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Jules Verne: Father of Science Fiction?

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Jules Verne (1828-1905) is conventionally regarded as the father of science fiction. Some literary historians may dispute this, asserting that sci-fi goes all the way back to the early moderns or even the ancients (via, of course, Bacon's "New Atlantis"…), with the boldest spirits even claiming Homer's *Odyssey* for the genre. That seems to me a stretch. Since science, as we now understand the term, did not really begin until the seventeenth century, surely science fiction cannot have existed any earlier.

Reserving the right to offer some qualifications of my own, "father of science fiction" will do very well as a starting point for discussing Verne and his works. Between 1863 and 1905, this very bourgeois French gentleman—Verne was the son of a lawyer, and his only paid employment outside literature was a brief spell as a stockbroker—wrote 65 books grouped by bibliographers under the heading *Les Voyages Extraordinaires*. These were works of fiction whose plots either hinged on some extrapolation, or untried application, of the science of Verne's time, or at a minimum used some unresolved scientific issue (and here you have to include geography among the sciences) as a "hook" on which to hang an adventure story.

A handful of those books, all from the first dozen or so of those 42 years, are known, at least by name, to any person literate in modern Western culture. *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea* was made into a fine early special-effects movie by Disney in 1954. Two years later, producer Mike Todd made Verne's *Around the World in Eighty Days* into a cast-of-thousands, costume-and-scenery extravaganza that won five Oscars. My ten-year-old son owns, and has read, an abbreviated young-reader's edition of *Journey to*

the Center of the Earth, and at least one recent movie, the rather dire 2003 *The Core*, can claim to be distantly descended (so to speak) from that book. The names of Verne's first published novel, *Five Weeks in a Balloon*, and his third, *From the Earth to the Moon* (generally issued together with its sequel, *Around the Moon*) ring a bell with some of us, though I do not think they are much read nowadays, except perhaps in abridged children's versions. The rest of Verne's titles are now little known.

Verne's biographers generally acknowledge that the quality of his books fell off after the mid-1870s, and that many of the later ones, though some contain interesting or original notions, are little more than pot-boilers. At the time of Verne's death in 1905, sales of these later books were at unimpressive levels. *The Mighty Orinoco*, for example, had a first-print run of only 5,000 at its publication in 1898, and unsold copies remained in the publisher's stockroom years later. Some of the later novels, including that one, were not translated into English. The fault here does not lie entirely with Verne. The very success of his early works inspired numerous imitators, so that by the end of the nineteenth century a reader seeking "scientific romances" in the style of Verne had plenty of authors to choose from.

The first English-language translations of Verne's work appeared in the early 1870s. They were commercially successful but in other respects unsatisfactory, and are rather resented by Verne's more serious admirers. Because the books were considered to be for children, and therefore to have no literary importance, translators felt free to abridge, amend, or even rewrite them. Translation work was in any case (and still is) badly paid and otherwise unrewarding. Furthermore, the metric system Verne used was unfamiliar to his British and American translators, so that the conscientious calculations he sometimes included in his text were, when not omitted altogether, frequently garbled in English-language editions, leading the more attentive reader to think that Verne was careless or innumerate.

With the growth of college English departments in recent decades, and the acceptance of science fiction as a proper field of study for literary theorists and cultural historians, some salvage work has been undertaken. This is the context for the publication by Wesleyan University Press of four new English translations of Verne novels, with annotations and introductions by scholars. These four translations came out between December 2001 and November 2005, and apparently they will be followed by others. The four originals span a period from the high summer of Verne's fame and popularity, in the mid-1870s, to the very end of his career in the year of his death, 1905. For that reason it seems to me best

to deal with them in the order of original publication, rather than in the order of Wesleyan's translations, the dates of which I shall note only in passing.

The Mysterious Island was published in installments through 1874 and 1875. It can, I think, fairly be described as the best-known of Verne's lesser-known works. It was translated into English twice in the 1870s, and all the other English-language editions available prior to this one from Wesleyan were derived from the first of those translations, usually much abridged. This Wesleyan edition of January 2002 is a completely new and full translation of the French text, and includes the original illustrations (as do the other three books in this series). The translator is Sidney Kravitz, billed on the book's cover as a "retired scientist and engineer." The introduction and endnotes are supplied by literary scholar William Butcher, who has also published translations of Verne, though not in the Wesleyan series.

One of the young Jules Verne's own favorite books was *The Swiss Family Robinson*, a children's classic from the early nineteenth century, in which the energetic and capable family of the title are marooned on a desert island, which they soon transform into a little Switzerland. *The Mysterious Island* builds on the same idea. Verne's castaways are five Americans from the Union side in the Civil War and a dog belonging to one of them. All are trapped by various circumstances in Richmond, Virginia in March 1865. During a tremendous storm they make their escape from the city in a balloon, which is then swept far across the world to the empty wastes of the southwest Pacific. The balloon fails at last, and the five are washed up on an uncharted island.

Desert-island stories, or "Robinsonades" as they were known in publishing circles of the time (after *Robinson Crusoe*, of course, the granddaddy of them all), were a staple of nineteenth-century popular fiction. Writing of another specimen, Charles Reade's *Foul Play*, which was published five years before *The Mysterious Island*, George Orwell remarked: "Some desert-island stories, of course, are worse than others, but none is altogether bad when it sticks to the actual concrete details of the struggle to keep alive. A list of the objects in a shipwrecked man's possession is probably the surest winner in fiction, surer even than a trial scene." Verne's castaways have one of the shortest such lists: the clothes they are wearing, a single match, two watches, the dog's metal collar, and one grain of wheat. They are Americans, though, and this was the beginning of the era—it ended with the Apollo program—when the U.S.A. was seen by foreigners, certainly by Verne, as the can-do nation, populated by ruggedly self-reliant types who could turn

their hands to any practical task. The personification of this national stereotype is Cyrus Smith, leader of the castaways, "an engineer and a scientist of the first rank," and also "courage personified," who "had been in all the battles of the Civil War."

Under Smith's direction, in next to no time the castaways have a forge, a brickworks, a pottery kiln, and a glassworks up and running. When they need to remove a rock barrier to lower the water level of a lake, Smith manufactures nitroglycerin. The various chemical processes are carefully described. Having installed themselves in a large cave high on some cliffs, the castaways construct an eighty-foot rope ladder whose "sides, formed of juncus fibers tightly braided by means of a winch, had the strength of a thick cable." This, however, is a mere makeshift, for "Cyrus Smith planned on later installing a hydraulic elevator"! He actually does so. The youngest of the castaways, a boy of fifteen, is a walking encyclopedia of botany and zoology, so that our heroes encounter few difficulties in provisioning themselves, and in seeking out construction materials like those juncus fibers.

It is all a bit implausible, and one finds oneself wondering whether people in their situation, and of their energy and abilities, would not bend their efforts to escaping from the island rather than making it a home away from home. It takes them three years to set about constructing a suitable boat—no mere raft, of course, but "a vessel of 250 to 300 tons." In the meantime, we have been taken through subplots about a stranger rescued from a neighboring island, a ship full of escaped convicts, and some inexplicable occurrences, all to the castaways' advantage, that suggest the presence of a hidden benefactor watching and helping them. At the end of the book this benefactor turns out to be none other than Captain Nemo of *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea*. Nemo dies; the island explodes; the castaways are rescued by a passing vessel out of one of the subplots, and all ends happily.

Of the four books salvaged by Wesleyan, *The Mysterious Island* is much the best, and may very well—not having read all 65 of the "extraordinary voyages," I cannot speak definitively—be the last decent book Verne wrote. In spite of implausibilities like those noted above, the author keeps a good narrative pace going, manages his action scenes decently well, and works up a nice air of mystery about the castaways' hidden benefactor. The translators, it must be acknowledged, were right: this is kid fiction, or at best young-adult fiction. It has no social dimension. The characters of the castaways are merely sketched, and they do not interact with each other in any interesting ways. One of them is a freed Negro, Cyrus Smith's manservant; but Verne makes so little of this that I found myself forgetting the man's color for

quite long stretches. Even that little is too much for a modern—I probably mean "post-modern"—academic, of course. The book's annotator warns us sternly that: "What should not be glossed over is the systematic racism of the novel."

Personally I found no difficulty in glossing over it. I could not, in fact, detect it. The story of the princess and the pea comes to mind. The Negro of *The Mysterious Island* seems to me to be as capable as his comrades. He is not even given a comic dialect to speak, though I suppose this might be discretion on the translator's part. In fact, the scraps of politics in the book—Nemo's denunciation of the British Empire, and the author's plain partiality for the Union side in the Civil War—are all of a very progressive kind by nineteenth-century standards, and are anyway incidental to the story.

The same cannot be said of *The Begum's Millions*, one of two books Verne published in 1879. This is a pretty straightforward anti-German diatribe, dressed up as a story about a huge inheritance divided between an idealistic French physician and a grotesque German academic given to writing articles with titles like, to quote an actual example, "Why Are All Frenchmen Stricken in Different Degrees with Hereditary Degeneration?" The French beneficiary uses his portion of the inheritance to build a model city in the far northwestern United States, a "City of Well Being" built according to the best principles of public health and education, to which are invited to live "all honest families whom poverty and lack of employment might have driven from overpopulated lands." The horrid German of course builds the opposite kind of city, a City of Steel, thirty miles away, and dedicates it to the manufacture of new and terrible weapons. His main aim is to destroy the City of Well Being. However, he is foiled by a *deus ex machina* plot device, and by the efforts of a gallant young man who loves the French doctor's daughter. Good France therefore triumphs over evil Germany, redressing, at least in fiction, the humiliation of the Franco-Prussian War eight years earlier.

It is curious to see such a strongly drawn caricature of the racist, bombastic, obsessive-compulsive, militaristic German at such an early date, but the novel is otherwise without much interest. The love-affair subplot is dealt with in a very perfunctory way, and would have been omitted altogether if Pierre-Jules Hetzel, Verne's publisher, had not insisted otherwise. The story, including this subplot, was actually a reworking by Verne of a manuscript Hetzel had bought from a colorful character named Paschal Grousset, a fugitive from justice at the time. This we learn from the annotator of the Wesleyan edition, Peter Schulman of Old Dominion University in Norfolk,

Virginia. The translator of this volume is Stanford L. Luce, Professor Emeritus of French at Miami University in Ohio. I have no doubt that Prof. Luce's command of French is all that it should be for a college teacher of that language, but his rendering of some of Verne's dialogue in English is gratingly anachronistic. We should not see locutions like "You're right up there with the Rothschilds!" or "Is he ever stupid . . ." in a nineteenth-century novel.

As well as echoing the passions aroused by the Franco-Prussian War, the crudity of the social commentary in *The Begum's Millions* probably reflects Verne's own lack of real interest in politics or society. That comment needs some qualification. In his sixties and seventies Verne was in fact a working politician, though how he found the time while turning out a book and a half a year is baffling to me. From 1888 to 1904 he served as a municipal councillor in the provincial town of Amiens, where he lived. His service seems to have been conscientious and useful—he was elected four times—but it is hard to deduce from it much of a fixed ideology, or even a coherent set of ideas about politics. Reborn in our own time, Verne would likely have been a libertarian. He was very strongly attracted to the idea of natural liberty, at least for people like himself. That is why his only really compelling characters are those like Captain Nemo and Phileas Fogg, who do just as they please. He actually favored the anarchist movement that was plaguing Europe in his later years—Prince Kropotkin was one of his acquaintances. The assassination of the French President by an anarchist in 1894 seems not to have dismayed Verne. Yet he was first and foremost a provincial French bourgeois, and in the practical affairs he was obliged to vote on as a councillor, he favored order and convention over liberty and social innovation.

That Verne needed to be persuaded (or perhaps just told: it seems that in the relationship between Verne and Hetzel, the author proposed, but the publisher disposed) to include some love interest in *The Begum's Millions* will not surprise readers of Verne's better-known works. The Indian widow rescued by, and eventually married to, Phileas Fogg in *Around the World in Eighty Days* is the merest of ciphers, and none of the other big Verne classics contain any women at all that I can recollect. It would have been easy enough to include a woman among the castaways in *The Mysterious Island*. It would not even have been original: Charles Reade's hero in *Foul Play* is marooned with an heiress, whom he marries at the end of the book. (Stacpoole's *The Blue Lagoon*, which took this line of thought as far as it can, or should, be taken, was still three decades in the future.) It is hard to imagine Verne thinking of this,

though, and the chances are it never occurred to him. So far as one can judge from the biographies, Verne had no interest in women at all after some youthful infatuations, the last of which ended in a marriage that rapidly cooled. Verne's son Michel was born when the author was 33, and husband and wife took to separate beds soon thereafter. They do not seem to have had much in common. It would not have been too transgressive of the French bourgeois code for Verne to have taken a mistress, but he never did so, though there is some circumstantial evidence of an "intellectual friendship" with a Parisian lady in the 1880s, during Verne's occasional visits to the capital.

It is therefore quite striking to see the Wesleyan edition of Verne's 1898 adventure story *The Mighty Orinoco* describe itself, on the back jacket, as having "a unique feminist twist." Really, though, this is making much out of nothing. *The Mighty Orinoco*, of which this is the first English translation (by Stanford L. Luce again) concerns a journey to the source of that river by a mixed party of Frenchmen and Venezuelans. The Venezuelans are three geographers intent on settling a point of fact about the river's origin. Two of the French participants are young naturalists on a scientific expedition for the French government. The other two are a young lad and his protector, a gruff old NCO from the French army. It eventually emerges that the lad is actually a lass, seeking her lost father, whose last known address was on the upper Orinoco. That is the entire "feminist" content of the book.

The annotator here is Walter James Miller, professor of English at New York University. Prof. Miller takes the "feminist" scraps offered to him by Jules Verne and pumps them up to beach-ball size with postmodernist gas, crediting our author with "remarkable intuition about androgyny." As a writer, in fact, Prof. Miller is more entertaining than the late-period Jules Verne, though unintentionally so. *The Mighty Orinoco* is a dreary book, a thin and unoriginal plot dressed up with far too much botanical, zoological, and anthropological detail. I found I was enjoying Prof. Miller's notes more than Verne's text. It was a macabre sort of enjoyment, though, the kind of dark pleasure one gets from watching someone make a fool of himself, for the good professor is the kind of literary academic anxious—far too anxious—to show you the racist, sexist, colonialist subtext lying beneath every page. At the least excuse he lets fly with little po-mo homilies:

> Patriarchal society glorifies certain characteristics (logic, assertiveness, action) as "male" and others (emotion, timidity, passivity) as "female." Actually all persons of both sexes are made up of both "masculine" and "feminine" traits, and if men developed their

> "female" side and women their "male" side both genders [sic] would enjoy a far greater chance to develop their full potential as human beings.

This kind of thing is intended to demonstrate how much less intelligent and humane our benighted ancestors were compared with our enlightened selves.

To chide Verne for not being on board with the intellectual fads current in early twenty-first century U.S. academe is misplaced, as Verne's comments about the Venezuelan Indians, and about such women as he deigns to notice, are uniformly innocuous, when not actually benign. (He describes one tribe of Indians as "gentle in character, resourceful and intelligent.") Academics must justify their existence, though; and it is, as I said, a kind of comic relief, after a dull dissertation on the appearance and habits of the tapir, to turn to Prof. Miller's endnotes and find a spirited rant against the wickedness of Pythagoras and Plato: "Even if they did not believe in [metempsychosis] themselves… [they] certainly thought it convenient to teach it to the masses as a means of controlling morals and politics." Ah, the masses! What would humanities professors do without them?

By the last year of his life, when he wrote *Invasion of the Sea*, Verne was tired, ill, and long since written out. The first of the Wesleyan series to appear (in January 2001), the book is translated by Edward Baxter, and annotated by DePauw University's Arthur B. Evans, the most senior figure in Verne studies outside France. Though nimble with phrases like "the semiotic evolution (didactic to hermeneutic) of this brand of scientific-literary discourse," Prof. Evans is not as pugnaciously post-modernist as Prof. Miller. This unfortunately means that *Invasion of the Sea* offers no pleasures at all, not even subversive ones. The reader is alone with a group of French engineers and their military escort in the Algerian Sahara, parts of which are to be turned into an inland sea. The Tuareg nomads of the region are naturally unfriendly to the idea, and their efforts to thwart the French supply such tension as the novel can muster. A French scholar quoted in Prof. Evans's notes thinks that "Jules Verne actually admires and empathizes with" the Tuareg rebels and their leader, but I must say I found this admiration and empathy hard to detect.

To what degree can these four books be said to belong to science fiction? Only *The Begum's Millions* suggests any interesting extrapolation of known science: an artillery shell filled with frozen carbon dioxide, so that: "Every living being within a radius of thirty meters from the center of the explosion is both frozen and asphyxi-

ated!" Of the others, *The Mysterious Island* gets in under the wire by its inclusion of Captain Nemo's marvelous submarine, *Invasion of the Sea* by being set in the future (around 1930, though it hardly matters). *The Mighty Orinoco* contains no scientific mystery or invention at all, only a technical and incidental point about the source of the river.

You could make a case, in fact, that Verne was not really interested in science at all but merely its technological applications. Certainly he was a magpie for curious technological and biological factlets, and had a fairly good head for numbers. The imaginative side of science, though—the side that actually propels science forward—was a thing he had no acquaintance with. I am sure he would have been baffled by Vladimir Nabokov's remark about "the precision of the artist, the passion of the scientist." The great pure-science advances of his time made no impression on him. I do not know of anything in Verne's works that would be different if Maxwell's equations had not appeared in 1865. About Darwin's theory he seems to have been utterly confused, employing a sort of crude pop-Darwinism in books like *The Aerial Village* (1901), yet declaring himself "entirely opposed to the theories of Darwin" in an interview he gave at about the same time. This was not likely an opposition based on religious belief. Though he always, when asked, described himself as a "believer," this was part of the bourgeois façade that Verne chose to live behind after some youthful dabbling in *la vie Bohème*. He actually gave up attending Mass in the 1880s, and probably died an agnostic.

Though a gifted storyteller, certainly in his early years, Verne had not sufficient powers of imagination, or scientific understanding, to rise to true science fiction. Here the contrast with his much younger (by 39 years) competitor for the "father of science fiction" title, H. G. Wells, is most striking. The concept of a fourth dimension, for example, first took mathematical form in the 1840s. By 1870 it was, according to the mathematician Felix Klein, part of "the general property of the advancing young generation [of mathematicians]." Wells grasped the imaginative power of this notion and used it to produce one of the greatest of all science fiction stories, *The Time Machine* (1895). Verne never used it at all, and would probably have found the notion of a fourth dimension absurd.

Gifted storytellers are rare enough that we should welcome them when they appear, especially if they have a strong appeal to young readers. The Mollweide projection of the earth's surface in my grandfather's 1922 *Atlas-Guide to the British Commonwealth of Nations and Foreign Countries* still has a jagged blue ballpoint line running across it, made by the hand of a fascinated small boy *circa* 1956, to trace the progress of Phileas Fogg on

his eighty-day journey. The point of science fiction, however, is something more than offering engrossing narrative. As stated by Kingsley Amis in his survey of the field (*New Maps of Hell*, 1960), science fiction exists "to arouse wonder, terror, and excitement" in its readers. Verne rose to this challenge once or twice in his early books—the mysteries and dangers of *Journey to the Center of the Earth*, the many strange encounters of *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea*, the whirlwind escapades of *Around the World in Eighty Days*—but it is not met, nor even glimpsed, in these four Wesleyan translations of later works.

Perhaps a better title for Verne is "Father of Tech-Fi," of stories that revolve around the fanciful possibilities of technology to harness nature's powers, to aid human adventure, and to rescue men from terrible perils. One of the blurbs on the Wesleyan edition of *The Mighty Orinoco*, taken from the *New York Times*, calls Verne "the Michael Crichton of the nineteenth century," which I think is very precise, and conveys the same idea. True science fiction, however, began twenty years after the masterpieces of Verne's youth, and on the other side of the English Channel.

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