

2013

Another Excellent Verne Translation

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Recommended Citation

Evans, Arthur B. "Another Excellent Verne Translation." [Review of Jules Verne's *The Sphinx of the Ice Realm*. Trans. and ed. Frederick Paul Walter. Albany, NY: Excelsior, 2012]. *Science Fiction Studies* 40.3 (2013): 572-575

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BOOKS IN REVIEW

Another Excellent Verne Translation. Jules Verne. *The Sphinx of the Ice Realm: The First Complete English Translation, with the Full Text of The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym by Edgar Allan Poe*. Trans. and ed. Frederick Paul Walter. Albany: State U of New York P/Excelsior, 2012. xix + 413 pp. \$24.95 pbk.

The past couple of decades have witnessed a resurgence of interest in Jules Verne and the appearance of a host of new English translations of his legendary *Voyages Extraordinaires*. For example, Oxford University Press's "World's Classics" series has published several fine translations by William Butcher, including *Journey to the Centre of the Earth* (1864) in 1992, *Around the World in 80 Days* (1873) in 1995, *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Seas* (1870) in 1998, and *The Adventures of Captain Hatteras* (1866) in 2005. Wesleyan University Press has published six Verne novels in its "Early Classics of Science Fiction" series: *Invasion of the Sea* (1905) in 2001, *The Mysterious Island* (1874) in 2001, *The Mighty Orinoco* (1898) in 2002, *The Begum's Millions* (1879) in 2005, *The Kip Brothers* (1902) in 2007, and *Travel Scholarships* (1903) in 2013 in translations by Edward Baxter, the late Stanford L. Luce and Sidney Kravitz, and Teri Hernandez. The "Bison Frontiers of Imagination" series of the University of Nebraska Press has published English translations of some of the original manuscripts of Verne's posthumous novels such as *The Meteor Hunt* (1908) in 2002, *Lighthouse at the End of the World* (1905) in 2007, *The Golden Volcano* (1906) in 2008, and *The Secret of Wilhelm Storitz* (1910) in 2011, by translators Butcher, Baxter, Walter James Miller, Frederick Paul Walter, and Peter Schulman. And in 2011 the North American Jules Verne Society sponsored the publication (in its "Palik Series" through BearManor) of several never-before-translated, unpublished early works by Verne such as *The Marriage of a Marquis*, *Shipwrecked Family*, *Mr. Chimp and Other Plays*, *The Count of Chanteleine*, and *Vice, Redemption and the Distant Colony*, translated by Baxter, Kravitz, Kieran M. O'Driscoll, and Frank Morlock.

One of the newest shining stars to be added to this constellation of recent Verne translations is *The Sphinx of the Ice Realm*, translated by Frederick Paul Walter and published last year in the "Excelsior Editions" series of SUNY Press. Following on the heels of their excellent omnibus collection of *Amazing Journeys: Five Visionary Classics* (2010; reviewed in *SFS* 37.3 [2010]: 515-19), Walter and SUNY Press have partnered again to bring this "First Complete English Translation" of Verne's *Le Sphinx des glaces* (1897) to an Anglophone reading public.

In 2005, I published in these pages a lengthy article on Verne's English translations—the good, the bad, and the very ugly—and I identified three general criteria to use when judging their quality: *completeness* (has the translator abridged the original?), *accuracy* (has the translator added to the original, mistranslated it, or censored it?), and *style* (has the translator captured the "feel" of the original in terms of its discursive structure,

narrative voice, word-play, humor, and overall tone?). I shall refer to each of these criteria in my comments about *The Sphinx of the Ice Realm*.

Before this book, there existed three other English translations of Verne's *Le Sphinx des glaces*: the first, retitled *An Antarctic Mystery*, was by Mrs. Cashel Hoey and published in London by Sampson Low in 1898 (reprint by Gregg Press in 1975); the second, called *The Sphinx of Ice, or An Antarctic Mystery*, was edited by Charles Horne and published in New York by Vincent Parke in 1911; and the third, *The Sphinx of the Ice-fields*, was done by I.O. Evans and published in London and Westport, Connecticut by Arco and Associated Booksellers in 1961. Ironically perhaps, the first was the least bad of the three. It contained 26 chapters compared to 32 in Verne's original; the second (a radically abridged rehash of the first) reduced the story to only 15 chapters; and the third contained 27 chapters, but the content of each chapter was severely chopped. Judging it by its overall completeness, the Frederick Paul Walter (FPW) translation—which contains not only all of Verne's original 32 chapters but also a complete reprint of the work on which Verne's novel was based, Edgar Allan Poe's *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* (1837)—is hands down the best of the lot.

In terms of its textual accuracy, the FPW translation is also much superior to the others. The following example is representative. Verne's original novel often quotes passages from Poe's text, from the famous French translation of Poe done by Baudelaire. When rendering Verne into English, instead of quoting Poe directly, Hoey translates Baudelaire's version of Poe back into English:

Nevertheless, I did not fail to take into account the share that belongs to chance in human affairs, for it is wise, as Edgar Poe has said, always "to reckon with the unforeseen, the unexpected, the inconceivable, which have a very large share (in those affairs), and chance ought always to be a matter of strict calculation." (7)

In contrast, the FPW translation uses Poe's own words:

However, I didn't forget to make allowances for the role that chance plays in human planning, because it's smart, as Edgar Allan Poe has said, to always "calculate upon the unforeseen ... the unlooked for and unimagined." Which means that it's worth taking "collateral, or incidental, or accidental events" into serious account in your decision making, and chance should always be "a matter of absolute calculation." (10)

FPW also gives a detailed explanation of this (mis)quote by Hoey in his "Textual Notes" at the back of the book—a highly useful source of textual oddities.

In addition to paraphrasing or abridging their original text, bad translators often seek to "improve" their author's prose by adding to and/or embroidering upon it. Take, for example, the following passage from early in Verne's novel:

"Why do you say the antarctic seas?" he went on, clutching me.

“But I could just as easily have said the arctic seas, or the North Pole instead of the South Pole....” (22-23, FPW)

This same passage in the Hoey translation now features an elaborate literary reference that did not exist in Verne’s original (complete with footnote at the bottom of the page to identify its source, Thomas D/Arcy McGee):

“Why do you speak of the Antarctic seas?” he asked, taking my hand.

“Well, just as I might have spoken of the ‘Hyperborean seas’ from whence an Irish poet has made Sebastian Cabot address some lovely verses to his ‘Lady.’ I spoke of the South Pole as I might have spoken of the North.” (24)

Or consider the following description of one of the species of fish caught by the sailors on board the schooner *Halbrane*:

As for fish, the schooner’s anglers got busy with their lines and tridents and laid in an ample supply, out of which some dolphinfish deserve special mention—they’re a sort of giant sea bream, three feet long, with firm, tasty meat. (120, FPW)

The same passage in the Hoey translation is supplemented by a lengthy footnote at the bottom of the page explaining the etymological (and religious) lineage of the fish’s name:

Among the denizens of the deep captured by the crew of the schooner with line and net, I noted more particularly a sort of giant John Dory¹ (*dorade*) three feet in length, with firm and savoury flesh....

¹ The legendary etymology of this piscatorial designation is *Janitore*, the “door-keeper,” in allusion to St. Peter, who brought a fish, said to be of that species, to our Lord at His command. (145)

Note especially the phatic “our” in “to our Lord” where the translator speaks directly to the—presumably Christian—Anglophone reader. As these few examples demonstrate, in terms of its accuracy and faithfulness to Verne’s original text, this new FPW translation of *The Sphinx of the Ice Realm* is by far the best available. Even the “least bad” of the other translations (the Hoey) has some serious problems.

And then there remains the question of style. Does this new translation capture the important elements of Verne’s narrative recipe—his tongue-in-cheek humor, his play on words, his mixing of technical jargon with literary tropes, his “zest, irreverence, and storytelling virtuosity” (xix), as the translator explains in his preface? Yes, infinitely better than the previous translations. For example, unlike the others, FPW does not systematically censor Verne’s more salty passages, as in: “The weather was abominable” (Hoey 20) versus “It was weather for dogs, as the French say—or, in our vernacular, a bitch of a day” (FPW 20). And he makes an effort to reproduce the full range of Verne’s colorful—and sometimes offbeat—similes instead of watering them down, as in: “At all events the *Halbrane* will make more degrees of latitude than any other ship before her” (Hoey 91) versus “In any event the *Halbrane*’s going to cover more degrees of latitude than she has reef points in her spanker sail or ratlines in her rigging!” (FPW 76). I do have

mixed feelings about how FPW adapts all of Verne's metric measurements to US equivalents in order to appeal to American readers. And I also confess to having reservations about the appropriateness of FPW's word choice whenever I see a twentieth-century American colloquialism coming out of the mouth of a nineteenth-century fictional character (as in "scramming out of Christmas Harbor" [10]) or when I encounter a term where, in my opinion, the translator goes over the line in attempting to enliven Verne's vocabulary (as in "gasbag" [76] for "causeur" [talker, conversationalist] or "kicked the bucket" [173] for "mort" [died]). But these linguistic disagreements aside, my assessment of the overall quality of this English-language version of Verne's novel—in its completeness, accuracy, and reproduction of Verne's style—is that it is truly top-notch.

Finally, *The Sphinx of the Ice Realm* offers a very informative critical apparatus to accompany its fine translation: an introduction, an appendix containing a chapter from Verne's published essay on Poe, an extensive set of "Textual Notes" (many of which offer insights into Verne's manuscript variants), an analytical afterword that surveys what a number of contemporary literary critics have had to say about the novel (nicely located at the end of the book to avoid spoilers), and finally a "Recommended Reading" list consisting of critical works about Verne and Poe, other books by Verne available in modern translations, and a limited number of Internet resources related to Verne and Poe (although the website for the journal *Verniana* seems to be inadvertently missing: <<http://www.verniana.org/>>). A noteworthy addition to the ongoing international revival of Jules Verne, this book is highly recommended for all aficionados of Verne's *Voyages Extraordinaires*. And I believe it would be of strong interest to fans and scholars of Edgar Allan Poe as well.—**Arthur B. Evans, SFS**