Victorian Literature and Culture (2004), 421–434. Printed in the United States of America.
Copyright © 2004 Cambridge University Press. 1060-1503/04 $9.50

HOUSES IN BETWEEN: NAVIGATING SUBURBIA IN LATE VICTORIAN WRITING

By Gail Cunningham

> Oh it really is a wery pretty garden
> And Chingford to the eastward could be seen;
> Wiv a ladder and some glasses
> You could see to 'Ackney marshes
> If it wasn't for the 'ouses in between.[1]

"WHAT A PLEASANT THING IT MUST BE . . . to have ancestors," muses Alma in George Gissing's *The Whirlpool*. This reflection is prompted by response to her location, living as she does neither in country village nor metropolitan center but in suburbia. Recognition of this brings her bleakly down to earth: "Nobody's ancestors ever lived in a semi-detached villa" (342; pt. 3, ch. 4). Genealogically speaking, of course, Alma has as many ancestors as anyone else, as Gissing knew perfectly well; his point, however, is to signal through Alma – as he does throughout the novel – the degree to which the explosion in suburban living that characterized late nineteenth-century London had disturbed and fractured identities. Alma's ancestors may have existed, but not in any spatial, social, or temporal dimension to which she, a dweller in the new semi-detached suburbia, can relate. Like all suburban dwellers of the *fin de siècle*, she has moved beyond the bounds of the historically known and culturally defined. Floundering between fantasies of rural idylls and illusions of metropolitan glamour, she is fatally unable to settle the new territory she now actually inhabits, a *terra incognita* of domesticity in redbrick villas, of streets, gardens, commuters, of atomized family units in homogenized streetscapes. She has no social or historical chart by which to navigate.

Gissing's imaginative engagement with the historically and culturally indeterminate character of the suburbs is matched by autobiographical accounts. H. G. Wells, reflecting in *Experiment in Autobiography* on the unexpected burgeoning of his adolescent intellectual curiosity, describes the "accidental elements, the element of individual luck" that enabled this development. Chief among these is his removal from suburban Bromley, where he had suffered "meagre feeding and depressingly shabby and unlit conditions" (1: 143) to the country estate of Up Park where his mother became housekeeper in 1880. The change in diet and living conditions brought about by the move were, however, less developmentally

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1060150304000579 Published online by Cambridge University Press

important than the opportunity it gave Wells to orientate himself, to map a physical and thus an intellectual world:

> This definite estate of Up Park and the sharply marked out farms, villages and towns of the countryside below, caught me just in the proper phase to awaken a sense of social relationship and history that might never have been roused if I had remained in the catastrophic multitudinousness of suburban development. (1: 144)

Wells's conclusion is explicit: the experience of clear boundaries (the "definite" estate, the towns and villages "sharply marked out") enables him to understand social and historical relations in a way that would have been impossible in the "catastrophic multitudinousness" of suburbia. Yet Wells, like Gissing's Alma, is reaching for past securities; the clear boundaries between town and country, and between classes and cultures, were being effaced by the rapidity and magnitude of suburban growth – catastrophic, perhaps, but also in its very "multitudinousness" imaginatively stimulating. This essay will investigate ways in which writers, both social and imaginative, orientated themselves in relation to suburban space; how suburbia was represented and constructed as environmental catastrophe, as social opportunity, as cultural provocation; at what the suburbs and the suburban were or were thought to be, and at what they could or should become. I will argue that the eruption of suburban growth towards the end of the nineteenth century impelled writers to negotiate new boundaries at both local and global levels with an imaginative energy that pushed them invigoratingly beyond the realist mode.

I

IN HIS MONUMENTAL HISTORY of London, Stephen Inwood claims that "nothing struck visitors to Victorian London more forcibly than the enormous extent of its suburbs" (568). At the beginning of the nineteenth century a pedestrian could stroll comfortably across the three or four miles from one side of London to the other; by its end, the distance was a daunting sixteen miles of continuous built-up area, with an additional five to fifteen to take in the outlying commuter belt (Jackson 21). In the early Victorian period the *Builder* was noting that "many thousands of families . . . have left the city to reside in the suburbs" (Edwards 76) and by the *fin de siècle* census data show the process accelerating to breakneck speed. Between 1881 and 1891 the inner city population had declined substantially (25% in the City of London, 20% in Westminster) while the suburban population recorded growths of over 100% in, for example, Leyton and Willesden (Low 549–50). The four fastest growing areas in the whole of England were London suburbs, and by 1901 the largest of these ranked amongst the country's ten biggest towns.[2]

London's boundaries, then, were expanding on an unprecedented scale and in an entirely new manner. The suburbs did not replicate the metropolitan center either in physical construction or in social organization. Where Georgian residential London was built in harmonious terraces with squares enclosing landscaped communal gardens, suburban houses were built in streets of detached or semi-detached houses with private gardens to front and rear. As male breadwinners commuted to work by omnibus, tram, or train (removing the need to keep horses and thus male servants), separation of gender roles was further exaggerated and suburban spaces were widely seen as predominantly woman-dominated. The

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1060150304000579 Published online by Cambridge University Press

suburb privileged the family unit, privacy, and individual self-expression through domestic display and decoration, but did so within a wider environment that appeared monotonous, undifferentiated, and conformist. They introduced new spatial relations that appeared to contemporaries at once homogenous and incoherent, amorphous and atomized, dull and febrile – and that had significant implications, as many writers recognized, for gender, social, and cultural identities.

Lynne Hapgood has argued that the demographic move from center to suburbs was matched by a corresponding shift in fictional setting from the city to suburbia, and rightly notes that this suburban literary relocation has "gone almost unnoticed." This may in part be explained, she suggests, by the fact that the suburbs' "perceived knownness and sameness" makes impossible the "anagogical dimension that pervaded all writings about nineteenth century London, and which suggested an almost mystical urban quintessence" (287). She persuasively analyzes novels by Conan Doyle and Pett Ridge as suburban fictions that repress a wider knowledge of economic and social realities in order to enclose the suburban world in safe moral values. Yet for many writers of the late nineteenth century the prime response to the new suburbia was one of anxiety and disorientation. How were they to conceptualize the sudden appearance of this new spatial environment? Was London reaching out to embrace its outlying villages? Was the countryside being invaded by a violent and mindless force? Were they witnessing an evolutionary process of the environment bursting forth in rampant or diseased energy that they were powerless to control? All these responses inform the metaphorical strategies that novelists adopted in their attempts to write suburbia. "Steadily London drew it closer and suburbanized it," says H. G. Wells of Bromley (*Autobiography* 1: 81–82). Conan Doyle also uses images of embrace, but with more explicitly sinister tones: "Gradually the City had thrown out a long brick feeler here and there, curving, extending and coalescing, until at last the little cottages had been gripped round by these red tentacles" (8). In *The New Machiavelli* Wells sees suburbanization less as embrace than as invasion and conquest when he evokes memories of "woods invaded by building, roads gashed open . . . hedges broken down . . . rivulets overtaken and swallowed up" (41). In *Ann Veronica* he likens the sudden appearance of "red-and-white rough-cast villas" to "fungoid growth in the ditch" (2; ch. 1), while Ella D'Arcy sees the "high art" villas of Twickenham as disfiguring facial eruptions, like boils or acne, that "flared up into pinnacles, blushed with red-brick" (4). Notably, all these images exclude human agency; sometimes London is personified as agent, sometimes the act of building, in other instances spontaneous mutations of nature. Suburbia, culturally categorized as home to the commonplace and mundane, is conceptualized with great imaginative vigor. The dominant images are of alien forces breaking natural or historic bounds.

Late nineteenth-century fears about suburbia, then, frequently centered on issues of boundary. Suburbs of their nature have no clear boundaries, are boundary-less and also (as many commentators feared) potentially boundless. Suburbia is the third term that, by the late nineteenth century, was inserting itself between the traditional cultural binary of country and city, a newcomer that brought with it no historical lineage, no reference points by which to locate its significance, but a visible and undeniable speed of growth that clamored for recognition.[3] Yet recognition was itself a part of the problem facing writers who wished to incorporate suburbia into cultural consciousness, for the very boundary-less quality of the suburbs made it hard to define what, or even where, they were. Suburbia is physically indeterminate and shifting. Early suburbs (such as Chelsea or Bloomsbury) had already by

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1060150304000579 Published online by Cambridge University Press

the *fin de siècle* been reclassified as city; small towns and villages became suburbs simply through the arrival of the railway and the acquisition and development of land by a speculative builder. Suburbanization was unpredictable, unplanned, and apparently uncontrollable, a category that could overtake a community and impose upon it an alien and often unwelcome identity.

It is perhaps unsurprising, then, that suburbia should be recognized at least as much by attitude as by location. If it was not always easy to tell what or where a "suburb" was, it was always simple to define something as "suburban": the object becomes less nominal than adjectival, less a bounded entity than a conglomeration of attitudes. "The very word suburban implies something that is second-rate, some narrow and pharisaical attitude of mind," wrote A. T. Edwards in 1913 (154), an attitude which retains currency in the indiscriminate condemnation of the modern suburban. John Carey has powerfully argued that modernist literature and culture is predicated on the exclusion of the masses, and that this "imaginative project of rewriting the masses" (46) is centrally linked to the historical fact of suburban growth from the late nineteenth-century onward. Although Carey argues that "the masses do not exist," being rather "a metaphor for the unknowable and invisible" (22) it seems that for many *fin de siècle* writers suburbia gave the masses a local habitation and a name – or at least an adjective. Metropolitans and intellectuals, anxious to distinguish themselves from a mass newly visible in the built environment, ascribed attributes to the suburban that continue to resonate - complacency, timid conformity, routine – and values that were assumed aesthetically to favor cheap ostentation and culturally to be irredeemably middlebrow. A form of complicit equilibrium had been maintained, as Jonathan Rose argues, between highbrow and lowbrow cultures, the latter serving as subject matter and audience for the former. But "trouble arises . . . with the intrusion of a third cultural stratum, which has been called by various names: 'bourgeois,' 'petit bourgeois,' . . . 'suburban"' (432).

Looking at suburbia late-Victorian writers were seeing both a troubling contemporary reality and a threatening future. Sober projections from the 1891 census data, that showed massive movement of both urban and rural populations to the suburbs, predicted a Britain of the future in which the familiar divisions of country and city would be erased, and suburbia and suburban attitudes would become all-pervasive:

> If the process goes on unchecked the Englishman of the future will be of the city, but not in it. The son and grandson of the man from the fields will neither be a dweller in the country nor a dweller in the town. He will be a suburb-dweller. The majority of the people of this island will live in the suburbs; and the suburban type will be the most widespread and characteristic of all. (Low 548)

Both existing and future space needed to be negotiated and defined, absorbed into a conceptual map by which late Victorian society could orientate itself in relation to this third locational and cultural point. The "'ouses in between" of the music-hall song, separating the familiar cultural categories of city and country, seemed set to become the dominant social and spatial form. And perhaps because suburbia was largely defined by what it was not – neither town nor country – a frequent reference point by which writers conceptualized these issues was the garden, an apparently obvious signifier of *rus in urbe* that linked familiar terms to a new environment. The garden could be constructed as a productive compromise, a solution to the boundary-less qualities of suburbia and a reassuring cultural and historical landmark. It was often enlisted as a selling-point for suburban living, for example in Jane Panton's advice to

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1060150304000579 Published online by Cambridge University Press

young couples to begin married life in the suburbs because "smuts and blacks are conspicuous by their absence" and they will have "a small garden, or even a tiny conservatory" (2). But the suburban garden also created new dividing lines. The front garden inserted an unfamiliar space between street and house, between public and private or masculine and feminine domains, while the back garden could become contested territory between competing demands of male horticultural effort and female relaxation and entertainment. In both imaginative and socio-political writings, the garden is central to the conceptualization of suburbia.

II

WILLIAM MORRIS'S SOCIALIST UTOPIA, *News from Nowhere* is frequently credited with providing the inspiration for Ebenezer Howard's garden city movement, which itself has been characterized as "in all respects . . . part of the suburban solution" (Mellor 62). In fact, though both Morris's utopia and Howard's town-planning respond directly to aspects of the suburban problem they do so in ways which are interestingly distinct, for where Morris dissolves boundaries, Howard strengthens them. Morris's narrator in *News from Nowhere* goes to bed in a "shabby London suburb" (182; ch. 1) and wakes in the same place transposed to the twenty-first century. Though no longer shabby and polluted, however, it remains distinctly suburban: "There were houses about, some on the road, some amongst the fields with pleasant lanes leading down to them, and each surrounded by a teeming garden" (202; ch. 4). While Morris's vision of a future socialist England is often assumed to be predicated on an aesthetic of faux-mediaevalism, it in fact has more in common with an idealized suburbia. The population, we are told, is much the same as at the end of the nineteenth century – "we have spread it, that is all" (256; ch. 10); domestic architecture is an improved version of the suburban villa, "elegantly-built, much ornamented houses, which I should have called villas if they had been ugly and pretentious" (221; ch. 7); distinctions between town and country have been dissolved, so that "it is not easy to be out of sight of a house" (255; ch. 10). Like Victorian suburbans, Morris's twenty-first century utopians "like everything trim and clean, and orderly and bright" (255; ch. 10). His vision of the spatial configurations that underpin a socialist utopia adopts the basic impetus of suburban development and turns it into an ideal rather than an environmental disaster. The narrator learns that

> the town invaded the country; but the invaders . . . yielded to the influence of their surroundings, and became country people . . . so that the difference between town and country grew less and less. . . . England . . . is now a garden, where nothing is wasted and nothing is spoilt, with the necessary dwellings, sheds, and workshops scattered up and down the country, all trim and neat and pretty. (254; ch. 10)

Morris's work directly influenced suburban design in the late Victorian and subsequent periods through the work of such architects as Richard Norman Shaw, Charles Voysey, Mackay Hugh Baillie Scott, and Edgar Wood, and in the development of garden suburbs. He taps in to the idealized notion of the "private, healthy, quasi-rural existence that lies at the root of English suburbs" (Whitehead and Carr 78), though this can, of course, be traced back long before Morris's work at least as far as Nash's individually designed villas, set on winding roads in private gardens, in Park Village West. He should not, however, be over-credited

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1060150304000579 Published online by Cambridge University Press

(as Raymond Williams does) with projecting forward to the Garden City movement, since in many respects Howard's solution to the problem of population growth and housing issues is diametrically opposed to Morris's. For Howard, the garden city is not a conglomeration of buildings within private gardens, but a whole city itself set in a garden. Where Morris dissolves the boundaries between town and country, Howard strengthens them. Lewis Mumford argues that Howard's garden city "is not a suburb but the antithesis of a suburb; not a more rural retreat, but a more integrated foundation for an effective urban life" (Howard 35). Howard describes the garden city as a series of concentric circles with a park at their center, housing arranged in rings or on boulevards around it, and business and industry on the outer circle. Beyond this lie some 5000 acres of agricultural land interspersed with hospitals, convalescent homes, and something rather ominously described as a farm for epileptics. Each garden city, with a population of some 30,000 inhabitants, is thus a highly planned and condensed town set within a garden-like area of surrounding country. However, although Howard prefaces his account with visionary extracts from Blake and Ruskin, the values he attributes to the garden city are more characteristically suburban than Mumford allows. His famous "three magnets" diagram, designed to demonstrate the superior desirability of the "town-country" (or garden city) values over those of town or country, lists a set of attributes that were in fact frequently attached to suburbia: "beauty of nature, social opportunity . . . pure air and water, good drainage . . . bright homes and gardens, no smoke, no slums" (46). Howard's aims for living conditions are not unlike Morris's, but are to be achieved by concentration and separation rather than by dispersal.

The issue of separation or separatism was particularly acute for writers engaging with suburbia, since suburban topography appeared to create new and anxiety-provoking configurations of gendered space. Although in one sense suburban domestic architecture explicitly privileged the single family unit, throwing married couples together into an intimate or confined shared space, in another it introduced (or reinforced) gender divisions. The rise of suburbia co-existed naturally with the creation of the commuter, the almost exclusively male worker whose daily rhythm was dominated by the trains or buses that took him to his place of work anything up to an hour's journey from home. As Gissing notes in *The Whirlpool* this newly extreme severing of home and work, rather than confirming the notion of marital home as refuge, paradoxically alienated the male from his dwelling place:

> Thousands of men, who sleep on the circumference of London, and go each day to business, are practically strangers to the district nominally their home . . . and as often as not they remain ignorant of the names of the streets or roads through which they pass in going to the railway station. (354; pt. 3, ch. 5)

The daily exodus of men from commuter suburbs created a uniquely female-dominated space, not only within the house but more widely across suburban spaces. As T. H. Crosland notes in his viciously splenetic study *The Suburbans*, "When the Underground and the bulgy buses have swallowed up their husbands, suburban wives take in deep breaths of freedom and content" (24) as suburbia is given over to "the unquestioned rule of women" (21).

This perceived inversion of the gender power base informed many writers' conceptions of sexual relations, creating a common trope of the predatory female luring innocent males into the women-dominated space of suburban domesticity. In *Tono-Bungay* Wells provides a comically counter-utopian solution to the problems of suburban sexualities which

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1060150304000579 Published online by Cambridge University Press

interestingly parodies Howard's conception of the garden city. George Ponderevo's friend Ewart attempts to console him for being ensnared into an unsuitable marriage in an Ealing villa with a vision of women walled in to a large-scale version of the suburban house-and-garden:

> I seem to see – a sort of City of Women, Ponderevo. . . . A walled enclosure . . . going about a garden. Dozens of square miles of garden. . . . Lawns on which the women play, avenues in which they gossip. . . . And this city-garden of women will have beautiful places for music, places for beautiful dresses, places for beautiful work . . . each woman will have her own particular house and home, furnished after her own heart in her own manner. (216; bk. 2, ch. 4)

Wells's city-garden of women inverts Howard's garden city by enclosing the garden in a city rather than the city in a garden, and plays on fears about the female orientation of suburbia by excluding men entirely. But it is merely playful. As George says, "this is all very pretty in its way . . . but it's a dream. . . . What I want to know is, what are you going to do in Brompton, let us say, or Walham Green *now*!" (217–8; bk. 2, ch. 4). For the male threatened with suburban domestication, this was an urgent issue, and its valency was often played out in fiction in that most ambivalent and suggestive of suburban spaces, the front garden.

The potency of the garden is apparent not merely in grand visions of utopian or socially planned futures, but actually and immediately in the configuration of suburbia and its organization of spaces. Garden space, no matter how small, was an essential feature of the suburban house, and the front garden was a more or less defining aspect of suburbia. A private area with clear boundaries separating it from the street, the front garden is nevertheless clearly displayed to the public view. It is an intermediate space between house and street, accessible and visible from the street but subject to the householder's individual displays of taste. "The tenants sprayed their roses, mowed their lawns, weeded their paths, and ignored the fact that their own garden was part of a larger whole which included the road outside, the pavements, the verges, the other houses in the street" (Edwards 107). To the despair of planners intent on creating harmonious streetscapes, front gardens burst the bounds of homogeneity, tiny pockets of unruly self-display from the invisible householder to the passing public. As the Dudley Report recorded, "probably the greatest individual obstacle to the creation of successful urban-landscape effects in domestic streets is the ubiquitous front-garden wall or fence" (Edwards 154). The double boundaries of the front garden – between street and private exterior space, and between garden and front entrance to the house – set up particular movements that informed the constructions of gender tensions in imaginative writing. For both returning commuters and male visitors, the front garden represented a transitional territory between the open, masculine space of the street, with its direct linkages to the worlds of city and work, and the constrained, internal and woman-dominated interior spaces of the home. Entering a front garden, the male makes a public commitment to a private domestic space into which he is not yet incorporated; visible from both street and house, he is momentarily captured in liminal space with conflicting possibilities still available of flight or admittance, confrontation or conformity.

The significance of this intermediate, indeterminate space is apparent in the way imaginative writers of the period exploited its possibilities to express aspects of transgressive sexuality or gender tension. Ella D'Arcy, for example, sets the first two stories of her *Modern Instances* collection in London's south-west suburbs. Both stories figure blameless

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1060150304000579 Published online by Cambridge University Press

middle-class men trapped in the numbing domesticity of suburbia by women of limited or actively malicious aspiration. "At Twickenham" anatomizes the soulless round of suburban marital routine in a household of emotionally neglected children and material aquisitiveness. The narrative, dealing with the engagement and later jilting of householder John Corbett's sister-in-law, is structured deliberately on incidents around the garden gate, signifying the tension Corbett experiences between secure but dull domesticity and masculine expansiveness and challenge. Returns from his daily commute to the city are defined by the presence or otherwise of his wife waiting in the front garden: "When, on turning into Wetherly Gardens on his way from the station, Corbett perceived his wife's blond head above the garden gate, he knew at once that it betokened a domestic catastrophe" (11). The first of these incidents, signalling a scalded child, introduces to the Corbett household the young doctor who is to be inveigled into engagement with the sister-in-law. The second occurs after a period of unusual domestic harmony "when turning into Wetherly Gardens . . . Corbett perceived, with a sudden heart-sinking, Minnie awaiting him at the gate" (22) to inform him that her sister has been jilted. The story concludes with Corbett, sent by his womenfolk to confront the faithless fiancé, brought rapidly into sympathy with his position and spending a convivial masculine evening over whisky and cigarettes. He sets off home at midnight "glowing outside and in with the warmth which good spirit and good fellowship impart," only to have it evaporate at the touch of his garden gate: "Chilled and sobered and pricked by conscience, he stood for a moment with his hand upon the gate of 'Braemar,' looking up at the lighted windows of Minnie's room" (29). Throughout the story, the front garden signifies gender tensions and sublimation of male feeling that potentially subvert suburban values. In *Tono-Bungay* Wells makes more unequivocal use of a similar device, as George returns to his marital villa in Ealing after a week of adulterous passion with a typist:

> I did not feel in any way penitent or ashamed, I know, as I opened the little cast-iron gate that kept Marion's front garden and Pampas Grass from the wandering dog. Indeed, if anything, I felt as if I had vindicated some right that had been in question. (235; bk., ch. 4)

George's return through his front garden triumphantly breaches the protective bounds of respectability set up by his thoroughly suburban wife Marion. His sexual transgression subverts the values encapsulated in the front garden and its pampas grass, and opens them, Wells suggests, to the predations of the "wandering dog" that George now symbolically resembles.

In the second story of *Modern Instances* D'Arcy exploits the potential of front garden space to more sinister ends, as suburban sexual allure proves literally fatal to the male. Young Catterson, pricked by conscience and devotion to his illegitimate daughter, determines to marry the mistress he keeps in Teddington, and persuades his friend West to accompany him from the City to visit his secret *ménage*. Their journey from Waterloo is made with rising anxiety as the suburbs close round them, and the approach to the house itself is given gothic overtones:

> West saw the usual, creeper-covered, French-windowed, sham-romantic, and wholly dilapidated little villa. . . . It stood separated from the road by a piece of front garden, in which the uncut grass waved fairy spear-heads, and the unpruned bushes matted out so wide and thick as to screen the sitting-room completely from passers-by.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1060150304000579 Published online by Cambridge University Press

> The narrow gravel path leading up to the door was painted with mosses, the little trellis-work porch was giving way beneath the weight of vine-wood and rose-stem which lay heavy upon it; the virginia-creeper over the window-top swayed down to the ground . . . the bedroom windows above blinked tiny eyes beneath heavy lids of greenery. (40)

D'Arcy describes the two young men in terms that evoke a couple of metropolitan princes traversing enchanted ground to waken a suburban beauty. Their welcome, though, moves rather into the bad fairy mode: "a thin bell responded . . . from the interior of the house . . . the door opened, and a very little woman, in a dark woollen gown, stood within" (41). Once transformed from mistress to wife, Mrs. Catterson ruthlessly exploits her husband and ruins his health. The story ends with Catterson in the final stages of consumption, and his wife, indifferent to his fate, deliberating over a choice of dress fabrics. A similarly portentous threshold-crossing into the sinister hinterland of suburban sexuality is described by Arnold Bennett in *A Man from the North*, when Richard first visits the Fulham home of the woman who tempts him toward marriage. Once again, the front garden is represented as the almost animate space that marks a dangerous frontier between conflicting worlds. As Richard hesitates in the front garden no-man's-land between street and house "the slender, badly hung gate closed of itself behind him with a resounding clang, communicating a little thrill to the ground" (84). Forced to proceed, he too is greeted at the door by a witch-like woman lurking in a dark interior: she is "short, thin and dressed in black," beckoning Richard into the "half light of the narrow lobby" and a front room "full of dim shadows" (84). Both D'Arcy and Bennett figure the entrance of the male into suburban domestic space as a sinister *rite de passage*. From the free public area of the street, the man enters the transitional space of the front garden, in which gates shut with portentous finality behind him, and thorns and briars pluck at his sleeve. Behind the front door there is no sleeping beauty waiting to be aroused; rather, the enclosed female lurks in her domain, small, dark-robed, and with a predatory sexuality set to entrap the innocent male.

III

ALL THESE TEXTS SEEK in various ways to defamiliarize a suburban environment that had already become culturally embedded as synonymous with dullness and conformity. But perhaps the most striking imaginative representation of alienation in suburbia comes in Wells's *The War of the Worlds*, in which London's southern suburbs are – quite literally – occupied by aliens. Wells's mapping of the Martian invasion is highly specific, and deliberately focused on a suburban world carefully distinguished from both metropolis and nation. The narrative is strung together along a series of place names, a litany of south London suburban locations that would reverberate with many readers (then as now) as a recital of commuter-line stations. Woking, Weybridge, Esher, Coombe, Wimbledon . . . Chertsey, Addlestone, Hampton Court, Ditton . . . Shepperton, Kingston, Richmond, Putney – each name-cluster maps onto railway routes from the commuter suburbs into Waterloo, and closely follows the Martian advance on London. The first Martian cylinder lands on Horsell Common, near the junction of the main lines from Portsmouth and Southampton at Woking, where the line becomes a commuter service with over 50 trains a day to Waterloo. Thereafter the Martians advance on a widening front across the southwestern suburbs, driving the population

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1060150304000579 Published online by Cambridge University Press

back into London and then out through the northern and eastern suburbs to the Thames estuary. Wells's Martians provide his readers with a comprehensive tour of London suburbia.[4]

In one sense, then, *The War of the Worlds* is strikingly mis-titled; the furthest point of the Martian advance is the Thames estuary, and nothing beyond the greater London area – let alone beyond England – is touched. From a distance of 35 million miles, and with the entire planet earth to choose from, Wells's Martians land with pin-point precision at the outer edge of London's commuter-land, and lay waste suburbia from Woking to Waterloo. Weybridge is destroyed, Richmond "burning briskly" (111; bk. 2, ch. 1), Sheen "a mound of smashed brickwork" (136; bk. 2, ch. 5), Putney reduced to "blackened, desolate ruins" (140; bk. 2, ch. 5). In another sense, though, the story is rightly identified as a war of worlds, a conflict between the narrator's "little world in which [he] had been living securely for years" and the "fiery chaos" (48; bk.1, ch. 11) of the Martian invasion that both destroys the suburban world and ironically mimics its creation. In bringing extra-terrestrial aliens to suburbia, Wells is able to give literal embodiment to the characteristic metaphors employed by so many writers of suburban development. Not only are the Martians invaders and destroyers, like the speculative builders who smashed the Surrey countryside to build their red-brick villas, but their instruments of destruction are extra-terrestrial actualizations of images of suburban development. Where Conan Doyle imagined the spread of suburbia as tentacular embrace, Wells's Martians are physically endowed with tentacles that entwine suburb-dwellers and suck the blood from their living bodies. The main Martian imports are a death-dealing Black Smoke, "an inky vapour . . . that sank and spread itself . . . over the surrounding country" (81; bk. 1, ch. 15) and the Red Weed that grows with such unearthly speed that "the ruined villas of the Thames Valley were . . . lost in this red swamp" (139; bk. 2, ch. 6), desecrating suburbia as the builders who created it had desecrated the countryside. When Wells expands his perspective to an aerial view by imagining a balloonist hanging in the sky above London, his vision of the invasion is in images of spoilation:

> Directly below him the balloonist would have seen the network of streets . . . spread out like a huge map, and in the southward *blotted*. Over Ealing, Richmond, Wimbledon, it would have seemed as if some monstrous pen had flung ink upon the chart. Steadily, incessantly, each black splash grew and spread, shooting out ramifications this way and that, now banking itself against rising ground, now pouring swiftly over a crest into a new-found valley, exactly as a gout of ink would spread itself upon blotting-paper.
>
> And beyond, over the blue hills that rise southward of the river, the glittering Martians went to and fro, calmly and methodically spreading their poison-cloud . . . and taking possession of the conquered country. (97–8; bk. 1, ch. 17)

Wells writes the invasion as a randomly destructive act (flinging ink on a chart) which is at the same time deliberate and purposeful. The Martians work with the black and red colors of the suburban builder, and bring the same violent disorder imposed with moral indifference.

Perhaps, then, *The War of the Worlds* should be read as Wells's revenge on the suburbs, an energetic and gleefully imagined destruction of the environment whose creation he had witnessed with fear and dismay as a boy. In the first single-volume issue of the work, he inserted a chapter not present in the earlier serialized version which could at first sight support such a reading. In chapter 7 of the second book, "The Man on Putney Hill," the

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1060150304000579 Published online by Cambridge University Press

narrator encounters an artilleryman who takes a grim satisfaction in envisaging the Martians' utter destruction of the suburban masses and their values:

> The sort of people that lived in these houses, and all those damn little clerks that used to live down that way. . . . They haven't any spirit in them – no proud dreams and no proud lusts. . . . They just used to skedaddle off to work . . . working at businesses they were afraid to take the trouble to understand; skedaddling back for fear they wouldn't be in time for dinner; keeping indoors after dinner for fear of the streets; and sleeping with the wives they married, not because they wanted them, but because they had a bit of money that would make for safety in their one little miserable skedaddle through the world. (148–49; bk. 2, ch. 7)

The passage is often enlisted (for example by Carey and Bergonzi) as evidence of Wells's élitist or proto-fascist sympathies. It is certainly true that the artilleryman's dystopian view of life under Martian rule provides imaginative space for expression of fear and loathing – not primarily of extra-terrestrial invaders, but rather of the suburban masses they destroy. His vision of the future predicts a Martian-ruled society in which his skedaddling commuters are bred and farmed as Martian fodder, compliant and contented as cattle, while a resistance movement of men of action like himself, and intellectuals such as Wells's narrator, form terrorist resistance cells in the London sewers. But in fact Wells reveals the artilleryman as more pathetically inadequate than visionary prophet. His schemes are exposed as hollow, his inclinations – towards feasts of looted mock-turtle soup, champagne and cigars – as gluttonous and cowardly. Though at first the narrator is seduced into concurrence with his views, later he experiences "a violent revulsion of feeling" (155; bk. 2, ch. 7). It is after all his own "little world" that the artilleryman anathematizes, a world of routine and comfort in which, after his first encounter with the Martians, he walks calmly home to tea with his wife in Woking. In subscribing to the artilleryman's views, Wells has him feel, "I seemed a traitor to my wife and to my kind" (155; bk. 2, ch. 7).

Perhaps the significance of Wells's added chapter lies rather in pointing to the distinctively suburban targeting of the Martian invaders, and – through the narrator's rejection of the artilleryman's views – inviting a reading of the whole work as altogether more interestingly nuanced. The incongruity between extra-terrestrial beings and the settled, comfortable world they invade produces a creative tension. On the one hand, it provokes comic bathos by linking apocalyptic catastrophe to banal location, and Wells plays with this to good effect through the figure of the curate, first encountered at Walton and later – deservedly – eaten by a Martian. Wells invites a sophisticated readership to derive amusement from the curate's narrow conventionality in the face of cataclysm, his comic inability to comprehend that the tragedy extends beyond his cozy suburban world: "I was walking through the roads . . . and suddenly – fire, earthquake, death!. . . All the work – all the Sunday-schools . . . what has Weybridge done?" (65; bk. 1, ch. 13). On the other hand, the predominantly suburban setting for humanity's first contact with another world necessarily aggrandizes suburbia. Wells carefully isolates London from its southern suburbs, ensuring that his Martians destroy the rail and telegraph links to the metropolis. It is Londoners, not suburbanites, who are portrayed as complacent and incurious, reading garbled newspaper accounts of Martian activity "without any personal tremors" (68; bk. 1, ch. 14) and concerned only at the disruption to rail services from Waterloo. While Londoners go about their business "oblivious and inert" (75; bk. 1, ch. 14), the suburbs are preparing a dignified and heroic

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1060150304000579 Published online by Cambridge University Press

last stand: "every copse, every row of suburban villas on the hilly slopes about Kingston and Richmond, masked an expectant black muzzle" (62; bk. 1, ch. 13); "at Staines, Hounslow, Ditton, Esher, Ockham . . . the guns were waiting" (79; bk. 1, ch. 15). When these defenses are breached, six million Londoners flee in disorderly and undisciplined rout, leaving the city to a few drunken looters.

The Martians' defeat comes not through human agency, but "by the humblest things . . . upon this earth," bacteria (161; bk. 2, ch. 8). To some extent, Wells's story is a lesson in humility, the antithesis, perhaps, of the artilleryman's grandiose schemes for developing a super-race resistant to Martian rule, and a defense of the values of the "little" people for whom he professes such contempt. At the end, Wells sends his narrator on a reverse-commute from London to Woking, to satisfy "a growing craving to look once more on whatever remained of the little life that seemed so happy and bright in my past" (165; bk. 2, ch. 9). Around Waterloo "the houses were blackened ruins"; as far as Clapham "the face of London was grimy with powder of the Black Smoke"; up to Wimbledon the landscape is "gaunt and unfamiliar" (166; bk. 2, ch. 9). But as he gets towards the outer suburbs things begin to improve: a union jack is "flapping cheerfully" (167; bk. 2, ch. 9) over the ruins of a Martian cylinder, and approaching home a neighbour greets him by name. His house has suffered no worse damage than some trampled bushes in the front garden, and a muddied stair-carpet. His wife, whom he had assumed dead in the Martian destruction of Leatherhead, is waiting for him unharmed, and normal life can be resumed.

At the time of writing *The War of the Worlds*, Wells was living with Jane in Woking, "in a small resolute semi-detached villa with a minute greenhouse" (*Autobiography* 1: 542), and recording such humble events as cutting his first marrow – "a horticultural triumph not uncommon in suburban gardens" (1: 553). The tension in his novel between affectionate respect and destructive urges toward the suburban districts that separated him from London may reflect a latent ambivalence about his own location. But finally *The War of the Worlds* invites a reading that repudiates the artilleryman's contempt for suburbia; in the face of unimaginable catastrophe, the "little" suburbanites have behaved no worse, and in many ways better, than the London sophisticates. Order is restored to both suburb and city, and the Martians turn their attention from Earth to Venus. However, these extra-terrestrial invaders of suburbia have breached humanity's ultimate boundary, that between itself and the universe. As Wells's narrator says in his summarizing Epilogue, "We have learned now that we cannot regard this planet as being fenced in and a secure abiding-place" (170; bk. 2, ch. 10).

In finally characterizing Earth as a "fenced in . . . secure abiding-place," Wells manages to make it sound less like a planet than a suburban villa. And this perhaps points to a prime characteristic of the imaginative strategies adopted by these writers in their responses to the new suburbia, counterposing the mundane with the otherworldly. As the suburbs had so swiftly become culturally grounded in the commonplace and routine, which social-realist writers struggled to value appropriately, others found the very mundanity of suburbia imaginatively provoking. Morris's utopian writing imagines a future England in which boundaries not only of class but of city and country have dissolved, making twenty-first century England into an arts-and-crafts, socialist suburb. In *Tono-Bungay* Wells plays with a dystopian view of a female suburban ghetto; Crosland finds dystopia actually and immediately present in contemporary suburbs; and D'Arcy and Bennett re-write the dull south-western suburbs as

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1060150304000579 Published online by Cambridge University Press

threatening, gothicized her-lands. For many writers of the *fin de siècle* the new suburban "houses in between" had become imaginatively central.

Kingston University

NOTES

1. "If it Wasn't for the 'Ouses in Between," written by Edgar Bateman and performed by Gus Elen, was a popular music hall song of the late Victorian period. Comically, but with underlying pathos, it evokes a cockney's attempt to create a country garden from discarded vegetable toppings and old tools in an East End back yard. Hackney Marshes and Chingford, to the northeast, represent the nearest equivalents of open countryside, joined to the city by new suburban developments such as Leyton and Walthamstow.
2. By 1901 Camberwell, Islington, Lambeth, and Stepney had populations that outstripped provincial cities such as Hull, Newcastle, and Nottingham.
3. Although the word "suburb" is medieval in origin, "suburbia," a quasi-proper noun for the suburbs, was not used until the 1890s. Its coinage at this time may be assumed to reflect the growing social and cultural prominence of the suburbs from the 1880s onward.
4. Or perhaps not completely comprehensive. Interestingly, the only suburban area left entirely untouched by the Martian invasion is the southeastern quarter, which contains Bromley. Perhaps some residual nostalgia impelled Wells to spare the suburbs of his childhood, despite his professed hatred for the speculative builders who created them.

WORKS CITED

Bennett, Arnold. *A Man from the North*. London: John Lane: The Bodley Head, 1898.

Bergonzi, Bernard. *The Early H. G. Wells*. Manchester: Manchester UP, 1961.

Carey, John. *The Intellectuals and the Masses*. London: Faber and Faber, 1992.

Crosland, T. W. H.. *The Suburbans*. London: John Lang, 1905.

D'Arcy, Ella. *Modern Instances*. London: John Lane: The Bodley Head, 1898.

Doyle, Arthur Conan. *Beyond the City: An Idyll of a Suburb*. London: Everett, 1912.

Edwards, Arthur M. *The Design of Suburbia*. London: Pembridge P, 1981.

Edwards, A. T. "A Criticism of the Garden City Movement." *Town Planning Review* 4 (1913): 154.

Gissing, George. *The Whirlpool*. London: J. M. Dent, 1997.

Hapgood, Lynne. "The Literature of the Suburbs." *Journal of Victorian Culture* 5.2 (2000): 287–310.

Howard, Ebenezer. *Garden Cities of Tomorrow*. Intro. by Lewis Mumford. Northampton: John Dickens, 1965.

Inwood, Stephen. *A History of London*. London: Macmillan, 1998.

Jackson, Alan A. *Semi-Detached London*. London: George Allen and Unwin, 1973.

Low, Sidney J. "The Rise of the Suburbs: A Lesson of the Census." *Contemporary Review* 60 (1891): 545–58.

Mellor, J. R. *Urban Sociology in an Urbanized Society*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1977.

Morris, William. *News from Nowhere*. *Three Works by William Morris*. Ed. A. L. Morton. London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1968.

Panton, J. E., *From Kitchen to Garret*. London: Ward and Downey, 1888.

Rose, Jonathan. *The Intellectual Life of the British Working Classes*. New Haven: Yale UP, 2002.

Wells, H. G. *Ann Veronica*. London: Virago, 1980.

———. *Experiment in Autobiography*. 2 vols. London: Victor Gollancz, 1934.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1060150304000579 Published online by Cambridge University Press

———. *The New Machiavelli*. London: John Lane: The Bodley Head, 1911.

———. *Tono-Bungay*. London: Macmillan, 1909.

———. *The War of the Worlds*. London: J. M. Dent, 1993.

Whitehead, J. W. R., and Christine M. R. Carr. "England's Garden Suburbs: Development and Change." *Changing Suburbs: Foundation, Form and Function*. Ed. Richard Harris and Peter J. Larkham. London: E & FN Spon, 1999. 76–90.

Williams, Raymond. *The Country and the City*. London: The Hogarth P, 1993.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1060150304000579 Published online by Cambridge University Press