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## Lost Places in Dreams and Texts: H.G. Wells's *The Autocracy of Mr. Parham*

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William J. Scheick

However much *The Autocracy of Mr. Parham* (1930) still amused its author several years after its appearance, H.G. Wells readily admitted that few people shared his enthusiasm for this "boisterous caricature"<sup>1</sup> of a chauvinistic academic who blindly adheres to English tradition and, during a seance, has a dream in which a Master Spirit from Mars invades his body and transforms him into a fascist dictator. Much of the book's humor has paled with the years, and modern students of Wells's work have either ignored the novel entirely or dismissed it in passing. It is doubtful, in my judgment, that any case for the literary brilliance of *Parham* is likely to emerge; yet in light of recent disclosures about the level of artistic consciousness and execution in Wells's late works, we are admonished to attend well even to this novel.

*Parham* appears at a critical juncture in Wells's literary career. The fiction Wells wrote during the 1920s exhibits a remarkable degree of experimentation, particularly in new fictional strategies appropriate to his social and artistic beliefs.<sup>2</sup> Wells's fiction during the 1930s represents a still greater closure with his aesthetic theory, not merely in the matter of expert utilization of repeated motifs<sup>3</sup> but more pertinently in the matter of a revisionary cast of mind and a concomitant experimentation with fictional structure and characterization. Recently reevaluated in terms of these latter concerns, the novels *Anatomy of Frustration* (1936),<sup>4</sup> *Brynchild* (1937), *Star Begotten* (1937), and *Apropos of Dolores* (1938)<sup>5</sup> have emerged as innovative and aesthetically accomplished works. *Parham* appears precisely between these two significant decades in Wells's long literary career, and in this context it deserves more careful scrutiny than it has received to date. Especially noteworthy in *Parham* is a fictional form derived from a revision of Petronius's *Satyricon*.

*Parham* is a historian interested in Cardinal Richelieu, the seventeenth-century French nationalist and advocate of centralized

royal authority. Parham's story abounds in allusions to historical figures, often presented in sequences suggestive of a repetition through time of certain personality types. To be sure, any implied parallelism between Parham and Sargon, Alexander the Great, Genghis Khan, Julius Caesar, and Napoleon Bonaparte is parodistic; but within this rather obvious humor lies a more covert point about the readiness of people (in Wells's opinion) to relate to history as if it were circularly self-defined, fixed, and dependent on recurrent personality types. Parham, whose classical education encourages him to "lose all sense of current events" ("you simply get such history as you have swallowed repeating itself"),<sup>6</sup> evinces this very tendency. He fears that the rising generation fails to perceive the continuity of history and that, consequently, "round and about the present appearances of historical continuity something else quite different and novel and not so much menacing as dematerializing these appearances was happening" (p. 9). Appropriately, during the dream of his dictatorship, Parham conceives his mission to include the reassertion of history. For him "it is the past that rules; it is the past that points us on to our assured Destinies" (p. 190). Responding in his dream to his view of the world "going through a phase of moral and intellectual disintegration; its bonds relaxed; its definite lines crumbled" (p. 68), he undertakes a mission "to make history and to make it larger and heavier and with a greater displacement of the fluidities of life than it had ever been made before" (p. 167).

Ironical is the fact that Parham's belief finds embodiment in a dream, for such a belief is, in Wells's view, a delusion akin to a dream. Moreover, as the novels Wells wrote during the twenties make abundantly evident, a dreamlike fluidity with "definite lines crumbled" characterizes human life. Time is fluid, or relative, Wells makes clear, and as a result every period of history constitutes a mere phase in an apparently infinite series of alternate possibilities, or dimensions. Each phase shares something essential with any other phase, but it also differs to some significant degree—as if each were related but not quite identical dreams within some larger dream-context. Pertinently, at the end of the novel we learn that Parham and Sir Bussy Woodcock have experienced, in precisely the same period of time, "a similar dream" though "not exactly the same dream" (p. 323).

What is true for Wells about historical events and human experience generally is applicable to personality types appearing in

the past and in the present. *Parham* is a novel populated by caricatures rather than by three-dimensional characters, a manner in part derived from Wells's Edwardian preference for character types, but more specifically the product of his artistic aim to present personages at once unique and typical. Very early in his literary career Wells spoke of "the novel of types" as "the highest form of literary art," citing the work of Turgenev and Thomas Hardy as *exempla*.<sup>7</sup> Late in his career, in fact four years after the publication of *Parham*, Wells reflected upon his current interest in individuality only in relation to "the frame in which individual lives had to be lived."<sup>8</sup> During this period Wells considered time to be a polymorphous dimensionality, which includes various unique species evolving towards the ideal modes of being that are implicit in the typicality underlying all uniqueness. This paradoxical state permits a variety of alternate possibilities for humanity, which at any given moment lives as if in a dream.<sup>9</sup> Event and character, then, are at once repetitious and unique; like the dream shared by *Parham* and *Woodcock*, events and human types are throughout history similar without being precisely identical.

And what is true for Wells about historical events and personality types is equally true about art works. Like events and like individuals, literary texts incorporate a unique and a typical identity. Herein lies the significance of *Parham's* reference to Petronius's *Satyricon* (pp. 46-47). *Parham*, especially its first part, is designed to echo the manner of the *Satyricon*, but this act of imitation finally duplicates the classical work only in degree. Like Petronius's novel (which survives only in fragments), Wells's book exhibits a loosely organized satirical plot permitting frequent digressions, and emphasizes (through *Parham's* "refined" eyes) the seamier side of life. More interesting is the recasting of Trimalchio as *Woodcock*, a vulgar but wealthy representative of the lower class who gives an ostentatious banquet and who aspires to be considered a person of culture. The difference of degree, however, is crucial. Petronius's work maintains a cynical attitude toward Trimalchio, whereas Wells's novel suggests that *Woodcock* may embody the hope of humanity's future. *Woodcock*, who "out of a dream . . . had got [a] crazy confidence" (p. 325), departs from *Parham*, with whom he has shared a similar yet slightly different sense of purpose and destiny. *Parham* is left in the dream world of the *Satyricon*, whereas *Woodcock*, as a revised version of Trimalchio, enters another, somewhat more hopeful version of this

same "reality."

In effect, such a revision of Petronius's classical text constitutes a modification of reader expectations. If he realizes the parallel between the *Satyricon* and *Parham*, the reader must confront the disappointments of these expectations that arise; so that in *Parham*, as in other early and late novels by Wells,<sup>10</sup> the emphasis falls upon the cognitive processes of the reader. This novel, in other words, points away from itself as a self-contained, finished artifact—the way history appears to Parham—and towards the reader's cognitive experience of open-ended possibility in the novel and in his own life. Ideally, for Wells, *Parham* would function as a self-consuming artifact, a work with a distinctive identity derived from its slight modification of the *Satyricon* model that yet yields up its individuality in the process of exposing readers to multiple realities in time. Like the text of *Parham* as a revised echo of the *Satyricon*, like all historical events and personality types, every reader, in Wells's view, paradoxically blends uniqueness (individuality) and typicality.

The ideal reader of *Parham* should awaken from his present dream-reality, as does Woodcock in the dream-novel in the hands of the reader. Herein lies an explanation for the following intrusive narrative comment occurring in the last chapter: "A dream, as everyone knows, can happen with incredible rapidity. It may have happened in a second" (p. 321). Any event in history, it follows—indeed all of history as the reader has experienced it—is like a second in some larger unobserved time scheme incorporating simultaneous alternate possibilities. The reader's entire life, the novel indicates, amounts to such a second or, more accurately, to such a dream-second:

All life has something dreamlike in it. No percipient creature has ever yet lived in stark reality. Nature has equipped us with such conceptions and delusions as survival necessitated, and our experiences are at best but working interpretations. Nevertheless, as they diverge more and more from practical truth and we begin to stumble against danger, our dearest dreams are at last invaded by remonstrances and warning shadows. (p. 250)

The "truth" hinted at in *Parham* is designed by Wells to puncture the dream of the reader's firm sense of history and of personality,

or self. Just as Parham and Woodcock awaken from their similar dreams, the reader ought to awaken from the dream of the text he is reading. In the process of managing the disappointments or surprises generated by the revision of the *Satyricon* model, as well as coping with the deprivation of fictive illusion whenever the narrative voice bursts through the essentially conventional manner of the novel, the reader should awaken out of the present phase of his dream-life to participate, with Woodcock, in another one, similar yet different in degree insofar as it involves a more advanced condition of human self-awareness. Wells denies his reader any escape into the past time of history, the present time of contemporary personality, or the future time of the speculative events of his humorous novel; his object remains to decrease self-delusion by rousing the reader from all such related forms of fictive time in texts and in life.

In achieving this end in *Parham* Wells manages a technique to which he referred as "the splintering frame." In the early thirties Wells explicitly challenged all notions of "a rigid frame of values" and believed that "for a time [he was] the outstanding instance among writers of fiction in English of the frame getting into the picture." Of the English novel Wells observed, "Its standards were established within that apparently permanent frame and the criticism of it began to be irritated and perplexed when, through a new instability, the splintering frame began to get into the picture."<sup>11</sup> Wells's technique of "the splintering frame" employs fictional conventions in such a way as to frustrate reader expectations generally associated with these conventions, to draw attention to themselves as artificial devices, and finally to point away from the text as a self-contained, finished artifact and towards the reader's experience as open-ended and infused with possibilities for humanity's ongoing development. In other words, indicating the negative as well as the positive features of the human dream-reality—by positing an equation between the dreams of its characters, the "dream" of the reader vicariously experiencing the illusory text, and the dream of each reader's personal experience of history and personality in life—*Parham* becomes a self-consuming artifact, a work surrendering any fixed identity based on its classical prototype or as a permanent work of art in favor of generating a *real* response in its readers.

In contrast to Parham's concept of art as "the concentrated quality of loveliness" resulting from selectivity and permanence (pp.

20, 23), the novel about him ironically evinces a fragmentation and a fluidity similar to the incomplete and progressive jazz music which irritates him (p. 48). This deliberate manner frustrates any hope in the reader for discernible structural rigidity in the novel and, consequently, for his comfortable engagement with the fictive illusion of the text's humor. Early in the novel minor narrative intrusions occasionally vex the reader's desire to escape into this humor (e.g., pp. 55, 58), but a major violation of the reader's relaxed submergence into the dream-story occurs when the narrative voice suddenly dismisses all of Book One and the first chapter of Book Two of the novel as "a certain prelude," if not quite a false start:

But the real business we have in hand in this book is to tell of the Master Spirit. A certain prelude has been necessary to our story, but now that we are through with it we can admit it was no more than a prelude. Here at the earliest possible moment the actual story starts. There shall be nothing else but story-telling now right to the end of the book. (p. 90)

At this juncture the reader's sense of dislocation is quite significant, as the satirical phase of the novel most reminiscent of the *Satyricon* becomes increasingly modified by degree. Confronting this fragmentation of the novel, this apparently structure-defying bifurcation recalling Parham's fear of the crumbling of definite lines, the reader senses his victimization by a confidence-man narrator who has lured him thus far into the story for some purpose other than mere humorous entertainment. And what should the reader make of the narrator's explicit promise to tell only a story henceforth, after his violation of the same implicit promise a reader assumes every novelist to make? Surely the reader ought to remain skeptical after this experience of dislocation—and with good reason. First, the second fragment of the novel constitutes a disturbing revision of reader sympathy for the refined Parham in the first part; increasingly, in contrast to Petronius's treatment of Trimalchio, Woodcock emerges (in spite of initial reader hostility towards his vulgarity) as the genuine protagonist of the book. Second, the latter part of the novel is merely a dream, as the reader discovers only at the end of the book, a dream from which the characters awaken and into the narrative frame of which the narrator intrudes to comment on the dreamlike nature of life.

At no point after this critical transition to the second part of the novel is the reader permitted easy reliance upon fictional convention or sure identification of authorial loyalty towards the characters. Never resolved, this uncertainty informs the final words of the novel:

And so, showing a weary back to us, with his evening hat on the back of his head, our deflated publicist [Parham] recedes up Pontingale Street, recedes with all his vanities, his stores of erudition, his dear preposterous generalizations, his personified nations and all his obsolescent paraphernalia of scholarly political wisdom, so feebly foolish in their substance and hideously disastrous in their possible consequences, and his author, who has come to feel a curious unreasonable affection for him, must needs bid him a reluctant farewell. (p. 328)

Of course, in the last analysis good sense can be made of this apparent authorial vacillation concerning Parham; in fact, the cognitive analysis required of the reader defines the purpose of these closing words. The quaint Victorian mannerism of these final words, so vexed by the paradoxically satirical-sympathetic attitude of the narrator, fractures the very fictional convention it pretends to employ, thereby once more splintering the frame of the novel and generating for a last time an experience of dislocation in the reader. In a sense, the reader briefly loses his place, even at the book's close, where presumably the reader ought to feel most confident. The reader's experience here is different only in degree from that of Parham, who in confronting the threat of "definite lines crumbled" is authorially described as "a reader who has lost his place in a story and omitted to turn down the page" (p. 192)—a remark designed by Wells to be reflexive in its implicit analogy between Parham and the Parham-like reader, and the life-dream and the text-dream. In *Parham* the frame of the text splinters, even at the end, so that its dream-fiction points away from artistic self-enclosure and thrusts outward through its fictional perimeter into the realm of the reader.

Commencing as a modern-day *Satyricon*, Wells's novel revises its classical prototype, to which it is similar in its discursive and fragmentary manner, but from whose satire it differs in degree concerning the nature of humanity. This revision is aesthetically



conveyed through the technique of "the splintering frame," which procedure violates reader expectations based on fictional conventions. In this way denying escapism through humor in *Parham*, Wells shatters his reader's Parham-like illusions about historical events, personality types, and human prospects—about the dream of life in general. The true Master Spirit in *Parham* is the self-awareness that Wells hopes will invade the dream-reality of each reader, who ideally will awaken to discover that he is living his life in the same sort of vicarious escapism characteristic of the average reader's experience of a typical humorous work. This "invaded" and roused reader should for a moment have a sense of having lost his place in the dream-fiction of his present life, so that he may henceforth participate better in the true story of humanity, a story characterized not by delusive rigid structures but, like *Parham*, by a dream-like fluidity of self and event that permits open-ended possibilities for an evolutionary transformation of human existence little imagined at present.<sup>12</sup>

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>H.G. Wells, *Experiment in Autobiography* (New York: Macmillan, 1934), p. 421. Contemporary reactions to *Parham* are surveyed in William J. Scheick and J. Randolph Cox, *H.G. Wells: An Annotated Bibliography of Writings about Him* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, forthcoming).

<sup>2</sup>See my "The Fourth Dimension in Wells's Novels of the 1920's," *Criticism* 20 (1978): 167-90.

<sup>3</sup>See Robert Bloom, *Anatomies of Egotism: A Reading of the Last Novels of H.G. Wells* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1977).

<sup>4</sup>See Robert M. Philmus, "Revisions of His Past: H.G. Wells's *Anatomy of Frustration*," *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 20 (1978): 249-66.

<sup>5</sup>See my "Schopenhauer, Maori Symbolism, and Wells's *Brynhild*," *Studies in the Literary Imagination* 13 (1980): 17-29; "Towards the Ultra-Science-Fiction Novel: Wells's *Star Begotten*," *Science-Fiction Studies* 8 (1981): 19-25; and "The Womb of Time: Spengler's Influence on Wells's *Apropos of Dolores*," *English Literature in Transition* 18 (1975): 217-28.

<sup>6</sup>*The Autocracy of Mr. Parham: His Remarkable Adventures in This Changing World* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, Doran, and Co., 1930), p. 28. Subsequent page references to this edition will be included parenthetically in the text.

<sup>7</sup>"The Novel of Types," *Saturday Review* (London), 81 (1896): 23-24.

<sup>8</sup>Wells, *Experiment in Autobiography*, p. 422.

<sup>9</sup>Several other implications of this paradox are noted in Roslynn D. Haynes's *H.G. Wells: Discoverer of the Future* (New York: New York University Press, 1980), pp. 163-96.

<sup>10</sup>Perhaps *In the Days of the Comet* (1906) is the earliest Wells novel to produce this effect; see William Bellamy, *The Novels of Wells, Bennett, and Galsworthy: 1890-1910* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1971), p. 125.

<sup>11</sup>Wells, *Experiment in Autobiography*, p. 416.

<sup>12</sup>This essay is drawn from a book-length work in progress entitled "The Splintering Frame: H.G. Wells and the Transition from Victorian to Modern Fiction." I should like to acknowledge my indebtedness to the University Research Institute of the University of Texas for a grant enabling me to work on this project.