

**Witnessing the End of the World:  
H. G. Wells's Educational Apocalypses**

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When looking back on the religious elements of his upbringing in *Experiment in Autobiography* (1934), H. G. Wells associates 'Protestant piety' with his mother in particular.<sup>1</sup> He identifies Sarah Wells personally with Queen Victoria and more generally with the spirit of the nineteenth century at its most backward-looking. She is characterised as 'having been born in the days when King George IV was king, and three years before the opening of the first steam railway' (I, 43); 'she followed the life of Victoria (...) with a passionate loyalty. The Queen, also a small woman, was in fact my mother's compensatory personality. In her latter years in a black bonnet and a black silk dress she became curiously suggestive of the supreme widow' (I, 46). In a much-quoted passage from his novel *The Soul of a Bishop* (1917), Wells makes Queen Victoria a symbol of epistemological resistance to the New Republic that his works are seeking to build:

Since the passing of Victoria the Great there had been an accumulating uneasiness in the national life. It was as if some compact and dignified paperweight had been lifted from people's ideas, and as if at once they had begun to blow about anyhow.<sup>2</sup>

When reviewing the world into which he had been born in the previous century, Wells explicitly identifies the Victorian church as another obstacle to

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<sup>1</sup> *Experiment in Autobiography: Discoveries and Conclusions of a Very Ordinary Brain*, 2 vols (London: Gollancz, 1934), I, 45. For the story of the nineteenth century's feminization of piety, which originates in the low church, see Callum G. Brown's fascinating *The Death of Christian Britain: Understanding Secularisation 1800-2000*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn. (London: Routledge, 2009), 58-87.

future human improvement, both a guarantor and a beneficiary of the status quo. This present order of things is a society in which the privileged aristocracy and priests rule over the servant class into which the successive generations of Sarah and Bertie Wells had been unluckily born:

In the lower sky and the real link between my mother and the god-head, was the Dear Queen, ruling by right divine, and beneath this again, the nobility and gentry, who employed, patronised, directed and commanded the rest of mankind. On every Sunday in the year, one went to church and refreshed one's sense of this hierarchy between the communion table and the Free Seats. (...)

My mother was Low Church, and I was disposed to find, even in my tender years, Low Church theology a little too stiff for me, but she tempered it to her own essential goodness, gentleness and faith in God's Fatherhood, in ways that were quite her own. (*Autobiography*, I, 47-48)

Patrick Parrinder has written of how Wells associates Kent with his father and with liberty, and Sussex with his mother and restraint.<sup>3</sup> The *Autobiography* quotes passages from his mother's diary in which she thanks God when Joseph Wells chooses to attend Church with her, and laments when he does not. A common theme in Wells's earlier fiction is the breaking free from societal and mental restrictions: see especially, in this respect, *Tono-Bungay* and *The History of Mr. Polly*, which begin in Sussex and Kent respectively.<sup>4</sup> For Wells, then, the maternal principle tends towards conservation and constraint, and the paternal at this stage represents escape and freedom; as Michael Sherborne, Wells's most recent biographer, relates 'while, as Sarah's son, Bertie passed his evenings at Field's house, singing hymns, praying and borrowing religious books, as Joe's son he was mentally undressing the girl apprentices.'<sup>5</sup> Joseph Wells had portrayed himself as religious in order to win his fiancée's affections; those affections secured, he abandoned church-going, family legend even had it, to pursue an adulterous

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<sup>2</sup> *The Soul of a Bishop, The Works of H. G. Wells* (New York: Scribner's, 1924-27), 28 vols, XXV, p. 22.

<sup>3</sup> Patrick Parrinder, 'The View from Bun Hill: H. G. Wells, Kent and the Male Romance', *Wellsian* 20 (1997), 38-49.

<sup>4</sup> Robert P. Weeks, 'Disentanglement as a Theme in H. G. Wells's Fiction', in *H. G. Wells: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Bernard Bergonzi (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1976), 25-31.

<sup>5</sup> Michael Sherborne, *H. G. Wells: Another Kind of Life* (London: Peter Owen, 2010), p. 45.

affair.<sup>6</sup> Although, in the passage above, Wells is careful to note the tempering of Sarah Wells's stiff low-church theology by mother love, he presents himself as much more imaginatively attracted to the creative irresponsibility and freedom associated with his father. At the same time, as Wells's own global thought developed, he looked to assume the theological authority of his mother's beliefs; according to Kirby Farrell 'Wells submitted to an apocalyptic vision and used it to support messianic fantasies of saving the world through his superior insight. (...) Almost always in Wells's work fantasies of extinction are matched by fantasies of self-aggrandizement.'

Through most of his subsequent six decades of writing, H. G. Wells claimed to be hostile to organized religion, and especially to the more pronounced manifestations of the Christian church at its highest and lowest extremes. The Church is a challenge to the intellectual authority of Wells's own project: a secular prophetic cult around himself that he labeled the 'New Republic', or later the 'Open Conspiracy'. New converts were always welcome, but the truth of the vision of humanity's secure future was only available to the righteous who had made the choice to educate themselves properly in following the doctrine of H. G. Wells.<sup>7</sup>

As an ideologue and teacher, then, as well as a writer of fiction, Wells tended to value the work of other thinkers, from Confucius and Buddha to Freud and Lenin, in proportion to the degree to which their ideas harmonized with his own programme for the scientifically organized improvement of humanity; and this process of assimilation included the teachings of Jesus and the Old Testament. Only during the late 1910s, when under the influence of F. W. Sanderson, the progressive headmaster of Oundle School, did Wells adopt a form of religious belief, a version of deism that saw God as a 'personification of human progressiveness' (*Autobiography*, II, 674).<sup>8</sup> However,

<sup>6</sup> Sherborne, p. 35.

<sup>7</sup> Kirby Farrell, *Post-Traumatic Culture: Injury and Interpretation in the Nineties* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), p. 118.

<sup>8</sup> See, for instance, the explicitly deist postscript Wells added in the wartime reissue of his 1908 tract on metaphysics *First and Last Things: A Confession of Faith and Rule of a Life* (London: Cassell, 1917), pp. 92-93, and *God the Invisible King* (1917).

after the end of World War One he recanted to his earlier non-belief, writing the bestselling *The Outline of History* (1920), which was intended to serve two purposes: firstly, to be a textbook for an international audience that told the story of humanity beginning from the shared biological origin of all nations. The second was a polemical work which sought to use the fact of that common origin to persuade its readership to abandon the concept of the nation state and to adopt a utopian system of world government. Such an ending would thus 'end history', at least for the history of individual countries. Wells takes his authority for preaching of the necessity of a World state from post-Darwinian revelations that have the status of scientific truth, and so he is especially severe on what he sees as the inherent falsehood of certain forms of Christian evangelism, and on their distraction from the gospel of Darwinism and world government.<sup>9</sup> Writing on Jesus in *The Outline of History*, Wells soberly declaimed that:

We shall tell what men have believed about Jesus of Nazareth, but him as being what he appeared to be, a man, just as a painter must needs paint him as a man. (...) About Jesus we have to write not theology but history, and our concern is not with the spiritual and theological significance of his life, but with its effects upon the political and everyday life of men.<sup>10</sup>

Distinguishing between Jesus in his real life and his afterlife, Wells judges that Jesus 'was some fine sort of man perhaps, the Jewish Messiah was a promise of leadership, but Our Saviour of the Trinity is a dressed-up inconsistent effigy of amiability, a monstrous hybrid of man and infinity, making vague promises of helpful miracles for the cheating of simple souls,

<sup>9</sup> 'I feared Hell dreadfully for some time. Hell was indeed good enough to scare me and prevent me calling either of my brothers fools, until I was eleven or twelve. But one night I had a dream of Hell so preposterous that it blasted that undesirable resort out of my mind for ever. In an old number of *Chambers Journal* I had read of the punishment of breaking a man on the wheel. The horror of it got into my dreams and there was Our Father in a particularly malignant phase, busy basting a poor broken sinner rotating slowly over a fire built under the wheel. I saw no Devil in the vision; my mind in its simplicity went straight to the responsible fountain head. That dream pursued me into the day time. Never had I hated God so intensely.

And then suddenly the light broke through to me and I knew this God was a lie.'  
(*Autobiography*, I, 67)

<sup>10</sup> *The Outline of History: Being A Plain History of Life and Mankind*, 2 vols (London: Newnes, 1919), I, 356.

an ever absent help in times of trouble' (*Autobiography*, I, p. 68).<sup>11</sup> The curious young Wells had first looked to Christianity to provide answers about the nature of the world:

It still seemed to me to be of primary importance to find out if there was, after all, a God, and if so whether he was the Christian God and which sort of Christian God he was. In the absence of a God what *was* this universe and how was it run? Had it ever begun and had it any trend? (*Autobiography*, I, p. 161)

Since science provided him with more convincing answers to these questions, Wells not only turned away from his mother's religious beliefs, but was openly hostile to the Church, as he saw it, actively peddling falsehood. Sarah Wells was dismayed by her son's turn to atheism – although Wells does suggest that she thought it better for him to be an atheist than a Catholic (and even that her own faith might have ebbed following the death of a young daughter). Wells sees Catholicism as morally even worse than the reformed Church, especially in *The Outline of History*, for he saw it as choosing to impose its intellectual authority on its followers rather than using it to educate them; in *A Modern Utopia* (1905), Wells tends to view the birth of new religions as false starts towards programmes of universal education.<sup>12</sup> When Wells was an apprentice draper, a Catholic service also provided him with:

a memory of a popular preacher preaching one Sunday evening in the Portsmouth Roman Catholic cathedral. It was in the course of a revivalist mission and I had been persuaded to go with one of the costume room assistants who played elder sister to me. The theme was the extraordinary merit of Our Saviour's sacrifice and the horror and torment of hell from which he had saved the elect. The preacher (...) was enjoying himself thoroughly. He spared us nothing of hell's dreadfulness. All the pain and anguish of life as we knew it, every suffering we had ever experienced or imagined, or read about, was as nothing to one moment in the unending black despair of hell. And so on. For a little while his accomplished

<sup>11</sup> Wells's view of the historical Jesus was strongly influenced that of Victorian historian Winwood Reade: see *The Martyrdom of Man*, 15<sup>th</sup> edn. (London: Kegan Paul, 1896), pp. 221-29.

<sup>12</sup> The *Outline* sees Catholicism as having the potential to develop into a global education system, even government, but instead proving to be a block on the development of literacy. Wells's disagreements with apologist Hilaire Belloc are recorded in *Mr Belloc Objects to 'The Outline of History'* (London: Watts, 1926). Wells wrote to James Joyce in 1927, 'You began Catholic, that is to say you began with a system of values in stark opposition to reality.' *H. G. Wells's Literary Criticism*, ed. Patrick Parrinder and Robert Philmus (Sussex: Harvester, 1981), p. 176.

volubility carried me with him and then my mind broke into amazement and contempt. This was my old childish nightmare of God and the flaming wheel; this was the sort of thing to scare ten year olds. (*Autobiography*, I, pp. 163-64)<sup>13</sup>

Wells is persistently hostile throughout his career to the 'incredible and ugly lie' (*Autobiography*, I, 165) of Roman Catholicism, right up until his controversial 1943 Penguin special *Crux Ansata: An Indictment of the Roman Catholic Church* (1943), which he had to be persuaded out of titling, after one of its chapters, 'Why Should We Not Bomb Rome?'. However, in seeking to convert his own audience into disciples, Wells himself repeatedly draws on Christian tropes of the ending of the world, right up until his 1940 retelling of the Noah story *All Aboard for Ararat*. Sherborne has suggested that Wells's autobiography in fact rather exaggerates his youthful impiety, and that:

If in the long term Bertie's understanding was resistant to Christianity, his imagination retained the impression of it deeply. (...) in particular, the events of the apocalypse – the destruction of this world through a series of miraculous happenings and the establishment of a new, perfect order of things in which an elite group of believers was exalted – maintained a lifelong hold on him.<sup>14</sup>

For all of his moral objections to the effect of Christian evangelism, Wells repeatedly ended the world in his fiction and future histories, as the secular equivalent of an evangelist who not only preaches hellfire, but, like preacher of his boyhood, rather enjoys the destruction of his real-life surroundings.<sup>15</sup> To quote Patrick Parrinder again, 'time and again, Wells would draw upon the religious imagery of the end of the world in his search for a language powerful enough, and urgent enough, to convey his sense of human destiny.'<sup>16</sup> When, in the Bible, God decides to destroy civilization and the majority of humanity, the resulting spectacle of destruction should at least be

<sup>13</sup> Wells's description of this scene may also incorporate a memory of the sermon in *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, which Wells reviewed for *Nation* in 1917 (*Literary Criticism*, 171-75).

<sup>14</sup> Sherborne, p. 27.

<sup>15</sup> 'Later on I wheeled about the district marking down suitable places and people for destruction by the Martians', *Autobiography*, II, p. 543.

<sup>16</sup> Patrick Parrinder, 'Edwardian Awakenings: H. G. Wells's Apocalyptic Romances (1898-1915)', in *Imagining Apocalypse: Studies in Cultural Crisis*, ed. David Seed (Houndmills: Basingstoke, 2000), pp. 62-74 (p. 73).

edifying at least to the text's audience – and so too for the Wells text. In modern usage, the words 'apocalypse' and 'catastrophe' tend to be used interchangeably, but the *Oxford English Dictionary* shows important historical differences.<sup>17</sup> Catastrophe (literally, 'overturning') evolves from Dr Johnson's 'a final event; a conclusion generally unhappy' (OED 2a) to geologist Charles Lyell's coining of its technical use to indicate 'a sudden and violent change in the physical order of things, such as a sudden upheaval, depression, or convulsion affecting the earth's surface, and the living beings upon it' (3), to today's usage: 'a sudden disaster, wide-spread, very fatal, or signal' (4). Apocalypse ('uncovering'), on the other hand, migrates specifically from the revelation granted to St John of Patmos in the final book of the New Testament to 'any revelation or disclosure' (OED 2). Such a distinction throws useful light on Wells's famous maxim that 'human history becomes more and more a race between education and catastrophe' – even the end of the world might still be educational if it takes the form of a revelatory apocalypse.<sup>18</sup>

What might be a total catastrophe within the world of a Wells text can therefore appear as a kind of apocalypse to the readers outside it, since they function as witnesses to the world's end. Famously, Wells departed radically from the more disengaged, autonomous aesthetic of Henry James and of his modernist contemporaries in seeing art's essential role as not to exist autonomously, but to actively seek to improve the world – as to teach, more than to adorn.<sup>19</sup> The end of civilization within a Wells text thus seeks to prevent such an outcome actually occurring in the real world. Repeatedly Wells flattens an image of civilization as it currently exists in order to build a better one upon its imaginary ruins, – but 'whichever future is ordained,

<sup>17</sup> The distinction is thoughtfully discussed in Mary Manjikian, *Apocalypse and Post-Politics: The Romance of the End* (Plymouth: Lexington, 2012), pp. 41-43.

<sup>18</sup> *Outline*, II, p. 758. Wolfhart Pannenberg has traced the idea of God educating Man 'by means of revelation to a mature future of rational autonomy' to Gotthold Ephraim Lessing's Enlightenment essay *Die Erziehung des Menschengeschlechts* (1780). 'Modernity, History and Eschatology', in *The Oxford Handbook of Eschatology*, ed. Jerry L. Walls (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 493-99 (494).

<sup>19</sup> See Simon J. James, *Maps of Utopia: H. G. Wells, Modernity and the End of Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), pp. 22-35.

destruction must come first.'<sup>20</sup> Both for the readers outside of the text and the survivors within it, the experience of witnessing the destruction of civilization should serve as educational, even a stimulus to improvement. As Wells's authorial alter-ego Dr Philip Raven puts it in *The Shape of Things to Come* (1933), 'such hope as there was for the salvaging of a reconstructed civilization from a welter of disaster lay in the coordinate effort of intelligent, able and energetic individuals of every nation, race, type and class' energetically pursuing the millennium. The depiction of such a surviving type in a fictional world might stimulate their creation, or even conversion, in the real one.<sup>21</sup>

Wells's first lengthy work of fiction *The Time Machine* (1895) certainly toys with catastrophe, rather than apocalypse, since it imagines not only the world coming to an end through the sun's heat death, but the conditions for representing this end also becoming erased. Wells imagines by the year 802,701, humanity's physical shape degenerating into the forms of the decorative but helpless Eloi and the adept but gruesomely simian Morlocks. The time traveller also notes the disappearance of the written word and of sophisticated functions of language such as abstract nouns. Escaping from the Morlocks, the Time Traveller journeys further into the future, into the scene of an eclipse. Previously, the text had used images of sound and light to symbolise knowledge; here the image-complex collapses into itself to denote nothing more than the impossibility of further representation:

The darkness grew apace; a cold wind began to blow in freshening gusts from the east, and the showering white flakes in the air increased in number. From the edge of the sea came a ripple and whisper. Beyond these lifeless sounds the world was silent. Silent? It would be hard to convey the stillness of it. All the sounds of man, the bleating of sheep, the cries of birds, the hum of insects, the stir that makes the background of our lives – all that was over. As the darkness thickened, the eddying flakes grew more abundant, dancing before my eyes; and the cold of the air more intense. At last, one by one, swiftly, one after the other, the white peaks of the distant hills vanished into blackness. The breeze rose to a moaning wind. I saw the black central shadow of the eclipse sweeping

<sup>20</sup> Parrinder, 'Bun Hill', 46.

<sup>21</sup> *The Shape of Things to Come: The Ultimate Revolution* (London: Hutchinson, 1936), p. 109.



towards me. In another moment the pale stars alone were visible.  
All else was rayless obscurity. The sky was absolutely black.<sup>22</sup>

Here the time traveller is the only spectator of the Earth's twilight – but even this spectacle of catastrophe becomes transformed into an apocalypse instead when he returns to the present and narrates it to an after-dinner audience of ruling-class male professionals, who might be able to effect the changes in society that would prevent such a degeneration of civilisation (as occurs in the altered timeline of Stephen Baxter's 1995 authorised sequel *The Time Ships*). Wells's Time Traveller makes a further journey in time, but never returns. The text's frame-narrator acknowledges that the Time Traveller himself 'thought but cheerlessly of the advancement of mankind, and saw in the growing pile of civilization only a foolish heaping that must inevitably fall back upon and destroy its makers in the end' (p. 91). The Time Traveller's absence means that he is no longer to verify his story, and so his revelations fail to have the apocalyptic effect that they might. Rather than acting on the effect of the knowledge prophetically revealed to him, the narrator in effect chooses to make a virtue of his own ignorance: 'if that is so, it remains for us to live as though it were not so. But to me the future is still black and blank – is a vast ignorance' (p. 91).

Wells's later visions of the world ending are as much a way of thinking about the near as the far future. After toying with the failure of *The Invisible Man's* (1897) scheme to terrorise civilisation, Wells's next full-scale apocalypse, intended to humble mankind's 'infinite complacency' was the Martian invasion of Earth in *The War of the Worlds* (1898).<sup>23</sup> As in *The Time Machine*, the text's discourse repeatedly signals the difficulty of interpreting its own signification (and, indeed significance). The fantastic manifestations of the story's science-fictional elements such as space travel and alien beings initially appear, like the eclipse of *The Time Machine*, as uninterpreted sensory phenomena, then disappear from sight or hearing. Humanity's eventual survival in this romance ensures that the Martian invasion ultimately remains

<sup>22</sup> *The Time Machine: An Invention*, ed. Patrick Parrinder (London: Penguin, 2005), p. 85.

more purgative apocalypse than catastrophe, but the survival of the conditions of representation is severely threatened, as the very strangeness of the Martian manifestation can produce a vagueness in the narration that verges on the Conradian (concluding here with an echo of Exodus 10:21):

The sun sank into grey clouds, the sky flushed and darkened, the evening star trembled into sight. It was deep twilight when the captain cried out and pointed. My brother strained his eyes. Something rushed up into the sky out of the greyness – rushed slantingly upward and very swiftly into the luminous clearness above the clouds in the western sky; something flat and broad, and very large, that swept round in a vast curve, grew smaller, sank slowly, and vanished again into the grey mystery of the night. And as it flew it rained down darkness upon the land. (p. 85)<sup>24</sup>

Throughout, the text's language seeks to make complex or troubled the decoding of perception.<sup>25</sup> The Martians' advanced technology makes them difficult to see properly, both literally, since their cyborg bodies are hidden by the machines that encase them, and also at the level of the text's signification.<sup>26</sup> The opening pages draw a humbling analogy between the Martians looking at the inferior beings of humanity through a telescope and humans scrutinising infusoria through a microscope; the initial reporting of the Martian landing is characterised by its inaccuracy.<sup>27</sup> The narrator's unfortunate friend Ogilvy is the first to make the connection between the cylinders on Horsell Common and the flashes in the sky near Mars's place in the constellation, but his death means that the insight is not communicated to the newspapers and the army until much later. Even the Martians themselves realize the importance of communication in humanity's response to the threat

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<sup>23</sup> *The War of the Worlds*, ed. Patrick Parrinder (London: Penguin, 2005), p. 7.

<sup>24</sup> Wells reviewed Conrad's *An Outcast of the Islands* in 1896 and complained that 'Mr. Conrad is wordy; his story is not so much told as seen intermittently through a haze of sentences' - *Literary Criticism*, p. 88.

<sup>25</sup> On vision in this text, see Keith Williams, 'Alien Gaze: Postcolonial Vision in *The War of the Worlds*', in *H. G. Wells: Interdisciplinary Essays*, ed. Steven McLean (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars, 2008), pp. 49-73.

<sup>26</sup> Interestingly in this respect, Frank McConnell indeed interprets future shock, the experience of being perceptually overwhelmed by over-rapid technological development as 'a kind of second version of the myth of the Fall' – here, humanity is cast out of Paradise a second time by the realization that it is not the only sentient, technological species. Frank McConnell, *The Science Fiction of H. G. Wells* (New York: Oxford University Press 1981), p. 136.

<sup>27</sup> *Maps of Utopia*, pp. 44-45.

they initially present, destroying telegraph and railway lines wherever they see them.

Since, as the Artilleryman notes, the Martians will be relying on human beings for food, they don't need to kill as many of them as they do – but they do so in order to make a demonstration. They sweep Leatherhead out of existence 'without any provocation, as a boy might crush an anthill, in the mere wantonness of power' (p. 173). The narrator always reprovingly notes where the crowds of the English public at first misinterpret the landing of the cylinders as a spectacle that serves only for entertainment.<sup>28</sup> One of Wells's concerns when representing apocalypse is the risk of the indifference of his audience to its importance. *The Wonderful Visit* (1896) dramatizes an English village's lack of belief when it is visited by an angel; in the incomplete short story 'The Last Trump', included in *Boon* (1915), a vicar receives a vision of the Day of Judgement which persuades or converts almost no-one. Wells shows Mars invading again late in his career, possessing human minds by means of cosmic rays, in his late romance *Star Begotten* (1938). Here, Prof. Keppel complains that:

'There is no conceivable issue now upon which [the human mind] can be roused to spontaneous action. If it opened its newspaper one morning and read that Christianity has been abolished, it would wonder what sort of pensions the bishops would get – "pretty fat, I expect" – and then turn over to see if the cross-word puzzle was an easy one. If it read that the queer noises it had heard in the night were the trumpets announcing the Resurrection of the Dead and the end of the world for tomorrow afternoon, it would probably remark that the buses and tubes were full enough as it was without all these Dead coming up, and that a thing of that sort ought to be held somewhere abroad where there was more room....'<sup>29</sup>

<sup>28</sup> The panicked reaction of members of the public who believed Orson Wells's Mercury Theatre radio broadcast to be real shows that Wells may have been wide of the mark in imagining the likely reaction to alien invasion. See Alan Gallop, *The Martians Are Coming!: The True Story of Orson Welles's 1938 Panic Broadcast* (Stroud: Jefferson: Amberley, 2011) and John Gosling and Howard Koch. *Waging The War of the Worlds: A History of the 1938 Radio Broadcast and Resulting Panic, Including the Original Script* (McFarland 2009).

<sup>29</sup> *Star Begotten: A Biological Fantasia*, ed. John Huntington (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2006), 99. William J. Scheick notes that the protagonists of this romance are called Joseph and Mary and persuasively argues that this is Wells's version of the Christmas story: *The Splintering Frame: The Late Fiction of H. G. Wells* (Victoria: English Literary Studies, 1984), pp. 83-85.

The narrator notes with astonishment the persistence, in the face of their utter destruction, of normal forms of social life in the reactions of others to the invasion (frequently symbolised by humans continuing to care about money).<sup>30</sup> For Wells, if the end of the world should appear spectacular, it is important that the spectacle must be edifying as well, not spectacular only.<sup>31</sup> The value of the Martian invasion, for Wells's ideological programming of his creative work, lies in the necessity of the population of the earth in, and the readership of *The War of the Worlds*, learning something from it – as should readers of Biblical apocalypse, as should the time traveller's dinner guests. In order to attract its audience's immediate attention, the Christian tradition tends to portray the end times as being near at hand: there is less incentive for sinners to repent if the apocalypse will not happen for thousands of years, long after the listener's soul has already safely repaired to Heaven.<sup>32</sup> The new scientific understandings of time and history brought by Charles Lyell, Charles Darwin, Lord Kelvin and the second law of thermodynamics enable Wells to foresee the apocalypse near-mystically.<sup>33</sup>

<sup>30</sup> As noted by Steven McLean, *The Early Fiction of H. G. Wells* (Houndmills: Palgrave, 2009), pp. 98-99.

<sup>31</sup> See also my reading of Wells's cinematic collaboration *Things to Come*, which also looks to reproach its own audience for complacency, in *Maps of Utopia*, pp. 187-88.

<sup>32</sup> Wells's last, perhaps most pessimistic book *Mind at the End of its Tether*, p. 2 laments that 'We live in reference to past experience and not to future events, however inevitable' (London: Heinemann, 1945), 2. David Lodge's recent novel *A Man of Parts* imagines Wells making the following reflection during World War Two: 'Christians like [T. S.] Eliot have never expected anything better from humanity than blitzkriegs and concentration camps, because they believed in original sin. So they can calmly contemplate the end of civilization, put their feet up, and wait for the Second Coming. David Lodge, *A Man of Parts: A Novel* (London: Harvill Secker, 2011), p. 17.

<sup>33</sup> 'The sense of an impending apocalypse pervades all the scientific romances. (...) Wells not only absorbed Huxley's pessimistic gloss on evolutionary theory, but he was also affected by the work Kelvin and others who insisted that the law of entropy would eventually lead to a cooling of the sun and the reduction of the planets to a system of dead matter whirling in the nothingness of the space', Norman and Jeanne Mackenzie, *The Time Traveller: The Life of H. G. Wells* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1973), 120. See also: William R. Stoeger, 'Scientific Accounts of Ultimate Catastrophes in Our Life-Bearing Universe', in *The End of the World and the Ends of God: Science and Theology on Eschatology* (Harrisburg: Trinity Press, 2000), 19-28, Wells's early essay 'The Extinction of Man', in *Certain Personal Matters* (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1901), pp. 115-19 and *The Discovery of the Future: With The Common Sense of World Peace and The Human Adventure*, ed. by Patrick Parrinder (London: PNL Press for the H. G. Wells Society, 1989), p. 23.

The irruption of a fantastic apocalypse into the present day or the near future – (*The War of the Worlds*, although published in 1898, is described as taking place in the early twentieth century; *The Time Machine* begins in 1901) – requires the Wells protagonist to confront the facts of their own mortality and insignificance in the Universe.<sup>34</sup> 'A few minutes before, there had only been three real things before me – the immensity of the night and space and nature, my own feebleness and anguish, and the near approach of death' (p. 31). Ideally, such moments of epiphany should energize the individual to making a radical improvement in their being and the construction of the world. 'Those who have been under the shadow, who have gone down at last to elemental things' like the narrator (p. 132) should, in the phrase popularised by twentieth-century science fiction writer Robert Anton Wilson, be encouraged to 'immanetize the eschaton', and realize that the 'kingdom of heaven is materially within our reach' (*Autobiography*, I, p. 28).<sup>35</sup>

The sight of 'destruction (...) so indiscriminate and so universal' (p. 55), should urge humanity to rethink its existing ontology and epistemology. When the fleeing narrator falls in with a curate contemplating the Martians' destruction of his church (literally so, as the recently completed building itself has been obliterated), the curate's first question to him "'What does it mean? (...) What do these things mean?'" (p. 69). The curate is unable to interpret this spectacle in any other way than that of the Catholic preacher of Wells's childhood.

'This must be the beginning of the end,' he said, interrupting me.  
'The end! The great and terrible day of the Lord! When men shall call upon the mountains and the rocks to fall upon them and hide them – hide them from the face of Him that sitteth upon the throne!' (p. 71)

An army sapper also makes a weak joke connecting the Martians' octopus-like physiology to Matthew 4:19: "'talk about fishers of men – fighters of fish it is this time!'" (p. 39). It is as if, in the still imperfectly educated state of the

<sup>34</sup> Patrick Parrinder, *Shadows of the Future: H. G. Wells, Science Fiction and Prophecy* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1995), p. 42.

<sup>35</sup> Eric Voegelin, *Science, Politics and Gnosticism* (Chicago: Gateway, 1968), p. 89.

world, there is no language available to speak of the end of the world except for that of Christian eschatology – and this restriction informs even Wells's own choices of diction in speaking in this romance of 'the beasts that perish', 'pillars of fire' and 'Sodom and Gomorrah'.<sup>36</sup>

What few commentators on this scientific romance have noted is that, surprisingly, the narrator retains some form of Christian faith throughout, and after, his experiences.<sup>37</sup> He even reproves the Curate for interpreting the Martians' destruction of Surrey as evidence of God's abandonment of mankind: "What good is religion if it collapses under calamity? Think of what earthquakes and floods, wars and volcanoes, have done before to men! Did you think God had exempted Weybridge? He is not an insurance agent" (p. 71). Although the account of the narrator's brother attending church on the Monday after the invasion attests to the utter inefficacy of prayer against Martian invasion, the narrator still chooses to thank God when he is finally delivered from two weeks of imprisonment by a watching Martian (which is achieved at least in part by his accidental manslaughter of the unsteady-in-his-faith curate). While the narrator seems to have been shaken out of his vocation as an academic philosopher, his faith in God endures. He intriguingly raises the possibility that the Martians themselves have the same God – believing, like the British Empire, and Bismarck's Germany, for as long as they are victorious, that He is on their side:

Since the night of my return from Leatherhead I had not prayed. I had uttered prayers, fetterish prayers, had prayed as heathens mutter charms when I was in extremity; but now I prayed indeed, pleading steadfastly and sanely, face to face with the darkness of God. Strange night! Strangest in this, that so soon as dawn had come, I, who had talked with God, crept out of the house like a rat leaving its hiding place – a creature scarcely larger, an inferior animal, a thing that for any passing whim of our masters might be hunted and killed. Perhaps they also prayed confidently to God. (p. 149)

<sup>36</sup> Respectively Psalms 49:12, Exodus 13:21 and Genesis 19. Andy Sawyer's notes to the most recent Penguin edition of the text counts over ten separate direct allusions to the Bible.

<sup>37</sup> One that does is Patrick Parrinder, 'How Far Can We Trust the Narrator of *The War of the Worlds?*', *Foundation* 77 (1999), 15-24.

First the Martians' red weed and then the Martians themselves are destroyed by their lack of immunity to earth's bacteria. The narrator imagines the Martians as Assyrians and Earth's bacteria as divinely enforcing God's Providence against them for the sin of occupying the cities of Judah: 'for a moment I believed that the destruction of Sennacherib had been repeated, that God had repented, that the Angel of Death had slain them in the night (p. 169; cf. II Kings 19:35, II Chronicles 32:21). The narrator gives thanks, then, not to an outcome of the processes of natural selection, but instead to divine invention and intervention, the Martians being 'slain, after all man's devices had failed, by the humblest things that God, in his wisdom, has put upon this earth' (p. 168).

The possibility of a further invasion even makes the Earth more eschatologically attentive, nervously awaiting the signs of the second apocalypse. *The War of the Worlds* is the first of a long series of Wells's texts in which apocalypse serves a distinct utopian function within the world of the text, the events certainly educating humanity and perhaps the Martians as well:

Our views of the human future must be greatly modified by these events. We have learned now that we cannot regard this planet as being fenced in and a secure abiding place for Man; we can never anticipate the unseen good or evil that may come upon us suddenly out of space. It may be that in the larger design of the universe this invasion from Mars is not without its ultimate benefit for men; it has robbed us of that serene confidence in the future which is the most fruitful source of decadence, the gifts to human science it has brought are enormous, and it has done much to promote the conception of the commonweal of mankind. It may be that across the immensity of space the Martians have watched the fate of these pioneers of theirs and learned their lesson, and that on the planet Venus they have found a securer settlement. Be that as it may, for many years yet there will certainly be no relaxation of the eager scrutiny of the Martian disk, and those fiery darts of the sky, the shooting stars, will bring with them as they fall an unavoidable apprehension to all the sons of men.

The broadening of men's views that has resulted can scarcely be exaggerated. (pp. 178-79)<sup>38</sup>

<sup>38</sup> According to Martha Himmelfarb, "Son of man" is a literal translation of a phrase that is an idiom for human being in both Hebrew and Aramaic. The phrase is perhaps best known from the book of Ezekiel, where (...) the term should probably be translated "mortal," that is, a human being in contrast to God. In Daniel, however (...) the emphasis is clearly not

Five times in the text the narrator uses the phrase 'in those days' to describe the complacent, unmindful pre-invasion world – in this text, the consequence of the world almost ending is that it must change.

As Parrinder notes, in the Wellsian apocalypses that follow in works such as *The Food of the Gods* (1904) or *In the Days of the Comet* (1906), the details of how the new commonwealth is created tend to be elided: Wells's gestures are 'optimistic and deliberately incomplete'.<sup>39</sup> In the short story 'The Star', published the same year as *The War of the Worlds*, the narrator demurs, 'of the new brotherhood that grew presently among men, of the saving of laws and books and machines (...) this story does not tell.'<sup>40</sup> Nonetheless, the details that Wells does choose to convey are frequently, even predominantly articulated in Christian tropes. Since Wells's audience for communicating his visions of the end of the world was still predominantly Judaeo-Christian in belief, the most effective language for him to express it was that of the Christian apocalypse. In 1905's *A Modern Utopia*, Wells imagines a utopian world government ruled over by an elite called the Samurai. He imagines the calling of the Samurai in vividly Biblical terms:

Could one but realise an apocalyptic image and suppose an angel, such as was given to each of the seven churches of Asia, given for a space to the service of the Greater Rule. I see him as a towering figure of flame and colour, standing between earth and sky, with a trumpet in his hands, over there above the Haymarket, against the October glow; and when he sounds, all the *samurai*, all who are *samurai* in Utopia, will know themselves and one another....<sup>41</sup>

Perhaps the Wells of 1934 was indeed exaggerating the impiety of his younger self; the traces of his mother's belief were clearly still strongly present in the romancing Wells of the late 1890s. Eschatology in the scientific romances provided a way for Wells both to exorcise his childhood religious

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on mortality in contrast to divinity but rather on human form in contrast to animal form.' *The Apocalypse: A Brief History* (Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), pp. 37-38.

<sup>39</sup> Patrick Parrinder, 'Edwardian Awakenings', p. 64.

<sup>40</sup> 'The Star', *The Complete Stories of H. G. Wells*, ed. J. R. Hammond (London: Dent, 1998), pp. 281-89 (289), .

<sup>41</sup> *A Modern Utopia, Works*, V, pp. 326-27.



demons through fantasy, and to speak to his audience about the end of the world in the language that would most effectively compel its attention.<sup>42</sup>

<sup>42</sup> For a striking reading of Biblical allusion in two early romances, see Holly Norman, 'Holly Norman, "The Future is a Return to the Past:" Space, Time and Memory in *The Time Machine* and *The Island of Dr Moreau*', *Wellsian* 33 (2010), 3-19.