

# Romancing the Anthropocene: H. G. Wells and the Genre of the Future

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*"... Which only shows how small the vastest of human catastrophes may seem, at a distance of a few million miles."*

—Wells, "The Star"

This essay considers how the representation of deep time affects, and is affected by, literary genres. It takes *The Time Machine* (1895) as its case study, investigating the ways in which H. G. Wells's work repurposes the conventions of the romance genre as a means of narrating expansive temporal scales that exceed the representational capacity of the realist novel. The essay's overarching suggestion will be that stretching narratives to the extreme *longue durée* of the geologic epoch necessitates shifting away from realism, opening new possibilities for genres (including melodrama, epic, and, in this case, romance) that the realist tradition had ostensibly superseded. Understanding how the formal expansiveness of genres can be mobilized strategically, I conclude, affords a critical perspective for analyzing the Anthropocene—a concept whose narrative and discursive patterns concern the contemporaneity of deep time and the present and that could itself be construed as a genre.

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Imagining what the world might look like in the year 802701 seems absurd. The date is unfathomably distant, some 160 times longer than the roughly five thousand years of recorded human history—but this is only the initial stop in Wells's first major work of fiction, *The Time Machine*. Wells explained that this immense narrative scope was necessary to his purpose of providing "a glimpse of the future that ran counter to the placid assumption of that time that Evolution was a pro-human force making things better and better for mankind" (*Seven ix*). The novel envisions a world in which *Homo sapiens* has diverged into two subspecies—Eloi and Morlocks—a biological process that would realistically take thousands of generations to unfold. Yet the protracted temporality of species change dwarfs the lifespan of an individual to such an extent that for the protagonist to experience it firsthand as an event, or a "glimpse," the novel must alternately stretch and contract its narrative *durée* in ways that destabilize its status as a realistic account. Wells's explanation, moreover, hardly justifies the surprising detours that occur toward the end of the story, in which the protagonist is propelled many *millions* of years forward, into post- and nonhuman time: to an age of weird amphibious blobs; to black seas under a cold sun; to a moment when the Earth stops turning. These latter

scenes push far beyond evolutionary pessimism, disclosing a vision of cosmic indifference on a vastly larger scale.

Narrating on such enormous scales poses serious aesthetic and formal problems for a work of fiction. As *The Time Machine* jumps across thousand- and then million-year gaps, it maroons narrative devices in environments that are progressively less compatible with human experience and increasingly hostile to techniques of realistic representation. The Time Traveller seems aware of this: standing on the distant shores of this alien planet, no longer recognizable as Earth, he relates,

*From the edge of the sea came a ripple and whisper. Beyond these lifeless sounds the world was silent. Silent? It would be hard to convey the stillness of it. All the sounds of man, the bleating of sheep, the cries of birds, the hum of insects, the stir that makes the background of our lives—all that was over. . . . In another moment the pale stars alone were visible. All else was rayless obscurity. The sky was absolutely black. A horror of this great darkness came on me. (66)*

This scene of the deep future becomes “hard to convey” as description breaks down, as the fabric of literary realism—the “stir that makes the background of our lives”—transforms into its negative. Here, a conspicuous absence stands in for the mass extinction not just of life forms but also of the vibrant frequencies that make up life’s sensorium. Faced with the solipsistic loneliness of the cosmic abyss, the narrator experiences “horror.”

Horror becomes one symptom among many in *The Time Machine* that attune us to what Mark McGurl calls the “implication of genre,” among “literary forms willing to risk artistic ludicrousness in their representation of the inhumanly large and long” (“Posthuman Comedy” 539). Following McGurl, we can see how scaling up narrative temporality to such extremes involves shifting away from surface-level resolution, close observational distance, and precisely detailed description—sacrificing both the immediacy and the focus on everydayness associated with novels of the realist tradition.<sup>1</sup> Outstripping the pace of individual human experience, it would seem, runs the risk of flattening the aesthetic complexity and qualifying the engagement of affective sympathy that typically credential a “legitimate” work of art. A novel that sheds too much detail in its attempt to narrate the “inhumanly large and long” might thus appear *generic* in the pejorative sense: “typical, dull, unoriginal, nondescript.”<sup>2</sup> Yet if representing phenomena at outsized scales hazards a nondescript, “generic” style that is opposed to realism, this also indicates how certain forms of genre fiction can in turn expose realism’s raw materials as structural limits. In *The Theory of the Novel*, György Lukács argues that the realist

<sup>1</sup> In Ian Watt’s *The Rise of the Novel*, for example, these characteristics are regarded as innovative and essential: “[T]he novel’s closeness to the texture of daily experience directly depends upon its employment of a much more minutely discriminated time-scale than had previously been employed in narrative” (22).

<sup>2</sup> Def. A: “Characteristic of or relating to a class or type of objects, phenomena, etc.; applicable to a large group or class, or any member of it; not specific, general”; def. E: “Typical; dull, unoriginal, nondescript.”

novel “has a ‘bad’ infinity about it: therefore it needs certain imposed limits in order to become form” (81). It gains these limits by adhering to the “biographical form,” or individual life story, whereby a “heterogeneous mass of isolated persons, non-sensuous structures and meaningless events receives a unified articulation by the relating of each separate element to the central character and the problem symbolized by the story of his life” (81). Biographical mimesis thus becomes a strategy for developing character while imposing a kind of artificial closure on the open-endedness of plot, maintaining “a hedge,” as Jed Esty explains, “against the potential endlessness of modern secular narrative” (27). Deliberately exceeding the individual subject and its temporalities, therefore, might constitute a refusal of realism’s tacit adherence to an Enlightenment conception of *Bildungs*, and a means of narrating empirically observable realities that the realist novel cannot seem to handle.

*The Time Machine* thus raises questions about whether attempting to write fiction on the scales at which the biological, social, and political become visible as planetary forces necessitates breaking with realism and, if so, which genres are better suited to the task. We have by now come to expect a strong “implication of genre” from narratives that deal with overwhelming phenomena (what Timothy Morton calls “hyperobjects” that are “massively distributed in time and space” [*Hyperobjects* 1]), but it is not entirely clear where this expectation comes from.<sup>3</sup> At the same time, one suspects that the current resurgence of genre criticism in literary studies corresponds to our increasing awareness of the Anthropocene: a term that conceptualizes the present as belonging to a new geologic epoch in which the human species emerges as a planetary agent, exposed to and broadly responsible for the megahazards this status entails—overpopulation, climate change, mass extinction; the sign under which inhuman scales start to look profoundly human after all. While the Anthropocene is useful for indexing the anthropogenic character of these overwhelming events, it also, as Dipesh Chakrabarty observes, “leaves us with the challenge of having to think of human agency over multiple and incommensurable scales at once” (1). Responding meaningfully to the urgent crises associated with the Anthropocene would therefore seem to require the development of vocabularies and methods capable of reading human activity simultaneously at many levels—as everything from a practice of daily life to a geologic force; strategies for responding, in other words, to a new crisis of representation.

The possibility that literary texts—charged with representing this ineffable situation whether explicitly or unconsciously—are already confronting this challenge has provoked serious critical attention; it informs a range of methods, from designations of new speculative fiction subgenres such as “cli-fi” to calls for reexaminations of canonical works. In “What Are the Novels of the Anthropocene? American Fiction in Geological Time,” for example, Kate Marshall claims that “contemporary US fiction seems quite clearly to be responding to the pressures of

<sup>3</sup> In addition to *Hyperobjects*, see Morton’s “Victorian Hyperobjects,” which argues that the Anthropocene discloses how “we are still inside the Victorian period, in psychic, philosophical, and social space” (489). My argument here follows similar lines but pursues the challenge of representing this space as a problem of literary form.

the larger anthropocenic imagination by staging its own temporality within increasing time scales and geologies" (523–24). Marshall's question need not be limited to the contemporary; the Anthropocene remains provisional in large part because of disputes over its starting point, and one senses that the term will continue (whether officially or not) to be applied *ex post facto*. Here I aim to trace the "pressures" of anthropocenic representation on literary form to the turn of the twentieth century, to a period in which the concept of deep time—and humanity's relationship to it—was becoming a matter of significant public interest and concern. The late Victorian imagination was the first to confront the radical implications of theories proposed by Charles Lyell, Charles Darwin, and Thomas Huxley, theories that expanded the duration of natural history by orders of magnitude beyond even the wildest estimates of the previous centuries. Within this historical context, *The Time Machine* emerges as a major experimental effort in adapting the form of the novel to the experience of deep time. The difficulties this entailed are recoded in the same qualities of the work that connote what McGurl calls "artistic ludicrousness"—including didactic narrative voice, flat characters, and underdeveloped plots—for which Wells's early fiction has garnered a reputation as formulaic or subliterate ("Posthuman Comedy" 539).<sup>4</sup> However, I will argue that instead of judging Wells's "generic" style an aesthetic defect or, at best, a tactical concession for moving radically beyond the realist novel's conventionally "human" scale, it should be reconsidered as a deliberate alternative to realism that makes visible a new form of collective human agency operating at a planetary scale. If the narrative patterns this produces seem to anticipate and resonate with our contemporary concept of the Anthropocene, then *The Time Machine* indicates the degree to which anxieties about the human species as a geologic force have roots not only in a long literary tradition but in a genre developed specifically for their representation: something we might, in retrospect, call "Anthropocene romance."

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Wells's preoccupation with finding a suitable genre for narrating deep time appears even before *The Time Machine*. Prior to the success of his first novel, Wells was known, if at all, as the author of the *Text-Book of Biology* (1893), a primer adapted from the syllabus and lesson plans he developed for teaching science classes to part-time students at London's University Tutorial College. Amid *Text-Book's* dry, technical material (e.g., "The Alimentary Canal of the Rabbit"), Wells inserts enthusiastic digressions on the wonders of scientific theory.<sup>5</sup> Its conclusion, for example,

<sup>4</sup> E. M. Forster deserves a certain amount of responsibility for this critically persistent attitude toward Wells. In *Aspects of the Novel* (1927), he classes Wells among "[g]ood but imperfect novelists," offering him up as an example in his famous coinage of the term *flat characters*: "Wells' characters are as flat as a photograph. But the photographs are agitated with such vigour that we forget their complexities lie on the surface and would disappear if it were scratched or curled up. . . . It is the deft and powerful hands of their maker that shake them and trick the reader into a sense of depth" (72).

<sup>5</sup> Wells hoped *Text-Book of Biology* would furnish a "vast number of solitary workers . . . scattered through the county," lacking means or access to formal university education, with a manual by

flashes with energetic prose: "Our little book is the merest beginning. . . . In the book of nature there are written, for instance, the triumphs of survival, the tragedy of death and extinction, the tragi-comedy of degradation and inheritance, the gruesome lesson of parasitism, and the political satire of colonial organisms. [It] is, indeed, a philosophy and a literature to those who can read its symbols" (131). Wells's "book of nature" metaphor rhetorically links *Text-Book* to the two most prominent natural history treatises of the nineteenth century: Charles Lyell's *Principles of Geology* and Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species*.<sup>6</sup> It echoes a signature passage from the latter wherein Darwin acknowledges "following out Lyell's metaphor" by comparing the "natural geological record" to a vast encyclopedia, "a history of the world imperfectly kept, and written in a changing dialect" (229). Darwin explains that this book is now so eroded and fragmentary that "we possess the last volume alone . . . only here and there a short chapter has been preserved; and of each page, only here and there a few lines" (229). Wells adopts the metaphor by proposing that understanding the natural world involves deciphering its coded "symbols," that scientific study constitutes a specialized mode of hermeneutics. Yet Wells also takes it in a new direction, pivoting away from the figure of a tome (Darwin's "record," "history," "volume") and instead proposing nature's textual kinship with the more romantic ambits of "philosophy" and "literature." What is even more striking is Wells's description of natural phenomena in terms of curiously specific genres such as "tragicomedy" and "political satire." This shift to genre implies the metaphor's reversal from book of nature to *nature of books* while also hinting at an exigent literary dilemma: how might the enormous durations involved in emerging scientific paradigms be encompassed within the microcosm of a "little book" or novel? Whether he realized it or not, Wells seemed to be anticipating the challenges he would soon face in attempting to create fiction at geologic timescales.

Given his description of genres within the "book of nature," Wells's decision to write *The Time Machine* as a romance might speak less to his immaturity as a novelist (though he was frequently slighted for it) than to his awareness of the form's representational capacities. He called *The Time Machine* a "scientific romance," and although it is now considered an urtext of the science fiction genre, Wells's taxonomy better identifies its hybrid form.<sup>7</sup> Wells's method involved substituting the scientific or technological discovery for the romance's magical, "fantastic" aspects, bringing the "fetish stuff up to date" and making it "as near actual theory

turns rigorous and scintillating (vii). Finding ways to combine didacticism with popular appeal would continue to be one of his major ambitions, and achievements, in fiction.

<sup>6</sup> Simon James tracks Wells's use of the "nature as a book" trope even further, through *Sartor Resartus* to its origins in Galileo (53–54).

<sup>7</sup> Indeed, "science fiction" loses the specificity that Wells was aiming for in subordinating the adjective *scientific* to romance, which was already a viable generic category with an extensive formal history covering Victorian "sensation novels," chivalric romances, heroic myths, and folklore. Wells credited Grant Allen with originating the "field of scientific romance with a philosophical element" (*Literary Criticism* 225), and *The Time Machine* bears a striking resemblance to Allen's 1892 short story "Pallinghurst Barrow" (see Hughes).

as possible" (*Seven* viii). The title of *The Time Machine's* early draft, "The Chronic Argonauts," alludes directly to the mythic quest it takes as its structural model, and the finished text can be stripped down to a staple generic formula: the heroic Time Traveller boards a modern-day *Argo* that transports him to alien shores, where he encounters friendly natives, becomes amorously entangled with one of them, and overcomes a hostile tribe of cannibals in order to return home.

Yet Wells expressed deep ambivalence about this kind of genre fiction, and although he maintained that "a novel" should be defined broadly as "any sort of honest treatment of the realities of human behaviour in narrative form," he also, as Patrick Parrinder and Robert Michael Philmus point out, "regarded his 'scientific romances' as substitutes for the [realist] novel—and as inadequate substitutes at that" (*Literary Criticism* 217, 226). Maintaining the accuracy of realism was especially important to Wells, because he was attempting to extrapolate the likely course of the distant future from the knowledge and conditions of his present, and he understood that the inclusion of any fantastic device—let alone an adventure plot—threatened to undermine the text's empiricist foundations. He therefore insisted that although his scientific romances proposed unlikely conceits (time travel, invisibility, advanced life on Mars), their "living interest lies in their non-fantastic elements and not in the invention itself. They are appeals for human sympathy quite as much as any 'sympathetic' novel, and the fantastic element—the strange property or the strange world, is used only to throw up and intensify our natural reactions of wonder, fear or perplexity" (*Seven* vii).

Wells continually stressed the need "to domesticate the impossible hypothesis" through the use of conventions like frame narratives, providing a layer through which the reader could experience an intensified version of the affective sympathies produced by realist fiction (*Seven* viii). Darko Suvin has called the technique "cognitive estrangement," whereby the "effect of . . . factual reporting of fictions is one of confronting a set normative system—a Ptolemaic-type closed world picture—with a point of view or glance implying a new set of norms" (372–74). This attitude of factual reporting is consistent among Wells's novels;<sup>8</sup> it produces what one could call "weird realism"<sup>9</sup>—a quality Joseph Conrad recognized when branding Wells the "Realist of the Fantastic" (qtd. in Wells, *Literary Criticism* 88). If the nonexistent characters and situations of a typical "'sympathetic' novel" could nevertheless produce genuine emotional responses in readers, the scientific romances set out to test how far that sympathy could extend. Wells justified this ambition in his essay "The Contemporary Novel": as "the only medium through which we can discuss the great majority of the problems which are being raised in such bristling

<sup>8</sup> The affective force of this factual style of reporting is perhaps best demonstrated by the panic sparked by Orson Welles's infamous 1938 radio dramatization of *The War of the Worlds*. Welles capitalized on Wells's style by adapting it to a new medium that carried the weight of authority, splicing fictional news bulletins and public address announcements into a fictional live musical performance.

<sup>9</sup> For Graham Harman, this provocative term emblemizes a general principle of his speculative philosophy: "No reality can be immediately translated into representations of any sort. Reality itself is weird because reality itself is incommensurable with any attempt to represent or measure it" (51).

multitude by our contemporary social development," the novel was "an important and necessary thing indeed in that complicated system of uneasy adjustments and readjustments which is modern civilization" (201, 192). *The Time Machine* responds to what Wells considered an urgent need to increase the novel's range as a "powerful instrument of moral suggestion" by evoking sympathy for characters born hundreds of thousands of years in the future, for quasi- or posthuman species, and ultimately for the planet itself (*Literary Criticism* 200).

It is possible that Wells turned to romance as a repository of popular motifs with which to engage a broad readership (the better to stimulate public discussion and social change), but it is also likely that the form afforded him the scope to narrate topics as expansive as modernity, civilization, and planetarity in ways that the realist novel could not. "'Romance' is characterized," Patricia Parker argues, "primarily as a form which simultaneously quests for and postpones a particular end, objective, or object"; its dilatory, episodic structure thus allows for "extension in space and . . . endless deferral of endings" (4, 10). This is clearly a useful feature in a story concerned with narrating the expanses of geologic time, the scale at which the *world* itself emerges as a dominant figure. Fredric Jameson points out the "centrality of *worldness* in romance," observing that unlike the realist novel, wherein specific settings like a "landscape or village, forest, or mansion" become "mere temporary stopping places on the lumbering coach or express-train itinerary of realistic representation," in romance those settings are "somehow transformed into folds in space, into discontinuous pockets of homogeneous time and of heightened symbolic closure, such that they become tangible analoga or perceptual vehicles for *world* in its larger phenomenological sense" (*Political Unconscious* 112). In romance, *world* takes on a life of its own; endowed with a "strangely active and pulsating vitality," it also "tends to absorb many of the act- and event-producing functions normally reserved for narrative 'characters'" (112).

This shift, in which the world is transformed from object to *actant*, soaking up narrative agency in the process, is undoubtedly at work in *The Time Machine*. Consider, for example, the Time Traveller's first description of being launched into futurity:

*I was already going too fast to be conscious of any moving things. . . . The landscape was misty and vague. I was still on the hillside upon which this house now stands, and the shoulder rose above me grey and dim. I saw trees growing and changing like puffs of vapour, now brown, now green: they grew, spread, shivered, and passed away. I saw huge buildings rise up faint and fair, and pass like dreams. The whole surface of the earth seemed changed—melting and flowing under my eyes. The little hands upon the dials that registered my speed raced round faster and faster. . . . The unpleasant sensations of the start were less poignant now. They merged at last into a kind of hysterical exhilaration. (17–18)*

What we might today dub the "special effects" of this passage have to do with imagining being overwhelmed by unfettered acceleration. As the Time Traveller moves faster and faster, the dim marks of human life "pass like dreams" before his eyes, and the earth itself seems to liquefy—the whole panorama dissolves into abstraction.

It is worth underscoring that in order to achieve a panoramic view, the first-person narrator requires an elevated perspective from which to look down on the changing landscape. We are told that the time machine has been designed to travel only in the fourth dimension, not along any spatial axis, and since the device cannot move independently up, down, or sideways, the physical location it occupies becomes a crucial feature of the story. All of the future action is limited to the vicinity of the protagonist's home on Richmond Hill, in a suburb of London commutable by train since 1846. Today this location might seem rather arbitrary, but the commanding view from Richmond Hill was known at the time of the novel's publication as one the most famous prospects in England—so famous that it was protected by act of Parliament in 1902.<sup>10</sup> The vista faces southwest and away from the city. It was and is still renowned for its view of the River Thames and the unspoiled parklands beyond.<sup>11</sup> A popular spot for day-trippers, Wells's contemporary readers might have experienced the view themselves while standing atop Richmond Hill, or they might have seen it depicted by prominent British artists including Joseph Turner, in paintings that evoke an anachronistic sense of London's natural idyll, its pastoral, its *picturesque* (fig. 1). Moreover, Richmond Hill's prominent status in Victorian culture makes its transformation in *The Time Machine* both poignant and topical: Wells's scene essentially reverses public efforts to preserve this view *from* change.

From this celebrated spot, the Time Traveller witnesses the unmaking of the world. At first the experience produces "unpleasant" sensations along with a melancholic mood Wells emphasized in his manuscript notes by inserting these suggestive lines from section CXXIII of Tennyson's "In Memoriam A. H. H.":

*The hills are shadows and they flow  
From form to form, and nothing stands;  
They melt like mist, the solid lands,  
Like clouds they shape themselves and go.* (qtd. in *Time Machine* 18n3)

The personal loss expressed in Tennyson's poem is rendered at a geologic scale as the ground advances fluidly "from form to form." In the previous stanza the speaker apostrophizes the Earth itself:

<sup>10</sup> The view was preserved by the passage of the Richmond, Ham, and Petersham Open Spaces Act of 1902. It is the only view in England protected by act of Parliament (see "Protected View").

<sup>11</sup> Richmond Hill likely inspired the setting of the flood in George Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss* (1860); see Kathleen McCormack (87–89). A scene atop Richmond Hill also appears in Walter Scott's *Heart of Midlothian* (1818), along with an engraving of the view: "They paused for a moment on the brow of a hill, to gaze on the unrivalled landscape which it presented. A huge sea of verdure, with crossing and intersecting promontories of massive and tufted groves, was tenanted by numberless flocks and herds, which seemed to wander unrestrained and unbounded through the rich pastures. The Thames, here turreted with villas, and there garlanded with forests, moved on slowly and placidly, like the mighty monarch of the scene" (429).





Figure 1. Joseph Mallord William Turner, *Richmond Hill*, ca. 1820–25. © Tate, London, 2018

*There rolls the deep where grew the tree.  
O earth, what changes hast thou seen!  
There where the long street roars, hath been  
The stillness of the central sea. (126)*

These lines, inspired by the work of Charles Lyell, register the aesthetic range that Victorian geologists had suffused into the literary imagination.<sup>12</sup> In his first volume of *Principles of Geology* (1830), for example, Lyell waxes on the “delightful meed” of geology “to trace the same system through various transformations—to behold it at successive eras adorned with different hills and valleys, lakes and seas, and peopled with new inhabitants,” which “convey[s] to our minds more definite ideas than figures can do, of the immensity of time” (73).

This view of the planet in a state of gradual but constant change is also expressed in the formal similarity between paintings of Richmond Hill and paintings of prehistoric Britain that were much in vogue during the Victorian period. Geologist and illustrator Sir Henry De la Beche, for example, was celebrated for his vivid

<sup>12</sup> As Adelene Buckland has shown, this influence went both ways: romance and epic were “vital genres that shaped nineteenth-century geological writing. . . . Geology was often portrayed as a romantic science, with geologists traveling through time into a forgotten and sometimes violent past, contemplating temporal infinitude, and subjugating creatures resembling the ancient dragons. Here ‘romance’ meant something more than knightly tales of love and heroism. It also betokened wildness, immensity, and wonder” (14–15).



Figure 2. Sir Henry De la Beche, *Duria Antiquior*, 1830. National Museums and Galleries of Wales

depiction of extinct animals and plants that lived, epochs ago, in a familiar British locale (fig. 2).<sup>13</sup>

Combining a close range of detail on flora and fauna and a receding horizon that encompasses geographic features, both Turner's and De la Beche's paintings work in the style of *Weltlandschaft*, or "world landscape." De la Beche's substitution of prehistoric forms and a radically altered climate breathes life into Dorset's fossil record, but in doing so it serves as a memento mori for the human species whose time on the planet is also marked, and suggests how alien the present might seem to our successors in deep time. Wells's scene freights the Victorian pastoral of Richmond Hill with the same mode of pathos: as the Time Traveller later remarks, "I found afterwards that horses, cattle, sheep, dogs, had followed the Ichthyosaurus into extinction" (23). The subject of *human* extinction was one of Wells's most enduring obsessions, explored at length in nonfiction essays such as "On Extinction" and "The Fate of Homo Sapiens." In the latter, Wells asserts his oft-repeated personal opinion that "there is no reason whatever to believe that the order of nature has any

<sup>13</sup> *Duria Antiquior*, "a more ancient Dorset," a rendering based on reconstructed fossils collected by Mary Anning in Lyme Regis, was also the first scientifically accurate representation of a deep-time scene and the origin of what would become a popular visual genre throughout Europe during the mid-nineteenth century (see fig. 2). For a complete history of the genre's development, see Martin J. S. Rudwick.

greater bias in favour of man than it had in favor of the ichthyosaur or the pterodactyl" (qtd. in Hammond 78).<sup>14</sup>

To "provide a glimpse" of a distant future in which man had fallen out of "nature's favour," Wells could simply have skipped directly to 802701; instead, the novel modernizes the aesthetic tradition of *Weltlandschaft* by setting its planetary outlook in motion. This causes *The Time Machine* to swing frantically between emotional registers; it becomes both a eulogy for what passes away and a vehicle for exploring the thrilling sensations of passage itself. As the novel's subtitle, *An Invention*, indicates, the work positions itself as a textual machine for simulating technological effects, specifically those of the motion picture. This emerging medium fascinated Wells and led him, in the year of the novel's publication, to collaborate with the inventor Robert Paul in filing British Patent No. 19984. The patent designates a prototype cinema: "a novel form of exhibition whereby the spectators have presented to their view scenes which are supposed to occur in the future or past, while they are given the sensation of voyaging on a machine through time" (qtd. in Ramsay 155). The extension of the text's *montage* effect was just the start: Paul and Wells planned for "the members of the audience . . . to be seated on platforms that rocked to and fro, and which moved toward and away from a screen onto which still and motion picture scenes were to be projected" (Fielding 34). The projectors would also be "mounted on rollers and tracks," constantly moving and changing the proportions of images on the screen. "As a final touch, a current of air was to be directed over the audience to suggest the speed with which they were racing" (34).<sup>15</sup> Even though this experimental cinema was never built, its plans indicate Wells's interest in capturing an individual's sensory experience of temporal passage and accelerating it to speeds at which massive world-historical forces could become visible to the naked eye.

The time machine's velocity turns history into an observable phenomenon—a vast and growing record of struggles spanning epochs—and it is this aesthetic strategy that prepares the story to tunnel into the Darwinian and Marxist forces that structure its vision of the future. The novel can be read, moreover, as an implementation of the way *The Communist Manifesto* compares the mania of breakneck speed to the pace of industrial modernity, which involves "[c]onstant revolutionising of production, uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions, everlasting uncertainty and agitation," whereby "[a]ll that is solid melts into air" (Marx and Engels 64). Yet the queasy thrills of time travel extend beyond social critique to capture the "new mass availability of speed as technology's tangible pleasure"; speed itself, as Enda Duffy notes, emerged during the late Victorian period as "a deep form of ideology: not merely as a cause that had cultural effects but as a force

<sup>14</sup> Wells imagines a number of doomsday scenarios that might produce this result, including climate change (by both anthropogenic and "natural" causes), the invasion of the land by well-adapted sea creatures (fictionalized in Wells's 1896 short story "The Sea Raiders"), and the invasion of Earth by alien life in *The War of the Worlds* (1897).

<sup>15</sup> The plans anticipate the conceptual affinity between cinema and new modes of public transportation thematized in early Auguste and Louis Lumière films, including *L'arrivée d'un train en gare de La Ciotat*, and in Georges Méliès's *Le voyage dans la Lune*.

that at this moment not only infiltrated people's consciousness and their unconscious but offered people a wholly new sensation" (19–20). Thus while the novel makes recourse to the time spans of the geologic past to project the long-term planetary impacts of industrial modernity, it relates these immense scales to individual experience through the subjective *sensation* of speed.

This melding of epistemological knowledge and subjective experience places the first-person narrator in an unstable position: throughout the novel he formulates hypotheses for describing events objectively, and yet his impressions prove irreducible to them. Rendering this paradox aesthetically becomes a risky strategy in terms of the novel's ability to sustain its own narrative progress. While acceleration is important for gaining access to mechanisms of change that operate on a planetary scale and can be witnessed only from the perspective of continuous movement through deep time, at extreme speeds the vertiginous sensations of time travel become overwhelming, and aesthetic description engulfs the plot entirely. For the protagonist, experiencing the world "melting and flowing" on such a scale produces "astonishment," what Edmund Burke calls "the effect of the sublime in its highest degree" (53). Burke describes the sublime experience as a drama of movement and stasis in which the observer enters a paralyzing "state of the soul, in which all its motions are suspended, with some degree of horror," as "the mind is so entirely filled with its object, that it cannot entertain any other, nor by consequence reason on that object which employs it." The object, meanwhile, "anticipates our reasonings, and hurries us on by an irresistible force" (53). When the Time Traveller moves forward faster than he can make sense of what he is seeing, his faculty of reason yields to the thrill of the ride, to the "hysterical exhilaration" of pure aesthetic sensation.<sup>16</sup>

A new distinction emerges, however, just before the world dissolves into an unrelenting blur—namely, the emergence of the *generic* figure. It would surely be a strange experience for Wells's late Victorian readers, who would have been just starting to imagine the possibilities of nascent forms of film and time-lapse photography, to visualize trees "growing and changing like puffs of vapour, now brown, now green," bursting forth and decaying in a matter of seconds; but the novel pushes far beyond this, multiplying the effect exponentially.<sup>17</sup> When the Time Traveller notices the hazy outline of a tree, he realizes that what he is seeing is actually thousands of generations of trees living and dying in almost the same moment. What appears to be a discrete object is in fact a persistent image of shared

<sup>16</sup> "Hysteria" was of course gendered and pathologized in Victorian discourse. Freud was writing about it before the novel's publication, and the implications of "mass hysteria" are apparent throughout Wells's oeuvre. See esp. the psychiatric remedies for deep-time neurosis in "The Croquet Player" (1936) in *Complete Short Stories*. Jameson's "'hysterical' sublime" diagnoses a condition of mass hysteria that involves the "*derealization* of the whole surrounding world of everyday reality. . . . The world thereby momentarily loses its depth and threatens to become a glossy skin, a stereoscopic illusion, a rush of filmic images without density. But is this now a terrifying or an exhilarating experience?" (*Postmodernism* 34).

<sup>17</sup> Here the Time Traveller's research expertise—his publication of "seventeen papers on physical optics" (54)—seems especially pertinent.

features, the flickering of countless trees seen together all at once. Since this figure appears only when many individuals are overlapped, it expresses the features of no constituent tree in particular: it looks spectral, unstable.<sup>18</sup> Thus what the Time Traveller experiences as a “tree” is a visual representation of a much larger set—something approaching a biological genus. And since the figure shares the features of many individuals, it expresses the force of genre whereby individual difference gives way to phenomena that are “general” or “typical.” The Time Traveller cannot observe any particular thing in isolation because the nature of objects under scrutiny has been ontologically changed by a radical shift of scale. At certain speeds objects seem to become generic; as they lose their specificity they begin to disclose unsuspected properties that are only visible from a different scalar vantage.<sup>19</sup>

The ontological transformation from individual to genus that occurs as the novel accedes to the perspective of the world-scale represents a shift of narrative register that cannot be neatly reversed. At the level of character, stretching to such an extreme *durée* shifts focus from distinct people to entire populations, and while specific individuals do appear at various points in *The Time Machine*, character development is always subsumed to characterological function. The protagonist’s name, for example, is never mentioned. He is simply referred to as the “Time Traveller.” Likewise, the invited dinner guests of the frame narrative are identified only by profession—the Psychologist, the Medical Man, the Journalist, and so on—practitioners of empirical methods. Their various and collective skepticisms regarding the Time Traveller’s testimony serve as a kind of peer review, a means of incorporating reflexive critical distance and calling into question the reliability of a *récit* whose subjective impressions might be diagnosed as a vision of “madness.”

In the future world of 802701, a world teeming with two subhuman species, the only named character is “Weena,” the childlike Eloi woman with whom the protagonist forms a budding relationship. Clearly the avatar of the love interest subplot, she is typologically something of a Pocahontas; her function is to introduce the explorer-hero to the customs of her civilization and to teach him the rudimentary Eloi language. She forms an immediate and unrelenting attachment to the Time Traveller after he valiantly saves her from drowning in a slow-moving stream:

*It will give you an idea, therefore, of the strange deficiency in these creatures, when I tell you that none made the slightest attempt to rescue the weakly-crying little thing which was drowning before their eyes. . . . I hurriedly slipped off my clothes, and,*

<sup>18</sup> The term *montage* applies well in this case, because the sense of motion achieved by overlapping images is required for the effect. If the Time Traveller were to pause on his voyage for even an instant, the vision would presumably resolve into a different shape, one bearing little resemblance to the “puff of vapour” he had just been observing.

<sup>19</sup> However, if pressed to describe what a “generic tree” might look like, it is doubtful that a nebulous plume would be the first image to come to mind. More likely one would envision a solid figure whose features were notably unexceptional. This suggests, then, that two figures for the generic can be discerned from this passage: one that involves the actual overlay of many discrete individuals, yielding an unfamiliar, unstable image of the aggregate; and one that involves imagining a characteristic individual to stand metonymically for the category.

*wading in at a point lower down, I caught the poor mite, and drew her safe to land. A little rubbing of the limbs soon brought her round, and I had the satisfaction of seeing she was all right before I left her. I had got to such a low estimate of her kind that I did not expect any gratitude from her. In that, however, I was wrong.* (35)

It is clear that the Time Traveller rescues Weena out of a sense of duty; the principal feeling he expresses is of disgust for the decadent Eloi—"humanity upon the wane"—a species in the last throes of a millennia-long waning of affect (26). The Time Traveller's heroic intervention awakens an inchoate human sympathy in Weena, and she starts to follow him around in an obsequious, gently pestering way, as though hoping to enlarge her role in the narrative. By this point, however, the novel's romance plot has been severely compressed by the focal shift to planetary concerns. The protagonist himself notices this effect, remarking, "[T]he problems of the world had to be mastered. I had not, I said to myself, come into the future to carry on a miniature flirtation" (35–36). "Miniature flirtation" puns on Weena's diminutive stature, but it also implies that her narrative function is vestigial—a structural remnant included only in obeisance to the conventions of the genre—a concession for utilizing the romance's formal expansiveness.

The cost of formal expansiveness is paid within what could be theorized as the text's economy of representation.<sup>20</sup> Grappling directly with "the problems of the world" leaves little space for developing the kinds of plots that would sustain personal relationships, plots whose intricacy might steer the text back toward the realist mode. As Barthes explains in his discussion of the "reality effect," maintaining the novel's narrative texture comes at a price. The apparently unimportant details that "denote what is ordinarily called 'concrete reality' (insignificant gestures, transitory attitudes, insignificant objects, redundant words)" are also transactions within the work's descriptive economy, "increasing the cost of narrative information" (Barthes 146, 141). Setting a story in 802701 and beyond, as Wells does, ratchets up the cost of realistic details exponentially.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>20</sup> Such exchanges are convincingly described in terms of "character-space" and "character-system" in *The One vs. the Many: Minor Characters and the Space of the Protagonist in the Novel* (Woloch).

<sup>21</sup> Wells observed that the loss of close-up detail was much more pronounced when moving forward rather than backward in time. "[T]he best sort of futurist story," Wells wrote, "should be one that sets out to give you the illusion of reality. It ought to produce the effect of an historical novel, the other way round" (*Literary Criticism* 247). Yet he admitted that he had never "succeeded in producing anything like the convincingness of hundreds of historical novels," because whereas the "historical romancer has a whole mass of history, ruins, old costumes, museum pieces, to work upon . . . the futurist writer has at most the bare germs of things to come" (247). With this in mind, one might read the preponderance of future/antique set pieces in *The Time Machine*—a cryptic and dilapidated Sphinx statue, "suggestions of old Phoenician decorations . . . badly broken and weather-worn" (22), the gigantic Palace of Green Porcelain that turns out to be a ruined museum—as more than symbols of civilizational decline: they are monumental landmarks on an incomplete cognitive map, placeholders for the historical "reality" of an imaginary future society.

However, while the temporal scale of the *The Time Machine* forecloses the convincing richness of detail that the realist novel gains through its focus on daily life, Wells's use of romance need not be considered artistically reactionary. Even the "flat characters" for which E. M. Forster panned Wells can be interpreted as formal adaptations to narrative circumstances that do not privilege human development, at least not at the scale of the individual subject. "The essential difference between novel and romance," Northrop Frye argues, "lies in the conception of characterization. The romancer does not attempt to create 'real people' so much as stylized figures which expand into psychological archetypes" (304). This freedom from realistic characterization, Frye goes on to suggest, endows romance with a "revolutionary form" wherein "something nihilistic and untamable is likely to keep breaking out of [the] pages" (305). If we regard romance as "revolutionary" in its capacity to move beyond the confines of individual subjectivity and to summon instead figures that represent the "nihilistic and untamable" forces of human collectivity, then we move closer to grasping the manner in which Wells's romance dramatizes a confrontation between two figures that emerge visibly from a deep-time perspective: the planet and the human species in aggregate.

In the same way that the elastic property of romance allows the figure of *world* to absorb the narrative agency of individual characters, by stretching into geologic time Wells's Anthropocene romance introduces another generic figure, one capable of interacting and competing on the same narrative scale: the figure of human population. Collapsing the distinction between individual experience and that of the species was, Wells insisted, the polemical foundation of his writing: "I have never been able to get away from life in the mass and life in general as distinguished from life in the individual experience, in any book I have ever written. I differ from contemporary criticism in finding them inseparable" (*Seven* ix). *The Time Machine* bears out this hyperbolic claim by registering the planetary impact of the human species as a massive agential force. Its protagonist interprets all that he sees in 802701 as evidence of the changes wrought by the human species, now fallen into terminal decline. He hypothesizes that the (ironically) Edenic serenity of this far-off former London is the result of its technological progress: "One triumph of a united humanity over Nature had followed another. Things that are now mere dreams had become projects deliberately put in hand and carried forward" (26). While the specifics of these projects are left to the reader's imagination, collectively they amount to total civilizational modernization. This has yielded odd consequences; one of the Time Traveller's first observations of the deep future is its uncannily warm atmosphere (20). The entire "balance of animal and vegetable life," he realizes, has been readjusted "to suit . . . human needs": "The air was free from gnats, the earth from weeds or fungi. . . . The ideal of preventive medicine was attained. Diseases had been stamped out . . . even the processes of putrefaction and decay had been profoundly affected by these changes. . . . The difficulty of increasing population had been met, I guessed, and population had ceased to increase" (27). The Time Traveller speculates that unnaturally selected plant and animal monocultures provide abundance for sustaining human life, but he does not yet understand that the "population" is being actively regulated by more nefarious means—that the docile Eloi are actually the fatted cattle of the subterranean Morlocks, whose

ancestors were forced underground by the Eloi to labor at the machines that sustain the decaying utopia above.<sup>22</sup>

As a parable for both ecological collapse and the gruesome endgame of class apartheid, *The Time Machine* raises broad concerns over the imbalances between a massively expanding human population, the resources it requires, and the forces that keep it in check. While it is tempting to view these themes as anticipatory of the global crises now framed by the Anthropocene, the most significant connection between today's concept and Wells's novel is a formal one. *The Time Machine*, as with many of Wells's works, dramatizes a "change of scale in human affairs" that throws "the whole world in disorder"; yet as the novel attempts to navigate this change by expanding its temporal scale, the domain of "human affairs" keeps shifting as well. Ultimately, the novel pushes into temporalities that bear neither concern for, nor trace of, human existence—where the phrase *human affairs* carries no meaning at all (*Seven* ix). To the extent that the Anthropocene conceptually resembles *The Time Machine* as an attempt to narrate human agency at a geologic scale—to synchronize the ontologically disparate figures of "world" and "human"—it encounters the same problem: how to relate this enormous frame of reference to the much smaller scales of human activity where its meaning and significance are normally located.

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*The Time Machine* partakes in what Gillian Beer identifies as "the problem of finding a scale for the human": since late Victorian literature could no longer blindly privilege human perspectives, Beer argues, it commenced an ongoing search for "a scale that will be neither unrealistically grandiose, nor debilitatingly reductive, which will accept evanescence and the autonomy of systems not serving the human, but which will still call upon Darwin's often-repeated assertion: 'the relation of organism to organism is the most important of all relations'" (233). Preserving intersubjective relationships amid the yawning expanses of time that threaten to flatten them into insignificance remains a problem for literary forms, even as the growing awareness that our habits of daily life are being inscribed in deep time intensifies our search to find new forms of meaning in literature.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>22</sup> Allusions to Thomas Malthus are unmistakable in *The Time Machine* in such passages as: "Where population is balanced and abundant, much child-bearing becomes an evil rather than a blessing to the State. . . . We see some beginnings of this even in our own time, and in this future age it was complete" (25–26). Wells held that "[p]robably no more shattering book than the *Essay on Population* has ever been, or ever will be, written" (*Anticipations* 312), and throughout his career he dedicated considerable attention to the problem of overpopulation, advocating and then renouncing policies for the sterilization of "base and servile types," later becoming an outspoken proponent of public access to birth control (Partington).

<sup>23</sup> The posthuman trend in recent scholarship has at times called for dispensing with the idea of recuperating a "human scale" that retains the species as its universal subject. For example, Derek Woods makes the intriguing case that the "*anthropos* of 'Anthropocene' and 'anthropogenic' needs to be divided among scale domains, the tributaries of which fail to converge at



We can see how fin de siècle novels such as *The Time Machine* that address human impact on a planetary scale initiate what we might now call an “Anthropocene imaginary.” Including such texts in a wider tradition and perhaps even categorizing them within a new genre allows us to fully investigate how our present discourse of the Anthropocene is imbricated with the same Victorian epistemology that yoked the emergent concept of geologic time to romance. This line of analysis can also help to account for the challenges writers faced when using realist representational strategies at scales that exceed the measure of individual human life and for how alternative genres might have arisen, or been repurposed, for outsized or inhuman narratives.

Yet as Wells’s novel makes clear, the trouble with stretching conventional narrative devices follows from what Timothy Clark calls “scale effects” (149), or structural distortions that can result from radical shifts of size. Clark demonstrates that while the term is proper to architecture and engineering, scale effects are discernable in the objects of literary analysis as well if one understands a text’s materials—characters, events, settings—to be networked in the space and time of narrative (156–64).<sup>24</sup> Extending a novel’s plot across vast temporal or spatial distances can serve to attenuate character to a point at which it loses coherence; alternatively, condensing a novel to a single day can magnify character while diminishing other features, such as plot. Temporal scale can thus formally register a work’s discursive priorities by impacting the range of dramatic possibilities the work can express.

In a sense this suggestion is nothing new, since narrative *durée* has been considered a property of genre at least since the *Poetics*. Aristotle distinguishes between epic and tragic forms “in their length: for Tragedy endeavours, as far as possible, to confine itself to a single revolution of the sun, or but slightly to exceed this limit; whereas the Epic action has no limits of time” (23). This generic property does not suggest that a work can be identified as tragic or epic simply by virtue of its *durée*; rather, the intensity of a work’s affective force depends in part on how its materials are temporally distributed. This distribution corresponds with M. M. Bakhtin’s formulation of the chronotope, which names the “intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature” (84). Bakhtin emphasizes that “it is precisely the chronotope that defines genre and generic distinctions” insofar as it “provides the ground essential for the showing-forth, the representability of events. And this is so thanks precisely to the special increase in density and concreteness of time markers—the time of human life, of historical time—that occurs within well-delineated spatial areas” (85, 250).

And yet the massive distributions of deep time seem to open the possibility of something radically new in narrative form. While deep time usually denotes

‘species’” (138). Apart from their persuasiveness, such arguments remind us that the displacements of Darwinian epistemologies continually return us to Victorian points of view.

<sup>24</sup> Clark offers G. Darrel Jenerette and Jiango Wu’s useful illustration of a wooden model of a building. Though such a model might be structurally sound in miniature, at much larger scales the added weight of the building strains the load-bearing capacities of wood, making it an unsafe construction material.

geologic timescales—periods, epochs, and ages—it need not refer only to events in the past. It is a loose signifier, one that might be expanded to cosmic proportions, to scales that render a geologic era as relatively insignificant as a calendar year. Indeed, the indeterminacy of the term reflects the bewildering effect of attempting to bridge the cognitive rift between an event occurring in deep time and the present moment of attention. Measuring deep time in units such as years, decades, and millennia can upend the “concreteness of time markers” by estranging the units themselves (as when a word repeated again and again drifts into nonsense sounds), making even familiar figures appear to be both overwhelming and arbitrary. Nevertheless, we are increasingly making recourse to deep time in our efforts to grasp the precarious conditions of daily life, as events in the present start to appear coterminous with the long or “deep” processes of planetary systems that once seemed impossibly remote.

Genre theory continues to supply compelling models for engaging with deep time because of its focus on relational distributions within and among texts. This analytic purchase applies both to the objects and to the methods of literary inquiry. Wai Chee Dimock, for example, has recently noted that genres, far from being stable ontological categories, constantly shift and mutate. Since genres are not grounded in single texts but emerge from groups of texts, she moreover suggests that deep time might offer a means of extending observational distance “through continents” rather than confining it to privileged times and places (*Continents*, 3). McGurl has in turn criticized certain aspects of this approach, arguing that the loss of detail involved in scaling up to such broad critical horizons can yield obscure and sometimes misleading conclusions. Interestingly, both have named particular genres that seem to capture something of the experience of deep time: Dimock offers “low epic” (“Critical Response,” 631), while McGurl proposes “posthuman comedy.”<sup>25</sup> Graham Harman and Eugene Thacker both relate the profound disorientation posed by deep time’s ontological uncertainties to the horror genre, wherein the nonhuman is confronted at, and constituted by, the dark voids of human-centric philosophy.<sup>26</sup> This essay seeks to add another hybrid: Anthropocene romance. Yet each of these variations aligns within a broader hypothesis: if scale informs genre, then certain genres will be more successful than others for representing longer or shorter periods of time, smaller or greater geographic expanses; and generic innovation may indeed make new space for the representation of deep time.

This raises further possibilities, not just for recognizing certain genres as “anthropocenic” but for addressing the Anthropocene *itself* as a genre. To understand

<sup>25</sup> McGurl notes the “frequently unfunny ‘comedy’ of the human condition such as we find it in Dante’s *Divina commedia* or Honoré de Balzac’s *Le Comédie humaine*, where it is associated with various forms of ontological *lowliness*” (“Posthuman Comedy” 549). See esp. the exchange in *Critical Inquiry* between Dimock (“Critical Response I”) and McGurl (“Critical Response II”).

<sup>26</sup> Thacker identifies “horror” as “a non-philosophical attempt to think about the world-without-us philosophically,” a genre that takes the “blind spots” of anthropocentric philosophy as “its central concern, expressing them not in abstract concepts but in a whole bestiary of impossible life forms” (9).

the Anthropocene *in* literature might be to “scale down the Anthropocene from the world to *a* world,” as Eric Hayot explains, “and recognize that, unlike the Pleistocene or Holocene, we can use the concept to refer to any ‘world’” by thinking of it as “a ‘world-concept.’” It might then include “any ‘world’ (that is, any relatively closed totality . . . ) that is capable of producing self-extinction through the manipulation of its environment,” and be generalizable among “other Anthropocenes, some of them, perhaps, not even human” (Hayot). But this is not quite the same as grasping the Anthropocene *as* literature, which requires retaining a commitment to the specificity of this world and treating it as singular, even as we uncover traces of the Anthropocene across unusual periods.

Profoundly proleptic and analeptic, the Anthropocene evokes sympathy across distances that vastly exceed the limits of individual experience, even as its simultaneous presence denies the possibility of somehow stepping outside it. It would seem that one cannot observe the Anthropocene from a distance safe enough to reduce the experience to the purely aesthetic (another iteration of the “sublime,” perhaps). One is always returned to the Anthropocene. And while the disorienting sense of scalar incommensurability that it produces helps to account for why the concept is so difficult to circumscribe, it might also indicate the degree to which—following Derrida’s meaning—the Anthropocene could be considered “fabulously textual” (23). This is not to suggest that the past, present, and future events associated with the Anthropocene are any less “real”; rather, that organizing them under the heading “Anthropocene” serves to reframe those events into narratives whose structures, tropes, and rhetorical devices enter the purview of literary analysis. This involves reopening the “book of nature” that so fascinated Lyell, Darwin, and Wells and seeing the writing of a new author.

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