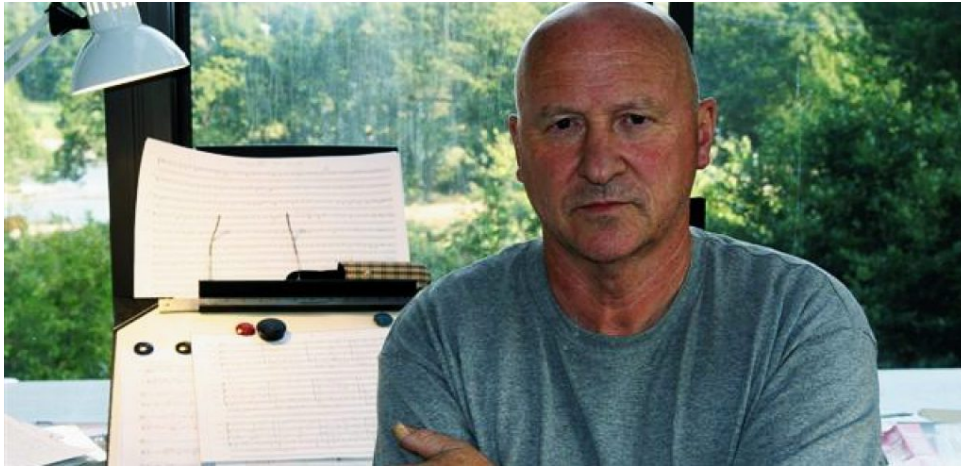


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Verne's Journey to the Centre of the Self: Space and Time
in the *Voyages Extraordinaires*, by William Butcher

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Within the last year, English language discussion of the work of Jules Verne has begun to grant the author something of the respect and admiration that has been current in France for several years. There, important writers such as Raymond Roussel and Raymond Queneau acknowledged their debt to Verne, and critical writing too, both within and without the *Société Jules Verne*, has demonstrated a level of creative insight quite absent from the limited accounts of his work in this country – excluding translations from the French of course. Perhaps this is because we have been particularly ill-served by translations of the stories themselves. The original 19th century translations were invariably anonymous and frequently abridged key texts ; the most widely-read from the 20th century, by the prolific I.O.Evans, seem to be entirely aimed at the schoolboy reader and are usually found in the Junior section of the library. This means, for example, that substantial portions and even whole chapters disappear from **20,000 Leagues Under the Sea**, chapters which appear to the timid translator to 'hold up the narrative' by moving into factual digression or scientific analysis. Without these chapters Queneau's expression of admiration for Verne – "what a style. Nothing but nouns !" – is hardly comprehensible ; certainly Verne is the only writer of fantastic fiction to avoid hyperbolic adjectives.

William Butcher's book appeared at about the same time as Andrew Martin's brilliant **The Mask of the Prophet** which it complements in a satisfying way. His style is less immediately

attractive than Martin's and his prose can be dense and his observations terse, but he approaches the texts in an engagingly systematic and imaginative way. It is a relief to find a work that does not talk about the 'precursor of science fiction' and to find only 3 references to H.G.Wells in the index. The thematic nature of Butcher's book is its strength, for Space and Time are the most blatant themes in Verne's *Voyages Extraordinaires* (though Martin shows that there are others) and Butcher examines them from many points of view, illuminating the stories in a startling and complex way. He brings to Verne Studies a thorough knowledge of the subject, a history of publication in scholarly journals, and a real love and enthusiasm for the work. On the other hand the scale of the book gives the impression that he may have been forced to compress a lifetime's commitment into very few pages, and that he would have been happier with four times the number he has been given. Certainly this would have helped, since many points are made in a compressed or allusive way. For the general reader – who would without doubt learn a great deal from this book – it would have been helpful to give translations of the quotation (which are invariably beautifully apt) and this is something that Martin does throughout his study. This sense of pressure of space may well have caused him to abridge some quotations and, for me, he is a little too casual about the ending of **Voyages et Aventures du capitaine Hatteras**. For me this is the most sublime, and spatially direct, ending of all Verne's novels.

“For a considerable time the captain had been in the habit of walking in the garden for hours, accompanied by his faithful dog, who watched him with sad, wistful eyes, but his promenade was always in one direction in a particular part of the garden. When he got to the end of his path, he would stop and begin to walk backwards. If anyone stopped him he would point with his finger towards a certain part of the sky, but let anyone attempt to turn him round, and he became angry, while Duk, as if sharing his master’s sentiments, would bark furiously.

The doctor, who often visited his afflicted friend, noticed this strange proceeding one day, and soon understood the reason of it. He saw how it was that he paced so constantly in a given direction, as if under the influence of some magnetic force.

This was the secret : John Hatteras invariably walked towards the North.”

No author ever wrote “FIN” with a greater poise and a greater sense of timing than Verne and, in most editions, of spatial layout. There may well be a book to be written on this too, dealing equally with those novels where Verne omits the final word. It is the highest praise to suggest that this should be written by Dr. Butcher.

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Professor Gavin Bryars composed music for the “Jules Verne sections” of Robert Wilson’s THE CIVIL WARS in 1984. He has recently released recordings on ECM Records and on Les Disques du Crepuscule. He is currently working on an opera, with libretto by Blake Morrison, based on Jules Verne’s **Doctor Ox’s Experiment** for production in 1993.



