REMINGTON AS TIME-TRAVELLER
Wells's Treatment of Time in the New Machiavelli

J.P. Vernier

(All references are to the first edition: John Lane, 1911)

H.G. Wells's narrative technique has never been considered as one of his strong points. In fact, most critics found fault with his careless style and the loose structures of his plots. However, Wells was, before all things, a professional writer perfectly aware of the problems inherent to his craft, and **The New Machiavelli**, although certainly not one of his best novels, affords a good example of the way he could handle his material, and twist it so as to achieve precisely the effect he required.

Published serially in 1910, and in book form in 1911, **The New Machiavelli** attracted more attention because of its subject matter and of its thinly disguised caricatures of actual living characters than because of its technique, and yet Wells was experimenting with a genre, or more precisely a type of novel, that would, to his mind, represent a radical departure from the more traditional novel focused on plot and characters. He intended to emphasize the forces shaping the lives of individuals and, through a discussion of these elements, question the society of his day. It was to be a novel with a purpose, a novel in which characterization would be kept subservient to ideas.

The form he chose was that of a fictional autobiography, a form he may well have borrowed from the Victorians. His main protagonist, Remington, looks back upon his past life. Circumstances have led him to give up a promising political career and to vindicate the rights of love by abandoning his wife, Margaret, to spend the rest of his life with his mistress, Isabel, in Italy. The dramatic element is provided by the conflict between Remington and (a) the political circles of the day, (b) the problem of sexual attraction. Both questions are naturally connected, but the main point is that the book aims at presenting the reader with a picture of contemporary political life, that is, between the turn of the century and 1910.

Now, when reading this book one cannot help feeling a kind of persistent uneasiness: one gets the impression that, in this picture of contemporary life, something has gone awry. The facts are there, the illusion of reality is fairly convincingly created, even to the point that it is extremely easy to find, behind the characters, the models Wells used - and the contemporary reader was certainly meant to do so - but somehow the perspective is all wrong. I should like to try and show that this impression is due to the fact that Wells deliberately confused historical and narrative times.

The pseudo-autobiographical method he chose means that we have a narrator situated at a fixed point and selecting a number of significant events in his past. This past is clearly defined as the first decade of the twentieth century. An interesting question is: where does Remington stand along the time-axis when he surveys his past to impose a meaning upon it? If we bear in mind the fact that the book was originally published in 1910, and that this date represented the historical present at the time, we may notice a number of significant points: On the very first page, we are given to understand that the break in Remington's career has taken place very recently:

"One does not settle down very readily at two-and-forty to a new way of living." (p.3)

Later on, when he recalls his passage from adolescence to manhood, he says:

"This did not happen until I was twenty-two. I was a fellow of Trinity, and the Peace of Vereeniging had just been signed." (p. 134)

As the South-African War ended in 1902, and a twenty years gap separates this event from the moment when Remington starts telling his story, the logical inference is that the narrator is situated in 1922, which means that, although there is not the slightest hint about it, a contemporary reader had to assume that the narrator was surveying the past, not from the present - that is the time of publication: 1910 - but from a point in the future.

This could certainly be considered as mere carelessness on the part of Wells, were it not for the fact that Remington keeps dating with great precision the times when certain events happened in his life. If we turn to his marriage with Margaret, we find that the times mentioned are perfectly in keeping with those given previously. Before proposing to Margaret, Remington tells us:

"I was twenty-seven when I met Margaret again, and the intervening five years had been years of vigorous activity for me, if not of very remarkable growth." (p. 198)

We know that their first meeting had taken place when she was twenty and he twenty-two, just before his trip to Switzerland in 1902.

So far, everything is perfectly consistent, provided we assume that the ten years' gap between the historical present and the narrative present is a mere convention. Again, when we consider Remington's statement, on p. 256,

"I look back now across the detaching intervention of sixteen crowded years, critically and I fancy almost impartially, to those beginnings of my married life,"

we see that the same pattern remains valid. If we assume that Margaret and Remington were married in 1907, the narrator must be situated about 1923. The twelve years' gap between fictional present and historical present remains roughly consistent.

But when one reaches approximately the second half of the book, things become very different, and a new chronological scale appears. Thus Remington alleviates the tedium of married life by the excitement of political struggle under precise historical circumstances:

"A few brief months of the vague activities of "nursing" gave place to the excitement of the contest that followed the return of Mr. Campbell-Bannerman to power in 1905." (p. 260)

To a certain extent, this marks the beginning of his political career and one tends to overlook the fact that, given the datas provided in the preceding chapters, he could not have married Margaret before 1907.

All the rest of the novel is consistent with this new chronology, which follows the historical evolution of the time: Remington is elected as a Liberal M.P. at the General Election of 1906 (pp. 275-278); he gradually clarifies his position, this takes him three years

("My first three years in Parliament were years of active discontent" p.306);

and he eventually joins the Tories in 1909 (p. 379). Book IV has several references to the situation of the narrator: the triumph of Remington's political ideas is illustrated by his winning the Handitch election, shortly after his defection from the Liberal Party, and, on p. 448, Remington says:

> "The Handitch election flung me suddenly into prominence. It is still only two years since that struggle....."

And later on, when he mentions his decision to give up his political career and to run away to Italy with Isabel, we are told:

> "It is only now, almost a year after these events, that I can begin to see what happened to me." (p. 488)

Therefore, at the end of the book, the narrator's present roughly coincides with the historical present. The gap of twelve years has simply vanished.

We may sum up these conclusions in the following chart illustrating the fundamental discrepancy in the structure of the novel:

	Elements in Remington's story.	Story told by Remington in
1st half of the book	Met Margaret before going to Switzerland in 1902. Married her at the age of 27.	1922 or 1923, at the age of 42.
2nd half of the book	Was married before the election of Campbell-Bannerman in 1905. Elected M.P. in 1906. Joined the Tories in 1909. Handitch Election: 1909. Ran away with Isabel in 1910.	1911

The whole thing is so systematically presented and carefully worked into the narrative structure that it is almost impossible to attribute it to carelessness. The number and precision of the references to the position of the narrator along the time-axis makes it highly probable that Wells was well aware of the problem he had to face and tried to solve it by means of a time-travelling narrator.

One may remark that practically all the events mentioned in the first half of the novel are connected with Remington's sentimental and emotional education, while, on the contrary, when he deals with the political life of the day, the narrator moves back toward the present. To use what may be an oversimplification, one could say that there are two different time-scales involved: one for Remington's sentimental life, and another one for his political career. It is true that the Isabel episode is found mainly in the second half of the book, but its function in the overall pattern of the narrative is that of a disruptive element in the public life of Remington rather than of a fundamental incident in his sentimental education. The emphasis is more on the public good than on the evolution of an individual.

The main question is naturally : why did Wells use this travelling narrator? Why did he create the illusion of a story told from a single point of view while, at the same time, moving his narrator to and fro along the time-axis?

Any answer must, to a certain extent, remain hypothetical, but it may also help to elucidate Wells's cryptic statement when he called **The New Machiavelli** "one of my worst and one of my most revealing books." (**Experiment in Autobiography**, p.773). I should like to suggest that the use of this rather peculiar device resulted from the fact that Wells was caught between two conflicting and irreconcilable trends: on the one hand he tried to recreate, as accurately as possible, the social and political mood of the day; on the other, for various reasons he was led to ignore the distance between author and narrator. In a lecture he delivered in 1911, and published in **An Englishman Looks at the World** (1914) under the title: "The Contemporary Novel", he described the function he assigned to the novel:

> "..It is to be the social mediator, the vehicle of understanding, the instrument of self-examination, the parade of morals and the exchange of manners, the factory of customs, the criticism of laws and institutions, of social dogmas and ideas. It is to be the home confessional, the initiator of knowledge, the seed of fruitful self-questioning."

This may explain why Remington often sounds like a mouthpiece of his creator, and also why he has to be forty-two when the novel starts. It would certainly be useless and irrelevant to offer precise models for the characters of Margaret and Isabel. Both certainly owe much to actual contemporary people while, at the same time, embodying some of Wells's dreams of ideal womanhood, but what really matters is the fact that Remington had to feel the same emotions as Wells and to go through similar experiences. Wells was to admit that his character had been conceived as a kind of **alter ego** that would say and do things its author could not say and do. Hence the necessity for author and narrator to be the same age.

But if Remington was to be forty-two in 1911, as his author had been in 1908, he would have been twenty not at the end of the South African War, but in the early nineties, and the scene shaping his emotional and intellectual growth would have been the end of the Victorian era. Obviously, this would not have been in keeping

with Wells's critical purpose. Wells was far more interested in deriding the contemporary society he lived in than in passing judgement on the past, and, furthermore, the undergraduates and young Liberal intellectuals who made up the bulk of his audience were more likely to be interested in an indictment of the present day. Remington had therefore to be shown as a character moulded by the social conditions of the Edwardian period, just as the political scene described had to be that of the first decade of the century, which means that, in the span of ten years' time, he had to pass from adolescence to mature manhood. Thus, Wells was hampered by the fact that historical time is not expandable at will, and by the absence of distance between author and narrator. He had in fact to compress twenty years of his character's life into a clearly defined historical period which was unfortunately half the length.

The only way he could solve the problem was through a manipulation of time by means of narrative technique. Whether this is the reason why he decided to use the form of a fictional autobiography is of course impossible to assert with certainty, but it seems likely. The first-person narrative enabled him to present things from a single point of view and to create the illustion that Remington was, in the fictional present, looking at a very recent past, which was a historical past. He could then, by sliding his narrator along the time-axis, bridge the awkward gap between fiction and history. Presenting Remington's story in the guise of an autobiography helped him to creat the illusion of reality and to keep the reader's attention away from the real issue which was purely technical.

The New Machiavelli thus appears as a good illustration of the kind of problems Wells had to face when he turned to the writing of novels dealing with the contemporary scene. In his autobiography he wrote:

> "I set out to write novels, as distinguished from those pseudo-scientific stories in which imaginative experiences rather than personal conduct was the matter in hand, on the assumption that problems of adjustment were the essential matter for novel-writing." (**Experiment in Autobiography**, p. 488)

In the case of **The New Machiavelli**, this led him to blend purely fictional elements with others that were determined by historical facts. The result was a strange confusion between the world of fiction and that of reality, a confusion which resulted in a dilemma that could only be resolved by means of technical devices. The fact that we find in **The New Machiavelli** two different time-scales, each one of which is perfectly coherent within its own framework, leads one to believe that Wells was perfectly aware of the distortion he was imposing upon his narrative. His many declarations about his lack of interest in the way things are told, and the carelessness apparent in some of his later novels, have led to his earning the reputation of being a writer more interested in ideas than in his art. All the same, he was a very competent craftsman, to say the least, as is proved by most of his tales and early romances, and I feel that, in **The New Machiavelli**, he deliberately made use of the resources afforded by a changing point of view to solve a problem that was apparently insoluble.

J.P. Vernier

H.G. WELLS AND BEATRICE WEBB: REFLECTIONS ON A QUARREL

Patrick Parrinder

If we were to look among the titles of Wells's books for the one which best sums up his own life, we might well choose the Penguin Special that he published in 1939 -- **In Search of Hot Water**. Wells was always getting into hot water; he was a past-master at the art of creative quarreling. His quarrels were creative not because they ever led to compromise or agreement, but because they are the sort of quarrels that continue to fascinate us long after the participants themselves are dead. Vincent Brome wrote a book called **Six Studies in Quarreling** (1958), at least half of which was taken up by Wells's efforts, and one pictures the author struggling against the temptation to fill up the rest of the book with them as well. There is no doubt about Wells's most famous quarrel, which was with his fellow-novelist Henry James. This affair displays a remarkable temperamental incompatibility, and a good deal of personal infighting, in which Wells comes in for much of the blame. Yet it is also recognized as the expression of a clash between two fundamental attitudes to art and society, and that is why it is still of paramount interest. The same degree of interest, I believe, attaches to a quarrel which has attracted rather less attention, at least until recently. This is the quarrel of Wells and Beatrice Webb. The circumstances of this are widely known, but my concern will not be with the circumstances so much as with the underlying intellectual and political contrast that it reveals.

Wells first came into contact with Sidney Webb in the 1880s, during the period when, as a London student proudly sporting the red tie of socialism, he first attended Fabian Society meetings. But it was not until he had become famous as the author of **Anticipations** (1901) that the partnership of 'Webb and Webb' decided to seek him out. Wells recalled them arriving at Spade House, 'riding very rapidly upon bicycles, from the direction of London, offering certain criticisms of my general forecast and urging me to join and stimulate the Fabians.[1] And stimulate them he did. I shall pass quickly over the colourful events of the next few years, in which he tried to turn the Fabian Society into a popular socialist crusade, a kind of Edwardian C.N.D. The resulting battle is one of the best-documented episodes of Edwardian history, as well as one of the most richly comic. Wells initially had the support of a majority of the younger Fabians, and of respected older figures like Sydney Olivier. His antagonists were not Beatrice Webb alone, but her colleagues in the 'Old Gang' -- Sidney, Bernard Shaw, Edward Pease and Hubert Bland. The 'Old Gang' won, thanks largely to Shaw, and the Society continued as the small intellectual research organization that it has remained to this day.

The personal antagonism between Wells and the Webbs sprang out of this episode, but it had other causes as well. Chief among these was the impact that Wells's various Fabian love-affairs were having, both on the recipients of his advances and on the other members of the Society. Beatrice Webb played what seemed to Wells a highly compromising role in the most dramatic of these affairs, that with Amber Reeves. As a close friend of the Reeves parents (William Pember Reeves was High Commissioner for New Zealand and a long-time Fabian), she tried to act as intermediary between parents and daughter, and so attempted to manoeuvre Amber away from Wells. The story of this episode has been fully told for the first time in Norman and Jeanne Mackenzie's excellent biography, and probably all that remains to be revealed would be in the way of further quotations from