

## H. G. Wells the Poststructuralist

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Perhaps more than with most writers, there has always been a great deal of controversy amongst critics about the achievements of H.G. Wells as a literary figure, but one thing which does seem clear is that in England at any rate, he has not been accorded canonical status. The purpose of this paper is to suggest that in the light of new developments in literary theory, particularly developments in textual analysis, the time has come for a reassessment of Wells's fiction.

Since, as Colin MacCabe puts it, "No text can escape the discourse of literary criticism in which it is referred to, named and valued,"<sup>1</sup> it was Wells's misfortune to achieve maturity as a writer at a time when literary fashions were changing rapidly, and after about 1912 both literary practice and critical opinion went against him. Wells's rejection of the modernist aesthetic has resulted in much of his fiction being misunderstood and underrated because it does not measure up to the criteria established by modernism and upheld by its critical counterpart, New Criticism. This, of course, is by no means an original observation,<sup>2</sup> but what has not up to now been sufficiently emphasised is the extent to which modernist ways of thinking have obscured the experimental nature of Wells's writing, to the extent, in fact, that his attempts to explore new forms of expression in the novel - from a poststructuralist perspective, incorporating subtle and innovative narrative techniques - have often been dismissed as failures in execution.

The modernist writers were unequivocal in their rejection of Wells and his contemporaries. As Virginia Woolf puts it: "the sooner English fiction turns its back on them, as politely as may be, and marches, if only into the desert, the better for its soul."<sup>3</sup> Wells was equally unequivocal in his rejection of the modernists' techniques. He told

Gertrude Stein bluntly that he considered her later writing to be insane, and in a letter to James Joyce which has since become famous, writes that he can no longer support the younger writer's work on *Ulysses* because he sees it as "Vast riddles" leading only to a "dead end".<sup>4</sup> In fact, Wells's major accusation against the experimental modernist mode of writing, particularly its emphasis on erudite allusion, syntactic disruption and general linguistic deviation, was that it was elitist, a form of self-indulgence which had the effect of excluding, even alienating vast numbers of potential readers. As he writes in the letter to Joyce: "You have turned your back on common men, on their elementary needs and their restricted time and intelligence and you have elaborated." For his own work, Wells declares, he wants "language and statement as simple and clear as possible."

Throughout his career, then, Wells consciously and avowedly refused to adopt modernist techniques. He never departed from direct, accessible sentence structures and - ostensibly, at any rate - retained the illusion of reality conveyed by realist narrative conventions. These practices can, of course, be seen as a direct consequence of his often-expressed views on the power and purpose of literature. He maintained throughout his career that the novel had a function,<sup>5</sup> that it could convey ideas and affect conduct as effectively - often more effectively - than non-fictional writing, and with this in mind he dismissed modernist theories of the impersonality of the artist and of literary autonomy. Wells was eager to deal directly with contemporary social issues with the aim of reaching as wide a readership as possible.

But although this aim undoubtedly had a significant effect on the content and form of Wells's novels, my claim that he should be seen as a poststructuralist rests on a much more fundamental principle underlying both his style and his approach to fiction - his theory of language. Discussing the modern period in *Writing Degree Zero*, the French structuralist, Roland Barthes argues that "the whole of literature, from Flaubert to the present day became the problematics of language"<sup>6</sup> and H.G.Wells was one of

the first writers of his generation to realise this. From his early years at South Kensington his study of science had led him to explore the way language relates to the world,<sup>7</sup> and this is evident in some of the very first scientific writing. As early as 1891, for instance, he is questioning the commonsense notion that language relates directly and unproblematically to a pre-existing reality. Words do not refer directly to things, he argues; on the contrary, by categorising and classifying, language creates meanings.<sup>8</sup> From this point on, Wells became increasingly fascinated by the nature and function of language. He goes on to trace in detail the ways in which language shapes us as individuals, and the extent to which our native language determines our view of the world around us.<sup>9</sup> Later in his career Wells was profoundly influenced by William James's work on Pragmatism and language, and became even more convinced of the dangers of assuming that words and meanings are fixed and stable, when, in fact, "we see the world through a mist of words".<sup>10</sup>

By the 1930s, in *The Science of Life*,<sup>11</sup> Wells is outlining a view of language as a signifying system which is in many ways as revolutionary and far-reaching as Saussurean claims about the arbitrary nature of the sign.<sup>12</sup>

Wells's ideas about language played a crucial role in his response to literary modernism and they are at the heart of his dispute with Henry James about the function and form of the novel. The two writers were never able to agree on such issues because they had diametrically opposed conceptions of language. James's approach is fundamentally Platonic. He sought to attain an ideal form of artistic representation through the form and discourse of his texts - in his last letter to Wells, he writes: "It is art that makes life, makes interest, makes importance, for our consideration and application of these things"<sup>13</sup> - and his essays and prefaces reveal a firm conviction that although this ideal, this perfect fusion of content and expression is elusive, certainly, and achieved only as the result of

strenuous, unremitting effort on the part of the writer, it is nonetheless attainable.<sup>14</sup> Wells, on the other hand, was convinced that there could be no such thing as a perfect expression, because language does not represent pre-existing meanings, but mediates - and to that extent creates - meaning. In fact, had James written that *language makes life, makes interest and so on*, it is hard to see how Wells could have disagreed with him - this, after all, is what he himself had been saying in *Mankind in the Making* and *First and Last Things*, and was at that period about to explore in global and historical terms in *The Outline of History*.

It is significant, therefore, that in his reply to James's letter, Wells writes:

I don't clearly understand your concluding phrases - *which shows no doubt how completely they define our difference*. When you say "it is art that makes life, makes interest, makes importance," I can only read sense into it by assuming that you are using "art" for every conscious human activity. I use the word for a research and attainment that is technical and special.[my italics]<sup>15</sup>

Wells is surely right in his reading of what is implied in James's assertion: it does go to the heart of the difference between them. Henry James and the later modernists assume a special use of language, a language available only to the literary artist, whereas for Wells, language is always a social fact, never fixed, never stable; an arbitrary and everchanging system of signification. Literature may have an important part to play in modern life, but its discourse can never be separated out as something special, as apart from ordinary human concerns.

Since literary modernism played a crucial role in how the world saw Wells, it must have played an equally large part in how he saw himself, and the quarrel with Henry James may well have led to a defensive - sometimes aggressive - attitude towards literary artistry. Pro-Wells critics have spent a lot of time explaining away some of his comments on his own

writing - assertions that he would rather be called a journalist than a novelist, and so on<sup>16</sup> - which have led to the widely accepted view that he was a self-declared philistine who cared nothing for art and took no pains with expression. But in one sense Wells was expressing what he believed to be true. If the content and form of the novel had to be what James and the modernists decreed, then he was not a novelist and he was not prepared to adhere to such rules in order to be one. Major changes in literary taste were to boost Henry James's prestige and to diminish H.G. Wells's reputation as a literary figure, and in *Boon* - published in 1914 - Wells had shown himself to be both perceptive and prescient:

"You see," Boon said, "you can't now talk about literature without going through James. James is to criticism what Immanuel Kant is to philosophy - a partially comprehensible essential, an inevitable introduction. If you understand what James is up to and if you understand what James is not up to, then you are placed. You are in a position to lay about you with significance. Otherwise...." (98)

From the vantage point of the 1990s, the trailing away of that last sentence can be seen as both satirical and prophetic. In his book on Wells, Michael Draper claims that to take sides in the dispute between the two writers is both unnecessary and unproductive: "Before James and Wells fell out they were both artists, but artists of a different sort."<sup>17</sup> The problem for Wells, of course, was that it was the artists of James's sort whose work was esteemed and modernist critics whose precepts for the novel prevailed.

It is Wells's theory of language, then, which determines his view of literature, and informs his contention in the General Preface to the Atlantic edition of his collected works that all his fiction is about "unrest and change":

The writer confesses his profound disbelief in any perfect or permanent work of art. All art, all science, and still more certainly all

writing are experiments in statement. There will come a time for every work of art when it will have served its purpose and be bereft of its last rag of significance.<sup>18</sup>

A poststructuralist view of art! Language does not reflect but creates what Wells describes in 'The Scepticism of the Instrument' as "an uncertain and fluctuating world of unique appearances" (392). No literary text can be guaranteed immortality. For Wells, therefore, there was no way in which the form of the novel could be predetermined, no way in which formal rules could be laid down for expression, and here he was taking a view of fiction diametrically opposed to that of Henry James and the later modernist writers like Virginia Woolf and James Joyce, who refined and expanded Jamesian precepts. Wells's ideas about the novel accord, in fact, with Mikhail Bakhtin's claim that the novel as a genre is "plasticity itself", its defining characteristic being that it can never have a fixed, prescribed form. "It is," writes Bakhtin, "by its very nature non-canonic.... It is a genre that is ever questing, ever examining itself and subjecting its established features to review. Such, indeed, is the only possibility open to a genre that structures itself in a zone of direct contact with developing reality."<sup>19</sup>

Many of the formal strategies in Wells's fiction can be seen as deriving from his theory of language and from the conception of the novel genre which it entails - the belief that the novel form must change and adapt in accord with "developing reality". It could be argued, in fact, that H.G. Wells should no longer be assessed as an outmoded realist, and certainly not as a failed modernist, but as a poststructuralist writer. By this I mean not only that Wells moves away from many of the conventions of traditional literary realism - which are linked in his autobiography with the nineteenth century's "prevalent sense of social stability" (494) - but also that in his most innovative novels there is a self-conscious awareness of the ways in which the discourse and narrative structures of fiction both create and disturb such meanings. Certainly not all



of Wells's structural innovations are equally successful,<sup>20</sup> but in many of his novels they are far more effective - and certainly more subtle - than has generally been acknowledged.

A number of Wells's later novels fall into this category, but these are texts which are seldom read and rarely analysed. I propose, therefore, to look at *Tono-Bungay* in support of my thesis that Wells should be regarded as a poststructuralist writer whose work has often been misinterpreted because it has been categorised inappropriately. This is not only one of his best-known novels but also one which has received considerable and varied critical attention.

A number of Wells's contemporaries considered *Tono-Bungay* a masterpiece<sup>21</sup> but later commentators have been more grudging. Those who have approached the novel as a realist text look for plausibility and convincing characters, and Arnold Kettle's comments are typical.<sup>22</sup> He claims that the novel has no characters which "grip the imagination of the reader. Even Uncle Ponderevo himself is scarcely a person" (84). Walter Allen focuses on coherence; he sees *Tono-Bungay* as "a novel of excellent interludes in an embarrassing muddle,"<sup>23</sup> and he is particularly scornful of the Quap incident as "plainly an afterthought" (319). Even Gordon Ray, who sets out in 'H G Wells tries to be a Novelist' to enhance Wells's reputation, feels that in the Quap episode "credence is strained to the breaking point" (145).<sup>24</sup> But what is interesting is that although all three critics are treating the text as a traditional realist novel, they are, at the same time, evaluating its structure by modernist criteria - Kettle writes, for instance, that *Tono-Bungay* lacks "inner artistic unity" (82), Allen's main accusation against the novel is that it conspicuously lacks "a Commanding Centre, the principle making for unity" (317), whilst Ray's unquestioned initial premise is that all "true novels" must be "perfectly harmonious and consistent works of art" (125). Mark Schorer's influential essay, 'Technique as Discovery,' published in 1948,<sup>25</sup> is even more scathing about Wells's writing, because

it uncompromisingly assesses the language and structure of *Tono-Bungay* as though it had set out to be a modernist novel. What is more, his criteria for assessing technique are wholly those of New Criticism.

He tells us - in a very Jamesian phrase - that he will focus on "the uses to which language, as language, is put to express the quality of the experience in question" and the ways in which point of view is employed "not only as a mode of dramatic delimitation, but more particularly, of thematic definition" (69). In fact, the language and point of view of *Tono-Bungay* are not discussed at all in Schorer's essay except in the form of generalised comments - we are told, for instance, that the novelist flounders through a series of literary imitations, and that the most "significant failure" (68) of the novel is its ending insofar as it fails to convey what Wells "meant to represent" (69). All in all, Schorer concludes, "Wells, with his...large blob of potential material, did not know how to cut it to the novel's taste" (83). It is hard to resist the conclusion, in fact, that *Tono-Bungay* features in the essay merely as an exemplum of lack of technique in the novel, as a dreadful warning of what happens when a writer wilfully ignores the Jamesian rules of art - "That art will not tolerate such a writer H.G.Wells handsomely proves" (73) - with the result, as Schorer concludes, predictably, that "James grows for us and Wells disappears" (73).

The critical balance has been redressed to a large extent by David Lodge's 1967 article, '*Tono-Bungay* and the Condition of England'.<sup>26</sup> Lodge rebuts much of the adverse criticism by arguing persuasively - and in my view convincingly - that Jamesian criteria are inappropriate for an assessment of *Tono-Bungay*, which should be seen as in the tradition of the "Condition of England Novel", picaresque in form. Lodge goes on to defend the novel on the very grounds that Schorer and most other critics had dismissed it - its language. "Wells's undertaking in *Tono-Bungay*," he argues, "does not require the elegant, harmonious, intricate kind of language adopted by James, but a language that is hurried, urgent,

groping" (216). What is more, he claims, the "organizing principle" of the novel "is to be found in the web of description and commentary by which all the proliferating events and characters of the story are placed in a comprehensive political, social and historical perspective" (219).

This seems to me to be both illuminating and incontestable, but I believe that there is another, equally important organising principle in *Tono-Bungay*, one, moreover, which challenges Lodge's assertion that as a novelist "Wells was not as revolutionary as he thought" (218). The text as a whole foregrounds narration. There is throughout a sceptical awareness of the power of language and narrative as a means of social control - and therefore a source of power - in a modern consumer-based society. It is the sudden realisation of this which persuades George Ponderevo to join his uncle in the production of Tono-Bungay, despite his initial reluctance to involve himself in what he sees as a ludicrous project. The scene in which this change of mind takes place illustrates Wells's awareness of language as a social semiotic. Walking along the Embankment, George is at first struck by the dignity of the buildings. They provide a perspective which shrinks his uncle "until he was only a very small shabby man in a dirty back street, sending off a few hundred bottles of rubbish to foolish buyers" (169), and then his eye is caught by the advertisements on the south side of the river: "of 'Sorber's Food,' of 'Cracknell's Ferric Wine,' very bright and prosperous signs, illuminated at night, and I realized how astonishingly they looked at home there, how evidently part they were in the whole thing" (169). An advertisement for Tono-Bungay "shouts" at him from a hoarding near Adelphi Terrace, "it cried out again" in Kensington High Street, and six or seven more times it "burst into a perfect clamour" (169) as he nears his lodgings.

The imagery here is, of course, drawing attention to the inescapable impact of modern advertising; it relates also to George's growing awareness that although his uncle's plan is silly and wild, it is nonetheless "silly and wild after the fashion of the universe" (168). It is significant that Wells's

emphasis in this passage is on the way in which the hoardings themselves are related to their contexts, because recent work on the language and ideology of advertising indicates that the effect of an advertisement does not depend solely on a simple text-context dichotomy. The various contexts of advertisements are in themselves texts, which carry their own meanings - large hoardings erected prominently in public places, for instance, are evidence of official local-government approval, the text itself has been approved by the appropriate agency and so on - and this has an effect on the spectator. In *Social Semiotics*, Hodge and Kress argue that in such cases "The text has an institutionalized legitimacy and authority."<sup>27</sup>

Although the sceptical George never ceases to be amazed that people can be persuaded to buy "slightly injurious rubbish" (194) in such large quantities by the language of advertising, Edward Ponderevo is carried along and persuaded by the force of his own rhetoric about the virtues of Tono-Bungay, and his advertising campaign sweeps the public along with him. Whilst Uncle Edward believes that he is giving his customers "faith" (165), George's friend, the artist Ewart, knows that what they are being given is words divorced from their function in social reality. "You are artists," he tells them:

"You and I, sir, can talk, if you will permit me as one artist to another. It's advertisement has - done it. Advertisement has revolutionized trade and industry; it is going to revolutionize the world. The old merchant used to tote about commodities; the new one creates values. Doesn't need to tote. He takes something that isn't worth anything and he makes it worth something. He takes mustard that is just like anybody else's mustard, and he goes about saying, shouting, singing, chalking on walls, writing inside people's books, putting it everywhere, "Smith's Mustard is the Best." And behold it is the best!"  
"True," said my uncle, chubbily and with a dreamy sense of mysticism; "true!" (194)

The biblical undertones in this passage are unmistakable. In the modern world the advertiser is the creator of a new reality.

But in *Tono-Bungay*, the sceptical awareness of language and the narratives it creates is more fundamental than this. Interpretation of the text, I would suggest, must take into account the narration itself, the fact that the first-person narrator, George Ponderevo, is a scientist and, what is more, a scientist of a particular kind. He announces his incapacity as a novelist at the very beginning of his narrative, and as Lodge points out, this should not be seen as a confession of failure on Wells's part but as a "rhetorical device to prepare the reader for the kind of novel *Tono-Bungay* is" (240). It is also, I would suggest, a pointer to the reader that George's view of things, together with his means for describing them, will of necessity be that of a scientist - "I want to tell - myself," he insists, and this is the self his training and the discourse it entails has produced; it is the language of science which has shaped his perspective on the world. Around the time he was writing this novel, Wells was also working on his philosophical book, *First and Last Things*, in which he discusses what was to prove a life-long interest, the ways in which the language of scientific thought influences and relates to human development<sup>28</sup>. He is anxious not to sound ungracious about science in this book - empirical science, he stresses, has added richly to the store of human knowledge during the past three hundred years and has done much to clarify men's thinking. Nevertheless, the scientists' use of language, particularly in the physical sciences, can present a number of problems. A particular dilemma arises, he points out, when the scientist, who is accustomed to working with technical terms, which do have a precise - because stipulated or operational - definition, assumes that he can apply the same standards to ordinary language. "The man trained solely in science," Wells writes, "falls easily into a superstitious attitude; he is overdone with classification. He believes in the possibility of exact knowledge everywhere. What is not exact, he declares is not knowledge. He believes in specialists

and experts in all fields"<sup>29</sup> One of the most important narrative strategies in *Tono-Bungay*, then, and central to its interpretation is that its narrator is a scientist of the kind Wells is describing.

George Ponderevo is writing, he tells us, in his Thames-side yard, against the background of "these white heats and hammerings, amidst the fine realities of steel" (6), and throughout the book George Ponderevo is searching for something unmistakably real. Commercial success, socialism, love and marriage, all prove insubstantial; it is only in science that he finds what he has been seeking. "Scientific truth...is reality, the one reality I have found in this strange disorder of existence" (346). The book ends where it began, with George committed to "the fine realities of steel" as he prepares his destroyer for her first trial, and the interpretation of this concluding section is crucial to the understanding of the novel as a whole. The ending of *Tono-Bungay* has been variously interpreted, but has in general been condemned as badly written or ill-thought out.<sup>30</sup> In 'Technique as Discovery,' Schorer claims that insufficient thought has been given to technique in the novel as a whole but "the significant failure is at the end and in the way that it defeats not only the entire social analysis of the bulk of the novel, but Wells's own ends as a thinker" (392). Schorer's reading depends on his assumption that the end of the book is not intended to be in any way ironical. This assumption has not gone unchallenged. David Lodge writes of the note of "scientific mysticism" in the closing pages and claims that Wells was well-aware of the irony of making George's final achievement a destroyer (241); Bernard Bergonzi, too, sees the destroyer's rapid progress down the river as an appropriate ending to the book because it is "a radical symbol of disengagement, a leaving behind of the whole hopeless confusion of Edwardian England."<sup>31</sup> The ending certainly appears to suggest ironies, and part of this irony is that George has, through his narrative, been attempting to give shape to what he admits from the outset to be "unmanageable realities" (8) and he fails - the Quap episode, for instance, refuses to be



incorporated (401), the murder of the native remains "unmeaning and purposeless" (408). It is as though language is not adequate for the realities he wants to convey.

At the beginning of the book, George refers to the ways in which "we poor individuals get driven and lured and stranded among these windy, perplexing shoals and channels" of life in modern society (7). This image contrasts markedly with the incisive progress of X2 as she "bored her nose under the foam regardless of it all like a black hound going through the reeds" (487) - the word "drive" is repeated four times in the last section of the novel - and this, it seems, is a situation in which George is at last in control. The London County Council steamboats - "Caxton", "Pepys", "Shakespeare" - are named after figures who have, in their day and in their various ways, helped give shape to experience through narrative, who have found language adequate for their purposes, but which now seem to George "wildly out of place, splashing about in all that confusion. One wanted to take them out and wipe them and put them back in some English gentleman's library" (489). The production of fine writing is inappropriate for present-day realities which are to be served to the public in the "turgid degenerate Kiplingese" (492) of the attendant journalists, whose communications are irrelevant, in any case, because they have completely misunderstood the purpose of X2. George states emphatically that the destroyer is not intended for the Empire, "or indeed for the hands of any European power" (492) but he gives no indication of what will happen to the destroyer, claiming merely that he has "long ceased to trouble much about such questions" (493). George is heading for the open sea, and, as Gillian Beer points out in *Darwin's Plots*: "The sea became for post-evolutionary novelists the necessary element against which to measure the human." Woolf and Conrad, she suggests, "seek through it to express that which is beyond the human, and so impervious to the commands of language" (232),<sup>32</sup> and in these passages Wells, too, achieves this effect.

At the end of the book, then, George, in struggling to express what for him is the ultimate reality,

insists on the inadequacy of words; he gives an onomatopoeic rendering of the sound of the destroyer "sirroo, sirroo, - swish - sirroo" (490), the turbines "fall to talking in unfamiliar tongues" (490), and "through the confusion sounds another note" (491), but it is a note he cannot express:

I fell into thought which was nearly formless,  
into doubts and dreams that have no words,  
and it seemed good to me to drive ahead and on  
and on through the windy starlight, over the  
long black waves. (492)<sup>33</sup>

For linguistic science, meaning cannot exist apart from words - as the Russian linguist, Volosinov, puts it: "Meaning can belong only to a sign; meaning outside a sign is a fiction"<sup>34</sup> - but for the poet there are, in T. S. Eliot's words, "frontiers of consciousness beyond which words fail, though meanings still exist".<sup>35</sup> George Ponderevo, scientist turned novelist, is caught between these two contradictory formulations. It could be argued, then, that George functions as a rhetorical device in *Tono-Bungay* not only, as Lodge suggests, because he proclaims his inadequacy as a story-teller, but also because as a scientist he cannot come to terms with the demands of narrative. Thus he is not only impatient of the confusions and waste of modern society, he is also unable to accept the imprecision and impermanence of ordinary language. If this is so, then the ending of the book is clearly ironical since as a pragmatist, Wells takes the provisional nature of language as starting point.

This reading has implications also for those critical interpretations of *Tono-Bungay* which assume that George Ponderevo is a thin disguise for Wells himself. The early life at Bladesover, the education at South Kensington, the marriage problems and so on are, it is argued, clearly autobiographical, therefore George, the apostle of science, is assumed to be speaking for Wells. Setting aside the theoretical inconsistency of critical statements based so uncertainly on biographical fallacy, it could equally well be argued, even if they are accepted, that as a story-teller and as a scientist

George is markedly different from his creator. He goes out of his way to stress his incapacity with words, whilst Wells, whatever his views on "style" in the *belle-lettrist* sense, was in no doubt about his capacities as a writer.

Even more significant is the fact that Wells makes his hero an engineer whose research is in the physical sciences - it can be found, George tells us, "in the *Philosophical Transactions*, the *Mathematical Journal*, and less frequently in one or two other such publications" (345). As Bakhtin stresses, the ultimate semantic authority in any written work must always be the author himself, nonetheless, the creation of a narrator like George Ponderevo ensures that the novel is characterised, in Bakhtin's terms, by its "double-voicedness, by the interaction within it of two voices and two accents".<sup>36</sup> The author may, says Bakhtin:

... make use of someone else's discourse for his own purposes, by inserting a new semantic intention into a discourse which already has, and which retains, an intention of its own. Such a discourse, in keeping with its task, must be perceived as belonging to someone else. In one discourse two semantic intentions appear, two voices. (189)

By this argument, then, one voice in *Tono Bungay* is that of the author, whose biological training has shown him that "every species is vague, every term goes cloudy at its edges" (*A Modern Utopia* 268). The other voice belongs to a first person narrator whose scientific philosophy is far closer to the positivism of a scientist like Herbert Spencer, described by Wells in 'The So-called Science of Sociology,' as one who "no doubt talked of the unknown and the unknowable, but not ... as an element of inexactness running through all things. He thought of the unknown as the indefinable beyond to [sic] an immediate world that might be quite clearly and exactly known."<sup>37</sup>

This interplay of voices is detectable in the ironic contradictions implicit in George Ponderevo's position; throughout the book he is searching for

positives, for an ideal towards which he can strive, but ultimately he finds satisfaction and peace of mind only in negation and non-commitment. Thirty years later, in *Experiment in Autobiography*, Wells returns to this point and argues that we may in the future be able to improve our methods of observation and analysis and achieve a more exact knowledge of the unique particulars of the external universe, but complete knowledge, he believes, will never be possible because language will never be adequate for the task; this, he maintains, is not surprising: "was it not to be expected that the whole of Being would be infinitely more subtle and intricate than any web of terms and symbols our little incidental brains could devise to express it?" (225-26).

From the perspective of its narration, therefore, *Tono-Bungay*, can be seen as one of H.G. Wells's postmodernist novels. George Ponderevo functions in the text not in any straightforward sense as a mouthpiece for his creator's ideas, but as the means by which Wells expresses his incredulity towards what was - and perhaps still is - one of the most important "metanarratives" (the philosopher Jean-Francois Lyotard's term for the forms of knowledge - God, history as pattern, Reason and so on - which have underpinned Western assumptions about the world).<sup>38</sup> George's final escape from language, then, can be seen as an escape from the "grand narrative" of science itself, widely regarded at the time the novel was written as the source of enlightenment and absolute truth.<sup>39</sup>

In Wells's later fiction, the most successful novels are, I would argue, the ones in which ideas are introduced and explored through various narrative strategies, devices which, as in *Tono-Bungay*, introduce ironies and ambivalences - the effect which Bakhtin has named dialogism or double-voicedness. In *The Croquet Player*, for instance, the treatment of time in the framing story and the ways in which each of the narrator's attempts to shape the presentation of events in accord with his own psychological needs, combine to create a disturbing sense of uncertainty and menace. Similarly, much of the power of the 1914 novel, *The Research Magnificent*, can be attributed



to its narrative strategies. The story is recounted on three different narrative levels by three different narrators, each of whom takes a different ideological stance in relation to the events described and each of whom has a different conception of what is required by literary form. This means that there is a complex interplay of voices and perspectives throughout, which ensures that the reader's response to the hero's idealism and, in particular, to the novel's ending is problematic - which narrative is nearest the truth? *Mr Blettsworthy on Rampole Island* employs a different narrative approach, one which sets up a complex dialectic between dreaming and waking, reality and illusion, the rational and the irrational. A major contributory factor to this dialectic is the novel's intertextual references to Voltaire's *Candide*, allied with the way in which, once he has arrived on the island, Mr Blettsworthy's narration changes from his normal modern idiomatic speech to the complex, formal cadences of eighteenth century prose - his speeches to the elders, for instance, evoke Gulliver's to the King of Brobdingnag. It is significant that during this period, when Blettsworthy is attempting to represent his own civilization as an ideal, he falls naturally into the form of expression associated with the Age of Reason and Enlightenment.

So far as innovative narrative strategies are concerned, however, perhaps the most underrated of Wells's novels is *The Bulpington of Blup*.<sup>40</sup> In this satirical portrait of a bogus modernist artist, the story is told from Theodore Bulpington's perspective throughout. The narrator is neutral and unobtrusive, and only once does he comment directly on the hero's behaviour, however outrageous and despicable it may seem to the reader, but throughout the text, the extensive and subtle use of free indirect discourse<sup>41</sup> ensures that the narrator's comments become fused with those of the character. While on the one hand the reader acquires some degree of sympathy with Theodore because we see events from his perspective, this is always tempered by the ironical ambivalence established and sustained by the discourse of the narration. This dynamic interrelationship between narrator and character through the extensive use of

free indirect discourse is established also in one of Wells's last novels, *The Holy Terror*. What is striking is that in the two books in which the heroes' world-views are most diametrically opposed to those of their creator - Theodore Bulpington is a reactionary aesthete and Rud Whitlow a ruthless fascist demagogue - Wells should have employed a narrational mode which has the effect of narrowing and blurring the distance between the discourse of the character and that of the author. This means that the reader is always aware of two voices. As Volosinov puts it: "almost every word in the narrative... figures simultaneously in two intersecting contexts, two speech acts: in the speech of the author-narrator (ironic and mocking) and the speech of the hero (who is far removed from irony)" (136). We are certainly aware in these novels of how the author feels about modernism and fascism, but at the same time, the conflicting voice of the central character is neither wholly silenced nor finally negated.

I suggested at the beginning of this article that many of Wells's more innovative texts have been misinterpreted and undervalued because of his rejection of modernist techniques and the subsequent dominance of modernist criticism. Recent theories of language and of literature, particularly pragmatic narrative analysis and Bakhtin's theory of dialogism which stress the inherently social and historical nature of all language use - and thus of all literary forms - are now far more in accord with Wells's theory of language and his practice as a novelist. In 1972, Patrick Parrinder wrote in his introduction to *H.G. Wells: the Critical Heritage* that although for a long time the climate of opinion had been against Wells's fiction, "The vagaries of critical fashion may also now be working in Wells's favour" (29). Twenty years on, this has proved to be the case. While the modernist aesthetic ran counter to Wells's practice as a writer in almost every respect, poststructuralist literary theory reaches conclusions not far removed from his ideas about texts as "experiments in statement". It seems that the time has come for reinterpretation and for reassessment.

## Notes

[All references to pagination in H.G. Wells's texts are to the first edition. Other texts are fully documented in the notes when first cited. Later references to pagination are to be found in the text of the article.]

- 1 Colin MacCabe. *James Joyce and the Revolution of the Word*. (London: Macmillan, 1979) p. 23.
- 2 See John Batchelor, *H G Wells*. (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1985) pp.113-22, 145-59; Patrick Parrinder, ed. *The Critical Heritage* (London: Routledge, 1972) pp.24-31; David Lodge, *Language of Fiction*. 2nd ed (London: Routledge, 1984) 'Tono Bungay and the Condition of England.'
- 3 Virginia Woolf, 'Modern Fiction.' *The Common Reader*. First Series. (London: Hogarth, 1962). pp.185-86
- 4 Letter from H.G.Wells to James Joyce, dated 23 November 1928. Patrick Parrinder and Robert M. Philmus, eds. *H.G. Wells's Literary Criticism*. (Sussex: Harvester, 1980) pp.176-77.
- 5 Wells's writings abound in such justifications, but the most extensive are to be found in: 'The Contemporary Novel' *An Englishman Looks at the World*. (London: Cassell, 1914); his exchanges with Henry James: Leon Edel & Gordon Ray, eds. *Henry James and H G Wells*. London: Hart-Davis, 1959); and the 'Digression about Novels', *Experiment in Autobiography*. 2 vols. (London: Gollancz, 1934) pp.487-504
- 6 Roland Barthes. *Writing Degree Zero*. (London: Cape, 1967) p.4.
- 7 See 'The Rediscovery of the Unique' (1891), 'Human Evolution: An Artificial Process' (1896), 'Morals and Civilisation' (1897) reprinted in Robert M Philmus & David Y Hughes, eds. *H G Wells: Early Writings in Science and Science Fiction*. (Berkeley: California UP, 1975) and Wells's address to the Oxford Philosophical Society, 'The Scepticism of the Instrument' *A Modern Utopia* (London: Chapman & Hall, 1905)
- 8 In 'The Scepticism of the Instrument' Wells points out that when he wrote the earlier paper he honestly believed that he had been the first person to have thought along these lines. By 1903 he had read enough philosophy to know that at least some of the issues he raised had been problems in logic for centuries. But he stresses that his scepticism has not changed: "The idea underlying that paper I cling to-day. I consider it an idea that will ultimately be regarded as one of primary importance to human thought" (379)
- 9 See *Mankind in the Making* (London: Chapman & Hall, 1903); *The Outline of History* 2 vols. (London: Newness, 1920) 'Early Thought' I.8.
- 10 *What are We to Do with Our Lives?* (London: Heinemann, 1931) p.15.

11 See *The Science of Life*, Book 8. ch 7.2 (London: Cassell, 1931)

12 The work of the linguist, Ferdinand de Saussure at the University of Geneva (1907-11), influenced a number of linguistic schools in Eastern Europe but had no impact in the west until the Structuralist movement of the 1960s. Wells would certainly never have heard of it.

13 Leon Edel & Gordon Ray, eds. *Henry James and H G Wells*. (London: Hart-Davis, 1959) p.267.

14 It is evident that Wells recognised this Platonic aspect of James's approach to expression. In his satire on the Jamesian novel in *Boon* the writer-hero, Mr Blandish, a character "Pretty completely taken from the James ideal" believes that "in speech and still more in writing there was an inevitable right word." *Boon, The Mind of the Race, The Wild Asses of the Devil and The Last Trump*. (London: Fisher Unwin, 1915) p.109.

15 Quoted by Percy Lubbock in *The Letters of Henry James* 2 vols (London: Macmillan, 1920) II p.488.

16 In his penultimate letter to Henry James, in which he explains why he had decided to publish *Boon*, Wells states categorically: "I had rather be called a journalist than an artist, that is the essence of it ...." (Edel & Ray p.264). He repeats the claim frequently throughout his subsequent writing.

17 Michael Draper *H.G.Wells* (Houndmills: Macmillan, 1987) p.118

18 *The Atlantic Edition of the Works of H.G. Wells*. 28 vols. (London: Unwin, 1924) I. p xviii.

19 Mikhail Bakhtin. *The Dialogic Imagination*. Trans. Caryl Emerson & Michael Holquist. (Austin: Texas UP, 1981) p 39.

20 In 'The Novel of Ideas' - his introduction to *Babes in the Darkling Wood* - and in *Experiment in Autobiography*, Wells makes out a spirited case for what he calls the discussion novel ("something outside any established formula for the novel altogether" p.497) but his aims are seldom realised in practice. Ideas are not conveyed as persuasively through characters talking at one another as they are through the narrative structures of the novels I discuss in this paper.

21 See C.F.G. Masterman *The Condition of England* (London: Methuen, 1909) p 181; Patrick Parrinder, ed. *The Critical Heritage* (London: Routledge, 1972) pp 147-50, 154-56

22 Arnold Kettle *An Introduction to the English Novel* 2 vols (London: Hutchinson, 1974). Kettle begins his discussion of *Tono-Bungay* by pigeon-holing it as a realist novel of a certain kind. He declares categorically "Wells undoubtedly thought of himself - in so far as he thought in such terms at all - as in the tradition of Fielding, Thackeray and Samuel Butler" (82).

23 Walter Allen *The English Novel* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1967) p.317

24 Gordon Ray 'H G Wells Tries to be a Novelist.' *Edwardian and Late Victorians: English Institute Essays* ed. Richard Ellmann (New York, 1960)

25 Mark Schorer, 'Technique as Discovery' *Hudson Review* I (1948) pp. 67-87

26 David Lodge *Language of Fiction* 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 1984)

27 Robert Hodge and Gunther Kress *Social Semiotics* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1988) p.9

28 Wells returns to the question of scientific language again and again. In *Experiment in Autobiography*, for instance, he suggests that scientists should not make use of existing terms. When a science such as physics "recedes beyond the scope of experiential thinking and of a language based on common experience" (220), ordinary language is pressed into service and the result is obfuscation: "The more brilliant investigators rocket off into mathematical pyrotechnics and return to common speech with statements that are according to the legitimate meaning of words, nonsensical. The fog seems to light up for a moment and becomes denser for these professorial fireworks. Space is finite they say! That is not space as I and my cat know it. It is something else into which they are trying to frame the vague imperfect concepts they labour to realise....Ordinary language ought not to be misused in this way. Clearly these mathematical physicists have not made the real words yet, the necessary words that they can hold by, transmit a meaning with and make the base of a fresh advance" (219-20).

29 *First and Last Things*. (New York: Putnam's Sons, 1908) p 46.

30 Walter Allen, who feels that *Tono-Bungay* is a muddle all the way through, claims that "the book ends with the muddle increased.... It is one of Wells's shoddiest and most careless pieces of writing" (318).

31 Bernard Bergonzi *The Turn of a Century Essays on Victorian and Modern English Literature* (London: Macmillan, 1973) p.89

32 Gillian Beer *Darwin's Plots* (London: Ark Paperbacks, 1985) p.232

33 In his essay on *Tono-Bungay*, David Lodge draws attention to the number of times George uses the word "something" as an indication that he cannot find the word for what he wants to express.

34 V.N.Volosinov *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language* Trans. Ladislav Matejka & I R Titunik (London: Harvard UP, 1986) p.28

35 T.S. Eliot 'The Music of Poetry' *T.S. Eliot: Selected Prose* Ed. John Hayward (Penguin Books: Faber & Faber, 1953) p.55

36 Mikhail Bakhtin *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1984) p.192

37 *An Englishman Looks at the World: Being a Series of Unrestrained Remarks upon Contemporary Matters* (London: Cassell, 1916)

38 Jean-Francois Lyotard *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1986).

39 In his introduction to *The Postmodern Condition*, Lyotard writes: "Simplifying to the extreme, I define postmodern as incredulity toward metanarratives" (xxiv). Wells seems to be exploring an idea very similar to this in his 'Digression About Novels' in *Experiment in Autobiography*, in the passage describing the breakup of traditional, supposedly stable social values towards the end of the nineteenth century, and the effect of the new instabilities on the art of fiction, "which had floated on this same assumption of social fixity" (494). His metaphor of the splintering frame - "I suppose I was for a time the outstanding instance among writers of fiction in English of the frame getting into the picture" (495) - describes exactly the scepticism about the narratives which is evident in so many of his fictions.

40 The only critic who shares my view of this novel is John Batchelor, who believes *The Bulpington of Blup* to be a major novel, which, he claims, combines the strengths of Wells's early fiction with a new objectivity and sensitivity, resulting in "a subtle and sophisticated work of art which marks an advance on the methods of his Edwardian books and ought to be among the group of Wells's novels and romances which establish his claim to be regarded as one of the great twentieth century writers." *H.G.Wells*. (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1985) p.160

41 In literary terms, Free Indirect Discourse (or Free Indirect Speech) is generally described as a form of speech or thought emanating from a represented character reported in a manner which reproduces to some extent features of the original speech act. See Brian McHale, 'Free Indirect Discourse: A Survey of Recent Accounts' *PTL: A Journal for Descriptive Poetics and Theory of Literature* 3 (1978) pp.249-287; Norman Page *Speech in the English Novel* (London: Longman, 1973)