‘Some old-world savage animal’: H. G. Wells’ White Sphinx and the Terror of Posthuman Time

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Abstract

This article examines the significance of the White Sphinx statue in H. G. Wells’ The Time Machine *(1895) in relation to Victorian anxieties surrounding deep time and posthuman futures. It argues first that contemporaneous developments in archaeology and palaeontology during the first half of the nineteenth century led to an elision between the two fields, with the result that Victorian literary depictions of archaeological artefacts often link them with geological or palaeontological timescales.*

In Wells’ The Time Machine*, a colossal marble sphinx functions as a symbolic manifestation of complex and often conflicting questions surrounding the newly-conceptualised geological timescale that dwarfed human history, and that implied the disturbing likelihood of both pre-human and posthuman temporalities. At once an archaeological remnant produced by a human society, and a transitional hybrid body comprised of both human and animal elements, Wells’ sphinx is able simultaneously to embody historical and evolutionary timescales. As such, it appears to offer a possible answer to unsettling questions about time, history, and humanity’s place on this planet, if only its significance can be unriddled. Ultimately, however, the White Sphinx remains an unassailable enigma, testament to the incomprehensible profundity of deep time.*

The nineteenth century saw a dizzying expansion of time. Rapid developments in geology and palaeontology brought people face to face with the prospect of a world that was immensely older than previously imagined. More troublingly still, it was a world that had existed long before the arrival of humans, and that might conceivably long outlast them. The Victorians were forced to reassess their relationship with a planet made alien by the newfound understanding of both deep time and evolution. H. G. Wells’ *The Time Machine* (1895) is one of the best-known Victorian literary responses to the question of deep time, employing the mechanism of time travel to explore abhuman and ultimately posthuman futures. Voyaging forward to the year 802,701, the unnamed Time Traveller finds himself confronted with the incongruous shape of a vast white marble sphinx, looming, with enigmatic smile, over far-future Surrey. The first thing the Time Traveller sees upon his arrival, the White Sphinx is a figure so obviously symbolic as to

have prompted a multitude of critical responses and interpretations. But little has been written about the interestingly conflicted relationship between Wells' sphinx and deep time itself. I will argue that concurrent developments in geology and archaeology during the nineteenth century led to a blurring of lines between the two disciplines, so that archaeological artefacts were often employed in literature to embody questions of deep time. Wells' sphinx, therefore, functions firstly as a physical manifestation of geological/evolutionary time, ostensibly enabling human engagement with an otherwise alienatingly expansive concept. Secondly, and contradictorily, the sphinx's traditional association with opacity and enigma testifies to the ultimate impossibility of any true human comprehension of deep time. Allen MacDuffie writes that Victorian literature 'reveals a culture simultaneously struggling to come to terms with, and struggling to avoid, its relationship to the natural world, and thus its situation on the planet'.[1] Existing at the juncture between human and inhuman timescales, the silent, unclassifiable form of Wells' White Sphinx reflects deep ecological anxieties surrounding the question of what kind of future humanity will create for itself.

'Awful Changes': reimagining time in the early-to-mid nineteenth century

For much of post-antique history, as Daniel Lord Smail writes, 'human history, as imagined in the Judeo-Christian tradition, was coterminous with the age of the earth itself'.[2] This meant around six thousand years, according to most theologians. As geological knowledge progressed, however, it became increasingly apparent that world and humanity both were of a far greater age than this biblical timescale suggested. In 1788, the Scottish geologist James Hutton declared that he could identify for the earth 'no vestige of a beginning – no prospect of an end'.[3] Interest in fossilised remains increased, with the French zoologist Georges Cuvier identifying dozens of now-extinct species in the early nineteenth century. Between 1830-33, Charles Lyell released his sweeping earth-history *The Principles of Geology*, which drew attention to the idea that different

[1] Allen MacDuffie, 'Charles Darwin and the Victorian Pre-History of Climate Denial', *Victorian Studies*, 60 (2018), 543-564 (p. 545).
[2] Daniel Lord Smail, *On Deep History and the Brain* (London: University of California Press, 2008), p. 21.
[3] James Hutton, quoted in Stephen Jay Gould, 'Toward the Vindication of Punctuational Change', in *Catastrophes and Earth History: The New Uniformitarianism*, eds. William A. Berggren and John A. Van Couvering (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984), pp. 9-34 (p. 12).

geological strata represented different chronological periods. Lyell's belief in gradual change across vast swaths of time would prove influential upon Charles Darwin's eventual development of an evolutionary theory.

With the recognition of the planet's antiquity came speculation about the age of the human race. Across Europe, human-made artefacts were being excavated from the same strata as the bones of extinct animals.[4] In 1859, having previously rejected the idea of a deep past for humanity, Lyell visited various sites of excavation in France and England to inspect flints uncovered alongside fossil remains, and judged the tools to be of human origin. Reluctantly, he conceded at a meeting of the British Association for the Advancement of Science that 'man was old enough, at least, to have coexisted with the Siberian mammoth'.[5] The same year, Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* appeared in print. Darwin's hypothesis, Smail writes, provided 'a crucial link in the time revolution […] because it offered a way to link the history of life and the descent of humanity to the emerging geological timescale, thereby unifying biological time'.[6]

The fascination and unease provoked by these scientific developments is well-documented. In 1851, John Ruskin famously complained in a letter to Henry Acland that his faith was being eroded by progressions in geology: 'If only the Geologists would let me alone, I could do very well, but those dreadful Hammers! I hear the clink of them at the end of every cadence of the Bible verses —'.[7] Even humorous nineteenth-century responses to questions of deep time reveal anxiety. An 1830 cartoon by Henry de la Beche – produced in response to comments by Lyell that the world's climatic conditions might someday return to their prehistoric state, bringing with them a resurgence of previously-extinct genera – depicts an anthropomorphic ichthyosaur, lecturing to its fellows on the now-extinct human species.[8] Its caption reads: 'AWFUL CHANGES. MAN FOUND ONLY IN A FOSSIL STATE – REAPPEARANCE OF ICHTHYOSAUR'.[9] While the cartoon is intended as a joke, its subject matter reveals that the possible implications of this new planetary timescale had not gone unnoticed. Having

[4] Smail, p. 25.
[5] Charles Lyell, 'On the Occurrence of Works of Human Art in Post-pliocene Deposits', in *Report of the Twenty-Ninth Meeting of the British Association for the Advancement of Science* (London: John Murray, 1860), pp. 93-5 (p. 93).
[6] Smail, p. 26.
[7] John Ruskin, *The Works of John Ruskin*, ed. by E. T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn, 39 vols (London: George Allen, 1909), XXXVI, p. 115.
[8] Virginia Zimmerman, *Excavating Victorians* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2008), p. 38.
[9] De La Beche, cited in Zimmerman, p. 39.

previously supposed both human and planetary history to be essentially knowable and contained, the Victorians now found themselves adrift in a sea of time too vast to comprehend, with no guarantee that humanity would continue its dominion over the earth.

Contemporaneous with these changes in the understanding of geological time was a growing interest in archaeology, in particular that of Egypt. Napoleon's Egyptian campaign of 1798-1801, which included a large group of scientists and academics, had sparked a widespread fascination with Egypt's ancient past. The group's findings were published between 1809-1829 as the *Description de L'Eygpte*. By 1822, twenty-three years after its discovery, the hieroglyphic portion of the Rosetta Stone was beginning to be deciphered, allowing for a greater understanding of Egyptian history and mythology. Meanwhile, continued excavations in Egypt ensured that a steady flow of artefacts (including numerous sphinx statues) made their way to Europe, and a dedicated Egyptian Room was opened in the British Museum in 1837.[10]

These major developments in archaeology and geology took place almost concurrently during the final years of the eighteenth century, and the early decades of the nineteenth. Hugh Torrens has argued that our current understanding of the two as separate disciplines is a departure from the nineteenth-century conception of these subjects. Scholars of the time, he suggests, regarded both geological and archaeological remnants as the products of worlds which were 'continuous, and equally past'.[11] Both geology and archaeology involved excavation; both centred upon the 'reading' of ancient fragments for information about the past, and both raised unsettling questions about the marks left upon the world by past iterations of life, whether these took the form of extinct species or vanished civilisations. My argument in this paper, then, builds upon the premise that the lines we now draw between the two fields – 'the one human, the other scientific', in Torrens' words – were faint or even nonexistent during the nineteenth century.[12]

Archaeological fragments and deep time in nineteenth-century literature

[10] Beverley Rogers, 'Unwrapping the Past: Egyptian Mummies on Show', in *Popular Exhibitions, Science and Showmanship, 1840-1910*, ed. by Joe Kember, John Plunkett, and Jill A. Sullivan (London: Routledge, 2016), pp. 199-218 (p. 205).
[11] Hugh Torrens, 'Geology and the Natural Sciences: Some Contributions to Archaeology in Britain 1780-1850', in *The Study of the Past in the Victorian Age*, ed. by Vanessa Brand (Oxford: Oxbow, 1998), pp. 35-60 (p. 36).
[12] Torrens, p. 36.

Likely as a result of the close links between archaeology and geology, nineteenth-century literary responses to ancient artefacts (and ancient Egyptian artefacts in particular) frequently invoke the idea of unfathomably vast spans of time. An early and well-known example is Percy Bysshe Shelley's 1817 sonnet 'Ozymandias', composed in response to the news that a colossal granite head of Ramesses II was being transported to London for display in the British Museum. The poem describes the huge and fragmentary remains of the pharaoh's statue, which lie 'half-sunk' in the Egyptian desert.[13] The speaker does not relate this story first-hand, but claims to have encountered 'a Traveller from an antique land' who told him of the figure.[14] Here, Shelley conflates the spatial and the temporal: the land from which the Traveller hails is itself characterised as *antique*; as if, by voyaging there, one might transcend time as well as distance. Virginia Zimmerman has argued that Victorian literary responses to questions of deep time are often marked by a 'sense of time as spatial', reflecting 'the fact that geology is a science based on digging into the Earth, and that the new time scale was a direct product of those excavations'.[15] Shelley's poem anticipates this approach. The image of the ruined statue seems to reach the poem's reader across a chasmic gap of both space and time, with its own wasted form functioning at once as a symbol of endurance and of decay.

An alternate version of the poem written at the same time by Shelley's friend Horace Smith makes plain what 'Ozymandias' leaves unsaid:

> We wonder, – and some Hunter may express
> Wonder like ours, when thro' the wilderness
> Where London stood, holding the Wolf in chace,
> He meets some fragment huge, and stops to guess
> What powerful but unrecorded race
> Once dwelt in that annihilated place.[16]

Smith explicitly transfers the threat of civilisational collapse from the ancient Egyptian ruins to his own society. While he stops short of envisaging a

[13] Percy Bysshe Shelley, 'Ozymandias', in *The Complete Poetry of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, eds. Donald H. Reiman, Neil Fraistat, Nora Crook, 3 vols (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012), III, p. 326, l. 4.
[14] Ibid, l. 1.
[15] Zimmerman, p. 36.
[16] Horace Smith, 'Ozymandias', in *The Complete Poetry of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, III, p. 949.

posthuman world, his references to 'fragments' and 'annihilation' evoke images of species extinction and palaeontological remnants, thus linking the poem with contemporary ecological concerns. The possibility that these hubristic lost societies might have been responsible for their own downfall lingers unnervingly between the lines of each sonnet, and Smith's vision of a future visitor stumbling upon English ruins is strikingly anticipatory of Wells' narrative in *The Time Machine*.

The idea of the Egyptian fragment as possessing a kind of trans-temporal sublimity is evident, too, in Thomas De Quincey's essay 'The Affliction of Childhood' (1853), in which the same statuary head of Ramesses is described as '[wearing] upon its lips a smile co-extensive with all time and all space'.[17] In his earlier essay 'System of the Heavens as Revealed by Lord Rosse's Telescope' (1846), De Quincey recalls his encounter with the head in greater detail:

> [W]hat it symbolised to me were: 1. The peace which passeth all understanding. 2. The eternity which baffles and compounds all faculty of computation; the eternity which had been, the eternity which was to be.[18]

For De Quincey, the statue does not only represent the millennia that have passed since its own creation, but a far vaster span: all the time that has ever passed, or even that ever will pass. It is an object associated explicitly with deep time, rather than history.

In *fin-de-siècle* poetry, the Great Sphinx in particular is often figured as an impassive observer of the ravages of time. The American poet John Spollon's work of 1900, 'The Sphinx', describes the statue as 'The Watcher […] who never winks', and states that 'Empires rise and Empires fall / The Sphinx's eyes beheld them all'.[19] John Davidson's 1895 poem 'St George's Day' similarly establishes the statue as a constant and unchanging presence in time: 'The sphinx that watches by the Nile / Has seen great empires pass away'.[20] Perhaps the most well-

[17] Thomas De Quincey, 'The Affliction of Childhood', in *Works of Thomas De Quincey* , ed. by Daniel Sanjiv Roberts, 21 vols (London: Routledge, 2003), XIX, pp. 3-21 (p. 12).
[18] De Quincey, 'System of the Heavens as Revealed by Lord Rosse's Telescopes', in *Works of Thomas De Quincey*, ed. by Frederick Burwick, 15 vols (London: Routledge, 2003), XV, pp. 393-420 (p. 403).
[19] John Spollon, 'The Sphinx', in *Mary Ann; Or, Advice to a Street-Walker, and Other Poems* (Boston: Jos. M. Wade, 1900), pp. 54, 53.
[20] John Davidson, *St George's Day: A Fleet Street Eclogue* (New York: John Lane, 1895), p. 14.

known poetic depiction of the watchful sphinx archetype is Oscar Wilde's 'The Sphinx' (1894). The poem is a monologue, delivered by a young man to the sphinx statuette that sits in the corner of his room. He offers a decadent account of her past deeds, and speculates that she observed various pivotal events from Egyptian, classical, and biblical mythology. Like other late-nineteenth-century sphinxes, she is portrayed as a being outside of time:

> Inviolate and immobile she does not rise she does not stir
> For silver moons are naught to her and naught to her the suns that reel.
>
> Red follows grey across the air, the waves of moonlight ebb and flow
> But with the Dawn she does not go and in the night-time she is there.
>
> Dawn follows Dawn and Nights grow old and all the while this curious cat
> Lies couching on the Chinese mat with eyes of satin rimmed with gold.[21]

The model sphinx, like her giant counterpart at Giza, is a creature immune and indifferent to the movement of day and night, defined by her static immutability in time. She has outlived civilisations before, and will do so again.

H. G. Wells' future-past: recapitulation, degeneration, and hybridity

In Wells' *The Time Machine*, a sphinx statue again acts as an inscrutable observer of overwhelming temporal spans. In this case, the focus is not upon the past, but the future: in De Quincey's words, 'the eternity which was to be'.[22] As we shall see, however, Wells' 'deep future' is constantly haunted by the deep past: posthuman temporalities are revealed to be disturbingly analogous to pre-human temporalities, and future evolutionary and environmental decline mimics primordial indifferentiation. This layering of times finds physical expression in the figure of the White Sphinx.

The Time Traveller voyages forward some 800,000 years, to find the landscape of his day transformed into a bountiful garden, littered with the

[21] Oscar Wilde, 'The Sphinx', in *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde: Poems and Poems in Prose*, ed. by Bobby Fong and Karl Beckson, 8 vols (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), I, ll. 3-8.
[22] De Quincey, 'System of the Heavens', p. 403.

decaying monuments of an earlier civilisation. The first of these structures to be encountered by the Time Traveller has a familiar appearance:

> It was very large, for a silver birch-tree touched its shoulder. It was of white marble, in shape something like a winged sphinx, but the wings, instead of being carried vertically at the sides, were spread so that it seemed to hover. The pedestal, it appeared to me, was of bronze, and was thick with verdigris. It chanced that the face was towards me; the sightless eyes seemed to watch me; there was the faint shadow of a smile on the lips. It was greatly weather-worn, and that imparted an unpleasant suggestion of disease.[23]

The White Sphinx stares inscrutably out over a world inhabited by the descendants of humanity, which has split into two distinct strands: the beautiful but dissolute Eloi, who have lost all intellectual acuity, and the intelligent but monstrous Morlocks, who inhabit underground industrial structures, and feed upon the Eloi by night. The Eloi are all that is left of a feckless, pleasure-loving upper class, while the abhuman Morlocks represent the remnants of an abused proletariat that gradually evolved into a chthonic species as a result of increasingly inhumane living and working conditions. These divergent evolutionary paths are the direct result of human impact upon the environment: what the Time Traveller refers to as 'the subjugation of Nature' through advanced technology (p. 40). In shaping the upper-world into a place of 'perfect comfort and security' (p. 42), free from illness or hunger, the progenitors of the Eloi removed all evolutionary pressures from themselves, leading gradually to their own mental decay. Meanwhile, subterranean industrialisation created the Morlocks. 'Humanity had been strong, energetic, and intelligent,' the Time Traveller writes, 'and had used all its abundant vitality to alter the conditions under which it lived. And now came the reaction of the altered conditions' (p. 42). Aaron Rosenberg rightly observes that the text may be regarded as 'anticipatory of the global crises now framed by the Anthropocene'.[24] Wells' vision of a world in which humanity has brought about its own downfall by unintentionally triggering planetary-scale forces (in this case, the blind

[23] H. G. Wells, *The Time Machine*, in *The Works of H. G. Wells*, Atlantic Edn, 28 vols (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1924), I, pp. 1-118 (p. 27). Further references are given after quotations in the text.

[24] Aaron Rosenberg, 'Romancing the Anthropocene: H. G. Wells and the Genre of the Future', *Novel*, 51 (2018), 79-100 (94).

indifference of evolutionary change) in its search for greater technological power is strikingly prescient. Far from demonstrating the power of humanity to mould its environment, this debased future does quite the opposite, emphasising our ultimate powerlessness to predict or shape environmental outcomes.

So what can the White Sphinx tell us about this 'catastrophe narrative'?[25] A colossal and weather-worn relic, it immediately evokes the Great Sphinx of Giza (an impression heightened by the fact that the novel's original cover image depicts a sphinx wearing an Egyptian headdress). However, Wells specifies that his sphinx is winged, an attribute particular to the Greek offshoot of the sphinx mythos. Like many *fin-de-siècle* sphinxes, it seems Wells' sphinx combines Greek and Egyptian features. The Greek sphinx is of course most famous for its riddling encounter with Oedipus at Thebes. Numerous critics have noted that Wells' sphinx, too, appears to offer a riddle which can be answered with the same response as that given by Oedipus: 'Man'. Gazing at the statue soon after his arrival in the future, the Time Traveller wonders what might have happened to humanity in the intervening years:

> I looked up again at the crouching white shape, and the full temerity of my voyage came suddenly upon me. What might appear when that hazy curtain was altogether withdrawn? What might not have happened to men? […] What if in this interval the race had lost its manliness and had developed into something inhuman, unsympathetic, and overwhelmingly powerful? I might seem some old-world savage animal, only the more dreadful and disgusting for our common likeness – a foul creature to be incontinently slain. (pp. 27-8)

Of course, humanity *has* grown 'inhuman' in the millennia since the Time Traveller set out upon his voyage, although not in quite the way he imagines. While the Eloi are superficially attractive, both they and the Morlocks are ultimately presented as degenerate, and it is the Time Traveller who comes to regard these inhabitants of the future earth as something akin to 'animals', rather than the other way around. The White Sphinx, whose appearance immediately prompts the Time Traveller to question the possible ramifications of human evolution, physically contains within itself the answer to the Time Traveller's question ('What has become of humanity?'), since it is later established that the

[25] MacDuffie, p. 557.

base of the statue serves as an entrance to the underworld community of the Morlocks. The riddle of the original Theban sphinx – most often transcribed as 'What has four legs in the morning, two at mid-day, and three in the evening?' – deals with questions of human development and change within time.[26] The riddle implicitly posed by Wells' sphinx replaces ontogeny with phylogeny, examining not a single human life, but the broader arc of human evolution as a whole.

To regard the White Sphinx as a version of the Greek riddler is to suggest that it is in possession of an essential truth that its questioner must attempt to ascertain. We have already seen that this is true, in the sense that the Morlocks dwell beneath the statue. I will argue, however, that the truth held and embodied by Wells' sphinx goes beyond this. Stephen Jay Gould writes in his history of geology *Time's Arrow, Time's Cycle* that the concept of deep time 'is so alien that we can really only comprehend it through metaphor'.[27] The White Sphinx of *The Time Machine* functions as the metaphor by which its reader might hope to approach, Oedipus-like, the vast and louring question of deep time.

Wells' sphinx mediates between deep time and what Smail refers to as 'deep history'. Deep history is based upon a rejection of the traditional understanding of history as having begun with the genesis of the written word. Instead, 'deep historians' locate the birth of history at the point of the evolutionary development of modern humans. In other words, deep history includes within its remit the portion of deep time inhabited by humanity. Deep history was not yet a named concept in the late nineteenth century; in fact, Smail argues that historians of the time 'recoiled' from the idea, choosing to relegate pre-literate, human-inhabited time to the foggy designation of 'prehistory'.[28] However, Aaron Worth has argued that an anxious awareness of the implications of deep time for our understanding of history is nonetheless evident in nineteenth-century literature.[29]

For Worth, the significance of deep history for Victorian writers lies in its blending of 'the conceptual spaces of historiography and deep (evolutionary or palaeontological) time, in a move whose concomitants include the imaginative transference of such conceptual elements as the idea of a continuity between

[26] Eleanor Cook, *Enigmas and Riddles in Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 163.
[27] Stephen Jay Gould, *Time's Arrow, Time's Cycle: Myth and Metaphor in the Discovery of Deep Time* (London: Harvard University Press, 1987), p. 3.
[28] Daniel Lord Smail, *On Deep History and the Brain* (London: University of California Press, 2008), pp. 1-2.
[29] Aaron Worth, 'Arthur Machen and the Horrors of Deep History', *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 40 (2012), 215-27, p. 217.

nature and culture'.[30] Worth's essay focuses upon the fiction of Arthur Machen, but parts of his argument may be brought to bear upon *The Time Machine*, whose inclusion of literal time travel adds an interesting dynamic to questions of deep history. While Wells' text deals with the future rather than the past, I would argue that the society visited by the Time Traveller – as a distant temporal 'location', inhabited by hominins – can be included under the umbrella of deep history, particularly since Wells' vision of the future is so clearly influenced by ideas of the past.

Worth's mention of the elision of nature and culture is particularly relevant here. He writes that Machen 'imaginatively [attributes] an impossible antiquity to symbolic forms' such as the faun, thus suggesting an unsettling melding of 'the cultural and the biological' by conceptualising a mythological product of human culture as a naturally occurring, pre-human entity.[31] Rather than being projected impossibly into the past, Wells' sphinx occupies a distant future; yet the implications of its presence there are equally disturbing, and similarly serve to blur the lines between organic and human-made. The White Sphinx is, we must assume, the product of an earlier human culture: one that thrived before the evolutionary schism between Eloi and Morlocks developed. The derelict state in which the Time Traveller finds the statue is visual evidence of the depth of time that has passed between its creation and the year 802,701. The fact that the figure is that of a sphinx, a shape recognisable from antiquity, suggests, in Patrick Parrinder's words, 'a grotesque repetition implying that what is to come is (like the Sphinx's famous riddle, to which the answer is "a man") no more and no less than we already know'.[32] Rather than ascending to new heights, the supposedly advanced future society that produced the White Sphinx circled back upon the iconography of the ancient past – and, like the empires of antiquity, ultimately fell.

This idea of recapitulation is doubly significant to the figure of the sphinx. Not only does its presence suggest a regression to the belief systems of earlier societies, but its physical form – part human, part animal – echoes the evolutionary turn taken by the inhabitants of the future earth. While the Eloi remain at least superficially human in appearance, the Morlocks are consistently described as bestial. Glimpsing one of the creatures' luminous eyes in the

[30] Worth, p. 219.
[31] Worth, p. 217.
[32] Patrick Parrinder, *Shadows of the Future: H. G. Wells, Science Fiction, and Prophecy* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1995), p. 16.

darkness, the Time Traveller admits to feeling 'the old instinctive dread of wild beasts' (p. 59). His first proper look at a Morlock leads him to liken it initially to 'a queer little ape' (p. 59), and then to 'a human spider' (p. 60). These references serve at once to emphasise the creature's proximity to, and divergence from, humanity. One of Wells' first references to the sphinx, meanwhile, describes it as a 'crouching white shape' (p. 27), a phrase echoed in the numerous allusions to the pallor of the Morlocks, and their stooping, ape-like movements. As a form hovering unsettlingly between human and beast, the White Sphinx anticipates the future humanity's descent into animality.

Moreover, since evolutionary science denies human specificity, arguing instead that our species developed from animal ancestors, the sphinx's human-animal form also suggests humanity's prehistoric origins. T. H. Huxley reached first for the image of mythical hybrids when describing our proto-human forebears, writing in 1863 that,

> though the quaint forms of Centaurs and Satyrs have an existence only in the realms of art, creatures approaching man more nearly than they in essential structure, and yet as thoroughly brutal as the goat's or horse's half of the mythical compound, are now not only known, but notorious.[33]

The White Sphinx therefore implies both the deep past and the deep future of human evolution, with its presence suggesting an unsettling temporal recapitulation. As both a cultural artefact, and a transitional form linked with evolutionary time, Wells' sphinx is therefore connected with both deep history and deep time. That it is a human-made object only ties it more closely to the inhabitants of the future earth, who are themselves 'human-made', in that they are the evolutionary outcome of anthropogenic environmental changes. Thus the human-inhuman sphinx exists at the heart of the novel's ecological concerns: the point at which human and planetary outcomes collide, and, as Rosenberg writes of the Anthropocene, 'inhuman scales start to look profoundly human after all'.[34]

The idea of deep future as recapitulating deep past was not of Wells' own invention. As noted earlier in this article, Charles Lyell had famously suggested that coming epochs would see the return of earlier climatic conditions,

[33] Thomas Henry Huxley, *Evidence as to Man's Place in Nature* (London: Williams and Norgate, 1863), p. 1.
[34] Rosenberg, p. 80.

accompanied by flora and fauna akin to those of the prehistoric past. In an 1830 letter to Gideon Mantell, he writes that '[a]ll these [climatic] changes are to happen again, and Iguanodons and their congeners must as assuredly live again in the latitude of Cuckfield as they have done so'.[35] Zimmerman observes that, while Lyell is often regarded as having had a cyclical interpretation of time, 'reading time as purely cyclic reduces time's complexity, and Lyell also embraced the linear. […] In his view, progress *and* decay are the Earth's texts' (emphasis mine).[36] Wells' approach to time is similarly complex. While the evolutionary changes seen in his vision of the deep future recall and recapitulate the deep past, his future world appears simultaneously to be moving linearly towards a set end point of complete indifferentiation and destruction. When, having eventually regained his machine, the Time Traveller voyages even further into the future, he finds the earth barren and cold, and devoid of any being even distantly resembling humanity. Instead, he encounters 'a thing like a huge white butterfly', which emits a 'dismal' screaming sound as it flees from 'a monstrous crab-like creature' with 'vast ungainly claws' and a mouth 'all alive with appetite' (pp.106-7). He has now arrived in a fully posthuman world. Yet this predator-prey dynamic is familiar from the earlier section of the novel, and, while the Time Traveller himself never explicitly suggests as much, it seems likely that the frail and defenceless butterfly-creatures are all that remain of the Eloi, while the vicious crab-monsters represent a further deterioration of the Morlocks. Humanity, it appears, has continued down the degenerate path it unknowingly set for itself in its attempt to 'triumph […] over Nature' (p. 39).

Travelling still further ahead, he finds that even this level of recognisability has been lost: all that remains is a sterile sea, and one living creature: 'a round thing, the size of a football perhaps […] tentacles trailed down from it; […] and it was hopping fitfully about' (p. 110). Sickened by this image of utter degeneration, he boards his machine once more, and returns to the nineteenth century. Alex Eisenstein suggests that this 'Last Creature' may be read as a final and ultimate degeneration of humanity: '[A] highly specialised and atrophied edition of genus *Homo*. Note particularly the size of the creature; it is about 'the size of a football' – which is to say, about the size of a human head'.[37] Eisenstein suggests that the Time Traveller's nauseated response to this creature stems from

[35] Charles Lyell, Letter to Gideon Mantell, February 20th, 1830, in *Life and Letters of C. Lyell*, ed. by K. Lyell, 2 vols (London: John Murray, 1881), I, p. 262.
[36] Zimmerman, p. 38.
[37] Alex Eisenstein, '"The Time Machine" and the End of Man', *Science Fiction Studies*, 3 (1976), 161-5 (163).

his subconscious recognition of 'what man has become'.[38] There is no sense, here, of an ongoing cycle in which humanity will someday rise again to greatness – only of a gradual waning into shapelessness and extinction. Yet this grim vision of future life also inevitably recalls the earliest stages of evolutionary development: the amorphous, tentacled creature which we presume to be the last vestige of humanity might just as easily be taken for a sea creature from millions of years in the past. The evolutionary wheel seems, at its stopping-point, to have come almost full circle, ending with a primitive life-form described by W. Warren Wagar as 'nothing more than a glorified horseshoe crab'.[39] Thus the future presided over by the White Sphinx may be read both as one stage on a linear journey towards the annihilation of life on Earth, and as part of an uncanny cyclical return to the deep past. The sphinx itself – both human and bestial, able simultaneously to embody conflicting geological and archaeological timescales – is well-placed to represent Wells' complex vision of planetary time, and of our relationship with it.

The riddle with no answer

The Time Traveller imagines breaking down the doors of the White Sphinx, and entering the statue in 'a blaze of light' to reclaim his machine. Such a scene would be the fulfilment of his role as Oedipus-figure: what Willis Goth Regier describes as 'the overthrow of enigma by thought, of nature by man, of mystery by clarity'.[40] Yet Eleanor Cook observes that the Oedipus myth does not end in certainty or illumination, but in 'darkness and blinding': upon discovering the truth of his parentage, Oedipus stabs out his own eyes, and lives out the rest of his life sightless and in exile.[41]

In his *Lectures on Aesthetics* (1835), Hegel writes of the Theban encounter as an example of human mastery over enigma: 'Oedipus found the simple answer: a man, and he tumbled the Sphinx from the rock.'[42] In this reading of the myth, Oedipus' response is characterised as an objective truth, and sphinx and riddle

[38] Eisenstein, p. 163.
[39] W. Warren Wagar, *H. G. Wells: Traversing Time* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2004), p. 51.
[40] Willis Goth Regier, *The Book of the Sphinx* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2004), p. 5.
[41] Cook, p. 70.
[42] G. W. F. Hegel, *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, trans. by T. M. Knox, 2 vols (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), I, p. 361.

both are dismissed as an almost comically feeble obstacle to human ingenuity. But Hegel's view did not go unchallenged. The nineteenth century saw an increasing tendency for writers to recast the Oedipus myth as an example of the failure of human reason, rather than its triumph, and to depict the sphinx as a creature of essential and irresolvable enigma. Writing in 1850, De Quincey attacked the Hegelian assumption that Oedipus' answer of 'a man' had conclusively solved the riddle posed by the sphinx. In his essay 'The Sphinx's Riddle', De Quincey argues that, while Oedipus' response is *a* solution to the riddle, 'it is not *the* solution' (emphasis mine), since '[a]ll great prophecies, all great mysteries, are likely to involve double, triple, or even quadruple interpretations — each rising in dignity, each cryptically involving another'.[43] Instead, he writes, 'the full and final answer to the Sphinx's riddle lay in the word Œdipus. Œdipus himself it was that fulfilled the conditions of the enigma (p. 20)'. The true answer to the riddle, De Quincey suggests, lies in the figure of Oedipus – who was, as an injured infant, uniquely vulnerable in his four-legged crawling; who then stood on his own two feet as, 'trusting exclusively to his natural powers as a man', he rose to power in Thebes (p. 20). Finally, blinded and in exile, he leaned upon his daughter Antigone, using her as the 'third leg' or staff alluded to as the final age of man in the riddle. 'In this way', De Quincey argues, 'we obtain a solution of the Sphinx's riddle more commensurate and symmetrical with the other features of the story', which are all marked by an air of mystery (p. 20).

Thus Oedipus, who believed he had out-reasoned the sphinx, is shown to have been blind to a greater truth, long before he put out his eyes. De Quincey suggests that the sphinx herself may have been unaware of the implications of her riddle, writing that this second reading was '*possibly* unknown to the sphinx, and *certainly* unknown to Oedipus' (p. 22). Yet, despite this speculation, De Quincey retains a sense of her fundamental enigma: 'The Sphinx herself is a mystery. Whence came her monstrous nature, that so often renewed its remembrance amongst men of distant lands, in Egyptian or Ethiopian marble? Whence came her wrath against Thebes?' (p. 20). Whether or not the sphinx comprehended the full answer to her own riddle, she is a being 'clothed with the grandeur of mystery' (p. 20).

The influential nineteenth-century occultist Helena Blavatsky takes a similar approach to the Oedipus myth in her 1888 work *The Secret Doctrine*: 'If

[43] De Quincey, 'The Sphinx's Riddle', in *Works of Thomas De Quincey*, ed. by Edmund Baxter, 21 vols (London: Routledge, 2001) XVII, pp. 14-22 (p. 19). Further references are given after quotations in the text.

the Sphinx threw herself into the sea and perished, it is not because Oedipus *had* unriddled the secret of the ages, but because, by anthropomorphizing the ever-spiritual and the subjective, he had dishonored the great truth forever'.[44] The sphinx did not die because Oedipus had successfully decoded her riddle, but because, in his attempt to force the 'great truth' into the shape of a man, he debased that which ought to remain unknowable and inexpressible.

I will examine one further nineteenth-century reception of the sphinx's riddle before returning to *The Time Machine*. In his essay 'Enigmatic Intertexts: Decadence, De Quincey, and the Sphinx', Alex Murray highlights a fascinating but now little-known Victorian text: *Riddles of the Sphinx: A Study in the Philosophy of Evolution*, an 1891 work by Ferdinand Canning Scott Schiller. *Riddles of the Sphinx* purports to '[accept] without reserve the data of modern science, and [derive] from them a philosophical cosmology'.[45] At its heart is the symbol of the sphinx, which, for Schiller, can be found 'seated in the soul of each man', asking the answer to the fundamental questions '[w]hat is man or what is life?' – both queries that are central to *The Time Machine*.[46] Schiller's work culminates with an imagined encounter between philosopher and sphinx:

> And when he finds the Sphinx, enthroned amid the desert sands far from the pleasant paths of life, he cannot read the ambiguous smile that plays around her face. It may be much that she is not grimly unresponsive to his plea, but he cannot tell whether he have answered her aright, whether her smile betoken the approval and acknowledgement of a goddess to be won by toil and abstinence, or the mocking irony of a demon whom no thought can fathom and no sacrifice appease. And even though he abide to sit at the feet of the Sphinx, if so be that his steadfast gaze may read the signs of her countenance in the light of long experience; yet anon will the wild storms of fortune tear him away, and the light of life fade out, the rushing pinions of Time sweep him along into darkness, and the bitter waters of Death engulf the questioner. For life is too fragmentary and experience too chequered wholly to dissipate a dread that springs from the heart rather than from the reason, and

[44] Helena Blavatsky, *The Secret Doctrine: The Synthesis of Science, Religion and Philosophy*, third edn, two vols (London: The Theosophical Publishing Society, 1893), II, p. 543.
[45] F. C. S. Schiller, Preface, *Riddles of the Sphinx* (London: Swan Sonnenschein & Co., 1891), p. vii.
[46] Schiller, pp. 8, 9.

> shrinks too vehemently from the cruelties of the world's ways to be consoled by the subtleties of a metaphysical demonstration.[47]

Marked by anxieties surrounding human (in)significance in time, this evocative passage is reminiscent of the Time Traveller's encounters with the White Sphinx, who, upon the Traveller's first arrival in the future, 'seemed to watch me all the while with a smile at my astonishment' (p. 32). Any attempt to answer the riddle of the sphinx must necessarily be in vain; no matter how we devote ourselves to the essential questions of existence, their answers will ultimately remain inaccessible to us. In Murray's words, this excerpt suggests that 'there is no form of philosophical reflection that could wholly combat the experience of uncertainty and profound sense of finitude that characterizes a post-Darwinian world'.[48] Murray identifies the birth of evolutionary theory as the driving factor in this sense of *fin-de-siècle* dread. Certainly this is true of *The Time Machine*, in which the abyssal spaces of geological/evolutionary time provoke fear and revulsion in equal measure. It seems likely that Wells would have been familiar with Schiller's text. He was fascinated by evolutionary science, and his own essay on evolutionary degeneration, 'Zoological Retrogression', appeared the same year as *Riddles of the Sphinx*; in it, he argues that there can be 'no guarantee in scientific knowledge of man's permanence or permanent ascendancy'.[49] Indeed, the Time Traveller's observation that 'Man as I knew him […] had been swept out of existence' (p. 79) might be taken as a conscious echo of the passage quoted above. Planetary time, in Schiller's text as much as in Wells', is chasmic, and disturbingly indifferent to human desires and fears.

Like the unfulfilled questioners of De Quincey, Blavatsky, and Schiller's prose, Wells' Time Traveller ultimately fails to unravel the enigma of the White Sphinx – and, by extension, the enigma of deep time. Having prepared to fight his way into the sphinx to retrieve his machine, he finds instead that the doors to the base of the statue are already open: 'Within was a small apartment, and on a raised place in the corner of this was the Time Machine. […] So here, after all my elaborate preparations for the siege of the White Sphinx, was a meek surrender' (p. 102). Superficially, the Time Traveller has succeeded in solving the riddle

[47] Schiller, p. 436.
[48] Alex Murray, 'Enigmatic Intertexts: Decadence, De Quincey, and the Sphinx', in *Decadent Romanticism*, ed. by Kostas Boyiopoulos and Mark Sandy (Farnham: Ashgate, 2015), pp. 89-101 (p. 100).
[49] H. G. Wells, 'Zoological Retrogression', *The Gentleman's Magazine*, 271 (1891), 246-253 (253).

implicitly offered by the silent sphinx. He has deduced that both Eloi and Morlocks represent the debased future of the human race, and the sphinx has opened to allow him entry. But the Time Traveller does not enter, as he imagined, bearing 'a blaze of light' which will defeat the Morlocks (p. 82). Instead, he finds that his matches – which Bradley W. Buchanan identifies as representing '[the] idea of a human nature based on mental achievement' – will not ignite.[50] He is left in the dark, scrabbling against the hungry advances of the Morlocks. Fleeing into two increasingly desolate futures, he finds only ecological collapse, and greater obscurity; the last thing he sees before returning to the nineteenth century is, in fact, an eclipse. Thus the Time Traveller's narrative ends, like that of *Oedipus Rex*, with a blinding: as darkness sweeps over the face of the dying earth, like the final falling of a great theatre curtain.

Conclusion

In the frame narrative that closes the novel, the unnamed narrator reports that, the day after hearing the Time Traveller's story, he visited him again, finding him about to embark upon his second voyage. Catching a glimpse of the Time Traveller's departure – 'a ghostly, indistinct figure sitting in a whirling mass of black and brass' – the narrator determined to wait for his return (p. 116). But, we are told, three years have since passed, and, 'as everybody knows now', the Time Traveller has not yet reappeared (p. 117). The epilogue is composed of the narrator's speculations as to where (or rather *when*) the Time Traveller might be:

> It may be that he swept back into the past, and fell among the blood-drinking, hairy savages of the Age of Unpolished Stone; into the abysses of the Cretaceous Sea; or among the grotesque saurians, the huge reptilian brutes of the Jurassic times. He may even now — if I may use the phrase — be wandering on some plesiosaurus-haunted Oolitic coral reef, or beside the lonely saline lakes of the Triassic Age. (p. 117)

Once again, prehistory and futurity are shown to be intimately connected. The violence of the 'blood-drinking' Stone Age humans mirrors the Morlocks'

[50] Bradley W. Buchanan, Introduction, *Oedipus Against Freud: Myth and the End(s) of Humanism in Twentieth Century British Literature* (London: University of Toronto Press, 2010), p. 10.

cannibalism. Deep past, like deep future, provokes revulsion: dinosaurs are 'grotesque brutes' and prehistoric humans 'hairy savages'. The narrator finds comfort only in the possibility that the Time Traveller might instead have gone 'forward, into one of the nearer ages, in which men are still men, but with the riddles of our own time answered and its wearisome problems solved' (p. 117). In travelling to a nearer future, the narrator hopes that his friend might have arrived at 'the manhood of the race' (p. 117): an age in which the fundamental enigmas of human existence – 'what is man or what is life?', to return to Schiller's sphinx-question, might finally have been resolved. This seems a rather inadequate solace, given what the Time Traveller has revealed about humanity's ultimate destiny. It is also the only point in the novel at which the word 'riddle' is actually used, and it seems a deliberate reference to the Oedipus mythos: a last nod to the White Sphinx whose watchful presence overshadows the narrative.

Even before his voyages, the Time Traveller was apparently less optimistic than the narrator about the future of humanity, correctly predicting that overreaching ambition would bring about the downfall of the species:

> He, I know – for the question had been discussed among us long before the Time Machine was made – thought but cheerlessly of the Advancement of Mankind, and saw in the growing pile of civilisation only a foolish heaping that must inevitably fall back upon and destroy its makers in the end. (p. 117)

The narrator rejects this idea, favouring instead a stolid pragmatism: 'If that is so, then it remains for us to live as if though were not so' (p. 117). MacDuffie highlights this comment, linking it with current 'soft denial' of climate change: the ability to accept that climate change is real, and really happening, and simultaneously to go about one's life as if it were not.[51] The narrator chooses to blind himself to the uncomfortable truth of humanity's future, concluding that 'to me the future is still black and blank: a vast ignorance, lit at a few casual places by the memory of his story' (p. 117). Again, deep time is figured as abyssal, and again, human (in)comprehension of it is marked by imagery of darkness and blindness. The few spots of illumination created by the Time Traveller's story cannot compensate for the fact that the deep future is a space of human ignorance.

We have seen that the only way to satisfactorily conceptualise deep time is through metaphor. As Gould writes, '[a]n abstract, intellectual understanding of

[51] MacDuffie, p. 556.

deep time comes easily enough […]. Getting it into the gut is another matter'.[52] Wells' White Sphinx serves as a super-saturated embodiment of deep time: a physical monument onto which vastly different timescales may be simultaneously projected. Its presence links deep past and deep future; time occupied by humans, and time in which humanity has long since destroyed itself. Through their association with the sphinx, a recognisable man-made artefact, these troubling temporal and environmental questions are made tangible, and therefore approachable.

Yet the sphinx at the *fin de siècle* was associated as much with mysterious silence as with elucidation, with Blavatsky writing in 1877 that the creature 'has become a greater riddle in her speechlessness than was the enigma propounded to Œdipus'.[53] Wells' sphinx remains silent; it neither offers an explanation for the mystery it itself represents, nor confirms the speculations of its interrogator. To engage with it is at once to perceive the possibility of an answer to the fundamental questions of planetary time and our place within it, and to recognise that such a thing is ultimately unattainable. While we might sit at the feet of the sphinx, we cannot hope to read her.

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[52] Gould, *Time's Arrow*, p. 3.
[53] Blavatsky, *Isis Unveiled: A Master-Key to the Mysteries of Ancient and Modern Science and Theology*, 6th edn, 2 vols (London: Bernard Quaritch, 1892), I, p. 515.

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