Of Modernism and Wells

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Victorianism but also enabled an innovative fusion of these widely different approaches, which later was fully realised in Joyce’s *Dubliners*.

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OF MODERNISM AND WELLS


J. R. HAMMOND ARGUES that Wells’s reputation as a novelist has suffered from the critical perception of him as a realist rather than as a modernist in his fictional interests and techniques. Wells, Hammond contends, is a transitional figure who anticipates the modernists’ management of narrative voice, structure, form, and point of view. Like the modernists, Wells emphasizes a sense of anxiety and isolation in a world gone awry. Consequently, as a reflection of the destabilization of the world, as Wells saw it particularly after World War I, his fiction evinces several types of dissonance: a frustration of the reader’s expectations, a fracturing of fictional conventions (especially in the area of narrative framing), a dislocation of normal time sequences, a depiction of the world as insubstantial and ephemeral (as suggested by the coalescence of dream and reality), a reliance on equivocal and ambiguous endings, and a portrait of skeptical, confused, and self-divided protagonists.

This line of approach strikes me as exactly the appropriate tack to take with Wells’s fiction, and it is for this very reason that I wish Hammond’s book made a more substantial contribution with fewer problems. Its first deficiency emerges in Hammond’s proclivity to generalize without advancing supporting arguments. For instance, just what is his definition of a modernist novelist? Not only does he problematically associate Italo Calvino (117, 200) and John Fowles (50) with this group, but when he does venture a statement about one or another feature of the modernists, he makes assertions that are questionable. He claims, for example, that a Wells novel "is characteristically modernist in its extensive use of metaphor and imagery" (89), a statement which amounts to a startling obliteration of hundreds of years of literature before Wells. Nor does it help when Hammond further defines Wells’s modernist interest to include "themes of decay, disease and the coming of change" (89), which observation not only misrepresents a goodly number of the so-called

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modernists, but again obliterates a long tradition of pre-Wellsian literature, particularly Romantic works. In fact, many of the themes and images Hammond categorizes as modernist have been featured in art for centuries and are particularly the mainstay of Romantic writings, which Wells knew and often revised in his fiction.

Generalizations of other kinds abound as well. Is it correct, in the light of so much fin de siècle literature, to claim that an "emphasis on decline was unusual for a work [like The Time Machine] published at the climax of the Victorian age" (77)? Is it accurate, in the light of the epistemological problems so fundamental to Henry James’s fiction, to declare that in contrast to Wells’s writings, James’s works "posit a conception of the universe in which man's stability and security are axiomatic" (37)? Is it sufficient merely to assert that "blue, in the language of symbolism," is "the colour of innocence" (137), especially if later we are told that "white is a familiar symbol of innocence and loss" (142). Does white routinely symbolize loss, or for that matter, does it always evidently "symbolise the feminine realm" (142)? Is it true, moreover, that "water is a symbol of the female side of the personality, the feminine unconscious" (167), and if so, where is the proof that Wells believed this association to be true?

Another problem surfaces in the progression of Hammond’s book. The first part sets out the thesis well enough, although contrary to Hammond’s claim, it adds little to our understanding of the James-Wells controversy. The first part contains a good section on the nature of Wells's conclusions. In the second part, however, the case studies steadily dwindle in energy and insight as they proceed. By the end of the book Hammond’s discussion degenerates into a virtual listing of motifs, sources, and Wells’s autobiographical traces. This diminishing vigor unfortunately vitiates Hammond’s argumentative introduction advancing claims for Wells’s progressive artistic accomplishment as a major novelist.

Diminishment of another kind surfaces as well in the fact that Hammond seems to be indebted heavily to many Wells scholars, whose names and works are not cited anywhere in his sparsely footnoted book. Is it Hammond's news that parts of Tono-Bungay reflect the influence of Joseph Conrad? Should we be told that in The Time Machine the inscrutableness of the white sphinx is linked up with the nature of meaning without any reference to Catherine Rainwater’s groundbreaking "Encounters with the 'White Sphinx'" (ELT [1983])? There are numerous similar instances in H. G. Wells and the Modern Novel where one might ask such questions. I too would have enjoyed seeing Hammond relate his work to my The Splintering Frame (1984),

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which shares so many concepts and phrases with the first seventy pages of his book.

Hammond's book made me remember a story narrated by an American contemporary of Wells. As a young man on the American frontier, this man found himself snowbound in a cave with an older Native American. When he mentioned that they most needed food, Pitamakan replied, "I thought you would say that! It is always food with white people. Get up in the morning and eat a big meal; at midday, another; at sunset, another. If even one of these is missed, they say they are starving. No, it is not food; it is fire that we most need. Were we to go out in that snow [to hunt] and get wet and then have no means of drying out and warming ourselves, we should die." And so it is for me with Hammond's book. If Hammond's study seems to me to be not quite satisfying or substantial as food for thought in some immediate material sense, it does generate a little heat in an essential sense and thereby contributes somewhat to the resuscitation of Wells's literary reputation, which currently languishes in the present general climate of frigid critical disregard.

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EDWARD THOMAS


MICHAEL KIRKHAM'S BOOK concentrates on Edward Thomas's poetry, but it begins with a chapter devoted to the voluminous prose writings that preceded the remarkable body of poetry that Thomas wrote in the two years before he was killed in France in 1917. In subsequent chapters, too, the prose is used frequently to shed light upon various aspects of Thomas that are being considered. And this is the first point to be made about this book. While Kirkham agrees with most of Thomas's previous critics that few of the prose works "can be unreservedly recommended" (2), he more than justifies his contention that the prose is of interest because "it expresses the same structure of consciousness ... as is revealed more finely in the poetry," that the prose and the poetry both "belong to one sustained endeavour" (1). I do not mean to suggest that the book is of special interest because it examines Thomas's prose—as I say, the book focuses on the poetry—but rather to indicate Kirkham's purpose in this book. It is the "structure of consciousness," revealed preeminent-