

Bad Romance and Failed Mediation: Spirit and Matter in Wells's *The Invisible Man* and *The Wonderful Visit*

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H. G. Wells's late-Victorian fiction is filled with fantastical, mechanical models and science experiments. In later decades, Wells likened this machinery and its "scientific patter" to the formal components of a narrative "magic trick" ("Preface" viii). As Wells himself treats them, scientific romances like *The Time Machine* (1895) seek "to domesticate the impossible hypothesis": they invite us to take their machinery on faith, through the felt spiritual and material experience of technical immersion ("Preface" viii). Elsewhere I have argued that these fictions both invoke and ironize earlier religious models of divine design and persuasion, transforming vestigial spiritual forms into narratives of human artifice and invention, or what historian David Noble has called "the religion of technology" (9).

ABSTRACT: H. G. Wells's scientific romances often invite us to take their "impossible hypotheses" on faith. This essay, however, explores an alternate path in Wells's fiction, where successful experiments and astonishing miracles do not inspire wonder or belief, but rather repulsion, contempt, and disgust. Filled with miscues and anticlimaxes, *The Invisible Man* and *The Wonderful Visit* frustrate efforts at spiritual and empirical persuasion, through the failed reception and broken media forms of deflated romance. Instead of resolving such speculative possibilities, these works deploy a battery of technical special effects, drawn from experimental scientific method and the theological argument from design. Whether in the fantastical physical form of *The Wonderful Visit's* angel inhabiting Sussex, or the Invisible Man's useless devices and abjectly transparent body, both novels show how science fiction is premised on a technical structure of persuasion rooted in the anxious perception of functional material detail and complexity.

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This essay, however, explores an alternate path in Wells's early scientific romances, in which successful experiments and astonishing miracles do not inspire wonder or belief, but rather repulsion, contempt, and disgust. In *The Invisible Man* (1897), the "experimental investigator" Griffin succeeds in making himself invisible and then must face a host of unpleasant consequences in a world where he is naked and vulnerable without his scientific apparatus or other physical and communicative aids (13). Through Griffin's invisibility, Wells presents a peculiarly aversive form of media and mediation in which the human body itself is transformed into a network of transparent and defenseless matter. In Wells's earlier satirical romance, *The Wonderful Visit* (1895), we witness a similarly miraculous and disappointing event: the visit of a winged angel to a small Sussex village and his ensuing reception as disabled, disgusting, criminal, and, ultimately, socialist.

Published on the heels of *The Time Machine*, *The Wonderful Visit* and *The Invisible Man* challenge the easy satisfactions of scientific and spiritual romance. With energetic persistence, these two works deploy a battery of narrative machinery and technical special effects, drawn from both experimental scientific method and the theological argument from design. In both cases, we repeatedly confront the blockage of this religious and empirical persuasion, through the failed reception and broken media forms of deflated romance. Readers may ask, can these tales ever move beyond posing "the impossible hypothesis" (Wells, "Preface" viii)? Can they affirmatively state that yes, he really is an angel; and, yes, he really is a man—an invisible man? This essay suggests that *The Wonderful Visit* and *The Invisible Man* should interest us precisely because they do not always seek to resolve such moments of speculative possibility. As bad romances, filled with miscues and anticlimaxes, these novels show us how the genre of science fiction is premised not only on "cognitive estrangement" (Suvin 372), but also on the technical structure of speculative persuasion: a structure rooted in the anxious and often frustrated perception of felt material presence, complexity, and detail.

I. Bad Romance

For Wells, nothing inspires contempt and aversion more than the bungled spectacle of lost faith in fiction-making, especially when both the Invisible Man and the Angel repeatedly insist on their empirical reality, a reality that spectators nonetheless view as grotesque and abject. Whether in the case of the Angel's failed efforts at conviction or of Griffin's obsession with material aids

and “appliances,” these works promise faith but leave us with opaque technical media, intensified through blockage and static (Wells, *Invisible Man* 13).

It is no coincidence that, following these two works, Wells voiced increasing skepticism toward the traditional narrative armature of romance—that is, toward the “touches of prosaic detail” that must make fiction “human and real” after its initial “magic trick” (“Preface” viii). Both *The Wonderful Visit* and *The Invisible Man* strain against these material limits, and, by the time Wells published his first lengthier work of social prophecy, *Anticipations* (1902), he celebrated his freedom from fiction’s time-bound thick description, its restricted human embodiment, and its inability to imagine an expansive future. As Wells bluntly remarks, “narrative form becomes more and more of a nuisance” (*Anticipations* 1-2). Instead, he embraces journalism as a more effective and scientific mode of forecast and speculation. “Fiction,” Wells suggests,

is necessarily concrete and definite; it permits of no open alternatives; its aim of illusion prevents a proper amplitude of demonstration, and modern prophecy should be, one submits, a branch of speculation, and should follow with all decorum the scientific method. The very form of fiction carries with it something of disavowal. (*Anticipations* 1-2)

Here Wells describes both his frustration with restrictively “concrete” forms of representation, and his resulting fantasy of unmediated prophecy and scientific revelation, realized through a newly expansive “branch of speculation.” He uses a spiritually freighted term—prophecy—to define this speculative knowledge, evoking a continuum between practices of revealed and natural theology, between direct prophetic revelation from God and faith mediated by natural evidence, prosaic detail, and human reason.

Even more striking, however, is what this turn to prophecy reveals about the greater spiritual and material direction of Wells’s speculation. For, through his fantasy of a modern genre of abstract knowledge and unmediated prophecy, Wells comes to resemble no one so much as his own Invisible Man, who initially believes that his condition will provide him with an ideally disembodied form of power and spiritual vision, much like the expansive grandeur of Wells’s speculative inductions. Describing this earlier mindset to his false friend Dr. Kemp, Griffin reflects:

To do such a thing would be to transcend magic. And I beheld, unclouded by doubt, a magnificent vision of all that being invisible might mean to a man,—the mystery, the power, the freedom. Drawbacks I saw none. You have only to think! And I, a shabby, poverty-struck, hemmed-in demonstrator, teaching fools in a provincial college, might suddenly become—this. (Wells, *Invisible Man* 92)

Griffin is inspired by a fantasy of superhuman possibility—of living above and beyond the limits of human society. He is a faithful adherent to experimental hypothesis, believing in the impossible and “unclouded by doubt.”

As Griffin soon discovers, however, invisibility does not make him magical and powerful. His experiments are successful, and should, theoretically, produce effects of technical wonder and spiritual persuasion. Yet, instead of producing the results that he expects, his “magic trick” goes awkwardly awry, making him even more painfully impaired by material human wants and disabilities (Wells, “Preface” viii). In this fittingly subtitled “Grotesque Romance” (*Invisible Man* xxviii), Griffin is struck by “the full disadvantage of my condition. I had no shelter, no covering. To get clothing was to forego all my advantage, to make of myself a strange and terrible thing. I was fasting; for to eat, to fill myself with unassimilated matter, would be to become grotesquely visible again” (114). To invoke a line from Tom McCarthy’s novel *Remainder* (2005), “matter” is Griffin’s “undoing” (17). An invisible man cannot benefit from being invisible so long as he lives within an actual material body, even a transparent one. Forgotten within his abstractly grand speculations, this “prosaic detail”—of “real,” “human” life and narrative—comes back to haunt Griffin each and every moment (“Preface” viii). For, as he reflects on his many wants, Griffin also effectively reflects upon the worn mechanical appurtenances of fiction—setting, community, relationship, character, and worldview: “I had no refuge, no appliances, no human being in the world in whom I could confide” (*Invisible Man* 108).

II. Failed Mediation

Earlier I suggested affinities between the Invisible Man’s condition and Wells’s own fantasy of social speculation unbound by conventional narrative and material form. In *The Invisible Man*, Griffin exposes the risks of construing Wells’s social prophecy too rigidly—as purely disembodied and immaterial—and thus as removed from the vulgar yet necessary mediations of everyday life. For Griffin, this lack of foresight is consequential, as it is for Wells, whom we remember today not for his journalism but for the grotesque and speculative materiality of his fiction: for the thick, messy description that houses his expansive prophecy.

Whether in *The Invisible Man* or in Wells’s forays beyond romance, this awkward stuff of life—of functional technical detail—persistently defines the mediated form of social and narrative relationships. Despite his attempts to transcend these limits, after his invisibility Griffin must exist steeped in embodied

complexity, in a mocking echo of “the trim clockwork thought” of natural theology, as Wells terms it in his early scientific writing (“The Rediscovery of the Unique” 111).¹ Indeed, the Invisible Man’s greatest failing lies in his limited grasp of these complex and physically mediated structures, as designs that typically support agency and intent. He does not realize, until too late, that power inheres in networks, relationships, and systems, and that these systems rely upon specific social and material adjuncts. Instead of simply prevailing upon his invisible state, Griffin’s condition requires constant material support: he is nothing without partners, appliances, apparatuses, prostheses, and networks. “Alone,” Griffin exclaims, “it is wonderful how little a man can do alone!” (Wells, *Invisible Man* 124). Through his powerful need for these physical and social connections, Griffin highlights a process of “radical mediation,” defined by theorist Richard Grusin as a relationship where “all bodies (whether human or nonhuman) are fundamentally media and life itself is a form of mediation” (132). The Invisible Man desperately seeks the dynamic ecology of “organic and inorganic entities” that Grusin explores (146).

Being invisible alone cannot help Griffin: his miracle requires the constant support of material form in order to be believed. From the novel’s beginning, we witness his obsessive pursuit of experimental apparatus, instruments, appliances, and books. Hundreds of glass bottles arrive at the inn with his baggage, and Griffin’s determined recovery of these instruments serves as a material compensation for his own insecure physical and social status. Moreover, as he arranges their delivery, Griffin must confront an even more symbolically freighted device in his room: a stopped clock, examined and dissected by townsman Teddy Henfrey, who seeks to delay and observe the odd stranger. Accused by Griffin of “simply humbugging,” Henfrey adds needless technical detail to a process that only requires “fix[ing] the hour-hand on its axle” (Wells, *Invisible Man* 14). Yet, while Henfrey’s and Griffin’s mechanisms recall William Paley’s famed analogy of watch and divine watchmaker, their objects also resist serving as transparent vehicles for the mediation of spiritual evidence. Partial, excessive, intrusive, and perhaps unnecessary, these devices cast an anxious light on design as a perceptible claim of presence and intention, whether divine or otherwise.

Beyond his pursuit of apparatus, the Invisible Man also engages in the social and bodily employment of radical mediation. He himself becomes physiological media. During the progress of his own experiment, Griffin presents a peculiarly aversive form of mediation, in which “the whole fabric of a man”—his “fibres” of bone, flesh, hair, nail, and nerves—are transformed into an interdependent network of defenseless and permeable matter (Wells, *Invisible*

Man 91). Other forms of linkage and mediation are heightened through this novel's uncanny reversal of positive and negative space. Griffin's living body is uneasily defined by clothing, the elements, the digestion of food, and its perpetual communication with matter: whether footprints, sound, smell, or even air. Snow "settle[s] on [him] and expose[s] [him]," and rain makes him a "watery outline" (114). Griffin's most labored and needy mediations, however, emerge through his efforts at social engagements and relationships, abortive as they are. Critic Jeanne Walker has emphasized Griffin's social isolation as a scientist, and other scholars have likened him to the solitary fin-de-siècle type of an anarchist antihero. Even so, Griffin is nothing if not energetic in his quest to find human partners, first seeking an alliance with the town tramp Thomas Marvel and then with his former school-fellow Dr. Kemp. As he tells Marvel, "I've chosen you. . . You are the only man except some of those fools down there, who knows there is such a thing as an invisible man. You have to be my helper. Help me—and I will do great things for you" (48). Griffin relies upon these individuals for aid and impersonation, and particularly appeals to Marvel with his disembodied "Voice" (43), which parodies divine prophecy in its failed efforts to ventriloquize the man as his adjunct and communicative apparatus.

III. Spiritual and Technical Persuasion

Beyond the futile appeals of its "Voice," *The Invisible Man* challenges greater expectations surrounding faith and empirical persuasion, as both readers and characters seek to perceive Griffin's impossible materiality (43). Critics Bernard Bergonzi and Robert Sirabian have stressed the romance's focus on scientific method and, especially, its critique of the limits of Baconian methodology. Viewers thus respond to Griffin with a blend of horror, disgust, skepticism, and incomprehension, since one cannot accept the unseen when it does not follow acceptable standards of visual proof. This uncertainty, moreover, is suffused with broader questions surrounding the failed reception of religious and scientific conviction. As Wells's narrator notes, "it is so much easier not to believe in an invisible man; and those who had actually seen him dissolve into air, or felt the strength of his arm, could be counted on the fingers of two hands" (49). From the moment of his arrival at the village of Iping, Griffin inspires a malignant curiosity in its inhabitants, who first view him as disabled and "ugly" (14), with his peculiar "goggling spectacles and ghastly bandaged face" (23), and then as more suspiciously occult and antisocial—a "Bogey Man" (24). Yet Griffin is most persistently viewed as a presence who challenges rational and coherent perception. His landlady Mrs. Hall is shocked to see that he

has “an enormous mouth wide open,—a vast and incredible mouth that swallowed the whole of the lower portion of his face” (11).

As the narrative proceeds and Griffin attempts to recruit human partners, he seeks—anxiously and monotonously—to assert his presence through physical touch and verbal argument posed in a manner approaching religious apologetics. To Marvel, he insists, “I am just a human being—solid, needing food and drink, needing covering too.—But I’m invisible. You see? Invisible. Simple idea. Invisible” (46). Later turning to Kemp, Griffin repeats these appeals melancholically, comically, and irritably—with the same effect of narrative and rhetorical stasis that we find in the Angel’s efforts in *The Wonderful Visit*. Griffin claims, “I’m an Invisible Man. It’s no foolishness, and no magic. I really am an Invisible Man” (79). And, then, more ridiculously: “I am Griffin, of University College, and I have made myself invisible. I am just an ordinary man—a man you have known—made invisible” (79). Although Marvel and Kemp are persuaded, it is after considerable doubt, wavering, and anxiety. Even after accepting Griffin’s invisibility as an “undeniable fact” (85), Kemp still mocks himself for believing “a flagrant absurdity” (85), for “dreaming” (85) and for succumbing to “hypnotism” (80).

As a scientific man, Kemp responds to Griffin with one question that hits at the core of this romance’s structure of technical persuasion: “‘But how’s it done?’ began Kemp, in a tone of exasperation. ‘Confound it! The whole business—it’s unreasonable from beginning to end’” (81). Kemp’s question reveals a functional awareness—and appreciation—of Griffin’s scientific technique. Kemp here subscribes to an “operational aesthetic,” to invoke Neil Harris’s account of the increasingly technical reception of P. T. Barnum’s mechanical stunts and hoaxes by modern audiences (57). According to Harris, Barnum’s objects “focused attention on their own structures and operations, were empirically testable, and enabled—or at least invited—audiences and participants to learn how they worked” (57). Barnum cultivated “a delight in observing process and examining for literal truth” (79) in a technically-minded “public [accustomed] not merely to a belief in the continual appearance of new marvels but to a jargon that concentrated on methods of operation, . . . organization[,] and construction” (Harris 75). Or, in the words of Jason Mittell, this aesthetic finds pleasure “less about ‘what will happen?’ and more concerning ‘how did he do that?’” (42). Our resulting amazement—and curiosity—toward mechanical technique is, as Mittell notes, “often held in opposition to narration” (43). As we have seen in *The Invisible Man*, such special effects slow the progress of romance to support other priorities: our speculative experience of Griffin’s invisible—and impossible—hypothesis.

IV. An Impossible Angel

Like *The Invisible Man*, *The Wonderful Visit* navigates the joys and obstacles of felt technical detail. However, while *The Invisible Man* spurs questions surrounding speculation, media, and immediacy, *The Wonderful Visit* focuses on the distinctly formal and aesthetic aspects of religious persuasion. This earlier romance addresses both spiritual experience and its deflation: the miracle of an angel whose descent to earth is also read as a tale of disgusting antisocial disability, criminality, and pathology. Inspired by John Ruskin's remark that if modern Britons ever "[saw] a real angel before the Day of Judgment, [their] first thought would be,—to shoot it," Wells explores how our perceptions of this creature might function on the level of their sheer physical materiality (Ruskin qtd. in Bergonzi 91).²

As a parody Christ figure, the Angel is a conundrum: an otherworldly spirit that somehow also exists materially on earth. Wells's narrator stresses that "the weakest intellect will admit this situation is impossible" (*Wonderful Visit* 17). Even so, *The Wonderful Visit* highlights this being's persuasive, embodied specificity: he is "really a solid concrete Angel" (26). From the start, the Angel appears in the sky with a glare of light and burst of sound, at first mistaken for a "strange bird," possibly a flamingo (7). The local amateur naturalist, Vicar Hillyer, decides to investigate, packs his gun, and proceeds to see

something full of wavering colours, twenty yards or less in front of his face, and beating the air. In another moment it had fluttered above the bracken and spread its pinions wide. He saw what it was, his heart was in his mouth, and he fired out of pure surprise and habit. . . .

It was no bird at all, but a youth with an extremely beautiful face, clad in a robe of saffron and with iridescent wings, across whose pinions great waves of colour, flushes of purple and crimson, golden green and intense blue, pursued one another as he writhed in his agony. (14–15)

Through the Angel, the Vicar experiences a transformative sense of aesthetic complexity.

While this immersive experience does not stop the Vicar from shooting, it does move him to a sort of belief. At the time, "it never occurred to the Vicar to ask whether the angel was possible or not. He accepted him in the confusion of the moment, and the mischief was done" (17-18). Or, to invoke Barnum again, *The Wonderful Visit* is not interested in the mere fact of the Angel's existence, but, rather, in how this existence functions—technically and aesthetically—as a magic trick, "distract[ing the Vicar] . . . by irrelevant iridescence and a violent fluttering" (17).



Fig. 1. “Tobias and the Angel” by the Workshop of Andrea del Verrocchio. Courtesy of the National Gallery UK.

Wells heightens these technical effects by rooting the Angel’s physicality within the specific visual idiom of Renaissance painting. This character is an “Angel of Italian art, polychromatic and gay” (37), whose “slight . . . figure” and “beautiful, almost effeminate face” are “not at all unlike” the National Gallery’s canvas “Tobias and the Angel” (33) (fig. 1). In an earlier article for *The Pall Mall Gazette*, Wells closely examines the visual form of this painting’s angel, whose “brilliant new halo,” “coquettish bows and ribbons,” and “deliciously coloured” wings suffuse the scene with “delight” as he walks “daintly

arm in arm” with Tobias (“Angels” 3). Both “Terrestrial Angelic” and “Angelic Terrestrial” (*Wonderful Visit* 193), this hybrid creature places Wells’s Vicar and readers upon a conflicted philosophical “See-Saw,” shifting between marvelous and mundane worlds (192).³

Once upon this see-saw, *The Wonderful Visit* deflates and domesticates its moments of superhuman epiphany, mediating the Angel’s already technical, fantastical form through the prosaic customs of a Sussex village. For, aside from the Vicar and, later, the servant girl Delia, the rest of Siddermorton views the Angel’s most miraculous features as disgusting and pathological. His lightly robed form offends the decency of the Curate’s wife, and, once properly clothed, he appears grotesquely disabled, “his wings under [his] overcoat g[iving] him the appearance of a hunchback” (46). The village doctor pathologizes him, diagnosing the Angel as physically and psychologically degenerate, his wings as evidence of “abnormal growth,” and his air of brilliance as a sign of either lunacy or fraud (51). Nor is the Angel himself irreproachably celestial. Siddermorton corrupts him with human passions that shrink his wings and provoke his final, impulsive whipping of a tyrannical baronet who maligns him as an “idler” bent on inciting socialist revolt (211). Despite his miraculously material form, the Angel’s efforts at spiritual persuasion are still stymied by human matter and culture: by the “mess” of Siddermorton’s “dear grotesque ugly world” and the people who cannot speculate beyond it (46).

Like *The Invisible Man*, *The Wonderful Visit* blocks any narrative resolution of its Angel’s impossible hypothesis. Ultimately, both romances subject us to extended sequences of stalling, deflation, repetition, and reversal; and both restage Wells’s central tension between disembodied speculative prophecy and mediated prosaic detail. Resisting the satisfactions of plot, Wells’s readers instead must pursue an immersive aesthetics of functional technical detail, whether in the Angel’s transformed physical form—with his shrinking wings still recalling their former glory—or in Griffin’s own useless devices and abjectly transparent body. For, despite their setbacks, both *The Wonderful Visit* and *The Invisible Man* still maintain the vestigial technical form of spiritual and empirical persuasion. Through these bad romances, Wells suggests the possibility of something better, so that we may continue to speculate, unravel, and read.

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NOTES

1. Here my thinking dovetails with two recent studies of Victorian genres and forms evolving from natural theology: 1) Amy M. King's analysis of detailed, "reverential" reading (24) in provincial fiction and natural history and 2) Devin Griffiths's account of "flat theology" and analogies of design in works by the Darwins and their literary contemporaries (26). Arguably, Elaine Freedgood and Cannon Schmitt treat a related process in their discussion of the opaque "authenticity effect" (2) of technically specialized, "denotative" language, although they do not explicitly compare this effect to immanence (3).

2. See Cook and Wedderburn's second footnote in *The Works of John Ruskin*, which credits "Mrs. Christina Thompson (mother of Lady Butler, the painter)" with first making this remark to Ruskin (154).

3. See Plotz on Wells's location of readers "on the threshold" between marvelous and mundane worlds (178).

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