

AESTHETICS, NARRATIVE AND THE CRITIQUE OF RESPECTABILITY IN
THE HISTORY OF MR POLLY

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The reception of *The History of Mr Polly* (1910) has been, in part, linked to its humorous and yet scathing critique of late-Victorian and Edwardian middle-class culture and society. It is, as Patrick Parrinder has argued, a ‘Comedy of Limitation’,¹ taking aim at a variety of stifling social institutions, beliefs, and practices – exposing their often absurd and tragic consequences. And yet, for all that, a considerable amount of the criticism of the novel has focused almost exclusively on the character of Mr Polly and his apparent social deficiency. Norman and Jeanne Mackenzie, for example, have argued that the novel is about a ‘maladjusted man who, unable to make the objective world conform to his subjective desires, runs away into the comfort of his fantasies’.² Though Wells was certainly concerned with the socially antithetical aspects of Mr Polly’s actions and desires, the overarching critical perspective of the novel is aimed primarily at the limitations of a ‘maladjusted’ culture and society, rather than the deficiencies of Mr Polly. His ‘fantasies’ are very much related to the often tedious and deadening realities of respectable society and his eventual release from its material, psychological and ideological control does not signify ‘flight’ – that is, Mr Polly running away from reality – but rather a dramatic transformation born of a profound insight into the nature and contingencies of social reality.

Wells supports this reading of Mr Polly in a variety of writings, though perhaps most explicitly in *Experiment in Autobiography* (1934), where we get a clear sense of what motivates, in part, his construction and treatment of Mr Polly. In *Experiment in Autobiography* we learn that Mr Polly embodies many of the characteristics and qualities that Wells recognised in himself, his brother Frank, and his father, Joseph. Concerning his elder brother, Wells writes:

When I rebelled against the servitude of the draper’s shop, my yawps of liberation had been too much for my elder brother and he had thrown up the yardstick also. He had

¹ Patrick Parrinder, ‘The Comedy of Limitation’, in *H. G. Wells: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Bernard Bergonzi (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1976), 69-82 (69).

² Norman and Jeanne Mackenzie, *H. G. Wells: A Biography* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1973), 266.

conceived an ideal of country existence from reading Washington Irving's *Bracebridge Hall*, and he quartered himself with my father first at Rogate and then at Liss, and wandered about the country repairing clocks, peddling watches, appreciating character and talking nonsense. If it was not particularly profitable, it was amusing – and free. There is a touch of my brother about Mr Polly – the character, not the story.³

Wells did not believe Frank to be a maladjusted man, frustrated by his inability to make the objective world conform to his subjective desires. Nor does he view Mr Polly as such. Of course, the draper's shop constitutes only one dimension of the objective reality. And yet, for those with sensibilities akin to what Wells designates as 'authentic, artistic and creative workers',⁴ the draper's shop (and all that it signifies as a metaphor of middle-class existence) must necessarily function as a kind of prison. Whereas the 'rats' and 'pushers' of capitalism, described in *The Work, Wealth and Happiness of Mankind* (1931) as the 'chief enemies of mankind',⁵ may very well thrive in the shop and beyond, those like Mr Polly with predominately aesthetic sensibilities and desires must suffer dreadfully.

But why is this the case? What is it about the shop (read as a socio-economic and cultural metaphor) that rubs against the grain of those with aesthetically responsive minds like Mr Polly? Ultimately, the reality of the shop requires, encourages and validates certain types of performance that are grounded in the concept of use, which is the operative term that determines value within the larger socio-cultural sphere. There, performance aims to produce and maintain quantifiable results (that is its use). The aesthetic and those with aesthetically responsive minds are fundamentally at odds with this, for their concern is primarily in being, experience or phenomena *as such* – not as a means to a calculated socio-economic end. Part of the argument of the novel is that the aesthetic is, ultimately, useless – or, to put it slightly differently, that its importance is not contained in its utility.

³ H. G. Wells, *Experiment in Autobiography: Discoveries and Conclusions of a Very Ordinary Brain (since 1866)* (New York: Macmillan, 1934), 157.

⁴ Wells, *Experiment in Autobiography*, 157.

⁵ H. G. Wells, *The Work, Wealth and Happiness of Mankind* (New York: Doubleday, Doran, 1931), 884.

The antithetical relationship between the shop and the responsive mind (in *The History of Mr Polly* and beyond) helps to illustrate some of the ways in which Wells views capitalism itself as a foundational problem. Much of Wells's criticism of capitalism (and the dominant culture and society of late-Victorian and Edwardian Britain) stems from a concern for aesthetics, creativity and individual expression and freedom.⁶ Regarding capitalism, socialism and responsive (or aesthetic) minds, Wells writes:

In a social order where all the good things go to those who constitutionally and necessarily, watch, grab and clutch all the time, the quality of my father, the rich humour and imagination of my brother Frank, were shoved out of play and wasted altogether. In a world of competitive acquisitiveness the natural lot of my sort of people is to be hustled out of existence by the smarties and pushers. A very strong factor in my developing socialism is and always has been the more or less conscious impulses, an increasingly conscious impulse, to anticipate and disarm the smarty and the pusher and make the world safe for the responsive and candid mind and the authentic, artistic and creative worker.⁷

In *The History of Mr Polly* aesthetic response and the creative space of narrative oppose the dominant world of the 'smarties and pushers'. As a form of socio-cultural satire, the novel thus concerns itself primarily with the significance of aesthetics (and aesthetic pleasure in particular) and its potentially antithetical relationship to middle-class normality and respectability. For Wells, normality and respectability are little more than coded performances

⁶ For some, this claim may seem ironic given Wells's various comments on aesthetics in relation to literature. Famously, Wells claimed that he, as a writer, sided with those 'opposed to the aesthetic valuation of literature' (Wells, *Experiment in Autobiography*, 532), suggesting perhaps that Wells did not put much value on aesthetics in general. However, we would do well to recall that his claim concerning 'aesthetic valuation' was in response to what he perceived as the posturing and performative nature of 'literary artists' such as Henry James, Ford Madox Ford and Joseph Conrad. Increasingly, Wells was convinced that writing must communicate a direct purpose for the *present*. He tells us, 'what I write *goes now*', and 'I moved more and more away from conscious artistry and its exaltations and chagrins; I was strengthened against self-dramatisation and confirmed in my disposition to social purposiveness (Wells, *Experiment in Autobiography*, 532-33). The movement away from 'conscious artistry' and its 'exaltations', however, is not a disavowal of writing that heightens a subjective sense of beauty, truth and pleasure (the realm of aesthetics); nor is it an implicit critique of aesthetic sensibility. Rather, Wells's argument for 'purposiveness' as opposed to 'aesthetic valuation' opposes the attempt to universalise and abstract certain forms of writing. For Wells, literature, and narrative in particular, must have relevance for readers here and now and speak to the needs of the present.

that are intimately bound to the idea of use which, again, becomes one of the foundational determinants of socio-economic action and consciousness ('getting on' or profiting is the objective of use). Throughout the novel, Wells establishes a loose opposition between the allure and promise of aesthetic experience and the tedium and restrictions of middle-class life. The vacuous nature of Mr Polly's social existence puts him into a state of crisis and revolt, which leads him to seek imaginative and symbolic (if not, ultimately, real) alternatives.

For Mr Polly, the road to liberation passes through selected terrains of narrative. Ultimately, it is the various accounts and representations of the relationship between certain forms of narrative and aesthetic pleasure that allow Wells to situate precisely much of his critique of respectable culture and society. For Mr Polly, 'who reads Boccaccio and Rabelais and Shakespeare with gusto' (41) and is transformed and loses (if only momentarily) his nagging sense of the oppressiveness of existence when contemplating life from the perspective of narrative romance and adventure, narrative takes on a vital existential *and* aesthetic significance. It is the very thing that helps him in the battle against a stifling conformity and its miserable consequences.

In the novel, wonder and imagination are at the core of narrative and these subjective experiences oppose, in essence, social forces that seek to 'overwhelm soul and body'.⁸ As the artistic object, *par excellence*, of wonder and imagination, narrative, for Wells (and Mr Polly) embodies a 'grand land of sublimated things' and offers a 'happy asylum, refreshment, and refuge from the world of every day' (130). We discover in Mr Polly's delight in adventure, romance, and travel narratives, that they provide something more than simply escape. Such narratives offer alternative perspectives that allow Mr Polly to imagine different social and (inter-)subjective realities. They also open up and heighten the possibility of something primary and vital – the experience and sensibility of the aesthetic, the beautiful and the sublime:

Deep in the being of Mr Polly, deep in that darkness, like a creature which has been beaten about the head and left for dead but still lives, crawled a persuasion that over and

⁷ Wells, *Experiment in Autobiography*, 156-57.

⁸ H. G. Wells, *The History of Mr Polly* (Cambridge, MA: Riverside, 1960), 13. All further references to this novel are contained parenthetically within the text.

above the things that are jolly and ‘bits of all right’ there was beauty, there was delight; that somewhere – magically inaccessible, perhaps, but still somewhere – were pure and easy and joyous states of body and mind. (13)

It is the deep sense of the possibility and reality of beauty and pleasure that becomes the foundational and critical subtext of *The History of Mr Polly*. Without the expression of this sensibility, Wells’s critique of the limitations of middle-class culture and society would lose much of its force. All of this, of course, begs the question, what is the novel’s sense of the aesthetic and how does it underscore, solidify and illustrate its project of socio-cultural critique?

The Aesthetic of Window Treatments

I begin with the second chapter, ‘the Dismissal of Parsons’, and the account of Parsons’s ‘aesthetic’ of window treatments. In the humorous window episode and subsequent dismissal of Parsons, Wells draws our attention to the dichotomy between aesthetic need and desire and the contingencies of social respectability. Parsons, who ‘like many a fellow artist, fell prey to theories’, muses, ‘The art of window-dressing is in its infancy, O’ Man – in its blooming Infancy. All balance and stiffness like a blessed Egyptian picture. No joy in it, no blooming Joy! Conventional. A shop-window ought to get hold of people, *grip* ‘em as they go along. It stands to reason. Grip!’ (27). Implicit in Parsons’s ‘theory’ of the aesthetic of window treatments is the notion that common aspects of daily life must be infused with the joy of vibrant artistic expressions, objects and experiences (no matter how absurd they may seem to others). The account of Parsons’s artistic rebellion is farcical, mixed with no small measure of grotesque irony, and yet such rebellion, and the pathos that creates it, is precisely what the novel suggests is needed as an antidote to everyday reality. In the staid objects of middle-class respectability, there is ‘no blooming Joy’, for the culture itself is partially maintained by its proscribed and received notions and customs of art and beauty which, for those who wish to be ‘gripped’ in their aesthetic

experiences and expressions, can only produce objects that are ‘bleak’. Delightfully, Parson’s makes the point quite clear:

‘Look at old Morrison’s dress-stuff windows! Tidy, tasteful, correct, I grant you, but Bleak!’ He let out the word reinforced to a shout: ‘Bleak!’

‘Bleak!’ echoed Mr Polly.

‘Just pieces of stuff in rows, rows of tidy little puffs, perhaps one bit just unrolled, quiet tickets.’

‘Might as well be in church, O’Man,’ said Mr Polly.

‘A window ought to be exciting,’ said Parsons; ‘it ought to make you say, “El-lo!” when you see it.’ (27)

In this exchange, we have part of the novel’s essential complaint: Victorian and Edwardian culture and society are decidedly unexciting - moreover, they are bleak in their attempt to maintain ‘convention’, ‘balance’ and ‘stiffness’. For Parsons, the experience of the aesthetic ought to transform, if only momentarily, the being and perception of reality – its function is certainly not to signify and communicate respectability. The true aesthetic object excites in its difference from what is expected (this is part of the core definition of the aesthetic throughout the novel) – its very nature is antithetical to the proscribed social codes and practices of middle-class normality. There is thus a dimension of adventure in the aesthetic. Whereas the novel suggests that codes of respectability are authorised and legitimated in part in collective fear and a lack of imagination, the real experience of the aesthetic is rooted in a sensuous abandonment and displacement of social contingencies and concerns. Sensing the truth of this, the young Mr Polly is enthralled by Parsons’s ‘artistic’ vision and his resolve to act upon it. The result of Parsons’s radical window dressing is exhilarating and somewhat frightening for the young Mr Polly:

Parsons had made a huge asymmetrical pile of thick white-and-red blankets twisted and rolled to accentuate their woolly softness heaped up in a warm disorder, with large window tickets inscribed in blazing red letters: 'Cosey Comfort at Cut Prices,' and 'Curl up and Cuddle below Cost.' Regardless of the daylight he had turned up the electric light on that side of the window to reflect a warm glow upon the head, and behind, in pursuit of contrasted bleakness, he was now hanging long strips of grey Silesia and chilly coloured linen dusting.

It was wonderful, but – (29)

Parsons's asymmetrical pile is wonderful but it will not suffice, for radical deviation from the dictates and protocols of normality are intolerable to men such as Mr Garvace, who ultimately cannot comprehend Parsons's thoughts, feelings and actions. For the likes of Mr Garvace, artistic expression is necessarily limited and must ultimately succumb to the concerns of class identification and its codes of propriety. Thus, Parsons's presumption of freedom of expression and aesthetic delight is perceived as dangerous, for it disrupts the authority of routine, social expectation and custom. The lesson of Parsons's artistic rebellion is swift and direct: in the middle-class world; materialism and respectability are supreme and one cannot simply create and enjoy artistic objects of beauty. Indeed, the pursuit and expression of pleasure and beauty must be limited to what is deemed customary, normal and, most importantly, useful. Parsons and Mr Polly are taught that artistic rebels and aesthetes suffer consequences:

There are events that detach themselves from the general stream of occurrences and seem to partake of the nature of revelations. Such was this Parsons affair. It began by seeming grotesque; it ended disconcertingly. The fabric of Mr Polly's daily life was torn, and beneath it he discovered depths and terrors.

Life was not altogether a lark. (33)

The 'Parsons affair' is significant because it reveals to the youthful Mr Polly how social dictates and proscriptions seek to shape, bind and control the meaning, significance and

consequences of one's actions and desires. In the dismissal of Parsons, Mr Polly becomes painfully aware of the seriousness of social perception, performance and expectation. To be respectable, one must *act*, feel and think in certain proscribed ways, for experiential limitation – the partial determining of subjectivity through repetitious action and social judgements – is key to its establishment and continuance.

'Rabooloose' and the Wonder of Life

Filled with a variety of hopes and desires, otherwise frustrated and buried by social routine and custom, Mr Polly instinctively seeks to defy certain social limitations through books and narrative. Like his friends Parsons and Platt, Mr Polly is a devotee of carnivalistic literature – particularly the writings of Boccaccio, Chaucer and Rabelais, who partake in the satirical critique of 'official' or 'serious' culture. For the three Ps (Parsons, Platt and Polly), who 'thought the birth-feast of Gargantua the most glorious piece of writing in the world' (18) and would read it aloud 'when there was danger of hymn singing', part of the allure of Rabelais's *Gargantua* is its absolute inability to be assimilated into any kind of respectability. Mr Polly and his friends might very well agree with M. M. Bakhtin's claim regarding Rabelais's work and images:

Rabelais' images have a certain undestroyable nonofficial nature. No dogma, no authoritarianism, no narrow-minded seriousness can coexist with Rabelaisian images; these images are opposed to all that is finished and polished, to all pomposity, to every ready-made solution in the sphere of thought and world outlook.⁹

The essence of *Gargantua* is contained in its irreverent humour which for Bakhtin undermines the foundational ethos of restrictive and authoritarian culture. Ultimately, in its humour and excess, *Gargantua* offers a sense of liberation from the strictures of respectability. For the three

⁹ M. M. Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Helene Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 3.

Ps, *Gargantua*'s richness of language, its defiance of what Bakhtin describes as 'official' culture and its grotesque imagery provide decisive and dramatic contrasts to the world of everyday experience. Moreover, *Gargantua* achieves in essence the aesthetic ideal of Parsons's theory of window treatments – it 'grips' and transforms receptive readers and alters the perception and sense of reality.

Ultimately, Mr Polly and his friends find none of the proscriptions and pressures of getting on in the world of work, none of the platitudes of maintaining appearances in the books that they love. Rather, the books that speak most forcefully to Mr Polly and his friends are the ones that offer glimpses and accounts of life well lived outside of the boundaries of rigid respectability. In particular, travel, romance and adventure narratives serve as essential antidotes to the boredom and confinement of lower middle-class existence. In books, the dull and unfulfilling routines of a shopkeeper's reality vanish and 'the wonder of life' is restored for a while. The contrast between everyday routine and invigorating narrative suggests that the wonder of life is a kind of aesthetic experience – grounded in a sensibility receptive to beauty and mystery. There is an undeniable and consistent aesthetic sensuousness in the narratives and heroes that Mr Polly loves best. 'Mr Polly dreamt always of picturesque and mellow things, and had an instinctive hatred of the strenuous life. [...] He loved Falstaff and Hudibras and coarse laughter, and the Old England of Washington Irving and the memory of Charles the Second's courtly days' (42). In the mind of Mr Polly, these heroes and their environments stand in symbolic opposition to the lingering Victorian gospel of work, respectability and the strenuous life, for they provide and conjure images of life lived in ease and fulfilment. Beyond that they have no use in the typical sense of the word. And yet, as literary constructs, they are inscribed with an aesthetic sensuousness that sparks the renewal of wonder and imagination.

Still, there is more to Mr Polly's love of books than simply alternative perspectives and accounts of adventure and romance. Mr Polly is also deeply receptive to the pleasures of language itself. Described as 'a man whose brain devotes its hinterland to making odd phrases and nicknames out of ill-conceived words, whose conception of life is a lump of auriferous rock to which all the value is given by rare veins of unbusiness like joy' (41), Mr Polly takes great delight in language that is decidedly *not* utilitarian – that is, whose function is not simply to communicate thought and information, but rather to transform itself into an aesthetic experience. We witness how 'ill-conceived' phrasemaking for Mr Polly is an act of remaking the world

through neologism and polysyllabic delight, and how the ‘vivid phrase’ becomes an object of beauty and pleasure. In part, Mr Polly’s relation to narrative and language is that of the aesthete:

There was, for example, the voyages of La Perouse, with many careful, explicit woodcuts and the frankest revelations of the ways of the eighteenth-century sailorman, homely, adventurous, drunken, incontinent, and delightful, until he floated, smooth and slow, with all sails set and mirrored in the glassy water, until his head was full of the thought of shining, kindly women, who smiled at him and wreathed his head with unfamiliar flowers. He had, too, a piece of a book about the lost palaces of Yucatan, those vast terraces buried in primordial forest, of whose makers there is now no human memory. With La Perouse he linked ‘The Island Nights’ Entertainments,’ and it never palled upon him that in the dusky stabbing of the ‘Island of Voices’ something poured over the stabber’s hands ‘like warm tea.’ Queer, incommunicable joy it is, the joy of the vivid phrase that turns the statement of the horriddest fact to beauty. (129)

And yet, the aesthetic response to the vivid phrase and the alluring images formed in narrative does not exist without the suggestion of frustration and unfulfilled desire. In a variety of ways, Wells shows us how the seductiveness of an image (the ‘homely, adventurous, drunken, incontinent, and delightful’ sailorman, for example) is measured by degrees of contrast to respectable reality. The more powerful the image, the more decisively it contrasts to pressures and facts of Mr Polly’s social state of being. Ultimately, we are meant to read Mr Polly’s romantic longings and narrative pleasures as so many indictments against the real limitations of middle-class culture and society, for they point to what is missing and needed in the world of rigid respectability.

Paper Walls of Everyday Experience and the Road

The truth of this last point is communicated perhaps most clearly in the symbolic significance of the road. For much of his history, Mr Polly is haunted with the image and desire of the road – of travelling, of encountering new and interesting people and things along the way. Initially, the symbolic significance of the road is linked with the carefree companionship of the three Ps and the sensuous discovery of the English countryside. Beauty, adventure and companionship are to be found on the road. It functions on Bank Holidays as the space that allows the three Ps to live outside of the gaze and working hours of the Bazaar. It is essentially emblematic of freedom and pleasure. It is where one might live life as narrative romance and adventure. However, after the dismissal of Parsons and the break-up of the three Ps, the symbolic significance of the road is increasingly inscribed with the pathos of unfulfilled desire:

He had dreamt of casual encounters with delightfully interesting people by the wayside – even romantic encounters. Such things happened in Chaucer and ‘Bocashiew’; they happened with extreme facility in Mr Richard le Gallienne’s very detrimental book, ‘The Quest of the Golden Girl,’ which he had read at Canterbury; but he had no confidence they would happen in England – to him. (71)

The fulfilment of desire is removed in time and space – always beyond where Mr Polly exists. Thus, the road is not simply symbolic of hope and freedom; it is also tinged with Mr Polly’s sense of alienation and despair. As a sign, it communicates a desire for a profoundly different kind of life and social experience, and yet it also suggests that meaningful life might only exist elsewhere for others who are decidedly unlike Mr Polly:

He was haunted by the memory of what was either a half forgotten picture or a dream; a carriage was drawn up by the wayside and four beautiful people, two men and two women graciously dressed, were dancing a formal ceremonious dance, full of bows and curtsies, to the music of a wandering fiddler they had encountered. They had been driving one way and he walking another – a happy encounter with this obvious result. They might have come straight out of happy Theleme, whose motto is: ‘Do what thou wilt’....

Mr Polly, dear heart! firmly believed that things like that could and did happen – somewhere. Only it puzzled him that morning that he never saw them happening. Perhaps they happened south of Guildford! Perhaps they happened in Italy. Perhaps they ceased to happen a hundred years ago. Perhaps they happened just round the corner – on week-days when all good Mr Pollys are safely shut up in shops. (72)

In passages such as this, we witness a gap between the authorial awareness of reality and the hope and belief of Mr Polly. Though Wells implicitly suggests here that Mr Polly's belief in spontaneous romance and adventure is somewhat naïve, he does not criticise or trivialise the desire that motivates the belief. Rather, Wells encourages us to be mindful of the social and historical meanings and realities that determine Mr Polly's hopes and desire. Certainly, his haunted memory of the 'half forgotten picture' or 'dream' is emblematic of his longing for freedom and pleasure. The idea of 'do what thou wilt' stands against the rigid limitations of respectable culture and society and, within the strictures of middle-class normality, it is of course an impossibility. 'Good Mr Pollys' never live the life of romance and adventure as long as they remain wedded to the proscribed routines and boundaries of respectability. Ultimately, the profound experience of beauty, pleasure and adventure demand something more than passive anticipation and desire. Whereas wonderful things often do happen on the road in narrative, in reality one must act decisively, despite social expectations and conventions (this is, again, part of the lesson of Parsons's aesthetic theory of window treatments).

It requires quite a bit of misery and a botched attempt at suicide to produce this liberating insight for Mr Polly. Not surprisingly, his moment of enlightenment is described as a shock of critical self-awareness. He fully realises in the contemplation of 'the end' how the hollow, shoddy and illusory nature of respectability is maintained in the routines of everyday life; equally important, he discovers how his own cowardice and lack of decisive action and imagination have bound him unnecessarily to a life he loathes. The effect of his realisation is dramatic:

The End! And it seemed to him now that life had never begun for him, never! It was as if his soul had been cramped and his eyes bandaged from the hour of his birth. Why had he lived such a life? Why had he submitted to things, blundered into things? Why had he

never insisted on the things he thought beautiful and the things he desired, never sought them, never fought for them, taken any risk for them, died rather than abandon them? They were the things that mattered. Safety did not matter. A living did not matter unless there were things to live for.... (153)

If events such as the dismissal of Parsons, the marriage to Miriam and the prospect of personal bankruptcy impress upon Mr Polly the idea of absolute social determination, then it is the deep awareness of death that finally explodes the idea of social inevitability. In the novel's most famous passage, Wells writes:

When a man has once broken through the paper walls of everyday circumstance, those unsubstantial walls that hold so many of us securely prisoned from the cradle to the grave, he has made a discovery. If the world does not please you, *you can change it*. Determine to alter it at any price, and you can change it altogether. (172)

In order to break through the 'paper walls of everyday circumstance', one must first be able to see them as such. Although facing mortality might allow one to see the illusory binds of daily life, Wells does not suggest that this experience alone creates enlightened thought and subjective liberation. Rather, it is the awareness of death coupled with a sense of the beautiful and the reality of unfulfilled desire that allows for 'a discovery' that is potentially revolutionary.

In the scope of the novel, changing the world begins by changing one's relation to it. Inevitably, this conclusion leads Wells and Mr Polly back to the contrast between utility and performance and aesthetics and pleasure. Attempting to perform respectability disallows Mr Polly the realisation of his desires. Only after abandoning his role as shopkeeper and husband does Mr Polly have the capacity to experience directly some of the things described in narrative. Indeed, as many commentators have noted, the novel's conclusion provides a utopian wish fulfilment of sorts for Mr Polly. In settling at the Potwell Inn, he is able to realise many of his narrative fantasies and desires. He acts the part of the chivalric hero against the menacing Uncle Jim and his aesthetic sensibilities are encouraged and satisfied by the idyllic landscape of his new

surroundings. Ultimately, the Potwell Inn signifies and allows the actualisation of picturesque and mellow things so dear to Mr Polly. At the conclusion of the novel, we are left primarily with a description of personal fulfilment realized in the experience and meditative awareness of ease and the aesthetic sublime:

It was one of those evenings serenely luminous, amply and atmospherically still, when the river bend was at its best. A swan floated against the dark green masses of the further bank, the stream flowed broad and shining to its destiny, with scarce a ripple – except where the reeds came out from the headland, and the three poplars rose clear and harmonious against the sky of green and yellow. It was as if everything lay securely within a great, warm, friendly globe of crystal sky. It was as safe and inclosed and fearless as a child that has still to be born. It was an evening full of quality, of tranquil, unqualified assurance. Mr Polly's mind was filled with the persuasion that indeed all things whatsoever must needs be satisfying and complete. (224)

In the last instance, Wells concludes his criticism of late-Victorian and Edwardian culture and society by suggesting an approach toward life itself that is no longer alienated from the pleasures described in and created through certain forms of narrative. But perhaps more significantly, at the close of the novel we are shown how Mr Polly is able to merge the concerns and experiences sought in narrative with those of everyday life. By breaking free of the binds of respectability, Mr Polly is allowed to live the life of the aesthetically responsive mind and thus rid himself of the overarching social concern with utility and performance:

'What have we done,' said Mr Polly, 'to get an evening like this? Lord! Look at it!' He sent his arm round the great curve of the sky.... 'Sometimes I think I live for sunsets.'

'I don't see that it does you any good always looking at sunsets, like you do,' said the fat woman.

'Nor me. But I do. Sunsets are things I was made to like.'

'They don't help you,' said the fat woman thoughtfully.

‘Who cares?’ said Mr Polly.... He pointed his hand toward the neighbour’s hedge. ‘Look at ‘em – against the yellow – and they’re just stingin’ nettles. Nasty weeds—if you count things by their uses. And no help in the life hereafter. But just look at them!’ (226-227)

In describing the concerns of contemporary novelists, Wells writes in *Experiment in Autobiography*: ‘We are going to write of wasted opportunities and latent beauties until a thousand new ways of living open to men and women. We are going to appeal to the young and the hopeful and the curious, against the established, the dignified, and defensive’ (417). Although *The History of Mr Polly* may not offer ‘a thousand new ways of living’, it does provide an in depth account of ‘wasted opportunities’ and ‘latent beauties’, while intimating and ultimately offering a glimpse at an approach toward living that stands against the status quo of middle-class respectability.