

“ESCAPE TO IMPERSONALITY”: PERSONA IN H.G. WELLS’ *EXPERIMENT IN AUTOBIOGRAPHY*

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ABSTRACT

This article reads H.G. Wells’ Experiment in Autobiography (1934) through the lens of Persona Studies to situate life writing in the context of (post) human rights, biopolitics, and surveillance capitalism. Carl Jung’s concept of persona pervades Wells’ writing and life. Persona, for Wells, is the path towards the “impersonality” that is essential to humanity’s evolution. Wells recognized that personas are plural, inconsistent, and evolving performances whose fictional unity, if enacted deliberately without self-delusion, can serve real ends—such as the prolific creative and intellectual work that earned him four nominations for the Nobel Prize in Literature. Further, Wells presents life writing as a human right: the right to tell our own stories, access our own records, represent the personas which we elect, and enjoy the freedom to evolve from one persona to the next. A persona’s double movement, poised between the personal and the impersonal, the individual and the world, the biological and the historical, represents both the form and content of Wells’ Experiment in Autobiography. If Wells gives us reason to hope amidst a global pandemic, the specter of World War III, the proliferation of nuclear arms, and climate catastrophe, it is that these existential threats help us answer the question, “What will come after man?” To consider the answer is not to give up on humankind. On the contrary, to imagine non/post human lifeforms is essential in defining human rights and securing a human future.

KEY WORDS

H.G. Wells; Experiment in Autobiography; Multiple Personality; Biopolitics; Surveillance Capitalism

At the age of sixty-eight, H.G. Wells published *Experiment in Autobiography* (1934), where he reflects on a life of “personal achievement” while paradoxically attempting an “escape to impersonality”—an escape which, Wells believed, should “distinguish the modern civilized man from all former life” (Wells 1934, pp. 10; 707). On the one hand, Wells unapologetically celebrates vanity and egoism as “unavoidable” in autobiography since, he writes, “Our own lives are all the practical material we have for the scientific study of living” (1934, p. 347). However, *Experiment in Autobiography* reflects neither Wells’ attempt to exalt his personal life nor to neglect it. Rather, he tells his life story as a “way to power over that primary life” of “individual immediacies” and “everyday things” that once subsumed the pre-modern personas of “philosophical, artistic, creative, preoccupied men and women” before they could emerge from the waters of primitive survival “to breathe in a new fashion and emancipate ourselves from long accepted and long unquestioned necessities” (Wells 1934, p. 2). Wells’ *Experiment* maps an emerging “new land” where personas transcend the demands and limits of quotidian life to

travel through personal egos towards an ultimately impersonal “new world” where “individual aims will ultimately be absorbed” (Wells 1934, pp. 2-3). A persona, for Wells, is the path towards the impersonal that is essential to humanity’s evolution.

The concept of persona, which Wells’ borrows from the psychoanalyst Carl Jung, pervades *Experiment in Autobiography*—and his life generally. “Throughout my life,” Wells writes, “a main strand of interest has been the endeavour to anchor *personas* to a common conception of reality” (1934, p. 532, emphasis original). He cites several of his own works, including the 1915 novel *The Research Magnificent*, where “this theme of the floating *persona*, the dramatized self, recurs at various levels of complexity and self-deception” (1934, p. 532, emphasis original). For Wells, personas are dynamic and possibly fictional, although their consequences are real, as they filter perception and motivate certain life paths over others. A persona does not exhaust or comprehend one’s entire being, Wells reflects, yet it establishes a “ruling system of effort” (1934, p. 2) that organises a life with purpose that makes it worth living. “My *persona* may be an exaggeration of one aspect of my being, but I believe that it is a ruling aspect,” he observes: “It may be a magnification but it is not a fantasy. A voluminous mass of work accomplished attests its reality” (Wells 1934, pp. 10-11, emphasis original). Thus, through creative and intellectual labour, reified in works of science and art, drifting individuals with “floating” performative personas “anchor...to a common conception of reality”.

Wells’ Jungian persona resembles Pico della Mirandola’s concept of “chameleon” humanity in *Oration on the Dignity of Man* (1496). Considering the human’s place in the Great Chain of Being according to Aristotle’s tripartite division between vegetative, sensitive, and rational life, Pico orates,

Whatever seeds each man cultivates will grow to maturity and bear in him their own fruit. If they be vegetative, he will be like a plant. If sensitive, he will become brutish. If rational, he will grow into a heavenly being... Who would not admire this our chameleon? (della Mirandola 1496, p. 225)

Pico’s versatile human persona enjoys the freedom of becoming whatever it invests in, even as it remains anchored to what Wells calls “a common conception of reality”—in this case, Aristotelean ontology syncretised with Platonism and other systems.

According to Wells’ paraphrase, “A *persona*, as Jung uses the word, is the private conception a man has of himself, his idea of what he wants to be and of how he wants other people to take him” (Wells 1934, p. 9, emphasis original). Complicating the notion of persona as an outward-facing, public performance—“In classical Greece, ‘persona’ was...the mask that was to create the actor’s fictitious personality” (Carpi 2011, p. 180)—Wells’ interpretation of Jungian persona is primarily a “private” and inward “standard by which [one] judges what he may do, what he ought to do and what is imperative upon him. Everyone has a *persona*. Self conduct and self explanation is impossible without one” (Wells 1934, p. 9, emphasis original).

Like Wells, founders of the emergent field of persona studies including Marshall and Barbour reprise Jung to posit persona as a “strategic form of communication” (Marshall & Barbour 2015, p. 2) and a “performance of individuality” (Marshall et al. 2020, p. 3). However, instead of conceiving a persona’s performativity as social dissimulation, Wells represents persona, first, as the key to one’s private relationship with oneself. Accordingly, his draft for *The Rights of Man* (1940), which set the table for the United Nations’ “Universal Declaration of Human Rights” (1948), includes prescient protections for personal privacy:

All registration and records about citizens shall be open to their personal and private inspection. There shall be no secret dossiers in any administrative

department. All dossiers shall be accessible to the man concerned and subject to verification and correction at his challenge. (Wells 1940, p. 9)

Wells believed it was a human right to entertain and represent diverse personas; to access, inspect, and correct any public records concerning oneself. In brief, he believed that life writing is a human right: the right to tell our own stories, access our own records, represent the personas which we elect, and enjoy the freedom to evolve from one persona to the next. For, again, “Our *personas* grow and change and age as we do” (Wells 1934, p. 9, emphasis original).

A decade after publishing *Experiment in Autobiography*, while researching for his doctorate in science in 1942, Wells,

began a sort of Memoir of my ideas and impressions of the contemporary world crisis... and I wrote without restriction or limitation. I did this to sustain a certain order and consistency in my mind amidst the wild rush of events, and the only reader I had in mind was myself. From this accumulation I drew material for articles and discussion. (1944, p. 7)

Besides the resultant articles and discussions, Wells eventually refined the accumulated material into *'42 to '44: A Contemporary Memoir Upon Human Behavior During the Crisis of the World Revolution* (1944). Analogous to his claim in *Experiment* “that human life as we know it, is only the dispersed raw material for human life as it might be” (1934, p. 11), in *'42 to '44* Wells reflects on the life-writing process of contemporary memoir as an experimental accumulation of material for future revision: “I began to accumulate material; material accumulated upon me, some of it turned itself inside out and ceased to be what it had been, some changed from significance to extreme unimportance” (1944, p. 35).

Congruous with his persona represented in *Experiment*, Wells again makes space for variation alongside consistency: “The *persona* may of course have its own unconscious phases and variations, but it is at least pervaded by an impulse towards consistency”. *'42 to '44* keeps faith with Jung’s concept of persona: “Jung...first styled this wabbling working self we imagine for ourselves the ‘*persona*’, and it remains the best word for it. Our *personas* are what we pretend and intend to be in the sight of our set or society (Wells 1944, p. 172, emphasis original). As before, Wells seizes persona as a lynchpin fastening personal life to impersonal human rights. Recognising that “an extraordinary amount of unhappiness has been and still is caused in the world by the failure to recognize the fluctuating quality of personality” (Wells 1944, p. 173), Wells “insist[s] upon a man’s right to learn and adapt his conduct to what he did not understand before” (1944, p. 56). More than a matter of personal happiness, allowing personas the right to fluctuate and grow is key to human survival “in this age of adaptation or death” (Wells 1944, p. 56).

Reflecting on the purpose of his experimental autobiography, Wells declares, “A biography should be a dissection and demonstration of how a particular human being was made and worked” (1934, p. 10). The passive past tense (“was made and worked”) belies Wells’ current persona, the autobiographical experimenter, who is making and working in real time, speaking in the first person in the present and future tense, experimenting with multiple personas to represent truth and attain universal impersonality, even as he “realize[s] how difficult an autobiography that is not an apology for a life but a research into its nature, can become” (Wells 1934, p. 348). Wells thus anticipated what Shoshana Zuboff has called our current “Age of Surveillance Capitalism” where Big Data’s predictive analytics undermine a person’s “*right to the future tense as a condition of a fully human life*” (2019, p. 331, emphasis original). She asks,

What happens to the right to speak in the first person from and as my self when the swelling frenzy...set into motion by the prediction imperative is trained on cornering my sighs, blinks, and utterances on the way to my very thoughts as a means to others' ends? (Zuboff 2019, p. 29)

As in Pico's *Oration* four centuries earlier, for Wells human dignity includes the right to represent whatever personas one elects. Bearing the right to speak in the first person, Wells' persona is private yet publishable, individual yet pluralistic, and preserved in records yet open to the future.

Wells observes how the achievement of a coherent persona, necessary to represent oneself in daily life as well as in autobiography, takes time and continuous struggle.

And as I turn over old letters, set date against date, and try and determine the true inter-relation of this vivid memory with that, it grows clearer and clearer to me that my personal unity, the consistency of my present *persona* has been achieved only after a long struggle between distinct strands of motivation, which had no necessary rational relation one to another and that, at the period of which I am writing, this unity was still more apparent than real. (1934, p. 349, emphasis original)

Unlike his self-deceiving characters with floating personas unanchored to reality, Wells recognises how the memories and records of his life complicate and expand rather than dissolve his evolving multiple personas, whose unity may be fictional but which are real nonetheless.

The emergence and preservation of moments that contradict or transcend Wells' predominant *e pluribus unum* persona render his life story more nuanced, yet also more awkward and challenging to narrate from a stable point of view. In his words,

The simple attractive story I am half disposed to tell, of myself as an ugly duckling who escaped from the limitations and want of understanding of his... family...to discover itself a swan...is made impossible by two things: an awkward trick my memory has had of stowing away moments of intense feeling and vivid action quite regardless of the mental embarrassment their preservation may ultimately cause my *persona*, and an analogous disposition already noted, on the part of my friends and family to keep letters I have written. (1934, p. 350-351, emphasis original)

Memory, records, and letters preserve the persona's lifelong continuity while paradoxically exposing its apparent unity as fictional performance.

Wells finds that most "normal" persons delude themselves into preserving "personal unity" by telling themselves "fanciful stories" to "rationalize...inconsistences" (1934, p. 349). Still experimenting with this pejorative sense of persona a decade later in '42 to '44, Wells cites an example:

The straying curate comes home insisting on the 'higher purity' of nudism and 'natural' love, with a deep, if perhaps unpublished, scorn for the meretricious bonds of matrimony. In that way the old *persona* elbows its way back to recover control and put a moral face on life again. It is rationalization among the ruins after the fact. (1944, p. 173, emphasis original)

In contrast to such post-facto moralizing personas, future-facing persons will not force a delusional unity from their many distinct personas but instead "recognize the ultimately

irreconcilable quality of these inconsistencies...to make a deal between them" (Wells 1934, p. 349). What might such a deal look like? Perhaps like Pico's dignified human chameleon; or the interdisciplinary imagination that inspired Margaret Cavendish to cross-pollinate hybrid personas in poetry, philosophy, and science fiction; or Walt Whitman's freedom to declare "I contain multitudes"?

Wells made a "deal" between his own inconsistent personas as rational scientist and intuitive artist. As a poor, hungry undergraduate student, "Wells presented the world with a persona which combined aspects of the artist and the scientist" (Draper 1987, p. 438). Michael Draper remarks that each aspect of this interdisciplinary persona represented "distinct social roles" for Wells, whose "best works of fiction were written during the period when he was struggling to combine the subject matter of the scientist with the creative response and self-expression of the artist" (1987, p. 438). Wells recognized that personas are plural, inconsistent, and evolving performances whose fictional unity, if enacted deliberately without self-delusion, can serve real ends—such as the prolific creative and intellectual work that earned him four nominations for the Nobel Prize in Literature. He reflects in *Experiment*,

A persona may be very stable or it may fluctuate extremely. It may be resolutely honest or it may draw some or all of its elements from the realms of reverie. It may exist with variations in the same mind. We may have single or multiple personas and in the latter case we are charged with inconsistencies and puzzle ourselves and our friends. Our personas grow and change and age as we do. And rarely if ever are they the whole even of our conscious mental being. (1934, p. 9, emphasis original)

Allowing for fluctuation and multiplicity nourished Wells' personal growth as well as his scientific and creative output.

If, in the 1930s, Wells was still puzzling over inconsistencies of his multiple personas, and indulging the creative struggle between his roles as scientist and artist, '42 to '44 is clearer about the limited role of his persona as it emerges alongside, if not from, the social and professional roles open to his abilities and ideological disposition:

It is my rôle to observe things and work out their riddles; not to achieve things; the two jobs demand different and almost incompatible qualities; I have little or no ability in managing people and my ideas are averse to the impertinence of 'getting people to do things' when they do not fully understand what they are doing. (Wells 1944, p. 35)

The former tension between scientist and artist has resolved into a clear personal tendency towards the role of the observer/riddle-solver over that of the achiever/people-manager.

Wells fashioned this persona after Nietzsche's Zarathustra, whom he quotes in the epigraph of '42 to '44: "And all my thought and striving is to compose and gather into one thing what is a fragment and a riddle and a dismal accident" (Wells 1944, front material). For Zarathustra, as for Wells, the human condition would be unbearable if *homo sapiens* were "not a poet and a solver of riddles and the saviour of accidents" (Wells 1944, front material). As Wells' experimental autobiography and contemporary memoir illustrate, life writing is the genre *par excellence* for saving accidents and gathering riddling fragments into coherent unities afforded by persona.

By the mid-1940s, Wells represents a persona who knows himself, his strengths and weaknesses, better than he did a decade prior. This evolution may represent the success of his

interdisciplinary career and the syntheses he achieved through science fiction, as much as it reflects a disillusionment with attempts to apply impersonal world-revolutionary ideas in personal practice. For instance, Wells recalls the tragicomic scene of coordinating a group of world leaders in 1939 to draft a declaration of universal human rights:

These ten people had embarked upon the most important job human beings have ever attempted. They had, with their eyes open, engaged to draft a fundamental law for the unification of mankind, nothing less. Yet, even at our meetings, after an hour or so of discussion, only a novelist could describe how eagerly they adjourned for tea and what urgent engagements demanded early departures and excused late arrivals. (1944, p. 38)

Beyond an emblem of all-too-human banality of bureaucracy where tea takes precedence over declarations of human rights, Wells' account reveals the inevitable entanglements of biopolitics.

A decade prior in *Experiment*, he characterized modern life as a gradual liberation from, or at least de-emphasis of, the existential exigencies of bare life. By the 1940s, he has witnessed world politics threaten his personal survival and that of the species, while leaders put their personal lives before the impersonal species-level survival on which their personal futures depend. In 1934, Wells dreamt of achieving “a hitherto undreamt-of fullness, freedom and happiness within reach of our species” or else “perish[ing] within a very limited time” (1934, p. 12). In *'42 to '44*, he writes, “So I remain what I was ten years ago, a world revolutionary, except that the undreamt-of thing has happened and it is all coming true, and more than true” (1944, p. 57).

Appearing in a chapter entitled “The Plain Truth about the Communist Party” in Part II of the memoir, entitled “How We Face the Future”, the “undreamt-of thing” which has happened and proven true is undefined. Certainly, as Wells is sheltering from germs, bombs, and bullets in London, he cannot mean that the “undreamt-of thing” is either humanity's fulfilled happiness or its sealed doom. Rather, Wells must mean that the existential choice is more imminent—and more personal—than ever: “It has been my luck to be consistently missed by bombs... so that I can still sit in the same study...saying things men, often for excellent reasons, hesitate to say in this age of adaptation or death” (Wells 1944, p. 56).

He knows his “conceit” is “entirely irrational, as though there was some magical quality, some gift, to account for my immunity”—yet he reasons that such delusion boosts morale: “The germ or the bomb or the bullet or the tottering wall that will finish me may be almost ready for me, but until it really gets me I shall go on in my conceit” (Wells 1944, p. 57). In other words, as long as a persona recognises itself as irrational and subject to change, then its drive towards personal consistency can serve humanity's evolution through an impersonal future. If Wells' persona did not imagine his immunity in the face of germs and bombs, he could not transcend immediate personal danger to focus on the longterm survival of the species.

Even in the nineteenth century, Wells was facing a future where the versatility of the human chameleon's multiple and rapidly evolving personas was both key to our survival, adaptation, and evolution, as well as a threat to our humane future. That is, while a lack of personal unity threatens to disperse the raw material of human experience beyond comprehension or utility, conversely a persona or species unwilling to imagine lifeforms beyond itself is doomed to perish. Thus, the question T.H. Huxley's biology class opened in Wells' mind—“What will come after man?” (Wells 1944, p. 9)—paradoxically represents a foundation of human rights, as he recounts on the first page of *A Contemporary Memoir*.

Accordingly, Daniela Capri analyzes Wells' science fiction novel *The Island of Doctor Moreau* (1896) through the lens of "the persona/human being dichotomy" to grasp the bioethical implications of "an ever-changing concept of 'persona' that is extended by the new cloning experiments and by the recourse to organ transplantation" (Carpi 2011, p. 178). The mad scientist Doctor Moreau vivisects animals to create human-like chimeras whose ethical and legal status as persons with rights is as ambiguous as their hybrid ontology. The new persona that emerges from Moreau's laboratory should be protected by new rules that recognize their diversity," Carpi argues, "while the only law we perceive in the text is an instrument of the new scientific power on the island" (2011, p. 185).

This is a risk and limit of Wells' cultivation of multiple personas: while an openness to the evolving performative dynamism of personas may yield new scientific wonders and interdisciplinary excellence, it may also result in a brave new world where hybrid personas, not subject to human rights, proliferate faster than ethics, law, and humanity can keep up. However, this is not to say that laws could or should constrain the evolution of personas. On Dr. Moreau's island, the Sayers of the Law's privative bans on undesirable animalistic behaviour are a mockery in place of positive principles for personal growth:

Not to go on all-fours; that is the Law. Are we not men? Not to suck up Drink; that is the Law. Are we not men? Not to eat Fish or Flesh; that is the Law. Are we not men? Not to claw the Bark of Trees; that is the Law. Are we not men? Not to chase other Men; that is the Law. Are we not men? (Wells 1896, p. 107)

Conversely, Wells' autobiographical experiment seeks to represent a plurality of personas, preserving their diversity while subordinating them to "the newer ruling system of effort" (Wells 1934, p. 2) instituted by his currently predominant persona.

Experiment in Autobiography rejects dictating delusional unity upon a person's multiple personas, yet Wells advocates for the development of a flexible, strategically fictionalized persona to subordinate the multiple, inconsistent "personal affections" and "everyday things of life" that do not—and need not—reconcile with the prevailing persona. A persona need not be true to be effective. It represents more an elective, pluralistic, dynamic system for present and future living than a single story dictated towards a foregone conclusion. It is a principle of selection. Wells explains,

A *persona* may be fundamentally false, as is that of many a maniac. It may be a structure of mere compensatory delusions, as is the case with many vain people. But it does not follow that if it is selected by a man out of his moods and motives, it is necessarily a work of self deception. A man who tries to behave as he conceives he should behave, may be satisfactorily honest in restraining, ignoring and disavowing many of his innate motives and dispositions. The mask, the *persona*, of the Happy Hypocrite became at last his true faces. (1934, pp. 9-10, emphasis original)

The hypothesis of Wells' autobiographical experiment is that the fittest personas of the future will strive through what is personal (and what is more personal than autobiography?) towards what is impersonal: namely, "a racial synthesis" of all humanity that absorbs individual persons into "the greater life of the race as a whole" (Wells 1934, p. 3).

For Wells, prioritising the species is compatible with celebrating individual personas and even indulging in "the pleasures, the very real pleasures, of vanity" (1934, p. 3). The unapologetic—and ultimately altruistic—embrace of vanity in the context of experimental life writing evokes the sixteenth-century *Essais* of Michel de Montaigne. In the essay entitled "Of

Vanity” Montaigne anticipates Wells’ conviction that a persona serves as a “personal criterion” (Wells 1934, p. 9), a principle of selection, standard of judgment, and guiding system for self conduct and social accountability. The French essayist writes,

I find this unexpected advantage in the publication of my manners, that it in some sort serves me for a rule. I have, at times, some consideration of not betraying the history of my life: this public declaration obliges me to keep my way, and not to give the lie to the image I have drawn of my qualities, commonly less deformed and contradictory than consists with the malignity and infirmity of the judgments of this age. (Montaigne 1580, pp. 260-261)

Further, Montaigne predicts Wells’ recognition that, while excessive misguided vanity is delusional, nevertheless an egotistical autobiographical persona may be ideal for connecting with others and therefore paradoxically approaching the universal impersonality of the whole human race.

Montaigne imagines a stranger reading his *Essais* then wanting to meet the author. He is pleased to think that his life-writing persona will have given the stranger a great advantage:

for all that he could have, in many years, acquired by close familiarity, he has seen in three days in this memorial, and more surely and exactly. A pleasant fancy: many things that I would not confess to any one in particular, I deliver to the public, and send my best friends to a bookseller’s shop, there to inform themselves concerning my most secret thoughts. (Montaigne 1580, p. 262)

Again, this reflects the negotiation of publishable privacy, the creation of personas who attain an impersonality necessary to realize “that new world, that greater human life, which all art, science and literature have foreshadowed” (Wells 1934, pp. 6-7).

A generation following Montaigne, and three centuries before Wells—both of whom personified a monistic, psycho-spiritual-somatic worldview—René Descartes bifurcated the fluid ancient ontology, represented by Pico’s dignified human chameleon, into a dualism of mind and body. Historicizing the proliferation of rightless personas in Wells’ *The Island of Doctor Moreau*, Carpi remarks, “Cartesio marks a schism with a well balanced concept of persona through his distinction between ‘res cognitans’ and ‘res extensa’.... with Cartesio the persona is reduced to a pure act of self-knowledge: ‘cogito ergo sum’” (2011, p. 180). Wells’ rejection of such dualism is key to understanding his autobiographical experiment with the “process of generalization by which the mind seeks an escape from individual vexations and frustrations, from the petty overwhelming pains, anxieties and recriminations of the too acutely ego-centred life” (Wells 1934, p. 706).

It is not by attempting to transcend one’s sensual, animalistic ego or to outlaw individual vanity and vexation that “a particular human” can attain universal humanity. For that, one must “subordinate” yet “continue to value everyday things, personal affections and material profit and loss, only in so far as they” support one’s current persona—“and to evade or disregard them in so far as they are antagonistic or obstructive to that” (Wells 1934, p. 2). Again, in accommodating the spirit of the creative science fiction experimenter as well as the “irrelevant necessities” (Wells 1934, p. 6) of embodied human life, Wells’ *Experiment in Autobiography* conditions personal as well as impersonal evolution.

On the one hand, Wells finds humanity on an unprecedented precipice of danger and opportunity:

There is a hitherto undreamt-of fullness, freedom and happiness within reach of our species. Mankind can pull itself together and take that now. But if mankind fails to apprehend its opportunity, then division, cruelties, delusions and ultimate frustration lie before our kind. The decision to perish or escape has to be made within a very limited time. (Wells 1934, pp. 11-12)

On the other hand, he observes continuity between traditional worldviews, ontologies, and personas—and modern personas' journey towards impersonality. He writes, "The idea of creative service to the World-State towards which the modern mind is gravitating...[in] its releasing and enveloping relation to the individual *persona* is...almost precisely the same" as the "religions and conduct-philosophies of the past"—except "the increasingly monistic quality" of "modern consolation systems" differs from the "matter-spirit dualism, which has haunted human thought for thousands of generations" (1934, p. 706, emphasis original).

Wells' modern monistic persona recognises itself as an embodied, vain, vexed individual—the offspring not of a privative law but of an elective "ruling system of effort"—"And the desire to live as fully as possible within the ruling system of effort becomes increasingly conscious and defined" (Wells 1934, p. 2). Wells intends not to dissolve the bonds between incompatible personas and their ruling systems but rather to satisfy "this powerful desire for disentanglement" which reflects "the common experience" of writers, artists, and researchers whose work prepares "that new world, that greater human life, which all art, science and literature have foreshadowed" (Wells 1934, pp. 6-7). Wells' modern persona excels at autobiography and desires to disentangle, without disintegrating, the many personas who constitute "a World State" (Wells 1934, p. 556).

Persona is the "tendency" and "ruling system" that organises human life, and Wells represents himself as the paradigmatic arch-persona, one whose lifelong tendency has been to study tendency.

From quite an early age I have been predisposed towards one particular sort of work and one particular system of interests. I have found the attempt to disentangle the possible drift of life in general and of human life in particular from the confused stream of events, and the means of controlling that drift, if such are to be found, more important and interesting by far than anything else. I have had, I believe, an aptitude for it. The study and expression of tendency, has been for me what music is for the musician, or the advancement of his special knowledge is to the scientific investigator. My *persona* may be an exaggeration of one aspect of my being, but I believe that it is a ruling aspect. (Wells 1934, p. 10, emphasis original)

Experiment in Autobiography is not the conclusive record of a life but rather its ongoing "study and expression" of personas.

Metacognitively, Wells conceives his present life-writing persona as just another persona, such that it reveals more about his evolving personal desires, judgements, and projects than it does about some unruffleable ego:

So that this presentation of a preoccupied mind devoted to...seeking a maximum of detachment from the cares of this world and from baser needs and urgencies that distract it from that task, is not...what I am, but only of what I most like to think I am. It is the plan to which I work, by which I prefer to work, and by which ultimately I want to judge my performance. (Wells 1934, p. 9)

By recognising the critical importance—and the futility—of detaching one’s persona from worldly and personal cares, Wells achieves two inseparable aims, one personal, the other impersonal: first, “to reassure myself during a phase of fatigue, restlessness and vexation” and, second, to catalyze “world revolution” (Wells 1934, p. 705).

In other words, for Wells, persona is the crux between personal part and impersonal whole. One should disentangle but could never divorce the two:

My ruffled *persona* has been restored and the statement of the idea of the modern world-state has reduced my personal and passing irritations and distractions to their proper insignificance. So long as one lives as an individual, vanities, lassitudes, lapses and inconsistencies will hover about and creep back into the picture, but...this faith and service of constructive world revolution does hold together my mind and will in a prevailing unity, that it makes life continually worth living, transcends and minimizes all momentary and incidental frustrations and takes the sting out of the thought of death. (Wells 1934, p. 705, emphasis original)

Not the achievement of impersonality but its lifelong pursuit is the essence of Wells’ persona and his experimental autobiography. *Experiment* thus studies and expresses a double movement, a persona who disentangles individual life from life in general to prepare for their ultimate rapprochement: “The stream of life out of which we rise and to which we return has been restored to dominance in my consciousness, and though the part I play is, I believe, essential, it is significant only through the whole” (Wells 1934, p. 705).

This persona’s double movement, poised between the personal and the impersonal, the individual and the world, the biological and the historical, represents both the form and content of Wells’ *Experiment in Autobiography*. As he conceives it, “My story therefore will be at once a very personal one and it will be a history of my sort and my time. An autobiography is the story of the contacts of a mind and a world” (Wells 1934, p. 12). Four decades later, Michel Foucault corroborates Wells’ historical narrative: that as modern life became disentangled from the exigencies of survival, biological self-preservation, which was “once the whole of life, has become to an increasing extent, merely the background of life” (Wells 1934, p. 2). Foucault locates the origins of this biopolitical process in the Renaissance, which “was nothing less than the entry of life into history...that is, the entry of phenomena peculiar to the life of the human species into the order of knowledge and power, into the sphere of political techniques” (Foucault 1978, pp. 264-265).

Accordingly, Wells suggests that life-writing personas do not so much separate the “biological” from the “historical” as they bring these “into closer and more exact relations” (Wells 1934, p. 11). Such relations are the hypothesis and result of *Experiment*:

This work, this jewel in my head for which I take myself seriously enough to be self-scrutinizing and autobiographical, is, it seems to me, a crystallization of ideas. A variety of biological and historical suggestions and generalizations, which, when lying confusedly in the human mind, were cloudy and opaque, have been brought into closer and more exact relations; the once amorphous mixture has fallen into a lucid arrangement and through this new crystalline clearness, a plainer vision of human possibilities and the conditions of their attainment, appears. (Wells 1934, p. 11)

Wells thus personifies “the modern escape to impersonality” (1934, pp. 706-707) not by abandoning the embodied, sensual world of personal vanities and vexations, but rather by “power[ing] over that primary life which, though subordinated, remains intact” (1934, p. 3).

Hence, for example, his focus (again anticipating Foucault) on histories of sexuality, which “should be at least the second theme, when it is not the first, in every autobiography, honestly and fully told. [Sexuality] insists upon a prominent rôle in the dramatizations of the *persona* and it will not be denied (Wells 1934, p. 348, emphasis original). Notwithstanding his desire to foreground sexuality in *Experiment*, Wells' persona ironically suppresses its erotic drives, as he admits in a postscript to *Experiment* edited by his son, G.P. Wells, and published posthumously half a century later as *H.G. Wells in Love* (1984). There, Wells writes of “the Lover-Shadow” as “the inseparable correlative to the *persona*, in the direction of our lives. It may be deprived of all recognition; it may be denied; but it is there” (1984, p. 54, emphasis original).

Wells planned for the postscript's posthumous publication to set right the record of his life, fully and honestly, with details that, in 1934, would have been fatal to his public persona as a loyal husband, dispassionate scientist, and moral voice of human rights.

This postscript does not tell the main story of my life. It is the story of a broad strand in my life that had to be turned away from the reader in the original *Experiment in Autobiography*... All the main lines of my development were given in the *Autobiography* except for one suppression; that the Lover-Shadow by which my *persona* was sustained was no longer definitely represented in it after 1900. The careless reader was left to suppose and almost lured to suppose that the loyal support and affection of Jane [i.e., Wells' second wife, Amy Catherine Robbins] and my own conceit of myself was sufficient to sustain my nervous and imaginative balance. (1984, p. 112, emphasis original)

On the contrary, the carapace of Wells' self-conceit—his predominantly rational, dispassionate, loyal persona—had to crack to accommodate the Lover-Shadow.

The postscript includes what Wells' omitted from *Experiment* and '42 to '44: namely, that he justified his polyamorous affairs by representing them, according to his modern mind-body monism, as one with his world-revolutionary persona in pursuit of impersonality. Finding his persona forging a logic between sexual desire, human rights, and world revolution, Wells reflects in the postscript how he hungrily sought to sate his “inachieved desire roving involuntarily among the girls and women of my widening acquaintance” (1984, p. 57). With a tinge of self-mocking irony and hindsight that suggests he was misguided to seek transcendent impersonality through lust, Wells recounts how “old Nature, whispering in my blood,” persuaded him that some girls and women “might have it, *must* have it, in their power to give me at least a transitory ecstatic physical realization of my *persona* that I had not yet attained” (1984, p. 57, emphasis original). Whether Wells posthumously indicts himself as no better than the “straying curate” whose hypocritical persona he mocked in '42 to '44, or whether he continues to believe that extramarital affairs advance the same pursuit of the impersonal on which he hinges universal human rights, the postscript's inclusion of sexuality illuminates Wells' formation and negotiation of various fluctuating personas as he faces the future.

Experiment in Autobiography finally represents “the modern escape to impersonality”—“an escape from first-hand egoism and immediacy, but...no longer an escape from fact” (Wells 1934, pp. 706-707). It is a journey through multiple individual personas towards “the less personal activities now increasing in human society”—activities which have led Wells to “a participation in the greater life of the [human] race as a whole” (Wells 1934, p. 3). Readers of

Wells' experiment will experience with him the uncertain hope of human possibility, the "change from egoism to a larger life [which] is...now entirely a change of perspective" (Wells 1934, p. 706). Writing in between the First and Second World Wars, Wells was understandably skeptical about humanity's "will and power" to undertake the changes necessary to avoid civilization-ending catastrophes resulting from delusional egoism:

For escape, vast changes in the educational, economic and directive structure of human society are necessary. They are definable. They are practicable. But they demand courage and integrity. They demand a force and concentration of will and a power of adaptation in habits and usages which may or may not be within the compass of mankind. (Wells 1934, p. 12)

One way to expand "the compass of mankind" is autobiographical experimentation that inspires without prescribing diverse personas, remembering past lives to face the future.

In the second chapter of *Experiment in Autobiography*, entitled "Persona and Personality," Wells considers the payoff of his "personal achievement" (1934, p. 10): "I have shown that human life as we know it, is only the dispersed raw material for human life as it might be" (1934, p. 11). He makes no promises, yet entertains some pessimism, about the future personas who might come to shape this raw human material. In *The Fate of Homo Sapiens* (1939), Wells laments,

there is no creed, no way of living left in the world at all, that really meets the needs of the time... all the main religions, patriotic, moral and customary systems in which human beings are sheltering today, appear to be in a state of jostling and mutually destructive movement, like the houses and palaces and other buildings of some vast, sprawling city overtaken by a landslide. (1939, p. 291)

Indeed, the shaping of raw human material in the twenty-first century appears as misguided and dangerous as in any preceding century.

Zuboff defines *surveillance capitalism* as "a new economic order that claims human experience as free raw material for hidden commercial practices of extraction, prediction, and sales" (2019, front material). Beyond the dilemma that social media companies monetize users' attention and data without informed consent, Zuboff argues that surveillance capitalism seizes "critical human rights" and is as threatening "to human nature in the twenty-first century as industrial capitalism was to the natural world in the nineteenth and twentieth" (2019, front material). To escape the danger and seize the opportunity of shaping raw human material, Wells turns to autobiography, since "the directive *persona* system is of leading importance only when it is sufficiently consistent and developed to be the ruling theme of the story" (Wells 1934, p. 10, emphasis original).

As we navigate the twenty-first-century proliferation of hybrid personas, increasingly exaggerated and divided by social media that cynically exploits human nature in exchange for impersonal connection with so-called friends, *Experiment in Autobiography* lends perspective and hope—hope that it is possible to celebrate our diverse individual personas and to tell our own stories in the first person while also practicing "faith and service of constructive world revolution" (Wells 1934, p. 705). In *21 Lessons for the 21st Century*, Yuval Noah Harari considers "people who spend countless hours constructing and embellishing a perfect self online, becoming attached to their own creation, and mistaking it for the truth about themselves" (2018, p. 306). Through the posturing performance of narrowly cultivated public personas, "a family holiday fraught with traffic jams, petty squabbles, and tense silences becomes a collective of beautiful panoramas, perfect dinners, and smiling faces" (2018, p. 306).

To be sure, Wells would not advocate to include all such “everyday things of life” (Wells 1934, p. 2), lest it overwhelm “my personal unity, the consistency of my present *persona*” (Wells 1934, p. 349, emphasis original) and exacerbate the “feeling of being intolerably hampered by irrelevant necessities” (Wells 1934, p. 5). However, Wells might concede with Harari that “99 percent of what we experience never becomes part of the story of the self” (Harari 2018, p. 306)—with this caveat: that our present personas, without self-delusion, carefully elect the one percent of our experience that does become part of the story of the self.

Among the actionable insights of *Experiment in Autobiography* is the possibility of representing many personas and narratives under a united “ruling system of effort” (Wells 1934, p. 2). The risk of investing in a single system or persona is a descent into nihilism when that system or persona disintegrates. In Harari’s words, “To have one story is the most reassuring situation of all. Everything is perfectly clear. To be suddenly left without any story is terrifying. Nothing makes any sense” (2018, p. 6). Wells prepared for this danger by establishing a persona’s freedom and right to “grow and change and age as we do” (Wells 1934, p. 9). Surveying the failed arch-narratives of previous centuries, Harari observes, “We are still in the nihilist moment of disillusionment and anger, after people have lost faith in the old stories but before they have embraced a new one” (2018, p. 18).

In such a moment, autobiographical experimentation represents, far more than personal vanity, nothing less than a declaration of human rights. Wells presents an alternative to false binary choices between biology and history, science and art, or private individuals and public humanity. To attain a persona at home in the world, a person must begin with their own narrow perspective.

Essentially this autobiography treats of the steady expansion of the interests and activities of a brain, emerging from what I have called a narrow-scope way of living, to a broader and broader outlook and a consequent longer reach of motive... More and more consciously the individual adventurer, as he disentangles himself from the family associations in which he was engendered, is displayed trying to make himself a citizen of the world. As his *persona* becomes lucid it takes that form. (Wells 1934, pp. 347-348, emphasis original)

At the start of *Experiment in Autobiography*, Wells predicts his persona’s evolution from a confused mortal individual to an “undying” and purposeful collective: “The story will begin in perplexity and... culminate in the attainment of a clear sense of purpose, conviction that the coming great world of order, is real and sure” (1934, p. 13). This attainment of clarity and purpose results not despite but because of Wells’ imminent loss of “individual life...with time running out and a thousand entanglements delaying realization. For me maybe—but surely not for us” (1934, p. 14).

Wells finally achieves his “escape to impersonality” (Wells 1934, p. 707), yet far from abandoning his individual persona, his autobiographical experiment concludes with a return to its humble origins:

So ends this record of the growth and general adventure of my brain which, first squinted and bubbled at the universe and reached out its feeble little hands to grasp it, eight and sixty years ago, in a shabby bedroom over the china shop that was called Atlas House in High Street, Bromley, Kent. THE END. (Wells 1934, p. 707)

Reprising his *Experiment* a decade later in ‘42 to ‘44, Wells celebrates his personal consistency and the realization of predictions he made in *Autobiography*: “In that book I make certain

criticisms and forecasts, and I see no reason in anything that has happened since to modify them. They might have been written yesterday instead of nine years ago" (Wells 1944, p. 59).

However, while editing the posthumous postscript, G.P. Wells took a page from his father's book to challenge this consistent persona. The son describes the editorial challenges that surfaced in places where his father had revised "sections written years before and especially when these involved the modification of earlier judgments. In such cases I have generally given priority to the earlier version, written while the events were relatively fresh in his mind" (G.P. Wells 1984, p. 20). While the postscript lends fullness and honesty to Wells' life story by publishing what was suppressed, nonetheless editorial discretion demands the suppression of certain personas and personal variations in the name of coherence. For example, to prove his consistency, if not his prophecy, while absolving himself of the need to modify previous statements, Wells reiterates in '42 to '44 that ten years prior in *Experiment*, "I gave reasons for fearing that Russia may relapse towards a bigoted oriental despotism if it persists in its exclusive attitude towards Western ideas" (1944, p. 59).

Wells would take no pleasure to learn that such predictions have proven true in the seventy-six years since his passing. Nor would he take heart from the anti-scientific politicization of public health that has plagued humanity's response to the latest pandemic. As the end of '42 to '44 warns,

The germ, the virus, can adapt itself to new occasions within the life span of a single human being. Only the hard-thinking man with the microscope, working without haste and without delay, can hope to anticipate and avert that attack upon mankind... Knowledge or extinction. There is no other choice for man.
(Wells 1944, p. 212)

Beyond performing a consistent yet evolving persona, why did Wells consistently revisit patterns and predictions from his life and times across the experimental autobiography, contemporary memoir, and postscript—and why should we revisit his experiences today? According to David C. Giles, "Recognising a type, or pattern, in what Jung calls 'humanity's constantly repeated experiences' is clearly a matter of interpretation, but doing so may be an important task for Persona researchers" (2020, p. 23).

If Wells gives us reason to hope amidst a global pandemic, the specter of World War III, the proliferation of nuclear arms, and climate catastrophe, it is that these existential threats help us answer the question, "What will come after man?" To consider the answer is not to give up on humankind. On the contrary, to imagine nonhuman lifeforms and forms of life, which "type of persona is not really considered in the foundational persona studies literature" (Giles 2020, p. 25)—whether extraterrestrials, posthuman cyborgs, genetic chimeras, or impersonal humanoids who transcend the old personas of "man" as we know them today—is essential in defining human rights and securing a human future. Only once we are free from the delusions of personal unity can we unite in an "escape to impersonality".

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