So Much Life with (So to Speak) So Little Living: The Literary Side of the James-Wells Debate

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There has been a good deal of interest, particularly during the last ten years, in the relationship and eventual break between Henry James and H. G. Wells. Many critics have seen their argument as paradigmatic of the split between two kinds of artists and two types of novels in the twentieth century. As Vincent Brome put it, for Wells

> It was Man not men that mattered, the race not the individual, but James held up his hands in well-bred horror at any such barbarism and continued to exercise his brilliant gifts on situations which, for Wells, bore all the marks of triviality. The novel divided into two schools, one preoccupied with probing the very ganglia of super-sensitized individuals, deeply imprisoned in the beautiful palaces of their own sensibilities, the other involved with man as part of a community, concerned to interpret one reacting on the other. The novel is still so divided. Somerset Maugham, J. B. Priestley, Joyce Cary and R. C. Hutchinson would be suffocated in the secret places of Proust, Elizabeth Bowen and possibly Sartre. (231)

In Brome's imaginative description, the division between Wells and James (and that between their respective successors) is stark. The main purpose of this essay will be to subtilize that division, to probe and clarify the points at issue. A relationship as complex as that between Wells and James has many sides: critics have seen Wells as a son in revolt against a kindly but condescending father; as a lower middle-class outsider envious of a wealthy man secure in his position; and as a best-selling novelist whose success James, largely ignored by the public, found intolerable.[1] My concentration will be less on the economic, class, or Oedipal aspects of the dispute and more on the literary. In particular, I shall discuss the novelists' different attitudes toward life ("so much life . . . so little living"), the audience, other novels, and the form of their own works.[2] I do not hold with Brome that "There is nothing very new to say about the threadbare argument of matter versus manner in the art of novel writing" (108); on the contrary, I think that there are issues, especially in the debate between James and Wells, still largely unexamined. To consider these issues with some kind of clarity, I have disturbed chronology and re-organized the main points in the James-Wells debate according to theme. This will avoid needless back-tracking and self-anticipation. Besides, as Nicholas Delbanco points out, the debate is very often a case of "the cart . . . come before the horse—if Wells appears to answer, in 1911, an observation James would make in an essay one year later—that is at least in part a function of anachrony" (163).

Before discussing the major points at issue, however, a brief chronological summary of the James-Wells relationship will give a sense of its development in time and of the main documents in the case.[3] Wells first met James in 1898. Before that he had seen James publicly booed for the unsuccessful drama Guy Domville (1895), which Wells reviewed, for the most part unfavorably, in the Pall Mall Gazette. Later in that year (1895), Wells also wrote a piece on James's collection of short stories, Terminations, for the Saturday Review; like the earlier, this review was largely disapproving. In 1898 Wells and James struck up a friendship, which was considerably strengthened when Wells took a house in Sandgate near James's in Rye and began to pay the "Master" frequent visits. Their correspondence from 1898-1914 shows two men with widely divergent views of life and literature gradually coming to realize their differences, but still remaining friends. At one point (1900) Wells even wrote a letter to the Morning Post defending James's The Soft Side against a hostile review.

All this changed in 1914, when James

published a two-part essay called "The Younger Generation" in the Times Literary Supplement. This piece was most likely a response to Wells's ideas as expressed in "The Scope of the Novel," a lecture he gave in 1911 to the Times Book Club. James probably read the revised version of this lecture, retitled "The Contemporary Novel," in the Fortnightly Review (November 1911), and took the opportunity to respond. In any case, Wells fought back in Boon (1915), a lively lampoon of James's ideas and style that ended their friendship, for James found himself unable to accept the apology Wells offered in their last, brief correspondence. After James's death in 1916, Wells had the last word in his Experiment in Autobiography (1934), where he looked back on the relationship and reexamined the major points of disagreement. We turn now to a consideration of those very points.

Because all the literary points at issue in the James-Wells debate are interrelated, it is difficult to discuss them in any linear order. For the sake of clarity, though, the attempt must be made. I shall start with one of the most important matters of dispute: the artist's treatment of reality. "When you want to read and find reality too real, and hard story-telling tiresome," Wells said, "you may find Henry James good reading" (Edel 47-48). James, on the other hand, found in Wells's work "so much life with (so to speak) so little living" (Edel 27). Here is clearly a major disagreement as to the representation of reality in fiction. Let us look a little more closely at what each author means.

Wells, in the same passage (Edel 47), complains of James's novels as those "from which all the fiercer experiences are excluded." Elsewhere he gives a catalogue of what in his opinion are James's most grievous omissions: "He went about elaborately, avoiding ugliness, death, suffering, industrialism, politics, sport, the thought of war, the red blaze of passion" (Edel 250). James, in other words, ignores all the hard facts of life and concentrates only on the easy. But there is more to Wells's charge than first meets the eye: behind James's penchant for exclusion there is something, Wells maintains, much worse: a passive attitude to life. "James never scuffled with Fact," Wells says, by which he means not only that James leaves "Fact" alone, but also, and more importantly, that he "never questioned a single stitch or flounce of the conventions and interpretations in which she presented herself" (Edel 47). A statement Wells makes in 1917 about his own work could stand as a direct rebuttal to what he sees in James: "I have never once 'presented' life. My apparently most objective books are criticisms and incitements to change".[4] Because the role of the novel is to promote change, fiction must take an aggressive stand toward reality. It must not only deal with those unpleasant aspects of life other novelists leave out, but it should attack the ills of society in order to make known the need for and the way to improvement. Hence Wells's most famous statement as to the scope of the novel:

> it is to be the social mediator, the vehicle of understanding, the instrument of self-examination, the parade of morals and the exchange of manners, the factory of customs, the criticism of laws and institutions and of social dogmas and ideas. (Edel 154)

Wells's position on the treatment of reality in fiction also affects his views on the form of the novel, on unity, objectivity, and characterization, as well as influences his attitude toward the audience and towards other works of art. I shall consider each of these points in turn, but for now I return to James and his very different sense of the words "reality," "life," and "fact."

Of Wells's Love and Mr. Lewisham James writes, "I have found in it . . . a great deal of the real thing—that is of the note of life," but then he hastens to add—"if not all of it (as distinguished from the said great deal)" (Edel 67). What of "life" has Wells omitted? It is difficult to pin James down on this point (it is always difficult to pin James down—as we shall see, this is part of his point), but there would seem to be at least two kinds of omission worth noting. Discussing In the Days of the

Comet, James appears somewhat disturbed that Wells has not pulled back from the "fiercer experiences":

> one doesn't, in it, take refuge, (one can't), in the waiting-room of The Crematorium, with a saddened sense of the dread Process going on adjacently—one is in the presence of the heated oven and one hears and feels the roar and the scorch of the flames. That is your Book—magnificently crematory, in other words magnificently direct and real (though perhaps with too little of the waiting room.) (Edel 111)

This passage would seem to lend credence to Wells's claim that James prefers to omit the hard facts, but actually James is accusing Wells of having omitted something: understanding of—or at least reflection on—the experience of the Crematorium. Right before the above passage, "one doesn't . . . take refuge . . . in the waiting-room," James writes: "I don't find your work—or at least this one—as projected an artistic fact, quite, as it is my habit to yearn to find suchlike—" (Edel 111). If I read James aright, his point about the need for a waiting room has less to do with avoiding the heat of the fire and more with getting some perspective on its "dread Process." It is this perspective that James fears Wells has omitted in his "direct" treatment of life. By going straight at the fire, Wells misses an essential part of the experience: he fails to give us a perspective on the fire, an understanding of the subject that is certainly an important part of our experience of the subject.

Ironically, then, Wells misses part of life because of his direct approach to the fact; only an artistically "projected fact," the indirect, "waiting-room" approach, will catch all of life. As James says elsewhere of novels that "saturate" or pile up mere facts:

> yes, yes; but is this all? These are the circumstances of the interest—we see, we see; but where is the interest itself, where and what is its centre and how are we to measure it in relation to that? (Edel 184)

Thus Wells's first omission: perspective, or some distance from the fact and some central point of view to show us how to understand the fact, and why we should see it as interesting. Where Wells accuses James of not getting to the point, James protests that the manner of getting there, the perspective, is essential to the point. "Love," for example, is made "interesting and productive" not by Wells's kind of direct treatment, but "by tracing it through indirectness and tortuosities of application and effect" (Edel 129). Part of the point in not being able to pin James down is in the interest and productive discoveries made in trying to do it.

The other occasion upon which James charges Wells with omitting part of life has to do with a major difference in the authors' perspectives. Contrasting Wells's view of America with his own, James says,

> you tend always to simplify overmuch (that is as to large particulars—though in effect I don't think you do here as to the whole.) . . . I seemed to see, for myself, while I was there, absolutely no profit in scanning or attempting to sound the future (beyond mere space and quantity and motion so incalculable—as to the whole;) and yet here you come and throw yourself all on the future, and leave out almost altogether the America of my old knowledge; leave out all sorts of things. . . . (Edel 114)

Wells, in attending to the "whole" and the "future," misses the "particulars" of the present. As James in another letter recognizes, these omissions follow naturally from Wells's chosen perspective: "I can't imagine a subtilizing prophet" (Edel 76). Wells, as we saw, is interested in the here and now mainly as a subject for vast future "change." James, from his own subtilizing perspective, protests: "for [because of] vaticination, you, to excess, simplify" (Edel 76). James, then, either finds missing any sense of perspective in Wells (as toward the Crematorium), or laments the perspective

Wells has chosen (as in the vatic).

As we might expect, these two authors' disagreement as to the treatment of reality in fiction makes for further disagreement on all related matters, including the form of the novel and the handling of unity, objectivity, and characterization. To take the last first (there is no reason not to, as all are interrelated), James finds two main failings in Wells's method of characterization: a failure to "present" and an authorial intrusiveness. Discussing Wells's Marriage, James claims that the big love scene of the novel leaves him cold because it is a climax lacking in preparation:

> To show it step forth and affirm itself as a relation [between the hero and heroine], what is this but the interesting function of the whole passage, on the performance of which what follows is to hang?—and yet who can say that when the ostensible sequence is presented, . . . we do not assist at a well-nigh heartbreaking miscarriage of "effect"? We see effect, invoked in vain, simply stand off unconcerned; effect not having been consulted in advance, she is not to be secured on such terms. (Edel 191-92; italics added)

"Presentation," for James, involves sending ahead all the preliminary scenes necessary to make the big scene, when it finally arrives, supremely effective.

Wells's rebuttal is simple and direct: he was after a different effect. Rather than a subtle exploration of a complex, real-life relationship between two individuals, Wells was trying to demonstrate the basic relation between two representative types:

> the story tells how masculine intellectual interest met feminine spending and what ensued. Trafford [the hero] is not so much a solid man as a scientific intelligence caught in the meshes of love. . . . (Edel 224)

Had Wells included such "minor tricks and turns" as James called for, "the argument of the book would not have stood out" (Edel 224). What is major to James is "minor" to Wells: the prophet and social critic simplifies character to what he calls the "caricature-portrait" (Edel 227). Nuanced characterization might only make the audience miss the point: a relation between basic types, not particular persons, is the issue here.

With this point in mind, it is not difficult to guess what Wells's answer will be to James's second charge, that Wells intrudes himself upon his characters and will not let them speak the truth about themselves. About Wells's characterization of the heroine in The Passionate Friends, James warns,

> your way strikes me as not the way to give the truth about the woman of our hour. I don't think you get her, or at any rate give her, and all through one hears your remarkable—your wonderful!—reporting manner and voice . . . and not, by my persuasion, hers.
> (Edel 175)

But that "prodigiously clever, foreshortened, impressionising [in short, Wellsian] report" of which James complains is exactly what Wells is after. Uninterested in "fundamental veracity about the secondary things of behavior," Wells wants no more—and nothing more complex or confusing—than a "ventilation of the point at issue" (Edel 225). Although Wells makes no specific comment on the heroine of The Passionate Friends, it would be perfectly consistent for him to reply that it was not her particular voice he was after, but rather how she figured in the "point at issue." He says something very much like this in a passage that does not deal specifically with the problem of authorial intrusiveness but that does put fully realized characterization second to an author-reader discussion of ideas:

> I could not see how, if we were to grapple with new ideas, a sort of argument with the reader, an explanation of the theory that is being exhibited,

> could be avoided. I began therefore to make my character indulge in impossibly explicit monologues and duologues. (Edel 226)

For Wells, then, it is less important that a character might probably have said what she does (is it her own voice? would she have spoken that and in that way?) and more important that she gets it said, it being whatever "new idea" Wells wants to communicate to the reader.

Having discussed authorial intrusiveness in characterization, we have already dealt with one sense of objectivity; we saw, for example, that James is in favor of a more objective form of characterization, whereby the author allows a character to speak her own truth and not primarily the truth he wishes to communicate, even improbably, through her to the reader. The question of objectivity is likewise involved in the major dispute between James and Wells over the form of the novel. Speaking of Wells's The New Machiavelli, James warns that the "autobiographic form" "has no authority, no persuasive or convincing force--its grasp of reality and truth isn't strong and disinterested" (Edel 128). By "autobiographic form," James appears to mean a novel whose main unifying center is the author, who speaks throughout in the first person. James's point here about the form of the novel is closely related to his earlier remark concerning the treatment of its subject, as of the Crematorium. By the desired "disinterestedness" or objectivity, James is again referring to a sense of perspective, as he reveals in another letter:

> I adore a rounded objectivity, a completely and patiently achieved one, and what I mean by your perversity and your leak is that your attachment to the autobiographic form . . . affects me as sacrificing what I hold most dear, a precious effect of perspective, indispensable, by my fond measure, to beauty and authenticity. (Edel 174)

But the inverse relation between "perspective" and "autobiographic form" is still unclear: how exactly is objectivity gained by eschewing the author as first-person center of the novel? This James explains in "The Younger Generation": when there is "no difference between the subject of the show and the showman's 'feeling,'" or between what the characters think and the author's own thoughts, this identity certainly inspires "confidence" in the thoughts expressed, but it is a

> confidence truly so abject in the solidity of every appearance that it may be said to represent our whole relation to the work and completely to exhaust our reaction upon it. (Edel 187)

Objectivity, then, is gained through a multiplicity of perspectives, each of which calls into question the others' authenticity so that, as with Conrad's Chance, "the prodigy of our knowing" becomes as much the subject of the novel as "what we are to know" (Edel 201). The "autobiographic form," with its single, unquestioned perspective, misses part of life: the act itself of knowing.

Wells makes no direct response to James's charge about "autobiographic form," but, in a defense of the author's right to speak his mind in the first person, or even to "saturate" a book with his own "personality" (Edel 140), Wells does claim that objectivity is not necessarily the only—or even the most important—criterion. There is, he says, "a sort of depth, a sort of subjective reality" to be gained from authorial intrusion or saturation, especially if the author steps forward not in some phony, other voice, but "without affectations, starkly as a man comes in out of the darkness to tell of perplexing things without" (Edel 141). Again, the question of means has to do with the effect desired: the "autobiographic form" may not emphasize the "prodigy of knowing," but Wells values it for its impression of straightforwardness and honesty.

James's second charge against the "autobiographic form" is related to the question of unity and also to the author's attitude towards other fictional works. "That accurst autobiographic form," James says, ". . . puts a premium on the loose, the

improvised, the cheap and the easy" (Edel 128). What James values is clearly the opposite: a tight, carefully—even painstakingly—wrought structure for the novel. Even though a strict unity "may entail the sacrifice of certain things that are not on the straight line of it," this sacrifice is necessary to achieve the desired effect, an effect whose "interest," as we have seen, lies often in the very way it is "made" to seem interesting (Edel 263). James's comment on Wells's belief in the "anarchic" artist has implications for the former's opinion on the need for unity in the novel:

> I utterly defy the anarchic to express itself representationally, art aiding, talent aiding, the play of invention aiding, in short you aiding, without the grossest, the absurdest inconsistency. (Edel 162)

It may seem odd that the advocate of multiple perspectives in the novel should also campaign for unity and consistency, but the link here is clearly in the self-reflexive theme: different points of view lead the reader toward a consideration of the very act of knowing, an act that is often the basic theme or unifying concept of the novel.

Wells offers two responses to the James accusation of structural looseness and inconsistency in the "autobiographic form." The first defense is simple and lighthearted: "the novel . . . is like breakfasting in the open air on a summer morning; nothing is irrelevant if the writer's mood is happy" (Edel 140). Note that here Wells claims as a virtue what James had considered a fault: the fact that the "autobiographic" novel depends too much on the vagaries of the author's mind. While James emphasizes probability and presentation, Wells takes delight in the surprising and unexpected, as in his own definition of a "well-conceived character": its "charm . . . lies, not in knowing its destiny, but in watching its proceedings" (Edel 137).

But there is much more to Wells's defense than this, as is hinted when Wells speaks of "letting [the novel] loose, as it were, in form and purpose" (Edel 142; italics added). In his Experiment in Autobiography, Wells mounts a complicated argument designed to prove that form is related to purpose and that, since the purpose of James and other writers like him is essentially different from that of Wells, so too should be their form of novel. James, Wells argues,

> was a man of intensely conservative quality; he accepted, he accepted wilfully, the established social values about him; he had no doubt in him of what was right or wrong, handsome or ungracious, just or mean. He saw events therefore as a play of individualities in a rigid frame of values never more to be questioned or permanently changed. (Edel 222; italics added)

The italicized words in this passage are meant to highlight the transition Wells makes from James's attitude toward society and values to James's opinion on characterization and unity in the novel. James chose ("accepted wilfully") the social and novelistic frame in which to work, a frame containing subtly realized characters moving within unquestioned norms of behavior.

But for Wells, who questioned, questioned wilfully,

> It was necessary for me to reconstruct the frame in which individual lives as a whole had to be lived, before I could concentrate upon any of the individual problems of fitting them into this frame. (Edel 230; italics added)

Wells, choosing to look at the old picture in a new way, required a different frame: as exhaustively rendered individuals gave way to type characters, so the old accepted unity ceded to an inconsistency expressive of doubt and insecurity. James's "artistic singleness of mind," Wells claims, was fit for picking up a "pea," but most of the important things were "beyond it"—outside of that singleness (Edel 249). It may seem odd that the very modern Wells should look back to the Victorian Dickens for an appropriate form for the novel, but

Dickens, like Sterne and Fielding, offered the "lax freedom of form, the rambling discursiveness" (Edel 138) and the authorial intrusion that Wells put to his own use: "criticisms" of the existing frame of values and "incitements to change" (West 213). The "true unity" could come only through a splintering of the misplaced Jamesian frame (Edel 246) and through the construction of a new Wellsian frame that would allow readers to view what he wanted them to see.

The question of communication between author and reader brings us to our last point of controversy. We have already hinted at one aspect of James's and Wells's disagreement on this issue: Wells favors a more direct line between author and reader, without possibly confusing multiple perspectives to get in the way. Wells's directness is connected to his general attitude toward the reader, which is provocative. He is not writing the "Novel" with a capital N, "produced in an atmosphere of security for the entertainment of secure people who like . . . to feel established and safe for good" (Edel 222); he is writing to incite the reader to bring about change. Clearly, the Wellsian novel has an affinity to propaganda: both work more or less directly on the reader. Yet Wells makes one crucial distinction: "the word propaganda should be confined to the definite service of some organized party, church or doctrine" (Edel 224). Wells implies that, despite his forthrightness, he does not wish to "thrust" any specifically programmatic views upon the reader. His approach to the audience is, nevertheless, still much more direct than James's.

The other major difference in the way these two authors view the writer-reader relationship has to do with the kind of audience each thinks it important to address. Consider Wells's comment to James on the subtleties of the latter's The American Scene: "How much will they get out of what you have got in?" (Edel 116). Although sometimes appreciative of James's extraordinary style, Wells also sees it as a block between the author's idea and the ordinary reader. Wells made this basic point way back in 1895, in a review of James's play, Guy Domville:

> Delicate turns, soft shades, refinements of grey must be avoided; bold strokes, black and firm—that is all that is possible. The thing is to be reproduced on such a scale as to carry across unimpaired to the pit and gallery. Delicate work simply blurs and looks weak. (Edel 51)

What is true for the theater is true for the novel, when it is the general reader one is trying to reach. The work must be pitched to the audience: this is Wells's basic defense against James's criticism that he wrote carelessly, in "simplified impatiences" (Edel 174). As Wells put it thirty-nine years later, "I had very much to say and . . . if I could say one of them in such a way as to get my point over to the reader I did not worry much about finish." And then follows the crucial difference as to audience: "the fastidious critic might object, but the general reader to whom I addressed myself cared no more for finish . . . than I" (Edel 225). So it is not only a question of being heard as far as the pit and gallery; Wells also wanted to be heard by both the pit and gallery. His novelistic practice, as he defines it, was to speak loudly and simply so that his words might be caught and understood by all. James, on the other hand, spoke with refinement and reached, by consequence, only a specialized audience.

These, then, are the basic literary issues on which James and Wells disagreed in essays, in reviews, and in their correspondence—for as long as that correspondence lasted. In conclusion, I would like to combine a brief summary of some of these issues with something more: my own explanation as to why I think each side in the debate makes good sense. Mine is not an attempt at arbitration except insofar as it awards some points to both sides. I want also to show that neither has a monopoly on the true way to represent "life" or "living" (Edel 27). On the question of characterization, James's subtly rendered personalities are certainly one kind of truth, just as

Wells's "caricature-portraits" are another. One way to get at the essence of a person is to exaggerate his characteristic traits; such hyperbole certainly makes a clear target for satire, which is one of Wells's central purposes. On the other hand, the truth about a person may have more to do with his subtle deviations from or variations on his most visible traits; this is James's area of exploration, the fine line between surface and what is going on underneath.

Perspective is another relative matter. Multiple points of view may be effective in getting the reader to compare and contrast perspectives in order to gain an objective view, or at least to learn about the process of knowing. But such complicated mental work requires a sophisticated reader; Wells's method of straightforward presentation of the issues, even through direct address to the reader, may have more impact on the general audience. One drawback to Wells's approach is that even the general reader often learns best through suggestion and not by loud directness; of course, if the suggestion is as devious and buried in complex characterization as is sometimes the case with James, even the most perspicacious of readers may miss the point.

Finally, the issue of unity is tied to the question of desired effect. Wells's digressiveness, his attempt to get "all life within the scope of the novel" (Edel 156), may be exciting—and it may be confusing. Even in a novel in which there is "not a single interest, but a woven tapestry of interests" (Edel 136), some attention must be paid to the weaving, or the tapestry will be a disconnected jumble. Such a jumble may be provocative, but if it is to provoke us towards anything in particular (as Wells certainly had particular changes he wanted to promote), then the interests in the tapestry must to some extent be organized, or unified, to this end. On the other hand, it may be possible to overorganize a novel, if by this is meant such a narrow concentration on subtle matters that the big ones, the ones that really matter, are left out of the frame. For example, too close attention to the process of knowing may leave little room for what is to be known. But once again, so much depends on the effect desired: if it is the very process of knowing that is to be known and if the novel is organized properly to achieve this end, then one can hardly question its organization—one can only question the worthiness of its end.

NOTES

[1]For more on the class and economic aspects of the relationship, see the introduction to Edel 15-41. For coverage of the Oedipal angle, see Swan 43-65.

[2]The quotation in parentheses is of a letter James wrote to Mrs. Humphrey Ward in 1912, concerning Wells's Marriage, as quoted in Edel 27.

[3]Most of the major documents can be found in Edel. The exceptions to this are Wells's review of James's Terminations for the Saturday Review (1 June 1895), reprinted in Parrinder and Philmus 189-91, and Wells's defense of James's The Soft Side for the Morning Post (13 October 1900), reprinted in Bergonzi 36-38.

[4]From Wells's 1917 introduction to Frank Swinnerton's Nocturne; quoted in West 213.

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