

Le tour du monde en 80 jours

J. Verne

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Why are Verne's books so popular? He had great success as an author more or less from a start, disregarding his early high-flown attempts for the theatre (including plays in verse!), but as soon as he found his true metier as an author, things went straightforward. I read quite a few of them as a child, obviously in Swedish translation. I enjoyed them a lot, especially the one of the mysterious island. As a child they made quite an impression on me, obviously because the books you read as a child invariably do so, and they also introduce you to facts of the world for the first time. On the trip to the Moon I recall particularly the city of Baltimore, which ever since has had a romantic aura, a totally undeserved one, I hasten to add. As an adult I never read any Verne, except twice I made attempts to do so for the sake of French practice. Once this very book back in 1977 in a train going from Paris to London, and then another (Five weeks in a balloon?) twenty years later during another sojourn in France. My French was at the time not up to par, I was both too impatient, and did not at the time possess the critical fraction of necessary vocabulary. Still I have during the years acquired about half a dozen Verne titles for my library, now ready to be dipped into.

I enjoyed them as a child, and I now understand that they really are books for children. Of course they are science fiction, but very mild such. In the present book what is really science fiction? As science fiction they cannot compare to those of H.G.Wells, whose scientific background was much more solid than that of Verne. But he has a style which is marked by being very factual and a lot of numerical data, which may impress and reassure the child, but bore the adult. The interesting thing is how much I remember from my childhood reading. Not very much I have to admit, yet rereading it I am somewhat disappointed. Is this all that was to it? As a child it made a far deeper impression than some sixty years later. I do recall the figure of Fogg and his Club, as well as the French valet Passpartout with a very fitting name. And I also recall the dramatic ending when they arrive five minutes to late, not realizing that having circulated the Earth in the opposite direction of its rotation, they had indeed experienced one more sunrise than those who were stationary¹. This is clever of course, and one wonders whether this was present from the very start of Verne's conception of the story, or whether this was an afterthought which struck him later. Anyway the afterthought, if that is what it is, has been well integrated in the story, and hints thereof are clearly placed in the beginning, but hardly such which would have been noted by the child reader (nor the casual adult). Fogg does keep a careful count of the days, on the other hand the Bradshaw schedules he uses, should have served as a correlative to the internal reckoning, but in fiction you need to stretch things and make allowances.

¹ If you want to you can see this as an analogous example of relativity, not of course Einstein's, but one which may prepare you for the it.

One moral of the story is of course its single-mindedness, Fogg does not care for the countries he enters, his own concern is to race and catch the next connection. Indeed one obvious criticism of the whole project is of course the need not to miss connections. Thus we learn nothing of the trip until we get to Egypt and the Suez canal, where we are introduced to inspector Fix. There are glimpses of the Arab world and India, and later on Hong Kong and Japan. In India there are complications of a railway line not yet completed, and the first interruption, of several subsequent ones, necessitating the purchase of an elephant. Here Fogg becomes witness to a suttee, sacrifices a day to rescue the young widow sent to burn with the carcass of her old husband. Fogg might be cold and imperturbable, but he has of course a heart of gold, otherwise the reader would not engage with his endeavour. This I of course remember from my first reading, how it all was resolved I had consciously forgotten, but as I read it came vaguely back to me just before the resolution was presented, thus creating a kind of *deja vue*. Most of the actual adventures take place while crossing the North American continent and those I had largely forgotten, as well as the continued presence of the Indian widow throughout the rest of the journey, let alone her eventual marriage to Fogg, something which as a child would not have interested me in the least, but of course as an adult would be a tantalizing aspect of the whole book. But in spite of the contrived adventures I must admit to a certain suspense, even as I knew that the book had a happy ending. This must have been a source of excitement to contemporary readers, and maybe would go some way in explaining his appeal.

What is the point of the story, and as a child you never put such a question, because a story is judged by its fascination and the window it gives to the world that opens up to the young emerging mind. Why did Verne write it? It was written in the early 1870's showing how small the world had become, thanks to modern technology and communication interlocked in a global way. The Bradshaw timetables are all you need to travel (as it turns out you needed a little bit more). At the end of the 19th century the world was rapidly being globalized with the cutting down of fences and obstacles, one detail which struck me as a child, was that Fogg needed not to stamp his passport (but insisted of course for other reasons), passports were becoming obsolete and until the First World War you did not need them, at least while travelling in Europe, something that greatly surprised me when I first learned of it. So in certain respects life was more modern then than it would later become. As to actual flaws I would add the character of Fix. At the very end he is discarded, but could he not have been made some final use of, as a hapless witness to substantiate that Fogg had indeed circled the globe? Maybe Verne had considered this, but finally abandoning the idea as compromising the dramatic ending with the last minute resolution. Maybe Fix is a left-over from an earlier plot?

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