Cahiers victoriens et édouardiens

Transforming the Art of Fiction: Walter Besant, Professional Service and the Society of Authors

La transformation de l'art de la fiction: Walter Besant, le service professionnel et la Société des auteurs

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Résumés

Français English
Fondée en 1884 par le romancier et historien Walter Besant (1836-1901), la Société des auteurs devint l'association professionnelle organisée par et pour les auteurs qui rencontra le plus de succès et dura le plus longtemps en Grande Bretagne. La Société des auteurs fut créée parce que l'on estimait que l'action collective était nécessaire pour défendre les intérêts économiques des auteurs et pour exprimer un grief ancien à l'égard d'éditeurs peu scrupuleux et de lois inadaptées sur les droits d'auteurs ; c'est un exemple intéressant des transformations plus larges que les arts ont subies dans la société professionnelle moderne. Bien que l'influence de Besant sur le développement de la Société à ses débuts soit bien établie, sa conception de cette identité professionnelle qui détermina son activité pendant les deux premières décennies demeure insuffisamment étudiée. Cet article aborde deux aspects distincts mais liés du travail de Besant pour la Société des auteurs pendant cette période. Tout d'abord, il examine les différents modèles d'association professionnelle envisagés par Besant et d'autres membres influents de la Société et qui vont du pragmatique à l'utopique, ainsi que leurs fonctions. Comment les membres de la Société concevaient-ils son rôle de fournisseur d'un service professionnel en relation au champ plus large du marché littéraire ? Ensuite, cet article explore la relation entre le service professionnel fourni par la Société et le genre émergent du manuel (ou guide) littéraire — « comment devenir » un auteur professionnel —, relation qui, lors de la fondation officielle de la Société en 1884, déclencha un débat mémorable sur 'l'art de la fiction' entre Besant et le romancier contemporain, Henry James. Dans quelle mesure ce célèbre débat de la fin de l'ère victorienne sur la dimension esthétique et morale du roman a-t-il été modelé par la création d'identités professionnelles au sein d'une association destinée aux auteurs.

Founded in 1884 by the novelist and historian Walter Besant (1836–1901), the Incorporated Society of Authors went on to become the most successful and long-lasting professional association organized by and for the benefit of authors in Britain. Established in the belief that collective action was necessary in order to defend authors' 'trade interests' and to express a long-held 'grievance' against exploitative publishers and inadequate laws of copyright, the Society of Authors presents a valuable case-study of the wider transformation of the arts in modern professional society. Though Besant's influence on the early development of the Society is well-documented, the conception of professional identity which shaped his activity during its first two decades remains under-explored. This essay considers two distinct, but interrelated, aspects of Besant's work for the Society of Authors during this period. Firstly, it examines the various models of professional association and their functions, envisaged by Besant and other leading members of the Society, ranging from the pragmatic to the utopian. How did members of the Society conceive of its role in providing professional service in relation to the wider field of the literary market? Secondly, the essay explores the Society's professional service in relation to the emerging genre of the literary manual—or 'how to' guide to professional authorship—, a connection which in 1884, the year of its official foundation, sparked a memorable debate on the 'art of fiction' between Besant and his fellow novelist, Henry James. In what ways was this well-known late-Victorian debate on the aesthetic and moral dimensions of the novel shaped by the formation of collective professional identities for authors?

Entrées d'index

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Texte intégral

1   Looking back over the course of fifty years from the end of the nineteenth century—and the end of his life—the novelist and historian Walter Besant (1836–1901) observed the growing importance of association and collective agency in British social life:

> The growth of the feeling that in endeavour, in action, in objects of every kind, union and united effort are better than individual effort has been very rapid during the nineteenth century and especially during the latter half of it. It is now well understood that if anything has to be done or attempted, if trade interests are to be defended, if injurious legislation is to be checked, if a grievance has to be removed and an evil prevented, then a Society must be formed. (*London in the Nineteenth Century* 253)

2   More recent social historians have concurred with this assessment of the period, identifying the late nineteenth century as a crucial juncture for various forms of collective association, from the 'rise of professional society' to the 'New Unionism' and the 'zenith' of London club-land.[1] More specifically, though, the above passage serves as a clear indication of the intention behind Besant's pivotal role in the formation of the Incorporated Society of Authors, a 'union' of professional writers whose first meeting was held in Kensington, London in September 1883. Incorporated by charter in the following year, the Society of Authors went on to become the most successful and long-lasting professional association organized by and for the benefit of authors in Britain: indeed, it has continued to exist for the past 130 years in a form not dissimilar to that planned by Besant in the 1880s. Established in the belief that collective action was necessary in order to defend authors' 'trade interests' and to express a long-held 'grievance' against exploitative publishers and inadequate laws of copyright, the Society of Authors presents a valuable case-study of the wider transformation of the arts in modern professional society.

3   Though Besant's influence on the early development of the Society of Authors is well documented, most notably in accounts by G. H. Thring (unpublished, 1933), Victor Bonham-Carter (1978), and Timothy Wager (1998), the conception of professional identity which shaped his activity during its first two decades remains under-explored. This essay considers two distinct, but interrelated, aspects of Besant's work for the Society during this period. Firstly, I examine the various types of professional association and their functions, envisaged by Besant and other leading members of the

Society, ranging from the pragmatic to the utopian. How did these members conceive of the Society's professional service in relation to the wider field of the literary market? Secondly, I consider the Society's service in relation to the emerging genre of the literary manual—or 'how to' guide to professional authorship—, a connection which in 1884, the year of its official foundation, sparked a memorable debate on the 'art of fiction' between Besant and his fellow novelist, Henry James. In what ways was this well-known late-Victorian debate on the aesthetic and moral dimensions of the novel shaped by the formation of collective professional identities for authors?

Models of Professional Association: The Society of Authors (1884)

4   Besant wrote several retrospective accounts of the rationale behind the formation of the Society of Authors during its first two decades, part of an ongoing publicity campaign waged in the periodical press which continued until his death in 1901. One of the most instructive in terms of self-conception is an essay entitled 'The First Society of British Authors (1843)' published in the *Contemporary Review* for July 1889. Here, Besant looks back at an earlier failed attempt to establish a professional society for authors, which involved some of the leading literary figures of the previous generation —Charles Dickens, Thomas Carlyle, and Harriet Martineau amongst others—, and recounts 'the story of a movement begun before the time was ripe, conducted without appreciation of what was wanted, and ending in failure', yet 'full of interest and instruction' for those who 'have revived that attempt under more favourable conditions' (Besant, 'First Society' 10). This 'first' Society of British Authors issued a Prospectus in 1843, outlining its aims '[t]o secure the observance of the laws for the protection of authors and their property' and '[t]o obtain such alterations of existing laws, and the enactment of such new laws, both national and international, as may from time to time be deemed necessary', but for Besant it contained 'on the one point—the only point—which can unite members of any profession, their material interests, not a word of hope or even of understanding' ('First Society' 13). Besant portrays his predecessors as well-meaning but timid and naïve in their apprehension of what motivates solidarity within professional groups. Referring to the Prospectus's suggestion that members of the Society should also attend lectures on improving subjects by 'their more eminent brothers', Besant notes ironically: 'Specialists are well known to desire nothing so much as the success of brother specialists in the same line' ('First Society' 14). Lacking a more determined appeal to collective self-interest, the earlier Society had failed, according to Besant, through the ineffectual idealism and diffidence of its members—Dickens and Carlyle soon dropped out of the venture, while G. H. Lewes lamely professed his inability to offer practical assistance. As Bonham-Carter suggests, Besant's scathing review of the 1843 Society of British Authors Prospectus highlights the need for stronger professional leadership which he was himself intent on providing: 'a new English Society has undertaken the task abandoned by the last generation, and is vigorously pursuing its aims with a new definite policy' ('First Society' 26; Bonham-Carter [1] 88–89).

5   It should be noted, in passing, that a more successful model for the new Society of Authors was found in the French Société des Gens de Lettres, established in 1837. Representatives of the British Society attended the 50th anniversary celebration of the Société's foundation in Paris on 10 December 1887, and Edmund Gosse, an active member of the Society's Managing Committee at the time, wrote a commemorative article for *The Nineteenth Century* to mark the occasion, which explicitly aimed to 'stimulate British authors to support with more warmth and confidence a scheme which has started favourably in this country, and which means to march on and conquer' (Gosse 844). Gosse believed that the Société 'has revolutionised the professional life of the French writer' and plainly takes inspiration from it (Gosse 847). Two years later, one of the Society's official book publications (used to promote its campaigns for professional reform and membership recruitment) was devoted to a

more detailed history of the Société des Gens de Lettres, in which the author, Samuel Squire Sprigge—the first Secretary of the Society—declared: 'We have borrowed much, and shall perhaps borrow more from the methods of the French Society' (Sprigge, *Society of French Authors* 42).

6   As a model of professional association within the field of literature (and later the performing arts), then, the 1884 Society of Authors was not without historical precedents. But, as suggested above, the 'policy' of the new Society was to adopt a more combative defence of authors' material interests than had previously been attempted. In a retrospective account of its formation, from 17 December 1892, Besant outlined the three key aims of the Society as follows:

> 1. 'The maintenance, definition, and defence of literary property';
> 2. 'The consolidation and amendment of the laws of domestic copyright';
> 3. 'The promotion of international copyright' (Besant, *The Society of Authors* 4).

7   Of these three stated objectives, the first was the most distinctive feature of the Society's work. The promotion of copyright reform, whether domestic or international, was an important corollary of the first aim, yet was essentially an extension of a long-standing campaign, which went back to the debates around the passage of the 1842 Copyright Act, if not earlier (a campaign involving some of the same prominent early-Victorian authors who had planned the 1843 Society of British Authors).[2] By contrast, the 'maintenance, definition, and defence of literary property' is the foundational principle for a new campaign on behalf of authors' 'rights', and a new model of professional association in Britain. Besant envisaged the Society as a consultative body for authors with 'grievances and quarrels' against their publishers, providing its members with practical 'advice and assistance' on publishing contracts and copyright law (Besant, *The Society of Authors* 9). Its Prospectus declared that '[t]he Society is ready to protect any member against the infringement of his property', not only by offering professional advice but also through the threat of legal action against publishers suspected of fraudulent practice (*Society of Authors* 8). In its early years, during Besant's lifetime, the Society was aggressively polemical in its defence of 'literary property', explicitly postulating the exploitation of authors' labour. Besant insisted that his concern was to *'ascertain the true principles, founded on equity and justice, which should govern the relations between author and publisher' (Grievances Between Authors and Publishers* 19; original emphasis), but the confrontational edge to many of the Society's publications engendered animosity from some leading publishers, as well as discomfort from some authors.

8   A common criticism of the Society's activity, from both sources, was that it reduced the formerly personal relationship between author and publisher to a purely commercial transaction. Speaking for the latter, Thomas Werner Laurie, for example, complained in an article for *The Nineteenth Century* (November 1895) that the Society 'has utterly destroyed the old friendship between authors and publishers which was so pleasant in the days of the first and second Murrays',[3] while the novelist George Gissing famously derided a meeting of the Society which he attended as 'a mere gathering of tradesmen, & very commonplace tradesmen to boot' (quoted in McCann 35). A decade earlier, press responses to the Society's formation characterized it as a trade association based on a narrow principle of self-interest, *The Times* (30 May 1884) commenting: 'They do not disguise that their motives are selfish, and that they are organized for class objects', and the trade journal *The Bookseller* (5 June 1884) mockingly announcing a 'SOCIETY FOR THE PREVENTION OF CRUELTY TO AUTHORS'—the implication of the latter being that the Society casts authors in the role of victims, exploited labour, banded together against an oppressive system (quoted in Bonham-Carter [1] 123).

9   It is important to acknowledge, however, that the Society also espoused a broader aspiration for professional service, albeit in less emphatic terms. From its inception, Besant and Sprigge promoted the Society to prospective members as an advisory body on all aspects of authorship, offering not only practical advice on publishing contracts and the economic value of 'literary property', but also professional opinion on the 'literary worth' of manuscripts. In his 1884 lecture on 'The Art of Fiction', for example,

Besant expressed the hope 'that one effect of the newly founded Society of Authors will be to keep young writers of fiction from rushing too hastily into print, to help them to the right understanding of their Art and its principles, and to guide them into true practice of their principles while they are still young' (Besant, *The Art of Fiction* 65). As Timothy Wager points out, Besant's conception of the Society's role was not simply based on defending authors' property rights and commercial value, but also on the regulation of access to the literary market at the level of production. In line with the wider tendency of professional groups to 'limit the number of practitioners and regulate the quality of their work', the Society also sought to achieve 'a certain amount of independence from the market' (Wager 88). Besant's initial enthusiasm for developing the Society of Authors as a resource for wider professional training was not consistently applied on a practical basis over the following decades, but he maintained a belief that the defence of authors' material interests would lead not to a lowering of literary standards, but the opposite. The 1898 Prospectus, published at the end of his literary manual *The Pen and the Book* (1899), declared that the 'Reading Department' of 'the Society has done much to restrict the publication of worthless books' by dissuading hundreds of aspiring authors from publishing 'immature work': further 'regulation of the trade . . . would stem the output of books which ought not to be published' (*The Pen and the Book* 323–25). While offering advice to authors on the 'literary worth' of their manuscripts risked repeating what Besant saw as the naïve approach of earlier Societies —would authors pay to be informed of their inadequacies by self-appointed experts?—it should be seen in the broader context of his ideal of professional service.

10   Indeed, despite Besant's rejection of the lofty rhetoric of his predecessors, the 1884 Society of Authors continued to model itself as a literary 'guild', using a term promoted by Carlyle and Dickens earlier in the century. In his essay on the 1843 Society, Besant acknowledged the challenge of organizing authorship into a professional body, since it is rather 'a collection of professions': 'It is impossible to make a guild of these men. How are outsiders to be kept off? How is the distribution of work to be regulated? How is professional etiquette to be established?' ('First Society' 15) Here, Besant is evidently aware of the difficulties of regulating the literary market in the manner expected of most professional groups. Yet in an earlier address on 'The Maintenance of Literary Property' to one of the Society's London conferences held in March 1887, Besant drew precisely on the historical resonance of the pre-industrial trade guild, exhorting his audience to 'make the English Society of Authors . . . such a great guild of literature— the most powerful city company ever known' (*Grievances* 46). By the turn of the century, the Society's Prospectus was making a similar appeal for authors to become 'member[s] of the great guild' (*Society of Authors* 13). Such rhetoric directly echoes that of Dickens, who in May 1851 announced, with great fanfare, the foundation of the 'Guild of Literature and Art' (a quasi-professional association which, though more successful than the Society of British Authors, was unable to sustain its initial profile).[4]

11   Besant and his associates, however, went somewhat further in imagining how the Medievalist model of the 'literary guild' should operate within the modern environment of the mass market. From the beginning, the Society's 'defence of literary property' sought to find ways of diminishing the role of the publisher in mediating the relationship between author and reader, even to the extent of bypassing established commercial publishers altogether. In his book *The Methods of Publishing* (1890), Sprigge indicated that the Society's ultimate aim was to 'submit a scheme for publishing, based upon what may seem after careful consideration of the whole question fair and equitable principles' (vii). Similarly, Besant envisaged a future in which the Society would effectively replace existing publishers to become 'the greatest publishing company ever known', publishing 'all the books of its members—that is to say, all the new books of all the authors' (*Grievances* 44). In this monopolistic vision, Besant projected the Society's future expansion throughout the English-speaking world to become a global professional association:

> a great army of men and women constantly engaged in
> writing . . . books . . . belong[ing] to a great society called the Society of Authors,
> which has branches all over the habitable globe; each branch a centre of light and
> learning, so that not a town or a village all over Great Britain, America and

Australia, but has a local secretary, and is in correspondence with the central office. (*Grievances* 44)

12   As in the model of the craft guild, the Society's imagined role as a centralized office for managing the production and distribution of literature suggests that a fully professional association should extend beyond the protection of narrow material self-interest to encompass some qualitative measure of professional autonomy. Peter Keating rightly notes that Besant's utopian vision for the Society of Authors contains elements of contemporary socialist and co-operative thought, notwithstanding his constant emphasis on the defence of 'literary property' (Keating 46). While it is true that Besant's notion of 'literary property' exemplifies what Andrew McCann has recently described as a 'proprietary model of authorship', based on a 'self-originating, sovereign subject', the fact that the Society was characterized by some hostile publishers as 'socialistic' in its aims reveals a fundamental ambivalence in its position (McCann 21, 19).5

13   While Besant's ideal of a literary guild disseminating the intellectual property of its members in return for an annual subscription fee of one guinea did not come to fruition, the Society nevertheless could claim to function as an effective 'trade union' for authors, as both supporters and detractors pointed out. This impression was encouraged by the Society's Prospectus which explicitly described its role as embodying the 'collective force which nowadays is obtained in other professions and businesses by associations or trade unions' (*Society of Authors* 4). The publisher William Heinemann saw this as a threat, condemning the Society as 'a trades union more complete, more dangerous . . . more determined in its demands than any of the other unions' (Bonham-Carter [1] 170). In truth, the Society of Authors attempted to have it both ways, posing *both* as the guardian of collective professional interests (embodying the solidarity of the guild) and as a liberal defender of individual property rights (recognizing the inherent variability of commercial value).6 Various scholars have thus questioned whether the Society can really be described as a 'professional' organization in a sociological definition of the term. Its attempt to reconcile the impulse to regulate the market with an 'emphasis on private property and manufacture' seems contradictory to a modern observer versed in an understanding of 'professional ideology' (Culver 120).7 But it may be more accurate to conclude that the definition of what constitutes 'professional' service remained fluid and inchoate through to the end of the nineteenth century. This becomes particularly evident when we turn our attention to the 1884 debate between Besant and Henry James on the 'art of fiction'.

Professional Pedagogy and 'The Art of Fiction'

14   As indicated above, Besant's lecture on 'The Art of Fiction', first presented to the Royal Institution on 25 April 1884 and published in book form later that year, can be read as a direct extension of the promotional and pedagogical work which he was beginning to undertake on behalf of the newly-formed Society of Authors. In terms of genre, the lecture/essay bears a clear resemblance to the form of the literary manual, or 'how to' guide to authorship, which began to proliferate during the late nineteenth century. Keating notes that in the literary manuals of this period, professional 'advice had become a marketable commodity' (71). Towards the end of his career, Besant published a more comprehensive manual, *The Pen and the Book*, which outlines his approach to the literary profession, both practical and aesthetic, in much greater detail, and contains passages reproduced verbatim from 'The Art of Fiction'. The genre of the literary manual, it might be said, offers a textual equivalent to the various professional advisory services offered by the Society. Its avowed purpose is to induct young, aspirant writers into the profession, providing them with the acquired knowledge, techniques, and principles of more experienced authors, which will assist their pursuit of a professional career (though without any guarantee of success).

15   Approaching Besant's 'The Art of Fiction' from a prior knowledge of James's more famous essay of the same title, as most readers do, we may be surprised to discover that Besant's professional advice to 'students' of the novel is not quite as reductive as some critics have suggested. Besant's central proposition is that fiction should be accorded the status of a fine art, 'worthy to be called the sister and the equal of the Arts of Painting, Sculpture, Music, and Poetry', and he proceeds to codify the distinct 'laws' of the form, which he believes 'may be laid down and taught with as much precision and exactness as the laws of harmony, perspective, and proportion' (*Art of Fiction* 5–6). At the same time, he acknowledges that 'like the other Fine Arts, Fiction is so far removed from the mere mechanical arts, that no laws or rules whatever can teach it to those who have not already been endowed with the natural and necessary gifts' (*Art of Fiction* 6). Though often represented through a Jamesian lens as advocating a crudely mechanical and philistine approach to writing fiction, Besant in fact positions the novel at the higher end of an aesthetic hierarchy, distinct from less creative forms of craft. However, Besant attributes the traditionally lower cultural status of fiction to a lack of supporting professional authority:

> How can that be an Art, they might ask, which has no lectures or teachers, no school or college or Academy, no recognized rules, no text-books, and is not taught in any University? . . . Any one, they think, can write a novel; therefore, why not sit down and write one? (*Art of Fiction* 14–15)

16   It is because Besant seeks to elevate the artistic status of the novel that he insists on its having 'rules' which can be taught and ratified through a recognized pedagogical apparatus. The absence of rules may suggest greater spontaneity and creative freedom (untutored genius), but it opens the profession too indiscriminately to accord value to literary labour: 'Any one . . . can write a novel' being the popular assumption. Critics of Besant might view the absence of rules and training for writing fiction as desirable for maintaining the openness of the profession, but, on the other hand, as Christiane Gannon has recently argued, the refusal to see fiction as teachable can also carry undemocratic implications—reducing creativity to a mystified, inaccessible inspiration (Gannon 382).[8]

17   However, one views Besant's insistence on 'rules' as a means of enhancing professional regulation and status, his account of the 'art of fiction' takes seriously the matter of artistic form which also preoccupied James. Reading Besant through James, critics have tended to emphasize his insistence on the 'conscious moral purpose' of the 'modern English novel', yet there is as much, if not more, attention given in the lecture to literary craft (*Art of Fiction* 57). Besant declares that it 'is almost impossible to estimate too highly the value of careful workmanship, that is, of style' in the composition of a novel, and, conversely, specifies that 'the preaching novel is the least desirable of any' (*Art of Fiction* 58–59). Moreover, while he defends the cultural legitimacy of popular fiction throughout the lecture, Besant is careful not to conflate commercial and artistic success or to dismiss writers who fail to reach a wide readership: 'the Art of a great writer is of such a kind that it may never become widely popular', he acknowledges (*Art of Fiction* 76).

18   Besant's rationale for teaching the 'art of fiction', then, is more nuanced than is often presented by critics influenced by James's response to the lecture. But what of James himself? First published in *Longman's Magazine* in September 1884, James's essay 'The Art of Fiction' achieved an elevated status in twentieth-century literary criticism, becoming, in the words of Stephen Arata, 'the best-known theoretical statement on the novel published in Victorian England' (Arata 53). Yet as Arata and other recent critics have begun to recognize, James's essay is best understood not as an isolated theoretical pronouncement, but in the context of its dialogue with Besant, and indeed with other critics who responded to Besant.[9] I do not intend to repeat all of the arguments which James develops in this essay in response to Besant, some of which are quite familiar, but rather to indicate how the wider context of this debate shapes both the form of James's essay and his contribution to the contemporary discourse of professional service. Firstly, James concurs with Besant that 'fiction is one of the *fine* arts deserving in its turn of all the honours and emoluments that have hitherto been reserved for the

successful profession of music, poetry, painting, architecture' (James, 'Art of Fiction' 505). He also agrees, implicitly, with Besant's view that the status of the novel would be enhanced by regulation of the market. The artistic value of the form is 'compromised' by the fact that it is also a 'commodity so quickly and easily produced': 'the field, at large, suffers discredit from overcrowding' ('Art of Fiction' 506). However, as is well known, James takes issue with Besant's insistence that fiction has intrinsic 'laws' equivalent to those of perspective in visual art and harmony in music, which can be taught instrumentally to aspiring writers within an institutional framework. James's 'The Art of Fiction' is most commonly read as a defence of individual creative freedom, in particular through his refusal to define *a priori* 'what sort of an affair the good novel will be' (James, 'Art of Fiction' 507). As Arata puts it, '[t]he only prescription to which James is willing openly to commit himself is the prescription not to prescribe' (54).[10] Hence, in the essay, James emphasizes the significance of sporadic moments of perception to the author's phenomenal experience, such as his anecdote about the English novelist Anne Thackeray Ritchie's inductive knowledge of French Protestant youth. James strongly contests Besant's 'rule' that fiction should always be grounded in extensive 'personal experience and observation'—his recommendation to authors 'never to go beyond your own experience' (Besant, *Art of Fiction* 34-6): 'It is equally excellent and inconclusive to say that one must write from experience; to our suppositious aspirant such a declaration might savour of mockery. What kind of experience is intended, and where does it begin and end?' (James, 'Art of Fiction' 509). Where Besant defines authorial 'experience' as a passive product of external circumstance, James validates the capacity of the mind, internal consciousness, for creating experience.

19   In this example, and throughout 'The Art of Fiction', however, James deploys the pedagogical vocabulary of the literary manual to which he is responding. The essay is self-consciously addressed to the 'novice', 'young aspirant' and 'ingenuous student', and it culminates in an imagined speech to this figure placed in quotation marks (James, 'Art of Fiction' 510, 515, 520). The 'first lesson of the young novelist', James insists, is to realize the freedom of the form and to reject prescriptive rules: 'All life belongs to you, and don't listen either to those who would shut you up into corners of it and tell you that it is only here and there that art inhabits' (James, 'Art of Fiction' 520). We might be inclined to interpret this appropriation of the rhetoric of professional advice as parodic of the genre. James effectively utilizes the form of the literary manual to develop a counter-argument against its prime exponent, the advice being: 'don't listen to Besant when he gives you advice'! But I would argue that James's reimagining of the relationship between professional experience and youthful aspiration—between the figures of master and apprentice—goes beyond parodic citation. James emphasizes the limitations of formal instruction 'when it comes to the application of precepts', but, as several critics have observed, he goes on to develop an alternative model of professional authority (James, 'Art of Fiction' 511). An example of this can be seen in his elucidation of the organic form of the novel, which is presented in contrast to Besant's 'mechanical' rules. For James, it is not possible to disarticulate the form of the novel into discrete components such as 'story', 'adventure', or 'idea': 'The story and the novel, the idea and the form, are the needle and the thread, and I never heard of a guild of tailors who recommend the use of the thread without the needle or the needle without the thread (James, 'Art of Fiction' 516).

20   In the context of Besant's newly-formed Society of Authors, this is a particularly pointed remark. The choice of sewing (or tailoring) as a metaphor for the composition of fiction ('the needle and the thread') expresses James's sense of the interconnected fabric of literary form—both activities work with organic tissue, impossible to separate into constituent parts. For James, this is a matter of acquired knowledge which any self-respecting professional 'guild'—of tailors or authors—should convey to young apprentices. James thus implies the need for a better professional (or technical) understanding of the craft of fiction. Standing behind this remark, of course, is Besant's use of his lecture on the 'Art of Fiction' to promote the idea of a new literary guild and its potential to train the next generation of professional writers.

21   Reading the two essays alongside each other, then, reveals an exchange between two contrasting, but not entirely antithetical, visions of professional authority. As Wager

suggests, Besant and James have more in common with each other than critics have generally assumed, yet are nevertheless representative of two distinct and alternative 'trajectories of the professionalization of authorship' towards the end of the nineteenth century (Wager 86, 92). The debate on the 'art of fiction' is often represented as marking an 'irrevocable schism' between 'high-brow' and 'middle-brow' literature, between popular fiction and an incipient modernist aesthetic (Cross 216), but it can also be viewed as a dispute about the true meaning of professional service in the arts. As Michael Anesko has demonstrated, James was far from being inattentive to the practical professional concerns around publishing contracts and copyright which preoccupied Besant; in 1888 he also became a member of the Society of Authors, and through the mediation of their mutual friend Edmund Gosse sought Besant's advice on employing the literary agent A. P. Watt (Anesko 128–29). Yet in his correspondence with Gosse during the following decade James clarified his dissatisfaction with the version of professionalism offered by the Society. In a letter dated 10 May 1895, he wrote to express sympathy with Gosse's public criticism of the Society's focus on the material rewards of authorship:

> The fact is that authorship is guilty of a great mistake, a gross want of tact, in formulating & publishing its claim to be a 'profession'. Let other trades call it so— & let it take no notice. That's enough. It ought to have of the professions only a professional thoroughness. But never to have that, & to cry on the housetops instead that it is the grocer & the shoemaker is to bring on itself a ridicule of which it will simply die. (*Letters from James to Gosse* [v]; Quoted in Anesko, viii)

22   Here, James both challenges and perpetuates the conception of literature as a 'profession'. On the one hand, he dismisses the Society's claim to professional authority as the noisy self-promotional talk of tradesmen: like Gissing, he deplores its preoccupation with commerce, eliding authors with grocers and shoemakers. But on the other hand, James preserves the notion of 'professional thoroughness', an ideal of artistic rigour and dedication, marked by its absence from the Society he believes. James's view is similar to that of Gosse, one of the original members of the Society's managing committee, who became increasingly uneasy with what he saw as Besant's narrowly focussed campaign for authors' rights, warning against the dangers of commercial avarice and a 'professional *vendetta*' against publishers (Gosse 849).

23   Besant's response to such criticism from fellow authors was always the same. In his report on a 'Literary Congress' held in Chicago in July 1893—apparently, the first ever transatlantic gathering of professional authors on a major scale—he queried: 'Why are literary folk, alone among mankind, hostile to common action? . . . the moment an author begins to make practical investigation into the material value of his work, a hundred voices are ready to cry out upon him for degrading literature into a trade' (Besant, 'Literary Conferences' 124, 129). Criticism of the Society from within the ranks of the profession was invariably charged with breaching solidarity. Yet the apparent schism between 'high' and 'low' versions of literary professionalism did not significantly impede the expansion of the Society, which comfortably absorbed authors of all descriptions. While Besant, through his lectures and literary manuals, unashamedly promoted the rewards of popular authorship in terms of vastly expanding markets and potential readership, the Society's early Presidents—Lord Tennyson (1884) followed by George Meredith (1892) and Thomas Hardy (1911)—provided literary figureheads of impeccable cultural prestige. As Wager points out, the Society occupied a 'mediating position between producers of "high" and mass culture', refusing to discriminate between different categories of authorship in its membership criteria (beyond the minimum threshold of a single book publication) in the manner of a literary Academy (Wager 91).[11] Membership of the Society thus grew steadily from its 8 founding members in 1884 to 1,300 in 1895, and 2,500 by 1914. Even those who questioned the Society's 'professional' values during its first two decades (such as Gissing and James) invariably became members of the Society and took advantage of the services which it offered. This in itself provides some measure of vindication for Besant's view that 'in objects of every kind, union and united effort are better than individual effort'.

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Notes

1 For an historical account of the growth of professional associations and the 'New Unionism', see Perkin (1989) and Mommsen and Husung (1985). Amy Milne-Smith argues that 'clubland was certainly at the zenith of popularity from the 1880s to the Great War'. Besant and other founding members of the Society of Authors were also members of the Savile Club, a gentleman's club which catered especially for 'literary and artistic men' (*London Clubland* 33, 48).

2 See Seville (1999) for a detailed account of this earlier campaign for copyright reform and the involvement of contemporary authors.

3 Responses to Werner Laurie's criticism by Besant ('The Literary Agent') and by W. Martin Conway were published in the following month's issue of *The Nineteenth Century*. For the latter, '[t]he Society has merely enabled the author to negotiate this partnership with a full knowledge of what is that is bargained for' (976).

4 For a more detailed discussion of the Guild of Literature and Art see Hack (1999), and for a broader account of the figure of the 'guild' in earlier Victorian debates on the literary profession see Salmon (2013), especially chapters 2 and 4.

5 The late-nineteenth century saw broader attempts to revive 'guild' organizational structures within the context of an advanced market economy from a radical perspective. What came to be known as 'guild socialism' in Britain and the United States can also be linked to the contemporaneous effort of Emile Durkheim (1957) to define a 'professional ethics' through a revised model of the Medieval trade guild.

6 As Bonham-Carter points out, the Society did not officially attain the status of a trade union until 1978; prior to then, it 'still regarded itself as a professional association' and by the terms of its original charter was a private limited company (non-profit-making) with shares owned by the Society's Council (Bonham-Carter [2] 122–23).

7 John Goode (1966) was one of the first critics to raise this issue, contending that the Society, 'by concerning itself almost exclusively with the protection and better marketing of *literary property* limited itself to the view that literature is a trade' (250). More recently, Leary and Nash (2009) have observed that the Society 'contributed to the growing sense of authorship as a professional activity, even if it couldn't be seen as a profession in the strict sociological sense of controlling access, training and accreditation' (209).

8 Andrew McCann has recently offered an opposing view to Gannon's, arguing that Besant's 'attempts to consolidate authorship as a respectable profession and writing as a form of rule-based discipline are partly oriented to the containment' of popular literary production (54). While Gannon's concern is to defend Besant's pedagogy against what she sees as elitist denigration, McCann positions him against more genuinely popular novelists such as Marie Corelli.

9 Though he recognizes the value of establishing the context of James's essay, Arata is generally dismissive of the merits of Besant's argument, describing him as 'in no way a creditable theorist of narrative fiction' (55). In fact, the 'conversation' in which James's essay participates is more significant than Arata acknowledges, and includes not only the stimulus of Besant's lecture but also Andrew Lang's prior response entitled 'The Art of Fiction' (30 April 1884) for the *Pall Mall Gazette*.

10 See also Goode's characterization of James's essay as a 'plea for liberty' amounting to 'a plea for freedom from the public' (261).

11 During the 1890s and early 1900s there was an extended debate in the Society of Authors' house journal *The Author* (and elsewhere) on the desirability of establishing a separate Academy of Letters, closer in function to the *Académie française*. For further information see Waller (458–63). Besant was supportive of this idea inasmuch as it would serve to elevate the perceived status of the profession, but he remained committed to the principle of (relatively) open membership

for the Society of Authors, even though this made it harder to operate as a regulative professional body. See, in particular, his 1892 essay 'Literature as a Career' (309–13).

Pour citer cet article

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