

Review: Handle with Care

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BOOKS IN REVIEW

Handle with Care

Simone Vierne. *Jules Verne*. Paris: Balland, 1986. 447pp. FF89.00.—As well as her *Rite, roman, initiation* (1973), Professor Vierne is justly well-known for her long-term pioneering work on Jules Verne—authorship studies, her 1972 *thèse d'Etat, Jules Verne et le roman initiatique* (published in 1973), prefaces to Garnier Flammarion editions of the “Voyages Extraordinaires,” and many other distinguished efforts. Unfortunately, this latest volume—which appears in the Phare series, devoted so far to Freud, Machiavelli, and Malraux—does not fully live up to what might have been expected. The book, it is true, is written for a very general audience, and thus originality is not necessarily an important criterion; but all the same, *Jules Verne* shows signs of a certain haste. It is sometimes needlessly drawn out and repetitious; allusions are dropped which the general reader cannot possibly fathom; assertions are made but not followed up; and recent scholarship, especially of the non-traditional variety, is under-represented (e.g., Delabroy's thesis). All this is a shame, for there is a great deal of value in the book, especially for those new to the subject. The style is elegantly straightforward, and the decision to complement each of the six chapters with a selection of eminently-quotable extracts both from other works by Verne and from the critical corpus is very effective.

After a chronology of Verne's life, Vierne provides a general introduction and then proceeds to individual novels. Her commentary on *Cinq semaines en ballon* does justice to the brilliant *chapitre sur rien* of the desert scene, to the English and Scottish character types, to the role of the tree-refuge, and, more generally, to the authentic poetry of much of Verne's writing, its unique combination of realistic and symbolic levels. Her discussion of *Voyage au centre de la Terre* pins down much of the intertextuality evident in the text, including the mythical substratum. *Vingt mille lieues* and *Le Tour du monde* are dealt with adequately; but only a tantalizing snatch is given about a first draft of part of *L'Île mystérieuse*; and *Le Château des Carpathes*, finally, could have been covered in a more analytical fashion. One interesting detail from all this is that the extremely passionate and lyrical “quotations” put into Aouda's and La Stilla's mouths were apparently invented by Verne—although some evidence for this view of Vierne's she does not supply.

Ultimately, the most useful aspect of this book is its account of the reactions to Verne. His persistent reputation for *scientificité* and authenticity originated, it can be seen, in the contemporary critics, themselves often merely reproducing the hand-outs of his publisher, Hetzel (whereas we can recognize that the authenticity is in fact rarely more than extreme plausibility). Rimbaud's reaction in particular can be read in his very Vernian *Bateau ivre*; and Zola, in a first article, also quite liked Verne—but then subsequently attacked him ferociously, denying his works even the quality of “novels.”

The errors in this book include: “*Forum de New York*” for the *Forum* of New York (p. 26); “*Goath's companion* de Boston” for *Youth's Companion* (p. 100);

“Ney Land” (p. 232); “*Haarper’ Bazar*” (p. 385); “John Clark” as author of *2001* (p. 427); and “Gallacher” (p. 444) for Gallagher. It is also wrong to claim that Allotte de la Fuÿe was the first biographer of Verne (p. 35); that the North and East of France were “peu accessibles à l’époque” (p. 81); that “les jeux de mots des romans...ne bravent jamais l’honnêteté” (p. 86; see Compère and Soriano); that *Apocalypse Now* is about the atomic bomb (p. 91); that “ce n’est que par hasard que le cataclysme n’a pas lieu” in *Sans Dessus Dessous* (p. 98); that Verne quotes Wagner with admiration only before 1871 (p. 100); that wheat ever multiplies in “progression arithmétique” (p. 303); that the Minard RLM bibliography is still continuing (p. 394); and that the number of articles on Verne is “au moins 2000 à mon avis” (p. 443—it already exceeded 2600 in 1982). Very debatable as well, in my view, are the claims that: “L’Eternal Adam” is purely and simply “extrêmement pessimiste” (p. 90); that “Saknussem” (*sic*) ever really reached the center of the Earth (p. 163); that my own thesis is “difficilement accessible,” probably formalist, and systematically Ricardolien (pp. 412-13); that time can ever be totally “abolished” (p. 209); or that time’s mythical and metaphysical aspects are ignored by Verne (p. 426).

But I would not like to give the impression that this book is without considerable usefulness. It’s just that, to get from *Jules Verne* to Jules Verne, you need to keep your wits about you. *A manier avec précaution.*

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Second Chances

Richard Hauer Costa. *H.G. Wells*. Rev. ed. Boston: Twayne, 1985. xx + 177pp. \$13.95. Robert Crossley. *H.G. Wells*. Starmont House, 1986 [rpt. 1983 ed.]. 79pp. \$7.95 (paper).—By the very fact that Twayne has issued a revised *H.G. Wells*, one is reminded of how much has happened in Wells studies since Richard Hauer Costa originally produced his survey in 1967; and, indeed, in the updated index, bibliography, and acknowledgments, Costa cites some 25 new books about Wells. Pity he does not make better use of them. He does remedy some of the holes in the 1967 text. The discussion of Wells and feminism has been expanded, and there is a head-on effort to gauge the Wellsian and Jamesian types of “central intelligence” by comparing them in *Britling* and *The Ambassadors*. But very little has been added or altered as regards the Wells of the 1920s, ’30s, and ’40s, where the survey was—and remains—the scantiest. What has not been remedied at all (indeed, has in some ways been exacerbated) is bad organization, with attendant repetitiousness, and factual unreliability.

For present purposes, I shall consider mostly the revised text. Rather than assimilating the old text to the requirements of the new findings, Costa typically retains the major sections of the original nearly verbatim and then at remote and arbitrary junctures interpolates the results of recent criticism. In large part because of this untidy and repetitious procedure, the book has fattened by maybe 30%. For example, the discussion of Wells’s early SF is barely altered (occupying chapter 3 in the 1967 edition and chapter 2 in 1985); but then eight chapters later, without warning, comes a new section, “The Science Fictionists: *The Time Machine*,” which is subheaded disjunctively under “Suvin,” “Parrinder,” “Philmus,” and “Huntington,”