

Foreword

Ray Bradbury

William Butcher proves in this book that we are all, in one way or another, the children of Jules Verne. His name never stops. At Aerospace or NASA gatherings, Verne is the verb that moves us to Space.

He was born in the future we inhabit as our present. Once born he ricocheted back to the 19th century to dream our dreams and cause us to realise his possible improbabilities.

In one way or another Butcher shows us how Verne has structured our ideas and reared up the architectures of our lives even as Walt Disney, an equally improbable god, has blue-printed new cities from old ruins, and taught us how to run them, amidst doubts and derision.

Back in the early sixties when Verne was the unacknowledged ghost writer for President Kennedy, I described Verne along with *his* influence, Herman Melville, as the Ardent Blasphemers.

Melville struck God's sun because it insulted him.

Verne very quietly suggested that the sun should not be struck, but plugged into, utilized, its energies borrowed to move and light the world.

Melville's maniac Captain ran forth to kill a whale.

Nemo, with a more serene madness, said no, do not kill but *build* a whale. Run up a steel skeleton, skin it with iron, illuminate its interior and swim forth as Nautilus to be mistaken for and dubbed Moby Dick, in tribute to the American master.

Melville had a most sad ending. In a poem based on a terrible regret, a few years ago, I advised Herman, much too late, to 'stay away from land, it's not your stuff'.

Instead like an old god, its energies reversed, he made permanent landfall where gravity seized him. Instead of rejuvenation from contact with the earth, Melville was stake-driven down record straight and do some housekeeping in the rummage left behind by one-eyed screenwriters.

Butcher's journey to, around, back and away from the pachyderm approaches the literary beast from as many directions as a well-meaning analyst can conjure. And if we do not in the end completely find the animal, that is good. For Verne turns out to be less creature and more unexplored territory. The metaphor of the elephant is insufficient. The fun and the mystery of Verne is the fact that after you have traversed great distances across his time, he always runs ahead. Like other novelist-explorers before and after him he could not resist going in a journey. And the journey itself is all. He acted out

what I describe to my friends as the Aesthetic of Lostness.

He does not want to arrive any one place and truly know where he is. The effervescent boy-man in him longs always to be at odds, not to know where he came from, where arrived or where going.

We share that leaning into adventure.

If women want to stake their tents and stay, it is the man who is always grousing around the campfire because he knows only too well he is putting down roots and is discomfited by a knowledge of self as well as place.

He must be up and going, off and gone, long before dawn.

The wise woman drags after the absolute fool. It is man, not woman, who claims he climbs Everest 'because it is there'. An insufficient reason, if I ever heard one.

A better one, that Verne implies is, we go there because we are nearer the stars, and if we reach the stars, one day, we will be immortal. I think this is all submerged in Verne. I risk criticism for bringing it out. What is the use of life if it isn't immortal? The rage to live underlies everything Verne says and does. And to live at the top of one's blood, heart, soul, and breath. Verne's gift to us is the best: he makes us want to live forever. And we shall do so, one year, because he lifted our spirits in *Le Géant* in which he flew over France in a basket filled with liquid spirits, spiced chicken and, one hopes, an occasional female.

Which is why, of course, Verne is suspect among not all but many intellectuals. Life is too serious to be taken frivolously, they say. No, says Verne, life is too serious to be taken seriously. Life can be won with a good heart, high fevers and walked with tons instead of pounds of invisible flesh. He died not knowing his fame beyond century's end, stamping and stamping and stamping the United States customs in.

Verne, contrarily, as Butcher proves in chapter after chapter, died in the midst of families. His own, with its lights and darks, but more important the world's and all those young locomotive, diving-bell, cloud-staring men who would almost rather stoke engines in lieu of exasperated fiancées and wives.

Resultantly, he has never died. His family on his last day, was immense, and remains so.

We young romantics who once read Tarzan have found that Burroughs was for our boyhood jungle years and can not be revisited.

Verne, when we sit at his feet, remains our technological St. Nicholas, dispensing old gifts made freshly new on turning a page.

When I made a brief appearance on APOSTROPHES the leading intellectual French television hour, 11 years ago, I found myself in a squabbling hen-yard of pontiffs mewling and muttering about Verne's this, that, and t'other, with some

homosexual innuendos tossed in to spoil the hour. In the midst of the exchange I advised everyone to be quiet.

'Gentlemen', I said, 'you want to talk about the ants. I wish to talk about the Elephant'.

I went on to say what I have said early on in this preface. Without Verne there is a strong possibility we would never have romanced ourselves to the Moon. His immortal dust should be divided in separate and equal parts to be lodged in that first footprint on the Moon, and tossed to the winds that blow across that great Martian ravine that can hide our continental United States and swallow our imaginations.

It is only appropriate then that William Butcher comes at Jules Verne from just about every angle one can image. There are ants aplenty at his picnic. But in the main he skins and mounts the pachyderm without making it resemble the nine different kinds of animal described by those blind men of India.

It is just about the most complete work on Verne I have seen, and I saw a plenteous lot when the *New York Times*, more than 30 years ago, asked me to celebrate his life. Since then, Verne has been rediscovered by Hollywood, and on several occasions by TV, not always to his advantage. Butcher is here to set the humour. Otherwise the Will sinks, the ship is not built, the city lifted, or the rocket promised for some future noon.

All this, one way or another, is in Butcher's book, fastened in place by his bright wits, or tangentially implied. Since the 50th anniversary of Verne's death, a score of books have examined his life. Butcher does the work of all those books, and more. For, as I have said, he describes more than the inkstained beast and tries for Verne's territorial imperatives.

During this century we have fired at and ricocheted radio sounds off the Moon. But Verne arrived there long before us. Why then should we be puzzled when all those sounds return with a French accent?

Butcher has captured those grand sounds and told us what they mean.

Ray Bradbury
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