



## Editorial — Microgalaxies, or the Protean World of Jules Verne

**Alex Kirstukas**

Readers of Jules Verne's *Voyage au centre de la Terre* (*Journey to the Center of the Earth*, 1863) may recall a visit supposedly made by the real-life chemist Humphry Davy (1778–1829) to the fictional mineralogist Otto Lidenbrock [1]. After theorizing on the metallic composition of the Earth, Davy impressed Lidenbrock with « une expérience bien simple » (a very simple experiment) made in the comfort of the latter's own study:

Il composa une boule métallique faite principalement des métaux dont je viens de parler, et qui figurait parfaitement notre globe ; lorsqu'on faisait tomber une fine rosée à sa surface, celle-ci se boursoufflait, s'oxydait et formait une petite montagne ; un cratère s'ouvrait à son sommet ; l'éruption avait lieu et communiquait à toute la boule une chaleur telle qu'il devenait impossible de la tenir à la main. [2]

He constructed a ball made mainly of the metals I have just mentioned, and which perfectly represented our globe. When a fine dew was dropped on to its surface, it blistered, oxidised, and produced a tiny mountain. A crater opened at the summit; an eruption took place; and it transmitted so much warmth to the whole ball that it became too hot to hold. [3]

Verne's storytelling gifts are on full display in this passage, in which a flashy but inconsequential stunt performed in lectures by the real Davy—trickling water into a potassium-loaded model volcano and letting the reaction take its pyrotechnic course—is misdirected through artful prose to become a small scientific miracle. [4]. Verne's version of

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1 Jules Verne found the Davy anecdote in the 7<sup>th</sup> edition of the *Lettres sur les révolution du globe* by Alexandre Bertrand (Hetzal, 1863), p. 365. Book available on *Gallica*.

2 Jules Verne, *Voyage au centre de la Terre* (Paris: J. Hetzel et Cie, 1867), 31.

3 Jules Verne, *Journey to the Centre of the Earth*, trans. William Butcher (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 32.

4 The Royal Institution, where Davy performed this stunt in 1812, offers a demonstration on YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nxRHQ1xfnWc>. Another aspect of Verne's artful misdirection, of

the experiment, whether from misunderstanding or deliberate mythologizing, has Davy creating nothing less than a fully functioning miniature planet Earth: alive with sped-up geological activity, pullulating with change and transformation, reacting to external stimuli with mysterious internal energy, all in its own self-contained microcosmic system.

It is tantalizing to compare this imagery to Hetzel's description of the *Voyages extraordinaires* project, with its impossible promise that Verne would rewrite all known and unknown information, the entire "history of the universe," to fit within the tiny confines of a didactic novel sequence. [5] In response, Verne (playing Davy playing God?) does indeed shape his narratives as microcosmic worlds of information and invention—"microgalaxies," to quote an elliptical but intriguing Verne homage from Vladimir Nabokov. [6]. But the imagery in Lidenbrock's anecdote could also be applied, still more metatextually, to the field of Verne studies, itself a miniature world continuing to flourish and react even as its system constantly shifts and changes.

In the past few years, Vernians have seen a particular flourishing in the availability and multilingual variety of easily accessible research materials—one of the external stimuli provoking action as Davy's "fine dew" provokes geological activity. The Bibliothèque nationale de France's online platform *Gallica*, already a considerable and valuable resource when Garnt de Vries-Uiterweerd cited it in his editorial to *Verniana 7*, continues to grow, offering not only a varied trove of Verne-specific material but also long runs of many newspapers and journals. In that respect it can be fruitfully compared to a similarly growing collection in the United States, *Chronicling America*, hosted jointly by the Library of Congress and the National Endowment for the Humanities, and offering a wide assortment of American newspapers, including many little-known names. *Chronicling America*'s interface is arguably the more user-friendly—full text search is consistently available, with keywords highlighted directly on page scans—although *Gallica*'s interface allows faster access to specific dates. (*Gallica* also has the advantage of historical scans for major ongoing titles; back issues for equivalent newspapers in the United States tend to be unavailable for free online access, locked in their own subscription archives.) As de Vries-Uiterweerd's editorial points out, the sheer vastness of such archives threatens to overwhelm the researcher; no matter how savvy the available search functions, the burden still falls on the reader to sort the wheat from the chaff and make sense of the results. This issue of *Verniana*, however, includes no less than three texts in which historical newspapers are prominently featured, going some way toward demonstrating the possibilities of wading and searching among the digitized archives. Indeed, when my own article here on early serializations of *Around the World in Eighty Days* was first presented as a

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course, is the way he discreetly papers over the logistical unlikelihood of his invented meeting. As Butcher notes, Lidenbrock would have been about twelve at the time (Verne, *Journey to the Centre*, 222).

- 5 J. Hetzel, « Avertissement de l'Éditeur », in Jules Verne, *Voyages et aventures du capitaine Hatteras* (Paris: J. Hetzel et Cie, 1866), 1–2.
- 6 In the mysterious alternative universe of Nabokov's *Ada, or Ardor* (1969), the direct counterpart of Verne's *Les Enfants du capitaine Grant* is said to be a book by Captain Grant, titled *Microgalaxies*. Verne and Grant also send the novel's narrator into rhapsodies of sexually charged wordplay: "the burning tip of Patagonia, Captain Grant's Horn, a Villa in Verna, my jewel, my agony..." See Vladimir Nabokov, *Novels, 1969–1974: Ada, Transparent Things, Look at the Harlequins!* (New York: Library of America, 1996), 175, 476, 266–67.

talk in 2017, the two newspapers heavily involved were only available in print form or as scans behind online family-research paywalls; at this writing, both are freely available on *Chronicling America*.

A more specifically curated kind of research-material proliferation, and a most welcome one, comes in the form of new Vernian publications across multiple languages. T3AxEL, an international team of experts led by María Pilar Tresaco and hosted by the Universidad de Zaragoza, has recently launched the website *Julio Verne: Textos, Territorios, Tecnologías* (<http://axelverne.unizar.es/>), featuring a wide array of information and archival texts relating to Verne's early readership in Spanish and Portuguese. Meanwhile, Ediciones Paganel, the publishing arm of the Sociedad Hispanica Jules Verne led by Ariel Pérez Rodríguez, offers new Spanish translations of numerous lesser-known Verne texts, as well as an impressive array of Verne scholarship, including new research in both French and Spanish. Similarly promising efforts are appearing in other languages, such as ongoing efforts led by Andrzej Zydorczak to publish a vast amount of the Verne corpus, newly translated, under the auspices of Polskie Towarzystwo Juliusza Verne'a (the Polish Jules Verne Society).

For the moment, English-language Verne publications seem to be in a temporary period of somewhat slower activity. In 2018, the North American Jules Verne Society completed its Palik Series of previously untranslated Verne materials, an effort led with energy and rigor by Brian Taves. His recent untimely death underlines existing uncertainties in the Anglophone field; though numerous Verne novels and almost all French scholarship remain unavailable in responsible English translation, it is unclear when and where the next translation projects may appear. This is, however, only a snapshot of the immediate present, and there is every reason to hope for new developments and enterprises. Here as well, the imagery of an ever-changing microworld seems relevant, and certainly efforts to break language barriers are well worth attempting in any circumstance. As Tresaco implies in her trilingual editorial for the previous volume of *Verniana*, multilingual efforts offer much for the future of Verne studies, opening the field more widely to potential new readers and researchers.

It of course remains unknown what the kind of critical landscape these future Vernians will encounter, and what kind of Vernians they will be. Jean-Michel Margot has argued that, while much work remains to be done among Verne's manuscripts, letters, and notes, the field is currently at a turning point. The "two Jules Vernes," the writer and the popular icon, have in some cases become such separate entities that it is often difficult to forecast what trends in future readership and scholarship will look like. [7].

In this respect Verne seems somewhat different from many other writers who have inspired large and active followings. In many major appreciation societies—such as those for P. G. Wodehouse, Jane Austen, or L. Frank Baum, to take some Anglophone examples—there seems a certain consensus as to what kind of "atmosphere" (e.g. fictional universe, philosophical framework, and stylistic tone) the writer consistently evokes, with much of the pleasure of membership coming from the conscious shared immersion in that specific atmosphere. Verne cannot be fitted quite as easily into a single shape or personality; in addition to identifying two Jules Vernes across reception history, we can also imagine as many individual Vernes as there are readers. Consider this very issue of *Verniana*, featuring Verne the impetus for good and bad translations (in the article by Arthur B. Evans), Verne the

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7 See especially Margot's editorial for *Verniana* 9.

youthful playwright-in-training (Samuel Sadaune), Verne the inspiration for science and science fiction (Jacques Crovisier), Verne the source material for parodic adaptations and wildly variant texts (Philippe Burgaud and I), and Verne the individual whose personal and political life can be glimpsed in his interviews and writings (Volker Dehs).

If there were only a scattered few such perspectives available to a beginning Vernian, as has sometimes been the case, [8] the field and the writer would be vastly misrepresented. In *Verniana*, however, these different aspects of Verne combine and unite. Their simultaneity and juxtaposition demonstrate actively that there is no one authoritative understanding of Verne and his work, no one valid theoretical framework, but a rich and continually evolving array of potentially useful approaches.

This is not to pretend that every imaginable interpretation of Verne is equally plausible or enlightening; this field, like every other, has its share of misleading arguments. Nor is it to exaggerate the field's current diversity; here as in many other fields, nonwhite and nonmale approaches are still drastically in the published minority. Rather, the variety of approaches serves to underline that the very multiplicity of possible entrance points is an advantage rather than a shortcoming of current research. Here again, for a third and final time, the image of a Davian-Lidenbrockian microcosm seems of encouraging relevance. On a global scale, reading Verne is not a single activity, but a whole evolving microworld of different processes and perspectives with the potential to shape and transform each other. The more open this system to both internal and external stimuli, the more fruitful the activity.

It is to be hoped that, in this decade leading up to Verne's bicentennial, Vernians across all languages can find ways of joining in the effort to encourage this kind of multifariously accessible interest: interdisciplinary, multilingual, multifaceted, and increasingly diverse in every sense. Verne research is a varied and ever-changing miniature world, but for that very reason it is also a robust and continuously compelling one—*The Fabulous World of Jules Verne*, as Hollywood put it. [9] Even Verne's mythic Humphry Davy, shaping tiny planets in the quiet of the study, could hardly ask for more.

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8 Previous editorials in this space have noted or hinted at this situation, and the need to avoid it going forward. See particularly Daniel Compère's and Terry Harpold's editorials for *Verniana* 1 and 3, respectively.

9 This was Warner Brothers' American release title for Karel Zeman's superb 1958 Czech film *Vynález zkázy* ("Invention for Destruction"), from Verne's *Face au drapeau*.