

The Popular Wells, the Classic Wells

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ABSTRACT

In H. G. Wells, two forces were struggling for predominance, the desire to please as a scientific romancer and a short story writer, and as even a mainstream novelist; and the desire to have his message heard and acted upon; the desire to maintain his great appeal as mainly a science fiction writer and his sense of responsibility to effect a real change of the world, to reform and to create a world state. Perhaps it is true that he was not gifted enough to write great mainstream novels, and so he was denied a place among the greatest masters of this genre, masters like his three friends Bennett, James and Conrad; but it is perhaps more certain that his urge to reform and put the world right, which was so insistent in his consciousness, and was present more and more as he grew older, was making his writing more and more didactic and heavy-handed, and consequently more and more unpopular. He was at his best when the educationist in him worked in unison with the imaginative artist, and that was true of his early science fiction.

Wells is not alone in working under two or more opposed forces, although this was most detrimental in his case. A writer may occasionally decide to relax his/her rigorous watch over the quality of his/her product, and stoop to write some sensational though aesthetically superficial stories. This happened to Joseph Conrad, for instance, and so it happened to James; but that was rare in the case of these two writers. But in the case of Wells, though he was never careless about his art, the other preoccupations, as his role as a man with a message, were definitely having their toll on his art; 'message' often had the upper hand, and the 'aesthetic' aspect receded proportionately. Even so, he has left enough valuable work that it is quite possible that he may regain the distinguished place that he had enjoyed between 1895 and 1910.

Keywords: HG Wells; Popularity; Science Fiction; Great Art.

INTRODACTION

H.G. Wells's (1866-1946) achievements are numerous and varied and yet, there are some indications that he aspired for something that he never achieved: He very much wished to occupy his place side by side with his friends Conrad, James, and Bennett, who won their reputation as major writers of mainstream novels. It might not be such an impressive fact that he aspired for something that he could not attain, for this happens to most of us; but it *is* an impressive fact that he equally believed deeply in that which he was: an educationist, a campaigner for a new world, a man with a message, and a public figure. If, as Hammond tells us (2001, xi), Wells was "a writer who made a permanent mark on English literature through his contribution to science fiction, the realist novel and the short story but who dissipated his formidable talents on issues which are finally ephemeral,"

we must add that, in his own eyes, it was certainly not a dissipation of his talents what he was working at, nor was it a trivial pastime.

While H.G. Wells is generally acknowledged as the pioneer of modern science fiction, he also wrote science textbooks, journalism, short stories, utopias, social novels, futurist speculations, and works of popular history. From the very outset of his intellectual career, Wells was, as McLean called him (McLean, 2008, 1) "a polymath whose work invites the interdisciplinary perspective."

Let's here touch first on what won him this enormous popularity, and why he risked losing it; then we look into that message which preoccupied so much of his attention; and we last wind up with a general assessment of his art.

WHY RISK LOSING POPULARITY?

In the minds of most people, Wells is the writer of *The Time Machine*, published 1895, his first and perhaps most original of several enormously popular novels of scientific mythmaking, including *The Invisible Man*

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(1897) *The War of the Worlds* (1898), and *The First Men in the Moon* (1901). His scientific romances of that period seemed innovative in both form and subject matter. It has been said of *The Time Machine* (Cantor and Hufnagel, 2006, 36): "It virtually inaugurated the genre of science fiction, and has been shamelessly imitated by aspiring authors in the field ever since."

He has also won recognition as a remarkable short-story writer. Deftness in the employment of scientific resources in those stories, his ability to write horror stories won him equal fame in this genre as in the previous one. Some would single out this short story, some would single out that: Some of the stories which have been singled out for attention are, "The Lord of the Dynamos," "The Country of the Blind," "The Door in the Wall," "The Star," "Under the Knife," "The Stolen Bacillus," and "The Man Who Could Work Miracles." About them Draper says (1987, 24): "It is no accident that these stories are ones which focus Wells's deepest concerns particularly sharply."

The impression most strongly conveyed by Wells's books was that of novelty, that they carried a new and unknown voice. After the publication of *Kipps* and *A Modern Utopia* 1904, according to Raknem (1962, 63) "the former made the public realize that he was a novelist of a very high class; the latter convinced all that he was a thinker of exceptional abilities."

The issue of popularity is worthy of following up a little further, because most of us tend to take the popular for the superficial, and to a lesser degree to take the thing preferred by the elite to be deeper; which is not true at all, for Shakespeare is the perfect example of popularity and depth at the same time. And many writers, both old and modern, are both popular and great.

So what is so peculiar about Wells's attitude to popularity? One thing is that at the time Wells was rapidly gaining a distinguished place in the estimate of his contemporaries he was working for something else. This is what Hammond is expressing when he says about him (2001, xi): "A novelist and storyteller of formidable imaginative power, he wished to be remembered as an educationist and writer on social questions."

Reading Wells's mind slightly differently, Raknem (47) says:

Bristling with ideas [after 1899,] he must have felt compelled to embody them in his writings; and instead of choosing one road, he tried, during the next five years, to

follow three parallel tracks. He turned to socio-logical writings and ended up by creating *A Modern Utopia*. He continued to produce scientific romances, but made parts of them discussions of the 'state of the world', or he turned them into allegories. He wrote novels, but discussed big issues in them, so that the social critic often took the place of the narrator.

It would seem, then, that Wells was willing to risk some of his popularity for the sake of seeing his ideas reach the greatest number of people, and, besides, he saw himself as being capable of doing much good as a public figure. It would be a mistake to assert that he did not care for art, as will be seen in the last section, but it is not an exaggeration to assert that his 'art' was not dearer to his heart than his 'message.'

The above is true about H.G. Wells until about 1910, for, after that, as Raknem notes (46), there was in his later works, "a hostile seriousness, a tendency to argue, and in many of them, a bitterness absent in earlier novels."

It is tempting to ask here: Did not each and every writer, for instance his three friends Bennett, James and Conrad, have his own philosophy, his approach to enlightening the world? This is so, beyond any doubt, may be most glaringly in Joseph Conrad. But we may put it like this: in the case of Conrad, he was an artist, first and foremost. As far as this researcher knows, no one charged Conrad of neglecting his art for the sake of his message to the world. But this cannot be said of Wells, or to be precise the later Wells, after a short successful period, from say 1894 to 1908, this latter date being that of publishing his best mainstream novel, *Tono-Bungay*.

Let's remind ourselves again that for Wells himself, his gain as a public figure, as an educator, as a popular historian, among other things, was at least as worthy as his success as artist, which must be clear from the various quotations above and below.

But how far was he willing to jeopardize losing some or much of his popularity for the sake of seeing his message well-established in the world? The evidence strongly indicates that he was willing to go far indeed; but despite some miscalculations, he was also keen to remain a favourite with the public.

If Wells had some reason to feel bitter for not winning the glory his fellow novelists were winning, then he was gaining in other spheres. For instance, Wells wrote a very popular book on world history, *The Outline of History*. That book was praised by no less authority than Arnold Toynbee, greatest historian of the twentieth century.

Toynbee asserted that Wells was superior to all other historians in one respect at least: his daring to bring together in his *The Outline of History* the whole experience of mankind. Other historians, says Toynbee, "seemed not to realize that, in reliving the entire life of Mankind as a single imaginative experience, Wells was achieving something which they themselves would hardly dare to attempt," (Toynbee and Caplan, 1995, 32.) He was also an outstanding futurist of his time, but more about this in the next section. Taking all this into consideration, one would hardly expect Wells's energy not to be dissipated. But this researcher contends that this is not nearly a major factor that accounts for Wells's not being on a par with the major novelists like his three friends, James, Bennett and Conrad. His best novels just did not find the luck his friends had with the public; or maybe they were more aesthetically gifted.

If Wells kept repeating that he did not regard himself as an artist, it is just fair to state that, as McLean puts it (4), in addition to assimilating various discourses in his work, Wells himself not only had an incalculable influence on popular literature and culture, but also on significant political figures.

But we need not take Wells's assertion that he did not much care for popularity as a great novelist too seriously. Some of his own declarations might indicate the opposite. In an early letter to Arnold Bennett, he protested: "For me you are part of the Great Public, I perceive. I am doomed to write 'scientific' romances and short stories for you creatures of the mob, and my novels must be my private dissipation," (Draper, 4.)

His own friends did compliment, where compliment was due. Joseph Conrad, for example, responded to the publication of *The Invisible Man* (1897) by calling Wells the "Realist of the Fantastic," (McLean, 3.) But that was of course no compensation for full acceptance as a great novelist. How deeply he felt it we might never be able to know precisely. What we do know is that he did not believe that his role as a mainstream novelist was his most precious role. That might be gleaned from a famous quarrel between him and his friend Henry James. He wrote to James: "There is of course a real and very fundamental difference in our innate and developed attitudes towards life and literature. To you literature like painting is an end, to me literature like architecture is a means, it has a use ... I had rather be called a journalist than an artist, that is the essence of it," (Simpson, 1995, 75).

Early on in his career he was fortunate. After only a couple of years of his first success, he was believed, as one of his biographers says, to be a man who could work miracles (Raknem, 11). And after only a few years, he established his reputation as a novelist who had "given more proof of original genius than any of his contemporaries," (ibid, 37).

But it must clear by now that, to him, fiction and theoretical writing were a continuum. He would finish here what he initiated there: history of the future; the world state; attack on the superficiality of the present civilization; the beneficial effect of a global outlook: all such issues were taken up equally directly or indirectly, in fiction and outside fiction. For instance, he produced his *Outline of History*, as Draper says (7), to help disseminate a more global outlook.

MESSAGE

In the following paragraphs, I try to sum up Wells's message in a few points. It is a message that he seems to have envisioned early on in his life and kept developing it, but one finds it distributed over all his works, fiction and non-fiction.

1- Though Wells never downplayed the material success or the necessity of sustained development, he nevertheless often derided most scathingly the superior attitude of Western nations, and their arrogance in dealing with especially the nations they dominated. This has been especially depicted in *The War of the Worlds*, as will be discussed soon. Two additional ideas are related to this:

- That purely rational superiority is worthless unless it leads to moral integrity. This is a main theme of *The War of the Worlds*, but, as Parrinder points out (1970, 31), "The vision of a master civilization organized on ruthlessly rational lines is carried much farther in the last of his major romances, *The First Men in the Moon*" (1901). The idea here is that intellect divorced from human sympathy is a disaster.

- That the Westerner basically assumes, especially when he occupies other countries, that the natives are inferior and he alone is superior. This again will be elaborated further when we come to discussing his utopias and science romances.

2 – He also felt it his duty to devote some attention to exposing the breakup of Victorian England. This is the main theme of his best discussion novel, *Tono-Bungay*. One researcher (Simpson, 79) puts this point in the following way: "George [narrator-protagonist of *Tono-*

Bungay] renounces Bladesover [the countryside in England where he spent his childhood] and the Victorian scene to characterize himself as the only One capable of retrieving true meaning in a world depleted of values." Here are a few lines from the novel itself, which may help to bring the idea home:

There are many people in England to-day upon whom it has not yet dawned. There are times when I doubt whether any but a very inconsiderable minority of English people realise how extensively this ostensible order has even now passed away. The great houses stand in the parks still, the cottages cluster respectfully on their borders, touching their eaves with their creepers, the English countryside-you can range through Kent from Bladesover northward and see persists obstinately in looking what it was. It is like an early day in a fine October. The hand of change rests on it all, unfelt, unseen; resting for awhile, as it were half reluctantly, before it grips and ends the thing for ever. One frost and the whole face of things will be bare, links snap, patience end, our fine foliage of pretences lie glowing in the mire. (I, 1, iii)

What the narrator is looking forward to is a new England, to replace the old one; this is how Parrinder sees it when he says (1995, 23): "*Tono-Bungay* is a prophetic social novel in which the male narrator's impatient imagination struggles to discern the outlines of the new England that is replacing the old one, the 'England of our children's children' (I, 1, iii)

3- In his role as an educationist, Wells proved to be, as Parrinder points out (1995, 18), "a tireless campaigner for a new form of political organization, the world state, to which the adjective "Wellsian" has frequently been attached." In this endeavour, he went ahead boldly to fulfill the part of a public figure; and on the intellectual level, he was regarded as a kind of prophet. This is closely related to his utopian novels and books, which will be discussed soon.

- In his endeavour to bring about a favourable change to the world, he felt it incumbent on him to write a history of the past, the present and even the future. It was in this context, as mentioned above, that he produced his *The Outline of History* to help create an awareness of the state of humanity. In the same spirit, his *The Shape of Things to Come*, is, a bold 'history' of the next couple of

centuries. According to Parrinder, "Virtually every Wellsian future history is a prophecy of war, beginning with *The War of Worlds* where not only are the invaders literally bloodthirsty but the Thames turns red due to the growth of the Martian red weed," (Parrinder, 1995, 23.)

4 - Wells's contribution as a utopian writer could have been easily discussed under the last point, but by setting this aspect apart we may give it some special distinction among his contributions as a man with a message: because after the first few years of popular writings, the notion of an ideal society - how it might be brought about, what it might be like - became central to Wells's work.

Wells was one of the most original utopian writers, and one of the basic features of his utopian writings was that the modern utopia, as Parrinder puts it (Parrinder, 1970, 10), "must not be static but kinetic, must shape not as a permanent state but as a hopeful stage, leading to a long ascent of stages."

He started in *The Time Machine* with criticizing the then current notions of an ideal society. In that novel the two species into which humankind will divide, the Eloi and the Morlocks, present two principles. One researcher (Partington, 2002, 62) puts it like this: "While the Eloi settled for a society of leisure and rest, the Morlocks pursued adaptation and change out of necessity and eventually threw off the dominance of the Eloi." By critiquing the then current static utopias, in *The Time Machine* and elsewhere, he was laying the ground for a new brand of utopia, the dynamic, ever developing utopia.

To present a convincing alternative world, Wells fell back on his rather solid scientific background, which many utopian writers lacked. Additionally, he had such a rich imagination that he felt, in the words of another researcher (Ruddick, 2001, 339), that "the time was ripe for a work on the grand theme of humanity's place in time that would capture the popular imagination. Victorian novelists in the dominant realist tradition, ignorant of science or unused to dealing in millennia, had largely ignored this theme."

It may be mentioned here that writing romances under the influence of the evolutionary theory was much in vogue in late nineteenth century and early twentieth century. Wells just happened to be the most powerful of those writers who took up the theme. About *The Time Machine* itself, while it is surely a distinguished scientific romance, it can be well argued that it does not have much

claim to being a utopia. What, after all, is utopian or ideal about the Eloi or the Morlocks? Therefore, while many do classify *The Time Machine* as a utopia, this writer would rather count it as an anti-utopia.

One may carry the point about the drawback in earlier utopias a little further. As Peter Firchow explained (Firchow, 2004, 131), "The very elimination [in earlier utopias] of harmful insects and of disease, of predatory animals and overt cruelty, and especially of the need to work for one's food and shelter: all of these apparent blessings are really a curse." This connects well with what we read in *The War of the World* about what enabled the Martians to be intellectually and technologically superior (Wells, 1988, 4), "The immediate pressure of necessity has brightened their intellectuals, enlarged their powers, and hardened their hearts."

For Wells, "In a modern Utopia there will, indeed, be no perfection; in Utopia there must also be friction, conflicts and waste, but the waste will be enormously less than in our world," (*A Modern Utopia*, 155; quoted in Partington, 98.) What Wells is saying about the then current notion of utopia is that almost by definition, 'Utopia' is a state of perfection, and that is to say, it is a state that is already realized, finished, ended. As is often the case with bright ideas, a thinker just awakens us to something that we perceive as self-evident; but we perceive this only after the thinker has brought it to our attention. His idea here is that unless humans work under hardships, they will soon lose their initiative and creativity.

Thus Wells stood out as the cleverest of utopian writers, a kind of prophet of the new century. One aspect of his superiority has been explained in this way (Pamboukian, 16-17):

In *The Time Machine* (1895), Wells uses innovative tropes to resolve the tension between romance and evolutionary theory [...] The time machine itself is a new trope that replaces earlier, supernatural time-travelling [...] In the context of late-Victorian culture, the invention of a new machine that opens hitherto unknown territory appears not only possible but also plausible.

Wells succeeded in *The Time Machine*, more than anywhere else, in winning the reader's approval, even when leveling his attacks. Here is a sample of his satire in that novel (Wells, 1984, 86-87):

I grieved to think how brief the dream of the

human intellect had been. It had committed suicide. It had set itself steadfastly towards comfort and ease, a balanced society with security and permanency as its watchword, it had attained its hopes – to come this at last... No doubt in the perfect world there had been no unemployed problem, no social question left unsolved. And a great quiet had followed... An animal perfectly in harmony with its environment is a perfect mechanism... So, as I see it, the Upper-world man [i.e. the Eloi] had drifted towards his feeble prettiness.

If Wells believed that an ideal society was never to be static, then logically, he should not have the final word about the shape of such future society; and that seems to be true, for, as a certain researcher has put it (Ruddick, 338), he "always thought of his writing, even when it was prophetic, as provisional, contingent, and ephemeral."

This provisional nature of any futurist speculation is based on Wells's having learned well his Huxley. Man has no reason to be proud or too confident about the present, for no matter how dazzling this civilization's achievements seem to be, evolution will leave them behind. This is not at all a pessimistic attitude on the part of Wells, for as a certain researcher has remarked (Cornils, 2003, 36), "man would have to abandon his supreme confidence in the future, accept that the evolutionary process would continue, improve through universal education, and unite in a league of nations to avoid destruction by the very means he had created to establish his powers."

But let's not be deluded into assuming that it is the scientific element of works like *The Time Machine* that keeps this novel alive. It is true that the scientific dimension had initially attracted most attention, for science seemed to matter more than literature in the late-Victorian period; but, as another researcher has noted (Firchow, 123), "it is its enduring literary power that has kept it alive after its original scientific basis has either eroded or faded into reality."

5- It was also in Wells's role as a bearer of a message that he upheld scientific knowledge and speculation. This again could have been treated under the above section on Wells as the Utopian, but it does seem to deserve separate treatment. One feels that, in *The Time Machine* for instance, he enjoyed exhibiting his knowledge of the latest theories about four-dimensional geometry. Let's

elaborate a little: Very early in the first chapter, the Time Traveller proposes to his guests the idea of a four-dimensional geometry, with a fourth dimension at right angles to the other three. Aware that such an idea, even if it is understood, will be resisted by his more conventionally-minded guests, he immediately supports the speculation by remarking, "Professor Simon Newcomb was expounding this to the New York Mathematical Society only a month or so ago," (Wells, 1984, 3.). And Nicholas Ruddick (340) affirms that Professor Newcomb did speculate on four-dimensional mathematics about the time Wells had mentioned.

On another level, Wells showed an admirable ability in putting to account his short study under Huxley. It was a short period that he spent as a student of this remarkable Darwinian scholar, but Wells was perhaps proud of the fact of having attended with him; and he adopted Huxley's approach to evolutionary theory. On a practical level, a human who has the evolutionary theory in mind has no reason to feel too proud, as indicated above, for there will be a time when whatever he/she holds to or stands for will be a thing of the past. On the positive side, it means simply that as we go, things will be better than they were; but, according to Wells, unless the world unites in a league of nations or a world state, people will be sure to destroy themselves. This self-destruction could be Martian-style. In *The War of the Worlds* Wells describes the Martian war in a way that the world would witness in the two world wars; it is a devastating war, a war that does not spare the civilians, not even the little children.

That Wells was a staunch believer in Huxley's approach to evolutionary theory has its bright side; this has been well expressed by Partington (97) when he says, "Wells believed that, although the human race is not without instinct, its ability to reason made that instinct infinitely malleable through 'moral education' or, in Huxley's phrase, through the 'ethical process.' "

But Wells's scientific and historical knowledge that impressed some very bright minds (like Toynbee's as we have seen), did not go unchallenged. T. S. Eliot was not at all impressed. Here is his critique:

One can capture attention, as a science fiction author and popular man of letters like Wells, largely because of the esoteric nature of modern science research. Established science, with its perceived genuine and highly technical relationship to natural phenomena, keeps itself at a

far remove from the grasp of the lay person, who is therefore easily swayed to admiration and respect for "scientific novelty" and for the assumed authority of men of letters like Wells. (Fluet, 2004, 303)

For Eliot, writers like Wells and Belloc, "to their lay audiences possess more authority over their adopted subjects than specialists in those subjects [like history], precisely by virtue of their 'lack' of disciplinary 'credentials.'" (Fluet, 306.). Notwithstanding Eliot's critique, however, there is enough evidence to show that Wells took the side of science all the way. For instance, his time machine is just a machine; he does his best to distance it from anything supernatural. He discredits supernatural narratives in his frame tale. For example, when the Traveller sends a small-scale model of the machine into the future, his guests initially treat the model's disappearance as if it were a magic show: the narrator wonders whether the whole thing is a 'trick' and the Traveller encourages his guests to, " 'satisfy yourselves there is no trickery. I don't want to waste this model and then be told I'm a quack,' " (Wells, 1984, 7).

Wells's familiarity with psychology, as it existed before Freud and his psychoanalysis, can also be noted in his fiction. For instance, as a certain researcher (Firchow, 128) has noted about the very deep circular wells, that the Time Traveller discovers:

the attentive reader is immediately alerted to the possibility that these wells will reveal some mystery not only with the future world but also with Wells's own psyche [...] the future schism of humanity into the creatures of light (the Eloi) and the creatures of darkness (the Morlocks) is not merely social but is also psychological. In a way, [...] Wells confirms the existence of ego and id, the conscious and unconscious levels of human perception. Descending into the wells, Wells's Time Traveller also descends into his and the author's unconscious self.

One feels, however, about the above reading, that the researcher is reading more in the novel than it bears; that he has first understood Freud and his theory, and then approached Wells with Freud's theories in mind, although as everybody knows, Wells's work predates Freud's theories.

6 – One more aspect of Wells's role as a thinker and

reformer is his tackling some worries of his time. Let's elaborate this rather briefly:

- One of these anxieties is well expressed by Anne B. Simpson (78):

The deep discrepancies between communal need and individual desire worried Wells throughout his career, beginning in the *fin de siècle* when his scientific romances – works like *The Invisible Man* (1897) and *The War of the Worlds* (1898) – exhorted readers to recognize, if not resolve, the complex interplay of sameness and difference among individuals, and the conflicts that would inevitably result.

- Another element of anxiety of his age is the fear of invasion. We come across this for instance in *The War of the Worlds*. We had occasion to quote about the Martians in that novel before, for their intellectual powers were sharpened by dire need: their planet was extremely cold. Now, once they have discovered the warmer planet, the earth, Wells tells us (Wells, 1988, 4) "To carry warfare sunward is, indeed, their only escape from the destruction that, generation after generation, creeps upon them." We had occasion before to mention that it was quite in vogue around the turn of the century to write about invasions from space.

7 – As a last point here, we may point out Wells's progressive attitude towards imperialism and skepticism. As a bright intellectual in late-Victorian period, Wells had to encounter imperialism and all its ugly attitudes and practices. Wells has often been read as one of the pioneers in condemning imperialist arrogance and cruelty. One such reading is the following (Cantor and Hufnagel, 43):

The revenge of the Morlocks upon the Elio has been read – quite rightly – as the lower classes of Victorian Britain turning the tables on the upper classes. But viewing *The Time Machine* in the context of imperialism, one might also read the Morlocks as the long oppressed colonial subjects of the British finally having their revenge on their imperial masters.

Wells was of course not the first to mock the British and imperialist powers for their arrogant attitudes towards the nations they dominated. He drew some insight about that from H. Rider Haggard's *King Solomon's Mines* and *She*, of the mid-1880s. In Haggard's novels, the 'civilized'

British move towards remote 'savage' parts of the world; whereas in Wells the travel is in time rather than in space. At a deeper level, as Cantor and Hufnagel tell us (37), the similarity is closer, "Haggard's British heroes are associated with modern sciences and technology, whereas the African natives they encounter are associated with magic and superstition." It is of course a long tradition in Western conscience that Europe is associated with superiority and the East is associated with inferior ways and mentality. According to the last source (Cantor and Hufnagel, 44), in *The Time Machine*, "Wells's hero displays the same sense of adventure that drove real explorers like Burton and Stanley, but he also shares their darker side. Although he has a few moments of doubt, he basically assumes that he is superior to any being he encounters."

Now Wells's ridicule of the colonizing powers, and especially the British, becomes more pointed in *The Time Machine* when we remember that the Eloi are most likely descendants of the British themselves. As they are quite like the most primitive natives, Wells is reminding the British that their present civilized ways are just a coincidence of timing. A last detail in this connection is that Wells makes a point in *The Time Machine* of putting in many orientalizing touches (for instance the sphinx-like statue) to indicate that the British have indeed gone native, that they are not unlike the natives they try to subdue. How different from the conventional Victorian attitude, according to which the British are disciplined, the natives undisciplined; the British active, the natives lazy, and so on!

In *The War of the Worlds*, Wells takes such exposure much further. The Martian invasion of the earth is used to expose the advanced nations' ruthless invasion of weaker nations. As Ingo Cornils tells us (35), "At the end of the novel, we know what to expect: we may be wiped out by a ruthless enemy, just like the "primitive" races that were wiped out by colonial powers." And we have it declared quite explicitly by Wells in this particular novel (Wells, 1988, 5), "The Tasmanians, in spite of their human likeness, were entirely swept out of existence in a war of extermination waged by European immigrants, in the space of fifty years." As Parrinder puts it (1970, 29), in *The War of the Worlds*, Wells "takes a demonic pleasure in the overthrow of the self-styled master race [...] The Martian invasion is frequently compared with the brutal European colonization of Tasmania."

Now this modern attitude of Wells's to imperialism

can be viewed within a general progressive attitude to the world that may not impress us today, but was surely far ahead of the conventional minds of late-Victorian period. Contrasted with them, Wells strikes us a modernist. This may be amplified with pointing out some element of skepticism in Wells, and skepticism is surely the single most telling feature of a modernist mind. A certain researcher has noticed (Lennartz, 2007, 430), "Wells's novels are not so much part of a self-contained 'futurism' as of a tradition of skepticism which has influenced literature and culture since the early 19th century." One is surely reminded here of Joseph Conrad. Cantor and Hufnagel point to this link with Conrad (36), "Comparing both Wells works [*The Time Machine* and *The Island of Doctor Moreau*] with Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* helps to reveal how the experience of empire played a role in the development of modernist fiction." That is to say, when one has gone over the complacency of the Victorians, he/she is sure to see through the ugly side of imperialism; both writers' skepticism towards imperialism is only one feature of a general wave of skepticism which was swaying pre-modernist minds.

A last remark in this section is that the sense of having a responsibility to deliver a message is all right if one can blend it in the right way with the art (i.e. if one cares to be remembered as an artist!) And Wells had his successes and failures in maintaining this balance. As Raknem says (Raknem, 46), in the course of analyzing a novel of Wells's, "Already *Love and Mr. Lowisham* shows us Wells as a preacher and reformer." After a very early and striking success, until around 1910, the struggle in Wells's mind between first-rate art and delivering a message was being settled in favour of the latter element.

ART AND GREATNESS

At the outset to this section, in the debate whether Wells cared or did not care for the quality of his writing, this writer opts for the former view. As Hammond has put it (2001, xii), "He cared passionately about words and the meaning of words and at his best – in his autobiography and such novels as *The History of Mr. Polly* and *Tono-Bungay* – he was a stylist of rare accomplishment." Having said that, it may be asserted that caring is one thing and having the talents of a great writer of the mainstream novel is another. As Raknem tells us (35), though in the field of science fiction Wells would rarely stumble, this cannot be said of his pure fiction; one novel would raise his fame, another would

bring a set-back.

You can be a writer for an elite group, and in this case you do not care for the common readers. But Wells was not of this type. He wrote his pure fiction hoping to win the admiration of both critics and public. So how much was his hope gratified? As for the public, we have the evidence of a full century to show that for only brief periods his pure fiction has won the popularity he had hoped for. And as for the critics, maybe his friends, masters of fiction themselves, should be first to be consulted about his rank in the art. We had occasion before to mention that they did compliment his successes (as when Conrad called him 'Realist of the Fantastic.') But they of course knew his limitations. When *Kipps* (serialized 1904; in book form 1905) came into the hands of Bennett, the latter was reading Zola's *L'Ouvres* and, as Raknem reports (66), "Compared with *L'Ouvres*, it appears in a way insignificant."

We may gain some closer insight about one reason for his failing to rise to the heights he hoped to reach. Draper (9) points out that, "His books have the realistic surface detail and middle-class ambience we associate with the novel, but these features are deliberately disrupted by outlandish fantasy or argument, which brazenly question received notions of relevance and decorum."

Again, one can question Wells's keenness to portray lifelike characters. Even in perhaps his best novel, *Tono-Bungay*, the characters do not develop; they do not grow into maturity. They are rather static. This is why Parrinder (Parrinder, 1995, 83) can say of him: "Wells's protagonists may be divided into those who share his mature authorial consciousness ..., and those who do not. The latter – comic heroes or anti-heroes such as Kipps, Bert Smallways, and Mr. Polly – remain limited, provincial and English."

We have reason to believe that Wells himself was aware that some of his friends were superior in some of the abilities required for great art – he was indeed rather aggressive in stressing that if their aesthetic gift was rather superior, there was another consideration, where he claimed to have advantage. Here is a frequently-quoted letter he sent to his friend Bennett, and the latter's reply, as Hammond reports (Hammond, 2001, 65):

Writing to Bennett apropos of his novel *Sacred and Profane Love*, for example, Wells had written: "I doubt if ever you weep. You have no passion for Justice. You prefer 'style' to 'beauty.'" In response Bennett told Wells a few home truths:

"Art, really, you hate. It means to you what 'arty' means to me. You live in a nice house, but you know perfectly well you wouldn't care what sort of a house you live in ... You won't have anything to do with 'surface values' at all. You don't merely put them in a minor place; you reject them."

Will this then leave Wells in the 'inferior' class of science-fiction writers? Yes, it is true that his reputation has so far (not necessarily permanently) rested on science fiction, but it is unfair to think this kind of fiction an inferior art. Let's think of it as only different from the novel proper. With this in mind, and having already said enough about the subject-matter of his science fiction, we may only add a note from a wider perspective. As early as 1895, it was felt Wells had won publicity and approval, that his books were pleasantly satirical, agreeable and amusing. This was because, like Jules Verne, an older contemporary of his (1828-1905), Wells well understood how effective the double-edged sword of hope and fear can be in science fiction. The popularization of this type of fiction may be credited to these two writers more than any other ones. Writers like Wells and Jules Verne play on the fact that part of our mind will enjoy suspending our better judgment and letting go with fantasies. Perhaps our mind tells us that we need some rest from rigorous logic – to enjoy being transported to Verne's or Wells's worlds.

It may be added about his scientific romances that he did not envision such novels as just a kind of mythmaking. For instance, *The War of the Worlds* stands out among the scientific romances as a triumph of realism. We learn much about London and the home counties of the 1890s from this novel. Let's read a few lines from this novel (Wells, 1988, 83-84):

[The narrator's brother] got out of the fury of the panic and, skirting the Edgware Road, reached Edgware about seven, fasting and wearied. .. He was passed by a number of cyclists, some horsemen, and two motor cars. ...He saw few fugitives until, in a grass lane towards High Barnet, he happened upon two ladies who became his fellow travelers. He came upon them just in time to save them.

He heard their screams, and, hurrying round the corner, saw a couple of men struggling to drag them out of the little pony-chaise ...

My brother immediately grasped the situation,

shouted, and hurried towards the struggle. One of the men desisted and turned towards him, and my brother, .. being an expert boxer, went into him forthwith and sent him down against a wheel of the chaise.

No wonder, then, that Parrinder says of his science fiction (Parrinder, 1972, 63), "Even when Mr. Wells is most awful and eccentric, there is something human about his characters." What mostly annoyed critics, it seems, is that he often spoiled his work by intrusion and irrelevant digressions.

His Short Stories

But Wells was dazzling with both novelty and the sheer volume of production. While publishing the scientific romances of the 1890s, Wells was concurrently publishing a volume of short stories, *The Stolen Bacillus and Other Incidents* (1895), and then another, *The Plattner Story and Others* (1897). It is true that some of the stories here were horrifying, but many also were very amusing stories; Raknem (26) singles out "Pollock and Porroh Man" and "The Cone" as frightful and impressive. There is some truth, Raknem says (26), in what Wells was charged of - his having, "a tendency to depict the horror and terror, and it went with his humour and a flair for the grotesque, as it did with Dickens."

Raknem tells us (27) that at the publication of *The Plattner Story and Others*, Wells was recognized as the most ingenious short-story writer. More specifically, Raknem adds (27) that Wells showed an ability to hold the reader very effectively in suspense, that he has verisimilitude, and that, "He knows just the moment when a description must be plain and prosaic if it is to be credible."

So, in the art of the short story, there was no doubt about Wells's craftsmanship. He knew exactly how to use the wide range of scientific facts he had absorbed. He had the ability to both horrify and amuse. One of his short stories, "The Lord of the Dynamos," has been singled out by many as the most impressive horror story. Here are a few lines from this story (Wells, 1998, 74),

[Azuma-zi now regards the big dynamo as a real god.] "When Holroyd was away, he went and whispered to the thundering machine that he was its servant, and prayed to it to have pity on him and save him from Holroyd. As he did so a rare gleam of light came in through the open archway of the throbbing machine-shed, and the Lord of

the Dynamos, as he whirled and roared, was radiant with pale gold. Then Azuma-zi knew that his service was acceptable to his Lord."

Two of the stories that strike this researcher as quite powerful are "The Stolen Bacillus" and "The Country of the Blind." Both can show Wells at his best. Here are a few lines from the first (Wells, 1998, 3) [An anarchist is trying to steal a bottle full of cholera bacteria to contaminate the main water supply of the city]:

"I suppose," the pale man said with a slight smile, "that you scarcely care to have such things about you in the living - in the active state?"

"On the contrary, we are obliged to," said the Bacteriologist. "Here, for instance -" He walked across the room and took up one of several sealed tubes. "Here is the living thing. This is a cultivation of the actual living disease bacteria." He hesitated. "Bottled cholera, so to speak."

The Bacteriologist's naïve boasting and its terrible consequences are well rendered in the story.

About the other short story, "The Country of the Blind", Draper says (15), "It is about the plight of and isolated and thwarted visionary in a society which denies the truth of his revelation – in short, of someone very like Wells himself."

Past, Present, and Future

Wells's luck with readers and critics has followed a very uneven course. At first he wrote some essays in the mid 1880s. He was not successful then. His writing was characterized by abstractness and lack of immediate human element.

Success came after his having read J. M. Barrie's *When a Man's Single*, after which Wells turned from the didactic to the imaginative, concentrated on some matter-of-fact incident. In the years 1893-94 he had success as journalist of the purely imaginative kind, in a humorous vein. Then came the well-known great eruption of *The Time Machine* and the other science romances, from the mid-1890s.

After only a few years, he had, as Raknem reports (36), established his reputation as a novelist who had "given more proof of original genius than any of his contemporaries." And Reknem reports somewhere else (16), "The impression most strongly conveyed by Wells's books was that of novelty. Reading his stories, many people found themselves listening to a new and hitherto

unknown voice."

Among critics, he did suffer neglect for some time. Even in his lifetime, there was the feeling after about 1910 that he had no more to give. It is almost unanimously agreed that the quality of his imaginative writing had really deteriorated. (But that does not of course apply to his theoretical and other writing.) And then, as numerous commentators have noted, there was something of a scarcity of interest in Wells in the years following his death in 1946. After that, as McLean says (1), the publication in 1961 of two important works, Bernard Bergonzi's *The Early H. G. Wells: A Study of the Scientific Romances* and W. Warren Wagar's *H. G. Wells and the World State*, is widely regarded as a pivotal moment in the emergence of modern Wells scholarship. Since the publication of these now classic studies, an ever-growing number of books and articles on Wells have appeared.

Even so, Wells has not yet come to be regarded among the masters of the English novel, or at least as a major writer of it. And that can simply be ascertained from the scarcity of coming across his name on the syllabuses of English departments. There is, however, no reason to suppose that Wells will be for the public some decades ahead what he is today. Let's remind ourselves that for the first two decades of the twentieth century he was counted first among novelists (at a time when scientific fiction had not separated from pure fiction,) and let's remind ourselves, too, of all the strange ups and downs of many writers' luck with the public. If an H.G. Wells search on Amazon.com renders today about thirty two thousand books – admittedly most of which are repetitions – then one can imagine how high he has risen with the public in the last few years. And what is to prevent anyone from supposing that some time later he will be as popular as he was in the late 1890s and the early 1900? But that is for the future to watch for.

CONCLUSION

From our discussion we may assert that, as a pure fiction writer, Wells lost more than he gained in somewhat loosening his grip on 'pure' art for the sake of education and reform. While his gain as educator and bearer of a message is rather doubtful, his loss in somehow turning from perfecting his art is certain. He moved horizontally more than he should have done, attempting too much for one mind. For this researcher, that was a mistake. But we need not go too far, for it is

right for anyone to wonder why should 'pure fiction' be the only great fiction. Wells does have his secure place in the annals of leading writers in both science fiction and

the short story. And we may hope that some of his mainstream novels, like *Tono-Bungay*, will one day receive the attention his *The Time Machines* has received.

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ويلز بين القصص الشعبية والقصص الخالدة

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ملخص

كانت هناك قوتان متضادتان تتصارعان أيهما يكون لها الغلبة في فنّ ه. ج. ويلز، فنّه ككاتب القصص العلمي والقصّة القصيرة، بل وككاتب للروايات الخالدة، ورغبته في إبلاغ رسالة؛ دوافعه ككاتب عظيم الجاذبيّة في مجاله المتميّز، مجال قصص الخيال العلمي، ودوره الذي اختاره لنفسه كمربّ ومصلح. قد يكون بعض السبب في حرمان ويلز من أن يحتلّ مكانه بين رواد روايات الأدب الخالد أنّه لا يملك ما يكفي من موهبة في هذا الميدان، كمثّل مواهب أصدقائه الثلاثة: بينيت وجيمس وكونراد، ولكنّ من المؤكّد أكثر أنّ ما منعه من احتلال مكانه بين فحول هذا الأدب، رغم تكرّر محاولته، ذلك الدافع الشديد لإصلاح المجتمع والحضارة وتصحيح مسار العالم. كان هذا الدافع من القوّة في ذهنه بحيث أصبحت لهجته أكثر فأكثر ثقلاً وتلقيناً، وبالتالي أقلّ فأقلّ شعبيّة. بينما حين كان يحقّق التوازن بين الفنّ والرسالة في تناسق جيد، وهذا ما يلاحظ في أوائل أعماله في روايات الخيال العلمي، فقد كان نجاحه باهراً.

وليس ويلز الوحيد في مواجهة قوتين متصارعتين أو أكثر في فنّه، مع أنّ ضرر الصراع كان أكبر في حقّه مما هو لدى غيره من كبار الكتاب، فالمرء يصادف لدى الكتاب الكبار نزعة تدعو أحدهم أحياناً أن يتراخى عن ملاحظة أقصى درجات الفنّ وهو يكتب ما يكتب. ففي حالة جوزف كونراد مثلاً، كان يمرّ في ذهنه بين الفينة والفينة إغراء أن يكتب قصصاً شديدة الإثارة قليلة العمق حتى يربح عن هذا الطريق شعبيّة سريعة، واستجاب لهذا الإغراء مرّة أو مرتّين. صحيح أن مثل هذه النزعة كانت نادرة في حالة كونراد، كما كانت نادرة في حالة هنري جيمس، ولكنّ ما كان يشدّ ويلز ويبعده أحياناً عن الفنّ المتميّز ذلك الشعور بالحاجة لأنّ يقدّم رسالة ويحدث تغييراً في العالم. وكثيراً ما كان فنّه يعاني وينخفض بقدر ما تستولي عليه النزعة الأخرى. ومع ذلك ينبغي أن نقول إنّ ويلز ترك من الأعمال القوية ما يترك الباب مفتوحاً لأنّ يستعيد مكانه المتميّز كأديب الذي احتله بين عامي 1895 و1910.

الكلمات الدالة: ويلز، القصص الشائعة، الخيال العلمي.

* كلية الآداب، جامعة فيلادلفيا، الأردن. تاريخ استلام البحث 2012/1/31، وتاريخ قبوله 2013/10/22.