

The Three Tropographies of Ronald Wright's *A Scientific Romance*

Gary Wolfe's useful work on the iconography of science fiction suggests that, as the science fiction genre has developed, its conventions and stereotypes have taken on the status of icons, with the icon's peculiar ability to move and inspire. According to Wolfe, icons evoke but also transcend the easy pleasures of familiarity and recognition and tap into our deepest beliefs, fears, and desires (16–19). I propose to borrow Wolfe's insight, substituting the term "trope" for "icon," while retaining his emphasis on the emotional and cultural power of abiding images and patterns of action. *A Scientific Romance*,¹ Ronald Wright's prize-winning 1997 novel, draws much of its power from its rich intertextuality and particularly from three sources of generic convention—three interwoven tropographies that compel reader involvement in complex ways.² Combining Christian and erotic tropes with those of science fiction, Wright creates a dynamic matrix of images and actions that articulate the longings of his postmodern hero, David Lambert, for connection and meaning.³ Some of these tropes reflect well-known myths; others are what we might call myths-in-the-making. Examination of these tropic patterns helps to elucidate the particularly elaborate tapestry of generic allusion that gives *A Scientific Romance* much of its expressive resonance, although it by no means exhausts the breadth of reference in a work that ranges from the Bible to Baudrillard.

Science Fiction

The science fiction tropes Wright employs in *A Scientific Romance* derive quite explicitly from a number of sources, most prominently from the grandfather of time-travel fiction—H.G. Wells.⁴ Wright's iconic time

machine is not just a variation on the Wells device. In the novel *A Scientific Romance*, a young Russian scientist, Tatiana / Tania Cherenkova, a student of Nikola Tesla—and Wells' lover—constructed it, and thus it becomes a part of Wells' life in Wright's imaginings. Inspired to build for her beloved what he had imagined, Tania later flees to the future in despair after Wells tires of her. The hero of Wright's novel discovers the time machine after he receives a letter from the grave. Wells entrusted the letter to his solicitor and, with characteristic hubris, asked that it be passed on to a scholar of Wellsiana at the end of the twentieth century. According to the letter, before Tatiana left in the time machine, she installed a failsafe mechanism to assure that the device would reappear at her basement laboratory in the "first moments of the twenty-first century" (29). David Lambert, a young historian of Victorian technology and the letter's skeptical recipient, manages to be on the spot when the time machine materializes. His own motivations for taking the machine into the future, as well as what he finds there, are the subject of the novel.

Wright borrows the sub-title of Wells' work for his own story, as well as the time travel device. According to Paul Fayer, "scientific romance" was the coinage of a mathematician named Charles Howard Hinton, who first used the term in 1884 (256). Wells' *Time Traveller* journeys forward hundreds of thousands of years, from the late-nineteenth century to 802,701 A.D., while Wright's David Lambert travels forward in time just five centuries. Wells' tale comes to the reader through a frame story narrated by Hillyer, a friend of the *Time Traveller* who conveys the Traveller's story and describes the inventor's various attempts to convince a salon of local personages that his time machine works. Wright's work is an epistolary novel, conveyed via letters and journal entries inscribed on computer disks. How the information on the disks becomes a book is never explained in *A Scientific Romance*, but if, as Wright hints, his hero survives his ordeal and is able to go back in time as well as forward, the book's existence is easily explained. The "romance" of *The Time Machine*⁵ is clearly that of a wild adventure story, but at least two common senses of the term are at play in Wright's *A Scientific Romance*—a book that is clearly both a quest / adventure narrative and a novel of lost love.

In their different ways, both works debunk the casual human assumption that the march of time means progress. Wright's Lambert initially places his faith in the progress of science. Rootless, solitary, and mired in an uninspiring job, David has recently discovered that the woman he loved in his student days, Anita Langland, has died and that he has been diagnosed with Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease, the human form of "mad cow" or BSE, and the

illness that killed her. After making a number of twentieth-century updates to the time machine, David launches himself forward to the year 2500, looking for Tania, a cure for himself, and a way to rewrite his history with Anita. Wells' project requires a more aggressive thrust into the future, since he wants to tackle common assumptions about evolution, suggesting not only that its movement may not always entail progress but also that class divisions in late-Victorian England could result in degeneration of the human species. As Darko Suvin has observed, "the basic device of *The Time Machine* is an opposition of the Time Traveller's visions of the future to the ideal reader's norm of a complacent bourgeois class consciousness with its belief in linear progress" (223). While Wells' novel focuses fairly narrowly on class issues and evolution, with a few asides concerning *fin de siècle* aestheticism, Wright tackles a host of modern ills evident at the end of the twentieth century, including the destructive capacity of science and technology, rampant commercialization, globalization, and the oppression of native peoples by white Europeans.

Time travel in both novels reveals a dystopic future, and both works end indeterminately. In *The Time Machine*, Wells portrays the Time Traveller engaging two races, the Eloi and the Morlocks, that he believes to be strains of debased humanity. Then, having propelled himself "more than thirty million years hence" (93), the Traveller relates the last vision of his journey, that of an uninhabited Earth dying as it nears a dying Sun. "A horror of this great darkness came on me," the Time Traveller reports; "The cold that smote to my marrow, the pain I felt in breathing, overcame me" (*TM* 95). At the novel's end, after three year's absence, the Time Traveller has yet to return from an attempt to go forward in time again to document his findings. When Wright's David Lambert finally discovers a remnant of humanity near Loch Ness in Scotland, it is more recognizably human than the Eloi or Morlocks of 801,702 A.D. However, the Macbeth clan appears at the brink of extinction, unskilled, illiterate, fearful of technology, and practicing a primitive form of Christianity. [The clan's origins story and theology labels greed and the love of technology the besetting sins of those who previously perished from the Earth (*SR* 282-283).] Plagued by genetic and other diseases, the clan appears unable to reproduce sufficient healthy offspring to maintain itself. Although less dark than the Time Traveller's final vision, Lambert's bleak picture of Earth in 2500 holds out little hope for human progress, even in the distant future. As David observes near the end of the book:

The Glen Nessies of the earth may survive, human numbers may eventually rebuild, we may with time and luck climb back to ancient China or Peru. But the ready ores and fossil fuels are gone. Without coal there can be no Industrial

Revolution; without oil no leap from steam to atom. Technology will sit forever at the bottom of a ladder from which the lower rungs are gone. (SR 346)

David's own fate, like that of the Time Traveller, is left unresolved. A *Scientific Romance* closes with David setting the time machine for return to life in the twentieth century—before the time he believes he and Anita contracted their fatal disease. Appropriate for a novel concerned with time and memory, David's reports range back and forth, among past, present, and future time, providing in the disjointed, fragmented style of memory (or the delusions of illness) the narrative of his early life, of his relationships with Bird and Anita, and of his exploration of life in the year 2500.

A *Scientific Romance* participates in a post-World War II tradition of literary fiction that employs some science fiction devices and tropes without fully participating in the genre.⁶ Wright samples liberally from established elements of science fiction, but he writes that his desire was to “borrow without being pigeon-holed” as a science fiction writer—one reason for the consciously literary style of the novel with its myriad allusions and literary pastiche. As he has observed,

I went through a science fiction phase in my teens and early twenties but am no longer a fan . . . It's [primarily] the early stuff I like . . . My influences were Victorian and Edwardian “scientific romances” (e.g. Bulter's *Erewhon* and Morris' *News from Nowhere*, as well as Wells) and their twentieth-century descendants—mainly the great social and political satires of Orwell and Huxley, but also Russell Hoban's *Riddley Walker*, John Wyndham's gloomy dystopias, and Kubrick's superb film *Dr. Strangelove* (“Re: SAR”).

The landscape Wright's hero explores in the England of 500 years hence—a steamy jungle thriving where chilly fog used to reign, the detritus of the twentieth century rusting under vines—conveys the vision of “an author who understands what it takes to bring down a civilization” (Weller 34).

For much of the novel, Wright plays on the “last man” tradition in science fiction, drawing from his youthful reading of Shiel's classic *The Purple Cloud*⁷ and alluding to Mary Shelley's *The Last Man*. Surveying devastated London, David quickly realizes that his quest for a cure has failed, but since he must wait at least two months for the solar batteries of the time machine to recharge, he decides to use the time to look for its inventor, Tania; puzzle out what has happened prior to 2500; and search for survivors. But Tania is not to be found, except in dreams, and David has only a friendly puma for company during his early explorations. When he discovers in Scotland the dark-skinned people of Glen Nessie herding llamas like sheep, he is not sure how to react. Before he can decide how (or whether) to reveal himself, he is captured and taken to a village, where he is first imprisoned, then

befriended, and finally offered a starring role in the annual Passion play.

Wells' story is a tall tale of the imagination and a polemic—an adventure story that comments on ideas: evolution, socialism, and late-nineteenth-century aestheticism. Characterization is practically nil. The Time Traveller has no name; he is simply the gentleman scientist. “Kingsley Amis argues in *New Maps of Hell* (1961) that [science fiction] must deal in stock figures because it ponders our general condition rather than the intricacies of personality” (Sanders 131). Wells provides a case in point. *A Scientific Romance*, however, is not a science fiction story but a story that borrows from science fiction. Its characterizations have the depth and introspection, the “Inwardness,” as Aldiss terms it, that Wells' and others' scientific romances lack (120).

The iconic time machine is central to Wright's enterprise. With it, he pays homage to Wells and sets his plot spinning, but most importantly, he taps into a powerfully evocative nexus of human longings and fears. Wells' device permits David to flee the mortal threat of his disease, at least temporarily, and to confront the unknown in the shape of the world's future and his own. Because it offers as well the possibility of rewriting the past, Wells' device in Wright's hands becomes the occasion for a profound meditation on memory and regret. Near the end of the novel, David asks,

Why is the echo richer than the source, and time remembered always grief? People come and go, and you hardly notice how they feel, what you feel. Then one day when you least expect it remembrance slips like a blade into the heart: what you did and didn't do, said and didn't say; and suddenly you fall down into a cold and sunken place with only your regrets for company . . . (SR 330–31)

Time travel causes David to contemplate the works of time—and how he has spent his time—with a seriousness he has heretofore avoided. He is able to examine the dark moments of his past from a great distance—the only perspective from which he can bear to look at them. Looking back, he can ponder his painful history—the death of his parents in a car accident on Christmas Eve when he was 11 after he'd wished his father dead, his betrayal of Bird and of their friendship, his loss of Anita—and assess his guilt and responsibility.

Certainly the time machine trope gathers much of its power from the device's abiding presence in the science fiction tradition—or perhaps it is more accurate to observe that its potency has created the tradition. But the machine's special force derives from a number of factors: (1) its position as a meeting point between the known and the unknown (in this case, the present and future); (2) its relation to a “subjunctive” reality based on possibility, on what might be or might have been—the term is Samuel Delaney's (52); and (3) its myriad psychological and cultural evocations,

among them the human attraction to (and fear of) technology and the yearning to transcend time and thereby repair old wrongs and gain immortality (Wolfe 17). Other familiar science fiction tropes—the mutant remnant, the landscape of future-shock, the time loop, the post-apocalyptic search for human survivors, the new dark age—play their parts in the novel's grand scheme, gathering significance beyond their functions in its plot.

The trope of time travel also makes possible Wright's and David's chilling meditation on life in the late twentieth century. As Patrick Parrinder has observed, "Prophetic [science fiction] is a propaganda device which is meaningful only in relation to the discursive present in which it arises" (29). Wright is not trying to predict the future so much as using subjunctive reality to imagine where the world might end up in 500 years if human beings continue to behave as though their actions have no consequences. As David travels through England and Scotland, he pieces together the elements of modern civilization's demise. Global warming, nuclear and chemical pollution, the unintended effects of genetic research, the almost total failure of antibiotics and the spread of incurable disease, unfettered capitalism and globalization—in Wright's imagined future, all have played their part in the dissolution of modern technological and industrial culture. "Civilization's always a pyramid scheme," Prof. Skeffington used to tell his archeology students. "Living beyond your means. The rule of the many by the few. The trick is to keep wringing new loans from nature and your fellow man" (SR 83). As he returns to England and the time machine near the end of the novel, David observes that "One thing seems clear enough: nature didn't clobber us, except in self-defense. There was no *deus ex machina*, no cosmic foot" (SR 327). With coal and fossil fuel stores exhausted and the secrets of science and technology lost to the surviving remnant, humanity seems destined to live in a "Scrap-Iron Age." David imagines "old girders beaten into swords and ploughshares over charcoal fires, stainless steel more precious than gold. Not for a hundred million years will the earth become gravid with new coal and oil, and Lord knows what will have evolved by then" (SR 347).

While the time machine and time travel tropes are the central science fiction elements Wright employs, he uses a number of other science fiction tropes effectively, of which I will mention only three: the search for human survivors, the rejection of science and technology, and the mutant remnant. When David fails to find the time machine's test pilot, Tania, the echoing loneliness of London threatens his sanity, and he becomes determined to discover whether any human beings have survived the apocalypse. Wright crafts this search adeptly, carefully drawing out the suspense and playing on David's and the reader's hopes that some vestige of humanity remains. The

novel is nearly two-thirds over before David discovers the Macbeth tribe. Meanwhile Wright toys with us as we follow David's search. A "brilliantined head" that peers down at him from the ruins of a toll booth ramp turns out to be a sea lion (SR 105). What looks at first like a baby's arm in the puma's lair is revealed as the arm of a monkey (SR 120). A "stout man in a three-piece suit, about twice life-size, lying on his back" turns out to be an upended statue (SR 122). And naked footprints in the dirt are those of a bear (SR 215).

As mentioned previously, the companionship of a one-eared black puma David names Graham somewhat alleviates his loneliness. David and Graham share the fruits of their hunting, and Graham shadows and protects David until his travels take the big cat too far from home. Writing to Anita, David admits how much the cat's presence means to him: "I can talk to you and I can talk to Bird [via his journal]; I can hear myself speak and sign and recite sublime poetry and utter gibberish; but Graham is the only living creature I can touch, and who touches me, in this whole world" (SR 170). When the cat leaves him and returns home, David is desolate. Graham provides friendship, warm-blooded connection in the absence of human society, but the animal also represents the natural connection between man and nature that man's mistreatment of the natural world has virtually destroyed.

Graham is also part of the mutant remnant David finds in this alien landscape. At first surmising that the cat had lost an ear in a fight, David later realizes that he was born without it, one of the many victims of the environmental pollution everywhere evident. Village chieftan Macbeth, whose tiny kingdom survives on the shores of Loch Ness, looks very little like the ancient Scot Shakespeare conjured up but quite like his Moor of Venice blown up to sumo wrestler size.⁸ David speculates that Macbeth and his people are either descendants of urban blacks whose skin color protected them from the harsh effects of global warming or, very likely, the product of latter-day genetic experiments with a melanin enhancement called "Black Face," of which David has found documentary evidence. According to the tribal origins story, they are the remnant of human civilization. Their "gospel"—the story of how they survived by asking nothing of God and rejecting technology—owes something to the Old Testament, something to the origins story of *Riddley Walker*, and something to *The Passion Play from the N. Town Manuscript* (the latter two works cited in Wright's acknowledgements). Wright's exploitation of mutant remnant topography heightens the reader's sense of human-engineered disaster and plays upon natural human fears of deformity and defect. As David learns more about village life, he realizes that almost any sexual pairing is winked at because the tribe is so desperate to replenish itself. The remnant's policy of combating extinc-

tion through any means necessary—polyandry, polygyny, incest—evokes the shiver of taboo.

Wright's allusion to the Scottish Play refers more or less overtly to white British and European imperialism, with a sidelong glance at the fraught history of the emerging British state and the problem of colonialism closer at hand in regard to Scotland and Ireland, the tribe standing for the native, mostly dark-skinned, peoples who have faced white, European exploitation and repression throughout recorded history.⁹ Aspects of *A Scientific Romance* that address the depredations of empire will come as no surprise to readers familiar with the author's other work. Wright, who was born in Great Britain but now considers himself more Canadian than British,¹⁰ had been an established, award-winning travel writer for many years before he penned his first novel and had also authored an acclaimed work of revisionist history several years before the publication of *A Scientific Romance*.¹¹ His non-fiction work, particularly the 1992 book *Stolen Continents: The Americans Through Indian Eyes Since 1492*, offers an indispensable gloss on the ecological, political, and cultural concerns of the novel. Released just prior to the 500th anniversary of Columbus' encounter with the Americas, *Stolen Continents* explores the European incursion from native American perspectives and might almost be considered a companion piece to *A Scientific Romance*—the one looking forward, the other back. *Stolen Continents* looks back 500 years to examine the effects of European invasion on five civilizations—Aztec, Mayan, Inca, Cherokee, and Iroquois—and to recount the cost to the land and its indigenous peoples, and, of course, *A Scientific Romance* casts the reader forward 500 years, as Wright imagines the potentially destructive effects of western civilization on its own lands and people in a not-too-distant future. Besides borrowing the occasional image or character from earlier books—howler monkeys and a black puma from *Time Among the Maya*, for example (57)—Wright creates landscapes in the history and fiction that are disconcertingly similar, describing the ravages of violence and disease, political and cultural disintegration, and ecological disaster. Occasional references in *A Scientific Romance* to the five ancient cultures discussed in *Stolen Continents* contribute to the pleasurable complexity of Wright's fictional terrain. For example, when David meets the leader of the tribe, he observes:

This was it: the fraught meeting of alien kind and white invader, the encounter of worlds. Would he be florid and obsequious like Moctezuma to Cortés: "My lord, you are weary, you are tired"? Or a disdainful and sarcastic Anahuallpa, flinging down the Bible, averting his nose from the smelly barbarians who dared disturb him at his bath? (SR 237)

Both of these scenes, mentioned in passing in *A Scientific Romance*, are treated at greater length and within their richly textured historical and cultural contexts in *Stolen Continents*.

Christianity

Although science fiction tropes are clearly central to the novel's design, the time machine and other science fiction elements gradually cede prominence to Christian tropes in the last third of the book. Here Wright's bold use of communion and crucifixion¹² creates a rich nexus of horror, genuine sacrifice, love, and skepticism in scenes simultaneously true to David's rejection of Christianity and redolent of his desire for love and transcendence. David Lambert's quarrel with Christianity began at age 11 with his parents' untimely death on Christmas Eve. He writes, "I remember telling Uncle Phil I couldn't believe in a god who'd killed my mother and father and dumped me in the hands of therapists" (SR 150). That his parents' death also dumps him quite literally into the hands of a pederast priest—the same Uncle Phil, who serves as David's guardian for six years—does not do much to advance God's cause either. So David is no believer. Yet, at the ruins of Christopher Wren's London temple on Christmas Day 2500, David acknowledges a desire to believe that "God so loved the world"¹³ and observes in his missive to Anita that "people like us . . . are too clever by half: too smart to kneel; not smart enough to shape a credible alternative" (SR 150). Lambert's journey into the future confirms his cynicism—among other things, he finds a brochure advertising a biorama owned by "Vatican Disney"¹⁴—but he retains a vague uneasiness about taking communion with Macbeth's tribe as an unbeliever. (Their chalice is a Waterford crystal martini glass; the sacramental wine an old malt!) Even after his near-death participation in primitive Christian ritual, David's last jottings in his journal suggest that creation is the last prerogative of the something or someone David still calls God (SR 349). Wright's use of Christian ritual and trope reaches its apogee in a horrifying reenactment of the Passion with David starring as Christ—Macbeth and company filling secondary roles in the annual rite. David's first name recalls the Old Testament House of David from which the Messiah comes, and his last name, Lambert, the sacrificial lamb, the Christ of the cross; his mother's name was Mary.¹⁵ As the annual Passion Play unfolds, David is dismayed to discover with what relish the assembled mob scourges and abuses him on his own *via dolorosa* and stunned when his friend Hob¹⁶ apologetically drives a six-inch nail into his palm. As an outsider, a "pairson of nae colour," David had initially been treated with fear and suspicion, but his developing relationship with Macbeth, the tribal leader, had led him to believe he was

safe. Macbeth had even seemed to take in stride David's reluctant admission that he has come from the past—the source, according to the tribal origin story, of technology and, hence, destruction—and to have accepted David's pledge that no others would follow him. But Macbeth's wife demands David's sacrifice, and Macbeth appears to agree.

Wright's use of crucifixion tropography is masterly. Pale and blonde and 33 years old, David "looks like Jesus" (SR 228) to the village girl Maile—the image of Jesus still preserved in a nearly indestructible plastic dashboard figurine. A representative of the Gentiles—in tribal lore the "greedy and ambitious people" whose materialism and selfishness despoiled the earth—David must suffer for the sins of his age. A scholar of nineteenth-century technology and curator of the Museum of Motion, he is the scapegoat for capitalist exploitation of the natural world, and, as the only surviving white man, European exploitation of native peoples. In personal terms, David must die to his old self—the self so mired in grief and regret that he has become isolated from others and lost the power to act. The aftermath of David's crucifixion is painful physical recovery and a type of spiritual rebirth, his suffering on the cross causing him to recognize the extent to which he has lived as one of the walking dead. Tellingly, he remembers hearing the news of his parents' accident at 11 and not being certain whether they had died, or he had.

The sensation of having escaped and lived on becomes a solipsism, a trick of evaporating consciousness or, if you like, an anodyne from a loving God to spare you the blow of your extinction. And it follows that one may never know when one has died, may go on living an echo, like a player performing to the darkness of an empty hall he thinks is a full house. And the ever-running play you write and act is your eternity. (SR 325)

The passage is both a meditation on the nature of consciousness and existence (how do we know that we exist?) and David's acknowledgement of how little of his life he has truly lived. Ironically, it is a trick of memory—a misremembering and distortion of the gospel story on the part of the Macbeth tribe—that affords David his chance for realization and renewal.

Eros

As earlier noted, *A Scientific Romance* is both a science fiction adventure and a love story. The time machine takes David to 2500, but Eros propels him. He goes in search of a cure for his illness but also to find the basis for a healing return to past romance. The erotic tropography of David's affair with Anita Langland—passion consummated after a near-death experience, the betrayal of a friend and rival, blood sacrifice—is mirrored darkly in the final section of the novel as David's dreams and memories recall his lost love.

Darko Suvin has observed that the message of true science fiction is that “man’s destiny is man” (65). Suvin makes the statement in an article positing that science fiction has no room for metaphysics, but his statement can be applied to David’s search for meaning as well. David’s desire to believe in something beyond himself finds its focus in Anita—in human, not divine love—what Robert Polhemus has termed “erotic faith” (1). Polhemus observes,

Because doubt about the value of life has been a human constant, historically people have always needed some kind of faith. And with the spread of secularism since the eighteenth century, erotic faith, diverse and informal though it may be, has given to some a center and sometimes a solace that were traditionally offered by organized religion and God. By love we can change the situation—that sentiment moves people: love relationships have the highest priority in the real lives of millions as they have had for innumerable characters in fiction. (SR 1)

The details of David’s and Anita’s love affair come to us in brief, disjointed fragments of memory as David records his thoughts, but as the tropes of eros, of love, combine with those of Christianity and science fiction, they gather power and shape the novel’s response to the vision of loss it portrays.

The love affair begins with the familiar trope of romantic betrayal. Anita is Bird’s girl, and Bird and Anita are David’s friends. All are outsiders, orphans of a sort, and only children. David’s parents are dead. Anita’s parents are far away in the West Indies and have little to do with their daughter. Bird has a mum, but never knew his dad, and as a “Cockney in Classics” at Cambridge, is a rare bird indeed.

Many of the names Wright chooses for his characters are Dickensian in their allusiveness. As earlier noted, David is a Christ figure, and Wright plays with his first and last names. David’s love interest, Anita Langland, claims to be related to the English poet William Langland, author of *Piers Plowman*, the earliest known example of English alliterative verse. Anita quotes from Langland’s poetry, and lines from *Piers Plowman* appear on her gravestone. As a child of elderly colonials, her character summons up ghosts of Olde England, of empire and glory days past.

Tania, the architect of the time machine, is both Anita’s antithesis—the woman scorned—and her symbolic double, a relationship pointed up by the fact that the women’s names are anagrams for each other, and both have red hair. David is always seeking and just missing Tania—in the time machine, in his dreams—just as he is always reaching and searching for Anita, failing to understand her when she is with him or to find her after she has gone.

Bird’s real name is Charles Gordon Parker, an allusion to the famous Charlie “Bird” Parker—alto saxophonist, composer, and co-founder (with Dizzy Gillespie) of *bebop*—and also to Charles George Gordon, Governor

General of the Sudan from 1877 to 1880, sometimes called “Chinese Gordon” and “Gordon Pasha” because of his service to the far-flung British empire. The name, then, reflects Bird’s mixed heritage in much the way some African-American slave names combine the names of slave and owner and oppressor.

David does not set out to betray Bird. In fact, his friendship with both Anita and Bird appears almost familial. However, when the deed is done, it does not improve our opinion of David to remember that Bird had confided in him. “He talked a lot about you in those days,” David recalls in writing to Anita, “was terrified he’d lose you, couldn’t imagine what you saw in him . . .” (SR 131). The trope of betrayal adds drama to the story and complexity to David’s otherwise somewhat blandly likeable character. It also provokes a *frisson* of discomfort regarding David’s values, and, almost simultaneously, pity for Bird and sympathy with David’s helpless passion.

The betrayal occurs in the context of another erotic trope: passion stimulated by a near-death experience. Like lovers in wartime, David and Anita fall into each other’s arms after very nearly perishing in a sudden sandstorm while on a dig in Egypt, the ancient combustion of love and death defeating all their defenses in an instant. It seems appropriate, then, that after Anita abandons David, he goes searching for her in that same death-obsessed desert country. It is likewise appropriate that he cannot find her again except in the context of death, when he reads her obituary ten years later.

What to do with a man in love with a dead woman—with a man whose search for meaning requires the resurrection of one who is lost? Ronald Wright suggests an answer, and he reveals it in David’s dream on the rood. David records two visions from his pain-wracked hours on the cross, as he drifts in and out of consciousness: in the first, he is back in Aswan, with Anita; in the second, he is reliving a memory from his last undergraduate year at Oxford—a champagne breakfast after a dance he and Anita attended together. In the second scene, betrayal and blood sacrifice collide as Bird, enraged at the discovery that David and Anita are lovers, crashes the party and throws a fire-axe at David’s head. Anita averts disaster by flinging out her arm, deflecting the blade but severing an artery in the process. David later wonders if the blood transfusion she received after her injury was the cause of her fatal illness—“The blood that killed you; the blood you spilt for me” (SR 318)—Wright’s imagery skilfully connecting both Anita and David to the crucified Christ, substituting human sacrifice for divine, and combining erotic tropes and Christian.

The two visions—David’s dream of Aswan while on the cross and his memory of Bird’s attack—open the fourth section of the novel, ominously

entitled “Tithonus.” By the end of the section, David has returned to the time machine, reactivated it, and set it for some time in the 1980s, before he and Anita parted. The last pages of the novel record his determination to attempt a return to his own past and conclude with the opening lines of Tennyson’s elegiac poem. The passage closes with Tithonus’ stark pronouncement: “Me only cruel immortality / Consumes; I wither slowly in thine arms, / Here at the quiet limit of the world.” (SR 350). Things do not look good for David or Anita. And yet, taken fully into account, the first of David’s two visions supplies a guardedly optimistic gloss on Tithonus’ monologue. That vision pictures David and Anita reunited at Aswan, almost two years after she left him, bantering playfully. “Look at yourself,” David teases. “That pipe for a start. People are giggling. Haven’t you noticed? Even the staff.” “*They ought to be used to eccentric archaeologists in Egypt by now,*” Anita replies, “*we’ve been coming here for two hundred years.*”¹⁷ “Some longer than that,” David responds; “until today I was older than you could possibly believe” (SR 316–17).

Embedded in this first vision is a glimpse of David’s fate—the result of his attempt to return to the past and “live again” with Anita. In the vision, David *has* made it back but has not yet revealed to Anita where he has been or what their future might be. At the end of the novel, as David prepares to set off in the time machine back to the late twentieth century,¹⁸ he wonders, “Will it be as I dreamed on the Rood: an earthly paradise of bad wine and good company beside the Nile? Was that a vision of the future (or more precisely an amended past)?” (SR 348–49). Ending the novel as he does, Wright leaves open the possibility that it is so, but he also does a bit more than that. In David’s vision on the cross, Anita calls him “Dave.” Much earlier in the novel, David recalls receiving just two postcards in response to his many letters to Anita over the years:

I sent letters to Luxor, to the Dakhla Oasis, to Heliopolis, to Aswan. Two postcards came. The first wounding, unworthy of her (though clever in a puerile way): a sunny Levantine beach, Israeli stamp, and one line: *Topless in Gaza, on the pill, with Dave*. Unsigned. I prefer to think ‘Dave’ sent this, whoever *he* was. The second I believe was genuine Anita: the unfinished obelisk at Aswan, the largest stone ever attempted by the Egyptians, the one that was their match, cracked and prostrate in its quarried womb and tomb. And on the back, from the Book of the Dead, three words of Aten—*I am Yesterday*—in that green ink she liked. (SR 63)

The postcards make sense, of course, if David Lambert made it back, if he is the “Dave” to whom the message refers—writing to some version of himself in an alternate time-continuum, Anita on the pill to avoid sacrificing a child to the future that David has already seen. In this reading, David has a science

fiction version of a mystic vision. In his own dream while on the rood, the tropes of science fiction, Christianity, and love come together, producing a powerful magic and the intimation that, despite all the obstacles before him, David made it back.

However bleak the novel's vision of the future, the conclusion offers the reader restrained wish-fulfillment: the pleasure of imagining David's harrowing quest rewarded in reunion with his one, true love—a vision of David and Anita clinging together at the “quiet limit of the world.”¹⁹ If David does not quite defeat death, he seems to have assayed a temporary end-run around it. And yet the power of the novel—what hangs in the mind long after its pages are closed—arises less from its semi-happily-ever-after ending or even its powerful landscape of future shock than from the abiding human desires its tropes evoke. When we first meet him, David Lambert is a man adrift in regret, a man without deep human connections or purpose. Using Christian, erotic, and science fiction tropography, Wright fashions a tale in which David's rescue from regret becomes our reminder of it. In Wright's hands, Wells' time machine becomes the embodiment of the human desire to do what in a real world without time machines cannot be done: to go back, to correct mistakes, to avoid past sins, to recover losses, to rewrite history in favour of love and purpose and meaning.

Wright acknowledges a major debt to the nineteenth-century science fiction he read as a young man—Mary Shelley's *The Last Man*, M. P. Shiel's *The Purple Cloud*, and Richard Jefferies' *After London* and *The Great Snow*—and, as previously noted, to polemicists such as William Morris and George Orwell. Russell Hoban's *Riddley Walker* is also an obvious and acknowledged influence. His novel, in turn, appears to have inspired some aspects of Margaret Atwood's latest work. Atwood, who has long sampled from the science fiction tradition in penning literary novels, appears to tip her hat to *A Scientific Romance* in her 2003 novel, *Oryx and Crake*,²⁰ another vision of future dystopia, this one the inadvertent result of extreme genetic manipulation meant to birth a paradise. Both Wright's and Atwood's novels focus to some degree on genetic engineering run amok, a common enough element in contemporary dystopian fiction, but Atwood echoes several aspects of Wright's vision that appear more directly inspired. One is David's belief that the earth of 2500 cannot recover from its new dark age because humanity has not only lost the technological skills of an earlier time, but the raw resources necessary to birth another iron age are also depleted and largely inaccessible (*SR* 346–347). Atwood's genius, Crake, makes virtually the same prediction (*OC* 222). Another reverberation is the religious dogma that Atwood's protagonist, Snowman, fabricates to explain his presence to the

naive beings Crake created (OC 346–353) and which is reminiscent of the origins story that Wright’s Macbeth clan uses to explain its survival (SR 281–283). Most notably, Atwood’s brief allusion to *Macbeth*, a work her protagonist Snowman has come to know through watching a “self-styled installation artist” named Anna K. perform via the web (OC 84), is a nod to Wright’s more extensive use of the Scottish Play in the next to last section of *A Scientific Romance*.

While Wright’s book borrows from the futurist fiction of the past, his elegaic tone brings to mind contemporary British writers Graham Swift and Ian McEwan, and yet it has as well something of the nostalgic, lyrical grace one finds in the prose of some American Southern writers—Willie Morris, Eudora Welty, William Styron—and in parts of Faulkner. The first lines from Tennyson’s “Tithonus,” capture the mood and the facility for nineteenth-century quotation that enriches his work: “The woods decay, the woods decay and fall / The vapours weep their burthen to the ground / Man comes and tills the soil and lies beneath, / And after many a summer dies the swan” (350).

And yet, unlike Tithonus’ gorgeous lament, *A Scientific Romance* is not unrelievedly dark. There is hope, if not for a brighter dawn, at least for a recovered and rewoven past. Matthew Arnold’s entreaty at the close of “Dover Beach” is surely the more appropriate poetic refrain for the vision of return toward which the novel gestures: “Ah love, let us be true to one another / For the world which seems / To lie before us like a land of dreams, / So various, so beautiful, so new / Has really neither help nor hope / Nor light nor certitude / Nor help for pain . . .” (lines 29–34). Wright leaves us with a haunting vision of one man clinging to love, a single survivor of the late-twentieth century reaching out for human connection as the only source of comfort in a world bereft of faith in God or the ingenuity of man. In this final vision, the tropes of Christianity, science fiction, and romance come together—God and science abandoned, while love abides.

NOTES

- 1 Future references will be abbreviated SR.
- 2 In his masterly volume, *Reading by Starlight: Postmodern Science Fiction*, Damien Broderick joins Samuel Delaney in rejecting an iconographic (or tropographic) approach to science fiction criticism (154). While I agree that a purely iconographic (or tropographic) approach to science fiction must be reductive, Wright’s agile use of multiple tropic patterns in *A Scientific Romance*—which the author considers science-fiction influenced, not pure science fiction—is sufficiently intricate to preclude oversimplification on the part of writer or critic.

- 3 For reviews of *A Scientific Romance*, including a number that attest to the novel's haunting qualities, see Vernon, Weller, Charles, Hopkinson, Schellenberg, Miller, and Hutchings.
- 4 Harry M. Geduld notes that Wells was not, however, the inventor of time travel. Wells' work was certainly the most influential of all time travel books, but earlier examples include L.S. Mercier's *L'An Deux Mille Quatre Cent Quarante* (1771) and Johan Herman Wessel's *Anno 7603* (1781). Robert Scholes and Eric Rabkin observe that Wells' contribution was to create time travel by mechanical means, introducing the elements of technology and science and thereby changing the future of the scientific romance (19).
- 5 Future references will be abbreviated *TM*.
- 6 The work of Margaret Atwood and Doris Lessing come to mind. Atwood has noted, for example, that her most recent novel, *Oryx and Crake* (2003), "is not science fiction. It is fact within fiction. Science fiction is when you have rockets and chemicals. Speculative fiction is when you have all the materials to actually do it. We've taken a path that is already visible to us" ("Life after Man").
- 7 One of several sources he acknowledges in the book (*SR* 351–352).
- 8 Wright has noted that the "personal appearance of my Macbeth was inspired by Idi Amin" ("Re: ASR").
- 9 According to David Norbrook, a number of Shakespeare's contemporaries noted the radicalism of the text (80). Alan Sinfield's "*Macbeth*: history, ideology and intellectuals" offers a transgressive reading of the play suggesting that it can be read as justification for rebellion against tyranny.
- 10 When I asked about his identification with Canada, Wright reported, "I've lived in Canada for more than half my life and have been a citizen most of that time. My mother is English through and through, but my father was from British Columbia, though his family moved back to England when he was about ten. So I'm truly half and half, and am probably more Canadian now than British. The England I belong to no longer exists, destroyed by time and Margaret Thatcher. It was partly this sense of familiarity yet detachment that made Britain an ideal setting for *A Scientific Romance*" ("Re: ASR").
- 11 Wright, who holds a BA and an MA from Cambridge in archeology, is the author of four non-fiction travel books that deal with the clash of European and native cultures: *Cut Stones and Crossroads: A Journey in the Two Worlds of Peru* (1984); *On Fiji Islands* (1986); *Time Among the Maya: Travels in Belize, Guatemala, and Mexico* (1989); and *Home and Away* (1993)—a travel memoir. His second novel, *Henderson's Spear*, is a multigenerational story that also treats themes of love, memory, history, and connection but in a more purely realistic way than *A Scientific Romance*.
- 12 Science fiction and speculative fiction writers have long employed these Christian tropes creatively. See, for example, Jorge Luis Borges, "The Gospel According to Mark" and Harry Harrison, "An Alien Agony."
- 13 John 3:16 (KJV).
- 14 The influence of Baudrillard is evident throughout the novel, not only in a passing reference to his "obscene ecstasy" (*SR* 86), but also in this mention of Vatican Disney—see his "Disneyworld Company," written shortly after the opening of Euro Disney in France—and in regard to David's desire to reshape his past—see "Reversion of History."
- 15 Wright plays a number of similar games with naming in the novel, which I discuss in the next sections of the essay. (Even the name of the doctor who treats Anita, and later David, "Dorothy Six," alludes to a labour de-industrialization movement.)
- 16 In keeping with Wright's penchant for allusion and wordplay, Hob for Hobbesian? Elsewhere David describes the lives of the tribe as "nasty, British, and likely short" (*SR* 146).
- 17 In the novel, when David recalls conversations with Anita, her words are italicized and his are not. The words from Anita's postcard are also italicized.

- 18 In his classic article, "The Time Travel Story and Related Matters of SF Structuring," Stanislaw Lem addresses the problem of the time loop and going backwards in time.
- 19 Perhaps inspiration for the lover's reunion in Aswan may be traced to a trip to Egypt Wright took with his wife, Janice Boddy, (Wright, *Home and Away* 86–95).

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