

H.G. Wells In The Reception of E.I. Zamyatin

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Abstract

The article deals with the peculiarities of E.I. Zamyatin's perception of H. Wells' work. Zamyatin considered H. G. Wells as his creative predecessor, who had a great influence on the formation of the fantastic novel as a genre combining acute plot with social analysis of the consequences of scientific and technical development. The author of the novel 'We' notes the anti-utopianism of many of H.G. Wells' novels and connects it with the opposition "static utopia - dynamism of anti-utopia". Zamyatin's attitude to the realistic work of Wells is more restrained. Wells is perceived by Zamyatin as a deeply national writer, aware of his national identity, rooted in the Dickensian tradition and reflecting in his work the peculiarities of the English mentality. The created myth of the English writer becomes at the same time a projection of Zamyatin's own aesthetic programme of the early 1920s, developed in other articles and lectures of the writer of this period.

Key words: E. Zamyatin, H. Wells, dystopia, fiction, myth, scientism, syntheticism, irony, author's reflection.

Introduction. E.I. Zamyatin - 'one of the most Russian in spirit writers, ...at the same time was a passionate admirer of H.G. Wells' work, his best translator, biographer and commentator in Russia' [Kaznina 2003, p. 5]. [Kaznina, 2003, p. 5]. At the moment, three articles by Zamyatin devoted to the English writer are known: 'Wells' (1920), 'The Genealogical Tree of Wells' (1921-1922), 'Herbert Wells' (1921-1922) and several prefaces to the novels of H. Wells translated into Russian [Wells]. Despite the fact that they were all part of the program for the publication of books 'of all times and peoples' (E. Zamyatin) by 'World Literature' and were conceived as prefaces to editions of works by the science fiction and dystopian H.G. Wells¹, who was undoubtedly of interest to the creator of the novel 'We', the author solves here his own super-task. As in other articles and lectures of this period, he develops his aesthetic program [Khatyamov, 2006] on the 'material' of the English novelist's prose. Therefore, each article becomes Zamyatin's new statement on creativity, and together they form a kind of autometa-descriptive unity.

Main part. The article 'H.G. Wells' is written, seemingly, 'on the spur of the moment', about the meeting of the famous English writer, who came to Russia, with St. Petersburg writers and journalists in the House of Arts on 20 September 1920. However, all the facts that need to be present in this kind of publication (the places Wells visited in Russia, the meeting in the Disk, the Englishman's answers to questions from Russian cultural figures, etc.) are framed in an aesthetic framework - the 'fan of fantastic travels' looks at Russia as a writer: 'He (Wells - M.H.) came here in a different way from other foreigners: not as an ambassador from nation to nation or from class to class. His only official title was the most honorable and most international of titles: writer. As a writer, he came to visit

a writer." [Zamyatin, 2010, p. 377]. Zamyatin 'looks' at Wells as in a mirror, actualizing those problems of personality and creativity that concern him as a writer. Firstly, the study of everyday life for the comprehension of being: Wells 'without official guides went and looked at everything that can be seen without an official guide. And it seems that he became more thoroughly acquainted with the present-day Russian life than other foreigners. He was in the Soviet canteen; he was in one of the prisons; he was in Petrokommune; he was in school; he was in the Academy of Sciences, in the House of Scientists, in the House of Arts, in the publishing house 'World Literature', in the Hermitage, in the Institute of Experimental Medicine, at the meeting of the St. Petersburg Council' . [Zamyatin, 2010, p. 378]. Secondly, Wells' impartial view is noted: "much, naturally, left heavy impressions", but also "much interested him". Recounting the meeting in *Disk*, Zamyatin quotes Wells in connection with the points of principle for him: 1) the artist is free, including from power and government: 'The first thing I would like to say,' Wells said, 'is that we cannot be blamed for the actions of our rulers; we are not responsible for them. Second: I do not want to remove responsibility from the government of England: for its policy - I have no excuses' [Ibid]; 2) the people are also free, choosing their path according to their mentality: 'Third: we in England want one thing now - that Russia should be given the opportunity to finish its experience in a peaceful environment, so that we can see the results of this experience. Fourthly, we Englishmen and you Russians are people of very different minds. We have different ideas about socialism, and we in England do not think about communism, no - we think about collectivism." [Ibid.]

According to Zamyatin, Wells' creative originality is largely conditioned by the traditionalism of English culture, which is also manifested in his attitude to social problems and his ability to learn from other people's mistakes: "Such a rich, multicoloured intellect as Wells" cannot be put into boxes and paragraphs. Wells's socialism is built according to his own blueprints. Wells remains true to what he said a few years ago in his autobiography, 'I have always been a socialist, but a socialist not according to Marx.' And, as far as we can tell, his prognosis for the social movement in England remains the same. "That we should "overthrow", "overturn", "destroy" anything, that we should "begin again" - never! Nevertheless we are saturating ourselves thicker and thicker with socialism. Our individualism is giving way to the ideas of social organisation' (Wells, "Autobiography") [Zamyatin, 2010, p. 378379].

Thus, the personality and writing credo of H.G. Wells undoubtedly meet Zamyatin's urgent creative tasks. Being-description (as knowledge of life) and freedom of creativity, originality and irony, anti-utopianism and hereticism - are these not the aesthetic attitudes of Zamyatin himself in the period of the novel 'We'? However, having outlined the main features of the creative portrait of the English writer, in his next article 'The Genealogical Tree of H.G. Wells' Zamyatin reveals the genesis of his fiction, i.e. imitates a study on historical poetics. Likening discoveries in literature to geographical discoveries and inventions in science, he divides all writers into discoverers and those who perfect what has already been discovered, geniuses and talents: "Geniuses who discover hitherto unknown or forgotten countries ... history knows few; talents who improve or significantly modify forms are more numerous." Wells is a genius - 'a time traveller, author of science-fiction and social-fantasy tales', Wells is a talent - 'an inhabitant of our three-dimensional world, author of domestic novels' [Zamyatin, 1990, p. 322].

The analysis of fantasy novels leads the writer to the statement that Wells 'created a new original kind of literary form' [Ibid., p. 324]. Without using the term 'anti-utopia', Zamyatin, in fact, characterises Wells's fantasy novels as anti-utopian: 'There are two generic and invariable signs of utopia The peculiarity of the new genre form, which Zamyatin will call "a social pamphlet clothed in the artistic form of a fantasy novel", is seen in the combination, "fusion" of two elements in Wells's novels - "an element of social satire" and "an element of science fiction". 'And so,' the writer argues,

‘the roots of Wells's genealogical tree can only be sought in such literary monuments as Swift's “The Voyage of Lemuel Gulliver”, Ludwig Golberg's “Nils Klim's Journey to the Centre of the Earth”, Edward Bolver-Lytton's “The Coming Race”.’ Building a long and varied genetic series of fantastic literature (from F. Bacon to Flammariion and J. Verne), from which Wells draws ‘many details of the fantastic future’, Zamyatin sees the appeal of Wells's novels to the reader in the strict logic, ‘provided with a sharp seasoning of irony and social satire’.

Another important feature of the novels of the English science fiction writer is, according to Zamyatin, the art of plot construction: ‘In Wells's social science fiction novels, the plot is always dynamic, built on collisions, on struggle; the plot is complex and entertaining. His social and science fiction Wells invariably puts on the form of Robinsonade, a typical adventure novel, so favored in Anglo-Saxon literature. In this area Wells is the continuator of the tradition established by Daniel Defoe and going through Fenimore Cooper, Mein Reid, Stevenson, Edgar Poe - to the modern Haggard, Conan Doyle, Jack London. But, taking the form of the adventure novel, Wells has significantly deepened it and increased its intellectual value, brought it an element of socio-philosophical and scientific ‘[Ibid., p. 326]. For Zamyatin, Wells's suspense novels become an argument in the discussion of the plot initiated by the formalists in these years, on the one hand, and a confirmation of the correctness of the chosen path in the novel ‘We’, on the other. The regularity of the emergence of a new genre form of the fantasy novel is confirmed, according to Zamyatin, by the large number of followers of H.G. Wells in European literature . Zamyatin hopes that the time of suspense literature is coming in the new Russia, ‘the most fantastic of the countries of modern Europe’: ‘and the beginning of this has already been laid: the novels of A.N. Tolstoy “Aelita” and “Hyperboloid”, the novel of the author of this article “We”, the novels of I. Ehrenburg “Julio Jurenito” and “Trust D.E.”’ [Ibid., p. 328].

Like any myth, Wells's myth of the modern world reproduces a syncretic form. It is simultaneously technical, scientific, religious and social myth: ‘This is what is revealed to us when we go inside these fanciful buildings - Wells's tales. Math and myth, physics and fantasy, drawing and miracle, parody and prophecy, fairy tale and socialism’ [I left the foggy shore of Albion., 2001, p. 414]. The first level of Wells‘ picture of the world is scientific and technical: “Today's city with its uncrowned ruler - the mechanism, in the form of an explicit or implicit function - is necessarily included in each of Wells” fantasy novels, in the equation of any of Wells’ myths, and these myths, as we will see further on, are exactly logical equations” [Ibid., p. 406]; ‘.For his tales he (Wells - N.A., M.H.) chooses a reliable path: a path paved with astronomical, physical, chemical formulae, a path tamped with cast-iron laws of exact sciences. This sounds at first very paradoxical: exact science and fairy tale, precision and fantasy. But it is - and must be. Because myth is always, explicitly or implicitly, connected to religion, and the religion of today's city is exact science, and here is the natural connection of the newest urban myth, the urban fairy tale, with science. And I don't know if there is a major branch of the exact sciences that would not be reflected in Wells's fantasy novels.” [Ibid., p. 407].

The social component of Wells's myth is an integral part of it, for he creates ‘a parody of modern civilization’: ‘In all of Wells's prophecies, the reader has probably already picked up another feature of Wells's fiction - a feature inextricably linked to the city, that rocky soil in which all of Wells's roots lie. For today's urban man is necessarily a zoon politicon, a social animal; and hence, almost without exception, the social element is woven into every one of Wells's fantasies. Whatever tale he tells, no matter how distant it may seem at first glance from social issues, the reader will inevitably be led to these issues’ [Khatyamova, 2006a]. [Khatyamova, 2006a, p. 412].

Moving in the second part of the essay to the poetics of Wells's novels (not only ‘fantastic’, but also ‘everyday, realistic’), Zamyatin replaces the term ‘plot’ (from the previous articles) with ‘fabula’, meaning, like the formalists, the order in which events are narrated. Plot is also an ‘English trait’ of

Wells: ‘...Wells, like most of his English comrades in arms, pays much more attention to the plot than to language, style, words - to everything that we are accustomed to appreciate in the newest Russian writers. <...> Wells had his own, original, exceptional in the fabula of his fantasy novels; and as soon as he got off the aeroplane, as soon as he took up more conventional fabula, - part of the originality he lost". [Ibid., p. 415]. According to Zamyatin, the secondary nature of Wells's realistic novels is caused by the ‘slow, unhurried course of the domestic novel’ of C. Dickens, whose traditions are inherited.

Another important ‘English peculiarity’ of H.G. Wells' prose is “the smile of irony”, for he “loves with a sharp, hateful love..., and therefore his pen often turns into a whip, and the scars from this whip remain for a long time”. Giving numerous examples of ironic passages of H.G. Wells-fantastes, Zamyatin notes that ‘even clearer is this ironic basis in the fabric of each of Wells's realistic novels’. [Ibid., p. 416].

Zamyatin is paradoxical in his assessment of Wells's ‘everyday’ novels. Recognizing their strong dependence on the tradition of English classics, he at the same time cannot help noting that ‘the architect who built the airy castles of scientific fairy tales and the architect who built the six-storey stone hulks of everyday novels is one and the same H.G. Wells’. [Ibid., p. 418]. ‘Wells's domestic novels,’ writes Zamyatin, ‘become a sociological observatory, and his pen, like the pen of a seismograph, systematically records all the movements of the social soil in England at the beginning of the twentieth century. <...> Thus, gradually, from autobiographical - domestic novels Wells become a chronicle of life in England today." However, and realistic novels Wells striking depth and unexpectedness of the problems posed in them, among them - the problem of God. ‘Eternal aviator’ Wells flies ‘somewhere even higher, even further, to the very top of the sky...’. Again turning to the last of Wells's novels - ‘The Bishop's Soul’, ‘Joanna and Peter’ - and the novel ‘The Unquenchable Fire’ translated into Russian by himself, Zamyatin spatially quotes fragments devoted to dialogues about God, the conversation between God and the Devil, in order - quoting Wells - to affirm his idea developed in the novel ‘

We’ and his other works: ‘evil is as expedient in the cosmic organism as pain is in the human organism.’ [Ibid., p. 423].

Wells's religious myth is, according to Zamyatin, modern humanism: ‘...And in his religious constructions Wells remains the same Wells. <...> Of course his god is the God of London, and of course the best incense for his God is the smell of chemical reactions and petrol from an aeroplane engine. So the omnipotence of this God is in the omnipotence of man, of human reason, of human science. Because this is not an Eastern God, in whose hands man is only an obedient instrument: this is a Western God, demanding from man, first of all, activity, work. This God is familiar with the English constitution: he does not rule, but only reigns. And the banners of this modern God, of course, are neither gold nor silver, but red: this God is a socialist." [I left the foggy shore of Albion., 2001, p. 423].

Conclusion. Thus, E.I. Zamyatin's articles about H.G. Wells fulfil two tasks. Firstly, Zamyatin creates his myth about H.G. Wells, who turns out to be the embodiment of the ‘ideal Englishman’, the bearer of a free European worldview; his meaningful, focused scientific and at the same time spiritual and moral, humanistically aspiring to the future existence is embodied in his books. Secondly, it is an aesthetic myth, it is structured from ideas and categories important for Zamyatin of the early 1920s: literature is a myth about the world, and the scientist myth is modern, irony and knowledge of everyday life are necessary components of this myth, the synthesis of fiction and everyday life, the fabulosity (plot, events) of literature is its future, conditioned by the need of fantastic time. The work of an outstanding English writer becomes not only an object of reception as an alien cultural phenomenon, but also a material for the author's aesthetic reflection.

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