

**VICTOR HUGO: A  
SKETCH OF HIS LIFE  
AND WORK**

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Victor Hugo: A Sketch of His Life and Work by J. Pringle Nichol

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BY  
PRINGLE NICHOL



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or Spanish ; their station a lackey's or a king's ; the children of Hugo's imagination have marked family resemblance, on all are stamped the features of their father. No matter in what environment or in what connection they speak, the tones of their voices are singularly alike ; they are, notably in all crises of passion or action, the tones in which their creator, when speaking in his own person, expresses himself. Ruy Blas, in the play of that name, denouncing the unpatriotic selfishness of the Spanish grandees ; M. de Saint-Vallier, in *Le Roi s'amuse*, apostrophising Francis I. ; the Burggrave Job, in *Les Burgraves*, ordaining that honour shall be paid to the beggar who appears at the feast ; all these give vent to their anger or their compassion in accents quite similar to the accents of Victor Hugo when he launches invectives against oppression or pleads for universal charity.

Hernani, set under the bann of the Empire by Don Carlos, replies :—

"As you will,  
All the world else rests mine to brave you still.  
Where your power looms not, there for me is room.  
—And when the world is mine?  
—Then mine the tomb."

Hugo, defying Louis Napoleon, declares for final word :—

" If a mere thousand cleave to right, well, I am of them ! Then  
If but a hundred stay, this Sylla yet I bid beware ;  
If ten alone are faithful, I shall be among the ten ;  
If one man only stands untamed, I shall be that one there ! "

The two voices here are obviously identical ; read in



connection with any of his dramatic works, play or romance, any volume of the poet's verse will afford numerous parallels of the same order.

In his earlier days, Hugo's heroes, as *Hernani*, *Didier*, *Ruy Blas*, were made directly after his own image; they are ardent, tender, indomitably obstinate, somewhat magniloquently magnanimous. Later, they ceased to be himself, to become instead one of his favourite virtues, flung intact into human form, as *Jean Valjean* is charity, *Gilliat* self-sacrifice, draped in ideal colours and elevated above humanity. In the same way, Hugo has given us several charming feminine types, *Esmeralda*, *Dea*, *Déruchette*, *Doña Sol*, but these are rather the concrete expression of what their creator finds delightful in womankind than actual studies of woman in "her infinite variety," as she ranges with Shakespeare from *Cleopatra* to *Imogen*, with Racine from *Phèdre* to *Bérénice*, with Balzac from *Valerie Marneffe* to *Marguerite Claës*.

Nothing is less absolute than a critical generalisation. There are, scattered throughout Hugo's verse, many dramatic lyrics where the poet has, with much felicity, sung, so to say, in fancy dress; similarly, in bypaths of his dramas and romances, we come upon characters wholly outside of his personal orbit. *Don César de Bazan*, *Gringoire*, *Gavroche*, for instance, sceptical and irresponsible scantily-clad Bohemians, have, in their grace as in their frailties, little in common with their staid and stately creator; various historical persons also, as *Louis XI.* and *Louis XIII.*, are drawn as history supposes them to have been.

But these and others are secondary personages, lightly, though happily, sketched in; it remains true that Hugo's principal characters are moulded upon his own personality, or spun from his own soul. And this is true of his villains as of his heroes and heroines, of his marplots as of his martyrs of love or duty.

Fashioned out of air and unknown to humanity are such frantic figures—like Webster's Cornelia "in several forms of distraction"—as Lucrece Borgia, Claude Frollo, the duchess Josiane; in the author's maturity, however, his ordinary type of darkness is the hero of his maturity reversed. A peculiarly detested vice or form of ignorance takes human shape, is set in relief against a specially admired virtue, and we have Javert, the incorruptible pedant of the hard letter of the law; Torquemada, the inflexible bigot of one fanatical idea. These, and their like, are personified agencies of evil or error rather than reasonable human evil agents; they are, as are the enlightened and virtuous people opposed to them, the creation of a temperament whose moral vision saw all things in large masses, to the neglect of modifying shades. Hugo, a master and finally a slave of literary antitheses, beheld the world and men's souls under the immense and eternal antithesis of light and darkness, good and evil, rigorously defined, irreparably separated. On the one hand, Bishop Myriel and Dea, saints without spot; on the other, the *Sieur Clubin* and the couple *Thénardier*, mere moral monsters.

The monsters imagined by his genius were not always only in the moral order. Henri Heine, who

persistently disparaged Hugo, tells a story, according to which, in a conversation he had with Renduel, Hugo's publisher, shortly after the appearance of *Notre Dame de Paris*, M. Renduel informed him that, having one day surprised Hugo in déshabille, he had ascertained the fact that Quasimodo's creator was himself hunchbacked, or, more accurately, hunch-hipped. It is thus that the poet of the *Buch der Lieder* accounts for the fondness for describing deformities on the part of his brother bard.

The story, eminently characteristic of the malice-loving Heine, is probably of his invention; in any case, it is not necessary to penetrate the secrets of Hugo's dressing-room in order to discover the reason of his literary partiality for a class of beings indissolubly associated with his name, the class of physical monstrosities, to some extent redeemed, as Quasimodo and Gwynplaine, by beauty of soul, or accentuated, as Triboulet, by a soul that corresponds with the body.

It was not, as is sometimes alleged, to an ingrained strain of morbidity in their creator's nature that these twisted-backed and gaping-mouthed people owed their birth. Of the two rocks in wait for a writer, Hugo not infrequently strikes on the commonplace; he steers clear, in a measure rare in his century, of the morbid. He appreciated all the ordinary pleasures, he shared all the ordinary ambitions, he felt all the ordinary sorrows, of his kind; he preferred always the scent of a cornfield, even of a cabbage garden, to the odour of haschisch; in all essentials, no saner, healthier genius ever lived. His morbidity, such as it is, is of the sur-