

EDISON'S MODERN LEGEND IN VILLIERS' *L'EVE FUTURE*

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Moi, je représente la Science avec la toute-puissance de ses mirages.
Thomas Edison, *L'Eve future*

After being unsuccessfully serialized in three separate publications, *L'Eve future*, Villiers de l'Isle-Adam's only novel, is finally published in volume in 1886. In preparation, the author drafts an *Avis au lecteur* meant to challenge certain received ideas with which the public, already aware that the novel's protagonist is Thomas Edison, might approach the work. He tries to steer their reading of this character away from the historical figure of the same name by distinguishing between the American and "une LÉGENDE [qui] s'est ... éveillée, dans l'imagination de la foule¹" (Villiers, 1986, p. 766). He recapitulates the notions making up the inventor's image in the popular imagination, reminding the reader that Edison is "le MAGICIEN DU SIÈCLE, le SORCIER DE MENLO PARK, le PAPA DU PHONOGRAPHE" (Villiers, 1986, p. 766), and stresses that *L'Eve future* will feature "le PERSONNAGE de cette légende" (Villiers, 1986, p. 766). Instead of the historical figure who demonstrated wide-ranging technical prowess in the 1870s, the novel then borrows the corresponding character from popular culture. The conclusion to the *Avis* however indicates that even this character, whoever he may be, is not the protagonist of *L'Eve future*. That role is assigned to Edison's *légende moderne*, which Villiers asserts he "interprète ... au mieux de l'œuvre d'Art-métaphysique dont j'ai conçu l'idée" (Villiers, 1986, p. 766).

The novel's serious, artistic goals mark Villiers' thoughts from his earliest work on this project. In 1879 he writes to his friend Jean Marras "je sais ce que je fais et je sais que cela pèse lourd, cette fois-ci. ... c'est un livre vengeur, brillant, qui glace et qui force toutes les citadelles du Rêve!²" (Correspondance I 261-3). We might then ask why, given such a poetic purpose, Villiers chooses an inventor as protagonist. In the 1870s, inventors appear mostly in the novels of Jules Verne³. His *littérature d'anticipation*, though praised for many qualities, such as his excellent documentation and the entertaining relation of scientific knowledge⁴, is not known for its literariness⁵. A look at

¹All italics and capitalization are Villiers' emphasis.

²For an interpretation of this quote, see Collion-Diéricks, *La femme, la parole et la mort*, Deuxième partie, ch. I, "*L'Eve future*, roman et métaroman."

³The year Villiers starts writing, Verne publishes *Les Cinq cents millions de la Béguine* (1879) and *La Maison à vapeur* (1879). The first novel presents a contest between two inventors, one German and French inventor, and the second features a steam-powered mechanical elephant. Verne's earlier notable works with inventor protagonists are *L'Île mystérieuse* (1875), the sequel to *Vingt mille lieues sous les mers* (1870) and *Autour de la lune* (1870), the sequel to *De la terre à la lune* (1865).

⁴A significant number of Verne's reviews are collected in *Jules Verne en son temps*. Already in 1865 we read praise of his "sérieuse et profonde étude des lieux, des choses et des caractères, encadrée de la manière la plus heureuse dans un récit qui devient vrai à force de naturel" (p. 19).

Villiers' drafts, however, shows he is not interested in telling the story of *an* inventor, but in shaping the "livre vengeur" around Thomas Edison: the first fragments he prepares for a short story on the topic of androids (at this point called "sosie"), "Miss Hadaly Habal" (1877), his other short story "L'Andréide Paradoxale d'Edison" (1878), as well as the serialized early versions of the novel, *L'Eve nouvelle* (1880 in *Le Gaulois*, then 1880-1 in *L'Etoile française*) all feature the American. In this study, I propose to analyze Villiers' method of distinguishing Edison's modernity as an inventor and of proclaiming his legendary status through comparisons with the more traditional literary models of this character, Faust and Prometheus. I show that aspects of his representation in the press are woven into the *œuvre d'Art-métaphysique* Villiers has imagined in order to suggest that Edison is an equivalent figure to these symbols, but one who, instead of being timeless, is adapted to his age.

Many scholars have discussed the art and the metaphysics⁶ of the novel, and I do not intend to redefine this aspect of the work. I join Jacques Noiray in reading Edison's task to reproduce a woman as metaphysical. The inventor must copy the appearance of his friend Lord Ewald's beloved Alicia, while replacing her vulgar soul. As the Lord explains, "Sa beauté, je vous l'affirme, c'était l'Irréprochable, défiant la plus dissolvante analyse," but it hides "au dedans, une personnalité tout à fait ÉTRANGÈRE à ce corps. Imaginez ce semblant de conception réalisé: une Déesse bourgeoise" (Villiers, 1986, p. 804). Unlike other critics, however, I focus on the inventor's realization of the machine, and his presentation of his work to his audience. I am concerned with Edison's vision of his work as well as the methods and terms in which he presents it because it is they that convince Ewald to consider the android as a viable solution even before she is possessed. Critics emphasize primarily this latter development in discussing the construction of the feminine, but though this development brings Eve⁷ the young man's love, it is not part of Edison's plan and does not contribute to his modern legend, except perhaps insofar as it characterizes him as an opportunist. The singularity of Villiers' character is that in the novel, as in the newspaper reports of the 1870s and 1880s, he achieves technological excellence and commercial success.

Villiers is very quick to suggest models for his inventor, even though the *Avis* champions Edison's modern legend with the intimation that it is unique. The same brief text already attacks the apparent originality of featuring such a protagonist, as the author likens him to Goethe's Faust. As Alan Raitt shows, Goethe's play exerted a powerful influence over Villiers throughout his career, and in *L'Eve future*, the most popular

⁵Emile Zola goes so far as to proclaim in *Le Figaro* of 1878/12/22 "Celui-là n'écrit pas précisément des romans," and "[il] est certainement, à cette heure, l'écrivain qui se vend le plus en France [...] cela, d'ailleurs, n'a aucune importance dans le mouvement littéraire actuel." (p. 2)

⁶See for example, Collion-Diérickx, *La femme, la parole et la mort*, Noiray's *L'Eve future ou le laboratoire de l'idéal*, and Lathers' *Aesthetics of Artifice*. These works read the android, Eve, primarily as a metaphor, or as an alchemical success. Most importantly, they do not separate Edison's science and his designs from the android's eventual supernatural possession.

⁷I use "Eve" to designate the android because this is the most general term for the machines Edison designs to replace women. It emphasizes his concern with their serial production, rather than supporting the singularity of Ewald and Alicia's case.

literary allusion is to *Faust*⁸. The exposition of the novel already stages Edison as this character by depicting him alone in his study, pondering the limits of his science. Like Goethe's protagonist in the tragedy's first act, Edison is unhappy with his level of achievement, but unlike his predecessor, he does not dismiss the significance of the knowledge he possesses. Instead, he bemoans not being able to acquire more knowledge like that which he already has:

Comme j'arrive tard dans l'Humanité! murmurait-il. Que ne suis-je l'un des premiers-nés de notre espèce!... Bon nombre de grandes paroles seraient incrustées, aujourd'hui, *ne varietur*,--(sic),--textuelles, enfin, sur les feuilles de mon cylindre, puisque *son prodigieux perfectionnement permet de recueillir, dès à présent, les ondes sonores à distance!*... (Villiers, 1986, p. 770)

Edison's wish for more recordings recalls the advertising of the phonograph, which emphasized its versatility in terms of the different types of sounds or communications that it could archive. It is not surprising that the device should appear in the novel almost as soon as the protagonist, because when Villiers starts writing, this is Edison's best known accomplishment: the phonograph is the central item featured in the inventor's popular stand at the 1878 Exposition, and the French press covers it in abundance. It moreover recalls Edison himself because though the American does not travel to France, given this presence in the papers, he too, appears as a disembodied voice: his accomplishments speak for him⁹.

Aside from reminding the reader of Edison's image in popular culture, such a remark serves to characterize him as an arrogant inventor who overestimates his own importance in the history of science. In imagining that had he been alive earlier in human history, he would have been able to record the "grandes paroles" he references, the inventor erases the contribution of all prior scientists or inventors making his phonograph possible. He is suggesting that at any time in history, he would have been able to carry out his activity, deriving from first principles or rebuilding from basic materials all necessary tools and devices. Though similar statements about how useful the phonograph might have been, had it been invented earlier, are made in its advertising (Baldwin, 2001, p.81), Villiers exaggerates them in the novel to emphasize Edison's conceit. The pride he takes in his work gains a diabolical aspect as the inventor's thoughts culminate in his bemoaning not being alive at the beginning of the world to record the Word by which it had been created. Recording God's Word implies that the inventor could also have reproduced it, which justifies Raitt's description of his activity as a "conduite factieuse et blasphématoire" (Raitt, 1987, p. 199).

⁸ Raitt suggests that the novel's occultism draws on that of the play, and that the creation of the android is meant as a modern version of the homunculus, since Villiers cites the *Second Faust* more than the *First* (Raitt, 1987, p. 196-8). However, lacking a body, this being appears to be Eve's opposite, because she lacks a soul or consciousness.

⁹ Edison travels to France, however, for the 1889 Exposition, where he is received very well, meeting Gustave Eiffel and French President Sadi Carnot.

Edison further diverges from Faust as he complains that the attention he received for his invention is insufficient. In the first act of the tragedy, the doctor is unhappy because he finds his work to be held in too high a regard by his contemporaries. He is embarrassed by the reverence with which the townspeople greet him, and cannot see the good work he has accomplished in his career because he is too focused on his early failure. Sitting alone in his study, Faust gloomily thinks back on the experimental elixir he had developed with his father, and which had unfortunately killed his patients (Goethe, 2004, p. 35-36). In his home, Edison envisions his interaction with the public very differently, exclaiming “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” (Villiers, 1986, p. 771).

Though such a reaction does indeed greet the phonograph in France, where it is suggested that it is merely an expensive toy, it is quickly overshadowed by the public's positive response (Jehl, 1941, p. 272). The scientific community also embraces it, with *Le Figaro* noting that praise of the phonograph “fit résonner ... les murs sonores de l'Académie des sciences.” Their excitement matches that of the general public, and is taken for “que le commencement de l'enthousiasme spécial, qui prend tous les auditeurs quand le phonographe se met à tourner et à bavarder” (1878/06/03). Villiers' version of Edison then appears petty or vengeful, since he focuses on the negative reception, without embracing the positive response that replaces it. Indeed, we later learn that the only reason he has not made the android public is that he wishes the phonograph to have no competition in the market: “je tiendrai secret [...] l'absolu perfectionnement que j'ai découvert [...] J'écoulerai, de la sorte, pour cinq ou six millions de vieux phonographes-et puisque l'on veut rire... je rirai le dernier” (Villiers, 1986, p. 772).

His reaction is moreover notable because it suggests the inventor finds his interaction with his public, here, the press, to be theatrical. As he puts it, their reactions are *lazzis*, rehearsed comical replies like those of the *commedia dell'arte*. Edison may only be accusing them of lacking imagination, but I read this as a first indication that the inventor is aware he plays a part in the spectacle of his representation, an aspect which will form my focus in Edison's staging of his work to his customer, and more immediate public, Lord Ewald. His irritation at the press does not bother Edison for too long. He leaves Faust far behind as he happily dives back to work: “il se leva, non sans un sourire, et se mit à faire les cent pas dans le laboratoire,” (Villiers, 1986, p. 772), a prospect which Faust finds unbearable (Goethe, 2004, p. 27).

Villiers operates Edison's decisive break with this literary model of the inventor in the *Livre deuxième*, suggestively titled *Le Pacte*. There, Lord Ewald and the inventor reach an understanding, namely that Edison will build a counterfeit Alicia and Ewald will test her authenticity by trying to love her. The inventor is given twenty-one days in which to realize the android, at the end of which, should he fail, the Lord will commit suicide. The book's title, the time limit, and the provision that the inventor provide his friend with a beloved recall the terms upon which Faust and Mephisto settle in the tragedy. This arrangement, however, casts Edison in the devil's role, since he is providing a

solution to Ewald's predicament. Moreover, in the play, the potion Faust drinks to grow younger also works to make him see Helen of Troy in any woman (Goethe, 2004, p. 79), characteristic which closely approximates the function of the android according to Edison. The inventor may be copying a particular individual, but the machine he has devised is not only reproducible, this is not even the instance in which it was conceived. The reader first learns of the android in connection to Lord Ewald's sorrows, but Edison imagines the artificial woman after witnessing the ruin of another friend, Edward Anderson, at the hands of an actress. As the literature of the period advises, such a woman represents a great danger, and the inventor decides to work on a replacement for this type¹⁰. Like Mephisto then, Edison suggests that he will produce a unique ideal, but is in fact offering a solution that will only appear as such through magic. As we will see, in Edison's case, the magic is science carefully disguised through clever rhetoric.

The significance of both Faust and Mephisto in Edison's characterization is greatly diminished when Villiers lets it be understood that Lord Ewald had in previous years lent the inventor "[un] peu d'or" (Villiers, 1986, p. 791). The sum seems to have made a great difference, as the inventor praises the young man's generosity: "Lui, l'excellent, le charmant samaritain, sans tant de doléances, sut mettre pied à terre pour me relever et, d'une poignée d'or, me sauver la vie, le travail!" (Villiers, 1986, p. 779), and later, he will state that this help made his new electric light possible. Though Noiray is right in observing that "on ne le voit réclamer un quelconque salaire" (Noiray, 2000, p. 123), in these circumstances, their understanding is recast as a business relationship, or the repayment of a debt. This material aspect clashes with the literary model, but together with Edison's plan to mass-market the android, it emerges as a characteristic of his modern legend, which is founded in technology.

The model Edison claims for himself in the novel, Prometheus, accomplishes the opposite function: it provides the inventor a figurative, mythological frame in which to present his practical expertise. The inventor refers to electricity as "cette étincelle, léguée par Prométhée" (Villiers, 1986, p. 910), implying that he, who has mastered electricity, is an heir to Prometheus. As we have already seen, Villiers' Edison¹¹ is very proud, so such a take on his work does not surprise the reader. Instead, what is remarkable about this metaphoric relationship is that it is an image accepted by Lord Ewald. With regard to the android's animation, the young man asks him "veuillez bien m'apprendre, mon cher Edison, où je dois aller ravir une étincelle de ce feu sacré dont l'Esprit du Monde nous pénètre! Je ne m'appelle point Prométhée" (Villiers, 1986, p.

¹⁰ This characteristic, Edison's desire to improve women, is one of Villiers' anticipations that find an echo in the historical figure. It is interesting to note, as does Wood in Edison's *Eve*, that the historical Edison also pondered, at least in passing, the perfectibility of women. In a couple of journal entries he describes how a feminine ideal could be formed starting from his wife, and adding traits he had observed in other women. Though he terms the perfection of this composite being 'Raphaelized beauty,' the method by which he envisions it to be achieved is identified with Galton (Wood, 2002, p. 145-6). Though Villiers could not have been aware of this aspect of Edison's life, these terms approximate very well those in which his fictional Edison will present his creation to Ewald.

¹¹ According to the inventor's biographer, Paul Israel, Edison was actively invested in representing himself as a modern-day Prometheus (Wood, 2002, p.144).

841). Both thus employ the same 19th century metaphor¹² even though they are very different characters: Edison is a man of science and, as critics have already shown, Ewald is a decadent¹³ aristocrat, to whom science and technology are low, overly practical concerns.

Their meeting in this image is however of great significance in the text because it allows them the impression that they are communicating, when in fact, Edison is refusing to answer. The young man is asking for an explanation of how the android will be animated, but Edison is not willing to answer because he does not wish to grant his interlocutor access to his world at this point. Instead, the inventor brings himself into Ewald's world by replying, "Bah! tout homme a nom Prométhée sans le savoir-- nul n'échappe au bec du vautour" (Villiers, 1986, p.841). Whereas Edison knows what the referent of the figurative language is (electrical technology), Ewald does not. The two speak at cross-purposes, as they allude to different aspects of the myth, but this is part of the inventor's strategy. In this exchange, each man's interpretation reflects their impression of the other: Edison sees Ewald's suffering, and thinks of the punishment endured by Prometheus, while the young man perceives the inventor's power and thinks of Prometheus the creator, and the figure who stole fire. The inventor understands that Ewald requires sympathy, he is visiting his friend before dying, and is saving the revelation of Eve until he is in a mindset more propitious for him. Electricity as Promethean inheritance joins the mechanical world to the decadent aesthetic, as Villiers shows that the terms take different meanings for the two speakers.

Such skillful manipulation of language and awareness of his audience are qualities unique to this inventor. Faust and Prometheus are known for their defiance because they chose to be intractably themselves, while Edison plays the part his audience desires. The inventor is able to disguise a great inequality in knowledge and roles under the appearance of equivalence, denoted by both characters being likened to Prometheus, which serves to facilitate his interaction with his customer. He is obscuring from Ewald information which would have tainted his reception of the android: the answer the young man sought was that he, like any number of others, would have to buy the *étincelle* from Edison. This, however, is not appealing to a man seeking a unique, refined solution, and might offend his decadent sensibility. Villiers' characterization of Edison shows that he retains only audacity from the myth, not the magnanimity¹⁴, and certainly not the

¹² Prometheus as the father, or symbol, of electrical technology is commonplace in 19th century literature from Mary Shelley to Jules Verne.

¹³Patricia Miller-Frank comments on Ewald's resemblance to Huysmans' *des Esseintes*, his literary contemporary, while Jacques Noiray sees him as the epitome of the noble dandy. Going to the young man's interest in the artificial, Desmarests identifies him as a modern Adam, and so Eve's perfect match. He suggests the Lord is named after Johannes Ewald, "auteur d'une tragédie française en alexandrins intitulée *Adam et Eve* (1786)" (Desmarests, 1999, p. 37)

¹⁴ Though Edison is interested in cultivating an image of himself as Prometheus, he is not possessed of a great love of humanity. In producing a counterfeit human being, he is aiming to improve people, rather than their standard of living.

punishment¹⁵, while pretending to possess the figure's other qualities because they paint a flattering picture of him, and one which is appropriate to his audience.

Edison's playing to his public is most evident in his presentation of the android to Lord Ewald. To prepare the positive reception of the machine, Edison convinces him that his situation is in fact similar to that of his former friend, Anderson, who suffered at the hands of an actress. The inventor puts it forth that actresses, the women who eventually ruin men, initially repulse them. He hypothesizes that the men's first reaction is due to their instinctively spotting that the women's beauty, unlike that of their wives, is dishonest, or meretricious. They succumb because this appearance of perfection wins over the knowledge that it is illusory. The only evidence Edison can cite to Ewald in support, however, is that Alicia is also an actress, so his demonstration relies instead on a manipulation of his customer's emotions. Though Alicia's beauty is genuine and Ewald objects to her vulgar soul, Edison paints such a convincing picture of himself as a savior of men that the Lord believes his predicament is similar to Anderson's, which prepares the way for the android to be accepted as a solution. He achieves this result by terrorizing the young man with a prolonged demonstration of the accessories and prostheses¹⁶ seductresses rely on to enhance their charms¹⁷.

The inventor's terrible presentation of the 'beauty' that has ruined many men occupies chapters IV and V of the *Quatrième Livre*. Edison confronts Ewald with a troubling sight: "un petit être exsangue, vaguement féminin, aux membres rabougris, aux joues creuses, à la bouche édentée et presque sans lèvres, au crâne à peu près chauve, aux yeux ternes et en vrille, aux paupières flasques, à la personne ridée, toute maigre et sombre" (Villiers, 1986, p. 898). The young man responds emotionally, asking "Qu'est-ce que cette sorcière?" (Villiers, 1986, p. 898). The inventor steps in as his guide to this supernatural world, his explanations demystifying it by dramatically revealing the tricks employed by women to fool men. The author accentuates the visual, carnivalesque aspect of the show by having the inventor remark *voilà* or *voici* to introduce almost every grotesque, disembodied item. For example, we read "voici les belles petites dents lumineuses, si enfantines et si fraîches! Ah! le premier baiser sur la provocante magie du sourire ensorcelant qui les découvrait! Et il faisait jouer, avec bruit, les ressorts d'un

¹⁵ Edison survives the novel, and the reader leaves him contemplating his future work, though the android is destroyed and Ewald commits suicide.

¹⁶These devices are mostly not Villiers' invention, but items displayed at the 1878 Exposition, where a stand of note was, of course, Edison's (Villiers, 1986, p. 1446).

¹⁷The ideal beauty Edison deconstructs is described as follows: "c'était une ravissante enfant? disait Edison. Eh! eh! A tout prendre la passion de mon ami Edward Anderson ne fut pas inconcevable.--Quelles hanches! quels beaux cheveux roux! de l'or brûlé, vraiment! Et ce teint si chaudement pâle? Et ces longs yeux si singuliers? Ces petites griffes en pétales de roses où l'aurore semble avoir pleuré, tant elles brillent? Et ces jolies veines, qui s'accusent sous l'excitation de la danse? Cet éclat juvénile des bras et du col? Ce sourire emperlé où se jouent des lueurs mouillées sur ces jolies dents! Et cette bouche rouge? Et ces fins sourcils d'or fauve, si bien arqués? Ces narines si vives, palpitantes comme les ailes d'un papillon? Ce corsage, d'une si ferme plénitude, que laisse deviner le satin qui craque! Ces jambes si légères, d'un modelé si sculptural? Ces petits pieds si spirituellement cambrés?--Ah!... conclut Edison avec un profond soupir, c'est beau la nature, malgré tout! Et voici bien un morceau de roi, comme disent les poètes! " (Villiers, 1986, p. 898).

ravissant dentier pareil à ceux que l'on voit dans les montres des dentistes” (Villiers, 1986, p. 901). Ewald and the reader both watch wordlessly Edison’s theatrical performance, which deconstructs the ravishing beauty into an assemblage of devices that, to a man unused to them, and in the absence of the person who wears them, is senseless and disagreeable.

This demonstration, however, also calls into question Ewald’s, and the reader’s perception of Edison as a genuine scientific authority, as Villiers seems to suggest that the showman has gotten the better of the scientist. This can be observed firstly though the inventor’s remarking “Ecce pucella” (Villiers, 1986, p. 899) in the beginning of his presentation, in adaptation of Pilate’s introduction of the degraded Christ. He means thereby to give his subsequent revelation of the nature of women greater significance, but since Pilate is wrong, because the man before him is divine, Edison’s expertise becomes dubious. The same suspicion is cast through Ewald’s chosen term for the decrepit woman the inventor shows him, *sorcière*, an expression which reminds the reader that Edison himself is the *Sorcier de Menlo Park*. The similarities between the inventor and the beings he has just denounced as inauthentic are further suggested through the laboratory décor. He has not only accumulated the women’s many devices in his workspace, but he is surrounded by his own props. This room is full of his eye-catching, counterfeit marvels such as mechanical birds, electrical flowers¹⁸, and a ceiling that looks like the sky. The inventor’s own clever language and his setting could thus be construed as implying that he is closer to the women he appears to revile than the reader might have thought. At the same time, it is important to note that the author does not propose that Edison might have occult powers¹⁹: he acts, instead, like a stage magician.

Despite this representation, Edison’s scientific expertise is not being contested; Villiers is indeed unmasking him, but as a technician. In the author’s description, the inventor’s workplace is an underground Eden, as the title of the *Livre Troisième* indicates, and Ewald finds it “pareil à ceux que, jadis, sous les palais de Bagdad, orna la fantaisie des califes” (Villiers, 1986, p. 869). It is a place that invites reverie, but his fanciful devices are Edison’s own work, and he explains their mechanical and electrical nature to Ewald. The laboratory setup also makes the inventor appear a good businessman in that he knows to separate his public representation from his private life: he chooses not to illuminate his home or workplace with his new electric light. The sky-like ceiling is achieved through the use of gas light, “trois lampes oxhydriques, entourées de globes teintés de bleu, flamboyèrent brusquement, au plafond, autour d’une

¹⁸Villiers might have been inspired by Edison showcasing his bulbs in flowered chandeliers at the 1881 Paris Electrical Exposition (Baldwin, 2001, p.131).

¹⁹The phonograph, a suggested use of which is to record people’s dying words, is perceived, to some extent, as occult by the public, and the inventor is even contacted by a psychic, Mme. Blavatsky, founder of the Theosophical movement. She sends him a copy of her book, *Isis Unveiled*, as she believes the inventor’s work and her own meet in their exploration of electricity and magnetism. The phonograph is also associated with the otherworldly in more general settings, and we can read in the same *Univers illustré* article cited earlier, “mais, me direz-vous, ne faites vous pas un voyage dans le pays des chimères?” (78/03/23).

sorte de foyer d'électricité rayonnante, illuminant le laboratoire d'un effet de soleil nocturne.” (Villiers, 1986, p. 790), and in the house, “l'ingénieur abaissa le ressort d'un briquet à hydrogène qui se trouvait plus près de lui que les allumeurs électriques. Le jet de gaz, au contact de la frêle éponge de platine, s'enflamma” (Villiers, 1986, p. 778). This is a historically realistic decision, since the new technology is still very expensive and unreliable at this time, but it also supports Villiers' characterization of Edison as a modern legend inspired from the popular culture figure by the same name.

To great public acclaim, the inventor's experiments yield a bulb lasting about 100 hours in 1879. Large groups travel to see the device and many publications feature detailed drawings of the new lamp. In France, *La Lumière électrique*, *La Nature*, *L'Illustration* publish numerous articles on this development, the first touching upon 'la nouvelle lampe' in every other issue of 1880. Progress however is perceived as slow, and until the next year, the only place the bulbs can be seen is in Edison's home in Menlo Park (Baldwin, 2001, p.116). Demonstrating great understanding, *L'Univers illustré* writes “La curiosité est très excitée en Europe à l'endroit de cette invention, et l'on a hâte de pouvoir s'assurer *de visu* des résultats merveilleux que les Américains en annoncent ; mais, Edison l'a déclaré, il ne livrera ses lampes au public que lorsque l'expérience à laquelle il les soumet depuis plusieurs semaines aura une durée d'au moins six mois” (1880/01/31). Eventually, public opinion turns on Edison, as he appears not to be living up to its high expectations of 'the Wizard.' On both sides of the Atlantic, he is accused of having played a trick, or having faked his results. More leniently, J.W. Urquhart suggests in his well-known work, *The Electric Light: Its Production and Use*, that Edison should abandon the lamp, as it cannot work. As Baldwin puts it, “the image of Edison in the zeitgeist of the new decade hovered between the poles of legitimate entrepreneur whose time had come, and unfulfilled prophet” (Baldwin, 2001, p. 118).

In response, Edison works hard at improving the new technology and at developing a system of delivery of electricity, but he is also careful to manage his representation in the press. He maintains a good relationship with them by giving interviews and writing letters, while also taking matters into his own hands and founding *Science* magazine without publicizing his involvement (Baldwin, 2001, p. 121). He uses it, in part, to promote his work, and to justify the 'slow progress' by explaining the steps required before electricity can illuminate a city. However, in the 1881 Paris Electrical Exposition, the American achieves a significant victory, which is also strongly representative of his unique talents. Though more than 50 types of electric light are shown, as the exposition catalogue indicates, Edison's display is the most visible because it occupies two large rooms on the first floor of the Palais de l'Industrie (Baldwin, 2001, p. 131). His representatives hire Camille Flammarion to place articles in *Le Monde Illustré*, *L'Illustration* and *Le Figaro* in support of Edison's work, and this prominent representation makes him stand out. His biographer stops short of asserting that a causal relationship exists between this effort in the press and the five gold medals the inventor is awarded. This success greatly improves Edison's visibility in Paris, which Villiers, an avid Exposition visitor, would certainly have noticed: he founds two companies in the city, and is hired to light the foyer of the Opéra. Though this is finally a public use of his

new technology, it is still exceedingly expensive for private consumers. As an example, when Edison opens the Manhattan Pearl Street Station in 1882, J.P. Morgan can afford to have his Madison Avenue mansion electrified. Not using this light in Edison's laboratory then indicates that Villiers' inventor has made the reasonable choice for his work, while maintaining his reputation as an innovator. It moreover suggests that his work is primarily meant for sale to the public.

The unveiling of the android supports the representation of the inventor as an astute showman who knows his audience well. To Ewald, it arrives as a relief from the horrors of women's prostheses, which Edison has detailed in the hopes that if he proves all women are fake, in revealing that Eve is also counterfeit, the young man will conclude she is also a woman. His logic is flawed, but Edison's rhetoric bridges the gaps between what the Lord desires and what he as an inventor can produce. Detailing Eve's systems, of which this study is concerned with the third, "le Système-vivant, intérieur, qui comprend l'Equilibre, la Démarche, la Voix, le Geste, les Sens, les Expressions-futures du visage, le Mouvement-régulateur intime, ou, pour mieux dire, «l'Ame»" (Villiers, 1986, p. 908), Edison convinces Ewald that the android's semblance of animation and intelligence is the solution to his problem. Already the label he has affixed on the machinery making up Eve's movements and speech indicates the inventor is preparing the positive reception of his work. A term such as "L'Ame" would appear to reveal Edison's interest in the metaphysical, but it is only borrowed from Ewald, who desired to have Alicia's soul replaced.

Edison's ability to present his work in terms that are relevant to such an audience is demonstrated again, as he skillfully reinforces Ewald's metaphorical interpretation of the *étincelle*. The inventor contends that the android is 'alive' because "ces poumons, l'étincelle les met en mouvement comme l'étincelle de la Vie met en mouvement les nôtres" (Villiers, 1986, p. 855). Eve's lungs are golden phonographs²⁰, and she will be loved by Lord Ewald because of them -- Edison has recorded there the poetry and philosophy that serve as replies to all of the questions her lover would have. As he explains,

Les chants et la parole de l'Andréide seront à jamais ceux que lui aura dictés, sans la voir, et inconsciemment, votre si belle amie, dont l'accent, le timbre et les intonations, à des millièmes de vibrations près, seront inscrits sur les feuilles des deux phonographes d'or, -- perfectionnés à miracle, aujourd'hui, par moi, c'est-à-dire d'une fidélité de son de voix vraiment... *intellectuelle!* (Villiers, 1986, p. 855).

This remark meaning to stress to the young man how much the android will resemble Alicia calls into question her perfection because it implies that her intelligence is derived

²⁰It is interesting to note that, in a manner of speaking, the android anticipates a development in the career of the historical Edison. In 1890, the Edison Phonograph Toy Manufacturing Co. produces dolls containing small phonographs with recordings of nursery rhymes. They are very unsuccessful both because of their large size and their high cost, and production is quickly abandoned, (Wood, 2002, p.151).

from Edison's skill, rather than from the recordings themselves. It is the *fidélité de son* that is *intellectuelle*, a comment which bears on the phonograph's ability to record sound and reproduce it accurately.

In this aspect, Villiers draws on Edison's representation in the press, as such considerations are a standard of the coverage of the phonograph. We read, for example "le phonographe existe, [...] il est certain qu'il garde les sons qu'on lui confie et qu'il les répète fidèlement, que de plus savants que moi n'assignent pas de limite de temps à son fonctionnement". The impression that the phonograph can 'chat' to its audience is a mainstay of Edison's marketing²¹. One article, said to be translated from an American magazine, recounts that a reporter, welcomed by "le professeur Edison" to his laboratory at Menlo Park asked "Comment va le phonographe aujourd'hui, M. Edison? Oh! À peu près comme d'habitude," fut la réponse, "mais venez le lui demander" (1878/04/12). Most importantly, however, the success of the phonograph, like that of Edison in convincing Lord Ewald, is directly dependent on spectacle: when in 1878 the inventor founds the Speaking Phonograph Company, the new machine is exploited by exhibiting it: its performance is its first commercial use. It was mass-marketable for recording and reproducing sound only around twenty years later²².

One reason Edison stresses the *fidélité de son* over the intelligence of the replies is that the phonograph only provides sequential access to its recordings. Through her golden lungs, Eve becomes a 'perfectly cultivated hetaira,' as Miller-Frank puts it, but Ewald doubts she can appear to reason. Instead of attempting to correct this, which would indicate his willingness to produce a customized, or unique solution to Ewald's problem, Edison convinces him that this does not make her any worse than Alicia. He is intent on demonstrating the wide applicability of his devices, and when he cannot change them to fit a situation, he reinterprets it so that his work appears valid. To Ewald, he argues that given that Alicia's replies in a conversation are always inappropriate, he must already take great pains to read creatively what she says in order that they talk, and by extension, have a relationship. Speaking with Eve will require the same involvement, but because she is prepared to produce much more intelligent answers, and can accompany them with elegant gestures, it will be a much more pleasurable exercise. Edison concludes,

En vérité, *tout, je vous assure, peut, absolument, répondre à tout*: c'est le grand kaléïdoscope des mots humains. Étant donnés la couleur et le ton d'un sujet dans l'esprit, n'importe quel vocable peut toujours s'y adapter en un sens

²¹Eleven years later, in Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, Mina Harker's first reaction upon seeing the phonograph is still to ask "May I hear it say something?" (Stoker, 1993, p. 269).

²² In *Dracula* (1897) the phonograph has settled into one function, that of dictating machine, but it is still considered expensive and enthusiasm for it outshines its practicality. The cost of the device separates the characters by class, but its positive perception is visible across social and professional divisions. Thus we see that *Dracula's* first victim, Lucy Westenra, who is wealthy and superficial, owns a phonograph but never uses it, Mina Harker, who works to support herself, has never been able to afford one, and the professional man, Dr. Seward uses one at work, and finds it indispensable.

quelconque, dans l'éternel à *peu près* de l'existence et des conversations humaines.--Il est tant de mots vagues, suggestifs, d'une élasticité intellectuelle si étrange! et dont le charme et la profondeur dépendent, simplement, de *ce à quoi ils répondent!* (Villiers, 1986, p. 913)

To win the argument, the inventor extrapolates a general maxim from his very particular circumstances: "tout peut répondre à tout," with the intimation that if Eve can sound like Alicia, she is a suitable replacement by any other measure. Edison convinces Ewald that in loving Alicia he already loves an illusion, because he must ignore her faults. Having equated the two women through their physical aspect²³, and now through Ewald's perception of them, the inventor concludes that living with the android as a companion is just a matter of practice, "Avec un peu d'habitude--(ah! vous savez! il faut connaître une femme!)--tout vous deviendra *naturel*" (Villiers, 1986, p. 858).

Edison is thus selling imperfection as perfection: the phonograph's sequential access, a shortcoming of its playback function, is recommended to Ewald as further evidence of the fidelity with which Alicia has been reproduced. It is the real woman, who, according to the inventor, is an illusion to Ewald, so Eve must then also be acceptable. Such logic is lent further support by Edison's emphasis on the theatrical aspect of the interaction with both women, which he knows is appealing to his customer because he recognizes him as a type, and is also attentive to his predilections. The inventor, for example, notes that when he first presents his work to the young man, he sees in it similarities to the efforts of Paracelse and Raymond Lulle²⁴, "au temps des magistes et des souffleurs du Moyen âge" (Villiers, 1986, p. 834). It might appear that Ewald is doubting the authenticity of Edison's devices, but it is this perception of science as theatrical magic that the inventor reproduces and which convinces him to try to love Eve.

Villiers' Edison is however thoroughly a scientist. He is not only technologically proficient, as shows the functioning android, but he imagines such a provenance for himself. He integrates his work into the tradition of Albert le Grand, Vaucanson and Maëlzel [sic]²⁵, adding proudly that they "furent, à peine, des fabricants d'épouvantails

²³ Edison's presentation of Eve's other systems reveals that Alicia's likeness has been photosculpted onto the android.

²⁴Paracelsus (1493 - 1541) is the byname of a German alchemist and physician who turns away from the study of medicine in medieval universities.

Ramon Lull (c. 1232 - c. 1315) is a Catalan mystic and poet whose work, *Ars Magna* (1305-9) attempts to unify all forms of knowledge in support of the Christian faith. He is also cited as the author of a number of 14th century works on alchemy. According to medievalist Michela Pereira, however, already in the 19th century scholars began considering that these were not written by him, as his attitude toward alchemy had been negative, and all the volumes were published posthumously. Given Ewald's characterization, it is much more likely he is imagining this Ramon Lull, rather than the Christian apologist. (Encyclopædia Britannica, 2011)

²⁵St. Albertus Magnus (c. 1200 - 1280), Doctor of the Church, legitimized the study of nature as a science within the Christian tradition.

Jacques de Vaucanson (1709 - 1782) is a French inventor whose work includes automata (such as the 'digesting' duck), and the development of a loom later patented by J.-M. Jacquard.

pour les oiseaux. Leurs automates sont dignes de figurer dans les plus hideux salons de cire, à titre d'objets de dégoût d'où ne sort qu'une forte odeur de bois" (Villiers, 1986, p. 832). Though Edison finds the automata unsightly and unpolished, he reminds Ewald that his work builds on theirs, as he notes "oui, telles furent les premières ébauches des Andréidiens²⁶" (Villiers, 1986, p. 832).

The contrast of the two characters is used by Villiers to show to what extent Edison is willing to adapt himself to this audience. His decadent interlocutor responds to the explanation above with the medieval and alchemical allusions cited, and is "émerveillé," which prompts the inventor to do his best to reproduce this reaction to the *merveilleux*. He terrifies the young man with the props women use to seduce men. In this comparison with Edison's 'real' women, Eve is at least an honest (transparently inauthentic) woman, and her behavior is reliable, because it is guaranteed through his "Science avec la toute-puissance de ses mirages" (Villiers, 1986, p. 845). The inventor thus succeeds because Villiers makes him adept at staging his devices, as he did in the Expositions, so that they cannot be evaluated solely on technical grounds. A showman and a sophist, his science is nevertheless reliable, as the many devices accumulated in his laboratory attest. The inventor's purposeful representation of his technology as magical is the aspect of Edison's modern legend that separates him from his literary and mythological precursors and reveals his adaptation to his time. Villiers casts the inventor as Faust and Prometheus only to show that he is not possessed of the same passions, nor does he operate in the same frame. As in his 19th century, Villiers' Edison is a technology merchant: the Eve he offers Ewald is only one of a series, and the inventor sees little difference between her and the phonograph²⁷ itself.

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Johann Nepomuk Maelzel (1772 -1838) is a German inventor who perfected the metronome, and is also known for his fraudulent chess-playing machine, "The Turk." (Encyclopædia Britannica, 2011)

²⁶ Again, Edison is anachronistically reading himself back into the history of science.

²⁷As Gaby Wood points out, phonographs were sold in velvet-lined wooden boxes that resemble the coffin in which the android travels.

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Biographical note

Ana Oancea is a Ph.D. candidate in the Dept. of French and Romance Philology at Columbia University. She is completing a dissertation analyzing the figure of the inventor in 19th century French literature. Her work focuses on Emile Zola, Villiers de l'Isle-Adam, Jules Verne, and Albert Robida. It seeks to define the threat that the inventor's unique craft and intelligence are seen to pose by studying the representation of science and technology in the novels' historical context. She has published an article on *Le Rouge et le noir* and presented papers on the authors of her specialization. Her most recent paper was given at the AIZEN conference in Pusan, South Korea and dealt with "Matters of Life and Death: *Thirst* as an Adaptation of *Thérèse Raquin*". In the spring, she is chairing a panel on "Fictional Readers of French Literature" at the NeMLA convention.

Summary

This paper analyzes the characterization of Thomas Edison in Villiers de l'Isle-Adam's *L'Eve future* (1886) in an effort to explain how the author constructs this figure's modern legend in the novel's "oeuvre d'art-métaphysique." Choosing an inventor protagonist in a work that recommends itself on its serious, artistic purpose stands out in late 19th century literature because, at the time, such characters are associated with popular literature. Villiers stresses the uniqueness of his Edison by suggesting comparisons with such literary and mythological precursors as Faust and Prometheus only to show that his protagonist has little in common with them: this inventor looks down upon humanity and wishes to reform it, while being arrogant and happy in his lucrative business.

Edison's seemingly occult task is to copy a woman, and this paper argues he achieves success not because he produces a functioning android but because he presents his machine as an occult device to his decadent interlocutor. This spectacular marketing recalls that of the phonograph, as well as the staging of devices in Edison's stands in the International and Electrical Expositions of the 1870s and 1880s. Villiers' depiction of the protagonist as astute showman does not, however, amount to a criticism of his technological abilities. Instead, the author's emphasis on these characteristics goes to

solidify his legend as a modern, unique tale of economic success through applied science.

Key words

Villiers de l'Isle-Adam, "Eve future", Thomas Edison, 19th century French press, science, phonograph, android, decadence