Inventing Tomorrow: H. G. Wells and the Twentieth Century, by Sarah Cole

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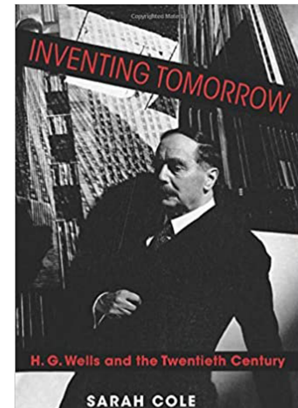

In her article "Rereading H. G. Wells's *The Time Machine*: Empiricism, Aestheticism, Modernism" (*English Literature in Transition*, vol. 58, no. 4), Caroline Hovanec calls for an alternative history of modernism that places H. G. Wells at its vanguard, rather than Joseph Conrad: "it [would] challenge[ ] us to think beyond the heroic narrative of modernism rising up against a complacent positivism, and to imagine a literary history in which modernist epistemology is seen not as a radical break from Victorian positivism and realism, but instead as an evolution of a particular species of Victorian thought" (480). Hovanec argues that critics have been too accepting of Wells's own claims about his distance from modernism.

Sarah Cole's monograph proposes a different alternate history of twentieth-century literature, one where Wells's ideals for "how literature would engage the public world" won out over the modernists' (4). Cole argues that Wells's writing—with its strong didactic bent, its grand projects, its lack of focus on interior life—seems strange from our current vantage point because the modernists won. She argues Wells benefits from being read outside the context that modernism created in literary analysis, which "uncover[s] a thriving form of literary accomplishment, germinating alongside the more familiar works from this period […] producing, perhaps, a broader and more capacious modernism" (4). The introduction to *Inventing Tomorrow* explicates the differences between Wells's approach to literature and that of the modernists, exemplified by Virginia Woolf, but also shows how Wells and the modernists were allied in their reactions to the new century.

Cole argues that her analysis of Wells is distinct because of its capaciousness; Wells wrote voluminously in many genres across a long career, but most contemporary studies focus on his science fiction or a couple of well-regarded literary texts. Cole covers it all, from textbooks to autobiography to novels to pamphlets to short fiction to film scripts. The first chapter tries to lay out an overall sense of Wells's attitudes, techniques, style, and tone across the totality of his writing. The other three chapters each focus on a key theme of his work: "Civilian" on his explorations of wartime and calls for peace, "Time" on his attempts to communicate new

understandings of history and futurity, and "Life" on the role of biology and evolution in his thought.

I found the first chapter the least successful because of its amorphousness. It has some keen insights, such as Cole's discussion of Wells's propensity for self-insertion (61-3), and how his novels tell the reader how to read them, but not heavy-handedly (72). Wells had many novels with protagonists that were essentially him (e.g., *The History of Mr Polly* [1910], *Love and Mr Lewisham* [1900], *In the Days of the Comet* [1906], *Tono-Bungay* [1909], *Ann Veronica* [1909], *The New Machiavelli* [1911]), and one could see this as egoistic, but Cole argues that the primary feature of his self-writing is argument: his "voice discussing the problems of our world and offering solutions" (67). Even Wells's autobiography, she claims, is more about his ideas than his actual life (66). There are other good insights, but limiting a discussion of darkness and light in Wells to just over four pages suggests more than it compels. (It was unclear to me, too, why and how these topics all fit into the theme of "voice.")

The other chapters, though, are compelling, specifically for the breadth of Wells's writing that they cover. The chapter on "Life," for example, takes in SF such as *The Food of the Gods* (1904), *The Island of Doctor Moreau* (1896), and *The Time Machine* (1895), book-essays such as *The Conquest of Time* (1942), *The Future in America* (1906), and *Mankind in the Making* (1903), the popular science book *The Science of Life* (1929-30), the religious parable *The Undying Fire* (1919), and literary novels including *Ann Veronica* and *Tono-Bungay*. Cole doesn't force all this into a single trajectory, however, as Wells is too diverse and self-scrutinizing a writer for that. Rather she explores how for Wells, life is all about energy (often unfulfilled) and waste (often necessary) in a variety of different contexts, from Doctor Moreau's attempts to reshape evolution to Ann Veronica's inability to achieve a political awakening. For the SF scholar, the real benefit is in seeing how the familiar SF texts interact with the less familiar literary and nonfiction ones. Most of Wells's scientific romances are clustered at the beginning of his career, but Wells continued to explore the ideas in them throughout his life.

After the introduction, Cole's placing of Wells in the context of modernism is usually implicit more than explicit, but one of the book's strengths is in showing how Wells was influenced by his world and how he then made the world others reacted to. Many scholars note Wells's claim about what such an influence Thomas Henry Huxley was on his thought; Cole actually incorporates discussion of a couple of Huxley essays into the chapter on "Life." She also analyzes the scenes in Woolf's *Between the Acts* (1941) in which a character is reading Wells's *The Outline of History* (1919-20). Cole shows how Wells was reacting to his era—but also creating it.

The scale of Cole's analysis is impressive, but in a sense, it just reflects the scale of Wells. He had a plan for the entire world, and that is what let him essentially invent the genre of SF, and what set him apart from his modernist contemporaries. Cole's conclusion emphasizes this point: "Wells […] set literature on a path to social amelioration, seeing its *forms* as mutable and impermanent but its power and purpose as firm.[…] [W]riting need not be diffident […] change need not seem

impossible" (319). It's an almost inspirational conclusion: "I hope that, in considering Wells's lifetime of writing, that reader—you—will feel motivated to ask of literature, what can and should it do for the world, for tomorrow?" (320).

It's a big ask. And so too are the alternate histories that Cole and Hovanec propose. Wells is so big a writer that an alternate literature with Wells at its center is almost impossible to contemplate. For what Cole shows is that, like the sun of the dying Earth at the end of *The Time Machine*, Wells absorbed everything before the end.

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