

## RADICAL UNCERTAINTY IN H. G. WELLS'S *TONO-BUNGAY*<sup>1</sup>

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In his 1909 work *The Condition of England*, C. F. G. Masterman writes that 'contemporary observers' are drawn, irrepressibly, to the study of humanity's present position:

It is not that they deliberately turn towards consideration of the meaning and progress of the actual life around them. It is that they cannot with the best desire in the world – escape from such an encompassing problem. To those the only question before them is the present.<sup>2</sup>

The same sense of urgency, the need to respond to the conditions and confusions of contemporary English life, pervades H. G. Wells's *Tono-Bungay* (1909). Despite his repeated claims of literary inadequacy, Wells's protagonist, George Ponderevo, feels he must convey his experience of contemporary England via prose: 'I have got an unusual series of impressions that I want very urgently to tell.'<sup>3</sup> His impulse is not one of measured retrospection but of a need to impress the reader with the exigency of current social disintegration.<sup>4</sup> Masterman prefaces his text similarly, stating 'if I had delayed a study of modern England to a less hurried and more tranquil future, I might have found that it would be a very different England which I should then be compelled to examine.'<sup>5</sup> Despite noting the potential pitfalls of historical oversimplification, José Harris states that the Edwardian age nevertheless experienced a 'marked decline' in its sense of historical continuity with the previous Victorian era.<sup>6</sup> According to Harris this 'sense of living in a new epoch found expression in many contexts and in a variety of ways', and thus Masterman's and Wells's texts can be interpreted as similar

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<sup>2</sup> C. F. G. Masterman, *The Condition of England* (1909), ed. J. T. Boulton (London: Methuen, 1960), 1.

<sup>3</sup> H. G. Wells, *Tono-Bungay* (1909), ed. Patrick Parrinder (London: Penguin, 2005), 9, 12. All further references to this novel are contained parenthetically in the text.

<sup>4</sup> Wells's opinions on the suitability of fiction to address complex modern problems had clearly altered from those presented in his 1901 work *Anticipations*, in which Wells decries previous fictional attempts as falling prey to the impulses of satire and claims that the narrative form becomes 'and more of a nuisance as [the writer's] speculative inductions become sincerer.' H. G. Wells, *Anticipations* (Charleston, SC: BiblioBazaar, 2007), 9.

<sup>5</sup> Masterman, 1.

<sup>6</sup> José Harris, *Private Lives, Public Spirit: A Social History of Britain, 1870-1914* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 33.

attempts to convey the condition of England, albeit via different media.<sup>7</sup> This relationship has been well established critically and Wells himself grouped *Tono-Bungay* with *Mr. Britling Sees it Through* and *Joan and Peter* as, what he described as, ‘fairly sound pictures of contemporary conditions’.<sup>8</sup> Wells’s tentative phraseology here reveals a crucial lack of certainty however; he does not confidently situate his text in the ‘Condition of England’ tradition, a genre which, as this essay will attempt to demonstrate, *Tono-Bungay* ultimately resists in its anti-Realist and experimental qualities. Though Wells describes his text as an ‘indisputable Novel’ written ‘upon accepted lines’, *Tono-Bungay* does far more to subvert the Realist and Condition of England traditions than re-enforce them.<sup>9</sup> Though Wells never claimed to be writing in a way that was ‘radically new’, *Tono-Bungay* achieves a profound radicalism, both in terms of form and content, and which is located in the text’s ‘unsettling’ embodiment of uncertainty.<sup>10</sup> Though attempts have been made to conceptually unify *Tono-Bungay* (via notions of change, decay and the search for expression respectively) two crucial aspects require further expansion; namely, the text’s critique of organised religion and its reflections on the transformative power of literature itself.<sup>11</sup> This essay aims not to challenge the validity of the unifying concepts mentioned above, but to suggest that it is only with a deeper appreciation of both these aspects, each intimately related to the concept of uncertainty, that *Tono-Bungay* discloses its unique radicalism.

At his tale’s opening George Ponderevo prepares the reader for an unusual literary experience: ‘I warn you this book is going to be something of an agglomeration’, adding ‘I want to trace my social *trajectory*’ [my emphasis], (11). Rather than being bound structurally to the orbit of urban or domestic spheres, George’s narrative charts a movement through each level of the English class system, soaring out into the skies and then across the ocean. His rocket-like social trajectory, enabled by the emerging forces of advertising and mass marketing, is

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<sup>7</sup> Harris, 33.

<sup>8</sup> See in particular David Lodge’s 1966 essay ‘*Tono-Bungay* and the Condition of England’, in *The Language of Fiction* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984), 214-43, and Barbara Bond, ‘H. G. Wells’s *Tono-Bungay* as a Reflection of Its Time’, *Wellsian*, 26 (2003), 3-11; ‘Digression about Novels’, *Henry James and H. G. Wells*, ed. Leon Edel and Gordon N. Ray (London: Hart-Davis, 1958), 215-33 (232), first published in *Experiment in Autobiography*, (London: Gollancz: 1934), 487-504.

<sup>9</sup> *Henry James and H. G. Wells*, 33.

<sup>10</sup> Edward Mendelson, *Tono-Bungay*, xxvii.

<sup>11</sup> Kenneth B. Newell, *Structure in Four Novels by H. G. Wells* (The Hague: Mouton, 1968) ; Maria Teresa Chialant ‘Dickensian Motifs in Wells’s Novels: The Disease Metaphor in *Tono-Bungay*’, in *H. G. Wells Under Revision*, ed. Patrick Parrinder and Christopher Rolfe (London, Associated University Presses, 1990), 97-108; Lucille Herbert, ‘*Tono-Bungay* Tradition and Experiment’, *Modern Language Quarterly*, 33 (1972), 140-155; John Batchelor offers an insightful yet brief paragraph on the subject of religion in *H. G. Wells* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 73-4.

thus represented spatially. As George becomes increasingly anxious to pilot faster, more effective ways to break away from the bonds of society the text frees itself from the formal stability (and security) of a centre. For readers this sense of formal disruption is heightened by the knowledge that George is the victim of something newly emergent, an ‘unusual transverse force’ which jerks him ‘crosswise’ out of any previously assured social ‘stratum’ (9). Appropriately, George can only relate such an experience as ‘a succession of samples’ (9), with his narrative reproducing such confusion for the reader via a series of chronological jerks and transitory panoramas.

As many of its major episodes are so transparently influenced by previous authors, the plot of *Tono-Bungay* could also be interpreted as a succession of samples. Mark Schorer, for example, writes that Wells ‘flounders through a series of literary imitations’ and stresses Wells’s apparent lack of artistry, for which a brand of patchwork plagiarism is the novelist’s only compensation. This cannibalisation of style in *Tono-Bungay* is intimately linked to the text’s wider notions of uncertainty however, and should not be equated to a lack of precision or vagueness of intent.<sup>12</sup> When addressing this issue Lucille Herbert states that:

If [...] there is a fundamental dissonance between the values, the interests, the conceptions of self and society that inform *Tono-Bungay* and those of the nineteenth-century authors whom Wells might be thought of as impersonating through the voice of his narrator, then some questions about the whole expressive method of the novel also demand attention.<sup>13</sup>

Herbert continues to argue that by utilising these previous novelistic styles the text *intentionally* raises questions about their value and thus ‘the essential and unifying form of *Tono-Bungay* becomes that of a search for expression which inheres in the process of composition itself.’<sup>14</sup> Not only does the text draw from a whole set of literary influences; it does so in ways which frequently disrupt readers’ expectations or work against pre-established literary tropes. Like Robinson Crusoe, George meets a native on his quap expedition, yet the reader is denied any relationship between the two by George’s thoughtless murder of him. During his daredevil escape flight George engages in ‘a Fight against the east wind’ (354), but though such scenes can be found in many ‘popular magazines’ (355) and adventure novels of the time, George instead chooses to stress their mundanity; ‘Literary men all their lives, may have these squealing fits, but my own experience is that most exciting scenes are not exciting’ (355). The text’s ‘parodic’ treatment of past

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<sup>12</sup> Mark Schorer, ‘Technique as Discovery’, in *The World We Imagine: Selected Essays* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1969), 3-23 (11).

<sup>13</sup> Herbert, 141.

<sup>14</sup> Herbert, 142.

novelistic structures and styles, combined with the text's formal instability, suggests stagnation and disintegration, an uncertainty towards the authority of Edwardian values and that of previous literary traditions.<sup>15</sup>

The radicalism of these perspectives may be best understood by their relation to the views of Wells's contemporary Henry James. Wells states that, in James' point of view, 'There were not so much "novels" as *The Novel*, and it was a very high and important achievement.' Wells states, by contrast, that he will refuse to respect such 'limitations'. He argues that such a conception of 'The Novel' confines authors to a singular Realist style, with no room for vision, experiment or change:

The important point which I tried to argue with Henry James was that the novel of completely consistent characterization arranged beautifully in a story and painted deep and round and solid, no more exhausts the possibilities of the novel, than the art of Velazquez exhausts the possibilities of the painted picture.

For Wells this exhaustive approach is an attempt to place the novel within an 'apparently permanent frame', and he cites himself as *the* visionary attempting to splinter such an illusory notion: 'For a time I was the outstanding instance among writers of fiction in English of the frame getting into the picture.' More importantly, such conceptions of permanence in literature are direct reflections of conservative wishes for the preservation of existing social hierarchies. As Wells writes:

Throughout the broad smooth flow of nineteenth-century life in Great Britain, the art of fiction floated on this same assumption of social *fixity*. The Novel in English was produced in an atmosphere of security for the entertainment of secure people who liked to feel established and safe for good.<sup>16</sup>

While Wells may be guilty of understating the social disruption of the previous century (and its own literary responses) his implication is crucial; now social fixity is breaking down, literature's response should not be continued pursuit of a pseudo-Platonic ideal of 'The Novel' but its formal reconstruction. Such an understanding of Wells's perspectives on contemporary society and literature illuminates how *Tono-Bungay* may have functioned on contemporary readers, as

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<sup>15</sup> Simon J. James, 'Pathological Consumption: Commodities and the End of Culture in H. G. Wells's *Tono-Bungay*', in Nickianne Moody and Julia Hallam, eds, *Consuming for Pleasure* (Liverpool: Liverpool John Moores University Press, 1999), 44–61 (45).

<sup>16</sup> *James and Wells*, 216, 228, 220, 223, 222.

well as highlighting the text's implicit suggestion that in modern England no-one is 'safe for good'.

Masterman writes that 'Of all illusions of the opening twentieth century perhaps the most remarkable is that of security' and, in its attempts at disillusionment *Tono-Bungay* is aimed directly at those who believe their position unshakable.<sup>17</sup> Characters that claim certainty or believe they can remain untouched by the wider forces of change and decay are at best undermined and at worst satirised. While this process has been well documented in relation to Edward Ponderevo and his naive yet 'craven' business sensibilities, less attention has been paid to the text's many religious characters.<sup>18</sup> Though organised religion is far from homogenous in *Tono-Bungay*, it nevertheless promises moral and epistemological certainty in its various Christian formations. Far from being a marginal issue, *Tono-Bungay* provides a substantial critique of orthodox theology, which is not merely sustained throughout George's life but fully integrated with the text's wider themes.

George begins life as a fairly credulous child and describes that he was unable to see beyond Bladesover's external illusion of stability: 'the great house, the church, the village and the labourers and the servants in their stations and degrees, seemed to me, I say, to be a closed and complete social system. [...] It seemed to be in the divine order' (15). Delivered in retrospect, George's repetition of 'seemed' and its juxtaposition with 'closed' and 'complete' signal his later recognition of Bladesover's fragile facade and the weakness of its apparently divine justification. Harris writes that commentators of the period were now beginning to blame 'the repellently 'class' character of much organized religion' and the use of theology 'to buttress inequality and orthodox economics'.<sup>19</sup> As in medieval feudalism, the social hierarchy of Bladesover depends upon religious justification for its dominion over those of lower status. This motif of religiously buttressed inequality is sustained by George's description of the Vicar's rise to social prestige. He states that 'nothing is more remarkable' than the social progress of 'the contemporary cleric' who has soared ironically from the humble position of the seventeenth-century parson to one which outranks the doctor (18).

From his earlier naivety however, George develops 'some queer inherited strain of scepticism' which leads him to doubt those in authority, including the vicar and his ability to 'really know with *certainty* [my emphasis] all about God' (14). The importance of this sceptical rebellion is stressed through the tone of the text's terminology; George is proud that he '*achieved* [my emphasis] terrible blasphemies and sacrilege' (15); he affirms that the freedom of 'spiritual neglect' at his school was a definite 'privilege' (29). Despite his venom for Christianity, George's rebellion is not purely scriptural or philosophical; religion is simply one

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<sup>17</sup> Masterman, 222.

<sup>18</sup> William Kupinse, 'Wasted Value: The Serial Logic of H. G. Wells's *Tono-Bungay*', *Novel: A Forum on Fiction*, 33 (1999), 51-72 (52-3).

<sup>19</sup> Harris, 159.

element of the text's wider social critique. When George describes with mock sympathy the opposition between himself and the Bladesover tea circle, for example, it is not one but many conflated injustices which are presented for readers to decry: 'it was hard on me, but perhaps it was also hard upon these rather over-fed, ageing, pretending people, that my youthful restlessness and rebellious unbelieving eyes should be thrust in among their dignities' (22). For striking someone of higher status George is sent away to live with the extremely religious Frapps. Among the hell-fearing family, George terrifies his cousins with heresy and mocks their submissive faith. George highlights the Frapps' rejection of basic reasoning, stating that 'resignation to God's will was the common device of these people in the face of every duty and every emergency' (45). Such passivity allows any occasion that might lead to questions of God's benevolence to be twisted into tests of moral endurance: 'God sent them many children, most of whom died, and so, by their coming and going, gave a double exercise in the virtues of submission' (45). Such sharp satire functions in *Tono-Bungay* to estrange religion from familiarity. The irrationality and stranger rituals of the Catholic Frapps, such as their drinking of 'imaginary draughts of blood'(45), are thus removed from the security of tradition, allowing for their re-assessment. Nicodemus attempts to shortcut George's rationality through fear, and scare him into belief saying, 'You don't want to wake in 'ell, George, burnin' and screamin' forever, do you?'(50). Though 'thoroughly miserable and frightened' (50), George's scepticism does not permit him to believe in such a simplistic tyrant dealing out punishment and demanding penance. Whatever God might be like, George reasons; 'one didn't square [him] like that' (51).

*Tono-Bungay* thus presents the rational, questioning spirit triumphing over the closed minded certainty of both the Bladesover theocrats and hell-fearing Frapps, a critique made all the more damning as George is only a child when he disavows the easy assurance of revealed religion. When placed in historical context, these models of faith are shown to be deeply out of step with prevailing religious attitudes. In his 1909 study Masterman writes that Christianity was drifting away from scripture 'towards a non-dogmatic affirmation of general kindness and good fellowship', and nearly ninety years later Harris concurs that:

In all branches of rank-and-file religion there was a tendency upon the part of worshippers to ignore the claims of authority [...] a growing distaste for creedal orthodoxy and hell-fire sermons, and a growing preference for hymns, choirs, flowers, and forms of worship that were aesthetically pleasing rather than theologically precise.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Masterman, 207; Harris, 172.

Despite this evolution from a shared public faith to one of individual preference, Christianity in Edwardian England was nevertheless ‘an assertion of national and cultural identity’, and in challenging it George reconstructs an essential part of his identity against that of the nation.<sup>21</sup> Like much of the text, this early section has its roots in Wells’s real-life experiences and his own rejection of an ‘identity which he despised’, and had been ‘forced upon him by the conventions of society’. Norman and Jeanne MacKenzie state that the teenage Wells searched for salvation among different denominations but found not only their various dogmas unsatisfying, but the very ‘fact of organisation’ oppressive.<sup>22</sup> To Wells it was this which combined with scriptural authority to make religion so short-sighted to change, and allowed it to make claims of certainty in defiance of the implications of contemporary philosophy and science.

For better or worse, scientific and technological advancement loom steadily over the landscape of *Tono-Bungay*, encroaching upon its sites of security and inevitably transforming its physical shape. Through their reactions to such changes, Wells’s characters embody a number of contemporary perspectives and anxieties. The ‘embittered Protestant’ (284) Lady Osprey, for example, is satirised for her general pomposity and religious certainty. Despite her name, Lady Osprey regards the very subject of flying ‘as a most undesirable and improper topic – a blasphemous intrusion upon the angels’. Though George (and the modern world), is on the brink of mastering flight, Lady Osprey is rigid in her belief that flight is a divine preserve, her repeated denials and misplaced Biblical allusion making her appear increasingly foolish:

‘We don’t fly yet.’

‘You never will,’ she said compactly. ‘You never will.’

The little lady lifted a small gloved hand and indicated a height of about four feet from the ground. ‘Thus far,’ she said, ‘thus far – and no farther! No!’

She became emphatically pink. ‘No,’ she said again quite conclusively, and coughed shortly [...]

‘Upon his belly shall he go,’ she said with quiet distinctness, ‘all the days of his life.’ (287)

The reality presented by the text in contrast to such short-sightedness is one of unstoppable flux in which religious, and not only class and technological boundaries are constantly being reformed. Kenneth B. Newell proposes that *Tono-Bungay* ‘is based on the idea of Change and its several manifestations’, concluding ‘it is the principle of Change that, in the end, structurally unifies all.’<sup>23</sup> When the

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<sup>21</sup> Harris, 151.

<sup>22</sup> Norman and Jeanne Mackenzie, *The Time Traveller: The Life of H. G. Wells* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1974), 43.

<sup>23</sup> Newell, 73, 83.

Vicar mournfully observes the changes brought to the valley by the construction of Crest Hill, George attempts to comfort him:

‘Things will readjust themselves,’ I lied.

He snatched at the phrase. ‘Of course,’ he said. ‘They’ll readjust themselves – settle down. Must. In the old way. It’s bound to come right again – a comforting thought’ (274).

The comfort gained from this lie is ultimately hollow however, as the Vicar cannot fully believe that the world will return to a familiar shape. Newell chooses to quote from this section to illustrate his conclusions about change:

He had kept the truth from his mind a long time, but that morning it had forced its way to him with an aspect that brooked no denial that this time it was not just changes that were coming in his world, but that all his world lay open and defenceless, conquered and surrendered, doomed so far as he could see, root and branch, scale and form alike, to change. (274).

The quotation is certainly apt, yet Newell ignores the relevance that it is the Vicar to whom these words apply. While the text does not mock the Vicar, as it mocks the bloated figure of Lady Osprey, it nevertheless presents his *entire* world (presumably including the spiritual as well as the physical) as in a state of ‘root and branch’ decay.

Critics have documented the theme of decay in *Tono-Bungay* (Maria Teresa Chialant, for example, notes that ‘pathological metaphors’ constantly ‘impregnate’ the text, which Newell calls ‘fermenting mass’ in itself) but they have not demonstrated its extension to religion.<sup>24</sup> Juxtaposed images of decay and fading religion are found not only in the ‘cadaverous face’ (273) of the Vicar but in the ‘fester[ing]’ world of the Frapps; Nicodemus is ‘dirty and crushed’, (45) his house filthy with rotting food, and the local congregation described as ‘twenty or thirty other darkened and unclean people, all dressed in dingy colours that would not show the dirt [...] the self appointed confidants of God’s mockery of His own creation’ (45). *Tono-Bungay* conceptualises Edwardian England as diseased and organised religion is simply part of this wider metaphor, something decaying which would be far better removed.

Simon J. James has demonstrated the shared critique of patent medicine and art enacted in *Tono-Bungay*; both promise ‘relief from the demands of reality’ yet fail

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<sup>24</sup> Chialant, 99; Newell, 75.



to provide any 'material good'.<sup>25</sup> Religion is presented in the same way: as an ineffective remedy. Through its assurance of immortality, religion can offer only false hope and the text brings this notion under constant scrutiny. While characters like the Vicar and Lady Osprey ignore the particulars of life and its inevitable changes in order to hold on to their general assurances, George considers what effect the particular might have on these larger structures of belief: 'If single human beings – if one single rickety infant - can be born as it were by accident and die futile, why not the whole race?' (330). The futility of life leads to George's uncertainty of the human race and its privileged position as a species. When his uncle Edward is dying and uncertain of his own immortality, George lies in order to give solace though he does not believe in the Christian afterlife himself. Like the Vicar on Crest Hill, Edward is also 'comforted' (365) by such easy assurances, as they make the powerful claim that some part of humanity, both at individual and societal levels, is ultimately immune to decay. George takes the more trepid steps away from such claims in order to observe '[him]self from the outside' and his 'country from the outside - without illusions' (389).

This uncertain attitude adopted by George contrasts sharply with the group of religious characters which plague his uncle's deathbed with rites, and whose 'climax' (363) is disappointed by the old man not dying promptly enough. Before George clears the room in anger the 'little' (362) English clergyman succeeds in smashing a glass, tripping up George, and quarrelling with the landlady over the hanging of a 'cheap crucifix in the shadow over the bed where it might catch [Edward's] eye' (362). The whole scene appears ludicrous, emphasising the artificial 'show' elements of death rituals, and the foolish clergyman described as merely 'playing a game' (363).

In 'Dickensian Motifs in Wells's Novels', Maria Teresa Chialant argues that *Tono-Bungay* can be read as a response to Dickens's fiction.<sup>26</sup> While George and Beatrice are reminiscent of Pip and Estella, it is their differences that generate new reflections of the landscape of contemporary England. Similarly if Edward's 'disappointing' death scene is compared to the decidedly climactic demise of Little Nell in *The Old Curiosity Shop*, Wells's text clearly denies readers the kind of religious solace given by Dickens. Instead of demonstrating the certainty of 'Heaven's justice' projected through a solemn religious speaker like Dickens' schoolmaster, Wells's scene instead employs bumbling Dickensian characters in completely the wrong context and ultimately undermining aspects of organised religion in the process.<sup>27</sup> Of Dickens, Wells writes though his 'novels [are] with a purpose [...] they never deal with any inner confusion, any conflicts of opinion

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<sup>25</sup> James, 48.

<sup>26</sup> Chialant, 105.

<sup>27</sup> Charles Dickens, *The Old Curiosity Shop* (1841), ed. Angus Easson (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976), 654.

within the individual characters, any subjective essential change.’<sup>28</sup> Even if Wells is underestimating the complexity of Dickens’ fiction in these statements, they nevertheless give an insight into what he sought to achieve through his fiction by contrast, and explain why George’s narrative is such a catalogue of inner conflicts, self-questioning, and re-evaluations of the self and the world. The text’s constant interruptions and collisions with the certainties of social conventions and organised religion offer a keen counterpoint to previous models of belief and fiction.

In his earlier life George claims to suffer from a ‘constant error of youth’, which is ‘overestimating the Will in things’ (94). A crucial element of George’s journey is his disavowal of this teleological ‘illusion’ which colours the world with ‘a sinister and magnificent quality of intention’ (94). He comes to recognise that independent thought and actions are paramount, as is the will to challenge those institutions which claim legitimacy from questionable authorities. The text further returns to the ‘Will in things’ when George describes how he is driven by a combination of sexual frustration and social convention into unhappy marriage with Marion (182). Christopher Butler writes that ‘a sometimes despairing sceptical distance from social norms [...] is central to the novel at the beginning of the century’, and, like the work of E. M. Forster and Joseph Conrad, Wells’s texts advocate ‘very different kinds of dissentient morality, divorced from conventional political and religious constraints’.<sup>29</sup> The text questions the authority of marriage (which both legitimates and cements the loveless union) whilst also presenting an ambivalent attitude to George’s infidelity. When he returns from his lover Effie, George states that he has ‘no sense of wrong-doing at all’, adding, ‘I don’t know how it may be *proper* [my emphasis] to feel on such occasions; that is how I felt’ (190). George pulls himself from what society tells him he *ought* to feel and instead explains what he *does* feel. *Tono-Bungay* depicts the certainty of moral consensus being disrupted by issues of sexual desire and its projection. As Butler states, the authors of early modernism were beginning to present texts in reaction to established conventions such as Christian marriage. They began using texts to consider what might be lacking in religious tenets and to enlarge moral possibilities rather than prescribe them.

George tells us that Marion inherits her conceptions of sexual relationships from both her religious upbringing and romantic fiction. Such ‘training’ results in an ‘absolute perversion of instinct’ which transforms Marion from a ‘shy lover’ into ‘an impossible one’ (164). In Marion’s fiction sexuality is both romanticised and sanitised, leading her to label genuine sexual impulses as “horrid” (164) by contrast. The gendered roles promoted by these romances debase masculinity to an unworthy slavery whilst almost deifying the female:

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<sup>28</sup> *James and Wells*, 223-4.

<sup>29</sup> Christopher Butler, *Early Modernism: Literature, Music and Painting in Europe 1900-1916* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 2.

She had an idea of love as a state of *worship and service* [my emphasis] on the part of the man and of condescension on the part of the woman. There was nothing ‘horrid’ about it in any fiction she had read. (164)

Once again the text employs religious terminology to express notions of mental restriction and pacifying illusion, but in this case in relation to literature. Marion, who has only read the Bible and childish romances, is characterised by an inability to communicate, by ‘sulky silence’ (164), ‘suppressions’ (165), and ‘baby talk’ (187). This is in direct contrast to George’s reading habits: read endless books in trains as I went to and fro. I developed social relationships at my uncle’s house that Marion did not share. The seeds of new ideas poured in upon me and grew in me’ (187). George’s literary appetite is delivered in terms of fertility, promising the growth of new ideas, change and communication.

This is one among many instances of *Tono-Bungay*’s engagement with notions of the “transformative” power of literature and becomes all the more purposeful in light of the text’s intertextuality. Like *Jane Eyre*, George is a lonely and oppressed child whose imagination and moral reasoning is nurtured by books, in particular, those ‘banished [...] during the Victorian revival of good taste and emasculated orthodoxy’ (26-7). George reads *The Rights of Man*, *Gulliver’s Travels* and *Candide*, each significant for their promotion of radical (and often anti-clerical) ideas, and, as examples of new thinking, serve as a contrast to ‘emasculated’ Victorian orthodoxy, which is itself incapable of giving birth to new ideas. The language employed by *Tono-Bungay* in these early scenes is crucial; George seeks ‘banished’ texts, his ‘book-borrowing raid’ described as ‘one of extraordinary dash and danger’, and all risked to sniff out ‘abandoned crumbs of thought’ (28). The drama of George’s book raids is painted with a child’s passion for adventure and peril, yet it is also a damning representation of literature’s control; wisdom is depicted as precious yet scarce, first censored by orthodoxy and then placed behind closed doors. At the close of the nineteenth century the Catholic Church entered its own period of ‘modernism’, during which theological scholars attempted to demonstrate the compatibility of established doctrine with a ‘meticulous and dispassionate study’ of the Bible itself. The success of this approach can be measured by Pope Pius X’s subsequent decisions to excommunicate such scholars, proclaim modernism heresy and prohibit all critical studies of the Bible in 1907.<sup>30</sup> It is notable that the list of proscribed books put forward by the Vatican at this time also featured many works of fiction, including texts by Paine, Swift and Voltaire – the authors read by George as a child. Norman and Jean MacKenzie state that *Tono-Bungay* recreates the hours Wells spent reading as a child, and the books recalled through its protagonist are deeply significant as they represent themes of

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<sup>30</sup> Sam Harris, *The End of Faith* (London: Free Press, 2006), 104; Harris, *The End of Faith*, 104.

‘radicalism and agnosticism’ which would play a ‘pre-dominant role’ in his future writing.<sup>31</sup>

Establishing these personal and historical contexts makes the inclusion of such texts all the more relevant to the intimately entwined notions of religious criticism and the transformative power of literature. The certainty afforded by strict religious orthodoxy makes literature which dares to pose complex epistemological and ethical questions entirely redundant. It comes as no surprise that there are ‘no books’ in the Frapp household or that George doubts the family’s capacity for ‘reading consecutively for more than a minute or so’ (45). Literature is presented as double-edged, with the ability to transform in ways that are both constructive, as in George’s case, and repressive, as with Marion and the Frapps.

It might be tempting to suggest therefore, that *Tono-Bungay* constructs a clear divide between morally and stylistically restrictive literature on one hand, and a constructively radical tradition (to which the text itself ascribes) on the other. Wells clearly considered his conceptions of literature and the novel more morally relevant due to their freedom from convention; hand in hand with his earlier criticisms of Henry James, for example, is his complaint that he ‘had no idea of the possible use of the novel as a help to conduct’. James’s mind, according to Wells, ‘had turned away from any such idea’ by attempting to achieve some abstractly perfected notion of the ‘Novel’.<sup>32</sup> Such a simple dichotomy however, is rendered unstable in *Tono-Bungay* by Wells’s narrator. It is through writing that George wishes to aid ‘poor individuals’ stranded among the ‘windy, perplexing shoals and channels’ (12) of society, its laws and traditions, yet his narrative constantly dismisses ‘the very form, substance, and language of the novel as hopelessly inadequate to tell the truth he wishes to tell’.<sup>33</sup> George is plagued by ‘indistinctness’ (350); he apologises to the reader that even he doesn’t fully understand what he is writing, and when he finally surveys his text he states: ‘Whether I have succeeded I cannot imagine. All this writing is grey now and dead and trite and unmeaning to me’ (381). With these understandings in mind we arrive at apparently contradictory conclusions in the text; that while literature is endowed with transformative power it ultimately fails to provide stable truths.

It may also be tempting to suggest that it is not religion or literature in *Tono-Bungay* but science and technology which will provide the stability and certainty George and society so desperately seek. At some moments there is indeed optimism that science will deliver salvation: ‘I idealized Science. I decided that in power and knowledge lay the salvation of my life, the secret that would fill my need’ (202).

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<sup>31</sup> Mackenzie, 36, 39.

<sup>32</sup> *James and Wells*, 216.

<sup>33</sup> Herbert, 142.

This is a view made more attractive perhaps by the knowledge of Wells's scientific background and the increasing focus of his later, more popular, writings on science fiction. The text itself however, does not fully bear out this conclusion either. Science, the 'remotest of mistresses' (277), remains something noble yet abstract, always mystic in its definition and often at odds with any optimistic views of the future. This is because, despite George's natural desires for progress, contemporary science points to extinction, 'atomic decay' and the futility of the human race (329-30). According to Norman and Jeanne MacKenzie, Wells grew up in the years often called 'the Age of Doubt' but began writing in 'the Age of Anxiety'. Though controversial scientific theories such as evolution had by this time been comfortably reconciled in some intellectual quarters by 'popular and optimistic' glosses, Wells's doubts persisted. Like his tutor and hero T. H. Huxley, Wells believed that it was impossible to simply substitute 'divine purpose' with 'natural selection', whilst leaving an optimistic model of human teleology unblemished. Survival of the fittest did not guarantee the positive evolution of human ethics, and this 'dualism' of scientific optimism and despair was to continue throughout Wells's future works.<sup>34</sup>

Lawrence Poston stresses the hollow and unwieldy quality of technology as presented by the text. As well as noting the symbolic flimsiness of George's hot air balloons, Poston observes a correlation between Edward, the magnate, and George, the inventor; 'the threat of crash hangs over both,' and neither are fully masters of the forces with which they grapple (289).<sup>35</sup> George claims that he has intended his creation, the X<sub>2</sub> Destroyer, to figure as a concluding 'symbol' (388) and thus we might expect some kind of finality to be established in this enduring image. What George is symbolising through the Destroyer, however, is deeply elusive and seems to constantly reflect back on its own signification. It is something that is at once 'human achievement and the most inhuman of all existing things', something 'so essential and so immaterial', which is felt intensely, yet 'beyond the compass'(388) of his mind. The Destroyer is described as a monstrous 'black hound', boring its nose through the Thames on a trail even George, its Frankensteinian creator, does not know. For these reasons the destroyer must remain an 'ambiguous symbol' and science, both as a wider feature of the text and through its specific manifestation in the X<sub>2</sub>, is terrifying and beautiful; seemingly tied to some elusive notion of progress yet refusing to promise salvation or peace.<sup>36</sup>

*Tono-Bungay* embodies a deliberate refusal of conclusion. Though many of George's apparent surmises are troubled later on one statement however, is fully borne out by the text: 'the perplexing thing about life is the irresolvable complexity of reality, of things and relations alike. Nothing is simple. Every wrong done has a

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<sup>34</sup> Mackenzie, 54-7.

<sup>35</sup> Lawrence Poston III, 'Tono-Bungay: Wells's Unconstructed Tale', *College English*, 26 (1965), 433-8 (437).

<sup>36</sup> Bernard Bergonzi, 'Introduction' in *Tono-Bungay* (Boston: Riverside, 1966), xix.

certain justice in it, and every deed has dregs of evil (195-6). In their formal disruption and moral ambivalence, the series of impressions that George presents as his life story repeatedly demonstrate their ‘incompatibility with any of the neat and definite theories people hold about life and the meaning of the world’ (333). Religion, literature and science are each crippled in their various attempts to offer certainty in morality, knowledge or the future. *Tono-Bungay* is radical, in a sense therefore, for its critique of established moral and epistemological structures. George’s journey in the destroyer (too long to quote in its entirety) is crucial in this respect as it charts an escape from the very physical manifestations of tradition, religion, empire and England, all of which promise collective identity, stability and certainty. George instead chooses the ‘windy freedom’ of ‘trackless ways’ (387), and rejects the ‘great pile’ (383) of Victorian self-assurance and its pleas to be respected. It is also true however, that many texts, including those referenced within the text, have enacted similarly severe critiques. The unique radicalism of *Tono-Bungay* is located precisely in its refusal to offer the certainty of another, new, structure to replace the ones it has just dismantled. *Tono-Bungay* embodies a shift from the Victorian novel’s often didactic impositions of certain epistemological structures to consider more ontological questions of individual essence and subjectivity.<sup>37</sup> Instead of imposing a new narrative of epistemological and moral certainty, the text recognises that the grand narratives of religion, science and literature are fundamentally unsuccessful; they fail their own promises of totalising human knowledge and comprehending the subjective complexities of life. In these respects *Tono-Bungay* ultimately displays elements of the postmodern, the most forceful of which being the text’s essential uncertainty or undecidability. It may seem counter-intuitive to chart features of postmodernism occurring before the onset of the high modernism, yet this depends entirely on how immutable we believe such categories to be, especially considering postmodernism’s tendency to ‘refuse the constraints of periodization’.<sup>38</sup> These conclusions do not suggest that *Tono-Bungay* totalises every aspect of the postmodern anymore than does *Tristram Shandy*. Wells’s text was clearly not formalised with such conceptualisations in mind, yet it is defined by a quality of undecidability, a refusal to place trust in grand narratives and rely on conventional forms of literary expression, that has more in common with postmodernism than it does with the realist tradition. Like its hero, the text grapples with unknown forces, acknowledging its inability to establish truth or certainty whilst also exposing the insubstantiality of the past. The future promised by *Tono-Bungay* may always be one of uncertainty therefore, but there is still hope that by the fires of the old the individual may stumble upon that ‘hidden mission’ (388): a path to the new.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> The postmodern shift from an epistemological to ontological dominant is outlined by Brian McHale in *Postmodernist Fiction* (New York: Methuen, 1987), 6-10.

<sup>38</sup> Bruce Robbins, ‘Across the Ages’ (1993) in *Postmodernism Across the Ages*, ed., Bill Readings and Bennet Schaber (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1999), 239.

<sup>39</sup> Bond stresses this point in her conclusion, 11.