Inside the European Submarine: Europe's Dreams of Autonomy and Global Perspectives

Adam Bence Balázs

Abstract

Dreams of autonomy are symptomatic of contemporary European politics and imagery. The independence from Russian gas, the EU member states' sovereignty against the continental construction, the isolation in a fortress from global migration processes, or the establishment of a European defense system emancipated from NATO: these vague claims portray an ideal state where the Old Continent could follow its own rules in multiple fields, regardless of the given context (of the global network of energy supplies and migration, the constructive framework of European integration, the North-Atlantic shield paradigm). These symptoms call for a diagnosis. These dreams of autonomy combine two contradictory ideas: isolation and centrality. Europe could be a powerful center yet isolated from global reality and its most pressing contemporary challenges. These toxic symptoms go against the contemporary challenge of being critical of Europe's real place and role in the global world. They have historical origins: the bygone rule of European empires when European centers felt free to appropriate and exploit the outside world in the name of the Western monopoly on power and copyright on modernity. In this inquiry, I will examine the core contradiction of European delusions regarding autonomy through literary criticism, focusing on a specific yet emblematic case: Roland Barthes' reading and interpretation of Jules Verne's popular fiction. The dream of autonomy is that of a submarine, like Captain Nemo's Nautilus, that would guarantee a safe technological bubble for Europeans and allow them to observe the outside world without ever really encountering it. I will show how Verne's popular literature and imagination are still at work because many Europeans fail to understand their actual location in the global world's geopolitical network. Finally, I will highlight that genuine autonomy refers first to autonomous thinking, to our ability to *read* history, politics, and geopolitics as *texts*, in other words, to mobilize our means and tools in textual understanding to overcome the pipedreams and empty promises of loose populist narratives.

Europe, like the whole of the globalizing world, has been in transition since the end of the Cold War. Within this complex shift, marked by the multi-scale process of globalization – from the intercontinental to the most local realities –, the place and role of the Old Continent are yet to be sketched and clarified. This complexity is easily legible in European politics and in the already worn-out phrases regarding the rise of populism. The present-day symptoms of anxiety are indeed highlighted but also instrumentalized by post-fascist movements and rhetoric.

A recurring theme in this troubled and anxious context is the harsh yet vague demand for autonomy, a symptomatic notion mixing elements of independence, sovereignty, separation, and isolation: independence from Russian gas; creation of a European army distinct from NATO; isolation of Europe from global migration processes; definition of national identities against ethnic diversity; separation of national sovereignty from the European project. At this initial stage of our inquiry, it makes sense to focus on the symptoms and their vagueness. What are the components of these European dreams of autonomy, and how can their hazardous political capital be overcome?

The mentioned cases have a common denominator: the assumption is that energy supplies, defense, identity, and sovereignty could work and exist autonomously, i.e., following their own rules, and regardless of the given context. The dream is that of a European model in advance of the rest of the world yet comfortably secured from it. It is the dream of an isolated center, as if Europeans wanted to live in Captain Nemo's Nautilus, the submarine designed by Jules Verne for the chosen few within the long-gone world of European empires in which the "West" had an undeniable monopoly on power and held the copyright on modernity. Contemporary dreams of autonomy are not one bit less fictional than the hi-tech machine from yesterday's popular literature. I will first examine the aforementioned literary source with the tools of literary criticism. Second, I will attempt to put a name on this symptomatic European dream and highlight the contradiction behind the idea of a secluded center. Third, I will investigate European politics and medium-term history to see what realistic form of autonomy might override the empty promises made in the name of a vague, island-like representation of the Old Continent.

Inside the Nautilus: Barthes' Rereading of Jules Verne

For a popular science fiction novel, Verne's *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Seas* has had a remarkable career in the field of literary criticism. As a childhood memory, this novel has inspired autobiographical approaches to literature (Gracq, 1985, p. 21). In the field of cultural and decolonial studies, it has been mentioned as symptomatic of Eurocentric conceptions of the world, to highlight the correlation between imperialism and the imperialist centers' seemingly apolitical literary production (Said, 1993, p. 187). At the crossroads of rekindled childhood memories and social-political criticism, and bringing—as could be expected—a touch of psychoanalysis, Roland Barthes (1991/1957) has pinpointed the basic bourgeois experience behind the reader's pleasure of traveling on an imaginary submarine like the Nautilus—a ship that has obviously been around the different seas of social and human sciences.

Barthes' approach combines the pleasure of rereading childhood classics with a harsh social criticism. The reader of his short essay on the Nautilus becomes somewhat torn between the nostalgic "pleasure of the text" (Barthes, 1973) and the critical blame it contains of bourgeois culture and society. The submarine turns into a mirror, both for the reader of the essay and, presumably, for its author.

Barthes characterizes Verne's novels as resulting in "a kind of self-sufficient cosmogony, which has its own categories, its own time, space, fulfillment and even existential principle" (Barthes, 1991, p. 65). To clarify this holistic dimension of Verne's oeuvre, I will rebuild Barthes' argumentation in three steps.

1. Barthes underlines Verne's "obsession for plenitude." Verne was like an "encyclopedist" who considered the world "finite, [...] full of numerable and contiguous objects." He "never stopped putting a last touch to the world and furnishing it, making it full with an egg-like fullness" (p. 65). In other words, Verne's science fiction is more about ordering the long list of available objects than inventing or seeking new ones outside of a circle closed in advance.

Imagination is enclosed: for Barthes, Verne did not indulge in the "banal mystique of adventure" (p. 65) or "mystical plans to reach the infinite." On the contrary, "he constantly sought to shrink [the world], to populate it, to reduce it to a known and enclosed space" (p. 66). This approach might seem unexpected in the case of adventure novels: are not Verne's stories about wide, open spaces, with characters traveling the world and discovering its diversity by boat, submarine, or hot-air balloon, from the center of the Earth to the Moon?

What could be so extraordinary about these *Voyages Extraordinaires* since they lack the basic pattern of discovery? How come "[i]magination about

travel corresponds in Verne to an exploration of closure" (p. 65)? Barthes develops this idea to point in two directions: the experience of childhood and the appropriation of the material world by the bourgeoisie.

2. For Barthes, the "existential principle" of Verne's world has its roots in a basic childhood experience: the "compatibility between Verne and childhood" stems "from a common delight in the finite." Indeed—and most probably based on personal memories—the pleasure taken from enclosed spaces can be found "in children's passion for huts and tents: to enclose oneself and to settle, such is the existential dream of childhood and of Verne" (p. 65). Hence, the emphasis is not on the "twenty thousand leagues," but rather on the secured interior of the submarine. The natural wonders and dangerous creatures we see "under the seas" are mostly kept outside of this hut or tent-like experience. There is adventure and danger, but the comfortable circle always closes again after such hazardous encounters with the outside.

Barthes identifies a childhood experience behind the pleasure taken by the reader in Verne's universe and its "existential principle." According to the literary critique, Verne's *Mysterious Island*, where the reader again encounters Captain Nemo and his submarine, is an "almost perfect novel" where the "archetype of this [childhood] dream" can be identified: the island is a secluded topographical entity; in it, we locate a cave, close to the "hut" experience, and inside this cave, we again see the Nautilus with its hi-tech interior (p. 65). The perfection of the novel might result from the arrangement of the story as a series of concentric circles (island, cave, submarine) where, despite different sources of danger, the characters and the readers can count on enclosed security. That is the thrill of these narratives: danger observed from secured shelters. In other words, magic is inside; imagination is much more invested in the interior than in the fictitious creatures that stay outside.

However, this thrill exceeds mere nostalgia for childhood: in Barthes' opinion, the main characters of these adventures *are* children-like minds, even when they are "officially" adults in the narrative. Indeed, in the *Mysterious Island*, the "manchild re-invents the world, fills it, closes it, shuts himself up in it" (p. 65). Obviously, many adult characters in children's novels are, in reality, children with whom the underage reader can easily identify. Nevertheless, the "manchild" might betray, beyond personal nostalgia, a phenomenon of mental regression, or a refusal to grow up and step out in the real world, as if the Nautilus (the hut, the cave, the island) could guarantee a sustainable form of autonomy against the outside reality. As soon as we reflect on this cloistered thrill from a historical and geopolitical perspective (Europe in the world), the secluded security of the automatic machine turns into a risky pipedream of autonomy.

3. Bourgeois persons are children like everyone else. Barthes does not address the colonialist dimension of Verne's "existential principle"; discretely

revisiting his childhood, his critique focuses on a more domestic sociological phenomenon: the appropriation of the material world by the bourgeoisie.

By filling and securing it, the "manchild re-invents the world […] and crowns this encyclopedic effort with the bourgeois posture of appropriation." For Barthes, "huts and tents" get replaced, in the adult world, by this posture coming along with "slippers, pipe and fireside, while outside the storm, that is, the infinite, rages in vain" (p. 65). The thrill of childhood turns into the very definition of comfort.

For Barthes, Verne would indeed belong to this "progressive lineage of the bourgeoisie" (p. 65), appropriating the world based on the assumption that it is already filled. The aim is not to "enlarge the world by romantic ways of escape or mystical plans to reach the infinite: [the bourgeois] constantly [seeks] to shrink it, to populate it, to reduce it to a known and enclosed space, where man could subsequently live in comfort" (pp. 65–66). Comfort is thus thought of as a secluded pleasure.

In the already well-furnished world, the task is not to explore, but "to make catalogues, inventories, and to watch out for small unfilled corners in order to conjure up there, in close ranks, the creations and the instruments of men" (p. 65). The tendency to fill joins the obsession to quantify and instrumentalize what is given.

Given to whom? In fact, appropriation is thought, not unrelated to childhood and its island, as the opportunity and task of an unrivalled agent. Like the child under the tent, the bourgeois imagines himself to be alone in a world that would be, first and foremost, available for his kind: "the world can draw everything from itself; it needs, in order to exist, no one else than man" (p. 66). This man, however, is not a representative of mankind among many others, but the one who dictates the "existential principle" of his "egg-like" full world.

It is in this enclosed space that appropriation in the hands of the single agent turns into exploitation: the bourgeois "proclaims that nothing can escape man, that the world, even its most distant part, is like an object in his hand, and that, all told, property is but a dialectical moment in the general enslavement of Nature" (p. 65). The comfort of the submarine supposes both the security from and the availability of the infinite seas for exploitation. The Nautilus is not merely a secure shelter: it is also, if not first, the advanced center that organizes the outside world into a catalogue of items and resources at the disposal of the captain.

* *

Barthes' interpretation of Verne's fictional world duplicates the idea of finiteness. On the one hand, the securely enclosed space is the submarine itself. The Nautilus, he writes, "is the most desirable of all caves: the enjoyment of

being enclosed reaches its paroxysm when, from the bosom of this unbroken inwardness, it is possible to watch, through a large window-pane, the outside vagueness of the waters, and thus define, in a single act, the inside by means of its opposite" (pp. 66-67). Here, finiteness characterizes the tent (hut, cave, island) in opposition to the open outside world.

Yet this outside world is also considered as finite, which is the very condition of its appropriation and exploitation:

> Beyond the innumerable resources of science, Verne invented an excellent novelistic device in order to make more vivid this appropriation of the world: to pledge space by means of time, constantly to unite these two categories, to stake them on a single throw of the dice or a single impulse, which always come off. Even vicissitudes have the function of conferring on the world a sort of elastic state, making its limits more distant, then closer, blithely playing with cosmic distances, and mischievously testing the power of man over space and schedules. And on this planet which is triumphantly eaten by the Vernian hero, like a sort of bourgeois Antaeus whose nights are innocent and "restoring", there often loiters some desperado, a prey to remorse and spleen, a relic from an extinct Romantic age, who strikingly shows up by contrast the health of the true owners of the world, who have no other concern but to adapt as perfectly as possible to situations whose complexity, in no way metaphysical nor even ethical, quite simply springs from some provocative whim of geography (p. 66).

The world is available: traveling around it by train, submarine, or hot-air balloon certainly takes time, but this time is that of the exploration of a finite universe already considered as a well-defined property. The "Vernian hero," in full command of (his own) space and time, browses across *his* world to appropriate and "eat" it—in other words, to exploit it. Here and there, blasé outcasts show up, like perhaps Captain Nemo himself, who, in the original novel, is not European. However, the experience of the main characters (Professor Aronnax, the French scientist, his servant Conseil, and Ned Land, the Canadian harpooner) and, with them, the experience of the reader is that of a perfectly readable world, where such "desperados" only appear as exceptions confirming the rule of a safe and enclosed world at the disposal of modernity.

Dreams of Autonomy Between Fiction and Politics

I will now take stock of the main points addressed by Barthes in terms of autonomy to then see how these symptomatic perceptions in Verne's world might be at work in present-day Europe.

First, an idea of autonomy shows through the automatic wonders of hi-tech machines. Technological innovation, the perceived fact that man is in full command of machines that work alone, mirrors in Verne's fictional universe the unquestioned bet on progress. In a sense, the Nautilus, as a machine, is the symbol of an appropriated world where the same rules should apply: man is in control of the world he himself creates, develops, and orders. The autonomy of the automat reflects the autonomy of the innovator, namely the Western ruler. If the automaton works by itself following the laws of science, the innovator should be able to impose his own political laws everywhere his automatons can take him. Mobility, the very advantage Europeans had over other civilizations in the time of colonization, can be defined as "to pledge space by means of time."

Second, this mobility does not make the European leave his or her home. The Vernian hero is, so to speak, at home wherever he can go with his automaton, this symbol of home. Whether a submarine or, perhaps even more emblematically, a "steam house," home is wherever the colonizer can build up his tent or hut, secured from the outside reality by constructions that follow his own rules. What truly confers "on the world a sort of elastic state" is this autonomy of the European home. The idea that perhaps one should not necessarily feel at home wherever one goes would be the antithesis of this colonialist conception. Comfort is opposed to fear and, as a matter of fact, there is no serious source of fear in Verne's novels beyond the necessary adventurous sequences: the legal framework of the highly mobile European home is hardly ever called into question. No matter how fast and performative, this image of home betrays, at the end of the day, an immobile conception of the world. "Home" is the center, wherever the autonomous tent is pitched in the "elastic" world.

Third, the appropriation and the exploitation of the world supposes a solitary (undisturbed) agent. Indeed, if man was not alone in the world, and if he—the bourgeois or the colonizer—had to consider a framework with different sets of rules, the very idea of free appropriation would become impossible. In other words, what is reflected in Verne's stories, in a symptomatic rather than a pretentious way, is that the "world-eating" hero is indeed a "manchild," a mentally regressive individual who cannot accept that rules other than those contained in his purportedly self-sufficient framework might apply outside of the tent. The manchild is at the center of its own world, secluded from the rules that might apply to it.

The common denominator of these three sets of comments is a combined idea of centrality and isolation. Technological innovation is at the center of attention, its autonomy mirrors the superiority of its engineer, whose own rules should apply to wherever this superior mobility could take him. From this point of view, Captain Nemo is an ambiguous character, representing both the autonomy of the outcast and the similarly arbitrary rule of the civilization represented by the other main characters.

Literary criticism examining Verne is certainly tainted with childhood nostalgia. The "manchild" is also Verne's adult re-reader, the child in us. The ideal combination of centrality and seclusion is indeed tempting, hence probably the comfort and pleasure of reading and rereading Verne's novels. Yet, as Barthes shows through social criticism, there is more to these temptations of our imagination than thrilling entertainment.

In Barthes' view, the craving for centrality *and* security is symptomatic of a certain social class, the bourgeoisie. In my view and this through Barthes' hint at the "general enslavement of Nature," the Nautilus might be symptomatic of a more toxic form and object of nostalgia: a craving for different epochs of the European past: the centrality of the Old Continent in the time of colonial empires *and* the comfortable security of Western Europe during the Cold War.

Instead of accusing Verne, his popular novels, and his readers of naivety, I will rather consider how these points on technological superiority, elastic home and regressive rule translate into our contemporary delusions regarding Europe's place and role in the global world. These delusions were already symptomatic of Eurocentrism when Verne published his novels. However, what matters here is the way these symptoms are still ours, in the present-day geopolitical state of global transition.

In fact, it is our ability to critically reread the classics of our own culture (or childhood) and constructively reflect, with them, on our most contemporary challenges, that might lead to a certain degree of autonomous thinking to counter and overcome dreams of European autonomy in an interdependent world where all continents are, so to speak, supposed to be on the same ship.

The European Submarine in the 21ˢᵗ Century

Talking about ships, the one carrying the West's monopoly on power has sailed. According to a deliberately provocative essay, the "West has lost it" (Mahbubani, 2018). Following a short couple of centuries during which science, technology, and the resulting mobility made the West the center of the world, older centers at the other end of the Silk Road – first of all China and India, but now also Indonesia – emerged *again* to occupy the places they had

temporarily lost. The author, Kishore Mahbubani, a former UN diplomat from Singapore uses a questionable approach and methodology to put forward the idea that Western supremacy was nothing but a short-term "parenthesis," and even an "aberration" in world history (p. 12). In this reading, the Nautilus would be the symbol of an intermediary – or, in a more provocative way, almost a "medieval" period.

The question is not the Western or European reader's opinion about an essay that was deliberately meant to be a provocation (for the West, for the International Liberal Order, and for European modernity). The idea would rather be to see to what extent Europeans are able to decenter their home on the map and to consider, at least for the time of a self-critical sequence of reflection, that they are no longer at the center of the map and of global attention.

Autonomous thinking might commence with the ability to play with such a provocative idea: the West has lost it. Hubert Védrine nuances the provocation, suggesting that the geopolitical players behind the somewhat vague label of "the West" are still powerful, but that the monopoly is gone (Védrine, 2021, pp. 266–267). Europe, especially, is not the center it used to be, but one of many ships sailing somewhere on the map. The question is where it is, how to orient ourselves, and what relations to strengthen in an era of global neighborhood. The ability to read and accept such opinions does not mean agreeing with them or showing spontaneous and unreflected contempt for the Old Continent, but showing curiosity for what is outside the submarine, and not only through its protecting "window-panes."

For a reason that is correlated with the loss of the Western monopoly on power—the loss of the West's copyright on modernity—the Nautilus no longer looks so fancy or shiny. Almost the whole world is now modern. Except for shrinking non-modern groups, modern material civilization has become a shared standard on a global scale. It is vital to grasp the anthropological dimension of these recent changes.

As Claude Lévi-Strauss has highlighted, the danger and deadlock of a globally shared modern civilization are that its different parts start to look for differences within this framework of uniformity. Such differences are potentially even more violent than those at work in a "clash of civilizations" type of narrative (Lévi-Strauss, 2011, p. 138). The difference between Europe and other corners of the modern world, the hazardous clash of identitarian fairy tales within a shared global plot: once again, and looking beyond short-term politics, history and anthropology call for a textual understanding. The reader can be autonomous in a way a continent or a "civilization" cannot. From an anthropological point of view, these have lost their autonomy in the longer term, along with the emergence of modernity (Lévi-Strauss, 2011, p. 36).

Dreams of autonomy are tempting in an age of interconnectedness. After all, is not autonomy the opposite of interdependence? Let us briefly examine this latter concept. On the one hand, interdependence is, economically speaking, "blatant" (Védrine, 2021, p. 241). The last forty years have been characterized by an optimistic approach to the iconic global plane and the appraisal of "globalized value chains." However, Védrine continues, if "almost all peoples, states, economies, cultures, individuals have become interdependent and interwoven, then can we still talk about independence, national, European, or otherwise? Of sovereignty?" (pp. 241–242).

It is crucial to put some order in the terminology in order to distinguish between pipedreams of independence and adequate geopolitical room for maneuver. According to Védrine, autonomy is first the ability to think autonomously (a classic philosophical idea of *courage* that deserves revisiting in troubled times of transition and moments of danger). Autonomous thinking comes with the possibility of making decisions with "freely chosen partners." That is almost a privilege if we look at how dependent the majority of the world actually is: "the means to intimidate, to threaten, to manipulate, to sanction, to boycott, to interfere, to use lobbies and diasporas are unequally distributed" in the world (p. 242).

Independence is a pipedream, but interdependence has also been put to the test. The Covid pandemic has revealed the fragility of interdependent actors in international politics (p. 242). More recently, the Russian aggression of Ukraine has emphasized and abused this inherent fragility. Indeed, well-functioning interdependence supposes approximately equal powers and values. If one side is keen on protecting its population while the other is much more careless, interdependence quickly turns into a toxic mutual annoyance. Interdependence would suppose a symmetrical relationship: Europe's weakness (lack of sufficient energy resources) is Russia's power; Russia's weakness (dependence on exporting energy resources) is Europe's power. Such symmetry would suppose comparable respect of the citizens' needs and rights. The European submarine can count on the Northern Asian – i.e., Russian – fuel if Northern Asia seeks to guarantee a similar level of welfare to its population. If the passengers of the European submarine are used to well-established human rights and cannot even comprehend how Northern Asia's population can suffer major violations of basic rights, interdependence gets abused and turns into a cynical tool for blackmailing.

Independence from Northern Asian gas is, however, unsustainable beyond short-term symbolic acts. The European submarine can celebrate its autonomy until it runs out of fuel. According to Védrine, the idea is instead to multiply sources of supply and, somewhat vaguely, "not to be (too) dependent" (2021, p. 435). What matters is to distinguish between notions that might otherwise turn the symbol of autonomy into a conceptual short-circuit: independence, sovereignty, and autonomy.

Postwar European history has blurred these distinctions. A more critical look at the last seven decades should contribute to deconstructing the pipe-dream of a European Nautilus that would be both central and secluded from the rest of the world, and help us see that autonomy is, first and foremost, a virtue of reason and understanding.

European construction as we know it is a postwar process and narrative. The six founding members of the community could not efficiently have joined forces without substantial transatlantic support, both financially speaking (the Marshall Plan, see Steil, 2018) and in terms of US "mentoring" of postwar Europe (Védrine, 2021, p. 168). The Western part of Europe could only develop in the geopolitical framework of the Cold War, in a specific context where the two superpowers met in the middle of the Old Continent.

This allowed, for a couple of decades, the privilege of an "end of history" period (although Francis Fukuyama coined the phrase in 1989, the experience already applied to postwar Europe) where Western Europeans did not have to care about their defense—and could easily forget about their dependence on the North-Atlantic military shield. In this specific geopolitical context, a part of Europe could consider, without contradiction but without guarantees for the longer term, a pleasant combination of centrality as a patchwork of democratic welfare models and security (guaranteed by the transatlantic neighbor).

This form of autonomy lasted until the end of the bipolar world order. For three decades, and despite significant warnings, Europe enjoyed the impression that it could keep on living in the Nautilus, observe the horrors of the outside world through the thick window, and claim to be a model without a defense system that would not depend entirely on the US. The leading idea of European *unification* might have blurred the fact that *strong* and *united* are not interchangeable concepts.

The violent breakup of Yugoslavia—a European conflict that Europe could not handle—was a first warning. The large-scale influx of asylum-seekers to the EU's borders in 2015 brought into the limelight the blatant contradiction of being a more than attractive model for the "rest of the world" while, at the same time, being isolated from it. This contradiction has resulted in the accelerated rise of post-fascist movements and voices (Tamás, 2021, pp. 375–392). These have two common denominators: a vague demand for national sovereignty in the face of the European construction perceived as an authoritarian center, and the deliberate mongering of fear and anxiety with the promise of a secured submarine.

Despite the clashes resulting from the delusional windmill fight of Viktor Orbán's Hungary against "Brussels" as an imperial center, this cynical and opportunistic opposition to European institutions contributes to an idea shared by the Hungarian leader's European opponents: the idea that the EU is a center. National sovereignty and independence, inherited on the

East-Central periphery from the age of Romanticism along with anti-Western resentment, might be more harmful on the side of the all-European illusion of the Old Continent being "central" than on the side of technically weakening institutions. What undermines European credibility on the global stage is the EU's lack of autonomy from its own member states. It cannot decide on its own foreign political agenda and is doomed to a lack of perspectives if it comes to a standstill when faced with the problems it has created for itself—"autonomously," without foreign help or threat.

Fearmongering, or the deliberate use of anxiety in these troubled times of transition, and tumultuous present-day challenges, bring us back to 19th-century fiction. Europe, as a fortress at the very center of the global map but well isolated from it, is closer to Jules Verne's naïve imagination than any geopolitical reality. Fear and anxiety have real sources; the feelings in themselves are legitimate and understandable. They also have long-term origins (Duby, 2020). Post-fascist voices relentlessly rekindle these feelings in the name of a continental, macro-regional, or national specificity within the global world and the emergency to defend them. Such empty identitarian promises of security go against the only form of autonomy we can name without vagueness: that of thinking, i.e., autonomy as a means of orientation. Geopolitically, the aim is to develop multilateralism while remaining keen on choosing our closest allies (in this sense, there is no need to break free from military dependence on the U.S., but should nevertheless motivate Europeans to keep an eye on how close, how powerful, and how reliable the transatlantic neighbor is in this early 21ˢᵗ century). Multilateralism without allies sharing our values and principles is a slippery slope towards dependence and vassalage—the Hungarian deadlock being a useful demonstration of this.

The autonomy of a fictional submarine remains tempting. It is crucial to see that this temptation is more closely connected to 19th-century popular literature than it is a realistic option for the Old Continent in the 21ˢᵗ century. Nevertheless, the secluded center and its artificial adventures sound promising:

> (T)he ship may well be a symbol for departure; it is, at a deeper level, the emblem of closure. An inclination for ships always means the joy of perfectly enclosing oneself, of having at hand the greatest possible number of objects, and having at one's disposal an absolutely finite space. To like ships is first and foremost to like a house, a superlative one since it is unremittingly closed, and not at all vague sailings into the unknown: a ship is a habitat before being a means of transport. And sure enough, all the ships in Jules Verne are perfect cubby-holes, and the vastness of their circumnavigation further increases the bliss of their closure, the perfection of their inner humanity. (Barthes, 1972, p. 66)

The words to emphasize are probably: "in Jules Verne." The temptation can be deconstructed through textual understanding, the main guarantee for autonomous thinking in contrast with the delusions of automatic opinions. Our understanding of politics, history, and anthropology is, first and foremost, textual. The difference between reality and fiction, a substantial strategy and an empty promise, a feeling and a concept, an entertaining illustration and a convincing example – all depend on our ability to read written lines and between them. What we can learn from reading Jules Verne (and his professional readers like Roland Barthes) is how to make such distinctions and then how to make meaningful choices regarding the place and role of Europe in the global world.

References

Barthes, R. (1973). *Le plaisir du texte* [The pleasure of the text]. Seuil, Points/ Essais.

Barthes, R. (1991/1957). *Mythologies*, A. Lavers. The Noonday Press/Farrar, Straus & Giroux.

Duby, G. (2020/1994). *Sur les traces de nos peurs* [The origins of our fears]. Textuel.

Fukuyama, F. (1989). The end of history? *The National Interest*, *16*, 3–18.

Gracq, J. (1985). *La forme d'une ville* [The shape of a city]. José Corti.

Lévi-Strauss, C., (2011) *L'Anthropologie face aux problèmes du monde contemporain* [Anthropology in front of the modern world's problems]. Seuil.

Mahbubani, K. (2018). *Has the West lost it? A provocation.* Penguin Books.

Said, E. W. (1993). *Culture and imperialism*. Vintage Books.

Steil, B. (2018). *The Marshall Plan: Dawn of the Cold War*. Simon & Schuster.

Tamás, G. M. (2021). *Antitézis* [Antithesis]. Pesti Kalligram.

Védrine, H. (2021). *Dictionnaire amoureux de la géopolitique* [A sentimental dictionary of geopolitics]. Plon/Fayard.