

2015

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Repository Citation

Schulman, Peter, "Melancholic Mirages: Jules Verne's Vision of a Saharan Sea" (2015). *World Languages and Cultures Faculty Publications*. 24.

https://digitalcommons.odu.edu/worldlanguages_pubs/24

Original Publication Citation

Schulman, P. (2015). Melancholic mirages: Jules Verne's vision of a Saharan Sea. *Verniana: Jules Verne Studies/Etudes Jules Verne*, 7, 75-86.



Submitted September 9, 2014

Proposé le 9 septembre 2014

Published January 29, 2015

Publié le 29 janvier 2015

Melancholic Mirages: Jules Verne's Vision of a Saharan Sea

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Abstract

L'invasion de la mer (The *Invasion of the Sea*), Verne's last novel to be published during his lifetime, would appear to be a paradoxical vision of French colonial involvement as it chronicles the attempts of the French army occupying Tunisia and Algeria to capture Tuareg leaders bent on pushing the French out of the Maghreb on the one hand, and thwarting an environmentally disastrous French project on the other. *L'invasion de la mer* (The *Invasion of the Sea*) is a complex, if not melancholic vision of the limits of French expansionism, however. The real-life French army geographer François-Elie Roudaire and his backer, Ferdinand de Lesseps, seem to fascinate Verne the most. Roudaire's actual plans for the canal Verne writes about failed miserably but at the end of the novel, a tumultuous earthquake allows the "Saharan Sea" to be completed, kills the Tuareg leader and gives the victory to the French despite all their blunders. That Verne gives his final laurels to a failed inventor rather than flag-waving general serves as a wistful *fin-de-siècle* coda to what had been such innocently exuberant adventures at the start of his century.

Résumé

L'invasion de la mer, le dernier roman de Verne publié de son vivant, pourrait être considéré comme une sorte d'hybride entre les "deux Vernes" car il raconte d'une part les tentatives de l'armée française qui occupait la Tunisie et l'Algérie de capturer les chefs touaregs qui veulent repousser les Français hors du Maghreb, et d'autre part éviter un désastre environnemental (car les français ont pour but de construire "une mer intérieure en Algérie"). *L'invasion de la mer* représente une vision complexe et mélancolique des limites du colonialisme français. Ce sont le vrai géographe français François-Elie Roudaire et son commanditaire Ferdinand de Lesseps qui semblent fasciner Verne le plus. Roudaire avait souffert d'un énorme déficit budgétaire pour son projet qui fut un grand échec. Or, à la fin de *L'invasion de la mer*, un tremblement de terre permet à la "mer saharienne" de se réaliser et d'éliminer le chef touareg en donnant la victoire aux français malgré toutes leurs erreurs. Verne place les lauriers sur la tête d'un inventeur raté plutôt que sur celle d'un grand soldat et termine ainsi son cycle littéraire sur une vague de tristesse par rapport à l'esprit si enthousiaste qui caractérisait son commencement.

Although his earlier works such as *Cinq semaines en ballon* (1863) and *Le Tour du monde en quatre-vingts jours* (1873) have been part of a corpus that helped to establish Jules Verne as a cheery author eager to glorify European conquests around the world (even though not all of his early works are always so “cheery” or optimistic), his later novels such as *Les Cinq Cent Millions de la Bégum* (1879) or *Maître du monde* (1904) are so pessimistic and dystopian that many scholars have commented on a shift within Verne’s attitudes towards life — from a sunny positivist to a dark cynic fearful of megalomaniacal land-grabs between nations or greedy industrialists. At first glance, *L’Invasion de la mer* (1905), Verne’s last novel to be published under his name in his lifetime, would appear to be a sort of hybrid of what Arthur B. Evans has called the “two Vernes” (Evans x) as it chronicles the attempts of the French army occupying Tunisia and Algeria to capture Tuareg leaders bent on pushing the French out of the Maghreb on the one hand, and thwarting an environmentally disastrous French project to construct “une mer intérieure en Algérie” (“an inland sea in Algeria” quoted by Evans, xiv) on the other. Indeed, as the novel’s title suggests, the Tuareg are existentially threatened not only by a military invasion but an ecological one as well as the French prepare a two-hundred-kilometer Suez-like canal linking the Tunisian Gulf of Gabès with the eastern territories of Algeria.

While the outline of the novel would suggest that Verne had written yet another indictment of misguided powers unwisely tampering with the environment (compare the “Gun Club” engineers in *Sans dessus dessous* (1889) who sought to change the earth’s axis through a giant cannon blast), *L’Invasion de la mer* is a complex, if not melancholic vision of the limits of French expansionism. Indeed, while the French army and the Tuareg leaders fight in a type of guerrilla war across the Sahara, it is the real-life French army geographer François-Elie Roudaire and his backer, Ferdinand de Lesseps, that seem to fascinate Verne the most. Roudaire’s actual plans for the canal Verne writes about went wildly over budget and failed miserably, yet at the end of *L’Invasion de la mer*, a tumultuous earthquake allows the “Saharan Sea” to be completed, kills the Tuareg leader and gives the victory to the French despite all their blunders throughout the campaign.

That Verne gives his final laurels to a failed entrepreneur rather than a flag-waving general serves as a wistful *fin-de-siècle* coda to what had been such innocently exuberant adventures at the start of his century. There is, in fact, a sense of fatalism throughout the novel that is highlighted by the novel’s title itself: no matter how careful the plans may be on each side of the battle (the enterprising French or the Tuareg guerrilla war), the sea, not man, will be the ultimate invader. Why did Verne pick this particular title with its emphasis on *invasion* rather than the two other choices he had come up with, the more neutral *La mer saharienne* (*The Saharan Sea*) or *Une nouvelle mer au Sahara* (*A New Saharan Sea*)? The indecision that he had shown in selecting a title might well have reflected his own ambivalence towards the French mission and the heroes meant to fulfill it. [1]

Arthur B. Evans has pointed out the difference between the relatively optimistic early Verne and the darker, later one, a difference that had a direct effect on sales at the time from a peak of a hundred thousand copies of *Le Tour du monde en quatre-vingt jours* in 1873 to a mere five thousand in 1898 for *Le Superbe Orénoque* (Evans, ix). Verne has always been wary of countries or money-crazed capitalists usurping for nationalist or financial gain (although he more often than not targeted France’s archrivals England and Germany as the most egregious empire builders). Even in his arguably most pro-French colonialist novel, his first in fact, *Cinq semaines en ballon* (1863), when Ferguson warns of deforestation and the over-exploitation of global resources in America,

A son tour, ce nouveau continent se fera vieux; ses forêts vierges tomberont sous la hache de l'industrie, son sol s'affaiblira pour avoir trop produit ce qu'on lui aura trop demandé [...] Alors l'Afrique offrira aux races nouvelles les trésors accumulés depuis des siècles dans son sein. (*Cinq semaines en ballon*, 123)

That continent will in turn grow old, her virgin forests will fall under the axe of excessive demands made upon it [...] When that time comes, Africa will offer to the new races the treasures accumulated in her breast for centuries. (Chambers, *trans.*, 70)

Kennedy warns of an apocalyptic end of the world caused by too much hyper industrialization and proto-global warming:

[C]ela sera peut-être une forte ennuyeuse époque que celle où l'industrie absorbera tout à son profit ! A force d'inventer des machines, les hommes se feront dévorer par elles ! Je me suis toujours figuré que le dernier jour du monde sera celui où quelque immense chaudière chauffée à trois milliards d'atmosphères fera sauter notre globe !. (*Cinq semaines en ballon* 124)

[T]he time when industry gets a grip of everything and uses it to its own advantage may not be particularly amusing. If men go on inventing machinery they'll end by being swallowed up by their own machines. I've always thought that the last day will be brought about by some colossal boiler heated to three thousand atmospheres blowing up the world. (Chambers, *trans.*, 71)

Similarly, in *La Jaganda*, in reference to the shrinking population of the Amazon Indians, Verne writes:

C'est la loi du progrès. Les Indiens disparaîtront. Devant la race anglo-saxonne, Australiens et Tasmaniens se sont évanouis. Devant les conquérants du Far-West s'effacent les Indiens du Nord-Amérique. Un jour, peut-être, les Arabes se seront anéantis devant la colonisation française. (1^{ère} partie, chpt XVI, quoted by Boia 248).

It's the law of progress. The Indians will disappear. Faced with the Anglo-Saxon race, Australians and Tasmanians have vanished. Faced with the conquerors of the Far West, the Indians of North America are being erased. One day, perhaps, the Arabs will be annihilated in the face of French colonization. [2]

Yet as Lucien Boia explains, Verne may write with acidity about other countries and movements, France's own colonialist agenda is often spared. Algeria is presented proudly as "une deuxième France" ("a second France") in *Clovis Dardentor*, for example, and as Boia remarks, in *L'Invasion de la mer*:

Le progrès nécessaire joue en faveur des Français et contre les autochtones [...] La mer Saharienne se fera en dépit des protestations, légitimes certes, de ceux qui vont perdre leur terres. Mais légitime aussi est l'entreprise de la France, soutenue par les lois du progrès. (Boia 249)

Necessary progress works in favor of the French and against the natives [...] The Saharan sea will be made despite the of course legitimate protests of those who will lose their land. But France's enterprise is also legitimate, upheld as it is by the laws of progress.

In keeping with *L'Invasion de la mer's* seemingly split message, Verne posits two main heroes, the engineer de Schaller, who is responsible for spearheading the Saharan Sea project on behalf of the newly organized corporation, la Compagnie Franco-Etrangère [3] and the dashing Captain Hardigan whose "spahis" are sent to protect de Schaller's team. Hardigan, as Verne describes him, is loosely based on the "soldier geographer" Roudaire, the bachelor officer whom Jean-Louis Marçot laments "resterait dix-sept ans au grade de capitaine malgré ses brillants états de service et l'intervention de ses protecteurs civils" ("will remain seventeen years at the rank of captain despite his brilliant record of service

and the intervention of his civilian protectors”) [Marçot 206]. For Marçot, Roudaire was a utopist and a dreamer (206); for Verne, Hardigan represents the military/explorer ideal:

Le capitaine Hardigan était dans toute la force de l'âge. Trente-deux ans à peine. Intelligent, audacieux, mais d'une audace qui n'excluait point la prudence. Très accoutumé aux rigueurs de ce climat africain, et d'une endurance dont il avait donné d'incontestables preuves pendant ses diverses campagnes, c'était l'officier dans la plus complète acception du terme, militaire d'âme, ne voyant d'autre métier en ce monde que celui de soldat. D'ailleurs, célibataire, et même sans proches parents, il n'avait que son régiment pour famille, ses camarades pour frères. (*L'Invasion de la mer* 84)

Captain Hardigan was in the prime of his life, barely thirty-two years old, intelligent, daring but not rash, accustomed to the rigors of the African climate, and possessed of a stamina that he had demonstrated beyond question during his many campaigns. He was an officer in the fullest sense of the term, a soldier at heart, who could see no other career in the world than the army. Since he was a bachelor and had no close relatives, his regiment was his only family, and his comrades-in-arms were his brothers. (translated by Edward Baxter, all translations from *Invasion of the Sea* will refer to his translation, 56)

Similar to Roudaire who gained brief notoriety for his 1874 article in *La Revue des Deux Mondes* chronicling his adventures in the Sahara, Hardigan earns his sterling image of being an ideal leader:

On faisait plus que l'estimer au régiment, on l'aimait et quant à ses hommes, autant par affection que par reconnaissance, ils se fussent dévoués pour lui jusqu'au sacrifice. Il pouvait tout attendre d'eux, car il pouvait tout leur demander (*L'Invasion de la mer* 84)

He was not only respected in the regiment, but loved. The affection and gratitude of his men showed in their devotion to him, and they would have sacrificed their lives for him. He could expect anything from them, and could ask anything of them. (Baxter 56)

De Schaller, in contrast, is almost Phileas Fogg-like in his precision yet Michel Ardan-like in his enthusiasm:

M. de Schaller, âgé de quarante ans, était un homme de moyenne taille [...] le regard d'une extrême fixité. Ses épaules larges, ses membres robustes, sa poitrine arrondie où les poumons fonctionnaient à l'aise comme une machine à haute pression dans une vaste salle bien aérée... Au moral, cet ingénieur n'était pas moins 'établi' qu'au physique [...] Jamais d'ailleurs mentalité ne fut plus positive que la sienne. (*L'Invasion de la mer* 79)

Mr. de Schaller was forty years old, of medium height, strong willed [...] and a piercing gaze. His broad shoulders, his strong limbs, the barrel chest where lungs pumped as a high-pressure machine in a large, well-ventilated room, were all signs of a very robust constitution. And he was as perfectly well equipped mentally, as he was physically [...] No one ever had a more positive attitude than he. (Baxter, 53)

De Schaller has the drive and the energy of the best of Verne's heroes — or at least the mind for his mission, while Hardigan represents the more physical soldier-hero type. As Verne continues regarding de Schaller:

Esprit réfléchi, méthodique, mathématique; si l'on veut bien admettre cette épithète, il ne laissait prendre aucune illusion; bonnes chances et mauvaises chances d'une situation ou d'une affaire, il calculait tout avec une précision "poussée jusqu'à la dixième décimale," disait-on de lui. Il chiffrait tout, il enfermait tout dans des équations, et si jamais le sens imaginaire fut refusé à un être humain, c'est bien à l'homme-chiffre, à l'homme-algèbre qui était chargé de mener à bon terme les si importants travaux de la mer Saharienne. (*L'Invasion de la mer* 35)

With his reflective and methodical mind- mathematical, if one may use that term – he never let himself be deceived by illusions. It was said of him that he calculated the chances of success or

failure of a situation or a business affair with precision “carried to the tenth decimal place.” He reduced everything to figures and summed it up in equations. If ever there was a human being immune to flights of fancy, it was certainly this number-and-algebra man, who had been assigned to complete the vast work of creating the Saharian Sea. (Baxter 53)

In constituting his team of French heroes, Verne in fact tries to complete the work that had crushed Roudaire and Lesseps. Unusually, Verne sets *L’Invasion de la mer* not in contemporaneous times, as the vast majority of the *Voyages extraordinaires*, but, strangely, over thirty years into the future, in 1934. In an earlier, yet fantastical novel, however, *Hector Servadac* (1877), Verne writes of another Roudaire-like captain who, while studying the Algerian topography for the French army, is taken away, along with the rest of Algeria, into space by a giant comet. Written at around the time of Roudaire’s expeditions and findings, Verne already (if not prematurely) trumpets the Saharian Sea project’s triumph:

A cette époque et bien que pendant longtemps on eût renoncé à cette entreprise — la nouvelle mer saharienne avait été créée grâce à l’influence française. Cette grande oeuvre, simple restitution de ce vaste bassin du Triton sur lequel fut jeté le vaisseau des Argonautes, avait changé avantagement les conditions climatiques de la contrée, et monopolisé au profit de la France tout le trafic entre le Soudan et l’Europe. (*Hector Servadac* 794).

Quite recently a long-abandoned project had been revived and, by French influence, the new Sahara Sea had been created. This great achievement, which had refilled the Lake Tritonis that had borne the vessel of the Argonauts, had not only secured to France the monopoly of traffic between Europe and the Soudan, but had materially improved the climate of the country. (quoted by Evans xvi)

Later in that novel, Verne even adds an optimistic footnote to this *fait-accompli* by stating that the British, influenced by such a French engineering feat, did the same thing in Australia: “[E]merveillée au succès de la mer saharienne créée par le capitaine Roudaire, et, ne voulant pas être en reste avec la France, l’Angleterre fondait une mer australienne au centre de l’Australie” (“[A]stonished at the success of the Saharian Sea lately formed by Captain Roudaire, and unwilling to be outdone by France, England was occupied in a great scheme for the formation of a similar sea in the center of Australia” *Hector Servadac*, 811, quoted by Evans xviii). Indeed, de Schaller’s devotion to Roudaire’s plan in 1934 is, for his backers, a sure sign of future success, as Verne puts it:

Au surplus, du moment que M. de Schaller, après avoir froidement et minutieusement étudié le projet du capitaine Roudaire, l’avait déclaré exécutable, c’est qu’il l’était, et il n’était pas douteux que, sous sa direction, il n’y aurait aucun mécompte soit dans sa partie matérielle, soit dans sa partie financière. (*L’Invasion de la mer* 79)

Since Mr. De Schaller, after an objective and meticulous study of Captain Roudaire’s plan, had declared it to be feasible, then that clearly meant it was. Under his direction, there would certainly be no miscalculation in either materials or finances. (Baxter 53)

For Jean-Pierre Picot, the hybrid Lesseps-Roudaire combination embodied by de Schaller and Hardigan is even calculated with numeric precision. He explains the atypical far-off date the novel is set in as a direct continuation of Lesseps’ spirit that begins with Lesseps’ death in 1894, the year de Schaller was born if he is 40 years old in 1934. For Picot, even the date of publication is Lesseps-related:

[R]evu et corrigé de façon à paraître en 1905, dès le 1er janvier, soit trois semaines après le dixième anniversaire de la mort de Ferdinand — et faisant mention du passage de la reprise du chantier de Panama par les Américains en avril 1904 — *L’Invasion de la mer* est bel et bien un monument à la mémoire de l’homme du canal de Suez. Mais un monument qui se veut allègre

et non pas funèbre. Car de Schaller, c'est Ferdinand ressuscité, c'est Ferdinand triomphant, c'est Ferdinand heureux. (Picot 79)

[R]eviewed and edited so as to come out in 1905, as early as January 1st, or rather three weeks after the tenth anniversary of Ferdinand's death — and making a reference to the passage of the re-taking of the Panama construction site taken over by the Americans in April 1904 — *Invasion of the Sea* is indeed a monument to the memory of the Suez canal man. But a monument that wishes to be a cheerful one and not funereal. Because de Schaller is a resurrected Ferdinand, a triumphant Ferdinand, a happy Ferdinand.

If Lesseps died with his projects ruined and a five year prison sentence that he would never serve, Verne creates a revisionist composite of what could have been were things to have turned out as he appears to think they should and could have. Indeed, throughout the later *Voyages extraordinaires*, Verne does not hesitate to champion Lesseps. Picot even suggests that *Sans dessus dessous*, during which the world's axis is jeopardized by reckless entrepreneurs, contains pro-Lesseps messages: “*Sans dessus dessous* aurait donc été conçu, rédigé et publié avec, en exergue implicite, la phrase : ‘Ce n'est pas avec Ferdinand de Lesseps qu'une telle catastrophe technologico-financière se produirait !’” (“*Topsy-Turvy* would have thus been conceived, written and published with, as an epigraph, the sentence: ‘You wouldn't have had such a technological-financial disaster with Ferdinand Lesseps!’”) [Picot 78]. Picot hypothesizes. Even Captain Nemo in *Vingt mille lieues sous les mers* admires Lesseps as he and Aronnax discuss the junction between the Red Sea and the Mediterranean:

- Eh bien, capitaine, ce que les Anciens n'avaient osé entreprendre, cette jonction entre les deux mers qui abrégera de neuf mille kilomètres la route de Cadix aux Indes, M. de Lesseps l'a fait et avant peu, il aura changé l'Afrique en une île immense.

- Oui, monsieur Aronnax, et vous avez le droit d'être fier de votre compatriote. C'est un homme qui honore plus une nation que les plus grands capitaines ! Il a commencé comme tant d'autres par des ennuis et les rebuts, mais il a triomphé, car il a le génie de la volonté. Et il est triste de penser que cette oeuvre, qui aurait suffi à illustrer un règne, n'aura réussi que par l'énergie d'un seul homme. Donc, honneur à ce grand citoyen, répondis-je, tout surpris de l'accent avec lequel le capitaine Nemo venait de parler. (2^{ème} partie, Chapitre 4 quoted by Picot, 75).

“Well, Captain, what the ancients dared not undertake, this junction between the two seas, which will shorten the road from Cadiz to India by nine thousand kilometers, Monsieur Lesseps has succeeded in accomplishing; and before long he will have changed Africa into an immense island.”

“Yes, Monsieur Aronnax, you have the right to be proud of your countryman. Such a man brings more honor to a nation than great captains. He began, like so many others, with difficulties and rebuffs; but he has triumphed, because he has the genius of will. It is sad to think that this work, which should have been an international work and which would have sufficed to make a reign illustrious, should have succeeded by the energy of one man. Thus, one must give honor to Monsieur Lesseps!” “Yes, honor to this great citizen!” I replied, surprised by the manner in which Captain Nemo had just spoken.” (*The Complete Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea*, translation Emanuel J. Mickel, 323)

Moreover, as Régis Debray has observed, Verne places much confidence in the colonial spirit to actually transform the world around us for the good. For Verne, Debray explains, innovation and action are all part of the colonist's character:

Fascination du colon, c'est l'homme du progrès. Je crois que quand ils arrivent dans *L'île mystérieuse*, Cyrus Smith, Gédéon Spilett et les autres perçoivent la possibilité d'une petite Amérique, d'un petit paradis. L'ingénieur Cyrus Smith est formé à l'idée qu'en construisant des chemins de fer, ou des canons, ou des fusées, on va transformer non seulement le monde,

mais l'homme. C'est la conviction du progressisme de haute époque [...] C'est une prouesse d'ingénieurs, que la géographie ignore, tout comme l'Histoire. On pose des rails, on perce des voies, on trace des routes, on lance des fusées pour aller droit au but...[mais] on ne va jamais droit au but ! (Debray 288)

The colonist is fascinated by the man of progress. I think that when they arrive on *The Mysterious Island*, Cyrus Smith, Gideon Spilett and the others perceive the possibility of a little America, a little paradise. The engineer, Cyrus Smith, is educated by the idea that by constructing railways, or canons, or rockets, one can transform not only the world, but man. That's the conviction of the high progressivism at that time [...] it's the prowess of engineers, that geographers, just as History, is not aware of. Rails are set, lanes are drilled for, rockets are launched to go directly on target...[but] they are never directly on target!

Often in Verne's work, the heroes in fact arrive at their goals not as a consequence of the success of their plans but by way of their errors. Paganel in *Les Enfants du Capitaine Grant* (1867-68) makes a mistake in his calculations but arrives at his goal anyway; Fogg's forgetting about the International Date Line [4] gains him the extra day he needs to win his bet; even at the end of *L'Invasion de la mer*, the Saharan Sea is not created by the French who get captured, and then dispersed, but the cataclysm that fulfills the project naturally. Yet, as Verne writes in *Les Voyageurs du XIX^{ème} siècle* (1880), technology and vision always have the potential of winning the day — the essential part, as he understands it, is coming up with the right invention for the right need:

A nous, par tous les moyens que le progrès des Sciences met à notre disposition, d'étudier, de défricher, d'exploiter ! Plus de terrains en jachère, plus de déserts infranchissables, plus de cours d'eau inutiles, plus de montagnes inaccessibles ! Les obstacles que la nature nous oppose, nous les supprimons, les Isthmes de Suez et de Panama nous gênent : nous les coupons. Le Sahara nous empêche de relier l'Algérie au Sénégal : nous y jetons un *railway*. L'océan nous sépare de l'Amérique : un câble électrique nous y relie : le pas de Calais empêche deux peuples, si bien faits pour s'entendre, de serrer cordialement la main : nous y percerons un chemin de fer ! (quoted by Dekiss, in Debray, 333).

For us, with all the means that the progress of the Sciences make available to us, to study, to decipher, to exploit! No more fallow lands, no more impassable deserts, no more inaccessible mountains! The obstacles that nature confronts us with, we will eliminate, the Isthmus from Suez and Panama bother us: we will cut them. The Sahara prevents us from linking Algeria to Senegal: we'll throw a *railway* onto it. The ocean separates us from America: an electric cable will connect us to it: the Straits of Dover are in the way of two populations, who are so suited to getting along, to shake hands cordially: we'll tunnel in a railroad!

Yet, as with many of Verne's later novels where nature has the ultimate word over technology, a pre-apocalyptic melancholy infiltrates the narrative. At one point, for example, de Schaller, Hardigan and Hardigan's lieutenant, Villette, discuss the nature of cataclysms in general and their effects on the planet. "Qui peut lire dans l'avenir ?" ("Who can read the future?") de Schaller asks before musing:

— Notre planète, ce n'est pas douteux, a vu des choses plus extraordinaires, et je ne vous cache pas que cette idée, sans m'obséder, m'absorbe quelquefois. Vous avez sûrement entendu parler d'un continent disparu qui s'appelle *Atlantide*, eh bien ! Ce n'est pas une mer saharienne qui passe aujourd'hui dessus, c'est l'océan Atlantique lui-même, et les exemples de ces sortes de cataclysmes ne manquent pas [...] Pourquoi ce qui s'est produit hier ne saurait-il se reproduire demain ?

— L'avenir, c'est la grande boîte à surprises de l'humanité, répondit en riant le lieutenant Villette.

— Juste mon cher lieutenant, affirma l'ingénieur, et quand elle sera vide...

— Eh bien, le monde finira,” conclut le capitaine Hardigan. (*L’Invasion de la mer* 129)

“Our planet has certainly seen more extraordinary things than that, and I don’t mind telling you that that idea does occupy my attention at times, although it’s not an obsession with me. You’ve surely heard of the lost continent of Atlantis, which is covered today, not by a Saharan Sea, but by the Atlantic Ocean itself, and at definitely established latitudes. There have been many cataclysms of that kind, although on a smaller scale, I grant you. [...] What happened yesterday could happen again tomorrow, couldn’t it?”

“The future is humanity’s great surprise package,” replied Lieutenant Villette with a laugh.

“Exactly, my dear lieutenant,” declared the engineer, “and when the package is empty...”

“The world will come to an end,” concluded Captain Hardigan. (Baxter 94)

Indeed, while de Schaller had given a speech in the Gabès Casino to convince future investors to support his project despite Roudaire’s prior failures, the specter of doubt and death hovers throughout the novel. In the very beginning, as if to corroborate Ferguson’s comment in *Cinq semaines en ballon*, as the balloon follows the path of massacred European explorers before them: “Ah ! L’on peut appeler justement cette immense contrée le cimetière des Européens !” (*Cinq semaines*, 251) [“This great country may well be called the white man’s grave” Chambers, 141], Verne recounts the misadventures of the fallen Europeans who were killed by the Tuareg, he labels “les pirates du désert” [“the pirates of the desert”](142). He writes of Flatters, “ce courageux officier” [“that courageous officer”] who was brutally killed during his explorations as well as the Belgian Carl Steinx whose heinous murder would ignite a vengeance-seeking French public against his attackers: “Il n’y eu qu’un cri : Venger la mort du hardi explorateur, et la venger sur cet impitoyable chef Touareg, dont le nom fut voué à l’exécration publique” (37) [“the outraged public demanded vengeance and grieved for the death of this brave explorer; they insisted that the ruthless Tuareg chieftain whose name was held up to public loathing, pay for this crime and for his many other attacks on caravans,” Baxter 22]. Yet, when Hardigan and de Schaller discuss the future of the Sahara, Hardigan can’t help to doubt the end result of de Schaller’s idealized vision. Lamenting the end of discoveries in the region, Hardigan admits he wants to appreciate the undisturbed desert landscape before it is irrevocably damaged. He enjoys the solitude it provides him with and fears that meddling with it is a fundamentally un-natural act that can only lead to disaster: “Gagnera-t-elle au change ?” [“Do you think the change will improve it?” Baxter, 67] Hardigan asks. “[...]Je suis convaincu,” [“Definitely, captain ...”] de Schaller explains, “que bientôt vous retrouverez l’animation de la vie commerciale là où ne se rencontrent encore que les solitudes du désert” [“I’m sure you’ll find a bustling commercial life where there’s nothing now but the solitude of the desert...”] to which Hardigan replies sadly, “ce qui avait son charme, mon cher compagnon” (96) [“Which has a charm of its own, my dear fellow” Baxter, 67].

Hardigan, in fact, reveals his deep-seated suspicion of de Schaller’s enterprise and those who think commercially at the expense of wrecking the environment. “Un esprit comme le vôtre,” Hardigan reflects, in response to de Schaller’s incapacity to understand Hardigan’s appreciation of desert landscapes, “non, sans doute [...] mais qui sait si les vieux et fidèles admirateurs de la nature n’auront lieu de regretter ces transformations que le genre humain lui impose !” (87) [“To a mind like yours, probably not. But who knows? The old stalwart admirers of nature may yet have cause to regret the changes imposed on it by the human race,” Baxter, 67]. To every one of Hardigan’s points, de Schaller bounces back with unbridled optimism and faith in his project: As de Schaller crows:

Eh bien, mon cher Hardigan, ne vous plaignez pas trop, car si tout le Sahara eût été encore d'un niveau inférieur à celui de la Méditerranée, soyez sûr que nous l'aurions transformé en océan de Gabès jusqu'au Littoral de l'Atlantique. (*L'Invasion de la mer* 87)

Well, my dear Hardigan, don't complain too much. If the entire Sahara Desert had been below the level of the Mediterranean, you can be sure we would have turned it into an ocean all the way from the Gulf of Gabès to the Atlantic coast, just as it must have been during some geological periods. (Baxter, 67)

Could Hardigan's thoughts be Verne's very own conclusion as well? It is certainly a scathing attack on hubristic attempts to manipulate nature for immediate business profits:

Décidemment, déclara en souriant l'officier, les ingénieurs modernes ne respectent rien ! [...] Si on les laissait faire, ils combleraient les mers avec les montagnes et notre globe ne serait qu'une boule lisse et polie comme un oeuf d'autruche, convenablement disposée pour l'établissement des chemins de fer. (*L'Invasion de la mer* 97)

Present-day engineers really have no respect for anything [...] If they had their way, they'd fill the oceans up with mountains and our globe would be nothing more than a smooth polished ball, like and ostrich egg, with a convenient network of railways! (Baxter, 67)

Although Hardigan and de Schaller debate vigorously, Verne underlines the fact that, despite not seeing eye to eye, "ils n'en seraient pas moins bons amis" (97) ["they would be good friends nonetheless," Baxter, 67) as they indeed, combined, form a composite Lesseps- Roudaire re-incarnation that he appears to endorse and admire. Perhaps they also reconcile Verne's own ambivalence towards potentially — and literally — "earth-shattering" re-configurations of natural spaces and indigenous peoples. While nature seems to provide a *deux-ex-machina* at the very end of the novel by carrying out the inundation that de Schaller was in the process of fumbling, Verne is nonetheless the one who has the last word — by definition as the author of the novel — a word that signals the ultimate victory of de Schaller's company: " 'Monsieur le Mandataire aux pouvoirs très étendus' de Schaller urges, " 'Prenez plutôt des actions de la mer Saharienne'. Et pendant qu'au milieu des manifestations et des félicitations, il poursuivait sa route, il se mit à chiffrer les devis des nouveaux travaux qui devaient figurer dans le rapport qu'il voulait envoyer le jour même aux administrateurs de la société" (281) [" 'Mr. Agent with full authority, let me give you a bit of friendly advice. You would do better to buy shares in the Sahara Sea Company.' As he went on his way, surrounded on all sides by cheers and congratulations, Mr. de Schaller was already working out a cost estimate of the new construction, which would appear in the report he intended to send to the company's directors that very day," Baxter, 206).

While the immediate threat of Tuareg revolt is eliminated by the flood that wipes them out as they pursue Hardigan and his men, de Schaller's last words which he utters with such alacrity insures that the ghosts of Roudaire and Lesseps might get their last word in as well. In his attempts to make their graves a bit less unsettled by pinning an unlikely victory and perhaps even a certain wishful continuity to their vision that had been so decisively destroyed during their lifetimes, Verne's farewell to novel writing remains one of solidarity for the last of the error-prone geniuses he had championed during his long and illuminating career. Yet, as the ambivalence inherent in Verne's choice of title suggests, there is a certain note of resignation in Verne's vision of colonial power. The idealism inherent in de Schaller and Hardigan's respective visions of either financial success or military heroism seem to just be mirages from the imaginative folly of nations and men. Similar to many of Verne's cataclysmic endings such as the exploding volcano in *Le Volcan d'or* (1906) that obliterates the prospectors' quest for gold, the sea does the

invading as if to wipe out the errors of humans, the true intruders within what was once a pristine desert.

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NOTES

1. For Francis Lacassin, Verne's final choice of titles represents a critique of France's "civilizing mission": " [...] *L'Invasion de la mer* montre un Jules Verne étrangement réticent [...] Et c'est ainsi que, pour la première fois de sa carrière, après avoir conçu ou anticipé une immense transformation due à l'application de la Science, [il] s'arrête au prélude [...] au meilleur scientifique et à la croissance effrénée, il préfère la justice" (Lacassin, 12-13).
2. Unless otherwise noted, all translations will be my own.
3. The France-Overseas Company which, according to Jean-Pierre Picot, was loosely based on La Compagnie Nouvelle de Panama [the New Panamanian Company] that was formed in 1894 from the rubble of Lesseps' Compagnie Universelle du Canal Transocéanien [The Universal Company of the Transoceanic Canal], Picot 33.
4. The IDL as such didn't exist yet in 1872.

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