

‘IN SPITE OF GOD AND WASPS AND HER FATHER’: DISCURSIVE ENTANGLEMENT IN H. G. WELLS’S *ANN VERONICA* (1909)

Nathalie Saudo-Welby

Ann Veronica is a novel that successfully incorporates different genres and confronts different voices, which are interwoven and contrasted with great comic results. It is at the same time a *Bildungsroman*, a Condition of England novel, a Romance, a discussion novel, and a satirical social comedy. It is also the last and probably the best example of a genre which is generally circumscribed in the 1890s: New Woman Fiction. At the time, this type of fiction was identified as ‘novels with a purpose’ dealing with the ‘Marriage question’ or, in the words of William Stead, ‘novels of the Modern Woman’. Wells was one of the first to mention ‘the “New Woman” Fiction’ in a review of *Jude the Obscure* he wrote in 1896.¹ In 1894, when Stead analysed the most important novels of the genre, he defined them as ‘written by a woman about woman from the standpoint of Woman,’ but some male novelists, including Thomas Hardy and George Gissing, engaged in this genre, and the most famous New Woman novel, *The Woman Who Did* (1895) was written by Grant Allen, who also wrote two novels under a female pseudonym.² This novel went through several reprints and spawned controversy, in the form of several novels and many articles.³

With very few exceptions, New Woman novels end sadly with the defeat of the heroine’s ambitions, her despondent acceptance of social conventions and marriage. They are told by omniscient narrators focalizing on female characters who clearly voice a feminist message. Unlike most authors of New Woman fiction, Wells has avoided making his heroine an ‘exponent’ character.⁴ She could more rightly be called a defensive character. With the voices of the good and bad teachers ringing loud in her ears, she endeavours to free herself from others’ views and injunctions.

¹ ‘It is now the better part of a year ago since the collapse of the “New Woman” fiction began. The success of *The Woman Who Did* was perhaps the last of a series of successes attained, in spite of glaring artistic defects, and an utter want of humour or beauty, by works dealing intimately and unrestrainedly with sexual affairs.’ *Saturday Review*, 8 February 1896, in *H. G. Wells’s Literary Criticism*, ed. Patrick Parrinder and Robert M. Philmus (Brighton: Harvester, 1980), 79-82 (79).

² William Stead, ‘The Novel of the Modern Woman’, *Review of Reviews*, 10 (1894), 64.

³ The two references to this novel in *Ann Veronica* show that Grant Allen’s novel had become emblematic of the genre. H. G. Wells, *Ann Veronica* (1909), ed. Sylvia Hardy (London: Dent, Everyman, 1993), 19, 90. Subsequent citations in text.

⁴ Wells used this expression in particular in his review ‘The Novels of Mr. George Gissing’ (*Contemporary Review* 72, August 1897) where he defined them as ‘unconventional ideal persons, created to satisfy the author rather than his readers’ (*Literary Criticism*, 150). In ‘The Novel of Ideas’ (1940), he wrote of ‘self-projections, author’s exponents’: *Literary Criticism*, 216-21 (218).

As Mikhail Bakhtin was to write some twenty years later in 'Discourse and the Novel,' disentangling others' discourse is part of anyone's maturation:

The importance of struggling with another's discourse, its influence in the history of an individual's coming to ideological consciousness, is enormous. One's own discourse and one's own voice, although born of another or dynamically stimulated by another, will sooner or later begin to liberate themselves from the authority of the other's discourse. This process is made even more complex by the fact that a variety of alien voices enter into the struggle for influence within an individual's consciousness (just as they struggle with one another in surrounding social reality).⁵

For Bakhtin, the novel is a privileged medium for the representation of an individual's self-development because its specificity precisely lies in its being dialogic and hybrid in essence. This is particularly perceptible in *Ann Veronica*, where Wells focalizes on the central character while effacing her discursive presence in favour of others, thus generating discursive entanglement. What favourably distinguishes *Ann Veronica* from the other novels of the genre is its multivoicedness or heteroglossia. The confusion inherent to novelistic discourse has a positive value, representing as it does the intellectual buoyancy and questionings of the Edwardian period. Wells's humour (a feature that is ordinarily absent from New Woman fiction) brings out the excess, incoherence and lack of sincerity behind the different discourses. As a result, the novel's feminist message has been considered as problematic. How loudly can Ann Veronica's voice be heard? Where does Wells stand in his satire of feminism? Which voice predominates in the novel's ending?

The Wrappered World

Ann Veronica is neither a didactic heroine, like Olive Schreiner's Lyndall in the first New Woman novel, *The Story of an African Farm* (1883), nor the author's mouthpiece. A listener more than a speaker, she is an incomplete character who constructs herself by disentangling the discursive mesh around her and uncovering what she calls the wrappered world.

In the first four chapters, the theory of the wrappered world is the only real product of her individual thoughts. Her theory is adopted by the narrator in his rendering of her reflections, and the word 'wrap' and its compounds reappear some fifteen times. They belong to what Bakhtin would have called Ann Veronica's 'character zone': they are selected by the narrator as her most significant attempt to

⁵ M. M. Bakhtin, 'Discourse in the Novel' (1934-35), *The Dialogic Imagination*, trans. by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 259-422 (348).

define her relation to the world. The metaphor had become Wells's own since he used it earlier in *Tono-Bungay*.⁶

At the end of the original presentation of the theme of the wrapped world, it appears that the wrappings are made of words:

All the world about her seemed to be – how can one put it? – in wrappers, like a house when people leave it in the summer. The blinds were all drawn, the sunlight kept out, one could not tell what colours these grey swathings hid. She wanted to know. And there was no intimation whatever that the blinds would ever go up or the windows or doors be opened, or the chandeliers, that seemed to promise such a blaze of fire, unveiled and furnished and lit. Dim souls flitted about her, not only speaking but it would seem even thinking in undertones... (5)

Ann Veronica here leaves her own intellectual mark at the narrative level and invites the readers to seek out those speaking and thinking souls flitting around her. The wrapped vision of the world is a successful one: it feels distinctively girlish with its sensual nature, using the feminine attribute of textiles and the domestic image of the house under dust covers. In its figurative sense, it gives an interesting twist to the late Victorian debate on the Ignorance of the Daughters and the Tree of Knowledge.⁷ The question is not whether Ann Veronica should learn or not, or even what she should learn.⁸ She is not ignorant, but confused, because she has been brought up to blind herself to certain things and there are veils over things which prevent her from knowing them. The daughters 'know more than they think they know'.⁹ In the episode when she is followed by a stalker, the narrator comments:

⁶ On character zones, see Bakhtin, 316-20. When first seeing his uncle's flat in Wimbleshurst, George is struck by 'the remarkable fact that something was hung about or wrapped round or draped over everything'. H. G. Wells, *Tono-Bungay* (1909), ed. John Hammond (London: Dent, Everyman, 1999), 46.

⁷ On the debates that went on in the columns of *The New Review*, *The Nineteenth Century* and *Punch* in 1894, see 'The Tree of Knowledge', *New Review*, 10 (1894), 675-90 and *The Late Victorian Marriage Question*, ed. Ann Heilmann, vol. 2 (London: Routledge/ Thoemmes, 1998).

⁸ Ann Veronica's subject, biology, gives her an access to scholarly knowledge but also to the facts of life. In an article entitled 'A Young Woman's Right: Knowledge' published in the *Westminster Review* in 1894, a female writer made the surprising claim that 'The Battle of the higher education of women was long ago fought and won.' She goes on to insist on the need for women to know about matrimony and motherhood, subjects which had always been central to fiction. Some fifteen years later, Wells makes his heroine knowledgeable but almost unaware of possessing such a knowledge. See *A New Woman Reader: Fiction, Articles, Drama of the 1890s*, ed. Carolyn Christensen Nelson (Toronto: Broadview, 2001), 203-7.

⁹ 'You know more than you think you know, just as you know less than you want to know.' Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, ed. Donald L. Lawler (1891) (New York: Norton, 1988), 22.

The art of ignoring is one of the accomplishments of every well-bred girl, so carefully instilled that at last she can even ignore her own thoughts and her own knowledge. Ann Veronica could at the same time ask herself what this queer old gentleman could have meant by speaking to her, and know – know in general terms, at least – what that accosting signified. (*AV*, 72)

Ann Veronica's self-development is heavily dependent upon her capacity to realize *and* formulate things for herself. This has allowed Wells to avoid making

her 'a machine to carry out a purely sentimental principle to its logical conclusion' as he calls Grant Allen's Herminia, with the author preaching the gospel of emancipation.¹⁰ Ann Veronica is constantly trying to negotiate others' discourse. A few lines after the passage quoted above, she catches sight of a woman, whom we see approaching as Ann Veronica's perception of her becomes more and more refined. The woman's description ends with the words: 'a sort of unreality in her splendour betrayed itself for which Ann Veronica could not recall the right word – a word, half understood, that lurked and hid in her mind, the word "meretricious"' (*AV*, 73). Wells is here wavering: he is telling us that she cannot remember a word but he nonetheless tells it to us. The word is located in a hazy zone wherein she negotiates her own voice. The reader may remember that it is the word her aunt called to mind upon seeing the young girl's 'yellow and gold Turkish slippers' (*AV*, 43).

Caught in an ideological mesh from which she needs to free herself, Ann Veronica needs to examine the world views of those around her. Within the pattern of omniscient narration, Wells adopts different strategies in order to reproduce within the text the young girl's task of disentangling discursive threads. Overall he uses internal focalisation with Ann Veronica as the focalizer. Yet, his opinion that 'Ann Veronica soliloquizes continually' does not correspond to textual evidence. In the early sections of the novel, she speaks in fragments.¹¹ While the table of contents presents her life in the form of a coherent linear narrative readable at first sight, titles like 'Ann Veronica gathers points of view', 'Ann Veronica puts things in order' and 'In Perspective' suggest that the main focalisation hides a multiplicity of voices. Ann Veronica is energetic, resilient, feminine, young and alive but her voice is elusive. She is the object of focalisation rather than the subject: she is the most often seen from the outside through the eyes of others unless she herself struggles to apprehend a world surrounded by a thick layer of meaning and words. Wells often uses hybrid speech where narratorial commentary provides multiple entries for the others' thoughts and current opinion.

¹⁰ H. G. Wells, *Experiment in Autobiography: Discoveries and Conclusions of a Very Ordinary Brain (since 1886)*, 2 vols (London: Gollancz, 1934), vol. 2, 550. The quotation occurs in a reprint of his review of the novel for the *Saturday Review* in 1895.

¹¹ *Autobiography*, 498. See also 'The Novel of Ideas', 218.

Disentangling Discursive Threads

The male voices form a rich foreground music. They form a group, composed of Ann Veronica's father, her brother Roddy and Mr. Manning who is said to speak the same discourse in an 'entirely different dialect' (AV, 90). Their motto could be, in her brother's words, 'go home and wait a century' (AV, 90). Since Ramage's views form the counterpart of her father's views on women, she gradually realizes that most of the male characters speak the same language. Part of the comedy in *Ann Veronica* lies in the pleasure of identifying behind the multiplicity of individualized male voices the subtleties of a single patriarchal discourse.

Conversely, Ann Veronica is led to uncover the hidden meaning and lack of sincerity in discourse, thus discovering that a single speech can be two-fold. Ramage's encouraging and progressive ideas originally ring the truest of all, but the reader understands even before she does that he never utters them without deliberate or unwitting double-entendre. Their discussion on female instincts satisfies Ramage's sentimental needs and his analysis of women's economic situation reads like a covered invitation to prostitution: 'you are like an inaccessible gold-mine in all this sort of matter. You're splendid stuff, you know, but you've got nothing ready to sell. That's the flat business situation' (AV, 109).

Ann Veronica is also brought in contact with adverse discourse. Those I will call the 'DO IT NOW' group are idealists comprising Feminists and Socialists (AV, 99). She first perceives their conversation as confused and elusive, lacking in 'something'. Her reflections end with the often quoted description of a 'coherent spectacle of failure protecting itself from abjection by the glamour of its own assertions' (AV, 105). Yet, the excess behind those voices, which are constantly satirized, can make the reader wonder whether it is not H. G. Wells rather than Ann Veronica that we can hear in the scathing criticism. It is often difficult to attribute the summary of her thoughts to anyone but the narrator and even Wells himself. As Patrick Parrinder has observed, 'sometimes Wells seems to be nervously replacing a glass case between himself and his specimen.'¹²

Yet, we sometimes get a sense that Ann Veronica outdoes Wells and even some readers in her capacity to get a sense of promise in their talk. We feel that she is the one who is best able to perceive the positive value of the debates. After the characters have indulged in 'meandering talk' voicing their 'felted ideas,' she feels that there remains a positive 'something':

From that [Miss Miniver] opened out into a long, confused emphatic discourse on the position of women, full of wonderful statements [...]. Ann Veronica watched her face, vaguely sympathizing with her, vaguely disliking her physical insufficiency and her convulsive movements, and the fine eyebrows were knit

¹² Patrick Parrinder, *H. G. Wells* (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1970), 93.

with a faint perplexity. Essentially the talk was a mixture of fragments of sentences heard, of passages read, or arguments indicated rather than stated, and all of it was served in a sauce of strange enthusiasm, thin yet intense. Ann Veronica had had some training at the Tredgold College in disentangling threads from confused statements, and she had a curious persuasion that in all this fluent muddle there was something – something real, something that signified. But it was very hard to follow. (*AV*, 28)

This passage is rich in words denoting confusion. Its style is based on a systematic counterbalancing of one element against another, a rhythm which anticipates Ann Veronica's hesitation between sympathy and dislike. Wells enjoys showing how partisan discourse works and he does it very well, but he also suggests that such discourse releases positive energy. Ann Veronica's task of 'disentangling threads from confused statements' is a good description of the reader's own task. Discursive confusion appears as a sign of the times, reflecting the questionings of the Edwardian period and imbuing people with energy. The chapters break down into a series of short sections, which become shorter and shorter as the novel progresses. This organisation implies an acceptance of disjointedness and division as against the progressive illusory linearity of life and evolution. Wells describes a moment of chaos when thinkers addressed chaos, which stimulated thought and led to reform.

Out of such confusion, Wells has created some comical effects. Bakhtin observed the merits of comical novels for the rendering of conflicting voices: 'The so-called comic novel makes available a form for appropriating and organizing heteroglossia that is both externally very vivid and at the same time historically profound.'¹³ Irony is used when the reader interprets Ramage's *double entendre* or the socialists and feminists' hazy formulations and rigourless logic. Wells sometimes fuses different semantic domains in order to baffle our logical sense. For instance, the expression '[i]n spite of god and wasps and her father' (*AV*, 226) puts on the same syntactic level elements which belong to different domains. The syllepsis brings out the fact that Ann Veronica is moulded by dominant repressive discourses whose potency is as great as the immediate and concrete danger of a wasp. An added layer of humour comes from the absence of gradation in the list. The priority which is given to the wasps comically reflects her constant disregard for her father's recommendations. Wells is distancing himself from his heroine, and once again placing her in a defensive position.

Ann Veronica still has a long way to go before she can present herself to the eyes of the world in her own words. After she has become a suffragette and a feminist heroine, she finds herself in jail. Wells then borrows from the genre of confessional writing and presents her thoughts in a disjointed form resembling the stream of consciousness, with sentences left in suspense and segments of discourse

¹³ Bakhtin, 301.

lacking in direction. The hundred and one rhyming couplets which clutter her brain symptomatize the stuttering nature of her revolt. She is locked in complaint because her ideas cannot take the form of organized discourse. Identifying the ‘streak of male’ (*AV*, 177) in herself does not lead her to completeness or independence but to give in to the voice of ‘compromise’ and ‘kindness’, thus incorporating male discourse.

When we reach the episodes of her encounters with Capes, Wells’s method changes again: Ann Veronica is hardly ever seen through Capes’s eyes. The text is dramatized and we reach a sort of external focalisation. When Ann Veronica interacts dialogically, she still proves to be more of a listener than a speaker. One has to wait until Chapter 16 in the Swiss Alps before her cues extend to full paragraphs and until the very last pages of the novel before she releases her discursive energy in an organized way. At that point, the reader is able to gather the threads and piece together a discourse which is essential to the novel and probably the closest to Wells’s own feminist ‘message’: matriarchal discourse.¹⁴

The Voice of Matriarchy

The happy ending forms a sharp contrast with the endings of New Woman novels in the 1890s. Ann Veronica has ‘progressed’ individually and is left with a life of possibilities. She is a sexualized woman living with the man she has chosen freely for his mind, his easy-going attitude towards women but also for his manliness and the ‘fine golden down of delicate hairs’ (*AV*, 130) on his cheeks.¹⁵ The voice of the Eternal Bios (comprising fragments of biology lessons and the voice of Nature) has made her aware of her feelings. Her perception of Capes is expressed in a language which is borrowed from textbooks of biology and sociology: Capes ‘str[ikes] her as being the most variable person she ha[s] ever encountered’. She compares him to the other more ‘stable [male] types’ she knows. (*AV*, 117). Variability was regarded as a male feature as opposed to females’ inherent conservatism.¹⁶ In the words of Lester Ward, ‘the central characteristic [of the female mind] is extreme *conservatism*.’¹⁷ Ann Veronica has chosen her partner

¹⁴ The advantage of Bakhtin’s theories for students of New Woman fiction is indeed that they preserve the notion of authorial intention. This leaves room for Wells’s own voice and discourse and the didacticism inherent to this generic type.

¹⁵ ‘Capes was an exceptionally fair man of two and thirty, so ruddily blond that it was a mercy he had escaped light eyelashes, and with a minor but by no means contemptible reputation of his own. He talked at the blackboard in a pleasant, very slightly lisping voice with a curious spontaneity, and was sometimes very clumsy in his exposition, and sometimes very vivid. He dissected rather awkwardly and hurriedly, but, on the whole, effectively, and drew with an impatient directness that made up in significance what it lacked in precision’ (*AV*, 116).

¹⁶ ‘That men should have greater cerebral variability, and therefore more originality, while women have greater stability and therefore more “common sense,” are facts both consistent with the general theory of sex and verifiable in common experience.’ Patrick Geddes and J. A. Thomson, *The Evolution of Sex* (London: Scott, 1908), 290.

¹⁷ Lester Ward, *The Psychic Factors of Society* (Boston: Ginn, 1893), 177.

with a sense of his fitness which is in keeping with the eugenic dimension of much of New Woman fiction.¹⁸

Wells's contemporaries and modern readers have had difficulty with that ending.¹⁹ Modern feminists have been disappointed by Ann Veronica's choice of a settled life at home, where she will look after lots of boys and girls (247).²⁰ The chapter when she becomes reconciled with her father and aunt over 'golden and excellent clear soup' (*AV*, 253) belies its title: 'In Perspective'. Perspective is precisely what she seems to have lost, and surrendered to a husband miraculously turned playwright.

In the words of Bakhtin, the end seems to be 'single-languaged,' with a total absence of distance: we seem to hear an immense chorus composed of parental authority, Capes, Ann Veronica, and what Bakhtin called the 'authorial voice'.²¹ Could it be that, instead of hearing Ann Veronica's own voice, we are witnessing the triumph of Matriarchy? Lester Ward's matriarchal theses have been introduced fragmentarily by Miss Miniver:

'Originally in the first animals there were no males, none at all. It has been proved. Then they appear among the lower things' – she made meticulous gestures to figure the scale of life; she seemed to be holding up specimens, and peering through her glasses at them – 'among crustaceans and things, just as little creatures, ever so inferior to the females. Mere hangers on. Things you would laugh at. And among human beings, too, women to begin with were the rulers and leaders; they owned all the property, they invented all the arts. The primitive government was the Matriarchate. The Matriarchate!' (*AV*, 28)

Miss Miniver is refracting Lester Ward's matriarchal theses in an imperfect form and mixing it with feminist catchphrases, such as the idea that English women

¹⁸ Angelique Richardson, *Love and Eugenics in the Late Nineteenth Century: Rational Reproduction and the New Woman* (Oxford: OUP, 2003).

¹⁹ A reviewer in the *Daily News* wrote: 'But as I approached the end of this book a fear began to creep unpleasantly over me. Mr. Wells was weakening; he has succumbed.' *H. G. Wells: The Critical Heritage*, ed. Patrick Parrinder (London: Routledge, 1972), 157. An anonymous reviewer in the *Nation* spoke of the conventional conclusion which Mr. Wells, good artist as he is, might well have spared us.' (*Critical Heritage*, 165).

²⁰ Patricia Stubbs calls the ending 'implausible' and 'unconvincing' although she likes the fact that 'Ann Veronica [wa]s not punished': *Women and Fiction: Feminism and the Novel 1880-1920* (Brighton: Harvester, 1979), 184. Jane Elridge Miller observes that after Ann Veronica has decided to fulfil her sexual destiny, 'what had appeared to be a feminist *Bildungsroman* is revealed to be a romance narrative after all' and that by 'depict[ing] the daily domestic life of Ann Veronica and Capes four years after their elopement', Wells 'exposes the inconsistencies in his narrative and his feminism': *Rebel Women: Feminism, Modernism and the Edwardian Novel* (London: Virago, 1994), 169. Margaret Drabble called the ending 'a classic Wellsian exercise in escapism': 'Introduction', *Ann Veronica* (London: Penguin, 2005), xiii-xxxiii (xxvi).

²¹ Of Turgenev, Bakhtin writes that his language and style 'have the appearance of being single-languaged and pure' (Bakhtin, 315).

were invalids. The form is totally unconvincing and undermines the content. Ann Veronica's response to this speech is at odds with what the reader expects for she is said to find Miss Miniver's speech 'at once absurd and extraordinarily right' (*AV*, 29). She can feel rather than understand that there is some truth in what the feminist character is saying. The authorial voice thus refracts the discourse of Matriarchy both ironically and favourably.

Capes was initially described as the man who 'had made a vigorous and damaging attack on Lester Ward's case for the primitive matriarchate and the predominant importance of the female throughout the animal kingdom' (*AV*, 124), but the living Capes, distinct from the writing Capes, changes his mind when he sees in Ann Veronica the original Mother-Goddess. Having decided to be 'as primordial as chipped flint' (*AV*, 228), she appears to him as 'the High Priestess of Life' (*AV*, 248). The final sentimental conversations thus have a strong argumentative value: set in the Swiss Alps, they confirm the perfection of the primordial biological romance in a gynecocratic world where Capes, the teacher and mountain guide, suddenly feels like 'a young, silly, protected thing' at her feet and claims to have been 'converted to Lester Ward' (*AV*, 248). At that point, the discourse of romance, which has been undermined through the character of Manning, is made to sound natural and legitimate. Capes claims that Ann Veronica and himself have reached a form of communication where they are equals and he takes up Ann Veronica's metaphor of the wrapped world to suggest that they are speaking their own, true language: 'That wrapped life, as you call it – we've burned the confounded rags! Danced out of it! We're stark!' (*AV*, 244). Yet, at the moment when Capes claims their intellectual independence, Wells is bringing his text to a fine closure by consecrating Matriarchal discourse.

Modern readers are now left confused, because since the nineteen-sixties they have had difficulty regarding a message as feminist unless it treats the theme of Mother Nature with some distance.²² This was not the case when *Ann Veronica* was written. In *The Daughters of Danaus* (1894), Mona Caird was critical of women's prostitution of their reproductive faculties in marriage, but she constantly referred to Mother Earth, although more or less appreciatively.²³ Lester Ward (1841-1913), the American biologist and sociologist, himself a feminist, had to discursively negotiate the biological thesis of women's inherently conservative nature with the modern necessity for feminist reform. In a chapter devoted to 'Female Intuition' in *The Psychic Factors of Civilisation* (1893, 1906), he explained that women's need to preserve their interest and that of their offspring could turn them into revolutionaries. In his attempt to conciliate both his theory of

²² See Sherry Ortner, 'Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture?', in M. Z. Rosaldo and L. Lamphere, *Woman, Culture and Society* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1974), 67-87.

²³ See for example, 'Nature in her most maternal and uninspired mood – Mother earth submissive to the dictatorship of man' and 'Mother earth had deserted her child', in Mona Caird, *The Daughters of Danaus* (1894) (New York: Feminist Press, 1989), 172, 464.

female intuition and his own belief in the legitimate nature of women's feminist claims, his formulations became confused.

On the other hand the so-called reforms in which women engage are properly speaking not reforms at all, they are more nearly revolutions. The only institutions they have any interest in reforming are those that they believe to be bad, and the way they propose to reform them is simply to abolish them. It is self-preservation all the time. The bad is the unsafe, the dangerous, and women's reforms are simply crusades against real or supposed evils that threaten the safety of themselves and their children. Viewed in this light the most radical reform is the most complete conservatism, the conservation of all that they cherish in life.²⁴

Lester Ward's meandering attempt at asserting the potential genius of female intuition confines women to the sphere in which that intuition was born, the sphere described by Ramage as 'the central thing in life, [...] life itself, the warmth of life, sex – and love' (*AV*, 108). That women are 'conservative revolutionaries' is just as problematic as Wells's happy ending. Since Lester Ward bases his argumentation on the premise that women are 'the balance wheel of society, keeping it in a steady and fixed condition of growth. It is for this work that woman's intuition is adapted,' he concludes that woman's intuition never allows her to exceed this conservative task.²⁵ The difficulty reflects a problem within feminism at the time: how it was pervaded by biological discourse and eugenic concerns and the incapacity to imagine women in any sphere other than the one to which they 'naturally' belonged. Wells's ambitious and multivoiced account of women's situation in the Edwardian period makes us feel the weight of some of the representations and discourses of his time.

Ann Veronica is intensely alive because she is able to make us feel something which Wells himself could not transmit and which he refracts without becoming the lecturer-demonstrator. She is an authentic character who was born without any pre-determined language into a discursive world which Wells orchestrates. The novel presents an authentic character and a specific space where a discourse he likes, matriarchal discourse, can be expressed truthfully. Ann Veronica becomes the living embodiment of the feminist power suffusing the text and this makes the novel not only one of the best New Woman novels but also a great feminist novel, pervaded by some of the contradictions and inconsistencies which Ann Heilmann sees as intrinsic to New Woman fiction.²⁶ Wells's choice of this form can appear as

²⁴ Ward, 178.

²⁵ Ward, 177.

²⁶ Ann Heilmann, *New Woman Strategies: Sarah Grand, Olive Schreiner, Mona Caird* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004).

surprising considering his dislike of sermon-like novels with a purpose.²⁷ Commenting on the fiction he wrote in the 1930s in a preface which is roughly contemporary to Bakhtin's theories, Wells defined his own 'novel of ideas' as a form of 'discussion-fiction' which foregrounded others' voices without enforcing his own opinions. He traced this 'dialogue-novel' back to *Ann Veronica*:

I found myself, and I got to the dialogue novel, through a process of trial and error. The critical atmosphere was all against me. As I felt about rebelliously among the possibilities of fiction, I found certain of my characters were displaying an irresistible tendency to break out into dissertation. Many critical readers, trained to insist on a straight story, objected to these talkers; they said they were my self-projections, author's exponents. But in many cases these obtrusive individuals were not saying things I thought, but, what is a very different thing, things I wanted to put into shape by having them said. An early type of this sort of book was *Ann Veronica*. She is a young woman who soliloquizes and rhapsodizes incessantly, revealing the ideas of the younger intelligentsia round about 1910, which I had found very interesting indeed. Before then no one had realized there was an English intelligentsia. The book is not a dialogue, simply because no one answers Ann Veronica. It interested a number of people who did not realize fully what bad taste they showed in being interested.²⁸

Wells went on to explain what work of magnification, clarification and crystallisation he had to put into the writing of the dialogues. This work is his, but the characters' voices are both powerfully distinct and representative of the intellectual context of his time

²⁷ See his denunciation in his review of 'Mr. Grant Allen's New Novel' for the *Saturday Review* in December 1895 (*Literary Criticism*, 59-61).

²⁸ 'The Novel of Ideas', 218-219.