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## Lewis' Time Machine and His Trip to the Moon

### **Abstract**

Explores Lewis's (acknowledged) debt to H.G. Wells's *First Men in the Moon* for *Out of the Silent Planet*. Suggests that "we can only understand Lewis' fragmentary *The Dark Tower* by noticing a similar debt to Wells' *The Time Machine*."

### **Additional Keywords**

Lewis, C.S. "The Dark Tower"—Sources; Lewis, C.S. *Out of the Silent Planet*—Sources; Wells, H.G. *The First Men in the Moon*—Relation to *Out of the Silent Planet*; Wells, H.G. *The Time Machine*—Relation to "The Dark Tower"; Thadara Ottobris

# LEWIS' TIME MACHINE AND HIS TRIP TO THE MOON

ROBERT E. BOENIG

A literary historian who could write an article entitled, "What Chaucer Really Did to *Il Filostrato*"<sup>1</sup> would, when he turned to fiction, be aware of the creative possibilities open to one writing consciously with a literary model in mind. If Chaucer succeeds in *Troilus* largely because of the manner in which he reacts to Boccaccio and plays with the preconceptions we have about Troy from the Italian master's poem, so also does *Out of the Silent Planet* succeed largely because of what Lewis does to H. G. Wells' *The First Men in the Moon*. Lewis acknowledges his debt to Wells in the dedication to his book, and critics have taken note of that debt,<sup>2</sup> but what Lewis really did to Wells has not yet totally been understood. I would like to explore some aspects of that debt and make the suggestion that we can only understand Lewis' fragmentary *The Dark Tower* by noticing a similar debt to Wells' *The Time Machine*.<sup>3</sup> On the basis of that debt we can, I think, make a few guesses about how Lewis was going to end his one attempt at time-traveling.

When, in Wells' *First Men*, Cavor, the brilliant physicist who constructs a spherical spaceship in his backyard, and Bedford, the young opportunist who is interested in interplanetary gold, arrive on the Moon, they are beset by a plethora of nightmarish fears and are, as psychologists would explain, in an approach/avoidance conflict. Bedford narrates:

I shaded my eyes with my hand. It's like the landscape of a dream. . . [Cavor] sighed and looked about him. "This is no world for men," he said. "And yet in a way. . . it appeals."  
(p. 54)

Their every action recapitulates this estimate. As Bedford says about jumping in this reduced gravity. "It was horrible and delightful, and as wild as a nightmare to go flying off in this fashion" (p. 55). This nightmare deepens when Cavor and Bedford first loose their space-sphere and then hear the noise of the Selenites' machines under the Moon's surface:

I felt the pressure of Cavor's hand upon my arm. He spoke in an undertone as if he feared to wake some sleeping thing. "Let us keep together," he whispered, "and look for the sphere. We must get back to the sphere. This is beyond our understanding."

"Which way shall we go?"

He hesitated. An intense persuasion of presences, of unseen things about us and near us, dominated our minds. What could they be? Where could they be? Was this arid desolation, alternately frozen and scorched, only the outer rind and mask of some subterranean world? And if so, what sort of world? What sort of inhabitants might it not presently disgorge upon us?

And then stabbing the aching stillness, as vivid and sudden as an unexpected thunder-clap, came a clang and rattle as though great gates of metal had suddenly been flung apart.  
(p. 60)

With this opening of the subterranean door the nightmare becomes one of almost archetypical proportions: the fear of getting hopelessly lost, the fear of being watched. And when the two stumble--almost fatally--upon that door, a third phobia, the fear of the abyss, enters the nightmare:

At that instant came a thud like the thud of a gun, and then a thing happened--it still haunts me in my dreams. I had turned my head to look at Cavor's face, and thrust out my hand in front of me as I did so. My hand met nothing! I plunged suddenly into a bottomless hole!

My chest hit something hard, and I found myself with my chin on the edge of a unfathomable abyss that had suddenly opened beneath me, my hand extended stiffly into the void.  
(p. 66)

Since Wells' moon is a world of neurotic fear, we should not be surprised at how Cavor and Bedford perceive the aliens they encounter. The first is the mooncalf, a dumb domestic beast used by the Selenites for food:

They seemed monsters of mere fatness, clumsy and overwhelmed to a degree that would make a Smithfield ox seem a model of agility. Their busy, writhing, chewing mouths, their closed eyes, together with the appetising sound of their munching, made up an effect of animal enjoyment that was singularly stimulating to our empty frames.

"Hogs!" said Cavor, with unusual passion. "Disgusting hogs!" (p. 65)

Next is the Selenite himself:

For a moment my eyes sought him in the wrong place, and then I perceived him standing facing us both in the full light. Only the human features I had attributed to him were not there at all! (P. 73)

Bedford eventually succeeds in describing the Selenite, and the description is not a comforting one:

"Well, what are they? They're much more like ants on their hind legs than human beings, and who ever got to any sort of understanding with ants?" (p. 78). The nightmare is now complete: the fear of being lost, of being watched, of falling, of crawling things all combine to defeat the attempt of Cavor and Bedford to communicate with the Selenites, and the inevitable nightmarish violence and destruction follow.

When Ransom first arrives on Malacandra--kidnapped by Weston and Divine, Lewis' variation on the theme of Cavor and Bedford--he has Wells' book in mind and is all too willing to experience these same fears himself.

His mind, like so many minds of his generation, was richly furnished with bogies. He had read his H. G. Wells and others. His universe was

peopled with horrors such as ancient and medieval mythology could hardly rival. No insect-like, vermiculate or crustacean Abominable, no twitching feelers, rasping wings, slimy coils, curling tentacles, no monstrous union of super-human intelligence and insatiable cruelty seemed to him anything but likely on an alien world. The sorns would be. . . would be. . . he dared not think what the sorns would be. (p. 35)

Violence, human sacrifice, the bare chance of escape from certain death--all these things are in Ransom's mind, blocking a persistent message that Malacandra would communicate to him. But slowly Ransom grows up<sup>4</sup> and begins to listen to the strange world about him, begins to understand that he is not in a Wellsian universe:

Ransom soon realized that he was to have little leisure for observation and no opportunity of escape. . . . But something he learned. Before anything else he learned that Malacandra was beautiful; and he even reflected how odd it was that this possibility had never entered into his speculations about it. The same peculiar twist of imagination which led him to people the universe with monsters and somehow taught him to expect nothing on a strange planet except rocky desolation or else a network of nightmare machines. (p. 42)

When he does escape, however, Ransom finds it necessary to defend himself by blocking this message of beauty from his mind. Instead he concentrates on the horrors of the sorns:

But Ransom was thinking of sorns--for doubtless those were the sorns, those creatures they had tried to give him to. They were quite unlike the horrors his imagination had conjured up, and for that reason had taken him off his guard. They appealed away from the Wellsian fantasies to an earlier, almost an infantile complex of fears. Giants--ogres--ghosts--skeletons: those were its key words. (p. 47)

This compulsion to be afraid at all costs brings its inevitable consequence of near madness, Wellsian neurosis:

If only he hadn't lost his nerve the sorns would have killed him by now. Then he remembered with inexpressible relief that there was a man wandering in the wood--poor devil--he'd be glad to see him. He would come up to him and say, "Hullo, Ransom,"--he stopped, puzzled. No, it was only himself: it was Ransom. Or was he? (p. 51)

Ransom begins to heal only when he perceives Malacandra on its own terms, and this first happens when he sees the Malacandrian version of Wells' Mooncalf:

Before he could fly he found himself in the midst of a herd of enormous pale furry creatures more like giraffes than anything else he



could think of, except that they could and did raise themselves on their hind legs and even progress several paces in that position. They were slender, and very much higher, than giraffes, and were eating the leaves off the tops of the purple plants. They saw him and stared at him with their big liquid eyes, snorting in *basso profundissimo*, but had apparently no hostile intentions. (p. 52)

They are domesticated, food-producing animals, but they are no creeping slugs: they are tall, graceful, and have beautiful eyes. Thus Ransom realizes that Malacandra does not crawl and is no home for either insects or fears of insects. Moreover, the soaring height of everything on the planet speaks comfort to him; he describes what he thinks are mountains:

Here, he understood, was the full statement of that perpendicular theme which beast and plant and earth all played on Malacandra--here in this riot of rock, leaping and surging skyward like solid jets from some rock-foundation, and hanging by their own lightness in the air, so shaped, so elongated, that all terrestrial mountains must ever after seem to him to be mountains lying on their sides. He felt a lift and lightening at the heart. (p. 53)

"Perpendicular," here italicized by Lewis himself, is a term he borrows from art history describing a type of Gothic architecture developed in late medieval England. It is, in fact, the style of King's Chapel, Oxford and many of the most famous English churches. Malacandra is no hole full of monstrous and violent ants, but instead is a cathedral in which Ransom will learn to approach God.

The prime instrument of Malacandra's communication with Ransom is the intelligent life he encounters there, especially Hyoi, the first Malacandrian he meets. Hyoi is, like the first Selenite Bedford sees, tall and black and disturbingly non-human, but there are significant differences, for he is more like a seal than an insect--and thus not the substance of neurotic fear--and has not the slightest interest in violence:

Ransom rose to his knees. The creature leaped back, watching him intently, and they became motionless again. Then it came a pace nearer, and Ransom jumped up and retreated, but not far; curiosity held him. He summoned up his courage and advanced, holding out his hand; the beast misunderstood the gesture. It backed into the shallows of the lake and he could see the muscles tighten under its sleek pelt, ready for sudden movement. But there it stopped; it, too, was in the grip of curiosity. Neither dared let the other approach, yet each repeatedly felt the impulse to do so himself, and yielded to it. It was foolish, frightening, ecstatic and unbearable all in one moment. It was more than curiosity. It was like a courtship--like the meeting of the first man and the first woman in the world; it was like something beyond that; so natural is the contact of sexes, so limited the strangeness, so shallow the reticence, so mild the repugnance to be overcome, compared with the first tingling intercourse of two different, but rational species. (p. 56)

Like Cavor and Bedford, Ransom is in an approach/avoidance conflict, but it is one in which the approach will emerge as the proper response. In fact, Out of the Silent Planet is largely the story of Ransom's approach--a journey towards communication in which he gradually repudiates Bedford's persistent instinct to escape. His journey towards the Oyarsa who is Malacandra thus becomes a journey away from fear towards final understanding of the order and peace behind the cosmos.

Lewis' The Dark Tower has as strong a connection to Wells' The Time Machine as Out of the Silent Planet has to The First Men in the Moon. Both stories begin in the study of a man who has just invented a time machine; both have a journey from framework-time to other-time, and both reveal an other-time society split in two, in which a weak, innocent race is victimized by a race of humanoid monsters. In both, moreover, the time-traveler develops a close relationship with a female of the victimized race. In Wells, the Time-traveler's movement through the 800,000th century is from Eden to Hell. The Eden and Hell, of course are products of Wells' early social theories, but the religious imagery nevertheless remains. With a jolt the Machine stops, and the Time-traveler tells his guests about this first impression of the new world he has visited:

I looked around me. I was on what seemed . . . to be a little lawn in a garden, surrounded by rhododendron bushes, and I noticed that their mauve and purple blossoms were dropping in a shower under the beating of hail-stones. (p. 210)

He finds himself in a garden-world, and the people he finds there are innocent and beautiful, gathering fruit for food:

Fruit, by the by, was all their diet. These people of the remote future were strict vegetarians. . . . But the fruits were very delightful; one, in particular, that seemed to be in season all the time I was there--a floury thing in a three-sided husk--was especially good, and I made it my staple. (p. 215)

The Time-traveler sees the fruits and declares them good and thus creates for himself a theory of the origins of this fragile Eden:

The air was free from gnats, the earth from weeds or fungi; everywhere were fruits and sweet and delightful flowers; brilliant butterflies flew hither and thither. The ideal of preventive medicine was attained. Diseases had been stamped out. I saw no evidence of any contagious diseases during all my stay. And I shall have to tell you later that even the processes of putrefaction and decay had been profoundly affected by these changes.

Social triumphs, too, had been effected. I saw mankind housed in splendid shelters, gloriously clothed, and as yet I had found them engaged in no toil. There were no signs of struggle, neither social nor economical struggle. The shop, the advertisement, traffic all that commerce which constitutes the body of our world, was gone. It was natural on that golden evening that I should jump at the idea of such paradise. (p. 220)

The "golden evening" of that "paradise" is shattered by a serpent--the by-product of the industrialized society that gave rise to the Edenic conditions available to the surface-dwellers of the 800,000th century. Wells' future world, it seems, has been produced by a split in society between the proletariat and working classes in which the former, the Eloi, have grown weak in their leisure while the latter, the Morlocks, doomed to work without sunlight in the industrialized pits of the earth, have grown strong in their labors and eventually have become the dominant species. The Morlocks are carnivorous and, in this world without cattle or sheep, raise the Eloi for food. The horror, of course, is that these Mooncalves are human.

Since the Morlocks have also dragged away the Time Machine while he was not looking, the Time-

traveler must descend into the earth to recover it, although Weena, his female companion, resists his attempt:

At first she watched me in amazement. Then she gave a most piteous cry, and, running to me, she began to pull at me with her little hands. I think her opposition nerved me rather to proceed. I shook her off, perhaps a little roughly, and in another moment I was in the throat of the well. (pp. 236-240)

Thus the entrance to the Morlocks' Underground has the "throat" we expect of a Hell-mouth. In this first, unsuccessful trip, the Time-traveler is tormented by the demons he encounters:

...while I stood in the dark, a hand touched mine, lank fingers came feeling over my face, and I was sensible of a peculiar unpleasant odour. I fancied I heard the breathing of a crowd of those dreadful little beings about me. . . . I shouted at them as loudly as I could. They started away, and then I could feel them approaching me again. They clutched at me more boldly, whispering odd sounds to each other. I shivered violently, and shouted again--rather discordantly. (p. 242)

He escapes, later recovers the Time Machine, and makes good his return to framework-time--but without Weena, who has been devoured by the monsters.

When we get our first glimpse of Other-time in Lewis' The Dark Tower, we immediately realize we are not in Eden, but in this same sort of Hell. The narrator describes a being he sees in the viewing screen of the inventor Orfieu's Time Machine:

The face looked out from a mass of black hair and beard. But the word 'black' is inadequate. . . . It was dead black, like the darkness in a coal-cellar, a mere negation of colour. . . . His stillness was not like that of a man asleep, nor like that of an artist's model: it was the stillness of a corpse. And oddly enough, it had the curious effect of making one think that it must have begun suddenly--as if something had come down like the blade of a guillotine and cut short the Man's whole history at a moment. . . . His eyes were open, but the face had no expression, or none that we could interpret. . . . The anatomical absurdity--the incredible thing--how can I write it down in cold blood? Perhaps you, reader, will laugh. We did not, neither then, nor since, in our dreams. The Man had a sting. (pp. 32-33)

The negation of color and life, the subterranean darkness, and the grotesque deformity all indicate to us the locality. As the narrator explains, "destiny chose this night to pitchfork us brutally, and with no gentle gradations, into something so shocking. . . ." (p. 30). This victimizer, this Stingingman, moreover, engages in an activity that makes the Morlocks' cannibalism pale in comparison, for he feeds on his victims' wills instead of their bodies (see pp. 33-35). Significantly, McPhee later calls the Stingingman and his companions "devils" (p. 37), and Ransom finally names Other-time "hell" (p. 38).

This inversion of Wells is consistent with Lewis' method in Out of the Silent Planet. If Wells' Time-traveler moves from Eden to Hell, Lewis' Scudamour, Orfieu's assistant who travels accidentally from framework-time to Other-time, likely would have moved--if the novel had been completed--in the opposite direction. Several details in the story as it now stands support this theory. First, there is a retreat from hell

imagery. Before he enters Other-time, Scudamour speaks:

"I never went in for religion, but I begin to think Dr. Ransom was right. I think we have tapped whatever reality is behind all the old stories about hell and devils and witches. I don't know. Some filthy sort of something going on alongside the ordinary world and all mixed up with it."

Ransom was able to meet him on this ground with perfect naturalness and obvious sincerity.

"As a matter of fact, Scudamour," he said, "I've changed my mind. I don't think the world we see through the chronoscope is hell, because it seems to contain quite decent, happy people, along with the Jerkies [the victims] and the Stingingmen." (pp. 48-49)

We now know that the horrible world we have witnessed is not entirely hopeless: if it is not hell but only a hellish replica, it can be redeemed.

The second significant detail is the existence of a group in Other-time capable of opposing the Stingingmen--the White Riders. A messenger comes to warn Scudamour, who has inexplicably entered Other-time as the reigning Stingingman, about an approaching danger:

"They came out of the wood from the north," said the man, "galloping so fast that your scouts were hardly here before them, and they were on us before the troops could well be ordered. They came straight to the north door and some of them dismounted; they had a felled tree for a battering-ram. They seemed to take no notice of the workmen who caught up what they could for weapons and came at them. The Riders were more ready to threaten them than to fight, and when the workmen would not be kept back by threats they struck feebly and like fools--even using the butts of their lances. They killed very few. When the troops came, it was another matter. The Riders charged them with lances and rove them back twice. Then they seemed to lose heart and would not charge a third time. They left off battering the door and drew together and then their leader shouted out a message. Then they fled." (pp. 73-74)

We know that the White Riders cannot be evil, because they do not wish to harm helpless enemies. As it turns out, their sole desire is to destroy the deformity which makes the Stingingmen evil, not the Stingingmen themselves. As the "black robed attendant" later tells Scudamour, the White Riders' message is that "whoever comes to them with a sting in his hand. . . shall have a good welcome. . . ." (p. 75).

The third detail is Scudamour's probable role in Other-time. He brings the morality of framework-time with him through the chronoscope for, unlike the Other-timers, he can conceptualize God (p. 65) and he can utter the word "love" (p. 66). In addition, his name is "Michael" (p. 68)--angelic and military--and thus he is a fit agent for destruction of the forces of hell controlling his new world. He can therefore help the victims to develop moral resistance to the Stingingmen, and the woman who is the Other-time analogue for Scudamour's fiancée Camilla is the first to develop this resistance, for after she speaks the name "Michael," the narrator comments, "And it seemed to him that she spoke with the steadiness of a martyr" (p. 68). A world capable of producing the faith of martyrs and one in which someone named Michael is in command is not only capable of redemption, but is actually moving towards it.

From this basis we can perceive a dim outline of what might have followed had not Lewis been distracted by a greater author than Wells into writing Perelandra--Milton. An escape to the woods (further up and further in?), a meeting with the White Riders in which earlier mistrust gradually breaks down (Hyoï?), the removal of the Sting (the man with the lizard in The Great Divorce?), leadership in the final overthrow of evil (Prince Caspian?) and eventual return to framework-time with the Camilla-analogue--who might, according to Hooper's suggestive note (pp. 97-98) be the real Camilla--are all in the future for Scudamour. Or at least they are in the future in some other time in which Lewis is sitting down to finish his book.

## Notes

1. Essays and Studies by Members of the English Association, 17 (1932), pp. 56-75.
2. See Janice Neuleib, "Technology and Theocracy: The Cosmic Voyages of Wells and Lewis," Extrapolation 16 (1975), pp. 130 ff.
3. The editions I use in this paper are those most commonly available: H. G. Wells, The First Men in the Moon (New York: Berkley, 1967), and The War of the Worlds and The Time Machine (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1961); and C. S. Lewis, Out of the Silent Planet (New York: Macmillan, 1965), and The Dark Tower & Other Stories, ed. Walter Hooper (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1977).
4. See Judith Brown, "The Pilgrimage from Deep Space," Mythlore 15 (March, 1977), pp. 13-15.



MYTHLORE cannot be better than the material submitted. Presently our backlog of articles has been reduced, especially as regards Tolkien, and we are soliciting new articles. We want material on all aspects of Tolkien, Lewis, and Williams, and would especially like to see articles on The Silmarillion, since we have not seen much coverage on this work since its publication.

We would appreciate having manuscripts typed in format--single spaced in five-inch column, with a carbon-ribbon typewriter, with italicized words lightly underlined in blue pencil if italic type is not available. To save space, please restrict the use of footnotes by incorporating "ibid." and "op. cit." citations in your text in parentheses. Type your name and address and the first page, and your last name on each succeeding page; staple cover letter and pages together. An enclosed postcard will hasten acknowledgement. Enclose self-addressed envelope with paper-clipped stamps.

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