

**THE LOVER-SHADOW AND THE RESISTANT READER:
H. G. WELLS IN LOVE AND THE PROBLEM OF TEXTUAL RECEPTION**

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H. G. Wells's second work of autobiography, the posthumously published *H. G. Wells in Love*, has largely escaped critical notice. At first glance, the work's confessional, even sensationalistic subject matter, the myriad love affairs of Wells, may indeed seem to preclude any analysis other than the psychological or biographical. However, Wells penned *H. G. Wells in Love* as a follow-up to his better known *Experiment in Autobiography* and his second autobiography, like his first, is an artistic and rhetorically skilful attempt to defend his literary authority for posterity. In fact, as Wells realises, the second work both literally and thematically completes the first.

Experiment in Autobiography is concerned with defining Wells's identity as an author; it is an attempt to defend Wells's authorial persona as the prophet of the coming World State by narrating its origins and development. As Wells writes, the work charts his transition 'from Atlas House [where his family lived above his father's crockery shop] to the burthen of Atlas [his attempt to create a World State]'.¹ Since this narrative shows that his 'faith and service of constructive world revolution does hold together [his] mind and will in a prevailing unity', writing it 'restore[s]' his 'ruffled persona'.² However, on Wells's own terms, a book about his literary identity cannot in itself secure his persona. As Wells defines the persona as a person's 'idea of what he wants to be and of how he wants other people to take him',³ his authorial persona can hold only if it is accepted by his audience.

H. G. Wells in Love, begun just months after the completion of *Experiment in Autobiography*, attempts to create the audience that the *Experiment's* persona requires. The amorous quests of *H. G. Wells in Love* are quests for the ideal audience, the 'Lover-Shadow', the infinitely receptive and infinitely pliant audience that Wells requires if his persona as the prophet of the World State is to cohere. Wells, as I shall show, held the Catholic Church to be a synecdoche for the masses and mass readers and their conservative resistance to his Planned World. Consequently, he expresses his desire to transform resistant readers into adoring Lover-Shadows most clearly when narrating his affair with his ex-Catholic, ex-nun mistress Odette Keun. Ultimately, though, no audience is docile enough to solidify Wells's authority and he is left dreaming of a future

¹ H. G. Wells, *Experiment in Autobiography: Discoveries and Conclusions of a Very Ordinary Brain (since 1866)* (New York: Macmillan, 1934), 347-48.

² Wells, *Experiment in Autobiography*, 705.

³ Wells, *Experiment in Autobiography*, 9.

audience, ‘some lingering vestige of [his] Lover-Shadow’,⁴ who will appreciate his work as it deserves and bring him back to life as an author.

In order to discuss the ways in which *H. G. Wells in Love* attempts to create the audience Wells’s prophetic persona requires, I must first summarise his prophetic ideas, their demands on his audience and why he so often pictures a resistant mass audience as Catholic. A student of T. H. Huxley at the Normal School of Science, Wells bases his prophetic vision primarily around Darwinian biology.⁵ What Wells gains from Darwin is primarily the concept that the world is in a state of constant flux and is devoid of teleology;⁶ evolution, as Wells understands it, primarily means that life possesses no stable shape and moves towards no coherent goal.⁷

Wells found his vocation as a prophet by carrying this potentially nihilistic version of evolution to its logical conclusion. By the evolutionary accident of the development of a self-conscious, self-reflective mind, humanity has become the first species capable of deliberate self-shaping, of replacing natural selection with ‘self-selection’ and imposing order on the disordered forces of evolution.⁸ As Wells says in his *Experiment in Autobiography*, ‘Human life as we know it, is only the dispersed raw material for human life as it might be’.⁹ In his later work, Wells repeatedly calls for an ‘Open Conspiracy’ of educators, scientific researchers and engineers to arise, cast off nationalism and capitalism, and themselves systematically give shape to humanity and the world.¹⁰ In 1928, he wrote *The Open Conspiracy* – which he considered his attempt at a ‘religion’, his attempt to give the chaos of the age ‘general form and direction’ – in an effort to inaugurate this conspiracy himself.¹¹

Since Wells considers both the universe and humanity to possess no essential nature, the validity of his prophetic ideas rests entirely on humanity’s

⁴ H. G. Wells, *H. G. Wells in Love: Postscript to an Experiment in Autobiography*, ed. G. P. Wells (London: Faber and Faber, 1984), 235.

⁵ See W. Warren Wagar, *H. G. Wells and the World State* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1961), 62-63.

⁶ Wagar, *H. G. Wells and the World State*, 71-72. See also Patrick Parrinder’s comment that Wells saw the scientific method less as a means of obtaining reliable information than ‘as a progressive, subversive, and destabilising’ ideal (Patrick Parrinder, *Shadows of the Future: H. G. Wells, Science Fiction and Prophecy* [Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1995], 137).

⁷ On Wells’s view of evolution see, for instance, H. G. Wells, *Tono-Bungay*, ed. Bernard Bergonzi (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1978), 70 ff. See also Kirby Farrell, ‘H. G. Wells and Neotony’, *Cahiers Victoriens et Edouardiens*, 46 (1997): 145-58.

⁸ On humanity’s capacity for self-selection, see Parrinder, *Shadows of the Future*, 63. This work is probably also the best single analysis of Wells’s use of the future in his thought and work.

⁹ Wells, *Experiment in Autobiography*, 11.

¹⁰ See H. G. Wells, *The Open Conspiracy: Blue Prints for a World Revolution* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1928), 30-31; 132.

¹¹ Wells, *The Open Conspiracy*, vii.

willingness or unwillingness to accept them. His demands on his audience are extreme. His Open Conspiracy is, in his own words, nothing short of ‘a world religion [...] definitely and obviously attempting to swallow up the entire population of the world and become the new human community’.¹² But if ‘sufficient men and women’ are not willing to join the Open Conspiracy and propel it to victory, then Wells is a deluded dreamer and, as he admits, there is ‘no foretelling’ how many will be interested.¹³ Alternately, he might find sufficient intellectual conspirators, only to have the conspiracy thwarted by the opposition of the masses. If the masses successfully resist Wells’s imagined oligarchy, then the possibility of deliberate, scientific human self-shaping is destroyed; humanity will be as humanity has been and the Wellsian future will not materialise.¹⁴ As Wells complains, ‘the multitude, when it is suitably roused, can upset anything’.¹⁵

As Wells aged, he increasingly saw the Catholic Church as embodying the basic beliefs of the masses and their resistance to his ideas. In the Catholic Church, the acceptance of authority, love of tradition, fear of change and distrust of intellectuals that he imagined (and disdained) in the masses were institutionalised and theorised.¹⁶ For the late Wells, ‘the Catholic vision of life’ systematises a ‘common-sense vision of the world’ that is ‘widely accepted’ outside of the church’s borders.¹⁷ In Catholic thinkers, the ‘resistances’ of the generally ‘silen[t]’ masses to progress and the World State are given voice and ‘animation’.¹⁸ Whether the Catholic Church expresses the mass’s natural resistance to the World State or the Catholic Church embodies a rival ‘Open Conspiracy’ that programs the masses to resist the World State,¹⁹ millions of the uneducated masses follow the teachings of the Catholic Church and their staunch traditionalism stands in the way of the World State. Moreover, since the Catholic Church opposes birth control and runs a worldwide educational system, the Catholic masses comprise a prolifically fertile and structurally self-sustaining hoard standing in the way of all attempts to design a new humanity. The Catholic Church represents a force of ‘successive thousands of millions’ of

¹² Wells, *The Open Conspiracy*, 163.

¹³ Wells, *The Open Conspiracy*, 198; cf. 27.

¹⁴ See Wells, *The Open Conspiracy*, 93. For Wells’s connection of this fear to Catholicism, see H. G. Wells, *Mr Belloc Objects to ‘The Outline of History’* (New York: Doran, 1926), 80.

¹⁵ Wells, quoted in Wagar, *H. G. Wells and the World State*, 185.

¹⁶ On these traits of the masses, see Wells, *The Open Conspiracy*, 59-61.

¹⁷ Wells, *Mr Belloc Objects to the ‘Outline of History’*, 82.

¹⁸ H. G. Wells, *A Year of Prophecy* (New York: Macmillan, 1925), 150; 155.

¹⁹ On the latter possibility, see Wells, *Experiment in Autobiography*, 487. Wells sees in the universal nature of the Catholic Church a thwarted attempt at a ‘competent receiver for human affairs’, a primitive version of the Open Conspiracy, and for that reason suggests that he himself may be a ‘heretic’ who ‘branch[es] from the Catholic stem’. But for Wells, the day of Catholicism has passed and it now can only obstruct progress.

people that are determined to resist the World State.²⁰ Consequently, Wells imagines as early as *The Shape of Things to Come* (1933) that the coming World State must ban traditional religions, especially Catholicism, if it is to remake humanity.²¹ By 1944, Wells goes so far as to insist in his non-fiction work that when the World State is inaugurated it will allow ‘no religious toleration’ and Catholicism with its ‘priestly kidnapers’ will in particular be banned.²² As Wells writes, ‘Only one body of philosophy and only one religion, only one statement of man’s relation to the universe and the community can exist in a unified world state’, or the World State will be rent with division and presently come apart.²³

In *The Shape of Things to Come*, Wells confidently imagines that the World State will destroy all traditional religions, if necessary by active persecution, and that the Catholic Church will be the last Christian organisation to die.²⁴ By the early 1940s, however, Wells had come to fear that the ‘mental cancer’ of Catholicism was ‘spread[ing] itself back to destroy the health and hope of our modern world’.²⁵ The presumably Catholic masses were the only force that the late Wells thought capable of really threatening the World State. In the popular futuristic movie *Things to Come* (1936), for which Wells wrote both the story and the screen adaptation, after a conspiracy of technocrats has already achieved the World State, a grandiose orator who praises normality, attacks progress and continually uses the word ‘jolly’, goads a crazed mob into an uprising that threatens to destroy the authority of the technological oligarchy and, thereby, the World State.²⁶ This uprising constitutes the only rebellion against the World State that Wells imagines in any of his Utopian works²⁷ and it is a rebellion of the masses against the elite, led by a man whose continual praise of normality and use of the word ‘jolly’ seem to mark him as a caricature of the prolific and popular Catholic convert G. K. Chesterton.

Like Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot and many other writers of the first third of the twentieth century, Wells identifies Chesterton, more than any other author, as the voice of the masses. Wells considers him the chief intellectual advocate of

²⁰ Wells, *Experiment in Autobiography*, 129.

²¹ See H. G. Wells, *The Shape of Things to Come: The Ultimate Revolution* (New York: Macmillan, 1934), 332-34.

²² H. G. Wells, *'42 to '44: A Contemporary Memoir Upon Human Behaviour During the Crisis of World Revolution* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1944), 100-01.

²³ Wells, *'42 to '44*, 101. See also the nearly identical attack on ‘kindly disastrous religious toleration’ in Wells, *The Shape of Things to Come*, 333.

²⁴ Wells, *The Shape of Things to Come*, 334; 348-49.

²⁵ H. G. Wells, *Crux Ansata: An Indictment of the Roman Catholic Church* (New York: Agora, 1944), 98.

²⁶ H. G. Wells, adpt., *Things to Come*, dir. William Cameron Menzies, Madacy Entertainment, 1999, DVD.

²⁷ See Wagar, *H. G. Wells and the World State*, 224.

the masses' way of life and to be one of the only 'clear-headed and consistent' 'reactionar[ies]' in the world.²⁸ Always a resistant reader of Wells's work, Chesterton had also authored *The Everlasting Man*, a popular Catholic refutation of Wells's 'modern bible',²⁹ the *Outline of History*. Wells fought back in his satirical novel *The Bulpington of Blup*; the character 'Wimperdick the eminent convert and Catholic apologist'³⁰ – fat, alcoholic, obsessively and reflexively jolly, self-deluded and lacking in oral hygiene – is an obvious caricature of Chesterton. Wells blamed the Catholic Church itself for the hostility between himself and Chesterton, lamenting, 'I loved Chesterton, before Roman Catholicism tarnished him'.³¹ In Wells's later works, Chesterton in particular, like Catholicism in general, represents the potentially fatal resistance of the masses to his theories, the fatal possibility that humanity will insist on remaining as it is.

In *H. G. Wells in Love* Wells addresses these concerns about the reader reception of his work by narrating his numerous love affairs. Each chapter is named after and focuses on a woman with whom he had a long-term affair and each mistress who receives extensive treatment seems tied to issues of literary authority. Rebecca West, for instance, both literally and symbolically represents Wells's quarrels with the modernists; she was a significant modernist and wrote literary criticism in defence of the movement and in critique of Wells. Odette Keun, whom I will principally discuss, represents both the resistant Catholic reader in general and Chesterton in particular. By narrating his affairs with these women, Wells wishes to illustrate that he *can* be loved by the younger modernist generation, that he *can* be loved by the (Catholic) mass audience and, thus, that his prophetic persona *can* hold. The amorous quest of *H. G. Wells in Love* is the quest for the perfect audience, a world of people who will allow Wells to inscribe meaning on them, will not talk back and will never abandon him.

The opening chapter of *H. G. Wells in Love*, 'On Loves and the Lover Shadow', presents an elaborate theory of audience and its role in the construction of identity. As I have discussed, Wells's theory of the persona assumes that if a persona is to be entirely valid and stable, it must be affirmed by an audience. Since Wells's persona is of the prophet who has assumed 'the burthen of Atlas', his view of himself, like his view of the world, requires universal acceptance. In 'On Loves and the Lover Shadow', Wells attempts to address the gap between the needs of the persona and the response of its

²⁸ H. G. Wells, 'The Past and the Great State', in *Socialism and the Great State: Essays in Construction*, ed. H. G. Wells, the Countess of Warwick and G. R. Stirling Taylor (New York: Harper, 1912), 9; 17.

²⁹ Wells, *The Open Conspiracy*, 128.

³⁰ H. G. Wells, *The Bulpington of Blup: Adventures, Poses, Stresses, Conflicts, and Disaster in a Contemporary Brain* (New York: Macmillan, 1933), 18.

³¹ Wells, '42 to '44, 127.

audience. He suggests that, since other people affirm our personas in at best a limited and qualified way, the psyche makes up for this deficiency in reception by imagining an ideal audience, the Lover-Shadow, that affirms our personas unconditionally. Wells defines the Lover-Shadow as a ‘vague various protean but very real presence’ always at the persona’s side offering it perfect ‘understanding’ and acceptance.³² The Lover-Shadow, ‘the inseparable correlative to the persona’, is an audience that never argues or disputes, that speaks only to say, ““Right-O,” or “Yes” or “I help” or “My dear”” (54). This fantasy of perfect reception is the necessary condition for all Wells’s efforts in life. As he says, ‘The fundamental love of my life is the Lover-Shadow’ (61). The Lover-Shadow, Wells asserts, is the true audience desired by himself and all serious authors; ‘Books, poems, pictures; it is for the Lover-Shadow they are written’ (54). The goal of *H. G. Wells in Love*, quite explicitly, is the analysis and creation of this ideal audience. As Wells observes, if *Experiment in Autobiography*’s ‘sustaining theme’ was ‘the development and consolidation of [Wells’s] persona as a devotee [...] to the evocation of a Socialist World State’ the main theme of *H. G. Wells in Love* will be the ‘Lover-Shadow by which [his] persona was sustained’ (55; 112).

Wells’s romantic escapades, at least as he narrates them, are prompted by the desire to incarnate the ideal audience in actual readers. He theorises that ‘When we make love, we are trying to make another human being concentrate for us as an impersonation or at least a symbol of the Lover-Shadow in our minds’ (55). The story of Wells’s love affairs is, quite explicitly, the story of his attempt to create the audience he requires, his ‘search for its [the Lover-Shadow’s] realisation in responsive flesh and blood’ (55).

As Wells saw the Catholic Church as a synecdoche for the masses and the mass reader, his attempt to create the ideal reader is most explicit when he discusses his ex-Catholic, ex-nun mistress, Odette Keun. The dedication of *The Bulpington of Blup*, the novel in which Wells most openly satirises Chesterton, reads ‘To the critic of the typescript ODETTE KEUN gratefully (bless her)’ and her connection with this work suggests her role in *H. G. Wells in Love*; she is to serve as Wells’s revenge on Chesterton and his religion and is to be his Catholic Lover-Shadow. In *H. G. Wells in Love*, Wells describes Keun as something of a female Chesterton. Like Chesterton, Keun was an author of non-fiction and something of a wit. Like Chesterton, Keun debuted as a humorist and then became an aggressive Catholic convert. As Wells relates, by the age of eighteen, Keun had published a satirical novel; by the age of twenty-one she had converted to Catholicism and entered a convent (119-20). Wells continually mentions Keun’s status as a former nun; it is precisely as symbol of the Catholic Church that she intrigues him. When he first becomes interested in her, he

³² Wells, *H. G. Wells in Love*, 54. Subsequent citations in text.

knows only that she is a former 'Dominican novice' who admires his books (124).

Keun's life initially seems to embody the transformations Wells would like to see in his readership. She turns from an analogue of Chesterton and the Catholic audience as they are to an analogue of Chesterton and the Catholic audience as Wells would have them be. In the convent, she becomes filled with 'Doubt' after reading something about 'Evolution', loses her faith and is eventually expelled from her religious order (121). She leaves the convent eager to write 'a tremendous novel or "show up" of the Catholic Church' (122). By 1919, though she has never yet met Wells, she has dedicated a novel to him with the inscription, 'H. G. Wells. Tu nous a imposé tes songes' ('You have forced your dreams on us').³³ The Catholic satirist in this story does not, like Chesterton, write a withering attack on Wells's account of human history; rather, within a three year period, she loses her faith in the Church's origin story, becomes a bitter enemy of organised religion and declares herself to be one of Wells's dreams. Soon, she will tell Wells that he is 'the hero of her life' (123). A potential enemy has become a mouthpiece; Wells now has a Chesterton who loves him.

At first, Keun does truly seem to be Wells's Catholic Lover-Shadow. She has been re-created by his works and speaks only when he wishes her to speak and says only what he would have her say. On their first meeting, Keun treats Wells as an object of 'adoration', declaring that she wants 'to give her whole life to [him]', that she wants 'nothing but to be of service to [him]' (125). Wells accepts her as a lover only because she has made this vow of obedience to him (he calls it her 'protestation'): "If you feel like *that*," said I' (125, emphasis Wells's). Her temporary vow of obedience to the Catholic Church has been transformed into a permanent vow of obedience to the prophet of the World State. To ensure that Keun remains as quiet and submissive as the ideal Lover-Shadow must be, Wells sets some rather severe terms for their relationship that essentially place Keun back in cloistered seclusion. She is to stay at a chateau he sets up for her in rural France. She is not to write to Wells when he is away and she must never, for any reason, set foot in the English-speaking world (125). If Keun was figuratively written by Wells before, she is almost literally written by him now, as in her isolation she tailors her personality according to 'the sort of effects [he] would tolerate' (149).³⁴ She also begins to write exactly what Wells

³³ Odette Keun, quoted in Wells, *H. G. Wells in Love*, 123.

³⁴ Many critics have suggested that Wells's view of the world is implicitly totalitarian and one is strongly reminded of this critique in Wells's insistence that he must control Keun's speech and action. On Wells's unconscious tendency towards totalitarianism, see Willis Glover, 'Religious Orientations of H. G. Wells: A Case Study in Scientific Humanism,' *Harvard Theological Review*, 65 (1972): 132. See also William T. Ross, *H. G. Wells's World Reborn: The Outline of History and Its Companions* (Selinsgrove: Susquehanna University Press, 2002), 132.

would have her write, the satire of the Catholic Church that she has long intended but never executed (126). At this point, Wells remarks, ‘I was as nearly in love with her as I ever became’ (126). Since Keun functions as a metaphor for Chesterton and his Church, her willingness to play the part and speak the lines assigned to her by Wells promises that the Catholic threat to his authority will be removed, the world will submit to his remaking and the Wellsian future will come to be.

Keun, as Wells depicts her in the early stages of their relationship, is the perfect Lover-Shadow, conforming herself to his desires and affirming his every idea. As Wells’s language suggests, she is his oeuvre. In *Experiment in Autobiography* Wells describes much of his work as being ‘as white and pasty as a starch-fed nun’.³⁵ In *H. G. Wells in Love*, Keun is depicted as a liberalised version of this metaphor. Wells writes that during her days as a nun Keun became ‘so pallidly fat’ from ‘the convent fare’ that after re-entering the secular world she was no longer able to ‘know herself’ in a mirror; she *is* his starch-fed nun (121).

This fantasy of Keun as a book written by Wells ultimately turns to nightmare, however. Wells’s metaphor of book-as-nun, ominously, describes works in which his intention and the resulting work are at odds, in which his ‘desire for achievement [...] outruns [his] capacity’.³⁶ In her isolation in rural France, Keun adapts her persona to Wells’s wishes because he ‘[i]s her only audience and [he] [i]s a very restraining audience’ (128). As Wells recollects, ‘She played to me to be effective to me’ (149). However, since Keun’s identity is derived from her audience’s responses to her actions, as she comes into contact with audiences other than Wells, her behaviour changes radically. Wells asserts that he ‘could trace [...] with every enlargement of a circle of acquaintance [...] the gradual return of Odette from her original abjection [to Wells] to a state of [...] egotistical assertion’ (128). The relationship soon becomes a horror to them both and their constant fights are quite exactly over who gets to talk. Keun, Wells suggests, wants him to become her ‘protective, sustaining, responsive, understanding Lover-Shadow’ and she complains that he does not ‘suppor[t]’ her or function as her ‘protector’ when she talks to their guests (128-29). What Wells desires of Keun is much simpler: ““Oh God,” I would cry, “*shut up*”” (129, emphasis Wells’s). If Wells is to re-create the world as he intends, he requires as his audience the submissive Lover-Shadow and he becomes deeply frustrated as Keun ceases to embody this audience.

As Keun’s behaviour becomes more hostile, self-assertive and, at times, simply bizarre, she changes from an infinitely pliable audience on whom Wells’s desires are written to a parody of such an audience. Keun begins to seek to be the centre of attention at Wells’s social gatherings and she achieves this

³⁵ Wells, *Experiment in Autobiography*, 5.

³⁶ Wells, *Experiment in Autobiography*, 5.

end through the reliable, if dubious, means of interrupting upper-class English dinner conversation with outbursts of profanity (134). She then exploits her status as a non-native speaker of English to blame these outbursts on Wells. When Keun has horribly offended their guests with her profanities, Wells will ‘see her long hands gesticulating down the table towards [him]. “I learnt it all from that man,” she [will] cry. “Every word I know – I got from him”’ (134). Keun is now a nightmare of reception, a text that constantly generates meanings adverse to authorial intention; her irruptions of profanity disrupt and discredit her author and his attempt to impose meaning on the world. Her insistence that Wells has authored her has turned parodic; as in Homi Bhabha’s definition of mimicry, Keun’s apparent repetition of Wells’s own often-profane speech comprises an ‘excess or slippage [...] [that] becomes transformed into an uncertainty which fixes’ Wells’s authorial ‘subject as a “partial” [rather than full] presence’.³⁷ Wells himself recognises some subconscious or conscious subversion in Keun’s tendency to attach herself to totalling authorities whom her seemingly submissive behaviour ultimately discredits. He observes, ‘Just as she had thought to thrust the responsibility for her conduct upon the Catholic Church, so now she turned to me [...]. In form she gave; in effect she grabbed’ (125).

Wells’s relationship with Keun finally collapses in a series of disputes over which of them is author and which is audience. She abandons her ‘original pose of an intense devotion’ and adopts that of the ‘beautiful woman with a [...] subjugated lover’ (146). Wells desires a relationship with her only if she continues to accept her objectified status; he ‘took her’ only on ‘terms’ and she has ‘no meaning’ for him outside of these terms (136, 151). He is also exasperated, to the very end, by her failure to finish ‘her convent novel’ attacking the Catholic Church (151). Wells breaks off their relationship after she first violates their terms by coming to London and then ‘inflict[s] [...] disgrace upon’ him in London and elsewhere by her obnoxious behaviour (150; cf. 148-49). She has failed to be the perfectly receptive audience he desires; rather, in keeping with her unconsciously parodic manner, she has behaved in such a way as to hurt Wells’s reputation and credibility by invoking her association with him. Interestingly, a significant number of her embarrassing outbursts occur in front of prominent political figures (including, for instance, a Romanian prince and an Asquith) and a number of her embarrassing letters are addressed to prominent literary figures (including, for instance, Somerset Maugham) (150; 160). Despite her initial agreement with Wells, Keun refuses to leave the ‘English and American worlds’ of his primary readership as his ‘own to do as [he] pleased in’; her chaotic speech becomes another interruption of his authority over his universe of discourse (151). Presumed to be his Catholic

³⁷ Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), 86.

Lover-Shadow, she becomes instead another rival author, another scandal to his name, even another book he wishes he had not written.

As *H. G. Wells in Love* narrates, Keun's transformation from Lover-Shadow to resistant reader reached its culmination when she authored a series of articles damningly deconstructing Wells's authorial persona. Wells's break-up with Keun occurred early in 1933, as he was writing *Experiment in Autobiography*. Keun traversed the London literary world telling her story of use and abuse and found sympathy from Lady Rhondda, the editor of the feminist magazine *Time and Tide* (cf. 156-57). When *Experiment in Autobiography* appeared, *Time and Tide* hired Keun as its reviewer for the volume.

Keun's series of articles, collectively entitled 'H. G. Wells the Player', offer a cogent critique of the sources of Wells's authority. Her basic criticism is twofold: one, that Wells reacts too intensely to outside stimuli to synthesise all of human knowledge successfully and, two, that he treats other people as objects and has no respect for their agency. In *Experiment in Autobiography*, Wells had explained that his principal literary role in the Open Conspiracy was to coordinate all human knowledge into a series of 'outlines' that could together comprise a 'guiding framework for life', and serve as the basis for humanity's reconstruction.³⁸ Wells saw himself as uniquely suited for this literary task because – unlike the modernists, whose 'abundant, luminous impressions' of the world could not be 'subdue[d] to a disciplined and co-ordinating relationship' – his mind was 'systematically unified' but marked by 'coldness and flatness [...] of perception'.³⁹ Synthesis and observation, for Wells, are opposite and mutually exclusive mental gifts.

In a direct reversal of *Experiment in Autobiography*'s rhetoric, Keun's review of the work describes Wells's mind as 'miraculously over-sensitised'.⁴⁰ Since his mind is so dangerously receptive to external stimuli, Wells collects more 'impressions' than he can effectively process, leading to his constant changes of idea and ideal.⁴¹ His intellectual inconstancy also suggests that his Utopias are merely wish-fulfilment fantasies produced by his 'outraged ego' rather than applications of any real ideal.⁴² Since Wells desires a world designed according to his wishes, the existence of other people, other human subjects, proves a problem to him. Keun complains that he sees other people only as 'objects, to be annihilated if they oppos[e] to be used if they serv[e]' his ends.⁴³ Adding a Catholic dimension to this resistant reading of Wells, Keun blames his inability to recognise and correct these aberrancies in his behaviour on his lack

³⁸ Wells, *Experiment in Autobiography*, 12; 612-13.

³⁹ Wells, *Experiment in Autobiography*, 529.

⁴⁰ Odette Keun, 'H. G. Wells the Player', *Time and Tide*, 15 (1934): 1249-50.

⁴¹ Odette Keun, 'H. G. Wells the Player', 1249-50.

⁴² Odette Keun, 'H. G. Wells the Player', 1250.

⁴³ Odette Keun, 'H. G. Wells the Player', 1347.

of systematic religious training, for religion provides us with an ideal of the human spirit by which we may judge ourselves.⁴⁴ Keun ties her charges together by asserting that Wells is, above all, a ‘player’; his attempt to remake the world is not a systematic crusade but rather an ever-changing game in which people serve as counters.

Wells mentions in *H. G. Wells in Love* that he has read Keun’s articles against him (cf. 157) and the section devoted to their relationship in that work is, in part, an attempt to counter her direct assault on his persona. Surprisingly, *H. G. Wells in Love* seems to endorse some of Keun’s charges against him. He openly grants her accusation that he uses people as objects, using herself as his primary example of the truth of this charge. I have already established that Wells is frank about his use of Keun as an object; at one point, he goes so far as to admit that he ‘regard[ed] Odette as [...] a prostitute-housekeeper, to put it plainly’ (139). He cannot grant, however, that his mind is ‘over-sensitised’ and responds too readily to ‘impressions’. Since the Wellsian prophet has little sensitivity to impressions, a characteristic which enables him to synthesise all human knowledge into a coherent outline, this charge, if true, would discredit Wells’s authorial persona. Wells defends himself against Keun’s charges by dividing them against each other. Wells’s narrative argues that his tendency to treat people as objects *proves* that he is not overly influenced by and does not particularly care about what goes on outside him.

Wells illustrates his lack of sensitivity to external sensation particularly by describing his response to Keun and to her articles attacking him. When Keun undergoes minor surgery, Wells’s inability to ‘feel a spark of distress’ on her account causes her to ‘rave’ about his ‘callousness’ (138). Shortly thereafter, Keun has an affair with her surgeon and is so emotionally scarred by it that she buys a gun, explicitly intending to kill him and, implicitly, perhaps herself (her ‘life’ has been ‘spoilt’, she insists) (139). Even this soap opera elicits no response from Wells. He is ‘bored’ by the story of her affair and ‘never bother[s] to take [her gun] away from her’ for ‘Odette is not the stuff to shoot’ (138-39). After his break-up with Keun he also ignores her explicit threats of suicide (151). In *Apropos of Dolores*, which Wells admitted to be a satire on Keun⁴⁵ (and in which Dolores parallels Odette from her profane speech and fantasies of being a nun down to her love of jasmine and small dogs), Stephen Wilbeck, the protagonist, takes a more active approach to the problem of Odette

⁴⁴ Odette Keun, ‘H. G. Wells the Player’, 1250. Keun’s other writings after her break-up with Wells also evidence a melancholy nostalgia for the religion she has rejected. She claims in *I Think Out Loud in America* (London: Longman, Green, 1939) to have gained in the convent an ‘intuition [...] of the mystical life’ and asserts that ‘a longing for those [mystic] horizons, which [she] afterwards lost [...] will accompany [her] to [her] grave. Nothing has replaced, nor will replace until [she] die[s], the radiance and peace of those incommunicable intimations’ (241). Despite Wells’s efforts, the Church is irreplaceable.

⁴⁵ See Wells, *H. G. Wells in Love*, 218.

/ Dolores. He gives Dolores the drug Semondyle to help her sleep and she dies of a Semondyle overdose; whether she has killed herself or he has murdered her is never clearly resolved.⁴⁶ *The Shape of Things to Come*, written as Wells was planning his break with Keun, may also contain a more ideologically apposite fantasy of her death. 'The first killing in a new religious conflict' that ends with the suppression of all religion and the triumph of the World State is the 'martyrdom' of the significantly named Catholic 'Saint Odet' at the hands of the Air Dictatorship.⁴⁷ However, such visions of Keun's destruction have no place in the rhetoric of *H. G. Wells in Love*, in which she is too insignificant to kill or be killed.

Wells's description of his relationship with Keun sets the stage for his narrative of his response to her verbal and written attacks on him. Simply put, these attacks elicit no reaction. After their break-up, Keun feels 'a necessity to scream at [Wells]; to libel, to expose, to hurl missiles, to worry [him] and hurt [him]' and cannot understand that he does 'not care a rap' what she says, does, or publicly reveals (156-57). Her articles against him strike him only as 'very silly', so devoid of real bite that he wonders whether the editor removed the more interesting material from them out of fear of libel (157). He concludes that, 'For all her spasmodic efforts to do so, she never really hurt me' (116). Wells's description of his behaviour after their break-up summarises his general apathy towards Keun: he was 'not only invisible but *deaf and blind* to her. [He] was not reacting to her' (156, emphasis mine). Wells is completely unresponsive to external stimuli and simply will not accept the reactive role of the audience; he is entirely an author and will be no one's Lover Shadow.

The problem of audience that Wells set out to analyse and to correct in *H. G. Wells in Love* remains, however, as the volume closes. Wells has again defended his persona, but he still lacks the enormous and infinitely submissive audience he needs to remake the chaotic present world into the future world of order. His attempts to embody the Lover-Shadow in concrete human beings have failed; for instance, he can successfully defend his persona against Keun's writing, but he cannot retain her as his Lover-Shadow. Towards the end of the volume, Wells recognises this problem. His self-appointed persona as creator of the future world places requirements on his corresponding Lover-Shadow that no actual person can fulfil. The audience he needs simply does not exist. As he acknowledges, his 'own unreasonable monstrous demands for a Lover-Shadow [are] based on the exacting enormity of the persona [he has] devised for [him]self' (197). 'I am', he continues, 'an insufficient and often irritable "great man" with an infantile craving for help' (197). He desires, he realises, no actual audience and no actual lover, but 'the Lover-Shadow of my persona', a being made partly from 'fantasy' (200). Consequently, he demands the impossible

⁴⁶ H. G. Wells, *Apropos of Dolores* (London: Cape, 1938), 242-43; 248.

⁴⁷ Wells, *The Shape of Things to Come*, 332.

from his real lovers. He mourns that of his lovers ‘in my last phase as [...] in my first, I asked impossible things’ (197-98).

Wells realises that, since his audience has failed to sustain his prophetic persona, this persona cannot cohere. Consequently, he spends much of the last part of the work despairing of his prophetic persona and his dream of a Planned World. Wells knows that *his* universe does not exist; the present world, a ‘lying’, ‘foul’ ‘tangle’, is his ‘inescapable background’ (226). He writes, ‘In my less protected moments I do think quite deliberately of self-destruction [...] by open, deliberate suicide, which would be a frank confession that life has been too much for me; that it is not good enough and that I am beaten, and *I and my universe* a failure’ (202, emphasis mine). These attacks are usually brought on when his ‘Lover-Shadow has dispersed again’, when his hope in his ideal audience becoming actual has become thin (201).

Wells’s second autobiography, then, seems to admit in the end what nearly every intellectual in the 1930s and 1940s asserted: there is no master interpretation of the world, there is no inspired hermeneutic that can account for all reality, the work of the prophet is futile.⁴⁸ But this is not quite the case. *H. G. Wells in Love* is a designedly posthumous autobiography; quite intentionally and quite exactly, it *must* be read by a future audience and its success or failure depends on the response of this audience. Since Wells rejects all notion of historical inevitability, he cannot decide what this future audience will be like, however; *H. G. Wells in Love* worries about its own reception to a degree unusual in a posthumous autobiography. The full effect is clearest when the drafts of the book are considered as well as the published version.

The text of *H. G. Wells in Love* seems to end with Wells imagining an audience that disdains his work. Despairing, he lies with his ‘face to the wall’ and gives up his war with his critics. Regarding his most recent book, he says to all resistant readers, ‘If you cannot understand it, read it again or quibble away from it, but anyhow do not pester me [...]. Anything you can say or do I shall disregard entirely [...] you will never get nearer to me now than the waste-paper basket’ (229). He has closed himself off from the world and has ceased to attempt to embody his Lover-Shadow in the actual audience. Having given up on his present audience, he begins to despair of the future. He pessimistically

⁴⁸ The reviews of *Experiment in Autobiography* often reflect this sentiment. For instance, Montgomery Belgion’s largely negative review in the *Criterion*, 14 (1935) concluded that *Experiment in Autobiography*’s literary dimensions replicate Wells’s career, a strong, character-centred start squandered midway for the ‘wild-goose chase’ of the ‘pursuit of the world-state’ (319). In his generally favourable review, Malcolm Cowley writes that *Experiment in Autobiography*’s final chapter, ‘The Idea of a Planned World’, is ‘obviously and immensely inferior to everything that has gone before’ because the ‘Open Conspiracy’ around which it is centred is a ‘dream that has nothing to do with the shape of things as they are’ (Malcolm Cowley, ‘Outline of Wells’s History’, in *Think Back On Us: A Contemporary Chronicle of the 1930s* [Carbondale, Illinois: Southern Illinois University Press, 1967], 247).

wonders whether ‘sufficient interest in [his] life will survive’ to ‘justify’ the publication of *H. G. Wells in Love* (234). Continuing in this vein, he guesses that ‘the world will [n]ever stand a complete posthumous edition of [his] works’ (235). The editor of *H. G. Wells in Love* takes Wells’s acceptance that his audience has rejected him to be the true ending of the work, remarking that ‘effectively it ends [...] with the waste-paper basket’ (18).

In the B typescript, one of the manuscripts from which the printed text of *H. G. Wells in Love* was compiled, a further ending is appended which continues the trope of Wells picturing the resistant mass reader as Catholic, a trope that shapes and haunts the work as a whole. In this manuscript, the book ends with Wells discussing the ‘posthumous fate’ of Anatole France, his close friend and fellow sceptic. In contrast to his previous insistence that the actions of the outside world can no longer affect him, Wells writes that his ‘barriers’ have been breached by hearing about the blows his friend’s reputation has recently sustained. France’s death, Wells writes, ‘was the signal for a perfect mud volcano of abuse and detraction by novelists and by the Catholic youth of France. Maybe that will happen to me’.⁴⁹ Wells’s other works from the 1940s, as I have shown, fearfully imagine a Catholic future world; in this alternative ending, he worries about his inevitably negative reception in that world, a world that stubbornly refuses to be remade.

If Wells’s final revisions to *H. G. Wells in Love* are considered, however,⁵⁰ the work actually closes with Wells imagining a future audience that lives in the World State. This audience has literally been created by Wells’s works and alone can properly appreciate him. Wells reminds us once again that his life has been lived in service of the ‘creative World-State’ (235). It is, in fact, to the World State and not the present that Wells belongs. He is ‘an early World-Man’ and ‘live[s] in exile from the world community of [his] desires’ (235). He can belong and be understood only in the future world his works may create. He ends with this benediction: ‘I salute that finer larger world [...] and maybe ever again someone down the vista, some lingering vestige of my Lover-Shadow, may look back and appreciate an ancestral salutation’ (235). Here, the future audience *is* his Lover Shadow, *is* the infinitely receptive audience he requires, *is*, even, his descendant and, far from ignoring him and his work, obligingly does what he suggests. It looks back and watches him wave. If only in the realm of science fiction, Wells receives the audience he needs in order to remake the world; however, in a paradox worthy of science fiction, this audience can exist

⁴⁹ H. G. Wells, *H. G. Wells in Love: Postscript to an Experiment in Autobiography*, Wells Collection ms. W-I-L (page labelled B-317), University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign.

⁵⁰ See Wells, *H. G. Wells in Love*, 236, for Wells’s final excisions.

only in a world his works have already remade.⁵¹ This faint and paradoxical hope sustains the narrative into its final sentences.

The problem of reception – a reminder that the author can neither create nor control his audience, but that this audience reads and interprets him – became for Wells an obsession that haunts his autobiographies. In *H. G. Wells in Love* Wells neither achieves his ideal audience nor despairs of its possibility. Perhaps Wells's audience, despite his best efforts at seduction, will continue to reject his advances and resist his works, leaving his dreams without their intended effect. But perhaps Wells's apocalyptically-imagined audience, the future Lover-Shadow, will arise, finally read his books as they should be read and fulfil his prophecies. One simply can never know. In the final pages of Wells's final autobiography, the prophet of the World State, like the protagonist of *When the Sleeper Wakes*, passes into a state of suspended animation in which he awaits the coming of that future world where, just possibly, he will be brought back to life as the 'Master of the Earth'.⁵²

⁵¹ This element of Wells's audience dynamic accords with William Scheick's theory in his *The Splintering Frame: The Later Fiction of H. G. Wells* (Victoria, BC: English Literary Studies, 1984) that Wells's last novels are 'framed for a Utopian audience' (44).

⁵² H. G. Wells, *When the Sleeper Wakes* (Leipzig: Tauchnitz, 1899), 90.