Wells's Novels, Imagination or Thought?

by CHRISTOPHER PRIEST

H. G. Wells, who was the most important thinker of the early part of the 20th Century, was also one of its most prolific novelists. Was he a novelist who was also a thinker, or a thinker who also wrote novels? Are the two activities indeed even mutually exclusive? It is generally recognized that Wells's best novels, as novels, were written at or near the beginning of his career, and it is also widely acknowledged that as Wells grew older his philosophical ideas became more mature and, some would say, despairing. I believe that this process of division has always been present in his work, and that by examining some of his very earliest work, in particular his scientific romances, we can understand better what was to happen later in his career.

Before going into that in some detail, I feel I should introduce myself, and explain or justify my own interest in Wells. I am not a Wells scholar, nor even something of an expert on his work. I am a novelist, and in some respects the most I can say is that Wells impinges on my work no more and no less than he impinges on any other modern British writer.

However, in 1974 I wrote a novel called *The Space Machine*. This was, in short, a homage to Wells, motivated by a number of reasons, but not least the fact that perhaps his influence was rather larger than I have just admitted.

I am, as you can see, a young or youngish man. I was born in 1943, just three years before Wells died. My family was not, and is not, an especially literary one, and yet by the time I had learned to seek out books on my own, Wells was very much a household name, one synonymous with daring or even slightly dangerous thought. The first book of his I ever read was one on the school syllabus: a collection of his stories. It was the most enjoyable book I read at school, and the only one I've re-read since leaving. Some time after this I discovered *The Invisible Man*, and after that *The War of the Worlds*. This personal discovery of H. G. Wells's work follows a pattern that was set from the early years of the century: the scientific romances still have the capacity to attract young minds, and fill them with dreams of a larger or more exciting world.

I began writing for a living in 1968; I am known today as a science fiction writer, for my sins. Wells's work looms over modern science fiction as a whole, but especially over the science fiction that is written in England. I shall talk in more detail about this later, but the influence of Wells's writing can be seen in the work of a number of modern British writers, including John Wyndham, Brian Aldiss, John Christopher and Arthur C. Clarke, as well as myself.

I conceived the idea for *The Space Machine* in a moment of hubris.

The thought suddenly struck me that I was then more or less the same age as H. G. Wells had been when he was writing his own scientific romances. The hubris was short-lived: I did not go on from there to imagine myself stepping into his boots in any other way, but because Wells became so famous in his middle and later years I had always unconsciously thought of him as an "old" writer. It was something of a revelation to realize that those books of his I admired – in particular his scientific romances – had been written when he was a young man.

I hope those of you who have not read *The Space Machine* will be encouraged to hurry out and buy a copy, so I don't want to give too much of it away, but the story deals with a young commercial traveller called Edward Turnbull who meets by chance a young woman called Amelia Fitzgibbon. The year is 1893. Miss Fitzgibbon (or Amelia, as he soon learns to call her) is employed as an amanuensis by a noted inventor, Sir William Reynolds, who lives in Richmond. Edward calls on Amelia, meets Sir William, and is soon shown Sir William's latest invention: a time machine. Or, as will be instantly clear to anyone who knows his Wells, *the* Time Machine. In Sir William's absence, Edward and Amelia mount the Time Machine and set off into what they imagine is the future. However, anyone who knows his Wells really well will recall that a certain nickel rod was loose in the controls. This has the effect of turning the Time Machine into a Space Machine, and hence my title. There follows what is known in the trade as a series of adventures, which culminate in Edward and Amelia stepping sideways from one Wells novel into another: in fact, into *The War of the Worlds*. While the Martian monsters are rampaging about the Surrey countryside, Edward and Amelia happen upon a rather portly man with bright blue eyes and a somewhat high-pitched voice, who is himself much occupied with escaping from the Martians. He introduces himself as the author of Sir William's memoirs – dictated to him by Sir William himself, immediately after his return from futurity – and his name is Mr. Wells. The three retire to the house in Richmond, where they set about a plan to defeat the Martian monsters. *The Space Machine* ends in the same place, and at the same time, as *The War of the Worlds* on Primrose Hill where the Martians are dying of head-colds. Mr. Wells and Edward part amicably, each intending to write a version of what has happened.

In setting out to write this novel, I was aware that there are three pitfalls that await the author of this kind of allusive writing, and they all begin with the letter P: Parody, Plagiarism and Pastiche.

Parody was certainly not on, not even for a moment. I believe that parody should be saved for those occasions when one wishes to satirize something one disapproves of. You'll be relieved to hear that the novels of H. G. Wells are not books I disapprove of.

Plagiarism presented more of a problem. I borrowed many things from Wells, including backgrounds and situations, a few sections of plot and some of his ideas. However, I see *The Space Machine* as being

specifically my own novel, and not a kind of surrogate Wells. When I wrote scenes that overlapped similar scenes from Wells I was careful either to describe them from a quite different point of view, or to embellish them with details that are not to be found in Wells. When I borrowed his ideas I did so only when I felt able to add to them. To give you a few examples: You will remember that in *The War of the Worlds* the Martians bring with them a virulent red weed. Wells gives no clue as to what this plant might be like in its natural state; *The Space Machine* suggests an answer. Wells has his Martian invaders fired to Earth in huge cannon-shells; we know today that no living organism could survive that sort of acceleration – indeed, anyone inside would become a red smear on the back wall of the projectile – and so in *The Space Machine* I suggest a way such a cannon might work *as a cannon* without killing its occupants. Even the "Mr. Wells" in *The Space Machine* is not who you might imagine him to be. Many readers have jumped to the conclusion that this is H. G. himself, and in fairness the novel contains no clues to the contrary. However, it was my intention not even to plagiarize the great man himself: my "Mr. Wells" is meant to be the unnamed narrator of several of Wells's scientific romances, especially that of *The Time Machine* and *The War of the Worlds*. The assumption I made was that the scientific romances are not novels at all, but journalistic accounts of actual events. If you like, *The Space Machine* is a novel about a false past, one where Wells's novels came true, and where those books are the best existing eye-witness accounts.

The last trap, that of pastiche, was one I was constantly aware of all through the writing of the novel. Again, I wanted the book to be mine, and not ersatz Wells. I wrote the novel in as straightforward a manner as I could, and did not consciously copy Wells's style at any point. But the book *is* set in period, and I assumed a different moral code, a slight difference in vocabulary, and of course gave my characters a world-view that might seem rather strange to modern readers. All this was intended to evoke the same sort of feeling as is present in the best of Wells, and if that is pastiche then pastiche is what I have created. However, I interpret the meaning of the word to be a deliberate borrowing of an instantly recognizable style. A comparison of the prose in *The Space Machine* with that of Wells will reveal what I think of as considerable differences. (If I sound defensive about this it is because "pastiche" is a word that has featured most frequently in the criticism published about my novel, even the favourable criticism, and for some reason it wounds me. It is almost as if a pastiche is an easy thing to do, writing in an assumed voice, whereas *The Space Machine* was immensely difficult to write.)

So much for *The Space Machine*. What would probably be more interesting to you would be an explanation of my motives.

All my novels, to one degree or another, are what I call critical novels. In other words, as well as having a life of their own – and are, I believe, capable of being read entirely on their own terms as stories – they attempt to say something about the form they adopt. Nearly all my published work is known as science fiction, so you can take it that most of my novels are critical of science fiction (as well they might be). For example, my novel *Fugue for a Darkening Island* is what science fiction enthusiasts call a disaster novel, in that it describes the break-up of civilization as we know it. At the same time, however, I felt I was also saying several things about the literary form. I said that the fans know the "type" by a certain name, the Disaster Novel, and it is best exemplified by the novels of John Wyndham .... although there are literally dozens of other examples. In *Fugue* I was not only paying a sort of rent to Wyndham and the others for working in their pasture, and so taking the idiom on its own terms, but also saying one or two things about what I saw as its shortcomings. For a second example, my most recent novel *A Dream of Wessex* is about the things it is about .... but in addition it is a concealed discussion of the kind of science fiction which takes a few contemporary trends and extrapolates them into an imaginary future.

And so it was with *The Space Machine*, although my criticism of the chosen idiom was almost wholly to its favour. I suppose if the motive was boiled down to its essence, it would be very simply that I was trying to recapture some of the innocence, the excitement and the ingenuousness of the early scientific romances .... especially those by H. G. Wells.

It is often said of Wells – and so often said that it has virtually become a truism – that his rise as a thinker was at the expense of his ability as a novelist. It would take considerable stamina to read every novel Wells ever published (let alone every book), but even to read a few, from selected periods of his life, is to see the process taking place. As Wells became involved with Socialism, and the World State, and history, and social evolution, his philosophy became ever more sophisticated .... but his novels became ever more hortatory and boring. His work, in fact, provides a living example to those who would argue about the worth or otherwise of a "message" in fiction. As Wells's message became more urgent, his fiction suffered.

This is not to say that I find his early work trivial or lacking in substance. The substance is there, but it is different in kind. What it amounts to is that the true ideas content of fiction springs from the unconscious.

When Wells began writing he was barely formed in his ideas. He was, as I have said, a young man. His education owed as much to his own initiative and drive as it did to his tutors, at least in the early, formative years of childhood. When he began writing his head must have been spinning with intelligence and comprehension, bursting with ideas, most of them wild and imaginative. He had no long apprenticeship as a writer; as far as we know he was published in one form or another almost from the outset. The image we have, therefore, is of a young man whose background is sketched in novels like *Love and Mr. Lewisham*, *Kipps* and *Tono-Bungay*: he would be trying to make a go of it as a writer, he was struggling against ill-health, living in rented rooms,

constantly short of money and recovering from an unsuccessful marriage. What he then wrote was, compared with the output of his mature years, direct and unsophisticated. In other words he was (and I don't mean to be condescending) a primitive, in the artistic sense of the word.

We come by this route to the innocence, excitement, etc., that I mentioned a few minutes ago, but there is much more to it than that. The early novels, of which a large number are scientific romances, have a metaphorical life that the later novels lack. They have plots and incursions, stratagems and concealments, and objective ideas. They are, to use an old-fashioned word, stories. As a consequence, I believe, of this distance, some of Wells's finest descriptive prose appears in his earliest work. One thinks immediately of the epilogue to *The Time Machine*, or of some of the passages in *The War of the Worlds* .... particularly the opening pages (who can ever forget those Martian intellects, "vast and cool and unsympathetic"?), or the exciting scene at the end of Book I, where the "Thunder Child" rams the Martian fighting machine. In the later novels, which were either more didactic or more directly autobiographical, we find similar passages only rarely. Perhaps a notable exception is the final chapter of *Tono-Bungay*, but in that instance it is interesting to note that Wells was writing in a consciously metaphorical vein.

Nor is it simply a question of prose-style. All Wells's novels are *about* something, and this is no less true of the scientific romances, for all their high entertainment value.

Anthony West has spelled out one of the essential paradoxes of Wells: that for all his obsession with optimistic ideals, such as his belief in the World State as the ultimate achievement of mankind, much of his visionary quality is in fact coloured by despair. This is so, whether it is pessimism about the frailty of human beings against the System, as shown in his later work, or the more cosmic pessimism of his scientific romances. In *The Invisible Man* it is revealed partly by the common misunderstandings the world shows towards what is after all a truly innovative scientific breakthrough, and partly by the characterization of Griffin, the Invisible Man himself, who is depicted as an irascible and paranoiac outcast. In *The War of the Worlds* he shows, perhaps, what it is to be like on the receiving end of colonial power and gun-boat diplomacy; in this novel man's mightiest weapons are no match for the science of the invader, and he wins through only because of his alliance with the invisible microbes. And what vision of humanity could be more bleak than that revealed in *The Time Machine*, where the land-owners and workers are shown to have evolved into two different races, each parasitic upon the other? Even in his comic scientific romances — particularly *The First Men in the Moon* and *The War in the Air* — the despair of humanity is vividly there, and in the latter of these is probably one of Wells's most startling imaginative prophecies: the use of aircraft in war. His introduction to the later editions is famous, where he asks for his epitaph to be, "I told you so. You *damned* fools."

It is Wells's scientific writing — and I mean that to include his romances — that provides a clue to the change that overtook his work. If I seem to be burying his later novels at the expense of praising his early work, it is not because I resist his ideas for what they were. I believe they were failures as novels, but not necessarily as tracts. What his later work reveals — or that, I must add, which I have had an opportunity to read — is that he saw himself as and believed himself to be a prophet, and, what is more, an accurate prophet. (Here I am using the word in a double sense: partly in the common usage to mean someone who can foresee the future, and partly in the more accurate sense of an inspired teacher and interpreter.)

Where I feel Wells went wrong — and I immediately qualify this to mean as a *novelist* — was in mistaking the nature of his own prophecies. It is in his scientific romances that we can see the process actually taking place.

Consider some of his successes, just his more notable ones. He saw trench warfare and the atomic bomb, in *The World Set Free*. He saw warplanes in *The War in the Air*. He saw tank warfare in *The Land Ironclads*. He even saw some of the potential of hallucinogenic drugs in *The Purple Pileus*.

However, I should like to examine one of his more brilliant prophesies by reading you a section from one of his short stories, *The Argonauts of the Air*:

> The thing .... was driven by a huge screw behind in place of the tail; and so hovering .... was rendered impossible. The body of the machine was small, almost cylindrical, and pointed. Forward and aft on the pointed ends were two small petroleum engines for the screw, and the navigators sat deep in a canoe-like recess, the foremost one steering, and being protected by a low screen, with two plateglass windows, from the blinding rush of air. On either side a monstrous flat framework with a curved front border could be adjusted so as either to lie horizontally, or to be tilted upward or down. These wings worked rigidly together, or, by releasing a pin, one could be tilted through a small angle independently of its fellow. The front edge of either wing could also be shifted back so as to diminish the wing-area about one-sixth.

This was published in 1895, so we may presume that it was written either in that year or the year before; in other words, Wells wrote this passage *at least* eight years before the Wright Brothers' first heavier-than-air flight. It's worth underlining the fact that at the time Wells wrote his story there was a considerable body of scientific opinion that heavier-than-air flight was impossible to achieve; the best hope for success lay in a machine called the ornithopter, which contrived mechanically to imitate the flapping movements of a bird. (I'd like to add, parenthetically, that I have a small joke about this in *The Space Machine*.)

But what did Wells do? He not only went against the tide of scientific opinion and assumed that flight was possible, but went on to predict what amounts to a modern monoplane. If you read that passage care-

fully you will find references to a propellor (Wells uses the word "screw", probably literally, but even today propellors are still called "airscrews"), petrol engines, fuselage, rigid wings with aerofoil shaping, windscreen, ailerons and elevators .... he even describes what we today call retractable flaps.

So on every count one can say, with a great deal of justification, that here is a clear example of Wells's predictive ability. Wells himself obviously saw it that way, as witness his introduction to *The War in the Air*.

At the risk of stating the obvious, though, what I can't let go unsaid is the fact that this description appears in a work of fiction. This story is from very early in Wells's career, from what I called the primitive period. My guess is that he did not set out consciously to predict an aircraft as such .... but, to render it into simplistic terms, he needed a flying machine that would work for his story, and created one for that purpose. What I believe he was doing was responding to an *imaginative* need, and used his imagination to assemble a logical whole. It so happens that he turns out to be more or less right, mechanically, but it does not enhance the story, as a piece of fiction, by being so, although it does add to its curiosity value. Nor would it have detracted from the story if he had turned out to be *wrong* .

The need to create imaginative situations is at the heart of the fiction-writing impulse, and my case about Wells is that this is no less true of his apparently predictive weaponry and machines. For example, a writer can invent for a novel a perfect love-relationship between two characters, and make it seem true and human and compassionate; yet that same writer might be incapable of pursuing a similar relationship in real life. The fictional impulse is to discuss reality through the use of literary metaphors, and what we can now see with hindsight as a visionary quality in Wells's early fiction probably sprung unconsciously from the same impulse.

But later in his life, probably from the time of the turn of the century, when *Anticipations* was published, Wells took his rôle as a seer and adviser not only seriously, but literally too. As I have said, this is not to demean the quality of that thinking, but to mourn the fact that Wells's novels from that time, with a few notable exceptions, became overlong, overliteral and overdidactic.

For a final example, let us consider the famous closing passages of *The War of the Worlds* . Here Wells reflects passionately on the long-term effects of the Martian invasion. He says:

.... our views of the human future must be greatly modified by these events. We have learned now that we cannot regard this planet as being fenced in and a secure abiding-place for Man; we can never anticipate the unseen good or evil that may come upon us suddenly out of space. It may be that in the larger design of the universe this invasion from Mars is not without its ultimate benefit for men; it has robbed us of that serene confidence in the future which is the most fuitful source of decadence, the gifts to human science it has brought are enormous, and it has done much to promote the conception of the commonweal of mankind.

Here is an unmistakable warning to the late Victorian Age, in which Wells was writing, and to the Edwardian Age, in which his book was set. And here too are the beginnings of his obsession with the creation of the World State. Yet how much more moving is it, and effective as propaganda, within its context? It is simple, direct, unidealized; a sharp contrast with the long, thinly disguised polemics of his later novels.

In conclusion, I should like to turn to Wells's relationship with and influence on the modern idiom of science fiction.

It is quite likely that to Wells himself the existence of science fiction would seem the least important of the many effects of his life; after all, his own attitude to his scientific romances, in later years, was one of disinterest. (He is reported as having said to George Orwell that he could not even be bothered to re-read *The Island of Doctor Moreau* in order to correct printers' errors.) However, the passage of time plays unwelcome tricks on authors. Whereas serious novels from Wells's later life, such as *Mr. Blettsworthy on Rampole Island* and *A Propos of Dolores* are frequently out of print, and are only read by scholars or students of Wells, his scientific romances, especially those from his early years, are not only continually in print in paperback, but are bought, read and enjoyed by new generations of readers. *Ann Veronica* and *Tono-Bungay* , excellent as they are, can seem extremely dated to modern readers; *The Time Machine*, *The War of the Worlds* , *The Invisible Man*, *The Island of Doctor Moreau* , *The First Men in the Moon* .... these and a few others are read not as museum pieces, but as lively, imaginative novels that still have the capacity to speak with a modern voice.

Modern science fiction has much in common with H. G. Wells's early work. It is a lively, popular literature, brimming with ideas. Much of it, curiously, is written by people with personal backgrounds not unlike Wells's own: truncated educations, lonely or intellectually isolated childhoods. And although there are today several exceptions to this, most examples of science fiction are primitive in the same sense as Wells's early work was primitive.

I should like to take you backwards through the evolution of modern science fiction, to trace Wells's influence. If you go into almost any bookshop today, you will find a huge and diverse range of titles. Some of these books are quite good, and are recognized as comparative classics within the field. Some, a few, are excellent novels by any standard. But most, an embarrassingly large percentage in fact, are rubbish, being poorly written, derivative in content and style, and inferior in every literary sense.

However, the modern paperback science fiction book is only the end of the story. The growth of the idiom took place in the mass-market American magazines, which catered, with cheap fiction, to the sort of audience that today derives much of its entertainment from television.

During the inter-war years these pulp magazines prospered, and as well as science fiction magazines there were romances, Westerns, detective stories, thrillers, horror, sea-stories, flying-stories .... all the various categories, in fact, which survive today in paperback publishing. The writers for these magazines were hacks, more often than not. They were paid by the word, and their only aspiration, especially during the years of the Depression, was to stay out of the bread-lines. Hack-writing is by its very nature imitative. If there is a formula that works (in other words, a formula that *sells*) then it is a daring hack who attempts to change it. So the primary reading-material of these writers was the magazines they were writing for. Clichés were grown under glass, for they were the food of tomorrow.

This is true of all these categories, and it is no less true of science fiction, at least in the years I am talking about. The only difference between science fiction and the other categories is that at various times, especially in the last ten or fifteen years, writers of real talent have been attracted by the ideas of science fiction and have been writing serious novels on subjects that once would have been the fodder of the magazines. (There were very few genuine novels in the science fiction category until the beginning of the 1960s, if you define a novel as being book-length fiction conceived and written as a coherent work. Most so-called science fiction novels are no such thing, being either rewritten magazine serials, or collections of short stories with common background and characters.)

If we accept, therefore, that the science fiction *genre*, at least in its formative years, was a magazine category produced by hacks, with imitation piled on imitation, it is interesting to go back to the beginning, to the very beginning, to see how it all started.

Fortunately for the social historians of the science fiction world, the beginning of the category is well known and clearly dated. It all began in April 1926, when a Luxembourger immigrant called Hugo Gernsback started a magazine called *Amazing Stories*. This was the first pulp magazine devoted entirely to science fiction .... or, in the Wellsian nomenclature, the scientific romance.

In 1926, H. G. Wells was 60. He was probably the most famous living author in Britain, if not in the world, and certainly one of the most controversial. He had written two major histories, a number of books on warfare, politics, democracy, the World State, Russia and the United States, as well as his copious output of fiction and journalism. His scientific romances were still immensely popular with the public, but they were ignored by most critics and even Wells himself was prone to undervalue them.

What then would Wells have thought when he heard about or saw the first few copies of *Amazing Stories* ? It is almost certain that he did see them (although I have never come across any record that he did) because Hugo Gernsback used a number of Wells's short stories in the first few issues. *Amazing Stories*, from the outset, looked like the sort of thing we associate with science fiction today: it was printed on the cheapest paper, it carried advertisements for trusses and crystal-sets, had lurid illustration work inside, and had sensational and brightly coloured paintings on the covers. Here was the modern manifestation of of the scientific romance!

The real interest of the first science fiction magazines, though, is in Gernsback's choice of material. In the first issues he drew heavily on reprints of existing work, notably from writers like Jules Verne, Edgar Allan Poe .... and H. G. Wells. Gernsback's dependence on Wells in particular was astonishing. In the first three years of *Amazing Stories* he published no less than seventeen of Wells's short stories, and serialized six of his novels!

It was in this way that Wells inadvertently helped create the modern American science fiction idiom. It is not that his early work would now be forgotten but for the science fiction magazines – this ludicrous claim is sometimes made in the science fiction world, and it is ludicrous because the scientific romances were already popular with an audience far wider than that sought by Gernsback – but that because the existence of these magazines soon attracted new writers, they provided the sample for the first imitations.

The pulp magazines were an American phenomenon, and they never had the same popularity over here. Most of the contributors were American, but of course British writers were published too. However, most of the British science fiction is quite different from its American counterpart. Those writers who sold to America in the days of the pulp magazines did so by adopting the American idiom, which if you think about it is a curious matter, since the idiom itself was largely derived from a British author! Other writers in Britain went their own way, looking into their own culture and society and background to find their view of the world. In this they are similar to Wells, in using what amounts to a microcosm to stand for a cosmic view. Take, for example, *The War of the Worlds*, which in spite of its title is not a pitched battle between Mars and Earth, but is actually Mars *vs.* the Home Counties! Yet the universality of the idea goes without question, as evidenced by the huge success of the various dramatic adaptations. A British writer who reveals typical Wellsian influence is John Wyndham, whose stories about ordinary people caught up in cosmic upheaval evoke an uncannily Wellsian atmosphere. His novel *The Kraken Wakes* is not perhaps his best novel, but it is the closest to the centre of his work. A sort of sub-aquatic *War of the Worlds*, it is filled with memorable images. Other modern British writers must acknowledge the same debt, mostly indirectly, but some have paid the homage by direct reference. I have already talked about *The Space Machine*, but Brian Aldiss once wrote a story called *The Saliva Tree*, in which Wells appears almost in person; Michael Moorcock has done similar.

So it can be seen that Wells's place in science fiction is a seminal

one. He is read, his books are loved and admired, and although there will never be another H. G. Wells his spirit lives on. As I say, I do not think the mature Wells would have found much of interest in science fiction, but the youthful spirit in him – the spirit of those last magical years of the nineteenth century – would have responded happily to the knowledge that there is today a large number of writers, both here and in other countries, who are trying to do in their way what he did in his.

H.G. Wells, Writer or Thinker? From Science Fiction to Social Prophecy

by J.P. VERNIER September 1978

My title is obviously paradoxical, implying as it does an opposition between "writer" and "thinker", as though we did not recognize that H. G. Wells was evidently both. However, it is a fact that his contemporary reputation largely depended on whether he was considered mainly as a novelist or as a social and political reformer. His views on social and political matters exerted a major influence on the intelligentsia of the Edwardian epoch and, although he lost a great part of his audience in the twenties and in the thirties, even then he was still considered as one of the shapers of modern thought. The preceding statement should be qualified since, to many intellectuals of the thirties he appeared as an exploded humbug both as a writer and as a thinker: a novelist who was unable to follow the evolution of the novel and insisted on being considered as a journalist, a thinker whose apocalyptic warnings to the world reminded one either of the tantrums of a fretful child or of the preaching of a belated Victorian Radical. At his death in 1946, most critics agreed that he was one of the major figures of his time and yet they generally found it very difficult to assess the nature of his achievement. David Lodge summed up the situation very clearly:

> At his death in 1946 Wells was a discredited thinker; as a novelist he was allowed the doubtful honour of having fathered "science fiction", but was remembered chiefly as the creator of engaging but light-weight sub-Dickensian comedies of lower middle-class manners. (1)

Since then, the wind has changed and Wells's reputation as a writer has grown steadily: we now know that the image of Wells as a man who wrote too much too quickly and therefore paid little attention to the language he used, was as much a cliché as the familiar portrait of Wells as an inveterate optimist and a naive apostle of technological progress. Yet the nature and value of his thought remain more doubtful: was he a popularizer of notions that are now part and parcel of our cultural background or was he a genuine original thinker? It is difficult to answer this question mainly because there was little system in Wells's thought: he had two or three basic ideas which he kept presenting under different lights, and they were ideas born not of a rational process of thinking but of instinctive likes and dislikes. This is not a reflection on their validity: reason is not often a very efficient tool when it comes to putting across social and political ideas, but it does help the critic to trace a pattern behind a thinker's utterances.