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The Verne School in France: Paul d'Ivoi's *Voyages Excentriques*

During the final decades of the nineteenth century, the unprecedented worldwide popularity of Jules Verne's *Voyages Extraordinaires* gave birth to a host of writers who, seeking to emulate Verne's success, began to publish similar works of scientific-adventure fiction. Sometimes described as belonging to the "Verne School," in France these novelists included Paul d'Ivoi, Louis Boussenard, Maurice Champagne, Alfred Assollant, Georges Le Faure, and Henry de Graffigny, among others. Their stories featured the same themes of exploration and technology, the same ideologies of positivism and bourgeois morality, and the same types of narrative recipes found in Verne's best-selling novels of the 1860s and 1870s. From the 1880s to the 1930s, these many Verne School authors generated a flood of new speculative works in the emerging pulp fiction marketplace in France, ushering in what some critics have called French science fiction's first "Golden Age."¹

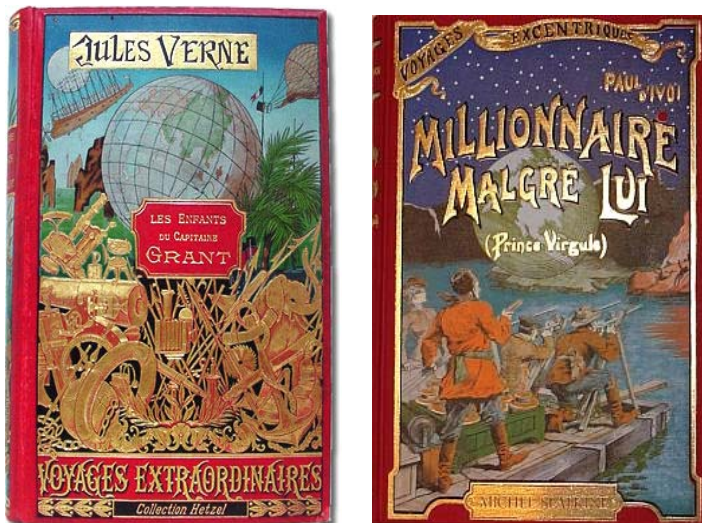
In this essay, I will discuss the most successful of these French Verne School writers, Paul d'Ivoi. In the history of science fiction, d'Ivoi's best-selling sf novels published between 1894 and 1914 should be viewed as more than simple Verne imitations. They also constitute a kind of narratological stepping-stone between Verne's generally conservative "hard sf" model and the more fantastic "speculative sf" of authors such as H.G. Wells and J.-H. Rosny aîné (Rosny the Elder).²

Paul d'Ivoi's real name was Paul Charles Philippe Eric Deleutre. He was born in Paris on October 25, 1856 and died there on September 6, 1915. His father and grandfather—Charles and Edouard Deleutre, respectively—were also writers and, on occasion, both had used the same *nom de plume*. Paul's education was similar to Jules Verne's: he completed a degree in law in Paris but chose instead to devote himself to the world of letters. In the 1870s, he began his writing career as a journalist for the daily newspapers *Paris-Journal* and the *Figaro* and as a literary critic, first at the *Globe* and then at the weekly illustrated magazine *Journal des Voyages* (where, along with Louis Boussenard, he would become one of the magazine's most dependable contributors). Also like Verne, d'Ivoi wrote and staged several vaudeville-type plays early in his career—including *Le Mari de ma femme* [The Husband of My Wife, 1887] and *Le Tigre de la rue Tronchet* [The Tiger of Tronchet Street, 1888]—before becoming a novelist.

D'Ivoi's first published novel was *Le Capitaine Jean* [Captain John, 1890], a melodramatic tale of love and treachery taking place in the Tonkin region of Indochina. During his relatively short lifetime (he died at age 58), d'Ivoi managed to publish—alone or in collaboration with others—dozens of fictional works in many different genres: love stories, war fiction, cloak-and-dagger spy thrillers, historical novels, and science fiction. But what really made him famous were his twenty-one Verne-inspired adventure tales published in a popular series whose

name was also derived from Verne's: the *Voyages Excentriques* ["Eccentric Voyages"—in French the word carries less the meaning of "peculiar" or "odd" and more the meaning of "singular," "unusual," or "out of the ordinary"].

In their plots and style as well as in their published format and how they were marketed, Paul d'Ivoi's *Voyages Excentriques* strongly resembled Verne's *Voyages Extraordinaires*. As a rule, the novels of both authors first appeared in "feuilleton" format in periodicals: Verne's in the *Magasin d'Education et de Récréation* and those of d'Ivoi (and several other Verne School writers) in Parisian newspapers such as *Le Petit Journal* (1863-1944) or *Le Matin* (1884-1944) or in popular magazines such as *Le Journal des Voyages* (1875-1949). After serial publication, the works of both were then reprinted in expensive, illustrated, in-octavo, hard-cover editions (most often with bright red and gold covers). These luxury volumes frequently graced the shelves of upscale bourgeois family libraries during the Third Republic; they were also used as Christmas gifts and academic awards for French youngsters; and they later became prized *objets d'art* for avid book collectors around the world. Finally, the works of both authors have been continually reprinted since their first publication and have been translated into several languages—although, to my knowledge, none of d'Ivoi's *Voyages Excentriques* has ever been published in English.



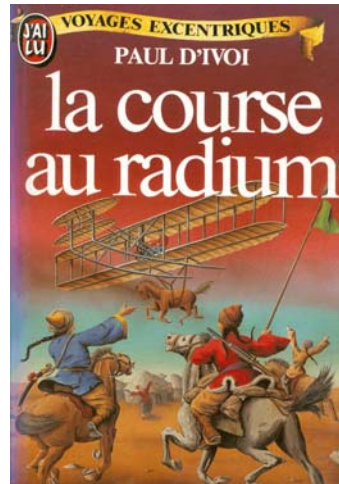
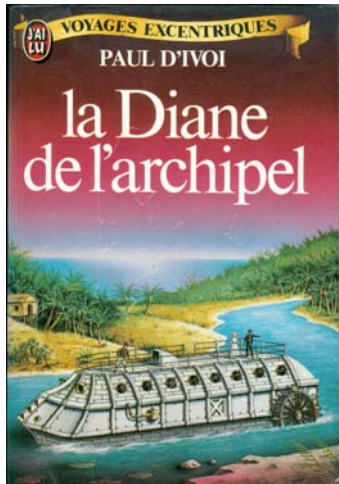
Reading d'Ivoi's works, one is constantly reminded of Verne. For example, d'Ivoi's first novel in this series, *Les Cinq sous de Lavarède* [The Five Pennies of Lavarède, 1894], appears to be a direct spin-off from Verne's *Le Tour du monde en 80 jours* [Around the World in 80 Days, 1873]. In d'Ivoi's version, in order to win millions, a young Frenchman named Armand Lavarède must circumnavigate the globe, overcoming numerous obstacles and experiencing many adventures along the way. Unlike Verne's Phileas Fogg, however, the ingenious Lavarède must do so without the benefit of a seemingly endless supply

of banknotes—he is allowed to carry only “five pennies” in his pocket (hence the novel’s title). His low-budget itinerary also differs greatly from Fogg’s since he travels west instead of east, passing through Panama, Costa Rica, Hawaii, Japan, China, Tibet, Russia, and the Ukraine—all the while being chased by an antagonist named Bouvreuil, a character reminiscent of Inspector Fix in Verne’s novel. In the end, like Fogg, he succeeds in completing his trip around the world on the exact date required, winning both his money and the hand of his new bride Miss Aurett, who accompanied him during his journey.

Also similar to Verne’s, d’Ivoi’s characters tend to occupy the same fictional universe and sometimes reappear in later novels. His hero Armand Lavarède, for example, returns three years later in d’Ivoi’s 1897 novel *Cousin de Lavarède!* [Lavarède’s Cousin!], where he and his cousin Robert are kidnaped and find themselves on a futuristic airship invented and flown by an eccentric scientist named Ramier. Recalling Verne’s *Robur*, the brilliant but antisocial Ramier flies them across the continents of Australia, Asia, Africa, and North and South America, eventually stopping to resupply his craft at his Nemo-like secret base located near the North Pole.

Echoes of Captain Nemo reverberate also in d’Ivoi’s 1898 novel *Corsaire Triplex* [Privateer Triple-X], a work that resembles Verne’s *Vingt mille lieues sous les mers* [Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Seas, 1869] not only for its nameless genius at the helm of his personal submarine but also for its revenge-motivated plot (in this case, seeking justice against the murderous head of the British police). The ghost of Nemo surfaces yet again two years later in the title character of d’Ivoi’s *Le Docteur Mystère* [Doctor Mystery, 1900], an anonymous crime-fighting scientist and inventor of an advanced, multi-purpose RV called the “Electric Hotel”—an updated version of Verne’s steam-driven overland locomotive from *La Maison à vapeur* [Steam House, 1880]. Doctor Mystery, like his Vernian forebear, is a Hindu prince from India who, having escaped to Europe after his family was murdered, has now returned to his native land to fight injustice, religious fanaticism, and foreign oppression.

As may be deduced from the above, technology plays an important role in d’Ivoi’s *Voyages Excentriques*. Reflecting the new *fin-de-siècle* social paradigm of speed and mobility, his works present an seemingly endless array of high-tech transportational vehicles.³ They range in sophistication from the bicycle (a newfangled contraption at the time) in the final chapter of *Les Cinq Sous de Lavarède*, to an electric car in *Les Voleurs de foudre* [The Lightning Thieves, 1912], to the ornithopter airship of *Cousin de Lavarède!*, to a gigantic ocean liner inspired by the Titanic—and reminiscent of Verne’s own *Great Eastern*—in *Les Dompteurs de l’or* [The Gold Tamers, 1914], to the submarines of different sizes and types in *Corsaire Triplex*. D’Ivoi also makes use of a variety of “transformer”-type vehicles such as an eight-wheeled all-terrain tank called the “Karrovarka” that converts into a boat in *Jean Fanfare* [Jean Fanfare, 1897] and the “hydravion,” a boat that can turn into an airplane, in *Match de milliardaire* [The Billionaire’s Game, 1917]—the latter resembling Verne’s similar shape-shifting vehicle in his *Maître du monde* [Master of the World, 1904].



Other innovative technologies appearing in d'Ivoi's fiction include advanced telecommunication devices such as the telephote in *Le Maître du drapeau bleu* [Master of the Blue Flag, 1907], light sabers in *Miss Mousqueterr* [Miss Mousqueterr, 1907], a special police switchboard in *Corsaire Triplex* that can simultaneously screen hundreds of telephone calls and automatically transcribe any suspicious conversations, high-powered rifles in *Cousin de Lavarède!* that use a special propellant 100 times stronger than gunpowder, electric lances and cannons in *L'Aéroplane fantôme* [The Phantom Airplane, 1910], liquid carbon dioxide bombs that can unleash an asphyxiating cloud of 200 degrees below zero in *Les Dompteurs de l'or*—recalling those of the mad scientist Schultze in Verne's *500 Millions de la Bégum* [The Begum's Millions, 1879]—and even, in *Millionnaire malgré lui* [A Millionaire in Spite of Himself, 1905], a ray-gun that uses radium, an element discovered just two years earlier by Marie Curie—no doubt one of the earliest examples of an atomic weapon in science fiction. By their variety and omnipresence, the many technological gadgets in d'Ivoi's narratives suggest less the cautiously conservative extrapolations of Verne and more the highly whimsical inventions commonly found in the dime novels of Frank Reade, Jr. and Tom Swift.

The readers (both implied and actual) of d'Ivoi's *Voyages Excentriques* were predominantly young people. Accordingly, the plot structures of these novels feature much fast-paced action and melodrama, light-hearted humor, geographical and scientific didacticism (although not as much as in Verne), one-dimensional “good guys” and “bad guys” (but more interesting women protagonists than in Verne), and many Bildungsroman-type quests to distant lands in order to solve a problem, rescue a family member, or right a wrong. In contrast to Verne, d'Ivoi's heroes and heroines seem less interested in acquiring knowledge *per se* than in various forms of discovery (of true identities, diplomatic secrets, lost treasure, or new technologies) or of winning (wagers, races, the fight against crime, or the hand of a loved one).

Jean-Paul Sartre, in his autobiography *Les Mots* [Words, 1964] explains how, as a young reader, he always preferred the “extravagances of Paul d’Ivoi” to the novels of Jules Verne, whom he describes as “too level-headed” (62). In comparing the two authors today, Jean-Marc and Randy Lofficier observe that

D’Ivoi’s novels were more adventure-oriented, in the pulp/serial sense, and faster-paced than Verne’s. They included a variety of futuristic planes, submarines, rocketships, super-powered weapons, and other wonders. Their heroes circum-navigated the globe in the air or under the oceans, fought a variety of mad scientists, international conspiracies, and megalomaniacal tyrants, and discovered evidence of advanced, ancient civilizations. (*French Science Fiction* 341)

In a letter to fellow writer Hugues Lapaire, d’Ivoi reportedly once advised him, “[I]t’s action that the reader must have, non-stop action” (Lapaire 137). In his search for new sources of action, d’Ivoi often found raw material for his stories in the current events of the time. The bloody Boxer rebellion and the much-publicized siege of the foreign embassies in the summer of 1900, for example, figured prominently in his novel *Cigale en Chine* [Cigale in China], published the following year. The catastrophic 1902 eruption of Mount Pelée in Martinique became a major focus of his 1903 *Les Semeurs de glace* [The Ice Sowers], where the explosion is shown to have been triggered by an evil scientist’s experiments with liquid carbonic gas. And the depredations of British colonialism during the *fin-de-siècle* are often depicted in works such as *Le Sergent Simplet à travers les colonies françaises* [Sergeant Simplet Visits the French Colonies, 1895], *Corsaire Triplex*, *La Capitaine Nilia* [Captain Nilia, 1899], *Le Docteur Mystère*, and *L’Aéroplane fantôme*, among other novels.

The colonialist rivalries of France, Great Britain, and Germany during this era are evident in the strongly nationalistic tone that permeates d’Ivoi’s works. In contrast to Verne, whose fictional heroes tend to be American or English, d’Ivoi’s are proudly French. And a palpable pro-France ideological bias—at times bordering on the jingoistic—runs through all the novels of his *Voyages Excentriques*. One modern French scholar has pointed out that d’Ivoi’s French protagonists always seem to be

courageous, noble, and cheerful. They are intended to serve as role-models to the youth of this period. Indeed, the *Voyages Excentriques* themselves have a clear educative purpose. Their goal is that, by emulating these heroes who move higher up in society by virtue of their own personal merit, young readers will develop a sense of patriotism and a strong work ethic....

These educative concerns are closely tied to the official state propaganda of the time. It can be seen most visibly in novels such as *Le Sergent Simplet à travers les colonies françaises*.... While walking its readers through many different French colonies, the text praises France’s military and colonial outreach, in sharp contrast to England’s. The French [unlike their rivals] ... bring nothing but benefits to the peoples they have colonized: education, medicine, and prosperity. (Palewska, “*Les Voyages excentriques*” 145)⁴

As spokesman for the “civilizing mission” of French colonialism, d’Ivoi argues that the greatest difference between the British and French colonial efforts is that the British seek only to subjugate and then extract the wealth from their colonies,

whereas the French seek to improve the lot of the indigenous peoples of their colonies by assimilating them. The French heroes of *Le Sergent Simplet* travel to India and are astonished by the levels of poverty and suffering that they witness there. They ask “How is it that 250 million Hindus do not have the courage to exterminate the 100 thousand British who control the wealth of all India?” (242). In reply, they are informed by the American geographer accompanying them that

The strength of the British comes uniquely from the weakness of their subjects. This leads me quite naturally to make the following comparison.... French colonies become *French*; look at Canada, Louisiana, Algeria, Guadeloupe, and the island of Réunion. British colonies do not undergo any assimilation.... You French are trying to achieve a *moral conquest* of the people there, whereas the inhabitants of Great Britain seek only to *plunder them commercially*. (242; emphases in original)

Although quite un-Vernian, this *pro patria* ideology coloring d’Ivoi’s fiction is not unusual for Verne School and other writers of the time. Note, for instance, the seemingly unrelenting anglophobia in Alfred Assollant’s *Aventures merveilleuses mais authentiques du Capitaine Corcoran* [The Marvelous but Real Adventures of Captain Corcoran]—first published in 1867 but frequently reprinted, reaching its eleventh edition in 1905—where the young French hero, aided by his faithful pet tiger, foments rebellion among the oppressed Indian populations of the subcontinent. Or consider Gustave Le Rouge and Gustave Guitton’s *La Conspiration des milliardaires* [The Conspiracy of the Billionaires, 1899-1900], which tells the story of an idealistic young French engineer who courageously battles a confederation of rich and rapacious American industrialists who have devised a diabolical scheme for the conquest of Europe. Or look at the novels of Capitaine Danrit (Emile Driant), who specialized in *Dorking*-type future-war tales and who portrayed glorious French victories over the Germans in his three-volume *La Guerre de demain* [The War of Tomorrow, 1889-91] and over the British in his *Guerre fatale: France-Angleterre* [The Fatal War: France-England, 1903].⁵ Finally, witness the following stereotyped but quite typical confrontation between a brutish and bellicose German and a smaller but more agile young Frenchman that appears in Louis Bousсенard’s *Le Tour du monde d’un gamin de Paris* [A Trip Around the World by a Lad from Paris, 1890]:

The first voice, cursing in German with mixed references to both God and the devil, belonged to a colossus of a man over six feet tall.

As broad as a hippopotamus with a torso like a large barrel mounted upon legs that looked like rough-hewn beams and brandishing a knife that seemed to flit back and forth like a feather in the hand of a wrestler, this man personified physical power in all of its unstoppable brutality.

The man’s head reinforced this impression: unkempt beard, beast-like, with tangled hair, small but ferocious eyes, the misshaped nose of a half-wit or a drunk, and a craggy face that looked as if it had been carved out of a massive beechwood stump from the Black Forest.

The other voice, in contrast, was clear, vibrant, and cocky. Its accent was untranslatable. In hearing it, however, anyone recognizing the dialect spoken between Bercy and Auteuil, between Montrouge and Montmartre, would have no

difficulty identifying it as being from 35° south latitude and 45° west longitude: in other words, it was Parisian! ...

Its owner had all the looks of a child. Not yet eighteen years of age, barely five feet tall, not a hair on his face, with an upturned nose and nostrils deeply breathing in the sea air. His mouth carried an ironic smile and his bright, sharp eyes cut like a sword.

His legs, as strong and lithe as a deer's, had extraordinary agility. His slender arms resembled metal cables wound with steel threads. The muscles of his body rippled hard beneath his smooth skin....

In observing these two adversaries so dramatically different from each other, one immediately thought of that legendary Biblical battle, and those of later Homeric heroes, in which David emerged victorious over Goliath. (104)

Needless to say, as a result of his speed and skill, the little Frenchman decisively triumphs over the powerful but clumsy German—to the enthusiastic cheers of the many spectators gathered round. Most of the French heroes of these Verne School fictions seem cut from the same cloth and exhibit the same character traits of cockiness, lanky strength, resourcefulness, and Gallic wit. In remarking upon these similarities, Matthieu Letourneux of the Université de Paris has observed that this particular fictional prototype “gives a good idea of the image that the French had of themselves” during these years just before World War I. It is also worth noting that, in this Bousсенard story as well as in those by d'Ivoi and the majority of other Verne School writers, the “alien Other” is never extraterrestrial; but he is always extranational and extracultural. He comes not from a distant planet, an alternate time-stream, or another dimension but, rather, from “foreign” countries such as China, Tibet, Egypt, India, Costa Rica, Australia, or Abyssinia. And some of the most dangerous of them hail from England and Germany.

One unfortunate consequence of d'Ivoi's ultra-nationalism and cultural stereotyping is that they often lead to racist caricatures of non-Caucasian peoples. In *Le Sergent Simplet*, for example, the black natives of Madagascar are routinely compared to ignorant apes (chapter 9). Nali, the half-breed heroine of *Jean Fanfare* has “American Redskin” blood in her veins, so naturally she is adept at following a trail through the woods, is an excellent swimmer, and has superior “nature skills” (part I, chapter 12). Later in the same novel, the ongoing conflict in Crete between the Greeks and Turks is characterized as “European civilization battling Asian barbarism” (part II, chapter 12). Some Hindu Brahmins and their followers in *Le Docteur Mystère* are described as savage dogs and poisonous snakes (part II, chapter 6). And, in *Les Cinq sous de Lavarède*, one discovers the following heavily anti-Semitic portrait of a Jew taking advantage of some tourists who just missed their boat:

A Jew was walking along the dock next to the Old City—during the previous few years the Jews had managed to monopolize nearly all the commerce of the country. He heard them speaking and, smelling a profit in their emotional distress, inquired as to the reasons for their anger....

“We must, at all costs, be in San Francisco at the same time as the *Alaska*.”

“At the same time is not possible, but I can show you a way to get there within a day or two—if you have money.”

And for a Columbian condor coin, worth fifty francs in gold, this Israelite provided them with the same information that a careful reading of the Mexican and American maritime schedules would have given them for free. (147)

In the interest of avoiding moral anachronisms, we should perhaps not be too harsh in condemning d'Ivoi for certain racist attitudes that were common during his time. Jules Verne himself was far from innocent in this regard—remember his treatment of blacks in *Cinq semaines en ballon* [Five Weeks in a Balloon, 1863] and *L'Île mystérieuse* [Mysterious Island, 1874] and especially of Jews in *Hector Servadac* [Hector Servadac, 1877].⁶ Further, in America, a quick look at any of the popular dime novels from this turn-of-the-century period would reveal that they contain more than their fair share of flag-waving jingoism and racial bigotry (Bleiler xxii).

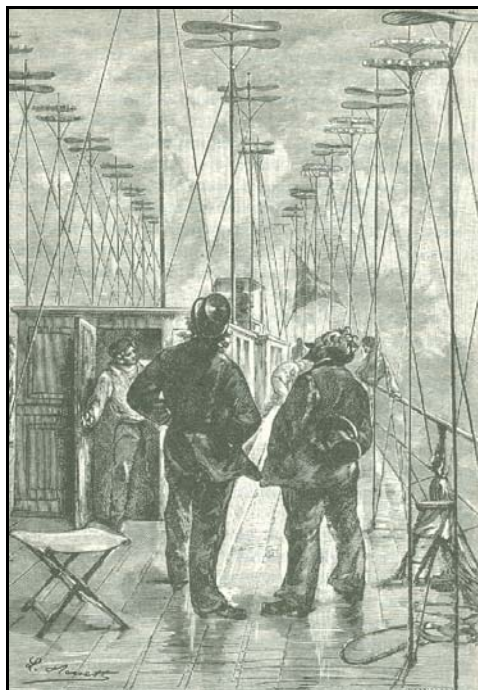
The final reason why the sf novels of Paul d'Ivoi's *Voyages Excentriques* seem noteworthy is because they reflect an important change in the semiotic structure of early French science fiction as it begins to evolve away from the dominant Vernian model toward a more Wellsian and post-Wellsian one. Situated midway between the highly mimetic, pedagogy-based fictions of Verne and the more estranging, "absent paradigm"-based fictions of authors such as J.-H. Rosny aîné and Maurice Renard, the works of d'Ivoi and other Verne School writers straddle two narratological worlds.⁷ Although still ostensibly didactic, the science in these narratives is often watered down and/or simulated; instead of implanting knowledge, it now serves more fictional purposes such as verisimilitude-building, plot progression, or special effects. As a result, its place in the narrative moves from primary to secondary—from subject to context—as it now seeks to appeal to the creative imagination rather than the reasoning intellect of the reader.⁸

A close reading of three excerpts from the novels of Verne, d'Ivoi, and Rosny should suffice to demonstrate this evolution. In order to maximize their thematic similarity, I have selected descriptions of three imaginary flying machines: the helicopter-airship called the *Albatros* [albatross] from Verne's *Robur-le-conquérant* [Robur the Conqueror, 1886], the ornithopter aircraft called the *Gypaète* [lammergeir, or bearded vulture] in d'Ivoi's *Cousin de Lavarède!* [Lavarède's Cousin!, 1896], and the spaceship called the *Stellarium* [star vessel /star metal/star goer] of Rosny's *Les Navigateurs de l'infini* [The Navigators of the Infinite, 1925].

Appearing in part one, chapter six of *Robur*, the following passage and illustration are part of a full, chapter-long pedagogical pause in Verne's story, in which he proceeds to summarize the history of aviation (including lengthy lists of "martyred" pioneer aviators) and to explain the innovative mechanics of Robur's airship.

Engines of suspension and propulsion: Above the deck rose thirty-seven vertical axes, fifteen along each side, and seven, more elevated, in the center. The *Albatros* might be called a clippership with thirty-seven masts. But each of these masts bore, instead of sails, two horizontal propellers, not very large in spread or diameter, but driven at prodigious speed. Each of these axes had its own movement independent of the rest, and each alternate one spun round in a different direction from the others, so as to avoid any tendency to gyration. Hence

the propellers as they rose on the vertical column of air retained their equilibrium by their horizontal resistance. Consequently the apparatus was furnished with seventy-four suspension propellers, whose three branches were connected by a metallic circle which economized their motive force. In front and behind, mounted on horizontal axes, were two additional propellers, each with four arms. These propellers were of a larger diameter than the suspension ones, but could also attain a very high speed. All in all, the vessel combined the systems of Cossus, De la Landelle, and Ponton d'Amécourt, as perfected by Robur....



Machinery: To power his airship, Robur had not availed himself of the vapor of water or other liquids, nor of compressed air or other gases, nor of those explosive compounds that are capable of producing a mechanical reaction. He employed electricity, that agent which one day will be the soul of the industrial world. But he required no electro-motor to produce it. All he depended upon was batteries and accumulators. What were the elements of these batteries, and what were the acids he used, Robur only knew. And the construction of the accumulators was kept equally secret. Of what were their positive and negative plates? None can say. The engineer took good care—and not unreasonably—to keep his secret unpatented. One thing was unmistakable, and that was that the batteries were of extraordinary strength; and the accumulators left those of Faure-Sellon-Volckmar very far behind in yielding currents whose amperes ran into figures up to then unknown. As a result he obtained almost unlimited electrical

horsepower to drive the propellers and generate a suspending and propelling force in excess of all his needs and under any circumstances. (66-68)

As mentioned, this long passage of indirect discourse (the voice of “objective” exposition) is inserted “en bloc” directly into the fictional narrative. It is unmediated—there are no fictional protagonists acting as *porte-paroles* to convey (and perhaps personalize) the information. The narrative voice seems omniscient, authoritative, and very matter-of-fact. The description proceeds logically and dispassionately, without undue emotion. Real-life scientists and engineers are cited, enhancing the scientific credibility of the extrapolated technology being presented. The cutting edge, experimental nature of the aircraft is underscored by its use of electricity and by special batteries (invented by Robur himself) that can generate “almost unlimited electrical horsepower.” And, of course, the text is accompanied by an illustration showing the ship’s deck and the thirty-seven masts of propellers featured in the description.

The following passage appears in part two, chapter two of d’Ivoi’s *Cousin de Lavarède!* The protagonists—Robert Lavarède, his friend Ulysse Astéras (an amateur astronomer), a mute Egyptian girl named Maïva, an evil Egyptian prince who calls himself Radjpoor, and a young noble Egyptian woman named Lotia—have all been scooped up by a strange flying machine piloted by a mad scientist named Ramier, who later gives them a tour of his aircraft.

“Here is the blueprint of my aircraft, which gives you its general layout. You see on it the main deck where we are at this moment, the propulsion wings located forward, the drive propeller at the stern, as well as the mobile rudder placed vertically against the horizontal propeller shaft.”

“But” objected Astéras, who was listening with rapt interest, “I recall that you indicated two pairs of wings, not one. So does your aircraft fly less like a bird and more like a mayfly?”

“Yes, mayflies that this fellow keeps in his attic” whispered Robert, but so low that his compagnons could not hear this disparaging remark.

Ramier was quick to respond to Astéras’s observation:

“No, no. The *Gypaète* is powered by only one pair of wings at a time. The others, folded against the exterior hull, remain immobile. They are for emergencies only.”

“Emergencies?”

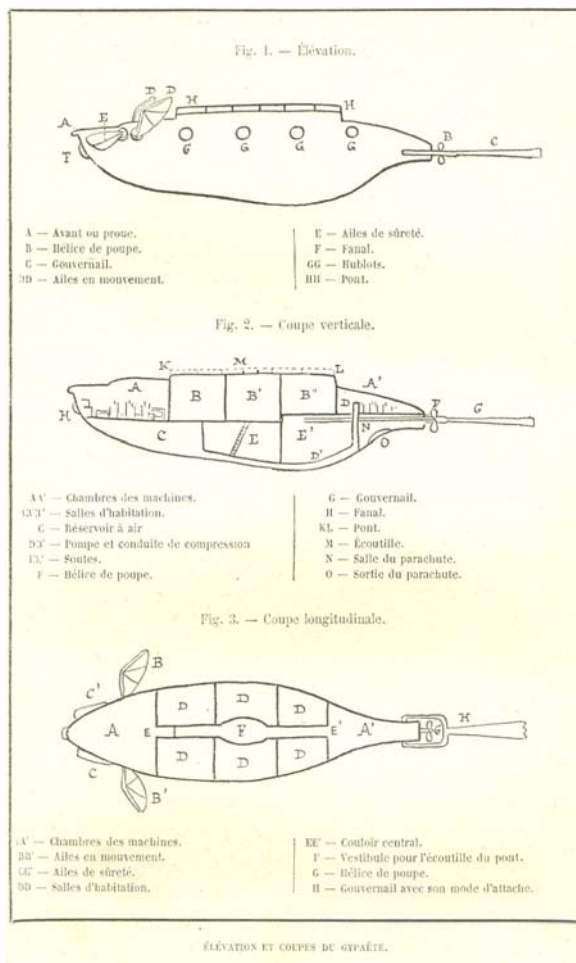
“Absolutely. For instance, let’s suppose that one of my wings becomes damaged while in operation.”

“The aircraft would no longer remained suspended in air and would begin a terrible dive...”

“Would begin, if at that same moment the spare wing did not immediately activate and automatically take the place of the damaged one.”

“Yes, I understand perfectly” the excited astronomer exclaimed. “It’s almost impossible to fall.”

“Almost” muttered Lavarède. “Almost, and that’s enough.” ...



“I reduced the dimension of the wings, not only for the sake of their motors but also to reduce the chances of their becoming damaged. I simply replaced size by speed. The wings of my aircraft move at one thousand beats per minute.”

“One thousand? That’s amazing!” ...

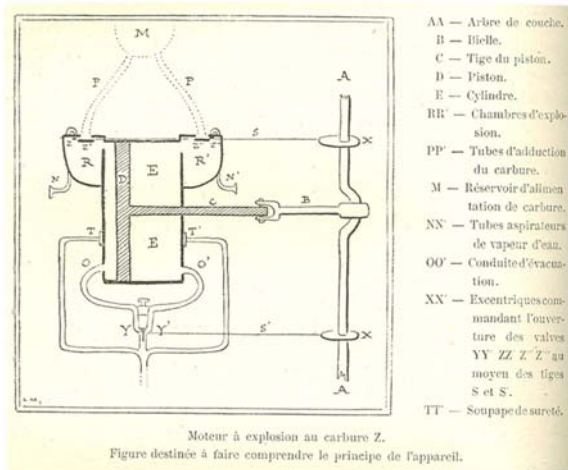
“Here is a drawing of the engine that I invented for this purpose” Ramier said with a triumphant tone. “Just above it is located the fuel reservoir.”

“Ah!” said the astronomer, “an acetylene motor.”

The madman responded disdainfully:

“Not at all! It runs on a new fuel that I discovered and liquified, *carbure Z*, whose power is ten times stronger than acetylene. A tiny drop of this liquid falls alternately into the two combustion chambers on either side of main piston. As it explodes, the gas expands and pushes the piston in the same manner as in the steam engine of a locomotive. The connecting rod of the piston activates a drive

shaft that is connected to the wings. This drive shaft contains two cams that connect to and regulate the opening of the two valves which permit the new fuel to enter and the burned fuel to escape.”



As Astéras applauded, the mad fellow concluded:

“I have ten of these engines on board. Two for each wing and two for the rear propeller and rudder. Each one weighs thirty kilograms.”

“Superb!” (265-66)

Like Verne’s, this passage appears to be highly didactic, intending to provide a rational, scientific explanation of how the *Gyapète* works. It includes detailed schematics in two accompanying illustrations, and the exposition is both linear and unambiguous. Similar to Robur’s innovative batteries, Ramier has invented a new, special fuel called “carbure Z” to power his on-board motors. In contrast to Verne, however, this pedagogical lesson is now mediated by the fictional characters themselves, instead of by an omniscient and authoritative narrator. It is presented via direct discourse in a spirited give-and-take conversation where the characters, expressing their “sense of wonder,” continually personalize and valorize the technology (“Amazing!” “Superb!”). The credibility of the entire scene depends on the reader’s acceptance of the technological genius of Ramier and the premise that the aircraft’s two little bird-like wings can keep it aloft by beating phenomenally fast—i.e., by replacing “size by speed.” This science, of course, is bogus. But it is presented in such a way as to enhance the plausibility of the flyer, allowing for the reader’s suspension of disbelief. It is interesting that the author even seems to acknowledge this bit of narratological legerdemain by having the novel’s hero, Lavarède, question Ramier’s sanity. Although not enough to undermine the verisimilitude-building quality of the scene, it could be argued that Lavarède’s gibes constitute a kind of authorial “wink” while adding a note of humor and irony to the whole episode.

Finally, the following mini-chapter opens *in medias res* Rosny's sf novel *Les Navigateurs de l'infini*. There are no illustrations accompanying the text, and the narrative voice is that of one of the story's three Mars-bound astronauts (a term Rosny coined).

All is ready. The walls of the *Stellarium*, made of refined argine and perfectly transparent, possess a hardness and an elasticity that had seemed unachievable in the past and which make the vessel nearly indestructible.

A pseudo-gravity field throughout the interior of the craft will assure a stable equilibrium to all living beings and objects inside.

We have at our disposition accommodations whose total capacity measures three hundred cubic meters. Our supply of hydralium should be sufficient to provide oxygen for three hundred days. Our hermetically-sealed suits of argine will allow us to move around Mars as if we were in the air pressure of Earth, our breathing being maintained by direct or pneumatic transformers. If needed, the Siverol apparatuses would free us from the necessity of breathing during several hours by their corpuscular action and anaesthesia of the lungs.

Lastly, our supply of condensed foodstuffs, which we can return to their original volume at any time, will last for nine months.

The laboratory is equipped to handle all physical, chemical, and biological analyses; we are armed with powerful devices of destruction. In sum, propulsion, pseudo-gravity, normal respiration, artificial combustion, and nutrition are all assured for more than three seasons. In counting three months to go to Mars and three months to return, we should have a full three months remaining to explore the planet, assuming the worst possible scenario where we could find no additional sources of food or respiration there. (9-10)

Obviously, Rosny's text—in both content and style—stands in sharp contrast to the preceding ones by Verne and d'Ivoi. Along with the illustrations, the overt pedagogy has disappeared, and the thematic focus has shifted from the mechanics of the machine to how it provides for the various needs of the men inside it. An unexplained pseudo-gravity field maintains a “stable equilibrium” within the voyagers' cabin. They have a sufficient quantity of “condensed” (presumably dehydrated) food to last for nine months. To respond to whatever circumstances they might encounter on Mars, they have on board not only powerful (nuclear?) weapons but also an entire high-tech lab that can handle “all physical, chemical, and biological analyses.” The only scientist/engineer cited in the passage is a fictional one, the inventor of a biological apparatus that can temporarily replace human respiration by means of “corpuscular action and anaesthesia of the lungs.” The text's non-mimetic referentiality is reinforced by richly suggestive but semantically empty neologisms such as “argine” (when speaking of the walls of the ship and the spacesuits) and “hydralium” (when explaining the on-board oxygen supply). And even the name of the craft itself, “*Stellarium*,” eschews the bird nomenclature used by Verne and d'Ivoi in favor of a much more nebulous and poetic appellation evoking the stars. The differences in the semiotic structure of these texts is clear. The basic narrative recipe used in Verne's extrapolative “hard sf” and d'Ivoi's derivative “*faux-hard sf*” has been abandoned in favor of a more impressionistic “speculative sf” model built upon absent paradigms, imaginary science, and estrangement effects.

Although consistently shunned as “paraliterary” by most French critics,⁹ the novels by Paul d’Ivoi and other Verne School writers constitute an interesting and unjustly neglected phase in the early history of French sf. Among the first examples of a very rich period of post-Verne pulp sf (roughly equivalent to that of the dime novels in America), they represent an important step in the genre’s evolution in France from the nineteenth-century *voyaage extraordinaire* to the *roman d’anticipation* of the early twentieth century.

NOTES

1. As Jean-Marc Gouanvic has observed: “The model for the imaginary established by [Verne’s] *Voyages Extraordinaires* imposed a brand of science fiction on all authors of rational conjecture up to World War I and even beyond” (46). Jean-Marc and Randy Lofficier describe this domination as follows: “In France, Verne cast an enormous shadow on the entire genre, until World War II. Jules Verne’s huge commercial success virtually created an industry overnight” (*French Science Fiction* 338-39). See also Evans, “Science Fiction in France” (256-57) and “Scientific Fiction vs. Science Fiction” (1-3). Although the popular French writers Albert Robida and Gustave Le Rouge published what might be construed as Verne School-type stories early in their careers (e.g., *Voyages très extraordinaires de Saturnin Farandoul* [The Very Extraordinary Journeys of Saturnin Farandoul, 1879] and *La Princesse des airs* [The Princess of the Skies, 1902], respectively), most of their fiction follows a very different narrative model. Robida’s fancifully extrapolative novels such as *Le Vingtième siècle* [The Twentieth Century, 1882] are futuristic fantasies in the satiric mode, whereas most of Le Rouge’s sf works such as his famous two-volume interplanetary saga *Le Prisonnier de la planète Mars* [The Prisoner of the Planet Mars, 1908] and *La Guerre des vampires* [The War of the Vampires, 1909] are a mixture of Wellsian speculative sf, “cosmic horror and interplanetary heroic fantasy,” and the “populist traditions of the French *roman-feuilleton*” (Stableford, 5-6). For more on Robida, see Willems and Compère. For more on Le Rouge, see Evans, “Gustave Le Rouge” and Stableford (5-14). All translations from the French appearing in this article are my own.

2. Noted French scholar and encyclopedist Pierre Versins describes the fiction of Paul d’Ivoi as

... less powerful than Verne’s, but it has regained a certain popularity during the past few years, and with good cause. His stories feature exciting adventures that are narrated with briskness and verve. And the large number of [sf] themes in them make d’Ivoi one of the most imaginative writers of this conjectural genre.... (462)

3. See Evans, “The Vehicular Utopias of Jules Verne” (99).

4. The explicitness of this educative goal—as well as a sense of the colonizing rivalry with Great Britain that was acutely felt in France at the time—can be seen in the following 1902 advertisement for d’Ivoi’s series:

If it is true that the future of France’s colonial expansion depends on a change in the education of its children, then one can say that the author of the *Voyages excentriques* has served his country well by developing in its youthful readers the taste for expeditions to far-away places, by awakening in them the spirit of initiative, and by giving them a feeling of self-confidence, all of which constitute the first steps toward [achieving] the success of our neighbors across the Channel.... (qtd. in Palewska, “De l’*extraordinaire* à l’*excentrique*” 4)

5. According to historian and sf scholar I.F. Clarke, “Driant has a world record as the man who turned out more future-war stories (some twelve in all) than any other writer before 1914” (394).

6. On Verne's racism and national stereotyping, see especially Boia (209-61) and Dusseau (410-38).

7. The theory of "absent paradigms" for describing the semiotic structure of sf was first popularized in English by McGill professor and sf scholar Marc Angenot in a 1979 article for *SFS* entitled "The Absent Paradigm: An Introduction to the Semiotics of Science Fiction." Angenot suggests that the fundamental signifying structure of most speculative sf is that its narrative discourse makes continual reference to illusory absent paradigms—i.e., neologisms, exolinguistics, etc.—where the reader is forced to invent, *ex nihilo*, contextual meaning. In other words, reading sf is very different from reading realistic fiction in that the the mental associations created by the words themselves are either incomplete or entirely absent. The reader must *conjecture*, must fill in the semantic blanks, must move to a higher level of cognitive interactivity with the text in order to create meaning.

For more on Rosny aîné, see Vernier, Gouanvic (45-73), and Huftier, and the forthcoming translation of three Rosny novellas by George Slusser and Danièle Chatelain. For more on Renard, see Evans "The Fantastic Science Fiction of Maurice Renard" and Gouanvic (75-130).

8. For a detailed analysis of this shift from mimetic to non-mimetic signifiers and from scientific didacticism to scientific impressionism in early French sf, see Evans, "Scientific Fiction versus Science Fiction" and Saint-Gelais (135-94).

9. In the words of one contemporary French scholar, Paul d'Ivoi "has been classified among those authors who are judged to be *démodés*, or superficial, or simple imitators. He is not credited with the same literary talent as Jules Verne, nor with the latter's prophetic vision" (Palewska, "*Les Voyages excentriques*," 146). See also Van Herp (279-80).

LES VOYAGES EXCENTRIQUES BY PAUL D'IVOI (in-octavo editions)

As is the case with many early sf authors, reprints of d'Ivoi's novels were often given different titles (*Jean Fanfare* became *La Diane de l'archipel*, for example). For a complete listing of these title variants, see the following online bibliography:

<http://www.ebooksgratuits.com/html/ivoi_biblio_voyages_excentriques.html>.

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Le Sergent Simplet à travers les colonies françaises [Sergeant Simple Visits the French Colonies]. Paris: Combet, 1895. Available online at <www.ebooksgratuits.com>.

Cousin de Lavarède! [Lavarede's Cousin]. Paris: Combet, 1896. Available online at <www.ebooksgratuits.com/ebooks.php>.

Jean Fanfare [Jean Fanfare]. Paris: Combet, 1897. Available online at <www.ebooksgratuits.com/ebooks.php>.

Corsaire Triplex [The Privateer Triple-X]. Paris: Combet, 1898. Available online at <www.ebooksgratuits.com/ebooks.php>.

La Capitaine Nilia [Captain Nilia]. Paris: Combet, 1899. Available online at <www.ebooksgratuits.com/ebooks.php>.

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ABSTRACT

During the final decades of the nineteenth century in France, the unprecedented success of Jules Verne's *Voyages Extraordinaires* began to generate a host of "Verne School" imitators including Paul d'Ivoi, Louis Boussenard, Maurice Champagne, Georges Le Faure, and Henry de Graffigny, among others. They were very prolific and specialized in science-fictional adventure stories that recycled the same themes of exploration and technology and the same narrational trademarks of didacticism and *Bildungsroman* that characterized Verne's most memorable fictions. This essay examines the sf works of the most popular of these Verne School writers, Paul d'Ivoi. In the history of French science fiction, d'Ivoi's twenty-one novels, collectively titled the *Voyages Excentriques*, may be viewed as a kind of stepping-stone between Verne's generally conservative "hard sf" model and the more fantastic "speculative sf" of early twentieth-century sf writers such as J.-H. Rosny aîné, Gustave Le Rouge, and Maurice Renard.