



Submitted September 23, 2011

Published January 17, 2012

Proposé le 23 septembre 2011

Publié le 17 janvier 2012

Verne the Futurist: “Jules Verne Foresaw Hitler’s Rise and Fall”

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Verne the futurist. Verne’s popular reputation as a scientific visionary is, we know, a misrepresentation of his achievement. His scientific and technological references are at most current with the documentation of his time and often out of date with actual practice, and his science is too positivist in its principles and conservative in its applications to admit of real innovation or anticipation. Verne’s foresight in these domains lies elsewhere, in his depictions of human thought and action patterned by programs of an increasingly total scientific imaginary, the logic of which (and not the *content* of which) he was among the first to describe in fiction. [1]

But the myth of Verne’s futurism still can be of value to the literary historian, insofar as the “predictions” discovered in Verne’s œuvre tend to bleed into other areas of thought and disclose other imaginative investments of those who read him in this way. This object (Figures 1 and 2) is a minor example of such investments. It is, moreover, a little out of the ordinary in that, rather than crediting Verne with foresight after the fact (the typical form of the anticipation reading) it proposes that one of his novels is a genuine piece of future history *at the time the credit is given*.

Herr Schultze and Hitler. “Jules Verne Foresaw Hitler’s Rise and Fall” is a short magazine story written by Eugene Tillinger, which appeared in the October 13, 1942 issue of *PIC*, a popular American monthly magazine of the period. (On Tillinger and *PIC*, see below.) “Jules Verne, the famous French writer of scientific fiction,” Tillinger begins [2],

foresaw not only the advent of Adolf Hitler, but also his end, his final defeat. All this fifty years in advance of the facts.

In Jules Verne’s forecast, Hitler is called Herr Schultze. He is the protagonist of a great novel entitled “*Les 500 Millions De la Begum* [sic]” (“The Five Hundred Millions of Begum”)... (Tillinger 1942, 20)

Schultze, Tillinger proposes, is the type of Hitler: despotic, given to fits of hysteria, “animated by a satanic spirit of destruction,” and determined that the master German race should absorb all other races. His project to annihilate France-Ville (“synonymous with

freedom and democracy,” thus an analogue to the Allies) is at once monstrous and doomed to failure. The despot’s war machine, Verne’s novel proves, will fail to cause much damage (here the comparison to Hitler is at its most strained) and the villain will be finally destroyed by his own nefarious instruments of death.



Figure 1 — Cover of *PIC*, October 13, 1942. (Click on image to view in full size)

A shorthand analogy of Schultze to Hitler will not surprise us; it is now part of the received mythology of *Les Cinq Cents Millions de la Bégum*. [3] Peter Schulman’s introduction and notes to Stanford Luce’s recent English translation of the novel (2005) observes the connection, pinning it on Jean Chesneaux’s description of Schultze as “proto-Hitlerian.” Schulman wonders, “if only Verne *could* have been wrong in his predictions for *The Begum’s Millions*, perhaps our twentieth century would not have been so bloody!” (xv). The analogy was more fully developed by Charles-Noël Martin (who, unusual among Verne critics, considers *500* to be one of the author’s masterpieces):

Les Cinq Cents Millions s’avère d’autant plus être une *anticipation* au sens scientifique que ce roman préfigure, des dizaines d’années à l’avance, ce que sera le monde du milieu du XXe siècle confronté avec les idéologies adverses dont le heurt a déchiré l’Europe et l’Asie. La lutte des masses, jetées les une contre les autres par la démagogie de quelques illuminés criminels, a abouti, entre 1914 et 1918, puis entre 1939 et 1945, à l’holocauste de quelque quatre-vingts millions d’êtres humains. Et le tout s’est fait sous l’égide de la Science triomphante qui a donné à chaque belligérant des moyens d’extermination sans cesse accrus, sans cesse plus efficaces. (viii) [4]

“L’Allemagne de Hitler,” Martin asks later in the essay, “n’a-t-elle pas été, pendant plus de dix ans, le modèle exact de Stahlstadt?” (x).

Perhaps. But a case can be made for the analogy only if we separate out its cruder

elements (Schultze = *warmongering German madman, armed with terrible weapons* = Hitler) from those that are in keeping with Verne’s larger interests in telling such a story. Chesneaux finds 500 to be Verne’s most severely anti-German text, drifting as it often does into cartoonish extremes (e.g., Schultze’s tirades on German racial superiority and the degeneration of the French). Even so, at the limit of Verne’s French nationalism, his depiction of the novel’s villain cannot be disentangled from the modern figure of the “magnat de l’industrie du guerre” and the “savant qui met ses connaissances au service d’une œuvre de destruction” (Chesneaux 1971, 128; 2001, 186), which has no necessary connection to Schultze’s national origins. Martin similarly stresses that the novel is not, or not only, an expression of French hatred of Germany, but (also), on a deeper level, a critique of misapplications of technology in the service of war: “Lisons-le attentivement et nous verrons qu’il y a *constamment* en filigrane l’idée que le danger vient des progrès de la recherche dirigée vers les fins destructrices” (xii). Perhaps one senses here most strongly the role of André Laurie (Paschal Grousset) in the novel’s conception, though Verne’s concern with the allure of “les fins destructrices” is equally clear in other novels of the *Voyages extraordinaires* (e.g., *Face au drapeau*, *Maître du monde*, *Sans dessus dessous*, etc.). Rather than deriving from strictly nationalist impulses, then, 500’s depiction of the thanatic industrial state can be said to situate that terrible scene of technological modernity within French national consciousness after the military debacle of 1870–71.



Figure 2 — Pages 20–21 of the PIC article. Upper left: portrait of Jules Verne by Etienne Carjat (n.d.). Other illustrations by Léon Benett for *Les Cinq Cent Millions de la Bégum* (Hetzl et Cie., 1879), counter-clockwise from lower left, from chs. vii, v, v, xvi, v (in Hetzel's second printing, 1902), vii. In the magazine's table of contents, these are credited to Tillinger. (I am indebted to Randall Renner of the University of Florida's Digital Library Center for his assistance in reproducing these images. Click on image to view in full size.)

Unsurprisingly, Tillinger’s appropriation of 500 ignores such complexities; he has a plain interest in comparing two German despots and one imagines his intended readership must

have welcomed the comparison. This is clearest in captions of images in the *PIC* story, which – though they support Tillinger’s analysis of the novel – are disconnected from the original contexts of Léon Benett’s illustrations. For example, the two images at the bottom of page 21: on the left, “The new weapon is finally completed by the workers: it will be aimed at a neighbor,” is actually from chapter v and is associated with Marcel Bruckmann’s first experiences of working in the factories of Stahlstadt; on the right, “The weapon is tested. This tale, written a half century ago, has come true in Hitler,” is from chapter xvi, where it depicts Bruckmann and Octave Sarrasin’s explosive penetration of the city’s Central Block. The *PIC* captions reduce the variety and ambiguity of Benett’s images – many of which seem as much to celebrate the technocratic potency of the City of Steel as to monumentalize its inhumanity – in the same way that Tillinger’s streamlined account of the novel reduces its message to a single refrain.

Overall, Tillinger’s contribution to this way of reading Verne is to see him, officiously, as an author of future history: *500* predicts Hitler’s rise and reign of terror, and the Allies’ successful prosecution of the War, or at least the self-destruction of Schultze/Hitler as a result of his cruelty and hubris. “All this,” we are reminded, “fifty years in advance of the facts.” The implicit *a priori* of such a claim is Verne’s uncanny prescience in other matters – trips to the moon, submarines, flying machines, and so on. If he was correct in anticipating those things, then this tale, which with some gentle forcing fits the scenario of WW II, must also come to pass. Verne’s presupposed futurism guarantees other futures that may be imagined on the basis of his fiction.

Such a reading can only be speculative – in the most radical sense – and therein lies a notable irony of Tillinger’s casting of Verne as a prophet of Allied victory: the outcome of the war was still far from certain in October 1942, and Tillinger’s dismissal of Hitler’s threat of technological triumphs – “both the master of Steel City and the master of the Third Reich boast of secret weapons” – was premature. Tillinger could not have known that the first successful launch of a German A-4 rocket had taken place only weeks before at Peenemünde. (Reaching a height of 84.5 kilometers, it was the first human-made object to enter space, and another and more sinister – if we continue in this way of reading – confirmation of a Verne prediction.) Development of the V-weapons was proceeding apace. V-1 flying bomb and V-2 rocket attacks on Allied territories would begin in June 1944. The Manhattan Project, formally started in June 1942, was still in its earliest phases and would not bear its deadly fruit until August 1945. At the time of the *PIC* story’s publication, the worst of the War’s *Wunderwaffen* were yet to come.

Eugene Tillinger. In the late 1920s and early 1930s, German-born Eugene Tillinger (1904–1966) worked as a journalist for the Berlin tabloid *Tempo*. He moved to Vienna in 1933, and around 1938 fled to France, where he briefly worked for French newspapers and English-language news services before decamping permanently to the US. There he began writing primarily for magazines devoted to film and stage news and gossip, or right-leaning politics, such as *The Billboard*, *Look*, *Pageant*, *PIC*, *The American Mercury*, and *The Catholic Digest*. [5]

In 1945–46, Tillinger served as secretary of the Society for the Prevention of World War III, a US-based organization of writers and media figures that advocated a harsh peace with post-War Germany. In 1949–1951, he was the notional author of four widely-circulated articles denouncing novelist Thomas Mann’s “communist” sympathies, parts of an extensive covert

campaign against Mann by the FBI in response to the writer's criticisms of US anticommunist hysteria. Published primarily in FBI-front journals, the articles were probably aimed at triggering action against Mann by the House Un-American Activities Committee. [6]

Tillinger's subsequent career as a journalist was more varied. For a time in the early 1950s, he was Editor of *Top Secret*, an East-coast based Hollywood scandal sheet. In the early 1960s, he appears to have worked as an editor for Natlus, Inc., a Long Island (New York) publisher of sporting, true crime, and men's adventure magazines with an emphasis on cheesecake photography and Commie-bashing pulp fiction. He may have worked as an editor for The Girl Friend–The Boy Friend Corporation, a minor New York publisher of music memorabilia. Shortly before his death, he co-authored a sensational exposé of the Ku Klux Klan with Paul J. Gillette (1938–1996), an author of numerous books of popular sexology (Gillette and Tillinger, 1966).

PIC magazine. *PIC* was a ten-cent monthly (later, bi-weekly) magazine produced from 1937 to 1945 by Street & Smith Publications (S & S), a storied New York publisher of pulp fiction and general interest magazines and annuals. Founded in 1855 by Francis Scott Street and Francis Shubael Smith, the company remained active in weekly magazines and pulp publishing until 1937, when it shifted entirely to pictorial, hobbyist, and sporting periodicals. Its remaining titles were sold to Condé Nast in 1957. [7]

In the late 19th and early-mid 20th centuries, S & S was among the most important publishers of American periodical literature. Contributors to its publications included numerous influential American writers, such as Horatio Alger, Jr., Theodore Dreiser, Zane Grey, Bret Harte, O. Henry, Jack London, Dorothy Parker, and Upton Sinclair. Edward Stratemeyer, a founding figure of American juvenile fiction, began his writing career in the 1890s working for *Good News*, an S & S magazine. Significant pulp and comic characters and periodicals in the S & S catalogue included, among others, Buffalo Bill, Chick Carter, Frank Merriwell, Doc Savage, The Shadow, and The Yellow Kid, and *Ainslee's*, *Astounding Stories*, *Detective Story*, *Mademoiselle*, *New York Weekly*, *Picture-Play*, *The Thrill Book*, *Tip-Top Weekly*, and *Unknown*. [8] Within their respective spheres of influence, comparisons of S & S with Hetzel et Cie. are not unwarranted.

PIC was typical of S & S's second- or third-tier entertainment magazines. Printed on low-quality stock and heavily illustrated with photographs, its primary focus was on Hollywood, Broadway, and sporting news. Like many American magazines of its kind, during the war years *PIC* devoted significant print space to stories at least tangentially related to the war effort, usually on topics critical of Axis figures or aimed at bolstering readers' confidence in the outcome of the conflict. Tillinger's story on *500* is in this vein. [9]

Tillinger's textual sources. His brief stint as a journalist in Paris suggests that Tillinger likely had some measure of fluency in French. This is relevant because we can be confident that excerpts from the text of *500* included in the *PIC* story were originally from a French edition. [10] Tillinger gives the French title and a fair translation of it. The excerpts he cites do not match the deeply flawed Kingston translation (1879), the only English reference text available in 1942. [11] Tellingly, Tillinger consistently refers to Herr Schultze using the spelling of his name as it appears in French and more recent English editions: with a terminal e, whereas Kingston's translation infamously omits that letter.

NOTES

1. Cf., among others, Serres and Dekiss 2003, *passim*.
2. Hereafter abbreviated as *500*.
3. Here is the full text of the article: JULES VERNE, the famous French writer of scientific fiction, foresaw not only the advent of Adolf Hitler, but also his end, his final defeat. All this fifty years in advance of the facts. In Jules Verne's forecast, Hitler is called Herr Schultze. He is the protagonist of a great novel entitled "*Les 500 Millions De La Begum*" ("The Five Hundred Millions of Begum"). "Schultze," explains Jules Verne, "was known for his numerous works on the various human races in which he tried to demonstrate that the 'master' Germanic race should absorb them all." Thanks to an immense inheritance, Herr Schultze succeeds in founding a German city in America. Situated "south of the Oregon," the new city is Herr Schultze's personal property. Its name is (Steel City). "Within its walls," writes Jules Verne, "human rights are abolished." The citizens are slaves of Herr Schultze, in whom all power is concentrated. "He was," the author adds, "king, supreme judge, commander-in-chief, notary, all in one." There are also psychological resemblances between Herr Schultze and Adolf Hitler. In one passage of the novel, someone dares speak to him as follows: "I must say, Herr Schultze, that I don't believe that the Germans will conquer the world." Herr Schultze was convulsed with rage; his blood rushed to his face with great violence. Is this not an exact portrait of Hitler in one of those angry fits of hysteria? Isolated from the rest of the world by fortifications, watched by battalions of sentries, Herr Schultze's city is a gigantic plant in which thousands of slave workers manufacture armaments. Animated by a satanic spirit of destruction, the tyrant of Steel City prepares to carry out his long-cherished project: the annihilation of France-Ville, a peaceful neighboring city. In Jules Verne's novel, France-Ville is synonymous with freedom and democracy. Herr Schultze has no difficulty in finding justification for his criminal design: "Justice, good and evil," he says in Jules Verne's novel—"are purely relative concepts, things of convention. Only the great natural laws are absolutes. The law of struggle for survival is as absolute as the law of gravitation. To try to escape it is madness; to submit to it and act accordingly is wise." To satisfy his monstrous ambitions and do away with the free city once and for all, the despot has built an extraordinary gun, the pride of his arsenal, a formidable instrument of death and destruction. In their enormous tubes, the projectiles hurled by this engine contain carbonic acid. "As this gas is heavier than air," he explains, "it remains in the atmosphere for a long time, and the zone of danger preserves its properties several hours after the shell has exploded. Every living being who enters the infected regions must perish. Such is my system: no wounded, only dead." As we see, both the master of Steel City and master of the Third Reich boast of secret weapons. Jules Verne foresaw not only Hitler, but also his end, his collapse. In the novel, Herr Schultze the dictator perishes after his first defeat. Far from crushing the free and democratic city, the gigantic projectile of the gun fails to cause much damage. Herr Schultze, made furious by his first defeat, which followed so many victories, dies as a result of the explosion of one of his own gas shells. "With the disappearance of the despot, the city of steel collapses as a house of cards," writes Verne.
4. Schulman also pushes the range of Verne's anticipation back to the first decades of the century, citing an exchange in Gaston Leroux's *Rouletabille chez Krupp* (1917), in which characters observe that that novel's central intrigue – the development of a new secret weapon that will turn the tide of World War I in Germany's favor – was forecast by *500* (Schulman, xv).
5. What I have been able to piece together concerning Tillinger's career as a journalist in the

1940s–1960s is drawn from Vaget 1992, a 1966 *New York Times* obituary of Tillinger, several archives of US newspapers of the period, and materials in the WorldCat (OCLC) database.

6. Vaget 1992, *passim*. Like Tillinger, Mann had fled Germany for refuge in the US in 1938, and had become a US citizen in 1944.
7. Reynolds's history of S & S, published shortly before the sale to Condé Nast, remains the most complete study of the firm. See Saint-Martin for an analysis of S & S's role in the American pulp tradition.
8. See Reynolds, 272–75 and Syracuse University's "S & S Preservation and Access Project" <<http://library.syr.edu/digital/guides/s/StreetAndSmith/inventory/index.html>> for comprehensive lists of S & S publications. Several Verne novels (in translations acquired from Norman L. Munro) were published in S & S's paperback "Arrow Library" series (Reynolds 118).
9. As is a second story in this issue of *PIC*, on Anton Mussert, leader of the National Socialist Movement (NSB) in the Netherlands and a reviled collaborator during the Nazi occupation. Other stories in the issue include: glamour and candid photos of movie and stage actresses Ann Corio, Claire James, and Peggy Knudsen; pictorials on the work of the New York Volunteer Ambulance Corps and the efforts of New York City orphanages to place children in foster homes; a tongue-in-cheek memoir by film comedian W.C. Fields; and an installment of the "*PIC* Album of Notorious American Murder Cases," on a sensational 1913 New York murder trial in which a Catholic priest was found guilty of the crime.
10. Whether they from the 1879 Hetzel et Cie. edition, or from a subsequent Hachette reprint, I have not been able to determine.
11. I.O. Evans's "Fitzroy" translation would not be published until 1958.

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