

NEWS FROM SOMEWHERE

Competing Viewpoints in *The Wheels of Chance*

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While it would be foolish to call *The Wheels of Chance* one of Wells's major works (it is, in fact, an early and comparatively slight attempt to mine the vein of *Kipps* and *The History of Mr. Polly*), it would, I think, be equally wrong to say that it's of interest now just as a sketch for those two later books.

On the contrary, *The Wheels of Chance* not only remains an amusing and memorable novel in its own right, but offers an instructive point of entry to Wells's work as a whole. Although the only 'realistic' novel Wells produced in the eighteen-nineties, it revealingly takes fantasy as a central theme. And, like the scientific romances around it, it exhibits an exciting and disturbing range of viewpoints. Throughout this period, in spinning a diverting yarn, Wells presents the action through various ways of seeing and creates a particular tension between them which gives the work its special flavour. Although its charm probably transcends profitable analysis, a consideration of such ambivalences may help us appreciate *The Wheels of Chance* and thus other of Wells's writings, more fully.

In his important study of Wells,¹ Patrick Parrinder has written of *Kipps* and *Mr. Polly*:

the experience of the simple hero, the 'little man' confined in the nets of retail trade, is revealed and interpreted by a complex narrator addressing the reader from what Wells elsewhere called "our educated standpoint" ... The comedy arises from a confrontation between the class into which Wells was born and the class into which he adventured, and it leads towards a new world of escape from the limitations of either.

This pattern of conflicting class standpoints provides a skeleton key which will unlock *The Wheels of Chance* too, though naturally Wells wields his material less assuredly here than in those more mature works.

The book's very first sentence, while rather awkwardly constructed, serves to establish straightaway the social status of the reader and the author as that of shop-users, as against that of Mr. Hoopdriver the shop assistant. Also established right off is the digressive, facetious tone employed throughout to quietly peel aside veils of habit and complacency.

Mr. Hoopdriver is seen with what might be called a 'threefold vision'. Outwardly he is a clumsy, unremarkable, even rather dopey young draper's assistant. Inwardly, he daydreams — living "a series of short stories linked only by the general resemblance of their hero" (p.42)². The narrator, in depicting these two versions of Hoopdriver's life, mediates between them and supplies an overview, wringing his hands at his hero's simple-mindedness but insisting too on his basically chivalrous and sensitive nature. The total effect is to portray Hoopdriver as a Cockney Billy Liar-cum-Bottom.

A victim of the late-Victorian class structure, he is condemned to a life of drudgery, undercultivated both in mind and body. The very phrases and gestures he uses furnish evidence of his constriction. His remarks in the shop are "cliché, formulae not organic to the occasion, but stereotyped ages ago" (p.4). On holiday what is ironically called his "business training" (p.21) retains a deadening grasp. He calls the Young Lady in Grey "madam"; bows, rubs his hands and looks expectant; keeps pins in his lapel; scrutinizes the tablecloth. His breadth of response has been institutionalized out of him. One thinks of the educational methods of the Selenites in *The First Men in the Moon* (1901), who mechanically crush all faculties but one in their young to achieve maximum division of labour.

Setting his daydreams to one side later in the book, Hoopdriver bitterly comments that his is:

not a particularly honest nor a particularly useful trade ... there's no freedom and no leisure ... you are packed in dormitories like convicts, fed on bread and butter, and bullied like slaves ... Without capital there's no prospects; one draper in a hundred don't even earn enough to marry on; and if he *does* marry, his G.V. can just use him to black boots if he likes, and he daren't put his back up. That's drapery. (p.168).

Only reverie and the annual stimulus of a few days' holiday relieve this circumscription, but these are enough to suggest that there is much more to Hoopdriver than his role in society can accommodate.

The wounds he receives while learning to cycle become, through the narrator's commentary, mock-heroic emblems of stifled energy:

Thus even in a shop assistant does the warmth of manhood assert itself, and drive him against all the conditions of his calling, against the counsels of prudence and the restrictions of his means, to seek the wholesome delights of exertion and danger and pain. And our first examination of the draper reveals beneath his draperies — the man! (p.7)³

But, although Hoopdriver's class position demands that he be portrayed facetiously (or, what would have been worse in this context, pityingly), within the conventions of the contemporary middle-class novel Wells is clearly engaged on a salvaging operation to establish, on the one hand, Hoopdriver's essential dignity and, on the other, a

vision of life and society that will get behind not only Hoopdriver's limited perceptions but also the assumptions of the gentle reader.

The descriptions of Hoopdriver's struggles to master the comparatively awkward bicycle of the period, for example, are obviously intended to engage our sympathy. But Wells goes further and exploits the discrepancy between the outer and inner 'images' of Hoopdriver to put forward a heroic conception of him which is not altogether mockery, and which subtly prepares the reader to take him more seriously later on:

He did not ride fast, he did not ride straight, an exacting critic might say he did not ride well — but he rode generously opulently, using the whole road and even nibbling at the footpath. (p. 14).

A product of society almost as lopsided in development as Hoopdriver is Jessie, the Young Lady in Grey. Her cultivation is the counterpart of his drudgery. (Indeed Wells later regretted that he'd not extended the book by dealing with her in more depth).⁴ "Her motives are bookish, written by a haphazard syndicate of authors, novelists, biographers, on her white inexperience" (p. 66). Her life-style can produce nothing but an earnest hollowness. "My stepmother takes me shopping, people come to tea, there is a new play to pass the time, or a concert, or a novel. The wheels of the world go on, turning, turning. It is horrible". (p. 116) So, inspired by 'advanced literature', she seeks to escape and "Live Her Own Life". Instead, she finds herself in a void where she is assailed by Mr. Bechamel, rescued by Mr. Hoopdriver and finally recaptured by her stepmother. Her brave attempt only teaches her the liberal paradox that, "No one is free, free even from working for a living, unless at the expense of someone else" (p. 188).

Her stepmother, Mrs. Milton, author of the witty and daring *Soul Untrammelled* (her name implies a damning comparison, of course, with the other Milton who wrote about freedom) is much less naive. Her frivolous cultural activities are subsidized by "Mr. Milton's Lotion". Though she is a good woman at heart, the hypocrisy of her 'advanced' pose is expressed through the comment of her friend, Jessie's teacher and betrayer Miss Mergle, that, if you really want to live fearlessly and honestly, you should avoid doing extravagant things. (This complacent attitude is earlier, in a brilliant flash of polemic, attributed mockingly to Bernard Shaw's Fabian socialism. "We all know that to earn all you consume is right, and that living on invested capital is wrong. Only we cannot begin while we are so few. It is Those Others".) (p. 139).

Bechamel, the art critic, positively embraces society's self-diminishing conventions, eagerly taking up the role of that cultural cliché, the moustache-stroking villain, confident Jessie's Passion will awaken before his Strength ("He knows Passion ought to awaken, from the textbooks he has studied") (p. 66) and only fearful that if his vice

gets too public his wife may tighten the purse strings.

As he cycles out of Putney one fresh August morning, Hoopdriver innocently enters a challenging new world in which these constricting barriers of class and convention give without actually breaking.

The bicycle was a real vehicle of liberation in this period (the craze reaching its peak around 1895), admitting townfolk to the country and countryfolk to the town, doubling the distance a day's outing could cover, challenging the layers of conspicuous distinction between the lower-middle-class and the aristocracy and blessing New Women like Jessie with increased mobility and decreased harassment from chaperons. Hoopdriver's bike seems, in addition, to have his unconscious sexual desires projected on it, "leering ... with its darkened lantern eye" (p. 37)

Hoopdriver's holiday clothes are another instance of how progress in technology and the growth of the mass market were just starting to blur some of the more obvious class-distinctions in the eighteen-nineties. Both Jessie and the ostler at Bognor mistake Hoopdriver for Bechamel, albeit one at a distance and the other in the dark. Jessie cannot 'place' him — "so much there is in a change of costume" (p. 122) — and deduces he must be from the colonies, a theory to which Hoopdriver plays up in a hilarious fashion. To Bechamel himself, however, Hoopdriver's clothes are not a source of confusion but a potential threat. "Greasy proletarian," is his initial reaction. "Got a suit of brown, the very picture of this". (p. 32). It is poetic justice that Bechamel's "machine of dazzling newness", the object which most distinguishes the two, winds up in Hoopdriver's guilty possession.

The shop assistant on his bike riding to the rescue of a middle-class young lady of advanced views marks the tentative emergence of the Wellsian New Man and Woman at the approach of a new century. But tentative it is as yet. Mr. Hoopdriver can indulge in the dream that he's a "bloomin' dook" for a few days, thanks to his bicycle and cycling suit, but the distance between shop assistant and duke is only confirmed by the wish. Similarly, when Jessie offers Hoopdriver a sticking plaster when they first meet and he has "a wild impulse to ask her to stick it on for him" (p. 23), the reason his response carries such conviction is not only that it would achieve physical contact and show the strength of her concern, but that it would also temporarily reverse the customer-servant relationship. Again, the wish confesses the drab reality.

Under the stimulus of prolonged contact with Jessie, however, a greater Mr. Hoopdriver does appear. His new maturity is expressed initially, and perhaps surprisingly, in an outburst of knight-errantry recalling the daydreams of the junior apprentice back at the drapery shop. But, as well as being good fun, the flight with Jessie affirms again the potential for creative action previously squandered in

drudgery. It is better, after all, to be a real saviour, however comical, than an imaginary duke! Before Hoopdriver rescues the fair maiden we are told:

The strangeness of new surroundings has been working to strip off the habitual servile from him ... Mr. Hoopdriver for the time was in the world of Romance and Knight-errantry, divinely forgetful of his social position or hers; forgetting, too, for the time any of the wretched timidities that had tied him long since behind the counter in his proper place ... The man was living. (p. 88).

As in a world of moonshine Bottom aspired to the fairy queen, so in the moonlight ride out of Bognor ("Nowhere was the moon shining quite so brightly as in Mr. Hoopdriver's skull",) (p. 98) romance challenges reality and we are invited to take the romance as expressing a deeper truth. 5

But as he comes to regard Jessie as a real person instead of just a tantalizing vision, Hoopdriver becomes increasingly aware of their respective positions in society and sees himself in an increasingly objective light. Bitterness appears in his soliloquy to the mirror at the expensive hotel where they've sought refuge:

If I'd been exercised properly, if I'd been fed reasonable, if I hadn't been shoved out of a silly school into a silly shop - But there! the old folks didn't know no better. The schoolmaster ought to have. But he didn't, poor old fool! - Still, when it comes to meeting a girl like this - it's 'ard.

I wonder what Adam'd think of me - as a specimen. Civilization, eigh? Heir of the ages! I'm nothing. (pp. 111-2).

His role in society is not the whole Hoopdriver, however. He can still make some positive resolutions. "You can help the young lady, and you will ... If you ain't a beauty, that's no reason why you should stop and be copped, is it?" (p. 112)

Inevitably, the final question becomes: will Hoopdriver be able to rise out of his station? "If I could get really educated," he muses. (p. 169). On the other hand:

One gets tired after business, and you can't get the books ... It's all very well to bring up Burns and those chaps, but I'm not that make. Yet I'm not such muck that I might not have been better - with teaching. I wonder what the chaps who sneer and laugh at such as me would be if they'd been fooled about as I've been. At twenty-three - it's a long start. (pp. 170-1).

At the end of the book the class barriers are restored. The knight cannot win the fair lady. They part with her looking down on him from higher ground. That he trips over a rabbit hole as he departs saves the scene from sentimentality, and at the same time adds to its pathos (another paradoxical effect in what at first appears so simple a book).

Jessie promises to send him some material for study, but it is uncertain whether Hoopdriver will be able to succeed in breaking free from his trade:

It's a chaotic mood the man's in, and Heaven alone can say what will come of it all ... To-morrow, the early rising, the dusting, and drudgery, begin again - but with a difference, with wonderful memories and still more wonderful desires and ambitions, replacing those discrepant dreams. (p. 196)

The substitution of one kind of dream for another as Hoopdriver's own viewpoint - ambition in place of reverie - constitutes his progress during the book. But it should be noted that Wells regards all Hoopdriver's daydreaming as an expression of vitality, not weakness:

his real life was absolutely uninteresting, and if he had faced it as realistically as such people do in Mr. Gissing's novels, he would probably have come by way of drink to suicide in the course of a year. But that was just what he had the natural wisdom not to do. On the contrary, he was always decorating his existence with imaginative tags, hopes and poses, deliberate and yet quite effectual self-deceptions. (p. 42)6

Reverie is thus a kind of resistance to oppression, but one Hoopdriver must transform if he is to succeed in reality.

The idea of journeying out of reality into the 'fourth dimension' of imagination, then returning to reshape reality, is one Wells was to wrestle with under many guises throughout his career as a writer. It takes its impetus from the very sequence of viewpoints Mr. Hoopdriver experiences, with all the insights and limitations that implies, because Wells had himself experienced them in his own struggle to rise from the status of shop assistant to that of intellectual.

Wells's Time Traveller, when he had wanted to explore the implications of modern man's perceptions and acts, had climbed into a saddle and headed into the future, a strong, and probably deliberate, contrast with William Morris's traveller in *News from Nowhere* (1890) who simply dreams himself into the future: to a utopia which, however inspiring its positive values, is clearly also a sentimental escape from the complexities of contemporary life.

In *The Wheels of Chance* the idea of travelling into a puzzling new world where the everyday can be seen in a new light, as exemplified in *The Time Machine* (1895), is translated back into topical present-day terms.

There are certainly elements of sentimentality and simplification: someone like Hoopdriver would probably have been pulverized in the fight in Buller's Yard, for example, and our sympathy for the draper's assistant is never harnessed on behalf of those even worse off or to indicate whether improvement may be possible for shop assistants as a class rather than just for Mr. Hoopdriver in parti-

cular. But these limitations also hold true for *Mr. Polly* (the fight with Uncle Jim and the impossibility of other shopkeepers emulating Polly's actions) without damaging that book within its artistic frame of reference; and, in any case, what is so impressive here is precisely the breadth of implication that *The Wheels of Chance* is able to carry despite being an entertainment, not a professedly serious novel — something also true of Wells's scientific romances of the period. In rendering the archetypal 'stranger in a strange land' situation in contemporary England and affixing it with sociological observations, Wells had found an original and fruitful way of blending romance and social comment which is the mirror image of his best work in the science fiction field.

Whereas most of Wells's protagonists in the eighteen-nineties are catapulted out of the human context into some monstrous state of alienation, raising severe philosophical questions for the attentive reader in the process, Hoopdriver merely transcends the context of his particular job, which he comes to see as repressing his true potential as a man. But there is, nonetheless, a suggestion of the former condition, in the narrator (the very kind of person Hoopdriver aspires to become!) whose superior perception does occasionally drift towards an unhuman detachment.

Sherlock Holmes's style of deduction (an exciting innovation in late-Victorian literature, reflecting the popular impact of scientific method) is used to explain Hoopdriver's cycling bruises. Wells's narrator, however, makes it clear that this is merely a stylistic device to convey information he already has, gently poking fun at Conan Doyle who always wrote backward from the conclusion to the evidence.

"Let us treat this young man's legs as a mere diagram," he further urges, "and indicate the points of interest with the unemotional precision of a lecturer's pointer" (p.5). Later he describes the hero of Hoopdriver's daydreams and comments, "c. p., as the scientific books say, p. 4" (p.42): that is, compare the original description of Hoopdriver. These are comic touches, but a reminder too that the narrator is offering us a cross-section of contemporary life for dissection (as Wells had offered dead animals to his students, in his laboratory and textbooks, three years earlier).

When two pages further on the narrator remarks that, "Self-deception is the anaesthetic of life, while God is carving out our beings", and refers to this analysis as a "general vivisection", one is reminded that *The Wheels of Chance* appeared shortly after *The Island of Doctor Moreau* (1896), that blasphemous tale about the surgical transformation of animals into people.

The chapter entitled 'Of the Artificial in Man, and of the Zeitgeist' insists that people are indeed not self-contained entities, but subject to alteration from outside both physically and spiritually. That of course is what makes civilization possible, although the primitive man

may be supposed to be still lurking beneath the cultivated exterior. Bechamel, for example, was "getting down to the natural man in himself for once, and the natural man in himself, in spite of Oxford and the Junior Reviewers' Club, was a Palaeolithic creature of simple tastes and violent methods" (pp.83-4). When Hoopdriver chases Jessie early on, the narrator comments:

The situation was primordial. The Man beneath prevailed for a moment over the civilized superstructure, the Draper. He pushed at the pedals with archaic violence. So Palaeolithic man may have ridden his simple bicycle of chipped flint in pursuit of his exogamous affinity. (p.23)7

Such a view of human life is more readily acceptable now, in this age of the naked ape and the behavioural sink, than at the time Wells was writing of course, but it remains disturbing nonetheless.

Man is so little in control of himself that even feeding alters the disposition. Hoopdriver "was getting hungry and that has a curious effect upon the emotional colouring of our minds" (pp.58-9) and "... of an early morning, on an empty stomach (as medical men put it, with characteristic coarseness), heroics are of a more difficult growth than by moonlight" (p.110).

It is a short step from such acknowledgement of physical cause and effect to the presentation of religion as a mere empty routine, useless for guidance — as implicitly in Hoopdriver's rendition of the Lord's Prayer, "Our Father 'chartin' heaven" (p.48) — and thence to the view that evolution, not God, runs life, the waste of individuals intrinsic to it:

The faint breath of summer stirred the trees, and a bunch of dandelion puff lifted among the meadowsweet and struck and broke into a dozen separate threads against his knee. They flew on apart, and sank, as the breeze fell, among the grass: some to germinate, some to perish. (pp.116-7)

This final, desolating perception curves poignantly back into the human context here, because it is Hoopdriver himself who notices the dandelion seed as he is having his first proper conversation with the unattainable Jessie. Within the book, in fact, the effect of all these reductive perceptions is merely to provide a welcome breadth of reference and analogy. Those who know Wells in his less cheerful moods, however, will detect a chill cosmic vision seeping in among the other viewpoints.

This toying with the reader, switching from "cosmic" to "human" standpoints (to use the terms of Philmus and Hughes in their *H.G. Wells: Early Writings*)⁸, questioning one's normal limited response to events, is a constant feature of Wells's work in the eighteen-nineties. Perhaps the most horrific instance occurs in *The Island of Doctor Moreau*, chapter 10, when the screams of the puma undergoing vivisection turn overnight into those of a woman.

One might also mention the repeated equation in *The War of the Worlds* (1898): as we are to animals, so the Martians are to us.

A reference in *The Wheels of Chance* to be picked up in this context is the comment made when Hoopdriver tries cycling after a pub meal. "He felt as a man from Mars would feel if he were suddenly transferred to this planet, about three times as heavy as he was wont to feel" (p.80). Two years later the Martians – the ultimate Wellsian New Men, beings further evolved, but still riding liberating machines – were to descend on the Home Counties, emphasizing man's cosmic helplessness, revenging Hoopdriver's humiliations and subjecting reality to Wells's imagination. Hoopdriver had had a nightmare of running over Guildford with his bike⁹ – "the houses were cracking like nuts, and the blood of the inhabitants squirting this way and that" (p.49) – and Wells wrote in his autobiography, "I rode wherever Mr. Hoopdriver rode in that story. Later on I wheeled about the district marking down suitable places for destruction by my Martians" (*Experiment in Autobiography*, chapter 8). Both are surely extensions of Wells himself, the frustrated young cyclist released from the lower-middle-class through studying science.¹⁰

Moreover, the use of such viewpoints and their implications is a constant characteristic of Wells's writing: "three dimensional universes packed side by side, and all dimly dreaming of one another"¹¹ with his central characters passing between them. To be aware of their pattern as it emerges in this early social comedy is surely to begin to understand more fully Wells's science fiction achievements of the eighteen-nineties and also their unity with his latter work.

NOTES

1. Patrick Parrinder. *H.G. Wells* (Edinburgh, 1970), p. 54.
2. *The Wheels of Chance* First published 1896. Page references are to the Everyman's Library combined edition of *The Time Machine* and *The Wheels of Chance* (Dent, London, 1935).
3. It's probably as well to say here that Michael Draper is not a pseudonym.
4. Quoted Ingvald Raknem. *H.G. Wells and his Critics* (London, 1962), p. 201.
5. A common situation in Wells. Compare, for instance, 'The Door in the Wall' (1906), *Christina Alberta's Father* (1925) and, less straightforwardly, 'The Country of the Blind' (1904).
6. One such pose marks Hoopdriver as a theatregoer. When he imagines himself as George Alexander (p.115) he is recollecting Henry James's *Guy Domville*. See *Experiment in autobiography*, chapter 8. For the unreality of the contemporary theatre in general see 'The Sad Story of a Dramatic Critic' (1895)!