

REFLECTIONS

IMAGINARY VOYAGES

Robert Silverberg

The voyages of which science fiction writers tell have to be considered accounts of imaginary journeys. There are novels of voyages that aren't science fiction, or even really imaginary—Nordhoff and Hall's *Mutiny on the Bounty*, though a work of fiction, tells of events that actually happened, involving people who actually lived. Then there are complete fictions, like Katherine Anne Porter's *Ship of Fools*, for example, or that other one about the white whale, which are imaginary in so far as both situation and characters were invented by their author. These are imaginary voyages too, but not quite in the same way as the kind that science fiction writers create.

Science fiction carries things to the next level of imagination, into a new universe of the mind. What's imaginary about *Moby-Dick* is Moby himself, and Ahab and Ishmael and the rest of the crew, but apart from them the book is solidly realistic, virtually a documentary account of the nineteenth-century American whaling industry. "Doc" Smith's *The Skylark of Space*, though, takes place aboard a vessel that never existed or could have existed, traveling to worlds no human being will ever visit. Robert A. Heinlein's generation-ship saga *Orphans of the Sky*, better known in its novella form as "Universe," is an imaginary-voyage tale. Imaginary too are the travels of Gully Foyle in Alfred Bester's *The Stars My Destination*. The starship *Enterprise*—the adventures of Luke Skywalker—the journey of the spaceship *Discovery* in Arthur Clarke's 2001—all imaginary. The voyage of Captain Nemo's *Nautilus*, and Professor Cavor in H.G. Wells' *The First Men in the Moon*—imaginary. What science fiction writers do, what they have always done since the days of Verne and Wells, is just make the stuff up. It goes without saying, really.

Not long ago I came upon an interesting reference book that deals with the literature of the imaginary voyage in a time when the phrase "science fiction" had not yet been coined. It's *The Imaginary Voyage in Prose Fiction*, by Philip Babcock Gove, first published in 1941 and reprinted by Octagon Books in 1975. Its subject is the novel of the imaginary voyage in the eighteenth century, a period when such works occupied more or less the niche in publishing that science fiction does today, and it brings to our attention a host of glorious speculative works, some as well known to us as *Gulliver's Travels* and *Candide*, and others totally obscure today and covering a range from the seriously thoughtful to the wildly goofy.

Gove's scholarly introduction, nearly two hundred pages long, reminds us that tales of imaginary voyages go far back into antiquity. We have *The Odyssey*, of course, but Gove cites an Egyptian story, the twelfth-dynasty "The Shipwrecked Sailor," a thousand years older than Homer, in which we hear of an enchanted island inhabited by a wise old cobra fifty feet long who rules over seventy-five of his kin. From Roman times comes the *True History* of Lucian of Samosata, a satirical account of a voyage to the Moon. The medieval authors of the stories we call *The Arabian Nights* gave us the varied exploits of Sindbad the Sailor. Cyrano de Bergerac—the real one, not the character in Edmond Rostand's nineteenth-century play—provided several methods of reaching the moon in his playful *Voyage dans la Lune* of 1650, of which the best, I think, involved traveling in a chariot made of iron and throwing magnets upward that would pull the chariot after them.

But Gove's *The Imaginary Voyage* makes it clear that the eighteenth century was a golden age for such fantasies. Dipping in here and there, I find references to all

sorts of wondrous stories, books that I suppose few of us will ever read, which provide the foundation for the science fiction of modern times.

Gove proposes five types of imaginary voyages. "The term *Extraordinary Voyage* is . . . a fictitious narrative, purporting to be the veritable account of a real voyage . . . to an existent but little known country—or to several such countries—together with a description of the happy condition of society there found. . . . Another type is the *Fantastic or Marvelous*, in which dreams, witchcraft, or other supernatural agencies preclude any serious attempt at realistic authentication." Cyrano's adventures fall into the class of *The Extra-Terrestrial Voyage*. Then there is the *Satirical or Allegorical* type, which includes various utopias and dystopias, and, finally, *The Subterranean Voyage*, in which a world beneath the surface of the Earth is explored.

In the multitude of works Gove describes, I am particularly taken by Robert Paltock's *The Life and Adventures of Peter Wilkins* (1750), which a contemporary reviewer called "the illegitimate offspring of no very natural conjunction between *Gulliver's Travels* and *Robinson Crusoe*." Wilkins, a mariner from Cornwall, is shipwrecked near the South Pole, and, says the title page, the book relates how he entered into a "wonderful Passage thro' a subterraneous Cavern into a kind of new World; his there meeting with a Gawry or Flying Woman, whose Life he preserv'd, and afterwards married her; his extraordinary Conveyance to the Country of Glums and Gawrys, or Men and Women that fly. Likewise a Description of this strange Country, with the Laws, Customs, and Manners of its Inhabitants, and the Author's remarkable Transactions among them."

Peter Wilkins was a great success in its own day, going through dozens of editions by 1848, and reprinted from time to time even in the twentieth century. Another best-seller of this genre was *Nicholas Klim* by Ludvig Holberg, a book published (in Latin) in Copenhagen in 1741, and subsequently translated into many languages, going through thirty-four editions in the eighteenth century alone. It is a story that has for Scandinavian readers much the same appeal that *Alice in Wonderland* has for us. Nicholas Klim, a mountaineer, descends by rope into a mysterious cavern; the rope breaks, and he finds himself plummeting into the interior of the Earth, where he floats suspended in space until a flying monster appears and carries him off to Nazar, a planet within our world. There he encounters trees with human heads, headless people whose mouths are in the middle of their chests, and many another wonder, all described in the greatest detail. He travels from country to country, each one with customs quite opposite to anything found in our surface world, telling of them with much the same satiric effect that Swift achieves in *Gulliver's Travels*.

Gove goes on to list scores of other tales of imaginary voyages, most of them long forgotten and all but unobtainable today, such as *John Daniel* (1751), attributed to one "Ralph Morris," in which we learn of John Daniel's shipwreck on a desert island, "His accidental discovery of a Woman for his companion. Their peopling the island. Also, a description of a most surprising Engine, invented by his Son Jacob, on which he flew to the Moon, with some Account of its inhabitants. His return, and accidental Fall into the Habitation of a Sea Monster, with whom he lived two Years. . . ." And there is a multitude of other works of the same sort. *The Travels and Adventures of William Bingfield*, from 1753, gives us "that amazing Animal called The Dog Bird," and tells of Bingfield's "dispersing an amazing multitude of African Cannibals, Who were feasting on the miserable wretches they had taken Captives. . . ." 1774 brought *The Travels of Hildebrand Bowman, Esquire, Into Carnoviria, Taupiniera, Olfactaria, and Auditante in New Zealand; in the Island of Bonhommica, and in the powerful Kingdom of Luxo-Volupto, on the Great Southern Continent. . . .* And so forth—much, much else.

I think my favorite, though, is the sequel to *The Adventures of Baron Munchausen* that some unknown hand turned out in 1792. Munchausen himself was a real person, an eighteenth-century German baron who told many a lively story of his adventures far and wide. In 1785 a writer named Rudolf Erich Raspe put together a collection of Munchausen's tales, somewhat enhanced by his own rich imagination—the baron rides a cannonball, is swallowed by an immense fish in the Mediterranean, fights a forty-foot crocodile, travels to the Moon, etc., etc. Raspe's book has held readers entranced to this day, and has been the source for several delightful movies. But it is the lesser-known anonymous sequel of seven years later that provides even greater fun. A look at the title page hints at the pleasures within:

“Containing his expedition into Africa. How he out-does Alexander.—Splits a rock at the Cape of Good Hope.—Wrecked on an island of ice.—Becomes acquainted with the Sphinx, Gog and Magog.—Overcomes above a thousand lions.—Buried in a whirlwind of sand.—Feasts on live bulls and Kava.—Is declared Sovereign of Africa, and builds a bridge from thence to Great Britain, supported by a single arch.—Battle of his retinue with the famous Don Quixote.—Becomes acquainted with the Colossus of Rhodes.—Chase of Wauwau through America.—Meets with a floating island.—Visits the islands in the South Sea.—Becomes acquainted with Omai.—Cuts a canal across the Isthmus of Darien.—Discovers the Alexandrian Library.—Besieges Seringapatam.—Overcomes Tippoo Saib.—Raises the hull of the Royal George; together with a variety of other very Surprising Adventures.”

Now, *there's* an adventurer for you. The doings of Baron Munchausen in the sequel make his earlier exploits seem like very weak tea indeed. Builds the Panama Canal! Puts a single-arch bridge across the Mediterranean to London! Duels with Don Quixote and chats with the Colossus of Rhodes! What a movie it would make! (Special effects budget, two hundred million.) And, best of all, the Munchausen sequel has recently been reissued and is currently in print, so you can thrill and chill along with the valiant baron as he dines on those live bulls and wrangles the thousand-plus lions. (All at once, I wonder?) I don't think there's anything to match it in the rest of Philip Gove's huge compendium of fantastic voyages.

There are no unexplored corners of the Earth in which imaginative writers can discover places like Olfactria and Luxo-Volupto, and we are quite certain that no planets like Nazar lurk beneath the surface of the world. Today we are forced to go farther out for our imaginary destinations—Dune, Ringworld, my own planet Majipoor. But the impulse is the same: to invent, to divert, to extend the realm of the imagination. It is an aspect of ourselves that must have been there in Cro-Magnon days and, I think, will never leave us.