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Verne Among the Punks, Or “It’s Not All Just a Victorian Clockwork”

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Abstract

Much of the critical discussion of the steampunk school in English-language science fiction and science fantasy rightly focuses on several Victorian roots of steampunk, but this focus should not eclipse the importance of Jules Verne to the development of steampunk. Given Verne’s broad and deep infiltration of Anglophone popular culture, I argue that the memes and motifs of the Verne corpus are at least as essential to the development of both steampunk and the extraordinary voyage as anything originating in nineteenth or early twentieth century English or American sources. Through this tracing of memes and motifs, I move beyond simply describing writers of Jules Verne pastiche who also happen to belong to the steampunk school – to defining, in a concrete way, what has long been presumed to be the “amorphous” influence of Verne on steampunk.

Note to the readers (from the Editors): the concept of steampunk is well defined at <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Steampunk>.

Résumé

La majorité des discussions critiques de l'école anglophone de “steampunk” en science-fiction et en science “fantasy” met correctement l'accent sur les différentes racines victoriennes du “steampunk”, mais cette focalisation ne doit pas éclipser l'importance de Jules Verne dans le développement du “steampunk”. Étant donné la large et profonde influence de Verne dans la culture populaire anglophone, je prétends que les thèmes et les motifs du corpus vernien sont au moins autant essentiels au développement du “steampunk” et des voyages extraordinaires que tout ce qui est issu des sources du dix-neuvième ou du début du vingtième siècles anglais ou américain. En retraçant les thèmes et motifs, je vais au-delà des pasticheurs de Verne qui appartiennent aussi au “steampunk”, afin de décrire de manière concrète ce qui a été longtemps considéré comme une influence “amorphe” de Verne sur le “steampunk”.

Note des éditeurs aux lecteurs: le concept de steampunk est bien décrit dans <http://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Steampunk>.

Let us take a short flight of whimsical fancy and imagine that, instead of wherever we may be, we are in fact sitting in overstuffed armchairs in the brass, oak, leather, port, brandy, and cigar-smoke environs of the palatial 53rd Thursday Club for the Advancement of Science and Society. Originally a gentleman’s establishment, it is perhaps not so very different from the Reform Club from which Phileas Fogg departs and to which he returns in *Around the World in Eighty Days*. The 53rd Thursday Club, however – in recognition of the contribution of thinkers like Ada Lovelace and Mary Shelley – will have long since admitted women to its ranks, something the actual Reform Club, filmic versions featuring female

invasion notwithstanding, did not do until 1981. That, at least was the earliest such change by any of the old Pall Mall clubs in London, and considerably earlier than the older and more conservative club in opposition to which Reform was formed, Brooks's Club, which did not admit women until the 1990s.

Founded by Jules Verne, the 53rd Thursday Club always and only meets for official business on the last day (Thursday) of every year which begins on a Thursday, and of every leap year which begins either on Wednesday or Thursday – and thus in which a red-letter 53rd Thursday also occurs. The Club never meets for official business at any other time, but is always open as a social club for use by its members.

The officers and members of the 53rd Thursday Club (among whom have been such occasionally contentious luminaries as H.G. Wells, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, Mark Twain, Nikola Tesla, and Madame Curie) do not find the official requirements of membership particularly burdensome. The odds that a given non-leap year will begin on a Thursday is only one in seven, while the odds that a leap year begins on either a Wednesday or Thursday is two in seven, but since leap years occur only once every four years, the circumstance that a leap year is also a fifty-third Thursday year occurs, by the odds, about once every fourteen years.

Given the calendrical and chronological rubric under which it meets, it comes as no surprise that the 53rd Thursday Club's main conference room, in its roofed-atrium saloon, is presided over by a large and vastly intricate steam-powered and gear-driven simulacrum of the solar system as celestial chronometer. Dedicated to the study and advancement of knowledge concerning space and time, the Club's activities and discussions range, in both its official and unofficial proceedings, from the more theoretical realms of mathematics and physics to more immediately practical advancements in energy and transportation.

I give you the preceding uchronian (if not necessarily utopian) scenario not because it echoes steampunk elements in *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* series or *The Five Fists of Science*, or because I'm trying to hammer out an overall metaphor for science fiction generally which is steampunkish particularly — or even because the year in which I write this, 2009, is itself a 53rd Thursday year. Rather, I wish to highlight that, although the steampunk subgenre generally presents itself as clubby British Victorian, steampunk is in fact a London gentleman's club founded by a French author, a British Victorian Phileas Fogg as puppeteered by a Frenchman, Jules Verne.

If we get beyond its top-hat, goggle and waist-coat trappings to its steam and gear guts, we quickly see that steampunk moves by clockwork (even more so in its sub-sub-genre known as clockpunk) and that it is particularly in its focus on steam engine time — on the gears running everything from pocket watches to locomotives to the cosmic clockwork — that steampunk is most distinctly Vernian in its memes, themes, and motifs.

In Verne's *Extraordinary Voyages*, one need look no further than the titles — summarizing phrases often imposed *post facto* by the publishing house, it's true — to see evidence of Verne's obsession with clockwork, with time, time-keeping, and duration even in travels through space: *Five Weeks in a Balloon* (1863), *From the Earth to the Moon: Passage Direct in 97 hours and Twenty Minutes* (1865), *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea* (1870), *Around the World in Eighty Days* (1873), *Eight Hundred Leagues on the Amazon* (1881), even his *Paris in the Twentieth Century* (written in 1863, published in 1994). Steam power too is also everywhere in Verne, perhaps nowhere more prominently than in *The Steam House* (1880).

Gears and steam are significantly less prominent in the work of that other great "prototyper" or early "maker" of what will one day be called science fiction, namely the properly British and Victorian H.G. Wells. Further, Verne's clockwork spatio-temporal obsession precedes Wells's different version of that same obsession, whether in Wells's short story "The Chronic Argonauts" (1881) or novella *The Time Machine* (1895). In works as different as *Time Machine* and *When the Sleeper Wakes*, Wells is more concerned with spatio-temporal *discontinuity*, in contradistinction to the clockwork spatiotemporal continuity generally highlighted by Verne. Verne emphasizes travel-time while Wells focuses on time travel, but machines for measuring the time one has been on one's travels necessarily pre-date machines for travelling through the time so measured.

Around the World in Eighty Days is Verne's quintessential travel-time book. Its hero, Phileas Fogg — the cool, collected, cash-heavy, aloof, somewhat Aspergerish and OCD hero, simultaneously phlegmatic and engaged in a breakneck race — is a clockwork Victorian, a gentleman-cipher who is himself obsessed with time, odds, and mathematics, even before he sets out on his quest to conquer the world and its spaces.

Described as "an enigmatic figure about whom nothing was known, except that he was a thorough gentleman and one of the most handsome figures in the whole of high society" and as a "bewhiskered Byron, an impassive Byron, who might live for a thousand years without ever growing old" (*Days* 7), he is also said to be "the least communicative of men" (8). His days are utterly scheduled and invariant. His only pastimes, we are told, were reading the newspapers and playing whist — a game he played "for playing's sake" not so as to win, a game "he found perfectly suited his character because it was for him a challenge, a struggle against a difficulty, but one that required no action, no travel, and no fatigue" (8-9). It is also a game the winnings from which he always gives to charity.

On the day when his well-regulated daily orbit suddenly expands — Wednesday, October 2nd — Fogg has just fired his sole domestic, James Forster, because "the fellow had made the mistake of bringing in [Fogg's] shaving-water at eighty four degrees Fahrenheit rather than the statutory eighty six" (10). Awaiting the arrival of Forster's successor, Fogg is described as "seated squarely in his armchair, both feet together like a soldier on parade, hands firmly on knees, body erect, head held high, steadily watching his clock, a complicated apparatus that showed the hours, minutes, seconds, days, dates, and years" (10). We are told that, "in himself, this gentleman gave the impression of being perfectly balanced in all his parts, weighted and poised, as flawless as a chronometer by Leroy or Earnshaw . . . precision personified" (12). Even his well-organized and perfectly comprehensive wardrobe is calendrical: "each pair of trousers, shoes, vest, coat bearing an order number. This number was marked on a register of incoming and outgoing items, showing the date on which each garment was to be worn, depending on the time of the year" (14). The person whose job it is to lay out that calendrical wardrobe is the new domestic, Jean Passepartout, who, after a life of much wandering, many jobs, abundant spontaneity and chaos, is only too glad to settle in with the well-regulated, mechanical-industrial clockwork man his new master Phileas Fogg appears to be.

Then of course — because at the Reform Club's whist table a discussion about a bank robbery leads in turn to a discussion about flight and hiding, and the world getting smaller, and how long it would take to circumnavigate the globe, and Fogg's bet of 20,000 pound sterling with his fellow whist-players that he can go around the world in eighty days or less, i.e. in 1920 hours, or 115,200 minutes (20), as he himself describes it — all hell breaks loose, at least from Passepartout's point of view.

From Fogg's point of view, however, it does not seem to do so. I have belabored the opening chapters of the book here in order to emphasize how Fogg's story is all about what chaoticists and complexity theorists have called "sensitive dependence upon initial conditions." Fogg himself, the epitome of order and mathematical certainty, believes in an utterly deterministic world. When he quietly but confidently declares in Chapter Three that "The unforeseen does not exist" (20), this clockwork man shows himself to also be a Newtonian-Laplacian fantasy man of the highest order, fully in agreement with Pierre Simon de Laplace's faith in a mechanistic and mathematically predictable universe, so clearly enunciated in his statement (in *A Philosophical Essay on Probabilities*) that a powerful enough intelligence — a brainy demon, or great clockwork computer, say — would "embrace in the same formula the movements of the greatest bodies of the universe and those of the lightest atom; for it, nothing would be uncertain, and the future, as the past, would be present to its eyes" (Laplace 4). As Graham Collins notes in his article "Impossible Inferences," in the March 2009 issue of *Scientific American*, "give the computing demon the exact positions and velocities of every particle in the universe and it will compute every future state of the universe" (Collins 19) — the unforeseen does not exist.

Yet, in 1873 — decades before Einsteinian relativity displaces the Newtonian notion of absolute space and time, before quantum theory and Heisenbergian uncertainty displace the Newtonian and Laplacian dreams of utterly controlled measurement processes, before Godel's incompleteness theorem, Turing's halting incomputabilities, and chaos and complexity theory all displace the Laplacian fantasy of linear-deterministic predictability — before *any* of that, Jules Verne, in *Around the World in Eighty Days*, conducts a novel-length thought experiment on what happens when a deterministic and determined clockwork man interacts with a nonlinear, chaotic, and messy world.

That "interacts" is, for much of the book, an overstatement about Fogg says much about the inadequacy of linearly deterministic approaches to the describing of that messy world he moves through. Although his "highly methodical travel-plan . . . included everything, and Mister Fogg always knew if he was ahead or behind," he has very little curiosity about the space he is moving through, "being of that breed of Britons who have their servants do their sightseeing for them" (34) — "a person rarely seen on deck who made little effort to observe this Red Sea, so redolent in memories and the theatre of the opening scenes of human history" (39). Later we are told Fogg "wasn't travelling, he was describing a circumference, and that "he constituted a heavy body moving in orbit around the terrestrial globe, following the rational laws of mechanics" (48). Although his fellow passenger, Brigadier General Sir Francis Cromarty, "was an educated man, who would willingly have provided information about the customs, history, and political system of India if Phileas Fogg had been the sort of man to ask for it, Phileas Fogg is not that sort of man, and requested nothing" (48).

Yet it is precisely here in India, specifically in Bundelkhand (also the home province of Prince Dakkar/Captain Nemo), that clockwork Fogg begins to interact more with the world around him, specifically when he decides to rescue the young, "white as a European" (60), and English-educated Parsee woman Aouda from suttee-death on her (formerly aged and now recently deceased) husband's funeral pyre. Turning to Cromarty, Fogg says,

"What about saving this woman?"

"Saving this woman, Mr. Fogg?" exclaimed the Brigadier-General.

"I'm still twelve hours ahead; I can use them that way."

"I say, you do have a heart!"

"Sometimes," he replied. "When I have the time" (62).

This is that same brand of understated assertion we saw earlier attached to "The unforeseen does not exist." Yet the rescue of Aouda is precisely something Fogg never indicates he has foreseen; it is, *she* is, the complexity in the heartbeat, the chaos that is not randomness, the Other not so otherly that the Self cannot recognize itself in it, the woman both exotic and domestic who proposes marriage to him, the noble woman who risks all to save the man she owes everything to (195). If Fogg in his circumnavigation had not crossed India overland unnecessarily in the first place, he could not have saved her, and been saved by her when she suggested marriage — with the result that Passepartout was sent to the Reverend Samuel Wilson's, where was learned the error that determined and linearly deterministic Fogg had made by *not* taking into account the emergent property arising out of the interaction of abstract clockwork and actual world, namely that

"By heading toward the east, Phileas Fogg had gone toward the sun, and consequently his days were four minutes shorter for each degree of longitude covered in this direction. Now there are 360 degrees on the Earth's circumference, and this 360, multiplied by 4 minutes, makes exactly 24 hours — in other words the day gained unconsciously. . . And this was why, on that very same day, Saturday, and not Sunday as Mr. Fogg believed, [his colleagues] were waiting for him in the drawing-room of the Reform Club" (201).

Along similar lines, Bruce Sterling suggests — in his introduction to a 2004 edition of *Around the World in Eighty Days* — that Verne

"always favors broken, fragmented characters. He divides them into operational trios of 'Head, Heart, and Hand' . . . Superego, Id, and Ego: a brainy overlord, a sentimental favorite, and some capable type who can get things done" (xiii).

Nonetheless, as apt as this idea may be, it is still not enough merely to say, as Sterling does, that "Aouda plays the Heart role" (xiv). Aouda is not only the one who suggests the tying of the knot of marriage but also is herself the knot of Complexity in which Heart, Other, Anima, Emergent, and Unconscious are all tied together, and who — in her domesticated-exotic yet unforeseeable self — makes possible the tying off of the loose ends of the novel.

To win Aouda and all she represents Phileas Fogg "must give and hazard all he hath" (2.9.21), as Bassanio also must do, to win Portia in *Merchant of Venice* — with the important distinction that, unlike Bassanio, Phileas Fogg doesn't know until his journey is over what he was really hazarding *for*. The narrator tells us that

"So Phileas Fogg had won his bet. He had completed the journey round the world in 80 days. To do so, he had used every means of transport: steamship, train, carriage, yacht, cargo vessel, sled, and elephant. In all this the eccentric gentleman had displayed his marvellous qualities of composure and precision. But what was the point? What had he gained from all this commotion? What had he got out of his journey? Nothing, comes the reply? Nothing, agreed, were in not for a lovely wife, who — however unlikely it may seem — made him the happiest of men (202)!"

Like Bassanio, Fogg, as a result of his circumnavigation experience, inverts the question of Matthew 16:26. For him, the issue becomes not what it will "profit a man to gain the whole world if he loses his soul," but rather the soul he will gain by losing, or at least hazarding, the whole world. And this is true not only for man but also for woman — for Aouda, who likewise risks all.

Just as Passepartout's nickname and its meaning of skeleton key is appropriate to his Handy role in the novel, and Detective Fix (the other Hand) is appropriately an embodiment of the *idée fixe*, it is not beyond the realm of the possible that "Phileas Fogg" is a tag name and a pun too: "Phileas" having its roots in the Greek word for "lover" and "Fogg" punning not only on the fact that the character is a Londoner but also on the French "brouillard/brume" or "vapeur" — fog, mist, haze, *steam*.

Fogg, in the early going, is not just a lover of steam, another "Steam Man of the Prairie," but in fact the would-be Steam-master of the Planet. He is the original, archetypal steampunk who, initially, is in Laplacian-demonic rebellion not so much against the stodginess of his Reform Club fellows, but against the restraints of that messy physical universe — space, time, and chance themselves. "The unforeseen does not exist," as he quietly but importantly tells us, early on — and his journey is initially intended to be a triumph of that will. He begins as a Don Quixote tilting (just as madly as that literary precursor, but ultimately more successfully) not at windmills but at the windmilling hands of the clock. Curiously, Fogg's Sancho Panza, Passepartout — trickster-clown servant to Fogg the master of order —refuses to alter the time on his pocket watch to match the changes in time zones through which he and his master pass. Passepartout thereby stubbornly insists on the arbitrariness and unreality of the real time which his master Fogg so firmly believes in — and so firmly believes he can best and control, until Fogg learns from Passepartout that, in keeping such careful track of minutes and hours, Fogg has lost a full day. (Curious too is the fact that the Mexican comic Cantinflas played both Passepartout and Sancho, very nearly back to back in his film career.)

Unlike Quixote, however, in the end Fogg gets his Dulcinea. He overcomes the enchanters and obstacles and Fixes by understanding in time his own delusions about time, his own errors in looking at the world — particularly in his ultimately realizing that not only does the unforeseen exist, but it is arguably what makes existence meaningful. As the Handdara Foreteller Faxe (a professional foreseer) puts it to Genly Ai in Ursula LeGuin's *Left Hand of Darkness*,

"The unknown, the unfortold, the unproven, that is what life is based on. If it were proven that there is no God there would be no religion. But also if it were proven that there is a God there would be no religion. . . What is known? What is sure, predictable, inevitable the one certain thing you know concerning your future, and mine?"

"That we shall die."

"Yes. There's really only one question that can be answered, and we already know the answer... The only thing that makes life possible is permanent, intolerable uncertainty: not knowing what comes next (71)."

On the level of chronology, Fogg and his story manifest the unforeseen, arising as they do out of "a truly surrealist act, a spontaneous, senseless decision to personally conquer the world" (xiv) as Sterling puts it in his introduction. It is an irruption of a what-comes-next, post-Victorian future into a Victorian present, both as imagined by a French author — while much of steampunk, in contrast, is an irruption of the post-Victorian (and postmodern) present into a Victorian past, most often as imagined by American authors.

Both *Around the World in Eighty Days* and steampunk more generally, to the extent that either or both are punkish, rebel essentially against a frustrating present. Verne's book generally expresses a yearning for an improved very-near-future to be achieved through a

fuller human control of energies and complexities, both cultural and natural; Steampunk expresses a yearning for an improved past, a nostalgia for a more human scale in the energies we now control, the complexities we now recognize.

Yet so many works of both Verne and his steampunk descendants are always really only about the present: every yesterday's tomorrow and every tomorrow's yesterday is always really only today. Verne's *Around the World in Eighty Days* and the stories of so many of his literary descendants dwell in the tension between linear determinism and complexity, in the awareness that all our systems of knowledge, all our inference devices and difference engines must ultimately fail to fully capture the meaning of the world. At the deepest levels, such stories confront the paradox that we have been post-human for as long as we've been human — ever since we made that first tool or spoke that first word.

Phileas Fogg appeals to us because he *is* us. He may be different from us in degree — richer from some unknown source, more obsessed, perhaps — but he is not different from us in kind. Our daily adventure too is racing against the clock. Fogg, with his daily recording of his itinerary and schedule, with his pocket almanac and red-bound copy of *Bradshaw's Continental Railway Steam Transit and General Guide* is the harbinger of who we are — with our Blackberries, iPhones, and travel blogs — and the world in which we increasingly live.

Based on his travels, Fogg would no doubt be at least a charter member in that 53rd Thursday Club (founded by Verne) with which I began this discussion. The novel in which Fogg occurs, and his creator too, have already been so apotheosized, appropriately in our day: In 2007, a hotels group based in Barcelona proposed the construction of a Galactic Suites Hotel, an orbiting resort which would offer its guests the opportunity to go around the world in eighty minutes and featured, as part of its proposed accommodations, something called a Jules Verne package.

Perhaps the ultimate apotheosis of Jules Verne thus far, however, may be that "Jules Verne" is the name of the European Space Agency ATV (automated transfer vehicle), an orbital cargo freighter which uses the world's most advanced space autopilot system. On the last day of March 2008 (according to Stephen Clark's post on the *Spaceflight Now* website, entitled "Jules Verne Practices Close Approach to Space Station"), the "robotic spacecraft *Jules Verne* hit all its marks on time as it traveled to the International Space Station" and performed, as NASA and ESA officials put it, "like clockwork."

The Phileas Fogg of the beginning of *Around the World in Eighty Days* would be proud of that. The Phileas Fogg of the end of *Around the World in Eighty Days*, however — the Phileas Fogg who has come to realize his need for the exotic Otherness of Aouda and the trickster-Otherness of Passepartout and Detective Fix, the Phileas Fogg that has come to realize his predictions about the world are fundamentally constrained by himself being a part of the world he is predicting — *that* Phileas Fogg would be even more impressed if he *hadn't* foreseen it.

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