



Editorial : The end of his(s)tory?

William Butcher

Verniana remains the only high-level forum of its sort that is truly international, that transcends geographical and linguistic boundaries. However, given the nationality of the person in question and the language of the primary documents, France and French are the obligatory starting point for anyone interested in Verne. This is a rare field of knowledge where English does not transmit the majority of syntheses and cutting-edge research, paradoxically, given the number of Verne researchers hailing from wider horizons.

Volume 12 of the journal, which has just closed, contains a healthy "broad-church" range of approaches: notably a welcome growing number of reviews, a "downstream" study of *Paris in the Twentieth Century* compared with an urbanisation initiative, and two "upstream" studies: a search for the author's sources in classical literature and an commented transcription of excerpts from an unpublished manuscript.

Through such articles, *Verniana* strikes a delicate balance between, first, communication amongst specialists and essays designed for the general public. Literature, in the final analysis, consists of a kind of catch-all, smorgasbord, the last refuge of generalists, where the most familiar ideas can live in promiscuity with the most revolutionary ones. A division that corresponds only in part to the mental gap between established, even conservative, researchers dominating Vernian institutions, and newcomers, carried on winds — or typhoons — from the back of beyond, casually upsetting conceptions and hierarchs.

The second balance found in the "columns" of *Verniana* is that between communication emanating from Western Europe and that taking place on a wider global scale and in the most varied media. Gone are the days when a single colloquium could bring together the majority of those doing original research, as is the time when one could reasonably hope to read everything that was written. That geographical and conceptual localisation has now given way to an anarchic multiplicity of voices, in all tones, discordant one hopes. However, this internationalisation brings us back to the starting point: can one be a Vernian without knowing French? (One gets the impression that some authorities, and not the least, have done so.) Can cutting-edge research be done in translation?

Contributing to this opposing centripetal-centrifugal tendency, the many Vernian societies, normally endowed with their own reviews, continued their activity in 2021 with surprising vigour. All the more meritorious in this regard is the resurgence of Spanish-speaking studies, overcoming a sea of troubles. All the more commendable in this regard is the resurgence of Spanish-speaking studies, as shown by the flourishing health of a journal, *Mundo Verne*, a bilingual and multinational publishing house, Paganel, and biannual symposia. At the opposite extreme, China and Chinese language show little international activity on or around Verne — a sign of a wider disengagement?

But rather than resting on the laurels of *Verniana* and Vernians worldwide over the past year, it is perhaps preferable to look at future prospects — while being aware that, just as shoemakers' wives are often poorly shod, futurists are prone to be wrong more than just about anybody.

Some writers have opined that the essential discoveries in Verne studies have already been made, that the unpublished works are beginning to dry up, that we are beginning of the end of knowing all that can be known about Verne. In his 2020 editorial, while mentioning some instances of expanding activity, Alex Kirstukas does note a certain slowdown in output. In my opinion, it would be foolhardy to speak of a "last frontier", given the work that remains to be done in two or three areas in particular, seconded by a tool whose usefulness has only just begun: information and language processing.

Certainly, writing about Verne using only pen and paper will always be possible. But that would be to deprive yourself of truly miraculous, almost instantaneous tools, starting with the unrestricted online consultation of a massive bibliography, begun by Jean-Michel Margot and colossally expanded by Wim Thierens, which lists the vast majority of publications on Verne since the beginning. Or indexing: those who have worked in the mists of history keep a sense of wonder at the possibility of searching for keywords, above all proper names, through thousands of texts. Or, having found the obscurest of documents, to be able to read it and even copy the text. Or to have it translated, even from or to Japanese or Welsh, without elegance it is true but enough to extract meaning.

As for a still largely unexploited field of research, certainly built on insecure, even sandy foundations, appear first of all Verne's texts published before 1863 but pseudonymous and therefore not identified to date. It is not clear, when other candidates for inclusion arise, that a consensus can be found on the reliability of the attribution or even on the criteria for coming to such an agreement.

At a different level of urgency is the establishment of the text of Verne's novels, starting with the famous ones. While it may seem surprising to advocate such a fundamental operation, performed long ago for other celebrated writers, it is obvious that even the best contemporary French editions continue to include a number of errors of all kinds. There is currently a lack of a policy or willingness to correct typos, gender errors, spelling mistakes — without even mentioning the issue of faulty proper names. Another urgency, probably needing to be done first: to check if the famous illustrated in-octavo editions are really the "best" (they are inferior to humbler editions in the case of *Twenty Thousand Leagues and Around the Moon*). An additional essential task for proper knowledge of Verne's books: starting from the edition considered canonical, however modest its origin, to quote the many variant texts,

usually stylistic or minor between the various editions, but sometimes attaining dozens of pages in the manuscripts.

Only after such fundamental work will it be possible to define a reference edition of the collected *Extraordinary Journeys*. Unlike essayists who can smoothly glide over the obscurities and contradictions of the text, translators will be grateful, because they are at present forced to deal with the texts somewhat manhandled by Hetzel and reproduced more or less wholesale ever since, and to try to extract from the muddle a more coherent text. The same holds true for the French educational system, still struggling, at both school-leaving and doctoral-level teaching examinations, to deal with texts that flout the agreement rules or evoke non-existent geographical entities.

If the establishment of reliable texts of the novels remains highly urgent, reading the manuscripts of the novels appears almost as pressing. The majority of the tens of thousands of handwritten sheets are unexplored to date. While this remains a controversial area, judging from recent commentary on the matter, it seems obvious that gaining knowledge of these precious documents, almost all of which are from the horse's mouth, could in no way harm understanding of Verne.

In the longer term, and therefore at greater risk of error, it is possible to imagine — and therefore to carry out? — increasing explorations and investigations in Vernian studies. First in machine-based presentation of the critical editions which, from the basic text, must extract a breadcrumb trail through the maze of variants, ex-cathedra interventions (by Hetzel...), changes of mind, three-quarters illegible erased passages, and scores of numbered editions, while showing, if possible, the relationship — identity, opposition, correction, refinement — between the text of all these versions: all without descending into the endless maelstrom of minute variants in punctuation.

The semi-automatic transcription of Verne's best calligraphy, if not of the logbooks or first drafts of the novels, will have to become feasible sooner or later. The ultimate goal would be to arrive at a handwritten sheet underpinned by the corresponding transcription — reproduced in colours that correspond to the authors of the text or the stages of correction? — where, as at present for printed documents, you could simply hover over the text to see its transcription.

Going back even further into Vernian creation, almost to the very source, one can also dream of being able to x-ray or MRI the manuscripts of the most famous novels, as for the Dead Sea scrolls or Proustian scrawls, to see "inside" the manuscripts, to observe the successive layers of the palimpsests, even to bring back the erased text, naturally in search of the successive modifications, but aiming above all to reach the most primitive state of writing, the zero degree of composition, the creation itself.

For the 2020s in short, and even beyond, there is still plenty of exegetical grist for the Vernian mill. Whatever the discoveries, impossible to predict, but surely plentiful and, with a little luck, revolutionary, *Verniana*, approaching the mythical year of 2028, will surely maintain its momentum, or better its cruising speed, and will thus remain at the centre of the renewal.

