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“Tell Us All About Little Rosebery”: Topicality and Temporality in H.G. Wells’s *The Time Machine*

The writer confesses his profound disbelief in any perfect or permanent work of art. All art, all science, and still more certainly all writing are experiments in statement. There will come a time for every work of art when it will have served its purpose and be bereft of its last rag of significance.—H.G.Wells, “A General Introduction” xviii.

Maybe no literature is perfect and enduring, but there is something specially and incurably topical about all these prophetic books; the more you go ahead, the more you seem to get entangled with the burning questions of your own time. And all the while events are overtaking you.—H.G. Wells, “Fiction” 246.

Most of the events depicted in *The Time Machine* (1895) take place in the far future at a time when the human species in its present form no longer exists—consequently after human history has come to an end. Yet everything that happens in Wells’s “invention”¹ is deliberately and rigorously historicized by being placed in a specific temporal relation to a moment in history that corresponds very closely to the date of *The Time Machine*’s composition. Indeed, *The Time Machine*’s unusual narrative structure may be accounted for by the work’s topicality—its rootedness in the specific historical moment of its composition. It will be argued here that Wells was concerned to specify when events in *The Time Machine* were happening² because such a clarification of their temporal configuration would account for and justify the asymmetrical and apparently fragmented quality of the double narrative he was presenting. One corollary of this argument is that the non-traditional structure of *The Time Machine*, though it may appear to anticipate modernist narrative practices, is not strictly a modernist (or postmodernist) phenomenon—even though it has been creatively and critically interpreted as such.³

The Time Machine’s topicality, which Wells never did anything to conceal, has been largely ignored by critics, possibly because they have felt that its status as a “permanently established” classic (Geduld 1)—one of the very few in the sf genre—might be jeopardized by an emphasis on those elements of the text which are not “timeless,” possibly because topical allusions quickly lose force and meaning over time and critics have simply not noticed their significance.⁴ Indeed, the older Wells came to feel that its topicality had over time reduced *The Time Machine*, at least in his own eyes, to a polemic by an immature writer—not that he lamented this circumstance. It will be suggested here, however, that *The Time Machine*’s topicality, perhaps paradoxically, helps to endow the work with both the formal and thematic durability characteristic of the classic.

The narrative of *The Time Machine* is organized according to a temporal logic that is governed by topicality. The short novel that is familiar to us was for the most part composed very rapidly in the summer of 1894 by an author

in temporarily reduced economic circumstances, in poor health, and impatient for recognition, who was addressing a readership, not of the future, but of the immediate present. The text's topicality first becomes visible in the opening scene at the Time Traveller's house at Richmond, which does not take place at some unspecified time in the Victorian *fin de siècle*, nor (as has been ingeniously suggested) at the turn of the twentieth century (Parrinder, *Shadows* 42), but almost certainly in early February 1894. That most of the action of the internal narrative takes place in A.D. 802,701 may not be because of the author's fascination for numerology or cryptography, nor because he, concerned only to get the Time Traveller into the very far future, generated at random a date with more than the familiar four numbers, but may be explained by the 1894 setting of most of the external narrative. Similarly, there is a good reason, also rooted in 1894, why the Time Traveller's last stop, as described in the chapter originally called "The Further Vision," takes place thirty (rather than ten, or ten thousand) million years thence.

For a reader today, the topicality of a work may cause even greater problems of comprehension than complexity of expression. To take an example from Shakespeare: Rosencrantz's disparaging reference in *Hamlet* (1601) to the "little eyases" (II. ii. 336) who are all the rage in Elsinore and driving the (traditional) Players out of a living is a topical reference to the Children of the Chapel who began to perform at the Blackfriars Theatre from Michaelmas, 1600 (Jenkins 1, 255). Shakespeare's satirical allusion to a late Elizabethan theatrical fad for boy actors would be incomprehensible today were it not for the painstaking annotations of scholars. But does the topical allusion, which may well be cut from a modern performance, weaken the play? One might argue that, on the contrary, *Hamlet* draws part of its strength from what was happening in the London theater in late 1600. By the allusion, Shakespeare was affirming his solidarity with his fellow-actors against the juvenile intruders, while emphasizing that *Hamlet* is a drama with mature and enduring themes, not one motivated by fashion or suitable in any sense for children.

The Time Machine is certainly rooted in the nineteenth-century *fin de siècle* in the manner eloquently demonstrated by Bernard Bergonzi in his contextualization of the early scientific romances (1-61). But the topicality at issue here is not a literary-historical dimension of the text perceptible only in hindsight by the reader today, but a historically specific expression of its author's intentions in 1894. It will be suggested that for Wells, topical references offered a means of exposing and satirizing the gulf of incomprehension that separates the more blinkered of the dinner-guests from their host. One implication of such a suggestion is that in 1894-95 *The Time Machine* was addressed, not to readers of the future (as was sometimes the case with the ambitious modernist text),⁵ but primarily to the readers of the present. To be topical is to add an expiration date to certain elements of a text, and by doing so a writer risks losing readers of the future. But it is likely that Wells, whether in 1894 or thereafter, was never greatly concerned with future readers. There is plenty of evidence (such as the passages quoted in the epigraphs above) that Wells always thought of his writing, even when it was prophetic, as provisional, contingent, and ephemeral,

his attitude deriving both from his training as experimental scientist and his experience as a journalist.

However, the now enigmatic topical references upon which the temporal logic of *The Time Machine* rests pass almost unregistered by a reader today swept up by the narrative and visionary power of the work—they are no more aesthetically damaging than the allusion to the “little eyases” is to *Hamlet*. Indeed, as with *Hamlet*, one could argue that *The Time Machine* draws some of its strength from its author’s response to a set of momentary historical conditions. Moreover, while *The Time Machine*’s asymmetrical and quasi-fragmented narrative structure has proved easy to naturalize from a postmodernist perspective, this act of naturalization may blind us to the adherence of the text to more traditional narrative canons.

The Time Machine is about the transformed post-Darwinian relationship between humanity and time. Late nineteenth-century biology, working with the extended temporal scale provided incrementally by astronomers and geologists from the Renaissance on, had radically revised humanity’s temporal place in nature. But late in the Victorian age the implications of this revision had still not fully registered with the reading public. The time was ripe for a work on the grand theme of humanity’s place in time that would capture the popular imagination. Victorian novelists in the dominant realist tradition, ignorant of science or unused to dealing in millennia, had largely ignored this theme. Wells was well positioned to explore it, by his own later admission having conceived as early as 1887 a plan of a universal history in which humanity was “definitely placed in the great scheme of space and time” (“Scepticism” 376) from the courses in embryology, paleontology, and astronomy he had taken at the Normal School of Science in South Kensington.

The unusual narrative structure of *The Time Machine* offers the main clue to understanding Wells’s approach to the grand temporal theme. The double narrative has two main components of very unequal length. The shorter is the external or frame narrative beginning and ending the work, told in first person by a primary narrator who is a frequent dinner guest of the Time Traveller;⁶ the longer is the Time Traveller’s internal or framed narrative as reported verbatim⁷ by this primary narrator. The embedded narrative takes the form of an (almost) uninterrupted⁸ chronological narrative of just-experienced events by a first-person narrator who was the protagonist in those events. It too is divided into two unequal sections: the longer first section is set in the degenerate world of the Eloi and Morlocks in A.D. 802,701; the shorter second section, constituting the chapter called “The Further Vision,” is set “more than thirty million years hence” (*TM* §XIV:139), as the Time Traveller recounts firsthand the (probable) moment of total extinction of life on earth.

Three different time-scales operate in *The Time Machine*: the *historical*, the *evolutionary* (or *geological*), and the *astronomical*.⁹ These three time-scales correspond to the tripartite temporal structure of the work: A.D. 1894-97 (the external narrative; see n. 20 below); A.D. 802,701 (the world of the Eloi and Morlocks); and more than thirty million years thereafter (“The Further Vision”). All coexist simultaneously, as they do in the real world, but the last

two are not at first evident to the narratees, actual (the Time Traveller's dinner-guests) or implied (*The Time Machine's* readers). In the external narrative, historical time is dominant. Indeed, the dinner-guests imagine that historical time is the only kind of time in the universe, or at least the only one that affects their lives; that is why the more unimaginative of them dismiss the Time Traveller's tale of the future as incredible (*TM* §XVI:146, 148). Historical time, marked out by dates B.C. or A.D., also offers narratees the comforting illusion of continuity with their own present—with their listening or reading situation in real time. When the internal narrative ceases towards the end of *The Time Machine*, historical time, which has been suspended, reasserts itself, but by then the narratees, like the narrators, are likely no longer to have the same confidence in locating and grounding themselves exclusively in historical time. It has been claimed that the reader's vertigo is the result of Wells's precocious discovery of modernist or postmodernist time (Caldwell 132-33). In my view, however, Wells is not trying to liberate his text from traditional chronology as part of a (proto-)modernist project,¹⁰ but simply to raise the reader's awareness of a temporal frame too large to be measured by the clock or the calendar, and indifferent to human concerns.¹¹

The historicity of historical time in the external narrative is enforced by topicality. Very early in the first chapter, the Time Traveller proposes to his guests the idea of a four-dimensional geometry, with a fourth dimension at right angles to the other three. Aware that such an idea, even if it is understood, will be resisted by his more conventionally-minded guests, he immediately supports the speculation by remarking, "Professor Simon Newcomb was expounding this to the New York Mathematical Society only a month or so ago" (*TM* §I:4). As commentators have noted, Newcomb (1835-1909), probably the most famous American mathematician of his age, presented a paper entitled "Modern Mathematical Thought" as an "Address delivered before the New York Mathematical Society at the annual meeting, December 28, 1893" (Newcomb 325 n.1). This paper, which did speculate on four-dimensional mathematics, was reprinted in the British weekly general science periodical *Nature* (1 February 1894), just over a month after the address was given. Though the Time Traveller may be interpreted as suggesting that he was present at Newcomb's lecture in New York, it is more likely that he is implying that he has just read the text of the address in the most recent issue of *Nature*—indeed, the purpose of the reference seems to be to show how up-to-date the Time Traveller is in his scientific reading.¹² This topical allusion, then, almost certainly fixes the date of the Time Traveller's dinner-party that opens *The Time Machine* as a Thursday some time in early February 1894.¹³ Indeed, as 1 February 1894 was a Wednesday, one might without excessive presumption date the Time Traveller's two Thursday soirées at the beginning of the narrative as February 2 and February 9, 1894.¹⁴

At the Time Traveller's second dinner, the six guests include three returnees from the previous week—the Psychologist, the Medical Man (a.k.a. the Doctor) and the primary narrator—and three new faces, the Editor, the Journalist, and the "quiet, shy man with a beard" (*TM* §III:19) (who replace

the Provincial Mayor, Filby, and the Very Young Man.) They are kept waiting for the host, who eventually arrives late, “in an amazing plight” (*TM* §III:20)—dirty, disheveled, limping, pale, haggard, with a cut on his chin and seemingly grayer of hair than he was the previous week. He drains a glass of champagne, then excuses himself to go and wash and dress for dinner. After he returns, the Editor, having established that his host has been time traveling, remarks to him, “Tell us all about little Rosebery, will you? What will you take for the lot?” (*TM* §III:23). This is another topical allusion, of the sort whose semantic expiration date is rapidly reached. Lord Rosebery (1847-1929) became Liberal Prime Minister on Monday, March 5, 1894 after the resignation of Gladstone from his fourth and final ministry three days earlier. A turf enthusiast, Rosebery would remain Prime Minister only until June 1895, but his brief political elevation coincided precisely with his greatest success as racehorse-owner. In the spring of 1894, Rosebery’s horse Ladas performed the remarkable feat of winning three major races for 3-year-olds: the 2,000 Guineas (May 9), the Newmarket Stakes (May 23), and the Derby (June 6), for all of which he was odds-on favorite. (Before then, Rosebery’s horses had not won any great race since the Oaks in 1883.) The Editor’s epithet “little” derives from Rosebery’s boyish appearance—much emphasized in contemporary caricatures—in contrast to the patriarchal Gladstone. As the Newcomb reference allows us to date the Time Traveller’s two soirées as occurring a week apart in early February 1894, so the Editor’s questions, viewed in this narrow temporal frame, concern both the imminent likelihood of Rosebery’s succeeding Gladstone as Prime Minister, and Rosebery’s possible successes on the turf in the upcoming racing season. The Editor is asking the Time Traveller whether Rosebery would sweep the upcoming season both politically and on the racing turf (as he did, though this would have been a matter of speculation for the dinner guests in February 1894).¹⁵

The Editor intends by his (facetious) questions to fish for racing tips based on the Time Traveller’s supposed inside knowledge of future winners. In trying to reduce the extraordinary invention of the time machine to a device to cheat bookmakers, the Editor is revealing his utter fatuity. For Wells reserves the full measure of his scorn for those of the dinner guests who, like the Editor, have no scientific imagination,¹⁶ and who consequently cannot understand that the Time Traveller has visited a future in which our descendants could not be less concerned with horse racing or election results, and have no access to, nor indeed knowledge of, clothes-brushes (*TM* §III:23). The Rosebery allusion, then, reveals the Editor’s extreme temporal myopia, and he, or rather the attitude he represents, becomes the primary butt of the satire.

As Lord Rosebery’s premiership is now a historical parenthesis, and his ownership of racehorses a mere footnote, it is not surprising that not only modern readers but also annotators of *The Time Machine* do not fully understand the Editor’s joke, even though they may understand his motive for making it. So, Frank McConnell glosses the phrase “little Rosebery” as “A horse named for its owner, Lord Rosebery” (*Time Machine* 27 n. 6). For Harry Geduld, “Little Rosebery was the latest champion racehorse of ...

Rosebery" (99 n. 16). For Patrick Parrinder, little Rosebery was "a racehorse owned by the Earl of Rosebery" (*Time Machine* [1996] 224 n. 16). For Leon Stover, little Rosebery is "a recent winner in the Derby ... a champion racehorse bred in the stables of Archibald Philip Primrose, fifth Earl of Rosebery" (50 n. 51).¹⁷ That scholars in the late twentieth century found it difficult to distinguish between a late nineteenth-century prime minister and his racehorse ironically strengthens Wells's satirical point in 1894 about the triviality of human concerns when viewed from outside the exclusive perspective of the historical present.¹⁸

As the Time Traveller's narrative begins, historical time rapidly dissolves (this vertiginous idea is expressed through the famous description [*TM* §IV:28-32] of the sensations of time traveling), and an underlying time scale, evolutionary (or geological) time, supersedes it. The existence of the concept of historical time depends upon the existence of an advanced, literate human culture that can measure and record time's passage. But the Eloi and Morlocks are in their different ways living in the ruins of culture, and there is no evidence that either species is numerate or literate enough to be measuring time or recording its passage as history. The Eloi indeed are almost certainly not literate,¹⁹ while the Morlocks live in darkness, where reading and writing could hardly be expected to flourish, and avoid the sun, chief index of the passage of time on earth. The A.D. in A.D. 802,701 (*TM* §VI:46) is consequently ironic, and not just because of the total disappearance of the Christian religion. The date thus invoked sounds historical, and derives from the Time Traveller's initial assumption that after a very great leap in time into the future he will meet a race that has made a very great advance on humanity in A.D. 1894. What has apparently happened instead is that during this period evolutionary elaboration has ceased and degeneration toward homogeneity, not progress toward heterogeneity, has become the dominant tendency in the biosphere.

William Bellamy first suggested that by the number 802,701 Wells "presumably intends a sense of 'running down'" (221 n. 7), a point taken up by Norman and Jeanne Mackenzie (124) and then by McConnell, who called the number a "hieroglyph of entropy" (*Science Fiction* 82). The entropic theory may be glossed as follows: the number 802,701 is composed of two related three-digit sequences, in which 7 is one less than 8, and 1 one less than 2, each minimally descending pair separated by an irreducible zero. The number, then, may arithmetically symbolize a cosmic running-down. But this theory does not explain why the date is 802,701 rather than, say, 702,601 or 906,805. Certainly, a figure in the hundreds of thousands—in contrast to the A.D. 12,203 of the *National Observer* version (Philmus and Hughes 66-70) or the A.D. 32,701 of the intermediate MsB version (Loing 73-74)—suggests a very remote future that stands as the counterpart of the hundreds of thousands of years of human evolution that culminated in the Victorian age (Loing 74; Parrinder, *Time Machine* [1996] xxii). Parrinder suggests that the number 802,701 encrypts the double historical-biological time-scale, as a support to his argument that *The Time Machine* takes place both in the near and far human future at the same time and that the setting of the opening scenes is a near-

future Richmond of 1901 (*Shadows* 40–42). But as we have seen, the Newcomb and Rosebery allusions, retained through the Atlantic revision, make it fairly clear that the two dinner-parties that open the external narrative take place in early February 1894.²⁰ That is, the temporal specificity of the external narrative is part of the satirical system that highlights the pettiness of the Time Traveller's guests (especially the Editor and Journalist) by placing their trivial, banal, quotidian concerns against the vast backdrop of evolutionary and astronomical time.

Why specifically 802,701? Probably, as Loing suggests, Wells decided to advance the MsB date, A.D. 32,701, to a figure in the hundreds of thousands of years because this allowed more time for the devolution of humanity into two distinct species to occur plausibly. In practical terms, it is possible that Wells merely lopped off the 3 in A.D. 32,701 and replaced it with 80 because the latter was the first two-figure number he thought of. But the deliberation with which 802,701 is on three separate occasions literally spelled out in the text—"Eight Hundred and Two Thousand Seven Hundred and One, A.D." (*TM* §VI:46, §VIII:71, §XIII:131)—suggests that the date bears some more specific symbolic weight.

In Chapter X, "When the Night Came," the Time Traveller, watching over the sleeping Weena to protect her from Morlocks, finds little that is familiar even in those supposed symbols of immutability, the constellations:

Looking at these stars suddenly dwarfed my own troubles and all the gravities of terrestrial life. I thought of their unfathomable distance, and the slow inevitable drift of their movements out of the unknown past into the unknown future. I thought of the great precessional cycle that the pole of the earth describes. *Only forty times* had that silent revolution occurred during all the years that I had traversed. And during these few revolutions all the activity, all the traditions, the complex organizations, the nations, languages, literatures, aspirations, even the mere memory of Man as I knew him, had been swept out of existence. (*TM* §X:103; italics added)

The precession of the equinoxes refers to their slightly earlier occurrence every year, a phenomenon reflected in the perceptible shift in the position of the so-called fixed stars over long periods of time that had been observed but not fully understood by ancient astronomers. It is a result of the slight retrograde motion of the circle described by the earth's axis, itself caused by the combined gravitational drag of the sun and moon. The whole circle or cycle, which the ancients, imagining that after that time all the heavenly bodies would occupy the same place as they did at the creation, called a great year (or Platonic cycle) and estimated variously, is now known to be completed approximately every 25,800 years. When the Time Traveller, having established that he is in the year 802,701, refers to forty precessional cycles having elapsed since his starting point in 1894, we may conclude that either his math is poor, or his astronomical knowledge is weak. But it is likelier, I think, that Wells has rounded a great year down to 20,000 years, perhaps because this period was associated in his mind with a temporal cycle whereby one might gauge the

Time Traveller's enormous *historical* distance from his own present, while at the same time show that in *astronomical* terms such a distance is insignificant. The entire course of human civilization, Wells later noted, was "a matter of at most the last twenty thousand years" (*Outline* 183).

By the Time Traveller's calculation, the precessional cycle has occurred "only forty times" since 1894, and here one suspects that Wells was drawing on the biblical resonances of that number.²¹ Moreover, the cycle of the great year had, as recently as 1893, been notably invested with apocalyptic connotations. In his Romanes Lecture of that year, "Evolution and Ethics," Wells's master T.H. Huxley had memorably stated:

The theory of evolution encourages no millennial anticipations. If, for millions of years, our globe has taken the upward road, yet, some time, the summit will be reached and the downward route will be commenced. The most daring imagination will hardly venture upon the suggestion that the power and intelligence of man can ever arrest the procession of the great year. (85)

This Huxleyan "great year" is here associated with the life-cycle of the human species and does not seem conceived as a precise astronomical quantity; it is thus very suited to be adapted to Wells's requirements in *The Time Machine*. Forty Wellsian-Huxleyan great years of 20,000 years each plus 1894 equals 801,894. If we accept the possibility that Wells had in mind the suggestive possibility of a minimally entropic number, then the first such number after 801,894 is 802,701.²²

In "The Further Vision," evolutionary time has itself been superseded by yet another time-scale, that of astronomical time, which cannot be meaningfully measured by terrestrial yardsticks at all. The section set in the world thirty million years in the future is short, because once the effects upon the earth of astronomical change have been described (in the most highly charged passage in the whole work), there is nothing more to say: the plot, that characteristically human superimposition of a temporal structure on randomness, is over. Wells offers a vision of global extinction, taking us to a point beyond which human narrative cannot go. At the same time, it should be remembered that one of the less obvious but striking elements of *The Time Machine* is its strict unity of place. That is to say, the area around the White Sphinx is the same location as the beach where the last creature is hopping about, and both are in the same location as the comfortable Richmond of February 1894, for the time machine has the (frankly miraculous) ability to travel in time without moving in space. This uncanny unity of place greatly strengthens the complex temporal theme and adds to the horror of (and the dinner-guests' resistance to) the Time Traveller's narrative.

Darwin, with the support of geologists, had assumed that life on earth had evolved over hundreds of millions of years, for such a length of time was needed if his model of gradual evolution through natural selection was to be credible. In the later nineteenth century, however, this time-scale came under serious question, not by religious fundamentalists but by physicists. Lord Kelvin's interpretation of the second law of thermodynamics reinforced what

Helmholtz and Clausius had foreseen as an ultimate heat-death for the universe, as stars' energy became dissipated and the entropy of the macrocosm inevitably increased. It had long been recognized that life on earth was entirely dependent on our local star, and Kelvin's calculations in his paper "On the Age of the Sun's Heat" (1862) concluded that it would burn itself out, not in hundreds of millions, but in a few tens of millions of years at the very latest (Thomson 393). (Nuclear fusion was not yet understood, and the sun was supposed to be exhausting its radiant energy in roughly the same manner as a candle burns itself up.) In other words, the grim vision of global extinction thirty million years hence at the end of *The Time Machine* derives from theories of a cosmic time-scale that had *shrunk* in an alarming manner between Darwin's heyday and 1894.²³

Moreover, the end of the earth would not come suddenly in the far future but slowly in a process that had already begun. For extrapolations from the theories of orbital retardation by tidal (i.e., gravitationally-induced) drag proposed by G.H. Darwin in 1879²⁴ suggested that the earth would eventually come always to offer the same face toward the sun, just as the moon now does to the earth, and that the moon, gradually losing orbital velocity, would fall into the earth, which would subsequently and for the same reason fall into the sun. From the perspective of those relatively few observers who, like Wells, were fully in touch with *fin-de-siècle* astronomy, then, the future of human life on earth came to seem very precarious indeed. It is also not hard to understand why Wells in 1894 felt so exercised about the complacency of the vast majority of educated people, who blithely professed their ignorance of science or indifference to the amazing but terrifying vistas that scientists had opened up.

The specific figure of (more than) thirty million years is most likely Wells's educated guess based on combining Kelvin's calculations on the age of the sun's heat with G.H. Darwin's calculations on tidal drag. A passage from *La Fin du monde* (1893-94), the best-known fictional work by the distinguished French astronomer Camille Flammarion (1842-1925), is significant here. (This novel was translated into English as *Omega: The Last Days of the World* in 1894, the same year that *The Time Machine* was written.) An astronomer from Colombia offers his theory of how the world will end:

"One thing is certain, that the sun will finally lose its heat; it is condensing and contracting, and its fluidity is decreasing.... When this circulation shall have ceased, the brilliant photosphere will be replaced by a dark opaque crust which will prevent all luminous radiation. The sun will become a dark red ball, then a black one, and night will be perpetual.... The solar heat having vanished, the atmosphere will remain undisturbed, and an absolute calm, unbroken by any breath of air, will reign ... and the earth, a dark ball, a frozen tomb, will continue to revolve about the black sun, travelling through an endless night and hurrying away with all the solar system into the abyss of space. *It is to the extinction of the sun that the earth will owe its death, twenty, perhaps forty million years hence.*" (109-10; italics in original)

Thirty million years, then, is a mean estimate of the length of time remaining

to life on earth that someone well-versed in astronomy in 1894 would offer. It is not necessary to establish the direct influence of *Omega* on *The Time Machine*, merely to note that Wells, like Flammarion and his Colombian mouthpiece, was up to date with contemporary astronomical theory in 1894.

The reason why the temporal logic of *The Time Machine* has not been fully understood is partly accounted for by its elements of topicality, and the fact that this topicality has itself not been recognized is partly due to the strange temporal paradox associated with its composition. On the one hand, it is relatively well known that *The Time Machine* was a work that evolved slowly, from undergraduate speculations at South Kensington in 1885 about time as the fourth dimension, through the awkward first step of "The Chronic Argonauts" in 1888, two lost revisions, the *National Observer* sketches, the surviving partial drafts described by Bernard Loing (97-126), the Holt text of the American first edition, the *New Review* serial, and the Heinemann first British edition. If one counts Wells's subsequent revision of the text for the Atlantic edition of 1924, there is an apparent evolutionary process of composition of almost forty years. On the other hand, it is less well known that the essentially definitive text—far outstripping any previous version in aesthetic achievement—was actually written in a concentrated burst of two to three weeks from July to August 1894 in Sevenoaks ("Bouts" 3:5; Loing 64), to fill an economic hiatus in Wells's journalistic career. In other words, *The Time Machine* as we now know it was very long in the gestation, yet remarkably rapid in the execution. Expectedly, it bears the marks of its long evolution, but more surprisingly, it also bears the clear traces of its 1894 conception, when the writer was essentially used to producing topical journalism in short order and knew little of the luxury of leisurely artistic composition.

There is a related paradox in the contrast between the grandeur of Wells's theme—nothing less than humanity's temporal place in nature—and the brevity of its expression—the mere 32,334 words of the Heinemann *Time Machine*. But this can be accounted for, not by an urge toward ironic modernist compression,²⁵ but by the exigences of the 1894 moment. The invention of the concept of a time machine as early as 1888 had given Wells the means to articulate the big idea that he had been contemplating probably ever since his early South Kensington days, but during the long struggle to support himself and his various households through the years of poverty, ill health, and emotional turmoil after leaving the Normal School without a degree, he had never had the leisure to work it out properly on paper. The *National Observer* sketches, composed presumably from early February 1894, were the closest he had come to articulating the idea that he would refer to on December 22, 1894, just before the serial began appearing in the *New Review*, as his "trump card," adding that "if it does not come off very much I shall know my place for the rest of my career" (Smith 226). Wells's vivid description in *Experiment in Autobiography* (1934; see 435-37) of the circumstances of the work's composition in Sevenoaks makes it clear that he was making the fullest possible use of a very narrow window of opportunity, and it is clear that *The Time Machine*, as it first came into being, was an expression of the big idea that was

relatively brief only because of the constraints of the moment. From our perspective, part of what makes *The Time Machine* a classic is its compression; it avoids the discursiveness that weakens so much of Wells's other longer fiction. But Wells would always be discontented that he had not had greater scope in 1894 to introduce his big idea to the world.

Indeed, Wells tended to be quite dismissive of *The Time Machine* in later life. In the "Preface to Volume I" (1924) of the Atlantic Edition, Wells said that he now found *The Time Machine* "hard and 'clever' and youthful. And—what is rather odd, he thinks—a little unsympathetic" (xxii). In 1931, in the "Preface" to the Random House edition, he noted that as a young man he had saved up his one big idea "in the hope that he would one day make a much longer book of it than the [sic] *Time Machine*, but the urgent need for something marketable obliged him to exploit it forthwith," the result of which was "a very unequal book" (vii-viii). Indeed, "the story of the *Time Machine* as distinguished from the idea, 'dates' not only in its treatment but in its conception. It seems a very undergraduate performance to its now mature writer" (ix). Moreover, "The Further Vision," notes Wells, was rooted in a pessimism that was born of the errors of scientists:

the geologists and astronomers of that time told us dreadful lies about the "inevitable" freezing up of the world—and of life and mankind with it. There was no escape it seemed. The whole game of life would be over in a million years or less. They impressed this upon us with the full weight of their authority, while now Sir James Jeans in his smiling *Universe Around Us* [1931] waves us on to millions of millions of years. (ix-x)

In other words, the older Wells remembered *The Time Machine* as a highly topical work (in its "story" if not in its "idea"), the product of a rapid period of composition by an immature writer at a time when the human vision of the future was clouded as much by faulty scientific theory as by his own ill health and general *fin-de-siècle* pessimism.²⁶ His low estimate of the work was not false modesty but the result of a vivid recollection of the economic urgency behind the particular circumstances of composition—the specific historical moment out of which *The Time Machine* sprang and to which it was addressed.

Wells makes a similar point even more strongly in his "Preface" to *Seven Famous Novels* (1934), now emphasizing the satirical and polemical elements that *The Time Machine* has in common with his later work:

My early, profound and lifelong admiration for Swift ... is particularly evident in a predisposition to make the stories reflect upon contemporary political and social discussions. It is an incurable habit with literary critics to lament some lost artistry and innocence in my early work and to accuse me of having become polemical in my later years. That habit is of such old standing that the late Mr. Zangwill in a review in 1895 complained that my first book, *The Time Machine*, concerned itself with "our present discontents." (viii-ix)²⁷

What Wells means here is that critics' habit of (correctly) viewing his fiction as polemical dates back to the original reception of *The Time Machine*. Later literary critics, for whom *The Time Machine* had become a classic, bewailed

the author's "lost artistry" in subsequent works. Yet from Wells's perspective such critics were oblivious to, or were ignoring, the topical, polemical urges that underlay *The Time Machine*. His memories of the circumstances of its composition in 1894 made it impossible for the author in 1934 to view *The Time Machine* as an immortal work. But just as readers may admire the classics *Hamlet* and *Gulliver's Travels* without registering Rosencrantz's allusion to the "little eyases" or the references to early eighteenth-century political factionalism in Book I of Swift's great satire, so "little Rosebery" passes by without telling us anything, for *The Time Machine* has become, with delicious irony, timeless.

The Time Machine as we now know it was the product of an author, almost unknown and in poor health, who used a hiatus in his journalistic career and a consequent downturn in his economic fortunes to bring rapidly and perhaps prematurely into being a work on the big idea that he had nursed for more than seven years in the hope that it would one day make his literary fortune. This big idea, articulated in the internal narrative, was that "man's place in nature"—in Huxleyan phrase—was at once closer to the apes biologically than anyone liked to think, and insignificant in the light of earth's astronomical destiny. Yet for all the grandeur of its temporal theme, *The Time Machine* was, as its narrative framing strategy suggests, couched as a satire upon the narrow-mindedness, complacency, and scientific ignorance of the supposedly well-educated professional men in 1894. *The Time Machine*, as its subtitle tells us, was *An Invention*. That is, the short novel, employing the fantastic device of the eponymous contrivance, was a means by which the young Wells, infuriated by the smug confidence of the late Victorian bourgeoisie in its ascendancy over the material universe, could launch an "assault on human self-satisfaction" ("Preface" [1934] ix). To understand this is not to conclude that *The Time Machine* is a polemic masquerading as a classic; but it is to understand more fully how the work was a direct response to a historical moment, and why Wells was dismissive of it in later years. It is also to learn to treat with caution claims that *The Time Machine* was conceived as primarily a work for the future, or that it is a "timeless" classic, or that it is a miraculous anticipation of (post)modernism.

NOTES

1. How to refer to *The Time Machine*? I am indebted to Brian Aldiss for pointing out that the work conforms well to Goethe's definition of the novella as a work about "a peculiar and as yet unheard-of event" [*"eine sich ereignete unerhörte Begebenheit"*] (Eckermann 171). Wells himself was conscious of the problem of how to label *The Time Machine*, referring to it in a letter of 1895 as part of his project to develop "scientific romance with a philosophical element" (Smith 245-46), and elsewhere in correspondence simply as his *book*. His nonce-subtitle *An Invention* suggests that he saw it as a work original enough to evade traditional categories, as indeed it still is. Yet though it was certainly not a novel by Victorian standards, to refer to it today as a short novel does not offend too much against looser twenty-first century criteria. All references to *The Time Machine* (hereafter abbreviated *TM* in citations) will be to the Heinemann London first edition (1895), essentially the definitive text emerging from the period of composition.

2. Cf. Richard Jefferies's *After London* (1885) and W.H. Hudson's *A Crystal Age* (1887), both fantasies whose narratives have been deliberately dehistoricized by obscuring, if not entirely obliterating, the temporal relation between the future events recounted and the historical present.

3. Perhaps the most notable creative response was by Joseph Conrad in his early modernist masterpiece *Heart of Darkness*. McCarthy (38-39) summarizes the debt Conrad owed to *The Time Machine* at the level of both narrative structure and theme. J.R. Hammond (73-84) offers a summary of the ways in which *The Time Machine* might be read as a modernist work. Larry Caldwell claims that in *The Time Machine* Wells shows "a radical skepticism about narrative" that suggests his "critical affiliation ... is with the *post-Modern*" (130). Wells did nothing to discourage such readings. In 1895 he described his forthcoming novel, *The Wonderful Visit* (1895), one much more conventional in every way than *The Time Machine*, as an "experiment in form" ("New Writers" 135), while in later life he affirmed that all writings were "experiments in statement" (see the first epigraph above).

4. One possible recent exception is David Y. Hughes, who, noting the Time Traveller's allusion to "a queer notion of Grant Allen's" (*TM* §VIII:75), asserts that "Wells expected a wide sampling of his readers to remember Allen's story ["Pallinghurst Barrow" (1892)] and to appreciate how closely it bore" upon *The Time Machine* (Hughes 280).

5. For example, James Joyce, when asked why he had written *Finnegans Wake* (1939) in such an obscure style, responded, "To keep the critics busy for three hundred years" (qtd. in Ellmann 703).

6. The primary narrator is often referred to by critics as Hillyer, though this name, mentioned only once in an ambiguous context (*TM* §XV:143), may refer to the Time Traveller's manservant (*TM* §XVI:151). The primary narrator's name, like that of the Time Traveller, is one of the interesting indeterminacies of the text that require further exploration.

7. That we hardly think to ask how the primary narrator can possibly have recorded the Time Traveller's long narrative verbatim suggests that we quickly learn that narratorial veracity in *The Time Machine* is an issue only for characters already marked as unsympathetic (see n. 16 below). There is little evidence that Wells in 1894 was interested in already well-established strategies of interrogating subjectivity through narratorial unreliability of the sort pioneered by Poe and developed by Henry James. To contrast J. Sheridan Le Fanu's "Green Tea" (1869) with *The Time Machine*, for example, is to reveal how much more Le Fanu was interested in psychologizing and rendering opaque a framed narrative—also set in Richmond—than was Wells twenty-five years later.

8. There is an italicized interpolation by the external narrator (*TM* §X:100), and an editorial footnote (*TM* §XI:111). These interruptions are of different narratological orders, and both are worth further analysis.

9. Bernard Loing, discussing the change in the manuscripts of *The Time Machine* from a five- to a six-figure date for the world of the Eloi and Morlocks, notes that "*La première est encore d'ordre historique, la seconde est d'ordre géologique, voire cosmique*" (74). McConnell conflates the evolutionary and astronomical scales into "the abyss of geological time" (*Science Fiction* 82). Parrinder identifies only two time-scales, the "historical" or "historiographic" and the "biological" or "evolutionary" (*Shadows* 41-42). Kathryn Hume identifies three time frames, "Victorian England, the Realm of the Sphinx, and the Terminal Beach" (233), but her ideological concerns lead her to stress the dubiousness, rather than the coherence, of the logic that binds them. Suvin (231-33),

seeking evidence for the way that Wells by manipulating narrative rhythm mutates scientific into aesthetic cognition, distinguishes the frame from the "Eloi," "crab," and "eclipse" episodes, accounts for their proportional lengths, and reveals their formal significance, but does not dwell on the question of a specific binding temporal logic.

10. "[T]he keynote of Modernism is liberation, an ironic distrust of all absolutes, including those of temporal or spatial form" (Hollington 432).

11. Wells's avoidance of engagement with temporal paradoxes in *The Time Machine* suggests that he was not interested in raising the relativistic issues associated with time that are characteristic of the modernist sensibility and which were already becoming familiar in the 1890s. Israel Zangwill as early as 1895 chided Wells for failing to explain how the Time Traveller in the future avoids his own death (153).

12. Newcomb's address does not mention the possibility that time might be a fourth dimension, and notes that as far as the actual likelihood of a fourth dimension of space is concerned, "so far as observation goes, all legitimate conclusions seem to be against it" (329). Peter Morton consequently notes that the Time Traveller "serves up a bogus philosophy of time under cover of a calm citation" from Newcomb (103). Stover goes so far as to claim that Newcomb's address dismisses modern talk of the fourth dimension as "nonsense" (39 n. 14). In fact, Newcomb clearly states that it is the "limitations of our faculties," not the laws of nature, which compel us, "as far as our conceptions go, to accept three dimensions and no more" (329). He actually raises the question of the fourth dimension because it is "very interesting" (328), not simply to dismiss it out of hand as absurd.

13. "Time Travelling: Possibility or Paradox," the first installment of the early version of *The Time Machine* published in the *National Observer* on 17 March 1894, contains the sentence: "Professor Simon Newcombe [*sic*] was expounding this to the New York Mathematical Society only a month or so ago" (Philmus and Hughes 59). Thus the allusion was even more topical when the *National Observer* serial was composed in February or early March 1894. When writing the definitive *Time Machine* a few months later, Wells corrected the spelling of Newcomb's name but otherwise did not change the sentence; this suggests that he had already fixed the beginning of the historical frame of reference at early February 1894, presumably very close to the historical moment when he had composed the conversation that opens the first *soirée*.

14. Paul Nahin, who affirms that Wells "certainly" read *Nature*, comes to an almost similar conclusion (263 n. 21). The importance of *Nature* to the young Wells is a topic warranting further study.

15. By chance or by design the Rosebery allusion, unchanged, might have had a different topical meaning for readers from January 1895, when *The Time Machine* began to appear as a serial in the *New Review*, to late May 1895, when the Heinemann *Time Machine* appeared. Then the question was whether a horse owned by Rosebery would win the Derby for the second year running (Sir Visto did indeed win on May 29, the same day that the Heinemann *Time Machine* was published), or whether Rosebery's government would fall, as seemed imminent (it did, on June 21).

16. The guests are accorded sympathy by the author in proportion to their preparedness to credit the veracity of the Time Traveller. The Medical Man and Psychologist, who evidently have scientific training, are treated with rather more sympathy than the Editor, Journalist, or Provincial Mayor, while the guest who is the most sympathetic in both senses is the primary narrator himself (see also Hennelly 157). Geduld claims that the character of the primary narrator is a mystery that causes epistemological problems for the reader (16). But I would venture that there is little mystery about the primary narrator, who reveals himself as a serious-minded science

writer of the sort that Wells in 1894 aspired to be. Consider, for example, his meeting with the Medical Man at the Linnaean Club (*TM* §III:18), his plans to meet his publisher (*TM* §XVI:150), and his scientific imagination based on an up-to-date grasp of paleontology (*TM* Epilogue:151-52). Bruce Sommerville, however, comes to a completely different conclusion (26) based on his ingenious but improbable argument that the Time Traveller's story is an elaborate hoax.

17. Stover wages the bravest battle with topicality, noting that Rosebery "was still prime minister (March 1894-June 1895) when *The Time Machine* came out.... [He] had wished to marry the richest heiress in England, to become Prime Minister, and to win three times at the Derby. All that he got except for the last of the last. With little Rosebery he won for a second time in 1894; and now the whole kingdom waited breathlessly on the question, to see if he did it a third and final time in 1895" (50 n. 51). Only the last sentence is incorrect, partly as a result of the common misconception that, as *The Time Machine* was first published in 1895, it must be set in 1895.

18. The reference to "Hettie Potter" (*TM* §III:24), of whom the Journalist tells anecdotes shortly after the Editor's Rosebery allusion, would seem also to be topical, but no commentator has adequately identified this person. It can be said with some certainty that there was no real celebrity of this name active in 1894, so that it is likely that, unless "Hettie Potter" was a private joke, the prosaic name was intended to suggest a music-hall artiste, actress, spiritualist, or other female celebrity, comic anecdotes about whom the Journalist, just as fatuous as the Editor, might expect would relieve the suspense around the table. "Hettie" (a diminutive of Hester or Henrietta) was the sort of forename associated with music-hall stars—cf. Vesta Tilley (1864-1952), Lottie Collins (1866-1910), Cissie Loftus (1876-1943)—while "Potter" suggested the theater, through the American-born actress Mrs. James Brown-Potter (1859-1936) or the successful dramatist Paul Potter (1853-1921). The familiarity with which Hettie Potter's name, shorn of Miss or Mrs., is raised at this all-male gathering suggests that the anecdotes are sexually scandalous; it would have been worse than indecorous in the 1890s for Wells to have used the name of a real woman in this context. All the same, the effect of this allusion is topical and its function satirical, as with the reference to "little Rosebery."

19. For example, one of the Eloi asks a question about the Time Traveller's origin that shows the little creature to be "on the intellectual level of one of our five-year-old children" (*TM* §V:39), while "the bare idea of writing had never entered [Weena's] head" (*TM* §XI:107).

20. When *The Time Machine* first appeared in print in 1895, the narrative present was actually in the near future. For the primary narrator notes at the end of the final chapter that the Time Traveller "vanished three years ago" (*TM* §XVI:151). As he disappeared in February 1894, that would make the narrative present *circa* February 1897. Was Wells giving himself time to compose a sequel that would clarify the Time Traveller's fate?

21. "A number of frequent occurrence in the scriptures and hence formerly treated as, in a manner, sacrosanct. Moses was 'in the mount forty days and forty nights'; Elijah was fed by ravens for forty days; the rain of the flood fell forty days; and another forty days expired before Noah opened the window of the ark; forty days was the period of embalming; Nineveh had forty days to repent; Our Lord fasted forty days; he was seen forty days after His Resurrection, etc." (*Brewer's* 430-31).

22. It might be argued that there is a set of entropic numbers—802,101, 802,201, 802,301, 802,401, etc.—between 801,894 and 802,701 that Wells might have come to before 802,701; and, moreover, that the implied idea of a "countdown" (8,7...2,1) in 802,701 is anachronistic in that such a concept did not enter the language until the

rocketry experiments of the 1950s. (The *OED*'s first reference to "count-down" is dated 1953.) In reply to this, it might be pointed out that the suitable entropic qualities of 802,701 are in the idea of *minimal descent* suggested by the correlation of the pair of three-number sequences. Entropy suggests a slow reduction in usable energy and order, and this is best conveyed by the double one-step descent from 8 to 7 and from 2 to 1. Any of the set of entropic numbers above suggests not slow and minimal but more rapid and possibly even quasi-exponential descent, e.g., 802,401 necessitates a jump from 8 down to 4. Gradual devolution or degeneration (and certainly not a countdown, which would anyway have logically generated 876,543) are the underlying terms that are likely to have influenced Wells's choice of A.D. 802,701 as symbolic date—for does *The Time Machine* not offer a kind of ironic literalization of the Darwinian evolutionary phrase, *The Descent of Man*?

23. The ideas summarized in the preceding paragraph are dealt with in more detail by Morton in his important study *The Vital Science* (26-27).

24. In two papers, "On the Precession of a Viscous Spheroid, and on the Remote History of the Earth" and "The Determination of the Secular Effects of Tidal Friction by a Graphical Method." This Darwin (1845-1912), second son of Charles, is mentioned by name in *The Time Machine* (TM §VIII:76).

25. Cf. T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922) as modernist epic in a mere 434 lines. Parrinder offers an ironic, if not precisely modernist, rationale for the brevity of the work ("*Time Machine*" [1981] 21).

26. Parrinder (*Shadows* 46-47) elaborates well the connections between Wells's poor health and his pessimism in the 1890s.

27. Wells alludes to the review of *The Time Machine* in *Pall Mall Magazine* (September 1895) in which Zangwill describes the work as "a fine imaginative creation worthy of Swift, and possibly not devoid of satirical reference to 'the present discontents'" (153). While what Zangwill meant by "the present discontents" is now uncertain, it is clear that he felt that *The Time Machine* was topical but not weakened by its topicality. Though Wells remembered Zangwill's point as a complaint, he must surely have been sufficiently struck by the truth in it to recall it almost forty years later.

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ABSTRACT

The essay seeks to demonstrate that the events described in H.G. Wells's *The Time Machine* (1895) are deliberately and rigorously historicized by being placed in a specific temporal relation to a moment in history that corresponds very closely to the date of the short novel's composition. It also claims that *The Time Machine's* unusual narrative structure may be accounted for by the novel's hitherto largely unacknowledged topicality. Moreover, it will be suggested that its topicality has perhaps paradoxically helped to endow *The Time Machine* with the formal and thematic durability of the classic.