

Review

of *The Knowledge of Ignorance: From Genesis to Jules Verne*. By Andrew Martin. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 1985. x + 259 pp. £25.00

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Andrew Martin's book is perspicacious, subtle, and ironic. The style is elegant, readable, lucid, and knowing, and switches effortlessly from formality to informality and back again. The result seems a little like a Lamborghini in third gear: efficient and exhilarating but difficult to manage more than an hour or so of hard suspension and pure power. Said, Kermode, and Derrida constitute the main critical flavours, but with relatively few author-specific critics. Dr Martin's great strength may be in his refusal to be trapped in a timid and exclusive view of French Studies. For *The Knowledge of Ignorance* is not straight 'lit. crit.', or intellectual history, or philosophical treatise but merely criticism at full stretch.

The main focus is the age-old human attempt, from Genesis, via the Renaissance and Rousseau, to Hugo, Chateaubriand, Napoleon, and Verne, to 'totalize' existence, to write and therefore to know absolutely everything: to trace the transition from the very beginnings of human knowledge through to the ends of the various cul-de-sacs of the nineteenth century. These beginnings, Dr Martin argues, are articulated with an uncorrupted state, a degree zero, a pre-history, whereas everything that came afterwards was infused with feelings of a fall, a lost plenitude, an idea, above all, that writing itself formed a crucial part of the transition.

For Dr Martin, Napoleon is symptomatic of French and European attitudes to knowledge, and conquest, of the East. Bonaparte's assault on the world is as much literary as anything else, with its fifty volumes of output. The invasion of Egypt, with its *moments forts* at Alexander's Alexandria and the Pyramids, may be considered an obsessive attempt to annex several millennia of history, although the French thought very little of what they found. In a word, the militaro-literary assault still resonates through the modern world. But can Napoleon be considered a creative writer? Can one read him simply for the pleasure of the text? I should have liked some sort of answer to these questions.

The 'chapter' on Verne (one that contains, in my view, as many ideas as any existing book) is the most literature-centred and the most interesting one. Starting with the Vernian idea that to know is to eat, Dr Martin explores with

great relish the over-excited, carnivorous, remainder-less, unbalanced, or frankly self-anthropophagous tendencies of the characters. Their stomachs seem, indeed, to symbolize a much deeper urge: 'Polyphagy and polymathy, bulimia and epistemophilia, obey a single corporate impulse' (p. 130). On an apparently different level, Verne's project is also to re-present the whole globe on to his own database, to mathematize the whole of human existence, to minimax every problem into geometric terms of perpendicularity and circularity, to 'discover and retrace the infinite line . . . which would be simultaneously a straight line, a triangle, a circle, and a sphere' (p. 135). In fact, if the heartless, calculating *voyageurs* inhabit a unique *comédie inhumaine*, the material world compensates by being orally and erotically, hermeneutically and proairetically alive, by having touch-sensitive areas everywhere, by reducing to an interactive network of protuberances and hollows, curves and sharp points, throbbing thicknesses and misty depths. The role of the *Nautilus* is revealing in a different way. Nemo's attempt is to constitute both an ark and an archive, to enclose and compress at a given moment both nature and culture: in other words, the aim of the futuristic vessel is to stop the future coming about. On a more general level, Verne systematically tries to combine the already-discovered with the not-yet-known. His works are fashioned by the overlapping tensions plausibility/possibility, truth/invention, description/poetry. His language veers from the quasi-mathematical to the restlessly evolutionary, from the atemporally static to the entropically insecure. Perhaps this writer's ultimate aim, as Dr Martin says, is to conjugate 'the quest for the absolute' with 'the anxiety of relativity'.

The Martinian reader may well feel numbed by the multiplicity of ideas, and occasionally feel that *Knowledge AND Ignorance* would have left more scope for all the sallies into virgin territory. But everything is surely forgiven at the end, when Verne is reinserted into the perspective of the various totalizing projects of the nineteenth century. Verne's attempt may be construed as being a last stand, a final fling at producing a 'composé de toute la science et de toute l'intelligence humaine'. But just as the clocks of his Protestant-ethic-harbinger Maître Zacharius in the end break catastrophically down, and just as his characters' language fails at the vital moment, so his whole encyclopaedic endeavour creates its own heroic failure: the end, after all, was in the beginning.

In such a refreshingly unhindered and intelligent analysis, there will be a few problems. Dr Martin's style is self-conscious at the start, and his vocabulary is occasionally overextended, as in 'Jacobian ladder' (p. 144) (biblical or mathematical?), or in the Derridian 'the anepistemological text repeats its

attempt to articulate the hyperbolic desiderata of nescience and omniscience which belong outside the intermediate space of discourse' (p. 7)! A unique hapax consists of seven successive main verbs being 'is' (p. 171). Typographically, I also detected 'interlocuter' (p.89), 'province français' (p.91), 'La Masque' (p. 93), and 'nuées d'arabes' (p. 99). In addition, Dr Martin seems to underestimate the innovative qualities both of the future world of 'L'Éternel Adam' (p. 159) and of the Vernian machines in general (pp. 6, 122); *all* the *Chancellor's* raftees are reduced to chewing on leather (p. 124); it is probably not in general true that 'the more deeply the voyageurs descend into the earth, the further they advance (not retreat) in its history' (p. 140); the idea that the conclusion of *Le Tour du monde en quatre-vingts jours* flaunts a scientific triumph over the vagaries of time' (p. 142) is one-sided, for the whole novel is predicated on the surprise generated by one particular temporal vagary; Dr Martin's insistence on the role of Verne's exclamation marks in terms of the mathematical notation 'n!' (p. 172) is anachronistic; *L'Étonnante aventure de la mission Barsac* (1919), finally, is not a 'late work' (p. 161) but a posthumous one -- and indeed very probably not by Jules Verne at all, but by his son, Michel Verne.

But these are mere quibbles. Rather than search for a Dewey Decimal niche big enough to take this opus, it would perhaps be better to acquire n copies, annotate them in n different ways, and place them on n different shelves. *The Knowledge of Ignorance* creates an ideal reader: polymathic, polyglot, almost omnipotent.