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# Science Fiction Studies

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## New and Recycled Translations of Jules Verne.

**Jules Verne.** *The Floating Island*. London and NY: Kegan Paul International (Routledge, Chapman & Hall), 1991. xvii+352. \$19.95 paper

**Jules Verne.** *The Complete Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea*, ed. and trans. Emanuel J. Mickel. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1992. ix+499. \$29.95 cloth.

These recently-published English translations of two of Jules Verne's classic *romans scientifiques*--one new and the other sadly recycled--might easily symbolize the two extremes in quality to be found in most translated foreign SF. The former is a facsimile reprint of Routledge's own horribly bowdlerized English version of Verne's *L'Ile à hélice* (Propeller Island) first published in 1895 in Great Britain. With the exception of a new (albeit cursory and largely uninformed) introduction and a new snazzy cover, the text itself appears to be photocopied directly from the pages of Routledge's original translation. The text uses "proper" 19th century British idiom throughout ("*Confound* that railway" [3] for *Maudit* [Damn]), consistently glosses over or undermines Verne's humor and word-play, and somehow even manages to mistranslate a variety of common French words ("promised the driver a handsome *present*" [5] for *pourboire* [tip]; "an invasion of this decadent *pest*" [78] for *peste* [plague]; "There was nothing in a *failure* to astonish Americans" [291] for *faillite*[bankruptcy]).

But that's not the worst of it. This translation is severely abridged, and almost *all* the passages excised from Verne's original French text happen to be in some way or another critical of England and/or the English people. Coincidence? Hardly. I counted at least 17 instances throughout this

translation where passages describing British politics, religious beliefs, or social customs--some mildly satiric, others quite virulent--were summarily "censored" by the translator because they were (ostensibly) considered offensive. Some were up to 3 pages in length! And where such passages were deemed too integral to the plot to be chopped out, the characters' nationalities were systematically altered: e.g., where Verne portrayed the malevolent influence of English missionaries on South Sea island cultures, the translation now identifies these same missionaries as *German*(190)!

Given this massive tampering with Verne's original novel, it seems highly ironic that the publisher of this book--in an obvious attempt to hype this modern repackaging of a very old, very bad translation--tries to advertise Jules Verne as "a social satirist whose work has been compared to that of Montesquieu, Swift and Voltaire. Today he is recognized as one of the most significant writers and social commentators of modern times" (back cover). Insofar as I am aware, this is the first time Verne has ever been classified as a famous writer of social satire, and comparable to Voltaire no less! But, even worse, to characterize him as such from this outrageously truncated translation is more than simply (and sadly) ironic, it is insulting both to Verne and to any knowledgeable reader's intelligence.

To summarize, a revised and more accurate English translation of Verne's *L'Ile à hélice* would have been genuinely welcome and would have done honor to any publisher. In contrast, this book brings shame: it represents a commercialized resurrection of a translator's travesty, and it aptly demonstrates how an industry's profit motive can sometimes overpower its sense of literary integrity.

Fortunately, the new translation of Verne's *Twenty Thousand Leagues under the Sea* by Emanuel J. Mickel represents the opposite extreme of this quality spectrum. Although some might criticize it as "yet another" English translation of this popular work (especially when there currently exist several *Voyages Extraordinaires* which remain to date untranslated), Mickel's version must be recognized as truly professional in its scope and its integrity. What Mickel has done is to use the original Hetzel (1869, 1870, 1871) French texts as his point of departure, instead of the hackneyed and

much-abridged 1928 Hachette text (used by many 20th century translators). But one might wonder: what are the differences between Mickel's "*Complete*" *Twenty Thousand Leagues* and the fine translation done by Walter Miller in 1976 which he called the "*Annotated*" *Twenty Thousand Leagues* (wherein he attempted--prior to Mickel--to reestablish the original)? Mickel explains:

[Miller] provides the Mercier Lewis translation and supplements it with an original translation of the portions of Verne's work which had been omitted. ...Although it is interesting to read the Mercier Lewis translation and it was important to Miller in making his case against the shortened English version, the modern reader might have been better served by an entirely new translation of Verne's novel. (63)

In addition to his re-translation of the text itself, Mickel is generous with explanatory footnotes (a very Vernian trait). And he also includes a lengthy introduction which discusses a wide variety of biographical, thematic, and critical issues pertinent to Jules Verne's life and work. Although occasionally based too much (in my opinion) on several early canonical French studies that are now either outdated or highly controversial--like Marc Soriano's Freudian "psychological" biography of the author, or Allotte de la Fuye's gossipy "family" biography--Mickel's critical introduction is one of the most informed (i.e., the best) that I have seen in English. The book also provides a chronology of the events portrayed in *Vingt mille lieues sous les mers*, a relatively up-to-date critical bibliography, and reprints of many (though not all) of those now-famous Riou, Neuville, and Hildibrand lithographs found in the original. All in all, this Indiana UP publication of *The Complete Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea* proves to be an excellent translation and a fine piece of scholarship. My only regret is that Mickel did not lend his expertise to some of Verne's lesser-known but equally-deserving works. Like *L'Ile à hélice*, for example?

--**ABE**