"A Blaze and New Beginnings": The Ironic Use Of Myth in *The History of Mr Polly*

Christopher Rolfe

In order to justify his decision to abandon the "scientific romance" in favour of the realistic novel, a form he considered artistically superior (1), H. G. Wells felt obliged to belittle the achievements of such books as *The Time Machine* and *The Island of Dr Moreau.* (2) It was, nevertheless, its elements of the mythic and the marvellous which made the traditional romance a form congenial to his creative imagination. Indeed, much of the popular success of his "realistic" social novels stems from their blend of the usually distinct narrative modes of realism and romance. Gillian Beer has indicated an artistic purpose underlying this technique:

> In his social novels H. G. Wells deliberately invokes echoes of older romance worlds to suggest the imagination's power to transform its surroundings. (3)

This observation is particularly true of *The History of Mr Polly,* a novel replete with the imagery of romance and whose main contention is: "If the world does not please you, *you can change it*". (4)

The romance aspect is most apparent in the language of knight errantry which colours Mr. Polly's courtship of the upper class schoolgirl, Christabel. As Mrs Beer points out, (5) the language works on two levels here, suggesting both the emotional lyricism of Mr Polly's experience, and the essential unreality of his aspirations. The episode is simultaneously elevated and (in a subtly ironic way) undercut. A more meaningful act of knight errantry – and one anticipated by the Christabel episode – is Mr Polly's offer of "protection and chivalry" (p. 319) to the Plump Woman and her grand-daughter at the Potwell Inn. He frees them from the tyranny of the bully, Jim, in a conflict which, by the same dual viewpoint, is made to appear both epic and ludicrous.

The dual point of view perhaps indicates an ambiguity on Wells's part: by having the romance element imported into the narrative by his protagonist, he can both employ its characteristic devices and at the same time maintain a superior detachment expressive of his critical disapproval. It is as though Wells is being ironic at his own expense, as well as Mr Polly's, giving wry acknowledgement to his facility with the genre he professed to despise. The book represents a self-conscious reversion to the style of the scientific romances, (6) and one undertaken with a story that has significant parallels with Wells's own life. Furthermore, it was written at a time when he was contemplating a comparable domestic escape. (7)

It is perhaps because of this degree of personal involvement that, despite its comic aspect, the book realises a very deeply felt appreciation of the mythic qualities of the romance. Mr Polly's transition from a repressive, deterministic urban environment to the pastoral idyll of a riverside inn (strongly reminiscent of the structure of Morris's "utopian romance", *News from Nowhere*) embodies an underlying myth of the Fall and the return to Paradise. As Mr Polly fulfills the chivalric fantasies he had woven around Christabel, he unwittingly becomes the hero of this archetypal journey. What appears originally to be a delightful novel of lower-middle-class manners assumes a considerably more universal significance when the

mythological patterning is revealed. At his journey's end Mr Polly is seen to be the rightful heir to the utopian Potwell Inn, a place which takes on the aura of the earthly Paradise in contrast to his earlier personal Hell.

David Lodge has suggested that Paradise and the Fall constitutes the dominant myth behind utopian literature and indicates a critical strategy one might employ in this context:

> There would seem to be plenty of scope in the utopian tradition for critical enquiry into basic myths and archetypes, as practised, for instance, by Northrop Frye. (8)

This essay will be an attempt to undertake such an enquiry into the underlying structure of *The History of Mr Polly.*

Professor Frye relates the plot structure of the romance to the quest myth: "The complete form of the romance", he writes, "is clearly the successful quest, and such a completed form has three main stages; the stage of the perilous journey and the preliminary minor adventures; the crucial struggle, usually some kind of battle in which either the hero or his foe, or both, must die; and the exaltation of the hero". (9) The plot structure of *The History of Mr Polly* relates closely to the form of the romance as described here. The first stage, which Frye terms *agon,* or conflict, (10) corresponds with the first part of the book which deals with the intensification of Mr Polly's distress. During this period his internal disorders are described metaphorically in terms of a civil war (pp. 11-12) and he is involved in an actual fight with a neighbour (pp. 235-8). The central image, formulated during the Christabel episode, is of Mr Polly as " 'one of those old knights .... who rode about the country looking for dragons and beautiful maidens and chivalresque adventures' " (p. 140).

The second stage, the *pathos* or death struggle, (11) might be seen in the three-part battle with Jim. (Frye points out in the same passage how a three-fold structure is repeated in many features of romance, and how frequently the hero is successful in his third attempt). The final stage, the *anagnorisis,* (12) is really in two parts: the public exaltation after the fire, and the private exaltation at the book's conclusion where "the mind of Mr Polly (is) exalted and made tender" (p. 369) as he meditates upon the significance of his actions.

Apart from Mr Polly's statement to Christabel, on the comic level of the narrative, that she makes him feel like an adventurous knight, there are a number of allusions to his underlying, mythic role as questing hero. One of the most subtle is on the occasion of Mr Polly's rendering of his friend Parson's recitation from Carlyle: " 'So too shall every hero inasmuch as notwithstanding for evermore come back to Reality' " (p. 40). This parody of the windy rhetoric of *On Heroes and Hero-Worship,* with its implied departure and return, acts as a veiled prophecy of the course of Mr Polly's own journey. The pattern outlined here is close to Joseph Campbell's formulaic expression of the "monomyth": "The standard path of the mythological adventure of the hero is a magnification of the formula represented in the rites of passage: separation – initiation – return: which might be named the nuclear unit of the monomyth. " (13) This is an accurate description of the structural archetype of *The History of Mr Polly.*

Mr Polly is vouchsafed a vision of the goal he is destined eventually to attain during a visit he makes to a country inn accompanied by his friends Parsons and Platt (the "three P's"). Preceded by a sceptered-isle

evocation of the English countryside (despite their attractions, no other countries "change scene and character in three miles of walking, nor have so mellow a sunlight nor so diversified a cloudland nor confess the perpetual refreshment of the strong winds that blow from off the sea, as our mother England does" (p. 36) this generalised inn evokes the atmosphere of the earthly Paradise (14) and prefigures the discovery of the Potwell Inn.

Mr Polly and his companions relish the sensuous pleasures afforded by such a place: "the swinging sign, the geese upon the green, the duck-pond, the waiting wagon, the church tower, a sleepy cat, the blue heavens, the sizzle of the frying audible behind one!" (p. 37) This list constitutes a sort of working class version of Constable's English Arcadia, or the mythical Cokaygne, which A. L. Morton has termed a "folk Utopia" (15). It is apparent, though, that this brief sojourn in and departure from this idyllic environment is symbolic of Paradise lost. As they are leaving, the young girl with whom they have been shyly flirting gives them "three yellow green apples – and wished them to come again some day" (p. 38). As in Milton, the possibility of a return to Paradise is hinted at in this parodic version of the Fall. That Mr Polly is now falling is perhaps confirmed by the girl "reaching down, apple in hand" (p. 38), and the fact that the "three P's have "no footing" in this land; like Adam, they are "doomed to toil ..... for the better part of their lives" (p. 36).

The idea of the Fall constantly attends upon Mr Polly during the first part of the book. For example, at the end of the Christabel episode he falls from the wall, receiving cuts and bruises and a face "wet with blood" (p. 149). During his proposal to Miriam he feels himself "falling, falling through the aching silence" of a pregnant pause (p. 163). His sense of a vertiginous existence is expressed by Mr Polly as being like "going down a Vorterex" (p. 167).

These images of falling are reinforced by several metaphors which indicate the presence of a subterranean world beneath the narrative's "realistic" surface. For example, when Mr Polly falls in love with Christabel, we are told that it is "as though the world had given way beneath him and he had dropped through into another" (p. 145). This other world, invoked to describe Mr Polly's sensations on discovering the sharp fall in his bank balance, has a sinister aspect: "It is like the opening of a pit just under your feet" (p. 166). The pit image is allied to the "depths and terrors" Mr Polly discovers beneath the fabric of his daily life on the occasion of the disruptive "Parsons affair" (p. 53), and the "fearful suspenses yawning beneath his feet" (p. 167) when he considers the prospect of unemployment. That it is potentially violent is suggested by the metaphor descriptive of the state of Mr Polly's digestive process (the language of which demonstrates the relatedness of this thread of underworld imagery): "those grey spaces of time after meals when all one's courage had descended to the unseen battles of the pit" (pp. 14-15). The imagery of falling and the descent into a perilous subterranean world are obviously related, and suggest both the Fall and the hero's underworld journey. Both of these motifs may be seen as expressions of Campbell's first phase, separation.

Separation may be experienced as social or psychological, as well as physical, alienation. Northrop Frye has shown how these states may be connected with the mythological. "In the descending hierarchical order",

he writes, "where the individual is primarily a unit of his society, there is a sense of growing isolation that intensifies as we reach a place in which we feel, as Sartre says, hell is other people" (16). The fifteen years that pass "in a flash" (p. 203) at the Fishbourne shop are the years during which Mr Polly becomes isolated from his fellows and dehumanized:

> he came to hate the very sight, as people say, of every one of these neighbours. There they were, every day and all the days, just the same, echoing his own stagnation. They pained him all round the top and back of his head; they made his legs and arms weary and spiritless. The air was tasteless by reason of them. He lost his human kindliness (p. 230).

This depiction of Mr Polly's torment emphasizes the hellish nature of his environment. Like those trapped in the rings of Dante's Inferno, the High Street shopkeepers are described as "distraught souls" who constitute "a magic circle of suspicious, preoccupied, and dehumanized humanity" (p. 229). For Mr Polly, whose "soul is black indeed" (p. 243), the High Street has become "an infernal place" (p. 245).

Having decided to cut his throat, and intent on starting a fire in the coal cellar, Mr Polly descends "slowly downstairs, matchbox in hand" (p. 253). This is his nadir; in this moment all the underworld imagery finds its concrete embodiment. The flames bursting from the underground chamber powerfully suggest the flames of hell. It is at this point, as the paraffin can explodes, that Mr Polly cries out "like a man who wakes up from a dream", and he springs "up and backwards" from the flames (p. 255). Here is the beginning of his ascent, both from the flame-filled cellar and the deterministic dreamworld he has been inhabiting. From now on, from being a passive sufferer of the vertiginous sensations of post-lapsarian man, he becomes an active force in a sphere of his own choosing, and his veiled heroic nature becomes more manifest.

The fire is one of the book's major set pieces and the description of the fire-fighting activity is handled with Keystone-comedy gusto, providing a lively, festive atmosphere. It is apparent, though, that Wells intended this event to have an underlying ritual aspect. A clue to this intention is provided by those onlookers newly emerged from church whose formal attire gives "a note of ceremony to the whole affair" (p. 266). This aspect of the fire has earlier been prefigured when, in his helpless state before his marriage, Mr Polly is compared to other "souls" who have been "ceremoniously drowned or burnt or hung" (p. 175). Wells's source for the idea of Mr Polly's conflagration as a ceremonial fire-festival appears to have been Sir James Frazer's *The Golden Bough*. (17)

As the sub-title of the first edition of 1890 indicates, *The Golden Bough* is a study in comparative religion. Its basic theme is that the myths and rituals of all ancient religions ultimately refer back to the worship of a vegetation deity. Frazer points out that under the names of Attis, Adonis and Osiris, the early middle eastern civilisations "represented the decay and revival of vegetation with rites which, as the ancients themselves recognised, were substantially the same, and which find their parallels in the spring and summer customs of our European peasantry (18)". One of the most widespread of all these customs was that of the ceremonial fire. Frazer devotes a large part of his book to the discussion of the meaning of fire-festivals. "Not uncommonly", he writes, "effigies are burned in

these fires, or a pretense is made of burning a living person in them; and there are grounds for believing that human beings were actually burned on these occasions (19)". It is perhaps the element of "pretence" of human sacrifice, that is to say its symbolic enactment, that allowed Wells to see the fictional possibilities of this anthropological material. On several occasions Frazer describes how peasants "dance singing round" the bonfires (20). At the Fishbourne fire, which occurs in the spring, a vulgar element "danced and shouted" (p. 265) throughout the proceedings. The description of dancing links up with Wells's treatment of the actual flames. Consistent with the hell imagery of the fire, the flames are compared to "serpents' tongues" which are "licking" from the roof (pp. 264-5). Paradoxically, the same association with serpents is made with Rusper's garden hose, which is being used in place of the town's burnt fire-fighting equipment: "a number of people appeared to be destroying interminable red and gray snakes under the heated instruction of Mr Rusper – it was as if the High Street had a plague of worms" (p. 265). The association of flames and serpents may well have been suggested to Wells by a passage in *The Golden Bough*. In the context of discussing Druidic fire sacrifices, Frazer quotes a description of the contemporary Pyrenean practice of burning the creatures live in bonfires:

> As many living serpents as could be collected are now thrown into the column, which is set on fire at the base by means of torches, armed with which about fifty boys and men dance around with frantic gestures. The serpents, to avoid the flames, wriggle their way to the top, whence they are seen lashing out laterally until finally obliged to drop, their struggle for life giving rise to enthusiastic delight among the surrounding spectators. (21)

The "serpents' tongues ... licking" from the roof of the burning shop, Mr Rusper's organisation of the snake-destroying activities, and the earlier references to the shouting and dancing crowd, find their parallels here.

The richness of Wells's imagery encompasses the idea of Mr Polly as sacrificial scapegoat, as well as "distraught soul" in hell and hero on a perilous journey. In Frazer, the sacrificial scapegoat, identified with the deity, is often eaten by the celebrants. Alluding to Frazer in *The Outline of History*, Wells describes the "special sacrificial persons who are killed at seed-time," and how "the tribe eats portions of the body of the victim in order to share in the sacrificial benefits (22)". Sacramental cannibalism, which is a vestigial form of *sparagmos*, the ritual dismemberment of the god prior to his regeneration, appears to be alluded to in the description of the crowd's reception of Mr Polly as he emerges from the blazing building after rescuing Mr Rusper's mother-in-law:

> .... the crowd howled like a pack of dogs at him. Impatient men, unable to wait for him, seized and shook his descending boots .... (p. 273)

However, the communion is celebrated not with the consumption of the hero but, later at the Temperance Hotel, more temperately with cocoa and a tin of biscuits (p. 277).

Be that as it may, the descriptive language makes it clear that the appearance of Mr Polly from the flames signifies the ritualistic climax of this particular episode. He is described as emerging "out of the conflagration he had lit to be his funeral pyre, moist, excited, and tremendously alive" (p. 273). Here Wells includes a further dimension to the mythic

possibilities suggested by the fire, one which is naturally suggested by the death and rebirth motif. Like the fabulous phoenix, from his self-ignited "funeral pyre" Mr Polly is " 'born again' " (p. 280). That Wells intended this allusion is made clear by the feelings of Mr Polly's fellow shopkeepers: because of the insurance money which will allow them to leave hated Fishbourne and start afresh, we are told: "Life was already in their imaginations rising like a phoenix from the flames" (p. 278). (23)

The complex of mythological associations symbolised by the fire is, as it were, summed up by one of the book's vivid expressions of release: Mr Polly's realisation that his actions had "turned old, cramped and stagnant Fishbourne into a blaze and new beginnings" (p. 284). Reminiscent of Michael's prophecy to Adam that, after destroying Satan's perverted world, Christ will

> raise
> From the conflagrant mass, purged and refined,
> New Heavens, new Earth, (24)

Wells's phrase strongly suggests the purging effect of the fire. Given this traditional association of fire, one is not surprised to find that Frazer is able to demonstrate that fire-festivals had a purificatory function (25). Thus Mr Polly's blaze, which destroys his old, deadening life, constitutes on the mythological level the fire through which, like Dante, he must pass before being able to undertake the quest to regain paradise. Guided by Campbell, one may consider that Mr Polly is now initiated into his "new beginnings", the new world of the Potwell Inn.

The sudden change from urban Fishbourne, associated with violence, death and hell, to the green, pastoral, riverside setting of the Potwell Inn, is as disjunctive as that of the two countries of *The Winter's Tale*. (26). Like one of Frazer's vegetation gods, Mr Polly's personal renewal, manifested in this landscape, coincides with "a profusely budding spring day, and greens such as God had never permitted in the world before .... " (p. 286). In this connection, it is worth remarking that at the beginning of the book, when Mr Polly is suffering the worst torments of his personal hell, the actual landscape has a waste land appearance, the fields are "threadbare" (p. 7), the buds "wilted, the sunlight metallic, and the shadows mixed with blue-black ink" (pp. 10-11).

The inn itself is intimately associated with vegetation. With "its deep tiled roof, nestling under big trees" (p. 292) and "an extensive grapevine (spreading) level branches across the whole front of the place" (p. 293), it is as though it enjoys the protective embrace of a maternal nature. The flowering garden, orchard, and adjacent "buttercup yellow meadow" (p. 292) serve to emphasise the Inn's paradisal quality. Mr Polly feels that it is "almost divine" (pp. 292-3), and it is here that he discovers the Plump Woman, an almost-divinity.

The first mythological association made in connection with the Plump Woman is the simile comparing her "jolly chins" to "chubby little cherubim about the feet of an Assumptioning Madonna" (p. 294). The ascending aspect of this comparison is humorously apt for the future consort of the hero presently on the upward stage of his journey. It is apparent, though, that she is to be compared less with a baroque Mother-of-God than a primitive Mother Earth. The emphasis upon her amplitude and serenity, her appearance as "one who knew herself good in substance, good in essence" (p. 294), and her

abundantly stocked, shrine-like bar, combine to give this impression. Like many avatars of the earth goddess, for example, Gaea, who produced the goods of the earth whilst asleep (27), she is first portrayed sleeping. However, because of the quintessential Englishness of the Potwell Inn, she may perhaps be seen as a more homely female divinity, an embodiment of that "Mother England" apostrophised during the earlier inn episode, and whose "careless generosity" is later described as affording "her children a variety of foods unparalleled in the world's history" (p. 220).

The riverside setting of the Inn is an important aspect of the Plump Woman's mythological correspondences. Water, like earth, has always been conceived of as a female element, and in British folklore rivers are often identified with a supernatural female (28). That the Plump Woman is closely associated with the river (like another pub lady, Joyce's Anna Livia) is suggested not only by the fact that her inn is located on its bank and that she owns the ferry, but also by her name, Aunt Flo. In the following lyrical description of the river:

> A swan floated against the dark green masses of the further bank, the stream flowed broad and shining to its destiny (p. 368),

It is whilst he is upon the river, returning from ferrying his second passengers "across the sundering flood from the inn to the unknown" (p. 303), that Mr Polly meets the Plump Woman's granddaughter. The allusion here to William Morris's last romance, *The Sundering Flood* (published the same year as Wells's *The Plattner Story* and *The Invisible Man: A Grotesque Romance*, (1897), is particularly apt. Osberne and Elfhild, the youthful protagonists, live on opposite banks of the eponymous river; hence during their first conversation they are divided by it – as are Mr Polly and the girl (29). There is thus an ironic comparison implied here between Morris's hero and Mr Polly which mocks the quixotic consciousness formed by such literature. And yet, as in the parallels suggested by Mr Polly's possession of a copy of Morris's quest-romance, *The Life and Death of Jason* (p. 119), there is a dual response. Modern life can be seen to possess the possibility of heroic achievement, if of more modest – or "realistic" – proportions, and the potential to return to a simpler, nobler existence. The phrase, "across the sundering flood from the inn to the unknown," provides an image for the transitions that Wells's mythopoeic imagination makes possible between the book's "real" world and that "other world" of mythic analogies. Not surprisingly, therefore, the relationship between Mr Polly and the child, who also is called Polly, proves to be of symbolic importance.

The fact that they share the same name immediately implies some kind of bond between them, one which is reinforced by the less obvious point that they are both without parents. Their name, reminiscent of the parrot, the so-called echo-bird, hints at a *Doppelgänger* motif; the reflecting water between them is a mirror implying the same idea. (30) She considers him to be "the new human being Heaven had sent into her world" (p. 314), and concedes that he may "be called Mr Polly, in honour of her, Miss Polly, even as he desired" (p. 314). In this way she symbolically confers her innocence upon him whilst acknowledging the special nature of their relationship.

As Wordsworth makes clear, the universal myth of paradise is a myth of childhood. It is Wells's awareness of this which accounts for the otherwise irrelevant inclusion of the little girl at the Potwell Inn (31). Inasmuch as she may be seen to symbolise Mr Polly's renewed self, the threat to her

innocence from her Uncle Jim is a major factor in his decision to stay and fight. East of the Inn, debating the wisdom of taking on the battle, Mr Polly's predicament is underlined in a Miltonic allusion: "There lay the road before him . . . . " (p. 322), an obvious indication that he is teetering on the brink of a second Fall, this time from his precariously regained innocence. And in fact, when the effect of his smashing a bottle over Jim's head is only to infuriate further his antagonist, this is exactly what happens: "For a time our Mr Polly has figured heroic. Now comes the fall again" (p. 326); he flees. However, his flight is in the nature of a tactical withdrawal: he knows he must "fight or perish" (p. 320) to preserve his "threat-marred paradise" (p. 319).

At this stage, the three characters, Mr Polly, little Polly, and Uncle Jim, constitute a kind of psychomachia, the "little tramp" (p. 322) Everyman figure containing them all. The statement that Mr Polly's mind "seemed to have divided itself into several compartments, each with its own particular discussion busily in progress, and quite regardless of the other" (p. 321), lends credence to this view. Seen in this light, the "private war between Mr Polly and Uncle Jim for the possession of the Potwell Inn" (p. 324) might also be interpreted in a Freudian sense as symbolizing the conflict between the Superego and the Id.

Certainly Wells achieves here the kind of symbolic intensity that is generated by the paradisal and demonic imagery of *The Time Machine*. (32). In this context, Frye's discussion of the conflict between the hero and the enemy of traditional romance is illuminating. "The enemy may be an ordinary human being," he writes, "but the nearer the romance is to myth, the more attributes of divinity will cling to the hero and the more the enemy will take on demonic qualities (33)." The kind of divinity which hedges Mr Polly, his sacrificial death and rebirth corresponding to Frazer's seasonal King-priest-god figures, has already been suggested. It remains, then, to illustrate the "demonic qualities" of Uncle Jim.

In the reformatory where he was sent as a boy, according to the Plump Woman, Jim underwent a Miltonic metamorphosis: because he " 'didn't mind pain' ", the other boys " 'made him think himself a hero' " (p. 309); but on his return to the paradisal inn, he looked " 'more like a viper than a human boy' " (p. 310). He appears to Mr Polly with a "big head that has something of the snake in the convergent lines of its broad, knobby brow" (p. 315). The snake imagery in these two passages associates Uncle Jim with Mr Polly's inferno, and the phrase "knobby brow" even suggests horns. The delinquent himself confirms all suspicions: " 'They've reformed me,' " he informs his aunt, " 'and made me a devil, and a devil I mean to be to you' " (p. 310). Apart from generally " 'prowling around and doing evil' " (p. 307), this "devil" is attempting to corrupt little Polly by " 'teaching her words, and giving her ideas' " (p. 307) – the temptation of forbidden knowledge.

The mock-epic nature of the three-part "private war" between Mr Polly and Jim emphasises the ironic cast of Wells's mythopoeic imagination. Jim, for example, fights with a serpent-like dead eel; and Mr Polly, retaliating with a poker, thrusts a "spectacled gentleman before him, as heretofore great heroes were wont to wield the ox-hide shield" (p. 343). At the same time, like his eighteenth-century mentors Pope and Fielding, Wells's tendency towards mock-epic (stressed further by the *in medias res*

opening) is indicative of a great respect for the ancient, mythic world. Thus, beneath the parody of Homer may be discerned deeper archetypal analogies. Jim has not only to be ousted like the priest at Nemi (a ritual described by Frazer at the beginning of *The Golden Bough*) before Mr Polly can reign at the Potwell Inn; he also has to assume Mr Polly's role of scapegoat along with the hero's clothes.

This view of their conflict may be illustrated by the comparison with an incident in the earlier fight Mr Polly has with his neighbouring shopkeeper, Mr Rusper. The affray begins with Mr Polly being precipitated from his bicycle into Mr Rusper's hardware: "He sent a column of pails thundering across the doorway and dismounted with one foot in a sanitary dustbin amidst an enormous uproar of fallen ironmongery" (p. 235). The "entanglement with the dustbin" (p. 236) and the other "fallen" items is emblematic of Mr Polly's condition at this time. This scene is echoed when, Mr Polly having rammed a pail over his enemy's head, Jim is portrayed "down and writhing dangerously and noisily upon the yard tiles with his head still in the pig pail" (p. 328). By ramming the pail over Jim's head, Mr Polly transfers his entangling frustrations onto him.

The struggle the two combatants have with the broom also contributes to this interpretation. The encircling of the house which preceded the impailing of Jim is repeated in the circles they make around one another with the broom held between them. The terrifying bond of the broom implies both their separation and their relatedness. (There is a suggestion here of another *Doppelgänger* relationship: if little Polly represents Mr Polly's renewed innocence, Jim is the "superfluous criminality" (p. 284) he must shed (34). When Jim almost jerks the broom out of Mr Polly's grip he recovers it "with the clutch of a drowning man" (p. 330). Earlier, amongst various modes of dispatching himself, Mr Polly has considered drowning (p. 285). Thus Wells has taken care to associate his hero with death by water; this is now, along with his frustrations, transferred onto Jim. After having "swept him round in a circle", Mr Polly thrusts Jim into the river, at the same time abandoning "the broom to the enemy's clutch" (p. 330). The verbal echo here signifies that the transferrence has taken place and that, as Mr Polly repeatedly jabs at him with the punting pole, it is complete: "A hand clutched and disappeared" (p. 331). In this comic analogue of his actual drowning, Jim, the symbol of evil, is ritually cast into the river like so many of the scapegoats in *The Golden Bough* (35)

On the brief visit to Miriam where Mr Polly learns of Jim's actual and his own supposed death, he reassures his wife that she will never see him again, saying: " 'I'm a visitant from Another World' " (p. 367). The mythical dimension of the Potwell Inn, referred to here in this ironic allusion to the scientific romances, is given suitably prominent treatment in the book's final section, where Mr Polly and the Plump Woman admire the sunset across the river. Despite his struggles "with the mystery of life" (p. 368), Mr Polly at this stage is described as "not so much thinking, as lost in a smooth, still quiet of the mind" (p. 374). This metaphor, with its watery implications, relates to his present meditation to the earlier time when he had considered drowning himself in "some smooth broad river" (p. 285). He has moved from vexed action to contemplative serenity and achieved those "joyous states of body and mind" which in Fishbourne had appeared "magically inaccesible" (p. 21). There is also a further implication, that he is bathed

in the flowing waters, associated with the Plump Woman beside him, from which his sense of regeneration will be made perpetually manifest. The amniotic overtones are made quite explicit, for after describing the harmonious setting, the narrator observes:

> It was as if everything lay securely within a great, warm, friendly globe of crystal sky. It was as safe and enclosed and fearless as a child that has still to be born (p. 368).

Thus we are in a sense returned to the beginning of Mr Polly's "history", which is related, as we saw, "from the cradle", that initial state of security and safety where the infant hero's parents "wrapped him up in soft, warm blankets, and smothered him with kisses" (p. 15). With this cyclical structure, chronological time, that is, history, is abolished and a timeless "other world" created. It is precisely this feeling, reflected in the book's many images of childhood, of a fundamental unity between man and a maternal nature, which constitutes Paradise regained (36).

The hero has successfully returned; just as Wells himself, and for the last time, successfully returned to that narrative mode which released his mythopoeic imagination. By achieving what Gillian Beer has referred to as a reconciliation of realism and romance (37), Wells was able to give symbolic expression to the utopian possibilities of ordinary life and create of Mr Polly's "quest" (p. 322) for "his sufficient beauty" (p. 321) a modern myth of personal renewal.

NOTES

1. For a detailed discussion of Wells's critical attitude towards romance and his strong advocacy of the realistic novel, see Gordon N. Ray's article, 'H. G. Wells Tries to Be a Novelist', in *Edwardians and Late Victorians*, ed. Richard Ellmann, New York: Columbia U. P., 1960, pp. 106 ff.
2. See, e. g., Wells's letters to Arnold Bennett of 15th June 1900, and 19th August, 1901. *Arnold Bennett & H.G. Wells*, ed. Harris Wilson, London: Hart-Davis, 1960.
3. Gillian Beer, *The Romance*, London: Methuen, 1970, p. 75.
4. H. G. Wells, *The History of Mr Polly*, London: Thomas Nelson, 1910, p. 283. All further page references to this edition will be made in the text.
5. *The Romance*, p. 75.
6. David Lodge has sensed this aspect of *The History of Mr Polly*: "Wells was back to the point he had reached in the scientific romances, Mr Polly's arson being a private enactment of the earlier versions of global destruction". *The Novelist at the Crossroads*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1972, p. 219.
7. See Norman & Jeanne MacKenzie, *The Time Traveller; The Life of H.G. Wells*, London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1973, p. 266.
8. *The Novelist at the Crossroads*, p. 230.
9. Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism*, Princeton: Princeton U. P., 1957, p. 187.
10. Ibid.
11. Ibid.
12. Ibid.
13. Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, Princeton, Princeton U. P., 2nd. ed., 1968, repr. pb. 1973, p. 30.
14. The Prologue to William Morris's *The Earthly Paradise* (1868-70) describing the actual quest, is entitled "The Wanderers". Amidst these "rural serenities" (p. 34) the "three P's" are described as "happy wanderers" (p. 36). The lonely and unhappy period spent by Mr Polly searching for a "crib" after Port Burdock is called his "wander years" (p. 71).

15. Of Cokaygne, Morton writes: "It reaches back into myth, it colours romance, there is hardly a corner of Europe in which it does not appear." *The English Utopia*, London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1952, 2nd imp. 1978, p. 16.
16. Northrop Frye, *The Secular Scripture: A Study of the Structure of Romance*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard U.P., 1976, p. 184.
17. The first 2 vol. edition of *The Golden Bough*. was published by MacMillan in 1890. All references will be made to this edition. A 2nd., 3 vol. edition appeared in 1900, and the full 12 vol. edition was completed in 1915. Wells had certainly some knowledge of the first edition by 1898, when in a review of Grant Allen's *The Evolution of the Idea of God* he ironically refers to *The Golden Bough* as "that most valuable and unreadable book" (Robert M. Philmus and David Y. Hughes (eds.), *H.G. Wells: Early Writings in Science and Science Fiction*, California U.P., 1975, p. 43). The chapter of *In the Days of the Comet* (1906) entitled "The Beltane Fires" draws freely upon Frazer's discussion of Beltane bonfires (*The Golden Bough*, 1890, Vol. 2., pp. 254-258), demonstrating that, in fact, Wells had found the book eminently readable. The most clear evidence of Wells's enduring interest in Frazer is to be found in *The Outline of History*. Here Frazer is called "the leading student of the derivation of sacraments from magic sacrifices" (rev. edition, London: Cassel, 1920, p. 66), and the chapters on primitive thought are primarily dependent on his work (see John B. Vickery, *The Literary Impact of The Golden Bough*, Princeton: Princeton U.P., 1973, p. 102). Although Wells began writing *The Outline* eight years after the publication of *The History of Mr Polly*, it is evident that his interest in Frazer's work had been aroused at least 20 years before.
18. *The Golden Bough*, Vol. 2, pp. 278-9.
19. Ibid., p. 247.
20. Ibid., p. 253. See also p. 246.
21. Ibid., p. 282.
22. H.G. Wells, *The Outline of History*, p. 65.
23. The figurative language here possibly conveys a further implication, that Mr Polly's accidental release of the shopkeepers from their economic bondage is a comic version of the Harrowing of Hell. Cf. Bernard Bergonzi's interpretation of the Time Traveller's "descent into hell", *The Early H.G Wells*, Manchester: Manchester U.P., pp. 52-3.
24. *Paradise Lost*, XII, 547-9.
25. *The Golden Bough*, Vol. 2., p. 272.
26. William Bellamy makes the same point in relation to the structure of *In the Days of the Comet*. See *The Novels of Wells, Bennett & Galsworthy: 1890-1910*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1971, p. 126.
27. See Robert Graves, *The Greek Myths*, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1971, Vol. 1, p. 31.
28. See J.P. Alcock, "Celtic Water Cults in Roman Britain", *Archaeological Journal*, 1965, Vol. 122, pp. 1-13. Cited by Michael Dames, *The Silbury Treasure: The Great Goddess Rediscovered*, London: Thames and Hudson, 1976, p. 106.
29. Cf. Canto 28 of *Purgatorio*, where the poet finds himself separated by a narrow river from "una donna soletta" (l. 40), the young Matilda, who symbolizes unfallen childhood in Eden.
30. See Frye, *The Secular Scripture*, pp. 106 and 108. Norman and Jeanne MacKenzie indicate the prevalence of the *Doppelgänger* motif in Wells's work: see *The Time Traveller*, p. 118.
31. Cf. the 65 year old Wells's treatment of Surly Hall, the "summer paradise" of his boyhood and model for The Potwell Inn, *Experiment in Autobiography*, London: Gollancz, 1934, Vol. I, pp. 112-115.
32. For this and the Freudian approach, cf. Bergonzi, *The Early H.G. Wells*, p. 20.
33. *Anatomy of Criticism*, p. 187.

34. Interestingly enough, Wells originally intended calling his hero Jim: one of the preliminary versions of the title written by Wells across the top of the first page of the typescript (held at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign) is *The Experiences of Mr James Prolly*. Furthermore, considerable emphasis is given in the book to the fact that the Plump Woman confuses Mr Polly with Jim when she first sees him (p. 295).
35. Amongst a number of examples of rituals designed to drive out witches and devils with sticks and brooms, Frazer gives that of the Finns who beat every corner of house and yard with a stick split in nine places, saying: " 'We are driving Satan from the village.' Afterwards the sticks are thrown into the river below the village and as they float down stream Satan goes with them...." (*The Golden Bough*, Vol. 2, p. 179) Having been thrown into the river with the broom, "devil" Jim is kept "moving down-stream" (p. 332) with regular jabs of the ferry pole.
36. I am indebted to Professor J.-P. Vernier for letting me read his unpublished paper, '*The History of Mr Polly* et la quête du bonheur', from which I have adapted this idea.
37. *The Romance* p. 74.

THE H. G. WELLS SOCIETY

Weekend Conference 1981

The theme of the 1981 weekend conference is to be H. G. WELLS AND HIS LITERARY FRIENDSHIPS. This will be held at the Polytechnic of North London on Saturday and Sunday, September 19th. and 20th.

There will be three main sessions, dealing respectively with 'Wells and George Gissing', 'Wells and Arnold Bennett', and 'Wells and Henry James'. The intention is to invite representatives of the appropriate literary societies to join with us on this occasion.

For further information please write to: J. R. Hammond, 24 Wellin Lane, Edwalton, Nottingham, NG12 4AS, enclosing a £1 deposit to secure your booking.