

Book Review: W. Warren Wagar, *H. G. Wells: Traversing Time* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2004), xiv, 338 pp. ISBN 0-8195-6725-6. \$34.95. [By Elmar Schenkel]

Since 1989 we have been living in a world that is characterised by an urge to redefine itself and to redraw boundaries not only among states but also between states and a global order. In light of these developments, H. G. Wells's thought has gained a new relevance. It seems as if he had anticipated not only the nature and the problems of this situation but also the very process of redefinition. It is high time, therefore, to reconsider his work with regard to our present predicaments. This has been done courageously and cogently by the late Warren Wagar, one of those Wellsians who, ever since his 1961 study, *H. G. Wells and the World State*, has always paid close attention to Wells's political reflections concerning ongoing processes. His new, and alas,

last book – his twelfth – bears witness to this in his passionate portrayal, which to some extent also reflects Wagar’s own stance, hopes and expectations. It is, however, not merely a subjective study since it brings into relief objective features of Wells’s ideas of current developments.

Wagar confesses to this personal involvement in his epilogue: ‘Like Wells, I have always been a time traveler.’ Reading this book is indeed like travelling through time: the periods of Wells’s thought as it unfolded and refolded throughout his life. It is, as history was for Wells, a history of ideas, not a biography though there are numerous biographical asides. Wagar’s passion is incited and kindled by ideas and concepts, political programmes and utopography.

Wells came into his life when Wagar was ‘a veritable tadpole’. This tadpole was especially intrigued by the 1934 Knopf edition of *Seven Famous Novels by H. G. Wells*, appearing in the same year as Thomas Mann’s *Joseph and His Brothers* and Mikhail Sholokhov’s *And Quiet Flows the Don*. Wells’s book on the family shelf, however, eclipsed everything else for the boy; it became his treasure island. The problem, however, is more general, as Wagar suggests. These seven scientific romances eclipsed almost everything else that Wells himself wrote. But there is, as Jorge Luis Borges, a long-time admirer, showed, more than one Wells. According to the Argentine writer, on some distant day in the future literary historians will debunk the idea of an author called H. G. Wells. They will prove with some certainty that there were actually six authors working under the same pseudonym. In this sense, Wagar is mainly working on two or three of these authors: the moral utopian writer, the encyclopaedist and the journalist. His forays into the fictional works are, however, useful since they establish subtle links between different layers in Wells’s mind. Wagar’s journey through Wells takes us from the early ‘Discovery of the Future’ and *Anticipations to Mind at the End of Its Tether*, and Wagar proves to be a guide as well-informed and knowledgeable as any. The detailed discussion of neglected works such as *Anticipations*, *The Shape of Things to Come* or *The Open Conspiracy* will help new readers to discover the wealth, but also the contradictions and mazes of Wells’s thought. Of *The Shape of Things to Come*, Wagar has this to say: ‘If I had only one book of Wells to rescue from a burning house or take to a desert island, it might well be *The Shape of Things to Come*.’ While critics generally agree that sometime between 1900 and 1910, Wells sold his birthright for a pot of message, Wagar salvages a number of fictions that appeared in the second half of Wells’s life showing that they are more than simply products of a tired imagination. I, for one, am happy to see that here is a critic able to see the qualities of such a novel as *Mr*

Blettsworthy on Rampole Island, which could justly be compared to Hermann Hesse's *Steppenwolf*, or, as Wagar suggests, to Doris Lessing's *Briefing for a Descent into Hell*. It is exciting to compare Wells to new types of writers, not simply those hailing from the world of SF. Saul Bellow's *Mr Sammler's Planet* could have been another instance; or what about looking at Sri Aurobindo's reaction to *God the Invisible King* (neither of which are mentioned in Wagar's study)?

Obviously, in a book covering such vast territories of thought there are bound to be areas left out. Let me deplore, then, that Wagar omits a discussion of Wells's trips to the Soviet Union and the ensuing *Russia in the Shadows*, though this could have been enlightening as to his stance on socialism. It is also regrettable that Olaf Stapledon is not mentioned as one of Wells's greatest disciples, especially when Wagar writes about Wells's thoughts on transcending our species. Be this as it may, Wagar has rescued great chunks of Wellsian territory that otherwise might have been lost to future readers or other inhabitants of the Internet – which, according to Wagar, is still a far cry from any sort of World Brain. Wells, as we learn from this in-depth study of his intellect, refuses to go away. He may be an Invisible Man at times, but his sneeze will always betray him.