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# 'A Sort of Parricide': H.G. Wells and the Making of George Orwell

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December 16, 2005


To the Graduate School:

This thesis entitled "A Sort of Parricide": H. G. Wells and the Making of George Orwell" and written by Thomas Adams Coker, Jr. is presented to the Graduate School of Clemson University. I recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts with a major in History.

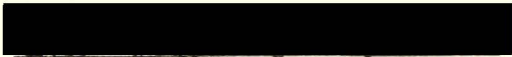

  
Alan Grubb, Thesis Advisor

We have reviewed this thesis  
and we recommend its acceptance:

  
Tom Kuehn

  
Steven Marks

Accepted for the Graduate School:



“A SORT OF PARRICIDE”

H. G. WELLS AND  
THE MAKING OF  
GEORGE ORWELL

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A Thesis

Presented to  
the Graduate School of  
Clemson University

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In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts  
History

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by

Thomas Adams Coker, Jr.

December 2005

Advisor: Professor Alan Grubb

## ABSTRACT

George Orwell and H. G. Wells, both of whom have been dead now for nearly six decades, remain among the most popular and widely read authors in twentieth century English literature. At the same time, both men have become the foci of scholarly industries devoted to their life, thought, and work. Despite the fact that Orwell and Wells shared a number of significant literary, political, and even personal connections, relatively few Orwell or Wells scholars have bothered to examine them. As a result of this scholarly inattention, the nature and significance of Orwell's relationship with Wells have long been obscured and underappreciated. Redressing this scholarly shortcoming is the primary objective of this thesis.

Much of what Orwell wrote and argued was filtered through the lens of his appreciation for Wells's thought and work. Orwell, who described himself as "Wells's own creation," even modeled much of his own literary career upon that of Wells. At the same time, Orwell became an outspoken critic of Wells's eschatological, utopian worldview. For instance, Orwell's final novel, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, emulated Wells's Edwardian utopian novels even as it mocked the very ideals that Wells had long regarded as the apotheosis of his life's work.

Ultimately, the relationship between Orwell and Wells hinges upon "a sort of parricide," to use Orwell's phrase for his attack upon a number of key Wellsian ideas and ideals. This being said, Orwell's parricide was not as simple as the toppling of a childhood idol, nor was it in any way indicative of a complete break with his Wellsian heritage. This thesis examines the nuances of this ambivalent, conflicted process.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First and foremost, I owe a massive debt of gratitude to my thesis advisor, Professor Alan Grubb. Without his encouragement and thoughtful guidance, it is doubtful whether this project would have ever reached fruition. I can only hope he has enjoyed our time together as much as I have.

Secondly, I would like to thank Professor Steven Marks for his persistent work on my behalf throughout my years at Clemson. As a professor and advisor he has gone beyond the call of duty to assist and encourage this sometimes wayward son in the pursuit of his ambitions.

I would also like to thank Professor Tom Kuehn for graciously agreeing to join my thesis committee (at the last minute, no less). I hope I have been able to incorporate some of his thoughtful criticism into this project.

And last, but certainly not least, I would like to thank my sister Elizabeth for her help in completing this project. Not only did she patiently listen to my ideas over the last nine months, but she even proofread my final draft. To her I am much obliged.



## A NOTE ON SOURCES AND CITATIONS

Currently, the definitive published collection of Orwell's works is the twenty-volume *The Complete Works of George Orwell* (1998), edited by Peter Davison. This collection includes the unexpurgated texts of every Orwell novel and book, as well as the most inclusive selection of his essays, reviews, letters, memos, poems, notes, and juvenilia available to date. However, it is not without its shortcomings, namely cost and availability. For the *Complete Works* is too expensive (at nearly \$300) for most private collections, and is sometimes difficult to locate in public or small university libraries. Therefore, I have tried to make use of editions of Orwell's writings more readily available than the Davison text.

First, where possible, I have cited Ian Angus and Sonia Orwell's *Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell* (1968; hereafter *CEJL*). Published in four compact volumes, *CEJL* remains a useful scholarly tool, and it includes most of Orwell's major essays, letters, and book reviews. More importantly, unlike *Complete Works*, it remains an inexpensive and widely available reference. Second, I have generally cited the Harcourt paperback editions of Orwell's major works. While the unexpurgated Davison texts are certainly of interest, their emendations and additions did not alter Orwell's texts or, more importantly, my basic argument in any significant way. Third, I have cited *Essays* (2002) a single-volume Everyman's Library edition, for essays and reviews not included in *CEJL*. Lastly, for material not available in the above collections, I have cited the Davison texts.

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## INTRODUCTION

In the decades since his death in 1950, George Orwell (not to mention the adjective “Orwellian”) has become freighted with such cultural, literary, and political baggage that the man behind the name is now scarcely recognizable. As Peter Marks observed, Orwell “has attained something akin to the status of a cultural icon.”<sup>1</sup> And yet, for most of his career Orwell was a minor novelist and essayist who “published in small and sometimes obscure journals and papers,” and who otherwise failed to cultivate anything approaching the widespread readership his works currently enjoy.<sup>2</sup> In fact, it was not until 1945, when he at last found a publisher for his ninth book, the viciously clever Soviet satire *Animal Farm*, that Orwell at last made himself widely known to the world outside the left-wing socialist and literary circles he had inhabited since the early thirties.<sup>3</sup> Considering that the whole of Orwell’s literary career spanned only two decades, and that after the publication of *Animal Farm* he lived just four more years and wrote one more novel, the international best-seller *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, it is fair to say

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<sup>1</sup> Peter Marks, “Where He Wrote: Periodicals and the Essays of George Orwell,” *Twentieth Century Literature*, Vol. 41, No. 4 (Winter, 1995), 266-283, 266.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*, 268. Additionally, consider Orwell’s *Homage to Catalonia* (1938), which is currently revered as a classic account of the Spanish Civil War. From the time it was published until the outbreak of the Second World War, *Homage* sold less than a thousand copies.

<sup>3</sup> While it is true that *The Road to Wigan Pier*, Orwell’s best-selling book in the first fifteen years of his career, sold an impressive 40,000 copies, it should be noted that the vast majority of these books were earmarked for members of Victor Gollancz’s Left Book Club, a British book-of-the-month society which catered exclusively to a socialist, communist, and Popular Front-aligned readership. Furthermore, Orwell’s first “break” with an American audience came in the form of his wartime series of “London Letters” to *Partisan Review*, then the anti-communist left-wing journal of record.



that Orwell was scarcely able to enjoy his hard-earned success.<sup>4</sup> The fact that most of his previous books were out of print at the time of his death only confirms that for most of his life Orwell was a struggling, frustrated writer who was unable to achieve the success of his literary heroes, men such as Dickens, Swift, Kipling, Joyce, and Wells.<sup>5</sup>

In recent decades, however, Orwell has not only risen to the ranks of his idols, but has even become the focus of a cottage industry devoted to embellishing and refining his now mythical status within twentieth-century literature, culture, and politics. Today, Orwell scholars submit Orwell papers to Orwell conferences and lament the pervasiveness of the "Orwell industry."<sup>6</sup> Although it has long been convenient, if not fashionable, to damn or praise Orwell according to one's literary or political sensibilities, the fact remains that he was neither a devil nor a saint.<sup>7</sup> Rather, Orwell was simply, and determinedly, a man of his age. Those who would use him as a crude polemical weapon (or for that matter, use the term "Orwellian" to describe anything remotely unpleasant) are surely missing the point of studying Orwell in the first place. Orwell's admirers and

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<sup>4</sup> As a testament to the enduring commercial success of Orwell's final two works of fiction, John Rodden observed that "*Animal Farm* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* have sold almost 40 million copies in sixty-odd languages, more than any other pair of books by a serious or popular postwar author." (Note that Rodden was writing in 1989.) John Rodden, *George Orwell: The Politics of Literary Reputation* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Transaction Publishers, 2002), 16.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*, 46.

<sup>6</sup> Peter Davison, the editor of the twenty-volume *Complete Works of George Orwell*, wrote: "There is a Shakespeare industry, a Joyce industry and, as a mark of his stature I suppose, an Orwell industry of which, alas, I must be a part." For good measure, Davison added, "There is even a *Nineteen Eighty-Four* industry." Peter Davison, *George Orwell: A Literary Life* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1996), 130.

<sup>7</sup> For instance, literary theorist Daphne Patai infamously villainized Orwell as a sadistic misogynist, homophobe, and paranoiac in her study *The Orwell Mystique*. Conversely, the socialist-turned-neoconservative Norman Podhoretz composed an essay for *Harper's* in which he praised Orwell as a prophet of the postwar age. (For that matter, he also argued that Orwell, had he lived into the nineteen-eighties, would have likely divested himself of his lifelong socialist beliefs in favor of a political perspective similar to his own.) See Daphne Patai, *The Orwell Mystique: A Study in Male Ideology* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1984); Norman Podhoretz, "If Orwell Were Alive Today," *Harper's*, Jan. 1983, 31, 37.



detractors alike owe it to themselves, if not to Orwell, to investigate his life within the context of the age in which he lived.<sup>8</sup>

Similarly, in the years since his death in 1946, the Edwardian literary lion H. G. Wells has been obscured by his literary reputation and by the work of certain Wells scholars. Despite the fact that he published over one hundred books on a wide range of topics during his fifty-year long writing career, Wells is most commonly remembered today for his contributions to the genre of science fiction. “Today there are hundreds of different doors into science fiction,” wrote science fiction novelist Orson Scott Card. “But at the beginning, there was only one door, and H. G. Wells was the one who turned the key, opened it, and stepped through, showing everyone else the way.”<sup>9</sup> Card’s compliment may be well-deserved, but the fact is that Wells composed his major “scientific romances”—*The Time Machine*, *The Island of Doctor Moreau*, *The Invisible Man*, *War of the Worlds*, and *When the Sleeper Wakes*—during his first five years as a professional writer. That leaves some forty-five years of active writing, traveling,

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<sup>8</sup> This is a conclusion recently reached by many Orwell scholars, including, ironically, Daphne Patai (see footnote seven). Nearly twenty years on the heels of the publication of *The Orwell Mystique*, Patai wrote: “Orwell needs to be seen in the context of other British writers of the 1930s and 1940s, not as a uniquely heroic figure... To build one’s case by citing Orwell at this late date is simply, and ironically, to abdicate the very habit of independent thinking for which he is being celebrated.” Similarly, Christopher Hitchens, formerly a staunch defender of Orwell’s leftist credentials and a bitter critic of Patai (as well as Norman Podhoretz), remarked: “A thing that I am no longer interested in is the question of whether or not George Orwell would take my view or anyone else’s if he was still with us... We are now as far from him as he was from Dickens. We have to say goodbye to him as a contemporary and ask why it is, therefore, that he remains so vivid and actual in our own lives.” Daphne Patai, “Third Thoughts About Orwell?” and Christopher Hitchens, “George Orwell and the Liberal Experience of Totalitarianism,” both from Thomas Cushman and John Rodden, eds., *George Orwell: Into the Twenty-First Century* (Boulder, Colorado: Paradigm Publishers, 2004), 85, 209.

<sup>9</sup> Orson Scott Card, untitled introduction, from H. G. Wells, *When the Sleeper Wakes* (New York: Modern Library, 2003), xx.

preaching, and teaching that many Wells admirers have either failed to acknowledge or simply chosen to ignore.

In addition to his seat at the throne of modern science fiction, Wells has also long been the *raison d'être* of the H. G. Wells Society, a worldwide association of academics and activists which has sought, since its establishment in 1960, "to promote a wider knowledge of the ideas and ideals of H. G. Wells and to assist in promoting their understanding and dissemination."<sup>10</sup> The H. G. Wells Society, then, is not an aggregation of independent, open-minded Wells scholars, but rather an association devoted to the promotion and dissemination of Wells's thought, including his unique chiliastic vision of human history.

Wells framed the narrative of humankind in grand, if not grandiose terms, placing before his fellow creatures an eschatological choice between cataclysm and utopia. This overarching theme was one which persistently resurfaced throughout Wells's writings and was a notion which he himself variously described as the dream of an emerging "New Republic," "Mind of the Race," "World State," "World Pax," "Cosmopolis," and "World Brain," among other terms.<sup>11</sup> Ultimately, Wells's historical vision was an *idée fixe* which he always maintained and from which he never strayed. During one of the darkest years of the Second World War, Wells wrote, "No man knows he is beaten until he knows and admits he is beaten, and that I will never admit."<sup>12</sup> And in 1946, only three months before his death, he remarked, "I have just read an article I wrote fifty years ago

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<sup>10</sup> "Statement of Objects," <http://www.hgwellsusa.50megs.com/UK/state.html> (Nov. 26, 2005).

<sup>11</sup> Norman and Jeanne Mackenzie, *H. G. Wells: A Biography* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1973), 164, 313; David C. Smith, *H. G. Wells: Desperately Mortal* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), 331, 333, 337.

<sup>12</sup> Smith, *Desperately Mortal*, 355.



and if it was reprinted today I should not have to change one word of it.”<sup>13</sup> The interesting thing about certain Wells scholars is the extent to which they have failed to scrutinize the veracity of Wells’s idiosyncratic eschatological vision.<sup>14</sup> Much like the unrepentant Stalinist historian Eric Hobsbawm, they have remained apologists for a worldview which was, and remains to this day, a deeply flawed guide to history and a wrongheaded map for the future of mankind.

The truncated scope of Wells’s literary reputation and the implicitly uncritical tone of many works of Wellsian scholarship have together produced a deeply flawed portrait of Wells as a literary god, a prophet of the future, or, as Saul Bellow portrayed him in his novel *Mr. Sammler’s Planet*, an inherently ridiculous fool.<sup>15</sup> But Wells was no prophet, god, or fool. Instead, he was determinedly, and steadfastly, a man of his age. As is the case with Orwell, Wells’s life and work cease to be fully comprehensible once they have been abstracted from the historical milieu in which he lived and wrote.

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<sup>13</sup> Smith, *Desperately Mortal*, 446.

<sup>14</sup> In particular, I am referring to the scholarship of John S. Partington, David C. Smith, and W. Warren Wagar, all of whom are active members of the H. G. Wells Society. Partington is the current editor of *The Wellsian* (the journal of the H. G. Wells Society), and his essay “The Pen as Sword” is examined in the second and third chapters of this thesis. As for Smith, his laudatory biography of Wells concluded with this optimistic, if dubious, flourish: “Wells shares are rising on the stock exchange; slowly, perhaps, but rising. He still speaks to us all—and a Wellsian world awaits, as it has always done, for those who are willing to use their brains and their will. The Trojan Horse that is the Open Conspiracy still stands in the courtyard.” As for Wagar, he concluded his most recent study of Wells thusly: “Since boyhood I have believed, with Wells, that the only conceivable remedy for the human predicament is the full and irreversible transfer of sovereign power from the tribes and states of the present day to a secular global commonwealth.” See John S. Partington, “The Pen as Sword: George Orwell, H. G. Wells and Journalistic Parricide,” *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 39, No. 1, 45-56; Smith, *Desperately Mortal*, 485; W. Warren Wagar, *H. G. Wells: Traversing Time* (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 2004), 274.

<sup>15</sup> In *Mr. Sammler’s Planet*, Bellow depicted Wells as “a horny man of labyrinthine extraordinary sensuality. As a biologist, as a social thinker concerned with power and world projects, the molding of a universal order, as a furnisher of interpretation and opinion to the educated masses—all of these he appeared to need to great amount of copulation.” Bellow continued, explaining that “nowadays Sammler would recall him as a little lower-class Limey, and as an aging man of declining ability and appeal. And in the agony of parting with the breasts, the mouths, and the precious sexual fluids of women, poor Wells, the natural teacher, the sex emancipator, the explainer, the humane blesser of mankind, could in the end only blast and curse everyone.” Saul Bellow, *Mr. Sammler’s Planet* (New York: Viking, 1970), 28.

Accordingly, both H. G. Wells and George Orwell deserve to be approached, examined, and understood within their proper historical context.

Precisely because the ideas and works of Wells and Orwell have been abstracted, used, and misused so often over the previous six decades, it may seem strange to note that Orwell and Wells shared a number of significant literary, political, and even personal connections. Although the term "Wellsian" has long conveyed an essentially antithetical notion from the adjective "Orwellian," the fact remains that much of what Orwell wrote and argued was filtered through the lens of his appreciation for Wells's thought and work. This is something that has long been underemphasized or ignored by many Orwell scholars. For instance, Michael Shelden, in *Orwell: The Authorized Biography*, mentioned Wells just three times, and then only within a chapter about Orwell's childhood. And Peter Davison, the editor of *The Complete Works of George Orwell*, also authored *George Orwell: A Literary Life*, a book in which Wells was conspicuous largely by his misappropriation.<sup>16</sup> On the other hand, scholars and critics such as William Abrahams and Peter Stansky, Gordon Bowker, Bernard Crick, John Hammond, Jefferson Hunter, John Partington, Richard Rees, Jonathan Rose, William Steinhoff, and George Woodcock have all noted a number of literary, intellectual, and political connections

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<sup>16</sup> Michael Shelden, *Orwell: The Authorized Biography* (New York: HarperCollins, 1991), 46, 62, 63. As for Peter Davison, he mentions Wells three times in passing, and then uses him to make the specious argument that Orwell's boyhood dream of writing a book like Wells's novel *A Modern Utopia* "might, with only a little romantic exaggeration, be seen as the moment when *Nineteen Eighty-Four* was conceived." Davison, *Literary Life*, 9.



between Orwell and Wells.<sup>17</sup> However, no scholar to date has confronted the question of Wells's influence upon Orwell in a full-fledged way. Redressing this oversight is the primary objective of this thesis.

Orwell, who described himself as "Wells's own creation," adored the works of Wells as a schoolboy and later abandoned a career with the British Imperial Police in order to pursue his childhood ambition of becoming a writer like Wells.<sup>18</sup> As a young writer, Orwell not only mimicked Wells's didactic tendencies, but even modeled the plots of several of his own books upon his favorite Wells novels.<sup>19</sup> However, some twenty years later Orwell composed *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, a novel which parodied Wells's eschatological worldview and largely discredited the very ideals which Wells had long regarded as the apotheosis of his life's work. Ultimately, the relationship between Orwell and Wells hinges upon "a sort of parricide," to use Orwell's phrase for his attack upon a number of key Wellsian ideas and ideals.<sup>20</sup> This being said, his parricide was not as

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<sup>17</sup> See William Abrahams and Peter Stansky, *The Unknown Orwell* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1972); Gordon Bowker, *Inside George Orwell: A Biography* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003); Bernard Crick, *George Orwell: A Life* (New York: Penguin Books, 1982); J. R. Hammond, *A George Orwell Companion* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1982); Jefferson Hunter, "Orwell, Wells, and *Coming Up for Air*," *Modern Philology*, Vol. 78, No. 1 (Aug., 1980), 38-47; Partington, "Pen as Sword," 45-56; Richard Rees, *George Orwell: Fugitive from the Camp of Victory* (Carbondale, Illinois: Southern Illinois University Press, 1961); Jonathan Rose, "Eric Blair's Schooldays," from Jonathan Rose, ed., *The Revised Orwell* (East Lansing, Michigan: Michigan State University Press, 1992); William Steinhoff, *George Orwell and the Origins of 1984* (Ann Arbor, Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1975); George Woodcock, *The Crystal Spirit: A Study of George Orwell* (New York: Schocken Books, 1984).

<sup>18</sup> In his famous 1941 essay "Wells, Hitler and the World State," Orwell was undoubtedly referring to himself when he wrote: "Thinking people who were born about the beginning of this century are in some sense Wells's own creation." From Ian Angus and Sonia Orwell, eds., *The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell*, 4 vols. (London: Penguin Books, 1970), 2:170-1 (hereafter cited as *CEJL*).

<sup>19</sup> Despite the fact that Orwell's relatively straightforward prose style had little in common with that of the rambling Wells, he nonetheless adopted Wells's penchant for didactic, discursive, polemical writing. Among Orwell's novels, *Keep the Aspidochelone Flying*, *Coming Up for Air*, and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* in particular display strong connections to the following Wells novels: *Love and Mr. Lewisham*, *The History of Mr. Polly*, and *When the Sleeper Wakes*.

simple as the toppling of a childhood idol, nor was it in any way indicative of a complete or decisive break with his Wellsian heritage. Instead, like Wells before him, Orwell positioned himself as a self-made man of letters, as a didactic, polemical writer, and as an impassioned opponent of fascism, Soviet Communism (and, in a crankish way, the Catholic Church). Like Wells, Orwell also became a passionate defender of free speech as well as an internal critic of the British Labour Party. In examining the lifelong influence of Wells upon Orwell, it becomes clear that Orwell's "parricide" was not so much a single act of polemical violence against Wells as it was a selective elimination of certain Wellsian ideas he disfavored or with which he came to disagree.

The first chapter of this thesis, "Wells's Own Creation," is an examination of the influence of Wells upon the adolescent Orwell. As a schoolboy, Orwell steeped himself in Wells's utopian romances and Dickensian working-class novels. Influenced by Wells's Edwardian radicalism, he also became an atheist and socialist. And on weekend tramps through the English countryside, he sometimes imagined himself as a character from one of Wells's novels. But in his schoolboy parody "A Peep into the Future," he also poked fun at what he considered to be Wells's fundamentally misguided utopianism. Although Orwell later rejected many of the Wellsian ideals he absorbed and embraced as a child, he always retained his youthful admiration for Wells as an imaginative, didactic writer, as an independent-minded socialist, and as an intellectual and literary father figure for Englishmen of his generation.

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<sup>20</sup> In his 1941 essay "Wells, Hitler and the World State," Orwell asked, rhetorically: "But is it not a sort of parricide for a person of my age... to find fault with H. G. Wells?" Angus and Orwell, eds., *CEJL* 2:170.



The second chapter, "Coming of Age," is an analysis of the first decade of Orwell's writing career, a period in which he rapidly developed as a novelist as well as a reporter and polemicist. This chapter also addresses the trajectory of Wells's career as a novelist and social prophet from the early decades of the century to the months just before the outbreak of the Second World War. By examining Orwell's artistic and political development in light of his continued, if changing, relationship with the thought and work of Wells, it will become clear that Orwell's incipient "parricide" was never as complete or decisive as the term itself implies. On one hand, Orwell wholeheartedly embraced Wells as a literary figure worthy of emulation. In fact, he even mimicked a Wellsian plot in one of his early novels, *Keep the Aspidistra Flying* (1936). (This particular literary connection is one that few scholars have confronted, and will be examined in detail.) On the other hand, by the middle of the decade, Orwell emerged as a vocal critic of the more utopian elements of Wellsian socialism. In *The Road to Wigan Pier* (1937), he explained why Wells's utopian vision failed to resonate with the masses of unemployed people in England's poverty-ravaged industrial cities. And in *Homage to Catalonia* (1938), Orwell described a rough-hewn but undeniably functioning worker's republic in revolutionary Barcelona. Indeed, in Catalonia, he believed he had witnessed a short-lived but vibrant socialist society resembling nothing like the glittering, antiseptic world Wells had long prophesied. Lastly, in the months before the start of the Second World War, Orwell composed *Coming Up for Air* (1939), a novel in which he explicitly confessed his continued admiration for Wells's Edwardian social novels, and in which he ironically upended Wells's bucolic, utopian themes in order to express his horror and revulsion at the prospect of another European war.



The third chapter, "A Sort of Parricide," is an examination of Orwell and Wells's continually evolving relationship throughout the Second World War and into the postwar era. Although Orwell always retained a number of Wellsian values and attitudes, the war eventually exposed a major rift between the thought of Orwell and Wells which, by the end of Orwell's life, widened into a considerable gulf. In 1941, Orwell's increasingly conflicted relationship with Wells manifested itself when the two writers finally met one another in wartime London. Even as Orwell made a conscious effort to woo and befriend Wells, he simultaneously aired fierce public criticism of Wellsian utopianism in his essays "Wells, Hitler and the World State" and "The Rediscovery of Europe." In less than eleven months, Orwell's repeated attacks effectively destroyed his friendship with Wells, who cursed him as a "shit" and "a Trotskyist with big feet," among other things, before telling him he never wanted to see him again. From 1942 until Wells's death in 1946, Orwell dispensed with any remaining vestiges of politeness, and ridiculed Wells savagely in a number of essays and newspaper columns. In what proved to be his final book, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949), Orwell committed the final and most damaging act of his Wellsian "parricide" by suggesting that Wells's dream of a world state could easily be perverted into a great and terrible system of war and tyranny. Ultimately, Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* was the book that killed off the vision of a Wellsian utopia and discredited altogether the notion of Wells as a timely political thinker. It is also from *Nineteen Eighty-Four* that the adjectives "Orwellian" and "Wellsian" have come to be seen as conveying a pair of fundamentally irreconcilable historical visions, and it is this legacy which has since obscured so many of the intellectual, literary, and political connections between Orwell and Wells.

Although this thesis restates the ideas and opinions of many Orwell and Wells scholars, it also examines a number of literary and political connections between Orwell and Wells which have remained, until now, virtually unnoticed or unexplored. This being said, it has neither been my intention to add yet another layer of hagiographical gloss to the reputations of Orwell and Wells, nor have I sought to attack either man in the unfairly critical spirit of what Milan Kundera trenchantly called "the tribunal."<sup>21</sup> In the end, it is my hope that this examination of the literary, political, intellectual, and personal connections between Orwell and Wells will shed some new light on the relationship between them, and also that it will contribute to a better historical understanding of George Orwell and H. G. Wells within the context of the age in which they lived.

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<sup>21</sup> In an essay about the typically easy, wrongheaded way many critics and historians have characterized and then dismissively criticized their human subjects, Kundera wrote: "If we don't want to leave this century just as stupid as we entered it, we must abandon the facile moralism of the trial... But the conformism of public opinion is a force that sets itself up as a tribunal, and the tribunal is not there to waste time over ideas, it is there to conduct the investigations for trials. And as the abyss of time widens between judges and defendants, it is always a lesser experience that is judging a greater... If the spirit of the trial succeeds in annihilating this century's culture, nothing will remain of us but a memory of its atrocities sung by a chorus of children." From Milan Kundera, *Testaments Betrayed: An Essay in Nine Parts* (New York: HarperCollins, 1995), 233-4.



## CHAPTER ONE

### “WELLS’S OWN CREATION”

Currently, H. G. Wells is best known as the father of modern science fiction. However, in the first decade of the twentieth century, Wells was widely regarded as a major literary talent in a more general sense. His “scientific romances,” “future histories,” and social comedies appealed to a popular audience and also impressed a number of critics, intellectuals, and fellow writers. Joseph Conrad, Henry James, and George Gissing, for instance, were among his most ardent admirers. Conrad, in one of his letters to Wells, gushed: “I suppose you’ll have the decency to believe me when I tell you I am always powerfully impressed by your work. Impressed is the word, O Realist of the Fantastic! whether you like it or not.”<sup>22</sup> Similarly, Henry James’s brother, the philosopher William James, told Wells: “You are a triumph and a jewel, and for human perception you beat Kipling, and for hitting off a thing with the right words you are unique... You are now an eccentric; perhaps fifty years hence you will figure as a classic.”<sup>23</sup>

Like Dickens before him, with whom he had a lot in common in how he merged a popular and literary following, Wells ascended to the literary heights from decidedly humble origins. In Wells’s case, he escaped the lower-middle class fate of a draper, and then struggled to educate himself and establish his writing career. As Norman and

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<sup>22</sup> Patrick Parrinder, ed., *H. G. Wells: The Critical Heritage* (Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1972), 60.

<sup>23</sup> Mackenzie, *H. G. Wells*, 191.

Jeanne Mackenzie noted in their authoritative *H. G. Wells: A Biography*, Wells toiled for nearly a decade as a journalist and reviewer before at last discovering a market as the author of serialized “scientific romances.”<sup>24</sup> When Wells found his niche, his ascent to popular and critical success was swift and complete. His first novel, *The Time Machine* (1895), which was initially published in the pages of W. E. Henley’s monthly magazine *The New Review*, was the work that established his literary reputation. It was even hailed by one critic as “that rarity which Solomon declared to be not merely rare but non-existent—a ‘new thing under the sun.’”<sup>25</sup>

Within a matter of months, Wells capitalized on his newfound popularity and cemented his literary reputation with a string of commercially and critically successful works, including the scientific romances *The Island of Doctor Moreau* (1896), *The Invisible Man* (1897), *War of the Worlds* (1898), and *When the Sleeper Awakes* (1899). Most of Wells’s early novels were characterized by apocalyptic, pessimistic, and even morbid themes, all of which reflected a number of key influences from his life, including his acute awareness of mortality (Wells suffered from chronically bad lungs and came close to death several times as a young man, as did Orwell a generation later), his childhood exposure to an eschatological-minded variant of evangelical Christianity, and the impact of Sir Thomas Huxley’s decidedly pessimistic approach to evolutionary theory (in the 1880s, Wells studied under Huxley, who famously denied the false optimism of many progress-obsessed Darwinians).<sup>26</sup> From 1895 to 1899, Wells wrote at a furious,

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<sup>24</sup> Mackenzie, *H. G. Wells*, 116.

<sup>25</sup> Parrinder, ed., *Critical Heritage*, 38.

<sup>26</sup> Mackenzie, *H. G. Wells*, 120.



inspired pace. Indeed, during these years he averaged two books and sixty short stories per year, and published well over a million words in all.<sup>27</sup>

In addition to his scientific romances, Wells also composed a number of light comedies and social novels in the tradition of Galsworthy and Dickens. These works, as one can imagine, were even more directly inspired by his own life. For instance, *Love and Mr. Lewisham* (1901) reflected his days as a student at South Kensington; *Kipps* (1905) drew from his adolescent memories of working as a draper's assistant in Windsor; *Tono-Bungay* (1908) sketched several revealing scenes from his first marriage; and *The History of Mr. Polly* (1910) paid tribute to his father, a one-time cricket player who later struggled to make ends meet as a village shopkeeper.<sup>28</sup>

For the generation of Englishmen who grew up in the first decade of the twentieth century, Wells was often revered as a kind of literary and intellectual idol. In fact, following Wells's death, the editors of *The Times Literary Supplement* recalled: "There was a time when Wells spoke more clearly than any other man to the youth of the world."<sup>29</sup>

In the early years of the century, one particularly ardent young admirer of H. G. Wells was George Orwell. Born Eric Blair in 1903, the boy who would become the world-famous writer discovered the works of Wells at an early age. Coming from what he later called "one of those ordinary middle-class families of soldiers, clergymen, government officials, teachers, lawyers, [and] doctors," Blair grew up in various towns

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<sup>27</sup> Mackenzie, *H. G. Wells*, 116.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid*, 119.

<sup>29</sup> Parrinder, ed., *Critical Heritage*, 322.

throughout the Thames valley in southeast England.<sup>30</sup> He was the product of a “lower-upper-middle class” world from which he never fully escaped, despite the fact that he spent much of his adult life railing against what he considered to be its inherent snobbishness and narrow-mindedness.<sup>31</sup> A middle child and only son, Blair was raised by his mother and enjoyed only a handful of childhood friends. His father, a lifelong officer in the Opium Department in Burma, was literally half a world away, and was largely absent from his son’s life. Encouraged by his mother and fostered by the more than occasional loneliness of his home life, young Blair developed into a voracious reader. In particular, he adored the works of Thackeray, Kipling, and Wells, whom he considered his “favourite authors.”<sup>32</sup>

As a child, Blair shared his love of Wells with his friend Jacintha Buddicom. Intelligent, pretty, and several years older than Blair, she related well to the bright, bookish boy. Years later, Buddicom recalled their excited conversations about the works of Wells. In particular, she remembered Blair’s pleasure with the short stories “Slip under the Microscope” and “The Country of the Blind,” as well as his fascination with one particular book in the Buddicom family library—a copy of Wells’s scientific romance *A Modern Utopia*.<sup>33</sup> According to Buddicom, Blair read it so often that she eventually gave it to him as a Christmas gift.<sup>34</sup> For his ninth birthday, Blair also received

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<sup>30</sup> John Carey, ed., *George Orwell: Essays* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2002), 1211.

<sup>31</sup> George Orwell, *The Road to Wigan Pier* (New York: Harcourt, Inc., 1958), 121.

<sup>32</sup> Angus and Orwell, eds., *CEJL* 4: 344.

<sup>33</sup> Crick, *A Life*, 93.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid*, 93.



a copy of Wells's *The History of Mr. Polly* (1910).<sup>35</sup> To his delight, he discovered that the novel was set in the same Thames valley countryside in which he grew up and attended school.

Even as a boy, Blair not only read Wells's books, but aspired to write books like them himself. "From a very early age, perhaps the age of five or six, I knew that when I grew up I should be a writer," he later wrote.<sup>36</sup> This ambition he confided in his friend Buddicom. "Of course, Eric was always going to write: not merely as an author, always a FAMOUS AUTHOR, in capitals," she clarified.<sup>37</sup> Anecdotal evidence suggests that Wells was the "FAMOUS AUTHOR" Blair had in mind. He told Buddicom, at one point, that *A Modern Utopia* was the kind of book he would like to write.<sup>38</sup> In later years, the influence of Wells was a persistent theme throughout his writing, as Orwell himself readily acknowledged. In a letter to a friend, for instance, he likened his novel *Coming Up for Air* to "Wells watered down," and confessed, "I have a great admiration for Wells, [who] ... was a very early influence on me."<sup>39</sup>

In 1911, Blair's mother sent him off to Saint Cyprian's, a well-respected, highly competitive English preparatory school. Like most academies of its ilk, Saint Cyprian's sought, above all else, to mold its boys into suitable candidates for England's top public schools. Although young Blair rose to this challenge and eventually won a scholarship to Eton, he later emphasized the hardships and traumas of these years. "I have good

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<sup>35</sup> Bowker, *Inside Orwell*, 26.

<sup>36</sup> Angus and Orwell, eds., *CEJL* 1:23.

<sup>37</sup> Crick, *A Life*, 93.

<sup>38</sup> Bowker, *Inside Orwell*, 42.

<sup>39</sup> Angus and Orwell, eds., *CEJL* 4:478.



memories of St Cyprian's, among a horde of bad ones," he famously recalled in "Such, Such Were the Joys" (1948), a bitter exhumation of his prep school years which, until 1968, his publisher considered too libelous to print.<sup>40</sup> Of course the irony of the essay's title only underscored the bitterness of his memories. Nevertheless, Orwell fondly recalled reading Wells's books as a schoolboy at St. Cyprian's. In part, Wells's stories provided a welcome escape from the pressures of the playing fields and the demands of schoolmasters and tutors. In 1938, while working on the manuscript of what eventually became *Coming Up for Air*, Orwell penned a nostalgic letter to former St. Cyprian's schoolmate Cyril Connolly (himself a noteworthy literary figure, as the author of *The Rock Pool* and editor of the literary journal *Horizon*). In it, he recalled their shared schoolboy passion for Wells:

Do you remember one or other of us getting hold of H. G. Wells's [short story collection] *Country of the Blind* about 1914, at St. Cyprian's, and being so enthralled with it that we were constantly pinching it off each other? It's a very vivid memory of mine, stealing along the corridor at about four o'clock on a midsummer morning into the dormitory where you slept and pinching the book from beside your bed.<sup>41</sup>

For a precious few hours, with Wells in hand, Blair could escape into worlds far removed from the drab routine of prep school life. Above all, he admired the power of Wells's imagination, and thrilled as it soared to prophetic heights. "A decade or so before aeroplanes were technically feasible," he later wrote, "Wells knew that within a little while men would be able to fly." By contrast, in his everyday world such dreams were dismissed as frivolous or even disreputable. "Even when I was a little boy," he explained, "at a time when the Wright brothers had actually lifted their machine off the

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<sup>40</sup> Angus and Orwell, eds., *CEJL* 4:394.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 1:400.

ground for fifty-nine seconds, the generally accepted opinion was that if God had meant us to fly He would have given us wings."<sup>42</sup> As Blair saw it, Wells was a prophet, a man who could see beyond the Edwardian present and into the gleaming future. For a bright boy lodged in a stodgy, regimented school in peaceful Edwardian England, reading the scientific romances of Wells was a powerful, even liberating experience. This was something Orwell later realized, and likened to a rite of passage:

Back in the nineteen-hundreds it was a wonderful experience for a boy to discover H. G. Wells. There you were, in a world of pedants, clergymen and golfers, with your future employers exhorting you to "get on or get out," your parents systematically warping your sexual life, and your dull-witted schoolmasters sniggering over their Latin tags; and here was this wonderful man who could tell you about the inhabitants of the planets and the bottom of the sea, and who *knew* that the future was not going to be what responsible people imagined.<sup>43</sup>

At the same time, Wells also instilled in Blair an essentially romanticized view of Edwardian England. In novels like *The Wheels of Chance*, *Kipps*, and *The History of Mr. Polly*, Wells depicted the Thames valley countryside as a kind of timeless, bucolic idyll. Mr. Polly, for instance, abandons his unhappy life as a village merchant and flees into the country, where he at last finds happiness and contentment at the charmingly rustic Potwell Inn. As for Blair, he seems to have imagined that the farms and villages surrounding Saint Cyprian's belonged to the simple, decent, unspoiled world of Wells's novels. As Peter Stansky and William Abrahams noted in *The Unknown Orwell*, Blair and Connolly often ventured beyond the gates of Saint Cyprian's and into the surrounding Thames valley countryside. Sometimes the two boys felt that they had entered into a kind of tranquil Wells-world:

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<sup>42</sup> Angus and Orwell, eds., *CEJL* 2:171.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid*, 171.



He and Connolly would leave the school grounds and set out across the Downs to Beachy Head, or far along the plunging leafy roads that led deep into the Sussex countryside, to villages that might have figured in a Wells novel: Eastdean and Westdean and Jevington. They would pause in each, and buy from the little old lady who kept the village shop penny candies and various fizzy drinks: lemonade, cherry-ade, and cherry fizz. They might have been a world away from St. Cyprian's.<sup>44</sup>

In later years, Orwell waxed nostalgically, and even obsessively, upon the relatively peaceful decade between his birth and the outbreak of the First World War. In the novels *Coming Up for Air* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, for instance, he imagined the England of his youth as a kind of pastoral paradise, a "Golden Country" far removed from the horrors of the modern age.<sup>45</sup> As John Hammond noted, "Orwell shared with a number of other radical English novelists, most notably H. G. Wells, a nostalgia for the unchanging rural order he had known and loved as a child."<sup>46</sup> For Orwell, the comparatively sleepy Edwardian years always stood in direct contrast to "tumultuous, revolutionary ages like our own," the post-1914 years of revolution, depression, and warfare in which he lived his adult life.<sup>47</sup>

As a restless, creative adolescent, Blair was even known to imagine himself as a Wellsian character. At Eton, for instance, he occasionally spent his weekends roaming the countryside, sleeping outdoors, and pretending to be a tramp. Although he later repeated this experiment in his mid-twenties in order to report on the lives of the dispossessed of Slump-era London, these early adventures were born of a literary rather than a sociological impulse. Several of the books he most admired featured tramps as

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<sup>44</sup> Abrahams and Stansky, *Unknown Orwell*, 58.

<sup>45</sup> George Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1949), 29.

<sup>46</sup> Hammond, *Orwell Companion*, 151.

<sup>47</sup> Angus and Orwell, eds., *CEJL* 1:25.

protagonists, including Jack London's *People of the Abyss* (1903), W. H. Davies's *The Autobiography of a Super-Tramp* (1908), and H. G. Wells's *The History of Mr. Polly* (1910).<sup>48</sup> Following in the footsteps of one of Wells's more rustic characters, Blair focused on the supposedly romantic aspects of the tramping life, reporting to his friends, for instance, the benefits of fresh air and sleeping under open skies. Unable to hide his Etonian accent, he even invented a colorful hard-luck story to explain his supposed predicament. In later years, he explained:

The story I always tell was that my name was Edward Burton, and my parents kept a cake-shop in Blythburgh, where I had been employed as a clerk in a draper's shop; that I had had the sack for drunkenness, and my parents, finally getting sick of my drunken habits, had turned me adrift.<sup>49</sup>

Admittedly, Blair used his own life to flesh out some of the details: Cliffy Burton was a bully from St. Cyprian's, and his sister Avril worked at a local tea shop. Nonetheless, his story clearly owed more to Wells's *The History of Mr. Polly* and *Kipps* than anything else.<sup>50</sup>

Interestingly, this habit seems to have continued well into Orwell's adult life. In the spring of 1936, for instance, he married Eileen O'Shaughnessy and reopened an old country store in the village of Wallington. Although the venture failed to turn a profit, Orwell enjoyed growing vegetables in the adjacent garden, raising chickens, geese, and goats, and selling old-fashioned penny candies to the local children.<sup>51</sup> When Cyril

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<sup>48</sup> D. J. Taylor, *Orwell: The Life* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2003), 93.

<sup>49</sup> Bowker, *Inside Orwell*, 103.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid*, 103.

<sup>51</sup> Crick, *A Life*, 296.



Connolly paid a visit to Wallington, it struck him that his boyhood friend “saw himself as a kind of Edwardian shopkeeper out of a novel by H. G. Wells.”<sup>52</sup>

Upon his graduation from St. Cyprian’s in December 1916, Blair, aged thirteen, spent several uneventful months at Harrow before earning a scholarship to Eton, a place he later called “the most costly and snobbish of the English Public Schools.”<sup>53</sup> At Eton, which he attended from May 1917 until December 1921, he was neither a standout in the classroom nor on the playing fields.<sup>54</sup> In fact, he simply preferred to coast on his scholarship credentials. Later, he explained why he chose not to participate more vigorously in public school life:

I knew that at a public school there would be more privacy, more neglect, more chance to be idle and self-indulgent and degenerate. For years past I had been resolved—unconsciously at first, but consciously later on—that when once my scholarship was won I would “slack off” and cram no longer.<sup>55</sup>

Although he refused to cram for exams, he read constantly and filled his mind with the rebellious, anti-authoritarian ideas of his favorite authors. Roger Mynors, a fellow Etonian, remembered that his political and religious opinions echoed those of radical authors like Wells, Shaw, and Samuel Butler.<sup>56</sup> Similarly, classmate George Wansbrough recalled how Blair, aged fourteen, “used to quote writers like Bernard Shaw, Chesterton, H. G. Wells and... Samuel Butler, as if he had read them and absorbed their

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<sup>52</sup> William Abrahams and Peter Stansky, *Orwell: The Transformation* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1980), 173.

<sup>53</sup> Carey, ed., *Essays*, 1211.

<sup>54</sup> Peter Davison, ed., *The Complete Works of George Orwell: Volume*, 20 vols. (London: Secker & Warburg, 1998), 10:87.

<sup>55</sup> Angus and Orwell, eds., *CEJL* 4:415.

<sup>56</sup> Crick, *A Life*, 104.

points of view.” Wansbrough continued: “I doubt whether any others in our Election had read more than a very little of these authors by the time we arrived at Eton.”<sup>57</sup> By the time he entered public school, Blair claimed to have read much of Sterne and Chesterton. During his first two years at Eton, he also read through the whole of Shaw and re-read the works of Wells.<sup>58</sup> Interestingly, most of his favorite writers were opinionated controversialists. Although their opinions varied widely, they impressed upon Blair the notion that the writer’s duty was to challenge, provoke, and draw fire.

Not surprisingly, Blair’s fascination with the discursive literary lights of the early nineteenth-hundreds did not extend to their successors, the Eliots and Lawrences of the postwar era. As Stansky and Abrahams noted in *The Unknown Orwell*, his schoolboy reading habits were essentially limited to those whom he discovered at an early age:

As a reader he had been precocious only in the sense that he came very young to Shaw and Wells and Galsworthy; but these were staple reading for Englishmen of the time who were literate and progressive; and presently they were known in College. ... In succeeding years, though he continued to read avidly, he did not venture deep into the territory of the “new.” (Not necessarily a fault, of course, but it must be kept in mind that he was at Eton when D. H. Lawrence and Virginia Woolf and T. S. Eliot and Wyndham Lewis were publishing their work, and were not wholly unknown to other Etonians.)<sup>59</sup>

Even as his fellow Etonians delved into works like *The Waste Land* and *Sons and Lovers*, Blair remained stubbornly content to read, and re-read, the rambling, didactic, problem-solving novels of writers like Galsworthy, Dickens, and Wells. He did not “evolve” like the trendy, bright young literary set. Moreover, when Blair eventually confronted the

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<sup>57</sup> Crick, *A Life*, 104.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 104.

<sup>59</sup> Abrahams and Stansky, *Unknown Orwell*, 121.



modernists, their sense of moral ambiguity often left him confused and dissatisfied. In later years, he wrote:

When I first read D. H. Lawrence's novels, at the age of about twenty, I was puzzled by the fact that there did not seem to be any classification of the characters into "good" and "bad." Lawrence seemed to sympathize with all of them about equally, and this was so unusual as to give me the feeling of having lost my bearings.<sup>60</sup>

Although he eventually came to admire Lawrence, Joyce, and even Henry Miller, Blair's literary interests and sensibilities remained distinctly old-fashioned, if not fundamentally boyish. As Jonathan Rose noted, the literature he read as a schoolboy comprised the subject matter of more than half of his major essays.<sup>61</sup> As Orwell, he later composed critical essays on Kipling, Dickens, Gissing, Wodehouse, Thackeray, and Swift, all of whom he loved as a child, and none of whom appealed to the postwar literary set. In his incisive literary study *The Crystal Spirit*, George Woodcock observed that "few of the authors he read in later years engrossed his attention so much or left such a lasting mark on his mind as those great Victorians and Edwardians who had impressed him in his youth."<sup>62</sup>

In the years before the First World War, Wells was regarded in Establishment circles as a troublesome outsider. After all, as an atheist, socialist, and advocate of various progressive political causes, including free love, women's rights, and anti-imperialism, this was precisely his intention. More significantly, Wells was among those

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<sup>60</sup> Angus and Orwell, eds., *CEJL* 3:258-9.

<sup>61</sup> Rose, ed., *Revised Orwell*, 81.

<sup>62</sup> Woodcock, *Crystal Spirit*, 291.



of his generation who came to believe in the possibility of a rational, scientific utopia.<sup>63</sup> In *Anticipations* (1901), he optimistically laid out a “future history” of the world. As Norman and Jeanne Mackenzie observed, Wells’s vision was eschatological and messianic in its scale, and was quite unlike—and in a sense, much older—than many of the other secular or “scientific” utopian creeds that were then being formulated throughout the Western world:

There were obvious similarities between this interpretation of the future and the apocalyptic variant of Marxism which Lenin, living in London, was developing at much the same time. But, in trying to persuade his readers that there was a pattern to the future as well as to the past, Wells had not borrowed from Marx: he was tapping a much older tradition, reaching back to the millenarian doctrines of Cromwell’s England for his vision of things to come. *Anticipations* was written in the language of sociology, but its plot was a morality play about the Last Judgment.<sup>64</sup>

In *Anticipations*, Wells described his vision of a utopian world state, which he named “the New Republic.” As he saw it, the New Republic would come to pass in the wake of a frenzied global war (which he called the “last war cyclone”) and a fallow period of anarchy, disorder, and famine. In Wells’s *Anticipations*, as John Hammond observed, once human civilization had collapsed into another dark age, an elite of revolutionary scientists and technicians would then “impose their will on the shattered fragments of Europe and succeed in rebuilding a system of world order.”<sup>65</sup> Wells’s basic vision—apocalypse followed by redemption and utopia—was something he maintained and continued to expound upon for the rest of his life.

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<sup>63</sup> Parrinder, ed., *Critical Heritage*, 2-3.

<sup>64</sup> Mackenzie, *H. G. Wells*, 164.

<sup>65</sup> John Hammond, *A Preface to H. G. Wells* (Harlow, England: Pearson Education Limited, 2001), 67.

In the first decade of the twentieth century, Wells followed *Anticipations* with a deluge of similarly-themed books, like the prophetic *The Discovery of the Future* (1902) and *Mankind in the Making* (1903), as well as the utopian novels *Food of the Gods* (1904), *A Modern Utopia* (1905), and *In the Days of the Comet* (1906). In all of these works, Wells elaborated upon his cataclysmic vision of history, as well as his newfound hope for the creation of an earthly utopia. For the most part, Wells's works were received with widespread popular and critical praise. However, not all of his readers embraced his transition into a messianic prophet. Commenting upon the optimistic flourish of human good will at the end of *Anticipations*, Joseph Conrad confided to Wells: "Generally the fault I find with you is that you do not take sufficient account of human imbecility which is cunning and perfidious."<sup>66</sup> Wells evidently took Conrad's point to heart and thereafter invented ways, no matter how improbable or fanciful, of transcending the otherwise intractable problem of the selfish, destructive side of human nature. In *Food of the Gods*, for instance, he invented "Boomfood" as a device to create a race of super men. Similarly, in the novel *In the Days of the Comet*, he relied upon a miraculous, enlightenment-bestowing comet to establish a temporal heaven.<sup>67</sup>

In *The World Set Free* (1914), Wells famously articulated the first literary account of a nuclear war. (Leo Szilard, the exiled Hungarian physicist and member of the Manhattan Project, considered Wells's description of a nuclear chain reaction to be one of the primary inspirations behind the creation of the Hiroshima bomb.)<sup>68</sup> As he did with

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<sup>66</sup> Mackenzie, *H. G. Wells*, 167.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid*, 188.

<sup>68</sup> Tom Reiss, "Imagining the Worst: The Novels that Foresaw Our World," *The New Yorker* (Nov. 28, 2005), 106-114.



Boomfood and his magical comet, Wells used the nuclear holocaust of *The World Set Free* as a *deus ex machina* to clear the ground, in a literal and figurative way, for his impending world state, or “the great conception of universal rule.”<sup>69</sup>

When the First World War actually erupted across Europe in the summer of 1914, Wells optimistically christened it “The War That Will End War.”<sup>70</sup> In the face of his persistent idealism, many of Wells’s formerly idealistic Edwardian readers abandoned him for the darker pleasures of the modernist writers who emerged in the latter years of the war, and who increasingly gained in popularity what Wells lost. For those young disciples of Wells who survived the unexpectedly barbaric war, the Wellsian gospel of human “progress” often seemed an impossible ideal, even as the global conflagration Wells had long prophesied destroyed three Western empires and ensured the rise of the Bolshevik socialist experiment in Russia. In later years, Orwell described overwhelming disillusionment which characterized the spirits of many in the years following the war:

Progress had finally ended in the biggest massacre in history, Science was something that created bombing planes and poison gas, civilized man, as it turned out, was ready to behave worse than any savage when the pinch came.<sup>71</sup>

But this was Orwell writing in 1942, in the midst of an even bloodier global war. As a schoolboy at Eton, as he was during the Great War, Blair did not succumb to despair. In fact, he continued to flirt with progressive Wellsian ideals even as the war became a massacre and the massacre subsided into an uneasy peace.

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<sup>69</sup> Mackenzie, *H. G. Wells*, 298, 299.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid*, 298.

<sup>71</sup> Angus and Orwell, eds., *CEJL* 2:238.



Unlike the boys only two or three years older than him, Blair was too young to fight in the war. And like many of his Eton contemporaries, he took pride in his ignorance of the developments on the Western Front, even as 1,157 Old Etonians eventually perished there.<sup>72</sup> Later, in "My Country Right or Left" (1940), Orwell described his attitude as one of sneering, dismissive anti-authoritarianism:

In the school library a huge map of the western front was pinned on an easel, with a red silk thread running across on a zig-zag of drawing-pins. Occasionally the thread moved half an inch this way or that, each movement meaning a pyramid of corpses. I paid no attention. I was at school among boys who were above the average level of intelligence, and yet I do not remember that a single major event of the time appeared to us in its true significance. The Russian Revolution, for instance, made no impression, except on the few whose parents happened to have money invested in Russia. Among the very young the pacifist reaction had set in long before the war ended. To be as slack as you dared on O.T.C. parades, and to take no interest in the war, was considered a mark of enlightenment.<sup>73</sup>

Aloof and seemingly unaffected by the descent of western society into barbarism, Blair remained loyal to his Wellsian ideals. Like Wells before him, he rejected militarism, embraced pacifism, discarded the last vestiges of his boyhood religious faith, and declared his allegiance to the gospel of socialism.<sup>74</sup> In later years, Orwell realized that

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<sup>72</sup> After noting the staggering number of Old Etonians killed in the war, Orwell biographer Michael Shelden added: "[it] was the equivalent of some terrible plague wiping out the entire population of the school." Michael Shelden, *Authorized Biography*, 63.

<sup>73</sup> Angus and Orwell, eds., *CEJL* 1:588-9. It is also worth noting the attitude of Wells himself, who in his *Experiment in Autobiography*, described a wartime journey, under the escort of C. E. Montague, through the trenches of Amiens: "I remember vividly walking with him across the shell-hole-dotted, wire-littered open towards the front line trenches. The sun was shining brightly and there was just the faintest whiff of freshness and danger in the air. I doubt if anything was coming over; what shelling was audible overhead was British. We had agreed that blundering up the wet and narrow communication trench was intolerable in such sunshine and we talked bare-headed and carried our shrapnel helmets, like baskets, on our arms. We had confessed to each other what a bore the war had become to us, how its vast inconsequence weighed us down, and we talked as we trudged along very happily of the technical merits of Laurence Sterne." H. G. Wells, *Experiment in Autobiography* (New York: Macmillian Company, 1934), 583.

<sup>74</sup> Bowker, *Inside Orwell*, 53.

radical, idealistic writers like Shaw and Wells had profoundly shaped his youthful political development. In *The Road to Wigan Pier* (1937), he reflected upon his student socialist ideals with a mixture of pity and disgust:

Hence, at the age of seventeen or eighteen, I was both a snob and a revolutionary. I was against all authority. I had read and re-read the entire published works of Shaw, Wells, and Galsworthy (at that time, still regarded as dangerously “advanced” writers), and I loosely described myself as Socialist.<sup>75</sup>

During his final years at Eton, Blair also met various members of the Fabian Society, a group of elite progressive socialists to which Wells had previously belonged. During school vacations in 1918 and 1919 (and sporadically thereafter) Blair accompanied his radical aunt Nellie Limouzin to a number of Fabian salons in the more fashionable districts of London. Despite the fact that he was introduced to dozens of Fabian artists and writers, Blair was largely uninterested in making their acquaintance. Instead, he sought to meet his boyhood idol, the literary lion Wells.<sup>76</sup> Although Wells left the Fabian Society in 1908 (this episode is examined in the next chapter), he nonetheless remained on good terms with quite a few of its members. As Blair discovered, Wells was known to show up occasionally at informal Fabian gatherings. Years later, Jacintha Buddicom recalled Blair’s bitter disappointment at having just missed Wells at a salon held at the apartment of Nellie’s Fabian friend Edith Nesbit.<sup>77</sup> Although he was unable to meet his boyhood hero, Blair nonetheless received a compulsory education in Fabian political thought.

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<sup>75</sup> Orwell, *Wigan Pier*, 140.

<sup>76</sup> Bowker, *Inside Orwell*, 64.

<sup>77</sup> Rose, ed., *Revised Orwell*, 84.



As H. C. G. Matthew noted, the Fabians were evolutionary socialists who argued that “a centrally-planned economy and labor market, administered by an elite of trained professionals, would eliminate inefficiency, the trade cycle, and its by-products such as unemployment and poverty.”<sup>78</sup> In other words, most Fabians, as well as Wells, believed that the rule of order comprised the basis of socialism. “In place of disorderly individual effort,” wrote Wells, “each man doing what he pleases, the Socialist wants organized effort and a plan. That and no other is the essential Socialist idea.”<sup>79</sup> In addition to a focus on order and central planning, socialists like Wells and the Fabians predicted that future scientific and technological advances would play a key role in organizing naturally disorganized humans into efficient, industrious societies.

Even though he considered himself to be a socialist, Blair was also a decidedly individualistic, anachronistic, tradition-loving Etonian who found the Fabian-Wellsian emphasis on order and scientific progress off-putting, to say the least. As a fifteen year-old schoolboy, Blair parodied the notion of a hierarchical, science-worshipping socialist world as a kind of dingy, dehumanizing utopia in “A Peep into the Future,” a short story originally published in the June 1918 edition of *The Election Times*.<sup>80</sup> Blair set his story, as Orwell scholar Jonathan Rose noted, at “a futuristic Eton, where a revolution has taken place.”<sup>81</sup> In a post-apocalyptic landscape clearly intended to resemble the world of Wells’s *Anticipations* and *The World Set Free*, an ideological science professor named

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<sup>78</sup> H. C. G. Matthew, “The Liberal Age,” Kenneth O. Morgan, ed., *The Oxford History of Britain (Revised Edition)* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 569.

<sup>79</sup> Alex Zwerdling, *Orwell and the Left* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1974), 35.

<sup>80</sup> Davison, ed., *Complete Works* 10:48-50.

<sup>81</sup> Rose, ed., *Revised Orwell*, 88.

Sir Pigling Hill has imposed a technocratic dictatorship upon the school.<sup>82</sup> Although his rule is based upon the promised benefits of science and technology, these gains are evidently not expected to materialize. Hanging on the wall of the dining hall is a banner which humorously reveals the gulf between the promise and the reality of Hill's science-obsessed utopia:

Blessings on Science! When the bread seems old,  
The water tasteless, or the meat is cold.  
'Tis she that shows us that those things are right  
And teaches us the unwelcome food to bite.<sup>83</sup>

Once he establishes the atmosphere of the story, Blair's narrator confides to his readers: "I have not yet mentioned the impression made on me, namely, that Science had had a hardening effect on my schoolfellows."<sup>84</sup> As if to prove this point, an Old Etonian kicks his own child, and Hill is shown presiding over the torture of an innocent woman.

But then "a mighty woman" storms into the torture chamber, and declares to Hill, "A good smashin's what *you* want!" She attacks him, and is soon joined by the captain of the school, who cries, "Let's go back to the good old fashions and drop all this scientific stuff." When all the students enthusiastically concur, Blair's story swiftly concludes: "The reign of Science was at an end."<sup>85</sup>

For his part, Jonathan Rose argued that Blair's short story "reveals that the germ of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* had formed in Eric Blair's mind while he was still at Eton."<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> Rose, ed., *Revised Orwell*, 88.

<sup>83</sup> Davison, *Complete Works* 10:48.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, 49-50.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, 50.

<sup>86</sup> Rose, ed., *Revised Orwell*, 88.



However, "A Peep into the Future" is simply too brief and flimsy to justify this assertion. Nonetheless, Blair's story does suggest that his admiration and respect for Wells was already tempered by the ideals and sentiments instilled in him by his home and school life. In other words, even before the events of the tumultuous thirties and forties drove them apart, and despite the fact that he admired and respected Wells, it seems that Blair could not escape the fact that he was the son of colonial parents and a student at the most prestigious public school in England. In this regard, he had been imparted with a set of values vastly different from those of his literary idol.

This was a point Orwell later made in many of his writings, namely how difficult it was to get beyond the ideas or prejudices fostered early in one's life. Later, while conducting research for *The Road to Wigan Pier* (1937), he spent two months eating, sleeping, and drinking with working class Englishmen. Even at the time, Orwell realized that he could never fully relate to them, and that this was obvious to everyone. "But though I was among them," he wrote, "and I hope and trust they did not find me a nuisance, I was not one of them and they knew it even better than I."<sup>87</sup> To an extent, this was also the case with his youthful admiration for Wells. As George Woodcock observed:

Orwell was emotionally far removed from the majority of the middle-class Socialists, with their heritage of Wellsian Utopianism; he brought with him more than a vestige of the cold-bath Spartanism which in his day was automatically inculcated into members of the sahib caste.<sup>88</sup>

At Saint Cyprian's and Eton, Blair was raised in an environment that stressed the virtues of tradition and individual autonomy. Although he admired and respected Wells, Blair

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<sup>87</sup> Peter Lewis, *George Orwell: The Road to 1984* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1981), 50.

<sup>88</sup> Woodcock, *Crystal Spirit*, 247.

seems instinctively to have rejected the more utopian elements of Wells's socialist ideology.

In this regard, it is important to remember that Rudyard Kipling was also among Blair's favorite authors. As he later wrote, "If one had to choose among Wells's own contemporaries a writer who could stand towards him as a corrective, one might choose Kipling."<sup>89</sup> Unlike Wells, Kipling was a man for whom "the thunder of guns, the jingle of spurs, the catch in the throat when the old flag goes by" were real and meaningful human gestures, and not simply the products of an anachronistic, irrational worldview.<sup>90</sup> Although he rebelled against the values of his elders and adopted an anti-authoritarian Wellsian pose, Blair was ultimately unable to deny the influence of his heritage and education.

Even as a child, Blair's relationship with Wells was marked by a tension between the world in which he lived and the world of Wells's novels and short stories. On one hand, Blair clearly idolized Wells, and even dreamt of living in a Wells-world: he read all of Wells's books, aspired to become a writer like Wells, imagined himself to be a Wellsian character, and adopted a Wells-influenced political outlook. In 1941, Orwell reflected upon the preeminent influence of Wells upon his schoolboy years, and indeed, upon his whole life:

How much influence any mere writer has, and especially a "popular" writer whose work takes effect quickly, is questionable, but I doubt whether anyone who was writing books between 1900 and 1920, at any rate in the English language, influenced the young so much. The minds of

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<sup>89</sup> Angus and Orwell, eds., *CEJL* 2:172.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, 169.



all of us, and therefore the physical world, would be perceptibly different if Wells had never existed.<sup>91</sup>

But, as "A Peep into the Future" suggests, as Blair grew older he also rejected progressive Wellsian ideals when they did not make sense or suit the more conservative elements of his temperament. Although his youthful hero-worship superseded any truly critical examination of Wells's thought and work, Blair nonetheless came to regard his boyhood idol with an attitude of mingled admiration and doubt. As "Wells's own creation," Blair never shook off or repudiated his interest in and respect for Wells the writer, even though he later explicitly and decisively parted ways with Wells the thinker. However, Orwell could have been referring to his schoolboy attachment to Wells when he wrote, near the end of his life, "I am not able, and I do not want, completely to abandon the world-view that I acquired in childhood."<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>91</sup> Angus and Orwell, eds., *CEJL*, 2:171.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid*, 1:28.

CHAPTER TWO  
COMING OF AGE

In the first decade of his writing career, George Orwell grappled with the literary and political legacy of his childhood idol, H. G. Wells. On one hand, he pursued his youthful ambition to become a “FAMOUS WRITER” in the mold of Wells.<sup>93</sup> Even though it was unfashionable to do so at the time, he adopted Wells’s “Grub Street” approach to the writing profession, and composed pieces for any newspaper, magazine, journal, or review willing to pay for his contributions. This was much more in the nineteenth-century tradition of a man of letters than the twentieth-century literary ideal of a serious writer. In his early fiction, Orwell also borrowed from Wells what Jefferson Hunter called “a flexible notion of the novel’s form.”<sup>94</sup> In his novel *Keep the Aspidistra Flying* (1936) Orwell even modeled his story upon one of his favorite Edwardian Wells novels, *Love and Mr. Lewisham*.

And yet, even as he embraced Wells as a literary influence, Orwell came to criticize Wells’s utopian dreams in light of the massive social upheavals and political degenerations of the thirties. Even as the collapse of the old nineteenth-century order heralded the rise of political extremism and hastened the advent of another destructive European war, Wells preferred to look beyond the defining people and events of the age and to focus instead on his vision of an emerging world state. Throughout the

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<sup>93</sup> Crick, *A Life*, 93.

<sup>94</sup> Hunter, “Orwell, Wells,” 41.



increasingly gloomy interwar years, Wells continued to espouse his eschatological, utopian worldview. To this, Orwell responded with a pair of works in which he found fault with the need and desire for Wells's scientific, rational future. In *The Road to Wigan Pier* (1937), he examined the legacy of the Wellsian utopianism in light of a life-changing journey to the Depression-ravaged industrial cities of northern England. Even as he renewed his personal commitment to revolutionary socialism, Orwell challenged many of the Wellsian values he had embraced as a schoolboy. In part, he argued that Wells's conception of "progress" gave a misleading impression of what a truly socialist society would look like. More significantly, Orwell suggested that Wells's vision of a mechanized socialist future had to be disavowed and repudiated if socialism were actually to take root in England. In *Homage to Catalonia* (1938), Orwell described his experiences in wartime Spain in the spring and summer of 1937, when a worker's republic in Barcelona was violently suppressed by Communist troops acting under the counterrevolutionary orders of Stalin. Despite the fact that the Catalonian republic was a short-lived experiment, Orwell came to see it as the model for a humane, realistic, libertarian socialist state quite unlike that of Wells's utopian ideal.

In his 1939 novel, *Coming Up for Air*, Orwell demonstrated his admiration for Wells as a novelist, and at the same time expressed his ambivalence regarding the notion of Wells as a social and political prophet. Even though he self-consciously modeled his story upon Wells's novel *The History of Mr. Polly*, Orwell viciously satirized the hopeful, optimistic themes of Wells's Edwardian tale. Unlike Wells's Mr. Polly, Orwell's protagonist George Bowling tries, and fails, to find an idyllic refuge from the modern world. Even though Orwell continued to laud the "golden Edwardian years" of his youth,

he argued that the decade between his birth and the First World War was lost to history and was impossible to reclaim, especially in the violent, tumultuous world of 1938. After all, Orwell was writing when the thought of the next European war was a terrifyingly real possibility. At a time when Wells confidently envisioned the coming war as a bloody, albeit necessary precursor to his impending world state, Orwell feared that the gathering conflict would play out much like the Spanish Civil War, and that a terrifying alliance between Hitler and “pro-Fascists” within England would likely incarcerate or execute socialists like himself.

In the decade before the Great War, Wells reached the pinnacle of literary reputation. At the same time, he also came to be widely regarded as a consequential political figure and even as a kind of social prophet. After the publication of *Anticipations* (1901), Wells was invited to join Beatrice and Sidney Webb’s Fabian Society. Although many older Fabians shunned Wells as a self-serving scribbler of low-brow fantasies, George Bernard Shaw and Graham Wallas, the son of an evangelical preacher, welcomed Wells into the Fabian fold and soon became his steadfast supporters within the group. In particular, Wallas, who dreamt of what he called a “Great Society,” encouraged Wells to understand mankind as an “undynamic and incompetent” species which needed, more than anything else, leadership and instruction from enlightened, progressive-minded individuals.<sup>95</sup> Evidently considering himself to be a particularly enlightened individual, Wells soon began to advocate “a massive campaign of popular education” as the panacea to the social and political problems of the world.<sup>96</sup> In later

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<sup>95</sup> Mackenzie, *H. G. Wells*, 168.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid*, 169.



years, and even in the midst of two world wars, Wells continued to describe the idea of universal education—the creation of a “World Encyclopaedia” or “World Brain,” among other terms—as the cornerstone of his plan for a scientific, rational future.

As Wells became further enmeshed within the public and private affairs of the Fabian Society, his personal relationships with old friends like Conrad, Gissing, and James began to suffer. By the end of the First World War, most of these old friendships were effectively dead.<sup>97</sup> In a sense, this was not altogether unexpected. While Conrad and Gissing lived (and in Gissing’s case, died) in relative obscurity, Wells swiftly became a celebrated literary and political figure. As Norman and Jeanne Mackenzie observed, by 1906, on the verge of his fortieth birthday, Wells:

had moved away from the scientific romances and short stories which had made his reputation. He had established himself as a novelist, as a serious writer on social problems, and as a significant figure in socialist politics. He was financially successful and lionized in society.<sup>98</sup>

The drastically improved circumstances of Wells’s life revealed themselves in many of his published works, including his fiction. Unlike his early novels, in which the protagonists were invariably doomed or crushed under the weight of the world, Wells’s characters increasingly became the optimistic, if static, mouthpieces for his utopian social and political schemes. The old Wells, with his despairing vision of history and acceptance of human frailty, was being eroded by a more progressive, but decidedly less empathetic and perceptive prophet of the future. This was something that Conrad, one of his oldest literary friends, perceived. In 1908, he told Wells: “The difference between us

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<sup>97</sup> Mackenzie, *H. G. Wells*, 177.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid*, 239.

is fundamental. You don't care for humanity but think they are to be improved. I love humanity but know they are not."<sup>99</sup>

The difference between Wells's early fiction and those works published in the wake of *Anticipations* is something that his son, the critic and writer Anthony West, also discerned. In 1957, West composed an essay about his father's literary reputation in which he argued that novels like *The Time Machine* and *The Island of Doctor of Moreau* displayed "a profound mistrust of human nature, and a doubt about the intellect's ability to contain it."<sup>100</sup> West continued:

I think, too, that the view of human nature taken in these early books accounts for the flaw in the later ones which now makes them seem ill-considered and confused. These are forced in so far as they say things which Wells wishes to believe, and in which he, ultimately, does not believe. What he ultimately does not believe in is the ability of the human animal to live up to its ideals. *The Time Machine*, *The Island of Doctor Moreau*, and *When the Sleeper Wakes*, all state this idea quite bluntly. In mid-career Wells stopped saying this and adopted the progressive line, stating a body of ideas which can be called Wellsian.<sup>101</sup>

For his part, West argued that Wells eventually came to change his mind about the perfectibility of man, and that "at the close of his life... he was trying to recapture the spirit in which he had written *The Island of Doctor Moreau*," and also that "what haunted him... was a tragic sense that he had returned to the real source of what could have been his strength too late."<sup>102</sup> West reached this judgment, at least in part, on the basis of private conversations held between himself and his father near the end of Wells's life.

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<sup>99</sup> Mackenzie, *H. G. Wells*, 239, 241.

<sup>100</sup> Anthony West, "H. G. Wells," from Bernard Bergonzi, ed., *H. G. Wells: A Collection of Critical Essays* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1976), 14.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid*, 17.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid*, 23.



These conversations are one thing, but Wells's public actions and wartime writings are another matter altogether. The fact is that Wells continued, at least publicly, to advocate his utopian vision until the end of his life. Even when Wells despaired in this dream, his pessimism was exceeded and surpassed by a sense of mission and determination to boldly gaze beyond any current crises and dilemmas towards the bright Golden Age of tomorrow.

If West was right, then why—and for that matter, *how*—did his father persist in a cause which he instinctively understood to be hopeless, fruitless, and impossible? This is a question to which West did not adequately respond, other than to say that Wells came to despair his wasted decades as a social prophet in the last years of his life. Despite the fact that West knew Wells more intimately than most of Wells's critics, it seems that his interest here was mostly one of trying to make his father appear less optimistic than he clearly was. Ultimately, West simply cannot play down the fact that H. G. Wells spent over four decades of his writing career developing a complex, idealistic scheme for transforming a lowly humanity into the citizens of a rational world state. To argue that the profoundly pessimistic works of the first six years of Wells's career comprise the essence of "the real Wells," and that the ninety-plus works from the rest of his life should be understood as an extended period of forced self-delusion, is simply ludicrous. One cannot blame Anthony West for attempting to salvage his father's literary reputation, which was in shambles when he composed this particular essay. But to flatly deny H. G. Wells the power to speak for himself, to deny the forty-odd years of his life when he incessantly preached to a worldwide audience an unequivocally eschatological, utopian vision of human history, is to engage in an unpersuasive revisionist exercise.

Even though Wells always retained a Fabian-inspired confidence in the need for popular education in order to foster the emergence of a scientifically-trained revolutionary elite, Wells nonetheless departed from the Fabian Society in 1908. In the months leading up to his break with the Fabians, Wells led a failed campaign to convince the diffident, indifferent, or actively hostile Society members to reposition themselves as the vanguard elements of a future world state. Later, in his *Experiment in Autobiography* (1934), Wells attempted to put a positive spin on this disappointing turn of events:

I envisaged that reconditioned Fabian Society as becoming, by means of vigorous propaganda, mainly carried on by young people, the directive element of a reorganized socialist party. We would attack the coming generation at the high school, technical college and university college, and our organization would quicken into a constructive social stratum... The idea was as good as the attempt to realize it was futile... I was fundamentally right and I was wrongheaded and I left the Society, at last, if possible more politically parliamentary and ineffective than I found it.<sup>103</sup>

Several years later, Wells quarreled publicly and bitterly with his friend Henry James about the role of the novel in society. The conflict started when Wells viciously mocked, in his novel *Boon* (1915), what he considered to be James's artful pretensions:

It is like a church but without a congregation to distract you, with every light and line focused on the high altar. And on the altar, very reverently placed, intensely there, is a dead kitten, an egg-shell, a bit of string... And the elaborate copious emptiness of the whole Henry James exploit is only redeemed and made endurable by the elaborate, copious wit...<sup>104</sup>

Throughout 1915, James and Wells exchanged a series of increasingly nasty letters in which both men articulated their own philosophies of writing. While James famously extolled the aesthetic dimension of fiction, Wells argued instead that the primary function of the novel was to criticize, provoke, and teach. "To you literature like painting is an

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<sup>103</sup> Wells, *Experiment*, 564.

<sup>104</sup> Mackenzie, *H. G. Wells*, 291.



end, to me literature like architecture is a means, it has a use," Wells wrote.<sup>105</sup> For that matter, Wells also contended that the duty of the novelist was to serve as an intelligent advocate, polemicist, teacher, and reporter. "I had rather be called a journalist than an artist," he declared, to the lasting displeasure of James and his acolytes.<sup>106</sup> In later years, Wells's didactic, discursive approach to writing was something Orwell embraced, defended, and regarded as central to his identity as a political writer, even though he sometimes felt that the circumstances of his age had forced him into becoming a kind of "cheap pamphleteer."

Following his confrontation with James, Wells stripped himself of any remaining literary pretension and consciously attempted to infuse his works with overt political and social commentary. Although this tendency did not sit well with his old friends or with many literary critics, Wells was able to retain a substantial, even sizable popular readership throughout much of the next decade. For instance, his *Outline of History* (1920), a single-volume chronicle of world history, sold over two million copies.<sup>107</sup> But while he composed several other commercially successful works in the 1920s, Wells never recaptured the combined popularity and lofty literary reputation of his early career. As he later wrote, "I lost touch with the reviewers and the libraries, I never regained it, and if I wrote a novel now it would be dealt with by itself by some special critic, as a singular book, and not go into the 'fiction' class."<sup>108</sup>

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<sup>105</sup> Mackenzie, *H. G. Wells*, 293.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*, 531-2.

<sup>107</sup> Parrinder, ed., *Critical Heritage*, 25.

<sup>108</sup> Wells, *Experiment*, 614.

In his *Experiment in Autobiography* (1934), Wells retrospectively laid out the significance of his career and life:

That main story, is the development, the steady progressive growth of a modern vision of the world, and the way in which the planned reconstruction of human relationships in the form of a world-state became at last the frame and test of my activities. It is as much the frame and test of my activities as the spread of Islam was the frame and test of an early believing Moslem and the kingdom of God and salvation, of a sincere Christian.<sup>109</sup>

Indeed, by the thirties Wells had convinced himself, in an almost religious way, that he held the key to human happiness and social development. The ultimate solution to the perpetual problems of humankind, as he professed to understand them, was to be found in the organization and implementation of a “world state.” As Wells himself admitted, his revolutionary vision was quite unlike that of any Fabian bureaucrat or Marxist theorist.<sup>110</sup>

As Wells later recounted, his dream of a world state was born out of an effort to popularize, during the darkest years of First World War, the notion of a League of Nations. As early as 1916, Wells outlined his case for an international governing body:

And so the discussion of the future of the overseas “empires” brings us again to the same realization to which the discussion of nearly every great issue arising out of this war has pointed, the realization of the imperative necessity of some great council or conference, some permanent overriding body, call it what you will, that will deal with things more broadly than any “nationalism” or “patriotic imperialism” can possibly do. That body must come into human affairs.<sup>111</sup>

Wells’s vision of what “that body” meant grew and transformed over the next two decades. From the disillusioning failures of the actual League of Nations, he learned that

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<sup>109</sup> Wells, *Experiment*, 425.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid*, 561.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid*, 581-2.



politicians, diplomats, and citizens would fight aggressively against a world governing organization if it was perceived as a threat to national sovereignty or prestige. Therefore, the endemic weakness of the League was something that would have to be remedied in the case of any future world body. This was an idea which Wells, along with a number of similarly idealistic, cosmopolitan intellectuals, advocated in a pamphlet entitled “The Idea of a League of Nations”:

The League of Nations cannot be a little thing; it is either to be a great thing in the world, an overriding idea of a greater state, or nothing. Every state aims ultimately at the production of a sort of man, and it is an idle and a wasteful diplomacy, a pandering to timidities and shams, to pretend that the World League of Nations is not ultimately a State aiming at that ennobled individual whose city is the world.<sup>112</sup>

In the mid-twenties, Wells continued to elaborate upon his political ideal, imagining and formally theorizing the mechanism through which his world state would be established. As he saw it, an “Open Conspiracy” of dedicated scientists and technical specialists could one day transform human governance on a worldwide scale through an extra-parliamentary technocratic uprising. Introduced in the discursive novel, *The World of William Clissold* (1926), the Open Conspiracy was an idea which Wells honed and refined throughout the next two decades. In *The Open Conspiracy: Blue Prints for a World Revolution* (1929), a book he reworked and republished under the communist-baiting title, *What Are We to Do with Our Lives?* (1931), Wells proposed a series of concrete steps to be taken in order to lay the groundwork for his incipient technocratic revolution.<sup>113</sup> In *The Shape of Things to Come* (1933) and *Experiment in Autobiography* (1934), he provided the fullest expression of his progressive social and political dreams to

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<sup>112</sup> Wells, *Experiment*, 604.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid*, 638.

date. Particularly in the latter book, Wells radiated confidence in his Open Conspiracy and world state, and argued that the establishment of a Wellsian utopia represented not only a potential state of affairs, but the one true destiny of humankind:

What is plain to me is that the modern world-state which was a mere dream in 1900 is to-day a practicable objective; it is indeed the only sane political objective for a reasonable man; it towers high over the times, challenging indeed but rationally accessible; the way is indicated and the urgency to take that way gathers force. Life is now only conflict or "meanwhiling" until it is attained. Thirty-four years ago the world-state loomed mistily across a gulf for me and my swinging bridge of ropes and planks and all the other ropes and wires that are being flung across, are plainly only the precursors of a viaduct and a common highway. The socialist world-state has now become a to-morrow as real as to-day. Thither we go.<sup>114</sup>

In the twenties and thirties, while H. G. Wells was busy detailing his messianic political vision, George Orwell was simply trying to eke out a hand-to-mouth existence as a struggling, unknown writer. The years following his graduation from Eton had been both difficult and uncertain, as he later recounted in the preface to the Ukrainian edition of *Animal Farm*:

Shortly after I left school (I wasn't quite twenty years old then) I went to Burma and joined the Indian Imperial Police. ...I stayed five years in the service. ...When on leave in England in 1927, I resigned from the service and decided to become a writer: at first without any especial success. In 1928-29 I lived in Paris and wrote short stories and novels that nobody would print (I have since destroyed them all). In the following years I lived mostly from hand to mouth, and went hungry on several occasions.<sup>115</sup>

To the horror of his mother, and to the displeasure of everyone in his family except his bohemian Aunt Nellie, Orwell abandoned a "respectable" career with the Imperial

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<sup>114</sup> Wells, *Experiment*, 642-3.

<sup>115</sup> Carey, ed., *Essays*, 1211.



Service and declared his intention to become a writer.<sup>116</sup> For several difficult years, he descended into what he later described as “the dreary sub-world of the free-lance journalist, the world of furnished bed-sitting rooms, hired typewriters and self-addressed envelopes.”<sup>117</sup> Much like a young Wells, he wrote articles for newspapers, composed essays for journals, translated articles for foreign journals, and churned out book and film reviews.<sup>118</sup> In order to supplement his income and keep hunger from the door, Orwell also worked as a dishwasher, tutor, bookshop attendant, and school teacher.

Even as he doggedly pursued his writing career, Orwell found writing itself to be an especially difficult process. Unlike Dickens or Lawrence, he struggled tremendously to craft a narrative or establish a style. As Peter Lewis noted, his first book, *Down and Out in Paris and London*, “was the fruit of five years’ struggle, not just to write a book but, first, to find his subject matter and his vision of it.”<sup>119</sup> (Incidentally, Orwell was twenty-nine when it was finally published, the same age as Wells when *The Time Machine* was serialized.)<sup>120</sup> Despite the fact that Orwell eventually cultivated a measure of literary success, his attitude towards the writing profession retained much of the bitterness and frustration of these early years. Of the book reviewer, he wrote: “He is pouring his immortal spirit down the drain, half a pint at a time.”<sup>121</sup> Similarly, the film

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<sup>116</sup> Crick, *A Life*, 174, 176.

<sup>117</sup> Angus and Orwell, eds., *CEJL* 3:288.

<sup>118</sup> Crick, *A Life*, 176, 186, 221.

<sup>119</sup> Lewis, *Road to 1984*, 18.

<sup>120</sup> Hammond, *Companion*, 81.

<sup>121</sup> Angus and Orwell, eds., *CEJL* 4:217.

reviewer “is expected to sell his honour for a glass of inferior sherry.”<sup>122</sup> Even late in his career he likened the writer in society to “an animal that is tolerated but not encouraged—something rather like a house sparrow.”<sup>123</sup>

Regardless of his long-lived angst, Orwell’s commitment to the craft of writing was both tenacious and unwavering.<sup>124</sup> In fact, he consciously embraced the Grub Street ethos of his childhood literary heroes. Like Wells a generation before him, he wrote every day and busied himself with whatever paying assignments he could muster. “Orwell belonged to the category of writers who write,” observed William Abrahams and Peter Stansky. “For him, a day without writing was not a good one.”<sup>125</sup> At the same time, Orwell slowly constructed a literary identity around the hardships of these difficult and uncertain years.

In his first three books, *Down and Out in Paris and London*, *Burmese Days*, and *A Clergyman’s Daughter*, Orwell fashioned his narratives around his intimate knowledge of poverty and colonial life. In *Down and Out*, he detailed his struggle to earn a living as a dishwasher in a dingy, Depression-era Paris slum, as well as his travels among the destitute and homeless around London. In *Burmese Days*, he described the land and the people he encountered as a young officer in the Imperial Police in the early twenties. And in *A Clergyman’s Daughter*, he placed Dorothy, his protagonist, in situations clearly based upon his own experiences along the margins of English society. As did Orwell,

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<sup>122</sup> Angus and Orwell, eds., *CEJL* 4:218.

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid*, 238.

<sup>124</sup> Crick, *A Life*, 179.

<sup>125</sup> Abrahams and Stansky, *Transformation*, 180.



Dorothy picks hops in the south of England, teaches at a less-than-reputable private school, and sleeps outdoors among the tramps at Trafalgar Square.<sup>126</sup>

Orwell also adopted an essentially Wellsian approach to the craft of writing. In fact, beginning with his early works and continuing throughout the rest of his writing career, he mimicked Wells's discursive tendencies, in the way he mingled polemic with reportage and embedded his own personal experiences within his novels. As Jefferson Hunter explained in his essay "Orwell, Wells, and *Coming Up for Air*," Orwell borrowed "that Wellsian willingness to include in his novels everything he wanted to say, that discursive or even journalistic itch which so annoyed James."<sup>127</sup> To be sure, Orwell had few qualms about scratching his journalistic itches. In fact, he based portions of *Down and Out in Paris and London* and *A Clergyman's Daughter* upon his own early journalism, as articles like "The Spike" and "Hop-Picking" (both 1931) attest.<sup>128</sup>

However, Orwell was initially less adept than his heroes when it came to avoiding awkward or embarrassing literary transitions. For instance, in *Down and Out*, he invented the ridiculous prospect of a job looking after "a congenital imbecile" as a way to shift the plot of his book from Paris to London.<sup>129</sup> And in *A Clergyman's Daughter*, he hinged his narrative on one of the weakest, most cliché-ridden devices in literature—the amnesiac spell. Dorothy passes out one evening (presumably from a combination of stress, overwork, and the unwanted advances of one Mr. Warburton) only to wake up,

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<sup>126</sup> Crick, *A Life*, 183, 222.

<sup>127</sup> Hunter, "Orwell, Wells," 41.

<sup>128</sup> Angus and Orwell, eds., *CEJL* 1:58-66, 75-97.

<sup>129</sup> George Orwell, *Down and Out in Paris and London* (Hammondsworth, England: Penguin Books, 1963), 103; Crick, *A Life*, 200.

penniless and adrift, with no remembrance of herself or her past life, in the slums of London.<sup>130</sup> “The thing that had happened to her was common-place enough,” Orwell timidly suggested. “Almost every week one reads in the newspapers of a similar case.”<sup>131</sup> Dickens or Wells could pull this sort of thing off, but not Orwell.

Despite the fact that he adopted, with varying success, Wells’s discursive, flexible approach to the novel, Orwell modeled the narratives of his first three books upon the work of other writers, such as London, Dickens, and Joyce. In *Down and Out in Paris and London*, he mimicked the first-person, hardboiled reportage of Jack London. Not only this, he literally traced London’s footsteps. Precisely as London had done in his *People of the Abyss*, Orwell began his descent into the London city slums by walking to a run-down East End second-hand shop in order to purchase a sufficiently battered, decrepit outfit.<sup>132</sup>

In *Burmese Days*, Orwell tried to capture the tone of the nineteenth-century novels he had admired as a boy. “I wanted to write enormous naturalistic novels with unhappy endings, full of detailed descriptions and arresting similes, and also full of purple passages in which words were used partly for the sake of their sound,” he later recalled in his famous essay “Why I Write” (1946). “And in fact,” he continued, “my first complete novel, *Burmese Days*, which I wrote when I was thirty but projected much earlier, is rather that kind of book.”<sup>133</sup> Unlike Orwell’s later novels, *Burmese Days*

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<sup>130</sup> George Orwell, *A Clergyman’s Daughter* (New York: Harcourt, Inc., 1936), 96.

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid*, 105.

<sup>132</sup> Crick, *A Life*, 184.

<sup>133</sup> Angus and Orwell, eds., *CEJL* 1:25.



digresses into vivid, long-winded descriptions of flora and fauna, and concludes with a decidedly melodramatic suicide.<sup>134</sup>

In *A Clergyman's Daughter*, Orwell juggled an array of literary influences, both “high” and “low.” Nobby the hop-picking scamp and Mrs. Creevy the beastly headmistress, for instance, clearly owed something to Dickens.<sup>135</sup> At the same time, Dorothy’s amnesiac spell was an obvious nod to the kind of generic pulp thrillers Orwell himself later classified as “good bad books.”<sup>136</sup> And the “nighttown” chapter, in which Dorothy spends an evening among the vagabonds at Trafalgar Square, was a heavy-handed homage to Joyce, circa *Ulysses*:

*Charlie* (singing): “‘Ail Mary, ‘Ail Mary, ‘a-il Ma-ry—” (Big Ben strikes ten.)

*Snouter* (mimicking the noise): “Ding dong, ding dong! Shut your — noise, can’t you? Seven more hours of it on this — square before we got the chance of a set-down and a bit of sleep! Cripes!”

*Mr. Tallboys* (to himself): “Non sum quails eram boni sub negro Edwardi! In the days of my innocence, before the Devil carried me up into a high place and dropped me into the Sunday newspapers—that is to say when I was Rector of Little Fawley-cum-Dewsbury...”

*Deafie* (singing): “With my willy willy, *with* my willy willy—”<sup>137</sup>

Despite the fact that Orwell regarded this chapter as the highlight of the novel, at least one reviewer dismissed it as an embarrassing, sub-Joycean interlude. Sean O’Casey, to whom Orwell’s publisher sent an advance copy in the hope of obtaining a favorable quote for the dust jacket, wrote instead: “Orwell had as much chance of reaching the stature of

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<sup>134</sup> Orwell, *Burmese Days* (New York: Harcourt, Inc., 1962), 126-7, 162-8, 281.

<sup>135</sup> Hunter, “Orwell, Wells,” 40.

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

<sup>137</sup> Orwell, *Clergyman's Daughter*, 167.

Joyce as a tit has of reaching that of an eagle.”<sup>138</sup> In a less abrasive way, Orwell ceded the same basic point in a letter to his editor:

It was a good idea, but I am afraid I have made a muck of it—however, it is as good as I can do for the present. There are bits that I don’t dislike, but I am afraid it is very disconnected as a whole, and rather unreal.<sup>139</sup>

In the wake of the fragmented, ultimately unsatisfying *A Clergyman’s Daughter*, Orwell finally turned to H. G. Wells for direct literary inspiration. As Jefferson Hunter noted, Wells was a writer Orwell “knew he could profitably respect and imitate.”<sup>140</sup> In particular, Orwell modeled his next book, *Keep the Aspidistra Flying*, along the lines of Wells’s Edwardian drama *Love and Mr. Lewisham*. Despite the fact that Orwell never explicitly described it as such, *Keep the Aspidistra Flying* can and should be read as an admiring update of Wells’s novel. Among his friends Orwell was known as a vociferous advocate of *Love and Mr. Lewisham*, which he felt had been sorely underappreciated. Years later, at least one acquaintance recalled how Orwell practically forced a copy of it upon him.<sup>141</sup> More significantly, the basic similarities between *Love and Mr. Lewisham* and *Keep the Aspidistra Flying* are simply too numerous and uncanny to be coincidental. As Jonathan Rose pointed out, both books share an essentially identical plot and deal with the same basic issues—ambition, marriage, and poverty—in analogous ways.<sup>142</sup>

Clearly echoing elements of Wells’s own life, G. E. Lewisham is an earnest socialist who cannot decide, in his ridiculously self-serious way, whether to become a

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<sup>138</sup> Crick, *A Life*, 258.

<sup>139</sup> *Ibid.*, 248.

<sup>140</sup> Hunter, “Orwell, Wells,” 40.

<sup>141</sup> Taylor, *The Life*, 305.

<sup>142</sup> Rose, ed., *Revised Orwell*, 81.



school teacher or a political prophet.<sup>143</sup> He is a student radical, a socialist who wears a blood-red collar, organizes the “Friends of Progress,” and dreams of becoming “the Luther of Socialism.” As a disciple of scientific knowledge, he considers himself the enemy of priests, psychics, and all embodiments of irrational thought.<sup>144</sup>

But when Lewisham falls in love, his rigid radicalism quickly disintegrates into middle-class conformity. First, he marries Ethel Henderson, the step-daughter of a cynical, money-grubbing huckster who poses as a “medium.” Then he nearly abandons university life altogether, leaving the Friends of Progress and failing his final science examination.<sup>145</sup> Lastly, he renounces his dream of becoming a prophet of socialism. In the concluding chapter of the novel, he realizes that he must choose between his wife and his socialist dreams. For Lewisham, the decision is a remarkably easy one, and he dutifully destroys the notebooks and pamphlets that had once been the focus of his life:

His eyes came back to the Schema. His hands shifted to the opposite corner and he hesitated. The vision of that arranged Career, that ordered sequence of work and successes, distinctions and yet further distinctions, rose brightly from the symbol. Then he compressed his lips and tore the yellow sheet in half, tearing very deliberately. He doubled the halves and tore again, doubled again very carefully and neatly until the Schema was torn into numberless little pieces. With it he seemed to be tearing his past self.<sup>146</sup>

By the end of the novel, Lewisham discovers that radicalism is not an option for lower-middle class married men like himself. However, assuaging his fierce hatred of

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<sup>143</sup> In his *Experiment in Autobiography*, Wells wrote: “Mr. Lewisham was a teacher and science student as I had been, and his entanglement is quite on all fours with mine.” Wells, *Experiment*, 392.

<sup>144</sup> H. G. Wells, *Love and Mr. Lewisham* (New York: George H. Doran Company, 1901), 151-2, 179-80.

<sup>145</sup> *Ibid*, 254.

<sup>146</sup> *Ibid*, 323. In his *Experiment in Autobiography*, Wells added: “Because he loved his Ethel, Mr. Lewisham had to tear up his Schema and settle down.” Wells, *Experiment*, 393.

moneyed Edwardian society proves a difficult, if not embarrassing task. When he goes out to interview for a teaching position, for instance, he catches a glimpse of himself in a windowpane and is so ashamed of his shabby clothes that he cannot bring himself to go inside the school. "The thing was out of the question. He crossed Leicester Square and went down Bedford Street disliking every well-dressed person he met."<sup>147</sup> Although Lewisham does not want to accept the fact that he must conform to the standards of the moneyed world, through a combination of shame and husbandly duty he eventually compromises his intellectual and political ideals in order to seek some form of respectable employment. Along the way, he discovers that a life of poverty is a far worse thing than a life of middle-class mediocrity. To his surprise, he also realizes he is more than willing to abandon his youthful idealism in order to provide for his wife and future family.<sup>148</sup>

Similarly, Orwell's Gordon Comstock is a self-obsessed, money-loathing idealist who eventually divests himself of his hopelessly adolescent dreams. However, unlike the student socialist Lewisham, Comstock is a willfully underemployed poet. He quits his job at the New Albion advertising agency and accepts a part-time position at a small bookshop, ostensibly in order to concentrate on his next project, the ironically-titled *London Pleasures*.<sup>149</sup> Soon, however, he loses sight of poetry altogether, and rails against the "Money God" for the fact that money, in a sense, makes a happy life possible. Even as he slides from middle-class comfort into an ugly rented room and a life of near-

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<sup>147</sup> Wells, *Lewisham*, 235-6.

<sup>148</sup> Referring to the title of his novel, Wells later wrote: "The 'love' in it is the most naïve response of youth and maiden imaginable, and the story is really the story of the 'Schema' of a career and how it was torn up." Wells, *Experiment*, 393.

<sup>149</sup> George Orwell, *Keep the Aspidistra Flying* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1956), 30.



penury, Comstock revels masochistically in his worldly failure. In his mind at least, he has momentarily triumphed over the insidious "Money God." However, when he learns that his girlfriend Rosemary (with whom he has slept with only once) is pregnant with his child, he quickly decides to destroy his unfinished manuscript and devote himself to his future family. In a scene strikingly reminiscent of *Love and Mr. Lewisham*, Comstock disposes of the project that had once consumed so much of his life:

He was aware of a lumpish weight in his inner pocket. It was the manuscript of *London Pleasures*. He took it out and had a look at it under a street lamp. A great wad of paper, soiled and tattered, with that peculiar, nasty, grimed-at-the-edges look of papers which have been a long time in one's pocket. About four hundred lines in all. The sole fruit of his exile, a two years' foetus which would never be born. Well, he had finished with all that... He doubled up the manuscript and stuffed it between the bars of the drain. It fell with a plop into the water below.<sup>150</sup>

At the same time, Comstock also realizes that he wants to marry Rosemary, reclaim his old job, and rejoin the world of respectable middle-class society. To his surprise, he accepts this fate with a sense of relief, and actually looks forward to a predicable, conforming life of marriage, fatherhood, and steady employment:

Now that the thing was done he felt nothing but relief; relief that now at last he had finished with dirt, cold, hunger and loneliness and could get back to decent, fully human life. His resolutions, now that he had broken them, seemed nothing but a frightful weight he had cast off. Moreover, he was aware that he was only fulfilling his destiny. In some corner of his mind he had always known that this would happen. He thought of the day when he had given them notice at the New Albion; and Mr. Erskine's kind, red, beefish face, gently counseling him not to chuck up a "good" job for nothing. How bitterly he had sworn, then, that he was done with "good" jobs for ever! Yet it was foredoomed that he should come back, and he had known it even then. And it was not merely because of Rosemary and the baby that he had done it. That was the obvious cause, the precipitating cause, but even without it the end would have been the

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<sup>150</sup> Orwell, *Aspidistra*, 239-40.

same; if there had been no baby to think about, something else would have forced his hand. For it was what, in his secret heart, he had desired.<sup>151</sup>

Although they differ on points of detail, both *Love and Mr. Lewisham* and *Keep the Aspidistra Flying* convey a nearly identical coming-of-age tale. When he tears up his Schema, Wells's Lewisham sighs, "It is the end of adolescence, the end of empty dreams..."<sup>152</sup> Similarly, just before he tosses *London Pleasures* into the Thames, Comstock has "a queer feeling that he had only just grown up." Suddenly, he realizes "that he was merely repeating the destiny of every human being."<sup>153</sup> In this regard, both Lewisham and Comstock learn that life involves a measure of corruption and accommodation, and that it is sometimes necessary and worthwhile to sacrifice one's dreams and ideals for the sake of family, love, and a truly lived life. The only real alternative, as Nicholas Guild observed, is to reject the very things that make life worth living.<sup>154</sup>

Despite the fact that Orwell's *Keep the Aspidistra Flying* clearly owes a great deal to Wells's *Love and Mr. Lewisham*, this literary kinship has gone largely unnoticed and unexamined. As a consequence, *Keep the Aspidistra Flying* has been chronically misread and misunderstood. For instance, Bernard Crick, Orwell's first official biographer, speculated that Comstock's return to the middle class world could be explained by the fact that Orwell met Eileen O'Shaughnessy, the woman who became his first wife, around the time he was finishing up the novel. "Perhaps Eileen's arrival in his life,"

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<sup>151</sup> Orwell, *Aspidistra*, 237.

<sup>152</sup> Wells, *Lewisham*, 323.

<sup>153</sup> Orwell, *Aspidistra*, 238.

<sup>154</sup> Nicholas Guild, "In Dubious Battle: George Orwell and the Victory of the Money-God," from Harold Bloom, ed., *Modern Critical Views: George Orwell* (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1987), 84.



Crick wrote, "could account for the sudden, strange and rather ambivalent 'happy ending' of Gordon Comstock's odyssey."<sup>155</sup> Similarly, critics John Wain and Lionel Trilling were unable to make sense of Comstock's return to respectability, and drew their own separate but equally misguided conclusions. Wain, for his part, simply dismissed *Keep the Aspidistra Flying* as a failed novel, arguing that "in the closing pages everything collapses, tripped up by one of the author's basic confusions."<sup>156</sup> Trilling, on the other hand, largely ignored the thematic implications of Orwell's final act and characterized the book as "a *summa* of all the criticisms of a commercial civilization that have ever been made."<sup>157</sup> Although *Keep the Aspidistra Flying* has been interpreted a number of different ways, reading it as an admiring literary response to Wells's *Love and Mr. Lewisham* is perhaps the most profitable way of understanding it. Richard Rees's observation that "Orwell... is in the direct line of descent of 'angry young men' between H. G. Wells and John Osborne" is, in this case at least, literally true.<sup>158</sup>

The most significant discrepancy between *Love and Mr. Lewisham* and *Keep the Aspidistra Flying* is the fact that the characters in Orwell's novel seem nervously aware of the worsening political climate of the thirties. This is precisely what gives *Keep the Aspidistra Flying* an oppressive, even paranoid tone, and is largely what prevents it from being simply a weary retread of Wells's *Lewisham*. For the protagonist of an essentially apolitical novel, Gordon Comstock is acutely alert to the looming threat of war. In fact, in his own perverse way, he positively longs for it:

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<sup>155</sup> Crick, *A Life*, 269.

<sup>156</sup> Bloom, ed., *Modern Critical Views*, 77.

<sup>157</sup> *Ibid.*, 78.

<sup>158</sup> Richard Rees, *Fugitive*, 122.

Gordon squinted up at the leaden sky. Those aeroplanes are coming. In imagination he saw them coming now; squadron after squadron, innumerable, darkening the sky like clouds of gnats. With his tongue not quite against his teeth he made a buzzing, blue-bottle-on-the-window-pane sound to represent the humming of the aeroplanes. It was a sound which, at that moment, he ardently desired to hear.<sup>159</sup>

In 1940, Orwell admitted that he had known he “should be simply relieved when the long-dreaded war started.” He added, “I don’t quite know in what year I first knew for certain that the present war was coming. After 1936, of course, the thing was obvious to anyone except an idiot. For several years the coming war was a nightmare to me.”<sup>160</sup> For Orwell, just as it was for the would-be poet Gordon Comstock, the specter of coming war was something that noticeably darkened the atmosphere of the thirties, and which made the pursuit of art seem tragically futile. “Poetry!” Comstock hopelessly exclaims, “*Poetry*, indeed! In 1935.”<sup>161</sup> For his part, Orwell seems to have felt the same way about composing literature in 1935.

One other aspect of *Keep the Aspidistra Flying* that sets it apart from *Love and Mr. Lewisham* is the fact that Orwell’s Comstock is not a “blood-red” socialist like Lewisham. Rather, as Norman Winthrop observed, Comstock regards socialism “as little more than a refuge for cranks and wealthy dilettantes.”<sup>162</sup> In 1935, Orwell regarded himself not as a socialist, but a “Tory anarchist.” Despite the fact that he continued to be an outspoken critic of English socialism, Orwell was only months away from joining,

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<sup>159</sup> Orwell, *Aspidistra*, 21.

<sup>160</sup> Angus and Orwell, eds., *CEJL* 1:590

<sup>161</sup> Orwell, *Aspidistra*, 239.

<sup>162</sup> Norman Winthrop, “George Orwell’s Socialist Commitment and Moment of Political Optimism,” unpublished paper presented at the Australasian Political Studies Association Conference (Sept. 2004), 6.



nearly against his will, the ranks of whom he considered to be the cranks and ideologues of the English socialist movement.

In the mid-thirties, while Orwell was toiling away as a minor novelist, Wells was convening with world leaders and celebrities in an attempt to fulfill his plan to educate the citizens of the world about the need for a world state and a "World Encyclopaedia." Over the span of two weeks in 1934, Wells traveled to Washington, D. C. to talk to Franklin Delano Roosevelt and flew to Moscow to interview Josef Stalin. Upon meeting the American president and his New Deal "Brains Trust," Wells swiftly came to the conclusion that Roosevelt represented, as he put it, "the most effective transmitting instrument possible for the coming of the new world order... He is continuously revolutionary in the new way without ever provoking a stark revolutionary crisis."<sup>163</sup> It should be noted that Wells's tendency to envisage FDR as an Open Conspirator was reinforced by the president himself, who upon reading Wells's *Experiment in Autobiography*, confided to him: "I believe our biggest success is in making people think... They may not think straight but they are thinking in the right direction—and your direction and mine are not so far apart."<sup>164</sup>

On the other hand, Wells's journey to the Soviet Union was a disastrous, supremely disillusioning affair. His scheduled interview with Stalin was basically a summit of two irreconcilable ideologues, as Wells preached his gospel of a world state only to have Stalin rebuke him with a dogmatic repetition of Marxist-Leninist doctrine. Stalin, like Lenin before him (Wells had interviewed Lenin in 1920), regarded Wells as

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<sup>163</sup> Mackenzie, *H. G. Wells*, 379.

<sup>164</sup> *Ibid*, 384.

an incorrigible, despicable bourgeoisie. On a particularly ominous note, Stalin admonished Wells with this astute but decidedly terrifying judgment: "You, Mr. Wells, evidently start out with the assumption that all men are good. I, however, do not forget there are many wicked men. I do not believe in the goodness of the bourgeoisie."<sup>165</sup> (It should be noted that Wells's visit to the Soviet Union coincided with the months in which Stalin started plotting his infamous purges.) Before this disillusioning trip to Moscow, Wells had regarded Roosevelt and Stalin as political equals, in the sense that they had both represented, in his mind at least, potential Open Conspirators. As Norman and Jeanne Mackenzie explained, Wells:

had a distinctive position in politics which could not be neatly classified in contemporary terms as "right" or "left," and anyone who tried to locate him along that spectrum found puzzling contradictions... H. G. never saw politics in conventional terms. His apocalyptic beliefs had given him the notion of an elite whose mission it was to save mankind and, after an inevitable catastrophe, establish the New Jerusalem.<sup>166</sup>

However, after 1934, Wells eyed the Soviet Union with suspicion, and considered Stalin, like Hitler, to be the human manifestation of an atavistic spirit decidedly not in keeping with his dream of a rational world state.

In late November 1935, during an American speaking tour, Wells was briefly the talk of the town in Hollywood, California. Accompanying his fellow countryman Charlie Chaplin to a dinner at Cecil B. de Mille's ranch, Wells vented his antipathy towards both Stalin and the Soviet Union in an after-dinner conversation among the Hollywood elite. Chaplin, who was embarrassed, if not puzzled by Wells's remarks, asked him, "If you, a socialist, believe that capitalism is doomed, what hope is there for the world if socialism

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<sup>165</sup> Mackenzie, *H. G. Wells*, 380.

<sup>166</sup> *Ibid*, 380.



fails in Russia?" To this, Wells replied, "Socialism won't fail in Russia, or anywhere else, but this particular development of it has grown into a dictatorship."<sup>167</sup> In this regard at least, Wells could not have been more correct. Knowledge of this kind was something that Orwell learned in an even more visceral way, when Stalinist agents tried to apprehend and incarcerate him in Barcelona in the summer of 1937. The notion that the Soviet "experiment" was little more than a bloodthirsty, corrupt dictatorship was to become the overarching theme of Orwell's first truly successful book, *Animal Farm* (which, incidentally, appropriated elements of Phillip Guedalla's anticommunist satire "A Russian Fairy Tale" as well as the animal-to-human transformation motif from Wells's *The Island of Doctor Moreau*).<sup>168</sup>

For all too many, British life in the thirties was characterized by widespread distress at the battered, precarious state of economic and political affairs. This was certainly the case for Orwell and the millions of Britons whose lives were thrown into turmoil, even as it was not the case for the globe-trotting, would-be world educator Wells. Following the 1929 American Stock Exchange collapse, the ruling Labour government stood helplessly by as what became an international economic disaster resulted in nearly three million British unemployed and created an attitude of hopelessness and despair throughout vast regions of the nation. Among those places most afflicted were the mining communities and manufacturing cities of northern England. Even as late as 1936, hunger marches, rallies, and demonstrations among the unemployed remained a part of everyday life throughout these less fortunate regions,

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<sup>167</sup> Mackenzie, *H. G. Wells*, 393.

<sup>168</sup> Cushman and Rodden, eds., *Twenty-First Century*, 206.

even as London and the Midlands staged an economic comeback.<sup>169</sup> Despite such glimmers of hope, the prevailing atmosphere in the thirties remained one of gloom, restlessness, and increasingly, outright despair.

In order to forestall the collapse of the old liberal order, as H. C. G. Matthew observed, many British economists, politicians, and intellectuals searched for “a new political initiative... to regenerate and revitalize the nation and its economy.” David Lloyd George, as well as a number of moderate British politicians, favored an economic program modeled upon Roosevelt’s New Deal. At the same time, frustrated minorities along the political margins increasingly made their radical views known to the British public. On the far left, Sidney and Beatrice Webb sung the praises of Stalin and advocated the adoption of Soviet-style communism (interestingly, the Webbs made their case at the very height of Stalin’s purges, the criminality of which was systematically denied by English communists). On the far right, Sir Oswald Mosley, a former darling of the Labour Party, drifted across the political spectrum and established his black-shirted, Mussolini-inspired British Union of Fascists.<sup>170</sup>

The rise of political extremism and the widespread loss of confidence in *laissez-faire* liberal capitalism foretold, at least to George Orwell, the end of the capitalist era. As Norman Winthrop observed, by the mid-thirties Orwell believed that capitalism was doomed, and that the coming years would be characterized by an ideological struggle between its two potential successors, fascism and socialism.<sup>171</sup> However mistaken, this

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<sup>169</sup> Morgan, ed., *Oxford History*, 609.

<sup>170</sup> *Ibid*, 609.

<sup>171</sup> Winthrop, “Socialist Commitment,” 7.



was a belief which colored Orwell's political thought for the rest of his life. In 1941, for instance, he wrote, "Capitalism... *does not work*. It cannot deliver the goods... Hitler's conquest of Europe... was a *physical* debunking of capitalism."<sup>172</sup> Although no direct evidence exists to prove this, it seems likely that Orwell's despairing view of the future was attributable, at least in part, to his lifelong affinity for the eschatological-themed works of Wells. Even though Orwell adamantly refrained from imagining human existence as a grand Wellsian choice between extinction and utopia, he nonetheless agreed with Wells that the modern world was dying, and that capitalism, liberalism, and everything else associated with the world of his childhood was bound to be swept from the stage of history.

Unlike his boyhood idol Wells, who continued to meet with statesmen and lecture audiences across the world in an effort to expound upon the merits of his rational socialist utopia, Orwell set out on a worm's-eye tour of northern England in order to investigate for himself the endemic social, economic, and political problems of the day. In January 1936, after completing the manuscript of *Keep the Aspidistra Flying*, Orwell accepted an offer from Victor Gollancz, the left-wing publishing magnate and publisher of his first four books, to compose a work about "the condition of the unemployed in the industrial north of England."<sup>173</sup> From January 31 to March 30, Orwell traveled north and lived among working class families in Wigan, Barnsley, and Sheffield. There he visited workers' meetings, lunched with socialist organizers, slept in rented rooms, and surveyed the working conditions in a local coal mine, which he wrote resembled "my mental

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<sup>172</sup> Angus and Orwell, eds., *CEJL* 2:100.

<sup>173</sup> Crick, *A Life*, 278.

picture of hell.”<sup>174</sup> Although Orwell would not articulate his impressions of this dingy, hopeless world for some months, the visceral and intellectual impact of his experiences confirmed his suspicion that northern England was becoming increasingly conducive to the emergence and growth of a British fascist movement. Judging from what he had witnessed during his journey, Orwell felt assured that the capitalist system had been dealt a series of blows from which it was unlikely to recover. Imagining that the old order was doomed, and sensing that the only real alternative to a post-capitalist fascist state lie in the establishment of an English socialist republic, Orwell reluctantly allied himself with the very same people he had ridiculed in the pages of *Keep the Aspidistra Flying*.

In the spring of 1936, following his return from the north, Orwell married Eileen O’Shaughnessy and relocated to the tiny village of Wallington, where he abandoned his literary ambitions and started to hash out his first full-fledged work of political analysis. In the opening chapters of what became *The Road to Wigan Pier* (1937), Orwell dutifully fulfilled his contract with Gollancz, reporting on his journey to the industrial north and describing his experiences among the socialists and workers he met along the way.

Then, in the vastly more interesting second part of *Wigan Pier*, Orwell revealed, in a personal, polemical way, the roots of his antipathy for many English socialists, as well as the reasons why he felt compelled, in spite of his reservations, to align himself with the English socialist movement. Significantly, Orwell argued that the movement was ill-positioned to counter what he perceived to be the rising tide of fascist sentiment among the English working and lower-middle classes. Observing that “Fascism has conquered half [of] Europe,” Orwell feared that the English socialist movement was

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<sup>174</sup> Lewis, *Road to 1984*, 52.



unready to withstand the challenge represented by Hitler and any potentially-treasonous “Blimps” within the British ruling class.<sup>175</sup>

Even as he reluctantly committed himself to the English socialist movement, Orwell did not recommit himself to the shallow, literary socialism of his schoolboy years. Nor, for that matter, did he align himself with the parlor theories of the middle-class socialists he had met during his northern journey. It was precisely these sorts of people, Orwell reasoned, who were to blame for turning what should be a viable political movement into a kind of freak show. “Socialism,” he wrote, “in the form in which it is now presented to us, has about it something inherently distasteful—something that drives away the very people who ought to be flocking to its support.”<sup>176</sup> As Orwell saw it, socialism usually implied a roomful of bourgeois parlor socialists, or worse still, a motley assortment of cranks, dreamers, and fools:

Socialism calls up a picture of vegetarians with wilting beards, of Bolshevik commissars (half gangsters, half gramophone), of earnest ladies in sandals, shock-headed Marxists chewing polysyllables, escaped Quakers, birth control fanatics, and Labour party backstairs crawlers.<sup>177</sup>

Accordingly, Orwell argued that any successful English socialist movement would have to espouse, as a matter of course, an ideology that appealed to the kinds of sensible middle and working class citizens who would most benefit from the emergence of a socialist society. In order to turn the English socialist movement into a real catalyst for change, Orwell favored the adoption of a simple, even conservative form of socialism,

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<sup>175</sup> As Robert Graves and Alan Hodge explained in *The Long Week-End*: “‘Blimp’ was a contemptuous term for every reactionary muddle-headed Conservative who feared a Red Revolution at home more than national humiliation by the Totalitarian Powers.” Robert Graves and Alan Hodge, *The Long Week-End: A Social History of Great Britain, 1918-1939* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1963), 390.

<sup>176</sup> Orwell, *Wigan Pier*, 171.

<sup>177</sup> Lewis, *Road to 1984*, 54.

which he later tellingly described as “English socialism.” Even though Orwell’s socialist worldview became increasingly nuanced throughout the years, it never became cluttered with what he saw as the kind of dehumanizing abstractions that invariably preoccupied the minds of Marxists, Fabians, and utopian socialists like Wells. The essential tenet of Orwell’s political thought, from 1936 until the end of his life, was that he wanted to see a more egalitarian, humane approach to the pressing social, economic, and political problems of the day.<sup>178</sup> “We have got to fight for justice and liberty,” Orwell wrote in *The Road to Wigan Pier*, “and Socialism does mean justice and liberty when the nonsense is stripped off it. It is only the essentials that are worth remembering.”<sup>179</sup>

Significantly, among his critique of those whom he considered to be the horror fringe of English socialism, Orwell reserved special scorn those who espoused the naïve, utopian ideals of H. G. Wells. In fact, he devoted the twelfth chapter of *The Road to Wigan Pier* to a vicious broadside against Wellsian socialists. Although he did not directly attack Wells’s Open Conspiracy or world state ideals, Orwell nevertheless undermined the Wellsian position by criticizing what he considered Wells’s slavish devotion to the idea of scientific progress. In order to bring about his world state, Wells had long argued that it was necessary for human affairs to become sufficiently complex and sophisticated for a cabal of committed technicians to have the ability to wrest power from the governments of the world. Because Wells invariably painted progress in a positive light, Orwell seized upon this point and attacked Wells relentlessly, arguing that the notion of progress itself was full of unexamined consequences, many of which were

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<sup>178</sup> Orwell, *Wigan Pier*, 171.

<sup>179</sup> *Ibid*, 220.



fundamentally dehumanizing and inherently detrimental to the increasingly fragile, embattled socialist movement of the late thirties.

Among Wells's current champions, John S. Partington is among the most articulate and thoughtful. In his essay "The Pen as Sword: George Orwell, H. G. Wells and Journalistic Parricide," Partington defended Wells against a number of Orwell's attacks in *The Road to Wigan Pier*. In response to Orwell's assertions that "Wells... cannot write with any conviction against 'progress,'" "the only evil he cares to imagine is inequality," and "the thought he dare not face is that the machine itself may be the enemy," Partington countered:

Far from dwelling on class oppression in his writings, Wells expressed his two greatest fears—ignorance and nationalism. Were the issues of ignorance and nationalism not dealt with, Wells could also fear "the machine itself." In *The Outline of History* he declares that "Human history becomes more and more a race between education and catastrophe." ...Indeed, as early as 1925 Wells was warning of the risk of a second Great War if humanity did not act as one for the common good.<sup>180</sup>

However, for all his attention to detail, Partington failed to appreciate the fact that Orwell's criticism of Wells was part of a larger polemical argument against what Orwell regarded as the crank fringe of socialism, and that his priority was not so much to treat Wells fairly as it was to persuade sympathetic middle class members of the Left Book Club to follow his lead and pursue a simple, "decent" form of socialism. Furthermore, Partington did not mention that Orwell's argument in *The Road to Wigan Pier* focused largely upon the more optimistic of Wells's utopian novels, or that Orwell's pronouncements about the Wellsian world being an inhuman, mechanical one were likely also a result of the impact of Alexander Korda's popular Wells-scripted film *Things to*

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<sup>180</sup> Partington, "Pen as Sword," 47.

*Come*, which was in wide release in late 1936, precisely when Orwell was finishing up *The Road to Wigan Pier*.

In 1934, when Wells composed the script of *Things to Come*, he envisaged it as his chance to share with a worldwide film-going audience his idiosyncratic gospel of cataclysm, rebirth, and utopia. As Norman and Jeanne Mackenzie noted, *Things to Come* was intended to be:

a simplified version of mankind's progress through a devastating war, the coming of the dictatorship of the airmen and the reconstruction of the world state, to the final escape into space from the soulless and hygienic utopia constructed by the scientific elite.<sup>181</sup>

However, when Wells screened the final cut of the film, he was so appalled with what he saw that he nearly disowned it. In a letter to Beatrice Webb, he wrote: "My film is a mess of a film & Korda ought to be more ashamed of it than I am." Even Webb, who remained among Wells's staunchest defenders, confessed to Wells that she thought that *Things to Come* represented "the epitome of meaningless mechanization." In a letter to Wells, she wrote:

Within masses of moving machinery, multitudes of men and women and children scurrying about like ants in a broken open ant hill: they seem moved by herd impulse not by individual minds. Restless, intolerably restless, is this new society of men: ugly and depressing in its sum total... As an attempt to depict *a new civilization* the film is a disastrous failure.<sup>182</sup>

Even though *Things to Come* is not mentioned in *The Road to Wigan Pier*, it seems likely that Orwell nonetheless relied upon the impact of Korda's film to further his polemical case against Wells. Orwell's portrayal of his childhood idol as a cold-blooded, science-

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<sup>181</sup> Mackenzie, *H. G. Wells*, 391.

<sup>182</sup> *Ibid.*, 391.



obsessed fool may have been unfair, but it also seems to have been a shrewdly calculated portrayal designed to capitalize upon a public image of Wells that was widespread in 1936 and '37, when Korda's *Things to Come* perhaps spoke louder than many of Wells's previous works.<sup>183</sup>

Ultimately, as Orwell saw it, Wells's utopian vision was essentially inhuman and undesirable. Furthermore, Wells was among those who were guilty of turning the notion of socialism into something so repulsive and undesirable that ordinary working class Englishmen might be tempted to align themselves with the "pimpled fascists" of Moseley's BUF. "Fascism has been able to play upon every instinct that revolts against hedonism and a cheap conception of 'progress,'" Orwell reasoned.<sup>184</sup> As he saw it, the spirit of Wellsian utopianism had to be abandoned in order to curb the growth of fascism and to foster the development of a fundamentally pragmatic, humane socialist movement. Only once Wells's ultimately distracting legacy had been cast aside, Orwell argued, could a democratic, popular form of English socialism be cultivated. "The job of the thinking person," he famously wrote, "is not to reject Socialism but to make up his mind to humanize it."<sup>185</sup>

In March 1937, *The Road to Wigan Pier* was printed and bound in the orange covers of Victor Gollancz's Left Book Club, complete with an embarrassedly apologetic

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<sup>183</sup> Later, in June 1940, Orwell reviewed *Film Stories*, a book containing the scenarios of a pair of Wells-penned screenplays, one of them being *Things to Come*. It is interesting to note the similarity between his critique of *Things to Come* and his portrayal of Wells in *The Road to Wigan Pier*. In part, Orwell wrote: "In *The Shape of Things to Come*...the—as Mr. Wells sees it—eternal struggle between progress and reaction is set forth. Mankind goes through a bad time, there are wars, dictatorships, plagues, devastations, but, needless to say, progress wins out in the end. The film ends on a familiar note, with eager young citizens of the future setting out in a rocket to explore the moon." Davison, ed., *Complete Works* 12:191.

<sup>184</sup> Orwell, *Wigan Pier*, 214.

<sup>185</sup> *Ibid*, 219.

introduction from Gollancz, who well understood that the polemical second part of the book was sure to offend vast portions of his socialist reading public. When *Wigan Pier* finally reached the coffee tables and studies of Left Book Club readers throughout Britain, Orwell himself was in Spain, fighting in the trenches of Huesca with the *Partido Obrero de Unificación Marxista* (POUM) against Franco's fascist-supported Nationalist forces.<sup>186</sup> In late December 1936 he traveled to Barcelona, where he quickly abandoned his original plan of observing the war as a journalist. Instead, Orwell signed up with the POUM, a marginal, communist (but not Stalinist) militia affiliated with the International Labour Party, an offshoot of the mainstream British Labour Party which Orwell himself had joined shortly after his return from Wigan.

As did many of his fellow socialists, Orwell arrived in Spain with only the vaguest notion of what the war was really about. As Robert Graves and Alan Hodge suggested, Orwell's incomprehension was likely due to the fact that the war meant so many different things to different people:

Never since the French Revolution had there been a foreign question that so divided intelligent British opinion as this. It could be seen in so many ways: as Fascism versus Communism, or Totalitarianism versus Democracy, or Italy and Germany versus England and France, or Force versus Liberty, or Rebels versus Constitutional Government, or Barbarism versus Culture, or Catholicism versus Atheism, or the Upper Classes versus the Lower, or Order versus Anarchy—however one's mind worked.<sup>187</sup>

“When I came to Spain, and for some time afterwards, I was not only uninterested in the political situation but unaware of it. I knew there was a war on, but I had no idea of what kind of a war,” Orwell confessed in *Homage to Catalonia* (1938), the book in which he

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<sup>186</sup> Crick, *A Life*, 316.

<sup>187</sup> Graves and Hodge, *Long Week-End*, 337.



related his experiences of the Spanish Civil War. When he joined the POUM, Orwell assumed that this faction was not altogether unlike the dozens of other left-wing militias involved in the larger war against Franco, and that the war itself was as a global struggle between “Democracy” and “Fascism.” “If you had asked me why I had joined the militia,” Orwell wrote, “I should have answered: ‘To fight against Fascism,’ and if you had asked me what I was fighting *for*, I should have answered: ‘Common decency.’”<sup>188</sup> However, after being shot through the throat by a fascist sniper and then, as a member of the suddenly “illegal” POUM, facing the prospect of arrest, torture, and execution at the hands of Stalinist Communists in Barcelona, Orwell learned that “common decency” was, among other things, a politically naïve goal. Unlike the hordes of English parlor socialists who continued to praise Stalin, “the Soviet experiment,” and perpetuate the idea that the Spanish war was about abstract ideas of democracy or freedom, Orwell came to understand, through his own bitter experiences, that these notions were nothing but propagandistic lies.

In fact, Orwell argued, the only true socialist revolution in Spain had been defeated not by Franco’s Nationalists, but rather by duplicitous Communist aggression within the ranks of the Republicans themselves. Although the revolutionary Catalanian republic flourished only briefly during the spring of 1937, Orwell’s impressions of it affected him profoundly and permanently. In *Homage to Catalonia*, Orwell described the sometimes messy revolutionary state of affairs when working class Spaniards controlled the local government. In the process of establishing the rule of the people, churches were burnt down, shops and cafés collectivized, formalities of speech completely eliminated,

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<sup>188</sup> George Orwell, *Homage to Catalonia* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1952), 47.

and workers organized. "All this was queer and moving," Orwell wrote. "There was much in it that I did not understand, in some ways I did not even like it, but I recognized it immediately as a state of affairs worth fighting for."<sup>189</sup> In a visceral way, Orwell felt he had witnessed a rough-hewn but undeniably real incarnation of the socialist dream. Significantly, the short-lived Catalan workers' republic demonstrated, to Orwell at least, that socialism could exist and thrive without a trace of what he considered to be Wells's slavish progress-worship. As George Woodcock observed:

He encountered in Spain an austere and libertarian type of socialism which was not linked indissolubly with the idea of progress. The Spanish Anarchists and the left-wing Socialists influenced by them had not read Wells, had little trust in Utopian dreams, and had developed an extraordinary secular Puritanism which made them look forward to the revolution as a time when life would become simpler, more austere, and, as a consequence, more free. For the first time socialism appeared to Orwell not only as just, but also as congenial.<sup>190</sup>

Following his journeys to the slums of northern England and to the war-torn Spanish frontier, Orwell developed what was a fundamentally anti-utopian socialist outlook. Unlike Wells, Orwell allowed the tumultuous and often tragic events of the thirties to shape his political development.

As for Wells, he often simply refused to allow world events to impinge upon his persistent *idée fixe*. For instance, at a meeting of the British Association for the Advancement of Science in September 1936, Wells argued that his dream of developing a "World Encyclopaedia" was:

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<sup>189</sup> Orwell, *Homage*, 4-5.

<sup>190</sup> Woodcock, *Crystal Spirit*, 247.



a better investment for the time and energy of intelligent men and women than any definite revolutionary movement, Socialism, Communism, Fascism, Imperialism, Pacifism or any other of the current *isms*...<sup>191</sup>

Even as the decade turned increasingly gloomy, and as the rise of extremist ideologies lay the groundwork for another European war, Wells, with his idealistic projects, was himself unwilling and unable to provide a plausible alternative to the political visions of men like Hitler, Mussolini, and Stalin.

In 1938, while convalescing in Marrakech (his chronically bad lungs, not to mention his throat, had been aggravated by his Spanish experiences), Orwell pondered the contrast between the violent, ominous world of the late thirties and the comparatively idyllic England of his childhood. With this theme in mind, he set out to write his next book, the novel *Coming Up For Air* (1939). In it, Orwell attempted to come to terms with the modern world by comparing it to his nostalgic remembrances of the years before the First World War. Underscoring the fact that his love for all things Edwardian was inextricably tied to his intense boyhood admiration for Wells's Edwardian novels, Orwell decided to use one of his favorite Wells novels as a guide to the Edwardian world, and to illumine the relative degeneration in human affairs since then.<sup>192</sup>

As he did with *Keep the Aspidistra Flying*, Orwell constructed *Coming Up for Air* along the lines of one of his favorite Wells novels. In particular, he sought inspiration from Wells's *The History of Mr. Polly*, a book he had read and loved ever since receiving a copy for his ninth birthday.<sup>193</sup> However, unlike *Keep the Aspidistra Flying*, in which

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<sup>191</sup> Mackenzie, *H. G. Wells*, 403-4.

<sup>192</sup> Hammond, *Companion*, 151.

<sup>193</sup> Bowker, *Inside Orwell*, 26.

the paranoia of the thirties merely contributed to the tone of the novel, Orwell crafted *Coming Up for Air* as a raging polemic against the world of 1938. Instead of merely mimicking Wells, Orwell consciously and even sadistically ruined the hopeful, idyllic themes of *The History of Mr. Polly*. While Wells's Polly is able to find peace and contentment at the rustic Potwell Inn, Orwell's protagonist George Bowling tries, and fails, to find anything resembling refuge from the horrors of the late thirties. As John Hammond explained, "Whereas *Mr. Polly* could be described as an allegory on the theme of paradise regained, *Coming Up for Air* is a fantasia on the theme of paradise destroyed."<sup>194</sup>

Wells's Mr. Polly is a marginally successful, deeply unhappy shopkeeper in Fishbourne, a sleepy Edwardian village. Like Wells himself, he is a restless soul, and consequently grows increasingly depressed, desperate, and frantic in his quiet life. Eventually, Polly turns to thoughts of suicide. When he finally decides to burn down his shop and slit his own throat, it reflects his desire to fulfill his death wish and yet leave something behind for his wife Miriam—namely, an insurance check for his burned-out shop. But when he sets fire to his store, Polly discovers two things: one, he is too afraid to commit suicide; and two, that he desires a new life, one free of deadening burdens of a wife, a mortgage, and the other trappings of his dreary existence. Consequently, he pockets part of the insurance money owed him and flees into the countryside in search of a new life.

When he ventures into the surrounding hills and vales, Polly finds himself in the midst of a bucolic idyll, a half-remembered world of simple pleasures and adolescent

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<sup>194</sup> Hammond, *Companion*, 156.



adventures. Even the occasional stray thought regarding the plight of his abandoned wife cannot stifle his sense of overwhelming existential joy:

After a lapse of fifteen years he rediscovered this interesting world, about which so many people go incredibly blind and bored. He went along country roads while all the birds were piping and chirruping and singing, and looked at fresh new things, and felt as happy and irresponsible as a boy with an unexpected half-holiday. And if ever the thought of Miriam returned to him he controlled his mind. He came to country inns and sat for unmeasured hours talking of this and that to those sage carters who rest for ever in the taps of country inns, while the big sleek brass jingling horses wait patiently outside with their wagons; he got a job with some van people who were wandering about the country with swings and a steam roundabout and remained with them for three days, until one of their dogs took a violent dislike to him and made his duties unpleasant; he talked to tramps and wayside labourers, he snoozed under hedges by day and in outhouses and haystacks at night, and once, but only once, he slept in a casual ward. He felt as the etiolated grass and daisies must do when you move the garden roller away to a new place.<sup>195</sup>

Eventually, Polly ambles past the Potwell Inn, a quaint, rustic country establishment in need of some hired help. Eager to prove himself to the innkeeper, whom Wells describes simply as “a plump woman,” he makes himself useful as ferryboat operator, handyman, gardener, and porter. Before long, Polly finds himself enmeshed in the day-to-day affairs of the Potwell Inn. And for the first time in many years, he actually feels some semblance of happiness and contentment in his everyday life.

Years later, Polly leaves the Potwell Inn in order to see Miriam, his long-abandoned wife. To his surprise, she has rebuilt his old store and converted it into a tea shop. When Polly enters her shop, he does so discretely, with no intention of making his presence known to her. Even when Miriam eventually recognizes him, Polly is unwilling to confront the reality of the situation. In an oddly comical exchange, he tells her:

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<sup>195</sup> H. G. Wells, *The History of Mr. Polly* (New York: Readers Club Press, 1941), 265-6.

I haven't come back and I'm not coming back. I'm—I'm a Visitant from Another World. You shut up about me and I'll shut up about myself. I came back because I thought you might be hard up or in trouble or some silly thing like that. Now I see you again—I'm satisfied. ...Don't think you're going to see me again, for you ain't.<sup>196</sup>

With this, Polly departs and makes his way back to the Potwell Inn. Despite the fact that he obviously cares enough about Miriam to come back and make sure she is alive and well, it is even more evident that he wants to ensure the continuation of his new life, which is satisfying and rewarding in ways his previous one never was. Later that evening, Polly takes his place beside the same woman (who, once "plump," is now "fat") with whom he has happily lived and worked for five years. In the novel's closing scene, he relaxes contently beside his fat woman and ponders his good fortune. How nice it is to be alive, Polly thinks, when each passing day is simply the continued unfolding of a timeless, uninterrupted idyll:

It was an evening full of the 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. It was incredible that life has ever done more than seemed to jar, that there could be any shadow in life save such velvet softnesses as made the setting for that silent swan, or any murmur but the ripple of the water as it swirled round the chained and gently swaying punt.<sup>197</sup>

By contrast, George Bowling, the protagonist of Orwell's *Coming Up for Air*, is a would-be Polly who tries, and eventually fails, to find his Potwell Inn. Like Wells's Polly, Bowling is trapped in an unpleasant job and trudges through a listless marriage.<sup>198</sup> Similarly, he longs for peace, contentment, and a timeless refuge from his quietly

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<sup>196</sup> Wells, *Polly*, 335.

<sup>197</sup> *Ibid.*, 336.

<sup>198</sup> Incidentally, Bowling works for the "Flying Salamander" insurance company, a name which Orwell likely adopted from "Royal Salamander," an insurance company mentioned in Wells's *Mr. Polly*. Hunter, "Orwell, Wells," 42.



desperate life. For Bowling, even the mundane details of modern life, such as a meal at a lunch counter, are freighted with all that is rotten and foul about the world of 1938:

At this moment I bit into one of my frankfurters, and—Christ!... The thing burst in my mouth like a rotten pear. A sort of terrible soft stuff was oozing all over my tongue. But the taste! For a moment I just couldn't believe it. Then I rolled my tongue round it again and had another try. It was *fish!*... When you come down to brass tacks and get your teeth into something solid, a sausage for instance, that's what you get. Rotten fish in a rubber skin. Bombs of filth bursting inside your mouth.<sup>199</sup>

In an effort to heal his blighted soul, Bowling dreams of returning to Lower Binfield, the village of his birth. For him, Lower Binfield is an embodiment of his idyllic Edwardian childhood, as well as a searing indictment of all that is wrong with the modern age. As Bowling recalls, life in Lower Binfield was uncommonly rich, varied, and pleasant in even the smallest of ways. For instance, he recalls the sweets of his boyhood years, and their names waft through his mind like a kind of confectionary litany: Paradise Mixture, Farthing Everlastings, sugar mice and pigs, liquorice pistols, prize packets, Caraway Comfits, chocolate pipes and matches, Hundreds and Thousands, and Penny Monsters.<sup>200</sup> For Bowling, such seemingly insignificant details suggest not the comparative quaintness of the Edwardian age, but rather point to the inherent decency and humanity of the men and women who inhabited the England of the years before the Great War:

The very idea of sitting all day under a willow tree beside a quiet pool—and being able to find a quiet pool to sit beside—belongs to the time before the war, before the radio, before aeroplanes, before Hitler. There's a kind of peacefulness even in the names of English coarse fish. Roach, rudd, dace, bleak, barbell, bream, gudgeon, pike, chub, carp, tench. They're solid kind of names. The people who made them up hadn't heard of machine-guns, they didn't live in terror of the sack or spend their time

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<sup>199</sup> Orwell, *Coming Up*, 27.

<sup>200</sup> *Ibid.*, 44, 82-3.

eating aspirins, going to the pictures and wondering how to keep out of the concentration camp.<sup>201</sup>

Before returning to Lower Binfield, Bowling explains why he left it in the first place.

Like most English boys born in the final decade of the nineteenth century, he was called to serve in the Great War, and soon departed Lower Binfield for the Western Front. After receiving a relatively inconsequential war wound, he found himself stationed at “a place called Twelve Mile Dump, on the North Cornish Coast.” There, he settled into a near-solitary, contemplative existence, reading more than he had ever read in his life, and cultivating a particular affinity for Wells’s *The History of Mr. Polly*:

Don’t run away with the idea that I suddenly discovered Marcel Proust or Henry James or somebody. I wouldn’t have read them even if I had. These books I’m speaking of weren’t in the least highbrow. But now and again it so happens that you strike a book which is exactly at the mental level you’ve reached at the moment, so much so that it seems to have been written specifically for you. One of them was H. G. Wells’s *The History of Mr. Polly*, in a cheap shilling edition which was falling to pieces. I wonder if you can imagine the effect it had upon me, to be brought up, the son of a shopkeeper in a country town, and then to come across a book like that?<sup>202</sup>

Bowling, the son of a rural seed merchant, optimistically comes to see himself as the inheritor of Polly’s pluck and good fortune. Orwell, who established the connection between Bowling and Polly in a clear, overt way, clearly wanted his readers to see his protagonist as a man driven by Polly’s desire to break through the “paper walls of everyday circumstance” and discover a refuge from the world where he can lead a quiet, simple, happy life.<sup>203</sup>

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<sup>201</sup> Orwell, *Coming Up*, 87.

<sup>202</sup> *Ibid*, 141.

<sup>203</sup> Christie Davies, “Making Fun of Work,” from Patrick Parrinder and Christopher Rolfe, eds., *H. G. Wells Under Revision* (Selinsgrove: Susquehanna University Press, 1990), 94.



With Mr. Polly as his inspiration and guide, George Bowling at last makes up his mind to leave behind his family and job, if only for a few days, in order to revisit the countryside of his youth. However, when he arrives in Lower Binfield, his dream of recapturing the joy and hopefulness he had once known is swiftly crushed by his horrified realization that his boyhood village, too, has become a casualty of the modern world. As Jefferson Hunter observed:

Partly because Bowling is so cynically hopeless, partly because the England he inhabits has systematically eliminated its Potwell Inns, Bowling cannot find anything like a "quiet week" in the past. The past represented by Lower Binfield is gone. Bowling's stay there all by himself turns into a visit to the ruined present. His old home is a tea shop, the town itself is swollen out of recognition by new factories and workers with outlandish accents, his first love Elsie has become a slattern. Worst of all, the hidden pond teeming with enormous carp, which since Bowling's childhood has been a symbol of inviolability and potential joy, has become the trash dump for a housing estate.<sup>204</sup>

In the novel's final chapter, Bowling also experiences a foretaste of one of the ultimate horrors of the modern technological age: a civilian bombing campaign. On the final morning of his stay in Lower Binfield, Bowling is strolling about the town marketplace when a fleet of Royal Air Force bombers flies overhead. In the middle of their training exercise, one of the planes inadvertently releases a live bomb. In the ensuing chaos and destruction, a woman screams "The Germans! The Germans!" while a group of schoolchildren race down High Street, gas masks covering their faces, just like the doomed, demon-possessed Gerasene swine from the Gospel of Luke: "And down this

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<sup>204</sup> Hunter, "Orwell, Wells," 43.

little hill a herd of pigs was galloping, a sort of huge flood of pig-faces.”<sup>205</sup> Orwell’s apocalyptic horror show concludes with the image of a single severed leg, “with the trouser still on it and a black boot with a Wood-Milne rubber heel,” strewn among the wreckage of a greengrocer’s shop, the accidental target of the inadvertent but nonetheless murderous bomb.<sup>206</sup> With this image seared into his mind, George Bowling departs Lower Binfield with a spirit quite unlike the one he had when he set out on his journey. “The old life’s finished,” he remarks, “and to go about looking for it is just waste of time. There’s no way back to Lower Binfield...”<sup>207</sup> Not only is the past lost to the present, Bowling senses, but the present is soon to be wiped out by the horrors of the future. In the novel’s final sentence, he warns: “If there’s anything you care a curse about, better say good-bye to it now, because everything you’ve ever known is going down, down, into the muck, with the machine-guns rattling all the time.”<sup>208</sup> Although Bowling expresses a generalized paranoia regarding what many in 1938 perceived to be an impending war, he also echoes Orwell’s intense fear of a German invasion of Britain. Fortunately, the machine gun battles on the streets of London that Orwell vividly foresaw never came to pass.

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<sup>205</sup> Orwell, *Coming Up*, 263. Compare Orwell’s image of the galloping pig-like schoolchildren to that of Luke 8:32-3: “Now there on the hillside a large herd of swine was feeding; and the demons begged Jesus to let them enter these. So he gave them permission. Then the demons came out of the man and entered the swine, and the herd rushed down the steep bank into the lake and was drowned.” Wayne A. Meeks, ed., *HarperCollins Study Bible: New Revised Standard Version* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1993), 1974.

<sup>206</sup> *Ibid*, 265.

<sup>207</sup> *Ibid*, 267.

<sup>208</sup> *Ibid*, 269.



In stark contrast to the conclusion of *The History of Mr. Polly*, and in open contradiction to Wells's notion of an imminent and emerging world state, Orwell's George Bowling, like a latter-day Hebrew prophet, unnervingly predicts dark times ahead. As Orwell himself saw it, the major political figures of the thirties were not openly conspiring to create a glittering new world order. Rather, the Hilters, Stalins, and Blimps of the world were plotting his enslavement or demise. In this regard, men like Wells were like Bowling's friend Porteous, an idealistic medieval scholar. When Porteous dismisses Hitler as "ephemeral, purely ephemeral," Bowling is struck by a sudden flash of intuition: "And a curious thought struck me. *He's dead*. He's a ghost. All people like that are dead."<sup>209</sup> Just as Bowling intuitively regards Porteous as "dead," Orwell consciously rejected Wells's utopian political vision as irredeemably idealistic, if not entirely delusional. As he saw it, Wells had utterly failed to recognize the true significance of the social and political developments of the thirties.

Unlike *Keep the Aspidistra Flying*, a novel in which Orwell simultaneously emulated and failed to acknowledge the influence of Wells, *Coming Up for Air* proclaims its Wellsian heritage proudly, if ironically. If only to make his repudiation of Wells's Edwardian idyll more apparent, Orwell chose to lay out the connections between *Coming Up for Air* and *The History of Mr. Polly* in a clear, open way. Therefore, Orwell's book evokes the spirit of Wells's Edwardian novels, even as it dashes Wells's optimistic idealism against the hard, violent realities of the late thirties. Ultimately, *Coming Up for Air* embodies the two major facets of Orwell's literary and intellectual development in the first decade of his writing career: his embracing of Wells as a literary guide and

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<sup>209</sup> Orwell, *Coming Up*, 185, 188.

inspiration; and his rejection of Wellsian utopianism in favor of a decidedly pessimistic, anti-utopian appraisal of the modern social and political landscape. In the first decade of his writing career, George Orwell wrestled persistently with the literary and intellectual legacy of his childhood idol. Although he would eventually come to regard Wells, in no small way, as the perpetrator of a dangerously misguided worldview, in the years before the Second World War Orwell leavened his criticism of Wellsian social and political thought with a clear sense of respect and admiration for Wells as a literary influence.



## CHAPTER THREE

### “A SORT OF PARRICIDE”

Following the outbreak of the Second World War, George Orwell intensified his critique of the social and political thought of H. G. Wells. In part, he honed some of the same basic criticisms he first articulated in *The Road to Wigan Pier* and *Homage to Catalonia*. At the same time, Orwell broadened his polemical campaign against Wells to include attacks against Wells's cherished Open Conspiracy and world state ideals. In no small way, in a series of wartime articles, essays, and radio broadcasts, Orwell attempted to undermine, discredit, and destroy the foundations of the Wellsian worldview. At the same time, and in keeping with his lifelong admiration for Wells, Orwell publicly praised him as one of his childhood heroes and saluted him as a major influence upon his life. In the spring of 1941, Orwell even made a conscious effort to befriend Wells. However, by early 1942, Orwell's habit of publicly attacking Wells's steadfastly upbeat, utopian worldview ruined their once-pleasant rapport. After Wells angrily addressed Orwell as “you shit” and forbade him from visiting him again, the two men remained bitter adversaries until Wells's death in 1946. In 1949, Orwell published *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, a novel which, among other things, savagely satirized Wells's dream of a world state. As Gordon Bowker observed, with *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, “more decidedly than either Huxley or Zamyatin, Orwell killed off the Wellsian Utopia.”<sup>210</sup>

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<sup>210</sup> Bowker, *Inside Orwell*, 389.

In the months leading up to the Second World War, H. G. Wells (who was in his seventies by this time) continued to prophesy the future of humanity in terms of an impending eschatological crisis: either mankind would choose the path of universal education and a utopian world state, or the human species would destroy itself in an apocalyptic global conflagration. During a spring 1939 speaking tour of Australia, Wells preached his gospel of salvation through universal education and his Open Conspiracy. When pressed about the likelihood of another European war, he dismissed Hitler as “a certified lunatic” and mused that it was “much pleasanter to prophesy at long range.”<sup>211</sup> However, only a few weeks later, on June 26, 1939, Wells wrote a letter to the *British Weekly* in which he confessed: “I think the odds are against man but it is still worth fighting against them.”<sup>212</sup> At a reception held just weeks before Hitler’s invasion of Poland, Ernest Barker found an apparently depressed Wells sitting quietly by himself. When Barker asked him how he was, he replied, “Poorly, Barker, poorly.” Wells then joked that he was composing his epitaph, which was to be “just this—God damn you all: I told you so.”<sup>213</sup>

Like Wells, Orwell often found himself in a despondent, even apocalyptic mood in the months before the war. Even so, he certainly did not share Wells’s grandiose fear of the extinction of the human species, nor did he dare dream of an earthly heaven. Rather than imagining the world in Wellsian terms as a race between cataclysm and utopia, Orwell interpreted (incorrectly, as it turned out) the current political crisis in

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<sup>211</sup> Smith, *Desperately Mortal*, 340, 343.

<sup>212</sup> Mackenzie, *H. G. Wells*, 420.

<sup>213</sup> *Ibid*, 420.



slightly less dramatic terms as an imminent ideological conflict between fascism and socialism. Returning to themes he first expressed in *Coming of for Air* and *The Road to Wigan Pier*, Orwell revealed his fears regarding the prospect of a German invasion as well as the rise of a “pro-fascist” movement within Britain itself. These were likelihoods in which he believed until early 1941, when it at last became apparent that the British Isles were not going to be invaded by Hitler and that the vast majority of Englishmen would remain united under Churchill’s national government.

In the early months of the war, however, Orwell persistently argued that it was time for English socialists to acknowledge the reality of Hitler’s atavistic power or risk perishing at the hands of his followers. In a review of *Mein Kampf* published in the waning days of the Phony War, Orwell explained why Hitler’s hate-fuelled, militaristic *Weltanschauung* was more emotionally appealing than the rational, “hedonistic” worldview of socialists like Wells. Echoing a major theme from *The Road to Wigan Pier*, he argued that most “progressive” theorists since the First World War had “assumed tacitly that human beings desire nothing beyond ease, security and avoidance of pain.”<sup>214</sup> However, Orwell reminded his readers, the ideal progressive world was simply unimaginable, because all humans were fundamentally emotional, irrational creatures. “The Socialist who finds his children playing with soldiers is naturally upset, but he is never able to think of a substitute for the tin soldiers; tin pacifists somehow won’t do,” he quipped.<sup>215</sup> Unlike the hedonistic Wells, Hitler understood “that human beings *don’t* only want comfort, safety, short working-hours, hygiene, birth-control and, in general,

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<sup>214</sup> Angus and Orwell, eds., *CEJL* 2:29.

<sup>215</sup> *Ibid*, 29.

common sense; they also, at least intermittently, want struggle and self-sacrifice, not to mention drums, flags and loyalty-parades.”<sup>216</sup>

In the March 1940 essay “Charles Dickens,” Orwell continued to berate his fellow socialists, and to mock Wells in particular. In part, he suggested that Wells “sees the world as a middle class world, and everything outside these limits is either laughable or slightly wicked.”<sup>217</sup> By comparison, Orwell articulated his first-hand knowledge of the colonial caste, those for whom the words “patriotism,” “duty,” and “country” generated honest respect, not sneering incredulity. By discounting the reality of the “military virtues,” and having placed all his faith in what was proving to be an unrealistic utopian fantasy, “Wells wears the future round his neck like a millstone.”<sup>218</sup>

In the same month, in his essay “Notes on the Way,” Orwell rearticulated his apprehension regarding the rise of totalitarianism and its impact upon the modern world. It was, he wrote, “as though in the space of ten years we had slid back into the Stone Age.”<sup>219</sup> Worse yet, Orwell argued, was the fact that scientific progress had been employed not to benefit the common good of mankind (as Wells, more than anyone else, had hoped), but rather to fulfill essentially murderous, anti-human goals. “Mechanization and a collective economy seemingly aren’t enough,” he wrote. “By themselves they lead merely to the nightmare we are now enduring.” Without a clear moral direction, Orwell suggested, material progress could easily lead to a nightmarish future. In one of his darker visions, he foresaw a dismal world of:

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<sup>216</sup> Angus and Orwell, eds., *CEJL* 2:29.

<sup>217</sup> *Ibid*, 1:470.

<sup>218</sup> *Ibid*, 470.

<sup>219</sup> *Ibid*, 2:31.



endless war and endless underfeeding for the sake of war, slave populations toiling behind barbed wire, women dragged shrieking to the block, cork-lined cellars where the executioner blows your brains out from behind.<sup>220</sup>

By contrast, in the opening months of the war Wells was desperately optimistic, working steadily and determinedly upon what he eventually published as the "Declaration of the Rights of Man." As the Mackenzies noted, the Declaration was something which Wells returned to throughout the war:

The Declaration, in various forms, cropped up in his writings with the same persistent regularity that had once been true of the Open Conspiracy and then of the World Encyclopedia. All three themes reappeared in *Phoenix: A Summary of the Inescapable Conditions of World Reorganization*, and again in *The Outlook for Homo Sapiens*, both of which were published in 1942, and finally in *'42 to '44: A Contemporary Memoir*.<sup>221</sup>

In short, the circumstances and events of the war did not change Wells's political thought at all. During the Phony War, for instance, he called for "a full-scale debate of the putative aims leading to a Federation of Man." Soon thereafter, as the Battle of Britain raged in the skies above England, Wells (along with nineteen other men) submitted a manifesto to the editors of the *Manchester Guardian* demanding "a federal government for the world in the final peace settlement."<sup>222</sup> Needless to say, in 1940, the outcome of the war was far from being settled, at least in favor of the Allies.

By June 1940, Orwell was dismayed at the swift Allied rout on the European continent. Moreover, he was indignant at the way Wells continued to preach his utopian gospel despite the fact that the prospect of a Wellsian world state was clearly more

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<sup>220</sup> Angus and Orwell, eds., *CEJL* 2:31.

<sup>221</sup> Mackenzie, *H. G. Wells*, 424.

<sup>222</sup> Smith, *Desperately Mortal*, 429.

remote than ever. In a review of *Film Stories*, a book containing the screenplays to Wells's utopian novels *The Shape of Things to Come* and *The Man Who Could Work Miracles*, Orwell commented on the characteristically hopeful themes of these Wellsian fables before posing a difficult question: "I wonder what Mr. Wells thinks of them now, in this eighth year of Hitler's reign?" For Wells, he argued, it had always seemed so clear: "Mankind goes through a bad time, there are wars, dictatorships, plagues, devastations, but, needless to say, progress wins out in the end."<sup>223</sup> By the tumultuous summer of 1940, however, it was evident to Orwell that "progress" was not only on the retreat, but in danger of being killed off altogether. Disgusted with Wells's easy, unthinking assurances that the world state shall nonetheless prevail, he examined one of the key weaknesses of the grand Wellsian scheme.

As Orwell saw it, the social role of scientists, Wells's perennial heroes, had to be re-evaluated. Instead of the humane, rational supermen Wells once fancied them to be, Orwell argued that they had to be regarded as the corruptible, fallible human beings they actually were. The fate of a Wellsian utopia, or any society for that matter, depended upon the constant diligence, humanity, and rationality of hundreds of thousands of intelligent people who, as Orwell observed, were susceptible to the same hatreds and prejudices as anyone else. If men like Hitler could convince German scientists to provide "scientific theories" to justify the deportation, incarceration, or euthanization of thousands of *Untermenschen*, then just how rational or humane could any future mechanized world be? As Orwell explained:

The trouble with this, as with all Mr. Wells's prophetic books, at any rate till very recently, is his confusion of mechanical progress with justice,

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<sup>223</sup> Davison, ed., *Complete Works* 12:191.



liberty and common decency. The kind of mind that accepts the machine and despises the past is supposed to be, automatically, the kind of mind that longs for a world of free and equal human beings. The same antithesis—quite false, as it has turned out—runs through Mr. Wells's work: on the one hand the scientist, the man of the machine, offering sweetness and light, on the other the reactionary, the romantic, the man of the past, prancing about on a horse and starting wars. ...Now that we are almost within earshot of Hitler's guns, the Wellsian Utopia, a super-Welwyn constructed by benevolent scientists is somehow unconvincing.<sup>224</sup>

Even as he challenged what he saw as Wells's false assumptions regarding science and ethics, Orwell argued that the war had effectively rendered meaningless the longstanding Wellsian virtues of pacifism and antimilitarism. By the autumn of 1940, it had to be recognized by every conscientious English citizen, whether pacifistic or militaristic, that Britain had to fight if it wished to survive as a free nation. In "My Country Right or Left," Orwell praised "the spiritual need for patriotism and the military virtues, for which... no substitute has yet been found."<sup>225</sup> Unlike the stridently antimilitaristic Wells, Orwell dreamt of "the possibility of building a Socialist on the bones of a Blimp"—in other words, of creating the kind of person who intuitively understood, as he himself did, that the dream of a humane, egalitarian society was in itself inseparable from the effort to build and defend it from its enemies.<sup>226</sup>

In February 1941, Victor Gollancz published "The Lion and the Unicorn: Socialism and the English Genius," a book-length essay in which Orwell outlined his case for an English socialist revolution. As John Newsinger noted, following the collapse of Allied Europe and the commencement of the *Luftwaffe* bombing campaign over

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<sup>224</sup> Davison, ed., *Complete Works* 12:191.

<sup>225</sup> Carey, ed., *Essays*, 286-7.

<sup>226</sup> *Ibid.*, 287.

England, Orwell “saw the situation in Britain through Spanish glasses.”<sup>227</sup> That is, he superimposed the domestic political climate of Spain in early 1937 upon that of England in early 1941. The collapse of Norway, Denmark, Belgium, the Netherlands, and France, combined with the Nazi naval blockade and aerial bombardment of England, had created, in the mind of Orwell at least, an essentially pre-revolutionary atmosphere within England.<sup>228</sup> Consequently, he believed that the time was ripe to dispense with the old order and establish an English socialist republic. Even if it meant bloodshed or civil strife, such a revolution was something that had to happen if the English were to have a chance of defeating Hitler. Only months before, in “My Country Right or Left,” Orwell wrote:

Only revolution can save England, that has been obvious for years, but now the revolution has started, and it may proceed quite quickly if only we can keep Hitler out. Within two years, maybe a year, if only we can hang on, we shall see changes that will surprise the idiots who have no foresight. I dare say the London gutters will have to run with blood. All right, let them, if it is necessary. But when the red militias are billeted in the Ritz I shall still feel that the England I was taught to love so long ago and for such different reasons is somehow persisting.<sup>229</sup>

However, it soon became evident that Orwell had completely misread the British political climate of the early months of the war. The London gutters never ran with blood, and the only red militia men billeted in the Ritz remained those he had seen in Barcelona in 1937.

Nonetheless, in the winter of 1940-41, Orwell ardently believed in the possibility of an English socialist revolution. As he saw it, the war against Hitler had destabilized

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<sup>227</sup> John Newsinger, *Orwell's Politics* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999), 64.

<sup>228</sup> As Gordon Bowker noted, Orwell later learned from Wells himself “that Blimps were consciously acting to forestall a revolution by imprisoning anti-Fascist refugees,” and that J. B. Priestley’s “mildly socialist” radio broadcasts had been ended “at the insistence of the Conservative Party.” Bowker, *Inside Orwell*, 271.

<sup>229</sup> Angus and Orwell, eds., *CEJL* 1:593.



England, leaving a class-ridden, disunited nation on the brink of a stunning defeat. Believing that “laissez-faire capitalism is dead” and that the only realistic political future was a choice between fascism and socialism, it was therefore the moment, Orwell argued, to rally the innate patriotic sentiments of the English people around the notion of a war to be fought simultaneously *against* Hitler and *for* a democratic socialist England.<sup>230</sup> To do nothing, or to pursue one of these goals without the other, was simply suicidal. “We cannot win the war without introducing Socialism,” he wrote, “nor establish Socialism without winning the war.”<sup>231</sup>

As matter of necessity, Orwell argued that any successful socialist movement would be forced to emerge during the opening months of the war. Any would-be revolutionaries would have to dispense with the anti-authoritarian sneers they had been taught and fashion a socialist credo capable of attracting popular support and of existing as a mainstream political movement. “Now,” Orwell wrote, sensing that the time had at last come to fulfill the socialist vision he imagined in *The Road to Wigan Pier* and experienced briefly in *Homage to Catalonia*, “the circumstances have changed, the drowsy years have ended. Being a Socialist no longer means kicking theoretically against a system which in practice you are fairly well satisfied with.”<sup>232</sup> Of course, most English socialists, Orwell realized, were of the parlor variety, and were hardly prepared for leading an actual revolution. Their theories had not prepared them for assuming control of the machinery of government, and hardly even allowed them to articulate what

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<sup>230</sup> Angus and Orwell, eds., *CEJL* 2:129.

<sup>231</sup> *Ibid*, 129.

<sup>232</sup> *Ibid*, 116.

socialism might actually look like if implemented in the real world. In contrast to Fabian theories and Wells's eschatological, utopian dreams, Orwell argued that socialism had to be made vivid, real, and concrete.

For his part, Orwell proposed a relatively simple working definition of socialism. Socialism, he wrote, could be defined by certain economic, political, and social policies, such as: "common ownership of the means of production," "approximate equality of incomes," "political democracy," and "abolition of all hereditary privilege, especially in education."<sup>233</sup> Without a spirit of pragmatism and a focus on such concrete changes, he feared, any hope for a socialist England was doomed to fail. "We have got to make our words take physical shape, or perish," he warned, before continuing:

At such a time it is possible, as it was not in the peaceful years, to be both revolutionary and realistic. A Socialist movement which can swing the mass of the people behind it, drive the pro-Fascists out of positions of control, wipe out the grosser injustices and let the working class see that they have something to fight for, produce a workable imperial policy instead of a mixture of humbug and Utopianism, bring patriotism and intelligence into partnership—for the first time, a movement of such a kind becomes possible.<sup>234</sup>

As Orwell saw it, the only socialist dream worth fighting for was the kind that fostered the development of a more humane, egalitarian society. Unlike Wells, who placed his faith in order, bureaucracy, and specialization, Orwell threw his hat in with the likes of

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<sup>233</sup> Angus and Orwell, eds., *CEJL* 2:119. It is interesting to compare Orwell's "six point programme" to Wells's "seven broad principles" from his pamphlet "What Are We To Do With Our Lives?" Orwell's plan was sweeping, but was nonetheless modest when compared to Wells's principles, which included the following goals: the acceptance of existing governments as "provisional"; "the establishment of a world economic system"; the creation of "a responsible world directorate serving the common ends of the race"; the need for "world biological controls" of human population and disease control; "support for a minimum standard of individual freedom and welfare"; "the supreme duty of subordinating the personal career to the creation of a world directorate"; and "the admission therewith that our immortality is conditional and lies in the race and not in our individual lives." From Partington, "Pen as Sword," 55.

<sup>234</sup> *Ibid*, 117.



ordinary Englishmen. As Orwell portrayed them, they were a people of “mild knobby faces,” “bad teeth,” and “gentle manners” who were naturally averse to theories and intellectual fads. “We are a nation of flower-lovers,” he wrote, “but also a nation of stamp-collectors, pigeon fanciers, amateur carpenters, coupon-snippers, darts-players, crossword-puzzle fans.” In short, Orwell argued that the English people by nature preferred to conduct their affairs with a spirit of common sense and decency.<sup>235</sup> Whether or not these were the characteristics most Englishmen actually embodied, Orwell’s overarching goal was to propagate the idea of an increasingly classless, yet recognizably English socialist society.

Wells, who had read and even enjoyed Orwell’s anti-Stalinist reportage in *Homage to Catalonia*, obtained a copy of “The Lion and the Unicorn” shortly after its publication. As one can imagine, he parsed through Orwell’s polemic with great interest. As John Partington observed, Orwell’s revolutionary credo seemed to build upon a basic Wellsian premise, in the sense that it paid special attention to the roles of technicians and specialists in fomenting an “English revolution”:

In 1941, in “The Lion and the Unicorn,” [Orwell argued] that the overthrow of capitalism was in the interests of a large majority of the population: “The people in England who grasp that changes are needed and are capable of carrying them through are not confined to any one class... Right through our national life we have got to fight against privilege, against the notion that a half-witted public schoolboy is better fitted for command than an intelligent mechanic... The England that is only just beneath the surface, in the factories and the newspaper offices, in the aeroplanes and the submarines, has got the take charge of its own destiny.” Interestingly, this quotation shows that both Orwell’s and Wells’s image<sup>236</sup> of the emerging type of person is identical—the mechanic or engineer.

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<sup>235</sup> Angus and Orwell, eds., *CEJL* 2:76-8.

<sup>236</sup> Partington, “Pen as Sword,” 53.

Despite the outward similarities between Orwell and Wells's "image of the emerging type," the fact remains that Orwell's socialist dream was modest, crude, and attainable when compared to Wells's systematic, if grandiose, utopian vision.

After reading Orwell's polemic, Wells discussed it with his friend Roger Senhouse, who recorded the following impressions:

H. G. W... Apropos of Orwell—to whom he's written on various points in his analysis of English character. Fondness for flowers, unmusical, shocked him... Bad teeth? He hadn't noticed it... "What can you expect? All public schoolboys in the 6<sup>th</sup> learn sodomy & side." "What does Orwell mean by saying the English are not intellectual?" "Too sweeping in his general arguments," I said, "but that is controversy in embryo." "He's not a deep thinker."<sup>237</sup>

Despite the fact that Wells found fault with *The Lion and the Unicorn*, most of his criticism apparently had less to do with Orwell's basic argument than with his decidedly idiosyncratic stereotypes. If nothing else, the fact that Orwell advocated a socialist revolution within England could help to explain why Wells's comments about *The Lion and the Unicorn* were relatively quibbling and minor. Wells, who had been preaching his own idiosyncratic socialist gospel for over four decades, apparently found Orwell's book compelling enough to want to meet its author in person.

In the spring of 1941, Wells arranged, through his publisher Fredric Warburg, to invite Orwell over for dinner at his Hanover Terrace townhouse. Although no known record of this evening exists, it was significant in at least three regards. First of all, the occasion allowed Orwell to finally meet his childhood idol, the man whom he had tried, and failed, to meet some twenty-five years earlier. Secondly, after dinner, Wells introduced Orwell to Inez Holden, a writer and journalist who had recently moved into

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<sup>237</sup> Bowker, *Inside Orwell*, 276.



“the mews flat” behind Wells’s townhouse (she had been bombed out of her own apartment) and with whom Orwell thereafter engaged in a wartime love affair. And lastly, over the course of the evening, Orwell and Wells enjoyed each other’s company so much that they decided to see each other again, and visited one another frequently throughout the spring and summer of 1941.<sup>238</sup>

Throughout the war years, both Orwell and Wells lived in the bomb-riddled city of London. Wells continued to live and write, as he had for the previous decade, at his handsome townhouse just off of Regents Park. As for Orwell, he and his wife Eileen rented a small apartment near the offices of the British Broadcasting Company, where from August 1941 until November 1943 he worked as an assistant talks director (alongside T. S. Eliot, among other prominent figures) with the Indian section of the Eastern Service Bureau.<sup>239</sup> Considering the fact that both Orwell and Wells hewed to their own busy writing schedules, they seem to have spent a considerable amount of time together throughout the spring and summer of 1941. (Of course, Orwell’s visits to Wells’s townhouse may have had less to do with Wells than with the fact that he was then sleeping with Holden.) Mulk Raj Anand, who worked with Orwell at the BBC, recalled attending several informal weekend discussions presided over by Orwell and Wells. Not surprisingly, he remembered that their conversations usually veered toward “utopias, anti-utopias and other subjects connected with the state of western civilization.”<sup>240</sup> Interestingly, according to Anand, Orwell articulated his decidedly anti-

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<sup>238</sup> Bowker, *Inside Orwell*, 271, 278.

<sup>239</sup> Newsinger, *Orwell’s Politics*, 100.

<sup>240</sup> W. J. West, ed., *Orwell: The Lost Writings* (New York: Arbor House, 1985), 27.

Wellsian opinions only over the course of several months.<sup>241</sup> In the early months of their ultimately ill-fated friendship, it seems that Orwell submerged his ordinarily outspoken opinions and tried to enter into a real dialogue with Wells, who, despite his adamant refusal to confront the world as it was, remained one of Orwell's heroes.

Throughout the spring and summer of 1941, Orwell refrained from engaging in his usual polemical attacks against Wells. In fact, he even published a pair of Wells-admiring pieces: a pleasant review of the film version of *Kipps*, and a defense of Wells's position in the famous Wells-James literary controversy.<sup>242</sup> In his review of *Kipps*, which appeared in *Time and Tide* on May 17, 1941, Orwell applauded Wells as a guardian and defender of the bygone Edwardian age. To view *Kipps*, he wrote, was to be reminded that England was now quite a different place than it had once been. "The comedy of the situation depended on class-differences which no long effectively exist, and on intellectual fashions which are almost completely forgotten," Orwell observed, before reminiscing, "It was still the era of the *Yellow Book*, of the Burne-Jones maidens with their unhinged necks and russet-coloured hair, of *Omar Khayyam* in limp leather covers, and also of 'the new immorality' and 'splendid sins.'" Returning to a theme previously developed in *Coming Up for Air*, Orwell argued that "Mr. Wells, the apostle of progress and the future, has been able more than almost any other writer to make the sleepy years at the end of the last century and the beginning of this one seem a good time to live in." In a similarly admiring vein, he continued: "It is a pleasure to see so many films appearing with an Edwardian setting. It is time we stopped laughing at that period and

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<sup>241</sup> West, ed., *Lost Writings*, 27.

<sup>242</sup> Davison, ed., *Complete Works* 12:500; Carey, ed., *Essays*, 351-2.



realized that it had its points, as we did with the mid-Victorian age some twenty years ago."<sup>243</sup>

In "The Frontiers of Art and Propaganda," a BBC radio address transcribed and published in *The Listener* on May 29, 1941, Orwell mounted a staunch defense of the Wellsian position in the decades-old Wells-James literary controversy. As he explained, his own development from an apolitical novelist into a political writer was due to two factors. The first, Orwell noted, was the worsening political landscape of the thirties: "The writers who have come up since 1930 have been living in a world in which not only one's life but one's whole scheme of values is constantly menaced."<sup>244</sup> The second reason, Orwell argued, was the overwhelming triumph of Wells's didactic, discursive philosophy of writing over James's comparatively shallow aestheticism. As he saw it, Wells's insistence that all writing contained a political dimension had been borne out by the literary and political developments of the thirties:

And this period of ten years or so in which literature, even poetry, was mixed up with pamphleteering, did a great service to literary criticism, because it destroyed the illusion of pure aestheticism. It reminded us that propaganda in some form or other lurks in every book, that every work of art has a meaning and a purpose—a political, social and religious purpose—and that our aesthetic judgments are always coloured by our prejudices and beliefs. It debunked art for art's sake.<sup>245</sup>

Although Wells himself had used his discursive writing philosophy for the purposes of advocating a political fantasy, Orwell nonetheless understood Wells's crucial role in laying the groundwork for politically-engaged writers like himself.

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<sup>243</sup> Davison, ed., *Complete Works*, 500.

<sup>244</sup> Angus and Orwell, eds., *CEJL* 2:152.

<sup>245</sup> *Ibid*, 152.

Although Orwell refrained from criticizing Wells throughout the spring and summer of 1941, it was certainly not because he had been won over by Wells's arguments during one of their weekend bull sessions. In fact, during these months he had been preparing a major polemical attack against Wells. This is not to suggest that Orwell abused his friendship or conducted himself disingenuously with Wells. But it is to say that the differences between the two writers were so deep-rooted and fundamental to their worldviews that some sort of clash was all but imminent. For a polemicist like Orwell, matters of personal tact or political convenience never stood in the way of a thorough public airing of opinion. Besides, as a stiff-upper-lip Old Etonian accustomed to voicing fierce and open criticism of even old friends like Cyril Connolly, he could justify, to himself at least, writing and publishing what was undoubtedly his harshest, most damning indictment of Wells to date.

Published in the August 1941 edition of Connolly's literary journal *Horizon*, Orwell's "Wells, Hitler, and the World State" was at once incisive, malevolent, and yet sympathetic in its treatment of Wells.<sup>246</sup> Even as he attempted to demolish the notion of Wells as a credible political thinker, Orwell celebrated Wells as a personal hero and as a literary light of the Edwardian age.

As Bernard Crick trenchantly observed, Orwell's essay was largely "a classic criticism of rationalism in politics" aimed at discrediting the hopelessly idealistic Wells, who in a series of articles and essays in early 1941 simply ignored the fact that world events had recently taken a decidedly disastrous turn.<sup>247</sup> Compiled and published as

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<sup>246</sup> Angus and Orwell, eds., *CEJL* 2:166-172.

<sup>247</sup> Crick, *A Life*, 428.



*Guide to the New World*, Wells's articles offered such dubiously upbeat analyses of contemporary events as:

In March or April, say the wiseacres, there is to be a stupendous knockout blow at Britain... What Hitler has to do it with, I cannot imagine. His ebbing and dispersed military resources are now probably not very much greater than the Italians' before they were put to the test in Greece and Africa.

In 1914 the Hohenzollern army was the best in the world. Behind that screaming little defective in Berlin there is nothing of the sort... [The German army's] raw jerry-built discipline is wilting under the creeping realization that the Blitzkrieg is spent, and the war is coming home to roost.<sup>248</sup>

However, as Orwell noted, in the handful of months since the publication of *Guide to the New World*, "the German army has overrun the Balkans and reconquered Cyrenaica, it can march through Turkey or Spain at such time as may suit it, and it has undertaken the invasion of Russia." With more than a touch of smugness, he added: "So much for the idea that the German army is a bogey, its equipment inadequate, its morale breaking down..."<sup>249</sup>

As Orwell saw it, Wells had simply failed to comprehend the direction and significance of contemporary world events. It seemed obvious to him that Wells was using his rhetoric of "the usual rigmarole about a World State" to shield himself from the tragic reality that an emerging global community was clearly not developing as he had long hoped, planned, and prophesied. In light of the dismal world of 1941, Orwell argued, Wells's Edwardian utopian vision appeared as a quaint, delusional fantasy.

"What is the use of pointing out that a World State is desirable?" Orwell wrote. "What

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<sup>248</sup> Angus and Orwell, eds., *CEJL* 2:166-7.

<sup>249</sup> *Ibid*, 167.

matters is that not one of the five great military powers would think of submitting to such a thing.”<sup>250</sup> In a similar vein, he continued:

All sensible men for decades past have been substantially in agreement with what Mr. Wells says; but the sensible men have no power and, in too many cases, no disposition to sacrifice themselves. Hitler is a criminal lunatic, and Hitler has an army of millions of men, aeroplanes in thousands, tanks in tens of thousands. For his sake a great nation has been willing to overwork itself for six years and then to fight for two years more, whereas for the common-sense, essentially hedonistic world-view which Mr. Wells puts forward, hardly a human creature is willing to shed a pint of blood.<sup>251</sup>

Returning to a previously articulated theme, Orwell observed that Hitler’s worldview was one which, despite its barbaric, irrational tone, was nonetheless capable of galvanizing an entire nation into frenzied, purposeful action. As for the comparatively bloodless, rational-minded Wells, he was even blind to the fact that “the atavistic emotion of patriotism” even existed, much less to the fact that it exerted a powerful force upon the lives of most human beings. “The energy that actually shapes the world springs from emotions—racial pride, leader-worship, religious belief, love of war,” Orwell argued, correcting Wells on this fundamental point.<sup>252</sup> To be sure, such dark, irrational impulses were the very same human sentiments that Wells had long disregarded as anachronistic, degenerate, or otherwise inconsequential. (Typically, in the rational Wellsian scheme of things, any violent or aggressive tendencies were to be shunted off into constructive pursuits, such as the drive for scientific discovery or the colonization of other planets.)

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<sup>250</sup> Angus and Orwell, eds., *CEJL* 2:167.

<sup>251</sup> *Ibid*, 168.

<sup>252</sup> *Ibid*, 168.



As Orwell saw it, an ingrained “lifelong habit of thought” prevented Wells from even beginning to contemplate the source of Hitler’s power.<sup>253</sup> A cursory glance at Wells’s books demonstrated that he had long endorsed a deeply flawed vision of history as a kind of dialectic between rational, scientific progress on one hand, and superstitious, violent barbarism on the other:

If one looks through nearly any book that [Wells] has written in the last forty years one finds the same idea constantly recurring: the supposed antithesis between the man of science who is working towards a planned World State and the reactionary who is trying to restore a disorderly past. In novels, Utopias, essays, films, pamphlets, the antithesis crops up, always more or less the same. On the one side science, order, progress, internationalism, aeroplanes, steel, concrete, hygiene; on the other side war, nationalism, religion, monarchy, peasants, Greek professors, poets, horses. History as he sees it is a series of victories won by the scientific man over the romantic man.<sup>254</sup>

Wells’s insistence to the contrary notwithstanding, the modern world was one in which scientific progress had undoubtedly allied itself with the murderous and primeval. As Orwell observed, Wells was simply unwilling and unable to accept this dreadful fact:

Modern Germany is far more scientific than England, and far more barbarous. Much of what Wells has imagined and worked for is physically there in Nazi Germany. The order, the planning, the State encouragement of science, the steel, the concrete, the aeroplanes, are all there, but all in the service of ideas appropriate to the Stone Age. Science is fighting on the side of superstition. But obviously it is impossible for Wells to accept this. It would contradict the world-view on which his own works are based. The war-lords and the witch-doctors *must* fail, the common-sense World State, as seen by a nineteenth-century liberal whose heart does not leap at the sound of bugles, *must* triumph. Treachery and defeatism apart, Hitler cannot be a danger. That he should finally win would be an impossible reversal of history, like a Jacobite restoration.<sup>255</sup>

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<sup>253</sup> Angus and Orwell, eds., *CEJL* 2:169.

<sup>254</sup> *Ibid.*, 169.

<sup>255</sup> Angus and Orwell, eds., *CEJL* 2:170.

According to Orwell, the very same “singleness of mind” and “one-sided imagination” that once secured Wells’s Edwardian reputation as a social prophet were the very same qualities which made him “a shallow, inadequate thinker” in 1941. When Wells broke into the Edwardian literary and cultural scene, Orwell reminded his readers, “society was ruled by narrow-minded, profoundly incurious people.”<sup>256</sup> In the early decades of the century, Wells served an important role as a radical adversary who was unafraid to challenge the prevailing social and political mores of the day. However, because he had been able to see through the prejudices of the Edwardian era simply did not mean Wells was able to understand the modern age, or for that matter anything about the desires and motivations of the vast majority of human beings. As Orwell correctly observed, Wells had long been, “and still is, quite incapable of understanding that nationalism, religious bigotry and feudal loyalty are far more powerful forces than what he himself would describe as sanity.” Unfortunately, Well’s sane, rational vision was essentially powerless in the face of the threat posed by Hitler’s hate-fueled ideology. “Creatures out of the Dark Ages have come marching into the present,” Orwell wrote, “and if they are ghosts they are at any rate ghosts which need a strong magic to lay them.”<sup>257</sup> As Orwell saw it, only the atavistic emotional power of patriotism, not Wells’s rational cosmopolitanism, had the power to confront and repel Hitler’s fanatical war machine.

In the conclusion of “Wells, Hitler and the World State,” Orwell carefully circumscribed Wells’s literary achievements, excluding his forays into prophesy from

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<sup>256</sup> Angus and Orwell, eds., *CEJL* 2:171.

<sup>257</sup> *Ibid*, 171.



what he otherwise regarded as an admirable, if not envious career as an Edwardian novelist. “The succession of lower-middle-class novels which are his greatest achievement stopped short at the other war and never really began again,” Orwell wrote, “and since 1920 he has squandered his talents in slaying paper dragons.”<sup>258</sup> In particular, this final jab was sure to infuriate Wells, who always regarded his evolving utopian dream as the defining accomplishment of his life.

Shortly after the publication of his essay, Orwell invited Wells over to his apartment for dinner. Orwell, for his part, did not seem to have considered canceling the date, which certainly seems strange considering the fact that his critique of Wells had been such an incendiary, *ad hominem* attack. On the other hand, Orwell’s unthinking acceptance of the Etonian literary code likely played into this. As for Wells, he asked Inez Holden to send him a copy of “Wells, Hitler and the World State” the afternoon before the dinner, a request to which she reluctantly obliged. As one can imagine, Wells arrived at Orwell’s apartment in an agitated, if not thoroughly incensed state.<sup>259</sup> (As Gordon Bowker observed, Wells “was by no means party to the Eton tradition of ruthless criticism within a continuing friendship.”)<sup>260</sup> As for Holden, she arrived at Orwell’s apartment after dinner, just as the long-simmering argument between Orwell and Wells was at last heating up. She later recorded her recollections of this evening in her wartime diary entry for August 30, 1941:

In the evening I went down to the Orwells. It was nine o’clock. H. G. had had his dinner with [them]. He was sitting quietly in his high chair there,

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<sup>258</sup> Angus and Orwell, eds., *CEJL* 2:172.

<sup>259</sup> Bowker, *Inside Orwell*, 288.

<sup>260</sup> *Ibid*, 288.

looking half good half pettish. Orwell had the look of an embarrassed prefect. It was easy to see that the row had not started up yet. The poet Empson was sitting in a chair. He was slightly drunk... H. G. in an ominous way said to me "Thank you for that document." Soon he trotted off and got out a copy of *Horizon* from his coat pocket and Orwell got out another one and slapped it down on the table opposite Wells.

Wells began to read. First Orwell's quotation of him and then what Orwell himself said, putting in stamping parenthesis "So says Orwell" and "this is Orwell." When he spoke of Orwell's defeatism I raised one over-bred eyebrow and H. G. said "No I want to have this out with Orwell." On with the argument. "The Germans aren't all over the Balkans," said H. G.; "Of course they are," answered Orwell, "look at the map." Another thing H. G. said "What sort of world Orwell wants we are going to hear soon. Soon we shall [be] told all about the Orwell world and the Orwell Utopia." Orwell started to tell him and H. G. interrupted and Orwell said, "Every time I try to tell you how, you ask me what; and every time I try to tell you what, you ask me how." Finally it seemed agreed that they both wanted much the same world, H. G. was concerned with what, Orwell with how to get it. The poet Empson said that H. G. should take back the word defeatist considering Orwell had seen a considerable amount of fighting under the worst conditions.

H. G. was clearly outraged and hurt by the wording of Orwell's article calling him old-fashioned and his world state scheme and Sankey declaration "the usual rigmarole." Orwell had put some whiskey and snuff between them, he tried to keep it on as friendly as possible a footing. He never got rude or impertinent, although it was agreed that his manners were not so good on paper. H. G. enjoyed the evening. He stayed quite late and we set off home taking with him the poet Empson who was now... pretty well drunk. Empson had considered he should say that Orwell's effort should be appreciated and so he said, "Great man Orwell. I think we should appreciate his effort, there he is an Etonian and his honesty and fight against his upbringing compels him to say anything he wants in a rude manner. He is an Etonian. I am a Wykehamist, I can't write about anything that matters." ... I remember H. G. saying it was not because Orwell was rude that he had been angry with him but because his values were wrong.

Empson said, "No it was because Orwell was rude that H. G. had been angry." So ended the evening. H. G. on saying Good Night to me said "I was sorry to take you home early but I have to work tomorrow." He said it was an amusing evening.<sup>261</sup>

As Holden recalled, both Orwell and Wells seem to have held their own ground.

Each man walked away fundamentally unchanged, still imagining himself to be in the

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<sup>261</sup> Crick, *A Life*, 429-30.



right. As for Wells, he refused to concede that the Germans could do what they pleased in Europe, and pointedly accused Orwell of being “defeatist” in the face of the fascist threat. Wells also (correctly) diagnosed the main difference between himself and Orwell as being one of “values.” Indeed, Orwell did not believe, as Wells did, in Jamesian “operative truths,” nor did he conceive of the future in terms of apocalypse versus utopia. For his all his polemical gusto in “Wells, Hitler and the World State,” Orwell seems to have been too embarrassed or afraid to hash out his fundamental differences with Wells in a face-to-face confrontation. Presumably, he understood that Wells had come to dinner in order to confront and rebut him, not to receive a lashing from a young, comparatively obscure polemicist. Sensing that his friendship with his childhood idol was on the line, it seems that Orwell preferred to keep his mouth shut. However, it should be noted that Wells’s assertion that “soon we shall [be] told all about the Orwell world and the Orwell Utopia” was ultimately one of the truest prophesies he ever uttered.

Following their August run-in, Orwell and Wells appeared to patch up their differences, at least for the time being. As Norman and Jeanne Mackenzie noted, a few weeks after the publication of “Wells, Hitler and the World State,” Wells “strolled down the garden to call on Inez Holden... and finding that Orwell was visiting her he had quite a polite but somewhat strained conversation with him.”<sup>262</sup> Despite the fact that Orwell continued to visit both Holden and Wells throughout the autumn of 1941 and winter of 1942, it soon became all too apparent that his essay had done irreparable damage to his relationship with Wells. Some twenty-five years later, in 1967, Inez Holden recalled that

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<sup>262</sup> Mackenzie, *H. G. Wells*, 430.

Orwell had “very much regretted the *Horizon* article and was sorry he had upset Wells, whom he had always greatly admired.”<sup>263</sup>

However, just how sorry Orwell was about offending Wells with “Wells, Hitler and the World State” is open to debate, especially considering the fact that several months later he broadcast a radio talk in which he once again carefully backdated Wells’s literary and political significance to the Edwardian age. Broadcast on the BBC on March 10, 1942, and published in *The Listener* nine days later, “The Rediscovery of Europe” was an essay in which Orwell delved into the question of “what English literature was like in the days before 1914.”<sup>264</sup> (Incidentally, the title itself appears to have been a mocking allusion to Wells’s first published essay, “The Rediscovery of the Unique.”) In part, Orwell acknowledged that Wells had been an influential Edwardian master of both the fantastic and of the ordinary: “He writes about journeys to the moon and to the bottom of the sea, and also he writes about small shopkeepers dodging bankruptcy and fighting to keep their end up in the frightful snobbery of provincial towns.”<sup>265</sup> At the same time, Orwell argued that Wells had always naively believed in the power of science to “solve all the ills humanity is heir to.” As Orwell saw it, Wells

is saying all the time, if only that small shopkeepers could acquire a scientific outlook, his [sic] troubles would be ended. And of course he believes that this is going to happen, probably in the quite near future. A few more million pounds for scientific research, a few more generations scientifically educated, a few more superstitions shoveled into the dustbin, and the job will be done.<sup>266</sup>

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<sup>263</sup> Davison, ed., *Complete Works* 13:250.

<sup>264</sup> Angus and Orwell, eds., *CEJL* 2:232.

<sup>265</sup> *Ibid*, 234.

<sup>266</sup> Angus and Orwell, eds., *CEJL* 2:234.



Although Orwell conveniently ignored the fact that Wells believed just as ardently in the likelihood of total human annihilation, he was nonetheless correct in his assertion that Wells had imagined the past “as a mess which ought to be swept away in the name of progress, hygiene, efficiency and what-not.”<sup>267</sup> Ultimately, Orwell argued that Wells was a necessarily limited literary figure who reflected the tone of the naively overconfident age in which he developed his progressive, utopian ideals.<sup>268</sup>

In response to “The Rediscovery of Europe,” Wells composed a pair of letters, the first of which he addressed to the editor of *The Listener*. Published in the magazine on April 9, 1942, Wells’s letter reasserted his belief that “science” was not merely something that led invariably towards a rational utopia. As Wells reminded his audience, despite Orwell’s assertions to the contrary, he had long argued that scientific progress could just as easily lead to the extinction of the species:

Your contributor, George Orwell, has, I gather, been informing your readers that I belong to a despicable generation of parochially-minded writers who believed that the world would be saved from its gathering distresses by “science.” From my very earliest book to the present time I have been reiterating that unless mankind adapted its social and political institutions to the changes invention and discovery were bringing about, mankind would be destroyed. Modesty prevents my giving you a list of titles, but I find it difficult to believe that anyone who has read *The Time Machine* (1895), *The Island of Doctor Moreau* (1896), *The Land Ironclads* (1903), *The War in the Air* (1908), *The Shape of Things to Come* (1933), *Science and the World Mind* (New Europe Publishing Company, 1942), to give only six examples of a multitude, can be guilty of these foolish generalizations.

H. G. Wells<sup>269</sup>

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<sup>267</sup> Angus and Orwell, eds., *CEJL* 2:233.

<sup>268</sup> *Ibid.*, 235.

<sup>269</sup> Davison, *Complete Works*, 13:218.

Although Wells was correct that Orwell had unfairly portrayed him as a naïve devotee of “science,” he nonetheless failed to recognize one of the larger implications of Orwell’s critique. The unstated assumption of Wells’s letter—namely, his long-held idea that a “Golden Age” was attainable, if only humans would only use their scientific and technological advances to help, rather than kill, one another—was of course the idea that Orwell found most repellant about the Wellsian worldview.

As for Wells’s second letter, he mailed it directly to Orwell. While his missive to *The Listener* had been defensive but explanatory, his note to Orwell was accusatory and downright vicious. In part, Wells advised Orwell to “read my early works, you shit!” and forbade him from ever setting foot upon his property again.<sup>270</sup> When Wells spoke to Inez Holden about “The Rediscovery of Europe,” he told her that he considered Orwell’s essay an act of “treachery.” For good measure, Wells then cursed Orwell as a “Trotskyist with big feet” and stomped back to his study.<sup>271</sup>

In the wake of his public and private break with Wells, Orwell continued to attack the basic assumptions of the Wellsian worldview in a series of essays and reviews. In a review of Viscount Samuel’s utopian novel *An Unknown Land* published in *The Listener* on December 24, 1942, Orwell wondered:

Why is it that such “ideal” conditions... are always so profoundly unappetizing to read about? One is driven to conclude that [a] fully human life is not thinkable without a considerable intermixture of evil. It is obvious, to take only one instance, that humour and the sense of fun, ultimately dependent on the existence of evil, have no place in any Utopia. A certain smugness and a tendency to self-praise are common failings in

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<sup>270</sup> Angus and Orwell, eds., *CEJL* 2:469.

<sup>271</sup> Crick, *A Life*, 431.



the inhabitants of Utopias, as a study of Mr. H. G. Wells's work would show.<sup>272</sup>

Similarly, in his December 24, 1943 essay "Can Socialists be Happy?" Orwell challenged the practicality and even the desirability of a Wellsian utopia. Returning to a theme from *The Road to Wigan Pier*, he attributed the unattractiveness of Wells's socialist vision, in part at least, to the rise of fascism across Europe:

Here you have a picture of the world as Wells would like to see it—or thinks he would like to see it. It is a world whose keynotes are enlightened hedonism and scientific curiosity. All the evils and miseries that we now suffer from have vanished. Ignorance, war, poverty, dirt, disease, frustration, hunger, fear, overwork, superstition—all vanished. So expressed, it is impossible to deny that that is the kind of world we all hope for. We all want to abolish the things that Wells wants to abolish. But is there anyone who actually wants to live in a Wellsian Utopia? On the contrary, *not* to live in a world like that, *not* to wake up in a hygienic garden suburb infested by naked schoolmarms, has actually become a conscious political motive. . . . With the Fascist movement in front of our eyes we cannot write this off as a merely silly remark. For one of the sources of the Fascist movement is the desire to avoid a too-rational and too-comfortable world.<sup>273</sup>

In the same essay, Orwell rephrased his long-held belief in the need to equate socialism with "decency" rather than "progress." "The real objective of Socialism is human brotherhood," he wrote, before explaining:

Men use up their lives in heart-breaking political struggles, or get themselves killed in civil wars, or tortured in the secret prisons of the Gestapo, not in order to establish some central-heated, air-conditioned, strip-lighted Paradise, but because they want a world in which human beings love one another instead of swindling and murdering one another. And they want that world as a first step. Where they go from there is not so certain, and the attempt to foresee it in detail merely confuses the issue.<sup>274</sup>

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<sup>272</sup> Davison, ed., *Complete Works* 14:254.

<sup>273</sup> Carey, ed., *Essays*, 504.

<sup>274</sup> *Ibid*, 504.

As Orwell correctly observed, the Wellsian dream of a regimented, hierarchical world was simply not the sort of thing that actual revolutionaries fought or died for. Nor, for that matter, was it a state of affairs that anyone, except for Wells, even desired.

Although Wells continued to find solace in his daily schedule of writing, editing, and speaking, what he had to say seemed increasingly detached from the reality of the wartime situation. For instance, when the publisher of *Phoenix* (1942) asked Wells to conclude his book with a list of suggestions to ensure “its maximum effectiveness as a revolutionary instrument,” Wells simply advised his readers to re-read the book, discuss it with friends, “organize groups... write to newspapers, heckle politicians,” and translate it into other languages. As Norman and Jeanne Mackenzie harshly, but succinctly judged: “The campaign for the Open Conspiracy had been reduced, in the end, to the politics of the parish pump. The world was in flames, and H. G. was trying to beat them out with a Fabian tract.”<sup>275</sup>

In 1942, at the age of seventy-five, Wells started working towards his doctorate in science at London University. His thesis, “On the Quality of Illusion in the Continuity of the Individual Life in the Higher Metazoa, with Particular Reference to the Species *Homo sapiens*,” was eventually accepted, even though its content was scarcely distinguishable from that of his many books and tracts. As Wells saw it, the notion of the existence of the individual human life was an dangerous illusion, a long-lived hallucination which had caused “most of the foolish dogmatisms and ultimate ‘explanations’ of life, the priestcrafts, presumptuous teachings, fears, arbitrary intolerances, tyrannies and mental muddles, that have embittered human relationships hitherto.” Never the humanist, Wells

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<sup>275</sup> Mackenzie, *H. G. Wells*, 426.



instead looked towards “some sort of super-individual, a brave new persona” who would presumably be able to lead the way to “the great impersonal society of the days to come.” With this paper, Wells received his degree from London University. However, he was unable to get it published in the journal of the Royal Society—or, for that matter, to become a fellow himself.<sup>276</sup>

For whatever reasons, from 1941 to 1943, Orwell refrained from reviewing any of Wells’s copious wartime publications. However, after picking up a copy of Wells’s *'42 to '44: A Contemporary Memoir upon Human Behaviours During the Crisis of the World*, Orwell was evidently unable to resist what he saw as an opportunity to show up the old man once and for all. In particular, the devastatingly hilarious introduction to Orwell’s May 21, 1944 review of *'42 to '44* deserves repeating:

The chief difficulty of writing a book nowadays is that pots of paste are usually sold without brushes. But if you can get hold of a brush (sometimes procurable at Woolworth’s), and a pair of scissors and a good-sized blank book, you have everything you need. It is not necessary to do any actual writing. Any collection of scraps—reprinted newspaper articles, private letters, fragments of diaries, even “radio discussions” ground out by wretched hacks to be broadcast by celebrities—can be sold to the amusement-starved public. And even the paper shortage can be neutralized by—as in this case—issuing your book in a limited edition and selling it at an artificial price. This seems to be the principle that Mr. Wells has followed.<sup>277</sup>

After rearticulating his basic criticism from “Wells, Hitler and the World State,” Orwell ridiculed Wells’s penchant for ignoring actual events in favor of his long-maintained *idée fixe*:

Except in certain books in which he invoked a miracle, Mr. Wells has never once suggested how the World State is to be brought into being.

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<sup>276</sup> Mackenzie, *H. G. Wells*, 437.

<sup>277</sup> Carey, ed., *Essays*, 605.

This is to say that he has never bothered to wonder who the actual rulers of the world are, how and why they are able to hold on to power, and by what means they are to be evicted. In formulating the "Rights of Man," he does not even drop a hint as to how such a document could be disseminated in, say, Russia or China. Hitler he dismisses as simply a lunatic: that settles Hitler. He does not seriously inquire *why* millions of people are ready to lay down their lives for a lunatic, and what this probably betokens for human society. And in between his threats that *homo sapiens* must mend his ways or be destroyed he continues to repeat the slogans of 1900 as though they were self-evident truths.<sup>278</sup>

In no uncertain terms, Orwell disavowed the notion of a Wellsian apocalypse. "Except through some unforeseeable cosmic disaster," he wrote, it was "very unlikely that man will become extinct." Contrary to Wells's fears, the technologically advanced world was not primed for destruction, precisely because "the machine culture thrives on bombs." Articulating an idea that would become one of the major themes of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, Orwell countered the misguided Wellsian apocalypse of "the world being plunged back into the Dark Ages by a few tons of bombs" with his own future vision. "The danger seemingly ahead of us is *not* extinction," he explained. "It is a slave civilization which, so far from being chaotic, might be horribly stable."<sup>279</sup>

*The Observer* published Orwell's review of '42 to '44 on May 21, 1944. Despite the fact that it concluded with a laudatory flourish ("This book contains brilliant and imaginative passages. One expects that of Mr. Wells. More than any other writer, perhaps, he has altered the landscape of the contemporary mind"), Orwell's essay was clearly a malicious attack against a fallen idol. Several days later, Ivor Brown, the editor of *The Observer*, received an angry, unprintable letter from Wells, who castigated Brown

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<sup>278</sup> Carey, ed., *Essays*, 605-6.

<sup>279</sup> *Ibid.*, 606.



for publishing what he saw as yet another crass, unfair polemic from Orwell.<sup>280</sup>

Excluding its profanity, according to Peter Davison, Brown declined to publish Wells's letter "possibly because it referred to Inez Holden, which would have puzzled readers." As Davison explained, Wells had convinced himself that Holden, as Orwell's lover, had been "in some way connected with the adverse review." Consequently, Wells abruptly forced Holden to move out of the mews flat behind his townhouse in a final act of vengeance against Orwell.<sup>281</sup>

In all likelihood, Wells kicking Inez Holden out of her apartment was the final incident in the long-lived Orwell-Wells feud. However, at least one apocryphal tale suggests otherwise. According to Michael Meyer, one evening in 1944 Orwell told him "the sad story" of the end of his friendship with Wells. Recorded in Meyer's essay "Memories of George Orwell," this "alternate ending" is a colorful, humorous episode, albeit one of dubious veracity. Precisely because it conflates certain details (for instance, it was Holden, not Orwell, who had moved into the apartment behind Wells's house) and paints Wells in an unflattering, if not buffoonish light, the Meyer account should be read with a skeptical eye. The fact is it may have been Orwell's not so subtle way of getting back at Wells:

Somehow the conversation got on to H. G. Wells, and George told me the sad story of the end of their friendship, which I don't think has been related elsewhere. Some time earlier Wells had offered them the use of a flat above the garage of his house in Regent's Park. They had been very happy there until on day Wells got it into his head, as he so often did about people, that George had been saying unkind things about him behind his back, and ordered him to leave immediately; nor could George persuade him that his suspicions were unfounded, so they had to go. A few months

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<sup>280</sup> Bowker, *Inside Orwell*, 313-4.

<sup>281</sup> Davison, ed., *Complete Works* 14:199.

later the Orwells thought they would try to patch things up, so they wrote to Wells inviting him to dinner. Wells replied at once with a warm acceptance and expressed wonder at their having left the flat he had lent them so suddenly and without explanation. He turned up full of amiability and began by warning them that he had stomach trouble and could not eat anything rich. "Oh, dear," said Eileen. "I've cooked a curry." "I mustn't touch that," said Wells. "Just give me a very little." He ate two huge helpings, as well as drinking plentifully, and chatted away in excellent form. After dinner William Plomer (or was it William Empson?) arrived. It transpired that he had not eaten, and the curry, thanks to Wells's greed, was finished, so Eileen said: "All I can offer you is some plum cake," "Plum cake?" said Wells, overhearing this. "I don't think I could manage that." "I'm not offering it to you, it's for Bill," said Eileen, but when it appeared Wells observed that it looked uncommonly good and took two slices. Around midnight they put him into a taxi, in the best of spirits, and as he drove off he cried: "Don't lose touch with me for so long again!" They congratulated themselves on having repaired the friendship, but a week later they got a furious letter from Wells saying: "You knew I was ill and on a diet, you deliberately plied me with food and drink," etc., and declaring that he never wanted to see either of them again... Apparently Wells had been taken violently ill in the taxi and had had to be rushed to hospital; obviously, they had conspired against him in revenge for (he now remembered) the trouble over the flat. I believe they never did see each other again.<sup>282</sup>

Even as Orwell's treatment of his boyhood idol became increasingly harsh, he retained his intense admiration and respect for Wells as an imaginative writer. In "How Long is a Short Story" (1944), Orwell considered the breadth and quality of Wells's early short stories: "They are collected under various titles, and quite twenty of them are of outstanding brilliance. The best of all, perhaps, are 'A Slip Under the Microscope' and 'Miss Winchelsea's Heart.'"<sup>283</sup> In his weekly *Tribune* column for November 3, 1944, Orwell defended Wells against the attacks of whom he considered to be the authors of

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<sup>282</sup> Michael Meyer, "Memories of George Orwell," from Miriam Gross, ed., *The World of George Orwell* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1971), 128-9.

<sup>283</sup> Davison, ed., *Complete Works* 16:383.



“the silly-religious book.”<sup>284</sup> And in July 1945, in the essay “Personal Notes on Scientifiction,” Orwell attacked the “poisonous rubbish” of American comics like *Marvel Comics* and *Famous Funnies*: “Seen in the mass these things are very disquieting. Quite obviously they tend to stimulate fantasies of power, and in the last resort their subject matter boils down to magic and sadism.” He continued: “The whole thing is just a riot of nonsensical sensationalism, with none of the genuine scientific interest of the H. G. Wells stories from which this class of fiction originally sprang.”<sup>285</sup> For his part, Orwell was clearly worried that modern “scientifiction” (what we now call science fiction) was likely to obscure and sully Wells’s literary reputation.

In “You and the Atom Bomb” (1945), an essay written several months on the heels of the war-ending Hiroshima and Nagasaki blasts, Orwell countered Wells’s doom-laden prediction of imminent apocalypse with a different kind of horror, one which he described as “a permanent state of ‘cold war’” (thereby coining a twentieth century commonplace):

For forty or fifty years past, Messrs. H. G. Wells and others have been warning us that man is in danger of destroying himself with his own weapons, leaving the ants or some other gregarious species to take over. Anyone who has seen the ruined cities of Germany will find this notion at least thinkable. Nevertheless, looking at the world as a whole, the drift for many decades has been not towards anarchy but towards the reimposition of slavery. We may be heading not for general breakdown but for an epoch as horribly stable as the slave empires of antiquity... Had the atomic bomb turned out to be something as cheap and easily manufactured as a bicycle or an alarm clock, it might well have plunged us back into barbarism, but it might, on the other hand, have meant the end of national sovereignty and of the highly-centralized police State. If, as seems to be the case, it is a rare and costly object as difficult to produce as a battleship,

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<sup>284</sup> Angus and Orwell, eds., *CEJL* 3:304.

<sup>285</sup> Carey, ed., *Essays*, 884.

it is likelier to put an end to large-scale wars at the cost of prolonging indefinitely a 'peace that is no peace.'"<sup>286</sup>

In "What is Science?" (1945) Orwell again undermined the classic Wellsian assumption that scientists could be persuaded to establish a cosmopolitan, rational world state. "It is often loosely said that 'Science is international,'" Orwell wrote, nearly quoting Wells, "but in practice the scientific workers of all countries line up behind their own governments with fewer scruples than are felt by the writers and the artists. The German scientific community, as a whole, made no resistance to Hitler."<sup>287</sup> As Orwell saw it, the war had clearly demonstrated that "piling up a lot of facts" without the benefit of any moral or ethical framework led invariably to the human tragedies of scientific torture and mechanized death. Instead, Orwell suggested that the goal of scientific training in the future should consist primarily of "the implanting of rational, skeptical, experimental habit of mind." In this way, he hoped that a modest, method-based conception of science could help to prevent further abuses in the use of science as a tool of systematic oppression and mass murder.

In the summer of 1945, Wells turned seventy-nine. His health and stamina had waned throughout the war years, and he had begun to sense that the near was drawing near. Increasingly forced to spend his days confined to bed, he saved his remaining strength for periodic bursts of writing in his Hanover Terrace study. In 1945, Wells published what would prove to be his two final works: the optimistic *Happy Turning* and the apocalyptic *Mind at the End of Its Tether*. Taken together, these short books represent the fundamental bipolarity of Wells's eschatological worldview. In *Happy*

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<sup>286</sup> Angus and Orwell, eds., *CEJL* 4:26.

<sup>287</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.



*Turning*, Wells wrote eloquently of his renewed hope that “the human mind may be in a phase of transition to a new, fearless, clear-headed way of living.”<sup>288</sup> The war had been fought and won: it was time to rebuild the world of tomorrow, and there was no reason why it should not be a beautiful place to live. Conversely, In *Mind at the End of Its Tether* Wells suggested that the human race would just as likely destroy itself altogether. “The world is at the end of its tether...the end of everything we call life if close at hand and cannot be evaded,” he intoned. The only possible hope for the future of mankind, Wells hypothesized, was to “give place to some other animal better adapted to face the fate that closes in more and more swiftly upon mankind... a new modification of the *hominidae*...”<sup>289</sup> (Characteristically, Wells refrained from elaborating upon precisely what he meant by this bold assertion.)

In November 1945, the *Manchester Evening News* published Orwell’s review of *Mind at the End of Its Tether*. Even though Orwell observed that “it would be simply dishonest to pretend that this is one of Mr. Wells’s better books,” he nonetheless argued that it represented “a conclusive end to the series of essays, memoranda, pamphlets through which the writer has experimented, challenged discussion, and assembled material bearing upon the fundamental nature of life and time.” Orwell continued: “So far as fundamentals go, he has nothing more and never will have anything more to say.”<sup>290</sup> After elaborating upon Wells’s “adapt or perish” thesis, Orwell once again repudiated the Wellsian notion of imminent destruction: “Are we really done for? If the

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<sup>288</sup> Mackenzie, *H. G. Wells*, 443.

<sup>289</sup> *Ibid*, 444.

<sup>290</sup> Carey, ed., *Essays*, 920.

worst came to the worst and a shower of atom bombs descended on every great city in the world, would that necessarily be the end? The end of machine civilization—yes, but probably not of human life.”<sup>291</sup>

Near the end of his review, Orwell correctly observed that *Mind at the End of Its Tether* “is hardly a book at all, merely a series of short, disjointed essays which have probably been written with considerable effort between bouts of illness.” Regardless of this fact, for Orwell it had “the power that Mr. Wells’s writings have always had—the power of arresting the reader’s attention and forcing him to think and argue.”<sup>292</sup> Of course, this had long been Wells’s primary affect upon Orwell’s intellectual development. Throughout his life, he had always found Wells’s works equal parts inspiring, challenging, and frustrating. In a sense, Wells had long served as a whetting stone for Orwell, who sharpened and focused his own thought against the assumptions and implications of his hero’s copious, wide-ranging works.

When H. G. Wells died in August 1946, his life was roundly celebrated in papers and journals throughout the world. In part, the editors of the *Times Literary Supplement* wrote: “For more than any other man, Mr. Shaw alone excepted it may be, it was Wells who created the popular intellectual climate of the English generation which came immediately after him.”<sup>293</sup> Similarly, in the journal *Adelphi*, John Middleton Murray eulogized: “England without H. G. Wells, to many of us, will hardly be England.”<sup>294</sup>

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<sup>291</sup> Carey, ed, *Essays*, 922-3.

<sup>292</sup> *Ibid*, 923.

<sup>293</sup> Parrinder, ed., *Critical Heritage*, 322.

<sup>294</sup> *Ibid*, 324.



And in an obituary published in the *Manchester Evening News* on August 14, 1946,

Orwell opined, in a generous but critical way:

No writer of our time, at any rate no English writer, has so deeply influenced his contemporaries as Wells. He was so big a figure, he has played so great a part in forming our picture of the world, that in agreeing or disagreeing with his ideas we are apt to forget his purely literary achievement.<sup>295</sup>

Even in the wake of Wells's death, Orwell's praise of his boyhood hero's life and literary accomplishments remained constrained by an underlying ambivalence towards his utopian worldview.

In the months following Wells's death, Orwell wrote about Wells in a more elegiac way, even as he remained overtly critical of his political thought. In his "As I Please" column on December 6, 1946, Orwell wrote:

We value H. G. Wells, for example, for *Tono-Bungay*, *Mr. Polly*, *The Time Machine*, etc. If he had stopped writing in 1920 his reputation would stand quite as high as it does: if we knew him only by the books he wrote after that date, we should have rather a low opinion of him. A novelist does not, any more than a boxer or a ballet dancer, last for ever.<sup>296</sup>

Similarly, in "As I Please" on February 7, 1947, he considered the recently reprinted Penguin Library edition of Wells's *The Island of Doctor Moreau*:

I looked to see whether the slips and misprints which I remembered in earlier editions had been repeated in it. Sure enough, they were still there. One of them is a particularly stupid misprint, of a kind to make most writers squirm. In 1941 I pointed this out to H. G. Wells, and asked him why he did not remove it. It had persisted through edition after edition since 1896. Rather to my surprise, he said he remembered the misprint, but could not be bothered to do anything about it. He no longer took the faintest interest in his early books: they had been written so long ago that he no longer felt them to be part of himself. I have never been quite sure whether to admire this attitude or not. It is magnificent to be so free from

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<sup>295</sup> George Orwell, "The True Pattern of H. G. Wells," *Manchester Evening News*, 14 August 1946, 1.

<sup>296</sup> Angus and Orwell, eds., *CEJL* 4:293.

literary vanity. And yet, what writer of Wells's gifts, if he had any power of self-criticism or regard for his own reputation, would have poured out in fifty years a total of ninety-five books, quite two thirds of which have already ceased to be readable?<sup>297</sup>

The fact is that Orwell was so troubled with the misprints in *The Island of Doctor Moreau* that he dashed off a letter to the editor of Penguin Books, A. S. B. Glover, on March 19, 1947. His letter to Glover suggests the extent to which his lifelong passion for Wells had always been a kind of obsession:

As to the slips, the one that struck me in re-reading the book is this. Dr. Moreau says that the yacht in which he and his assistant came to the island was stolen and lost. The assistant is nevertheless shown as traveling to the mainland on a steamer, to pick up new supplies of animals. Obviously, if they were on an island away from the shipping lanes and had no boat of their own, they would have had no way of arranging for any ship to pick them up. I have no doubt that this was a slip on Wells's part, but it is hardly the kind of thing that one could put right without the author's agreement.<sup>298</sup>

While Orwell never repudiated his socialist credo, he became increasingly disenchanted with political solutions to mankind's perennial problems. Like Wells, he even expressed his doubts about the survival of human civilization in the age of the atom bomb. At the same time—and decidedly unlike Wells—Orwell persisted in confronting the world as he saw it, and insisted upon maintaining his hope (however deracinated) in the socialist cause, which he persistently equated with the dream of human brotherhood. In his "As I Please" column on November 29, 1946, he mused:

When one considers how things have gone since 1930 or thereabouts, it is not easy to believe in the survival of civilization. I do not argue from this that the only thing to do is to abjure practical politics, retire to some remote place and concentrate either on individual salvation or on building up self-supporting communities against the day when the atom bombs

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<sup>297</sup> Angus and Orwell, eds., *CEJL* 4:326-7.

<sup>298</sup> Davison, ed., *Complete Works* 19:79.



have done their work. I think one must continue the political struggle, just as a doctor must try to save the life of a patient who is probably going to die. But I do suggest that we shall get nowhere unless we start by recognizing that political behaviour is largely non-rational, that the world is suffering from some kind of mental disease which must be diagnosed before it can be cured.<sup>299</sup>

Similarly, in “Writers and Leviathan” (1948) Orwell articulated his fear of the fundamental lack of preparedness—and likely, the inability—of most socialists to confront the political realities of the modern age:

The whole left-wing ideology, scientific and utopia, was evolved by people who had no immediate prospect of attaining power. It was, therefore, an extremist ideology, utterly contemptuous of kings, governments, laws, prisons, police forces, armies, flags, frontiers, patriotism, religion, conventional morality, and, in fact, the whole existing scheme of things. Until well within living memory the forces of the left in all countries were fighting against a tyranny which appeared to be invincible, and it was easy to assume that if only *that* particular tyranny—capitalism—could be overthrown, Socialism would follow. Moreover, the left had inherited from Liberalism certain distinctly questionable beliefs, such as the belief that the truth will prevail and persecution defeats itself, or that man is naturally good and is only corrupted by his environment.<sup>300</sup>

As Orwell saw it, the overthrow of capitalism did not necessarily equal the end of tyranny, nor were humans “naturally good” creatures who were “only corrupted by” environmental factors. As Anthony Burgess observed, optimistic socialists like Wells were not unlike the disciples of Pelagius, who argued that:

man was free to choose salvation as much as damnation: he was not predisposed to evil, there was no original sin. Nor was he necessarily predisposed to good: the fact of total freedom of choice rendered him neutral. But he certainly possessed the capacity, with no hindrance from unregenerate forces within, to live the good life and, by his own efforts, to achieve salvation at the end.<sup>301</sup>

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<sup>299</sup> Angus and Orwell, eds., *CEJL* 4:288-9.

<sup>300</sup> *Ibid*, 465.

<sup>301</sup> Anthony Burgess, *1985* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1978), 53.

Orwell, for his part, rejected the Wellsian brand of Pelagianism (which “blamed criminal impulses on environment”) in favor of what Burgess characterized as an “Augustinian” interpretation of the human condition. The outcome of the Russian Revolution, the tragedy of the Spanish Civil War, and the realities of postwar Labour Party politics confirmed to Orwell, against his hopes to the contrary, that the future of mankind was not likely to bring the fruition of the socialist dream of human brotherhood.<sup>302</sup> And yet, he stood athwart history, and persisted in his long-lived dream of a declassed, egalitarian English society. Like Wells before him, Orwell’s political vision began to take on an abstract, even metaphysical glow, as his dream of a socialist republic hinged upon what he increasingly came to regard as a historical and political impossibility: the awakening and rise of the long-slumbering working class.

One year after Wells’s death, Orwell started work on *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, the novel that would make his reputation as a prophet of pessimism and despair—and which also proved to be his final work. As usual, Orwell turned to Wells for literary inspiration. Although dozens of Orwell scholars have examined *Nineteen Eighty-Four* in relation to Huxley’s *Brave New World* and Zamyatin’s *We*, relatively few have analyzed the connections between Orwell’s novel and its earliest direct predecessor, Wells’s early scientific romance *When the Sleeper Wakes* (1899).

As a child, Eric Blair loved *When the Sleeper Wakes*. In later years, Orwell returned to it repeatedly, examining Wells’s novel in a number of essays and reviews. As he correctly observed, *When the Sleeper Wakes* stands in marked contrast to most of Wells’s utopian works. Unlike the ordered progressive worlds of novels like *A Modern*

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<sup>302</sup> Burgess, 1985, 1264.



*Utopia, The Dream, or Men Like Gods, When the Sleeper Wakes* portrays “a glittering, sinister world in which society has hardened into a caste system and the workers are permanently enslaved.”<sup>303</sup> In *The Road to Wigan Pier*, Orwell devoted nearly two pages of criticism to *When the Sleeper Wakes*, and concluded that it was “much superior,” imaginatively speaking, to its major literary descendent, Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World*.<sup>304</sup> Similarly, in “Prophecies of Fascism” (1940), Orwell claimed that “everyone who has ever read *The Sleeper Wakes* [sic] remembers it,” and argued that the world of Wells’s novel clearly predicted elements of the modern political landscape. In the pamphlet “James Burnham and the Managerial Revolution” (1946), Orwell rearticulated this same basic idea when he wrote:

Jack London, in *The Iron Heel* (1909), foretold some of the essential features of Fascism, and such books as Wells’s *The Sleeper Awakes* (1900)[sic], Zamyatin’s *We* (1923), and Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World* (1930), all described imaginary worlds in which the special problems of capitalism had been solved without bringing liberty, equality, or true happiness any nearer.<sup>305</sup>

In short, Orwell was always drawn to *When the Sleeper Wakes*, and later regarded it as a book which suggested the basic features of the kind of centralized, dictatorial, post-capitalist society he himself had long feared.

*When the Sleeper Wakes* was published two years before *Anticipations*. Like *The Time Machine* and *The Island of Doctor Moreau* before it, *Sleeper* displays markedly little confidence in the ability of ordinary people to assert themselves politically, or in the benevolence and wisdom of the ruling class. If we compare *When the Sleeper Wakes* to

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<sup>303</sup> Angus and Orwell, eds., *CEJL* 2:46.

<sup>304</sup> Orwell, *Wigan Pier*, 202.

<sup>305</sup> Angus and Orwell, eds., *CEJL* 4:195.

its most obvious literary antecedent, Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backwards*, it becomes acutely clear that Wells wrote his novel as a conscious rejection of Bellamy's optimistic socialist vision. Like Bellamy's protagonist Julian West, Wells's Graham is a late nineteenth-century man who falls into a trance only to awaken generations into the distant future. While West wakes up in Boston in the year 2000, Graham rises to find himself in the London of 2100. However, the contrast between Bellamy's confident embrace of the future and Wells's ambivalence towards it is striking. In fact, the difference between West's Boston and Graham's London is something that Wells made explicitly clear in the pages of *When the Sleeper Wakes*:

[Graham] thought of Bellamy, the hero of whose Socialistic Utopia had so oddly anticipated this actual experience. But here was no Utopia, no Socialistic state. He had already seen enough to realize that the ancient antithesis of luxury, waste and sensuality on the one hand and abject poverty on the other, still prevailed. He knew enough of the essential factors of life to understand that correlation.<sup>306</sup>

The world in which Graham wakes is vastly transformed, and the city of London is a frighteningly massive, complex anthill of humanity. When Graham gazes upon it the first time, he can comprehend neither the function nor scale of the buildings before him:

His first impression was of overwhelming architecture. The place into which he looked was an aisle of Titanic buildings, curving spaciously in either direction. Overhead mighty cantilevers sprang together across the huge width of the place, and a tracery of translucent material shut out the sky.<sup>307</sup>

Even though the cityscape is dramatically changed, Graham learns that the everyday plight of the common man is little different than it had been in the nineteenth century. Despite the fact that nearly everyone is fed, sheltered, and enjoys immunity from most

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<sup>306</sup> H. G. Wells, *When the Sleeper Wakes* (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1899), 68-9.

<sup>307</sup> Wells, *Sleeper*, 45.



diseases, Graham comes to understand that “the crowd... was a crowd still, helpless in the hands of demagogue and organizer, individually cowardly, individually swayed by appetite, collectively incalculable.”<sup>308</sup> In this fundamental way, London society in 2100 was just as divided as it had been in 1897. The social and political split between the empowered and the powerless was not yet bridged, and democracy remained as unthinkable as ever.

Shortly after awakening, Graham discovers that he is the fabled “Sleeper,” a near-mythical figure whose slumber has long provided the opportunity for his legal guardians (who are known only as “the Council”) to assume *de facto* oligarchic control over vast swaths of the planet. Like a twenty-second century Lenin, Graham’s body has been displayed *in situ* for generations of worshipful onlookers. As a symbol of power and authority, however, Graham is useful to the Council only in his unconscious, recumbent state. When it becomes clear that the awakened Graham poses a threat to the established order, the Council, which is interested only in maintaining its rule, decides put him back to sleep permanently.

However, before the Council can re-induce Graham’s trance, the minions of Ostrog, a political opportunist and would-be revolutionary, kidnap him and flee into the streets of London. News of Graham’s awakening and dramatic escape from the Council swirls around the city, and by the time he reaches Ostrog’s command post, Graham learns that Ostrog has acted in the name of the Sleeper in order to foment a worldwide revolution against the Council. To his disappointment, Graham discovers that Ostrog is just as cynical and power-hungry as the Council. When Graham explains that he wants

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<sup>308</sup> Wells, *Sleeper*, 168-9.

the incipient revolution to embody his late nineteenth-century progressive dream of “a wonderful democratic life” in which all men are happy and equal, Ostrog immediately rejects this idea as idealistic and unrealistic. “The day of democracy is past. Past for ever...” Ostrog explains. “You must accept facts, and these are facts.”<sup>309</sup>

Like Dostoevsky’s Grand Inquisitor, Wells’s Ostrog poses himself as the guardian of “the common man,” whom he regards as “a helpless unit.” “In these days,” he explains, “we have this great machine of the city, and an organization complex beyond his understanding.”<sup>310</sup> In the world of *When the Sleeper Wakes*, the Council has long manufactured cheap “chemical wine” and “Babble Machines” to supply cheap entertainment and propaganda for the pleasure of the amusement-starved, illiterate masses.<sup>311</sup> Ostrog, a staunch opponent of individualism, certainly does not oppose such practices *per se*. Rather, he simply wants to use them to his own political advantage.

Wells’s protagonist, on the other hand, literally represents another way of seeing the world. That is, Graham regards a technocratic London on the verge of the twenty-second century with the idealistic optimism of a nineteenth-century man who still believes in the sanctity of the individual (of course, this is an idea which Wells himself later repudiated). In the final chapter of *When the Sleeper Wakes*, Graham confronts Ostrog for leadership of the global revolution, and is killed in a dramatic airborne duel. Wells concludes his tale with Graham’s demise, implying that the dream of an egalitarian

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<sup>309</sup> Wells, *Sleeper*, 235.

<sup>310</sup> *Ibid*, 236.

<sup>311</sup> *Ibid*, 250, 252.



future is destroyed with the death of the one man who truly understood and embraced the ideal of human brotherhood.

Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949)—a novel which he originally titled *The Last Man in Europe*—mimics the sinister atmosphere and basic plot structure of *When the Sleeper Wakes*. Like Wells's Graham, Orwell's Winston Smith is an isolated, anachronistic, would-be rebel who dreams of overthrowing the oligarchs in control of his crushingly conformist, violent, hierarchical world. Although his day-to-day existence is carefully monitored, scrutinized, and recorded by the Party's omnipresent surveillance apparatus, Winston is nonetheless aware that his interior life is beyond the reach and scope of its dictates. Like Graham, Winston dreams of utilizing the progressive values of the late nineteenth century as a means to subvert the sinister machinations of a totalitarian state. Furthermore, both men are ultimately thwarted by cynical, power-hungry adversaries who reduce the whole of human existence to the will to power. Like Wells's villainous Ostrog, Orwell's O'Brien is an intelligent, even philosophical nemesis who grasps the dream of human brotherhood and yet rejects it as naïve and politically unrealistic. Both *When the Sleeper Wakes* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* conclude with pessimistic flourishes, with Graham's death at the hands of Ostrog and Winston's lobotomization by O'Brien.

Even as Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* emulates Wells's *When the Sleeper Wakes*, it also viciously mocks Wells's Open Conspiracy and world state ideals. The world of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is a London shattered by war and tyrannized by a totalitarian cabal of leaders who rule under the auspices of "English Socialism," or "Ingsoc." While Ingsoc has nothing to do with Orwell's definition of socialism, it has

everything to do with the perversion of Wells's long-lived dream of an ordered, hierarchical society. Winston Smith is a party member who works in the ironically-titled "Ministry of Truth," where he performs the task of altering historical events, erasing and sometimes inventing people for the Party's main propaganda organ. When Winston reflects upon the discrepancy between the dream and reality of life under the Party, he is struck by the fact that it "bore no resemblance not only to the lies that streamed out of the telescreens, but even to the ideals that the Party was trying to achieve."<sup>312</sup> Of course, the Party's official goal is to create the world of Wells's utopian future vision:

The ideal set up by the Party was something huge, terrible, and glittering—a world of steel and concrete, of monstrous machines and terrifying weapons—a nation of warriors and fanatics, marching forward in perfect unity, all thinking the same thoughts and shouting the same slogans, perpetually working, fighting, triumphing, persecuting—three hundred million people all with the same face.<sup>313</sup>

However, as Winston observes, "the reality was decaying, dingy cities, where underfed people shuffled to and fro in leaky shoes, in patched-up nineteenth-century houses that smelt always of cabbage and bad lavatories."<sup>314</sup> Winston's life, like the lives of all Londoners—except for those within the inner circles of the Party—is a dingy, shabby affair, characterized by an incessant search for simple everyday items: "Sometimes it was buttons, sometimes it was darning wool, sometimes it was the shoelaces, at present it was razor blades. You could only get hold of them, if at all, by scrounging more or less furtively on the 'free' market."<sup>315</sup>

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<sup>312</sup> Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, 63.

<sup>313</sup> *Ibid*, 63.

<sup>314</sup> *Ibid*, 63.

<sup>315</sup> *Ibid*, 43-4.



Orwell also employed Emmanuel Goldstein's "secret book," *The Theory and Practice of Oligarchical Collectivism* as a device to parody the Wellsian worldview, demonstrating that the same kind of technical specialists whom Wells hoped would establish his World State could just as easily choose to impose upon humanity a system of perpetual war and tyranny. As Winston Smith, the novel's Everyman, learns:

The new aristocracy was made up for the most part of bureaucrats, scientists, technicians, trade-union organizers, publicity experts, sociologists, teachers, journalists, and professional politicians.<sup>316</sup>

Goldstein's book also explains why Wells's Edwardian dream of a socialist utopia failed to take root in the twentieth century, and why it ultimately should be written off as a wrongheaded, delusional fantasy:

In the early twentieth century, the vision of a future society unbelievably rich, leisured, orderly and efficient—a glittering antiseptic world of glass and steel and snow-white concrete—was part of the consciousness of nearly every literate person. Science and technology were developing at a prodigious speed, and it seemed natural to assume that they would go on developing. This failed to happen, partly because of the impoverishment caused by a long series of wars and revolutions, partly because scientific and technological progress depended on the empirical habit of thought, which could not survive in a strictly regimented society.<sup>317</sup>

Like George Bowling before him, Winston Smith dreams of a rural paradise removed from the horrors of everyday life, and away from under the Party's brutal omnipresent rule. In the midst of the failed utopia around him, Winston maintains his sanity by dreaming of an imaginary world he calls "the Golden Country":

Suddenly he was standing on short springy turf, on a summer evening when the slanting rays of the sun gilded the ground. The landscape that he was looking at recurred so often in the dreams that he was never fully certain whether or not he had seen it in the real world. In his waking

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<sup>316</sup> Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, 169.

<sup>317</sup> *Ibid*, 155-6.

thoughts he called it the Golden Country. It was an old, rabbit-bitten pasture, with a foot track wandering across it and a molehole there. In the ragged hedge on opposite side of the field the boughs of the elm trees were swaying very faintly in the breeze, their leaves just stirring in dense masses like women's hair. Somewhere near at hand, though out of sight, there was a clear, slow-moving stream where dace were swimming in pools under the willow trees.<sup>318</sup>

Of course, when Winston finally encounters what he believes to be the Golden Country, it is wired with listening devices. Also, Goldstein's fabled book, despite the undeniable truth of its content, is eventually unmasked as product of the cynical apparatchik O'Brien, who simply regards it as an effective way to ensnare suspected dissidents. And much like Orwell's deracinated hope in a future age of human brotherhood, Winston senses that his dream of a people's revolution against the Party and Big Brother is little more than a futile anticipation: "'If there is hope,' he had written in the diary, 'it lies in the proles.' The words kept coming back to him, statement of a mystical truth and a palpable absurdity."<sup>319</sup>

Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, which at once mimics and mocks the thought and work of Wells, is a novel which epitomizes the ambivalent nature of Orwell's Wellsian "parricide." On the one hand, the novel indicates that Orwell continued to read, respect, and emulate the works of his childhood hero, even until the end of his own life. (Orwell's final literary notebook, which dates from the final months of 1949, even mentions Wells's *Outline of History* as one of his "perennial subjects of conversation.")<sup>320</sup> Orwell sympathized with the pessimism of early Wells novels like

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<sup>318</sup> Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, 29.

<sup>319</sup> *Ibid*, 73.

<sup>320</sup> Davison, ed., *Complete Works* 20:201.



*When the Sleeper Wakes*, and continued to lament with Wells the waning and eclipse of his optimistic Edwardian worldview in the face of an oppressive modernity.

On the other hand, Orwell disagreed profoundly with Wells's world state, Open Conspiracy, and "World Encyclopaedia" ideals, seeing in them much of the naïve, wrongheaded ideological blindness he felt characterized the thought of so many artists and intellectuals in the first half of the twentieth century. Even though few men of the generation before him were willing or able to confront this fact, Orwell came to understand and publicize the fact that tyrants like Hitler, Mussolini, and Stalin had effectively ensured that the dream of a temporal heaven was impracticable in the twentieth century. This is what Bertrand Russell must have sensed when he wrote:

Orwell faced it, and lived, however bleakly and unhappily, in the actual world. Elderly Radicals, like Wells and myself, find the transition to a world of stark power difficult. I am grateful to men who, like Orwell, decorate Satan with the horns and hooves without which he remains an abstraction.<sup>321</sup>

Orwell also rejected the notion of the grand Wellsian "choice" between destruction and utopia. Instead, he crafted an idiosyncratic belief in the need to pursue the dream of an age of human brotherhood, even though he readily admitted that the advent of such an era was doubtful at best. In his essay "What is Socialism?" (1946), Orwell attempted to reconcile these seemingly conflicted strands of optimism and pessimism into a realistic, practicable credo. In part, he surmised:

A Socialist is not obliged to believe that human society can actually be made perfect, but almost any Socialist does believe that it could be a great deal better than it is at present, and that most of the evil that men do

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<sup>321</sup> Jeffrey Meyers, ed., *George Orwell: The Critical Heritage* (London: Routledge, 1997), 301.

results from the warping effects of injustice and inequality. The basis of Socialism is humanism.<sup>322</sup>

Ultimately, Orwell's humanistic ethos is what set him apart from Wells, the disciple of order and regimentation. Unlike Wells, who spent much of his career cultivating an inhuman eschatological worldview which allowed only for the advent of absolute destruction or redemption, Orwell struggled to divest himself of his Wellsian tendencies, and sought instead to formulate a non-utopian socialist worldview that accounted for the hopes, dreams, fears, and motives of actual men and women. For Orwell, the only real alternatives to his cautious but hopeful brand of humanistic faith were despair or mysticism, two philosophies which simply refused to confront political realities, much less the sanctity of individual human lives. In "Reflections on Gandhi" (January 1949), one of the final essays of his life, Orwell could have been rejecting Wells along with "the Mahatma" when he wrote: "The essence of being human is that one does not seek perfection... and that one is prepared in the end to be defeated and broken up by life, which is the inevitable price of fastening one's love upon other human individuals."<sup>323</sup> Ultimately, Orwell rejected the Wellsian dream of a utopia, and chose instead to fasten his love upon the hopes and dreams of his fellow man, however imperfect, partial, and provisional they may be.

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<sup>322</sup> Carey, ed., *Essays*, 1005.

<sup>323</sup> *Ibid*, 1253.



## CONCLUSION

### PROPHETS AND PROPHECIES

On the morning of July 7, 2005, four radical Islamist Britons, all outfitted with explosives-laden backpacks, detonated their devices in four locations across central London. Three of the suicide bombers exploded their payloads in quick succession during the morning rush hour in the city's Underground system. Over an hour later, at nine forty-seven, the fourth bomber, Hasib Hussain, aged eighteen, blew up his rucksack while in transit above ground, ripping off the top level of a double-decker bus traveling from Marble Arch to Hackney. The Tavistock Square bombing, as this incident is now known, inflicted dozens of injuries and killed thirteen passengers.<sup>324</sup>

Among the dead in the Tavistock Square bombing was Giles Hart, a fifty-five year-old Englishman from Essex. As it happened, Hart, an educated, cultured, life-long supporter of progressive political causes, had been a primary figure in fomenting popular British support for the Polish Solidarity movement in the early nineteen eighties. More significantly, at the time of his death, Hart was the acting chairman of the H. G. Wells Society. (The Society, of course, is a group of scholars and activists dedicated to the memory of Wells's writings, and to the popularization, if not eventual enactment, of Wells's cosmopolitan, rational, progressive political vision.) In the wake of Hart's death, his family released a statement to the British press which read in part: "It is tragic that

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<sup>324</sup> "BBC News: In Depth: London Attacks," [http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/shared/spl/hi/uk/05/london\\_blasts/what\\_happened/html/tavistock.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/shared/spl/hi/uk/05/london_blasts/what_happened/html/tavistock.stm) (Dec. 14, 2005).

[Giles] fell victim to the very evil against which he had struggled.”<sup>325</sup> Indeed, Hart’s demise was tragic. And sadly, it was also deeply ironic. For he was murdered by a man who embodied the kind of atavistic ideology he had long despised and crusaded against, and which Wells, his political forbearer, had largely preferred to overlook throughout his career as a utopian social prophet. Sadly, the nihilistic worldview of modern-day Islamist jihadists, much like the pseudo-scientific, hate-fueled Aryanism of Hitler’s Third Reich, reveals a facet of the human condition that has been all too easily underestimated by idealists like Hart and Wells.

George Orwell, who adopted a position distinctly at odds with the Wellsian worldview, wrote in March 1940 that he found himself unable to dislike Hitler, precisely because the Fuehrer told his followers, “I offer you struggle, danger, and death.”<sup>326</sup> Although he absolutely despised the content of Hitler’s *Weltanschauung*, Orwell nonetheless grasped the truth that Nazi ideology, no matter how paranoid, resentful, or hate-mongering, was something which, in an intuitive, emotional, primal way, satisfied the deeper urges of the human spirit. Thus, in no small way, Orwell learned the hard lesson of “an age like this,” or of any age, for that matter.

So, then, was George Orwell a prophet of *our* age? The ongoing, undeniably Orwellian human tragedy of North Korea notwithstanding, it must be said that Orwell was decidedly *not* a prophet of the twentieth century. In fact, as Louis Menand observed,

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<sup>325</sup> Dana Gornitzki and David Smith, “Guardian Unlimited: Special reports: Activist ‘cut down by the evil he defied,’” <http://www.guardian.co.uk/attackonlondon/story/0,,1530288,00.html> (Dec. 14, 2005).

<sup>326</sup> Angus and Orwell, eds., *CEJL* 2:29.



when it came to anticipating the future, George Orwell was usually flat wrong.<sup>327</sup> In the late thirties, Blimpish fascist sympathizers never threw Orwell into an English concentration camp (this was a fear which George Bowling revealed in the closing pages of *Coming Up for Air*), nor did the London gutters run with the blood of a wartime English socialist revolution (as Orwell prophesied in “The Lion and the Unicorn”). Although the human suffering of the Slump and the rise of political extremism led Orwell to believe that the old order was doomed (an underlying assumption of *The Road to Wigan Pier*, and indeed all of Orwell’s political thought), political liberalism and capitalism in fact reemerged in a reinvigorated form throughout the Western world in the postwar era. And the Cold War, a phrase which Orwell himself coined, was something he fundamentally misapprehended, largely because he assumed that the foreign policies of the totalitarian Soviet Union would be essentially undistinguishable from those of the capitalistic United States.<sup>328</sup>

Despite Orwell’s failure as a prophet of our age, his final two books, *Animal Farm* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, have nonetheless resonated with tens of millions of readers worldwide since their publication six decades ago. Why is this? In part, it has to do with the blatant misuse and false mythologizing of Orwell as a defender of the capitalist *status quo* (which he adamantly was *not*, despite the assertions of Norman Podhoretz and other right-wing Orwell admirers). At the same time, and to a largely unappreciated extent, Orwell’s final books provided comfort to victims of state-sponsored oppression and even became rallying points for democratic movements across

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<sup>327</sup> Louis Menand, “Honest, Decent, Wrong: The Invention of George Orwell,” *The New Yorker* (Jan. 27, 2003), 84-91.

<sup>328</sup> *Ibid*, 90.

the world. For instance, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, a work which was adopted by American Cold Warriors in the early fifties (and used as a political bludgeon at home), was translated and smuggled into Soviet-controlled Eastern Europe, among other global “hot spots.” Throughout the Cold War era, Orwell’s novel—a book about a would-be political dissident who seeks out and discovers an illegal text which purportedly exposes the lies of the shabby totalitarian society in which he lives—provided much-needed solace to countless real-life political dissidents, thereby serving as an inspirational text within *Samizdat* circles from East Germany to Eastern Siberia. Add to this the fact that *Nineteen Eighty-Four* as well as the tyranny-baiting *Animal Farm* have recently been outlawed in dingy third world dictatorships such as Myanmar and Zimbabwe, and it should become increasingly clear that Orwell’s iconoclastic, egalitarian voice is one which still resonates throughout the world of the twenty-first century.<sup>329</sup>

So, then, how should we understand Orwell? As I have argued throughout this thesis, Orwell was first and foremost a man of his age. He was an independent-minded socialist who was deeply affected by the major political, social, and economic turmoil of British life in the thirties and forties. And yet, Orwell was also determinedly a man of his own making. He was a contrarian—an intellectual-hating intellectual, a left-wing

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<sup>329</sup> As Emma Larkin noted in *Finding George Orwell in Burma*, “*Nineteen Eighty-Four* is banned in Burma because it can be read as a criticism of how the country is being run and the ruling generals do not like criticism.” Regarding Zimbabwe, the U. S. State Department reported: “In January 2001, an explosion destroyed the printing press facility of the *Daily News*. The *Daily News* continued to operate using a combination of private and government-owned printers before replacing its presses in September. There was a police investigation, but no arrests were made by year’s end, despite the fact that police were given the registration number of the vehicle seen at the sight. Most observers believe that the Government or ruling party was responsible due to the professional nature of the operation.” What this State Department report fails to mention is that the equipment of the *Daily News* was destroyed because the paper was then printing a serialized version of Orwell’s *Animal Farm*, which Robert Mugabe and his governing party (correctly) perceived to be a politically subversive text. From Emma Larkin, *Finding George Orwell in Burma* (New York: The Penguin Press, 2005), 11; State Department of the United States, “Zimbabwe,” <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/hrrpt/2002/18234.htm> (Dec. 15, 2005).



attacking leftist, a despiser of the English class-system and yet an incorrigible snob, and a man who detested cloth-spinning ascetics like Gandhi but who preferred to make his own furniture. He was also a romantic, a man who advocated (to provide just one example) the adoption of the austere revolutionary principles he witnessed firsthand in Catalonia in the spring of 1937.<sup>330</sup>

Even more significantly, Orwell was an independent-minded student of the human condition. In stark contrast to his boyhood idol, H. G. Wells, George Orwell struggled to make honest sense of the endemic violence and human tragedies of the age in which both men lived. Unlike Wells, who fixed his gaze on a future age when humans would become supremely rational “men like gods,” Orwell examined the world around him and discovered that his fellow men were, at least in part, profoundly irrational creatures whose tendencies invariably led to interminable violence and warfare. Despite his lifelong belief in a fundamentally optimistic socialist creed, Orwell nonetheless grasped that “progress” was not inevitable or even desirable, that age-old hatreds and fears would likely continue to dominate human affairs, and that ideologies, despite their vast appeal to intellectuals like himself, were nonetheless the inherently corruptible stuff of tyrants, dictators, warlords, and fanatics. For Orwell, a simple, unencumbered examination of actual human lives and events, not Wells’s eschatological narrative of utopia and cataclysm, was the proper starting point for any real understanding of human history. In this regard, Orwell, like a modern-day Swift, made inferences about the way we are—as opposed to how we would prefer ourselves to be—that seem likely to stand the test of time. I suspect this is why the works of H. G. Wells have mostly been shunted

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<sup>330</sup> Louis Menand, “Honest, Decent, Wrong: The Invention of George Orwell,” *The New Yorker* (Jan. 27, 2003), 84-91.

away into the literary ghetto of science fiction, and why the works of George Orwell have retained much of their vibrancy and broad cultural currency to this day.



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