

WITOLD OSTROWSKI

Lódź

## IMAGINARY HISTORY

There is a minor and rare kind of fiction, which has not been, I believe, properly isolated and described as a literary genre in its own right. It deserves some attention because of its unique character and because of its being closely associated with at least one prominent writer known all over the world. The recognition of its existence may therefore affect the appreciation of some important books.

H. G. Wells, the writer in question, has called it anticipatory history<sup>1</sup>. The more convenient name is imaginary history since this will fit all the specimens of the genre and not only those which anticipate the history of the future.

The imaginary history is a kind of fiction whose form and method of presentation belong to historiography, but whose contents are a figment of the imagination. Being fiction, it serves the general purposes of other kinds of fiction and in this it mostly resembles the novel. But it differs from the novel, even from a novel like *Nostromo*, *The Prisoner of Zenda*, or *Queen Sheba's Ring*, in which, nevertheless, the action takes place in an imaginary country with an imaginary history. Unlike this type of the novel it subordinates the interest in the individual to the interest in the communal so strictly that its story is not of a few people, but of a nation or of the whole of mankind. Consequently, if there are any characters in it, they become mere sketches, their appearance in the story being only momentary and their individual lives shown only so far as they become public and influence the lives of masses<sup>2</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> See *The Shape of Things To Come*, Introduction.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. the following passages:

"Little by little the great brain probed the material universe and the universe of mentality. He mastered the principles of biological evolution, and constructed for his own delight a detailed history of life on earth. He learned, by marvellous archaeological technique, the story of all the earlier human peoples, and of the Martian episode, matters which had remained hidden from the Third Men. He discovered the principles of relativity and the quantum theory, the nature of the atom as a complex system of wave trains. He measured the cosmos; and with his

This is, as I have said, due to a shift in the interest of the author. In the novel he is usually interested in following the developments of a few human lives. Even in a novel with such vast social and historical horizons as *Nostromo* or *War and Peace* the horizons make only a monumental background to the experience of fully characterized individuals. In the imaginary history historical process itself is the principal thing the author is interested in<sup>3</sup>.

delicate instruments he counted the planetary systems in many of the remote universes" (O. Stapledon, *Last and First Men*, 1938, p. 185).

"Newton was born at Woolsthorpe in Lincolnshire, on Christmas-day in the memorable year which saw the outbreak of the Civil War. In the year of the Restoration he entered Cambridge, where the teaching of Isaac Barrow quickened his genius for mathematics, and where the method of Descartes had superseded the older modes of study. From the close of his Cambridge career his life became a series of great physical discoveries. At twenty-three he facilitated the calculation of planetary movements by his theory of Fluxions. The optical discoveries to which he was led by his experiments with the prism and which he partly disclosed in the lectures which he delivered as Mathematical Professor at Cambridge, were embodied in the theory of light, which he laid before the Royal Society on becoming a Fellow of it" (J. R. Green, *A Short History of the English People*, 1888, p. 611).

"She seems to have given herself to him without hesitation or qualification or concealment ... But there was a third principal in this primitive drama, the wife of Essenden, a woman of great energy, great possessiveness and obtrusive helpfulness. It had been her vanity to »inspire« Essenden. And in the cast of the drama was Ryan, loudly resentful at Essenden »stealing« his »air girl«, and Hooper Hamilton, inexplicably malignant. We are left to guess at the incidents and details of the drama, which was after all a very commonplace drama, only that it was magnified to the scale of the world stage. It culminated in Jean Essenden bringing a charge before the World Council against her husband of being concerned in a reactionary plot against the Modern State" (H. G. Wells, *The Shape of Things To Come*, 1935, p. 264).

"Though Caroline was in a sense the »heroine«, her low vulgarity was in itself an argument for republicans and levellers. As the Queen's trial dragged its foul length along week after week, an utter contempt for their rulers, Royal and other, sank deep into men's hearts, and prepared the way for change. Whether Caroline was guilty or not no man can with certainty say. On the other hand, it is certain that her marriage had been a legalised bigamy, since her husband had previously been married in secret to Mrs. Fitzherbert, who was still alive. It is also certain that George had cast off Caroline almost at once, before he had any ground against her, and that he had lived and was still living in open relations with a number of other women... The national instinct for fair play was too much the loyalty of many Tories who had supported the Government..." (G. M. Trevelyan, *British History in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century*, 1945, p. 192).

<sup>3</sup> Cf. typical passages describing a change limited to one field of human activity:

"London, under the Visible Smoke Law, by which any production of visible smoke with or without excuse was punishable by a fine, had already ceased to be the sombre smoke-darkened city of the Victorian time; it had been and indeed was



There is, still, another difference between the imaginary history and the novel. Assuming as it does the narrative forms belonging to historiography, the imaginary history must be essentially prosaic and "scientific" in style. It must avoid what is called the magic of description, the "atmosphere", the poetic, the picturesque, the metaphorical, and the marvellous. This distinguishes it from the amusing tales of fantastic kingdoms, like *The Rose and The Ring* by W. M. Thackeray. It must, of necessity, be sober, plain, almost flat in style. If it achieves or ever tries to achieve the sublimity of poetry, it does so because of its impressive conception of the process of history, and not because it can enhance it through the usual and legitimate tricks of style.

Another stylistic feature of the imaginary history is its avoidance of dialogues. These are reduced to short exchanges of words of the type found in J. R. Green's *A Short History of the English People*, less frequently in Trevelyan<sup>4</sup>.

constantly rebuilt, and its main streets were already beginning to take on those characteristic that distinguished them throughout the latter half of the twentieth century. The insanitary horse and the plebeian bicycle had been banished from the roadway, which was now of a resilient glass-like surface, spotlessly clean; and the foot passenger was restricted to a narrow vestige of the ancient footpath on either side of the track and forbidden at the risk of a fine, if he survived, to cross the roadway" (H. G. Wells, *The World Set Free*, 1914, p. 69).

"The new London County Council, to the chagrin of some who had had a hand in creating it, at once became the representative and agent of millions of Londoners who aspired after better conditions of daily life. The popularity and energy of John Burns of Battersea gave him success as the first apostle of a London patriotism distinct from pride in the old »City«, while the intellectual leadership of the Fabian publicists, and the organisation of the »Progressive« party formed *ad hoc*, helped London to take her place beside the foremost cities of the Empire in municipal progress, while she remained Conservative in Imperial politics" (G. M. Trevelyan, *British History in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century*, 1945, p. 401).

"All the continents were urbanized, not of course in the manner of the congested industrial cities of an earlier age, but none the less urbanized. Industry and agriculture interpenetrated everywhere. This was possible partly through the great development of aerial communication, partly through a no less remarkable improvement of architecture. Great advances in artificial materials had enabled the erection of buildings in the form of slender pylons which, rising often to a height of three miles, or even more, and founded a quarter of a mile beneath the ground, might yet occupy a ground plan of less than half a mile across" (O. Stapledon, *Last and First Men*, 1938, p. 69).

<sup>4</sup> Cf. the following accounts of conversations:

"We can put the talk of the Dearborn director side by side with that of the European aviator reported by Titus Cebbett. There is the same realization of the final death of the old order. »All that king business and congress business is as dead as mutton«, said the Dearborn director. »And the banking business is deader«. »And what is coming?«, asked the visitor. »That«, said the director, and pointed to

The imaginary history is an essentially modern creation in that its proper interest lies in the process of history and not in the fictitious incidents it relates. It is an indirect or direct commentary on history in general. This explains why we repeatedly find in it passages like this:

"The history of mankind is the history of the attainment of external power. Man is the tool-using, fire-making animal. From the outset of his terrestrial career we find him supplementing the natural strength and bodily weapons of a beast by the heat of burning and the rough implement of stone. So he passed beyond the ape. From that he expands. Presently he added to himself the power of the horse and the ox, he borrowed the carrying strength of water and the driving force of the wind, he quickened his fire by blowing, and his simple tools, pointed first with copper and then with iron, increased and varied and became more elaborate and efficient. He sheltered his heat in houses and made his way easier by paths and roads. He complicated his social relationships and increased his efficiency by the division of labour. He began to store up knowledge" (*The World Set Free, Prelude*).

Or this:

a mounting aeroplane inaudible in the blue" (H. G. Wells, *The Shape of Things To Come*, 1935, p. 192).

"Boats are proceeding up the river (from Hull) heavily laden with voters", says a letter in 1807, "and hundreds are proceeding on foot. Another large body, chiefly of the middle class, from Wensley Dale, was met on their road by one of the Committee. — For what parties, gentlemen, do you come? — Wilberforce, to a man — was the leader's reply" (G. M. Trevelyan, *British History in the 19th Century*, 1945, p. 54).

"The Chinese scientist turned his eyes on the President. There was a general cry of — »Stop them«. Only the Frenchman protested. The representative of the United States raised his voice and said, »They are my people, I have friends up there in the sky. My own boy is probably there. But they're mad. They want to do something hideous. They're in the lynching mood. Stop them«. The Mongol still gazed at the President, who nodded. The Frenchman broke down in senile tears. Then the young man, leaning upon the window sill, took careful aim at each black dot in turn. One by one, each became a blinding star, then vanished" (O. Stapledon, *Last and First Men*, 1938, p. 41).

"I am come to know if any of these persons that were accused are here«. There was a dead silence, only broken by his reiterated »I must have them where-soever I find them«. He again paused, but the stillness was unbroken. Then he called out, »Is Mr. Pym here?«. There was no answer; and Charles, turning to the Speaker, asked him whether the five members were there. Lenthall fell on his knees; »I have neither eyes to see« he replied »nor tongue to speak in this place, but as this House is pleased to direct me«. »Well, well«, Charles angrily retorted — »'tis no matter. I think my eyes are as good as another's!«. There was another long pause, while he looked carefully over the ranks of members. »I see«, he said at last »all the birds are flown«". (J. R. Green, *A Short History of the English People*, 1888, p. 545).



"Long before the human spirit awoke to clear cognizance of the world and itself, it sometimes stirred in its sleep, opened bewildered eyes, and slept again. One of these moments of precocious experience embraces the whole struggle of the First Man from savagery toward civilization. Within that moment, you stand almost in the very instant when the species attains its zenith. Scarcely at all beyond your own day is this early culture to be seen progressing, and already in your time the mentality of the race shows signs of decline"<sup>5</sup> (*Last and First Men*: Chapter I).

Thus the imaginary history differs from the antique and mediaeval fictitious histories of mythical and legendary character. The authors of these either believed them to be true or tried to pass them off as such. But a modern author of an imaginary history does neither. His attitude towards his story is different from the attitude of the naive chronicler of a *Brut*. His attitude towards his reader is not the same as Geoffrey of Monmouth's if we assume that the author of *Historia Regum Britanniae* knew he was passing off romantic fiction as history. The modern author's intention is not to make the reader believe that the imaginary history is actually true. The intention is to make the reader believe that the process of history, as shown in the imaginary history, is or at least may be essentially true.

"This is the work of fiction. — says the author of an anticipatory history. — I have tried to invent a story which may seem a possible, or at least not wholly impossible, account of the future of man; and I have tried to make that story relevant to the change that is taking place to-day in man's outlook"<sup>6</sup>.

As I have said, there are few imaginary histories. A history of the genre to date would not take much place. Naturally, we can find adumbrations of the imaginary history in some utopias. In More's *Utopia* and in *The New Atlantic* we are shown a few glimpses of the history

<sup>5</sup> Cf. the following passage from Trevelyan's *British History in the Nineteenth Century and After*: "During the last hundred and fifty years, the rate of progress in man's command over nature has been ten times as fast as in the period between Caesar and Napoleon, a hundred times as fast as in the slow prehistoric ages. Tens of thousands of years divided man's first use of fire from his first application of it to iron. Even in the civilised era, when literature, science and philosophy were given us by Greece, the art of writing preceded the printing-press by tens of centuries. In those days each great invention was granted a lease of many ages in which to foster its own characteristic civilisation, before it was submerged by the next. But in our day, inventions, each implying a revolution in the habits of man, follow each other thick as the falling leaves. Modern history, beginning from the England of 1780, is a series of dissolving views. In each generation a new economic life half obliterates a predecessor little older than itself" (*op. cit.*, Introduction).

<sup>6</sup> O. Stapledon, *Last and First Men*, Preface.

of the imaginary Atlantic and Pacific communities. James Harrington's *Oceana* (1656) is in its general outline, though not in all its parts, an imaginary history of England. Its author starts with the real constitutional history of his country in which people and places appear under Greek or Latin names (Elizabeth I as Parthenia, Cromwell as Olphaus Megaletor, Westminster as Hiera, Hampton Court as Convallium). The history becomes imaginary and anticipatory when he passes to the description of the events he longed for: Cromwell's voluntary abdication after the adoption of a new, democratic, form of government, his election as a honorary Protector of the Commonwealth for life and his death (at the age of 116). The improvement in welfare created by the new constitution, the resulting abolition of taxes, the limitation of state-owned property, and an increase in *Oceana's* population are described in the concluding pages of the book.

Harrington's treatment of his subject shows all the features of the imaginary history as described above. Some of these features almost certainly are to be found in literary attempts at anticipating the future like *L'an 2440* by Louis Sebastien Mercier, published in France in 1770 and in England in 1802.

The nineteenth century produced several histories of the future<sup>7</sup>, in the form of either utopian or futuristic fiction. The utopias especially were liable to show a natural tendency to the historiographic method of description. Like the imaginary history, they presented panoramic pictures of societies, their institutions, and development.

The man who eventually produced a fully recognisable imaginary history was H. G. Wells. In his *Experiment in Autobiography* he says: "I began a book *Anticipations* which can be considered as the keystone to the main arch of my work. The arch rises naturally from my first

---

<sup>7</sup> I lack some of the necessary first-hand information, but England and France seem to have been especially productive in this sphere. I. F. Clarke in his article on *The Nineteenth Century Utopia* in "The Quarterly Review" of January, 1958, has given several titles of books which seem to be stories of the future (cf. *Oxford in 1888* publ. 1838; *The Air Battle*, 1859; *The Annals of the Twenty-Ninth Century*, 1874; *Three Hundred Years Hence*, 1881). This type of fiction, however, might be found in other countries. Of the Polish writers of the early half of the nineteenth century Julian Ursyn Niemcewicz may be mentioned as the author of *The Year 3333, or an Unheard-of Dream*, an anti-Jewish satire written in 1820 and published in 1858, 1911, and 1913. The poet Adam Mickiewicz wrote (in French) some fragments of *A History of the Future* in the years 1829—1833, published after his death by his son Władysław Mickiewicz in *Mélanges posthumes*. Bolesław Prus (1845—1912) has left two short stories — *War and Peace* and *Revenge*, each of which contains an imaginary history, the latter being that of a Polish colony in Africa in 2008.



creative imaginations *The Man of the Year Million ...* (1887) ... and it leads on by a logical development to *The Shape of Things To Come* (1933)...<sup>8</sup>

Wells believed it is possible to foresee the future. He formulated this idea in his lecture in the Royal Institution in January 1902. He called the lecture *The Discovery of the Future. Anticipations of the Reaction of Mechanical and Scientific Progress upon Human Life and Thought*, dating from 1901, gives even in its title an idea of the problems that attracted his attention. Both the lecture and the book cast off the novelistic form of Wells's exploration of the future used in *Time Machine* (1895) and in *When the Sleeper Wakes* (1899). Wells wished nothing to stand between him and the subject of his speculation. If he used the fictional form earlier or later it was for the purpose of discussing his ideas with the general public in the most acceptable form<sup>9</sup>.

In a *Modern Utopia* (1905) he was — artistically unsatisfactorily — wavering between a direct discussion of the future and story-telling. While philosophically he admitted the importance of both the general and the individual aspects of human life, he found that the historian's treatment of life was incompatible with that of the novelist's. "In that incongruity between great and individual — he writes — inheres the incompatibility I could not resolve, and which, therefore, I have had to present in this conflicting form<sup>10</sup>".

*The War in the Air* (1908), a story anticipating the German attempts to gain military control of the world, is another compromise in which, however, the novelistic form has been reduced to the bare minimum.

The next book, which appeared in 1914, belongs to a new kind of fiction. It is *The World Set Free, a story of mankind*, foretelling the invention of an atomic bomb and the resulting establishment of world peace and general welfare. The book, "a futuristic story", as Wells called it in his *Autobiography*, is an almost complete specimen of the imaginary anticipatory history with a few remnants of the novelistic handling of its action.

<sup>8</sup> H. G. Wells, *Experiment in Autobiography*, 1934, vol. II, p. 649.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. what he wrote in his essay on the modern novel in *An Englishman Looks at the World*, 1914: "I consider the novel an important and necessary thing indeed in that complicated system of uneasy adjustments and readjustments which is modern civilization. I make very high and wide claims of it. In many directions I do not think we can get along without it. ... it is to be the social mediator, the vehicle of understanding, the instrument of self-examination, the parade of morals and the exchange of manners, the factory of customs, the criticism of laws and institutions and of social dogmas and ideas".

<sup>10</sup> *A Modern Utopia*, 1908, p. 186. Cf. also his own words in the *Experiment in Autobiography*, vol. II, p. 659: „*A Modern Utopia* goes half way towards the fantastic story for its form, in a fresh attack upon the problem of bringing the New Republic into existence“.

The writing of that book taught Wells how to write history. In 1920 he published *The Outline of History* and in 1922 — *A Short History of the World*. The two books show that he realized that thinking in the terms of history is essential for any attempt at planning the life of human society.

He returned to the newly developed genre when he wrote *The Shape of Things To Come* published in 1933. "It is... — let me quote the author's words in the Introduction — a Short History of the World for about the next century and a half... It is a Short History of the Future"<sup>11</sup>. In the following few sentences H. G. Wells also uses the term "anticipatory history".

Any doubts as to Wells's full awareness of the fact that he was creating a new literary genre, which the reader of *The World Set Free* might still entertain, must be dispelled by a reading of *The Shape of Things To Come*. It is not only that Wells felt forced to find a special name for this kind of fiction, but all the traces of the novelistic composition or style visible in one or two places in *The World Set Free* are entirely absent from the later book. Fictitious authorities are quoted throughout the text, side by side with living writers. There are practically no dialogues. The general impression is that of a perhaps less balanced and more colloquial Trevelyan intent on didactic purposes.

Wells's aim in writing the book was to show how "the Ultimate Revolution" (mentioned in the subtitle) might be achieved in the twenty first century. That is to say, he was interested in the possible process by which his dream of a flourishing World State might be built out of the facts and forces known to him in the early thirties of the twentieth century. It is enough to read the chapters describing the period 1940—1960 to realize Wells's success and failure in anticipating the future. It is true that his Second World War breaks out between Poland and Germany over Gdańsk in 1940, but its description shows how strangely Wells overrated the military strength of Poland and underrated that of Germany, how he failed to recognize the importance of air power and heavy tanks as decisive factors in modern warfare, how blind he was to the real sense of Nazism and fascism. In this he did not differ from many people of sense and good will. But his picture of the Europe of 1960 shows a greater flaw. It shows how far Wells was from a realistic assessment of the strength of capitalism, communism, nationalism, and the national state.

One of the surprising features of *The Shape of Things To Come* is its tendency to assume the aesthetic principle as the rule of life and "geogonic" planning. "The clue to life" is Proportion — an equilibrium be-

<sup>11</sup> H. G. Wells, *The Shape of Things To Come*, 1935, p. 12.



tween the individual and the species, Man and the State, service and assertion. "But how can proportion be determined except aesthetically? <sup>12</sup>" It would be interesting to know whether Wells read another imaginary history which preceded his own by three years.

The book was *Last and First Men* by Olaf Stapledon. Its subtitle is *A Story of the Near and Far Future*. Published in 1930, it was seven times reprinted before 1939. Though written by a philosopher it has certainly provided the writers of science fiction with an undrying source of extraordinary suggestions. Let it suffice to say that Stapledon described nuclear bombs, a chain-reaction ending in complete destruction of the earth's surface, plastic biology including the creation of Big Brains controlling mankind, invasions from Mars by cloudlike thinking jelly, man's migrations to Venus and Neptune, psychic exploration of the past, the development of several sexes and of a group superconsciousness.

These extraordinary ideas are acceptable to the reader only owing to the immense length of time provided for future developments. Stapledon's imagination is exceptionally time-conscious and his time scale exceeds any found in fiction. In fact, he has drawn five successive time scales on which to pin mankind's past, present, and future. Each of them is one hundred times larger than the preceding one and the trick reduces long periods into insignificant moments. Thus Time Scale 1 opens with the birth of Christ, fixes year 2000 as "Today" and closes with the year 4000. Time Scale 2 begins with Heidelberg Man of 200 000 years ago. Then Egyptian pyramids, Jesus Christ and the "fall of the First World State" become "Today". Time Scale 5 carries us 10 000 000 000 000 years back. Consequently, "Today" embraces such events as "the formation of planets" and "the end of Man".

Stapledon's story of mankind proceeds at this increasing rate. Indeed his purpose is "to attempt to see the human race in its cosmic setting and to mould our hearts to entertain new values <sup>13</sup>".

"The new values" are aesthetic. The author does not accept the idea (common to the Mazdaic, Hebrew-Christian, and Marxist thought) of history as an essentially moral process of striving, ultimately successful, toward justice and happiness. His conviction that sooner or later mankind must die, combined with the absence of God or of any human bias in his universe that might enable Man to attain some form of lasting happiness, makes the life of his mankind, as a species, morally meaningless. "Great are the stars, and man is of no account to them. But man is a fair spirit, whom a star conceived and a star kills. He is greater than those bright

<sup>12</sup> H. G. Wells, *The Shape of Things To Come*, 1935, p. 289—291.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. his *Preface*.

blind companies. For though in them there is incalculable potentiality, in him there is achievement, small, but actual. Too soon, seemingly, he comes to his end. But when he is done he will not be nothing, not as though he had never been; for he is eternally a beauty in the eternal form of things <sup>14</sup>.

Pursuing this way of reasoning the author further asks himself whether "the beauty of the Whole" is "really enhanced by our agony". His conclusion is that at least "Man himself... is music, a brave theme that makes music also of its vast accomplishment, its matrix of storms and stars. Man himself in his degree is eternally a beauty in the eternal form of things <sup>15</sup>".

Stapledon was hoping that "a very earnest movement for peace and international unity" might triumph, but "gladly recognizing that in our time there are strong seeds of hope as well as of despair", he has „imagined for aesthetic purposes that our race will destroy itself" and he has invited the reader to "find room ... for the thought that the whole enterprise of our race may be after all but a minor and unsuccessful episode in a vaster drama, which also perhaps may be tragic <sup>16</sup>".

This attitude is only consistent with his vision of mankind's history as of something that ends after a series of failures and partial successes. Like a Greek tragedy, his history is a drama of unavoidable disaster, satisfying only in the aesthetic sense.

The style of *Last and First Men* has been modelled in every respect on the style of a scientific history. The book is as complete an example of the imaginary history as *The Stape of Things To Come*.

An interesting variety of the genre is to be found in *I'île des Pingouins* (1908). It is, perhaps, significant of the period and of the author's concern with the future that Anatole France wrote that book about the same time as Wells was finding his way to an imaginary history.

The book differs from Wells's and Stapledon's histories. It is not only a history of the future, but also an imaginary history of the past. Its author was quite conscious of writing a new kind of fiction. "I am writing a history of the Penguins" he says in the *Preface*. If the history differs in style from others of this kind, that has resulted from the fact that it is a satire. It burlesques the history of France and, at the same time, parodies historians and historiography of different periods. The prehistory of the Penguins has been modelled by Anatole France on some fantastic lives of Celtic saints. The parts describing the ancient and me-

<sup>14</sup> O. Stapledon, *Last and First Men*, 1938, p. 287.

<sup>15</sup> O. Stapledon, *Last and First Men*, 1938, p. 288.

<sup>16</sup> O. Stapledon, *Last and First Men*, 1938, Preface.



diaeval periods travesty old chronicles and legends. Only when the author comes to modern and future history does he adopt the style of the modern historian. But, being a satirical chronicler of manners rather than of events marking new developments, he frequently moves into the style of a novel. Book Seven especially shows all the characteristics of a novel of society. Thus even the several parts of the book differ in style.

In spite of all his interest in things petty and scandalous and therefore personal, A. France, like Wells, is concerned with the process of history in general. He is aware of some problems created by urbanization, imperialistic capitalism, the poverty of the working class, the discovery of new sources of dangerously powerful energy. But his pessimism permits him to accept the fatalistic Greek idea of ever-recurring cycles of history, the idea also popular in India. This sort of fatalism may become a source of despair and contempt for history. No wonder that in *L'île des Pingouins* it goes hand in hand with satire. And the satirical element has, of necessity, influenced the style which otherwise might have been more like that of a historian's dissertation.

Probably there are not many more examples of the genre under discussion in the literatures of Europe and other continents. But these which have been described here are sufficiently different from the novel to warn the reader that he should avoid taking either genre for the other. The difference becomes the greater when we compare the imaginary history with the historical novel. They are, in fact, antipodal. The imaginary history presents a series of fictitious events usually set in the future, affecting the life of a race and described as a large-size process. The historical novel describes events essentially included in the real history of the past, influencing people's lives in a way exemplified in a few individuals. In the first instance the view is macroscopic, in the second, by contrast, microscopic.

The examples of the genre here discussed seem to suggest that behind the writing of most of the imaginary histories there are two psychological facts: an anxiety for the future of mankind and a desire to shape or at least to foresee coming developments. These, in turn, seem to be conditioned by the quick change in every field of human activity and by the general political instability, combined with a conviction that man has at last discovered the laws governing the process of history. So it is only natural, that the creators of the genre should belong to the twentieth century — an age of flourishing science and great technical development, of wars and revolutions, and of human attempts to plan the future. Those who, like Harrington, came close to the creation of the imaginary history in other ages, lived in situations politically and mentally similar.

To all that has been said here, a few words about the artistic poten-

tialities of the imaginary history may be added. As one of the vital features of this kind of fiction is the method of presentation used in the standard historical works, its aesthetic values lie mainly in the intellectually satisfying handling of the forces working in history and in the ordering of their interplay in such a way as to produce an impression, if not of the truth, at least of the plausibility of the author's main conception of the historical process. A grand epic conception of history, a gradual and masterly piling up of events, not only interesting in themselves, but also impressive and sublime in their cumulative effect may contribute to the aesthetic satisfaction. And, conversely, any failure in the sound, realistic vision of history gives an impression of a disappointing naivety, especially when the reader can check up the predictions concerning his own times with his experience of them.

Thus, we admire Wells's forecast, as early as 1914, of an atomic bomb, because it was a result of a sound assessment of the possibilities of science. But we are left deeply disappointed with the way the rule of peace has been established in his book because we do know that no single international conference can build up a World State. Wells himself knew better than that when he was writing *The Shape of Things To Come*. But, as I have pointed out, in some of its important parts even this book strikes the reader as naive and unsatisfactory. This is due to Well's lack of a really deep understanding of the nature of political forces of his times. On the other hand, the reader feels that he faces something great when, towards the end of the book, the author gives a glimpse of the mankind of the future as "one single organism" united in itself and entering a stage in which "the confluence of wills supersedes individual motives and loses its present factors of artificiality" so that "the history of life will pass into a new phase, a phase with a common consciousness and a common will" in Man<sup>17</sup>.

The demands of extreme asceticism as regards the style, of intellectual force, and of an epic greatness are so exacting that they do not seem to promise either numerous authors or many outstanding achievements in writing imaginary histories.

#### FIKCYJNA HISTORIA

#### STRESZCZENIE

Istnieje rzadki gatunek beletrystyki, dotąd nie wydzielony i nie opisany jako swoisty gatunek literacki. Zasluguje on na uwage ze wzgledu na specyficzny swój charakter i związek z jednym przynajmniej pisarzem o światowej sławie. Uznanie więc jego istnienia może wpłynąć na ocenę pewnych ważnych książek.

<sup>17</sup> H. G. Wells, *The Shape of Things To Come*, 1935, p. 332.



H. G. Wells, o którego tu chodzi, nazwał go *anticipatory history* — historią uprzednią lub historią przewidywaną. Wygodniejszą nazwą jest historia fikcyjna (*imaginary history*), ponieważ odpowiada ona wszystkim okazom tego gatunku, a nie tylko tym, które przewidują historię przyszłości.

Fikcyjna historia jest utworem literackim, którego forma i sposób przedstawienia treści należą do historiografii, chociaż treść jest tworem wyobraźni. Różni się ona od powieści (nawet takiej, której akcja rozgrywa się w fikcyjnym kraju z wymyśloną historią) tym, że podporządkowuje zainteresowanie jednostkami zainteresowaniu sprawami zbiorowości tak dalece, iż nie jest już historią kilku czy kilkunastu osób, lecz całego narodu lub całej ludzkości. Dlatego też jednostki są w niej tylko naszkicowane i pojawiają się tylko chwilowo, o tyle tylko, o ile wpływają na sprawy publiczne.

W fikcyjnej historii zainteresowanie autora skupia się przede wszystkim na samym procesie dziejowym.

Przejmując formy narracyjne od historiografii, fikcyjna historia musi być zasadniczo prozaiczna i „naukowa” pod względem stylu. Musi unikać tego, co nazywamy czarem opisu, atmosferą, poetycznością, malowniczością, metaforą i baśniością. Musi być z konieczności trzeźwa, nieozdobna, niemal pospolita w stylu. Jeśli osiąga lub próbuje osiągnąć poetycką wzniosłość, to tylko przez wywierającą silne wrażenie koncepcję procesu dziejowego, a nie dlatego, żeby mogła posługiwać się zwykłymi środkami stylistycznymi.

Fikcyjna historia unika dialogów. Sprowadzają się one do krótkiej wymiany słów spotykanej u historyków (por. J. R. Green, G. M. Trevelyan).

Fikcyjna historia jest tworem nowoczesnym o tyle, że wyraża zainteresowanie procesem historii, a nie samymi fikcyjnymi wydarzeniami, o których opowiada. Jest ona wprost lub pośrednio komentarzem na temat historii w ogóle. Tym tłumaczy się częste występowanie w niej rozważań o ewolucji człowieka, o postępie cywilizacji itp. Tym właśnie różni się ona od starożytnych i średniowiecznych fikcyjnych historii o charakterze mitów albo legend. Autorzy ich albo wierzyli w ich prawdziwość, albo starali się je podać za prawdę. Nowoczesny autor fikcyjnej historii różni się od naiwnego kronikarza lub świadomego fałszerza historii. Nie zamierza on wmawiać w czytelnika, że jego fikcyjna historia jest faktycznie prawdziwa. Chce, aby czytelnik uwierzył, że proces dziejowy ukazany w jego historii jest lub przynajmniej może być zasadniczo prawdziwy.

Oto jak określa swój stosunek do dzieła Olaf Stapledon, jeden z autorów historii przyszłości: „Jest to utwór literacki. Próbowałem wymyślić historię, która może wydawać się możliwym, a przynajmniej nie niemożliwym opisem przyszłości człowieka; usiłowałem też związać historię tę ze zmianą, która zachodzi dziś w poglądach i perspektywach człowieka”.

Fikcyjnych historii jest niewiele. Dotychczasowa historia tego gatunku byłaby krótka. Zapowiedzi fikcyjnej historii spotykamy w utopiach literackich w formie fragmentów dziejów fikcyjnych społeczeństw (np. w *Utopii* More’a i *Nowej Atlantydzie* F. Bacona). Utopijna *Oceana* (1656) Jamesa Harringtona jest w ogólnym zarysie, choć nie we wszystkich częściach, fikcyjną historią Anglii. Opisuje m. in. dobrowolną abdykację Cromwella po wprowadzeniu demokratycznej formy rządu, jego śmierć w wieku lat 116 oraz zniesienie podatków i wzrost ludności Rzeczypospolitej Oceańskiej, wynikające z ogólnego dobrobytu — skutku nowego ustroju.

Mimo braku informacji z pierwszej ręki, należy przypuszczać, że pewne cechy fikcyjnej historii posiada *L’An 2440* Louis Sebestien Merciera wydany we Francji w 1770, a w Anglii w 1802. F. Clarke w artykule *Utopia dziewiętnastego wieku*



w *The Quarterly Review* ze stycznia 1958 podaje szereg tytułów książek angielskich, które wyglądają — przynajmniej jeśli chodzi o treść — na historie przyszłości. O tym, że tego rodzaju literatura mogła powstać również w innych krajach, świadczą *Rok 3333*, czyli *sen niesłyszany* J. U. Niemcewicza, fragmenty *Historii przyszłości* A. Mickiewicza i dwie nowelki B. Prusa — *Wojna i pokój* oraz *Zemsta* — z których każda zawiera fikcyjną historię (*Zemsta* — o polskiej kolonii w Afryce w r. 2008).

Człowiekiem, który ostatecznie wytworzył w pełni rozpoznawalną, jako odrębny gatunek beletrystyki, fikcyjną historię, był H. G. Wells. Mówi on w swej *Autobiografii*: „Zacząłem książkę *Anticipations* (*Wizje przyszłości*), którą można uznać za kamień kluczowy głównej arkady mojego dzieła. Łuk jej wznosi się w naturalny sposób od moich pierwszych twórczych fantazji pt. *Człowiek z roku milionowego* (1887) ... i wiedzie przez logiczny rozwój do książki *The Shape of Things To Come* (*Kształt rzeczy przyszłych*, 1933)...”

Wells wierzył w możliwość przewidywania przyszłości. Przewidywania swe wypowiadał albo w odczytach, albo w powieściach. W *Nowoczesnej utopii* (1905) starał się — bez powodzenia — połączyć sposób patrzenia na historię historyka i powieściopisarza. „W tej niezgodności między wielkim a jednostkowym tkwi niemożność pogodzenia, której nie umiałem rozwiązać i którą dlatego musiałem przedstawić w tej skłóconej formie”.

Wydana w 1914 książka *Świat wyzwolony, historia ludzkości*, przepowiadająca bombę atomową, pokój światowy i ogólny dobrobyt, jest prawie doskonałym przykładem fikcyjnej historii przyszłości z resztkami tylko powieściowego traktowania akcji. Pisząc tę książkę Wells nauczył się pisać prawdziwą historię (por. *Zarys historii świata* z 1920 i *Krótką historię świata* z 1922).

Do nowego gatunku powrócił w *Kształcie rzeczy przyszłych* w 1933. „Jest to — pisał we wstępie do tej książki — krótka historia świata najbliższego półtora wieku... jest to krótka historia przyszłości”. Dalej Wells używa określenia *anticipatory history* — historia przewidywana. Książka ta w całej pełni realizuje wymagania fikcyjnej historii podane wyżej.

Inną fikcyjną historią są *Last and First Men* (*Ostatni i pierwsi ludzie*, 1930), „historia bliskiej i odległej przyszłości” napisana przez Olafa Stapledona. Jest ona również klasycznym przykładem omawianego gatunku. Autor jej, pisarz o wyjątkowo oryginalnej i wyczulonej na pojęcie czasu wyobraźni, przedstawił w niej w perspektywie pięciu wzrastających skali czasu dzieje ludzkości, w których bomby jądrowe, pożar ziemi, plastyczna biologia, wytworzenie wielkich mózgów rządzących ludzkością, inwazja z Marsa, emigracja na Wenus i Neptuna, psychiczne badanie przeszłości, powstanie kilku płci i nadświadomości grupowej są tylko etapami rozwoju rozciągającego się na miliardy lat. Celem tej historii jest „ujrzyć rasę ludzką na jej kosmicznym tle i ukształtować nasze serca tak, by przyjęły nowe wartości”. Ale te nowe wartości są tylko estetyczne. Historia ludzkości, kończąca się śmiercią człowieka jako gatunku, nie ma dla Stapledona sensu moralnego.

Ciekawą odmianą fikcyjnej historii jest *Wyspa Pingwinów* (1908) Anatola France'a. Jest godne uwagi, jeśli chodzi o epokę i troskę autora o przyszłość, że France napisał tę książkę w tym samym czasie, kiedy Wells zmierzał do napisania fikcyjnej historii.

*Wyspa Pingwinów* jest nie tylko historią przyszłości, lecz także przeszłości. Historią pisaną świadomie, jak widać ze słów — „piszę historię Pingwinów” — w przedmowie. Jeśli różni się stylem od innych fikcyjnych historii, to dlatego, że jest satyrą. Parodiuje historię Francji, a jednocześnie historyków i historiografię



różnych okresów. Prehistoria Pingwinów jest trawestacją fantastycznych celtyckich żywotów świętych. Części poświęcone starożytności i średniowieczu trawestują kroniki i legendy. W częściach nowożytnych styl często ulega upowieściowieniu wskutek tego, że autor jest raczej satyrycznym kronikarzem obyczajów niż wydarzeń będących punktem wyjścia dla dalszego rozwoju dziejów.

Mimo zainteresowania sprawami małymi i skandalicznymi, a więc personalnymi, A. France'a jak Wellsa obchodzi proces historyczny w ogóle. Widzi pewne problemy stworzone przez urbanizację, imperialistyczny kapitalizm, nędzę robotników, odkrycie nowych źródeł niebezpiecznej energii. Ale pesymizm pozwala mu przyjąć fatalistyczną ideę grecką wiecznie powtarzających się cykli historii. Tego rodzaju fatalizm może być źródłem rozpacz i pogardy dla historii. Nic dziwnego, że w *Wyspie Pingwinów* występuje razem z satyrą. I ten właśnie element wpłynął na styl, który mógłby bardziej przypominać rozprawę historyką.

Przytoczone przykłady fikcyjnej historii — a nie ma zapewne wielu innych — powinny ostrzec czytelnika, żeby nie mylił jej z powieścią. Różnica ta występuje tym bardziej przy porównaniu z powieścią historyczną. Są to gatunki antypodyczne. Fikcyjna historia przedstawia serię fikcyjnych wydarzeń umieszczonych zwykle w przyszłości, wpływających na życie zbiorowości i opisanych jako proces masowy. Powieść historyczna opisuje wydarzenia w istocie swojej należące do rzeczywistej historii przeszłości, a wpływające na życie ludzkie w sposób ukazany na przykładzie niewielu osób. W pierwszym wypadku mamy perspektywę makroskopową, w drugim — mikroskopową.

Przykłady fikcyjnej historii zdają się wskazywać, że podstawą tego rodzaju twórczości są dwa fakty psychologiczne: niepokój o przyszłość ludzkości i pragnienie kształtowania lub przynajmniej przewidywania przyszłego jej rozwoju. Te fakty, z kolei, wydają się uwarunkowane szybkimi zmianami na wszystkich polach ludzkiej działalności i brakiem stabilizacji politycznej w połączeniu z przekonaniem, że człowiek wreszcie odkrył prawa rządzące procesem dziejów. Jest więc rzeczą naturalną, że twórcy tego gatunku literackiego należą do wieku dwudziestego — wieku kwitnącej nauki i techniki, wojen, rewolucji i prób planowania przyszłości. Ci, którzy — jak Harrington — zbliżyli się do stworzenia fikcyjnej historii w innych wiekach, żyli w sytuacjach politycznie i intelektualnie zbliżonych.

Jednym z zasadniczych rysów fikcyjnej historii jest sposób podania treści używany w dziełach historycznych, estetyczne więc wartości jej zawierają się głównie w intelektualnie zadowalającym traktowaniu sił działających w dziejach oraz w takim ułożeniu ich wzajemnego oddziaływania, które by dało wrażenie jeśli nie prawdy, to przynajmniej pozorowanej słuszności procesu historycznego w ogólnym ujęciu autora. Wielka, epicka koncepcja historii i stopniowe, mistrzowskie piętrowanie wydarzeń, nie tylko ciekawych z osobna, lecz także wywierających wrażenie wielkości wskutek akumulacji, mogą przyczynić się do zadowolenia estetycznego. Przeciwnie zaś, braki w zdrowym, realistycznym widzeniu historii rozczarowują jako naiwność, zwłaszcza wtedy, kiedy czytelnik może porównać przepowiednie dotyczące jego własnych czasów ze swoim ich przeżyciem.

Podziwiamy więc zapowiedź bomby atomowej u Wellsa z r. 1914, ponieważ była wynikiem słusznej oceny możliwości nauki. Ale rozczarowuje nas to, że pókój powszechny i państwo światowe są u niego wynikiem jednej jedynej konferencji międzynarodowej. Wiemy, że jest to niemożliwe. Pisząc *Kształt rzeczy przyszłych*, Wells już bardziej dojrzał. Ale i tu, choć podziwiamy zapowiedź drugiej wojny światowej na r. 1940, i to między Niemcami i Polską o Gdańsk, przebieg tej wojny, jak i opis roku 1960 wskazują na to, że Wellsowi brakło naprawdę głębokiego

zrozumienia istoty takich sił politycznych, jak kapitalizm, komunizm, nacjonalizm i państwo narodowe. Natomiast gdy pod koniec książki autor daje zapowiedź przyszłej ludzkości jako jednego organizmu, zjednoczonego w sobie i wchodzącego w stadium rozwoju, w którym „spływ jednostkowych woli zastępuje indywidualne motywy i traci dzisiejsze cechy sztuczności“, tak że „historia życia wejdzie w nową fazę, fazę wspólnej świadomości i wspólnej woli“ ludzkości, czujemy, że autor stawia nas wobec czegoś wielkiego i estetycznie zadowalającego.

Wymagania nadzwyczajnej ascezy stylu, siły intelektualnej i epickiej wielkości, które stanowią o estetycznej wartości fikcyjnej historii, są tak wielkie, że nie wydają się obiecywać ani wielu autorów, ani wielu wybitnych osiągnięć w zakresie tego gatunku.

Witold Ostrowski