

Book Review: Harold Bloom, ed., *H. G. Wells* [‘Bloom’s Modern Critical Views’] (Philadelphia: Chelsea House, 2005). xii, 245 pp. ISBN 0-7910-8130-3. US \$38.95. / £22.40 (approx.) / €33 (approx.). [By John S. Partington]

This collection of previously-published essays, edited by the distinguished literary scholar Harold Bloom, is an excellent addition to the Wells critical canon. And, for a change, this attractive hardback is not exuberantly priced!

The volume begins with an introductory essay by Bloom himself which, inspired by Italo Calvino, compares Wells’s ‘The Country of the Blind’ to the work of Jorge Luis Borges. While Calvino, in *Fantastic Tales: Visionary and Everyday* (1983; trans. 1997), argues that Wells’s story is ‘a meditation on cultural diversity’, Bloom claims it shows Wells as an ‘heroic individualist but burgeoning Fascist’, with Nunez ending the story equally unsympathetic as when it opens, with his visions of lording it over the blind inhabitants of the mountain community into which he falls.

To me, Bloom’s claim that Wells was a ‘burgeoning Fascist’ is extreme and unfair, but he uses the turn of phrase as a reference to the penultimate essay in the anthology, Philip Coupland’s ‘H. G. Wells’s “Liberal Fascism”’ (2000). Coupland, a scholar of British far-right ideology and utopianism, finds in Wells a thinker who (consciously or not) combines the traits of both of these interwar thought patterns. By presenting his own band of world order in such works as *A Modern Utopia* (1905), *The Shape of Things to Come* (1933) and *The Holy Terror* (1939), Coupland maintains that Wells simultaneously rejected contemporary fascism while creating his own totalitarian (fascistic) elite to sweep in the liberal world order presented in those works (the samurai, the airmen, the ‘Purple Shirts’). Despite Wells’s radical thinking, the allure of elite rule and the imposition of a ‘right way’ was too strong even for him, and so some of his proposed methods for achieving his new world order paralleled those advanced by Benito Mussolini and, to a lesser extent, Oswald Mosley in the 1930s.

Turning to the first essay of the volume, we find W. Warren Wagar’s ‘H. G. Wells and the Scientific Imagination’ (1989). By Wagar’s high standards, this essay is lightweight, though interesting all the same as a ‘popular science’ piece more than an academic article. In it, Wagar tells the story of Wells’s influence on the scientific creativity of the nuclear physicist, Leo

Szilard, and the rocket scientist, Robert H. Goddard, through their readings of his *The World Set Free* (1914) and *The War of the Worlds* (1898), respectively. Wagar notes the paradox of the destruction and fear wrought by the inventions of Szilard and Goddard, two humanist-scientists deeply concerned for world peace. Wagar might have paralleled their paradox with that of Wells himself, who similarly campaigned for a world at peace while publishing fiction containing the most devastating conflicts imaginable as the precursor to the creation of such a millennium.

In Colin Manlove's 'Charles Kingsley, H. G. Wells, and the Machine in Victorian Fiction' (1993), Kingsley and Wells are foregrounded as the primary Victorian novelists responsible for treating science and industry as complimentary with or part of nature, rather than antithetical to it. In Kingsley's *Water-Babies* (1863), Tom experiences natural phenomena as machines, or at least as operating like machines, and learns moral lessons throughout the story as a result of either maintaining the natural equilibrium or causing disequilibrium and thus being punished. His punishments, however, are not administered by any outside agency, but through the dislocation of nature itself which, like a machine, behaves erratically when not tended in the appropriate manner. That Kingsley was consciously drawing a parallel between science and nature is clear through his use of language throughout the novel and which is reinforced at its end when Tom, having come through a number of trials, ends up a Victorian scientist instead of the chimney sweep which he starts out as: 'nature's laboratory has created its own technician'.

Although Manlove proceeds in the essay to a brief treatment of Charles Dickens's rendering of machine civilization in *Hard Times* (1854), the remainder of it focuses on Wells's considerations of technology in *The Time Machine* (1895) and *The War of the Worlds* (1898). Manlove ably argues that, while 'mind' has no place in *The Water-Babies* or *Hard Times* with regard to controlling science and technology, in *The Time Machine* 'it is mind, and its child the wonderful machine, that dominates and degrades the physical, whether that "physical" be nature, society, or even the body itself.' This projection of the machine as dominant over its maker is taken further in *The War of the Worlds* where the Martians are physically helpless on Earth, reliant on their tripod machines to carry them and fight their battles, and on their medical instruments to inject the nutritive (though ultimately suicidal) human blood into their bodies for sustenance.

Manlove's conclusion is that, while Kingsley and Dickens 'both look at the machine from the point of view of its effect on individual beings', Wells makes a new departure in his scientific romances, where 'we see science become capable of being a law unto itself, its invented products thrown off like dangerous sparks that can threaten, not subserve, the social system.' Despite the difference in degree of scientific advance between the mid- and late-Victorian times (between the pre-Darwinian and the pre-Einsteinian periods), however, one thing is asserted in the writings of both Kingsley and Wells; the need for an equilibrium to be struck between mind, body and nature. While Kingsley asserts the inevitability of such an equilibrium, Wells warns of the danger of mind disregarding both body and nature, and thus logically desires the striking of an equilibrium even while promoting the need for further and further scientific advance.

Kathryn Hume's 'Eat or Be Eaten: H. G. Wells's *Time Machine*' (1990) looks at the ideology of dominance present in Wells's first novel, represented by power, size and gender. Hume demonstrates that weakness, diminutiveness and femininity interconnect in *The Time Machine*, opposing the Time Traveller's own strength, height and maleness to justify his dominance of the Eloi and repulsion towards the Morlocks. Hume sees in *The Time Machine* a hopelessly insurmountable tale of degeneration, arguing that class harmony and an end to exploitation would result in stasis through lack of competition, while bourgeois exploitation leads to the fission of humanity into Morlocks and Eloi, and a consequent degeneration through the 'permanency' of the Eloi's ascendancy. Not only does the Eloi's lack of exertion, in this latter scenario, result in their inability to adapt biologically, but it leaves them prey to the cannibalistic Morlocks who, nevertheless, are doomed to subterranean existence and thus cannot emerge as master's of the Earth.

John Huntington's 'H. G. Wells: Problems of an Amorous Utopian' (1987) looks at Wells's conflict with his own ideals. Despite his calls for 'sacrifice and discipline' in *A Modern Utopia* (1905) and elsewhere, Wells could never cease pursuing his sexual ideal of the 'Lover-Shadow'. The problem for Huntington of this pursuit 'is that, while it is social insofar as it draws one out of pure self-centeredness, at the same time it represents a drive that has no regard for social good', and Huntington observes that the difference between Wells's 1934 *Experiment in Autobiography* and his posthumous *H. G. Wells in Love* (1984) is that the latter 'depicts a Wells relentlessly intent on his private desires.' Huntington believes that Wells aimed to rationalise these seeming contradictions by rephrasing contemporary morality (as Remington desires in *The*

New Machiavelli [1911]) and releasing humanity from sexual guilt and thus liberating it from traditional instinctive taboos. This is most clearly expressed, for Huntington, in *A Modern Utopia*, where Wells's ideals are presented by 'the Voice' but Wells's own nature is acted out by the botanist, who expresses his heart's desire in conscious disregard of the utopian world around him (especially in light of the restraints which that world demands of its inhabitants).

Paul A. Cantor, in '*The Invisible Man* and the Invisible Hand: H. G. Wells's Critique of Capitalism' (1999), attempts to demonstrate the use of science fiction 'for exploring a larger set of economic and political problems.' Cantor maintains that Wells's *Invisible Man* (Griffin) can be seen to represent literally the 'hidden hand' of Adam Smith's *laissez-faire* capitalism. The first instance of the power of money in the novel is Griffin's ability to remain socially 'invisible' in a village where everyone knows everyone – so long as Griffin pays his rent, his landlady is not even concerned to know his name. It is when his payments cease that local curiosity is unleashed and Griffin is driven, first to lock himself in his room, before ultimately having to flee the prying eyes of the Iping villagers. As the novel develops Griffin comes to represent the pure consumer – he is an egoist, a secretive researcher and, throughout the story, he is constantly on the move seeking ways to satisfy basic human needs: food, clothing and shelter. To obtain these, and fulfil his wants, Griffin is also a thief, regularly emptying cash registers into the pockets of his forced accomplice, Thomas Marvel. Griffin's problem of course is that, while he can get anything he wants, he can not enjoy his acquisitions without become visible – even the foods he craves renders him temporarily visible when he eats them, until his digestive system assimilates them. Cantor remarks that Wells's creation of Griffin's paradoxical situation predates the Frankfurt School's later critique of capitalism which argues that capitalism 'may succeed in allowing consumers to acquire the goods they want, but it prevents people from enjoying them.' Capitalism's creation of infinite desire results in perpetual dissatisfaction.

Curiously, having argued that Wells's *Invisible Man* critiques capitalism in this way (on textual evidence alone, with no clues from Wells as to authorial intent), Cantor then asserts Wells's failure in his critique, claiming that, as socialist states of the twentieth century alienated individuals as much or more than capitalist ones, making people 'feel like zeros', Wells's attack is really aimed at modern society, both capitalist and socialist. So the critique of capitalism that Cantor makes for Wells is subsequently torn down by him with the suggestion that Wells should have critiqued modern society more generally. Why Cantor did not demonstrate this latter

critique from the start is a mystery, as his evidence is all textual – Cantor makes no references to Wells’s non-fictional writings.

Janice H. Harris’s ‘Wifely Silence and Speech in Three Marriage Novels by H. G. Wells’ (1994) discusses marriage relations in *Marriage* (1912), *The Passionate Friends* (1913) and *The Wife of Sir Isaac Harman* (1914), and finds that the general critical consensus about marriage in modern British fiction – ‘a disaster’ – is an oversimplification. Harris maintains that *Marriage* is important for asking key questions which Wells then attempts to answer in the two succeeding novels: ‘*Marriage* entertains a range of cultural voices on the problems of modern marriage, but that is all it manages to do. The novel gives little indication that Wells has sorted through the many texts and voices he has included to find those that are persuasive.’ Harris goes on to argue that, ‘*The Wife of Sir Isaac Harman* reads as a thoughtful response to the unevenness of *Marriage*, while *The Passionate Friends* reads as a worried reaction.’ In her conclusion, Harris states that ‘In their distinct ways, *Marriage* and *The Passionate Friends* ultimately valorize wifely silence. In *The Wife of Sir Isaac Harman*, Wells constructs an increasingly articulate, activist heroine and, simultaneously, insists that the males who would gag her must cease their obstructionist ways.’ This fine essay, demonstrating Wells’s struggle with (at least one aspect of) feminism gives due praise to Wells’s finest novel of the ‘woman question’ (and one which is too often neglected or disregarded altogether), *The Wife of Sir Isaac Harman*.

Patrick A. McCarthy, in ‘*Heart of Darkness* and the Early Novels of H. G. Wells: Evolution, Anarchy, Entropy’ (1986), argues that, in their work of the late-nineteenth century, ‘Wells and Conrad reveal a fundamental kinship with implications in the moral and aesthetic dimensions of their art’ founded upon ‘the evolutionary theme’, ‘the portrayal of a megalomaniacal mind’ and ‘the pessimistic implications of the Second Law of Thermodynamics.’ McCarthy draws several parallels between *Heart of Darkness* (1899) and Wells’s scientific romances, such as when he notes Wells’s reversing of European imperial conquest in *The War of the Worlds*, with Martians causing Southeast Englanders to rampage in fear of extermination, and when Conrad ‘speculates on what would happen “if a lot of mysterious niggers armed with all kinds of fearful weapons suddenly took to travelling on the road between Deal and Gravesend, catching the yokels right and left to carry heavy loads for them”.’ McCarthy expands such connections to include the relationship between Marlow and Kurtz and that of the Time Traveller and the Morlocks, as well as identifying connections between Kurtz’s and

Marlow's views of the Congolese, and Prendick's views of the Beast Folk in *The Island of Doctor Moreau* (1896). For all the transference of ideas between Wells and Conrad however, McCarthy's point in the essay 'is not merely how Conrad responded to Wells, but how both men responded to their age.'

Other essays included in this collection are 'The De-Forming In-Struction of Wells's *The Wonderful Visit* and *The Sea Lady* (1987) by William J. Scheick, 'The Conception of Science in Wells's *The Invisible Man*' (2001) by Robert Sirabian, 'The Grotesque in Wells's *The Invisible Man*' (1983) by Bruce Beiderwell and 'Wasted Value: The Serial Logic of H. G. Wells's *Tono-Bungay*' (1999) by William Kupinse. The volume also contains a chronology (with some errors) and a short but useful bibliography.