Cambridge Studies in French

THE KNOWLEDGE OF IGNORANCE
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FROM GENESIS TO JULES VERNE

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GENERAL EDITOR’S PREFACE

This series aims at providing a new forum for the discussion of major critical or scholarly topics within the field of French studies. It differs from most similar-seeming ventures in the degree of freedom which contributing authors are allowed and in the range of subjects covered. For the series is not concerned to promote any single area of academic specialisation or any single theoretical approach. Authors are invited to address themselves to problems, and to argue their solutions in whatever terms seem best able to produce an incisive and cogent account of the matter in hand. The search for such terms will sometimes involve the crossing of boundaries between familiar academic disciplines, or the calling of those boundaries into dispute. Most of the studies will be written especially for the series, although from time to time it will also provide new editions of outstanding works which were previously out of print, or originally published in languages other than English or French.
PREFACE

Ignorance is like sin: most people profess to be against it, but few abstain altogether. The heretical character of some of the writers I shall be writing about is such that they are not only not against it, but would like to so maximize ignorance as to reduce knowledge to zero. Others, taking orthodoxy to a heterodox extreme, would prefer to make knowledge so all-encompassing that there is no room left for ignorance. In the one case, nothing but ignorance is the ideal; in the other, nothing but knowledge. But these two seemingly antagonistic camps are bound by a secret alliance: they share an obscure faith that knowing nothing and knowing everything are in some way equivalent, and a common abhorrence of the composite or intermediate state (which characterizes discourse) in which knowledge and ignorance commingle.

The title of this book is not intended to be mysterious. It does, however, incorporate various strands. The ‘knowledge of ignorance’, at its simplest, offers knowledge, or information, about ignorance. Secondly, the phrase denotes the attainment of ignorance (thus ‘knowing’ it as one knows joy, pain, etc.). Thirdly, it alludes to the privileged species of wisdom held to derive from the enjoyment of ignorance. And fourthly, the title signifies the apprehension or recognition of ignorance. The title, then, is simply an abbreviation, a more economical way of saying: ‘the acquaintance with, acquisition of, enlightenment out of, and acknowledgment of, ignorance’. Ellipsis is, I think, a lesser evil than long-windedness.

The subtitle is similarly a slimmer version of a more obese ancestor. It originally boasted a triumvirate of abstract nouns, ‘science, nescience, and omniscience’, since omitted to avoid advertising the incredible. The existing subtitle, ‘From Genesis to Jules Verne’, might still seem like mere bravado. But it is at least more accurate (and briefer) than an earlier avatar – ‘in some French Writers of the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries’ – and rather less fraudulent
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than one alternative suggested by my publishers – ‘in French Literature’. The following text delivers, in fact, precisely what it promises, neither more nor less: it begins at the beginning of the Bible, goes on until it reaches Jules Verne, and then stops. But anyone expecting a comprehensive survey of the entire literary history spanning these extremes will be disappointed (although I trust that those who relinquish that expectation and read on will not be).

All books that claim to proceed ‘from’ something ‘to’ something else inevitably leave a lot out. The itinerary of this book differs only in degree by leaving in so little. The ordering of material obeys a narrative logic which is, moreover, less that of a history than of a work of science fiction: there are time-warps and hyperspatial jumps, as well as numerous black holes. Thus even what is left in is often left out of context.

This policy is not wholly accidental. Context is always a con-text: that is, a text that pretends to be something other than it is. To ‘con’ is to know (cognate with ‘ken’) but also to deceive, and may have some affinity with the French verb cogner. The contextualist purports to provide a foundation or origin to the text, a historical and intellectual prop for an interpretation. But contextualism conveniently forgets that the secondary or sub-texts it calls upon for endorsement are themselves in need of interpretation and thus engage the interpreter in an indeterminate interplay between texts. The con-text, converting circumstantial evidence into a canon, seeks to replace the circulation of sense by mere circularity, a tautological equation of texts, a hall of mirrors in which an interpretation encounters only reflections of its own argument. And since it makes a proper understanding dependent on acquaintance with the sub-texts invoked or the erudite commentary invoking them, the text in turn becomes fully accessible only to a closed circle of savants, initiates schooled in the incantations of the con-text.

While this esoteric knowledge is only a sophisticated mode of ignorance, it may be possible that ignorance, collapsing the putative foundation of the con-text, constitutes a kind of knowledge, a way out of the hall of mirrors, or at least a change of mirrors. Erudition, however wide, when tied to the con-text, is always too narrow. I will not therefore object too strongly if it is said of The Knowledge of Ignorance that there is more of ignorance than of knowledge in it. In an earlier incarnation, this text masqueraded as a scholarly dissertation; it now stands revealed as the mere book it always secretly was.

Nabokov wrote of Sebastian Knight that his prose was like his
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thought, which consisted of 'a dazzling succession of gaps'.¹ If the flattering epithet is set aside, the same might be said of this book, perhaps of any book, and certainly of this preface, which has indicated what is not in the text and sketched out a rationale of exclusion but has omitted to specify what is in it (an omission partially rectified by a rationale of inclusion in the introductory chapter). There is an aesthetics of omission; but one reason, perhaps the main reason, for the gaps in this book can be located in the gaps in the knowledge of its author. I am currently trying to fill in a few of these gaps and, as Verne said of his plan to describe the universe, this shouldn’t take more than a century or so. Meanwhile, the gaps in the book will have to stay in.

Montesquieu said: ‘il ne faut pas toujours tellement épuiser un sujet, qu’on ne laisse rien à faire au lecteur’.² This book, which follows that sound advice, can be read as the textual equivalent of a picture made up mainly of empty space populated by a few stray dots which need to be connected up before any intelligible form, or forms, can appear: I leave it to the reader to connect up the dots.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am indebted to all those who have assisted in the genesis and evolution of this book: in roughly chronological order, to John Cruickshank, who opened; to David Kelley, who took over; to Christopher Prendergast, who encouraged; to Robert Bolgar and Terence Cave, who read and rectified; and to Malcolm Bowie, who advised and revised. The sections on Genesis and Jules Verne in particular have benefited from the generous erudition of, respectively, Melvyn Ramsden and William Butcher. I am especially grateful to King’s College, Cambridge, for providing provocative interrogators and interlocutors, and for awarding me the Fellowship that made possible the final conversion from dissertation to book. My greatest debt of thanks is owed to Heather, who nursed the infant text, enthusing, musing, typing, editing, without ever losing faith, hope, or charity.

Earlier versions of the present sections on Genesis, and nutrition and cognition in Jules Verne, first appeared in Philosophy and Literature (Spring 1981) and French Studies (January 1983). The chapter on Verne also contains fragments of an article published in Modern Language Review (January 1982). I am grateful to the editors and publishers of these journals for permission to re-use this material (and for using it themselves in the first place).

Finally, I wish to thank all those, unnamed here, who have variously contributed, over the ages, to my knowledge of ignorance.