



Submitted July 29, 2009

Published November 15, 2009

Proposé le 29 juillet 2009

Publié le 15 novembre 2009

Nemo, the *Nautilus*, and the Triumph of the Instrumented Will

Robert O'Connor

Abstract

The monstrous in science fiction is commonly an externalization of all or part of the solitary will, the overreacher's selfhood manifested in some embodiment manufactured by his own conscious or subconscious mind. A parallel science-fiction phenomenon empowers the individual or the collective self to achieve feats beyond the body's limited capacities through the ingenuities of engineering. Combining aspects of the willed monstrous and the engineered and logically explicable marvelous, Jules Verne's *Twenty Thousand Leagues under the Seas* focuses on a character whose ego combines many elements of 19th century willfulness and whose monstrous embodiment, the *Nautilus*, empowers its creator's will. As engineer, as collector, as taxonomist, as artist, as polymath, as imperialist, as revolutionary, as autocrat, as avenger, as misanthrope, as mercantilist, as environmental sentimentalist, as environmental rapist, as self-indulgent potentate, and as surrogate god, Captain Nemo is of his age though he believes himself opposed to it, and the *Nautilus* is the instrument by which he magnifies himself.

Résumé

Le monstrueux en science-fiction est souvent une extériorisation de tout ou partie de la volonté solitaire, l'ipséité de l'individu qui réussit se manifeste par une certaine forme de personnification réalisée par son propre conscient ou inconscient. Un phénomène parallèle la science-fiction permet à l'individu ou au moi collectif de réaliser des prouesses au-delà des capacités limitées de l'organisme grâce aux techniques de l'ingénierie. Combinant les aspects du monstrueux voulu et du merveilleux expliqué rationnellement, *Vingt Mille Lieues sous les Mers* de Jules Verne se concentre sur un personnage dont l'ego combine de nombreux éléments de l'entêtement du 19^{ème} siècle et dont l'incarnation monstrueuse, le *Nautilus*, rend démesurée la volonté de son créateur. Comme ingénieur, collectionneur, taxonomiste, artiste, esprit universel, impérialiste, révolutionnaire, autocrate, vengeur, misanthrope, mercantiliste, amoureux de l'environnement, violeur de ce même environnement, potentat indulgent à l'égard de soi-même, et enfin comme substitut Dieu, le capitaine Nemo appartient à son époque, même s'il y est opposé, et le *Nautilus* est l'instrument par lequel il se grandit lui-même.

The monstrous in science fiction is very commonly an externalization of all or some part of the solitary will, the overreacher's selfhood manifested in an embodiment manufactured by his own conscious or subconscious mind. Victor Frankenstein combines body remnants to produce his personal nemesis, his "own vampire" (Shelley 81), who will enforce the dark loneliness that created it. Dr. Jekyll uses the compound produced in his experiments with "transcendental medicine" (Stevenson 475) to unchain desire from the repressive powers of conscience and becomes, first, the murderer of his era's lethal respectability and, then, the self-murderer of his own repressive perfectionism. With the help of the long-dead Krell, Dr. Morbius amplifies and sends forth his incestuous Id to destroy anyone who would

come between himself and his daughter (*Forbidden Planet*). Such tales tend to be psychologically grounded, owing a debt as much to occult as to hard science.

A parallel science-fiction phenomenon, with fewer overtones of medieval pseudoscience, empowers the individual or the collective self to achieve feats beyond the body's limited capacities through engineering. Swift's Laputans oppress their earth-bound neighbors by blocking the sun and threatening to bring their island down onto their victims' homes and cities (*Gulliver's Travels* Part III). Robert Heinlein's Waldo Jones releases himself from the prison of his weakened body through manipulable devices that have since come to be referred to as "waldos" (*Waldo and Magic, Inc.*). The bionic Steve Austin (Caidin, *Cyborg*, and ABC's *The Six Million Dollar Man*) and the even more drastically reengineered Alex Murphy (*Robocop*) fight evil by using body enhancements that whole teams of scientists have given them.

A more complex manifestation of such character creation is the relationship between Captain Nemo and the *Nautilus* in Jules Verne's *Twenty Thousand Leagues under the Seas*. Combining aspects of the monstrous and of the logically engineered marvelous, Captain Nemo's *Nautilus* simultaneously encases and externalizes its creator. The ship, like the chambered shell after which it is named, provides an armored home for its restless captain and his obedient crew, allowing them, at times, to sequester themselves and, at other times, to lash out as a single threatening entity. Although there are moments when Nemo and his companions seem tempted toward a self-annihilating quietude, more typically, their actions embody the broad possibilities, from the relatively benign to the clearly malignant, of a decidedly 19th century triumph of the will. Perpetual Faustian endeavor is not the inevitably admirable and always forgivable thing Goethe and others once deemed it to be, and examined from the perspective of our own millennium, a century regretting more and more of the energetic triumphs of the human past, Nemo's engineered willfulness often seems a very dark thing indeed.

In keeping with the century that produced the Crystal Palace, Nemo's genius shows itself most directly through his capacities as an engineer, but an engineer possessing the managerial skills and the commanding personality of a captain of industry. The words Verne applies to another engineer of genius, Cyrus Smith of *The Mysterious Island*, fit Nemo perfectly:

whatever the circumstance, he never failed to retain the mastery over himself, nor to meet the three necessary conditions for human achievement: an active mind and body, an impetuous desire, and a powerful will. (13)

An "active mind and body" provide Smith and Nemo with the creative energy to initiate their projects, but "an impetuous desire" and "a powerful will" sustain them as they coordinate the work needed to complete what they have at first merely imagined. In Nemo's case, not only does he design a miraculously advanced submarine, but he funds and organizes its manufacture, and the manufacture of all its supporting technology, undetected by any world power. This latter fact, the vessel's entirely secret construction, allows Nemo and his crew to harass world shipping with such startling suddenness that Professor Aronnax and others believe the offending object to be a stupendous creature of natural origin (a gigantic narwhal in the opinion of Aronnax) rather than a product of human ingenuity.

Like a technically astute Jehovah, Nemo directs his Leviathan through the world's waters pursued by the righteous but inferior might of captain Farragut and the United States Naval vessel *Abraham Lincoln*. Farragut's success in finding the *Nautilus* suggests Nemo's willingness to be found, and the great Farragut's inability to outmaneuver Nemo

and the *Nautilus* or to breach the submarine's defenses demonstrates the immense tactical advantage Nemo and his machine have over any other captain and ship.

This dangerous power is confirmed when Professor Aronnax, his servant Conseil, and the French-Canadian harpoonist Ned Land are washed from the decks of the *Abraham Lincoln* and find precarious refuge on the metal skin of the *Nautilus*. For a moment, Dr. Aronnax retains his sea creature hypothesis, guessing that the hard exterior of the submarine is "a bony carapace, like that of some prehistoric animals" (45). At last, though, he admits "that the creature, the monster, the natural occurrence which had puzzled the entire scientific world and baffled and troubled the minds of seamen in both hemispheres, constituted a still greater marvel—a man-made phenomenon" (45). Still worse, this man-made phenomenon is under the command of a misanthrope reluctant to take on new passengers. As Nemo himself indicates to Aronnax and his companions after barely allowing them the mercy of shipboard captivity, it is only through his God-like caprice that they, his voluntary attackers, have been allowed to become Jonahs swallowed by Nemo's unnaturally luxuriant whale.

After their disconcerting entry into Nemo's disorienting hermitage, the tolerated intruders are introduced to the technology and the material amenities that allow Nemo his aquatic existence. Despite his sympathies with the poor and his revolutionary ideals, Nemo is as self-indulgent a connoisseur of the arts as any acquisitive robber baron and has indulged himself, within his bubble of steel beneath the pressures of the sea, with a private collection that any hoarder of cultural treasures might envy. The works of Raphael, da Vinci, Correggio, Titian, Murillo, Holbein, Velasquez, Ribera, Rubens, and others hang from the walls of the *Nautilus*. The ship also carries musical "scores of Weber, Mozart, Beethoven, Haydn, Meyerbeer, Herold, Wagner, Auber, Gounod, and several others" (72). Presumably, this music is intended for Nemo's own impromptu performances on the ship's organ, the powerful, and thus nearly inevitable, instrument of choice not only of the captain of the *Nautilus* but of such other great egotists of the human imagination as the Phantom of the Opera and the abominable Dr. Phibes.

In addition to his collected music and art, Nemo also possesses a museum's worth of oceanic biological specimens. Equipped with elaborate dredging nets to scoop up masses of marine life and diving suits and electrified bullets to hunt more selective specimens, Nemo has captured sea creatures in abundance, partially to supply his tables with food and partially to satisfy his scientific curiosity. This collecting exemplifies another great project of the 19th century will, the attempted gathering and taxonomic arrangement of all the earth's living things. Conseil particularly appreciates this effort and spends long hours not only specifying the Latin designation of each displayed creature but also using the large viewing windows of the *Nautilus* to further aid in the effort to catalogue the full range of sealife.

Nemo's knowledge of engineering, art, music, and biology is supplemented by his familiarity with geography, geology, metallurgy, hydrodynamics, navigation, electrodynamics, and cultural anthropology. Add to these capacities Nemo's fluency in French, English, German, Latin, and several other tongues, plus a mastery of the invented language of the *Nautilus*'s crew, and he clearly possesses a universal genius's store of facts and skills. The *Nautilus*'s library, in the opinion of Professor Aronnax, contains "everything that humanity has produced of greatest beauty in history, poetry, the novel, and science: from Homer to Victor Hugo, from Xenophon to Michelet, from Rabelais to Mme. Sand" (70). Nemo's volumes on science include "books on mechanics, ballistics, hydrography, meteorology, geography, geology, etc." which "[take] up at least as much

space as works on natural history” (70). It appears that little known to humanity remains beyond Nemo’s scope and that nothing vital – only political economy! - has been omitted from the *Nautilus*’s bookshelves.

None of this as yet suggests the *Nautilus* as a scourge of the seas or Nemo as a willful destroyer, but very early in the novel, before Aronnax, Conseil, and Ned Land have become Nemo’s prisoners, the *Nautilus* has already used its ramming power to cripple ships. The one rule the three outsiders are required to obey while on the *Nautilus* is to accept periodic isolation while the ship and its crew carry on activities the captives are not to witness. The murderous possibilities of these actions are evident, and the morbid lingering of the *Nautilus* in the vicinity of the sinking hulk of the *Florida*, with the bodies of four men, a woman, and an infant clearly visible to Aronnax and his companions (124-25), is a direct demonstration of the consequences of shipwreck. When Aronnax, after a period of involuntary sleep, is called to minister to the wounds of a *Nautilus* crew member, we have been primed to imagine Nemo’s probable depredations of the previous night, and later, when Nemo overtly attacks a European vessel and Aronnax watches its crew drowning (373), the full power of the *Nautilus* to enact its captain’s vengeance is revealed. The tears he then sheds as he gazes at the portrait of what presumably is his murdered family (373) indicates the intense private grief at the core of his rage.

That Nemo is a potentially dangerous autocrat, as haughty as any monarch and not to be trusted with the power of so infernal a machine as the *Nautilus*, is evident long before this scene, however. In an early summation of Nemo’s nature, we are told that Aronnax

instantly recognized his dominant feature: confidence in himself, for his head rose nobly from the curve formed by his shoulders and his dark eyes looked at you with a cool assurance. He was composed, since his skin, more pale than ruddy, indicated a calmness in the blood. Energy he possessed, as demonstrated by the rapid contraction of his eyebrow muscles. And courage also, since his deep breathing marked great vitality and expansiveness. (49-50)

A few pages after Aronnax makes this judgment, as applicable to a self-reliant hero as to a self-assured villain, Nemo tells him that he and his companions will forever remain the captain’s captives. The usually mild-mannered scientist then accuses Nemo of savagery, to which Nemo replies,

“I am not what you call a civilized being! I have broken with society for reasons which I alone have the right to appreciate. So I do not obey its rules, and I ask you never to invoke them in my presence again!” (63)

The ironic injustice of this situation is emphasized throughout the novel by the rancor which flares up between the commanding Nemo, whose central desire is to exercise his own unrestrained will, and the Canadian Ned Land, who embodies the North American triumph of freedom over autocracy, a triumph that Verne relies on in several of his novels to express his democratic sympathies. Because Ned, Aronnax, and Conseil are a threat to Nemo’s autonomy and anonymity, the *Nautilus* is to be their perpetual prison house.

Nor, as we have seen, is Nemo a self-denying autocrat. Although he is a champion of the disadvantaged and the powerless in one avatar of his existence, the *Nautilus* gives him access to everything he needs to live like the wealthiest potentate. He has no hesitation about reaping what the sea offers as long as he and his crew have some purpose in mind for using what their nets and electric bullets collect for them. Nemo directly states that hunting for the mere sake of killing is hateful to him, but apparently all is well if the hunter eats or wears what he shoots or the killer rights some moral wrong through the carnage he wreaks. Thus, when one of his sailors repeats the crime of the Ancient Mariner, the

universe seems not to notice because the albatross is being harvested for some unstated practical purpose. Aronnax describes the moment as follows:

It was then that I witnessed one of the finest gun shots ever to play on the heart-strings of a hunter. A big bird with a large wingspan, very clearly visible, was gliding towards us. Captain Nemo's companion shot at it when it was only a few metres above the waves. The animal fell down dead, and dropped down within reach of the skillful hunter, who seized hold of it. It was an albatross of the finest sort, an admirable specimen of those pelagic birds. (116)

Verne could hardly have missed the significance of this moment, but what is an act of perverse will requiring an eternity of penance in *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* occurs here with the everyday assurance that comes with a sense of moral entitlement.

Hunting, often to the point of mass slaughter, is one of the commoner acts of willfulness in 19th century tales of masculine adventure, but when one consumes nature in some more or less responsible fashion, what objection can be made to the killing? Even creatures of the most extreme rarity may be hunted as long as the eventual intention is to harvest their meat or their fur. Twice Nemo encounters creatures we are told are approaching extinction, and twice he allows them to be killed. He personally dispatches the first of these with a single electric bullet and leaves it to be carried off by a crew member:

It was a magnificent sea otter, an enhydra, the only quadruped that is exclusively marine. The five-foot otter was surely very valuable. Its skin, rich brown on top and silver underneath, was one of those admirable furs that are so sought after on the Russian and Chinese markets; the fineness and sheen of its coat meant it was worth at least 2,000 francs. I admired this curious mammal with its rounded head and short ears, round eyes, white whiskers like a cat's, webbed and clawed feet, and bushy tail. This precious carnivore, hunted and tracked down by fishermen, is becoming extremely rare, and it has taken refuge principally in the northern Pacific, where its species will probably soon become extinct. (115)

The second, a Dugong, falls to the harpoon of Ned Land with Nemo's encouragement. The self-indulgence of this particular *Nautilus* adventure is emphasized by the interchange that precedes it:

“Yes, Master Land, its flesh is real meat. It is very highly esteemed, reserved for the tables of princes throughout Malaysia. This excellent animal is so fiercely hunted that, just like its congener, the manatee, it is becoming rarer and rarer.”

“And so, captain,” Conseil said seriously, if by chance this were the last of its race, would it not be better to spare it—in the interests of science?”

“Perhaps,” responded the Canadian, “but in the interests of the table, it is better to hunt it.”

“So go ahead, Master Land,” replied Captain Nemo.” (220)

Despite some difficulty, Land kills the Dugong, and its flesh is added to the ship's larder.

Nemo also uses the *Nautilus* to enforce his personally approved code of animal morality. In what seems an extension of his hatred of predatory humans, he has little tolerance for predation among sea creatures and champions the sentimentalist cause of the weak occupants of the lower rungs of the food chain against the stronger, larger carnivores at the top. His first massacre of predators is of the swarming Giant Squid that have impeded the *Nautilus*'s movement. When the beak of one of these creatures fouls the submarine's propeller, Nemo vows, in words suggestive of Kurtz in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, to “Surface, and exterminate all the vermin” (346). With arms enough to rival

Scylla, the dozen or so squid are, to varying degrees, butchered by the crew, who experience a killing frenzy as they strike at the writhing tangle of tentacles. Luckier than Odysseus, Nemo loses one crew member in the encounter rather than six.

Much more extreme is the carnage Nemo inflicts, during a transparent parody of the obsessive hatred of Ahab against Moby Dick, upon a pod of sperm whales that have chosen to attack a pod of gentler baleen whales. When Ned Land asks to harpoon one of the baleen whales, the suddenly conscientious Nemo says, “What would be the point?” He condemns “Hunting simply to destroy!” and because “We have no use for whale oil here on board” (287), he refuses to let the captive harpoonist proceed. He even goes so far as to lecture Ned on the terrible impact whaling has had on the marine life in Baffin Bay. Nemo then notices the sperm whales quickly approaching to attack the morally preferable baleen whales and declares, “it is right to exterminate such cruel and evil-doing animals” (288). As Nemo uses the *Nautilus* to spear sperm whale after sperm whale and the surface becomes glutted with their torn bodies, even Ned Land becomes disgusted.

If Nemo’s attitude toward animal interaction is to differentiate the evil from the righteous, he follows a similar pattern with humanity. Whether or not the previously mentioned sinking of the *Florida* is of the *Nautilus*’s doing, Nemo assures himself and his guests of a full spotlighted view of the ship’s demise. More insidiously cruel than the mere invasion of the privacy of death that the *Florida* incident might, generously interpreted, represent and treated as a matter of expedient indifference is Nemo’s handling of a Papuan invasion of the *Nautilus* during a necessary reventilation of the ship. Aronnax, Ned, and Conseil have inadvertently led the Papuans to the submarine and are startled by Nemo’s nonchalance in dealing with the potentially deadly threat. Their concern is eliminated when the hatches are opened to take in the vital oxygen and the Papuans are struck by Nemo’s lightning, passed as a powerful current through the rails of the entrance tunnel. The savages, presumably ignoble, have been taught a lesson by European science.

Entirely opposite to this callousness and suggestive of Europe’s capacity to raise the impoverished heathen to sudden prosperity is Nemo’s heroic kindness to a Sinhalese pearl diver whose life he and Ned save and whose poverty is allayed when Nemo places a string of pearls in the diver’s hands. That this gesture of generosity to a poor man exploited by the rich indicates a largesse the *Nautilus* facilitates on a grander scale at other times is hinted in an exchange between Aronnax and Nemo at Vigo Bay, underwater repository of a hoard of gold looted from the Americas by Spain. When Aronnax imagines the good that so much gold could do if properly used, Nemo exclaims,

“What makes you believe, Monsieur, that these riches must be considered wasted if I collect them? Do you think that it is for my own benefit that I take the trouble to gather these treasures? Who told you that I do not put them to good use? Do you think I am unaware there are suffering beings and oppressed races on this planet, wretches to be helped and victims to be avenged?” (253)

Aronnax immediately identifies “rebellious Crete” (253) as the culture to benefit from Nemo’s treasure-hunting, but Nemo’s reference to thousands of such hoards magnifies the potential impact of efforts he might make to aid the oppressed, to instigate revolution, and to avenge the victimized. With all the zeal of a Garibaldi or a Bolivar and many times the resources of a Count of Monte Cristo, what might a politically connected and technologically empowered Nemo accomplish?

But the whole point of Nemo’s willfulness is to maintain a disconnection from the general struggles of humanity, or, at most, to maintain a connection to one narrow focus at a time. For a moment, he plays explorer and imperialist, but he unfurls his black flag

emblazoned with the golden N of Nemo at the South Pole on the imagined coast of Antarctica, inhabited by crowds of penguins but generally avoided with aversion by *Homo sapiens*. He plays a sub-aqueous Childe Harold contemplating the ruins of Atlantis, a vaster wasteland than Byron ever composed his meditations on, but Aronnax is the only sharer of Nemo's contemplated desolation, and the single word "Atlantis" is Nemo's only scrawled comment on that continent in ruins.

By contrast, Nemo does prove the intensity of his zeal for vengeance in the glimpses he gives Professor Aronnax of the several possible *Nautilus* maritime attacks and in the direct spectacle of the vessel Aronnax watches the *Nautilus* sink. But as many aspects of 19th century willfulness as Nemo practices and as his ship allows him to carry into magnified operation, the most salient fact about Nemo is his apparent unwillingness to be effectively willful, to influence the world at large in any lasting way. His genius is cloistered in the very vessel that manifests its power, his discoveries are destined not to survive the instrument that makes them possible, his revolutions hardly intrude upon human awareness, his impositions upon nature and humanity are matters of isolated moments, his imperialism is paltry, and his acquisitiveness circumscribed. He becomes the monster most truly only when the *Nautilus* hurls itself at some vulnerable ship, and after that, his presence is effaced by the watery world he prefers to the tyrannized earth, the realm of a willfulness become global plague.

His is not the fully realized triumph of the 19th century will that his subversive actions so ironically exemplify, and that Hitler's 20th century triumph of the will brings to grotesque fulfillment, but the involuted specter of that will. His marvelous ship allows that specter strength enough, for a moment, to be known, but Nemo's essential nihilism, his inescapable despair, renders his genius moot and validates the pseudonym he chooses to sum up his life.

WORKS CITED

- The Abominable Dr. Phibes*. Dir. Robert Fuest. MGM. 1971.
- Caidin, Martin. *Cyborg*. Westminster, MD: Arbor House, 1972.
- Forbidden Planet*. Dir. Fred M. Wilcox. MGM. 1956.
- Heinlein, Robert A. *Waldo and Magic, Inc.* New York: Ballantine Books, 1994.
- Leroux, Gaston. *The Phantom of the Opera*. Trans. Mireille Rivière. New York: Penguin Books, 2009.
- Robocop*. Dir. Paul Verhoeven. Orion Pictures. 1987.
- Shelley, Mary. *Frankenstein*. New York: Pocket Books, 2004.
- The Six Million Dollar Man*. ABC. 1973-78.
- Stevenson, Robert Louis. *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*.
- Stevenson, Robert Louis. *The Complete Shorter Fiction*. New York: Carroll & Graf Publishers, 1991. Pp. 439-88.
- Swift, Jonathan. *Gulliver's Travels*. New York: Penguin, 2003.

Verne, Jules. *The Mysterious Island*. Trans. Jordan Stump. New York: Modern Library, 2004.

---. *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Seas*. Trans. William Butcher. New York: Oxford UP, 1998.

Dr. Robert O'Connor (robert.oconnor@ndsu.edu) has taught in the English Department at North Dakota State University since 1985 and also taught for several years before that at Southwest Texas State University. Much of his teaching has been in the British novel, British Romantic poetry and prose, and science fiction, fantasy, and horror. His articles have appeared in *The Wordsworth Circle*, *The Lamar Journal of the Humanities*, and elsewhere. In 1995, the Edwin Mellen Press published his edition of Henry William Bunbury's *Tales of the Devil*, a fully illustrated set of parodies of M. G. Lewis's *Tales of Wonder* (1801) and similar volumes of ballad horror.