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Another Verne Manuscript Translated

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Another Verne Manuscript Translated. Jules Verne. *Golden Danube*. Trans. Kieran M. O'Driscoll. Ed. Brian Taves. Albany, GA: BearManor, 2014. 273 pp. \$24.95 pbk.

This book is the first English translation of Jules Verne's original manuscript for his novel *Le Pilote du Danube*, published posthumously in 1908 and appearing much later in English as *The Danube Pilot* (1967; trans. I.O. Evans). Verne's title for this rough-draft version was *Le Beau Danube jaune* [The Beautiful Yellow Danube], no doubt a spin-off from Strauss's famous waltz *The Blue Danube* (in French *Le Beau Danube bleu*). The manuscript was first published in French by the Société Jules Verne in 1988—along with the original drafts of Verne's other posthumous novels, following the discovery that these works had been revised, edited, and in some cases entirely rewritten by Verne's son Michel before their publication. At the time, Verne purists immediately denounced these “semi-forgeries” as a serious threat to the integrity of Verne's oeuvre. Other Verne scholars disagreed, pointing out that in his later years Verne *père* often asked for Michel's help in bringing his works to publication and that Michel's revised versions are probably much closer to what Jules himself would have produced had he been alive to finalize his first drafts. The debate continues to this day. (For an overview of this controversy surrounding Verne's posthumous works, see my two book reviews, “Protesting Too Much” [*SFS* 36.2 (Jul. 2009): 321-26] and “Re-Viewing Verne's Invisible Man” [*SFS* 39.1 (Mar. 2012): 150-53].) The publication of this new manuscript translation, retitled *Golden Danube*, is part of the PALIK SERIES—a collection of previously untranslated works by Verne sponsored by the North American Jules Verne Society (for more information, consult the NAJVS website at <<http://www.najvs.org/publications.shtml>>).

When discussing Verne's published posthumous works, the inconvenient truth is that many if not most of Verne's rough drafts were significantly improved by Michel's rewrites. For example, although I prefer the Verne *père* manuscript version of his 1910 *Le Secret de Wilhelm Storitz* [The Secret of Wilhelm Storitz], mostly because of its conclusion, I consider the manuscript versions of his 1906 *Le Volcan d'or* [The Golden Volcano] and his 1909 *Les Naufragés du “Jonathan”* [The Survivors of the “Jonathan”] to be clearly inferior in quality to those that were edited and published by Michel. As for the present volume under review, after a detailed comparison of this manuscript version of *Le Beau Danube jaune/Golden Danube* with the posthumous, Michel-edited version of *Le Pilote du Danube/The Danube Pilot*, I am again forced to conclude that the latter seems to me far richer in plot, deeper in characterization, and overall more engaging as a fictional narrative than Verne's rather flat rough draft.

The storyline of the manuscript *Le Beau Danube jaune/Golden Danube* (spoiler alert!) follows a simple and very linear design. A likable Hungarian fisherman and former river pilot named Ilia Krusch wins a fishing competition and decides to journey down the entire length of the Danube, living on the sales of the fish he catches along the way. He agrees to share this voyage with

a mysterious stranger named M. Jaeger, who pays him a large sum of money in exchange for the proceeds that Krusch's fishing will earn. During the trip down the river, they become good friends. But, as the reader learns near the end of the book (and probably guessed long before), M. Jaeger is actually police chief Karl Dragoch, who is using Krusch's journey as a cover for tracking the activities of a gang of smugglers led by a certain Latzko, whom he eventually succeeds in bringing to justice with Krusch's courageous help.

As for the manuscript's narrative structure, the titles of most of the sixteen chapters serve to mark the duo's slow but sure progress down the river: e.g., "At the Sources of the River Danube," "From Passau to Linz," "From Linz to Vienna," "From Vienna to Pressburg and Budapest," etc., up to the final chapter "From Galati to the Black Sea." Apart from the (slight) mystery surrounding the true identity of M. Jaeger, the portrayal of the characters remains rather stereotypical: Krusch is the epitome of a nice guy (honest, strong, gentle, trusting, affable, etc.) and Latzko is the epitome of a bad guy (immoral, conniving, brutish, violent, etc.). As one might expect, Verne's geographical pedagogy regularly punctuates the text: as the protagonists descend the Danube, a short description of each town and city they pass through along the way is dutifully offered. Finally, the tone of the story is invariably light, relaxed, and "mildly intriguing," in the words of its English translator (35).

In contrast, the plot of the *Le Pilote du Danube/The Danube Pilot* is more complex and incorporates many action-packed twists and turns typical of a thriller or a detective novel. The opening chapters are nearly identical to those in the manuscript, although the main protagonist, now called Ilia Bruschi, is in reality a renowned Bulgarian freedom fighter and arms smuggler named Serge Ladko, who is traveling in disguise and with a price on his head set by the Turkish authorities. (The historical backdrop of the story, outlined in chapter four, involves Bulgaria's 1876 revolt against centuries of Ottoman rule, which led to the Russo-Turkish War the following year and eventually to Bulgarian independence.) The murderous gang of bandits being secretly chased by Jaeger/Dragoch is actually led by the cunning criminal Ivan Striga, a long-time personal enemy of Ladko, whose wife Striga kidnaps. Striga also uses Ladko's name during his crime spree down the Danube, which leads to Ladko's arrest and imprisonment. But Ladko manages a daring escape and, with the help of Dragoch who has now become his friend, they intercept Striga before he is able to load his ill-gotten booty (and hostage) aboard a freighter on the Black Sea. Striga is killed in a final battle, the hero and his wife are reunited, Dragoch succeeds in rounding up the remainder of Striga's criminal gang, and (in the epilogue) Ladko enlists in the Russian army to continue fighting the Turks for the independence of his homeland.

Beyond its geopolitical context and travelogue aspect, there is little of Verne's signature pedagogy in *Le Pilote du Danube/The Danube Pilot*. Rather than following a predictably linear pattern, the novel's chapters tend to zig-zag among the different strands of plot and sub-plot. The portrayal of the characters also seems more "round" than "flat"—their individual personalities

and the emotions triggered by their circumstances (especially in the case of Bruschi/Ladko) add both depth and verisimilitude to the narrative. And the overall tone of the story alternates between moments of suspense and revelation, tension and high action, self-reflection and feats of derring-do. According to Olivier Dumas, president of the Société Jules Verne and author of the preface to *Le Beau Danube Jaune* (Paris: L'Archipel, 2000), Verne's original manuscript was "a peaceful river promenade ... [resembling] a fisherman's primer" (14). He opines that Michel ruined this "peaceful and cheerful work" by transforming it into a "somber and humorless police drama" (15). In my opinion, Michel's rewrite also made it much more entertaining.

Apart from his unfortunate choice of *Golden Danube* as the title of the book—which remains wholly inaccurate despite his explanations that he found it "more appealing, elegant and poetic" and "more tasteful and attractive" (1)—Kieran M. O'Driscoll's translation is very good and extremely faithful to Verne's original text. It also reads quite smoothly, despite occasional Britishisms such as "I knew that I would get out of that distressing spot of bother" (214) for "je savais que je m'en sortirais de ce mauvais pas," or "Ilia Krusch had a fruitful spot of fishing" (223) for "Ilia Krusch fit bonne pêche," or "the great unwashed" (224) for "le commun des mortels," or "kitted out" (225) for "outillés," among others. Although the textual annotations are few and far between, I also found O'Driscoll's 36-page introduction to be truly top-notch, not only instructive and critically aware but also (and in contrast to Olivier Dumas's) ideologically balanced. It provides the reader with an in-depth look at the book's publishing history, its major themes and characters, its possible homoerotic undertones, its humor, and how the current translation compares to the one done in 1967 by I.O. Evans.

At the end of his introduction, O'Driscoll concludes that, in his opinion, Verne *père's* manuscript has "proven worthy of translation" (35). Despite my reservations about its literary quality, as a Vernian I must agree. But what I find most distressing is that, in the future, this much less interesting rough-draft manuscript will no doubt end up being the *only* "official" version of this posthumous Verne novel available to the reading public. Quel dommage!
—Arthur B. Evans, DePauw University