

TRANSLATING VERNE



raduttore, traditore runs the old Italian adage: translators are traitors. And it's possible that no big-name author has suffered more betrayals than Frenchman Jules Verne in his nineteenth-century English translations.

Fans and academics have been pointing out this problem for decades. It was in the turbulent 1960s that NYU scholar Walter James Miller made a startling discovery: Captain Nemo's famed submarine, the *Nautilus*, was manufactured from a revolutionary type of sheet iron that was lighter than water and could float.

Well, not really. Checking Verne's French, Miller verified that the translator had simply made an idiotic mistake. And then other readers started finding other kinks: the first English version of *Journey to the Center of the Earth* (1864) recomposed every third paragraph and gave the characters silly new monikers—Verne's Professor Lidenbrock became Professor Hardwigg. As for more literal translations, often they were preposterously abridged: in *Circling the Moon* (1869) Verne includes an amusing chapter on using algebra to calculate flight times—the original translator kept the chapter but left out the formulas. And then there were issues of political correctness: in *The Mysterious Island* (1875) Verne condemns the British Raj—his UK translator simply revamped him so that he voices support instead.

In short, the Victorian translations of many Verne novels not only abound in asinine errors, they condense him, censor him, rewrite him, drop whole passages, fabricate new ones, concoct different titles, rearrange chapters, redo characterizations, chop his descriptions, dump his science, axe his jokes, and generally delete things that are politically iffy or call for homework. As Verne specialist Arthur B. Evans has noted (80), "Scholars now unanimously agree that the early English versions of Verne's *Voyages extraordinaires* were extremely shoddy and often bore little resemblance to their original French counterparts."

How, then, has *The Sphinx of the Ice Realm* fared in our language? After all, it's a tolerably well-known item, it regularly turns up in discussions of Poe's *The Narrative of Arthur*

Gordon Pym, and it's a world-class sea story from an author who knew his tall ships. Again, how has it fared?

Badly, I'm afraid. The only prior English translation of *Le Sphinx des glaces* came out in 1898 under the title *An Antarctic Mystery*. Attributed to "Mrs. Cashel Hoey" and published by the British firm of Sampson Low, it's heavily abridged, deleting *over a third* of the French original. Out went much of the stuff that makes a novel a novel—humor, atmosphere, characterization, scene painting, historical touches, seagoing detail. What's more, there are plenty of figure errors and translating bloopers.

And, amazingly, later reprints and revisions are even worse. In fact the publishing history of Hoey's translation is a literal demonstration of the law of diminishing returns: a reissue published in 1911 by Vincent Parke further abridges Hoey's already-abridged text, now cutting *over half* of the French original . . . not to be outdone, a 1960 Arco revision mixes *Pym* excerpts with a radical rewrite of Hoey that omits *over 60%* of Verne's novel . . . finally a 1975 Penguin paperback of *Pym* includes extracts from *Sphinx* as an appendix, leaving out *90%* of Verne's original. True, its editor makes no claims to completeness, but for anybody who honestly enjoys Jules Verne, that's mighty cold comfort.

What in blazes is going on?

Well, it may be that Verne himself is partly to blame. His novels aren't routine romances or standard-issue thrillers. Big chunks of them *are* challenging to translate, and for two particular reasons: a) they often have specialized content, meaning that the translator has to do research; b) they're full of comedy and satire, meaning that nothing's trickier to transfer to another language. So how did many of those nineteenth-century translators deal with the challenging passages? Simple. They left them out.

Take the offbeat content of Verne's yarns. They jockey from one unusual place to another—Patagonia to Turkistan, Auckland to Beijing, the Greek Isles to the Carpathian Mountains, the Kalahari Desert to the Bering Strait. Plus they get into science—chemistry, astronomy, paleontology, ichthyology. They tinker with technology—optics, weaponry, aeronautics, marine engineering. They dabble in industry—whaling, metalworking, railroading, coal mining. And, of course, they dream about the future—moon shots, giant robots, super submarines, mobile landmasses.

Which means that an honorable translator has to play detective. To cope, for instance, with the many realms of *The Sphinx*, I needed to learn that paracuta is an obsolete spelling of barracuda . . . that ridges on the isle of Tristan da Cunha are officially called gulches . . . that a *perroquet* isn't a parrot in this context but the topgallant sail . . . that British mariner John Balleny discovered the Sabrina Coast—not the "Fabricia" Coast, as some typesetter fumbled it over a century ago.

So it isn't enough to be good at Gallic chitchat. Here well-meaning translators have to do spadework, look things up, track stuff down . . . in libraries . . . in museums . . . in the field.

After all, Verne did.

As for the jokes and tomfoolery, we need to remember that Verne started out as a scriptwriter, penning dozens of stage pieces—slapstick and vaudeville turns, bedroom farces,

the books for musical comedies. Not surprisingly, his novels can be just as mischievous: they're packed with running gags, gallows humor, bawdy wordplay, shameless plot twists. Even darker novels like *20,000 Leagues Under the Seas* or *The Begum's Millions* (1879) have a satiric edge.

Ditto *The Sphinx of the Ice Realm*. The bosun Hurliguerly is its resident standup comic, piling on the salty similes. To him, the earth turns on its axis *comme un poulet à la broche*, "like a chicken on a spit." Or an unsociable sailor pal is *muet là-dessus comme une carpe dans la friture*, "as mute as a carp in a frying pan." Yes, comedy is common in Verne's novels—and it can be a headache for translators. Even so, we have to do our best or we're skimping on a major Vernian ingredient. Luckily, as per above, a straightforward rendering will sometimes do the trick.

But just as often it won't. And at that juncture a translator needs to loosen up and get more creative—as with, say, another leading character in *Sphinx*, the geologist Jeorling. One of a long line of ironic Vernian narrators, he looks on with amused eyes: the self-important innkeeper Atkins is *le personnage le plus considérable et le plus considéré de l'archipel*, — *en conséquence le plus écouté*, "the most respected and respectable individual in those islands, hence the one who did the most talking." Or, hearing the donkeylike racket of nearby penguins, he snaps that "*l'air était rempli de braiements à vous rendre sourd*," "the air was full of enough braying to cause hearing loss."

And that's just a sampling of the challenges. But in the case of a protean tale spinner like Verne, I think they're worth toiling over—and thank heaven others agree, because we're in the midst of a marvelous Verne renaissance. Since Miller's crusade back in the '60s, some forty new translations of Verne's novels have appeared in English, readable and accurate versions of top favorites, plus first-time editions of titles never before available in our language. I list and describe many of them in the Recommended Reading section at the end of the book—trust me, they're worth dipping into.

As for this English text of *The Sphinx of the Ice Realm*, it's a new, accurate, communicative translation of the 1897 French first edition. Keeping American purchasers particularly in mind, it converts metric figures to U.S. equivalents, adheres to the original paragraphing, is complete down to the smallest substantive detail, and has enjoyed the advantages of electronic access to the full manuscript in Verne's hometown library. Which means I've not only had an extra resource for untying textual knots, I've also been able to sneak peeks into Verne's creative processes—a jaw-dropping experience.

My renderings aim especially to convey the humor and excitement of Verne's unique novel, the zest, irreverence, and storytelling virtuosity that somehow stayed with him into old age. The entire book has benefited from current Verne scholarship and today's instant access to academic, institutional, and educational resources around the globe—access not only to Verne's original texts but to those of his countryman Baudelaire and our countryman Poe, equally essential to *The Sphinx of the Ice Realm*.

Specialists, educators, and students are encouraged to consult the Textual Notes starting on page 385: they specify the policies, priorities, and point-to-point decisions underlying the contents of this volume. FPW



Jules Verne
(1828–1905)