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### Jules Verne: Exploring the Limits

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## Jules Verne: Exploring the Limits

ARTHUR B. EVANS

In a seminal 1949 essay, French author and critic Michel Butor praised the raw mythic power of Jules Verne's *Voyages extraordinaires*. He found especially evocative Verne's heroic treks to what he termed the "*points suprêmes*" of our globe, such as the North and South poles or the center of the Earth. Humans have an innate fascination with such initiatory journeys to our planet's "outer limits," Butor argued, because of the richly transcendental nature of these locations. In fact, the majority of Verne's most memorable novels are constructed around "quest" motifs of this sort, a narrative trait whose importance has frequently been discussed by Vernian scholars in the past few decades.<sup>1</sup>

For over 140 years, Jules Verne has always had the reputation of "pushing the envelope" and venturing beyond the limits of the ordinary. For generations of readers, the many novels of his *Voyages extraordinaires* offered exciting armchair voyages to the far ends of the Earth, to the bottom of the sea, to the Moon, and beyond. Similar to those utopian high-tech vehicles<sup>2</sup> which frequently carry his heroes to their destination, Verne's stories themselves functioned as textual "dream machines." Reading them was to travel to the frontiers of the known, where one might encounter a giant prehistoric man herding mastodons (*Voyage au centre de la Terre*, 1864), or the legendary ruins of Atlantis (*Vingt mille lieues sous les mers*, 1870), or warring tribes of cannibals in deepest Africa (*Cinq semaines en ballon*, 1863). Significantly, the full title of Verne's series was *Voyages extraordinaires dans les mondes connus et inconnus*—a title that purposefully emphasized the borderline between the familiar and the new, between the already-explored and the yet-to-be-discovered.

Although less acknowledged, Verne's texts also represented another kind of extraordinary journey: they tested the limits of orthodox literary convention in late-nineteenth century France. By intentionally mixing science with literature, Verne was breaking all the rules. In an era where *L'Art pour l'art* continued to be the reigning aesthetic, and a work's "literariness" was in part defined by its disdain

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1. Michel Butor, "Le Point suprême et l'âge d'or à travers quelques oeuvres de Jules Verne," *Arts et Lettres* 15 (1949), 3-31. See also the pioneering work of Simone Vierre (*Jules Verne et le roman initiatique*. Paris: Sirac, 1973) and Michel Serres (*Jouvenances sur Jules Verne*. Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1974), among others.

2. See Arthur B. Evans, "The Vehicular Utopias of Jules Verne" in *Transformations of Utopia: Changing Views of the Perfect Society*, eds. George Shusser et al. (New York: AMS Press, 1999), pp. 99-108.

for the exterior world, Verne's narratives were unrepentantly pedagogical and extrovertive.<sup>3</sup> At a time when it was *de rigueur* for "serious" authors to write *against* their public,<sup>4</sup> Verne's novels sought to entertain and instruct and became hugely popular. And, finally, during a period where a refined style constituted the litmus-test for literary acceptability, Verne's brash experiments in co-mingling literary and scientific discourse were generating unprecedented similes such as "L'astre du jour, semblable à un disque de métal doré par les procédés Ruolz, sortait de l'Océan comme d'un immense bain voltaïque" (*Les Enfants du capitaine Grant*, p. 48)<sup>5</sup> or tongue-in-cheek Newtonian metaphors such as "Ces savants lui paraissait dignes de toutes les admirations et bien faits pour qu'une femme se sentît attirée vers eux proportionnellement aux masses et en raison inverse du carré des distances. Et précisément, J.-T. Maston était assez corpulent pour exercer sur elle une attraction irrésistible..." (*Sans dessus dessous*, pp. 46-47). By going beyond the established limits of his time, Verne succeeded in creating a new reading experience and a new genre—the scientific novel. And, in so doing, he laid the foundations for the emergence of a new type of literature that would flourish during the twentieth century—science fiction.

And yet, in this oeuvre that seems so epic in its scope and so rich in its diversity,<sup>6</sup> there exist certain limits beyond which it will not pass—certain thematic, ideological, and narratological boundaries that Jules Verne refuses to cross. A close reading of the *Voyages extraordinaires* reveals a fundamental irony: despite their "sci-fi" reputation and their supposedly extrapolative nature, Verne's narratives are

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3. See Timothy Unwin, "Jules Verne: Negotiating Change in the Nineteenth Century." *Science Fiction Studies* 32.1 (March 2005), 5-17.

4. In his *Qu'est-ce que la littérature?* (Paris: Gallimard, 1978), Jean-Paul Sartre discusses how the rise of the bourgeoisie caused literary writers in France to turn against their public during the latter half of the nineteenth century:

A partir de 1848, en effet, et jusqu'à la guerre de 1914, l'unification radicale de son public amène l'auteur à écrire par principe *contre tous ses lecteurs*. Il vend pourtant ses productions, mais il méprise ceux qui les achètent, et s'efforce de décevoir leurs vœux; c'est chose entendue qu'il vaut mieux être méconnu que célèbre, que le succès, s'il va jamais à l'artiste de son vivant, s'explique par un malentendu. Et si d'aventure le livre qu'on publie ne heurte pas assez, on y ajoutera une préface pour insulter. Ce conflit fondamental entre l'écrivain et son public est un phénomène sans précédent dans l'histoire littéraire. (p. 148)

5. References to Jules Verne's novels throughout this essay are to *Oeuvres de Jules Verne*, 50 vols. (Lausanne: Rencontre, 1966-1971).

6. In his fine study, *Jules Verne écrivain* (Genève: Droz, 1991), Daniel Compère analyzes the uniqueness of Verne's *Voyages extraordinaires*, saying:

L'oeuvre de Jules Verne échappe aux classifications tant elle est riche d'éléments les plus variés: elle brasse les connaissances scientifiques, géographiques, littéraires de son temps, traverse différents genres romanesques, engrange une multitude de messages et d'opinions. Les données les plus précises côtoient la fantaisie la plus débridée. "Refaire l'histoire de l'univers": tel est le projet. C'est précisément dans cette aptitude à appréhender un ensemble aussi vaste dans un tissu romanesque que l'oeuvre vernienne trouve sa singularité. (11)

in many ways quite conservative in both message and tone. But exactly *where are* these limits? Why does Verne honor them? And to what extent do they define the author's relationship to his historical milieu and to his own writing? Such are the questions I wish to address in the remainder of this essay. I shall discuss three types of limits in Verne's writing: those imposed by his editor and publisher Hetzel, those mandated by the political and religious ideology of his times, and those he continually confronted in the writing process itself.

Serving as Verne's *père spirituel* in all matters literary, Pierre-Jules Hetzel was also Verne's publisher and prime censor. It was Verne who had initially conceived the idea of creating the *roman scientifique*; but it was Hetzel who—with his sense of what the public wanted and his canny business instincts—took this idea and transformed it into the very successful *Voyages extraordinaires*. A social activist and proponent of secular education in France, Hetzel's wanted to publish a series of novels that would be strongly didactic, highly entertaining, morally wholesome, and appealing to young and old alike.<sup>7</sup> Many of these would be “pre-published” in serial format in his family-oriented journal, the *Magasin d'Éducation et de Récréation*. Although Hetzel and Verne's relationship would evolve over time,<sup>8</sup> during the early years of their collaboration—when Verne's most popular novels were published—Hetzel repeatedly required him to conform to “house rules” in his writing. Perhaps the most famous instance of Hetzel exerting his editorial authority over Verne was his outright rejection of a very Romantic and futuristic manuscript called *Paris au XXe siècle* in 1863.<sup>9</sup> But other examples abound. Consider, for instance, the hero of the *Voyages et aventures du capitaine Hatteras* (1866) who was originally to perish by throwing himself into a volcano at the North Pole but who was rescued by Hetzel (who doubtlessly thought this suicide a bit too traumatic for his readers);<sup>10</sup> or Captain Nemo of *Vingt mille lieues sous les mers* (1870) whom Verne had originally cast to be a Pole seeking vengeance for the massacre of his family and countrymen by the army of the Russian czar (which Hetzel forbade since Verne's books sold very well in Russia); or, finally, the conclusion of the novel *Hector Servadac* (1877) which was originally to feature the comet Gallia—discovered to be composed of solid

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7. See Hetzel's “Avertissement de l'éditeur” (in Jules Verne, *Voyages et aventures du capitaine Hatteras*. [Paris: Hetzel, 1866], pp. 1-2) where he clearly outlines both the *raison d'être* and the principal goals of Verne's *Voyages extraordinaires*.

8. The evolution of their personal and professional relationship—where Verne became increasingly more independent and less willing to follow Hetzel's dictates—can be clearly seen in the voluminous correspondence between them. See Olivier Dumas, Piero Gondolo della Riva, et Volker Dehs, eds. *Correspondance inédite de Jules Verne et de Pierre-Jules Hetzel*. 3 vols. Genève: Slatkine, 1999, 2001, 2002.

9. Note especially the excellent “Préface” by Piero Gondolo della Riva contained in the French publication of this “long lost” novel (*Paris au XXe siècle* [Paris: Hachette, 1994], pp. 11-24) and sadly lacking in the English translation of the novel published two years later.

10. See Olivier Dumas, “La Mort d'Hatteras,” *Bulletin de la Société Jules Verne* 73 (1985), 22-24.

gold—crashing back to Earth (which Hetzel deemed lacking in credibility, so Verne refashioned it into a banal “it was all perhaps just a dream”-type ending).<sup>11</sup> Given Hetzel’s persistent editorial interventions and the rigid parameters of content and style within which Verne was forced to write, it is not surprising to hear the author, in a letter to him dated 2 December 1883, complain about the “le milieu assez restreint où je suis condamné à me mouvoir.”<sup>12</sup>

But there existed another, more pervasive, set of limitations that Verne had to respect in his fiction: the social mores of his times. As mentioned, Hetzel required that Verne’s texts be “morally wholesome,” which meant that they needed to reflect the mainstream bourgeois values of Second Empire and Third Republic French society—values epitomized by the ideas of Progress, Providence, and Profit. Such values included belief in unlimited industrial growth and laissez-faire capitalism, traditional family and gender roles (and faithful servants), the moral imperative of “civilizing” various pre-industrial cultures around the world, and an educational system which promoted the virtues of individualism and upward mobility. And, in fact, a close examination of Verne’s works (especially those published before 1886, the year of Hetzel’s death) reveal that most do indeed reflect this rather conservative ideological agenda.<sup>13</sup>

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11. See Olivier Dumas, “Le Choc de Gallia choque Hetzel,” *Bulletin de la Société Jules Verne* 75 (1985), 220-21.

12. Olivier Dumas, Piero Gondolo della Riva, et Volker Dehs, eds. *Correspondance inédite de Jules Verne et de Pierre-Jules Hetzel*. tome 3. (Genève: Slatkine, 2002), p. 203.

13. Despite their overall bourgeois tone, it is nevertheless important to point out that many of Verne’s works offer a very strong “anti-colonialist” message. Critiques such as the following one in *Les Enfants du capitaine Grant* are common throughout Verne’s oeuvre:

Paganel, tout en chevauchant, traitait cette grave question des races indigènes. Il n’y eut qu’un avis à cet égard, c’est que le système britannique poussait à l’anéantissement des peuplades conquises, à leur effacement des régions où vivaient leurs ancêtres. [...]

Aux premiers temps de la colonie, les déportés, les colons eux-mêmes, considéraient les noirs comme des animaux sauvages. Ils les chassaient et les tuaient à coups de fusil. On les massacrait, on invoquait l’autorité des jurisconsultes pour prouver que l’Australien étant hors la loi naturelle, le meurtre de ces misérables ne constituait pas un crime. [...]

Les Anglais, on le voit, au début de leur conquête, appelèrent le meurtre en aide à la colonisation. Leurs cruautés furent atroces. Ils se conduisirent en Australie comme aux Indes, où cinq millions d’Indiens ont disparu; comme au Cap, où une population d’un million de Hottentots est tombée à cent mille. Aussi la population aborigène [...] tend-elle à disparaître du continent devant une civilisation homicide. (pp. 503-504)

In fact, Verne espoused the cause of all oppressed peoples trying to liberate themselves from tyranny: French-Canadians struggling for independence (*Famille-sans-nom*, 1889), peasants rising up against their rulers in Transylvania (*Le Château des Carpathes*, 1892), the insurgents of Crete to whom Captain Nemo gives salvaged gold (*Vingt mille lieues sous les mers*), or the Sinn Fein rebels of Ireland who escape from prison to fight another day for their homeland (*Les Frères Kip*, 1902). See Francis Lacassin, “Jules Verne ou le socialisme inattendu,” in his *Passagers clandestins* (Paris: Union Général d’édition, 10/18, 1979), pp. 99-162 and Jean Chesneaux, *Une Lecture politique de Jules Verne* (Paris: Maspero, 1971), pp. 116-125.

For example, despite their valorization of Progress and change, the novels of Verne's *Voyages extraordinaires* never remain open-ended—they invariably take the form of a circle.<sup>14</sup> The Vernian text, like Ulysses, must always return to its original point of departure—geographically, ideologically, and mimetically. Closure is paramount. Lost family members are reunited, heritages are retrieved, wrongs are righted, newly-matured youngsters get married, and intrepid heroes reap the fruits of their labors. Further, at the conclusion of Verne's narratives, whatever constituted their innovative *novum*—e.g., the Nautilus, the Albatross, the Iron Giant, Standard Island, even Lincoln Island—nearly always disappears, and the pre-narrative status quo is reestablished. Darko Suvin once commented that most of Verne's novels “can be compared to a pool after a stone has been thrown into it: there is a ripple of excitement on the surface, the waves go to the periphery and back to their point of origin, and everything settles down as it was.”<sup>14</sup> And Roland Barthes once perceptively described Verne's oeuvre as “une exploration de la clôture.”<sup>16</sup>

Another ideological “limit” is Verne's (or, no doubt, Hetzel's) rigid sense of decorum. Any overt human sexuality is banned from the pages of these novels, along with any vulgarity or references which might be of questionable good taste.<sup>17</sup> Even excessive displays of emotion are avoided—the typical Vernian hero is always in *control*. The leader of Verne's *Voyages et aventures du capitaine Hatteras* is repeatedly described not only as “maître après Dieu” aboard his ship but also master of himself: “Si Hatteras ne laissait pas percer ses inquiétudes au-dehors, au-dedans il les ressentait avec une extrême violence” (p. 113). Phileas Fogg of *Le Tour du monde en 80 jours* (1873) seems so stiff-upper-lipped and emotionless that his servant Passepartout says of him “[J]’ai connu chez Mme Tussaud des bonshommes aussi vivants que mon nouveau maître!” (p. 9). Cyrus Smith of *L’Île mystérieuse* (1875) is portrayed as pragmatic, down-to-earth, and always “maître de lui, quelles que fussent les circonstances” (p. 14). As for Nadia, the sister of *Michael Strogoff* (1876), “[p]as un cri ne lui échappa” during the cruel blinding of her brother as she “eut la force de rester immobile et muette” (p. 346). And when Dolly Branican of *Mistress Branican* (1891) witnessed her husband's departure, “[b]ien que cette séparation lui causât un profond chagrin, elle n'en voulait rien laisser voir, contenant les battements de son coeur” (p. 10).

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14. See Michel Serres, *Jouvences sur Jules Verne* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1974), pp. 81-99) and Marc Angenot, “Jules Verne: The Last Happy Utopianist” in *Science Fiction: A Critical Guide*, ed. Patrick Parrinder (New York: Longman, 1979), pp. 18-32.

15. Suvin, Darko. *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction: On the Poetics and History of a Literary Genre* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1979), pp. 151-52.

16. Barthes, Roland. “Nautilus et Bateau Ivre,” in his *Mythologies* (Paris: Seuil, 1957), p. 80.

17. Although Verne does sometimes manage to sneak past Hetzel's vigilance an occasional gallicism or sexual innuendo—e.g., Frantz and Suzel's “fishing” expeditions along the Vaar in *Une Fantaisie du Docteur Ox* (1874) or the stormy “climax” of the rescue scene in Fingal's Cave in *Le Rayon vert* (1882).

As for religious boundaries—those geographical, technological, or epistemological limits beyond which Providence forbids humans to venture—an examination of those Vernian novels published under Hetzel’s tutelage versus those published after Hetzel’s death reveals a rather curious fact. Despite Verne’s continual references to God, the former works often appear to be *less* religiously restrictive in some ways than the latter works. In the earlier texts, especially during moments of discouragement, Verne’s explorers repeatedly wonder if they are infringing on the prerogatives of the Almighty. But their fears are generally shown to be unfounded, and they then go on to complete their quest. Consider, for example, Samuel Fergusson of *Cinq semaines en ballon* who, when stranded in the Sahara Desert without water, begins to have second thoughts about the wisdom of his pan-African balloon expedition:

La responsabilité qui pesait sur lui l’affectait beaucoup, bien qu’il n’en laissât rien paraître. [...] Avait-il bien agi? N’était-ce pas tenter le voies défendues? N’essayait-il pas dans ce voyage de franchir les limites de l’impossible? Dieu n’avait-il pas réservé à des siècles plus reculés la connaissance de ce continent ingrat? (p. 207).

Of course, he and his intrepid companions ultimately survive this ordeal—courtesy of a *deus ex machina* windstorm that subsequently sweeps them across the desert and drops them near an water-filled oasis. Appropriately grateful, “les trois voyageurs remercièrent du fond du coeur la Providence qui les avait si miraculeusement sauvés” (p. 232). Fergusson’s brief moment of doubt served to build suspense, to underscore the mythic magnitude of their quest, and to add a measure of religious humility (un-hubris) to the hero’s character. And, almost on cue, God stepped in to rescue their expedition.

Such is the pattern in most of Verne’s pre-1886 novels: Providence, far from jealously guarding its secrets, almost always comes to the aid of the Vernian explorer during moments of crisis, allowing them to continue their explorations. As Captain Hatteras explains to Dr. Clawbonny: “il y a une logique à tout ici-bas, et rien se s’y est fait sans des motifs que Dieu permet quelquefois aux savants de découvrir; ainsi, docteur, usez de la permission” (p.106). And, a bit later in the novel, Dr. Clawbonny reassures the members of the crew, saying: “Laissons faire la Providence, mes amis; jouons de notre mieux notre rôle, et puisque le dénouement appartient à l’auteur de toutes choses, ayons confiance dans son talent; il saura bien nous tirer d’affaire” (p. 327). This implicit optimism and trust in Providence, however, does not exempt the heroes from doing all that is humanly possible to attain their goals. In fact, the axiom of “God helps those who help themselves” seems a omnipresent moral complement to religious faith. As Paganel replied to Lady Helena when she shouted “Mes amis, Dieu vous aide!” as they departed on their journey: “Et il nous aidera, madame [...] car je vous prie de le croire, nous nous aiderons nous-mêmes!” (p. 100). But the message is nevertheless clear: the Almighty favours Science.

Very different is the role of Providence in most of Verne's post-1886 novels. Here, a seemingly vengeful God repeatedly strikes down hubris-filled scientists who have "crossed the line." Examples might include the accidental (and fortuitous, for France-Ville) chemical spill that instantly freezes the evil Herr Schultze at the end of Verne's 1879 *Les 500 millions de la Begum* (p. 228), or the fate of Robur and his polymorphic flying machine both of whom are blasted by a celestial lightning bolt in the denouement of his 1904 *Maître du monde* (p.197-198), or the zartog Sofr-Ai-Sr's discovery of the planetary cataclysms that repeatedly wipe out human civilization just before "sa victoire définitive sur la nature" (p. 234) in the posthumous short story "L'éternel Adam" in *Hier et demain* (1910). In this regard, the conclusions to two Verne novels, his 1889 *Sans dessus dessous* and his 1895 *L'Île à hélice*, are unusually explicit:

Il semble ainsi que les habitants du globe peuvent dormir en paix. Modifier les conditions dans lesquelles se meut la Terre, cela est au-dessus des efforts permis à l'humanité; il n'appartient pas aux hommes de rien changer à l'ordre établi par le Créateur dans le système de l'Univers. (p. 178)

Et pourtant, on ne saurait trop le répéter, créer une île artificielle, une île qui se déplace à la surface des mers, n'est-ce pas dépasser les limites assignées au génie humain, et n'est-il pas défendu à l'homme, qui ne dispose ni des vents ni des flots, d'usurper si témérairement sur le Créateur? (p. 317)

Finally, what narratological limits did Verne encounter or set for himself in his own writing? It seems obvious that a fundamental limit—and one which defines him as the first important author of *hard* SF in Western literature—was his uncompromising demand for scientific verisimilitude. Despite Verne's "sci-fi" reputation in some quarters (in America, especially), he was actually quite modest in his extrapolations and insisted that his narratives always remain grounded in *real* science. There are no warp drives, bug-eyed aliens, ray guns, or star cruisers in Verne's fiction; one finds neither magic nor supernatural fantasy therein. Semiotically, Verne's narratives do not proliferate "absent paradigms,"<sup>17</sup> and they produce no "estrangement effects" that are not immediately rationalized and recuperated.<sup>19</sup> As I have argued elsewhere, Verne was less a writer of "science fiction" (in the sense that the term is understood today) than he was a writer of "scientific fiction."<sup>20</sup>

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18. See Marc Angenot, "The Absent Paradigm: An Introduction to the Semiotics of Science Fiction." *Science-Fiction Studies* 6.1 (March 1979), 9-19.

19. For example, the role of science in Verne's narratives is very different from most science fiction. The latter uses science or pseudo-science for purely *fictional* purposes, most often to act as a catalyst for plot progression and special effects. In contrast, the science in Verne's texts serves (as per Hetzel's mandate) *didactic* purposes, most often as the means whereby the estranging novums in Verne's plots are explained and "de-alienated" for the reader.

20. See Arthur B. Evans, "Science Fiction vs. Scientific Fiction in France: From Jules Verne to J.-H. Rosny Aîné." *Science-Fiction Studies* 15.1 (March 1988), 1-11.



And Verne was very conscious—and proud—of this fact. In two interviews toward the end of his life, he was asked to compare his own work with that of a young rival named H.G. Wells whose “*scientific romances*” (as he called them) entitled *The Time Machine* (1895), *The War of the Worlds* (1898), and *The First Men in the Moon* (1901) were enjoying a huge success at the time. In his two answers to this question—the second one being rather more diplomatic than the first—Verne stressed that the single greatest difference between himself and Wells was how they each used science in their novels:

“I do not see the possibility of comparison between his work and mine. We do not proceed in the same manner. It occurs to me that his stories do not repose on very scientific bases. No, there is no *rapport* between his work and mine. I make use of physics. He invents. I go to the moon in a cannon-ball, discharged from a cannon. There is no invention. He goes to Mars [sic] in an airship, which he constructs of a metal which does away with the law of gravitation. *Ça c’est très joli*,” cried Monsieur Verne in an animated way, “but show me this metal. Let him produce it.”<sup>21</sup>

“Some of my friends have suggested to me that his work is on somewhat similar lines to my own, but here, I think, they err. I consider him, as a purely imaginative writer, to be deserving of very high praise, but our methods are entirely different. I have always made a point in my romances of basing my so-called inventions upon a groundwork of actual fact, and of using in their construction methods and materials which are not entirely without the pale of contemporary engineering skill and knowledge. [...]

“The creations of Mr. Wells, on the other hand, belong unreservedly to an age and degree of scientific knowledge far removed from the present, though I will not say entirely beyond the limits of the possible. Not only does he evolve his constructions entirely from the realm of the imagination, but he also evolves the materials of which he builds them. See, for example, his story ‘The First Men in the Moon.’ You will remember that here he introduces an entirely new anti-gravitational substance, to whose mode of preparation or actual chemical composition we are not given the slightest clue, nor does a reference to our present scientific knowledge enable us for a moment to predict a method by which such a result might be achieved. [...]

“Mind,” continued M. Verne, “in saying this, I am casting no disparagement on Mr. Wells’ methods; on the contrary, I have the highest respect for his imaginative genius. I am merely contrasting our two styles and pointing out the fundamental difference which exists between them.”<sup>22</sup>

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21. Robert H. Sherard, “Jules Verne Revisited.” *T.P.’s Weekly* (1903), 589.

22. Jones, Gordon. “Jules Verne at Home.” *Temple Bar* 129 (1904), 664-670.

Another narratological boundary discernible in Verne's novels takes the form of what might be called the "limits of the expressible"—where the Vernian narrator, in a moment of unusual candor, freely admits that it is impossible to adequately describe what s/he is seeing or feeling. Such meta-narrational moments occur frequently in Verne's prose. And it is interesting to see what kinds of plot situations trigger such discursive short-circuits. Most often, they include encounters with awe-inspiring beauty or natural wonders such as the Milky Way in *Autour de la Lune* ("Les observateurs ne pouvaient détacher leurs regards de ce spectacle si nouveau, dont aucune description ne saurait donner l'idée" [p. 57]), or a majestic undersea forest in *Vingt mille lieues sous les mers* ("Quel spectacle! Comment le rendre?" [p. 416]), or a huge Sphinx-shaped mountain at the South Pole in *Le Sphinx des glaces* ("Je ne saurais peindre l'effet qu'il produisait, isolé à la surface de cette immense plaine. Il y a de ces impressions que ni la plume ni la parole ne peuvent rendre..." [p. 484]). Other scenes producing narrator speechlessness include moments of strong emotional pathos such as when long-departed family members are finally reunited at the conclusion of novels like *Voyage au centre de la Terre* ("Quelle fut la stupéfaction de Marthe, quelle fut la joie de Graüben, je renonce à le décrire" [p. 369]) or *Les Enfants du capitaine Grant* ("Comment peindre cette scène? Les mots n'y suffiraient pas. Tout l'équipage pleurait en voyant ces trois êtres confondus dans une muette étreinte" [p. 852]). Episodes of high emotional intensity often produce this effect, especially those involving terror, anxiety, or pain—as in Mrs. Aouda's worrying about the fate of Phileas Fogg among hostile Sioux Indians ("Ce qu'elle souffrit pendant ces longues heures ne saurait s'exprimer" [p. 278]) or the physical and psychological anguish of those aboard the ill-fated ship *Le Chancellor* ("Non, je ne puis peindre ce que je ressens! Les mots manquent quand il s'agit d'exprimer des douleurs surhumaines!" [p. 216]). In all such extreme circumstances, the narration suddenly becomes painfully aware of its own inefficacy, and words fail.

At times, the reader can even sense a certain authorial self-consciousness in those passages where Verne's narrators struggle to find the right words. Consider, for example, Professor Aronnax's difficulties in writing his journal entry about the battle between the *Nautilus* and the giant squid:

Cette terrible scène du 20 avril, aucun de nous ne pourra jamais l'oublier. Je l'ai écrite sous l'impression d'une émotion violente. Depuis, j'en ai revu le récit. Je l'ai lu à Conseil et au Canadien. Ils l'ont trouvé exact comme fait, mais insuffisant comme effet. Pour peindre de pareils tableaux, il faudrait la plume du plus illustre de nos poètes, l'auteur des *Travailleurs de la Mer*. (p. 564)

Invoking the poetic powers of legendary *littérateur* Victor Hugo, Aronnax's attempts to find *le mot juste* reflect those of Verne, his creator, in depicting this memorable scene. And they also invite us to imagine Verne asking others (perhaps Hetzel?) to

read his rough-draft account of this episode before completing the final proofs of the manuscript.<sup>23</sup>

Incidentally, Verne's use of the phrase "Pour peindre de pareils tableaux, il faudrait la plume..." in the above passage may seem like a wholly predicatable—if slightly mixed—metaphor, but in truth it is much more. Throughout his *Voyages extraordinaires*, Verne repeatedly suggests that the plastic arts far surpass the written word in their ability to express the sublime:<sup>24</sup>

Je ne puis, au courant de la plume, donner une idée de cette merveille. Lorsque j'aurais enfilé les mots mosaïques, frontons, tympans, bas-reliefs, niches, émaux, encorbellement, dans le chapelet d'une phrase, le tableau serait toujours incomplet. Ce sont des coups de pinceau qu'il faudrait, non des coups de plume. (*Claudius Bombarnac*, p. 117)

Et maintenant, comment pourrais-je retracer les impressions que m'a laissées cette promenade sous les eaux? Les mots sont impuissants à raconter de telles merveilles! Quand le pinceau lui-même est inhabile à rendre les effets particuliers à l'élément liquide, comment la plume saurait-elle le reproduire? (*Vingt mille lieues sous les mers*, p. 170)

It is also important to note that this "visionary" dimension in Verne's novels was significantly enhanced by their many splendid maps and illustrations—over *four thousand* in all, an average of more than *sixty* per novel, one for every six to eight pages of text in Hetzel's famous red and gold in-octavo editions.<sup>24</sup> These graphics served as a powerful complimentary signifying system within Verne's narratives, "painting" such moments of sublime for the reader even as his awe-struck heroes struggled with the limits of their own expressivity. One critic has described the maps and illustrations in Verne's *Voyages extraordinaires* as "among the most accomplished and evocative reflections on the relations of the alphabetic text to its graphic counterparts in modern fiction."<sup>25</sup> Combined with Hetzel's ornate covers, such graphics helped to transform Verne's novels from mere books into valuable *objets d'art* for generations of collectors

Thus, the mythic richness and enduring popularity of Jules Verne's *Voyages extraordinaires* derive in large part from their portrayal of an exploration of limits

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23. See William Butcher, "Hidden Treasures: The Manuscripts of *Twenty Thousand Leagues*." *Science Fiction Studies* 32.1 (March 2005), 43-60.

24. For Verne, as for the Romantics, the sublime represented a transcendental "beyond" (as the word itself suggests: *sub+limen*, beyond the threshold) which cannot be fully grasped, measured, or even represented. From Edmund Burke and Emmanuel Kant to Jean-François Lyotard, the notion of the sublime has continually preoccupied Western philosophers and artists. For a short online history of the sublime (including a quite good critical bibliography), see <[http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi\\_m2342/is\\_4\\_36/ai\\_98167921/pg\\_1](http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m2342/is_4_36/ai_98167921/pg_1)>.

25. See Arthur B. Evans, "The Illustrators of Jules Verne's *Voyages Extraordinaires*." *Science-Fiction Studies* 25.2 (1998), 241-270.

26. Terry Harpold, "Verne's Cartographies." *Science Fiction Studies* 32.1 (March 2005), 18-44.

—of Nature, of knowledge, of expression, of self. An examination of Verne’s *own* limits—those ideological and narratological boundaries which define him and his oeuvre—permits us to appreciate not only how this remarkable author navigated around them but also to what extent his “extraordinary” narratives *depended upon* them in order to enhance their own verisimilitude. Ironically, by anchoring his speculative fictions in hard science, mainstream social values, and realistic prose, Verne offered his readers a way to embrace the “other” and to let their imaginations soar.

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