


3-2002

# Gustave Le Rouge, Pioneer of French Science Fiction

Arthur B. Evans  
*DePauw University*

Follow this and additional works at: [http://scholarship.depauw.edu/mlang\\_facpubs](http://scholarship.depauw.edu/mlang_facpubs)

 Part of the [French and Francophone Language and Literature Commons](#), and the [Modern Languages Commons](#)

---

## Recommended Citation

"Gustave Le Rouge, Pioneer of French Science Fiction." *Science Fiction Studies* 29.1 (2002): 1-14. Available at: [http://scholarship.depauw.edu/mlang\\_facpubs/3/](http://scholarship.depauw.edu/mlang_facpubs/3/)

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Modern Languages at Scholarly and Creative Work from DePauw University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Modern Languages Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of Scholarly and Creative Work from DePauw University. For more information, please contact [bcox@depauw.edu](mailto:bcox@depauw.edu).

Arthur B. Evans

### Gustave Le Rouge, Pioneer of Early French Science Fiction

Tout ce que l'homme rêve—et même *tout ce qu'il peut nettement concevoir*—finit par s'accomplir tôt ou tard. Il est contraire au bon sens que notre esprit conçoive une chose qui ne puisse jamais exister. (Everything that man dreams—and even everything he is able to clearly visualize—will sooner or later come to be. It is against common sense [to say] that our mind is able to conceive of a thing that can never exist.) Gustave Le Rouge, *La Guerre des vampires*

At the dawn of the 20th century, in the wake of the unprecedented success of Jules Verne's *Voyages Extraordinaires* but many years before Hugo Gernsback launched his first issue of *Amazing Stories* in the United States, the magazine sf industry in France was flourishing. During this first "golden age" of French science fiction—or, as the new genre was called at the time, *romans d'anticipation* (novels of the future)—weekly or monthly issues of popular periodicals such as *Le Journal des Voyages*, *La Science Illustrée*, and *Science et Voyages* sold by the tens of thousands to readers eager for the next cliff-hanging episode of their favorite *roman-feuilleton* (serialized novel). Of the many French writers contributing to these magazines, Gustave Le Rouge (1867-1938, sometimes spelled "LeRouge" or "Lerouge") was undoubtedly one of the most prolific and multi-talented.

Virtually unknown outside of France, Gustave Le Rouge is not listed in Bleiler's authoritative *Science-Fiction: The Early Years* (1990), nor in the Clute/Nicholls *Encyclopedia of Science Fiction* (1993), nor in Barron's *Anatomy of Wonder 4* (1995). To my knowledge, there have been to date no scholarly articles on Le Rouge published in English. And yet Pierre Versins, in his massive *Encyclopédie de l'utopie, des voyages extraordinaires, et de la science-fiction* (1973), has called one of Le Rouge's sf novels "remarkable ... a true chef-d'oeuvre" (531); another respected dean of French sf criticism, Jacques Van Herp, has described his fiction as being "first-class, the work of a master" (*Panorama* 43); and the celebrated author and poet Blaise Cendrars (1887-1961), who collected Le Rouge's books and admired him greatly, has portrayed Le Rouge as a writer of uncommon genius and productivity—an unsung hero of French letters who published over three hundred works during his lifetime, dozens of which were identifiably sf or hybrid-sf.

In the 1970s and 1980s, through the efforts of noted French critic Francis Lacassin and others, much of Le Rouge's fiction—including his best-known sf novels—was finally reprinted in France. A few years before, in a 1966 article published in the French sf journal *Fiction* ("Gustave Le Rouge, ou le naufragé de la S.F." [Gustave Le Rouge, or SF's Castaway]), Lacassin first attempted to explain why Le Rouge, despite his remarkable talent, had somehow slipped into literary obscurity:

Among the "no-luck" authors of adventure literature, one of the most afflicted was without a doubt Gustave Le Rouge.... [He was] one of the great pioneers of science fiction, but remains unrecognized by the genre because its true origins have always been eclipsed by and improperly attributed to Jules Verne.

A series of unfortunate circumstances also served to doom Le Rouge to literary oblivion. His best sf novels ... appearing from 1899 to 1914 ... were never reprinted. Their publishers, before going bankrupt during the upheavals of World War I, had originally published them in a cheap, bi-weekly pulp format that was very fragile. And, although their print-runs were often in the tens of thousands, nothing of them remains today....

Further, the only surviving descendants [i.e., copyright holders] of Le Rouge, who died in Paris on Feb. 24, 1938, all disappeared....

But it is Le Rouge himself who is perhaps the most responsible for the silence that surrounds his name....<sup>1</sup> (137)

What Lacassin is referring to in this last sentence is that Le Rouge—fiercely proud of his poverty and unrelenting in his hatred of bourgeois materialism—was often his own worst enemy. He persistently refused lucrative publishing contracts, and, once a story was in print, he often sold away its rights for a pittance. Cendrars, in his *L'Homme foudroyé* (1945, *The Man Struck by Lightning*), gives an example of Le Rouge's lack of practical sense in the following biographical anecdote:

An example: having brought him a Japanese edition of his *Mystérieux Dr. Cornélius* ... to my surprise Lerouge admitted to me that [it] had already been translated into *thirty-two* languages, that the French edition published in Canada had sold 800,000 copies, and that a new printing would reach a million. When I mentioned that he evidently was hiding his good fortune under a bushel [basket] and must be the richest man of letters in the world, he confessed with pride that he had sold his publishing rights to all future editions of the novel for the ridiculous price of 400 francs, and that he no longer had anything to gain from it, not a sou from the innumerable French editions, from the translations, from the different versions, second and third publication rights, serial rights, from all the various adaptations of this novel that had traveled around the world! Lerouge, who had nothing, prided himself on this as if it were a clever trick he had played on the publishers who were making fortunes at his expense but who had never succeeded in nailing him down to steady employment. "I am free," he said, "my pen is not for sale!" ("Two Portraits" 159)

Le Rouge saw himself primarily as a *littérateur*, an absinthe-drinking poet of the French symbolist and decadent movement of the late 1880s and 1890s, and a close friend of Paul Verlaine, who dedicated to him one of his later sonnets.<sup>2</sup> Le Rouge's tastes were extraordinarily eclectic—from occultism, to *haute cuisine*, to science and technology, to psychology, to social theory, to cinema—and his hundreds of published works (often unsigned) are a revealing testament to his deeply polygraphic nature. They include, for example, poetry collections, sf and adventure novels, detective fiction, ghost stories, romance novels, spy thrillers, cookbooks, biographies, social tracts, pamphlets on

various home and garden “how-to”s, the interpretation of dreams, and the art of fortune-telling, among many others.

Despite his seemingly dilettante “Jacques-of-all-trades” literary production, Le Rouge was far from being a mere hack. Cendrars, for example, repeatedly characterizes him as a gifted writer of high literary merit, praising Le Rouge in the following terms:

How to define his kaleidoscopic versatility, his lively and spontaneous erudition, never at a loss for arguments? He was no drudge, no hack; even in the obscure anonymous brochures that were sold only at news-stands and in neighborhood or provincial notion shops, he was never unworthy of his craft as a writer, which he took very seriously and of which he was very proud. Moreover, it was in these unsigned popular publications ... that he really let himself go, calling on science and erudition, not for the purpose of vain encyclopedic display ... not for style, but to give the facts ... to say the most in the fewest possible words and to present an original idea free of any system, isolated from any association, seen as if from another world, from a hundred different points of view at the same time, with added views from telescopes and microscopes, and clarified to its very essence. (“Two Portraits,” 158)

Le Rouge’s first three sf novels, co-authored with Gustave Guitton, were published between 1899 and 1902 and include *La Conspiration des milliardaires* (1899-1900, *The Billionaires’ Conspiracy*), *La Princesse des airs* (1902, *The Princess of the Skies*), and *Le Sous-marin “Jules Verne”* (1902, *The Submarine “Jules Verne”*).

*La Conspiration des milliardaires* is a 3-volume, 90-chapter international cloak-and-dagger thriller set in the near future. The villains are a group of rich American industrialists who concoct a scheme to conquer Europe—first by an army of robots manufactured at their secret plant in the American West called Mercury’s Park (not to be confused with Edison’s Menlo Park), and, second by a well-paid network of hypnotist-telepaths whose mission is to infiltrate the minds of Europe’s top engineers and inventors and rob them of their most precious secrets. The heroes include the son of the billionaires’ head scientist, who has rebelled against his father’s despicable “sell out” to corporate America, a young and idealistic French inventor, and an aging but venerable French scientist who is a member of the Académie des Sciences and responsible for (among other things) an undersea railroad connecting America with Europe, a vaccine against alcoholism, and a “psychic condenser” capable of projecting goodness and mercy into even the most malevolent of human brains. At times patterned on Verne’s utopia/dystopia *Les 500 millions de la Béguine* (1879, *The Begum’s Fortune*) and Villiers de l’Île-Adam’s *L’Ève future* (1886, *The Future Eve*), this fast-moving melodrama is, above all, a colorful diatribe against American imperialism and what Le Rouge saw as America’s greedy and unrelenting industrialization-for-profit of the world’s scientific knowledge. Witness, for example, Le Rouge’s portrayal of William Boltyn, rapacious US industrialist and firm believer in America’s imperial “manifest destiny,” who proudly proclaims to his corporate associates:

“We Yankees ... are the most industrious and productive people on the planet. Thanks to our work ethic, our sense of practicality, and our business genius—in a word, our extremely vigorous sense of initiative—we have managed, in less than a century, to bring our industry and trade to a height of development never equalled by any European nation. Our culture is built upon a base of solid values, and we are not hobbled by this mish-mash of outdated ideas and beliefs so prevalent in the Old World.

“Therefore,” he concluded, “the future is ours alone. The products of our factories and mills have flooded the globe. We have only to desire it, and we shall be masters of the world!” (41)

The rabid anti-Americanism expressed in this novel seems as much a reflection of its historical period—i.e., France’s anxiety concerning the rapidly growing military and economic power of the United States during the early years of the twentieth century—as of Le Rouge’s own political beliefs. Further, as Lacassin points out, such sentiments seem also to “have lost none of their topicality” in the Europe of today (“Roman populaire” 18), as the latter struggles to maintain its cultural and industrial autonomy against America’s perceived hegemony as the world’s only remaining “superpower.”

*La Princesse des airs* is a 2-volume, 28-chapter adventure-filled narrative in the early Jules Verne mode, featuring a high-tech dirigible with wings and propellers, a shipwreck in the mountains of Tibet, where the pilot and passengers become Crusoe-like castaways, and a trans-Asiatic trek by their friends and family who seek to rescue them. Perhaps the most “geographical” of Le Rouge’s sf novels, it includes many descriptive passages on the history, local flora and fauna, and customs of the various locales through which the protagonists pass. Also very Vernian, it often assumes the narrative structure of a *bildungsroman*, as the castaway children come of age under the tutelage of the heroic scientist-inventor, who teaches them how to survive in their hostile environment. Unlike Verne, however, the final rescue of the lost aeronauts is brought about through the intervention of Tibetan monks who, using their mystical telepathic powers, not only put the search party and the castaways in contact with each other, but also unmask the traitor in their midst who was responsible for the original sabotage of the aircraft.

Finally, as its title suggests, *Le Sous-marin “Jules Verne”* is a single-volume, 19-chapter homage to Verne’s *Vingt mille lieues sous les mers* (1870, *Twenty Thousand Leagues under the Sea*) transposed into a detective fiction format. It features two *Nautilus*-like submarines, the *Jules Verne I* and the *Jules Verne II*, both created by the French engineer Goël Mordax and funded by a rich Swedish philanthropist. The first sub is hijacked by a rich American industrialist (do you see a recurring pattern here?) and the second is sent—in *Red October* fashion—to track it down and rescue the philanthropist’s daughter who has been kidnaped with it. Although *Le Sous-marin “Jules Verne”* often mimics Verne’s earlier masterpiece in terms of its plot, characters, and unrelenting scientific didacticism, there are nevertheless a number of striking differences between the two. Some are quite obvious: for example, in Le Rouge’s narrative, there is a “happy ending” where, following her dramatic

rescue, the hero-engineer marries the erstwhile damsel-in-distress (and the world-renowned scientists Berthelot and Tesla agree to serve as groom's best men). But some differences are more implicitly ideological in nature: for example, compare Captain Nemo's famous "praise of the sea" speech in *Vingt mille lieues sous les mers* with a similar panegyric voiced by Mordax in the two passages that follow:

"You love the sea, captain."

"Yes, I love it! The sea is the be all and end all! It covers seven-tenths of the planet earth. Its breath is clean and healthy. It is an immense wilderness where a man is never lonely, because he feels life astir on every side. The sea, quite simply, offers the possibility for a prodigious, unearthly mode of existence; it is movement and love; it is living infinity, as one of your poets put it.... Here resides supreme peace. The sea does not belong to tyrants. On its surface, they can still exercise their iniquitous claims, battle each other, devour each other, transport there every earthly horror. But thirty feet below the sea's surface, their dominion ceases, their influence fades, their power vanishes! Ah, sir, live! Live in the heart of the sea! Here alone lies independence! Here I recognize no superiors! Here I am free!" (I, §10, 103-4)

Goël added solemnly:

"The sea, which covers two thirds of the surface of the earth, contains within it billions and billions in undersea minerals—enough to increase ten times, a hundred times!, the well-being of humanity—enough to make crime, poverty, and selfishness disappear forever from the face of the earth! It is noble Science that must provide mankind with this happiness which is its right by virtue of its intelligence and its centuries of toil." (§7, 89)

In Verne's novel, the misanthropic Captain Nemo—in self-imposed exile from the "civilized" world—extols the unparalleled peace, beauty, and independence that a life beneath the sea can offer. For Nemo, the sea is the path to transcendence. In contrast, Le Rouge's engineer—a stereotypical positivist hero—visualizes the sea only as a means to a practical social end: to improve the lot of humanity by mining the sea's vast riches for the benefit of all. For Goël, the sea is an untapped source of wealth to be used for charitable purposes. In terms of their respective originality, psychological depth, poetic intensity, and emotional appeal, it is clear which of these two passages (despite its rather "politically incorrect" message) is the more memorable.

Thus, although they are at times much more ingenious and better written than similar works by many of his peers, Le Rouge's first three sf novels did nothing to truly distinguish him from the scores of other Jules Verne wannabes whose speculative fiction inundated the French publishing marketplace from 1880 to 1914—those, for instance, by Paul d'Ivoi, Louis Boussenard, Maurice Champagne, or Henri de Graffigny and Georges Le Faure. It was only with the publication in 1908 and 1909 of his two-volume interplanetary saga *Le Prisonnier de la planète Mars* (The Prisoner of the Planet Mars, later reprinted as *Le Naufragé de l'espace* [The Castaway of Space]) and *La Guerre des vampires* (The War of the Vampires, later reprinted as *L'Astre d'épouvante* [The Star of Terror]) that Le Rouge helped to chart a new and innovative course

for early French sf. In these novels, Le Rouge abandons the cautious scientific fictions of Verne and his imitators and adopts an entirely new narrative recipe, one that—while still anchored to the principles of science (or pseudo-science)—is both more speculative in its subject-matter and more evocative in its style.

Robert Darvel, a young and successful engineer, invests his life's savings in an experiment to communicate with the planet Mars via huge mathematical symbols carved into the Siberian countryside.<sup>3</sup> The attempt fails, and Darvel finds himself ruined. He accepts a mysterious invitation by a Brahmin priest named Ardavena to travel to a Hindu monastery in India, where he is initiated into the mysteries of telepathy, psychokinesis, and other psi powers. Ardavena convinces Darvel to construct a complex device called a "psychic condenser" (a more advanced model of the prototype first mentioned in Le Rouge's *La Conspiration des milliardaires*). This apparatus accumulates and channels the psychic energy of the monks who are connected to it, allowing its operator to explore the cosmos as a kind of astral projection.<sup>4</sup> After the machine is built, however, the power-hungry Ardavena betrays Darvel, imprisons him in a metal capsule, and uses the device to transport the young engineer to the planet Mars.

Once on Mars, Darvel explores the planet, investigates its alien flora and fauna, and undergoes a variety of adventures. Among others, he meets a tribe of diminutive humanoid Martians, the Eeeoys (derived from Wells's Eloi?), who are being terrorized by a race of large and highly intelligent vampire-bat creatures called "Erloor" (reminiscent of Rosny's bat-men in *La Contrée prodigieuse des cavernes* [1896]). Darvel teaches the former how to defend themselves from these predators and attempts to "civilize" them, but he is soon captured by the bat-men and imprisoned in a crystal tower. This tower, Darvel discovers, serves as a kind of museum for the history of Martian life and is peopled by strange invisible lifeforms. Darvel learns from them that the entire planet is controlled by a Great Brain, the evolutionary culmination of an earlier Martian race (foreshadowing the Fourth Man of Stapledon's *Last and First Men* [1930]). Housed within a gigantic quartz mountain, the Brain feeds upon the vampire creatures for its organic needs and draws additional sustenance from the electricity in the Martian atmosphere. In a stirring climax, Darvel devises a way to send light signals back to Earth, leads an attack on the Great Brain, fails, and is ultimately hurled back to his home planet inside the hollow chamber of a gigantic meteorite—accompanied by a dozen of the vampire creatures, who are eventually destroyed by Darvel and his Earth friends in a final epic battle.

These two works by Le Rouge pre-date and yet are remarkably similar in tone, structure, and thematic content to Edgar Rice Burroughs's BARSOOM series, begun with *The Princess of Mars* in 1913. They were also influenced by J.-H. Rosny Aîné's visionary sf tales of the 1890s and early 1900s<sup>5</sup>, and at times they recall certain episodes in Wells's *The Time Machine* (1895) and *The First Men on the Moon* (1901), as well as in Jean de la Hire's popular *La Roue fulgurante* (1908, The Flaming Wheel). Le Rouge's Martian saga goes well beyond the traditional Vernian prototype in the scope of its vision, the ingenuity of its extrapolations, and the colorful exoticism of its alien descriptions.

Consider, for example, the following passage, where Darvel encounters his first Martian lifeform—an intelligent humanoid-squid creature—and wonders:

This incredible species suggested an evolution that had stopped at the level of mollusks, creating a hideous experiment on a branch that was intermediary between man and squid.... "The intelligence that we possess," he reflected, "is not necessarily exclusive to the mammalian order of which we humans are the most developed form!" And he had a frightening vision of planets inhabited by plant-men, insect-men, and reptile-men who might equal, or even surpass, the mental power that humans have attained.

Why not? Even on Earth, certain animals, such as the elephant, are almost on the level of human intelligence. Perhaps all they lacked was a more useful appendage, a hand, an environment better suited to them, and more fortunate evolutionary circumstances to become man's equal. (180-81)

This brief Darwinian conjecture on alternative evolutionary patterns recalls the many speculations about the "plurality of worlds" and the "plurality of lifeforms" in French sf literature, from Fontenelle's *Entretiens sur la pluralité des mondes* (1686, Conversations on the Plurality of the Worlds) to the winged men of Restif de la Bretonne's *La Découverte australe* (1781, Discovery in the Southern Hemisphere) to Flammarion's *La Pluralité des mondes habités* (1862, The Plurality of Inhabited Worlds) to the intelligent elephants of Rosny's *Le Voyage* (1900). Such fanciful notions are very un-Vernian.

In another significant departure from Verne's highly mimetic *romans scientifiques*, the semiotic structure of Le Rouge's narrative involves a new pattern of reader interaction that is inherently less realistic-deductive and more speculative-intuitive in nature. The following passage in the first volume where Le Rouge offers a detailed description of his "psychic energy condenser" is quite representative:

"It is a huge black room. But, unlike an ordinary darkroom, it will be round and the interior will be layered with a special phosphorous gelatin (for which I have worked out the formula) that reproduces certain properties of brain tissue. It is this gelatinous material, very costly to produce, that accumulates human willpower as a battery accumulates electrical energy. A glass cylinder of massive dimensions, filled with the same substance that has been energized even more by an electrical bath, will act as a kind of reservoir for all of the energy channeled into the eyepiece of the machine...."

"I understand perfectly. But, once you have stored this willpower in the cells of your 'artificial brain,' how can you make use of it and transmit it over distance?"

"I'll show you. At the rear of the machine is located a chair, the arms of which terminate in two metal spheres that are perforated with an infinity of small holes like the heads of two watering cans. Through these perforations run the strands of the electro-magnetic web of my machine, all of which then connect to the center of the gelatinous mass. Once charged, to activate the Condenser all you need do is place your hands on the spheres. In a few seconds, you will be the recipient of all the energy stored in the machine. Your faculties of willpower and creativity will be increased by that of all those who

contributed to the energizing of the Condenser. The power of your brain will thus be expanded almost to infinity...."

Robert Darvel started to work feverishly. In a few days, the outer shell of the "Psychic Energy Condenser" was completed....

The fabrication of the electrified phosphorous gelatin, which seemed to have a kind of life of its own, was more difficult and had to be restarted several times. Finally, with a great deal of patience and hard work, everything eventually began to go as planned. (108-11)

At first glance, this passage appears to be a typically Vernian description of a high-tech "dream machine" that—like those portrayed in several Verne novels such as *La Maison à vapeur* (1880, The Steam House) or *Le Château des Carpathes* (1892, The Carpathian Castle)—advances the story-line by allowing the inventor-hero to journey "where no one has gone before" while also foregrounding his cutting-edge scientific and technological know-how. But look closer. Note the degree of vagueness and obscurity that mask the details of this apparently complex contrivance: amorphous terms such as "huge," "massive," and "an infinity of," measurements that are consistently qualitative rather than quantitative and that force readers to fill in the blanks on their own. Note also the unspecified composition of the materials used in its construction: "a special phosphorous gelatin" that contains "certain properties" seeming to have "a kind of life of its own." And, finally, note the purposefully obscurantist terms used throughout this description, such as the mysterious "formula" that is "very costly to produce"—a topos that eventually becomes a well-worn cliché in this brand of fiction. Why? Because it amplifies the uniqueness of the fictional inventor, investing him with both wisdom and resources well beyond that of normal scientists. In other words, it is through Robert Darvel's association with *secret* and *arcane* scientific knowledge that his special expertise is defined—in the mythical tradition of alchemists and the literary tradition of Shelley's Dr. Frankenstein and Stevenson's Dr. Jekyll. Such references, while pretending to be instructive, are in fact consistently anti-pedagogical, addressing the intuitive imagination rather than the reasoning intellect. It is evident that Le Rouge has deliberately chosen to sacrifice hard science for pseudo-science and scientific didacticism for enhanced literary effect (as Verne once accused Wells of doing in his "scientific romances"). This particular fictional recipe—which pushes scientific conjecture beyond the bounds of mimetic extrapolation into the realm of the fantastic—would soon prove to be the trademark of a growing number of early twentieth-century sf works by such authors as Burroughs, Abraham Merritt, E.E. "Doc" Smith, Edmond Hamilton, and many others.

Therefore, the importance of Le Rouge's two-volume novel *Le Prisonnier de la planète Mars* and *La Guerre des vampires* within the early French sf tradition should not be measured by its incorporation of science à la Verne but, rather, by its imaginative fictionalization of science à la Wells. As such, it was one of the first popular examples in France of the emerging "space-opera-cum-heroic-fantasy" subgenre that, as mentioned, would soon be popularized throughout the world by Burroughs in his BARSOOM and PELLUCIDAR series. In addition, it stands as one of the most developed of those early "Robinson Crusoe

on Mars" narratives inspired by the astronomer Percival Lowell's animist descriptions of the Red Planet in 1896. It is also one of the few works of pre-modern sf—somewhat like the "spiritualist" space fiction of Camille Flammarion—that sought to bridge the disparate fields of natural science and parapsychology. And, finally, it epitomizes the evolution of the sf genre itself during the early decades of the twentieth century, as the latter progressively began to take on an entirely new post-Verne narrative configuration—one that now privileges imagination over Cartesian reason and "sense of wonder" over scientific didacticism.

The final major work of Gustave Le Rouge's pulp opus—but far from his best sf, in my opinion—is his massive *Le Mystérieux docteur Cornélius* (The Mysterious Dr. Cornelius), published in 18 volumes in 1912-13. Although receiving rather poor reviews by some contemporary French sf critics,<sup>6</sup> others have nevertheless called it a "classic of French pulp literature" (Jakubowski 425) and "one of the three masterpieces of adventure literature produced in the last 50 years" (Lacassin, "Gustave Le Rouge, ou la naufragé de la S.F." 147). A highly variegated composite of sf, detective fiction, spy thriller, western, and adventure tale—a *mélange*, if you will, of Ian Fleming, Dashiell Hammett, and George Lucas's Indiana Jones—*Le Mystérieux docteur Cornélius* chronicles the nefarious exploits of the world's most-wanted criminal mastermind, Dr. Cornelius Kramm, and the efforts of a group of dedicated French scientists, led by the esteemed botanist and inventor Prosper Bondonnat, who have decided to end his international crime spree. Dr. Cornelius is a world-renowned American plastic surgeon and parapsychologist who has gone bad. Justifying his reputation as the "sculptor of human flesh," he steals both the faces and identities of his victims, along with their fortunes, their memories, and often their very lives. The epitome of the evil mad scientist in the best tradition of Wells's *Dr. Moreau* and Maurice Renard's *Dr. Lerne*, Le Rouge's Dr. Cornelius is the leader of a well-organized, secret crime organization called "The Red Hand." Their headquarters is hidden in the Aleutian Islands, but their felonious activities extend around the entire world—from the haciendas of the American West to the Paris stock market, from the islands of Polynesia to Vladivostok, and from Cherbourg to Chicago.

The sometimes bewildering, kaleidoscopic twists and turns of the plot of *Le Mystérieux docteur Cornélius* offer a non-stop series of assassinations, bank robberies, poisonings, train derailments, shipwrecks, kidnappings, hijackings, arson, and falsified deaths. But, amid the many stereotypical pulp motifs one would expect to find in such a serial melodrama—e.g., the many heroines-in-distress and just-in-the-nick-of-time escapes from certain death—one also discovers a variety of sf themes: the possibility of human immortality through continuous organ transplants, a procedure for the manufacture of artificial diamonds, a special elixir that instantly activates the body's hair follicles, rapid-growth hormones for vegetables and fruit, and portable X-ray machines, among others. And, via his professorial *porte-parole* Prosper Bondonnat, Le Rouge also includes numerous pedagogical asides on a wide variety of scientific topics: human anatomy, Japanese architecture, the chemistry of marsh gases, the

economic structure of trust funds, the composition of snake-bite sera, the effect of climate on the fur of Arctic seals, and the sources of phosphorescent light, among many others.<sup>7</sup>

So what, then, is the real significance of Gustave Le Rouge's sf works, and what should be his place in the history of science fiction? First, Le Rouge's sf is unique in that his novels are among the earliest to portray the fictional overlap between scientific technology and psychic phenomena—what John W. Campbell would later come to call "psionics" during the 1950s. Second, as contemporary space exploration has turned its sights from the Moon to the planet Mars—inspiring a veritable plethora of Mars-related sf novels in the past two decades and highlighting earlier sf narratives on the same theme—I believe that it is high time that Le Rouge's heretofore untranslated Martian novels finally receive the recognition they deserve by anglophone sf critics and historians. Lastly and most importantly, as I have argued both here and elsewhere,<sup>8</sup> Le Rouge is one of a relatively small number of early French sf authors—along with Albert Robida, J.-H. Rosny Aîné, Maurice Renard, Jacques Spitz, José Moselli, and Jean de La Hire—who succeeded in breaking away from the dominant "Jules Verne" tradition of *scientific fiction* to explore a host of new cognitive, aesthetic, and narratological frontiers in their innovative tales. And, in so doing, they became the first vanguard of European writers to help launch a new literary genre that, in America, would soon be dubbed *science fiction* but that, in France, would not be officially "discovered" until the 1950s.<sup>9</sup>

## NOTES

1. All translations from the French are my own.

2. Written in 1891 and entitled "À Gustave Lerouge," this poem includes the following stanza:

Lerouge! Et vous? Tout coeur et toute flamme vive,  
Qu'allez-vous faire en notre exil ainsi qu'il est,  
Vous, une si belle âme en un monde si laid?

(*Dédicaces*, 1894)

(Le Rouge! And you? All heart and burning passion,  
What are you going to do in our present exile,  
You, such a beautiful soul in such an ugly world?)

In December 1891, both Verlaine and Le Rouge found themselves in "exile" in a French hospital in Broussais—Le Rouge having convinced a certain Dr. Chauffard to allow him to be admitted and assigned to Verlaine's room in order to keep his friend company during his treatment. See Lacassin, *Gustave Le Rouge* (Vol. 1), 1268.

3. Ideas for methods to send messages to Mars were common throughout the nineteenth century, especially following Schiaparelli's discovery of "canali" on Mars in 1877 (mistranslated in English as "canals" instead of "channels") and astronomer Percival Lowell's subsequent popularization of the notion that advanced Martian civilizations did indeed inhabit the Red Planet. But Le Rouge's fictional episode recalls a much earlier reference: in 1802, noted German mathematician and physicist Karl Friedrich Gauss actually proposed that communication with Mars could be accomplished by creating huge geometric shapes in Siberia in order to demonstrate that intelligent life existed on Earth.

4. In a very strange (and rather suspect) coincidence, the French author H. Gayar published, also in 1908, his most popular novel, *Aventures merveilleuses de Serge*

*Myrandhal* (The Marvelous Adventures of Serge Myrandhal), which features a machine very similar to Le Rouge's "psychic condenser"—one that, when attached to a host of (Hindu) fakirs, succeeds in transporting his hero's spacecraft to ... Mars. See Versins, "Le Rouge (Gustave)," 531.

5. For an overview of Rosny's sf, see J.-P. Vernier.

6. French sf critic Jacques Sadoul, for example, while praising Le Rouge's *Le Prisonnier de la planète Mars* and *La Guerre des vampires* as sf that "already announces the science fantasy of 1930s ... [they] remain very readable today," has a very different reaction to Le Rouge's *Le Mystérieux docteur Cornélius*: "I read every episode of this 18-volume *Cornélius*.... My God! How boring! ... [W]hen I sometimes encounter fans of this work and hear how emotional their voices become when they speak of it, I can scarcely keep from laughing" (390).

7. It was undoubtedly the highly baroque and collage-like nature of Le Rouge's *Le Mystérieux docteur Cornélius* that attracted the attention of Blaise Cendrars and the French Surrealists of the 1920s. Cendrars eventually devoted over half of his biographical work *L'Homme foudroyé* to personal reminiscences of Le Rouge, as well as a portion of his popular book *Bourlinguer* (1948, Getting Around). Cendrars went so far as to clip a large number of passages from his friend's novel to create a book of surrealist poetry called *Kodak* (1924). Cendrars explains:

I had the cruelty to bring to Lerouge a volume of poems ... that I had cut out with scissors from one of his prose works and had published in my own name! What nerve! But I had to resort to this subterfuge which borders on dishonesty and which risked our friendship in order to force him to admit ... that he too was a poet, or else this stubborn fellow would have never accepted the idea. (*L'Homme foudroyé* 215)

8. See my "Science Fiction in France" (258), "Functions of Science" (94, 97-100), and "Science Fiction vs. Scientific Fiction" (1, 4-5, 10). Reprints of these articles are also available online at the following website: <<http://JV.Gilead.org.il/evans>>.

9. For a closer examination of the rise of "la science-fiction" in post-war France during the 1950s, see Lofficier (414-32), Evans ("Science Fiction in France" 260-63), Sadoul (415-37), Bozzetto (*L'Obscur objet* 106-10), Slusser, and especially the excellent studies by Gouanvic on this topic.

### Bibliography of Gustave Le Rouge's SF Works

- Guitton, Gustave, and Gustave Le Rouge. *La Conspiration des milliardaires*. Paris: Guyot, 1899-1900. Rpt. ed. Francis Lacassin. Paris: U.G.E. "10/18," 1977, and in *Gustave Le Rouge*. Ed. Francis Lacassin. Vol. 2. Paris: Laffont "Bouquins," 1993. 1-739.
- . *La Princesse des airs*. Paris: Guyot, 1902. Rpt. Paris: U.G.E. "10/18," 1976.
- . *Le Sous-marin "Jules Verne"*. Paris: Méricault, 1902. Rpt. Paris: U.G.E. "10/18," 1976.
- Le Rouge, Gustave. *Le Voleur de visages* [The Thief of Faces]. Paris: Méricant, 1904. Rpt. Paris: Éditions d'aujourd'hui, 1975.
- . *L'Espionne du Grant Lama* [The Grand Lama's Spy]. Paris: Méricant, 1905. Rpt. in *Gustave Le Rouge*. Ed. Francis Lacassin. Vol. 1. Paris: Laffont "Bouquins," 1986. 1063-1158.
- . *Les Écumeurs de la pampa* [The Pampas Pirates]. Paris: Méricant, 1905. Rpt. Paris: Tallendier, 1933.
- . *Le Prisonnier de la planète Mars*. Paris: Méricant, 1908. Rpt. Paris: U.G.E. "10/18," 1976 and in *Gustave Le Rouge*. Ed. Francis Lacassin. Vol. 1. Paris: Laffont "Bouquins," 1986. 769-914.

- . *La Guerre des vampires*. Paris: Méricant, 1909. Rpt. Paris: U.G.E. "10/18," 1976 and in *Gustave Le Rouge*. Ed. Francis Lacassin. Vol. 1. Paris: Laffont "Bouquins," 1986. 915-1062.
- . *Le Mystérieux docteur Cornélius*. Paris: Maison du livre moderne, 1912-13. Rpt. Paris: U.G.E. "10/18," 1975 and in *Gustave Le Rouge*. Ed. Francis Lacassin. Vol. 1. Paris: Laffont "Bouquins," 1986. 27-768.
- . *La Vengeance du docteur Mohr* [Dr. Mohr's Vengeance]. Paris: Nilsson, 1914. Rpt. Paris: Tallandier, 1927.
- . *La Rue hantée* [The Haunted Street]. Paris: Nilsson, 1914. Rpt. Paris: Tallandier, 1925.
- . *Mystéria*. Paris: La Renaissance du livre, 1921.
- . *Les Aventures de Todd Marvel, détective milliardaire* [The Adventures of Todd Marvel, Billionaire Detective]. Paris: Nilsson, 1923. Rpt. Paris: U.G.E. "10/18," 1986.

### Works Cited and Critical Studies on Gustave Le Rouge

- Alfu. "Le Mystérieux Dr Cornélius (Gustave Le Rouge)." *Encrage* 8 (juillet-août 1986, nov.-déc. 1986): 29-32, 37-40.
- Bozzetto, Roger. "Intercultural Interplay: Science Fiction in France and the United States." *SFS* 17.1 (March 1990): 1-24.
- . "La Science-fiction en France depuis 1914." *Histoire littéraire de la France*. Eds. Pierre Abraham and Roland Desne. Paris: Editions Sociales, 1982. 735-39.
- . *L'Obscur objet d'un savoir: Fantastique et science-fiction*. Aix-en-Provence, France: Publications de l'Université de Provence, 1992.
- Bridenne, Jean-Jacques. *La Littérature française d'imagination scientifique*. Paris: Dassetonville, 1950. Rpt. Paris: Antares, 1983.
- Cendrars, Blaise. *L'Homme foudroyé*. Paris: Denoël, 1945. Partially rpt. in English as "Two Portraits: Gustave Lerouge, Arthur Cravan." Trans. William Brandon. *Paris Review* 11.42 (Winter-Spring 1968): 157-70.
- Cendrars, Raymone. "Gustave Le Rouge vu par Raymone Cendrars." Preface to *Le Mystérieux docteur Cornélius* by Gustave Le Rouge. Vol. 5. Paris: U.G.E., "10/18," 1975. 7-11.
- Evans, Arthur B. "Functions of Science in French Fiction." *Studies in the Literary Imagination*. 22.1 (1989): 79-100.
- . "Science Fiction in France: A Brief History." *SFS* 16.3 (1989): 254-76.
- . "Science Fiction vs. Scientific Fiction in France: From Jules Verne to J.-H. Rosny Aîné." *SFS* 15.1 (1988): 1-11.
- Freustie, Jean. "Un feuilletoniste qui voulait changer le monde." *Le Nouvel Observateur* (18 août 1975): 46-47.
- Gouanvic, Jean-Marc. "Enquête sur l'irruption de la SF américaine en Europe dans les années 50." *Imagine...* 1 (1979): 95-110.
- . *La Science-fiction française au XXe siècle (1900-1968)*. Amsterdam and Atlanta, GA: Rodopi, 1994.
- . *Sociologie de la traduction: la science-fiction américaine dans l'espace culturel français des années 1950*. Arras, France: Artois Presses Université, 1999.
- "Gustave Le Rouge." *Le Roman d'aventures*. April 2000. Multimania. Dec. 10, 2001 <<http://www.multimania.com/adventur/LeRouge.html>>.
- Jakubowski, Maxim. "French SF." *Anatomy of Wonder*. Ed. Neil Barron. 3rd ed. New York: Bowker, 1987. 405-40.



- Juin, Herbert. "Gustave Le Rouge, trois cents volumes et des poussières." *Ecrivains de l'Avant-Siècle*. Paris: Seghers, 1972. 197-202.
- Lecaye, Alexis. "Gustave Le Rouge, dernier prince du feuilleton." *Le Monde* (9 janvier 1987): 15.
- Lacassin, Francis. "Une apologie de l'infra-littérature." *Gustave Le Rouge*. Ed. Francis Lacassin. Vol. 1. Paris: Laffont "Bouquins," 1986. 1183-95.
- . "Cornélius, ou Fantômas raconté par Bernardin de Saint-Pierre." *Le Mystérieux docteur Cornélius* by Gustave Le Rouge. Paris: Martineau, 1967. 9-23. Rpt. in *Gustave Le Rouge*. Ed. Francis Lacassin. Vol. 1. Paris: Laffont "Bouquins," 1986. 27-42.
- . "Dans le sillage du 'Nautilus.'" *Le Sousmarin "Jules Verne"* by Gustave Le Rouge. Paris: UGE "10/18," 1979. 5-15.
- . "Gustave Le Rouge, le gourou secret de Blaise Cendrars." *Passagers clandestins*. Paris: UGE "10/18," 1979. 283-335.
- . "Gustave Le Rouge, ou le naufragé de la S.F." *Fiction 155* (1966): 137-49.
- . "Gustave Le Rouge, pionnier de la science-fiction ou 'Jules Verne des midinettes'?" *Le Prisonnier de la planète Mars* by Gustave Le Rouge. Paris: UGE "10/18," 1976. 7-30. Rpt. in *Gustave Le Rouge*. Ed. Francis Lacassin. Vol. 1. Paris: Laffont "Bouquins," 1986. 771-82.
- . "Le mystérieux Gustave Le Rouge." *Gustave Le Rouge*. Ed. Francis Lacassin. Vol. 1. Paris: Laffont "Bouquins," 1986. 7-24.
- . "Le Rouge et C<sup>ie</sup> fabrique de romans...et de rêves." *La Princesse des airs* by Gustave Le Rouge and Gustave Guitton. Paris: UGE "10/18," 1976. 7-15.
- . "Quatre écrivains populaires." *Magazine littéraire* 9 (juillet-août 1967): 16-22.
- . "Roman populaire, roman visionnaire." *La Conspiration des milliardaires* by Gustave Le Rouge and Gustave Guitton. Paris: UGE "10/18," 1977. 7-24. Rpt. in *Gustave Le Rouge*. Ed. Francis Lacassin. Vol. 2. Paris: Laffont "Bouquins," 1993. 3-15.
- , ed. *Gustave Le Rouge*. Paris: Laffont "Bouquins," 1986, 1993. 2 vols.
- Lofficier, Jean-Marc and Randy. *French Science Fiction, Fantasy, Horror and Pulp Fiction*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2000.
- Murail, Lorrin. "Gustave Le Rouge." *Les maîtres de la science-fiction*. Paris: Bordas, 1993. 52.
- Reuillard, Gabriel. "Un Précurseur du roman d'anticipation, Gustave Le Rouge" *Bulletin de la librairie ancienne et moderne* 101 (janvier 1968): 11-13.
- Sadoul, Jacques. *Histoire de la science-fiction moderne*. Paris: Laffont, 1984.
- Slusser, George. "The Beginnings of Fiction." *SFS* 16.3 (Nov. 1989): 307-37.
- Van Herp, Jacques. *Panorama de la science-fiction*. Verviers, Belgium: Marabout, 1975.
- . "Le Prisonnier de la planète Mars (The Prisoner of the Planet Mars)." *Survey of Science Fiction Literature*. Ed. Frank N. Magill. Englewood Cliffs: Salem, 1979. 1726-29.
- Verne, Jules. *Vingt mille lieues sous les mers*. Paris: Livre de Poche, 1966.
- Vernier, J.-P. "The SF of J.-H. Rosny the Elder," *SFS* 2.2 (July 1975): 156-63.
- Versins, Pierre. "Le Rouge (Gustave)." *Encyclopédie de l'Utopie, des voyages extraordinaires, et de la science-fiction*. Lausanne: L'Age d'Homme, 1972. 530-31.
- . "Un Mystère littéraire." *La Guerre des vampires* by Gustave Le Rouge. Paris: U.G.E., "10/18," 1976. 301-09.

## ABSTRACT

A prolific writer of French pulp fiction at the dawn of the twentieth century, Gustave Le Rouge (1867-1938) penned an estimated 312 works in a wide variety of genres: science fiction, horror, detective fiction, spy novels, historical dramas, poetry collections, theater and screenplays, biographical studies, essays on occultism, and even cookbooks. His best-known sf works include such scientific-adventure tales as *La Conspiration des milliardaires* (1899), *La Princesse des airs* (1902), and *Le Sous-marin "Jules Verne"* (1902); an imaginative two-volume space opera *Le Prisonnier de la planète Mars* (1908) and *La Guerre des vampires* (1909); and an eighteen-volume pulp epic, *Le Mystérieux docteur Cornélius* (1912-13). This essay attempts to familiarize English-language readers with the life and works of Gustave Le Rouge, one of the unjustly neglected pioneers of early science fiction.