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REVIEW-ESSAY

Arthur B. Evans

Protesting Too Much: The Jules vs. Michel Verne Controversy

Jules Verne. *The Golden Volcano*. Trans. and ed. Edward Baxter. Preface by Olivier Dumas. Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 2008. xiv + 340 pp. \$15.95 pbk.

The unusual subtitle of this work, "The First English Translation of Verne's Original Manuscript," warrants some explanation, since it constitutes the very *raison d'être* of the book. When Jules Verne died in 1905, he left behind several unpublished novels (titled and untitled, in various states of completion, including *Paris in the Twentieth Century* [c.1863], which had been rejected by his publisher Pierre-Jules Hetzel over forty years earlier), a number of short stories, a few plays, and some autobiographical and historical writings. The author's last will and testament clearly stipulated: "I hereby declare all my manuscripts, books, maps, library and papers, without exception, including notes, preliminary drafts, etc. to be the exclusive and immediate property of my son Michel Verne" (Martin 252). Michel, acting as executor of the estate and knowing that they were intended to be part of his father's collection of *Extraordinary Voyages*, made arrangements with Verne's publisher (Hetzel fils) to have most of these novel manuscripts published posthumously. They subsequently appeared in print from 1906 to 1919. One of them, *The Golden Volcano* (1906), tells a tale about the Klondike gold rush and the quest of two brothers to locate a mythical gold-filled volcano on the edge of the Arctic Ocean. Not viewed as an especially important novel in Verne's oeuvre, the first and only English translation of this work, by I.O. Evans (no relation), did not appear in print until 1962, in two volumes called *The Claim on Forty Mile Creek* and *Flood and Flame*.

In 1978 during a conference celebrating the 150th year of Jules Verne's birth, respected collector and Verne scholar Piero Gondolo della Riva, who personally owned copies of many of Verne's first-draft manuscripts, dropped a bombshell into

the world of Verne studies when he claimed that Michel had purposefully altered—sometimes massively—his father’s posthumous works before their publication. Comparing the published versions with the first-draft manuscripts, he showed how Michel had not only corrected inconsistencies and fixed errors in Verne’s texts but had also added new chapters, invented characters and episodes, modified plots, reworked style, and actually rewritten his father’s first drafts in order to make them richer and more interesting. Among other changes to the manuscript version of *The Golden Volcano*, for example, were the addition of four chapters including a longer conclusion with a happier ending, a new Irish “servant” character named Patrick, and the replacement of two nuns by two female prospectors who now occupy a more central role in the plot. (Surprisingly, the first name of one of the two principal protagonists of the novel—Summy Skim—was *not* changed to Sammy, as one might expect.)¹

In the three decades since Gondolo della Riva’s revelations, reaction among Verne scholars has been mixed. Many purists have called Michel’s tampering with Verne’s posthumous works a reprehensible betrayal of trust, one that severely compromised the integrity of Verne’s *Extraordinary Voyages*. Olivier Dumas, avid Verne collector, president of the Jules Verne Society in France, and editor of its journal *Bulletin de la Société Jules Verne*, has been most vociferous in his denunciation of these “tainted” editions. From 1985 through the early 1990s, in order to set the record straight, Dumas and his Society published all available first-draft manuscripts of these works. Each edition features a preface by Dumas strongly condemning Michel’s revisions and proclaiming that Verne’s first-draft manuscripts are the *only true, authentic* versions of these stories. Frederick Paul Walter and Walter James Miller, members of the North American Jules Verne Society, in their own foreword to the “First English Translation of Verne’s Original Manuscript” of the novel *The Meteor Hunt* (2006), echo this same refrain as they unilaterally denounce the first published version of this novel as a “fraudulent pastiche,” “a semiforgery,” and a “grotesque distortion” (vii) of Verne’s intentions.

Other Verne scholars disagree. They point out that the manuscript versions of these works are, at best, of inconsistent quality and that Michel’s changes (if they were all indeed by Michel) often served to improve the readability of his father’s rough drafts. French Verne expert Daniel Compère, for example, argues that since the elder Verne always did extensive revisions directly on his proofs, Michel’s revised versions are probably much closer to what Jules himself would have produced had he been alive to rewrite his first drafts (62). During the final decade of his life when his eyesight was rapidly failing, Jules often asked Michel to collaborate with him to help bring several of his later novels to publication. So, at least in some cases, it is

certainly possible that father and son discussed specific revisions to these works before Verne's death. Such is the opinion of Verne's grandson Jean Jules-Verne, who immediately took issue with Gondolo della Riva's claims and argued that, for the text of *The Golden Volcano*,

We have no serious reason at all to affirm that the rewrite is by Michel. And yet you do so "ex cathedra" when it can only be an hypothesis.

That the initial manuscript was modified for the better is not in doubt. But by whom? By Jules who often proceeded in this way or by Michel after some conversations that he had had with him?

And which manuscript was submitted to Hetzel? Surely not the first.... (90)

Further, as noted Verne biographer and translator William Butcher has stated, "Michel's action in revising the works would seem justified by the standards of the time" (*Jules Verne* 298). And in his introduction to the "First English Translation of Verne's Original Manuscript" of Verne's *Lighthouse at the End of the World* (2007), Butcher offers his own assessment of the Jules vs. Michel controversy, saying: "Most critics have taken on trust Dumas's claim of the literary superiority of Jules's version[s]. However, his arguments have often been one-sided and indeed tendentious.... [I]n the case of *Lighthouse*, I consider ... Michel's changes on balance [to be] improvements of the book" (xix-xx).

The preface included in *The Golden Volcano* presently under review is a translated reprint of Olivier Dumas's preface to the French edition, published in 1989. In it, as one might expect from the above, Dumas uniformly castigates Michel's revised version of the novel and praises the efforts of the French Jules Verne Society for rescuing Verne's true voice: "Today Jules Verne can finally express himself, cleansed of the slag that disfigured his work" (xiii). Reading the first-draft manuscript, according to Dumas, "restores the novel's power and beauty, and all its purity" (xiii). It is clearly evident that Dumas's preface does not (and has no desire to) present an objective comparison of the two versions of this story. Unrelentingly hyperbolic and one-dimensional in its judgments, Dumas's preface is also prone to silly statements such as the following:

At the end of the eighteenth [sic] century, when getting rich was the goal of the entire middle class, it required a certain audacity to attack the Golden Calf, the capitalists' god. This burden probably compelled Verne to postpone the publication of his novel and explains some of the changes introduced by his son and Jules Hetzel, who were frightened by the writer's contempt for the "vile metal" and afraid that it might have

a negative effect on book sales. (ix-x)

Apart from the (translator's) error in writing "eighteenth" for "nineteenth," Dumas's blithe generalizations about the nature of *fin-de-siècle* French society and his ensuing assumptions about the personal motives of Verne, his son, and Hetzel regarding the novel's content and its publication schedule are obviously a preposterous stretch.

Also difficult to reconcile is Dumas's repeated insistence that Verne's first draft "did not need to be corrected or altered. But that was the fate in store for it. The manuscript of *The Golden Volcano* is a finished text" (viii-ix). Especially when Dumas then goes on to reassure the reader later in the same paragraph that "We have corrected mistakes as the author would have done.... This new edition has been revised and corrected" (ix). There is a fundamental inconsistency in an argument that condemns all changes to Verne's original manuscripts as inherently sacrilegious and then takes credit for making certain corrections to them.

The "inconvenient truth" of the entire matter boils down to this: some of Michel Verne's modifications to his father's posthumous works were good, some were bad, and some were bad because they were too good.

On one level, "good" and "bad" can be defined according to whether the changes were editorial or authorial. If Michel had limited himself to editing Verne's manuscripts—correcting errors, polishing style, reducing inconsistencies and repetitions, and perhaps even adding a (brief) passage or chapter to flesh out an existing theme or character (as Jules no doubt would have done himself during his proofing)—then the blow-up about the authenticity of these works would never have occurred. It was when Michel chose instead to replace his father as *author* of these stories—changing plots, adding characters, shifting the ideology, or (as in the case of the short story "In the 29th Century: The Day of an American Journalist in 2889" and even perhaps *The Thompson Travel Agency*) attributing to his father a story that Michel himself had written in its entirety—that the problems begin. After all, in his publishing contract with Hetzel, Michel had agreed to "make the revisions and corrections that were necessary to each of these volumes and *to do his best to preserve the character that his father had given to these works* in order to maintain the series for the use of Jules Verne's public" (Gondola della Riva 76; emphases added). Judged from this point of view, Michel's sin was to change the basic *character* of Verne's final narratives.

If all this is true, then one might argue further that many of the revisions authored by

Michel were *too good* to be late Verne. In my opinion, the eccentric scientist-inventor Zephyrin Xirdal (despite his admittedly unVernian sci-fi ray-gun) and the malapropism-prone servant Mrs. Mitz are wonderful comic additions to an otherwise rather dour *The Meteor Hunt*. Most readers would agree that Michel's version of *The Survivors of the Jonathan* (1909) is an infinitely better novel (despite its contradiction of the conservative political and religious leanings of the aged Verne) than the manuscript-based version called *Magellania* (2002). Of the latter, Verne scholar Brian Taves reports that it "reads like an outline rather than a polished book.... Too often the narrative is told, rather than shown through characters and events—and Michel's determination ... to 'flesh out' these limitations of the novel is understandable" (233). And in the case of the newly translated manuscript-based *The Golden Volcano* under review here, I was disappointed to see the intelligent and strongly feminist characters of Jane and Edith Edgerton disappear from the story (replaced by two pathos-producing nuns), the humorous native guide Neluto reduced to the stereotype of the taciturn and "eagle-eyed" Indian scout (xii), and the conclusion of the novel made to end all too abruptly, as if Verne had suddenly become tired of telling the tale or had simply run out of creative gas. As Piero Gondolo della Riva himself observed in 1978 when describing the dramatic differences between Verne's late versus posthumous novels:

The issue of the authenticity of Jules Verne's posthumous works first arose because of reasons of style. When reading in chronological order the *Extraordinary Voyages ...* one could not help noticing that several of them from 1895 to 1905 often exhibit a certain sluggishness, an absence of action or of originality.... [Some] are almost unreadable today and, to the readers of the time, they must have already seemed less interesting than those that preceded them.

On the other hand, when reading Jules Verne's posthumous works, one is immediately struck by the richness of the ideas and themes to be found therein. (73-74)

So, in this case, Michel's sin was not only in supplanting the authorial voice of his father and in changing the basic character of his works; it was also in daring to write *better* than Verne père. There is some irony to this state of affairs. But, of course, in literary studies as well as in the collector's marketplace, the quality of the writing will always be trumped by the authenticity of the writer. Even a poorer story that is "pure" Verne will invariably be perceived as having more value (canonical, economic) than a richer story that is "hybrid" Verne. There can be no compromise.²

Apart from a few glitches here and there, the translator of this edition of *The Golden*

Volcano, Edward Baxter, does a fine job of rendering Verne's (sometimes *négligé*) prose into readable narrative. The Notes at the end of the volume, however, are quite disappointing and rarely add useful information. Most are tediously descriptive rather than analytical—pointing out repeated errors in Verne's spelling or his many lapses in plot coherence or how he incorrectly calculated distances, etc.

As can probably be surmised from the above, I have to admit to being deeply ambivalent about this book. As a scholar of Verne, I must recommend this version of *The Golden Volcano*. As a reader of Verne, I cannot. Having read both versions, I must confess that I prefer the "tainted" one, the "un-PC" one, the one that has already begun to be systematically excised from the Verne canon. (See the up-to-date Jules Verne Bibliography on the most respected website devoted to the author at <http://jv.gilead.org.il/biblio/voyages.html> where *all* of Verne's posthumous novels have now been expunged from the "official" list of his *Extraordinary Voyages*.) As the first-draft manuscripts rapidly become the standard versions for these novels in Verne's oeuvre, it is not hard to predict that Michel's originally published editions will soon be forever doomed to a dark corner of literary history. When the cleansing is complete, some will surely proclaim, "Justice has been done!" I will quietly sigh, "More's the pity."

NOTES

1. The most important changes made to the other posthumous works (when compared to the first-draft manuscripts) are as follows:
 - The Meteor Hunt* (1907): four new chapters added and at least one new character;
 - The Danube Pilot* (1908): three new chapters added, one new character, and a new title (original: *The Lovely Yellow Danube*);
 - The Survivors of the Jonathan* (1909): sixteen new chapters added, along with many new characters, episodes, and a new title (original: *In Magellania*);
 - *The Secret of Wilhelm Storitz* (1910): rewritten to take place in the eighteenth century instead of at the end of the nineteenth, with a different conclusion;
 - *Yesterday and Tomorrow* (1910): most of the short stories appearing in this collection were substantially altered; one of them, "In the 29th Century: The Day of an American Journalist in 2889," was authored entirely by Michel (with his father's help) and published in the British magazine *The Forum* in 1889; another, "Eternal Adam," a posthumous story (original title: *Edom*), was no doubt a product of their collaboration as well;
 - *The Amazing Adventure of the Barsac Mission* (1919): the "final" novel of the *Extraordinary Voyages* series, written entirely by Michel from his father's notes for a novel to be called *Study Trip*.

Although it is suspected that the posthumous novel *The Thompson Travel Agency* (1907) may have been entirely the work of Michel, it seems that the first-draft manuscript (by Jules? by Michel?) does not differ greatly from the published edition.

2. Or can there be? While they do not hesitate to condemn the Michel versions of Verne's posthumous works as "fake" (see Dumas's 1997 article in his *Bulletin* entitled "Do you prefer the true or the fake Jules Verne?"), these hardcore Vernians do not raise the same concerns over those novels that Jules Verne himself rewrote from manuscripts that were authored by André Laurie (aka Paschal Grousset) and that were published in his *Extraordinary Voyages: The Begum's Millions* (1879) and *Star of the South* (1884). And they certainly do not mention how father Jules revised and then republished (in French, under his own name) the short story "In the 29th Century: The Day of an American Journalist in 2890" (emphases added), a text *authored by his son Michel* and published in English (under his father's name and with his blessing) the preceding year. Obviously, the question of author "authenticity" as it applies to the published works of Jules Verne is a bit more complex (and less "pure") than many Vernians are willing to admit.

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