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Matthew Beaumont

Red Sphinx: Mechanics of the Uncanny in *The Time Machine*

‘The tomorrow in today is alive ...’ – Ernst Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*

1. Science fiction has frequently been identified as a literature of estrangement. “One of the supreme functions of SF as a genre,” Fredric Jameson has argued, is “the ‘estrangement,’ in the Brechtian sense, of our culture and institutions—a shocked renewal of our vision such that once again, and as though for the first time, we are able to perceive their historicity and their arbitrariness, their profound dependency on the accidents of man’s historical adventure” (29). In this article, I want to propose that the estrangement effect generated by science fiction can be especially unsettling if it suggests more than simply that the apparently solid culture and institutions characteristic of capitalist society *will be different* at some scarcely conceivable time in the future but also insinuates the suspicion that, incipiently at least, *they are already different*. Effective sf can demonstrate that an inchoate future is already germinating in the present, changing it, and making it other than itself.

For the present is parturient with the future, and science fiction that is capable of reflecting this dialectical relationship creates an uncomfortably concrete mode of estrangement. The reader’s culture and institutions are rendered unfamiliar not merely by revealing their profound dependency on the accidents of humanity’s historical adventure, nor by making them seem mutable in a merely abstract sense; but also by intimating, disconcertingly, that they are already mutating, and that, consequently, they are mutant. The present is, from this angle, monstrous because it is already in the process of being ineluctably transformed into an unimaginable shape by the underlying historical logic of the future. In science fiction that enacts this dialectic, the present is defamiliarized in a quite specific sense. The agent of estrangement is not external to the present, but internal to it. To put it metaphorically, it is less an airborne foreign body than a cancerous cell quietly metastasizing. The present, silently reconfigured by a germ of the future, becomes what Sigmund Freud once called a *locus suspectus*. It becomes an uncanny place.

Freud’s notion of the uncanny, which is central to the account of science fiction that I adduce in this article, emphasizes the obtrusion of the unconscious into conscious existence. It denotes the sinister reappearance of the repressed past, at an individual or a societal level, in the present. “An uncanny experience,” Freud concludes in “The ‘Uncanny’” (1919), “occurs either when infantile complexes which have been repressed are once more revived by some impression, or when primitive beliefs which have been surmounted seem once more to be confirmed” (221). Freud’s study represented an attempt to overcome the theoretical limitations of the only previous essay “On the Psychology of the Uncanny,” by the German psychologist Ernst Jentsch. In

1906, Jentsch had argued that a sense of the uncanny is invariably generated in the subject by the sudden appearance of an alien or unexpected object. The *unheimlich* was for him associated with the characteristic moment of uncertainty experienced by the human intellect as it half-reluctantly tries to assimilate an unfamiliar phenomenon to its "ideational sphere," as when a wax model momentarily seems to be animate. He reassured his readers, however, that this "*lack of orientation*" could be overcome by sheer intellectual mastery (8; emphasis in original).

Freud disputed this complacent rationalist assumption. He insisted that Jentsch's interpretation was incomplete because, according to the latter's logic, "the better oriented in his environment a person is, the less readily will he get the impression of something uncanny in regard to the objects and events in it" (221). Freud argued instead that it is precisely when one feels at home in an environment that one is most susceptible to the uniquely subversive influence of the uncanny, which is a special "class of the frightening." "The uncanny," he states at the outset, "is that class of the frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar" (220). The article's central claim is buttressed by an etymological examination of the term *heimlich*, which on the one hand means "what is familiar and agreeable, and on the other, what is concealed and kept out of sight" (224-25). Jentsch's narrow focus on misoneism, on dislike of the unknown, had prevented him from recognizing the chiasmic structure of the uncanny, which marks the moment at which, according to Freud, the familiar becomes unfamiliar, and the unfamiliar, at the same time, comes to seem all too familiar. This distinction can be conveniently illustrated in terms of a scene from a stereotypical horror movie: the uncanny is generated not so much by the sudden realization that an intruder is attempting to break into the heroine's home from the outside, as by the creeping suspicion that, in the shape of a close relative perhaps—one whom, without ever quite admitting to it hitherto, the heroine profoundly fears—the malefactor is already on the inside.

The "general contention" of Freud's essay is "that the uncanny proceeds from something familiar which has been repressed" (247). The uncanny marks the point at which the unconscious re-conquers an unprotected corner of the conscious mind. Instead of the unconscious, the concept of the uncanny that I develop in this article on the mechanics of *The Time Machine* (1895) evokes the "Not-Yet-Conscious." The Not-Yet-Conscious is the name ascribed by Ernst Bloch, the so-called "philosopher of the future" associated with the Frankfurt School, to an anticipatory consciousness: it is "the preconscious of what is to come, the psychological birthplace of the New" (116). In *The Principle of Hope* (1959), Bloch argued that the unconscious in Freud is exclusively the No-Longer-Conscious, a site of "repressedness and forgottenness." Its theater is the night-dream rather than the daydream. Consequently, it cannot accommodate "a future consciousness which is only just beginning to come up," a consciousness that "represents the actual space of the receptivity of the New and the production of the New." The Not-Yet-Conscious alludes to the protrusion of the future in the present. It is "*the psychological representation*

of the *Not-Yet-Become in an age and its world, on the Front of the World*," as Bloch puts it (115-16, 127; emphasis in original). That is to say, it is the unsettling intimation, collectively or individually, of a historical alternative to society as it is currently constituted. The future estranges the present, lodged like a fragment inside it. It is an instance of what I term the historical uncanny.

John Fletcher has recently noted that Freud identifies two forms of the uncanny and that "they might be labeled the personal and the social uncanny" (35). The "personal uncanny" is a type of the return of the repressed, in the form of "phobic objects or the persecutory figures of paranoia"; the social uncanny, by contrast, "is what Freud describes as the return of animistic or magical modes of thought that have been historically suppressed but persist within us" (35). In the argument that I am outlining, the historical uncanny designates the idea, taken partly from Bloch, that an unfamiliar future can be secreted in the present as a Not Yet. For Bloch as a Marxist, the proletariat and the seeds of a socialist society are carried inside its collective activity and represent this historical alternative, the Not-Yet-Become. It might be claimed that for him, as for Marx himself, the revolutionary working class is the ultimate embodiment of the historical uncanny.

In other words, there is what might be called a Marxian uncanny as well as a Freudian one. Indeed, the *Manifesto of the Communist Party* (1848) quite deliberately dramatizes its historical dialectic. It is the most graphic formulation of Marx's attempt throughout the 1840s to discover a point of exteriority interior to contemporary society. In Marx's account of history, the proletariat represents this interior point of exteriority. The proletariat is located at the contradictory center of modern class society. It is the productive activity of this class that maintains capitalism, and that consequently sustains precisely those social relations that enslave it. For this reason, its self-emancipation necessarily entails the destruction of the entire socioeconomic system. The proletariat is therefore inside and outside capitalism at the same time, an inseparable part of it that nonetheless stands for its irreparable collapse. In the exploited proletariat, capitalist society encounters both its quintessential constituent and its inchoate opposite.

The *Manifesto*, as its title indicates, brings to light what ought to have remained secret and hidden. By demonstrating that the only force able to destroy capitalist society is the force that materially reproduces it, it reveals that the future is concealed in the present. The bourgeoisie, it announces, creates that class that is the "special and essential product" (494) of modern industry: the proletariat. Before this class, in "the more or less veiled civil war, raging within existing society" it must "stand face to face" (495)—like Dr. Frankenstein confronting his demon. If the bourgeoisie has "forged the weapons that bring death to itself" in the form of crises of overproduction, then "it has also called into existence the men who are to wield those weapons—the modern working class—the proletarians" (490). "What the bourgeoisie, therefore, produces, above all, is its own grave-diggers" (496).

Capitalist society is thus itself a *locus suspectus*. In an historical irony, the specter of communism is intrinsic to the contemporary class system. Paul

Thomas has convincingly claimed that in the *Manifesto*, “Marx’s spectre sets us the task of finding it a home or making it a home in the world” (209). Yet the uncanny secret unveiled by the revelatory *Manifesto* is that in another sense this specter *is already at home in the world*. If Marx and Engels demonstrated the ways in which the bourgeoisie’s predatory role in class society is structural to its relations with the proletariat, then they showed too how communism is a parasitic presence within capitalism. Its future fattens on the present. It announces that the fall of the bourgeoisie and the victory of the proletariat are mutually inseparable eventualities (though that is not to say that they are necessarily inevitable). We might say that capitalist society is inhabited by the “real possibility” of the communist future. The specter of communism has from some proleptic point of view materialized already. This is surely what Marx meant when he wrote that the Communards of Paris “have no ideals to realize, but to set free the elements of the new society with which old collapsing bourgeois society itself is pregnant” (*Civil War* 335).

This vision of a collapsing bourgeois society pregnant with an embryonic proletarian one shapes the political imaginary of *The Time Machine*. In his seminal science fiction, H.G. Wells uses the literary effects of the uncanny, as Freud later analyzed them, in order to render the reader’s relation to history itself uncanny. In a close reading of *The Time Machine*, I seek to demonstrate that, not least because of the contradictory nature of his political outlook, Wells depicts contemporary society as one that is in a prescient sense marked by the victory of the revolutionary working class that he is apprehensive will occur at some indeterminate future date. Reconceived from the perspective of an imaginary future, the working-class movement at the *fin de siècle* is for Wells, therefore, much less militant than secretly triumphant.

In Section 2 of this article I look at the novel’s central symbol, the sphinx, in order to unravel Wells’s concern with the destiny of class relations. In Section 3, I explore the Time Traveller’s various interpretations of the society in which he arrives, looking in particular at the uncanny revelations that result from his encounter with the Morlocks. Finally, in Section 4, I relate the uncanny associations of *The Time Machine* to the middle-class fascination, at the end of the nineteenth century, with the lives of the most impoverished and immiserated portions of the working class lurking in the darker corners of the city. It must be clear from this sketch of my main lines of inquiry that I am concerned primarily with the novel’s political rather than scientific narrative of degeneration, though the latter is doubtless the dominant one. It nonetheless seems to me that Wells’s treatment of biological rather than social development in *The Time Machine* is also susceptible to the logic of an uncanny interpretation, as Kelly Hurley’s account of its representation of “abhumanness” in *The Gothic Body* (1996) implicitly suggests (79-88). Where her reading, which deliberately leaves a political reading of the novel “to one side,” provides the basis for an exploration of what might be called an evolutionary uncanny, my reading, which deliberately leaves a scientific reading of the novel to one side, explores a revolutionary uncanny.

2. The emblematic profile of an impassive sphinx, included on the author's recommendation, dominates the cover of the first edition of *The Time Machine* in book form, dated 1895 (141). Its elegant human head is serene, its muscular animal body energetically coiled. From the beginning, therefore, as its mythological associations suggest, this hieroglyphic image represents an inescapable intellectual challenge to the reader's imagination. So subsequently does the statue of the sphinx when it silently accosts the Time Traveller on his inconspicuous arrival in the year 802,701. Lost in an almost impenetrable hailstorm after halting his machine, the Time Traveller is confronted by "a colossal figure, carved apparently in some white stone" (33):

My sensations would be hard to describe. As the columns of hail grew thinner, I saw the white figure more distinctly. It was very large, for a silver birch tree touched its shoulder. It was of white marble, in shape something like a winged sphinx, but the wings, instead of being carried vertically at the sides, were spread so that it seemed to hover. The pedestal, it appeared to me, was of bronze, and was thick with verdigris. It chanced that the face was towards me; the sightless eyes seemed to watch me; there was the faint shadow of a smile on the lips. (33-34)

Most obviously, this is of course "a variation of Oedipus's encounter with the sphinx on the road to Thebes," as critics have long recognized (Scafella 255, Ketterer 340-41). Wells's sphinx is, however, an obdurately overdetermined symbol. "We shall never know exactly which items from the rich literary and pictorial iconography of sphinxes may have influenced Wells," Patrick Parrinder has remarked; "all we can say is that the presence of a sphinx in *The Time Machine* would have been unlikely had there not been so many contemporary and near-contemporary precedents for it" (111). In this section I want to explore a number of these precedents, the range and meaning of which have not been exhausted by previous commentators, before I go on to analyze the novel's exemplary strategy of uncanny estrangement.

The epilogue to *The Time Machine* offers a preliminary clue to the enigma of the sphinx. There, the narrator initially wonders whether the Time Traveller has eventually rocketed back into a prehistorical past, and then asks:

Or did he go forward, into one of the nearer ages, in which men are still men, but with the riddles of our own time answered and its wearisome problems solved? Into the manhood of the race: for I, for my own part, cannot think that these latter days of weak experiment, fragmentary theory, and mutual discord are indeed man's culminating time! (152)

Among a range of different significations, I want to argue that it is "these latter days," the social and cultural conflicts of the *fin de siècle*, that are constituent of the question that the sphinx stonily poses. In a discussion of various utopian socialist experiments in the United States, which they described as "small islands of more or less incomplete communism in the midst of the present sea of capitalist method of living," Edward and Eleanor Marx-Aveling had in 1888 referred to the problem of labor and capital as "the riddle of modern society" (192). For Wells, too, the relationship between the classes comprises the most

pressing question of the late-nineteenth century. The sphinx ultimately stands for the historical destiny of nineteenth-century class relations.

This sphinx is thus closely related to Thomas Carlyle's sphinx, which stands sentinel at the start of *Past and Present* (1843).¹ Indeed, "Present and Future" might have made an appropriate subtitle for *The Time Machine*. Carlyle's mythical beast, quietly predatory and persistent in its questioning, stands for "this Life of ours, to all men and societies of men": "And does she not propound her riddles to us? Of each man she asks daily, in mild voice, yet with a terrible significance, 'Knowest thou the meaning of this Day? What thou canst do Today; wisely attempt to do'" (7). Although he variously identifies it as Justice, Nature, Universe, Destiny, Existence, and "the eternal Substance," this riddle, and its explanation, is obviously an irreducibly concrete and social phenomenon—"this grand unnameable Fact in the midst of which we live and struggle." It is "the inner sphere of Fact," as he later elaborates it, folded into the "the outer sphere and spheres of Semblance" (7). As in the epilogue to *The Time Machine*, in other words, the sphinx points to the future implanted within the present, the historical fate of humanity uncannily secreted in England's "strange new Today" (13). In sum, the mystery of the sphinx includes the so-called "Condition of England Question," which was called the "social question" when discussion of working-class living conditions was revived in the 1880s after the complacency of the third quarter of the century. Famously, it had first been posed in Carlyle's polemic on "Chartism" (1839): "What are the rights, what are the mights of the discontented Working Classes in England at this epoch? He were an Oedipus, and deliverer from sad social pestilence, who could resolve us fully!" (123). This appeal submits that the aleatory destiny of class society is the problematic within which the riddle of history must be solved.

There were even more immediate precedents for formulating the social question in terms of the sphinx's riddle, especially in late-nineteenth century fiction set in the future. In Edward Bulwer-Lytton's *The Coming Race* (1871), the faces of the Vril-ya, whom the narrator predicts will destroy bourgeois civilization, are described as "sphinx-like" (22). In his account of his first encounter with one of the "Coming Race," the narrator notes: "It was the face of a man, but yet of a type of man distinct from our own known extant races. The nearest approach to it in outline and expression is the face of the sculptured sphinx—so regular in its calm, intellectual, mysterious beauty" (16). The skin-color of the creature, he observes, is "more like that of the red man than any other variety of our species" (17). Although this image denotes the indigenous Indians of North America, it is not too far-fetched to claim that, given events in Paris at the time of the novel's composition, and given the latent association of the "Coming Race" with the working class, in the form of the miners past whom the narrator must climb in order to return to the surface of the earth, it is intended to connote what one turn-of-the-century novel was to call "the Red sphinx of Anarchy" (Valentine and Harper 83): that is, the menace of the proletariat "hovering over Paris and threatening to annihilate the

city" (90). Marx had in 1871 described the Paris Commune as "that sphinx so tantalizing to the bourgeois mind" (*Civil War* 328).

More recently still, in *Looking Backward 2000-1887* (1888), a phenomenally popular utopia that exercised a formative influence on *The Time Machine*, the American Edward Bellamy offered his own answer to the social question, which is formulated in equivalent terms.² Soon after arriving in the twenty-first century, the hero, Julian West, asks his guide, Dr. Leete, a preliminary question about the historical changes of the intervening one hundred or so years: "To make a beginning somewhere, for the subject is doubtless a large one, what solution, if any, have you found for the labor question? It was the Sphinx's riddle of the nineteenth century, and when I dropped out the Sphinx was threatening to devour society, because the answer was not forthcoming" (66). "It was not necessary for society to solve the riddle at all," Leete intones in answer to this, since "it may be said to have solved itself"; that is to say, "the solution came as the result of a process of industrial evolution which could not have terminated otherwise" (66-67). In this way, Bellamy resolves the problem of class struggle by abolishing it. Wells finds a more sophisticated and far less optimistic solution in *The Time Machine*.

A year after the publication of Carlyle's *Past and Present*, Marx had stated that "Communism is the riddle of history solved, and it knows itself to be this solution" (*Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts* 296-97). *The Time Machine*, which conducts its debate about the future within the terms set out by Carlyle's problematic, is in effect an elaborate refutation of Marx's claim. The first word spoken by the Time Traveller after his arrival in the land of the Eloi, outside his attempts to converse with them, is "Communism" (47). Initially, he associates communism with "the idea of a social paradise" (52); but the remainder of the narrative is a sustained attempt to prove the futility of social dreams of classlessness. In this respect, it is clearly a polemical response to William Morris, the most celebrated Marxist among Wells's contemporaries. In particular, the child-like simplicity of the bucolic Eloi makes it clear that Wells is dismissing *News from Nowhere* (1891), the utopia that Morris wrote as a rebuttal of *Looking Backward*, when Wells later describes their apparently paradisaical world as "this too perfect triumph of man" (56). Wells insists instead that an attenuated class system based on the extension and inversion of Social-Darwinist assumptions is the future of human society.

The imagery of *The Time Machine*, which establishes a close association between the sphinx and Wells's subterranean industrial proletariat of the future, underlines the relevance of the "social" or "labor" question. Significantly, the Morlocks and the ancient mythical beast are linked by color imagery (an essential component of the novel's symbolic makeup, as Suvin among others has testified [212, 233]). Both are ushered onto the scene by a grey light: the Time Traveller stops his machine in an obscure grey hailstorm, through which the sphinx presently materializes; and he later has his first encounter with the Morlocks during "that dim grey hour when things are just creeping out of darkness, when everything is colourless and clear cut, and yet unreal" (*TM* 74-75). (It might not be a coincidence that, in his chapter on "The Life-History of

Democracy" in *Anticipations* [1901], Wells consistently and obsessively argues that, in "this grey confusion that is Democracy" [175], only the emergent technocrats of the middle class can save society from "the grey mass of [the] governed" [155].) Both the sphinx and the Morlocks are themselves white: the former, carved out of white marble, is repeatedly characterized by a leprous pallor; the latter are ghost-like "white figures" (*TM* 75). Both are therefore identified with death "and the uncanny whiteness of things which were once alive but are so no longer," as David Lake notes (78). But their association is confirmed by an etymological connection of which Wells was clearly conscious. For in marking them out as "ape-like," he intended the reader to identify them with the type of ape known as the "sphinx" or "sphinx-baboon," and so with the sphinx itself.

The word "sphinx" derives from the Greek verb meaning "to draw tight." The tightly drawn cluster of associations to which I have adverted signifies that those degenerate proletarians the Morlocks contain the crucial clue to an understanding of the sphinx's riddle. As we shall see, Wells uses the historical uncanny to demonstrate that the secret content of future history is enclosed in the present—in Bloch's terms, that "*the knot of the riddle of existence is to be found in this nearest*" (292; emphasis in original).

3. In *The Time Machine*, the Traveller's reactions to his new environment trace a kind of dialectic of estrangement. This consists of three roughly consecutive phases in the narrative: first, defamiliarization, associated with the Time Traveller's sudden arrival in the year 802,701; then the neutralization of this effect, associated with his assimilation to the society of the Eloi; and finally a redoubled form of defamiliarization, resistant to the neutralizing effects of rationalization and associated with the irreducibly alien Morlocks. It is this last form of defamiliarization that I identify with the uncanny. It cannot be overcome, as Jentsch claims, by intellectual reorientation. On the contrary, it conforms to the logic of the Freudian uncanny, the disquieting effects of which prove persistently destabilizing. It is a symptom of the deeper structure of the historical uncanny associated with Wells's perception that—to put it in the future perfect tense that implicitly informs his dystopia—the proletariat will have been victorious.

The first stage, the formal use of the unfamiliar to induce the perception of social difference essential to any work of science fiction, centers on the Time Traveller's entry into the future in chapters 4 and 5. Time-traveling itself stimulates his vertiginous sense of "the absolute strangeness of everything" (32). The description of the machine's passage through the mist of an immaterial future thus represents the reader's initiation into the space of utopian alterity. At the culmination of this giddy induction, both Traveller and reader, hitched to one another by the narrator, are dumped, disoriented, into the brave new world in which the machine stops. There, as the shadowy statue of the sphinx emerges through the hailstorm, the sense of strangeness persists and deepens. But there is nothing specifically uncanny about this first impression of the utopian or dystopian future. The future is at this stage much too unfamiliar to generate the uncanny. The narrative does not divulge its

suppressed secret, so much as threaten to do so. It poses teasing rhetorical questions, which merely anticipate the uncanny experiences to come: "What might appear when that hazy curtain was altogether withdrawn? What might not have happened to men?" (34). The Traveller's ignorance of his situation, as he confesses, briefly generates a frenzied fear in him, but this emotion is quite unlike that insidious sensation identified by Freud as a special class of the frightening.

Subsequently, the appearance of the Eloi, diminutive and unthreatening as they are, does not evoke a sense of panic. The attractive liquid sounds that they make when they speak are in strict contrast to the "uncanny noises" made by the Morlocks whom he later encounters (127). Indeed, the Time Traveller's meeting with the Eloi marks the moment at which the narrative starts to neutralize its preliminary estrangement effects. If in one sense these porcelain creatures seem impossibly exotic, in another they exude an easy sense of intimacy. There is nothing unnerving about the frank familiarity with which the first Eloi to greet the Traveller laughs into his eyes. For "this fragile thing out of futurity"—four feet tall, clothed in a quaint costume that leaves him "bare to the knees" (36), his face reminiscent "of the more beautiful kind of consumptive" (37)—is an effete late-Victorian schoolboy on his best behavior. There is no danger that he and his friendly peers will degenerate into the Social Darwinians depicted half a century later in William Golding's *The Lord of the Flies* (1954). Their height, proportionality, and beauty instantly insure against the risk that they will transform into something monstrous. The narrative function of the Eloi is therefore to neutralize, but not entirely eradicate, the sense of defamiliarization associated with the Time Traveller's arrival in the remote future. We might summarize this by saying that their role is to reassure the reader that the *ou-topos* (or no place) is at the same time a *eu-topos* (or good place).

The reader's creeping comprehension that this *eu-topos* is in fact a *dys-topos* is the uncanny experience at the core of *The Time Machine*. The text's gradual disclosure of the fact that the Eloi are not the only inhabitants of the future and that the Morlocks are masters, not slaves, of this society, constitutes the third stage of the dialectic of estrangement. This composite stage recapitulates the dialectical movement of the narrative as a whole: the initial impact of the uncanny is to some extent defused before it is finally reinforced, just as the defamiliarizing future setting is rendered *heimlich* by the Eloi, only in order subsequently to reveal its *unheimlich* underside.

In *The Time Machine*, the reader's intimation of the uncanny coincides with the Traveller's awareness that he is being watched. Wells uses the same technique to brilliant effect in the first paragraph of *The War of the Worlds* (1898): "Yet across the gulf of space, minds that are to our minds as ours are to those of the beasts that perish, intellects vast and cool and unsympathetic, regarded this earth with envious eyes, and slowly and surely drew their plans against us" (2). This is a trope typical of the operations of the uncanny. "One of the most uncanny and wide-spread forms of superstition is the dread of the evil eye," Freud remarks: "what is feared is ... a secret intention of doing

harm, and certain signs are taken to mean that that intention has the necessary power at its command" (240). In Wells's first work of science fiction, the statue of the sphinx, later linked to the Morlocks, supplies a sly anticipation of this uncomfortable apprehension when the clear-eyed Eloi conduct their curious visitor to the nearest building: "I was led past the sphinx of white marble, which had seemed to watch me all the while with a smile at my astonishment" (40). This forewarning of the uncanny is underlined two chapters later, when the Traveller returns to the lawn beside the sphinx in order to find a place to sleep. There, "a queer doubt chill[s his] complacency" before he realizes for certain that the Time Machine has been removed (56).

The unsettling implications of this discovery are at first suppressed by the sickening sensation with which his breath is choked, and by his sense of existential freefall as he grasps "the possibility of losing [his] own age, of being left helpless in this strange new world" (57). But they begin to gnaw away at him when once again he stands before the sphinx, which "seem[s] to smile in mockery of [his] dismay":

I might have consoled myself by imagining the little people had put the mechanism in some shelter for me, had I not felt assured of their physical and intellectual inadequacy. This is what dismayed me: the sense of some hitherto unsuspected power, through whose intervention my invention had vanished. (58)

The Traveller is subject to the sort of "psychical uncertainty" discussed by Jentsch. Here, however, it is manifestly not in doubt as to whether an ostensibly living individual is inanimate, or a seemingly lifeless one is animate as in Jentsch's most prominent example; the real question is whether the entire social organism regulating the Eloi's ideal pastoral existence is alive or dead, vital or somehow mechanically simulated: "And the little people displayed no vestige of a creative tendency. There were no shops, no workshops, no sign of importations among them. 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. *I could not see how things were kept going*" (70; emphasis mine). There is, apparently, no economic infrastructure to utopian society. The real foundations of the Eloi's world, its forces and relations of production, are eerily absent.

The stage has been set for the entry of the Morlocks. The Time Traveller recalls that, restless one morning in the "ghastly half-light" of the dawn, he awoke with the unsettling conviction "that some greyish animal had just rushed out of the chamber" (74-75). Getting up to see the sunrise, he thought he had glimpsed ghosts in the shape of white ape-like creatures. He meditates on the idea that the world is a kind of necropolis populated by the ghosts of dead generations, alluding to Grant Allen's short story "Pallinghurst Barrow" (1892).³ This careful and self-conscious Gothic *mise-en-scène* demarcates the *locus suspectus* of the uncanny. "There happened this strange thing," the Traveller then announces, as if even his syntax has been deranged by the experience that he narrates. On a subsequent morning, he sought shelter from the heat among the slabs of shattered masonry alongside a ruined building.

There, he found “a narrow gallery, whose end and side windows were blocked by fallen masses of stone”:

By contrast with the brilliancy outside, it seemed at first impenetrably dark to me. I entered it groping, for the change from light to blackness made spots of colour swim before me. Suddenly I halted spellbound. A pair of eyes, luminous by reflection against the daylight without, was watching me out of the darkness.

The old instinctive dread of wild beasts came upon me. I clenched my hands and steadfastly looked into the glaring eyeballs. I was afraid to turn. Then the thought of the absolute security in which humanity appeared to be living came to my mind. And then I remembered that strange terror of the dark. (77)

This terrifying encounter recalls the experience of Bulwer-Lytton's narrator in *The Coming Race*, who hears “a strange sound” while bending over his friend's corpse and turns to see “emerging from a dark fissure in the rock a vast and terrible head, with open jaws and dull, ghastly, hungry eyes” (10). Erecting what Jentsch refers to as “a defensive position against the assault of hostile forces” (15), the Traveller reports that he hastily constructed the theory “that Man had not remained one species, but had differentiated into two distinct animals” (79). Hence he arrived at “the solution of the economic problem that had puzzled [him]”—the Morlocks are degenerate relations of the nineteenth-century proletariat, condemned to an “artificial Underworld” where they are forced to produce the wealth on which the effeminate Eloi flourish (81).

This rationalization of the Morlocks' presence is a further tranquilization strategy. For if the Time Traveller's utopian interpretation of the future as a classless rural society has proved false, then this “realist” or anti-utopian reading, extrapolated from the late-Victorian present, replaces it, disenchanting the domain of the uncanny:

At first, proceeding from the problems of our own age, it seemed clear as daylight to me that the gradual widening of the present merely temporary and social difference between the Capitalist and the Labourer, was the key to the whole position. No doubt it will seem grotesque enough to you—and wildly incredible!—and yet even now there are existing circumstances to point that way.... Even now, does not an East-End worker live in such artificial conditions as practically to be cut off from the natural surface of the earth? (81-82)

It subsequently transpires that this superficially reasonable explanation is a false one. It is already evident from this passage, however, that the evolutionary logic around which it is organized is built on an ideological contradiction, consisting, on the one hand, of the dream of a “merely temporary” class struggle and, on the other, of the nightmare of a class struggle so permanent that it imprints itself onto the genetic identity of the species.

In this contradiction, Wells's own distinctly ambivalent attitude to the working class, derived in part from his petit-bourgeois social origins, can be detected. He is acutely conscious of the appalling daily consequences of class division, but in contrast to contemporary Marxists such as Morris, he does not want to see class struggle as an agent of political change. According to one historian of the socialist movement at the *fin de siècle*, Wells had an “almost

obsessive concern with the social menace of the lower classes," in spite of his sympathetic attitude to their condition (Pierson 115).

Bernard Bergonzi has argued that the Time Traveller's interpretation of the Eloi's society in terms of "Haves" and "Have-Nots," as in the above quotation, represents "a romantic and pessimistic variant of orthodox Marxist thought: the implications of the class war are accepted, but the possibility of the successful proletarian revolution establishing a classless society is rigidly excluded" (47). This is the view taken by Wells, too, though to call it a "variant" of Marxist thought is to underestimate Wells's hostility to Marxism. That his voice can be heard in the narrative at this point is manifest in the peculiarly hesitant character of the Time Traveller's defense of his "key" to the society whose meaning he is so keen to unlock: "This, I must warn you, was my theory at the time. I had no convenient cicerone in the pattern of the Utopian books. My explanation may be absolutely wrong. I still think it is the most plausible" (84). Slipping precariously between past and present tenses, this passage proves the protagonist's reluctance to relinquish his anti-utopian interpretation of future social history in terms of the triumph of "a real aristocracy, armed with a perfected science and working to a logical conclusion the industrial system of today" (84).⁴

When he summarizes this historical outcome in the sententious slogan of the succeeding statement—"Its triumph had not been simply a triumph over Nature, but a triumph over Nature and the fellow-man" (84)—it is possible to discern a guarded admiration for the creative destruction of a rising class. With a sneaking sense of nostalgia, these lines look back to the industrial revolution, when Nature's forces were systematically subjected to human control at the cost of mass immiseration. And with scarcely suppressed excitement, they also look forward to the time when a technocratic elite will impose its program on the people. The hesitation between past and present tenses, it appears, attests to the covert presence of the future perfect.

A utopian impulse, in other words, is almost invisibly woven into the Time Traveller's supposedly anti-utopian rejection of his earlier theory that the Eloi enjoy a simple epoch of rest. The idea that a progressive future society will be structured by a radical polarization between the classes is ideologically congruous with Wells's emerging evolutionist vision of a society that is engineered and administered by a scientific elect. Reflecting on this utopian prospect later in the narrative, the Traveller grieves over the brevity of "the dream of human intellect": "Once, life and property must have reached almost absolute safety. The rich had been assured of his wealth and comfort, the toiler assured of his life and work. No doubt in that perfect world there had been no unemployed problem, no social question left unsolved. And a great quiet had followed" (130). This is ultimately a capitalist utopia, one that accepts a permanent division between the classes even if it hopes to make society completely pacific. Bloch recognized this in his passing comments on *The Time Machine* (a novel that in most other respects he misinterprets), remarking that it is premised on the popular bourgeois conformist conception, according to

which "since man never changes," there will still be classes even in hundreds of thousands of years (440).

In this way, Wells elevates "the present merely temporary and social difference between the Capitalist and the Labourer" into the distinction between two different species. In 1877, the mystical "Theo-Socialist" Thomas Lake Harris, to take a parallel example, had described their polarization thus: "Civilization is the abode of two classes of men;—one tending down to an ever increasing degradation, brutalization and final barbarism; the other tending up to ever increased humanity, holiness, refinement, unselfishness and final immortality" (19). Like Harris, Wells cannot escape the Manichean assumption that this opposition is historically, and even biologically, inescapable. Utopia, from this perspective, is the epoch in which, briefly, these classes, or species, attain a perfect equipoise because they are peacefully interdependent. It is a dream of class society as a symbiotic rather than parasitic system. Morris had attacked Bellamy for subscribing to a version of this delusive attitude in his review of *Looking Backward* in 1889: "The only ideal of life which such a man can see is that of the industrious *professional* middle-class men of to-day purified from their crime of complicity with the monopolist class, and become independent instead of being, as they now are, parasitical. It is not to be denied that if such an ideal could be realized, it would be a great improvement on the present society. But can it be realized?" (421; emphasis in original). Wells's conviction that it can be realized is inscribed into the surreptitiously utopian aspects of his dystopian fiction.

The disavowal that the Time Traveller makes to the effect that he possesses "no convenient cicerone in the pattern of the Utopian books" therefore functions as a clue to the continuity between the time from which he has come and that in which he has arrived; it indicates that the reason that he does not need a guide to this supposedly strange world is because he is already familiar with its basic social topography. His interpretation of the future at this stage of the narrative is effectively consistent with Wells's later Fabian fantasy of a society ruled by an enlightened minority in *A Modern Utopia* (1905). To be sure, in 802,701 this meritocratic system of government has become etiolated and sickly. The frailty and stupidity of the Eloi, he concludes, indicate that "the balanced civilization that was at last attained must have long since passed its zenith" (84-85), and that the modern utopia has been superseded. But according to him it has at least gone through this "Golden Age"—a golden age that, as far as the novel's narrator and reader are concerned, is still to come. The Traveller persists in referring to the world of the Eloi as a golden age, even after he has accepted their degenerate evolutionary status.

It is this that makes the Traveller disinclined to commit himself to the dystopian interpretation of the future that is about to insinuate itself into his consciousness with such uncanny force. Wells himself does not want to admit that social evolution might invert the utopia of administration from above into the dystopia of a dictatorship from below. He wants to satirize the Marxist dream of self-government by the masses, but he is forced to place this polity on the same historical continuum as his own utopia of an enlightened elect. His

exclusively evolutionary understanding of history, in other words, draws him into an ideological deadlock. Ironically, he cannot countenance the only model of historical development that would enable him to escape this trap. To suggest that the Morlocks overturned the Eloi through revolution would entail the risk of making an unnervingly concrete connection to social and political conditions at the *fin de siècle*. At the end of the decade, Wells does take this risk in *When the Sleeper Wakes* (1899). In that novel he escapes the deadlock because, although he depicts a democratic insurrection with great evocativeness and even makes it seem irresistibly attractive, he goes on to demonstrate that it has all along been used by the demagogue Ostrog to create another dictatorship, thereby proving that, from the point of view of the masses, it has been effectively pointless.⁵

In *The Time Machine*, the Time Traveller's sense of intellectual mastery after the discovery of the Morlocks, it can be concluded, is scarcely secure, and not least because it is based on Wells's own ideological contradictions. He is quickly beset by uncertainty, the trademark of the Jentschian uncanny. "Troublesome doubts" (86), which seem to pivot on the fact that the Eloi fear the Morlocks, disturb his sense of equilibrium. The mysterious "feeling of intense fear" with which his sleep is oppressed the following night increases this insecurity (86). An impression of the aggressive gaze of the Morlocks—their predatory nature—is thus registered in the reader's consciousness. This impression is deepened when on the next morning the Traveller descends into the darkness of the "Underworld." A Gothic scene, "in which dim spectral Morlocks" shelter in the "grotesque black shadows" of bits of industrial machinery, is once more set (91). "The faint halitus of freshly-shed blood" that pervades the air seems ominous (91). And the Traveller is bemused as he wonders what animal furnishes the red joint that he sees. Ascending to the surface, he grapples again with his "ignorance of their ways of thinking and doing" (93). This time, he speculates that the old order based on the dominance of the Eloi is beginning to be reversed. His conclusion—that "ages ago, thousands of generations ago, man had thrust his brother out of the ease and sunshine," and that "now that brother was coming back—changed!"—has the sting of a late-Victorian intuition into the tenuous stability of bourgeois society. As he thus contemplates the return of the oppressed, the smothered memory of the meat floats into his mind, "not stirred up as it were by the current of my meditations, but coming in almost like a question from outside." "I tried to recall the form of it," he continues; "I had a vague sense of something familiar, but I could not tell what it was at the time" (98).

This is a premonitory preparation for the text's culminating instance of the uncanny, which occurs later that night. The Traveller is still caught up in the problem of trying to understand the history of the future: "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" (103). The Traveller dismisses his suspicion (one which he has already unwittingly suppressed) because it is "too horrible!" (103). The reader has

earlier anticipated the discovery that the Morlocks are actually a cannibalistic ruling class, so it does not need to be stated explicitly. Indeed, the effect of the passage is all the more eerie because the Traveller ultimately arrives at an interpretation of the Morlocks' carnivorous proclivities that has subsisted as the repressed content of the narrative ever since the scene set underground. "This uncanny," as Freud reminds us, "is in reality nothing new or alien, but something which is familiar and old-established in the mind and which has become alienated from it only through the process of repression" (241).

So desolated and disoriented by the sclerotic caricature of class society that he must finally accept as the true picture of future history, the Traveller's intellectual capacity for control of the situation entirely deserts him. He rationalizes it "in a scientific spirit" ("Why should I trouble myself?" he asks); in a religious spirit ("by regarding it as a rigorous punishment of human selfishness"); and in a political spirit ("I even tried a Carlyle-like scorn of this wretched aristocracy in decay") (105-106). But this dramatic moment of estrangement resists neutralization to the last. The ideological materials available to the Victorian Traveller are inadequate to the task of mounting that "defensive position against the assault of hostile forces" that Jentsch admired so much (15). The uncanny continues to trouble even after its initial shock has dissolved because it secrets that which is alien or unfamiliar into the very structure of our everyday lives.

4. In the uncanny, the germ of estrangement is assimilated into our bloodstream. How does this mechanism work in *The Time Machine*? If there are local uncanny effects in Wells's text, then these depend on the operation of the "historical uncanny" in some more general sense. From the perspective of the Time Traveller and his audience, what is uncanny about the future is that the familiar substance of late-Victorian social life has been distorted into an alien, *but imaginable* shape. If the familiar has been translated into something unfamiliar, then the unfamiliar is not so remote as to be unrecognizable.

Wells plays on the common late-nineteenth-century anxiety that the achievements of bourgeois culture will be destroyed by society's outcast and oppressed classes. But he also plays out this anxiety. He realizes the fears of the bourgeoisie in a fictional account of future history, generating what Freud calls that "uncanny effect [which] is often and easily produced when the distinction between imagination and reality is effaced, as when something that we have hitherto regarded as imaginary appears before us in reality" (244). He does not, however, offer the kind of cathartic relief that some contemporary authors of dystopian texts, who staged the revolution as a gothic melodrama, extended to their readers.⁶ In *The Time Machine*, Wells first inculcates a false sense of security into his middle-class readers and only afterwards demonstrates that their ultimate destiny, as a class, is destruction. The fears of the past—that is, of the Victorian present—resurface in the future present. So if the uncanny, as Freud said, is that class of frightening things "in which the frightening element can be shown to be something repressed which *recurs*" (241; emphasis in original), then *The Time Machine* stages the return of the repressed. Wells understands that the bourgeois conception of revolution is undialectical,

because it centers on the idea of a singular and consequently reversible event. He therefore reinforces his readers' fears by presenting their fate not in terms of an irruption into history but of an irreversible historical process. He makes the evolutionary prospect seem more alarming than the revolutionary prospect.

This is the import of the description of the Palace of Green Porcelain in chapter 11. It functions as a metaphor for a culture that, however long it lasts, will always stand poised over an abyss of certain desolation. The Palace is a post-Victorian museum "among the ruins of some latter-day South Kensington" (108). But it contains artifacts that have been spoiled by corrosion and decay. Like Morris, it seems, Wells is implicitly commenting on the fact "that there is something melancholy about a museum, such a tale of violence, destruction, and carelessness, as its treasured scraps tell us" (Morris, *Lesser Arts* 17). More importantly, Wells is counting the future cost of this carelessness and destruction. Marx looked forward to the proletarian revolution on the grounds that "then only will human progress cease to resemble that hideous pagan idol, who would not drink the nectar but from the skulls of the slain" ("Future Results" 222). Wells warns against the triumph of the proletariat on the grounds that it will ultimately avenge the proscription imposed upon it by bourgeois culture. The cannibalistic Morlocks, uncannily lurking in the "thick darkness" towards which the gallery containing remnants of industrial machinery slopes, represent nothing so much as a proletarian reprisal against the pagan idol of bourgeois progress (112). The Palace of Green Porcelain, suspended precariously above the subterranean city of the Morlocks, is symbolic of a civilization condemned to rest on the support of a barbarism into which it will one day collapse. As the narrator tells us in the novel's Epilogue, the Time Traveller "thought but cheerlessly of the Advancement of Mankind, and saw in the growing pile of civilization only a foolish heaping that must inevitably fall back upon and destroy its makers in the end" (152).

In *The Time Machine*, Wells insinuates that, slowly, infinitesimally, the solid architecture of bourgeois society is being hollowed out into a rotten shell by the parasite that inhabits its foundations. Wells's work of future history inflects a contemporary sociological and literary discourse, the concern of which was to map the collective identity of the urban working class in the aftermath of industrial modernization. This tradition of metropolitan cartography stretched back at least as far as the mid-nineteenth century. But it thrived most vigorously at the end of the nineteenth century, when explorations of the "residuum" in the East End during the so-called Great Depression became the subject of sociological picaresques. In the 1880s, the urban working class was rediscovered, like the race of Morlocks, in its soiled and cheerless lair. And almost simultaneously, as the confidence of the labor movement increased, it became clear to bourgeois commentators that this sickly class was showing signs of wanting to make history on its own terms.⁷ Indeed, there is something of the uncanny about the bourgeoisie's reaction, say, to the riots in central London in 1886. It responded as if to the epileptic twitch of a hitherto inert body. If the poor were visited by the middle classes in a mood of "horrificed enthusiasm," as Henry Nevinson subsequently described it, "the

Trafalgar Square Riots of November, 1887, added a spasm of tremulous terror, such as a child might feel when, after venturing playfully into a dark room, it saw the grey shadow of something move" (79). The object of history, it suddenly seemed, was a subject in its own right.

One of the most powerful contemporary descriptions of the uncanny presence of a proletarian future, by the "New Liberal" C.F.G. Masterman, writing anonymously, centered not on riots or demonstrations but on patriotic celebrations at the end of the Boer War (1899-1902). *From the Abyss of Its Inhabitants by One of Them* (1902) registers the spectral appearance of the people as a mass force: "Our streets have suddenly become congested with a weird and uncanny people," he writes. "[W]hence did they all come, these creatures with strange antics and manners, these denizens of another universe of being?" (2-3). "We have seen a ghost," Masterman continues, and "are striving to readjust our stable ideas" (4). But what makes the recovery of intellectual mastery difficult, as he concedes, is that this spectacle appears to anticipate an inescapable future:

It has crept out into the daylight. At first it has moved painfully in the unaccustomed glare, as a cave bear emerging from his dark den. Now it is straightening itself and learning to gambol with heavy and grotesque antics in the sunshine. It finds the exercise pleasant; it uproots a small tree, displaces a rock, laughing with pleased good humour. How long before, in a fit of ill-temper, it suddenly realizes its tremendous unconquerable might? (7-8)

A grotesque comedy is the certain prelude to a tragedy. If Masterman situates the drama of turn-of-the-century class conflict on the cusp of tragic and comic genres—"Exit the bourgeoisie, pursued by a bear," as it were—he is also conscious of the uncanny sense in which the final act has been written in advance, not by history's victors but by its victims.

In the later nineteenth century, as Anthony Vidler is no doubt correct to claim, "the uncanny finally became public in [the] metropolis" (6). "As a sensation," he argues, "it was no longer easily confined to the bourgeois interior or relegated to the imaginary haunts of the mysterious and dangerous classes; it was seemingly as disrespectful of class boundaries as epidemics and plagues." His account does not, however, acknowledge that epidemics and plagues have always been peculiarly respectful of class boundaries. In the nineteenth century, disease always radiated out from the working-class districts. It often remained confined to quarters in which conditions of poverty prevailed. So if the late-Victorian uncanny was "increasingly conflated with metropolitan illness," this was precisely because metropolitan illness was itself identified with the increasingly conspicuous urban poor. In *The Doom of the Great City* (1880), a novel by William Delisle Hay, the London fog that initially provokes fatal bronchial convulsions and then destroys "the richest and the poorest, the best and the worst alike," originates in the East End, where "the democracy" lives (43). The agent of social destruction inhabits the interior of the body politic. The emergence of the working class as a mass entity in the late nineteenth century discloses something that ought to have remained secret and hidden but has come to light.

The Time Machine exploits the uncanny thrills enjoyed by middle-class readers of exercises in domestic tourism, pushing them to an unbearable extreme. It not only charts the sinister subterranean existence of degraded nineteenth-century workers, in an attempt to estrange or even exoticize the familiar geography of the city, but it also historicizes this existence from the standpoint of an imaginary future, one in which a grotesque proletariat is not so much militant as potentially triumphant. In this perspective, the structural relations between Eloi and Morlocks in Wells's future cannot be plotted in terms of a straightforward reversal of relations between capitalists and workers in "Social-Darwinist Britain," as Suvin has asserted (234). According to him, the capitalist's evolution into an Eloi describes his passage from predator to prey; and this is mirrored by the laborer's evolution into a Morlock, which describes his passage from prey to predator. This is uncontroversial, so far as it goes. But it omits an account of the relations between capitalist and laborer that is hidden in the late-Victorian present. Seen in retrospect, from the anamorphic angle of *The Time Machine*'s fictional future, the social relations between Morlocks and Eloi are tendent in this present. In late-nineteenth-century class society, Wells implies, the working class is already incipiently predatory. Secretly, its future feeds on the present. Predator and prey are thus not opposites that Wells simply inverts in his dystopia, as Suvin says. Their relationship is parasitic. In other words, according to this uncanny reading of history, the victory of the working class is already inscribed within the social relations of late-nineteenth-century Britain.

Wells's work of science fiction uses the future to interrogate the historical status of the present and so to question the future of history itself. It transpires that, at a certain point, the point at which "Mother Necessity, who had been staved off for a few thousand years, came back again," the parasite has eviscerated its host: "and she began below" (131). Wells therefore depicts a late-Victorian present, apprehended as the pre-history of the future, in which the proletariat, covertly assured of its ultimate victory, is at once oppressed and oppressor, the passive object and active subject of the collapse of human society. It is difficult to imagine a more charged and dynamic drama of the lower-middle-class intellectual's ambivalence towards the working class. Wells only finally escapes the contradictions implicit in his position by pulling the emergency lever, almost literally, and halting history in order to start it over again. The Traveller's final journey into the future—he lunges desperately into his laboratory before disappearing "in a whirling mass of black and brass" (150)—is an extravagant evasion strategy. It recalls the panic of his "last scramble" to break free from the clutches of the Morlocks as they close in on him (133). He can countenance any form of destruction rather than one at the hands of the working class.

The sense of despair that pervades the last pages of *The Time Machine* is a gloomy admission not only of the entropic prospect open to human history, but also of the uncanny political logic of the present. It points in horror to the presence in late-Victorian society of a force that both elicits sympathy and threatens the ruin of civilization. In his *Experiment in Autobiography* (1934),

Wells wrote that: "strong as is my disposition to deflate the reputation of Marx I have to admit that he was the first to conceive of the contemporary social process not as a permanent system of injustice and hardship but as a changing and *self-destroying order*" (*Experiment* 247, emphasis mine). In *The Time Machine*, he effectively concurs with the conclusion of the *Communist Manifesto*, that "the proletariat, the lowest stratum of our present society, cannot stir, cannot raise itself up, without the whole superincumbent strata of official society being sprung into the air" (495). But he frames this uncanny reading of history as a dystopian narrative rather than a redemptive one. For him, the oppressed will become the oppressor, not the emancipator, of humanity. Wells maps his dystopian topography onto the territory marked out by the *Manifesto* in order to expose its corruptive implications for the future of civilization. And in so doing he creates the template for a particularly sophisticated form of fictional estrangement, one structured by the dialectical logic of the historical uncanny.

NOTES

1. See Stover, 2. For a critical discussion of this association, see Mullen.
2. Stover suggests that Wells "expected his American readers to get the allusion to Bellamy from the artwork done for the first New York edition. Its frontispiece pictures the statue of the sphinx glimpsed by the Time Traveller at the moment of his arrival in the world of 802,701" (4).
3. See Hughes.
4. See also Carey, 123. On the relation of Wells's politics to the prevailing models of socialism, see Partington.
5. See Wells, *When the Sleeper Wakes* (1899), especially chapters 9 and 10.
6. For an account of these "cacotopian" fictions, see Beaumont, chapter 4.
7. See Jones, 280-314.

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ABSTRACT

This article commences with the familiar claim that science fiction is a literature of estrangement and argues that, at times—as in the seminal case of H.G. Wells's *The Time Machine* (1895)—sf produces a particularly unsettling form of estrangement that can be identified with Freud's notion of the "uncanny." *The Time Machine* is an uncanny text because it portrays an alien future in which the not so much militant as triumphant working class is secreted in the late nineteenth-century present. The first section of the article sets out the theoretical framework for this argument, using Ernst Bloch's concept of the Not-Yet-Conscious, which he explicitly opposed to Freud's concept of the unconscious in order to revise the standard understanding of the uncanny by adding a historical dimension to it. Section 2 focuses on the central symbol of the sphinx in *The Time Machine* as a means for discussing Wells's contradictory attitudes toward the destiny of class relations at the end of the nineteenth century. Section 3 explores the Time Traveller's various interpretations of the mysterious society of 802,701 and examines the uncanny effects of his encounter with the Morlocks. Finally, Section 4 relates the novel's uncanny revelations about the present and future of class society to the middle-class *fin-de-siècle* fascination with the threatening specter of the proletariat in the English metropolis. The article offers a political reinterpretation of *The Time Machine* and, more broadly, attempts to develop further the concept of estrangement in relation to science fiction.