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Words that (should not!) exclude: Scientific explanations and wordplay in science fiction and in Villiers de l'Isle-Adam's *L'Ève future*

Abstract: Wordplay emphasizes the poetic function according to Jakobson as it foregrounds language. This is a major reason why wordplay and science fiction seem to be in heavy contradiction – the genre privileges the referential function in order to obtain a mediatic transparency thanks to which the innovation, which is usually at the center of science fiction texts, is not put into doubt by the reader. A well-known example is H. G. Wells' description of the time machine – maybe one of the most intriguing inventions in literature that fulfils a dream of mankind and finds a succinct and credible explanation in the novel. Almost at the same time French symbolist Auguste de Villiers de l'Isle-Adam presents in his *L'Ève future* a comparable dream of mankind: the mechanical creation of a perfect being. Nevertheless, his narrative strategy could not be further away from Wells': the endless technical details with which his fictive Edison explains the android exclude the listening Lord Ewald, for whom the robot is created, and the reader alike. The same is true for some sophisticated wordplays which can be found in the novel and which, moreover, ridicule the scientist and his aspirations. These puns, exactly like the parodic scientific discourse, serve to ironize science and form part of Villiers' crusade against positivism. In this respect, wordplay serves in *L'Ève future* goals that go way beyond a playful effect and can serve to specify the particular place of this French novel in the history of science fiction.

Keywords: French literature, irony, science fiction, symbolism, Villiers de l'Isle-Adam, wordplay

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1 Introduction: Science fiction and credibility

Science fiction reflects on society and human nature. The introduction of a so far unheard of and very powerful innovation, which (might) influence the fictitious world in a tremendous way, serves as starting point for a discussion not so much about a different world, but above all about mankind's position and behavior in it (Aldiss and Wingrove 1986; Seeßlen and Jung 2003; Suvin 1979). This innovation, the "novum" that defines the genre according to Darko Suvin (1979), has to be credible to stimulate a serious philosophical discussion with far reaching implications. At first glance such a credibility does not seem to go together very well with the need of a spectacular invention so important for a major change in the diegetic universe, which is a prerequisite to show how mankind and social structures are to evolve under different circumstances.

However, this presumed problem is hardly one, as prove so many science fiction texts and films that present the most astonishing apparatuses which are – generally – not put into doubt by the readers or spectators. This is primarily due to the mediatic transposition that these inventions undergo when they are narrated. For it is not only true that media possess the characteristic to dissolve their own existence ("die Eigenart […], ihr eigenes Sein aufzulösen, zu verflüchtigen"), and thus to get invisible in the very moment of appearing ("sich im Erscheinen selbst ungreifbar zu machen"), as Dieter Mersch puts it (2020: 136), but the same is true for devices – which are not seldom media again – that appear within this mediatic framing. This can be seen (or rather: cannot be seen, if a bad play on words is allowed in a contribution about wordplay…) every day in science fiction films in which the inventions, independently of how groundbreaking they are, quickly become invisible for the spectator, what thoroughly fosters the spectator's immersion, as Tobias Schwaiger has shown convincingly (2019: 55–60 and 104).

2 Wordplay, the prevention of mediatic transparency and *L'Ève future*

Nevertheless, media can prevent this transparency and make themselves palpable on purpose as we all know. In literature, a classic strategy is the "'foregrounding' of language" (Culler 1997: 28–29). Wordplay, on which this volume focuses and which is also at the center of this contribution, is without a doubt a prominent means of such "foregrounding", for it is a classic example of the poetic function according to Jakobson (Winter-Froemel 2016: 21). Therefore, wordplay is likely to impede the

"mediatic invisibility" and to disturb the illusion science fiction, more than most other genres, aims at, and that is why wordplay and science fiction seem to be in heavy contradiction.[1] This seems to be even more true for a supplementary reason: wordplay usually excludes a certain number of hearers / readers for it permits "complex social games based on complicity / in-group communication vs. excluded thirds" (Winter-Froemel 2016: 12), and the exclusion of a major part of the readers / viewers cannot be the aim of science fiction that usually reaches out to a wide audience in order to discuss technological progress and its social consequences on a broad basis.

However, the example we want to explore in this article fulfils exactly these aspects: a great inclination for wordplay that foregrounds language at any moment and, at that, tends to exclude great parts of an ordinary readership: by doing so, French symbolist Auguste de Villiers de l'Isle-Adam's *L'Ève future* (1888) radically subverts the expectations of science fiction and can be considered an almost unique case in this genre. In the following pages we would like to examine this dimension of Villiers' text and explain the author's intentions, which seem to line up perfectly with the aim of this volume. We will begin with a classic example of traditional science fiction, Wells' *Time machine* that will serve us as a contrasting foil, before analyzing the peculiarities of Villiers' specific use of technical jargon and wordplay that can be explained by Villiers' fight against positivism, which is explored in the paper's last section. The conclusions of our discussion may help to concretize the text's position in the history of science fiction – a genre that might be described with even more accuracy looking carefully at the use of wordplay, which can have, besides its known humorous effects, highly serious implications that are taken into particular account in our contribution.

1 This explains why wordplay does not play a significant role in the texts of H. G. Wells and Jules Verne, two emblematic authors of science fiction, whose works will be discussed in more detail further on. Precisely in this privileging of the referential function we can find, of course, also a reason why lots of science fiction (especially texts written by authors with less literary ability than Verne or Wells) suffer the critique of an austere style…

3 Wells' *Time machine*: An archetypical example of the introduction of an innovation in science fiction

To highlight the peculiarities of Villiers' text it seems useful to compare it to an archetypical science fiction novel which, moreover, offers probably the best known example of a credible introduction of an invention that surpasses by far our (scientific) understanding: Herbert George Wells introduces in 1895 in his homonymous novel the time machine, a machine that not only fulfils an eternal longing of man to fight the unrelenting linearity of time and get to know the unfathomable future and change the seemingly unalterable past, but is at the same time way above all general knowledge. The novel also overtly mentions this problem as the narrator states at the beginning of the second chapter (Wells [1895] 2003: 13): "I think that at that time none of us quite believed in the Time machine."[2]

Certainly, the narrator's attitude is to reflect the expected reaction of the reader, who also is likely to respond with disbelief when confronted with a device that seems to lie so far beyond man's capacities. But special attention has to be paid to the short insertion "at that time" in the quoted narrator's comment, for Wells is not without reason considered "the father of science fiction" (even if such a sweeping allocation is highly problematic, it is of interest for our line of reasoning that wants to show the peculiarities of Villiers in a genre for which Wells undoubtedly is a permanent reference): he is able to quickly suspend this disbelief in the following pages and creates an intense illusion of the existence of a machine that allows us to travel forth and back in time.[3] His strategy to achieve this goal primarily consists in not explaining which specific mechanical components and what exact scientific principles allow the machine to function, but to show it in action and, even more, to tell a story in which the invention is gradually transformed from the plot's principal item to a sheer background element. By doing this, he adroitly makes use of the above sketched "medial transparency" thanks to which the time machine finally almost disappears behind the description of the future societies visited and the

2 Moreover, this objection is preceded by a long discussion between the Time Traveller and his friends, who all raise serious objections to the possibility of his machine.

3 That most of his friends do not believe the Time Traveller's story at the end of the novel does not prevent this illusion, especially as the homodiegetic narrator, the key person for identification for the reader, accepts the story – and, a central aspect, waits for his friend to come back with the two flowers from the future at his side, which are an important proof of the successful time travelling and decisively strengthen the Time Traveller's credibility.

reflections caused by them – what corresponds in an ideal manner to the goals of science fiction.

4 A completely different approach: *L'Ève future* and the parody of the scientific discourse

Here we can find a first decisive difference to Villiers' *L'Ève future*, in which almost simultaneously to Wells a comparable dream of mankind is addressed, the mechanical creation of a perfect being.[4] In this novel, probably the most important example of symbolist narrative[5], the English Lord Ewald turns to the American inventor Thomas Alva Edison because he is in deep despair, for his fiancée Alicia Clary, who seems perfect on the outside to him, has, still according to him, a terribly vulgar soul. This "*non-correspondance* du physique et de l'intellectuel" (Villiers [1886] 1993: 85, italics in the original text) makes Ewald, so unhappy in love, think of suicide, until Edison proposes a surprising solution: the creation of a robot, called Hadaly, that combines Alicia's exterior perfection with a similar inner "life". Thus, we are confronted, exactly as in Wells' novel, with an invention that fulfils an old dream of man (which here is indeed particularly a dream of *man*, a decidedly male fantasy).

However, in his novel, Villiers turns on its head the strategies used by Wells a few years later and in general inverts all common narrative patterns. Instead of showing for most of the time what the android does and how it interacts with humans, Villiers centers almost only on the production of the robot:[6] he makes his

4 With this goal Villiers places his text, of course, in the tradition of the imagination of artificial beings: Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Shelley's *Frankenstein* or Hoffmann's *Sandman*. The last of these texts is textually cited right at the beginning of *L'Ève future* (Villiers de l'Isle-Adam [1886] 1993: 41), what underscores Villiers' intention to take up this tradition, which he varies in a highly original way.

5 Symbolism, which is mainly anchored in poetry, might be the most important literary current of "le principe antireprésentatif d'expression" (Rancière 2010: 122), for there "[l]e symbole n'est […] plus […] l'opérateur d'une traduction entre le monde de la matière et le monde de l'esprit" (Rancière 2010: 128), what explains both the current's distance to classic science fiction which normally is decidedly not "antirepresentative" (for it stresses the referential function, see above) and its affinity to wordplay.

6 Of course, this has to be seen also as an inversion of the common pattern of love novels: not the encounter of the protagonists and the moments together are recounted in detail, but the *production* of one partner takes up a major part of the story – what obviously undermines any possibility of

fictitious Edison explain for hundreds of pages how the robot's mechanical components are put together and based on which scientific insights they should work.[7] Moreover, these endless explanations are expressed in such a scientific-technical manner that not only the intradiegetic listener, Lord Ewald (for whom the robot is built), cannot follow but neither can the reader – whose reaction is in a certain matter reflected in Lord Ewald's, as we have already seen in Wells' text, a central difference being that Wells' narrator finally believes in the presented machine whereas Lord Ewald response to Edison's stream of technical details constantly oscillates between incredulous laughing and sheer lack of understanding.[8] For example, Lord Ewald "eut un veritable accès de fou rire" (Villiers de l'Isle-Adam [1886] 1993: 241) immediately after hearing Edison's explanation of the android's equilibrium that represents without a doubt a highlight of an incomprehensible scientific discourse, barely ever reproduced in such consequence in literature (Villiers de l'Isle-Adam [1886] 1993: 237–239):

> Les deux hanches de Hadaly sont celles de la Diane chasseresse ! – Mais leurs cavités d'argent contiennent ces deux buires vasculaires, en platine, dont je vous spécifierai tout à l'heure l'utilité. Les bords, bien que glissants, sont d'une quasi-adhérence aux parois de ces cavités iliaques, à cause de leur forme sinueuse.

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romance… And even more precisely: this structure deconstructs the principles of the novel in general, what explains why *L'Ève future* is often described as anti-novel.

7 Whereas Wells' description of the time machine's exterior does not even fill half a page and the (rather vague) explanation of its principles does not go beyond some five pages, which are, on top of that, constantly interrupted by the commentaries of the Time Traveller's friends (by the way: this dialogical situation further fosters the illusion of a feasible invention an uninterrupted monologue, like the one Edison delivers, scarcely is able to produce). Edison's endless explanations also form a decisive contrast with the Bible, a central intertext of Villiers' novel that is addressed right from the novel's title, as the future Eve obviously relates to the biblical first Eve (for another dimension of this title see footnote 28 further down). Whereas the Bible recounts the creation of humans as scarcely as possible, Villiers' Edison sheerly overwhelms the reader with explanations of his creation, which finally make this creation seem ever more unlikely. This also points to the fact that the Bible's elliptical style not only heightens the suspense of the recounted episodes (as has pointed out Auerbach in his *Mimesis*) but also fosters the credibility so important for a religious text. Finally, one cannot help but record that "le froid de la Science" (Villiers de l'Isle-Adam [1886] 1993: 214) with which Edison gives his explanations forms a sharp contrast with the (warm) miracle of life that the android is to achieve (already indicating that Edison's robot is not, and is far from being, a real living being).

8 This also stresses that science fiction, which is at first glance so heavily based on scientific insights (which give the genre its name), hardly ever uses a strictly scientific language. One can even speak of a proper neglection of science in most of science fiction works, what indicates that the real aims of the genre are elsewhere (Schwaiger 2019).

> Les fonds de ces récipients – dont l'évasement supérieur est de la forme de ces parois – se terminent en cônes rectangulaires, lesquels sont eux-mêmes inclinés en bas, l'un vers l'autre sous tendant ainsi un angle de quarante-cinq degrés par rapport au niveau de leur hauteur. […]
> Au centre du disque supérieur qui clôt hermétiquement chacun de ces récipients, est rivée l'extrémité d'une sorte d'arc, également d'un acier très pur, très sensible, très puissant. L'autre extrémité est fixée et très fortement soudée à la partie supérieure de la cavité d'argent de la hanche, qui est la prison, PRESQUE adhérente seulement, de ces deux appareils. Cet arc est non seulement tendu par le poids spécifique du vif-argent, vingt-cinq livres, mais encore est forcé, dans sa tension, du poids d'UN SEUL CENTIMÈTRE de mercure de plus que n'en représente le niveau de chaque buire.[9]

This is a very clear example of how language can exclude the readers or listeners (as well the intradiegetic listener Lord Ewald as the empiric readers), how it surpasses their abilities and leaves them without understanding[10] – and this in a genre that ordinarily is marked by a consequent integration of the unheard invention in the realm of the readers' horizon.[11]

5 Wordplay in *L'Ève future* or "Tenez-vous droite"

This parody of the scientific discourse can be seen as verbal humor, which is omnipresent in *L'Ève future* and which also includes an intense use of wordplay (Winter-Froemel 2016: 40 and 42), on which we will focus now. Some of the most interesting examples of wordplay can be found in the chapter titles and motto texts that Villiers uses extensively and that – often in the thoughtful and surprising combination of title and epigraph – contain allusions that place the narrated events in a broader (philosophical / aesthetic) context, contrast or problematize them. Moreover, the epigraphs, with which every single chapter is introduced, highlight again the litera-

9 This is only one example under many others one can find in the novel, cf. the very similar explanations of the android's movements (Villiers de l'Isle-Adam [1886] 1993: 230–234).

10 A final irony of this text is the fact that the continuation of the story excludes Edison himself and shows drastically the limitations of his own understanding, which seems so great up to this point: as Hadaly comes to life at the end of the novel, she is not controlled by all this mechanical expenditure that is recounted with so much detail but by a supernatural power that does not need any of these mechanical elements and is, moreover, able to give the android a *real* life that is way beyond Edison's goals (who finally only conceived a sophisticated puppet, cf. Hausmann 2015 and footnote 15 in this contribution).

11 For, if it is clear that science fiction often shows devices that have a sharp exclusive function in the diegetic world (e.g. machines that are only affordable for a small minority), their representation is to be as inclusive as possible for the text to gain its effect on a broad audience (see above).

ry dimension of the work, as they foreground, especially because of their often exotic and extraordinary character, the poetic function.[12]

Our first example of wordplay is precisely the epigraph of the chapter just mentioned, which deals with the android's equilibrium. This epigraph says (Villiers de l'Isle-Adam [1886] 1993: 237): "Ma fille, tenez-vous droite" and is attributed[13] to a mother (certainly understood in a generic way, an archetypical mother): "(Conseils d'une mère)". At first glance, this quotation does not seem to form part of wordplay, and it might indeed be a special case: in standard French "se tenir droite" almost only applies to a corporal position, to the fact to straighten up one's body (and is therefore in fact a possible suggestion of a parent who cares for a decent behavior of her / his daughter – and an epigraph that suits in an ideal way the description of the android's equilibrium). Nevertheless, the expression of a "droiture morale" is so near that it should be taken into account to understand this motto in all its implications, especially if we refer it to the novel's plot. For Edison, Hadaly's inventor, and Lord Ewald, her future "husband" – by the way two men and in a certain manner the two "fathers" of the project, what already contrasts significantly with the female voice of a mother that gives the advice to "se tenir droite" – certainly lack any "droiture morale", as they realize a project that is clearly seen as blasphemy throughout the text.[14] And there is more to this motto, for also Hadaly, the girl / woman presumably addressed by this epigraph also leaves the indicated way – she is not "the good girl", who obeys each order of her parents, but finds her own and autonomous way, a way that will turn into absurdity all Edison's efforts the reader follows for so long and create a major surprise for this reader that completely discredits the scientist. It needs not to be stressed that this also points to a decidedly feminist aspect in Villiers' novel that deconstructs thoroughly male fantasies.[15]

12 Significantly in Wells' *Time machine* not a single epigraph can be found – on the contrary: the different chapters are only numbered (Chapter 1, Chapter 2, …), which heightens medial transparency, whereas the conspicuous epigraphs used by Villiers certainly hamper it.

13 As all the epigraphs are carefully attributed to their respective sources, what might be used, said apart, for humorous, and often at the same time insightful, purposes as well, for some of the presumed sources are mere inventions of Villiers himself.

14 Therefore, the text's end with the loss of Hadaly, the death of Alica Clary, and the suicide of Lord Ewald has to be regarded as a divine punishment, what is underscored by Edison's final look that is directed, with a shudder (that is ironically attributed to the cold by the narrator), to the sky (Villiers de l'Isle-Adam [1886] 1993: 349): "son regard s'étant levé, enfin, vers les vieilles sphères lumineuses qui brûlaient, impassibles, entre les lourds nuages et sillonnaient, à l'infini, l'inconcevable mystère des cieux, il [Edison] frissonna, – de froid, sans doute, – en silence."

15 One could remind the reader here that the android in its form devised by Edison is nothing more than a perfectioned puppet that follows exactly the wishes of its (male) master – a project

6 The android's name: Secret wordplay

This makes us turn, almost automatically, to the artificial being that should "se tenir droite", the android that is at the center of the text and is described for so many pages before it has its spectacular appearance that proves (completely) false all these explanations. The android's name, Hadaly, contains a highly important wordplay that reveals key elements of the text's conception and foreshadows this ending that so thoroughly contradicts Edison's scientific convictions.[16] The American inventor gives Lord Ewald an explanation of the name he has chosen himself, as he shows his guest the coffin(!), in which the android will be transported from Menlo Park, Edison's laboratory, to Lord Ewald's home country England, adding that on this coffin "le nom de Hadaly est gravé en ces mêmes lettres iraniennes où il signifie l'IDÉAL" (Villiers de l'Isle-Adam [1886] 1993: 144).[17] Edison probably arrives at this meaning of "Hadaly", that is by no means a real Persian expression, thanks to a combination of two words, as has been put forward by research (Raitt 1993: 144): he combines the Persian word *had*, meaning 'frontier', with *ali*, a Persian word of Arabic origin that signifies 'the highest' or 'the best' so that the combination – roughly 'the ultimate limit' – could indeed signify 'ideal'. However, there could also be another meaning to this compound which reveals a completely different implication – and heavily puts into doubt Edison's aspirations.[18] The reader is implicitly asked to find further meanings of this name, since Edison himself uses an artificial word combination – and as it is a combination of a genuine Persian word with one of Arabic origin, crossing language borders seems appropriate for this search. Such an approach across languages is further fostered by the fact that Edison speaks of "lettres iraniennes", a term, which is very seldomly used in French, where one would expect "lettres persanes"[19], what indicates again that a close look on other source languages could be fruitful.

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made ridiculous by Sowana, with whom the android not only reaches real life, but more importantly a complete autonomy.

16 For the general importance of names in the domain of wordplay, and especially wordplay that deliberately excludes others, see Kölligan, this volume.

17 The typographic specificities we can see in the print of "IDÉAL" are a prominent feature of the whole novel, which uses extensively the possibilities of typography (italics, small caps, …). This is another feature of the novel's global strategy to undermine medial transparency and, therefore, impede a naïve immersion of the reader.

18 The following reflections have benefited greatly from discussions with my colleague Amirhossein Tasdighishahrezaei, whom I would like to thank very much.

19 This replacement is highly significant by the way: "lettres persanes" is, of course, closely associated with Montesquieu's homonymous work, which is at the same time taken up and

Thanks to such a translingual research another possible meaning of the robot's name occurs, which completely discards Edison's aspiration to build a perfect, an ideal artificial being. For Hadaly could also be a composite of two other words: of Spanish *hada*, a term that does not only refer to a being that that clearly belongs to the realm of the supernatural, as it means *fairy* in English, but is above all the distinctive term in designating fairy tales, which are called *cuentos de hada* in Spanish. The second part, *ali*, could refer to the Persian *al-e*, another word of Arabic origin that is much used in the 19th century to indicate the origin of a person or its belonging to a group – therefore in our case, Hadaly's belonging to the world of fairy tales. In this perspective, the word part *ali*[20], which is so present in the robot's name, obtains a supplementary dimension that supports our thesis, for it immediately evokes associations with characters like *Ali* Baba of the *One Thousand and One Nights*, that are as closely linked to the Persian-Arab world as Hadaly's name. Moreover, "[l]es *Mille et une nuits* sont évoquées dans *L'Ève future* par six allusions directes" (Néry 1996: 103), what, together with the name's additional implications, insinuates that the project of Hadaly's creation is not so different from the stories told by Shahrazad, indicating that the ideal female robot belongs to the marvelous realm that forms such a sharp contrast to Edison's marked faith in science.[21]

So the android's name indicates – and, decisively, without Edison's knowledge, who gives his invention a name which deconstructs right away his scientific goals, what additionally ironizes his unfounded hubris that is ridiculed throughout the text – that the "ideal perfection" the artificial creature is to obtain, only exists in

rewritten in an interesting way by Villiers: the French symbolist does not only maintain the paternalistic understanding of a male dominance of women represented by Montesquieu's Usbek in his Edison, but also replaces Usbek's Oriental wisdom in all other fields of life by Western hubris, what leads to the final devastating result.

20 *Ali* also takes up the first part of the name of the woman who is to be replaced by the robot, *Alicia*, what explains why *ali* (*al-e*), which normally is a prefix in Arabic and Persian, is used by Villiers as an ending: Hadaly is a different Alicia, one that inverts the model in almost every aspect.

21 Another important intertextual relationship between *L'Ève future* and *The One and Thousand Nights* can be found, of course, in the strong misogyny of the male protagonists', who are finally outwitted by a female voice. This dimension is again intertwined in a highly ironic way with a name in Villiers' novel: the fact that the English lord bears the name Ewald, which is extremely unusual in England, can be explained by the meaning of this name, "ruler" – a name that the storyline proves to be inappropriate in every respect, as Lord Ewald is not able to achieve any kind of dominance, especially not over women (I am very grateful to Daniel Kölling for pointing out to me this meaning of the name *Ewald*).

fairy tales.[22] Here we have a typical example of what Matthias Bauer has called "secret wordplay", because the two conditions he postulates are fulfilled in a perfect way (2015: 272):

> [T]here must be a semantic, phonetic or graphic plurivalence, which may be translingual, and the textual and / or situational context must warrant that the different forms and meanings are related in a way that may be unexpected and go unnoticed for some time but is still relevant to what the discourse is about. The discovery of that relevance or aptness is part of the game in secret wordplay.

The "translingual" aspect of this wordplay is very clear as well as its secrecy[23] and its broadening of our understanding of the novel, for this underlying meaning of the android's name is – we would even argue highly – "relevant to what the discourse is about" but has up to now gone mostly unnoticed despite the extensive research about the novel.[24] The pun's exclusiveness is also linked in another way to secret wordplay, as Bauer suggests (2015: 271–272): "Authors, […] may have […] reasons for raising the hurdles, turning the play on words into a mystery that is only to be solved by a select, knowledgeable audience." Villiers most certainly writes for such a happy few and excludes large parts of his readership, especially in this novel. Therefore, we can find here again the strongly excluding character of verbal humor in *L'Ève future*, which deliberately leaves out great parts of the audience, what counteracts science fiction's common aim to vulgarize knowledge, an aspect to which we will return at the end of our contribution.

Moreover, the wordplay's clear indication that perfection only forms part of the merely invented, allows a highly interesting parallel to More's *Utopia*, where also a presumed ideal is already deconstructed by the very name of the entity: exactly as is the case in *L'Ève future*, the name of the perfect island itself puts right away into doubt the possibility of its existence. This parallel can be pursued in a manner that seems instructive for our purposes, for utopias, that can, by the way,

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22 One could add that the name Hadaly also evokes Hades, indicating not only Edison's subterranean laboratory, where he has built Hadaly, but more importantly, the demonic dimension that is linked to the creation of the artificial woman throughout the novel.

23 Both aspects are, of course, interlinked, as has shown Esme Winter-Froemel (2016: 33): "Wordplay involving language contact can be realized in different subtypes; what is common to all of them is the additional reference made to the other language, which thus presupposes additional knowledge by the speaker and hearer […]. Again, this may be exploited for in-group humor / excluding third parties."

24 An additional meaning of the robot's particular name besides the one given by Edison is neither discussed in Raitt's outstanding edition of *L'Ève future* (1993) nor in other contributions (Néry 1996; Noiray 1982; Ortner 2012; Wortmann 2004).

be considered as a subgenre of science fiction (the latter genre understood in a broad way; Suvin 1979), should be comparably as exempt of wordplay as science fiction and for the same reasons: because of their serious purpose to create a credible illusion of a perfect society, for only a plausible illusion seems to be able to stimulate the wish to change society in the direction of the outlined world, which is the central feature of all utopias.[25] Nevertheless, More's fundamental text is full of wordplay, as is common knowledge; he integrates, besides the title, many more puns, which often have a translingual dimension and among which we only can mention here the river Anydrus, the island's main source of water, that underscores the particular structure of this island, for it conveys in its literal meaning the idea of being "without water". This tendency to wordplay underscores More's endeavor to emphasize the imaginary dimension of the perfect human society, which might have been an inspiration for Villiers, who indicates as well that the pursuit of perfection, that Hadaly's creation implies, is beyond reality.[26]

7 Explicit thematization of wordplay

This relationship to More's text might be hardly visible, but the general importance of wordplay in the text is obvious, and what is more and highly interesting for our purposes, explicitly indicated. For Villiers makes his inventor Edison literally mention wordplay – and directly intertwine it with own examples and reactions to them – at a very early stage of the novel, foreshadowing that it will be an important facet of the text. Edison, who is introduced as "Phonograph's Papa" (another deliberate play on letters), recollects the negative reactions to his invention with the following words (Villiers de l'Isle-Adam [1886] 1993: 45):

> Et penser qu'après six mille et *quelques* années d'une lacune aussi préjudiciable que celle de mon Phonographe, [...] quantité de lazzis, émanés de l'indifférence humaine, ont salué l'apparition de mon premier essai !... « Jouet d'enfant ! » grommelait la foule. Certes, je sais

25 Cf. the excellent definition of utopia by Raymond Trousson who stresses that the genre presents a different society that is to be understood as an "idéal à réaliser" (1999: 24).

26 There is, of course, a central difference between the two texts that our observations should in no way cover up: More undoubtedly stresses that the strive for a perfect society is the right thing to do (and his term "utopia" signifies less "a place that does not exist" than "a place that does not exist *yet*"), whereas for Villiers the creation of a perfect human being certainly must never take place – which highlights, by the way, the interest of this text in our contemporary world, where the creation of artificial creatures no longer belongs to the realm of fiction and is discussed vehemently in its moral implications.

> que, prise à l'improviste, quelques jeux de mots lui sont d'un soulagement indispensable et lui donnent le temps de se remettre… Cependant, à sa place, en fait de jeux de mots, je me fusse, du moins, efforcé d'en parfaire quelques-uns d'un aloi supérieur à celui des grossiers calembours qu'elle n'a pas rougi de risquer à mon sujet.
> Ainsi, j'eusse blâmé, par exemple, le Phonographe, de son impuissance à reproduire, en tant que *bruits*, le bruit… de la Chute de l'Empire romain… les bruits qui courent…

Thus, Edison does not only mention and criticize the wordplays directed to (or rather against) his invention, but explicitly proposes one of his own, which in turn is closely linked to his phonograph and he considers much more sophisticated than the ones he attacked before, probably alluding to an interesting reversal with regard to wordplay's common structure: for as he says that the phonograph would not have been able to reproduce the noises of the fallen Roman Empire, the addition "les bruits qui courent" does not take up the figurative meaning, so common in French, of rumors that are heard, but picks up the, much less used, literal meaning of environmental noises that accompany destruction.

It could be argued that it is up to the reader to decide if this wordplay is indeed more sophisticated than the ones Edison satirizes before, but it has to be stressed that the novel itself contains a clear opinion on that matter: directly after Edison's explicit thematization of wordplay, the subject is taken up again, this time by Sowana, the (extraterrestrial?) spiritual being that will take control of Hadaly later on. She tells Edison that "depuis quelques minutes, je vous entends jouer avec des mots, comme un enfant" (Villiers de l'Isle-Adam [1886] 1993: 46). That she qualifies the wordplays, which Edison considers sophisticated, as childish has to be seen as another important foreshadowing: the android he has built, is in Edison's eyes a highly sophisticated machine, that could only be devised and realized by a mind "supérieur à celui des grossiers [autres]" to take up his very words in his comment about wordplay – however, for Sowana this android is nothing else than a toy for children she handles with absolute nonchalance, as the novel's final sequence shows. This inversion of roles between Edison and Sowana that the novel displays and that is central for its severe critique against positivism, as the representant of material knowledge is outdone by a representant of the unknown, is already indicated here, in an exchange that openly thematizes wordplay. For this reason, it is difficult to understand why several critics totally underestimate the role of wordplay in the novel and deplore Villiers' "goût […] pour les calembours et sa tendance à plaisanter là où l'on aurait cherché une observation profonde et sérieuse" (Conyngham 1975: 19). Such a judgement can only be explained by a great misunderstanding of wordplay's possibilities that also include the communication of serious and important aspects, as this volume demonstrates in each of its contributions.

8 Wordplay in the *Contes cruels*

This serious dimension of wordplay is obvious in Villiers' whole work; wordplay has a strong presence in many of his texts, what seems important to mention to complete the panorama of his use of this linguistic technique. For reasons of space, we have to limit us to a single example besides *L'Ève future* and have chosen one that is representative of his collection *Contes cruels*, his second most important book. In these *contes* we find numerous inventions that link the stories to the novel, not least in the moral implications related to progress. This becomes especially obvious in the *conte* "L'Affichage céleste", in which is described an invention that transforms the night sky into a huge advertising space and, by doing this, subordinates the sky to business, or in the story's words makes possible a world in which is "[le] ciel considéré au point de vue industriel et sérieux" (Villiers de l'Isle-Adam [1883] 1983: 91). The name of this device's inventor is key in two respects for understanding the short story, for he is called M. Grave. In its French meaning, this name takes up the omnipresent term "sérieux" that we have already seen in the quotation above and that is the leitmotif running through the whole story as a representation of an attitude which merely takes an interest in financial, utilitarian and practical issues – an attitude execrated by Villiers. However, we can find here again, as in Hadaly's name, an interlingual wordplay, for the name could also be read as the English word, what seems all the more plausible as the heavy critique Villiers constantly utters against the harmful consequences of a progress that seems to destroy basic moral principles is directed above all against the United States (Noiray 1982: 251) – and we want to remind the reader here that the action of *L'Ève future* is set in the United States, what is hardly a coincidence, and that, moreover, its protagonist is *the* American inventor of the 19th century, Thomas Alva Edison. In its English pronunciation, the name of the short story's inventor not only forms a sharp "topologic" contrast to the sky, on which he realizes his advertising work[27], but, more importantly, literally buries the idealistic dimension of life, so often associated with heaven.

27 This topologic dimension is interesting in so far as in another one of the *Contes cruels* ("La machine à gloire"), another soulless inventor (of course again an American) carries the name Bottom, which evokes similar associations and indicates, above all, that the one who carries this name lacks any feeling for transcendence.

9 A quest for transcendence and a fight against vulgarization

With this we come back to *L'Ève future*, where the quest for a transcendence, which seems ever more threatened by modern life, is also crucial: the linguistic creativity that the novel displays at every moment, not least in its use of wordplay, underscores the symbolistic irony[28], which is directed, on an intratextual level, against naturalism (Hausmann 2015) and, on an extratextual level, against the current so closely linked to it, positivism. Precisely in this context we want to comment on another epigraph that is not only central for understanding the whole novel but might as well shed even more light on Villers' use of chapter mottos. As motto for the chapter "Luttes avec l'Ange" we find the following quotation that Villiers ascribes to "quelqu'un", but in reality is his own invention (Raitt 1993: 433), what is revealing with regard to his ideological position and the aims he pursues with his novel (Villiers de l'Isle-Adam [1883] 1983: 312): "Le positivisme consiste à oublier, comme *inutile*, cette inconditionnelle et *seule* vérité, – *que la ligne qui nous passe sous le nez n'a ni commencement ni fin*." Here we find, condensed in a single sentence, the fundamental criticism Villiers directs against positivism (and that has already been visible in his *conte* "L'Affichage céleste"): the conviction that only those aspects of life are "utile", which regard the everyday life (above all in its economic dimension…), and that all reflections on higher principles or a deeper meaning of life recede into the background.

Such an unbearable shortening of life's secrets is in Villiers' understanding not least transported by scientific progress that boasts to explore all dimensions of Earth (and the cosmos alike). This boast is particularly palpable in the programmatic introduction to Jules Verne's – the second "father of science fiction" besides Wells – *Voyages extraordinaires*[29], in which we find this well-known and often quoted sentence by his editor Hetzel which explains aim and scope of the series, that does not only recount "extraordinary voyages", but above all has an extraordinary success in this period (Hetzel 1866: 2): "Le plan que s'est proposé l'auteur […] est, en effet, de résumer toutes les connaissances géographiques, géologiques, physiques,

28 This irony is also palpable in another dimension of the novel's title, which foregrounds again a name: the "future Eve" is of course an allusion to the second Eve, Mary, but it should not be overseen either that Villiers' own name ends with Adam so that he creates also a link to his person, and this in a highly ironic way as it becomes clearly evident that the technocratic "Eve" designed by Edison is certainly not his choice…

29 For the genesis of this "avertissement" cf. Scheinhardt (2005: 115–118).

astronomiques, amassées par la science moderne, et de refaire, sous la forme attrayante et pittoresque qui lui est propre, l'histoire de l'univers." This statement implies not only that a lot of findings have already been made, but above all that many more will follow and that finally all mysteries will be resolved. Villiers rejects heavily such an idea and in general the vulgarization of science, for which Verne was the key person at his time, as can be seen prominently in this program devised by Verne's editor that stresses the "forme attrayante et pittoresque" of the representation and is at any rate typical for (common) science fiction. For Villiers the sheer notion of vulgarization is execrable, and it is by no means a chance that the most negative person of *L'Ève future* (despite Edison's hubris and Lord Ewald's recklessness) is Alicia Clary, the former fiancée of the English lord, whom he cannot stand anymore because of her vulgar soul. The extremely negative representation of this character finds its explanation in Villiers' crusade against vulgarization, what sheds an important additional light on the construction of wordplay in his novel that is to be discussed now, before we come to our conclusions. It cannot be overseen that many of the wordplays we have described in our paper are extremely complicated, which is particularly true for the implications of the android's name, that do not only exclude the scientific himself, but at the same time many readers. As in other cases we have mentioned (e.g. the overcomplicated description of Hadaly's equilibrium) a very high background knowledge is required in order to decode the wordplay and understand all the implications of the use of language. This clearly points to an elitist understanding of literature, which is characteristic of Villiers, who only writes for a select audience[30] and fights against the vulgarization of knowledge and literature alike that he associates above all with positivism.

10 Conclusion: A serious ironization of science

In a marked contrast to the adherents of positivism Villiers strives to extend again "la ligne qui nous passe sous le nez" and to (re)introduce a realm beyond the scientific provable. This leads us to our final comments that can begin with the novel's dedication which, in a way, foreshadows its subject and tone. Villiers dedicates *L'Ève future* "Aux rêveurs, Aux railleurs", and in the perspective we have sketched "les rêveurs" are not least the people who fight against the notion of a world that

30 One might wonder whether this striving for exclusivity is not essentially due to the completely changed conditions of reception at the end of the 19th century: now the masses can read and consume literature, and Villiers seeks to counter this development with strategies designed to keep the masses away from his texts.

becomes ever more predictable, who, in sharp contrast to their materialistic contemporaries, still believe in an endless line. Thus, "les rêveurs" represent the novel's serious side, but this side is indissolubly linked to an intense humoristic dimension foreshadowed in the dedication's second term, "les railleurs".[31] Both aspects are intertwined, and their interdependence might nowhere be as clear and important as in the utilization of wordplay.

In *L'Ève future*, wordplay and the general use of language certainly have a strong humoristic effect, which is the "core function" of wordplay (Winter-Froemel 2016: 13–14), but Villiers' utilization of this technique goes way beyond this seemingly playful effect: he introduces in his wordplays a serious dimension that might not be obvious at first glance, but underlies both the use of each wordplay and the structure of the whole novel, what is underscored by the epigraph with which begins the chapter after Edison's endless explanations of Hadaly's equilibrium. This chapter, where Lord Ewald has his great laughing fit, is introduced by the following "proverbe", as it is called in the novel (Villiers de l'Isle-Adam [1886] 1993: 242): "Le sage ne rit qu'en tremblant". This serious aspect (that is only visible for an exclusive group, alluded to by "le sage") is characteristic for Villiers' "strategic use" of wordplay (Winter-Froemel 2016: 16) that underscores that this use is far from being exclusively funny and even less "innocent" to pick up a central idea from the call of papers of the conference on which this volume is based (Winter-Froemel 2025). One specific goal of Villiers' use of wordplay and the scientific discourse, which is reproduced to a parodic extent in the novel, is the fight against a naïve immersion that is so often aimed at in science fiction. In this respect, *L'Ève future* can without a doubt be regarded as a special case within the genre, but it has to be stressed as well that Villiers' novel shares one of the genre's central starting points, the reflection on human nature and society. In his case, it is his own contemporary society that is under scrutiny and is harshly attacked for its, in Villiers' opinion, blind and unfounded trust in a science that is completely incapable of explaining the really important things. He shows his profound contempt by means of a constant ironization of science, which is reflected not least in sophisticated wordplays which expose the (unaware) scientists to ridicule and the full implications of which are only accessible to a small audience. Therefore, the particular position of *L'Ève*

31 This term also appears in a central position in the passage about Hadaly's equilibrium and the stream of extremely complicated details, with which Edison tries (certainly in vain) to explain it – Lord Ewald characterizes his counterpart here saying (Villiers de l'Isle-Adam [1886] 1993: 241): "Vous êtes un terrible railleur". It is of great importance that for Edison only the second attribute of the novel's dedication applies – he lacks any transcendental level, associated with "rêveurs", what explains his final failure.

future in the history of science fiction becomes much clearer if special attention is paid to Villiers' specific use of wordplay and its potential to exclude intradiegetic characters and empiric readers alike.

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