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One Text, Many Utopias: Some examples of intertextuality in *The Time Machine*

I am a traveller, and I tell you a traveller's tale. I am not an annotated edition of myself.
(*The Time Machine*, National Observer Ed., 1894 p.15)

That extraordinary narrative achievement published in book form in 1895 under the title, *The Time Machine: An Invention* [hereafter TTM] might well be defined as a sombre, admonitory fable whereby Queen Victoria's subjects were told about the terrible fate of their own age. This is how an ex-student of biology at the Normal College of Science could conceive the future of mankind. At the end of Time only a handful of dust is left of our civilisation, a colourless sea of mud populated by strange creatures which are the very last ones in the evolutionary parable of the earthly living beings. What I wish to assess in this case is the amount of aesthetic and narrative originality Wells consciously putting into this early scientific romance, initially devised (in the Eloi segment) as a fictional commentary on Utopia and turned into a disconcerting and typically anti-utopian parable (the discovery of the Morlocks and the entropic ending). The young Wells clearly juxtaposes the Victorian idea of Progress with the concept of evolution, thus making a strong argument against the so-called "Excelsior biology" of the time. The final result, from a strictly literary point of view, is a scientific fable wherein the utopian *topos* of previous popular narratives is condensed and used in a completely new way. Wells was aware of the utopian tradition in English literature and, in various drafts of the text, he made many utopian references. This feature constitutes what I have called the "utopian intertextuality" of *The Time Machine*.¹ Seen in its original context *The Time Machine* is not – or rather, is not yet – a modern text of science fiction. It is of course a romance, an adventurous story but it also betrays a utopian lineage involving a whole corpus of texts which appeared in the nineteenth century. The "ambiguity" I have referred to arises from the evolutionary (i.e. "Huxleian") resolution given to the two main stops in the future of the time-traveller.

¹ I am aware that there are many definitions of intertextuality: the term is used here to imply the potentiality of a given text to stand in reciprocal and dialectical relationships with other texts sharing its obvious genealogical significance.

Now, not only TTM has a long and complex textual record – since Wells wrote the whole story many times and published it in different magazines² – but this text shows in a unique and unparalleled way Wells's narrative awareness while dealing with a pre-constituted literary topos or genre: that of Utopia or "Tale of the Future" as it was also called at the time. This seems to suggest that *The Time Machine* is complex and meaningful in so far as one is aware of the aesthetic and stylistic elaboration Wells put into it. Others had tried to write apocalyptic stories, and many had already criticised the evils of bourgeois complacency in a fictional form. Some writers had their travellers going back and forth in time, discovering utopian landscapes to be wished for or dystopian societies to be feared. Wells did all this in his own way and, with the invention of a time machine, and his fictional drama could work perfectly because he accepted and at the same time distanced himself from the earlier narratives. This constitutes the ambiguous utopian intertextuality of *The Time Machine*. It is from this ambivalent significance of the future that the reader finally constructs a supposed didactic message. Such a message, however, is never fully stated in simple or univocal terms.

First of all, to understand the utopian ambiguity of *The Time Machine* we must consider its itinerant nature: this romance about time-travelling is similar to a classical story dealing with a fantastic voyage: there is the usual tripartite structure formed by a) a journey – only, in this case, it is in time, not in space – and a trip leading to the discovery of b) and apparently *better world*, a period of history where mankind has "devolved" into two separate species (Morlock and Eloi), whose only relationship is an absurd cannibalistic one. Finally, there is a "departure" from the time and place of 802,701 AD culminating into c) *a return*, though very brief, of the Wellsian traveller to the present.³ In this very concise summary of *The Time Machine* the apocalyptic discovery made by the Traveller on his last stop in the very far future of the earth may be regarded as a mere appendix, though a very significant one, to the pessimistic message of the text.

² The textual history of *The Time Machine* is complicated and has been reviewed by several critics: B. Bergonzi, "The Publication of *The Time Machine*, 1894-95"; D.J. Lake, "The Drafts of *The Time Machine*, 1894"; B. Loing, "H.G. Wells at Work 1894-1900: A Writer's Beginnings." Loing has also written a very detailed philological account of the whole drafting of this romance: he 1980 Sorbonne doctoral dissertation published as H.G. Wells à l'Oeuvre: Les Debuts d'un Ecrivain."

³ This tripartite paradigm, also defined as the "plot stereotyping" of any utopian text, has been identified by V. Fortunati in her *La letteratura utopica inglese: morfologia e grammatica di un genere letterario*.

This said, it is evident that the romance presents the Utopian place in a new way because one has to travel *into* time to reach it. There is no dream for the Wellsian traveller of Utopia; Utopia is in the future and it can be visited only if one is aware of the historical process which governs all human affairs and affects our perceptions. Thus, an illusive better reality is shown "as it happens", with all its confused pieces slowly fitting into their own right places. Reality, in other words, appears to be a misleading concept to the time-traveller, and the whole diegetic movement of the text clearly acknowledges such a contradiction. There is no fixed, unaltered reality for the utopian time-traveller, so that what he encounters in the future is firstly "utopically" described and the "dystopically" characterised in the course of the narrative process.

An appropriate example of the utopian ambiguity of *The Time Machine* is given by the "impressions" referred to in a section ironically entitled "In the Golden Age".⁴ Here, "the whole earth has become a garden," but it is a "ruinous" garden with no gardener at all - "the waste garden of earth" (39); perhaps this is a nightmarish version of the small "home back garden" Wells's middle-class reader would patiently care for. Thus, the time-traveller has really arrived in the place which may be considered a source of all utopian narratives: the "garden of Eden", the epitome of ideal harmony between Man and Nature, an adequate setting in which to imagine - as William Morris did - man's existence liberated from material needs as well as from all the egoism of modern (industrial) civilisation:

So far as I could see, all the world displayed the same exuberant richness as the Thames Valley. From every hill I climbed I saw the same abundance of splendid buildings, endlessly various in material and style, the same clustering thickets of evergreens, the same blossom-laden trees and tree-ferns. Here and there water shone like silver, and beyond, the land rose into blue undulating hills, and so faded into the serenity of the sky. (V 51)

Such a utopian setting is the Eloi's world, where life seems to flow peacefully, just like the silvery streams the Traveller sees walking through the "blossom-laden trees" of the "undulating hills". But, again, the supposed "order" of the natural landscape can be ascribed to no one: the observer becomes more and more a witness "of a long neglected and yet weedless garden" (IV 32) so much so that we get the impression of a "sterilised pastoral nowhere", a Utopia fully anti-industrial and devoid

⁴ This is also Chapter V of the first book edition (Heinemann 1895). It corresponds to Chapter IV of the text of the Atlantic Edition, 1924, where no titles at all are given.

of any physical or biological danger for the explorer. In other words, in the future we are presented with a "tamed" version of Nature rather than with a classical and hostile environment to human enterprise: this is not a jungle where the savagery of Nature "red in tooth and claw" as Tennyson would put it, is displayed. This how the ambiguous utopian society of the Eloi is presented: apart from the "frugivorous" - i.e. vegetarian - diet they strictly follow, it is their own complexion that prompts the Traveller to observe: "[The Eloi] struck me as being a very beautiful and graceful creature, but indescribably frail" (III 29).⁵

TTM is thus able to depict the inner paradox of any Utopian society: progress means a stop to the evolutionary process; in Huxleian terms, progress cannot be equated with the "ethical process" mankind should implement. It is in this way that the apparent Utopia of the "Upperworld" gradually reveals its necessary and subterranean antithesis. As a result the strange Utopia of the Eloi is turned into an anti-utopian nightmare when the Traveller descends underground and finds another race that complements them. The monstrous Morlocks live an absurd, almost symbiotal relationship with their weaker counterpart. Not casually, Wells here adopting what Bernard Bergonzi, following Northrop Frye, has called the "demonic and Dantesque" mythical imagery of the romance mode.⁶ Travelling downwards allows the author of this first scientific romance to present the late-Victorian reader with the ultimate taboo - anthropofagism. In a metaphorical sense it is as if this utopian journey led not towards "higher" states of human existence but the "the lowest" of imaginable realities, Wells is perhaps even trying to debunk the epistemological nature of utopian writing; although any utopian traveller usually envisages some kind of truth, often a better one, together with a brighter arrangement of human affairs, no luminous discovery awaits the time-traveller. Literally, this is a voyage down into the darkest depths if mankind:

⁵ Indeed, the "frailty" and "gracefulness" of the Eloi has led many critics to individuate a "real" counterpart to such a fictional creation: since Bergonzi (1961) it has always been suggested that Wells tried to satirise the ineffectual sensibility of the aesthetes and decadents of the Nineties. However, another interesting case of utopian intertextuality acknowledged by Wells is W.H. Hudson's *The Crystal Age* (1887): the calm and *emotionally apathetic* behaviour of the Eloi may remind us, in fact, of the same *modus vivendi* of the "Crystallites". Besides, in that book too the Earth of the future was depicted as a "green paradise". In particular, everything was covered by a huge forest which had blotted out the ugliness of industrial "towns". This utopian advocacy of natural "wilderness" - a perfect metaphor to stress the absolute lack of human control over Nature - is another post-Romantic feature which Wells shares with writers like Hudson who were well apart from the post-industrial pastoral idyll of Morris.

⁶ See Bergonzi 52-53; Frye 52-53.

Sitting by the side of these wells, and peering down into the shafted darkness, I could see no gleam of water, nor could I start any reflection with a lighted match. But in all of them I heard a certain sound: a thud thud thud, like the beating of some big engine...]. (V 51)

Revealingly, no light – either direct or reflected – comes from the deep shafts the Traveller is peering into; instead the resounding “thuds” seem to communicate some kind of obfuscated, sombre message. It is a message coming from the “heart of darkness” of the future – the Wellsian interpretation of the instinctual, primitive aspects of human existence which in 1899 would also inspire Wells’s friend, Joseph Conrad. Through the mechanical rhythm of this subterranean “dark heart”, the author destroys what is left of the “utopian hope” of the surface. The Traveller hears the sound of some remote, undescribed machinery and soon realises that someone must be capable of attending to it. Although their “apelike” appearance is stressed, the Morlocks are far more intelligent than the Eloi; they make garments for them and prepare their vegetarian meals – “The Eloi, like the Carovingian kings, had decayed... and the Morlock made their garments, I inferred, and maintained them in their habitual needs...” (VII 74).

To peer into the darkness means for the Traveller to peer into the unexpected age of a new barbarity. In this sombre mood ends the first and longest stop of the Wellsian “chrononaut” who has found a pastoral Utopia and witnessed the dehumanised version of an industrial anti-Utopia.⁷ In both cases the same utopian ideal, that is the melioristic “dream of human intellect”, has been shown by Wells to be false and dangerous. The post-Darwinian paradigm of a bio-cultural “devolution” is used to support such a negative vision of the year 802,701 and even darker ages

⁷ The same dehumanised version of Utopia can also be found in another, almost forgotten, version of *The Time Machine* which comes just before the “National Observer” version. That text has never been recovered but I am basing my deductions on the account of one of Wells’s oldest friends, Professor A. Morley Davies, later recounted in Geoffrey West’s biography of 1930. In that version of *The Time Machine* Dr Nebogipfel and the Rev. Cook still travel into the future (as happened in *The Chronic Argonauts*) and discover that the “upper and lower worlds exist but their inhabitants are not yet distinct species...”. In fact the whole story is aptly devised, in my opinion, following the typical utopian/anti-utopian plot; the two travellers of the “here and now” discover that that the decadent red-robed priesthood of the Upper World has completely forgotten art and literature; they come from the past, so that their action is used to validate the “cultural” and “moral” superiority of Victorian England. Their presence in the future is so disruptive that it provokes a revolution; when some of the idle priests go underground with the time-travellers they get killed by the sudden reaction of the workers. This eventually leads to a complete massacre of the Upperworlders once all the population rushes up to get the freedom it has wished for so long – the whole thing reminds one of a later anti-utopian text, *When the Sleeper Awakes* (1899). As in every utopian text there is also a love story between a beautiful representative of the Upper-world and the Rev. Cook. But her beauty is completely artificial and so,

await to be explored in the next phases of the time-traveller’s journey. Indeed, if ever a “Golden Age” of mankind existed, it has already disappeared when the protagonist walks alone amidst the dusty and ruinous “Palace of Green Porcelain” (VIII). In this abandoned building, the exact counterpart of the South Kensington Museum, the record of human progress has no meaning at all because human life is now approaching its end. No utopian advancement can be conceived of, and consequently no utopian artefacts are to be added to this useless museum of the future.⁸

Thus far we have seen how Wells is able to draw a paradoxical inversion of a double utopian standard. Wells considers Utopia and plainly applies the evolutionary scientific paradigm to it, but instead of using it to magnify the so-called “Excelsior hypothesis”⁹ he contrives to shock his readers and to attack any complacent assumption regarding a Utopian future. Though he is not really thinking “utopically” as he will do later on, he is already mastering the utopian genre. There are two specific episodes which metatextually confirm Wells’s awareness of the utopian genre, while enabling us to assess the scale of the aesthetic originality he was trying to achieve. The first episode occurs when the time-traveller himself acknowledges the very different – and equivocal – nature of the future world of the Eloi and Morlocks, and compares his account to the journey towards Utopia with previous attempts:

And here I must admit that I learned very little of drains and bells and modes of conveyance, and the like conveniences, during my time in this real future. In some of these visions of Utopias and coming times which I have read, there is a vast amount of detail about building, and social arrangements, and so forth. But while such details are easy enough to obtain when the whole world is contained in one’s imagination, they are altogether inaccessible to a real traveller amid such realities as I found here. (V 52)

Wells seems here to endorse a specific “incompleteness” of the future, basing his almost novelistic appeal towards credibility and realism – while using the non-mimetic genre of the romance – on the speculative nature of the Traveller’s utopian impressions. Visiting “this real future”, while at the same time claiming to be “a real traveller”, requires the Wellsian observer to abandon any commitment to didactic commentaries in the tradition of “these visions of Utopia and coming times”.

unlike in the later editions of *The Time Machine*, the time-traveller consciously decides to get rid of her while he is climbing into the machine.

⁸ See L. Gustafson, “The Present as the Museum of the Future” 111-122.

⁹ The so-called “Excelsior hypothesis” is that by which man’s evolution is only and always to be intended as linear and positive. Wells’s severe criticism of this popularised notion of Darwinism is contained in his article “Zoological Retrogression.”

However, no "vast amount of detail" is obtained at this time so that the semantic fluidity of his remarks is also emphasised. Wells's way of fictionally representing Utopia is more impressionistic and less naturalistic; he seems to reject – at least in this early romance – an exhaustive report of the utopian "place" to be visited in the future as being only possible when "the whole world is contained in one's imagination"¹⁰ Wells has devised a story of time-travelling rather than a mere utopian journey into the future, and this emphasis might also explain the itinerant, provisional nature of the Traveller's comments. Such a traveller holds very few beliefs when he leaves, and most, if not all of them will completely change because of the dramatic discoveries made in the course of the journey. If, as the Traveller has previously explained, "There is no difference between Time and any of the three dimensions of Space except that our consciousness moves along it..." (I 5), then the whole temporal journey embodies a long process of discovery and realisation, with the narrative itself being a "parallel" – and perfectly diegetic – record of such a process.

The intertextual references in the last quotation not only show Wells's self-awareness in dealing with the utopian genre; they also test the author's capacity to renew these same conventions. The second episode confirms this assumption in so far as we detect in it the author's metanarrative input towards a personal reformulation of the utopian plot. More specifically, Wells knows that in any utopian narrative there is a "native" character who acts as a guide for the "ordinary" external observer. William Morris in *News from Nowhere*, for example, accepted this convention and created Dick, a boatman, to accompany his traveller into the Thames valley that is also Wells's setting for *The Time Machine*. However, in Wells's case, no guide is available for the tour of Utopia: "This, I must warn you, was my theory at the time. I had no convenient cicerone in the pattern of the Utopian books. My explanation may be absolutely wrong" (V 64).

While Morris's fluvial journey in the twenty first century represented a sort of "initiatory trip" towards the socialist Utopia of the "lived" present,¹¹ Wells's traveller wanders around the ruins of a "Golden Age" of the dead past; seen from this perspective, the future setting chosen by the two narrators is really not important. The future is just another convention in order to tell what cannot be told in the present.

¹⁰ Wells's intertextual reference to "this real future" seems to imply a particular use of realist conventions. On this aspect see Patrick Parrinder, "News from Nowhere, The Time Machine and the Break-Up of Classical Realism."

More importantly, the Traveller of *The Time Machine* has no one to help him to understand what he sees (especially in the "Eloi" section). The fixed "utopian pattern" of this kind of narrative – or perhaps, following A.J. Greimas's narratology, the "actantial model"¹² – is openly transformed by Wells's unstable narrative point of view so that the status of his Traveller – the Inner Narrator – itself becomes unreliable and awkward.

Besides, Wells's ambiguous connotation of "his" utopian future for mankind produces a sort of meta-narrative commentary referring to other futures, those imagined in similar and contemporary romances. The kind of critique present in *The Time Machine* is even more openly expressed in an earlier version of the passage quoted above (the one published in the *National Observer*):

Odd as it may seem, I had no cicerone. In all the narratives of people visiting the future that I have read, some obliging scandal-monger appears at an early stage, and begins to lecture on constitutional history and social economy, and to point out the celebrities. Indeed so little had I thought of the absurdity of this that I had actually anticipated something of the kind would occur in reality... I had figured myself lecturing and being lectured... But they [the Eloi] didn't explain anything. They couldn't. They were the most illiterate people I ever met.¹³

Wells's utopian intertextually therefore always requires some kind of authorial renewal. In *The Time Machine* the reader is invited not to expect the usual utopian pattern, and the author's reasons for such metanarrative enticement are easily understood; there is no "convenient cicerone" because there is no convenient Utopia to be described; and there is no Utopia any more because reality makes no sense under the post-Darwinian perspective of bio-cultural retrogression. Consequently, the time-traveller must remain alone to face entropy and he also must prove to be stern and unyielding in the critical moments of the story. His strange relationship with Weena, the Eloi girl he saves from drowning, is clearly indicative of the unromantic, even callous, seriousness Wells ascribes to "his" utopian journey:

[Weena] was exactly like a child. She wanted to be with me always. She tried to follow me everywhere and on my next journey out and about it went to my heart to tire her down, and leave her at last, exhausted and calling after me rather plaintively. The 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. (V 55)¹⁴

¹¹ On this interpretation cf. Also Patrick Parrinder, "News from the Land of No News."

¹² A.J. Greimas, *Semantique Structurale*, Paris, 1966 (Milan, 1969).

¹³ H.G. Wells, "The Refinement of Humanity," *National Observer*.

¹⁴ The name of Weena seems to confirm the intertextuality Wells is establishing in *The Time Machine*. In *Across the Zodiac*, a little-known scientific romance by Percy Greg, we find another female

A female companionship would almost always be present in any utopian romance, thus creating a strong emotional involvement for the lonely explorer who finally finds love in a world or in an epoch where he is a stranger.¹⁵

Of course, all this would seem absurd and unrealistic to Wells's Traveller in this utopian future; he is well-informed about the "romantic" attitude of previous utopian writers, and he affirms that "no miniature flirtation" will ever seduce him. The fact that he has come into the future because "the problems of the world had to be mastered" is revealing of the more sophisticated aim of the whole narrative, while underlining the male individualism and the rational commitment of a scientist – whose only wish is to see and report back to the present the incredible things of the future. Further on in the story the Traveller is afraid that the mere thought of the Eloi girl might distract him from his purpose, so much so that he banishes her from the narrative act he is performing in front of his guests ("But my story slips away from me as I speak of her..." (V 57). This scientific romance is therefore intended to be innovatively and unconventionally utopian at the cost of completely erasing any female counterpart. The gentle and meek figure of the Eloi girl is regarded as "a great comfort" only after her untimely death. The sentimentalism rejected the Traveller is partially restored at the very end of the story when Wells, perfectly in line with the tradition of previous utopian romances, has the outer narrator musing on the flowers given to the Traveller by Weena: "And I have by me, for my comfort, two strange white flowers – shrivelled now, and brown and flat and brittle – to witness that even when mind and strength had gone, gratitude and a mutual tenderness still lived on in the heart of man" (Epilogue 118).¹⁶

female representative of an organised society who desperately needs the help of the earthly explorer. Her name is Eveena and, given the date of publication of Greg's book – 1880 – the young Wells may have read it.

¹⁵ For example, in Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward* (1888), the protagonist Julian West awakes in the industrial socialism of the year 2000 to discover that the great-granddaughter of his fiancée – Edith Leete – has read all his old love letters to the other Edith and has been charmed by them. She has always told her parents that she would only marry a man like the lover who wrote them. The male protagonist is so pleased at this unexpected turn of affairs that he plans to marry and live happily ever after in the wonderful world of the twenty-first century.

¹⁶ Wells openly disapproved of the stereotyping of the utopian genre. In 1910 he revised his romance *The Sleeper Awakes* (originally published in 1899 as *When the Sleeper Wakes*). About six thousand words were omitted and the whole love-story between the male protagonist and his female utopian companion was heavily cut (in the Preface to that edition Wells spoke of his elimination of the "sexual interest" of the story). Again, William Morris and Edward Bellamy's utopian romances are implicit in Wells's re-formulation of the plot. Bellamy's *Looking Backward* is even specifically acknowledged (see Chapter v).

The utopian intertext of TTM thus works to radically transform the typical idea of Utopia (or anti-Utopia, depending on the positive/negative stance of the writer). Since Plato's monological example, and after Thomas More had stressed the inherent ambiguity of any utopian writing – coining the word of "ou/eu-topos" to designate a "no place" that can also be a "good place" – the Utopian genre clearly found a new conceptual status thanks to Darwin and the advent of evolutionism. Wells, of course, makes good use of such a revolutionary trend of thought by adding the Hegelian and Marxist concept of dynamic historicity: the history of mankind is then to be conceived as the history of a wilful progress of our species along the planetary scale. The dynamism of history thus influences the achievement of Utopia so that Wells also will postulate his gradual, but steadfast, realisation of this ideal in *A Modern Utopia* (1905). However, underlining its importance in an early text can be useful in order to understand Wells's original approach to the whole genre of utopian writing. In this respect, the strange reversion of roles between the "effeminate" Eloi and the "masculine" Morlocks appears more and more as a paradoxical outcome – based on gender and presented in the outrageous light of future cannibalism – or the perpetual dynamics of history and evolution, even when the utopian "march of time" has definitely lost its progressive attributes.

In the end, to conceive of Utopia through the distorting lenses of a scientific romance like TTM meant, for Wells, to meditate fictionally and without sentimentalism. The various drafts and versions of *The Time Machine* only partly betray the author's acknowledgement of other utopian narratives. To write a romance meant for Wells "not [to] pretend to deal with possible things..." but to produce "exercises of the imagination in a quite different field".¹⁷ The distance between the extremes of the old and the new "Stories of the Future" could only be covered at the cost of shocking readers who had never before faced the possibility that Utopia might lead to its sombre and nightmarish opposite.

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Alan Mayne

The Virtual Time Machine: Part II - Some Physicists' Views of Time Travel

2.1 Examples of Media Coverage of Physicists' Views

Ever since the publication of "The Time Machine" in 1895, time travel has become a theme that is very widely used in science fiction. In the popular media, perhaps the best known series of time travel stories are those featuring Dr Who and his time machine the Tardis, whose exterior looks like a London police box!

This led to a news story with the remarkable headline "Time lords square up to do battle over the grandfather paradox"!, which appeared in The Sunday Times