

of the Earth (1864).² And lastly, this story, first published in 1910, constitutes another key to the Jules-Michel mystery, which has not been totally elucidated to date.

Virtually all of the **Extraordinary Journeys** have appeared in English—if the word “translation” can be used. Many of the hundreds of attempts have indeed been atrocious: often truncated by up to two-thirds and demonstrating precious little understanding of the original works. They contain a large number of howlers: “the Passage of the North Sea,” “jumping over an island” and “each square 3/16 of an inch,” to quote but three.³

From the beginning, the English versions were the result of, but also contributed massively to, the masking of that highly original writer, Verne, a creative artist of the first order. The **Extraordinary Journeys** are indisputably literary works—except in English.

“Verne,” rather than “Jules Verne”: one does not normally say “*William Shakespeare*,” “*Jean Racine*” or “*Charles Dickens*” (only female writers tend to need both names . . .). But the omission of the first name also helps to avoid the thorny problem of authorship. Many of the works appearing after Jules Verne’s death in 1905, although published under his sole name, were extensively revised and added to by his son Michel Verne (1861-1925). Nearly all *The Barsac Mission* (1919) and much of the masterpiece “**Edom**” (1910) are Michel’s work. This revelation clearly has important implications for our understanding of the Verne phenomenon.

The son’s participation in the collected works is far from a crass bolt-on job. Michel’s contribution, although perhaps making our knowledge of Jules more difficult, must be considered an important literary *œuvre* in its own right. It is an excellent imitation of his father’s style (it had to be, to convince); but it also furnishes an ironic commentary on the **Extraordinary Journeys** as a whole—including the posthumous production itself!

It is therefore fitting that “**Humbug**” should acknowledge Michel Verne in the authorship formula. This seems indeed to be the first time Michel was credited as an author of any substantial prose work, anywhere in the world. (A remarkable irony: the son repeatedly criticised by his father as not being self-effacing enough successfully effaced his own *œuvre* for nearly a century.) It is to be hoped that it will not be the last; that future publications of the posthumous works will acknowledge Michel Verne’s contribution as reviser, co-author or main author.⁴

The Acadian volume was also the first in any language to explicitly indicate the variants, and hence allow a direct

That the short story signed Jules Verne, called “**Le Humbug**” in French, remained unavailable in English until 1991 was a surprising omission for the most translated writer in the world.¹ It was all the more astonishing given its importance and interest.

First, “**Humbug**” is set in America, and analyses Anglo-Saxon customs—always illuminating when done from the outside. Secondly, this tale elucidates the better-known *Voyages extraordinaires*. The theme of the dangers of fraud ironically shows up all the “extraordinary” discoveries of the rest of the canon, especially *Journey to the Centre*

comparison between Jules and Michel's writings. Astonishingly, it was the first critical edition of *any* of Verne's works, a publication that indicated the textual variants: a sign of the neglect of Verne as a serious writer.

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Humbug was first published in the volume of short stories *Yesterday and Tomorrow* (1910). Verne had apparently not intended it to be included, planning instead to include "Memories of Childhood and Youth" and "The Count of Chanteleine" (1864). In other words, "Humbug" is unique amongst Verne's finished post-1860 fiction in that he did not foresee its publication.

Three versions of the story exist. Jules Verne's manuscript was bought from his descendants by the town of Nantes in 1981. Piero Gondolo della Riva had, however, acquired a typescript from the archives of the publisher: this had been typed on Michel Verne's initiative by an averagely competent secretary following his father's death in 1905. It was this typescript that the *Bulletin de la société Jules Verne* published in 1985 as the original, unrevised version.⁵

If we compare the two versions, Jules's version contains about 11,400 words, as against 10,700 for Michel's. Some of Michel's revisions are in fact simply excisions, although there are a large number of other changes designed to increase the story's coherence. Other alterations in the 1910 version include the correction of the numerous spelling mistakes and a reduction in Jules Verne's numerous semi-colons and exclamation marks. The confusion as to whether the fossil is a mastodon, a mammoth or a human being is decreased (but not totally eliminated); and a particularly racist remark is removed, as are most of the references to the Old Testament. Also cut by Michel are references to a character with the name of a real-life friend of his father's.

Olivier Dumas finds the posthumous amendments negative.⁶ I cannot agree: Michel's version seems more to the point, more modern, more lucid and more coherent. Little useful information is lost through the cuts. Of course, much of the revision work would normally have been done by Jules himself had he prepared the work for publication—he often requested, à la Balzac, multiple sets of proofs in order to polish his prose.

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There is no conclusive evidence as to when the story was written. Terrasse has pointed out a similar claimed discovery of a human fossil near the same Albany in 1869; and so argues that "Humbug" was probably written in about

1870—a view shared by Dumas.⁷ Chelebourg places the writing after 1871-2, when Darwin's *The Descent of Man* was published.⁸ Compère, on the other hand, has argued for 1865, indicating similarities (the prehistoric aspect, the theme of evolution, the doubt as to the veracity) with both *Journey to the Centre of the Earth* (1864) and *From the Earth to the Moon* (1865), including an explanation by Verne of the word "un 'humbug,'" in a footnote simply glossing it as "mystification" (ch. 18).⁹

The short story itself starts "In March 1863, I embarked . . .," and we know that the internal date in Verne's works is often that of writing. The story could easily, of course, have been written in stages. The indication "1863," in the middle of the Civil War (1861-5), is a strange feature that previous commentators do not seem to have noticed, and yet it is almost incredible for someone to travel calmly through a nation in the throes of an internecine war. But it is in fact an addition by Michel, and need not necessarily be taken at face value, for it is possibly a guess as to Jules's date of writing, or even a deliberately false trail. Further evidence is provided by Verne's own visit to New York and up the Hudson to Albany in 1867, although there are differences with the account he gives in the lightly fictionalised *A Floating City* (1871), especially as regards the scenery along the Hudson.¹⁰ Again, no mention is made in the published narration of slaves or slavery—although one of the remarks cut by Michel refers to slavery as if it still existed, perhaps even in the North. Finally, the real-life opera-singer Henriette Sontag gives a concert in Albany in the tale—although she died in Mexico in 1854. The date of the writing, in sum, remains uncertain.

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The purely literary aspects of the text often point back, curiously, to the conditions under which it was written. Whatever their origin, three strands run throughout Verne's works, both pre- and post-1905. First, Delabroy's underlying thesis is that all of Verne's early works centre on the problems of beginning, of setting up new objects, paradigms or systems.¹¹ "Humbug" demonstrates that even an apparently radically new discovery is in fact nothing but a reshuffling of existing elements, a heteroclitite accumulation of not-even-old bones.

Also, the question of fraud—of things not being entirely what they seem—runs through all the posthumously-published works. The theme of fraud in "Humbug" can clearly not be linked directly to Michel's revisions. However, in many cases, it works in conjunction with that other self-referring strand of "filiality"—father-son relationships—often including the idea of material or spiritual

inheritance. A persistent filial rebellion indeed underlies the relations of Jules with both his father Pierre and his son Michel. But these revolts are undermined from the beginning by self-doubt, a nagging apprehension that in reality it may be very hard to do better than one's ancestors, that there may be very little new under the sun. If we accept this idea of the impossibility of bettering one's forefathers, fraud then becomes a necessity. Since the past benefits from an unfair, overwhelming, primacy, the only way to beat the past, to effect any change at all, is to lie and cheat. Thus, although Michel was a mere child when the tale was written, Jules's tale treats the theme of whether the future is just a repetition of the past—the very theme that Michel was later to make his “own.” His “own” in inverted commas, given the difficulty of positing any first-level writing for Michel. He seems foredoomed to remain the rebellious-son-of-a-famous-man, a Sartrean writer-against, a frustrated voyeur of deflowered virgin territory, a writer without hope of returning to first innocence. The Vernian son is the father to the man.

A last theme connected with Michel's role is the scientific ideas at the centre of the tale. Despite Verne's erroneous reputation for being a science-fiction writer, the **Extraordinary Journeys** involving the novel use of science (and it cannot be pointed out often enough that they are in a tiny minority) do their utmost to minimise the impact on history. Virtually all of the machines are “one-offs,” and nearly all are destroyed at the end, together with their creators and blueprints. The problem with the 1863 setting of “**Humbug**” is that the usual damage-limitation is well past its sell-by date, for the reader of 1910 may know that Fort William was *not* destroyed then, and will certainly know that science was *not* transformed by the discovery of a remarkable fossil.

This tension between the knowledge of the fictional characters and that of the writer and readers constitutes a problem in all historical fiction, but is more acute in works involving scientific knowledge. It can on occasion be highly productive in terms of ironical distance, *clins d'œil* and even deliberate anachronisms, à la Anouilh.

In the rewriting of “**Humbug**,” Michel largely avoids getting embroiled. One avoidance tactic is the mode of narration. If, in Jules's version, events are by implication recounted shortly after they happen, in Michel's, the date of narration is not indicated. The use of the first person presumably limits the time to some point in the narrator's subsequent life. But the use here of the *passé simple* (absent from many of Verne's short stories and even from some of his novels) distances the events recounted. Ultimately the narrator's own views on these questions (can

one really be an anti-evolutionist in 1910?) are reduced, because of the indeterminacy of Michel's part-authorship.

We know in fact very little about the narrator, even his name, marital status, profession or age. But he is French—in order to write in that language, but also to act as a bridge for the reader. He is a little stuffy and conformist, and even slightly hypocritical, in the European fashion: perhaps all the better to highlight the strange directness of the Americans which only contrasts all the more with their love of humbug. With his freedom to travel and observe unencumbered, he remains largely a man without qualities. His one defining trait, a highly un-American scepticism, is the one that leads to the central discovery, for he is apparently the only person to doubt the authenticity of the bones. The narrator thus becomes the unique repository of knowledge that the origins of humanity have been transformed through a hoax.

At this point he could have told the world about it. But he doesn't (if one discounts the act of narration itself)—perhaps to avoid drawing attention to himself. This story is thus frivolously unpedagogical. Elsewhere Verne had stretched the limits of what was plausible—by recounting a journey towards the centre of the Earth, or the tearing away of a populated fragment of the Earth by a passing comet (*Hector Servadac*). These limits are extended further here, possibly because of the brevity of the story, or because it was not due to be published by Hetzel, and therefore censored. In interviews with journalists Verne repeatedly stressed the plausibility and even practicability of his works. His claim can now be seen to have been much exaggerated. One possible reason, then, for the non-publication of this work is that Verne wished to protect his reputation as the ultimate realist.

Other short stories are in fact just as implausible, such as the brilliant “**Dr Trifulgas**” (1884), where the eponymous doctor splits into two physical beings; or “**Adventures of the Rat Family**” (1891) where rats are transformed successively into various other animals via the process of “metempsychosis”: in other words, another attack on evolution. Once again, Verne's reputation as pro-science is wildly off-beam. He was in reality so reactionary as to deny the most important scientific revolution of the mid-nineteenth century, basing his anti-evolutionary ideas on age-old attempts to reconcile the Bible and science—hence the importance, in “**Humbug**” and elsewhere, of the Flood, the Garden of Eden and the superiority of the first beings. In this tale, he presents scientists as at least as vulnerable to chauvinism, self-aggrandisement, self-delusion, fashion and rumour as anyone; and indeed assimilates them to journalists, who largely recycle other people's ideas. But

because “**Humbug**” uses a realistic time and place, it emphasises even more the basic implausibility of the events recounted—which is presumably why Michel Verne, in the prominent footnote he added on the first page, calls it a mere “jest.”

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With its prominent river, “**Humbug**” remains close to Jules Verne’s life. He was born on an island in the Loire in central Nantes; and the most vivid part of his “**Memories of Childhood and Youth**” is the sailing of makeshift rafts on the Loire with his brother Paul, later a naval officer. Watercourses, with their uniquely linear structure and built-in progression, are in fact central to many of Verne’s works. Even his conceptions of time and space are “fluvial.”

The remarks in “**Humbug**” about the dangers of steamboats may seem exaggerated, but are in fact the opposite. At the time blacks were frequently paid to sit on the safety-valves to prevent them functioning, meaning there were frequent fatal explosions. Europeans, including Dickens, were horrified at this lack of concern for human life: they booked cabins as far away from the boilers as possible, despite being mocked by the locals for their pusillanimity, as in Verne’s tale.

Another aspect drawn from life is that of the stock-exchange. Verne was himself a jobber for several years, although with scarce success. His language remains marked by the experience: “speculation” for him is both a financial and a philosophical activity.¹² But in any case it is marked by its inner emptiness, its vain attempt to be more than it is, its dishonest endeavour to create something out of nothing. True, speculation represents a model of how things can get started in the first place: as Mr Wilson says, one starts with invented share values, which then become real. Even a bankruptcy seems to harm no-one.

The master of irony, it gradually becomes clear, is corrosively commenting on the role of publicity in American capitalism, on its thrusting modernity, its willingness to knock down everything in its course, even historic monuments. The title itself of the short story is of course a reference to Ebenezer Scrooge’s “Bah, **Humbug!**” in Dickens’s *A Christmas Carol* (1843) (which is why the English translation is simply “**Humbug!**,” without the article). But in addition to this meaning of “hypocrisy,” the word also means “hoax” or “fraud.” The term was highly popular in the nineteenth century due to its use by Barnum, especially in the catch-phrase “the American people like to be humbugged” and in the title of his bestselling autobiography, *The Humbugs of the World* (1865).

Verne’s irony is visible elsewhere. The whole problem of the implausibility of the find, and the associated abuse of coincidence, is directed at the characters, the narrator, and especially the readers. The narration is full of tongue-in-cheek traps, with its description of the “monstrous,” “miraculous” discovery, a Flaubertian “enormity.” The irony connects with the debates throughout the *Voyages [Voyages extraordinaires]*, setting chance and Providence off against each other, and so pointing to the simultaneous absence/presence of both divine intervention in human affairs and of the author in his own story.

But mockery is also directed at the production of text itself. Literature is unsubstantiated words, a creation *ex nihilo*. Even if, as Michel puts it, in the pseudo-posthumous short story, writing can be a “silver mine,” fictional share-values can go down as well as up. Writers are speculators, gamblers on a hypothetical future. Verne’s surface positivism hides a convoluted irony aimed at his own livelihood.

The story omits the blacks’ degrading role as human safety-valves, but this very omission may point, for the modern reader, to two further concerns haunting the *Journeys [Strange Journeys]*. Racism is visible in “**Humbug**” in the remarks about the superiority of black servants and about the “children of Africa”; but also, in more full-blooded form, in the comment on their loquacity and the origin of this, although considerably toned down by Michel.

More original are the metaphors concerning the human body.¹³ The dimensions of the *bourses* (*wallets* but also *scrotum*) are always impressive in Verne’s works. But Vernian man is also a machine: people are worth less than their weight in coal or coffee; they “jump, derail or sink rather than miss out on an affair”; and they can be “fitted neatly into each other” (in Jules’s, ruder, version). The humour of the last quotation also illuminates the verb “to jump” (“sauter,” but also “to screw”). Verne was probably thinking here of his hero’s libertine friend, who, it is explained in the original version, decided not to embark with him because of a pressing engagement with a lady friend: “rather than miss out on an affair.” Sex, in sum, is a mechanical metaphor for Verne, and one that vibrates in unison with his other obsessions.

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“**Humbug**” is thus revealed, on close inspection, to be a rich and complex narration. Its century-long occlusion from the American reading public seems inexplicable. Its publication has hopefully helped to dispel the mythical Verne that has accreted over the last century and a half.

Notes

1. The present piece is a revised version of the introduction in "Humbug" (Edinburgh, Acadian Press, 1991).
2. All dates of book publication refer to publication in book form in French (usually after the first serialisation).
3. Quoted by Walter James Miller, "A New Look at Jules Verne" and "Jules Verne Rehabilitated," in *Twenty Thousand Leagues under the Sea*, New York, Crowell, 1976, pp. 7-22 and 356-62.
4. Not to include such an acknowledgement is illegal in Europe, for authors' moral rights are enshrined in law, including those of seeing their work acknowledged.
5. No. 76, pp. 258-77. The ownership of copyright is complex in such cases. "Pierre-Jean," Jules Verne's original version of "La Destinée de Jean Morénas" (1910), was published by Olivier Dumas in 1988 (*Jules Verne*, Lyon, La Manufacture): he was successfully sued for breach of copyright by the town of Nantes as the owners of the manuscript, but won on appeal on the basis of having used a manuscript from another source, acquired before Nantes', then lost the highest-level appeal, resulting in the withdrawal from sale of *Jules Verne*.
6. "Le Humbug en version originale," *BSJV*, No. 76, pp. 256-7.
7. Pierre Terrasse, "À 'Humbug,' humbug et demi," *BSJV*, Vol. 18, No. 71, 1984, pp. 150-2. Amongst the notable similarities pointed out by Terrasse are the "discovery" in 1869 at Cardiff, near Albany, of a prehistoric giant 10 ft 4½" tall, the tremendous publicity that resulted, the exhibiting at a dollar a time, the discussion by the academic establishment, the giant poster and a display in the Albany Museum (mentioned in *Une Ville flottante*), an offer by Barnum, the exposing of the fraud in 1870, and the fact that this did not diminish interest in the phenomenon.
8. *BSJV*, "'Le Humbug': Une pierre au jardin des savants," Vol. 19, No. 76, 1985, pp. 278-82.
9. Volker Dehs ("À propos de la gestation de quelques nouvelles verniennes," *Bulletin de la société Jules Verne (BSJV)*, Vol. 20, No. 79, 1986, pp. 36-7) argues from the subtitle ("Mœurs américaines") that it was originally intended for publication in the *Musée des familles*, given the similarity with the subtitles of three of Verne's short stories published there in the period 1851-65.
10. In *Une Ville flottante*, the trip from New York to Albany is done at night—in a fog "that you could cut with a knife." There are very few shared details between the two narrations. Nevertheless, the *Saint-John* is described as "whinnying in the shadows, like a terrifying Mastodont," an allusion to the central theme of "Humbug." What is more, in visiting Albany, the narrator comments, tongue in cheek, on the "extremely remarkable fossil museum": perhaps the origin of "Humbug."
11. Jean Delabroy, "Jules Verne et l'imaginaire: Ses représentations et ses fonctions principales dans la période de formation de l'œuvre romanesque (1851-1875)," Paris, Univ. de la Sorbonne nouvelle (Paris III), 1980 (Thèse de doctorat d'État).
12. Delabroy has written illuminatingly on Verne's "speculation": "'Le Humbug' et la crise des spéculations," *Colloque d'Amiens II: Filiations—Rencontres—Influences*, Paris, Librairie Minard, 1980, pp. 187-97.
13. *Backwards to Britain* (probably written in 1859-60) shows that, from the beginning, Verne employs a metaphor equating humans and machines.

Bibliography of Studies on "Humbug"

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Compère, Daniel, "Préface," *Le Gué* (Villelongue d'Aude), Oct.-Dec. 1978, pp. 47-50.

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