

Reviews

Fernando Porta, *La scienza come favola. Saggio sui scientific romances di H G Wells.* Salerno: EDISUD, 1995. 144 pp, index. L.40.000.

"Science as a fable" - the title of this study on Wells' early fiction - is a key expression in understanding the basis of the author's critical premises: Porta's point is that Wells' Scientific Romances could be seen as expressing a rhetorical power deeply indebted to the tradition of romance and supporting not a scientific but a rhetorical truth. Any analysis is therefore bound to take into consideration a wide range of different literary influences, which imply a complex fictional structure.

Despite the common belief that, as Patrick Parrinder reminds in his Preface to the volume, "H G Wells was a storyteller who happened to have studied the physical and biological sciences", Porta demonstrates that it is possible to focus, with particular reference to Wells's early Scientific Romances, some specific structural and thematic features which lead the writer to the creation of a hybrid form connected with very different narrative genres. Referring to the English tradition of essay-writing and through it, to the Romantic experience, Wells borrows its speculative and futuristic aspects and proves able to widen its field of reference. While doing so, he clearly keeps in mind a whole range of Scientific Romances' literary ancestors, moving from the imaginary voyage to the utopian and evolutionary fantasy, with brief excursions in the field of metaphysical narrative. At the same time, he seems to be perfectly aware of the Scientific Romances' literary status, in which any reference to science is to be considered as serving a rhetorical purpose.

Therefore, Porta locates a crucial clue in the often conscious and willed coexistence of the two different fields of science and romance, and makes a convincing and critically supported case for Wells's ability to create a definite expressive and stylistic pattern, highly metaphoric and semantically loaded, so defining the path by which evolutionary theory is gradually appropriated by literature. Through a temporary breakdown of the borders between science and literature, concepts, themes, structural clues, language and style are profitably exchanged, creating in Wells's narrative, Porta argues, a kind of subtext giving new life to the conventions of romance.

By this criterion, Porta's theoretical frame in his study is stated in terms of romance's structural features and the way in which these are exploited in Wells' early fiction. A close analysis of the novels is introduced in the first part of the volume, which offers details on the historical and cultural context in which the early Scientific Romances were written, with particular reference to the epistemological discontinuity introduced by the theory of evolution and its implications both in science and in literature.

After focusing attention on a definite cultural background reproducing the contradictions of Darwinism on a larger scale, Porta's analysis proceeds to identify a web of influences connecting Wells's manipulation of Darwinian science to the world of romance. His guiding thread in the first and second sections of Part One - dedicated respectively to the *fin de siècle* evolutionary implications in culture and Wells' attitude to the tradition of romance - is the complex semantic loading of the scientific paradigm at the end of the XIX Century, with particular reference to the implications of the parallel concepts of evolution and change, particularly when the two of them are filtered through the imaginative history of romance. From this perspective, Porta maintains, Wells's writings reveal a very peculiar approach to the problem. They modify the traditional patterns of romance through science and its methods, thus attempting to create, in the contiguous forms of popular science and scientific romance, a narrative including the empirical achievements of science and the rich, mythopoetic structure of literature.

In Part Two of the study, which moves from the theoretical frame to a close analysis of the early Scientific Romances, Porta concentrates on three Scientific Romances covering the timespan from 1895 to 1897 (*The Time Machine*, *The Island of Dr Moreau*, and *The Invisible Man*). Thus he wisely avoids the risk of a general - and probably generic - survey of the whole bulk of Wells' writings. Again, through close and careful examination of the chosen texts, Porta points to the way in which familiar bits and pieces, drawn from the popular science as well as from the field of literature, are combined in a totally unfamiliar pattern. While the central themes change slightly in each of the several Scientific Romances, the stylistic and structural strategies tend to overlap, even though Wells never repeats himself. From a global perspective, it may be said that the old well-made plot of romance is enriched through the use of topics borrowed from the most recent scientific developments - be that the technology of time travel, the possibilities of vivisection or the miracles of chemistry.

This implies also a definite change in the language of romance. Words borrowed from a scientific context acquire a new scientific flavour when recurring in a narrative context. Moreover, the whole structure of the fictional work tends to be modified, often duplicating the modalities of the supposedly scientific experiment which forms the thematic core of the story. These references to a definite literary tradition, often located in the field of utopian romance, also show an unprecedented potential for rupture in that they create a sort of *mixed genre*, meant to educate the reader through a highly symbolic and mythopoeic exploration of the scientific concept of evolution.

In his preface to the volume, Parrinder defines Porta as "a true Wellsian scholar" and I couldn't agree more. The meticulous scholarship that makes the book so reliable is combined with a deep insight into Wells's *Weltanschauung*, supported by some effective critical premises which are gradually enlarged through close textual analysis. What all this amounts to is an amazingly rich and certainly original contribution to the critical studies on Wells's fiction.

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Two Cheers for Stoverism

H G Wells. *The Time Machine: An Invention - A Critical Text of the 1895 London First Edition, with an Introduction and Appendices.* Edited by Leon Stover. 258 pp, index. \$45/£40.50. ISBN 0-7864-0124-9

H G Wells. *The Island of Doctor Moreau - A Critical Text of the 1896 London First Edition, with an Introduction and Appendices.* Edited by Leon Stover. 289 pp, index. \$55/£49.50. ISBN 0-7864-0123-0

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Recent criticism of Wells sometimes recalls the 1950s science fiction movie *It Came from Outer Space* in which "It" or "They" kidnapped a number of upstanding citizens and replaced them with lookalikes, rather given away by their impassive facial

expression and monotonous tone of voice. In recent years, we Wellsians too have been the victims of intellects vast, cool and unsympathetic, determined to spirit away H G Wells, the genial author whom we know and love, and replace him, not entirely convincingly, with a sinister, impassive intellectual, relentlessly promoting racism and eugenics.

Of those who have attempted this alarming substitution, Leon Stover is by far the most knowledgeable and the most worthy of our attention; and, unfairly, he is one of the least known to the general public. Where the work of a more widely-syndicated Wells-detractor like Michael Coren is shot through with misinformation and malice, Stover's accusations rest on sound knowledge, an unflagging enthusiasm for Well's writings and a willingness to engage in honest debate. He enjoys nothing more than venturing into the lions' den of the H G Wells Society and spellbinding his audience with the latest prosecution, revealing some apparently inoffensive work of fiction to be a celebration of 'nihilism and unreason', a call to violently overthrow existing society for a totalitarian utopia based on the premise that 'everything human is alien; all that exists deserves to perish'. As he sums up, Stover leans over the podium, drops his voice to a growl and delivers his QED with an infectious relish.

Regular readers will be familiar with Stover's contributions to past issues of the *Wellsian*, specifically numbers 5, 12 and 15. Some may also have read his two previous books on Wells: *The Shaving of Karl Marx* (a series of imaginary conversations between Wells and Lenin) and *The Prophetic Soul* (a critique/edition of the *Things to Come* film script). Now Wells' most perceptive detractor since Chesterton has begun to produce his own special editions of the major science works, with predictably arresting results. It is unlikely that any lover of these books will entirely accept Stover's 'reading' of them, but equally no one with an interest in Wells will fail to profit from their perusal.

Perhaps the greatest strength of these editions is their editor's sensitivity to the intellectual and cultural debates of the period. For example, Wells' view of evolution is traced back to such sources as Winwood Reade's *Martyrdom of Man*; and his view of vivisection contrasted with that of Wilkie Collins and his now forgotten book *Heart and Science*, an extract from, which is handily attached to the volume. Convinced that Wells is always astute in his choice of topics, but utterly wrong in his conclusions, Stover also supplies a running critique of what he calls "Wellsism". Wells never understood, for instance, that "humans as primates, were from the start no less social animals than the living monkeys and apes". This led him to overstate