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Imperialism disguised as progress in the early days of science  
fiction**

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**The Scientific Romances of Jules Verne and H.G. Wells:**  
Imperialism disguised as progress in the early days of science fiction

by

Timothy Ferris

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of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts (Literature, Language, and Theory), Hunter College,  
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As a period of unlimited potential for progress and modernization, the nineteenth century moved at breakneck speed in developing new technologies that would change the world forever. Seizing upon these new and exciting developments, writers of fiction took the products of their imagination into strange new territories where the human condition is tested in ways that were not previously possible a mere century before. Working within this creative zeitgeist, in the latter half of the nineteenth century, are two men whose bodies of work are considered to be the two foundational pillars for the science fiction genre: namely, Jules Verne and H.G. Wells. Their influence over the genre has become so widely accepted that the two men seem to be perpetually linked together, sometimes resulting in works of similar presentation being awarded the epithets of being either “Vernian” or “Wellsian” in design. But what exactly does this mean? In brief, stories that emulate the format of the “scientific romance” (as the genre was known at the time) present a bold new theoretical scientific development (underwater travel, let’s say), and attempts to demonstrate the practice and consequences of such extraordinary technology. Protagonists of such stories are put to the test in more ways than one as they come to grips with a technology that is beyond their initial understanding. As they venture into previously inaccessible territories, their strength of character and mental faculties are exercised in ways that produce results that may have been shocking to readers at the time when these stories were first published. What sort of feats *could* a man with a submersible vehicle accomplish? What truths might we discover if we had the means to travel through *time*?

But while these speculations provide thrilling adventures for nineteenth-century readers, these early science fictions are irrevocably linked with themes of colonialism and empire. Frequently in their respective oeuvres, Verne and Wells write in a rhetoric of conquest that almost always translates to discovering a more efficient means of taming wild, non-European



environments. These goals extend not only to the lands that their protagonists explore, but also to human beings and other life that may populate them. Indeed, the underlying focus—the one that is masked behind the thrill and adventure of both Wells and Verne—is none other than the march of progress as understood by middle-class Europeans in the latter half of the nineteenth century. Progress can produce positivistic optimism, and it can also produce existential anxiety. The through-line that links the work of both Verne and Wells is the use of these new or theoretical technologies in order to express these ideologies, whether for valorization or condemnation of European imperialism and colonialism. The fictional men of science who wield these technologies, likewise, serve as an expression of the consequences of what happens when human beings are granted more efficient means of power over their fellow men. The scientific romances of Jules Verne and H.G. Wells serve exclusively as a medium through which to speculate over the linked subjects of progress and empire: to what extent human beings may affect control over the earth and the men who live there, the consequences thereof, and the value of progress as it is foisted upon supposedly primitive societies by the hands of European progressives who claim to know better.

But *why* do these themes of imperialism assert themselves repeatedly in Verne and linger on in the writings of Wells as the nineteenth century comes to a close? Is the scientific romance inherently predisposed to discuss the topic of imperialism? Was the format conceived as a means to demonstrate more efficient means of global control? In a genre where the only limitations are the plausibility of the author's imagination and the credulity of the individual reader, the scientific romance presents an idyllic playground in which one may effectively speculate on bold new ideas and theoretical concepts. Living in a time when imperial expansion was at the



forefront of Western ideas of progress, it seems natural that it should serve as both backdrop and recurring subject of fiction produced during the nineteenth century.

Romance (scientific or otherwise) offers readers an escape from the routine doldrums of the metropolitan home front, and an easy method of transportation to a life of adventure and excitement. In his book *Rule of Darkness*, Patrick Brantlinger provides a detailed analysis of the appeal of the romance novel through citations of contemporaries of both Verne and Wells. For example, Andrew Lang, prominent literary critic in the latter half of the nineteenth century, described the romance as an exploitation of “universal, deep-rooted, ‘primitive’ aspects of human nature...Fiction is a shield with two sides, the silver and the golden: the study of manners and of character, on one hand; on the other, the description of adventure, the delight of romantic narrative” (*Darkness* 231).

Throughout the Verne-Wells literary pantheon, we follow protagonists who seem to be caught between these two worlds. With Verne, his heroes bring the comforts of the home along for the ride (quite literally) as the adventure takes place inside a fantastic vehicle that defies the elements and provides all of the trappings that would make the travelling bourgeois on the move comfortable as he negotiates his passage under water, through a jungle, or even in the air. Likewise, Wells’s heroes and villains are exemplary Victorian gentlemen until they are confronted with the consequences that newly discovered science produces. Their moral fiber and chivalrous conduct are constantly tested as they are forced into situations that require solutions that are most ungentlemanly and come close to behavior that would be considered “savage” by the standards of their societies. It is stories like these, Lang explains, that appeal to the baser part of human nature: “[T]he natural man within me, the survival of some blue-painted Briton or of some gipsy ... [is] equally pleased with a true Zulu love story ... [T]he advantage of our mixed



condition, civilized at top with the old barbarian under our clothes, is just this, that we can enjoy all sorts of things” (*Darkness* 231-232). Brantlinger’s interpretation of Lang’s writings describes the genre of the romance as an escape from the confines of the urban imperial capital as the reader summons up within themselves “the barbarian buried self” which proves to be an appealing alternative to the realist novels of the era. These romances, Brantlinger explains, “are more fundamental, more honest, [and] more natural than realism,” and give way to what Lang would call “savage survivals,” which invoke the irrational, bestial side of humanity that has lain dormant under the yoke of polite society and class warfare (*Darkness* 232). Romances, therefore, offer the reader stuck in the day-to-day routine a thrilling and exciting avenue for adventure and exploration, one that leaves behind the factory or the office or the drawing room and presents an escape into anywhere—*everywhere*—else instead.

If the romance is an appeal to the more bestial side of human nature, then the scientific romance is an attempt to understand and conquer that which the reader would prefer to remain hidden. The Vernian/Wellsian romance invariably describes adventures into the unknown and demonstrates how suitably-learned protagonists come back alive through scientific ingenuity. The Vernian/Wellsian protagonist is inevitably brought face-to-face with that which is savage in the Western understanding of the word, and the focus and chief anxiety of the Vernian/Wellsian plot is the struggle for maintaining control and dominance over a world that is savage and hitherto unknown. How well the Vernian/Wellsian protagonist succeeds depends entirely on his level of skill, cunning, and capacity to understand his surroundings and recognize the potential of the raw materials that Mother Nature provides. Therefore, the Vernian/Wellsian plot will always rely on discursive techniques that would find themselves at home among other strategies of imperialist propaganda.



Before diving deeper into Verne's and Wells's respective oeuvres, it would be useful to examine the topics of speculation shared between the two writers. Once we look past the technological or scientific plot devices that inform their narratives, we are treated to plot structures that could not be more different. But as we will see, the authors' work nevertheless engages in a dialogue with one another, with echoes of one appearing in the works of the other, thereby laying the groundwork through scientific romance for the common tropes of existential speculation and cosmic angst that would come to typify the modern genre of science fiction. In order to understand how colonialism inevitably creeps into the narratives of both Verne and Wells, it is necessary to explore how the two authors approach an identical theme. It proves therefore convenient that both Verne and Wells wrote on the topic of lunar exploration, with both men speculating on what humankind may find on the surface of Earth's neighboring satellite.

### **Lunar Exploration**

In *From the Earth to the Moon* (1865), Jules Verne begins his voyage in the halls of the Baltimore Gun Club, where the club's president, Impey Barbicane, suggests rather flamboyantly that his club members construct a cannon large enough to fire a projectile at the moon. When Barbicane's wild idea is pushed forward, the project becomes an enterprise around which Americans throughout the nation rally, and Verne seems determined to illustrate this voyage in terms of conquest and imperial expansion. Barbicane and his fellows seek solely to test their abilities and technological ingenuity rather than pursue a meaningful goal. Rather distressingly, Barbicane frequently refers to the project as a mission of annexation on behalf of the United States:

My colleagues, there is no one here who has not seen the moon or at least heard of it....Perhaps it has been reserved to us to be the Columbuses of



that unknown world. Listen intently, support me with all your strength, and I will lead you to conquer that world, its name will be added to those of the thirty-six other states that already belong to the Union! (*Earth* 10)

This speech serves as Barbicane's mission statement, outlining his intentions to make contact with the moon and claim it in the name of the United States of America. He states explicitly that he means to stake a claim to the lunar surface, as if it were another frontier awaiting the influence of so-called American exceptionalism.

Barbicane's vehement desire to engage the moon by way of cannonball calls attention to his militarized personality. While Barbicane claims to wish to "communicate" with the moon, his only means of expression is through violence and war. Therefore, the only communication that the Gun Club can hope to deliver to the presumed inhabitants of the moon is a message of violence, which lends itself nicely to Barbicane's dream to see the moon colonized.

As we will see, this approach is typical of Verne, as the methods by which he chooses to take his readers along for the ride remain consistent throughout his body of work, known collectively as *Les Voyages Extraordinaires*. Innovative technology is not a thing to be feared, but instead a thing to be *admired* as it is made to usher in further progress for humankind. According to Jean Chesneaux, "If [Verne's] machines thus fulfil [the role of] nature, they become at the same time part of human life and extend human potentialities. Machines are no more antagonistic to mankind than they are to nature; and... Verne likes to illustrate his idea[s] by the use of stylistic effects which are of great significance, whatever their literary value may be" (Chesneaux 41). This being said, Barbicane's *Columbiad* in fact *doubles* as an instrument of war and an instrument of progress, extending its potential for power in an entirely new way that does not end at the potential for destruction. Barbicane sees the possibility of issuing a message



to the moon in the form of a projectile, transforming what was previously a destructive message into a signal of life and desire for fraternity.

However, in spite of the Gun Club's attempts to dress up their project in the language of diplomacy, Barbicane's goals are not given more definitive purpose until the arrival of the Frenchman, Michel Ardan. Ardan's role in the novel serves to offer a guiding hand for the American protagonists, and inspire a higher aspiration other than simple self-congratulation. He offers Barbicane and his colleagues an alternative goal for the enterprise. With his arrival, Ardan immediately transforms the conversation from one of conquest to one of exploration:

This voyage must be made sooner or later, and as for the means of locomotion, that simply follows the law of progress. Man started to travel on all fours, then one fine day, on two feet, then in a cart, then in a wagon, then in a stage-coach, then in a railroad car, and now! The projectile is the vehicle of the future....We are going to the moon, we shall go to the planets, we shall travel to the stars just as today we go from Liverpool to New York, easily, rapidly, surely, and the oceans of space will be crossed like the seas of the moon! Distance is only a relative term, and ultimately it will be reduced to zero. (*Earth* 104-05)

Not for the first time, and certainly not for the last, Verne raises the idea of mobility as a demonstration of power. Ardan's speech would have it so that humanity's mastery over technology would naturally run in parallel with its evolutionary development. The more developed humanity becomes, the more its technological feats should by consequence reflect that development. A voyage into space would therefore be the next stage on the evolutionary chain, and Ardan means to witness this next step firsthand.

However, it is not so simple. As Arthur B. Evans explains, Verne's ideological diversity leads to certain hiccups in his narrative: "[T]he lessons of geography, history, and science are alternatively valorized or subverted by their own philosophical and moral underpinnings—often resulting...in texts that seem strangely at odds with their own focus" (Evans 37). This confusing



role is best exemplified when Ardan introduces more problems than he resolves. Ardan illustrates his vision in the language of the colonialist. He means to conquer space and the heavenly bodies in the name of progress, claiming that it is merely the natural progression of human evolution. As he details further in his speech to the Americans, this voyage to the moon should naturally result in “trains of projectiles in which people will be able to travel comfortably from the Earth to the moon” (*Earth* 107). This, of course, would reflect Verne’s vision of global communication where the entire earthly sphere may be circumnavigated in a matter of months, not only efficiently, but in all the comforts to which the travelling bourgeois European is presumably entitled. “There will be no accidents,” Ardan continues, “no jolts, no derailments. Passengers will reach their destination swiftly, with no fatigue, on a straight course....Within twenty years, half of the Earth’s population will have visited the moon!” (*Earth* 107). To Ardan, the mission is strictly detailed in terms of a one-sided beneficiary. It is about what good can be achieved for the benefit of humankind, and not for the benefit of interplanetary cooperation. And shockingly, as Ardan continues, his speech becomes more fanatical, with his progressive ideas coming closer to colonialism. He turns to the question of the usefulness of the Gun Club’s mission:

I would tell myself that nothing useless exists in this universe, and...I would say...that if the worlds are inhabitable, then either they are inhabited, or they have been, or they will be....It’s obvious that on most of them, the principles of life as we know it would have to be modified. To mention only the planets, we would be burned alive on some of them and frozen to death on the others, depending on their distance to the sun. (*Earth* 108)

And here we see Ardan’s true goal: to see humanity come to settle on various planets in the solar system and beyond. While Barbicane had originally indicated a vague desire to see the moon



conquered and colonized, Ardan articulates a clear intention to have humankind transported onto another plane of existence.

A few decades later, H.G. Wells would make his own literary expedition to the lunar surface. While it would be a mistake to accuse Wells of stealing Jules Verne's idea, the thematic similarities in *The First Men in the Moon* (1901) are incontestable. However, it would appear that Wells launches his characters into undiscovered territory in order to blatantly come face-to-face with lunar natives and illustrate an invective *against* colonialist and imperialist ideologies. While it could be argued that Jules Verne offers a criticism against imperialistic designs, his characters unfortunately undermine these sentiments through their unwavering dedication to Verne's problematic notion of progress. Wells tackles the dual nature of Verne's idea of progress directly through his two protagonists: Bedford and Cavor.

Wells's Mr. Bedford drives the action of the novel through his role as narrator, and it is through Bedford that Wells introduces the theme of empire in his very first chapter. Bedford has retreated from London and his various creditors to lie low in Lympne in Kent, a location for which Bedford feels little sentiment other than disdain and indifference. He comments on the swampy marshland that forms the landscape:

I doubt if the place would be there at all if it were not a fading memory of things gone forever. It was the big port of England in Roman times, Portus Lemanis, and now the sea is four miles away. All down the steep hill are boulders and masses of Roman brickwork....I used to stand on the hill and think of it all, the galleys and legions, the captives and officials, the women and traders, the speculators like myself, all the swarm and tumult that came clanking in and out of the harbour. All now just a few lumps of rubble on a grassy slope and a sheep or two—and I! (*First Men* 2-3)

Wells draws attention to a once mighty power that has subsequently faded into distant memory, with nothing but a few remnants left behind to remind those in the present that something was there at all. Here, Wells's Roman Empire has become nearly indistinguishable from the



landscape that surrounds the present-day Lympne, suggesting that all such empires are doomed to a similar fate. This is an important observation for Bedford to make, as he will later attempt to lay the foundation for the makings of his own colony and, by extension, his own empire.

Bedford's ideology is shamelessly that of a capitalist, seeking to gain whatever profit there is to be had in the multitudinous endeavors he pursues. He leeches himself onto Cavor's experiments in the hopes that whatever Cavor may produce could somehow be of profit to Bedford himself. Cavor describes himself (in the Wellsian fashion) as "an investigator" rather than a scientific professional. As narrator, Bedford serves as a source of amusement in his way of interpreting Cavor's lessons, as well as providing a means for Wells to distance his novel from Jules Verne's preceding work. Bedford's stubborn refusal to learn aids the author in deliberately glossing over the finer details of science where Verne would insist on enumerating the minutest of calculations. However, Bedford soon comes to internalize the aims of Cavor's investigations almost imperceptibly, and soon gains an amateur's understanding of Cavor's goal to seek a substance that "will cut off the gravitational attraction of the sun or the gravitational attraction of the earth" (*First Men* 9). It is when Bedford gains this understanding that he finally becomes fully appreciative of the profundity of Cavor's work as a project that might change the world, and immediately begins to consider the project in terms of profit and acquisition:

There seemed no limit to the possibilities of the scheme; whichever way I tried, I came on miracles and revolutions, one had only to get a sheet of this substance beneath it and one might lift it with a straw. My first natural impulse was to apply this principle to guns and ironclads and all the material and methods of war and from that to shipping, locomotion, building, every conceivable form of human industry....I saw a parent company and daughter companies, applications to right of us, applications to left, rings and trusts, privileges and concessions spreading and spreading, until one vast stupendous Cavorite Company ran and ruled the world....And I was in it. (*First Men* 10)



Bedford introduces an attitude that has rarely been so thoroughly described in the Vernian-Wellsian pantheon; namely, the exploitation of scientific innovation for personal profit. The Vernian protagonist is famous for developing his experiments for the benefit of humankind, while the various men of science in Wells's canon have chiefly conducted their investigations for curiosity's sake alone, or for even deeper, more malign purposes. Bedford is quick to realize the potentialities of Cavor's as-yet undeveloped Cavorite, and practically salivates at the notion of building a monopoly on weightless apparatuses. As Bedford theorizes, once the process is perfected, the world will never be the same. The man who develops this process will, in effect, become master of the world and lead an empire of industry.

This is where Wells draws the line between his two protagonists. Bedford sees profit and monetary gain, whereas Cavor operates in the manner of one who might be found tinkering away in one of Jules Verne's adventures. Cavor is motivated by curiosity for curiosity's sake. He claims his work is "the most important," and yet Bedford is flabbergasted when he comes to understand Cavor's idea of importance:

He had not the beginning of the inkling of an idea! This astonishing little man had been working on purely theoretical grounds the whole time! When he said it was "the most important" research the world had ever seen he simply meant it squared up so many theories, settled so much that was in doubt; he had troubled no more about the application of the stuff he was going to turn out than if he had been a machine that makes guns.  
(*First Men* 11)

Cavor would sooner conduct his research in private, far away from the prying eyes of those like Bedford who would seek to exploit his labor for their personal gain. For Bedford, the only way this project could have any success would be for the result of financial gain: making deals, signing contracts, changing the way businesses and industries operate overnight. For Cavor, the simple road to understanding and gaining greater knowledge is success in itself.



In this way, we can see the dual nature of Jules Verne's idea of progress personified in Wells's two protagonists. Bedford represents the road to progress and greater industry, as Verne might illustrate through his various bourgeois-capitalist protagonists, while Cavor stands for the admirable acquisition of knowledge alone, which would characterize the pedagogical goals of Verne's *Les Voyages Extraordinaires* series in its entirety. As the novel progresses, and Bedford's and Cavor's morals and desires become further at odds with one another over the course of their adventure, we see how this dual nature cannot help but undermine the goals of the lunar expedition. In Bedford's eyes, the moon adventure can only mean a journey of speculation, a journey to discover what bastion of unused or raw materials could be uncovered for use back home on earth. This approach alienates one such as Bedford from the environment in such a way that he views an entire world as merely a larder or closet in which one keeps supplies for greater purposes in the home territory. He cannot hope to achieve an understanding of a newfound frontier until he is able to remove these desires from his mind. Cavor, on the other hand, will always view his surroundings through interpretation. While Cavor may be more receptive to new cultures and environments, he will always place himself at a distance as an observer, translating new discoveries in terms that he will only be able to understand upon reflection. In this way, he becomes more like Bedford than he would be willing to admit, cataloging the newfound flora and fauna for his own personal sense of fulfilment as to how this new knowledge could be assimilated for better use elsewhere.

Wells allows these two perspectives to play out during a conversation between the two men, when Cavor raises the possibility of finding minerals on the moon in order to tempt Bedford ("gold perhaps"), as well as the convenient ease the new Cavorite material provides for carting to and from similar heavenly bodies. Bedford is struck by an appealing prospect:



An extraordinary possibility came rushing into my mind. Suddenly I saw as in a vision the whole solar system threaded with Cavorite liners and spheres de luxe. “Rights of pre-emption,” came floating into my head—planetary rights of pre-emption. I recalled the old Spanish monopoly in American gold. It wasn’t as if it was just this planet or that—it was all of them. (*First Men* 21-22)

In Bedford’s mind, if Cavorite can bring two men to exciting new frontiers, then why should they keep the secret to themselves? By preempting everyone else, Bedford can gain a monopoly not only on lunar tourism alone, but over interplanetary travel throughout the entire solar system. This idea recalls Michel Ardan’s vision of a train of projectiles bridging Earth with the rest of the universe, giving voice to what Ardan could not articulate himself: that the people who first develop interplanetary travel can and will sell the experience for any price they see fit to name—as anyone who can afford it will pay for it—not in the name of human progress, but in the name of human profit. “This is tremendous!” concludes Bedford, “this is imperial! I haven’t been dreaming of this sort of thing” (*First Men* 22).

As we see demonstrated above, to both Verne and Wells a trip to the moon means naturally to *conquer* the moon. In perhaps the most direct parallel between the two novels, there exists an almost identical episode wherein the writers’ protagonists fall into a drunken frenzy. Verne’s direct sequel to his own novel, *Around the Moon* (1870), follows Barbicane, Ardan, and Nicholl after the projectile was fired from the *Columbiad* and towards the moon. En route to the lunar sphere, the explorers fall victim to the effects of excessive oxygen from the projectile’s breathing apparatus and begin to articulate the goals of their mission in indisputably colonialist rhetoric. Barbicane and Nicholl stupidly wonder aloud why they are going to the moon and what they shall do once they reach it, to which Ardan replies in a drunken speech:

Why?...Why? To take possession of the moon, in the name of the United States! To add a fortieth state to the Union! To colonise the lunar regions, to cultivate them, to people them, to carry thither all the prodigies of art,



of science, of industry. To civilise the Selenites, unless they are more civilised than we, and to form them into a republic if they do not already form one. (*Around* 281)

Following this, Barbicane and Nicholl are quick to take up a cheer and declare “[t]he empire of the moon” to belong to the three of them. While the novel’s narrator would dismiss these declarations in the subsequent chapter with a weak “Many foolish things had been uttered under [the] influence, but they were forgotten as soon as said,” the impression remains that the explorers would still see the moon transformed into a hub for human activity following a takeover by whatever means necessary (*Around* 286). The presumed Selenites would—like the various native populations who had suffered under the yoke of European imperialism—simply have to move out of their way and accept human dominion in the name of “progress.”

Our friends Bedford and Cavor perform similarly in an episode in Wells’s novel. While crawling to escape the notice of the moon’s native population (Wells’s own Selenites), the two men happen upon what can only be described as lunar mushrooms. Starving from their journey through space, they wolf down samples of the fungus and quickly descend into a state of intoxication. “It’s good,” says Bedford. “Infernally good! What a home for our surplus population! Our poor surplus population” (*First Men* 59). As they continue eating, Bedford falls into a deeper state of intoxication and into a more fevered frenzy:

In some way that I have now forgotten my mind was led back to projects of colonisation. “We must annex this moon,” I said. “There must be no shilly-shally. This is part of the White Man’s Burden. Cavor—we are—*hic*—Satap—mean Satraps! Nempire Caesar never dreamt. B’in all the newspapers. Cavorecia. Bedfordecia. Bedfordecia....” Certainly I was intoxicated. I embarked upon an argument to show the infinite benefits our arrival would confer upon the moon. I involved myself in a rather difficult proof that the arrival of Columbus was, after all, beneficial to America. I found I had forgotten the line of argument I had intended to pursue, and continued to repeat “sim’lar to C’lumbus” to fill up time. (*First Men* 60)



Once again, we see Columbus's name dragged out in order to lend an enterprise like lunar exploration a sense of legitimacy. However, Bedford's language here and drunken ramblings automatically dismiss any claim to legitimacy that he may entertain. Additionally, we see recent events like the founding of Rhodesia namechecked in Bedford's arrogant declarations of naming the moon "Cavorecia" or "Bedfordecia." This, of course, highlights Bedford's superficial understanding of what it actually means to colonize a given space, as he imagines a convenient dumping ground for undesirables ("surplus population") back home and a mine from which valuables may be found and carted off homewards.

So what is the takeaway from these nearly identical episodes? Why do both Verne's and Wells's protagonists descend into imperialistic fever dreams while intoxicated? One possible interpretation is that these sets of characters in two different scenarios are giving vent to latent anxieties concerning their place in the racial hierarchy that the possible presence of Selenites ultimately represents. As Patrick Brantlinger explains in his book *Taming Cannibals*, "The standard image of the 'imperial race' ... is of the unflinching British hero, braving the attacks and temptations of savages and barbarians. The "natives" are supposed to mimic their betters, not the other way around" (*Cannibals* 21). Nothing could have prepared Bedford and Cavor for actually confronting a native population on the moon, neither would Barbicane and his cohorts begin to know how to conquer an entire spheroid with only the three of them, a few guns, and a dog. What these separate episodes of hallucination ultimately suggest is a desperate need for confirmation of the Europeans' supposed racial superiority. The more these characters are able to articulate their belief in their racial right to rule, the more tangible their empire becomes and, by extension, the stronger their means of moral support as they venture boldly into uncharted territory. To Ardan, Bedford, and the rest, if human progress has taken their species as far as the



moon, it stands to reason that humanity has earned its right to conquer and take possession of its neighboring satellite; and so continue the work that Columbus began centuries before.

### **Progress and Conquest**

The underlying current that appears to drive the motivations of both Verne's and Wells's protagonists is the idea of "progress." Certain actions are taken in the name of progress, technologies are forced onto civilizations in order to expedite progress, and European colonization is known to bring progress with it simply by virtue of there being a Western presence in the Orient and among other reputedly "primitive" cultures. The European protagonist in these adventures stands in sharp contrast with the exotic environments through which he travels and the peoples and cultures he might encounter. This stark contrast ushers in the concept of progress almost unconsciously, as the reader is forced to consider how far humanity has come since its primitive origins as they witness episodes involving the latest scientific concept that drives the plot.

Jules Verne, in particular, is greatly interested in the role of progress throughout his *Les Voyages Extraordinaires* series. The idea of progress, in the Vernian sense, is reflective of the Saint-Simonian school of philosophy. Promulgated by the ideas of Claude Henri de Rouvroy, comte de Saint-Simon, the Saint-Simonian ethos was developed during the early nineteenth century and described the value of science as a means of making the world a better place: "Steam and electricity for all tasks," declared Saint-Simon, "in place of the exploitation of man by man, the exploitation of the globe by mankind" (Chesneaux 69). Like Plato's philosopher kings, the Saint-Simonian school of thought dreamed of an ideal world wherein scientists and men of advanced education led society towards a more rational and more efficient mode of existence



through scientific ingenuity and problem-solving. Specifically, followers of Saint-Simonianism believed the concept of a machine to be indicative of the highest form of progress, and a world proliferated with machines would indeed represent the best of all possible worlds. Though Saint-Simon fails to address the sustainability of available resources, what is stressed is the importance of “careful, regulated, fraternal co-operation in the exploitation of the globe in the light of scientific knowledge” (Chesneaux 69). We see these themes occur frequently in *Les Voyages Extraordinaires*, with those characters whom Verne gifts with specialist knowledge achieving great accomplishments through intelligence, skill, and the resources made available to them.

Nowhere is this better illustrated than in Verne’s very own Robinsonade, *The Mysterious Island* (1874), which features a small group of American soldiers stranded on a deserted island in the south Pacific. The group’s leader is an engineer named Cyrus Smith, who utilizes his substantial scientific knowledge in order to develop a comfortable community for him and his cohorts on the island. In what Jean Chesneaux describes as a “Saint-Simonian parable,” Verne’s novel sets out to demonstrate what feats may be achieved through fraternal cooperation between men and the careful utilization of the environment in which they inhabit. The novel follows a pattern of introducing a problem, followed shortly by a description of how Cyrus Smith is able to solve that problem with the resources at his disposal on the island.

Smith, the novel’s ostensible hero, is lauded by his fellows as someone of almost divine status. The sailor Pencroff, in particular, frequently refers to Smith’s endeavors as “miracles” or magic tricks, thereby illustrating the moral value of what a comprehensive education may achieve through the sailor’s constant approbation. He and the boy Harbert act as Cyrus Smith’s most willing pupils and quickly place unwavering faith in the abilities of their engineer leader. As explained by the novel’s omniscient narrator:



The engineer was to them a microcosm, a compound of every science, a possessor of all human knowledge. It was better to be with Cyrus in a desert island, than without him in the most flourishing town in the United States. With him they could want nothing; with him they would never despair. If these brave men had been told that a volcanic eruption would destroy the land, that this land would be engulfed in the depths of the Pacific, they would have imperturbably replied, 'Cyrus is here!' (*Island* 78)

If *The Mysterious Island* is a "Saint-Simonian parable," then Cyrus Smith is a Saint-Simonian hero. He is not just a man, but a walking library and a sentient embodiment of accumulated human knowledge. As Arthur B. Evans explains in *Jules Verne Rediscovered*, the verb "to possess" plays particular significance here: "[I]n Verne's fictional world," Evans explains, "knowledge is portrayed as an object to be possessed—one that confers social status, wealth, and, above all, power to the possessor, at the same time morally requiring him to use it for the benefit of humanity" (Evans 148). As is often the case in the *Les Voyages Extraordinaires* series, knowledge is both the means to the end and the prize to be won throughout the adventure. Cyrus Smith stands in the unique position as the possessor of all knowledge among his fellows, casting him in the role of natural leader among the castaways. His absence is strongly felt at the novel's start, when he is swept away by the storm that strands the castaways, leaving the rest of the group in a state of anxiety until he is recovered.

It is not until Smith is found that the castaways truly begin overcoming their difficulties and adjusting to life on the island. Smith *shares* his knowledge with his friends, thereby enriching their own experience on the island and helping through what would otherwise be considered a stressful time of crisis. As a point of contrast, the character of Ayrton is reduced to a state of base savagery before he is found by the castaways on a nearby neighboring island. Ayrton, a former antagonist, was left marooned at the conclusion of an earlier Verne novel—*The Children of Captain Grant* (1867-1868)—without the benefit of one such as Cyrus Smith's



guiding hand; and as a result, he is found in dire straits with nothing that is recognizably human perceptible within him: “Indeed it was not an ape; it was a human being, a man. But what a man! A savage in all the horrible acceptance of the word, and so much the more frightful that he seemed fallen to the lowest degree of brutishness” (*Island* 298). The stock figure of the savage is a recurring trope in the Vernian pantheon, usually made to serve as a point of contrast between modern technological developments and humanity’s origins. Ayrton is no exception; but in this instance, he uniquely serves as a specter of what fate *might* have befallen our heroes had they not the benefit of Smith’s leadership and education. If they were not made privileged to Smith’s knowledge, they might have degenerated just as easily into as wretched a state as Ayrton.

Cyrus Smith’s purpose in the novel is to teach his fellows and, by extension, the reader. As the castaways’ education progresses, they too become like Smith as they accumulate what can only be described as abstract units of intelligence. The more they acquire, the more suited they become to mastering their environment and taking possession of the island as a whole. Which is where we come to the more problematic aspect of Verne’s positivist parable: the castaways forcibly shift their role away from being passive victims of circumstance, and actively redefine themselves and their role on the island not as prisoners of fate, but independent agents seeking to conquer a territory gifted to them by fortune. This is when the castaways declare their intentions and become colonists instead. Committed to remaining optimistic, and knowing they may rely on Smith and his talent for survival, Pencroff leads the call to his fellows to make the most of their time on the mysterious island:

[I]f you like, captain, we will make a little America of this island! We will build towns, we will establish railways, start telegraphs, and one fine day, when it is quite changed, quite put in order and quite civilised, we will go and offer it to the government of the Union. Only, I ask one thing...that we do not consider ourselves castaways, but colonists who have come here to settle. (*Island* 98)



From this moment onwards, the group is collectively referred to in the text almost exclusively as “colonists,” which is exactly what they become as they come to settle the island. Just as the castaways are transformed, so too is the island as it becomes subject to the will of the protagonists. The narrative is transformed as well, as the story ceases to be a story of survival, but instead becomes a Vernian adventure about how a group of Westerners might efficiently and effectively come to settle and make use of a foreign space, and, by doing so, introduce the element of progress to this untamed new frontier.

Most importantly, Verne’s *The Mysterious Island* reveals the true character of the scientific romance as a subgenre focused on the conquest of a given location, environment, or even a fictionalized people by use of specialist knowledge and modern science. The accuracy of the science itself is immaterial to the goals of the narrative; for in order to prove successful—and thus elucidate the many and varied achievements of progress as defined by Western society—the story must conclude with the triumph of the white European male over his environment through the careful utilization of studied practical skill. Cyrus Smith is able to conquer Lincoln Island in the name of the United States *because* he is a brilliant engineer. Ayrton, though in possession of a certain level of cunning in his own right, is utterly hopeless without the survival knowledge required to exploit the resources made available to him. And so we understand the scientific romance to always reveal itself to be a story of conquest in disguise, as the adventure insists upon the reification of science as synonymous with progress: the needs of the romantic narrative will always return to the idea of modernity and how a land is shaped, transformed, and civilized by the hands of the abstract agent known as progress.



## The Risks of Progress

Throughout his career, Wells was obsessed with the idea of progress and its effects and consequences over the world at large. His debut novel *The Time Machine* (1895), for example, predicted a future that was doomed by the Victorian concept of what constituted as jolly good progress indeed: particularly, the evolutionary forecast for what lies in store for the descendants of the pampered and idle bourgeois, as well as the working-class wage slave consigned to operating the very machines that Verne might have hailed as a symbol of modernity. But it is the notion of a “civilizing mission” that I would like to discuss at this juncture, as Wells writes a more nuanced take on the consequences of the so-called White Man’s Burden in his sophomore effort *The Island of Dr Moreau* (1896).

Like Verne’s *The Mysterious Island*, Wells’s novel details the careful exploitation of nature in the name of progress. Rather perversely, however, the story concerns one of Wells’s infamous mad scientists, Dr. Moreau, and his horrific efforts to transform a beast into a man through grotesque experiments in vivisection; or, as Moreau describes, “the study of the plasticity of living forms” (*Moreau* 53). Moreau maintains that a living creature’s nature and behavior is not inherent, and may in fact be molded and shaped given the proper stimulus, or through violent surgery and a blueprint of human anatomy. Moreau proves himself fixated on the recreation of humanity through the collection of triumphs that populate his island, and goes so far as to create a facsimile of human civilization in order to keep his beasts under his control. While he claims that giving the beasts human shape has become an almost easy process, his procedure for civilizing them proves to be a different caliber of challenge altogether:

[I]t is in the subtle grafting and re-shaping one must needs do to the brain that my trouble lies. The intelligence is often oddly low....And least satisfactory of all is something that I cannot touch, somewhere—I cannot determine where—in the seat of the emotions. Cravings, instincts, desires



that harm humanity, a strange hidden reservoir to burst suddenly and inundate the whole being of the creature with anger, hate, or fear. These creatures of mine seemed strange and uncanny to you as soon as you began to observe them, but to me, just after I make them, they seem to be indisputable human beings. It's afterwards as I observe them that the persuasion fades. First one animal trait, then another, creeps to the surface and stares at me....But I will conquer yet. Each time I dip a living creature into the bath of burning pain, I say: this time I will burn out all the animal, this time I will make a rational creature of my own. (*Moreau* 58-59)

Whether Moreau actively realizes it or not, he is attempting to imitate a god and recreate humanity in an image that pleases him. His attempts to humanize his beast men are in fact attempts to civilize them as a colonist might do to a group of people he believes to be primitive. Try as he might, even when his latest effort proves successful, it is still not good enough—it is still not *human* enough. The cracks in the façade assert themselves, and Moreau is forced to rule his experiment a failure. Through Moreau, Wells recreates what Brantlinger describes as the “civilizing mission.” In Moreau’s eyes, the beast men are just as savage as any of the other indigenous populations that may be found in the rest of the world. With careful mental suggestion, Moreau might just be able to train them into becoming creatures that are socially acceptable. As Brantlinger explains, nonwhites or, in this case, the beast men as their proxy race can only hope to “approximate” Western behavior, even though they will never attain the level of civilization demanded of them. The beast men can only aspire to be “mimic men,” or those who imitate the cultural norms of Western society, as their species and origins will always cement them in the role of “the Other.”

The “civilizing mission,” described above, serves as the ultimate justification for colonialism. The colonist will see it as only natural that those “backwards” people should wish to aspire to their level of civilization and see their culture as something to be desired and imitated. Furthermore, as Brantlinger explains, the justification for colonialism is based on the assumption



that the native populations *want* to leave behind their old ways and join the so-called “respectable” nations of the world (i.e. Europe and its affiliates). However, in spite of this, “that they have not progressed on their own and may very well need the assistance of Europeans to achieve civilization implies their natural inferiority, just as it would later do after Darwin’s theory of evolution was well established and when the phrase ‘backward races’ became familiar” (*Cannibals* 2-5). This is indeed Moreau’s assumption as well, as he believes his beast men unconsciously desire to become civilized in spite of their limitations. According to Moreau, “[T]hey’re odd. Complex, like everything else alive. There is a kind of upward striving in them, part vanity, part waste sexual emotion, part waste curiosity. It only mocks me” (*Moreau* 59). Moreau might claim ambivalence towards his project, but there is a desire to see his beast men become truly civilized, if only just to prove that they can, in fact, become civilized at all.

To this end, the beast men have created amongst themselves a code that they call “The Law,” which each of them must obey if they should hope to become true human beings. The Law reads as follows:

“Not to go on all-Fours; *that* is the Law. Are we not Men?”  
 “Not to suck up Drink; *that* is the Law. Are we not Men?”  
 “Not to eat Flesh or Fish; *that* is the Law. Are we not Men?”  
 “Not to claw Bark of Trees; *that* is the Law. Are we not Men?”  
 “Not to chase other Men; *that* is the Law. Are we not Men?” (*Moreau* 43)

Wells leaves it ambiguous as to where the Law comes from, as Moreau claims only a peripheral awareness of it: “There’s something they call the Law” (*Moreau* 59). Even Montgomery, Moreau’s drunken assistant who keeps regular congress with the beast men, appears ignorant to its origins. Whether or not the pair are playing coy, the fact remains that they both subscribe to the Law and hold it as a sacred doctrine to which the beast men must aspire lest they should invite severe punishment. Moreau finds the Law particularly useful for keeping his creatures in



line. In this way, Moreau has perpetuated a crude system of religion on his island, whereupon his beast men hold his words and actions to be that of the divine. To them, Moreau creates, he punishes, and he raises them up again with profound mercy. To them, the Law is synonymous with Moreau, as they believe him capable of asserting his presence and influence everywhere through omnipotent intervention. Likewise, Moreau keeps the Law as a measure to save himself from potential injury. He knows the bestial nature of his creatures is kept at bay with a barricade made from gossamer; the more he can perpetuate this Law and hold it as a lofty ideal, the less likely the beast men are to revolt and degenerate. It cannot go unremarked, however, that the Law is ultimately meaningless to Moreau and Montgomery, as they both actively engage in activities that should ostensibly *break* the Law, and so would logically contradict their humanity in the eyes of their beast men. True to the spirit of colonialism, humanity is whatever Moreau and Montgomery say it is, just as civilization is as it is defined through the eyes of the Westerner.

Postcolonial critical theorist Frantz Fanon thoroughly describes the mentality of a colonized race in his book *The Wretched of the Earth*, in particular the process of assimilation that takes place in the mind of the individual who seeks to receive Western indoctrination. This attitude, Fanon explains, is known to take on “the aspect of a cult or of a religion” as the native subject becomes desperate to find a sense of anchorage under the new regime. Oftentimes, the native will be caught between two worlds, claiming the nationality of both his homeland and the colonizer’s home territory, but ultimately he will fall into models set and provided by his European oppressors, leaving his indigenous culture behind. These actions provide the native with “a nucleus of security” around which is built an identity that will correspond with the demands made by the oppressor (Fanon 217-218). In this way, we can understand the beast men adopting the habits and mannerisms of “men” as a means to end the pain that Moreau inflicts



upon them. They do not truly believe themselves to be human beings, but simply enact the role in order to appease their tormentors, Moreau and Montgomery. As Moreau explains:

Oh! but it is such a little thing....Pain is simply our intrinsic medical adviser to warn us and stimulate us....Plants do not feel pain; the lower animals—it's possible that such animals as the starfish and crayfish do not feel pain. Then with men, the more intelligent they become the more intelligently they will see after their own welfare, and the less they will need the goad to keep them out of danger. I never yet heard of a useless thing that was not ground out of existence by evolution sooner or later. Did you? And pain gets needless. (*Moreau* 54-55)

Moreau's reasoning is predicated on the idea that pain and fear of pain serve as reliable means of exercising control and influence. The "lower animals" cannot appreciate this as, according to Moreau, they are incapable of feeling pain as we do, and are thus incapable of understanding the "advice" that pain is likely to provide. To Moreau, pain is simply a built-in message-system that serves to discourage unfavorable behavior by way of a signifier that sets the organism on the right path towards peace or reward. Pain is thus an agent of progress; the more pain that is dealt, the less likely the subject is to perform behaviors that invite further pain. The subject—in this case, the beast men—will eventually come to "see to their own welfare" as Moreau puts it, and attempt to mimic the habits and mannerisms of their tormentors in order to put a stop to the pain, and so create for themselves the "nucleus of security" that will safeguard them from Montgomery's whip or Moreau's special tools.

More subtly, though, *The Island of Dr Moreau* reflects the degenerative anxieties that plagued the latter half of the nineteenth century. Frequently cited as a direct result of the dissemination of Darwin's theory of evolution, Wells's contemporaries were haunted by a fear of their own mortality. Basically, Darwin's theory of evolution called attention to the accident that was humanity's ascendancy to the top of the food chain; and even more distressing, was the idea that European hegemony across the globe was just another accident of chance, and not



indicative—as was commonly assumed—of racial superiority. Thomas Huxley, famous champion of Darwin’s theories and Wells’s tutor during his time at the Normal School of Science, wrote extensively on the theory of evolution and its implications regarding humanity’s place in the universe. As Frank McConnell summarizes, Huxley’s thoughts are reflective of the general consensus regarding these controversial revelations:

For Huxley, the lesson of evolution is a bitter and possibly a tragic one. Morality, decency, love—all the things we value most intensely as characteristics of our civilization and our distance from the beasts—can be seen, on the cosmic scale, as mere evolutionary excrescences. They are “values,” to be sure: but value whose only function is to make possible the banding together and survival of our weak, prehuman ancestors, and having no objective correlation in the structure of outer, physical or biological, reality. The only law nature knows is the law governing the relation of the eaters and the eaten: what humans celebrate as “natural law” is no more natural, no more suggested or echoed by the rest of the universe, than the construction of high-rise apartment buildings or the invention of clothing. (McConnell 61)

Basically, what Darwin’s theories presented was the possibility that man is not definitively master of his environment. Just as he so quickly ascended the evolutionary ladder, he might slip back down again. The delusions that we create for ourselves—morality, loyalty, patriotism, honor, love, what have you—are ultimately meaningless in the cosmic scale of things, and hold very little weight when considered from the position of objective reality. European imperialists were either distressed or emboldened by Darwin’s theories. The former position called attention to the fragility of European empires, suggesting that their dominion was not founded on principles of justice or divine right, but merely on the caprice of fortune and an accident of nature. And what nature giveth, nature could taketh away again. The latter position, however, believed Darwin’s theories to confirm European superiority and so provided the much-coveted scientific justification for colonialism and empire.



## Reverse Progress, Reverse Invasion

These degenerative anxieties are a recurring theme in the scientific romances of H.G. Wells. His very first novel, *The Time Machine*, speculated on the possible outcome of humanity's degeneration across millennia. In what John Huntington describes as "the paradox of degenerative progress," the Eloi are the direct result of a stagnated population at the twilight end of empire, with all of their needs met and no perceivable threat to their existence (Huntington 47). As Huxley declared elsewhere in his writings, the struggle for humanity ultimately means an escape from pain and sorrow. Once these needs are met, and a given people have no more cause for survival anxieties, then there is no further need for progress and innovation: the empire loses all forward momentum and begins to enter into a period of stagnation. The Eloi are the end product of this stagnation, as millennia of evolution has changed humanity into effete and weak creatures that have no motivation apart from gross hedonism. This makes the Eloi easy prey for the Morlocks who supersede their hegemony and keep them as mere chattel and fodder for their larder.

In this way, Wells illustrates the anxieties of his contemporaries as Victorians from every corner of the British Empire began to see the writing on the proverbial wall and came to view their station as tenuous and vulnerable. Wells was not the only author of his time to write on themes invoking the collapse of empire, but he was the first to articulate these themes in reference to the theories of Charles Darwin. These degenerative anxieties eventually gave way to the invasion novel, creating a trend in pulp literature of the day as various obscure writers would seize upon this disturbing theme and offer accounts of invasion by a superior imperial force. These narratives gave expression to the rising fear of not just an invasion from a superior foreign nation, but also a fear of invasion from a superior race of people. Ever the trendsetter, it may be



surprising to learn that a work on this theme appears in the bibliography of Jules Verne, and make no mistake, in spite of the pedagogical and didactic goals of *Les Voyages Extraordinaires*, *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea* (1870) is first and foremost a novel concerning invasion from a foreign power. That foreign power is none other than Jules Verne's arguably most famous character, Captain Nemo himself.

Just as the driving mystery of *The Mysterious Island* is the identity of the colonists' unseen benefactor, the driving mystery of *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea* is the origins and identity of the inscrutable Captain Nemo. His chosen name "Nemo" implies a non-identity, a "no one," and it is this cloak of obscurity on which the novel focuses as Nemo gradually becomes himself "known." Professor Aronnax, the novel's narrator, frequently wonders at Nemo's allegiances, desperately attempting to discover Nemo's homeland and nation, and who the crew of the *Nautilus* ultimately serve. The *Nautilus*, being a new and extraordinary vehicle, the like of which humanity has hitherto not seen, presents an existential threat to the European powers of the world whose naval forces simply cannot match the potential that a submersible vehicle presents. As Nemo himself states repeatedly, the ocean represents a powerful and ever-changing element ("*Mobilis in mobili*") that can both give life and take it away. The ocean is that which is sometimes known as "the element of death for humanity," and he who is master of that element is a force to be reckoned with indeed (*Leagues* 124). The *Nautilus*, much like its master, has a dual nature of its own. On the one hand, it is a destructive force that wages war on the various oppressive naval powers of the world, and more relevantly (and true to the goals of *Les Voyages Extraordinaires*) it is a vehicle of exploration that charts the underwater domain and catalogues the creatures and features that may be found there. Thus, there are many facets to Captain Nemo and his *Nautilus*. He is a scientist, a terrorist, an explorer, and a pirate in his own



right. But most importantly, Nemo is a freedom fighter, a champion of the world's underdogs who seeks to topple the powers that keep the downtrodden underfoot.

So why is it that Verne returns repeatedly to the themes of empire while charting Nemo's journey underwater? Why is it that—while the novel is certainly preoccupied with Aronnax and his newly found observations made from the benefit of this new underwater perspective—we come to understand indisputably that we are not in fact journeying through a newly charted frontier, but instead navigating the realms and domains that make up the dominion of Captain Nemo? Aronnax's first meeting with Nemo establishes the man as a nation unto himself. When Aronnax accuses the captain of savagery after threatening to leave him behind to drown, Nemo replies: "Professor...I'm not what you call a civilized man. I am finished with society, for reasons I alone can appreciate. I don't obey its laws, and I suggest you never again refer to them in my presence" (*Leagues* 65). It is subsequently Aronnax's impression that Nemo moves as an independent agent and swears fealty to no one in particular: "Not only had he [Nemo] put himself outside the pale of humanity's laws," Aronnax muses, "but also he had made himself independent, free in the ultimate sense of the word, quite beyond all law!" (*Leagues* 65). To Nemo, the sea represents a true ideal and an alternative mode of existence. As he is able to escape from the surface world, he has founded a new sense of independence:

Here is supreme tranquility! The sea does not belong to despots! Up there on the surface, men can still exercise their iniquitous claims, fight each other, tear one another to pieces, and transport their terrestrial horrors. But thirty feet below the surface, their reign ceases, their influence is quenched, their power vanishes. Ah professor, why not live—live in the bosom of the seas! Here alone will you find true independence! Here I recognize no master! Here I'm free! (*Leagues* 70)

Here, we understand what it is about the ocean that so greatly appeals to Nemo. He is able to escape from allegiances and power-mad despots who would seek to keep him under their yoke of



tyranny. In a world that is governed by various imperial powers, the inaccessible frontier world of the bottom of the ocean presents an appealing alternative. Tragically, Nemo's belief in a free ocean begins and ends with his personal needs. The ocean presents a world of freedom to *Nemo*, and to no one else, much less Professor Aronnax and the other prisoners aboard the *Nautilus*. He begins his speech to Aronnax from a seemingly objective standpoint before slipping into his own particular desires. Indeed, *here* in the ocean, Nemo recognizes no master besides himself, and *here* in the ocean he *alone* can be free.

Ironically, in spite of his hatred of despots, Nemo regards himself as lord and master over the world's oceans, as he frequently refers to its aquatic flora and fauna in the possessive. For example, in reference to a submarine "forest," Nemo claims, "They're known only to me, they grow only for me" (*Leagues* 104). This is echoed later on a much grander scale when Nemo reveals a secret tunnel that bridges the Red Sea with the Mediterranean. Nemo says that he "alone know[s] of its existence" and calls it "my Arabian Tunnel" (*Leagues* 221). It belongs to Nemo through the mere fact that he has discovered it and is the sole man alive who is able to navigate through it. In this way, Nemo demonstrates the continued theme of *Les Voyages Extraordinaires* of the power of knowledge and the privileged position that may be achieved through modern technology. As Thomas Richards explains in his book *The Imperial Archive*, Nemo has created for himself an empire of information. The *Nautilus* becomes, in effect, a mobile archive of all worthwhile information concerning the world's oceans. The more information Nemo acquires, the more powerful is his empire:

The archive gradually comes forward in the course of the novel in a variety of specifically modern logistical capacities and attributes. It appears as raw data, as classification systems able to absorb the artifacts of the material world into its own internal order, as arsenal, as military structures of rank and precedence, and most importantly, as the central



chamber of a mobile and malleable new weapons system, the submarine.  
(Richards 116)

This is a fair analysis of the *Les Voyages Extraordinaires* series in general, as the pedagogical structure of the series seeks to catalog all information that is worth knowing about a given space. What Richards attributes to the *Nautilus* is the sheer breadth of power and knowledge that this privileged position grants an explorer such as Nemo. Nemo's ability to traverse the world's oceans allows him to present the bounties of nature from an exclusive point-of-view that few living may be able to achieve. In this way, Verne is able to provide detailed instruction to his readers concerning the various mysteries of life under the sea, and consecutively display in meticulous order all that may be found there and all that is worthy of his audience's attention. Therefore, the pedagogical method of Verne's novel serves not only as a guide and tutorial for the casual reader but as a method of describing how very thoroughly Nemo, and explorers like him, is able to catalog and take possession of the underwater realm solely because he owns the world's *only* submarine.

Nemo's initial appearance in Verne's works presents a purposefully ambiguous figure; while Verne seems to revel in Nemo's imperial temperament and ideology, his romantic characterization as both a rebel and an outcast cannot be disregarded. Nemo returns later in the *Les Voyages Extraordinaires* series, where he reveals himself to the colonists in *The Mysterious Island* as their unseen benefactor. Upon this discovery, Nemo discloses his definitive origins to the group on Lincoln Island. This is when Verne's later novel takes an unexpected turn, as Nemo describes his dual identity as the infamous Captain Nemo, scourge of the earth's oceans, and as Prince Dakkar, exiled nobleman of Bundelkhand and hero of the Indian Rebellion of 1857. In this moment, Nemo's character is retroactively transformed and weighed down with the violent history of British imperialism on the Indian subcontinent. By making this dramatic revelation,



the Nemo of *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea* becomes an insightful critique of colonialism: a figure from an oppressed people who unconsciously (and tragically) takes up the practices of his oppressors in order to revenge himself upon them. Whether or not Verne had intended this remarkably nuanced approach, we are able to read how Nemo was himself colonized through his retelling of his own history in *The Mysterious Island*:

Captain Nemo was an Indian—Prince Dakkar, the son of a rajah in the formerly independent territory of Bundelkhand....When the prince was ten years old, his father sent him to Europe to receive a comprehensive education, with the ulterior motive of preparing the boy so that someday he could contend on equal terms with those he regarded as the oppressors of his country....Prince Dakkar traveled throughout Europe. His wealth and station made him immensely popular, but worldly enticements held no attraction for him....[H]e remained grave, gloomy, and ravenous for knowledge—and in his heart he nursed an undying grudge....The prince was full of hate. He hated the one country he had never wanted to visit, the one nation whose overtures he continually rejected. He hated England—and hated it all the more because he admired certain of its achievements....Inside this Indian youth there seethed all the savage hatred that the victim feels for his vanquisher. There could be no love between the invaded and the invader....He was a patriot with an overwhelming love for his poetic country, a country groaning under English shackles. This Indian had no desire to visit that cursed land which had enslaved his India. (*Leagues* 389-90)

As detailed above, Nemo was thoroughly Europeanized once he was sent away from his home country. Verne's idea of a "comprehensive education" naturally implies an exclusively European education in the arts and sciences. And while it cannot be denied that Verne was attempting something radical through Dakkar's characterization, he still falls into the pit holes of classic nineteenth-century ideas of race and civilization. At home, Prince Dakkar could not receive the tools he needs in order to beat back the threat of British imperialism. Only through travel and study across the European continent can he attain the level of sophistication and knowledge needed in order to most effectively make war on his oppressors. A deeper reading of this history reveals the profound psychological changes that colonialism and cross-cultural experience may



effect. The young Dakkar returns home greatly changed, not in the sense that he becomes dissociated from his racial identity, but in his methods of effecting political or social change in his homeland.

This is where Verne's allegedly childish and "intellectually shallow" novels become more complicated than the assessment of modern scholars might suggest (Evans 1). Verne's Nemo works as a postcolonial prototype, conceived and executed as a criticism of European imperialism and colonial goals. Being a member of a colonized race of people while working within the mode and methods of European imperialism, we may observe in the tragedy of Captain Nemo the age-old story of a man who has become the very thing he has sworn to destroy. Whatever extent we may apply the story of Prince Dakkar to the earlier depiction of Nemo seen in *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea*, the fact remains that Nemo has always been a figure representing violent rebellion against a mighty militarized oppressor, and should therefore always be read as an underdog who has fashioned himself a stronger set of teeth.

In order to understand this transformation, let us turn once again to Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*, wherein Fanon describes the plight of the native intellectual who struggles with his sense of identity while living under colonial rule. To begin with, Fanon describes a fraught relationship between the colonized and the colonizer, with both parties being made to understand implicitly that the only language that the other understands is force. Any hope of reconciliation is precluded automatically, as any form of reasonable debate is guaranteed to return to the subject of violence and begin a finger-pointing that could last for decades, thereby bringing the means of argument once again back to violence and strength of arms. Dakkar's father understands this, and sends his son to be educated in Europe in order to learn their ways and more effectively make war on his country's oppressors. Dakkar seems to go along



willingly in order to absorb as much knowledge as he can; but this knowledge comes at a terrible cost, as the boy Dakkar returns to his home country irrevocably changed, setting the stage for him to become the man who will be Nemo.

Fanon warns of the native intellectual caught between two worlds: one where he is accepted by his oppressors and rewarded with salvation from threat of punishment through their acceptance of his seeming assimilation into their European culture; the other, where he is conscious of his estrangement from his own people, and tries desperately to maintain his true self and respect the roots of his culture and heritage. Fanon explains that this creates an impossible dichotomy within the native intellectual, who must “tear himself away” from his original culture lest he become an individual “without an anchor, without a horizon, colorless, stateless, rootless” (Fanon 218). Nemo, a man renowned to be nationless, fits into the logical extreme of Fanon’s theory. Having sworn himself away from anything to do with the surface world and its problems, he chooses instead to remain anonymous beneath the sea, and owes allegiance to no one at all but himself. In this way, the man who was Dakkar has cut himself off not only from his original native culture from India, but also from his British oppressors and the other nations of Europe that would seek to keep him under heel.

However, in spite of Nemo’s willingness to tear himself away from the world, he still remains slavishly devoted to the great works that were produced by one single continent on the earth that he hates so much. He has chosen what he has taken with him aboard the *Nautilus* very carefully, claiming that he wishes to believe that all cultural endeavors have ceased upon his self-imposed exile, and that “humanity no longer thinks or writes” (*Leagues* 71). It must be noted that of the great masters that Verne cares to list while enumerating the contents of Nemo’s library and collection of great works, all of them are of European origin, all Europeans, all Westerners, all



declared by Nemo to be of value and worthy of his great archive of important materials: “I sought them out greedily, ferreted them out indefatigably, and I’ve been able to bring together a few objects of great value. These are my last souvenirs of those shores that are dead for me” (*Leagues* 74). Frantz Fanon’s theory of the evolution of the native intellectual under a colonial regime suggests that he will perpetuate foreign trends in his own writings or actions, and that the presence of the foreign power affects him even in creative works of the imagination. While Nemo’s library is the clue to this circumstance, we are able to read Nemo’s actions as a recreation of the goals of the colonizing power across his underwater domain as he lays claim to every submarine territory with which he comes into contact:

“There[,...]out there is true existence. And I can imagine the founding of nautical cities, clusters of submarine households...free towns, independent towns such as we’ve never known. But then, probably some despot....”...He finished with a violent gesture. (*Leagues* 124)

As stated previously, the sea represents to Nemo unmitigated freedom from the various woes of the world. While he remains earnest in his desire to share this freedom with others who may feel the need for escape, the fact remains that Nemo’s freedom is a freedom dictated by Nemo on his own terms. Nemo invites the comparison to despotism with his own unfinished sentence, suggesting a realization of his own personal transformation into the lord of the oceans.

The second and third phases of Fanon’s theory of this process of evolution in the native intellectual describe a state of anxiety in the individual who feels himself increasingly estranged from his native culture. The intellectual will attempt to reacquaint himself with his old culture and heritage, finally moving himself into violent action as he attempts to move his people into revolutionary passion. The intellectual becomes an “awakener of the people,” or a champion for the oppressed against the occupying power. And while Nemo’s characterization as an Indian revolutionary is not so firmly established in *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea*, we are



able to read these phases in Nemo's dedication towards liberty and freedom. His insistence that the ocean presents a more favorable lifestyle solidifies his desire to escape from the despots of the world that would wish to oppress him. As a captain and leader of men aboard the *Nautilus*, he has transitioned away from this desire to reconnect with his heritage to the third stage of inciting revolution in others. Nemo's crew remain fanatically devoted to his goals and to his charismatic personality, and are shown on more than one occasion to be prepared to die for their captain. Again, however, Nemo fails to see that he recreates a social hierarchy and imperial model that would be traditionally associated with the British Raj. His crew remains mostly unseen throughout the novel—and invariably silent when they do make the rare appearance—consigned to their shared quarters *en masse* while Nemo and his guests (or prisoners) enjoy private spaces befitting their lofty position atop the social hierarchy of the *Nautilus*. Thus, Nemo's model for freedom requires a leader of men who demands complete and utter devotion from a single-minded crew who are willing to do what is necessary in order to maintain the secrecy of said leader and safeguard the goals of the collective. As Frantz Fanon explains, the native intellectual fails to see how his original work is created in the mode of his oppressor:

At the very moment when the native intellectual is anxiously trying to create a cultural work he fails to realize that he is utilizing techniques and language which are borrowed from the stranger in his country. He contents himself with stamping these instruments with a hallmark which he wishes to be national, but which is strangely reminiscent of exoticism. The native intellectual who comes back to his people by way of cultural achievements behaves in fact like a foreigner. (Fanon 223)

The *Nautilus*, as conceived by Jules Verne, is an impressive mode of transportation that allows terrestrial beings to come into intimate contact with inaccessible spaces underwater and collect useful materials that no one else may access without the vehicle's power. Nemo, as the master of this extraordinary vehicle, stands in the unique position, like Barbicane and Bedford, to dictate



the terms by which humanity is able to come into contact with this underwater frontier, thus cementing his position as lord and master over the ocean in its entirety. As a member of an oppressed people, Nemo does not see that he himself has created his very own empire, complete with subjects who will blindly do *his* bidding in *his* name, as well as territories claimed for Nemo's use alone and marked, following imperial tradition, with a flag bearing his insignia. If Nemo fears the influence of a despot in his claimed territory, it is only because he fears losing his means of power, or as he calls it, his freedom and independence.

Threat of invasion from a superior martial strength would continue to haunt Europeans throughout the century. It would become a favorite theme of H.G. Wells as he produced his own adventures that worked within the scientific romance format, illustrating breakthroughs in power from fantastic forces originating from the home country, abroad, or even further beyond.

Invasion would be a subtle topic of interest in his third novel *The Invisible Man* (1897), which depicted the imperial ambitions of Mr. Griffin, the titular invisible man. Griffin (another of Wells's "investigators"), renders himself invisible in a mad bid for power with delusions of fame and fortune as his just deserts. Alone and friendless and fugitive, Griffin lays his intentions bare in a letter sent to his former colleague, Kemp: "This announces the first day of the Terror. Port Burdock is no longer under the Queen, tell your Colonel of Police, and the rest of them; it is under me—the Terror! This is day one of year one of the new epoch,—the Epoch of the Invisible Man. I am Invisible Man the First" (*Invisible* 97). Griffin is convinced that his transformation immediately confers unto him unlimited power and influence. However, Wells reminds us at every turn that while Griffin has achieved a considerable scientific breakthrough, his invisibility does not remove him from the limitations and physical necessities of his fleshy, mortal person. Griffin requires food, rest, and shelter, just like any other human being, and yet he maintains that



he has become a godlike figure, larger than life and invulnerable to the petty concerns of mortal men. His “reign of terror,” such as it is, is primarily concerned with games of mischief and larceny, ranging from knocking men’s hats off in the street to robbing a shopping emporium in the night. While Griffin insists on his newfound “extraordinary advantage,” he becomes increasingly aware of his vulnerable position as an invisible man. His first expedition into London finds him jostled in the streets, naked and exposed to the elements, and nearly run down by a mob curious to the muddy footprints appearing seemingly from nowhere. Griffin’s limitations do not end with bodily necessity, but extend to the sheer practicality of *being* an invisible man. He cannot easily make off with his stolen goods, as the curious spectacle of objects floating in midair is enough to give the game away; additionally, he cannot eat without revealing himself, as any food he consumes will linger visually until Griffin is able to fully digest it into his system. In spite of all this, Griffin insists that he has transcended the experience of what it means to be human, and nurses his ambitions of becoming an all-powerful global leader.

This is where we may read from Griffin Wells’s thoughts on the state of empire and imperial ambition. Griffin, nearly intangible and ephemeral, cannot so easily exercise his influence without the assistance of others. He is utterly dependent on the charity of strangers as he makes himself at home at the *Coach and Horses* in Iping; and when his funds run short, he is required to enlist the services of Thomas Marvel, gentleman of the road, in order to more efficiently steal money and other items of interest, offering false promises of reward once Griffin assumes his seat of power. “You have to be my helper,” he says to Marvel. “Help me—and I will do great things for you. An invisible man is a man of power” (*Invisible* 33). This is comically followed by a violent sneeze. Griffin in effect colonizes the people of Iping, and conscripts them



into his service for his own greater glory. He offers all the promise and prestige that imperial endeavors usually confer unto loyal subjects, with no tangible evidence of making good on these promises apart from the feeling of doing good work on behalf of Griffin's empire.

Throughout the novel, Wells makes every effort to draw a sharp contrast between Griffin and the rest of the world. Nearly all of the supporting cast use regional dialects, calling attention to their class, social status, and level of education. Observe the following exchange of dialogue between Griffin and the landlady Mrs. Hall:

"But they take long enough to get well, sir, don't they?...There was my sister's son, Tom, jest cut his arm with a scythe, tumbled on it in the 'ayfield, and, bless me! he was three months tied up sir. You'd hardly believe it. It's regular given me a dread of a scythe, sir."

"I can quite understand that," said the visitor [Griffin].

"He was afraid, one time, that he'd have to have an operation—he was that bad, sir."

The visitor laughed abruptly, a bark of a laugh that he seemed to bite and kill in his mouth. "Was he?" he said.

"He was, sir. And no laughing matter to them as had the doing for him, as I had....There was bandages to do, sir, and bandages to undo. So that if I may make so bold as to say it, sir—"

"Will you get me some matches?" said the visitor, quite abruptly. "My pipe is out." (*Invisible* 4-5)

Throughout his time as an invisible man, Griffin attempts to throw his weight around wherever possible. He is well aware of his rank and station in society, and brings with him the condescension that is typical of having been born from the upper crust. His urbane superciliousness offers a harsh juxtaposition from Mrs. Hall's salt-of-the-earth frankness. However, she must constantly defer to Griffin as her social better, and pay him the respect owed to his privilege as a gentleman. In this way, Wells cements Mrs. Hall and the other supporting characters of the suburban neighborhoods as the other, with Griffin venturing forth from the city to exercise whatever influence he may over the rustics that he finds there. Patrick Brantlinger, once again, offers valuable insight into social interactions like these. Through Griffin's



privileged position as a member of the upper class, Wells illustrates the racialization of the poor that was common of the day, and subsequently given more rationalized justification through the theories of Charles Darwin. To Griffin, Mrs. Hall and the denizens of the *Coach and Horses* were made to be conquered to serve at his pleasure. They are the “human rats” that are only good for servitude and not much else, the dregs of civilization that were undesirable in any of the so-called fashionable areas of society. As Brantlinger explains, “[T]hey all offer or at least imply comparisons to ‘savage’ peoples in the far reaches of the empire. A wishful aspect of this comparison may have been that those ‘savages’ who were supposedly uncivilizable were also held to be doomed to extinction by the laws of nature” (*Cannibals* 126).

These characterizations in fiction and reality are not so far removed from the attitudes of the imperial subject regarding the colonized other. These people simply cannot hope to raise themselves above their station, and society will continually keep their progress in check in order to keep them in their consigned place on the social hierarchy. Griffin, ever industrious, seeks to exploit their labor in order to achieve his own ends, seeing these people as little more than beasts of burden who will eventually make way for his designs for “the coming race” of invisible men to replace them. However, this attitude is to his detriment, as the denizens of the *Coach and Horses* ultimately get the better of Griffin after his credit runs dry. Money being the primary distinguishing factor between them, the citizens of Iping are quick to bring Griffin down from his lofty position once it is made plain that he is no better and just as human as the rest of them.

John Kucich, author of *Imperial Masochism*, describes how the bid for empire takes the form of omnipotent fantasy:

Omnipotent fantasy can certainly thrive without masochism. But from a relational perspective, masochistic strategies are singularly dedicated to producing it... That self-inflicted pain might imply fantasies of omnipotent power may seem counterintuitive unless we remember that pain is the



origin of the need for compensatory fantasies as well as the stubborn reality that omnipotence seeks magically to transform. The “omnipotent system”...creates a complex, variable set of relationships between pain and narcissistic compensation and a wide range of phantasmagoric strategies through which pain might be transformed into omnipotence but also inscribed within it. (Kucich 22-23)

It is easy to see this masochism applied to Griffin as well, as his Faustian bid for power falls in line with the fantasy of omnipotence. Griffin’s process of becoming invisible is described as being painful beyond belief. His dedication to his own enterprise reveals the masochistic nature of his ambitions, profoundly isolating himself from his fellow men and becoming something sinister through his transformation. His repeated insistence of his own power, in spite of the evidence collected against his own assertions, serves only to confirm his own insanity and delusional behavior. His logic runs as follows: develop a means of becoming invisible, demonstrate the value of said invisibility, reap the rewards of fame and fortune; or, as Griffin puts it: “I kept it to myself. I had to do my work under frightful disadvantages....[Y]ou know the knavish system of the scientific world. I simply would not publish....I told no living soul, because I meant to flash my work upon the world with crushing effect,—to become famous at a blow” (*Invisible* 65). Griffin, egomaniacal in the extreme, freely chooses his social isolation and path towards pain in the bizarre hopes that it all may one day pay off in excess. In his mind, his experiments provide the ultimate justification in his pursuit for power, as he believes that he has put in the effort and done enough hard work in order to claim his reward as master of the earth; or, as he sees it in his mania, the faceless, bodiless replacement ruler over an empire that spans the globe. The pain that he puts himself through simply places him one step closer to his dreams of fame and fortune. “To do such a thing would be to transcend magic,” Griffin claims. “And I [behold], unclouded by doubt, a magnificent vision of all that invisibility might mean to a man,—the mystery, the power, the freedom. Drawbacks I saw none. You have only to think!”



(*Invisible* 66). Indeed, the irony is that Griffin's "vision" resides in a goal that is ultimately *obscured* from vision, just as his dreams of power, freedom, and imperial omnipotence fail to solidify in any meaningful or tangible capacity after he renders himself invisible. Griffin dooms himself from the start; but his shameless ego proves that he was already far gone.

While invasion from impossible forces originating from the home counties forms the basis for *The Invisible Man*, H.G. Wells takes the invasion narrative even further by illustrating a more traditional invasion scenario from another superior power, this time originating from the most unlikely of sources: the planet Mars. A masterpiece in paranoia and cosmic anxiety, Wells's *The War of the Worlds* (1898) is the definitive precursor for modern science fiction, inventing the all-too-familiar tropes of mass hysteria and close encounters with the strange and alien. Wells's novel appears to internalize the writings of Huxley, as the narrative continuously trivializes humanity's hegemony over the planet earth. The Martians are depicted throughout as superior to human beings in terms of intelligence and technological power, and they look on humanity as a mere pestilential presence rather than as a species worth engaging in meaningful dialogue. The novel's unnamed narrator, our protagonist and guide through the horrors of the Martian invasion, appears himself ambivalent to humanity's supposed superiority over nature and their environment:

[A]s men busied themselves about their various concerns they were scrutinised and studied, perhaps almost as narrowly as a man with a microscope might scrutinise the transient creatures that swarm and multiply in a drop of water. With infinite complacency men went to and fro over this globe about their little affairs, serene in their assurance of their empire over matter. (*Worlds* 37)

Like with his earlier effort *The Time Machine*, Wells sets the stage for his story to unfold around the concerns of empire and the stagnation that develops when all human necessities for food and shelter are met and provided for. The accident that is humanity's advanced position is



highlighted again and again, with frequent comparisons to lowlier lifeforms, such as rabbits or ants, used in reference to the Martians' superiority over humankind. The above passage is scathing in the extreme, as the reader is immediately introduced to the Martians as an unbelievably powerful species that regards humanity as little more than vermin that must be exterminated. The middle-class concerns of the day-to-day routine are highlighted as well, as Wells trivializes these common features of Western society as "little affairs" that will soon appear meaningless as the Martians exercise their power over humanity in the ensuing conflict.

It becomes clear, as the novel progresses, that the themes of empire and colonialism form the primary focus of Wells's war between two unbelievably unmatched military forces. The Martians, with their mission of colonization, are an unsubtle analog for the horrors committed by the British Empire over the world at large. Through his Martians and their terrible war machines, Wells addresses the anxiety held by all imperial subjects regarding the fragility of their empire and forces his readers to reexamine the bold, though perhaps self-consciously reckless claim "It can't happen here." Wells introduces this anxiety in the first few pages of his novel, comparing the Martian invasion to the violent eradication of the Tasmanians:

And before we judge of them [The Martians] too harshly we must remember what ruthless and utter destruction our own species has wrought, not only upon animals, such as the vanished bison and the dodo, but upon its inferior races. The Tasmanians, in spite of their human likeness, were entirely swept out of existence in a war of extermination waged by European immigrants, in the space of fifty years. Are we such apostles of mercy as to complain if the Martians warred in the same spirit? (*Worlds* 38)

The invasion narrative lends itself nicely to the anxieties of degenerative evolution and threats to imperial dominion. While Wells sidesteps the issue as to the exact culprit of these atrocities against the Tasmanians (while calling into question their status as human), it is left unsaid but understood that the British Empire were responsible for waging this caliber of violence against



other human beings. In this way, Wells lays the blame at the feet of British colonialism, and puts forward the idea of what might occur if the tables were turned and it was the British who were the race that was colonized.

The Martians, as described by the narrator, are grotesque caricatures of something *resembling* humans, but not enough of an exact likeness to be considered familiar:

They were, I now saw, the most unearthly creatures it is possible to conceive. They were huge round bodies—or, rather, heads...each body having in front of it a face. This face had no nostrils—indeed, the Martians do not seem to have had any sense of smell, but it had a pair of very large dark-coloured eyes, and just beneath this a kind of fleshy beak. In the back of this head or body—I scarcely know how to speak of it—was the single tight tympanic surface, since known to be anatomically an ear....In a group round the mouth were sixteen slender, almost whiplike tentacles, arranged in two bunches of eight each. These bunches have since been named rather aptly...the *hands*. (*Worlds* 131)

Wells's fearsome imagery is undermined by the Martians' vulnerability when outside of their war machines. The earth's gravity appears to be much too strong for them, and they are described as very piteously crawling about the surface while gasping for air and dripping saliva. They are very nearly immobile without the use of their machines, which does not go unnoticed by the narrator, who surmises that, were it not for their machines, the Martians would be more-or-less helpless.

Alien though they may be, the Martians are noted to have the requisite features that might approximate a human being. Mouth, ears, and eyes, they have indeed, but only perverse facsimiles of each, including disturbing appendages that Wells hesitates to name as "hands." They appear more akin to octopi than human beings, but Wells's narrator recognizes something uncannily familiar in them enough to draw a disturbing parallel: "To me it is quite credible that the Martians may be descended from beings not unlike ourselves, by a gradual development of brain and hands (the latter giving rise to the two bunches of delicate tentacles at last) at the



expense of the rest of the body” (*Worlds* 133). Once again, Wells returns to Darwin’s theory of evolution, and asks us to ponder over the direction towards which humanity is heading. *Are we truly a superior form of life? By what right do we as humans have to exercise such strength and authority over a world about which we understand so little? The disgusting form of the Martian body is the destiny that awaits humanity, if it should persist in its imperial designs for conquest and control. As Aaron Worth has suggested in his book *Imperial Media*, the Martian tentacles recall the old imperial expansionist cliché of the octopus, grasping desperately at anything within reach to drag towards the greedy mouth of the home counties. As Worth explains:*

[It is] a trope closely associated with sprawling webs of communication, with cables conceptualized as tentacles, grasping extensions of imperial power. The horrible bodies of the Martians, in other words, suggest a kind of cautionary just-so story for an imperial race: over time...we become our technologies, as well as the relationships they engender and embody. (Worth 66)

The Martian is indeed a caricature of humankind; however, it is one divorced from all emotion and abstract concepts of justice and mercy, obsessed instead with the power that progress has gifted them through their advanced technology. All that is left to the creature is what Wells describes as a “selfish intelligence” that only knows how to consume and destroy. In effect, the Martians represent the adverse evolutionary forecast for an imperial race, showing how progress may lead to a horrible destiny for those who would persist in exercising such terrifying power.

Wells later demonstrates how completely civilization has collapsed through the character of the artilleryman, who displays the most disturbing transition under the panic that has gripped England. We meet him near the conclusion of the novel, newly deserted from the military and working as a free agent, and having laid claim to an abandoned suburb with grand plans for starting an underground resistance movement against the Martians. The artilleryman is convinced that civilization is done for and that, if humanity is to have any hope, it must make



some drastic changes. He declares succinctly that “It never was a war, any more than there’s a war between men and ants,” and goes on to detail his scheme to ensure the Martians’ defeat, or “the new state of affairs,” as he calls it. The artilleryman imagines a new future for humankind, one that is predicated on survival and resisting the tyranny of the Martians. The reader, much like the narrator, is hoodwinked for a short time into seeing the artilleryman’s vision as a rational, well-thought-out, scheme for survival. His plan is the first and only articulated set of ideas that seems something almost like hope, but soon begins to descend into delusions of grandeur and vague gestures at a fighting spirit. “Cities, nations, civilisation, progress—It’s all over. That game’s up. We’re beat.” (*Worlds* 153). The artilleryman persists in this Hobbesian vein:

There won’t be any more blessed concerts for a million years or so; there won’t be any Royal Academy of Arts, and no nice little feeds at restaurants. If it’s amusement you’re after, I reckon the game is up. If you’ve got any drawing-room manners or a dislike to eating peas with a knife or dropping aitches, you’d better chuck ’em away. They ain’t no further use. (*Worlds* 153)

It becomes clear that the artilleryman’s primary goal in his new world order is simply the elimination of the old way of things, since his social status of modest origins was a limitation in his previous life. He rejects the bourgeois values of middle and upper class society, seeing in the Martian invasion an easy means to assert himself and gain a position of authority as humankind struggles for survival. Progress is an ugly word for the artilleryman, who sees no hope for his prospects should the traditions of the past somehow manage to survive the conflict and the world goes on as it had previously. In the ensuing chaos, in the Martian-occupied planet Earth, the artilleryman fancies that he could make himself a leader of men, or a king of men, so long as all that has been achieved by progress is thoroughly eliminated and humankind resorts back to savagery. As the weak die out, he has only to outlive those ill-equipped for survival and he can finally make something for himself out of the ruins of the old world. While the artilleryman is



made to look ridiculous in the eyes of the narrator, who soon abandons him, the reader is persuaded by the logic in what he is saying. What good has humanity's progress done that it should suffer the Martian threat? The Martians have demonstrated the success of the brutish idea that might makes right, so who are civilized human beings to argue otherwise? The artilleryman articulates the seed of a disturbing idea... that if humanity is to survive it must evolve and become a fighting race just like the Martians. And so, Thomas Huxley's anxieties have been brought to life in the pages of H.G. Wells: humanity's success is but a mere accident of nature, and nature will always present something better and stronger to take its place.

The scientific romance, as painstakingly built by the writings of Jules Verne and H.G. Wells, lays the groundwork for the thematic preoccupations that would come to typify the struggles, conflicts, and speculations that form the body of literature that we recognize today as the modern genre of science fiction. These early speculations chiefly concern the role of human progress as represented by advanced technologies and, of course, the spread of Western civilization across the globe by fanatical European imperialism. While Jules Verne rarely subverts the tropes of this genre, he comes remarkably close through his invention of Captain Nemo, who—as a member of a so-called subject race—presents an existential threat to Western society after gaining the tools of progress and Eurocentric ideas of civilization. Verne, whether he intended to or not, causes the reader to question the notion of progress and its role in the world at large. Who is to say who gains the means for progress? What happens when those methods of progress are used against those who had provided them in the first place? These are the sorts of unsettling questions that are probably best left without an answer; though, through speculative fiction, they provide exciting forward momentum for the adventure narrative.



H.G. Wells would subsequently seize upon these questions and provide even more disturbing food for thought through his own endeavors with the format of the scientific romance. No longer is the protagonist of the scientific romance a master of his domain, but a mere traveler through uncertain new territory, whose grip on his own sense of control is tenuous at best, with the so-called savages that gave Jules Verne such cause for anxiety lurking around every corner to ensnare him and replace his position atop the food-chain. Through Wells, the scientific romance reveals in full light the troubling character of progress, as we come to truly question what the word means to humanity and the world. “Does progress move in one direction?” Wells asks. Or is it perpetually in flux, subject to outside forces like the unpredictable forces of nature, disasters, threats from superior intelligences, or humanity’s own inherently bestial nature? The scientific romance in the hands of Wells reveals the malleable nature of progress as not only a goal towards which to build, but also as an unstoppable, indiscriminate force of reality.

As the pioneers of the scientific romance, Jules Verne and H.G. Wells were solely responsible for its formation and character, which would come to evolve into the modern science fiction genre that we know and enjoy today. Science fiction has always been preoccupied with the future of human civilization and how society might progress given enough time to fully observe. Even the subgenre of the space opera is predicated on the notion that the human race persists into the future in order to practice the same petty squabbles and bids for power that can be found in our contemporary fictions and, more disturbingly, our contemporary politics. For science fiction is as much tethered to the present as it is to the future, seeking to answer the questions of today using the dreamscape of a probable tomorrow.

With the early days and subsequent development of the scientific romance, we witness the desire for a very thorough feeling of control over the planet which humanity calls home. This



feeling of control brings with it a feeling of safety and order, as humanity would presumably no longer have reason to fear for its survival, given that their needs are met no matter where they may venture. And how better to represent an answer for these simple desires than through the spread of empire? As the wellspring for all the rights, privileges, and comforts that can be found in the homeland, empire promises just that feeling of security that Westerners so longed for when journeying abroad. And, indeed, Jules Verne would see to it that these promises are fulfilled through a demonstration of one of his extraordinary modes of transportation, while H.G. Wells would seek to suggest that these promises ultimately have little meaning and viability when put under scrutiny or existential threat. Which is why the two authors return to the theme of empire time and again in order to play with their readers' expectations of what it means to be a citizen of an imperial nation at the height of European imperial expansion, as their safety and security can only continue so long as the empire is able to thrive and exercise greater influence.

Thus, I conclude, the nineteenth century's scientific romance *must* work within the framework of empire in order to accomplish its narrative goals. Progress and empire are forever inseparable concepts within the genre, as scientific developments become a yardstick with which to measure progress and its effects over a given society. As Jules Verne and H.G. Wells were writing at the height of European imperial expansion, history and the relevant political goals of the day naturally seeped into their writings, creating a unique landscape of technological fantasy that serves to demonstrate how much more efficiently humanity may conquer or make war on its fellow man and the environments in which he lives. While I would hesitate to suggest that the genre is naturally confrontational or bigoted, the evidence gathered reveals a genre that is uniquely focused on Western hegemony, as well as the status of empire and how effectively one nation exercises power over another. However, at its heart, the scientific romance is a genre of



escapism and adventure, an open door through which the reader may throw himself and find an exciting new location, guided by a compelling protagonist, to be led towards experiences that are the very opposite of those which he may find at home.



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