

Future Times Three, Barjavel (1944). Part III. Imprudence.

Le voyageur s'approcha, regarda l'homme avec une curiosité passionnée. Le glorieux soleil du matin cernait d'or son profil. Il jetait des phrases brèves, se grattait de temps en temps les poignets, l'aîne, les aisselles, puis croisait de nouveau ses mains derrière son dos. Ses cheveux plats lui tombaient dans le cou, cachaient ses oreilles. Saint-Menoux le trouva vraiment petit, jaunâtre. « Il manque vraiment d'allure », pensa-t-il. Il poussa un grand soupir, et se prépara à l'action. Il était venu pour tuer Bonaparte.

The traveler approached and stared at the man with a passionate curiosity. The glorious morning sun framed his profile in gold. He shouted out brief orders, from time to time scratching his fists, his groin, his armpits, then crossing his hands again behind his back. His flat hair fell down his neck, hiding his ears. St. Menoux found him very small and rather yellowish. He certainly lacks grandeur, he thought. He sighed heavily and prepared for action. He had come to kill Bonaparte.

Napoléon a ployé Europe sous sa botte. Les nations portent encore les traces de ses pas. Il n'a pas été entraîné par les hommes, mais s'est imposé à eux. Son génie personnel a conduit toute son aventure. S'il succombe au début de sa carrière, si une balle perdue le tue au siège de Toulon, que deviendra l'Histoire ? Saint-Menoux se pose cette question depuis des semaines. Il a voulu la résoudre avant de se consacrer au bonheur d'Annette.

Napoléon had crushed Europe under his heel. Modern nations still carry the scars of his footsteps. He was not led by men, but imposed his will upon them. The entire adventure was a result of his personal genius. Had he died at the beginning of his career, had a stray bullet killed him during the siege of Toulon, what would this have done to history? St. Menoux had asked himself this question for weeks. He would have to resolve it before committing himself completely to Annette.

Si, Bonaparte tué, un autre empereur des Français surgit de l'armée ou du peuple et livre les mêmes guerres, ce sera la preuve que les hommes ne sont point libres, mais qu'une fatalité effrayante les conduit sur une route de sang tracée de toute éternité, et qu'il est vain de tenter de les en détourner. Le sage, alors, s'écartera de la vie active, laissera les ignorants s'agiter, savourera dans un lieu écarté les petites joies quotidiennes.

If Bonaparte were killed and another emperor were to rise from the army or from the people and wage the same wars, it would be proof that men are not really free, but that a terrible fate leads them along a bloody road traced for all eternity, with no hope of changing its direction. The wise man, then, will reject the active life, will leave the ignorant to their quarrels, and will savor the simple daily joys of a secluded place.

Pierre sourit tendrement à l'image d'Annette. Il se construira avec sa jeune femme un petit paradis, dans un coin choisi de l'espace et du temps, en un lieu, en une époque bien abrités des révolutions et des frimas. Ils y vivront des années, des siècles, des éternités. Ils n'auront rien d'autre à faire qu'à s'aimer. Rien d'autre à faire ?... Enfin il verra bien !... Maintenant il va se livrer à cette dernière expérience.

Peter smiled tenderly at Annette's image. He would build a paradise with his young wife, in a chosen corner of space and time, in an epoch sheltered from storms and revolutions. They would live there for years, for centuries, for eternity. They would only love each other. Nothing else to do? Well, he would see. Now he would undertake his final experiment.

Ce soir, il sera renseigné sur le destin des hommes. Ce soir, il sera le mari d'Annette. Petite Annette ! Douce de chair, de cœur. Ce soir... Les cris des combattants, le fracas des explosions, la lumière rouge du soleil levant sur les nuages et sur la mer, la conscience de l'énormité de son geste exaltent Saint-Menoux. Les bras étendus, il plane, tourne, autour du petit homme campé dans la fumée. Ses mains subtiles se promènent sur le visage, sur le dos du futur maître de Europe. Il cherche l'endroit où il va frapper.

This evening he would discover the destiny of man. This evening he would be Annette's husband. Little Annette! Sweet of body and in heart. This evening... The combatant's cries, the roar of explosions, the red light of the rising sun on the clouds and the sea, and the consciousness of the enormity of his task excited St. Menoux. With arms stretched out, he soared and circled the small man encamped in the smoky haze. His thin hands touched the face and the back of the future ruler of Europe. He looked for the best place to strike.

More in English

In order to act, St. Menoux would have to stop for a few seconds outside of time. It would be brief. He decided to station himself behind the man, to appear, shoot, and disappear. A violent explosion shook the ground. A cloud of dust flooded the battery. Shots whistled and roared. Pebbles crackled in the plane tree leaves. A severed arm flew by St. Menoux. The cannon of the fortress replied and the dust flew. A bomb-burst mangled two gunners. Bonaparte did not move, but continued to shout out orders. The hesitant artillerymen went back to their posts, directing their fire on the fort.

[...] He stopped the vibrator. The odor of powder stung his nose. Cannons pounded the air and a bomb approached with a deafening roar. It exploded. He fired. An artilleryman had thrown himself between the bomb and Bonaparte. It did not explode. The man was struck by four bullets. Two others whistled in his ears. He staggered. Bonaparte did not move.

Eight cannons roared and the ground trembled. St. Menoux had no more bullets in his weapon. The smoke was choking him. The weight of destiny was crushing him. He had failed. He became invisible again.

Why hadn't he brought another ammunition clip? He had not known that a clenched finger fires an automatic pistol like a machine gun. He had never used a firearm, not even during the war. He was neither a warrior nor an assassin, only a scientist, a theorist. He would have to begin all over again. He slumped discouraged and terribly weary. He did not move from his spot. The artillery continued to thunder.

He floated behind the blind like a cork on still water. His enthusiasm left him as the cannon balls burst from the brown steel cannons. A heavy sadness replaced his excitement, perhaps fatigue.

The soldier's devotion did not surprise him. He knew that he had been rescued before by the fanatic love of his men at the Arcole bridge and at the siege of Acre. Yet here, it seemed that God himself

had pushed the gunner in front of the weapon that would have altered the course of history. God did not want the face of the world to be changed.

Vocabulary

Napoléon Bonaparte: French general and statesman who rose to prominence during the French Revolution and led a series of military campaigns across Europe during the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars from 1796 to 1815. He led the French Republic as First Consul from 1799 to 1804, then ruled the French Empire as Emperor of the French from 1804 to 1814, and briefly again in 1815. He was King of Italy from 1805 to 1814 and Protector of the Confederation of the Rhine from 1806 to 1813. He was in fact 170 cm (5 ft 7 in), an average height at the time.

Staggered (Il [chancela](#)): to move or stand unsteadily, to hesitate.

Slumped (Il s'affaissa): to fall or sink suddenly, or a noun meaning a decline or a downward slide.

Arcole bridge: in 1796, battle fought between French and Austrian forces 25 kilometres southeast of Verona during the War of the First Coalition, a part of the French Revolutionary Wars. La [Bataille](#) du Pont d'Arcole.

Acre: The siege of Acre of 1799 was an unsuccessful French siege of the Ottoman city of Acre and was the turning point of Napoleon's invasion of Egypt and Syria, along with the Battle of the Nile.

René Barjavel (1911–1985) is a French author and journalist more famous in the French-speaking world than in Anglo-Saxon countries, despite the fact that he is was one of the pioneers of science fiction and time travel (the grandfather paradox in *Future Times Three*; French: *Le Voyageur imprudent*, 1944. Literally: The Careless Traveler).

When he visits 2052, the protagonist witnesses a planet-wide societal collapse to pre-industrial levels, due to the mysterious “disappearance” of electricity.

Concerning the date, 2052, it appears to be a reference to Nostradamus. The quote can be found in *Future Times Three*: “The year that Venus is lying near Mars” designates astrologically, in an indisputable way, the year 2052, continued the scientist. The other verses make us fear terrible events. The rooster here, designates, France, or perhaps humanity. “The naked man will remain . . . The naked man! You hear that! what can happen to our unfortunate grandson that he will remain naked?”

It tells the story of two scientists who invent a substance which if swallowed allows a man to time travel. They travel to the future, where humanity has branched into different species with their own particular tasks. The book was published in English in 1958, translated by Margaret Sansone Scouten. *Future Times Three* is the first novel to present the famous grandfather paradox of time travel.

In the middle of World War II, young mathematician Pierre Saint-Menoux meets wheelchair-bound scientist Noël Essaillon (as well as his beautiful daughter Annette), inventor of the substance that allows time travel — Noëlite. Thankful to Pierre, whose mathematical work allowed the Noëlite breakthrough, Essaillon enlists him in the exploration of time, using Noëlite pills at first, then a special "time suit".

Written when Time Travel Tropes were not yet codified, *Future Times Three* has too many ideas to explore to remain confined to a single plot point. Consequently, the novel is organized as a series

of Story Arcs: the introduction and testing of time travel; the exploration of the future, especially the collapse of society in 2052 and the unrecognizable world of the year 100.000; Pierre's attempt, after Essaillon's death, to escape wartime hardship by turning time travel to more practical (though dangerous and morally dubious) applications. What gets Pierre in the end, however, is his existential curiosity: he sets out to kill Napoleon to see if history can be changed, only to kill his own great-grandfather by accident and vanishing.

Concentrating more on the philosophical and existential consequences of Time Travel rather than the technical aspects, the book explores — and sometimes invents — many Time Travel concepts, such as the extent to which history can be changed, the ethics of saving someone who was supposed to die and whether people from the past count as "real" or not since they're already dead from your point of view. The novel is often credited with inventing the Grandfather Paradox.

Grandfather Paradox (Le [paradoxe](#) du grand-père): This happens literally when Pierre tries to assassinate Napoleon Bonaparte before his rise to power: at the last moment, a soldier jumps to take the bullet and save Bonaparte. This soldier is of course the time-traveler ancestor. The time-traveler is then wiped out from existence. There is even an appendix explaining the paradox at length (including the fact that, for the time-traveler, there is no real ending — he is constantly oscillating between existing and non-existing. The ending of the novel however makes it clear he does not exist anymore — his fiancée is celibate, and the man he helped build the time machine in the first place is fruitlessly trying to make it work).

The time machine allows to program the destination time, but only the time traveller's thoughts can decide where they will land, so Pierre needs to focus on a specific place as he switches the time machine. This requires some training as his first attempts cause him to appear either in the privy, the pantry, or Annette's bed. Later on, this has dramatic consequences when he lets his mind wander during a time trip and he ends up disrupting his neighbour's parents' wedding, erasing the poor guy from history.

Peter St. Menoux is a corporal, Master of Arts in Mathematics. He is young math teacher, a French soldier in World War Two (named Pierre Saint-Menoux in the French text).

Time travel novels are nearly always the author's way of making social commentaries. H. G. Wells used *The Time Machine* as a way of saying that if current (as of a century ago) trends continue, the leisure class will evolve into childlike, tender, stupid Eloi and the working class will evolve into bestial Morlocks. The twist was that the Eloi appeared to be the privileged class but were mere cattle for the Morlocks. Wells was, by writing this novel, saying that we had to do something to solve this problem. Wells's open proclamation of eugenics, however, was not the right way to deal with the problem.

René Barjavel certainly fit into the social commentary pattern. When the time travelers visited the year 100,000, they found that humans had evolved into a multitude of forms, but that they had transformed the face of the Earth so that it consisted only of flat plains with regular lines of conical structures. Some of the human forms had mouths without jaws, and lived off of milk, delivered through teats that fit directly into their conical mouths, and completely assimilated the molecules.

Barjavel's novel was based on the totally preposterous premise that a man named Noël Essaillon invented a material known as noélite that would allow a person, when wearing a green diving suit, to float through time and space. Essaillon chose a young math teacher, a French soldier in World War Two named Pierre Saint-Menoux, to be his collaborator, since Essaillon was wheelchair-

bound and could not himself travel in time. Spray on some noëlite, slip into the scaphandre suit, and off you go. But when Pierre slipped into the near future, he found that Essaillon's pretty little daughter Annette had grown up. Love was inevitable. During one of their trips to the future, the elder Essaillon died, then came back to life, then decided that God wanted him to stay dead.

Saint-Menoux wanted to understand the time structure of reality. So he performed experiments. He went into the past and interrupted a wedding so that he could steal jewels. He and Annette were also very poor in wartime France. When he got back to the future, though, he discovered that the wedding he had interrupted was that of the parents of one of his friends. That friend no longer existed or, more properly, had never existed. However, the incredibly ugly building for which that friend had been an architect still existed, designed exactly the same way by some other architect.

Perhaps, Saint-Menoux thought, history was inevitable and individuals did not matter. He also wanted to see if he could make himself appear in history books by doing something outrageous in the past. In his green scaphandre, he stole money from a bank. What he did not count on was getting his scaphandre ripped and inactivated. The distraught Annette had to go back in time and rescue him. Back into his home time, he found that he had appeared in history as The Green Demon. He had become a legend.

Saint-Menoux was to marry Annette the very night when he decided he had to answer one last question before giving up his time traveling to become a husband. He wanted to know whether he could change all of history, not just the history of individuals. **He decided to go back to 1793 and kill Napoleon. Pierre found Napoleon, but accidentally killed another man instead, the man who turned out to be his ancestor. At that moment, Saint-Menoux ceased to have ever existed.** The final scene was very touching. Annette heard a shriek outside, it reminded her of Pierre, but even as she was thinking about Pierre she forgot who he was. She ran past the workshop where her father was still working unsuccessfully on his time machine.

Annette raised the lamp as she looked outside of the door: "The lamp threw a square of light on the paving stones. Very high up, amidst the stars, the moon illuminated the empty street. A little whirl of wind threw upon her naked feet a dead leaf." And that was the end of Saint-Menoux, and the very memory of him, and of noëlite, which Annette's father would never actually discover.