Beastly Journeys

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CHAPTER THREE

Morlocks, Martians, and Beast-People

Probably the writer best known for populating his tales of the 1890s with beastly specimens is H. G. Wells. Often hailed as a prophetic figure, Wells is most firmly of his time, his texts born of attempts to come to terms with late nineteenth-century social and cultural anxieties. One can readily apply to Wells Rosemary Jackson’s observation that:

Like any other text, a literary fantasy is produced within, and determined by, its social context. Though it might struggle against the limits of this context, often being articulated upon that very struggle, it cannot be understood in isolation from it.¹

The present chapter is concerned not only to identify the origins of the creatures that reside within Wells’s writing, but to examine the form of the narrative vehicle in which they are transported. The focus is on three texts: *The Time Machine* (1895) and its metaphor of time travel; *The War of the Worlds* (1898) and its space travel (with Earth as the destination, rather than the departure point); and *The Island of Doctor Moreau* (1896) as a variant of the castaway voyage. I aim to show that the internal transformations that occur in Wells’s tales (that is, the changes that are narrated within them) are complemented by the alterations that Wells effects to their external shape (that is, to the literary genres on which he draws for his scientific romances). Linda Dryden argues that Wells ‘took the fin de siècle Gothic a stage further by subjecting it to a scientific scrutiny’ and that ‘[i]n the modern Gothic, physical transformation from human to some bestial other is a central trope’.² Wells explicitly relates his metaphors of bodily alteration to social conditions. His linkage of them combines with his experiments in literary form to produce shifts in narrative perspective.

Feeling his way among his words

Like several of Wells’s works, *The Time Machine* is usually hailed as an
early science fiction tale. In it, the Time Traveller remarks that: ‘Time is only a kind of Space.’ The discussion that follows takes up this implied invitation to examine it as a travel narrative and will focus on its beastly imagery. Like travel writing, science fiction tells us more about the society that produces it than about the world it ostensibly portrays, so Wells’s story must be viewed in its fin de siècle context.

With its tale within a tale, the presentation of The Time Machine bears similarities to Joseph Conrad’s later Heart of Darkness (1899, 1902). In the former, the framing narrator has an audience of professional gentlemen: a psychologist, medical man, provincial mayor, doctor, journalist, and an editor – all of whom try to make sense of what they are told, just as the narrator himself does. Wells has the Time Traveller speak about the problems of understanding and communicating what one has seen on one’s journey:

Conceive the tale of London which a negro, fresh from Central Africa, would take back to his tribe! … how much could he make his untravelled friend either apprehend or believe? Then, think how narrow the gap between a negro and a white man of our own times, and how wide the interval between myself and these of the Golden Age! (p.40)

Not only does the passage draw attention to the problems of cross-cultural translation and comprehension, as the Traveller pronounces himself unable to convey to his audience more than a little of the differences that he has found, but the image of a bemused African visiting a strange London reverses the direction of movement common in travel writing of the time. In so doing, it introduces the possibility of a different perspective, while the statement that there is little difference between an African and a modern white person defies dominant beliefs. Readers’ values are thus questioned and their values destabilised.

The Time Traveller’s difficulties in relating his experiences are apparent in his demeanour. The narrator speaks of him ‘feeling his way among his words’ (p.17) – a suitable image for the cautious linguistic exploration that occurs in The Time Machine and other contemporary works. A connection between spatial, verbal, and textual voyaging is thereby made. The early emphasis on finding one’s way puts readers on their look-out, too. This is new and uncertain ground and it is in keeping with what Wells commented on in late 1895:

the modern fanciful method takes the novelist to a new point of view. Stand aside but a little space from the ordinary line of observation, and the relative position of all things changes. There is a new proportion established. You have the world under a totally different aspect. There is profit as well as
novelty in the change of view. That is, in some small way, what I aim at in my books.6

Wells has the main character of *The Time Machine* tell his audience that the only difference between Time and Space is that ‘our consciousness moves along it’ (p.8). His explanation assumes equivalence between cultural and temporal distance. He draws racial and beastly comparisons to make his point. Insisting that we can move about in Time, he comments:

> For instance, if I am recalling an incident very vividly I go back to the instant of its occurrence. I become absent-minded, as you say. I jump back for a moment. Of course we have no means of staying back for any length of Time, any more than a savage or an animal has of staying six feet above the ground. But a civilized man is better off than a savage in this respect. He can go up against gravitation in a balloon, and why should he not hope that ultimately he may be able to stop or accelerate his drift along the Time-Dimension, or even turn about and travel the other way? (p.10)

The Traveller’s subsequent account interrogates the widely and confidently held idea that the ‘savage’ and the ‘civilised’ were separated, both physically and culturally, as he suggests above. Wells’s use of narrative to demonstrate the problems of distinction and relativity has affinities with what, nearly a century later, the sociologist Norbert Elias writes of as the fifth dimension. Elias ascribes to this the standpoint of the observer, who not only looks on at the four dimensions, but is able to perceive

> the symbolic character of the four dimensions as means of orientation for human beings … who are capable of synthesis and so are in a position to have present at the same time in their imagination what takes place successively and so never exists simultaneously.7

For Elias, this idea of synthesis also remedies the false distinction made between the natural and the social. Suggesting a model of ‘people who can observe and investigate from different storeys and so from different perspectives’ (i.e. who can appreciate the symbolic character of the four dimensions), he declares that:

> Time, which on the preceding step was recognizable only as a dimension of nature, becomes recognizable, now that society is included in the field of view as a subject of knowledge, as a human-made symbol and, moreover, a symbol with high object-adequacy.8

Although Elias makes little reference to literature, I shall wilfully misread ‘storey’ as a typographical error for ‘story’ and argue that the
Time Traveller’s movement through the fourth dimension is observed and investigated by Wells, who uses his tale to inspect, from this fifth dimension, the symbolic construction of time in relation to physical, ‘natural’ time. Indeed, Wells shows this quite graphically, demonstrating the impossibility of achieving an easy synthesis. Much of the latter part of his text is taken up with a kind of dialectic between nature and society, and he deliberately avoids neat closure of the tale that would amount to an easy synthesis.

My approach will also draw on Bakhtin’s idea of the ‘chronotope’:

We will give the name chronotope (literally, ‘time space’) to the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature …

In the literary artistic chronotope, spatial and temporal indicators are fused into one carefully thought-out, concrete whole. Time, as it were, thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible; likewise, space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot and history. This intersection of axes and fusion of indicators characterizes the artistic chronotope.9

Using his Traveller’s voyages through time, Wells takes existing conditions in the city and projects them forwards within Darwinist and quasi-Marxist terms, framed in fin de siècle mood and imagery. The time travel serves as a defamiliarising device, facilitating scrutiny of contemporary life. As with many 1890s texts, confidence about domestic society and imperial activity is undermined (in this case literally, as we shall see).

When the Traveller first arrives in the future, he wonders what changes may have happened to humanity, whether it might have ‘lost its manliness’ and

... 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. (p.23)

The Traveller finds himself potentially in the position of the ‘savage’ – a post-Darwinian reversal, which would underline the fragile basis of any current boasts of superiority. But while assumptions of racial hierarchies are unsettled, gender values are not. ‘Manliness’ is associated with vigour and proposed as the vital quality of humankind. Further evidence of this comes with the appearance of the Eloi. The first one that the Traveller sees is a typical four feet tall, ‘very beautiful and graceful creature, but indescribably frail’. It reminds him of ‘the more beautiful kind of consumptive – that hectic beauty of which we used to hear so much’
The fragile, sickly type would be familiar to 1890s readers, given the plethora of commentaries on the aesthetes and decadence. The Elois’ prettiness is soon equated with a lack of physical and mental strength – a connotation that preserves gender inequalities. Those ‘pretty little people’ with their ‘child-like ease’, their lack of facial hair, and their ‘Dresden-china type of prettiness’ may be superficially attractive (p.25), but when the Traveller realises that they think he came from the sun in a thunderstorm (thus betraying a level of ignorance and superstition commonly attributed to ‘primitives’), then the situation becomes more disturbing, as they appear to be the intellectual equal of ‘one of our five-year-old children’ (p.26). The disjunction between linear time and progress is a shock; for the Traveller to be superior to the Eloi is as great an aberration as for the ‘savage’ to be superior to ‘us’.

The Elois’ lack of curiosity matches their unproductiveness (another fault widely attributed to ‘savages’, signifying at once their alleged lack of forethought and a justification for appropriating their land). The Traveller’s ‘general impression’ of their world was of ‘a long-neglected and yet weedless garden’ (p.26). Their exclusively fruit diet (horses, cattle, sheep, and dogs are extinct) is also a sign of a loss of vigour; meat often being associated in Wells’s time (and not only then) with manliness, though the association was not made uncritically: adherents of vegetarianism denounced meat-eating as degenerate and traced a line from it to cannibalism.10

The reification of the aesthetic in the Eloi points to an alarming decline in usefulness. Their limitations remind one of Darwin on the probability ‘that disuse has been the main agent in rendering organs rudimentary’.11 In the Traveller’s attempts to account for this situation, Wells reflects on the problems of interpretation, and it is in this respect that the narrative is written from, so to speak, the fifth dimension.

When the Traveller begins to muse on the condition of the Eloi, his thoughts focus on the uniformity of their appearance. The apparent absence of ‘the single house, and possibly even the household’ leads him to deduce that he is witnessing a communistic society (p.29). He opines that ‘the strength of a man and the softness of a woman, the institution of the family, and the differentiation of occupations are mere militant necessities of an age of physical force’ and that the necessity for them will happily vanish in a more easeful, balanced, and secure society (p.30). We are already seeing the start of this process in our own time, he comments (and he may well have in mind such phenomena as the rise of the New Woman).
Immediately afterwards, the Traveller throws us off balance by admitting that he has since had to revise this speculation, because ‘it fell short of the reality’ (p.30). We infer that future revelations will force further revisions, making us cautious in our reception of the Traveller’s theories. A kind of dialectic is thus set up. We absorb the Traveller’s ‘present’ words, knowing they will be modified by subsequent events.

What the Traveller describes would indicate, to many readers, not progress but regression. Although he has hinted that he is uneasy at the Elois’ mental state, he soon tries to console himself with the thought that he is witnessing the construction of a communistic utopia. However, it would have been widely known that to many social theorists, notably Herbert Spencer, the specialisation of function, which loss the Traveller celebrates, actually constituted the very fact of progress. ‘Life in general has been more heterogeneously manifested as time has advanced’, wrote Spencer in an essay first published in the *Westminster Review* in April 1857: ‘[T]he transformation of the homogeneous into the heterogeneous, is that in which Progress essentially consists.’

Where Spencer sees differentiation and hierarchy as vital conditions for civilisation, with the gap between the governing and the governed especially important, the Time Traveller wishes to reverse these markers, associating the desirable simplicity of the primitive with the communist. At this point there is bound to be confusion in most readers’ minds, as there is in the Traveller’s, as to whether society has moved backwards or forwards. Wells uses the Traveller’s successive modifications of interpretation to add to his readers’ uncertainty. Wells’s chronotope, his narrative manipulation of time and space, positions the Traveller as a kind of floating interrogative. The question of the direction of change – advancement or degeneration – is fundamental and the Traveller’s problems of comprehension are induced in part by the continuing debate over existing tendencies in fin de siècle society.

In a volume published thirteen years after *The Time Machine*, Wells dwelt on these concerns, but also included a passage that may be read as a coda on the method he adopted in the earlier story:

The current syllogistic logic rests on the assumption that either A is B or it is not B. The practical reality is that nothing is permanent; A is always becoming more or less B. But it would seem the human mind cannot manage with that. It has to hold a thing still for a moment before it can think it … It cannot contemplate things continuously, and so it has to resort to a series of static snapshots. It has to kill motion in order to study it, as a naturalist kills and pins out a butterfly in order to study life.
It would seem that Wells allows for this limitation while striving to overcome it. By having the Traveller stop off at a particular point in the future, go briefly further forward, return to tell his tale, then travel again, Wells provides the freeze frame, but does so within a larger picture of process. He supplies both a synchronic and diachronic perspective. He demands that we resist easy assumptions of finitude and of closed fact. For Wells, that which cannot be pinned down is as crucial as that which can:

Every species is vague, every term goes cloudy at its edges … Every species waggles about in its definition … … The finest type specimen you can find simply has the characteristic quality a little more rather than a little less.15

The waggle for Wells is Weena. The emotional affirmation she brings to the tale is clearly meant to transcend the material changes that occur to her and our worlds. Individual variation was the key to Darwin’s theory of evolution, something which Wells himself reminds us of: ‘it was only with the establishment of Darwin’s great generalizations that the hard and fast classificatory system broke down and individuality came to its own’.16 Wells’s use of time travel, emphasising, as it does, indefinability and uncertainty, works against the then-predominant notions of type, essence, and wholeness.

The unreliability of interpretation, exemplified by the Traveller’s theorising, makes it hard for readers to be certain about the truth of the Morlocks and the Eloi and of their relation to each other. ‘We are “too blind” to understand Nature’s meaning’, wrote Darwin.17 As well as the Traveller’s reported attempts to understand what he witnesses, there is also the narrator’s and his peers’ uncertainty as to whether or not to accept the hero’s account at all.

The old needs of the ape

Wells advises against the suppression of appetites (and he probably had little choice, given what was known of his indulgence of his own sexual ones): ‘One has to accept these things in oneself … even if one knows them to be dangerous things, even if one is sure they have an evil side.’18 The Morlocks would not be the creatures they have become had it not been for the bourgeois Eloi’s suppression of their own baser selves and those they made serve them. Like Hyde in Stevenson’s tale, the Morlocks represent the return of the psychologically and socially repressed. Wells
was later to refer to the ‘old needs of the ape but thinly overlaid by the acquisitions of the man’ — an idea which, although his reference in the context is principally to sexual urges, nevertheless clearly underlies the association of the Morlocks with humans’ animal instincts. We can readily apply to the uninquiring Eloi the opening of the following comment by Wells on curiosity:

I perceive hypertrophied in myself and many sympathetic human beings a passion that many animals certainly possess, the beautiful and fearless cousin of fear, Curiosity, that seeks keenly for knowing and feeling. Apart from appetites and bodily desires and blind impulses, I want most urgently to know and feel, for the sake of knowing and feeling. I want to go round corners and see what is there, to cross mountain ranges, to open boxes and parcels.

Actual and intellectual adventure are conjoined here and they find rich expression in time travel.

In *First and Last Things* Wells would dismiss omniscience. *The Time Machine* dispenses with it. Neither the anonymous framing narrator nor Wells as author is able to supply the positive interpretation the Traveller cannot give. The Traveller, after his initial deductions, becomes a little more restrained in his judgements. He supposes that humanity had continued its fight against disease, discomfort, and danger and gradually attained the climax of the civilising process. But, he thinks, ‘[s]trength is the outcome of need; security sets a premium on feebleness’ (p.31). The people are housed in splendid shelters and wear gorgeous costume, but seem to be engaged in no toil. He sees no signs of struggle, either social or economic: ‘all that commerce which constitutes the body of our world, was gone’ (p.32). From all this, he thinks it understandable that he should jump at the idea of a social paradise. Knowing, post-Darwin, however, that changes in conditions lead to adaptations to the change, he begins to worry that the frailties he encounters are an inevitable result of the triumph over Nature. He speculates that in the new environment of ‘comfort and security, that restless energy, that with us is strength, would become weakness’ (p.33). The passage would disturb the Traveller’s audience, for it suggests that ‘savage’ survivals in civilised ‘man’ are necessary if one is not to sink into idleness and decay.

In an observation redolent of the 1890s, the Time Traveller muses on decadence. He comments that in conditions of security, energy ‘takes to art and eroticism, and then come languor and decay’ (p.33). The Traveller’s Social Darwinist view equates lack of struggle with
enervation. All that was left of the artistic impulse, he muses, was the Elois’ dancing and singing and their decoration of themselves with flowers and even this would ‘fade in the end into a contented inactivity’, for ‘[w]e are kept keen on the grindstone of pain, and necessity’ and, it seems to the Traveller, that ‘hateful grindstone’ had now been broken (p.33). Immediately afterwards, however, he comments that this theory and his idea that the Elois’ efforts to control their population rates have succeeded too well, creating a decrease, are very plausible – like most wrong ones.

That the Eloi represent a regression is also apparent from their language, which to the Traveller seems ‘excessively simple’, with few ‘abstract terms’, ‘little use of figurative language’, and sentences usually of only two words (p.39). From this bare description it would be quite obvious, even to those who knew nothing of evolutionary theory, that such linguistic simplicity heralds no great advance in the development of the race. For those acquainted with evolutionary ideas, the connotations would be clearer still. We can again turn to Herbert Spencer for an identification of language with racial development. This is what he says on the matter:

The lowest form of language is the exclamation, by which an entire idea is vaguely conveyed through a single sound; as among the lower animals … [T]hat language can be traced down to a form in which nouns and verbs are its only elements, is an established fact. In the gradual multiplication of parts of speech out of these primary ones – in the differentiation of verbs into active and passive, of nouns into abstract and concrete – in the rise of distinctions of mood, tense, person, of number and case – in the formation of auxiliary verbs, of adjectives, adverbs, pronouns, prepositions, articles – in the divergence of those orders, genera, species, and varieties of parts of speech by which civilised races express minute modifications of meaning – we see a change from the homogeneous to the heterogeneous … [I]t is more especially in virtue of having carried this subdivision of function to a greater extent and completeness, that the English language is superior to all others.\textsuperscript{21}

Spencer’s robust confidence in this route of progress is challenged by the condition of the Eloi as Wells forces us to confront the possibility of degeneration. (It may also be that by way of the Traveller’s changes of mind and fallibility, Wells is questioning the credibility of those travellers whose observations were used as evidence by armchair anthropologists, as well as of those anthropologists who themselves travelled.) The Traveller’s fluent relation of his narrative – his vacillation notwithstanding – encloses the alleged linguistic deficiencies of the Eloi just as
other travellers’ narratives contained the so-called primitive utterances of ‘savages’. The cultural and temporal confusion in Wells’s text is caused by the fact that rather than being our forebears, these inarticulate simpletons are our descendants. (It should not be forgotten though that pronominal identification works no less coercively in *The Time Machine*, pulling readers into the cultural position of the author.)

The theme of degeneration intensifies with the Traveller’s nocturnal glimpse of the white ape-like figures that we come to know as the Morlocks. His sighting comes the night before another proof of the Elois’ enervated state: their lack of effort to rescue Weena from drowning. The Traveller himself saves her and is rewarded with her affectionate gift of a garland of flowers. As he recalls this episode and its aftermath, he interrupts himself to declare that ‘my story slips away from me as I speak of her’ (p.43), a statement that interestingly, if unconsciously, attests to the destabilising effects of gender. Furthermore, when he later recounts another episode and remembers that Weena had placed some flowers in his pocket, not only does he break off his narrative, but the framing narrator re-emerges in the story for a rare moment:

*The Time Traveller paused, put his hand into his pocket, and silently placed two withered flowers, not unlike very large white mallows, upon the little table. Then he resumed his narrative.* (p.56)

The female presence introduces an emotional quality which, though sought after by the narrator as a sign of humanity, is nonetheless dismissed at will as a disruption to rationality and purpose. The Traveller’s intention of bringing Weena back to his present world is thwarted by her disappearance and probable death, though we must doubt whether his intention would have been realised in any case, and in this there are similarities with the unconsummated union of Good and Foulata in H. Rider Haggard’s *King Solomon’s Mines* (1885).

When, the night before Weena’s rescue, the Traveller dreamily glimpses the Morlocks, they appear to him as ‘white figures’ and are variously described as ‘greyish animal[s]’ and ‘white, ape-like creature[s] … carrying some dark body’ (p.43). Encountering some later, on what he thinks is his fourth morning, the terms are repeated, but enlarged. He has an ‘imperfect’ impression of the creature he sees, but knows ‘it was a dull white, and had strange large greyish-red eyes; [with] flaxen hair on its head and down its back’. The speed at which it moves means that he ‘cannot even say whether it ran on all-fours, or only with its forearms held very low’ (p.45). When he strikes a match to get a view
of it scuttling down a shaft, it makes him shudder, as ‘[i]t was so like a human spider!’ (p.45).

In *Children of the Ghetto*, published the same year as *The Time Machine*, Israel Zangwill has his narrator recall:

> a dull, squalid, narrow thoroughfare in the East End of London, connecting Spitalfields with Whitechapel, and branching off in blind alleys. In the days when little Esther Ansell trudged its unclean pavements, its extremities were within earshot of the blasphemies from some of the vilest quarters and filthiest rookeries in the capital of the civilized world. Some of these clotted spiders’ webs have since been swept away by the besom of the social reformer, and the spiders have scurried off into darker corners.22

After his sighting of what looks like a human spider, the Time Traveller now has to modify his Social Darwinist reading to account for this new revelation. Doing so leads him in a different direction as he relays his gradual realisation that

> Man had … differentiated into two distinct animals … my graceful children of the Upper-world were not the sole descendants of our generation … [T]his bleached, obscene, nocturnal Thing, which had flashed before me, was also heir to all the ages. (p.45)

His new interpretation has the Traveller thinking, too, of the economic environment that may have led to this development as he considers both the physical and social factors that may have resulted in the emergence of this second, subterranean species. He uses the concept of adaptation to the environment as a basis for a kind of Marxist explanation of what he sees, but prefaces this by warning of his theory that he soon felt it inadequate (p.46). The Morlocks’ whiteness is seen as a natural reaction to their subterranean life, their pigmentation disappearing in response to the absence of light. The Traveller posits that the Morlocks toil underground for the benefit of the Eloi. He bases his interpretation on a projection from the current state of things, remarking that it seemed very clear to him ‘that the gradual widening of the present merely temporary and social difference between the Capitalist and the Labourer was the key to the whole position’ (pp.46–47). He has in mind the present ‘tendency to utilize underground space for the less ornamental purposes of civilization’. He lists as examples the Metropolitan Railway in London, the increasing number of new electric railways, subways, and underground workrooms and restaurants. We might add (while we still have some memory of them) the miners who toiled underground to supply society’s energy needs.
The Traveller speculates that Industry operated increasingly underground until the situation which he has found had been reached. Rhetorically, he asks his contemporaries: ‘does not an East-End worker live in such artificial conditions as practically to be cut off from the natural surfaces of the earth?’ (p.47). He also refers to the growing gulf between the rich and the poor, with the former seeking to distance themselves further physically and socially from the latter (including by endogamous marriages, which helps give the biological explanation for the development of two species). He deduces that above ground are the Haves, ‘pursuing pleasure and comfort, and beauty, and below ground the Have-nots, the Workers getting continually adapted to the conditions of their labour’ (p.47). The aristocracy are, literally, on top. Yet despite asserting of his explanation that he still believes it ‘the most plausible one’ (p.48), it is not long before he recants and feels it ‘was all wrong’ (p.54).

As befits a (soon-to-be) Fabian, the author seems to share the Traveller’s lack of sympathy for, and identification with, the oppressed class. Besides the epithets already given them, the Morlocks are referred to as ‘whitened Lemurs’ and ‘vermin’, from whose ‘half-bleached’, ‘pallid’, and ‘filthy cold’ bodies the Traveller recoils (p.49). These reactions precede the Traveller’s latest revision to his interpretation of the world in 802,701, which is to propose that the old relationship of dominance by the Eloi has long ended and that they have ‘decayed to a mere beautiful futility’ (p.54), possessing the earth only on sufferance, since the Morlocks are unable to endure the daylight and have maintained their old habits of service as an unconscious instinct ‘because ancient and departed necessities had impressed it on the organism’ (p.55). The Traveller senses that the Eloi are about to meet their Nemesis. Readers will pick up hints that they are the victims of cannibalism by the Morlocks, though the Traveller appears slow to grasp the implications of his own sightings:

Even at the time, I remember wondering what large animal could have survived to furnish the red joint I saw. It was all very indistinct: the heavy smell, the big unmeaning shapes, the obscene figures lurking in the shadows, and only waiting for the darkness to come at me again! (p.52)

In the Traveller’s greater feeling for the Eloi than for the Morlocks, an ambivalence is introduced, which parallels that of many middle-class Socialists’ feelings towards the masses; feelings, if not of loathing, then certainly of distance and anxiety. As Bernard Bergonzi noted in the early 1960s: ‘The Traveller’s gradual identification with the beautiful and aristocratic – if decadent – Eloi against the brutish Morlocks is indicative
of Wells’s own attitudes.’

No matter how detached and scientific the Traveller tries to be about the dietary habits of the sons of labour – ‘These Eloi were mere fatted cattle, which the ant-like Morlocks preserved and preyed upon – probably saw to the breeding of’ – he is unable to maintain an aloofness as ‘[t]he Eloi had kept too much of the human form not to claim my sympathy’ (p.59). Far from achieving objectivity, he feels himself stirred into action as he shares their degradation and fear. In a show of atavism, he finds himself longing ‘very much to kill a Morlock or so’, and it is only a desire not to endanger both Weena and his Time Machine that prevents him from seeking out and ‘killing the brutes I heard’ (p.63). That last phrase anticipates Kurtz’s scrawled postscript in the report which Marlow finds in Heart of Darkness. The extent of this victory of passion over science is reinforced by the mention, almost immediately afterwards, of the Traveller’s having authored seventeen scientific papers.

That night, when the Morlocks attack the Traveller and Weena (who vanishes and is presumed by the Traveller to have been killed), they are scared off by the fire that the Traveller has started. The art of fire-making was lost to this future world. In a confusion of self-defence and violent repugnance, the Traveller kills at least one of the ‘human rats’ (p.69) and cripples several more with an iron bar. Whether or not Wells intends the link, it recalls the descriptions of the urban poor as rats that we encountered in Chapter Two of the present study. The following morning the Traveller laughs bitterly at the memory of his innocent optimism at the apparently utopian surroundings. He now gives us his last view of the world of 802,701, but still concedes that it may be wrong. His final theory slightly modifies his previous one. He repeats his idea that humanity, having attained a balanced society with security, slumbered into a state with no social problems. A ‘great quiet’ had followed, which diminished and then eradicated intellectual activity: ‘There is no intelligence where there is no change and no need of change.’ The Eloi had ‘drifted towards his feeble prettiness’ and the Morlocks to ‘mere mechanical industry’, but this state of affairs lacked the absolute permanency required for stability. When food supplies to the Morlocks were disrupted, they ‘turned to what old habit had hitherto forbidden’, having retained more initiative than the Eloi (p.72). The Morlocks are the ones in control. They hunt the Eloi at will. Wells hints to us that the Morlocks are, literally, feeding off them. It is this, as critics have noted, that makes us shudder when, on his return, the fatigued Traveller is revived by the odour of ‘good wholesome meat’ (p.79). Such moments give rise to Lee’s claim that The
with the rise of Darwinism, cannibalism could no longer be strictly consigned to the ‘outside’ realm of the savage other. Now Victorian culture faced the idea that the line between humans and animals might not be one of division but of lineage. For many, this idea triggered the possibility that those animals consumed as meat were not essentially different from the ‘we’ who ate them.25

It is tempting to read the relationship between the classes psychoanalytically: the Morlocks as the id, living underground and adapted to darkness, the obscene nocturnal creatures; the Eloi afraid of the dark and subject to attack from the subterranean dwellers. Thus the appearance of the Morlocks above ground may be read as the return of the repressed. What interests me more about this image, though, is that, like Melville before him and Conrad afterwards, Wells questions, even reverses, the conventionally held moral attributes of whiteness.

After escaping the Morlocks’ attempts to trap him inside the pedestal in which they have kept his machine, the Traveller inadvertently voyages even further into the remote future, finding scenes of ‘abominable desolation’ (p.76) as the earth ‘had come to rest with one face to the sun’ (p.75). Wanting to know more of the fate of the planet, he travels ever further into the future, stopping momentarily every thousand years or so, observing the dying of the sun. More than thirty million years on, it is bitterly cold and snowing. An eclipse of the sun is in progress. The Traveller is unnerved by the silence of the world. The only life he observes at first is some green slime on the rocks, but then, already feeling a horror of the darkness (a reminder of the fear felt by the Eloi), he is sickened by the sight of a solitary large jellyfish-like creature, hopping about on the shoal.

The Traveller then returns to the present. This brings us back full circle to the opening of the tale. The guests are all sceptical. Even the curious flowers and the time machine itself fail to convince. The only person who seems to have an open mind on what he has heard is the anonymous narrator. The next day he visits the Traveller to question him further. The Traveller, clutching a rucksack and a camera, tells the narrator to wait half an hour, and then he, the Traveller, will have specimens to prove that he does travel through time. The Traveller shuts his laboratory door, leaving the narrator to read a newspaper. Going into the laboratory to tell the Traveller that he has to leave because of an appointment, the narrator
catches a glimpse of the phantasmic figure disappearing. Three years on, he is still waiting for the Traveller to come back, for ‘as everybody knows … he has never returned’ (p.83). The ending resolves nothing. The protagonist’s journey is open-ended. His descriptions and interpretations of what he sees are clearly culture-bound and he is therefore limited in what he is able to apprehend of the objects themselves.

Monsters manufactured

*The Island of Doctor Moreau* has as one of its main themes the indeterminate relationship between the bestial and the human. It also deliberately confuses the boundaries of realism and romance, producing an example of what Wells called his ‘scientific romances’, which have been said to ‘define a new form’. The effect of this generic compound is to have the narrative confusion destabilise the readers and so extend their vision of the world, in Wells’s case through the ‘cognitive shudder’ that Darko Suvin has identified as a characteristic of science fiction. It is an example of how the diffusion of Darwinian and post-Darwinian ideas of evolution contributed to the evolution of the novel. Not only is it the case that in the late nineteenth century ‘Darwinism mutated in a variety of ways’, but *The Island of Doctor Moreau* has itself been identified as a transitional text in Well’s career, evidenced by his divided reactions to it.

The radical implications of Wells’s investigation of the problem of ascertaining the divide between the human and the bestial are lost in his focus on biological, rather than social conditions. Admittedly, he comes close to constructing a critical allegory of colonialism: not long after Prendick has arrived on the island, for example, he observes ‘a man, going on all-fours like a beast!’, but who ‘had not been naked as a savage would have been’ (p.41). Prendick’s exploration of part of the island echoes the adventures of explorers: ‘I began to realize the hardihood of my expedition among these unknown people’ (p.42). The reader understands more readily than Prendick that the strange inhabitants cannot easily be classified as ‘Other’ in the way that explorers and scientific commentators were wont to label indigenous peoples of the territories they invaded. Three ‘grotesque human figures’ (one female, the others male) that Prendick finds squatting in ‘a kind of glade’ in a forest ‘were naked, save for swathings of scarlet cloth about the middles, and their skins were of a dull pinkish drab colour, such as I had seen
in no savages before’ (p.43). Their hue makes them, of course, ‘white’, as is the case with the sloth-like creature he will meet later, which he describes as ‘a dim pinkish thing’ (p.61). The fact that Prendick has ‘[n]ever before … seen such bestial-looking creatures’ inverts the usual terms of colonialism in which animality is commonly ascribed to the dark-skinned (p.43). The gibbering and chanting of the pink creatures reinforces this impression.

Yet the possibilities of a sustained critique of colonialism are soon lost as Wells pursues instead the more general question, asked by Prendick about the man he had seen on all-fours, ‘the Thing’: ‘What on earth was he – man or animal?’ (p.45). As the story progresses, Wells directs this question to the state of humanity as a whole, losing sight of the possibilities for a subversive reading of colonialism.32 For the moment, though, the interpretation holds. Prendick finds himself talking to the ‘simian creature’ with the ‘black face’ (p.58). This ‘ape-like companion’, with ‘his hands hanging down and his jaw thrust forward’ is not out of keeping with popular representations of black people (p.59). His powers of speech mark him as a man, but his English is broken. However, Prendick’s remark on the Beast-People, that ‘I did not know yet how far they had forgotten the human heritage I ascribed to them’ (p.59), signals the broader allegory that is to emerge as he takes their condition to be the result of reversion to a former state. This conclusion will be challenged by Moreau’s claim that they are improved animals – ‘humanized animals – triumphs of vivisection’ (p.77) – not deteriorated humans. Although Moreau’s boast challenges Prendick’s assumption of degeneration, the very terms of the question mean that the novel ends up allying itself with contemporary debates about the direction and shape of human development. This distracts from the more specific issue of colonialism and the questioning of innate superiority; it has the text ultimately transcend particular political problems and flatten out into a much more general comment on the duality of humanity.

When Moreau talks of operations that had already been carried out by others, such as the grafting of skin and bone, he uses the phrase ‘monsters manufactured’ (p.77) and goes on to tell Prendick that: ‘These creatures you have seen are animals carven and wrought into new shapes. To that – to the study of the plasticity of living forms – my life has been devoted’ (p.78). His study of the ‘plasticity of living forms’ is a frightening reminder of the mutability of species to which Darwin had called attention in *The Origin of Species*, where he declared, for example, that: ‘Judging from the past, we may safely infer that not one
living species will transmit its unaltered likeness to a distant futurity.'

Through the person of Moreau, Wells invites his readers to contemplate the identity of the power that can – or will – change us. Moreau’s words also have added significance. It is not only living forms that are plastic, but social and cultural ones, too. These include literature.

Moreau brags that: ‘It’s not simply the outward form of an animal I can change. The physiology, the chemical rhythm of the creature, may also be made to undergo an enduring modification’ (p.78). The link between outer and inner alteration has serious social and literary implications: social because it relates changes in outer to those in inner states, thereby calling into question moral absolutes; and literary because the relationship of the internal to the external has likely consequences for narration and characterisation (particularly once developments in psychology are considered).

When Prendick is back in London, he finds that his experiences on Moreau’s island have left him with a vision that cuts through the mundane activities around him. As he brings his narrative up to date, he tells us that he has been troubled for many years by the fear that

I could not persuade myself that the men and women I met were not also another, still passably human, Beast People, animals half-wrought into the outward image of human souls, and that they would presently begin to revert, to show first this bestial mark and then that. (p.149)

In the words of Chris Baldick, Prendick is ‘clearly reinterpreting the struggle for existence in the capitalist metropolis as, only too literally, the law of the jungle’. His perception of the animal truths behind the show of everyday reality calls into question, by throwing into relief, the substance of civilisation. But, as Suvin rightly observes of Wells’s scientific romances of this period, the author’s ‘satisfaction at the destruction of the false bourgeois idyll is matched by his horror at the alien forces destroying it’. This ambivalence is shown through, and is a result of, the recognition of the animal within the human and of the human within the animal.

Suitably for Wells the sexual libertine, the instinct which for authors of naturalistic novels perverts our humanity threatens to be perverted by civilised restraint. This is suggested by Prendick’s misanthropy at the end of the book when he shuns ‘cities and multitudes’ and all but a few strangers. He ends his story in ‘solitude’, in hope of a celestial refuge for ‘whatever is more than animal within us’ (p.151). It is also suggested by a speech of Moreau’s that hints at the threat posed by society in its manipulation and control of natural instinct:
In our growing science of hypnotism we find the promise of a possibility of replacing old inherent instincts by new suggestions, grafting upon or replacing the inherited fixed ideas. Very much, indeed, of what we call moral education is such an artificial modification and perversion of instinct; pugnacity is trained into courageous self-sacrifice, and suppressed sexuality into religious emotion. (p.79)

Here Wells seems to be warning his readers about the social retraining of the human character away from its natural basis, perhaps reflecting contemporary fears of overcivilisation. We are all, Wells appears to be saying, at the mercy of redefinition. Moreau exclaims that ‘[a] pig may be educated’ and that ‘[t]he mental structure is even less determinate than the bodily’. He maintains that ‘the great difference between man and monkey is in the larynx … in the incapacity to frame delicately different sound-symbols by which thought could be sustained’ (p.79). Prendick disagrees and it is probable that Wells himself, while showing the impossibility of discerning where animality ends and humanity begins, hopes that his readers will awaken to the harm that could be done by allowing their instincts to be so modified.

Prendick observes that:

A blind fate, a vast pitiless mechanism, seemed to cut and shape the fabric of existence, and I, Moreau (by his passion for research), Montgomery (by his passion for drink), the Beast People, with their instincts and mental restrictions, were torn and crushed, ruthlessly, inevitably, amid the infinite complexity of its incessant wheels. (p.108)

The beginning of this quotation is a classically naturalistic expression that might equally be at home in Dreiser’s Sister Carrie, but Wells uses Prendick’s dual vision to communicate the alienating effects of not being able to accept the incorporation of the animal and the human; of nature and society. Appropriately, if frustratingly, The Island of Doctor Moreau, ‘while it may be Wells’s most systematic study of the evolutionary dilemma, arrives at no conclusions’, and Wells ends up in danger of transferring the conflicts in the book from society to biology.36

Prendick cannot come to terms with the social body. He describes himself thus: ‘And even it seemed that I, too, was not a reasonable creature, but only an animal tormented with some strange disorder in its brain, that sent it to wander alone, like a sheep stricken with the gid’ (p.150). Wells struggles to hold together the social and natural and to find a literary style that will demonstrate the plasticity of living forms.
‘Seeing further’: *The War of the Worlds*

Like *The Time Machine*, *The War of the Worlds* (1898) is partly about contemporary social conditions, but it is also, more overtly, about writing those conditions. Greater than the imagined war between humans and Martians is the actual conflict between ideas of realism and romance. This is quite apparent in the narrative, in which Wells’s strategies clearly have to do with the problem of creating a fresh vision of the mundane. *The War of the Worlds* embodies a battle between forms of writing. On one side, we have realism – the local and everyday – and science; on the other, fantasy and romance. Wells’s own description of his work as ‘scientific romance’ is probably a more accurate term for the outcome than the more popular designation of ‘science fiction’. Another label has been supplied by Joseph Conrad, who in a letter to Wells called him ‘a realist of the fantastic’.37 Though interesting, this may be less helpful in that it could imply a straightforward transposition of method from one realm to another, whereas the process is more complicated than that.

Whatever name we choose to apply to Wells’s method, it is more important to concentrate on its reflection of its present than to beam him up from his world and hail him as some kind of prophet. Stanislaw Lem is right to suggest that the impact of Wells’s story was likely to be the stronger for its being published the year after Queen Victoria’s Jubilee, though he greatly underestimates the nervousness already existing when he describes that time as

the apogee of Victorianism, when the British Empire appeared to be the mightiest power on this planet at its very fulcrum of cocksureness, yet bearing within it the seeds of incipient stagnation, when nineteenth-century English bumptiousness had reached a peak of self-satisfaction.38

Fear of international competition, national and imperial decline, and racial and social degeneration was already tangible. Contemporary anxieties about decadence, degeneration, class unrest, and reverse colonisation are more significant than the Martians’ function as a defamiliarising device by which these questions can be objectified.

As with *The Time Machine*, the narrative in *The War of the Worlds* seeks a position from which aspects of late nineteenth-century British society can be criticised. In the latter text, space performs the role that time plays in the former. True, the action of the later novel also occurs in the future, but it is a future so near to the readers that the only difference it seems to mark is that it allows for an event yet to occur (the landing of
the Martians) to happen soon: ‘early in the twentieth century’, remarks the narrator, ‘came the great disillusionment’. That phrase is crucial to the story. Disillusionment is the subject of the text. The Martians are the means by which the narrator becomes disillusioned. It is a great indictment of his world that it should take the manifestation of such fantastic creatures – ‘alien vampires’, as Dryden calls them – to endow him with his new insight. This is how the novel begins:

No one would have believed, in the last years of the nineteenth century, that human affairs were being watched keenly and closely by intelligences greater than man’s and yet as mortal as his own; that as men busied themselves about their affairs they were scrutinized and studied, perhaps almost as narrowly as a man with a microscope might scrutinize the transient creatures that swarm and multiply in a drop of water. With infinite complacency men went to and fro over this globe about their little affairs, serene in their assurance of their empire over matter … Yet, across the gulf of space, minds that are to our minds as ours are to those of the beasts that perish, intellects vast and cool and unsympathetic, regarded this earth with envious eyes, and slowly and surely drew their plans against us. And early in the twentieth century came the great disillusionment. (p.9)

Right at the beginning of the novel, then, the readers are offered a reverse perspective. The confidence of the imperialist is attacked. When the narrator undermines the complacency of ‘empire over matter’, his words refer to the scientific and technological capabilities of Western civilisation, on which the advance of capitalism depended, and to the imperial project. Wells’s problem (it becomes his, though initially it is that of the society he is criticising) is that he must travel outside his society in order to find the position from which its stature can be diminished. Christianity cannot supply that vantage point, for ‘God was a lie’, and Wells wondered:

Why do people go on pretending about this Christianity? At the test of war, disease, social injustice and every real human distress, it fails – and leaves a cheated victim … Jesus was some fine sort of man perhaps, the Jewish Messiah was a promise of leadership, but our Saviour of the Trinity is a dressed-up inconsistent effigy of amiability, a monstrous hybrid of man and infinity, making vague promises of helpful miracles for the cheating of simple souls, an ever absent help in times of trouble.

Nor can science readily offer the critical perspective, because if it did it would then be seen to be in the service of humanity, underlining the very dominance that Wells wishes to question. The answer is found in scientific romance, in the invasion of creatures to which the author gives

scientific plausibility, but whose threat humanity’s scientific knowledge is incapable of negating. The narrator does not travel to Mars. Nor in itself does the arrival of the Martians cause the readjustment of perspective in the novel. Civilised humanity is displaced by the Martians’ superiority, which is such that conventional views of evolution as having brought Europeans almost to the ultimate point of progress are radically challenged. Wells corrals several bestial images to suggest this: ‘we men, the creatures who inhabit this earth, must be to them at least as alien and lowly as are the monkeys and lemurs to us’ (p.111); ‘So some respectable dodo in the Mauritius might have lorded it in his nest, and discussed the arrival of that shipful of pitiless sailors in want of animal food. “We will peck them to death tomorrow, my dear”’ (p.38); ‘The bare idea of this [the Martians’ injection of the fresh living blood of other creatures into their own veins] is no doubt horribly repulsive to us, but at the same time I think we should remember how repulsive our carnivorous habits would seem to an intelligent rabbit’ (pp.133–134); “It’s just men and ants”, says the artilleryman. “There’s the ants build their cities, live their lives, have wars, revolutions, until the men want them out of the way, and then they go out of the way. That’s what we are now – just ants. Only … We’re eatable ants”’ (p.163); ‘I felt as a rabbit might feel returning to his burrow, and suddenly confronted by the work of a dozen busy navvies digging the foundations of a house … I was no longer a master, but an animal among the animals, under the Martian heel. With us it would be as with them, to lurk and watch, to run and hide; the fear and empire of man had passed away’ (p.154); ‘I began to compare the things to human machines, to ask myself for the first time in my life how an ironclad or a steam-engine would seem to an intelligent lower animal’ (p.56). These comparisons of civilised humanity with monkeys, lemurs, scared rabbits, soon-to-be extinct dodos, and displaced ants emphasise humans’ instability and compel readers to contemplate the effects of imposing their technology upon ‘lower’ beings. They suggest the vulnerability of humans, projecting globally the fears of decline in British authority that are present in many texts of the decade.

There is a moral, as well as a physical, dislocation to the narrative. In the first chapter, the narrator has this to say about the Martians:

And before we judge of them too harshly, we must remember what ruthless and utter destruction our own species has wrought, not only upon animals, such as the vanished bison and the dodo, but upon its own inferior races. The Tasmanians, in spite of their human likeness, were entirely swept out of existence in a war of extermination waged by European immigrants, in
the space of fifty years. Are we such apostles of mercy as to complain if the Martians warred in the same spirit? (p.11)

The invitation to think carefully about the actions we perform under the banner of progress could hardly be clearer, even if it is driven by fear of a like retribution, rather than by an altruistic sense of human equality and liberty. Just as Darwinian theories of race and progress had conflated physical and moral stature, so Wells (while drawing on them) had to do likewise in questioning his contemporaries’ self-satisfaction. The critical tensions within the story have to do with Wells’s desire specifically to critique ‘our’ (i.e. British) imperialism, while tracing natural laws applicable to all (and not only to humans). We might note, at this point, Conrad’s description of the imperialism of ‘our modern Conquistadores’: ‘Their achievement is monstrous enough in all conscience … like that of a gigantic and obscene beast.’

If one sees the whole of the human race as the hero one closes down questions that the text leaves open. Not only are we asked to reflect on the fate of the Tasmanians; there are direct references to rivalry and hostility between the European powers. The narrator recalls that soon after the first Martian vessel had landed, ‘[m]any people had heard of the cylinder, of course, and talked about it in their leisure, but it certainly did not make the sensation an ultimatum to Germany would have done’ (p.39).

These tensions encourage one to review Catherine Belsey’s reading of classic realism – not so much her definition, which ‘permits the inclusion of all those fictional forms which create the illusion while we read that what is narrated is “really” and intelligibly happening: *The Hobbit* and *The Rainbow, The War of the Worlds* and *Middlemarch*’ – but her statement on closure:

Classic realist narrative … turns on the creation of enigma through the precipitation of disorder which throws into disarray the conventional cultural and signifying systems. Among the commonest sources of disorder at the level of plot in classic realism are murder, war, a journey or love. But the story moves inevitably towards closure which is also disclosure, the dissolution of enigma through the re-establishment of order, recognizable as a reinstatement or a development of the order which is understood to have preceded the events of the story itself.

One can hardly quarrel with the first half of that passage, but the ending of *The War of the Worlds* seems not to conform to the rules observed in the second part. It preserves a dual vision that makes the readers doubt that either cognitive or social order has been satisfactorily re-established.
The social and moral questioning is achieved by a narrative juxtaposition of the everyday and the fantastic. Critics have frequently commented on this. It has been intelligently elaborated by Rosemary Jackson in her discussion of the paraxial area which ‘could be taken to represent the spectral region of the fantastic, whose imaginary world is neither entirely “real” (object), nor entirely “unreal” (image), but is located somewhere indeterminately between the two’.47 Wells’s narrator himself draws our attention to the arrangement, saying: ‘The most extraordinary thing to my mind, of all the strange and wonderful things that happened upon that Friday, was the dovetailing of the commonplace habits of our social order with the first beginnings of the series of events that was to topple that social order headlong’ (p.39). From this and other utterances it is clear that the focus of the narrative will not be on the Martians (the source of disorder) but on the capacity of the social order to respond to their threat. The narrator must be able to observe both the order and the challenge to it. To do this he must be positioned within that order, but also be able to observe it from without. It is important therefore that we have an idea of the unnamed narrator as both representative and unique. He moves inside and outside society. This is what he writes of himself:

Perhaps I am a man of exceptional moods. I do not know how far my experience is common. At times I suffer from the strangest sense of detachment from myself and the world about me; I seem to watch it all from the outside, from somewhere inconceivably remote, out of time, out of space, out of the stress and tragedy of it all. This feeling was very strong upon me that night. Here was another side to my dream. (p.36)

Ostensibly these words are provoked by his flight from the Martians’ Heat-Ray, yet one may infer that they are true of his constitution more generally; that they identify him as precisely the sort of individual who will be able to give a reading of the situation that is at once involved and detached. As readers, we have to guard against an easy acceptance of his self-diagnosis. After all, he can no sooner remove himself from his time and space than can we or the author. He might wish, like many writers, to live by the illusion that he possesses a depth of vision others lack because he has the unusual ability to step outside his everyday surroundings, but wherever one treads one carries the imprint of one’s milieu.

Against such activity, however, is set the force of nature, which appears ultimately irresistible. On the face of it, The War of the Worlds treats this theme in a similar way to The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde and Heart of Darkness in that nature is seen as operating internally as well as
externally. So in Wells’s text one concern is the danger of the conquest of civilisation by pre- (or anti-)social urges. This threat arises not from the Martians, but from the responses of ‘civilised’ people to them. The narrator indicates as much when he relates the details of his flight from the Martians and their ‘pitiless sword of heat’. After falling with the exhaustion caused by ‘the violence of my emotion and of my flight’, he sat up, strangely perplexed. For a moment, perhaps, I could not clearly understand how I came there. My terror had fallen from me like a garment. My hat had gone, and my collar had burst away from its stud. A few minutes before there had only been three real things before me – the immensity of the night and space and nature, my own feebleness and anguish, and the near approach of death. Now it was as if something turned over, and the point of view altered abruptly. There was no sensible transition from one state of mind to the other. I was immediately the self of every day again, a decent ordinary citizen. The silent common, the impulse of my flight, the starting flames, were as if it were a dream. I asked myself had these latter things indeed happened. I could not credit it. (p.35)

Like Marlow in *Heart of Darkness*, the narrator experiences a vision of the wilderness invading the civilised world. The signs of everyday existence are lost in a moment of metaphysical revelation, and are then suddenly recovered, leaving the narrator with the altered consciousness that affords him a view of his ordinary self and of the eternity of nature that will obliterate him. His altered point of view gives him a dual perspective, which remains with him throughout and beyond the rest of his story. It is in this sense that the text avoids the act of closure that Belsey contends is a feature of classic realist narratives. The narrator witnesses the re-emergence of animal behaviour as panic sets into the multitude and he hears of the ‘savage struggle’ (p.66) for places in the special evacuation trains and of people ‘fight[ing] savagely’ (p.99) for standing room in the carriages. The reappearance of these bestial characteristics, also marked by the failure to observe property rights – ‘As they [the scattered multitudes] grew hungry the rights of property ceased to be regarded’ (p.114) – shakes any lingering certainty that civilised humanity has reached a secure position at the top of the evolutionary ladder.

At the end of the story, the narrator feels ‘an abiding sense of doubt and insecurity in my mind’ (p.192). He tells of how he still witnesses two worlds:

I sit in my study writing by lamplight, and suddenly I see again the healing valley below set with writhing flames, and feel the house behind and about me empty and desolate. I go out into the Byfleet Road, and vehicles pass
me, a butcher-boy in a cart, a cabful of visitors, a workman on a bicycle, children going to school, and suddenly they become vague and unreal, and I hurry again with the artilleryman through the hot, brooding silence …

I go to London and see the busy multitudes in Fleet Street and the Strand, and it comes across my mind that they are but the ghosts of the past, haunting the streets that I have seen silent and wretched, going to and fro, phantasm in a dead city, the mockery of life in a galvanized body. (p.192)

This is not the recovery of the established order, but a continuing revision of one’s view of reality. The narrator sees through the superficial signs of mundane existence to place these alongside historical and biological truths (if one accepts the Martian invasion as constituting part of the history of his surroundings). He manages to gain a diachronic perspective alongside the synchronic: he can see ordinary everyday activities and how they fit into a larger timescale. This allows him to question the solidity of modern urban life. He has already told us, at the height of the panicked evacuation of the capital, that “[b]y ten o’clock the police organization, and by mid-day even the railway organizations, were losing coherency, losing shape and efficiency, guttering, softening, running at last in that swift liquefaction of the social body” (p.99, my emphasis). And he has shown us the metaphysical depth underlying the quotidian in the city, what he calls the ‘mockery of life in a galvanized body’ (p.192) – a phrase that critics have noted recalls the Martians themselves, perhaps as a kind of objective correlative for the imperialist urban dwellers. The railway that kills or injures the Egyptian invader in Marsh’s The Beetle, as we saw in Chapter Two, is no threat to the Martians, but the collapse of infrastructure forces a shift in perception. It also illustrates the quality that leads one critic to claim that: ‘Of fin-de-siècle authors, H.G. Wells best understood historical contingency and the relationship between order and chaos.’

Both author and narrator intend their tale to enlarge if not transform their readers’ vision. Near the end of the book the narrator exclaims:

The broadening of men’s views that has resulted can scarcely be exaggerated. Before the cylinder fell there was a general persuasion that through all the deep of space no life existed beyond the petty surface of our minute sphere. Now we see further. (p.191)

Wells has had to combine elements of realism and romance so that each may be seen more clearly through its estrangement by the intrusion of the other. The narrator’s declaration that now we see further might be said to satisfy Lukács’s criterion of realism:
If literature is a particular form by means of which objective reality is reflected, then it becomes of crucial importance for it to grasp that reality as it truly is, and not merely to confine itself to reproducing whatever manifests itself immediately and on the surface. If a writer strives to represent reality as it truly is, i.e. if he is an authentic realist, then the question of totality plays a decisive role …

… So the crux of the matter is to understand the correct dialectical unity of appearance and essence. What matters is that the slice of life shaped and depicted by the artist and re-experienced by the reader should reveal the relations between appearance and essence without the need for any external commentary.49

In *The War of the Worlds* Wells goes some way to showing the surface of life; he provides in his geographical and domestic settings the kind of detail which Henry James called ‘solidity of specification’ and which, for James, constituted the ‘air of reality [which] … seems to me to be the supreme virtue of a novel – the merit on which all its other merits … helplessly and submissively depend’.50 But for Wells, this sort of solidity is plainly insufficient.51 Indeed, his phantasmical imagery makes that supposed solidity insubstantial. In doing this, he opposes appearance and essence quite deliberately and is finally unable to decide between them. His method illustrates the truth of Jackson’s observation that:

Fantasy is not to do with inventing another non-human world: it is not transcendental. It has to do with inverting elements of this world, re-combining its constitutive features in new relations to produce something strange, unfamiliar and apparently ‘new’, absolutely ‘other’ and different.52

Wells achieves this through the tropes of space travel and the monstrous Martians. Dryden describes the latter as ‘a new type of Gothic monster, but one whose inspiration comes from earlier Gothic forms’.53 As with physical entity, so with literary form. Through his dissolution of generic borders, Wells’s narrative innovations call into question the solidity of his readers’ social world. His metaphors of travel and animality play an essential part in this.

‘Monkey on a gridiron!’

Wells’s treatment of transformation and travel is not confined to his science fiction and gothic tales. His comic romance, *The Wheels of Chance* (1896), tells of the critical adventure that befalls draper’s assistant
Mr Hoopdriver during a cycling holiday along the southern coast of England. Hoopdriver finds himself rescuing Jessie Milton, a naïve seventeen- to eighteen-year-old with aspirations to be a New Woman, from Mr Bechamel, a family friend in his early thirties who (unbeknown to her) is already married. Somewhat uncertainly, she has run away with Bechamel from her stepmother. Bechamel ‘came into my life, and talked to me of art and literature, and set my brain on fire’. He promised to help her earn a living by writing (p.98). The transformation Jessie had sought was from sheltered captivity to a life of freedom: ‘I wanted to come out into the world, to be a human being – not a thing in a hutch’ (p.154). She wants to ‘write Books and alter things. To do Good … to lead a Free Life and Own myself … to obtain a position as a Journalist’ (p.180); to leave conventional Surbiton and to be unconventional.

Although humorously handled, transformation is dealt with no less seriously in this tale than in the others of Wells’s discussed in this chapter. Similar connections between money, class, and beastliness are made. Moreover, the ending leaves open the question of whether or not the transformation will ultimately be accomplished. Jessie’s rather reluctant restoration to her stereotypically unpleasant stepmother leaves Hoopdriver with only her urging his self-improvement – for which she will send him books – to leave in his mind the possibility of a social advancement that might, in six years’ time, make him a suitable match.

Two factors make possible Hoopdriver’s (would-be) transformation: his vacation and the encounters with Jessie. Early on in his holiday, the narrator tells us that:

Only those who toil six long days out of the seven, and all the year round, save for one brief glorious fortnight or ten days in the summer time, know the exquisite sensations of the First Holiday Morning. All the dreary, uninteresting routine drops from you suddenly, your chains fall about your feet. (p.20)

There is a comic tone to the passage, but it is far from flippant: wage labour is a threat to independence, and its gradation can further limit one’s freedom. Also, in common with other texts we have examined, self-definition is gendered and identified with masculinity. Thus:

No more Manchester Department for ten days! Out of Manchester, a Man. The draper Hoopdriver, the Hand, had vanished from existence. Instead was a gentleman, a man of pleasure, with a five-pound note, two sovereigns, and some silver at various convenient points of his person. At any rate as good as a dook, if not precisely in the peerage. (p.29)
But Wells, who had himself been apprenticed to a draper, brings Hoopdriver down to earth again as, reaching involuntarily for his money, he takes his right hand off the handlebar and his bicycle violently swerves towards the cemetery. It is a striking symbol of the social precariousness that Hoopdriver faces should he climb off his saddle. Even so, his temporary climb sees him differentiate himself from people he regards as beneath him. Of those who have positioned in the road a half-brick which he just misses, he thinks: ‘Mischievous brutes there were in the world to put such a thing in the road … Ought to prosecute a few of these roughs, and the rest would know better’ (p.30).

Another sign of his in-between status comes later when a young boy calls him ‘[m]onkey on a gridiron!’ (p.40). This occurs as Hoopdriver is pursuing Jessie and just after the narrator has observed:

The situation was primordial. The Man beneath prevailed for a moment over the civilised superstructure, the Draper. He pushed at the pedals with archaic violence. So Palæolithic man may have ridden his simple bicycle of chipped flint in pursuit of his exogamous affinity. (p.39)

This is but a comic treatment of a theme evident in others of Wells’s works and those of many of his contemporaries: the extent to which the primitive remains intact under the civilised veneer.

Further evidence of class distinction comes when Hoopdriver mentally compares Jessie with his female co-workers: ‘She was a real Young Lady. No mistake about that! None of your blooming shop girls’ (p.40). But he reminds himself of his own standing: ‘What’s the good of thinking such things … I’m only a blessed draper’s assistant’ (p.41). He notes that she is from a wealthy family: ‘Her machine couldn’t have cost much under twenty pounds.’ Class embarrassment is reinforced by a gender one. Hoopdriver speculates that Jessie is ‘one of these here New Women’ (p.42), but it is as likely that his awkwardness has as much to do with her being a woman at all as with her being a new one.

With a new-found confidence born of Jessie’s trust, Hoopdriver plans to get Jessie’s and Bechamel’s bicycles, so that he can escape with her. His ‘intelligence now was a soaring eagle; he swooped on the situation at once’ (p.141). Then, cycling away with Jessie, Hoopdriver ‘was in the world of Romance’ (p.150). Under the benediction of the magical moonlight, ‘rode our two wanderers side by side through the transfigured and transfiguring night’ (p.152). Hoopdriver presents an altered self by giving his name to her as Chris Carrington and later as Benson and entertaining her wrong guess that he comes from South Africa (pp.188–189). His escape from his mundane existence is temporary, but dramatic:
in illegal possession of a stolen bicycle, a stolen young lady, and two stolen names, established with them in an hotel that is quite beyond his means, and immensely proud of himself in a somnolent way for these incomparable follies. (p.161)

Reflecting on his inadequacy, Hoopdriver

... wonder[s] what Adam’d think of me – as a specimen. Civilisation, eigh? Heir of the ages! I’m nothing. I can’t do anything. – Sketch a bit. Why wasn’t I made an artist?

‘Beastly cheap, after all, this suit does look in the sunshine.’ (p.174)

It may seem light-hearted, but the phrase ‘heir of the ages’ echoes the Traveller’s dread inference when he catches sight of a Morlock and wonders about the destiny of the human race.

When Hoopdriver feels the weight of his lies become too much, he admits to Jessie that he is not a wealthy South African, but a humble draper’s assistant. He is ashamed of having to be ‘just another man’s hand’ and had lied to her because ‘I wanted somehow to seem more than I was’ (p.248). The previous night he had lain awake, ‘thinking what a got-up imitation of a man I was’ (p.249). He complains about the draper’s lot:

It’s not a particularly honest nor a particularly useful trade; it’s not very high up; there’s no freedom and no leisure – seven to eight-thirty every day in the week; don’t leave much edge to live on, does it? – real workmen laugh at us, and educated chaps like bank clerks and solicitors’ clerks look down on us … Without capital there’s no prospects; one draper in a hundred don’t even earn enough to marry on. (pp.253–254)

Hoopdriver thinks about ‘what I really am, and what I might have been. Suppose it was all different—’. Jessie tells him to ‘[m]ake it different’, and her remedy is that classic Victorian prescription: ‘Work’ (p.258). Self-effacing as ever, Hoopdriver, believes it is too late for him to begin afresh. When they part with the understanding that he will work to improve himself and Jessie has asked him: ‘What will you be – what can a man make of himself in six years’ time?’ (p.290), he trips over a rabbit hole.

John Batchelor’s dismissal of The Wheels of Chance as ‘facetious and superficial’ is too harsh, especially as he earlier remarks (while discussing the Time Traveller’s machine as based on a bicycle) that Wells ‘saw the bicycle as a revolutionary, democratic form of transport which would initiate social change; it was one of the very few activities in which men and women could enjoy each other’s company without chaperones’.55
Wells himself has pointed to the seriousness of his book, grouping *The Wheels of Chance* with one of a number of works dealing with the ‘theme of the floating persona, the dramatized self [that] recurs at various levels of complexity and self-deception’. The ‘endeavour to anchor personas to a common conception of reality’ has, he writes, been a main strand of interest throughout his life.\(^{56}\) He identifies Hoopdriver as one of these personas. He may have in mind Hoopdriver’s propensity to fantasise about roles for himself that he plays out in his mind, but the idea of the floating persona can apply equally, whether intentionally or not, to Hoopdriver’s social situation.

It could be argued that the lack of fixity applies to genre also: much of the novel has a dramatic feel, with many more passages of dialogue than one finds in several other of Wells’s writings from the 1890s. In fact, Wells later wrote (from 1903 to 1904) a play, *Hoopdriver’s Holiday*, based on the novel.\(^{57}\) Furthermore, in the novel, Wells includes several references to other writers – Conan Doyle, Gissing, Kipling, Ibsen, Schreiner, Besant, Rider Haggard, Marie Corelli, Ouida, Shakespeare, and Christina Rossetti – and to ideas about what novels should represent and how. Hoopdriver’s imaginative flights – ‘His entire life, you must understand, was … a series of short stories linked only by the general resemblance of their hero’ (pp.67–68) – constitute transformations of his everyday existence.

That the novel should be taken seriously is also indicated by the fact that Wells wrote it during a year-and-a-half’s residence in Woking, where he also composed *The War of the Worlds* and *The Invisible Man*. He learned to ride his bicycle – ‘a description of [the] state of my legs … became the opening chapter of the *Wheels of Chance*’ – and ‘[I] wheeled about the district marking down suitable places and people for destruction by my Martians’.\(^{58}\) Indeed, we might remember that the Time Traveller’s machine was an ‘adapted bicycle – one of the most common symbols of social liberation in the 1890s’.\(^{59}\) It is the perfect image of the ordinary and extraordinary that informs his writing, which in turn alters generic boundaries as it aims to transform our vision.

**Notes**


Interview with Wells in the *Weekly Sun Literary Supplement*, 1 December 1895, quoted in Dryden, *The Modern Gothic and Literary Doubles*, p.148. Dryden observes that the interview appeared as Wells was about to publish *The Island of Doctor Moreau*. It was also, of course, the year that *The Time Machine* was published.


Elias, *Time*, p.36.


One critic has argued that in Wells’s work: ‘meat becomes both something capable of shaping narrative structure and the visceral evidence of an imperial culture in which social interest is inseparable from appetite and illumination is bound to carnage. In both *The Time Machine* (1895) and *The Island of Doctor Moreau* (1896), the seeker of information … is figured as a sublimated hunter of human meat.’ Michael Parrish Lee, ‘Reading Meat in H. G. Wells’, *Studies in the Novel* 42, 3 (Fall 2010), 250. On contemporary attacks on meat-eating, see Lee, ‘Reading Meat’, p.251.


Wells, *First and Last Things*, p.16.


Wells, *First and Last Things*, p.51.

Wells, *First and Last Things*, p.123.

Wells, *First and Last Things*, p.53.


29 For more on this influence, see Gillian Beer, *Darwin’s Plots: Evolutionary Narrative in Darwin, George Eliot and Nineteenth-Century Fiction* (London: Ark, 1983), though Beer makes no reference either to American naturalism or to Wells.
31 Glendening, *The Evolutionary Imagination in Late-Victorian Novels*, p.51. Glendening argues this on thematic and stylistic lines. In the former case, he maintains that Moreau ‘appears to announce its author’s efforts to extricate himself from the snarls of evolutionary theory’ and that ‘[i]n later works he was free to transmute Lamarckian optimism and Darwinian pessimism into a cautionary vision of a possible ideal future always in doubt’. As regards style and Wells’s changing responses to the text, Glendening observes that although ‘[l]ater in his life Wells characterized the story as a satirical fantasy or romance with a story line not to be taken seriously … […] in the immediate wake of its publication [he] argued against critics who had questioned the efficacy of Doctor Moreau’s methods of altering animals, contending that they are not unrealistic at all’. Glendening identifies it as situated ‘somewhere between realism and satirical fantasy’ (p.51).
35 Suvin, ‘Wells as the Turning Point’, p.129.
36 Huntington, *H. G. Wells*, p.68. Suvin judges this to be the case in all but the ‘maturest moments’ in Wells’s science fiction. Suvin, ‘Wells as the Turning Point’, p.129.
43 Tasmanians were not, in fact, wiped out to extinction, but survived through
intermixing with whalers and others, though the consequences continue to provoke
difficult questions about racial and cultural purity.

44 Joseph Conrad, letter to R. B. Cunninghame Graham, quoted in Baldick, *In
Frankenstein’s Shadow*, pp.171–172.


46 Belsey, *Critical Practice*, p.70.

47 Jackson, *Fantasy*, p.19.

48 Glendening, *The Evolutionary Imagination in Late-Victorian Novels*, p.28.

49 Georg Lukács, ‘Realism in the Balance’, in *Aesthetics and Politics: Ernst Bloch, Georg
Lukács, Bertolt Brecht, Walter Benjamin, Theodor Adorno* (London: Verso, 1980),
pp.33–34.

Muse. Selected Literary Criticism* (London: Penguin, 1987), p.195. This essay was first
published in *Longman’s Magazine* in 1884. For the details and accuracy of Wells’s
geographical setting of the story, see Iain Wakeford, ‘Wells, Woking and *The War

51 As he explains in *Experiment in Autobiography*. See p.410 et seq.

52 Jackson, *Fantasy*, p.8.


p.154. Further page references will be given parenthetically in the body of the
chapter.


56 Wells, *Experiment in Autobiography*, p.532. The rest of the group he gives as *Research
Magnificent, Christina Alberta’s Father*, and *The Bulpington of Blup*.

