

BOOK REVIEW: Matthew Beaumont, *The Spectre of Utopia: Utopian and Science Fictions at the Fin de Siècle* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2012) ISBN: 978-3-0343-0725-3, (PB) £40.00 ; Károly Pintér, *The Anatomy of Utopia: Narration, Estrangement and Ambiguity in More, Wells, Huxley and Clarke*; foreword by Patrick Parrinder (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland) ISBN 978-0-7864-4036-8, (PB) (£32.95) [Sylvia Hardy]

Neither of these books is primarily or wholly focused on the writings of H. G. Wells, but he is a figure of central importance in both. To Matthew Beaumont in *The Spectre of Utopia: Utopian and Science Fictions at the Fin de Siècle* he is 'indisputably the pioneer of science fiction as a singular, recognisable genre, at the end of the century' (266), whilst for Károly Pintér in *The Anatomy of Utopia: Narration, Estrangement and Ambiguity in More, Wells, Huxley and Clarke*, Wells is the founding father of both science fiction and twentieth century dystopias (9).

Although there is only one chapter in each of these books devoted exclusively to Wells, there are many other references to his work and its influence. What is more, after I had read them - one after the other, I was struck by the fact that although they are in many respects very different they resemble one another in their structure. In both texts a chapter on the concept of utopia and its history is followed by one on an influential and significant earlier fiction in the genre - *The Anatomy of Utopia* focuses on Thomas More's *Utopia*, *The Spectre of Utopia* chooses Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward*. And in each, the chapter on Wells is central to the argument advanced by the book as a whole. So despite the fact that they have chosen to discuss different texts, take different approaches and often reach different conclusions, it would seem that for both Pintér and Beaumont, H. G. Wells is not only one of the most significant figures in utopian studies he is also its fulcrum.

Károly Pintér's opening chapter, 'Utopia the Protean Concept', examines various definitions of the term itself, then goes on to consider several of the major theories and accepted ideas of utopian criticism, particularly the ideas of Darko Suvin, whose concept of cognitive estrangement Pintér sees as a necessary element in all fantastic fiction. But when it comes to a consideration of utopia as a literary genre, however, Pintér considers that other critical approaches should be considered as important, particularly Northrop Frye's classification of literary forms in *Anatomy of Criticism* where utopia is seen as a type of Menippean Satire which takes the form of an 'anatomy'. This a text which does not conform to the classic novel form because it is more concerned with the discussion of ideas than with characterisation and plot - this, of course, is the kind of text Wells was seeking to define and promote throughout his career. Looked at from this perspective, Pintér suggests, utopian fictions should be regarded as 'literary-intellectual games', with Thomas More's *Utopia* and H. G. Wells's *A Modern Utopia* featuring as amongst the most 'influential and

intriguing' (43). The former, claims Pintér, established a narrational model for later writers, whilst Wells's text 'makes a significant attempt to rewrite the rules of the game' (44). The chapter on More's text, therefore, after a detailed discussion of *Utopia's* historical context and publishing history, concentrates on the various narrative strategies by which More makes his story both interesting and - above all - credible. Devices such as framing stories and reliable narrators, Pintér claims, established a pattern followed for four centuries by later utopias.

I will admit that when I first began reading the *Modern Utopia* chapter, 'Glimpses of a Moving Picture', I felt that the first section - headed 'Anatomy of an Outdated Futurist' - gave an over-lengthy and unnecessarily detailed account of Wells's early achievements as a writer, but then I realised that the outline serves a necessary purpose. Not only does it reinforce Pintér's earlier claim that Wells's progression as a writer 'can be interpreted as a development from the romance to the anatomy genre,' it also relates to the debate, triggered by Anthony West, about whether his father was more of a pessimist than an optimist. This relates to the next section of the chapter discusses whether Wells was truly a utopian thinker. As an advocate of a modern utopia, Pintér argues, Wells was 'his own most powerful opponent' (106) since his moods varied so often that much of his work is devoted to predicting a dark and menacing future.

The best part of the chapter, in my opinion, is Pintér's exploration of the ways in which H. G. Wells's *A Modern Utopia* attempts to 'rewrite the rules of the game' (44) by creating a new form, overturning the pattern established by More and his successors. Wells's choice of title, he argues, is a manifesto in itself, because at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, everything had to be 'new' (110). So far as the basic structure of the book is concerned, since, in a post-Darwinian world, the idea of utopia as an unchanging, stable place is no longer tenable, a modern utopia has to be kinetic, ever-open to change. In the same way, the traditional journey to an undiscovered corner of the globe would no longer be acceptable, so in Wells's story, the two imaginary characters just find themselves on another, twin, planet which in many ways corresponds to this one.

The rest of the chapter provides an intriguing analysis of the narrational devices the book employs. Pintér suggests that there are several levels of irony at the beginning of *A Modern Utopia*, that Wells is 'making gentle fun' (112) of the strategies established by the traditional model. The framing techniques, for instance, which help establish the credibility of the story in earlier utopias are multiplied to an absurd extent in *A Modern Utopia*, and the reliable narrator is replaced by an imaginary one, who himself arbitrarily creates the botanist as a companion. Pintér traces the ways in which, as the story progresses, the characters gradually achieve autonomy to such an extent that the botanist's wounded ego destroys the whole project. The ending of *A Modern Utopia*,

Pinter's is persuasive; he suggests that 'the spectacularly inconsistent end to Modern Utopia' (133) is a consequence of Wells's choice of a narrative mode. He had attempted to present positive ideas for a twentieth century utopia whilst at the same time commenting on them ironically and satirically, but, Pinter concludes, this approach had failed to reach a satisfactory conclusion. This, he suggests, is because 'The narrative estrangement employed by Wells is nothing else but a correlative of his own ambiguity about utopianism' (135).

In Pinter's next chapter, 'After Utopia? Anti-Utopia and Science Fiction in the 20th Century', Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* and Arthur C. Clarke's *The City and the Stars* are as discussed as twentieth-century dystopias which reveal Wells's influence. It is the moral ambiguity in Wells's science fiction in general and *A Modern Utopia* in particular which, Pinter claims, played a major part in the development of dystopian fiction in the twentieth century.

Matthew Beaumont's book also opens with an Introduction which sets out to analyse and explain the concepts set out in its title – *The Spectre of Utopia: Utopian and Science Fiction at the fin-de-siècle*. He claims that 'utopia' has always been a controversial term because it is a shifting, relative one which can be used in contradictory ways, favourably or pejoratively. 'Utopia', he argues, occupies what he calls 'a liminal space' between what is imaginable but at that particular moment unrealisable, existing between practicability and impossibility. Utopia, therefore, occupies what Derrida has termed 'the virtual space of spectrality' (10). The idea of the spectre, therefore, is one which helps us understand the dialectic he has set out. This is because ghosts, like utopia itself, are also liminal, always outside the boundaries of our understanding, neither real nor unreal, present or absent. This 'virtual space of spectrality' is also 'both of its time and not of its time', and because of this it reveals 'alternative futures, the potentialities secreted in the cavities of the actual present' (10). I have quoted this passage because it sums up many of the ideas Beaumont explores in his chapter on *The Time Machine*.

After the exposition of what he calls 'the ontology of utopia', Beaumont goes on to explain the last part of his title, the *fin de siècle*. He has chosen texts written in the late nineteenth century not only because this was the period when utopian fiction was more popular in Britain and the United States than at any other time in its history but also, he claims, because it is the period which best exemplifies utopian fiction as he has described it. A period when socio-economic conditions, resulted in popular agitation, riots, strikes and militant feminist as well as socialist agitation. The next seven chapters are devoted to Edward Bellamy's 'phenomenally successful book' (13), *Looking Backward 2000-1887*, first published in 1888, and the conditions which accompanied its production and reception. These chapters, I would suggest, are not only well-researched and interesting in themselves, they are also of special interest to Wellsians, insofar as they convey fascinating detail about the publishing and readership world for which the young Wells was writing in the 1880s and '90s.

In Chapter 8, Beaumont analyses Oscar Wilde's essay, 'The Soul of Man Under Socialism', which first appeared in the *Fortnightly Review* in February 1891. Wilde's famous statement that 'a map of the world that does not include Utopia is not worth even glancing at' (197) which is quoted by virtually every writer on utopia has, Beaumont claims, been misread by readers, including scholars of utopian writing, who have taken it at face value and assumed it to be a liberal view of advancement to a better world. It is, in Beaumont's opinion, not a support for Victorian middle-class notions of progress, but 'a powerful exhortation not simply to "read the present into the future", as Morris put it, but to read the future into the present' (220).

This assertion comes at the end of the chapter and is still ringing in the reader's ears as s/he begins reading chapter 9, 'The Red Sphinx: The Mechanics of the Uncanny in *The Time Machine*'. And this, presumably is just what Beaumont intended because the central premise in his reading of *The Time Machine* is based on his contention that certain aspects of the world of 802701 were already present, but hidden, in the late-nineteenth century social and cultural institutions of England. Scarcely in itself an original idea, of course. The Time Traveller himself points to what is happening 'even now' as he struggles to understand the world of the Eloi and Morlocks. Nonetheless, Beaumont's development of his argument is intriguing. He announces at the outset that unlike most critics he is concerned with the book's political rather than the scientific narrative of degeneration, and via references to Freud's notion of the uncanny, Ernst Bloch's 'Not-Yet-Conscious' and the 1848 *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, he suggests that in *The Time Machine* Wells has constructed what he terms 'the historical uncanny' and 'a Marxian uncanny' (225). Both of these, he claims, contributed to the secret fears of the bourgeoisie at the *fin de siècle*, the unfaceable prospect that the working class will ultimately be triumphant.

From Beaumont's political perspective, the Sphinx – 'an obdurately overdetermined symbol' (229) – is red because it 'ultimately stands for the historical destiny of nineteenth century class relations' (230). The possibility that in the future the working class would be dominant is one that must be kept hidden. But the central argument is that Wells himself, because of his own class origins, was ambivalent about the working class; sympathetic to its suffering certainly, but, reluctant to admit the possibility of a revolution which would give them power. This reluctance, Beaumont argues, is at odds with Wells's social evolutionary perspective of history. All Wells can do to escape the contradictions in his own feelings, this 'ideological deadlock' (243), is to plunge into the future, like his own Time Traveller (252).

Beaumont's final chapter is, as he says in his Introduction, another attempt to 'theorize utopian and science fiction as a distinct form' (24). He argues, that the defamiliarizing devices characteristic of science fiction are 'equivalent to anamorphosis' (261), obliging the reader to adopt a particular,

non-realist perspective. Brief references to Wells's *When the Sleeper Wakes* and *The War of the Worlds* illustrate this idea. But, intriguing as this argument is, it constitutes an afterword rather than a concluding chapter to the book as a whole. Pintér's book, on the other hand ends with a Conclusion in the form a question. Given that H. G. Wells's work marks the end of a long era, will the utopian genre survive into a more sceptical age? There are, he claims, no easy answers, but, as *A Modern Utopia* reveals, there is 'an irrevocable and unbridgeable moral ambiguity' (192) at the centre of all utopian fiction which, Pintér argues, will continue to influence much of science fiction in the future.

I enjoyed reading Beaumont's *The Spectre of Utopia* and Károly Pintér's *The Anatomy of Utopia*, and I would recommend both books to any reader interested in H. G. Wells's work, although it is unlikely that the first-named would appeal to any reader dismissive of literary theory.

NEW BOOKS AND ARTICLES ON H. G. WELLS
COMPILED BY DENISE KINSINGER

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