BOOKS

Blasting People Into Space

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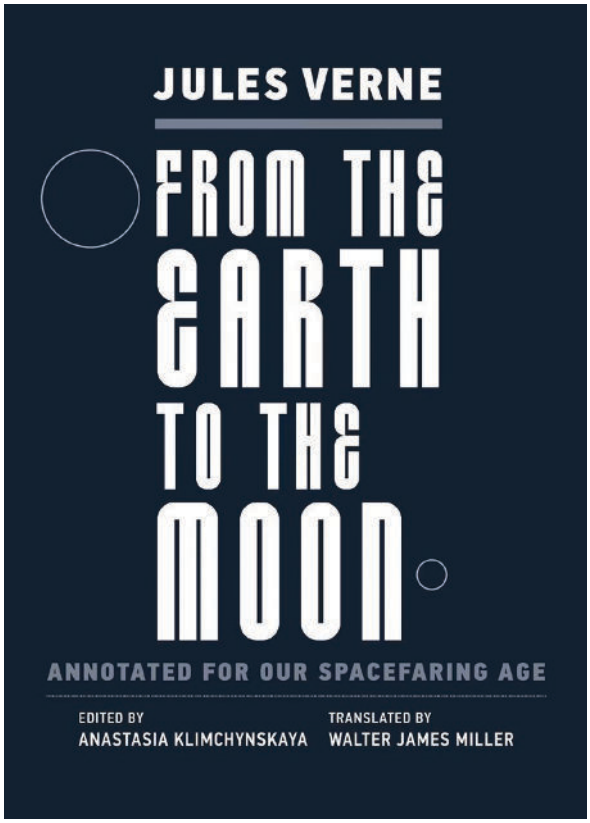

From the Earth to the Moon: Annotated for Our Spacefaring Age
by Jules Verne. Edited by Anastasia Klimchynskaya, translated by Walter James Miller. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2026, 334 pp.

"A hundred years ago," Neil Armstrong said on a broadcast during his return from the first Moon landing in 1969, "Jules Verne wrote a book about a voyage to the Moon. His spaceship, *Columbia*, took off from Florida and landed in the Pacific Ocean after completing a trip to the Moon. It seems appropriate to us to share with you some of the reflections of the crew as the modern day Columbia completes its rendezvous with the planet Earth in the same Pacific Ocean tomorrow."

Jules Verne's *From the Earth to the Moon*, a 160-year-old comic novel about bored artillerymen blasting people into space, is far more relevant to modern space policy debates than it ought to be. For readers like Armstrong, who misremembered some of the details of the 1865 novel in ways that only enhanced the resemblance between fiction and fact (the projectile was never named, the actual journey to the Moon is a matter for the sequel, and in neither book does anyone actually land on the Moon), the abundant parallels between the novel and real-world space programs, especially the Apollo program, have reinforced a popular interpretation of Verne's story as prophetic.

Anastasia Klimchynskaya has little patience for this game of "Which science-fiction author first imagined which gadget or gizmo?" and prefers instead to focus on what she calls the "significance of science and technology within human and social life." Klimchynskaya, a literary scholar who specializes in science fiction, is the editor of a new edition of Verne's novel. She opens her introduction with Armstrong's mention of Verne—not to launch another prophetic reading of Verne, but as a point of departure for reading the book against the backdrop of the American space program and its renewed efforts to send humans to the Moon.

The first volume in MIT Press's *Imagination, Annotated* series, this edition can be read as three related texts: Verne's story (a 1995 translation from the French by Walter James Miller), extensive annotations in the form of signed footnotes, and eight accompanying essays. The commentary speaks in two distinct voices: a traditional historical approach, and—what I'm more interested in as a space policy researcher—a critical approach that relates Verne's text to current perspectives on space exploration.

One of these perspectives, popularized by advocates like the writers Willy Ley and Arthur C. Clarke, is sometimes called "astrofuturist." The term, coined by American studies scholar De Witt Douglas Kilgore, casts spaceflight as the fulfillment of an old dream: "Devoted to breaking the limits placed on humanity by the surface of this planet, astrofuturism forecasts an escape from terrestrial history. Its roots lie in the nineteenth-century Euro-American preoccupation with imperial expansion and Utopian speculation, which it recasts in the elsewhere and else*when* of outer space."

Within this tradition, Verne's novel is treated as a landmark of space fiction. As Klimchynskaya notes, this is part of the broader tendency to remember the book less as a novel and more as a portent of the spaceflight that would be achieved a century later. More consequentially, the book was cited by rocket science pioneers including Konstantin Tsiolkovsky, Robert Goddard, and Hermann Oberth as a work that fired their imaginations and set them working on the problem of space travel. *From the Earth to the*

Moon thus came to occupy two roles in the astrofuturist tradition: first as inspiration, then as prophecy.

Although there isn't a properly "astrofuturist" school of thought so much as a kind of advocacy characterized by particular tropes, the astrofuturist perspective has drawn a reaction from historians and critics who treat space exploration as historically contingent—for instance framing the Apollo program as a matter of Cold War geopolitics, rather than a point on a narrative arc reaching back into the distant past. Many of the annotations and several of the essays in the volume draw from this critical framing.

Within the context of the space program, this critical attention makes sense. But asking a book about bored artillerymen to carry all of it asks a lot, and obscures how odd an artifact Verne's novel really is. The story tracks the doings of the fictional Baltimore Gun Club, a popular society of artillery fanatics, and its president, Impey Barbicane. Stuck in a post–Civil War malaise (after all, what's an artilleryman to do without a war's demand for artillery?), club members find new purpose with a swords-into-plowshares moment—the plowshare, in this case, being an enormous cannon. The mighty Columbiad is a 900-foot-long cannon intended to blast a projectile toward the Moon. Verne's text is largely a series of dramatic set pieces linked by detailed technical narration: the space cannon's design calculations, how the club raises funds for the project, and, finally, the cannon's construction in Florida. (The debate over whether to build the cannon in Florida or Texas occupies an entire chapter.) The book describes the launch but ends shortly thereafter; the actual mission to the Moon belongs to *Around the Moon*, which Verne published five years later.

From the Earth to the Moon reads, at least to me, as a mock epic. Even when the text teaches physics and astronomy, the instruction sits within a satirical frame—sharp in places, elsewhere gentler, even affectionate. This may come as a surprise, because generations of English-language readers know the story only through botched translations and poorly edited versions that rendered it a children's adventure story, shaping Verne's reputation accordingly. Walter James Miller, whose 1995 translation is used for this volume, elsewhere called Verne "a superb social satirist and humorist" and questioned his relegation to the category of hack writer: "Why do the arbiters of public taste insist on their one-sided description of a many-sided talent?"

Klimchynskaya certainly takes Verne seriously. She contextualizes Verne's novel within what science fiction scholar John Rieder calls the "fantasies of appropriation" of nineteenth-century adventure stories. That framing, visible in her text annotations, introduction, and opening essay, has real grounding. The adventure tales of Verne's era were written at the peak of European empire; their plots routinely carried heroes into territories being mapped, claimed, and exploited by colonial powers; and literary scholars have long read the genre as empires' imaginative companion.

Verne's text is full of comic bombast about adding a new state to the union. But where I read it as a satire of popular American rhetoric and media in that era, Klimchynskaya narrows the question to focus on colonialism. She claims that "Verne's novels unquestionably fall" into the category of colonial fantasy and asks whether *From the Earth to the Moon* exists "somewhere on a spectrum between celebrating the colonial paradigms embedded in his text and satirizing them." The two ends of that spectrum assume that, whether endorsing or criticizing, Verne is taking an active stance toward colonialism. This reading is very compatible with Kilgore's assessment of astrofuturism as rooted in a "preoccupation with imperial expansion."

But Klimchynskaya's supposition about colonialism misses an important question: What if Verne's attention is simply directed elsewhere? *From the Earth to the Moon* was part of a series of stories, *Voyages extraordinaires*, that Verne wrote expressly for popular instruction of science through fiction. In this book, he adds a satirical and humorous layer on top of the book's pedagogy, affectionately mocking a wide array of targets: the press, mass enthusiasm, oratory, industry, militarism, nationalist rhetoric—even the era's state of astronomical knowledge of the Moon. In limiting the critical reading of the novel to either celebration or satirical denunciation of colonialism, the result is a cramped, diminished text that is less interesting than the one Verne actually wrote.

For example, Klimchynskaya's introduction asserts that the Moon project Verne describes "requires the displacement of a caricatured version of Florida's Indigenous people, the Seminole nation." The claim recurs more emphatically in an essay by astrophysicist and space ethicist Erika Nesvold. When Barbicane and his colleagues search for a launch site in Florida, Nesvold understands their spotting "a few Seminoles in the distance" as "clearly demonstrating that the Seminole people are being displaced from their land by the project." Verne's descriptions certainly caricature the Seminole (one character calls them "savages who roam the prairie"), but nowhere does the text depict or require their displacement.

In fact, the story describes the opposite: Barbicane, annoyed by Florida's fertile country "precisely because of its fertility," hunts for "incontestable signs of *in*fertility." The Gun Club sites their project on land no one cultivates or claims, and the Seminoles remain present and undisturbed throughout. Context can enrich a reading; it cannot manufacture

events the novel omits. The annotations occasionally fail factually as well. One annotation about launch sites places Baikonur—a city in Kazakhstan at a latitude north of Minneapolis—"close to the equator," and calls the surrounding steppe "largely uninhabited," passing over the Kazakhs who have long lived in the region.

The effort to turn Verne's text into a statement on colonialism also deafens the editorial voice to the novel's many classical references. For instance, Michel Ardan, the story's boisterous French daredevil who plans to travel in the projectile to the Moon, mocks "narrow-minded people" who believe humanity is confined "within a circle of Popilius." He is referencing the Roman envoy who drew a circle in the sand around a dilatory king and forbade him to leave until he had given an answer as to whether he would submit to the Romans. Ardan's point is that confining humanity to Earth is, like Popilius's circle, a line drawn by mere symbolic authority—one he refuses to honor. Here the annotation recounts the reference accurately, then confesses that "it is difficult to understand what relation this has to the situation at hand in the novel," supposing instead that Verne deploys such references to give his adventure story "a veneer of 'high' literature."

The same looseness touches the science. The novel's astronomy chapter reports the era's best selenography (the study of the physical features of the Moon): Wilhelm Beer and Johann Heinrich von Mädler's finding that the Moon has no atmosphere. It concludes that any beings on the Moon "must possess a special constitution and differ markedly from Earthmen." When Barbicane's nemesis, Captain Nicholl, publicly presses the point ("There is not a molecule of air on the surface of the Moon"), Ardan appeals to the crowd: "'Is life … possible on the surface of the Moon?' Three hundred thousand people voted by applauding loud and long." The novel is gently satirizing the idea of lunar life as a popular enthusiasm sustained against the evidence; the annotations, returning to the question repeatedly, presume that Verne earnestly believed that beings lived on the Moon, since science "was still far from disproving their existence."

The point is not that an editor misread this or that allusion or mistook satire for sincerity. But taken together, they suggest a critical focus that, I argue, becomes Procrustean: Valuable pieces are lopped off, others stretched to fit. And what happens in this volume also appears in the broader debate between astrofuturist and critical views of space exploration and space settlement.

For astrofuturists, settling space is the logical next step in achieving humanity's destiny among the stars. Critics, on the other hand, see echoes of a dark colonial past. Neither view can properly enlist Verne's text, since the novel doesn't take settlement seriously at all. The crew's seeds and shrubs are comic provisioning, not a colonial program, and talk of annexing the Moon belongs to satirized orators, excited crowds, and what the sequel's narrator dismisses as "scatterbrained schemes and cockeyed theories."

What both camps do engage with are the ideas that animate Verne's characters: "Conquest, thrill-seeking, scientific curiosity, peaceful cooperation," as Nesvold lists in her essay. With evidence that these remain the motivations of the contemporary space program, she deftly connects the book to current policy debates. "Now is the time to ask," she writes, "Should we attempt not just to explore space but also potentially to colonize it? Are the potential benefits of our activities in space worth the danger and the cost?"

Nesvold's essay touches on harm to Indigenous communities and workers, access to space for people with disabilities, environmental damage, commercial use of space, resource extraction, gender representation, and animal testing. She addresses economic costs and benefits, treating the international subscription described by Verne as a kind of investment and then asking why there was no global distribution of "financial profits from the project." Yet the investment premise is one Verne explicitly forecloses: "This subscription was … a question of giving, not lending." Other topics Nesvold extrapolates in interesting ways, developing arguments the book offers only in passing. For example, she insightfully reads Ardan's move to push both Barbicane and his archrival, Nicholl, together on the flight as foreshadowing the International Space Station, reflecting the possibility that "space can be a mechanism for peace as well as war."

Although she doesn't directly engage with space settlement in her essay, science fiction author and sociologist Malka Older also invites comparison between the arguments put forward by astrofuturists and the rationales presented in Verne's text, which she calls "the 'because it's there' school of lunar landings." Throughout her annotations and essay, she displays a welcome wit and expresses admiration for Verne's writing and craftsmanship. Where Nesvold discusses costs and the distribution of benefits of space settlement, Older's essay examines the contradictions Verne's story presents in launching people into space.

Older argues that Verne's characters give "no clear rationale … for traveling to the Moon." She then catalogs reasons ranging from establishing, as Barbicane says, "direct communication with [the Moon]" to filling "the void left by the end of the Civil War." This apparent contradiction is rooted in a distinction between instrumental and intrinsic motivation. Older argues that the project produces no instrumental benefit (answering "specific scientific questions," for example, although she notes that one might view the scheme as "a way of accumulating territory and resources"), but the characters justify

their actions as "doing something that has never been done." That is a rationale—an intrinsic one. Older has recorded the characters' reasons accurately, judged them insufficient, and counted her verdict as "rationalism without reasons," as per her essay's title. The novel is full of discussions of the enterprise's merits—the premise of the book rests on them. Those intrinsic rationales may be unpersuasive, but unpersuasive is not the same thing as absent.

Klimchynskaya notes that Verne is often reduced to "a set of 'iconic' images, moments, and illustrations," and in the process his texts are "removed from their context—that context being any kind of critique or satire Verne might have been engaging in—in favor of pure celebration." This habit also applies to his critics, who tend to credit Verne's celebration and miss his critique or satire.

Astrofuturists and their opponents disagree profoundly about what space settlement would mean, but the intensity of that disagreement points to something they share. Both treat settlement as a future sufficiently imaginable and important to argue over its consequences in detail. If, as Elie Wiesel observed, the opposite of love is indifference, neither side is remotely indifferent to space: They are simply attached to competing visions of humanity's future in it. This volume's contributors keep asking whether we should settle space; part of the answer to why we go—to create the kind of future we want—is visible in the intensity of the argument itself.

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