

## Wells, Blake and the Prophetic Vision

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I shall not cease from Mental Fight  
Nor shall my Sword sleep in my hand  
Till we have built Jerusalem  
In England's green & pleasant Land.  
William Blake

If it seems an unlikely literary pairing to link H.G. Wells (1866-1946) and William Blake (1757-1827) — as I suspect it may to some readers — then the reason for the raising of eyebrows is probably a formal one, the artists' preference for different media. Blake was a painter, engraver and poet. Wells, while he did produce comical sketches and light verse for his friends, was professionally committed to prose as a storyteller and an ideological journalist. The chief characteristic which the two authors have in common, in contrast, is a matter of content: an idealism which deliberately recalls the biblical prophets, visionaries who railed against injustice and threatened its perpetrators with apocalypse.

The word 'prophecy' is most often used today to mean 'prediction of the future,' as in Dr Parrinder's piece on 'the Literature of Prophecy' elsewhere in this issue, so I had better make it clear that in the present article I am using it in the related sense of 'an inspired utterance, proclaiming what is right,' which often, though not always, warns of doom to follow if the utterer's values are not respected.

Wells and Blake shared several such values. Both distrusted established authority, supported individual freedom, sympathised with revolution and admired the works of that robust political controversialist Tom Paine. Wells had read Paine in his youth<sup>1</sup> and seems to have named two books of his old age after Paine's: *The Common Sense of War and Peace* after *Common Sense*, and *The Rights of Man* after *The Rights of Man*. Blake set down his support for Paine in the margins of a hostile pamphlet by Richard Watson, Bishop of Llandaff, *An Apology for the Bible in a Series of Letters Addressed to Thomas Paine*, and is said to have warned Paine in 1792 of an impending arrest, enabling him to flee to revolutionary France.

Blake welcomed Paine's attacks on the literal-minded, authoritarian Christianity represented by Watson but, as his prophetic stand suggests, he himself remained deeply attached to religious belief. Religion at its best endorsed imagination, creativity and forgiveness, while the scientific world-view of Blake's day seemed to legitimise only materialism, mechanism and self-interest. Blake's enemy was not simply injustice, or even the destructive aspects of industrial society, but the reductive, inhibiting outlook which both of these seemed to embody.<sup>2</sup>

Here there is a strong distinction from Wells who opposed injustice and repression in the name of rationality and science. If Blake was a pioneer Romantic who placed the imagination at the centre of human experience, Wells was quite consciously a post-Romantic, distrustful of the individual imagination as the source of distracting fantasies and a breeding ground of egotism. The fact that his own

imagination was an outstandingly powerful one only made him the more resolute that it should be subordinated to general, objective truths. Religion — as it is normally understood, at any rate — was not to figure among these.

Early in life Wells had identified Christianity as the official mythology of the social order which had labelled him fit for menial tasks only. His fight to get an education that would allow him to better himself, and if possible change the world for the better, led him eventually to the Normal School of Science in South Kensington, where he proudly attended the lectures of Darwin's champion, T.H. Huxley, coiner of the word 'agnosticism.' Wells realised that religion was important, perhaps indispensable, as a force to pull society together and give the individual inner encouragement, but this perception did not lead him meekly back into the fold of Christianity. Instead he devised a non-supernatural equivalent for religion in his 'Mind of the Race,' a distillation of all the most progressive elements in world culture.

Wells proved to be more in tune with his era than Blake. He established himself as a successful writer, famous throughout the world, first for his stories, then to a lesser extent for his progressive ideas. A century earlier, the thinking and the artistry of Blake were too far from orthodox assumptions to win acceptance. Those who came across his work thought him at best cranky, at worst insane, though Wordsworth conceded that Blake's madness was more interesting than the sanity of Byron or Scott.<sup>3</sup> Appreciation of Blake did not begin to grow until about forty years after his death — around the time, in fact, that Wells was born.

By the end of Wells's long life, Blake had come to be widely admired by the educated public while Wells's reputation was on the wane. Given this fact and the apparent distance between their beliefs and modes of expression, it is no surprise to find Wells dismissing Blake in *The Happy Turning* as an "overrated etcher".<sup>4</sup> Yet the Wells who wrote this was, we should remember, a cantankerous old man, seizing what might be his last chance to outrage the literary establishment. The same sentence goes on to sweep aside with a cunningly insulting lack of distinction

the jingling vulgarities of Byron, Martin Tupper, Alfred Noyes, T. S. Eliot, Bridges and the rest of them — as void of the mysterious exaltation of Beauty as a crew of disinherited mourners at a bankrupt's funeral on a wet day.

This can hardly be characterised as a critical judgment; it is more like a verbal equivalent of Samson bringing down the roof on the Philistines.

If we go back to Wells's *Experiment in Autobiography* and read of his life as a no less cantankerous young man outraging his superiors at the Normal School of Science, a very different picture emerges, for there we learn of Wells neglecting the geology lectures of Professor Judd to read the works of Carlyle and Goethe and, more especially, of Blake.

There, ready to hand on the table, was a folder of Blake's strange tinted designs; his hank-haired rugose gods, his upward whirling spirits, his strained, contorted powers of light and darkness. What exactly was Blake getting at in this stuff about "Albion"? He seemed to have

everything to say and Judd seemed to have nothing to say. Almost sub-consciously, the note-books and textbooks drew themselves apart into a shocked little heap and the riddles of Blake opened of their own accord before me.<sup>5</sup>

Wells would recall Blake's mythic figures in the giants of *The Food of the Gods*. Blake's parody of Genesis, *The Book of Urizen*, would find its Wellsian counterpart in *The Island of Doctor Moreau*. However, the actual influence of Blake upon Wells seems to me a less significant topic than the issues raised by the similarities and divergences in their thinking.

Despite his youthful shift in allegiance from Christianity to science, Wells kept a firm hold on the Judaeo-Christian notion that mankind was going somewhere, that the individual life was fullest when lived against a cosmic perspective and with a sense of human destiny. The ruling consensus paid lip service to this idea of course, but it did so from a conservative standpoint, hostile to the experiences and desires of a Wells or a Blake. Both men felt moved to counter-attack the social reality which had them surrounded, by an imaginative appeal to a subversive cosmic scheme.

Had he lived to read them, Blake would probably have found many items he could approve of among Wells's iconoclastic ideas. While he sincerely called himself a Christian, Blake had no time for God the Father as many, perhaps most, Christians conceive of Him. To Blake this god is a mythical tyrant people neurotically project into the heavens to explain and sanction a system of irrational authority and self-limitation in which they have become entangled. He accordingly appears in Blake's counter-mythology as the repressive father-figure Urizen or (in moments of especial irreverence) Old Nobodaddy — as in

Then old Nobodaddy aloft  
Farted & belch'd & cough'd,  
And said, "I love hanging & drawing & quartering  
Every bit as well as war & slaughtering ...."<sup>6</sup>

Blake would have been delighted by Wells's adolescent rejection of the cruel father-figure version of God (recorded in the *Experiment in Autobiography*<sup>7</sup>), by his parody of that figure in *The Island of Doctor Moreau* and by the sharp distinction he draws in the preface to *God the Invisible King* between "God the Creator," the unknown force responsible for the universe and for all the suffering and conflict it contains, and "God the Redeemer," the epitome of humanity's heroic struggle with nature.

Blake would have been dismayed, however, to find Wells's redeemer taking sides in the Great War. To misread a secular power conflict as the coming of the apocalypse indicates a failure to break completely free of the familiar cycle by which local pressures corrupt the liberating spirit of rebellion into yet another Urizen, proclaiming "an ideal that will make killing worth the while."<sup>8</sup> The quote comes from *Anticipations*, Wells's first non-fictional book about the future, which looks forward to a world run by a technocratic elite prepared to make use of torture and perhaps even genocide in the service of their ideal. Wells's subsequent utopian works are a lot more humane, it is true, but they always retain a very strong authoritarian element.

The depersonalisation of Wells's Invisible King into the abstract Mind of the Race, while it may make Wells's theology look a shade more plausible to twentieth-century intellectuals, would surely have enraged Blake. It suggests that salvation entails the individual's submersion into a collective; that there are no great men, only a supposed universal man in whom we are to be humble contributory cells.<sup>9</sup> For Blake, on the contrary, all creative activity, even self-sacrifice, is the work of free individuals. "All deities reside in the human breast," "God only Acts & Is, in existing beings or Men" and "those who envy or calumniate great men hate God; for there is no other God." "Attempting to be more than Man We become less."<sup>10</sup>

Blake's revolution begins within. His salvation is not a far-off political goal but a matter of looking at the world with inspired eyes. When enough people do this the apocalypse will have begun. The aim of the artist is therefore not to convey information, as Wells assumes, but to reveal an inner vision. It is not an achievement that can be brought about merely by formulating a message at the level of rational consciousness, then thrusting it carelessly into whatever medium happens to be to hand. Blake insists that the synthesising power of great art can only be achieved through painstaking fidelity to the concrete world of the imagination. "Poetry admits not a Letter that is Insignificant."<sup>11</sup> The true prophet must be a totally committed artist. From Blake's point of view Wells's fitful concern for style and structure is more than ominous. That Wells's books begin with enchanting conviction but tend to end comparatively feebly, as V. S. Pritchett has observed,<sup>12</sup> is only to be expected. Wells's beginnings do vivid justice to his own experiences and desires; his endings are distorted in the direction of some general, abstract conclusion.

Blake would see Wells as doomed to fall short of his full potential as a prophetic artist because, with whatever qualification, he is prepared to entertain a world-view in which the general and the externally verifiable are taken seriously at the expense of the individual and the spiritual. Once this 'tough-minded' perspective has been adopted, art comes to seem marginal and frivolous, if not foolish and unmanly. Wells's much-quoted declaration to Henry James that he would rather be called a journalist than an artist is, accordingly, a poorly disguised apostasy from his fundamental calling, naturally followed by very little good journalism, in the normal sense of the word, but great a deal of inferior art.

The charges that Wells's idealism is compromised by a totalitarian goal and his artistry by failure to value the inner world of art in its own right do, I feel, have some validity, though it is plain that the author of *The Time Machine* and *The History of Mr Polly* also produced a great deal of work which magnificently eludes these limitations. However, if we look at Blake through Wells's eyes, we can see that there are equally substantial points to be made in the opposite direction.

Blake's faith that being true to the inner reality is ultimately the same thing as transforming the outer one depends on serious belief in the supernatural as a common reality underlying both. If we do not share that belief the system falls apart. From the standpoint of Wells, Blake deludes himself by not acknowledging that the external world has to be dealt with on its own terms. If, as Blake suggests, we content ourselves with cultivating our imaginations and purging ourselves of

inhibition, paying no attention to such exterior matters as social arrangements and scientific developments, the starving will go unfed, the oppressed continue to suffer and the whole of human life remain needlessly impoverished in countless ways.

It is true that a work of art weak in aesthetic coherence is likely to be an ineffective vehicle for any additional, propaganda purposes, but there is equal danger in artists pursuing their unique inner vision so single-mindedly that it becomes irrelevant or unintelligible to others. Blake, by departing radically from the normal terms of thought, and constructing a resolutely alternative world-view, does indeed leave his most serious work incredible and inaccessible. His contemporaries ignored or derided him, while he sank into a prickly self-absorption. Only in the lofts of Bohemian poets or the dark Satanic mills of subsidised scholarship have readers been prepared to struggle with the perverse polysyllabic mythology of his later works.

From Star to Star, Mountains & Valleys, terrible  
dimension  
Stretch'd out, compose the Mundane Shell, a mighty  
Incrustation  
Of Forty-eight deformed Human Wonders of the Almighty,  
With Caverns whose remotest bottoms meet again beyond  
The Mundane Shell in Golgonooza; but the Fires of Los  
range  
In the remotest bottoms of the Caves, that none can  
pass  
Into Eternity that way, but all descend to Los,  
To Bowlahoola & Allamanda & to Entuthon Benython.<sup>13</sup>

Wells's writing is sometimes more careless than this, but it is always a good deal more interesting.

Readers of this article will, I suspect, share something of the apocalyptic idealism common to Wells and Blake. Even if we do not believe in the Day of Judgment literally, it is probably detectable as a guiding idea lurking somewhere deep in our minds. We are also likely to share Blake's strong regard for the inner life and for the importance of art. Yet, living in an age when we depend so heavily on the manipulation of physical reality by science, we cannot be quite so confident as Blake in denying that we live in a closed, material universe, in which such unquantifiable matters as the inner life and art have an uncertain status. If we find ourselves thus caught between mind and matter, subject and object, art and science, we can appreciate that, when Wells falls short of Blake's artistic and spiritual dedication, it is not because he is slovenly and insensitive, but because he is trying to import what he can salvage of the apocalyptic vision into a world-view inhospitable to it. Wells craves to join the everyday details of his stories to an informing cosmic scheme. The effort to do so, the failure to completely do so and the braving of that failure, are all part of his special reality. To ignore this prophetic element and simply read Wells as a conventional novelist is to miss much of his truth to experience and to invite some disappointment and confusion.

While neither Wells nor Blake exactly relished criticism, both dished it out to others and expected their share in return, realising that true prophets are not those who exact unquestioning obedience. Their occasional pose of philosophical detachment never for a moment conceals their quirky personal commitment or inhibits their engaging Cockney forthrightness which challenges us to take up their ideas and add to them our own. Wells puts it very clearly:

Read me, I would say, use all I have to give you, assimilate me to yourself (and assimilation may very well mean a digestive change and improvement) and we will go on together in fraternal co-operation, but please, please, do not imagine you are being invited to line up behind me. You have a backbone and a brain; your brain is as important as mine and probably better at most jobs; my only claim on your consideration is that I have specialised in trying to get my Outlines true.<sup>14</sup>

In a world where so many of the shots are called by 'Fundamentalist' politicians, projecting all evil onto their enemies, leaving mercy to the afterlife, it is valuable to be reminded that there exist more creative ways of being a prophet.

#### Notes

1. Wells *Experiment in Autobiography* Ch.3:6.
2. My understanding of Blake is much indebted to Northrop Frye *Fearful Symmetry* Princeton (Princeton University Press) 1947.
3. Frye *Fearful Symmetry* p.12.
4. Wells *The Happy Turning* Ch.9.
5. Wells *Experiment in Autobiography* Ch.5:4.
6. William Blake *Complete Writings* ed. Geoffrey Keynes, London (Oxford University Press) 1974 p.185.
7. Wells *Experiment in Autobiography* Ch.2:4.
8. Wells *Anticipations* Ch.9.
9. See Wells *A Modern Utopia* Ch.11:5.
10. Blake *Complete Writings* pp.153,155,158 & 376.
11. Blake *Complete Writings* p.611.
12. V. S. Pritchett 'The Scientific Romances' in Bernard Bergonzi ed. *H.G. Wells: A Collection of Critical Essays* Englewood Cliffs, NJ (Prentice-Hall) 1976 pp.32-38.
13. Blake *Complete Writings* pp.528-9.
14. Wells *The Common Sense of War and Peace* Ch.1.