

As Verne Smiles

Walter James Miller

ABSTRACT

In this piece, Walter James Miller describes the “resurrection” of Jules Verne among English-speaking countries and interviews five Vernian scholars about the current state of Verne’s reputation. He begins with the fact that, in an effort to profit from Verne’s international fame in the 19th century, British and American publishers rushed into print very poorly translated and edited versions of his works. As a result, by the 1930s, Verne had developed a reputation as an author only of “children’s books,” which persisted for many decades. This situation began to change in 1963 when Miller was asked to write the introduction to a new edition of an 1872 version of *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea*. This version was riddled with errors that had stripped the work of its humor, philosophy, and science. The first printing sold out quickly and began to inspire a new generation of Verne scholars. In 1976, the first volume of *The Annotated Jules Verne* was published, containing a new and annotated translation of *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea*. A second volume followed 2 years later, performing the same service for *From Earth to the Moon*. In all, more than 30 new translations have been published since 1965, and 9 new titles have been published in English. Perhaps most validating is the news that French publishers are now preparing their first critical editions of Vernian works, which will be modeled after the American annotated versions. Truly, an international victory for those seeking Verne’s rehabilitation.

RÉSUMÉ

Dans cet article, Walter James Miller décrit la “résurrection” de Jules Verne dans les pays anglo-saxons et questionne cinq spécialistes à propos de la réputation actuelle de Verne. Il débute en mentionnant le fait que les éditeurs anglais et américains du dix-neuvième siècle, avec l’idée de profiter de la réputation internationale de Verne, se dépêchaient de publier des versions très mal traduites et pauvrement présentées de ses œuvres. Le résultat fut que, vers 1930, Verne s’est vu considéré comme auteur pour enfants uniquement, réputation qui s’est maintenue pendant plusieurs décades. La situation a commencé à évoluer en 1963, quand Miller fut invité à rédiger l’introduction d’une nouvelle édition de la version de 1872 de *Vingt Mille Lieues sous les mers*. Cette version était bourrée d’erreurs qui éliminaient tout humour, philosophie et science du roman. Le premier tirage fut vendu très rapidement et commença à inspirer une nouvelle génération de spécialistes de Jules Verne. En 1976, le premier volume de *The Annotated Jules Verne* fut publié, contenant une nouvelle traduction de *Vingt Mille Lieues sous les mers*, avec de nombreux commentaires. Le deuxième volume suivit deux ans plus tard, remplissant les mêmes fonctions pour *De la Terre à la Lune*. Au total, plus d’une trentaine de nouvelles traductions ont été publiées depuis 1965, dont neuf œuvres jamais traduites auparavant en anglais. Le plus encourageant est la nouvelle que les français prévoient une édition critique des œuvres de Jules Verne, prenant les versions commentées américaines pour modèle. Véritablement une victoire internationale pour ceux qui envisagent une réhabilitation littéraire de Jules Verne.

In 1976, when Thomas Y. Crowell published the first *Annotated Jules Verne*, the jacket was graced with blurbs by such luminaries as Isaac Asimov and Kurt Vonnegut. Asimov pictured Verne as “surely....smiling from his grave,” because “for the first time [*Twenty Thousand Leagues under the Sea*] appears in English as it was in French, together with fascinating notes that place it in the context of its time.” And Vonnegut imagined that “Few science-fiction stories could match [the editor’s] adventures in resurrecting a great author, Jules Verne, in love and scholarship.”

So now, on February 8, 2008, we can imagine how much bigger, wider, fuller that smile! For, on this 180th anniversary of his birth, of his arrival in history, a group of some of the world’s top Verne scholars hereby launch *Verniana*. This is the first international, multi-language review devoted to the Grand Romancer. And we suspect that the smile includes Verne’s joy that—a la Jules—this new journal appears in a new medium, online.

And 2008 is the 12th anniversary of Zvi Har’El’s founding of the Jules Verne Forum (<http://JV.Gilead.org.il>), the 15th of Arthur Edwards’ founding of The North American Jules Verne Society, and the 43rd of the start of the massive “rescue operation” that has, since 1965, involved more than 40 scholars.

But why was a “rescue” required? What does Vonnegut mean by a “resurrection?” Wasn’t Verne world-famous from the 1860s on? Yes, in France, Germany, Russia, China, etc., but by the 1930s his reputation in the English-speaking world had sunk to a pitiful low. In an effort to profit from Verne’s international fame, English and American publishers had, in the 1870s and thereafter, rushed into print slapdash, tendentiously cut, error-soaked translations. These versions were so shallow that they came to be regarded as fit only for children.

And so this 180th anniversary is also the perfect time to review what has amounted to an amazing reversal in literary history. *Verniana* is not only the latest step in this phenomenon, it is the best medium for recording it.

According to Brian Taves, Library of Congress expert on Verne, many 20th-century parents were disturbed by this criminal situation. For instance, Willis T. Bradley, a Massachusetts academic, lamented “the free and silly adaptations made for....schoolboys nearly a hundred years ago.” For his own kids, he composed several new translations, most notably *Journey to the Center of the Earth*, which was published in hardcover (New York: A. A. Wynn, 1956).

And two years later I. O. Evans launched his Fitzroy edition, which ironically added to the controversy. On the one hand, Evans issued many titles Anglophone readers had never heard of. On the other, in an effort to make his translations more salable, he “decided to leave out the detail, for surely no author more repaid judicious skipping”! He slashed the longer volumes (e.g. *Twenty Thousand Leagues*) 25% or more. Worse yet, he imposed his own political and religious attitudes on what “Verne” had said, actually regarding his own editing as “Providential inspiration.” So in effect he was repeating the license that the 19th-century translators had arrogated to themselves.

Just as the Fitzroy series was “beginning to wind down,” says Taves, “Walter James Miller became the first translator to explore the problem of Verne in English in an essay introducing his own first translation of *Twenty Thousand Leagues* (New York: Washington Square Press, 1965).”

As Taves himself reminds us, at the start of *Master of the World*, John Strock explains, “If I speak of myself in this story, it is because I have been deeply involved in its startling events.” So please let WJM take over *this* story in his own voice. My main question is: How much progress have we made in rehabilitating Verne in America?

In 1963, I agreed to write for Washington Square Press an introduction to a new school edition of *Twenty Thousand Leagues under the Sea*. Although the title page gave no date or credit to any translator, I managed to find out that this version was published in 1872, it was by Mercier Lewis, and that that was one of the pseudonyms used by the Reverend Lewis Page Mercier, of Oxford. Checking with other publishers—for I soon discovered that they almost all used the Mercier Lewis version—I found that only one would even answer me: “We have not heard from Mr. Lewis in some time,” the editor wrote me, “and can tell you nothing about him.”

It would be four decades before I got the full story. Norman Wolcott, a fellow member in the North American Jules Verne Society, delivered a paper that was a brilliant piece of detective work. It explains why the clergyman was reduced to doing rush hack translations, how he actually and helplessly made most of the hundreds of errors that are still enshrined in his editions.

For me the nightmare began when in Lewis’s second chapter the narrator, Professor Aronnax, says, “I had just returned from a scientific research in the disagreeable territory of Nebraska.” I immediately imagined dozens of hands going up in Nebraska classrooms, and in any wide-awake group. I knew I had to check the original French.

Sure enough, all that Aronnax had said in the original French was that he had just returned from the...BADLANDS...*badlands*...those geological phenomena of erosional sculpting and fantastically shaped hills. Now here the reader had lost a typical Verne allusion to a wonder of geography, and gained a nasty unintended and mysterious slur on Nebraska.

From there on I proceeded with painful caution, like a poor GI in Iraq watching for bumps in the roadside. Mercier’s road blew up all over the place where Verne had sketched entirely different terrains. And I was compiling a list of scientific details that the clergyman had simply omitted, e.g. the essential facts about Nemo’s batteries. And a few pages later the Captain was saying that his steel plates have a “density of .7 to .8 that of water.” I could see any bright school kid raising her hand and protesting, “Why, that would mean Nemo’s steel would float.” Pity the teacher teaching that classic! What the poor teacher could not know was that the good clergyman had botched dozens of crucial passages and, as Wolcott has now taught us to say, it was his publisher who omitted scores of others. These “errors” of commission and omission ranged from neat little Verne jokes, which deprived the reader of the vaudeville side of Verne, to long passages that took all the politics and philosophy out of a writer for whom there is no separation between science and politics.

For example, the reverend’s version omits Verne’s first mention of Nemo’s portrait gallery of heroes—like Washington, Lincoln, Kosciuszko—and of Nemo’s own politically tortured family. This explains so much about Captain Nobody. Neither student, teacher, nor other adult readers learn how Verne felt about the colonialist British exploitation of the Indian pearl divers, or even the Professor’s interpretations of Darwin.

Naturally I could not resist the temptation to see if such indignities had been visited on just *Twenty Thousand Leagues*. Or had they generally been applied to the great wave of English versions that came out in the 1870s and 1880s? I did not have to go far to discover the horrid truth. W. H. G. Kingston (1814-1880) was surely a man we could trust. He was a famous writer for children, covering adventures on all continents, famous largely for the strong patriotic and ethical message in his books. I discovered what that meant when I read his version of *The Mysterious Island*. Just one example: Kingston dared to rewrite Nemo’s deathbed speech so that it was no longer critical of British imperialism.

Indeed, I soon found that a Philadelphia teacher had, as early as 1874, complained that an American version of *Five Weeks in a Balloon* “contains so many geographical mistakes that it must have been done in a hurry.” He wrote that “hasty translations of Verne’s later works by English hands,” with “some of the best passages omitted,” were being sold in America. The intrinsic value, the uniqueness of Verne’s work still managed to shine through. Our Broad Street Academy teacher went on to say that “these translations...spread like wildfire...and were everywhere hailed with the greatest delight by young and old.”

There’s a tragicomic ending to this tale of the Philadelphia teacher, named Edward Roth. He himself got caught up in the frenzy. He put out a now infamous American version of the moon novels in which he has Verne write a poem about the City of Brotherly Love, talk in the first person, and invent many pro-American episodes that even the America-lover Verne could never have dared. A tragic precedent had been renewed: knowing no better, people would buy any incomplete and ersatz Verne book.

Notice that the only Verne novel to escape such mistreatment was *Around the World in Eighty Days*. How come? By then Verne had become so famous that as each chapter was serialized in a leading French newspaper, foreign correspondents were cabling summaries back home! So when translators got to work on American book versions, they could certainly not wreak their usual irresponsible havoc and leave out less than was their wont.

Knowing any better, I said, Americans would buy any version of Verne. But as time passed, American critics could not help concentrating on the literary value of Verne. Judging from the translations, they pronounced Verne a very poor writer. As Brian Aldiss summed it up in the early editions of his histories, Verne was considered an author fit only for boys. We hit bottom in American critical regard in 1961 when *Galaxy* magazine published a sneering article that—you guessed it!—ridiculed Verne for creating steel lighter than water, for failing to give the specs for his batteries, and on and on. Ironically, the writer, T. L. Thomas, like most critics, put the blame for these errors not on the translators but squarely on Verne himself! Even such an sf intellectual as Damon Knight had been taken in on this, and deeply regretted this error when Washington Square Press showed him a draft of my “Jules Verne in America: A Translator’s Preface.”

My editor at Washington Square could easily have said, “Let’s just do what all the other publishers do. Put out Mercier Lewis.” The problem of course was that a long-dead translator does not have to be paid, and I was still very much alive. Phil Flayderman, my editor, actually sold this novel idea—of paying a live Verne translator—to his boss, Freeman Lewis, a cousin of Sinclair Lewis. Ethics won the day...another reason Verne must be smiling on February 8, 2008.

While my version was in press, I discovered the beginning of another ironic trend in Verne publishing. Anthony Bonner had just put out a version of *Twenty Thousand Leagues* that was 99% complete in content but had serious new flaws. Whenever in doubt about what Verne meant, Bonner had simply fallen back on the Mercier Lewis version! For example, Nemo’s steel was still .7 to .8 the specific gravity of water!

Worse yet—and this mistake surely delayed our mission for years—Bonner must certainly have noticed the awful omissions and errors in Mercier Lewis—since he used the clergyman as a backup—and told nobody about them! He did not mention this in his introduction because he did not write an introduction. And so he neither exposed the Lewis Mercier crimes nor claimed a BIG FIRST for himself! This is such a strange situation that it’s the perfect setup for a second crusade of detective work by Norman Wolcott. Alas, Bonner’s own incorporation of Mercier’s shenanigans did not remain corrected

until four decades later when Frederick Paul Walter helped Bantam put out an excellent new Bonner version.

So now, there were at least two Mercier Lewis legacies to contend with. Some publishers still sell the Mercier Lewis intact, as we shall show in detail. Others correct his more obvious mistakes but “preserve” major omissions. And here’s the secret: they reissue Mercier Lewis in bright newly illustrated editions, perfect for Auntie’s expensive graduation gift to her nephews.

Of course, the most valuable—and endurable—value of my 1965 edition is that it DID contain an introduction, which Bonner’s should have done. *I explained in detail why and how the Anglophone world had never had a chance to know the real Jules Verne.* I offered my version of *TTLUTS* as a modest first step in the rehabilitation of Verne’s reputation in America.

Washington Square Press had to rush out a second printing before publication because a small book club snatched up the first. In one month after publication, I appeared on 27 radio and TV shows to explain why “There are two Jules Vernes.” Another irony in this story is that the *Reader’s Digest* Best Loved Books series bought the rights to produce a condensed version! I had done a new version partly to close the gaps in America’s knowledge of the real Jules Verne, and our ever-alert-to-new-trends *Reader’s Digest* issued a condensed version, with new gaps of their own choosing.

But at least, or so it seemed, the rescue mission was under way. When Flayderman moved to the New American Library, he naturally wanted his new audience to benefit by my discoveries. To produce an NAL version, I recruited a New York University colleague, Mendor T. Brunetti. That gave me a chance to get into print corrections of (innocent) mistakes I myself had made. And in 2001, when NAL decided to do a new edition of Brunetti, they returned the favor by hiring me to write an Afterword that explains the Verne problem to still another audience. But notice—that was still news as late as 2001.

Later Taves told me it was the original Miller-Brunetti editions that inspired him to become a Verne scholar. Verne was becoming respectable in the academic world. Stanford Luce wrote the first English PhD. dissertation on Verne, followed soon by Arthur B. Evans and William Butcher, all three leading names in today’s Verne Renaissance. For a while it looked as if we had won. But alas, many commercial publishers continued to put out expensive, beautifully illustrated editions of Mercier Lewis. Most of them were not identified as his work, but most of them featured that “disagreeable territory” (which has become a code-phrase to identify a real Vernian) and whatever other Mercierisms they can get away with.

But then, a miracle. Hugh Rawson, one of the great editors of our time (and author of several books on language), came up with a new solution. Why not make our case through ANNOTATED editions? For a start we would reprint the good clergyman’s *Twenty Thousand Leagues* with all his errors and omissions, adding in brackets my own restorations to bridge the gaps! In annotations and other critical sections, we could make the case for “the real Verne.” Only an editor at a fine old LITERARY publishing house like Crowell could see the value in this venture.

So in 1976 they issued the first volume of *The Annotated Jules Verne*. Crowell ran a three-column ad in the *New York Times Sunday Book Review*, and the main journalist Herbert Mitgang actually treated the new edition as a news article! Volker Dehs, then just fourteen and traveling in America, bought a copy in San Francisco in 1978. In 2003, long after he had become one of our most illustrious Verne scholars, he wrote to me that that edition was “...a revelation to me. You’ve founded a manner of editing Jules Verne seriously that is still lacking even in France.” And when Wolcott published his expose about Mercier Lewis, he included this question and answer: “How do we reach these conclusions? The key came to me when studying *The Annotated Jules Verne*.”

In short, it seemed once again that victory was ours. In 1978 Crowell, now a part of Harper Collins, published the second volume, *The Annotated Jules Verne: From the Earth to the Moon*. This is a complete new translation, with critical materials that show the errors and distortions of the 19th-century editions by Mercier Lewis, Elizabeth King, and Edward Roth. I established Verne as a political writer, proving for the first time in an English book what Jean Chesneaux had said about Verne—that as a political writer, he ranks with H. G. Wells. I flaunted *From the Earth to the Moon* as not only a prescient space novel but an anti-war classic on a level with Aristophanes' *Lysistrata* and Heller's *Catch-22*. I showed how once again the Reverend Lewis Page Mercier had diluted Verne's anti-imperialism and emasculated his anti-militarism.

Meanwhile, Harper Collins sold to a Japanese publisher rights to produce an edition of my *FTETTM!* They have translated even my name Miller into a Japanese ideogram, with just one Verne Americanism left in English—"bugjuice." In 1995 Gramercy put out an updated edition. Frederick Paul Walter and I are working on a third edition.

So at last the rehabilitation of Verne in America seemed safely in progress. Indeed in 1993 we did win a major victory. The Naval Institute Press asked Taves to nominate someone to do a special annotated deluxe edition of *TTLUTS*. One third through—slowed down by the desire this time to put out the lists of fishes as they are properly called in America—I asked NIP to take Rick Walter on board. He is well-versed in marine biology and technology and actually had his own translation in progress. We joined our efforts. Tom Cutler, our editor, says that our book is their longest title in print. Recently NIP shared with us an option to the movie rights of our version, sold to a free-lance producer. For the first time we might get a REAL Verne movie!

Five years after our coffee-table version appeared, William Butcher produced a mass-paperback edition through Oxford University Press. He made us feel good by quoting us 22 times! And so Anglophone readers of Verne now have both quality and mass paperback editions, thoroughly annotated from the historical, biographical, technical, and literary points of view.

Brian Taves summed it up when he wrote in the 1999 Summer issue of *Extrapolation*:

"Miller first vividly exposed the drawbacks of earlier translations in the preface to his 1965 edition. Miller elaborated on these problems in his Annotated Verne series and other scholars have since followed his lead."

And so now how has the overall situation changed since the opening campaign of 1965-1978? I have recently canvassed five experts to get an overall estimate of where we stand. Let's go from the bad news to the best, from what will provoke a scowl on Jules' face but then restore his 180th anniversary smile.

First I consulted the Verne expert at the Library of Congress, Brian Taves, who is also author of numerous papers and books. I got a series of notes like this:

"Despite the new translations, this old one from the 1870s is still on bookstore shelves." And he gave me the amazon.com shot of Kingston's *Mysterious Island*!

"Despite Tor supposedly being a leading sf publisher, again they use Mercier." And he gave me amazon's picture of Tor's *20K*.

A worse shock: "*Scholastic*," which supplies the schools, "still shovels Mercier at the unsuspecting." This is the edition that omits more than 50% of *20K*—that is, the highly trusted *Scholastic* cut it yet another 30% after Mercier Lewis' publisher had slashed it by more than 20%.

But for both Brian and me, the worst shock came in our perusal of the 2005 Barnes & Noble edition of five novels in one fat book. *It shows that now we have made some publishers well aware of the Mercier Lewis problem but they have found a new, unethical way around it.* The title page credits the translation to the good reverend, with introduction and notes by Victoria Lake. She lets mistakes like “the disagreeable territory” go by without comment. When she comes to a major omission, like Verne’s “long passage in which Conseil lectures Ned on the scientific classification of fish,” she does acknowledge the literary value of the scene—but still omits it!

When she gets to a monstrous error—like Nemo’s steel plates having (get this!) *a density of 0.07 to 0.08 of water*, she simply says: “The standard translation..., used for this edition, misprints many of Verne’s original and correct figures. Steel has a density of 7.8, not .07 to .08, that of water.”

Next in my canvass was Jean-Michel Margot, president of the North American Jules Verne Society and former member of the Société Jules Verne. He emailed me:

“My personal opinion is from now on, we will have two JVs who will have nothing to do with each other: the French author and his works (the scholarly side) and...the icon, ...used as an idea, a concept, in the way Steve Fosset used it: “I’m a successor of ...Verne” (after he had done a World Round Flight without stop...). JV was used as icon by IBM, Toshiba, Nini Ricci, Waterman, Nestlé, and many others. I think it’s the trend, and it’s not our goal to go against it. Our goal is to promote JV as a writer as much as we can.”

But I think Verne must be smiling in both versions of himself. He should broaden his smile even more as he hears from my third expert, Rick Walter, vice-president of the NAJVS and adult librarian in Albuquerque. Of the 13 polluted titles available to us in 1965, he now counts 40 new translations! Five have been produced under the aegis of Arthur B. Evans, our expert at DePauw and general editor of the Wesleyan Early Science Fiction Classics. These 40 include translations and/or critical materials by Stan Luce, Edward Baxter, Frederick Paul Walter, and WJM.

And Rick counts nine premieres, titles that had never before appeared in English. This bright new crop includes: *The Mighty Orinoco* translated by Luce, annotated by WJM; *The Meteor Hunt* translated and annotated by Walter and WJM; and *The Kip Brothers*, rendered by Luce and annotated by Margot.

Then my fourth expert, the REAL Evans at DePauw, produced for *Verniana* a new bibliography of all valid translations and critical commentaries published from 1965 to 2007. This can stand as one of *Verniana*’s first birthday gifts to the Grand Romancer. We are proud to offer this as a separate article, below. Notice that Art sums it up very modestly: “...*the rescue seems to be working.*”

The final expert in my canvass, Terry Harpold, professor at the University of Florida, brings us another kind of gratifying news. On a recent visit to Europe, he learned that *the French are preparing their first critical editions of Verne and—they will be modeled on the American annotated versions!* This means that America, whose critics once mercilessly beat and denigrated Jules Verne, is now showing his native land a new way to honor him. The *Anglophone* rescue operation, the rehabilitation, the resurrection of Jules Verne in *America* can now claim an *international* victory. And that’s where *Verniana* enters history.

So smile, Jules, smile smile smile.

