that it would be offensive to readers, Stead delayed publication until he had secured control of the *Review* by "buying out" Newnes. (1979: 73)

The amicable buy-out occurred after the March 1890 issue, and Tolstoy's condensed novella appeared the following month. It may be that Stead had hoped to publish *The Kreutzer Sonata* even sooner in the *Review of Reviews*, bringing attention to the new venture while also making a bold statement about the magazine's willingness to publish material that controversially raised serious questions for moral consideration. Not long after, in 1892, Max Nordau would decry the huge global popularity of "Tolstoism" as a "mental aberration", believing the famous author to be one of the chief literary examples of the morbid, exhausted culture of degeneration that afflicted late-nineteenth century Europe (1895: 145). Stead was a great supporter of Tolstoy, calling him "the greatest novelist of our time" (1890b: 332), and he appears repeatedly in the pages of the *Review* in the early volumes, in letters, biographical sketches, and causeries.¹⁵ As with previous writers, Tolstoy is embedded in the discourse of the magazine, not only, or even primarily, through the fiction.

The fiction by Fullerton, Twain, Thiuse, and Tolstoy represents the sum total of Stead's commitment to provide a "condensed novel" in each issue of his new monthly. The project may have been unsuccessful with readers, and it may also have been difficult to find journalists capable of condensing fiction to Stead's requirements. By May 1890, it was a book of religious essays that were condensed: "Hitherto I have given each month a condensed novel. This month, for exchange, I

¹⁵ See, for example, Stead (1890i: 228–229) and biographical sketches of Tolstoy in vols. 2 and 11.

substitute a *précis* of a volume of theology. Theology is often quite as new as romance, and sometimes as true” (Stead 1890j: 434). In introducing the controversial book of essays, *Lux Mundi*, Stead compares it to the recently published and extraordinarily popular novel by Mrs. Humphrey Ward (Mary Augusta Ward), *Robert Elsmere* (1888), about a clergyman who begins to doubt the tenets of Anglican faith. But Stead suggests that even the “excitement caused by Mrs. Ward’s novel was, in deed [sic], a mere ripple on the surface compared with the storm which is now rising” (1890j: 435). It is telling that Stead’s point of comparison for the controversial essays is a work of fiction and there is a feeling that Stead might just as easily have condensed Ward’s novel as *Lux Mundi*. The point is less about the quality of either book as either fiction or non-fiction than it is about the ideas each raises for readers, in this case about Anglican dogma. In June, the “Book of the Month” was a condensed version of *The Journal of Marie Bashirtseff*, translated by New Woman writer Mathilde Blind, which aligns with Stead’s support for women’s rights. After June, the “Book of the Month” is less consistently published and certainly less consistent in its form. Condensed work was almost always non-fiction and that was somewhat irregular.

4 Conclusion

That is not the end of the story when it comes to Stead’s wrangling with how fiction might be made to fit his vision for journalism. In 1893, Stead started to develop ideas for a new daily penny newspaper, the *Daily Paper*, a manifesto and sample issue for which he published in the *Review of Reviews* in November and December, respectively. While focusing on the *Review of the Reviews*, Stead never left the world of daily journalism. In the manifesto for his proposed new paper – an idea which never got off the ground because its subscription model never worked – Stead suggests that what readers want is less rather than more content, that “what the average reader wants is not so much acreage of print as a handy readable penny paper, every page of which will contain something of interest” (1893: 464). His mission to pare down material, to gather and simplify for readers, continued apace. The new paper is described as “a kind of cross between the *Pall Mall Gazette* and *Tit-Bits*”, that is, a cross between an evening penny newspaper and a weekly penny miscellany of extracts, with the goal of reducing the amount of required reading to a minimum and extracting the best material that has been published.

There are a number of innovations which Stead foregrounded in his new venture – not least his claim to have used telepathy as the basis of an interview he publishes, claiming that we are “on the eve of revolutionising journalism” with telepathy, a method that he says he has been using to communicate with friends for

quite some time. Leaving his interest in spiritualism and his links between print and psychic media to one side, there is another striking innovation which Stead places “in the position of honour at the centre of the paper”:

the incorporation of the leading events of the world's history in “The Romance of the World,” which, once begun, will never end, and be continued as a serial from day to day as long as the paper lasts. [...] At present women, and a great number of men, will not read politics unless they can get politics in the shape of a story. In order to induce them to take an interest in affairs Mr. Stead proposes to serve up the news with the sauce they like. (1893: 464)

It is as if Stead was trying to find ways of taking his monthly, serial, condensed news round-up in the *Review of Reviews*, “The Progress of the World”, and turning it into a daily serial written contemporaneously, converting the news of the world into serial tit-bits in narrative form. Stead provides a few sparse chapters in the sample issue, by way of convincing prospective subscribers about what might be possible in this kind of “journalism fiction”, as Laurel Brake, who has written most fully about this venture, has called it (2007: 179–180).¹⁶ “The Romance of the World” starts out as a kind of male adventure story, but the project of the *Daily Paper*, so elaborately mapped out in advance for readers, never made it past that first sample issue, appended as a supplement to the Christmas issue of the *Review of Reviews*, and the serial ended where it began. Clearly, long after his plan to condense fiction faded, he continued to think of ways that fiction could become a conduit for conveying news, that fiction could align with, even become coterminous with, journalism.

Five years after the launch of the *Review of Reviews*, Stead reflected on the trajectory of the magazine. He admits that the global community of Helpers he hoped to enlist in “common cause” was only partly realized, but he boasted about the wide circulation of the magazine, despite the absence of fiction:

There is no other magazine or review in the whole world which has a definite or political, social and religious propaganda, and which entirely eschews fiction, that has even a quarter of our circulation. Of the REVIEW it may be said that there is no speech or language where its voice is not heard. Originally intended as a medium of communication between the English-speaking races, it has become to a large extent an interpreter of the ideas and literature of our race to other races who do not speak our tongue. (1895: 4)

By 1895, he says that fiction has been “eschewed”, but that was not his original plan. In developing a new kind of monthly magazine, forms of extraction, reduction, and compression were key to the project. When Stead republished press reviews of the first issue of his *Review of Reviews*, it was precisely the forms of compression that

¹⁶ See also Laurel Brake's discussion of fiction and journalism in “Stead Alone” (2012: 80).

are noticed admiringly. “This is condensed culture. It is the swiftest, deftest and most complete achievement in sub-editing we have ever seen”, wrote *The Star* (Stead 1890d: 166). The *Sunday Times* commented that, “the condensed summaries, the indexes, and all such things are admirable, and deserve our thanks” (Stead 1890d: 166). Noting the progressive but morally robust agenda, they go on to say that “it is a new and far higher thing that the editorial scissors should be turned into a crusader’s sword, the paste into the cement for a spiritual city” (Stead 1890d: 166). The *Dublin Telegraph* calls the new publication “a condensed literary extract or gold-mining process” (1890d: 168). The success of the condensed culture of the *Review of Reviews* did not extend to the experiment with fiction. It would be some decades later that condensing fiction became a truly popular mode, with a monthly miscellany like *Reader’s Digest* (launched in 1922) that sold itself partly on the condensing of its fiction. Stead’s vision was specific: he condensed fiction not for the sake of fiction, but for the sake of journalism. He sought to repurpose the fiction so that it could be used in the service of a bold, globally minded journalistic experiment. In the second half of the nineteenth century, serial fiction had helped define the monthly magazine market, driving readership and circulation in so doing. By the 1890s, when lengthy serial fiction in the periodicals was being reconsidered, Stead’s condensed versions of novels failed to find its readers. Tellingly, that did not impact seriously on the success of the magazine and its impressive and steady circulation continued without the aid of ongoing serial fiction, whether full-length or condensed.

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