

A View from Above: Lucian's *True History* and the Manufacture of Belief in *The First Men in the Moon* By H.G. Wells

Justin Cheng

Establishing the Connection Between Wells and Lucian

When George Newnes published *The First Men in the Moon* in 1901, the title page carried an epigraph that most modern editions omit: "Three thousand stadia from the earth to the Moon... Marvel not, my comrade, if I appear to be talking to you on super-terrestrial and aerial topics. The long and the short of the matter is that I am running over the order of a Journey I have lately made."¹ The quotation is from Lucian's *Icaromenippus*, in which Menippus flies upward to test and ultimately exposes the claims of philosophers who measure the heavens yet cannot settle the distance from Megara to Athens. Wells places a second-century Syrian satirist at the head of his novel in preference to the moon-voyages of Verne or Kepler, nearer to his own century. The epigraph asks us to read the book as the heir of a tradition in which a writer leaves the Earth in order to judge it. Distance lends clarity and displacement provides cover for criticism.

The epigraph comes from the *Icaromenippus*, not the *True History*, so it cannot by itself tie Wells to the work this essay concerns. However, it does show possible direct contact with the Greek. The rendering follows no published English translation, yet it is an accurate version of the original. Keen concludes that the epigraph was probably Wells's own translation.² Wells likely had the ability: he studied Latin and Greek at Midhurst Grammar School.³ The link to the *True History* itself rests on other evidence.

In the 1931 edition of Wells's *Outline of History*, he also described Lucian as "a great and original imaginative writer who still commands our interest and admiration."⁴ More significantly, in the 1933 preface to his *Scientific Romances*, he names the *True History* itself as one of the predecessors of the tradition in which he was writing.⁵ This demonstrates not only that Wells was familiar with the *True History*, but also that he later placed it within the literary ancestry of his own scientific romances. Although the acknowledgement postdates *The First Men in the Moon* (1901), it makes the Lucianic features already present in the novel more difficult to dismiss as coincidence. There are several similarities including: the name of Wells's Moon-people "Selenites" probably derives from the

¹H. G. Wells, *The First Men in the Moon*, ed. by Patrick Parrinder (London: Penguin, 2005). The epigraph is drawn from Lucian, *Icaromenippus* 1.1–13 (abridged); see Antony Keen, 'Mr Lucian in Suburbia: Links between *The True History* and *The First Men in the Moon*'

²Keen, 'Mr Lucian in Suburbia: Links between *The True History* and *The First Men in the Moon*', in *Classical Traditions in Science Fiction*

³H.G. Wells, *The First Men in the Moon*, ed. By Patrick Parrinder with an introduction from China Mieville (London: Penguin, 2005).

H. G. Wells, *Experiment in Autobiography* (London: Gollancz, 1934)

⁴H. G. Wells, *The Outline of History* (1931 edn); quoted in Keen, 'Mr Lucian in Suburbia'

⁵H. G. Wells, preface to *The Scientific Romances* of H. G. Wells (London: Gollancz, 1933).; quoted in Keen 'Mr Lucian in Suburbia'

Selēnitai of the *True History*; both narratives end with an account left incomplete; both narrators become intoxicated by a foreign substance; and ordinary sexual difference is absent among the Moon's inhabitants. None of these parallels would prove influence by itself, and some of the broader similarities between the works may belong to the satirical-voyage tradition generally. Moreover, since writers such as Cyrano and Swift were themselves established inheritors of Lucian's imaginary-voyage tradition, influence mediated through them would place Wells within a longer Lucianic lineage. However, the epigraph, his later acknowledgement of the *True History* and the various textual parallels make a more specific connection difficult to dismiss. The question, therefore, is not whether Wells knew Lucian, but how he transformed Lucian's methods for the concerns of his own period.

Wells's debt to Lucian lies less in the details of lunar travel than in a shared satirical method. From the *Icaromenippus*, he draws on the use of distance to see earthly assumptions more clearly and to provide cover for criticism. From the *True History*, he draws on the practice of presenting impossible events through the form of credible reporting. Yet Wells does not simply repeat Lucian's devices. Writing in a different age, he redirects Lucian's attacks on philosophers, historians and travel-writers towards empire, commerce, industrial specialisation and the authority granted to science. What Wells preserves therefore reveals what he found most important in Lucian, not the lunar setting itself, but the machinery through which the familiar is made strange and the impossible is made credible. This transformation also works backwards, inviting us to reread the *True History* not only as mockery of particular contemporaries, but as a satire on the processes through which falsehood acquires authority and belief is manufactured.

The Journey to the Moon Providing Perspective

Neither Lucian nor Wells writes about the Moon for its own sake. For Lucian and Wells, it changes the scale until the human world looks small enough to judge.

The height does its first work by shrinking. In the *Icaromenippus*, Menippus, hung above the world, finds Greece reduced until it "might measure some four inches," and the frontier two armies died for "no broader than an Egyptian lentil."⁶ A lentil is a trivial, everyday object, and Lucian sets it against a frontier for which armies have fought and men have died. The bathos reduces the supposed grandeur of territorial conflict, exposing the absurd disproportion between the smallness of the prize and the human cost of possessing it.

This resembles what Darko Suvin later termed "cognitive estrangement": the use of an imaginative framework alternative to the reader's own world, through which that world is made foreign enough to be examined critically.⁷ Suvin identifies Lucian as an early practitioner of this method, and Wells

⁶Lucian *Icar.* 18 trans. Fowler

⁷Darko Suvin, *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction: On the Poetics and History of a Literary Genre* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979)

adapts it to the concerns of his own age. Drifting through space, Bedford realises that the Earth and everything upon it has come to seem “infinitely minute and altogether trivial.”⁸ Where Lucian reduces borders and war until their supposed importance collapses, Wells directs the same distancing effect towards the commercial, imperial and social structures of modern life. Business, empire and rank lose the grandeur they possess on Earth because, from space, they appear as temporary human arrangements. Wells therefore redirects Lucian’s use of distance from the absurdity of war towards a wider criticism of the systems through which modern society measures importance.

Both writers may have been drawn to this form of estrangement because of their outsiders’ perspective. Lucian came from provincial Samosata and grew up speaking Aramaic before mastering Greek.⁹ Wells was distanced by class¹⁰ rather than language or geography. Both learned the most prestigious forms of knowledge available and used them with authority. While their biographies alone cannot explain their satire, it may help account for their attraction to a view from outside. The lunar vantage turns that social and intellectual distance into a position the reader can temporarily occupy.

Distance Provides Safety for Critique and Satire

Distance also gives both writers cover for criticism. In the *Icaromenippus*, Menippus adopts the posture of an observer, not a moralist. He does not openly denounce human vanity but reports how absurd human affairs appear when viewed from above. Lucian can present this criticism as the consequence of perspective rather than a direct attack. In the *True History*, he uses distance in a different way. He announces that “this one thing I confidently pronounce for a truth, that I lie.”¹¹ By surrendering any claim to factual authority, Lucian gains the freedom to imitate and expose historians and travel-writers who falsely claimed it.

Wells similarly displaces his criticism into an alien world and a compromised speaker. The Selenite hive carries British industrial specialisation to an extreme, allowing him to criticise the reduction of workers to functions without directly depicting a British factory. Imperial ambition is placed in the mouth of a drunken Bedford, who declares that “we must annex this Moon,” invokes the “White Man’s Burthen”¹² and imagines “Bedfordecia Limited.”¹³ His drunkenness both discredits the speech and strips away the restraints that would normally conceal its assumptions. Bedford expresses in crude form the commercial instincts of empire in a new world. The lunar setting makes those

⁸Wells, *First Men in the Moon*, ch. 20

⁹Diskin Clay and James H. Brusuelas, *Lucian, True History: Introduction, Text, and Commentary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021)

¹⁰Born to a shopkeeper and a maid, he left school for a draper’s apprenticeship before winning a scholarship to the Normal School of Science in London

¹¹Lucian VH 1.4 trans. Hickes

¹²A reference to Kipling’s poem ‘The White Man’s Burden’ (1899), published two years before the novel. Wells gives the imperial slogan to a drunken speculator scheming to annex the Moon, emptying it of moral weight.

¹³Wells, *First Men in the Moon*, ch. 11

instincts look ridiculous, while Bedford's condition allows Wells to expose them without speaking in his own voice. Like Lucian, Wells creates distance both from the world he criticises and from the words through which the criticism is delivered.

Distance protects an account from verification. In the preface to the *True History*, he attacks Ctesias¹⁴, who wrote of India "matters which he neither saw himself, nor ever heard,"¹⁵ and Iambulus¹⁶, who filled the distant ocean with wonders "which all men knew to be lies."¹⁷ India and the uncharted seas were near enough to make their reports appear plausible, yet remote enough to prevent most readers from first-hand verification. Lucian moves the same kind of marvels to the Moon, where their invention becomes impossible to conceal. He even challenges the sceptical reader to verify the account by travelling there themselves. The relocation is the satire. By moving the travel-writer's wonders from inaccessible places on Earth to an openly impossible world, Lucian exposes the travel-writer's reliance on the inaccessible.

Wells draws on the same method for ideas whose familiarity gives them a different kind of protection. Industrial specialisation and the shaping of people for particular functions could pass without question because they formed part of everyday modern life. Where Ctesias's India was too distant to check, these arrangements were too familiar and close to notice. Wells transfers them to the Moon and develops them to their extreme in the Selenite hive, where each creature is "born to that place" and shaped to fit it until it becomes "a perfect unit in a world machine."¹⁸ Practices that could be praised on Earth as efficiency and progress become visibly grotesque when they produce living beings with no purpose beyond their work. Lucian uses distance to expose inventions hidden by remoteness, while Wells inverts its use to expose cruelty hidden by nearness and familiarity. In both works, the Moon reveals what the ordinary conditions of Earth allow readers to overlook.

Adapting the Lucianic Method to Critiquing Society

One of Wells's clearest targets in *The First Men in the Moon* is commercial imperialism. Bedford, before even reaching the Moon, pictures a "stupendous Cavorite company" that "ran and ruled the world,"¹⁹ claims "planetary rights of pre-emption" and recalls "the old Spanish monopoly in American gold."²⁰ The terms "company," "pre-emption" and "monopoly" show that Bedford wants only to own the Moon as a commercial opportunity. Discovery leads automatically to ownership, exclusive rights and profit. These ideas are not novel inventions produced by the lunar setting, but

¹⁴Ctesias of Cnidus (c.400 BC), Greek author of a lost *Indica* full of Indian marvels; called by Photius the 'Prince of Liars' (Diskin Clay and James H. Brusuelas, *Lucian, True History: Introduction, Text, and Commentary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021))

¹⁵Lucian VH 1.3

¹⁶Iambulus (probably 2nd century BC), author of a lost account of a utopian "Islands of the Sun" in the Southern Ocean, cited by Lucian as a teller of travellers' fictions.

¹⁷Lucian VH 1.3

¹⁸Wells, *First Men in the Moon*, ch. 24

¹⁹Wells, *First Men in the Moon*, ch. 1

²⁰Wells, *First Men in the Moon*, ch. 3

familiar habits of imperial expansion carried unchanged into space. Removed from the earthly institutions that normally give them legitimacy, Bedford's assumptions appear openly possessive and absurd.

This colonial outlook is accompanied by Bedford's capacity for violence. During his captivity, he strikes a Selenite until its "head smashed like an egg" and then feels himself "equal to smashing any number."²¹ The violence begins as an attempt to escape, yet Wells shows how quickly self-defence develops into exhilaration and generalised contempt. The episode does not depict a planned campaign of conquest, but it exposes the mental movement through which fear and self-defence can become a pretext for colonial violence.

The criticism culminates in the Grand Lunar's response to human civilisation. In the *Icaromenippus*, Menippus rises above the Earth and looks down upon the tiny borders over which humans fight. Wells reverses the direction of the encounter. Cavor carries an account of earthly civilisation to the Moon and presents it to a listener who does not share humanity's political assumptions. On hearing of war and human government, the Grand Lunar is "perplexed and incredulous"²² that people fight over a world whose resources they have scarcely begun to use. Lucian exposes war by reducing it through physical distance, while Wells exposes it by forcing humanity to explain itself to an outsider. In both works, the lunar setting strips society down to basic motives of power and wealth, exposing them with ridicule.

Wells's treatment of empire also changes how the lunar war in the *True History* can be read. Endymion, King of the Moon, fights Phaethon of the Sun for the right to colonise the empty Morning Star, which he intends to settle with "all the poor people and needy persons."²³ The narrator joins a fantastical vulture cavalry on a spider-web battlefield, and the absurdity is so thick, it reads as one more lunar marvel.²⁴ Read after Wells, however, Lucian's lunar war can be reread as a satiric exposure of colonialism. It contains the familiar structures of colonial expansion: a surplus population at home, supposedly empty land abroad, rival rulers, military conquest, tribute and hostages.²⁵ However, the joke can be seen in the emptiness of the prize. Two kings raise fantastical armies and fight a full campaign for the right to possess a barren world. The narrator joins Endymion's campaign without moral objection and records it in the same flat, factual manner as the rest of his voyage. No civilising mission, sacred duty nor historical destiny is offered to justify the conquest. Without these claims, the war appears as a rivalry between rulers who use violence to establish ownership. Wells's explicit satire of Bedford's colonial ambition therefore allows us to re-examine Lucian's lunar war with new attention to its colonial structure: beneath the comic fantasy lies the bare drive for territory and power.

²¹Wells, *First Men in the Moon*, ch. 17

²²Wells, *First Men in the Moon*, ch. 25

²³Lucian VH 1.12

²⁴Lucian VH 1.11-18

²⁵Lucian VH. 1.19-20

The same method continues in the ethnography of the Moon's inhabitants. Lucian's Selenitans form a catalogue of marvels. They are a race whose males carry children in their legs, remove and replace their eyes, and dissolve "like smoke" when they die.²⁶ These bodies parody writers such as Ctesias, who described distant peoples as collections of strange customs while claiming the authority of direct observation.²⁷ Lucian makes the invention deliberately visible, admitting that he expects to be "taken for a liar in publishing a matter so incredible."²⁸ The absurdity of the bodies exposes the method by which the travel-writer creates the foreigner as an object of knowledge and spectacle. Precise description gives the impression that the people have been carefully observed, even when every detail has been invented. Lucian therefore shows that the language of ethnography can manufacture a sense of authority without guaranteeing that such a world exists.

Wells inherits Lucian's catalogue of hyperbolically strange bodies in order to critique. Trained in biology under Huxley²⁹, he imagines what happens when industrial specialisation is pushed to an extreme and allowed to shape the worker completely. The overseers of the mooncalf herds possess "larger brain cases" and "very short legs,"³⁰ while a sleeping worker, "some kind of refined manipulator," has fore-limbs drawn out into "long, delicate tentacles."³¹ Their bodies are not arbitrary marvels. They have been bred, educated and surgically altered until every organ serves a single occupation. The phrase "a perfect unit in a world machine"³² completes this reduction. "Unit" turns the individual into an interchangeable component, while "machine" presents society as a mechanism whose efficiency depends upon every living part performing its allotted function. Wells keeps Lucian's device of the impossible body but reverses what it exposes. In Lucian, the absurdity of the body points back at the writer who invented it. In Wells, each feature points back at the labour that produced it. The Selenite does not merely look strange. Its appearance records what its society has done to it.

Wells complicates this criticism through Cavor, who admires the order of the hive. He describes a Selenite shaped by "training and education and surgery" until it has "neither ideas nor organs for any purpose beyond" its work.³³ When a surplus worker is drugged and stored, Cavor argues that this is kinder than allowing him "to wander starving in the streets."³⁴ His defence is disturbing because the comparison contains some truth. Victorian society might abandon an unwanted worker, while the Selenites preserve his life. Yet their apparent humanity depends upon treating him as

²⁶Lucian VH 1.22-25

²⁷Clay and Brusuelas suggest that Lucian followed Iambulus in his description of the bodies of the Moon's inhabitants.

²⁸Lucian VH 1.25

²⁹ H. G. Wells, *Experiment in Autobiography* (London: Gollancz, 1934)

Wells, H.G. 2005. *The First Men in the Moon*. Editor: Patrick Parrinder with an introduction by China Mieville (London: Penguin, 2005)

³⁰ Wells, *First Men in the Moon* ch. 19

³¹Wells, *First Men in the Moon*, ch. 24

³²Wells, *First Men in the Moon*, ch. 24

³³Wells, *First Men in the Moon*, ch. 24

³⁴Wells, *First Men in the Moon*, ch. 24

equipment that can be put away when no longer required. The pose of “submissive suffering”³⁵ reveals the cost concealed by Cavor’s account of order and efficiency. Cavor responds like an educated scientist or social planner who judges the system by how smoothly it functions and overlooks the experience of the individual within it. Through him, Wells exposes how cruelty can acquire the appearance of reason when efficiency becomes the only standard of judgement. Wells enlarges Lucian’s criticism. Lucian exposes how travel-writers invent the foreign body through description, while Wells, using the same metaphor, exposes a society that literally manufactures workers to fit its economic needs.

Making the Impossible Credible, the Manufacture of Belief

Both writers separate factual truth from the appearance of truth by presenting impossible events in the authoritative style of factual reporting. Writers such as Ctesias and Iambulus had presented “so many notorious lies...in the way of truth,”³⁶ securing authority through eyewitness testimony, geographical detail and an orderly narrative voice. Lucian inverts this on the first page of the *True History*, announcing that “this one thing I confidently pronounce for a truth, that I lie.”³⁷ The reader is told from the beginning that the events are invented, yet Lucian proceeds to describe them in the precise and controlled manner of a truthful report. His declaration removes any uncertainty about whether the voyage occurred and allows the reader to concentrate on how the narrative creates an appearance of reliability. Lucian’s narrator measures distances, records journeys, names rulers and reproduces treaties with apparent precision. Karen Ní Mheallaigh describes this technique as “embedded pseudo-documentarism,” through which invented documents give fiction the appearance of external evidence normally associated with historiography.³⁸ Lucian does use inscriptions, letters and other invented documents and shows that an account can possess the manner of truth even when its contents are known to be false, mimicking what he claims Ctesias and Iambulus had done. As Clay and Brusuelas observe, Lucian ‘takes comic shots at the convention of ensuring plausibility’, disavowing his own account while reproducing every device that secures belief.³⁹ These devices encourage the reader’s impulse to believe while simultaneously exposing how easily that impulse can be manipulated through the way in which an account is written.

Wells rebuilds this method through the forms of authority trusted at the turn of the twentieth century. Cavorite is introduced as the result of a detailed experiment, complete with a precise date, 14 October 1899, technical explanation and calculations down to the pressure per square inch.⁴⁰ The journey itself is presented as a scientific problem. The sphere is controlled through blinds

³⁵Wells, *First Men in the Moon*, ch. 24

³⁶ Lucian VH 1.2

³⁷Lucian VH 1.4

³⁸Karen Ní Mheallaigh, *Reading Fiction with Lucian: Fakes, Freaks and Hyperreality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

³⁹Diskin Clay and James H. Brusuelas, *Lucian, True History: Introduction, Text, and Commentary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021)

⁴⁰Wells, *First Men in the Moon*, ch. 2

engineered from Cavorite, and its course is determined through calculation. Cavor's account of the Moon later reaches Earth through wireless transmissions received at an observatory by the independent experimenter Wendigee. The messages are reproduced as documents, with damaged and illegible sections left visible.⁴¹ Their incompleteness strengthens their appearance of authenticity, since real evidence often survives in a fragmentary condition. Wells rebuilds Lucian's historical and documentary apparatus with the recognised evidential forms of modern science to establish the same credibility.

In a nod to Lucian's satirical model, Bedford is presented as an unreliable source who declares his account unlikely to be believed. However, Wells frames the narrative with independent evidence such as the presence of Cavor, Wendigee and the transmissions from Cavor. These details allow parts of the story to seem verifiable without requiring the reader simply to trust Bedford's character. His commercial ambitions give him an interest in presenting the voyage in ways that support possession and profit; as a failed businessman turned playwright, he has his own importance to restore. The science, documents, dates and measurements supply some of the authority that Bedford himself lacks. Lucian parodies the appearance of trustworthiness in the calm confidence of a single eyewitness, even after identifying that eyewitness as a liar. By contrast, Wells provides corroboration within the fiction using independent witnesses to provide evidence. The source of credibility shifts from the traveller's voice to a network of evidence that appears external to him, but both writers show that the form of a report can make an impossible account appear reliable.

Wells's version makes us read Lucian differently. By showing how Bedford's account gains authority, Wells draws attention to the way Lucian constructs credibility in the *True History*. The measured journeys, named rulers, eyewitness claims and official records no longer appear as separate attacks about historical style. Together, they show how an invented voyage can be made to resemble knowledge. Wells therefore deepens Lucian's attack on Ctesias and Iambulus. Their offence lies not only in telling lies, but in presenting those lies through forms that encouraged readers to trust them. The *True History* can therefore be re-read as a satire on the manufacture of belief, exposing how falsehood acquires the appearance of authority.

Lucian's declaration that he is lying makes this especially clear. Since the reader already knows that the voyage is false, the factual style cannot simply be an attempt to deceive. Lucian allows us to watch the methods of truthful reporting operate without truth behind them. He shows how a false claim can begin to resemble knowledge once it is presented through forms that readers have learned to trust. Wells makes this process easier to recognise by translating it into the familiar forms valued by a scientific age. Lucian relies on eyewitness confidence and official records, while Wells relies on experiments, instruments and transcripts. The sources of authority have changed, but the process by which belief is produced remains the same. Wells therefore allows the *True History* to be

⁴¹Wells, *First Men in the Moon*, ch. 23-25

reread not only as an attack on dishonest travel-writers, but as a satire on the wider methods through which a society decides which claims deserve to be believed.

Lucian gives this problem a physical form on the Isle of Dreams where the Temples of Truth and Falsehood stood adjoining, neighbours rather than opposites.⁴² Once dreams have entered the world, however, one does not know from which Temple each originated. A dream, like a story, arrives as a finished account, detached from its maker; the episode mirrors the method of the *True History* itself. A false account can be transmitted in the same orderly and convincing form as a true one. The receiver cannot judge it by its origin, only by examining what has arrived.

In both works, the provenance of the story is unreliable, fact and fiction are intertwined and personal verification is impossible. The Isle of Dreams therefore gives visible form to a problem shared by Lucian and Wells, the need to distinguish between information that is true and information that has merely been made to look trustworthy. The problem retains relevance to the modern reader as similar devices of manufactured belief can be seen in social media, “fake” news, “alternative facts” and AI-sourced hallucinations.

Wells later described *The First Men in the Moon* as an attempt “to look at mankind from a distance and burlesque the effects of specialisation.”⁴³ His description confirms the importance of the lunar viewpoint to the novel’s satire. Distance and imaginary travel are not uniquely Lucianic devices, but the epigraph together with the adoption of his satiric methods identify Lucian as the ancient predecessor through whom Wells presents their use. The significance of the connection therefore does not depend on proving that every shared feature originated with Lucian. It lies in Wells’s conscious revival of a Lucianic way of judging the world from outside it, extended into a critique of his own society. The movement also turns backwards. Wells’s transformation makes clearer that Lucian’s satire tests not only what readers believe, but the forms through which belief is manufactured and acquires authority.

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⁴²Lucian VH 2.33

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