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Author(s): PAUL A. CANTOR and PETER HUFNAGEL

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THE EMPIRE OF THE FUTURE: IMPERIALISM AND MODERNISM IN H. G. WELLS

PAUL A. CANTOR AND PETER HUFNAGEL

H. G. Wells's scientific romances of the 1890s are remarkably innovative in form and subject matter, and the first in the series, *The Time Machine*, may be the most original of them all. It virtually inaugurated the genre of science fiction, and has been shamelessly imitated by aspiring authors in the field ever since. And yet as forward-looking as Wells's first novel is, it is deeply rooted in the Victorian era. As we shall see, in *The Time Machine*, he takes us 800,000 years into the future, and he finds the Victorian class system still intact. Its extremes have of course been exaggerated, but, as many commentators have noted, in the Eloi and the Morlocks, we can still recognize Disraeli's "two nations," the rich and the poor of Victorian England. But another Victorian aspect of *The Time Machine* has not been as thoroughly analyzed—the way in which Wells drew upon his experience of the British Empire to shape his vision of the future. And yet some of the most modern and even modernist aspects of *The Time Machine* grow out of precisely this engagement with the very Victorian theme of empire. This theme connects *The Time Machine* with another of Wells's early scientific romances, *The Island of Doctor Moreau*, and this book in turn makes Wells's links to modernism even clearer. Comparing both Wells works with Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* helps to reveal how the experience of empire played a role in the development of modernist fiction.

Wells's many false starts and the number of versions he went through before he published *The Time Machine* as we know it testify to the difficulty of his enterprise.¹ It is therefore understandable that when he was trying to imagine a journey into the future, he ended up modeling it on something more familiar, a journey to the imperial frontier. Imperialist narratives—either

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factual or fictional—became very popular in Britain in the nineteenth century, and had reached the level of a fad in the mid-1880s with the publication of H. Rider Haggard's bestsellers, *King Solomon's Mines* and *She*. Drawing upon Robert Louis Stevenson's *Treasure Island*, Haggard crystallized the form of the imperialist romance as a journey to a remote corner of European dominion, where a group of intrepid British explorers encounter an exotic civilization, with strange and often bizarre customs that seem the antithesis of the European way of life.

This formula would in itself have been useful to Wells, preparing as he was to create a new form of exoticism in his first science fiction novel. But Haggard prepared the way for Wells even further by adding a new twist to the imperialist romance, or at least highlighting an element that had been latent in the form. In *King Solomon's Mines* and *She* the journey to the imperial frontier becomes a journey into the past; for Haggard space travel becomes time travel. That is, in both works Haggard's British heroes leave the world of modern Europe behind and enter what he views as a historically backward land. Haggard's British heroes are associated with modern science and technology, whereas the African natives they encounter are associated with magic and superstition. Indeed the British use their scientific knowledge and their modern weapons to awe the African natives into submission. Moreover, the British explorers represent the principles of modern politics as Haggard understands them—limited government and the rule of law—whereas the African natives represent the principles of the old regime, autocracy and the rule of priests and witches. Thus in Haggard the journey to the imperial frontier becomes imaginatively a journey into the past of Europe. That is why Haggard goes out of his way to link contemporary Africa to the ancient heritage of Europe, finding Biblical connections with the African civilization in *King Solomon's Mines* and Egyptian and Classical Greek connections with the one in *She*.

Haggard's fiction thus reveals the peculiar way in which the imperialist expansion of Europe in the nineteenth century opened up the imaginative possibility of time travel. The relentless European drive to occupy all corners of the earth made it for the first time a regular occurrence for cultures at very different stages of historical development to come into contact and be forced to co-exist. Travelers to remote corners of empire often had the impression that they were entering the world of the past. Perhaps the most famous literary expression of this feeling can be found in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, where Marlow views his voyage up the Congo as a journey into a prehistoric age: "Going up that river was like travelling back to the earliest beginnings of the world" (Conrad 35). All Wells had to do was reverse this perspective and imagine how things might look going in the opposite direction in order to come up with the possibility of journeying to the future. *The Time Machine* begins with a remarkable anticipation of Einstein and Minkowski (Russell 54-55), as Wells has his hero articulate a theory of four dimensions and in particular the

equivalence of time and space: “*There is no difference between Time and any of the three dimensions of Space except that our consciousness moves along it*” (4).² Thus Wells’s theory of time travel rests on the idea that it is only a form of space travel, or as Wells has his hero put it: “Time is only a kind of Space” (5). If time travel as space travel is the formula for Wells’s first novel, then he is following a path already adumbrated by Rider Haggard in *King Solomon’s Mines* and *She*. We do not wish to call into question Wells’s genuine originality in *The Time Machine*—only to point out that to the extent that he had any experiential basis for time travel it was provided by the imperialist romances spawned by the expansion of the British Empire in the nineteenth century.

This hypothesis is borne out by the actual form the plot of *The Time Machine* takes. In many respects Wells’s book is simply a Rider Haggard romance in science fiction dress and his hero is a sort of Richard Burton or Henry Stanley of the future. The imperialist coloring of Wells’s scientific romance is perhaps most clearly evident in the nature of the natives the Time Traveller meets. The Eloi and the Morlocks are of course, as we have already suggested, based on the social divisions of the Victorian Britain Wells knew (Stover 4-12). But they also come straight out of the pages of imperialist romance; they are the two tribes the European explorer usually meets when he enters a strange land: a good tribe and an evil tribe.³ The good tribe is peaceful, docile, and friendly to the explorers; indeed it demonstrates its goodness by its willingness and even eagerness to submit to European rule. The evil tribe is beastly, warlike, and hostile to the explorers; far from being submissive to European rule, it tries to kill the explorers, and sometimes even to eat them (the evil tribe is frequently marked as cannibalistic). This archetype in imperialist literature can be traced back at least as far as Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe*, where Friday plays the role of the good, submissive native and Crusoe has to save him from a group of evil cannibals. Whatever the origins of this motif, it clearly flourished in nineteenth-century imperialist romances. In *King Solomon’s Mines*, for example, Haggard’s British heroes ally themselves with a good faction of natives against an evil faction, as they seek to restore the rightful ruler of an African people to a throne occupied by a villainous usurper, and thereby to establish a European form of rule of law in place of native autocracy. Since imperialist romances generally sought to provide an ideological justification for European rule over non-Europeans, the reason for the “two tribes” motif is obvious. If the natives are docile, they are asking to be ruled by Europeans; if they are warlike and even cannibalistic, they cannot be trusted to rule themselves and must still be brought under European control.

Wells’s Morlocks seem to have been ordered up by central casting to play the role of the evil tribe in his romance. They are several times referred to as “ape-like” (45, 46) and the Time Traveller speaks of “how nauseatingly inhuman they looked” (56). And of course the Time Traveller’s shocking

discovery about the Morlocks is that they feed upon the Eloi, which, in view of their common descent from human beings, makes the Morlocks cannibals (Wells's hero compares them to "our cannibal ancestors" 63). In his visceral revulsion against the Morlocks, the Time Traveller allies himself with the Eloi, who are equally suited to play the role of the good tribe of imperialist romance. Wells's hero describes them as docile: "there was something in these pretty little people that inspired confidence—a graceful gentleness, a certain childlike ease" (24). The non-European natives in imperialist romance are frequently pictured as children as part of the attempt to portray Europeans as their natural superiors, and the Time Traveller picks up the same motif: "I felt like a schoolmaster amidst children" (27). In an archetypal scene from imperialist romance, the Eloi even take Wells's hero for a god descended from the sky:

Then one of them suddenly asked me a question that showed him to be on the intellectual level of one of our five-year-old children—asked me, in fact, if I had come from the sun in a thunderstorm!...I nodded, pointed to the sun, and gave them such a vivid rendering of a thunderclap as startled them. They all withdrew a pace or so and bowed. (25)

The Eloi conform to a specific archetype of the good native in imperialist romance, what might be called the "South Seas Islander" motif. As if they had stepped out of a Gauguin painting, they appear to live in a kind of paradise, where all things are held in common and enjoyed without labor: "There were no hedges, no signs of proprietary rights, no evidences of agriculture; the whole earth had become a garden" (30). Later the Time Traveller's description of the Eloi even more clearly resembles the kind of South Seas idyll European travelers liked to conjure up: "They spent all their time in playing gently, in bathing in the river, in making love in a half-playful fashion, in eating fruit and sleeping" (42). The "eroticism" (33) of the Eloi particularly links them with places like Tahiti and Samoa in the European colonial imagination, especially in one scene the Time Traveller describes: "two of the beautiful Upper-world people came running in their amorous sport across the daylight into the shade. The male pursued the female, flinging flowers at her as he ran" (48; see also *Geduld* 103, n. 7).

The mention of eroticism leads us to another familiar motif from imperialist romance that Wells drew upon, the love affair between the European explorer and a native woman. In what might be labeled the "Pocahontas motif," the European explorer typically falls in love with a native woman, who comes to embody all that is submissive in the good tribe. She is totally devoted to the explorer, caters to his every desire, and in particular often supplies him with the information he needs to survive in the strange world he has entered. All that attracts the European explorer to the exotic non-European world becomes concentrated in the figure of his native lover, who threatens to seduce him

away from his European way of life and get him to go native. In the racial discourse that is basic to imperialist romance, the native woman poses the threat of miscegenation. She therefore usually has to be killed off by the end of the story, in order to free the explorer to return to Europe and perhaps even to a racially suitable European fiancé or wife. Often the native woman must sacrifice her life to save the explorer in a gesture that validates the superiority of the European to the non-European. *King Solomon's Mines* offers a textbook example of the Pocahontas motif in the romance between John Good and the Kukuana woman Foulata. In a variant of the motif, Rider Haggard made it the center of his plot in *She* in the romance between Leo Vincey and Ayesha.⁴ The motif survives in the sophisticated imperialist narratives of Conrad; it is at the heart of *Lord Jim*, for example, in the hero's love for Jewel and can even be detected in *Heart of Darkness* in the juxtaposition of Kurtz's native mistress with his Intended back in Belgium.

The Eloi woman Weena is of course the Pocahontas of *The Time Machine*. Given the physical and mental feebleness of the Eloi, she cannot be of much help to the Time Traveller, and in fact their romance begins when he has to save her from drowning. But almost as if he has been reading imperialist romances himself, the Time Traveller expects Weena to perform the usual role of the native informant when he turns to her to translate a puzzling inscription: "I thought, rather foolishly, that Weena might help me to interpret this, but I only learned that the bare idea of writing had never entered her head" (64). But although she lacks the competence of the typical female companion of imperialist romance, Weena makes up for it by her total devotion to the Time Traveller:

She received me with cries of delight and presented me with a big garland of flowers—evidently made for me and me alone....The creature's friendliness affected me exactly as a child's might have done. We passed each other flowers, and she kissed my hands....She was exactly like a child. She wanted to be with me always. She tried to follow me everywhere. (43)

Weena is a perfect distillation of the childish character of the natives that makes them subject to European rule, and indeed the Time Traveller assumes that she wants him to have dominion over her. Accordingly he becomes tempted by the prospect of a kind of intertemporal miscegenation: "Weena I had resolved to bring with me to our own time" (64). Thus, following the logic of imperialist romance, Wells has to kill off his native heroine—she apparently dies in a forest fire ironically set by the Time Traveller himself.⁵

If the fate of Weena is not enough to establish that Wells was following the pattern of imperialist romance in *The Time Machine*, one might point to a really unexpected element in the book that cannot otherwise be explained—its orientalism. Orientalism is the tendency for the West to define itself in opposition to the East in a series of binaries that always place the West on top: reason

vs. passion, science vs. superstition, representative government vs. despotism, and so on (Said 40). We have already seen how these binary oppositions are at work in imperialist romances such as *King Solomon's Mines* and *She*; it is necessary only to point out that the supposedly inferior characteristics of the non-European natives in these stories are clearly associated with the East. Recalling that in the nineteenth century the "orient" began with the Levant, what we would call the Middle East today, we can see that the way Haggard associates his Africans with figures out of the Bible and ancient Egypt stamps them as "oriental." It is thus significant that virtually the first object the Time Traveller sees when he arrives in the future is a giant sphinx.⁶ The sphinx of course suggests Egypt and was a chief symbol of the East in the British colonial imagination.

Confronted with the strangely easternized world of the future, the Time Traveller defines himself in opposition to it as a Westerner: "I was too Occidental for a long vigil" (39).⁷ Wells's hero views himself as active in contrast to the passive Eloi—exactly one of the binary oppositions by which the West sought to distinguish itself from the East. Just like the explorers in *King Solomon's Mines*, the Time Traveller finds "suggestions of old Phœnician decorations" (26) in the buildings he observes.⁸ He names the most impressive structure he finds "the Palace of Green Porcelain" and remarks that "the façade had an Oriental look: the face of it having the lustre, as well as the pale-green tint, a kind of bluish-green, of a certain type of Chinese porcelain" (52). Even the plants in Wells's future are "pagoda-like" (29).⁹ What makes the orientalizing touches in *The Time Machine* all the more interesting is that Wells is at the same time mapping the landscape against the familiar contours of Greater Metropolitan London. When the Time Traveller correlates his movements with such locations as "Wimbledon" (60), "Battersea" (64), and "South Kensington" (65), one is tempted to get out a London tube map in order to follow the action. The result is that Wells is not just orientalizing the future; he is orientalizing the future of *Britain*. In this respect, *The Time Machine* is truly prophetic, although a glance at London today would suggest that Wells was off by about 800,000 years in his prediction of when the city would take on an Eastern look.

In a weird way, then, Wells anticipates one of the principal motifs of postcolonial literature, the idea that the Empire Strikes Back.¹⁰ In the course of its imperialist expansion in the nineteenth century, Britain believed that it was conquering the world, but in certain respects it actually surrendered to the forces it assumed it had under its control. Britain thought that it was imposing its language, its literature, its educational system, and other British traditions on its colonial subjects—and to some extent it surely was—but at the same time they had almost as much impact in changing Britain as Britain had in changing them. The way the English language has absorbed words with Indian, African, and Caribbean origins is one measure of this countermovement. One might

also cite the way writers from the periphery of the Empire moved to the center of the English literary tradition in the twentieth century, beginning with Rudyard Kipling and continuing down to Salman Rushdie. In both his fiction and his essays, Rushdie has documented how Britain's colonial subjects have worked to transform the mother country of the Empire.¹¹ His *Satanic Verses* portrays the experience of so-called Third World immigrants in Britain, and one of the novel's themes is the orientalizing of London—the way the very food that Londoners eat has taken on an Eastern flavor.

The many orientalizing touches in *The Time Machine* combine to portray a Britain that has in effect gone native, that has succumbed to the seductive forces it hoped to subdue on the imperial frontier. Going native was one of the great fears of imperial Britain. The British Empire based its right to rule its subjects on the claim that the British were disciplined and the natives undisciplined, and therefore only British dominion could maintain order in the colonial lands. But the British continually worried that the example of the free and easy life of the natives would prove too attractive to the British masters sent over to rule them, that the natives would infect the British with their supposed laziness and lack of self-control. The fear of going native seems to stand behind Tennyson's poem "The Lotos-Eaters," which may have provided one of Wells's models for the Eloi. That would suggest that a kind of imperialist anxiety informs Wells's vision of the future of Britain in *The Time Machine*.

We have been talking about the Time Traveller as if he were journeying to the imperial frontier, but now we are suggesting that Wells's genius is to map the imperial frontier back onto the homeland of Britain in *The Time Machine*. One of the ways in which Wells accomplishes this reversal is to tropicalize the Britain of the future; in the words of his hero: "I think I have said how much hotter than our own was the weather of this Golden Age. I cannot account for it. It may be that the sun was hotter, or the earth nearer the sun" (45-46). The "Golden Age" aspects of the life of the Eloi follow from this change of climate—passing from the temperate to the tropic zone, they get to lead the idyllic existence of South Seas islanders. But in Wells's account, the happiness of the Eloi is purchased at the price of their moral fiber and their intellectual development. One might read this aspect of *The Time Machine* as a comment on the British belief that they were by nature entitled to rule the world. Wells in effect says: "Put the British in a tropical climate and you will soon see the famous British pluck that conquered the world disappear; the British will degenerate to the level of the natives they despise." The British believed that their bracing northern climate made them into a hardier race and assured their ability to conquer any people reared in the enervating environment of a tropical climate. Wells seems to be playing with this notion in *The Time Machine*—if the British really owe their superiority and their imperial conquests to their harsh climate, then meteorological developments over vast stretches of geological time may well fundamentally alter the nature of the British and eventually turn them into a subject race themselves.

Wells thus anticipates the remarkable passage in *The Satanic Verses* in which Rushdie describes the tropicalization of London. Raise the temperature of London, Rushdie suggests, and you will soon see the Londoners loosening up, enjoying “spicier food” and “higher-quality popular music,” and even relaxing their sexual inhibitions (“No more British reserve; hot-water bottles to be banished forever, replaced in the foetid nights by the making of slow and odourous love” 355). Rushdie is having fun at the expense of the proverbially uptight British, but he and Wells may be making a similar serious point: the British pride themselves on being British in every sense of the term, but that very Britishness may be more an accident of climate than anything inherent in the British national character. We began by discussing the Time Traveller as the archetypal European encountering non-Europeans on the imperial frontier. But because the country he comes to is in fact Britain, Wells reverses perspectives for his readers, and thus reduces the British to the level of the natives they regard as their natural inferiors. At the end of the nineteenth century, the British seemed to be on top of the world and at the peak of their imperial power. Wells wished to warn his countrymen that they might not remain this powerful forever, and that time in its infinite duration might eventually bring about a reversal of their position of superiority. The revenge of the Morlocks upon the Eloi has been read—quite rightly—as the lower classes of Victorian Britain turning the tables on the upper classes. But viewing *The Time Machine* in the context of imperialism, one might also read the Morlocks as the long oppressed colonial subjects of Britain finally having their revenge on their imperial masters.

Thus *The Time Machine* may be interpreted as a parable of the doom of empire. Looking back to the example of Rome, eighteenth- and nineteenth-century thinkers began to view empires as inevitably going through a cycle of rise and fall. In particular, empires were said to reach a peak of power, and then go into decline precisely because of the stagnation bred by a position of unchallenged supremacy.¹² At their height, empires were said to go soft, eventually leaving them prey to the onslaught of barbarians, who retained their natural energy and aggressiveness.¹³ In the Time Traveller’s hypothetical account of the development of the Eloi, he seems to have something like this process in mind, especially in the parallels he draws to European history. At one point he says that “the Eloi, like the Carolingian kings, had decayed to a mere beautiful futility” (58) and he later comments: “I even tried a Carlyle-like scorn of this wretched aristocracy in decay” (63). Although the terms of the Time Traveller’s analysis of the Eloi’s fate are generally economic and biological, at times he speaks like a historian of imperial decline: “the balanced civilisation that was at last attained must have long since passed its zenith, and was now far fallen into decay. The too-perfect security of the Upper-worlders had led them to a slow movement of degeneration, to a general dwindling in size, strength, and intelligence” (50). Although even this passage has a Darwinian ring to

it, it is also very much in the spirit of Edward Gibbons's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, one of Wells's favorite books.¹⁴ Through the historical references in *The Time Machine*, Wells touched a raw nerve in the Victorian sensibility, a widespread fear that Britain might be degenerating the way Rome once did and thus be on the brink of its decline as an imperial power.

Wells conveys a sense of empire in decline in *The Time Machine* in the haunting scene of a museum in ruins: "The tiled floor was thick with dust, and a remarkable array of miscellaneous objects was shrouded in the same grey covering.... Clearly we stood among the ruins of some latter-day South Kensington" (64-65). The South Kensington museum complex in London was a showcase of the British Empire, proudly exhibiting artifacts and natural history specimens brought back to the metropolitan center from all around the globe.¹⁵ Thus Wells can powerfully suggest the fall of the British Empire by showing such an imperial museum in ruins.¹⁶ But Wells deploys an even more potent symbol of imperial decline in *The Time Machine*. The most Tennysonian aspect of the novel is the prevailing mood of the setting sun Wells creates. A rough count suggests that there are seven references to sunsets in the main part of the narrative, but, more importantly, when the Time Traveller journeys further into the future, he comes upon the sunset to end all sunsets, the moment when as a result of "tidal drag," "the earth had come to rest with one face to the sun" (81), thus producing an "eternal sunset" (84). The most famous line associated with Victorian imperialism was of course: "The sun never sets on the British Empire." In his final dark vision of the future in *The Time Machine*, Wells seems to go out of his way to suggest that the sun would someday set on the British Empire with a vengeance.

Even though Wells himself acknowledged how much *The Time Machine* was rooted in its imperialistic age (Ruddick 250), the book aggressively breaks out of Victorian horizons. Wells refuses to accept Victorian complacency and self-satisfaction—he does not think that the British by virtue of some kind of racial superiority are entitled to rule the world, or that their empire will last forever. Here is the core of Wells's modernism. Indeed he was as thoroughgoing a critic of Victorian pieties as any of the famous modernists, and shared their contempt for Victorian smugness, as becomes evident in his portrayal of the Time Traveller as an explorer.

Just as the Eloi and the Morlocks are modeled on the two tribes of imperialist romance, Wells developed the character of the Time Traveller according to the standard pattern of the intrepid Victorian explorer. Wells's hero displays the same sense of adventure that drove real explorers like Burton and Stanley, but he also shares their darker side. Although he has a few moments of doubt, he basically assumes that he is superior to any being he encounters, and therefore believes that he has a right to appropriate anything he needs or desires, including, as we have seen, a native woman. He does not feel bound by the laws or customs of the lands he enters. Indeed, since he is

separated from his homeland, he apparently no longer feels bound by its laws either. In the exotic world of the future, the Time Traveller feels liberated from the fundamental civilized prohibition against murder: "I longed very much to kill a Morlock or so. Very inhuman, you may think, to want to go killing one's own descendants! But it was impossible, somehow, to feel any humanity in the things" (67). Wells's hero seems to operate according to the Kurtzian principle: "Exterminate all the brutes" (Conrad 51).

Like his real and fictional prototypes, Wells's hero is a kind of anthropologist. He understands that knowledge is power, and if he is to survive in and master the world of the future, he must first come to understand it. In particular, in a scene familiar from imperialist romance, the Time Traveller sets out to learn the language of the Eloi, which turns out to be childishly simple (39-40). The idea that native languages are primitive and incapable of expressing sophisticated ideas was a cliché of imperialist romance (Pagetti 125).

In his activity as an anthropologist the Time Traveller displays his cultural arrogance. He has entered a world totally unfamiliar to him, and yet he believes that he can figure out by his own efforts exactly how it works. His typical procedure is to observe something in the world of the future and immediately try to erect a grand speculative theory to explain how it came about. In this, he resembles Victorian explorers in fact and fiction, who were equally eager to theorize about the native cultures they encountered, often on the basis of very limited knowledge. Given the number of mistakes Wells shows the Time Traveller making, he seems to be criticizing his hero for precisely this overconfidence and overeagerness in thinking that native society is simply transparent to him.

Wells develops this critique by showing how long it takes the Time Traveller to understand the world of the future. *The Time Machine* is structured around a series of progressive revelations. At each stage, confronted by a certain set of phenomena, the Time Traveller offers an explanation for them, always revising his theories in light of new data, and thus coming closer to the truth about the future world. Wells carefully marks the progressive nature of this process by having his hero warn us about the limited character of his knowledge at each stage. For example, "This, I must remind you, was my speculation of the time. Later, I was to appreciate how far it fell short of the reality" (30). At first, trying to explain the seemingly idyllic life of the Eloi, the Time Traveller theorizes that sometime in the future, humanity achieved perfection of social organization, solved all its problems, and eventually began to degenerate and lose its strength as a result of no longer having to face any challenges or threats. When the Time Traveller learns of the existence of the Morlocks, he is forced to come up with a "new view" (48), and spins out a theory of how humanity could eventually evolve into two distinct species in the distant future. He suggests that a deepening of the class conflicts already evident in the Victorian period would lead to the aristocracy and proletariat

evolving along separate paths. But the Time Traveller must make one last revision of his theory of the future, when he finally realizes how the Morlocks have turned the tables on their former masters, the Eloi; the Morlocks have become cannibals and now treat the Eloi as their cattle.

This structure of progressive revelations makes a powerful statement about what is often called Eurocentrism today. In his efforts to understand an alien world, Wells's hero is all too eager to impose categories derived from his homeland, to explain the unfamiliar in terms of the familiar. If he repeatedly misunderstands what is going on among the Eloi and the Morlocks, the reason is that he assumes that he can view them on the model of the English men and women he knows. Of course the joke of Wells's story is that the Eloi and the Morlocks are in fact English men and women at an advanced stage of evolution. And yet in the Time Traveller's eagerness to jump to conclusions about the future world, Wells seems to be satirizing the way the typical Victorian explorer assumed that he could easily solve the mysteries of native life any place on the globe. In this respect, *The Time Machine* becomes a prototypical modernist narrative. By its structure, it raises serious questions about our access to truth, in particular, whether our view of the world is colored by our distinct perspective on it.

One can see the connection between *The Time Machine* and modernism once one realizes that what we have been calling the structure of progressive revelations could also be described as "delayed decoding." This is the term Ian Watt uses to characterize the modernist narrative technique of Joseph Conrad:

Long before *Heart of Darkness* Conrad seems to have been trying to find ways of giving direct narrative expression to the way in which the consciousness elicits meaning from its perceptions. One of the devices he hit on was to present a sense impression and to withhold naming it or explaining its meaning until later; as readers we witness every step by which the gap between the individual perception and its cause is belatedly closed within the consciousness of the protagonist.... This narrative device may be termed delayed decoding, since it combines the forward temporal progression of the mind, as it receives messages from the outside world, with the much slower reflexive process of making out their meaning. (175)

In Watt's classic example of delayed decoding, Conrad's Marlow in *Heart of Darkness* at first describes "little sticks" "whizzing before [his] nose" (45); only later does he realize that they are arrows and that his boat is being attacked by hostile natives.

Watt is right that Conrad was a master of this technique, but so was Wells. Consider how the Time Traveller arrives at his knowledge of the Morlock's cannibalism. He begins with a set of vague sense impressions, which he reports but does not understand:

The place, by the bye, was very stuffy and oppressive, and the faint halitus of freshly shed blood was in the air. Some way down the central vista was a little table of white metal, laid with what seemed a meal... Even at the time, I remember wondering what large animal could have survived to furnish the red joint I saw. It was all very indistinct: the heavy smell, the big unmeaning shapes, the obscene figures lurking in the shadows. (55)

As if he were toying with his readers, Wells has his hero think back to these initial impressions, but still without comprehending them (58); only after an extended cosmic meditation does the Time Traveller have a revelation and fully understand the truth about the Morlocks:

Then I thought of the Great Fear that was between the two species, and for the first time, with a sudden shiver, came the clear knowledge of what the meat I had seen might be. Yet it was too horrible!... These Eloi were mere fatted cattle, which the ant-like Morlocks preserved and preyed upon—probably saw to the breeding of. (62-63)

Delayed decoding is in fact Wells's basic narrative principle in his scientific romances. In proto-modernist fashion, Wells tends to employ limited narrators, and have them tell their stories from a skewed perspective that often conceals key facts from the reader (Hammond 50). In *The Island of Doctor Moreau*, the narrator Prendick initially mistakes the nature of the scientist's grotesque experiments and thus misleads the reader. In *The War of the Worlds*, we first get limited glimpses of the invading Martians, and are fooled by the various misinterpretations of their nature and their motives as initially supplied by Wells. In *The Invisible Man*, we again initially catch only glimpses of the titular character's peculiarity, and we must puzzle out his mystery along with the other characters in the novel. We have become so familiar with the outcomes of Wells's science fiction novels that we forget that for their original impact they depended on shock value. In each case Wells exploited narrative point of view to hold back crucial information from his readers and then hit them with a sudden revelation that transforms their whole view of the story. We are not trying to call into question Conrad's originality; he remains one of the great innovators in narrative technique.¹⁷ Nevertheless, the technique of delayed decoding did not arise out of thin air; rather it seems to be rooted in the soil of late Victorian popular fiction, specifically Wells's scientific romances. Once one notes this connection, it is difficult to look at some of Conrad's greatest narrative coups—the revelation in *Lord Jim* that the *Patna* did not sink or the revelation in *The Secret Agent* that it was Stevie who was blown up—and not see the example of Wells in the background.

The value of discussing Wells and Conrad together as masters of delayed decoding is that it helps us to see how the development of this fictional

technique was related to the experience of empire. When the Time Traveller explains the difficulty of describing the world of the future, he uses an analogy from the imperial frontier:

Conceive the tale of London which a negro, fresh from Central Africa, would take back to his tribe! What would he know of railway companies, of social movements, of telephone and telegraph wires, of the Parcels Delivery Company, and postal orders and the like?...And even of what he knew, how much could he make his untravelled friend either apprehend or believe? Then, think how narrow the gap between a negro and a white man of our own times, and how wide the interval between myself and these of the Golden Age! (41)

At first this passage seems to embody the sense of European racial superiority endemic to imperialist romance, as Wells's hero dwells on the ignorance of an African trying to understand the complicated world of London. But by the end of the passage, the Time Traveller stresses that he as an Englishman is far more limited than an African in his ability to comprehend an alien culture. Wells brings about one of his typical reversals: the English pride themselves on their ability to spy out the workings of native communities around the globe, but if the English were confronted with a society technologically more advanced than their own, they too would be at a loss to explain it.

More importantly, this passage points to the link between the experience of empire and the experience of modernism. The European exploration, invasion, and conquest of non-European territories led to a situation in which both Europeans and non-Europeans were constantly forced to negotiate between fundamentally different cultures. Locked within the horizons of one's own culture, one is tempted to accept its conventions as natural, as simply the way of the world. But when one sees how other people live comfortably under different customs, one begins to realize the conventionality of one's own way of life. As Wells suggests, this process is a two-way street; even though the Europeans may have dominated politically and economically in their encounters with non-Europeans, they often yielded, as we have seen, to the cultural influence of people they had seemed to conquer. We think of imperialism as an expression of Eurocentrism, but it could at the same time be a culturally decentering experience for Europeans. Sent to the imperial frontier, many Europeans lost touch with their homelands and even lost faith in their values, especially when they were confronted by alternative ways of life that might seem more attractive than what they were used to in Europe.

This experience of decentering is also the fundamental experience of modernism, the unnerving realization that the conventions of European civilization have no solid foundation and traditional values may be hollow at the core. That is why the famous phrase "things fall apart; the centre cannot hold" can come from a modernist poem by Yeats ("The Second Coming") and

yet provide the title of a postcolonial novel by Chinua Achebe. In particular, what we think of as the distinctive techniques of modernist fiction—delayed decoding and abrupt shifts in narrative frameworks—are analogous to the distinctive experience of the imperial frontier. When two very different cultures suddenly come into contact and try to understand each other, both may be forced to re-evaluate themselves and call into question their most cherished beliefs. *Heart of Darkness* is a profound chronicle of just such a crosscultural encounter and Conrad stresses how it is the European Kurtz who is unhinged by the experience. Thus *Heart of Darkness* becomes a central text of both imperialist and modernist literature. So, we have been arguing, is *The Time Machine*.¹⁸ Wells models his Time Traveller on a typical African explorer, and then emphasizes his epistemological difficulties negotiating between his own and an alien culture. As the Time Traveller puts it: “Suppose you found an inscription, with sentences here and there in excellent plain English, and, interpolated therewith, others made up of words, of letters even, absolutely unknown to you?” (42). The Time Traveller is in effect searching for the Rosetta Stone of the future. When the interpretation of culture is viewed on the model of deciphering a foreign language, imperialism and modernism meet, and delayed decoding becomes the principle of both anthropological investigation and modernist narrative.

As we have been seeing, the way Wells’s hero jumps back and forth between different time periods corresponds to the way an imperial explorer jumps back and forth between communities at different stages of historical development. In either case, this kind of back and forth movement is culturally disorienting, since it involves a constant shifting of perspectives and hence a questioning of traditional assumptions. The equivalent in fictional terms of this constant decentering movement would be the temporal and other shifts characteristic of modernist narrative. By destabilizing the narrative framework of fiction, the modernist author hopes to undermine traditional notions of reality and in particular to reveal the perspectival nature of truth. The progressive revelations of a modernist narrative keep readers off balance, forcing them continually to revise their understanding of the story and perhaps eventually to realize that no one view can ever encompass the whole truth about reality.

That is how the imperialist romance helped prepare the way for modernist fiction; by exploring shifting perspectives as a narrative principle, imperialist authors such as Kipling served as models for modernist authors such as Conrad. (Kipling’s experiments with native narrators in such stories as “Gemini” and “In Flood Time” are especially pertinent here.) Such considerations in turn explain the paradox of *The Time Machine*—how a novel that seems at first to reflect Wells’s inability to think outside the categories of British imperialist romance turns into a searching critique of those very categories—in short, how a Victorian thriller turns into a modernist interrogation of Victorian culture. For Wells, time travel itself becomes a fundamentally modernist experience.

Indeed there is something distinctively modern about the way the Time Traveller approaches his whole enterprise: “with a kind of madness growing upon me, I flung myself into futurity” (20). This is of course literally true of Wells’s hero, but it is also symbolically true of his generation, which may have been the first to orient itself by the future, rather than by the past, as humanity had done for millennia.

Being guided by the future rather than the past is almost the defining characteristic of modernity. *Victorian* has become for us a by-word for “old-fashioned,” but in fact the British in the second half of the nineteenth century, with their faith in progress and their remarkable record of economic, technological, and scientific achievements, were embracing the future with an unprecedented eagerness. Throughout history, humanity had lived in a basically stable world, in which changes of course happened, but they tended to happen slowly and thus pass unnoticed. In the course of the nineteenth century in Britain the pace of change increased at an exponential rate, and as a result for the first time in human history change became a way of life. The building of the great medieval cathedrals certainly changed the urban landscape of Europe, but these massive construction projects took decades and sometimes hundreds of years. By contrast, nineteenth-century observers were startled by the speed with which London grew, and frequently remarked about how new housing developments were springing up seemingly overnight (Pagetti 122). One of the defining events of the Victorian Era was the erection in 1851 of the famous Crystal Palace, a huge edifice of iron and glass, which, because of prefabrication and other new building techniques, was, to the amazement of the British public, put up in only four months; even more remarkably, it was taken down in three (Auerbach 207).

It is on precisely this spectacle of rapid change that Wells concentrates in trying to capture the nature of the Time Traveller’s experience—the radical transitoriness of the modern landscape:

I saw trees growing and changing like puffs of vapour, now brown, now green; they grew, spread, shivered, and passed away. I saw huge buildings rise up faint and fair, and pass like dreams. The whole surface of the earth seemed changed—melting and flowing under my eyes....I saw great and splendid architecture rising about me, more massive than any building of our own time, and yet, as it seemed, built of glimmer and mist. (19-20)

Here Wells almost seems to be echoing the famous characterization of modernity in Marx and Engels: “All that is solid melts into air” (Feuer 10). The Crystal Palace was probably Wells’s inspiration for this vision of architecture “built of glimmer and mist,”¹⁹ but, more generally, in his hero’s experience of time travel, Wells was trying to convey a sense of how the world had suddenly begun to look to observant people in the late nineteenth century; he marked the emergence of the modern sensibility, with its acute awareness that nothing

humanity creates is built to last. Indeed it is a real question whether this passage could have been written by anyone living much before the 1890s. Wells was drawing upon the Victorian's new sense of geological time, developed by Lyell and others in mid-century—the idea that the natural landscape is always changing—gradually but radically over long intervals.²⁰ But Wells was also impressed by the new mutability of the urban landscape in Victorian London—a tribute to humanity's emerging power to alter its own environment.

In another connection to modernism, Wells creates a link between time travel and a chief form of modern art, impressionism: “At first I scarce thought of stopping, scarce thought of anything but these new sensations. But presently a fresh series of impressions grew up in my mind” (20). For the Time Traveller, the world dissolves into a rapid succession of isolated sensations, and it thus begins to resemble an Impressionist painting; he speaks of “the dim elusive world that raced and fluctuated before my eyes!” (20). Thus *The Time Machine* curiously calls to mind a famous passage in which the distinctive modern sensibility is often said to be emerging, the conclusion to Walter Pater's *The Renaissance*:

...those impressions of the individual mind to which, for each one of us, experience dwindles down, are in perpetual flight....It is with this movement, with the passage and dissolution of impressions, images, sensations, that analysis leaves off—that continual vanishing away, that strange, perpetual, weaving and unweaving of ourselves. (151-52)

Both authors link a meditation on the nature of time to the modernist sense of the loss of personal identity. Here is how Wells connects the way the solid world melts into a series of flickering impressions to the Time Traveller's sense of the dissolution of his self: “So long as I travelled at a high velocity through time,...I was, so to speak, attenuated—was slipping like a vapour through the interstices of intervening substances!” (20). When things fall apart, the self falls apart too—a great deal of twentieth-century literature has explored this problematic aspect of modernity. As a science fiction writer, Wells is often credited with anticipating Einstein in *The Time Machine*; looking carefully at the way he portrays his hero's experience of time travel suggests that he equally deserves credit for anticipating the new sense of temporality in modern thought and specifically the temporal innovations of modernist fiction. For Wells, the novel itself becomes the ultimate time machine, able to take us to any era we desire and to jump around from era to era with the ease of the imagination. In creating the novel as time machine, Wells pointed the way to the temporal jumps of modernist fiction (Hammond 58-59, 70).

As a way of summing up, we can confirm what we have been seeing about the link between imperialism and modernism in Wells by a brief look at *The Island of Doctor Moreau*. As fantastic as this horror story may seem, here too Wells is drawing upon actual experience, and once again his source is British

imperialism (Parrinder [1995] 57-58). The Beast People Moreau creates correspond to natives in the British colonial imagination; imperialist romances often pictured non-Europeans as animals (think of Kipling's *Jungle Books*). Indeed Moreau's fear that his creations will be unable to abide by the laws he has laid down for them reflects the central concern of British colonial rule. For Prendick, the narrator of Wells's novel, his encounter with Moreau's attempt to keep a native population in line proves to be a harrowing experience. It teaches him a lesson in the bestiality of all humanity, and even when he returns to European civilization in London, he keeps reliving his nightmare. In the midst of the supposedly civilized metropolis, Prendick sees reminders of Moreau's Beast People:

I would go out into the streets to fight with my delusion, and prowling women would mew after me, furtive craving men glance jealously at me, weary pale workers go coughing by me with tired eyes and eager paces like wounded deer dripping blood, old people, bent and dull, pass murmuring to themselves, and all unheeding a ragged tail of gibing children.... Particularly nauseous were the blank expressionless faces of people in trains and omnibuses; they seemed no more my fellow-creatures than dead bodies would be. (220)

Reading this passage, especially its image of the walking dead in the modern metropolis, we cannot fail to be reminded of a famous modernist scene written three years later—the moment when Conrad's Marlow returns from the Belgian Congo to Brussels and expresses a similar alienation from modern civilization:

I found myself back in the sepulchral city resenting the sight of people hurrying through the streets to filch a little money from each other, to devour their infamous cookery, to gulp their unwholesome beer, to dream their insignificant and silly dreams. They trespassed upon my thoughts. They were intruders whose knowledge of life was to me an irritating pretense because I felt so sure they could not possibly know the things I knew.... I had no particular desire to enlighten them, but I had some difficulty in restraining myself from laughing in their faces. (70)

In its vision of “the sepulchral city,” this passage from *Heart of Darkness* is often viewed as pointing the way to much of twentieth-century literature and in particular the “Unreal City” of T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*: “I had not thought death had undone so many.” The passage is particularly important because it shows how experience on the imperial frontier unsettles a European and creates a sense of alienation we think of as characteristically modern. And yet Wells had already covered exactly this ground in *The Island of Doctor Moreau*.

In its own powerful portrayal of the heart of darkness, *The Island of Doctor Moreau* stares directly into the modernist abyss, and leaves its narrator

Prendick wondering if human beings can be distinguished from beasts. For Prendick the Beast People are a horrible distortion of humanity:

Most striking perhaps in their general appearance was the disproportion between the legs of these creatures and the length of their bodies....The next most obvious deformity was in their faces, almost all of which were prognathous, malformed about the ears, with large and protuberant noses, and often strangely coloured or strangely placed eyes....The hands were always malformed; and though some surprised me by their unexpected humanity, almost all were deficient in the number of digits.... (170-71)

Where have we seen these figures before, this strangely familiar blend of human and bestial forms? One answer is: in one of the most famous modernist paintings, Pablo Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger (O. J. R. M.)*. Painted in 1907, this groundbreaking work almost looks like an attempt to illustrate *The Island of Doctor Moreau*. Particularly striking in this context are the distortions of the women's figures, and above all the disproportionate length of their legs. They also all have the "large and protuberant noses" Prendick describes in the Beast People, and of course, since this is Picasso, all have "strangely placed eyes." And when Picasso adorns two of the women with native African masks, the parallel to *The Island of Doctor Moreau* is complete. It would be hard to find a work more crucial to the history of modern painting than *Les Femmes d'Alger (O. J. R. M.)*.²¹ And yet over a decade before Picasso created his modernist masterpiece, Wells had in effect already sketched it out, and with the same uncanny sense of the beast lurking beneath the surface of civilized humanity.

Les Femmes d'Alger (O. J. R. M.) has become a textbook illustration in art histories for documenting the influence of African and other native sculpture on the development of modernism and cubism in particular. Picasso credited the inspiration of the painting to an exhibition of African sculpture he saw at the Trocadéro ethnographic museum in 1907.²² Thus his modernism precipitated out of his experience at one of the great imperial museums of Paris. By bringing works of art from the frontier to the metropolitan center, the museums of France and other imperial powers exposed European artists to new forms of creativity, broadened their horizons, and helped them to break out of the limits of traditional nineteenth-century art. We have been trying to show that a similar process occurred in Wells. As a Victorian, he drew upon British imperial experience to flesh out his vision of the future in *The Time Machine*. But precisely his coming to terms with experience on the imperial frontier undermined Wells's attachment to Victorian values and allowed him to see beyond the horizons of his era—indeed to prophesy the eventual setting of the sun on the British Empire.

We have been looking at *The Time Machine* in the context of British imperialist experience; it is time to do likewise with the time machine itself. Although Wells is understandably reluctant to attempt a full explanation of

how it works, he has his narrator supply the details of its composition: “Parts were of nickel, parts of ivory, parts had certainly been filed or sawn out of rock crystal. The thing was generally complete, but the twisted crystalline bars lay unfinished upon the bench besides some sheets of drawings, and I took one up for a better look at it. Quartz it seemed to be” (11). The raw materials of the time machine are the raw materials of empire, exactly the minerals and other valuable substances brought back from the frontier to supply the industrial and technological needs of Europe. The mention of ivory of course calls to mind *Heart of Darkness*, and it is a curious coincidence that Conrad’s description of Kurtz presents him too as a mixture of ivory and crystal. His head is described as “an ivory ball” (49); his image is said to be “carved out of old ivory” (59); he has an “ivory face” (68), but, oddly enough, Marlow finally speaks of his having “a soul as translucently pure as a cliff of crystal” (70). It is appropriate that the imperialist Kurtz should himself be composed of the precious materials of empire—ivory and crystal. But it is equally appropriate that Wells’s time machine should be constructed out of the same elements. The composition of the time machine is a perfect symbol of all that we have seen about the composition of *The Time Machine*. Wells built his vision of the future out of elements taken from the British Empire. The result was an exotic-looking contraption, but upon closer inspection, it actually proves to have a familiar shape; indeed, as we have seen, *The Time Machine* is structured like a nineteenth-century imperialist romance. Like the time machine itself, *The Time Machine* has a distinctly Victorian look to it. And yet, for all the quaint Victorian ivory and crystal, the time machine is a remarkable piece of technology, and capable of bursting out of the Victorian period into the distant future. The same may be said of *The Time Machine*. It at first appears to be typically Victorian in its use of patterns from the imperialist romances of Rider Haggard, but, as we have seen, it ultimately looks forward to the future, and indeed anticipates many of the ideas and literary techniques of modernism. The time machine uses the raw materials of empire to leap into the future; in doing the same, Wells’s *The Time Machine* reveals the profound connection between imperialism and modernism.

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NOTES

¹ For the complicated history of the composition of *The Time Machine* and an account of the many versions Wells went through, see Geduld 5-9 and Ruddick 22-30.

² All quotations from *The Time Machine*, as well as *The Island of Doctor Moreau*, are from the Patrick Parrinder edition.

³ For the way Wells drew upon accounts of African exploration in creating the “tribes” of the Eloi and the Morlocks, see Pagetti 123. Pagetti points out that in his book *In Darkest England*

(1890), General William Booth had drawn parallels between African tribes and the urban poor in London. (Booth 11-12).

⁴ That Wells was quite aware of this pattern in imperialist romance is evident from the fact that he makes fun of it in his May 30, 1896 *Saturday Review* comment on Haggard's *Heart of the World* (Parrinder and Philmus 98).

⁵ There is some question about the exact manner of Weena's death, but most commentators assume that she died in the fire. Wells's carelessness about this important detail in a sense reveals the generic character of the event; Wells knows that according to the formula of imperialist romance, Weena must die; he does not trouble himself too much over how it happens.

⁶ For a variety of interpretations of this sphinx, see Stover 2-4, Hammond 78, and Geduld, 101-102 (n.12).

⁷ For the importance of Wells's use of the word *occidental* here, see Stover 87 (n. 112), Geduld 105 (n. 6), and Pagetti 125.

⁸ In the corresponding moment in *King Solomon's Mines*, Sir Henry Curtis observes several giant statues and comments: "Perhaps these colossi were designed by some Phœneecian official who managed the mines" (Haggard 259).

⁹ See Geduld 110-11 (n. 4) for an account of Wells's experience of pagodas in London, at the Victoria and Albert Museum, the Royal Albert Hall, and the Royal Botanical Gardens at Kew.

¹⁰ On this general subject, see Ashcroft, et al.

¹¹ See, for example, a number of essays in Rushdie's *Imaginary Homelands*, including the title essay, "The New Empire Within Britain," and "Hobson-Jobson."

¹² For an example of this kind of thinking, see Montesquieu's *Considerations on the Causes of the Greatness of the Romans and Their Decline*.

¹³ For a striking visual representation of this cycle, see Thomas Cole's five paintings entitled "The Course of Empire" (Truettner and Wallach 90-95).

¹⁴ For the relevance of Gibbon to *The Time Machine*, see Parrinder (1995) 65-68.

¹⁵ This aspect of the Victorian museum is reflected in the Time Traveller's observation: "In another place was a vast array of idols—Polynesian, Mexican, Grecian, Phœneecian, every country on earth I could think of" (69).

¹⁶ The classic visual representation of such a scene is Hubert Robert's "Imaginary View of the Grande Galerie in Ruins," a painting both in and of the Louvre Museum in Paris. For the significance of the ruined museum in *The Time Machine*, see Parrinder (1995) 53-55 and Parrinder (2001) 111-12.

¹⁷ Wells himself recognized Conrad's originality as a narrator in an insightful review of his *An Outcast of the Islands*, which appeared in *Saturday Review* in May 16, 1896. Wells appears in fact to be describing what we now call delayed decoding in Conrad:

His style is like river-mist; for a space things are seen clearly, and then comes a great gray bank of printed matter, page on page, creeping round the reader, swallowing him up. You stumble, you protest, you blunder on, for the drama you saw so cursorily has hold of you; you cannot escape until you have seen it out. You read fast, you run and jump.... Then suddenly things loom up again, and in a moment become real, intense, swift (Qtd. in Parrinder and Philmus 88).

Although Wells is criticizing Conrad's narrative style here (its wordiness), his comments raise the question of whether his own use of delayed decoding was modeled on Conrad's.

¹⁸ On the connection between *The Time Machine* and *Heart of Darkness*, see Hammond 84.

¹⁹ In his introduction to his edition of *The Time Machine*, Parrinder points out: "Wells as a child was taken to see the life-size plaster reproductions of the dinosaurs at the Crystal Palace in Sydenham" (xviii).

²⁰ On the importance of the new geological thinking in the Victorian era, see Gillispie and Gould.

²¹ For the historical importance of the Picasso painting, see Leslie 24 and Galassi 36.

²² For an account of this visit, see Leslie 23.

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