

The White Sphinx and "The Time Machine" (Le Sphynx blanc et la Machine à remonter le temps)

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Frank Scafella

The White Sphinx and *The Time Machine*

The fable [of the Sphinx] is an elegant and a wise one, invented apparently in allusion to Science: especially in its application to practical life . . . Sphinx proposes to men a variety of hard questions and riddles which she received from the Muses . . . when they pass from the Muses to Sphinx, that is from contemplation to practice, . . . they begin to be painful and cruel: and unless they be solved and disposed of, they strangely torment and worry the mind, pulling it first this way and then that, and fairly tearing it to pieces.

Francis Bacon, "Sphinx: or, Science" from The Wisdom of the Ancients

1. Soon after crash landing his Time Machine in the land of the Morlocks and the Eloi, H. G. Wells's Time Traveller stands up to look around him. What should he see immediately before him but a gigantic Sphinx, "a colossal figure, carved apparently in some white stone [while] all else of the world was invisible."

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. It was greatly weather-worn, and that imparted an unpleasant suggestion of disease.¹

A diseased sphinx, as white as Melville's whale, blind, with wings outspread in mock flight and on its face the grin of the fabled Cheshire Cat stands in the Time Traveller's way and holds him in fascination. It is only by an act of sheer will that "at last I tore my eyes from it for a moment, and saw . . . that the sky was lightening with the promise of the sun" (3:18).

We do not know what prompted Wells to imagine his Time Traveller face to face with the Sphinx at the very opening of his narrative, but that he did so is significant. For one thing, it means that *The Time Machine* must be read as a variation of Oedipus's encounter with the Sphinx on the road to Thebes. For another, the Sphinx, according to Bacon, is a symbol of Science.² For still another, the White Sphinx is alluded to or figures directly in the action on 15 of the 70-odd pages of the narrative. Moreover, in the presence of the White Sphinx the Time Traveller experiences a variety of psychic states which range from the awe of his initial awareness through dread and despair to a resolve to hold himself in check by the exercise of reason. This sequence of emotions charts a transformation in the mind of the Time Traveller from an essentially contemplative to an intensely practical mode of response to the world. It would be too much to suggest, by way of Bacon, that *The Time Machine* is thus an allegorical rendering of the fable of Oedipus and the Sphinx. Nevertheless, certain parallels between that fable and the Time Traveller's adventures are direct and highly suggestive of the emergence, establishment, and predicament of the scientist in the modern world—especially when one examines the Time Traveller's experience in the

world of 802,701 in light of Bacon's interpretation of the fable as an allegory of the nature of knowledge as it is employed in contemplation and in practice. By playing Bacon off against Wells and Wells against Bacon, we can augment our appreciation of *The Time Machine* as a scientific romance.

2. The Time Traveller's initial awareness of the White Sphinx coincides with the shattering of his presupposition of finding "incredible advancement in knowledge" and a "profoundly grave and intellectual posterity" in the future to which his Time Machine transports him. Far from grave and intellectual, however, the first beings to greet him, the Eloi, appear effeminate and child-like. "A flow of disappointment rushed across my mind," he says. And there, towering above him, is the "Sphinx of white marble, which had seemed to watch me all the while with a smile at my astonishment" (4:21). As in the ancient fable of Oedipus and the Sphinx, so here: the appearance of the Sphinx coincides with the posing of a hard question or riddle. And from that moment onward, there is no help for the Traveller but to answer the riddle correctly or be devoured.

"Now of the Sphinx's riddles there are in all two kinds," says Bacon: "one concerning the nature of things, another concerning the nature of man" (p. 419). So far as the nature of things is concerned, the world of 802,701 poses no riddles for the Time Traveller. "The whole earth had become a garden" (4:25), he knows, through the organized effort of mankind to subjugate Nature, to "readjust the balance of animal and vegetable life to suit our human needs". He is witness to the completion of this readjustment "for all Time"—no insects, no weeds, no fungi, no disease, no toil, no commerce, luscious fruits and flowers, a "social paradise" (4:26). But so far as the nature of man is concerned, there is indeed a riddle to be solved. For in this "garden" world of the future the Time Traveller has "happened upon humanity upon the wane." How does he explain this paradox? Through what process of readjustment has man come to the state of the Eloi? Why is it that the subjugation of Nature to human needs has led to atrophy of knowledge and intellect? At first the answer to these questions seems simple enough to the Time Traveller. He is at leisure when he first answers the riddle of the nature of man, seated on top of a hill on a bench of griffins' heads (a mythical monster closely associated with the Sphinx), looking out upon "as sweet and fair a view as I have ever seen" (4:25). At this moment the riddle does not trouble the Time Traveller deeply for, as Bacon observes, "so long as the object of meditation and inquiry is merely to know, the understanding is not oppressed or straitened by it, but is free to wander and expatiate, and finds in the very uncertainty of conclusion and variety of choice a certain pleasure and delight" (p. 419). With the sweet and fair view of the world around and no restrictions on the time he might take to contemplate that world and the creatures who inhabit it, the Time Traveller moves with ease to the following conclusion about the nature of man as he has found him in the Eloi. "Humanity had been strong, energetic, and intelligent, and had used all its abundant vitality to alter the conditions under which it lived. And now came the reaction of the altered conditions." Whereas the pain and necessity of readjustment forced man to exercise intelligence, self-restraint, patience, and decision to channel his "restless energy" of mind in constructive enterprises, under the conditions of perfect comfort and security that energy "takes to art and eroticism," and then comes "langour and decay." Thus "the exquisite beauty of the buildings I saw was the outcome of the last surgings of the now purposeless energy of mankind before it settled down into perfect harmony

with the conditions under which it lived" (4:27).

Everything is fine with the Time Traveller, then, so long as he is free merely to contemplate the nature of the Eloi. Indeed, he takes pleasure in dallying since there is no pragmatic reason for pressing on to certainty about his hypothesis. In this mood of quiet contemplation, "musing over this too perfect triumph of man" (5:28), the sun sets and the Time Traveller's casual gaze begins to search out familiar objects as he determines to descend the hill to sleep. "I looked for the building I knew," he says. "Then my eye travelled along to the figure of the White Sphinx upon the pedestal of bronze, growing distinct as the light of the rising moon grew brighter. I could see the silver birch against it. There was the tangle of rhododendron bushes, black in the pale light, and there was the little lawn" on which the Time Machine had landed. Then "I looked at the lawn again," he says, and suddenly the mood of contemplation is shattered. "A queer doubt chilled my complacency," he confesses, for "the Time Machine was gone!" (5:28). In this instant the question or riddle of the Eloi, like the hard questions posed to ancient travellers by the Sphinx, suddenly passes "from contemplation to practice, whereby there is necessity for present action, choice and decision," and here the riddle begins to be "painful and cruel." For unless such questions are "solved and disposed of," says Bacon, "they strangely torment and worry the mind, pulling it first this way and then that, and fairly tearing it to pieces" ("Sphinx," p. 419).

The discovery of his loss of the Time Machine throws the Time Traveller into emotional turmoil. "At once, like a lash across the face, came the possibility of losing my own age, of being left helpless in this strange new world" (5:28). The time of contemplation is now past; the occasion for practical action, choice, and decision is at hand, and if he does not act quickly the Traveller is lost forever. For if the wretched captives of Sphinx could not at once solve and interpret the dark and perplexed riddles that she propounded to them, says Bacon, "as they stood hesitating and confused she cruelly tore them to pieces" (p. 418). The bare thought of the loss of his Time Machine grips the Time Traveller at the throat and stops his breathing. He plunges down the hill and into the rhododendron bushes in a passion of fear, in excessive dread, cursing aloud, feeling faint and cold, and running about furiously. He is possessed of blind anger, frenzy, anguish of mind, horrible fatigue, and despair. He beats the bushes with clenched fists, sobbing and bawling like an angry child, blundering about, screaming and crying upon God, maddened. And all the while "above me towered the Sphinx, upon the bronze pedestal, white, shining, leprous, in the light of the rising moon. It seemed to smile in mockery of my dismay." For what causes dismay is "the sense of some hitherto unsuspected power, through whose intervention my invention had vanished." At length he falls to the ground at the pedestal of the White Sphinx and lies "weeping with absolute wretchedness... I had exhausted my emotion" (5:30). Thus the Time Traveller, taken unawares, finds himself in a paradigmatic human situation symbolized in the Oedipus myth: either exercise reason to gain control over paralyzing fear, or be devoured by the Sphinx.

3. If the Time Traveller is unaware of the paradigmatic nature of his predicament, Wells was not. As we have seen, the Time Traveller's initial encounter with the Sphinx results in his experience of a sequence of emotion and thought at once typical of the Oedipus narrative and representative of the transition that takes place in the human mind as it shifts from an artistic or

purely philosophical to a scientific grasp of the world. Having been drained emotionally, and having been placed beyond confidence in his first hypothesis about the Eloi by his "sense of some hitherto unsuspected power," the Time Traveller finds himself on just such a verge of consciousness as Wells speaks of (autobiographically) in "The Rediscovery of the Unique" (1891). His set views of the world of 802,701 have been "decimated . . . as a pestilence thins a city"; his theory of life among the Eloi has received "such a twist as tall towers sometimes get from lively yet conservative earthquakes"; and his new relationship to the world is perhaps best characterized by the final paragraph of the essay.

Science is a match that man has just got alight. He thought he was in a room—in moments of devotion, a temple—and that his light would be reflected from and display walls inscribed with wonderful secrets and pillars carved with philosophical systems wrought into harmony. It is a curious sensation, now that the preliminary splutter is over and the flame burns up clear, to see his hands lit and just a glimpse of himself and the patch he stands on visible, and around him, in place of all that human comfort and beauty he anticipated—darkness still.³

Not only does the Time Traveller thus come to see his immediate situation clearly but he begins to reason with himself "to be calm and patient, to learn the way of the people, to get a clear idea of the method of my loss, and the means of getting materials and tools" to make another machine if he cannot recover the original one. He begins to probe the world around for answers, as the true scientist must.

It does not take him long to determine that the method of his loss is a secret of the bronze doors in the pedestal under the White Sphinx. Nor does it take him long to see that no amount of force will cause these doors to open. The Sphinx divulges its secrets to no man by force or cunning. "Patience," says the Time Traveller to himself.

If you want your machine again you must leave that Sphinx alone . . . You will get it back as soon as you can ask for it . . . Face this world. Learn its ways, watch it, be careful of too hasty guesses at its meaning. In the end you will find clues to it all.(5:32)

Implicit in the Time Traveller's resolve to "leave that Sphinx alone" is his recognition that the Sphinx will not, in and of itself, afford him access to what is unique about the nature of man in 802,701. Access to that uniqueness will come, he concludes, only as a result of mastering the problems of the world. So "I determined to put the thought of my Time Machine and the mystery of the bronze doors under the sphinx as much as possible in a corner of memory, until my growing knowledge would lead me back to them in a natural way" (5:32). His discovery of the Morlocks, "the bleached, obscene, nocturnal Thing" that lives in the deep darkness of wells, is his first major clue to an understanding of his loss and the method of recovering his machine. For even though his discovery of the Morlocks raises as many questions as it answers ("What, I wondered, was this Lemur doing in my scheme of a perfectly balanced organization? How was it related to the indolent serenity of the beautiful Upper-worlders? And what was hidden down there, at the foot of that shaft?"), "my mind was already in revolution; my guesses and impressions were slipping and sliding to a new adjustment. I had now a clue to the import of these wells . . . [and] to the mystery of the ghosts; to say nothing of a hint at the meaning of the bronze gates and the fate of the Time Machine" (5:39). Unlike the scientist who might seek to keep his original suspicion of a perfectly balanced organization intact by

experimental verification, the Time Traveller lets his original theory go as he begins to make his investigation into the nature of the Morlocks more searching and minute. His acquisition of knowledge about the Morlocks and the Eloi thus presents us with a paradigm of the true scientist's approach to the world.

From the point of view of the reader, at least two additional observations should be made about the Time Traveller's decision to leave the Sphinx alone in his attempt to recover his Time Machine. First, the White Sphinx is not a monster with volition of its own (as is the Sphinx that blocks Oedipus's way); it is a statue, a symbol, a work of art. Neither the Time Traveller nor the narrator follows out the implications of this fact, but the Traveller is obviously aware that the White Sphinx manifests certain sharp variations from the classical Sphinx with which he is familiar: "the wings, instead of being carried vertically at the sides, were spread so that it seemed to hover," and so on. Moreover, the Traveller fails to make explicit a connection between the White Sphinx and the Morlocks that the sightless eyes and diseased aspect invite. Mention of the Morlock as a "bleached, obscene, nocturnal Thing" should leave little doubt in the reader's mind that the White Sphinx is an outward and visible sign of the inward and spiritual condition to which man as Morlock has fallen.⁴ Furthermore, it would seem that the reader is justified in pointing out that the White Sphinx thus brings with it into Wells's romance the most ancient of its associations, those with the conditions of disorder or chaos. In the *Enuma elish*, a creation myth dating from the beginning of the second millennium before our era, the Sphinx is a monster born of Tiamat, the primordial mother and embodiment of the disorder that preceded the creation of the world. For "when Marduk had been created ('A God was engendered, most able and wisest of gods'), Tiamat, inflamed with rage, gave birth to monsters—viper, dragon, sphinx, great lion, mad dog, scorpion-man."⁵ Living under the oppression of the great order that exists among the Eloi, the Morlocks give birth to the White Sphinx, symbol of the great disorder that reigns among men in the Under-world. Thus the problem that the Traveller faces in the White Sphinx is to determine just what the nature of the disorder is that the statue projects, and the Sphinx itself will not give him the solution to that problem.

Second, the Sphinx is a symbol of science.

Science, being the wonder of the ignorant and unskillful, may not be absurdly called a monster [says Bacon]. In figure and aspect it is represented as many-shaped, in allusion to the immense variety of matter with which it deals. It is said to have the face and voice of a woman, in respect to its beauty and facility of utterance. Wings are added because the sciences and the discoveries of science spread and fly abroad in an instant; the communication of knowledge being like that of one candle with another, which lights up at once. Claws, sharp and hooked, are ascribed to it with great elegance, because the axioms and arguments of science penetrate and hold fast the mind, so that it has no means of evasion or escape. (p. 419)

If so (and I wager that Wells intended it this way), *The Time Machine* presents us with a paradox so far as science itself is concerned. Here we find science diseased primarily because of the uses to which Man has put it. Symbolized in the White Sphinx, science (in the long view) is to become a mockery of its true nature: in place of a sober countenance, the Traveller finds a sly and condescending grin; the swift communication of knowledge from man to man, and from generation to generation, ceases even as Sphinx spreads her wings to show all the world that she can fly; and "that ghastly

whiteness it is which imparts such an abhorrent mildness, even more loathsome than terrific, to the dumb gloating of [its] aspect." These words from *Moby-Dick* are appropriate since what the Time Traveller beholds in the White Sphinx Ishmael beholds in the white whale:

the one visible quality in the aspect of the dead which most appals the gazer, . . . the marble pallor lingering there; as if indeed that pallor were as much the badge of consternation in the other world, as of mortal trepidation here Nor even in our superstitions do we fail to throw the same snowy mantle round our phantoms; all ghosts rising in the milk-white fog—Yea, while these terrors seize us, let us add, that even the king of terrors, when personified by the evangelist, rides on his pallid horse.⁶

One side of the paradox, then, has science as a shroud, dormant, corpse-like, a phantom of her true self. On the other side, however, it is only by way of science, the patient acquisition of knowledge through study of the natural world, that the Time Traveller can regain his own age and circumvent the fate prophesied for him and for all mankind in this phantom of his vision. It is by the very gifts of science—the match and the Time Machine in particular—that the Traveller not only regains his own time, but lives to tell his tale so that those with eyes to see and ears to hear may avoid the fate that was almost his.

4. If the Time Traveller's response to his predicament is representative of the scientific method of achieving discernment and knowledge, we have in *The Time Machine* a model of Wells's own deepest hopes for and misgivings about the nature and role of science in the modern world. If so, we cannot regard Wells's attitude in 1895 as unequivocally pessimistic. It may be that the evidence before us leaves us no alternative but to conclude that Wells was less pessimistic about science itself than he was about the use to which scientists were putting it. Certainly the Time Traveller's actions manifest what Alfred North Whitehead calls the genius of science, namely "the instinctive faith that there is an Order of Nature which can be traced in every detained occurrence."⁷ The true scientist, that is, approaches the world in confidence that, in the words of Robert Andrew Millikan,

the universe is rationally intelligible, no matter how far from a complete comprehension of it we may now be, or indeed may ever come to be. [Science] believes in the absolute uniformity of nature. It views the world as a mechanism, every part and every movement of which fits in some definite, invariable way into the other parts and the other movements; and it sets itself the inspiring task of studying every phenomenon in the confident hope that the connections between it and the other phenomena can ultimately be found.⁸

The emphasis on instinctive faith, Order, Nature, rational intelligibility, and what Whitehead calls "a vehement and passionate interest in the relation of general principles to irreducible and stubborn facts" Wells's Time Traveller manifests in his actions. His attitude (to borrow an apt figure from Steven Marcus), expresses

the faith which our culture has inherited that there is nothing that cannot be rationally understood and thus taught and learned . . . Our culture is probably incorrigible in this virtually dogmatic innocence, and indeed it is difficult to imagine our own existence if we try to subtract from it the conviction that it is really highly preferable to live in the light we continue to generate rather than in the darkness we have cast out and replaced.⁹

From the perspective of Wells's Time Traveller, the vantage point of one who holds the match of science in his hand and is permitted to see, not the ultimate order and original form of the universe itself but merely "his hands lit and just a glimpse of himself and the patch he stands on visible," certainty about the ultimate order of things may never be his to hold. But his patient and steady investigations into the natural order of things move him inevitably in that direction. What he must avoid is the rational manipulation of nature through experimental verification to prove the theories he holds about the ultimate order of the world of 802,701; and he must also forego the temptation to employ his knowledge of that world to mold nature to fit his own human needs. Perhaps it was because he saw science moving in the direction of serving human needs primarily that Wells became pessimistic, not about science itself but about the uses to which scientists put it.

In Wells's thinking about science (so far, at least, as *The Time Machine* and "The Rediscovery of the Unique" are concerned), emphasis falls not on mind, reason, order, principle, or rational intelligibility but on method, technique, technology. It is with micrometer, microscope, polarizer, and micro-chemical tests that the natural scientist perceives the uniqueness of otherwise apparently identical crystals of a precipitate. The Time Machine and matches serve something of the same function for the Time Traveller. "When I started with the Time Machine," says the Traveller,

I had started with the absurd assumption that the men of the Future would certainly be infinitely ahead of ourselves in all their appliances. I had come without arms, without medicine, without anything to smoke . . . even without enough matches. If only I had a Kodak! I could have flashed that glimpse of the Under-world in a second, and examined it at leisure.(6:45).

Appliances—arms, medicine, matches, Kodak, and the Time Machine itself—embody more significance in the Wellsian view of the nature and function of science than any idea, virtue, or particular quality of sense or sensibility supposed to be inherent in the human psyche or the universe at large. It is machinery, appliances, that provide the occasion for the sustenance, if not the creation, of that peculiar quality which makes the Morlock, however loathsome, a creature more creative and self-sustaining than the Eloi. For "the Under-world being in contact with machinery, which, however perfect, still needs some little thought outside habit, had probably retained perforce rather more initiative, if less of every other human character, than the Upper." Surely it is this insight, arrived at by way of "learn[ing] this world," that the Time Traveller has in mind when, after the night in the forest and the loss of Weena to the Morlocks and sitting once more on the bench of griffins' heads, he observes that "for once, at least, I grasped the mental operations of the Morlocks" (10:64). Their initiative with machinery is the clue that explains both the loss of the Time Machine and the method of its recovery. By way of the Machine the Morlocks seek to trap the Time Traveller for meat, and seeing this he walks willingly through the bronze doors which slide open at his approach, knowing that all he need do is to replace the levers that set it in motion and be returned to the 19th century, his own age.

5. The dominating presence of the White Sphinx, then, causes *The Time Machine* to bulge toward myth and allegory. What might otherwise have been a novel thus becomes SF or "scientific romance." For *The Time Machine* begins and ends as a novel might; reality is rendered realistically as the Time

Traveller's friends gather in his home and (when all is said and done) depart from it. Yet even the names of the Time Traveller's friends, which appear only at the beginning and the ending, suggest that this is more than a novel. The Time Traveller, the Medical Man, the Psychologist, the Editor, Blank, Dash, and Chose are all one-dimensional characters. Even the narrator remains nameless and impersonal since the focus of *The Time Machine* is not on character but on plot. For if in the novel "character is more important than action and plot," the romance clearly "prefers action [and plot] to character."¹⁰

Nevertheless Frank McConnell and Samuel Hynes regard *The Time Machine* as a novel and interpret the role of its narrator as if they were dealing with a narrative rendered realistically rather than with a romance. The narrator reacts "to the Traveller's theories and tales with ordinary doubt," they write, because

he is simply the ordinary man refusing to acknowledge what his imagination cannot endure. So at the end he offers his own hearty but ill-founded hopes: '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!' And he offers, as reasons for comfort, the flowers that the Traveller brought back from the Golden Age, 'to witness that even when mind and strength had gone, gratitude and a mutual tenderness still lived on in the heart of man.' But the reader who had read the story must feel the bitter irony of that foolish comfort; for mind and strength had indeed gone, but fear had not, and the preying of man upon man had not, and where is the comfort in *that*?¹¹

In the first place, the narrator is not simply the ordinary man who doubts what his imagination cannot encompass; he is a man for whom the Time Traveller's story has had the salutary effect of putting a whole new aspect on the face of things. Far from being the one who doubts, he is the only one of the Traveller's immediate audience not to dismiss the tale of the Morlocks and the Eloi as either incredible or a lie. When the Traveller finishes his story, his audience sits around him "in the dark," says the narrator,

and little spots of colour swam before them. The Medical Man seemed absorbed in the contemplation of our host. The Editor was looking hard at the end of his cigar—the sixth. The Journalist fumbled for his watch. The others, as far as I remember, were motionless. (12:71)

Each has his attention focused on something other than the story that he has just heard. The Journalist is concerned about the lateness of the hour and of getting home. The Editor, on his way home, dismisses the story as a "gaudy lie." Only the narrator continues to be held by the story of the Morlocks and the Eloi. "The story was so fantastic and incredible," he says, "the telling so credible and sober. I lay awake most of the night thinking about it" (12:72). The narrator recognizes in the sober and credible manner of its telling, in its very atmosphere and tone, that the Traveller's story is not a fabrication but a faithful description of an actual experience in a real place. It is this that elicits the narrator's belief and elevates his thought to a new and unexpected level of reality. For the Time Traveller's story awakens in the narrator the twin desires "to survey the depths of space and time" and "to hold communion with other living things."¹² If when all is said and done the narrator takes comfort in anything, it is the manifold possibilities of Time Travel.

Second, this awakening of belief and desire within the narrator not only opens him to other worlds but to discipleship. He returns to the Time Traveller's house next day; he would hear and see more of this man who tells

such credible and sober tales of his travels in the fantastic and incredible realm. In the Traveller the narrator recognizes a kindred spirit if not a mentor. As if in direct verification that he might be chosen for a disciple, chance affords the narrator the rare privilege, at the Time Traveller's house next day, of touching the Time Machine itself. "I stared for a minute at the Time Machine and put out my hand and touched the lever," he says. And what happens in the moment of this touch marks the narrator as a Time Traveller too, if only in imagination. For at his touch "the squat substantial-looking mass swayed like a bough shaken by the wind." The narrator's touch and the instantaneous movement of the machine attest to his having been awakened to the Time Traveller within himself. It is, therefore, no surprise to the reader when (subsequently) the Time Traveller says to the narrator, "I know why you came," and then affords him the high and rare privilege of actually seeing the Traveller depart into the incredible realm once more. The narrator opens the laboratory door just as the Time Traveller departs on his second trip into the future, and here is what he sees.

I seemed to see a ghostly, indistinct figure sitting in a whirling mass of black and brass for a moment—a figure so transparent that the bench behind with its sheets of drawings was absolutely distinct; but this phantasm vanished as I rubbed my eyes. The Time Machine had gone . . . I felt an unreasonable amazement. I knew that something strange had happened, and for the moment could not distinguish what the strange thing might be . . . Then I understood . . . I stayed on, waiting for the Time Traveller; waiting for the second, perhaps still stranger story, and the specimens and photographs he would bring with him.¹³

Third, and finally, it is not the narrator's experience here that is important in and of itself (as it would be in the novel), but the function that he serves in the narrative. He is the master link between the reader and the fantastic realm into which the Time Traveller ventures. In the manner of the Time Traveller himself, but as one who believes from hearing rather than from actual experience (as the reader must also), the narrator represents the fantastic and the incredible in a sober and credible way. It is the story that counts, not the teller of the tale, because

where the novelist would arouse our interest in character by exploring his origin, the romancer will probably do so by enveloping it in mystery. Character itself becomes, then, somewhat abstract and ideal, so much so in some romances that it seems to be merely a function of plot. The plot we may expect to be highly colored. Astonishing events may occur, and these are likely to have a symbolic or ideological, rather than a realistic, plausibility. . . . [Thus] the romance will more freely veer toward mythic, allegorical, and symbolic forms.¹⁴

It matters very little, then, whether the narrator is an ordinary man; what matters fundamentally is that he be a true believer. Then the reader will be confident that the story he is told, however fantastic and incredible, is rendered accurately and in minute detail, with that kind of faithfulness to mood and tone, atmosphere and incident that is commonly found in the recounting of experiences that have changed one's life. In such narrations it matters very little who the narrator is *as a person*, for it is the action and the story that he tells that are important. *The Time Machine* is just such a narration and there at its very beginning is the Sphinx, the most ancient of mythical creatures and as enigmatic to the narrator as it is to the Time Traveller himself. This mystery is passed on directly to the reader. And the reader is left not with the burden of having to believe or not believe, but with the very same obligation that has fallen to the Time Traveller and to the

narrator in his turn: each must make some sense of the riddle thus posed. The Time Traveller makes sense of it all by way of leaving the Sphinx alone. The narrator's mode of making sense is, in the best mythological sense, wonderful participation in the Time Traveller's experience through a faithful rendering of it. But the reader must face the Sphinx directly if he is to make sense, as I have tried to do here, of its peculiar kind of sense-making.

NOTES

1. H.G. Wells, *Three Novels: The Time Machine, The War of the Worlds, The Island of Doctor Moreau* (London: Heinemann, 1963), 3:18.
2. In *Francis Bacon: Selected Writings*, with an Introduction and Notes by Hugh G. Dick (NY: The Modern Library, 1955), pp. 417-20.
3. In H.G. Wells, *The Time Machine and The War of the Worlds: A Critical Edition*, ed. Frank D. McConnell (NY: Oxford, 1977), p. 344.
4. See Robert M. Philmus, *Into the Unknown: The Evolution of Science Fiction from Francis Godwin to H.G. Wells* (Berkeley & Los Angeles, 1970), in which it is argued that what I have called "fallen" should be understood as "devolution," as the "gradual reduction of Homo sapiens to species lower and lower on the evolutionary scale" (pp. 70ff.). Philmus points out that the Time Traveller views man's decline as "degeneration"; Wells's own term for this process was "degradation"—all of which goes to show that the White Sphinx forces author, protagonist, reader and critic to formulate his own answer to the riddle of man's future.
5. Paul Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, trans. Emerson Buchanan (NY, 1967), p. 178.
6. Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick*, Chapter 42, "The Whiteness of the Whale."
7. Alfred North Whitehead, *Science and the Modern World* (NY, 1958), p. 4.
8. Robert Andrew Millikan, "The Spirit of Modern Science," in *Science and Literature*, ed. Frederick H. Law (NY, 1929), p. 311.
9. In a review of *Havelock Ellis: A Biography*, *New York Times Book Review*, June 22, 1980, p. 29.
10. Richard Chase, *The American Novel and its Tradition* (NY, 1957), p. 13. Even though Chase is concerned primarily with American romance, his guiding assumption is "that the American novel is obviously a development from the English tradition" (p. 3), a tradition of which Wells is no small part.
11. In McConnell, *The Time Machine*, pp. 352-53.
12. J.R.R. Tolkien argues that these desires are basic both to the creation and the appreciation of Fantasy or Fairy-Stories. "Eloi and Morlocks live far away in an abyss of time so deep as to work an enchantment upon them. . . . This enchantment of distance, especially of distant time, is weakened only by the preposterous and incredible Time Machine itself. But we see in this example one of the main reasons why the borders of fairy-story are inevitably dubious. The magic of Faerie is not an end in itself, its virtue is in its operations: among these are the satisfaction of certain primordial human desires," in particular the desires mentioned above. "On Fairy-Stories," in *The Tolkien Reader* (NY: Ballantine, 1966), p. 13.
13. There is a strong suggestion here that the Time Traveller thus becomes to the narrator as the Hebrew prophet, Elijah, is to his disciple, Elisha. "Elijah said to Elisha, 'Tell me what I can do for you before I am taken from you.' Elisha said, 'Let me inherit a double share of your spirit.' 'You have asked a hard thing,' said Elijah. 'If you see me taken from you, may your wish be granted; if you do not, it shall not be granted.' They went on, talking as they went, and suddenly there appeared chariots of fire and horses of fire, which separated them one from the other, and Elijah was carried up in the whirlwind to heaven" (II Kings 2:9-12).
14. Chase, *loc. cit.* (see note 10).

RÉSUMÉ

Frank Scafella. Le Sphinx blanc et la Machine à remonter le temps.—L'étude est centrée sur l'épisode où le Voyageur du temps s'efforce d'arracher sa machine au Sphinx blanc, dans le roman de Wells. Le problème auquel fait face la Voyageur et sa résolution sont lus à la lumière de l'essai de Francis Bacon "Sphinx: or, Science": l'épisode est perçu comme le paradigme des transformations auxquelles l'esprit humain est soumis lorsque les circonstances obligent à employer le savoir non plus de façon contemplative mais dans la pratique. En décrivant cette modification dans la manière de penser et d'agir que Wells prête à son héros, nous accédons à une meilleure compréhension de la façon dont Wells conçoit la science dans le monde moderne et à une redéfinition du récit de Wells comme "roman scientifique." (FS)