



## Editorial — The Historical Rupture in Verne Studies

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In a 1979 talk delivered at Minicon, an annual gathering of science fiction and fantasy authors and enthusiasts, writer and scholar Samuel R. Delany observed that the academic study of science fiction, as it was then constituted, was marked by vexing *ruptures*. [1] After a long exclusion from the university, science fiction was in the first decade or two of being recognized as a significant field of literary and imaginative production. Scholars who had honed their critical skills on other literatures were beginning to take science fiction seriously, and to teach and write on its established and emerging canons. Delany admitted that this was a positive development for the field, but worried that the novelty of science fiction as an accepted subject for academic study might mean that new criticism would be disconnected from the long period of evolution that preceded it. (“The working assumption of most academic critics is that somehow the history of science fiction began precisely at the moment they began to read it – or, as frequently, in the nebulous yesterday of 16th and 17th-century utopias” [p. 99].) The new scholars, he complained, were often unaware of individual works or whole genres that had been crucial to the formation of the field. As important, they were also unaware of a substantial body of older critical thinking and writing. Science fiction has a significant (if varied and conflicted) history that is its own, Delany insisted, a history that has shaped its meaning and will shape its future. A rupture between an emerging practice of criticism and the established history of the field would diminish the field’s potential for genuine innovation. Critics need, he concluded, to take account of the *presence* of a history within their field if it is to develop effectively. [2]

Delany has more to say about where this historically-based and actively-present difference is found in science fiction — he locates it in the field’s rhetoric — but I think it possible, even appropriate, to apply his observations on science fiction’s historical dimension to the current state of Verne studies, which is also marked by the kinds of ruptures of which Delany complained more than thirty years ago. [3]

Walter James Miller’s early efforts were instrumental in establishing Verne studies as a serious endeavor among Anglo-Saxon critics. In public lectures given near the end of his life, he lamented that the successful rehabilitation of Verne for readers and scholars might, perversely, lead to further misfortunes for Verne’s legacy. [4] In the last few decades (mainly after the sequicentennial of Verne’s birth in 1978, and the centennial of his death in 2005), a torrent of new articles, books, journals and special issues of journals, and new

annotated editions and translations in multiple languages have been published. All of this is to our advantage; in some respects, the field is now more international, multidisciplinary, and critically richer than at any time in its prior history.

But (here is where Delany's complaint applies), that history is more complex and inconsistent than the ongoing renaissance indicates. There are volumes, shelves, whole archives, of older published critical and historical work leading up to and in myriad ways entangled with the present state of Verne studies. Our productivity as scholars and enthusiasts is shaped to a large degree by our recognition and engagement with this literature. Certainly, a good deal of what has been written and said about Jules Verne is nonsense, and can be easily dismissed. Some of the scholarship is of historical interest only in the narrow sense, as the methods and concerns that produced it are of little relevance to the contemporary state of the field. What is difficult, and intimidating for the new scholar of Verne, is sifting out from the mass of verniana and paraverniana the bits that are valuable and essential to reading and teaching Verne. Moreover, Verne's *oeuvre* poses distinct challenges for the completist. Given the richly intertextual, auto-citational character of his work, is there a comparable modern author for whom it seems equally necessary to aspire to have read all that he wrote? And to have read a good deal of the immense literary and scientific corpus that informed his writing? [5]

As Miller observed, the more successful we are in elevating Verne's significance, the more likely it may be that the bad old readings, editions, and translations will be resurrected (and, via the Internet, in more durable forms!). [6] Further, the *good* old readings, etc., will be neglected, either because they will be lost in the mass of material, or because scholars and students new to Verne will predictably fail to consult the record and will devote their energies to "reinventing the wheel". Despite the publication in recent years of superb annotated English translations of Verne (from Oxford University Press, the University of Nebraska Press, Wesleyan University Press, and others), and a notable increase in excellent English-language criticism, in the Anglo-Saxon world such texts still vie for shelf space with the wretched old translations and potted father-of-the-future biographies. This competition between the good-new and the bad-old is less pronounced elsewhere (for example, in Francophonie), but the lack of quality annotated editions requires new readers and scholars to look elsewhere for documentation and analysis of Verne's achievement, with uneven results.

There are several causes for the rupture between the critical present and past of Verne studies. Verne's academic reputation during much of the twentieth century as an extra-literary outlier, a mere author of boys' adventure tales, can lead one to assume that the work of that period is of little interest. The insularity of some factions of the field and changing modes of criticism and documentation have tended to wall off newcomers from the significant labors of their predecessors. Historically important texts are scattered across a coterie of small-circulation print journals. Little of the best criticism has been collected in edited volumes, or made available online, forcing scholars to seek it out through irregular systems of exchange. [7] Still less of this material has been translated into languages other than French. The growth in quality critical editions has brought welcome concentrations of the historical scholarship, but the number of such editions in the *Voyages extraordinaires* (or among Verne's nonfiction and plays) is still a small portion of the whole. The complete lack of critical editions in French requires that new readers are restricted in their choices of sources that dependably expand on the most widely-circulated versions of Verne's texts. [8]

In the end, the rupture in Verne studies is a consequence of positive definitions: "Jules Verne is... *this* or... *that* sort of writer; his works signify *this* or *that*...". All such assertions

are bound to an explicit or a tacit history in the moment they are offered, and it is difficult to think through them with rigor if one is unaware from whence they came. A more nuanced and reflective approach is needed.

The field of Verne studies, as it is now constituted, is undergoing energetic transformation; this is a vital source of its scholarly and creative potential. Yet that transformation, and any break with the past it may entail is in multiple senses of the term an *historical* development. It is determined by the histories of Verne's reading and writing practices; the histories of his reception by contemporary and subsequent readers and critics; and the institutional, national, and international histories of a field that has moved, haltingly, from a position at the margins to one of increasing visibility and stature in modern literary studies. The care we take in our responses to these factors will determine the success of our endeavors in the present and the future growth of Verne studies.

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## NOTES

(I am indebted to Arthur B. Evans for his advice regarding an early draft of this text.)

1. "Science Fiction and 'Literature' – Or, The Conscience of the King." Reprinted in *Speculations on Speculation: Theories of Science Fiction*, eds. James Gunn and Matthew Candelaria. Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2005. 95–117.
2. French-speaking critics of the period may have had an advantage in this regard, in Pierre Versins' monumental *Encyclopédie de l'utopie, des voyages extraordinaires et de la science-fiction* (Lausanne: Editions L'Age d'homme, 1972), a basis of much of the best subsequent criticism. Versins' achievement was recognized by a special Hugo Award in 1973.
3. For an admirably concise and pointed analysis of Delany's importance in sf and sf criticism, and the ways in which his career as a writer and critic is exemplary of sf's continuing struggle for respectability in the university, see Stephanie A. Smith, "A Most Ambiguous Citizen: Samuel R. "Chip" Delany," in *American Literary History* 19.2 (2007): 557–70.
4. See, for example, Miller's "The Role of Chance in Rehabilitating Verne," in *Extraordinary Voyages* 17.1 (December 2010): 6-10. In recognition of this accomplishment, this volume of *Verniana* is dedicated to Miller.
5. Here I echo Volker Dehs' sentiment, expressed in his editorial for *Verniana* 2, that we are obliged to attend closely to the unprecedented scholarly productivity of our field in recent years. Dehs's contribution to this volume, which reconstructs in the most comprehensive and bibliographically-precise form to date the personal libraries of Jules and Michel Verne, is a landmark achievement in documenting intertexts of the Verniverse.
6. Arthur B. Evans documents the extremity of the bad translations in "Jules Verne's English Translations," in *Science Fiction Studies* 32.1 (2005): 80-104.
7. The exception to this: a growing body of Verne-related materials collected at Zvi Har'El's Jules Verne Collection <<http://jv.gilead.org.il/>>. The Jules Verne Forum <<http://jv.gilead.org.il/forum/>>, an electronic mailing list founded by the late Zvi Har'El in 1996, has become the principal site on the WWW for dialogue among Verne scholars. As such, it represents not only an invaluable

resource for every Verne scholar, but also a model for collegial scholarly exchanges in the field. The gift in 2007 by Jean-Michel Margot of his unequalled collection of international Verne scholarship to the Maison d'Ailleurs <<http://www.ailleurs.ch/>>, where the Margot Collection will form the heart of a new research center for Verne studies, represents another opportunity for bringing together the fractious corpus of Verne criticism.

8. The publication of the bulk of Verne's manuscripts in high-quality digitized formats on the WWW site of the Bibliothèque municipale de Nantes <<http://www.bm.nantes.fr/>> has opened an unprecedented store of materials to scholars worldwide. Ideally, the new knowledge about Verne's compositional methods that this undertaking will reveal will be made available to readers and scholars through networks of exchange that will increase, not isolate, discoveries.