1

Meliorism and Edwardian Modernity

Nowhere is the split in early modernist politics between sceptical disbelief and buoyant anticipation better shown than in the differences between Joseph Conrad and H. G. Wells. Conrad’s ‘affectionate’ offering of his novel *The Secret Agent* (1907) to Wells, a gesture signalled on the novel’s dedicatory page, was in one sense an act of friendship, the sign of one respectable statesman of the republic of letters acknowledging the correspondingly esteemed statesmanship of another. But even so it was, as has often been pointed out, an act of defiance, whereby the socialist politics of Wells were challenged by a Conradian text in which the very possibility of political betterment is questioned in formal and thematic terms. Wells doesn’t ‘appear’ in the novel as he does, say, in lightly disguised shape in Ford Madox Ford’s *The Simple Life Limited* (1911) or *The New Humpty-Dumpty* (1912), but the principles upon which Wells’s particular brand of politics were based – optimism, a belief in the achievability of social betterment, faith in a socialist future – are subjected to a relentless mode of scepticism from which they do not emerge unscathed. Wells was, by his own admission in *New Worlds for Old* (1908), ‘by no means a fanatical or uncritical adherent’ (1908, p. 1) of socialism. However, he was sufficiently convinced by the notion that society might be transformed for the better by human hands to have a contestant in Conrad, who time and again opposed the idea that society might in any meaningful sense be improved through political deeds. Conrad wrote to Wells in 1903 after reading the latter’s *Mankind in the Making* (1903) to say that the differences between their respective outlooks on social questions were ‘fundamental’ even if the ‘divergence’ was
‘not great’ (Conrad, 1988, p. 62), illustrating the distinction with a wonderful doodle of which Wells, a brilliant doodler himself, would no doubt have been proud. But Conrad’s letter all the same ought to be compared with his words to Wells in 1918, as recorded by Hugh Walpole: ‘the difference between us […] is fundamental. You don’t care for humanity but think they are to be improved. I love humanity, but know they are not!’ (quoted in Knowles and Moore, 2000, p. 446).

It has become something of a cliché in modernist studies to use the words just quoted to indicate how deeply Conrad’s opposition to politics qua politics could go. Conrad was influenced by the pessimism of Arthur Schopenhauer, but even so Conrad’s pessimistic accounts of modern British and European politics were not straightforwardly or uniformly Schopenhauerian. For instance, Conrad in his essay ‘Books’ (1905) railed against the ‘arrogance’ of ‘declared pessimism’ for its giving to the modern Edwardian author ‘an elated sense of his own superiority’ (1905b, p. 13), despite the fact that in his novels Conrad persistently provided variations on the theme that ‘[t]here is no morality, no knowledge and no hope; there is only the consciousness of ourselves which drives us about a world that whether seen in a convex or a concave mirror is always but a vain and floating appearance’ (1986, p. 30). At the same time, Conrad could write about the future in a way evocative of the manner in which Bloch would talk of future-directed ‘anticipations’ after him – about the future as a space ‘of our own making’ (p. 386) whose latent possibility on the other hand is as much of a truth to human desires as it is an illusion. As we will see, a significant part of this apparent illusoriness derived from Conrad’s reading of the cosmological principle of heat death, which reinforced his sense that ‘[a] little illusion, many dreams, a rare flash of happiness followed by disillusionment, a little anger and much suffering, and then the end’ is about all man has to look forward to in the ‘tragi-comedy’ (1983, p. 50) of existence.

By contrast, Wells believed that man might hope for and work towards what in Anticipations (1901) he called ‘a Republic that must ultimately become a World state of capable, rational men, developing amidst the fading contours and colours of our existing nations and institutions’ (1901, p. 157). With the exception of Mind at the End of its Tether (1945), pessimism is a sentiment markedly absent from Wells’s political and futurological writing, which turns incessantly to the question of how the world might be set free by ‘highly