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## Finding Nemo: Verne's Antihero as Original Steampunk

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### Abstract

In the foreword to his annotated translation of Jules Verne's *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea*, Walter James Miller suggests that Verne's image was in need of rehabilitation due to the plethora of poor English translations his works have suffered. With the emergence of better translations, the same need for rehabilitation has emerged for Captain Nemo, the anti-hero of Verne's underwater adventure tale. In the updated, post-colonial English translations of *The Mysterious Island*, Nemo is revealed to be the antithesis of the Caucasian pop-culture iteration made famous by James Mason and most recently continued by Patrick Stewart and Michael Caine: an Indian prince whose real name is Dakkar, a leader of the Sepoy rebellion against colonial rule in 1857. It is this Nemo, Verne's original character, who embodies the essence of the Steampunk aesthetic of the instability of identity through his repeated death-and-rebirth cycle in both novels. Mixing one part recursive fantasy, one part historical criticism, and one part textual analysis, this paper will demonstrate how Captain Nemo is representative of one of the core elements of the Steampunk aesthetic, namely the redefining of identity.

### Résumé

Dans l'avant-propos de sa traduction annotée de *Vingt mille lieues sous les mers* de Jules Verne, Walter James Miller suggère que l'image de l'auteur avait besoin de se faire réhabiliter à cause d'une grande quantité de mauvaises traductions dont son œuvre aurait souffert. Avec l'émergence de meilleures traductions, le même besoin de réhabilitation se présente pour le capitaine Nemo, l'antihéros de cette aventure sous-aquatique. Dans les mises à jour postcoloniales des traductions vers l'anglais de *L'île mystérieuse*, Nemo est dévoilé comme antithèse de l'itération de culture pop caucasienne rendue célèbre par James Mason et plus récemment représentée par Patrick Stewart et Michael Caine : un prince indien dont le vrai nom serait Dakkar, un des chefs de la rébellion de Sepoy de 1857 contre le régime colonial. C'est ce Nemo, le personnage original de Verne, qui incarne l'essence de l'esthétique SteamPunk de l'instabilité de l'identité par la répétition du cycle mort-et-renaissance qui se trouve dans les deux romans. En métissant la fantaisie récursive, la critique historique et l'analyse textuelle, ce travail démontrera comment le capitaine Nemo représente un des éléments centraux de l'esthétique SteamPunk, soit la redéfinition de l'identité.

### Introduction

Despite a scholarly rehabilitation of the author and his works, one of Verne's most famous characters remains misunderstood and with rare exception, misrepresented. In addition to film, the Captain has appeared around the world in works of fiction, comic books, and in song lyrics by pop artists Sarah Brightman, *L'Affaire Louis Trio*, and *Nightwish*. Portrayed alternately as hero, anti-hero, or villain, the figure of Nemo is

conflated unilaterally with genius: a man of prodigious mental faculties, at times ruled by questionable morality. In Kevin Anderson's *Captain Nemo: The Fantastic History of a Dark Genius*, he is even imagined as the boyhood friend and romantic rival of Jules Verne himself! The irony of "Nemo" meaning "no one" in Latin is how the Captain's ubiquity in Western culture and beyond has made the name self-referential. It no longer represents namelessness, but rather synonymous with the very medium Nemo most revered: the ocean. Consider the intertextual reference in this article's title to Disney Studios, arguably responsible for the most famous portrayal of Nemo by James Mason in *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea* (1954), as well as Pixar's computer-animated family film *Finding Nemo*. If one does a Google search for "Nemo," they will get more results for *Finding Nemo's* clownfish than the Captain of the *Nautilus*. No longer "no one," it appears Nemo has become everyone and anyone.

In the hope of "rescuing" Captain Nemo from his literary crisis of identity, this paper employs the "gentle fiction" Leslie Klinger utilized in *The New Annotated Dracula*, playfully imagining "that the events... 'really took place' and that the work presents the recollections of real persons" (xii), permitting a unique academic exercise one part recursive fantasy, one part historical criticism, and one part textual analysis. Given nationality, motivation, and a past in *The Mysterious Island*, Nemo may be deciphered psychologically as a figure of counterfactual history. Timothy Unwin has suggested the term "Vernotopia" for the counterfactual secondary world of the *Voyages extraordinaires*. Verne himself implied "a network of references" in the *Voyages extraordinaires* whereby the textual history is treated with an attention to detail commensurate with recorded history (2006). Consider *20,000 Leagues* as inter/intratext for *An Antarctic Mystery*, which contains a footnote concerning the flag Nemo placed at the South Pole: "[t]here is no attempt here to present this as 'mere' fiction. On the contrary, Verne recalls this adventure as if it were recorded history" (Unwin 2005 141-42). In treating Vernotopic history as recorded history, the order of Verne's slow reveal of Nemo from a man of mystery in *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea* to Indian prince in *The Mysterious Island* will be reversed to create a chronological portrait of Nemo.

My interest in investigating Nemo as historical figure is related to the euchronic fiction known as steampunk, which Cherie Priest has defined as: "a retro-futuristic neo-Victorian sensibility that is being embraced by fiction, music, games, and fashion" (theclockworkcentury.com). Given the increased interest in steampunk as both fashion sub-culture and science fiction sub-genre, and taking into consideration steampunk's fascination with Verne, either in his own works or pastiches, it is lamentable that this seminal submariner remains doomed to deliver dialogue with the accent of the Empire he hated most of all. It is all the more lamentable when one understands Nemo not only as "Verne's greatest creation, indeed one of the stars of world literature, and a prototype of a major science fiction personality" (Miller xvii), but as a "potential model for oppositional politics", which have been posited as the "punk" in steampunk (Pagliasotti).

It is my contention that Nemo offers an oppositional politic, but not through either his life as Prince Dakkar of India, or as Captain of the *Nautilus*, but rather as the Mystery of the Island. Throughout his Vernotopic existence, Nemo engages in a repetitive cycle of death and rebirth: as Dakkar, he is the rebel, a subaltern member of an oppressed nation and freedom fighter against imperial tyranny; as Nemo he is the mad scientist, genius inventor of the spectacular *Nautilus*, and artistic romantic resisting Empire through monstrous violence. As rebel and mad-scientist, Nemo embodies two steampunk types. In addition to these two types, Nemo suggests a third possible type for the future of steampunk: an ecumenical and egalitarian humanist seeking redemption. This third identity's rejection of

the oppositional politics of the first two identities posits a possibility for the future the oppositional politics of steampunk through an ethic of compassion and egalitarianism.

### Prince Dakkar – Nemo as Subaltern Rebel

Nemo's first identity as the Indian Prince Dakkar explores steampunk's interest in rebellion. Argued as the "punk" in steampunk, this attitude of oppositional politics, of standing against oppression, is common in steampunk literature. Consider the revolutionary forces opposing the totalitarian demi-dicties in S.M. Peters' *Whitechapel Gods*; the numerous anarchists of Thomas Pynchon's steampunk-influenced postmodern epic, *Against the Day*; General O.T. Shaw and the denizens of Dawn City engaged in guerilla warfare with the British Empire in Michael Moorcock's *Nomad of the Time Streams*; Sir Robert Bruce's quiet resistance of an all-too colonial world government in Theodore Judson's post-apocalyptic steampunk future of *Fitzpatrick's War*, and the one man war of revenge, echoing Nemo's vendetta in Al Ewing's *El Sombra*, to name only a few.

Prince Dakkar belongs in the ranks of these steampunk rebels: his involvement in the Sepoy Rebellion displays a concern for the sort of issues that, in "a Victorian or pseudo-Victorian setting [might] inspire a punk movement":

Concern about the impact of pollution caused by the Industrial Revolution. Child labor. Social justice for women and minorities. Imperialism and war. A counter-culture can be built around these things, strengthened by the gadgetry. Opposition to these things should be reflected in song, poetry, art, and fashion. Steampunk should be a true movement within the setting, adding depth and flavor to otherwise superficial trappings of gears and boilers. (Kinsman)

Dakkar is doubly important to steampunk as an exemplar of oppositional politics because of his ethnicity. A number of recent articles at *Racialicious.com*, devoted to race and ethnicity in steampunk, wondered at the inherently Eurocentric nature of neo-Victoriana, and how Persons of Colour (PoCs), specifically, "Steampunks of Colour" (SPoCs) might access the subculture without compromising their heritage. After all, blacks were enslaved by Europeans, the most-emulated culture in steampunk costume. Jha Goh's "The Intersection of Race and Steampunk" reflects on steampunk as a counterfactual exercise, imagining alternate histories of Asia "industrialized enough to take on colonial powers...An Asia that is not the Mysterious Orient, but an assertive culture (or several) that stands on par with Western imperial powers" (*racialicious.com*). She suggests such counterfactual imaginings could lead SPoCs to explore steampunk's ostensible rejection of Victorian racism, and posit ways to do more than offer protagonists in petticoats or top hats. Nemo matters to steampunk discussions of race and colour because he isn't wearing a top hat; he is not part of the colonial empire, but a subaltern oppressed by that colonial empire. He is a PoC, and as such, can be a model for SPoCs.

Nemo's little known Indian heritage, and even less known revolutionary involvement in the Sepoy Rebellion of 1857, amounts to the literary equivalent of a political conspiracy, beginning with Verne's first imaginings of the character. It has been well documented how Hetzel refused Verne's first iteration of Nemo, given France's political ties with Russia:

"[Verne's] first draft was influenced by the 1863 Polish uprising against Tsarist Russia. Poland was quashed with a bestial savagery that appalled not just Verne but all Europe. As first conceived, the novel's protagonist, Captain Nemo, was a Polish aristocrat whose parents, wife, and children were brutally slaughtered by Russian troops." (Miller xvi)

Verne acquiesced to Hetzel's suggestion, by leaving "the identity of Nemo and of his great oppressor as something of a mystery, at least in *20,000 Leagues*" (xvi). But Hetzel's censoring only delayed Verne's intent for Nemo's origins. By the time Verne wrote *The Mysterious Island*, he was positioned to refuse any censorship, and able to present an arguably more radical genesis for the Captain, as the leader of infamous Sepoy Rebellion, the Indian Mutiny of 1857: "Indian in his heart, Indian in his longing for revenge, Indian in his dreams of reclaiming his native land, driving out the invaders, and inaugurating a new era of independence" (*Island* 584-85).

While never a mystery to French readers after 1874, the nationality of the enigmatic Captain remained largely unexplained to English readers up until the late twentieth century, due in part to his many on-screen appearances. Since Allen Holubar played the Captain in the silent film of *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea* (1916), a total of sixteen actors have portrayed Nemo in versions of Verne's novels, as well as original works such as *The Return of Captain Nemo* (1978) or *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* (2003). The majority of these films portrayed Nemo as older and serious, with the exception of the mid-1970s children's cartoon series *The Undersea Adventures of Captain Nemo* which re-imagined Nemo as a "[b]londe and hunky...ocean researcher and do-gooder named Mark Nemo" (thewellers.com). While a blonde and "hunky" Nemo is as far afield from Verne's Captain Nemo as might be imagined, it is perhaps no better a representation of Verne's anti-hero than those by celebrated actors James Mason, Michael Caine, or Patrick Stewart, who all performed Nemo with British accents, implying citizenship of the nation he hated most.

Nemo has been portrayed as an Indian only three times, and played by an Indian only once, by Naseeruddin Shah in *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen (LXG)*. The identity of Nemo as Indian outside Europe remains to this day largely unknown, so that one reviewer of *LXG* commented: "I didn't even know [Nemo] was Indian in the books; I thought the choice of Shah was innovative casting" (Heroine Content). It might be assumed that Walt Disney is largely responsible for the accidental Occidentalizing of Nemo, given the popularity of Disney's film version in 1954. However, even the earlier audiences of the 1916 version of *20,000 Leagues* were told that Nemo's Indian heritage as seen in the film was not of Verne's invention, with reviewers assuming "it was the invention of the filmmakers" (Taves 209). Even so, the blame for the cover-up cannot be laid solely at the feet of Richard Fleischer, Stuart Paton, or any other film director. Instead, we must look earlier, to the first English translations of *The Mysterious Island*. Miller and Walter identify culprit of the greatest translation misrepresentation of Nemo as "British boys' author," W.H.G. Kingston:

"Unfortunately, Kingston's rendering of Nemo's biography is not at all faithful to Verne: the Englishman rewrites, cuts, and just plain fabricates, all in an effort to bring this crucial passage into line with the official British propaganda of his day" (389).

A cross-examination of Kingston's translations with post-colonial (and arguably superior) translations of *The Mysterious Island*, such as Jordan Stump's, demonstrates the extent of Kingston's obfuscating revisions. Stump reveals the motive behind Dakkar's father sending him to Europe as a secret hope that the education "would prepare him to do battle with those he considered the oppressors of his land" (584). This hope is subverted in Kingston as the deflated aspiration "that by his talents and knowledge he might one day take a leading part in raising his long degraded and heathen country to a level with the nations of Europe" (353). Even though Kingston translates Nemo's heritage correctly, he co-opts the Captain's affections to coincide with those of India's oppressors, the British Empire. An

entire paragraph detailing Dakkar's all-consuming "implacable resentment" towards "the one country where he had never consented to set foot, the one nation whose advances he continually spurned" (Stump 584-85) is entirely omitted in Kingston, replaced by "an unquenchable thirst for knowledge," ostensibly to enable Dakkar to become ruler of a people in need of colonial enlightenment. Brian Taves argues that to downplay the intensity of Dakkar's love for India and hatred for Britain, makes for a characterization "hardly the rebel leader Dakkar that Verne imagined" (209).

Kingston also reduces Dakkar's active leadership of the Sepoy rebellion of 1857, stating that the Prince's involvement was "[i]nstigated by princes equally ambitious and less sagacious and more unscrupulous than he was" while the revolutionary Indians are diminished as well, rendered as "facile tools of their designing chiefs" (354). Stump's translation reveals Dakkar as the "soul" of the revolt, "he who had organized the entire uprising" (585). The difference is monumental: in Kingston, Dakkar is a dupe, in Stump he is the author of his own fate.

Thankfully, even Verne's choice of the Prince's homeland, the "then-independent territory of Bundelkund" (*Island* 584), argues against a pliant, ideologically feeble Dakkar. Bundelkhand, as it is correctly spelled, has a regional history of insurgence, possessing geography advantageous to a guerilla revolutionary force. Particular to the Sepoy revolt, Hibbert notes that "[n]either the fighting in Malwa nor in Bengal was as fierce or costly...as the battles in Bundelkhand" (377), while Jain argues forcefully that the rebellion in Bundelkhand was an orchestrated effort:

The complexities of the uprising of 1857 have to be understood in the context of its specificity in time and space. It was through the unique political experience of that summer of 1857 that the rebellion evolved, gathering different strands of protest *into one single concerted defiance*. (226, italics mine)

This is hardly a case of tractable sycophants dragged into a conflict through convincing arguments on the part of a charismatic, but according to Kingston's translation, misguided few. It solidifies Bundelkhand is the birthplace of Prince Dakkar, raised with "an upbringing that inculcated undying dreams of revenge and redress" (*Island* 585). Bundelkhand supports why Dakkar "organized the entire uprising" (585), acting as Vernotopia's Tantia Topi or Lakshmi Bai.

Alternate histories such as Dakkar's provide a social-psychological foundation underscoring the importance of the individual in history. Karen Hellekson highlights how readers of alternate histories "come away with their own lives sharpened and enriched by the realization that history is something possible for an individual to shape" (255) The alternate history changes the perspective of the reader:

The psychological effects of reading the alternate history are important; it could have happened otherwise, save for a personal choice. The personal thus becomes the universal, and individuals find themselves making a difference in the context of historical movement. (255)

The alternate histories of steampunk represent a mindset where "horizons are infinite and nothing is fixed in stone...a world larger and better suited to the classic adventure story than ours" (Stirling 151). In such cases, the objective truth value of steampunk's counterfactual propositions is largely ignored, "in favor of examining their perceived plausibility and meaningfulness to the individual" (Roese & Olson 6). The historical reality of Prince Dakkar is superfluous: what matters is the inspiration one draws from his fictional life, and how that might change the way an individual perceives their own role in current

events. In perceiving Nemo as an exemplar however, it must be remembered that Dakkar serves only as prologue to the terrible genius of the master of the *Nautilus*.

### Captain Nemo: Master of a Terrible Reality

When Aronnax and his companions ask the commander of the *Nautilus* for his name, he replies, “to you I am nothing but Captain Nemo” (67). As “Captain No One,” his name reflects his withdrawal from society: he is the romantic outcast, the “nameless one.” (Miller and Walter 67). While Emmanuel Mickel interprets this as a refusal to reveal his identity (160), it seems more accurate to say that Nemo *is* his new identity: formed by a desire for revenge against the British Empire.

In his second iteration of identity, Nemo provides a cautionary exemplar as a proto-mad-scientist, a monstrous Maker whose do-it-yourself punk ethos produces the *Nautilus*, a marvelously advanced hybrid of marine exploration vessel and lethal war-machine. As the captain of the *Nautilus*, Nemo straddles the liminal zone of brilliant inventor and misanthropic madman, one moment taking Professor Aronnax on a tour of an underwater forest, the next drugging his “guests” to hide the *Nautilus*’ terrorist activities. It is this tension which speaks to a number of technological representations in steampunk texts: simultaneously fascinated to the point of fetish, yet cynical about technology’s capacity to truly improve the human condition.

Steampunk engages in a balancing act between loving and hating its anachronistic technologies. In addition to questioning Europe’s colonial zeitgeist, steampunk has acted as a counterfactual antecedent to unrestrained technophilia. In *Nomad of the Time Streams*, airships are the setting for high-flying adventure, but also the delivery device of the atomic bomb; *Wild Wild West* has the heroic Artemus Gordon and the villainous Dr. Arliss Loveless, both brilliant inventors in their own right; the biological warfare which halts the Martian invasion in the second volume of *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* also wipes out numerous Londoners; the advent of the computer a century ahead of time in *The Difference Engine* speeds Western society into dystopia. This juxtaposition of awe and dread is ably demonstrated by the Steam Castle of Katsuhiko Otomo’s *Steamboy*. Originally intended to enlighten and entertain, a modified Steam Castle looms over London with an arsenal of advanced weaponry, while its polarized inventors struggle with the controls, resulting in the retraction of weapons and the emergence of carousel-style animals.

In Jeff Vandermeer’s short story “Fixing Hanover,” the narrative centers on steampunk’s technological ambivalence. The remains of a clockwork automaton wash up on a beach, and it falls to the protagonist, who admits he can “fix anything,” to repair the automaton, dubbed “Hanover” (383). The process of repair is highly self-reflexive of steampunk ideas, containing “several leaps of logic” and decisions “that cannot be explained as rational,” (388) which sums up steampunk’s approach to technology. There are other examples of this self-reflexivity, such as the response to the question, “What does it do?” The inventor-protagonist ruminates, “Why should everything have to have a function?” (391), a possible response to cheap criticism leveled against steampunk makings, deprecating the decorating of a steampunk laptop with brass and antique accessories as pointless. Within the context of the story, the inventor of very functional devices seems to prefer making beautiful pointless items. He has seen the dark side of functionality, the ultimate outworking of infernal devices designed for destruction. Like Nemo, the protagonist of “Fixing Hanover” is a brilliant inventor. Unlike Nemo, he *unwittingly* creates weapons of mass destruction. Yet both come to the same conclusion when faced with the horror of

their actions: retreating to remote islands to live out their days. This technological ambivalence is aptly demonstrated in the scene when the automaton is finally fixed, as one of the villagers “backs away from Hanover, as if something monstrous has occurred, even though this is what we wanted” (390).

Similarly, Nemo represents a sublime entity to the reader through Aronnax's perspective: attraction to the man of scientific invention and repulsion from the man of violent intention. It is important in understanding Nemo's second identity that neither be stressed over the other. In *20,000 Leagues*, Nemo is neither unilaterally villain or hero, but complex amalgamation of both.

Portrayals of Nemo lacking intensity or ferocity emasculate the character, as Maertens accuses James Mason's portrayal of doing. Maertens contests that a Nemo entirely-on-the-defensive is a false interpretation of Verne's character and, as with Kingston's butchery of Prince Dakkar's history, removes Nemo's power of agency. Maertens states that “[i]n the novel, Nemo always has the advantage over his human opponents” (214) while the Disney version repeatedly portrays a vulnerable Nemo whose suicide “can only be read as the final failure of the heroic scientist, the culmination of accidents and incapacity, and the defeat of intellect by brute force” (223).

Maertens contrasts Disney's frail and vulnerable Nemo with Verne's seemingly indestructible Captain. In the novel, Nemo chooses to bring Aronnax and his companions on board the *Nautilus*; in the film, a carelessly open hatch leaves the *Nautilus* “open to invasion” while Nemo and his entire crew attend to a burial on the sea floor. In the novel, Nemo rescues Ned Land from the giant squids, in return for Ned's rescue of Nemo from a shark; in the film, Ned saves Nemo without any reprisal: “Scientific heroism is shown to be helpless and in need of rescue by the older ideal of muscular manliness” (220).

In addition to the reductionism of science as power, the Disney film omits the secret language of the *Nautilus*' crew, which Maertens states is a loss of “the sense that Nemo has achieved a discursive superiority over the whole institution of Western science, by, as it were, containing it inside his own language” (217). Maertens does Nemo a slight disservice in this statement—the creation of a language implies more than the mastery of a single discipline—as the Librarian tells Hiro in Neal Stephenson's *Snow Crash*, “In many Creation myths, to name a thing is to create it” (239), which Hiro concludes means that to have the keys to language is to be able to construct the “operating system of society” (240). The construction of a language is to be able to control a perception of reality. By having his crew speak a language of his invention, Nemo does more than bar Aronnax and his companions from comprehending conversation: he imbues his crew with his perception of reality. In *20,000 Leagues*, Nemo focuses this reality through the obsessive lens of retreat from and revenge upon the civilized world.

The Captain of the *Nautilus* is not engaged in aggression for the sake of power, or glory, but for revenge, a continuance of the resistance he started in 1857. Politically-motivated retribution is a key aspect of this second identity: if his “political purpose in seeking warships” becomes a solely a personal quest for reprisal, then there is “no rationale as to why Nemo went to all the trouble of building a submarine in order to seek revenge” (Taves 209). Removal of political motivation renders Nemo a mere caricature of mad scientist:

“Nemo [is] changed to a monstrous character, a Jekyll and Hyde type with an island fortress full of modern science, from television to...death rays, ready to destroy the world at his vengeful whim” (212).

Verne's Nemo does not possess the genocidal drive of comic-book villains; his quarrel is with the British Empire alone. His attacks indicate both precision of target, as well as restraint of violence. The *Scotia*, a passenger ship for the Cunard line "had not struck, she had *been struck*" (*20,000 Leagues* 9). Was this an accident on Nemo's part, or is his motivation to cripple British communication, seeking to thwart the Cunard line's "systematic improvement of transatlantic travel and communication" (Miller and Walter 7)? He obviously wanted to only damage, not sink the ship. Nemo repeats this restraint with the *Abraham Lincoln*: as with the *Scotia*, Nemo only incapacitates the frigate by breaking the ship's propeller and rudder. The intentional restraint of Nemo towards the *Scotia* and the *Abraham Lincoln* is emphasized by the attack on the ironclad: "The *Nautilus* did not intend to strike the double-decker *at its waterline*, where it was clad in impenetrable iron armor, but *below its waterline*, *below the metal carapace*" (377-78). All prior restraint is cast off in this encounter: "[c]arried by its great momentum, the *Nautilus* had passed right through the warship like a sailmaker's needle through canvas" (378). Nemo's murderous intent is unquestionable on this occasion, evidenced by Aronnax's description of the damage: "I could see its half-opened hull into which the sea was rushing with a sound of thunder" (378), a stark contrast to the "clearly defined" isosceles triangle-shaped gash in the *Scotia's* hull (9).

Nemo's unprovoked attack on the *Scotia* does not prove fatal as his later attack on the ironclad does—both by rule of choice—demonstrating that Nemo possesses, however questionable, a code of ethics for warfare. Shannon French argues that such a code separates the warrior from murderers, terrorists, or psychopaths. However, she also stresses how "important it is to the warrior to have the conviction that he participated in an honorable endeavor" (1-8). It is an oversimplification to label Nemo solely as a terrorist or madman, randomly "venting his anger in useless destruction ... [a] symbol of the alienation of vengeance, the bitterness that eats away and isolates a man's soul from human compassion and justice" (Nickel 52). Indeed, Verne has given readers a complex and rich character, whose ambiguous morality produces vacillating reactions, from horror to attraction and back again. This complexity is what must be maintained, to render Nemo neither as pure evil, nor reluctant aggressor.

In the aftermath of the episode with the ironclad, the Captain obviously rejects the reality he has constructed; convicted by the consequences of his vendetta, he utters the final words overheard by Aronnax: "O Almighty God! Enough! Enough!" These words are not vain entreaties to an abandoned deity, but rather a genuine desire for inner transformation (384). The monstrous nature of the Nemo identity must be discarded in order for the Captain to repent and "regain his identity as a human being" (160). The time has come for the inhuman Nemo to die in the maelstrom, to allow something new to emerge.

### **The Mystery of the Island: Unseen Samaritan Seeking Redemption**

At the close of *20,000 Leagues*, Aronnax wonders at the fate of the *Nautilus* and its Captain, with the hope that "the dispenser of justice will die, and that the man of science will ... continue his peaceful studies of the seas" (388). Unbeknownst to Aronnax and Verne's contemporary readers alike, the dispenser of justice had died, while the man of science survived, abandoning his quest for revenge and retreating to Lincoln Island in self-exile. Here, he is "no longer...unreconciled to God and man" (Mickel 496). Nemo's benevolence toward Cyrus Smith and his castaway companions is evidence of a "man at



peace with himself, one who has overcome the inner hatred which consumed him" (496). Nemo seeks atonement for his actions as dispenser of justice, calling upon Cyrus Smith and his companions to grant him absolution.

Smith pronounces Nemo as ultimately mistaken, not evil, and gives the premature eulogy that "your name has nothing to fear from the judgement of history" (590). Nemo supposedly goes to his grave with a clear conscience, confident as he is of an afterlife whereupon he may be watching the endeavors of Smith and company "from above" (593). Perhaps Nemo believes he has achieved *samsara*, "a clean escape from the...wheel of birth, death, and rebirth" (Fisher 87), into *moksha*, "the cessation of birth and death" (Moreman 105).

Maertens sees the entire narrative of *20,000 Leagues* as symbolic, with the action building is a "careful, contrapuntal structure to Nemo's ultimate crisis of soul" (214), ending in the episode with the Lofoten maelstrom. Walter James Miller applauds Verne's use of this real, albeit fantastically exaggerated confluence of tidal currents off Norway as a "magnificent symbol [of] classic death-and-rebirth" calling it a "moral maelstrom" (xvii), a downward spiral of the soul, or perhaps even the wheel of Dharma, from which Nemo emerges into a new life. It is noteworthy to consider the motto of the *Nautilus* in light of this discussion of death-and-rebirth. Aronnax translates the motto, "Mobilis in mobili," as "Mobile within the mobile element" (Miller and Walter 56) while other English variations interpret as "*flexible within flux, changing with change, or ... free in a free world*" (56). The "exact facsimile" Aronnax produces for the reader renders the motto's words encircling the letter N within another circle. This seems evocative of the Dharma wheel or wheel of life, which in pre-Buddhist India had two primary meanings: a weapon, and in a derivative sense, "any kind of cyclical motion" (Rinpoche 30). In Hindu belief, the wheel of life involves the cyclical journey of birth, death, and rebirth, a journey the Captain has been engaged in throughout his life.

Nemo's potential religious belief is no digression while investigating this "last" iteration of identity. Nemo's religious affiliations have been conjectured rather comprehensively by Jess Nevins in *Heroes and Monsters: The Unofficial Companion to The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen*. The graphic novel of *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* by Alan Moore and Kevin O'Neil was "the first Nemo to be shown wearing Indian clothing" (40). While having the laudable distinction of acting as an effective revelation of Nemo's true heritage, Moore and O'Neil keep the Captain stuck in his second, monstrous identity.

In Moore and O'Neil's vision, Nemo is a combination of Sikh warrior and Hindu devotee to Siva. Nevins reports that "Moore has said in interviews that Nemo must be a Sikh, the most warlike of the Indian peoples" (40). Indeed, Moore and O'Neil portray Nemo as a bloodthirsty madman in the first volume of *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen*, eschewing his electric guns for an automatic weapon utilizing tiny harpoons as its ammunition with gratuitously gory results. In this way, Moore reduces both Nemo and the religion of Sikhism to a caricature, with Nemo shouting "Come forward men of England; tell the gods that Nemo sent you" (Moore and O'Neil 140). Moore and O'Neil's Sikh Nemo focuses on the use of the sword in battle, without considering its purpose in initiation rituals symbolizing the combination of both bravery and compassion for Sikhs (418). While Sikh leader Guru Gobind Singh "admonished Sikhs not to feel enmity toward Islam or Hinduism, the religions of the oppressors" (422), Moore's Nemo fires a full sized harpoon at close range through several men he deems "Mohammedan rabble" (2000 17-18). Sikh Gurus "denounced the religious sanction behind birth distinctions and refused to admit that there were any divinely ordained classes and castes among mankind" (Singh 35), going so far

as to invite untouchable castes to communal meals, and treating women with greater respect than Indian society. Despite maintains a naval hierarchy upon his submarine vessel, Nemo could hardly be said to be a perpetrator of the Indian caste system. If we understand Sikhism as less of a caricature, the idea of Nemo as Sikh is appealing: not only because Sikh beliefs “have been interpreted as a synthesis of the Hindu and Muslim traditions of northern India” (Fisher 412), which references Nemo’s Indian heritage and the Islamic practice of Prince Dakkar’s ancestor, Tippu Sultan (Nevins 41), but because of Sikhism’s determination to “defend the weak of all religions against tyranny” (Fisher 416).

This attitude of compassion and egalitarianism is displayed further in the Captain’s fourth appearance, which I would include as an extension of this third post-*20,000 Leagues* identity, in Verne’s *Journey Through the Impossible*. In it, Nemo [1] is still sailing in his *Nautilus*, but proclaiming himself to be “[v]ery devout, and firmer in his beliefs than those whom I see displaying an atheism born of pride or fear” (87). This Nemo decries such atheism, and the civilization it creates:

Ah what a wonderful civilization it is! And on what an unshakable foundation this modern society rests, a society that steals from the disinherited of this world the hope of a better world to come. But if there is no life anywhere but on earth, if we have no expectation of any future punishment or reward, virtue is a fraud. (88)

In Verne’s texts, both *Mysterious Island* and *Journey Through the Impossible* present a gentler, more altruistic Nemo, a possible pattern for the portrayal of Nemo in the made-for-television film, *The Return of Captain Nemo* (1978), where the brooding misanthrope of *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea* was resurrected as a “comic book hero that had more in common with [Irwin] Allen’s 1960s movie and television series *Voyage to the Bottom of the Sea*” (Taves 243). While Taves decries this portrayal, a Nemo who is “entirely beneficent... docile, without a hint of anger or misanthropy” (244) seems, all issues of cinematic quality aside, to be truer to the anonymous philanthropist of Lincoln Island than the continuation of the mad scientist or crazed terrorist favored by a number of authors: Philip José Farmer in *The Other Log of Phileas Fogg*, Michael Mallory’s “The Secret of the Nautilus,” and as discussed, Moore and O’Neill’s *League of Extraordinary Gentlemen*.

The Captain’s final transformation of identity, at least within Verne’s texts, offers a new type for steampunk characters. While steampunk texts are able to ask difficult questions of history and culture through counterfactual scenarios, as is the case in Paul Di Filippo’s clever denunciation of racism in “Hottentots”, Moorcock’s slow burn to the rejection of colonial Empire in *Nomad of the Time Streams*, or Greg Broadmore’s brilliantly ironic satire of firearm fetish, and by extension, hunting and warfare in *Doctor Grordbort’s Contrapultronic Dingus Directory*, the genre is largely bereft of characters that perceive charity or hospitality as the solution. While aficionados applaud steampunk media and culture for being counter-culture to real-world Victorian values such as ethnocentrism, racism, and technophilia, the literature of steampunk provides few exemplars of non-violent solutions to these real-world problems. Granted, it’s far more exciting to have heroes overthrow an oppressive regime through force of arms, but if one accepts Verne as one of the inspirations for steampunk(as many do), then the absence of steampunk types imitating this final iteration of Nemo’s journey seems remiss. Verne concludes Nemo’s character arc in acts of charity and benevolence; why are there not more steampunk heroes who do likewise?

This is not to say there are no attempts to do so. Amidst the ultra-violence and standard

plot-by-numbers narrative, the eponymous hero of Al Ewing's *El Sombra* contemplates the efficacy of his mission of vengeance against the Nazis who have occupied his Mexican village:

He had spent a great deal of time learning everything he needed to know to conduct a one-man war against his enemies – and virtually no time learning how to help his friends...He had amassed an arsenal of guns and ammunition for the people to enact his personal vengeance, but had not bothered himself with bringing them hope." (134-35)

He has learned that the oppressed villager's reticence at joining in his violent resistance is not a matter of cowardice, but rejection of violence as the solution to the Nazi problem. A resistance has been going on, a resistance of education. *El Sombra's* contemplation that "Things would have to change," (135) mirrors Nemo's cries of "Almighty God, enough, enough!" as the *Nautilus* plunges into the maelstrom. Despite this ethical detour, the hero of *El Sombra* lives in a universe where violent solutions remain the chosen path—at the end of the book, he is clearly journeying towards what are unarguably more blood-soaked adventures.

Nemo, on the other hand, moves through two identities predicated on violence, before concluding that there is no redemptive value in it. He has opposed the law of Empire, become a man of lawlessness, before finally concluding that the best law of all is one which echoes the religious impulse. As has been suggested, steampunk heroes are often outlaws of one stripe or another. They exist at the periphery of law-abiding society, or are thrust from the comfort of a structured, moral and ethical society into the realm of lawlessness and chaos. In general, they are opposed to concepts of Empire and oppressive authoritarianism. Nemo's final identity suggests that the best opposition of Empire is an ethic of compassion and egalitarianism. While steampunk fans claim interest in such an ethic, rejecting colonial hegemonies of race and culture, their literatures do not. I would suggest that for steampunk literature to effectively write against itself, it should look to Nemo's third identity as a paradigm.

## Conclusion

The literary manifestation of Steampunk is moving away from homages to adventure tales, turning towards social criticism and commentary, as evidenced by the anti-Empire, anti-pax Americana subtext of Theodore Judson's *Fitzpatrick's War*. Steampunk culture attracts and embraces a diversity of ethnicities, genders, and personalities. It has the potential to be subversively counter-cultural through its playful performativity and light-hearted romanticism. If it is to be anything more than another fan culture however, it will need to engage in a more serious transformation of identity, taking the same journey its literature has begun to. It must seek a steampunk modification of the world beyond subculture and subgenre, the world beyond fantasy, sci-fi, and comic book conventions. What does the steampunk aesthetic look like when it is applied to the world at large? If Verne's writings are, as many Steampunk adherents claim, source-texts for Steampunk, then Nemo presents a possibility of real-world change to this subculture, and subgenre.

While steampunk culture shares Nemo's rejection of current society, the transformation of self in fictional identity does not necessarily result in actual change. Like the Steampunk camera which is only an antique shell with a digital camera inside, the aesthetic rejection of the modern is merely a covering of the eyes, a retreat with the head in the sand, or in Nemo's case, beneath the waves, unless it finds some means to go further. Unfortunately, the alternatives steampunk suggests are currently whimsical, aesthetic alterations to existing technologies: "building a blazing-fast, modern computer into antique fine

cabinetry” (Datamancer). While steampunk rejects dystopic elements of the “real world” and suggests more hopeful alternatives, the question remains: are these significant changes, or just another fan culture interested in costume and performance?

In tracing Captain Nemo’s fictional life it is necessary to recollect how that the quest began in revolution against oppressive Imperialism, was fueled by a monstrous sense of political agency, but concluded in anonymous philanthropy toward complete strangers, leading Cyrus Smith to conclude that “However posterity might judge the course of what could be called his extra-human existence, Prince Dakkar would forever remain engraved in the minds of men, a unique and unparalleled figure in human history” (*Island* 595). Nemo’s three transformations speak to the potential of not being stuck in a single iteration: there are alternatives to rebellion or revenge. For Nemo, those alternatives are redemption, and in some sense, reconciliation. Nemo moves through each of these spaces, fully inhabiting them, and shedding them like outgrown clothing, demonstrating that identity is not a singularity, and that the greatest resistance of oppression, is not retaliation, but compassion.

## NOTES

1. In *Journey Through the Impossible*, Nemo is one of three disguises adopted by Volsius, a character who acts as a spiritual conscience for the hero of the play. Nevertheless, since Volsius uses Nemo’s infamous line, “I am not what you call a civilized man” (87), the reader assumes that his sham Nemo closely resembles the real Nemo. *Journey Through the Impossible* has an oneiric tone to it at times, with Volsius nearly becoming the famous characters he clothes himself in, to act as the tale’s spiritual guide and guardian.

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