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PARIS WAS TOMORROW

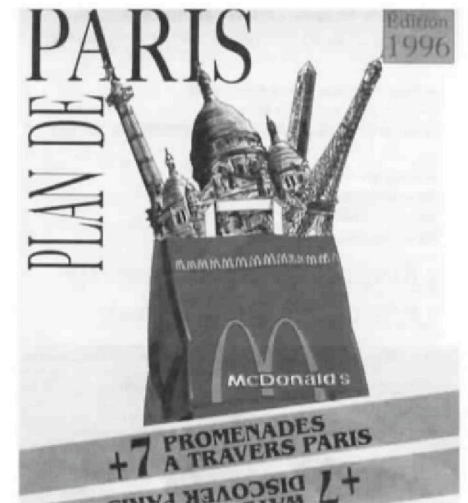
Paris in the Twentieth Century: The Lost Novel by Jules Verne. Translated by Richard Howard, introduction by Eugen Weber. New York: Random House, Inc., 1996. 222 pp.; 6 black-and-white illus. by Anders Wenngren; \$21.

Reviewed by Nora Laos

Written in 1863 but unpublished in his lifetime, Jules Verne's account of Parisian life in 1963 is a wry social dystopia in which technology, science, and wealth are glorified to the detriment of the humanities. He envisions a world where machines need beauty rest, people need safety valves, and capitalism is alive and well. Bookstores are stocked with titles such as *Meditations on Oxygen* and *Decarbonated Odes* while Victor Hugo is an unknown name, and the works of Sallust and Livy crumble on the shelves of the Hachette editing house (where, ironically, the recently discovered manuscript was first published). Verne would be relieved to know that the likes of Balzac are now available on CD-ROM and that even the printed page is extant. On issues of technology, he was possessed of an admirably farsighted vision. Among other inventions, Verne heralded electric and photographic telegraphy (the telephone and fax machine), gas-powered vehicles, and a suspended railway system with driverless trains powered by compressed air.

Despite his uncanny talent for imagining technological devices, Verne's novel was rejected by his publisher, Pierre-Jules Hetzel, who was unconvinced that anyone would believe the prophecies. The manuscript reappeared in 1989, discovered by Verne's great-grandson in a family home. The pages were quickly authenticated, matched with the refused manuscript, and, finally, published in Paris in 1994 under the title, *Paris au XXe Siècle*. Eugen Weber informs us in his introduction that 200,000 copies of the French text were sold in 1994, and 30 translations are currently underway or already published. Richard Howard's excellent English version, reviewed here, is among them.

The story revolves around the orphaned student, Michel Dufrenoy, a lost humanist in a Paris seduced by machines and money. Michel is present at the Prize Day (graduation) of the Academic Credit Union where he is to receive an award. The A.C.U., the university in Verne's Paris of 1963, is a complex of tall buildings around the Champ de Mars, an open quadrangle, entered through a monumental arch. Imagine the skyscrapers of La Défense flanking the Eiffel Tower (1887-89), built as a monumental arch-tower entrance to the Universal Exhibition of 1889, and voilà



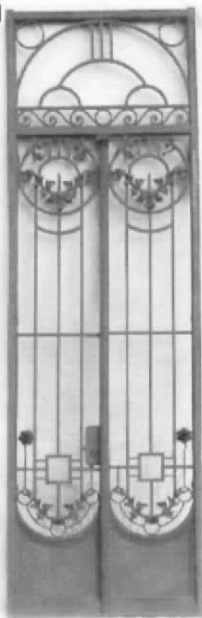
— Verne's techno-campus. The Champ de Mars was a convenient location for this new university since its purpose as a military training ground had been superseded due to the dissolution of the military — Verne's most significant lapse. He predicted that soldiers, by the mid-twentieth century, would be replaced by cumbersome robotic warriors, which had nothing to do with courage: "... indeed, machines have killed bravery, and soldiers have become mechanics." Verne also incorrectly proclaimed the obsolescence of journalism (no more politicians), doctors (no more disease), and lawyers (who compromise cases rather than plead them). Industry, commerce, and finance are all that's left and thus, Paris is portrayed as the *chef-lieu* of a capitalistic technocracy.

Michel receives a first prize for Latin verse, and is duly presented with jeers from the crowd and one copy of the latest *Factory Manual*. So begins this poor wanna-be poet's foray into the real world. He moves in with his spiteful uncle, Stanislas Boutardin (could this name be composed of *boudin* — sausage — and *batard* — bastard?). His wife, Athénaïs, and their son, Athanase, chief associate of the Casmodage and Co. Banking House, complete the triad of "an eminently practical family."

Stanislas is ashamed of Michel's dreams of becoming a poet and, to discourage this ridiculous desire, offers Michel a job at his son's bank. Michel is assigned to Calculating Machine Number Four, but, alas, he is incapable of mastering it. He is reassigned to dictate to Quinsonnas, the bookkeeper in charge of inscribing the daily activities of the Bank.

In Quinsonnas, secretly a musician, Michel finds a friend and an ally who introduces him to Jacques Aubanet, secretly a soldier. The "three drones" spend their free time together, dreaming of the future. Michel unexpectedly rediscovers another uncle, Huguenin, who invites Michel to dinner with his former literature professor, Richelot, and Richelot's beautiful daughter, Mademoiselle Lucy. Michel and Lucy fall in love (of course). Infected by the lightheadedness of love, Michel unfortunately distracts Quinsonnas one afternoon by

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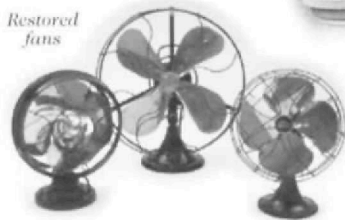


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requesting his opinions on women. Disaster strikes, the two are dismissed from the bank.

Michel tries the real world once more, this time as a dramatist for the *Grand Entrepôt Dramatique*, the government-run theatrical warehouse, "lawfully recognized as an establishment of public utility," which furnishes Paris's 50 theaters with plays. "The *Entrepôt* is organized and administered just like the Casmodage Bank and has five divisions: comedy, drama, vaudeville, opera, and pantomime. Verne must have been hard-pressed to admit the possibility that the theater might have completely died by the 1960s, and thus he creates a centralized organization, administered like a financial institution, where employees receive monthly salaries to produce "collective works, of an average appeal." Verne envisioned the extinction of "Bohemian poets, those erratic geniuses who seemed eternally to protest against the order of things." By extinguishing artists' personalities, the government was able to provide the public "precisely the amount of literature necessary to its needs."

As at the bank, here too Michel is shuffled from division to division as he repeatedly fails his given duties. He finally descends to the Vaudeville Division where he is given the job of curtain raiser at the Palais-Royal theater for performances of *Button Up Your Trousers!* Eventually, he comes to the conclusion that he would rather starve to death and starve he does. His world freezes, and he freezes with it. Like Aldous Huxley's Savage in *Brave New World*, Michel succumbs to Nature's ultimate destiny, one that neither technology nor money can overcome.

Along the journey, Verne presents a rather sordid view of Paris. Although he anticipates its sophisticated and extensive public transportation system and the Eiffel Tower in the form of a 152-meter-high electric lighthouse, he less accurately depicts a vast commercial and industrial seaport along the Seine. The city fabric itself is presented as a dull and repetitive network of streets. Here the author implicitly criticizes the destruction and transformation of much of Paris by Napoleon III and George-Eugène Haussmann, who was then prefect of the Seine (1853-69). Verne's Paris of 1963 (much like Paris of 1863) is a labyrinth of public buildings, open squares, and wide boulevards; the poor have been pushed to the outskirts into tiny apartments in tall buildings, *sans* elevators.

This pessimistic outlook was not far from the truth 35 years ago and Verne's predictions are, in some cases, continuing trends. The number of cultural and civic buildings in the city center has increased, due to François Mitterand's completion of most of the *Grands Projets*, while the poor remain housed in slums and subsi-

dized residential towers in distant suburbs.

Julian Barnes criticized Verne's social prophecy as "hopelessly, ridiculously wrong" (*New York Times Book Review*, January 26, 1997). Indeed, it is difficult to imagine the concurrent death of the arts, politics, medicine, war and law in such a culturally enriched nation as France. Barnes also discredits the social status of Verne's characters, as well as the relationships among them, as myopic visions based on nineteenth-century social values: "His characters behave in 1960 as if members of a very conventional mid-nineteenth-century novel."

However, rebellious children, authoritarian elders, and starry-eyed lovers are universal portraits. Furthermore, Michel, as a blond, long-haired, idealistic student would have made a prototypical 1960s hippie who could have fit perfectly into the mass demonstrations that erupted in Paris in 1968. Since hindsight is always accompanied by an auto-focus lens, it is perhaps more just to consider Verne's prescience. He was alarmingly accurate in his predictions of the roles of commerce, money, and technology. Business administration and finance were popular career choices already in the 1960s, while computer science has since exploded. In fact, as Verne forecasted, technology, both virtual and explicit, has come to dominate our lives in general.

Verne's attitude toward Americans is also rather astute. His French woman of the 1960s had become Americanized (contaminated). "She speaks seriously about serious matters, she takes life seriously, she rides on the rigid saddle of modern manners, dresses poorly, tastelessly, and wears corsets of galvanized tin, which can resist the most powerful pressures. . . . they have switched gender and no longer deserve the artist's gaze or the lover's attention!" So, the French woman has become a polite and hopelessly clad feminist. Few French women, in fact, fit this stereotypical description. On the other hand, Verne's criticism of the fast pace of American life has certainly infiltrated the Parisians' quotidian routine: ". . . from their hurried gait, their peremptory manner, their American 'dash,' it was apparent that the demon of wealth impelled [men of the 1960s] onward without mercy or relief." Verne would hardly be surprised to find that the statutory two-hour lunch has slowly been cast aside in favor of a quick sandwich in front of the computer screen. Nor would he flinch in a "gas-powered cab," racing along the ten-lane *Péripherique* that now rings Paris.

Verne also accurately predicted the corruption of "the fine French tongue" by an infestation of English vocabulary. What would he have said if offered *un Big Mac et un Coca* at one of the nearly 50 McDonald's restaurants now gracing Paris's city streets? "*Quelle horreur!*" ■

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