

REFLECTIONS

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WAS JULES VERNE A SCIENCE FICTION WRITER?

Was Jules Verne a science fiction writer? Isn't that like asking, "Is the Pope Catholic?"

The Pope is indeed Catholic—at least the one who is Bishop of Rome. (Other branches of Christianity have popes too, but we don't hear as much about them.) And, until recently, it seemed to me unthinkable to challenge Jules Verne's credentials as a science fiction writer. To me he was, as Peter Costello's 1978 biography called him, "the inventor of science fiction"—or, as Isaac Asimov called him in a 1965 essay, "Father Jules." But then I discovered that there's a substantial group of scholars who deny that he wrote science fiction at all.

Verne has always been part of my reading life. When I was about ten my parents gave me *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea*; I read it again and again, and went quickly on to such other Vernes as *From the Earth to the Moon*, *Voyage to the Center of the Earth*, and *Michael Strogoff*. *Strogoff* was an historical novel, but the others, tales of exploration in remote and fantastic places, spoke to me in a different way, and led me onward to such books of similar aspect as H.G. Wells' *The Time Machine* and Mark Twain's *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*. Not that I knew I was reading science fiction, not then. I had never heard the term. As I said in an autobiographical essay some years ago, "I certainly had no idea that those books belonged to that branch of fantasy known as science fiction. In fact, that was the sort of fantasy I preferred—the kind that might almost have been real, except that it was built around a fantastic premise."

In time my pursuit of that kind of fiction led me to the discovery of such actual SF magazines as *Amazing Stories* and *Astounding Science Fiction*, and then—I was about thirteen then—to trying to write some SF of my own, and then—well, you know the rest of the story. For the past sixty years I've been a professional science fiction writer. And I always have regarded Verne and Wells as the ones who set me on my path to that destiny.

Not long ago I happened to read David Standish's *Hollow Earth*, a book about the various theories that held that our planet's interior is accessible and habitable, and about the speculative fiction based on that idea. Verne, who wrote one of the best of the interior-of-the-Earth novels, came in for extensive discussion, which led me to return to Verne's own novels after a lapse of a good many years. I discovered then that most standard English translations of the Verne novels were unreliable, slipshod, and heavily abridged. (My beloved *20,000 Leagues*, for example, had omitted nearly a quarter of the original text, and much of what remained had been inaccurately translated. "The badlands of Nebraska" had been translated as "the disagreeable territories of Nebraska," and there was much else that was much worse.

The best modern translation of the book, I learned, came from the Oxford University Press, done by William Butcher, one of today's pre-eminent Verne scholars. I hastened to get it and was stunned to find this in the second paragraph of Butcher's introduction:

"Verne is *not* a science fiction writer: most of his books contain no innovative science." And then this, a few pages farther on: "Verne himself was categorical: 'I am not in any way the inventor of submarine navigation.' He even claimed he was 'never specifically interested in science,' only in using it to create dramatic stories in exotic parts; and indeed his reputation as a founding father of science fiction has led to a

major obfuscation of his literary merits." The introduction to Butcher's translation of *Voyage to the Center of the Earth* makes the same astonishing claim: "In Verne's case, if a genre classification really is necessary, he falls into that of travel and adventure. But in no case can he be considered a science fiction writer." He worked only within known scientific data, said Butcher, doing no imaginative extrapolation at all. And in Butcher's own biography of Verne, rather grandiosely called *Jules Verne: The Definitive Biography*, we are told that "people ignorant of his actual works . . . ultimately produced the absurd situation where the novelist would be thrust, screaming and kicking, into a genre invented long after his death."

I was flabbergasted by all this. Further research showed that Butcher is the most articulate spokesman for a whole group of scholars, here and in France, that believes that Verne's work should not and must not be deemed science fiction. An essay by the anthropologist Leon Stover asserted that Verne, because "he antedates the research revolution," did not write SF. A review of the Costello biography of Verne in the *Times Literary Supplement* also excluded Verne from our pantheon, insisting that he "never adopts either of science fiction's two main devices, projection into the future, or introduction of alien elements into the present." And so forth.

Really?

There are many, many Verne novels I haven't read, but I hardly consider myself "ignorant of his actual works." In *20,000 Leagues*, his submarine explorers visit the ruins of the lost city of Atlantis. Atlantis was a fable invented by Plato for philosophical and literary reasons some twenty-five hundred years ago; any story that tells of visiting its ruins has to be a fantasy, and if the vessel that goes there is decorated with scientific trappings (electric batteries, vanes for undersea navigation) it falls into the class of fantasy that we call science fiction. In *Voyage to the Center of the Earth*, Verne's explorers descend into the interior of our planet by way of an extinct volcano and discover an entire hidden world, complete with live dinosaurs, mastodons, and twelve-foot-high prehistoric men. *The Adventures of Captain Hatteras*, one of Verne's strongest and least-known novels, tells of the quest for the North Pole by an obsessive Ahab-like sea-captain, who, after much tribulation, gets there and finds an active volcano on the site. Until that point, there is nothing particularly speculative about the book; but we know now, as Verne, writing in the 1860s, could not have known that there are no volcanoes at the Pole. And in *From the Earth to the Moon*, Verne sends a group of venturers to the Moon aboard a projectile fired from a colossal cannon. Is that not science fiction?

Verne called what he wrote *le roman scientifique*, "the scientific novel"—to my mind, carrying much the same meaning as "science fiction." His first novel, *Paris in the Twentieth Century*, written in 1863 but rejected by his publisher and not brought to light until 1991, anticipates the fax machine, the photocopier, elevated railways, and boulevards lit by electric light. His short story "In the Year 2889" and the great visionary post-apocalyptic novella, "The Eternal Adam," are as science fictional as anything by Heinlein or Clarke. Some scholars think that those last two were written in part or whole by Verne's son Michel. Even so—Verne not a writer of science fiction? I rest my case.

I'm hardly alone here. Ray Bradbury called Verne his favorite science fiction writer, saying that he "makes one proud to be a human being." Arthur C. Clarke said of *From the Earth to the Moon* that "it was the first to be based on sound scientific principles." It predicted not only that the first flight to the Moon would be an orbital one but also that when it returned the space capsule would make an ocean landing. Robert A. Heinlein praised Verne also, though he noted that "the 'wild fantasies' of Jules Verne turned out to be much too conservative." And Kim Stanley Robinson, in an introduction to *Voyage to the Center of the Earth*, wrote, "In it, contemporary changes in science are explored in ways that enable or drive the plot, and everything is described with the help of a scientific rhetoric that makes the events feel like things that could

really happen: that's science fiction, no doubt about it."

Isaac Asimov, Ray Bradbury, Robert A. Heinlein, Arthur C. Clarke, Kim Stanley Robinson, Robert Silverberg—I think you would admit without much coaxing that those people can recognize science fiction when they see it. So what is the explanation for William Butcher's exclusion of Verne from the SF canon—Butcher who patronizingly called Asimov's 1965 essay a "disappointingly old-fashioned view of Verne as 'father of science fiction'"?

One big clue is contained in a sentence of Butcher's that I quote above: "Indeed his reputation as a founding father of science fiction has led to a major obfuscation of his literary merits." Butcher, a central figure in Verne studies for many years whose translations are generally accepted as the best in the field, has a vested interest in rescuing Verne from the taint of science fiction, which evidently he regards as trash. It's the old critical cliché: "If it's science fiction, it can't be literature." And vice versa. So much for Messrs. Asimov, Clarke, Bradbury, Heinlein, Robinson, and Silverberg. (And anyone else who wrote speculative novels that some people think of as science fiction—Olaf Stapledon, H.G. Wells, Aldous Huxley, George Orwell.)

True enough, Verne didn't regard himself as a science fiction writer. Why should he have? The phrase didn't even exist, back in the nineteenth century. Science fiction itself goes back at least to the *True History* of Lucian, which dates from the second century A.D. and is about a voyage to the Moon, and perhaps even to the Sumerian epic of Gilgamesh, twenty-five hundred years older than that, which tells of a quest for immortality. But the profession of "science fiction writer," to which Asimov, Heinlein, Robinson, etc., would not deny belonging, was a twentieth-century development, not coming into being until Hugo Gernsback founded the first true SF magazine in 1926, twenty-one years after Verne's death. (Gernsback used a sketch of Verne's tombstone on the contents page of the first issue of his magazine *Amazing Stories* and for many issues thereafter, and *Amazing* reprinted a dozen of Verne's novels and stories in its first eight years.)

You will note in the passage I quote above that even I, reading Verne as a boy, didn't know I was reading science fiction, simply because I hadn't yet encountered that term back in the mid-1940s. But that didn't mean I wasn't reading it, any more than Jules Verne wasn't writing it, although without knowing that that was what he was doing.

If William Butcher and his fellow critics want to reclaim Verne's work for the wider world of literature, so be it. I have no quarrel with that. And I suppose it is possible to say, using the narrowest sense of the phrase, that Verne wasn't a science fiction writer.

What he was, if you please, was a *writer*—one who happened to write quite a bit of science fiction. So was his successor H.G. Wells, who likewise didn't know he was a science fiction writer while he was writing some of the greatest science fiction ever written. (Verne admired Wells—"I consider him, as a purely imaginative writer, to be deserving of very high praise," but Wells' soaring vision went so far beyond Verne's that it made Verne uncomfortable: "Our methods are entirely different . . . I make use of physics. He invents.") Surely they were the fathers of our field. Without Verne—and Wells, and Hugo Gernsback too—I suspect that my life, and the lives of a number of people I know who do consider themselves science fiction writers, would have followed an entirely different course.

