

Dear Poets,

Today's teaching takeaway examines Eleanor Swanson's "H.G. Wells Re-imagines Time Travel" from her new collection, *Non Finito* (Fernwood Press, 2022). The poem, and a closer look at its sonic qualities, is included as a separate document. Having decorated my first apartment in early *Empire Strikes Back*, Swanson's work had me from the title on.

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How It's Put Together

This persona poem homages H.G. Wells (1866-1946), his environs and imbibement central to stanza one. Swanson imbues wariness, Wells pondering the continuum of yesteryear critics, his not-so-millennium stogie "unlit." For anyone doubting tobacco's ability to thwart physics, there's the simile-supported: "cigar / now rested in a crystal ashtray, / its smoldering tip red as Mars." I'm comforted by the thought of home-based wormholes. Take a stretch break, return to parsecced windowsill. Swanson's end-word *consequence* brings the notion of negative travel outcomes to light.

The first half of stanza two consists of "old man" Wells revisiting *The Time Machine* (1895), produced in his late twenties. Hyphenation and alliteration convey H.G.'s repudiation, *puerile* one of adjectiveville's more disdainful tracts. I don't possess a mega-opus from my late-twenties self who, at that juncture, was drafting agrarian safety proposals but what's relatable is the way I usually feel about my earlier writing—Swanson's elderly Wells, the sonar heard by internal editors queued to our work. Now and then, I forget *So's* staying power when a stanza needs tonal restarting. Fortunately, I have line seven ("So...I do not recall lighting"), line eight focusing on "this excellent Havana" (the 3+3 syllable song helps), "a single puff" confirming Wellsian worth, the soundplay between *dimension* and *dementia* a quantum cherish.

Beyond stanza two's closing line about mortality, "footsteps in the kitchen" introduces us to Rebecca West, Moura Budberg, Martha Gellhorn, and Constance Crowninshield Coolidge, "A legion of my lovers." Say what you will regarding companion omens, these come with a decanter. The dialogue between H.G. and Rebecca (question/question/response) fuels rather than floods stanza three. This talking takeaway is especially helpful when vocalizing a persona figure after lengthy interiority, the first and second stanzas contemplative.

I admire Swanson's emphasis on biographical investment. Prior to this, I knew nothing about Wells, nicknamed Bertie, outside of his books. The poet's writing compelled me to google concepts and cohorts alike. The date Wells and Einstein made each other's acquaintance? April 15, 1929.¹ It's one honor to provide space for your influential authors, another when pondering their "final moments." Eschewing the deathbed in favor of enjoyment palleted the poem a shade of *This Is Your Life*, imagination our agate.



R.W.

M. B.

M. G

C. C. C.

Did someone say *tangent universe*?



Prompt

Write a persona poem consisting of an author who reengages with one of their opuses. What roles do dialogue and biographical investment play? Include either of the phrases “closed timelike curve”ⁱⁱ or “causal loop”ⁱⁱⁱ and at least two lines from some of your earliest work.

Happy Poeming,

Jon

ⁱ <https://medium.com/starts-with-a-bang/when-einstein-met-h-g-wells-425372d21821>

ⁱⁱ In which “the mathematical result of physics equations allows for time travel.”
(<https://www.thoughtco.com/closed-timelike-curve-2699127>)

ⁱⁱⁱ A causal loop diagram consists of four basic elements: the variables, the links between them, the signs on the links (which show how the variables are interconnected), and the sign of the loop (which shows what type of behavior the system will produce). (<https://thesystemsthinker.com/causal-loop-construction-the-basics/>)