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■ As an author who once quipped "In the beginning . . . God created America in six days and rested on the seventh" (*A Floating Island* 67), Jules Verne's lifelong fascination with the United States had an indelible influence on his writing.[1] Although he made only one trip to America (voyaging to New York in 1867 aboard the huge steamship *The Great Eastern* and then making a brief trek northward to visit Niagara Falls), more than a third of the 60+ novels in Verne's series *Voyages extraordinaires dans les mondes connus et inconnus* [Extraordinary Journeys in Known and Unknown Worlds] take place in whole or in part on American soil. And the number of Vernian heroes and heroines that are of American nationality—from the retired Civil War artillerymen of the Baltimore Gun Club in *From the Earth to the Moon* (1865) to the ever-faithful Dolly Branican of *Mistress Branican* (1891)—is far greater than those who are French.[2] It must also be acknowledged, however, that Verne's feelings about America evolved dramatically during his lifetime. Many of his later works from the 1880s and 1890s, for example, depict a United States that is far different from the one found in his earlier and more well known novels from the 1860s and 1870s.

Why was Verne, at least initially, so enamored with America and all things American? According to noted Verne scholar Jean Chesneaux,

> Verne was fascinated by the nineteenth-century United States, by the American character, and by American society. For him it was as if the United States stood on the frontier between "known worlds" and "unknown worlds" . . . [W]ith hardly any ties to the past and its rapid demographic, technical, and economic development, it

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> constituted a futurist theme in itself. In the world of the mid-nineteenth century, it was the United States which came closest to the "model for development" which Verne dreamed for humanity. (150)

As a *quarante-huitard* (a supporter of the ideals of the Revolution of 1848) and a strong believer in republicanism, Verne was both attracted to and amused by the American system of free-wheeling and passionately partisan politics. Note, for instance, that delightful episode in *Around the World in 80 Days* (1873), when Phileas Fogg and his travel companions come ashore in San Francisco amid what appears to be a tumultuous street riot only to discover that it was, in reality, only a local election—ironically, for a justice of the peace! Or consider a similar scene in *From the Earth to the Moon* when President Impey Barbicane wishes to make a speech, and the unruly crowd begins

> pushing against the gates, trying to get closer, all eager to find out what Barbicane had to say, elbowing their way forward, jostling, crushing each other with that freedom of action particular to a people nurtured on the idea of "self government." (8)

Refreshingly different from Europeans, Americans for Verne were an essentially logical and pragmatic people who don't stand on ceremony and never hesitate when making decisions: "A Yankee, as we know, does not waste time beating around the bush. He takes one path only, and usually the one that goes straight to his goal" (*Robur* 9). They make very successful businessmen, entrepreneurs, and industrialists:

> Everyone knows that Yankees are born traders; wherever fate sends them, from the arctic zone to the tropical, their business sense has to find to useful outlet. (*From the Earth* 201-02)

> These businessmen's thirst for profit, the zeal with which they work, their need to extract money by every means that industry and speculation can discover, does not have the same repulsive aspect in the traders of the New World as it sometimes produces in their overseas counterparts. They act with a certain grandeur that is quite compelling. ("The Humbug" 162)

Further, by their emphasis on education—America is hailed as a land "where everyone knows how to read and write" (*From the Earth* 158)—as well as by their "can-do" temperament—"Impossible is not an American word" (*Journey Through the Impossible* 114)—Yankees make the world's best engineers and builders. For Americans, no construction project can ever be too large or too difficult:

> Yankees, the greatest mechanics in the world, are engineers—just as Italians are musicians and Germans metaphysicians—by birth. (*From the Earth* 2)

> Nothing can astound an American. . . . In America, everything is easy, everything is simple. As for mechanical difficulties, they are resolved even before they arise. (*From the Earth* 34)

Symbol of American engineering and its conquest of an entire continent, the railroad system in the United States was particularly appealing to Verne. He repeatedly sang its praises as an "instrument of progress and civilization" (*80 Days* 257) in novels such as *From the Earth to the Moon*, *Around the World in 80 Days*, *The Last Will of an Eccentric* (1899), and others. In his sometimes quite poetic descriptions of American railways, one can even discern the glimmerings of a new modernist aesthetic as the mechanical object—the locomotive—is viewed as a kind of kinetic *objet d'art*, one that conquers Nature not by frontal assault but, rather, by fusing with it:

> The train closely followed the twists and turns of the Sierra, at times clinging to the mountainside, at others hanging over precipices, avoiding abrupt angles by bold curves, and plunging into narrow gorges that seemed to have no exit. The locomotive itself sparkled like a box of jewels, with its great lantern projecting a yellowish light, its silver bell ringing, and its cowcatcher jutting out like an iron spur. As it sped along, its whistles and roars mingled with the sound of the brooks and the waterfalls, and its streams of smoke spriraled through the black branches of the fir trees. (*80 Days* 229)

Beyond their egalitarian social structures and their impressive technological accomplishments, Americans also represented for Verne a race of people who exemplified the very best of personal qualities: strength of body, energy of spirit, sharpness of mind, and integrity of character. Verne's description of the Civil War castaway Cyrus Smith, one of the heroes of *The Mysterious Island*,[3] is typical:

> A true Yankee, he was lean, bony, lanky, about forty five years of age, his close-cropped hair had already begun to grey . . . with fiery eyes, a serious mouth. . . . Along with his ingenious mind, he also possessed great dexterity and strength. . . . A man of action as well as of thought, he moved through the world effortlessly, impelled by a great vitality, with a kind of persistence that defies every threat of failure. Very learned, very practical, very *débrouillard* as French soldiers say in speaking of an unusually resourceful person, he was also a man of superb temperament; whatever the circumstances, he never failed to retain mastery over himself. . . . (13)

Finally, in America Verne found a land that was a wonderful "melting pot" of classes, cultures, and causes that could richly serve his many fictional needs. From the unabashed hucksterism of a Barnum-like Augustus Hopkins in his short story "The Humbug" (*Yesterday and Tomorrow* 1910) to the ever-proselytizing and often polygamist Mormons of *Around the World in 80 Days*, from the couple in *The Meteor Hunt* (1908) who were married on horseback

(and came back on horseback to be divorced two months later) to the Anglo-Saxons, Chinese, Negroes, Polynesians, and Indians standing side by side on the floor of San Francisco's Stock Market in *The Begum's Millions* (1879), this heterogeneous social patchwork that was the United States constituted an inexhaustible source of exoticism for his narratives. Note, for example, how Verne describes the diverse crowd assembled at the Florida launch site in *From the Earth to the Moon*:

> Every nation under the sun was represented there, and every language could be heard at the same time. It was a perfect Babel re-enacted. All the various classes of American society were mingled together in absolute equality. Bankers, farmers, sailors, cotton-planters, brokers, merchants, and magistrates were elbow-to-elbow with each other in the most free-and-easy way. Louisiana Creoles fraternized with farmers from Indiana; Kentucky and Tennessee gentlemen and haughty Virginians conversed with half-savage trappers from the Great Lakes and butchers from Cincinnati. (337-38)

There is something distinctly utopian in this mélange of different peoples who are peacefully co-existing in a frontier land of freedom and opportunity. And it is not surprising that Verne—like many other European novelists and social planners of the 19th century (Robert Owens and Etienne Cabet, among others)—also dreamed of establishing utopian cities in the American Far West. Such is the model community built in Iowa, for example, by Cyrus Smith and his fellow castaways after the disappearance of their island home in *The Mysterious Island*. Such is the ideal city of France-Ville in *The Begum's Millions*, built in Oregon according to the principles of public hygiene and good health. And such is the real-life Californian city of San Diego, described in very similar utopian terms in Verne's *Mistress Branican*:

> Gas, telegraph, telephone—the inhabitants have but to make a small gesture to be illuminated, to exchange messages, to speak into each other's ears between one district of the city and the next. There are even poles a hundred and fifty feet high which shed electric light all over the streets of the city. If the milk is not yet distributed via pneumatic pipes from the General Milk Company, if moving footpaths running four miles per hour do not yet exist in San Diego, these also will no doubt materialize there someday. (32)

But the reader also encounters in the novels of Verne's *Voyages extraordinaires* another, very different America—one less concerned with scientific exploration and more with imperialist exploitation, one whose citizens are just as energetic and inventive but whose motives are now colored by greed and a lust for power. As I have discussed in detail elsewhere,[4] the second half of Verne's writing career from 1886 to 1905 is quite different from the first in

its overall ideological tone. This change takes the form of a slow but steady shift away from an optimistic and Positivistic *Weltanschauung* toward one that is more often pessimistic, socially critical, and sometimes vehemently anti-science. The underlying reasons for this turnabout in Verne's outlook are complex and the result of a variety of events taking place in the author's own life, his society, and the world during the last two decades of the 19th century.[5] But, whatever the reasons, in his later works Verne's scientists seem increasingly portrayed as either buffoons or meglomaniacs, his technology either doesn't work properly or is used for purposes of evil, and his plot structures now focus more often on the social problems caused by irresponsible, hubris-filled inventors and their dangerous inventions.

In this regard, it is interesting to observe the metamorphosis of the American aeronautics engineer Robur from his initial appearance in *Robur the Conqueror* published in 1886 to his reappearance in the pages of *Master of the World* published in 1904. In the former novel, Robur is portrayed as the heroic *oberman* of the skies who, at the end of the narrative, announces to the American people from the deck of his wondrous helicopter airship *Albatross*:

> "Citizens of the United States, my experiment is finished. My advice to those present is that nothing should be rushed, not even progress. Science must not get ahead of social customs. It is evolution, not revolution, that is needed. Nothing should occur before its proper time. . . . I go now; and I am taking my secret with me. But it will not be lost to humanity. It will belong to you the day you are educated enough to profit by it and wise enough to never abuse it. Citizens of the United States—Good-by!" (246-47)

Here, contrary to what occurs in Verne's earlier novels, the fruits of the scientist's discoveries are no longer bequeathed to humanity as a whole. The scientist alone decides who should receive them, and when. In this instance, Robur judiciously decides that humankind is not yet fit to possess such technology, and he disappears, taking his secrets with him. But all is not lost—Robur promises to return someday, so there is still hope for the future. Thus, at this stage, Verne's growing pessimism is attenuated by the wisdom of Robur himself and by the assumption that humanity will, at some point in time, be capable of using but not abusing the science that Robur symbolizes.

But the later Robur of *Master of the World* breaks that promise and, with his new powerful car-boat-plane vehicle called *Terror*, he begins openly to intimidate humanity for the sheer pleasure of proving his superiority. Industrialized nations from around the world—including the United States—see in this "super-transformer" machine the potential for an unstoppable military weapon, and they offer him millions for it. But Robur defiantly rejects their offers, saying:

> "To the Old and New World! The propositions emanating from the different governments of Europe, as well as those that have most recently been made by the United States of America, need expect no other answer than this: I refuse absolutely and definitively the sums offered for my invention. My machine will be neither French nor German, nor Austrian nor Russian, nor English nor American. The invention will remain my own, and I shall use it as it pleases me. With it, I shall rule over the entire world!" (102)

And, of course, it is only by the hand of Providence—by a *deus- ex-machina* lightning bolt that destroys both the now-crazed Robur and his technological marvel at the conclusion of the novel—that the world is ultimately saved.

Consider also Verne's bitingly satiric novel *Topsy Turvy* (or *The Purchase of the North Pole*, 1889), where those likeable Gun Club engineers Barbicane, Nicoll, and Maston are once again brought back into the limelight, this time to construct a giant cannon which, when fired, would alter the Earth's very axis. The rationale is that, once straightened, the Earth's polar icecap would partially melt, exposing hundreds of thousands of square miles of new land and access to fabulously rich coal and mineral deposits. Never mind the fact that half the civilized world would be drowned in the process and the other half would be asphyxiated because of a sudden drop in the breathable atmosphere. No longer the heroic astronauts of *From the Earth to the Moon* and *Around the Moon*, Barbicane and his colleagues of the North Polar Practical Association are now portrayed as dangerous international criminals who would jeopardize the safety of millions in order to get rich quick. Turning a deaf ear to the pleas and threats of their brethren from around the world, Barbicane and his collaborators manage to build their cannon in the flanks of Mount Kilimanjaro and, with great ceremony, fire it at the appointed hour. As the peoples of the Earth hold their collective breath and await the impending cataclysm, it quickly becomes obvious that the attempt has failed. Why? Because of an unnoticed error in Maston's mathematics—an error caused (once again) by a *deus-ex-machina* lightning bolt that had distracted him and caused him to inadvertently drop three zeroes from his base equations! The once-beloved and then feared American engineers now become the laughing stock of the entire world:

> This, then, was the result of their gigantic operation. This was the huge fiasco that resulted from the superhuman projects of Barbicane & Co. . . . President Barbicane, the Directors of the new Society and their associates of the Gun Club were now universally sneered at. (173)

Time and again in Verne's later works, America and Americans are openly criticized or mercilessly satirized. In his (and his son Michel's) 1889 short story "In the Year 2889," the American flag now boasts 75 stars (including one for its newest colony, Great Britain) and the multi-billionaire American media

mogul Francis Benett acts as a kind of *de facto* emperor of the world. In Verne's 1899 novel *The Last Will of an Eccentric*, another fabulously rich American businessman invents a life-size board game using the various states of the United States as squares. At each toss of the dice, six randomly selected players compete with each other by dashing madly from state to state, hoping to win the cash prize of sixty million dollars. As his characters travel throughout the nation, they occasionally see the dark underbelly of America's industrial development, as in the following scene where Max Réal describes some oil refineries in Ohio:

> From Cleveland, I went to Warren, an important city in Ohio and very rich in petroleum. A blind man would recognize it by its smell alone; its air is sickening. One could easily believe that it would ignite if a match were struck. And what a countryside! On the flatlands, as far as the eye can see, nothing but oil derricks and wells, and even on the hillsides and along the edges of creeks. All these, like so many oil lamps fifteen to twenty feet high . . . all that's lacking are the wicks! (344)

Finally, in his 1895 novel *Propeller Island*, an imperialist America has succeeded in gobbling up both Canada and Central America but still remains a country so culturally impoverished that it must purchase all its art and music from others:

> The United States of America has doubled the number of stars on its national flag. It is now at the height of its industrial and economic power after having annexed Canada . . . and the provinces of Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, and Costa Rica up to and including the Panama Canal. At the same time, a hunger for art has developed among these Yankee invaders, and if their own productions in the realm of beauty remain limited, if their national genius is still somewhat recalcitrant in matters of painting, sculpture, and music, at least a strong taste for the arts has grown and spread universally among them. By purchasing—for their weight in gold—paintings by old and modern masters and by hiring—for fabulous sums—renowned lyrical and dramatic artists as well as musicians of the greatest talent, they have succeeded in infusing themselves with a sense of beautiful and noble things that they had been missing for so long. (*Propeller* 8)

The artificial, motorized island that constitutes the main novum of this narrative—built and paid for by American capitalists whose fortunes were made "by investments in railways, or banking operations, or oil wells, or futures in pork" (49)—symbolizes science in the service of self-indulgence as these multimillionaires leisurely cruise from one South Sea island to the next. But the island eventually comes to a tragic end. Political and ideological in-fighting between the island's two richest families (neither of whom is willing to compromise) leads to the eventual destruction of this floating paradise. The message of the

story is not subtle: as Verne says, the island's "moral desintegration" inevitably led to its "physical desintegration" (294).

Incidentally, given these negative portrayals of America in Verne's later works, it seems rather perplexing that he simultaneously expressed very pro-USA sentiments during his many interviews with journalists in his final years, especially when referring to his American readers and fans. For example, here is Verne's reply in 1894 (ironically, the year just before *Propeller Island* was published) to a question from R. H. Sherard of *McClure's Magazine* about the author's well-publicized gunshot wound in the leg that nearly crippled him:

> The great regret that this causes me chiefly [is] that I shall never be able to see America again. I should liked to have gone to Chicago this year, but the state of my health and with this ever-open wound, it was quite impossible. I do so love America and the Americans. As you are writing for America, be sure to tell them that if they love me—as I know they do, for I receive thousands of letters every year from the States—I return their affection with all my heart. Oh, if I could only go and see them all, it would be the great joy of my life! (123)

So, in the end, the true identity of America in the works and life of Jules Verne remains a profoundly ambiguous one. On the one hand, the USA is portrayed as an idiosyncratic but endearing amalgam of Yankee ingenuity, social egalitarianism, laissez-faire capitalism, and industrial progress—a kind of saint-simonian utopia whose population is "energetic and intelligent, gifted with a character that is. . . enterprising, audacious, and ready for anything" (*Adventures of Captain Hatteras* 294). On the other hand, this same country is shown to have a "dark side" where its expansionist political ambitions, its lack of culture, and its obsession with money make it a land where "By equal volume and weight, a man in America has less value than a sack of coal. . . ." (*A Floating City* 154).

In the United States, it is fair to say that Jules Verne is remembered principally as the "father of science fiction." But another legacy that he bequeathed to us in his prescient novels was this fictional mirror in which we Americans are invited to see ourselves as others once saw us—and perhaps as they are seeing us again today.

Notes

1. All unattributed translations from the French throughout this article are my own.
2. See the excellent articles by Agnès Marcetteau-Paul, Alexandre Tarrieu, Brian Taves, Christian Robin, Volker Dehs, Jean-Michel Margot, and Jean-Paul Dekiss in the special issue of the *Revue Jules Verne* devoted to "Jules Verne et les États-Unis" (#15, 2003): 9-95.

3. This fictional Yankee engineer was probably modeled on Cyrus Field, famous for laying the first cable across the Atlantic in 1858, whom Verne had met and befriended aboard *The Great Eastern* during his voyage to America the previous year.
4. Evans, *Jules Verne Rediscovered*, 79-101.
5. See Butcher, 269-95. See also Guillaud, who sums up Verne's contradictory attitudes concerning America by saying: "Verne's late works are less a condemnation of America per se than a sense of profound disappointment by a man who no longer recognizes the woman he had put on a pedestal" (69).

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