

Editorial

William Butcher

While Jules Verne is undoubtedly the most popular classic writer, probably the most translated one on a cumulative basis, clearly the novelist who has inspired — or at least lent his name to — the most films, and definitely the best-selling French author of all time, his essence still remains elusive, his status uncertain, even his literary value debated.

As *Verniana* moves towards its seventh year, traditionally the time when character has been formed, it is appropriate to take stock of its contribution to Verne Studies at large and to suggest ways forward. *Verniana* stands out amongst the periodical publications in its bilingualism, its diversity of methodology, its general rejection of dogma and no-go areas and its collegiate decision-making. It thus largely fulfils Zvi Har-El's longstanding dream of cooperation across continental boundaries, a dream nurtured under the guidance and prompting of Jean-Michel Margot.

Previous editorials have noted the multiple fractures running deep through all that has been written and said about Verne. Jean-Michel Margot marvels at the number of derivative products sold under Verne's name but which often betray his spirit. Daniel Compère argues that certain recent studies betray a confusion between fact and fiction or an ignorance of previous research. Terry Harpold laments, inter alia, the divisions between the synchronic and diachronic approaches to genre fiction and between the quality and the sheer quantity of studies: the tendency for uninformed "paravernia" to drive out the discoveries and insights of past generations has been stemmed only partly by the recent advent of the critical edition, spanning the divide between the scholarly and the popular. As regards genre, Volker Dehs prefers to remove Verne from the traditional literary context, while skirting around the vexed question of science fiction, to place him in the company of minor writers of the later nineteenth century.

While most contributions to *Verniana* have been in English, in accordance with its global dominance, French may be making a welcome comeback, manifest in the present volume, which is of great richness and variety. The special status of French-language studies, when compared to, say, English, Spanish, or Chinese ones, may have contributed to some of the divisions of Verne Studies. Clearly the original documentation — the published fiction and non-fiction, the manuscripts and letters to his family and publisher — is exclusively in French. Also, in recent decades a more sceptical and analytical approach, more closely based on the original texts, has come to the fore. Given the lack of translation of virtually everything bar the fiction, some knowledge of the language and cultural context is surely important to properly assess Verne. At the same time, it is inescapable that Verne himself rarely wrote about France and that the situation of the 1960s and 1970s, where virtually all Vernians were French, has undergone a revolution.

Biography is another of the tigers in the room, so to speak. The published lives of writers or public figures are notoriously subject to palace revolutions, intellectual scoops, fabrications and fictionalisations. And this is without raising the legitimate questions of methodology — whether to include detailed coverage of the works, to concentrate on the successful public figure or the earlier private, family and social life, to depend only on primary documentary evidence or to assess probabilities, indirect evidence and family accounts. It is little wonder that, judging from the encyclopedias, rare “documentaries” and other potted forms, or the ethical basis to commercial copyright or “moral rights”, more heat than light has usually been generated.

Passing mention should also be made of other questions, ruptures or controversies, whether real or fabricated, such as an assessment of Hetzel’s role on the basis of the primary evidence, the relevance of all that is “downstream” of Verne’s authentic production (including the play adaptations and even the illustrations), how to assess the quality of translations, the custodianship of and access to the nineteenth-century documents and photographs.

Whither Verne Studies? Some eminent critics, Jean-Pierre Picot amongst them, have raised the spectre of its impending death, the post-modern, Vernian notion that there may be few “unknown worlds” or final frontiers left. Certainly, it is unlikely that we shall witness again the sparks thrown off by the debates between Simone Vierre, Francois Raymond and Olivier Dumas, with Piero Gondolo della Riva, Daniel Compère, Charles-Noel Martin and a whole host of often lone voices acting as gadflies or outriders. The consensus and unity of purpose so lacking in contemporary debate could surely benefit from their pioneering disinterest, their outsider enthusiasm, their iconoclastic amateurism in the best sense of the term.

Verniana encapsulates, then, the progress towards loss of innocence, or towards maturity (or senescence?). It benefits from financial independence from any publishing house, the absence of domination by a single individual, the links with but salutary distance from academia, its eclecticism without undue relativism and the leverage of its cost-free, potentially infinite and instantaneous medium. It will thus continue to retain some of the free spirit of yesteryear, itself, I believe, a reflection of Verne’s own non-conformism and independence.

Viewed from another perspective, however, nearly everything remains to be done. *Verniana* itself must encourage book reviews, signed research notes, even interim accounts of ongoing discoveries. The coming years are bound to see leaps and bounds in our understanding of Verne’s style, of what his beliefs really were, of the links between the life and the works, and, more generally, why Verne remains of such interest; in the study of

the manuscripts, in the establishment of authentic and reliable texts, and in our knowledge of the great mass of books that were neither runaway successes nor (with some justification?) wreathed in obscurity.

The way will then finally be open for a full acceptance by the universities and literati and a transformation of the popular image of the most unknown of men.

