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Science/Fiction/Politics: Jules Verne's Floridas

JEAN-PHILIPPE MATHY

Jules Verne is often referred to as “the father of science fiction.” As Timothy Unwin has noted in his *Jules Verne: Journeys in Writing*, whether Verne’s books had anything to do with science fiction has been the subject of a long-standing controversy. While the Anglo-American scholarship on Verne puts him squarely in the camp of science fiction writers, the French have tended to “re-canonize” Verne, as Unwin puts it, describing him as a major figure whose standing in their country’s national literature would be diminished by an association with the subgenre of science fiction.¹ The French philosopher of science Michel Serres is a case in point. A noted specialist of Verne’s work, Serres argued that the author of *Twenty Thousand Leagues under the Sea* was more interested in the past than in the future, and that his writings were anything but fantasies defying the laws of our universe or anticipations of unforeseen technological inventions: “The fiction of the *Journeys* is, it is said, a form of science fiction. That is quite simply false. No mechanical law is ever bypassed, and no natural law of physics, material resistance or biology is ever extended. The scientific content is by and large very much behind the times [...]. Far from being futuristic, these novels are not even up to date.”²

In a similar vein, Arthur B. Evans draws a sharp distinction between Verne’s *scientific fiction* in which science fulfills “a predominantly pedagogical function” and *science fiction*, a genre that resorts to science or pseudo-science “for purely *fictional* purposes” (his emphasis).³ Sarah Capitanio, for her part, argues that “three main features of Verne’s novels militate against them being classified as science fiction at all”: firstly, the stories “are less concerned with linear action than with the ultimate solution of a mystery”; secondly, “elements of the empirical, recognizable world are constantly used as a measure against which to compare and thus the better to comprehend the new environments in which the characters find themselves”; and

thirdly, “the characters themselves undergo no fundamental evolution as a result of their extraordinary experiences” (70).

The French talk about *la science-fiction*, while Americans still refer to “sci-fi,” a sometimes derogatory term coined in the 1950s and usually reserved for the most commercial forms of the genre, whether as literature or film. As distinct from the usual spelling of “science fiction,” both terms are hyphenated, suggesting a strong organic connection between the two components of a hybrid genre of writing. Rather than taking sides in what Unwin calls the “science fiction debate,” I propose to erase the hyphenated, generic link between science and fiction, and examine how these two discursive forms interact with each other, and relate to a third term, politics, in Jules Verne’s two novels set in Florida, *From the Earth to the Moon* (1865) and *North Against South* (1886). In an essay characteristically entitled “The Fiction of Science and the Science of Fiction,” Unwin himself seems to favor a similar approach, emphasizing “the interplay in Verne’s writings between the objective and the poetic, the scientific and the fictional.” Far from being incompatible, science and fiction are intimately bound up with one another as symbolic, intertextual practices: “Science is fiction,” Unwin argues, “in the sense that we are obliged to use words and books to learn it, to understand it, and to share and communicate it. [...] Science fiction in Verne becomes not the creation of new and barely recognizable worlds inhabited by strange beings, but the larger-than-life fictions of science itself. Verne stages and dramatizes the scientific, giving it power and mystery through the cumulative impact of his language.”⁴

In *From the Earth to the Moon*, Jules Verne imagines a fictional Floridian site, a high desert plateau he called “Stone’s-Hill” [*sic*], the perfect location for sending a gigantic cannon ball, with three people on board, to the moon. The choice of Florida as the privileged site for the launching was determined by a set of scientific criteria described in detail at the beginning of the novel. The trip to the moon has nourished literary fantasies for centuries, but in Verne’s novel, American artilleryman Barbicane decides to actually land a rocket on the moon, as opposed to merely imagining it. Barbicane is the President of the Baltimore Gun Club, a group of individuals whose membership in the association is based on the fact that they have all “invented, or at least perfected, a cannon.”⁵ Before embarking on his project, Barbicane consults with the Director of the Observatory of Cambridge, Massachusetts, to determine the best location for the launch. The astronomer replies,

the cannon must be aimed at the zenith of the spot so that its line of fire will be perpendicular to the plane of the horizon, and the projectile will escape more rapidly from the effects of gravitation. But in order that the moon should reach the zenith of a certain spot, it is necessary that that spot should not be situated in a higher latitude

than the declination of the satellite—that is to say it must be situated within the degrees 0° and 28° north or south. In any other spot the line of fire must necessarily be oblique, which would impair the success of the experiment.⁶

Note that the engineer comes first and takes the initiative, seeking confirmation from the scientist. Verne's admiration for the "industrial genius" of the Americans, more practical than theoretical, is well known. Echoing de Tocqueville, the narrator adds two other qualities to the American character: a knack for the associative life, and, above all, an optimistic "can-do" spirit. "When an American has an idea he looks out for a second American to share it. If there are three of them they elect a chairman and two secretaries. If four, they appoint a recorder, and the committee is in working order. If five, they convene a general meeting, and a club is formed. [...] Nothing surprises an American. It has often been repeated that the word 'impossible' was not French, but this last word is evidently a *lapsus linguae*. In America, all is easy, all is simple; and as regards mechanical difficulties, they are conquered before they arise" (6, 22).

The narrator declares from the onset that "the main point in which the Americans were so much superior to the Europeans was the science of gunnery [...]. Nor is this matter for surprise. The Yankees, the first mechanics in the world, are born engineers, as Italians are born musicians and German metaphysicians."⁷ Since Barbicane himself is from Baltimore, the lunar experiment can only take place in a country whose citizens have no other ambition than "to take possession of this new continent, and plant on its highest summit the stars and stripes of the United States" (44). The allusion to American expansionism confirms what Verne scholars have often described as his growing concern with the political and military consequences of American scientific achievements. For Jean Chesneaux, for example, "as the development of industry aggravates human misery rather than relieving it, as the humanitarian dreams of 1848 are supplanted by the implacable rivalry of the various forms of imperialism, the highly idealistic view of Jules Verne gives way to pessimism."⁸ In *From the Earth to the Moon*, one of the earlier novels, the admiration for American engineering prowess is already mixed with apprehension regarding "the military instinct" of a nation of "ship-owners, wholesale dealers and merchants" and the rise of what Dwight Eisenhower famously called a century later the military-industrial complex. "The sole preoccupation of this learned society [the Baltimore Gun Club]," the narrator claims, "was the destruction of humanity from motives of philanthropy, and the perfecting of firearms considered as instruments of civilisation: an assembly of exterminating angels, otherwise the best fellows in the world."⁹

For the astronomical reasons presented in the pedagogical exposition from the Director of the Cambridge Observatory cited earlier, the launching site has to be situated below the 28th parallel north, and the combined demands of science and nationalism leave only two possible locations for what promises to be a world-wide

sensation: South Florida or Southern Texas. The rivalry between the two states takes such epic proportions that the narrator, in a characteristic example of Vernian irony, can only do it justice by referring to Antiquity: “Seven towns of Greece disputed the honour of Homer’s birthplace, two states of America were ready to annihilate each other merely on account of a cannon” (79).

While several towns in Texas, a more populated state than its competitor, can reasonably pretend to be home to Barbicane’s sensational endeavor, only one locality in Florida, “Tampa-Town,” is in a position to “have any claim in regard to its situation” (79). The story takes place immediately after the Civil War, and the rivalry between the two former Confederate states becomes so bitter that each of the two contenders appeals to its own historical past to win the contest. The Texans remind everyone of their successful war of independence from Mexico, while mocking the Floridians for having simply been bought from Bonaparte’s French possessions in North America without ever having to fight for their rightful place in the young nation. In order to prevent the competition between states from degenerating into a new battle among several cities if Texas is selected, the prize finally goes to Tampa-Town.

Once in Florida, Barbicane and his colleagues embark on a quest for the ideal place to built the launching site, a terrain both sufficiently dry and elevated enough to provide the ideal conditions for their experiment. Engineering, like fiction, astronomy, and national politics, has its own constraints, however. The excavation of the huge hole that will contain the space cannon, now baptized “the Columbiad,” requires a location sufficiently high above the sea level (more than 1,000 feet) to prevent underground waters from seeping into the foundations of the construction site required by Barbicane’s project. Consequently, as the small party of scientific adventurers makes its way through Tampa’s surroundings, their leader appears “well satisfied with the increasing elevation of the ground” (93). Barbicane and his companions soon encounter vast forests whose description is reminiscent of the pages François-René de Chateaubriand devoted to the banks of the “Meschacébé” (Mississippi) in the opening section of his romantic novel *Atala* (1801), one of the most celebrated instances of the French imagination of America’s natural beauty.

On the eastern side of the river, Chateaubriand wrote of the Mississippi valley, “overhanging the watercourse, clustered upon the rocks and hills, dispersed about the valleys, trees of every form and every color and every odor mingle, grow together, rise in the air to a height which tires the gaze. Wild vines, trumpet flower, bitter apple, twine at the foot of these trees, scale the great limbs, climb out to the ends of their branches, fling themselves from maple to tulip tree, from tulip tree to hollyhock, forming countless grottoes, countless vaults and archways.”¹⁰ The sublime grandeur of the river’s geological setting is only matched by the teeming variety of animal species that inhabit the mountains and forests surrounding the majestic river Chateaubriand called “a Nile of the wilderness” (4). “Life and enchantment,” the next paragraph reads,

are spread there by a multitude of animals, placed in these retreats by the Creator. Across a clearing may be seen bears drunk on wild grapes, swaying on elm branches; caribou bathe in the lakes; grey squirrels sport amid thick foliage; mocking birds and tiny Virginia doves as small as sparrows alight on lawns red with wild strawberries; green parakeets with yellow heads, empurpled woodpeckers, fiery cardinal birds, climb and fly around the cypress trunks; humming birds flash on the Florida jasmine, and bird-catching serpents hiss on the treetops, hanging there like creeping plants. (5)

Although it never reached the lyrical heights of the romantic poet's descriptions, Verne's own version of the bountiful American Eden in *From the Earth to the Moon* has a rightful place in the French intertextual representation of the New World: "At about ten o'clock the little troop had got over twelve miles, and the fertile plains were succeeded by forest lands. Here they found the most varied kinds of trees in tropical profusion. These almost impenetrable forests were composed of pomegranate trees, orange trees, lemon trees, fig trees, olive trees, apricot trees, banana trees, and vines, whose fruit and flowers rivaled each other in colour and perfume" (94).

Following a traditional figuration of literary exoticism, as exemplified in the passage from Chateaubriand where the accumulation of species signifies the paradisiacal abundance of American nature, the fauna is just as spectacular as the flora, since "the odoriferous shade of these magnificent trees was peopled by a world of brilliantly-plumaged birds, amongst which the crab-eaters (*cancroma*) were particularly noticeable" (94). The Vernian narrator, mixing ornithological accuracy with poetic sensibility, cannot help but show off his knowledge of taxonomy by providing the reader with the scientific name of the crab-eater. Further on, "lost in admiration of these beautiful works of nature" (95), the travelers encounter a profusion of alligators, seagulls, phaetons, and flamingoes that nevertheless seem to leave Barbicane indifferent. More savant than poet, the Yankee mechanic is too practical to share his companions' admiration for the sublime nature of the tropical New World. He is too busy looking for the elevated terrain that will enable him to build the huge foundry needed for his engineering feat: "But President Barbicane, who cared little for such marvels, was anxious to get on. The very fertility of the country was displeasing to him, for without a hydroscope, he could feel the water under his feet, and what he was searching for was a site of incontestable dryness" (95-96).

Such is the privilege of fiction writing: the ideal topography Barbicane has been dreaming of soon offers itself, as if by magic, to the astonished gaze of the

travellers. “At last they left behind them this too-well irrigated country, and the size of the trees diminished. As they advanced the underwood became less dense, until nothing was left but isolated clumps scattered over immense plains, where troops of wild deer ranged in primitive freedom” (96). The explorers are faced with no less than a desert plateau in the middle of subtropical Florida: “[They] had reached the center of a vast rocky plain, inundated by the burning rays of the sun, and formed by a large extumescence of the ground, which appeared to the members of the Gun club to combine all the conditions requisite for the manufacture of their columbiad” (96). As a good scientist, Barbicane scrupulously notes the precise coordinates of what has become the ideal site for his project: “This spot is situated 300 fathoms above the level of the sea, in 27° 7’ north latitude and 5° 7’ west longitude. It seems to me, from its rocky and arid character, to offer the most favorable conditions for our experiment. On this plain we will erect our stores, our workshops, our furnaces, and the huts for our workmen; and from this spot,’ he continued, stamping his foot on the summit of Stone’s-Hill, ‘our projectile will take its flight to the vast regions of the solar world”” (97).

Three hundred fathoms, about 540 meters or 1,800 feet above sea level: these topographic requirements exclude real Florida, since most of the state has an elevation of a few dozen feet above the sea level, especially where one of the illustrations included in the original edition of the novel places Stone’s-Hill, on the southern bank of Lake Okeechobee. The highest natural point in Florida, Britton Hill, on the border with Alabama, reaches a mere 345 feet above mean sea level. In fact, the highest spot in the state is not a natural marker, but a man-made one (which would have pleased Barbicane, and Verne also), namely the top of a building, the 70-story Four Seasons Hotel in Miami, which rises to a height of 789 feet, more than twice the elevation of Britton Hill.

In Verne’s novel, fiction definitely trumps scientific data. In the imaginary Florida constructed by the text, astronomical and topographical criteria serve a narrative driven by the literary exoticism and romantic Orientalism found in a long French tradition including works by Bernardin de Saint-Pierre, George Sand, and again, Chateaubriand. On the other hand, as has often been noted to underline the anticipatory nature of Verne’s prophetic imagination, the coordinates of the fictitious Stone’s-Hill are quite close to those of the actual Cape Canaveral Space Station: 28.5° of latitude north and 80.6° of longitude west. Following a selection process reminiscent of Verne’s own storyline, the site of the spacecraft launching station, as can be expected, was chosen for astronomical reasons to take advantage of the Earth’s rotation, as the linear velocity of the planet’s surface is greatest towards the Equator. Its south-eastern location gave Cape Canaveral an advantage over competing locations, as it allowed an eastward launching of space crafts following the Earth’s own rotation.

A historical landmark in today’s Tampa illustrates the mix of fantasy and realism often found in Verne’s texts, while testifying to the international influence of

some of his most famous novels. The site is currently called Ballast Point Park, but it was formerly known as Jules Verne Park and was developed in the late 1800s by a Mrs. Chester W. Chapin, whose company operated the city's first electric trolley cars, a fitting business venture for an admirer of Verne's own interests in the science and industry of his time. The official marker placed at the site by the Hillsborough County Historical Commission informs visitors that Mrs. Chapin originally named the park "for the French writer Jules Verne (1824-1905) who in his famous novel 'From the Earth to the Moon' [...] chose Tampa town as his launching site for the imaginary shot of his rocket to that planet nearly one hundred years ago." This is of course incorrect, since the launching site was actually set far away from the city itself, for the topographical reasons exposed in the novel. Interestingly enough, the park had been designed to be a "subtropical" stop at the end of one of the Chapin trolley lines, a far cry for the desert-like ecology of the fictional Stone's-Hill.¹¹

At first sight, Stone's-Hill seemed to offer the Barbicane party an environment conducive to the success of their exploratory mission. Pine trees had replaced the tropical vegetation and troops of wild deer taken the place of alligators. But the place soon proved to be a profoundly ambiguous locale, a combination of futuristic promise and primitive violence. Other beings happen to live in this inhospitable land, and their discreet but threatening presence is here to remind the reader of the untamed nature of the American wilderness: "At last, cried Barbicane, raising himself in his stirrups, 'we are in the region of pines.' 'And of savages,' replied the major. Just then some Seminoles appeared on the horizon, galloping their swift horses and brandishing long lances, and occasionally firing off their guns; but they confined themselves to these hostile demonstrations, and did not otherwise interfere with Barbicane and his party" (96). As in many of Verne's books, the science fiction story runs alongside a historical novel of adventure and a travel narrative. The presence of Seminole warriors provides a contrast between Barbicane's technological, modernist project and its incompletely civilized environment, a remnant and reminder of a past that had long preceded the arrival of the Europeans in the new world. Verne's writing echoes here one of the central themes of American mythology, the opposition between *settlement* and *wilderness*, between the pacified space of colonization and the unknown territory, a source of terror and fantasy, that lies beyond the frontier, the gradually displaced limit of the national expansion. The ideal geographical situation of Stone's-Hill as the best possible place to send a rocket to the moon superimposes the ageless presence of a pre-historical nature onto the urban and industrial utopia of the Columbiad's building site, a combination of boomtown and technopole that will soon sprout up in the wilderness, as so many places in American history, to turn Barbicane's own wild dream into reality. The mushrooming compound of engineers and industrial workers is another example of the ideal communities inhabiting Verne's imaginary worlds: the small scientific colony on *The Mysterious Island*, the model city of France-Ville in *The Begum's Fortune*, the

subterranean mine of Coal-City in *The Black Indies*, the secret base of Antekirtta in *Mathias Sandorf*, and the liberal plantation of Camden Bay in *North Against South*.

The other Florida in Verne's imaginings is much closer to empirical reality than the arid plateau of the fictional Stone's-Hill, namely the liquid, labyrinthine ecosystem of the St. Johns River and the Everglades that forms the backdrop of Verne's novel of the Civil War in Florida.¹² *From the Earth to the Moon* was written twenty years before *North Against South*, but the second novel takes place before the first, which starts after the Civil War. The two texts respond to one another, producing contradictory and complementary figurations of Florida, arid and watery, ancient and modern, historical and mythological, peopled with bold Yankee reformers and threatening Seminoles. In *North Against South*, the geographical opposition between the two cardinal points acquires a political meaning at the same time, since it refers both to a conflict between two parts of the United States and to a struggle between two regions of Florida, the local division between north and south mirroring that of the entire country. The structure of the novel is based on the displacement of the narration from the north to the south of the state, from the St. Johns River around Jacksonville to the Everglades, the setting for the last fourth of the book. As already mentioned, the two textual spaces, river and wetlands, are in stark contrast with the desert plateau of Stone's-Hill, not to mention the aridity usually associated with the Moon's surface itself. In terms of history and social ecology, Northern Florida belongs to the regional system of the plantation economy that comprises Georgia and the Carolinas, while the southern section of the state is part of the subtropical world of the Caribbean, and is culturally, linguistically, and geographically closer to Cuba than to the Deep South.

The novel starts with a brief account of the history and geography of Florida for the benefit of the uninformed reader. The narrator of *North Against South* displays a more factual knowledge of the state than his counterpart in *From the Earth to the Moon*. For one thing, he readily acknowledges that most of Florida is flat, which would suffice to rule out the existence of any place like Stone's-Hill: "Florida, throughout is a low, narrow, tongue of land. [...] There are no mountains, only a few lines of 'bluffs' or low hills such as are numerous in the central and southern regions of the Union. In form the peninsula is not unlike the tail of a beaver dipping into the ocean between the Atlantic on the east and the Gulf of Mexico on the west."¹³ The narrator goes on to foreground the cultural distinctiveness and ethnic composition of the state's population, a fact that will play a significant role in the novel, since the story pits different communities against one another: "Florida seems to be a country apart, with its people half Spaniards, half Americans, and its Seminole Indians so different from their congeners in the west" (7-8). The narrative quickly moves on to the its immediate temporal and spatial context, providing the reader with a date ("the 7th of February 1862"), and a place, a steamboat on the St. Johns river bound for St. Augustine while the Union Army is marching on Jacksonville. The steamboat scenes serve to introduce one of the main characters, Texar, a ruthless outlaw of

“Spanish” origin who will spend the rest of the novel trying to destroy the life and family of James Burbank, a wealthy abolitionist from New Jersey who settled in Jacksonville decades earlier. Burbank, who owns Camdless-Bay, a model plantation on the banks of the St. Johns River, will eventually decide to emancipate his slaves before his estate falls in the hands of local supporters of the Confederacy.

Burbank's plantation is set in natural surroundings whose description rivals Chateaubriand's celebration of the American Eden:

On the banks of the river among the reeds and beneath the interlacement of gigantic bamboos were flamingoes, pink or scarlet, white ibises looking as if they had been stolen from some Egyptian monolith, pelicans of colossal stature, myriads of terns, sea-swallows of all kinds [...] jacamars, kingfishers with golden reflections [...] to say nothing of the petrels, puffins, scissorbeaks, seacrows, gulls, and tropic-birds which the wind would bring into the St. John's, and occasionally even flying fish, beloved of epicures. (23)

Expectedly, following the canons of exoticism and the early catalogues of new world species by eighteenth-century British and French naturalists, the description moves from birds to mammals, including “grey squirrels, long-tailed rabbits, herds of deer, [...] raccoons, turtle, ichneumons, and unfortunately a good many serpents of venomous species” (23) The fertility of Florida's soil can only enhance the man-made production of a well-managed agricultural estate, and in addition to cotton, Burbank's slaves grow coffee and sugarcane, cocoa-trees, tobacco, and rice, “to say nothing of [...] the cinnamons, pears, oranges, citrons, olives, figs, mangoes and Bread-fruits” (22). Paradisiac conditions are not enough to turn natural bounty into a social and economic utopia. Burbank's personal philosophy and management style, a combination of humanism, paternalism, and rationalism, have turned his large estate into a model of scientific organization reminiscent of Barbicane's *Columbiad*. Both men are Yankee reformers and experimenters who have come to Florida, using their progressive, forward-looking ideology to build an ideal community, combining the favorable conditions of a southern climate with northern ingenuity.

The sight on the right bank of the St. John's had been very happily chosen for the foundation of a wealthy establishment. To its natural conveniences man had little to add. The land itself was adapted for all the requirements of extensive works, and the plantation of Camdless Bay, managed by an intelligent man, active and in the prime of life, well helped by his staff, and with no want of capital,

was in a most flourishing state. [...] Dwelling house, outbuildings, stables, cattle-sheds, huts for the slaves, farm-buildings, stores for the products of the soil, yards for handling them, workshops and mills, railways converging to the landing place and carriage roads,—everything was marvelously arranged from a practical point of view; that it was a Northerner who had conceived, organized, and executed these works could be seen at the first glance. (21)

The “Yankee” type of individual, optimistic, egalitarian, and pragmatic is a common presence in *Voyages Extraordinaires*. According to Arthur B. Evans, Verne saw Americans as “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.”¹⁴ Unsurprisingly, James Burbank exudes these physical and moral qualities:

He was then forty-six years old, of strong constitution, accustomed to work, and never sparing himself. We know he was of energetic character; firmly attached to his opinions, he did his utmost to let them be widely known. He was tall and slightly grey; his face had a somewhat severe but frank and encouraging look. With the goatee of the Americans of the North, without whiskers or moustache, he was a typical New England Yankee. Throughout the plantation he was liked, for he was kind, and he was obeyed, for he was just.¹⁵

As the perfect example of what reason and capital can achieve when combined, the plantation resembles a factory more than a rural estate of the traditional South and, as a consequence, “it was only plantations of the first class in Virginia and the Carolinas that could rival Camdless Bay” (39). The third characteristic of Burbank’s progressive achievement is the improved material and social conditions of his slaves. As “a partisan of the anti-slavery cause, a Northerner” (23), the owner had done as much as he could, given the legal system of slavery in Florida, to mitigate the harshest consequences of the plantation economy, from physical violence to the structure of family life:

There were about seven hundred blacks of both sexes properly lodged in the large barracoons, well looked after and kindly treated, and worked well within their powers. The overseer had orders to treat them all with justice and consideration; and the duties were done none the worst for corporal punishment having for some time been

abandoned at Camdless Bay. The slaves dwelt in healthy, comfortable huts [...] There the blacks lived with their wives and children. Each family was as much as possible employed in the same work in the fields, the forests or the workshops, so that its members were not scattered during work hours. (23-24)

As the heroic figure of the enlightened republican master, Burbank was anxiously awaiting the victory of the North to free his slaves, “and it was now only a question of weeks, of days perhaps, before the Federal army, which already occupied the outposts, would advance into Florida” (23). An island of humane justice in an ocean of greed and prejudice, surrounded by hostile neighboring plantation owners and fanatical, benighted townsfolk, Burbank’s model plantation is reminiscent of the communes and phalansteries, some of them set in America as a pristine environment conducive to bold social experiments, that Jules Verne had read about in the works of the French utopian socialists who influenced his youth.¹⁶ Camdless Bay’s social and economic laboratory links the geographical north of Florida with the ideological northeast of the United States, the birthplace of the abolitionist movement. On the other hand, the supporters of the Confederacy fleeing the advance of the Union armies end up in the impenetrable marshes of Southern Florida. Verne transfers what he sees as the moral and political backwardness of the Confederate worldview to the threatening, uncultivated (and uncultured) swampy areas that become the ultimate refuge of all of Burbank’s adversaries, a gathering of poor whites, Seminoles, and “Spaniards” from Texas the narrator repeatedly refers to as “the populace.” The exotic adventure tale is also a *roman à thèse*, a political narrative through which Verne’s support of Abraham Lincoln’s moral vision finds an epic and mythic expression in the struggle between the forces of Good and Evil in the southernmost corner of the United States.

The subtropical forest enclosing the meandering St. Johns River and the sprawling Everglades provides a safe haven for Texar, Burbank’s sworn enemy, a former Texan slave driver in cahoots with Seminole outlaws who ends up “dwelling in an old Indian wigwam” on a remote island before his defeat at the end of the novel. The ideological conflict between Texar and Burbank finds a symbolic equivalent in the two faces of Florida’s natural environment, the paradisiac, domesticated fertility of Camdless Bay, on the one hand, and the ambiguous and fascinating Hell of the southern marshes, on the other:

A horrible district is that of the Everglades, and yet it is superb. [...] It is a country half liquid and half solid, and almost uninhabitable. But let it not be supposed that it is barren. On the contrary, it is on the surface of the islands in the marsh that nature asserts her right. The malaria is, so

to speak, conquered by the perfumes of the wonderful flowers; the islands are steeped in the fragrance of a thousand plants, blooming in such splendor as to justify the peninsula's poetic name. (267)

The pristine beauty of the place is only matched by the constant threat it poses to those who dare to venture into its midst to escape society, its conventions, and its laws:

A clayey soil sticking to the feet like glue, enormous trunks of fallen trees barring the way, and a suffocating odor of moldiness were among the obstacles to be overcome in the approach [of the Texar brothers' hideout]. And there were masses of formidable plants, such as the phylacias, and millions of pezizas, gigantic mushrooms, as explosive as if they were charged with gun-cotton or dynamite going off with a violent report at the slightest shock and filling the air with a choking cloud of tawny spores that give the human skin an eruption of painful pustules, so that the spiteful vegetables have to be avoided as carefully as the most dangerous animals of the teratologic world. (268)

The malevolent nature of the wetlands is a perfect fit for the demonic character of those who thrive in it as so many venomous plants, primitive and barbaric beings who defy justice and challenge democratic reason and whom the text describes in highly racialized terms, adding to their personal villainy the double threat that nomadism and miscegenation has always posed to civilization: "When Florida belonged to the Spaniards it was thither that all the white scoundrels fled from justice. Mixing with the native population, among whom there still were traces of Carib blood, they made common cause with the Creeks and the Seminoles and nomadic Indians who were only subdued after the long bloody war that ended in 1845" (268). One is reminded here of the description of the "savages" Barbicane and his party encounter in *From the Earth to the Moon*, small bands of uncontrollable warriors on horseback whose very mobility might well make the foundation of the Columbiad more difficult. Barbicane's technological project, resting as it was on sedentarity, territorialization, and rootedness in a pacified, controlled environment is directly challenged by the Seminoles' nomadic culture as a symbiotic, natural product of the Floridian wilderness itself. In both novels, the triumph in the New World of a modern Republic based on science and industry implies the submission of the pre-modern communities, values, and ideologies that resist it, whether those of native tribes or poor white Confederates.¹⁷

Were things so different on the other side of the Atlantic? Verne, a conservative republican, supported at home the politics of another Jules, Jules Ferry,

whose program derived from the philosophical principles of the Enlightenment and included the alphabetization of the peasantry, a political “civil war” against the enemies of Progress (the Church and the Monarchists), and the colonization of African peoples in need of civilization: in short, another version of the struggle between North and South, but on another continent. Verne’s fascination with twin figures is well known, and there are many instances of rival siblings and uncanny doppelgängers in his Floridian novels, from the evil Texar brothers to the couple formed by Barbicane and Nicholl, the competing scientists in *From the Earth to the Moon*. Verne’s two Floridas are twin sisters, and feuding ones as well, as they represent opposite sides of the divide of modernity: progress and reaction, Western science and native mythology, medicinal plants and poisonous flora. The luxuriance of the Everglades’ green watery world is the backdrop of a battle between the just ones and the villains that transposes to the exotic locales of subtropical America the contested birth of the Third Republic in France.

Studies of Jules Verne’s politics have pointed to the contradictions between his traditional, bourgeois lifestyle and conservative views and the radical critique of the establishment voiced by some of his most memorable characters, such as the rebellious figure of Captain Nemo in *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea*. The walls of Nemo’s study are covered with the portraits of his favorite heroes, champions of oppressed peoples and dominated nations, including two martyrs of the abolitionist cause, John Brown, of course, and Abraham Lincoln, “killed by a bullet from a slave-owner’s gun.”¹⁸ Nemo’s creator, for his part, applauded the bloody repression of the revolutionary Paris Commune in 1871 and sided with the opponents of Captain Dreyfus during the famous Affair. But Verne also befriended Elysée Reclus, a major figure of the anarchist intelligentsia of his time, and some have seen in him an “underground revolutionary,” to quote writer and poet Pierre Louÿs. More recently, Jean Chesneaux has suggested that literary creation provided Verne with an opportunity to express his repressed resentment against his social class, his narrators and characters allowing him to voice ideological views he could not defend in person.¹⁹ A great admirer of Abraham Lincoln, Verne conceived of *North Against South* not only as a historical novel of adventure, but as a didactic *roman à thèse* devoted to the democratic politics of his time on both sides of the Atlantic. In the book, Verne sides with the Union, celebrates the abolitionist cause, reaffirms his belief in reason, justice, and tolerance, and unequivocally condemns the alliance between the rich slave-owners and the reactionary “populace” of the poor whites. The epic conflict between the forces of Good and Evil in the tropical wetlands of the Everglades is representative of Verne’s popular, didactic, and morally edifying kind of literature. It can be read as the transposition of the French Republicans’ idealized version of their own political agenda: the struggle between moral and scientific Enlightenment, on the one hand, and the mindless fanaticism of extremists from the right and the left, Monarchists and *Communards*, on the other. In this sense also, Jules Verne’s Floridas are eminently French Floridas.

Notes

¹ Timothy Unwin, *Jules Verne: Journeys in Writing* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2005), 8.

² Cited in Unwin, *Journeys*, 8-9.

³ Arthur B. Evans, "Science Fiction vs. Scientific Fiction in France: From Jules Verne to J.-H. Rosny- Aîné." *Science Fiction Studies* 15.1 (1988): 1.

⁴ Unwin, "Science of Fiction," 56, 47. Terry Hale and Andrew Hugill concur with Unwin's view of the interplay between the objective and the poetic by stressing the "unlikely affection with which the Surrealist movement viewed Verne" (122), and his lasting influence on the French literary avant-garde, including Raymond Roussel and other members of the Collège de Pataphysique (Queneau, Leiris, Vian). Terry Hale and Andrew Hugill, "The Science is Fiction: Jules Verne, Raymond Roussel, and Surrealism," in *Jules Verne: Narratives of Modernity* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2000), ed. Edmund J. Smyth, 122-141.

⁵ Jules Verne, *From the Earth to the Moon & Around the Moon*, R.G.A. Dolby ed., (Ware, United Kingdom: Wordsworth Editions, 2011), 6.

⁶ Verne, *Earth*, 31. Those who argue for the fictional nature of Verne's use of science will see in this type of scientific exposition, so prevalent in his writings, an adjuvant to "verisimilitude," what Roland Barthes called "effet de réel."

⁷ *Ibid.*, 5. America is overwhelmingly represented in Verne's writings. More than one third of the sixty plus novels that make up *Voyages extraordinaires* take place, at least in part, in the United States, and the number of American characters in the series exceeds that of the French. Verne, however, never went to Florida. His only trip to the United States, in 1867, took him to New York City and Niagara Falls. See Herbert R. Lottman, *Jules Verne: An Exploratory Biography* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1996), 121-124.

⁸ Jean Chesneaux, "Jules Verne's Image of the United States," *Yale French Studies* 43 (Nov. 1969): 121.

⁹ Verne, *Earth*, 7. As a testimony to Verne's growing disillusion with the optimistic positivism of his youth, Barbicane Maston and Nicholls return in *Topsy Turvy, or The Purchase of the North Pole* (1889), having gone from "exterminating angels" (but angels all the same, and "otherwise the best fellows in the world") to demented engineering villains bent on the destruction of part of the globe for financial gain. They are once again determined to construct a giant cannon, but no longer to expand human knowledge by exploring the known and unknown universe. This time, they plan to alter the Earth's rotation axis in order to melt the polar ice cap and uncover rich coal and mineral deposits at the cost of drowning half the civilized world. This being said, Verne the author seemed to have retained until the end of his life some of his narrator's admiration for the

American character in *From the Earth to the Moon*, somewhat complicating the thesis of the novelist's gradual disaffection for the United States in general, and its "military instinct" in particular. At least, he still loved his American readers. In an 1894 interview published in *McClure's Magazine*, the aging novelist expressed his regrets for not being able to "see America again." "I should liked to have gone to Chicago this year," he told his interviewer, "but because of the state of my health [...] it was impossible. 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!" Cited in Arthur B. Evans, "Jules Verne's America," *Extrapolation* vol. 48 (Spring 2007): 42.

¹⁰ François-René de Chateaubriand, *Atala and René*, trans. Rayner Heppenstall (Richmond, United Kingdom: Oneworld Classics, 2010), 5.

¹¹ See <https://www.tampapix.com/julesvernepark.htm>. Accessed May 15, 2017.

¹² To my knowledge, the only available English translation of *Nord contre Sud* dates back to 1888 and was published by Rand McNally. An electronic version of the text, with similar pagination, is in the public domain and available at www.hathitrust.org.

¹³ Jules Verne, *Texar's Revenge; or North Against South: A Tale of the American Civil War* (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1888), 7.

¹⁴ Evans, "America," 37.

¹⁵ Verne, *North Against South*, 39. Compare with the description of Impey Barbicane: "a man of about forty; calm, cold, austere, of a character eminently serious and concentrated; as exact as chronometer, of a temperament above proof, of immovable force of mind; not romantic although adventuresome, but bringing practical ideas to bear upon the wildest undertakings; a true son of New England, a colonising northerner, a descendant of those Roundheads who proved so fatal to the Stuarts, an implacable enemy to the southern gentlemen, those ancient cavaliers of the mother-country. In a word, a Yankee all over" (*Earth*, 15). The self-reliant "colonising Northerner" can be found throughout Verne's *Voyages* as an exemplary figure of middle-aged white Anglo-Saxon masculinity. Cyrus Smith, the resourceful and heroic engineer from Massachusetts in *The Mysterious Island* displays strikingly similar characteristics: "A true Yankee, he was lean, bony, lanky, about forty-five years of age [...] Along with his ingenuous mind, he also possessed a 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" (cited in Evans, "America," 37).

¹⁶ On the "echo of utopian socialism" in Verne's writings, see Jean Chesneaux, *Political and Social Ideas of Jules Verne*, trans. Thomas Wikeley (London: Thames and Hudson,

1972), 69: “‘Steam and electricity for all tasks; in place of the exploitation of man by man, the exploitation of the globe by mankind’: can there be a better summary of the *Voyages extraordinaires* than his famous phrase of Saint-Simon?”

¹⁷ On the contradictory treatment of “noble savages” and “backward races” in Verne’s writings, see Jean Chesneaux, *Jules Verne: Un regard sur le monde* (Paris: Bayard, 2001), 165-182. See also Peter Aberger, “The Portrayal of Blacks in Jules Verne’s *Voyages extraordinaires*.” *French Review* 53.2 (1979): 199-206; and Ross Chambers, “Phileas Fogg’s Colonialist Policy,” in Graham Falconer and Mary Donaldson-Evans, eds., *Kaleidoscope: Essays on Nineteenth Century French Literature* (Toronto: Centre d’études romantiques, 1996), 155-164.

¹⁸ “There were portraits, portraits of those great men of history who had lived only to devote all their time to a great human ideal: Kozciusko, the hero who died with the words *Finis Poloniae* on his lips; Botzaris, the Leonidas of Modern Greece; O’Connell, the Irish patriot; Washington, the founder of the United States; Manin, the Italian patriot; Lincoln, killed by a bullet from a slave-owner’s gun; and finally John Brown, that martyr of the liberation of the black races, hanging on his gibbet as so frighteningly depicted by Victor Hugo.” Cited in Chesneaux, *Political and Social Ideas*, 45.

¹⁹ Chesneaux, *Political and Social Ideas*, (“The bourgeois façade and what it concealed”), 11-22.

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