

**BOOK REVIEW:** Justin E. A. Busch, *The Utopian Vision of H. G. Wells* (Jefferson, North Carolina: Macfarland, 2009) ISBN: 978-0-7864-4605-6, (PB) £31.50. [Emma V. Miller]

Readers who prefer varying strains of academia to be clearly segregated ought to take heed before reading Busch's most recent study in the utopian thought of H. G. Wells; because it is a very persuasive and original work that asserts the kaleidoscopic nature of all academic enquiry and attempts with some success to meld a number of distinct disciplines into one cohesive theorem. The title initially appears misleading but the introduction attempts to prove that it is not the title that misleads, but educative preconceptions. This is not simply a literary, social, or philosophical critique of H. G. Wells, although it does attempt to be all of these things, but like a lengthy and complicated mathematical equation it tries to make all of these entities work together to lead to a single identification of the book as a study of *a* Wellsian 'utopian vision'. Herein lies the first second hurdle for the reader to overcome, Busch quite wisely does not attempt to present *the* unequivocal Wellsian utopian vision but one of infinite possibilities (a consideration that rather detracts from the appropriateness of the title). Busch is concerned that his study should feed into the, as he sees it, ever evolving nature of utopian studies. This causes a problem for his work though as it is not consequently working towards proving a particular theory but to providing a version of events that can equally be built upon or disputed; as the author phrases it: 'I will, at least to a degree, have failed if you finish this book and say, "Yes, I agree completely"' (7).

In addition to this, the author determines to not only examine Wells's thought, but also to utilise Wells's approach to utopian studies by evolving and expanding upon Wells's original purpose. This is both interesting and thought provoking but it is not without its problems. As preconceptions must first be confronted before the reader can engage with the content of the work, a very careful consideration of the introduction is absolutely necessary to the understanding and enjoyment of the rest of the text, and this prohibits the reading of chapters in isolation. This is perhaps something that might be expected from an author who repeatedly asserts the importance of a 'mosaic' (6) approach to utopian studies which he claims should be a continual and ever evolving discussion, where 'the end 'recedes as we

approach' (4). There is also the concern that this book is relatively short for a consideration of such a large number of themes (only 172 pages of discussion), and in order to prioritise some issues must be disregarded or diminished, which means that every sentence must be carefully considered for its multiple possibilities.

The effect is that of a book designed for those interested specifically in utopia studies as opposed to more generalised students of literature; and although Wells's thought is the focus of the book, his is just one of a plethora of voices under consideration, including the author's own. However, although the author states in his introduction the necessity of this continual theoretical discussion, he often refers to authors who are not contemporary and he returns to the same authors, rather than reaching out to the broad panorama he would have the reader believe is the centre of his polemic. Writers such as Plato, Martha Nussbaum, and Hannah Arendt, are referred to again and again and although they are quoted astutely, it would strengthen the argument for the necessity of competing voices, if there were more voices vying for attention, rather than ones which already have our attention and our respect. Admittedly each reader's thoughts are equally important, and to a certain extent as this book is offered as a starting point to instigate discussion rather than an end point in itself, those other voices might be gleaned from the book's circulation and consequently its afterlife.

Busch's analysis of Wells's ideas is both original and illuminating; however, this is not a book for the lay reader as a substantial body of prior knowledge is expected. For the well-informed student of Wells though it is a valuable addition to the critical oeuvre on Wells and also offers an interesting and detailed examination of writing a utopia. On occasions this book does read as a guide to writing a utopia rather than specifically an exploration and elaboration of Wells's utopian vision. This is interesting and would be worthwhile to pupils of utopian studies in general although again, some prior awareness of utopias is required and it is not a book for the beginner. Part of this is connected to the lack of attention given to utopian terminology; and of Wells as not merely a writer of utopia, but of dystopia as well. There is a tendency to refer to and quote from Wells's fiction as if it is a straightforward social tract: this needs to be treated with caution and means that the careful reader must repeatedly refer to the notes in order to separate fiction from non-fiction. Wells did often write his fiction with a social purpose, and attempted on occasions to use his fiction as propaganda, but there is a difference that must be more forcibly acknowledged, between artistry and opinion. It is also assumed that 'utopia' is obviously a term for a 'good society' and ignores the etymological minefield connected with this, and the history of Thomas More's *Utopia* which presents 'utopia' as 'no place' and 'eutopia' as the ideal land, as a result of the Greek background to the words. Busch does state that he does not want to distract from his purpose by straying into discussion of the terminology, which is understandable as the terms have been so widely defined and so diversely used; but as he does define three terms connected to

utopian studies and does so definitively, this is a point of concern. Busch needs to show awareness of the alternative ways

of addressing these themes and Wells's broader interests, especially when he states without qualification: 'Wells wrote both utopias and dystopias. He and I are mainly concerned with the former' (3).

The book is divided into four main sections after the Introduction; these are: 'The Individual', 'The Role of the Novel', 'The State', 'Freedom and Social Patterns', and 'The Problem of Death'. Considering this is Wells's utopian vision, it is questionable whether it would not have been better to deal with his modes of expression first and then go on to develop the individual themes. The chapter on the novel provides an astute discussion of the merits of exploring utopian visions within this genre as opposed to others, contemplating the novel's ability to examine extreme hypothetical situations against human emotions and limitations in a way that a non-fictional work could not. Busch makes a strong case for the peculiar possibilities of fiction in this respect, utilising similar arguments to those put forward by amongst others, Iris Murdoch (although she is not referred to) to assert the benefits of fiction as a medium for ideas rather than philosophy which is distanced from the immediacy of human emotions. The argument does not, however, make a case for the utopian ideology put forward in the context of Busch's own book, which is demonstrably not a novel. However, this perhaps should be excused on the grounds that he is attempting to both extrapolate Wells's ideas and his own simultaneously.

The chapter on the individual is placed before that of the novel; presumably to remove the emphasis from a literary study and direct the reader's attention firstly towards the individual who Busch describes as integral to the utopian ideal. He asserts that, 'it is at the level of the individual person that any hope for initiating a genuinely utopian process must begin [...]. Until we have a specific idea of what sorts of persons utopian writers are addressing, and what sort of resistances are likely to be encountered therein, any utopian speculation is at best a pleasant fantasy or pious hope' (7). This then explains the privileged position of the discussion of the individual in terms of utopianism but not in the context of Busch's study, which as it foregrounds Wells ought to perhaps deal with his mediums first, and then move on to consider the different strains of the content together. This is however, how the book develops, considering the major themes of Wells's utopian vision and the problems with the pursuit of utopia in general, when considered alongside the fundamentally fragile nature of humanity.

Appropriately enough there is no conclusion to the work as a whole, presumably allowing the continual evolutionary process to proceed where no end point can be reached, although it may be envisioned. There is much to commend this rather unusual work but the reader should proceed with caution, and ensure they are aware of the intricacies of the field of utopian studies as well as the contradictory nature of Wells's thought, before they proceed. With this in mind, however, this is a valuable

addition to Wellsian criticism, and offers its own vision of the future for academic critique, where the interdisciplinary nature of all such enquiries would be an accepted and integral part of the process.