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Submarine dreams: Jules Verne's *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Seas*

The classic sci-fi novel is more than a ripping yarn – it anticipated the ecology movement and shaped the French avant-garde.

BY MARGARET DRABBLE



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I was introduced to Jules Verne at Christmas 1948 when my parents gave me a beautifully illustrated and cleverly abridged copy of *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Seas*. I loved this book, and read it again and again. It inspired in me a passion for stories of underwater adventures, even more thrilling to me than travels in space and moon landings. I continue to be enthralled by submarine photography, by tales of giant squid and underground lakes, by shipwrecks and desperate voyages. The vast underwater world is full of wonders, and we have hardly begun to explore them. The sense of excitement communicated by Verne more than half a century ago is with me still.

Verne was impassioned by travel, by exploration, by motion, by all means of transportation and locomotion. The first of what came to be grouped together as his *Voyages extraordinaires* was *Five Weeks in a Balloon* (1863), which, after some years of struggle, launched his career as a commercially successful writer. These novels explored the outer realms of scientific possibility, and were backed up with extensive research and erudite displays of not always wholly trustworthy statistics. The plausible appearance of scientific verisimilitude enabled his enterprising and well-connected publisher, Pierre-Jules Hetzel, to market Verne's works not only as romantic adventures but also as educational and instructive works.

Travel by balloon, a theme to which Verne returned several times, was swiftly followed by journeys to the centre of the

earth, to the moon, to underground cities, to mysterious volcanic islands, to the Arctic and to the Antarctic, and even to complicated and competitive wager-driven journeys round the United States by train, bicycle, motor car, schooner and horse. Movement itself entranced him, and so did both natural and man-made wonders. He anticipated the restless mass tourism and relentless appetite for sightseeing of the 20th century, and his name appears on the title page of one of the earliest satires of package holiday travel, the posthumously published *L'Agence Thompson et Cie* (1907), though this was in fact largely written by his son, Michel.

But his greatest and most profound love was, arguably, for the sea, and all that was on it, in it and under it. He was born in the French town of Nantes, on the Loire, some 30 miles inland from the Atlantic coast, and he is said to have tried to run away to sea as a boy. He kept a succession of yachts, all named *Saint-Michel*, and he greatly enjoyed sailing and long sea voyages. He first described an underwater boat in the 1850s and we know that he was extremely excited when he hit upon the concept of his submarine novel, the subject matter of which was commended to him by an admirer, the novelist George Sand. Verne boasted to Hetzel that it would be unlike anything anyone had ever written before – it would be “superb, yes superb!” – and composed some of *Twenty Thousand Leagues* (1870) while sailing in his *Saint-Michel*, where everything he saw prompted new ideas and images.

The starting point of the adventure is stunningly simple: we embark, with our scholarly narrator Dr Aronnax and his

two carefully selected comrades, on a chase after a vast and dangerous beast that is causing havoc to the world's shipping. This monster may or may not be a narwhal, a legendary and quasi-mythological sea creature with a single horn like a unicorn's. At once we are in the realm of the epic, and are reminded of Captain Ahab's pursuit of Moby Dick. The voyagers discover not a narwhal, but the even more extraordinary *Nautilus*.

The characterisation of the main players – the narrator Pierre Aronnax, a lecturer at the Museum of Natural History in Paris, explorer and author of “a two-volume in-quarto work entitled *The Mysteries of the Ocean Deeps*”; his valet, the ever-faithful, classification-obsessed Conseil; and the hawk-eyed French Canadian harpooner Ned Land (a name of awesome monosyllabic resonance in a novel of the sea) – is of a stark but effective simplicity. These three representative mortals, cooped up together in the midst of almost limitless space, live out their personal dramas in tense and close confinement: as Richard Holmes, in his history of balloon travel *Falling Upwards* (2013), points out, in Verne's work the balloon basket, the moon rocket or the submarine provide the “ideal enclosed space in which to stage a drama, and draw out contrasting characters under pressure”.

Yet, despite their enclosure, they have a magnificent view of the spectacle of the underwater world. Verne's pleasure in describing the forests of kelp, the shoals of fish, the nesting turtles and the tentacles, beak and triple heart of the giant squid is infectious. Who could resist “blue dolphinfish picked out in gold and silver; parrot fish, true

oceanic rainbows competing in colour with the most beautiful birds of the Tropics”, or “golden *Pomacanthus* . . . decked out in emerald strips and clothed in velvet and silk, like lords out of Veronese’s paintings”?

Captain Nemo, the commander of the *Nautilus* and its mysterious polyglot crew, is a more complex figure than his three hostages; a Romantic, Byronic exile of perplexing nationality and (in this novel) obscure motivation. Cultured, tragic, ruthless, wealthy, he is at war with humanity, yet compassionate to the oppressed and the poor. He is anti-imperial, anti-colonial and republican at heart. We know that Hetzel steered Verne away from his politically sensitive conception of Nemo as a Polish nobleman seeking revenge against Russian tyranny, a character who might have prefigured some of Joseph Conrad’s later protagonists. Hetzel, by this censoring pressure, may thus have introduced some contradictions into Verne’s conception of his lonely ruler of the oceans, but Nemo nevertheless emerges as one of the great heroes, or anti-heroes, of fiction. When I first read *Twenty Thousand Leagues* as a child I had no idea that he would reappear a few years later as an agent of providence in Verne’s 1874 novel of shipwreck (or balloon-wreck) *The Mysterious Island*. I was astonished to meet him again, and to learn the explanations of his tragic past and ultimate fate.

On the surface, *Twenty Thousand Leagues* is an action-packed tale of adventure and exploration, precursor to and inspiration for *Boy’s Own* classics by British writers such as Rider Haggard, Conan Doyle and John Buchan. In England

Verne has been considered mainly a supreme storyteller. The very word “league” (both in English and in its French version) has a ring of the yarn or the tall story. Verne’s inventiveness of plot and boldness of characterisation are matched by a pleasure in daily details that bring his fantasies to life; he is particularly good, as perhaps a French writer should be, on food. Nemo is a gourmet, and Aronnax’s pleasure in the ingeniously contrived delicacies with which he is presented is delightfully portrayed: so is Ned Land’s hunger to get his teeth into a chop. The giraffe steaks and eland barbecues of Rider Haggard and the ham rolls, hard-boiled eggs and ginger beer of Enid Blyton pale in comparison to Captain Nemo’s fillets of emperor fish, soup of turtle, livers of dolphin and anemone jam. Ashore, Ned Land creates a feast of wood pigeons, wild boar, “rabbit kangaroos”, breadfruit and mangoes, a point at which Aronnax confesses that he has “become exactly like the Canadian. Here am I, in ecstasy at freshly grilled pork!”

Verne does, however, show that he recognises the dangers of hunting, and of growing threats to species and to the planet. Although great numbers of creatures are slaughtered and devoured in the course of the book, Verne and Aronnax tend to deplore needless killing. We now reread 19th-century classics for early signs of awareness of ecology and environment and entropy, and we can find them in the criticisms of the bloodthirstiness of Ned, and in the information that the poor dugong and the great emerald bird of paradise have been hunted almost to extinction. Conseil speaks for the future when he reflects that, if the dugong is the last of its line, it should be spared in the interests of science.

The French have taken Verne's work in general more seriously than the Anglo-Saxon literary establishment, seeing beyond the storyteller. Although it has been argued that he was never truly admitted to the canon, he was much admired by writers as different and as eminent as Théophile Gautier and Charles Baudelaire. The symbolist poet Arthur Rimbaud was directly inspired by *Twenty Thousand Leagues*. "Le Bateau ivre" ("The Drunken Boat", 1871), his best-known poem, owes some of its tumultuous, exotic imagery to Verne, and perhaps also a little of its world-weary melodramatic melancholy. As human beings, Verne and Rimbaud inhabited different universes; as writers, they meet, reminding us that, although Verne never overstates the significance of the great subconscious pull of the oceans, he is aware of their chaotic depths and currents.

A new generation of avant-garde Continental writers rediscovered Jules Verne in the 1960s and he became one of the cult heroes of the experimental group known as Oulipo, which included Raymond Queneau (1903-76), Italo Calvino (1923-85) and Georges Perec (1936-82). They investigated the connections between mathematics and language, enjoyed verbal conundrums and constraints, and stressed the playful, formal, puzzle-engendering aspects of literature, enlisting Verne as a writer who had explored in fiction the deployment of bets, wagers, challenges, inventions and statistics. Perhaps the most successful product of this movement is in a sense a direct homage to *Twenty Thousand Leagues*: Perec's remarkable novel *Life: a User's Manual* (1978). It is based on the conceit of an immensely wealthy and immensely bored man called

Bartlebooth, who is obsessed both by harbours and by jigsaws, and who has devised an elaborate plan of occupying the first half of his life by sailing the world with his faithful valet to paint harbours. These paintings will be returned to Paris, where they will be made into wooden jigsaws, which he will spend the second half of his life constructing, and then destroying. This is a parody of Nemo's restless circumnavigation of the globe; the novel is full of references to Verne, and to Verne's predecessor in the creation of the myth of the obsessed oceanic pursuit, Herman Melville. Perec, like Verne, was fascinated by lists, by the multiplication and classification of phenomena, and he wrote to one of his readers that Verne liberated his imagination "to rediscover the archetypes of the adventure story – multiple and mysterious births, filiations, inheritances, aquatic monsters, curses".

Jules Verne was buried in Amiens in March 1905, and his grave is marked by an extraordinarily dramatic sculpture, showing him bursting forth from his tomb and pointing upwards towards the heavens. The sculpture is called *Vers l'immortalité et l'éternelle jeunesse* ("towards immortality and eternal youth"). Verne is the saint of travel agents and the master of the travelogue, as well as the unwitting prophet of the surreal cruise liners of the 21st century. Despite parody and plagiarism and commercial exploitation, the haunting spirit of Nemo and his *Nautilus* sails on.

A version of this essay appears in a new edition of "Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Seas" (translation by William

Butcher, illustrations by Jillian Tamaki) published by the Folio Society (£36.95)



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