

it was at the beginning of the story, then deprive himself of his miracle-working ability. Even his own memory of his adventures is cancelled. Those present fail to notice the end of the world. Only the reader and Wells see, from their privileged position, that normality rests on conditions which at any moment may turn out to have been precarious.

If this tidy restoration of the old reality, with the threat observed from a secure, congenial present, is characteristic, so is the equivocal implication. To try to master the deeper forces of nature is highly dangerous; yet, as we are so vulnerable to natural disturbances, perhaps we should be pursuing science far more urgently. Both of these paradoxes are, as we shall see, central to the early scientific romances.

Michael Draper

H G Wells

Mac Millan 1987

4

The Mark of the Beast: The Early Science Fiction

The term 'scientific romance' is a good indicator of what the books it describes contain. Like the more recent 'science fiction' it yokes together two apparent opposites: science and art, knowledge and fantasy. In Wells's scientific romances, man is both a questing spirit trying to break through the barriers of material reality and an imperfectly intelligent animal shaped by the forces of nature. The heroic spirit seizes on the power of science as a means to free itself, but as the consequences of Wells's 'impossible hypothesis' are explored (*Literary Criticism* p. 241), finds itself disappointed or even deconstructed into a terrifying bestiality. Robert P. Weeks has claimed that disentanglement from an imprisoning reality, followed by exhilaration, then disillusionment or defeat, is the basic plot behind all Wells's fiction (*Critical Essays* pp. 25-31). It informs his non-fictional writings too. Nowhere, however, is it more intensely expressed than in *The Time Machine*. Into this, his first book-length story, Wells poured ideas and obsessions he had nursed for years, working over the text again and again till it rang true.¹²

The Time Traveller is the prototypical Wellsian hero, defying established notions of reality for a greater one revealed through science. In the opening pages of the book he intrigues and disconcerts a group of guests to his house, the narrator among them, by challenging their notions of space-time. Priding ourselves on grasping his meaning more readily than these minor characters do, we become, without realising it, Wells's true victims, for we are lured into making an imaginative investment in the idea of time travel and so begin to be drawn into the vision to which it will lead.

The Time Traveller is a kind of modern prophet who aims to transcend the mundane, not by receiving a revelation from God, but by taking advantage of a secular fourth dimension to examine man's destiny at first hand. For Wells and the reader, the fourth dimension is the imagination informed by science; in the world of the book, it becomes a perplexing and dangerous voyage into the future which belittles ordinary existence and robs the Traveller of his bearings.

I saw great and splendid architecture rising above me, more massive than any buildings of our own time, and yet, as it seemed, built of glimmer and mist. (Ch. 4)

✓ Light and dark – traditional symbols of knowledge and ignorance, and good and evil – merge into a grey flux. Committing himself to a new standpoint too abruptly, the Traveller tumbles headfirst into a 'pitiless' grey hailstorm, out of which looms an ominously eroded sphinx-like figure, representing the riddle of what his experiences may signify.

✓ At first the Traveller seems to have discovered a secular heaven: a green and pleasant landscape dotted with exotic structures and peopled by an apparently carefree race. Wells's model for this may have been the Botanical Gardens at Kew, with its greenhouses, pagoda and holidaymakers, located a few miles from the Traveller's home in Richmond. The Traveller describes the future world as a 'garden' – also T. H. Huxley's epitome for the precarious State of Art which man develops out of the State of Nature – and imagines himself to have reached the concluding, pastoral stage of a William Morris-style communist utopia.¹³ He soon finds the 'utopia' to be less than ideal. If mankind has freed itself from suffering and conflict, it is only at the cost of degeneration. The 'utopians' may have a kind of beauty but they are also puny and unintelligent. The Traveller reasons that in a secure world there is no demand for strength or intelligence, and that under these circumstances natural selection will therefore, contrary to expectation, bring about degeneration.

Some doubt is cast upon his ingenious theorising when he finds his vehicle has been dragged into the sphinx by unknown forces. The journey through the fourth dimension has not after all made the course of human development completely clear or

placed him outside its problems. He feels suddenly cut off from any shared reality, like 'a strange animal in an unknown world' (Ch. 7), a sensation of being completely trapped which is the exact reverse of the desire to range at will through time with which he set off. Dismayed, he tries to force passers-by to reveal the secret of the sphinx, but they react with horror to his questioning of a taboo subject, a response frustratingly similar to the incomprehension and derision of his Victorian contemporaries.

Mutual sympathy with a fellow creature is re-established and with it the possibility of ethical behaviour, when he rescues Weena, one of the future 'people', from drowning. But he has to admit that even she may have seemed 'more human than she was' (Ch. 11) and his fear of finding a race 'inhuman, unsympathetic' (Ch. 4) is fulfilled when he discovers his time machine has not been taken by Weena's people, the Eloi, but the subterranean Morlocks. (The clumsy introduction of the two names is the one flaw in an otherwise scrupulously written book.)¹⁴

The name of these heirs of evil aptly recalls Moloch, the biblical term for infanticide, generally taken to be the name of a false god to which Israelite children were sacrificed. The word Eloi appears prominently in the New Testament when Jesus cries out on the cross,

Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani? which is, being interpreted, My God, My God, why hast thou forsaken me? (Mark 15:34)

Beneath the innocent-seeming paradise of the witless Eloi lurks a godless reality in which the nocturnal Morlocks await the coming of the night, when they will be able to emerge and exercise their power.

As several critics have noted, the fantastic set-up recalls the actual world of Uppark, where the servants' areas were located below ground-level, giving the young Wells an unusually diagrammatic view of the class system at work. There were ventilation holes to the lower level, as shafts connect the worlds of the Eloi and the Morlocks. Like the Time Traveller, Wells was a visitor who found the social system he saw grotesque and beyond self-correction. As he grew older, he looked for a third class, of rebels like himself, to emerge in the world outside, which he saw as essentially analogous to Uppark. This elite

could take power from the moribund aristocracy and try to remake as many of the lower class as possible in its own progressive image. *The Time Machine* depicts the consequence if this revolutionary class should fail to appear. The aristocrats (Eloi) and labourers (Morlocks) have devolved into the lesser creatures they deserve to be. Revolution can now occur only in parody form. The human race has split into two as often foretold (they indeed resemble the prophesied opposites, capitalists and workers, saved and damned), but the new world they inhabit is a savage mockery of the ill-conceived promises of Marxism and Christianity, and the docile, vegetarian Eloi, once the masters of the carnivorous Morlocks, have now become their meat supply.

The Traveller's defiant descent into the underworld of the Morlocks resembles, it has been suggested, the Harrowing of Hell by Christ (Bergonzi pp. 52-3). The Traveller had already taken on the appearance of a messiah figure at his first meeting with the Eloi, humouring their naïve idea that he had come down to them out of the sky. However, trapped in a parody of the apocalypse, he is unable to free the Eloi and lead them to salvation.

The Traveller's possession of matches does establish a limited superiority to those around him. He is a representative of science, able to manipulate the forces of nature. But what the matches illuminate when he gets beneath the deceptive surface of the world is a ruthless exploitation of creature by creature which compromises man beyond any possibility of redemption. Concluding 'The Rediscovery of the Unique', Wells had written:

Science is a match that man has just got alight. He thought he was in a room – in moments of devotion a temple – that his light would be reflected from and display walls inscribed with wonderful secrets and pillars carved with philosophical systems wrought into harmony. It is a curious sensation, now that the preliminary splutter is over, and the flame burns up clear, to see his hands lit and just a glimpse of himself and the patch he stands on visible, and around him, in place of all that human comfort and beauty he anticipated – darkness still. (*Early Writings* pp. 22-31)

When the matches the Traveller strikes reveal horror and cause

destruction, he reveals himself to be part of a universe to which ideas of heaven and hell are finally irrelevant: one formed out of material processes, from which human values and aspirations emerge as mere by-products. What is implicit in the thinking of T. H. Huxley becomes concrete in the Time Traveller's adventures. Any independence from the material world humanity may have achieved does not open the way to transcendence, but to a painful and irreconcilable tension between the actual and the ideal.

A derelict museum the Traveller visits exhibits that no object is permanent or value absolute. Exuberantly exploring it, and making up a dance for Weena out of the various long-lost dances he remembers, the Traveller finds a trivial but satisfying use for man's heritage. However, this post-cultural play is short-lived. After the couple leave they are set upon by the Morlocks and the camphor the Traveller has salvaged from the museum becomes the source of an all-consuming fire which kills Weena.

Even while he is stumbling through the man-made hell of the fire, violently beating off the Morlocks, the Traveller clings to his faith that there is still some way of transcending the material and the bestial. The stars glimpsed through the smoke symbolise liberation, as they once did for Wells at Uppark. The Traveller feels he is caught in a nightmare; he calls upon God to awaken him.

Faith sustains him in the struggle to escape and recapture the time machine, but a fresh immersion in the fourth dimension leads only to a still more distant future when all sign of the human race has disappeared. Perched alone on a wintry beach, he gazes at the bleak seascape from which life once emerged, and into which, reversing the process, vegetation and giant crabs are now returning, oblivious to the claims of Genesis and Revelation. The eclipse of the sun which first startles, then demoralises, the Traveller brings the light and dark imagery of the story to a climax with darkness entirely dominant. Fortunately the sun is not actually extinguished. The fear of being eaten by some residual predator is enough to drive the Traveller back onto the machine and to the safety of the 1890s, a period when degeneracy and the *fin de siècle* are fashionable ideas, not yet unbearable realities (Bergonzi, pp. 1-14 and 60-1). His experience of the world's end seems the conclusion of

the story, but at this point neither he nor Wells has completed his mission. The revelation has still to be related to the late-Victorian world from which the voyage began.

The Traveller's guests reject his news of the future with the same unimaginative complacency they brought to his theory of the fourth dimension. Again this encourages the reader to take the vision comparatively seriously, and construe it in a way critical of their assumptions. The Traveller's call for meat, plus a reference to servants at his house, indicate that the horrific system of exploitation revealed in the future is continuous with the natural and social inequities of the present. If its inhabitants could see it from the standpoint of a time traveller, or a philosophical desperado, they might even discover Victorian Richmond itself to be a type of hell.

With his sense of what is real and what is acceptable disturbed, the Traveller makes an anguished exclamation which recalls those of the ideal-tormented Vicar in *The Wonderful Visit*.

They say life is a dream, a precious poor dream at times – but I can't stand another that won't fit. It's madness. And where did the dream come from? (Ch. 16)

One way to cope with such a disintegrating world view might be to do as the Philosophical Tramp: withdraw from the social consensus into an outlook based entirely on your personal convenience. Significantly the Traveller's guests liken his ill-used appearance to that of a tramp or a beggar. Up until the Great War, Wells often displays a sentimental attachment to Romantic vagrancy as an alternative to the commitment of the revolutionary.

The Time Machine does not, however, end with advice on how to live, what to do. Instead the exploratory story is completed by an ambiguous image. Our last glimpse of the Traveller is of a practically invisible man as he returns into the fourth dimension, never to reappear. This image brings the themes of disorientation, alienation and devolution to an appropriate end. Having seen through everything, the Traveller dissolves too. Yet his return into the fourth dimension also affirms that dimension's reality, as Robert Philmus has pointed out (*Critical Essays* pp. 67–8). By embracing annihilation the Traveller demonstrates his allegiance to a perspective greater than his

time- and space-ridden contemporaries dare acknowledge. As when the Angel throws himself into the burning vicarage in *The Wonderful Visit* and Nunez returns to the mountains in 'The Country of the Blind', self-fulfilment and self-destruction combine.

The Traveller's disappearance is still not quite enough to conclude the book, so the narrator comes forward with a brief commentary, stressing the problematic nature of his friend's revelation and making a cautious commitment of his own to the day-to-day struggle to revise and extend our civilisation. His commitment exists in open tension with the Traveller's reported scepticism, but is too low-key and stoical to be undermined by even the most powerful vision of ultimate failure.

He, I know – for the question has been discussed among us long before the Time Machine was made – thought but cheerlessly of the Advancement of Mankind, and saw in the growing pile of civilisation only a foolish heaping that must inevitably fall back upon and destroy its makers in the end. If that is so, it remains for us to live as though it were not so. ('Epilogue')

Sympathy, such as that shared by the Traveller and Weena, can at least generate temporary meaning. The book's final, equivocal image is of two flowers given to the Traveller by Weena and brought to our era, flowers which have now, in the course of time, shrivelled and died.

If the Traveller stands for the liberated imagination stimulated by the perspectives of material and social science, then the narrator, whose voice contains and filters the Traveller's, represents the part of ourselves which has to get down to the business of everyday living. The presence of the narrator, even at its most token, stops us becoming so involved with the Traveller's adventures that we are overwhelmed by their implications or, as is more likely, that we retreat into a thoughtless incredulity. Instead we are encouraged to adopt the attitude the Traveller requests from his fellow Victorians.

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

Simon J. James

Maps of Utopia

H. G. Wells, Modernity
and the End of Culture

Oxford UP, 2012

2

The History of the Future

The Scientific Romances

H. G. Wells was not the first English writer to produce fantastic fiction, but his pre-eminent success in the genre owes much to the way in which he melds with the fantastic material details of the actual. Joseph Conrad dubbed him a 'Realist of the Fantastic'; Arnold Bennett judged that *The First Men in the Moon* presented 'in the guise of the romance [...] a serious criticism of the real'.¹ Wells does not violate the perceived laws of reality merely to give greater imaginative liberty to the scope of his narrative, but to comment on and address something in the actual world. In the 1921 Preface to *The War in the Air* (1908), Wells refers to his romances as 'fantasias of possibility'; in the Preface to 1934's *Seven Famous Novels*, he confesses a desire 'to domesticate the impossible hypothesis'.² In the *Autobiography*, he added:

I had realised that the more impossible the story I had to tell, the more ordinary must be the setting, and the circumstances in which I now set the Time Traveller were all that I could imagine of solid, upper-middle-class comfort.³

Wells's scientific romances distort perceived reality in order to address something that he seeks to change within it. Science fiction, according to Darko Suvin, is 'wiser than the world it speaks to: the presence of the fantastic indicates not a departure from reality, but a perspective facing in from outside it'.⁴ Fredric Jameson also claims that 'one of the most

¹ Letter to Wells, 4 December 1898, in *Critical Heritage*, ed. Parrinder, 60; *Cosmopolitan Magazine*, 33 (1902), 465–71, reprinted in *Arnold Bennett and H. G. Wells: A Record of a Personal and a Literary Friendship*, ed. Harris Wilson (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1960), 260–76 (266). See also the unsigned review of *The War of the Worlds* in the *Academy*, 29 January 1898, 121–2, *Critical Heritage*, ed. Parrinder, 70–4.

² *Seven Famous Novels* (New York: Knopf, 1934), quoted in H. G. Wells, *The Time Machine: An Invention*, ed. Nicholas Ruddick (Peterborough, ON: Broadview Press, 2001), 252–4 (253).

³ *Autobiography*, II, 516. Cf. Suvin, *Metamorphoses*, 36, 80.

⁴ Suvin, *Metamorphoses*, 36.

significant potentialities of SF as a form is precisely this capacity to provide something like an experimental variation on our own empirical universe'. This kind of fantastic fiction seeks 'to defamiliarize and restructure our experience of our own present'.⁵ *Gulliver's Travels*, for example, turns 'extreme anti-utopian despair into a critique of the anti-utopian world which it mirrors. The more passionate and precise Swift's negation, the more clearly the necessity for new worlds of humaneness appears before the reader'.⁶ Far from being escapist fantasy, therefore, Wells's scientific romances also seek to provide their readers with, in Thomas Adorno's phrase, 'negative knowledge of the actual world', to set them in a dialectical relationship with their surroundings and thus be encouraged to alter these surroundings for the better.⁷

Like many of the best writers of the *fin-de-siècle* such as Gissing, Stevenson, Conrad, and James, Wells often ironizes, and even subverts the genre to which an individual work might loosely belong, here that of the romance.⁸ If readers of a romance expect imaginative freedom from actual material concerns, such expectations will be frustrated, thus putting Wells's romances into an antithetical or ironic relationship with genre, a relationship that asserts the author's individuality from literary convention.⁹ Choosing to write romance gives Wells access to a larger reading public than more hermetic (and less read) kinds of literary fiction; ironizing the genre, however, keeps his writing from complicity with the existing ideological status quo ante that it seeks to modify, a fault diagnosed by Wells in other kinds of romance.¹⁰ The generic reversals of Wells's early romances show a desire to thwart the expectations of their implied reader. *The Time Machine* and *The Wheels of Chance* parody the conventions of the imperial and the chivalric romance, respectively, in order to undermine the ideologies of colonial domination and heroic

⁵ Fredric Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions* (London: Verso, 2005), 270, 286.

⁶ Suvin, *Metamorphoses*, 111.

⁷ Theodor Adorno, 'Reconciliation Under Duress', in *Aesthetics and Politics*, ed. Fredric Jameson (London: Verso, 1977), 151–76 (160).

⁸ Susan Jones, 'Into the Twentieth Century: Imperial Romance from Haggard to Buchan', in *A Companion to Romance: From Classical to Contemporary*, ed. Corinne Saunders (Malden: Blackwell, 2004), 406–23 (408–9); on Conrad, see Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (London: Methuen, 1981), 207.

⁹ See Winnie Chan, *The Economy of the Short Story in British Periodicals of the 1890s* (London: Routledge, 2007), 50. See Wells's anonymously published sarcastic review of Percy Russell's *How to Write Fiction: A Practical Study of Technique*, 'The Secrets of the Short Story', *Saturday Review*, 80 (1895), 693.

¹⁰ *The Sea Lady: A Tissue of Moonshine*, Works, V, 603–7.

autonomy that underlie them.¹¹ *Tono-Bungay*, *The New Machiavelli* (1911), and even *Love and Mr. Lewisham* refuse the narrative arc of self-improvement common in the Victorian *Bildungsroman* and repeatedly imply a reader who is expecting a kind of book quite different from what these texts actually turn out to be. The later novels insist still more emphatically that lived experience cannot be contained within formal structures of language. 'Life is so much fuller than any book can be,' claims *The Passionate Friends*; 'Life is always more complicated than any account or representation of it can be' (*The Dream*, 1924).¹² Mr Blettsworthy (*Mr. Blettsworthy on Rampole Island*, 1928), like George Ponderevo in *Tono-Bungay*, acknowledges both the reader's expectations and his own incapacity to match them:

Since my memories have to be told in fragments, given like peeps into a book opened here and there, the reader may even be a little incredulous of some of the things I have to tell. He would prefer, but then I equally would prefer, a story continuous in every detail.¹³

The refusal of generic expectation is key to the didactic effect of Wells's fantastic fiction in particular. The counter-real elements that they depict contradict what the reader believes to be the case about the world in which they live not only counterfactually but also ideologically. Repeatedly, the fantastic requires protagonists to re-evaluate or reject a presupposition about the world they inhabit.¹⁴ Many of Wells's books are concerned with contradicting received wisdom: the Time Traveller, for example, claims that "the geometry [...] they taught you at school is founded on a misconception", that there are four dimensions, not three, that time can be travelled in as freely as the others, that humanity is not indubitably progressing towards an indefinite future but might in fact be degenerating.¹⁵

Darko Suvin argues that science fiction is the 'literature of cognitive estrangement [...] whose main formal device is an imaginative framework

¹¹ See throughout Yoonjung Choi, 'Real Romance Came Out of Dreamland into Life: H. G. Wells as a Romancer' (PhD, Durham University, 2007).

¹² *The Passionate Friends*, Works, XVIII, 379; *The Dream*, Works, XXVIII, 365.

¹³ *Mr. Blettsworthy on Rampole Island* (London: Ernest Benn, 1928), 136–7.

¹⁴ Tzvetan Todorov, *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to Literary Genre*, trans. Richard Howard (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1975), 25, 31–2.

¹⁵ *The Time Machine: An Invention*, ed. Patrick Parrinder (London: Penguin, 2005), 3. Cf. 'The point is that you teach things at school as proofs the world is round that are no more proofs than they are poetry'; 'The Flat Earth Again', *Pall Mall Gazette*, 2 April 1894, *Early Writings*, 32–5 (34). Cf. also the predecessor to *The Time Machine*, 'The Chronic Argonauts', *Science Schools Journal*, April, May, and June 1888, in Bernard Bergonzi, *The Early H. G. Wells: A Study of the Scientific Romances* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1961), 187–214 (209–11).

alternative to the author's empirical environment', adding that the principle of Wells's science fiction in particular is 'mutation of scientific into aesthetic cognition'.¹⁶ The scientific mode that is most important to Wells's early scientific romances is, of course, evolutionary theory. For Wells, Darwin's formulation of the theory of evolution warned of the impermanence of the status quo, and Wells's fiction and non-fiction writings insist repeatedly on the same message. The irruption of the fantastic into an otherwise realistically, sometimes pseudo-scientifically, narrated fictional world is a reminder of futurity: that the indefinite passing of history will repeatedly confront humanity with contingencies that it does not have sufficient knowledge to confront, contingencies that will threaten or displace its misguided faith in its own evolutionary security.

In *The Origin of Species*, Darwin had prophesied, somewhat disingenuously, that:

Judging from the past, we may safely infer that not one living species will transmit its unaltered likeness to a distinct futurity. And of the species now living very few will transmit progeny of any kind to a far distant futurity [...]. We can so far take a prophetic glance into futurity as to foretell that it will be the common and widely spread species [...] which will ultimately prevail and procreate new and dominant species. [...] Hence, we may look with some confidence to a secure future of great length. And as natural selection works solely by and for the good of each being, all corporeal and mental endowments will tend to progress towards perfection. Thus, from the war of nature, from famine and death, the most exalted object which we are capable of conceiving, namely, the production of the higher animals, directly follows. There is grandeur in this view of life [...] that, whilst this planet has gone circling on according to the fixed law of gravity, from so simple a beginning endless forms most beautiful and most wonderful have been, and are being evolved.¹⁷

The generation of readers that followed the *Origin's* first publication, however, correctly realized that in Darwin's own terms, organisms and species are not rewarded intrinsically for complexity, beauty, or intelligence, but only as far as these qualities are favourable for natural or sexual

¹⁶ Suvin, *Metamorphoses*, 4, 7–8, and 'A Grammar of Form and a Criticism of Fact: *The Time Machine* as a Structural Model for Science Fiction', in *H. G. Wells and Modern Science Fiction*, ed. Darko Suvin and Robert M. Philmus (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press; London: Associated University Presses, 1977), 90–115 (101). Cf. Wells's 1938 Australian radio broadcast 'Fiction About the Future', *Literary Criticism*, ed. Parrinder and Philmus, 246–51.

¹⁷ Charles Darwin, *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection, or the Preservation of Favoured Races in the Struggle for Life*, ed. Gillian Beer (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 395–6.

selection.¹⁸ Biological evolution thus provides Wells with a framework for challenging the epistemological authority of mankind's supposed dominion in nature; the combination of science with the literary fantastic also provides him with the imaginative liberty to assail the authority of language to describe the world.¹⁹ As Kathryn Hume has observed:

Science has also made it hard for us to ignore the illusory nature of our sense data; art may help us experience the stoniness of the stone—in Shklovsky's phrase—but that experience may seem meaningless when we remember that the stoniness is an illusion. The stone consists of empty space, a tiny proportion of which is occupied by atoms, and they, in turn, prove to be only a form of energy, whatever that might be.²⁰

The inadequacy of representation is a persistent theme of Wells's fantastic writing, and in spite of literary criticism having been somewhat over-preoccupied in recent years with signification's intrinsic unreliability, this particular aspect of Wells's writing is worthy of more attention.²¹ The nature of fantastic writing calls the fidelity of language into question: the language of the text must represent not only something the reader has never seen but something that they believe to be actually impossible. In Wells's fantastic writing, the reader is confronted with something that is unreal in order to challenge or unsettle their views of the real, as the Time Traveller does to his audience, as Prendick his posthumous readership's, as Griffin does Kemp's. These texts seek to disrupt complacency, to make the

¹⁸ See William Greenslade, *Degeneration, Culture and the Novel: 1880–1940* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994); Daniel Pick, *Faces of Degeneration: A European Disorder c.1948–c.1919* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

¹⁹ John Glendenning, *The Evolutionary Imagination in Late-Victorian Novels: An Entangled Bank* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), 55–7. Cf. *Babes in the Darkling Wood*, 53, 209.

²⁰ Kathryn Hume, *Fantasy and Mimesis: Responses to Reality in Western Literature* (London: Methuen, 1984), 45. I am grateful to Dr Paul McAdam for drawing this passage to my attention.

²¹ See Sylvia Hardy's inspirational 'Wells the Post-Structuralist', *H. G. Wells's Fin-de-Siècle*, ed. Parrington, 113–25 and two further excellent essays, 'A Story of the Days to Come: H. G. Wells and the Language of Science Fiction', *Language and Literature*, 12/3 (2003), 199–212 and 'H. G. Wells and William James: A Pragmatic Approach', in *Interdisciplinary Essays*, ed. McLean, 130–46 (136–7). Also Michael Fried, 'Impressionist Monsters: *The Island of Doctor Moreau*', in *Frankenstein: Creation and Monstrosity*, ed. Stephen Bann (London: Reaktion, 1994), 95–112 (111–12); Timothy Christensen, 'The Bestial Mark of Race in *The Island of Doctor Moreau*', *Criticism*, 46/4 (2004), 575–95 (584); Larry W. Caldwell, 'Time at the End of its Tether: H. G. Wells and the Subversion of Master Narrative', in *H. G. Wells's Perennial Time Machine: Selected Essays from the Centenary Conference 'The Time Machine: Past, Present and Future'* Imperial College, London July 26–29, 1995, ed. George Slusser, Patrick Parrinder, and Danièle Chatelain (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2001), 137–49.

has been and is directed to measures for promoting physical and moral welfare among the poorer classes.⁴⁵ In direct opposition to Herbert Spencer, he is emphatic that this benevolence must be eventually upheld by the sponsorship of the State: 'the endeavour to improve the condition under which our industrial population live, to amend the drainage of densely peopled streets, to provide baths, washhouses, and gymnasia [...] is not only desirable from a philanthropic point of view, but an essential condition of safe industrial development'.⁴⁶

Taking his cue from Huxley, Wells in *The Time Machine* endeavours to demonstrate the probable future outcome of a failure to introduce systemised reform in the contemporary moment.⁴⁷ This is apparent as the Traveller finally realises that the divergence between social classes he had earlier identified as the key to understanding this world has become an evolutionary distinction.

It would be difficult to overestimate the profound influence of Huxley on Wells. The author himself repeatedly acknowledged the indebtedness he felt towards his former Professor at the Normal School of Science. In his *Experiment in Autobiography* (1934), for example, Wells wrote: 'That year I spent in Huxley's class was, beyond all question, the most educational year of my life.'⁴⁸ With this comment in mind, it is unsurprising that Huxley's work is crucial to understanding *The Time Machine*. However, it is important to emphasise again here that – in his first novel at least – Wells undercuts the optimism of Huxley's position. The degradation of humanity the Time Traveller discovers in the world of 802, 701 reveals how Wells extrapolates the most pessimistic implications of Huxley's famous Romanes Lecture (1893).

In that lecture, Huxley had challenged the appropriation of Darwin's theory of natural selection by proponents of individualism. For Huxley, it is necessary to pit humanity's ethical system against the 'cosmic process' that has functioned so well in the natural world:

Social progress means a checking of the cosmic process at every step and the substitution for it of another, which may be called the ethical process; the end of which is not the survival of those who may happen to be the fittest [...] but of those who are ethically the best.⁴⁹

However, Huxley is keen to emphasise that this does not mean that we can simply disregard the importance of the cosmic process: 'Let us understand, once for all, that the ethical progress of society depends, not on imitating the cosmic process, still less in running away from it, but in combating it.'⁵⁰ Though he acknowledges that humanity remains in

perpetual combat ‘with a tenacious and powerful enemy’, he is equally certain concerning the means of subjugating it. This should entail the application on the part of humanity of sound and collective will.

Wells’s endeavour to extrapolate the pessimistic implications of Huxley’s theory is emphasised as the Traveller realises that, rather than having successfully attained a conquest over nature, humanity “‘had differentiated into two distinct animals”’ (60). The protagonist’s use of the term ‘animal’ is wholly appropriate in this instance, since *homo sapiens* is now subject to the exact same ‘cosmic process’ of evolution as the animal and plant kingdoms. That this is the case inverts the scientific rationalism of the Traveller’s earlier statement, “‘we shall readjust the balance of animal and vegetable life to suit our human needs”’, which is confident in its assurance of humanity’s capacity to control the entire course of earthly evolution.

Significantly, the Time Traveller learns that “‘like the Carlovingian kings”’, the once aristocratic Eloi “‘had decayed to a mere beautiful futility”’ (74). Hence, the playful lives of the **upperworlders** – which the protagonist had **misinterpreted** within a utopian frame – are not at all humanity’s reward for the application of a sustained and collective will in guiding its own course along the **evolutionary** path. Instead, the entire existence of the Eloi is indicative of a species that is subject to the far more powerful and tenacious process of cosmic evolution. **Moreover**, the traveller’s comparison of the automatic organic habits of the Morlocks with the behaviour of horses – “‘They did it as a standing horse paws with his foot”’ (74) – is acutely suggestive of a species that is subject to the identical **evolutionary** influences as animals and plants.

For the model of degradation which **characterises** the Eloi, Wells again reveals his indebtedness to the work of Huxley. In ‘The Struggle For Existence In Human Society’, Huxley stresses that ‘it is an error to imagine that evolution signifies a constant tendency to increased perfection’:

That process undoubtedly involves a constant **re-modelling** of the organism in adaptation to new conditions; but it depends on the nature of those conditions whether the direction of the modifications effected shall be upward or downward. **Retrogressive** is as practicable as progressive **metamorphosis**.⁵¹

In a letter which accompanied a presentation copy of *The Time Machine* that he sent to Huxley in May 1895, Wells wrote: ‘I am sending you a little book that I fancy may be of interest to you. The central idea – of

degeneration following security – was the outcome of a certain amount of biological study.⁵² Wells might well have intended this statement to direct Huxley's attention to the endeavour of this 'little book' to illustrate that retrogression 'is as practicable as progressive metamorphosis'. After all, the diminished size, intellect and strength of the Eloi in response to the amelioration of social life demonstrate perfectly Huxley's point that the course of evolution 'involves a constant remodelling of the organism in adaptation to new conditions'. However, by identifying the degeneration that must inevitably follow security as the 'central idea' of *The Time Machine*, Wells not only points to the didactic purpose of his first novel to warn against the assumption that evolution implies constant progression but also to an imperative that is crucial to understanding his subsequent work: that an element of risk and competition is essential to the continuing evolution of *homo sapiens*. While Huxley's reference to the plasticity of *homo sapiens* was undoubtedly pivotal to the formation of the novel's didactic intention, the degradation that the Time Traveller uncovers in the future reveals the influence of a more extensive account of the significance of retrogression in evolution.

The primary source for Wells's concept of degeneration in *The Time Machine* is Ray Lankester's *Degeneration: A Chapter in Darwinism* (1880).⁵³ Wells and Lankester became firm friends and allies, and the characterisation of both the Eloi and the Morlocks is informed by Lankester's account of the antithetical potential of degeneration in the evolutionary process.⁵⁴ Speaking from a strictly zoological basis, Lankester identifies three possible outcomes that can emerge from the influence of natural selection on an organism: Balance, Elaboration and Degeneration.⁵⁵ While in Balance the complexity of an organism's structure remains constant, and in Elaboration its complexity increases, Lankester is most interested in examining the third of these possible outcomes, **Degeneration**, in which the complexity of an organism decreases. 'Degeneration may be defined as a gradual change of the structure in which the organism becomes adapted to *less* varied and *less* complex conditions of life [emphasis in original]', he writes.⁵⁶ For Lankester, degeneration is most likely in circumstances where there is a 'new set of conditions occurring to an animal which render its food and safety very easily attained'.⁵⁷ Lankester identifies the parasite as a long recognised instance of degeneration, which is subject to what he terms retrogressive metamorphosis: 'Let the parasitic life once be secured, and away go legs, jaws, eyes, and ears; the active, highly-gifted crab, insect, or annelid may become a mere sac, absorbing nourishment and laying eggs.'⁵⁸

ancestors of that organism (or the ancestral forms of its species) have passed from the earliest periods of so-called organic creation down to the present time.⁹¹

Haeckel's theory of development is an optimistic one, since it implies a continually progressive evolution of the organism. Perhaps the popularisation of this '*fundamental law of organic evolution*' is what Wells had in mind in '*Zoological Retrogression*' (1891), where he wrote that 'the educated public': 'has decided that in the past the great scroll of nature has been steadily unfolding to reveal a constantly richer harmony of forms and successively higher grades of being, and it assumes that this "evolution" will continue with increasing velocity under the supervision of its extreme expression – man'.⁹² Wells is, however, at pains to point out that – like that of a man moving about in a busy city – the course of evolution can take many different paths: 'Sometimes it goes underground, sometimes it doubles and twists in tortuous streets, now it rises far ahead along some viaduct, and, again, the river is taken advantage of in these varied journeyings to and fro.'⁹³

In *The Time Machine*, Wells challenges any complacency on the part of his readers by illustrating how human evolution could take a downward course. In his characterisation of the Eloi, Wells inverts what Haeckel calls '*the first principle of Biogeny*'. Whereas Haeckel claimed that the development of the individual recapitulates the earlier phases of evolution of the entire species, Wells in his construction of the Eloi portrays the future development of *homo sapiens* as a retrogressive movement back towards the primitive stages of human development. This concurs with the overall implication that human evolution is moving backwards in *The Time Machine*, which is, of course, also suggested by the use of the number 802,701 almost as a countdown to extinction.

The depiction of the Eloi is indeed explicitly child-like. Their lack of abstract reflection, and indeed lack of concentration, is revealed as the Traveller feels '“like a schoolmaster amidst children”' (35) in his strenuous efforts to learn the language. The simplicity of the upperworlders' language not only relates to the general discussion of primitive language in anthropological circles but also more specifically to Lankester's discussion of language in *Degeneration: A Chapter in Darwinism*. Lankester insists that 'True' degeneration of language is 'only found as part and parcel of a more general degeneration of mental activity'.⁹⁴ The absence of abstract terms and concepts in their language is symptomatic of the fact that the Eloi have undergone 'a more general degeneration of mental activity'.⁹⁵

Towards the end of his sojourn in the future, the protagonist considers his hasty conclusions as he returns to the spot from which he had first viewed the future: “About eight or nine in the morning I came to the same seat of yellow metal from which I had viewed the world upon the evening of my arrival” (99). This implies that the Traveller not only journeys into the future, but also that his unravelling of the eventual fate of humanity in 802,701 takes the form of a journey which returns him to his original point of departure. The protagonist does not function as an unchanging observer who merely reports on events in the future. Rather, in the course of the journey in which he discovers the eventual fate of humanity, the Time Traveller is himself subjected to **retrogression**. This is immediately apparent as, having discovered the disappearance of his Machine, the Time Traveller himself regresses to the same child-like characteristics as his hosts: “‘Where is my Time Machine?’ I began, bawling like an angry child” (46). The regression of the protagonist to the same childhood state as the Eloi is further emphasised as he acquires their fear of the dark and loathing of the Morlocks.

His violent conduct towards the Morlocks emphasises the latent savagery underlying the Time Traveller’s own apparently civilised being.⁹⁶ Throughout his narrative, the protagonist creates a careful distinction between the civilised man and the savage. Thus while explaining the principles of time travel to his dinner guests he emphasises how the “civilised man is better off than the savage” (8) in his capacity to defy gravity by travelling in balloons. In the context of the future world which the Traveller initially identifies as the apex of evolution, contemporary men are nonetheless “savage survivals, [and] discords in a refined and pleasant life” (41). Wells’s source for the protagonist’s speculations in this respect is again Huxley’s *Romanes Lecture*. In that lecture, Huxley points out that man’s evolutionary position has been purchased by the same struggles that characterise the animal and plant kingdoms:

For his successful progress, throughout the savage state, man has been largely indebted to those qualities which he shares with the ape and the tiger; his exceptional physical organization; his cunning, his sociability, his curiosity, and his imitativeness; his ruthless and ferocious destructiveness when his anger is roused by opposition.⁹⁷

However, Huxley is at pains to point out that such characteristics are unnecessary with the advancement of social organisation, and that modern man would be pleased to see the ‘ape and tiger’ within him