

Mr. H. G. Wells as Gospeller.

IT seems that Mr. H. G. Wells began his public career with a mental background in which modern science was superimposed upon a faded evangelicism. In his youth he found science challenging traditional beliefs and agnosticism summoning men from the worship of an unknowable Infinite to the exploration of the knowable finite and its almost infinite possibilities. The period was, as he has said, almost hectically conscious of Progress. It was not, however, progress in the earlier romantic-philosophic-religious sense in which it was hymned by the dreamers and revolutionaries of '48; rather it was progress in the American sense of "development"—that is, scientific invention, planned efficiency and economy, and the extension of "civilisation." It was the period, in short, of Herbert Spencer, Huxley, Edison and H. M. Stanley; and young Mr. Wells felt called to prove himself worthy of his citizenship in a world no longer "boxed in by the Creation and the Day of Judgment," but stretching out on all sides toward alluring and explorable possibilities of human achievement. And there is reason to suppose that this early conditioning of his mind has persisted.

It is the epic of man and his universe that has fascinated Mr. Wells. In imagination he has seen the curtain of eternal nothingness rise upon the stellar dance of teeming billions of suns and planets whirling through the vast etheric fields. On one of these spinning particles, no bigger in relation to the immensity of space than a mote in the sunshine of a summer landscape, emerges the mystery of life; emerge a green scum upon the warm ooze of the earth—vegetation—forests—living creatures—the mind of man, and in that mind the secret of cities and empires, of sciences and philosophies and religions, of a history lengthening out into processive epochs of culture and civilisation. And here Mr. Wells has found his master-theme.

Mr. E. M. Forster, in a penetrating essay on Joseph Conrad, has complained of a central obscurity in the confessions of that great writer—complained that his essays suggest that "he is misty in the middle as well as at the edges, that the secret casket of his genius contains a vapour rather than a jewel"—that in short it is useless to try to write him down philosophically, because in that direction there is nothing to write. But not the most irresponsible critic in his wildest dreams would essay such a judgment upon the confessional essays of Mr. Wells, of whom it may be said that almost everything he has written has been in some respects confessional. "I am prepared to believe," he

has declared, "the universe can be deeply tragic and evil or wonderful and beautiful, but not that it can be fundamentally silly." And though it would be unfair to hold so exuberant a propagandist to the pronouncements of yesterday or the day before, it is safe to say that the conviction here quoted remains somewhere "in the middle."

For withal, Mr. Wells has not easily accepted science as a substitute for religion. What he has sought has been a science touched with imagination and with hope, and humanised into a gospel. Accordingly, much of his writings has been consciously or unconsciously dialectical, the dialectic being between scientific positivism and some sort of religious dogmatism. "Every believing Christian is, I am sure," he once confessed, "my spiritual brother"; and if we may suppose that here Mr. Wells regarded himself as an elder brother in a family of smaller children, nevertheless he felt the kinship to be real.

For the trouble with the average religious mind, as Mr. Wells sees it, or once saw it, is its uncritical puerility. The child takes a stick and pretends it is a sword: man takes a religious emotion and makes believe it is God. But while the child, after all, does not forget that the stick is only a stick, but at most only half-forgets, the average religious man does forget that his emotion is only an emotion. Nevertheless, there was a time when Mr. Wells could follow this up with a curious comment. It did not follow, he suggested, that the religious man was entirely deceived—deceived, that is to say, by thus identifying his religious feeling with God. And it did not follow for an excellent reason: for Mr. Wells himself had experienced something of these self-same emotional reactions, and was convinced there might be something in them. Thus, for example, we all recollect how Mr. Britling, in the process of *Seeing Things Through*, attained to illumination:

Never had it been so plain to him that he was a weak, silly, ill-informed and hasty-minded writer, and never had he felt so invincible a conviction that the Spirit of God was in him. . . . And for the first time clearly he felt a Presence . . . so close to him that it was behind his eyes and in his brain and hands. It was no trick of his vision; it was a feeling of immediate reality . . . God was beside him and within him and about him.

But also in his *First and Last Things* Mr. Wells has recorded the same experience without the guise of fiction.

If I am confessing, I do not see why I should not confess up to the hilt. At times in the silence of the night and in rare lonely moments, I come upon a sort of communion

with myself and something great that is not myself. It is perhaps poverty of mind and language obliges me to say that then this universal scheme takes on the effect of a sympathetic person—and my communion a quality of fearless worship. These moments happen, and they are the supreme fact of my religious life to me, they are the crown of my religious experiences.

“My religious life . . . my religious experiences.” One has no wish to enlarge upon these expressions, especially when they belong to a phase which Mr. Wells has apparently discarded; but they do indicate the fundamental difference between the mental attitude of Mr. Wells and that of a Continental sceptic like, let us say, Turgenev. The Russian was entirely a man of this world, without hesitations or compunctions; Mr. Wells is not entirely so; he is caught in his own inward dialectic, and, even when most in revolt, must justify himself to himself. And so in bygone years there have been times when he has relapsed naturally into the language with which the evangelical Christianity of his childhood made him familiar, and which, he found, offered the most expressive phrases he had ever met for the psychological facts of his own experience. Thus he has been able to write: “I have been through the distresses of despair and the conviction of sin, and I have found salvation.”

Such language, employed with the utter spontaneity and candour of Mr. Wells, might deceive even the elect; but it is fair to recognise that it is never used in a fully Christian significance. For when he has used it he has been concerned to confess that the Christian approach to Christ is beyond his understanding—that “terrible and incomprehensible Galilean with His crown of thorns.” So the conviction of sin has meant for Mr. Wells no more than a sense of the swarming confusion of motives which distresses and enfeebles the inner life, with its need for some dominant synthetic idea to harmonise it. And so with social evil. The sin of the world is no mere dualism of the good and the bad; it is rather that confused struggle of social forces which Mr. William Clissold likened to the conflicts of Vishnu, Siva and Brahma. Wherever there is privileged ownership there is stubborn conservatism (*Vishnu*), menaced by a resentful radicalism (*Siva*); but also, standing above the antagonism, there is the force of intellectual curiosity and creative, constructive experiment (*Brahma*), which, making all new things, seeks through them to make all things new. As long as society is torn by this conflict, society is in sin; its salvation lies in conversion to the new “Brahmanic” synthesis—to the Wellsian World State with its planned economy.

But also there have been times when Mr. Wells has been oppressed with a sense of evil more sinister and demonic. So in *The Island of Dr. Moreau* we were given a parable which reads to-day like an uncannily accurate forecast of the worst features of Totalitarianism and State propaganda. For what better representation of Totalitarian technique with its experimental surgery in which the public mind is slashed and mutilated and grafted with alien ideas—what better representation than the methods of Dr. Moreau, who stocks his island with the results of his secret experiments upon living brains and bodies, and who seems to have maintained order by infesting the minds of his victims with the notion of his own divinity? And what could be more prophetic than the Dictator's contempt for his abject creatures:

I fancy they . . . have a kind of mockery of a rational life—poor beasts! . . . They build themselves their dens, gather fruit and pull herbs—even marry. But I can see through it all, even into their very souls, and see there nothing but the souls of beasts. . . . Yet they're odd. Complex, like everything else alive.

However, it was the divergences of Mr. Wells's gospel from the Christian faith which we were remarking, and here it may be noted that not even in his most evangelic moods has he had any use for the doctrine of personal immortality. There is indeed, it seems to him, something *bourgeois* and pathetic and a little ridiculous about the whole conception.

When Mrs. Bloggs sits in her back pew and hears the blessed hope of immortality coming from the pulpit, it is Mrs. Bloggs herself, body and soul, thirty-five, a little faded, kindly and tending to put on weight, who is to live, she understands, eternal in the heavens. Dressed rather differently, perhaps, more in the bridesmaid style, but otherwise the same.

So he tells us in his *Anatomy of Frustration*. Yet it is possible to argue that what is significant here is not Mrs. Bloggs's picturesque misconception of immortality (which no more invalidates the doctrine itself than would her conceivable misconception, or even complete ignorance, of Mr. Wells's position in the world of letters invalidate his own literary immortality), but Mr. Wells's own misconception of Mrs. Bloggs—his evident opinion that in so homely a body it would be comical to suppose there could be personal possibilities of more than local and ephemeral importance. Whether or not such a downward revision of human values makes for great literature or a great

interpretation of life is not a subject for discussion in this review, but its relevance to the issue raised in *The Island of Dr. Moreau* is apparent. And it is precisely because the Christian faith sees in human personality, in all its drab disguises, an august possibility which Mr. Wells denies, that it is able to reinforce with higher sanctions and a superior logic Mr. Wells's own protest against the exploitation and victimisation of living souls. For here, Mr. Wells tends to defeat himself. To him the wheel-smashed frog in the road, the fly drowning in the cream-jug, and Mrs. Bloggs nearing the end of her earthly existence in the back-bedroom over the shop, are all alike, incidental experiments to be swept aside and forgotten. So that it is difficult to see that there is—or was—anything in his gospel to protect the masses of ordinary humankind from exploitation either at the hands of the modern Caesars whom he detests or those future "Great Barons of a World Witanagemot" whom he invokes.

To this consideration we may return; but what of the central Wellsian dogma itself? In his gospelling days it was the dogma of the Man-god, based upon what may be called a mystical collectivism. We are all "parts of one flow of blood and life," and thus between man and man, people and people, as they set their minds together, there is a something real and comprehensive which is more than the sum-total of individual human intelligences. Mankind is slowly achieving conscious unity—an awareness of itself as (in Mr. Wells's not too happy term) the Being of the Species.

And it was here that Mr. Wells, for all his modern impatience with superannuated myths, leaned to a mythology of his own, a mythology, if not a theology, of Crisis, with an eschatology and apocalyptic of its own. "I see myself," he has declared, "as part of a great physical being that strains and I believe grows towards beauty, and of a great mental being that strains and I believe grows towards knowledge and power"; and so he has looked forward to the time when men as gods "will stand on this earth as on a footstool and reach out their hands among the stars." This is the Wellsian Man-god, a divinity of physical strength and beauty, of knowledge and power, an Apollo, not a Christ. But also Mr. Wells has seen, even if dimly, a vision of still greater glory: for what limit may be set to the evolution of this Being from which we all rise and to which we return, and which even now is becoming the Conscious Being of this planet? Who knows if it will not "ultimately even transcend the limitation of the species and grow into the Conscious Being, the undying Conscious Being of all things"? (*First and Last Things*, p. 70.) This is the Man-god complex with a vengeance. Collective Man may invade and

conquer world after world, spread himself over the heavens, and become the dynamic Spirit, the directive, conscious Intelligence of the universe. Not even Mrs. Bloggs in her back pew ever dreamed so naïve a dream as this.

We had the Wellsian eschatology vividly set forth, of course, in *The Shape of Things to Come*, where we were shown our civilisation, brought to ruin by total war, rebuilt by an international group of airmen who succeed in moulding the world to their desire. This leads the way to the final vision, in which we are shown an observatory on a hill above an imposing Wellsian metropolis. It is night, and the stars are out, and in among the stars we see a minute cylindrical gleam. It is a rocket-shell containing two intrepid explorers thus rocketed into space for a reconnaissance flight to the moon. On the earth, near the observatory, stand the fathers of the daring couple, and we are permitted to overhear the dialogue between them.

“Will they return?”

“Yes. And go again. And again. And again—until the landing can be made and the moon is conquered. This is only a beginning.”

But what if they don't return? Then presently others will go. But is there never to be an end, a goal, an age when mankind shall be at rest? And the answer is resolute.

“Rest enough for the individual man. Too much of it and too soon, and we call it death. But for Man, no rest and no ending. He must go on—conquest beyond conquest. This little planet and its winds and ways, and all the laws of mind and matter that restrain him. Then the planets about him, and at last out across immensity to the stars.”

This indeed is the Man-god making his due appearance, his feet on the earth, his hands reaching among the stars.

It would be strange not to be grateful for a “thriller” so engaging and spectacular, or to fail to admire the vitality which could prompt a no longer youthful Mr. Wells to let himself go with so schoolboyish a lust for a tale of high adventure. But it would be still stranger to be blind to Mr. Wells's serious purpose. And here perhaps there is room for two comments. In the first place, one is not quite easy about these air-minded masters of the world in whom Mr. Wells sees—or saw—our hope of salvation, and who are to rebuild civilisation into one great artifact, diagrammatic super-State. Mr. Wells was at one time something of a Liberal; he will always, one must believe, be fundamentally Liberal in his personal bias in favour of human rights and liberties; but his detestation of the stupidities which have brought civilisation into its present muddle, and given our

absurd, drum-thwacking, flag-waving Dictators their opportunity, has led him to dream of a Planned Economy which may be only another name for a new and hardly less tyrannical bureaucracy. And after all, are our Hitlers and Stalins and Mussolinis to be succeeded by a new junta of supermen who are to claim the moon and stars for their *lebensraum*? "Imagine," says Mr. Bertrand Russell,

Imagine a scientific government which, from fear of assassination, lives always in aeroplanes, except for occasional descents . . . on the summits of high towers. . . . Is it likely that such a government will have any profound concern for the happiness of its subjects? Is it not, on the contrary, practically certain that it will view them, when all goes well, in the impersonal manner in which it views its machines, but that, when anything happens to suggest that after all they are not machines, it will feel the cold rage of men whose axioms are questioned by underlings, and will exterminate resistance in whatever manner involves least trouble?¹

And in the second place one feels, not that this dream, this programme, is too vast, too dazzling, too great, but that it is not great enough. No doubt it may all come true, but what then? After all, man is so constituted that he must look for something more than a World State organised by scientists and industrial magnates and humming with mechanical miracles, something more than an explorer-race whose aerial *Mayflowers* circumnavigate the interstellar oceans and colonise the stars. For in truth all this schoolboy regalement leaves us like hungry men invited to a lavish and glittering feast where the table decorations are enchanting and the illuminations dazzling, but where there is nothing under the covers but packets of children's "tuck"—lollipops and humbugs. There was once, one recollects, a Christian poet who also had a vision of the shape of things to come, and described it, in a still celebrated passage, as a vast and shining community unfolding like a rose, whose petals were the redeemed of all the ages, and whose golden centre was as it were the very core of Light itself, even the light which makes God manifest to His children, who, only in beholding Him, have peace. And though one has no wish to decline into unctuous comparisons, one feels that the finger of Dante points to heights and depths which still have meaning for us. The universe is still nothingness unless there are holiness and truth and love at the heart of it, and rockets to the moon are childish toys compared to the faith in which Christian souls have launched into eternity.

¹ *Power*, p. 33.

And now a last observation. It is significant that the present crisis finds Mr. Wells in a chastened mood, and the brave new gospel of "first and last things" and "men like gods" deflated beyond recognition. Precisely at the time when, presumably, the public nourished upon his prophesyings of human progress have need of cordial refreshment, Mr. Wells has discovered that his reserves of optimism are exhausted. And yet, who can blame him? If the food of the gods has now become illusory, is it not true that the gods seem illusory also? The Being of the Species with his hands reaching among the stars has shrunk back into our humbler friend *Homo sapiens*, who began in a cave and may end in an air-raid shelter. After all, was he not a biological accident who stumbled upon an evolutionary extra which raised him a perilous few inches above all other ruling animals?

And what if he, too, will blunder into a final and dismal decadence?

There is no reason whatever to believe that the order of nature has any greater bias in favour of man than it had in favour of the ichthyosaur or the pterodactyl. In spite of all my disposition to a brave-looking optimism, I perceive that now the universe is bored with him, is turning a hard face to him, and I see him being carried less and less intelligently and more and more rapidly . . . along the stream of fate to degradation, suffering and death.

(*The Fate of Homo Sapiens*, p. 312.)

The only slender hope, as Mr. Wells sees it, lies in "the wilful and strenuous adaptation by re-education of our species now—forthwith." Mankind must take itself in hand, become "renascent," or perish. And so the ebullient cheerfulness of the former days has given place to Mr. Wells's very worst bedside manner. Poor *Homo sapiens*, having been told that the universe is bored with him, and that he is being carried more and more rapidly toward "degradation, suffering and death," is exhorted, as Mrs. Dombey was exhorted, to "make an effort" and achieve a mental and moral renaissance "now—forthwith." Otherwise, he who began as a biological accident must know himself as a biological catastrophe, the earth for his grave and his hands already groping in the dust.

It seems indeed ungrateful to Mr. Wells to write in this way—an act of impiety to the memory of Kipps and Mr. Polly and Mr. Lewisham. But the truth is that the Olympian dream has faded. The gospel of scientific humanism has preached itself out. The star-begotten supermen have let us down. The Man-god complex has (perhaps fortunately) given us no Man-god.

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