

Introduction¹

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When the weather is clear, the white cone of Snæfellsnes's volcano is visible from Reykjavik harbour, looking very much as Jules Verne described it a hundred and forty years ago in his novel *Journey to the Centre of the Earth*. It is a testament to the enduring fame of this novel that no Icelander today refers to Snæfellsnes without, in the same sentence, mentioning Verne: 'That's the volcano where Jules Verne set his story . . .' Tourist literature calls Snæfellsnes (now a national park) 'Jules Verne's Volcano'. And when the Nobel Prize-winning Icelandic novelist Halldór Laxness wrote his novel *Under the Glacier* in 1972, he felt obliged to note in the first few pages that Verne had long before staked an enduring literary claim to this same glacier.

The strength of Verne's claim derives, in large part, from the continuing popularity of his tale, which has captivated generations of readers, while its title and plot are familiar to many millions more who have not read it. For *Journey to the Centre of the Earth* is one of the most famous novels ever written.

Its author was thirty-six years old when he wrote it, a young lawyer who had chosen a career in the arts, in defiance of his strict father's wishes. Jules Verne had first turned his hand to the theatre, and his early plays were well received. But they did not earn their author much money. Verne's father continued to press his son to choose a more practical occupation. Verne doggedly continued his writing career. At one point, to see his name in print, he began writing short articles on scientific subjects for magazines.

This was a time of enormous interest in the achievements of scientists and engineers, for it seemed each week brought the report of fresh technological wonders. Trains now travelled at fifty miles an hour. London was building an underground rail system beneath the heart of the city. The urban landscape was being transformed in every major city. Bridges spanned vast gorges; hot-air balloons rose into the air; submarines slid beneath the water. It seemed that men were everywhere exploring and conquering new realms, empowered by the latest developments of science.

French education did not yet include instruction in science, so there was a great demand among readers for popular articles to educate them on scientific subjects. Verne was one of those who helped supply this demand.

At some point Verne conceived of a novel that would be as informative about science as his magazine articles, but would also combine elements of adventure and discovery in an entertaining way. Verne wrote such a book in 1862, calling it

¹ Published in Jules Verne, *Journey to the Centre of the Earth*, translated by William Butcher (Folio Society, 2001), pp. vii-xxii.

‘An Air Voyage’. Retitled *Five Weeks in a Balloon* by his new publisher, Pierre-Jules Hetzel, Verne’s story was an immediate smash hit. And Verne’s literary career was finally launched.

Freed from lingering doubts about the direction of his career, Verne experienced a phenomenal burst of creativity. In the decade following *Five Weeks in a Balloon*, he wrote nearly all of the novels for which he is best remembered: *Journey to the Centre of the Earth* (1864); *From the Earth to the Moon* (1865); *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea* (1869); and *Around the World in Eighty Days* (1872).

Now, almost a century and a half later, these novels are all still familiar to readers around the world, still in print, still widely read. Indeed, Verne is one of the few nineteenth-century novelists young people read for pleasure, and not merely to fulfil a school assignment.

Verne’s continuing readership is impossible to explain if one thinks of him as a science-fiction writer, trading on new technological wonders. Verne himself once denied that he had any real interest in science, and he emphasised his lack of scientific training. In any case, Verne’s miraculous technologies are by now antique, his dazzling adventures old hat. We have cruised in atomic submarines; we have travelled to the moon; we have gone around the world in eighty days—then eighty hours—and finally eighty minutes. His technology no longer holds any interest.

Yet Verne’s novels continue to excite readers, just as they did a hundred and forty years ago. He is, by some accounts, the most popular author in the world. No reference to science fiction or technology can explain it.

What does?

His prose style contributes to his popularity. Verne’s prose is lean and fast-moving in a peculiarly modern way, although this has not always been seen as a virtue by critics.

Indeed, from his earliest success until his death in 1905, Verne’s literary reputation never matched his popularity; in later life he was bitter that he had not been made a member of the French Academy. Today, he is regarded much more seriously by French critics than he ever was during his lifetime.

But in English, Verne is still viewed as little better than a pulp novelist—his characterisations thin, his prose unprepossessing, his plots racing forward at comic-book speed. And it is not hard to see why, although translation may improve an author’s reputation in foreign lands, in Verne’s case it has not.

William Butcher, the translator of this volume, observes² that Verne has been

² See Note on the Text and Translation, pp. xxiii–xxviii, and his excellent introduction to the Oxford edition.

particularly ill-served by his English translators. At best they have provided us with clunky, choppy, tone-deaf prose. At worst—as in the notorious 1872 ‘translation’ published by Griffith & Farran—they have blithely altered the text, giving Verne’s characters new names, and adding whole pages of their own invention, thus effectively obliterating the meaning and tone of Verne’s original.³ Unfortunately, more recent translations are undistinguished as well.

The reader who compares the present translation with any other will quickly see the difference. William Butcher’s text has an easy, graceful rhythm; it preserves the allusive complexity of the original prose; and the characters make psychological sense in a way that they almost never do in other translations.

Verne’s lean prose reads quickly, generating much of the headlong rush so familiar to readers. It does not belabour descriptions or mental states; rather, it moves swiftly to Verne’s primary concern, which is physical action: movement through the external world. Verne always maintained that his enduring love was not science but geography. And most of his writing, both fiction and non-fiction, concerns travel or geographical exploration. His stripped-down, athletic prose is perfectly suited to this end.

But taut prose, like science fiction, is inadequate as an explanation for Verne’s popularity. To explain that, we must turn to the story itself. What Verne does, in book after book, is to recount a fantastic adventure with verisimilitude. In doing so, he revives our sense of mythic wonder, our deep feeling of connection to the physical world, and our appreciation of the practical possibilities of human imagination and human effort.

It is a deep and powerful combination. And it was Verne’s speciality for some sixty novels.

Jules Verne was not the first author to write a novel as if it were true, to imitate a popular true adventure form, or to incorporate quantities of fact into the narrative. All that had been done by Daniel Defoe, an author Verne much admired. Verne was doing something else.

Verne was the first author to write novel-length *fantasies* in a realistic manner. He found a way to tell absolutely fantastic stories as if they were true. This is his innovation, and I believe this is the source of his continuing hold on readers. One could say that Verne found a technique that merged romance and realism, and the result is enormously pleasurable. It is also inherently conflicted—a conflict I believe is mirrored within the author himself.

³ Indeed, it is surprising that the Griffith & Farran text is still printed and sold as Verne’s work; one would think present-day publishers would be ashamed.

As I read him, Jules Verne never felt comfortable writing realistic fiction; he always tried to escape realistic constraints. He was, after all, strongly influenced by the Romantic tradition. His earliest writing had shown a polemical tendency and a taste for tragedy; he was at heart anything but realistic. All his life, Verne was drawn to the extreme, the fantastic. There is certainly abundant evidence of this tendency in *Journey to the Centre of the Earth*, one of his least plausible novels.

At the same time, Verne—spurred on by Hetzel—was writing novels intended to be educational. Inevitably, this meant that many passages had to be as straightforward and factual as a textbook. Such passages would not blend smoothly into the narrative unless the rest of the text adopted a similarly factual tone. Thus, Verne had no choice but to write his fantastic story as if it were true. He was forced into it by the educational material embedded within it.

The resulting tension between fact and fantasy is what energises Verne's tales. But it is a delicate balance, and over the course of more than sixty novels he did not always achieve it. When his stories are too documentary-like, they become pedantic and dull; when they become too overtly fantastic, credibility suffers and tension collapses. Verne works best when he grips both strands firmly, and weaves them seamlessly.

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There is no better example of his methods than *Journey to the Centre of the Earth*, one of the author's most convincing narratives, and one of his least plausible. Indeed, Verne rarely allowed himself to write a story that was flatly impossible, as this one is. Nevertheless, he manages to imbue the tale with considerable credibility.

The story has many fantastic elements. Professor Otto Lidenbrock, with the help of his young nephew Axel, deciphers a mysterious, coded message concealed in a twelfth-century Icelandic book. The message, from one Arne Saknussemm (a celebrated alchemist of the sixteenth century), claims that he has gone through Snæfells volcano to the centre of the Earth. Lidenbrock decides to repeat the journey, with Axel at his side, and an Icelander named Hans who serves as a guide. Starting in Iceland, the three men travel deep beneath the Earth, where they discover an inland sea, a race of giants, and other marvels. At the end, they return safely to the surface by riding a volcanic eruption to emerge on Stromboli, an island off the coast of Sicily.

Clearly a fantasy. Clearly difficult to make credible. And yet much of the pleasure of reading this book is to see such outrageous events portrayed so convincingly.

Verne's critics in English hardly acknowledge how difficult it is to write a realistic fantasy—to recount a fabulous adventure in a credible, believable way. In fact, to accomplish this goal, Verne is obliged to revise every literary element—plot, characterisation, dialogue, mood—to the demands of the form.

Let's begin with character.

It's been suggested that Verne's simple characterisations echo the true adventure stories he was imitating. But there is no evidence that this is so. Verne's characters do not resemble real-life characters in the least. They are, in fact, quite blatantly unreal. Verne creates his characters in a purely literary way, to fulfil the specific demands of his work.

Verne is writing a novel of fantastic adventure, and to the degree that it is fantastical, it cannot be a novel with realistic characters. A moment's thought reveals why. The events of the story are a progression of miraculous sights, narrow escapes, and previously unknown wonders. Any realistic, fully drawn character would be obliged to react in a specific, character-driven way to each narrative incident, and that is impossible.

First of all, there are very few realistic human responses to thrilling, heart-stopping events. A character can say, in effect, 'Wow!' or 'Look at that!' or 'That was a close one!' But there is not much else to say. Therefore, as the thrills and spills continue, a realistic character will inevitably begin to repeat himself. (This is why characters in action movies are so often taciturn; it solves this problem.) Since Verne provides an incident on nearly every page, a realistic character would repeat himself on every page, thus revealing only too clearly the artifice of the basic narrative structure.

No author wants that.

Second, to the degree that a character has a detailed, specific, psychologically acute reaction to a fantastic event, the reader will be provoked to imagine his or her own reaction, and compare it to that of the character. Such comparisons occur continuously for active readers; it is how we assess character in the first place: we think, 'I wouldn't have said that,' and then deduce something about the character who did. But if, in a Verne story, you start asking, 'What would I do in this situation?' you will inevitably be forced to recognise how fantastic the event actually is, and how implausible. Before long, the credibility of the entire narrative will be undermined. The reader may even stop turning pages.

No author wants that.

The fantastic novel therefore creates specific problems for the creation of characters. Verne solves them. Because there are limited human responses to an ongoing succession of wonders, the author creates an obsessed character who is limited anyway. If he behaves in a repetitive way it will not point up the plot structure; it will appear to be the result of his defined character.

The central figure, Professor Lidenbrock, is an imperious professor whose most notable trait is impatience. Wealthy, restless and irritable, he propels the story forward. In fact, Lidenbrock has hardly any other qualities except impatience. He makes a brief show of concern when Axel is injured, but then is immediately back to his old self, caring for nothing except getting on with his quest.

Thus, he doesn't have to come up with new responses to new wonders. Lidenbrock never oohs and aahs. His reaction to everything is exactly the same: let's push on.

Similarly, Axel is the apprehensive junior man: afraid to displease the professor, afraid to go in the first place, dragged along against his wishes, vaguely hoping to win the girl—but basically fearful all the time.

His equally single-minded nature works just as it does with Lidenbrock. Axel is relieved of the demand to come up with a fresh response to a new thrill every few paragraphs. Show Axel a geyser, an inland sea, a diamond cavern, it doesn't matter what: he'll use it as a reason to worry, or to repeat his underlying fears. Even before he helps to translate the original coded message, he says, 'My head was swirling and I felt vaguely anxious. I had the feeling that something terrible was about to happen.' He's worrying before he has anything to worry about!

The third character, Hans, is defined as laconic from the outset. He is, in fact, so taciturn that, as the book proceeds, he often does not speak for thirty or forty pages at a time. Thus he's relieved of responding to the wonders, too.

Of course these monomaniacal characters provide other advantages for Verne. A driven hero propels the plot, and his unvarying dedication gets us past any question of 'Why are we here?' or 'Shouldn't we quit?' The reader may think such things from time to time. Lidenbrock will always answer, 'No: push on.' He in effect denies the validity of the question; and so helps turn the reader away from a consideration of how implausible the story really is.

In the same way, Axel's fretfulness causes him to raise many technical objections to the journey, and propose arguments why they should turn back. He gives voice to the reader's concerns, but in fact he is the perfect straight man, setting up one mini-lecture after another by the professor, which keep us pressing forward.

What I am saying is that Verne's tendency to create single-minded characters does not spring from any obsession of his own, nor any limitation in his literary abilities. Nor do I imagine it reflects his view of human nature. Rather, it's a solution to the problems posed by the kind of fantastic novel he's writing—a problem entirely unrecognised by generations of critics and reviewers, who complain about his solution without ever seeing the problem. There is, I believe, no other way to solve it.

And to my knowledge, no one ever has. At least I cannot think of any novel-length example. *Robinson Crusoe* is not fantastical. *Gulliver's Travels* is satirical, never pretending credibility. Fantasy writing by Kenneth Grahame and J. R. R. Tolkien offers vivid characters, but they aren't human. I conclude that if you are going to write a novel that attempts to tell a fantastic story as credibly happening to human beings, you will end up with characterisations very like Verne's.

Of course some readers will argue that I am being too harsh in my assessment; that Verne's characters are more variable in the novel than I have shown

them here. But I don't really think so. It is true that Lidenbrock shows some human concern when he is worried about Axel—but that lasts only a moment. The next instant, he is pushing onward again. And it is true that Axel raises questions, and solves problems for the professor, and thus performs a creative function in the story. Nevertheless, he is basically a worrier from start to finish. The third character, the Icelandic guide Hans, is taciturn—and unfalteringly loyal—as long as he receives his modest pay each Saturday evening, no matter where they may be—for the duration.

And these character dynamics are common throughout Verne's work. Lidenbrock is a typical Verne character: like Phileas Fogg and Captain Nemo, he is defined by an intense, near maniacal focus, unexplained and unmodulated. Similarly, the relationship of Lidenbrock and Axel, the master and acolyte, is also repeated in many Verne novels.

Once Verne has established his characters in this fixed and invariant way, he faces a new problem. What exactly will they talk about during the journey? They are, after all, each obsessed. Lidenbrock must always say, 'I'm in a hurry,' and Axel must always reply, 'I'm uneasy.' If they don't, they will lose their obsessive quality. How, then, can they talk?

Verne has two solutions. First, he makes them argue about ideas, facts, theories—in short, about abstractions. This allows them to be passionate but impersonal. They retain their obsession by debating each abstraction from their own obsessed point of view.

Second, he makes them converse about how to solve problems as they arise. Again, the subject is impersonal, but it can be tense enough to warrant a dispute, and some heated exclamation marks in the text.

Thus Verne gives his characters something to talk about—even to argue about—without ever delving into their personal psychology. And again, this solves a problem for telling a realistic fantasy.

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I believe Verne meant *Journey to the Centre of the Earth* to be, among other things, the story of a young man's transition to adulthood in an adventure of danger, in the company of older males. For Axel, the journey is a rite of initiation.

At the beginning of the novel, Axel defines himself as 'indecisive'. He is a timid man living in the shadow of his bullying and unreasonable uncle. His position is little better than a servant. He is afraid to take the journey, until his lovely girlfriend Gräuben defines its meaning for him. She tells him that it will raise his stature as a man of science, and enable them to marry. All this is quite explicitly stated.

And Axel does, in the course of the novel, become more assertive with the professor. He expresses his fears somewhat less often. One could say he becomes his own man. At the end, he marries the girl. But while all the elements of a com-

ing-of-age story are present, it seems to me that this story is only indicated—pointed to—rather than written. That is to say, *Journey to the Centre of the Earth* reminds you of a coming-of-age story without really being one.

Why isn't it? Verne laid out the elements, why didn't he write it? Because, I believe, Verne understood the delicacy of his literary form. His fantastic journey, so apparently robust, in fact couldn't bear the weight of a coming-of-age story. So he chose to hint at it, rather than write it.

But it is also true that characters in real-life adventures almost never change. Nor do they reveal their innermost selves. This is the case with adventurers such as Henry Stanley, Thor Heyerdahl or Edmund Hillary. (Hillary's reaction to conquering Everest—'Well, we knocked the bastard off!'—exemplifies the psychological opacity of true adventurers.)

It is only in fictional adventures, in stories as disparate as *Heart of Darkness* and *Captains Courageous*, that characters are ever transformed by events. But fictional adventures achieve this effect at the expense of pace and credibility. Verne was willing to sacrifice neither.

The importance to Verne of establishing a sense of verisimilitude is clear from his opening sentence. 'On 24 May 1863, a Sunday, my uncle, Professor Lidenbrock, came rushing back towards his little house at No. 19 Königstrasse, one of the oldest streets in the historic part of Hamburg.'

Now, why so many minor factual details, when we do not even know the professor's first name? Why, for example, interrupt a rather exciting opening to tell us a certain date was a Sunday? Or to give an exact residential address? Why tell us Königstrasse is an old street in the old quarter? Surely the sentence is intended to engage the reader at once with a question: why has the professor come rushing home? But it has been muddied by all these details. What does it accomplish?

We might note that this is a typical opening sentence for Verne in this period. His previous novel, *Five Weeks in a Balloon*, began this way: 'There was a large audience assembled on the 14th of January, 1862, at the session of the Royal Geographic Society, No. 3 Waterloo Place, London.'

A few years later his technique was perfected in the first sentence of *Around the World in Eighty Days* (the original sentence in French is very long, and Butcher chose to break it into two): 'In the year 1872, No. 7 Savile Row, Burlington Gardens—the house where Sheridan died in 1814—was occupied by Phileas Fogg, Esq. This gentleman was one of the most remarkable, and indeed most remarked upon, members of the Reform Club, although he seemed to go out of his way to do nothing that might attract any attention.'

Clearly Verne means to set a dense, factual tone at once, and he is willing to do so by piling on spurious and irrelevant facts. Who cares where Sheridan lived and died? It has nothing to do with the story, or with Phileas Fogg. Sheridan is

mentioned once in the second chapter, and never again.

In the case of *Journey to the Centre of the Earth*, the sprinkling of irrelevant facts continues throughout the first chapter. The great Hamburg fire of 1842 is mentioned, as are the canals of the city, the tilted caps of students, the museum founded by the Russian ambassador Struve—and on and on. None of this matters to the story. But it matters very much to how the story is taken. Verne provides these details to enhance his credibility, and it works. The reader thinks this author has his facts down. The most minute details are at his fingertips. He knows what he is talking about.

It is just what he wants you to think.

There is a final feature of the novel that must be addressed. One of the most powerful techniques to build credibility is to make the story self-consistent. But *Journey to the Centre of the Earth* is shot full of inconsistencies. A few examples will serve.

In the first sentence we are told it is Sunday, and yet Lidenbrock has bought a book. It's unlikely any bookstore in nineteenth-century Germany would be open on Sunday.

The last eruption of Snæfells is given as 1219, or 1229; the volcano is said to have been extinct for five hundred years, or for six hundred years.

Then there is the description of the provisions: 'The parcel was not a big one, but was reassuring, for I knew it contained six months' supply of dried meat and biscuits.' If each man ate eight ounces of dried meat a day, the meat alone would weigh nearly three hundred pounds. And six months' worth of biscuits would make a huge parcel.

But most glaring is the way water supplies are handled in the story. The adventurers carry a certain quantity of water as they start their descent. After two days' travel Axel tells Lidenbrock, 'We have water left for only five days.'

The third day they come to a fork, and choose the wrong path. They travel down this fork for four more days, or a total of seven days from the start of the trip. They realise they have gone the wrong way, and head back.

They run out of water on day eight. They continue back to the fork, arriving on day ten. (Never mind they went down in four days, and up in three, though the ascent would surely be slower.)

Axel now says, 'Since we have no water, we must retrace our path,' by which he means return to the surface. But this is clearly suicidal. They have been without water for two days, and they are at least three more days from the surface. They'll never make it back alive. Axel, so rational at other times, never seems to realise this.

Neither does the professor. Instead, Lidenbrock emotionally invokes Columbus's demands on his crew, and asks Axel to descend for one more day. Then, if

they don't find water, he agrees to turn back.⁴

Now, the reason for going into some detail on this point is that the readers never notice; they are immersed moment-to-moment in the story, and are not checking the exact number of days. In my view, Verne's indifference to such details means he understands he has the reader in his clutches; his story is credible only within a narrow window of a few pages. Outside that window, facts keep changing. But it doesn't matter, because the reader lives in that same narrow window.

And this, finally, gives us the result of Verne's literary techniques—his factual tone, his obsessed characters, his detailed fantasies. They have the effect of allowing readers to encounter the story directly, to feel as if it were happening to them. This oft-reported experience of Verne's novels, is, I believe, primarily a consequence of making characters so opaque that they feel like companions rather than avenues of entry into the experience. We cannot really identify with Lidenbrock or Axel, so we push them aside and take the journey ourselves.

4 For readers who may still be confused, here is the detailed chronology. The journey begins on the afternoon of Sunday, 28 June, the same day the travellers saw the shadow pointing the correct path. This is day one (pp. 89-94). The second day is 29 June. (Verne gives a notebook date of 2 July but it is an error.) At the end of the second day, Axel announces that there is only water for five more days. Ignore questions about why half the water was consumed at this point, because we do not know when the travellers last got water. Instead, we will focus on how Verne deals with the five days that remain.

On day three, 30 June, they come to a fork in the road and take the wrong path. On page 101 it is 1 July, day four. On page 105 Verne says there is only enough water for three more days, which is correct according to previous statements. By paragraph two of chapter 20, it is day five. On page 106, it is Friday, day six. Again, this is correct: if they began on a Sunday, the following Friday would indeed be the sixth day. Further down page 106, it is Saturday, day seven. They reach a cul-de-sac and must turn back. This is the day they should run out of water. But Axel says that tomorrow there will be no water left. Assume this discrepancy is because of rationing, and accept it.

On page 109, it is day eight, and they start back. Although, just a few paragraphs earlier, the professor claimed, 'Within three days we will be back at the point where the two tunnels fork,' Axel now says, 'We were five days' march from the parting of the ways.' In fact, they should be four days' march. On this eighth day they run out of water.

On page 110, it is Tuesday, 7 July. This would make it day ten, or three days since they started back. It is the second day without water. They reach the fork in the tunnel, and have an argument. At this point, they are three days from the surface, assuming they could ascend as quickly as they came down. Axel's wish to go back is impossible, since it would mean going at least three more days without water, or a total of five days. The only option is the professor's choice, to go forward in the hope of finding water. His offer to turn back after one more day makes no sense at all—except dramatic sense.

Early in Professor Lidenbrock's visit to Iceland, there are many accurate descriptions of the country, the town of Reykjavik, the sturdy Icelandic horses, the magnificent island terrain, and of how Iceland was formed: 'a wide slit cut its way diagonally from the south-west to the north-east of the island.' We know now that Iceland overlies the uneasy junction of vast tectonic plates, and the active line of the plates has left a clear line in the land above. Geology was an exciting field when Jules Verne wrote *Journey to the Centre of the Earth* in 1864. Today we know unimaginably more. I sometimes wonder what Verne's marvellous imagination would do with our knowledge, if he were alive today.

But he has left us an extraordinary book, which has withstood the test of time much better than some of the science described within it. It has brought delight to generations of readers, and will for many more to come. For there is nothing so rare as the chance to take an impossible journey, and to believe it so powerfully that we wonder if we will make it out alive. That's magic. And that's Verne's gift.

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