

Jules Verne, *Extraordinary Voyages (Library of Wonder): Around the World in Eighty Days*, anonymous translator, *Journey to the Center of the Earth*, translated by Ron Miller, *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Seas*, translated by F. P. Walter, New York, Fall River Press, 2009

## Introduction

William Butcher

Frenchman Jules Verne (1828–1905) is the best-selling classic writer of all time and the most translated author in the history of literature. While he wrote more than sixty novels, plus scores of other works, the three included in this volume—*Journey to the Center of the Earth* (1864), *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Seas* (1869–1870), and *Around the World in Eighty Days* (1872)—are by far his best known. These three masterpieces, and their perennially popular film adaptations, have entered the global consciousness to such an extent that their author does not even require identification.

It is impossible to explore Verne without considering the extensive myths that are associated with his work. The most common, particularly in American culture, is that Verne wrote science fiction. This term “science fiction” was actually invented long after his death, very little of his writing contains any science, and he himself repeatedly denied any interest in “anticipation.”

Verne’s books fall instead into the categories of adventure or travel. Remarkably, none of his stories are set in France; and indeed the title of the collected works, *The Extraordinary Journeys*, highlights his aim of getting as far away as possible from his homeland. When really necessary, the novelist uses up-to-date methods of travel, such as steam engines or paddle steamers. But his real preference is for much more lo-tech means: sail-power, whether on rafts, sleds, land-yachts or wheelbarrows; floating islands, whether the classic variety or as ice-floes, or landslides; or horses, elephants, or foot-power.

Much of the myth about Verne’s novels has been generated by poor translations of his work, which are still those most often published in America. Many of these translations exclude up to forty percent of the original text and include invented episodes and chapters. They delete the religion and the politics, the sex and the violence, the culture and the research, quite often producing something that Verne never intended. Nearly all the translations lack the depth and breadth of the French originals, their literary sophistication, and their distinctive voice.

But the legend also derives from the Hollywood films, which borrow Verne’s titles but usually little else, featuring instead balloons, nuclear bombs, bug-eyed monsters, mid-Atlantic villains, and scantily-clad fe-

males. Each successive remake moves still further away from the books themselves.

Part of the myth, finally, was perpetuated by the original publisher of Verne's novels. Jules Hetzel chopped and censored the texts, despite the writer's repeated protests, meaning that they often ended up as a betrayal of Verne's intentions. Also, a corresponding ignorance has accumulated around Verne's life. American and British biographical studies have invariably derived from publications written in French; but these dozens of biographies have repeated legends and ignored some of the most basic facts of Verne's life: the friends he made, the apartments he lived in, the places he traveled to, the money he earned, or the girls and women he fell in love with. The result is that even the encyclopedias usually contribute to peddling half-truths.

### The Real Verne

It is clear, then, that we must return to the basics. The three books in this volume were written and published within the space of eight years, soon after Verne met his lifelong publisher and, at the age of thirty-four, launched his main writing career.

In 1859, the writer left France for the first recorded time. His trip to Britain, especially Edinburgh and the Highlands, deeply marked him. Two years later a journey to Scandinavia, during which he missed the birth of his son Michel, would also have a great impact on his writing. From 1857 to about 1863, Verne worked as a stockbroker to support his new wife, plus her two daughters from a previous marriage. In 1864 the family was living near the future Eiffel Tower, but two years later moved to the Latin Quarter, and lived in the fishing village of Le Crotoy, near Amiens, each summer. In 1867 Verne traveled on the *Great Eastern* to New York, Albany and Niagara Falls, all places he would feature in his novels. In 1869 the family moved permanently to Amiens. During the Franco-Prussian War of 1870–1871 the author served in the National Guard.

In line with Verne's meticulous planning, the plots of *Journey to the Center of the Earth*, *Twenty Thousand Leagues*, and *Around the World* are determined by their crescendos. His preference is for his greatest heroes to never return home, for both practical and metaphysical reasons. Their pursuit of the unknown inevitably takes them past the point of no return, whether en route for the heart of Africa, the Pole, the ends of the earth, its center, the ocean depths, or the dark side of moon. His characters risk all in their mystical quest to physically and spiritually unite with the far realms they discover. How to get back is far from their minds.

The number of virgin territories is, however, severely limited, and in any case the publisher preferred a happy ending. Even in these three novels, then, some sort of return home had to be improvised. The solution

adopted in 1864 and 1870 was to tack on an epilogue, where Verne did his best to reconcile his heroes to their exile from transcendence. But by 1872 he was shocked at the sudden defeat at the hands of the Germans, the Paris Commune, the death of his father, the shortage of unexplored realms, and Hetzel's intransigent defacing of his masterpieces. He had given up hopes of the absolute and felt almost glad to bring Phileas Fogg lamely back to London, to settle down, marry, and perhaps have many children.

When we look further at the individual books, this historical situation, anchored in mid-century, post-romantic but pre-modern, will become even more evident.

### *Journey to the Center of the Earth*

In the humorous and good-natured *Journey to the Center of the Earth*, Professor Lidenbrock finds an ancient parchment which, when decoded, records a claim to have explored the core of the globe. The professor tears nephew Axel away from his foster-sister, with whom he is in love, wastes considerable time in Iceland, employs a guide, and heads down into the bowels of the earth. The three men eventually discover an ocean in an underground cavern. Because the vertical dimension of space is equated with past time, the cavern seems prehistoric, as do the plants and animals it contains. In order to travel further down, the three blow up an obstacle blocking their path, but with unexpected consequences.

*Journey* draws inspiration from Edgar Allan Poe, George Sand, and medieval hollow-earth theories, but also contains many echoes of Verne's two northern trips. It is narrated in the first person by Axel, who initially mocks his eccentric uncle, but matures during the expedition, and ends up taking the lead. Verne himself realized that such a journey was impossible, and indeed the novel is full of implausibilities and unanswered questions, especially as regards the theory of evolution, recently proposed by Darwin.

### *Twenty Thousand Leagues*

*Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea* benefited tremendously from Verne's real-life seaside residence and from the fishing boat he bought in 1868 and used for repeated trips, mostly to the British Isles. This grandiose and tragic epic recounts a circumnavigation in a submarine, the *Nautilus*. It contains many dramatic scenes: the funeral, on the ocean floor, of a dead crewman; an attack by New Guinea natives; an encounter with massed giant squid; a near-fatal journey under the Antarctic icecap; a farewell to the sun at the newly discovered South Pole; and a vision of the ruins of Atlantis. The main focus, though, is the lifestyle of the somber hero, Captain Nemo, who never sets foot on land sullied by humanity, while pursuing a mysterious mission.

The ending is determined by the sole natural force mightier than the *Nautilus*: the dreaded Arctic Maelstrom. But it is surely also linked with a seabed wreck to which Nemo attaches great importance. It is that of a vessel from the French Revolution, named, at least in the manuscript, *The People's Avenger*. Although other interpretations as to the nationality of the captain's foe are earlier hinted at, this would presumably mean that the captain's mission is a Socialist one, directed against the regime of Emperor Napoleon III.

### ***Around the World***

The lighthearted and fast-moving *Around the World in Eighty Days* describes Phileas Fogg's journey from London to Hong Kong and back again, undertaken to prove that the globe has shrunk. Gentle fun is made of the foibles of Fogg, who finishes up nevertheless as the hero, aided by his acrobatic French valet, Passepartout.

Verne was not in fact the sole author of *Around the World*, which should, in all justice, be co-credited to playwright Édouard Cadol. The novel reflects contemporary reality, given that Fogg's eighty days rely on the Suez Canal and railways across India and the United States, opened only in 1869–1871. Verne reinforces the link by aligning the dates of Fogg's journey to the dates of the first serial publication. The new telegraph also plays an important role, and for the first time, the audience, both within the fiction and in real life, can participate with bated breath in each new installment, can even bet on the outcome, while sitting safely at home.

Fogg, blind to the exotic sights encountered, reduces the three dimensions of space to one—the shortest route. But the structure of the novel, apparently a line connecting past or present British colonies, is more complex than this blinkered individual will admit. The whole of Europe, even France and the Suez Canal, are jumped over by the narrator, using a flashback within a flashback. So much to-ing and fro-ing occurs between Hong Kong and Yokohama, separating Passepartout from Fogg and then reuniting them again, that not a few readers end up lost.

*Around the World* is a brilliant essay on space and time, with a crescendo unique in the history of literature both in its use of a flashback (which turns out not to be a flashback after all) and in its demonstration of the relativity of time. Following the book's first publication, it spawned hundreds of real-life imitators, all attempting to circle the globe within a given time.

### **Conclusion**

The enduring value of these three novels is their readability. While students read Dickens, Balzac, or Flaubert partly because they have to, their

contemporary has had the good fortune to remain outside the prescribed curriculum, to be liked only for himself.

First-time readers are therefore in for a treat, that of pure entertainment, unsullied by dusty memories; while those who in their youth read the expurgated books purportedly by Jules Verne are also in for a great surprise.

Hong Kong citizen Dr. William Butcher has lectured at the École Nationale d'Administration and researched at the University of Oxford. Author of *Jules Verne: The Definitive Biography* (2006), he has also published translations and critical editions of *Journey to the Centre of the Earth* (1992), *Around the World in Eighty Days* (1995), and *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Seas* (1998).