In the mid-nineteenth century doctors and the public began to speculate about the effects travelling on trains could have on one’s health. The new level of speed and reactions to it were seen to be detrimental to the passenger’s state of mind. Theories ranged from simple exhaustion to madness induced by reading on trains. Thomas De Quincey was one of those writers who deplored the loss of a bodily sense of speed as it could still be experienced in coaches and on horseback: “This speed was incarnated in the visible contagion amongst brutes of some impulse, that, radiating into their natures, had yet its centre and beginning in man.” What he sensed was a disconnection between speed and humans: “But now, on the new system of travelling, iron tubes and boilers have disconnected man’s heart from the ministers of his locomotion.” With this, De Quincey also anticipated the division between matter and information, the news being carried by a system of communication faster than any organism: “Tidings, fitted to convulse all nations, must henceforward travel by culinary process ....”

With the expansion of the railway system across the world, this specific discussion began to fade though this did not mean that interest in speed as such disappeared. On the contrary, more and more speedy objects and speed-related innovations in technology began to influence everyday life and accelerate it. De Quincey’s emotional and literary observations about the faster modes of communication were soon discovered to have scientific merit as well. As George Beard, who introduced the term of neurasthenia, pointed out in his ground-
breaking study *American Nervousness* (1881) the increasing urban tempo and the intensified competition caused “an increase in the incidence of a host of problems including neurasthenia, neuralgia, nervous dyspepsia, early tooth decay, and even premature baldness”.\(^3\) While the 1878 Highways and Locomotive Act required that “any vehicle using public roads be preceded by a man on foot and not exceed a speed of four miles per hour”,\(^4\) cars exceeded a hundred miles an hour by 1906. And while Phileas Fogg in Jules Verne’s book needed eighty days for his tour of the world, by 1901 a certain Charles Fitzmorris made it in sixty-one. The new century was seen as the century of time saving. Yet this urge for speed also spelled disaster and some writers were aware of it. Joseph Conrad angrily predicted more irresponsibility when steamships could plough across the ocean in all weathers at forty knots. In 1898, Morgan Robertson published his novel *Futility* in which a speedy ocean-liner is shipwrecked on an iceberg. His ship was called the Titan, and it stood for the “destruction of life ... for the sake of speed”.\(^5\)

This is the context in which we have to see H.G. Wells’ interest in speed, with both its liberating and destructive sides. Wells was probably the first author to study speed in all its manifestations from vehicles to drugs, in fictional as well as non-fictional works. Like many another intellectual – Mark Twain, Leo Tolstoy, Edith Nesbit, or Henry Adams – he learnt how to ride the bicycle in the 1890s, when he was already in his mid-twenties. And like Mark Twain and many others who had to accustom their bodies to the new vehicle, Wells began to write about this experience. Not surprisingly, the new type of speed sustained in dynamic balance produced psychosomatic reactions that found their way into fictions and dreams. A year after *The Time Machine*, in 1896, Wells published a full-length novel devoted to the bicycle: *The Wheels of Chance*. Its lower-class protagonist, Mr Hoopdriver, is one of those who find the new freedom of the bicycle thrilling and dangerous at the same time. On the night after his first day out on the machine he has both exhilarating and threatening dreams all of which spin around the bodily experience of speed:

