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Re-viewing Verne's Invisible Man

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BOOKS IN REVIEW

Re-viewing Verne's Invisible Man. Jules Verne. *The Secret of Wilhelm Storitz*. Ed. and trans. Peter Schulman. Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 2011. BISON FRONTIERS OF IMAGINATION SERIES. xvi + 220 pp. \$29.95 hc; \$15.95 pbk.

This book is the first English translation of Verne's original manuscript of a novel that was published posthumously as *Le Secret de Wilhelm Storitz*, one of the legendary author's last *Extraordinary Voyages*. The first French edition was released in 1910, five years after Verne's death, and its English translation did not appear until 1963. *Storitz* was among several posthumous works—titled and untitled, in various states of completion—that were brought to press from 1905 to 1919 by Verne's son Michel, who was executor of his estate. By the early 1980s, however, Verne scholars began to question the authenticity of these works. Jules Verne's original manuscripts had finally become available to the general public, and a close examination of them revealed that Michel had heavily edited, revised, and even rewritten most of his father's posthumous novels before their publication.

During the past few decades, the reaction among Verne aficionados to this important revelation has been mixed. The majority of them have followed the lead of the Société Jules Verne in France and its president Olivier Dumas, who categorically denounced these "tainted" Verne novels and proposed replacing them with published editions of Verne *père's* first-draft manuscripts. These new French editions began to appear on the market in the mid-1980s. Most contain polemical prefaces by Dumas strongly condemning Michel's "disfigured" versions and insisting that these new manuscript-based editions henceforth be considered the *best and only authentic* versions of these Verne stories. Certain other Verne scholars, less obsessively purist, have disagreed. They have contended that Michel's changes often improved the readability of his father's rough drafts; that, for some of these novels, Verne *père* himself would have made many of these changes during the proofing stage had he lived long enough to do so; and that such father-son collaborations were not uncommon during Verne's final years and even earlier. They have argued that the actions of the Société Jules Verne—in its rigid, unilateral rejection of all these original editions, regardless of their individual quality—were harming Verne's literary legacy rather than helping it (see my review-essay "Protesting Too Much: The Jules vs. Michel Verne Controversy" in *SFS* 36.2 [July 2009]: 321-26).

But before proceeding to an analysis of this particular version of *Storitz*, it might be useful to clarify the present status of these controversial posthumous novels by Verne. There are a total of eight of them:

1905, *Le Phare du bout du monde*—original published version

The Lighthouse at the End of the World (1923, trans. Cranstoun Metcalfe)

Le Phare du bout du monde (1999)—manuscript version

The Lighthouse at the End of the World (2001, trans. William Butcher)

1906, *Le Volcan d'or*—original published version

- The Golden Volcano* (1962, trans. I.O. Evans)
Le Volcan d'or (1989)—manuscript version
The Golden Volcano (2008, trans. Edward Baxter)
- 1907, *L'Agence Thompson and Co.*—original published version
The Thompson Travel Agency (1965, 2 vols., *Package Holiday and End of the Journey*, trans. I.O. Evans)
 (to date, no manuscript version or translation)
- 1908, *La Chasse au météore*—original published version
The Chase of the Golden Meteor (1909, trans. Frederick Lawton)
The Hunt for the Meteor (1965, trans. I.O. Evans)
La Chasse au météore (1986)—manuscript version
The Meteor Hunt (2006, Frederick Paul Walter and Walter James Miller)
- 1908, *Le Pilote du Danube*—original published version
The Danube Pilot (1967, trans. I.O. Evans)
Le Beau Danube jaune (1988, *The Beautiful Yellow Danube*)—manuscript version
 (to date, no English translation of the manuscript version)
- 1909, *Les Naufragés du "Jonathan"*—original published version
The Survivors of the "Jonathan" (1962, 2 vols., *The Masterless Man and The Unwilling Dictator*, trans. I.O. Evans)
En Magellanie (1987, In *Magellania*)—manuscript version
Magellania (2002, trans. Benjamin Fry)
- 1910, *Le Secret de Wilhelm Storitz*—original published version
The Secret of Wilhelm Storitz (1963, trans. I.O. Evans)
Le Secret de Wilhelm Storitz (1985)—manuscript version
The Secret of Wilhelm Storitz (2011, trans. Peter Schulman)
- 1919, *L'Etonnante aventure de la mission Barsac*—original published version
The Barsac Mission (1960, 2 vols., *Into the Niger Bend and The City in the Sahara*, trans. I.O. Evans)
Voyage d'études (1993, Study Trip)—manuscript version (consisting of only 4-5 chapters and some notes)
 (to date, no English translation of the manuscript version)

With the exception of *L'Agence Thompson and Co.*—whose manuscript (by Jules? by Michel?) does not vary greatly from the 1907 published text—all the posthumous novels have now been replaced by new editions based exclusively on Verne père's original French manuscripts. And since 2001, Anglophone Vernians have begun publishing English-language translations of the latter.

One obvious question arises when judging the manuscript versions against the original published versions of these novels: which ones are better? Despite the biased judgment of the French Société Jules Verne (for whom *none* of the original versions can be better because they were all contaminated by Michel's hand), there are no simple answers to this question. For example, *The Survivors of the "Jonathan"* is clearly a much better novel in every way than the sketchy and uninspired *Magellania*. In my opinion, the same holds true for the Michel-edited versions of *The Lighthouse at the End of the World* and *The Golden Volcano*. But in *The Meteor Hunt*, *The Barsac Mission*, and *The Thompson Travel Agency*, Michel went too far: not limiting himself to being the editor of these texts, he became their primary author. The case of *The*

Secret of Wilhelm Storitz is similar but slightly different. Although Michel left the bulk of his father's (nearly finalized) manuscript intact, the changes he did make served to weaken instead of strengthen the novel's overall quality.

Exactly how are the two versions different? Here is a brief summary of *The Secret of Wilhelm Storitz* as Verne originally wrote it (spoiler alert!). The French engineer Henry Vidal—who acts as first-person narrator in the story—travels from Paris to Hungary to attend the wedding of his brother Marc, a painter, to a lovely young Hungarian woman named Myra Roderich. Weeks earlier, Myra and her family spurned a marriage proposal from the evil Wilhelm Storitz, whose late father was a famous but widely feared German scientist who had experimented with “Roentgen rays.” The young Storitz, infuriated with his rejection as a suitor, vows to take his revenge on the entire Roderich family. Determined to find a way to prevent Myra from marrying anyone but him, Wilhelm shuts himself up in his father's laboratory and, using the latter's secret notes, invents an invisibility potion. He drinks it and, now unseen, he terrorizes Myra's family and succeeds in kidnapping Myra herself and forcing her to drink the potion too. Before he can escape the country with his prize, Storitz is tracked down by the police and killed. As he lies dying, his body slowly reappears (strongly reminiscent of Wells's 1897 novel *The Invisible Man*, on which Verne's *Storitz* was patterned). But his secret dies with him; Myra must remain forever invisible. In a bittersweet ending, she and her fiancé Marc marry, remain in Hungary, and find happiness together. A nostalgic Henry Vidal concludes the novel with the following thoughts:

And I sometimes ask myself whether I have to permanently give up any hope of ever seeing that young woman in her physical form again, whether some sort of physiological phenomenon might possibly occur, or even whether the simple passage of time might bring back her lost visibility; whether, one day, Myra might finally reappear before our eyes, radiating with her youth, grace, and beauty?

The future might well decide in the end, but for the sake of Heaven, I pray that the secret of invisibility may never resurface again, and that it remain forever buried deep down in Otto and Wilhelm Storitz's grave! (Schulman trans.)

Michel's revisions to this original version of *Storitz* were few but significant. Inexplicably, he moved the action from the late-nineteenth century to the eighteenth century, which necessitated a host of changes to the geographical and historical references throughout the narrative. And he completely rewrote the novel's dénouement to give it a more conventional “happy” ending. In his version, a married Myra suddenly regains her visibility at the very moment when she gives birth to her first child (a boy). All three Vidals then move back to Paris, where Marc goes on to have a “glorious career” as a “famous artist,” and Henry spends a great deal of time with his young nephew whom he “cherishes.” The final paragraph of this doctored version reads as follows:

Heaven grant that their happiness endure for many a long year! Heaven grant that nobody else ever suffers the evils that they have suffered! Heaven

grant, and this shall be my last word, that nobody ever rediscovers the execrable secret of Wilhelm Storitz! (I.O. Evans trans.)

Obviously, such a clichéd and predictable conclusion changes the tone of Verne's cautionary tale from tragic to trite. As Peter Schulman, translator and editor of this edition of *Storitz*, accurately summarizes: Michel made a calculated decision to try to increase the novel's commercial sales by sacrificing his father's "poignant and highly original ending" (xiii) for one that he assumed the reading public would prefer.

Schulman is a professor of French at Old Dominion University, and his translation of *The Secret of Wilhelm Storitz* comes across as both supple and smooth. It achieves quite nicely that delicate balancing act of remaining faithful to Verne's text without being stilted. The book's critical apparatus (introduction, afterword, and notes) is a model of informed scholarly exegesis, which should be no surprise to those in the field since Professor Schulman is known as one of the world's top Verne experts. One small complaint: the lack of a secondary bibliography in the appendix—it would have been handy for the reader to find gathered together there all the critical references related to this little-known sf novel by Verne. Bottom line: this book is highly recommended for all libraries, for all Verne enthusiasts, and for all readers with an interest in early sf portrayals of invisibility.—**Arthur B. Evans, DePauw University**