

Submitted October 10, 2020

Proposé le 10 octobre 2020

Published December 10, 2020

Publié le 10 décembre 2020

Travels and Travails with the Big Three

Alex Kirstukas

Verne, Jules. *Twenty Thousand Leagues under the Sea*. Translated by James Reeves. New York: Vintage Books, 2011.

Verne, Jules. *Journey to the Center of the Earth*. Translated by Joyce Gard. New York: Vintage Books, 2011.

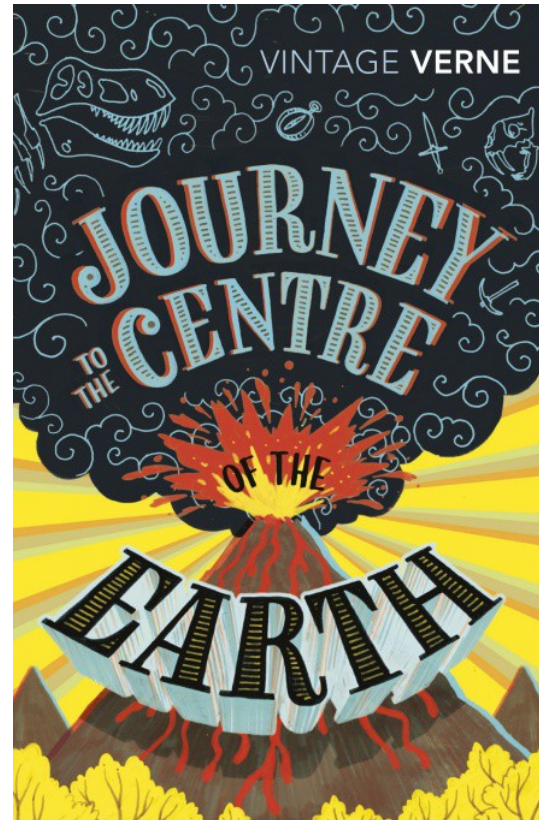
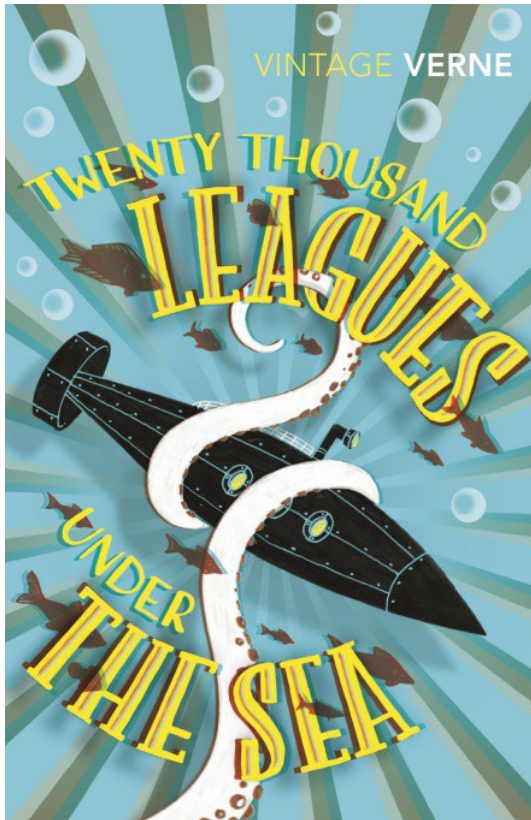
Verne, Jules. *Around the World in Eighty Days*. Translated by Timothy Martin. London: Usborne Publishing, 2017.

In the English-speaking world, one can identify a “Big Three” group of Verne novels—*Journey to the Center of the Earth*, *Twenty Thousand Leagues under the Sea(s)*, and *Around the World in Eighty Days*—by the sheer number of sub-par editions available from major publishers. It isn’t hard to find reasons for this dubious distinction; all three novels, in addition to being longstanding favorites among readers and scholars, received high-profile Hollywood adaptations in the 1950s and have retained special familiarity since. If a modern Anglophone bookshop or omnibus edition boasts only three Verne titles, it’s likely to be these. But with great popularity comes great reliance on existing translations, usually poor-quality Victorian texts in the public domain.[1]

A couple of widely available 2011 editions from Vintage Books, an imprint of Random House (now Penguin Random House), illustrate the problem with an unusual twist: the translations here are not the “standard” public-domain Victorian texts, but manage to be at least as unreliable. The Vintage *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea* has the title page

1 Brian Taves offers an excellent discussion of the 1950s Hollywood Verne boom in his *Hollywood Presents Jules Verne* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2015), 49-126. On publishers’ cost-effective (and reader-unfriendly) preference for Victorian translations, see Walter James Miller’s “As Verne Smiles,” *Verniana* 1 (2008-2009): 1-8.

credit “translated from the French by James Reeves,” and their *Journey to the Center of the Earth* has the credit “translated by Joyce Gard.” Are these fresh translations that escaped Vernian notice in 2011? No: a library search on WorldCat.org indicates that both texts come from British children’s editions, soon after the releases of the familiar Hollywood adaptations. The *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1956) was advertised as “newly adapted and abridged” by Reeves, and the *Journey* (London: Hutchinson, 1961) was advertised as “newly adapted from the original French” by Gard.



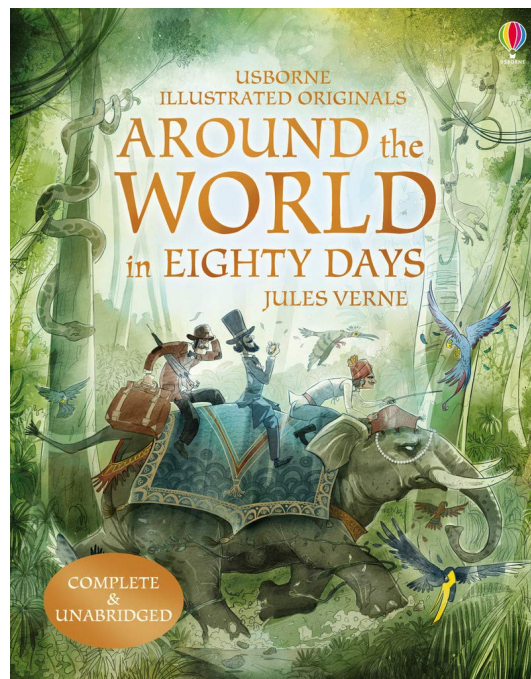
As one might expect from their original packaging, Reeves’s and Gard’s texts are heavily cut. The two opening chapters of *Twenty Thousand Leagues* are conflated into a single short one, “Professor Aronnax Is Invited to Join a Monster-Hunt,” with an opening mixing both:

In the year 1867 I had been on an expedition to collect plants and animals in the bad lands of Nebraska in North America. I was a professor in the Paris Museum of Natural History. While I was in New York, on my way home to France, a mysterious accident happened to the Cunard liner *Scotia*...

Gard opts for a similar, if slightly less hurried, paraphrasing style in *Journey*’s opening chapter, “My Uncle Finds a Manuscript”:

On Sunday, 24th May, 1863, my uncle Professor Lidenbrock came suddenly home, much too early for dinner. I was in the dining-room of our house, No. 19 Königstrasse, in the old quarter of Hamburg, when I caught a glimpse of him dashing along the street...

The bright side is that, since Reeves doesn't repeat Louis Mercier's famous translational howler about "the disagreeable territory of Nebraska" and Grad doesn't call Otto Lidenbrock "Professor Hardwig" (although Graüben does unaccountably become "Gretel"), there's a chance they were indeed working from the original French rather than from tired Victorian versions. The less bright side, of course, is that Reeve's and Gard's texts—short juvenile retellings, intended to be frankly advertised as such—are now being passed off by a reputable international publisher as complete translations. From an ethical standpoint, this dodgy dealing must be somewhere up there with Dover Publications' 2009 rerelease of the Moon novels: despite advance warnings and alternative suggestions from Verne scholars, Dover opted to resurrect Edward Roth's bizarre nineteenth-century rewrites unchanged from a midcentury edition.[2]



For the other member of the Big Three, a more complicated surprise comes from Usborne Publishing, a British house specializing in children's books. The Usborne Illustrated Originals is a series of lavish gift-book editions for young readers, comprised mostly of English-language classics long out of copyright, such as *Little Women* and *Treasure Island*. For a series like this, one might expect *Around the World in Eighty Days* to be represented by George Makepeace Towle's commonly reprinted 1873 translation.[3] Instead, the series

2 Joyce, Steve, and Brian Taves. "A View on *The Palik Series* from the North American Jules Verne Society (plus one)." North American Jules Verne Society, 2015. <<http://www.najvs.org/palikseries-interview.shtml>>

3 Initially *The Tour of the World in 80 Days* (Boston: Osgood, 1873); then imported for British publication, with scattered changes (and a memorable new title) by Nancy Meugens, as *Around the World in Eighty Days* (London: Sampson Low, 1873). See Arthur B. Evans, "A Bibliography of Jules Verne's English Translations," *Science Fiction Studies*, vol. 32, no. 1 (#95), March 2005, 105–141.

unexpectedly offers the book in a new translation credited to one of Usborne’s house editors, Jerome Martin, and advertised on its cover as “Complete and Unabridged.”

First, the positives. Usborne’s elaborate presentation for the book might have impressed even Pierre-Jules Hetzel, with his lavish illustrator commissions and cutting-edge reproduction techniques. There are full-color illustrations by Daniele Dickmann on almost every page, as well as several wordless double-page spreads allowing a single dramatic image to take full attention. Martin’s prose style is engaging, combining modern standards of clarity and flow with evocative old-fashioned word choices. In addition, Martin unobtrusively glosses many of Verne’s less familiar terms in-text, and appends a standalone glossary to explain more complex topics (e.g. the *Alabama* Claim). The beguiling visual treatment, the useful glosses, and the user-friendly translation style would seem to make this edition an intriguing, unpatronizing Verne introduction for young children.

Unfortunately, the devil is in the details. From the first paragraph onward, the text attributed to Martin is troublingly reminiscent of the old Towle version:

Verne: En l’année 1872, la maison portant le numéro 7 de Saville-row, Burlington Gardens — maison dans laquelle Sheridan mourut en 1814 —, était habitée par Phileas Fogg, esq., l’un des membres les plus singuliers et les plus remarqués du Reform-Club de Londres, bien qu’il semblât prendre à tâche de ne rien faire qui pût attirer l’attention.

A l’un des plus grands orateurs qui honorent l’Angleterre, succédait donc ce Phileas Fogg, personnage énigmatique, dont on ne savait rien, sinon que c’était un fort galant homme et l’un des plus beaux gentlemen de la haute société anglaise.

On disait qu’il ressemblait à Byron — par la tête, car il était irréprochable quant aux pieds —, mais un Byron à moustaches et à favoris, un Byron impassible, qui aurait vécu mille ans sans vieillir.

Martin: In the year 1872, the house at No. 7, Savile Row, Burlington Gardens—the house in which the playwright Sheridan died in 1814—was inhabited by Mr. Phileas Fogg. He was one of the most singular and notable members of London’s Reform Club: notable despite his apparent determination to do nothing at all that might attract attention. Nothing was known about this enigmatic person, except that he was a handsome and polished man of the world. It was said that he resembled the dashing poet Byron—but a bearded, impassive, irreproachable Byron who could have lived a thousand years without growing old.

Towle: Mr. Phileas Fogg lived, in 1872, at No. 7, Saville Row, Burlington Gardens, the house in which Sheridan died in 1814. He was one of the most noticeable members of the Reform Club, though he seemed always to avoid attracting attention; an enigmatical personage, about whom little was known, except that he was a polished man of the world. People said that he resembled Byron—at least that his head was Byronic; but he was a bearded, tranquil Byron, who might live on a thousand years without growing old.

Martin’s version is closer to the French on many points, from sentence structures to specific word choices, and does a better job at evoking Verne’s lively pace.[4] But the resemblances are unavoidable. Both translations omit Verne’s description of Sheridan as “one of the greatest orators to honor England” (*un des plus grands orateurs qui honorent l’Angleterre*) and Fogg’s place in “high English society” (*haute société anglaise*). Both mangle

4 Admittedly, though, the self-glossing phrase “the playwright Sheridan” seems slightly out of step with Verne’s original, which is more interested in Sheridan’s noisy political career than his writings.

Verne's comment about Fogg resembling Byron but being "irreproachable regarding the feet" (*irréprochable quant aux pieds*, i.e. not having clubfoot), with Towle reducing it to the cryptic "his head was Byronic" and Martin opting for the single word "irreproachable," seemingly implying a moral rather than a physical comment. Both compress three paragraphs of the French text into a single long one. And both make the same out-and-out error in calling Fogg "bearded": Verne's *favoris* refers to sideburns (or, if 1870s British phraseology is desired, "whiskers"), not to anything around the chin.

Similar parallels occur throughout. Both translations silently omit Passepartout's pun (Ch. 34) and Verne's narratorial footnote elaborating on military salaries (Ch. 9). The two texts even cut similar corners with some exoticisms, with Verne's "bhang fumes" (*vapeurs du hang*), for example, being simplified to "fumes of hemp" in Towle and "hemp fumes" in Martin (Ch. 12–14). The overall effect is of a translation based on a fresh reading of the French text, yet recycling a perplexing number of failings from its most common existing translation. Though no explanation is given in the volume, it seems possible that Martin initially intended a light revision of Towle—but then doubled down for a major stylistic overhaul, with much reference to the French original, when Towle's tendency for turgid prose became clear.

How can we best assess this hybrid? In completeness and accuracy, it makes for a less reliable English translation of *Around the World* than any since the mid-1960s.[5] On the other hand, in a series where one might expect a straightforward reprint of Towle, it's nice to see a different text that's about as accurate and considerably more readable. But a note explaining the Towle connection would have been good form, and the cover's claim that the work is "Complete and Unabridged" is surely stretching a point.

One final reason this Usborne edition must rate as a mixed bag: it received perhaps the most blink-and-you-miss-it release of any Verne translation in recent memory. Its release date is given as October 2017; the present reviewer first came across it in a bookstore the following year. By the time this review's first draft was ready a few months later, the book was already out of print, less than two years after publication. Statistically, this is unremarkable; some 90% of new books are as short-lived.[6] But it is perplexing to see an intriguing, visually exciting Verne volume, for all its textual idiosyncrasies, disappear so soon, especially when flatly fraudulent versions like Vintage's remain available year after year.[7]

5 The 1960s saw the release of K. E. Lichtenecker's poor translation (London: Hamlyn, 1965), but also of Jacqueline and Robert Baldick's highly faithful rendering (London: Dent, 1968). Since then, there have also been rigorous translations, across a wide spectrum of translational tones and styles, by William Butcher (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1995), Michael Glencross (London: Penguin, 2004), and Frederick Paul Walter (in *Amazing Journeys: Five Visionary Classics*, Albany: SUNY Press, 2010; as a standalone volume, same publisher, 2014). See Evans, op. cit., and Kieran O'Driscoll, *Retranslation Through the Centuries: Jules Verne in English*, Oxford: Peter Lang, 2011.

6 Giblin, Rebecca. "Everything he does, he does it for us. Why Bryan Adams is on to something important about copyright." *The Conversation*. September 25, 2018.
<<http://theconversation.com/everything-he-does-he-does-it-for-us-why-bryan-adams-is-on-to-something-important-about-copyright-103674>>

7 Indeed, the Usborne edition's disappearance initially led this reviewer to consider this review obsolete—hence the gap between first draft and publication. On the whole, though, it seems more useful to describe the book and its attendant problems than to ignore it outright.

Happily, as many *Verniana* readers will know, a wide array of high-quality recent translations are also available, for well-known and obscure titles alike.[8] Let's hope that, whatever the publication practices, the Big Three continue to lure new readers toward more Verne—and that even the questionable editions will entice readers into finding and enjoying the real thing.

Alex Kirstukas (alex.kirstukas@gmail.com) is a trustee of the North American Jules Verne Society and the editor of its magazine *Extraordinary Voyages*. His Verne translations include *Robur the Conqueror* (Wesleyan University Press, 2017) and “About the *Géant*” and “Twenty-Four Minutes in a Balloon” for *Worlds Known and Unknown* (BearManor, 2018).

8 The most recent translation guide is in Jules Verne, *Robur the Conqueror*, trans. Alex Kirstukas, ed. Arthur B. Evans (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan UP, 2017): 249–68. Further information is given in Evans's “Jules Verne in English: A Bibliography of Modern Editions and Scholarly Studies,” *Verniana* 1 (2008–2009): 9–22, and in his “Editorial—The Verne Translation Renaissance Continues,” *Verniana* 5 (2012–2013): i–iv.