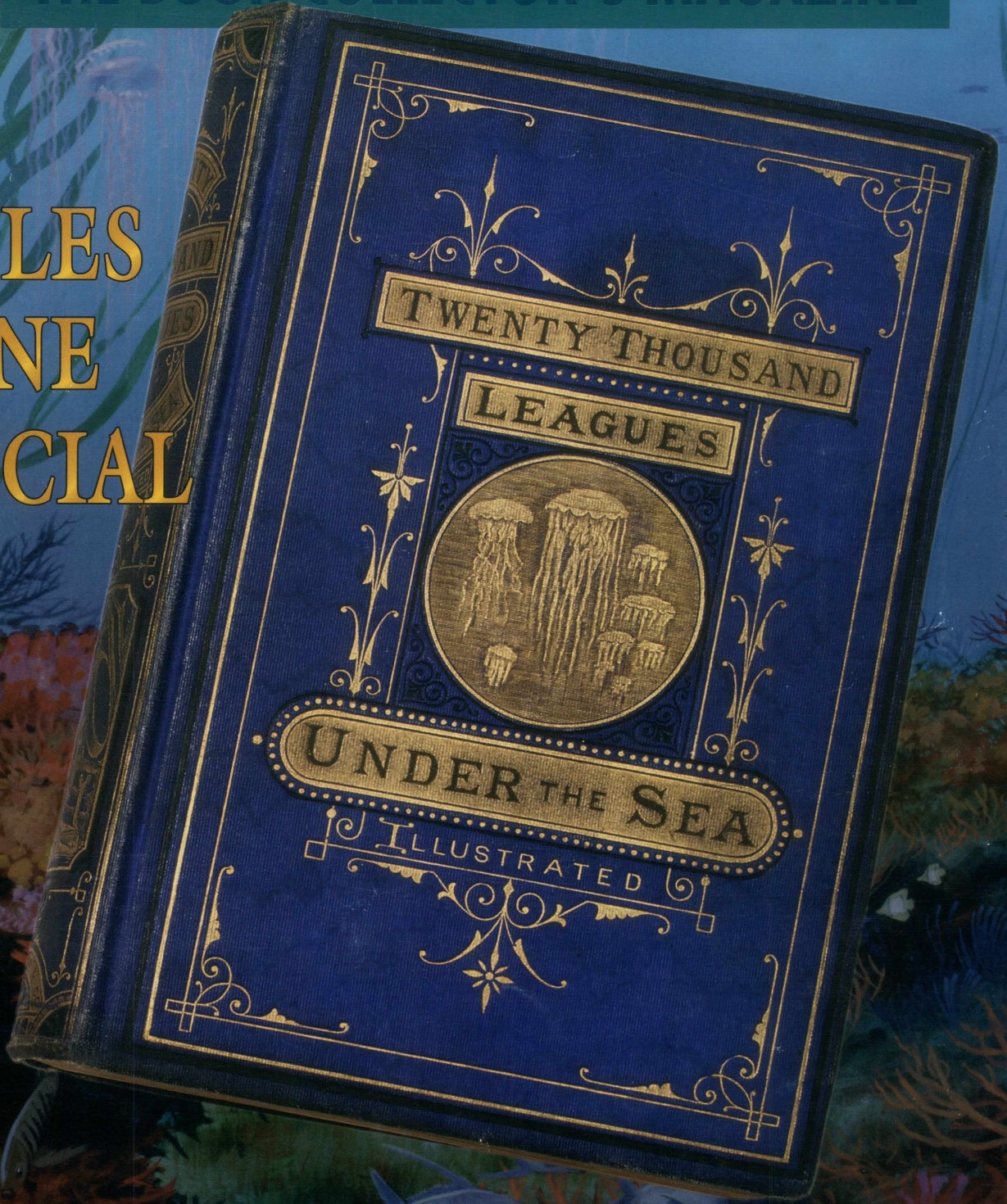


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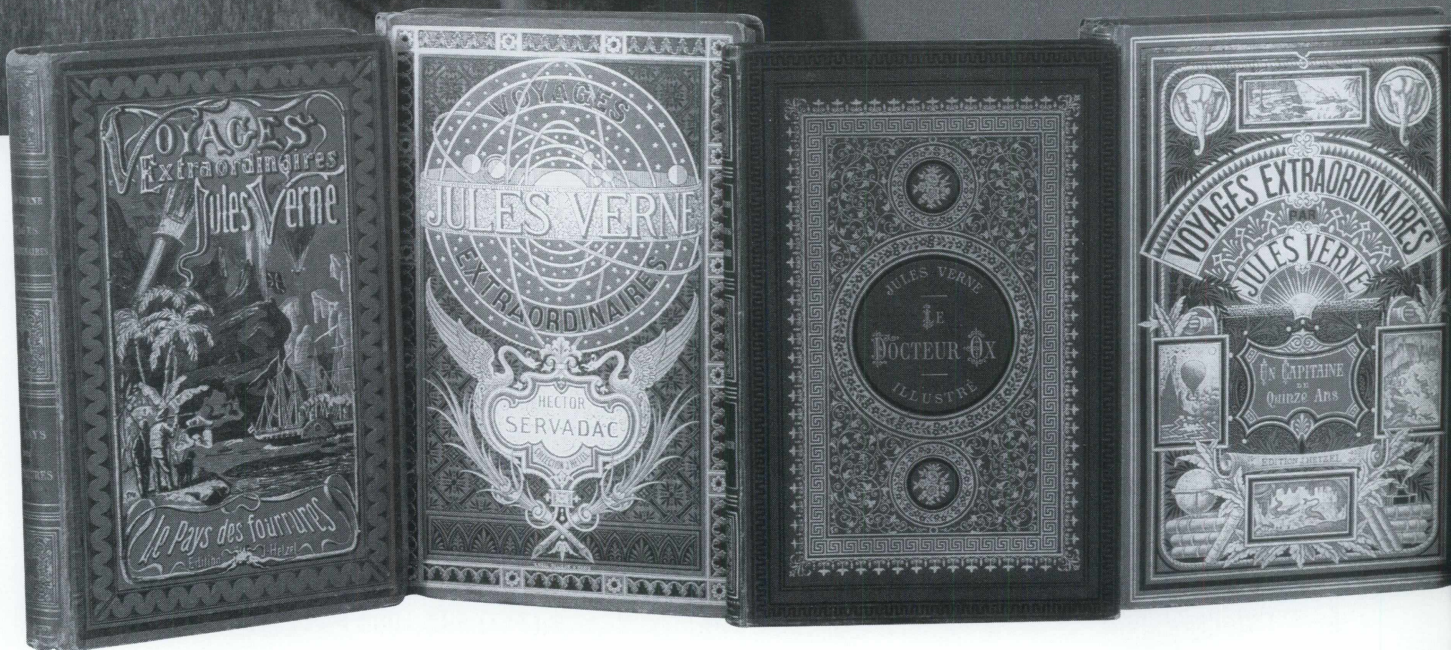
JULES
VERNE
SPECIAL





JULES VERNE

*The Lasting
Appeal
of Past
Futurism*



by
Lee
Biondi



JULES VERNE was not exclusively a futurist, but he is best known as such in the United States. There is a fond nostalgia for the appealing Victorian-era style of his futurism. Leaving aside for a moment Verne's unquestionable influence on the scientific visionaries of the Twentieth century, there are too many articles, too many conversations among collectors about how many of his predictions "came true."

Submarines were invented (inevitably), but they were not much like the *Nautilus*, with its vast paneled library and all the other accouterments of a fine country home. Helicopters were invented (how could they not be?), but there will never be one the likes of the *Albatross*, that extravagant airborne analogue of the *Nautilus*. Despite the hopeful protestations of some

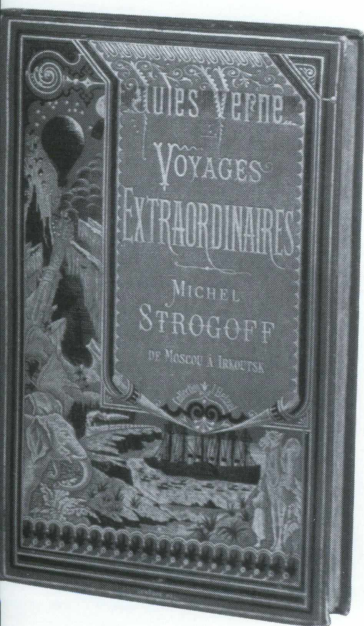
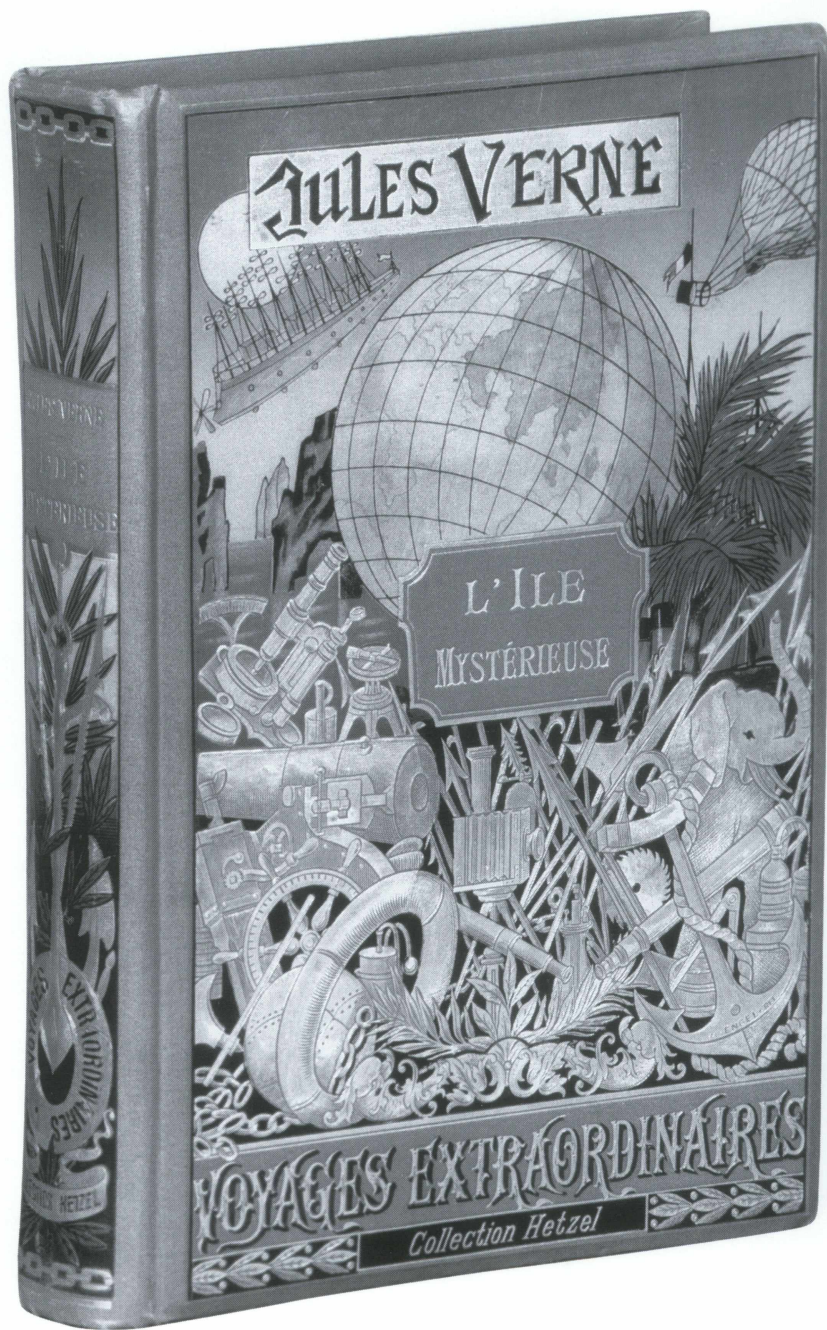
dedicated Vernians, the endeavors of the Baltimore Gun Club will forever more closely resemble Georges Melies' primitive experiments with motion picture special effects than NASA stock footage.

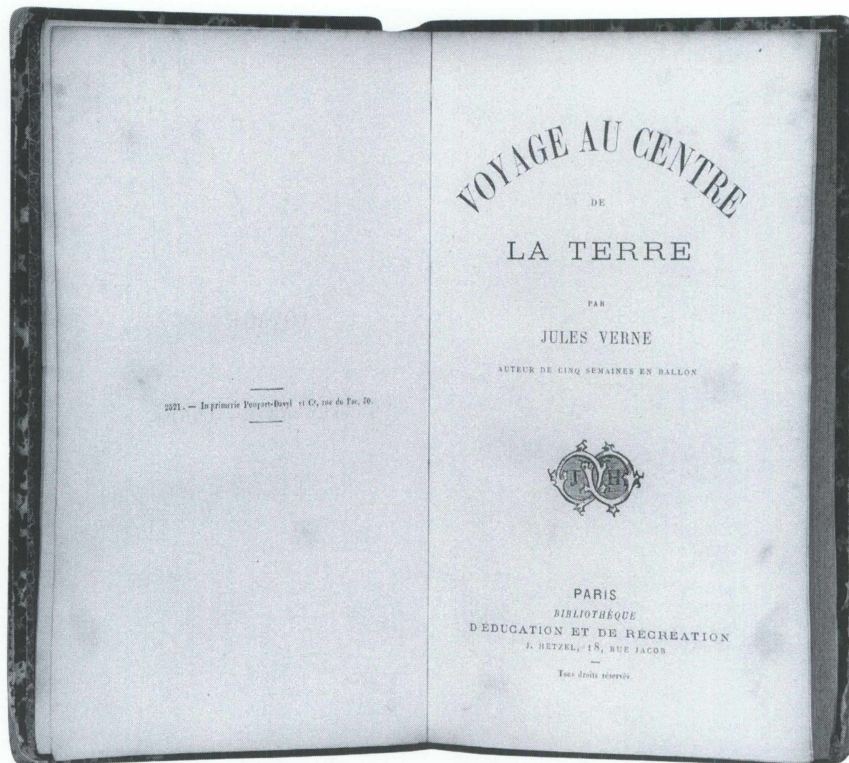
The warm fondness for the writings of this vast imaginer does not require the justification of his imaginings "having come true." With a few exceptions in some of his later novels, Verne's prevailing tone is that of an optimist, a man who believed in "Progress," who thought the future would actually be better and would work. A friend of mine who has what I think is a dispro-

portionate admiration for the *Star Trek* television shows and movies explained to me once that the show's appeal lies in the concept that, in general, *the future works*; that this show's vision of the future comes as a welcome relief from the deluge of Cold War, post-apocalyptic, dystopian science fictions.

Clearly, one can see this in Verne. Even if you find it slightly naive, its naivete is in good faith and, at least while you continue reading, very enjoyable, as long as you check your postmodern cynicism and critical faculties at the door.

Verne's futurism of the past has a calm nostalgic appeal similar to that of Chicago World's Fair imagery or the paintings of Syd Mead. While I can't place Mead among any serious artists, I can't see a Mead painting without a fond rush of childhood





memories, recollections of simpler times when I awaited the day those futuristic cars in my car model magazines would roll off Motown assembly lines, just about the time I turned 16. Well, it didn't happen that way, but the memories remain; they can pleasantly resurface given the right stimuli.

Verne is often considered—or I should say, dismissed—as a “boy’s writer.” This is not necessarily a bad thing for a writer to be labeled, as long as he is a *good writer*; Jules Verne is a very good writer. No matter the age group of the intended audience members, they should be addressed with talent and style, and Verne does this. As a child I was a voracious reader; as time allows, I still am. But I didn't start with Gissing, Trollope or Thackeray (never mind Kafka, Joyce or Pynchon). I can still nod respectfully and fondly to my earlier author friends: Poe, Haggard, Stevenson—and Jules Verne.



JULES VERNE was born on February 8, 1828 on an island in Nantes. After a seemingly most mundane childhood, Verne moved to Paris in 1847 to study law. While he eventually took a law degree, his predilections swayed him toward literature. In the early years he was quite prolific and modestly successful in writing drama, due in no small part to the intervention of the Alexandre Dumas, both *pere* and *filis*.

Verne was in Paris during the politically-charged year 1848 and the lessons of that remarkable year

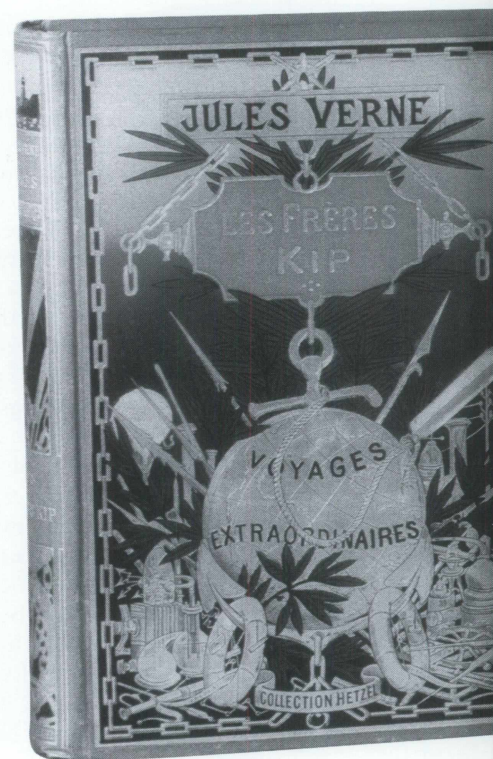
made a lifelong impression on the young man. In 1850 he had a play published and produced at Dumas' *Theatre Historique*. For the next several years he wrote plays and even an operetta.

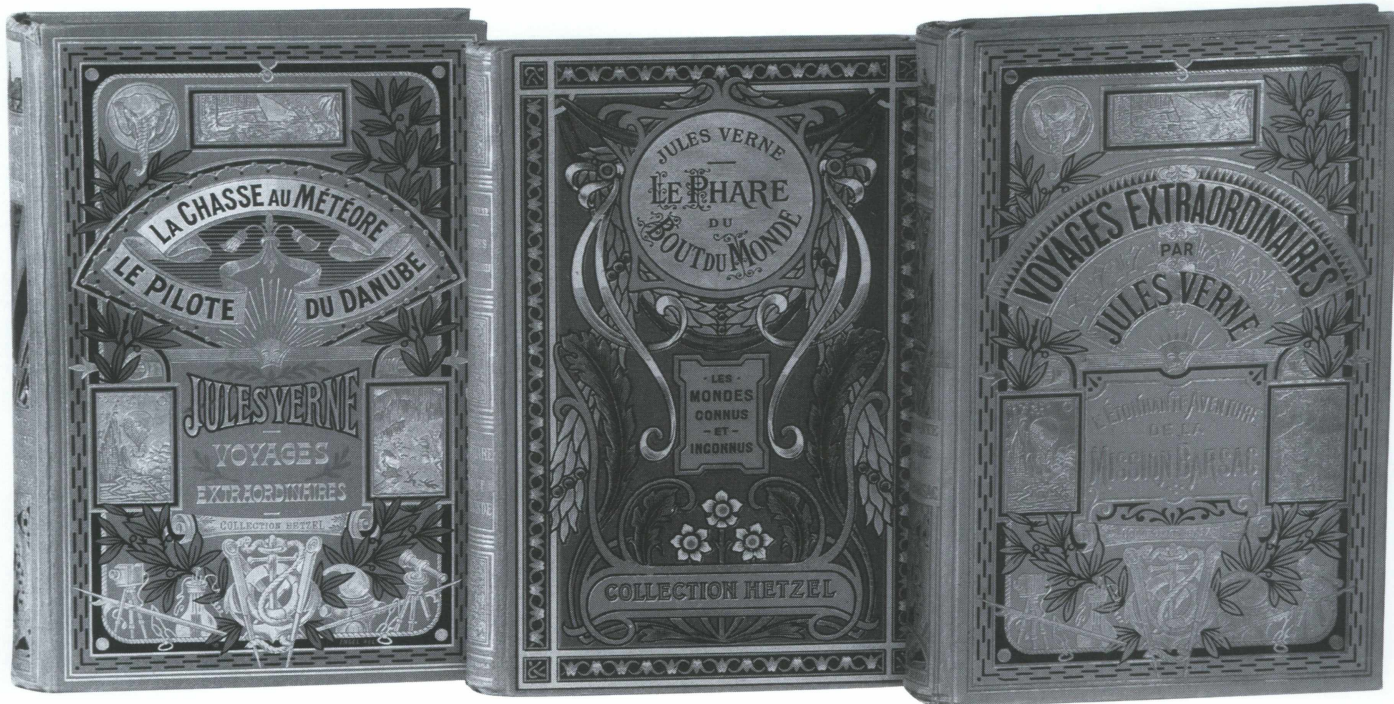
The first book Verne wrote, *Voyage en Angleterre et en Ecosse*, a travel journal of his visit to England and Scotland, was submitted to and rejected by the Parisian publisher Jules Hetzel. (This book, though lucratively self-pilfered for *Voyage au Centre de la Terre* [*Journey to the Centre of the Earth*], was not published in France until 1989, and not translated into

English until 1992.)

Despite Verne's first failed approach to Hetzel, *Cinq Semaines en Ballon* (*Five Weeks in a Balloon*) was accepted by Hetzel in 1862 and published in 1863, with immediate success. *Cinq Semaines en Ballon* was the first of Verne's massive oeuvre, collectively titled *Voyages Extraordinaires* (*Extraordinary Journeys*): both an unparalleled authorial feat and a publishing phenomenon (in the original French and in a plethora of hack translations and piracies) eventually totaling 63 novels. Verne became a veritable novel-machine, like a Trollope or a Balzac of genre fiction, even to the reappearance of key characters, as was the case in Trollope's *Barchester* series and *Palliser* novels, and the *Comedie humaine*.

Though Verne is thought of in the United States as an old-timey science fiction writer (indeed, as the inventor of the genre, despite Poe's much earlier forays and a long





tradition of “imaginary voyage” romances like *Peter Wilkins*, *Baron Munchausen* and *The Travels of Lemuel Gulliver*, the *Voyages Extraordinaires* also includes a great number of travel and adventure stories and, not surprisingly, various inventive combinations of these genres.

The success of *Cinq Semaines en Ballon* was followed by the truly extraordinary *Voyage au Centre de la Terre*. Verne was firmly established. He continued with *De la Terre à la Lune* (*From the Earth to the*

Moon) (1865), *Le Tour du Monde en Quatre-vingts Jours* (*A Tour of the World in 80 Days*) (1872), *L'Île Mystérieuse* (*The Mysterious Island*) (1874), and many more lesser-known, but not necessarily lesser, works. Verne toiled tirelessly, and though toward the end he became a little gloomier about the future both of mankind and the novel, he continued writing with imagination and panache until his death in Amiens on March 24, 1905. He left a unique literary legacy, one that in English, at least, is not yet fully mined. 📖

