# H. G. WELLS AND G. K. CHESTERTON – TWO MEN, TWO WORLDS.

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H. G. Wells and G. K. Chesterton, two friends and opponents, without doubt were very influential figures in the literary world of the beginning of the twentieth century. It may even be supposed that they originated some of the main tendencies in literary life of Britain for decades. The authors were diametrically opposite in their worldview: H. G. Wells, a materialist and scientist, fond of bold sexual experiments, and G. K. Chesterton, a devoted Roman Catholic and religious thinker, faithful husband. The list of the opposites could be continued. But extremes meet, and in spite of their constant and severe argument, in which G. K. Chesterton sometimes was close to being rude, (as in his polemics against H. G. Wells in *Everlasting Man*), they never quarreled. Their friendship was not close, but sincere.

When speaking about Catholicism, H. G. Wells once stated:

> I love G. K. Chesterton and hate the Catholicism of Belloc and Rome … If Catholicism is still to run about the world giving tongue, it has no better spokesman than GKC. But I begrudge the Catholicism of GKC.[1]

He also stated: 'nothing would delight me more than a controversy with GKC, whom indeed I adore.'[2] After Chesterton's death Wells confessed that they were very close friends 'from the first to last'.[3] In 1933 he wrote to his friend:

> Dear old GKC! ... If after all my atheology turns wrong and your theology right I feel I shall always be able to pass into Heaven (if I want to) as a friend of GKC. Bless you.[4]

Chesterton answered:

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[1] J. Pearce, *Wisdom and Innocence: A Life of G. K. Chesterton* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1997), 275.
[2] 'Laughter and Humility' (GK-CHESTERTON.ORG) <http//2011/07/hg-wells-on-gk-chesterton.html> [accessed 10 October 2014].
[3] 'Laughter and Humility' (GK-CHESTERTON.ORG) <http//2011/07/hg-wells-on-gk-chesterton.html> [accessed 10 October 2014].
[4] Pearce, *Wisdom*, 436.

> If I turn out to be right, you will triumph, not by being a friend of mine, but by being a friend of Man, by having done a thousand things for men like me in every way from imagination to criticism. The thought of the vast variety of that work, and how it ranges from towering visions to tiny pricks of humor, overwhelmed me suddenly in retrospect: and I felt we had none of us ever said enough.[5]

Comparing his friendship with two famous Fabians, he said:

> What I have always liked about Wells in his vigorous and unaffected readiness for a lark. He was one of the best men in the world with whom to start a standing joke; though perhaps he did not like it to stand too long after it was started. In most matters I have found myself rather more in sympathy with Mr. Bernard Shaw than with Mr. H. G. Wells, the other genius of the Fabians, warmly, as I admire them both. But, in the matter, Wells was more of my sort than Shaw. …. (*Autobiography*, 222-3, 231).

Their lifelong argument on the essential problems of religion, history, policy and ethics started openly in 1905 when Chesterton published the book of essays *Heretics*, one part of which was devoted fully to H. G. Wells ('Mr. H. G. Wells and the Giants').[6] The essay expressed Chesterton's attitude to Wells's world views in general and his four works published not long before the collections of papers on the questions of history of mankind, education, policy *Anticipations* (1902), *Mankind in the Making* (1903), the utopia *A Modern Utopia* (1905) and the romance *The Food of the Gods* (1905). 'Mr. H. G. Wells and the Giants' reveals to a great extent the main subjects of their future polemics: eugenics, science vs. art, materialism vs. idealism, social utopia, the history of mankind, the idea of a Superman. Most of these concepts were controversial for both of them, and thus the results of the discussion were never unambiguous.

Chesterton's attitude to his opponent is full of respect: 'One man of genius we have who is an artist, but who was a man of science, and who seems to be marked above all things with … great scientific humility' (73). He considers the main mistake of his friend to be the absoluteness of his materialistic approach:

> Mr. Wells, however, is not quite clear enough of the narrower scientific outlook to see that there are some things which actually ought not to be scientific. He is still slightly affected with the great scientific fallacy; I mean the habit of beginning not with the human soul, which is the first

[5] Pearce, *Wisdom*, 436.

[6] G. K. Chesterton, *Heretics* (London: Bodley Head, 1919).

thing a man learns about, but with some such things as protoplasm, which is about the last (*Heretics*, 78-9).

Chesterton's criticism of eugenics at this stage is quite mild. The possibility of breeding a physically and psychologically ideal human being by choosing mostly appropriate parents seems strange to him. Marriage is first of all a realization of human affection: 'man ought to marry because he has fallen in love, and emphatically not because the world requires to be populated' (78). The discussion was continued already after the Great War. Chesterton reacted to Wells's books *The Outline of History* (1920) and *A Short History of the World* (1922) in his *The Everlasting Man* (1925) and partially in *Eugenics and Other Evils* (1923). It must be stressed that both were written after Chesterton's conversion to Roman Catholicism and contained much open religious propaganda. In *The Everlasting Man* he first of all disputes with Wells over the issues around Darwinism and the history of Mankind and the origin of religion. In the conclusion to the book Chesterton says:

> I have taken the liberty once or twice of borrowing the excellent phrase about an Outline of History; though this study of a special truth and a special error can of course claim no sort of comparison with the rich and many-sided encyclopaedia of history, for which that name was chosen. And yet there is a certain reason in the reference; and a sense in which the one thing touches and even cuts across the other. For the story of the world as told by Mr. Wells could here only be criticised as an outline. And, strangely enough, it seems to me that it is only wrong as an outline. It is admirable as an accumulation of history; it is splendid as a storehouse or treasury of history, it is a fascinating disquisition on history, it is most attractive as an amplification of history; but it is quite false as an Outline of history. … In simple and homely language, I mean the things that stick out; the things that make the simplicity of a silhouette. I think the proportions are wrong; the proportions of what is certain as compared with what is uncertain, of what played a great part as compared with what played a smaller part, of what is ordinary and what is extraordinary, of what really lies level with an average and what stands out as an exception.
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> I do not say it as a small criticism of a great writer, and I have no reason to do so; for in my own much smaller task I feel I have failed in very much the same way. I am very doubtful whether I have conveyed to the reader the main point I meant about the proportions of history, and why I have dwelt so much more on some things than others.[7]

[7] G. K. Chesterton, *Collected* Works, 23 vols., vol. 2: *St Francis of Assisi*, The *Everlasting Man, St Francis of Assisi* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1986), p. 394.

Any literary text, fiction or non-fiction, contains implicit information about its author. The writer involuntary shows some of their personal features in the plot's peculiarities, conflicts, characters and in their style. Taking into consideration this open polemics of these two men of letters it is interesting and important to trace how their views and personalities were expressed in their writings, including both fiction and journalism. Not denying the existence of the implied author, we are going to look for not 'persona', in Wayne C. Booth's terms, but the real personalities of the writers emerging from behind the masks they assumed.[8]

This paper deals with texts written approximately at the same time and concerning issues that worried not only H. G. Wells and G. K. Chesterton personally but also their readership. It will discuss two dystopian novels: *When the Sleeper Wakes* (1899) and *The Napoleon of Notting Hill* (1904), pamphlets written in response to the events of the Great War: *The Barbarism of Berlin* (1914) and *War and the Future* (1916) and their autobiographies: Wells's *Experiment in Autobiography* (1934), and Chesterton's *Autobiography,* published posthumously (1936).

*When the Sleeper Wakes* envisions a strange, imaginary future Britain full of violence and uncertainty where it seems impossible to discern truth from deceit. The novel is structured on the principles of the genre of the dystopia: apocalyptic social life; technological growth which causes crisis and deep social inequality; love story in opposition to these dark forces and the heroic fight of an individual against the state machine. Wells, according to his preface to the 1921 edition of the novel, was more obsessed with the truthfulness of scientific and technical forecasts (aeroplanes used in battle, the urbane structure of London of the future). But it is more interesting now to concentrate on the figure of the protagonist: a common person, a 'little man' in the beginning, who falls into a coma, and becomes involuntarily the lord of the world, possessing enormous riches. Shocked, embarrassed and lost at first, not able to understand which of the competing sides is in the right, Graham has to get used to his new social role. In the episode when he is on the airplane as a passenger he is so excited by the new experience that he demands that the pilot let him lead the machine himself. When the man refuses, he insists, and, taking the rudder feels drunk with feelings of absolute power. 'He laughed; full of this novel realization of power that was his gift from the upper air … "Sire, there are rules" – "Not where I am concerned," said Graham. "You seem to forget."'[9] But soon he overcomes this temptation. Other Wells novels show similar situations. In *The Invisible Man* Griffin is at first as happy as a child when feeling himself absolutely free in his invisibility, but then starts dreaming of the world terrorism

[8] Wayne C. Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, 2nd edn (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1983), p. 73.
[9] H. G. Wells, *When the Sleeper Wakes* (Thirsk, NY: House of Stratus, 2002), 180.

as a form of dictatorship. In *When the Sleeper Wakes* (1899) this intoxication with power does not develop and does not stop Graham being a hero in the end, fighting with evil Ostrog and sacrificing his own life in the deadly air battle for the sake of justice. The sympathy of the author towards this character is so strong that the finale sounds even sentimental and nearly melodramatic:

> 'He wondered if he should see Helen again. It seemed so unreasonable that he should not see her again.'
> 'Although he could not look at it, he was suddenly aware that the whirling earth was very near.'[10]

This combination of great ambitions with absolute honesty and strong feeling of justice in the protagonist makes it possible to think that Wells identifies himself with Graham. The tendency of intertwining his own biography with the life of his heroes is typical in his social novels as well. It is worth quoting G. K. Chesterton here, who in his criticism of another Wells novel, *The Food of the Gods*, said:

> *The Food of the Gods* is the tale of Jack-the Giant-Killer told from the point of view of the giant. This has not, I think, been done before in literature; but I have little doubt that the psychological substance of it existed in fact … The modern world, like Mr. Wells, is on the side of the giants.[11]

Chesterton's novel *The Napoleon of Notting Hill* was written as an answer to *The Food of the Gods,* but at the same time can be regarded as a polemic against *When the Sleeper Wakes* and other Wells writings. This book also has obvious dystopian elements. The action again takes place in London and again in the future. Chesterton's London is not only absolutely different from the futuristic city of Wells, but it 'is almost exactly as it is now'.[12] Because of the absolute and extending indifference of the population to the political life, and of the wish to keep traditional monarchy, elections are abolished, and the king is chosen at random at certain periods of time from the full list of the citizens. Auberon Quin, a cynical joker, a man without any special talents except a unique ability to get into a mess and drag others with him, becomes the king. Playing games to entertain himself and not ruling the country in reality, as the royal role is nominal and Quin is bored with it, he forms the Charters of the Cities – districts of London which seem to him units capable of sovereignty. The

[10] Wells, *Sleeper,* 287.

[11] Chesterton, 85-7.

[12] G. K. Chesterton, *The Napoleon of Notting Hill* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 11.

mad idea comes into his mind when he meets with a little boy playing the 'king of the hill' game, protecting in this action Notting Hill as his kingdom. The crazy joke of Auberon Quin lasts for years. The boy, Adam Wayne, grows up and appears to be the only person who takes the game seriously, and starts a war protecting his district from invasion when city authorities plan to build a road there. As a result his opponents have to play according to his rules and bloody civil war and many atrocities are unleashed. The innocent game turns out to be a nightmare; the chain reaction causes more and more casualties. In the finale Auberon and Adam talk to each other. Quin understands that Wayne perceived the Chapter seriously; Wayne comes to know that the king just played a practical joke. The young man draws the line of their strange opposition:

> 'You and I, Auberon Quin, have both of us throughout our lives been again and again called mad. And we are mad. We are mad, because we are two lobes of the same brain, and that brain has been cloven in two. … When dark and dreary days come, you and I are necessary, the pure fanatic, and pure satirist. We have between us remedied a great wrong. We have lifted the modern cities into that poetry which everyone who knows mankind knows to be immeasurably more common than the common place. But in healthy people there is no war between us. We are but the two lobes of the brain of a ploughman.'[13]

In this novel G. K. Chesterton, usually speaking ironically about Wells's obsession with forecasts and prophecies, appears capable of a political prediction, providing the model of the untruthful despotisms of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

Chesterton's characters, in comparison with Wells's Graham, are absolutely conventional; his description of warfare is conventional too. It is a war of tin, even paper, soldiers. His protagonists form in the finale a kind of unity, and so dystopia grows into utopia.

In September 1914, soon after the beginning of the Great War, C. F. G. Masterman, as the head of the War Propaganda Bureau, asked some leading men of letters to take part in the project of writing books, pamphlets and articles on patriotic themes. Wells and Chesterton joined with enthusiasm. Chesterton contributed with The *Barbarism in Berlin*, a collection of essays published before in the *Daily Mail*. Wells reacted with a short pamphlet about the 'the war that will end war'; but changed his attitude to the events later, after he was sent to the Continent with journalistic mission, and as a result published a short book *War and the Future*. All he saw at the front, in trenches, made him now think about the war only as disaster:

[13] Chesterton, *Napoleon*, 163.

> I travel badly, I speak French and Italian with incredible atrocity, I am an extreme pacifist. I hate soldiering. And also I don't want to write anything under instructions … It has been my natural disposition to see this war as something purposeful and epic, as it is great, as an epoch, as 'the war that will end war'- but of that last, more anon. … Well, I came back from the front with something not as simple as that. If I were to be tied down to one word for my impression of that war, I should say that this war is *Queer*.[14]

Wells analyses the reasons for the war and its perspective and accuses Germany of causing this world catastrophe, through its imperial and industrial ambitions: 'I hate Germany, which has thrusted this experience upon mankind, as I hate some horrible infectious disease. The new war, the war on the modern level, is her invention and her crime.'[15] He suggests that the war caused a great rise of patriotic feelings and the best human qualities among the allies, but he doubts the necessity of paying such high price for it:

> A more serious argument for the good of the war is that it evokes heroic qualities that it had brought out almost incredible quantities of courage, devotion and individual romance that did not show in the suffocating peace time that preceded the war. The reckless and beautiful zeal of the women in the British and French munitions factories, for example, the gaiety and fearlessness of the common soldiers everywhere; these things have always been there - like champagne sleeping in bottles in the cellar. But was there any need to throw a bomb into a cellar?[16]

This sounds like a controversial and bitter answer to Chesterton's idea expressed in *The Napoleon of Notting Hill* years before, during this 'suffocating peace time'. What could be philosophical irony in peacetime sounds thrilling and threatening in the times of a real battle. Though Wells still believed that it was the war to end wars, he compares this fight with the killing of Nemean Lion and the cleaning of the Augean Stables.

Chesterton in *The Barbarism of Berlin* gives his analysis of the events of the Great War. Like Wells in his pamphlet, he also speaks about German responsibility for the bloodshed in the world, presenting it in his usual paradoxical and metaphoric manner:

> If I set a house on fire, it is quite true that I may illuminate many other

[14] H. G. Wells, 'War and the Future' <http://www.gutenberg.org.1/8/0/1804/> [accessed 30 August 2007].

[15] H. G. Wells, 'War and the Future'.

[16] H. G. Wells, 'War and the Future'.

> people's weakness as well as my own. It may be that the master of the house was burned because he was drunk; it may be that the mistress of the house was burned because she was stingy, and perished arguing about the expense of a fire-escape. It is, nevertheless, broadly true that they both were burned because I set fire to their house. That is the story of the thing. The mere facts of the story about the present European conflagration are quite easy to tell.[17]

It is interesting that in speaking about the war both writers are very close in their opinions. They both are full of sympathy to Russia, even trying to justify Russian policy in Poland, and full of hatred to Germany. General approaches and attitudes seem nearly similar; only Chesterton is more enthusiastic and categorical in patriotic propaganda. As J. R. McClearly states:

> Chesterton advanced the theory that true progress in history could only be found in the unified principles of personal integrity and commitment to advancing the noble aspirations of one's community and eventually one's country. This seemingly simplified approach had the air of being old-fashioned even in Chesterton's day. It was based not on blind devotion, however, but rather on his appraisal of the respective strength and weakness of his nation with a view to upholding the former and amending the later.[18]

Chesterton's *Autobiography* was published posthumously in 1936 just two years after Wells's *Experiments in Autobiography*. A comparison of these authors' private histories shows interesting results for whether they are choosing to reveal their own individuality, or to hide behind a mask. Chesterton describes his strategy in the following way: 'It is a purely private personal narrative that began in the first pages of this book; and I am answering at the end only the questions I asked in the beginning.'[19] Wells starts his narrative with nearly the same statement: 'My story therefore will be at once a very personal one and it will be a history of my sort and my time. An autobiography is the story of the contacts of a mind and a world.'[20] The writers try to be at the same time as objective as possible because autobiography for them is the way to sum up their life experience; to define their place in the world. Chesterton does it in his usual manner, starting his narrative in an ironic mode:

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[17] G. K. Chesterton, *The Barbarism of Berlin* (London: Cassell, 1914), 7-8.

[18] J. R. McClearly, *The Historical Imagination of G. K. Chesterton: Locality, Patriotism, and Nationalism* (London: Routledge, 2009), 158.

[19] G. K. Chesterton, *Autobiography* (1936), (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1986), 340.

[20] H. G. Wells, *Experiment in Autobiography. Discoveries and Conclusions of a Very Ordinary Brain (Since 1866)*, 2 vols., vol. 1 (London: Faber), 28.

> I am firmly of opinion that I was born on the 29th of May, 1874, on Campden Hill, Kensington; and baptised according to the formularies of the Church of England in the little church of St. George opposite the large Waterworks Tower that dominated that ridge. I do not allege any significance in the relations of the two buildings; and I indignantly deny that the church was chosen because it needed the whole water-power of West London to turn me into a Christian (*Autobiography*, 9).

Wells on the contrary is absolutely serious and sounds somewhat pathetic:

> 'A biography should be a dissection and demonstration of how a particular human being was made and worked. (…) So this autobiography plans itself as the crystallisation of a system of creative realizations in one particular mind - with various incidental, good, interesting or curious personal things that happened by the way (*Experiment in Autobiography*, 24-9).

Chesterton quite traditionally begins his book by describing his childhood and youth. The the author/protagonist is the centre of the narrative and information about people whom he met at the time and who influenced him is given to show this character's growth and development. But at the same time this part lacks consistency. Some of the fragments stand separately and are not directly connected with the biographical line. The chronological principle is constantly broken: after telling the reader about his first success in literature Chesterton skips back to his school years, and then even goes earlier in the passage when he remembers the first telephone and his childish reaction on this invention. The personality of the author/protagonist seems to disappear from the pages step by step; biographical plot gives way to memoir about people he liked and the epoch he lived in. The writer is very diplomatic in his comments about these people. Stressing the role they played in his life, he never describes directly the process of exerting this influence, considering the process to be too intimate to be discussed. This strategy is disclosed thus:

> I have said very little of my brother so far, in spite of the great power he played in my boyhood and youth; and the omission has been due to anything in the world except oblivion. My brother was much too remarkable a person not to have a chapter for himself (164-5).

The whole narrative forms a well-organised unity, speaking more about Chesterton than the exact facts of his biography, and the randomness of the facts mentioned in the text is elusive, for their connection is first of all associative and serves to deepen the characteristics of the central image. Chesterton used the

same technique in his famous literary biographies:

> I have written several books that were supposed to be biographies; and lives of really great and remarkable men, meanly refusing them the most elementary details of chronology, and it would be a more than mortal meanness that I should now have the arrogance to be accurate about my own life, when I have failed to be thus accurate about theirs (307).

Wells approaches the story of his life from the different angle. Being an honest scholar he scrupulously follows chronology, describing in detail the facts of his life and preceding events, paying a lot of attention to his parents' biographies. He scrupulously examines and analyses reality, as if making a scientific experiment and then putting down the results accurately. The author seems to be objective and sober in self-appraisal: 'Like most undernourished growing boys I was cowardly' (*Autobiography*, 124); 'I was perhaps intellectually forward but morally I think I followed an average curve' (331). Speaking about his schooldays he gives a full and detailed picture of all the teachers, their personalities and pedagogical methods. Wells pays equal attention to the professors he liked and disliked, tracing in every case definite features which were formed in him by their teaching.

Chesterton rarely writes about the most tragic and the happiest moments in his life, omitting all the naturalistic details of deaths and love stories. He shows obvious restraint and modesty speaking about his falling in love with Fanny Blog and the history of their marriage. Wells is very frank in giving detailed and open report on his first sexual experiences, his conquests, giving the names of the women he loved. In the same way he tells us about his marriage to Amy Catherine Robins. The drawings included in the text on one hand produce associations with the drawings in a naturalist's journal, but on the other form an ironical visual picture of their love story. This contrast between the absolute seriousness of the narrative and humorous character of the illustrations gives a hint that the author is just hiding his individuality under rather cynical mask of objectivity.

For Chesterton surrounding people and the world are interesting in their substance because they are miraculous God's creations but not because of how they were reflected in his personality. His philosophy is the philosophy of humbleness and humility: 'The only way to enjoy even a weed is to feel unworthy even of a weed' (331). In Wells's understanding, a person is absolutely utmost lonely and in that sense can be interested only in himself: 'We are all essentially lonely. In our nerves, in our bones, we are too preoccupied and too experimental to give ourselves freely and honestly to other people, and in the end other people fail to give themselves fully to us' (23).

Chesterton's autobiography is based on centrifugal and Wells's on centripetal principles. For both writers writing an autobiography is a form of

self-identification. But if Wells shows how the world is reflected in his personality, Chesterton sees in people and things around him a limitless source of inspiration, adoration and spiritual growth.

Thus Wells and Chesterton represent two types of personalities, two main tendencies of their age: atheism vs. religiousness, materialism vs. idealism, seriousness vs. humor and nonsense. Being friends they formed a unity similar to the one described by Chesterton in *The Napoleon of Notting Hill*. But who can say for sure which of them was Adam Wayne and who Auberon Quin?