

**COMING UP FOR AIR AND *THE HISTORY OF MR POLLY*: UTOPIAN YEARNINGS,
TRIUMPHS AND DEFEATS¹**

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In the beginning utopia is an image of desire

A. L. Morton

If one intends to discuss utopia in H. G. Wells and George Orwell one should most probably start with *When the Sleeper Wakes* (1899) by the elder gentleman and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949) by the younger one. For my part, I am not strictly concerned with ‘utopia’: I will use utopia in this paper – or these reflections or notes jotted down – mostly as a yearning, a longing for something out of the real world, its deficiencies (or our heroes’ deficiencies). The Orwellian and Wellsian heroes I am dealing with are Alfred Polly in Wells’s *The History of Mr Polly* (1910) and George Bowling in Orwell’s *Coming up for Air* (1939). Apparently they have nothing to do with utopia. About Polly, and his creator Wells, Orwell himself had something to say:

The ultimate subject-matter of H. G. Wells’s stories is, first of all, scientific discovery, and beyond that the petty snobberies and tragicomedies of English life, especially lower-middle-class life. His basic ‘message’ [...] is that Science can solve all ills [...] but that man is at present too blind to see the possibility of his own powers. The alternation between ambitious Utopian themes and light comedy [...] is very marked in Wells’s work. He writes about journeys to the moon [...] and also he writes about small shopkeepers dodging bankruptcy and fighting to keep their end up in the frightful snobbery of provincial towns.²

Mr Polly fits like a glove to the examples and situation referred to in this quote. Polly is obviously that shopkeeper, with his bankruptcy and his unpreparedness (poor maths, poor English). Wells, whose first job of his liking was a teaching post and was in 1910 still a relevant novelist, but later returned to the battle of education, shows us in *Mr Polly* (as he had done in *Kipps* in 1905) all the deficiencies of schooling, from the deficiencies of untrained instructors to the deficiencies of the curriculum.

¹ This is a revised version of a paper presented to the 5th International Conference of the Utopian Studies Society in Oporto, Portugal, July 2004. A Portuguese translation was published in *George Orwell: Perspectivas Contemporâneas*, ed. Fátima Vieira and Jorge Bastos da Silva (Porto: Faculdade de Letras da Universidade do Porto, 2005).

² George Orwell, *Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970), II: 234. All further references to this book are contained parenthetically within the text.

The fact that both stories are the stories of a single individual raises some structural problems. In that regard, let us agree that *The History of Mr Polly* is the better of the two books; Wells writes with gusto ('Wells the artist was untroubled by Wells the scientist'³), and he tells the story of his comic hero, including (as in other fiction of this time) autobiographic elements when needs be, but always from the outside, as an 'honest' narrator. As for Orwell, the author himself recognised his difficulty in making a clear-cut distinction between himself and his character – he wrote to Julian Symons, 'you are perfectly right about my own character constantly intruding on that of the narrator' (Orwell 1970, II: 478) – and this may have something to do with the fact that he wrote a first-person narrative.⁴ D. S. Savage accuses him of 'empathising with naïve directness with his heroes'.⁵ Although Bowling is not so ignorant as Polly, one can't help noticing that he is thinking above his capacities, that he is having Orwell's thoughts (many reflections concerning the oncoming war, with *Nineteen Eighty-Four* looking round the corner,⁶ so to speak, as well as a wry way to look at the world around him).

There are recognisable autobiographic elements in *The History of Mr Polly* (starting with the scenes at the bazaar – Polly is a 'wonderful incarnation of what might have happened to Wells without education'⁷). On *Coming Up for Air* it has been said by Alex Zwerdling that 'Orwell tried to invent a character very different from himself' and only here do 'we feel we can trust the observations of the hero';⁸ but the same critic recognised pages earlier 'Orwell's frequent confusion between himself and his major characters. In his early novels [...] the hero often acts as a spokesman of the author himself',⁹ while John Rodden goes so far as to call the novel's hero the 'most autobiographical of Orwell's heroes and a thinly disguised mouthpiece of the author's own views'.¹⁰

Alfred Polly, and like him George Bowling, the hero and first-person narrator of *Coming Up for Air* are, in a way, 'poor devils', lower middle-class men

³ Vincent Brome, *H. G. Wells: A Biography* (London: Non-Fiction Book Club, 1952), 110.

⁴ With a caveat: 'There is no truth in Orwell's statement that the "vice" of confusing the narrator with the author is inherent in the form' of the first-person narrative (Alex Zwerdling, *Orwell and the Left* [New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1974], 148).

⁵ D. S. Savage, 'The Fatalism of George Orwell', in *The New Pelican Guide to English Literature, Volume 8: The Present*, ed. Boris Ford (London: Penguin, 1983), 129-46 (131).

⁶ 'I can see the war that's coming and I can see the after-war, the food-queues and the secret police and the loudspeakers telling you what to think' (George Orwell, *The Penguin Complete Novels of George Orwell* [London: Penguin, 1983], 524; all further references to this book are contained parenthetically in the text).

⁷ Norman MacKenzie, 'H. G. Wells and His Critics', in *The History of Mr Polly*, by H. G. Wells (London: Dent, 1993), 187.

⁸ Zwerdling, *Orwell and the Left*, 157.

⁹ Zwerdling, *Orwell and the Left*, 146.

¹⁰ John Rodden, 'On Political and Sociology Intellectuals: George Orwell and the London Left Intelligentsia', in *George Orwell*, ed. Graham Holderness, et. al. (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998), 161-81 (164).

who lead trite or plain hard lives, and who would like to get out. Bowling in his youth had expected to become a shop-owner like his father; Polly, who started working at a drapery, ended up, by means of the insurance policy received on the death of his father, as a shop owner.¹¹ The question of finding a job, like the matter of finding a wife, in both cases just happens to them: and they find themselves stuck with jobs without prospects of improvement (in the case of Polly, on the way to bankruptcy), and stuck with wives whom they do not love and would not mind getting rid of if they had an opportunity.

Polly and Bowling are subject to ‘Fate’: social and economic laws which they do not understand clearly. ‘For most of his life, Polly is the victim of a deterministic world’;¹² everything and everybody bosses him around (his cousin’s advice, his relations’ comments, the market laws that dictate his bankruptcy and his own dyspepsia (on which Parrinder insists is a metaphor [Parrinder 1970, 79])). Savage has summarised the Orwellian novel in this way: ‘the story of a single individual’s disaffection from his society, his partially successful retreat or escape from it, and his final return [...] leading [...] to resigned conformity. [...] The philosophy is fatalistic’.¹³ Bowling is somewhat more clever than Polly: he understands how and why his father was being defeated in his trade by the more modern, larger competitor Sarazins that, from 1909, ‘would systematically undersell him, ruin him, and eat him up’ (Orwell 1983, 485). And he seems quite aware that he is in the hands of transcending circumstances: he is stuck with his house’s mortgage; and in his job, he has no illusions either: ‘I’d got a job and the job had got me. I was a promising young fellow in an insurance office – one of those keen young businessmen with firm jaws and good prospects that you used to read about in the Clark’s College adverts – and then I was the usual down-trodden five-to-ten-pounds-a-weeker in a semi-detached villa in the inner-outer suburbs’ (Orwell 1983, 480).

Neither do the two small heroes understand (or care to understand) the laws of their ‘Fate’ – the laws that rule the world they live in. Both Wells and Orwell were socialists however divergent, but ‘socialism and the rights of man [were] things that had no appeal for Mr Polly’ (Wells 1993, 27); as for Bowling, not only is he extremely critical of political activism (in the lecture on ‘The Menace of Fascism’ at the local Left Book Club, which is narrated from Orwell’s point of view), but also his fear of the war, or rather the after-war, is just an intensification of the regret for what is irretrievably lost. The after-war situation in itself ‘isn’t likely to affect me personally. Because who’d bother about a chap like me? I’m too

¹¹ ‘I came out of the army with no less than three hundred and fifty quid... Here I was, with quite enough money to do the thing I’d dreamed of for years – that is, start a shop’ (Orwell 1983, 504). As for Polly, at his father’s death, he ‘found himself heir to [...] an insurance policy of three hundred and fifty five pounds’ (H. G. Wells, *The History of Mr Polly* [London: Dent, 1993], 37; all further references to this book are contained parenthetically in the text).

¹² Patrick Parrinder, *H. G. Wells* (Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, 1970), 81.

¹³ Savage, ‘The Fatalism of George Orwell’, 130.

fat to be a political suspect. [...] As for Hilda and the kids, they'd probably never notice the difference'¹⁴ (Orwell 1983, 528). Between the left-wing or just liberal anti-Fascist propaganda and his friend the old public-school master who lives apparently out of this world, between the threat of war and his daily routines, Bowling takes refuge in the remembrance of things past. Even the news of the day – the marriage of the Albanian king – sets him thinking of his childhood. Those were the days, alas! or, such, such were the joys...

The possibility of escaping from the cheerless routine is next to none: Bowling even thought of killing his wife in the first years of his marriage, he was deterred only because in such cases 'chaps who murder their wives always get copped [...]. When a woman's bumped off, her husband is always the first suspect' (Orwell 1983, 510). As for deserting his wife (and children) 'and start a life under a different name[, t]hat kind of thing only happens in books' (Orwell 1983, 529). Quite true: it happens in *The History of Mr Polly*, a book that had made quite an impression on Bowling when he read it.

Yes, the chance to say good-bye to all that appears indeed in the novel by Wells. It is nearly a farce. The only way Polly has to go out of the scene is through suicide: but, since he wants to burn his house along with knifing his throat, the house is afire before he can kill himself, and he must run for help. At the end of the adventure, he has the insurance money to receive: but he will not use it and be a new one of the 'small shopkeepers who have [...] been thrown out of employment [...] and who set up in needless shops as a method of eking out the savings upon which they count' (Wells 1993, 105).¹⁵ He plainly decides to 'clear out'. He suddenly discovers that 'Fishbourne, as he had known it and hated it, so that he wanted to kill himself to get out of it, *wasn't the world*' (Wells 1993, 137). Then follows the adventure of this happy tramp who eventually has to face a ruffian known as Uncle Jim, and instead of running away 'turns back to confront his destiny, and is saved, and enters into his *personal utopia*'¹⁶ (my italics).

¹⁴ Fatness seems to be used iconically by Orwell – the scrawny Orwell: George Bowling is too fat to be suspect, so he would get along. As would – and wonderfully enjoying it – the 'little fat men' in their Wellsian 'paradise' in the often quoted vituperation of Wellsian utopias in *The Road to Wigan Pier* (George Orwell, *The Road to Wigan Pier* [London: Penguin, 1989], 180). The latter reference could well be a vicious description of H. G.'s physique (the sort of uncharitable caricature used by C. S. Lewis in his anti-Wellsian fantasy *That Hideous Strength* (1945). On the other hand, don't let us forget that Alfred Polly is described as a 'fattish little tramp, full of dreams and quivering excuses' (Wells 1993, 156)...

¹⁵ On the same page the text continues: 'Essentially their lives are failures... a slow, chronic process of consecutive small losses which may end, if the individual is exceptionally fortunate, in an impoverished death-bed before actual bankruptcy or destitution supervenes'. This is not verbatim, but very close to the story of George Bowling's father: 'a small shopkeeper going down the hill is a dreadful thing to watch [...]. It was a race between death and bankruptcy, and, thank God, death got Father first' (Orwell 1983, 489-90).

¹⁶ Norman MacKenzie, 'Introduction', in *The History of Mr Polly*, by H. G. Wells (London: Dent, 1993), i-xxxviii (xxxvi).

Notwithstanding their personal and idiosyncratic characteristics, Polly and Bowling are both simple persons; if they want out it is because they would like to invert ‘the image of the hunger, toil, and violence in the authors’ everyday lives’ – in their own (as characters in a fiction) everyday lives. This ‘inverted image of the hunger, toil, and violence’¹⁷ is what, in the words of Darko Suvin, typifies that sibling of utopia: Cockaigne.

It is with a chapter on Cockaigne that A. L. Morton starts his *The English Utopia*. In the Middle Ages, the Land of Cockaigne existed in the minds of serfs – i. e., of people living in a pre-capitalist economy, and so ignorant of that later sort of exploitation. Polly seems also ignorant of the mysteries of capitalism’s ways and means; he is a failure as far as administering his own capital; when his regeneration (if we may call it that) arrives, it is in the form of a more primitive level of economy, an easy-going way of life which is, in Parrinder’s words, ‘a consummation of his romantic medievalism in knight-errantry, in defence of a riverside inn which itself has a strong literary and pastoral flavour. *Mr Polly* ends, in fact, as a Thames Valley romance’,¹⁸ which of course reminds us (and the critic) of William Morris’s *News from Nowhere*.

Bowling, who is not dyspeptic and not as desperate as Polly, but only low-spirited, has the chance to go back to the lost world of his youth; and it is indeed a world that in the way he depicts it reminds one of Cockaigne, with all its references to food, sweets (and how cheap they were, compared to the present!), and, central to the utopian metaphor of the world of his youth, fishing. In Cockaigne, roasted geese fly to your mouth shouting ‘Eat me’; in Lower Binfield, Bowling’s native town, there was the secret pond with the ‘enormous’ carp, waiting for little George to catch them. In this childhood’s utopia, ‘it was summer all the year round’ (Orwell 1983, 450); and however contradictorily, Bowling says first ‘I don’t idealise my childhood, and unlike many people I’ve no wish to be young again’ although ‘in a manner of speaking I *am* sentimental about my childhood – not my own particular childhood, but the civilisation which I grew up in’ (Orwell 1983, 473). And in another place: ‘Christ! What’s the use of saying that one is not sentimental about “before the war”? I *am* sentimental about it. [...] [P]eople then had something that we haven’t got now’ (Orwell 1983, 492).

Lower Binfield before the war is Bowling’s personal utopia; the enormous carp mentioned above, ‘the carp stored away in my mind. [...] Practically they were *my* carp’ (Orwell 1983, 491-92). So an alternative place – not West Bletchley, where he lives with his family, but Lower Binfield; and for Polly, not Fishbourne, but the Potwell Inn, where he settles in the end – are the ‘other places’ yearned for. I recall the first sentence of A. L. Morton’s book: ‘In the beginning utopia is an

¹⁷ Darko Suvin, *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1979), 56.

¹⁸ Parrinder, *H. G. Wells*, 83.

image of desire'.¹⁹ And I wonder if perhaps all utopias aren't personal utopias: not in the sense of the utopian books written by their authors, who are obviously in control, but the image of the desire of the heroes of these novels, utopias or not in the literary technical sense.

Alas for poor fat George Bowling! His visit to his birthplace is a long series of successive disillusionments. There is an eerie feeling like in a *Twilight Zone* episode, when some guy travels to an old familiar place and finds it changed and weird. What Wells would perhaps have called progress has made the modest, semi-rural Lower Binfield an uncharacteristic town – rather, a town with the characteristics of the postwar days. If Potwell Inn and surroundings were a romance-type Thames Valley idyll for the benefit of Alfred Polly, Lower Binfield is just the opposite, the vision of a Thames Valley hell. It has grown immensely; and the people do not recognise each other. George's old lover Elsie does not recognise him; neither does the old vicar. Apart from these two, he finds no other acquaintance from those days. The old places have changed owner, name and trade: his family's house is now a tea shop,²⁰ the imposing Binfield House is now 'a loony-bin' (Orwell 1983, 547); the carp pond nearby has been 'turned into a rubbish-dump' (Orwell 1983, 559). He expected to bring some comfort from his visit; he does not.

He had decided on leaving for his private spree at Lower Binfield after having stopped on the road-side to pick flowers: 'I picked up my bunch of primroses and had a smell at them. I was thinking of Lower Binfield'. Eventually he has the idea of 'slipping down to Lower Binfield and having a week there all by [him]self, on the Q.T.' (Orwell 1983, 529). 'On the Q.T.' means that he will have to invent a story so that his wife doesn't get wind of his plans.

The way Bowling prepares his week in Lower Binfield may remind us of Mr Barnstaple, the small hero of Wells's *Men Like Gods* (1923). This is a utopian novel all right, not a story passed entirely in the 'real world' like the other two. Alfred Barnstaple is a journalist in a liberal paper; he has a passable family life, with the usual problems, but does not abhor his spouse the way Polly and Bowling hate theirs. He shares with Bowling the wish to get rid of the daily chores for some short-term; he suffers from neurasthenia and his doctor prescribes him a holiday. Only a *real* holiday must be without the burden of his wife and young sons, so he will go alone. He will have to scheme his way out, just like George; he does not need to make up a story, only to stealthily take his suitcase to the garage, and be evasive about his destination.

¹⁹ A. L. Morton, *The English Utopia* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1978), 15.

²⁰ This is the inversion of a *History of Mr Polly* situation which Orwell was perhaps consciously reworking: at the end of Wells's novel, Polly visits his 'dystopia' – his old house where his ex-wife goes on living – and finds it made into a tea shop (and if Mrs Polly recognises him, her sister doesn't).

By a pass of rhetorical magic, Wells brings Mr Barnstaple, aboard his yellow motor car, to a utopian parallel world. At the end of his adventures there, he is safely returned by his scientific friends from utopia to his own world; in order to confirm the success of the transfer of matter-energy between the two universes, he must on arrival deposit a flower he was given at the place of intersection where he appeared back, somewhere near Maidenhead. So he does, but as he has the flower from utopia in his hands, he decides to keep a petal as a souvenir – only to see it rot fast, in the polluted air of our world.

This is the final meaning of any utopia. Utopia as narrative is always a journey to another place (no-place, whatever!) – *an return*. First for the sake of narration itself, for the sake of rhetoric: we remember the words of Raphael Hathloday: ‘I lived there more than five years and would never have wished to leave *except to make known that new world*’²¹ (my italics). If he had not returned we would know nothing of utopia. In another sense, the voyager learns from his voyage, and from the voyage to utopia one learns exceedingly. ‘True voyage is return’, says Ursula Le Guin in a not altogether different context.²²

Mr Barnstaple returns with his withered petal as a proof that his stay in Utopia was not a dream – just like the Time Traveller, who brought from one of his futures ‘two strange white flowers’;²³ Borges has commented on the subject.²⁴ Barnstaple returns edified, invigorated and has decided to collaborate in the great effort Wells had called ‘the open conspiracy’.

Once Mr Polly found his ‘personal utopia’, and remained there, we need not bother too much about him now. It is George Bowling, whom we left a while ago picking primroses, that has to be dealt with as a visitor to his dystopian Lower Binfield. Were it the utopia yearned for, he could have brought the carp as a proof of the reality of his visit; he could even have convinced jealous Hilda that he had not been philandering. The only thing he had in plenty in his Land of Cockaigne was booze. Too much booze, and he paid for it. He also paid for his fishing tackle, only to find out that he couldn’t fish; so he says ‘I left my new rod and the rest of the fishing tackle in my bedroom. Let ’em keep it. No use to me. It was merely a quid that I’d chucked down the drain to teach myself a lesson. And I’d learnt the lesson all right’. Leaving there the fishing tackle is the gloomy opposite of bringing a flower from utopia. And had he indeed learned the lesson?

In the case of Alfred Polly, the narrator says: ‘when a man has once broken through the paper walls of everyday circumstance, those unsubstantial walls that hold so many of us securely prisoned from the cradle to the grave, he has made a discovery. If the world does not please you *you can change it*’ (Wells 1993, 137).

²¹ Thomas More, *Utopia*, ed. and trans. Edward Surtz (1964), 55.

²² Ursula Le Guin, *The Dispossessed* (London: Granada, 1975), 76.

²³ H. G. Wells, *The Time Machine* (London: Dent, 1995), 83.

²⁴ See Jorge Luis Borges, ‘La Flor de Coleridge’, in *Otras Inquisiciones* (Madrid: Alianza Editorial, 1985).

The feeling that you can change the world is also the feeling at the end of *Men Like Gods*: ‘I don’t want a safe job now. I can do better. There’s other work before me’.²⁵

After all, what has Bowling earned? His wife would never believe the truth, and if she did, she would eventually find out that he had squandered seventeen pounds. Better let her believe it was a woman, and ‘take [the] medicine’ (Orwell 1983, 571) of her harsh recriminations. Quoting Savage once more, ‘the Orwellian man [...] sees no option but to submit querulously to the mechanical course of events’.²⁶ To return to the lesson he learned, it was the lesson of dystopia: there’s no way out. He who was made by his author an updated Polly ‘return[s] to his everyday’s tasks at Flying Salamander Insurance. (Mr Polly’s neighbour little Clamp of the toy shop was insured with Royal Salamander)’, remarks Christie Davies; and he continues, ‘the Royal Salamander has flown, and so has Wellsian joy and optimism of Mr Polly’s escape – George Bowling will become Winston Smith’.²⁷

One last point, one last remark about Bowling’s education and Polly’s liberation. We remember that Bowling had recognised that true freedom appears only in books. As such, the book within the book in *Coming Up For Air* being obviously *The History of Mr Polly*; *Coming Up For Air* assumes itself as it were one level of veracity above *Mr Polly*. Only in books like that can you have happy endings; Bowling knew that leaving home and starting anew happens only in such books. And yet, when he had read Wells’s story, about twenty years old, it was a book

exactly at the mental level you’ve reached at the moment, so much that it seems to have been written especially for you [...]. I wonder if you can imagine the effect it had upon me, to be brought up as I’d been brought up, the son of a shopkeeper in a country town, and then to come across a book like that. (Orwell 1983, 501)

He read the book as a possible history of his life; but the way things went, some fifteen years later, the luck of Polly in ‘clearing out’ was obviously a thing of romance.

And this is also an aspect of the complex love-hate relationship Orwell felt towards Wells, enjoying his early lower middle-class novels (*Kipps*, *Mr Polly*, *Love and Mr Lewisham*) and deprecating later works (or not fitting to his taste,

²⁵ H. G. Wells, *Men Like Gods* (New York: Macmillan, 1923), 325.

²⁶ Savage, ‘The Fatalism of George Orwell’, 130.

²⁷ Christie Davies, ‘Making Fun of Work: Humor as Sociology in the Works of H. G. Wells’, in *H. G. Wells Under Revision*, ed. Patrick Parrinder and Christopher Rolfe (London and Toronto: Associated University Presses, 1990), 82-96 (94).

independently of date): of *The New Machiavelli* (1911), he said it ‘must be written down as failure’.²⁸

In the ‘General Introduction’ to *H. G. Wells under Revision*, Patrick Parrinder emphasises the role of Orwell in establishing a one-sided appreciation of Wells which values his early science fiction and his novels up to the First World War, diminishing his later efforts in various fields, namely as a utopist.²⁹ This is a possible enticing way for a metaliterary reading of *Coming Up For Air*. ‘The history of Mr Bowling’, as a between-the-wars rewriting of the Wellsian novel, is not only dystopic, but translates its author’s reflections on Wells in his prime, who is part of an irretrievably lost personal literary utopia of Orwell. The dismissal of the end of *Mr Polly* as unfeasible in the real world by Bowling is the dismissal of utopia – even this utopia travestied as romance – by the anti-utopian Orwell. Conditions changed, this is no more the time for early Wells romance. And romance, which is fantasy, evasive literature, entails the realisation of A. L. Morton’s utopian ‘image of desire’.³⁰

²⁸ George Orwell, ‘The True Pattern of H. G. Wells’, *H. G. Wells Newsletter*, 4: 8 (2001), 4.

²⁹ [Patrick Parrinder], ‘General Introduction’, in *H. G. Wells Under Revision*, ed. Patrick Parrinder and Christopher Rolfe (London and Toronto: Associated University Presses, 1990), 9-20.

³⁰ One can see that Arthur Leslie Morton appears in this text insofar as he supports any rather fluid use of the concept of utopia and not as the orthodox Marxist critic of Wells. Comparing Morton’s attack on Wells with Orwell’s would show some unexpected coincidences; which were, I believe, the common denominator of left wing criticism of Wells’s bourgeois type of utopian socialism – the best in the field being still possibly Christopher Caudwell’s.