Veronica Hollinger

Deconstructing the Time Machine

Time is, of all modes of existence, most obsequious to the imagination....

Samuel Johnson

The idea of time travel has for many years exercised the ingenuity not only of SF writers, but of scientists and philosophers as well; neither the equations of quantum physics nor the rules of logic have managed definitively to prove or to disprove the possibility that this most paradoxical of SF concepts may some day be realized. The purpose of this present essay is to examine some aspects of time travel within the framework of Derridean deconstruction, since, as I hope to demonstrate, the time-travel story always achieves a deconstruction of certain received ideas about the nature and structure of time. It may be that deconstructive activity of some kind is characteristic of all SF, in which case this present application of post-structuralist critical theory may serve to suggest new approaches to other SF motifs. The final two sections of this essay focus in detail upon H.G. Wells's *The Time Machine* (1895), the novella which first applied technology to time travel and which remains the most influential time-travel story ever written. Anticipating post-structuralist strategies by a good many years, *The Time Machine* accomplishes its own ironic deconstruction of Victorian scientific positivism, couched in the very language of the system which it sets out to undermine. And this, as I will discuss below, is the very essence of the deconstructive enterprise.

1. Time travel is a sign without a referent, a linguistic construction originating in the metaphorical spatialization of temporality. As Mark Rose observes, “the visualization of time as a line generated the idea of time travel” (p. 108). To write about time travel, therefore, is necessarily to have performed a kind of reading, to have interpreted time in order to structure it as the “space” through which a traveller can undertake a journey. As linguistic construction, time travel is never “true,” but its very status as pure sign gives rise to one of its most valuable functions within the SF genre: the time-travel story provides literary metaphors of our ideas about the nature of time; it is a means of working out the logical (and the not-so-logical) implications of our interpretations of this most nebulous aspect of human experience.

As in all SF, the relationship in time-travel stories between narrative event and empirical reality can be characterized as either analogical or extrapolative. The analogical tendency is exhibited, for example, in James
Tiptree, Jr’s “Houston, Houston, Do You Read?” (1976), in which time travel is used both to literalize Tiptree’s critique of contemporary sexual chauvinism and to demystify the signifying coercion of concepts such as “feminine” and “masculine.” Her fictional future is relatively discontinuous with contemporary reality. At the other end of the spectrum, a novel like Gregory Benford’s *Timescape* (1980) emphasizes the interrelationships among present, past, and future in very direct ways, concerned as it is with the short-term effects of recent ecological carelessness. No matter what the reigning tendency of a particular story, however, time travel is itself always metaphorical, the result of a “false” condensation of time with space. The *Time Machine*, for example, offers itself as a prophetic warning of the decline of the human race and this “devolution” is the apparently direct result of the class divisiveness of Wells’s contemporary social situation. Nevertheless, the “scientific” rationale for the temporal journey which makes possible this warning is developed solely through spatial metaphors. The Time Traveller’s central contention is that “there is no difference between Time and any of the three dimensions of Space except that our consciousness moves along it” (*TTM* 1:5).

It is indicative of the changes that have occurred in scientific and philosophical “discursive formations” (to borrow a term from Michel Foucault) that SF no longer defines itself solely as an extrapolative genre. This is due in large part to the comprehensive realization that reality is constituted by language; that the language from within which we speak constantly mediates between the self and experience of reality. Ferdinand de Saussure’s insight into the arbitrary nature of the bond between sign and referent, his conclusion that “every means of expression used in society is based, in principle, on collective behaviour or—what amounts to the same thing—on convention” (p. 68), indicates both the contingency and indeterminacy of these linguistic mediations. We are led to the unavoidable conclusion that experience of reality is always already interpretation, since “without language, thought is a vague, uncharted nebula [a happily fortuitous SF metaphor]. There are no pre-existing ideas, and nothing is distinct before the appearance of language” (Saussure: 112). Like other literary metaphors, a time-travel story is a metaphor once removed, a metaphor of a metaphor which may or may not have any direct relationship with objective reality, since that reality is screened from direct apprehension by the very language through which we speak of it. Language speaks of time in spatial metaphors and produces the concept of travel in time.

Rose suggests that the metaphorical tendency in contemporary SF far outweighs its predictive intent. In his initial distinction between fantasy and SF, he discusses analogy and extrapolation in the following terms:

it may be useful...to conceive the opposition between fantasy and science fiction in terms of Roman Jakobson’s distinction between metaphor and metonymy as poles of literary behavior. The changed worlds of fantasy are presented as literary substitutions for reality; they are related to the empirical world paradigmatically or metaphorically....The changed worlds of science fiction, however, are presented as logical extensions of reality; they are
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related to the empirical world syntagmatically or metonymically. This is what is meant when science fiction is called an extrapolative form. (Rose: 21-22)⁴

Recognizing that “both principles are at work in science fiction as in all discourse” (p. 22), Rose nevertheless notes a shift in emphasis from metonymy to metaphor in more recent SF, which has resulted in “a radical reinterpretation of the genre” (p. 16). We may conclude from this that time travel is not the anomaly it might at first appear to be, since its overtly metaphorical function is now the rule of the genre, rather than the exception. Darko Suvin (pp. 222-42) has suggested The Time Machine as a “structural model” for SF; in the present context, it offers itself as a linguistic paradigm as well.⁷

Suvin has defined SF as a genre “whose main formal device is an imaginative framework alternative to the author’s empirical environment” (p. 8). From this perspective, time travel is “a means of reality displacement” (p. 71) similar to space travel, in that it functions to introduce the reader into the alternative framework of the SF text as an “extension and exaggeration of some facet of our experience into [sic] another setting” (Lindsay: 126). Extending beyond such generic displacement, however, time travel also achieves a displacement specific to itself, and this is its subversion of certain traditional approaches to the question of time. This holds true whether the stories in which it appears offer themselves to the reader as metaphorical commentaries, as exercises in extrapolation, or as blends of both.

It will be useful at this point (for critical theory can be as much a force for defamiliarization as SF itself)⁶ to continue this discussion of the particular nature and function of time travel from within the context of Derridean deconstruction. Jacques Derrida’s (anti)philosophical strategies are so named because they recognize the impossibility of effecting any complete or permanent breakdown of the conventionalized modes of thought from within which we interpret human reality. Derrida cautions that

it is not a question of ‘rejecting’ these notions; they are necessary, and, at least at present, nothing is conceivable for us without them. It is a question at first of demonstrating the systematic and historical solidarity of the concepts and gestures of thought that one often believes to be innocently separated. (OG, pp. 13-14)

Both SF and post-structuralist theory in general are involved in the processes of defamiliarization: SF achieves a “cognitive estrangement” through its displacement of the social/political/cultural present, while deconstruction seeks to expose the conventional nature of the “gestures of thought” of the Western metaphysical tradition. Thus both call attention to the historical contingency of their subject matter.⁹ On the other hand, both SF and deconstruction must speak from within the contexts which they seek to defamiliarize: there is no getting outside of the discourses of consensus reality. Derrida is at his most succinct here: “il n’y a pas de hors-texte” (OG, p. 158). There is no vantage point outside the boundaries of the observable, no privileged observer, no completely innocent reading of “reality.”

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2. Time travel is always potentially deconstructive, effecting as it does a displacement of the human “here and now” upon which we tend to base our interpretations of reality. Its immediate fascination for writers, as for scientists and logicians, is the fact that time-travel stories are always constructed around and within paradox, “the contradiction that at each different moment we occupy a different moment from the one which we are then occupying—that five minutes from now, for example, [we] may be a hundred years from now” (Williams: 105). The time traveller experiences diachrony (succession) as synchrony (simultaneity), but the effect is not simply a reversal of these two perspectives, because the time-travel story does not abandon the notion of historical change, which tends to result when synchrony is privileged over diachrony. The result is rather a paradoxical movement in which the narrative synchronicity of temporal events highlights rather than hides differences in times. The instantaneous displacement of the time traveller from one moment to another creates an immediate juxtaposition of differences which our habitual sense of the successivity of events renders less discontinuous and jarring than it in fact is.

At the heart of the time-travel motif is the “scandal” of temporal paradox. The Grandfather Paradox is the best-known version of this peril of backward time travel. Larry Niven develops it as follows:

At the age of eighty your grandfather invents a time machine. You hate the old man, so you steal the machine and take it sixty years back into the past and kill him. How can they suspect you?

But you've killed him before he can meet your grandmother. Thus you were never born. He didn't get a chance to build the time machine either.

But then you can't have killed him. Thus he may still sire your father, who may sire you. Later there will be a time machine...

You and the machine both do and do not exist. (Niven: 111)

As Niven concludes, “with the Grandfather Paradox operating, the effect, coming before the cause, may cause the cause never to come into effect, with results that are not even self-consistent” (p. 113). This variation of the time-travel story leads the reader to “the point at which thought encounters an aporia—or self-engendered paradox beyond which it cannot press” (Norris: 49).

The structure of the time-loop story creates another version of temporal paradox. Readers who try to unravel the threads of Robert A. Heinlein’s “All You Zombies—” (1959) will find themselves ensnared in the same time-loop which traps its protagonist: through time travel and sex change, he is his own mother and father; trapped in a process of endless supplementation, he must repeatedly travel into the past to (re)create himself.

Heinlein's brilliant exercise in solipsism is a virtual dramatization of Derrida's (non)concept of the supplement, which he develops in his deconstruction of the nature/culture opposition. As Derrida demonstrates, the concept of the supplement contains two differing significations. At its most obvious, it is a surplus, an addition to full presence: “it cumulates and accumulates presence” (OG, p. 144). Thus, for example, culture supplements nature, and writing supplements speech. Traditionally, nature and speech are
privileged over culture and writing, which are considered to be supplementary constructs. In addition, however (as its own “supplementary” implication), the supplement compensates for a lack of full presence and comes to replace that which it supplements: “it intervenes or insinuates itself in-the-place-of” (OG, p. 145: emphasis in original).  

In demonstrating the impossibility of arriving at the origin of the “entity” (his protagonist Jane), Heinlein dramatizes the always already supplemented nature of that entity. At which point did Jane enjoy a pure un(re)created state if s/he is caught in the deterministic strands of an endless time-loop? “All You Zombies—” is the fictional analogue of the Derridean contention that “the apparent addition/substitution of the supplement actually constitutes the seemingly unsupplemented entity” (Leitch: 172; emphasis in original). Heinlein’s Jane is always already supplemented by his/her trips into the past to repeat the act of (re)creation: “the indifferent process of supplementarity has always already infiltrated presence” (OG, p. 163; emphasis in original).  

Heinlein’s story is arguably the masterpiece of its type, but the disturbing play of supplementarity is inherent in any time-loop situation, from Robert Silverberg’s hard-bitten “Absolutely Inflexible” (1956) to the parodic “Seventh Voyage” of Stanislaw Lem’s Star Diaries (1964).

3. As I suggested earlier, to write about time travel is always already to have performed a reading; that is, it requires that the writer has first interpreted time in order to structure it as space. Since scientific discourse is one of the frameworks within which all SF is written, the revolution which overturned the Newtonian scientific paradigm has necessarily had an effect upon how time-travel stories read time. This scientific revolution accounts for a major shift in the development of the motif, since interpretation of time is a crucial differentium between the Newtonian and Einsteinian worldviews.  

As James Ziegler explains:

To Newton time was a constant, to be measured in the same way that mass, density, and volume are measured. To Einstein time is relative in the same way that mass, density, and volume are relative. Since mass, density, and volume change as their velocities change, time also changes—hence the popular term fourth dimension. (p. 74)

If the reading of time takes place within the paradigm of Classical Physics, temporal structure will tend to be linear, homogeneous, and consecutive; on the other hand, relative time is nothing if not a “post-structure,” tending towards heterogeneity and indeterminacy. Or, to invoke an analogous set of metaphors developed by Roland Barthes, Newtonian time is read as Work (œuvre), Einsteinian time as Text (texte).  

Before exploring this analogy, however, it is necessary to review the implications of the several sets of binary oppositions that have appeared in my own text. I have already made use of Rose’s Jakobsonian distinction between metonymy and metaphor, and two more polarities have just been introduced: the opposition between the Newtonian and Einsteinian scientific paradigms and Barthes’ opposition of the Work to the Text. While each of these is a functional opposition in this present analysis, it should not be
supposed that they are in any *fundamental* sense truly antithetical. Indeed, the configuration of binary oppositions, as the principal structural convention of our mental operations, is the prime target of Derridean deconstruction.¹⁷

Derrida’s deconstruction of the “proper” discourse of philosophy (in his essay “White Mythology: Metaphor in the Text of Philosophy”), as it demonstrates the metaphorical nature of all language, leads inevitably to the conclusion that, so far from standing in opposition to metaphor, metonymy may in fact be defined as a special case of metaphor. Nor does Relativity Theory consider Newtonian science in opposition to itself: “Relativity does not...contradict classical physics. It simply regards the old concepts as limiting cases that apply solely to the familiar experiences of [human beings]” (Barnett: 58).

Hence, if my contention that time may be read as either Work or Text is to hold up, it is necessary to “supplement” Barthes’ argument, to recognize that all literary productions are texts (or intertexts, for that matter—a more radically heterogeneous view of literary discourse). The Work, best exemplified in the world-view of the 19th-century realist novel, is a limiting case of Text, one more consonant with “the familiar experiences” of human reality, which we tend to interpret in linear, causal patterns, as logical structures. It is *différence* which defines and which “invites us to undo the need for balanced equations, to see if each term in an opposition is not after all an accomplice of the other” (Spivak: lix). In place of presence, of center, of secure ground upon which to base our knowledge of reality, Derrida offers the “play” of *différence* as the (non)principle of reality. *Différance*, a Derridean neologism which conflates the effects of both deferral and difference, is the gap between signifier and signified, between sign and referent, between our interpretations of the world and the world “in itself.”¹⁸

Barthes makes the distinction between Work and Text in “From Work to Text,” a product of his later, post-structuralist, career. Recognizing that the idea of the Work arises from within the same epistemological matrix (or *episteme*) as does Classical Physics, he writes of it as “a traditional notion that has long been and still is thought of in what might be called Newtonian fashion” (p. 74). The implication here, of course, is that the Text is to be aligned with Einsteinian “fashion.” Derrida has also recognized the post-structuralist affinities of relativistic science. In his seminal essay “Play, Structure and Sign in the Discourse of the Human Sciences,” he observes that “the Einsteinian constant is not a constant, is not a center. It is the very concept of variability—it is, finally, the concept of the game” (p. 267). Relativity becomes identified with free play and *différence*, the (non)principles of the “post-structure.”

Time-travel stories influenced by Newtonian fashions rely heavily upon an interpretation of time-as-Work, which limits the free play of both narrative event and structure: the Newtonian universe is “a closed system operating by fixed rules that [can] be discovered by reason based on observation” (Ziegler: 70). Newton’s idealist physics defined time as absolute: in Book One of his *Principia Mathematica* (1687), he writes that “absolute, true and mathematical time, of itself and from its own nature, flows equably without relation to anything external” (quoted in Thayer, p. 17). Absolute Time
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(functioning like a kind of metaphysical Greenwich Mean Time) joins the company of transcendental signifieds, the centers which determine the fixed nature of metaphysical structures. By the 19th century, the concept of Absolute Time had given way to a belief in Natural Law as the organizing principle which secured and determined the nature and structure of time.

In many ways, The Time Machine appears to be an exemplary demonstration of time as Newtonian Work. Wells’s Traveller journeys through one dimension of a rational universe which is itself a fixed structure, a totality whose “truth” is, at least potentially, accessible to scientific discovery. The Victorian scientist is presented as an intelligent and competent reader of time future, the quintessential privileged observer, the subject who enjoys a vantage point hundreds of thousands of years removed from the object of his study.19

Because time is a linear and homogeneous Work, the Time Traveller moves along a fixed time-line into a future which is the direct and apparently inevitable result of his present (time read as classic realist novel). His ability to return to this present (as opposed to any other “present”) is never in question. As he gazed at the stars of the far future (he tells his listeners), he “thought of their unfathomable distance, and the slow inevitable drift of their movements from the unknown past into the unknown future” (1.79). This “inevitable drift” of the stars is both a fact of Wells’s narrative universe and a resolutely spatial metaphor for the fixed structure of time.

Inevitability is a keynote of time-as-Work. The “devolution” which Wells saw threatening the society of his own day is figured first in bio-sociological decline and then repeated in the entropic decay of the Solar System (scientifically determined according to the Second Law of Thermodynamics).20 At the level of narrative event, the logic of Wells’s reading seems to require the final disappearance of the Traveller himself from the text.21 The most powerful event in The Time Machine is a dramatically visual depiction of this vast determination: the Traveller at the terminal beach, a helpless and horrified spectator at the end of the world. Wells’s epilogue seems to suggest that time future is as fixed as time past: “If that is so, it remains for us to live as though it were not so” (12:117). Nothing to be done. Interpreted within the framework of the Newtonian world-view, the Narrator’s rather enigmatic conclusion invites this fatalistic reading.

When time is read as Work, SF tends to function metonymically—that is, as extrapolation—since temporal structure is comprised of a rational and successive series of cause-and-effect events. Temporal free play is usually limited to forward movement in time; the “scandal” of temporal paradox is quite firmly excluded from the game. This may be the reason that most early time-travel stories limit themselves to trips into the future. Examples would include the optimistic anticipation of Edward Bellamy’s best-selling utopia, Looking Backward, 2000-1887 (1888), and the “death-watch” anxieties of John W. Campbell’s twin stories “Twilight” (1934) and “Night” (1935), which together offer Campbell’s own version of the triumph of entropy. These future journeys provide some protection against the dangers (to narrative event and/or to the discourse of the text) of temporal paradox. One of the earliest stories to admit the potential for temporal paradox, Mark Twain’s A
Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court (1889), dissolves finally into a metaphysical negation of reality, conveniently erasing temporal structure altogether. In place of the majestic drift of the stars in The Time Machine, Hank Morgan in A Connecticut Yankee refers to his life as “this pathetic drift between the eternities” (18:161).

4. When the Einsteinian scientific paradigm displaces the Newtonian, SF is invited to explore what we might call the infinite free play of temporal structure, the play of time-as-Text, heterogeneous, indeterminate, and uncentered, completely at odds with the notion of fixed structure. Considered in this context, Derrida’s explication of the concept of centered structure implicates Classical Physics in the game of Western metaphysics:

The concept of centered structure is in fact the concept of a freeplay based on a fundamental ground, a freeplay which is constituted upon a fundamental immobility and a reassuring certitude, which is itself beyond the reach of the freeplay. With this certitude anxiety can be mastered, for anxiety is invariably the result of a certain mode of being implicated in the game, of being caught by the game, of being as it were from the very beginning at stake in the game. (“Play, Sign and Structure,” p. 248)

Derrida’s (anti)philosophy is clearly a product of the same epistemè which produced the Principle of Indeterminacy. This holds, in part, that “the very act of observing alters the object being observed” (Heisenberg: 24). The scientist as well as the philosopher is implicated in the game. We may also see in the Principle of Complementarity, by which contemporary physics recognizes both the wave and particle properties of light, a recognition of the fundamental différence in the nature of reality.

Relativity offers a new (non)definition of both space and time:

space and time are forms of intuition, which can be no more divorced from consciousness than can our concepts of color, shape, or size. Space has no objective reality except as an order or arrangement of the objects we perceive in it, and time has no independence apart from the order of events by which we perceive it. (Barnett: 19)

Scientific discourse admits its own status as metaphor. Time has no reality outside of our interpretations and it invites a potentially vast variety of possible “readings.” Time is read as Work in a reality defined by discourse that upholds the traditional hierarchical opposition between science and fiction, in which science is the privileged term. In post-structuralist epistemology, of which Relativity Theory is one expression, this opposition has been subverted. Science, no longer privileged, has become subsumed under fiction as a particular system of discourse, and this has greatly expanded the possibilities for SF’s explorations of the nature and structure of time.

Jorge Luis Borges has left us one of the most memorable figurations of this new awareness of time in his story “The Garden of Forking Paths” (1944), which concerns a book which is also a labyrinth, a remarkable image of time-as-Text. Borges writes that the author of this book
did not think of time as absolute and uniform. He believed in an infinite series of times, in a dizzily growing, ever spreading network of diverging, converging parallel times. This web of time—the strands of which approach one another, bifurcate, intersect or ignore each other through the centuries—embraces every possibility. (p. 156)\textsuperscript{23}

Borges's radical postmodern philosophy is echoed in less extreme form in many SF stories which function within the Einsteian paradigm. The fixed time-line of The Time Machine loses its privileged status in the face of the heterogeneity of times of the relative universe. Such offshoots of the time-travel story as alternate and parallel world stories, which frequently include the ideas of multiple time-tracks and branching time-lines, are extensions of this reading of time-as-Text. James Blish's Jack of Eagles (1952), for example, is an early novel which suggests the possibility of a split in the time-line. Larry Niven explores some of the darker implications of a universe of universes created by endlessly branching time-lines in his story "All the Myriad Ways" (1968). Alternate times and multiple time-tracks shape stories such as Philip K. Dick's The Man in the High Castle (1962), in which Germany and Japan have won World War II. Norman Spinrad's The Iron Dream (1972), which is "really" Adolph Hitler's 1953 award-winning novel, The Lord of the Swastika, also fits into this category. In many of these stories, scientific relativity finds its analogue in a serious exploration of cultural relativity.

Time-as-Text invites us not only to read it, but to participate in writing it as well, to admit our active role in the creation of the structure, our complicity in the game: "the Text requires an attempt to abolish (or at least to lessen) the distance between writing and reading, not by intensifying the reader's projection into the Work, but by linking the two together in a single unifying process" (Barthes: 79). Because Wells's Time Traveller reads the future as logical and determined extrapolation of his present, he confirms the inevitability of devolution and apocalypse, a confirmation which severely limits the freedom of the human subject to shape events in time. Relativity has contributed to the restoration of this freedom in many SF stories. Marge Piercy's Woman on the Edge of Time (1976), for example, posits at least two opposing futures which are potential in the present, and one of these, a feminist utopia, uses time travel in an effort (whose outcome is left open) to ensure its actualization. Benford's Timescape (1980) assumes an even greater freedom to write time: the doomed world of 1998 successfully uses time travel to warn the world of 1962 of its impending ruin; the result is a split in the time-line, as the world of 1962 veers towards its new future, while the "old" future continues to decline. Writing time in this instance includes (re)writing the past.

Even when a time-travel story inscribes itself within the Newtonian paradigm (as many still continue to do), it is (at least, from a "postmodern" perspective) always already deconstructive of any mechanical reading of the universe. The Time Machine can once again provide the model for this particular textual activity. We have already seen, for example, some of the effects of Wells's reading of time-as-Work: the determinate nature of time, the line-
arity of temporal structure, and the apparently extrapolative tendency which develops from this view of time. But by the very fact that this is a time-travel story, narrative activity disruptive of specific aspects of the 19th-century positivist world-view is already at play within the text.

In the first place, in order to postulate time travel as one of the given of his narrative universe, Wells had to separate the subjective time of his Traveller from the objective time by which his temporal perceptions are supposedly determined. Private time breaks free of public time. This situation is analogous to Derrida's subversion of the language-parole (language as system/language as individual speech-act) hierarchy erected by Saussurean structural linguistics. This deconstruction of the opposition between public and private time also anticipates Relativity Theory, which, in Stephen Kern's delightful image, has "filled the universe with clocks each telling a different correct time" (p. 19). Kern identifies the collusion between the normative and the coercive, between "the authority of uniform public time" and "centralized public authority" (p. 16) which is implicit in the idea of a public time. Now there is no more privileged Time, only an infinite number of individual times which together constitute the illusion of an absolute and universal Time.

As a consequence of this subversion of public time, the concept of "now" becomes displaced from its privileged point on the time-line: this is the characteristic gesture of displacement particular to the language of time travel. "Now" is no longer "here" but "there." There is no longer a privileged "now" of any empirical force. Within the discourse of the time-travel story, "now" becomes shifting and unstable, indicative of any point in the past, present, or future inhabited by the subjective present of the time traveller. Language recognizes temporal subjectivity; it is always limited to private time. No words exist to fix the absolute present, the Now, while narrating the time traveller's experiences in the past or future relative to that absolute present. Wells's Narrator demonstrates this linguistic peculiarity as he speculates on the Time Traveller's "present" whereabouts: "He may even now—if I may use the phrase—be wandering on some plesiosaurus-haunted Oolitic coral reef, or beside the lonely saline lakes of the Triassic Age" (12:117).

As at point of reference, the time traveller acts as both the functional (not absolute) center of the temporal structure and as a floating signifier released from any fixed relationship to that structure. Time-travel stories, then, are never "really" versions but are always subversions of traditional temporal structure; their absolute rejection of an absolute Present works to negate the very concept of temporal Presence, "temporal presence as point...of the now or of the moment" (OG, p. 12).

5. In an important early essay, "The Rediscovery of the Unique" (1891), Wells demonstrates his anticipation of several key Derridean concepts. The focus of the essay is the "rediscovery" of difference: "All being is unique, or, nothing is strictly like anything else. It implies...that we only arrive at the idea of similar beings by an unconscious or deliberate disregard of an infinity of small differences" (Philmus & Hughes: 23; Wells's emphasis). Even more significant is Wells's conclusion:
[The "human delusion" of sameness] has grown with the growth of the mind, and is, we are quite prepared to concede, a necessary feature of thought. We may here remark, parenthetically, that we make no proposal to supersede ordinary thinking by a new method. This...is outside the scope of the present paper, and altogether premature. (ibid., pp. 25-26)

According to Derrida, the present moment is no more conducive to new methods of thinking than was the late 19th century:

the movements of deconstruction do not destroy structures from the outside. They are not possible and effective, nor can they take accurate aim, except by inhabiting those structures. Inhabiting them in a certain way. (OG, p. 24; emphasis in original)

Wells’s answer to this dilemma, that there is no ground upon which to base any attack upon conventionalized systems of thought outside of those systems themselves, proves to be the same as Derrida’s. Just as Derridean deconstruction is a profoundly ironic enterprise, one which, in the words of Paul de Man, “splits the subject into an empirical self that exists in a state of inauthenticity and a self that exists only in the form of a language that asserts the knowledge of its inauthenticity” (p. 197), so The Time Machine is a profoundly ironic text. It simultaneously inhabits the world of Classical Physics and ironizes that world-view. We have already seen how the classical definition of time is crucial to the logic of the narrative events and to the Time Traveller’s interpretations of these events. It will therefore be worthwhile to examine in more detail the cumulative effects of Wells’s ironization of the Newtonian paradigm on the “meaning” of his novella.

An implicit confession of disloyalty to the classical world-view is embedded in the very title of this “exemplary” Newtonian production. While “the time machine” refers to the invention by which the Victorian scientist moves into the far future, Wells’s title invites at least two more readings. Mark Rose points out that the machine of the title is also “the relentless turning of history,...a diabolic mechanism whose workings lead to death” (p. 101). Time is the machine which will eventually crush the life out of the very universe. A third reading reminds us, self-reflexively, that the time machine is the story itself, which creates the time of its particular narrative universe. Although Wellsian time travel is a direct literalization of linguistic metaphor—diachrony treated as synchrony—his story-as-time-machine works its own considerable deconstruction upon the time machine of Classical Physics.

Robert M. Philmus and David Y. Hughes have discussed in some detail the subversion of the Newtonian world-view which takes place on the level of narrative event in The Time Machine. They link this to the rising influence of evolutionary theory in the latter half of the 19th century:

The newly posited entanglement of species in the destiny of one another reopened the question of ‘humanity’s’ relation to (the rest of) nature and to the universe at large in part because it rendered the concept of isolation (itself a spatial concept) anachronistic, if not obsolete. (p. 3)
Wells’s repudiation of “the anthropocentric fallacy” (Philmus & Hughes: 8) is demonstrated both in the disappearance of the human race from the universe of the far future and in the disappearance of the Time Traveller himself from the universe of the story. What is of interest within the terms of this present discussion is that there is a parallel attack against such a centrist perspective in the text’s ironically compromised sense of commitment to the ideal of logocentrism as well, an ideal framed by the same epistemê from within which the intellectual conventions of scientific positivism were developed. The very discourse of Wells’s text subverts the notion of full presence through its ironic treatment of this traditional metaphysical concept. This can most clearly be seen in the development of the “frame story” within which the events of The Time Machine occur. There is a constant tension between the logocentric idealism of Wells’s Narrator and the events which he reports at second hand.

Vincent Leitch explains that

the logocentric system always assigns the origin of truth to the logos—to the spoken word, or to the Word of God. Moreover, the being of the entity is always determined as presence: the ‘object’ of science and metaphysics is characteristically the ‘present entity.’ In these circumstances, the full presence of the voice is valued over the mute signs of writing...Writing represents a fall from full speech. (p. 25)

It is this hegemony of Speech over Writing that Derrida criticizes in Saussure: Wells’s Narrator is a supporter of the same metaphysics of presence and would undoubtedly agree with Saussure (p. 30) that “writing obscures language; it is not a guise for language but a disguise.” The “truth” of the Traveller’s story is apodictically proven through his own account of it, a convention used in the 19th century to support the fictional truths of texts as disparate as Jane Eyre (1848), David Copperfield (1850), and Dracula (1897) (although, as a compendium of written reports, Dracula is already contaminated by a fall from immediate presence).

Wells’s Narrator is so extremely conscious of the truth-value of the present voice that he enters the following disclaimer for his own second-hand account:

In writing it down I feel with only too much keenness the inadequacy of pen and ink—and, above all, my own inadequacy—to express [the] quality [of the original narration]. You read, I will suppose, attentively enough; but you cannot know the speaker’s white, sincere face...nor hear the intonation of his voice. (2:21-22; my emphasis)

Derrida reminds us that writing in the logocentric system is always the sign of a double absence: “the absence of the signatory, to say nothing of the absence of the referent” (OG, p. 40). The Time Machine calls particular attention to these absences, since the only /eye-witness disappears from the text. Committed as Wells’s novella apparently is to the tradition in which Presence supports the truth of narrative event, it nevertheless informs us at the end that “the Time Traveller vanished three years ago. And, as everybody knows now, he has never returned” (12:117). This last-minute supplementary
information changes the very essence of the narrative: the presence of the Time Traveller has, in fact, always already been an absence. This is further underlined by a strange and seemingly irrelevant occurrence which takes place during the Time Traveller’s exploration of the Palace of Green Porcelain. He recounts that, “yielding to an irresistible impulse, I wrote my name upon the nose of a steatite monster from South America that particularly took my fancy” (8:89). The unnamed Traveller has at last named himself, but that name exists on a monument from the past buried in a museum in the future—never in the present. Presence is always already past or to come: it is never immediate. If, as Derrida defines it, “a written signature implies the actual or empirical non-presence of the signer” (“Signature Event Context,” p. 194), then Wells’s text here reinforces the absence at its core, since not only the “signer” but his very signature is lost in time.

6. Paralleling this subversion of logocentrism in Wells’s text is the displacement of the human subject from the center to the periphery of natural structure, and, finally, to a point outside the picture altogether. This movement is analogous to the reversal of the evolutionary process which the Traveller discovers to be the fate of humanity. If we view the time from which the Traveller embarks as one in which humanity is the center and meaning of the natural world, then the world of 802,701 is one in which the Eloi and the Morlocks are less central and more marginal—that is, less “human” and more “natural”—than before; in the distant future at the end of the world, humanity is no longer even a peripheral presence but a complete absence. In this extreme displacement of the subject, only the object, the world of nature, remains. The “object” has overwhelmed the “subject” in a deconstructive reversal of the traditional scientific conviction of the power of the Cartesian res cognitans over the res extensa. The Time Machine, to borrow the words of Paul de Man, is an ironic treatment of “the purely instrumental, reified character of [our] relationship to nature.” It demonstrates that “Nature can at all times treat [us] as if we were a thing and remind [us] of [our] factitiousness, whereas [we are] quite powerless to convert even the smallest particle of nature into something human” (p. 196). Under these circumstances, the gestures of “observation” and “reason” become sadly diminished and ineffectual. Humanity as transcendental signified, the ground of the Time Traveller’s explorations into the future, has been removed as part of the narrative equation; and any “meaning” based on such a ground has vanished with it.

This is supported by the ironic role played by the figure of the White Sphinx in the text. The various references to the Oedipus myth in The Time Machine (noted in Ketterer: 340-41, and Huntington: 44-45) are focussed upon this inscrutably “colossal figure” with its “unpleasant suggestion of disease” (TTM 3:27); the answer to its ancient riddle is also the answer which correctly interprets the world of 802,701. Only now the riddle of the Sphinx might more suitably be: “What is missing from this picture?” In each case, the answer is the same: “Man”; but while the original question bespeaks presence, the revision in The Time Machine points to absence. The discourse of Wells’s text is also constituted by absence, so that the Time Traveller is a
correlative on the textual level of the absence repeated on the level of narrative event.\(^{27}\) The end result of the Time Traveller’s readings of the future is absence, just as his absence is the final note in our reading of *The Time Machine*.

In his early writings, Wells explored both absolutist and psychologistic approaches in his discussions of the nature of time, oscillating between concepts of cosmic determinism and human free will in his earlier versions of *The Time Machine*. Philmus and Hughes (pp. 47-56) demonstrate the balance achieved in the final version between Wells’s idea of “the universe rigid”\(^{28}\) and the theory that time is a subjective phenomenon, stressing Wells’ ultimate adherence to a principle of complementarity in what has become the definitive edition of the text. In like manner, John Huntington emphasizes that “the coexistence of opposites is a fundamental element in all of Wells’s early fiction,” and cites the juxtaposition of the world of 802,701 against the present world of *The Time Machine* as one example of what he terms “this two world structure” (p. 21). He goes on to argue that “by a series of fairly simple transformations a number of other oppositions in Wells’s early fiction derive from this...structure” (p. 22), such as “the moral opposition” (p. 33) represented by the scientist and the anarchist of “The Stolen Bacillus” (1895).

What is of interest here is Huntington’s contention that the typical Wellsian opposition, that between nature and culture, is an ironic one, maintaining as it does “a constant and balanced reciprocity[...the one cannot exist without the other” (p. 22). The two world(view)s which are woven together throughout both narrative events and textual discourse in *The Time Machine* function in a manner similar to Huntington’s “two world structure.” As he concludes, “in such a structure neither world in itself holds our interest; what is important is the two of them together and the linked oppositions they establish” (ibid.). (We might observe here once again that oppositions as *oppositions* tend to exist “in the eye of the beholder”; as a rule, they are *effects* produced by difference rather than fundamental antitheses.)

The end result of the presence of these complementary world-views is a play between narrative metonymy (*The Time Machine* as extrapolative work) and textual metaphor (*The Time Machine* as figurative text), which is as integral to its structure as is the play between present and future. There is an implicit insistence upon this in the Time Traveller’s invitation to his listeners (which is also a self-reflexive moment of textual duplicity):

> Take it as a lie—or a prophecy. Say I dreamed it in the workshop. Consider I have been speculating upon the destinies of our race until I have hatched this fiction. Treat my assertion of its truth as a mere stroke of art to enhance its interest. And taking it as a story, what do you think of it? (12:112)

*The Time Machine* is essentially an exercise in *aporia*, an oscillation between the desire for presence and the awareness of absence, between the objectivity of extrapolation and the subjectivity of metaphor, between—one is tempted to add, given its historical moment—the 19th century and the 20th century.

The Narrator’s acknowledgment of human ineffectuality in the face of a determined future—his “If that is so, it remains for us to live as though it were not so” (12:117)—begins to take on additional resonance at this point, in
view of the complementary existence of both world-views in the text. Balanced against the deterministic universe of the Newtonian paradigm is the refutation of that very paradigm. If the future is not, after all, a fixed and determined one, then perhaps the refusal on the part of humanity to read time as though it were inevitable might avert the devolution to which the Traveller bears witness. 39

Certainly The Time Machine is about “making a difference”; its narrative defamiliarizes apparently natural class-structures by taking them to their bio-sociological extremes; its discourse achieves at least a partial displacement of the logocentric system through a comparable act of deconstruction. Like the (anti)philosophy of deconstruction, it both admits the ineluctability of our metaphysical structures and effects a defamiliarization of those structures. It acknowledges its inevitable inscription within the logocentric system of Classical Physics at the same time as it inhabits that system “in a certain way,” with an ironic skepticism which questions some of its own fundamental narrative commitments.

In 1933, in his “Preface to the Scientific Romances,” Wells referred to The Time Machine as an “assault on human self-satisfaction” (p. v). The strategic position occupied by The Time Machine accomplishes much more than simply an overt attack upon 19th-century moral complacency, however; in its deconstruction of some fundamental aspects of traditional logocentric discourse, it looks forward to the projects of much contemporary critical theory. It attempts at once to displace a smug humanity from its privileged position at the center of creation and to remind us of our ineluctable ties to the natural world. And what, after all, is the aim of post-structuralist theory if not a continuation, in another form, of that same “assault on human self-satisfaction”?

NOTES

1. This essay was in part made possible through a grant from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.

2. See, for example, Larry Dwyer’s essay, “Time Travel and Changing the Past,” for a discussion of the implications of the Einstein-Maxwell equations and Kurt Godel’s solutions to the field equations of general relativity “which permit closed timelike lines to exist in spacetime” (p. 344). Dwyer’s is only one of many philosophical attempts to justify at least the logical possibility of time travel. Other challenging discussions include David Lewis’s “The Paradoxes of Time Travel” and Paul Horwich’s “On Some Alleged Paradoxes of Time Travel.”

3. Donald Davidson points out that “most metaphors are false” (p. 39). For his discussion of this aspect of metaphor, see “What Metaphors Mean,” pp. 39-41.

4. Time travel is the result of a kind of linguistic extrapolation, then, even as it functions as literary metaphor. I am indebted to David Ketterer for this observation.

5. Rose is applying the distinctions between metaphor and metonymy drawn by Jakobson in his “Two Aspects of Language and Two Types of Aphasic Disturbance.” See especially, Jakobson, pp. 76-82.

6. The most overtly “metonymical” trend in SF today is probably cyberpunk, which may be one of the reasons that it stands out as a “movement.” The sensibility of
a novel like William Gibson’s *Neuromancer* (1984), for instance, is firmly rooted in technological extrapolation, although it is by no means devoid of metaphorical content. Cyberpunk seems to be an SF current flowing against the contemporary tide.

7. In his recent essay, “*Futurological Congress* as Metageneric Text,” Robert M. Philmus has discussed several aspects of generic self-reflexivity in *The Time Machine*, demonstrating its value as a model in this context as well. The heterogeneity of meaning of Wells’s title, to which I refer below, is also a key factor in Philmus’s analysis. See especially pp. 313-15.

8. Terry Eagleton writes, for example, that “the genuinely theoretical question is always violently estranging, a perhaps impossible attempt to raise to self-reflexivity the very enabling conditions of a range of routinized practices...” (p. 89).

9. Suvin’s definition of the genre, which is the most useful yet devised, reads in full: “SF is...a literary genre whose necessary and sufficient conditions are the presence and interaction of estrangement and cognition, and whose main formal device is an imaginative framework alternative to the author’s empirical environment” (pp. 7-8).

10. Carl Freedman has made a similar point about the conjunction of SF and critical theory, which I will quote at length, because of its importance:

It is...a matter of the shared perspectives between SF and critical theory, of the dialectical standpoint of the SF tendency, with its insistence upon historical mutability, material reducibility, and, at least implicitly, Utopian possibility. In a sense, SF is of all genres the one most devoted to historical specificity: for the SF world is not only one different in time or place from our own, but one whose chief interest is precisely the difference that such difference makes, and, in addition, one whose difference is nonetheless contained within a cognitive continuum with the actual...(p. 186-87)

11. This is never posed as a “Father Paradox.” It is as if the SF community is evading the Oedipal aspects implicit in its favorite model of temporal paradox.

12. Even a narrative line as uncomplicated as that of *The Terminator* (1984) creates the potential for endless repetition which the viewer must tacitly ignore in order to collaborate in the closure of the film.

13. The sign, for example, “is always the supplement of the thing itself” (*OG*, p. 145), at the same time that it stands in for the full presence which it both defers and differs from. The aim of Derrida’s argument is to deny the notion of origin, of the unsupplemented entity. Nature is a construct of culture; speech of a larger writing (hence Derrida’s *grammatological* undertaking); “the thing in itself” of the sign used to “replace” it. For a useful summary of Derrida’s theories of the *supplement*, see Leitch, pp. 169-78.

14. As Leitch explains, the *always already* “works to insert the *supplement* into any seemingly simple or pure metaphysical conceptualization” (p. 171).

15. My initial thinking about the effects of Relativity on the development of the time-travel motif was generated by Andrew Gordon’s excellent essay, “*Silverberg’s Time Machine.*” Gordon discusses, for example, the disparity of subject and form in many time-travel stories: “the problem is that time-travel stories have been trying to deal with twentieth-century conceptions of time in narrative forms borrowed from the 19th-century” (p. 348). These narrative forms, of course, were developed to explain the reality created by nineteenth-century scientific metaphors.

16. Since availing myself of Barthes’ distinction between *oeuvre* and *texte*, I have come across another instance of the same application to quite different circumstances. This suggests to me that the Barthian treatment of *oeuvre* and *texte* is a flexible notion with potential for a wide range of applications. See Patrice Pavis’s discussion of *oeuvre* and *texte* (pp. 2-12).
17. In “Signature Event Context,” Derrida draws attention to the political character of such oppositions:

an opposition of metaphysical concepts...is never a confrontation of two terms, but a hierarchy and the order of a subordination. Deconstruction cannot be restricted or immediately pass to a neutralization: it must...put into practice a reversal of the classical opposition and a general displacement of the system. It is on that condition alone that deconstruction will provide the means of intervening in the field of oppositions it criticizes and that is also a field of non-disscursive forces. (p. 195; emphasis in original).

18. In her Preface to Of Grammatology, Gyatri Spivak neatly exemplifies the dual effects of différance in her discussion of the nature of the sign: “Such is the strange ‘being’ of the sign: half of it is always ‘not there’ [the signified, which is constantly deferred] and the other half always ‘not that’ [the signifier, which is always different from that which it signifies]” (p. xvii).

19. As Spivak points out, however, “the description of the object is as contaminated by the patterns of the subject’s desire as is the subject constituted by that never-fulfilled desire” (p. lix).


21. See Philmus’s discussion of this point in his “The Time Machine: or, the Fourth Dimension as Prophecy” (pp. 534-35).

22. British physicist Michael Shallis writes: “the world exists for us only in the form we clothe it. Our descriptions or explanations define our world. Our technology manifests our explanations” (p. 197).

23. Borges demonstrates a more pragmatic approach to the subject, however, in his ironic “A New Refutation of Time.” After developing arguments which seem to deny the objective reality of time, he nevertheless concludes that “denying temporal succession, denying the self, denying the astronomical universe, are apparent desperations and secret consolations....Time is the substance I am made of....The world, unfortunately, is real: I, unfortunately, am Borges” (p. 222). Borges thus neatly sums up the apparent impossibility of reconciling contemporary scientific descriptions of “reality” with our human experience of it.

24. The separation of private from public time, or as Hilary Putnam phrases it, “the relativistic notion of proper time” (p. 669), has been recognized as the only route logic can take to defend the philosophical possibilities of time travel. See, for example, Putnam’s essay, “It Ain’t Necessarily So” and David Lewis’s “The Paradoxes of Time Travel.”

25. Even this “obvious” reading suggests the play of différance: Philmus and Hughes (p. 48) draw attention to the fact that Wells’s “invention” includes not only the machine itself, but “the notion of travelling through time” and, even more importantly, “its rationale.”

26. The formal irony of The Time Machine has elsewhere been identified by Bernard Bergonzi, for example, in his “The Time Machine: An Ironic Myth,” and by Hughes in his “H.G. Wells: Ironic Romancer.”

27. I am here distinguishing between two aspects of The Time Machine as narrative fiction, based upon Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan’s structuralist distinctions (pp. 3-4). The first is that aspect of “written discourse,” or “text,” through which “all the items of the narrative content are filtered”; in the case of The Time Machine, the text is permeated by the absence of the Time Traveller, necessitating a secondary Narrator and a second-hand “translation.” The second aspect is that of the “story,” “the narrated events” of the fiction, which in the present instance include the final
disappearance of humanity from the world as well as the “actual” disappearance of the Traveller himself.

28. Although the original version of Wells’s essay entitled “The Universe Rigid” has been lost, he includes what might be considered an “abstract” of this lost essay in the first book version of The Time Machine, published in the United States by Henry Holt. This “abstract” probably gives a much truer idea of the original argument than does the reconstruction undertaken by Wells nearly 40 years after the fact in his 1934 Experiment in Autobiography (see Philmus & Hughes, pp. 4-5, 51-53).

29. I am indebted to David Y. Hughes for this reminder of possible alternative readings of the Narrator’s conclusion.

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DECONSTRUCTING THE TIME MACHINE


Veronica Hollinger. *La déconstruction de la machine du temps.*—Les méthodes analytiques de déconstruction de Jacques Derrida offrent une charpente efficace par laquelle on peut examiner certains aspects du motif du voyage dans le temps. La science-fiction et la déconstruction s'occupent du processus de la défamiliarisation, l'un par le déplacement du présent social/politique/culturel, l'autre par ses efforts en vue de démasquer la nature conventionnelle des «gestes à penser» de la tradition métaphysique occidentale. De plus, un voyage dans le temps opère toujours une déconstruction de certaines idées classiques concernant la nature et la structure du temps.

En premier lieu, il est toujours nécessaire de «lire» le temps avant d’écrire une histoire de voyage dans le temps: en tenant compte d’un groupe de métaphores suggérées par Roland Barthes, on peut conclure que les histoires qui illustrent la définition classique de Newton ont tendance à lire le temps comme «texte». Dans ce paradigme, la structure du temps est linéaire, homogène et consécutive alors que le temps einsteinien est une expression de la «post-structure», indéterminée, hétérogène et décentrée. Ainsi on peut identifier la relativité avec le jeu libre et avec la différence qui sont les (non)principes de la «post-structure» de Derrida.

À première vue, La Machine à explorer le temps de H.G. Wells paraît lire le temps comme «œuvre» classique. Cette nouvelle est structurée autour d’une lecture extrapolative du temps futur et paraît soutenir que les pouvoirs de la science peuvent découvrir tous les secrets du monde naturel. Cependant, parce qu’il s’agit d’une histoire d’une voyage dans le temps, ce texte fait une déconstruction de l’idée d’un temps absolu en déplaçant l’idée du «maintenant» de son lieu fixe sur l’axe temporel tout en renversant la position privilégiée du temps public sur le temps privé. De plus, le texte de Wells poursuit sa propre déconstruction du point de vue classique. Dans son essai, «La redécouverte de l’unique», Wells anticipe plusieurs concepts importants de Derrida, en particulier l’idée qu’il faille renverser les structures métaphysiques de l’intérieur. Ceci est réalisé par La machine à explorer le temps, qui, par conséquence, est un texte ironique. Le renversement des valeurs scientifiques du 19ème siècle qu’il poursuit au niveau de récit trouve un complément au niveau du discours par la déconstruction de la métaphysique de la présence. Le résultat est un jeu entre la métonymie du récit (le texte lu comme œuvre extrapolative) et la métaphore du texte (le texte lu comme œuvre figurative) et ce jeu fait partie intégrante de la structure au même titre que celui entre la présent et le futur. (VH)

**Abstract.**—*Both SF and deconstruction are involved in the processes of defamiliarization, the former through its displacement of the social/political/cultural present, the latter through its attempts to expose the conventional nature of the*
“gestures of thought” of the Western metaphysical tradition. In addition, time travel itself always achieves a deconstruction of certain classical notions about the nature and structure of time.

It is first necessary to “read” time before writing a time-travel story: within the terms of a set of metaphors suggested by Roland Barthes, one can conclude that stories which support the classical Newtonian definition tend to read time as “work” (“œuvre”), while stories which explore the Einsteinian paradigm of physical reality tend to read time as “text” (“texte”). Within the classical paradigm, time is linear, homogeneous, and uncentered. Relativity may thus be identified with free play and différance, the (non)principles of the Derridean “post-structure.”

At first glance, H.G. Wells’s The Time Machine appears to be an exemplary reading of time as classic “work.” Wells’s novella is structured around an extrapolative reading of time future, and seems to support the conviction that the powers of science will ultimately uncover the secrets of the natural world. However, because it is a time-travel story, The Time Machine necessarily deconstructs any notion of absolute time, displacing the concept of “now” from its fixed point on the time-line, and subverting the privileged position of public over private time. In addition, Wells’s text undertakes its own particular deconstruction of the classical world-view. In his early essay, “The Rediscovery of the Unique,” Wells demonstrates his anticipation of several key Derridean concepts, in particular the conviction that metaphysical structures must be undermined from the inside. This, in effect, is what is achieved in The Time Machine, which, as a consequence, is a profoundly ironic text. The subversion of 19th-century scientific values which it undertakes on the level of narrative event is complemented on the level of textual discourse by its deconstruction of the metaphysics of presence. The end result is a play between narrative metonymy (The Time Machine as extrapolative work) and textual metaphor (The Time Machine as figurative text), which is as integral to its structure as is the play between present and future. (VH)