

But this new Declaration was not the Code of Hamurabi or the Law of Moses. It did not spring from divine inspiration. It had no authority concerned with its implementation. It was a statement of a moral responsibility; but realistically it was nothing more. Inwardly, I believe, Wells knew this, and consequently he did his utmost to avoid being pushed into the role of New Age Leader. He confined himself to the expression of a Hope without commitment as to the manner in which the Hope should be fulfilled. Yet he insisted that it was entirely practicable. He wrote, in *The Common Sense of War and Peace*,

"The backbone of my hope for a new world is this possibility of a world-wide coalescence of all the scattered forces of creation and protest in the human heart, into one consciously revolutionary movement based on the declared rights of man. It is an entirely practical proposal. All over the democracies of the world now we can call into being this uniform opposition, inspired by a common idea of world unity."

I feel that this was a partial self-deception on Wells's part. And its only justification was what amounted to a spiritual faith deep down in his own consciousness. At the very beginning of the book I have just quoted Wells stated:

"I have never thought, much less have I asserted, that progress was inevitable, though numerous people chose to fancy that about me. I have always maintained that by a strenuous effort mankind *might* defeat the impartial destructiveness of nature, but I have always insisted that only by incessant hard thinking and a better co-ordination of man's immense but dispersed powers of self-sacrifice and heroism was such a victory possible."

So there could be no guarantee. It could be touch-and-go. That was the Wells of Common Sense.

But there was a man of faith behind the man of common sense. Wells did not care to put this forward on his own behalf. He wanted to be thought of as governed by reason and intelligence. But the inside man was not like that. And looking into his eyes one could be conscious of the mystic. It was this Wells to whom I was drawn and who every now and again peeped out through the creations of his mind.

I would remind you of his book *The Wonderful Visit* in which an angel strays into our world, and finally grasps its significance. I quote:

"For a moment the Angel stood staring. Then in a flash he saw it all, saw this grim little world of battle and cruelty, transfigured in a splendour that outshone Angelic Land, suffused suddenly and insupportably glorious with the wonderful light of Love and Self-sacrifice."

Ladies and Gentlemen, those attributes of Love and Self-sacrifice are printed with a capital L and a capital S.

H.G. Wells Gives a Speech to the British Science Fiction Convention at the Metropole Hotel, Birmingham, 1987

Patrick Parrinder

ANNOUNCER

Ladies and gentlemen, at this point in the programme we were to have heard an address by Ian Watson. The truth is that we are not sure quite *who* the next speaker is. He certainly looks rather like Ian Watson, but he claims to be an even more famous science-fiction writer who is generally supposed to have died in 1946. Presumably he arrived here by time machine. Our opinion is that he is an impostor, but since he begged to be allowed to speak to you, we agreed to let him fill in the time until the real Mr Watson shows up. I hope that at least you will give him a hearing ... He certainly has an incredible story to tell.

(The gentleman who appears on stage is breathless, visibly irritated, his squeaky voice betraying mental agitation. Smart, unspecifically old-fashioned dress – suit, waistcoat, a flower in his buttonhole. He has some trouble with the microphone. But after a few minutes he begins to warm to the oddity of the situation and its possible advantages – the chief one, in his eyes, being the presence of a large, captive, presumably sympathetic audience. His voice takes a more confident tone, his eyes have sometimes a visionary and faraway look, sometimes a mischievous gleam. A unique opportunity has presented itself, to this man who was always a pedagogue at heart ... to give the unsuspecting youth of 1987 a piece of his mind. But to do justice to the contents of his capacious mind he would need far more time than the organisers seem to have allotted him ...)

MR H.G. WELLS

Ladies and gentlemen,

I want to make it quite plain that I am here under false pretences, and against my will. I have been given a few minutes to explain my presence here this morning, though I must tell you that it is as much of a surprise to me as it undoubtedly is to you. First of all, I am not the person that you may mistakenly think I am. I am not Mr Ian Watson, even though just at present I seem to be the inhabitant of his body. Mr Ian Watson is, I am told, a science-fiction writer, with a certain admiration for some rather trifling books I once wrote. Whether his admiration will survive this experiment in which he and I have become so curiously entangled, I cannot say. As I am the present inhabitant of Mr Watson's body, he, I can only suppose, is currently making free with mine. Mr Watson, I have been told, bears a certain physical resemblance to me in my sprightlier and younger days. But I must assure you that the brain that is speaking to you from inside this body is not his. It is mine.

I am trying to outline these confusing matters to you as clearly as possible. When I left home this morning, I distinctly remember the date. It was 19 April, 1932. I was being driven in a hired limousine, and with me in my briefcase was the speech I intended to give at a weekend conference run by the younger members of the Fabian Society. These conferences are rather jolly affairs, as they tend to attract a number of intelligent young men and pretty and intelligent young women. On the whole I

find that the young women make more attentive listeners than the young men. The subject of my paper was to be 'The World of our Grandchildren' – though from my point of view, as I am 65, it would have been 'The World of our Great-grandchildren'. I wonder what has happened to that paper. Perhaps at this very moment Mr Ian Watson is reading it to an audience somewhere – though if he should find himself at that Fabian conference, he would do better to tear it up and speak from his own experience. Mr Watson, I understand, is almost young enough to be one of my great-grandchildren.

Now when I am in my own body I am a notoriously incompetent public speaker. I fiddle with my tie, lose my place, drop my notes, and my voice either dwindles into inaudibility or is mercilessly distorted by the public-address system. If I do not have a speech all written down beforehand I am left wordless, tongue-tied, squeaking and gibbering. Happily on this occasion I do not seem to be in so much of a funk as usual.

The fact is that I am a little nervous, but for a rather different reason. I understand that not only are you an audience of my great-grandchildren, so to speak, but you are an audience of 'science-fiction' fans. 'Science fiction' did not exist in my day unless you count some horribly cheap magazines published by a swindling American called Hugo Gernsback. I know about Mr Gernsback and his little ways, since he is in the habit of reprinting my stories without my permission and without paying any fees. But even Mr Gernsback in his wildest dreams could not have imagined this extraordinary Convention in which I find myself. I have learned to my horror that this gathering includes people who count themselves, in this year of 1987, among my most loyal and enthusiastic readers. I can only hope that what I have to say will bring them to their senses. I have to tell you that the fantastic tales of scientific inventions which I wrote in my youth were the merest apprentice-work, on which I cut my teeth as a writer before turning to more serious tasks. I have asked to be allowed to speak to you so that I can urge you to give up reading scientific romance and turn to the serious business facing the world. I want to ask you to turn from reading Science Fiction to building a Utopian World State.

Before I explain my ideas about the World State and the Open Conspiracy, let me try to say in a little more detail how I came to be here. I think I heard the person who introduced me suggesting that I might have travelled to this Convention in a time machine. I am afraid that he was guilty of a ridiculous error. The time machine of which I wrote in my youth was only a speculative device. Incidentally, I am told that Mr Ian Watson once published a story called *The Very Slow Time Machine*. If this was meant as a flattering allusion to my work it has sadly misfired. The whole point about time machines is that, if they existed, they would move very fast. In any case, I did not travel here on a time machine. I came here by car.

When I arrived, another member of your Committee suggested that I might have come by the method described in a little story I once wrote, *The Stolen Body*. It is true that I seem to have stolen Mr Watson's body. However, my story was written so long ago that I have not the slightest idea whether it is relevant or not. As I have said, I came here by limousine. I used to enjoy driving myself, in a jerky and approximate fashion, but nowadays when I have somewhere to get to I employ a

chauffeur. The young man who turned up to drive me this morning seemed perfectly normal. As we drove along I was too busy making some last-minute amendments to my speech to notice the landscape. I may have nodded off for a minute or two. When I woke up I was puzzled to find that the chauffeur addressed me as 'Mr Watson'.

Whether I have stolen Mr Watson's body, or whether he has stolen mine, is I confess something of a mystery to me. His is a fairly agreeable sort of body, though when I caught sight of it in the driving mirror I did suffer a most unpleasant shock. Also, I begin to feel some anxiety as to what Mr Watson is up to in my body – assuming that is where he is, and that we are not caught up in some intricate game of physical musical chairs. I hope he takes good care of my body, while he is inside it. He will need to give it regular exercise, fresh air, and a carefully controlled diet – since I am, or I was, a diabetic. He will find my body's sexual urges a little troublesome, I dare say. He will need to seek out attractive and intelligent members of the opposite sex in order to give these urges some relief. I hope this necessity does not put Mr Watson under too much strain. He is probably accustomed to a very different and much duller sort of life.

Now let me come to the real reasons why I wanted to be allowed to speak to you. When my chauffeur addressed me as 'Mr Watson', I asked him what the date was and where we were. He said it was 1987 and that we were driving through the outskirts of Birmingham. I confess that I was not as elated by this as I might have hoped. In fact I was conscious of considerable dismay. Looking around me, I soon realised that the world of my grandchildren was a world in which people could not possibly have read any of my serious books. If they had read my serious books they would have planned and organised and cleared away the dirt and dinginess I glimpsed around me. You see, to me your world of 1987 is rather like my world of 1932. All my life I have dreamed of an ordered and spacious society, an educated and disciplined world of the future. The alternative, I believed, was stark catastrophe. But I arrive in 1987 and I find that you are content to muddle along in the same wasteful and outdated fashion as my contemporaries did.

It is true that before I came on this platform I asked your Committee what mankind had achieved in the past 55 years. Their answers at first were difficult to understand, but finally I made out that they were speaking of space-rockets, atom bombs, and electronic brains. Perhaps they were disappointed by my response. I had expected that you would have built the new world order, and brought about world peace. All you have done is to develop various inventions which are anticipated either in my books, or in those of one or two of my more forward-looking contemporaries. Moreover, your scientists have been content to leave control of the world in the hands of the politicians and military men. Scientific research as a result is largely misdirected. It is plain to me that your age is in as much need of my ideas of the World State and the Open Conspiracy as were my contemporaries.

I feel that I am coming to the end of my allotted time on this platform, but I have not even begun to address you on these urgent matters. I would like to speak of the World State, of World education, World history, the World encyclopaedia, and the Open Conspiracy. I would like to discuss how we are to stop *homo sapiens* from

pursuing his present blind and suicidal path. I will not develop these matters further this morning. But this afternoon I intend to ask your chairman to suspend your regular proceedings so that we can debate them fully. If I am not here to do so, you will know that I have got my own body back and that I am busy expounding the same themes to the 1932 conference of the Young Fabians. You will, no doubt, wish to carry on this crucial debate in my absence.

Let me end, however, on a more personal note. Of all the many science-fiction writers who have claimed to be prophets, I am the first one to have actually visited the future. It is, I admit, a rather unnerving experience. But once I have got my own body back from Mr Watson it is plain what I shall do. I shall set to work on a novel describing this queer world of 1987, how it came into existence and where it is leading. Then I will travel round the world and unfold the results of my researches to Mr Roosevelt and Mr Stalin. No doubt they will see the necessity of amending their policies instantly. Now I realize that if I tell my readers *exactly* what I have seen in the year 1987 they will not believe me. I shall have to make some of it up. I shall certainly not mention anything so undignified as my appearance at this Convention.

I think I shall call this new novel of mine *The Shape of Things to Come*. Rather a good title, don't you think? I expect it to be published in 1933, and I shall then talk to Mr Alexander Korda about the film rights. Before I go I must confess that, after all, I am rather beginning to enjoy this world of 1987. There is something pleasantly informal about it. Some of your young ladies would, I suspect, make extremely congenial company. But I think I had better go back and write *The Shape of Things to Come* before Mr Ian Watson steals my idea. I am sure he is an expert on 1987 but he would be bound to make a frightful mess of writing about it. Besides, I am beginning to find his body rather a tight and uncomfortable fit. In my mature years I have needed a good deal more room to bulge and sag and flop about in than Mr Watson's body seems to provide.

By the way, I see that I must be a little more modest than you may have thought, since I have still to tell you who I am. My name probaby means as little to most of you as does Mr Watson's, to whatever audience he is currently addressing himself. But, ladies and gentlemen, my name is – or was – H.G. WELLS.

The International Wells Symposium, July 1986

W. Warren Wagar

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The site of the symposium, 'H.G. Wells Under Revision,' was in many ways the perfect choice: the Imperial College of Science and Technology, where the young H.G. Wells had studied and, one hundred years ago, had founded the college's literary journal. In its pages he serialised 'The Chronic Argonauts,' the tale he later transformed into *The Time Machine*. Our sessions took place in a modern building just around the corner from the college hall, now a wing of the Victoria and Albert Museum, in which Wells learned his biology from T.H. Huxley, grandfather of Julian and Aldous.

But symposia stand or fall on the merits of their symposiasts, and ours fully measured up to the site – if not always to the man we honoured. As one speaker late in the proceedings put it, in justification of reading to us a few lengthy excerpts from Wells, most of the best things he had heard at the conference were quotations from Wells anyway.

Most perhaps, but not all. The symposium included among its speakers two of Wells's chief literary successors, Brian Aldiss and Arthur C. Clarke, both vice-presidents of the H.G. Wells Society. Aldiss had been expected, and he was the keynote speaker at our opening session on the afternoon of 24 July. He also attended and participated in all the other sessions through mid-Saturday. Clarke appeared without advance notice and played an important part in our activities Saturday evening.

Of the eighty-odd other symposiasts, what can I say? Some were, unsurprisingly, professors of English at various British and American universities, people like Patrick Parrinder of the University of Reading, who is also Chairman of the H.G. Wells Society, and John Huntington of the University of Illinois, both authors of significant books on Wellsian topics. A mystifying (or revealing) sidelight on the English specialists is that at least five of them, including Parrinder himself and Christopher Rolfe, Hon General Secretary of the Wells Society, are also James Joyce scholars. One of the American Joyceans told me she had flown over to attend conferences on Joyce and on Samuel Beckett. Since the Wells symposium, fortuitously, fell just between the two, she had decided to drop in. Stranger and stranger!

But Joyce? As Wells put the matter in 1930, "I am the absolute antithesis of Mr James Joyce." Some of us pondered the paradox among ourselves, and came up with the thought that despite their radically different literary agendas, Wells and Joyce were the writers whose prose is kinetic, full of animal vitality, by contrast with the laborious lifelessness of Wells's true antithesis, Henry James.

A fair number of social scientists were on hand, too, including at least four historians, three sociologists and an anthropologist. Many others were not