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Verne's First Novel Finally in English

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Jules Verne. *A Priest in 1835*. Albany (GA): BearManor Fiction, 2016, 306 p. Volume 9 of the *Palik Series* sponsored by the North American Jules Verne Society.

Verne's unpublished first novel was written around 1847 (at age 19), long before the *Voyages extraordinaires (Extraordinary Voyages)*. It's little known outside the Vernian communities. It was finally published in 1992 in France with the title *Un Prêtre en 1839* and edited by Christian Robin. The novel has just appeared in the United States with the title *A Priest in 1835*, translated and edited by Danièle Chatelain and her husband the late George Slusser.

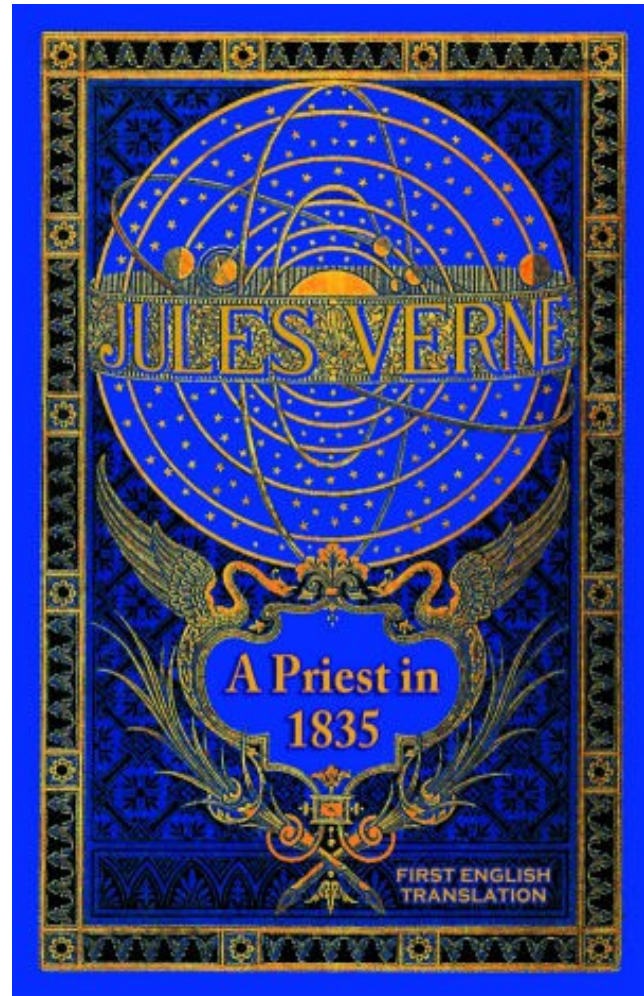
This publication of the novel in English is interesting for all Jules Verne specialists in more than one way. The date in the title is different: the French edition carries 1839, the American one has 1835. The French editions of 1992 and American of 2016 are both based on the manuscript available online on the website of the Bibliothèque Municipale (Municipal Library) of Nantes. The preface/postface writers and editors of the two editions are specialists of Jules Verne and of French literature of the nineteenth century.

A Priest in 1835 is the tenth volume of the Palik series [1]. The translation, introduction and notes are of excellent quality and the illustrated introduction "From *A Priest in 1835* to the *Extraordinary Voyages*" fills the first 64 pages of this volume of 306 pages.

In April 2009, the Eaton Science Fiction Conference (at the University of California, Riverside) was devoted to Jules Verne and organized by George Slusser. At that time, he indicated to the North American Jules Verne Society his interest in this almost unknown Vernian work, which still lacked an English translation. Later, when the Palik Series was launched, Slusser contacted Brian Taves, editor of the Palik Series, and expressed the desire to translate *Priest*. Slusser and his wife Danièle Chatelain had read *Un Prêtre en 1839*, edited by Christian Robin, and were interested in producing a critical edition of this novel in English.



Cover of the French edition in 1992 (Paris, le cherche-midi)



Cover of the American edition in 2016 (Albany, GA, BearManor Fiction)

Because it is the first novel written by Jules Verne, it could be considered a precursor of the *Extraordinary Voyages*. This observation was made both by Robin in France and by Chatelain and Slusser. In his afterword, Robin asks the question : “The First *Extraordinary Voyage*?” (p. 217-220) and he answers it as follows:

Grandioses métaphores, cyclopéennes, grâce auxquelles commencent de crépiter dans *Un Prêtre en 1839* les premières étincelles de l'imagination déployée dans les *Voyages extraordinaires* [2].

Grandiose, cyclopean metaphors, the first sparks of imagination that will later be on display in the *Extraordinary Voyages*, first begin to crackle in *A Priest in 1839*.

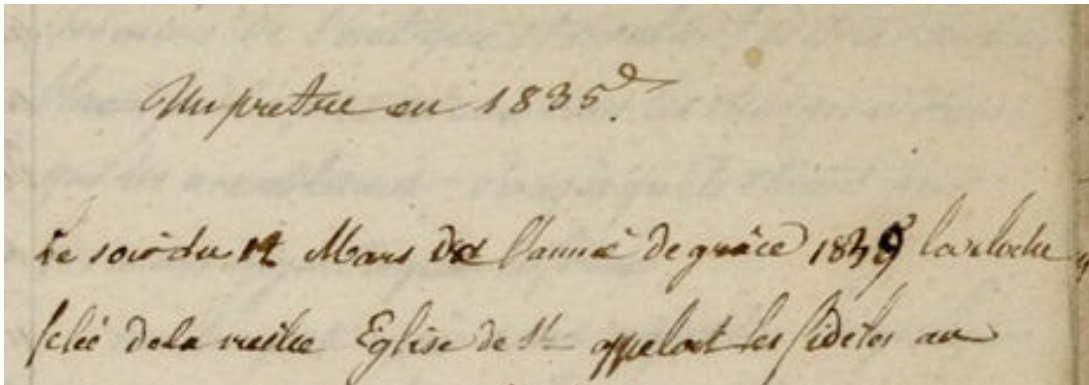
Chatelain and Slusser end their introduction with a sub-chapter entitled “The Legacy of *A Priest in 1835*” in which they see, like Robin, the influence of *Priest* in later Verne novels such

as *Journey to the Center of the Earth* and *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Seas*. If Robin had added *The Secret of Wilhelm Storitz*, Chatelain and Slusser add *Around the Moon* and *The Sphinx of the Ice*, and even link *Priest* to the origins of science fiction:

...Verne's first neglected first novel provides a key element in understanding the origins of science fiction, how this genre came together, in the age of modern science, from Verne's creative blending of available narrative forms [3].

These first remarks highlight the different approaches to and interpretations of *Priest*. The first scholar, in Nantes, in 1992, who represents a traditional French literary perspective, and had in place all the necessary Verne resources, at the Bibliothèque Municipale (Municipal Library) of Nantes. The second scholars, in Riverside (CA), more than twenty years later, were specialists in science fiction and French literature, while having easy access to one of the most voluminous science fiction literature collections in the world.

The commentaries of the two editions have virtually nothing to do with each other, except that Chatelain and Slusser had the opportunity to refer to the French edition, and chose to follow a different interpretive path. Robin had chosen 1839 as the year in the title of the novel as it appears in the first text line of the manuscript, as a correction of "1835". Chatelain and Slusser opted for 1835 as it appears in the title of the manuscript.



Beginning of Verne's manuscript of *Priest*: 1835 is in the title. 1839 (correcting 1835) is in the first line of the text

Unlike Robin, who seeks to link the content of the novel to Nantes at the time of writing and to discuss certain autobiographical and descriptive details in the text, Chatelain and Slusser examine *Priest* as an example of Verne's early narrative practice:

By no stretch of the imagination is *Prêtre* what is recognized today as a science fiction novel. But in this novel Verne develops a method of writing that leads directly to the creation of his later masterpieces, which in light of his synthesis of detective and Gothic elements, can be called a fiction of the "investigation *scientifique* extraordinaire."... What Verne does, in *Prêtre*, is first to deny these mysteries [the mysteries of the natural universe] the moral stature they enjoy in the classic Gothic novel. From here, only one step further is needed to see these mysteries as *natural phenomena*, as the stuff of scientific investigation. If Verne ultimately never published *Prêtre* per se, it is perhaps because he saw it as the springboard to a new form of fiction, a fiction that deals with the pursuit of mysteries of the physical world itself, mysteries that (as with his Gothic) never fully yield an explanation that is definitive (p. 48).

Chatelain and Slusser see *Priest* as a kind of bridge between the Gothic novel and the “investigation *scientifique* extraordinaire” (in French in the Introduction text), a transition between Ann Radcliffe and Edgar Allan Poe.

Between the first introductory pages and the conclusion already mentioned above, their analysis is divided into three parts, each with a significant title: “Verne’s Detective and Poe” (p. 9-31), “Verne and the Gothic” (p. 31-45) and “Verne’s method” (p. 45-53).



Vingt mille lieues sous les mers (*Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Seas*), second part, chapter 11 : «C'est l'épreuve positive que j'en donne ici. (Page 319.)» (“A deep-sea photograph”)

Short stories narrating the adventures of C. Auguste Dupin (Poe's iconic detective) had appeared in Parisian magazines as early as 1846, highlighting a narratological *modus operandi* that replaces the structure of the traditional Gothic novel where evil forces explain events considered as supernatural [4]. Through the Verne version of Dupin, Michel Randeau,

Jules Verne invites the reader to find and collect, sometimes faster than the detective himself, the pieces of the puzzle to solve. The method of deduction of Poe's Dupin and Verne's Randaeu lead Chatelain and Slusser to consider that this is a form of "investigation *scientifique* extraordinaire" (p. 48), which can also be related to the procedures of experimental medicine invented by Claude Bernard during this same period [5].

In contrast, the foreword introducing the French 1992 edition claims that:

Sans doute le roman est-il inachevé et son écriture quelquefois touffue, mais l'intrigue est suffisamment nouée pour qu'il soit possible à chacun d'en inventer la fin ou, du moins, d'imaginer une fin, selon sa propre vision de l'ensemble (p. 8).

The novel is without a doubt unfinished and its writing is sometimes dense, but the plot is tied together enough to make possible for everyone to invent the end or at least to imagine an end, according to his/her own vision of the whole.

What represents an absence of conclusion in the story for these editors suggests an additional literary aspect for Chatelain and Slusser:

The reader is able perhaps to see more pieces of the puzzle, but the puzzle is never complete, there is never enough of it to assemble a whole (p. 45). ...what for Verne will become a "method" of fictional writing is based precisely on the premise that no investigation can be complete, that no amount of rational examination can ever exhaust the mystery that remains behind the surface of things. That is of course a message that doesn't mesh with the later positivism of Hetzel, where a novel must not only teach solid scientific method but get results (p. 47).

In articulating this point of view, Chatelain and Slusser are joining several other Verne researchers whose analysis of the Vernian corpus demonstrate how Verne sought to manipulate his readers, offering a story that gave the illusion of closure, the end of the initiatory adventure [6]. The reader gets the impression that the story is complete, when in fact it remains open-ended, giving them a glimpse of yet another level of mystery [7]. Why do "the primeval rocks that have never seen the light of day, that nether granite that forms the solid foundation of our planet" have a cave at their base on the image taken by the photographic camera of the Nautilus? [8]. There is still something beyond what we can see and experience. Thus, according to Chatelain and Slusser, the fact that *A Priest in 1835* leaves the reader "hanging in the air" at the end of the novel constitutes yet another example of how it foresees Verne's yet-to-be-written *Extraordinary Voyages*.

NOTES

1. Daniel Compère. « Un Jules Verne inattendu : la collection Palik (Palik series). ». *Verniana*, vol. 7 (2014-2015), p. 63-74.
2. Christian Robin. « Postface ». In Jules Verne, *Un Prêtre en 1839*, Paris, le cherche midi éditeur, 1992, 244 p. The postface fills pages 213-221 and the notes pages 223-243. The translations are by Arthur B. Evans.

3. Danièle Chatelain and George Slusser. "From *A Priest in 1835* to the *Voyages extraordinaires*". In Jules Verne, *A Priest in 1835*, Albany (GA), BearManor Fiction, 2016, 306 p. The introduction fills pages 1-64 and the annotations are footnotes.
4. Danièle Chatelain and George Slusser. "Verne Transforms the Gothic: *Un Prêtre en 1839*." P. 207-224 of *Collectionner l'extraordinaire, sonder l'ailleurs. Essais sur Jules Verne en hommage à Jean-Michel Margot*. Amiens, Encrage, 2015, 350 p.
5. Danièle Chatelain and George Slusser. "The Creation of Scientific Wonder: Jules Verne's Dialogue with Claude Bernard." *Verniana*, vol. 2, 2009-2010, p. 89-124.
6. Jean-Michel Margot. « Un Archétype inattendu : Jules Verne ». *Verniana*, vol. 6, 2013-2014, p. 81-92.
7. Jules Verne. *Vingt mille lieues sous les mers (Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Seas)*. Second part, Chapter XI.
8. P. 283-284 of: Jules Verne. *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea*, Translated and Annotated by Walter James Miller and Frederick Paul Walter, Annapolis (MD), Naval Institute Press, 1993, xxiv + 400 p.

Jean-Michel Margot (jmmargot@mindspring.com) is an internationally recognized specialist on Jules Verne. He currently serves as vice-president of the North American Jules Verne Society and has published several books and many articles on the author. Margot edited Verne's theatrical play *Journey Through the Impossible* (Prometheus, 2003) for the Society; a volume of 19th century criticism, titled *Jules Verne en son temps* (Encrage, 2004); and provided the introduction and notes of Verne's *The Kip Brothers* (Wesleyan University Press, 2007). In 2015, he was awarded the Festschrift *Collectionner l'extraordinaire, sonder l'ailleurs. Essais sur Jules Verne en hommage à Jean-Michel Margot* (edited by Terry Harpold, Daniel Compère, and Volker Dehs, Amiens, Encrage).