

brought together, and the political consciousness of the human race revolutionised in the process, by the development of modern communications networks. From Manila to Bucharest the TV station has proved to be at least as important a target for contending political forces as the presidential palace, and what course of action have Vaclav Havel and his colleagues pursued for the last twenty years if not Open Conspiracy?

Whether the *Wellsian* has any significant part to play in stimulating the world brain may be open to question. In the knowledge that every constructive act helps the world along, however, we shall continue to bring you informed and informative articles on the subject of that very interesting (and pertinent) writer, H.G. Wells. Please make sure you circulate this copy of the *Wellsian* to anyone who might be interested in its contents, and if you live in Britain do encourage your friends and colleagues to attend the Wells Society's meetings. We're always pleased to see new faces and hear new voices.

M.D.

David Lake

Mr Bedford's Brush with God: Fantastic Tradition and Mysticism in *The First Men in the Moon*

"He had read his H.G. Wells and others. His universe was peopled with horrors..." So C.S. Lewis describes his hero Ransom's reading, in his novel *Out of the Silent Planet* (p 39); and it is obvious that in many respects *Silent Planet* (published 1938) in a polemic reply to Wells, especially to Wells's *The First Men in the Moon* (1901). Lewis, like Wells, has a spherical spacecraft; his two evil characters, Weston and Devine, correspond one-to-one with Wells's protagonists - one scientist, one capitalist; in each book the capitalist seeks gold on the strange planet; and each book climaxes in a confrontation with the planet's monarch (the Grand Lunar; Oyarsa). Indeed, at one point Ransom explicitly recalls the end of Wells's novel as a warning to himself to behave differently (p 81). The differences between the two books spring

from Lewis's deliberate reversals of, or additions to Wells: the Christianity of the third voyager, Ransom, and of the Malacandrian "aliens"; the vertebrate, non-squishy, non-horrific nature of the Malacandrians; Lewis's sunny "Heaven" versus the black of Wells's interplanetary Space. Thus it looks as though Lewis read *First Men* as being mostly Wells's usual sort of SF novel, with threatening environments and horrible aliens, as in *The Time Machine* and *The War of the Worlds*; and it is possible for us also to read it in that way.

But I believe that such a reading is a misreading. *First Men* is not cosmic tragedy (like the *Time Machine*) or evolutionary melodrama (like the *War of the Worlds*). It is rather a 'satire' in the old Roman sense, a *satura* or hodge-podge dish whose main flavour is comedy, with dabs of fantasy and mysticism. Bedford and Cavor, unlike Devine and Weston, are figures of fun, and neither is a totally consistent character. Moreover, *First Men* is in many respects "on the same side" as *Silent Planet*, not in opposition to it. For one thing, it too is anti-imperialist; it too draws not merely on modern science but on older and more fantastic traditions; and it is not even irreligious. Bedford, like Ransom, has his period of contact with the Eternal; and some readers may even find Bedford's experience more convincing, because more mystical and ambiguous. I am not sure whether we should call *First Men* "mythopoeic": but it is a fine (perhaps underrated) romance, a wonderful blend of up-to-date science and venerable fantasy - as I hope now to demonstrate.

1. *Wells and the seventeenth century tradition*

In the standard Atlantic Edition of his *Works*, volume 6 (1925), Wells claimed that, apart from the anti-gravity metal Cavorite, there was no impossibility in *First Men*. "There are no doubt details of a high degree of improbability but nothing that a properly informed science student can contradict flatly. The book had the honour of a review in *Nature* by Professor Turner, who discussed its ingenuities very sympathetically" (p ix). Professor H.H. Turner, F.R.S., was a prominent astronomer; and his (unsigned) review in *Nature*, 9 January 1902, praises Wells's "Lunar Romance" as more scientifically plausible than Jules Verne's moon novels of 1865-70 (218). In a subsequent letter he even goes far toward clearing Wells of the lack-of-free-fall mistake: when the Cavorite blinds of the sphere are rolled back, the occupants fall toward the attracting planet with full *g* for that distance, but part of the sphere's mass (on its sides) is still shielded by Cavorite, so the sphere

falls with less than g ; hence the occupants fall toward the unshielded windows (Turner, 318). But Turner's focus is mainly on the spacecraft: he does not comment on Wells's inhabited and hollow Moon, which is astonishingly unlike the Moon of Verne and of contemporary sober astronomers. One great oddity of Wells's romance is that it contrives to "save the appearances" of contemporary science, and so qualifies as genuine science fiction, and yet in essentials it embodies much of the tradition of *seventeenth century* "moon voyages". This old tradition, of Kepler, Godwin, Wilkins and Cyrano de Bergerac, has been carefully studied by Marjorie H. Nicolson in her *Voyages to the Moon* (1948); and she says: "I am convinced that Wells knew most of the stories I have retold" (247); however, "Wells's real master in the tradition...was Kepler" (248). I emphatically agree with both statements. Wells, indeed, credits Kepler in his text (*First Men* 110) with the idea that the Moon must be hollowed out, and the citation, and much else in the novel, shows a close acquaintance with the old German astronomer's text - possibly in the original Latin.

Johannes Kepler's *Dream - Somnium, sive Astronomia Lunaris* - published posthumously in 1634, is an amazing work of scientific imagination, almost already science fiction, since it includes a moon journey (by the help of demons, during the four hours of a lunar eclipse), and a plausible description of what an inhabited Moon world might be like. The main text (almost overwhelmed with Kepler's own footnotes) was written before the invention of the telescope (in 1609), but the Appendix is post-telescope, and considers the newly-revealed craters. Kepler is the great link between ancient and modern imaginings of the Moon: he builds on Lucian and Plutarch, but also on Copernicus and Galileo; and since he hands all this on to Wells (cf. Wells's epigraph to *First Men*, from Lucian), he makes the tradition of science fiction a continuous one from the second century to the twentieth. Since 1965 we can all read Kepler's marvellous work in John Lear's English edition; but I am puzzled to know how Wells read him. According to Nicolson (bibliography, 264), there was a German translation by Ludwig Gunther, Leipzig, 1898; Wells may have read this, or the original Latin, or possibly some popularizing summary of the work. But he certainly had some contact with the Latin text, for he makes Cavor say "Kepler, with his *subvolvani*, was right after all" (*First Men* 110). *Subvolvani* is Kepler's invented Latin name for the inhabitants of *Subvolva*, the Nearside hemisphere of the Moon; they are so called because they live under *Volva* - the Earth, which they see *revolving*.

(Science fiction always delights in neologisms, even in Latin.)

Kepler invented the hollow Moon much as an SF writer might: to provide for life in what he already realized must be a very hostile environment, with nights and days each fifteen days long, and therefore alternately very hot and very cold. But he was also impelled to postulate "hollows and continuous caves" by his belief in the Moon's low density (Kepler 154). Enormous tides of water surge through these hollows (151-52), cycling as the lunar day (30 Earth days). As for surface life: "Whatever is born from the soil or walks on the soil is of prodigious size. Growth is very quick; everything is short-lived, although it grows to such enormous bodily bulk" (155). Kepler imagined the great size of his lunar creatures in proportion to high lunar mountains - which he had deduced long before the telescope, in 1593! He also clearly imagines the surface life springing up and dying in one lunar day:

In the case of plants, bark, in the case of animals, skin, or whatever may take its place, accounts for the major part of the corporeal mass, and it is spongy and porous; if anything is caught in the daylight, it becomes hard and burnt on top, and when evening approaches the outer covering comes off. Things growing from the soil...are usually produced and destroyed on the same day, new growth springing up daily. (157)

Here, surely, we have the inspiration for Wells's lunar vegetation and his enormous, thick-skinned "mooncalves". His tidal inner sea (*First Men* 220) and even his tide-like ventilation (128, 222-24) probably derive also from Kepler's water tides.

And then, in his Appendix, Kepler deals with the newly-discovered craters, in a way which surely influenced Wells. Kepler quotes from an open letter to Galileo which he had published in 1610. There he says that the lunar inhabitants

dig out huge fields, carrying out and heaping up the earth in a circle; thus in the depths behind the heaped up mounds, they may bide in shade...This is for them a sort of subterranean city, their homes being the many caves cut into that circular elevation. In the middle are the fields and the pasture lands... (177-78)

That last phrase - in the original Latin, *ager et pascua in medio* - may well have suggested "The Mooncalf Pastures" (Wells's title for his Chapter 10). Those pastures are, precisely, inside the craters. And the idea that the craters are *artificial*, first suggested by Kepler, is confirmed by Cavor's radio message: "The great circular mounds of the excavated rock and earth that form these great circles about the tunnels are known to earthly astronomers (misled by a false analogy) as

volcanoes" (*First Men* 219).

Indeed, Wells's Moon is so similar to Kepler's, that we may speculate: perhaps Wells was so struck with Kepler's marvellous imaginings that he decided to take them whole, and *fictionalise* them. Details could be created to fill out Kepler's outlines: thus, the *ant-like* nature of the Selenites grew from their ant-like burrowings. Almost the only thing Kepler lacked was a plot, and this Wells provided.

And it is not merely the lunar set-up that Wells owes to Kepler. The journeys in the Cavorite sphere have also been influenced by the seventeenth century tradition: in one detail, by Godwin and/or Wilkins, but the subjective atmosphere may be more due to Kepler. Kepler says that to overcome the hardships of space-travel, human travellers "must be put to sleep beforehand, with narcotics and opiates" (107); and, after all, his whole book is called a *Dream*. With this compare Bedford's description of his departure: "I felt...as if I were disembodied. It was not like the beginning of a journey; it was like the beginning of a dream" (*First Men* 49).

The *dream-like* quality of Wells's voyages to and from the Moon is a very important feature of the novel. These are voyages almost out of time: Cavor has a chronometer on the outward journey (56), but that is consulted only once, and no precise time-limits are given for either journey. (It would be perfectly possible to calculate the length of the fall to either planet, but Wells avoids precision.) On both journeys Bedford has to look at earthly newspaper advertisements to restore himself, briefly, to a state of waking reality (52-53, 191). The dreamlike effect is much stronger during Bedford's solitary return, but even on the outward trip: "for the most part in a sort of quiescence that was neither waking nor slumber, we fell through a space of time that had neither night nor day in it, silently, softly, and swiftly down towards the moon" (56).

At this time also, a footnote from Bedford assures us that the travellers had no appetite: "...while we were in the sphere we felt not the slightest desire for food nor did we feel the want of it when we abstained" (56). This is a curious touch which reinforces the dreamlike atmosphere; and it almost certainly springs also from the seventeenth century moon-voyage tradition. Not from Kepler (whose voyage is too short for the point to arise, and whose travellers are narcotised), but from Francis Godwin and John Wilkins, who published their books almost simultaneously in 1638.

In Godwin's *The Man in the Moon*, the fictional hero Domingo

Gonsales is transported from Teneriffe to the Moon in a car drawn by migratory birds; and as soon as he is raised above the range of the Earth's gravity, he loses all hunger (Godwin 257-58). Wilkins in his non-fictional treatise *A Discourse Concerning a New World* postulates the same effect, and explains it by the lack of gravity: no gravity, no exertion; no exertion, no need of food (Nicolson 97). Wells hints at the same explanation: "So slight were the exertions required of us...that the necessity for taking refreshment did not occur to us" (56). Wells could easily have read both Godwin and Wilkins: they were often reprinted. But he may have come by some of his dreamlike effects and lack of hunger from later followers of this tradition. Nicolson observes:

Godwin, even more than Kepler, established a persistent convention of the cosmic voyage. Tale after tale will pick up this motif, mariner after mariner describe the strange sensation of becoming an apparently disembodied spirit... Weariness, hunger, thirst, all proved to be effects of gravity. (77)

The oddity of all this is that Wells need *not* have followed this antiquated tradition. There is, after all, no trace of it in Verne's *Round the Moon* (1870), which one might expect to be Wells's immediate model: Verne's travellers eat heartily and often, and keep as careful track of time as any 20th century astronauts. Wells goes out of his logical way to emphasize the dreamlike nature of his voyages. This is certainly a deliberately chosen effect.

Even Wells's choice of a *sphere* for the form of his spacecraft is a little strange: why not a craft with a differentiated floor and walls, with fitted furniture, like Verne's? Nicolson (248) suggests influence from Cyrano de Bergerac, who used a glass sphere on one voyage as part of his vehicle - its propulsion system (Cyrano 135-36). But, unlike Cyrano, Wells's travellers are *in* the sphere; and thereby Wells achieves a new effect: disorientation. Any part of the sphere can become up, down, or side at any moment; which must surely make the travellers' experience that much more dreamlike. Moreover, a *sphere* has a certain mythic resonance: it is a solid mandala, the perfect three dimensional form which traditionally symbolizes Heaven and Eternity.

As with the sphere, so, to a great extent, with the Moon. In or on that greater sphere, both time and space are vague. When Bedford and Cavor escape from the Selenites, and re-emerge onto the surface, they are astonished to find that some ten Earthly days must have elapsed, though they have eaten only once. Time seems different in this strange world. "Hunger - fatigue - all those things are different. Everything is

different. Everything!" says Cavor (166). They have left chronometers long behind them now: the only certainty is the waning of this nameless lunar evening.

In an equally nameless crater. Here again, the contrast between Verne and Wells is striking. Verne's *Round the Moon* is filled with precise lunar geography: at all times while his spacecraft is over the lunar Near Side, we know exactly what craters lie beneath: Copernicus, Tycho, and the rest (Chapters 11, 12, 16 in the English edition; original chapters 12, 13, 17). Verne's astronauts have maps of the Moon, and they use them, so that they and we always know exactly where they are. But Wells's men seem to have no map, and we do not even know which side of the Moon they are on. Since they never see the Earth in the lunar sky, I have argued elsewhere that they may be on the Far Side (the *Wellsian*, 1989). But even that is uncertain, and seems not to matter. It is all as vague as a dream; indeed, it is vaguer even than Kepler's *Dream* of 1634, for Kepler was straining to be as precise and accurate as he could: at least he differentiates between the two sides of the Moon! Wells does not. There is a great contrast here even with Wells's other interplanetary novel, *The War of the Worlds*, which is full of precision as to place and time. And the difference is not accidental, but deliberate: it shows that Wells in *First Men* is aiming at an effect different from Verne and even from his own previous work. *First Men*, indeed, is barely science fiction at all: from its very beginning, with the remarkable Cavorite, it borders on farce and fantasy.

It is also remarkably old-fashioned, in its reliance on Kepler, Godwin, Wilkins - and Swift, for, as everyone has noticed, the Gulliver-like quality of Cavor's messages by radio is very strong, with the Grand Lunar playing the part of the King of Brobdingnag. There is even a clear echo of Thomas More's *Utopia* in the use of gold for humble implements, including chains for prisoners (*First Men* 141; More, 79). In this use of old tradition, *First Men* resembles C.S. Lewis's space novels, with their reliance on the "discarded image" of the old astrology. But *First Men* differs from Lewis in being far less serious in tone: it is essentially a comic novel. Its ending does not destroy the comic effect; after all, it is only Bedford's conjecture that Cavor dies. The Selenites may merely have silenced him by destroying his radio.

The comic impulse appears quite clearly in Wells's handling of his two protagonists. Lewis once complained that "Cavor and Bedford have rather too much...character" (*Other Worlds* 64); indeed, each is

largely a figure of fun; but Lewis seems not to have realized that Wells was aiming at comic fantasy, not pure SF sense-of-wonder. Each character is vital to the effects of the book.

2. Cavor, Bedford and anti-imperialism

Cavor is, for the most part, a caricature of the absent-minded pure scientist; but he is not totally consistent. In the early accident in England, when the Cavorite sheet half-destroys his house, and he thinks his three workers may have died, he shows an arrogant disregard for ordinary human life. "My three assistants may or may not have perished. That is a detail. If they have it is no great loss; they were more zealous than able..." (31). But in dealings with the Selenites, Cavor shows himself much less of a chauvinist than Bedford; and in his radio comments on Selenite society, he plays the role of Gulliver, at times admiring the rationalism of the aliens, at times reacting humanely to the way they condition their workers (240-43). Still later, he explains and defends human wars to the Grand Lunar (261-63), even though this does not agree with either rationalism or humaneness. Wells is very close to Swift here, and the stupidity of the Gulliver role overwhelms the consistency of Cavor's character. And in the earlier part of the novel, Cavor is mainly a foil for Bedford - Bedford the hot-blooded capitalist-imperialist.

Bedford is by far the more important of the two protagonists, and his character is even more radically inconsistent - but "consistently inconsistent," as Aristotle says (*Poetics* Chap. 15, p 54). The dichotomy is between his dominant personality, which is egoistic, capitalist, imperialist, bellicose, and not entirely honest - and his mystical phase, which is not so much a personality as a negation of all personality. We may call these two aspects "Bedford 1" and "Bedford 2". Bedford 2 emerges most clearly in Chapter 19, 'Mr Bedford in Infinite Space,' the return voyage from the Moon, but there are important intimations before that. The clash between the two Bedfords is a fine source of comedy, but is it also central to the whole balance and meaning of the novel.

Bedford 1 is the main narrator, and he is clearly what Wayne Booth calls an "unreliable narrator" (Booth 158-59): his behaviour and values are, at least in part, not those of the author, and not meant to be endorsed by the reader. This is established quite early through his lack of scruple in money matters. He is an undischarged bankrupt, hiding from a creditor, yet for a moment he entertains the idea of selling Cavor a bungalow he does not own (12). And when he returns

from the Moon with a considerable amount of gold, he *still* hides from his creditor (207-08), under the assumed name of "Wells" (!), and is still unsatisfied with the wealth he has accumulated (he resumes the writing of his hopefully profitable play). All this sets him up to serve as a vehicle for satire against capitalist imperialism.

This satire is much more pointed and up-to-date than might at first glance appear. There are definite allusions in the text to Cecil Rhodes, to Rudyard Kipling, and possibly even to the Boer War that was in progress when *First Men* was first published in 1901. Bedford, of course, is a typical imperialist, out to get rich quick by establishing an empire in outer space. His first impulse, when he hears of Cavorite, is "to apply this principle to guns and ironclads and all the material and methods of war," then to many other activities "until one vast stupendous Cavorite Company ran and ruled the world" (19-20). But when he finds that Cavorite seems to be usable only for space vehicles, he thinks of "the old Spanish monopoly in American gold" and cries "this is imperial!" (38-39).

Dates are now of some importance. One of the bundles of the *First Men* MS, in the University of Illinois Library, is endorsed "Beach Cottage...Sandgate," where Wells was living from September 1898 to March 1899, so it is clear that Wells was writing the novel all through 1899 to 1900. Wells makes his story very contemporary, for Bedford says of Cavorite: "On the fourteenth of October, 1899, this incredible substance was made" (24). It may or may not be relevant that the Boer War began just three days earlier, on 11 October. But there are other, more pointed, imperial references. When Bedford is intoxicated on the lunar fungus, he speaks as follows:

We must annex this moon...There must be no shilly-shally. This is part of the White Man's Burden... Nempire Caesar never dreamt...Cavorecia. Bedfordecia... (100-01)

Cavorecia and *Bedfordecia* are clearly parodies of *Rhodesia*, which name was bestowed on the territories of the British South Africa Company, in honour of its founder-leader-tycoon Cecil Rhodes, in 1895; by 1899 there had been a couple of bloody native wars there, and the Company's activities had helped to provoke the Boer War. 'The White Man's Burden' was the title of a poem by Kipling published in *The Times*, 1 February 1899, addressed to the U.S.A. "Take up the White Man's Burden," sang Kipling,

To wait in heavy harness
On fluttered folks and wild ---
Your new-caught, sullen peoples,

Half devil and half child ... (Verse, 323)

The "new-caught peoples" were the peoples of the Philippines, whom the U.S. had just acquired in its easy war with Spain, but the Filipinos were indeed "sullen" and preferred independence to being handed over to a new colonial master. Three days after Kipling's poem appeared, the Philippines War began: a bloody struggle that would rage for years, disfigured by U.S. army atrocities. By the time *First Men* was published, the nature of the war, perhaps the most disgraceful in American history, was evident to the world, so that "White Man's Burden" would be a very barbed phrase. In practice, the White Man's Burden had meant massacre and rape. Bedford rounds off the effect of this passage in *First Men* by adding:

I embarked upon an argument to show the infinite benefits our arrival would confer upon the moon. I involved myself in a rather difficult proof that the arrival of Columbus was, after all, beneficial to America... (101)

The anti-imperialist satire is clear and strong. Wells is on the same side as Lewis, with *his* anti-imperialist satire directed at Weston and Devine; Wells is certainly not Earth-chauvinist, but rather pro-Selenite, and the Selenites are peaceful world-staters. This is in line with the anti-imperialist satire of *The War of the Worlds*, where the Martians do unto the British what the British have done unto the native Tasmanians. But now in *First Men* the aliens represent a positive, non-imperialist ideal.

However, in *First Men* the satire is lightly handled, and Bedford 1 is not a villain, but a rather likable rogue. We do not have to take his imperialism too seriously, since he is constantly foiled by episodes of rough farce, and is finally checkmated by the loss of the sphere. Moreover, satire of a deeper kind arises from his phases of supersession by Bedford 2, the trans-personal mystic.

3. Bedford the mystic

The dreamlike nature of the voyage to the moon is the first hint of the movement beyond the personality of Bedford 1. But that is hardly adequate to prepare us for the surprises of Chapters 18 and 19, 'Mr Bedford Alone' and 'Mr Bedford in Infinite Space.' It is as though, once removed from the society of Cavor, and exposed to environments which are beyond human experience, Bedford becomes aware of a trans-personal reality. These are some of the most impressively *religious* passages in Wells's early fiction. There are, of course, parallels: one thinks of a somewhat similar trans-personalism at the end of 'The

Country of the Blind,' where the hero Nunez dies willingly on the mountains, abandoning his petty life among the blind valley folk (*Complete Short Stories* 191-92). That is a solemn ending; but Wells's achievement in these chapters of *First Men* is more complex. Chapter 18 is solemn, with the approach, as in 'Country' of a trans-personal God who is also death for the individual. Bedford 2 is in tune with this Infinite; but Bedford 1 resists screamingly, and what we get is a tragicomic alternation. It is very funny, but also very believable: Wells is surely, in these chapters, dramatizing his own contradictory impulses, towards what he calls in *The New Machiavelli* (148 and passim) the "red life" of personal passion and the "white life" of impersonal purity.

The trans-personal mood first comes on Bedford when he is resting during his solitary search for the sphere (beginning of Chapter 18). The question, "Why had we come to the moon?" (172) leads to a deep questioning of all human motives, and he realizes that "I was not serving my own purposes...all my life I had in truth never served the purposes of my private life... Why had I come to the earth? Why had I a private life at all?" (173)

But after he has thus "lost himself in bottomless speculation," he comes back to a sharp sense of self when he faces the coming night, "that blackness of the void which is the only absolute death" (175). Curious expression, "the only absolute death": one can hardly be *slightly* dead; but here the Void symbolizes the total negation of the living universe. And then later in the chapter, when the first snowflake falls and the Selenites' tunnel closes, we have the tremendous confrontation:

Over me, about me, closing in on me, embracing me ever nearer, was the Eternal, that which was before the beginning and that which triumphs over the end; that enormous void in which all light and life and being is but the thin and vanishing splendour of a falling star, the cold, the stillness, the silence - the infinite and final Night of space. (182)

It is clear that this "Eternal" is not *merely* death, not merely negation: there are echoes of "Alpha and Omega" (Revelation 1: 8) and "That which was from the beginning" (1 John 1: 1), namely God; moreover, Bedford continues at once:

The sense of solitude and desolation became the sense of an overwhelming Presence, that stooped towards me, that almost touched me. "No," I cried, "no! Not yet! not yet!..." (182)

Here I cannot help feeling the comic presence of St Augustine, who also wanted God, only "not yet". This is funny, truthful, and mystical all at once: death, annihilation, the darkness of the soul are familiar

negative aspects of the God-experience in many mystical traditions. Bedford 1 now feels the approach of God-as-Death, and he hates Him-or-It. He begins running and leaping for the safety of the sphere. And now he applies to his Opponent an image of evil: *Serpent-girdled* must refer to the curving shapes of the crater-wall mountains against the solar disc; but "serpent" certainly suggests Satan: God as Devil. This is how Bedford 1 now sees the Eternal. But when he finally saves his life by taking off in his spacecraft, there is a sudden reversal of mood. The chapter ends: "I was in the silence and darkness of the inter-planetary sphere."

I think the word *sphere* in this place has taken on a rich ambiguity: it is both the spacecraft and the regions of space, the "spheres", perhaps, of the old astronomy. But certainly silence and darkness, so recently Bedford's great Enemy, have suddenly become acceptable and accepted. The new chapter begins:

It was almost as though I had been killed. Indeed, I could imagine a man suddenly and violently killed would feel much as I did. One moment, a passion of agonising existence and fear; the next, darkness and stillness, neither light nor life nor sun, moon nor stars, the black Infinite. (185)

Wells's heroes often begin a strange experience by wondering if they are dead: so, for instance, Plattner (*Stories* 335), and Davidson in 'The Remarkable Case of Davidson's Eyes' (*Stories* 275). But this "death" in *First Men* is probably the most interesting, because Bedford has been resisting literal death immediately before. Now he is no longer resisting. He is "borne upwards into an enormous darkness." The *upwards* is both a literal and a metaphorical ascension (to a higher level of being), and "I hung as if I were annihilated" (185).

Practical activities now supervene, since Bedford has to navigate the craft toward the Earth; but once that is taken care of, the mystical mood returns. He puts out the light, and floats, without weight or hunger, and with no fear or loneliness, "through immeasurable eternities like some god upon a lotus leaf" (189). Obviously here we are presented with an image of Eastern, perhaps Vedantic, mysticism. And the word *god* is important, because now Bedford has achieved the ultimate mystic ambition, he has *become* the divine infinite Being. "I seemed to myself to have grown greater and greater...and always the sense of earth's littleness and the infinite littleness of my life upon it, was in my thoughts" (189-90). He doubts his own identity, and reviews with scorn the life of "Bedford" - that is, Bedford 1. "I saw Bedford...not only as an ass, but as the son of many generations of asses" (190). Here the general comedy of the novel controls and 'places' the

experience, for Bedford as Narrator now remarks: "I regret that something of that period of lucidity still hangs about me" - he regrets it as Bedford 1, because Bedford 2, Bedford-as-deity, interferes with "the full blooded self-satisfaction of my early days."

For a while, in the sphere, he struggles with the mystical mood, by lighting the lamp and once more reading the newspaper advertisements. "But the doubts within me could still argue: 'It is not you that is reading, it is Bedford - but *you are not Bedford*, you know'..." (192). And Bedford as Narrator adds: "Do you know I had an idea that really I was something quite outside not only the world, but all worlds, and out of space and time, and that this poor Bedford was just a peephole through which I looked at life..." (192).

Undoubtedly, what we have here is the ultimate Vedantic intuition, *Tat tvam asi*, Thou art That: the only real identity is the identity of the One, or God. This philosophy was as well known in 1900 as it is today, since it is the 'perennial philosophy' of many mystical traditions. But one does not have to be piously religious to feel its force: every thinking scientist, at least, must feel the sheer oddity of the human condition - that the impersonal intellect we enjoy when we contemplate the universe is joined to a lusting, hungering, *particular* animal. Why am I in this narrow, single, mortal body, and not in every body, or none? Don't we all know that we are really God? This is what Bedford feels, as doubtless Wells felt. There is a similar moment of self-doubt and self-expression in Kipling's precisely contemporary novel *Kim* (1901), when the young hero, alone in an Indian railway waiting-room, goes into a trance repeating "Who is Kim - Kim - Kim?" (*Kim* 265).

In this chapter of *First Men*, Wells expresses this cosmic absurdity most beautifully. The setting is a symbolically expressive as it well could be: the lone figure is floating in darkness in a *sphere*, remote from all worlds; this is the ultimate three-dimensional mandala! And yet the whole thing is well modulated within the overall comedy. Bedford, or at least Bedford 1, is a reluctant mystic; he remarks soon after: "I hung...a cloudy megalomaniac... Until at last I began to feel the pull of earth upon my being" (192-93). The *pull* here is literal gravity working through the earth-facing window, but it is also symbolic. "And then indeed it grew clearer and clearer to me that I was quite certainly Bedford after all..." (193). The experience is over; from here onward, Bedford 1 returns, with apparently undiminished egoism and anxiety for money.

It is interesting to see what C.S. Lewis did with all this. Lewis indeed greatly appreciated the scene of the lunar evening, where Bedford is confronted with "the Eternal" as death and "the infinite and final Night of space" (182), for he quoted the passage with pleasure in his essay 'On Stories.' But he does not seem to have noticed the mystical element in that scene, for he compares it with "Pascal's old fear of those eternal silences which have gnawed at so much religious faith" (*Of Other Worlds* 10). And in Lewis's novel *Out of the Silent Planet*, his hero Ransom, while travelling between Earth and Mars, has no experience of mystical darkness, but instead spends much of his time sunbathing in the light of "Heaven" which symbolizes God (Chapters 5 and 21). Lewis writes beautifully, but he clearly rejects Wells's pantheistic mysticism in favour of an *external* and monarchic God. This is doubtless more orthodox; but Wells has just as ancient and strong a religious tradition behind his work, and moreover Wells is more accurate in his science. Ransom's sunbathing beyond the Earth's atmosphere would surely have given him skin cancer from hard ultraviolet rays; and space is, after all, black and hostile to life, not an "ocean of radiance" (*Silent Planet* 35). Wells's mystical scenes, in short, arise naturally out of the realities known to science and to everyday experience: we know that space is black, and that existence as rational individuals is metaphysically puzzling. From these elements, Wells creates the strange and wonderful heart of his novel.

By noticing the mysticism in the voyages of the sphere, we can get a clear picture of *The First Men in the Moon* as a whole. The novel is full of variety, but for all that it is reasonably well unified. Essentially, it is a philosophical comedy very much in the seventeenth century tradition, the tradition of Godwin and Cyrano, in which the moon voyage becomes a vehicle for speculation, at times utopian, at times religious, at times satirical, and at times scientific; while the overall mood tends toward humour. Wells's science is abreast of contemporary knowledge, yet unlike Verne's moon novel (which is 'hard' modern science fiction), *First Men* is a surprising throwback. Its playful fantasy is underlined by its title - the First Men in the Moon, which echoes the common phrase "the Man in the Moon," which is itself the title of Godwin's romance of 1638. The Moon, in a tradition which goes back to Ariosto, is the place of lost wits; and Bedford at least loses his normal wits, during his lunar escapade, to great effect. Indeed, with his mysticism Wells crowns the whole seventeenth century tradition by surpassing it.

It is also interesting to see how this novel fits into the pattern of Wells's career. By 1899-1900 Wells had come through his 'tragic' period of science fiction, as expressed in *The Time Machine*, *The Island of Dr Moreau*, *The War of the Worlds*, *The Invisible Man*, and some lesser works. He was also becoming prosperous, building Spade House, and looking towards a new century with hope for progress and a world state. He had always had a strong vein of humour, and now it was time for some fun in science fiction. His best stories of this time are comic ones: 'The Man Who Could Work Miracles' (1898), 'The New Accelerator' (1901) and 'The Truth About Pyecraft' (1903). *First Men* is the novel of this phase: great science fiction, not least for being mystical comedy. In his Preface, Wells said "It is probably the writer's best 'scientific romance'" (p ix). I am not sure about "best"; but certainly very good - a unique achievement.

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