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## One Small Step for Everyman, One Giant Leap Backward for Verne Readers

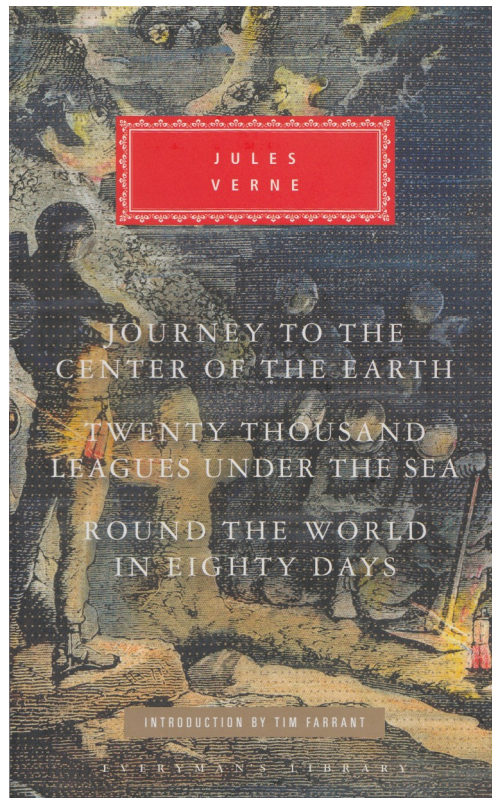
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**Verne, Jules.** *Journey to the Center of the Earth; Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea; Round the World in Eighty Days.* Introduction by Tim Farrant. *Everyman's Library* series, no 351. 688 p. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2013.

Until very recently, the venerable Everyman's Library series had a largely positive connection with the works of Jules Verne. Everyman's 1926 single-volume pairing of *Five Weeks in a Balloon* and *Around the World in Eighty Days* was a revelation; introduced and influenced by members of England's Jules Verne Confederacy, it offered sparkling new translations of both texts in an effort to improve Verne's literary reputation in the English-speaking world. Arthur Chambers, a professional British translator, supplied perhaps the most stylish rendering of *Five Weeks* published so far (it is seriously marred only by Chambers' disastrous decision to mistranslate the neutral French word *nègre* as a highly offensive English word also beginning with N), while Paul Desages, a French expert at Oxford, contributed an *Around the World* of impressive completeness and accuracy. Better still, a 1994 reprint of Desages's text added a wealth of critical material by Peter Costello, allowing English-speaking readers to appreciate the book in more detail than ever before. Though their other Verne titles, *Twenty Thousand Leagues under the Sea* and *The Mysterious Island*, were no better than the competition (they were simple reprints of the standard error-and-alteration-filled translations by Lewis Page Mercier and Agnes Kingston, respectively), and though all four Verne titles were allowed to go out of print, the lavish treatment they have given *Five*

*Weeks* and especially *Around the World* deserves a modicum of Vernian respect, and earns Everyman a special place in the history of Verne's English translations.

And so it comes as a great disappointment to find that, when Everyman put Verne back in their series last September, they did so with an abrupt downshift in translation quality. Their new single-volume omnibus offers no new translations; it does not even include the classic P. Desages text to which, presumably, they still own the rights. Rather, it reverts to some of the oldest English texts of all: the anonymous translation of *Journey to the Center of the Earth* published by George Routledge and Sons in 1876, and Henry Frith's versions of *Twenty Thousand Leagues under the Sea* (1876) and *Round the World in Eighty Days* (1878—note the idiosyncratic “Round” in the title, faithfully reproduced in this new edition) for the same publisher.



This strange choice is defended in an unsigned “Note on Translations” (p. xlv):

All three translations have been out of print for very many decades. The present republications offer an invaluable opportunity to encounter Verne in the versions his first English readers knew, giving unique access to his voice as heard in the idiom of his time. Their occasional archaisms, approximations and omissions lend spice to their overwhelming faithfulness, and make a telling contrast with perhaps more accurate if blander modern renderings. They will be of particular interest [...] to anyone in quest of a pleasurable and authentic record of Verne's work as it initially appeared.

Unlike many publishers, Everyman displays the courage and transparency to admit that their translations are not the most accurate available. However, the claim that these translations give “unique access to his voice” and are “a pleasurable and authentic record of Verne’s work” is ultimately just as deceptive as ignoring the issue of translations altogether would have been.

Everyman’s claim rests on the assumption that the Routledge translations of the 1870s, no matter how unreliable they may be in their details, are still “overwhelming[ly] faithful” to Verne’s “voice.” This assumption is itself problematic; many Verne aficionados, myself included, would argue that Verne’s wealth, variety, and accuracy of detail is a vital part of his identity as a novelist. Nor is it merely Verne’s research that is mangled in translation, for the inaccuracies introduced by these versions even extend into the fictional side of their universes: Lidenbrock’s bookseller Hevelius becomes the bookshop “Hevelin’s,” Passepartout and Mandiboy become “Passe-partout” and “Maudiboy,” the crew of the *Nautilus* fight an octopus rather than a giant squid. While the errors and omissions, on average, are less plentiful in the Routledge texts than in the most famously bad translations—Mercier’s *Twenty Thousand Leagues* or Lippincott’s *In Search of the Castaways*, for example—it is beyond question that there are enough of them to stop the translations from being reliable substitutes for the original works. Worse yet, in the case of *Round the World* it is blatant falsehood to claim that the text has undergone only “occasional...omissions”: fully one-fifth of the book is missing, a condensation process carried out mainly by omitting as much of Verne’s geographical research as possible—as well, unsurprisingly enough, as every passage of the book that could be construed as the slightest critique of the British Empire and its policies.

However, even if we accept Everyman’s assumption that only *stylistic* faithfulness is needed for a “pleasurable and authentic” Verne experience, two of the Routledge translations—those by Frith—are still deeply disappointing. As Norman Wolcott noted, Henry Frith’s training in engineering made his *Twenty Thousand Leagues* translation “one of the best of the time with only minor deletions from the original text. [1] However, Frith’s idiosyncratic writing style sometimes makes for a reading experience vastly unlike that of Verne in the original French. Take for example a line spoken by Captain Nemo in a typically aloof and straightforward tone:

«Voici, monsieur Aronnax, un manuscrit écrit en plusieurs langues. Il contient le résumé de mes études sur la mer, et, s’il plaît à Dieu, il ne périra pas avec moi.» (Part II, Chapter XIX)

“Here, M. Aronnax, is a manuscript written in several languages. It contains the summary of my research on the sea, and if God is willing, it shall not perish with me.” (my translation)

Though Frith’s word choices accurately render the meaning of the sentence, they also create a Nemo who seems markedly less serious:

“M. Aronnax, here is a MS., written in several languages. It contains the ‘digest’ of my studies beneath the sea, and, please goodness, it will not perish with me.”

The problem is even worse in *Round the World*, where Frith’s tendencies to call the hero by his first name only (which Verne never does) and to indulge in now-archaic slang (which Verne rarely does) make for a vastly different reading experience: for example, “Mr. Fogg prit un voiture” (Chapter XV, literally “Mr. Fogg took a carriage”) becomes “Phileas took a fly.” And, despite his technical training, Frith even manages to botch or discard some of Verne’s most delightful uses of science as literary imagery:

Telle était donc la situation respective de ces deux hommes, et au-dessus d'eux Phileas Fogg planait dans sa majestueuse indifférence. Il accomplissait rationnellement son orbite autour du monde, sans s'inquiéter des astéroïdes qui gravitaient autour de lui. [paragraph break] Et cependant, dans le voisinage, il y avait — suivant l'expression des astronomes — un astre troublant qui aurait dû produire certaines perturbations sur le cœur de ce gentleman. Mais non ! Le charme de Mrs. Aouda n'agissait point, à la grande surprise de Passepartout, et les perturbations, si elles existaient, eussent été plus difficiles à calculer que celles d'Uranus qui l'ont amené la découverte de Neptune. (Chapter XVII)

Such was the respective situation of these two men, and above them Phileas Fogg floated in his majestic indifference. He was rationally accomplishing his orbit around the world, without troubling himself about the asteroids gravitating around him. [paragraph break] And yet, in the vicinity, there was—as the astronomers would say—a disturbing star that ought to have produced certain perturbations in this gentleman's heart. But no! The charms of Mrs. Aouda had no effect, to the great surprise of Passepartout, and the perturbations, if they existed, would have been more difficult to calculate than those of Uranus which led to the discovery of Neptune. (my translation)

Such was the state of affairs, and meantime Phileas Fogg appeared perfectly indifferent to everything. [paragraph break] But nevertheless there was a disturbing cause not far off, which might be able to produce an influence on his heart; but no, Mrs. Aouda's charms had no effect, to the great surprise of Passepartout. (Frith's translation)

Everyman's other claim about the translations—that they were long out-of-print and thus worth reissuing—is equally misleading. Frith's *Round the World* has been available online through Google Books, and downloadable in a variety of formats from Project Gutenberg, for years. His *Twenty Thousand Leagues* was digitized some years ago by the University of Florida and is readable in full on their website for free (<http://ufdc.ufl.edu/AA00009645>). Finally, the Routledge *Journey* has been in print for years in inexpensive editions by Dover Publications and Modern Library. In short, the claim that the works were out of physical print is true only for two of the three volumes, and the underlying argument—that they were inaccessible enough to make reprinting worthwhile—is false for all three. Reprinting these texts furnishes very little that any reader with an Internet connection could not find elsewhere at a much better price.

To be fair, the omnibus is not without its charms. As usual for the series, the design of the book is top-notch, with a grand de-Neuville-derived cover and some of the most elegant typesetting Verne has been treated to in years. Tim Farrant's introduction is a thoughtfully written blend of academic comment and personal reflection, and shows true respect for the works, though Verne fans may wish that new readers had been welcomed into the omnibus with a more all-encompassing initiation to the author and his world (for example, by mentioning trends of Vernian analysis to show what the foremost scholars have found most interesting). And, given the usual tendency of publishers simply to reprint the most common versions of texts—Barnes & Noble's recent collection of seven mediocre-to-terrible Verne translations, including all three by Mercier, springs to mind—one might even argue that Everyman has to be applauded for thinking outside the box at all.

However, given the hopes raised by their earlier Verne editions, Everyman's 2013 omnibus comes as a disappointing step back, in which reuse of second-rate public-domain translations is legitimated by implying that "Verne in the versions his first English readers knew" means authentic Verne. As many of the world's most prominent Vernians have proved time and again, the problem is precisely that these versions are *not* authentic Verne, and that Verne's

reputation in the English-speaking world has suffered for it. [2] One can only hope that future Verne titles released by Everyman, if any, return to the levels of innovation they achieved almost ninety years ago when they first introduced their readers to Samuel Fergusson and Phileas Fogg.

## NOTES

1. Wolcott, Norman. "The Victorian Translators of Verne: Mercier to Metcalfe." Jules Verne Mondial, Amiens, France. March 2005. Conference presentation.
2. Miller, Walter James. "As Verne Smiles." *Verniana*, I (2008-2009): 1-8.  
     Evans, Arthur B. "Jules Verne's English Translations." *Science Fiction Studies*, XXXII:1 #95 (March 2005): 80-104. (available at <http://jv.gilead.org.il/evans/VerneTrans%28article%29.html>)  
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     Evans, Arthur B. "The English Editions of *Five Weeks in a Balloon*." *Verniana*, VI (2012-2013): 139-168.

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