

MORLOCKS AND MUDFISH:  
ANTHROPOCENTRISM AND EVOLUTION IN THE EARLY H.G. WELLS

by

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## ABSTRACT

This paper seeks to grapple with an apparent contradiction in H.G. Wells's early thought and writings. While his early essays espouse a model of evolutionary theory that anticipates the non-telic models of the twentieth century, his first full-length novel, *The Time Machine*, seems to claim that humanity is doomed to a future of negative telos, an unstoppable downward path toward degeneration and extinction. By reading *The Time Machine* alongside a collection of Wells's early writings, I argue that, while the narrative arc of the novel does map onto what Kelly Hurley calls an "entropic narrative," the figure of the Morlock acts as a point of rupture that pushes back against the narrator's story. Thus, the novel is both a depiction of the anthropocentrically biased science of the late nineteenth century and a critique of the concepts that underpin this science.

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## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

In *The Time Machine* (1895), his first full-length work of fiction, H.G. Wells sends his protagonist into a speculative future to work through a host of late nineteenth-century issues, such as the consequences of Victorian decadence and *fin de siècle* doubts and anxieties regarding cultural progress. In the novel, the unnamed Time Traveller first jumps ahead to the year 802,701 to find that humanity has split into two separate species (the childish Eloi and the brutish Morlocks), both of which strike the Traveller as being the products of an evolutionary process that tended towards degeneration—in simple terms, devolution back to “uncivilized” animality. The Traveller then jumps thirty million years into the future to witness the entropic death of the solar system. Much of the scholarship on *The Time Machine* tends to read the novel as a pessimistic thought experiment, one that traces an inevitable downward decay from the extinction of the human species, through the degeneration of all life on the planet, to the ultimate death of the whole solar system.<sup>1</sup> Putting it concisely, Kelly Hurley claims that *The Time Machine* conforms to an “entropic narrative” model, one that “moves steadily, without detour or interruption, towards a *telos*, albeit the negative *telos* of loss of specificity” (89-90).

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<sup>1</sup> This narrative pattern is described by scholars in a variety of ways. McLean calls it “evolution in reverse” and claims it “is a well-established reading of Wells’s first novel” (“Countdown” 15). Page claims that degeneration is an evolutionary pattern” for Wells in *The Time Machine* (164), and Philmus claims *The Time Machine* follows a “pattern of devolution tending towards extinction” (“Revisions” 24). Philmus elaborates on this “pattern of devolution” in another article: “The oppressive, almost Manichean, threat to the sunlit paradise of the Eloi which the dark and demonic ‘underworld’ of the Morlocks imposes becomes finally the impending destruction of the solar system itself... In retrospect, it seems that the unbalanced struggle between the Eloi and the Morlocks prepares for this final vision, that a terrible logic compels the conclusion” (“Prophesy” 531). Regarding the future year the Traveller journeys to, Parrinder says that “The order of the figures in 802,701 suggests a suitably entropic and cyclical ‘running-down’ number” (41). Finally—though not exhaustively—Sayeau notes that the novel’s entropic ending moves towards an “end of history” (443), but in opposition to most other commentators, Sayeau dubs the “Morlocks *ex machina*” a “restarting of history” (443) in contrast to the Eloi’s “end of history, which also marks the end of literature and literature’s foundation, interest itself” (Sayeau 440).

Although this is certainly a fair summary of the narrative arc of the novel, my thesis will show that the text also pushes back against itself to critique the anthropocentric concepts, taken from late Victorian theories of degeneration, that underpin its entropic narrative.

The pessimistic reading of *The Time Machine* sees in it an expression of the “*fin de siècle* mood” (Bergonzi 4), the fatalistic mindset that swept across Europe in the final two decades of the nineteenth century. Bernard Bergonzi, one of the earliest scholarly commentators on Wells’s work, claims that “The *fin de siècle* mood produced, in turn, the feeling of *fin du globe*, the sense that the whole elaborate intellectual and social order of the nineteenth century was trembling on the brink of dissolution” (4). William Greenslade locates the source of this mood in “a paradox” that gripped European society at the close of the century:

There was a paradox to be explained, and it was, in simple terms, the growing sense in the last decades of the century of a lack of synchrony between the rhetoric of progress, the confident prediction by the apostles of *laissez-faire* of ever increasing prosperity and wealth, and the facts on the ground, the evidence in front of people’s eyes, of poverty and degradation at the heart of ever richer empires. (15)

*The Time Machine* does not seem at all out of place in a decade marked by this paradox; the Eloi/Morlock split is as much an allegory for the economic disparity between the upper and lower classes as it is a product of scientific speculation. Furthermore, this paradox led to “The growth of degeneration into [a] fully fledged explanatory myth,” a myth that tried to resolve this paradox by “foster[ing] a sense that what might really be happening to civilization lay somehow hidden, buried from sight” (Greenslade 15). As an

entropic narrative charting the downward degenerating arc of life on earth from human to beast to cold, lifeless silence, *The Time Machine* seems to espouse this “explanatory myth” and Bergonzi appears justified in claiming that Wells “was, in essentials, a *fin de siècle* writer” (3).

When read against Wells’s earlier writings, however, the author’s decision to use an entropic narrative as the model for his first novel seems somewhat out of character. The work of Robert M. Philmus and David Y. Hughes reveals that Wells began his writing career not as a novelist but as an essayist, publishing “Over two hundred items... between 1887 and 1898” (Wells, *Early Writings* 1). The subject matter of these essays varies, but several of them deal with pertinent scientific questions of the day, especially regarding zoology and evolution. Such essays as “Zoological Retrogression” (1891), “On Extinction” (1893), and “The Rate of Change in Species” (1894) demonstrate Wells’s thorough knowledge of the theories and debates concurrently dominating the field of biology, knowledge that stemmed from and built upon the scientific education he had received between 1884 and 1890.<sup>2</sup> Wells’s early essays attest to the fact that he “assimilated the critical spirit of scientific enquiry” from this scientific training (*Early Writings* 2): “the young Wells was continually experimenting with ideas. Virtually all his essays and reviews dealing with science set out to prove, or rather test, hypotheses by referring to the evidence for them and examining their consequences” (3). Central to Wells’s preoccupation was the testing of hypotheses concerning the consequences of evolutionary theory, since, for “Wells, as for his contemporaries, the center of biological

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<sup>2</sup> In his introduction to *The Time Machine*, Ruddick reveals that Wells accepted a full scholarship to the Normal School of Science in 1884 (16). Although Wells lost his scholarship in 1887, he would eventually receive a B.Sc. in zoology and be “elected a Fellow of the Zoological Society” in 1890 (19).

thinking had become the theory of evolution” (3). As Philmus and Hughes point out, the testing of these hypotheses led Wells to a staunchly anti-anthropocentric stance: Evolution’s “corollary, diametrically at odds with anthropocentrism, was that *homo sapiens* is an accident and an episode in natural history. At least until about 1896, Wells was preoccupied with that notion; essay after essay assaults the anthropocentric fallacy” (8). This anti-anthropocentric vision of evolutionary change, however, was not universally agreed upon by scientists or even by evolutionary zoologists. Darwin’s theory of natural selection, at this point only three decades old, had to compete against other potential scientific explanations—to say nothing of the theological rebukes—that attempted to account for the origin of speciation.<sup>3</sup> The period in which Wells wrote his early scientific essays (as well as his early scientific romances, of which *The Time Machine* was the first) was marked by this debate, and not all camps believed it necessary to retract humankind’s status as the central goal of evolutionary change.<sup>4</sup>

When their respective positions towards evolutionary “progress” are considered, the competing evolutionary theories at the heart of this debate map onto three different narrative models: Eric White’s progressive metanarrative model and his non-telic “picaresque” model, and Hurley’s aforementioned entropic narrative model. These terms were not used by the nineteenth-century biologists engaged in this debate, but are descriptively accurate labels nonetheless. Relying on the work of Jean-Francois Lyotard, White distinguishes between the modern notion of “historical *grand récits* or metanarratives as versions of the past that treat the historical process as inherently

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<sup>3</sup> In his introduction to *The Origin of Species*, Carroll states that “There was a long interregnum, lasting from about 1859 to about 1920, in which uncertainty over the mechanism of heredity and the extent of geological time placed the theory of natural selection in doubt” (Darwin 54).

<sup>4</sup> As I show below, even Darwin espoused an anthropocentric position in *The Origin of Species*.



progressive” and the postmodern “view that no fixed direction has been inscribed in history from its outset” (63). Building on White’s work, Hurley posits a third possibility: the “straightforward reversal of progress” of the entropic narrative (89), to which *The Time Machine* conforms. As opposing models, the progressive metanarrative and the entropic narrative are both associated with two different yet related narrative “genres”; while the progressive metanarrative “approximates to a comic romance in which the hero’s final triumph is assured from the beginning of the tale” (White 63), the entropic narrative “bears rough similarities to tragic plotting,” where the “the achievements, or at least the consolidations, of a ‘forward-moving’ evolutionary process are undone” (Hurley 90). In contrast to these opposing models, “from a postmodern vantage, the narrative form that history most resembles would therefore be that of the picaresque, a ‘degree zero’ form of emplotment whose principle of articulation is not teleological but successive: ‘and... and... and....’ The picaro merely manages to survive from one escapade to the next” (White 63). Furthermore, out of the three evolutionary narrative forms only the picaresque is properly anti-anthropocentric. Humanity is the ideal apotheosis for both the proponent of the progressive evolutionary metanarrative and that of the entropic narrative; the only difference is that the former believes this apotheosis to perpetuate indefinitely, whereas the latter believes the Sisyphean rock must eventually roll back down after the summit is conquered.<sup>5</sup> Only in the picaresque narrative is

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<sup>5</sup> The anthropocentrism implicit in the “*fin de siècle* mood” (Bergonzi 4) still, to a certain extent, affects us today, and an analysis of it can shed light on our contemporary attitudes towards the threat of global extinction as a result of climate change. Gillian Beer says that “Our present attitude to extinction is freighted with human guilt: extinctions are understood not as the outcome of external catastrophic forces or long-extended depletion but as the outcome of one species’ current greed, folly, and neglect of posterity. This assertion of human responsibility may be tinged with hubris. Being the final generation has grandeur as well as desolation” (325). In other words, regardless of factual probability, the threat of human and/or global extinction can serve as a justification for anthropocentric attitudes.

humankind truly “an accident and an episode in natural history” (*Early Writings* 8), the “rogue or knave” (“Picaresque”) that just happens “to survive from one escapade to the next” (White 63).<sup>6</sup>

While I do not wish to imply, anachronistically, that he was in any way a postmodernist, Wells’s early essays do espouse an anti-anthropocentric, picaresque model of evolution that anticipates the turn away from metanarratives as totalizing explanations for the diverse phenomena of evolutionary history.<sup>7</sup> It is particularly striking, then, that Wells chose to model his first full novel after an entropic narrative. What J.R. Hammond says of *The Time Machine* in fact applies more accurately to Wells’s early essays: “The notion of man as heir to all the ages... gives way to a much less complacent idea: that man is simply one of many species and is subject to the same immutable laws governing all forms of life” (76). While certainly subject to the same physical and biological laws affecting all life on Earth, humankind is still depicted as something superior in *The Time Machine*, a pinnacle of evolutionary development that nevertheless must succumb to an all-pervasive entropic principle. By launching the narrative forward from the year 802,701 to the “Further Vision” thirty million years later, the text conflates the degeneration of humanity’s descendants with the entropic death of the planet. This narrative sleight of hand implies that the decline from the apex of human civilization to degenerate dystopia to planetary extinction is one single descending line, thereby disregarding the fact that there is still time in the interim for evolution to create a

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<sup>6</sup> The OED defines “picaresque” as such: “Originally: relating to or characteristic of a rogue or knave. Now chiefly: designating a genre of narrative fiction which deals episodically with the adventures of an individual, usually a roguish and dishonest but attractive hero.”

<sup>7</sup> While White locates the shift in evolutionary biology from metanarrative to picaresque in the 1970s with the work of Stephen Jay Gould and Richard Lewontin (71), Hurley argues that we can see examples of this picaresque model of evolutionary change in Wells’s “Zoological Retrogression,” which will be taken up in greater detail in Chapter 1.

variety of new organisms of various complexity. Furthermore, the Time Traveller himself proves his own superiority by adapting to this alien environment and besting his beastly adversaries.

It is not the purpose of this thesis to determine why Wells chose to move from a picaresque model of evolutionary development in his essays to an entropic narrative model for his first full novel.<sup>8</sup> Instead, I intend to show that Wells's "tale told in quotation marks" (Northrop Frye, quoted in Bergonzi 42-43) is characterized by its narrator's unreliability and too-human frailties, and thus it resists a single interpretive synthesis and pushes back against its narrator's interpretation of events. By shifting from writing scientific essays to an extended first-person narrative, Wells wrote a time travelling narrator who interprets his experiences through an anthropocentric and entropic narrative lens. At the same time, the facts as recounted and the actions undertaken by the Traveller undercut some of the narrator's conclusions, thereby introducing points of picaresque rupture that act as anti-anthropocentric critique. To argue this point, my first chapter will first present a full account of Wells's picaresque evolutionary model before turning, in the second chapter, to an intertextual reading of *The Time Machine* alongside some of Wells's early writings.

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<sup>8</sup> There are many possibilities, and it is unlikely that any one is the single "right" answer. Since entropic fears were in vogue at the time, Greenslade is likely justified in highlighting the economic incentive, stating that Wells "colluded with the reader's understandable fascination with these bio-social myths—with an eye on the market-place" (7). Huxley's publication of *Evolution and Ethics* in 1894 also likely played a part, since the entropic scene of a once luscious garden having succumbed to the inevitable "downward course" of the "cosmic process" (Huxley 45) is a defining feature of both. Furthermore, Wells's pessimism might have also been influenced by a "serious lung condition—it was wrongly diagnosed as tuberculosis [in 1887]—that would cause him, on and off for... twelve years, to cough up blood and feel the worst" (Ruddick, in Wells, *Machine* 18).

## CHAPTER 2: “ZOOLOGICAL RETROGRESSION” AS CRITIQUE OF EVOLUTIONARY METANARRATIVES

Perhaps nowhere else does Wells better demonstrate an anti-anthropocentric model of evolutionary change than in “Zoological Retrogression,” a piece he published four years before *The Time Machine*. While the essay explicitly critiques the teleological anthropocentrism of progressive evolutionary metanarratives, the arguments of the essay, and the imagery used to model these arguments, also serve to undermine implicitly the anthropocentrism of *fin de siècle* entropic narratives. According to Philmus and Hughes “Typically, [Wells] begins an essay by outlining a commonly held belief” before presenting an “opposite idea,” “the significance of which (as he develops it) either controverts a popular conception or renders it paradoxical” (105). “Zoological Retrogression” is no exception. The essay begins with Wells’s characterization of what he understands to be the “educated public’s” widely held notion of evolution: “It has decided that in the past the great scroll of nature has been steadily unfolding to reveal a constantly richer harmony of forms and successively higher grades of being, and it assumes that this ‘evolution’ will continue with increasing velocity under the supervision of its extreme expression—man” (158).<sup>9</sup> Wells dubs this belief in evolutionary progress “excelsior biology,” insisting that it is “a popular and poetic creation” (159) that nonetheless “receives neither in the geological record nor in the studies of the phylogenetic embryologist an entirely satisfactory confirmation” (158). The “great scroll

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<sup>9</sup> Huxley would also claim in *Evolution and Ethics* that “Taken in its popular signification [evolution] means progressive development, that is, gradual change from a condition of relative uniformity to one of relative complexity,” but he would add that “its connotation has been widened to include the phenomena of retrogressive metamorphosis, that is, of progress from a condition of relative complexity to one of relative uniformity” (6).

of nature... steadily unfolding,” the idea to which Wells’s educated public clings, is the *grand récit* of progressive evolutionism, a metanarrative model with “man” as its “final triumph.” To contest this progressive metanarrative, Wells posits evolutionary degeneration as the “opposite idea” against, and yet simultaneously the “essential complement” of, the “suggestion of advance in biological phenomena” (158). Crucially, “Wells does not simply champion retrogression against the optimist’s view of progression; he asks for a contrapuntal view of biological history that will accept both directions even in their contradiction” (Huntington 7). In other words, it is by introducing degeneration as an essential complement as opposed to an all-encompassing explanatory concept that Wells differentiates the arguments of “Zoological Retrogression” from other contemporary theories of degeneration, and, as I shall show in this section, the essay succeeds in positing a model of evolutionary change that is both anti-teleological and anti-anthropocentric.

According to Hurley, we can see an explicit example of Wells’s picaresque model of evolutionary change in the following passage from “Zoological Retrogression”:

In fact, the path of life, so frequently compared to some steadily-rising mountain-slope, is far more like a footway worn by leisurely wanderers in an undulating country... the *real* form of a phylum, or line of descent, is far more like the course of a busy man moving about a great city. Sometimes it goes underground, sometimes it doubles and twists in tortuous streets, now it rises far overhead along some viaduct, and, again, the river is taken advantage of in these varied journeyings to and fro. Upward and downward these threads of pedigree interweave, slowly

working out a pattern of accomplished things that is difficult to interpret, but in which scientific observers certainly fail to discover that inevitable tendency to higher and better things with which the word ‘evolution’ is popularly associated. (*Early Writings* 159; also quoted in Hurley 89)

This quotation, according to Hurley, depicts a “model of random movement, non-directive, non-telic, aimless and errant” (89). This passage shows that Wells was trying to think past the simple two-dimensional view of evolutionary progress towards a multi-dimensional model that can properly account for the non-telic complexity of evolution; the phylum is a flâneur with three dimensions through which to amble, and not a traveller with a mountain to conquer and only one road upon which to travel. And yet, this passage alone does not suffice to show the full anti-anthropocentric thrust of the essay; Hurley presents the quotation and its picaresque quality not as a comment on anthropocentrism but as an entryway to a discussion of “a randomly-working Nature” in the “*fin-de-siècle* Gothic” (90). Indeed, Wells maintains in this passage the language of telic direction, words like “upwards” and “downwards,” which characterizes both progressive and entropic metanarratives, and elsewhere in the essay he includes phrases such as “sunk to rise again” (164) and “rapid progress has often been followed by rapid extinction” (167). One might also question the anti-anthropocentric nature of an allegorical model that casts “a busy man” as the main actor. Thus, a more thorough comparison between the essay as a whole and the other evolutionary models of the day is necessary to tease out the full anti-anthropocentric thrust of the essay.

## 2.1 Progressive Evolution

At the time, the strongest proponent for the inherently progressive theory of evolution was Herbert Spencer,<sup>10</sup> and thus, according to Steven McLean, “Wells undoubtedly has Spencer’s developmental hypothesis in mind” at the beginning of “Zoological Retrogression” (“Countdown” 15). Inspired by the Lamarckian<sup>11</sup> notion of a “progressive transformation of species that began with the spontaneous generation of simple microorganisms” (Carroll, in Darwin 29), Spencer developed and put forth his developmental hypothesis, “essentially [arguing] that the movement from homogeneous to heterogeneous that characterizes organic progress is an all-pervading principle underlying all evolution” (Maclean, “Countdown” 16). In other words, Spencer claimed that an inevitably progressive development from the simple to the complex was an intrinsic feature of all aspects of creation: “Whether it be in the development of the Earth, in the development of life on its surface, in the development of Society, of Government, of Manufacturers, of Commerce, of Language, Literature, Science, Art, this same evolution of the simple into the complex, through successive differentiations, holds throughout” (Spencer, quoted in McLean, “Countdown” 16). Spencer’s increasingly heterogeneous universe is akin to the educated public’s “great scroll of nature” that “reveal[s] a constantly richer harmony of forms and successively higher grades of being” (Wells, *Early Writings* 158), and thus it is no great surprise to find that, like Wells’s educated public, Spencer places mankind at the pinnacle of this progressive process,

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<sup>10</sup> According to Carroll, Spencer was the “second most prominent English evolutionist of the nineteenth century” (Darwin 31).

<sup>11</sup> “[Ernst] Mayr notes that Lamarck was the first scientist to propose a consistent theory of gradual evolution” (Carroll, in Darwin 29).

calling man “the latest and most heterogeneous creature” (quoted in McLean, “Countdown” 16).

While Kelly Hurley is certainly correct to say that the eventual effect of Darwin’s work was “to demolish the model of human centrality in the universe” (56), the popularity of Spencer’s progressive evolutionism attests to the stubbornness by which humanity refused to give up the belief in its own centrality. Indeed, Hurley notes that “Even the Anglican Church managed to come to terms with Darwinism in the latter decades of the century by substituting Darwin’s theory of natural selection for the idea of ‘Divine Purpose,’ so that the human race could be seen as God’s ‘supreme achievement,’ the perfected product of a biological selection engineered by Providence” (57). Even Darwin himself, despite “scoff[ing] contemptuously at Lamarck” and his “idea of an inherent tendency to progress” (Carroll, in Darwin 30), and despite also claiming that Spenser’s “fundamental generalisations... are of such a nature that they do not seem to me to be of any strictly scientific use” (*Origin* 436), nonetheless concluded *The Origin of Species* by advocating for a progressive view of evolution:

When I view all beings not as special creations, but as lineal descendants of some few beings which lived long before the first bed of the Silurian system was deposited, they seem to me to become *ennobled*... And as natural selection works solely by and for the good of each being, all corporeal and mental endowments will tend towards *perfection*... Thus, from the war of nature, from famine and death the most *exalted object* which we are capable of conceiving, namely, the production of the *higher animals*, directly follows. (397-98; emphasis added)



Since this passage is addressed to those “Authors of the highest eminence [that] seem to be fully satisfied with the view that each species has been independently created” (Darwin 397), Darwin’s apparent optimistic progressivism in this passage may be written off as a rhetorical strategy meant only to convince skeptical theologians to take his theories seriously, and not the honest opinion of Darwin himself. Indeed, Peter Morton points out that Darwin “was well aware, as his letters if not the *Origin* tell us, that ‘perfection’ might mean one thing in a biological context and quite another in a social” (95). Darwin’s use of value laden terms related to the notion of perfection— “higher animals,” “ennobled,” “exalted object,” etc.—may also have been the naive rhetoric of a writer who “believed that people would let him speak out as a biologist only” (Morton 95). However, Eric White is correct to state that, “Although circumspect on the topic of human evolution in the *Origin*, among ‘higher animals’ Darwin would surely include man, who occupies, Darwin says in the *Descent*, ‘the very summit of the organic scale’” (65). Thus, while Darwin’s theory of natural selection did help to affect “a radical destabilization of what had formerly been a fixed boundary between man and animal” (Hurley 56), his value laden rhetoric also contributed to the anthropocentric optimism that Wells would later chastise the “educated public” for.

From the above, one can siphon out three important premises of the progressive evolutionary metanarrative, each of which builds on the one preceding it. Firstly, as I have already made clear, this model assumes that evolutionary progress is inevitable, whether as an intrinsic principle (Spencer) or as the necessary consequence of a more fundamental principle like natural selection (Darwin). Secondly, evolutionary progress is fundamentally understood as a move from the homogeneous to the heterogeneous, from

the simple to the complex, and this movement is imbued with a system of value that equates greater worth with greater complexity. To say that an organism is more advanced or higher than another is to say, according to this model, that the organism is more complex, and Darwin's use of "ennobled" to describe the most recent products of natural selection sets up a hierarchy of value that places the "more developed" organisms as more valuable than the "less developed." Finally, "man" is both the most complex and most ennobled animal. This final point carries with it the shadow of Eurocentrism; Spencer includes society, government, language, literature, and science in the list of things that "develop" towards greater complexity, all deriving from European definitions of the same, and so a "savage versus civilized" dichotomy necessarily follows. Thus, to be properly anti-anthropocentric, a model of evolutionary change must do away with any hierarchy that attributes value to "higher organisms," throwing out the three premises of the progressive metanarrative, and only using words like "higher" and "lower" in place of "complex" and "simple" at the risk of being misunderstood.

## 2.2 Degeneration

By positing degeneration as the "opposite idea" against this optimistic evolutionary progressivism, Wells makes the first step towards rejecting an anthropocentric model of evolution. However, while evolutionary models that posit the existence of evolutionary degeneration must by definition disagree with the first premise of progressive metanarratives, they do not necessarily reject the other two. The mere reversal of the direction of evolutionary progression does not by itself undermine the value-laden hierarchies present in the progressive position, and may instead further

entrench a belief in a “civilized” human superiority that must be defended against degeneration towards a “savage” animal world. Thus, a distinction must be made between Wells’s argument in “Zoological Retrogression” and other contemporary theories of degeneration, of which there were quite a few. The prevalence of degeneration as an entropic narrative rose in the final two decades of the nineteenth century, when Spencerian optimism began to give way to a growing fear that European progress would not continue. The shift was not immediate or all encompassing, of course; Wells estimates his optimistic “educated public” to be “three-quarters of the people who use the phrase, ‘organic evolution’” (159), thereby implying that only the remaining quarter had heard the somber knell of degeneration and deduced its less optimistic consequences. And yet, only four years after the appearance of “Zoological Retrogression,” Max Nordau’s infamous *Degeneration*, “the book of the 1890’s” (Hurley 76), was translated into English. That its English translation appeared the same year as the publication of the completed, non-serialized version of *The Time Machine*, says something about the growing presence of degeneration in the cultural consciousness of *fin de siècle* Europe.<sup>12</sup>

Despite the fact that, “At no point in its existence... did degeneration constitute a single, coherent scientific theory” (Dawson 207), some general remarks about its popular late Victorian formulation can be made. Morton points out that, while it may be the case that “a simple concern with moral or social degeneration is a perennial cultural need”

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<sup>12</sup> It is worth pointing out that Nordau’s theories were not universally supported. Hurley notes that “Despite... the immense popular success of *Degeneration*, which ran through numerous editions and translations, the book was received skeptically and reviewed scornfully by the medical community” (180). Furthermore, Ledger and Luckhurst insist that “Its contemporary significance should not... be overstated”: “It was laughably dismissed... [Bernard] Shaw humorously identifies Nordau’s tirade as ‘nothing but the familiar delusions of the used-up man that the world is going to the dogs’; [William] James sees it as the work of ‘a victim of insane delusions about a conspiracy of hysterics and degenerates’” (2). Thus, the success of Nordau’s *Degeneration* should serve as indicative of the popularity, but not the unanimity, of degeneration as a cultural mythology.

(87), the late Victorian pessimism “took on a sharper outline” when biologists and astrophysicists made it clear that “certain established assumptions about man *as a species* (and not simply about certain races, nations or cultures) might need to be abandoned” (Morton 88). Biological theories of evolutionary degeneration bestowed scientific legitimacy upon *fin de siècle* fears, and, conversely, “the evolutionary epic shifted decisively from a descriptive narrative of the evolution of life to a prescriptive one” (Hesketh 37). This prescriptive turn further helped to legitimize social and moral divisions:

The late Victorian establishment and the propertied classes generally harbored anxieties about poverty and crime, about public health and national and imperial fitness, about decadent artists, ‘new women’ and homosexuals... Degeneration facilitated discourses of sometimes crude differentiation: between the normal and the abnormal, the healthy and morbid, the ‘fit’ and ‘unfit’, the civilized and the primitive. (Greenslade 1-2)

Thus, degeneration theory not only maintained the hierarchies present in a teleological view of evolution, but also further exacerbated the gulf between the higher and the lower by insisting that “degenerates” were threatening humankind’s pursuit of perfection.

Degeneration theory became a full-blown entropic evolutionary narrative when coupled with contemporary astronomical calculations regarding the lifespan of the solar system. Lord Kelvin’s 1851 formulation of the Second Law of Thermodynamics and his calculations regarding the lifespan of the sun led him to predict that our star would burn out in only a few million years (Morton 25-27, 89). Thomas Huxley, whose lectures on

evolutionary biology at the Normal School for Science inspired the young Wells to pursue his zoological interests, combined this “cosmic process” towards entropy with evolutionary degeneration to describe the human condition as a struggle against nature’s inevitable “Sisyphean process” (48):

That which lies before the human race is a constant struggle to maintain and improve, in opposition to the State of Nature, the State of Art of an organized polity; in which, and by which, man may develop a worthy civilization, capable of maintaining and constantly improving itself, until the evolution of our globe shall have entered so far upon its downward course that the cosmic process resumes its sway; and, once more, the State of Nature prevails over the surface of the planet. (45)

This passage, from Huxley’s 1894 *Ethics and Evolution*, is a concise formulation of the entropic narrative model; it inverts the first premise of the progressive metanarrative while retaining the hierarchies implicit in the other two. For Huxley, “Civilization is the expression of human intelligence devising an order, based on ethical ideals, different from nature” (Huntington 13), and thus, while the fundamental arc of the universe is an entropic narrative towards death and ultimate extinction, the notion of “man” as the ideal pinnacle remains.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Huxley’s conservative push to defend civilization against degenerate barbarism can be seen in his attitude toward aestheticism. Dawson points out that, “despite [his] apparent cultural liberalism, aestheticism was consistently denounced by Huxley for what was considered its uniquely repulsive transgression of all conventional moral and artistic standards” (192).

### 2.3 Wells's Strategic Retrogression

Considering the concept was in vogue at the time, Wells takes it for granted that his audience has a general knowledge of degeneration, and thus he does not define the concept in “Zoological Regression,” at times substituting it for synonyms such as degradation or retrogression. We can find a precise definition of this “opposite idea” in the work of E. Ray Lankester, from whom Wells took many of the ideas that would appear in “Zoological Retrogression.”<sup>14</sup> Lankester began his scientific career as a proponent of Spencerian progressivism, but his attitude changed after studying “the evolutionary status of marine parasites” in 1871 (Barnett 208). In *Degeneration: A Chapter in Darwinism*, Lankester outlines three possible outcomes of evolutionary change:

It is clearly enough possible for a set of forces such as we sum up under the head “natural selection” to so act on the structure of an organism as to produce one of three results, namely, these: to keep it *in statu quo*; to increase the complexity of its structure; or lastly, to diminish the complexity of its structure. We have as possibilities either BALANCE, or ELABORATION, or DEGENERATION. (24)

“Structural complexity,” according to Barnett, “was Lankester’s acid test” (210). If an organism’s bodily structure simplified, whether over time because of evolution or within a single lifetime via metamorphosis, then by Lankester’s definition one would say it had

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<sup>14</sup> Barnett provides evidence that Wells was “well aware of Lankester’s work” as early as 1890 (214), and calls “Zoological Retrogression” a “short article summarizing Lankester’s account of degeneration” (212). Lankester was also “one of Wells’s examiners for the B.Sc.” (Barnett 212). While Wells was partially indebted to Huxley for this “opposite idea”—it was in Huxley’s lectures, after all, that “Wells found the germs of a whole string of articles and stories, and he especially took to heart Huxley’s careful and much elaborated disarticulation of progress from evolution” (Morton 101)—the ideas expressed in “Zoological Retrogression” are much more explicitly inspired by Lankester.

degenerated. Furthermore, Lankester adds to his definition by relating the simplicity of an organism's structure to its ability to act: "Degeneration may be defined as a gradual change of the structure in which the organism becomes adapted to less varied and less complex conditions of life... In Degeneration there is suppression of form, corresponding to the cessation of work" (26-27; also quoted in Barnett 210).<sup>15</sup> Thus, Lankester speaks of evolution in much the same way as Spencer, imagining evolutionary "advance" in terms of a movement from the simple to the complex. The major difference, of course, is that Spencer did not admit the same prevalence of a movement in the opposite direction.

Wells does not cite Lankester by name in "Zoological Retrogression," but the essay espouses much the same position as *Degeneration*, and both include lengthy descriptions of the ascidian, or sea slug, as an example of a degenerated organism.<sup>16</sup> Wells then builds off Lankester's work to make two points crucial to the anti-anthropocentric critique of the piece. First, Wells enlarges degeneration's role in the evolutionary process, highlighting the possibility that degeneration at one point might be necessary for the sake of a later move towards complexity. A "strategic retrogression" (164), Wells claims, was necessary for the rise of animal life on land, since it was the Silurian mud-fish, "less active and powerful than their rivals in the sea," that eventually evolved the lungs necessary to breath in the open air (166). Wells calls degeneration a "plastic process" (159), a phrase which resonates with the content of "The Limits of Individual Plasticity," an article published in 1895 wherein Wells claims that "a living

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<sup>15</sup> From a twenty-first-century position, complexity of the organism and adaptability to complex situations are not as obviously linked as Lankester makes them seem. Some of the simplest of life forms are capable of surviving in diverse environments, such as the microscopic tardigrades, or water bears (see Guarino). Morton puts it concisely when he states, "Devolution in form should properly be seen, not as backsliding, but as a new and successful adaptation to a fresh ecological challenge" (94).

<sup>16</sup> See pp. 32-40 of *Degeneration* and pp. 160-62 of "Zoological Retrogression" for a detailed account of the Ascidian life cycle.

being may... be regarded as raw material, as something plastic, something that may be shaped and altered” (*Early Writings* 36). Thus, degeneration, as a “plastic process” capable of affecting a “strategic retrogression,” is a fundamental aspect of an evolutionary process that creates novel forms and adaptations. Furthermore, Wells goes as far as to say that if we were to add to the “list [of degenerate species] the names of all those genera the ancestors of which have at any time sunk to rise again, it is probable that we should have to write down *the entire roll of the animal kingdom!*” (164). This undercuts any attempt to pass a judgement upon the evolutionary worth of a species; “degenerate” organisms cease to be the indicator of an evolutionary line moving towards extinction and instead point to the evolutionary value of simplicity. Wells further severs the link between evolutionary degeneration and moral judgment when he states that “Isolated cases of degeneration have long been known, and popular attention has been drawn to them in order to point well-meant moral lessons [sic], the fallacious analogy of species to individual being employed” (158). In other words, while these moral lessons might be “well meant,” any attempt to base a value judgment or a moral distinction on evolutionary biology must be regarded as nothing more than misleading analogy. Thus, Wells differentiates himself in “Zoological Retrogression” from the other degenerationists of the day, working towards a definition of degeneration as the move from complex to simple without any value attached to this change.

Second, and building from the first, Wells uses the proof of evolutionary degeneration as the foundation for his anti-anthropocentric critique of excelsior biology. Wells assures his reader that there is “no guarantee in scientific knowledge of man’s permanence or permanent ascendancy” despite—and here Wells uses the Lankesterian



language of adaptable complexity—the fact that “He has a remarkably variable organisation” (168). The essay ends on a strikingly anti-anthropocentric note:

Still, so far as any scientist can tell us, it may be that... Nature is, in unsuspected obscurity, equipping some now humble creature with wider possibilities of appetite, endurance, or destruction, to rise in the fullness of time and sweep *homo* away into the darkness from which his universe arose. The Coming Beast must certainly be reckoned in any anticipatory calculations regarding the Coming Man. (168)

While the term “Coming Beast” may first strike one as somewhat derogatory, Wells appears to exude admiration for the beast, since its “wider possibilities” would not be indicative of a degeneration away from human perfection but instead an acknowledgment of the possibility of non-human evolutionary “advancement” (in the Lankesterian sense of greater complexity). Far from being evolution’s “extreme expression” (Wells, 158), humanity is just one organism amongst many others, subject to natural laws that may as easily lead to degeneration or elaboration, and not at all the ideal higher life form towards which all evolution strives. Thus, Wells picaresque does away with the three premises of evolutionary metanarratives: evolutionary “progress” is not at all guaranteed; degeneration as a “plastic process” undermines value judgments that attempt to create evolutionary hierarchies; and humanity is not the highest ideal or goal of evolution, nor is its permanent dominance guaranteed. It is worth repeating, however, that Wells was not a postmodernist, and not merely because he died decades before the term would be coined. His casual use of terms like “higher,” “advance,” and “progress” while discussing evolutionary change towards greater complexity reveals that he was indeed a writer of his

own time, subservient to the discourse of the day despite his attempts to think beyond it. Nevertheless, the evolutionary model that he presents, the three dimensional model of the phylum moving like a busy man through the city, does point towards a model of evolutionary change that is properly non-telic, and therefore properly anti-anthropocentric. In the next chapter, I will show that *The Time Machine's* entropic narrative structure, as formulated and recounted by the time travelling narrator, is complicated by points of picaresque rupture that enrich the text's vision of the future and imbue the text with the complexity of "Zoological Retrogression's" model of evolutionary change.

### CHAPTER 3: MORLOCKS: ENTROPIC SYMPTOM OR STRATEGIC RETROGRESSION?

While Wells does retain the use of telic language in “Zoological Retrogression,” he does so sparingly. The Time Traveller’s story in *The Time Machine*, however, is largely characterized by it. Recounting the sensation of moving forward through time, the Traveller exclaims, “What strange developments of humanity, what wonderful advances upon our rudimentary civilization, I thought, might not appear when I came to look nearly into the dim elusive world that raced and fluctuated by my eyes!” (78). His optimism is very quickly shattered when he comes to learn that humanity’s future is not one of “advanced” knowledge, art, technology, or morality. Both the Eloi and Morlocks strike the Traveller as having degenerated physically, mentally, and culturally as compared to their human ancestors. The Eloi’s degeneration is presented as an evolutionary backpedaling in maturity, the descendants of humanity trapped in a perpetual childhood: upon encountering them he notices that they possess a “certain childlike ease” (82); he feels “like a school-master amidst children” when trying to work out an understanding of their language (86); describing his first day in the future world, he recounts, the Eloi “would come up to me with eager cries of astonishment, like children, but, like children, they would soon stop examining me, and wander away after some other toy” (87). The Morlock’s degeneration, of which much more will be said below, is presented as more extreme and monstrous than that of the Eloi. In opposition to the Traveller’s interpretation of the future, however, the Morlocks demonstrate an intelligence and ingenuity that undermines the entropic narrative model that shapes the story. Coupled with the Traveller’s lack of reliability, the Morlocks push back against the

text's narrative structure, thereby undermining the anthropocentrism that shapes the narrator's story.

### 3.1 Entropic Morlocks

The Time Traveller's opinion of the Morlocks is clear from the name he chooses to give them, a name that "combin[es] allusions to 'mullock' (garbage, low-class human trash), 'warlock' (evil spirit, male witch), 'Moloch' (god of Ammonites to whom children were sacrificed...), 'Mohock' (an eighteenth-century London ruffian), 'more' or 'mort' (means 'death' in French) and 'locks' (suggesting both imprisonment and hairiness)" (Wells, *Machine* 111 n.4). Furthermore, while recounting his first encounter with one of the Eloi's evolutionary cousins, the Traveller describes the Morlock as "ape-like," a "human spider," and a "bleached, obscene, nocturnal Thing" (107). This fixation on their obscene otherness and beastliness continues throughout the novel, as they are described as "new vermin" (113) and "nauseatingly inhuman" (117). The Traveller learns that the Morlocks are subterranean, hypothesizing that their bleached fur and large red eyes are the result of evolutionary adaptation to millennia of living underground. He also comes to learn that the Morlocks feed off the helpless Eloi "like cattle in the field" (141). His base revulsion of the Morlocks is so strong that he fantasizes about killing them: "And I longed very much to kill a Morlock or so. Very inhuman, you may think, to want to go killing one's own descendants! But it was impossible, somehow, to feel any humanity in the things" (130). This comment is particularly striking when compared to the fear he feels upon arriving in the future world immediately before meeting the Eloi:

What might appear when that hazy curtain was altogether withdrawn? ...  
What if in this interval the race had lost its manliness, and had developed into something inhuman, unsympathetic, and overwhelmingly powerful? I might seem some old-world savage animal, only the more dreadful and disgusting for our common likeness—a foul creature to be incontinently slain. (80)

When the Traveller imagines that he may find a race of humanity's descendants that are further advanced than those of his own time he worries that he will seem savage in comparison, a disgusting creature to be slain. And yet, it is the Traveller who wishes to slay the Morlocks for no other reason than his own irrational disgust. Like his imagined future race of inhuman, unsympathetic, yet greatly advanced beings, the Traveller looks with contempt upon creatures he considers "old-world savage animals."

The Traveller narrowly escapes his final confrontation with the Morlocks, hopping onto his time machine and heading aimlessly "into futurity" (144). As he clings to the time machine, he notices that the movement of the sun across the sky begins to slow despite the fact that his machine continues at the same speed. Eventually the sun comes to rest motionless on the horizon, a phenomenon that the Traveller, demonstrating his knowledge of astronomical science, easily explains: "I perceived by this slowing down of the rising and setting that the work of the tidal drag was done. The earth had come to rest with one face to the sun, even as in our own time the moon faces the earth" (144-45). When he stops the machine he finds himself on a beach in a world of "abominable desolation": "The red eastern sky, the northward blackness, the salt Dead Sea, the stony beach crawling with these foul, slow-stirring monsters [giant crabs], the

uniform poisonous-looking green of the lichenous plants, the thin air that hurts one's lungs: all contributed to the appalling effect" (146-7). He sends himself forward through time again and again, stopping periodically, and after travelling thirty million years into the future he stops a final time to find that the world has succumbed even further to its inevitable entropic death: "I stopped once more, for the crawling multitude of crabs had disappeared, and the red beach, save for its livid green liverworts and lichens, seemed lifeless. And now it was flecked with white. A bitter cold assailed me" (147). The only moving thing he sees is a "a round thing, the size of a football perhaps... and tentacles trailed down from it" (148), a creature (if it can be called such a thing) that embodies Lankester's notion of degeneration as a "suppression of form," a parasitic entity that has lost its "legs, jaws, eyes, and ears" and has become "a mere sac" (Lankester, 159). Having travelled just shy of the ultimate entropic death of the planet and all life on it, the Traveller returns to his own time, haunted by this vision of the earth's inevitable fate.

The Traveller's tale ends at the base of the entropic narrative's downward curve, the last few lethargic breaths of an "evolution in reverse" (McLean "Countdown" 15). The Traveller sees Huxley's predictions with his own eyes, the consequence of an entropic evolutionary principle that has "entered so far upon its downward course that the cosmic process resumes its sway; and, once more, the State of Nature prevails over the surface of the planet" (Huxley 45). Thus, while the novel reverses the direction of the first premise of the progressive metanarrative, it seems to promote the retention of the other two. The Traveller does not hesitate to pass judgment on both the Eloi and the Morlocks, both of which he considers lowly remnants of a human civilization that has "long since passed its zenith and was now far fallen into decay" (Wells, *Machine* 111).

While the Traveller empathizes with the Eloi, he does so as a parent might with a child. He does not at all think of them his equal, since “His strength, technological know-how, and culture elevate him in his own mind” (Hume 234). These “pretty little people” (Wells, *Machine* 82), with their “indescribably frail” bodies, “flushed face[s]” (81), and lack of obvious differences in sex or gender (88-89), resonate with the degenerationist’s worst fears regarding “decadent artists, ‘new women’ and homosexuals” (Greenslade 1)<sup>17</sup>. Thus, while the Traveller cannot help but empathize with the Eloi because of their “human form” (Wells, *Machine* 125), they are, for the Traveller, living remnants of a civilization that has “lost its manliness” (80).

The Morlocks do not receive any empathy from the Traveller at all. The Morlocks do not confront the Traveller aggressively until much later in the story, and yet the Traveller “Instinctively... loathe[s] them” and regards them as “inhuman and malign” (119). The Traveller looks at the Morlocks as the more degenerate, and thus more morally reprehensible, of the two descendants of humanity because, according to David J. Lake, “he has subconsciously equated them with the great and last Enemy; they are symbolically that white cold death which will eventually overwhelm the Earth and every descendant of mankind” (Lake 79). The Traveller calls the Morlocks “mere creatures of the halflight” (Wells, *Machine* 105), thereby associating them with the perpetual sunset he encounters in the “Further Vision” and poetically christening them “the ghostly harbingers of the end” (Lake 81). Similarly, Hume calls the link between the Morlock degeneration and the entropic final vision a “Thermodynamic fantasy” (247), a connection that is more “cultural and ideological” than it is “natural and inevitable”

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<sup>17</sup> See Bergonzi (48-49), Dawson (216-217), and Hurley (83-84) on the connection between the figure of the Eloi and Victorian decadence and aestheticism.

(247). Thus, the Morlocks symbolically stand in as the entropic principle dooming all life on the planet in much the same way that anything deemed “abnormal... morbid... ‘unfit’... [and] primitive” (Greenslade 2) was, for the degenerationists, symptoms of a decline towards moral disorder and the destruction of civilization. And while humanity is doomed to degeneration and ultimate extinction, the Traveller’s tale paints himself, and thus humanity as a whole, as a heroic yet tragic character, demonstrating human superiority by struggling against a savage environment and surviving on account of greater strength, intelligence, and adaptability.

### 3.2 Inventive Morlocks

And yet, just as the “degenerates” of the late nineteenth century were not harbingers of the end of European society, so too do the Morlocks resist the simple entropic narrative model that shapes the Traveller’s story. While the Traveller insists that the “modification of the human type was even far more profound” in the Morlocks than in the Eloi (Wells, *Machine* 111), Steven McLean rightly comments, “the Morlocks have adapted to their environment far more successfully than the Eloi. This is because, due to a shortage of food, they have not been introduced to the same biological security that inevitably tends to retrogression, and hence intelligence... has returned” (*Early Fiction* 26). Early on in the events of the year 802,701, the Traveller finds that his machine has been dragged behind the bronze panels of a large pedestal, upon which stands a towering statue of a white sphinx. He eventually concludes that it is the Morlocks that have taken his machine, and when he returns to the pedestal days later with the intention of breaking in he finds the doors wide open. Expecting a trap, the Traveller walks in knowing that he



can time-travel away if the door closes behind him. Recounting this event, the Traveller expresses a curious discovery: “I was surprised to find [the machine] had been carefully oiled and cleaned. I have suspected since that the Morlocks had even partially taken it to pieces while trying in their dim way to grasp its purpose” (143). The Morlocks demonstrate curious inquisitiveness in stealing and taking apart the machine to try to understand what it is, creative initiative in throwing a trap for the Traveller, and adaptive ingenuity in being able to put the machine (which they’ve never seen before) back together in the correct way so that it works when the Traveller tries to use it again. Admittedly, the Traveller does come close to a full realization of the Morlock’s intelligence near the end of his tale:

So, as I see it, the upper-world man had drifted towards his feeble prettiness, and the under-world to mere mechanical industry. But that perfect state had lacked one thing even for mechanical perfection—absolute permanency... Mother Necessity, who had been staved off for a few thousand years, came back again, and she began below. (142)

Ruddick’s gloss of the text notes that the phrase “Mother Necessity” is “an allusion to the proverb ‘Necessity is the mother of invention’” (142 n.1), which points to the possibility that the Traveller teeters on the edge of acknowledging that the Morlocks retain an inventive intelligence. Regardless, the Morlocks prove themselves to be the more complex of the two descendant species, with “complexity” understood as a Lankesterian ability to adapt to new conditions. This, in turn, helps to undermine the logic of the entropic narrative, since it is the species whose “modification of the human type was even far more profound” (111) that retains a greater complexity and adaptability.

Thus, Wells's vision of the year 802,701 positions the Morlocks at the beginning of a new evolutionary path, one that resists the entropic narrative arc towards further degeneration and embodies instead a picaresque model of aimless evolutionary meandering. In Wells's own words, the Morlocks possess the potential to be a "strategic retrogression," in that the evolutionary changes the Time Traveller deems degenerate in the Morlocks have allowed them to adapt to their subterranean environment while still retaining an inventive intelligence. The Morlock's symbolic identification with entropic extinction is "motivated not by scientific but poetic logic" (Lake 81), a logic that is more a product of the Traveller's telling of a gripping tale than it is the logical outcome of the facts as presented. Indeed, there should be plenty of time, if we take seriously the facts as presented by the Traveller, for the Morlocks to continue their evolutionary journey. Although Wells would admit later in life that the pessimistic conclusion of *The Time Machine* was influenced by Lord Kelvin's aforementioned predictions regarding the sun's lifespan, this pessimism does not entirely account for the Time Traveller's inability to imagine the Morlocks on anything but an inevitable downward path to further degeneration.<sup>18</sup> Patrick Parrinder points out that Wells's choice to set the majority of the narrative just shy of a million years into the future "reflects... the minimum time needed for natural selection to produce new degenerate beings descended from present-day humanity" (39).<sup>19</sup> Since the ultimate entropic death of the planet, as portrayed in *The*

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<sup>18</sup> Wells would later claim: "the geologists and astronomers of that time told us dreadful lies... The whole game of life would be over in a million years or less. They impressed this upon us with the full weight of their authority, while now Sir James Jeans in his smiling *Universe Around Us* [1931] waves us on to millions and millions of years" (quoted in Ruddick 347).

<sup>19</sup> Piers J. Hale points out that it was Wells's "conversion to Weismannism" between the 1894 and 1895 versions of *The Time Machine* that prompted him to "[move] the date of his Time Traveller's encounter with the Morlocks and Eloi forwards from the year 12,203 to 702,801 [sic]" (39). Whereas "Lamarckian biology... [proposed that] acquired effects might be transmitted and exaggerated across the generation" (Hale 31), Wells was eventually "convinced that Weismann had shown once-and-for-all that there was to

*Time Machine*, does not occur for tens of millions of years, there would still be time enough for natural selection to take over and create new evolutionary forms ten times over. For instance, the Morlocks have tens of millions of years to become the species of future humans Wells described in “Of a Book Unwritten,” strange creatures with “Great hands..., enormous brains, soft, liquid, soulful eyes” who live deep underground, “fighting together perforce and fiercely against the cold that grips them tighter and tighter” (113-114). Moreover, if their knowledge of technology were to increase, then their retreat into the earth might buy them enough time to discover the means to escape the planet like the Martians of *War of the Worlds*.

Such speculation about the possibility that the Morlocks might be the product of a strategic retrogression is supported by an earlier version of the novel, published serially in *The National Observer* a year before the novel’s final publication.<sup>20</sup> In this version, the Traveller’s conversation with a “common-sense person,” which takes place after a recounting of his return from the future, resonates with the same picaresque arguments of “Zoological Retrogression”:

‘For my part I have always believed in a steady Evolution towards something Higher and Better,’ said the common-sense person; and added, ‘and I still do.’

‘But still essentially human in all respects?’ asked the Time Traveller.

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be no changing human nature. Any such evolutionary change could occur only on a geological time-scale” (Hale 37).

<sup>20</sup> In 1894 Wells published a serialized version of *The Time Machine* in the *National Observer*, and the following year published another serialized version in the *New Review*. (*Early Writings* 47). While the *New Review* serialization closely resembles the finalized version, differing only in its opening chapter and an additional episode between the events of 802,701 and the “Further Vision,” the *National Observer* version differs in many respects, the most relevant of which I address in the following pages.

‘Decidedly,’ said the common-sense person.

‘In the past,’ said the Time Traveller, ‘the evolution has not always been upward. The land animals, including ourselves, zoologists say, are the descendants of almost amphibious mudfish that were hunted out of the seas by the ancestors of the modern sharks.’ (*Early Writings* 88)

This passage reveals two important aspects of the Traveller’s character in this early version. First, the Traveller’s response to the notion of evolution moving towards “Higher and Better” things implicitly criticizes the excelsior biology of the “common-sense person,” and thus this version of the Traveller possesses the same critical stance as Wells’s earlier essay. Second, by bringing up the mudfish he implies that humanity’s future descendants may themselves be the precursors of other unimaginable forms, fundamentally non-human, other-than-human, but not lesser-than-human. Again, it is worth pointing out that, although the characters in this exchange continue to use the language of telic direction, by criticizing the common-sense person’s anthropocentric progressivism the Traveller leans towards the same picaresque understanding of evolution found in “Zoological Retrogression,” one that is both positioned within the contemporary discourse while also trying to think beyond it.

A question, however, arises: what does Wells’s choice to remove this conversation from the final version mean for the future of the Morlocks? Admittedly, the Traveller of the final version gives no evidence of any further evolutionary change on the part of the Morlocks, and never once explicitly considers the possibility that they may in fact be a strategic retrogression. Thus, one might counter by saying that any further speculation regarding the evolutionary future of the Morlocks would be going *hors texte*,

extrapolating without evidence. On the contrary, I claim that, just as “*The tendency toward revision is already written into the text* from the moment the Time Traveller sets foot in the Future” (Philmus, “Revisi(tati)ons” 431; emphasis in original), so too is the tendency to speculate about the world of 802,701 written into the text. The Traveller recounts what he finds, but also speculates to fill in the gaps in his knowledge just as any zoologist or paleontologist must when presented with fragmentary fossil evidence. So why, we may ask, are we required to take at face value the Traveller’s interpretation of what he saw? Indeed, the Traveller himself claims that his final interpretation of the world of 802,701 “may be as wrong an explanation as moral wit could invent” (142); if anything, this encourages readers to speculate regarding the causes and effects of these future visions. The Traveller then jumps tens of millions of years into the future without considering what occurs in the interim. What actually happens to the Morlocks in the interim is, of course, ultimately unknowable, but so too are the interim years between the Traveller’s departure and the future of 802,701.

### 3.3 Narrative and Unreliability in *The Time Machine*

Thus, a new question presents itself: is there evidence that the Traveller might have deliberate reason to ignore the Morlock’s intelligence? It is a common interpretation to view the Traveller as a “passive spectator” or “scientist-as-observer” (Haynes 199), a depiction of the ideal scientist who adapts his hypotheses as new information presents itself. He also seems rather modest on account of his aforementioned tendency to admit he may be wrong. But this persona is one of the Traveller’s—and to a certain extent Wells’s—tools of persuasion; “Wells demands assent by apparently discouraging it”

(Bergonzi 43), and he knew that “one of the most effective methods of inducing a suspension of disbelief in his reader was to people an incredible story with the most ordinary characters” (Haynes 199). Contrary to the image of the “passive spectator,” “the Traveller often fails to live up to his ideal of scientific detachment... The Traveller’s behaviour in moments of crisis is typically hysterical, panic-stricken, negligent and, when he confronts the Morlocks, ruthless and desperate” (Parrinder 45). The Traveller is also a performer who, when demonstrating his discovery of time travel at the outset of the novel, “constructs a dramatic exhibition that has great impact upon the gathered witnesses” (Willis 292), and thus we cannot uncouple the Traveller’s inclination towards dramatic showmanship from the telling of his tale. But what is it specifically that would incline the Traveller towards a particular interpretation of the future that deliberately overlooks the Morlock’s potential?

One of Wells’s earliest short stories can help us shed light on this issue, as it sets an early precedent in Wells’s work of a time travelling scientist underestimating the intelligence of the creatures he encounters. Appearing in the *Science Schools Journal* in 1887, eight years before *The Time Machine*, “A Vision of the Past” depicts a nameless narrator’s trip to prehistory after he falls asleep under a tree. Like the Traveller of *The Time Machine*, this narrator encounters a creature that he considers monstrous, in this case a “reptile-like creature” that he describes as “heavy and ungainly,” “grotesque,” and an “uncouth beast” (*Early Writings* 153-54). Most grotesque of all are the creature’s three eyes, whose gaze evokes “the strangest feelings of fear and trembling” in the narrator (154), a feeling that resonates with the traveler’s immediate revulsion upon encountering the Morlocks. Furthermore, the narrator of “A Vision of the Past” is, if not himself a

scientist, at least scientifically inclined, as is the Traveller of *The Time Machine*. The narrator attempts to “identify the nature” of the lizard creature “With the intent to benefit science” (154), but he admits regretfully that he can “only identify by means of bones and teeth” (154), neither of which he can see. He also laments after waking that he cannot remember a flash of insight he experienced while listening to the reptile-creature speak with others of its kind. All he can remember is that he had had an insight into a “process of reasoning by which one could deduce the possession of speaking powers by these beasts from the characters of their lumbar vertebrae... which might have proved so valuable in the investigation of many fossil creatures” (155). Having forgotten this insight, the narrator declares his folly “the greatest loss to science that there has been for many a year” (155). Thus, despite the significant differences between the two stories, both “A Vision of the Past” and *The Time Machine* share a foundational formal structure: they are both first person narratives told by scientists recounting their encounters with beastly creatures far from their own time.

The comically didactic message of “A Vision of the Past” becomes apparent as the narrator observes the reptile-creature give a part philosophical, part scientific sermon to others of his own kind:

look at the wondrous world around, and think that it is for our use that this world has been formed. Look at the strata displayed in yon scarped cliff, and the facts which they record of the past history of this earth during the many ages in which it has slowly been preparing itself for the reception of us, the culminating point of all existence, the noblest of all beings who

have ever existed or ever will exist... This world is ours for ever, and we must progress for ever unto infinite perfection [sic]. (155-56)

The narrator reveals his anthropocentric prejudice in his reaction to the reptile's speech: "I had listened with great amusement at the absurd claims to such a lofty position, made by a creature so inferior to myself in all respects as this philosophic amphibian" (156). Like the Traveller, who looks upon his evolutionary descendants with contempt, the narrator of "Vision" assumes his own superiority to the reptile creatures only on account of their beastly outward appearance. As a scientist interested in identifying creatures by their bones and teeth, the narrator should have felt a connection with these creatures that can read in the "strata" of a "scarped cliff" the "facts which they record of the past history of this earth." In other words, he should have recognized that these creatures, despite their beastly appearance, are geologists and paleontologists capable of studying fossils to determine evolutionary history.

Instead of relating with these creatures on account of their shared scientific interests, the narrator admonishes instead their "reptilocentric" optimism:

O, foolish creature! Think you yourself the great end of all creation? Know, then, that you are but a poor amphibian; that, far from lasting for ever, your race will in a few million years... be wholly extinct; that higher forms than you will, by insensible gradations, spring from you and succeed you; that you are here only for the purposes of preparing the earth for the reception of those higher forms, which in turn will but prepare it for the advent of that glorious race of reasoning and soul-possessing



beings, who, through the endless aeons of the future, will never cease their  
onward march towards infinite perfection—a race of which I— (156)

The narrator is cut off as the reptiles begin to move menacingly toward him, but it is obvious that the narrator is referring to humankind when he speaks of the “glorious race of reasoning and soul-possessing beings.” His own critique of the creatures’ reptilicentrism is, therefore, undermined by his own anthropocentrism. Just as the narrator cannot recognize their shared scientific interests, so too does he miss the similarity between their optimistic folly and his own. Recognizing that the reptile creatures will inevitably go extinct, the narrator believes that it is his race that “will never cease their onward march towards infinite perfection,” and as a result he fails to see how his anthropocentrism is just as short-sighted as their reptilicentrism. Wells even includes a hint of their similarity in his naming of the reptiles the “Nēm of Dnalgne,” which, when the two main words are each spelled backwards, reads “men of England.”<sup>21</sup>

Like the narrator of “A Vision of the Past,” the Traveller of *The Time Machine* cannot empathize with the “beasts” that he encounters, and as a result he underestimates their intellectual worth so as to hold onto his own feelings of scientific superiority. John Huntington draws attention to the Time Traveller’s opposing reactions to the inquisitive touch of both the Eloi and Morlocks: “When he first meets the Eloi he allows them to touch him... Similar behaviour by the Morlocks, however, leads the Time Traveller to an hysterical smashing of skulls” (44). The Traveller describes this initial inquisitive touch by both the Eloi and Morlocks in strikingly similar ways: the Eloi’s fingers are like “soft little tentacles” (82) and the Morlocks’ are like “sea-anemones... feeling... with their soft

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<sup>21</sup> I thank Philmus for revealing this wordplay when he notes that “Wells designates these reptiles, anagrammatically [sic], the “Nēm of Dnalgne” (“Revisions” 28).

palps” (104). Both descriptions resonate with the Traveler’s encounter with the “monster crab” in the “Further Vision”: “I felt a tickling on my cheek as though a fly had lighted there... With a frightful qualm, I turned, and saw that I had grasped the antenna of another monster crab that stood just behind me. Its evil eyes were wriggling on their stalks, its mouth was all alive with appetite, and its vast ungainly claws... were descending upon me” (146). In all three cases, touch is described as coming from something obviously inhuman: tentacles, palps, and antenna. And yet the Traveller does not react fearfully to the touch of the Eloi: “They wanted to make sure I was real. There was nothing in this all that alarming” (82). The touch of the Eloi is seen as harmlessly inquisitive, whereas the touch of the Morlocks is regarded as fearfully as the touch of the monster crab.

It would be easy to explain the Traveller’s prejudice purely in terms of the visual disgust he feels towards the Morlocks. Huntington is correct, after all, to claim that “the novella sets up a symmetrical illusion: the Eloi, because of their appearance, seem more human than they are; the Morlocks, again because of their appearance, seem less” (44). The Traveller cannot empathize with the Morlocks because they seem on the surface to be so brutish and inhuman, and he cannot help but empathize with the Eloi because, as he claims, they “had kept too much of the human form not to claim my sympathy” (125). However, Hume hints at another possible explanation for the Traveller’s animosity towards the Morlocks: “The Morlocks are only guilty of touching him and of trying to keep him from leaving them. They use no weapons, and they attempt to capture rather than kill him. They may be *interested in studying him* or in trying to establish communication” (243; emphasis added). Unlike the Eloi, whose curiosity regarding the

origin of the Traveller wanes quickly, the Morlocks maintain their curiosity throughout the story. As I mentioned above, they steal his time machine and take it apart to try to understand what it is, but they also respond to the Traveller's arrival to the future world as well as his trespassing adventure into their subterranean lair not with aggression but with curious investigation. The Traveller "shudder[s] with horror to think how they must already have examined me" (120), and the Traveller of the *National Observer Time Machine* wonders whether the Morlocks "would try to take me to pieces and investigate my construction" (*Early Writings* 87). What is so terrifying about the Morlocks is not their appearance but the fact that these creatures, which seem on the surface to be completely inhuman, flip the relationship between scientist and object of study. Thus, when McCarthy says that the Time Traveller "prefers to avoid facing his kinship with the... Morlocks" despite their shared aggressive tendencies (201), one can also add that the Traveller equally avoids facing their kinship as scientifically inquisitive creatures. Therefore, with "A Vision of the Past" providing precedent, *The Time Machine* can be read as an implicit critique of the anthropocentric attitudes otherwise depicted in the novel.

## CHAPTER 4: CONCLUSION

*The Time Machine* not only insists that humans are as vulnerable to extinction as any other species, but it also demonstrates that anthropocentric biases can obstruct even the most astute scientist from the acknowledgement that starkly inhuman creatures have the potential to take the mantle of “heir of the ages” in the absence of humanity. While the Time Traveller’s story conforms to an entropic narrative form, the text gives us reasons to doubt the picture the Traveller gives us; it provides evidence that the Morlocks are more intelligent than the Traveller admits, and offers character tropes that explain why the Traveller would wish to ignore this intelligence. Philmus is right to say that “*The Time Machine* has precisely the character its title gives it... it applies to the entire fiction as constituting just such a vehicle for transporting the reader in ‘time’... to an alternative (vision of the) world” (“Congress” 314). Thus, when Manlove asks us to “Suppose the machine itself in a sense makes this future... [because] the transgressive technology involved in the time machine devours and deracinates the futures as it traverses it” (24), he is completely correct to do so, but for a reason besides the one he is implying. It is the time machine *as narrative*, as a story interpreted and told by the Traveller, that shapes the isolated events stretched across almost unimaginable time scales into a narrative arc that can be comprehended by an “audience”—with the implied double meaning of both the Traveller’s fictional audience and the real audience reading the novel. But the “*real form of a phylum*” (Wells, *Early Writings* 159) resists the narratives that are overlaid upon it, contesting and escaping any single interpretive synthesis. *The Time Machine*, therefore, demonstrates both the anthropocentric desire to capture nature in narrative and nature’s resistance against this anthropocentric impulse.

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