

underestimates the significance of the biomedical content when he describes the beginning of the novel as a “cheerful burlesque” and the end as the symbolic struggle of modern innovators in a reactionary world.<sup>35</sup> On a biomedical level, the novel is far more evocative than this binary description suggests. It is, rather, a cautionary tale on the power of scientific discovery – on its capacity either to serve, to destroy, or radically to transform mankind. From this perspective, Wells appears to be advising the political establishment of his times that research must be supported if diseases are to be conquered, if unregulated experimentation is to be curtailed, and if Britain is to remain internationally competitive. The genetic transformation of mankind into giants is actually a symbol of all that can go wrong with science: H.IV is not used to alleviate growth disorders in children; it is formulated under appalling conditions; and its clandestine and reckless development subverts the natural processes governing human evolution. Bensington and Redwood, though not rounded characters, are important indices to the state of scientific research in prewar Britain. Their great achievement – the synthesis of somatotropin – is worthy of the Nobel Prize for Physiology or Medicine, but in late-Victorian and Edwardian times it is initially ignored, and the outcome is catastrophic. If H.IV/somatrem and similar drugs are to alleviate human suffering, their development, Wells makes clear, requires national support and stringent regulation.

Richard Law

The Narrator in Double Exposure in *The War of the Worlds*

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<sup>35</sup> Wells, *Experiment in Autobiography*, p.558.

At first glance, it seems extraordinary that literary scholars and critics would be observing the centenary of the book publication of *The War of the Worlds*. After all, in the 1890s H.G. Wells wrote it and other scientific romances in rapid succession in order to earn money for immediate needs, not because he was aiming to make a classic. And as Patrick Parrinder mentions in *H.G. Wells: The Critical Heritage*, these popular romances were read mainly for amusement, and most reviewers at the time “judged them as light entertainment.”<sup>1</sup>

Yet the esteemed place of *The War of the Worlds* in 1998 can readily be understood in view of its decades of uninterrupted success. Since it was published serially and then in book form a century ago, it has never gone out of print. Either in school or for recreation, countless English and American youths in every generation have read *The War of the Worlds*, and it remains the standard for measuring every other alien yarn. For this short novel and the other scientific romances, Wells has been praised, as no other science fiction author has, by writers as distinguished as Joseph Conrad and Jorge Luis Borges.<sup>2</sup> *The War of the Worlds* has inspired movies, TV dramas, radio thrillers (including the notorious Mercury Theatre program in 1938), and a rock concert orchestration with Richard Burton reading dramatic passages from the novel.<sup>3</sup>

Many attributes of *The War of the Worlds* account for its notable standing through this century as a “central fiction”<sup>4</sup> – Frank McConnell’s apt label. It is the preeminent myth for the age of technology and attendant anxieties. It was prophetic of the weaponry of two world wars: tanks, poison gas, fighter planes, missiles. And the Martians and their ingenious instruments still symbolize the ultimate disaster that

<sup>1</sup> Patrick Parrinder, ed., *H.G. Wells: The Critical Heritage* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1972), p.9.

<sup>2</sup> In a letter to Wells, 4 December 1898, Conrad praises the “Realist of the Fantastic,” whose work “always powerfully impressed” him (Parrinder, ed., *H.G. Wells: The Critical Heritage*, p.60). In a 1946 essay, reprinted in Parrinder, Borges states that he was intrigued by the scientific romances because they are continually symbolic, although their author “appear[s] to be ignorant of all symbolism” (Parrinder, ed., *H.G. Wells: The Critical Heritage*, p.331).

<sup>3</sup> After H.G. Wells expressed disapprobation of the sensational American radio dramatization of the novel, Orson Welles, who directed it and was the narrator, gave waggish assurance that he would not do it again. The musical version of *The War of the Worlds* was developed by musician and composer Jeff Wayne and his father, Jerry, then a theatrical producer, between 1975 and the year of its release, 1978.

<sup>4</sup> Frank D. McConnell, ed., *H.G. Wells: ‘The Time Machine’ and ‘The War of the Worlds’* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), p.10.

mismanaged or uncontrolled technology could inflict on civilization. (In a precise assessment of the prescience of Wells, J.P. Vernier includes the accomplishment of space travel and of thermonuclear weapons that have “turned mass killing and biological mutation from fantastic hypotheses into frightening possibilities.”<sup>5</sup>) Also, the anticolonial message that the thoughtful English reader recognized a century ago is no less important today since there still are nations controlling or exploiting populations with no more compunction than that of the Martian invaders. Animal rights advocates have good reason to respect Wells as an ally, too, taking special notice when the narrator of the novel likens himself to a hunted animal and notes that one important thing the invasion taught us is “pity for those witless souls that suffer our dominion.”<sup>6</sup>

*The War of the Worlds* also exhibits Wells’s talent for popularizing scientific theory and concepts by conveying them in terms that are sufficiently descriptive but not tedious or too technical for the common reader. In 1898, Sir Richard Gregory, FRS, lauded Wells because he “gathered material from the fairy-land of science” and used it to construct a vivid scientific romance worthy of contemplation.<sup>7</sup> Yet regarding science and technology, Wells is sensibly ambivalent. For example, by virtue of evolution and natural selection, humans have come to resist germs that prove fatal to the Martians. Nevertheless, the Martians also may be construed as a future life form, possibly *Homo sapiens*, evolved into “intellects vast and cool and unsympathetic.” [51] Wells’s thoughtful narrator points out some of our deficient assumptions and views, warns us against complacency, and encourages us to use our talents and tools for the common good – even if “not to us, perhaps, is the future ordained.” [182]

Without gainsaying any of these qualities of *The War of the Worlds*, I propose that the primary reason for its longstanding popularity is the one given in 1898 by

<sup>5</sup> J.P. Vernier, ‘Evolution as a Literary Theme in H.G. Wells’s Science Fiction’, in *H.G. Wells and Modern Science Fiction*, ed. by Darko Suvin and Robert M. Philmus (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 1977), 70-89 (p.85).

<sup>6</sup> H.G. Wells, *A Critical Edition of ‘The War of the Worlds’*, ed. by David Y. Hughes and Harry M. Geduld (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), p.169. This text uses, with some modifications, the 1924 Atlantic edition of Wells’s novel. Its introduction; commentary; and abundant notes, maps and glossary of place names are extremely valuable. Further references to this work are contained parenthetically within the text.

<sup>7</sup> Parrinder, ed., *H.G. Wells: The Critical Heritage*, p.74.

John St. Loe Strachey, editor of the *Spectator*: "It is one of the most readable [imaginative works] published in many a long day."<sup>8</sup> Nearly thirty years ago, Isaac Asimov paid a similar compliment to Wells: his writing is effective because "it sounds good."<sup>9</sup> In a 1985 critique of Wells's fiction, John Batchelor provides a concise appreciation of the engrossing style of *The War of the Worlds*. He employs binary combinations in order to outline the effective narrative technique: e.g., "domestic English familiarity co-exists with inconceivable terror"; "verifiable particularities co-exist with fantastic imaginings"; a "double perspective" is maintained by the accurate eyewitness account alternating with the retrospective musings of the narrator.<sup>10</sup>

It is primarily through the narrator that Wells, an inveterately ironic writer,<sup>11</sup> projects his own subtle appreciation of the incongruities, contradictions, misperceptions, reversals, and surprises that irony comprises. By virtue of the double perspective, the narrator reconstructs events that he had witnessed on the scene – while, with the benefit of hindsight, he expresses or implies assessments and admonitions based on his review of events after six years. Hence, he functions as the composer of a script in which he is presented as the main dramatic character. His depiction of himself is modest, candid, and benignly ironic, and the role he remembers playing during the invasion is both perilous and amusing. He had been decent, brave (although sometimes hysterical), steadfast, scrupulous, considerate, and on many occasions sensible. Yet for all his virtues, he had been conspicuously fallible and hardly any more effectual than had all the other alarmed and confused people. In brief, he stars in a thrilling account of an impending catastrophe that ironically is dispelled by a natural and obscure force, "our microscopic allies." [184] The narrator reveals himself to have been, after all, a comic hero – not a fool, but an amiably flawed character prone to error through naivete, misperceptions, wrong decisions, and

<sup>8</sup> Parrinder, ed., *H.G. Wells: The Critical Heritage*, p.66.

<sup>9</sup> Isaac Asimov, 'The Contribution of H.G. Wells', in *H.G. Wells 'The Time Machine'/'The War of the Worlds'* (Greenwich, CT: Fawcett Publications, 1968) 9-22 (p.15).

<sup>10</sup> John Batchelor, *H.G. Wells* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), p.23-26.

<sup>11</sup> In the preface to the 1935 edition of *The Scientific Romances*, Wells states that his "early, profound and lifelong admiration for Swift, appears again and again in this collection." By this time, Wells had given up "playful parables" and "sarcastic fantasies," as well as "the invented humours of Mr. Parham in Whitehall," recognizing in the rise of Adolf Hitler "the fantastic fun of the Fates" [H.G. Wells, *The Scientific Romances of H.G. Wells* (London: Gollancz, 1935), pp.viii-x].

sometimes leaping to unwarranted conclusions. It was not his heroics or adroitness that got him through most of the perils.

In his notable critique of Wells's scientific romances, Patrick Parrinder explains how Wells regularly projects "the alternating vision" by juxtaposing contrary ideas and opposing images.<sup>12</sup> Such juxtaposing invariably has ironic effects. Recounting the Martian invasion, the narrator honestly makes many statements that are invalid or, at best, ambiguous. For example, he titles Book Two "The Earth Under the Martians" [139] although he knows that the invaders' short-lived siege did not exceed the south of England. However, his hyperbolic title signifies the conclusion he had drawn at that time (even believing at one moment that he was "the last man left alive" [167]).<sup>13</sup> Abundant ironies in the account result from the appearance of things being the opposite of reality, and also the expectations of the hero being refuted by actual outcomes. The double perspective in *The War of the Worlds* multiplies instances of irony because the narrator has two beings: one in the past, when he was as erethismic as he was reasonable, and one in the present, safe and calm, recounting his experience.

For illustration, consider the first chapter of Book One, which begins with a paragraph that is arresting for its conceptual range and rhetorical power. The first sentence is awesome: "No one would have believed in the last years of the nineteenth century that this world was being watched keenly and closely by intelligences greater than man's [...]." The next sentence, interjecting the "infinite complacency [of] men," [51] launches a six or seven hundred word discourse on conceited "man [...]" so blinded by his vanity," that he could not imagine there being extraterrestrials far more intelligent than he. Nor could our species acknowledge that its destruction of animals, "such as the vanished bison and the dodo," and of "its own inferior races," specifically the Tasmanians, is proof of human ruthlessness as deplorable as that of the Martians. [52] The substance and mentorial style of this chapter bespeak a cogent

<sup>12</sup> Patrick Parrinder, *H.G. Wells* (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1970), pp.16ff.

<sup>13</sup> David Ketterer illuminates another kind of subtle irony in the title, "The Earth Under the Martians." He suggests that Wells "probably intended that the note of contradiction direct his readers' attention to the literal earth *under* the Martians' bodies. From the sequence earth, dirt, bacteria we are to intuit in a title which seemingly expresses Martian dominance, the cause of the Martian downfall." [David Ketterer, 'The Earth Under the Martians', *Science-Fiction Studies*, 2 (July 1975), 198 (p.198)]. This construction is bolstered by the title of the succeeding chapter: "Under Foot."

and scrupulous narrator. Nevertheless, he is so earnestly moral and didactic that his sustained account, for all its eloquence, could become tiresome.

The tactical counter effect to solemnity begins near the end of the first chapter. The narrator remembers that at the time the Martian missiles were speeding Earthward he had been "much occupied in leaning to ride the bicycle" and writing papers on "moral ideas as civilisation progressed." Thus, he unequivocally includes himself among all the ordinary people who "could go about their petty concerns as they did" without regard for the "swift fate hanging over us." [55]

In Chapter III, which is serio-comic, the narrator reveals how imprudent, and in some moments, ridiculous, he had been. His scientific education notwithstanding, he had "believed that there were men in Mars." [60] Hoping the first Martian cylinder would contain manuscript that would require translation, as well as "coins and models, [...] and so forth," [60] he was impatient to see it opened. But since nothing was happening, he went home, "full of such thoughts." [60] Later that day, he "was very glad to [...] become one of the privileged spectators." [61] His eager attitude sets him up for the humiliating reversal that comes immediately.

The Martians he had looked forward to emerge, disgusting and dreadful, and soon immolate nearly forty people with the heat-ray. This horror made him so panicky that he "ran weeping silently as a child might do." [68] Confounded, somehow the haggard man gets home, startles his wife, and by reciting the ghastly details, afflicts her with enough horror to make her face "deadly white." [73] So he tries to recover her, and himself, with rationalizations, concluding that the Martians "have done a foolish thing," and if necessary, "A shell in the pit [...] will kill them all." [73] At this point in his recollection, the narrator mocks himself for having acted like "some respectable dodo" in its nest assuring its mate that tomorrow the birds would peck to death the sailors that had come to Mauritius. [73] By comparing his confident assurances to that of the personified dodo bird – which species was extinguished in a half century<sup>14</sup> – he manifests honesty and modesty. Because he is immensely more self-deprecating than self-righteous, we accept his admonitions here and elsewhere against complacency or seeking comfort in illusions. The analogy of the doomed birds

<sup>14</sup> The dodo was first discovered in 1505 by Portuguese sailors. In the seventeenth century, Dutch settlers in Mauritius, with their dogs, cats, and pigs, began devouring the birds and destroying their

and the human race at risk also epitomizes the narrator's sense of humankind's uncertain destiny – a caution that he states explicitly in his epilogue.

We continually observe the narrator's two distinct presences. The poised and eloquent chronicler can put into meaningful and heuristic perspective his own and his brother's experiences. And we sympathize with him in his previous role as representative beleaguered person afraid for his life and that of his wife. The separation from her that causes him unrelenting worry and shame is another in a string of ironic episodes. In Chapter X of Book One, he takes his wife to his cousin's in Leatherhead. Then he leaves her – at eleven o'clock at night – and rides twelve miles back to Woking and right into both a fierce thunderstorm and the path of two Martian machines. Consider his reasons for this headlong folly. First, "war-fever [...] had got into my blood, and [...] I wanted to be in at the death" of the Martians. [82] Next, he had promised to return the horse and cart to the owner. But instead, he is thrown into panic and causes the accident that kills the horse and destroys the cart. This mortifying reversal is made depressive by discovery of the crumpled corpse of the owner of the horse and cart. Finally, in his wretched condition, the hero does not try to rejoin his wife, which course the narrator acknowledges was the best to take, [85] but goes to his house, which obviously was not a safe refuge that night. In this episode and others, the narrator admits how futile had been his intentions and how inept his performance.

In Book Two, Chapter VII, the hero's reactions to the artilleryman are laughable, and justifiably so, because the narrator insistently highlights the soldier's absurdity and his own silly judgment.<sup>15</sup> In the course of the day, the artilleryman expounds his grandiose and selfish vision and unfeasible plans, not only for surviving, but also for eventually using heat-rays to destroy the Martians. For hours the narrator had been captivated. The soldier's assurance and courage, he states, "completely dominated my mind. I believed unhesitatingly both in his forecast of human destiny

eggs. By 1680 the dodo was extinguished [Dorothy Shuttlesworth, *Dodos and Dinosaurs* (New York: Hastings House, 1968), pp.11-18].

<sup>15</sup> Bernard Bergonzi explains that the artilleryman's views "are based on ideas that Wells was prepared to consider very seriously, if in a speculative fashion." [Bernard Bergonzi, *The Early H.G. Wells: A Study of the Scientific Romances* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1961), p.138] But one can readily agree with David Y. Hughes that in the novel's context "the proto-fascist [...] artilleryman cannot be taken seriously." [David Y. Hughes, 'Bergonzi and After in the Criticism of Wells's Science Fiction', *Science-Fiction Studies*, 3 (July 1976), 165-174 (p.167)].

and in the practicability of his astonishing scheme.” [176] The hero spent hours digging a tunnel with the soldier, even though he had doubts about it. At the end of the day, they ate, drank wine, and played games of cards and chess. Both were so delighted, the narrator recalls, that after dark they “decided to take the risk, and lit a lamp” so they could continue to play. [179]

This ludicrous episode differs in spirit from that of the narrator’s brother confronting three hoodlums bent on taking the pony cart carrying the Elphinstone ladies. The brother himself is rescued when Miss Elphinstone fires a handgun, narrowly missing him but scaring off the thugs. Then she takes charge of the escape. With this fetching ironic case of the rescuer saved by the lady in distress, Wells transports the reader momentarily from the ghastly Martian onslaught into the amusing romantic comedy of a gallant gentleman and plucky woman. [122-123]

This charming bit of comic relief differs from the more satirical scene with the hero and artilleryman. They reincarnate a farcical pair found in Shakespearean comedy and farther back in Roman comedy, i.e., the braggart soldier (*miles gloriosus*) and his foolish sidekick. Like all satire, this episode is instructive or corrective. “Strange mind of man!” the narrator exclaims, recalling the “vivid delight” with which they had played cards while on the verge of “horrible death.” [179] Also, the hero’s enthusiasm for the soldier’s egocentric palaver illustrates how a reasonable man can accept unreasonable notions if he is fearful and “distracted by apprehension.” [176] Finally, respect for the narrator is increased by his expression of remorse that he had been so foolish that he “seemed a traitor to [his] wife and to [his] kind.” [179]

He abandons “this strange undisciplined dreamer” [179] who represents the culture of technology.<sup>16</sup> Previously he had rejected the sanctimonious curate, who symbolizes “the traditional culture with its pessimistic resistance to progress”<sup>17</sup> and who had to be knocked unconscious when he began to rave fanatically with Martians nearby. [160] Yet just as the narrator, like the artilleryman, believes in scientific progress, [192] so is he also a theist. On the next to last night of the siege, alone and sensing “the nearness of God,” he did not utter “fetish prayers” but “prayed indeed, pleading steadfastly and sanely, face to face with the darkness of God.” [168-169]

<sup>16</sup> Jack Williamson, *H.G. Wells: Critic of Progress* (Baltimore: Mirage Press, 1973), p.60.

<sup>17</sup> Williamson, *H.G. Wells*, p.60.

Immediately after the crisis, he “extended [his] hands towards the sky and began thanking God.” [186] The most considered statement of faith in the narrator’s account is his conclusion that the Martians had been slain “by the humblest things that God, in his wisdom, has put upon this earth.” [184] Thus, unobtrusively he reconciles the scientist’s appreciation of evolution (natural selection) and the theist’s faith in divine intervention, and incidentally he also compounds the irony of the rescue of humanity by bacteria. “Our microscopic allies” [184] are, in his view, an instrument of the deity that he had previously told the querulous curate “is not an insurance agent.” [104]<sup>18</sup>

The hero’s initial misconception that a shell could kill the Martians was equalled by his later conclusion that they were invincible, which prompted him to end his hopeless plight by rushing right in front of a Martian machine. [183] But this is precisely when the Martians are dying one after another. The narrator’s recollection of his desperation (as well as other pronounced reactions) intensifies his account of the unprecedented events he had witnessed. Central in his emotional psychodrama are the continual bouts with fear, regret and shame resulting from having left his wife at Leatherhead.

Both the main action and the hero’s internal drama are brought to felicitous conclusions after ironic reversals. Parrinder calls the destruction of the Martians “the most brilliant of Wells’s ironic denouements.”<sup>19</sup> And although Leatherhead reportedly had been “swept out of existence,” [188] the hero’s wife was able to return home to Woking. Restored is the “old life of hope and tender helpfulness” [186] that he thought was forever lost. The narrator’s final line completes a familiar romantic formula: It is “strangest of all [...] to hold my wife’s hand again, and to think that I have counted her, and that she has counted me, among the dead.” [193] This sentimental reflection embellishes the spirit of renewal that the narrator remembers having felt when he saw London, “this dear vast dead city of mine be once more alive and powerful.” [186]

Wells’s double-perspective technique is engaging. The expressive and often hortatory discourse of the narrator evokes a cognitive or reflective response. Co-

<sup>18</sup> Hughes and Geduld call the novel a morality play, in which, “Bacteria redeem humanity as Christ redeemed the faithful [...] in Scriptural and Miltonic accounts.” [David Y. Hughes and Harry M. Geduld, eds., *A Critical Edition of ‘The War of the Worlds’* by H.G. Wells (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), p.13].

<sup>19</sup> Parrinder, *H.G. Wells*, p.29.

extensively, the graphic account of the hero's adventures and reactions and concerns generates strong emotional appeal. And the sundry ironies that flavor the story augment the pleasure of reading *The War of the Worlds*.

Gail-Nina Anderson and David Longhorn

Mr Wells's Goblins

Ages ago, thousands of generations ago, man had thrust his brother man out of the ease and the sunshine. And now that brother was coming back – changed! (*The Time Machine*, Chapter 7)

One of the most powerful images in H.G. Wells's fiction is that of the Morlocks. This race of subterranean beings, the Time Traveller speculates, was originally the working class, driven underground by the ancestors of the Eloi who constituted the ruling class in a ruthlessly stratified world-state. In the darkness the Morlocks evolved into lemur-like creatures that eventually begin to emerge at night to prey upon the decadent and weak descendants of their former oppressors.

Over a century after *The Time Machine* was first published, the image of the Morlocks remains a disturbing one, not least because they represent an ingenious modern variation on a familiar theme. Folklore provides numerous examples of ugly and malevolent creatures dwelling underground. In fairy tales such creatures of darkness emerge at night to subject innocent people to various forms of unpleasantness. Trolls and suchlike were often portrayed as eaters of human flesh, and such monsters may have provided Wells with the most horrific aspect of the Morlocks' behaviour.

George MacDonald (1824-1905), a Scottish Congregational minister turned full-time writer, was the author of three children's classics and two poetic novels for adults (*Lilith* and *Phantastes*). It is in the second of his children's novels, *The Princess and the Goblin*, that MacDonald introduces what amounts to a new species