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Brunel's *Great Eastern* and the Vernian Imagination: The Writing of *Une Ville flottante*

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Abstract

Ships have a privileged place in Jules Verne's work, and none offered him a more spectacular example of the nineteenth century's technological advances than the *Great Eastern*, designed and built by Isambard Kingdom Brunel in the 1850s. This essay examines Verne's response to the *Great Eastern* in his novel *Une Ville flottante* (1870), a story that conveys a new sense of man's relationship to the global space he inhabits, and underlines the excitement (as well as the anxiety) of modern travel. The novel is seen as broadly representative of the stylistic techniques of the *Voyages extraordinaires*, and the hypothesis that it might not have been written by Verne himself is firmly refuted. The essay offers a close analysis of the ways in which Verne negotiates and assimilates factual realities through his textual representations, and argues that there is no simple transcription of the "real" into the "imaginary" in Verne's world. For Verne, as for Balzac, the world is never *not* fiction: the real already has magical, make-believe properties, and in that respect the *Great Eastern* was the perfect site for a story. Far from being a documentary or factual account, Verne's text is intensely stylized and fictionalized, partly because "reality" itself is already so mesmerizing for its author, and partly because his writing is characterized by its verbal energy and exuberance. And while Verne's extraordinary and innovative style matches the invention that he describes, we shall suggest in the latter stages of this essay that the story also offers a nuanced reflection on the future of technology.

Résumé

Les navires occupent une place privilégiée dans l'œuvre de Jules Verne, et le *Great Eastern*, conçu et construit par Isambard Kingdom Brunel dans les années 1850, symbolise plus que tout autre vaisseau les progrès technologiques du XIXe siècle. Cet essai examine l'évocation du *Great Eastern* dans le roman *Une Ville flottante* (1870). Dans ce texte, Verne souligne la nouvelle relation qui existe entre l'homme et l'espace global qu'il habite, tout en exprimant l'enthousiasme (aussi bien que l'inquiétude) que provoque le voyage moderne. Le roman offre d'ailleurs un résumé exemplaire des techniques stylistiques de l'auteur des *Voyages*, et nous refusons fermement l'hypothèse selon laquelle ce texte ne serait pas de Verne. Au cours de notre analyse, nous examinons notamment la négociation et l'assimilation par l'écriture des réalités documentées, et nous soutenons qu'il ne s'agit en aucun cas d'une soi-disant transposition directe du réel dans le monde imaginaire chez Verne. Car, pour Verne comme pour Balzac, le monde n'a jamais existé à l'état *non-fictif*. Le réel possède au départ des propriétés magiques ou féeriques, et dans ce sens le *Great Eastern* fournit le site fictif par excellence. Ainsi, loin d'être un simple compte-rendu documentaire, le texte de Verne est profondément poétique et stylisé, non seulement dans sa vision d'une réalité merveilleuse, mais aussi dans son énergie et dans son exubérance verbale. Si le style extraordinaire et novateur de Verne est bien à la mesure de l'invention qu'il évoque, nous suggérons dans les dernières étapes de notre discussion que ce roman offre également une réflexion nuancée sur l'avenir de la technologie.

1. Introduction: the magic of ships

In chapter thirteen of *Le Rayon vert* (1882), entitled “Les Magnificences de la mer”, the wistful hero Olivier Sinclair makes the following statement to his beloved Helena Campbell in response to her declared admiration for the great navigators of history:

Oui, Miss Campbell, dans l'histoire de l'humanité, quoi de plus beau que ces découvertes! Traverser pour la première fois l'Atlantique avec Colomb, le Pacifique avec Magellan, les mers polaires avec Parry, Franklin, d'Urville et tant d'autres, quels rêves! Je ne peux voir partir un navire, vaisseau de guerre, bâtiment de commerce ou simple chaloupe de pêche, sans que tout mon être ne s'embarque à son bord! Je pense que j'étais fait pour être marin, et si cette carrière n'a pas été la mienne depuis mon enfance, je le regrette chaque jour! (*Le Rayon vert*: 130) [1]

[Yes, Miss Campbell, in the history of humanity, what could be finer than those discoveries? To be the first to cross the Atlantic with Columbus, the Pacific with Magellan, the polar seas with Parry, Franklin, d'Urville and so many others, what dreams! I cannot watch a vessel leave port, be it a warship, a trading ship or a humble fishing sloop, without feeling that my whole being has embarked with it on its journey! I think that I was made to be a seaman, and if that has not been my career since I was a child, it is something I regret every day.]

The remark strongly echoes Jules Verne's own well-known fascination with the seas and oceans, and his interest in the great voyages that have been accomplished over them. If the *Voyages extraordinaires* famously evoke the thrill of travel in its most modern forms, the ship remains Verne's privileged mode of transport, and, ancient as it is, the one that most truly excites his imagination. From his early childhood, Verne acquired a practical knowledge of seafaring that is in evidence throughout the *Voyages extraordinaires*. As he writes in chapter two of *Souvenirs d'enfance et de jeunesse* (1890) when evoking the port city of Nantes in which he grew up: “J'ai vécu dans le mouvement maritime d'une grande ville de commerce, point de départ et d'arrivée de nombreux voyages au long cours” (“I lived amidst the maritime movement of a large trading city, the point of departure and arrival of many long sea voyages”). [2] The excitement that he imparts in his descriptions of modern, nineteenth-century ships comes, in part, from this first-hand experience – something of an exception in his work since, with almost every other form of transport, he works largely through written documentation. If the century has invented new technology of all kinds that is able to shrink the globe dramatically, ships remain for Verne the most magical of all machines.

In fact, ships, boats and other waterborne craft (for example, that massive raft that floats down the Amazon in *La Jangada* [1881]) figure in more of Verne's novels than any other form of transport, and many of the stories that make up the *Voyages extraordinaires* take place extensively on or in water. A number of Verne's narratives start out with a description of a vessel leaving port, and proceed to recount a journey that tests or displays that vessel's technical excellence along with the mettle of her crew. This scenario is established as early as *Voyages et aventures du capitaine Hatteras* (1864) where, in chapter one, the crowds in Liverpool assemble to observe the *Forward* and there is speculation, at moments in almost metaphysical terms, about its possible mission. The *Forward* is, Dr Clawbonny surmises, going “là où il y a à apprendre, à découvrir, à s'instruire, à comparer, où se rencontrent d'autres mœurs, d'autres contrées, d'autres peuples à étudier dans l'exercice de leurs fonctions” (“where there is something to be learned or discovered, instruction to be gained, comparisons to be made, other customs to be encountered, other lands, other peoples who can be studied going about their business”) (*Hatteras*: 25). [3] With variations, the departure scene will return throughout the *Voyages extraordinaires*. *Les Forceurs de blocus* (1865), which describes the transatlantic crossing made by a merchant vessel during the American Civil War, similarly

starts with the launch and departure of a ship (this time down the River Clyde in Glasgow) on a mysterious mission. There is here an interesting additional feature that we should dwell on momentarily, since it has relevance (by virtue of contrast) to the discussion that follows, and that is Verne's view of progress as a combination of individual efforts that produce a collective momentum. In the opening lines of *Les Forceurs de blocus*, the narrator describes the *Delphin* as only one of many vessels of all types and sizes that have established the nineteenth century's claim to be the great era of shipbuilding. Since 1812, he says, the waters of the River Clyde have frothed under the paddle wheels of well over a million steamers, "et les habitants de la grande cité commerçante doivent être singulièrement familiarisés avec les prodiges de la navigation à vapeur" ("and the inhabitants of this great trading city must be singularly familiar with the prodigies of steam shipping") (*Les Forceurs de blocus*: 335). There is a sense here of the incremental nature of progress. Only occasionally are spectacular technical advances made, yet, taken as a whole, the nineteenth century has, in Verne's view, witnessed a massive leap forward. The collective and gradual refinement of these contemporary machines amounts to an achievement of momentous proportions. The ship may be an age-old invention, yet in its modern forms it is also an awesome and magical creature – sometimes, as we shall see, a monster – propelling humanity forwards.

2. Verne, the *Great Eastern*, and the composition of *Une Ville flottante*

Nowhere will the sense of the wondrous quality of modern shipbuilding technology be more apparent than in the short novel *Une Ville flottante* (1870), another of those Vernian texts that start out with a ship's departure from port. However, unlike *Les Forceurs de blocus*, *Une Ville flottante* truly does depict a vessel that was the exception, evoking an engineering achievement that, rather than building incrementally on the previous state of technology, represented a quantum leap towards modern shipbuilding.

The *Great Eastern* had been launched in 1858. She was Isambard Kingdom Brunel's third and final great ship after the *Great Western* and the *Great Britain* (launched in 1837 and 1843 respectively). [4] Brunel died of a stroke soon after the ship had set out on her maiden voyage from Southampton to New York in September 1859, his meteoric career cut short at the age of just fifty-three. His designs for the *Great Eastern* date from the early 1850s when his health was already beginning to fail. [5] The ship's construction then took place at great human and financial cost from 1854 onwards on the Isle of Dogs in the East End of London. The result, at twice the length of any previous ship, would be the biggest ocean-going vessel the world had ever seen. Though dwarfed by the subsequent generation of passenger liners, and positively diminutive by modern standards, [6] the *Great Eastern* remained the world's largest ship until almost the turn of the twentieth century.

Originally named the *Leviathan* after the sea monster of the Old Testament, [7] the *Great Eastern* was intended for voyages to India and Australia, and she was designed to be able to make the round trip without refueling (partly because of a spectacularly erroneous belief among British engineers that Australia had no coal reserves). Though never used for that purpose, the *Great Eastern* was nonetheless the first ship to cruise non-stop under her own power from London to New York. To achieve this range, Brunel introduced daringly innovative design features, including a cellular style of construction and transverse bulkheads. He used every available space in the hull for the storage of coal, which was packed in so tightly that the crew had to use an iron tube buried within it to move between engine rooms. As for the living areas on board the vessel, Brunel used skylights to illuminate inner compartments, and provided a system of air conditioning

through ducts. This enabled him to place cabins more deeply inside the hull of his vast liner, thus freeing up space on deck and in the public areas, with the result that the *Great Eastern* was capable of carrying up to ten thousand passengers. With these and other bold new developments, Brunel brought ocean transport into the modern era. [8]

A vessel of prodigious proportions, the *Great Eastern* also brought one of the nineteenth century's great dreams within tantalizingly close reach: that of effortless travel to the farthest reaches of the globe. The ship was a symbol both of the spectacular engineering progress that had by then become the hallmark of the era (and of which Brunel himself was an iconic representative), and of the related ambition among Western nations to conquer the planet by moving freely around it. Such a vessel could not fail to fire the imagination of the author of the *Voyages extraordinaires*, whose explicit ideology, as described memorably by Macherey in his landmark study, [9] was in the early phase of his career very much in tune with the scientific and colonizing optimism of the age (Verne's later works of course show a darker, more pessimistic vision). Nor could it fail to appeal to his sense of the magic of modern engineering – an attitude that contrasted sharply with that of some of Verne's European contemporaries like Dostoevsky. [10] While Verne saw the ship briefly for the first time in 1859 during his trip to Scotland and England, dismissing it uncharacteristically as “ce monstre des mers qui peut jauger vingt mille tonneaux de vanités” (“this monster of the seas that measures up to twenty thousand tons in vanity”) (*Voyage à reculons*: 221), this negative attitude certainly did not last. On his one and only visit to the United States in March–April 1867, Verne himself traveled on the *Great Eastern* from Liverpool to New York in the company of his brother Paul, just as the ship's latest refit had been completed. For Verne, the trip was an interruption to the planning of *Vingt mille lieues sous les mers* (published in 1869–70, but referred to in his correspondence as early as 1866 under the title *Voyage sous les eaux*). It eventually resulted in the publication of *Une Ville flottante* after *Vingt mille lieues* and the second space novel, *Autour de la lune* (1870), had been completed. [11] While on board the *Great Eastern*, Verne kept detailed notes, which, together with the completed text of *Une Ville flottante*, convey his acute sense of the wonder of technology. [12]

The proximity in the conception and composition of *Une Ville flottante* and *Vingt mille lieues* is broadly discernible in the descriptive style of the two novels, and there are many textual echoes between them. For example, Verne's copious descriptions of the effects of light and color through the water in *Vingt mille lieues* reappear in a freshly worked form in *Une Ville flottante* when, in chapter thirty-seven, he describes the enchanting effects of both sunlight and moonlight on the water at Niagara Falls. But there are other similarities too. Both novels deal, in their different ways, with a technologically spectacular “monster of the seas”, and both marvel throughout at the superb engineering feats that have enabled the construction of such sophisticated and, in some respects, unthinkable vessels. Both are also first-person narratives recounted by a privileged insider (either captive or willing passenger) on board a vessel whose features and characteristics he describes in detail. Finally, both texts also emphasize at certain points the sinister qualities of the machinery that has been created by man, a point to which we shall return later in this discussion. They are clearly texts from the same pen and very much the same phase of the author's life.

Partly because the short novel is so quintessentially Vernian in its admiration for the new technology and in the verbal energy that it displays, it is difficult to subscribe to the view put forward by William Butcher (Butcher: 181–82) that Verne may have delegated a major part of the writing of *Une Ville flottante* to his brother Paul. In fact, the suggestion that Paul might have been the author of the novel has only one attested source, this being

an unpublished memoir by Verne's nephew Raymond Ducrest de Villeneuve. Quite apart from the vagueness of its references to the journey made by the Verne brothers on the *Great Eastern*, scholars have offered a number of good reasons why this memoir should be treated with caution. [13] Butcher's remarks about the story imply that Paul's collaboration resulted in an uneven text that falls "awkwardly between travelogue and marine novel" (Butcher: 181), mixing technological description, an invented and implausible plot, and observation of manners and lifestyle. Yet many of Verne's texts could be described as mixtures of this kind, and one might suggest, on the contrary, that the polyphonic (and sometimes discordant) qualities of *Une Ville flottante* are precisely what make it so Vernian. In his classic study of description in *Vingt mille lieues*, Alain Buisine emphasizes that difference of register is a fundamental feature of Vernian writing, in which there is a constant hiatus between fictional discourse and didactic or scientific discourse. And Daniel Compère, for his part, argues that hybridity is what renders the Vernian text so rich and fascinating. [14]

Perhaps, though, the most eloquent confirmation that Jules Verne himself exercised consistent ownership over the text of *Une Ville flottante* comes from the manuscript of the novel, now available online at the Bibliothèque municipale de Nantes website (see works cited). Two related observations need to be made about this document: first, that the handwriting throughout is unmistakably Jules Verne's own, except for regular marginalia by Hetzel (most of which have been crossed out) offering comments on specific aspects of the story; and second, that the manuscript is evidently still a working copy with many amendments, excisions and developments in Jules Verne's own hand. One of the more interesting excisions by Verne is a lengthy development at the end of chapter fourteen. Here, the eccentric Dean Pitferge, a doctor who has become the narrator's traveling companion, recounts a macabre anecdote in which he explains that, as a student facing his final examination, he had performed an operation on what he thought was a cadaver, only to discover that it was a living person. [15] The manuscript also shows that Verne had originally given the character of Harry Drake, the villain of the tale, an entirely different surname – Valverde – which is crossed out throughout the manuscript, with the name Drake inserted at each occurrence. There is, throughout this copy, a visible process of authorship in action as well as an obvious dialogue between Verne and his publisher, and there can be no suggestion that this was only a fair copy written up on the basis of another text. There is abundant evidence here of a text still in gestation.

3. A storyteller's dream: cornucopian fiction

While Verne was an enthusiastic admirer of the miracles of modern engineering, he was first and foremost a natural storyteller, and that massive ship that he traveled on in 1867 was a storyteller's dream. Commentators have regularly suggested that fictionalization in *Une Ville flottante* is a secondary feature, and that the text reads more in the style of a documentary or even a journalistic piece. Herbert Lottman, for his part, argues that the story is "an autobiographical sketch thinly disguised as fiction" (Lottman: 124). [16] What I wish to emphasize here is, on the contrary, that processes of fictionalization are everywhere in Verne's text, indeed that they are never *not* present, and that the very notion of transforming reality into fiction might presuppose a false dichotomy. For Verne, reality *is* the story. It offers a wondrous and miraculous spectacle to the novelist, whose engagement with it is so intense and so verbally productive that the divisions between objective fact and its transposition into text are all but broken down. The *Great Eastern* may be a real invention of modern times, and one that can be objectively represented in

terms of its technological characteristics, but the very process of describing this great monster takes it emphatically into the realm of text, story and verbal artifact.

The presence in the story of a minor character, the statistician Cockburn, who in chapter thirty-four of the story tells the narrator precisely how many turns the paddle wheels have completed during the ship's transatlantic crossing, is one small instance of this process of exuberant verbalisation, and it is a reminder that in Verne's world even apparently useless facts can be turned to extravagantly humorous narrative effect. In this case, Cockburn is unwittingly confronting the narrator with a parody of his own statistically obsessive style (which is further parodied on several occasions by the eccentric Dean Pitferge). The episode underlines that Verne is a self-conscious novelist who – sometimes discreetly, sometimes more openly – draws attention to his own medium. Indeed, part of the energy and the momentum of his style comes from the self-reflexive focus on its own quality as narrative. Like Balzac who, some decades earlier, had claimed to find endless anecdotes in the ordinary streets and residential quarters of Paris, Verne too suggests, in quintessentially Balzacian mode, that his own milieu is a cornucopia of potential and actual stories among which he is simply able to pick and choose. And, just as Balzac does at the beginning of *Le Père Goriot*, he might have used the motto “all is true” as his narrative principle, a classic rhetorical device implying that nothing needs to be invented, for reality is itself the strongest and indeed the strangest of all fictions. This conviction (staged though it may be) is at the very heart of both Balzacian and Vernian narrative.

One thus senses everywhere in Verne, and perhaps nowhere more so than in *Une Ville flottante*, the excitement of storytelling and the sense of the abundance of potential narratives. The *Great Eastern*, Verne suggests on the first page of his story, is a rich repository of fiction, not least because it offers a microcosm of humanity, where any attentive observer will discover “tous les instincts, tous les ridicules, toutes les passions des hommes” (“all the instincts, the follies and the passions of human nature”) (*Une Ville flottante* [henceforward VF]: 1). Just as Paris fired the imagination of Balzac, this magnificent vessel is presented by Verne as the source of numerous, perhaps endless human dramas. As novelist, he can only begin to scratch the surface by uncovering some of the stories that he claims are present here, but he leaves the suggestion that there are thousands more lurking in the background. Balzac wrote in his 1842 “Avant-propos” to the *Comédie humaine* of “le drame à trois ou quatre mille personnages que présente une Société” (“the drama consisting of three or four thousand characters that a Society offers”) (Balzac: 12), and for Verne the process is essentially the same in this different, more technological context. The implication, in both cases, is that stories are ever-present, that they are never *not* there, and that a writer needs merely to seize upon them in passing. This in itself gives a sense of energy and vitality to their writing, as the passing dramas of humanity are drawn from the flux of daily life and fixed in words. This Balzacian approach is one of many similarities that link Verne with some of the other great novelists of his era, and one of many reasons why, as recent academic scholarship has increasingly recognized, he needs to be read and studied within the context of the nineteenth-century literary tradition in France. [17]

While the basis of Verne's story is, then, the real journey that he and his brother Paul made on the *Great Eastern*, the account is stylized and fictionalized at every stage, and the text is a very long way from being a banal factual account. But before focusing more closely on Verne's rhetorical strategies and stylistic techniques, it is important to lay to rest any residual suggestion that the narrative element of this text is weak [18] This is a story full of drama, surprise and conflict, and is anything but a tale without incident. There are, besides, several immediately visible markers of the fictional process. First and foremost

among them is the use of a first-person narrator who – while his real identity is never disclosed – seems to know everyone and to be everyone's preferred confidant on board. It is a wonderfully convenient device, for this garrulous narrator not only sees all and hears all, he also tells all; and in Dean Pitferge he finds a traveling companion who has similar storytelling skills to complement (and subversively mirror) his own. Apparently a tourist among many aboard the vessel, the narrator is evidently on special terms with the captain, who allows him on board in advance of normal embarkation, providing him with much useful information that can be passed on to the reader. This narrator is thus able to see and assess the vessel from a privileged perspective, but at another level he also becomes the conduit of information that is the source of the properly "fictional" structure of the story.

The plot that ensues, playfully contrived and excessive as it is, should be enough to convince the skeptic that this story is at least as fictional as any in the Vernian corpus. Early in his journey the narrator encounters a former military friend just back from India, Captain Fabian Mac Elwin, and it is around Mac Elwin that the central drama unfolds. Mac Elwin, it seems to the narrator, cuts a sadder figure than he remembers, and, because this narrator is the sort who finds out everything, in due course he learns that the woman Mac Elwin was to marry, Ellen Hodges, has been given away by her father to another man, Harry Drake, son of a Calcutta businessman. By another coincidence that is the classic stuff of fiction, Harry Drake also happens (unbeknown to Mac Elwin) to be on board the *Great Eastern* with his newly acquired wife. But while Drake, a rowdy and quarrelsome figure, frequents the gaming saloons, his wife remains locked in her cabin. She appears on deck only late in the evenings, a mysterious and ghostly veiled figure who wanders aimlessly, unable to recognize or respond to anyone, apparently in a state of folly. In due course, the inevitable and fateful encounter between Mac Elwin and Drake occurs, offence is duly given and received, and a duel is fought on deck late one night in stormy weather. At the moment when Mac Elwin has the advantage, in one of those ostentatiously contrived coincidences that are Verne's hallmark, the veiled woman appears. Taken aback at the sight of this strange yet oddly familiar figure, Mac Elwin drops his sword and suddenly finds himself at the mercy of his cruel adversary.

At this point, however, fate plays its reassuring hand, and a bolt of lightning, conducted along Harry Drake's own upheld sword, strikes down this villain. The scene is now set for recognition and recovery. Ellen Hodges, reunited with her former fiancé, begins to recover her reason, a process helped by the continuation of their journey to the Niagara Falls once American soil has been reached. The additional excursion on land is also made by the ubiquitous and ever-garrulous narrator who, in the company of Dean Pitferge, is able to observe the young woman's gradual recovery and the young man's rediscovered happiness. As is often the case in Verne's fiction, the evil have been dispatched, the good triumph, and we must assume that everyone who deserves to do so lives happily ever after. In a rapid conclusion, the narrator himself returns across the Atlantic to Brest, from where he heads back to Paris.

The actual plot of *Une Ville flottante* is, like so many of Verne's stories, visibly theatrical and bears the clear imprint of his early apprenticeship as a writer of plays whose characteristic features were contrived virtuosity, dramatic confrontations, surprises, reversals and neat *dénouements*. What makes Verne's novels so readable, though, is not that he takes the clichés of popular theatre – he was by no means the only writer to do that – but that he exploits them with such humor and finesse, rarely buying into the sentimentality or pomposity that they might so easily generate. In this respect, the creation of the character of Dean Pitferge, one of those unforgettable Vernian eccentrics, is crucial to the unfolding of the story, since he provides a constant dose of irony and detachment.

[19] Verne is, among many other things, offering us a send-up of literary traditions, and Pitferge's role is to puncture the melodrama with his macabre and mordant take on life. And if, for some readers, the unmistakably gothic features of this plot are at odds with the realist evocation of modern technology, part of the point is that the "reality" and the "fiction" must be seen as equally improbable: engineering innovation and literary invention are different but complementary signs of the fantastic excesses of human creativity. But whatever our judgment of the merits or failings of the intrigue that holds *Une Ville flottante* together as a narrative, the outline given above should in itself be enough to remind us that this novel certainly does not lack a fictional structure. On the contrary, the fictional structure is quite deliberately exaggerated, and, like many a Vernian narrator, the figure at the center of this story underlines its implausibility when at the end he professes disbelief were it not for his own notes.

Yet it is also clear that the actual plot, or intrigue, is not even half the story. The real fiction – that self-conscious process of turning the spectacle of this ship into words – begins at a different level altogether, and it comes about through Verne's evocation of the fabulous technology, the wondrous dimensions and capacity, and the sheer miracle of engineering that this majestic new liner embodies. Largely (and perhaps paradoxically) through its focus on fact and detail, Verne's story becomes a paean to the miracle of engineering progress in the nineteenth century, and, like so much of his writing, a kind of scientific poem that expresses awe and amazement at the possibilities it has created. [20] The floating city that he describes is an almost mythical symbol of space and vastness, the very image of the convenience of modern travel. Almost magically, it is seen as providing a seamless connection between land and sea, indeed between the different continents. As the narrator writes on the first page of the story, thereby explaining its title: "C'est plus qu'un vaisseau, c'est une ville flottante, un morceau de comté, détaché du sol anglais, qui, après avoir traversé la mer, va se souder au continent américain" ("It is more than a vessel, it is a floating city, an area of some English county that gets detached, crosses the sea, and joins up with the American continent") (VF: 1). There is something of an echo here of the flying carpet in the *Arabian Nights*: while the traveler sits still, it is as if everything else is in motion. [21] Travel for Jules Verne – or at least that enthusiastic version of travel that he imagines in the earlier phases of the *Voyages extraordinaires* – certainly does not involve the discomfort, the noise, or the overcrowding that is so familiar to the modern traveler.

Taking Verne to task for this, Roland Barthes wrote famously in *Mythologies* that his world was one of enclosure, and that for all his ostensible "openness" he ultimately never left the comfort-zone of confined living spaces. [22] What Barthes failed to emphasize, perhaps, was that part of the excitement of travel in the mid- and late nineteenth century came precisely from this sense of being able to turn a vehicle into a temporary home, living in it as on land, and perhaps to escape the constant awareness of "being moved". [23] After the days of coach travel in confined spaces over rough tracks, steam and rail travel offered new possibilities and an entirely new relationship to movement, indeed the sense that one could travel while not seeming to travel. Many shared the excitement of that development (of which Huysmans will later offer a wicked parody in *A rebours*, when his hero Des Esseintes is able to undertake a journey to London purely in his mind) and it is precisely this sense of novelty that Jules Verne captures in his writing. Moreover, it seems that in stories such as this one Verne is genuinely open to the delight of vastness and to the thrill of cosmopolitan diversity. There is nothing closed or introverted about his depiction of travel.

This new sense of what it means to travel comes across strongly in Verne's enthusiastic evocations of the *Great Eastern*. There is here a feeling of engagement with the world, not withdrawal from it, partly because the world is present in all its variety on board a ship that is, as we have seen, a cornucopia of fictions. Among the vessel's huge throng of passengers there are entire communities, with representatives of many different nationalities. The list itself is dizzying: "C'était [...] des Californiens, des Canadiens, des Yankees, des Péruviens, des Américains du Sud, des Anglais, des Allemands, et deux ou trois Français" ("There were Californians, Canadians, Yankees, Peruvians, South Americans, Englishmen, Germans, and two or three Frenchmen") (VF: 16–17). Even as the ship is moored in the Mersey docks, before the voyage, we read that the numbers of people who have business aboard her are truly fabulous: "Je ne pouvais me croire à bord d'un navire. Plusieurs milliers d'hommes, ouvriers, gens de l'équipage, mécaniciens, officiers, manœuvres, curieux, se croisaient, se coudoyaient sans se gêner, les uns sur le pont, les autres dans les machines..." ("I could scarcely believe that I was on board a ship. Several thousand men – workmen, crew, engineers, officers, deck-hands, lookers-on – all mingled and jostled together without any concern, some up on deck, others down in the engine rooms...") (VF: 6–7). Later, as the narrator discusses the occupants of the grand saloon with Dean Pitferge, the two travelers are again astounded at the variety of people before them, all no doubt with their different life stories.

And among all the Americans returning home, the Europeans heading to America to make their fortune, the newlyweds, engaged couples and others, there is also an amusing snapshot of a Peruvian couple who have been traveling for a year since they were married. As the eccentric and witty doctor puts it, assuming his occasional role as secondary narrator in the story: "Ils ont quitté Lima le soir des noces. Ils se sont adorés au Japon, aimés en Australie, supportés en France, disputés en Angleterre, et ils se sépareront sans doute en Amérique!" ("They left Lima on their wedding night. They adored each other in Japan, loved each other in Australia, put up with each other in France, argued with each other in England, and will no doubt separate in America") (VF: 55). That sequence of past participles – *adorés*, *aimés*, *supportés*, *disputés* – followed by an abrupt switch to the future tense at the end of the sentence is characteristically the device of a writer who revels in the energy of lists, and who knows that it is above all the words themselves, with their juxtapositions and cumulative momentum timed to perfection, that produce the effect. *Une Ville flottante* is full of similar effects. The cameo appearance made by the Peruvian couple is, moreover, another indication in Balzacian and discreetly self-reflexive mode that in this vast cosmopolitan space of the *Great Eastern*, there are stories aplenty to be picked out. This subtly reinforces the storyteller's own credentials when it comes to finding a good site for drama, and reminds us that this floating microcosm of humanity is a mighty, multitudinous setting.

We might also observe that what is here no more than a fleetingly glimpsed drama will, as so often happens with Verne, turn up in variant forms as a more significant sub-plot elsewhere in the *Voyages extraordinaires*. One notable recurrence of the topos of marriage and divorce in the course of a journey is in *Claudius Bombarnac* (1892) where an eccentric couple, the false-teeth salesman Fulk Ephrinell and the wig merchant Horatia Bluett, decide to marry on board the train in which they are both traveling to China, then later divorce as they are incapable of reconciling their business interests. A further variation on the theme is provided in the posthumous novel *La Chasse au météore* (1908), where Seth Stanford and Arcadia Walker, who had married on horseback in the first chapter, then divorced, are remarried in the final chapter of the story. Those sub-plots that expand and develop material from an earlier novel are confirmation of the underlying claim

in *Une Ville flottante* that there are stories galore between the lines and in the margins of the text. Verne's writing is always suggestive of profusion – which is why the list, in its various forms, is one of his preferred devices – and almost every sub-plot, every little passing sketch, conveys the sense that it could be developed into another story.

4. Extraordinary technology, extraordinary writing

In a further reinforcement of the sense of abundance that is such a strong feature of Verne's writing, the size and physical dimensions of the *Great Eastern* are repeatedly emphasized in the course of the story, giving the sense that there is a whole world in and on this ship. As she is docked alongside New Prince's Quay in Liverpool (nowadays called Prince's Dock), she has the appearance of being an independent land mass, and Verne thus underlines the point made on the first page of his story that this vessel is like a physical extension of the cities and countries it visits: "On eût dit une sorte d'îlot à demi estompé dans les brumes" ("It was like an island rising up through the mist") (VF: 5). But he gives the sense of vastness in various other ways too: through the strategy of enumeration of the liner's different areas and facilities, the stress on measurements, comparisons with other vessels as the ship maneuvers through the Mersey estuary and out to the open seas, and also through a constant strategy of near-personification of this sea-giant.

It is perhaps worth recalling that in *Paris au XXe siècle*, the 1863 text rejected by Hetzel, Verne had fantasized about a twentieth-century version of the *Great Eastern*, which his hero sees docked at the Port de Grenelle in chapter eleven of that story. This ship, called the *Leviathan IV*, echoing the *Great Eastern's* first name, is described in similarly hyperbolic terms that emphasize the vessel's phenomenal size and power:

Ce navire était un monde, et sa marche atteignait des résultats prodigieux; il venait en trois jours de New York à Southampton; il mesurait deux cents pieds de largeur; quant à sa longueur, il est facile de la juger par le fait suivant: lorsque *Leviathan IV* était la proue debout au quai de débarquement, les passagers de l'arrière avaient encore un quart de lieue à faire pour arriver en terre ferme. (*Paris au XXe siècle*: 137)

[This ship was a world in itself, and her speed gave prodigious results; she could get from New York to Southampton in three days; her width was two hundred feet; as for her length, it is easy to judge from the following fact: when *Leviathan IV* was docked with her prow alongside the landing quay, passengers in the stern still had a quarter of a league to cover before they reached dry ground.]

Relativities of size aside, the narrator of *Une Ville flottante* uses precisely the same rhetorical strategy, and his style conveys the sense of the extraordinary and prodigious nature of this new technology. As he takes a walk around the vessel on his arrival, he looks back through the mist from the bow to the stern, which he sees "à une distance de plus de deux hectomètres" ("at a distance of over two hundred meters"), adding: "Ce colosse mérite bien qu'on emploie de tels multiples pour en évaluer les dimensions" ("This colossus indeed requires the use of such multiples in order to judge its dimensions") (VF: 8).

To capture the reality of such dimensions, and no doubt for the sake also of his French readers, he also resorts to comparison with more familiar sights, pointing out for example that the deck of the ship is one third longer than the length of the Pont des Arts in Paris (VF: 33). Similarly, he observes that the main mast, at 207 feet, is higher than the towers of Notre-Dame Cathedral (VF: 35). As for the ship's main dining room, "on se serait cru dans un restaurant des boulevards, en plein Paris, non en plein océan" ("you would have

considered yourself in a restaurant on some Parisian boulevard rather than on the high seas”) (VF: 32). Comparisons are also made with English landmarks, again with the aim of stressing the hugeness of this ship. As she passes anchored and moving craft in the Mersey, the *Great Eastern* nearly strikes a three-master drifting into her path, after which the narrator compares this other vessel to the toy boats seen in the parks of London: “Je regardai ce navire qui ne jaugeait pas moins de sept ou huit cents tonneaux, il m’apparut comme un de ces petits vaisseaux que les enfants lancent sur les bassins de Green-Park, ou de la Serpentine-River” (“I watched this vessel of some seven or eight hundred tons and it seemed to me like one of those little craft that children launch onto the ponds of Green Park or the Serpentine” (VF: 24). The word “géant”, again echoing the ship’s first name *Leviathan*, also recurs repeatedly throughout the story, and serves to suggest that this massive vessel has a life and a will of its own. The expression “géant des mers”, specifically likening the ship to a sea monster, is twice used in the course of a single sentence early in the story as the vessel reaches the open seas (VF: 33).

Apart from the emphasis on size, the sense of Brunel’s exceptional technological achievement is conveyed through the accumulation of detail about the design of the ship, and by lengthy but precise descriptions of particular features and technicalities. Above all, Verne’s descriptions convey fascination with the machine. An extraordinary sea monster the *Great Eastern* may be, but she is first and foremost, in Verne’s story, a refined and beautiful piece of engineering whose enormous power is complemented by almost fabulous delicacy and precision: “Rien de plus étonnant que de voir ces énormes rouages fonctionner avec le précision et la douceur d’une montre” (“There is nothing more surprising than to see these huge cogs functioning with the precision and the delicacy of a pocket watch”) (VF: 37). This is a nineteenth-century wonder whose innovations are matched by those of Verne’s own writing style, which boldly digresses in order to incorporate technical specifications and which is, in its own way, equally monstrous and larger than life. In chapter seven of the story, as the *Great Eastern* leaves the Irish coast and heads out towards the open Atlantic, the narrator pauses for a while, takes stock, and discusses the structure, design and the features of the ship on which he is traveling (VF: 34–5). Here he refers at some length to the famous double-hull construction, gives technical information about flotation compartments, and does not even spare us the detail that three million heated rivets were used in the ship’s construction.

That proliferation of factual observations that are now made might seem to run counter to the classical rules of good writing, which stressed economy, clarity of structure, and above all “readability”. Yet what might have been a cumbersome digression turns out, like those lengthy descriptions of the marine depths in *Vingt mille lieues sous les mers*, to be central to the writing process and to the sense of awe that is generated. This is the poetry of lists, the heady textual realm of facts and statistics, often with technical knowledge and specialist terms thrown in for good measure, that gives Verne’s language a rhythm, indeed a life, of its own, and a momentum that commentators have found so captivating. [24] Thus: “La coque du *Great-Eastern* est à l’épreuve des plus formidables coups de mer. Elle est double et se compose d’une agrégation de cellules disposées entre bord et serre, qui ont quatre-vingt-six centimètres de hauteur” (“The hull of the *Great Eastern* can withstand the most violent blows of the sea. It is a double hull made up of a series of cells placed between the edge and the side-stringer beam, each of which is eighty-six centimeters in height”) (VF: 34). Naturally, Verne also gives chapter and verse on draft, displacement, the ship’s six masts, her funnels, paddle wheels, screw propeller (weighing, as he reminds us, no less than sixty tons and capable of forty-eight revolutions per minute), and the various engines that drive the different pieces of machinery. But it is precisely around such detail

that the Vernian imagination works, for the detail is itself dizzying, and the words convey a sense of the fantastic, often through their very superfluity. Verne's style, like the ship it describes, is excessive and extraordinary, and seems to acquire a life of its own.

In this sense, Brunel's monster was ideally suited to Verne's purpose, for the monstrosity of that ship was apparent in almost every feature of its design. It was, of course, normal for passenger steamers of this period to have masts as well as engines, so that sail could supplement or replace steam where appropriate. If the *Great Eastern* was theoretically able to cruise as far as Australia on steam alone, her range, speed and versatility were considerably increased by this double source of power. Yet as Verne notes, the ship not only had the option of both sail and steam, but also a *double* source of steam power: paddle wheels on each side of the hull, as well as an internal screw-propeller driven by a separate engine. The ship might thus be seen as the engineering equivalent of Vernian fiction, which often doubles up its own narrative mechanisms – for example, in the case of *Une Ville flottante*, through the addition of Dean Pitferge as an associate narrator who complements and extends the primary narrator's observations and knowledge. But it should be stressed that paddle wheels were still a standard feature of ship design in the mid-nineteenth century, and that there was lively debate and skepticism about the merits of the recently invented screw-propeller. [25] Brunel himself was at the forefront of this *querelle des anciens et des modernes* which is echoed in Verne's text. In fact, the paddle-wheel design remained a significant feature of shipbuilding until the turn of the century, [26] and it made sense for large ships like the *Great Eastern* to have both systems. Nonetheless, Verne's fascination for this double system is evident, and his narrator specifically points to its advantages when speed is required: "Sous la poussée de ses aubes et de son hélice, la vitesse du *Great-Eastern* s'accéléra" ("Under the pressure of the paddles and the screw, the speed of the *Great Eastern* increased") (VF: 25).

As well as representing a significant proportion of the ship's power system (some forty percent, compared to the sixty percent provided by the screw), [27] the paddle wheels also become a source of amazement and wonder in their own right in Verne's story. But extraordinary engineering requires innovative style, and Verne obliges with an early form of what Barthes would later call "écriture blanche" ("white writing") (see *Le Degré zero de l'écriture*: 108–11), where style is reduced to almost pure information content. Verne writes of the paddle wheels "Quels tonnerres engouffrés dans cette caverne des tambours, lorsque le *Great-Eastern* marchait à toute vapeur sous la poussée de ces roues, mesurant cinquante-trois pieds de diamètre et cent soixante-six pieds de circonférence, pesant quatre-vingt-dix tonneaux et donnant onze tours à la minute" ("What thundering noise within the paddle-wheel cylinders when the *Great Eastern* was sailing at full speed under the pressure of those wheels, each of which measured fifty-three feet in diameter and a hundred and sixty-six in circumference, weighing ninety tons and achieving eleven revolutions per minute") (VF: 6). The exclamatory construction with which the passage opens ("Quels tonnerres..."), the only indication of tone, is rapidly overwhelmed by the flow of information that ensues, and despite the wonder that is implied overall, the purely descriptive style seems deliberately to avoid any further subjective emphasis. This apparently neutral discourse can, though, disconcert and disorientate us with its absence of "readable" signposting, for despite the profusion of factual detail there is, oddly, minimalism in almost every other respect. As it conveys information, Verne's sentence avoids syntactical complexity and erases tonal nuance. But what does this achieve?

As in *Vingt mille lieues* and many other stories, the accumulation of detail in this fashion ends up by having a slightly hypnotic effect in which our attention begins to shift from the content to the sounds of words themselves. Consider, for example, the following highly

technical description in chapter two:

Une cinquantaine d'ouvriers étaient répartis sur les claires-voies métalliques du bâtis de fonte, les uns accrochés aux longs pistons inclinés sous des angles divers, les autres suspendus aux bielles, ceux-ci ajustant l'excentrique, ceux-là boulonnant au moyen d'énormes clefs les coussinets des tourillons. (VF: 8)

[Some fifty workers were spread across the metallic openwork of the cast-iron chamber, some hanging on to the long pistons positioned at different angles, others clinging to levers, these ones adjusting the crank, those ones using enormous spanners to wind the sleeve of pivot pins.]

Passages such as this cause defamiliarization when read aloud. Their effect could be compared to that of Perrault's "Tire la chevillette et la bobinette cherra" ("Pull the handle, and the latch will fall") in *Le Petit Chaperon rouge* (*Little Red Riding Hood*), that famous sentence which still fascinates French children today. While the words are recognized as being those of one's own language, they appear foreign or strange (in Perrault's case, because they are archaic, and in Verne's, because they are technical or because they are numerous, or both). In Verne's longer lists, it becomes almost impossible to give full and equal attention to every detail that is registered, especially when there are unfamiliar terms, and since we are unable to discern shifts of stress and intonation beyond the overall sense of awe, we need to adopt a reading strategy that can accommodate this. A major part of the interest of Verne's style lies precisely in this revolution that it engineers (the word emphasizes the parallel between the technology and Verne's own writing style) through constant but gentle pressure on our habitual reading reflexes and powers of rational cognitive focus.

In this respect *Une Ville flottante* is typical. Even where information remains quite comprehensible overall, the use of technical or nautical terminology and the accumulation of detail create an incipient sense of fragmentation, as well as the sense of being overwhelmed by the multiplicity of representations being offered by the writer. This is clearly quite deliberate, as when in chapter two Verne is describing the preparations on the *Great Eastern* prior to her departure, and expresses the disorientating effect of the whole:

Ici des grues volantes enlevaient d'énormes pièces de fonte; là, de lourds madriers étaient hissés à l'aide de treuils à vapeur; au-dessus de la chambre des machines se balançait un cylindre de fer, véritable tronc de métal; à l'avant, les vergues montaient en gémissant le long des mâts de hune; à l'arrière se dressait un échafaudage qui cachait sans doute quelque édifice en construction. On bâtissait, on ajustait, on charpentait, on gréait, on peignait au milieu d'un incomparable désordre. (VF: 7)

[Here, flying cranes removed great pieces of cast iron; there, heavy beams were hoisted up with steam-driven winches; above the engine room swung a steel cylinder, a veritable metal trunk; to the fore, the yards creaked as they were hoisted up against the topmasts; aft, there was a scaffold that no doubt concealed some construction in progress. Men were building, adjusting, working, rigging and painting, in the midst of incomparable disorder.]

The scene here is one of hectic confusion and profusion, the coordinating prepositions giving only a minimal indication of objective spatial relations. Verne seeks to capture the sense of proliferating activity in his cumulative style of writing. While there may not here be quite the information overload that is a feature of some of the descriptions of *Vingt mille lieues*, the simple functional value of particular terms begins to blur, as we become more aware of the materiality of language, the sounds of words (*madriers*, *treuils*, *vergues*, *hune*), and their juxtapositions and symmetries (*ajustait*, *charpentait*, *gréait*, *peignait*).

Alongside the profusion of his style, Verne thus foregrounds the fascinating strangeness and, ultimately, the opacity of language itself. In sentences such as the following, we cannot but be aware of language as object (rather than the objects of language), as language itself is extravagantly on display in this little volley of nouns: “Vivres, marchandises, charbon occupaient les cambuses, la cale et les soutes” (“Rations, merchandise and coal filled up the storerooms, the baggage compartments, the hold”) (VF: 12). With proliferating nouns yet syntactical sparseness, Verne achieves a purity of style around two symmetrical halves of a sentence, each of them based on a ternary structure that might have made Flaubert envious. With the benefit of hindsight, we could say that, like Brunel, Verne was a long way ahead of his time and that, just as Brunel had brought shipbuilding technology into the modern era, Verne was doing the same with style in the novel.

5. The monster machine: visions of the future

For all its miraculous efficiency, and for all its conduciveness to new forms of writing, modern technology is a potentially menacing monster in *Une Ville flottante* as elsewhere in the *Voyages extraordinaires*. Like the Vernian text itself, perhaps, it is almost always at risk of self-destruction through its very excesses. Large vessels and vehicles will often (and increasingly in Verne’s work) remain cruelly indifferent to the human destinies and dreams they carry within them on land, sea, or in the air. In this respect, the choice of the *Great Eastern*, dogged from the very outset by a legendary series of misfortunes, suits Verne’s purpose perfectly. Despite his enraptured appraisal of the ship’s design and seafaring properties, his vision is not purely one of a technological utopia, nor is it merely one of some ideal future society that is constructed in the mix of races and nationalities aboard the vast vessel. On the contrary, it is also one that acknowledges danger, concern, and the threat that technology might pose.

The so-called “curse” that accompanied the construction and subsequent career of the *Great Eastern* is thus well documented and well worked into Verne’s narrative. Several deaths (apart from the just and well-merited demise of Harry Drake) occur during the journey, four at the outset when a winch cable breaks during maneuvers along the Mersey, and another one when the ship is caught in a storm as she nears the end of her transatlantic crossing. For the narrator, this seems to be a sign of the indifference of the monster machine towards human life. After the first fatalities, the bodies are duly and emotionlessly dispatched back to shore on a tender. The narrator points out that human lives seem, like machine components, to be replaceable elements in the system, no single one of them indispensable: “Ces infortunés, tués ou blessés, n’étaient que les dents d’un rouage que l’on pouvait remplacer à peu de frais” (“Those unfortunate people who had been killed or wounded were no more than the cogs of a wheel that could be replaced quite cheaply”) (VF: 22). There is more than an echo, in Verne’s story, of that Old Testament leviathan, the huge uncontrollable beast of the seas: “When he raiseth up himself, the mighty are afraid” (*Job*: 41.25).

It is in particular through the character of the eccentric doctor, Dean Pitferge, that Jules Verne is able to suggest the negative and sinister side of this colossus, even though the tone of Pitferge’s remarks is often humorously perverse. In an ironic representation of the hermeneutic process, the narrator himself is often at a loss as to how to “read” Pitferge. The doctor has at best a healthy sense of skepticism, at worst a pathological hankering for catastrophe. He claims to have traveled on the *Great Eastern* on a number of previous occasions, in the expectation and the apparently somewhat masochistic hope that he himself will be on board when disaster strikes. When the nonplussed narrator reflects on

this strange catastrophe mentality of Pitferge, he concludes (in a remark that very clearly prepares the way for the invention of Phileas Fogg) that it has to be put down to plain old-fashioned English eccentricity: “Tout est possible de la part d’un excentrique, surtout quand il est Anglais” (“Everything is possible on the part of an eccentric, especially when he is an Englishman”) (VF: 45). [28] But beyond this lightheartedness, which adds such interest to the blend of registers in Verne’s narrative, the doctor is being used to increase the sense of foreboding. His predilection for the macabre gives a Poesque dimension to this extraordinary tale, with echoes for example of Poe’s 1844 story “The Oblong Box”, in which a narrator meets an old friend on a sea journey and is puzzled by his mysterious behavior on board (he learns subsequently that the friend was traveling with the coffin containing his deceased wife, but had indulged in an elaborate cover-up). [29] Pitferge’s recurrent theory is that the ship’s engines are not powerful enough for her overall size (e.g. VF: 21), and he is convinced that a major disaster will befall the vessel sooner or later. He takes the various misfortunes that have already befallen the *Great Eastern* as a sure portent of doom.

Through Pitferge, then, Verne is able to introduce the background history of the ship’s construction, and of those calamitous events that seem to have marked every stage of her progress. Referring to the failed first launch of the *Great Eastern* in 1857 – a botched attempt to shift the vessel sideways into the water [30] – Pitferge suggests that this is because the ship “ne voulait pas plus aller à l’eau que l’hôpital de Greenwich” (“had no more wish than did Greenwich Hospital to enter the water”) (VF: 41). Echoing a widespread contemporary belief, Pitferge sees the failed launch as a sign that the ship faces a cruel destiny. He also mentions the various commercial disasters that happened during construction, and points to the number of deaths that occurred, including that of Brunel himself. [31] Finally, he also recalls the well-known legend that during the ship’s construction a riveter and his workboy had been trapped and left to die inside the double hull. Pitferge thus assures his traveling companion that the ship is “un navire condamné, ensorcelé, auquel il arriverait fatalement malheur” (“a cursed and condemned ship, upon which disaster would inevitably fall”) (VF: 69), and this allows the connection to be made between Verne’s enraptured evocation of modern engineering and the gothic intrigue that is unfolding.

An ideal additional opportunity to link the ship’s real-life history and the gothic is seized by Verne when his character suggests that the veiled woman, seen walking late at night on deck, is possibly a ghost, and that this figure may have something to do with the many accidents and mishaps that occurred during the vessel’s construction. Similarly blending fiction and reality, Pitferge tells the story of the fateful 1861 voyage across the Atlantic, during which the ship was severely damaged in a hurricane and her rudder broken (VF: 42–3). [32] Now, Verne is indulging here in a standard storyteller’s trick, increasing the tension and the sense of foreboding in order to heighten the drama of his own tale; but he makes excellent use of the known facts, and the blend of fiction and history is almost seamlessly achieved in Pitferge’s interventions. The result is that we end up seeing the *Great Eastern* as a site of menace, potential catastrophe and even terror. The conflicts of humans are set against the backdrop of broader, more fundamental struggles between man and machine. The macabre dimension of the tale thus sits well with the technological reality that is evoked in the descriptions of the *Great Eastern*, for it underlines the notion that the finest achievements of the modern era might themselves be vehicles of the uncanny and the monstrous. This is, of course, a theme that will become much more pronounced in the later *Voyages extraordinaires*.

Yet it is also through the character of Pitferge that Verne offers a reflection about the possible future uses of such massive and beautiful, yet ultimately unwieldy machines. For Pitferge, the ship may not be fast enough to compete with the smaller vessels that carry passengers on the Atlantic routes, yet its space and comfort have undoubted advantages. Anticipating the idea of the modern luxury cruise liner, he suggests that the best use of it would be to sail the high seas simply for the sake of it, with super-rich passengers on board who would not be in any hurry to reach their destination (VF: 113). The pace of the vessel would be deliberately slowed, and its direction fixed so that it would always be ahead of the wind and never sideways on to the waves. Pitching and rolling would thus be avoided and the passengers assured that seasickness would be an unlikely eventuality. [33]

In fact, this idea of the “playground at sea”, where passengers might almost think themselves on land, will be much more fully developed by Verne in *L’île à hélice* (1895), in which one of the characters declares, echoing the title of this earlier story, that “le vingtième siècle ne s’écoulera pas sans que les mers soient sillonnées de villes flottantes” (*L’île à hélice*: 8) (“The twentieth century will not pass by without the seas being crisscrossed with floating cities”). In the later novel, which has so many links with *Une Ville flottante*, a vessel the size of an island, with motors and propellers on all sides, travels around the Pacific with millionaires on board, offering truly fabulous facilities and living conditions. However, in a more sinister turn underlining the change of ideological vision in Verne’s work over the two and a half decades that separate these texts, the community of passengers divides into two camps, and deep conflict ensues. The message now is that humanity is, for all its technological achievements, on a course of self-destruction if it cannot get its own house in order first and use its inventions wisely.

However, despite the differences of emphasis in *Une Ville flottante* and *L’île à hélice*, and the more dire predictions of the later novel, Verne is also – perhaps even first and foremost – articulating the idea of the modern cruise ship, a luxury vessel on which passengers travel not to get to any particular destination, but to be on the vessel itself, on this seemingly fixed “island” around which the rest of the world moves. He suggests that the pleasure and the purpose of travel is travel for its own sake, even when movement might seem futile or pointless. As Baudelaire had put it so memorably in the fifth stanza of “Le Voyage”, [34] travel is after all as much about departing for the sake of departure as it is about reaching any destination:

Mais les vrais voyageurs sont ceux-là seuls qui partent
Pour partir; cœurs légers, semblables aux ballons,
De leur fatalité jamais ils ne s’écarterent,
Et, sans savoir pourquoi, disent toujours: Allons!

[But the true travelers are those only who depart
For departure’s sake, with lightness of balloons in their heart;
From their own destiny they never sway;
And knowing not why, they always say: “Away!”]

If Verne’s vision of travel is less metaphysical and more resolutely practical than Baudelaire’s, it nonetheless shares that sense of restlessness and the hankering for constant displacement. Travel is consistently “away” rather than “towards”, and every journey is its own justification. The monster machine, if used wisely, can provide a small island of stability as it moves through a moving world and creates, to use Nemo’s motto, “mobilis in mobili”.

6. Conclusion

While the more sinister message about the dangers of modern technology is not insistently articulated in *Une Ville flottante*, it is certainly implicit in this novel and occasionally surfaces more explicitly. The masses of assembled passengers from all walks of life live largely separate existences, and they are all at the mercy of this great beast on which they travel. There is isolation and alienation on board the vessel, though a suggestion too that a genuine community spirit can be fostered when Verne describes the makeshift and – to say the least – eccentric entertainments that are arranged in the grand saloon during the crossing.

As we have seen, one of the questions underlying Verne's story is also a more specific yet more pressing one, namely what the best ultimate use of the *Great Eastern* herself might be. The checkered history of the vessel is evoked, and Verne joins in the debate about this problem ship. After being converted into a transatlantic cable-laying vessel, and expensively modified for that purpose, the *Great Eastern* had successfully completed her task in 1866 and, not for the first time, faced the possibility of becoming a white elephant. In 1867, the Great Exhibition in Paris had offered the possibility of a new lease of life to the ship. As Verne's story tells us in some detail in chapter two (VF: 10-11), the vessel was at this point taken on by a newly constituted French company, the *Société des Affréteurs du Great Eastern*, with the purpose of transporting American passengers to the Exhibition, and was reconverted at great cost into a passenger liner at Liverpool Docks. The first crossing from Liverpool to New York is the one described in the story. The return journey from New York to Brest, briefly evoked in the final stages of the novel, was made with just 193 passengers on board, and was to be the only such crossing before the problem ship was once again converted at vast expense into a cable-laying vessel (this time for the France-Newfoundland cable). Verne's story, even after a three-year delay, is nothing if not topical and relevant. While his narrator is happy to travel in comfort across the Atlantic, the question about the ship's future hangs over the entire story, and the broader question about humanity's handling – both financial and social – of its colossal inventions lurks in the background. A technological utopia the *Great Eastern* may be, but she remains a potential monster in various ways, and in any case, like all utopias, she carries sinister dystopian potential within her. [35]

A reading of *Une Ville flottante* alongside other texts in the Vernian canon, and against the background of its real-life model, tells us much about Verne's approach, his method of working, his sources of inspiration and, above all, about the way in which his imagination worked. Verne finds his verbal energy and his textual momentum not in a parallel, invented universe, nor indeed in a fantasy about the future, but in facts, details, statistics and verifiable realities. While it is true that in a few of his stories Verne envisions the world at a future stage, the reading of texts such as *Une Ville flottante* tells us is that he is above all fascinated by the creations of his own era, and that he is indeed overwhelmingly interested in what is objectively classifiable and describable, for that, precisely, is what frees his pen and unleashes his creativity as a writer. The fact that this is woven into a fictional plot that is exaggerated and unreal is quite appropriate, for in bringing together two realms, fantasy and objective fact, Verne is demonstrating that, if the fictions that come from the writer's pen sometimes appear to be beyond belief, then so too do the inventions of modern engineers. Who, then, can tell where fantasy ends and reality begins? Part of Verne's achievement is to have shown that no line of demarcation can be drawn with certainty. Science is fiction, every bit as much as fiction is a science, and there can be no better source of extraordinary tales than the wondrous inventions of the modern world.

NOTES

1. All translations of extracts cited in French are my own. I should like to express my thanks here to Volker Dehs, Art Evans, Terry Harpold and Derek Offord for helpful suggestions and comments on an earlier draft of this essay.
2. *Souvenirs d'enfance et de jeunesse*: online text (see works cited).
3. This yearning for otherness and the sense of the infinite possibilities of travel is also famously articulated by Baudelaire in the final poem of *Les Fleurs du Mal*, “Le Voyage”, a poem whose opening stanzas could well serve as an epigraph to the *Voyages extraordinaires*, conveying as they do the excitement of travel in the imagination. In Verne’s case, however, the imagining of other places and other lives does not give way to the same disenchantment or “ennui” that Baudelaire so fully explores later in “Le Voyage”, since, as Arthur B. Evans emphasizes (“The Vehicular Utopias of Jules Verne”), travel is so closely linked to the educational project of the *Voyages*. For the text of “Le Voyage”, see Baudelaire in works cited.
4. Of the three ships, only the SS *Great Britain* survives today, having become a major visitor attraction in Bristol, the city where Brunel began his career. The *Great Western* was scrapped in 1856 after service as a troop vessel during the Crimean War, and the *Great Eastern* in 1889, having completed her multi-stage existence as a floating billboard and fairground at New Ferry on the Mersey.
5. The first sketches appear in Brunel’s notebooks in 1851. By 1852, Brunel was facing a serious, long-term kidney disease. Much useful material relating to the *Great Eastern* can be found in the Isambard Kingdom Brunel archive held in the University of Bristol Special Collections.
6. The gross tonnage of the *Titanic* will be 46,000, compared to the *Great Eastern*’s 22,500. By way of a modern point of comparison, the *Queen Mary 2*, launched in 2004, has a gross tonnage of 150,000. The *Great Eastern* was 698 feet long (compared to 883 feet for the *Titanic* and 1132 feet for the *Queen Mary 2*). She was nonetheless well over twice the length of the *Great Britain* (322 feet), which had earlier held the record as the world’s largest ship at her launch in 1843.
7. References are found in *Job*: 3.8 and 41.1–34, *Psalms*: 74.14, 104.24–26, and *Isaiah*: 27. 1.
8. For further details of the ship’s revolutionary design, see James Dugan. Much useful information can also be found at the BBC History and Porthcurno Telegraph Museum websites (see works cited).
9. See *Pour une théorie de la production littéraire*: 189–97. Macherey defines Verne’s explicit and essential subject as being the conquest of nature through industrial technology, based on the three interconnected themes of travel, scientific invention and colonization. However, in a deconstructionist analysis *avant la lettre*, Macherey goes on to show that this explicit ideology is undermined from within Verne’s writing, and that the tension between Verne’s ideological program and the increasing sense of its impossibility is what constitutes the point of interest in the *Voyages extraordinaires*.
10. Visiting the International Exhibition in London in 1862, Dostoevsky admitted to feeling overwhelmed in a negative sense by the prodigious spectacle of modern progress: “You feel a terrible force that has united all these people here, who come from all over the world, into a single herd; you become aware of a gigantic idea; you feel that here something has already been achieved, that here there is victory and triumph. You even begin to be afraid of something. No matter how independent you might be, for some reason you become terrified.” (*Winter Notes on Summer Impressions*: 37)
11. *Une Ville flottante* was published in the *Journal des Débats* in August–September 1870, then in volume form with *Les Forceurs de blocus* in 1871.

12. There are many accounts of the Vernes' journey on the *Great Eastern*. See especially Dugan: 161–67, Lottman: 121–24, and Butcher: 175–79. Verne's notes on his journey are analyzed by Philippe Scheinhardt in his 2005 thesis "Jules Verne: génétique et poïétique (1867–1877)": 270–94.
13. Extracts from the memoir are given in a posting by Volker Dehs to the Jules Verne Forum on 13 August 2008 (see works cited). Dehs explains that skepticism needs to be exercised since the memoir – never published – evoking a journey made when Ducrest was nine, was not made available until 1928 / 1929, sometime before his death in 1930, at the age of seventy-two, and that it contains many discernible contradictions.
14. Alain Buisine, "Un cas limite de la description", *passim*. Daniel Compère, *Jules Verne écrivain*, *passim*., but see especially "Le Texte qui parle": 11–14, and "Les Voix multiples du XIXe siècle": 57–88.
15. This extract (ff. 41–42 of the manuscript) was published by Olivier Dumas in *Bulletin de la Société Jules Verne* 79 (1986): 34–35. It was clearly removed because it did not meet with Hetzel's approval. The publisher makes a lengthy comment in the margin, crossed out and largely illegible, but in which the words "cela n'est pas croyable" can be discerned. For a full analysis of Verne's manuscript from the point of view of Hetzel's influence on the text, see Philippe Scheinhardt, "Jules Verne sous la tutelle d'Hetzel".
16. In a posting to the Jules Verne Forum on 10 April 1997, giving useful details of Verne's journey to the US, Brian Taves similarly argued that there is "only minor fictionalization" in the story.
17. In this instance, as I am suggesting, Verne follows a distinctly Balzacian model. As I have argued elsewhere (Unwin, "Jules Verne: The Problem of the Already Written") significant similarities can also be found between Verne and Flaubert, particularly on the question of the recycling of material and the issue of the writer's "originality". A similarity with Flaubert on a completely different theme – that of the phenomenology of movement – is pointed out in note 21 below. In the context of the present discussion, one can also go beyond the generic boundaries of the novel and see in Verne's approach something akin to Baudelaire's exhortation to seize what is most transitory and fleeting, and fix it in durable artistic form. The best-known expression of this aesthetic is Baudelaire's essay on Constantin Guys, "Le Peintre de la vie moderne", published in 1863 (see works cited).
18. Lottman, in particular, is highly critical of the fictional and literary qualities of *Une Ville flottante*, which he describes as "a prosaic and predictable shipboard melodrama", adding: "The mix of uninspired plot and gushing descriptions rendered *A Floating City* as boring as first impressions scribbled on a picture postcard sent to family members" (Lottman: 147). He has clearly missed Verne's ironic use of stereotypes and the experimental language that offers so many echoes of other Vernian texts.
19. Jules Verne's notes on his journey aboard the *Great Eastern* show that he had originally envisaged writing *Une Ville flottante* with the central character as the eccentric Englishman, accompanied by his valet. While the eccentric Englishman remains in *Une Ville flottante*, the combination of eccentric English master and his valet will reappear in *Le Tour du monde en quatre-vingts jours* written a year later.
20. The poetic qualities of Verne's writing have been signalled by many subsequent writers. Georges Perec writes notably of *Vingt mille lieues sous les mers*: "Quand, dans *Vingt mille lieues sous les mers*, Jules Verne énumère sur quatre pages tous les noms de poissons, j'ai le sentiment de lire un poème" ("When Jules Verne lists all the names of fish over four pages in *Twenty Thousand Leagues under the Seas*, I feel as though I am reading a poem") (Perec: 73).
21. In terms of the perception of movement, there is also an interesting parallel here with Flaubert who, in the opening chapter of *L'Education sentimentale*, describes his hero Frédéric traveling on a steamboat along the Seine and having the impression that it is the landscape, not he, that is moving. As Larry Duffy has written in his study of the phenomenology of movement in the literature of the second half of the nineteenth century, "[Frédéric] cannot perceive his own movement other than in terms of the apparent movement of his surroundings" (Duffy: 51). Duffy

sees this as symptomatic of the nineteenth century's changing relationship to movement, as modern forms of transport alter the awareness of space, place and perspective. Although he does not discuss the case of Verne at length, Duffy suggests interestingly that movement is "an ideal point of access to the evolution of mimetic literature in the late nineteenth century" (Duffy: 16). The sense of being stationary in relation to a moving world is one that occurs repeatedly in the *Voyages extraordinaires*, where vehicles are often seen as islands, havens, cities or otherwise autonomous spaces in which the characters live while the world outside passes by.

22. "Verne ne cherchait nullement à élargir le monde selon des voies romantiques d'évasion ou des plans mystiques d'infini: il cherchait sans cesse à le rétracter, à le peupler, à le réduire à un espace connu et clos" ("Verne made no attempt whatsoever to open out the world through the paths of romantic escapism or mystical quests for the infinite: he constantly chose to diminish it, to inhabit it, and to reduce it to a closed and known space") (Barthes: 81).
23. For a fuller development of Verne's vision of transportational perfection, see Arthur B. Evans, "The Vehicular Utopias of Jules Verne". Agreeing with Barthes that the sense of enclosure and comfort is a key feature of Verne's travel machines, Evans nonetheless stresses that this is far more than a personal fixation, and that it goes to the heart of the educational project of the *Voyages extraordinaires*.
24. See, for example, Perec's comment quoted in note 20 above.
25. In 1845 the British Admiralty had held a tug-of-war contest between a screw-driven ship, the *Rattler*, and a paddle wheel ship, the *Alecto*. The *Rattler* won, towing the *Alecto* stern-first at a speed of 2.8 knots. The idea of propelling a ship by means of a screw rather than paddle wheels had been considered and developed by various designers since the start of the nineteenth century. Very much aware of the latest technology, Brunel changed his original design of the *Great Britain* to make it into a propeller-driven ship. He also exerted a decisive influence on the Admiralty as it adopted the screw propeller for its ships. On 19 September 1859, in its obituary for Brunel, *The Times* noted: "[Mr Brunel] was the first man of eminence in his profession who perceived the capabilities of the screw as a propeller. He was brave enough to stake a great reputation upon the soundness of the reasoning upon which he had based his conclusions. From his experiments on a small scale in the *Archimedes* he saw his way clearly to the adoption of that method of propulsion which he afterwards adopted in the *Great Britain*. And in the report to his directors in which he recommended it, he conveyed his views with so much clearness and conclusiveness that when, with their approbation, he submitted it to the Admiralty he succeeded in persuading them to give it a trial in Her Majesty's navy, under his direction. In the progress of this trial he was much thwarted; but the *Rattler*, the ship which was at length placed at his disposal, and fitted under his direction with engines and screw by Messrs Maudslay and Field, gave results which justified his expectations under somewhat adverse circumstances. She was the first screw ship which the British navy possessed, and it must be added, to the credit of Brunel, that though she had originally been built for a paddle ship, her performance with a screw was so satisfactory that numerous screw ships have since been added to the navy."
26. By way of example, the *Empress Queen*, a 2,500-ton steamer built by Fairfield shipbuilders in Glasgow and launched in 1897, was propelled by paddle wheels alone.
27. The paddle wheels also provided extra maneuverability since, when rotating in opposite directions, they enabled the vessel to turn around much more sharply. Verne, however, does not dwell on this aspect of the design.
28. For a fascinating account of changing French attitudes towards eccentricity, see Miranda Gill's *Eccentricity and the Cultural Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Paris*. Gill argues that, although eccentricity is linked to a view of quirky Englishness at the end of the eighteenth century, once it migrates across the Channel in the nineteenth century it becomes properly and increasingly "French". This historicisation of the concept would suggest that the view of Dean Pittferge in *Une Ville flottante* is based on a stereotype already well out of date by the time the novel was written – not that this detracts from Verne's lively and humorous representation, which deliberately exploits and dwells on the stereotype.

29. I am grateful to Volker Dehs for pointing out this echo of Poe's story to me.
30. The attempted sideways launch took place on 4 November 1857. The winch designed to control the movement spun out of control, killing one man and injuring four others, while the ship moved only three feet. Various attempts were made in the following months to move the vessel closer to the shoreline, but it was a high tide on 31 January 1858 that finally floated her. The episode was widely reported in the press and held to be a public humiliation for Brunel.
31. During construction of the ship, several workers fell to their deaths. Four days into the ship's maiden voyage in September 1859, an explosion destroyed the forward funnel and filled the boiler room with scalding steam, killing five men and injuring many others. Brunel, who had had a stroke just before the ship left London, died a few days after receiving news of this latest disaster.
32. During this incident, in addition to the loss of the ship's rudder, both paddle wheels were also torn away, and two huge tanks of fish oil on the ship's deck broke loose and spilled all the way down to the engine rooms. A full account of the disaster can be found on the Porthcurno Telegraph Museum website (see works cited).
33. In a short article written about the *Great Eastern* published in the French shipping journal *Le Paquebot* on 4 May 1867, Jules Verne himself had emphasized that the ship was, on account of her size, resistant to pitching and rolling. This article is reprinted in Marcel Destombes, "Jules Verne et le *Great Eastern*, 1867".
34. See note 3.
35. For further reflections on the avatars of utopia in Jules Verne, see Unwin, "Vernotopia (utopia, ecotopia, technotopia, heterotopia, retrotopia, textotopia, dystopia)".

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