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Two New British Studies on Jules Verne. [Review of William Butcher's *Verne's Journey to the Centre of the Self*, Macmillan, 1991, and Andrew Martin's *The Mask of the Prophet: The Extraordinary Fictions of Jules Verne*, Oxford UP, 1991]

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# Science Fiction Studies

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## BOOKS IN REVIEW

**Butcher, William.** *Verne's Journey to the Center of the Self: Space and Time in the "Voyages Extraordinaires."* Foreword by Ray Bradbury. London: Macmillan, 1990. xvii+206pp. 35.

**Martin, Andrew.** *The Mask of the Prophet: The Extraordinary Fictions of Jules Verne.* Oxford & NY: Oxford UP, 1990. xiv+222pp. \$42.50

This past year's publication of two monographs by William Butcher and Andrew Martin marks an interesting milestone in international Verne studies: for the first time, all three of the most noted English-language scholars of Jules Verne now have books in print. Together with my own *Jules Verne Rediscovered* (see *SFS* #49:369), these works constitute a small but highly credible and ever-growing body of modern Anglo-American criticism devoted to this most widely translated of all French SF authors. Moreover (albeit entirely fortuitous), their individual thematic foci tend to complement each other quite nicely: my 1988 book targeted Verne's scientific and moral didacticism, Butcher's analyzes the spatio-temporal structure of Verne's narratives, and Martin's investigates the ideological sub-texts of imperialism and revolt which pervade the *Voyages Extraordinaires*.

Contrary to what one might surmise from its title, Butcher's *Verne's Journey to the Center of the Self* is not a psychological study of Verne the man (in a Freudian or Jungian sense) but, rather, a meticulous and wide-ranging structuralist/phenomenological study of how time and space function together in Verne's works. Butcher explains:

Responses to the general question of plots in literature have often employed terms like 'slice of life,' 'train of events,' 'narrative thread,' or 'point of view.' Their use of metaphorical objects that are already of dimension two, one, or zero means, however, that the key question

of dimensionality is often begged. The vital problem, in other words, remains that of knowing how mappings can take place between the world and a one-dimensional succession of words; how space, even when divided in two, can begin to be 'temporalized.'

In simpler terms: how is the choice of particular journeys in time and space made? (2)

To answer this question, Butcher closely examines a variety of spatio-temporal structures and themes which undergird Verne's *romans scientifiques*: e.g., narrative patterns of linearity, arborescence, and circularity; their relation to and "symbiosis" (2) with fictional and nonfictional time (particularly evident, for example, in novels like *Voyage au Centre de la Terre*); Verne's innovative use of verb tenses and deictics (*Le Chancellor*, for instance, "constitutes apparently the very first novel in continuous prose written in the present" [132] and *L'Ile à hélice* "is apparently the first--perhaps only--one written in the third person and the present" [132]); the conflicting thematic presence in Verne's texts of closure vs. openness, invention vs. authenticity, scientific space-time vs. personal space-time, and so forth.

Butcher analyzes these aspects of Verne's narrative practice in the context of late 19th century naturalistic/realistic literary conventions--a canon within which Verne was forced to compose his fictions and against which he is convincingly shown to have rebelled again and again. To help illustrate his points, a number of Butcher's (sometimes difficult but very insightful) discussions are supplemented with graphs and charts: e.g., fictional time vs. narrative time in certain key works (31, 33, 35), cyclical plot structures (80), etc. But, as Butcher discovers (and openly admits in his conclusion), finding a definitive matrix for Verne's treatment of space-time is an impossible dream--similar, in some respects, to the ambitious (and Hetzel-mandated) goal of the *Voyages Extraordinaires* themselves in attempting to completely "map" the known and unknown universe.

Even at the end of our analysis, time and space in the *Voyages*, considered separately, remain largely mysterious entities. Neither is material nor immaterial, neither divinely-appointed nor created by man, and neither is detectable as a scientific object nor constructible as a literary subject. For Verne the positivist, the frustrating lack of physical data tends to lead time and space to be ignored; but for Verne the novelist-craftsman, they simply cannot be circumvented. Instead, the problem is transferred, subsumed into such typically nineteenth-

century concerns as the relationship with other times and places, the nature of identity and difference, or the functioning of feedback systems. Time and space in the *Voyages* ultimately remain a loose bundle of conceptions and perceptions, defined above all in terms of each other. Although rarely imperceptible, they stay consistently and implacably unanalysable....

[T]he *Voyages Extraordinaires* seem to present themselves as a heroic and exemplary failure: they prove that even the most visionary survey of Nature's outstanding features cannot put the world back together again....Verne puts another nail into the remaining encyclopaedic aims of the Age of Reason; and contributes massively to what was to become the new uncertainty.

But in this book, as in the *Voyages*, it is not the end-product or the destination that counts; it is the journey itself. And Butcher goes well beyond most Vernian critics in his coming to grips not only with the author's complex rendering of space and time but also with the relation between Verne's son Michel and the posthumous novels of the *Voyages Extraordinaires*--fictions long known to have been (at the very least) partially rewritten or (at most) completely authored by the latter.

In summary, I know of no other study, in French or in English, which treats the spatio-temporal aspect of Verne's creative vision so comprehensively and incisively. In *Verne's Journey to the Center of the Self*, Butcher has very capably explored the conceptual framework in which Verne composed his fictions; and, as a result, he has effectively demonstrated Verne's "modernity" as a writer as well as his status as a genuinely *literary* (as opposed to scientific) prophet for the 20th century.

But be forewarned: for the anglophone reader who is not an aficionado of Verne and/or does not possess a Ph.D. in literary studies, Butcher's study may present a challenge. All French quotations remain untranslated, the arguments presented (while cogent) are dense, intricate, and presuppose a familiarity with the nomenclature of modern literary theory, and the many sub-chapter rubrics sometimes tend to fragment one's sense of exegetic continuity. Finally, the forward by Ray Bradbury, although quite impressive as a marketing accoutrement, is generally disappointing--mostly rehash and generic accolades--particularly when compared to his earlier essay titled *The Ardent Blasphemers*. As for Martin's (more easily read but equally insightful) *The Mask of the Prophet*, its title refers not only to Verne

himself and to the many efforts made by French critics to discover his "true" identity, but also to the highly unique thematic/heuristic paradigm around which Martin's study is organized: i.e., the tale of a Masked Prophet in revolt against an Empire. The two-fold source of this story is (prior to Verne) Napoleon Bonaparte and (after Verne) Jorge Luis Borges--against whom Martin compares Verne. Martin explains his unusual *modus operandi* as follows:

To give an oblique impression of the sheer range of Verne's writing, and because it invites a double reading, I shall be invoking as models the work of two other, very different, writers (different from Verne and from each other)...Napoleon and Borges....Verne's extraordinary fictions persistently tell and retell, in multifarious forms, the story of a masked prophet who promises to reveal what is concealed. It is this recurrence that provides one of the many justifications for the seemingly arbitrary act of linking Verne with the names of Napoleon and Borges. For both of these writers tell essentially the same tale, archetypal in its implication and scope. (9, 14)

While freely admitting that the story *per se* of a Masked Prophet rebelling against an Empire actually appears in none of Verne's *Voyages*, Martin contends that it nevertheless constitutes--either explicitly or metaphorically--an ever-present politico-ideological backdrop to virtually all of them:

The *Voyages* can thus be read as an extended commentary on the narrative of the Masked Prophet, a set of variations on the infinitely rich themes the story contains. The fictions of Verne constitute a sequence of meditations on the ramifications of imperialism and its metaphorical counterparts. In particular, the *Voyages* explore both the avenues followed in the respective versions of the tale by Napoleon and Borges....The Vernian *oeuvre* might be said to enact the transformation linking Napoleon to Borges. (16-17)

To illustrate his point, at the outset of each chapter throughout *The Mask of the Prophet*, Martin reproduces excerpts from Napoleon's *Le Masque prophète* and Borges' *The Masked Dyer, Hakim of Merv* which then serve as catalysts to his own (ingeniously deconstructive) commentaries on a wide variety of novels from Verne's *Voyages Extraordinaires*.

Martin's often brilliant analysis of these novels in the light of Bonaparte and Borges succeeds in revealing the latent tension in Verne's narratives as the author strains to reconcile the irreconcilable: i.e., the bourgeois

(Napoleonic) ideology of positivist codification/closure, imperialist expansionism, and strict uniformity of narrative discourse along with its symbiotic yet subversive (Borgesian) counterpart of decategorization/open-endedness, libertarian individuation, and ironic self-parody. In Martin's terms, the former characteristics constitute the hegemony of "Empire," the latter represent "Revolt," and the "Masked Prophet"--or "The Prophet of the Mask," as Martin suggestively titles his final chapter--is both the author himself and the *Voyages Extraordinaires* as literary artifacts from a specific historical era, both of which are disguising themselves to be something they are not. Moreover, as mediators of this ideological and narratological tug-of-war, Verne's novels also symbolize, in a more general sense, the tension-filled dialectical nature of literature itself: i.e., the perpetual interplay between the innovative and the normative, between creation and canon:

The narrative of the rise and fall, the expansion and fragmentation of empire encapsulates the destiny of all concentrations of power--political, intellectual, and linguistic. Verne is a condensation of the forces that issue in the great system-builders of his era (Comte, Balzac, Marx) and the de-systematizers (Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, Roussel), the metaphysicians and the ironists. The narrow obsessions of the *Voyages Extraordinaires* attain almost unlimited symbolic power, generating an encyclopaedia of the forking paths of the future, a labyrinth from which we have still not emerged. To speak of Verne is thus in some way to speak of all literature. (201)

Whereas Butcher's *Verne's Journey to the Center of the Self* is an in-depth elaboration of various narratological/structural(ist) analyses first sketched out by the French theorist Jean Ricardou and well-known Vernian critics like François Raymond, Jean Delabroy, and Jean Roudaut, Martin's *The Mask of the Prophet* follows in the footsteps of three very different French scholars whose earlier studies of the *Voyages Extraordinaires* offered a more archetypal/political/ideological perspective: Michel Serres, Jean Chesneaux, and Pierre Macherey. But both new books are worthy and welcome additions to the growing corpus of English-language scholarship on Jules Verne and its efforts to both defamiliarize and refamiliarize (i.e., to "unmask") for the Anglo-American public the multi-layered richness of Jules Verne's legendary novels.

--ABE