

Journey to the Centre of the Text. On translating Verne

William Butcher

Some sort of connection between Jules Verne's poor reputation in the English-speaking countries and the generally inadequate translations to date would seem indisputable.¹ The aim of the present piece is to provide an account of some of the pitfalls involved in translating *Voyage au centre de la Terre*.

A first illusion is that there is anything simple about Verne. A prominent paperback imprint said recently: "We'd like a critical edition, with a couple of pages of endnotes". A tall order: Verne constantly makes implicit and explicit reference to real-world events, and 40 pages of critical introduction and notes to *Journey to the Centre of the Earth* (OUP, 1992) hardly scratch the surface of what could have been done. All the *Voyages extraordinaires* are veritable minefields of connotations and denotations, ambiguities and metaphors, poetic effects and scientific arguments. If traditionally translation has been either literary or technical, in Verne's case it really has to be both at the same time.

Journey to the Centre of the Earth (*JCE*) seems in fact to have been the only book of Verne's published in Britain before the United States.² But with the honourable exception of Baldick's Penguin version (1965), most "translations" of *JCE* bear unmistakable signs of haste, disrespect, and plain ignorance. The anonymous Griffith & Farran edition of 1872 (starring 'Hardwigg', 'Harry', and 'Gretchen') has remained the most reprinted one.³ (It also provided the (very loose) basis for the otherwise not unpleasant Henry Levin film version featuring James Mason.)

Although Arthur C. Clarke and Isaac Asimov provided Introductions to further anonymous editions in 1959 and 1966 (both New York), the general record for *JCE* is undistinguished. Nor has the book's compactness protected it from the criminal chapter-chopping so often perpetrated on Verne, for there are versions without number of it "retold by", "rewritten by", or "adapted by". This volume has thus sadly contributed to Verne's reputation in America and Britain as a second-rate writer for children despite its being one of his most appreciated adult literary works in France and the rest of the world.

One general problem in literary translation is to know what to do about errors in the original. Thus Verne describes Iceland as 90 miles away from Greenland, and its area as 14,000 square miles and makes the polyglot Lidenbrock seem slightly

incompetent in Italian. Baldick tinkers with some of Verne's mistakes, but for some reason maintains these three. What is worse, he introduces a few more of his own: he misses out whole sentences; he multiplies 200,000° by ten; and he converts 'firing at the walls with his walking-stick' to 'dragging his stick along the wall' (*tirant au mur avec sa canne*), 'iron crampons' to 'grappling irons' (*crampons de fer*), 'this microcosm' to 'these little people' (*ce microcosme*), 'furled sails' to 'bare poles' (*à sec de toile*), 'countenance' to 'figure' (*figure*), 'New Zealand' to 'Dutch' (*zélandais*), and 'Icelandic explorer' to 'Dane' (*explorateur islandais*). But one can perhaps pardon these slips in a generally fluent translation.⁴

Von Hardwig's creator has infinitely more to answer for. Not that he does not sometimes display a poetic vocabulary and a fine Victorian turn of phrase. But errors also abound. Thus we read 'manometer' to translate *chronomètre*, 'delebat' for *delibat*, an invented footnote reading '*(?) Nasal.' (*sic*), 'sight' for 'sigh' (*soupir*), and the slightly worrying closing words the 'five quarters of the globe' (*cinq parties du monde*). Some howlers, then, but not quite up to those in Verne reported by Miller (1976): 'the Passage of the North Sea' (*le Passage du nord-ouest*), 'jumping over the island' (*faire sauter l'île*), and 'each square 3/16 of an inch' (*chaque centimètre carré*). And certainly not a patch on those I detected in the proofs of Verne's *Backwards to Britain*: 'prunes' for 'plums' (*prunes*), 'mass' (*le sermon*) in a Presbyterian kirk, 'Scotsmen, and the English in general' (*les Ecossais, et les Anglais en général*), 'that brave, proud nation that now moans about English domination' ('still suffers under' - *gémît encore*), 'Galilee' for 'Galileo' (*Galilée*), and 'St Helen's' for 'St Helena' (*Sainte-Hélène*) (undoubtedly making Napoleon turn in his Lancastrian grave)!

More curious is the nineteenth-century translator's general tendency to insert at least one invented sentence at the end of each paragraph. Thus extraneous growths appear like 'This day, as on other Sundays, we observed as a day of rest and pious meditation.' or 'The whole state in which we existed was a mystery and it was impossible to know whether or not I was in earnest.' The opening paragraphs of the book are in fact an authentically Hardwiggian tumour from beginning to end.⁵ With time, our man gets bolder. Chapter XLI, describing 'Harry's' bird-nesting in the crags of an old castle, is wholly invented.

Was the budding author perhaps paid by the word? Probably not: his scalpel is just as devastating as his transplants. He unfeelingly cuts the four-page "decoding" scene where Axel, without wishing to, demonstrates his love for his cousin — Freud would have been fascinated, but generations of English readers have never suspected the depths of the young man's passion. Also excised are Verne's (ironic) allusions to the theory of evolution. Was the progenitor of such subterranean monsters a suppressed clergy(wo)man? This might explain such gems as 'his back raised like a cat in a passion' (for 'buttressed on its enormous legs' - *arc-bouté sur ses énormes pattes*), or the wonderful Freudian idea of a mastodon using 'his horrid trunk' to

'crush the rocks to powder' (poor Verne could do no better than 'uses his tusks to break up the rocks' - *broie les roches avec ses défenses*). In sum, a massacre.

But how *should* one translate *JCE*? Faithfully, I believe if only in reaction to the liberties previously taken. Verne's mock-learned footnotes should be retained, but chapter titles should not be inserted, as commercial publishers have tended to do. The distinction between the voices of the characters should be conserved: especially between the precise, academic-sounding Lidenbrock and his sometimes provocatively populist nephew, but also between Axel-the-wiser-narrator and Axel-the-youthful-character. The book's rhythm should be carefully maintained, at both sentence and paragraph level, for Verne has a distinctive structure: slow build-ups leading to explosive crescendos.

On the other hand, it would seem legitimate to reduce repetitious tics like the exclamation marks, the semi-colons in ternary sentences, and the superfluity of *he said*'s and *he replied*'s. Also, Verne (or perhaps his publisher Hetzel) is sometimes cavalier with spelling. For this reason, in the OUP version, *Sneffels* has been amended to 'Snæfells', *Graüben* to 'Gräuben', *Snorri Sturluson* to 'Snorre Turluson', and on occasion *sud-ouest* to 'southeast' (as otherwise Lidenbrock cannot calculate his position). Again, the apparent non-existence of some of Verne's geographical entities and inconsistencies in some of the dates and locations have been indicated in the endnotes.

Another challenge in translating Verne are the plays on words and other sly tricks. Metaphors often run through the simplest vocabulary.⁶ Phrases like *le mal de l'espace* can be simply translated by 'space-sickness', *existence 'terrestrielle'* by "'Earthman" existence'. *Extumescence*, with its connotations of "ex-tumescence", gives the safer but sufficiently suggestive 'bulge'.⁷ *Gouverneur, l'Averne, caverneux* can retain the authorial self-publicity of containing the letters *v, e, r,* and *n* as 'Governor', 'the Avernus', and 'cavernous'; but it is difficult to attain perfection with anagrams like *à l'ENVERs* ('backwards' or reversed).⁸ *Un savant égoïste* probably has to be translated as *both* 'a scholarly egoist' and 'a selfish scholar'; Lidenbrock's *Fessel* is a play on "fesses" ('backside'): the pun doesn't work in English, but two others, more daring, can be improvised ('Snyfil', 'Feless'). One of my favourite examples of underlying meaning is the OUP copy-editor's tactful enquiry whether the electrified waves like 'fire-breathing breasts' (*mamelons ignivomes*) on the Lidenbrock Sea might possibly be 'fire-breathing *beasts*'!

The problem of ambiguity re-emerges in Verne's delight in reactivating meanings, either by subtly undermining them or else by re-activating their literal sense. Depending on the context, *antédiluvien* should be translated as 'antediluvian', 'pre-historic', 'from before the flood', or 'from before the Flood'. *Sauvé* gives 'saved' in both adventure-story and religious senses.

Again, the present tense is used throughout the original logbook section (chaps. 32-5). As Weinrich (1973) points out, this question of interaction between tense and

time, literal form and allusive referentiality, represents one of the most challenging ones in modern literature. Verne was here again a consistent innovator. His *Le Chancellor* (1874) constitutes apparently the first novel ever written in French in continuous prose and in the present tense; and his *L'Île à hélice* (1895), the first in the present and the *third* person.⁹ *JCE* is, then, the precursor of a major stylistic experiment with consequences for the whole narrative process in the twentieth century. For some unfathomable, sub-marine reason, previous English translations have employed the past tenses. In the OUP edition, it was decided to use the present tense throughout this section.¹⁰ As a sign of the hard-to-break habit of narrating everything in the past tense, a few preterites did creep in but were spotted by the ever-vigilant editor.

In sum, puns, literal expressions, and underground devices run through the whole of *Journey to the Centre of the Earth*. All three involve a degree of 'deme-taphorisation' or 'remetaphorisation'. Half tongue-in-cheek, Verne warns us in *Les Enfants du capitaine Grant* that metaphors are one of the most dangerous things in existence, that they should only be employed in the direst emergency — and then persistently employs them himself, making them however so empty or so full as to transcend their original state. The complexities of Jules Verne should never be underestimated. Translators, above all, are the Vernian rockface-workers par excellence; they are perfectly placed to understand the density of the text and the many layers of meaning of the *Voyages extraordinaires*. They must be a bit of a wheeler-dealer, a shifter of both scenery and preconceptions. (Perhaps our clergyperson was on the right track after all?) They should admit more often how arduous they find their task. It is probable that the difficulties of transmuting Verne into English, although different, are as great as those of 'transducing' Poe or Proust into other languages. The battle for recognition will only be won when a late Verne novel wins, say, the Scott-Moncrieff prize for literary translation. Perhaps in time for the centenary of his death, in 2005?

NOTES

1. Such an argument formed a small part of the conclusion of a doctoral thesis presented to the University of London in 1983: it caused the majority of the examiners apoplexy - and the thesis not to be accepted.
2. Although often the British and American editions came out in the same year, making it difficult to know which was the earlier one. *Backwards to Britain* (Edinburgh, 1992) has not yet been published in the US.
3. A rather random list of a few of its successors would include separate anonymous New York and Boston editions in 1874 (respectively Scribner Armstrong & Co. and H. L. Shepard & Co.), another anonymous one (Routledge, London and New York, 1876), an F. A. Malleon one (London, Ward, Lock, & Tyler, 1876), another anonymous one (Blackie, London, 1925), an I. O. Evans one (London 1961) and another anonymous Blackie one (London c.d. 1960).

4. Although, when some of these slips are reproduced wholesale in another edition in the 1960s, then, as one has the habit of saying to one's less scrupulous students, it is a most remarkable coincidence!
5. "Hardwigg"
Looking back to all that has occurred to me since that eventful day, I am scarcely able to believe in the reality of my adventures. They were truly so wonderful that even now I am bewildered when I think of them.
My uncle was a German, having married my mother's sister, an Englishwoman. Being very much attached to his fatherless nephew, he invited me to study under him in his home in the fatherland. This home was in a large town, and my uncle a professor of philosophy, chemistry, geology, mineralogy, and many other ologies.
- Verne*
- Le 24 mai 1863, un dimanche, mon oncle, le professeur Lidenbrock, revint précipitamment vers sa petite maison située au numéro 19 de Königstrasse, l'une des plus anciennes rues du vieux quartier de Hambourg.
La bonne Marthe dut se croire fort en retard, car le dîner commençait à peine à chanter sur le fourneau de la cuisine.
- OUP Translation*
- On 24 May 1863, a Sunday, my uncle, Professor Lidenbrock, came rushing back towards his little house, at No. 19 Königstrasse, one of the oldest streets in the historic part of Hamburg.
Martha the maid must have thought she was running very late, for dinner had hardly begun to simmer on the kitchen range.
6. The part-time editor of the *Bulletin de la Société Jules Verne* pedantically replaced Verne's 'personne de Dickens' (*person in Dickens*) in my translation into French by 'personnage de Dickens' ('character in Dickens'), ignoring my repeated protests on the subject: he did not understand that for Verne art can have a higher reality than reality itself, that some people in literature are more alive than some characters in real life.
7. The classic work on the problems of English-French translation, Darbelnet and Vinay (1954), presents such "displacements" as an integral part of any translation.
8. 'VENilatoR' (rather than 'fan') for *ventilateur* could have survived if it had been thought of in time!
9. Butcher (1983).
10. Darbelnet and Vinay's theory, which can be very approximately translated as "you win some, you lose some", is well illustrated here, for the 'je vais prendre' ambiguity in French ('I am about to take' vs 'I move to take') is neatly compensated for by the existence of two present forms in English ('I take' vs 'I am taking').

About the author

Dr Butcher has worked as a part-time literary and technical translator since 1978, mostly from English to French, for bodies including IBM and the French Government. Amongst his books are *Verne's Journey to the Centre of the Self* (Macmillan, London, 1990), *Mississippi Madness: Canoeing the Mississippi-Missouri* (Oxford Illustrated Press, 1990) and translations and critical editions of *Humburg: The American Way of Life* (Acadian, Edinburgh, 1990), *Journey to the Centre of the Earth* (OUP, "World's Classics", 1992), and *Around the World in Eighty Days* (OUP, "World's Classics", 1995).

REFERENCES

- A Journey to the Centre of the Earth*, no translator acknowledged. London: Griffith & Farran, 1872
- Journey to the Centre of the Earth*, trans. Robert Baldick. London: Penguin (1965, reprinted by Dent in 1970)
- Backwards to Britain*, trans. Janice Valls-Russell. 1992. Edinburgh: Chambers 250 pp.
- Butcher, William. 1983. "Le Verbe et la chair, ou l'emploi du temps", *Revue des lettres modernes*. Jules Verne 4: Texte, image, spectacle textes réunis par François Raymond. 125-48
- Miller, Walter James, ed. and trans. 1976. *The Annotated Jules Verne: Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea*. New York: Thomas Y Crowell. 362 pp.
- Vinay, J. P., and Darbelnet, J. 1954. *Stylistique comparée du français et de l'anglais. Méthode de traduction*. Montréal: Beauchemin. 331pp.
- Weinrich, Harald. 1973. *Le Temps*, trans. from German by Michèle Lacoste. 280 pp.

RESUMÉ

Dans *Voyage au centre du texte: Comment traduire Verne?*, William Butcher souligne la complexité du cas Verne : les effets proprement littéraires du texte, mais également les multiples allusions contemporaines.

Presque toutes les traductions anglaises de *Voyage au centre de la Terre* sont atroces. Malgré quelques erreurs amusantes, celle de Baldick publiée par Penguin fait honorable amende. Mais la traduction la plus souvent réimprimée, celle de 1872, est un véritable massacre: d'entiers chapitres sont coupés, comme l'est toute référence à l'idée de l'évolution, bien que notre anonyme auteur-par-défaut fait récompense en inventant des chapitres de toutes parts.

Qu'aurait-il fallu faire? D'abord respecter la structure du texte, ses tonalités diverses, ses progressions de rythme, ses voix et ses modes; et surtout comprendre les anagrammes, les ambiguïtés, les inventions, et les jeux de mots, souvent "remétaphorisés" ou même "démétaphorisés". Surtout, conserver le temps présent du verbe, avant-signe d'une innovation parmi les plus radicales de l'histoire du roman.

Bref, le traducteur vernien doit se faire écrivain. Son travail ardu, à la fois littéraire et technique, mérite une meilleure reconnaissance.