

# **A STUDY OF VICTOR HUGO**

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A Study of Victor Hugo by Algernon Charles Swinburne

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**ALGERNON CHARLES SWINBURNE**

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## PREFACE.

IF the title chosen for this book should be impeached on the score of inaccuracy and presumption, I must admit that it might not seem easy to confute the charge. A full and thorough study of the great master whose name is the crowning glory of the nineteenth century could scarcely be comprised in ten times the space here allotted to a rapid and imperfect survey of so sublime and inexhaustible a subject. My principal aim has been to bring into more prominent relief such aspects of the poet and the man as hitherto, for various worse or better reasons, have found least recognition or least acknowledgment in England. It is on this account, no less than on account of my own conscious inability to say anything unfamiliar to anybody in praise of his great romances, that only a few words have been given to works of world-wide fame, and of a popularity qualified only by the exceptional protests of malignant or obtuse eccentricity. *Notre Dame de Paris* and *Les Misérables* need little more introduction to foreign readers than to French : and as a dramatist Victor Hugo is probably far



better known abroad than as a lyric or elegiac or epic or satiric poet. I have no further excuse and no better explanation to offer for such various and serious shortcomings as will probably be detected in a work which at least lays no claim to completeness and makes no pretence to adequacy; but which, if it should ever be found serviceable as an introduction to the study of the greatest writer whom the world has seen since Shakespeare, will have fulfilled the utmost hope and realized the utmost ambition of its author.

### *THE WORK OF VICTOR HUGO.*

IN the spring of 1616 the greatest Englishman of all time passed away with no public homage or notice, and the first tributes paid to his memory were prefixed to the miserably garbled and inaccurate edition of his works which was issued seven years later by a brace of players under the patronage of a brace of peers. In the spring of 1885 the greatest Frenchman of all time has passed away amid such universal anguish and passion of regret as never before accompanied the death of the greatest among poets. The contrast is of course not wholly due to the incalculable progress of humanity during the two hundred and sixty-nine years which divide the date of our mourning from the date of Shakespeare's death : nor even to the vast superiority of Frenchmen to Englishmen in the quality of generous, just, and reasonable gratitude for the very highest of all benefits that man can confer on mankind. For the greatest poet of this century has been more than such a force of indirect and gradual beneficence as every great writer must needs be. His spiritual service has been in its inmost essence, in its highest development, the service of a healer and a comforter, the work of a redeemer and a prophet. Above all other apostles who have brought us each the glad tidings of his peculiar gospel, the free gifts of his special in-

spiration, has this one deserved to be called by the most beautiful and tender of all human titles—the son of consolation. His burning wrath and scorn unquenchable were fed with light and heat from the inexhaustible dayspring of his love—a fountain of everlasting and unconsuming fire. We know of no such great poet so good, of no such good man so great in genius: not though Milton and Shelley, our greatest lyric singer and our single epic poet, remain with us for signs and examples of devotion as heroic and self-sacrifice as pure. And therefore it is but simply reasonable that not those alone should mourn for him who have been reared and nurtured on the fruits of his creative spirit: that those also whom he wrought and fought for, but who know him only as their champion and their friend—they that cannot even read him, but remember how he laboured in their cause, that their children might fare otherwise than they—should bear no unequal part in the burden of this infinite and worldwide sorrow.

For us, who from childhood upwards have fostered and fortified whatever of good was born in us—all capacity of spiritual work, all seed of human sympathy, all powers of hope and faith, all passions and aspirations found loyal to the service of duty and of love—with the bread of his deathless word and the wine of his immortal song, the one thing possible to do in this first hour of bitterness and stupefaction at the sense of a loss not possible yet to realize is not to declaim his praise or parade our lamentation in modulated effects or efforts of panegyric or of dirge: it is to reckon up once more the standing account of our all but incalculable debt. A brief and simple summary of his published works may probably lay before the student some points