



VICTOR HUGO.

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A Sketch of his Life and Work

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BY

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INTRODUCTORY.

"I HAVE seen Heidelberg. I seemed to see the works of Victor Hugo, when posterity has passed over them, when the words have grown rusty, when the superb frontage of the literary temple has clad itself with the solemnity of old ruins, when time, like hoary ivy, has spread itself over the beauty of the verse. Old, and with cracks in them, the hemistichs will keep the thunder-smitten majesty of these Sarmatian kings, struck by bullets full in the breast. And the vast palace of the master's poetry will remain, great and charming, like this giant of grace, mingling Albert Dürer and Michael Angelo, jumbling together Rabelais and Palladia, having Gargantua in its tun, and the *Invicta Venus* in its chapel."

It is in such terms that the *Journal de Goncourt* expresses the estimate formed by the two brothers as to Hugo's works and the future that awaits them. The simile is, in its details, a little forced, and, after its authors' manner, somewhat fantastically picturesque; it has the merit, however, of comparing great things with great, and of reposing on a possible foundation. If such comparisons be useful or admissible at all, it is open to us to see much in common between the literary temple left by Hugo and mediæval castles, and though Hugo's works are not yet centuries old,

still less in ruins, they are treated already, by the sprightly journalist, in England and in France alike, as altogether out of date ; they have, like the Sarmatian kings, had hurled at them, of late years especially, many a critical bullet, of greatly varying effectiveness and weight. Whether MM. de Goncourt's forecast of their fate be correct or not, time will decide ; in the meantime, France, most of all modern countries given to rapid and clamorous upheaval in things artistic, has seen, in the space that has elapsed since Hugo's death, at least one new literary movement form and establish itself. In art, as in politics, revolutionary leaders are not, as a rule, over-respectful towards the old order that gave them birth ; Hugo himself gave but grudging admiration to Racine ; the young French poets of to-day accord, in many instances, scant homage to Hugo, The poets of an elder generation are, on the contrary, with few exceptions, enthusiastic Hugolaters, and the recent publication of their idol's posthumous *Dieu* awoke in Parisian journals a chorus of acclamation which drowned the sneers of the younger reviewers. The two conflicting forces confront each other, and the moment is perhaps not inopportune for an attempt to resume the character and work of one who, whatever be the place ultimately adjudged him by posterity, has been, for his own country pre-eminently, and to some extent abroad, one of the chief intellectual influences of the nineteenth century.

APPENDIX.

LIST OF HUGO'S WORKS.

It may perhaps be of interest for students of Hugo to offer them, in chronological order, a classified list of his various volumes, with a few words descriptive of the general contents and character of each.

I. POETRY.

Odes et Ballades. 1822-1828.

These, Hugo's earliest collected poetical pieces, originally appeared in four volumes, published with an interval of two years between each. They are interesting as showing the progressive development of Hugo's talent and the gradual emancipation of his style. They are interesting also, in the light of Hugo's subsequent opinions and career, in that their tone throughout is ardently Catholic and Royalist. A large proportion of these verses deal with contemporary public events. Considered as the production of a young man, singularly few of them treat of love. From the literary point of view, some of the *Ballades* rank among the poet's daintiest work.

Les Orientales. 1829.

As its title shows, the inspiration for this volume was drawn from the East. Composed during the war of Greek Independence, a certain number of the poems deal directly with that. But, even at the epoch of its publication, it was chiefly memorable as the revelation of Hugo's rarely equalled gifts as an imaginative painter in words. At the present day, when its temporary interest of subject is long over, it remains in the front rank among his poetical masterpieces.

Les Feuilles d'Automne. 1831.

The poems which make up this volume are, for the most part, personal meditations of a sentimental kind. The poet's youth was beginning to go from him, and a pensive melancholy, full of regret and vague desire, is the general characteristic of the book; hence its title, *Autumn Leaves*. It contains some of Hugo's most exquisite intimate writing in verse.

Les Chants du Crépuscule. 1835.

These *Songs of the Twilight* were written when the poet's mind, as the minds of many around him, was, so to say, in a twilight state in regard to religious and political beliefs. He has not yet wholly abandoned Catholicism, as one very beautiful poem, inspired by seeing a woman praying in a church, proves. He is in many ways still conservative, though he now sings of Napoleon instead of the Bourbons. But one feels that he may end; as he actually did, by becoming a

pure Deist and a thorough-going democrat. In this volume are to be found also some of Hugo's most popular love verses, such as the "O! ma charmante," which, in various settings, is well known to English pianists.

Les Voix Intérieures. 1837.

The *Inner Voices* heard here tell us little we had not heard already in the two preceding volumes. But, though there is a considerable amount of repetition in it, one cannot but be grateful for a book which gave us such poems as that addressed *To birds who have flown away*, and the *Ode to the Arc de Triomphe*.

Les Rayons et les Ombres. 1841.

To these *Sunbeams and Shadows*, the same remark applies as to the *Inner Voices*, and with similar reservations. A lovely piece of autobiography, shaped from memories of childhood, and various lyrics, perfect in form, redeem frequent redundancies and moralising prolixity.

Les Châtiments. 1853.

Since the poet had last published a volume of verses, the iron had entered into his soul, and into his lyre also. He was now an exile, and this book was intended to be *The Punishment of Louis Napoleon*, the author of his exile, who had, as he conceived it, betrayed his country. From the literary point of view, there is little but praise to give to Hugo's form of vengeance. From other points of view, objection has

been frequently taken to the indiscriminate rancour with which the poet pursues and scourges all who were in any way concerned in the *coup d'état*. The book bristles with ferocious personal allusions that cut like a whip across the face.

Les Contemplations. 1856.

On page 55 reference has been made to the origin of the chief glory of this book,—the poet's memorial verses on his daughter. In other respects, it was the outcome of his thought, during his earlier years of exile, on all matters not directly political. Readers who do not primarily care for the artistic side of verse generally rank these volumes very high among Hugo's poetical work. They contain much of his deepest and tenderest philosophy. But, especially when writing of speculative subjects, he was growing less and less able to realize when he had said enough.

La Légende des Siècles. 1859, 1877, 1883.

Three series of the *Legend of the Centuries* were published. Of these the earliest was the finest, but even the least good, the latest, could only have been written by a poet of superb powers. Hugo's idea in this work was to give in verse a history of the world, showing man's progress from ages of cruelty and egotism towards ages, still in the future, of mutual love and forbearance. He has given us a series of episodes, reaching from the earliest annals of the race down to our own day. The centre of the entire work is to be found in his pictures of mediæval society and

manners. They are sombre, too sombre for truth, but Hugo is here at his highest as a poet. The general consensus of literary opinion regards *La Légende des Siècles* as his masterpiece.

Les Chansons des Rues et des Bois. 1865.

These *Songs of the Streets and Woods* were the fruit of Hugo's lighter hours during exile. They sing of loves that never become too passionate, of moods that never become too intense. A blending of the natural felicity of language in the songs of the Elizabethan dramatists combined with a touch of the conscious licence of wit in Charles II.'s days might have given English literature something similar to *Les Chansons des Rues et des Bois*.

L'Année Terrible. 1872.

This is a chronicle of the events of the *Terrible Year*, 1870-71. Hugo, in Paris at the time, gives now a description of some street scene, now protests, in the name of civilisation, against the martyrdom of Paris, its authors and abettors.

L'Art d'être Grandpère. 1877.

Vide p. 80 for a brief account of *How to be a Grandfather*.

Le Pape. 1878.

Hugo's evolution from Catholicism to vehement anti-clericalism had for many years been definitely

achieved. In this book the Pope dreams that he is going about the world, relieving man's estate. At the end he wakes and exclaims, "What a horrible dream I have had!"

La Pitié Suprême. 1879.

Inspired by excellent humanitarian sentiments; this is, in other respects, one of Hugo's poorest books.

Religions et Religion. L'Anc. 1880.

These two volumes, published in the same year, continue the poet's somewhat verbose series of metrical tracts on philosophy and faith. In the former book, the various religions of the world are contrasted, to their disadvantage, with the one true religion, naturally implanted in man's mind; in the latter, *The Ass*, an intelligent quadruped proves to the philosopher Kant, that he is himself, essentially, what the said quadruped is called. None of the four last-mentioned poems can be considered fully worthy of Hugo's powers, but they each contain many striking lines.

Les Quatre Vents de L'Esprit. 1881.

The *Four Winds of the Spirit* speak, each in a separate division of this book, which is divided into four parts. One of these is dedicated to satire, another to drama, a third to lyric, and the last to epic poetry. The second and the third divisions, at least, hold matter that is worthy of the poet at his best.

La Fin de Satan. 1886.

Published posthumously, this volume is a continuation of the series of metaphysical disquisitions. *Satan's End*, according to Hugo, is his repentance and pardon.

Toute la Lyre. 1888.

All the Lyre, like the *Four Winds of the Spirit*, strikes notes of a very varied compass. Some of the lyrics here make the book of distinct value, even though it came after so much of the same kind from the same author.

Dieu. 1891.

This book recently caused a revival of Hugo enthusiasm in Parisian journals. It is a mystical account of a soul permitted, while yet alive on earth, to wander forth to seek for Truth and God. Its ascension from the lower to the higher spheres of the Infinite and Unknown is described with a great deal of rather confusing symbolism, and with great wealth of versification and imagery. On the whole this volume is decidedly the most powerful of Hugo's lengthier attempts to express in verse the philosophical faith of his mature and declining years.

II. DRAMA.

Cromwell. 1827.

This play was too long for the stage. Its interest, even at the time of its publication, centred largely in its Preface, which was regarded as the manifesto of the new school. Hugo seems to have looked upon Cromwell as essentially devoured by ambition. The play ends with his words, "When then shall I be king?" In one scene Milton reproaches him with entertaining designs upon the Crown, and exhorts him to remain true to the Republic.

Hernani. 1830.

The first acted of Hugo's dramas remains, in many ways, the most characteristic specimen of his dramatic genius. The scene is laid in Spain and in Germany, just before and just after the election of the Emperor Charles V. (1519).

Marion de Lorme. 1831.

In some respects the most pathetic and interesting of Hugo's plays, *Marion de Lorme*, in sentiment and subject, is probably the least adapted to please average British taste. The period of its action is during the reign of Louis XIII. (1613).

Le Roi s'Amuse. 1832.

Dealing with the court and loves of Francis I. (1521), this is, in its *dénoûment*, the most harrowing of Hugo's

verse tragedies. It has not been found well suited for the stage.

Lucrèce Borgia. Marie Tudor. 1833.

The titles of these plays, written in prose, and produced in the same year, are sufficiently explanatory of where their story lies. *Lucrezia Borgia* is known all over the world through the music of Donizetti. *Mary Tudor*, which treats, in a purely imaginative manner, a stormy period of English history, gives an original view of the character of the English Catholic Queen.

Angelo, Tyran de Padoue. 1835.

A sombre story, like the preceding in prose, of love and passion in mediæval Venice. The three dramas last mentioned are still occasionally played at the theatres on the outer Boulevards of Paris.

La Esmeralda. 1836.

This is the story of the heroine of *Notre Dame de Paris*, arranged as a libretto for the music of the author's friend, Mlle. Louise Bertin. In the dramatic version of the story, things end happily. Esmeralda, instead of being burned, as in the original, is rescued by her lover, Captain Phœbus.

Ruy Blas. 1838.

The story passes at the Spanish Court, in 1699. It tells of the unhappy passion of the lackey, Ruy Blas, for the Queen of Spain. This drama is still frequently played at the Théâtre Français.

Les Burgraves. 1843.

The scene of *The Burgraves* is laid in a fortress of mediæval Germany. It is generally considered, from the literary point of view, as the greatest of Hugo's dramas. But its length and other reasons render it unsuited for the stage. It has not been revived there since it failed fifty years ago.

Torquemada. 1832.

Hardly inferior to *The Burgraves* as a piece of writing, this also is "a closet play." Hugo's version of the character of the Grand Inquisitor presents him as passionately convinced that purification by fire on earth saves souls from hell-fire hereafter. From wholly benevolent motives he burns two young lovers who had saved his life, because in doing so they had made use of a crucifix to raise the stone beneath which he had been buried alive. This, Torquemada regards as an act of sacrilege and a mortal sin, to be punished, unless shriven by fire on earth, by eternity of fire after death.

Theâtre en Liberté. 1886.

These are various plays of pure fantasy whose action passes in a half fairy-like forest. Though a posthumous work it should not be neglected. There is much in the volume that ought to make it acceptable in England, more, perhaps, than in France. It is an effort in the order of fancy of which *As you Like It* is the consummate type.

Amy Robsart. Les Jumeaux. 1889.

Amy Robsart was produced, in 1838, as the work of Paul Foucher, Hugo's brother-in-law. But it is now known that its real author was Hugo himself. The story is founded on Scott's *Kenilworth*. *The Twins* is merely a fragment of an unfinished drama, on the subject of "the Man with the Iron Mask."

III. NOVELS.

Han d'Islande. 1823.

The story of the monster *Hans of Iceland* is interwoven with a love story, which is of interest as having been written when the novelist was himself in love with the girl who afterwards became his wife.

Bug-Jargal. 1826.

The subject of this story is drawn from the history of the negro rebellion in Hayti, early in the present century, against European rule. Both this book and the preceding one prove Hugo's innate taste for the portrayal of physical deformities.

Le Dernier Jour d'un Condamné. 1829.

This is an attempt to depict, in a grimly realistic manner, the possible thoughts and sensations experienced by the victim during *The Last Day of One Condemned to Die*. It is a piece of special pleading against the penalty of death.

Notre Dame de Paris. 1831.

Hugo's first great romance is also, from the artistic point of view, his most perfect. Mr. Swinburne says that it "combines a Grecian perfection of form with a Gothic intensity of pathos." One may, however, object that even in *Notre Dame de Paris* there is a redundancy of mere description and a prolixity of detail. As a resuscitation of mediæval Paris it equals the best of Scott's historical novels, and its human interest is far more impassioned than any that Scott was capable of giving us. The book contains one of Hugo's most fascinating creations in feminine character, *La Esmeralda*.

Claude Gueux. 1834.

Another brief against capital punishment. *Claude the Beggar*, imprisoned for a trivial offence, has, in a moment of passionate irritation, killed the director of the prison, who treated him with brutality. Claude has, in reality, a noble nature, but circumstances have driven him to commit a crime which the law punishes by death. It is characteristic of Hugo that though this story was, to some extent, founded on fact, the Claude Gueux of real life was an ignoble ruffian.

Les Misérables. 1862.

Every one acquainted with Hugo at all knows the story of the man of sorrows, Jean Valjean, whose noble life was wrecked because he once stole a morsel of bread. In the original French edition the book was over-long; in English translations it is over-shortened.

Les Travailleurs de la Mer. 1866.

Conceived among the Guernsey rocks, this book, describing the existence of *The Toilers of the Sea*, is full of the might and the mystery of ocean. It is a little overloaded with technical detail.

L'Homme qui Rit. 1869.

As a picture of English life during the reign of Queen Anne, *The Laughing Man* is distinctly comic. As the story of the love of two high-souled creatures, each physically stricken,—for Gwynplaine has been mutilated and Dea is blind,—it is the tenderest and most sublime of Hugo's romances.

Quatrevingt-Treize. 1872.

Though published after his return from exile, *Ninety-Three*, in form and sentiment, finds its natural place among the novels inspired by Guernsey and the sea. Its interest centres itself in the scene where the royalist marquis, in the old tower, surrounded by republican soldiers, sacrifices his liberty in order to save the children who are threatened with destruction by fire.

IV. MISCELLANEOUS.**Littérature et Philosophie Mêlées. 1834.**

This volume of *Mingled Literature and Philosophy* is a collection of the various critical and general articles written by Hugo during his earlier years. They do not always appear, in their collected form, exactly as

they were first printed. Their original conservatism, literary and political alike, is at times considerably softened. The most interesting feature of the book is a study of Mirabeau, full of striking thought and striking phrase.

Le Rhin. 1842.

This graphic record of a tour on the banks of the Rhine is not merely descriptive. It contains also reflections on society, suggested by what Hugo saw in his travels, and some remarkable words on international politics. But the jewel of the book is a delightful fairy story, *The Legend of Handsome Pécopin and of the Beautiful Bauldour*.

Napoléon le Petit. 1852.

An indictment of Napoleon the Little, the degenerate descendant of Napoleon the Great. The prose commentary of *Les Châtiments*.

William Shakespeare. 1864.

A volume of fine rhapsodical writing on things in general.

Paris. 1867.

Hugo's contribution to a work descriptive of Paris, its history, arts and place in the world, prepared for the Exhibition of 1867.

Actes et Paroles. 1841-1876.

These volumes of *Words and Deeds* contain Hugo's speeches and a record of his political career. They are

divided into three parts: *Before Exile, During Exile,* and *After Exile*. His speeches, as here printed, are remarkable oratorical efforts. But it should be remembered that it was Hugo's practice to reserve to himself the right of correcting for the press his original utterances in the Chamber.

Mes Fils. 1875.

A tribute to the memory of his sons. It was originally printed as an introduction to Charles Hugo's book, *Les Hommes de l'Exil*.

Histoire d'un Crime. 1877.

A detailed account of the exciting days of the *coup d'état*. Many of the statements in these volumes have been challenged by Hugo's opponents; he has, at any rate, constructed out of the events they record a narrative more thrilling than any novel.

Choses Vues. 1887.

A record of various *Things Seen* during the author's lifetime. The description of persons and places is often brilliantly life-like.

En Voyage (Alpes et Pyrénées). 1890.

As its title shows, the narrative of a voyage among the Alps and Pyrenees. It was on his way home from the Pyrenees that the poet received the news of the death of his daughter.

Voyage en France et Belgique. 1892.

The nature and contents of this book are again explained by its title. The volume, as the preceding one, affords ample evidence of Hugo's keen powers of observation, and of his unsurpassed gift for description of what he saw.

There is no complete and authoritative Life of Hugo. *Victor Hugo raconté par un témoin de sa vie*, published in 1863, was written by Madame Hugo, under the superintendence of the poet himself; but it only brings the narrative down to 1862. There is besides a certain amount of poetry mingled with its truth. M. Barbou's *Victor Hugo et son temps* is the nearest existing approach to an official biography. Books such as those of M. Alfred Asseline, of M. Gustave Rivet, of M. Richard Lesclide, are mostly anecdotal, giving us various interesting glimpses of the poet's personal habits and domestic life. All students of Hugo's life must acknowledge their obligations to M. Edmond Biré's volumes, which constitute a detailed biography of the poet from his birth to his exile. But M. Biré's learned biography is to some extent vitiated by the ill-will he bears towards the poet for having changed his political faith and forsaken the religion of his childhood. His book is, so to say, informed throughout by the obvious intention to bring out as prominently as possible the spots upon the sun. French magazine and journalistic

criticism of Hugo is, naturally, very voluminous and of varying merit.

In England, the Hugo literature is not as yet large. Shortly after the poet's death, critical biographies of him appeared from the pens of Mr. Barnett Smith and of Mr. James Cappon. The latter book especially, *Victor Hugo, a Record and a Study*, contains much interesting matter. Mr. Frank Marzials has since produced a very readable life of the poet. Many Englishmen know Hugo chiefly through the panegyrics of Mr. Swinburne. "One must admire everything, like a brute," wrote Hugo of Shakespeare; and Mr. Swinburne might almost seem to have adopted this for his motto in regard to Hugo himself. But Mr. Swinburne's criticism is always stimulating. His always wonderful prose raises interest in all that he writes of, especially perhaps when, as in writing of Hugo, he offers us the spectacle, not diurnal in literary annals, of one great poet swinging incense before another, born in the same century with himself.

THE END.