Wells and the Literature of Prophecy

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> the prophetic soul
> Of the wide world dreaming on things to come...

In 1922 C. K. Scott Moncrieff went to Shakespeare's sonnets for the title of his great translation of Proust, *Remembrance of Things Past*. A few years later H. G. Wells took over another Shakespearean phrase in his novel *The Shape of Things to Come* (filmed by Alexander Korda in 1935 as *Things to Come*). If Wells is, as Brian Aldiss has suggested, the "Shakespeare of Science Fiction"[1] it is because he deliberately set out to become the 'prophetic soul' of an age which suspected that science could not only reconstruct the past but could anticipate the future. For Shakespeare, the only time-machine available had been the immortality of his own verses. Wells patented a time-machine in his fictional laboratory and led a long series of guided tours of the undiscovered country.

His whole life and activity as a writer was an exploration of the varying forms of prophecy. The continuity of his prophetic stance undermines all attempts at a rigid separation of his work into 'early' and 'late' periods, into 'imaginative' and 'didactic' writing, into a phase when he was a genuine artist and a subsequent collapse into journalism.[2] The view that Wells's career was that of a failed artist overlooks the fact that, throughout his life, his first responsibility was not to art but to the message that spoke through it.

The note of prophecy was already present in the apprentice writings that he produced as a science student in the 1880s. These included 'A Vision of the Past' (time-travel to the age of the dinosaurs) and 'A Tale of the Twentieth Century (for Advanced Thinkers)'. In 1888 the twenty-one year old Wells wrote 'The Chronic Argonauts', the earliest version of *The Time Machine*, and confided to a friend that it "was no joke. There is a sequel — it is the latest Delphic voice but the tripod is not yet broken".[3] The eventual breaking of the tripod is, doubtless, signalled by the image of the White Sphinx in the published *Time Machine*. The Sphinx is at once the Time Traveller's first intimation of future catastrophe (the rise and fall of mankind summarized as a progression from four legs to two legs to three), and a traditional symbol of prophecy.

In Wells we shall find the classical images of the prophet as Delphic priestess, Sphinx, and Sibyl; the Hebrew notion of the preacher and sage; and an attempt to define a new, scientific basis for prophecy.

Classical images play a part in the framing of several of his future narratives. The protagonist of *In the Days of the Comet* is first seen as 'the man who wrote in the tower', apparently an allusion to the Platonist of Milton's *Il Penseroso*. *The Shape of Things To Come* is one of a number of Wells's novels to be cast in the science-fictional mode of the 'future history' — that is, a retrospective narrative pieced together by someone not personally involved in the future events he describes. It is introduced as the 'Dream Book of Dr Philip Raven', and what Raven sees is a "modern Sibylline book".[4] At the centre of the future histories — but doubly distanced by the narrative framing — there is invariably a character who speaks out in the prophetic tones heard in some of Wells's non-fictional works. His words are given a superficially oracular quality by this fictional displacement. *In the Days of the Comet* is another 'dream book', as are 'A Dream of Armageddon' and several of the later novels. *When the Sleeper Wakes* uses the convention of the mentally exhausted individual who awakes after sleeping for two hundred years.

Wells's preoccupation with 'Sibyline histories' is part of the Romantic and Gothic strain in his works. The 'prophetic books' of Blake and Shelley are, in a certain sense, precursors of prophetic science fiction. Coleridge's 1817 volume of poems was entitled *Sibylline Leaves*, and Hopkins, much later, wrote 'Spelt from Sibyl's Leaves'. Among the Gothic novels, Maturin's *Melmoth the Wanderer* and Lewis's *The Monk* begin by introducing a 'Sibylline' character. The author of the original Sibylline books was the Cumaean Sibyl, who reputedly sold them to Tarquin. The collection of oracular utterances was then preserved in ancient Rome and consulted by the Senate in times of emergency. The fullest revival of the Sibylline legend in English Romantic literature is to be found in Mary Shelley's *The Last Man* (1826), where in a preface she tells, in abundant circumstantial details, of a visit to the cave of the Cumaean Sibyl at Baiae in 1818. On the floor of the cave were strewn leaves and bark covered with writing in various languages, including English (!). These "slight Sibylline pages" turned out, needless to say, to contain the story of *The Last Man*.

The likely source of all these Sibylline references is Book VI of Virgil's *Aeneid*, where the Sibyl, "wrapping truth in darkness," prophesies future wars and the Tiber foaming with streams of blood. In Wells's *War of the Worlds* the River Thames turns red, coloured by the Martian red weed rather than by human blood (the latter, however, turns out to be the Martians' staple diet). Towards the end of *The War of the Worlds* the narrator wanders deliriously through dead London streets singing "some inane doggerel about 'The Last Man Left Alive'".[5] If his predecessor is Mary Shelley's Last Man, his successor is Orwell's Winston Smith, since the manuscript title of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* was *The Last Man in Europe*.

The Hebraic element in Wells (whose short stories include both 'A Dream of Armageddon' and 'The Story of the Last Trump') is doubtless what John Middleton Murry had in mind when, in an obituary notice, he described the author of *The Shape of Things to Come* as the "last prophet of bourgeois Europe."[6] Wells's gospel of science, like Matthew Arnold's gospel of culture, offers rhetorical glimpses of a "promised land, towards which criticism can only beckon."[7] In later years he described himself openly as a religious writer aiming at a post-Christian and post-Darwinian synthesis. The ending of *Tono-Bungay* ("Through the confusion something drives, something that is at once human achievement and the most inhuman of all existing things"[8]) offers one such example of priestly rhetoric. Wells's prophecy, at least until his despairing last book, is not that of a man 'crying in the wilderness,' since he claims to speak for the scientific community and in the name of inescapable biological imperatives. Science, however, was not merely the source of value on which his prophecy was founded; it influenced his understanding of prophetic method. Prophecy, he argued, should evolve into futurology.

This belief was first advanced in his lecture to the Royal Institution, *The Discovery of the Future* (1902). Prophecy, he claimed, had "always been inseparably associated with the idea of scientific research." A "systematic exploration of the future" was now possible.[9] In 'the Prophetic Habit of Mind', an essay forming the first chapter of his report on *The Future in America* (1906), Wells described his own development as a prophet as having gone through five distinct phases. In the first phase, the bounds to speculation were set by orthodox religion. His upbringing was protestant and individualist, and

> to me in my boyhood speculation about the Future was a monstrous joke. Like most people of my generation, I was launched into life with millennial assumptions. This present sort of thing, I believed, was going on for a time, interesting personally, perhaps, but as a whole inconsecutive, and then — it might be in my lifetime or a little after it — there would be trumpets and shoutings and celestial phenomena, a battle of Armageddon, and the Judgment.[10]

The next phase, under the stimulus of Darwinian science, was "a wild effort to express one's sudden apprehension of unlimited possibility. One made fantastic exaggerations, fantastic inversions of all recognized things" (p.10). To this period belonged his imaginary 'Man of the Year Million' (on whom the Martians of *The War of the Worlds* are modelled), together with the alternative view of events approaching the year million embodied in *The Time Machine*. Yet soon Wells began to tire of unchecked fantasy and to experiment with methods of forecasting within rational limits. Two obvious methods presented themselves, those of systematic extrapolation from existing tendencies (no longer 'What if...' but 'If this goes on...'), and of 'synthetic' forecasting aiming at a co-ordinated picture in which adjustments are made for conflicting trends. (For example, after producing *When the Sleeper Wakes* (1899), an influential science-fictional portrayal of megalopolis, Wells saw correctly that urban overcrowding caused by population growth would be relieved by the suburban sprawl made possible by faster transport and communications.) Projection of existing trends subject to synthetic adjustment is what we now know as the method of futurology. The non-fiction treatise *Anticipations* (1901) — the book which brought him into the ambit of the Fabian Society and of Sidney and Beatrice Webb — is Wells's first futurological work. A few years later, however, he had come to distrust merely "administrative" forecasting, recognizing the "inseparable nature of the two functions of the Prophet" (p.15) — those of foretelling and exhortation. It was as if he was determined to maintain a prophetic role for the intuitive thinker, the creative writer.

Both *The Future in America* and the narrative commentary in his next serious novel, *Tono-Bungay* (1909), emphasize the interpretative activity of the reflective observer who can discern shape and pattern in what to others may appear a meaningless jumble. In *Tono-Bungay* the prophet's activity is symbolized in the 'Dissolving Views':

> The new order may have gone far towards shaping itself, but just as in that sort of lantern show that used to be known in the village as the 'Dissolving Views', the scene that is going remains upon the mind, traceable and evident, and the newer picture is yet enigmatical long after the lines that are to replace those former ones have grown bright and strong, so that the new England of our children's children is still a riddle to me. The ideas of democracy, of equality, and of promiscuous fraternity have certainly never really entered into the English mind. But what *is* coming into it? All this book, I hope, will bear a little on that. (p.12)

The interpretation of the 'newer picture' is provisional and always precarious. In one of the finest moments in *The Future in America*, Wells's "prophetic" impatience with tangible reality allows him to compare the skyscrapers of New York to "piled-up packing cases outside a warehouse" (p.358). Unpacked, he alleges, these cases may turn out to contain the "real right thing" (pp.358-9), the components, that is, of the American Dream. Yet, though this strikes the appropriately gracious note as he is leaving for home, it is not the only possible interpretation of the packing-case simile. The "life history of the prophetic mind" (p.16) did not end, for Wells, with the phase of 'creative forecasting' in a context of Edwardian optimism. It had further phases, many of them dark.

Wells, if anyone, should not have been surprised by the First World War. When he had published *The World Set Free*, his forecast of atomic war, in the spring of 1914 the *Spectator* had talked jauntily of his "habit of scrapping civilisation every two years or so," while the *New Statesman* opined that "we all like a good catastrophe when we get it."[11] When war came, however, it brought extreme distress to Wells, as he veered between the sanguine mood of *The War That Will End War* (1914) and the depression and cynicism evident in 'The Story of the Last Trump' in *Boon* (1915) — a story in which the apocalyptic trumpet sounds by accident on earth, but nobody takes any notice. Wells's distress during the First World War is evidenced by the 'Finite God' to whom he briefly turned, in books like *God the Invisible King* (1917). His resilience, however, is shown by his plan for a unified world history which would help to break down international rivalries and lead to a common and shared perception of the human future. Perhaps the most famous phrase from *The Outline of History* (1920) is his judgment that history "beomes more and more a race between education and catastrophe" (Ch.15). Much of his writing in the 1920s and '30s was devoted to education in the widest sense. As the Second World War approached, he increasingly feared that the race was being lost. A strenuous process of mental adaptation, which Wells frequently expressed by the metaphor of biological mutation, was necessary if humanity was to survive. Wells continued to believe that adaptation was possible, and that external conditions were still favourable to it. In 1942 he still held that the Second World War, however hideous, was not in itself of the nature of a biological catastrophe. The birth of the "After-man, our bodily and mental offspring, of whom this present time is the Advent"[12] was still attainable by an exercise of human will. It was that faith which failed Wells when in 1945, in his seventy-ninth year, he came to the unforeseen final phase of his career as a prophet.

The first three chapters of *Mind at the End of Its Tether* are a repudiation of all the earlier premises of Wellsian forecasting. Chapter Three is headed, simply, 'There is no "Pattern of Things to Come"'. Echoing another 'catastrophic' Shakespearean text, it states that

> *Our* universe is not merely bankrupt; there remains no dividend at all; it has not simply liquidated; it is going clean out of existence, leaving not a wrack behind.[13]

It would be quite wrong to think of this prediction as derived from any human event, such as the explosion of the first atomic bombs which took place between the writing of *Mind at the End of Its Tether* and its publication. Rather, Wells is obsessed by the intuition of a "harsh queerness' (p.8) in the "secular process" or "cosmic movement" (pp.2,3) of natural events. The cosmos, that is, is no longer hospitable to human life, and through an agency which Wells calls 'the Antagonist' it is about to accomplish the final destruction of man. The only evidence that he cites — and it is very ambiguous evidence — is that of the freakish nature of the terrestrial environment in which life began, and the limit set to velocity by the speed of light. Apart from this, *Mind at the End of Its Tether* is founded solely on the rhetorical strength of Wells's new-found convictions and on his past reputation as a soothsayer. The fact that he "puts forward his conclusions in the certainty that they will be entirely inacceptable to the ordinary rational man" (p.1) is not a disadvantage in this oracular mode, however damaging it might be as futurology or scientific forecasting. Indeed, it is Wells's very failure as a futurologist that constitutes perhaps his most powerful rhetorical argument:

> The writer is convinced that there is no way out or round or through the impasse. It is the end.
> The habitual interest of his life is critical anticipation. Of everything he asks: 'To what will this lead?' And it was natural for him to assume that there was a limit set to change, that new things and events would appear, but that they would appear consistently, preserving the natural sequence of life. So that in the present vast confusion of our world, there was always the assumption of an ultimate restoration of rationality, an adaptation and a resumption. It was merely a question, the fascinating question, of what forms the new rational phase would assume, what Over-man, Erewhon or what not, would break through the transitory clouds and turmoil. To this, the writer set his mind.
> He did his utmost to pursue the trends, that upward spiral, towards their convergence in a new phase in the story of life, and the more he weighed the realities before him the less was he able to detect any convergence whatever. Changes had ceased to be systematic, and the further he estimated the course they were taking, the greater their divergence. Hitherto events had been held together by a certain logical consistency, as the heavenly bodies as we know them have been held together by the pull, the golden cord, of Gravitation. Now it is as if that cord had vanished and everything was driving anyhow to anywhere at a steadily increasing velocity. (p.5)

Wells was a dying man when he wrote these lines. But that does not lessen their eloquence, or the intensity of their despair. There is an awesome quality about the cold impersonality of *Mind at the End of Its Tether*, the extent of its repudiations, its blankness of feeling. This shocking last book is at once a reflection of intellectual confusion and Wells's last contribution to the literature of prophecy. It is a testimony to the authenticity of his lifelong occupation of the prophet's office, of the office of those who "profess to foretell — more often than not, with warnings and forebodings."[14]

Notes

This article was first published in French translation in the special double number of the magazine *Europe* (Jan-Feb 1986), devoted to the work of H.G. Wells and the French science-fiction writer J. H. Rosny aîné.

1. Brian Aldiss *Billion Year Spree: The History of Science Fiction* London (Weidenfeld & Nicolson) 1973 p.132.
2. See for example Anthony West 'H.G. Wells' *Encounter* VIII no 41 (1957) 52ff.; Gordon N. Ray 'H.G. Wells Tries to be a Novelist' in *Edwardians and Late Victorians* ed. Richard Ellmann, New York (Columbia University Press) 1960 pp.106ff.; and Bernard Bergonzi *The Early H.G. Wells* Manchester (Manchester University Press) 1961.
3. Quoted by Geoffrey West *H.G. Wells: A Sketch for a Portrait* London (Howe) 1930 p.77.
4. H.G. Wells *The Shape of Things to Come* London (Corgi) 1967 p.12.
5. H.G. Wells *The War of the Worlds* London (Heinemann) 1898 p.289.
6. Murry 'H.G. Wells', reprinted in *H.G. Wells: The Critical Heritage* ed. Patrick Parrinder, London (Routledge & Kegan Paul) 1972 p.327.
7. Arnold 'The Function of Criticism at the Present Time'.
8. H.G. Wells *Tono-Bungay* London (Macmillan) 1909 p.491. Subsequent references in text.
9. H.G. Wells *The Discovery of the Future*, in *Wells' Social Anticipations*, ed. Harry N. Laidler, New York (Vanguard) 1927 p.73.
10. H.G. Wells *The Future in America* London (Chapman & Hall) 1906 p.9. Subsequent references in text.
11. *Spectator* CVII (1914) 837; *New Statesman* III (1914) 249.
12. H.G. Wells *The Conquest of Time* London (Watts) 1942 p.57.
13. H.G. Wells *Mind at the End of Its Tether* London (Heinemann) 1945 p.17. Subsequent references in text.
14. H.G. Wells 'Utopias' (radio broadcast given in 1939) *Science-Fiction Studies* IX (1982) p.117.