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With Verne in Icaria: Two Sources for *Robur-le-conquérant*

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Abstract

The character Robur in Jules Verne's *Robur-le-conquérant* has provoked a wide array of seemingly incompatible interpretations, ranging from unconvincing boor to noble hero. It is, however, possible to reconcile these varied interpretations if the character is viewed in the context of two sources for the novel: the Heavier-Than-Air Society associated with the photographer Nadar, and the Icarian movement conceived by the philosopher Étienne Cabet. This paper studies the extent of these two sources' influences, with assistance from Verne's manuscript and his correspondence with Pierre-Jules Hetzel.

Résumé

Le personnage de Robur dans *Robur-le-conquérant* de Jules Verne a provoqué une vaste gamme d'interprétations apparemment incompatibles, allant d'un butor peu convaincant jusqu'à un noble héros. On peut cependant réconcilier ces interprétations variées en examinant Robur dans le contexte de deux sources du roman : la Société du « Plus lourd que l'air » liée au photographe Nadar, et le mouvement Icarien du philosophe Étienne Cabet. Cet article analyse l'ampleur de l'influence de ces sources, avec l'aide du manuscrit de Robur et de la correspondance de Verne et de Pierre-Jules Hetzel.

Robur, the enigma at the center of Jules Verne's *Robur-le-conquérant* (1886), remains an ambiguous figure a century and a quarter after first seeing print. Some commentators have found him deeply disappointing as a character, “uncouth and boorish” (I. O. Evans 94), “distinctly dislikable in every respect” (Miller 5), “insufficiently developed to be convincing” (Eckley 387). Others have had the opposite reaction, describing Robur as “a creation to stand alongside Nemo” (Russell vii), a Prometheus too noble for his contemporaries (Curval 20–1), “a heroic *oberman* of the skies” (A. B. Evans, *Jules Verne Rediscovered* 85). Still others have taken a different approach, drawing upon the ending of the published text to describe Robur primarily as an allegorical symbol of science rather than as a character whose psychology can be explored (Marcucci 40; Reszler 58; Compère 38). One can be forgiven for concluding that the Robur of *Robur* is all things to all people, a meaningless cardboard cutout devoid of background and therefore of context to explain his actions. [1]

A historically grounded reading of the text, however, suggests two sources useful for understanding the novel. Both of these sources have been mentioned before in connection with *Robur*, but their impact upon it is greater than has previously been implied; when taken together, they suggest a more nuanced reading of Robur's character, synthesizing the divergent views cited above. These two sources are the Heavier-Than-Air Society founded in part by the photographer Nadar (born Gaspard-Félix Tournachon, 1820–1910) and the Icarian movement developed by the utopian philosopher Étienne Cabet (1788–1856).

Nadar takes flight

“Ringmaster, publicist, and performer in a highly theatrical life,” wrote a Metropolitan Museum of Art curator, “the legendary Nadar wore many hats—those of journalist, bohemian, left-wing agitator, playwright, caricaturist, and aeronaut” (Daniel). On July 6, 1863, he donned yet another hat: that of co-founder of the *Société d'encouragement pour la locomotion aérienne au moyen d'appareils plus lourds que l'air* (“Society for the Encouragement of Aerial Locomotion by Means of Heavier-Than-Air Machines,” often referred to in English as “the Heavier-Than-Air Society”). He was called into the endeavor by the viscount Gustave de Ponton d'Amécourt (1825–1888) and the writer Gabriel de La Landelle (1812–1886), two Parisians hardly less colorful than Nadar himself. Both were passionately committed to the dream of rendering balloons obsolete by means of propeller-based heavier-than-air flying machines, and had already collaborated on experiments with model proto-helicopters (Prinet and Dilasser 145). The ambitious scope of their mission is evident from their many written works on the subject, ranging from Ponton d'Amécourt's *La Conquête de l'air par l'hélice* (Paris: Sausset, 1863), a simple forty-page pamphlet laying out the physics behind heavier-than-air flight theories, to La Landelle's *Pigeon vole : Aventures en l'air* (Paris: Brunet, 1868), a ludic four-hundred-page tornado of typographical quirks, woodcut clip art, Second-Empire futurism, and eccentric rhetorical bombast. [2]

But if Ponton d'Amécourt and La Landelle were the most active scientifically oriented enthusiasts behind the Heavier-Than-Air Society, Nadar was its main mover and its public face. His publicizing and fundraising efforts were multifarious: he published a defiantly worded “Manifeste de l'Autolocomotion aérienne,” first in a newspaper and then in thousands of pamphlet copies; [3] he founded an illustrated journal called *L'Aéronaute*; he dashed off two colorful full-length books about flight, *Mémoires du Géant* (1864) and *Le Droit au Vol* (1865); [4] and, most memorably, he made public ascents in an enormous balloon built expressly for that purpose, the *Géant* (Prinet and Dilasser 146–62).

Nadar's friendship with Jules Verne has aptly been described by Arthur B. Evans as a “decisive” influence on the writer's work. It was thanks to Nadar that Verne met numerous innovators, including Ponton d'Amécourt, and joined the Heavier-Than-Air Society (A. B. Evans, *Jules Verne Rediscovered* 20). Verne, enthusiastic about the project, was quickly appointed one of the *censeurs* of the Society (Dehs 7), and did his own share of publicizing for Nadar, Ponton d'Amécourt, and La Landelle in his essay “À propos du *Géant*” (Verne 92–93). That he remembered the Society and its aims fondly may be guessed from the letter he sent Nadar in August 1886, just after the publication of *Robur*.



Nadar, self portrait in striped coat, circa 1856–1858 (courtesy the J. Paul Getty Museum)

I'm having Hetzel send you a copy of *Robur the Conqueror*. In it you'll find all your ideas about the *Heavier-Than-Air!* In a guise of pure *fantaisie* [i.e. caprice, whimsy, imagination], I've tried to raise the question once more. Tell me if it suits you, and if it pleases you. (L1886) [5]

It has, indeed, long been clear that *Robur* bears the mark of Verne's experiences with Nadar's Heavier-Than-Air Society, and supports the goals it publicized (Prinet and Dilasser 166). Even the *Albatros* itself has been shown to have been modeled closely after Ponton d'Amécourt's design (Compère 38; A. B. Evans, *Jules Verne Rediscovered* 20). However, it is worth taking a closer look at how materials related to the Society are woven intertextually into the novel. To do so sheds light on a less obvious area: how Verne's memories of the Society may have done much to shape the character of Robur himself.

First, there are the multiple direct references to Nadar and the Heavier-Than-Air Society. The novel's history of heavier-than-air flight experimentation literally begins by invoking the names of Ponton d'Amécourt, La Landelle, and Nadar (Chapter III). When the historical

narrative resumes in Chapter IV, the founding of the Heavier-Than-Air Society “thanks to Nadar’s efforts” (“*grâce aux efforts de Nadar*”) is portrayed as the watershed to which all previous experiments had been leading up, the direct reason for all contemporary work on the subject. The three aviation supporters quoted in the same chapter, and identified simply as “one of the most persistent supporters of aviation,” “one of its most tireless advocates,” and “the noisiest one of all, who blasted the trumpets of publicity to wake up the Old and New Worlds” (“*un des plus persistants adeptes de l’aviation ... un de ses plus acharnés partisans ... le plus bruyant de tous, qui embouchait les trompettes de la publicité pour réveiller l’Ancien et le Nouveau Monde*”), are La Landelle, Ponton d’Amécourt, and Nadar—that last descriptor also functioning as an intriguing echo of Tom Turner’s trumpet aboard the *Albatros*. (The manuscript features two further tributes to Nadar: the reference in Chapter III is given dramatically as “*Nadar,—oui ! Nadar !*” [MS 18] and the one in Chapter VI calls him “*Nadar l’Étonnant*” [MS 35].) The description of the *Albatros* credits La Landelle and Ponton d’Amécourt as two of the three experimenters whose ideas Robur had drawn upon (Chapter VI; the other, Cossus, was an English engineer working independently). Finally, a striking number of the other names Verne lists were members of the Heavier-Than-Air Society: Babinet, Bélégucic, Bourcart, Danduran, de Groof, de Louvrié, de Lucy, Duchesne, Garapon, Hureau de Villeneuve, Liais, Loup, Moreau, Panafieu, Parisel, Pline, Salives, and Vert can all be found on the membership roster for 1866 (La Landelle, *Société d’encouragement* 56–62).

Second, there are the less obvious textual references to Heavier-Than-Air-related publications. A host of eccentricities from Nadar’s writings are scattered freely through *Robur*: just as Verne does, Nadar quotes and misspells the English phrase “*Go a head!*” (*Mémoires* 118), calls the propeller “*la sainte Hélice*” (136), explains the helicopter by reference to a toy called the *spiralifère* (136), cites Franklin’s reaction to the first balloon (140), uses the theory of *analogie passionnelle* for description (216), likens buildings seen from the air to toys (265–6), and unexpectedly quotes a line of Ovid (271). Similarly, Robur’s diatribe at the Weldon Institute in Chapter III is largely lifted from Ponton d’Amécourt’s *La Conquête de l’air*: the reference to the bat as a flying mammal (7), the statistics about walking on a moving air column (9), the debunking of a balloon theory by imagining an eagle breathing in air (12), and the coining of “*ef*” from *avis* (19; cf. La Landelle, *Aviation* 7). Much of the rest of the diatribe is Nadar again: the claim that one must be heavier than air to resist it (*Mémoires* 31), the insistence that the bird is not a balloon but a machine (*Mémoires* 31), and the citation to Louis de Lucy’s flight research to support his theories (*Le Droit au vol* 23–5). [6]

Third, there are the situations in the novel that allude to Heavier-Than-Air Society events. For instance, while François Tapage makes many dubious claims about Robur in the novel, one of them is particularly intriguing: that Robur will make public ascensions for paying audiences to offset the huge cost of the *Albatros* (Chapter XIII). It is difficult not to recall Nadar’s travels in the *Géant* for the benefit of the Heavier-Than-Air Society, a publicity move that memorably took a standing tradition—ascents for paying crowds by professional balloonists—and repurposed it as a newsworthy fundraising tactic. Similarly there is the *Albatros*’s printing press, an amusingly unnecessary prop about which the manuscript’s narrator admits “I’m not too sure what function it could serve!” (“*je ne sais trop à quoi elle pouvait servir !*,” MS 40); the admittance could apply just as well to real life, for Nadar’s *Géant*, for reasons equally obscure, really did carry a printing press (Hallion 71). And it was Nadar as well who, at a public meeting designed to publicize heavier-than-air projects, exhibited a miniature helicopter attacking a miniature balloon (Ponton d’Amécourt 39). As

Christian Robin notes, “Jules Verne dramatized the collision, and gave it an epic dimension” (“*Jules Verne a dramatisé la collision, il lui a donné une dimension épique*,” Robin, “Robur” 131) by turning the memorable image into the novel’s climactic scene.

With so many references and allusions to the Heavier-Than-Air Society and to Verne’s old friend Nadar in particular, the question is inevitable: is Robur meant as a fictional version of Nadar? It is a tempting notion. Both are noisy heavier-than-air supporters with practical experience in the air, and their respective pseudonyms are strikingly close in construction (number of letters and syllables, arrangement of vowels and consonants)—by no means an insignificant detail when dealing with such a lover of wordplay as Verne. However, on closer examination the parallel falls apart. The figures, from all evidence of contemporary images and reports, are vastly different in appearance and temperament. One looks in vain for concrete similarities, whether in description, in behavior, or in style of speech, with the Vernian character Nadar *is* known to have inspired: the anagrammatically named Michel Ardan of *De la Terre à la Lune* (1865) and *Autour de la Lune* (1869).

Rather, the Heavier-Than-Air Society’s influence on Robur is manifested in two important character traits: extremism and exhibitionism. As Henri Zukowski has pointed out, Nadar and his contemporaries used violently absolutist imagery in their heavier-than-air campaigns; rather than merely positing that helicopters could supplement or supersede the use of balloons, nineteenth-century aviation propaganda obsessively depicted the technological question as a brutal all-or-nothing struggle in which balloons were an enemy to be destroyed (Zukowski 79). Robur consistently illustrates exactly this type of uncompromising extremism, from his initial ill-tempered diatribe to the Weldon Institute (Chapter III) to the final scene in which he maneuvers as if to destroy the Institute’s balloon (Chapter XVIII)—and indeed, in the manuscript version of the chapter, he does exactly that, sparing the lives of the passengers and insulting them one final time before abruptly flying off (MS 149–50). As the narrator is at pains to emphasize, Robur “had nothing but disdain for those who were still obstinate enough to attempt to steer balloons” (“*n’avait que dédains pour ceux qui s’obstinent encore à chercher la direction des ballons*,” Chapter VI).

The Heavier-Than-Air Society’s exhibitionism, manifested in their raucous propaganda and especially in the dramatic publicity stunts designed by Nadar, is reflected even more directly in the text. Robur exhibits his amazing achievement with Nadar-like showmanship, planting his flag across the globe and literally lighting up Paris to trumpet fanfares; like the *Géant*, the *Albatros* is coded to function more as a publicity machine than as a practical transportation device. The arguments Robur uses to advertise his position, as noted above, are lifted almost entirely from Society members’ writings. Even the general tone of his dialogue—balancing vertiginously between scientific argument and pure rhetoric, thumbing its nose at every variety of hypothetical naysayer—is strikingly similar to the argumentative bravado used in the most mass-market aviation tracts, such as La Landelle’s *Pigeon vole* or any of Nadar’s publications. “If I dream, let me dream on,—but I defy you to wake me up!” writes Nadar. “Let me contemplate the air traversed by *nefs*” (“*Si je rêve, laissez-moi rêver encore,—mais je vous défierais de me réveiller!—Laissez-moi contempler l’air sillonné de nefes*,” *Le Droit au vol* 112).

Fictional fanaticism

It comes as no surprise that Verne felt comfortable bestowing these tendencies of the Heavier-Than-Air Society upon Robur. To do so, after all, was to align his novel even more overtly with the ideological position of some of his own friends. Indeed, he hoped the novel itself would be recognized as a part of that very strain of pro-aviation rabble-rousing, as he noted in a letter to Hetzel:

I believe, and I hope, that all the supporters of *Heavier Than Air* will hold up *Robur* as an argument against their adversaries. There are some noisy people among them, and if I'm not mistaken, the book could raise some stir. (Verne and Hetzel 317) [7]

What is surprising is that, in adapting these tendencies for his fictional character, Verne moved away from the spirited enthusiasm of Nadar and his colleagues and strayed toward something rather sinister. All of Robur's dramatic acts aboard the *Albatros* read as deliberate stunts calculated to show off his power; thus, when Verne's narrator, anticipating Robur's grisly whale hunt, asks "What good would such a pointless massacre be?," the reply comes at once: "No doubt, to show the two members of the Weldon Institute what he could obtain from his aircraft" ("*À quoi bon cet inutile massacre ? ... sans doute, afin de montrer aux deux membres du Weldon-Institute ce qu'il pouvait obtenir de son aéronef,*" Chapter IX). Or again: "Cross the Himalayas to show what an admirable engine of travel he had at his disposal, convince even those who would not be convinced—no doubt that and nothing else was what he wanted" ("*Franchir l'Himalaya pour montrer de quel admirable engin de locomotion il disposait, convaincre même ceux qui ne voulaient pas être convaincus, il ne voulait sans doute pas autre chose,*" Chapter X). The narrator also emphasizes repeatedly that Robur is obsessed with keeping the technical details of his invention secret (Chapters VI, XIII, XIV, XVI, XVIII), apparently so as to remain the only human capable of such feats. [8]

In other words, despite his apparently lofty ideals, what Robur seems to want most of all is to *show himself off*, to be master over the sky, over his scientific adversaries, and by implication, over all the Earth. It is in pursuit of this goal that Robur's bombast goes beyond the rhetoric of the Heavier-Than-Air Society and transforms into monomania or even megalomania.

Since Robur returns in Verne's *Maître du monde* (1904), it is useful to consider whether this aspect of his characterization is continued or developed in the later book. Some scholars, notably Robert Pourvoyeur, have been understandably careful to treat Verne's characters as separate in each of the books they appear in, thus distinguishing Robur's "Robur I" from *Maître's* "Robur II" (Pourvoyeur 25). Such separation is certainly useful for analysis when characters seem to change more drastically between works than is psychologically credible. In this case, however, the character development could hardly be more logical. There is only a small step from the wild look-at-me fanaticism of *Robur* to the absolute villainy of *Maître*; indeed, all that really changes is that Robur II demands actual control over the Earth rather than the mere possibility or illusion of having control. Robur II's *volte-face* and downfall are amply prepared in the Robur I of *Robur-le-conquérant*.

So Robur, in this novel full of doublings and counterparts (Robin, "Le jeu dans 'Robur le Conquérant'" 113–4), can himself be called a warped funhouse-mirror variation on the Heavier-Than-Air Society: an aviation supporter who is full of high-minded ideas and dramatic

self-publicizing schemes, but whose hyperboles are constantly pushed to unsettling dimensions. If the very Nadar-like Michel Ardan is, in Verne's phrase, "an Icarus with spare wings" ("*un Icare avec des ailes de rechange*," *De la Terre à la lune* Chapter XVIII), then the less Nadar-like Robur is a character with no such precautions, an Icarus already flying dangerously near the sun. [9]

There are at least three compelling reasons why Verne, despite his own obvious support for heavier-than-air experimentation, could have felt comfortable giving his novel's central character such problematic traits. One such reason stems from Verne's own strong wish to create a multidimensional character different from any he had used before. When Hetzel, warning that readers would find it difficult to sympathize with Robur's views, encouraged Verne to make him more appealingly apostolic and suggested evoking heroic aspects of Captains Nemo and Hatteras, Verne's reply was emphatic:

Robur is committed, as you see, but I'm keen to make him a *fantaisiste* [i.e. a dreamer, with implications of being whimsical, extravagant, unreliable, utopian; cf. Verne's letter to Nadar quoted above]. [10] That won't stop him from being a man of bravery and coolheadedness in great circumstances. ... I repeat, he isn't at all a con man, he is committed, but not an *apostle*, not a Nemo, not a Hatteras. That doesn't cancel out emotions, nor the sublimity of such a means of travel. (Verne and Hetzel 286–7) [11]

A second reason to exaggerate Robur's personality is simply that doing so makes internal narrative sense; the novel is abundantly sown with references seemingly designed to parody, and ultimately deflate, the optimism of the earlier *Voyages extraordinaires*. Thus, Schulze's cannon from *Les Cinq Cents Millions de la Béguin* is mentioned, but immediately dismissed as irrelevant (Chapter I); the heroic Weldon family of *Un Capitaine de quinze ans* get a society of idiots named after them (Chapter II); the parodic justice-of-the-peace election in *Le Tour du monde en quatre-vingts jours* is parodied still further as a gas-lighter election (Chapter II); the Fergusson motto "Excelsior" from *Cinq semaines en ballon* is called an overused word in America (Chapter II); Phileas Fogg's eighty-day journey in *Le Tour du monde en quatre-vingts jours* is blasted into insignificance by Robur's promise of an eight-day flight (Chapter III); the iconic balloon-towed-by-elephant scene in *Cinq semaines* is exaggerated to ludicrous dimensions by replacing the elephant with a whale (Chapter IX); Tapage's multiple backstories for Robur seem to echo the Verne-Hetzel controversy over backstories for Captain Nemo, intended to be nationless or later Polish in *Vingt Mille Lieues sous les mers* and finally reinvented as Indian for *L'Île mystérieuse* (Chapter XIII); [12] the harrowing but delightful five weeks spent on the *Victoria* in *Cinq semaines* find their sinister counterpart in the suicide- and homicide-inducing five weeks Uncle Prudent and Phil Evans spend trapped on the *Albatros* (Chapter XV). Verne even takes some self-reflexive jabs at his time-honored practice of extensive descriptions: thus, Robur reads off his own physical and mental description to save the narrator the trouble (Chapter III); the *Albatros's* speed cuts Phil Evans's detailed description of Quebec short, underlining its plot-stopping pedagogic nature and contrasting it with the narrative's forward motion (Chapter VII). In such a farcical context, it becomes almost inevitable that even the novel's own ideological position would be pushed beyond reasonable limits.

Third and finally, it seems likely that Verne was able to see the brusque, monomaniacal Robur in a heroic light—and, indeed, to cast him as the spokesman for the winning side of the novel's flight dispute—simply because of what else he stands for. As Yves Chevrel has

pointed out, Robur uses the *Albatros* as a *défi*, a defiance of society; and, across the *Voyages extraordinaires*, Verne's tendency is to present *défis* sympathetically (Chevrel 82). Robur thus becomes one of an impressive series of Vernian characters—Ayrton, Nemo, Schultze, the Kaw-Djer—who, by the very act of revolting, take on near-mythic dimensions within Verne's narratives (Chevrel 87). As Arthur B. Evans has rightly said:

Robur, a true “prince of the clouds” ... found himself to be an “exile” on land and jeered at by his contemporaries. But, once aboard his powerful airship, this technological *génie* braves the worst of storms and soars far above the bullets fired at him, exulting in his supremacy over his earthbound rivals. (A. B. Evans, “Literary Intertexts” 174)

Small wonder that the narrator calls life on the *Albatros* “an existence superhuman, sublime!” (“*existence surhumaine, sublime !*,” Chapter XVI).

On this topic, one other difference between *Robur* and *Maître* is worth noting: though the later book summarizes the events of the earlier one, and reports its final scene in detail, no mention is made of the possibility of treating Robur as an allegorical symbol of the future. This omission makes obvious narratological sense—it would, after all, make little sense for John Strock to speak in allegories while pursuing Robur across the United States—but it also implies a return to Verne's original intentions. The published *Robur's* sudden shift into allegorical mode is not to be found in the manuscript, stemming instead from collaboration with Hetzel during the revision process (Pourvoyeur 31). In other words, while the symbolic dimension of Robur has provoked some interesting critical commentary, it can safely be bypassed when discussing him as a character. It is as a flawed and multidimensional human that he was originally conceived, and it is as such that he returns, with dramatic developments, in *Maître du monde*.

Stealing Cabet's trumpet

Étienne Cabet's influence on *Robur-le-conquérant* was undoubtedly less crucial than that of the Heavier-Than-Air Society. Indeed, it is possible that Verne knew of Cabet's writings only secondhand. Nonetheless, the phenomenon of Cabet's Icarian movement seems to have played its own role in shaping the published text, and forms an interesting addendum to the study of the book.

In his long novel-treatise-hybrid *Voyage en Icarie* (1840), Cabet imagines a mythical hero called Icar who, in the wake of a political upheaval on June 13, 1782, [13] founds a communistic dictatorship called Icaria. Because of his wisdom and benevolence, Icar is beloved and venerated by all his people, who sing his praises endlessly; “What a man or rather what a God is this Icar!” one character cries (“*Quelle homme ou plutôt quel Dieu que cet Icare !*,” Cabet 39–40). Icaria is symmetrically designed and rigidly controlled; although it counts *liberté* and *perfectabilité* among human rights, its law system in fact takes a dim view of human nature, constantly denying individual freedoms of choice and expression in order to preserve the status quo of the community as a whole. Cabet seems never to have grasped the inherent contradictions or disturbing implications of this totalitarian arrangement (Roberts 83–6). On a lighter note, the Icarians are puffed up with pride at having made flight practical by perfecting dirigible balloons, a technology for which they hold great hope for the future (Cabet 71–2). [14]



Frontispiece portrait of Étienne Cabet, with tipped-in autograph, from the second edition of *Voyage en Icarie* (courtesy Knox College and the Internet Archive)

Voyage en Icarie was popular among the French working class, going through five editions, and in 1847 Cabet announced a plan to found a real Icaria in the United States. In February 1848, sixty-nine Icarians went from France to Texas to launch the colony (Roberts 77–79). When the Icarians met with difficulty and had to relocate to New Orleans, Cabet himself went to join them in December 1848, having gathered a few additional adherents from Nantes and elsewhere (Sutton xxviii). But further moving and splitting ensued, and in 1894, the last remaining branch of Cabet’s colony was dissolved in Corning, Iowa (Roberts 80).

Did Verne ever read Cabet? That remains unknown, but he was undoubtedly aware of Cabet’s work. In an letter to his mother on July 30, 1848, the twenty-year-old Verne mentions the Icarians’ departure, joking that Cabet and his colony aimed to reach “the Icarian regions” by means of a “seven-times-blessed balloon” (“*Était-ce le départ de M. Cabet ... au moment où il mettait le pied dans le ballon sept fois béni qui devait l’emporter avec sa colonie vers les régions icariennes ?*,” Dumas 247). As with the previous sections, there are in fact several

different reasons to suspect that the Icarian movement influenced *Robur*, even if in this case the influence came only through hearsay or youthful memories. [15]

First, Robur calls his domain an “aerial Icaria that thousands of Icarians will people one day!” (“*Icarie aérienne que des milliers d’Icariens peupleront un jour !*,” Chapter VI). The narrator repeats the name “Icaria” in Chapter XVII; it appears again, in a paraphrase of Robur’s original remark, in *Maître du monde* (Chapter XVI). To most modern readers, the name will evoke only Icarus, but a reader of Verne’s generation was likely to have known or at least heard something about Cabet’s Icaria. As Chevrel says:

This text deserves to be remembered, even if it does not prove with certainty that Verne personally knew Cabet’s work; the latter had created, with his Icaria, a sort of new concept, very vague in the minds of many French people in Verne’s day, to design a new kind of utopian country, almost a dream. (81) [16]

Second, Robur’s project is rife with utopian overtones. Life on the *Albatros*—“a communal existence, a life as family” (“*une existence commune, d’une vie de famille*,” Chapter XIII)—mirrors the quasi-communistic designs of utopias such as France-Ville in *Les Cinq Cents Millions de la Bégum* (Capitano 66). More generally, the *Albatros* is portrayed as a vehicle for bringing the world closer to utopian conditions; thus, Robur’s showy performances in it are claimed to reveal the “services it could render to humanity” (“*services il pouvait rendre à l’humanité*,” Chapter XII), such as freeing prisoners (Chapter XII) or rescuing sailors (Chapter XIV). Hetzel, in a letter to Verne, became dizzy with enthusiasm at such an optimistic project: “That would be the opposite of the Tower of Babel, the unity of the world would inevitably ensue, no more possible borders, everything would belong to all and to each...” (“*Ce serait le contraire de la Tour de Babel, l’unité du monde s’ensuivrait forcément, plus de frontières possibles, tout serait à tous et à chacun*,” Verne and Hetzel 294–5).

Third, there is the question of Robur’s nationality. Though Robur makes his first personal appearance at the Weldon Institute in Philadelphia and sports a beard “in the American style” (“*à l’américaine*,” Chapter III), he is never clearly implied to be American; rather, he addresses the Philadelphians from a foreigner’s perspective, using the formula “Citizens of the United States” (“*Citoyens des États-Unis*,” Chapters III and XVIII). His preference for French aviation experiments (Chapter VI), his dramatic stop over Paris (Chapter XI), and his use of a French anthem as a signature tune (Chapter I, about which more below) point toward France as a possible homeland. And sure enough, on the manuscript’s last page, Verne’s narrator remarks: “I no longer have any doubts about the engineer Robur’s nationality ... I would wager that he is French, French in origin, mind, and heart!” (“*je n’ai plus de doute sur la nationalité de l’ingénieur Robur ... je parierais qu’il est Français, Français d’origine, d’esprit et de cœur !*,” MS 151).

Finally, there is Tom Turner’s trumpet call, already mentioned in reference to Nadar. In the published text, the trumpet call is identified early on as a 1794 French national song, the “Chant du départ” (Chapter I). [17] Christian Robin posits that Verne had the upcoming centennial of the Revolution in mind (Robin, “Robur” 126), but another explanation seems more likely. The anthem of Cabet’s real-life Icarian colony, sung by the colonists at the first departure from France, was the “Chant du départ icarien,” set to the melody of the French “Chant du départ” (Sutton xxvi–ii). Robur’s aerial Icaria is not only named after Cabet’s Icaria, but has stolen its theme tune. [18]

Citing utopian ideals, of course, does not imply a naive acceptance of them; on the contrary, *Robur* treats utopia ambiguously at best. Verne's direct references to utopia in the novel are scornful, for, like Cabet's Icaria, they involve lighter-than-air flight: "to believe in the navigability of balloons is to believe in the most absurd utopia" ("*croire à la direction des ballons, c'est croire à la plus absurde des utopies*," Chapter II; cf. the similar reference in Chapter XVII).

Nor is Robur painted as positively as Cabet's Icar, a cardboard archetype without a single human failing. Despite his dreams of founding a new Icaria, Robur ultimately subverts the entire idea of utopia in his egotistical attempts to keep his invention to himself. Even Hetzel, after the burst of optimism quoted above, concluded by admitting: "Just between ourselves, I really do believe, in fact, that the good Lord had his reasons for not giving men wings like birds or fins like fish" ("*Pour le dire entre nous, je crois bien, en effet, que le bon Dieu a eu ses raisons pour ne pas donner à l'homme des ailes comme aux oiseaux, des nageoires comme aux poissons*," Verne and Hetzel 296).

Conclusion

None of this, of course, is to say that *Robur-le-conquérant* should be interpreted entirely in terms of influence from the Heavier-Than-Air Society or Cabet. Verne's use of a vast cornucopia of texts—five hundred for *Robur*, he later claimed with a hint of exaggeration (Compère, Margot, and Malbrancq 232)—makes such a simplistic reading impossible. Rather, these sources simply suggest one path toward a more nuanced understanding of Robur's character, underlining the importance of historical context to a novel so rooted in timely material as *Robur*. A reading informed by such context will be more productive and more enlightening, and, ultimately, will furnish a clearer picture of the novel's central figure.

With the benefit of this context, it becomes possible to synthesize the different views of Robur into a reconciling whole. It is indeed appropriate to describe him as a boorish monomaniac or a nobly Promethean hero, for he is a unique Vernian composite of both. He is Nadar and Cabet writ even larger than life, an absolutist and exhibitionistic *fantaisiste* supercharged with pride at having conquered the air, whose problematically hubristic nature is on full view even when tempered by the heroism of revolt or the promise of a utopian invention. In short, *Robur wants to be Icar*, Cabet's myth-shrouded genius-hero who rises to god status by bringing a practical utopia to the world. That aspiration is his strength and his failing.

In *Robur*, Verne presents this figure in an essentially positive light, letting his brusque hyperbolism be counterbalanced by his heroic defiance and his sublime aerial existence. In the more pessimistic world of *Maître du monde*, just as in a classical tragedy or Greek myth, Robur's hubris gets the better of him at last. Robur, the man who would be Icar, ends up instead as Icarus, and pays the fatal price.

Nadar, Cabet, Robur: three symbolically charged and phonologically related names, three remarkable showmen with impossible utopian dreams. Robur may be an enigma, but he is an enigma grounded in reality, in the dramatic ideals and ambitions of a few memorable figures with their heads in the clouds.

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NOTES

1. Robert Pourvoyeur, in a perceptive speech about the novel, went so far as to argue that *Robur* had to be understood as inherently ambiguous and mysterious—all the more so after Hetzel's revisions to the manuscript (Pourvoyeur 31–2).
2. La Landelle's other flight-related publications include *L'Aéronef, appareil de sauvetage* (Paris: Danel, 1861), *Le Tableau de la mer : La Vie navale* (Paris: Hachette, 1862, including the text of the 1861 pamphlet), *Aviation ou Navigation aérienne* (Paris: Dentu, 1863), and *Dans les airs : Histoire élémentaire de l'aéronautique* (Paris: Haton, 1884); he also served as *rapporteur* for the 1864 and 1865 volumes of the Heavier-Than-Air Society's published *Rapport du conseil d'administration* (Paris: J. Claye, 1865 and 1866, respectively). Ponton d'Amécourt published a series of six monographs, *Collection de mémoires sur la locomotion aérienne sans ballons* (Paris: Gauthier-Villars, 1864–67), compiling his own and others' writings on aviation, with a strong emphasis on the scientific side of the concept.
3. The manifesto was also reprinted in one of his books (Nadar, *Mémoires du Géant* 129–146). It is from this version of the text that this article quotes.
4. *Le Droit au vol* includes Jules Verne's name in a long list of commentators whose observations put them in favor of heavier-than-air flight (70).
5. "Je te fais adresser par Hetzel un *Robur le Conquérant*. Tu retrouveras là toutes tes idées sur le Plus lourd que l'air ! Sous une forme de pure fantaisie, j'ai voulu reprendre cette question. Tu me diras si ça te va, et si ça te plaît."
6. Fewer textual details in *Robur* seem directly traceable to La Landelle's works; however, it seems to have been his innovation to appropriate the term *aéronef* to mean heavier-than-air flying machine, for use in opposition with *aérostat* (La Landelle, *Aviation* 8).

7. “*Je crois, j’espère, que tous les partisans du Plus lourd que l’air, soutiendront Robur, contre leurs adversaires. Il y a des gens bruyants parmi eux, et, si je ne me trompe, le livre pourra faire quelque bruit.*”
8. In this respect, Robur can be fruitfully contrasted with Nemo of *Vingt Mille Lieues sous les mers* (1870), whose secret life on the *Nautilus* is designed to let him carry out his project of political and personal vengeance. Robur, who has no such motivation other than his own self-aggrandizing showmanship, is in that respect something of an anti-Nemo. A fuller comparison of the two characters would make interesting reading, but is of course beyond the scope of this article.
9. Icarus is mentioned by name three times in *Robur*, first simply as a mythological martyr of flight (Chapter III) and then characterized as “that fool Icarus” (“*ce fou d’Icare*,” Chapter VI) who “perished as a victim of his own foolhardiness” (“*péri victime de sa témérité*,” Chapter XVII). And Robur, far from having Ardan’s spare wings, disdains even a parachute: “He did not believe in accidents of that kind” (“*Il ne croyait pas aux accidents de ce genre*,” Chapter VI).
10. In quoting this resonance-heavy word, I have had to fall into a trap Verne neatly avoided. As Pourvoyeur puts it, “he does not make the mistake of defining what a ‘*fantaisiste*’ is” (“*il ne commet pas le faux pas de définir ce qu’est un ‘fantaisiste’*,” Pourvoyeur 28). Such are the sacrifices made for the sake of translation.
11. “*Robur est un convaincu, vous le verrez bien, mais je tiens à en faire un fantaisiste. Il n’en sera pas moins un homme d’audace et de sang-froid dans les grandes circonstances.*”
12. On this controversy, see A. B. Evans, “Hetzal and Verne” 100.
13. June 13 is also the day when, in *Robur*, the captives from the Weldon Institute are discovered to be missing (Chapter XVII).
14. On the very next page, Cabet boasts that the Icarians have also perfected the submarine (Roberts 73).
15. Chevrel argues that France-Ville in *Les Cinq Cents Millions de la Bégum* (1879) was inspired mainly by Cabet’s Icaria, pointing out numerous striking parallels between the two (Chevrel 78–80). Even if that argument is correct, it unfortunately does not clarify how well Verne knew Icaria, as France-Ville’s depiction comes directly from the first-draft manuscript by Paschal Grousset (1844–1909).
16. “*Ce texte mérite d’être rappelé, même s’il ne prouve pas avec certitude que Verne connaissait personnellement l’œuvre de Cabet : celui-ci avait créé, avec son Icarie, une sorte de concept nouveau, très vague dans l’esprit de beaucoup de Français à l’époque de Verne, pour désigner un nouveau genre de pays utopique, presque un rêve.*”
17. The manuscript, befitting its raucous tone, uses a different melody: the spirited comic trio “Logeons-le donc, et dès ce soir” from Offenbach’s *La Grande-Duchesse de Gérolstein* (1867) (MS 6). Appropriately enough, Offenbach was himself a member of Nadar’s Heavier-Than-Air Society (Robin, “Robur” 126). But Hetzel, imploring Verne to put a damper on the raucousness, cited Offenbach as an example of how *not* to write (Verne and Hetzel 285).
18. Moreover, trumpet calls are used profusely in Cabet’s fictional Icaria, functioning as public signals (Cabet 50). Trumpeters even play aerial fanfares from the gondolas of Cabet’s dirigible balloons (Cabet 72).

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