

**A Kinship of Dreams
and Nightmares:
Anxiety and Wish Fulfilment Fantasy
in British Disaster Fiction,
1898-1939**

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ABSTRACT

Abstract of doctoral thesis

A KINSHIP OF DREAMS AND NIGHTMARES: ANXIETY AND WISH
FULFILMENT FANTASY IN BRITISH DISASTER FICTION, 1898-1939

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This thesis presents an in-depth analysis of the major British disaster novels published before World War II. Focussing on Wells' *The War of the Worlds* (1898), Shiel's *The Purple Cloud* (1901), Conan Doyle's *The Poison Belt* (1913), Connington's *Nordenholt's Million* (1923), Fowler Wright's *Deluge and Dawn* (1927 and 1929) and Sherriff's *The Hopkins Manuscript* (1939), it makes a significant contribution to the literary and contextual understanding of these narratives. Furthermore, it responds critically to the often imprecise employment of the term 'disaster' to describe related but distinct works of catastrophe, apocalyptic, post-apocalyptic, entropic or prophetic fiction. It does so by presenting a precise terminology with which to discuss disaster narratives featuring a catastrophic event. Such texts, termed 'transformative' disaster narratives, range from 'transfigurative' examples, which frame the disaster as an opportunity for positive social change, to 'deteriorative' texts, in which the disaster has long-term negative consequences. By analysing pre-World War II British transformative disaster narratives, the thesis avoids the ambiguities of previous studies that have often favoured broad discussions over sustained close analyses. It argues throughout that these transformative disaster novels were unanimously 'transfigurative', as all present catastrophe as opportunity. Each narrative satisfies contemporary anxieties by providing a wish fulfilment fantasy concerned with the correction or improvement of its cultural context. Responding to concerns around Victorian complacency, social degeneration, or increasing technologisation, the novels enlist catastrophe as a means of effecting cultural and/or political change. Taken collectively, they are united by their wish fulfilment responses to an increasing disillusionment in the first half of the twentieth century. *The Hopkins Manuscript* distinguishes itself from its predecessors by presenting a transfigurative cataclysm followed by a deteriorative catastrophe. Accordingly, it initiates the post-World War II movement away from transfigurative disasters towards pessimistic deteriorative scenarios, thereby marking the end of a significant period in British disaster fiction.

DECLARATION

This thesis is entirely my own work and has not been submitted in any form for the award of a Higher Degree at any other educational institution.

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Introduction

The Transfigurative Disaster Narrative: Anxiety and Wish Fulfilment Fantasy in the British Disaster Tradition

From the publication of Mary Shelley's *The Last Man* (1826) to Stephen Baxter's *Flood* (2008) and Alex Scarrow's *Afterlight* (2010), British science fiction has engaged consistently with the theme of disaster. It is perhaps surprising, therefore, that British disaster fiction has attracted comparatively little critical attention. There are no published author studies of key writers such as John Wyndham or John Christopher,¹ no detailed assessments of British disaster fiction's historic phases, most notably the pre- and post-World War II periods, and no attempts to distinguish between its various forms – at the simplest, those texts dealing with a contemporary catastrophe and its immediate aftermath and post-apocalyptic texts set some considerable time beyond the moment of disaster. As a consequence, a major subgenre of British sf – and what some critics have characterised as the defining theme of that fiction² – remains largely unexplored to any satisfactory degree.

This thesis responds to this lack of detailed critical discussion by examining pre-World War II disaster fiction and providing the first in-depth analysis of a subtype of what can be termed *transformative disaster fiction*.

This phrase allows a distinction to be made between disaster novels that

¹ Matthew Moore has produced a PhD study of Wyndham's work: Matthew Moore, 'A Critical Study of John Wyndham's Major Works' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Liverpool, 2008).

² Including Brian Aldiss and Nicholas Ruddick, as well as the popular media more broadly.

explicitly involve a catastrophic event, thereby exploring the transformation of society into a new post-cataclysmic structure, and other forms of catastrophe or apocalyptic fiction. Transformative disaster fiction describes a range of works that include 'transfigurative' disaster novels, which frame catastrophe as the source of positive transformations of society, and 'deteriorative' disaster novels that explore the negative transformation of contemporary society through catastrophic events dramatised in the narrative.

This study focuses specifically on the 'transfigurative' disaster novel, as it was the particular type of transformative text that defined the subgenre before World War II. Each transfigurative text discussed in the following chapters presents a wish fulfilment fantasy concerned with the correction or improvement of the pre-disaster society. In perceiving the fictional cataclysm as a means of positive cultural transformation, these transfigurative novels provide rich insights into the contemporary anxieties and dissatisfactions of the British contexts producing them and the nature of the wish fulfilment fantasies that arose in response to these concerns.

Differentiating transfigurative disaster novels from the body of British disaster fiction is important since it enables the identification of a coherent group of texts that share specific narrative characteristics. These novels are distinguishable from other apocalyptic stories such as last man narratives (like Shelley's seminal *The Last Man*), which lack the post-cataclysmic rebirth in which transfigurative texts establish their wish

fulfilment fantasies, and post-apocalyptic texts (such as Richard Jefferies' *After London* (1885), John Collier's *Tom's A-Cold* (1933) and Alun Llewellyn's *The Strange Invaders* (1934)). These latter narratives which, like last man stories, lack the defining wish fulfilment qualities of the transfigurative disaster novel, are set years or centuries after the catastrophe and do not concern themselves with the difficult processes of immediate social reconstruction.³ Post-nuclear apocalyptic tales (like Russell Hoban's *Riddley Walker* (1980)), or narratives that feature some form of entropic decline (for example, Michael Moorcock's Jerry Cornelius stories and the *Dancers at the End of Time* sequence (1974-81)), or fictions of psychic disaster (such as Brian Aldiss' *Barefoot in the Head* (1969)), or the inner-spatial 'transformation' narratives of J. G. Ballard,⁴ which unite both entropy and psychic disaster, can be considered 'disaster fiction', but they are all significantly different from one another and from transformative disaster fiction.

Identifying a group of texts defined by anxiety and wish fulfilment desires is not simply a pragmatic way of ensuring critical coherence. Such transfigurative disaster fiction lies at the root of much post-World War II transformative British literature, which is far more ambivalent in its attitude to cataclysm and its aftermath (there is a much broader spectrum of texts, from *transfigurative* to *deteriorative* narratives that appear after 1945). It is

³ Indeed in *The Oxford Dictionary of Science Fiction* the term 'disaster novel' specifically refers to a work that portrays a catastrophe and its aftermath – see 'disaster novel' in *The Oxford Dictionary of Science Fiction* <<http://0-www.oxfordreference.com.library.edgehill.ac.uk/views/ENTRY.html?subview=Main&entry=t226.e120>> [Accessed: 22 August 2012].

⁴ See James Goddard and David Pringle, eds, *J.G. Ballard, The First Twenty Years* (Frome: Bran's Head Books Ltd., 1976), p. 25.

the literary predecessor of that branch of British sf which Brian Aldiss terms, rather derogatively, the 'cosy catastrophe'.⁵ Accordingly, to understand the nature of transfigurative disaster fiction is to obtain an insight into the historical origins and consistent conventions of one of the major forms of British science fiction. This study focuses on the key texts that arose out of *fin-de-siècle* fears of decline and subsequent anxieties over social and cultural change in Britain between the wars: H. G. Wells' *The War of the Worlds* (1898), M. P. Shiel's *The Purple Cloud* (1901), Arthur Conan Doyle's *The Poison Belt* (1913), J. J. Connington's *Nordenholt's Million* (1923), Sydney Fowler Wright's *Deluge and Dawn* (1927 and 1929), and R. C. Sherriff's *The Hopkins Manuscript* (1939). It examines each novel's depiction of survival and restoration and investigates how the texts responded speculatively and politically to contemporary British cultural fears. In doing so it explores the tensions existing between the subgenre's two defining impulses: anxiety and desire.

To date, most scholarly work on disaster fiction has adopted much broader approaches to the genre. These include extended histories, discussions of dominant tropes, the place of disaster fiction in the wider context of American and British sf, and a subsuming of such fiction into studies of Biblical, mythic and historic apocalyptic narratives. These approaches have all contributed to a generalised rather than an interrogative approach to such fiction. The narrower focus of this study upon a particular mode of

⁵ Brian Aldiss and David Wingrove, *Trillion Year Spree* (North Yorkshire: House Of Stratus, 1986; repr. 2001), p. 279.

disaster fiction builds upon the insightful, but less specific works of earlier scholars including Brian Stableford, Nicholas Ruddick, Aldiss, and Warren Wagar⁶ in drawing out the philosophical, political and social underpinnings of the key disaster narratives published between 1898 and 1939.

One of the most significant contributions to the literary analysis of early British sf is Stableford's *Scientific Romance in Britain 1890-1950* (1985). This work reads disaster narratives in the broader context of the 'scientific romance'.⁷ Stableford distinguishes between the British scientific romance and the American speculative model which, he argues, flooded the market after 1950.⁸ Where Aldiss, and later Paul Kincaid, attribute the difference between British and American science fiction primarily to the socio-economic history of Britain since the industrial revolution, Stableford states that it 'has to do with the different religious cultures of the two nations, and the different influences of religious culture on publishing policy.'⁹ Accordingly, Stableford defines the 'scientific romance' as fiction which includes '[t]he impact of evolution on traditional views of man's place

⁶ Brian Aldiss, *Billion Year Spree* (London: Corgi, 1975); Nicholas Ruddick, *The Ultimate Island* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1994); Brian Stableford, *Scientific Romance in Britain 1890-1950* (New York: St. Martins Press, 1985); Warren Wagar, *Terminal Visions: The Literature of Last Things* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982).

⁷ Paul Kincaid's *A Very British Genre: A Short History Of British Fantasy and Science Fiction* (Kent: The British Science Fiction Association, 1995) offers a more extensive overview but it is, by necessity, a highly compressed account. It notes that British literature was consistently presenting 'specifically British responses to the fears and failures of [its] age' (p. 24) but offers no detailed analysis of the British disaster tradition.

⁸ The only exception to this, he claims, are the writers of the 'New Wave' who wrote under Michael Moorcock's editorship in *New Worlds* magazine, and who prevented British science fiction from simply being an imitation of its American counterpart.

⁹ Stableford, *Scientific Romance*, p. 6. See also Aldiss and Wingrove, *Trillion*, p. 279 and Kincaid, *Very British Genre*, pp. 5-25.

in nature, and on moral and metaphysical philosophies' as its central theme. American writers, however, were 'mostly content to steer clear of this particular war of ideas.'¹⁰ Nevertheless, Stableford recognises that British sf, like its American counterpart, also engaged with the prospect of advancing technology. He notes the typical British response:

For the writers of scientific romance, the question of how future developments in technology would affect the organisation of society and the quality of human life was wide open. It was there to be explored, and it *needed* to be explored, because it was highly problematic. In this respect the attitude of British writers was characteristically different from the attitude of American writers of speculative fiction. American writers of fantastic fiction [...] did not appear to see the development of powerful and versatile technologies as problematic at all; those who did saw the problem as something that could be corrected by a relatively minor adjustment of attitude. There were anxious science fiction writers and pessimistic science fiction writers, but neither the anxiety nor the pessimism cut as deep as the parallel feelings in Britain. Because the intensity of suspicion was missing.¹¹

Whilst Stableford is correct in locating anxiety and pessimism in British sf's responses to technological development, such emotions also inform the British disaster narrative. In the pre-World War II transfigurative mode, they underpin the novels' perception of their contemporary contexts as irredeemably flawed or corrupt. As a consequence, this thesis reads such transfigurative narratives as an additional method by which British science fiction explored 'the organisation of society and the quality of human life.' Like the British scientific romance's treatment of technological change, the British transfigurative disaster novel rejected the notion of 'relatively minor

¹⁰ Stableford, *Scientific Romance*, p. 6.

¹¹ Stableford, *Scientific Romance*, p. 26.

adjustment[s] in attitude.’ Indeed, it favoured radical and apocalyptic modification of the current society.

Stableford’s omission of an analysis of disaster literature is addressed directly by Nicholas Ruddick, whose book, *Ultimate Island: On The Nature Of British Science Fiction* (1993), is in some ways a condensed reworking of *Scientific Romance in Britain*. Though it is not the sole critical account of British sf, Ruddick’s work is unique in its examination of British disaster fiction. In its focus on the theme of disaster, *Ultimate Island* closes a gap in Stableford’s text and asserts the case for a ‘British science fiction’. Ruddick develops this assertion into an argument for a ‘British disaster tradition’ ‘strongly and positively influenced by’ Wells,¹² defined by its affinity with mainstream British literature, the motif of the island as a site of Darwinian struggle, and the theme of disaster. His recognition of the importance of the island motif (in terms of both physical and psychological space) to disaster fiction, and the thematic and conceptual associations that fiction shares with mainstream British literature, presents a reasoned case for a nationally specific subgenre of catastrophe narratives within Western literature.

Ruddick states that ‘if the island is a dominant motif in British science fiction, then the catastrophe is a dominant subject matter.’¹³ This, he argues, is difficult to explain when one considers the fact that neither the island of Britain, nor its inhabitants, has actually suffered catastrophe to

¹² Ruddick, *Ultimate Island*, p. 51.

¹³ Ruddick, *Ultimate Island*, p. 97.

any significant degree, 'at least not for several centuries before the period under scrutiny [i.e. before World War II].'¹⁴ Consequently, he argues that the British disaster narrative is the result of an 'anticipation' of events that arose from a sense of social decay during the *fin de siècle*, and later, from the recognition of the decline of empire.¹⁵ This thesis adopts a similar perspective, in that it reads disaster fiction as symptomatic of its socio-political context. However, where Ruddick's approach to the British disaster form offers a sweeping view of twentieth-century literature, this thesis examines the way in which pre-World War II transfigurative texts offer a series of anxious reflections on a changing British cultural landscape.

For Ruddick, the catastrophe scenario was the most explicit and imaginatively pessimistic response to cultural change in Britain. However, the implications of this assessment are never fully realised in Ruddick's study. Thus, where Ruddick offers a general discussion of the disaster literature of the time, this thesis interrogates the transformative form specifically and at greater depth, with increased attention to cultural context, to provide the first fully engaged analysis of the period's key novels.

Drawing out human vulnerability, isolation, and literal or potential invasion as 'the key characteristics of the British disaster-scenario',¹⁶ Ruddick

¹⁴ Ruddick, *Ultimate Island*, p. 97.

¹⁵ Ruddick, *Ultimate Island*, pp. 100-01.

¹⁶ Ruddick, *Ultimate Island*, p. 109.

concludes that the 'threatened or actual incursion into private space, represented by Island nation, home territory or insular self' is the defining quality of British disaster literature.¹⁷ Unfortunately, he does not consider the narrative function of such incursions. Whether they are a realised invasion (as in *The War of the Worlds*) or more metaphoric (*The Purple Cloud*, *The Poison Belt*, *Nordenholt's Million*), the arrival of alien invaders, purple clouds, poison belts, inundations, blights and falling moons are *initiating events*. Particularly, what he overlooks is how the disasters they create open speculative spaces for anxious social criticism and wish fulfilment fantasizing. In this instance, Ruddick overlooks a category of British sf where the incursions *per se* are less important than the social critiques and remodelling such intrusions allow.

The propensity for gloom that Ruddick observes in British science fiction often expresses, as Patrick Parrinder has noted, a deep-seated wish to see society destroyed.¹⁸ Ruddick's explanation for this phenomenon echoes Susan Sontag's 'The Imagination of Disaster' (1965), which contends that American sf films of the 1950s sublimate the audience's sense of 'unremitting banality and inconceivable terror' arising from their 'unbearably humdrum' existence and their 'terrors – real or anticipated.'¹⁹ He argues 'that the aesthetic strength of a catastrophe fiction depends on an effective balance being maintained in the text between the anxiety

¹⁷ Ruddick, *Ultimate Island*, p. 109.

¹⁸ See Patrick Parrinder, 'H. G. Wells and the Fiction of Catastrophe', in *Renaissance and Modern Studies*, 28 (1984), 40-58 (p. 52) and Ruddick, *Ultimate Island*, p. 111.

¹⁹ Susan Sontag, 'The Imagination of Disaster', in *Science Fiction: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. by Mark Rose (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1956), pp. 209-25 (pp. 224-25).

evoked by an envisionable end of the world and the desire to make a clean break with the present.’²⁰ However, this is only partly accurate with regards to the transfigurative disaster text. The anxiety expressed in the pre-World War II novels is not ‘evoked by an envisionable end of the world’ but by a growing unease regarding the direction in which society is developing. There is, undoubtedly, a ‘desire to make a clean break with the present’ but that desire is informed by a yearning for cultural transfiguration, for the removal of what are perceived as specific social and/or political ills.

Ruddick acknowledges the emotional oscillation between anxiety and desire found in many disaster narratives. Yet he fails to examine this tension in any great detail and, as such, *Ultimate Island* does not uncover the critical nature of disaster fiction produced in Britain before World War II, or the centrality of social criticism and wish fulfilment fantasy to that fiction.

Claire Curtis explores the anxiety-desire dichotomy characterizing (what is identified in this study as) the transfigurative disaster scenario more generally in *Postapocalyptic Fiction and the Social Contract* (2010). She notes:

postapocalyptic fiction speaks both to our deepest fears and to our desire to start over again. Postapocalyptic fiction describes our fears (of science and technology, of power and incompetence, of the random and un-controllable, of

²⁰ Ruddick, *Ultimate Island*, p. 125.

extinction and, of course, death) and like the horror genre, the catharsis of seeing total destruction either relieves that fear or awakens a need to act to prevent it. Simultaneously postapocalyptic fiction offers the fantasy of starting over.²¹

To some extent Curtis' comments inform the argument at the heart of this study. However, her work examines post-catastrophe recovery as means of redefining the social contract.²² Unlike this thesis, which explores how desire and wish fulfilment inform social remodelling, she takes Hobbesian and Lockean approaches to her examination of post-apocalyptic restructuring. In doing so, she divides her discussion between 'modern texts', which emphasise the desirability of the post disaster conditions; 'pre-modern', which 'shift their emphasis away from desirability to the immutability of the conditions'; and 'post-modern', which shift the emphasis away to 'the uncertainty of the deliberations' in the social conditions after the cataclysm.²³ Thus, while her study of post-apocalyptic fiction is broad, it provides useful distinctions between various types of post-apocalyptic societies.²⁴ Accordingly, the transfigurative disaster narratives analysed in this thesis conform to Curtis' 'modern' type in that their post-catastrophe

²¹Claire P. Curtis, *Postapocalyptic Fiction and the Social Contract: "We'll Not Go Home Again"* (Lanham: Lexington, 2010), p. 5.

²² Curtis, *Postapocalyptic Fiction*, p. 3.

²³ Curtis, *Postapocalyptic Fiction*, p. 2.

²⁴ Of the many scholarly works on disaster narratives outside of science fiction criticism Curtis' work is most notable in relation to this thesis. Most examine 'apocalyptic impulses' in novels, myth or the mood of contemporary culture. Collections including Saul Friedländer's *Visions of Apocalypse, End or Rebirth?* (1985), Malcolm Bull's *Apocalypse Theory and the Ends of the World* (1995), James Berger's *After the End: Representations of Post-apocalypse* (1999), David Leigh's *Apocalyptic Patterns in Twentieth-century Fiction* (2008), and Walliss and Newport's *The End All around Us: Apocalyptic Texts and Popular Culture* (2009) investigate the varied expressions of hope and loss in the twentieth century and provide useful insight into the ways in which 'the end times' have been expressed in narrative. However, standing outside of science fiction criticism these texts address such a diversity of work that the 'apocalyptic' becomes an amorphous concept, associated with a multitude of impulses throughout history. By focusing only on literature, Curtis avoids this amorphous approach.

situations present the particular rebirths of human society as positive developments.

While Ruddick and Curtis have developed the critical insight into disaster fiction, one of the most influential writers on the subject has been Brian Aldiss. Yet his work *Billion Year Spree* (1973, later revised and expanded with David Wingrove as *Trillion Year Spree*, 1986) emphasises the need for a more focused approach to British disaster science fiction. Aldiss offers a substantial history of sf, within which his discussions of the disaster form are embedded. Thus, his work favours breadth over depth. Like Stableford and Ruddick, Aldiss distinguishes between British and American sf. Although more wide-ranging in its treatment of science fiction than Stableford's text, Aldiss' history recognises that the catastrophe theme is dominant in British sf. He attributes this inclination towards catastrophe as either 'something to do with the collapse of the British Empire, or the back to nature movement, or a general feeling that industrialisation had gone too far, or all three.'²⁵ Whilst this vague account is clearly an unsatisfactory critical position, Aldiss' brief treatment of the British disaster tradition has been influential. His problematic and dismissive term 'cosy catastrophe' has become synonymous with the disaster fiction of John Wyndham, including *The Day of the Triffids* (1951) and *The Kraken Wakes* (1953). Aldiss argues that such fiction addressed contemporary fears by focussing on survival rather than on the horrors of catastrophe. Throughout these narratives, Aldiss suggests, 'the hero

²⁵ Aldiss and Wingrove, *Trillion*, p. 279.

should have a pretty good time [...] while everyone else is dying off.’²⁶ Aldiss’ derision is echoed in his terminology, which does such fiction a disservice, glossing over, as it does, the complex set of cultural anxieties informing the texts and the frequently unpleasant realities of the post-disaster environments. It is more accurate to identify Wyndham’s catastrophe stories as transformative disaster fictions since this privileges the texts’ defining narrative impulse of societal transformation based on contemporary anxiety over what such stories avoid (such as graphic accounts of the horror of catastrophe).

The Wyndhamesque transformative disaster narrative arose out of Cold War fears and addressed the new set of apprehensions that developed in Britain following World War II.²⁷ As such, it was a culturally resonant expression of sf’s formal and thematic preoccupation with the consequences of social and political change. Whilst it belonged to the disaster ‘tradition’ that had burgeoned during the first half of the twentieth century, it lacked the unambiguous positivity of the transfigurative disaster scenario.

The antecedent relationship between pre-World War II transfigurative disaster fiction and the transformative disaster fiction of the 1950s and beyond is evidenced in Jo Walton’s short article, ‘Who survives the Cosy

²⁶ Aldiss and Wingrove, *Trillion*, p. 280.

²⁷ Alongside fears of invasion or supersession it is often informed by paranoia and unease at the devastating potential of new technologies and scientific experimentation.

Catastrophe?’²⁸ Although Walton only discusses texts published after 1951, her observations are equally relevant to the fiction produced before World War II. Drawing on Aldiss, she explains that most British disaster texts written before sf’s New Wave of the 1960s were ‘cosy’ or ‘semi-cosy’.²⁹ That is, according to the categorisation identified in this study, they were transformative in nature. She accounts for this by concluding that the ‘cosy catastrophe’ is actually a response to the position of the middle-class in a post-war Britain where the Labour government had founded the National Health Service and ensured free public education, even at university level. As a result, to some extent, the class structure was breaking down. The middle classes had to pay taxes to support the masses. As such, the ‘cosy catastrophe’ is, for Walton, the product of a middle-class desire to see the working class eradicated.³⁰ When she asks, ‘who survives?’, her answer is white, middle-class men. They are not survivalists, but they are resourceful and often have some knowledge of science. They are usually young, and find ‘nice’, middle-class women to be their love interests.³¹ In other words, such texts are, like the pre-World War II transfigurative disaster narratives, expressions of cultural anxieties and wish fulfilment fantasies.

Walton defines the ‘cosy catastrophe’s’ major characteristics. She notes that firstly, the authors are British, but distinguished from other British

²⁸ Jo Walton, ‘Who Survives The Cosy Catastrophe?’, *Foundation*, 33 (2005), 34-39.

²⁹ Walton, ‘Who Survives’, p. 37.

³⁰ Walton, ‘Who Survives’, p. 37.

³¹ Walton, ‘Who Survives’, p. 37.

disaster writers in that they were usually adult before World War II and published their novels primarily between 1951 and 1977. Secondly, there is no real consideration of plausibility for the catastrophe, although the disasters are always treated seriously. Thirdly, nothing really unpleasant is described in detail – there is little concentration on the suffering of the dying millions – and the novels are upbeat about the possibility of building a better world in the future. Indeed, it should be noted that while not all of the novels are upbeat in their depiction of the devastated civilisation, or are not wholly transfigurative in the transformations they present, they do often conclude optimistically by envisioning the possibilities for rebuilding in the future (John Boland's *White August* (1955), J. T. McIntosh's *One in Three Hundred* (1954) and *The Fittest* (1955) and Charles Eric Maine's *The Tide Went Out* (1958) are relevant examples) or unqualified in their view of post-disaster social organisation (for example, *The Day of the Triffids*). Walton continues her account of the conventions of the 'cosy catastrophe' by noting that, fourthly, despite the time in which they were written (during the Cold War) they do not address nuclear war directly and, as such, they are to be distinguished from post-Holocaust novels. Fifthly, the cosy catastrophe is not written from many viewpoints; it follows closely one character, or a small group of characters. And finally, structurally, cosy catastrophes spend very little time on the catastrophe itself. Walton observes, 'the disaster isn't the important thing. The fact that ten per cent of the human race survive unscathed is what is important',³² so that, following descriptions of the abandoned landscape, the process of

³² Walton, 'Who Survives', p. 35.

(re)building can begin.

The clearly defined narrative patterns identified by Walton did not suddenly emerge after 1945, however. Such catastrophe fiction was a development of the traditions that had been established following *The War of the Worlds* in successive transfigurative disaster narratives. Walton's acknowledgment that *The War of the Worlds* had 'a lot of influence' on the 'cosy catastrophe'³³ is a typical critical perspective on the genre, which often isolates the 'cosy catastrophe' - or the transformative text - as a post-World War II phenomenon without acknowledging the literary tradition that had developed between the appearance of Wells' Martians and Wyndham's triffids. *The Purple Cloud*, *The Poison Belt*, *Nordenholt's Million*, *Deluge and Dawn*, and *The Hopkins Manuscript* demonstrate all but – obviously – the Cold War context of Walton's list of the defining features of the 'cosy catastrophe'. Indeed, in identifying specifically historic influences on the post-World War II 'cosy catastrophe', Walton does not acknowledge, or recognise, that such catastrophe fiction is part of a clear literary continuum reaching back to the *fin de siècle*. This oversight only serves to emphasise the need for a considered critical analysis of the pre-War transfigurative disaster narrative to ensure a more comprehensive understanding of subsequent transformative disaster fiction.

³³ Walton, 'Who Survives', p. 35.

Transformative disaster fiction describes texts that involve transformation caused by catastrophe; however, whether transfigurative or deteriorative, this transformation is achieved through either 'departures' or 'returns' following the disaster. Thus, in presenting its emergent post-disaster societies as positive transformations, pre-war transfigurative disaster fiction falls into these two 'departure'/'return' categories. 'Departures' describe those texts in which the post-catastrophe civilisation is radically different from the pre-cataclysmic world. *The Purple Cloud*, *Nordenholt's Million*, *Deluge* and *Dawn* all fall into this category. In contrast, 'returns' are texts in which the pre-catastrophe society is reinstated and, in the transfigurative mode, is improved upon. *The War of the Worlds*, *The Poison Belt* and *The Hopkins Manuscript* are all 'returns'.³⁴ In signifying their wish fulfilment fantasies through 'departures' and 'returns', transfigurative disaster narratives offer an appealing sense of continuance to readers. Accordingly, the satisfaction of reading transfigurative disaster novels derives, in part, from the fact that the 'end of the world' is, in actuality, the very opposite.

The pleasure gained from reading disaster narratives can be understood through Frank Kermode's seminal work *The Sense of an Ending* (1967). In his influential book, Kermode suggests that literary endings provide a sense of structure missing in real life. He explains that:

³⁴ Although *The Hopkins Manuscript* complicates this by depicting a 'return' based wish fulfilment fantasy followed by a second cataclysm resulting in a pessimistically represented (deteriorative) 'departure'.

Men, like poets, rush 'into the midst,' *in medias res*, when they are born; they also die *in mediis rebus*, and to make sense of their span they need fictive concords with origins and ends, such as give meaning to lives and to poems.³⁵

The Sense of an Ending argues that fiction provides a meaningful beginning, middle and end not necessarily present in life. It asserts that the thought of living within a sequence of events between which there is no relation, pattern, or progression is unthinkable. For this reason, humans create narratives. 'The fiction of transition', claims Kermode, 'is our way of registering the conviction that the end is immanent rather than imminent; it reflects our lack of confidence in ends, our mistrust of the apportioning of history to epochs of this and that.'³⁶ In short, he explains '[n]ovels, then, have beginnings, ends, and potentiality, even if the world has not.'³⁷ This concept of narrative as a meaning-making process can be seen, Kermode explains, in the human narrativisation of time itself.

Kermode asserts that humanity imposes a structure upon time in order to understand it better. He explains this idea using the example of a ticking clock; the unending succession of tick, tick, tick is narrativised as 'tick-tock'. As such, the successive ticking obtains a beginning ('tick') and an end ('tock'): a tiny genesis followed by a tiny apocalypse.³⁸ This narrativisation helps foster an understanding of the world as it imposes a structure onto a continuum. Tick-tock has a beginning, middle and an end.

³⁵ Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1967), p. 7.

³⁶ Kermode, *Sense of an Ending*, p. 101.

³⁷ Kermode, *Sense of an Ending*, p. 138.

³⁸ Kermode, *Sense of an Ending*, p. 45.

We perceive duration only when the ticking is organised into tick and tock. Kermode takes the tick-tock 'to be a model of what we call plot, an organisation that humanises time by giving it form; and the interval between tock and tick represents purely successive, disorganised time of the sort that we need to humanise.'³⁹ Indeed, the desire for an ending helps us to accept the middle, the *in medias res-in mediis rebus* in which each individual exists, as something complete. The apocalyptic tale takes this desire furthest by providing a sense of closure and understanding in its fictional representations of last things.

Kermode's *tick-tock* conceptualisation of narrative provides a useful way of considering transfigurative disaster fiction. While on one level the transfigurative novel has a physical beginning, middle and end, narratively it expands Kermode's *tick-tock* paradigm. The transfigurative disaster establishes the contemporary (or near future) setting (tick), depicts a catastrophic event (tock) before concluding with a new beginning (tick). By offering a *tick-tock-tick* structure, transfigurative disaster fiction does more than merely offer meaningful ends; it provides a sense of continuation and continuity as the novels explore what lies beyond 'the end'. The presence of the end as an opportunity for renewal humanises the 'purely successive, disorganised time' of the interval between tock and tick. In this way, the transfigurative disaster novel is a mode that affirms the continuation of life while providing potentially satisfying ends to contemporary dissatisfactions.

³⁹ Kermode, *Sense of an Ending*, p. 45.

In their balancing of 'last things' (tock) with 'first things' (tick), the transfigurative texts analysed in this study belong to that branch of science fiction that Warren Wagar terms 'secular eschatology'.⁴⁰ That is, each novel is 'a worldly study of world's ends that [either] ignores religious belief or puts the old [religious] visions to use as metaphors for modern anxiety.'⁴¹ In the insightful and comprehensive *Terminal Visions: The Literature Of Last Things* (1982), Wagar presents an informative study of a broad range of eschatological fiction. He examines disaster literature in its Western context, noting national differences (and speculating over the reasons for the preponderance of natural over human-made disasters in post-war Britain,⁴² for example), providing a critical examination of the wealth of literature detailing end times, doomsday scenarios and apocalyptic visions of the future. His work is commendable in its scope, yet its breadth militates against extensive textual analyses. Nevertheless, he makes the important observation that disaster fiction has a psychological relevance. This is evidenced by the fact that most disaster fiction is future orientated. Wagar argues that:

of all the disenchantments in our culture, visions of the end are the bluntest and most powerful [...] Through their images, Western man expresses disbelief that his civilisation can endure, in anything like its present form. He becomes a nay-sayer, and his nay-saying helps prepare the way for a better or at least different world.⁴³

⁴⁰ Wagar, *Terminal Visions*, p. 4.

⁴¹ Wagar, *Terminal Visions*, p. 4.

⁴² Wagar, *Terminal Visions*, p. 27.

⁴³ Wagar, *Terminal Visions*, p. 7.

Wagar's acknowledgement of the existence of optimistic and pessimistic post-disaster scenarios anticipates the distinction made here between transfigurative and deteriorative disaster fiction. For Wagar, such texts not only function as catalysts for a new beginning (that is, they are *transformative*), but also embody the internal anxieties of modern humankind.

Throughout his study, Wagar explores the psychological need for such works. He notes the possibility that 'visions of the end express neurotic feelings of guilt'.⁴⁴ He states that since childhood we are warned of the penalties of misconduct and the failure to obey authority. Hence readers consume literature about end times, Wagar argues, because they feel guilty about misconduct, whether real or imagined. He quotes Martha Wolfenstein's position that 'fear of death may express an unconscious expectation of talion punishment for death wishes towards others'.⁴⁵ Such a position is problematic in relation to the transfigurative disaster novel, which seems to offer the reward of survival vicariously to readers through the experiences of triumphant protagonists. Wagar argues, however, that ultimately the reward of reading catastrophe fiction lies in the evasion of death, something that is particularly true of the transfigurative disaster narrative with its 'tick-tock-tick' structure. Indeed, the attraction of this fiction lies with the triumph of life:

In almost every instance they [disaster narratives] confront in

⁴⁴ Wagar, *Terminal Visions*, p. 69.

⁴⁵ Wagar, *Terminal Visions*, p. 69.

a uniquely dramatic form the fact of death. They enable us to imagine ourselves heroically evading death, as we identify with the survivors of the world disaster. They also quite often give us a chance to re-live anxieties of separation from loved ones, and the healing that occurs when new ties are formed or old ones restored. All the central impulses of Eros, the wish for life and love, come into play in the typical eschatological tale, and propel its characters through their end-time struggles. If sometimes Thanatos, with its lust for destruction and self-destruction, gets the upper hand, the author generally takes pains to show that his own sympathies, nevertheless, lie with Eros.⁴⁶

Despite the sympathies that lie with Eros within disaster fiction, Wagar is careful not to dismiss the importance of Thanatos. He notes that such literature is often designed to satisfy the hunger of its readers (and sometimes its writers) for violence and death,⁴⁷ pointing out that many writers have used the genre to explore the self-destructive qualities of human nature, whilst celebrating personal struggles for survival. As Wagar remarks:

[Disaster narratives] not only help us cope with fears of death and separation. They grant the individual a unique opportunity to face and perhaps conquer the fears of powerlessness that begin for all of us in earliest childhood. The last man, or one of a handful of last men, is a figure of immeasurable power and importance. Whoever he was before the end he is now someone to be reckoned with.⁴⁸

Disaster novels (in either the transfigurative or deteriorative modes, or occupying a transitional position within this spectrum) reinforce the importance of the individual through the transformation from a 'nobody' into a 'somebody'. As Walton points out, this 'somebody' is most

⁴⁶ Wagar, *Terminal Visions*, p. 70.

⁴⁷ Wagar, *Terminal Visions*, p. 76.

⁴⁸ Wagar, *Terminal Visions*, p. 74.

commonly a middle-class white male in British disaster narratives.

Wagar notes that after the end, it is possible to start again with a rediscovery of the Garden of Eden in which the hero can 'prove himself' to be a man. Or, in Kermode's terms, the surviving male character(s) confirm the texts as 'tick-tock-tick' narratives. Thus, in disaster narratives, the Eros beholds a double triumph: the protagonist not only survives the catastrophe, he is released from the constraints of the old order. He is no longer an insignificant member of an anonymising society but an essential component in a new beginning. Such a position is asserted again and again in British disaster fiction; each novel examined in this thesis, from *The War of the Worlds* to *The Hopkins Manuscript*, emphasises the importance of the individual through the act of survival and through his role in the transfigurative reconstruction of society as part of its wish fulfilment fantasy.⁴⁹ The pleasure of these texts derives, in part, from the struggle for survival that is experienced vicariously by the reader through the narrative.⁵⁰ What transfigurative disaster fiction presents is the triumph of the individual Eros within a Thanatotic environment. As Freud notes, the ultimate goal of the psyche is to achieve pleasure and to avoid 'un-pleasure'.⁵¹ In reality, this goal is problematised by the seemingly opposed life (Erotic) and death (Thanatotic) drives, as the fulfilment of one is the failure to fulfil the other. However, both the life drive and the death

⁴⁹ In post-war transformative disaster fiction this survival is not always literal, but individuals develop an elevated importance through death, as in Charles Eric Maine's *The Tide Went Out* (1977).

⁵⁰ See Joanna Bourke, *Fear: A Cultural History* (London: Virago Press, 2005), p. 222.

⁵¹ Sigmund Freud, *Civilisation and its Discontents*, trans. by David McLintock (London: Penguin Books, 2002), p. 71.

drive can provide psychological fulfilment (pleasure) through reading transfigurative disaster fiction. The reader can simultaneously experience the pleasures offered by both Eros and Thanatos in the destruction of society, the survival of the protagonist(s), and the founding of a new world. Such satisfactions represent the universal attraction of transfigurative disaster fictions.

In examining the social contexts from which pre-World War II transfigurative disaster novels emerged, this study looks beyond this general appeal. It reads each text as an anxious social critique of its milieu. Such a contextual approach to disaster literature is taken in Mary Manjikian's *Apocalypse and Post-politics: The Romance of the End* (2012). Manjikian discusses post-9/11 American eschatological anxiety in relation to 'the sorts of speculative fiction created in Victorian Britain.'⁵² In doing so she examines literature from two nations at the height of their power and draws comparisons between them.

Tonally, *Apocalypse and Post-politics* is uneven, but it is insightful in some of its readings of twenty-first century American novels. However, Manjikian's choice of British fiction is unusual. Despite claiming that she will 'draw parallels between the apocalyptic appetite in Victorian Britain and the United States',⁵³ she does not compare the two nations' disaster narratives. Instead she focuses on *Erewhon* (Samuel Butler, 1872), *Gulliver's Travels* (Jonathan Swift, 1726), *News From Nowhere* (William

⁵² Mary Manjikian, *Apocalypse and Post-politics: The Romance of the End* (Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2012), p. 5 and p. 7.

⁵³ Manjikian, *Apocalypse*, pp. 7-8.

Morris, 1890), *The First Men in the Moon* (H. G. Wells, 1901) and 'The Machine Stops' (E. M. Forster, 1905). Her justification for this choice is unclear. She explains that these books are useful as they 'provided a new lens or new stance for considering old problems' regarding human history and its place in the world.⁵⁴ For Manjikian, then, these texts offer an insight into Britain at the height of its imperial power and enable her to make contextual comparisons between them and modern American apocalyptic literature.

In her discussions of American fiction, she explores transformative works like *The Passage* (Justin Cronin, 2010) alongside post-apocalyptic novels including *The Road* (Cormac McCarthy, 2006) and the post-9/11 *Falling Man* (Don DeLillo, 2006) and *The Second Plane* (Martin Amis, 2008). She does not distinguish between types of disaster/apocalyptic narratives, but categorises them as either 'linear apocalypses' involving 'Armageddon', where the state is 'smashed', or 'circular apocalypses', where this 'smashing' creates 'a new space for liberation'.⁵⁵ In the linear apocalypse 'history or ideology essentially stops' and 'the state collapses'.⁵⁶ Accordingly it is akin to the deteriorative 'departure' type of transformative novel. However, Manjikian's 'linear' type is less precise. It makes no distinction, for example, between the transformative and the apocalyptic or post-apocalyptic forms of the disaster scenario. Equally, the circular apocalyptic tale appears similar to the transfigurative 'return' disaster text but, again, it does not distinguish between the various forms of disaster

⁵⁴ Manjikian, *Apocalypse*, p. 13.

⁵⁵ Manjikian, *Apocalypse*, pp. 147-69.

⁵⁶ Manjikian, *Apocalypse*, p. 168.

fiction. Manjikian asserts that the circular apocalypse involves the ‘rebirth (or resurrection) of the nation in pure form.’⁵⁷ While this implies a departure/return distinction, in actuality the reappearance of ‘the nation’ in the circular apocalypses Manjikian discusses indicates a variety of ‘returns’ rather than returns *or* departures. Thus, the circular apocalypse ‘posits a new world in which the state is viewed as the solution’, and ‘citizens do not ask *if* the state will ultimately come back, but when it will come back.’⁵⁸

In effect, Manjikian’s classifications are a simplification of the observable spectrum of disaster narratives. Whilst her work provides a useful framework for her discussion of American literature, by offering a ‘linear’ – ‘circular’ dichotomy she generalises the diversity of post-catastrophe environments found in contemporary American disaster fiction.

Nevertheless, *Apocalypse and Post-politics* demonstrates the growing academic interest in reading disaster narratives in context. Manjikian sees apocalyptic texts as ‘uniquely beguiling to those writers and artists who worked within the context of power – whether in Victorian Britain or in the contemporary United States.’⁵⁹ Thus, she asserts that ‘imagining the demise of one’s Empire serves both psychological and political ends.’⁶⁰ Her focus is, however, on the politics of disaster writing rather than on the psychology. Indeed, she presents her work as of particular interest to

⁵⁷ Manjikian, *Apocalypse*, p. 172.

⁵⁸ Manjikian, *Apocalypse*, p.171.

⁵⁹ Manjikian, *Apocalypse*, p. 7.

⁶⁰ Manjikian, *Apocalypse*, p. 7.

political scientists.⁶¹ In contemporary America, she claims, disaster fiction is a response to 'unipolarity and imperial foreign policy' and offers a critique of 'foreign policy and the discourse of exceptionalism.'⁶² Accordingly, she sees the novels as a response to their context and a means of building 'national identity.'⁶³

Despite its differences from Manjikian's study, this thesis recognises the value of examining disaster fiction in context. Avoiding Manjikian's comparative cultural, historic and generic approach, it provides a more focused analysis of particularly British socio-cultural anxieties. In so doing, it discusses the various treatments of degeneration, technological change, efficiency, evolutionary progress and patriarchal or national authority found in a coherent body of fiction. It draws on Ruddick's recognition of the sense of social decay that emerged in Britain during the *fin de siècle*, and, later, from the decline of empire. It acknowledges his position that disaster fiction embodied a 'desire to make a clean break with the present', but argues that that desire was informed by an urge for cultural transfiguration, for the removal of what were perceived as specific social and/or political dissatisfactions. In its recognition of the transfigurative nature of Victorian and interwar disaster narratives it augments Kermode's thesis of a narrativised sense of an ending (tick-tock) into a sense of continuation and a new beginning (tick-tock-tick). It builds on Wagar's recognition of the psychological and cultural influences found within disaster narratives through its focus on specifically British texts and contexts. In noting how

⁶¹ Manjikian, *Apocalypse*, pp. 13-14.

⁶² Manjikian, *Apocalypse*, pp. 7-8.

⁶³ Manjikian, *Apocalypse*, p. 8.

British disaster novels affirm the position of the individual in their transformation of a 'nobody' into a 'somebody', it also argues that such fiction offers examples of the triumph of individual Eros within a Thanatotic environment. More importantly, however, in its readings of how British disaster narratives portray the 'disenchantments of our culture' before fictionally preparing the way for a different world, it reveals how an understanding of the cultural and historic specificity of each text exposes those disenchantments most clearly.

Formally, this thesis adopts a chronological historical structure. Chapter One: Invasion and Invigoration: H. G. Wells' *The War of the Worlds* draws upon the wealth of critical material on Wells' scientific romances, as well as Wells' autobiographical work, and examines the novel in relation to Freudian notions of Eros, Thanatos and civilisation. It discusses the way in which the text expresses contemporary anxieties regarding British complacency and potential decline. In doing so, this chapter uncovers the way in which these anxieties are resolved at the conclusion in a 'return' wish fulfilment fantasy, in which religious ideas are problematised and scientific progress is affirmed. Wells' post-disaster Britain represents a return to a civilisation defined by ambition for human biological, intellectual and scientific advancement.

Although tonally different from *The War of the Worlds*, M. P. Shiel's *The Purple Cloud* also addresses *fin-de-siècle* concerns regarding social and cultural decline. However, in Shiel's novel these are embodied in more

extreme philosophies of religion, science and race. Utilising primary research and drawing upon the work of Thomas Carlyle, Chapter Two: A Decadent's Dilemma examines the manner in which Shiel's disaster scenario forms a 'departure' wish fulfilment fantasy in which a corrupt contemporary civilisation is eradicated and replaced with what (it is implied) will become a racially pure 'overrace' whose beliefs are a combination of scientific rationality and spirituality.

Although clearly influenced by *The Purple Cloud's* means of destruction, Arthur Conan Doyle's *The Poison Belt* does not posit the radical break with the past found in Shiel's text. Here the poisoned population re-awakens, positively transformed by its experience. Thus, Chapter Three: Spiritual Renaissance adopts a socio-historical perspective to analyse how Conan Doyle employs the catastrophe scenario as a means of taking a 'snapshot' of contemporary British culture. Informed by Victorian anxieties of social degeneration and by impulses towards spiritualism, the novel, like *The Purple Cloud*, deploys the catastrophe narrative to explore religious ideas. It is lightened by humorously highlighting behaviour patterns deemed unfavourable in the protagonist's contemporary environment before establishing a 'return' wish fulfilment fantasy of social transfiguration.

Distanced from the *fin-de-siècle* period and early twentieth-century anxieties of complacency, degeneration and decline, J. J. Connington's *Nordenholt's Million* is more overtly political. The novel reflects the shift in tone that followed World War I as the transfigurative disaster narrative

became more explicitly engaged with twentieth-century political and technological concerns. Rather than looking back to Victorian values, like *The Purple Cloud* and *The Poison Belt*, Connington's text is informed by political disillusionment and the social changes occurring in post-war Britain. Thus, Chapter Four: Totalitarian Opportunism examines how *Nordenholt's Million* uses cataclysmic events to facilitate the establishment of a non-democratic, eugenically constructed, highly efficient utopia. Here the disaster is seized upon as a means of social engineering; it serves to justify the extreme actions of its protagonists and their drive toward social and scientific change. The society created at the conclusion, radically altered by authoritarianism and presented as an improvement on pre-disaster civilisation, is a clear 'departure' fantasy. It draws explicitly from the extreme political views burgeoning in Europe at the time.

Equally extreme in their call for the eradication of democracy, Sydney Fowler Wright's *Deluge* and *Dawn* provide positive expressions of a return to a primitivist, more patriarchal existence. In their depictions of survival and destruction these texts explicitly celebrate the satisfaction of Eros in a Thanatotic landscape. Accordingly, Chapter Five: Back to Nature argues how, by portraying such an existence favourably, the two novels are critical of their contemporary socio-cultural milieu and present emancipation and modern technological advancement as impediments to patriarchal authority and male virility. Hence, the novels' wish fulfilment fantasy is a 'departure' based primarily upon the eradication of physical comfort, male cowardice, female autonomy and their social and biological

implications. Unlike *Nordenholt's Million*, where the five million survivors must be led forcibly through dictatorship and authority towards survival and progress, *Deluge* and *Dawn* depict the survivors desiring strong leadership and authority, willingly ridding themselves of the trappings of their pre-cataclysm society.

Despite their differing pre- and post-World War I contexts, for Sam Moskowitz Fowler Wright is comparable to Shiel. He argues that the unrelenting dramatisation of personal obsessions in their fiction (Shiel's racism and his wish to eliminate Judeo-Christian religious perspectives in favour of science and Fowler Wright's hatred of scientific advancement) mean that they both demonstrate a 'radicalism verging on the insane.'⁶⁴ Indeed, both authors present views that are more extreme than those found in *The War of the Worlds* or *The Poison Belt*. They each present a radical scenario – the destruction of civilisation and the near-extermination of the population – as the only means of contemporary change. While Shiel's text is a product of *fin-de-siècle* anxieties, Fowler Wright's work exemplifies the necessity for an authoritarian overman, a quality it shares with *Nordenholt's Million*. Indeed, between the wars the British disaster tradition came to be dominated by the advocacy and championing of a strong, dictatorial, male leader. As such, the expressions of wish fulfilment found in these interwar texts are particularly revealing of their political climates, particularly in their advocacy of dictatorship.

⁶⁴ Sam Moskowitz, 'Shiel and Heard: The Neglected Thinkers of SF', *Fantastic SF Stories*, 9 (1960), 36-51 (pp. 48-49).

R. C. Sherriff's *The Hopkins Manuscript*, written on the brink of World War II, counters these pre-1933 (the year Hitler became Chancellor of Germany) novels by exploring the devastating potential of powerful leaders and nationalism. The conclusion, *A Janus-Faced Conclusion*, argues that Sherriff's text, through its depiction of two disasters – the Moon's collision with Earth and a consequent war – unites the idealism of the transfigurative novel in its 'return' mode with the radical shifts associated with 'departure' texts. However, the 'departure' in *The Hopkins Manuscript* differs significantly from those that preceded it. It depicts the demise of Western civilisation and, for the first time, the living conditions for the protagonist are portrayed as markedly worse than before either cataclysm occurred. Thus *The Hopkins Manuscript* marks a significant shift in the genre. Where each of the previous texts had presented the cataclysm as an opportunity, *The Hopkins Manuscript* explores this only in the aftermath of the first cataclysm. With the second disaster, the novel adopts a pessimistic, deteriorative view of the post-catastrophe world. The conclusion argues that, in this way, the novel anticipates the shift that would occur in transformative disaster fiction after World War II as it moved away from transfigurative narratives to assume a more ambivalent attitude towards the physical and psychological consequences of catastrophe.

As Stableford suggests in *Heterocosms: Science Fiction in Context and Practice* (2007) the 'horrific occurrences' found in disaster narratives, 'are not simply violations of a natural order that need to be cancelled out; they

are important lessons to be learned, forcing their victims – and their readers – to reappraise and more accurately determine their place in the great scheme of things.’⁶⁵ Stableford’s observation reveals the prominence of the cognitive element active in the disaster scenario. As Darko Suvin points out, ‘Science fiction does not posit another superordinated and “more real” reality but an alternative on the same ontological level as the author’s empirical reality.’⁶⁶ In essence, Suvin indicates that sf offers an alternative perspective from which readers can reflect upon their empirical reality. The quality Suvin perceives as defining sf against other forms of fiction is its capacity to estrange the reader and provoke cognitive reflection on, and political action in, his or her contemporary environment. This cognitive aspect is explicitly foregrounded in the anxieties, social critiques and wish fulfilment fantasies of pre-war transfigurative disaster novels. What these narratives reveal, however, is not the dealienating, Marxist agenda Suvin favours, but often radical social and political views that now appear deeply problematic. By drawing out these views, this thesis exposes and explores the anxieties and fantasies shaping the cultural landscape of Britain between 1898 and 1939.

⁶⁵ Brian Stableford, *Heterocosms: Science Fiction in Context and Practice* (San Bernardino: Borgo, 2007), p. 61.

⁶⁶ Darko Suvin, *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction: On the Poetics and History of a Literary Genre* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), p. 71.

Chapter One

Invasion and Invigoration: H. G. Wells' *The War of the Worlds* (1898)

The War of the Worlds addresses, directly and through metaphor, a number of late nineteenth-century anxieties. Concerns over the nature of civilisation, the contemporary position of science, the role of religion, and Victorian complacency all inform the text. Gradually, these anxieties are transformed – and ultimately resolved – in a transfigurative ‘return’ wish fulfilment fantasy of human biological, intellectual and scientific advancement. In dramatizing and resolving such anxieties, Wells’ novel draws upon Huxleyan evolutionary ideas and anticipates many of the observations made later by Freud, particularly in *Civilisation and Its Discontents* (1930). Indeed, in terms of its philosophical thought, the text expresses and fulfils the Thanatotic or death drive both through its depictions of setting and its transmutation of fear into a source of excitement for the reader. Through the narrative trajectory, the life drive – Eros – is later satisfied by the renaissance that follows the Martian invaders’ demise.

Arguably, the most apparent cultural anxiety expressed through *The War of the Worlds* is a fear of Britain’s imperialist centre itself falling victim to imperialism. However, despite extensive critical material documenting Wells’ sociological views, debate remains around the text’s status as an expression of imperialist anxiety. Its overt allusions to imperialist practices led ‘many critics’ as Wagar points out, to ‘regard Wells’ tale as a

devastating critique of European imperialism'.¹ For example, Bernard Bergonzi in *The Early H.G. Wells* (1961) considers the text to be an expression of 'a certain guilty conscience about Imperialism'.² John Huntington notes that the novel is 'on the surface a tale of imperialist guilt' and Fredric Jameson similarly labels it an imperialist 'guilt fantasy on the part of the Victorian man who wonders whether the brutality with which he has used the colonial peoples [...] may not be visited on him.'³ Yet all of these assertions have remained largely undeveloped beyond their status as summarising statements. Other commentators, including Karl Beckson, note that *The War of the Worlds* 'suggests an ironic anti-imperialist perspective', but acknowledge, like Suvin, that this perspective is one which expresses a fear of invasion rather than a criticism of imperialism itself.⁴ Wagar comes to similar conclusions by relating *The War of the Worlds* to Wells' later works, as does Alexander C. Irvine in his examination of Wells' Darwinist preoccupations.⁵

In one of the most significant discussions of *The War of the Worlds*' position on colonialism and imperialism, John Rieder notes that the text

¹ Warren Wagar, *H. G. Wells: Traversing Time* (Hanover and London: Wesleyan University Press, 2004), p. 54.

² Bernard Bergonzi, *The Early H. G. Wells* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1961), p. 179.

³ John Huntington, 'Problems of an Amorous Utopian', in *Critical Essays on H.G. Wells*, ed. by John Huntington (Boston: Hall, 1991), pp. 136-47 (p. 143) and Fredric Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fiction* (London and New York: Verso, 2005), p. 265.

⁴ Karl Beckson, *London in the 1890s: A Cultural History* (New York: Norton 1992), p. 368 and Darko Suvin, 'Wells as the Turning Point of the SF Tradition', in *Critical Essays*, ed. by Huntington, pp. 23-33.

⁵ Alexander C. Irvine, '*The War of the Worlds* and the Disease of Imperialism', in *Flashes of the Fantastic: Selected Essays on the War of the Worlds*, ed. by David Ketterer (Westport CT: Greenwood Publishing, 2004), pp. 33-42 (p. 33).

displays a 'motive of humiliating imperial pride'.⁶ Arguing that *The War of the Worlds* is largely critical of colonial ideology, demonstrating 'indignation against colonial arrogance', he acknowledges that the novel demonstrates 'colonial insecurity', whilst also highlighting some of the ambiguities in the text.⁷ Hence, for Rieder, Wells' novel is a satire on colonialism, but its criticisms are undermined by ambiguity. One could read the Martians as 'rational agents seizing control of their destiny' or as 'victims of circumstance driven to desperate measures by the pressures of climatic change'.⁸ The resultant uncertainty that arises from this doubt around 'the notion of choice and self determination'⁹ means that the Martian's could be read sympathetically if interpreted as victims fighting for survival. Rieder's recognition of the 'contradictory values' found within the text, means that his discussion is illuminating, if not conclusive.¹⁰

The varied perspectives on whether *The War of the Worlds* is a critique of imperialism or an expression of fear at the thought of a complacent Britain invaded by a foreign 'other' is a consequence of what are, in fact, competing anxieties present in the text. The novel embodies both a fear of invasion and apprehension at a Britain grown complacent and facing the possibility of imperial decline. Indeed, it was written in a period of what

⁶ John Rieder, *Colonialism and the Emergence of Science Fiction* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2008), p. 133.

⁷ Rieder, *Colonialism*, pp. 133-34.

⁸ Rieder, *Colonialism*, p. 133. Patrick Parrinder also notes this fact in his discussion of 'The Thames Valley Catastrophe', in *Anticipations: Essays on Early Science Fiction and Its Precursors*, ed. by David Seed (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1995), pp. 58-74 (p. 72).

⁹ Rieder, *Colonialism*, p. 133.

¹⁰ Rieder, *Colonialism*, p. 135.

John Hawley has termed 'paranoid national spirit'.¹¹ At the end of the nineteenth century British imperialist confidence was increasingly fragile. Fears about a potential invasion from Germany, the rise of competitive foreign powers, and the impression of Britain in decline, all contributed to a feeling of instability. Ironically, these anxieties occurred at a time when the British Empire was at its height. Paul Poplawski highlights this peculiar *fin-de-siècle* Zeitgeist:

Victorian Britons famously invoked the Roman Empire at the time of Queen Victoria's diamond Jubilee in 1897. Expressing as it did both unbound confidence in their achievements and, paradoxically, anxious awareness of their inevitable decline, the comparison perfectly encapsulates the Victorian tendency to posit a sense of cohesive national identity as stable and secure, yet to expose it as elusive, if not lost.¹²

Such 'unbound confidence', united with an anticipation of 'inevitable decline', informed the Victorians' sense of a great power under threat. In *The War of the Worlds*, this confidence is associated with complacency. The novel's opening page highlights humanity's belief in its own superiority, as 'with infinite complacency'¹³ humans 'fancied there might be other men upon Mars, perhaps inferior to themselves and ready to welcome a missionary enterprise' (*WoW*, p. 5). A sense of 'unbound confidence' is established here as these Martian 'men' are conceived as both inferior and receptive to a 'civilising', imperialist influence. The

¹¹ John C. Hawley, 'The War of the Worlds, Wells, and the Fallacy of Empire', in *Flashes of the Fantastic*, ed. by Ketterer, pp. 43-54 (p. 44).

¹² Paul Poplawski, ed., *English Literature in Context* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007) p. 480.

¹³ Herbert George Wells, *The War Of The Worlds* (London: Heinemann, 1976), p. 5. All future references to *The War of the Worlds* will be given in the main text in the form *WoW*, followed by the page number.

assumption of Martian inferiority is emphasised further when the first cylinder falls close to the narrator's home. People congregate at the 'pit', assured of their safety; it does not occur to them that the aliens may pose a threat. Indeed, the Martians are characterised as 'ugly brutes' (*WoW*, p. 21), a phrase that represents them as animals rather than intelligent beings.

Even after the Martians' preliminary attack, this self-assurance is not easily eroded. As the narrator observes, 'the people in the town [are] quite secure again in the presence of the military' (*WoW*, p. 37). These initial reactions to the Martians' landing highlight the population's (misplaced) confidence in its invulnerability. It is this confidence that the novel sets out to challenge. As Wells himself later remarked, part of the novel's purpose was to 'comment on the false securities and fatuous self-satisfaction of the everyday life – as we knew it then.'¹⁴ Accordingly, the text establishes the source of 'false securities' by drawing attention to the apparent serenity and safety of the familiar landscape as the first Martian cylinder approaches. Key to this sense of unassailable tranquillity is the novel's treatment of the Victorian railway, itself a symbol of progress, mobility and ingenuity. The regularity and power of the steam trains provide a comforting air of normality, as the narrator reflects:

From the railway station in the distance came the sound of shunting trains, ringing and rumbling, softened almost in to melody by the distance. My wife pointed out to me the

¹⁴ Herbert George Wells, *Strand Magazine* (1920), quoted in Bergonzi, *Early H. G. Wells*, p. 124.

brightness of the red, green and yellow signal lights, hanging in a framework against the sky. It all seemed so safe and tranquil. (*WoW*, p. 10)

The impression of stability and safety suggested by the melodic trains, and by the rhythmic signal lights, is entirely artificial and rapidly overturned.

The symbolic prowess of the steam trains is dwarfed in comparison to the Martian fighting machines. In fact, the Martian attack serves to destroy all that the trains stand for. The regularity and efficiency they symbolise is suddenly 'very much disorganised' (*WoW*, p. 69). This disruption results in a 'vague feeling of alarm' (*WoW*, p. 70) and serves as one of the first warnings to the inhabitants of London that something is wrong. Up until the disorganisation of the trains, the population felt little apprehension at the coming of the Martians, confident in their superiority over them.

If the interruption to regular train travel is an anticipation of the greater Martian threat, the obliteration of several trains throughout the text emphasises the aliens' superiority. The Martians are powerful enough not merely disrupt to the symbols of Victorian progress, but actually destroy them. This is so surprising to the narrator that he does not at first recognise the destruction:

The light upon the railway puzzled me at first; there were a black heap and a vivid glare, and to the right of that a row of yellow oblongs. Then I perceived this was a wrecked train, the fore part smashed and on fire, the hinder carriages still upon the rails. (*WoW*, p. 48)

The narrator's horror at this sight is emphasised as he reflects that 'the little world in which I had been living securely for years [had become] this fiery chaos!' (*WoW*, p. 48) Here, the destruction of the train underscores the Martian threat. This is significant as it demolishes Victorian faith in the power of steam engine and what it represented in terms of British technological achievement. The awareness of the danger that arises following the destruction of the trains is as palpable as the anxiety relating to the impotence of the military against the Martian machines. The destruction of the trains, the very emblem of Victorian accomplishment, is part of the text's assault on what it presents as the nation's misplaced certainty in its own intellectual and technical superiority. The devastating Martian assault that follows highlights the folly of any sense of security. Indeed, the inertia of the population, a consequence of their overconfidence, results in action being taken too late to be effective. As such, the novel constitutes a warning to a Britain framed as 'alarmingly open to penetration by alien [...] forces.'¹⁵

Whilst the Martian invasion is explained rationally as a consequence of their desire for survival, their superiority is defined in Spencerian Social Darwinist terms. As Wagar points out, 'the Martians were well within their rights to exterminate humankind. From their perspective, human beings were lower animals occupying choice real estate.'¹⁶ Accordingly, the novel shows Britain as the victim, rather than the perpetrator, of imperialism. The Martians' actions are horrific not only because they are brutal but also

¹⁵ Poplawski, *English Literature in Context*, p. 480.

¹⁶ Wagar, *Traversing Time*, p. 57.

because they are visited on the seat of Britain's imperial power. The narrator is quick to point out the parallels:

And before we judge of them too harshly we must remember what ruthless and utter destruction our own species has wrought, not only upon animals, such as the vanished bison and the dodo, but upon its inferior races. The Tasmanians, in spite of their human likeness, were entirely swept out of existence in a war of extermination waged by European immigrants, in the space of fifty years. Are we such apostles of mercy as to complain if the Martians warred in the same spirit? (*WoW*, p. 3)

Social Darwinist ideas regarding the superiority of certain races over others are not questioned here or elsewhere in the novel. The Tasmanians are categorised as 'inferior' and their extermination a result of the ruthlessness of superior Europeans. Eric S. Rabkin, Martin Harry Greenberg and Joseph D. Olander read the Martians, 'utterly cerebral, sexless and blood sucking', as a metaphor for 'British Colonialism [...which was...] based on pursuing narrow economic policies instead of the natural human promptings towards community.'¹⁷ While such an association can be made, the comparison between European and Martian imperialism does not signify an anti-imperialist stance, something that becomes clear later in the text. When the narrator observes the Martians feeding off human blood, the horror is qualified with an unsettling analogy. The narrator remarks that just as human 'carnivorous habits' would appear 'repulsive' to 'intelligent rabbits' (*WoW*, p. 119), so the eating habits of the Martians seem hideous to a human observer. In other words, behaviour is

¹⁷ Eric S. Rabkin, Martin H. Greenberg, and Joseph D. Olander, eds, *The End of the World* (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1983), p. ix.

relative. Just as humans feed on inferior rabbits – and by extension European imperialists ‘feed’ on ‘inferior races’ – so the Martians consume humans and their lands to survive. The narrator does not call for vegetarianism in order to preserve the rabbit population, nor does he criticise the ‘physiological advantages of the [Martian] practice of’ injecting human blood into their circulatory system (*WoW*, p. 119). Carnivorous human feeding habits are turned on humanity just as European-type imperialism is turned on Europeans. Neither are criticised as both are recognised as the exercise of power by the superior over the so-called ‘inferior’. Accordingly, what is expressed in *The War of the Worlds* is a fear of imperialism turned on imperialists, of invasion inflicted on invaders.

However, anxiety regarding invasion is transformed by the end of novel into an expression of desire through a ‘return’ fantasy that implies progress and dynamism. The narrator speculates on the possibility of a future attack and concludes that ‘we cannot regard this planet as being fenced in and a secure abiding place [...] this invasion [...] has robbed us of that serene confidence in the future’ (*WoW*, p. 170). The narrator’s final reflections indicate that there is no place for complacency in the future. The arrival and demise of the Martians has signalled a likely on-going conflict for which humanity must be prepared. This need for preparation, for a new watchfulness, sees the eradication of imperialist conceit, and constitutes a key source of wish fulfilment in the text.

The wish fulfilment fantasy of overturning national complacency is complemented by a desire to see humanity strengthened through adversity. The stimulus for this development is introduced through the initial associations made between the Martians and disease. Following the destruction of the first tripod the Martian crawls from the machine and appears as a 'brown figure oddly suggestive [...] of a speck of blight upon the horizon' (*WoW*, p. 78). Aside from the obvious identification of the Martians as racially other, the description of the alien as a 'blight' associates it with the narrator's later comments on 'disease and pain on earth' (*WoW*, p. 121) and how these have led 'by virtue of natural selection' to the 'development of resisting power' (*WoW*, p. 161) within humans. Just as disease has strengthened the human population by eliminating those poorly adapted to survive, so the Martians eradicate much of the human race, leaving survivors more resistant to, or better prepared for, future attacks. The narrator makes this clear when he speculates that '[i]t may be that in the larger design of the universe this invasion from Mars is not without its ultimate benefit for men' (*WoW*, p. 170). The Martian blight, then, functions as a form of natural selection, concentrating the 'resisting power' amongst survivors able to oppose a future invasion. In this way, the text sees the Martian invasion as doubly beneficial: it overthrows Victorian complacency and forcibly selects those humans most able to survive in any future war of the worlds. As John Partington explains, Wells' early works aimed to shake humanity out of

complacency and shape 'the future course of humanity'¹⁸ and *The War of the Worlds* is typical of these objectives.

The novel's denouement reveals that the anxieties expressed within the novel do not simply relate to a fear of external invasion; they also derive from concerns over a threat from within. The sense that imperialist overconfidence would leave Britain vulnerable is matched by disquiet surrounding Victorian debates about evolution and a sceptical attitude towards how stable Britain's assumed cultural superiority and civilisation was. Indeed, evolutionary-based fears of humanity's potential degeneration cast a lasting shadow over transfigurative disaster fiction, informing *The Purple Cloud*, *The Poison Belt*, and *Nordenholt's Million*.

As a result of Charles Darwin's theories of natural selection, most notably in *On the Origin of Species* (1859), uncertainties regarding social and individual progress became concepts that permeated much late Victorian thinking. He caused significant consternation, for example, by calling into question the mythic, Edenic origins of humanity and by linking the human species to what were perceived as 'lower life forms'.¹⁹ Equally, Darwin's concept of 'the survival of the fittest', a term borrowed from Herbert Spencer,²⁰ was employed by Social Darwinists to explain both the competition between nations and the differences between social

¹⁸ See John S. Partington, *Building Cosmopolis: The Political Thought of H. G. Wells* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003), p. 30.

¹⁹ Alan S. Weber, ed., *Nineteenth Century Science: A Selection of Original Texts* (Canada: Broadway Press, 2000), p. 216.

²⁰ See Herbert Spencer, 'Principles of Biology' (1896), in *Literature and Science in the Nineteenth Century: An Anthology*, ed. by Laura Otis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 285-89.

classes.²¹ *The War of the Worlds* echoes these contemporary insecurities and embraces notions of evolution voiced by ‘Darwin’s Bulldog’, Thomas Henry Huxley, in particular.²² It reflects a tension between the potential for human evolution through conflict and technological progress, and anxiety regarding civilisation as merely a fragile façade barely separating humanity from its animal predecessors.

In its attitude towards evolution, the novel is most clearly influenced by Huxley. Although the text has not been examined specifically in relation to Huxley’s writings, the links between the two men’s philosophies are well documented. Scholars such as Partington and Bruce Sommerville have examined at length Huxleyan thought in relation to Wells.²³ Of particular relevance to *The War of the Worlds* is Huxley’s *Evolution and Ethics* (1893). Here Huxley discusses the notion of ‘ethical evolution’. In so doing, he examines the ‘harmonious contrast’ that exists between the ‘cosmic process’, of evolution through natural selection, and the ‘ethical process’ existing within human-made social structures. These two processes are exemplified in two types of existence in Huxley’s work: the ‘state of nature’, disordered and callous, and the ‘state of art’, which is ordered and adapted to the human species.²⁴ In the ‘state of art’, the ‘ethical process’ facilitates

²¹ Wendy Bottero, *Stratification: Social Division and Inequality* (London and New York: Routledge, 2005), pp. 20-22.

²² See Thomas H. Huxley, *Evolution and Ethics and Other Essays* (Middlesex: Echo Library, 2006).

²³ See Partington, *Building Cosmopolis*, and Bruce David Sommerville, ‘The Speculations of H. G. Wells and T. H. Huxley: A Study in the Relations of Science and Literature 1800-1896’ (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Sydney, 1995).

²⁴ Huxley, *Evolution and Ethics*, pp. 11-27.

the movement towards a civilisation 'capable of maintaining and constantly improving itself.'²⁵ Indeed, Huxley states:

I see no limit to the extent to which intelligence and will, guided by sound principles of investigation, and organised in common effort, may modify the conditions of existence, for a period longer than that now covered by history. And much may be done to change the nature of man himself.²⁶

For Huxley, natural selection could, potentially, be replaced by advanced civilisation, in which human development would be defined by a growing intellectual capacity and the artificial adaption of the environment. Huxley's philosophies are central to *The War of the Worlds*. As Partington explains, 'both Wells and Huxley desired to see an end to the "ape and tiger" method of evolution [in the cosmic process] ruled by instinctive passions and advocated its replacement by an "artificial modification and perversion of instinct".'²⁷ In other words, both Wells and Huxley favour the sublimation of animal instincts in favour of the 'ethical process' and the 'state of art'. Yet, Partington notes that Huxley's 'ethical process' is a 'vague principle based on his biological wisdom.'²⁸ The 'vagueness' of his ideas would be addressed indirectly in 1930 with the publication of Freud's *Civilisation and its Discontents*, a book that has much in common with Huxley's philosophy. Here Freud discusses society's role in the civilising process of humankind. He explores the way in which civilisation functions to satisfy Eros over Thanatos, as aggressive impulses are repressed so

²⁵ Huxley, *Evolution and Ethics*, p. 27.

²⁶ Huxley, *Evolution and Ethics*, p. 44.

²⁷ Partington, *Building Cosmopolis*, p. 29.

²⁸ Partington, *Building Cosmopolis*, p. 29.

that survival is ensured for the majority of the population. His work unites Huxleyan thought with an exploration of the way in which society encourages humans to perform as civilised rather than savage beings.

Freud theorised that civilised society operates to fulfil Eros, or the life drive, as civilisation's constraints enable people to live longer and relatively free from danger. Without the constraints of society, impulses such as aggression, greed and lust would be selfishly displayed, without any of the concepts of 'politeness', 'decency' or 'morality' to control them.²⁹ In essence, without the repression that is integral to society, baser instincts would become more evident. Without the presence of laws (oppression), and socially enforced cultural practices to mask these instincts (repression), the species' dependence on rule systems to maintain order would be exposed.

Freud's theories have much in common with Huxley's, who stated that:

[T]he practice of that which is ethically best – what we call goodness or virtue – involves a course of conduct which, in all respects, is opposed to that which leads to success in the cosmic struggle for existence. In place of ruthless self-assertion it demands self-restraint; in place of thrusting aside, or treading down, all competitors, it requires that the individual shall not merely respect, but shall help his fellows; its influence is directed, not so much to the survival of the fittest, as to the fitting of as many as possible to survive.³⁰

²⁹ Freud, *Civilisation and its Discontents*, pp. 45-53.

³⁰ Huxley, *Evolution and Ethics*, p. 43.

Freud's discussion of the nature and purpose of civilisation echoes these Huxleyan ideas. However, where Huxley identifies the necessity for the 'ethical process', Freud explores how such 'self-restraint' functions within the individual in society. Huxley explains that the cosmic and ethical processes oppose one another – the advancement of one leads to a diminishing of the qualities associated with the other.³¹ He states that 'social progress means a checking of the cosmic process at every step and a substitution for it of another [...] the "ethical process"'.³² In many respects, Freud's work is an investigation into this substitution. It attempts to explain the opposition between these cosmic and ethical processes.

Freud's theory is pertinent to Wells' fiction as, for Wells, the 'ethical process' acts as the 'padding of suggested emotional habits necessary to keep the round Palaeolithic savage in the square hole of the civilised state.'³³ Wells' recognition that the savage is ill-fitted for civilised society is certainly based on Huxleyan ideas but it anticipates Freud's attempts to explain the nature of this emotional 'padding' within contemporary society. As such, a reading of *The War of the Worlds* through the lens of *Civilisation and Its Discontents* provides new insights into the text.

The novel combines the optimism associated with ethical evolution with the pessimistic belief that such progress is not necessarily inevitable.³⁴ It

³¹ Huxley, *Evolution and Ethics*, p. 16.

³² Huxley, *Evolution and Ethics*, p. 43.

³³ Partington, *Building Cosmopolis*, p. 29.

³⁴ Norman MacKenzie, and Jeanne MacKenzie, *The Time Traveller: The Life of H. G. Wells* (London: Weidenfield and Nicholson, 1973), p. 56.

suggests that humanity's civilised nature is constructed, a fact central to Huxley's thinking in *Evolution and Ethics*. Like Huxley and Freud, Wells sees social structures serving to disguise humanity's links to its animal origins and control its potentially more 'primitive' nature. If social conventions were suddenly dispelled, as they are in *The War of the Worlds*, behaviour patterns previously considered norms would quickly disappear and sublimated human impulses would come to the fore.

Highlighting insecurities regarding the fragility of such structures and constraints,³⁵ the novel draws attention to the veneer of civilisation that depends on morality, politeness and good manners,³⁶ which, in Huxleyan terms, are the products of the 'ethical process'. In Wells' novel, social structures are disrupted rather than eradicated. Nevertheless, the qualities necessary for harmony and progress within civilised society are swiftly abandoned in favour of the traits influenced by the 'cosmic process'. These traits, akin to the 'ape and the tiger' of Huxley's philosophy, include more aggressive impulses such as cunning, ruthlessness and ferocious destructiveness.³⁷ The fact that the vestiges of the 'ethical process' fall away so quickly emphasises the fragility of 'civilisation' in *The War of the Worlds*. In effect, the novel demonstrates what Huxley sees in 'Agnosticism' (1889) as a humanity marked still by its 'lowly origin'. Man 'is a brute,' Huxley argues, 'only more intelligent than other brutes, a blind

³⁵ See MacKenzie and MacKenzie, *The Time Traveller*, p. 128.

³⁶ This was explored by Wells explicitly in 'Morals and Civilization' (February 1897). See Herbert George Wells, *The Island of Doctor Moreau: A Critical Text of the 1896 London First Edition, with an Introduction and Appendices* ed. by Leon Stover (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 1996), pp. 252-64.

³⁷ Huxley, *Evolution and Ethics*, p. 30.

prey to impulses'.³⁸ Accordingly, the novel's optimistic conclusion, its 'return' wish fulfilment fantasy of a society informed by 'the ethical process', responds to an anxiety regarding how much of humanity's 'lowly origin' endures in contemporary Victorian society.

Although it uses the language of psychoanalysis rather than evolution, Freud's *Civilisation and its Discontents* echoes Huxley's perspective on humanity's relation to its 'lowly origin'. Freud saw the oppressing/repressing effects of civilisation as necessary for the maintenance of harmony and development on both personal and social levels. In his discussion of why the assumed naturalness of the commandment 'love thy neighbour' is 'absurd', Freud argues that the ethics that classify good and evil are conditioned by society.³⁹ As a result of this classification, accepted ideas of behaviour, including the ways people should treat one another, are constructed at great length by society to prevent disintegration.⁴⁰ Freud states that:

[t]he reality [...] which many would deny, is that human beings are not gentle creatures [...]. [T]hey can count a powerful share of aggression amongst their instinctual endowments [...]. If the circumstances favour it, if the physical counter-forces that would otherwise inhibit it have ceased to operate, it manifests itself spontaneously and reveals man as a savage beast that has no thought of sparing its own kind.⁴¹

³⁸ Quoted in MacKenzie and MacKenzie, *The Time Traveller*, p. 57.

³⁹ Freud, *Civilisation and its Discontents*, p. 47.

⁴⁰ Freud, *Civilisation and its Discontents*, pp. 48-49.

⁴¹ Freud, *Civilisation and its Discontents*, p. 48.

Freud asserts that civilisation 'has to make every effort to limit man's aggressive drives' to provide a 'measure of security' for individuals within society.⁴² Furthermore, when counter-forces to aggression are removed aggressive impulses reassert themselves. Over thirty years earlier, in both *The Island of Doctor Moreau* (1896) and *The War of the Worlds*, Wells had already reached this conclusion.

From the Martians' first attack, social order breaks down (though it is restored briefly by the appearance of the military). When the heat ray is first used a 'desperate struggle occurred [in which] two women and a little boy were trampled [...] and left to die amongst the terror and the darkness.' (*WoW*, p. 27) It is significant that those left to die are those considered to be the physically 'weaker' members of society, normally protected by patriarchal notions of chivalry. Possibly alluding to the 'Birkenhead Drill' (1845), the nautical protocol of saving women and children first, the novel shows social convention swiftly abandoned in the struggle to escape the Martians. The rather melodramatic language used – they are left to 'die amongst terror and darkness' – draws attention to the self-interest stemming from the people's desire to escape. Described as bolting 'as blindly as a flock of sheep' (*WoW*, p.27), the crowd are likened to a herd fleeing slaughter rather than intelligent beings. As order breaks down further, the novel shows people

being trampled and crushed even in Bishopsgate Street, a couple of hundred yards or more from Liverpool Street

⁴² Freud, *Civilisation and its Discontents*, p. 49 and p. 51.

station; revolvers were fired, people stabbed, and the policemen who had been sent to direct the traffic, exhausted and infuriated, were breaking the heads of the people they were called out to protect. (*WoW*, p. 90)

The emphasis on London place names highlights that the violence is occurring *within* civilised society, ‘*even* in Bishopsgate Street’ (emphasis added), close to Liverpool Street station, a symbol of Victorian engineering success and progress, with its steam trains and surface and subsurface platforms. This juxtaposition between modernity and brutality reminds the reader that despite the modern surroundings, humanity retains its links to ‘the savage beast’. In the fight for survival, selfish and aggressive human drives are exposed.⁴³ When suddenly faced with danger, previously polite members of society ‘trample and crush’ one another, and the police, those most responsible for maintaining order, are not only unable to protect the crowd, but become as aggressive as the populace. The police, symbols and supposed guardians of law and order, are shown to be no less susceptible than the rest.

The War of the Worlds is replete with examples of the breakdown of social etiquette. Often the loss of conventional politeness is coupled with an alteration in physical appearance. For example, only days after the Martian invasion, the narrator’s brother has the following short conversation with a family fleeing London on a cart:

⁴³ Those drives, which Freud explains in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920) and *Civilisation and its Discontents*, are usually repressed within civilised society.

‘This'll tike us rahnd Edgware?’ asked the driver, wild-eyed, white-faced; and when my brother told him it would if he turned to the left, he whipped up at once without the formality of thanks. (*WoW*, p. 90)

The social significance of the driver's lack of courtesy, his failure to adhere to 'the formality of thanks', is emphasised by the fact that the narrator preserves and communicates the observation from his brother's account to the reader. This loss of formality indicates the erosion of the driver's socially conditioned behaviour. With the onset of panic, the survival instinct overrides etiquette. The driver's 'wild' eyes and 'white face' accentuate the changes taking place amongst the panicked population as 'instinctual endowments' begin to manifest themselves in characters' physical appearance.

The physical changes taking place amongst the population are emphasised further by the narrator's brother's description of the exodus from London. Here, the crowd includes:

sad, haggard women tramping by, well dressed, with children that cried and stumbled, their dainty clothes smothered in dust, their weary faces smeared with tears. With many of these came men, sometimes helpful, sometimes lowering and savage. Fighting side by side with them pushed some weary street outcast in faded black rags, wide-eyed, loud-voiced, and foul-mouthed. There were sturdy workmen thrusting their way along, wretched, unkempt men, clothed like clerks or shopmen, struggling spasmodically [...]. (*WoW*, p. 97)

Here the constructedness of civilised human society is exposed. The depiction of 'haggard' and 'tramping' women and children, 'smothered in

dust' and 'smeared with tears', is juxtaposed with descriptions of their clothing. Taken out of the context of civilised norms, being 'well dressed' or wearing 'dainty clothes' is both incongruous and impractical. The social behaviour usually associated with such apparel is abandoned and cleanliness neglected. In the chaos following the Martian invasion such attire becomes symbolic of the veneer of social order, the products of mass civilisation and the class system. As Freud points out, in civilised society beauty and hygiene displace the unhygienic:

squalor of any kind seems to us incompatible with civilisation and we extend the demand for cleanliness to the human body too [...]. [C]leanliness relates wholly to the work of man [...and] [b]eauty, cleanliness and order plainly have a special place among the requirements of civilisation.⁴⁴

This notion is, according to Freud, constructed. As a result, civilisation is associated with ideas of cleanliness, control, order and beauty whereas their opposites – filth, uncontrolled behaviour, disorder and ugliness – are associated with the 'uncivilised'. Anticipating Freud's notion, *The War of the Worlds* associates the displaced population with squalor to indicate their descent into the uncivilised. Within hours, they have neglected the cleanliness and fastidiousness necessary for civilised society.

The speed, and ease, of this descent is emphasised in the descriptions of the men accompanying the women and children. Dressed like 'clerks or shopmen', they are lower middle-class members of society, removed from their familiar roles and embroiled in a Darwinist fight for survival. Stripped

⁴⁴ Freud, *Civilisation and its Discontents*, p. 30.

of social distinctions and controls, they struggle 'wretched, unkempt' to make their escape. '[L]owering and savage', they are associated with bestial aggression, 'pushing', 'thrusting' and 'fighting', while the weaker members of the group, like the 'weary street outcast' become 'wide-eyed, loud-voiced and foul-mouthed' to express their impotent frustration at their plight. Despite those who are 'sometimes helpful', there is little evidence of former 'civilised' behaviour. In fact, the men appear to have returned to their 'lowly origin', displaying the aggression that civilisation works to repress.⁴⁵

The desire for humans to be freed from the burden of 'primitive' emotions and the necessity for repression – already shown to be inadequate in the face of danger – is emphasised in the comparisons drawn between human development and the Martians themselves. The narrator's initial reactions to the Martians are horror and disgust; yet he defends them when he aims 'to form a clearer picture of these offensive creatures.' (*WoW*, p. 120) He suggests that the Martians seem offensive as a result of their unfamiliarity. Once examined, they are not as horrific as they first appear. In his description of the creatures he links them to a possible future human evolution:

To me it is quite credible that the Martians may be descended from beings not unlike ourselves, by a gradual development of brain and hands (the latter giving rise to the two bunches of delicate tentacles at last) at the expense of the rest of the body. Without the body the brain would, of

⁴⁵ MacKenzie and MacKenzie, *The Time Traveller*, p. 57.

course, become a mere selfish intelligence, without any of the emotional substratum of the human being. (*WoW*, p. 121)

Although they are possibly descended from human-like beings, the Martians have freed themselves from an equivalent 'emotional substratum' to that underlying humanity. This liberation from emotion is an attractive prospect to the narrator. He states that, 'in the Martians we have beyond dispute the actual accomplishment of' the 'suppression of the animal side of the organism by the intelligence.' (*WoW*, p. 121)

For the Martians, their development of 'intellects vast and cool and unsympathetic' (*WoW*, p. 5) has rendered 'primitive' emotions unnecessary. The narrator states that they have 'minds that are to our minds as ours are to those beasts that perish.' (*WoW*, p. 5) This comparison establishes a scale ranging from the intellectually superior Martians to the 'beasts', which contrasts intellectual growth with the rudimentary intelligence. In *The War of the Worlds* it is speculated that through intellectual improvement humanity could be released from the 'primitive emotions' associated with its animal nature.

The novel simultaneously points to a state in which sublimation is also a source of satisfaction, as the previously internalised act of emotional suppression becomes naturalised. Within civilised society the act of restricting the drives (such as libidinous or aggressive impulses) is one that is psychically unsatisfying. Freud states that '[p]rimitive man was actually better off [than civilised man], because his drives were not

restricted.’⁴⁶ This statement appears to contradict the notion that greater levels of sublimation can result in a sense of satisfaction. However, the dissatisfaction created by sublimation is overcome through what Freud calls ‘powerful distraction’ and ‘substitutive satisfaction’.⁴⁷ Freud categorises scholarly activity as a ‘powerful distraction’ and artistic or imaginative acts as ‘substitutive satisfactions’, but in doing so he ignores the substitutive satisfaction that can be obtained from all mental activity. This oversight is highlighted in his definition of the psychic process that occurs during intellectual activity. Drawing upon principles akin to Huxley’s insight that ‘men agree on one thing, and that is their innate desire to enjoy the pleasures, and escape the pains in life’,⁴⁸ Freud explains that feelings of displeasure are, through intellectual pursuits, substituted for pleasurable ones. It is a

technique for avoiding suffering [that] makes use of the displacements of the libido that are permitted by our psychical apparatus and lend its functioning so much flexibility. Here the task is to displace the aims of the drives in such a way that they cannot be frustrated by the external world. Sublimation of the drives plays a part in this. We achieve most if we can sufficiently heighten the pleasure derived from mental and intellectual work.⁴⁹

It is clear from Freud’s explanation that a degree of ‘substitutive satisfaction’ occurs as a result of the libidinous displacement that takes place. Intellectual work is not simply functioning as a ‘powerful distraction’ as he initially claims. Such libidinous displacement is encountered in the

⁴⁶ Freud, *Civilisation and its Discontents*, p. 51.

⁴⁷ Freud, *Civilisation and its Discontents*, p. 13.

⁴⁸ Huxley, *Evolution and Ethics*, p. 19.

⁴⁹ Freud, *Civilisation and its Discontents*, p. 17.

Martians who are 'absolutely without sex, and therefore without any of the tumultuous emotions that arise from that difference among men' (*WoW*, p. 120). Their libido has, in Freudian terms, been wholly displaced so that it cannot be emotionally 'frustrated by the external world'; rather it derives satisfaction from logic and from their 'vast and cool' intellect.

Freud points out that throughout life, suffering 'threatens from three sides': the body, the external world and relationships with others.⁵⁰ All three of these forms of suffering evoke emotional responses from individuals. To defend themselves from potential suffering, humans undertake a number of strategies, including mental and intellectual work, that act as palliative measures.⁵¹ The emotions which palliative measures displace are aligned with primitive impulses (*WoW*, p. 121). The Martians have evolved beyond the need for such palliative measures (their bodies are simplified, they suffer no fatigue and they are unaffected by emotional relationships (*WoW*, pp. 119-23)). Through them the novel presents a fantasy in which the substitutive satisfaction associated with intellectual activity is pursued to its ultimate conclusion: released from 'emotional substratum', they have become 'practically mere brains' (*WoW*, p. 123). Emotional ties are overcome by pursuing something 'higher and finer',⁵² and satisfaction has, for the Martians, become wholly cerebral.

⁵⁰ Freud, *Civilisation and its Discontents*, p. 15.

⁵¹ Freud, *Civilisation and its Discontents*, pp.13-19.

⁵² Freud, *Civilisation and its Discontents*, p. 18.

In his examination of the role of intellectual endeavour, Freud highlights a problem with the effectiveness of the sublimation that occurs:

The weakness of this method, however, lies in the fact that [...] it cannot afford complete protection against suffering; it does not supply them [individuals] with the armour that is proof against the slings and arrows of fortune, and it habitually fails when one's own body becomes the source of suffering.⁵³

Defence against suffering caused by bodily ailments is not provided by the suppression of emotion in favour of intellect. This weakness would imply that the Martians, for all their intellectual abilities, could still be beholden to the emotional consequences of bodily dysfunction. This is mitigated, however, by the novel's conception of Martian physiology. The Martians' internal organs have undergone an evolutionary simplification, and now encompass only brain, lungs and heart (*WoW*, p. 119). As a result they do not suffer the bodily ailments that affect humans; they are not subject to 'the digestive processes and their reaction upon the nervous system [that saps human] strength' (*WoW*, p. 119). Unlike 'Men [who] go happy or miserable as they have healthy or unhealthy livers, or sound gastric glands [...] the Martians were lifted above all these organic fluctuations'. (*WoW*, p. 119) In terms of their exterior anatomy, the Martians consist of simply a head (housing eyes and a large brain, its size symbolic of their intellect) and hands made of long tentacles.

⁵³ Freud, *Civilisation and its Discontents*, p. 18.

The novel links this representation of Martian biology to humanity's potential future development. In its description of the Martians, the narrative alludes intertextually to Wells' earlier publication 'The Man of the Year Million' (1893), in which Wells speculates about how the human species may evolve into a form very like that of the Martians. This allusion (*WoW*, pp. 120-21) draws attention to the fact that the Martians represent one possible evolutionary future for humankind. The novel does not depend on allusion alone, however. It makes the connection explicit through the narrator's speculations that the Martians have descended from human-like beings (*WoW*, p. 121).

Although seeming monstrous, the Martians are a source of wish fulfilment fantasy, an argument that can be understood through Freud's notion of the uncanny (1919). The Martians are uncanny; they have evolved from that which is familiar (*Heimlich*) – that is, their ancient human form – into something unfamiliar (*Unheimlich*) – their contemporary octopoid-like manifestation of head and hand. Where their unfamiliar appearance is a source of discomfort, their origins in a human-like ancestor evoke a sense of the familiar. This creates an uncanny effect and, as a result, the Martians evoke feelings of both fascination and revulsion. Rosemary Jackson notes that the transformation of *Heimlich* into *Unheimlich* derives from the projection of fears and desires onto people or objects.⁵⁴ Such a transformation occurs within *The War of the Worlds* where the Martians clearly embody fears of the monstrous whilst manifesting the text's desire

⁵⁴ Rosemary Jackson, *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion* (London and New York: Routledge, 1981; repr. 1988), pp. 63-71.

for an intellectually and biologically evolved human species. The horror that arises from the Martians' appearance is as much a result of the *Unheimlich* as it is of the threat of invasion they represent. Once examined rationally and scientifically by the narrator, the Martians are characterised as the logical outcome of a wish fulfilment fantasy of evolutionary progress through intellectual expansion and biological simplification. On seeing the Martians injecting blood directly into their bodies the narrator observes, 'The physiological advantages of the practice of injection are undeniable, if one thinks of the tremendous waste of human time and energy occasioned by eating and the digestive process.' (*WoW*, p. 119) Accordingly, the novel presents the Martian form as a desirable evolutionary objective: anatomically efficient, intellectually advanced, and unconstrained by emotion.

In *The War of the Worlds* intellect is inextricably associated with science and technology, concepts that are often used interchangeably in the text. Parrinder observes that this was a common association during the Victorian period. He notes that 'the idea that advanced technology is in itself a sign of superior intellectual capacity belongs to the popular racist and imperialist ideologies of the Victorian period.'⁵⁵ Technology is used by the Martians to supplement their intellect and to augment their physical activities; they wear 'different bodies according to their needs, just as men wear suits of clothes and take a bicycle in a hurry or an umbrella when

⁵⁵ Patrick Parrinder, "God's Ministers?" Reinterpreting the Martian Invasion in *The War of the Worlds*, in *Flashes of the Fantastic*, ed. by Ketterer (pp. 9-24) p. 15.

wet.' (*WoW*, p. 123) The intellect serves the physical body by providing the technology to allow the body to function at maximum efficiency within its environment. In this instance, the novel expresses Huxley's discussion of how, in the ethical process, social conditions can be altered to fit human needs rather than humans adapting to their environment (as in the evolutionary process). Huxley explains that progress can be achieved 'not by gradually adjusting the men to the conditions around them, but by creating artificial conditions for them'.⁵⁶ The desirability of such a capacity is clear in *The War of the Worlds*. However, when compared with Martian mechanisms, human technology is inferior. The narrator states that 'we men, with our bicycles and road skates [...] our guns and sticks and so forth, are just in the beginning of the evolution that the Martians have worked out.' (*WoW*, p. 123) For example, where humans have bicycles and trains, the Martians have a variety of machines, including the tripods, on which they can travel quickly. Similarly, where the humans have rifles and artillery, the Martians have their devastating heat ray. Such comparisons emphasise the dual expression of anxiety (arising from an awareness of human inferiority) and an additional desire (stemming from the enviable alien technology) the Martians evoke within the text.

Significantly, the destruction of the Martians by Earthly bacteria opens a new era of technological progress, achieved through the investigation of derelict Martian machinery. This progress is matched by developments in scientific knowledge that mark the beginnings of the next stage in human

⁵⁶ Huxley, *Evolution and Ethics*, p. 16.

evolution. The transfigurative 'return' fantasy in the novel is characterised by a renewed drive toward both evolutionary and technological 'progress'. Scientific knowledge is furthered, expanding the intellect, and engineering is improved to produce more advanced machines. As the narrator explains, the invasion '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' (*WoW*, pp. 170-71). Accordingly, the human response to the aftermath of the Martian invasion is the first step towards an evolutionary progression that mirrors that of the Martians – the brain and the hands work in conjunction in a new era of technological innovation, application and improvement.

The novel's desire to see humanity advance scientifically arises from its dissatisfaction with Victorian scientific knowledge. This dissatisfaction arises not from anxiety, but from a frustration with the inadequacy of that science in comprehending the universe and humanity's place within it. The critique of the state of nineteenth-century science is made through the character of Ogilvy the astronomer. The only named character of importance, Ogilvy represents the limits of contemporary understanding. In the narrator's conversations with Ogilvy, the novel reveals the astronomer's – and by extension, nineteenth-century science's – restricted understanding of events and possibilities.

Early in the novel the narrator watches from Ogilvy's observatory as the first cylinder approaches from Mars. As they see the first 'falling star', the observatory is described as:

black and silent [...] the shadowed lantern throwing a feeble glow upon the floor in the corner, the steady ticking of the clockwork of the telescope, the little slit in the roof – an oblong profundity with the stardust streaked across it. (*WoW*, p.8)

The setting creates an ominous sense of anticipation, emphasised by the ticking of the telescope in the darkened room. More importantly, the observatory is symbolic of the condition of contemporary scientific knowledge. The darkness represents the limitations of this knowledge; while the 'feeble glow' of the lantern suggests the insufficient light that Ogilvy's understanding throws on their predicament. It is, after all, Ogilvy who assures the narrator that 'the chances against anything man-like on Mars are a million to one.' (*WoW*, p. 9) While the Martians are not physically 'man-like', their colonial objectives are entirely human and familiar. The incompleteness of Ogilvy's assertions is based on 'rudimentary' science. The 'feeble glow' cast by such knowledge echoes Wells' earlier assertion in *The Rediscovery of the Unique* (1891) that:

Science is a match that man has just got alight. He thought he was in a room – in moments of devotion, a temple – and that his light would be reflected from and display walls inscribed with wonderful secrets and pillars carved with philosophical systems wrought into harmony. It is a curious sensation, now that the preliminary splutter is over and the flame burns up clear, to see his hands lit and just a glimpse of himself and the patch he stands on visible, and around

him, in place of all that human comfort and beauty he anticipated – darkness still.⁵⁷

In depicting this idea in the fictional space of the observatory, the novel recalls Plato's 'Allegory of the Cave', in which Socrates states that the tale functions to allow one to consider 'the enlightenment or ignorance of our human condition.'⁵⁸ Wells' metaphor of the match similarly emphasises the limitations of 'enlightenment'. Like the prisoners of Plato's cave, nineteenth-century science, for Wells, exists in darkness. Light, which symbolises knowledge, is provided by a match flame rather than the sun (which in the 'Allegory of the Cave' represents the illumination of all knowledge and understanding) and is inadequate. Hence the 'feeble glow' of the lantern in the observatory has a symbolic function similar to that of the match flame in Wells' darkened room: it emphasises the surrounding darkness to an even greater degree. As Norman MacKenzie and Jeanne MacKenzie point out, 'Wells was challenging both the optimism and assumptions of science' and his science-as-match metaphor represents 'the theme on which almost all his work was to be a series of variations.'⁵⁹ There exists in *The Rediscovery of the Unique* a sense of frustration and trepidation at the limitations of current knowledge, combined with a desire for greater scientific illumination. However, unlike the inhabitants of the cave in Plato's tale, Wells' survivors in *The War of the Worlds* are not

⁵⁷ Herbert George Wells, *The Rediscovery of the Unique* (1891), cited in MacKenzie and MacKenzie, *The Time Traveller*, p. 87.

⁵⁸ Plato, *The Republic* trans. by Desmond Lee (London: Penguin, 2003), p. 253.

⁵⁹ MacKenzie and MacKenzie, *The Time Traveller*, p. 87 and p. 88.

content to simply watch the shadows;⁶⁰ they desire greater levels of knowledge, to see 'philosophical systems wrought in harmony.' *The War of the Worlds* satisfies this desire by providing advanced alien artefacts that accelerate human scientific development and greatly modify 'the views of the human future.' (WoW, p. 170) The knowledge and attitudes of Earth's population have been shaped and progressed away from their 'serene confidence' by their encounter with the Martians.

Frustration and the desire for scientific advancement are rendered symbolically through Ogilvy's death. Following the landing of the first cylinder, Ogilvy, Stent (the Astronomer Royal) and Henderson (a London journalist) attempt to communicate with the Martians by waving a white flag (WoW, p. 22). Their strategy not only emphasises the parochialism of Victorian thinking – they all assume that the Martians will understand the significance of a white flag and abide by human conventions – but it also suggests how impotent humanity is when faced with superior technology. When the Martian heat ray destroys them, the partial scientific knowledge represented by Ogilvy and Stent is revealed as fatally inadequate.

Ogilvy's death represents the end of restricted scientific understanding and is, therefore, indicative of one of the wish fulfilment elements of the text: the replacement of limited scientific and technological knowledge in a new renaissance following the Martians' demise. The society that emerges

⁶⁰ In Plato's allegory, Socrates describes how the prisoners in the cave would put to death the prisoner who had escaped and seen the sun; they would rather watch the familiar illusions created by the shadows on the wall.

following the failed Martian invasion is one united in the common purpose of rebuilding and progress (*WoW*, pp. 170-71). In this context, *The War of the Worlds* establishes the Wellsian convention of employing a decisive break with the past – usually through conflict – to make social revitalisation possible.⁶¹ This convention subsequently became a feature of all transfigurative disaster narratives.

Juxtaposing the wish fulfilment fantasy of scientific advancement and emotional sublimation with a critique of the role of religious faith within society, *The War of the Worlds* adopts an overtly anti-religious stance throughout. Drawing upon anxieties regarding religion as an impediment to human development, the novel effectively discredits religiosity. Where Ogilvy represents contemporary science, the Curate personifies organised religion. Significantly the Curate, unlike Ogilvy, remains unnamed. The naming of Ogilvy suggests that he is an individual, one man whose knowledge and limitations, although representative of nineteenth-century science, can be surpassed. By contrast, the nameless Curate is a symbolic figure, representing the whole of Christian religion. His negative portrayal is exemplified in his initial meeting with the narrator, which establishes his self-absorbed character. Following a Martian attack, the narrator, lying semi-conscious and scalded, cries out for water. Rather than offering aid, the Curate responds by saying, “You have been asking for water for the last hour” (*WoW*, p. 64) in a manner that implies the narrator’s suffering may be a source of irritation to him. His apparent

⁶¹ For example, see Wells’ *The Shape of Things to Come* (1933).

indifference and his later refusal to share food draw attention to the Curate's selfishness, which contrasts sharply with the teachings of the Gospels. Indeed, his self-centredness stands in opposition to the Biblical valuing of kindness, most notable in the parables of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37) and the sheep and the goats (Matthew 25:31-46). In this allegory 'the Son of Man' returns to make his final judgement and separates the righteous (the sheep) from the cursed (the goats). To the righteous he says:

Come, you blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world: for I was hungry and you gave Me food; I was thirsty and you gave Me drink; I was a stranger and you took Me in [...]. Then the righteous will answer Him, saying, 'Lord, when did we see You hungry and feed You, or thirsty and give You drink? When did we see You a stranger and take You in, or naked and clothe You? [...] And the King will answer and say to them, 'Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these My brethren, you did it to Me.'⁶²

The selflessness of the righteous is contrasted with the selfishness of the cursed, the 'goats' who do not provide food or water or shelter to the needy. To these people the Son of Man says, 'assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to Me.'⁶³ The Curate, through his unwillingness to offer water or aid to the thirsty and injured narrator, is clearly associated with the 'cursed' in the parable. This connection emphasises the novel's location of hypocrisy within organised religion and reflects Wells' well-documented attitude

⁶² Matthew 25. 34-40 (all Bible references are to the New King James translation).

⁶³ Matthew 25. 45.

towards Christianity. Gordon D. Feir, for example, points out that Wells held a 'loathing for the Church in general and the Catholic Church in particular with its hypocritical doctrine.'⁶⁴

Wells documented his opinions regarding religion in *God the Invisible King* (1917), in which he evaluates the dogmas of the Christian Churches, and later even more explicitly in *Crux Ansata: An Indictment of the Roman Catholic Church* (1943). Although both of these texts were written in the twentieth century, Wells' opinion on religion had been formed in childhood. He outlines in his autobiography his experience of faith. Growing up in a poor family, his mother had a 'simple and confident faith':⁶⁵

every night and morning and sometimes during the day she prayed to Our Father and Our Saviour for a little money, for a little leisure, for a little kindness [...]. It was like writing to an absconding debtor for all the answer she got. [...] Except for Our Lord and Saviour, whose dumbness, I am afraid, made the make-believe very thin at times, my mother had to do her weeping alone.⁶⁶

Reaching the conclusion that praying was an act of 'make-believe' led Wells to perceive religion as a 'false doctrine which blighted life.'⁶⁷ This perspective finds expression in the experiences of the Curate. Filled with despair, he prays to God for an explanation of the Martian attack and receives no answer. Such 'dumbness' also makes the 'make believe'

⁶⁴ Gordon D. Feir, *H. G. Wells At The End of His Tether: His social and Political Adventures* (New York: iUniverse inc., 2005), p. 161.

⁶⁵ Herbert George Wells, *An Experiment in Autobiography* (London and Boston: Faber and Faber, 1984), p. 64.

⁶⁶ Wells, *Experiment*, pp. 65-66.

⁶⁷ Lovat Dickson, *H. G. Wells: His Turbulent Life and Times* (Middlesex: Pelican Books, 1972), p. 19.

appear very thin. The failure of the Curate's prayers, and his gradual loss of rationality, echoes Huxley's assertion that 'no personal habit more surely degrades the conscience and the intellect than blind and unhesitating obedience to unlimited authority [through religion].'⁶⁸

With little or no rational foundation available to him, the Curate is governed by his emotions and fluctuations in mood. Hearing human screams from the Martians' pit, the narrator observes how the 'new and culminating atrocity had robbed' the Curate 'of all vestiges of reason or forethought.' (*WoW*, p. 128) The invasion results in 'the complete overthrow of his intelligence [...]. My sole companion in this close and sickly darkness was a man insane.' (*WoW*, p. 130) Rather than rationally confronting the situation, the Curate is held back by his 'stupid rigidity of mind' (*WoW*, p. 125) and, as a result, sinks swiftly 'to the level of an animal' (*WoW*, p. 128). Like the population of London, he regresses into someone dominated by base instincts. He is not associated with the rationality of scientific thought or the progress of evolutionary development. Rather his faith and reliance on ritual has only disguised his selfishness, greed and 'cunning'; that is, his baser instincts (*WoW*, p. 126).

The Curate's religious faith is portrayed as a delusion that functions in a way similar to civilisation – it represses base instincts through the imposition of (spiritually-based) law. As with the collapse of civilisation, when faith is removed, so are the restraining forces that withhold the

⁶⁸ Huxley, *Evolution and Ethics*, p. 144.

‘immoral’ instincts. As a consequence, the Curate’s regression appears even more extreme than that of refugees from London, possibly implying that religion is more extensively repressive than other structures maintaining civilised behaviour.

In *Civilisation and its Discontents*, Freud claims that religious feeling originates from an earlier sense of the self where the ego was not separate from the world, combined with a longing for the protection of the father. Hence, religious faith is, according to Freud, the ego’s way of becoming ‘at one with the universe’, and thus expelling the threat of the outside world. In other words, it has a protective function within the psyche.⁶⁹ As noted earlier, Freud argues that there is an incompatibility between civilisation and happiness, and states that passions must be sublimated in order to maintain ‘civilisation’. Accordingly, religion is a mode of control that trades a lack of id satisfaction for super-ego fulfilment. It also enforces sublimation whilst offering the psychic reward of protecting the ego. Retrospectively, Freud’s hypotheses on the role of religion within society can be applied to an interpretation of the Curate’s character. Indeed, *The War of the Worlds* mirrors Freud’s view that ‘if only people can be educated to see what religion is – an illusion – there might be some greater hope for social progress.’⁷⁰ When the Curate’s ego protection is removed – his faith is not enough to help him comprehend his situation – he feels no protection from the father and derives no satisfaction from

⁶⁹ Freud, *Civilisation and its Discontents*, p. 10.

⁷⁰ Michael F. Palmer, *Freud and Jung on Religion* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), p. 48.

super-ego fulfilment. As such, his ego is threatened, resulting in neurosis and a reversion to id-based impulses.⁷¹

For Freud, the purpose of religion is twofold: to offer protection to the ego from threat, by clinging to the mythical conception of the 'protecting father', and to give an answer to the purpose of life. Freud hypothesised that on a psychological level the purpose of an individual's life is to seek to achieve happiness: the overall intent of the pleasure principle. The pleasure principle has two means of accomplishing its goal: through the attainment of pleasure and happiness or through the avoidance of pain, discomfort and displeasure. The ego gives priority to one or the other of these objectives. Religion at once defers and fulfils the pleasure principle through the promise of eternal happiness, leading Freud to conclude that:

Religion interferes with this play of selection and adaptation [within the pleasure principle] by forcing on everyone indiscriminately its own path to the attainment of happiness and protection from suffering. Its technique consists in reducing the value of life and distorting the picture of the real world by means of delusion; and this presupposes the intimidation of the intellect.⁷²

For Freud, religion is a fallacy that promises eternal happiness *post mortem* rather than allowing individuals to experience the 'reality' of life.

Like the shadows in Plato's cave, religion for Freud distorts people's perception of the real world, inhibiting the intellect. This perspective is

⁷¹ See *The War of the Worlds* pp. 125-32: the Curate devours food and drink not thinking of the narrator, he also cries out loudly, endangering himself and the narrator.

⁷² Freud, *Civilisation and its Discontents*, p. 22.

anticipated in *The War of the Worlds* when the Curate's faith offers him no explanation of what is occurring and he can find no answers to his question 'What do these things mean?' (*WoW*, p. 64) When the narrator offers an explanation of events, the Curate develops a 'dawning interest in his eyes' (*WoW*, p. 65), which have been blank and vacantly staring (*WoW*, p. 64). However, the Curate will not accept a secular explanation of events, and simultaneously cannot acknowledge a spiritual one. The failure of his faith renders the Curate disorientated and aligned with a God who appears to have abandoned him.

From the narrator's initial meeting with the Curate, spiritual belief, emotion and closed mindedness are contrasted with the open-minded logic attributed the narrator's secular or 'rational' perspectives. The Curate's inability to comprehend the situation reflects the fact that his religion does not provide answers to his plight. Just as science is shown to be limited earlier in the novel, so religion is incapable of explaining, or aiding, in the fight against the Martians. When the Curate and the narrator become trapped in a house by one of the Martian cylinders, their prison, with its 'triangular aperture' (*WoW*, p. 114) through which they can view Martian activity, is reminiscent of Ogilvy's observatory. The two settings parallel one another. Just as the darkness of Ogilvy's observatory symbolised a lack of advanced scientific knowledge, so the darkness of the demolished house is symbolic of religion's inability to account for the Martian invasion. The Curate's lack of comprehension and mental breakdown in the face of events can be read as a metaphor for the shortcomings of Christian

religion as a whole. Whereas Ogilvy's passing signifies the death of one part of human knowledge, the Curate's death symbolises the breakdown of Christianity and its functions. By the text's denouement, religion is overthrown in favour of rationalism and scientific and technological advancement.

Nevertheless, as the Martians expire, the narrator perceives their destruction as the result of the action of 'putrefactive and disease bacteria [...] the humblest things that God, in his wisdom, has put upon this earth.' (*WoW*, p. 161) This apparent revelation seems to establish a tension between the text's criticism of organised religion and religious faith and the narrator's sudden, paradoxical expression of faith in God. However, the narrator's expression of faith is not in a conventionally conceived religious deity but in God as an evolutionary force or mechanism. The narrator continues:

These germs of disease have taken toll of humanity since the beginning of things – taken toll of our prehuman ancestors since life began here. But by virtue of this natural selection of our kind we have developed resisting power; to no germs do we succumb without a struggle and to many – those that cause putrefaction in dead matter, for instance – our living frames are altogether immune. (*WoW*, p. 161)

In effect, the narrator opens his understanding of the Martians' demise with a conventional interpretation (the efficacy of the wisdom of God) and actively transforms it into a pro-evolutionary, Darwinist argument. It is a concise rhetorical strategy that works metonymically for the novel's rejection of the blind religious faith of the Curate and its advocacy of

scientific rationalism. Similarly, when the narrator thanks God for the destruction of the Martians (*WoW*, p. 163 and p. 164), his praise highlights religion's role as a convenient outlet for 'a wave of emotion that was near akin to tears' (*WoW*, p. 163) and nothing more.

The thematic connection made between emotion and faith implicit in this response to the Martians' destruction echoes the Artilleryman's discussions with the narrator. The Artilleryman argues that faith is based on insecurity deriving from fear. Motivated by fear and the desire to remain in relative safety and comfort, some people, the Artilleryman suggests, turn to religion:

Now whenever things are so that a lot of people feel they ought to be doing something, the weak, and those who go weak with a lot of complicated thinking, always make for a sort of do-nothing religion, very pious and superior, and submit to persecution and the will of the Lord. Very likely you've seen the same thing. It's energy in a gale of funk, and turned clean inside out. These [the Martians'] cages will be full of psalms and hymns and piety. (*WoW*, p. 156)

The Artilleryman associates 'do-nothing' religious faith with the 'weak' and the unintelligent, and states that, in his view, such faith functions to fill people with a false sense of importance. Religion is here portrayed as a construct, or a 'make-believe' that creates a sense of superiority amongst believers, while in reality, the Artilleryman asserts, they behave in a manner that is submissive and accepting of their fate. In Freudian terms, 'the believer' has as his 'ultimate consolation and source of pleasure in the midst of suffering [only] unconditional submission' to God's 'inscrutable

decrees'.⁷³ The acceptance of this fate is possible as a result of the substitutive satisfaction of the superego through religious zeal and the deferred fulfilment of Eros through the psychologically appealing promise of eternal life.

Deriving from a longing for paternal protection religion relates, according to Freud, to the child's feelings of helplessness.⁷⁴ Religion then serves to deny feelings of danger perceived by the ego and provides instead a sense of consolation, but it is the consolation of infantilism.⁷⁵ In discussing religion in this way, Freud offers a psychological explanation for what Huxley called the struggle for the 'means of enjoyment', through the goal to 'escape the pains of life [...].'⁷⁶ Freud points out that moving away from the consolation provided by religion is a difficult process. He states that individuals would:

have to admit to themselves the full extent of their helplessness and their insignificance in the great machinery of the universe; they can no longer be the centre of creation, no longer the object of tender care on the part of a beneficent Providence. They will be in the same position as the child who has left the parental house where he was so warm and comfortable. But surely infantilism is destined to be surmounted. Men cannot remain children forever; they must go out into 'hostile life'.⁷⁷

Palmer responds to Freud's observations by noting that 'although life might be harder without the intoxicant of religion the benefits are also

⁷³ Freud, *Civilisation and its Discontents*, p. 22.

⁷⁴ Freud, *Civilisation and its Discontents*, p. 10.

⁷⁵ Sigmund Freud, *The Future of an Illusion*, trans. by James Strachey (New York and London: Norton and Company, 1989), p. 80.

⁷⁶ Huxley, *Evolution and Ethics*, p. 27.

⁷⁷ Freud, *Future of an Illusion*, p. 81.

worth fighting for. Having given up the fiction of another world people will be thrown back on their own resources [...] able to concentrate their liberated energies on life on earth.’⁷⁸ The contrast between religious ‘consolation’ and the realisation of one’s own energies in a hostile world is discussed in *The War of the Worlds* in the Artilleryman’s implication that many members of the Christian church enjoy the *feeling* that they are doing something worthwhile rather than *actually* making a difference. What is implied here is that the feelings created by religious actions, such as attending sermons, praying and singing to God, are in direct contrast to facing ‘hostile life’. An earlier exchange between the narrator and the Curate further illustrates this point. Preoccupied by petty concerns, the Curate cannot understand why, after ‘all the work – all the Sunday schools’ (*WoW*, p. 65) the destruction has occurred, as if such activities would halt disasters in Weybridge (the Curate’s hometown). The Curate’s position, after the Martian invasion, is similar to that of a child no longer in the comfort of a parent’s house, but he finds that he is unable to concentrate his liberated energies on ‘life on earth’. The narrator tells him:

‘Be a man!’ said I. ‘You are scared out of your wits! 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.’ (*WoW*, pp. 65-66)

The Curate’s faith is weak when it is not protected by the everyday comforts of safety and familiarity. The narrator’s final words debunk the self-importance of the Curate and draw attention to the triviality of the

⁷⁸ Palmer, *Freud and Jung on Religion*, pp. 48-49.

relatively small concerns of Weybridge. It has never occurred to the Curate that disaster could strike Weybridge, and when it does he assumes it is 'the end! The great and terrible day of the Lord.' (*WoW*, p. 65) This reaction characterises him as small-minded. He has given little thought to others who suffer the natural disasters listed by the narrator; he is concerned only with his small community and the consolatory feelings provided by sermons and Sunday schools. Hence his encounter with a disaster functions as what Freud calls his 'education into reality'.⁷⁹

It is left to the reader of *The War of the Worlds* to draw out the implicit connection between the descriptions of the Curate's life prior to the Martian invasion and the Artilleryman's critique of the role of religion under Martian rule. The parallel is established by indicating that faith has a consolatory function that confers a sense of purpose whilst ensuring social and political inaction. The Artilleryman criticises such a mind-set and provides a rather controversial expression of dissatisfaction with late nineteenth-century attitudes:

All these – the sort of people that lived in these houses, and all those damn little clerks that used to live down that way – they'd be no good. They haven't any spirit in them – no proud dreams and no proud lusts; and a man who hasn't one or the other – Lord! What is he but funk and precautions? They just used to skedaddle off to work – I've seen hundreds of 'em, bit of breakfast in hand, running wild and shining to catch their little season-ticket train, for fear they'd get dismissed if they didn't; working at businesses they were afraid to take the trouble to understand; skedaddling back for fear they wouldn't be in time for dinner; keeping indoors after dinner for fear of the back streets, and sleeping with the wives they

⁷⁹ Freud, *Future of an Illusion*, p. 81.

married, not because they wanted them, but because they had a bit of money that would make for safety in their one little miserable skedaddle through the world. Lives insured and a bit invested for fear of accidents. And on Sundays – fear of the hereafter. (*WoW*, pp. 148-49)

The Artilleryman's diatribe criticises the stereotypical lower middle-class lives of nineteenth-century clerks, who were least secure in their social position.⁸⁰ Situated within the divide between the lower classes and upper-middle classes, the lower middle-class clerk faced, as John Kucich points out, 'working-class disdain for his effeminacy and bourgeois contempt for his vulgarity.'⁸¹ This position led to an aspiration to be more securely middle-class and a struggle to at least maintain their position on the social ladder. Kucich points out that 'lower middle-class Britons propped up their embattled dignity and their economic vulnerability by resurrecting archaic middle-class discourses of social respectability, especially moral ones.'⁸² Their attachment to social respectability and morality helped to disassociate the lower-middle class from the 'vulgarity' of the working classes, but for the Artilleryman, at least, resulted in people without 'any spirit in them – no proud dreams and no proud lusts [...] just funk and precautions.'

⁸⁰ Wells keenly understood the insecurity of lower-middle class positions due to the precarious state of his own family's social position as he grew up (see Wells, *Experiment*, Vol. 1 *passim*, for Wells' account of his childhood and family background).

⁸¹ John Kucich, *Imperial Masochism: British Fiction, Fantasy and Social Class* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006), p. 186.

⁸² Kucich, *Imperial Masochism*, p. 186.

The lower-middle classes were characteristically keen to hold on to their social position and were afraid to lose it.⁸³ The activities listed by the Artilleryman are carried out for the purposes of security and comfort, and in Freudian terms, fulfil the Eros drive. However, what results, the Artilleryman asserts, is a 'little miserable skedaddle through the world.' For the Artilleryman such an existence is unfulfilling and results in passivity. His description of these people reflects the anxiety associated with the assumed emasculation – the 'effeminacy' – associated with clerks at the end of the nineteenth century.⁸⁴ As John Tosh explains, the popular saying of the time was 'born a man died a clerk', which implies that to be a clerk inherently conflicts with perceived 'masculine' ambition and ability.⁸⁵

Leah Price and Pamela Thurschwell explain that part of the lack of esteem attached to being a clerk lies in the implication of immobility. To remain a clerk for one's career was perceived to reflect a lack of ability (to rise through company ranks, for example). Thus, by the end of the century, the role of the male clerk was associated with stagnation.⁸⁶ In *The War of the Worlds*, such clerks are used to express additional anxieties regarding a lack of vitality in human development. Just as the novel articulates fears associated with regression to humanity's animal ancestry, it also

⁸³ See Hugh McLeod, 'White Collar Values and the Role of Religion', in *The Lower Middle Class in Britain*, ed. by Geoffrey Joel Crossick (London: Croom Helm, 1977), pp. 61-88 (pp. 70-72).

⁸⁴ See Leah Price and Pamela Thurschwell, *Literary Secretaries/Secretarial Culture* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), pp. 32-46 and pp. 63-90.

⁸⁵ John Tosh, *Manliness and Masculinities in Nineteenth Century Britain* (Harlow: Pearson, 2005), p. 204.

⁸⁶ Price and Thurschwell, *Literary Secretaries/Secretarial Culture*, p. 75.

communicates concerns regarding humanity becoming a passive, vulnerable species.

These anxieties are explored in the Artilleryman's projection of the two kinds of people who would survive under Martian rule: those who would become Martian pets and those who would fight the Martians. For the 'useless clerks' described above, the Martians, the Artilleryman asserts, 'will be a Godsend' (*WoW*, p. 149). Such people, it is implied, have already sacrificed freedom for comfort and so they would come to enjoy the brief existence as livestock under the protection of the Martians and their 'nice roomy cages' (*WoW*, p. 149). He acknowledges that amongst the Martian 'pets' some will 'be worried by a feeling that it's all wrong, and that they ought to be doing something' (*WoW*, p. 149) but they will remain passive by habit *and* pacified by their religious faith (*WoW*, p. 156).

In contrast to his description of those who would submit to the Martians, the Artilleryman imagines those who would challenge the invaders. He is selective in those he deems appropriate for the task:

[A]ble-bodied, clean-minded men. We're not going to pick up any rubbish that drifts in. Weaklings go out again. [...] Those who stop, obey orders. Able-bodied, clean-minded women we want also – mothers and teachers. No lackadaisical ladies – no blasted rolling eyes. We can't have any weak or silly. Life is real again and the useless and cumbersome and mischievous have to die. (*WoW*, p.150)

The Artilleryman's criteria are strong minds and constitutions. For Bergonzi, this is 'the first suggestion of the need for an intellectual and

physical elite which was to dominate [Wells'] social thinking.'⁸⁷ Indeed it is in this part of the novel that we find the kernels of the viewpoints that would emerge unapologetically in Wells' later writing, including *Anticipations* (1901), *A Modern Utopia* (1905) and *New Worlds for Old* (1908). While the influential works of Marx and Engels had advocated the uprising of the working classes and highlighted the increasing economic impotence of the middle classes, Wells championed a 'constructive socialism'⁸⁸ in which the professions would be utilised to 'create a sane, scientifically planned society free of the connivances of profiteers, but also spared the savagery of class warfare championed by Marxists.'⁸⁹ Wells' well-documented socialism was reserved for the most capable in society and, as Wagar points out, 'Wells clearly invested most of his hopes [...] in this middle stratum of modern society.'⁹⁰ In *The War of the Worlds* the initial expression of these 'socialist' ideas can be found in the Artilleryman's views.

Notably, it is not the narrator who voices the text's explicit social criticism. Instead, such views are presented through a character who is, according to John Batchelor, 'shown up to be an idle windbag.'⁹¹ This is significant. While Batchelor attributes this characterisation to the possibility that 'Wells chooses to laugh at his own tendencies',⁹² it may also reflect Wells' lack

⁸⁷ Bergonzi, *Early H. G. Wells*, p.138.

⁸⁸ Herbert George Wells, *New Worlds For Old* (London and New York: Macmillan, 1908), pp. 21-22.

⁸⁹ Wagar, *Traversing Time*, p. 98.

⁹⁰ Wagar, *Traversing Time*, p. 98.

⁹¹ John Batchelor, *H. G. Wells* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), p. 29.

⁹² Batchelor, *H. G. Wells*, p. 29.

of confidence in presenting such views at this point in his career. Indeed, the Artilleryman's opinions are expressed with much greater confidence and conviction throughout Wells' later works. *A Modern Utopia*, for example, argues that only the most capable should be allowed amongst the population:

But the mildly incompetent, the spiritless and dull, the poorer sort who are ill, do not exhaust our utopian problem. There remain idiots and lunatics, there remain perverse and incompetent persons, there are people of weak character who become drunkards and drug takers, and the like [...] All these people spoil the world for others. They may become parents, and with most of them there is manifestly nothing to be done but to seclude them from the great body of the population.⁹³

Clearly, the rejection of the 'spiritless and dull' and those of 'weak character' corresponds with the Artilleryman's criticisms of the 'weak and the silly' and those with 'no proud lusts'. However, in *A Modern Utopia* the disdain for the 'weaker' members of society is stated more clearly and at greater length than in *The War of the Worlds*, which appears less confident and less assertive in its critique. Significantly, by the end of the novel the 'out of work clerks', (*WoW*, p. 166) previously subject to the Artilleryman's scorn, are given useful roles in the rebuilding process, 'working side by side' with shopmen and navvies (*WoW*, p. 166). This transformation from fearful men 'skeddaddling' through life into people active in the rebuilding of society highlights that the text is critical predominantly of contemporary attitudes and roles; it shows that released from these conventional positions, people have the potential to be

⁹³ Herbert George Wells, *A Modern Utopia* (London: Penguin, 2005), p. 83.

constructive members of society. In effect, the Martian invasion leads to the rehabilitation of the lower-middle classes, releasing them from their insecure social position. In his later works Wells developed the idea of constructive socialism, in which class insecurity is eradicated as the middle-classes secure new roles in working for state enterprises.⁹⁴ The new roles found for the 'out of work clerks' in *The War of the Worlds* can be seen as an early expression of this idea. Their status by the end of the text anticipates, and is emblematic of, class-based wish fulfilments developed in Wells' later novels.

As Bergonzi indicates, the reader cannot 'be in any doubt that the Artilleryman's views are those of Wells himself, or at least they are based on ideas which Wells was prepared to consider very seriously, if in a speculative fashion.'⁹⁵ However, the future envisioned by the Artilleryman is not presented as desirable. Whilst the gathering together of the most intellectually and physically able is certainly presented as a favourable activity, it is predicated on the fact that humanity would be under constant threat from the colonising Martians. The Artilleryman's idea of life underground is presented idealistically, rather than as a viable option for the survival of humanity.⁹⁶ For the narrator, 'oppressed by a sense of

⁹⁴ See Wagar, *Traversing Time*, p. 97.

⁹⁵ Bergonzi, *Early H. G. Wells*, p. 138.

⁹⁶ The Artilleryman's projection of a possible future for humankind echoes the evolutionary trajectory presented in Wells' *The Time Machine* (1895) where class determines human evolutionary pathways. The 'favoured aristocracy' (Herbert George Wells, H. G., *The Time Machine* (London: Dent, 1995), p. 51) evolve into passive, gentle creatures called the Eloi and the working classes become the Morlocks, savage beings who live underground. Although the circumstances creating the evolutionary division are different in *The War of the Worlds*, the projected outcome is similar to that of *The Time Machine*. The Artilleryman

dethronement' (*WoW*, p. 144) as the Martians depose humanity, the idea of such an existence is unacceptable and deluded. Hence, the wish fulfilment fantasy of *The War of the Worlds* depends not on surviving under Martian rule but on humanity emerging from a trial emboldened with a renewed determination to progress. Nevertheless, the providential nature of the Martian defeat and the Artilleryman's projection of life under their authority, further emphasises the warning against Victorian complacency found throughout the book.

The narrator's sojourn with the Artilleryman represents a complex combination of early Wellsian socialist ideas, expressed anxiety and rudimentary wish fulfilment. The encounter allows the narrator temporarily to indulge in an unrealistic but nonetheless appealing wish fulfilment fantasy: the freedom associated with the destruction of societal order and the release from the norm that catastrophe provides. At this point, the narrator is able to indulge himself. He can enjoy luxuries not usually available to him, such as 'excellent cigars' and champagne (*WoW*, p. 154),

acknowledges this when he states that 'The tame ones will go like all tame beasts; in a few generations they'll be big, beautiful, rich-blooded, stupid, rubbish! [...] The risk is that we who keep wild will go savage – degenerate into a sort of big savage rat [...] You see how I mean is to live underground.' (*WoW*, p. 150) Hence, the outcome of people living as 'pets' above the ground and fighters below it echoes the human devolution shown in *The Time Machine*. Here, Wells extrapolates future events based on the 'disastrous rift' in the class system and draws upon the Marxist prediction that the proletariat and the bourgeoisie would become increasingly polarised. However, he perverts the Marxist idea of a proletariat revolution by having his working class descendants literally 'rise up' through airshafts to feed cannibalistically on the Eloi. The descendants of the proletariat are, as Wagar terms them, 'nauseating and repulsive' (Wagar, *Traversing Time*, p. 49) beings. Through the Artilleryman, the possibility of humanity evolving into beings similar to those depicted in *The Time Machine* is explored. However, such ideas, which are clearly based on contemporary anxieties, are superseded by the wish fulfilment at the climax of *The War of the Worlds* where the potential of humanity to evolve into beings more like those presented in 'The Man of the Year Million' is postulated.

and he spends his time playing games with the Artilleryman. If, as Gaston Bachelard observes, 'literature is someone else dreaming for us'⁹⁷ then this section of the novel is a fantasy that appeals directly to the id. Freud, in *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900), stated that 'all dreams are absolutely egotistical [...]. The wishes that are realised in dreams are invariably wishes of the ego.'⁹⁸ This is most apparent during the narrator's time with the Artilleryman. Temporarily released from superego guilt, the narrator thinks nothing of the dying or suffering thousands as he enjoys his games and cigars. He reflects that 'with our species on the edge of extermination or appalling degradation [...] we could sit [...] playing the "joker" with vivid delight.' (*WoW*, p. 154)⁹⁹

The narrator soon experiences superego guilt at his decadence, a 'violent revulsion of feeling', which leaves him with a sense of being a 'traitor to my wife and my kind' (*WoW*, p. 155). Placing the blame for his actions firmly on the Artilleryman, the narrator, 'filled with remorse' resolves to 'leave this strange and undisciplined dreamer of great things to drink his gluttony.' (*WoW*, p. 155) In this way, the narrator's meal with the Artilleryman marks a break with older, more decadent ways. It is a final goodbye to such indulgences, before the work of re-building can commence. Accordingly,

⁹⁷ Quoted in Rabkin, Greenberg and Olander, *The End Of The World*, p. xii

⁹⁸ Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation Of Dreams*, trans. by James Strachey (Hertfordshire: Wordsworth, 1997), p. 206.

⁹⁹ Indulgences of this kind represent the liberation from social constraints that can follow catastrophe in transfigurative disaster fiction. Such liberty is subsequently exercised in *The Purple Cloud* when Adam Jeffson builds a palace to himself and indulges in years of destruction; in *The Poison Belt* where Challenger's utilises the catastrophe to examine his surroundings; in *Deluge* and *Dawn*, which assert and reassert masculine authority; and in *The Hopkins Manuscript* where Hopkins' passion for poultry breeding becomes an essential part of his status within his community.

the primary wish fulfilment of the novel – the movement towards the evolutionary development of humanity – is swiftly re-established in the text.

While the narrator experiences guilt as a result of his self-indulgence, he nevertheless finds pleasure in other sources of excitement created by the catastrophe, namely those associated with destruction, the exhilaration of fear, and the break from the security of the everyday (see, for example, *WoW*, p. 30 and p. 37).

From the first wave of destruction the novel captures the coexisting emotions of fear, fascination and excitement. There is, however, a shift in the novel's trajectory from the excitement of a perceived sense of inevitable victory towards a dawning new perspective that recognises a superior foe. The initial excitement felt by the narrator emphasises his sense of assurance of success. Having sent his wife to safety the narrator confesses that:

For my own part, I had been feverishly excited all day. Something very like the war fever that occasionally runs through a civilised community had got into my blood, and in my heart I was not so very sorry that I had to return to Maybury that night. I was even afraid that that last fusillade I had heard might mean the extermination of our invaders from Mars. I can best express my state of mind by saying that I wanted to be in at the death. (*WoW*, p. 41)

The narrator's excitement derives from the anticipation of triumph that comes from being a member of a nation confident in its superior imperial

power and military prowess. The narrator's war-like blood lust revealed in wanting to 'be in at the death' seems to arise from the excitement and camaraderie of war. For Chris Hedges, 'war makes the world understandable, a black and white tableau of them and us. It suspends thought, especially self-critical thought.'¹⁰⁰ The simple binary of 'them and us' is one that appeals to the Thanatotic drive. Conflict preys on the most primal and savage Thanatotic impulses as it 'allows us to do what peacetime society restrains us from doing. It allows us to kill [...] the god-like exhilaration of destroying is often thrilling.'¹⁰¹ The narrator's eagerness to actually observe the Martians being annihilated, underpinned by a complacency regarding the inevitability of victory, is a result of the 'them' and 'us' moral simplification that accompanies conflict. Released from society's usual civilising constraints, the battle is, to the narrator, an exciting sport and he revels in the anticipation of winning against the Martians.

The narrator's excitement arises from, as Wells puts it, a 'craving for release from – bothers, from daily demands and urgencies, from responsibilities and tempting distractions [...].'¹⁰² In other words, the novel recognises the appeal of escaping the mundane or what Sontag terms 'unremitting banality.'¹⁰³ As Joseph Dewey observes of American nuclear fiction, the 'apocalyptic temper corrupts into cataclysmic imagination – a

¹⁰⁰ Chris Hedges, *War Is a Force That Gives Us Meaning* (New York: Random House, 2003), p. 10.

¹⁰¹ Hedges, *War is a Force*, p. 171.

¹⁰² Wells, *Experiment*, p. 15.

¹⁰³ Sontag, 'Imagination', p. 130.

bizarre celebration of discontinuity, a break in the stultifying routine of life.’¹⁰⁴ This ‘cataclysmic imagination’ informs *The War of the Worlds*, which exploits ‘discontinuity’ as the means of social and cultural change.¹⁰⁵ In providing a release from the everyday, the novel both expresses and fulfils the Thanatotic drive. It does this through its transfiguration of fear into a source of excitement for both the narrator and the reader (who experiences the narrator’s sufferings and aspirations vicariously).

In its depiction of dead London (Book II, Chapter VIII), the novel anticipates Freud’s assertion in *Civilisation and its Discontents* that Thanatos is never present without its counterpart, Eros. London is where the Thanatotic fulfilment found in the novel, achieved through both the duality of danger and excitement and the uncanny landscape (see, for example, *WoW*, p. 19; pp. 136-37), is replaced by the satisfaction of Eros. The new beginning that follows the Martians’ demise – the ‘return’ transfiguration – is the wish fulfilment of the text: humanity will live on, at a new level of maturity and with greater scientific and evolutionary potential than before.

What occurs in *The War of the Worlds*’ ‘return’ denouement is the production of a society that will be, it is implied, more favourable to Huxley’s ‘ethical process’ than the one that preceded the disaster. As a

¹⁰⁴ Joseph Dewey, *In a Dark Time: The Apocalyptic Temper in the American Novel of the Nuclear Age* (West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 1990), p. 37.

¹⁰⁵ It is worth noting that this ‘cataclysmic imagination’ unites transfigurative novels with the broader range of transformative disaster texts.

consequence, it is the first transfigurative novel in British transformative disaster science fiction and serves as an exemplar of how the disaster scenario could be exploited for speculative purposes. After Wells, other writers would use the form of the transformative disaster narrative to express contemporary anxieties and imagine new transfigurative post-catastrophe societies. The disaster novels that followed *The War of the Worlds* are as diverse as the historical contexts from which they derive. Nevertheless, up until 1939 they are all expressions of political and socio-cultural transfiguration in which wish fulfilment fantasies inform the creation of alternate societies.

Chapter Two

A Decadent's Dilemma: M. P. Shiel's *The Purple Cloud* (1901)

Published three years after *The War of the Worlds*, M. P. Shiel's *The Purple Cloud* is a complex 'departure' novel¹ that synthesises autobiography, authorial philosophy and contemporary social criticism in a wish fulfilment fantasy of rebirth. Its catastrophe scenario allows for the narrative formation of a distinctly Shielian philosophy in its unification of spiritual and scientific thought and its portrayal of the eradication of a corrupt, decadent society to make way for the emergence of a new humanity, fathered by an 'overman figure', racially purged of non-white peoples. It is one of three Shiel novels to draw upon the interest in spiritualism prevalent at the end of the nineteenth century. Each text, *The Purple Cloud*, *The Lord of the Sea* (1901), and *The Last Miracle* (1906), is based on the visions of the fictional Mary Wilson, and each offers an alternate vision of the future. *The Purple Cloud* is the only vision to foretell of an apocalypse. Originally serialised in *The Royal Magazine* (January-June 1901), it was novelised with additions that same year. The text was revised again for the 1930 edition, though these revisions largely constitute minor stylistic changes and the modernising of extratextual references.²

¹ 'Departure' novels are those in which the post-catastrophe civilisation is radically different from the pre-cataclysmic world.

² The quotations provided here are from the 2000 Bison edition, which reprints the 1930 text. As this chapter was written, the 1930 version of the novel was the only edition in print, although the 1901 text was available online at ProjectGutenberg.com. Where significant deviations make it necessary to quote

The Purple Cloud recounts the near future experiences of Adam Jeffson, a London doctor engaged to Clodagh, a wealthy but cruel older woman. Tempted by financial gain, Clodagh engineers a place for Jeffson on an expedition to the North Pole. Following an arduous journey, Jeffson is the only member of the party to reach his destination. Protected by his proximity to the pole, Jeffson survives a volcanic eruption that releases the eponymous cloud, which apparently poisons all fauna on Earth. His initial search for survivors gradually becomes a quest to ensure he is completely alone. Succumbing to megalomania, he indulges his unrestrained ego, destroying countless cities and building a palace to himself. He is driven by two competing supernatural forces, which he calls 'Powers': the destructive 'Black' Power and the seemingly constructive 'White' Power. These Powers are engaged in a cosmic battle over the fate of humanity, though their means of shaping that fate are ambiguous for much of the novel. Seeing civilisation as deserving of obliteration without restoration, Jeffson's sympathies lie with the ostensibly triumphant Black Power until he discovers Leda, a woman affiliated with the White. Her survival renders the Black Power's victory uncertain, and Jeffson battles increasingly with his resolution to remain celibate and thereby ensure humanity's extinction. For much of their relationship, he acts as Leda's mentor, whilst resisting his growing physical attraction to her. When Leda suggests the existence

the 1901 version, this will be signalled in the chapter. In 2012 the original 1901 text was re-printed by Penguin.

of a second purple cloud,³ Jeffson assumes their own extinction is imminent and indulges his desire for her, 'wild with bliss' (*PC*, p. 290). It becomes clear, however, that Leda has duped Jeffson into taking her as his wife and lover since there is no second purple cloud. As a result, the Earth will be repopulated and the White Power emerges triumphant. Drawing on explicit Biblical allusions, the text frames Jeffson and Leda as a second Adam and Eve, parenting a new race.

Whilst the plot of *The Purple Cloud* appears relatively uncomplicated, the narrative discourse renders it an opaque, contradictory and misleading text whose treatment of human rebirth, with its philosophical combination of science and religion, its advocacy of an overman, and its racism, requires the reader to consider the implications of its frame narrative and its deployment of an unreliable narrator. The novel opens with an introduction to an extended quotation from a letter from Dr Arthur Lister Browne. The letter purports to accompany a package of notebooks sent to 'the writer' (*PC*, p. xiii) of the introduction. Framed by this introduction, the main text of *The Purple Cloud* (also entitled 'The Purple Cloud') is presented as a transcription of the third notebook, which documents one of Mary Wilson's precognitive visions. In this vision, Wilson is able to read Jeffson's account, authored sometime in the future. Her recitation of that account has then been recorded in shorthand by Dr Browne. Receiving this shorthand version of events, 'the writer' explains in the concluding

³ Matthew Phipps Shiel, *The Purple Cloud* (Lincoln, Neb.: University of Nebraska, Bison Books, 2000), p. 293. All future references will be included in the main text in the form *PC*, followed by the page number.

paragraph of the introduction that he has transcribed Browne's notes of Wilson's vision into longhand. This already complex process is complicated further by ambiguities inherent in the means by which each recipient of Jeffson's narrative communicates with the next. Jeffson's story, which is written from memory, is observed by Wilson, who then speaks in a 'visionary language' (*PC*, p. xv) composed of sounds that are difficult to understand. Browne, who 'learned to discern the words' so he 'could follow somewhat the trips of her musing and wandering spirit' (*PC*, p. xv), provides a shorthand document that 'the writer' admits has 'been no holiday' to decipher (*PC*, p. xiii). In addition, he acknowledges that 'the title, division into paragraphs, &c., have been arbitrarily contrived by myself for convenience.' (*PC*, p. xvii) Hence, Jeffson's narrative is communicated through three layers of narration/adaptation, which foreground four sources of unreliability: Jeffson's subjectivity, Wilson's 'visionary language', Browne's shorthand, and 'the writer's' deciphering and arbitrary editorial decisions.

The ambiguities of communication between each character mean that Jeffson's account is presented as the product of reading, recitation, documentation, conversion, transcription and approximation. Thus, in providing a description of the story's origins, the novel's introduction draws the reader's attention to the unreliability of Jeffson's heavily mediated narrative. Such mediating draws attention to the fact that 'The Purple Cloud' is a work of *fiction*. As H. Porter Abbott notes, with this kind of narrative device:

[E]ach successive embedded narrative pushes the one framing it out of view [...]. The succession of embedded narratives in novels [...] have a high degree of *narrativity* in that they have a narrator and a complication of related events and other qualities that give us a strong sense that we are reading a story.⁴

The Purple Cloud works comparably. 'The Purple Cloud' 'pushes' the framing introduction out of view, suggesting to the readers that they are receiving Jeffson's account first hand, an implication sustained by its homodiegetic narration. Hence, the frame narration establishes an apparent distance between the author (and his surrogate, 'the writer') and the main character, allowing Shiel to articulate his sometimes paradoxical views on spiritual and racial themes at one (or several, given the number of textual mediators involved) remove. A comparable strategy is employed by Wells in *The War of the Worlds* where 'Wells' extreme ideas are expressed through the character of the artilleryman.'⁵ Given that the frame narrative is not present in the original 1901 magazine publication, its addition in the subsequent Chatto and Windus edition (1901) implies – perhaps fallaciously – an intention on Shiel's part to distance himself from the character and his experiences. More significantly, this distancing lends 'Jeffson's' account greater credibility. As Jeffrey Williams points out in his discussion of Goethe's *The Sorrows of Young Werther* (1774), such frames provide 'an introductory source attribution explaining where [...the...]

⁴ H. Porter Abbott, *The Cambridge Introduction to Narrative* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 29-30.

⁵ Ailise Bulfin, 'One Planet, One Inhabitant: Mass Extermination as Progress in M. P. Shiel's *The Purple Cloud*', *Journal of Postgraduate Research*, 7 (2007-08), 102-20 (p. 112).

narrative comes from, thereby lending it the rhetoric of credibility.’⁶ Thus, the addition of the novel’s framing device can be seen as a rhetorical strategy in which its emphasis on artifice – the indication that it is a fiction – is, simultaneously, an attempt to achieve credibility or plausibility. This, perhaps paradoxically, suggests that *The Purple Cloud* is an unreliable narrative plausibly told. As William Nelles observes, ‘narrative embedding has the paradoxical effect of producing the illusion of a more profound realism, [...] but also of undercutting that illusion at the same time.’⁷ This is precisely the case in *The Purple Cloud* and proves essential to its wish fulfilment fantasy.

The paradoxical relationship between the ‘illusion of profound realism’ and the ‘undercutting [of] that illusion’ achieved by the frame narrative is reflected in the tension between the frame’s *apparent* dissociation and the text’s *actual* association of Shiel with Jeffson. Whilst the frame narrative seems to establish a distance between Shiel and Jeffson, this remoteness is undermined by the autobiographical allusions and by the parallels with Shiel’s life, his non-fiction, and his well-known views on religion and race that occur throughout the text. Indeed, numerous autobiographical references remind the reader that Shiel is the author of Jeffson’s words. As Albert Reynolds Morse points out, ‘most of Shiel’s philosophy of a socio-scientific nature is worked into his novels. [...] Shiel’s unique moral

⁶ Jeffrey Williams, *Theory and the Novel: Narrative Reflexivity in the British Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p.123.

⁷ William Nelles, ‘Stories within Stories: Narrative Levels and Embedded Narrative’, in *Narrative Dynamics: Essays on Time, Plot, Closure, and Frame*, ed. by Brian Richardson (Columbus, OH: Ohio State University Press, 2002), pp. 339-53 (p. 349).

and social philosophy [...] is veined through nearly all his works.’⁸ Shiel is clearly associated with Jeffson through a number of textual references to minor connections between author and protagonist. For example, both had sisters named Ada⁹ and Jeffson is inspired to write by Shiel’s friend, Arthur Machen (*PC*, pp. 128-29). These references signal, to informed readers, that aspects of Shiel’s life may inflect Jeffson’s account. They are, in effect, signposts to the text’s greater mirroring of Shiel’s own experiences as a decadent, egotist and monarch.¹⁰

Jeffson’s egotism and decadence can be seen as a reflection of Shiel’s own early life. Born in Montserrat in the West Indies in 1865, Shiel (originally Shiell) was the son of an Irish sea-trader and Methodist lay-preacher. His mother was black and possibly a freed slave. He was born after eight or nine sisters¹¹ and his status as a long-awaited firstborn son contributed to his sense of self-importance.¹² In his autobiographical writings he constructs a romanticised view of his birth, claiming to have been born during both an earthquake and a storm of the sort ‘unimaginable to Europeans.’¹³ Hyperbolically, he depicts his birth as a great event that literally ‘shook’ the Earth. The sense Shiel had of his own

⁸ Albert Reynolds Morse, ‘Some notes on Collations’, in *The Works of M. P. Shiel, Volume II: The Shielography Updated (Part 1)*, ed. by Albert Reynolds Morse (Cleveland: The Reynolds Morse Foundation, 1980), pp. 27-32 (p. 29).

⁹ Richard Shiell, and Dorothy Anderson, *The Shiell Family of the Caribbean Island of Montserrat* (Melbourne: MBE Business Service Centre, 2005), p. 50.

¹⁰ See Matthew Phipps Shiel, ‘About Myself’, *The Candid Friend* (17 August 1901), in *The Works of M. P. Shiel, Volume III: The Shielography Updated (Part 2)*, ed. by Albert Reynolds Morse (Cleveland: The Reynolds Morse Foundation, 1980), p. 417 and Svitavsky, William, ‘From Decadence to Racial antagonism: M. P. Shiel at the Turn of the Century’, *Science Fiction Studies*, 31 (2004), 1-24.

¹¹ The number is inconsistent in Shiel’s autobiographical writing.

¹² See Shiel, ‘About Myself’, p. 417.

¹³ Shiel, ‘About Myself’, p. 417.

consequence was exacerbated by his upbringing on Montserrat. His biographer, Harold Billings, observes that 'with few white boys for companions he had chiefly members of another race for friends. And they too were undoubtedly taught to treat him like a little God.'¹⁴ Richard Shiell and Dorothy Anderson corroborate this perspective in their exploration of Shiel's family tree. They note that Shiel's father would have regarded himself as upper-middle class because of his light skin colour, demanding a quality of life more privileged than many on Montserrat. The fact that Shiel was so light-skinned compared to his peers¹⁵ is significant as the 'degree of whiteness was of great importance in the social scheme of things.'¹⁶ Shiel's position as an only son, combined with a sense of racial superiority, led to what Billings terms his 'vast megalomania'¹⁷ and what J. Bryan describes as an attitude of 'God is more modest than I.'¹⁸ Such egotism was heightened when his father had Shiel crowned King Felipe I of the uninhabited island of Redonda (or Rodundo) on his fifteenth birthday. Reflecting on his coronation, Shiel observes that 'this notion that I am somehow the King, King of Kings, and the Kaiser of Imperial Caesar was so inveterately suggested to me, that I became incapable of expelling it.'¹⁹

¹⁴ Harold Billings, 'The Shape of Shiel 1865-1896: A Biography of the Early Years', in *Shiel In Diverse Hands*, ed., by Albert Reynolds Morse (Cleveland: The Reynolds Morse Foundation, 1983), pp. 77-108 (p. 84).

¹⁵ Shiell and Anderson, *The Shiell Family*, p. 50.

¹⁶ Shiell and Anderson, *The Shiell Family*, p. 12.

¹⁷ Harold Billings, *M. P. Shiel: A Biography of His Early Years* (Austin: Roger Beacham, 2005), p. 43.

¹⁸ Jeffrey Bryan, 'M. P. Shiel and the New Literature' (Orlando: Rollins College, MS, fol. 177, [n.d.]), p. 1.

¹⁹ Quoted in J. Maclaren-Ross [n.f.], 'The Strange Realm of M. P. Shiel', *The London Magazine* (September 1964), in *Vol. III*, ed. by Morse, pp. 685-90 (p. 685).

Such well-documented egotism on Shiel's part is echoed in Jeffson's perception of himself and in his behaviour. Early in the novel, he reflects that as a child he sensed that his 'life must be of mighty importance to some thing or things that I could not see; [...] that I was not a boy like other boys, but a being separate, special, marked for – something.' (*PC*, p. 9) Later his reflections that he is 'first of [his] kind' (*PC*, p. 55), the 'Arch one' (*PC*, p. 133) and on a par with divine forces (*PC*, p. 191) indicate a developing megalomania that shows itself in acts of destruction and self-indulgence. These references signal how much of Jeffson's personality derives from that of Shiel and it is essential to remain aware of the links between author and narrator when interpreting *The Purple Cloud* since the text is so conspicuously Shielian. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the novel's treatment of religion, science and race, and in the wish fulfilment 'departure' rebirth found at its conclusion.

To understand fully the text's Shielian philosophy, however, the reader is required to recognise that Jeffson is an unreliable narrator. Unreliability as an aspect of the novel's form is signalled by the frame narration, but is developed throughout 'The Purple Cloud' in Jeffson's fallible understanding of events. The reader's recognition of this fallibility is essential to distinguishing the novel's Shielian qualities, since Jeffson misinterprets the actions of the Black and White Powers for much of his narrative. As Maria Fumagalli notes, 'Shiel resorts to the cliché of Black

as Evil and White as Good', ²⁰ yet it is vital to read the novel through Shiel's particular conception of 'good' and 'evil' in order to accurately determine the roles of the Black and White Powers. Whilst the majority of Jeffson's story invites the reader to see good and evil, White and Black, from a conventional perspective, the conclusion exposes, more explicitly than the textual clues preceding it, Jeffson's unreliability. The climax reveals that it is actually the White Power that is responsible for the destruction of contemporary civilisation and its subsequent opportunity for regeneration.

Comprehending the nature and roles played by the Black and White Powers is central to understanding *The Purple Cloud's* particular wish fulfilment fantasy of human advancement. Each Power represents a potential direction for humanity's future, from contemporary decline, the domain of the Black, to evolutionary progress and a spirituality informed by knowledge, the path of the White. Indeed, as has been noted, Jeffson's trajectory is shaped by his relationship with the two conflicting Powers. Their opposition is the catalyst for the narrative events and the provocation for his actions. Unable to identify which Power urges him onward, ²¹ Jeffson senses that the Black Power is the more destructive of the two and speculates that it is the Black that has destroyed all life on the planet. Although this assumption is not consistent throughout the novel (Jeffson at one point implicates the White. Associating it with the Christian God, he

²⁰ Maria Christina Fumagalli, 'Representing the World Instead of Reproducing It: M. P. Shiel's *The Purple Cloud*', *ARIEL*, 33:1 (2002), 63-82 (p. 69).

²¹ Jeffson first hears the 'voices' of the Black and White powers when he is seven years old (*PC*, p. 8).

states: 'Well, Lord God, Thou hast destroyed the work of thy hand' (*PC*, p. 82)), it has led most critics, including John Clute, Brian Stableford, Paul Spencer and Ailise Bulfin to assume that it is the Black Power that destroys humanity.²² This conventional interpretation is based on the acceptance of Jeffson's supposition that it is the Black Power that has caused the eponymous cloud as a punishment for being first to reach the North Pole. Yet Jeffson's unreliability is telegraphed from the outset by the first line of his subjective, first-person account: 'Well, the memory seems to be getting rather impaired now. What, for instance, was the name of that parson who preached [...]? Forgotten!' (*PC*, p.3) This comment on the fallibility of memory sets the tone for the narrativisation of wish fulfilment fantasy throughout, which repeatedly alludes to Jeffson's unreliability through his lack of certainty, inconsistent assumptions, and emotional outbursts. His version of events is often recorded years after they happen and, on numerous occasions, he cannot remember names (*PC*, p. 193), changes his mind, and even contradicts himself.²³ He is paranoid (*PC*, p. 139), has hallucinations (*PC*, p. 203), and is deliberately dishonest with himself (*PC*, pp. 15-16, p. 216 and p. 293). At one point he doubts that the Black and White Powers even exist, declaring: 'Damn Them and their tangles! I care nothing for them! – if they were there. For are not these outcries I hear nothing but the screams of my own burning nerves [...]?'

²² See John Clute, 'Introduction', to *The Purple Cloud*, pp. v-xii; Brian Stableford, 'The Politics of Evolution: Philosophical Themes in the Speculative Fiction of M.P. Shiel', *Foundation*, 27 (1983), 35-60; Paul Spencer, 'Shiel verses Shiel', in *Diverse Hands*, ed. by Morse, pp. 31-56; and Bulfin, 'One Planet', pp. 102-20.

²³ See Matthew Phipps Shiel, *The Purple Cloud* (2000), pp. 73-74: Jeffson's unreliability is signalled. Here he sees himself as having 'chanced' upon the pole, whereas previously he viewed reaching as being part of a divine plan (he suspects the Black's hand in events). Such contradictions indicate that Jeffson is inconsistent and emotional.

(*PC*, p. 194) Jeffson's doubts, confusion and his frustration at his lack of understanding repeatedly point to his subjectivity.

The importance of Jeffson's restricted narration is central to accurately interpreting the actions of the Black and White Powers and the text's wish fulfilment fantasy. It encourages readers to interpret Jeffson's declarations as a series of clues rather than as reliable accounts of how the Powers function. Since he is unable to identify which utterance originates from what Power (see pp. 8-9), the text continuously problematises his assumption that it is the Black Power that has eliminated civilisation. En route to the North Pole with a group of explorers, Jeffson has

a fancy, a whim of the mind [...] that should Mankind force his way to the Pole and the old forbidding mystery biding there, then some sort of mishap should not fail to overtake the race; that the White, being kindly inclined to mankind, did not wish this to take place, and intended for the sake of the race to wipe out our entire expedition ere it reached; and that the Black, knowing that the White designed to do this, and by what means, used me – *me* – to outwit this scheme. (*PC*, pp. 23-24)

His narrative makes clear that, at this point, his understanding of the Powers' motivations is a 'fancy', something he senses rather than knows to be a verifiable fact. Jeffson's fallibility encourages the reader to be sceptical as to whether he is interpreting events correctly. Indeed, his impression that the White feels 'kindly' towards humankind is a misinterpretation deriving from his inability to see what the text reveals as the White's long-term plan. The White Power destroys humanity in order to facilitate human progress through a new beginning, a 'departure'

transfiguration. Its kindliness is observable only at the text's conclusion, when Jeffson acknowledges the future generation's potential to be greater than its predecessors (*PC*, p. 293). Incautious readers can be easily misled by Jeffson's subjective speculations about which Power is in the ascendant over him and over the Earth. It is only at the climax that the White's strategy becomes apparent. The initial destruction is actually presented as a positive act that eradicates a corrupt and decadent civilisation already on the path to its own ruin. It is, therefore, more appropriate and accurate to see the White Power as the destroyer of contemporary civilisation. Its motive is clear: it annihilates civilisation using a Noachian Flood-analogue to facilitate the purification of humanity, overcome contemporary decline and reinvigorate human development. In this instance, however, the catastrophe is the result of a volcanic eruption rather than a flood. Krakatoa had erupted only eighteen years earlier and that event provides a self-conscious parallel for Shiel's fictional cataclysm (*PC*, p. 109).

Given the unreliability of Jeffson's perceptions, the novel introduces a broader range of perspectives on its wish fulfilment. One of the most significant of these is explored through Jeffson's interaction with the views of a man named Scotland at Cambridge. As the only other person aware of the Black and White Powers before the disaster, Scotland's insights are important. As Jeffson reports, Scotland believes:

[T]he universe was being furiously contended for by two Powers: that the White was the stronger, but did not find the

conditions on our planet very favourable to his success, had got the best of it up to the Middle Ages in Europe, but since then had been slowly, stubbornly, giving way before the Black; and finally the Black would win – not everywhere perhaps, but *here* – would carry off, if no other planet, at least *this* one, for his prize.’ (*PC*, p. 10)

Whilst Scotland’s perspective is, perhaps, no more reliable than Jeffson’s, it possesses the authority of conviction and lends credence to the existence of the Powers.²⁴ Symbolically aligning the White Power with God and, by implication, with morality,²⁵ Scotland’s conjecture acknowledges that in contemporary society the Black Power is thriving in what Jeffson later describes as ‘a murrain of vices and crimes.’ (*PC*, p. 244) The suggestion that contemporary society is not favourable to the White Power’s drive towards ‘perfection’ establishes the text’s critical credentials.²⁶ Scotland’s claims indicate that the Black holds power in the modern world. Following the catastrophe, not realising that there is another survivor whose purpose is to fulfil the White’s plan, Jeffson misinterprets his isolation as the Black’s victory.

The overall acceptance by Shiel scholars that it is the Black Power that destroys humanity does not acknowledge the contradictions found in Jeffson’s uncertainties regarding the Powers. Ailise Bulfin’s position, for example, is to suggest that, ‘Ambiguity is [...] evident in the influence of

²⁴ See Monique R. Morgan, ‘Madness, Unreliable Narration, and Genre in *The Purple Cloud*’, *Science Fiction Studies*, 36 (2009), 266-81 (p. 275).

²⁵ See Matthew Phipps Shiel, ‘Are We Going Pagan?’ (Austin: University of Texas, Harry Ransom Centre, MS, Box 1, [n.d.]). Although Shiel rejected religion he did believe in a God-like force that provided life. He stated that ‘“God” is merely an English name for Power, for the Almighty, whose being is as perfectly certain as it is mysterious.’

²⁶ Bulfin, ‘One Planet’, p. 113.

the Black and White Powers: if the earth needed to be cleared in order for the new race to be born, did the destructive Power not also work for good?' ²⁷ Bulfin recognises that the destruction is necessary to make way for a 'new race'; the novel is, she explains, about evolutionary progress. However, her assertion that it is the Black Power that destroys humanity implies that the White had no authority or will to annihilate the species. This problematises her observation that 'Leda and the White Power represent progress and the fundamental evolutionary drive towards perfection.' ²⁸ She understands that the White drives towards 'perfection', and acknowledges that humanity is depicted as 'common, dull, lubberly, mean, debased, diseased', but does not explain how the White is going to perfect a species characterised by 'vices and crimes' (*PC*, p. 244). As a consequence, she does not reconcile her recognition of the White's impulse to engineer 'perfection' with the apparent need to eradicate the corrupt contemporary civilisation. In effect, she argues that the Black Power is in indirect service to the White. This seems to contravene textual evidence to the contrary, including Scotland's suggestion that the Powers are 'furiously' contending the universe and Jeffson's recognition 'that two Powers, which hated each other, must be continuously after me [...].'²⁹ (*PC*, p. 9) Bulfin's interpretation of *The Purple Cloud* overlooks the fact that if it is the White, rather than the Black, which desires progress, it is unlikely that the Black Power would eradicate the 'failed species' since eliminating corrupt humanity would serve the White Power's ultimate objective. Thus there is no motivation for the Black to destroy a race already in decline.

²⁷ Bulfin, 'One Planet', p. 114.

²⁸ Bulfin, 'One Planet', p. 113.

The actual destructive power of the Black is seen not in the effects of the eponymous cloud but in humanity's gradual decline into corruption before the disaster and in its attempts to prevent human recovery after the devastation. Indeed, this is a feature of the wish fulfilments of most pre-war transfigurative disaster novels. Jeffson, in his dynamiting of various cities to ensure there are no other survivors (see *PC*, p. 199) and in his reluctance to repopulate the earth with Leda, aligns himself with the Black Power for much of the text. Hence, Bulfin's assertion that 'Jeffson's sympathies lie with the Black Power and what he considers its destructive mission to purge the earth of a failed species'²⁹ is correct. Yet, whilst Jeffson's sympathies do lie with the Black Power until his seduction by Leda, his belief that all of the destruction can be attributed to the Black Power is flawed. It is the White Power that is responsible for sending the purging cloud.

Numerous Shiel scholars have acknowledged that the disaster is a necessary means of cleansing the planet of contemporary humanity. Bill Svitavsky, for example, argues that in the novel 'humanity's failings seem incurable short of apocalypse.'³⁰ He adds that 'Shiel's logic consistently leads to ruthless killing' throughout his entire oeuvre.³¹ This is echoed by Stableford, who notes that 'Shiel accepted the cruelty of nature [...] as part

²⁹ Bulfin, 'One Planet', p. 113.

³⁰ Svitavsky, 'From Decadence to Racial Antagonism', p. 16.

³¹ Svitavsky, 'From Decadence to Racial Antagonism', p. 15.

of the price to be paid for progress [...] a price worth paying.³² Bulfin observes that 'Shiel has no compunction about eradicating the entire existing population in order that the human race may obtain this fresh start.'³³ However, these critics assume that it is the Black Power that causes the catastrophe. This inevitably leads to oversights in their arguments. This is particularly apparent in the work of Spencer, who notes that:

beneath the story is the thought that the Black, too, has a positive role: the near destruction of humanity, Shiel suggests, has made possible the emergence of a new and superior race. In a cruel way God's evolutionary will has acted through Black and White together. The Biblical motto with which the book concludes balances God's brutalities and His long-term mercies.³⁴

As with Bulfin's assertion that it is the Black Power that destroys humanity, Spencer's suggestion appears inaccurate. He is, in effect, arguing that the Black and White Powers both constitute God's will. The destruction (His brutality) is part of God's plan for a new start (His mercy). However, 'The Purple Cloud' indicates throughout, and particularly in Scotland's remarks, that a kind of Manichean battle is being fought between the Powers as *two conflicting entities* (see pp. 99-100) rather than as *opposed manifestations of a higher, unified will* working towards an ultimately salvific objective.

The nature of the oppositional relationship between the Black and the White Powers, which is crucial to the introduction of the wish fulfilment

³² Stableford, *Scientific Romance*, p. 208.

³³ Bulfin, 'One Planet', p. 102.

³⁴ Spencer, 'Shiel versus Shiel', p. 36.

fantasy of this book, is confirmed at the climax of the novel. Jeffson realises that the White has won dominion over the earth and the text seems to give his account more reliability and certainty. In this respect the use of italics is noteworthy:

But *this* I understand: that it is *the* White who is Master here; that though He wins by a hair, yet He wins: and since He wins, dance, dance, my heart. [...] For I, Adam Jeffson, parent of a race, hereby lay down, ordain, and decree for all time, perceiving it now: That the one Motto and Watch-word proper to the riot and odyssey of life in general, and in especial to the race of men, ever was, and remains, even this: 'Though He slay me, yet will I trust in Him.' (*PC*, pp. 293-94)

This passage confirms that it is the White Power that has caused the catastrophe. The 'He' who wins, the triumphant White, is the same as the 'He' who slays and the 'Him' who should be trusted. The repetition of third person singular masculine pronouns unambiguously aligns the White Power with the acts of destruction and rebirth that bracket Jeffson's narrative. This final declaration encourages the reader to re-evaluate Jeffson's account, finding greater certainty in the hitherto ambiguous, unreliable narrative. This certainty is supported more explicitly by the 1901 version of the novel than the 1930 revision. The earlier text states that Jeffson is '*clearly* perceiving' (emphasis added) the situation at the end of the novel whereas the 1930 edition omits 'clearly'. The presence of 'clearly' in the first edition telegraphs that Jeffson's earlier perception was clouded or incorrect. Its removal from the 1930 revision renders Jeffson's new insight less certain, thereby maintaining an essence of the text's

overall ambiguity and complicating the interpretative game the text seems to be playing with the reader.

Having been in a position of uncertainty throughout, the reader, like Jefferson, realises that the rebirth of the human race has been part of the White Power's plan all along. The phrase, 'Though He slay me, yet will I trust in Him', reiterates *The Kent Express* newspaper article (*PC*, p. 88) in which a journalist reports on the encroaching cloud and prays for the doomed population. The phrase also appears in Shiel's 'Is War Necessary?':

war heightens the quality of varieties, by heightening the quality of births – a statement whose truth may not, indeed, be obvious at once to all: for, 'how!' someone may say, "here are our best and brightest, the parents of the future, being devoured by war – can this heighten the quality of births in our variety?" The answer is that the Great Physician is a Surgeon too; that, if He "works in a mysterious way", it is ever without fail; and, as for me, though He slay me, yet I trust in Him. Not, indeed, that it can be denied that when the brave and bright fall, there is a loss of good blood, as always when a cancer is cut out.³⁵

Shiel's perception of the benefits of war for the 'heightening' of the species explains the logic behind the supposed advantages of mass extermination shown in *The Purple Cloud*. Whilst he does not deny that much 'good blood' may be sacrificed, whether it is in war, or in the fictional catastrophe, he argues that what is important is that the quality of future births and, by extension, future humanity, is improved.

³⁵ Matthew Phipps Shiel, 'Is War Necessary?' (Austin: University of Texas, Harry Ransom Centre, MS, Box 2, [n.d.]), pp. 39-40.

The doctrine of sacrifice enabling progress underpins much Shielian philosophy. It is reiterated in his principle that the end justifies the means and that individuals do not count,³⁶ a perspective exemplified best by his interpretation of the 'happy ending':

[T]here are two kinds of happy ending: (1) endings happy for the 'characters' of the tale; and then (2) – a still better kind – endings happy for the reader, for society, for Life. Of this second kind an excellent example is [...] *Romeo and Juliet*, in which we have tragedy, pretty pitiful, but then comes a happy ending for *us*; we get the benefit, since that Montagu-Capulet feud that had so wounded the community is soothed to quiescence over the lover's tomb; and in the end we see that the pitilessness of God is *good*, for there was a happy issue out of all that affliction, [...] since the blessing to many immensely outweighed the bale to a pair of wee people [...]. [...] [S]orrow may endure for a night, two nights, but joy comes in the morning.³⁷

For Shiel, the truly happy ending is one in which the whole of society, or the human species, benefits from the outcome of tribulation. This far outweighs the suffering of individuals regardless of their numbers. Such a position enters many of Shiel's works including *The Weird O' It* (1902), in which the deaths of the main characters are part of a happy ending because the family is morally redeemed,³⁸ and the play, *The Yellow Deluge* (n.d.). This play is a Japanese-Russian retelling of *Romeo and Juliet* in which the romance prevents a 'yellow deluge' and a global war. The play emphasises the positive reading of *Romeo and Juliet* offered in

³⁶ Spencer, 'Shiel verses Shiel', p. 50.

³⁷ Matthew Phipps Shiel, 'On Happy Endings', in 'Science, Life and Literature – On reading and on Writing', in *Diverse Hands*, ed. by Morse pp. 449-84 (p. 449).

³⁸ John Squires, and Steve Eng, *Shiel and his Collaborators: Three Essays on William Thomas Stead, Louis Tracy and John Gawsworth* (Kettering: The Vainglory Press, 2004), p. 20.

‘On Happy Endings’, concluding that the personal tragedy is rendered insignificant in relation to the ‘bigger and better’ future ahead.³⁹

The denouement of *The Purple Cloud* is consistent with much of Shiel’s writing in that the end justifies the means, that long-term benefits for the species are more important than the sacrifice of millions. In this context, the vast majority of the *fin-de-siècle* population, characterised by indulgence and decline, are destroyed as punishment for their corrupt behaviour. Their demise contributes to the novel’s overall ‘happy ending’ in which humanity will progress from a fresh start with a new Adam and Eve. The catastrophe apparently initiated by Jeffson’s journey to the Pole is justified and validated by the triumph of the White Power and the text’s positive conclusion.

The Purple Cloud is purposefully ambiguous in the way it depicts the trajectory towards wish fulfilment fantasy brought about by the White Power. This deliberate ambiguity marks the text as symptomatic of Shiel’s well-documented egotism, in which the author exercises a god-like power over his text in order to place his readers in a position from which they should continuously question the narrator’s speculations, follow intertextual allusions, and finally re-evaluate the narrative.

³⁹ Matthew Phipps Shiel, ‘The Yellow Deluge’ (Austin: University of Texas, Harry Ransom Centre, MS, Box 16-19, [n.d.]).

The requirement for the reader to re-evaluate Jeffson's unreliable account, to ascertain the role of the White Power in the catastrophe and perceive its overall evolutionary strategy for humanity is an aspect of Shiel's writing which has been overlooked. It reflects his admiration of clever deception, seeing 'trickiness' aligned with wisdom. In 'About Myself' Shiel states how 'Conjuring tricks also attract me, as still I cherish a reverence for the conjuror, the acrobat – the intellectual or physical – knowing that "by wit He seated the Earth, he fastened the heavens with trickiness".'⁴⁰ *The Purple Cloud* encourages the reader into becoming, in Shiel's terms, an 'intellectual acrobat' to determine its complex themes and uncover its pragmatic, if callous, wish fulfilment fantasy of progress through destruction. From Shiel's linking of his admiration for the conjuror with a comparable appreciation of God's 'tricky' artifice, the reader of *The Purple Cloud* obtains a sense of the author as conjuror, artfully concealing the White Power's actions to secure its ultimate objective. In 'On Eternal and Temporal', Shiel proclaims that education ought to encourage empirical 'scepticism and inventiveness', which he sees as the two facets of wisdom,⁴¹ and it is possible to perceive Jeffson's account as a potentially pedagogic text that nurtures such intellectual resourcefulness amongst its readers as it directs them towards 'wisdom', towards an understanding of the text's final vision of a potentially perfectible humanity. In 'The Purple Cloud', the realisation of this latent perfection depends upon the unification

⁴⁰ Shiel, 'About Myself', p. 417.

⁴¹ Matthew Phipps Shiel, 'On Eternal and Temporal' (Austin: University of Texas, Harry Ransom Centre, MS, Box 16-19, [n.d.]), p. 12.

of the spiritual and the scientific within a patriarchal overman in a world cleared of decadence and the non-white races.

The Purple Cloud's integration of religiosity and rational understanding is, unsurprisingly, complex; drawing as it does upon Shielian philosophy, sustained Biblical allusion and mythic symbolism. For Shiel, knowledge derived from scientific advancement was not at odds with spiritual belief; rather it enhanced it. In 'The Inconsistency of a Novelist', he observes:

'Religion' was my atmosphere, though I am now so vastly more religious than he [his father], being modern religious, that his ancient religion seems irreligious: for in proportion as religion springs from knowledge it is real, in proportion as it springs from hope (ignorance) it is unreal.⁴²

For Shiel, religion obtains a 'reality' through knowledge. This is made explicit in 'Are We Going Pagan?', where Shiel speculates that 'Someday priests will doubtless be as religious as scientists now are',⁴³ a remark that emphasises his belief that it is only through science and rational thought that priests can be truly religious. Religiosity is, in Shiel's work, about a greater appreciation of the cosmos through scientific and rational comprehension.

Importantly, *The Purple Cloud* makes clear that it is not increasing knowledge and scientific advancement that aligns society with the Black, although this appears to be the case in Scotland's discussion with Jeffson.

⁴² Matthew Phipps Shiel, 'The Inconsistency of a Novelist', in *Vol. III*, ed. by Morse, pp. 427-29 (p. 429).

⁴³ Shiel, 'Are We Going Pagan?'.

Scotland draws attention to the White's dominance 'up to the Middle Ages' (*PC*, p. 10) and confirms that the Black has gradually increased its influence in subsequent periods, including the Renaissance, the Enlightenment and the Victorian Age. This suggests that the rise of the Black coincides with the Age of Reason and the growth of modern science. However, in the text as a whole, this is not the case. It is the corrupt uses to which science is put that contribute to the Black's influence over contemporary society, including the use of medicine to poison rather than cure (*PC*, p. 19) and technology to gain monetary reward (*PC*, p. 4). Hence, it seems probable that Scotland is alluding to the White's supremacy in classical antiquity, characteristically perceived as a social and cultural Golden Age by the Victorians,⁴⁴ when he suggests the White had 'got the best of it' before the Middle Ages. The advance of the Black, and the displacement of the White, corresponds with the opportunity for humanity to increase its selfish, sinful behaviour through the exploitation of the discoveries of science.

While Svitavsky equates the Black Power's accumulation since the Middle Ages with scientific and technological progress,⁴⁵ Shiel's fiction and non-fiction consistently advocates science. Towards the end of the novel, for example, Leda applauds pre-catastrophe 'cleverness [of the "best people"]

⁴⁴ Simon Goldhill notes that 'Victorian culture was obsessed with the classical past, as nineteenth century self-conscious about its own moment in history combined with an idealism focused on the glories of Greece and the splendor of Rome to make classical antiquity a deeply privileged and deeply contested arena for cultural (self-) expression.' See *Victorian Culture and Classical Antiquity: Art, Opera, Fiction, and the Proclamation of Modernity* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011), p. 1.

⁴⁵ Svitavsky, 'From Decadence to Racial Antagonism', p. 17.

– to find out what water is made of – to fly on those things [...] – to find out that the atmosphere of Mars has more oxygen than ours – to talk across the continents – how inspired!’ (*PC*, p. 244)⁴⁶ By contrast, Jeffson draws attention to the ‘vices and crimes’ that characterised ‘millions of others – especially at the time of the cloud – on a lower level [...] debased, diseased [...]’ (*PC*, p. 244) and, in the 1901 edition, ‘putrid wretches – covetous, false, murderous, mean, selfish, [...]and] hideous, [...]’⁴⁷ Although the arrival of the cloud destroys both the ‘best’ and the ‘debased’ millions, scientific and technical knowledge are not abandoned following the catastrophe. Rather they are united with spiritual awareness. Tellingly, Leda’s favourite texts are a book on chemistry and the Old Testament. Most revealingly, the chemistry book is given precedence over the Bible; it is described as her ‘book of books [...], and *next* the Old Testament’ (*PC*, p. 243, emphasis added). As Jeffson observes, ‘For chemistry she has a craving, a rage, and no little knowledge of it.’ (*PC*, p. 237) Accordingly, Leda’s learning derives from both scientifically and spiritually based material.

Religion is, in Shiel’s work, about a greater appreciation of the cosmos through knowledge. It is significant then, that in *The Purple Cloud* the Pole is associated with the Genesitic Tree of Knowledge (see p. 23 and 41). Adam Jeffson’s name makes the link to Genesis explicit; most obviously, ‘Adam’ was the first man according to the Old Testament. Less apparent

⁴⁶ Leda pronounces all ‘r’ sounds as ‘l’s, a symptom of the fact that Jeffson taught her to speak as an adult.

⁴⁷ Mathew Phipps Shiel, *The Purple Cloud* (1901), <<http://www.gutenberg.net/1/1/2/2/11229>> [Accessed 12 May 2008].

is the meaning of Jeffson's surname which, Stableford notes, is 'son of Jehovah'.⁴⁸ These allusions appear to suggest, as Everett F. Bleiler observes, that Jeffson's journey to the pole is a 'concealed recapitulation of the fall and the expulsion.'⁴⁹ However, it is actually a reversal of this scenario. 'Jeffson' is, in fact, a fictional surname, recalling both the name of Shiel's friend, the author Edgar Jepson,⁵⁰ and Thomas Jefferson (1743-1826), the third president of the United States of America (1801-09). Both versions of this name (Jepson and Jefferson) mean 'son of Geoffrey'.⁵¹ Geoffrey means 'God's peace, gift of peace or Divine peace.'⁵² Hence Jeffson more accurately suggests 'son of God's peace', reflecting the new harmony found at the end of the novel. The fall has occurred before Jeffson reaches the Pole and the catastrophe initiates a new Eden. When Jeffson returns from the Arctic, England has been transformed into an Eden-like realm. The 'Hell' created by humanity, from 'baby habits of mentation', has been superseded by a landscape as fair as a 'seventh heaven' (*PC*, p. 117).

Whereas Eden was the dwelling place of the first Adam, the Pole is now the place from where the second 'Adam' emerges into this new paradise. In the original myth, Eve offers the fruit from the Tree of Knowledge to Adam, who eats it and gains forbidden knowledge. Like Eve offering the

⁴⁸ Stableford, *Scientific Romance*, p. 79.

⁴⁹ Everett F. Bleiler, 'M.P. Shiel 1865-1947', in *Diverse Hands*, ed. by Morse, pp. 123-31 (pp. 124-25).

⁵⁰ Bleiler, 'M.P. Shiel 1865-1947' p. 124.

⁵¹ Percy H. Reaney and Richard M. Wilson, *A Dictionary of English Surnames* (London and New York: Routledge, 1991), p. 253.

⁵² Iseabail MacLeod and Terry Freedman, *Dictionary of First Names* (Hertfordshire: Wordsworth, 1995), p. 85.

apple to Adam, Clodagh tempts Jeffson to reach the Pole (*PC*, p. 20). This depiction of woman as temptress is revisited at the end of the novel through Leda's characterisation. Leda is the 'first' woman, the new Eve. She, too, tempts Jeffson and deceives him (by claiming to see another purple cloud) in order to make him acquiesce to his carnal desires. Both women act – indirectly and directly – to influence the rebirth of humanity. That the new beginning at the end of *The Purple Cloud* is portrayed positively marks a reversal of the traditional Edenic myth. Rather than being admonished for reaching the Tree/Pole Jeffson is rewarded and a new Eden is established. As Shiel asserts in 'Is War Necessary?': 'There lives and grows that Tree of Knowledge – fruit good for good, fruit to be desired to make one wise.'⁵³ Hence, in Shiel's writing the fruit of the Tree is not to be shunned, as in the Biblical myth, but to be embraced for the knowledge it brings.

That *The Purple Cloud* is a reversal of the 'fall and the expulsion' is evidenced by Jeffson not receiving the 'punishment' allotted to humanity. Jeffson's reaching of the 'tree of knowledge' is a marker of the next step in humanity's progress. According to this interpretation, attaining the Pole is an achievement, a triumph of strength rather than a sin. Reflecting on his journey, Jeffson recalls the words of parson Mackay, a 'prophet' (*PC*, p. 3), who claims that the constant failure of humans to reach the Pole is a 'lesson and a warning' (*PC*, p. 5) that the place was forbidden 'like the Tree of Knowledge in Eden' (*PC*, p. 6). According to Mackay's preaching,

⁵³ Shiel, M. P., 'Is War Necessary?' p. 52.

Jeffson would be the ultimate transgressor should he reach the Pole. Mackay sees the failure of past expeditions as a warning that the Pole should not be approached, rather than as a challenge to be overcome. He preaches that 'There was some sort of Fate, or Doom, connected to the Pole in reference to the human race [...] which the race disregarded at its peril' (*PC*, p. 5), indicating that reaching the Pole would likely result in the punishment of the race. Yet Jeffson is the only person – with the exception of Leda – who is spared. Compared to John the Baptist (*PC*, p. 5), Mackay precedes humankind's 'saviour'. Jeffson is not Jesus Christ, the Son of God, however, but the 'son of God's peace'. He is not the sacrifice that redeems humanity from its sins; rather, he is the father of a new humanity that follows the extermination of an irredeemably corrupt race. In this way, Shiel's novel presents pragmatically the cost in human lives in the cause of evolution. The White Power assists Jeffson, not because, like Noah, he is the most righteous, but because of all humanity he is the epitome of resilience and capability. As Bleiler points out, in 1901 the North Pole 'stood as the site of ultimate human achievement.'⁵⁴ Jeffson's triumph of endurance can, therefore, be read as a demonstration of his suitability for reshaping humanity in the post-catastrophe world.

Jeffson's capabilities and perseverance align him with the Shielian concept of the Overman, an important feature of the novel's wish fulfilment fantasy. Albert Reynolds Morse notes that according to Shiel, 'all men are different, with some rising to the top to become overmen who alone can save the

⁵⁴ Bleiler, 'M.P. Shiel 1865-1947', p. 123.

masses from self-destruction.’⁵⁵ In many of Shiel’s novels there is some manifestation of the Overman. Jefferson Hunter explains that in the early twentieth century Nietzschean ideas were popular in literature and often the superman’s ‘function was simply to exercise power on a grand scale, to redefine adventure as a quantitative achievement. [...] [T]he Edwardian novelist who responded most extravagantly to the challenge was M. P. Shiel.’⁵⁶ Shiel’s adoption and adaptation of Nietzsche’s concepts is certainly evident in *The Purple Cloud*. However, according to Shiel’s philosophy, unlike Nietzsche’s, all individuals could aspire to be an Overman. However, few will achieve such a goal, as they lack either the ability or will. *The Purple Cloud* presents this idea unusually through the race to the Pole and by having the extant masses destroyed. For Shiel, Overmen have the ability to be proficient at almost everything and Jefferson is ‘the most assured of these portraits of Shielian supermen.’⁵⁷ He demonstrates the required stamina, ambition and fortitude; he begins the novel as a doctor, becomes the first man to reach the Pole, is a proficient sailor, constructs a palace; and demonstrates an unceasing ability to turn his hand to any task.

Central to Shiel’s conception of the Overman is curiosity. In ‘Our Way Out’, Shiel emphasises that the most important skill for people to possess is curiosity. He asserts that if children are taught to be curious they will be

⁵⁵ Albert Reynolds Morse, ‘Qualifying a Biographer’, in *Vol. III*, ed. by Morse, pp. 494-98 (p. 495).

⁵⁶ Jefferson Hunter, *Edwardian Fiction* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard Uni. Press 1947), p. 93.

⁵⁷ Roger Dobson, ‘Extraordinary Prose: The Fiction of M. P. Shiel’ (Orlando: Rollins College, MS, fol. 255, [n.d.]).

able to turn their hand to any talent, including ‘spontaneously’ developing the capacity to read.⁵⁸ In *The Purple Cloud*’s pre-catastrophe society avarice has stifled that curiosity, a situation echoing Shiel’s attitude to his own contemporary society. Indeed, his writing on this topic suggests that there is a lack of aspiration, beyond the economic, amongst the masses. In his article ‘Science, Life and Literature’, for example, Shiel states that ‘men now, and cows, see many things and wonder at nothing’; that is, they have lost their curiosity and their capacity for thought.⁵⁹ A questioning attitude towards the universe leads, in Shiel’s writing, to aspiration. Most people, for Shiel, ‘lack the habit of philosophy – mental strength, independence and liberation.’⁶⁰ It is having the ability to reflect, to possess a curious mind, and be disciplined as well as being physically robust that is essential to Shiel’s vision of the Overman.

In parallel with its presentation of curiosity as a positive force for human development, *The Purple Cloud* is critical of the motivating power of greed. Early in the novel, Jeffson points out that the desire to send an expedition to the Pole had ‘a thousand times intensified by a new interest – a tremendous money interest.’ (*PC*, p. 4) He continues by stating that the ‘new zeal’ was motivated by the ‘mean demon Mammon’ and it ‘had ceased to be healthy as the old zeal had been’ (*PC*, p. 4). Demonic and ‘fevered’ (*PC*, p. 4), the craving for monetary gain has displaced the formerly ‘healthy’ desire for knowledge for its own sake. Here, the novel’s

⁵⁸ Matthew Phipps Shiel, ‘Our Way Out’ (Austin: University of Texas, Harry Ransom Centre, MS, Box 4, [n.d.]).

⁵⁹ Shiel, ‘Science, Life and Literature’, p. 453.

⁶⁰ Shiel, ‘Science, Life and Literature’, p. 453.

diction establishes a distinction between beneficial enthusiasm, fuelled by a desire for discovery, and the sickly consequences of avarice.

Clodagh's ambition for Jeffson to reach the pole is motivated by the prospect of fame and monetary gain, and she is willing to employ any means necessary to ensure this outcome. Her nephew, Peters, is addicted to atropine and it is this addiction that allows Clodagh to murder him. She tells Jeffson at one point that she is an admirer of Lucrezia Borgia (*PC*, p. 11), who married numerous times for political convenience and was rumoured to have poisoned several men.⁶¹ The fact that Clodagh poisons her cousin to release a place for Jeffson on the expedition makes the link between her and the Italian poisoner explicit. Her actions are shown to be symptomatic of wider society when she manipulates Jeffson into ignoring/denying the poisoning and remarking that they live 'in these days of "the corruption of the upper classes", and Roman decadence of everything [...]. I find a sensuous pleasure in dabbling in drugs [...]. And I want you to acquire the habit of letting me have my little way – ' (*PC*, p. 15). In emphasising Clodagh's selfishness and decadence – her corrupt sensuousness – and Peters' addiction, the opening of Jeffson's account quickly establishes a late Victorian Britain characterised by greed, drug addiction, selfish ambition and murder.

In the novel greed is presented as most responsible for social and cultural decline. Reflecting on the Victorian population, Leda notes, 'they had got

⁶¹ William Gilbert, *Lucrezia Borgia, Duchess of Ferrara, Volume 1* (London: Biblio Life, 2009), pp. 18-19.

so *spoiled*, that is all – seem to have become quite dull-witted – the plainest truths they could not see.’ (*PC*, p. 273) This dullness is a consequence of the pursuit of material wealth. She continues:

‘I can imagine that those faculties which aided them in their stultification to become rich, and make the least poor, must have been greatly sharpened, while the other faculties withered: as I can imagine a person seeing double through one eye, and blind on the other side.’ (*PC*, p. 273)

In other words, contemporary society operates under a capitalist imperative that suggests a Social Darwinist selection pressure where the capacity for making money flourishes while all other characteristics atrophy.

Jefferson argues that ‘they didn’t want to see the other side [...]. For they had become more or less unconscious of their misery, especially the rich [...].’ (*PC*, p. 273) The pursuit of wealth, Jefferson seems to be suggesting, makes both poor and rich miserable. Their ‘blindness’, however, does not simply prevent them from recognizing suffering but, as Leda explains, ‘from seeing the stars.’ (*PC*, p. 273) At this point, the novel makes clear that misery, conscious or unconscious, for poor or rich, stems from the inhibition of inquisitiveness by acquisitiveness. Free of greed, the population will, as Bulfin notes, be ‘more evolved – able to see their world clearly and use their brains and bodies fully.’⁶² The eradication of avarice would halt intellectual degeneration and lead to a reassertion of other, more constructive, motivations. Stableford notes that, for Shiel,

⁶² Bulfin, ‘One Planet’, p. 114.

exploitation of the working class by capitalists and landlords was not bad simply because it was exploitation. He was not at all interested in lifting the yoke of misery from the workers simply to make them comfortable. Exploitation was bad because it stifled scientific enquiry [...] [T]he suffering of individuals was of no consequence. What mattered was that evolution was held back.⁶³

Hence, Shiel's distaste for capitalism is grounded in his recognition of its stifling effect on intellectual development.

Importantly, *The Purple Cloud* is also critical of the uneven distribution of produce and land arising from capitalism. When Jefferson reflects on the pre-disaster society he observes how there was sufficient land for 'dates and wine for all', 'but some got hold of lots of it, and, as the rest felt the pinch of scarcity, there arose a pretty state of things – including the dulness [sic] and commonness, the vices and crimes.' (*PC*, p. 245) The disaster allows for the redistribution of land and for the elimination of capitalism by returning the world to a pre-capitalist era (*PC*, p. 246). As Leda explains:

'[I]f there should spring up more men now, and they, having the experience of the past at their hand, made an arrangement among themselves that the first who tried to take more than he could work should be sent to deam a nonsense-deam, the question [of inequality] would never arise! [...].'⁶³ (*PC*, p. 245)

⁶³ Stableford, 'The Politics of Evolution', p. 58.

Leda's speech emphasises that the disaster is an opportunity to secure a new 'arrangement' amongst future generations that will ensure an equality that supports and sustains human development.

Leda's perspective on the 'withering' effect of materialism is consistent with the view of Victorian socialists. Noel Thompson's examination of socialism in the late nineteenth century reveals that many socialist writers saw capitalism, with its inducement to consume, as encouraging 'unnatural wants'.⁶⁴ Socialists felt that by limiting production to fulfil natural desires alone there would be an abundance of produce and therefore greater equality. The *desire* to accumulate would be reduced, according to this logic, because the *need* to accumulate would be removed. In particular the need for individual ownership of property would lose its appeal, something that many socialists saw as a means to liberation.⁶⁵ Taking this perspective, *The Purple Cloud* implies that social equality is necessary for the renaissance it anticipates.

According to Morse:

the kind of socialism [...] that preoccupied Shiel was one where there was still room for actions by individuals. He envisioned a place for strong leaders and great personalities who could impose their redeeming dream on the people without utterly enslaving or destroying them, or without themselves becoming corrupt in the process.⁶⁶

⁶⁴ Noel Thompson, 'Social Opulence, Private Aestheticism: Ideas of Consumption in Early Socialist Thought', in *The Politics of Consumption: Material Culture and Citizenship in Europe and America*, ed. by Martin Daunton and Matthew Hilton (Oxford: Berg Press, 2001), pp. 51-68 (pp. 57-58).

⁶⁵ Thompson, 'Social Opulence', pp. 57-58.

⁶⁶ Morse, 'Qualifying a Biographer', p. 494.

Although Morse is here referring to Shiel's *Isle of Lies* (1909), the same perspective can be found in *The Purple Cloud*. Jeffson represents the masculine 'strong leader' while Leda envisions the 'redeeming dream' that will shape the more equal future society. In their pairing, the novel unites aspects of Shiel's peculiar socialism with his advocacy of an Overman. In the post-catastrophe world, the children fathered by Jeffson will all have the opportunity to become Shielian Overmen, their faculties undulled by the new social 'allangement'.

The movement from pre-disaster capitalism to post-catastrophe equality is communicated in a number of ways in the novel. In addition to the conversations between Jeffson and Leda, Jeffson undergoes considerable – if not consistent – character development. For example, when he finally reaches the pole his success marks the beginning of his transition away from the old civilisation's greed. At this point he turns away from 'unhealthy motivation'. When he is nine miles from the Pole, and where 'meteor stones' provide 'wealth, beyond dream' (*PC*, p. 37), his motives for continuing onward change. He is no longer driven by thoughts of material gain as he cares 'little' for Clodagh's greed-motivated pleas of 'be first – for her' (*PC*, p. 38). Rather he journeys onward for the satisfaction of being the first to conquer the Pole (*PC*, p. 39). His success is a measure of the qualities that distinguish the Overman from his fellow human beings.⁶⁷

⁶⁷ Shiel, 'Science, Life and Literature', p. 453.

This transformation is the first step towards Jeffson becoming the appropriate father figure for the society Leda envisions. Nevertheless, despite this change, Jeffson's movement from an association with a world defined by greed and its consequent corruption to a future based on enlightened motivation, hard work and discovery, is not straightforward. As Jeffson wanders the globe, his fluctuation between healthy and unhealthy motives is readdressed. He succumbs to decadence, materialism and admits to enduring 'a considerable amount of drudgery' if it will contribute to his 'growing voluptuousness' (*PC*, p. 134). Like those who would deny their own misery to enjoy material comfort, Jeffson labours for seventeen years raising a luxurious palace as 'an Altar and a Testimony to me', with a north wall built of gold and a lake of wine (*PC*, p. 163). Tellingly, his increasing decadence brings him no joy. He is, unlike those killed by the cloud, at least aware of his misery (*PC*, p. 164). It is only when he meets Leda that his progress away from the attitudes and values of the pre-catastrophe world becomes consistent.

The development of Jeffson's character is central to the expression of the tensions between the Black and the White Powers in the novel and to the narrativisation of the wish fulfilment fantasy at its conclusion. Through his transformation, *The Purple Cloud* charts a trajectory from the non-rational, immoral, decadent, degeneration of the Black to the rational, moral, industrious, regeneration of the White. However, for the majority of the text there exists – initially within society, later within Jeffson himself, and finally between Jeffson and Leda – tension between these binaries as

each Power strives for dominance. As Ronald Lewin points out in a letter to Shiel's close friend John Gawsworth (T. I. F. Armstrong):

the theme which obsessed Shiel was the tragic dualism of spirit in all human kind; in *The Purple Cloud* he was able to present the conflict clearly and vividly in the person and adventures of one man. The stress and tension between the Black powers [sic] and the White powers [sic], seeking control over human destiny were portrayed in a simplified and vivid myth.⁶⁸

Jeffson is a divided character, driven by the influences of the Black and the White. He moves between the extremes of endurance and indolence, destruction and construction, irrationalism and rationalism. He aligns himself with the Black, but ultimately follows the White. This transformation within Jeffson, toward the novel's ultimate wish fulfilment fantasy, which unifies Shiel's interest in science and religiosity, is given a distinctive focus by the influence of Thomas Carlyle on Shiel's text.⁶⁹ In Jeffson's characterisation, parallels with Carlyle's philosophical novel *Sartor Resartus* (1832) can clearly be seen. In this work the hero, Diogenes Teufelsdröckh, has a similar two-fold nature. As William Johnson notes, Teufelsdröckh's character is reflected in his name, which means 'God born Devil's dung'.⁷⁰ He is aligned with the lowly and the exalted, the spiritual and the corporeal. Like Teufelsdröckh, Jeffson is forced to confront both parts of his nature before reaching enlightenment. In doing this he follows

⁶⁸ Ronald Lewin, Letter' to Gawsworth' (Austin: University of Texas, Harry Ransom Centre, Box S, April 16 1947)

⁶⁹ Although it is unknown whether Shiel had read Carlyle's work, given the density of intertextual allusion present in *The Purple Cloud* and the similarities between the works, it is not unreasonable to assume that Shiel had at least some knowledge of Carlyle's philosophical writings.

⁷⁰ William Savage Johnson, *Thomas Carlyle: A Study of His Literary Apprenticeship, 1814-1831* (Folcroft, Pa.: Folcroft, 1969), p. 113.

the narrative pattern established in Carlyle's discussion of 'The Everlasting No', 'The Centre of Indifference' and 'The Everlasting Yea'. These describe the stages Teufelsdröckh undergoes as he moves from despair, defiance and a spirit of unbelief (the everlasting no), through agnosticism to happiness, reconciliation and love of God (the everlasting yea).

In *Sartor Resartus*, Teufelsdröckh plunges into deep gloom and despair when he finds out that Blumine, the woman he loves has married his friend. In his distress he feels abandoned by God and alone. He endures what Carlyle terms 'The Everlasting No' in which he feels the universe is:

void of Life, of Purpose, of Volition, even of Hostility: it was one huge, dead, immeasurable Steam-engine, rolling on, in its dead indifference, to grind me limb from limb. Oh, the vast, gloomy, solitary Golgotha, and Mill of Death! Why was the Living banished thither companionless, conscious?⁷¹

Teufelsdröckh's sense of aloneness in a universe 'void of life' is echoed in Jeffson's literal isolation. Carlyle's hyperbolic imagery, which creates a sense of despair at the universe and the sensation of being victim to a great force, indifferent to personal suffering, is mirrored in Shiel's depiction of Jeffson's wandering on the desolate Earth. The sublime 'vast' and crushing despair described in this passage anticipates Shiel's treatment of Jeffson's bouts of terror and frustration at the contesting Powers. In one of the most sublime passages in the novel the weather acts as a metaphor for the Powers battling over him:

⁷¹ Thomas Carlyle, *Sartor Resartus, The Life and Opinions of Herr Teufelsdröckh* (London: William Clowes and Sons, 1838), p. 124.

a great gale reigned over England: [...] over me vogued the megaphones of the immense tempest; and I communed with myself, thinking: 'I, poor man, lost in this conflux of infinitudes and vortex of Being, what can become of me, my God? For dark, ah dark, is the waste void into which from solid ground I am now gone a trillion furlongs down, the toy of all the whirlwinds: and it were better for me to have deceased with the dead, and never to have seen the wrath and turbulence of the Ineffable, nor to have heard the thrilling bleakness of the winds of Eternity, when they yearn, and plead, and whimper, and when they vociferate and blaspheme, and when they reason and intrigue and entreat, and when they despair and faint, which ear should never hear. For they mean to eat me up, I know, these vast darks, and soon like chaff I shall pass, leaving this scene to them'; so till the morning I lay mumping, with shudderings and coverings: for the shocks of the storm pervaded the locked nave to my heart; and there were hubbubs of thunder that night, my God, like callings and laughs and banterings bawled across from hill-top to hill-top in hell. (PC, pp. 99-100)

In its rhythmic concatenation, the passage recalls Carlyle's 'immeasurable Steam-engine, rolling on', yet as a metaphor for the Powers who seem to assail him with 'callings and laughs and banterings bawled,' the storm – 'the wrath and turbulence of the ineffable' – is not as indifferent as Carlyle's universe; it seems directed towards Jeffson.

The storm signifies the vast force of nature and, by extension, the warring Powers. Jeffson, who finds no sanctuary in the church in which he cowers, is helpless. His terror and his awareness of his smallness – he is 'a toy of all the whirlwinds' – derive from his recognition of the sublimeness of the storm.⁷² On several occasions, this sense of smallness is

⁷² The concept of the sublime was proposed by Edmund Burke in *A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (New York: Harper and Brothers, Publishers, 1860).

contrasted with his egotism as he is 'brought low' by the sight or effect of nature. His emotions continuously reinforce a sense of him being caught in, or by, the infinite, which Edmund Burke sees as a 'source of the sublime.'⁷³ He perceives himself 'lost in this conflux of infinitudes and vortex of Being', though it is ambiguous whether Jeffson is lost in his own sense of Being or the impression of the storm as a living thing. He is in a 'void' a 'trillion furlongs down' and he hears the 'winds of eternity'. These hyperbolic images convey Jeffson's psychological torment and unite his feelings of isolation (similar to those depicted in Carlyle's discussion of the 'Everlasting No') with his sense of the sublime.

Jeffson's movement into the 'Everlasting No' begins with a sense of sublime terror at his isolation after the cloud appears (*PC*, p. 42). His growing sense of aloneness is developed as he journeys through the inhospitable arctic landscape:

Often I have lain and listened long to the hollow stillness, recoiling, appalled by it [...]. Now it was all lanes, lanes, alas, yet no open water, and such was the drudgery and woe of my life, that sometimes I would drop prostrate upon the ice sobbing 'Oh, no more my God, here let me die'. (*PC*, p. 45)

Jeffson's expression of his remoteness foreshadows his later realisation of his total isolation as he listens to the 'stillness of eternity' (*PC*, p. 143) on the dead Earth. The Pole's unbroken, flat, isolated landscape is a source

⁷³ Burke, *A Philosophical Inquiry*, p. 80.

of terror and also a place of sublime beauty.⁷⁴ This antithesis is key to the novel's tone; the juxtaposition and coexistence of terror and sublime beauty is crucial to its portrayal of environment and psychology:

[I]t was at sunset that my sense of the wondrously beautiful was roused and excited, in spite of that burden which I bore: for certainly I never saw sunsets resembling those, nor could ever have dreamt of aught so flamboyant, exorbitant and distraught, all the vault seeming transformed to an arena for warring powers warring for the cosmos, or it was like the wild countenance of God routed, and flying flustered through cosmic storm gulfs from his foes. But many evenings I watched with unintelligent awe, believing it but a portent of the unsheathed sword of the Almighty. (*PC*, pp. 77-78)

The presence of the sublime reminds Jeffson of his ignorance *and* causes him to speculate regarding the nature of the cosmos. He senses the possibility that the world may be 'an arena for warring powers', or that it may indicate God in retreat, 'flying flustered [...] from his foes.' In other words, it creates the sense of curiosity Shiel associated with the Overman, awakening in Jeffson the ability to both 'see' and 'wonder' that would, according to Shiel's writing, lead to aspiration.⁷⁵ Each time Jeffson experiences such awe it is when he perceives a divine presence.

Jeffson's encounters with the sublime often emphasise his awareness of being metaphorically 'lost', or lacking direction as forces beyond his control use him as a pawn in their on-going struggle for dominance over the Earth.

⁷⁴ The Pole evokes a sense of the sublime comparable to that in Burke's description of the sea: 'A level plain of a vast extent on land is certainly no mean idea; [...] This is owing to several causes; but it is owing to none more than to this, that this ocean is an object of no small terror.' Burke, *A Philosophical Inquiry*, p. 73.

⁷⁵ Shiel, 'Science, Life and Literature', p. 453.

While alone, he lacks direction, filling his time with no greater purpose than indulging his whims, yet his experiences are not without purpose. Like Teufelsdröckh,

We behold him, through those dim years, in a state of crisis, of transition: his mad Pilgrimings, and general solution into aimless Discontinuity, what is all this but a mad Fermentation; wherefrom the fiercer it is, the clearer product will one day evolve itself? ⁷⁶

Here, Carlyle's narrator indicates that suffering must be endured to achieve renewal. Furthermore, the narrator implies, the worse the suffering the greater the evolution. He states: 'Such transitions are ever full of pain: thus the Eagle when he molts is sickly; and, to attain his new beak, must harshly dash off the old one upon rocks.' ⁷⁷ Pain is presented as necessary for renewal. Teufelsdröckh's trajectory through pain is a movement from 'The Everlasting No' to 'The Everlasting Yea'.

In *The Purple Cloud*, Jeffson's movement from being associated with the characteristics of the Black to the qualities of the White involves years of suffering and wandering alone. He is at this point crude, voyeuristic, thrill seeking, voracious and excessive (see pp. 145-46). Jeffson reflects that during these frenzies 'Hell was in my soul' (*PC*, p. 154), an admission that aligns his impulses with sin including, in the 1901 edition, violent necrophilia. ⁷⁸ Like Teufelsdröckh's 'dim years', this period is fundamental to his transformation. His movement from being a creation of the old

⁷⁶ Carlyle, *Sartor Resartus*, p. 165.

⁷⁷ Carlyle, *Sartor Resartus*, p. 165.

⁷⁸ See Shiel, *The Purple Cloud* (1901).

civilisation to being the progenitor of the new beginning is a consequence of the 'mad fermentation' he undergoes. He emerges, particularly after his time with Leda, a 'clearer product' for his experiences.

Considering Jeffson's trajectory as comparable to Carlyle's Teufelsdröckh provides a distinctive understanding of the narrativisation towards wish fulfilment undergone in Shiel's text. In *Sartor Resartus* Teufelsdröckh has a spiritual rebirth in which he rejects 'The Everlasting No' and replaces 'whining sorrow' with 'indignation and grim fire-eyed defiance.'⁷⁹ This rejection marks a movement from his preoccupation with 'Me' to 'Not-Me', in which he no longer scorns humanity but pities it.⁸⁰ In making this transition he passes through the 'centre of indifference' to recognise that there is divine guidance in the Universe. A comparable transition is seen in Jeffson, though it is provoked through two contrary groups of impulses, each belonging to the Black or the White Power. Just as 'The Everlasting Yea' sees the resolution of all contradictions for and within Teufelsdröckh, Jeffson's revelation at the conclusion of the text confirms divine guidance and the White's overall strategy. Like Teufelsdröckh Jeffson's position is transformed from the self-centred, unproductive 'Everlasting No' to 'The Everlasting Yea', which is outward-looking and filled with purpose. However, whereas Teufelsdröckh suddenly discovers the 'Everlasting Yea', Jeffson remains at the centre of a battle pulling him in each direction for much of novel. The Black, on the side of 'Everlasting No', pulls him towards decadence, a preoccupation with Ego, Thanatotic impulses,

⁷⁹ Carlyle, *Sartor Resartus*, p. 173.

⁸⁰ See Carlyle, *Sartor Resartus*, p. 75 onwards.

despair and aimlessness. The White, the 'Everlasting Yea', represents the value of work, a sense of purpose, and a shift in focus from the self to others. Jeffson's years of 'mad fermentation' situate him between these impulses as he moves gradually and inconsistently from destruction to construction. At the conclusion, he accepts that he has been part of the White's plan all along and embraces his role in the future evolution of humanity. Accordingly, his conversion can be read as an individual rendering of the transformation from decline to progress that humanity will undergo with Jeffson as its parent.

In Jeffson's transition from the 'Everlasting No' to the 'Everlasting Yea' he develops a new 'Western-ness', free of the degeneration that defined the pre-catastrophe West. In this context, 'East' and 'West' work both literally and symbolically. Following his return from the Arctic, Jeffson abandons England and moves eastwards, gradually succumbing to madness and decadence. The East is used to define Jeffson as dissolute; it is a place where he becomes a 'portly monarch-being that had strutted and moaned' (*PC*, p. 268) spending:

storm-tossed hours [...] stalking like a cock [...flaunting...]
my monarchy in the face of heavens with blasphemies, or
else dribbled, shaking up my body in a lewd dance, or was
off to reduce some city to ashes and revel in redness and the
chucklings of Hell, or rolled in the drunkenness of drugs.
(*PC*, p. 235)

Under Leda's influence, he wonders 'whether a certain Western-ness – a growing modernity of tone – may be the result, as far as I am concerned,

of her presence with me?' (*PC*, p. 238) He clips his 'beard and hair', removes his 'ear-rings' (*PC*, p. 235), resumes 'Western dress [...and adopts...] a manner of being and thought [that] might once more now have been called "modern".' (*PC*, p. 268) Thus, the West, now free of its former degeneration, and no longer under the influence of the 'mean demon Mammon', comes to symbolise rational achievement,⁸¹ a place from which Leda and Jeffson can exploit the accomplishments of the past and give birth to a new race. Echoing Shiel's argument that rationalism leads to greater religiosity in 'The Inconsistency of a Novelist' and 'Are We Going Pagan?', Jeffson declares: 'the modern Adam is some six hundred thousand years wiser than the first [...] less instinctive, more rational' (*PC*, p. 230) and has a greater sense of his position in the cosmos. The West's Edenic potential is even alluded to as nature becomes less savage, less tempestuous, and is subject to fewer climatic outbursts the further west Leda and Jeffson travel (*PC*, p. 261).

Ultimately, the West is portrayed as the domain of the White on both spiritual and racial levels. The White does not merely represent evolutionary progress, however, it represents specifically the progress of white, *Western* peoples. The novel positively associates the West with modern thinking, characterising the East as more primitive (*PC*, p. 138). Such a depiction is characteristic of Shiel's oeuvre, which typically associates race with evolutionary development. Moskowitz is critical of this

⁸¹ The West at *The Purple Cloud*'s conclusion is reminiscent of the wish fulfilment space implied in the Britain depicted at the end of *The War of the Worlds*. In both, the population's perceived degeneration is overcome.

attitude in Shiel's work in general, stating, 'here is a man who believes in the "obermensch", the superrace, born to rule other, inferior races.'⁸² In *The Purple Cloud*, however, the wish fulfilment fantasy is the evolution of a white 'super-race' that does not rule other races – it simply replaces them. Contrary to Moskowitz's observation, Billings remarks that Shiel 'saw the Overman as a development of the entire human race accomplished through better educational systems and a more scientific bend of mind, not for a single Overman race against other races, but for all humankind.'⁸³ Within *The Purple Cloud*, however, this equality is qualified, as 'all of human kind' is, in this instance, only one race. The equality implied by Billings' interpretation of Shiel's Overman does not acknowledge the racial selectivity at work in the rebirth of humanity at the conclusion of the text. This racism reflects the trend found in Shiel's non-fiction, in which, as Bryan points out, he 'showed bald tendencies to hate everything but white Anglo-Saxon agnostic scientists.'⁸⁴

While Jeffson is an Englishman, Leda is revealed to be 'of Circassian blood' (*PC*, p. 205). Circassians were one of the races thought by nineteenth-century German anatomist Johann Friedrich Blumenbach (1752-1840) to be the progenitors of Caucasians – the only race, he asserted, not created as a result of the 'degenerating' effects of environmental factors like location and diet, and as such, 'the most purely

⁸² Sam Moskowitz, 'The Dark Plots of One Shiel', in *Diverse Hands*, ed. by Morse, pp. 57-68 (p. 58).

⁸³ Billings, *M. P. Shiel*, p. 42.

⁸⁴ Bryan, 'M. P. Shiel and the New Literature', p. 2.

white.’⁸⁵ For Blumenbach, Caucasus was the origin of all humans.⁸⁶ Frost states that ‘Blumenbach and his followers believed that “the purest and most beautiful whites were Circassians”’.⁸⁷ Circassians are depicted as the direct opposite of black peoples in Blumenbach’s racist writings. ‘Take’, for example, he says, ‘a man and a woman most wildly different from each other; let one be a most beautiful Circassian woman and the other an African born in Guinea, as black and ugly as possible [...]’.⁸⁸ In Blumenbach’s work the Circassian people are linked to beauty, racial purity and superiority and many believed that the Circassian woman was the ‘whitest, racially “purest” specimen of human woman found on Earth.’⁸⁹ As a Circassian woman, Leda is racially pure. She is the white agent of the White Power. Hence, the White’s triumph at the end of novel marks a triumph for the white race. Leda and Jeffson’s offspring, the future humankind, will be white.

Many of Shiel’s novels reflect racist attitudes. In *The Yellow Danger* (1898) the Chinese are characterised by greed and a love of cruelty. According to Daniel Métraux, the notion of ‘The Yellow Peril’, which informed tales like *The Yellow Danger*, highlighted ‘diverse fears including the supposed threat of military invasion from Asia, competition to the white labour force from Asian workers, the moral degeneracy of Asian people, and the

⁸⁵ See Linda Frost, ‘The Circassian Beauty and the Circassian Slave: Gender, Imperialism and American Pop Entertainment’, in *Freakery: Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body* ed. by Rosemarie Garland Thompson (New York and London: New York University Press, 1996), pp. 248-64 (p. 250).

⁸⁶ Frost, ‘The Circassian Beauty’, p. 250.

⁸⁷ Frost, ‘The Circassian Beauty’, p. 250.

⁸⁸ Quoted in Sara Eigen Figal, *Heredity, Race, and the Birth of the Modern* (London and New York: Routledge, 2008), p. 83.

⁸⁹ Frost, ‘The Circassian Beauty’, p. 250.

spectre of genetic mixing of Anglo-Saxons with Asians.’⁹⁰ However, for Moskowitz, Shiel’s antipathy towards ‘the yellow race’ is a means of expressing his racism without directly addressing his own black heritage. In Moskowitz’s opinion, Shiel’s attitude towards race is the product of personal insecurity. Billings points out that Shiel saw himself as white, ‘with a sharp distinction between his lighter family and the generally black mass of those in the West Indies.’⁹¹ A fear that he may be ‘found out’ as non-white in England leads, for Moskowitz, to an overcompensation in which Shiel proclaims his racism throughout his fiction without drawing attention to his black racism which, in turn, may have left him exposed to discovery or criticism. Moskowitz’s observations regarding Shiel’s attitudes about his racial heritage seem at times to be assertions. However, in his own writing Shiel stated: ‘I greatly love the simple Negro race. It is only the half-breed that I think hateful and despicable.’⁹² Shiel’s comments about the ‘half-breed’ are particularly – and surprisingly – hypocritical when one considers that he was of mixed race.⁹³ When Moskowitz’s observations are read in this context it seems probable that Shiel opposed miscegenation and, ironically, the offspring of miscegenation. Whether or not Shiel’s egotism was overcompensation for his dislike of ‘the half-

⁹⁰ Métraux, Daniel A., ‘Jack London, Asian Wars and the “Yellow Peril”’, *The Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus* <http://www.japanfocus.org/-Daniel_A_-M__traux/3293> [Accessed 26 January 2010].

⁹¹ Billings, *M. P. Shiel*, p. 41.

⁹² Matthew Phipps Shiel, ‘Letter to Gussie’ (Austin: University of Texas, Harry Ransom Centre, Box 7, 14 January 1895).

⁹³ Much research into Shiel’s racial background has been undertaken. However, Shiel’s sister Harriet refers to it explicitly in a letter to ‘Olive’. Harriet states that her mother ‘like myself, was dark and the wonder is that my father a most prejudiced man should have picked her out, but we know, don’t we that love will not be hindered’ (Austin: University of Texas, Harry Ransom Centre, Box 7, 15 July 1927).

breed', or for a deeply concealed self-loathing,⁹⁴ may never be known, but it undeniably informs his attitude to race; and this attitude in turn informs the representation of race in his fiction.

For Svitavsky, Shiel's 'disturbing views about race grew out of fears of decline.'⁹⁵ His non-fiction champions the white races as more advanced than others and suggests that they are in danger of degeneration through interbreeding. Spencer notes that, for Shiel, during the evolution of *Homo sapiens* 'the white race has gradually lifted itself beyond the black and the yellow (says Shiel), out of us will grow beings of ever expanding wisdom, power and unselfishness.'⁹⁶ This tendency to perceive the white race as more evolutionarily advanced was typical of the time⁹⁷ and finds expression in *The Purple Cloud* in the racial purity of Leda and Jeffson and in the White Power's choice of them as the parents of a new humanity. In Shiel's fiction more broadly, the perceived superiority of the white race is emphasised through racist depictions of the East.

Shiel's racism explains Jeffson's peculiar obsession with the idea that there may be a Chinese man surviving after the cloud. His reaction to this possibility is unambiguous. The idea causes him to 'flush with rage' as it is 'detestable as death' (*PC*, p. 168). Although Jeffson does not want to find

⁹⁴ Shiel's large ego has been well documented. See Shiel, 'About Myself', p. 417, Billings, 'The Shape of Shiel', p. 84; Bryan, 'M. P. Shiel and the New Literature', p. 1; Maclaren-Ross, 'The Strange Realm of M. P. Shiel', p. 685 and Colin Wilson, 'Why is Shiel Neglected?', in *Diverse Hands*, ed. by Morse, pp. 213-23 (p. 220).

⁹⁵ Svitavsky, 'From Decadence to Racial Antagonism', p. 1.

⁹⁶ Spencer, 'Shiel versus Shiel', p. 32.

⁹⁷ See Edward Said, *Orientalism* (London: Penguin, 2003), pp. 19-78.

any human alive at this point in the text, the fact that he directs his paranoia and hatred at a *Chinese* man is significant. His response is extreme and epitomises the recurring racist attitude towards East Asian people found consistently in Shiel's work.

Having established himself as king of the Earth, Jeffson's reaction to the prospect of a Chinese survivor relates directly to fears of usurpation. On one level, Jeffson fears that there may be a contender for his throne; on another, the text indicates the contemporary cultural fears of a Chinese threat to British sovereignty expressed in the earlier *The Yellow Danger*. For Jeffson, the presence of a Chinese man would undermine not only the sense he has of his unique position as sole survivor but also his racial superiority as the *chosen* survivor. Leda's presence does not compromise this sense of superiority since she is a woman and subservient to his patriarchal authority.⁹⁸ In the novel's fantasy of racial purity it is possible to see a desire to rid the planet of the Chinese, 'the half-breed' that Shiel found so hateful, and the 'simple' Negro.

As an extrapolation from, and exploration of, contemporary anxieties about decline and degeneration, *The Purple Cloud* culminates in an extreme wish fulfilment fantasy about the possibility of a racially pure society of Shielian overmen, liberated from the monetary and corrupt preoccupations

⁹⁸ Even a brief examination of Shiel's non-fiction reveals a similar perspective on racial superiority. In the unpublished manuscript 'Our Way Out', Shiel states that millions of Chinese are being defeated by far fewer Japanese because the latter are 'superiors, overmen'. He speculates that, equipped with the tools of a '*higher white-man's evolution*' [emphasis added] one would be safe in betting on 10 English against 100 million continentals'.

of the past. Shiel's doctrine that the end justifies the means marks the author, as Spencer notes, as unwittingly fascist.⁹⁹ Numerous Shielian commentators, like Stableford and Morse, are apologists for Shiel's philosophies. However, Moskowitz finds Shiel's views unpalatable, claiming him to be 'an anti-Semite, anti-Christ, anti-Negro, anti-Oriental, an ardent believer in Aryan superiority and a war lover.'¹⁰⁰ To Moskowitz, Shiel is an 'evil man', an 'advocate of dictatorship, quite specifically the Nazi and Fascist type [...who] promoted it in many of his books.'¹⁰¹ Indeed, and particularly with hindsight, *The Purple Cloud's* promotion of racial purity and the eradication of millions to achieve progress, strikes a chilling chord with the reader. At its core, the novel is a fantasy about *how* and *what aspects* of the human race deserve to survive and prosper. In achieving this, the novel strives to be complex and misleading, uniting Shielian ideas of philosophy, science and religion. Yet it is also heavily influenced by contemporary ideas about degeneration and Western racial superiority. Indeed Jeffson's transformation from hedonistic 'Easterner' to rational Westerner is emblematic of *The Purple Cloud's* preoccupation with progress and race in its own transfiguration. Hence, from the outset, the novel presents destruction as necessary to secure a 'new Genesis' in which the white race emerges triumphant and sustained by a celestial White power. In this way, *The Purple Cloud* reveals itself as a Shielian fantasy, a callous text that expresses the author's well-documented, if distasteful, preoccupations and paradoxical philosophies.

⁹⁹ Spencer, 'Shiel verses Shiel', p. 50.

¹⁰⁰ Moskowitz, 'Shiel and Heard', pp. 48-49.

¹⁰¹ Moskowitz, 'Shiel and Heard', p. 65.

Chapter Three

Spiritual Renaissance: Arthur Conan Doyle's *The Poison Belt* (1913)

Arthur Conan Doyle's *The Poison Belt* occupies an unusual position in the British disaster tradition. While it ostensibly follows the conventional narrative structure of the transfigurative disaster scenario – in this case, the catastrophe is the titular belt that renders all life apparently dead – the conclusion reveals that the catastrophe's effects are only temporary. The reawakening of the seemingly poisoned population at the narrative's conclusion is both spiritual and literal, as society is transformed by its experience. Thus *The Poison Belt* is a 'return' narrative that occupies two border positions. Firstly, the novel's philosophical stance is located on a hinterland between scientific rationalism and spiritual speculation. Secondly, in terms of its relation to disaster fiction, it is unusual in presenting a catastrophe that is transient; the calamity is not, after all, calamitous. Rather, it uses the cataclysm to create a short-term 'snapshot' of an exaggerated caricature of its contemporary environment, in effect situating the unaffected protagonists beyond time and motion. From this position it allows for an examination and critique of class relations, social behaviour, the decline of the British Empire, and modernity. As a consequence, the characters' discourse – and the novel – is informed by both a transcendent perspective on existence and by anxious reflections on what the novel presents as contemporary social ills. The climactic recovery, which re-establishes more traditional standards of behaviour and the pursuit of 'worthwhile' pastimes, identifies it as a wish fulfilment fantasy

that is, ultimately, deeply conservative yet represents Conan Doyle's gradual journey towards fully embracing Edwardian spiritualism.

The Poison Belt is the second of Conan Doyle's Professor Challenger novels. *The Lost World* (1912), the first in the series, introduces the protagonists: Professor Challenger, Malone, a journalist and the narrator, and Professor Summerlee and Lord John Roxton, two fellow adventurers. *The Poison Belt* begins as the group is about to reunite at Challenger's house to celebrate the third anniversary of their 'lost world' adventure. Due to a developing 'cosmic disturbance'¹ caused by the Earth passing through a belt of ether, the men are instructed by Challenger to each bring an oxygen tank. Unaware that they are under the effects of the ether, Malone, Summerlee and Roxton display increasingly erratic behaviour on their journey. Their symptoms are allayed, however, as Challenger uses the oxygen to counter the effects of the ether. Beyond a sealed room specially prepared by Challenger for his party, the world's population succumbs to a death-like state.

Believing themselves the only survivors of the belt's effects, Challenger, his wife, and their guests lament the civilisation that has been lost. In its descriptions of London, *The Poison Belt* echoes the Thanatotic uncanniness of Shiel's *The Purple Cloud*. Both novels depict the dead and the apparently dead in uncannily lifelike postures. Faced with

¹ Arthur Conan Doyle, *The Poison Belt: Being an Account of Another Amazing Adventure of Professor Challenger* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska, 2001), p. 5. All future references to *The Poison Belt* will be given in the main text in the form TPB, followed by the page number.

numerous corpses frozen in attitudes of life, Malone remarks that 'Death must have come on them in an instant and fixed them as they sat. [...] they might all have been asleep' (*TPB*, p. 74). The irony of Malone's observation is that the population *is* asleep. The ether's narcotic effect accounts for the lifeless yet perfectly preserved appearance of the population. Like that of *The Purple Cloud*, this uncanny atmosphere is not only unsettling, but also emphasises the characters' isolation in a city of the (seemingly) dead. Their isolation is highlighted by the fact that, rather than seize disaster as an opportunity to begin again, the group succumb to a sense of desolation and loss:

Instead of the joy which men might have been expected to feel who had so narrowly escaped an imminent death, a terrible wave of darkest depression submerged us. Everything on earth that we loved had been washed away into the great, infinite, unknown ocean, and here were we marooned upon this desert island of a world, without companions, hopes, or aspirations. A few years' skulking like jackals among the graves of the human race and then our belated and lonely end would come. (*TPB*, p. 65)

The post-catastrophe world is a barren place. Challenger notes that being part of a universal death would have been preferable to living on as one of a few survivors (*TPB*, p. 55). He reflects that he could 'sympathise with the person who took the view that the horror lay in the idea of surviving when all that is learned, famous, and exalted had passed away.' (*TPB*, p. 32) The sleeping population provides a pause in time during which the group can view their surroundings from a detached vantage point and comment reflectively on the society that has apparently fallen. This perspective is fundamental to *The Poison Belt's* conservative agenda. Unlike 'departure'

disaster narratives like *The Purple Cloud*, or *Nordenholt's Million* that would follow *The Poison Belt*, the novel expresses no desire for an eradication of the contemporary world. Rather, *The Poison Belt* halts modernity – literally and figuratively – to allow for contemplation of ‘all that is learned, famous, and exalted.’

The way that *The Poison Belt* uses a catastrophe scenario to explore contemporary cultural anxieties makes the text recognisably Wellsian, something acknowledged at the time of its publication. In a letter to the author in 1912, his friend James Ryan expressed his concern that Conan Doyle may be criticised for the novel’s textual similarities to Wells’ *The War of the Worlds*. He told Conan Doyle:

Of course you will be accused of poaching on Wells’ manor, but the suspended animation idea is as old as the *Seven Sleepers of Ephesus*. The destruction of London, you will of course find in Wells’ *The War of the Worlds* which you might glance over so as to keep off his grass-plot.²

Despite Ryan’s concerns, *The Poison Belt*’s depictions of London are actually more Shielian than they are Wellsian. The ‘suspended animation’, which allows the protagonists to observe the environment around them, is tonally more uncanny than the ruined London of *The War of the Worlds*. Having said that, both texts offer ‘return’ transfigurative narratives and there are self-conscious allusions to *The War of the Worlds* within *The Poison Belt*. In a distinctly Wellsian passage, Challenger remarks:

² Arthur Conan Doyle, Jon Lellenberg, Daniel Stashower, and Charles Foley, *Arthur Conan Doyle: A Life in Letters* (London: Harper Perennial, 2008), p. 587.

‘You will conceive a bunch of grapes, said he, ‘which are covered by some infinitesimal but noxious bacillus. The gardener passes it through a disinfecting medium. It may be that he desires his grapes to be cleaner. It may be that he needs space to breed some fresh bacillus less noxious than the last. He dips it into the poison and they are gone. Our Gardener is, in my opinion, about to dip the solar system, and the human bacillus, the little mortal vibrio which twisted and wriggled upon the outer rind of the earth, will in an instant be sterilized out of existence.’ (TPB, p. 26)

Challenger’s description emphasises human insignificance and powerlessness in a manner reminiscent of the comparisons made by Wells between human beings and ‘transient creatures who swarm and multiply in a drop of water’ (WoW, p. 1) in *The War of the Worlds*. This is reaffirmed later when Challenger receives a telephone call and remarks: ‘there is one of our bacilli squeaking for help [...] they are beginning to realise that their continued existence is not one of the necessities in the universe’ (TPB, p. 26). The repeated reference to humans as bacilli undermines the human presumption of its own importance and superiority discussed throughout the novel. Just as Wells uses the bacterial analogy to emphasise humanity’s subordinate position in relation to the Martians, so the comparable analogy in *The Poison Belt* emphasises human vulnerability. Furthermore, *The War of the Worlds* creates a sense of hierarchical power by establishing that ‘this world was being watched keenly and closely’ by the Martians, who are likened to ‘a man with a microscope’ scrutinising ‘the transient creatures that swarm and multiply in a drop of water.’ (WoW, p. 1) By alluding to Wells’ cosmic perspective, *The Poison Belt* emphasises the analogous relationship existing between

Challenger and his group as observers, and poisoned Britain as the observed. Like the Martians, Challenger will examine his society from an observational position, here secured not by some telescopic device but by the effects of the poison belt. However, despite Challenger's scientific credentials, his comments on events are as philosophical, or even theological, as they are scientific.

While *The Poison Belt* provides a pseudo-rationally achieved 'snapshot' of civilisation in its contemporary state, Challenger's analogical explanations for the catastrophic event imply the existence of a universal consciousness separate from, and greater than, humankind. This consciousness is identified as a 'gardener', an image that evokes Judeo-Christian connections with the Old Testament God, Eden and the Creation myth in Genesis 1-3. The associations evoked through this analogy affirm the smallness and imperfection of humanity. The gardener 'cleanses' the fruit – a metaphorical rendering of the earth – of human beings in favour of 'some fresh bacillus less noxious than the last.' With remarkable economy, the passage implies the novel's unification of the scientific (through the language used) with the spiritual, whilst emphasising that one of its objectives is social criticism.

Challenger provides several discussions of the cataclysm that unite spiritual and scientific imagery. He explains:

Sometimes I think that it is only the monstrous conceit of mankind which makes him think that all this stage was

erected for him to strut upon. [...] It is as if the scum upon the surface of the ocean imagined that the ocean was created in order to produce and sustain it or a mouse in a cathedral thought that the building was its own proper ordained residence. (*TPB*, p. 58)

Here, Challenger provides scientific ('the scum upon the surface of the ocean') and religiously inflected (the 'mouse in a cathedral') analogies. He identifies humanity with the sea-scum and the mouse to emphasise that it dwells in a *created* environment that has not been engineered exclusively, or even deliberately, for the human species. The scum is sustained by the ocean, just as the mouse is protected by the cathedral, but neither sea nor cathedral are provided for these purposes. The scum and the mouse are merely opportunists, exploiting what has been created. In effect, Challenger is suggesting a guiding hand behind the creation of the world whilst rejecting the notion that the world was created for humanity. This synthesis of the scientific and the mystical, or spiritual, recurs throughout the novel. Unlike *The Lost World*, which is distinctly materialist, and the third book in the series, *The Land of Mist* (1926), in which Challenger's scientific credibility is undermined as he, and the group, convert to spiritualism, *The Poison Belt* embraces both the scientific method and certainty in a spiritual realm beyond the physical without subscribing to a Christian or a wholly 'spiritualist' world-view.

The suggestion of the existence of a spiritual realm is achieved through Challenger's speculations about an afterlife.³ These speculations are

³ Challenger's interest in the afterlife reflects the Victorian/Edwardian obsession with death and the spiritual realm. See Richard Moaks, 'Spiritualism, Science and

provided with a firm foundation when he revives his wife after she is temporarily exposed to the ether. Her first-hand, transcendental account of her experiences seems to confirm his personal certainty in life after death. She recounts to him how, 'The door of death is indeed, *as you said*, hung with beautiful, shimmering curtains; for, once the choking feeling had passed, it was all unspeakably soothing and beautiful. Why have you dragged me back?' (*TPB*, p. 42; emphasis added) This affirmation gains greater credibility because it is positioned proximate to a vindication of Challenger's scientifically based speculation regarding the nature of the poison ether. With his theory now substantiated by events, Challenger declares to Summerlee: 'I trust [...] that you will no longer contend that my letter in the *Times* was based upon a delusion.' (*TPB*, p. 42) By substantiating Challenger's interpretation regarding the nature of the poison belt, the novel ensures that his faith in life after death appears more plausible.

Challenger argues that the afterlife may, in fact, be more fulfilling than earthly existence. As a scientist, he seems excited by the possibility of new perspectives being made available to 'our psychical selves' (*TPB*, p. 52) after transcending the physical realm. He states: '[N]one of us can predicate what opportunities of observation one may have from what we may call the spirit plane to the plane of matter' (*TPB*, p. 44). For him, death provides an opportunity for acquiring knowledge through altered

the Supernatural in Mid-Victorian Britain', in *The Victorian Supernatural*, ed. by Nicola Bown, Carolyn Burdett, and Pamela Thurschwell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 23-43.

perceptions. In the novel's amalgamation of the scientific with the spiritual, it is significant that, even when considering the 'spirit plane', Challenger favours the observational eye. In his philosophy, scientific and spiritual ideas are not in conflict; indeed, a faith in spiritual transcendence marks a desire for alternate and, perhaps, broader scientific perspectives. It is for this reason, perhaps, that Challenger argues, 'The physical body has rather been a source of pain and fatigue to us. It is the constant index of our limitations. Why then should we worry about its detachment from our psychical selves?' (*TPB*, p. 52) In other words, Challenger asks his audience why they should fear death when it promises the possibility of transcending the 'index of our [physical] limitations.'

Although the novel does not explore such a transformed viewpoint on 'the spirit plane', a comparable effect is achieved solely on the 'plane of matter' as a consequence of the poison belt. Believing himself and his companions doomed to succumb to the catastrophe, Challenger engineers their acquisition of a transcendent perspective by preserving their lives for what he thinks is 'a few hours [...] to see the evolution of this mighty tragedy before we are actually involved in it' (*TPB*, p. 35). With all life suspended, Challenger and his group are provided with a 'transcendent' position from which to scrutinise and reflect upon the world. The apparent death of humankind allows Challenger to experience a new opportunity 'of observation'. Challenger makes this explicit when he remarks that:

The true scientific mind is not to be tied down by its own conditions of time and space. It builds itself an observatory

erected upon the borderline of present, which separates the infinite past from the infinite future. From this sure post it makes its sallies even to the beginning and to the end of all things. As to death, the scientific mind dies at its post working in normal and methodic fashion to the end. It disregards so petty a thing as its own physical dissolution as completely as it does all other limitations upon the plane of matter. (*TPB*, p. 49)

Here, Challenger perceives the scientific mind as one capable of transcending the limits of its historical and physical constraints in its speculation. For him, the transition to the post-catastrophe 'afterlife' allows for scientific discovery. The apparent suspension of time, achieved through the effects of the ether, allows the eye – whether it is that of the journalist or the scientist or the reader – to fully analyse what it sees.

Despite this emphasis on the observation of the material world, Challenger's acceptance of the existence of both the material and spiritual realms leads to a rejection of pure materialism:

'In all my probings of the actual, I have always found wisdom and kindness at the core; and if ever the frightened mortal needs tenderness, it is surely as he makes the passage perilous from life to life. No, Summerlee, I will have none of your materialism, for I, at least, am too great a thing to end in mere physical constituents, a packet of salts and three bucketfuls of water. Here – here' – and he beat his great head with his huge, hairy fist – 'there is something which uses matter, but is not of it – something which might destroy death, but which Death can never destroy.' (*TPB*, p. 34)

Challenger indicates that science – the 'probings of the actual' – leads to the recognition of 'wisdom and kindness' as central to all human life. The presence of a semi-colon in the first sentence implies that Challenger sees

'wisdom and kindness' producing the 'tenderness' required in assisting each 'frightened mortal' from 'life to life', that is, from the material realm to the spiritual plane through the process of dying. Here, the scientific method, emotionalism and a burgeoning spiritualism unite to inform Challenger's refutation of Summerlee's materialism. The fact that he points at his head – in effect indicating his mind – as something that *uses* matter, but is not of it, is important in establishing intellect as a spiritual (or a psychical) as well as a biological attribute. However, it is also apparent that Challenger's perspective is equally a product of his ego and his unwillingness to accept the annihilation of the self, 'something [...] which Death can never destroy.' The novel never engages with the possibility that Challenger may be wrong about the existence of 'the spirit plane'. His 'elemental greatness [...] the sweep and power of his understanding' (*TPB*, p. 33) is never really in question and Summerlee, designed to be Challenger's most critical and sceptical companion, is proved consistently wrong in his criticism of the Professor.

Challenger's conception of mind as something (possibly temporarily) dependent upon the material world, but not belonging to that world, functions metonymically for the unification of rational and spiritual ideas in the novel. The spiritual elements of *The Poison Belt* are important in establishing a reflective position from which Challenger contemplates the 'core' of the human character. The fact that he finds it to contain 'wisdom and kindness' is significant in the novel's function as a wish fulfilment fantasy. The assertion that humankind is essentially good at its heart

allows for the successful satisfaction of the novel's conservative agenda, when 'wisdom and kindness' re-emerge to underpin the desired personal and social transformations occurring post-catastrophe. When humanity re-awakens at the end of *The Poison Belt*, it is fundamentally altered. A cultural transfiguration has occurred in which contemporary social conduct, negatively portrayed throughout the text, is replaced with more considerate, restrained and sober behaviour (see *TPB*, p. 83).

Throughout, *The Poison Belt* is characterised by anxiety regarding social and cultural changes occurring in Britain in the early twentieth century. Indeed, numerous biographers have commented on Conan Doyle's dislocation from, and dislike of, his contemporary environment, which, as Michael Coren notes, 'he did not particularly care for'.⁴ Indeed, his Victorian views were increasingly at odds with the changing times, a fact Julian Symons points out when he remarks that 'his writing and his beliefs about the conduct of life belonged to an earlier age.'⁵ His discomfort with modernity seems likely to originate from the fact that 'much of early twentieth-century culture was pre-occupied with rejecting the immediate Victorian past and redefining the world in accordance with radically new precepts and ideas.'⁶ Indeed, this cultural shift in attitude is one that is examined, and critiqued, in the reflective space created by the ether's effects in the novel.

⁴ Michael Coren, *Conan Doyle* (London: Bloomsbury, 1995), p. 54.

⁵ Julian Symons, *Conan Doyle: Portrait of an Artist* (New York: Mysterious, 1987), p. 119.

⁶ Harry Cocks, 'Modernity and Modernism', in *Twentieth Century Britain: Economic, Social and Cultural Change*, ed. by Paul Johnson, Julie-Marie Strange and Francesca Carnevali (London and New York: Longman, 1994), pp. 26-41 (p. 26).

Fundamental to the novel's critique of its contemporary environment is the positioning of the characters frequently as observers rather than agents. During the disaster, they adopt an objective perspective from which to view events. The novel draws attention to this process when the group watch the disaster unfold beyond the sheet of glass that separates their sealed room from the contaminated environment (*TPB*, p. 46). They, in effect, inhabit the 'observatory erected upon the borderline of present' (*TPB*, p. 49) and the narrative is composed of the journalist Malone's reflections on what is seen here and in London. Noting Challenger's desire to examine scientifically what he believes to be the extinction of life, though that knowledge will never be shared, Malone reflects that 'the old instinct of recording came over me. If these men of science could be so true to their life's work to the very end, why should not I, in my humble way, be as constant?' (*TPB*, p. 53) The journalist's constancy not only facilitates the authoring of the narrative but also establishes the sustained observational, reflective tone of the text. Despite being emotionally involved in the disaster, Malone confirms his position as a privileged viewer of events when he remarks: 'I remember that the monstrous and grotesque idea crossed my mind [...] that we were in four front seats of the stalls at the last act of the drama of the world' (*TPB*, p. 44). This front-seat position works to confer a sense of authenticity on the lens through which Malone views events. His 'eye witness' testimony is invested with a credibility not usually associated with subjective first person narration. Accordingly, in relation to Challenger and to the catastrophe, Malone is

both a reliable witness to, and a partaker in, the action.

As a journalist, Malone is the ideal narrator. He is a practiced observer and recorder of people and events, he is capable of assimilating information and presenting it as a narrative, and he is privy to sources of information not available to the other characters. Emerging from a less cynical, jaded age in which journalists were perceived as purveyors of trustworthy information,⁷ *The Poison Belt's* positioning of Malone as narrator suggests the novel is endeavouring to confer reliability and credibility on his account. For this reason, it is significant that it is Malone, and not Challenger, who is the narrator of the novel. As with almost all of the Sherlock Holmes stories,⁸ the Challenger tales are not narrated by the central character. Such narration has a deliberate function, as Diana Barsham notes. The narration of these narratives replicates a truth-discourse 'so convincing that the stories pose successfully as "statements" or factual eye-witness testimonies.'⁹ This technique is crucial to the novel's social critique and wish fulfilment fantasy.

Central to the social criticism made by *The Poison Belt* is its affirmation of masculinity. Conan Doyle's male narrators, and particularly Malone, privilege the masculine viewpoint and voice. Both the Challenger and the

⁷ See Mark Hampton, *Visions of the Press in Britain: 1850-1950* (Urbana: University of Illinois, 2004), pp. 19-74.

⁸ All but four of the Holmes tales are narrated by his friend Watson: 'The Blanched Soldier' (1926) and 'The Lion's Mane' (1926) are narrated by Holmes, while 'His Last Bow' (1917) and 'The Mazarin Stone' (1921) are written in the third person.

⁹ Diana Barsham, *Arthur Conan Doyle and the Meaning of Masculinity* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000), p. 56.

Holmes narratives were written at a time when, Joseph Kestner argues, Britain needed masculine role models due to:

worries over controlling a distant Empire, rise of women's rights movements, labour unrest, and increased economic and military competition from the modern nations of Germany and the USA. All of these factors present an image of nation, metropolis and masculinity in crisis.¹⁰

Furthermore, James Chapman and Matthew Hilton point out that British masculinity can be seen as experiencing perpetual crisis since the late nineteenth century.¹¹ They assert that with the appearance of the assertive New Woman, male identities had become destabilised since the 1890s. According to Barsham, professional male observers narrate several of Conan Doyle's works. As such, the works are part of a 'truth discourse' that provides a masculine viewpoint that re-affirms masculinity.¹²

The fact that Malone is viewing a world effectively frozen in time from the perspective of a seasoned reporter draws attention to the efficacy of this masculine standpoint. As Barsham notes correctly:

For Doyle, this mode of evidential writing came to represent the most significant and interesting form of narrative, one in which the epistemological status of the masculine eye and voice was most obviously at stake. What men saw and

¹⁰ Joseph A., Kestner, *Sherlock's Men: Masculinity, Conan Doyle, and Cultural History* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1997), p.128.

¹¹ James Chapman and Matthew Hilton, 'From Sherlock Holmes to James Bond: Masculinity and National Identity in British Popular Fiction', in *Relocating Britishness*, ed. by Stephen Counce (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004), pp. 126-47 (p. 126).

¹² Barsham, *Meaning of Masculinity*, p. 56.

believed converted into a truth practice which then defined and guaranteed agreements about what constituted masculinity itself.¹³

Malone's first person narration not only shapes the narrative itself but also constructs a particular image of masculine knowledge and authority.

Barsham's study of masculinity in Conan Doyle's work has revealed that his writing career 'carried an ambitious project: that of modernizing and strengthening the representation of British manhood to match the directives of a more secular, scientific and Empire conscious culture.'¹⁴

Barsham argues that when it came to the representation of manhood, Conan Doyle was, in the terminology of the time, a 'boomster' – someone who reinforced the principle of masculinity by joining the masculine chorus of praise of itself.¹⁵ This can be seen in the Challenger novels. As a group, the male protagonists are intellectuals, adventurers and professionals: both practical and active.

The Poison Belt responds to the contemporary sense of a destabilisation in British 'manhood' by presenting its main characters as idealised portrayals of masculinity. Barsham notes that, personally, Conan Doyle felt that women wanted a 'good masculine performance, both within the family and outside it, or space in which to perform themselves.'¹⁶ In other words, women desired masculine authority or emancipation from a

¹³ Barsham, *Meaning of Masculinity*, p. 56.

¹⁴ Barsham, *Meaning of Masculinity*, p. 1.

¹⁵ Barsham, *Meaning of Masculinity*, p. 201.

¹⁶ Barsham, *Meaning of Masculinity*, p. 146.

weakened masculinity.¹⁷ *The Poison Belt* provides an image of the former and Mrs Challenger, the only continuous female presence in the novel, responds by turning to her husband for guidance throughout (see *TPB*, p. 33 for example). Tellingly, it is Mrs Challenger who is able to bring knowledge of what lies beyond death through what she sees at the moment of death. This is a significant role given the part women played in spiritualism and mesmerism in the Victorian period.¹⁸ Thus it is perhaps particularly telling that the novel provides such masculine observers, who lend an authoritative position over Mrs Challenger's spiritual experience, perhaps countering her female 'authoritative' vision.

The Poison Belt affirms an authoritative masculine viewpoint from which to critique social conditions. Its critical position on modernity is established soon after the cataclysm. Jill Greenfield notes that the new century brought with it fears about 'inner urban decay.'¹⁹ It saw the beginning of 'feminised consumerism', which was considered symptomatic of 'wider concerns about national cultural degeneration.'²⁰ The almost entirely 'masculine space' established by the effects of the poison belt counters the so-called 'feminizing' effects of modernity by paralyzing the modern to allow the emergence of active masculine roles, not in some remote corner

¹⁷ This perspective is seen again in the novels of Fowler Wright, where the reassertion of masculine authority is fundamental to his transfigurative disaster scenario.

¹⁸ See Alex Owen, *The Darkened Room: Women, Power, and Spiritualism in Late Victorian England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1990), pp. 16-17.

¹⁹ Jill Greenfield, 'Gender, Consumer Culture and the Middle Class Male in Early Victorian patronage of the Arts', in *Gender, Civic Culture, and Consumerism: Middle-class Identity in Britain, 1800-1940*, ed. by Alan J. Kidd, and David Nicholls (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999), pp. 183-97 (p. 170).

²⁰ Greenfield, 'Gender, Consumer Culture and the Middle Class Male', p. 170.

of *The Lost World*, but within the heart of the British Empire. Challenger exemplifies 'the ideal scientific mind', capable of thinking 'out a point of abstract knowledge in the interval between its owner falling from a balloon and reaching the earth. Men of this strong fibre are needed to form the conquerors of Nature and the bodyguard of truth.' (*TPB*, p. 50) In short, scientific minds perceived as having the capacity to think quickly and under pressure are essential for the establishment of masculine authority over Nature and as the protectors of truth. Here, the falling man serves as a metaphor for Challenger and his group, who are similarly poised between safety and death having survived temporarily the effects of the ether. The temporal pause created by the poison belt establishes a narrative space in which Challenger can contemplate Edwardian society from 'a point of abstract knowledge' as it falls towards extinction. Their masculine authority resides in their conquering of Nature – they have survived the ether albeit temporarily – and their communication of a 'truth', their unique observations on their contemporary culture. Their perspectives are privileged both in terms of the narration and in their temporary transcendence, both of which serve to affirm their masculine authority. Accordingly, they are men of 'strong fibre'.

The novel's conservative wish fulfilment fantasy goes beyond its reinforcement of masculinity to inflect its representations of class. Written at a time when there was a relative increase in social mobility, especially

for the working class,²¹ *The Poison Belt* re-affirms class positions and presents the middle classes favourably. On the journey to Professor Challenger's home, Malone presents the working class as brutish:

I turned away to pay off my taxi, the driver of which was very cantankerous and abusive over his fare. As I came back to Professor Summerlee, he was having a furious altercation with the men who had carried down the oxygen, his little white goat's beard jerking with indignation. One of the fellows called him, I remember, 'a silly old bleached cockatoo,' which so enraged his chauffeur that he bounded out of his seat to take the part of his insulted master, and it was all we could do to prevent a riot in the street. (*TPB*, p. 8)

In terms of its structure, the paragraph is somewhat discontinuous. It does not link the different scenes with particular fluency and each appears separate from, and juxtaposed with, the others. The effect is to produce a series of moments – snapshots, almost – that allow the reader to view the emerging shifts in class relations in detail. The extreme diction ('cantankerous', 'abusive', 'frivolous', etc.) contributes to the sense of frozen moments in time, providing the action with a photographic or sketch-like quality that anticipates the immobility – and the reflective space – caused ultimately by the poison belt.

In terms of the novel's social criticism, the exaggerated behaviour exposes (as the ether fully reveals through exaggeration) a lack of respect and an increase in aggression amongst the labouring class. Indeed, the ether seems to provoke a decline in politeness and standards of acceptable

²¹ Paul Richard Thompson, *The Edwardians: The Remaking of British Society* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), pp. 203-08.

behaviour, breaking down the 'social etiquette' Julia Bush sees as 'an important boundary marker in [...] London society'²² during the Victorian and Edwardian periods. The breakdown of this etiquette in *The Poison Belt* is treated critically with the ether exacerbating the dissolution of propriety the novel perceives as an effect of modernity. The disrespect shown to Summerlee indicates that the working class, represented by the taxi driver and the oxygen porters, no longer respect what the novel frames as their social superiors. Although irate themselves as a consequence of exposure to the ether, Malone and Summerlee can still exercise appropriate self-control and attempt to calm the situation. This distinction between reasonable middle-class men and unreasonable, aggressive working classes reaffirms class stereotypes derived from the 'Edwardian panic fantasies' about the working class.²³

It is not only the working class who are subject to negative representation in *The Poison Belt*, the upper class is also presented unflatteringly. For example, when travelling through London with his companions Malone witnesses:

Just beneath us there was such a one [car] of great size and luxurious appearance, with its owner, a fat old man, leaning out, half his gross body through the window, and his podgy hand, gleaming with diamonds, outstretched as he urged his chauffeur to make a last effort to break through the press.
(*TPB*, p. 78)

²² Julia Bush, *Edwardian Ladies and Imperial Power* (London: Leicester University Press, 2000), p. 86.

²³ Ross McKibbin, *Classes and Cultures: England 1918-1951* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 67.

This scene, appearing again to capture a moment motionless in time, allows for a 'wandering eye' that emphasises a depiction of crass, domineering corpulence. Malone's description emphasises the gluttony and self-indulgence of the wealthy materialist. He is described as a 'magnate', a term that associates him with the business community²⁴ and, in all likelihood, alludes to his membership of the *nouveau riche*. He is 'new money' compared to the aristocracy that is not, perhaps due to the novel's inherent conservatism, subject to comparable criticism.

Earlier in the novel, succumbing to the influence of the ether, which heightens emotional states, the usually splenetic Summerlee, who is often the foil for Challenger, remarks to Roxton:

'You lordlings are not accustomed to hear the truth [...]. It comes as a bit of a shock, does it not, when someone makes you realise your title leaves you nonetheless a very ignorant man?'

'Upon my word, sir,' said Lord John, very stern and rigid, 'if you were a younger man you would not dare to speak to me in so offensive a fashion.'

Summerlee thrust out his chin, with its little wagging tuft of goatee beard. 'I would have you know, sir, that, young or old, there has never been a time in my life when I was afraid to speak my mind to an ignorant coxcomb – yes, sir, an ignorant coxcomb, if you had as many titles as slaves could invent and fools could adopt.'

For a moment Lord John's eyes blazed, and then, with a tremendous effort, he mastered his anger and leaned back in his seat with arms folded and a bitter smile upon his face.

(*TPB*, p. 13)

In this exchange, Summerlee's criticism of Roxton as ignorant is met with restraint. Roxton respects Summerlee's age and exercises supreme self-

²⁴ See 'Magnate', *Oxford Dictionary of English* (Oxford University Press, 2012).

control. In this way, the novel indicates that each class is more self-possessed than the one below it. Just as Malone and Summerlee express self-discipline in their quelling of the potential working class 'riot', so Roxton calms the situation by refraining from engaging with Summerlee's continued insults. In effect, Summerlee's attack is undermined by the more positive characterisation of Roxton. Here, and elsewhere, Summerlee is revealed to be irrational, emotional and often amusing in his waspishness. Hence, the text makes conventional distinctions between a refined aristocracy (Roxton, a particularly adventurous, practical man in *The Lost World*), a gluttonous mercantile class ('the fat old man'), a wide-ranging professional middle class (the Professors Challenger and Summerlee and journalist Malone), and a volatile labouring class.

However, the novel recognises that not all members of the aristocracy are as laudable as John Roxton. Indeed, *The Poison Belt* draws attention to the economic and emotional detachment of an 'idle' upper class, preoccupied with leisure, compared with a more 'industrious' middle class.²⁵ Thus, despite reaffirming traditional class distinctions, the novel is implicitly critical of class inequality. In London the group see:

three gaily dressed women, all young and beautiful, one of them with a Peking spaniel upon her lap. With them were a rakish-looking elderly man and a young aristocrat, his eyeglass still in his eye, his cigarette burned down to the stub between the fingers of his begloved hand. [...] On one side of the car a waiter with some broken glasses beside a tray was huddled near the step. On the other, two very

²⁵ Jon Lawrence, *Speaking for the People: Party, Language, and Popular Politics in England, 1867-1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 145.

ragged tramps, a man and a woman, lay where they had fallen, the man with his long, thin arm still outstretched, even as he had asked for alms in his lifetime. (*TPB*, p. 74)

This snapshot, almost forensic in its detail, captures an image of social inequality. Rendered motionless in their selfish enjoyment of material luxury, they appear neither aware of, nor concerned for, the 'ragged tramps' beside them. Sectioned in time, the scene cuts across British class relations to highlight the indifference of a leisured upper class. Here, the novel suggests the reality of the Edwardian period, which saw a separation of harder living conditions for the lower classes and increased opportunities for leisure amongst the wealthy.²⁶

Such images highlight social inequality and establish, as Dana Batory suggests, *The Poison Belt's* credentials as a morality tale.²⁷ It reflects general concerns of the period regarding an increased emphasis on leisure and enjoyment above all else. Whittaker Chambers and Terry Teachout explore this growing preoccupation with leisure as a cultural priority. They explain that the Edwardians 'thoroughly enjoyed the kingdom of this world. Their watchword was happiness [...]. For the Edwardian era was one of those rare interludes of history where everyone who could possibly do so had a wonderful time.'²⁸ Indeed, in this period particularly, access to leisure pursuits was greater than in previous

²⁶ Roger Davidson, *Whitehall and the Labour Problem in Late-Victorian and Edwardian Britain: A Study in Official Statistics and Social Control* (London: Croom Helm, 1985), p. 139.

²⁷ Dana M. Batory, 'The Poison Belt as a Morality Tale', *Riverside Quarterly*, 7 (1982), 97-100 (p. 97).

²⁸ Whittaker Chambers, and Terry Teachout, *Ghosts on the Roof: Selected Essays* (New Brunswick: Transaction, 1996), pp. 224-25.

years.²⁹ The move towards recreation was causing unease, however, as nineteenth-century values continued to be 'under fire'³⁰ and new freedoms enjoyed. This increased focus on enjoyment was juxtaposed with concerns about living standards amongst the lower classes.³¹ Encompassing both a vision of luxurious relaxation and abject poverty in a single image, the novel draws attention to the gulf between the classes. Its status as a contemporary morality tale lies in its critique of the injustice of a leisured aristocracy indifferent to an impoverished working or under-class. Its solution to such injustice lies in the enhancement of a post-catastrophe 'common fund' to raise 'the standard of life in these islands' and paid for by contributions from those previously preoccupied with 'the noisy, foolish hustle which passed so often for enjoyment in the days of old' (*TPB*, p. 83). Accordingly, the class distinctions remain intact, though the wealthy now take responsibility for the welfare of the poor. Hence, in its rejection of significant social transformation, *The Poison Belt* is conservative in its wish fulfilment fantasy for a transformed society.

As a result of the ether's exaggerating effects, much of *The Poison Belt's* social criticism is achieved through parody and comedy, particularly in its treatment of anxieties surrounding changes in middle-class conduct and 'a subtle relaxation in etiquette and lifestyle [...] and a tendency towards a

²⁹ John K. Walton, and James Walvin, *Leisure in Britain, 1780-1939* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1983), p. 100.

³⁰ Lewis Charles Bernard Seaman, *Post-Victorian Britain: 1902-1951* (London and New York: Methuen, 1985), p. 119.

³¹ Davidson, *Whitehall and the Labour Problem*, pp. 152-57.

more relaxed approach to manners and decorum.’³² The ether exaggerates these changes, provoking extreme behaviour amongst the novel’s protagonists and thereby enabling the novel to comment critically on contemporary attitudes and advocate a return to Victorian ‘decorum’. The behaviour exhibited by Malone, Roxton and Summerlee during their journey to Challenger’s home is a richly symbolic parody of declining social reserve and the capacity to maintain rational discourse. Summerlee impersonates a ‘clucking hen’ that has just laid an egg, Malone becomes ‘hysterical’, and Roxton talks interminably (*TPB*, p. 14-16). Later, Challenger also breaks the codes of acceptable behaviour; he hides under a table and bites his housekeeper on the leg (*TPB*, p. 23) in order, like any good scientist, to observe her reaction. The characters’ inability to maintain what Herbert Marcuse describes as basic repression³³ makes them boisterous and hysterical, loud and unrestrained, and subject to sudden changes in their emotional responses. In short, they enact the very antithesis of formal and repressed Victorian conduct. They are a comedic expose of the declining etiquette that the novel seeks to redress through the transfiguration at its wish fulfilment conclusion.

As they travel to Challenger’s home, the group cannot conduct rational conversation. Unaware of their changed behaviour, their exchanges are confrontational and belligerent. The uproarious tone of their discussion, their lack of self awareness and the misplaced egotism attached to

³² Helen C. Long, *The Edwardian House: The Middle-class Home in Britain, 1880-1914* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1993), pp. 12-13.

³³ See Herbert Marcuse, *Eros and Civilisation* (London: Sphere Books, 1969), pp. 29-30.

Summerlee's character, constitutes a scenario in which reasoned debate is replaced with argumentative and aggressive conflict:

Here he [Summerlee] laughed with uproarious triumph over his own argument. 'Yes, sir, we should already be very far from our normal selves, and instead of sitting quietly discussing scientific problems in a railway train we should be showing actual symptoms of the poison which was working within us. Where do we see any signs of this poisonous cosmic disturbance? Answer me that, sir! Answer me that! Come, come, no evasion! I pin you to an answer!' (*TPB*, p. 12)

Summerlee's behaviour is self-congratulatory and confrontational; rational debate has been replaced with an explosion of pomposity. Mutual respect is absent from the exchange in favour of petty one-upmanship. The respectability and self-control conventionally seen as defining the middle-class³⁴ is dissolved. Collectively, the conduct of the 'cantankerous' taxi driver and the disrespectful oxygen porters, followed by the protagonists' own behaviour, emphasises declining etiquette and personal restraint and exposes humankind's irrational, boorish and violent nature that, the novel implies, requires repressing. Summerlee's ether-induced lack of awareness means that he fails to recognise that he is already far from being his usual self. Read in the light of the altered patterns of social behaviour occurring as 'Edwardian relaxation began to replace Victorian restraint',³⁵ such events form a critical commentary on what the novel perceives as social degeneration. In its negative portrayal of such conduct, *The Poison Belt* advocates the founding of a 'more sober and

³⁴ Long, *The Edwardian House*, pp. 10-11.

³⁵ Dora Russell, *The Religion of the Machine Age* (London and New York: Routledge, 1983), p. 185.

restrained' society (*TPB*, p. 83) clearly following the conventions of middle-class Victorian propriety.

This conclusion is anticipated by Malone's nostalgic response to Summerlee and Roxton's arguments. He reflects:

To me all this was dreadful and deplorable. Like a wave, the memory of the past swept over me, the good comradeship, the happy, adventurous days – all that we had suffered and worked for and won. That it should have come to this – to insults and abuse! Suddenly I was sobbing – sobbing in loud, gulping, uncontrollable sobs which refused to be concealed. (*TPB*, p. 14)

Malone's words suggest that, when working as comrades, the group could achieve a great deal. By contrast, they are now reduced to squabbling amongst themselves. Malone's tears, superficially at least, seem to reflect a breakdown in traditional masculine stoicism, again highlighting how the ether dissolves basic repression. However, his sobs symbolise more than this. In the context of his journey they represent a lament for the loss of past standards and conventions of behaviour. Accordingly, Malone's sorrow encompasses the novel's wish for a return to an idealised past.

The breakdown in actual Edwardian decorum implied in these sections of *The Poison Belt* is important for what the novel implies about the role of the British globally. *The Poison Belt* presents the English as the most intellectually developed race in the world. This is symbolised in the progression of the ether's effects across the globe. As it engulfs the planet, England is one of the last countries to succumb to its effects. This

implies English racial superiority, as the poison affects 'the less developed races' first (*TPB*, p. 30), before affecting 'the more complex peoples of Europe' (*TPB*, p. 6). As Terry Heller notes, the ether allowed Conan Doyle 'to lay out a map of racial complexity, which follows the familiar patterns of European racism: Africans, Australian aborigines, and Southern Asians succumb first.'³⁶ Indeed, *The Poison Belt's* treatment of race contrasts with that of *The Purple Cloud*. While both assume Western racial superiority, in Shiel's text the disaster is a means of racial purification. By contrast, Conan Doyle's novel emphasises the importance of the Western 'civilizing' process that informed Imperial and colonial enterprises. This contrast highlights the key difference between *The Poison Belt* and other disaster narratives: its wish fulfilment fantasy is not one of global annihilation but national augmentation in the form of a return to Victorian behaviour and the practice of Empire building.

Challenger is presented as the most highly developed of English minds. Hence, after hiding under the breakfast table and biting his maid on the leg, he realises that his behaviour is being adversely influenced by the ether and sets about exercising his mind to keep his less rational impulses under control. Although both Challenger and Summerlee are professors, it is Challenger who shows the greater self-awareness, thereby demonstrating his superiority even over those judged to be his intellectual equals. He explains: 'There is a mental inhibition by which such

³⁶ See Terry Heller, 'Arthur Conan Doyle British Fantasy and Science-Fiction Writers Before World War I', in *Dictionary of Literary Biography Vol. 178*, ed. by Darren Harris-Fain, (Detroit: Gale Research, 1997), p. 82.

symptoms can be checked and controlled [...] I cannot expect to find it developed in all of you to the same point which it has reached in me, for I suppose that the strength of our different mental processes bears some proportion to each other.' (*TPB*, p. 24) Once he has made this discovery, he explains to his less mentally developed friends how they might effect the same exercising of control:

'In an instant I perceived the truth. My pulse upon examination was ten beats above the usual, and my reflexes were increased. I called upon my higher and saner self, the real G. E. C., seated serene and impregnable behind all mere molecular disturbance. I summoned him, I say, to watch the foolish mental tricks which the poison would play. I found that I was indeed the master. I could recognise and control a disordered mind. It was a remarkable exhibition of the victory of mind over matter, for it was a victory over that particular form of matter which is most intimately connected with mind. I might almost say that mind was at fault and that personality controlled it.' (*TPB*, p. 25)

Through Challenger's instruction, Roxton, Summerlee and Malone are able to recover themselves and function rationally and coherently. This victory of 'mind over matter' underlines that those with a stronger intellect will be capable of resisting the ether's mental effects and of educating those of weaker mind to do the same. Challenger's influence is, in effect, a civilizing process that redeems his companions from their uncivilised behaviour.

Although the novel does not make an explicit connection between Challenger's influence on his companions and the British Empire's potential effect on foreign nations, Challenger's ability to civilise

'disordered' minds can be interpreted in a broader context. Challenger is represented as the epitome of English intellectualism, a superior man amongst a superior race more capable than any other of resisting the influence of the ether. By confirming that the poison belt affects 'less developed races first' in the aftermath of Challenger's restoration of his friends' decorum, the novel invites its reader to conjecture that England may be capable of performing a similar role for those framed as less civilised than the English. In short, the English, the text appears to suggest, could – and perhaps should – teach those peoples deemed less civilised appropriate behaviour and propriety. In essence, the text is implicitly colonial. It adopts a racist perspective on other cultures, seeing 'the indigenous races of Sumatra' (*TPB*, p. 6), Africa, Australia, India, Persia and '[t]he Slavonic population of Austria' as less resilient to the social and cultural breakdown instigated by the ether than 'the Teutonic' (*TPB*, p. 6 and 30). In this way, *The Poison Belt* subscribes to the Victorian view of a hierarchy of racial types with the white English as the pinnacle of human evolution, capable of civilizing the less advanced races of humanity.³⁷ As Thompson notes, in the late nineteenth century, 'if a country had not independently achieved an advanced stage of industrialisation and militarisation, this signified a social and cultural backwardness, an inferiority on behalf of its people. According to this logic, it became the duty of the developed nations to educate, civilise and

³⁷ Kenan Malik, *The Meaning of Race: Race, History and Culture in Western Society* (Washington Square: New York University Press, 1996), p. 115.

improve these primitive peoples.’³⁸ Whilst the racism of *The Poison Belt* is clear, the allusion to the process of imperial or colonial improvement is more elliptic and suggested by Challenger’s influence upon his colleagues; he is a manifestation of a great white father figure teaching discipline to his unruly children.

By indicating racial and intellectual difference and dramatizing that civilised behaviour can be taught, *The Poison Belt* suggests the benefits of those perceived as ‘more developed’ improving those seen as more ‘primitive’. This perspective reflects many views, which John MacKenzie notes, were present in the popular press, particularly the notion that the British Empire undertook ‘a civilizing process, not the survival of the fittest, but the white man’s burden.’³⁹ Challenger’s recognition of self-control as a civilizing process is achieved through observation, by summoning his saner self to watch, recognise and exercise control over his impulses. Again, the importance of ‘seeing’ is evoked. Mindfulness of one’s actions allows for the recognition of appropriate and inappropriate behaviour. In this context, the breakdown in the protagonists’ behaviour is more than an expression of anxieties about decorum. Like *The War of the Worlds* it expresses a fear that the English could lose their elevated position globally. By implication, if behaviour standards in Britain fall, then its claim to the civilizing authority of its people is diminished. Hence, *The Poison Belt* champions self-control as a means of legitimizing and maintaining Britain’s

³⁸ Thompson, Jon, *Fiction, Crime, and Empire: Clues to Modernity and Postmodernism* (Urbana: University of Illinois, 1993), p. 74.

³⁹ John M. MacKenzie, *Imperialism and the Natural World* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1990), p. 149.

global influence. This is perhaps unsurprising. In the Edwardian period, many commentators felt that the Empire was in decline and Conan Doyle engaged publicly with this changing context. He declared many of his views in his writing to the popular press, establishing himself as a firm believer in the British Empire as a positive, 'civilizing' influence in the world, perceiving it as a force for good.⁴⁰

Conan Doyle's faith in the British Empire is distinctly Victorian. Confidence in the Empire had declined gradually since the second Boer War (1899-1902) damaged the British's certainty in their masculine and martial prowess and fears of the degeneration of the race were increasing.⁴¹

MacKenzie notes that after the Boer War, which was a 'severe blow to national pride and prestige', people started to doubt the Empire's civilizing mission.⁴² In this context, Conan Doyle's certainty in English superiority seems anachronistic and his treatment of the ether's effects as it progresses across the globe a means of reaffirming the pre-eminence of the English.

While *The Poison Belt* re-affirms ideas of English racial superiority it simultaneously reflects anxieties akin to those found in *The War of the Worlds* about unpreparedness for a coming crisis. In her introduction to the Bison edition of the novel, Katya Reimann remarks how 'Conan Doyle's description of an invisible horror that sweeps relentlessly across

⁴⁰ Symons, *Conan Doyle*, p. 69.

⁴¹ MacKenzie, *Imperialism and the Natural World*, p. 150.

⁴² MacKenzie, *Imperialism and the Natural World*, p. 150.

the settled order and golden beauty of a perfect summer day in the Suffolk downs almost presciently describes the England of the summer of 1914.’⁴³ In effect, the novel draws attention to Britain’s unpreparedness for the disaster that befalls the country and, by implication, for the possibility of war. Seaman points out ‘the circumstances which had enabled this Empire to be created and maintained had, by the time the twentieth century opened, begun to pass away’ and at the same time Germany, since the 1890s, had been developing its military power.⁴⁴ Cocks explains that ‘Germany increasingly emerged from 1902 onwards as a threat to Britain’s global position.’⁴⁵ In this context it is significant that in the year Conan Doyle published *The Poison Belt*, the *Fortnightly Review* ran his ‘Great Britain and the Next War’ (February 1913). Given the growing tensions of the time it is unsurprising that Conan Doyle had been contemplating the likelihood of conflict and the need for national military preparation. As Challenger declares, ‘the wisest man is he who holds himself ready for the unexpected.’ (*TPB*, p. 6) Here, Challenger emphasises the intellectual necessity to be ready to anticipate and respond to the unforeseen, as it is through his foresight and preparedness that the group are saved.

In ‘*The Poison Belt as a Morality Tale*’, Batory points out:

There is an obvious relationship between *The Poison Belt* and the multitude of works appearing in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth centuries, warning a decadent

⁴³ Katya Reimann, ‘Introduction’ to *The Poison Belt*, p. xv.

⁴⁴ Seaman, *Post-Victorian Britain*, pp. 35-36.

⁴⁵ Cocks, ‘Modernity and Modernism’, p. 31.

England of the dangers of invasion if nothing was done to rejuvenate the country physically and morally.⁴⁶

Although the 'invasion' recounted in *The Poison Belt* is by an invisible etheric gas rather than by human agents or armies, Batory's observation highlights the presence of contemporary anxiety about Britain's readiness for an impended external threat. As Ignatius F. Clarke explains, 'from the time of Wells up to World War I Britain was in a state of panic about invasion.'⁴⁷ From the contemporary 'plethora of future war stories' he understands that this anxiety is addressed through narratives that embody the 'wish fulfilment fantasy about an idealised nation in arms.'⁴⁸ In *The Poison Belt* such apprehension is answered in a wish fulfilment representation of a small group of men ready for action. The representation of masculinity in *The Poison Belt* centralises the qualities of curiosity, tenacity, bravery and professionalism and presents these as the defining features of good character. These qualities are particularly relevant considering the novel's pre-World War I context. The novel's central characters do not express the physical deterioration many felt had come to characterise the contemporary British male. As such, *The Poison Belt* responds positively to the Edwardian 'crisis of manliness [which] became a national obsession as the poor quality of the Boer War recruits heightened growing fears over physical deterioration.'⁴⁹ Conan Doyle's protagonists, including Summerlee, who is significantly older than the rest,

⁴⁶ Batory, 'The Poison Belt as a Morality Tale', p. 98.

⁴⁷ Ignatius F. Clarke, *Voices Prophesying War, 1763-1984* (London: Oxford University Press, 1966), pp. 104-05.

⁴⁸ Clarke, *Voices Prophesying War*, pp. 104-05.

⁴⁹ Chapman and Hilton, 'From Sherlock Holmes to James Bond', p. 126.

are all physically robust and still demonstrate the vigour they expressed during their 'lost world' adventure three years previously. Their physical hardiness contrasts with perceptions of poor physical fitness levels circulating in the first decade of the twentieth century.⁵⁰ In this context *The Poison Belt's* representations of physically fit, authoritative characters would have been inevitably appealing. Thus the text presents a group whose intellect and foresight are matched by their physical capacity to deal with crisis.

Much of the anxiety expressed in *The Poison Belt's* depiction of a human race caught unprepared arises from the hubris recognised by Challenger when he discusses the 'monstrous conceit of mankind.' (*TPB*, p. 26)

While he relates this to human kind in general, the novel's pre-war context provides a more specific interpretation. Hence, the restoration of England at the climax of the novel represents a wish fulfilment fantasy of a peaceful, prosperous future secured by a nation prepared for adversity.

In its attempt to overturn British complacency, the novel presents the character of Austen, Professor Challenger's chauffeur, as a satiric figure. When Challenger informs him of the imminent destruction of life on Earth he seems unperturbed, so inconceivable is the prospect. Faced with this information, it does not occur to him to undertake anything other than his usual duties (see *TPB*, p. 33). Austen's response amplifies Malone's own ingrained sense of disbelief:

⁵⁰ MacKenzie, *Imperialism and the Natural World*, p. 150.

The end of the world! Our eyes turned to the great bow-window and we looked out at the summer beauty of the country-side, the long slopes of heather, the great country-houses, the cosy farms, the pleasure-seekers upon the links [...]. There is the sun shining as brightly as ever in a blue sky. (*TPB*, pp. 26-28)

Malone's words evoke a sense of familiarity and of permanence. His vantage point here, however, is restricted, and overlooks the harsher realities of the destruction caused by the ether globally. The view is idyllic and comforting: the great houses signal strength and permanence, cosy farms connote warmth and provision. So here the sun 'shining as brightly as ever' (emphasis added) creates a vista of idyllic normality. Such apparent permanence is, of course, illusory. Even when he is faced with the inevitability of destruction, he cannot bring himself to acknowledge the death of humanity and the brutality of a universe in which humanity is not privileged:

Above there was a perfect summer sky [...] if the human race must die today, it was at least upon a glorious deathbed. And yet all that gentle loveliness of nature made this terrific and wholesale destruction the more pitiable and awful. Surely it was too goodly a residence that we should be so swiftly, so ruthlessly, evicted from it! (*TPB*, p. 40)

Malone's observation of the 'perfect summer sky' evokes the same sense of permanence and reassurance he experienced earlier. However, the image of pastoral perfection is here juxtaposed with 'terrific' and 'ruthless' destruction. This shift in register undermines the sense of permanence achieved in his earlier view of England's landscape and emphasises

sudden danger and the vulnerability that comes from a limited understanding of global events.

Austen's lack of concern with, and Malone's inability to comprehend, disaster can be read metaphorically in relation to the novel's context. Chambers and Teachout note that, despite wars and political upheaval, Edwardian Britain was a place of 'confidence and security. [...] Crises and war were recurrent, but the mass of men had an almost organic confidence in peace.'⁵¹ Austen's reaction to Challenger's warning parallels this deep-rooted sense of security. *The Poison Belt's* reaction against this over-confidence is described by Batory as 'a bold faced plea for humanity to put its affairs in order [...]. Doyle was trying to frighten his readers into moral reform – but instead of the usual foreign invasion (or Martian invasion in the case of *The War of the Worlds*) to scare the English Doyle warned all of humanity by summoning the apocalypse.'⁵²

The ether cloud has various symbolic functions. While it allows for the exploration of spiritual ideas and social criticism it also presents an opportunity for the text to warn readers didactically of contemporary cultural complacency. As *The War of the Worlds* had done, *The Poison Belt* undermines complacency by emphasizing the illusion of peace. Anxieties about a lack of preparedness for action and fears of degeneration merge in the novel's representation of technology. Carelessness in the manufacturing of one of the oxygen tanks used to

⁵¹ Chambers and Teachout, *Ghosts on the Roof*, p. 224.

⁵² Batory, 'The *Poison Belt* as a Morality Tale', p. 100.

aerate Challenger's sealed room threatens the survival of the group:

'The amount contained is variable,' said Challenger, 'depending upon the pressure and care with which it has been bottled. I am inclined to agree with you, Roxton, that this one is defective.'

'So we are to be cheated out of the last hour of our lives,' Summerlee remarked bitterly. 'An excellent final illustration of the sordid age in which we have lived.' (*TPB*, p. 64)

Summerlee's comment sees the lackadaisical attitude to workmanship shown by the oxygen bottlers as symptomatic of Edwardian society in general. The recognition that carelessness in manufacturing would shorten lives is offered as an extreme example of the consequences of declining standards. In *The Poison Belt*, poor quality goods accelerate the death of the country, here personified by Challenger and his survivors. In effect, the passage draws attention to the importance of high quality goods in ensuring survival. Summerlee's criticism of his 'sordid age' reflects a belief in the gradual decline of the nation. After the mid-nineteenth century, which was considered to be the 'Golden age' of British manufacturing,⁵³ there had been a comparative weakening of the British economy, a slowdown in exports and a significant reduction in Britain's leading industrial position globally.⁵⁴ It seems likely that Summerlee's disgust identifies a need for high quality manufacturing to be a characteristic of British industry if the country was to survive economically and compete

⁵³ Ignatius F. Clarke, and Clive Trebilcock, *Understanding Decline: Perceptions and Realities of British Economic Performance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 62.

⁵⁴ Clarke and Trebilcock, *Understanding Decline*, p. 13.

globally with Germany and America.⁵⁵ Hence, the exchange between Summerlee and Challenger provides a microcosm of what the novel suggests is a condition of British manufacturing nationally. Its response is to argue for society's capacity to 'develop and improve', responsibly. Indeed this change forms a fundamental part of the altered mind-set of the population after the cataclysm. They have a '*feeling*' of 'responsibility', 'an *appreciation* of the gravity and of the objects of life' and 'an *earnest desire* to develop and improve' (*TPB*, p. 82, emphasis added). It is the attitudes towards standards and development that have altered as a consequence of the ether, overturning the perceived decline in standards and careless attitudes of the pre-catastrophe 'sordid' age.

Alongside its criticism of the failures of contemporary industrial production in Britain, *The Poison Belt* expresses uncertainty regarding the Edwardian age's growing dependence on technology. Despite Britain's industrial and economic slowdown, however, the Edwardian period saw rapid technological advancements and a concomitant growth in confidence in the efficacy of technology. MacKenzie notes, there 'was a seeming inevitability about technological progress that made it both exciting and taken for granted.'⁵⁶ *The Poison Belt* counters this excitement and easy acceptance by drawing attention to how technology, now capable of running autonomously, should be under the control of human agents. The necessity of such human control is emphasised most clearly in the

⁵⁵ See Steve N. Broadberry, *The Productivity Race: British Manufacturing in International Perspective 1850-1990* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp. 111-14.

⁵⁶ MacKenzie, *Imperialism and the Natural World*, p. 144.

damage caused by machines after the ether has taken effect (*TPB*, p. 47). Reimann points out that, at the conclusion, the text has an ironic bite as humanity awakens to a landscape devastated not by the poison belt but by the machines left running while humankind slept: 'Not only is humanity smugly unaware of its vulnerability, but he has created objects all around himself to make the disaster worse.'⁵⁷ Indeed very little damage is caused by the ether compared to that created by unguided technology, including trains and steamships (see *TPB*, p. 47). As Walter Minkel notes,

What is most interesting about the news about the collapse of the human world is what happens when many of the machines – particularly the trains and steamships – keep on running. This was the first time in human history machines 'could' go on running.⁵⁸

Whilst Minkel's comment draws attention to unintentional automation, and the capacity for machines to continue without human interference, the novel's end-weight falls on the need to exercise control over humanity's creations. The text makes this explicit in the *Times*' post-disaster report:

When the account of the railway and shipping accidents has been completed, it will furnish grim reading, although there is evidence to show that in the vast majority of cases the drivers of trains and engineers of steamers succeeded in shutting off their motive power before succumbing to the poison. (*TPB*, p. 93)

Thus, *The Poison Belt* insists that human agency is necessary to avert technological disasters, including train crashes and steam-powered ships

⁵⁷ Reimann, 'Introduction', p. xvi.

⁵⁸ Walter Minkel, 'Review of *The Poison Belt*', *New York Review of Science Fiction*, 174 (2003), 11-12 (p. 11).

running 'full tilt upon some beach' (*TPB*, p. 47). In doing so it emphasises that machines, the very symbols of human progress and prowess are, ironically, potential sources of further catastrophe, a theme that would come to dominate science fiction throughout the twentieth century.

The novel makes its most insistent claim to the importance of effective human control over the machine in its treatment of the car. While the text does not reflect what Andrew Thacker calls the increasing 'terror' about the car that emerged during the early years of the twentieth century,⁵⁹ it is critical of people's *use* of the car. As the group drives towards Challenger's home in a car scarcely under the control of their ether-influenced chauffeur, they dodge collisions with other equally erratic vehicles and Malone remarks to Summerlee 'that the standard of driving in London had very much declined' (*TPB*, p. 10). Moments later, their car brushes a group of people, provoking 'raised cries of anger at the clumsy driving [...].'⁵⁹ (*TPB*, p. 10) The irony and humour are obvious but, more importantly, the drivers' lack of control is the consequence of the ether exaggerating their more usual carelessness. That is, the text suggests that humanity is already unthinking in its use of machines and challenges this thoughtlessness with its visions of technology run amok.

The scene can, however, be read more symbolically. Like the train and the steamships, the car is a symbol of modernity, of humanity's changed relationship with time and space. All three shorten travel time and

⁵⁹ Andrew Thacker, *Moving Through Modernity: Space and Geography in Modernism* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), p. 65.

effectively compress space. In this vignette, those engaged with modernity strike a glancing blow to those who still stand outside of it. The impact, however slight, implies that a swiftly approaching modernity cannot be avoided and, on a careless trajectory, its effects could be potentially damaging. Hence, the novel appears to extend its argument for the control of technology, through images of that technology, to encompass a call for control over the objects and effects of modernity itself. By extension, this is equally a call for humanity to exercise control over its behaviour, not only in relation to machines but also in its social interactions. As MacKenzie remarks, before World War I, ‘celebrations of man’s achievements were, by association, exaltations of man himself [...]’⁶⁰ *The Poison Belt* undermines the hubris associated with such thinking. Through the sudden and striking effects of the ether, it draws attention to the fact that although modern civilisation may have created cars, ships and trains, humanity has gained mastery neither over nature nor over its own lack of propriety. The fictional quotation from the *Times* with which the novel concludes makes this explicit:

But what will not be forgotten, is this revelation of the possibilities of the universe, this destruction of our ignorant self-complacency, and this demonstration of how narrow is the path of our material existence, and what abysses may lie on either side of it. Solemnity and humility are the base of all our emotions today. (*TPB*, p. 93)

As a result of the ether and its effects, humanity, ‘a feeble folk before the infinite latent forces which surround’ it (*TPB*, p. 92), becomes more aware

⁶⁰ MacKenzie, *Imperialism and the Natural World*, p. 144.

of its vulnerability. The population undergoes a sublime and humbling appreciation of its own powerlessness in the universe. At the conclusion the population finds pleasure in reflective pastimes. '[I]gnorant self-complacency' has been replaced with 'solemnity and humility' and the alteration has become 'the foundations upon which a more earnest and reverent human race may build a more worthy temple.' (*TPB*, p. 93) The religious connotations of the novel's prose clearly indicate a new spirituality amongst the population.

The Poison Belt is a multi-layered text in which the ether belt can be read in different ways. At one level, it is a theological/philosophical text; it can also be read as an exploration of the true nature of Edwardian society, an attack upon complacency and as a cautionary tale. Infused with anxieties of degeneration, *The Poison Belt* offers a conservative and critical response to contemporary behaviour and attitudes. It champions masculine authority, laments a declining empire, and expresses concern about humanity's unthinking use of new technology. Accordingly, it encompasses several wish fulfilment fantasies. A spiritual dimension to human existence is reaffirmed in the modern world; a reinvigorated masculinity is envisioned, certainty about the English's racial superiority is confirmed, and what is presented as improper behaviour is transformed into something 'more sober and restrained' (*TPB*, p. 83). It achieves this by freezing time into a long contemplative pause that exposes the mores of Edwardian society to criticism.

Self-consciously aware of its status as a warning to the reader, *The Poison Belt* acknowledges, through the fictional entry from the *Times*, that the 'actuality and cogency' of other, earlier warnings from 'prophets' and 'philosophers' have diminished. Such an acknowledgement can be read as a rhetorical strategy that encourages the reader to recognise and heed the validity – the 'actuality and cogency' – of the novel's cautionary aspect before a 'lesson, an actual experience' is 'needed to bring home the realisation of our own limitations and impotence.' (*TPB*, pp. 92-93)

Whether the reader was mindful of Conan Doyle's text or not, World War I delivered precisely this experience to an overconfident Edwardian Britain.

Chapter Four

Totalitarian Opportunism: J. J. Connington's *Nordenholt's Million* (1923)

Between the publication of *The Poison Belt* in 1913 and 'J.J. Connington's' *Nordenholt's Million* in 1923, there is not another significant British novel addressing the moment of disaster and its immediate aftermath. Thus there is a notable ten-year hiatus in the production of British transformative disaster narratives during and after the Great War. This may result from the fact that the trauma of World War I discouraged speculative writers from depicting further contemporary mass loss of life as the means of securing wish fulfilment fantasies. Accordingly, it is *Nordenholt's Million* that marks the re-emergence of the disaster narrative for the purpose of presenting social transfiguration.

Subsequently and more widely known as the author of seventeen detective novels, 'Connington' was the pseudonym of Alfred Walter Stewart, a lecturer in physical chemistry and radioactivity at the University of Glasgow and, later, professor of chemistry at Queen's University, Belfast.¹ *Nordenholt's Million* was Stewart's first novel and his only work of speculative fiction. Uniting his principal areas of research the narrative's defining cataclysm results from the destruction of nitrates in the soil, while the salvation of human life is a consequence of the survivors' ability to harness nuclear energy. The novel is a 'departure' narrative that

¹ Stanley J. Kunitz and Howard Haycraft, eds, *Twentieth Century Authors: A Biographical Dictionary of Modern Literature* (New York: H. W. Wilson Co., 1942), p. 347.

responds to its interwar context, particularly the social and political conditions in Britain in the early 1920s. It explores a wish fulfilment fantasy arising out of this context. In doing so, it displays affinities with elements of Nietzschean philosophy and examines a proto-fascist dictatorship, which is seen in the book as the source of wish fulfilment and the means by which a highly efficient, eugenically constructed, 'ideal' society can be built.

Central to *Nordenholt's Million* is the text's advocacy of dictatorship as the political solution to weak government and contemporary crises.² After overthrowing the failing British government, Nordenholt establishes himself as dictator, selecting those who will survive and relocating them to a 'Nitrogen Area' in the Clyde Valley. The novel opens with the narrator, Flint, visiting Wotherspoon, a scientific writer for the popular press and a recognisable caricature of H. G. Wells.³ However, establishing a contrast to Nordenholt, Wotherspoon is characterised as inept. Wotherspoon is engaged in an examination of nitrifying and denitrifying bacteria, but he is not a competent experimenter. When an unexplained fireball enters the house and mutates the denitrifying bacteria, Wotherspoon is too inattentive to notice or contain the multiplying mutation. The denitrifying bacteria spread and the ensuing 'blight' results in massive crop failure. Five million English (rather than 'Nordenholt's Million', which is used by

² A number of Japanese are also saved due to the actions of a similar 'Nordenholt figure' in Japan (J. J. Connington (Alfred Walter Stewart), *Nordenholt's Million* (Harmondsworth, Penguin Books, 1923; repr. 1946)), p. 203. Hereafter all citations will be within the main text as *NM*, followed by the page number).

³ See Ruddick, *Ultimate Island*, p. 115 and Wagar, *Terminal Visions*, p. 101.

Nordenholt as a recruiting slogan) are saved only by the foresight and dynamic actions of multi-millionaire businessman Stanley Nordenholt. Thus Nordenholt becomes 'the architect' (*NM*, p. 146) of a future civilisation planned and executed by Flint, his friend, and Elsa, his niece. As the narrative progresses, it is apparent that the blight not only precipitates mass starvation but also exposes the degenerative path upon which the pre-disaster society was embarked. Hence, Nordenholt's actions in the Clyde Valley are directed towards finding both a remedy for the blight and to delivering the English from any regressive tendencies. At the conclusion, a new civilisation emerges in which what the novel has framed as the social, political and economic problems of Britain have been overcome.

Nordenholt's Million's anti-democratic ideology aligns it with what Dan Stone in *Breeding Superman: Nietzsche, Race and Eugenics in Edwardian and Interwar Britain* (2002) defines as 'extremes of Englishness' texts.⁴ These texts, according to Stone, embrace radicalism and illiberalism in relation to British concerns. He argues that a number of scholars, including Oscar Levy, Anthony Ludovici, Karl Pearson, and William Sanderson, all wrote reactionary works that, though not individually fascist, 'come very close to satisfying the criteria regarded by scholars as constituting fascism' when taken collectively.⁵ As Stone points out, themes in the works of these thinkers include militarism, defence of

⁴ Dan Stone, *Breeding Superman Nietzsche, Race and Eugenics in Edwardian and Interwar Britain* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2002), p. 2-3.

⁵ Stone, *Breeding Superman*, p. 3.

Empire, the call for a 'masculine renaissance', eugenics, and an engagement with Nietzschean philosophy.⁶ Whilst such texts encompass perspectives that do not produce all of the elements necessary for a fully-fledged fascist ideology, they promote ideas that can be associated with fascism, forming what Stone calls a 'sort-of proto-fascism.'⁷ Thus, these works indicate channels of reasoning that demonstrate a 'provenance of proto-fascist ideas in Britain,'⁸ particularly before World War II. The political position of *Nordenholt's Million*, which promotes autocratic authority, national efficiency, and eugenicist thought, and appears grounded in Nietzschean thought,⁹ clearly associates it with an 'extremes of Englishness' ideology. Addressing British anxieties regarding political systems, industry and industrial relations, race and degeneration, the novel expresses a number of proto-fascist attitudes in its presentation of dictatorial rule as the only viable response to global catastrophe.

Anti-democratic political ideologies gained increasing popularity in the inter-war years, a fact reflected in the rise of fascism across Europe following World War I. In Germany, for example, the *Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei* (Nazi Party) was formed in 1920; in Yugoslavia the fascist movement became prominent in the early 1920s; Mussolini came to power in Italy in 1922; and in Spain Miguel Primo Rivera used a

⁶ Stone, *Breeding Superman*, pp. 2-3.

⁷ Stone, *Breeding Superman*, pp. 2-3.

⁸ Stone, *Breeding Superman*, pp. 2-3.

⁹ It draws upon the distorted Nietzschean ideas that were in the popular cultural consciousness in the first part of the twentieth century.

fascist model as dictator between 1923 and 1930. What is clear from this movement towards autocracy is that forceful, decisive leadership was considered an appealing alternative to what were increasingly perceived as ineffective modes of government. Richard Thurlow explains that many saw democracy as a 'fair weather system' not best suited to times of social or economic difficulty.¹⁰ There was an increased sense that democratic government pandered to the physically weakest and least intellectually adequate in society.¹¹ Both in Europe and in Britain fascism came to be increasingly regarded as a positive force that would allow for the creation of a new society following the experience of World War I.¹² Alistair Hamilton points out that many saw civilisation in a state of decline.¹³ In Britain, a growing number of thinkers, from the Edwardian radical right (the 'Diehard' Conservatives who were anti-liberal and authoritarian), to the post-war radical right-wing conservatives were echoing the anti-democratic sentiments emerging across Europe.¹⁴ By adopting a 'history of ideas' approach, Stone demonstrates that such disillusionment with democracy was evident in fascist impulses in Britain. These fascist impulses are readily observable in *Nordenholt's Million*.

The appeal of fascist ideas in Britain emerged in the context of post-war political instability and social unrest, and the economic crisis that would eventually lead to the Great Depression of the 1930s. Although living

¹⁰ Richard Thurlow, *Fascism in Britain: A History, 1918-1985* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1987), p. 25.

¹¹ Schapiro, Leonard, *Totalitarianism* (London: Pall Mall Press, 1972), p. 8.

¹² Thurlow, *Fascism in Britain*, p. 25.

¹³ Hamilton, Alastair, *The Appeal of Fascism: a Study of Intellectuals and Fascism, 1919-1945* (London and New York: Macmillan, 1971), p. xxii.

¹⁴ Thurlow, *Fascism in Britain*, p. 8.

conditions had been improving after the war, largely due to advances in technology, it was a period characterised by industrial discontent and economic decline arising from demobilisation and the return to a peacetime economy. Thurlow notes that 'the existing political system had been unable to check the sharp decline in British power in the late Victorian and Edwardian eras.'¹⁵ Malcolm Smith argues that this was compounded by the fact that World War I had dealt a blow to Britain, both economically and psychologically.¹⁶ He states that 'it may well be realistic to argue that many aspects of post-war life had their origins in pre-war conditions, but it would be difficult indeed to show that contemporaries felt these continuities to be more significant than what had changed.'¹⁷ World War I created a fundamental disjuncture in society – what Smith describes 'as a paradigm shift in culture.'¹⁸ In essence, following the war, the psychology of the nation had changed. Consequently, an intellectual recourse to extreme responses as means of resolving problems was not uncommon, making *Nordenholt's Million's* depiction of extreme measures to achieve wish fulfilment perhaps appealing to contemporary readers.

Nordenholt's Million is committed to a totalitarian ideology in its response to its socio-political context. It is, as Ruddick acknowledges, a compendium of post-war anxieties.¹⁹ It incorporates death on a grand scale, food rationing, devastation, and the outbreak of a 'new strain of flu'

¹⁵ Thurlow, *Fascism in Britain*, p. 8.

¹⁶ Malcolm Smith, 'The War and British Culture', in *The First World War in British History*, ed. by Stephen Constantine, Maurice W. Kirby and Mary B. Rose (London: E. Arnold, 1995), pp. 168-83 (p. 169).

¹⁷ Smith, 'The War and British Culture', p. 169.

¹⁸ Smith, 'The War and British Culture', p. 169.

¹⁹ Ruddick, *Ultimate Island*, p. 115.

(*NM*, p. 233), which clearly alludes to the 1918-20 flu pandemic. Most significant, however, is its overt criticism of democratic government, representing it as weak, self-serving and corrupt. This is perhaps reflective of the 'serious difficulties' both the liberals and Conservatives were in during the years preceding the war.²⁰ Indeed, between 1915 and 1922, Britain was governed by a coalition which, as Haywood observes of other contemporary European governments, were 'representing a coalition of interests or parties, [and] often appeared weak and unstable when confronted by economic or political crises. In this context the prospect of strong leadership brought about by personal rule cast a powerful appeal.'²¹ Furthermore, in Britain, W. D. Rubinstein explains, '[e]verything in 1918 thus favoured the right-wing in politics.'²² Nevertheless, the coalition won the 1918 election based on patriotic anti-German sentiments and the promise of reward for wartime loyalty.²³ Yet by 1919 industrial disputes proliferated and there was mass unemployment from 1920. While Lloyd George's coalition initially appeared strong, the PM was 'a prisoner of the Tories.' Having won election victory after the war, he would have to 'win the peace', but in terms set by the conservatives.²⁴ However, though the transition from Lloyd George's coalition government to Law's Conservative administration in 1922 should, according to Alan J. P. Taylor, have created a greater impression of stability, there remained a sense of

²⁰ Sykes, Alan, 'The Radical Right and the Crisis of Conservatism During the War', *Historical Journal*, 26:3 (1986), 661-76 (p. 661).

²¹ Andrew Haywood, *Political Ideologies: An Introduction* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), p. 223.

²² William D. Rubinstein, *Twentieth-Century Britain: A Political History* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), p. 103.

²³ Rubinstein, *Twentieth-century Britain*, pp. 103-04.

²⁴ Rubinstein, *Twentieth-century Britain*, p. 106.

turmoil.²⁵ The sense of leadership stifled, as a result of a coalition, followed by increasing economic instability despite successive governments, meant that the ideas of “totalitarian state” were not unattractive to those who felt themselves to be the victims of weak parliamentary rule, or of economic crisis sustained by the failures of liberal capitalism.’²⁶ Thus the sense of a weak parliamentary system reduced the appeal of democracy for many intellectuals in Britain and across Europe.

In *Nordenholt's Million* weak parliamentary systems are overthrown in favour of authoritarian rule. The novel’s criticism of democracy begins when Flint is called to a meeting with Nordenholt and the government about the impending catastrophe. The Prime Minister, looking ‘worn and agitated’ but endeavouring ‘to assume a cheerful and confident air’ (*NM*, p. 45), is revealed to be preoccupied with preserving and consolidating his political position, with ‘the idea of party advantage’ (*NM*, p. 45). Without expressing any sense of irony, or indeed reality, the PM states that ‘nothing could be more fatal than a general election’ (*NM*, p. 46). Conscious of growing unease as the blight spreads, he acknowledges that ‘something must be done to allay public anxiety’ (*NM*, p. 46), yet rather than acting decisively, he perceives the crisis as requiring a public relations exercise directed towards pacifying the population, misjudging the situation entirely. ‘I am not one of those who take these passing scares seriously,’ he explains, ‘but we cannot afford to ignore present

²⁵ Alan J. P. Taylor, *English History 1914-1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 147.

²⁶ Richard J. Overy, *The Interwar Crisis 1919-1939* (London and New York: Longman 2007), p. 69.

feeling.’ (*NM*, p. 46) Conscious of a need to placate ‘the working classes who are being agitated by the dismal forecasts of the newspapers’ (*NM*, p. 46), the PM proposes the implementation of seven ‘measures’. Tellingly, the first is the issuing of a reassuring statement to the press, ‘putting an end to this rising clamour for haste’ (*NM*, p. 48). The second is an instruction to the King to ‘issue a proclamation on the same lines’ (*NM*, p. 48). The remainder is divided between food management, rationing, and unemployment relief to offset public disturbances. Finally, an invitation will be extended to the scientific community not, as might be expected, to seek a solution to the blight, but to find ways of improving the yield of the subsequent harvest (*NM*, p. 49). At no point does the Prime Minister seem to comprehend the apocalyptic effects of denitrifying the soil. In effect, the strategy is reactive rather than proactive, with no priority given to addressing the cause of the growing catastrophe. Indeed, none of these measures can even be implemented quickly, since the cabinet is dispersed, with many members abroad and unable to return due to interruptions to the transport system.

Midway through the meeting, Flint admits that ‘[a]s this speech proceeded, I had become more and more uneasy. Through it all ran the governing thought that something must be done, which was true enough; but the thing which he proposed to do, it appeared to me, was to persuade the country that all was well, whereas I felt that the essential matter was to prepare against a practical calamity.’ (*NM*, p. 47) He disagrees with the PM, who asserts that, although ‘There is a cry for action...I think all of you

will agree that consideration is required.’ (NM, p. 46) This allies Flint with Nordenholt, who is represented as a man of decisive action and foresight, fulfilling – in fiction at least – what Hamilton describes as the 1920s’ ‘craving for decisiveness.’²⁷ When they first meet, Nordenholt has already secured food from America and embraced the calamity as an opportunity to take control of the situation in Britain.

In its distinction between governmental prevarication and individual action, the novel differentiates sharply between feigned and genuine authority. As Flint observes Nordenholt, he notes that ‘while the Premier counterfeited power in his appearance, this unknown [Nordenholt] embodied it.’ (NM, p. 50) Nordenholt has little time for the government’s plans:

‘This scheme of yours,’ he remarks, ‘if I am not mistaken, is a piece of window-dressing, pure and simple. You felt you had to make some show of energy; and to pacify the public you bring forward these proposals. The first two of them achieve nothing practical; and the remaining five concern steps which you propose to take at some future time, but which you have not yet considered fully.’ (NM, p. 52)

Nordenholt’s dynamism, greater intellect and determination overwhelm the PM, leaving Nordenholt in complete control of the country. Flint notes how Nordenholt

seated himself; and for the first time I realised what he had done. By sheer force of *personality* and a *clear mind*, he had *carried us along* with him and *secured our assent* to a scheme which, wildcat though it might appear, seemed the only possible way out of the crisis. He had constituted himself a kind of dictator, though without any of the trappings

²⁷ Hamilton, *The Appeal of Fascism*, p. 259

of the office; and *no one dared oppose him*. The *cold brutality* with which he had treated the politicians was apparently justified; for I now saw whither their procrastination would have led us. (*NM*, p. 65, emphasis added)

Described in a language that connotes Fascist ideas of leadership, Nordenholt is depicted as an un-opposable and necessary force. In this way, he constitutes an antidote to British politicians who had failed 'to create a society that had adequately compensated for the horror and trauma of the war [and who] produced a mood of frustrated anger which tainted the utopian cravings of many attracted to Fascism.'²⁸

Flint's description of Nordenholt emphasises the contrast between the man and the politicians. By implication his 'clear mind', 'force of personality' and justified 'cold brutality' are all qualities lacking in the government. Being representatives of a democratically elected party compels them to consider how the electorate may vote and pander to it. They dither, and this prevents them from undertaking decisive, effective and, what voters may perceive as, extreme action. In its positioning of Nordenholt as a saviour-figure, the novel acknowledges an increasingly popular contemporary conviction that strong leadership was necessary if the nation was to survive its post-war crises. Once Nordenholt has established his survivors in the Clyde Valley, the novel's dismissal of democracy becomes explicit: Nordenholt simply sends the majority of the politicians back to their constituencies where they will starve (*NM*, pp. 106-07). In addition to establishing Nordenholt as the 'only one ultimate authority' (*NM*, p. 107),

²⁸ Thurlow, *Fascism in Britain*, p. 25.

this action confirms that they have nothing useful to contribute to the survival of the English. Only those who have 'personal value' (*NM*, p. 107), in other words those who are suitably skilled and who will not challenge Nordenholt's authority, earn a place in the Nitrogen Area.

By sacrificing the majority of the (admittedly) doomed British population, Nordenholt ensures that the catastrophe becomes an opportunity for transfiguration; it is a means of establishing a new mode of governance and a new society. Indeed, when he declares himself dictator, it is clear he has a long-term vision that goes far beyond the crisis itself. In contrast to the self-serving politicians, Nordenholt works for the benefit, rather than the pacification, of the population. Furthermore, in taking forceful action he also assumes responsibility for the outcomes of that action. By accepting accountability, he has to bear the consequences of his decision to let the majority of the population die *and* fulfil his singular vision of a cure for the blight. He leads by example, demonstrating tenacity and strength of will. Such characterisation contributes to the novel's status as an 'extremes of Englishness' text and associates Connington's novel with the philosophic writings of Friedrich Nietzsche.

Richard Overy explains that the idea of a 'New Order' based on authoritarian rule and active, decisive government in which a dictatorship is better suited to representing a nation, was influenced by 'fashionable ideas of personality and charisma, derived from a misreading of

Nietzsche's idea of the 'superman' as a political phenomenon.'²⁹ As a man presented as an ideal leader, Nordenholt has much in common with this popular idea of the Nietzschean *Übermensch*. Fundamental to this, is the fact that in *Nordenholt's Million* clear distinctions are made between 'types' of people. There is a majority who are sacrificed to the blight; a minority who are saved and become workers in the Nitrogen Area; Nordenholt's 'gang' (whom he has recognised as the most talented of the population before the blight) and those, like Flint, recruited during the blight who share a similar position; and Nordenholt himself. While the distinctions established here foreshadow Hitler's reliance on his select group of 'black shirts', they can also be read in distinctly Nietzschean terms. As Richard Schacht explains, Nietzsche 'takes human beings to fall into one or other of two radically different and widely disparate groups, one very numerous and occupying "the human lowlands," and the other, "very small in number," constituting "a higher, brighter humanity" standing far "above" the rest.'³⁰ Essentially, although Nietzsche states in *Thus Spake Zarathustra* that 'mankind is a rope, tied between animal and Overman',³¹ indicating a spectrum of human development, he broadly distinguishes between 'higher' and 'lower' types of individuals³² in terms of their power and ability.

²⁹ Overy, *The Interwar Crisis*, p. 68.

³⁰ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, ed. and trans. by Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1968), 4:1053-67.

³¹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, ed. by Robert Pippin, trans. by Adrien Del Caro (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 1:4.

³² Schacht, *Nietzsche*, p. 381.

In *Nordenholt's Million* the creation of the Nitrogen Area facilitates the separation of the 'higher' and 'lower' types. While the workers have been subject to eugenically-intended selection – they are those deemed 'most fitted to survive' (*NM*, p. 61) out of the 'human lowlands', those who work directly for Nordenholt are distinguished by their exceptional abilities. They represent, in Nietzschean terms, 'higher' types 'in relation to the general run of mankind.'³³ Schacht notes that in Nietzsche's writings the *Übermensch* is the apotheosis of these 'higher' types.³⁴ While the *Übermensch* is only prophesied in Nietzsche's writings, he is realised in *Nordenholt's Million*, in Nordenholt himself. He is described as 'Jagannatha' (*NM*, p. 259) and a 'Titan' (*NM*, p. 199), worshipped by his 'gang' (*NM*, p. 237). Such descriptions establish him as 'above' the rest of the population. Furthermore, while Nordenholt's gang represent potentially 'higher' men who have the potential to develop into the *Übermensch*, Nordenholt is a fully realised 'higher man': an exceptional individual guided by his own will and mastery over himself.³⁵ As a result of his legacy, the novel concludes with the prospect of humanity progressing toward something analogous to the *Übermensch*, and the alternate possibility of human decline if Nordenholt's legacy is not preserved. As indicated in his founding of a Nietzschean-type aristocracy at the wish fulfilment

³³ See Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, ed. by Keith Ansell-Pearson, trans. by Carol Dieth (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006) *passim* and Schacht, *Nietzsche*, p. 340.

³⁴ Schacht, *Nietzsche*, p. 349.

³⁵ See Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, ed. by Rolf-Peter Hortsman and trans. by Judith Norman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 1:19 and Carol Dieth, *Historical Dictionary of Nietzscheanism* (Maryland, Toronto, Plymouth: Scarecrow Press, 2007), p. 128.

conclusion of the novel, he is an evolutionary step in the potential development of humanity towards an *Übermensch*-like condition.

The fully realised 'higher man', as Leiter suggests from his distillation of Nietzsche's writings, is identified by five characteristics. Firstly, 'the higher type is solitary and deals with others only instrumentally.' Secondly, '[he] seeks burdens and responsibilities, as he is driven towards the completion of a unifying project.' Thirdly, '[he] is essentially healthy and resilient.' Fourthly, '[he] affirms life, meaning that he is prepared to will the eternal return of his life.' Finally, '[he] has a distinctive bearing towards others and especially towards himself: he has self-reverence.' This suggests that being a 'higher type' is a matter of "attitude" or "bearing".³⁶ Nordenholt fulfils each of these characteristics. He is aloof, takes on the responsibility of dictator, and descriptions of his gravitas situate him above those around him as he shapes events and makes all significant decisions. He is a self-made man whose achievements are the result of his natural abilities. The fact he is an orphan emphasises that his status as a 'higher man' is his own achievement. This is significant for a Nietzschean reading of the text, as Nietzsche 'believes that true genius is innate, never acquired. [...] One is born superior, one does not become superior.'³⁷ According to this perspective, Haywood observes that 'those with the rare quality of leadership rise through struggle, above those only capable of following.'³⁸

³⁶ Brian Leiter, *Nietzsche on Morality* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), p. 116.

³⁷ Abir Taha, *Nietzsche, Prophet of Nazism: The Cult of the Superman* (Bloomington: Author House, 2005), pp. 80-81.

³⁸ Haywood, *Political Ideologies*, p. 222.

As the novel unfolds, Nordenholt's actions demonstrate his superiority and his capabilities as a leader.

Nordenholt's characterisation as the equivalent of Nietzsche's *Übermensch*, the apotheosis of the 'higher type' of man, ensures that he is a formidable dictator. As Flint remarks, while work progresses in the Nitrogen Area,

behind us, seated at the nucleus of that complex web of activities, there was Nordenholt...the presence of that cool intelligence behind us had a moral effect upon our minds. He never lessened our initiative, never showed any sign of vexation when things began to go wrong. He treated us as colleagues though we knew that he was our master. And under his examination, difficulties seemed to fade away in our hands. (*NM*, pp. 95-96)

In summary, the novel suggests that what the population requires is a guiding, driving force. Nordenholt constitutes that form of authority, acting as both architect and overseer. Without his dictatorship, the text suggests, there will be no effective action, survival or progress. Society is presented as something which can be driven and shaped; something to be managed and, at times of crisis, manipulated. In this way, *Nordenholt's Million* seemingly echoes Nietzsche's (and Rousseau's) assertion that the 'role of the leader is to awaken people to their destiny, to transform an inert mass into a powerful and irresistible force.'³⁹ Thus Nordenholt's role is to achieve a transfigurative vision in society within the text.

³⁹ Haywood, *Political Ideologies*, p. 223.

In his assumption of power, Nordenholt displays what Nietzsche identifies as a 'master morality' that is above the 'herd instinct' that characterises conventional morality. Central to this is his strength of will.⁴⁰ Reflecting on his childhood fear of falling from progressively higher jumps between obstacles, Nordenholt explains:

[A]t once there came upon my mind the conception of a breaking-strain. Up to a certain tension, my conscious mind worked perfectly but, beyond that, there was a complete collapse. Something had snapped under the strain. I may say that I finally accomplished the leap successfully; I simply wouldn't allow myself to be beaten by a thing I knew I could do. (*NM*, p. 72)

Here, Nordenholt's mastery of himself through his will echoes Nietzsche's conception of the 'freedom of will' in which 'a person who *wills* [...] commands something inside himself that obeys' and as such, is an exceptional individual.⁴¹ Consciously overcoming self-doubt and fear of injury Nordenholt becomes fascinated by the concept of an individual's 'breaking strain'. His 'philosophy of the breaking strain', developed through childhood introspection and mature observations in the law courts, enables him to gauge the commitment, tendencies and abilities of other men (*NM*, pp. 72-75). 'What did interest me,' he admits, 'was the psychology of the thing, the probing among the springs and levels of men's minds, and the workings out of all the complex strains and stresses which form the background of our reason and our emotions.' (*NM*, p. 76) Considering 'political affairs', he discovers his 'principle' allows him to

⁴⁰ Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, 1:19.

⁴¹ Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, 1:19.

assess 'the psychology of the masses even more easily than those of individuals.' (NM, p. 76) His economic, political and financial successes stem from his understanding of an individual's and a society's breaking strain: 'After all', he concludes, 'it's a case of handling men, there [in politics] as in everywhere else.' (NM, p. 78) Through Nordenholt's psychological understanding and manipulation the novel links the wish fulfilment achieved at its conclusion with the ability to instil, mould and develop 'wishes' and 'fantasies' in the people. Significantly, the novel appears to allude to the central importance of Nordenholt's manipulative skills in its title. 'Nordenholt's Million' refers not only to the dictator's recruiting slogan but to the 'first million' he makes by 'regulating the price of platinum' through gaining 'control of the Canadian mines' (NM, p. 76) and which signals his mastery of how to exploit the concept of 'breaking strain'.

One of the essential elements of the Nietzschean 'higher' man is the will to power. This is characterised by mastery over oneself, which also 'gives him mastery over circumstances, over nature,' and elevates him above 'all more short willed and unreliable creatures.'⁴² While Nietzsche's writings are largely existentialist, in *Nordenholt's Million* such will to power is used, in crisis at least, for mastery over others. Nordenholt's ability to recognise 'breaking strain' pertains not only to his mastery over himself, but also those around him. Accordingly, it is he that designates some 'human

⁴² Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, II:2.

beings as “higher” in relation to the general run of mankind.’⁴³ This distinction between rank, while based on Nietzschean classifications, is un-Nietzschean in terms of its delivery (via Nordenholt’s decision to let 45 million die (see *NM*, p. 61, Nordenholt estimates the population of Britain to be fifty million)). Indeed, Nordenholt’s position as manipulator and decision maker has much in common with the misinterpretation of Nietzsche’s work that would famously be associated with Nazism in World War II.

It is in his reshaping of economic, political and financial landscapes that Nordenholt displays ‘master morality’, which Nietzsche associates with the ‘higher man’. He, like ‘the noble type of man, regards *himself* as a determiner of values; he does not require to be approved of.’⁴⁴ Nordenholt’s intolerance of those he recognises as lazy or inadequate is essential to his capacity to drive the population according to his will – to achieve a wish fulfilment society – after the cataclysm. In his manipulation of others (he supplants captains of industry and enlists the loyalty of small investors) and his rejection of democracy, Nordenholt stands in opposition to Judeo-Christian morality, which is attributed by Nietzsche to the population in general and sustains ‘slave morality’. In slave morality:

Qualities that serve to alleviate existence for suffering people are pulled out and flooded with light; pity, the obliging, helpful hand, the warm heart, patience, industriousness, humility, and friendliness receive full honours here – since these are the most useful qualities and practically the only way of

⁴³ Schacht, *Nietzsche*, p. 340.

⁴⁴ Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, 9:260.

holding up under the pressure of existence. Slave morality is essentially a morality of utility. Here we have the point of origin for that famous opposition between 'good' and 'evil'.⁴⁵

According to Nietzsche, those living under 'slave morality' view the powerful with dread and assume them to be evil. Conversely, according to 'master morality', it is the 'good' man who arouses fear and seeks to do what is conventionally perceived as evil.⁴⁶ As Abir Taha confirms, Nietzschean philosophy was a 'revolt against the entire humanist tradition of the West: Judeo-Christianity.'⁴⁷ For Nietzsche, the 'slave morality' creates a 'herd animal' whose position is perpetuated not only by religion but also by the democratic movement, which he sees as 'the inheritance of the Christian movement.'⁴⁸ '[I]ts tempo,' he argues, 'is much too slow and sleepy for the impatient ones, for those who are sick and distracted by the herding-instinct'.⁴⁹

Aligning himself with a comparably Nietzschean view of democracy 'not only as a degenerating form of political organisation, but as equivalent to a degenerating, a waning, type of man, as involving his mediocritizing and deprecation',⁵⁰ Nordenholt champions the rebellion against a morality that promotes the 'herding instinct' by elevating himself and those who work directly under him above the 'herd'. Nietzsche contends that equality stifles the most capable – those who are potentially 'higher types'. Schacht summarises this perspective in Nietzsche's work, stating that he 'discerns

⁴⁵ Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, 9:260.

⁴⁶ Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, 9:260.

⁴⁷ Taha, *Nietzsche, Prophet of Nazism*, p. 68.

⁴⁸ Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, 5:202.

⁴⁹ Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, 5:202.

⁵⁰ Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, 5:203.

an order of rank amongst human beings' and 'acknowledges their different capabilities.'⁵¹ Hence, Nietzsche contends that for humankind to develop it is essential to 'maintain the order of rank in the world',⁵² and to even widen the differences between the strata.⁵³ Whereas 'higher types' are usually overcome by the mediocrity of the herd, Nordenholt facilitates their elevation. Both, prior to the blight (by sponsoring those he included in his 'gang') and during the catastrophe, his primary role involves cultivating 'the greatest possibilities among the few who have it in them to be exceptions to the rule.'⁵⁴ Thus 'higher types' can only be fostered when their 'separation from the herd is sufficiently great to establish a "pathos of distance", a "disdain for the concerns of the herd".'⁵⁵

Nietzsche argued that a morality that endorsed the herding instinct encouraged a false sense of universalism, tending to promote pity for the weak rather than respect for the strong. That is, it endorses the morality that praises mediocre men and says 'be like them! Become mediocre!'⁵⁶ For Nietzsche, the only hope for future progress comes from a will to power:

To teach man the future of humanity as his WILL, as depending on human will, and to make preparation for vast hazardous enterprises and collective attempt to put an end to the rightful rule of folly and chance which has hitherto gone by the name of 'history'.⁵⁷

⁵¹ Schacht, *Nietzsche*, p. 327.

⁵² Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, 7:219.

⁵³ Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, 7:219. Also see Schacht, *Nietzsche*, p. 327.

⁵⁴ Schacht, *Nietzsche*, p. 386.

⁵⁵ Schacht, *Nietzsche*, p. 338.

⁵⁶ Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, 9:262.

⁵⁷ Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, 5:203.

Nordenholt echoes Nietzsche when he remarks to Flint that 'There's [... [an] ...] element of risk at the back of all real enjoyment, to my mind.' (*NM*, p. 70) In other words, Nordenholt stands ready for the 'vast hazardous enterprises and collective attempt' that will ensure civilisation endures and evolves post-catastrophe according to Nordenholt's 'WILL'. Through Nordenholt, the cataclysm will not only be survived, it will be employed as a means of eradicating contemporary socio-cultural and political systems and of facilitating eugenic selection. Nordenholt's direction of the 'collective attempts in rearing and educating' results, as Flint reflects, in those 'children who throng [the streets of the newly built cities being] happier and more intelligent than their fathers in their day.' '[T]hey are also part of our work', Flint explains, 'taught and trained in the ideals that inspired us.' (*NM*, p. 198) Their education marks the end of the 'rule of folly and chance.'

In the future that Nordenholt is creating, there is no place for the 'mediocre' man. The union leaders Nordenholt identifies as unwelcome in the Clyde Valley (*NM*, p. 92), the religious zealot that distracts the population from work by offering them false hopes (*NM*, p. 258) and whom Nordenholt has killed, and the government officials who offer platitudes to gain popularity with the masses (*NM*, p. 51), are all identified with the 'slave morality' associated with the 'herding animal'. Their removal from the Nitrogen Area reflects the end of the perpetuation of the 'mediocre

man'. The removal of such individuals is essential to the way the book achieves its wish fulfilment transfiguration.

In *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, Nietzsche argues that the main lesson of history is that at exceptional times a man of destiny would use his will to rise above the herd of ordinary men.⁵⁸ Nordenholt is such a man, emerging at an exceptional time of crisis to found a dictatorship driven by a 'master morality', which is presented as essential to progress. As Clarke points out, in post-World War I Britain, the 'old faith in humanity had given way to a belief in the powers of an exceptional individual, a saviour far above the rest of the community in determination and intelligence, who is the only conciliate means of achieving the "ideal state".'⁵⁹ In its advocacy of dictatorship, the novel indicates that survival and cultural transformation can only be achieved through a drive towards a particular form of national efficiency untrammelled by conventional morality in the foundation of such a state.

Geoffrey Searle explains that the term 'National Efficiency' emerged at the beginning of the twentieth century as a response to 'Britain's military incompetence during the Boer War.'⁶⁰ In addition, it was, as Martin Pugh points out, a 'reaction to the perceived decline in industry and agriculture...' and 'the corresponding enfeeblement of Britain as a world

⁵⁸ Roger Eatwell, *Fascism: A History* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1995), p. 8.

⁵⁹ Ignatius F. Clarke, *The Pattern of Expectation, 1644-2001* (New York: Basic, 1979), p. 230.

⁶⁰ Geoffrey Russell Searle, *The Quest for National Efficiency: A Study in British Politics and Political Thought, 1899-1914* (London: Ashfield, 1990), p. 2.

power.’⁶¹ Equally, exponents of National Efficiency saw the nineteenth-century parliamentary system as one of the underlying causes of British decline. Democracy was seen to have ‘warped parliamentary politics by rendering it vulnerable to sectional pressures. Governments were run increasingly by amateurs adept at party warfare but incompetent in administration and the development of policy.’⁶² The extant political system was seen to hinder efficiency. Too much power was seen to reside with the Treasury rather than with specialists including doctors, engineers, and so forth.⁶³ ‘National Efficiency’ also referred to a strategy of reform that would ‘re-structure the “national life” and overhaul the machinery of government, to fit Britain more adequately for the Great Power rivalries of the twentieth century...a rough description of the direction reform would have to take if the country were to escape future disaster.’⁶⁴ As Searle acknowledges, the drive towards National Efficiency was not restricted to any particular political party, it ‘cut completely across the conventional distinctions between “left” and “right”, “liberals” and “conservatives”, and even socialists and capitalists.’⁶⁵

Writings expressing ‘extremes of Englishness’ were influenced, Stone argues, by the indigenous ideas of the National Efficiency movement and respond to fears of degeneration.⁶⁶ National Efficiency and eugenics

⁶¹ Martin Pugh, *The Making of Modern British Politics 1867-1945* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), pp. 99-100.

⁶² Martin Pugh, *'Hurrah for the Blackshirts!' Fascists and Fascism in Britain between the Wars* (London: Pimlico, 2006), p. 101.

⁶³ Pugh, *'Hurrah for the Blackshirts!'*, p. 101.

⁶⁴ Searle, *The Quest for National Efficiency*, p. 2.

⁶⁵ Searle, *The Quest for National Efficiency*, p. 2.

⁶⁶ Stone, *Breeding Superman*, p. 10 and p. 116.

were both popularly offered as solutions to this crisis.⁶⁷ In accordance with the movement, *Nordenholt's Million* not only rejects democracy but also emphasises the importance of reinvigorating industrial production, creating new housing, and rejecting the capitalist system extant before the blight. Freed from the capitalist concerns that compelled them to consider loss of profits over mass starvation (*NM*, p. 32), Nordenholt's survivors are able to concentrate on what is necessary for survival and rebuilding. The profit-incentive no longer distorts their perceptions or prevents action from being taken for the benefit of society.

Once the crisis has passed, industrial production is maintained in a rebuilding programme that ensures full employment. This emphasis on national efficiency contrasts directly with the situation in Britain at the time. Between the wars, Britain was defined by industrial decline. The economy had taken a downturn following a brief post-war boom,⁶⁸ unemployment was high at 17.8% in 1921,⁶⁹ production underwent a concomitant fall and wages were reduced.⁷⁰ Labour strikes meant that 85 million working days were lost in 1921 alone.⁷¹ These strikes had started in 1919 on the Clyde, where mass demonstrations were held in favour of a forty-hour week. In response, the government mobilised the military and civilian volunteers to break up demonstrations. This oppressive response to strikers is significant to *Nordenholt's Million*.

⁶⁷ Stone, *Breeding Superman*, pp. 6-7.

⁶⁸ Rubinstein, *Twentieth-century Britain*, pp. 109-10.

⁶⁹ Rubinstein, *Twentieth-century Britain*, p. 110.

⁷⁰ Taylor, *English History*, p. 145.

⁷¹ Taylor, *English History*, p. 163.

Implicitly critical of its context, in which post-war rebuilding was occurring only slowly (notably, the 'homes for heroes' project, which had created jobs and whose purpose was to alleviate the housing shortage, was discontinued in 1922⁷²), the novel justifies action against anyone who refuses to work. Nordenholt allows no unionisation in the Nitrogen Area, claiming he wants only 'real working men' not people who would 'try to hamper this work which is essential to the race.' (*NM*, p. 92) To achieve a suitable level of efficiency, Nordenholt manipulates his population. Through persuasion he encourages the inhabitants of the Nitrogen Area to condemn each other. He asks the workers:

Is it right that a man who will not strain himself in the common service should reap what he has not sown? Is it right that any man should batten upon the labour of you all while refusing to do his utmost? Will you permit wilful inefficiency to rob you and your children of their proper share of the means of safety? Or do you believe this community should rid itself of parasites? I leave myself entirely in your hands in the matter. I take no decision without your consent. (*NM*, p. 111)

Nordenholt's rhetoric is highly manipulative. It exploits slave morality ('is it right...?'), fear (of injury to the children), a sense of justice ('proper share'), the need for efficiency, and the vestiges of old democratic thinking ('I take no decision without your consent') to manoeuvre the population into policing their own behaviour. Behind rhetoric, Nordenholt's motives are clear: 'I shall deal with them – and I shall do it by the hand of their own fellows. They [those who are judged not to be working hard enough] won't

⁷² Taylor, *English History*, p. 147.

last long.’ (NM, p. 92) As Flint realises, ‘These workers he [Nordenholt] proposed to eliminate at a later period; but he wished to allow them to condemn themselves’ and be exposed by their fellows (NM, p. 107). By this strategy, Nordenholt quashes disputes over pay and ruthlessly enforces long working hours, with the population policing itself, ‘[c]hoosing his moment, Nordenholt announced that, in future, the factories would be run continuously, shift after shift, throughout the twenty-four hours.’ (NM, p. 113)

Nordenholt’s punishment of workers deemed unproductive and uncommitted parallels the actions taken against the Clyde valley strikers. The Defence of the Realm Act (DORA), in place from 1914-23, gave the state the right to ‘deport individuals from one part of the country to another merely on suspicion that they might act in a manner that was prejudicial to the public safety or the defence of the realm.’⁷³ DORA had been applied to David Kirkwood, one of the leaders of the Clyde Workers’ Committee, who was presumed instrumental in a number of strikes in the Clyde. He was awoken at three in the morning by the police and removed by train from the area.⁷⁴ Significantly, one of Nordenholt’s first actions when dealing with the crisis is to introduce a Bill through government ministers who are now his puppets ‘along the lines of the old Defence of the Realm Act’ (NM, p. 97). This allows action to be taken without parliamentary debate, here represented as an impediment to action. Once resident in the Clyde Valley, Nordenholt has his secret police remove by night those

⁷³ Taylor, *English History*, p. 164.

⁷⁴ Pugh, *Hurrah for the Blackshirts!*, p. 24.

exposed as not working hard enough in a manner strongly reminiscent of the eviction of David Kirkwood (*NM*, p. 112). Blame for their punishment is ascribed to the workers themselves, rather than Nordenholt's actions against them. Terror becomes a means of securing national efficiency. As Flint observes, 'For the first time, fear in more than one form had entered the Nitrogen Area.' (*NM*, p. 112) Nordenholt's strategy ensures that the Clyde Valley population has no sympathy for the condemned while, at the same time, exonerating Nordenholt himself: 'He had given no time for amendment [of the sentence]: condemnation had been followed by the execution of the sentence: and it was they [the workers] themselves who had pronounced the decree. They could not lay it upon his shoulders [...]. Had Nordenholt caused them to be shot, public sympathy would have been aroused.' (*NM*, p. 113) At no point, in its description of Nordenholt's tyrannical behaviour, does the novel hint at irony: his actions are presented as pragmatism and emphasise the necessity of terror in the control of population and the securing of the national efficiency key to the novel's wish fulfilment fantasy.

Flint, the narrator, justifies Nordenholt's actions, noting that he only ruled as a despot due to his 'ever-growing determination to bring his enterprise to success.' (*NM*, p. 259) Whilst Flint recognises that Nordenholt's determination may have resulted in 'a loss of perspective that made him ruthless', he also admits that '[I] cannot find it in me to blame him.' He notes that 'where a smaller man would have frittered away his energies in petty oppression or ruthless regulation, Nordenholt never lost sight of his

main objective', thus while his actions are 'drastic in the extreme', they arise as a result of 'the responsibility which he bore' (*NM*, p. 259) as a 'higher man' following his 'master morality'.

Nordenholt's banishment of the unskilled and the unwilling is a Social Darwinist strategy that continues the natural winnowing of the population already begun by the disaster and extended further by the virulent influenza that follows the blight. Early in the novel, Nordenholt remarks that it was nature that passed sentence on humanity (*NM*, p. 62) and, in this context, his own extreme responses both in forming the Clyde Valley community and his leadership of that community, are positioned as necessary responses to an extreme situation. He is, in effect, acting as an evolutionary selection pressure in his use of eugenics, firstly through his initial appeal for a million volunteers, then subsequently through the exiling of those he considers unfit for the new society he is intent on constructing. As Nordenholt tells Flint, 'we select from the 50 millions of our population those who we regard as most fitted to survive.' (*NM*, p. 61)

In the exploitation of the transfigurative nature of catastrophe, as a means to begin his eugenic selection, Nordenholt's position is once again aligned with that of Nietzsche. As Stone points out:

The issue of consciousness in selection was in fact the thing that Nietzsche believed differentiated his idea of evolution from Darwin's. Nietzsche thought that the ideas of 'natural selection' and the 'survival of the fittest' were too random to be relied on, if one was interested in human progress. For

otherwise 'the fittest' could easily be the herd, whose safety in numbers secures propagation.⁷⁵

Nordenholt discards the humanist values of 'slave morality' to consciously select those most fitted to secure 'human progress'. Taking this Nietzschean perspective to the extreme to achieve his 'ideal' transformed society, he rejects 'natural' selection in favour of conscious selection, of certainty over randomness, and in this way culls the herd.

So excessive are the perspectives of the novel, they anticipate Hitler's philosophizing in *Mein Kampf* (1925-26; trans. 1939).⁷⁶ Hitler notes that 'Nature herself tends to check the population in some countries and among some races, but in a manner that is quite ruthless and it is wise.'⁷⁷

Like Nordenholt, he recognises that:

Just as Nature concentrates its greatest attention, not on the maintenance of what already exists, but on the selective breeding of offspring in order to carry on the species, so in human life, it is less a matter of artificially improving the existing generation – which owing to human characteristics is impossible ninety-nine cases out of a hundred – and more a matter of securing from the very start a better road for future development.⁷⁸

Presented as both 'ruthless and wise', Nordenholt secures his 'better road for the future' by assuming – like Hitler – that the majority of the population

⁷⁵ Stone, *Breeding Superman*, p. 74.

⁷⁶ This is unsurprising given that, according to Martin Cohen, 'Hitler read Nietzsche avidly, seeing in the philosopher some sort of fellow spirit.' See Martin Cohen, *Political Philosophy: From Plato to Mao* (London: Pluto Press, 2001), p. 173.

⁷⁷ Adolf Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, trans. by James Murphy (London, New York, Melbourne: Hurst and Blackett Ltd., 1939), p. 113.

⁷⁸ Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, p. 35.

is incapable of improvement. In this way, the novel responds to anxieties regarding decadence and decline manifest in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and present in the work of writers as diverse as Nietzsche, Wells and those of the *fin de siècle*. As Stone points out, eugenics was a reactionary stance predicated on a fear of degeneration. He argues that both positive and negative eugenics rested on 'an analysis of society which saw it as somehow in decline and hence in need of rescue.'⁷⁹ In this context, Nordenholt is saving humanity not merely from the blight but also from racial weakening and corrosion.⁸⁰

Contemporaneous fears of degeneration are central to the novel's advocacy of population selection and the necessity for control of that population by 'higher men'. Importantly, the threat to human survival and development is not only external in the form of the blight, but also internal, arising from what the text presents as the nature of humanity. Faced with Flint's unreal optimism regarding the capabilities and tendencies of those relocated to the Nitrogen Area, Nordenholt sends him to London to understand human nature deprived of the veneer of civilisation (*NM*, p. 182). This insight is invaluable for developing Flint's recognition of the need for controlling the surviving population until it can be shaped into a less base people. Nordenholt tells him, 'I want you to see what it [human nature] amounts to when you take off the leash. Of course the brute is the basis' (*NM*, p. 149).

⁷⁹ Stone, *Breeding Superman*, p. 6.

⁸⁰ This idea would also be found in Hitler's *Mein Kampf* (*passim*, but especially pp. 38-62 and 222-58).

An entire chapter of *Nordenholt's Million* is dedicated to educating Flint by emphasizing the fragility of civilisation. Much more extreme than *The War of the Worlds'* presentation, the portrayal of London's population exposes the potential for degeneration in contemporary society. As Ruddick notes, this chapter – 'Nuit Blanche', or 'Long Night' – is a 'phantasmagoria of embodied anxieties',⁸¹ chief among which is the vision of humanity consumed in crisis by its baser instincts. 'Nuit Blanche' charts Flint's journey amongst a starving population turning to cannibalism, ritualism and barbarism and, as such, comments critically on human nature and the tenuous façade of civilisation. Flint's passage into the Thanatotic burning landscape of London highlights the horrors 'at the roots of humanity' (*NM*, p. 182) and draws attention to humanity's links to its animal ancestry. Flint laments that the 'trail of the brute's over everything' (*NM*, p. 182) and, on his return, Nordenholt emphasises that this must be taken into account as plans are made for the future development of civilisation.

During 'Nuit Blanche', Flint experiences a number of significant encounters in which the text identifies various sources of degeneracy associated with the dying pre-catastrophe society. A Jewish survivor, stereotypically obsessed with gold and trying to buy food with imagined riches, is dehumanised as a 'filthy object' who disgusts Flint (*NM*, p. 159). Later, Flint observes signs of a German 'colony', which has crucified a victim as a warning to others and which Glendyne, his guide and one of

⁸¹ Ruddick, *Ultimate Island*, p. 117.

Nordenholt's spies in London, sees as 'apt to contaminate...its neighbourhood' (*NM*, p. 170). Moving on, they happen upon a 'gigantic Negro acting as a priest in some Voodoo mysteries' (*NM*, p. 177) and come into conflict with Herne, a 'huge negro' and Lady Angela, an upper-class woman (*NM*, pp. 173-78). While Lady Angela is 'rotten to the core' (*NM*, p. 178), implying the gentry's degeneracy, the racism in the text is more visceral. Glendyne tells Flint of the 'foreign scum' (*NM*, p. 163) in the city and when they face Herne he has 'flecks of foam on his mouth' (*NM*, p. 173) in a manner that depicts him as primitive and animalistic.

Emphasizing bloodlust and brutality, the novel shows the pair leading a band of 'men and women', hunting 'like hounds' and killing humans for sport. Here, racial signifiers (Herne's blackness) are combined with class signifiers (Lady Angela's social status and the pursuit of human prey as if the band were on 'a fox-hunt' (*NM*, p. 173)) associates degeneration with the upper classes and the black race. Herne, named after the mythological huntsman of English folklore, emblematises the conflation of Englishness and Otherness found acting in concert to lead the hunt.

Together, they represent the baser human instincts. As Glendyne remarks:

You see, Flint, in these times the instincts which are normally under control have all broken loose upon us; and the hunting instinct is one of the very oldest we have. In ordinary times it comes out in fox-hunting and grouse-shooting or some mild form like that. But nowadays there is no restraint and the instinct can glut itself to the full. Man-hunting is the final touch of pleasure for these creatures.' (*NM*, p. 173)

Whilst ‘these creatures’ refers to both Herne and Lady Angela, the text is ambiguous about which, the upper-classes or the foreign races, it perceives as more depraved. After shooting Lady Angela and Herne, Glendyne observes that “‘the leaders are gone” – he kicked the Negro’s body – “and they were the worst. I’ll take this [Lady Angela’s silver hunting horn] as a souvenir, I think.” (NM, p. 180) The ambiguity surrounding the deictic ‘they’ leaves the reader uncertain whether it is the gentry or the foreign other that is receiving the greatest censure. Nevertheless, the fact that Glendyne kicks the Negro’s body whilst making his statement seems to imply that he is identifying race as ‘the worst’. Ironically, Glendyne seems unaware that his trophy taking also indicates base motives. As Flint reflects, ‘I wondered what it [the horn] would remind him of in later days.’ (NM, p. 180)

The cumulative effect of these encounters emphasises that the catastrophe has exposed the hidden natures of what were once civilised people. The collapse of law and the onset of mass starvation outside the Nitrogen Area creates unrepressed, animalistic individuals. As a result of his experiences of barbarity during his long night in London, Flint understands that ‘the old civilisation went its way, healthy on the surface, full of life and vigour [...] yet all the while, at the back of it there lurked in the odd corners the brutal instincts, darting into view at times for a moment and then returning into the darkness which was their home.’ (NM, p. 181) While these traits are associated with the entire population, just as they had been in *The War of the Worlds*’ subtler treatment of the same ideas,

here they are linked directly with foreigners and a decadent aristocracy. As Ruddick notes, London is populated by those who 'have been masquerading as civilised human beings: the Jew, the buck nigger, the barbaric Hun, the degenerate upper class nymphomaniac.'⁸² Ruddick takes this to suggest that, 'For Connington [...] the new urgency for survival in the moral ruins of the postwar necessitates a hunt for scapegoats, rather than a period of introspection that might locate and confront the source of the catastrophe within.'⁸³ However, it is in its introspection, its attempt to 'locate and confront the source of the catastrophe within', that *Nordenholt's Million* provides scapegoats in order to justify its eugenic agenda and achieve its wish fulfilment conclusion.

The implicit eugenic objective of Nordenholt's strategy is the elimination of those judged to be degenerate: the lazy, the weak, foreigners, and the upper class. However, as 'Nuit Blanche' makes clear, another form of selection is crucial to Nordenholt's plans: selection based upon efficiency is also fundamental. Eugenics is not associated solely with selecting the best people as progenitors of future generations; it also informs how different vocations are classified as worthy or unworthy. Elsa, Nordenholt's niece, who is oblivious to her uncle's eugenic operations, tells Flint that there are three types of men: the largest number are 'looking for what is called *a good time*', the second group 'want to make money', and the third is comprised of those who 'want to *do something*' (*NM*, p. 193). Through Nordenholt's selection process the Nitrogen Area is

⁸² Ruddick, *Ultimate Island*, p. 117.

⁸³ Ruddick, *Ultimate Island*, p. 117.

populated by the third type, distilled in stages by Nordenholt's actions. As a consequence, there is 'no idle class in the Nitrogen Area.' (NM, p. 183)

The vocations *Nordenholt's Million* presents as most valuable are practical, particularly relating to industry and science. In 'Nuit Blanche', the novel emphasises that vocation determines worth. While in London, Flint meets a chemist who, despite starving, is continuing his experiments (NM, p. 175). Flint understands the man's worth, recognizing him as someone who looks forward to possibilities, and he wishes to relocate him to the Nitrogen Area. This contrasts with Flint's experiences in the Reading Room of the British Museum where he sees people, likely scholars of history, literature and so forth, continuing to study despite the effects of the blight (NM, pp. 161-62). Flint finds nobility in their actions but does not perceive them as worthy of salvation. Their rejection by Flint, and their position in the museum, symbolise the fact that the past they study is now being decisively rejected by Nordenholt, who wants a 'clean slate' (NM, p. 195). Indeed, the sight of the scholars working in the museum reminds Flint of James Thompson's bleak poem, 'The City of Dreadful Night' (1870-73), which envisions London as a place of darkness and despair:

The City is of Night; perchance of Death
But certainly of Night; for never there
Can come the lucid morning's fragrant breath
After the dewy dawning's cold grey air;
The moon and stars may shine with scorn or pity

The sun has never visited that city,

For it dissolveth in the daylight fair.⁸⁴

Amidst the ruins of the post-catastrophe London, the museum forms a parallel with Thompson's deathly sepulchre:

Yet as in some necropolis you find
Perchance one mourner to a thousand dead,
So there: worn faces that look deaf and blind
Like tragic masks of stone. With weary tread,
Each wrapt in his own doom, they wander, wander,
Or sit foredone and desolately ponder
Through sleepless hours with heavy drooping head.⁸⁵

Flint's readers, like Thompson's mourners, sit 'foredone', desolately pondering the past, their faces 'bent in the study of a volume' (*NM*, p. 161), their backward-looking scholarship promising no hope of salvation or rebirth. Bringing them to the Nitrogen Area will only hamper future generations with their knowledge of old traditions (*NM*, p. 186), whereas returning the chemist to the Nitrogen Area will actively contribute to the development of new knowledge and technological progress – the foundations upon which the wish fulfilment society created at the novel's conclusion is built. In this way, the text emphasises that intellect alone is not sufficient to be worthy of a place in the Nitrogen Area and, by extension, form the basis of future civilisation after the blight.

With Glasgow University as the nucleus of the Nitrogen Area, the novel emphasises the central value of scientists, scientific experiment and

⁸⁴ James Thompson, *The City of Dreadful Night* (Montana: Kessinger Publishing, 2004), Part One, Lines 1-7.

⁸⁵ Thompson, *The City of Dreadful Night*, Part One, Lines 50-56.

scientific knowledge. Working at Glasgow, Stewart's (Connington) research into organic compounds led to the discovery of isobars (named by Stewart as 'isobares') and the development of a new field in emission spectroscopy.⁸⁶ Thus, the university – where all of Nordenholt's assembled scientists work on finding a cure for the blight – is the site of the rejection of any education system that limited capabilities and stifled creativity. As Elsa observes, 'It seems to me that our education in the past has been all wrong. It has never been education at all, in the proper sense of the term. It's been a case of putting things into minds instead of drawing out what the mind contains already.' (NM, p. 194) As such, the university becomes the engine of scientific and industrial advancement.

Hence, a distinction is made between useful academic pursuits like those of the scientists at the university and less practical academic activities like those undertaken by the people in the museum's reading room. This distinction draws attention to those the text deems 'worthy' of saving and is not only evident between the scholars, but also between the pro-active, practically minded Nordenholt and the paralyzed, self-absorbed government officials, and between the inattentive Wotherspoon and the dedicated Hanely-Davenport, who discovers the means of solving the Clyde Valley enclave's power requirements which enables the survivors to build a new civilisation. The contrast between Wotherspoon and Hanely-Davenport establishes a distinction between the derivative summarizing of

⁸⁶ Kunitz and Haycraft, *Twentieth Century Authors*, p. 347 and George B. Kauffman, 'Alias J. J. Connington: The Life and Work of Alfred W. Stewart (1880-1947), Chemist and Novelist', *Journal of Chemical Education*, 60 (1983), 38-39 (p. 38).

others' work and the development of original scholarship with practical applications. Wotherspoon's ostensible successes mask his essential worthlessness; he is a 'dabbler. He originated nothing, discovered nothing, improved nothing; and yet by some means, he had succeeded in imposing himself on the public mind.' (NM, p. 8) Conversely, Hanely-Davenport is characterised by a forward-looking desire to contribute to scientific progress. He becomes one in a succession of scientists who nobly sacrifice themselves in order to advance scientific understanding. In this way, *Nordenholt's Million* establishes a contrast between those members of society sufficiently skilled to be worth saving and those who must be cast aside to ensure the establishment of a new civilisation.

Although Nordenholt is not a scientist, his decisions and actions are predicated on scientific rationalism and he gathers scientists around him in order to facilitate his actions as saviour, and initiator, of the novel's overall wish fulfilment rebirth fantasy. Furthermore, the natural catastrophe is overcome by scientific innovation and the sacrifice of selfless scientists. As a consequence, I. F. Clarke reads the novel as the source of a particular 'variant on the disaster story', the 'salvation myth', which relates 'how a man of genius, usually a scientist, saves a remnant of humanity and lays the foundation for a better order of existence.'⁸⁷ The 'better order' offered by *Nordenholt's Million* is a 'departure' based society governed by a dictator whose policies are implemented by a scientific and industrial elite composed of the most committed and productive in society.

⁸⁷ Clarke, *The Pattern of Expectation*, p. 229.

In this respect the text is a departure from Nietzschean thinking. Where, for Nietzsche, great importance is placed on artistic creativity in relation to 'higher men', here, scientific discovery and efficiency are central to the creation of 'higher types'. Progress, the novel affirms, is secured by the elevation of the competent in order to shape an efficiency-based society. As Pugh notes, champions of National Efficiency complained of the decay of parliamentary systems and the incompetence of mature party politicians in tackling complex issues. They sought to reduce the role of parliament by replacing elected authorities with experts and successful entrepreneurs 'capable of promoting the national interest.'⁸⁸ This strategy is precisely that adopted by Nordenholt. The key quality of those he enlists into his elite 'was efficiency' (*NM*, p. 237), resulting in an aristocracy formed from the 'super-excellence of the human material in which he [Nordenholt] had dealt.' (*NM*, p. 236)

Rejecting democracy, *Nordenholt's Million* advocates autocracy as a means of establishing aristocratic authority. Taha explains that, for Nietzsche, 'no true human excellence, greatness, creativity, or nobility was possible except in aristocratic societies, whose members possessed – to a high degree – the will to dominate arising out of megalothymia, i.e. the desire to be recognised as better than others.'⁸⁹ The aristocratic society formed by Nordenholt in the Nitrogen Area is directed towards achieving such 'greatness' in industrious and logistical activities as 'divergent as the

⁸⁸ Pugh, *'Hurrah for the Blackshirts!'*, p. 15.

⁸⁹ Taha, *Nietzsche, Prophet of Nazism*, p. 76.

poles' whilst its members recognise Nordenholt as 'their master' (*NM*, p. 237).

For Nietzsche, the age of the *Übermensch* would be a radically autocratic, anti-democratic age.⁹⁰ Thus Nordenholt leads the way to autocracy. Elite rule is presented as natural and desirable – indeed, essential – in *Nordenholt's Million* and, following Nietzsche's perspective of 'nature's aristocratic principle of the inequality of man',⁹¹ the novel rejects the notion of equality as natural. Aristocracy represents, in Nietzschean terms, a belief in an elite humanity and a higher caste.⁹² Nordenholt's selection of his elite establishes a new aristocracy along Nietzschean lines. Indeed, Nordenholt's psychological understanding, his recognition of a man's 'breaking strain', is as much to do with the ability to recognise the 'greatness of personality and individuality'⁹³ of the 'higher man' in others as it is to do with his capacity for manipulation. It is his psychological understanding that informs his selection of his aristocracy.

The aristocracy created in *Nordenholt's Million* is symptomatic of the appeal of dictatorial leadership in the inter-war period.⁹⁴ Even Wells had depicted a similar ruling class in his work through his conception of the New Samurai – a world government established along rational and scientific principles. This idea was first introduced in *A Modern Utopia*

⁹⁰ Taha, *Nietzsche, Prophet of Nazism*, p. 74.

⁹¹ Taha, *Nietzsche, Prophet of Nazism*, p. 70 and Nietzsche, *Will to Power*, 2:382.

⁹² Nietzsche, *Will to Power*, 3:752.

⁹³ Taha, *Nietzsche, Prophet of Nazism*, p. 72.

⁹⁴ Clarke, *The Pattern of Expectation*, p. 230.

(1905), a response to Plato's *Republic* (c. 360 BCE). Society in the *Republic* is divided into Guardians (the ruling philosopher-kings), Auxiliaries (the military class), and the Producers (the masses). In *A Modern Utopia* Wells' utopian society is divided into the Poietic (the Samurai), the spiritual and creative ruling class (who are equivalent to Plato's Guardians); the Kinetic – the executive and administrative class; and the Base – the uncreative masses whose numbers are in steady decline as a result of restricted breeding and positive eugenics. Whereas Plato's Guardians are philosopher-kings, Wells' Samurai are a meritocracy based scientific (and later in works like *The Open Conspiracy* (1928) industrialist) force. Through the process of eugenics, Wells presents the notion that the Base will die out over time and eventually all people will belong to the Samurai.⁹⁵ For Wells, William Ross argues, the strong appeal of 'discipline and dedication' was confirmed between the wars. Ross, citing Wells' 1934 reflections on his utopian Samurai, observes that for Wells the "essential soundness" of the scheme [...] is borne out by "the appearance of such successful organisations as the Communist Party and the Italian Fascists."⁹⁶ Importantly, William Ross understands, however:

That a symmetry between his [Wells'] scheme of governance and that of right and left-wing totalitarianism suggests something other than benign "liberal" consequences simply never occurs to Wells. His focus is completely on the intended results, and the violence that may accompany reaching that goal is never considered.⁹⁷

⁹⁵ Krishan Kumar, *Utopia and Anti-Utopia* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), p. 218.

⁹⁶ William, T., Ross, *H.G. Wells's World Reborn: The Outline of History and its Companions* (Massachusetts: Rosemont, 2002), p. 108.

⁹⁷ Ross, *H.G. Wells' World Reborn*, p. 108.

Although the aristocracy of *Nordenholt's Million* has clear similarities to Wells' Samurai class, the novel, unlike *A Modern Utopia*, does not shy away from the violence and manipulation required in securing a new ideal society. In achieving complete rule, manipulation of the masses is effected through propaganda. Initially, Nordenholt stops public transport (*NM*, p. 138), spreads misinformation through rumour (*NM*, p. 139), then counters this with further misinformation that appears official (*NM*, p. 140). As such, he is able to raise, and then shatter, the hopes of the population in England in order to crush dissent. In this way, Nordenholt dissolves any potential solidarity within the masses. He renders the population fractured and frightened. This use of propaganda for the purposes of terror is presented as necessary rather than cruel. As Wagar explains, 'forty-five million men, women and children die. But it is far better to let them die, Nordenholt argues, than to prolong their lives for a short while and in the process lose mankind's last chance for survival.'⁹⁸

Once the Clyde Valley enclave is established, it must be preserved and this, too, is achieved through manipulation and control. Once the immediate danger is passed, the anti-democratic position of *Nordenholt's Million* is maintained; democracy is not restored. Nordenholt tells Flint that in the Nitrogen Area there is 'no gabble about democracy, no laws a man can't understand' (*NM*, p. 138). The post-catastrophe society at the conclusion of the text has a leadership succession based upon merit and efficiency rather than democratic nomination and election. As such, Flint,

⁹⁸ Wagar, *Terminal Visions*, p. 101.

with his formidable logistical and management abilities, becomes Nordenholt's successor. This resolution echoes the Nietzschean perspective that 'a society based on freedom and equality diminishes self-responsibility, autonomy and efficiency.'⁹⁹ Thus *Nordenholt's Million* establishes autocratic leadership as an essential means of progress. Nordenholt's oppression is not merely for the purpose of saving humanity from the blight, it is also for the purpose of saving humanity from itself. Although the ruling class, like Aristotle's Guardians or Wells' Samurai, adopts a protective role, they are more engaged with protecting the populace from its baser instincts than from the influence or predations of an outside other. In this way, the novel is in harmony with Nietzsche's concept of 'aristocratic radicalism', and answers what Taha sees as his 'call for the creation of a "new nobility", a community of god-like Supermen who would replace the out-dated traditional aristocracy'.¹⁰⁰ In Nietzsche's work this new, 'higher' rule would, ideally, replace the social structures based on the 'little herd animal virtues' of Christian morality.¹⁰¹

In *Nordenholt's Million*, a clear distinction is made between the new aristocracy and the general population. The Nietzschean aristocratic society is one that recognises the 'long ladder of rank order and value distinctions between men.'¹⁰² In Nietzsche's works both the 'herd' and the 'higher' types are necessary elements of society, but their separation is

⁹⁹ Stone, *Breeding Superman*, p. 135.

¹⁰⁰ Taha, *Nietzsche, Prophet of Nazism*, p. 77 and Nietzsche, *Will to Power*, 4:957.

¹⁰¹ Nietzsche, *Will to Power*, *passim* esp. 2:200 and 2:203.

¹⁰² Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, 9:257.

essential. If the 'higher' is sufficiently distanced from the 'herd', they may bring about the enhancement of life.¹⁰³ This Nietzschean aristocratic division is akin to the separation in *Nordenholt's Million*. According to Taha, for Nietzsche, 'the order of castes, the supreme, the dominating law is only the sanctioning of a natural order.'¹⁰⁴ *Nordenholt's Million* adopts a similar stance in presenting this hierarchical structure. The aristocracy resides in the new city of Asgard, named after the realm of the Norse Gods, where the elite design, control and create the cities of the future. The leaders and masses do not mix (*NM*, p. 286). Flint notes that 'Asgard is a city only for the few who can enjoy its beauties: the many have other cities more suited to their tastes.'¹⁰⁵ (*NM*, p. 286) What these 'tastes' are remains obscure, but suggests a less refined, less aesthetic psychology that prevents the masses from fully appreciating the idealised beauty of Asgard. Indeed, they 'have no wish to come hither [to Asgard].'¹⁰⁶ (*NM*, p. 286) The acceptance of this separation, and the concomitant distinguishing of taste, emphasises the notion of spiritual and aesthetic superiority amidst the elite and affirms the eugenicists' view of a natural pre-eminence expressed by a minority.¹⁰⁵ Aristocratic separation in *Nordenholt's Million* prevents association between those of the 'higher race' and those considered, according to the Nietzschean model, as members of the 'lower race'.¹⁰⁶ In eugenic terms, this prevents the diminishment of the 'higher race' through interclass breeding.

¹⁰³ Schacht, *Nietzsche*, p. 338.

¹⁰⁴ Taha, *Nietzsche, Prophet of Nazism*, p. 76.

¹⁰⁵ Stone, *Breeding Superman*, p. 37.

¹⁰⁶ Taha, *Nietzsche, Prophet of Nazism*, p. 98.

The management of the labouring classes by the elite is a multi-generational project:

Environment counts for so much; and all the adult minds in the community had been bred in the atmosphere of the past. Their influence would always be there to hamper us, bearing down upon the younger generations and cramping them in the old ideas. There could be no clear severance between present and future, only a gradual change of outlook through the years. (*NM*, pp. 185-86)

The elite's objective is to educate the children and adolescents of the current generation in new ways whilst keeping the extant working class busy until they die out, taking their 'old ideas' to the grave. This is crucial to how the book achieves its wish fulfilment. A key strategy in maintaining activity amongst the labouring class is the building of cities. These cities are the products of the scientific imagination of the aristocracy and the skill and sweat of the mass labouring class. (*NM*, p. 283) They are utopian in their descriptions, combining practicality and beauty. Their practicality is emphasised, for example, by their self-sufficiency and by the linking of all cities by single major roads. Beauty is foregrounded in the idyllic accounts of their environs. Flint refers to the 'faint and perfumed breezes bringing their subtropical warmth as they blow across the valley; and I hear, faint and afar, the sounds of music mingling with the rustling of trees.' (*NM*, p. 286) The suggestion of warmth, beauty and sweet-smelling air in these final descriptions is perhaps a further justification for the extremes of Englishness expressed in the text. The city of the interwar years, as Thomas Linehan reveals, was seen as a place of 'squalor, deprivation and disease, poisoned environments which brutalised the inhabitants,

destroyed their health and invariably imperilled the survival of the race.’¹⁰⁷

This was hardly the place implied by Lloyd George when he asked the electorate in 1918, “What is our task? [...] To make Britain a fit country for heroes to live in.”¹⁰⁸ By 1923, the year of the publication of *Nordenholt’s Million*, there was no sign that this Britain fit for heroes was going to be achieved. Thus it is revealing that after the blight, the survivors build cities afresh in a wish fulfilment fantasy of urban efficiency and hygiene.

The maintenance of efficiency is central to the future utopia. As Flint notes, ‘Asgard is a city of leisure, though not an idle one.’ (*NM*, p. 286)

This distinction between leisure and idleness is significant. In his autobiography, Stewart (Connington) reflected:

[D]uring the slump that followed the war of 1914-1918, we had the fantastic spectacle of part of the population toiling with might and main whilst the remainder of the workers lived miserably on the dole, since there was no employment available to them. If atomic energy is to do much for mankind, this sort of thing will have to be avoided; work will have to be shared out more evenly.¹⁰⁹

Stewart’s reflection echoes one of the underlying themes of *Nordenholt’s Million*: that industry can facilitate the creation of the ideal society, but an idle population would invite disaster (*NM*, p. 283). With the invention of atomic energy in the text, which provides ‘electric furnaces on scale undreamed of before’ (*NM*, p. 284), the new utopia risks the creation of an

¹⁰⁷ Thomas Linehan, *British Fascism, 1918-39: Parties, Ideology and Culture* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), p. 248.

¹⁰⁸ Martin Pugh, *We Danced All Night: A Social History of Britain Between the Wars* (London: Vintage, 2009), p. 60.

¹⁰⁹ Alfred Walter Stewart, *Alias J. J. Connington* (London: Hollis and Carter, 1947), p. 64.

idle population. Hence, the labouring class is committed to the building of the great cities. It is inaccurate to argue, as Everett Bleiler does, that 'Flint – and the author – do not consider social or economic reforms at all, but are fixated on architecture as the end of human betterment.'¹¹⁰ Bleiler overlooks the importance of the new aristocracy that is formed during the catastrophe and its role in directing the population to new levels of efficiency, forms of education and recreational pursuits, though the latter is rather vaguely defined in the text (*NM*, pp. 197-98). Through the total management of the working classes, *Nordenholt's Million* addresses Marcuse's later observation that 'left free to pursue their natural objectives, the basic instincts of man would be incompatible with a lasting association and preservation: they would destroy even where they unite. The uncontrolled Eros is just as fated as his deadly counterpart.'¹¹¹

In recognition of society's capacity to decline, the final pages of the novel are divided between a celebration of the survivors' achievements in the ten years following the disaster and a lament that human kind is still far from being a perfected species. A shadow haunts the utopian future. Flint reflects on the beauty of the cities that have been built: 'Splendours of which I never dreamed have come into being and lie before my eyes as I gaze. [...] Cities and gardens have I raised in Dreamland' (*NM*, p. 285) with 'pleasure grounds' (*NM*, p. 198), 'perfumed breezes' (*NM*, p. 286) and 'low hills set here and there with groves and fretted with silver waterfalls'

¹¹⁰ Everett F. Bleiler, *Science Fiction, The Early Years: A Full Description of More than 3000 Science Fiction Stories* (Kent OH: Kent State University Press, 1990), p. 152.

¹¹¹ Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization*, pp. 29-30.

(NM, p. 285). Such descriptions echo the idyllic environs of Coleridge's *Kubla Khan, or A Vision in a Dream* (1816), with its 'stately pleasure-dome' (2), 'many an incense-bearing tree' (9) and 'sunny spots of greenery' (11). However, like Coleridge's city, situated close by a tumultuous river that plunges into 'caverns measureless to man' (27) and from where echo 'Ancestral voices prophesying war' (30), the new utopia of *Nordenholt's Million* is a paradise under threat. Rather than the possibility of future war in the poem, it is the past – the 'ancestral voices' – that jeopardises the post-catastrophe civilisation. Hence, despite the progress made after the blight, Flint and Elsa's imagined city, the symbolically named Fata Morgana (a mirage seen above the horizon) is never realised. This indicates that, despite the advancements made since the catastrophe, humanity has not developed fully towards being the 'higher type' of human. Flint notes that only a 'pure race' (NM, p. 198) could occupy such a place, signalling that the eugenic mission born out of the disaster has not yet reached fruition. Flint laments that he will never see Fata Morgana in his lifetime (NM, p. 286) but understands that the cities of the future will surpass the ones already built (NM, p. 285). He reflects 'Other men will surpass me; new wonderlands will rise in the future' (NM, p. 285), pointing to a time when both humanity and their environment will have transcended present limitations. Thus, the novel concludes with a sense of an on-going utopian project to be completed by Flint's successors.

Any objections the implied reader may have regarding the dictatorial means by which the novel secures this promise are mitigated by its

framing of Nordenholt's actions as necessary and rational, and by its treatment of Elsa's opposition to Nordenholt's selection of five million survivors. In a key argument between Elsa and Flint, the emotional and logical implications of Nordenholt's actions are evaluated. Drawing on conventional gender binaries of the emotional, empathic female versus the logical, pragmatic male, the text dramatises their differing interpretations of events. While Elsa can only see starving millions and think of dying children (*NM*, pp. 220-23), Flint attempts to explain that allowing most of the population to die ensures some can be saved. Emphasizing Elsa's emotional response, Flint remarks that 'I had been guided purely by intellectual considerations [...]. On her side, emotion and not intellect had been her guiding star.' (*NM*, p. 230) This stereotypical gendering of opinions weakens the validity of Elsa's critical position. She is shown as illogical and emotional, unsuited to make what are presented as the necessary rational choices in a time of crisis. Thus, when she states that 'The men I thought most of in the world turn out to be nothing but murderers on a gigantic scale' (*NM*, p. 222), her perspective is shown as compromised by her emotionalism. She has overlooked the fact that in sacrificing so many Nordenholt has saved humanity. As Flint explains:

I tried hard to put our case before her. I explained the state of things at the outbreak of the Famine. I gave her figures to prove that Nordenholt had only worked to save what he could from the disaster. It was all of no avail. I think that the picture of the starving children filled her mind to the exclusion of almost everything else; and that she hardly listened to what I said. (*NM*, p. 223)

In this way, the text associates any opposition towards Nordenholt's actions with a naïve, illogical response rather than reasoned thought. Hence, Elsa's standpoint, whilst ostensibly appealing, actually serves to strengthen the more pragmatic position taken by Nordenholt and Flint.

Accordingly, informed by the post-war zeitgeist, *Nordenholt's Million* presents a 'departure' wish fulfilment fantasy that embraces the appeal of, and advocates, proto-fascist ideas while drawing upon contemporary eugenic perspectives on the improvement of the human species. Its imagining of a non-democratic, highly efficient utopia built upon both the personal sacrifice of the few and the sacrificing of the many is informed by a desire to overcome, and where necessary oppress, what it perceives as 'human nature'. Strong leadership is shown as necessary as the novel emphasises the benefits of dictatorial rule. Such a positive representation of dictatorship, even one apparently justified by catastrophe, could only have been written in a pre-World War II context.

Chapter Five

Back to Nature:

Sydney Fowler Wright's *Deluge* (1927) and *Dawn* (1929)

Although it finds radically different expression, the post-World War I disenchantment evident in *Nordenholt's Million* permeates Sydney Fowler Wright's disaster novel *Deluge* and its sequel *Dawn*. Both texts, which chart the same events from different perspectives, portray a post-deluge society that encompasses a number of wish fulfilment fantasies. They are 'departure' narratives, but unlike *Nordenholt's Million*, they advocate a complete rejection of modernity in favour of a re-assertive middle-class patriarchy controlling the land, the working classes, and the women. Industrialisation, technologisation, the displacement of bravery by comfort and cowardice, mass general education, bureaucratic legal and governmental systems, and the emancipation of women are the novels' *bêtes noires*. Fears of a deteriorating masculine authority inform the texts' negative representation of modern comforts and increasingly independent women, and underpin the narratives' transfigurative wish fulfilment depictions of a movement to a more primitive and patriarchal existence at their combined denouement.¹

The anxieties informing the critical position of *Deluge* and *Dawn* find expression throughout Fowler Wright's oeuvre. Recurring cultural concerns are articulated in both his fiction and non-fiction, and later works

¹ Sections of this chapter have published as 'Following the Flood: *Deluge*, Adaptation and the "Ideal" Woman', in *Science Fiction across Media: Adaptation/Novelisation*, ed. by Thomas Van Parys and Ian Hunter (Canterbury: Gylphi, 2013).

often develop themes found in earlier works. This is evident in the publication of *Dawn*, which restates more overtly many of the dissatisfactions and wish fulfilment elements of *Deluge*. Published relatively early in Fowler Wright's literary career, both *Deluge* and *Dawn* express a burgeoning ideology that develops throughout his subsequent writing.

Fowler Wright's career as a writer was diverse. His non-fiction is particularly illuminating as it illustrates a number of the primary preoccupations within his work. Articles such as 'Police and Public' (1929), 'Life Without Hazard' (1932) and 'Science – Destroyer of Life' (1933) express many of the ideas that underpin his fictional narratives in an undiluted form. Similarly, the titles of many of the articles Fowler Wright had planned, but did not publish due to financial difficulties, are revealing. 'The Problems of Motor Traffic', 'The Case Against Birth Control', 'The Ethics of Taxation' and 'The Votes of Women' all highlight areas of contemporary society about which Fowler Wright held strong views.² In most cases his fiction dramatises these concerns. For instance, a number of his detective novels, including *The King against Anne Bickerton* (1930) and *The Hanging of Constance Hillier* (1931), are fictionalisations of the criticisms of the legal system found in 'Police and Public'. His Biblically named, semi-autobiographical novel *Seven Thousand in Israel* (1931) draws its themes from the distinction implied in its title between those who are righteous (the seven thousand of 1 Kings 19:18) and the corrupt who

² See sfw.org for a full list of planned articles.

follow false gods. In this instance, it is not the Biblical Baal whom the corrupt worship but what Fowler Wright terms – throughout his oeuvre – the ‘new gods’ of comfort and cowardice. Again, the themes of the novel mirror those in ‘Police and Public’ and foreshadow many of the points reiterated in ‘Life Without Hazard’ one year later. Equally, much of his speculative fiction is constructed to address contemporary social ills. This can be seen in the collection of short stories *The New Gods Lead* (1932), in which each tale is a projection of the repercussions of following these ‘new gods’. This type of speculation was developed furthest in *The Adventure of Wyndham Smith* (1950) where the protagonist’s ego is transported, while asleep, to the latter part of the forty-fifth century. The futuristic setting illustrates the ultimate consequence of following the ‘new gods’ – life has lost all meaning and the human race has decided to commit collective suicide.

In keeping with Fowler Wright’s perspective on comfort and cowardice, *Deluge* and *Dawn* form a wish fulfilment fantasy in which cataclysmic events allow the population to overthrow these heavily criticised ‘new gods’. Whilst the majority of his later scientific romances focus on the destructive consequences of following a path of increasing industrial development, *Deluge* and *Dawn* portray a set of events in which contemporary progress is halted, and a new direction found through the transfigurative cataclysm.

In *Deluge* and *Dawn* most of the Earth's surface is submerged following a number of earthquakes and the novels are preoccupied with the intricacies of social restructuring in post-diluvian England, which has become a series of small islands. *Deluge*'s narrative follows the converging trajectories of Martin and Helen Webster and Claire Arlington. Immediately following the flood, Martin becomes separated from the injured Helen and his children, and presumes them dead. They have, however, survived the catastrophe and been rescued by Tom Aldworth, the leader of the largest 'gang' of survivors. In the meantime, having established a camp, Martin finds the body of Claire, whom the reader knows to have been trapped on another island with two men, one who claimed ownership of her and one who tried to rape her. To escape this situation Claire swims away to be discovered, exhausted, by Martin. However, once at Martin's camp, another gang leader, Bellamy, kidnaps her. Martin rescues her, they have sex, and become 'married'. Together, they fight Bellamy's gang, and unite with Tom's group. Martin assumes leadership of the remaining population and is reunited with Helen and his children. The characters agree that he should remain 'married' to Claire in addition to being a husband to Helen.

Dawn relates the same overall story as *Deluge* but follows Tom and the rival gangs' experiences more closely. The final half of the text develops the end of *Deluge* and describes the final eradication of rival groups under Martin's leadership. The novel adds little to the original text, but further dramatises the masculine, anti-modern fantasy prominent in *Deluge*.

Deluge and *Dawn* are distinctive in their overt scepticism about modernity.

Stableford summarises Fowler Wright's position:

The sickness of civilisation was symbolised for him by the motorcar, the idea of birth-control and the pursuit of comforts. The motor car stood for the march of science and the mechanisation of the human world, birth-control for an attitude of mind by which men set themselves in opposition to nature, and the pursuit of comforts for a smokescreen which blinded men to the futility of idleness.³

Given Fowler Wright's perspective, it is no surprise that in *Deluge* and *Dawn* the threat to human wellbeing is modern civilisation itself, rather than the flood. The titular 'deluge' is reflective not only of the literal inundation, but the figurative tidal wave of modernity and the rapid social and industrial changes that occurred during the Victorian and Edwardian periods. Thus the concurrently purgative and regenerative character of the flood in *Deluge* is clearly reminiscent of the Biblical flood narrative. As in the Old Testament myth, the 'corrupt' (or those who follow, in Fowler Wright's terms, the 'new gods') are washed away in order that society may begin afresh. However, the flood in *Deluge* is presented in entirely secular terms. The narrator uses scientific language to describe the Earth's geology and the movement of tectonic plates that cause the cataclysm. Indeed, told from the perspective of 'an observer from a distant planet', the novel's prologue is more Wellsian than Biblical,⁴ recalling the Martian

³ Brian Stableford, 'Foreword' to *S. Fowler Wright's Short Stories* (1996) <<http://www.sfw.org/bsforeword.html>> [accessed 14 July 2012].

⁴ Sydney Fowler Wright, *Deluge* (Middletown, CT: New York and London: Wesleyan University Press, 2003), p. 1. Future references will be given in the main text in the form *Del*, followed by the page number.

surveillance of Earth in *The War of the Worlds*. The fact that 'the whole [tectonic] movement would have appeared trivial' (*Del*, p. 1) to this observer emphasises that modern civilisation, for all its ostensible power, is vulnerable to environmental forces that could easily destroy human culture. This perspective rebuffs the early twentieth-century sense of what Russell identifies as the 'pride at man's superiority over nature.'⁵ Indeed, the earthquake that causes the deluge is described as 'the slightest tremor' (*Del*, p. 1). Rendering such vast destructive power diminutive accentuates further the fragile status of humankind. Hence, if, as Freud points out in *The Future of an Illusion*, the 'principle task of civilisation, in fact its *raison d'être*, is to defend us against nature',⁶ then in *Deluge* and *Dawn* it fails wholeheartedly, falling victim to nature's capricious force.

Despite their secularity, *Deluge* and *Dawn* echo the Biblical myth in that humankind is represented as corrupt before the flood.⁷ However, where in *Nordenholt's Million* the source of human corruption lies within the human psyche, here modern society is the cause. Accordingly, in the novels' transfiguration the structures responsible for that corruption are literally washed away and an opportunity for a new beginning is created.⁸ This transformation is marked by the fact that although the survivors of the deluge are not righteous in a Noachian sense,⁹ the new rulers of the post-catastrophe society are presented as having a high degree of integrity.

⁵ Russell, *The Religion of the Machine Age*, p. 184.

⁶ Freud, *Future of an Illusion*, p. 19.

⁷ Genesis 6:12.

⁸ Bernard. F. Batto, *Slaying the Dragon: Mythmaking in the Biblical Tradition* (Westminster: John Knox Press, 1992), pp. 68-69.

⁹ It is Noah and his family who find 'grace in the eyes of the Lord' (Genesis 6:8) and that is why they are saved from the flood.

Such a change reflects a wish fulfilment fantasy that, once freed from the mores of modernity, what the text sees as moral and physical degeneration would be overcome. The survivors are those individuals most physically able to survive the adverse conditions of the post-diluvian environment. As the narrator reflects, '[n]ature, holding an impartial scale, would not fail to secure that the men most fitted to the new conditions should become the fathers of the next generation, although an individual life might fall to the dice of chance' (*Del*, p. 168). In contrast to *Nordenholt's Million*, *Deluge* and *Dawn* see the 'chance' of natural selection as working for the overall benefit of human development. The validity of this Darwinist view is underscored through a combination of the survivors' ability to adapt to the natural environment and to triumph in the gang warfare that follows the inundation. Hence, while *Deluge* and *Dawn* connote the Biblical flood, their speculations are avowedly secular.

Despite Fowler Wright's Darwinist position, which recalls that of Wells, *Deluge* and *Dawn's* kinship with *The War of the Worlds* begins and ends in *Deluge's* introduction. Vera Brittain's review of *Deluge* for *Time and Tide* magazine in December 1927 highlights one of the major distinctions between the two novels:

[Wells] has always regarded humanity as barely emerging from a barbarism to which only a few great souls rise superior, while Mr Wright considers humankind over-civilised and forcefully expresses his objection to such human achievements as medical science, tarred roads, motor-bicycles, feminism and coal mines. He would have us all return to what he would doubtless call a Golden Age, but which Thomas Hobbes more graphically described a State of

Nature, in which the life of a man was 'solitary, poore, nasty, brutish and short.'¹⁰

Whereas *The War of the Worlds* presents technological advancement and the development of scientific knowledge as desirable, *Deluge* and *Dawn* depict them as significant contributors to contemporary human weakness, degeneration and the destruction of the natural landscape. Wells saw technology as having a potentially positive influence on human life. As Partington points out, Wells 'hoped to abolish lifelong labour altogether, assigning as much manual work to machines as was possible.'¹¹ Hence, for Wells, one of technology's greatest effects lay in its ability to aid humanity in attaining a more comfortable existence. In Fowler Wright's works, however, increasing comfort is one of the contributors to social and masculine degeneration. The differences in attitudes to technological and industrial progress are encapsulated in the novels' contrasting treatment of the steam train. Representative of modernity, the train is a prominent symbol in *The War of the Worlds*. The sturdy structures and regularity of the railway system create an impression of safety, unassailable permanence and strength. The disruption the narrator notes following the Martian attack is defined by the overthrow of such symbols of industrial progress. In this context, the destruction of the train symbolises the destruction of Victorian technological aspiration and achievement and is a source of terror and loss. By contrast, in *Deluge* and *Dawn* the train represents one element in the human devastation of the landscape. As

¹⁰ Vera Brittain, *Time and Tide* (9 December 1927), quoted in Brian Stableford's 'Introduction' to Sydney Fowler Wright, *Deluge*, pp. xi-lviii (p. xxix).

¹¹ Partington, *Building Cosmopolis*, p. 38.

Trevor Rawley notes, it was the transport revolution of the nineteenth century, of which the steam train was a major constituent, which aided in bringing about profound changes in the scale and complexion of urbanisation.¹² It is symbolically significant, therefore, that in *Deluge* and *Dawn* the storm causes the derailment of the train; it abolishes one source of urbanisation. In the post-deluge environment, the survivors tellingly show no desire to relight the train's boilers and elect to redeploy the carriages as static lodgings.

Deluge and *Dawn* show a Britain in which the industrial revolution and the 'iron hand of civilisation' have had a wholly negative impact on both the landscape and the population.¹³ This position was not new. Since the Luddites of the early nineteenth century, who organised themselves against the encroaching modern and urban economy and sought a return to a more rural and feudal life,¹⁴ there had existed antipathy towards industrialisation. Distaste for the urban landscape was expressed by numerous writers working in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries including William Morris (1834-96), Richard Jefferies (1848-87), E. Nesbit (1858-1924), E. M. Forster (1879-1970) and D. H. Lawrence (1885-1930). Amongst others, these writers recognised the 'desecration of

¹² Trevor Rowley, *The English Landscape in the Twentieth Century* (London: Hambledon Continuum, 2006), p. 123.

¹³ Sydney Fowler Wright, *Dawn* (London and Manchester: Withy Grove Press, 1929), p. 114. Future references will be given in the main text in the form *Dawn*, followed by the page number.

¹⁴ John Barry, *Environment and Social Theory* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999), p. 137.

the landscape by industry [...]’¹⁵ Literary reactions to the impact of the industrial revolution arose as a result of the emergence of what J. B. Priestley would, in 1934, describe as the ‘cynically devastated countryside, sooty dismal little towns [and] still sootier fortress-like cities.’¹⁶ This description reflects the fact that while, for some, the industrial revolution marked the welcome beginnings of modernity, others saw it as destructive, unhealthy and unsightly.¹⁷ Hence, the devastation of the urban environment in *Deluge* partakes of ‘the common anti-urban fantasy of the destruction of cities’ prevalent in literature at the time.¹⁸

Faced with such destruction, the narrator speculates on how nature might reclaim the industrialised, polluted landscape:

It remained to discover what would be brought to birth from the wrecks of such a civilisation, when the fallen girders of its erections had rusted, and the coal-smoke cleared, and the fresh sea-air blew over the recovered greenness of the fields that they had once polluted. (*Del*, p. 5)

This speculation about the landscape’s possible reversion to nature recalls Richard Jefferies’ earlier post-apocalyptic novel, *After London*. In Jefferies’ text a sudden, unspecified catastrophe has occurred, and industrialised Britain has been largely destroyed. The opening chapters are concerned

¹⁵ Marilyn Palmer, *Industry in the Landscape: 1700-1900* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), p. 185.

¹⁶ John Boynton Priestley, *English Journey* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1934), p. 317.

¹⁷ Bill Luckin, ‘Pollution in the City’, in *The Cambridge Urban History of Britain*, ed. by Martin Daunt (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), pp. 207-28 (pp. 207-08).

¹⁸ Lawrence Phillips, *The Swarming Streets: Twentieth Century Literary Representations of London* (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2004), p. 54.

with lengthy descriptions of how nature has reclaimed the land, and how towns have reverted back to wilderness. *Deluge*'s depictions of the changing landscape are not as extensive as those of Jefferies, but are clearly reminiscent of the back-to-nature tradition. The juxtaposition between 'coal-smoke' and 'fresh sea air' and green fields and rusted girders creates a sense that nature is cleansing itself of human pollution and industrial activity.

The characters' movement from life in a modern, industrial environment to survival in a wild, natural landscape, emphasises the order-versus-chaos binary implicit in *Deluge* and *Dawn*. Where industry represents homogeneity, mechanisation, urbanisation and order, nature is associated with freedom, unpredictability and disorder. The irregularity and changeability of the natural environment is, in both novels, an intrinsic part of its appeal and beauty – it is beauty derived from vitality.

The desire for order is criticised explicitly in 'Police and Public'. In this essay, Fowler Wright attacks Alexander Pope's 'Essay on Man' (1732-44), stating: 'Only an English poet could have written "Order is Heav'n's first law" and been admired for such nonsense. [...] He had no admiration for the affluent disorders of Nature: no conception of the inevitable consequences of growth and change.'¹⁹ He continues: '[d]isorder is the law of life, and growth, and change. Order is the law of death. There is no

¹⁹ Sydney Fowler Wright, *Police and Public* (1929)
<<http://www.sfw.org/books/police.html>> [Accessed 17 January 2013].

change in death.’²⁰ For Fowler Wright, therefore, order is analogous to stagnation, disorder to progress. These associations inform *Deluge* and *Dawn*’s narratives, as it is the unpredictability of nature that ultimately results in an optimistic, wish fulfilment-based transfiguration. In effect, *Deluge* and *Dawn* present a favoured return to the natural world of unpredictability and struggle.²¹

The anti-industrial and anti-technological sentiments of *Deluge* and *Dawn* find their ultimate expression in the discussions of motor travel. As Stableford points out, across Fowler Wright’s body of work the car is consistently presented as the manifestation of the combined negative results of industrialism and materialism.²² In his writings it is depicted as the product of laziness (*Seven Thousand in Israel*) and selfishness and materialism (*Justice* (1932)). For Fowler Wright, it is the embodiment of the noisy, polluting and harmful effects of technological advancement. Such a position is a response to the fact that, as Trevor Rowley notes,

the beginning of the twentieth century coincided with the start of the era of the motor car, and it is the internal-combustion engine more than anything that has created the contemporary landscape and fashioned our perception of that landscape. The growth of private car ownership and the personal mobility this enabled has created a largely car-orientated society.²³

²⁰ Fowler Wright, ‘Police and Public’.

²¹ Comparable perspectives on the ordered landscape as unnatural are also presented in Sydney Fowler Wright’s *The Adventure of Wyndham Smith* (<<http://www.sfw.org/books/wyndham.html>>, 1950), in which the landscape contains no natural elements and ‘Science – Destroyer of Life’, *The Daily Mirror* (<<http://www.sfw.org/books/sdol.html>>, 1933).

²² Stableford, ‘Foreword’.

²³ Trevor Rowley, *The English Landscape in the Twentieth Century* (London: Hambledon Continuum, 2006), pp. 2-3.

The 1920s witnessed a dramatic increase in the sale of new cars and *Deluge* and *Dawn* are almost certainly a response to this.²⁴ Described as a 'nuisance so murderous and so useless' (*Del*, p. 236), motor travel is excluded from both novels. Only one vehicle is used in the texts – a motorbike – and this is destroyed having been ridden once. Before mounting this 'lethal instrument' (*Del*, p. 236) the narrator comments on the psychological purpose of motor travel within contemporary life:

most of the riders of these vehicles were actuated simply by the desire to escape for a brief interval from the enforced monotony of the mechanical slavery in which they lived, and after rushing over the public roads would return abortively to the place from which they started. (*Del*, p. 236)

For the narrator, rather than symbolizing freedom, such vehicles provide a momentary distraction from the otherwise inescapable constraints of ordered, regulated, modern living. The narrator's contempt for motor vehicles is linked to this concern regarding increasing social regulation and, additionally, (middle-class) reification in the early twentieth century. At the time there was a growing recognition of the importance of leisure and recreation. This became linked with motor vehicles as more people employed them for leisure activities.

Bronislaw Szerszynski points out that the growing ownership of cars 'resulted in the rapid increase in the numbers of people visiting the

²⁴ Rowley, *The English Landscape*, p. 12.

countryside.’²⁵ In essence, the car allowed for a liberating sense of freedom outside of the working week. *Deluge* and *Dawn*’s condemnation of motorised transport forms part of the novels’ rejection of urbanised living and their refutation of the idea of the countryside as a place of relaxation and temporary escape. In the novels, nature is instead praised for its vivacity. It presents a challenge to the fittest and most capable, rather than offering a place of leisure to be tamed and prettified. Claire reinforces this position towards the end of *Deluge*: ‘She had dreamed of the solitudes and dangers of an empty world, of the weight of the wilderness. She would have endured these with Martin. *Endured?* They would have been a joy beyond words.’ (*Del*, p. 275) For the characters of *Deluge* and *Dawn* the wilderness presents an opportunity for a reinvigorated life, and the struggles attendant to survival are deemed more rewarding than the appreciation of the tamed landscape offered in early twentieth-century Britain.

Fowler Wright’s consistent criticism of modern transport reflects the fact that as Strange, Carnevali and Johnson point out:

motorists took the opportunity that their mode of transport offered to explore the countryside. Their interest in, and impact on, rural Britain became one of the most controversial cultural issues of the early twentieth century. It also became one of the central ironies of the spread of motoring. Motor transport was a primary tool of modernity and yet cars and motorcycles were the most useful instruments in middle-class attempts to explore the countryside and to recapture romanticised rural Britain [...]. Moreover, their very intrusion

²⁵ Bronislaw Szerszynski, *Nature, Technology, and the Sacred* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), p. 104.

ensured that the world they sought was despatched further and further into a mythical past.²⁶

Deluge and *Dawn* draw attention to this incompatibility between machine and rural Britain. They highlight the erosion of the rural landscape that accompanies increasing numbers of cars and indicate the dissatisfaction that ensues from an inability to recapture a sense of rural life.

Written at a time when the car was used increasingly for recreational purposes, *Deluge* represents motor vehicles as an ideological product of the mechanical age; they have an Althusserian function, offering temporary release from regulated daily life.²⁷ Fowler Wright's general antipathy towards mechanical transport and to a modern living tainted by industrialisation and mechanisation²⁸ is explicit at the conclusion of *Dawn*:

He [Martin] remembered that terrible bureaucratic slavery which the waters covered, when every man had been compelled to walk the same road at the same pace as his neighbours; when he could not take pleasure, of work, for his own gain, or his fellows' good, but at the licensed times; when he could not find a corner of England so remote that he could build a home to his own liking without the interference and restraint of others; when he could not teach his own child in his own way, but it must be raped from him to be patterned in the common mould. (*Dawn*, p. 255)

²⁶ Strange, Carnevali, and Johnson, *Twentieth Century Britain*, p. 212.

²⁷ See Louis Althusser, *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1998).

²⁸ The unfulfilling nature of modern work practices and the purportedly futile sense of escape that arises from breaks from such practices were also found in D. H. Lawrence's earlier work *Twilight in Italy* (1915). Lawrence associates working life with slavery and mechanical process. His reflections on capitalist existence show a similar recognition of the reified individual seeking temporary freedom, before returning to routine life. See especially, D. H. (David Herbert) Lawrence, *Twilight in Italy* (Teddington: Echo Library, 2006), p. 96.

Martin's conclusion marks a condemnation and a rejection of contemporary social strictures and the creation of a homogenous subjectivity. Associating the old world with conformity and restriction reinforces the idea that the post-deluge society is defined by freedom. With modernity vanquished by the flood, the survivors of *Deluge* and *Dawn* are released from this former 'mechanical' and 'bureaucratic slavery'. As Phillips reflects in *Dawn*:

We used to be held down till we couldn't move. I don't say we weren't held down comfortable, but there it was. We was held down hard, and if we ached to move – well, there was only one way, and there was some that took it. (*Dawn*, p. 156)

Phillips' implication that freedom in contemporary civilisation was only attainable through suicide is addressed in the characters' unanimous refusal to return to industrialisation and bureaucratisation. Hence, when the survivors do 'the best thing' (*Del*, p. 163) and push the remaining cars over a cliff, the act is a symbolic refutation of one of the most prominent symbols of twentieth-century life.²⁹ Such destruction marks the survivors' break from former social structures and is an expression of the text's wish fulfilment fantasy of returning to a non-technologised culture.

²⁹ Such views are also explicitly present in *The Adventure of Wyndham Smith*, 'Police and Public' and 'Science – Destroyer of Life'. Indeed, in the latter text the public's response to the car is compared to the possessed Gadarene swine in Matthew 8: 28-33; Mark 5: 1-21 and Luke 8: 26-40 who run down an embankment and drown in the lake. Like the descent of the swine, car journeys are depicted as futile travels, made by a possessed population, leading to annihilation.

Denying the benefits of motor travel, *Deluge* and *Dawn*'s consistent antithetical position towards the car is part of their anti-industrial and anti-technological project. This project is undertaken when the disaster eliminates urban modernity and encourages the survivors to embrace discomfort as a positive influence in their lives. Accordingly, the novels demonstrate a desire for cataclysm rather than a fear of it. Stableford points out that, for Fowler Wright, 'struggle and strife were necessary features of a healthy way of life',³⁰ an attitude that informs *Deluge* and *Dawn*. Characters are repeatedly depicted as fitter and healthier than before the flood despite the hardships they suffer. In contrast to the perceived unhealthiness of the pre-deluge population, all of the characters are shown to benefit physically and psychologically from the loss of the material comforts of their former lives. For instance, both Claire and Martin are described as 'younger and healthier' (*Del*, p. 22) after the flood. With each privation and conflict they endure, including sleeping rough and strenuous physical exertion, they are portrayed as having 'reached a point of bodily health which had been rarely known in the civilisation which had left them.' (*Del*, p. 138) Similarly, in *Dawn*, Muriel, who has a terminal illness, is much less fatigued after the deluge. Despite camping in a church and living primarily on Brazil nuts, her quality of life improves now that she is no longer ordered to rest by her doctors (*Dawn*, p. 6 and p. 59). When she dies at the end of the novel, it is significant that she does not succumb quietly to her disease but actively sacrifices herself for the community (*Dawn*, pp. 253-54).

³⁰ Brian Stableford, 'Against the New Gods: The Speculative Fiction of S. Fowler Wright', *Foundation*, 29 (1983), 10-52 (p. 18).

The pre-catastrophe population is depicted as too dependent on modernity and, as a result of this dependence:

They had used their boasted intelligences to evade the natural laws of their beings, and they were to reap the fruits of their folly. They had degraded their purblind and toothless bodies, until even those which were still reasonably sound in heart and lungs, in liver and kidneys, were incapable of sustained exertion without continual food, or of retaining warmth without the clumsy encumbrance of skins [...]. (*Del*, pp. 3-4)

Manifestly, the view that modernity has produced individuals who are ill-equipped for survival in the natural environment resounds throughout *Deluge*. Twentieth-century comforts, the novel suggests, have fostered laziness and physical frailty.³¹ Although the flood is inherently a chance occurrence, it is telling that it was upon the modern 'artificial environment that the storm spent its force' (*Del*, p. 3). There is a distinct opposition between the artificial and the natural environments evoked in the novel, implying that each, in turn, has destroyed the other – the artificial has destroyed the natural and the natural has reclaimed its dominance by destroying the artificial. In this way, the flood can be read as the triumph of nature over civilisation.

³¹ Similar concerns about the physical deterioration of the population and an overdependence on technology was also, famously explored by E. M. Forster in 'The Machine Stops' (1909). In 'The Machine Stops' children are 'destroyed' if they are too muscular, and people have become so lazy as a result of their reliance on the machine, that when a man drops a book he does not retrieve it when the floor does not rise and return it to him.

The concern about humanity's physical weakness in the face of the storm draws upon a number of contemporary cultural anxieties. The rapid expansion of urbanisation during the nineteenth century had led to widespread squalor and increasing fears regarding the health and fitness of the population.³² These fears manifested themselves, in part, in the perceived dichotomy between the sportsperson and the spectator, between the disproportionate lifestyle of the physically fit and the physical unhealthiness of the watching masses.

At this time, many sporting professionals had emerged as sport spectatorship increased in popularity.³³ This resulted in a:

moral concern that professionalization created narrowly specialised people who lived unbalanced lives [... reflecting] a widespread fear that the whole purpose of sport as a broadening, disciplining, improving activity was lost if it became a primary concern in life. This ethical concern was deepened by the fact that a sport like football could mean twenty-two players and five thousand spectators.³⁴

While sport spectatorship was rising, sport for recreation was in decline, despite an increased emphasis on improving fitness levels within society. This suggested a population whose general fitness was deteriorating: that the populace was enjoying sport, without actually undertaking any exercise. Thus, sport for recreation, previously seen as a means to social

³² John Gooch, *The Boer War* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), p. 206.

³³ Allison notes that between 1860-90 modern sporting institutions were created and this began the bureaucratisation of sporting arrangements (see Lincoln Allison, *The Politics of Sport* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1986), p. 10).

³⁴ Allison, *Politics of Sport*, p. 11.

and physical improvement, came to represent two extremes: the unhealthy spectator and the 'specialised [...] unbalanced' sporting professional.

In *Deluge* and *Dawn*, the sportsperson is shown to be the product of modern society. Thus, the spectator and the sportsperson are each represented negatively in both novels. While the population, with 'purblind and toothless bodies' can be read as expressing the characteristics of spectators – the product of the 'new god' of modern comforts – the sportsperson is presented as unskilled and cowardly. In the texts, physical fitness for the sporting professional comes from the safety of constructed competition rather than the jeopardy of survival in a wild and natural environment.

Deluge's representation of the professional sportsperson, Norwood, is telling. Before the flood, Norwood was a professional cricketer yet, despite his career, he is depicted as 'handsome in a rather weak and swaggering way' (*Del*, p. 45) and cowardly as well (*Del*, p. 59). He reflects the contemporary idea of the professional whose life is preoccupied with his sport. As such, he is described as being well educated, but having 'far less knowledge or capacity for overcoming the practical issues of life' (*Del*, p. 45), and when faced with hard work after the cataclysm is 'disposed to grumble at his incessant toil' (*Del*, p. 46). Similarly, Joe Harker, an ex-jockey, is depicted as corpulent and cunning. He, too, mirrors the perspective that the 'broadening, disciplining, improving' function of sport was lost if it became a primary concern in life. Thus within *Deluge* and

Dawn sport is not presented as the answer to what were perceived as Britain's declining levels of physical robustness. Indeed, the sporting professionals found in the texts are just as unsuited to post-deluge survival as much of the rest of the population.

Between the wars concerns about the physical fitness of the British population were not only tied to the growth in spectator sports. Anxieties regarding the health of the nation had escalated during the Boer War (1899-1902) when it was revealed that large numbers – sixty per cent – of soldiers were 'physically unfit for military service.'³⁵ Investigations after the war revealed a general lack of physical fitness in the population, a revelation that alarmed many who still held the Victorian idea that 'social progress was inevitable' and achievable, in part, through improvements in bodily strength.³⁶ Hence, following the Boer War the recognised physical deterioration of the (male) population was a source of unease (a fact evidenced in the literary responses of novels such as *The Poison Belt* and *Nordenholt's Million*). Pioneers like Robert Baden Powell, who had fought during the Boer War, formed the Scouts which, according to Nicholas Edsall, 'were the product of late nineteenth century anxieties about national competitiveness and national and racial degeneration and

³⁵ Michael Kane, *Modern Men: Mapping Masculinity in English and German Literature, 1880-1930* (London and New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 1999), p. 124 and Nicholas C. Edsall, *Toward Stonewall: Homosexuality and Society in the Modern Western World* (Virginia: University of Virginia Press, 2003), p. 161.

³⁶ Allison, *Politics of Sport*, p. 9 and Richard Titmuss, *Welfare and Wellbeing*, ed. by Pete Alcock, Howard Glennerster and Ann Oakley (Bristol: The Policy Press, 2001), p. 74.

decline.’³⁷ The Scout Movement sought to address some of the problems associated with the perceived physical deterioration of the population. Nevertheless, these concerns re-emerged sixteen years later when ‘the story repeats itself after World War One.’³⁸ Many commentators, including Fowler Wright, became increasingly anxious about ‘the softening of masculinity in the new world of urban consumption and luxury’, and the virtues of ‘the fighter’ became increasingly valued.³⁹ These ‘virtues’ are highlighted in *Deluge* and *Dawn* through the contrast between the descriptions of the unskilled, cowardly or cunning sportspeople and representations of brave, virile, masculine fighters, most notably Martin.

Kane notes that from the end of the nineteenth century and into the twentieth century the image of the soldier was associated with strength, virility, health and youth.⁴⁰ In the media, soldiers at war were not shown as dishevelled, dirty or unkempt; rather they were portrayed as ordered, clean and strong.⁴¹ Unlike the professional sportsperson, who highlighted the broadening gap between the physically fit and the relatively unhealthy masses, ‘the soldier came to represent an antidote for this crisis and the occupation of war was seen as the activity that would reinvigorate nations.’⁴² As a physically fit, brave and resourceful character, Martin is the epitome of the soldier with its attendant characteristics of renewed masculine power. He is both a fighter and a strong leader (see *Del*, p.

³⁷ Edsall, *Toward Stonewall*, p. 161.

³⁸ Titmuss, *Welfare and Wellbeing*, p. 75.

³⁹ Gerald N. Izenberg, *Modernism and Masculinity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), p. 9.

⁴⁰ Kane, *Modern Men*, p. 125.

⁴¹ Gooch, *The Boer War*, p. 206.

⁴² Gooch, *The Boer War*, p. 209.

166), reflecting the contemporary valorisation of the soldier in which positive representations of masculinity were closely tied to militarism.⁴³

Having never been on active service himself, Fowler Wright's representation of Martin in his warrior role draws upon the romanticised views of the soldier at war and presents them in a manner in keeping with the common perception that conflict would restore the health of the nation. As such, *Deluge* and *Dawn* revel in their depictions of battles fought between rival gangs of survivors and emphasise conflict as a means of ensuring the development of physical strength.⁴⁴ The texts seemingly draw upon the views of war veterans like Sir Garnet Wolseley who contributed to the notion that conflict was the solution to declining physical fitness and increasing decadence. In his 1904 biography, Wolseley wrote that war, 'with all of its horrors exercises a healthy influence on all classes of society [...]. [T]he drastic medicine of war can revive [the nation's] former manliness and restore the virility that had made its sons renowned.'⁴⁵ Wolseley's view was, as Gooch points out, echoed in advertising at the time, which portrayed a one-dimensional depiction of manliness, often through the image of the soldier.⁴⁶ Fowler Wright echoes these perspectives throughout his writing career. Although he

⁴³ Jeff Hearn, 'Men, Fathers and the State: National and Global Relations', in *Making Men into Fathers: Men, Masculinities and the Social Politics of Fatherhood*, ed. by Barbara Hobson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 245-73 (p. 257).

⁴⁴ Just as commentators often described war as the route to progress, through which strength over weaker powers could be demonstrated. See Kane, *Modern Men*, p. 124.

⁴⁵ Field Marshall Wolseley, 'The Story of a soldiers life' quoted in Gooch, *The Boer War*, p. 209.

⁴⁶ Gooch, *The Boer War*, p. 209.

labelled war for its own sake the 'supreme evil', he contended that when it was necessary war should be embraced as rewarding and fulfilling.⁴⁷ In his editorial for the Empire Poetry League he wrote that conflict 'may open the path of glorious living to the individual, precisely because of the pain, physical discomfort, disease and death which it offers and of the spiritual temptations which it brings.'⁴⁸ Here, the physical discomfort offered by war, like that provided by the dissolution of modernity, is presented as an opportunity for the reclamation of freedom and masculine fulfilment.

Deluge and *Dawn* imply that jeopardy and discomfort are necessary elements in individual physical and psychological satisfaction. The narrator reflects that, 'Of the joy of present living, of the captured meal and the barred door, of brief safety after hazard, of ecstatic rest after exhaustion, they [the pre-deluge population] knew nothing, either by imagination or experience.' (*Del*, p. 12) As a result people's 'intelligences were dulled by the conditions of their existence' (*Del*, p. 12). The relative safety of modern life created, for the narrator, an 'unending monotony' (*Del*, p. 12) akin to Sontag's 'unremitting banality'.⁴⁹ *Deluge* comments on how this dullness affects mental capacity. Its narrator states that 'people's perceptions were blinded by physical deficiency. They were incapable of clear thought or decisive action.' (*Del*, p. 4) By contrast, the struggles and hardships experienced by the characters – Claire, Muriel and Martin particularly –

⁴⁷ Sydney Fowler Wright, 'Editorial', *Empire Poetry League* (1928), quoted in J. E. Clare McFarlane, 'Empire Poetry League Speech: Sydney Fowler Wright – Founder of The Empire Poetry League', Institute of Jamaica Gold Medal Presentation Address (3 December 1958) <<http://www.sfw.org/books/eplfull.html>> [accessed 21 September 2010].

⁴⁸ McFarlane, 'Empire Poetry League Speech'.

⁴⁹ Sontag, 'Imagination', p. 130.

result in what the texts present as a combination of physical and psychological benefits. Unlike *The Adventure of Wyndham Smith*, wherein the human race commits collective suicide, *Dawn* has Phillips telling Martin that in the post-deluge world ‘there haven’t been any suicides... We’re not as safe as we were. But we’re not held down as we was. I think that’s what makes it more worthwhile to keep alive. It’s not so easy to do, but, somehow, it’s more worth doing.’ (*Dawn*, p. 156) Hence, it is the combination of a new sense of freedom and the necessary fight for survival that have made people more appreciative of, and engaged with, their existence.

The argument of the texts – that without strife, life is unfulfilling – can be related to Freud’s later discussion of Thanatos. In *Civilisation and its Discontents* Freud states that ‘primitive man was actually better off, because his drives were not restricted [...]. Civilised man has traded a portion of his chances of happiness for a certain measure of security.’⁵⁰ Whereas *The War of the Worlds*’ wish fulfilment derives from overcoming such ‘unfulfillment’ through the erosion of the drives, *Deluge* and *Dawn* undo the trade of happiness for security by offering a reversion to a more ‘primitive’ existence. They offer Thanatotic fulfilment through their representation of the recursive landscape, through fulfilling struggles, and through their embracing of post-catastrophe discomfort. The new freedoms found by the survivors are united with Erotic fulfilment at the conclusion of each text through the triumph of the main characters.

⁵⁰ Freud, *Civilisation and its Discontents*, p. 51.

The shift towards a more satisfying life is established from the outset of *Deluge* and is highlighted in Martin's reaction to the storm, which he finds exhilarating, a point which the narrator finds worthy of comment: '[T]he lives of most people of that time were so bare of unexpected incident, that any unusual physical occurrence, even of a threatening character, had an effect of pleasurable stimulus.' (*Del*, p. 11) The desire for exciting stimuli within the safety of pre-deluge life is contrasted with the more rewarding post-disaster existence. The greater levels of exertion required result in greater physical robustness and excitement. This scenario acts, by way of contrast, as a critique of contemporary culture.

Reflecting back on the pre-deluge society, the narrator notes that there was a necessity for creating an 'illusion of surrounding incidents' (*Del*, p. 12) to offer temporary stimulation for a lacklustre existence. This illusion is provided by, and perpetuated through, the popular press (*Del*, pp. 11-12), and the narrator asserts that it at once 'dulls the intellect' yet fulfils the population's craving for excitement. *Deluge* presents the press, therefore, as delivering substitutive satisfactions to overcome 'the intolerable monotony of their [the peoples'] days' (*Del*, pp. 11-12). As Freud notes in *Civilisation and its Discontents*, such substitutive satisfactions are necessary in civilised society which is unfulfilling to the psyche,⁵¹ in that it creates an environment of safe and comfortable banality.

⁵¹ Freud, *Civilisation and its Discontents*, p. 13.

Significantly – in terms of *Deluge* and *Dawn*'s wish fulfilment fantasy of human improvement through struggle – the perspective that a comfortable life is inhibiting is one that reflects Nietzsche's view of the 'last men' in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. Here, Nietzsche differentiates the people, who derive pride from education – as 'it distinguishes them from the goatherds' – from Zarathustra, who views such an attitude with contempt. Because of the people's perspective on education, for them the last man represents humanity's 'highest hope'.⁵² As a result of his achievements the last man is comfortable, moderate, unemotional and enjoys equality amongst his fellow last men (much like the implied future of human progress proposed in *The War of the Worlds*). This perspective has a great deal in common with the utopian writers, such as Bellamy, Morris and Wells,⁵³ whose works all favour the utopia of comforts. However, in Nietzsche's work the last man is characterised as inward looking and lacking in ambition. He and his companions engage in no effort or striving; they work only for entertainment, never encountering any danger having attained a level of knowledge that 'makes everything small.'⁵⁴ Zarathustra, therefore, describes the last man as that which 'is most contemptible.'⁵⁵

Although the last man's existence may sound appealing, Zarathustra warns that in reality it is unfulfilling. To him, the last man is 'the most despicable man [...] that is no longer able to despise himself.'⁵⁶ Emotional

⁵² Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 1:5.

⁵³ In works such as *Looking Backward* (1887), *News from Nowhere* (1890) and *The Shape of Things to Come* (1933) respectively.

⁵⁴ Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 1:5.

⁵⁵ Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 1:5.

⁵⁶ Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 1:5.

conflict is a necessary part of creativity, Zarathustra implies. He proclaims: 'I say unto you, one must still have chaos in oneself to be able to give birth to a dancing star.'⁵⁷ Without either physical or emotional discomfort, great achievements cannot be made. Nevertheless, the people in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* do not comprehend Zarathustra's message. Instead they cry, 'give us the last man'⁵⁸ since, for them, like the utopianists of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, he is the embodiment of all they strive for.

Like Zarathustra's confrontational message to the people, Fowler Wright's fiction opposes the trajectory of contemporaneous transfigurative disaster novels involving new societies based on greater levels of knowledge, safety, comfort and progress. His fiction generally presents the corollary of such desires as wholly negative.⁵⁹ *Deluge* and *Dawn* explore the joys of a life of peril. As such, they offer an alternative vision to other transfigurative disaster fiction and to the utopia of comforts. Indeed, in 'Life Without Hazard', Fowler Wright offers a warning against the utopia of comforts: 'But all recorded history shows that a civilisation has doomed itself when it prefers comfort to liberty. Life without hazard is valueless, and is quickly so condemned by those who have gained it.'⁶⁰ Reflecting this viewpoint, the survivors of *Deluge* and *Dawn* rediscover the fulfilment

⁵⁷ Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 1:5.

⁵⁸ Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 1:5.

⁵⁹ As the protagonist of *The Adventure of Wyndham Smith* reflects, 'he knew that he had a good life, and one to be guarded with care, even though it might have its pains, its perils, its frustrations and toils. The alternative of a time which had become so barren of pain and grief that men had come to an end of joy would have had little allure' (Fowler Wright, *The Adventure of Wyndham Smith*).

⁶⁰ Fowler Wright, Sydney, 'Life Without Hazard', *Morning Post* (6 December 1938) <<http://www.sfw.org/books/without.html>> [Accessed 17 January 2013].

that can be obtained through freedom from modernity and an existence that encompasses hazard. Unlike *Nordenholt's Million*, which concludes with an idyllic environment for the survivors, *Deluge* and *Dawn* show abundant pleasure deriving from a life of struggle.

Part of the novels' denunciation of modernity is a partisan critique of contemporary education systems, equality, law and emancipation. These systems are presented as disconnecting people from their so-called 'natural' roles within society. In this context, the narrator discusses education as a constructed system detrimental to individuals. In terms of their attitudes to education, *Deluge* and *Dawn* adopt a viewpoint reminiscent of Rousseau's philosophy in *Emile* (1672), in which a more 'moral' existence is one that is closely aligned to nature. Although Stableford associates Fowler Wright with Rousseau he does not develop their association meaningfully and thereby overlooks their comparable perspective on education.⁶¹ Maurice Cranston's introduction to *Emile* makes explicit where Fowler Wright would find kinship with Rousseau:

The emphasis on going back to nature in Rousseau's treatise on education, *Emile*, is the result of his belief that cultural environment, not natural inclination, breeds such harmful passions.⁶²

The belief that a non-socially constructed education is beneficial to individuals is central to the two writers' works. In *Emile*, ideal educational

⁶¹ Stableford, 'Introduction', p. xiii.

⁶² Maurice Cranston, 'Introduction' to *The Social Contract*, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, trans. by Maurice Cranston (Harmondsworth: Penguin 1968), pp. 9-47 (p. 33).

development is achieved outside of society and within the natural environment. For Rousseau, the greater the association between the individual and society, the greater the corrupting influence on the individual. In Rousseau's philosophy there are two types of self-esteem within each person: *amour de soi* and *amour propre*. *Amour de soi* is, Gerald Gutek explains, 'an intrinsic core of being [...] love of oneself [which] is a natural life affirming sentiment that inclines the person towards self preservation.'⁶³ *Amour propre*, however, is defined by pride and selfishness. It is, for Rousseau, created externally by society. As such, it opposes the humane values associated with *amour de soi* and results in individuals who 'seek to control, dominate and use others for their own social aggrandisement.'⁶⁴ It is through the 'natural' education outlined in *Emile* that Rousseau sought to foster *amour de soi*, resulting in a person 'unspoilt' by social conventions and artificialities.

In *Deluge* and *Dawn* immorality is derived, like Rousseau's *amour propre*, from the influence of contemporary society (*Del*, p. 130); the contrary life-affirming elements of *amour de soi* are similarly fostered through the natural environment. Thus the wish fulfilment conclusion to both novels involves a return to 'natural education' through total immersion in nature.

In their emphasis on *amour de soi* *Deluge* and *Dawn* highlight the necessity of inequality in education. This inequality is predicated on

⁶³ Gerald, L. Gutek, *Philosophical and Ideological Voices in Education* (Harlow: Pearson, 2004), p. 66.

⁶⁴ Gutek, *Philosophical and Ideological Voices*, p. 66.

discriminations between the classes. Since 1870 education had been compulsory in Britain for all children. The narrator of *Dawn* sees this as a flawed system that adheres to the 'folly' that all men are made equal (*Dawn*, p. 186). This perspective is also present in *Deluge*, where class inequality, perpetuated through a discriminatory education system, is presented as desirable through the character of Donovan, one of the working-class survivors:

[Donovan's] instincts were primitive, and he was incapable of thought without physical or emotional incentive. Under a training adapted to his mentality, and mated at an early age to one of his own kind, he might have led a harmless and decent existence as an agricultural labourer. Instead of that [...] he had been compelled to attend a school for several years, where the inevitable physical detriment of herding large numbers of young animals in one pen, be they children or chickens, had not been compensated by useful instruction. He had vacuously attempted to memorise the climate of Patagonia, but he had learnt nothing of the decent conduct of life.' (*Del*, p. 130)

Accordingly, *Deluge* argues that education is not only irrelevant and impractical for the working-class but it also encourages *amour propre* rather than *amour de soi*. In effect, it prevents them from pursuing more appropriate and fulfilling occupations from an early age. The suggestion that Donovan be 'mated at an early age to one of his own kind' exposes one of the fundamental prejudices permeating the novels: that the working class be treated as herd animals fundamentally different from other social groups. Indeed, the argument that breeding should be restricted to within class boundaries is a eugenic exercise intended to preserve intellectual distinctions between the classes.

The emphasis on purposeless academic learning rather than on 'training adapted to [...] mentality' is framed as unnecessary and destructive. The notion that Donovan might have led 'a harmless and decent existence as an agricultural labourer' had he not been forced into extended schooling illustrates mass education's corrupting influence. Implied in the narrator's discussion is the suggestion that the 'instructed' lower classes – undifferentiatedly unintelligent, primitive and practical – are both dangerous (menial labour could render them 'harmless and decent') and 'other'. They are presented in *Deluge*, in Kincaid's opinion, as indistinguishable from the criminal class; they are 'nasty, brutish and thick.'⁶⁵ Their sole value lies in their abilities as manual workers – as agricultural labourers, for example.

The failure of mass education is emphasised in the social restructure that emerges following the flood. The working class, 'unimproved' by pre-deluge access to education, remain incapable of performing anything but manual labour. Hence, the old class system is reasserted and ensured by the abandonment of universal education.

Further validation for this prejudice towards class and mental capacity is found in *Dawn* when Martin quotes British anthropologist Sir James George Frazer. Finding a copy of Frazer's *The Golden Bough* (1922), he notes how the text 'brought recollection of a stray sentence of their author

⁶⁵ Paul Kincaid, 'Review of *Deluge*', *Science Fiction Studies*, 95:32 (2005), 213-17 (p. 214).

– he could not recall exactly where it occurred – "No abstract doctrine is more false and mischievous than that of the natural equality of men".' (*Dawn*, p. 155) The quotation, originally from Frazer's *Man, God and Immorality: Thoughts on Human Progress* (1927) expresses Frazer's doctrine that inequality must be fostered for human progress. Like the narrator's depiction of the contemporary education system in *Deluge* and *Dawn*, Frazer asserts that society serves to 'reduce the natural inequalities to a false, superficial appearance of equality.'⁶⁶ Martin's thoughts parallel Frazer's view: 'The great error of the latest developments of Western civilisation had been its tendency to treat all men as alike and equal... that, at least, was an error which he could avoid without difficulty.' (*Dawn*, p. 155)

Whether Fowler Wright intended to give Martin's perspective greater authority by aligning it with Frazer's observations is open to question. Nevertheless, Frazer's ideas seem to inform *Dawn*'s thinking on ability and class (it should be noted that *Dawn* was published only two years after *Man, God and Immorality*). Martin's criticism that civilisation wrongly tends to 'treat all men [...] alike' acknowledges Frazer's observation that 'within the same nation, men of the same generation differ enormously in inborn capacity and worth.'⁶⁷ It is this perspective that Martin employs to validate his argument for the necessity of great leaders. Frazer states that 'on the whole the men of the keenest intelligence and strongest characters lead

⁶⁶ James Goerge Frazer, *The Golden Bough: A Study of Magic and Religion* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1996), p. 46.

⁶⁷ James Goerge Frazer, *Man, God and Immorality: Thoughts on Human Progress* (London and New York: Macmillan Press, 1927), p. 235.

the rest [...] the dull witted majority in the end follows a keener witted minority.’⁶⁸ The obvious parallels between Frazer’s position and the new society established in *Deluge* and *Dawn* politicise the masculine triumph in the texts. Apparently drawing upon the contemporary anthropology of Frazer, *Dawn* reinforces the view that the new social structure – culminating in Martin’s leadership – is a natural one. Such an opinion reflects the novels’ confidence in middle-class superiority.

In *Deluge* and *Dawn* the endorsement of inequality seems to be a clear nod to the popular conception of Nietzschean thought that had informed *Nordenholt’s Million*. The recognition of ‘natural difference’ and the confidence in middle-class capabilities find their most extreme expression in the promotion of Martin as autocratic leader. Stableford accounts for Martin’s leadership by noting that Fowler Wright saw:

the need for a community to draw up some kind of social contract which would either limit or contain foolishness, indolence and wickedness. In the final analysis he had no confidence that people would freely and willingly enter into and honour such a contract, and thus had to conclude that some element of force would always be necessary if the well-being of a community were to be preserved. Martin’s story is an account of his making this unhappy discovery.⁶⁹

Stableford’s comments provide a context for why the novel presents Martin’s development into an autocratic leader as necessary, though the unhappiness he observes is not evident in the text. Martin is entirely pragmatic and attaches little emotional significance to his actions.

⁶⁸ Frazer, *Man, God and Immorality*, p. 235.

⁶⁹ Stableford, ‘Against the New Gods’, p. 28.

Clearly, *Deluge* and *Dawn* offer one autocratic, patriarchal leader as a wish fulfilment alternative to contemporary political structures. When Martin assumes control of the survivors' community, he states:

If I alter your marriage laws, they must be altered. If I tax you half of what you have, you must pay without question. If I tell you to hang your best friend you must fetch the rope with good will. I may do none of these things, but it is a risk you take. You must either trust or not trust me. I will be captain or nothing [...]. I will have no committees, no voting, no wasted hours of talk. No follies of compromise. (*Del*, p. 218)

The fact that the remaining population agrees readily to Martin's terms conveys their readiness to abandon pre-deluge systems. The survivors desire strong, decisive leadership. Such a radical stance is more than the product of Martin's recognition that 'some kind of social contract' would be needed to 'either limit or contain foolishness, indolence and wickedness', that 'some element of force would always be necessary.' Martin's position as ruler represents the rejection of democratic politics. Although executed very differently, *Deluge* and *Dawn*, like *Nordenholt's Million*, promote the establishment of one elevated dictator who can shape the structure and ideology of the newly formed society.

Although not as extreme as *Nordenholt's Million* in their fantasy of effective authoritarian rule, the novels' promotion of autocratic leadership can be understood in relation to contemporary politics. Following the end of the World War I a relatively rapid succession of British governments had been

in place. The Coalition government which had been in power since 1915 was defeated in 1922 under accusations of corruption; the Conservative government that followed was felt by many to be inadequate for dealing with the problems of post-war Britain; and the Labour party, in power briefly in 1924, was forced out due to accusations of associations with Soviets, resulting in the reinstatement of a Conservative administration. Written after such political upheaval, *Deluge* and *Dawn* express the desire for, and attraction of, one decisive leader who brings stability.

The novels' validation of this autocratic rule underscores their negative view of artificial bureaucratic political and legal systems. Indeed, Martin's leadership offers an alternative to contemporary systems of both rule *and* law in favour of a simplified justice system. Rule and law are inextricably related in the novels. The survivors recognise the 'need of leadership' but do not want laws that 'burden' or 'restrain' them (*Dawn*, p. 197).

Accordingly, Martin's leadership is one that replaces both democratic government and pre-deluge legalism. In response to his group wanting 'law – but not lawyers', he, an ex-lawyer himself (*Del*, p. 217), implements a new justice system based upon judging individuals according to their motivations rather than their actions.

Martin is, in effect, the answer to the survivors' hopes for the future. As Tom explains:

'We want someone can say what's needed, and get the whole thing straight. [...] We want laws we can understand;

and not too many. We want things done. We want to be told what needs doing most. If we quarrel, we want someone to whom we can go to decide it. We don't want to tell one man, who tells another, who takes it to another, where we all lie our best, and then find out that the one who decides has never understood it properly [...]. You know what the laws used to be, and you can't think we want that again.' (*Del*, p. 216)

What Martin proposes in response is an uncomplicated set of rules the survivors can follow, with punishment based on motive. This system enforces 'ideals of justice', which derive, Rosalind Brooke notes, from 'natural law theories' in which 'a distinction must [...] be made between laws actually in force, along with the methods and consequence of their implementation, and ideals of justice. Law is that which is in force in any particular country, while notions of justice will transcend those laws.'⁷⁰ Brooke's distinction draws attention to law as a national construct. It is one of the artificial structures of modernity that *Deluge* and *Dawn* seek to overturn. In 'Police and Public' Fowler Wright takes the distinction between law and justice one step further, stating that 'English courts are not concerned with the administration of justice, but of laws [which] are designed by and for the benefit of controlling bureaucracies.'⁷¹ Here he presents the legal system as a corrupt and serving those in power. Through the removal of the 'controlling bureaucracies' of political and legal systems *Deluge* and *Dawn* offer 'natural leadership' arising from the superiority of some individuals, and a system of accountability that focuses on justice.

⁷⁰ Rosalind Brooke, *Law, Justice and Social Policy* (London and New York: Routledge, 1979), p. 18.

⁷¹ Fowler Wright, 'Police and Public'.

The origins of Martin's ideas of justice and the unjust nature of contemporary legal systems are illustrated in his pre-deluge defence of Tom Aldworth. Tom's trial is framed within a broader critique of the increased comforts and consequent banality of life before the catastrophe. This environment, *Deluge* and *Dawn* suggest, drove people to indulge in desperate attempts to seek excitement. Tom is an example of this. As he reflects:

He [Martin] saved my life once. I was caught, and tried for murder. I'd done it, right enough. I told him that. I didn't see I was much wrong. It was Dick Winter who started it. He asked me to join him for a lark in a burglary at a house near where we lived. Of course, I said 'Yes'. I'd have said 'Yes' to anything. Life was so dull then. (*Del*, p. 163)

Identifying criminality as a consequence of banality, Martin recognises that Tom is 'worth saving' (*Del*, p. 157). Tom's actions are attributed to his social context: a combination of boredom and the influence of others. As such, his misadventure is represented as the honest mistake 'of a young man whose love of adventure had led him into trouble.' (*Dawn*, p. 49) That is, his negative actions are the product of positive motivation. It was a frustrated manifestation of his desire for adventure, something that the post-catastrophe environment would address, that led him to kill a man.

Tom's release is secured through the complexity of the legal system. Although Tom speculates that 'they [the judge and jury] all thought I was guilty' (*Del*, p. 164), Martin is successful in defending him due to a lack of

evidence. Thus Tom's trial provides a dual criticism: of the stifling homogeneity of life in pre-cataclysmic society and the bureaucratic legal system that can be manipulated by clever lawyers. In effect, Martin exploits the legal system to obtain a verdict that delivers an 'ideal of justice'.

Importantly, and in keeping with the novels' anti-modern ideology, both authority and justice are located firmly within a thoroughly patriarchal system. While this patriarchy is enforced through Martin's leadership, it is also shown to be something desired by most of the remaining population. In this way, *Deluge* and *Dawn* express the consistent misogyny found in Fowler Wright's work. This attitude is manifest in the backlash against female emancipation in both novels, which are likely to be a response to contemporary fears of declining masculine authority and the rise of the New Woman.

During the first half of the twentieth century, there were a number of debates regarding the nature and efficacy of masculinity. There was growing fear that as the influence of women increased, men would be gradually feminised.⁷² The New Woman was seen as a challenge to patriarchy and commentators since the late nineteenth century had been noting their concern about apparent changes in masculinity.⁷³ As early as 1888, the editor of *The Spectator*, Meredith Townsend, noted 'whether for

⁷² Raewyn W. Connell, *Masculinities* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2005), p. 195.

⁷³ Angela V. John, and Claire Eustance, *The Men's share?* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), p. 54.

good or evil, a great change is passing over Englishmen. They have become uncertain of themselves [...]. They doubt if they have any longer any mortal right to rule anyone, themselves almost included.’⁷⁴

Townsend’s comments suggest a decline in masculine confidence at the turn of the century that was exacerbated by the Boer War when there was widespread anxiety about degeneracy and the physical deterioration of the population.⁷⁵ At the same time, calls for increased female emancipation seemed to threaten the masculine position further.⁷⁶ In addition, changing female roles during World War I compounded this sense of threat. As a result, there was a strong reaction against the women’s movement.⁷⁷ *Deluge* and *Dawn*, written by a man who had grown to maturity against this background of anxiety and changing gender roles, advocate patriarchal constructions of gender as natural.

In both novels women are treated critically, from the ‘parasitic affection of Victorian women [to] the barren selfishness of their descendants.’ (*Del*, p. 97) Such criticism is directed in *Dawn* at the character of Doll, who represents the New Woman of early twentieth-century Britain. Doll’s depiction reflects the ‘feeling that masculine control over women, formerly taken for granted, was now being weakened.’⁷⁸ Her narrative is an indicator of the loss of masculine control and its reassertion through female punishment.

⁷⁴ Quoted in John and Eustance, *The Men’s Share?* p. 55.

⁷⁵ Izenberg, *Modernism and Masculinity*, p. 10 and Gooch, *The Boer War*, p. 206.

⁷⁶ Indeed, in 1918 the vote was granted to home-owning women over thirty and in 1928 it was granted to all women over twenty-one, the same as their male peers.

⁷⁷ Bernard Porter, *The Absent-Minded Imperialists* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 284.

⁷⁸ Gooch, *The Boer War*, p. 207.

Doll uses her appearance to manipulate the men around her, undermining their authority, making them submit to her will. She is described as 'attractive' and,

evidently well content both with herself and the world. She wore no hat, and showed a head of black and glossy curls, lightly restrained by a green ribbon. Her dress, though not innocent of crease and stain, was very brightly coloured. Slim, extended legs were silk-stockinged, and her shoes (however acquired) were neat and new. (*Dawn*, p. 186)

Confident and aware of her physical appeal, Doll uses her sexual awareness to achieve power over men. She is unwilling to retract her sexual autonomy and independence after the flood and, as such, is presented as a *femme fatale* – 'not a young woman to be safely left to her own devices' (*Dawn*, p. 113). When the narrator describes Doll's effect on the men around her, he presents her negatively, distinguishing her from the remaining female survivors. Her new shoes and stockinged legs are impractical for the rigors of post-deluge life and serve to highlight not only her preoccupation with her appearance, but also hints at indolence – she is clearly not concerned with the practical requirements of survival.

Reflecting broader fears of moral degeneracy, the novel shows how Doll uses her attractiveness to manipulate male characters into providing for her every whim:

Whatever her life might have been in the old factory days of hard work and unhealthy living, now, with abundant food,

and idle life in the sea air and the sunshine, she was like a dangerous cat. She had the power to madden men with her sleek ways and her lazy laughter. She had captured Will [...]. [H]e had waited on her like a dog, and she had lazed and lacked nothing. (*Dawn*, p. 97)

By being 'captured' by Doll and by waiting on her 'like a dog', Will is emasculated and loses the re-masculinisation that being a survivor should have afforded him. Doll's dangerousness, her 'power to madden men', and her laziness reflect a misogyny that is likely to derive, in part, as a response to the changing positions of young women in the 1910s and 1920s. Fashions had changed and had become more provocative and women enjoyed broader social activities.⁷⁹ The greater level of freedom afforded to women is depicted in *Deluge* and *Dawn* as having dangerous consequences. The modern woman, as signified by Doll, is represented as shallow and manipulative. As such, she is described by another character as 'worthless baggage. Probably didn't know how to boil an egg.' (*Dawn*, p. 89) Her domestic inadequacy highlights her detachment from the traditionally defined female space of the home. Doll's rejection of both domestic and maternal roles means that, although sexually alluring, she defies conventional, patriarchally defined, femininity. As an emancipated woman she refuses to submit to patriarchal control, a situation that her post-deluge husband, Will, attempts to rectify:

He had got a good grip of her before she guessed his purpose, but, when she did, there was a moment of furious struggling, with screams of protest. 'Will, you brute! I'll tell Tom Aldworth!'

⁷⁹ See Birgitte Soland, *Becoming Modern* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), pp. 24-31, p. 75 and p. 145.

The invocation was unfortunate.

'Tom told me to do it. He said, "Do it well, if you don't want it to end in murder.'" His voice, though somewhat breathless, was almost apologetic, but he had got her well over his knees, and the stick was descending.

Martin did not move. He was not at all sure that there would be wisdom in interference. In the end he might be thanked by neither.

The woman was now screaming abuse and protest, mingled with shrill cries as the strokes caught her.

But he only held her down the harder and pulled her farther over, to operate on the back of the stockinged legs. (*Dawn*, p. 186)

Here Will brutally reasserts his masculine authority over his wife through the use of the phallicised stick. A masculine contract between Doll's husband, Tom, and Martin is implied here that reflects a commitment to putting women back into their patriarchally defined roles.⁸⁰ Where women cannot be coerced into accepting patriarchal submission with equanimity, male violence is advocated as a means of control. The beating itself has sadistic psychosexual overtones, as the description of Doll's stockings adds a sexually gratifying quality to the assault. More significant, though, is that the reference to Doll's stockinged legs draws attention to the connection between her punishment and her attire. Doll is beaten because her mode of dress announces her transgression of the patriarchal requirements of the post-diluvian world. She is, in effect, being beaten into submission. Martin's opinion that he 'might be thanked by neither' if he were to interfere in the beating implies the perceived necessity of such actions and the notion that once control over Doll had been asserted she

⁸⁰ See Jack Holland, *A Brief History of Misogyny: The World's Oldest Prejudice* (London: Robinson, 2006), pp. 167-222.

would recognise the correctness of the punishment she received and accept her subservient position.

In their fantasy of a resurgent patriarchy, *Deluge* and *Dawn* align themselves with attempts to reassert patriarchal control and 'defend traditional masculinity' occurring at the turn of the century. In the early 1900s, male commentators had attempted to 'reduce femininity to nothing but [its reproductive] role and its attendant requirements.'⁸¹ Doll's desire to remain childless defies this position, reflecting, instead, the fact that by the 1920s fewer women were having children.⁸² *Deluge* and *Dawn* are explicitly critical of this. In *Dawn* the narrator comments that it was Doll's 'creed to take all and to give nothing. "No kids for me," she had told Muriel, yawning as she spoke, and looking at her with mocking eyes...' (*Dawn*, p. 98) Doll chooses the deliberate barrenness of which both novels are highly critical. It is portrayed as a selfish act, inconsiderate to men (*Del*, p. 9). Indeed, childless women are compared with car owners in Fowler Wright's fiction and are treated with equal contempt. *Deluge*, for example, opens with Martin and Helen entertaining a childless guest who insists that she cannot afford to have children because there is a car to be bought (*Del*, p. 9). Her affiliation with technology serves to highlight her selfishness. Like Doll, she has allowed materialism to overtake what the novel presents as her natural role as a woman.

⁸¹ Izenberg, *Modernism and Masculinity*, p. 111.

⁸² See Soland, *Becoming Modern*, pp. 24-31.

When it is revealed in *Dawn* that Doll is pregnant by her lover, Steve, she attempts to have the pregnancy terminated. Both Doll and the unsubtly named Dr Butcher who performs the procedure are punished by death. Butcher is banished by Martin and later killed by Steve. The banishment is presented as Martin's one act of weakness in the novel, as a decision to execute Butcher would have served as a warning to the other surviving women who did not want children. Muriel tells Martin that "It would have done good if you had had Dr Butcher hanged. They won't think much of him being sent away. It will look weak..." Martin said, "I knew I was wrong about Butcher, it was just cowardice." (*Dawn*, p. 208) The novel suggests that Martin's moment of weakness will hinder control over the female survivors, an eventuality that is avoided through Steve's actions. In killing Butcher, Steve achieves a level of patriarchal authority he had been unable to achieve with Doll. In effect, by killing the last surviving doctor he prevents any of the remaining women from acting like Doll. Hence, when Butcher's body is found, the women receive their warning.

In contrast to Doll, Helen and the initially independent Claire each represent ideal women from a patriarchal perspective. Although they differ significantly from one another their characterisation is defined by their relationship to Martin and demonstrates that women secretly desire enforced subordination to patriarchal authority. Unlike Doll, who represents the increasingly emancipated woman of the early twentieth century, Helen is portrayed as the traditional Victorian 'angel of the house', she is 'a nurturant wife [and] mother [...] constructed through the scopic

gaze of the male.’⁸³ Beautiful, refined and confined to the private sphere, she spends the novel caring for her children almost untouched by the post-flood social upheaval. Helen’s passive position within the private space is reinforced throughout the text. It is made explicit when Martin contemplates her possible reaction to Claire, his new ‘wife’:

He was sure that it would make no division between them. He had once said to her when a business necessity was taking him away for a month or two: "I don't believe you'd mind if I found someone else to console me while I'm away." She had smiled her answer [...] "Not if you wanted to." "But," he had added, "you'd want to know all about it when I came back." "Why, of course," she had answered. That was obvious. She was of the temperament that finds it almost as pleasurable to watch life as to share it. (*Del*, p. 210)

Helen’s characterisation as a woman content with her domestic role, subservient, understanding of her husband’s infidelities and happy to share in his reflections on past sexual experiences, clearly marks her as an idealised patriarchal construct. The novel asserts that her greatest satisfaction and sense of self derive from her family, an idea central to patriarchal ideology. Clare Burton notes that the idea of the family as the arena for personal fulfilment contributes to women’s subordination under patriarchy.⁸⁴ Helen is a fantasy figure created to contrast with the contemporary ‘modern woman’ who threatened traditional definitions of

⁸³ Sarah Gamble, ed., *The Routledge Companion to Feminism and Postfeminism* (London and New York: Routledge, 2001), p. 306.

⁸⁴ Clare Burton, *Subordination: Feminism and Social Theory* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1989), p. 41.

gender roles. She is part of, and re-enforces, the anti-feminist backlash that occurred early in the twentieth century.⁸⁵

Helen stands in contrast to women like Doll and is defined by motherly love. Although this is clear from the opening of the novel, Fowler Wright makes the distinction explicit when she finds a boat and saves her children during the flood:

Pillowed on her breasts, the children that she had saved slept peacefully. Born of a race of women that had learned to esteem their children as less than their pleasures, who would even pay to have them murdered in their own bodies, she had redeemed her own soul [...] and whether she were dead or living was a little thing. (*Del*, p. 37)

In this way, the novel equates Helen with what Shirley Foster notes was the Victorian idea that motherhood was 'the apotheosis of womanly fulfilment.'⁸⁶ Although *Deluge* was published in 1927, the old-fashioned idealisation of motherhood still endured. In fact, as Harriett Gilbert and Christine Roche point out, when women gained more sexual freedom in the early twentieth century, their independence was 'hijacked by the establishment' which propagated the idea that the greatest fulfilment a woman could achieve was to have children.⁸⁷ This view was compounded by the fact that, as Lucy Delap highlights, many men and women of the

⁸⁵ See Izenberg, *Modernism and Masculinity*, pp. 1-21.

⁸⁶ Shirley Foster, *Victorian Women's Fiction: Marriage, Freedom, and the Individual* (London and New York: Taylor & Francis, 1985), p. 15.

⁸⁷ Harriett Gilbert and Christine Roche, *A Woman's History of Sex* (London and New York: Routledge, 1987), p. 163.

time 'thoroughly disliked the values of Edwardian femininity.'⁸⁸ They deemed the New Woman as not only failing to adhere to traditional concepts of femininity, but also as threatening to men.⁸⁹ Complicit in her own subordination, Helen is a counterpoint to female emancipation. As someone who does not desire freedom or equality, she represents the contemporary patriarchal fantasy of returning women to a non-threatening, subjected state.

Fowler Wright's fiction implies that women are secretly unhappy with their emancipation; they are the victims of weak masculinity and desire re-submission to patriarchal authority. The misogynistic assumption that women desire to be dominated, and even mistreated, is reasserted throughout *Deluge* and *Dawn* through Claire's characterisation. Claire contrasts with Helen in that she represents the female as threat. Fowler Wright's idealisation of her comes from her desire for enforced subordination, something that distinguishes her from Doll.

The desire of women for subjugation is presented as natural throughout Fowler Wright's oeuvre. In *Seven Thousand in Israel*, for example, Alwyn has just beaten his wife, Joyce, for refusing to sleep with him due to her confused ideas about birth control. Joyce's reaction is significant. She reflects that:

⁸⁸ Lucy Delap, *Feminist and Anti-Feminist Encounters in Edwardian Britain* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), p. 6.

⁸⁹ Delap, *Feminist and Anti-Feminist Encounters*, p. 14.

If he had really wanted her, he would have hit harder than that! It was a contemptible blow. Looked at properly, it was an insult that he had not hit harder than that. Why, she could scarcely feel it at all. Of course, he would have her, if he really wanted. He would *take* her. Well, he should pay for it when he came home. He shouldn't have her at all now, not for ever and – at least a week. Or say till Sunday.⁹⁰

Joyce sees the comparative weakness of the blow she receives from Alwyn as indicative of her husband's lack of desire for her. That is, she sees male violence towards women as a measure of their masculinity and sexual prowess. Alwyn is less of a man for not hurting her more effectively. In response, she withholds sex from her husband, though it is clear her commitment to abstinence wanes the more she considers self-denial. By punishing her husband for not causing her more pain, Joyce, the text implies, wants to be beaten, 'to subdue her to her natural end.'⁹¹

Disturbingly, here, and in a number of Fowler Wright's works, including *Deluge* and *Dawn*, women are shown to desire and deserve physical punishment. In *The Adventure of Wyndham Smith* such desire is explicit. At the conclusion of the novel, the only female survivor, Vinetta, has disobeyed Wyndham. She states: 'If you want to hit me [...] I don't mind. You are quite right as to what I deserve.'⁹² This invitation to violence reflects the progression in Fowler Wright's fiction from the speculation that a woman may actually appreciate a beating to narratives that show women actively encouraging their own physical punishment. Through the sexualised and violent acts against women that his fiction advocates,

⁹⁰ Fowler Wright, *Seven Thousand in Israel*.

⁹¹ Fowler Wright, *Seven Thousand in Israel*.

⁹² Fowler Wright, *The Adventure of Wyndham Smith*.

Fowler Wright writes from the position of a male fantasist projecting a desire for female submission.

In *Deluge* and *Dawn* this fantasy is expressed through Claire. Physically muscular, Claire is practical, strong-minded, violent and independent. Importantly, her autonomous nature can be attributed to her pre-deluge marriage to a symbolically emasculated man; her husband was an invalid (injured during World War I) confined to a care home (*Del*, p. 42). Clearly, her husband is a metaphor for what many felt was a weakened masculinity that had allowed the emergence of female emancipation.⁹³ Hence, Claire's story is the account of her willing re-submission to a patriarchy characterised by renewed masculine virility.

The misogynistic assumption of women's assumed yearning for submission to an aggressively asserted patriarchy appears throughout *Deluge*. For example, Joe Harker imagines his gang 'burdened with [...] a score of screaming, weeping, struggling, or *secretly-contented* [captured] women' (*Del*, p. 259, emphasis added). The idea that the protesting woman may be secretly contented reflects the patriarchally constructed misconception of a woman's 'no'.⁹⁴ Claire propagates this misconception further. Throughout the text she is depicted paradoxically as both powerful and vulnerable. She is symbolically phallicised by her weapons and her

⁹³ Furthermore, the emancipation realised by Claire both in his absence and upon his return recalls the immediate post-war context in which women who had gone out to work were encouraged to return to their former roles within the home.

⁹⁴ Martha C. Nussbaum, *Sex and Social Justice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 142.

ability to disable male attackers (she even murders Bellamy), yet she is rendered sexually vulnerable – and therefore conventionally ‘feminine’ – by her repeated nakedness in the presence of men (for example, pp. 70-71, p. 112, pp. 121-22 and p. 211). As such, her asserted and assaulted independence marks her as a barometer for newly reclaimed male virility.

Throughout the novel Claire is an object men wish to acquire. She is tough enough to present a challenge to the men she encounters and sufficiently desirable to make the possibility of success worthwhile. She is ‘any man’s that can take her.’ (*Del*, p. 296) As such, her progress through the narrative is marked by a number of attempted rapes. During the first of these she fights off her attacker, Norwood, with a piece of wood. The narrator, overtly critical of Norwood’s unwillingness to pursue the attempted rape, reflects ‘[p]robably the game was still [Norwood’s], had he played it better. Women have been taken by force often enough [...] and have learnt to kiss their captors.’ (*Del*, p. 58) A scornful Claire echoes the narrator’s judgement of Norwood. She notes ‘the cowardly brutality of the man who had assaulted, and yet had lacked the manhood to overcome her [...]’ (*Del*, p. 59) It is significant that Claire’s lack of respect for her attacker does not derive from his attack, but from his inability to ‘overcome her’, a fact that marks him as a coward and anticipates Joyce’s opinion of Alwyn. Norwood’s premature acceptance of defeat reinforces the broader themes of the text; that it is male weakness that has failed to keep women in their place. Comparably, Martin questions his masculinity because he did not ‘take’ Claire when he first met her:

[I]t crossed his mind that a bolder man would take that which the Gods gave [...]. Was he of lesser manhood? Or more scrupulous? He decided he was nothing better than cautious, and he was not sure that he did not despise himself for the quality. (*Del*, p. 88)

Claire also wonders why he has not raped her, finding the prospect secretly appealing: 'She felt that he was hers if she would, and, perhaps, if she would not, he would still take her. There was a paradoxical pleasure in the thought.' (*Del*, p. 104) Eventually Martin does 'take' Claire, and 'not without violence' (*Del*, p. 179). This act marks Claire's surrender to patriarchal authority. During the rape, Martin claims ownership of her 'forever and ever' (*Del*, p. 179), a symbolic act that marks his power over his female acquisition, whilst simultaneously defining him as both protector and lover.⁹⁵

Anne Cranny-Francis defines the male notion of desired rape as a 'phallic interpretation of female desire' central to the 'construction of female sexuality [that] complements the male subject.'⁹⁶ Accordingly, the novel's construction of Claire's sexuality, which is defined by her desire for rape and, ultimately, submission, is an expression of a male subjectivity intent on valorising patriarchal authority. This is reinforced by Claire's later reflections on her relationship with Martin. Although she has acted more decisively and just as bravely as Martin, she nevertheless decides that he

⁹⁵ Anne Cranny-Francis, *Engendered Fiction* (Sydney: UNSW Press, 1992), p. 127.

⁹⁶ Cranny-Francis, *Engendered Fiction*, p. 126.

has superior judgement. During one of the battles he hesitates and it is Claire who saves them. She contemplates his hesitancy:

It was true that he had hesitated where she would not have done so. [...] She did not doubt that he was wiser, as she knew that he was stronger than she. Perhaps he saw more broadly, more truly, than she was able to do. To see all sides does not conduce to prompt action. She had seen that force was the ultimate court of appeal. (*Del*, p. 178)

Claire's conclusion that, despite her more decisive actions, Martin is the wiser of the two marks the intellectual submission that attends her physical and sexual capitulation. In retrospect, her immediate recourse to violence throughout the text indicates that she has responded to situations emotionally rather than rationally. Such a stereotypically female reaction distinguishes her actions from the more logical and rational planning of Martin and reinforces the conventional gender binaries established in the text.

Without doubt, Fowler Wright's *Deluge* and *Dawn* are overt, misogynistic wish fulfilment fantasies involving the enforced reassertion of patriarchy. For Stableford, 'the end of the book is really a triumphant recognition and acknowledgement of moral responsibility'⁹⁷ as Martin commits himself to both Helen and Claire. This is wholly naïve. Even Kincaid, who understands that the 'unlikely ménage' at the novel's denouement allows Martin 'sexual freedom without guilt; in a world where there are fewer

⁹⁷ Stableford, 'Against the New Gods', p. 22.

women than men', ⁹⁸ fails to acknowledge the disturbing themes of female subjugation and oppression that run through *Deluge* (and its sequel).

Additionally, it is telling that Martin's justification for having two wives is not only based on so-called 'moral responsibility' but also on the premise that any offspring would be able to identify their father. When Martin contemplates what would have happened if Helen had assumed him dead and entered into another relationship, he concludes that the scenario would have been 'monstrous' (*Del*, p. 181), justifying his position on the basis that future children would be unsure of which man was their father. The importance placed on a child knowing its father reinforces the significance of patriarchy to Martin and the society he will establish. As the head of a household, the father's position would be threatened, his authority undermined, if a child was unsure of his parent or if there were two fathers in one family. It is not unreasonable to conclude, therefore, that Martin's position on bigamy is patriarchal rather than moral. His stance is based on stereotypically gendered binary assumptions regarding masculine sexual voraciousness versus female maternal function. Equally, by ensuring ownership of his children, he secures a clear line of succession.

Grounded in contemporary ideas of 'natural' gender inequality, particularly the perception that female unfaithfulness 'is, and always will be, a more

⁹⁸ Kincaid, 'Review of *Deluge*', p. 216.

serious matter than the infidelity of the husband', ⁹⁹ *Deluge* and *Dawn* reflect the conventional male view that multiple sexual partners are acceptable for men, but not women. The fact that Helen never assumes Martin dead and so does not accept Tom's offer of marriage means that the moral dilemma this would pose is conveniently avoided. Martin's assertion in *Dawn* that he 'needs' both Helen and Claire (*Dawn*, p. 147) also undermines Stableford's argument, since it is clear that Martin has no desire to be without either. His position is one based on desire just as much as it is based on 'moral responsibility'. Furthermore in *Dawn*, when Doll has two partners – one she is married to and one whose baby she is carrying – she is characterised as an immoral, loose and manipulative woman who would use the 'natural' aggressive jealousy of her partners to achieve a life of leisure (*Dawn*, p. 97). The fact Martin's bigamous marriage is presented by the novel as a moral act, whereas Doll's is depicted as a symptom of her promiscuity and immorality, renders *Deluge* and *Dawn* misogynistic novels that offer a compensatory fantasy to counteract masculine anxiety about declining patriarchal power.

Deluge and *Dawn* construct patriarchal, historically contextualised, middle-class versions of 'natural' human roles. As such, although they are reminiscent of earlier back-to-nature novels, they could more accurately be termed back-to-'natural' novels. The 'natural' state advocated in *Deluge* and *Dawn*'s wish fulfilment scenario is a construct of the narrator's patriarchal, anti-modern ideological position. It answers middle-class male

⁹⁹ Quoted in Ronald Pearsall, *The Worm in the Bud: The World of Victorian Sexuality* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1983), p. 58.

anxieties with a transfigurative 'departure' wish fulfilment fantasy that abolishes twentieth-century industrial modernity to establish what it presents as a new, ideologically inflected 'natural' state of being.

Conclusion

A Janus-Faced Conclusion: R. C. Sherriff's *The Hopkins Manuscript* (1939)

The transfigurative disaster novels published in Britain between 1898 and 1939 established the tropes of transformative disaster fiction. Although ideologically distinct, each presented a critique of its socio-political milieu and framed a cataclysmic event as an opportunity for social and cultural rebirth. Politically, the novels offered alternate futures that challenged the established norms of their contemporary social context. Thus, while structurally the form of the transfigurative disaster novel remained largely consistent, the nature of the cultural transformation achieved in each text depended upon individual responses to shifting social, cultural and political anxieties. The diversity of the narratives and their ideological positions highlights transformative disaster fiction's capacity for reinvention, a factor that contributes to the mode's enduring longevity.

By presenting alternative social structures as wish fulfilment fantasies, each text reinforced the contemporary dissatisfactions underpinning it. Indeed, it seems likely that the novels sought to provoke a cognitive reaction in their readers, who were encouraged to re-evaluate critically their cultural values, political situation and contemporary attitudes.

Throughout the forty years following the publication of Wells' *The War of the Worlds*, concerns over increasing levels of pollution and squalor caused by industrialisation resulted in fears over the health of the nation's population and intensified the evolutionary based fears regarding

biological regression. These anxieties were compounded when confidence in British military superiority was damaged after the Boer War and again, when the World War I was not easily won. The British disaster novels that span this period are a symptomatic response to this declining confidence and, in many ways, seek to re-establish faith in the British evolutionary and cultural superiority that had existed in the nineteenth century.

The War of the Worlds responds critically to concerns around Victorian complacency and fears of the British being superseded by more advanced military forces, while *The Purple Cloud* uses the catastrophe scenario to facilitate a rebirth that eliminated a 'corrupt' humanity. Conan Doyle's *The Poison Belt*, while clearly influenced by *The Purple Cloud*, is more optimistic, and less apocalyptic, in its attitude to the necessity of cultural change. Only a reminder of human fragility is necessary to provoke social transformation. Such optimism is absent from Connington's *Nordenholt's Million*, which presents a totalitarian drive towards efficiency and positive eugenics as the means to cultural change. Rejecting modernity entirely, *Deluge* and *Dawn* use the catastrophe scenario to emphasise the merits of a less technologised existence. While these novels clearly continue the trajectory of 'growing pessimism that accompanies the theme of progress from the very beginning of the [nineteenth] century' (a theme that would grow throughout the twentieth century),¹ taken collectively, they are united by their wish fulfilment responses to an increasing disillusionment with contemporary conditions.

¹ Saul Friedländer, *Visions of Apocalypse, End or Rebirth?* (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1985), p. 61.

Of the transfigurative disaster novels published before World War II, those categorisable as 'returns' advocate a post-disaster restoration of an amended pre-disaster society in their wish fulfilment fantasy, whereas 'departures' are distinguished by the total destruction of the pre-disaster society. While all of the texts draw upon Darwinist and Social Darwinist ideas, 'returns' seek to redress Britain's perceived diminished power and restore the nation's implied former greatness, while 'departures' use destruction as a positive, purgative event. *The War of the Worlds* and *The Poison Belt* are 'returns', 'restoration' fantasies that modify British society. In these texts the cataclysm is the admonition of a complacent population. Thus these 'returns' use the cataclysm to elicit a change that essentially 'turns the clock back', redressing imperialist anxieties and evoking former attitudes in the surviving population. Alternatively, 'departures' halt the current trajectory of modernity by eradicating it entirely in favour of taking human civilisations in a new direction.

The Purple Cloud, *Nordenholt's Million*, *Deluge* and *Dawn* are 'departures'. They destroy contemporary society to offer disjunctive wish fulfilment fantasies. Here disaster is not a warning regarding contemporary complacency; it functions to eradicate a civilisation depicted as unworthy of saving. Each is an anti-democratic masculine power fantasy, expressing an overwhelming desire for control that perhaps reflects a sense of political impotence in the face of emancipation, modernity and technological change.

Although classifiable in two distinct categories, these transfigurative disaster novels are unanimously optimistic. They present the post-cataclysmic civilisation as an improvement on the author's contemporary environment. Such confidence began to falter on the eve of World War II, however, when the disaster tradition ceased to be characterised solely by optimistic transfigurative texts. The final British disaster novel to be published before the war, R. C. Sherriff's *The Hopkins Manuscript*, illustrates this shift. Sherriff's novel includes two cataclysmic events. The first involves the Moon colliding with the Earth, displacing the Atlantic Ocean, and creating a landmass that links Europe with America. At this point, the novel displays the characteristics of a 'return' wish fulfilment fantasy in which society is improved by its experience. The remainder of the text is, however, a pessimistic, deteriorative 'departure'. A devastating war breaks out over the Moon's territories and resources resulting in the demise of European civilisation.

Organised around these two disasters, *The Hopkins Manuscript* looks in two directions. The early sections follow the conventions of the 'return' transfigurative disaster novels that preceded it. Aldiss describes it as a 'cosy catastrophe, much in the style that Wyndham was to adopt two decades later. It reads now as a gorgeous parody of all things British and thirties-ish.'² However, this is a rather simplistic interpretation of the text in that it fails to address the tonal shift that occurs between the two

² Aldiss and Wingrove, *Trillion*, p. 278.

catastrophes.³ The subsequent 'departure' narrative has a pessimistic outcome in which the envisioned post-disaster world is, for the first time in pre-war transformative texts, deteriorative. This alteration in tone anticipates the larger shift in British transformative disaster novels published after the war when such texts began increasingly to present bleak, post-apocalyptic environments.⁴

Beyond these generic considerations, *The Hopkins Manuscript* is a witty, ironic work that develops its themes through rich characterisation and increasingly nostalgic reflection. By rejecting plausibility in its depiction of the initial 'Moon catastrophe' the text announces itself as allegorical, establishing a series of analogies with British history. The pre-cataclysmic society represents pre-World War I Britain; the Moon's descent and collision with Earth is a metaphor for World War I; the post-cataclysmic rebuilding parallels the post-World War I period up to 1933; the discovery of riches on the Moon suggests the period after 1933, which was characterised by increasing tensions in Europe; and the subsequent war over territory and resources on the Moon anticipates the imagined devastating effects of a second world war. In its deployment of two disasters, *The Hopkins Manuscript* exposes the transfigurative wish fulfilment fantasies of its predecessors as naïve. The Moon's impact initially draws nations and communities together in a spirit of mutual

³ Aldiss overlooks the text's pessimism entirely in *Trillion Year Spree* (see pp. 278-79).

⁴ Krishan Kumar, 'Apocalypse, Millennium and Utopia Today', in *Apocalypse Theory and the Ends of the World*, ed. by Malcolm Bull (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), pp. 200-24 (pp. 205-10).

cooperation as the novel embodies the optimism of the earlier transfigurative texts. However, once the Moon's mineral wealth and territorial possibilities are realised, the narrative highlights human avarice, national self-interest and political manipulation as opposing positive social transformation.

The novel's critical stance towards territorialism and competition is established satirically in the novel's Foreword, which originates from almost a thousand years in the future. This Foreword provides an introduction to an account – the eponymous 'Hopkins Manuscript' – retrieved from the ruins of an empty, overgrown England by the Royal Society of Abyssinia. The manuscript is one of only four surviving items recovered from England. Each of the other three establishes symbolically the sources of the text's dissatisfaction. A rusted 'KEEP OFF THE GRASS' sign represents petty territorialism; a milestone – engraved in stone and reading 'PECKHAM 3 MILES' – suggests the overconfidence that assumes Peckham will always exist; and a commemorative tablet for the opening of a swimming bath in North London recording 'in detail the names of the Borough Council, the architect and the sanitary engineer' implies the petty self-importance of minor officials.⁵ The survival of such objects is, of course, ironic: Britain's legacy is nothing more than a paltry collection of trivial territory markers. They depict inconsequential prohibited spaces, land boundaries and esteem associated with place.

⁵ R. C. (Robert Cedric) Sherriff, *The Hopkins Manuscript* (London: Persephone Books, 2005), p. 2, hereafter referred to within the main text as *THM* followed by the page number.

Indeed, the commemorative tablet is, as the Foreword's narrator states, 'the greatest disappointment' as it provides 'an example of urban vain-glory that appals the modern-mind' (*THM*, p. 3). This Foreword signals to readers that the transfigurations, so much a part of pre-World War II disaster fiction, will here be replaced by a new vision of decline, not regeneration. The items' emphasis on territory draws attention to the major themes of the text. Collectively, they foreshadow the preoccupation with land ownership that leads to the ruin of Europe as it engages in its territorial war over the Moon.

The newest addition to this collection of artefacts, 'The Hopkins Manuscript', recounts the story of the Moon's descent to, and collision with, the Earth from the perspective of the bumptious Edgar Hopkins, a poultry breeder from the small village of Beadle. Hopkins' self-importance is central to the overall tension the novel establishes between the individual or state in isolation and the individual or state's unique function within broader communities or alliances.

During and after the Moon's collision, widespread destruction is balanced with a local and global spirit of cooperation and collaboration. Adhering to the established transfigurative trajectory, this part of the novel is optimistic. While the approach and impact of the Moon is a great source of anxiety and tragedy, it also draws people together. At the level of the individual, Hopkins secures a position for himself in a burgeoning community that means companionship and newfound significance. Indeed, the novel is

careful to distinguish between one's sense of importance (represented by the found artifacts and Hopkins' haughtiness) and genuine usefulness through Hopkins' character trajectory. He spends the early parts of the novel imagining himself important while contributing little to his community. Later, his poultry breeding becomes an essential source of food for survivors of the cataclysm.⁶

Locally, the disaster creates a cordial spirit amongst the villagers, who rally together in the face of imminent danger. Similar themes of collaboration and friendship amidst adversity are explored in Sherriff's earlier, more famous work, *Journey's End* (1929). This semi-autobiographical play, based on Sherriff's wartime experiences, is set in the trenches during World War I and develops the dual themes of camaraderie and tragedy. An analogous camaraderie is found in *The Hopkins Manuscript*, particularly in scenes where the inhabitants of Beadle work together to build a dugout in preparation for the Moon's impact. This shelter unites the villagers during its construction, but it is the place where almost all of the population is killed (*THM*, p. 322). By depicting the same companionship during adversity as *Journey's End*, *The Hopkins Manuscript* makes explicit the parallels being drawn between the Moon's collision and World War I. The fact that Sherriff treats the events in Beadle in a way similar to those in *Journey's End* signals that, for Sherriff, World

⁶ Indeed, Hopkins' position following the Moon's impact is suggestive of the useful protagonist-survivors, and their newfound importance, common to disaster fiction more broadly.

War I had, paradoxically, been a traumatic and rewarding experience,⁷ much like the Moon collision for Hopkins.

Just as *Journey's End* provides an intimate insight into the personal experiences of war, Hopkins' narration of the events in Beadle provides a personal reflection on the fulfilment and pride of a community drawn together at a time of danger and fear. The understated bravery of the villagers is symptomatic of the celebration of human achievement that permeates the first part of the novel. It commends humanity's capacity to accomplish much when working cooperatively. Hence, the narrative's wish fulfilment fantasy is one of community, comradeship and equality. Nevertheless, the celebratory aspects of the text, which commend united purpose and shared achievement, are tempered by the persistence of cultural norms that predate the cataclysm. Thus, unlike the disaster novels that precede it, *The Hopkins Manuscript* stresses that societal change is an uncertain and fragile process.

Problematizing the straightforward transfigurations of prior transformative texts, *The Hopkins Manuscript* draws attention to the difficulties of socio-cultural transformation. These are emphasised through Hopkins' response to his altered environment following the Moon's collision. He is a petty and self-important man able, largely, to put aside his flaws as the cataclysm approaches in order to work with his fellow residents on the Beadle dugout. While he achieves much fulfilment working with his peers, and

⁷ As Sheriff explicitly states in his autobiography *No Leading Lady* (Hertfordshire: Garden City Press, 1968), p. 131.

recognises his greater happiness when part of a group, he is unable to accept such collective endeavours as a social norm outside of exceptional circumstances. Working on the dugout, he remarks that:

There was a grand spirit among us, too. We had always been a friendly, peaceful village, but I had never before felt such a fine bond of comradeship. We were all so happy at having something novel and valuable to do. The men all called each other by their nicknames and I was almost tempted to tell John Briggs, the carpenter, that my Christian name was Edgar. I decided upon reflection not to do so, for if nothing fatal happened on the 3rd of May he might fail to appreciate his duty to call me 'sir' again. (*THM*, p. 136)

For Hopkins, at this point, happiness and comradeship are less significant than the preservation of social distinctions and the expectation of class-based respect. The novel's satire is clear: the threat has unified the village, but social traditions and conservative attitudes threaten to break the union and cooperative spirit described. In this way, *The Hopkins Manuscript* laments that such collaboration is only likely under adverse conditions. It demonstrates little faith in the longevity or permanence of transfiguration, an assumption that had been key to the transformative disaster narrative previously. Preparing for the Moon's impact realises a 'bond of comradeship' that cannot displace permanently the former class distinctions that will reassert themselves once the crisis has passed. Hopkins' observation is, perhaps, a reflection on World War I, which had united men of all backgrounds in a common cause, yet failed to achieve any significant social change after the conflict ended.⁸

⁸ See Geoffrey Sherington, *English Education, Social Change, and War, 1911-20* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1981), p. xi.

The Hopkins Manuscript dedicates considerable time to highlighting the benefits of people working together in common purpose. The new social equality achieved through such camaraderie is most overt on the eve of the Moon's descent. The villagers hold a 'sing-song' evening in which people of all classes and ages celebrate together. Hopkins notes that 'I thought how strange it was that it had never occurred to the village to organise an evening like this — and why it should need the end of the world to inspire them to it' (*THM*, p. 211). Hopkins recognises that under normal circumstances there would be no such sense of community and his reflection is a gloomy indictment of social division.

Building upon the community and sense of fulfilment fostered by the Moon's descent, a 'golden age' follows the cataclysm. Society is reconstructed with a new emphasis on the collaboration and companionship that emerged pre-disaster. In contrast to inter-war Britain, the massive loss of life leads to social and cultural transfiguration.

Hopkins imagines the post-cataclysm society will be an altered one where the general quality of life is improved. As Hopkins explains to his fellow survivors, Robin and Pat:

We've suffered, [...] but we shall have reward [...] in the days to come. No matter what havoc lives out there – the world has survived. [...] Those of us who have survived will have a great duty ahead of us. We have to build the world again, and perhaps in doing so, we shall find little ways of improving it. [...] Before you are old you may be living in a world much finer than any you would have known if this...cataclysm had not come to us. (*THM*, p. 266)

Hopkins' words have a double address. They echo the unfulfilled hopes for social improvement that had followed World War I while simultaneously establishing the distinctly optimistic wish fulfilment fantasy of reconstruction found in the first part of the novel.

It is difficult not to read Hopkins' sanguine outlook in the light of post-World War I optimism. The devastation of the Moon's impact serves as a metaphor for the disruption and loss of life caused by the Great War.

Although there had been no physical damage to the British landscape, the war's cost 'in human and financial terms was immense.'⁹ Thus, the years that followed were 'a period of rebuilding and reconciliation.'¹⁰ This is depicted in the novel as the population working collectively, engaging 'cheerfully' in voluntary community work for two hours each day (*THM*, p. 358). Hopkins even imagines the future in utopian terms. He envisions 'fresh air – warm, friendly houses – peace – purpose – happiness...' (*THM*, p. 360). This vision – the result of the cataclysm and hard work on the part of the survivors – provides a positive outcome for tragedy. Had *The Hopkins Manuscript* concluded here, it would have aligned itself with the transfigurative disaster narrative. However, the novel interrogates its subject matter with greater scepticism than its antecedents.

⁹ Mike Sharpe, Steve Small and Donald Sommerville, *History of World War I* (New York: Marshall Cavendish, 2002), p. 530.

¹⁰ James J. Sheehan, *Where Have All the Soldiers Gone? The Transformation of Modern Europe* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2008), p. 107.

Although the future Hopkins envisions seems perfectly possible, it is quashed by global events. Like post-World War I Britain, the novel's post-impact society provides an opportunity for recovery and improvement. Hopkins explains that the cataclysm 'was terrible. But it was almost worthwhile to have achieved this wonderful spirit of friendship and helpfulness between nations' (*THM*, p. 336). Over time, however, this 'wonderful spirit' is lost. As such, the novel captures the post-war disenchantment with the possibility of genuine collective improvement. As Overy explains, the period after World War I was filled with expectations about the 'restoration of social peace.'¹¹ However, 'against this weight of idealism and illusion, the reality [...] was a grave disappointment. Social unrest, economic stagnation and political conflict were measured against the hopes of peace abroad and stability of the whole, and found sadly wanting.'¹² Overy continues that this culminated in a 'sense of loss – of innocence, of moral certainty, of social values, of cultural confidence.'¹³ By presenting an idealised England of reformed social values and renewed cultural confidence in the aftermath of catastrophe, *The Hopkins Manuscript* realises the transfigurative possibilities that were never achieved in reality. By presenting a fantasy of what *could-have-been*, the novel not only draws attention to the conditions in Britain that might lead disenchanted authors to see catastrophe as the only means of social progress but also deepens its later ironic reflection on the improbability of social change, even after a cataclysm.

¹¹ Richard J. Overy, *The Origins of the Second World War* (Harlow: Pearson 2008), p. 92.

¹² Overy, *The Interwar Crisis*, p. 42.

¹³ Overy, *Origins*, p. 42.

Following the Moon's collision, Hopkins' personal reflections highlight that while ostensibly the post-cataclysm society is more egalitarian, individual perceptions are slow to change. He states:

By one o'clock we were back in the market building where trestle tables had been rapidly laid out for a celebration lunch. In the old days when Mulcaster numbered 3,000 people, only the most important persons could have sat down to a lunch of this kind. Today the whole town – every one of the 436 survivors of the cataclysm – was able to sit down together. [...] It is hard to realise what a difference this meant in the spirit of the town: everybody had a place at the table: everybody an important job – none were useless – none were unemployed. Distinctions of class were gone forever, and I sat with Mrs Smithson, the wife of a plumber, and Mrs Bingham of the drapery store talking to them almost as if they were my equals. (*THM*, pp. 359-60)

Here the persistence of rigid attitudes towards social class is treated ironically. Although Hopkins believes class distinctions are 'gone forever', he is incapable of accepting this apparent new equality and lacks the self-awareness to challenge his own attitudes. Unaware of his ingrained prejudices, he can only perceive the wives of a tradesman and a shopkeeper as '*almost*' his equals, possibly on the grounds of gender as well as class. In this way, the novel suggests that social transformation may be superficial and transient rather than genuine and enduring.

The fragility of Hopkins' newfound and inconsistent attitude towards a 'classless' society parallels the problematic nature of the global spirit of equality and collaboration that emerges during the Moon's descent. Although the threat posed by the Moon ostensibly draws nations together,

in actuality their mutual cooperation was tenuous (see *THM*, pp. 336-49). Just as Hopkins is unable to see his fellow villagers as equals, so, it is revealed, internationally, each nation views its neighbours as less important. Their spirit of mutual cooperation is exposed as both shallow and fragile, existing only under exceptional conditions. Once the Moon has crashed to Earth, old antipathies resurface in the light of the new mineral wealth. In this way, the narrative events recall interwar unrest. Just as the war 'inflamed long-standing rivalries and confirmed old hatreds' rather than ushering in a lasting peace,¹⁴ so the Moon, which had initially fostered global goodwill, becomes the source of international conflict. The discovery of rich deposits on its surface causes former tensions to re-emerge as each nation lays claim to a share of the Moon.

This drive for new resources and territories, and the shift from potential peace to international conflict it provokes, is the textual equivalent of Hitler assuming the Chancellorship of Germany. As Norman Lowe explains, international relations fell into two distinct phases in the interwar years. Before January 1933 there seemed a good chance world peace could be maintained. Afterwards, however, all hope was gone.¹⁵ Read in the light of this historical turning point, it is clear that the idealised peacetime of *The Hopkins Manuscript* – before the discovery of minerals on the Moon – represents the brief period of peace between 1918 and 1933. Such peace is shattered, however, with the rise of nationalism and materialist

¹⁴ Sharpe, et al, *History of World War I*, p. 530.

¹⁵ Norman Lowe, *Mastering Modern World History* (London and New York: Macmillan, 1997), p. 207.

competition between the European powers. Thus, the collegiate spirit that forms the wish fulfilment opening section of the novel is displaced by a sense of distrust and national self-interest that leads to war. The growing momentum towards European annihilation in the latter part of the text is an expression of the sense of impending disaster that accompanied the approach of World War II. *The Hopkins Manuscript's* shift in tone reflects the dwindling optimism that arose between the wars as the nation realised that World War I was not, after all, the war to end all wars.

The parallels drawn by *The Hopkins Manuscript* between the fictional events and the global political situation pre- and post-1933 are overt. After the Moon's collision, the 'United States of Europe' is created (*THM*, p. 332) in a clear equivalent to the formal establishment of the League of Nations in 1920, supposedly symbolising a new era of peace.¹⁶ By the early 1930s, the League of Nations 'had ceased to be taken seriously as an organisation' as nations began to bypass it when conducting foreign affairs.¹⁷ By the end of 1933, Japan and Germany were no longer in the League and hopes for international peace evaporated, as 'the new rule seemed to be each country for itself.'¹⁸ In the text each nation 'demands a bigger slice [of the Moon].'¹⁸ (*THM*, p. 345) As a result, each country's claims to the Moon are coupled with a suspicion of other nations, especially the British (*THM*, 346) who, in a manner akin to Chamberlain's policy of appeasement, initially try to broker peace. The resultant fracturing

¹⁶ Lowe, *Mastering Modern World History*, p. 97.

¹⁷ Overy, *The Interwar Crisis*, p. 88.

¹⁸ Lowe, *Mastering Modern World History*, p. 224.

of a tentatively united Europe, the rise of territorial and economic disputes, and increasing global tensions parallel the 'disagreements over territorial demands, material compensation, and the conditions needed for future security' that threatened to break the League of Nations in the interwar years.¹⁹

Throughout this period a division was identified between what Mussolini called the 'have' and 'have-not' nations.²⁰ He considered Germany, Japan and Italy, the three main dissenters of the time, the 'have-nots', while the USA, Britain and France were considered the 'have' nations on account of their comparatively sizeable resources. The 'have-nots' in the 1930s were rearming and demanding territories by asserting their right to Empire.²¹ Overy points out that,

in all three 'have-not' powers, Germany, Italy and Japan, there existed circles which assumed that their country's long-term economic interests, indeed the very survival of their peoples, depended on the acquisition of large areas of conquered territory to be used as a source of minerals and cheap labour and the resettlement of surplus people from the home country.²²

The battle for territory and wealth in *The Hopkins Manuscript* is a clear reference to these events and the threat to interwar peace and global stability they posed. Thus, *The Hopkins Manuscript* does not see interwar unrest as an opportunity for social restructuring, as in *Nordenholt's Million* and *Deluge and Dawn*. This may be because it is the only transformative

¹⁹ Sharpe, et al, *History of World War I*, p. 532.

²⁰ Overy, *The Interwar Crisis*, p. 77.

²¹ Overy, *Origins*, p. 32.

²² Overy, *Origins*, p. 36.

disaster novel written after 1933, when the interwar mood had shifted in the light of increasing global tensions. Overy explains, 'Nationalists in all three "have-not" states boiled with resentment at the social and economic damage caused by the [economic] slump' of the 1920s and 30s.²³ They blamed the West for their decline and then for 'doing nothing to alleviate the suffering it caused.'²⁴ Economic woes and shortages in natural resources throughout Europe created a sense of mistrust, and because of the treaty of Versailles, Germany, in particular, felt it was being denied the necessary coal, oil and other natural resources it required. Throughout the 1930s Japan, Germany and Italy pursued territorial, economic and military expansion, although Italy lacked resources to do this independently and so welcomed Germany's military growth and the challenge it posed to Britain and France.²⁵

In the novel, the Moon's division exacerbates the 'have'/'have-not' division of nations to establish a situation parallel to these events. Initially, the Moon is divided according to 'each nation's size' with a British corridor running along the former coast of France and Spain allowing 'communications' with the Empire's 'dominions and colonies' (*THM*, p. 343). However, once the Moon is discovered to be 'immensely, immeasurably rich in precious minerals' and oil and coal deposits (*THM*, p. 345), this division is contested. As each nation asserts its need for more resources, the international situation deteriorates as each demand a

²³ Overy, *Origins*, p. 33.

²⁴ Overy, *The Interwar Crisis*, p. 77.

²⁵ Mark Donnelly, *Britain in the Second World War* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999), p. 5.

greater share (*THM*, p. 346). The events that culminate in the outbreak of war in the text are therefore informed by the European economic context of international distrust, envy, and the failure of the League of Nations.

Developing the novel's irony, Hopkins explains that 'the moon contains minerals sufficient to give wealth to this world undreamed of' (*THM*, 339). Hence, the initial cataclysm's potential to be a catalyst for positive change and international peace has, the text asserts, been wasted. Hopkins exclaims that it is as if,

the moon, long ages ago, were wrenched away from this earth by a divine, far-seeing power that realised the greed of man! – that realised that he would squander the earth's wealth and find it out too late! And now the moon is given to us in the hope that we have learned our lesson and will take more care of our treasures in the future! (*THM*, p. 340)

As the narrative reaches its climax, Hopkins' declaration is revealed as naïve. Indeed, the novel self-consciously signals this naiveté when Major Jagger, an intellectual who becomes Prime Minister, asks, 'Do you imagine a cataclysm — or one hundred cataclysms — can change human nature?' (*THM*, p. 337) Jagger's question seems to contradict what Michael Moorcock sees as Sherriff's recognition of 'the inherent decency of ordinary people caught up in events which they neither wanted – nor [...] engineered.'²⁶ Whilst Moorcock asserts that Sherriff never lost his

²⁶ Michael Moorcock, 'Preface' to *The Hopkins Manuscript*, pp. v-xiv (p. xi).

'optimistic belief in human decency',²⁷ the text offers a more complex representation of 'human nature' than this.

When Jagger later asserts, 'the cataclysm has not altered human nature' (*THM*, p. 345), he consolidates the theme introduced by Hopkins' unchanging attitude towards social class. Even in the face of calamity, the novel suggests, people remain self-important. In the aftermath of the Moon's collision, new manipulative political leaders exploit and extend this sense of self-importance into nationalism, into a belief in the primacy of the nation's interests. The positive representations of autocratic leadership found previously in inter-war transformative texts are not present in *The Hopkins Manuscript*. Accordingly, the novel depicts the newly established post-cataclysm governments as encouraging the worst characteristics of 'human nature'. Unlike previous transfigurative disaster novels, *The Hopkins Manuscript* addresses the idea that following a cataclysm those new leaderships that emerge are not necessarily going to change society for the better. Indeed, the political leaders that arise following the Moon's collision are characterised as power hungry scaremongers whose political decisions affect their populations negatively.

It is here that the novel's political position is most explicit. In a clear allusion to the emergence of dictators in Europe after World War I,²⁸ Hopkins observes that following the discovery of riches on the Moon there

²⁷ Moorcock, 'Introduction', p. xi.

²⁸ Including Mussolini, Franco and Hitler. See Roger Eatwell, 'Introduction: New Styles of Dictatorship and Leadership in Interwar Europe' *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions*, 7:2 (2006), 127-37.

arose a 'horrid swarm of political upstarts' (*THM*, p. 351). Where *Nordenholt's Million* and *Deluge* and *Dawn* presented post-catastrophe restructuring from the perspective of the new, post-disaster leaders, *The Hopkins Manuscript's* focus on the individual shows the effect of such leadership on the population. As a result of this shift in perspective, it emphasises the devastating effects of autocratic leadership on individuals. Hopkins' powerlessness and his frustration at these 'upstarts' is a consequence of their disruption of the fragile new communities emerging across Europe after the impact (*THM*, p. 353). He explains that these new leaders are:

nasty creatures [who] would swoop down upon peaceful, hard-working communities, upon people intent only upon rebuilding their shattered fortunes and living in quiet happiness. With clever, impassioned speeches they declared that their cowardly Governments were allowing other countries to seize the lion's share of the moon's wealth. They frightened bewildered people into believing that if they did not arouse themselves and 'stand up for the rights of their country' they would soon be living in poverty, slaves to a foreign power. (*THM*, pp. 351-52)

The allusion to 'new leaders [who have] risen abroad' (*THM*, p. 365) – and in Britain in the character of Major Jagger – makes the novel's anti-authoritarian, anti-nationalist and anti-war stance overt. This is no *Nordenholt's Million*, or *Deluge*, or *Dawn*, presenting the benefits of dictatorship. Rather, *The Hopkins Manuscript* views authoritarianism negatively and, by extension, can be read as a critical comment on the political direction of Europe between the wars, especially the rise of dictators in Germany and Italy.

The novel clarifies its political position further in relation to the new global situation when Hopkins looks back to the threat of the Moon's impact and imagines the impending war. He reflects that '[I] remembered how I faced the cataclysm without a shadow of fear: how I even exalted, at times, over the fierce excitement and danger of it. But now I was afraid – miserably, despicably afraid.' (*THM*, p. 348) Here, the novel juxtaposes allusively the national mood at the beginning of World War I with that on the eve of World War II. Like the Great War, the cataclysm created an initial excitement and carried the promise of transfiguration. Yet on the brink of international conflict over the Moon's resources, further hardship and suffering, the dashing of hopes for a better future, Hopkins is filled with despair. He explains,

I tried to fan within myself the spark of new adventure – a flame of patriotism – a grim determination to face this new menace as I had faced the approach of the moon. [...] But it was useless. I had survived the cataclysm: by super-human endeavour I rebuilt my life. It was too much to ask of any man that he should face a second ruin and rebuild again. (*THM*, pp. 348-49)

Hopkins' weary despondency alludes explicitly to the approach of World War II as the novel abandons metaphorical parallels (the Moon as World War I) for direct political comparisons. Indeed, the text seems to supplant the Moon-War metaphor with a direct reference to an earlier war that fosters the same sense of purpose, comradeship and unity as the impending Moon collision. Idealising this conflict, Hopkins remembers a time when

boys of my own generation had gone to another, far different war. They had gone in the morning sunlight – gone in fresh uniforms and glittering badges – gone to a fluttering blaze of flags and the brave music of bands – to cheering crowds and waving handkerchiefs. They had gone to finely ordered regiments, well-clothed and well fed: gone, above all, with a clear and definite purpose: with burning faith in triumph and cause.’ (*THM*, p. 390)

Explicitly drawing attention to World War I as positive event at this point in the text, the novel emphasises the air of celebration, of national confidence, prosperity (the soldiers are properly equipped) and purpose. At no point in the narrative is this positive view compromised. Hence, it stands in stark contrast to the approaching conflict. On his journey to war, Robin, Hopkins’ young friend, would be ‘going from the darkness of a derelict, wayside station into a deeper darkness from which reason and purpose had long since died, knowing nothing except that the land of his birth was in the toils – feeling nothing save an aching desire to do what he believed was right.’ (*THM*, p. 391)

This juxtaposition, which depends on an uncritical and naïve view of the earlier war, emphasises that the approaching conflict would lack the clarity and purpose of its antecedent. Robin departs from a country whose hope for a new ‘golden age’ has been ruined by political disagreements and national self-interests. As the war for resources develops, it consumes all the existing assets required for rebuilding (*THM*, p. 379). Hence, the new struggle is presented as a ruinous event that Britain and other countries can ill afford. Neither the nation, nor its people, is equipped –

economically, culturally or psychologically – for the conflict. The war is a tipping point that ensures the decline of Europe and its eventual annihilation by external forces.

In Hopkins' emotional response to the approaching war, the novel establishes the mood of a war-weary Britain. His reaction suggests the increasing sense of pessimism associated with the novel's context. As Overy points out, Britain, France and Germany:

believed that the next war, if it came, would be the total war, a long war that required the mobilisation of the nation's entire military and moral resources. This was to some extent a natural reaction to the war of 1914, which the powers had expected to be 'over by Christmas', but which had lasted instead for four years.²⁹

Given this expectation of a long and arduous clash, it is hardly surprising that *The Hopkins Manuscript* offers a vision of a total and devastating war, for Europe at least. Conflict is presented as catastrophe in the text. By fighting amongst themselves, the European powers become vulnerable to an invasion from the East. As each nation uses every provision to attain resources from the Moon, 'The Eastern Menace' (*THM*, p. 408) destroys a weakened Europe. Hopkins laments that "if Europe had remained united we could have scattered them to the winds...." I was past all anger now' (*THM*, p. 409). His tired, melancholic reflection reads as a final plea for a united Europe. The novel's overall despondency culminates in Hopkins' death. His demise, stemming from a loss of hope, is a metaphor for the

²⁹ Overy, *Origins*, p. 48.

downfall of Europe. He notes: 'I was living [...] in a fantasy of dreams that had no further kinship with this earthly world. "It need never have happened"', he says sadly (*THM*, p. 409). His reflection suggests not only the hopelessness of Europe's position but also the fact that such a catastrophe could have been avoided.

From a generic perspective, the movement from post-cataclysmic hope for the future to wartime despair within the novel's storyworld renders the text Janus-faced. The optimism expressed in the aftermath of the Moon's collision with the Earth looks back to the wish fulfilment fantasies that had hitherto defined 'return' transfigurative narratives. By exposing this uncomplicatedly optimistic position as naïve *The Hopkins Manuscript* can be read as a product of a loss of innocence within the British disaster tradition as a whole, something that would develop after the war.³⁰ The text's ultimate pessimism emphasises the fantasy inherent in such optimistic transfigurative disaster novels. This pessimism also marks *The Hopkins Manuscript* as a *deteriorative* 'departure' narrative. Its status as such is confirmed by the supersession of the East over Europe at the novel's conclusion. For this reason, the historical significance of the novel cannot be underestimated; it was the first to view disaster as a potentially negative event.

³⁰ Indeed, the history of the literary disaster tradition – in both Britain and America – over the twentieth century was one of increasingly bleak representations of cataclysm. In Britain, this pessimism was consolidated in the works of the New Wave writers such as Michael Moorcock, Brian Aldiss and J. G. Ballard but more recently, and internationally, it has culminated in the plethora of zombie survival narratives produced. This pessimism has recently been redressed on British television, however, with the remakes of *Survivors* (Adrian Hodges, 2008) and *The Day of the Triffids* (Nick Copus, 2009) offering a return to the optimistically depicted 'cosy' disaster scenario.

In the aftermath of World War II not all British transformative disaster novels expressed a comparable deteriorative approach. Some retained the optimism of the pre-war transfigurative narrative whilst others embraced pessimism similar to that of *The Hopkins Manuscript*. Between these two positions, the British transformative disaster novel diversified into a spectrum of speculative texts whose visions of the post-disaster future range from the transfigurative to the deteriorative. On occasion, transfigurative and deteriorative elements exist within the same text. John Wyndham's *The Day of the Triffids* (1951), for example, balances the negative view of a deteriorative 'World Narrowing' (Chapter Fifteen) with the potentially positive prospects of a transfigurative 'Strategic Withdrawal' (Chapter Seventeen).

Such ambivalence, which is more readily apparent in John Christopher's transformative catastrophes *The Death of Grass* (1956), *The World in Winter* (1962), and *A Wrinkle in the Skin* (1965), can be seen, in part, as a consequence of a loss of faith in what Sherriff terms 'human nature' following World War II. Additionally, the proliferation of new anxieties arising from the Cold War, military and civil nuclear threats, environmental failures, pollution, overpopulation, declining natural resources, and technological and scientific advancements³¹ contributed to an uncertainty over how a catastrophe – human-wrought or natural – could be survived. Nevertheless, these more ambivalent transformative texts, even in their

³¹ See Bourke, *Fear*, p. 259.

deteriorative mode, often contain a wish fulfilment element through their emphasis on survival as compensation for mass death and destruction.

As the twentieth century progressed, several critics noted that there has been a movement towards the deteriorative end of the spectrum that has continued into the millennium and beyond.³² As Krishan Kumar has observed, the contemporary apocalypse is often missing the sense of hope of something constructive emerging from the ruins.³³ For James Berger the increasingly pessimistic tone of apocalyptic fiction arises from the fact that 'in the late twentieth century the unimaginable, the unspeakable, has already happened, and continues to happen.'³⁴ Visions of catastrophe, accompanied by the sense that there are always new and additional sources of potential disaster, are dominated by what Kermode calls the 'mood of end-dominated crisis.'³⁵ Joanna Bourke outlines the sources of this mood:

Instead of the tangible threats to corporeal existence that are occasioned by war, the last few decades of the 20th century are characterised by more nebulous anxiety states, focusing on fatigued environments of flesh and fellowship. Cancer and crime, pain and pollution: these fears isolate us. The acceleration of rates of change and the fact that threats seem to be everywhere – in the earth, air and sun – is bewildering. The fact that many of these risks are invisible and global also makes them more frightening because they are impossible to manage or avoid.³⁶

³² Increasingly, survival stories, dystopian apocalyptic outlooks and tales of total annihilation have grown in popularity, particularly as the form's links to the horror genre have developed since the 1980s.

³³ Kumar, 'Apocalypse, Millennium and Utopia Today', p. 205.

³⁴ James Berger, *After the End: Representations of Post-apocalypse* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1999), p. 42.

³⁵ Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending*, p. 98.

³⁶ Bourke, *Fear*, p. 293.

The sense of immediacy – the feeling that catastrophe may be around any corner – reached new heights as the millennium approached. The popular media increasingly provided real-world alternatives to popular narratives of impending disaster. Striving for sensationalism, it has fuelled the general feeling that contemporary civilisation could be on the brink of collapse. Nuclear threats, chemical warfare, the millennium bug, SARS, CJD, global warming, declining natural resources, super volcanoes, asteroids and pandemics have each been presented as sources of humankind's possible downfall. While culturally this state of perpetual crisis is established and re-established, the disaster genre itself has proliferated in both Britain and America as it responded to the anxieties informing the modern cultural landscape. Yet at its core, the transformative disaster text has always been, and remains, one of the clearest expressions of the fragility of human civilisation and the nature and possibilities of what may follow its destruction.

In focusing on transformative disaster fiction published between 1898 and 1939, this study has sought to highlight the importance of such texts in understanding the cultural and political anxieties and hopes that defined the period. It has demonstrated that such texts repay sustained critical analysis and established a foundation for subsequent scholarly studies into the British disaster narrative and its varied social and political contexts. It is hoped that, from this foundation, subsequent studies will address the largely overlooked work of post-war writers such as

Wyndham, Christopher, J. T. Macintosh, John Boland, Fred Hoyle, John Bowen, Charles Eric Maine, Christopher Hodder Williams, John Creasy, Richard Doyle, Jack Ramsey, Louise Lawrence, Trevor Hoyle, Maggie Gee and Alex Scarrow to provide detailed assessments of such transformative disaster fiction rather than merely register its prominence in British science fiction.

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