URBANISATION, MODERNITY AND THE ROMANTIC IMAGINATION IN *TONO-BUNGAY*[*]

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This paper explores H. G. Wells's conceptualisation of urbanisation and modernity in *Tono-Bungay.* The novel exemplifies contemporary debates over the nature of modernity, and uncertainty in the face of social change and urban growth. But it also exemplifies Wells's own private ambivalence towards change, in which his nostalgia for the static and certain world of the Country House System, and the beauty of the countryside, coincided with a fascination with technological change, urban growth, and the bustle and pace of urban life. Wells provides a counterintuitive perspective on the intellectual dichotomies of tradition versus innovation, growth versus decay, country versus city, and so on. The paper suggests that Wells's typically idiosyncratic take on modernity in *Tono-Bungay* results from his ambivalence towards romanticism, an ambiguity that afforded Wells a more optimistic view of life in the modern city. Where his contemporaries, such as William Morris and C. F. G. Masterman, viewed urban life as mechanical and soulless, and counterposed the shabby materialism of the city to the sublime beauty of nature, Wells often rejected this backwards-looking nostalgia for the rural past.

In *Aspects of the Novel,* E. M. Forster wrote that 'the world of beauty was … entirely closed to Wells.'[1] Yet this article contends, as Simon J. James has argued, that Wells formulated a distinctive aesthetic that sought to address, rather than escape present-day realities by reconciling art with science, and romance with realism.[2] James's analysis of *Tono-Bungay* (1909) emphasises Wells's antipathy towards high aesthetic culture and his rejection of conventional romantic tropes, but it is argued here that Wells rejected such tropes precisely in order to advance his own, alternative conception of romance, envisaged as a means of recovering a sense of reality amid modernity's 'strange disorder of existence'.[3] Both in *Tono-Bungay* and in his wider thought, Wells

[*] Many thanks to Matthew Pateman for his generous and very helpful comments.

[1] E. M. Forster, *Aspects of the Novel* (London: Penguin, 2005), 34.

[2] Simon J. James, *Maps of Utopia: H. G. Wells, Modernity and the End of Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

[3] H. G. Wells, *Tono-Bungay*. ed. Patrick Parrinder (London: Penguin, 2005), 277. *Tono-Bungay's* narrator, George Ponderevo, writes of his search for 'salvation' amid the 'immediate things' of daily life, which seems to George as a disordered 'series of ignorances, crude blunderings, degradation and cruelty': 'I stumble and flounder, but I know that […]

offered his own distinctive vision of romance and its relationship to reality, truth and beauty. Whilst *Tono-Bungay* is haunted by a loss of romance amid the destructive energies of capitalist growth, it also suggests that if a sense of romance is to be recovered in life, it will not be recovered through a return to the aesthetic and social certainties of the rural past. Rather, it is argued that Wells's aesthetics provide something of a psychological and emotional grounding to the experience of modernity, in which the sublime and the beautiful could be glimpsed behind the fluidity and waste of industrial energies.

It is perhaps worth clarifying here my own use of the term 'sublime', and its relationship to beauty. This is not the Burkean sublime, counterposed to the beautiful and associated with dread, horror and the aestheticised enjoyment of fear. Rather, it is a more suburbanised, secular-sacred sublime – a state of mind in which heightened sensibility, aesthetic sensitivity and a kind of extra-rational intensity produce a sense of wonder, and the apprehension of the transcendent. This 'softened' conception of the sublime, which de-emphasised fear in favour of an association with the beautiful, can be found in much late nineteenth- and early twentieth century literature. Lynne Hapgood argues that the contemporary experience of urbanisation prompted novelists to suburbanise the Romantic impulse. Literary interest moved 'from the excitement of extremes … wildness/nature/heightened sensibility/the sublime' towards a gentler, vaguer and more domesticated conception of romance; a yearning for rural experience and a feeling for nature as something primitive, picturesque and poetic.[4] It should also be said that Wells does not explicitly refer to the sublime in *Tono-Bungay*. Yet the novel contains repeated references to a 'Something', which can never quite be named explicitly, and is attached instead to a fluid and shifting series of definitions. It is identified variously with 'reality', 'truth' and 'beauty'; at once 'human' and 'the most inhuman of all existing things'; both 'essential' and 'immaterial', and 'the one enduring thing'; most of all it is 'supreme' (388). This will be explored in more detail towards the end of the article, but it is argued here that this 'Something' is Wells's conceptualisation of the sublime, envisaged as something inexpressible and indescribable – an idealist quality that lies veiled behind the mundane, profane and often distorted realities of modern urban life.

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there are other things that are great and serene, very high, beautiful things – the reality. I haven't got it, but it's there nevertheless. I'm a spiritual guttersnipe in love with unimaginable goddesses. […] There is something links things for me, a sunset or so, a mood or so, the high air', 201-2.

[4] Lynne Hapgood, *Margins of Desire: The Suburbs in Fiction and Culture 1880-1925* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005), 10.

Tono-Bungay advances two alternative models of urban growth, and thus two theories of the nature of change in modernity. The first, which might be termed the Bladesover Theory of modernity, envisages urbanisation as an outgrowth of the Country House System. For the young George Ponderevo, Bladesover is 'the clue to all England' (100). 'The great house, the church, the village, and the labourers and the servants in their stations and degrees, seemed to me, I say, to be a closed and complete social system. … I thought this was the order of the whole world.' London appears to George simply as the social organisation of his childhood in a Great House writ large. 'I thought London was only a greater country town where the gentlefolk kept townhouses and did their greater shopping under the magnificent shadow of the greatest of all fine gentlewomen, the Queen. It seemed to be in the divine order' (15). George's first impressions of London provoke a vision of England in which urban modernity is rooted solidly in national tradition. Urbanisation is envisaged as a process of progressive, developmental change that maintains an essential continuity with English history:

> There have been no revolutions, no deliberate restatements or abandonments of opinion in England since the days of the fine gentry, since 1688 or thereabouts, the days when Bladesover was built; there have been changes, dissolving forces, replacing forces, if you will; but then it was that the broad lines of the English system set firmly. And as I have gone to and fro in London, in certain regions constantly the thought has recurred, this is Bladesover House, this answers to Bladesover House. The fine gentry may have gone; they have indeed largely gone, I think; rich merchants may have replaced them, financial adventurers or what not. That does not matter; the shape is still Bladesover. (100)

Yet as the novel progresses, George considers the modern city to be governed by an entirely new form of growth, analogous to the radioactive substance quap. Urban growth is seen to be entirely ungrounded in traditional forms of social organisation – the Bladesover model has been overtaken by 'blind forces of invasion'. Progress in modernity is unstable, transitory; a growth predicated on decay and destruction. Change seems structureless, purposeless, 'yeasty' – a pathological hypertrophy in which suburban sprawl produces an image of cities spreading cancerously into the surrounding countryside. George observes in suburban London 'the unorganised, abundant substance of some tumorous growth process, a process which indeed bursts all the outlines of the affected carcass and protrudes such masses as ignoble comfortable Croydon, as tragic impoverished West Ham' (102-3).

These two theories of the nature of change keyed into the contemporary discourse of modernity. On the one hand, modernity was seen to be characterised by a dangerous and disorienting fluidity in which 'all that is solid

melts into air', and in which change was envisaged primarily as a destructive, disintegrating force, swamping national histories and obliterating old certainties.[5] On the other, contemporary observers often saw the specific nature of British modernity as solidly grounded in historical tradition rather than adrift, without direction, in the present. As Martin Daunton and Bernhard Rieger have noted, British intellectual assessments of modernity differed from the Continental Western European conceptualisation, in that they 'successfully incorporated notions of gradual evolution rather than irreversible rupture'.[6]

Such experiences of modernity mapped onto changes in literary form, in which global capitalist growth was implicated in the breakdown of nineteenth-century *Bildung* narratives and the rise of literary modernism – of which *Tono-Bungay* itself is a part, bridging as it does traditional and modernist forms. Franco Moretti has argued that the nineteenth-century *Bildungsroman* provided a narrative of progress in which the open-ended nature of capitalist development was bounded by a more stable sense of national identity. In this assessment, the social function of the *Bildungsroman,* through its focus upon the psychological and moral growth of a protagonist from youth towards a stable adult identity, was to manage and contain the disruptive effects of modernisation by representing it within a safe narrative scheme.[7] Following Moretti, Jed Esty writes that the *Bildungsroman* thus fused individual experience and social transformation by creating a soul-nation allegory, in which the development of individual character was analogous to the development of the nation as a whole. Youth, in this view, served as a trope for modernity itself, signifying the transformation of industrial society. By intertwining adulthood and nationhood as mutually reinforcing versions of stable identity, the *Bildungsroman* thus embodied the nineteenth-century ideal of bounded progress. Just as youth could come to maturity, and stop there, the open-ended nature of capitalist development could be bounded by a more stable sense of national identity.

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[5] Marshall Berman, *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air: The Experience of Modernity* (London; New York: Verso, 2010), 13-15. The book's title borrows Marx's well-known formulation in *The Communist Manifesto* as a metaphor for the experience of modernity. Berman writes of this experience: 'To be modern is to live a life of paradox and contradiction. It is to be overpowered by the immense bureaucratic organisations that have the power to control and often to destroy all communities, values, lives; and yet to be undeterred in our determination to face these forces, to fight and change their world and make it our own. It is to be both revolutionary and conservative: alive to new possibilities for experience and adventure, frightened by the nihilistic depths to which so many modern adventures lead, longing to create and to hold on to something real even as everything melts.'

[6] *Meanings of Modernity: Britain from the Late-Victorian Era to World War II*, ed. Martin Daunton and Bernhard Rieger (Oxford: Berg, 2001), 7-11.

[7] Franco Moretti, *The Way of the World: The* Bildungsroman *in European Culture,* trans. Albert Sbraglia (London: Verso, 2000), 6, and Jed Esty, *Unseasonable Youth: Modernism, Colonialism, and the Fiction of Development* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 3-4.

Nationhood could give a finished form to modern societies in the same way that adulthood gives a finished form to the individual.[8]

Yet as industrialisation and imperialism progressed and capitalist development began to spread beyond the borders of European nation-states, Esty sees the developmental logic of the *Bildungsroman* as becoming strained. Esty conceptualises this as modernism's encounter with the problem of 'bad infinity', as history unfolds into the future without aim or end.[9] He writes that once the developmental logic of the *Bildungsroman*, in which soul and nation grow together and then stop, is destabilised, it becomes difficult to distinguish between constant change and no change. The figure of frozen or endless youth thus became a trope, in modernist fiction, for the unfinished and open-ended nature of modernity; a rejection of the *Bildungsroman* ideal of smooth progress towards a final *telos*.[10] In this sense, *Tono-Bungay* addresses endless progress, and the problem of bad infinity. George's conspicuous failure to mature morally or psychologically towards a stable narrative end-point both parodies the *Bildung* narrative and embodies a wider story of the disjunction between capitalist growth and national tradition, in which the boundless energy of global capitalism swamped both national histories and traditional narratives of character formation. George's failure to mature is thus linked to hyperproduction, and the corrosive effects of mass commodity capitalism; the Quap-like metastasis he perceives in his surroundings. For Esty, who refers to the novel as an *antibildungsroman,* George's subjectivity is written in the language of economic logic, producing a plot of permanent adolescence out of capitalism's endless forward motion. Endless development collapses into the absence of development.[11]

Tono-Bungay provides a counterintuitive perspective on contemporary debates surrounding the nature of change in modernity, and the dichotomies of tradition versus innovation, growth versus decay, and country versus city. Wells, both in *Tono-Bungay* and in his wider thought, resists being pigeonholed into a conventional intellectual position. For many of Wells's contemporaries, most notably Morris and Masterman, anti-urbanism was connected inextricably with a fear of modernity, nostalgia for rural modes of existence, and a yearning for the spiritual, the transcendent and the sublime that was felt to be lost amid the circumscribed material realities of urban life.[12] Wells himself, of course, shared many of these concerns. In his semi-autobiographical novel, *The New Machiavelli* (1911), Wells recounts how he watched his childhood home of Bromley – or Bromstead in the novel – being ruined.

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[8] Esty, 4-7.
[9] Esty, 26-9.
[10] Esty, 6-7.
[11] Esty, 118-122.
[12] Jan Marsh, *Back to the Land: The Pastoral Impulse in England, from 1880 to 1914* (London: Quartet Books, 1982).

> All my childish memories are of digging and wheeling, of woods invaded by building, roads gashed open and littered … hedges broken down and replaced by planks, of wheelbarrows and builders' sheds, of rivulets overtaken and swallowed up by drain-pipes … The Ravensbrook of my earlier memories was a beautiful stream. It came into my world out of a mysterious Beyond, out of a garden … And after I was eleven, and before we left Bromstead, all the delight and beauty of it was destroyed.[13]

Similarly, George Ponderevo recalls his childhood delight in the Bladesover countryside. He writes that the wood in which he played as a child 'is now precious sapphire in my memory; it was the first time that I knowingly met Beauty' (26).

This aspect of Wells's thought closely conforms to contemporary nostalgia for the beauty of the countryside, threatened in an age of urban growth. Conventionally, in this discourse, sensitivity towards the beauty of nature was allied to a backwards-looking, escapist flight into an imagined Golden Age of social harmony. For many intellectuals, hatred of urban sprawl was inextricably connected to romanticism, and the romantic view of industrialisation as a dehumanising process of disenchantment. Yet Wells refused to be drawn wholly into such nostalgic yearnings for the past. He disliked the ugliness of suburban sprawl, and the senselessness of unregulated jerry-building, but he did not equate this with a rejection of urbanisation and technological innovation *per se.* In *A Modern Utopia* (1905)*,* for example, Wells railed against industrial ugliness, but wrote:

> There is nothing in machinery, there is nothing in embankments and railways and iron bridges and engineering devices to oblige them to be ugly. Ugliness is the measure of imperfection; a thing of human making is for the most part ugly in proportion to the poverty of its constructive thought, to the failure of its producer fully to grasp the purpose of its being.[14]

For Wells, in Utopia engineers will also be artists, allying art with science in the pursuit of beauty. The example illustrates, again, Wells's counterintuitive, and at times iconoclastic relationship with romantic intellectual tropes. To take another example, Wells disagreed sharply with William Morris over the role of technological innovation in freeing man from physical labour. Wells's utopia aimed to free humanity from manual labour, whereas in Morris' *News from*

[13] H. G. Wells, *The New Machiavelli*, ed. Simon J. James (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2005), 38.
[14] H. G. Wells, *A Modern Utopia*, ed. Gregory Claeys and Patrick Parrinder (London: Penguin, 2005), 78.

Nowhere, the central purpose of utopia is to create social conditions that make manual labour pleasurable.[15] Yet Wells's view that industrial technologies 'are ugly primarily because our social organisation is ugly' bears a striking resemblance to Morris's thought. Wells's understanding of the pursuit of beauty as a process of social improvement, in which the aesthetic and the utilitarian are intertwined, was of course a key tenet of the Arts and Crafts movement, which in other aspects was just the kind of pseudo-medieval, bogusly folkloric brand of romanticism that Wells rejected.

To return to *Tono-Bungay,* we should perhaps also not take George's nostalgia for the Bladesover countryside, couched in romantic clichés of the beauty of nature, at face value. As James has written of Wells's aesthetics, Wells was often critical of the post-Romantic view of nature, and 'happy to murder romantic tropes in order to dissect them' in his wider writing.[16] It was one thing to experience personal enjoyment of nature and natural beauty; quite another to glibly quote Wordsworth in defence of anti-urbanism, as Wells discusses in *Mankind and the Making*:

> this nature, as [the Romantics] present it, is really not nature at all, but a factitious admiration for certain isolated aspects of the universe conventionally regarded as "natural." … Trees, rivers, flowers, birds, stars—are, and have been for many centuries Nature—so are ploughed fields—really the most artificial of things … A grassy old embankment to protect low-lying fields is Nature, and so is all the mass of apparatus about a water-mill; a new embankment to store an urban water supply, though it may be one mass of splendid weeds, is artificial and ugly. A wooden windmill is Nature and beautiful, a sky-sign atrocious.[17]

James notes that Wells's antipathy towards the romantic valorisation of nature reflected his increasing hostility towards the over-idealisation of the high aesthetic culture of the past, not least because such nostalgia failed to address aspects of the urban present and future.[18]

Similarly, whilst Morris, as well as Masterman, viewed urban life as mechanical and soulless, believing an apprehension of the spiritual and sublime to be possible only amidst the beauty of nature, in *Tono-Bungay* Wells inverts this relationship. Though George recognises beauty for the first time in the countryside, his move to London only serves to intensify his apprehension of the sublime:

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[15] Clive Wilmer, 'Introduction', in William Morris, *News from Nowhere and Other Writings* (London: Penguin, 2004), xxviii- xxxiv.
[16] James, 15.
[17] Wells, *Mankind in the Making* (1903), quoted in James, 14-15.
[18] James, 15.

> The whole illimitable place teemed with suggestions of indefinite and sometimes outrageous possibility, of hidden but magnificent meanings. It wasn't simply that I received a vast impression of space and multitude and opportunity; intimate things also were suddenly dragged from neglected, veiled and darkened corners into an acute vividness of perception. I was made aware of beauty as not only permissible but desirable and frequent, and of a thousand hitherto unsuspected rich aspects of life. (106)

Taking aim at contemporary anxieties surrounding the dehumanising and disenchanting effects of urban life, George muses that

> One hears a frightful lot of nonsense about the Rural Exodus and the degeneration wrought by town life upon our population. To my mind, the English townsman even in the slums is infinitely better spiritually, more courageous, more imaginative … than his agricultural cousin. (72)

Wells advanced a view of the city itself as a vale of soul-making. George perceives his fellow urbanites as being 'touched with something, however coarse, of romantic imagination' – a quality he finds entirely absent in rural villages. He continues:

> It is because I know this that I do not share in the common repinings because our countryside is being depopulated, because our population is passing through the furnace of the towns. They starve, they suffer no doubt, but they come out of it hardened, they come out of it with souls... (72)

Yet George does not express unqualified enthusiasm for modern urban life. At times echoing the contemporary discourse of anti-urbanism, George believes city dwellers to experience a sense of anomie, declaring that 'Everybody who is not actually in the shadow of a Bladesover is as it were perpetually seeking after lost orientations' (20). The ungrounded, rootless nature of modernity is emphasised throughout the novel: a semblance of the old social order remains visible only as a 'lantern show' (15); modern life is described as a kind of 'Limbo', a 'strange disorder of existence' (277); commercial civilisation 'drifts' on, its ultimate aim 'vague and forgotten' (222). George describes his mental state to his uncle:

> I want some *stuff,* man. I want something to hold on to. I shall go amok if I don't get it. … *I* feel like a man floundering in a universe of soapsuds, up and down, east and west. I can't stand it. I must get my foot on something solid or – I don't know what. (203)

His feelings of rootlessness create a sense of the existential pointlessness of the modern age. Depictions of the bustle and activity of urban scenes conclude, time and again, in his asking 'But after all, *why* – ?' His initial excitement at the sight of sailors at work in a busy industrial dockyard turns to disgust: 'I was first seized with admiration of their courage and toughness and then, But after all, *why* – ?' and the stupid ugliness of all this waste and endurance came home to me… And I had imagined great things of the sea!' (48). The magic and romance of the scene is stripped away in an industrial age.

Love, too, becomes a casualty of the modern industrial city, symptomatic of social disintegration. For George, 'Love, like everything else in this immense process of social disorganisation in which we live, is a thing adrift, a fruitless thing broken away from its connexions.' Sex is a 'mighty passion, that our aimless civilisation has fettered and maimed and sterilised and debased' (372-3). Whilst, in the Bladesover model of English life, marriage was a 'public function with a public significance', George's marriage to Marion in London becomes an irrelevant farce. He observes of the wedding procession:

> Under the stress of tradition we were all of us trying in the fermenting chaos of London to carry out the marriage ceremonies of a Bladesover tenant or one of the chubby middling sort of people in some dependent country town. … But in London there are no neighbours, nobody knows, nobody cares … Nobody made way for us, nobody cared for us; the driver of an omnibus jeered; for a long time we crawled behind an unamiable dust-cart. The irrelevant clatter and tumult gave us a queer flavour of indecency to this public coming-together of lovers. We seemed to have obtruded ourselves shamelessly. (181-2)

The failure of George's marriage savagely inverts the *Bildung* narrative, in which the marriage plot conventionally leads to a happily-ever-after, embedding characters in a fixed state of adult maturity. Even the progressive value of suffering to the protagonist's moral development is denied. Discussing his separation from Marion, George exclaims to his lover, Effie: 'Life is a thing that hurts, my dear! It hurts without logic or reason.' Following the breakdown of his marriage George finds himself at his lowest, his rootlessness penetrating down to the level of his very psyche: 'I suffered, I suppose, from a sort of *ennui* of the imagination. I found myself without an object to hold my will together … There were moments when I thought of suicide' (201).

Key to understanding Wells's ambivalent and often counterintuitive position within contemporary debates over the nature of modernity and the effects of urbanisation is his particularly idiosyncratic understanding of romance. Both in *Tono-Bungay* and in his wider thought, Wells took aim against what he perceived to be clichéd, false or delusive brands of romanticism. *Tono-Bungay* considers, and then rejects, several different modes of romance. As we

have seen, George dismisses his contemporaries' backwards-looking nostalgia for rural Olde England, and the romantic ideology that identified Nature as the sole embodiment of beauty and the sublime. George expresses, too, misgivings towards his Uncle's 'Romance of Commerce'. Capitalism is described in the language of illusion: 'a swelling, thinning bubble of assurances' in which advertising distorts reality, and ultimately replaces reality itself (222). George's disastrous search for the radioactive Quap is a farcical take on adventure and imperial romances, whilst his unsuccessful pursuit of Beatrice is a nod to medieval romance, with its emphasis on redemptive love. Throughout the novel, the *Bildung* narrative of character development is both subverted and parodied: as James writes, 'narrative closure does not demonstrate society's eventual accommodation of the protagonist.'[19] Rather, George begins his childhood at Bladesover grounded within a system of social organisation in which 'every human being had a "place"' (16), and not only subsequently fails to integrate or orient himself within society, but in doing so reveals the very failure of romantic narratives of moral and psychological development.

What links this series of delusive, escapist romances is Wells's antipathy towards romance understood as an ornamental prettifying of things, and the romantic reliance on illusive and deceptive narratives of self-development. In his wider thought, Wells wrote of high aesthetic culture: 'It was a culture that wrapped about and adorned the great goddess Reality. But indeed, she is not to be adorned but stripped. She ceases to be herself or to bless her votary unless she is faced stark and fearlessly.'[20] With their emphasis upon aesthetically pleasing form, traditional forms of romanticism, for Wells, failed to engage with lived reality. Peter Kemp has written that 'mess' is thus *Tono-Bungay's* 'structural principle', or as George states: 'I see now that I have it all before me, a story of activity and urgency and sterility. I have called it *Tono-Bungay*, but I had far better have called it *Waste*' (381).[21] The novel's irregular form reflects the unstable nature of hyperproduction and overconsumption in urban modernity that is its subject. James writes of Wells's aesthetics:

> For Wells, experience is too multifarious either for the progressive moral certainties of Victorian fiction or the aesthetic certainties of the Jamesian novel. The epistemological faith needed for such formal rigour requires an ultimately stable place in society, and … George Ponderevo is not a man who feels at home in the society in which he lives.[22]

[19] James, 105.
[20] Quoted in James, 16.
[21] Peter Kemp, *H. G. Wells and the Culminating Ape* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1982), 131.
[22] James, 108.

In *Tono-Bungay*, change is not a process of maturing, or of unified, measured progress towards a fixed end-point. Characters do not undergo epiphanic experiences that lead them towards a happily-ever-after. The plot, and indeed the plotlessness of the novel reflects Wells's refusal to evade social reality through a fictitious escape into romanticism.

Yet this very dismissal of false, illusive romances allows Wells to advance his own, idiosyncratic view of romance, and its relationship to reality, truth and beauty. Implicit in *Tono-Bungay* is a dialectic between romance as an escape from reality, and romance as the essence of reality. If Wells rejects the illusory prettifying of reality, *his* conception of romance consists in the stripping away of ornament, in order to reveal the heart, or the core of reality. The novel concludes with George observing a note running through the narrative, which is by turns elegiac and hopeful:

> It is a note of crumbling and confusion, of change and seemingly aimless swelling, of a bubbling up and medley of futile loves and sorrows. But through the confusion sounds another note. Through the confusion something drives, something that is at once human achievement and the most inhuman of all existing things. Something comes out of it… How can I express the values of a thing at once so essential and immaterial! … Sometimes I call this reality Science, sometimes I call it Truth. But it is something we draw by pain and effort out of the heart of life, that we disentangle and make clear. Other men serve it, I know, in art, in literature, in social invention, and see it in a thousand different figures, under a hundred names. I see it always as austerity, as beauty. This thing we make clear is the heart of life. It is the one enduring thing… I do not know what it is, this, something, except that it is supreme. It is a something, a quality, an element, one may find now in colours, now in forms, now in sounds, now in thoughts. (388)

In this 'something', Wells seems to be offering a conception of romance in which beauty is found in truth, and truth in beauty. Romance, here, is not counterposed to scientific realism; Wells's 'something' was to be found in the Arts as well as Science. This 'something' at the heart of life is seen to be abstract, without being divorced from material reality. It is identified with beauty, but is not merely picturesque, requiring both 'pain and effort' in order to be fully apprehended; it is sublime, beautiful truth that is the *essence* of reality – a reality that fused romance with realism, and idealism with materialism.

For Wells, romantic notions of love, beauty and truth cannot be sought as stable end-points in modernity; they cannot become tidy endings to narratives of social- or self-development. On the one hand, reality has become distorted by the delusive, false romantic clichés of a commercial age; on the other, the novel

is underpinned by a sense of the loss of true forms of romance in modernity. But this loss is qualified, not absolute. As George reflects of his affair with Beatrice:

> Once more I had the persuasion "This matters. Nothing else matters so much as this." … I have come to know so much of love that I know now what love might be. We loved, scarred and stained; we parted – basely and inevitably, but at least I met love. (373)

It would perhaps have been an abdication of responsibility for Wells to place such a revelation at the end of the novel; an evasion of social reality via the gloss of aesthetically pleasing form. But this sense of the loss of romance cannot solely be attributed to the corrosive, dissolving forces of urban growth. Nor can the failure of the *Bildung* narrative of development entirely be linked to George's departure from the safety of the Country House System, rooted in national tradition, and his entry into the complexities of modernity, as Jed Esty would suggest. George's pursuit of Beatrice begins in his Bladesover childhood and remains inextricably linked to his childhood experiences of the beauties of nature, his youthful belief in the reassuring solidity of the Country House System, and the romantic heroism of his childhood imaginings. Through George, Wells both articulates his nostalgia for rural Olde England and the Bromley of his childhood, and then disowns such a position, acknowledging the self-deception entailed by it. As Raymond Williams illustrated in *The Country and the City,* the tendency to look back towards a putative Golden Age of unspoilt natural beauty and social harmony, threatened by contemporary urbanisation, has a long literary history.[23] Though Wells lamented the destruction of the natural beauty of his childhood surroundings, he was disinclined to idealise the past if such a position failed to address present realities. Capitalist growth and urban sprawl thus cannot be wholly indicted for George's failure to find a romantic happily-ever-after, or a stable end-point to his self-development. It is not just that the conditions of modernity prevent George from attaining the *Bildung* ideal, but that, for Wells, such narratives have *always* been delusive. In this sense, *Tono-Bungay* is not just about the failure of romanticism in modernity, but also about the failure of adult life to live up to the romantic dreams of childhood.

This end to the 'nobility' of childhood innocence was a recurring concern for Wells. John Carey has written that Wells's sympathy for the young provoked some of the noblest insights in his writing, citing a passage from *The World of William Clissold*:

> Going to work is a misery and a tragedy for the great multitude of boys and girls who have to face it. Suddenly they see their lives plainly defined

[23] Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (London: Hogarth Press, 1985), 1-9.

> as limited and inferior. It is a humiliation so great that they cannot even express the hidden bitterness of their souls. But it is there.[24]

The passage bears a similarity to George's first impression of London, as a scene in which his youthful romantic hopes and heroic aims might play out:

> London! I came up to it, young and without advisers, rather priggish, rather dangerously open-minded and very open-eyed, and with something – it is I think the common gift of imaginative youth, and I claim it unblushingly – fine in me, finer than the world and seeking fine responses. I did not want simply to live or simply to live happily or well, I wanted to serve and do and make – with some nobility. It was in me. It is in half of the youth of the world. (103-4)

George reflects of his seamless youthful worldview that it was 'grave', 'serious', 'More serious indeed than any adult seems to be. I was capable then of efforts – of nobilities. … I thought I was destined to do something to a world that had a definite purpose' (74-5). In this way, what might be seen as George's failure to mature, in the *Bildung* sense, paradoxically also represents his attainment of maturity: the realisation that real life is messier than his heroic childhood imaginings or romantic hopes. When George tells us of the social order of his Bladesover childhood in which every human had a purpose and a place – 'I thought this was the order of the whole world' – he is not indicting urban modernity for the destruction of the old social order. Rather, he is reflecting on the ways in which his childhood self made sense of the world. The loss of this psychological order is one of the realities of adulthood.

George's maturation plot is thus a deeply ironic one: from certainty to uncertainty, from groundedness to disorientation – the only accommodation George can make with society is that his own life has become fluid and chaotic in the way that modernity is fluid and chaotic. But this has been his aim from the very outset. The novel opens with George laying bare the insufficiency of the *Bildung* ideal: 'Most people in this world seem to live 'in character'; they have a beginning, a middle and an end. … They are, as theatrical people say, no more (and no less) than "character actors."' But the course of George's life has been experienced in entirely different terms, as:

> a miscellaneous tasting of life. One gets hit by some unusual transverse force, one is jerked out of one's stratum and lives crosswise for the rest of the time and, as it were, in a succession of samples. … I have got an unusual series of impressions that I want very urgently to tell. (9)

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[24] John Carey, *The Intellectuals and the Masses: Pride and Prejudice among the Literary Intelligentsia, 1880-1939* (London: Faber and Faber, 1992), 141.

There is a perverse kind of logic to this: if people whose self-development follows a progressive logic are no more than 'character actors', then by inference George *is* the hero of his story – though not in the traditional sense of maturing towards a stable adult identity in which he finds his 'place' in society, nor in the sense of fulfilling his youthful hopes of being destined to do something 'definite' or purposive to the world. This perverse logic functions as a kind of self-justification: if George's *fabula* has been a failure in conventional narrative and biographical terms, he remains in control of his own *sjužet,* and becomes heroic through the elucidation of his own subjectivity. His aim has been to render 'nothing more or less than Life – as one man has found it. I want to tell – *myself*' (12).

This, then, is Wells's aesthetics of modernity. It might seem incongruous to compare Wells's aesthetics to those of Walter Pater, but at times George's reflections upon the course of his life read as a kind of Wellsian conclusion to *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* (1873). Michael Sherborne has written that 'If at the critic Walter Pater's end of the spectrum literature aspired to the condition of music, at Wells's end it aspired to several more worldly things, including sociology.'[25] Yet, in a sense, Wells's aesthetics aspired to both of these aims. To return to the novel's own conclusion, George states that at 'the heart of life' is a 'note', a 'something', that he identifies as 'reality', as 'Truth', 'as beauty': 'It is a something, a quality, an element, one may find now in colours, now in forms, now in sounds, now in thoughts' (388). This bears a striking resemblance to Pater's 'every moment some form grows perfect in hand or face; some tone on the hills or the sea is choicer than the rest; some mood of passion or insight or intellectual excitement is irresistibly real and attractive for us.' The novel's opening, too, bears comparison. George's philosophy of his own life as not so much a cumulative biography than 'a miscellaneous tasting of life', in which life is experienced as 'a succession of samples', a series of urgent impressions, is not far removed from the Paterian belief that 'not the fruit of experience, but experience itself is the end.'[26] The comparison can be pushed too far, but it is worth noting that Pater's Conclusion served as a kind of manifesto for experiencing beauty in the face of flux, in which sense experience was conceived in terms of 'perpetual motion', a 'whirlpool' which 'seems to bury us under a flood of external objects'. The reader is called to apprehend the objects of sense perception 'not with the solidity with which language invests them, but of impressions unstable, flickering, inconsistent'.[27] The language (though not the subject matter) closely corresponds to Wells's description of urban modernity. If Wells's aesthetics aimed to address present-day realities,

[25] Michael Sherborne*, H. G. Wells, Another Kind of Life* (London: Peter Owen, 2011), p. 174.
[26] Walter Pater, *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 119.
[27] Pater, 118-20.

then George's reflections at the opening and close of the novel are perhaps Wells's attempt to make art instrumental in serving the needs of modernity. The sublime glimpses of George's 'Something', in which he flickeringly apprehends a kind of transcendent beauty behind an agglomeration of sense impressions and experiences, are a means of recovering a sense of truth and meaning amid the disorienting flux and distorted realities of the modern city.

It is also worth noting a single reference to Pater in *Tono-Bungay.* Edward Ponderevo purchases ownership of a literary magazine, *The Sacred Grove,* 'that representative organ of British intellectual culture', which prompts George to note of his uncle that 'his sound business instincts jarred with the exalted pretensions of a vanishing age.' One title page reads:

> *A Weekly Magazine of Art, Philosophy, Science and Belles Lettres*
> HAVE YOU A NASTY TASTE IN YOUR MOUTH?
> IT IS LIVER.
> YOU NEED ONE TWENTY-THREE PILL.
> (JUST ONE).
> NOT A DRUG BUT A LIVE AMERICAN REMEDY.
> CONTENTS:
> A Hitherto Unpublished Letter from Walter Pater.
> Charlotte Brontë's Maternal Great Aunt.
> A New Catholic History of England (229-30)

Under the logic of industrial capitalism, advertising has co-opted the aesthetic; literature and advertising have been elided, presented in the magazine as indistinguishable.[28] High culture becomes irrelevant in a world in which advertising has distorted reality.

This ambivalence is characteristic of the novel. Wells parodies aestheticism in the figure of George's dissolute friend Ewart, who tells George that 'the reality of life, my dear Ponderevo … is Chromatic Conflict… and Form. … Be yourself, – seek after such beautiful things as your own sense determines to be beautiful. And don't mind the headache in the morning' (140). Yet, minus the hangover, Wells has George express the same sentiment in earnestness at the close of the novel. Similarly, whilst in the final chapter George's 'Something' is a kind of sublime, beautiful essence of reality, George also notes that 'I have figured it in my last section by the symbol of my destroyer' – a rather more profane symbol of a metaphysical 'Something' than we might expect in the midst of such an exalted passage. Throughout the novel, farce turns to pathos, which turns to farce again. David Lodge has highlighted Wells's irony in the symbol of the destroyer. For Lodge, 'in a social order given over to decay and death, even the impersonal achievements of science will …

[28] James, 110.

hasten and confirm, rather than alleviate, the incurable condition of England.'[29] Yet if the social condition of England is incurably pathological, Wells's diagnosis of the individual is less certain. George's journey out to sea in the destroyer both figures as his embracing of the destructive element in society, in which he envisages 'the inevitable decline and extinction of his country', and enables the recovery of a kind of freedom in his pessimism; an acceptance of the inevitability of change.[30] As George notes: 'we are all things that make and pass' (389).

In this way, Wells perhaps offered a psychological and emotional grounding to the experience of modernity. Social reality, in *Tono-Bungay*, has a definite quality of *unreality,* and of unreliability. The language of modernity is empty at its core, characterised by emptiness, hollowness, and disorienting fluidity. Advertising distorts reality; commodity culture is a hollow bubble, ready to burst; growth is blind, a 'wasting aimless fever'; forces run to waste (381). Modern society, for Wells, seems to consist of reality emptied of substance, meaning or truth. The novel is haunted by this sense of loss – the loss of solidity to the experience of reality. If Wells is ultimately pessimistic about the possibilities of society recovering such a foundation, his solution is an uncharacteristically subjective one. Wells's aesthetic is one in which, through the pursuit of truth, the individual can apprehend flickering moments of beauty and significance emerging from a background of flux, mess and waste. Individual failure, in *Tono-Bungay*, is inextricably linked to the failures of society, yet the individual can draw, 'by pain and effort out of the heart of life' a 'something' to underpin the fluidity of modernity – an apprehension of the sublime.

[29] David Lodge, *The Language of Fiction: Essays in Criticism and Verbal Analysis of the English Novel* (London: Routledge, 2002), 257-8.
[30] Lodge, 256.