My Beloved Toto

Letters from Juliette Drouet to Victor Hugo
1833–1882

Translated and with an introduction, additional notes, and glossary by

VICTORIA TIETZE LARSON

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SUNY series, Women Writers in Translation

Marilyn Gaddis Rose, editor

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French Edition
edited and annotated by

Evelyn Blewer

with a preface by

Jean Gaudon

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I live to love you, and I love you to live.
—Juliette Drouet to Victor Hugo, 4 September 1853

You are my life, and you will be my eternity.
—Victor Hugo to Juliette Drouet, 21 May 1875

Roofline of Juliette Drouet's house Hauteville Féerie in Guernsey. (Photo taken by the translator with kind permission of Richard and Elizabeth Soar).

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Preface to the French Edition

The trite version of Juliette Drouet's relationship with Victor Hugo endlessly rehashed by pseudohistorical and simplistic biographies is, alas, only too familiar to us. She called him "my Toto." Every day, and often two or three times, she wrote four pages to him in her cook's handwriting to tell him that she loved him. It was, in any case, always the same letter—to read one is to read them all! He liked this because he was incredibly vain. He had cloistered her in a cheap little apartment that she was not allowed to leave without him. She was jealous. He deceived her shamefully.

I trust Mme Drouet's shade will forgive this allusion to sanctimonious biographers who take the liberty of treating her with condescension and compassion. She had slight regard for "this dubious light of pity" (13 July 1851) and would have detested being pitied by muckrakers of any kind, charitable or not. Not being one to mince her words, she would certainly have had some sharp things to say about them.

When Victor Hugo became Julienne Gauvain's lover during the rehearsals of *Lucrèce Borgia*, she was not yet twenty-seven years old. In the theater she went by the name of "Mlle Juliette." In the world outside she was "Juliette Drouet," having taken the surname of a military uncle who had adopted her at a very young age. She spelled her name "Droüet" with a dieresis (testimony perhaps to a regional pronunciation), which Hugo usually observed but which has been dropped by later generations. She would be called "*Madame*" Drouet when she was an old woman, very beautiful and dignified, and continued to be so called for a long time after her death. Jean Hugo, a hundred years later, still occasionally referred to her in this way.

As a little Breton girl of very humble origins, who was born in Fougères on 10 April 1806 and orphaned before she was two years old, Juliette received a good education. However, her writing is not that of a *femme du monde* like the incredibly insipid writing of Léonie Biard. It is rather the writing of an actress—extroverted, with a grain of exhibitionism typical of those who need admiration to survive but who are misinterpreted as megalomaniacs. It seems improbable that she had already adopted this mode of writing at the convent of the Sisters of Perpetual Adoration where she received her education. Like the big, rather coarse handwriting, it must be one of the signs of her independence, dating from the time when she began to kick over the traces.

It is not known what she did after leaving the convent. However, when she made her debut in the Belgian theater under the direction of Harel, she had a little girl of three years old, "given" to her, as they say, by a fashionable sculptor, Pradier—who didn't give her much else. As far as her acting is concerned, the consensus has generally been that her modest talent would probably have gone unnoticed if she had not been so pretty. In the same view she is portrayed with an abundance of lovers—impecunious young men who cadge off her, and Russian princes who keep her in luxury. She is depicted as living in penniless splendor with a courtesan's wardrobe and pyramidal debt. Similarly, the impression given by the lithograph of Léon Noël, or by Théophile Gautier's portrait of her, is of an unintelligent vamp—more of a nincompoop than Zola's Nana in fact!

Victor Hugo's arrival on the scene would change everything. What began officially on the night of 16 to 17 February 1833, was not—although they could not know it—just a passing romance, but the affair of a whole lifetime, lasting until her death on 11 May 1883. She would very soon say that she was in love for the first time. *He* would say the same, which is more surprising. So did Hugo's letters to his fiancée, Adèle Foucher—Mme Victor Hugo since 1822—count for nothing? Certainly not, but obviously the relationship with Juliette Drouet involved something more, including, not insignificantly, sexual desire on her part as well as his.

There was a great deal of naïveté in the way in which Juliette abandoned herself very quickly to idyllic fantasies and to the spirit of self-purification. She suffered greatly and so did Hugo from the fact that the starry dream they tried to live out was completely at odds with harsh reality. There is a startling contrast between the poems that Hugo dedicates regularly to Juliette from *Les Chants du crépuscule* onward and the letters that she sends to him. On the one hand, we find in Hugo's poetry the bucolic spirit transplanted into the Ile-de-France—shady bowers and amorous euphoria that finds expression in long, disciplined phrases; on the other hand, in Juliette's letters we find overflowing passion voiced in stammering outbursts. There is also in these letters of hers a sense of revolt, weariness, discord, and a desire to flee from a love that offers no freedom. She declares Hugo's jealousy to be more unbearable than debt. The two hurt each other, tear each other apart, and rehearse separations as though planning suicide,

leaving behind them what is necessary to stop the tragedy short at the last moment and transform it into a confirmation of love.

In this redemptive battle of the emotions, writing certainly plays a mediating role. The letter seems often to refine and soften what might sound brutal or overly simplified if said aloud. In the minutes that follow a quarrel between them, Juliette will write a letter to explain and defuse what she has said, without, on the other hand, recanting it. Of course Juliette knows how to say she was wrong, but she also knows how to say, even in the midst of declarations of love, what is very soon true: that Hugo does not have enough time for her. She understands and respects his work, but suffers from the fact that the writer's calling brings with it distractions and worldly obligations. Sometimes her suffering takes on an accusatory form: "What use will have been my trust in your love, my faith in the future, and my courage? You always abandon me at the moment of danger! Oh Victor, Victor, you are truly at fault, and I am truly unhappy!" Juliette's ideal is very simple: love in a thatched cottage with reams of paper, pens, and an inkpot. He would write. She would copy. What use are the Bertin family, Dorval, the royal family, politics? Just let the great man do his job as a writer and give his Juju what her body and soul desire! In fact the trips they made together, despite their discomfort, almost succeeded in doing this.

There was also the complicated matter of the family. Not surprisingly, Juliette was rejected outright, but from the beginning she pretended desperately otherwise, referring to Hugo's children by their nicknames, Didine, Dédé, Toto, and Charlot, and taking an interest in their illnesses and scholarly achievements. She even gave them presents. One wonders whether they ever reached their intended destination. After the death of Léopoldine she is to be found alluding to "your dear children, whom I love as though they were my own flesh and blood." This osmosis, if there can be osmosis without a receptive counterpart, arose perhaps from the desire to get closer to Hugo, perhaps from the security that she received in November 1839 from a strange event that she described quite simply as a "marriage" (termed by some a "mystic" marriage, although this is a concept that hardly suited Juliette's temperament). By the same token Hugo "adopted" Juliette's daughter, the thirteen-year-old Claire, who called him "Monsieur Toto." Perhaps, after all, that was the receptive counterpart.

The letter mediates but also compensates. It expresses regrets and fills voids, while occupying the mind. Juliette hardly ever went out except accompanied by her gallant escort. If he did not come, or if he did not have time, she stayed at home—hence the innumerable "scribblings," which give such an extraordinary background to her biography.

If it is indeed true that Hugo was caught in flagrante delicto with Léonie Biard on the night of 4 to 5 July 1845 (although the date is not absolutely beyond doubt), then we must recoil at the irony of the letter written by Juliette on the morning of 5 July—Juliette is making him some tea! There is the same

feeling of tragic irony about the letters written on the morning of 28 June 1851—essentially letters about strawberries in syrup—when we know that a few hours later Juliette will receive from Léonie the letter informing her that Hugo has been her lover for seven years, proof enclosed.

After exile there would be other crises that would shake the long-standing relationship, and one can understand how Juliette considered the period in the Channel Islands a blessed time. Oh, but even then she was not completely at peace! There were still too many female visitors from England and France, whom she always imagined to be charming, but in general there were fewer obvious threats. Furthermore, in relation to the legitimate family she had acquired a (literally) marginal relationship, and her existence was acknowledged. Being modest and discreet, however, her initial reaction to any gesture of acknowledgment was to turn it down. But the sons got into the habit of going to her house, and Mme Hugo, shortly before her death, took steps toward a rapprochement with her that must have been carefully negotiated.

Conflicts remained, however. While Hugo and Juliette in their old age went gaga together over the two grandchildren, their relationship with the children's mother, Alice, widow of Charles Hugo, was far from perfect. Furthermore, Hugo's love for Blanche Lanvin caused a tremendous crisis in 1873. Once more Mme Drouet carried the day. By now deprived of illusions, she became openly tyrannical. In some ways she was more beautiful than ever.

It is almost a pity that the addressee of Juliette Drouet's letters is called Victor Hugo and that one is led, despite oneself, to be more interested in his biography than in the talent of his correspondent. He himself made no mistake about it, and if he encouraged Juliette to write to him, it was not because he was unable to live without the smell of incense, but quite simply because, as a master craftsman, he knew the value of her prose: it even happened on occasion that the roles were reversed and that he in turn copied extracts from her letters.

These letters, of which there must be at least twenty thousand, are neither more nor less monotonous than those of Mme de Sévigné. Both of them have to resolve the same problem: how to keep on saying "I love you." Both have the same skill in surmounting this obstacle, but Juliette has an additional difficulty: it is easier to ring the changes when the letter writer is at a distance and the letter can become a sort of journal, than when it is merely a connective tissue that helps to give consistency to daily life. It is impossible in this case to resort to novelistic tricks, and that is a serious drawback. It is a pity that this epistolary flow, this Mississippi of ink—of which the small number of letters published gives a very poor account—cannot be reproduced in its entirety. Contrary to the judgments of those with pretensions to taste—who, having no time for Hugo, keep a little of their dissatisfaction for Juliette—these letters are marvelously varied. I mentioned Mme de Sévigné. Juliette refers to de Sévigné on several occa-

sions, not to compare herself to her, but in order to contrast the imperfection of her own letters with the mastery of the certified letter-writer. I think she is wrong. Juliette Drouet had not only a genius for love, but also a real genius for language. Being profoundly and irremediably in love, she ended up, not surprisingly, melding into one the language of religion and the language of love and then taking it to its logical extreme, as have so many "baroque" painters and poets. At the same time, however, she was superbly irreverent and blasphemous. Just as she venerates each line that falls from the hand of her great man as a divine gift, so also she knows how to scoff, as no one else dared to do, at the "poor scribbler" who wastes his time laboring over his speeches. She writes the most demystifying letters imaginable, with the assurance of a woman who loves, who knows herself to be loved, and whose admiration cannot be called into question. She abuses this assurance wonderfully. The letter of 31 December 1840 about the toothbrush is a superb example. Who could resist the language of the Parisian street urchin used by Juliette, the girl from Brittany, when she writes about politicians or the "Cacadémie?" She plays on all the registers, shifts rhythm at will, suffers, groans, weeps, banters, pirouettes, bites, caresses, and breaks the rules with the ease of a professional writer who knows her art. The traditional wisdom has been that she was capable only of litanies of love. She said that much better than her critics when she described herself as "scribbling about love *with my head in my inkpot and my ass in the air*." Like Hugo she had a sense of humor. No doubt that was an important aspect of their deep understanding.

She was justly proud of the poems that told her what she alone could understand, with their dates deliberately incomplete and indecipherable to the common mortal, and with their indications of place that evoked what no biography can recount, representing in fact the very stuff of life. Why should Beatrices and Lauras be insensitive and ungrateful silly geese? Victor Hugo also gave her some even more secret presents, such as the chapter of *Les Misérables* entitled "16 February 1833," or the name "Gauvain" given to the hero of *Quatrevingt-treize*. In this new and vigorous collection of letters (which is so faithful to the originals, without false prudery or concession to propriety, without treacherous cuts and untimely interventions) I was amused to find one of these signals that Hugo made from time to time to the woman who knew how to love and who knew how to tell him so. On 21 December 1840 Juliette wrote: "I'm delighted with your idea, Toto, of putting your deerskin on the bed. I like the idea of preserving the memory of our charming little trip across the Black Forest." The adventures of this deerskin are enchanting. It was bought in Tuttlingen in October 1840 and retroactively warmed Jean Valjean in *Les Misérables* during the cold night at Digne, in October 1815. Mlle Baptistine refers to it in her account: "However, a moment afterward I sent Mme Magloire to put on this man's bed a deerskin from the Black Forest that I have in my

bedroom. The nights are freezing and it keeps you warm. It's a pity that this skin is old. My brother bought it when he was in Germany, at Tottlingen *[sic]*, near the source of the Danube, along with the little ivory-handled knife that I use at table."

Fiction and reality lend each other a helping hand here. I am sure that Juliette, as she copied* this passage, must have smiled happily.

JEAN GAUDON

* "Copire"—Drouet's invented word [T].

Abbreviations

CF	Victor Hugo. *Correspondance familiale et écrits intimes*. Ed. Jean Gaudon, Sheila Gaudon, and Bernard Leuilliot. 2 vols. Vol. 1, 1802–1828; Vol. 2, 1828–1839. Paris: Robert Laffont, 1988–1991.
CL	Juliette Drouet. *"Je ne veux qu'une chose, être aimée": Cinquante lettres de Juliette Drouet à Victor Hugo*. Ed. Simonne Charpentreau and Jacques Charpentreau. Paris: La Maison de Poésie, 1997.
JDD	Gérard Pouchain and Robert Sabourin. *Juliette Drouet ou "la dépaysée."* Paris: Arthème Fayard, 1992.
HS	Henri Guillemin. *Hugo et la sexualité*. Paris: Gallimard, 1954.
L.	Letter [in this collection].
LF	Juliette Drouet. *Lettres familiales*. Ed. Gérard Pouchain. Condé-sur-Noireau: Editions Charles Corlet, 2001.
Littré	*Dictionnaire le Littré*. 1872 edition with supplement of 1877.
LJD	Victor Hugo. *Lettres à Juliette Drouet: Correspondance, 1833–1883 suivi de* Le Livre de l'anniversaire. Ed. Jean Gaudon. Paris: Arthème Fayard, 2001.
LVH	Juliette Drouet. *Lettres à Victor Hugo: Correspondance, 1833–1882*. Ed. Evelyn Blewer. Paris: Arthème Fayard, 2001.
MUL	Juliette Drouet. *"Mon grand petit homme . . . ": Mille et une lettres d'amour à Victor Hugo*. Ed. Paul Souchon. Paris: Gallimard, 1951.

OC	Victor Hugo. *Oeuvres complètes*. Ed. Jean Massin. 18 vols. Paris: Club français du livre, 1967–1971.
[T]	Translator's note.
VH	Graham Robb. *Victor Hugo*. New York: W. W. Norton, 1997.
VHJD	Louis Guimbaud. *Victor Hugo et Juliette Drouet: D'après les lettres inédites de Juliette Drouet à Victor Hugo et avec un choix de ces lettres*. 2 vols. Paris: Auguste Blaizot, 1914.
VS	Jean Savant. *La Vie sentimentale de Victor Hugo*. 6 fascicles. Fasc. 1, *Juliette ou le supplice de la chasteté*; Fasc. 2, *Léonie d'Aunet: Madame Biard avant le scandale*; Fasc. 3, *Léonie d'Aunet: Du Scandale au coup d'état et à l'agonie*; Fasc. 4, *Les Amants de Juliette: L'Histoire de ses dettes et les personnages de sa vie*; Fasc. 5, *Amours et légendes: Le Faune et ses cent nymphes: Hypothèques abusives et lectures fautives*; Fasc. 6, *Adorations ultimes: Marie Mercier et la rue des 40 géants: Blanche Lanvin: Judith Gautier*. Paris: Chez l'auteur, 1982–1985.
[1857]	Editor's interpolation. All editorial interpolations in the text of the letters are italicized within square brackets.

Introduction

Victoria Tietze Larson

On 22 November 1835 Juliette Drouet, aged twenty-nine, wrote to Victor Hugo, renowned poet, novelist, and dramatist, and her lover of two years: "It's my love that will make me immortal. When I am dead, I will love you still. My body and my life will be used up before one single particle of my love disappears" (*MUL*, 77).[1] By 1883 when Drouet died at seventy-seven after a lifetime of passionate love for Hugo, it had long been clear that this early description of the intensity and durability of her love was no exaggeration. Just as she had predicted, it would be this love, expressed in some twenty thousand love letters written over a period of fifty years, that would make her and her relationship with Hugo "immortal."

Juliette Drouet was born Julienne Gauvain on 10 April 1806 in Fougères, Brittany.[2] Her parents, Marie and Julien Gauvain, were artisans of peasant stock who made a humble living in the town's weaving industry. They died in 1806 and 1807 respectively, both at the age of about thirty, leaving behind four orphaned children: three girls, Renée (born 1800), Thérèse (born 1801), and Juliette (or Julienne as she was christened), and one boy, Armand (born 1803). Renée, aged six when her parents died, was sent to a local hospice run by a religious order, while her younger siblings were farmed out to foster mothers. Thérèse would also end up in the hospice and die there in 1813 at the age of eleven. Armand became completely separated from his two surviving sisters and grew up apart from them.[3] It is unclear what happened to baby Juliette immediately after she left the wet nurse who looked after her following her parents' death. In the long term, however, she seems to have had a slightly luckier fate than her two sisters in that she was taken into the care of her mother's sister, her Aunt Françoise, and her Uncle René-Henry Drouet.

René-Henry was in the Army, but also worked for part of his married life as a printer. Drouet always remembered him with affection as "uncle by name, but father in heart," and she adopted his surname (*MUL*, 617). For her aunt, however, she never had much good to say. The couple probably first sent her to a local convent in Brittany and then took her with them when they moved to Paris in 1815. In Paris, René-Henry (now retired from the Army on a very small pension) hoped, perhaps, for help from his brother, who had been living there for some time. Juliette was placed, once again, in a convent, and her aunt and uncle separated. Her aunt, who appears to have gained some kind of marginal footing in Parisian artistic circles after her separation, gave birth to an illegitimate daughter, Eugénie, in 1816.[4] To judge by subsequent events, Juliette emerged from the convent with considerably more education and polish than had been afforded to her elder sister. After leaving the hospice in 1812 at the age of twelve, Renée remained in Brittany and was probably sent into service by her Aunt Françoise. She ended up with a level of education considerably inferior to Drouet's, and her letters written as an adult are semi-illiterate.[5]

The story is that Drouet was allowed to leave the Parisian convent in 1821 on the eve of taking orders, having discovered that she had no vocation for the nunhood.[6] Virtually nothing is known about Drouet's life in the next five years, but it must have been, as Gaudon puts it, a life that "bordered on prostitution" (*LJD*, 11). Later in a letter to Hugo, Drouet would thank him for having saved her from "poverty and prostitution,"[7] and as Drouet herself would admit, before she met Hugo she had been "a woman whom necessity can throw into the arms of the first rich man that wants to buy her" (*MUL*, 40). Some idea of the joys and of the much more obvious sorrows of living such a life are given by Hugo's description in his novel *Les Misérables* of the four *grisettes*, Dahlia, Zéphine, Favourite, and Fantine, as well as of Eponine and Azelma. Perhaps the sympathy with which Hugo portrays them owes something to what he knew of Drouet's past life.

In 1826 at the age of twenty Drouet gave birth to an illegitimate child, Claire, the daughter of Jean-Jacques Pradier, a sculptor who called himself James and was sixteen years older than Drouet. This was doubtless not Drouet's first liaison before she met Hugo, and there would be others after it, but it was the most important of the several relationships she had before she met Hugo because of the lasting consequences it would have on her life.

Born in 1790 in Geneva to French Huguenot parents, Pradier came to Paris around 1808 to join his brother, Charles-Simon, who had, like himself, been trained as an engraver.[8] He became a student at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts where he studied sculpture. He won the prestigious Prix de Rome in 1813, spent some years in Italy as a consequence (1814–1818), and subsequently kept a studio in Paris. He had soon acquired all the symbols of success within the establishment—exhibiting annually at the Salon, becoming a member of the Académie des Beaux-Arts (1827), professor at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts (1827), chevalier de la Légion d'honneur (1828), officier de la Légion d'honneur (1834), and obtaining numerous important commissions from the State for public build-

ings and monuments.[9] While now an unknown name, Pradier considered himself, and was considered by others, to be among the foremost sculptors of his time.[10] He specialized in erotic female nudes in marble, which he turned out in mythological guises in the hundreds. In the opinion of some, Drouet may have modeled for one of these, the *Satyre et Bacchante*,[11] a sculpture that many contemporary critics found indecent.

The reminiscences of his acquaintances allude to Pradier's flamboyant sartorial style and taste for frequent and extravagant entertainment.[12] A self-portrait[13] shows Pradier every inch the poseur, self-consciously enveloped in his trademark cape,[14] accompanied by a large greyhound. Since he assiduously tended his social and political connections, Pradier frequently threw parties, on which he spent exorbitant sums of money. One of his guests was Gustave Flaubert, who became acquainted through Pradier with the poetess Louise Colet, who was to become his mistress and "Muse."[15] Furthermore, Pradier's eventual wife, the reckless Louise d'Arcet, would provide the model for Emma in Flaubert's novel *Madame Bovary*.[16] Pradier had musical aspirations as well as artistic ones, dabbling on the piano, guitar, organ, and harp, and composing ballads, and was friends with a number of prominent composers of the time.[17] The cover of the score of one of his ballads, entitled *Le Chagrin de l'absence*, features a prominent dedication to Drouet "by her very humble servant" and a Pradier drawing of a romantically-cloaked man looking for all the world just like the self-portrait described above.[18]

Pouchain (*JDD*, 35) speculates that there are two possible ways in which Drouet could have been introduced to Pradier: either during the course of her artistic studies with Pierre-Joseph Redouté, a teacher of drawing, who must have known Pradier and may possibly have introduced her as a potential model, or, alternatively, through Drouet's friendship with Laure Krafft, a musician, who may have taken her to one of Pradier's musical soirées.[19] Another possibility is that, like her cousin, Eugénie, Drouet was first introduced into the artistic world—if only for the exploitation of her beauty as a model—by her manipulative aunt-cum-stepmother.[20] Like Drouet, Eugénie ended up with an illegitimate child fathered by an artist, Jules Ziegler. In any event, however Drouet may have met Pradier, she eventually became his model and therefore, as so often with Pradier, also his mistress.[21] Indeed, the narrow dividing line between sex and art in Pradier's studio is underlined by Arsène Houssaye, friend of Victor Hugo and onetime director of the Comédie-Française. In his memoirs he describes meeting in 1832 (almost at exactly our period) two *grisettes* who had been modeling, "naturally as goddesses or demigoddesses on Olympus," in Pradier's studio, and who were "not ashamed to undress before a bunch of prying men who wouldn't pretend to be artists except for the nude models."[22] Drouet claimed to have been the model for the city of Strasbourg, one of the two statues that Pradier executed for the place de la Concorde in Paris representing France's important cities.[23] She doubtlessly modeled for other well-known Pradier sculptures too.

Within Pradier's flamboyant and boastful bohemian facade there lurked a circumspect, bourgeois soul. Pradier had no intention of marrying Drouet, albeit the mother of his daughter. Any marriage he might make would be calculated to support his lavish lifestyle and social status. His marriage in 1833 to the wealthy nineteen-year-old, Louise d'Arcet (although it proved to be a grave mistake that Pradier would greatly regret, especially financially),[24] must have been based on just such a calculation. A marriage with Drouet could only be a marriage of love, although if Drouet ever felt any love for him it was probably quickly extinguished. Pradier's letters to her convey a picture of a man who was vain, self-centered, and self-righteous. Drouet would later feel nothing but contempt for him, describing him in one letter to Hugo as "a miserable imbecile, a stupid rogue, the vilest and most foolish of men."[25] In any case, the arrival of the baby Claire must have introduced a note of harsh reality into the relationship that brought it to an end. The most Pradier was willing to do was to put in a word for her later with contacts that might help launch Drouet's theatrical career[26] and to provide grudging and sporadic support for his daughter. This very rich man could never find the ready cash to pay for her upkeep on time, yet, as Houssaye tells us, he could spend ten thousand francs on one party.[27] Pradier's response to Drouet's cries for help was only to prevaricate concerning the money and to send pompous letters filled with gratuitous advice: "Come, come, now, courage and mint pastilles!"[28]

Before Drouet's theatrical career was to begin, however, Claire would be boarded out with a wet nurse (*JDD,* 41), and by 1827 Drouet was involved in a liaison with a married man with consequences far more important than the affair itself. This man was Scipion Pinel, a wealthy doctor in his early thirties with a specialization in psychiatric disorders and an interest in the arts.[29] Pinel presented Drouet with jewelry and Indian cashmere amounting to the value of twenty thousand francs, an enormous sum of money that was too much even for the affluent Pinel to afford: to finance the purchase of the gifts he borrowed money from a dealer in cashmere (*JDD,* 148) called Mme Ribot or Ribou. Subsequently Pinel found himself unable to repay the money as contracted, and by the beginning of the following year newspapers carried accounts of the legal case brought against Pinel by Ribot. The next months were spent by the two lovers in Frankfurt-am-Main in Germany, perhaps to avoid the possibility of further legal action. While they were there, Pradier wrote Drouet letters of paternalistic advice.[30] By October 1828, however, Drouet's affair with Pinel had finished. She was now on her own financially and physically and must take drastic measures to earn enough money to live and make at least some gestures toward paying off her large debts. She went to Brussels where she initiated, without any dramatic training whatsoever, a career in the theater. Why Brussels? It was a cosmopolitan cultural center with many links to Paris. Drouet may also have been helped to break into theatrical circles there by Simone Luigi Peruzzi, the ambassador for Tuscany in Brussels and Paris, with whom she had a liaison, which was in full swing by January 1829 (*JDD,* 83). The debt

to Mme Ribot, which Drouet had honorably assumed after the end of her relationship with Pinel, and the debts to her many other creditors, would continue to haunt her, however, for many years to come.[31]

Drouet's theatrical debut—under the stage name "Mlle Juliette"—occurred on December 6 1828, in a play by Scribe and Courcy called *Simple Histoire* at the Théâtre du Parc in Brussels.[32] It was a theater that specialized in vaudeville—short, comic, lighthearted plays, often with some topical relevance and interspersed with songs. Drouet played the role of Miss Milner in this vacuous story of the love affair between Lord Frédéric, "so well-known for his duels and gallant adventures," and his seventeen-year-old pupil. This play, like nearly all the plays in which Drouet would hold a role of any importance, was of second-rate literary merit by now forgotten dramatists.[33] The reviews in the press of her first ever appearance on stage, however, were encouraging and all of them remarked on her beauty.

Without a doubt, Juliette Drouet was a beautiful woman. In a description that originally appeared in *Les Belles Femmes de Paris* (*The Beautiful Women of Paris*), Théophile Gautier, friend of Victor Hugo, Parnassian poet, novelist, and journalist, said of her:

> Mlle Juliette's face is beautiful in a regular and delicate way . . . Her nose is purely cut and finely chiseled. Her eyes are sparkling and limpid . . . Her mouth, which is of a dewy rose and lively in expression, is always small, even in bursts of the greatest gaiety. All these features, which are so charming in themselves, are contained within an oval face of the smoothest and most harmonious outline. A smooth and serene forehead like the white marble pediment of a Greek temple luminously crowns this delightful face. Abundant black hair with a wonderful shine sets off marvelously, by contrast, its diaphanous glow.
>
> Mlle Juliette's neck, shoulders, and arms are of quite classical perfection. She could be a worthy inspiration to sculptors and compete with the beauty of the young Athenian women who cast off their veils before Praxiteles as he contemplated his Venus.[34]

Drouet's stay in Brussels turned out to be a short one. By April 1829 she was back in Paris and, possibly with the help of Pradier, managed to secure a role at the Théâtre du Vaudeville which, true to its name, specialized in staging vaudevilles. Her debut on the Parisian stage on 29 July 1829 was in *Kettly ou le retour en Suisse* by Duvert and Paulin. In this play Drouet played the part of Kettly, the young, female love interest and a role in which she was required to sing some duets. Her connection with this theater, too, did not last long. The Théâtre du Vaudeville was in financial difficulty, and Juliette Drouet left it after just a few months to make her debut on 27 February 1830 at another Parisian theater, the Théâtre de la Porte-Saint-Martin.

Like the Théâtre du Vaudeville this theater catered to popular (although more middle-class) audiences, with a specialty in melodrama: sensational plays with some incidental music and often a strong moral component.[35] Drouet began in the box office success *L'Homme du monde* by Ancelot and Saintine and then appeared, beginning in April, in *Shylock* by Dulac and Alboise. This sensational melodrama was described by one drama critic as "horror from beginning to end. Not a smile, but constantly cries of rage, vengeance, cruelty, despair, tears, sighs, pain, misery. First of all tempests, shipwrecks, abductions, then a deathbed, a funeral procession, secret meetings in underground caverns, a trial, finally the frightful triumph of hatred and vengeance in the heart of the Jew."[36] Drouet played the part of Jessica, the young daughter of Shylock, who falls in love with a young gentile Venetian, Lorenzo. The couple attempts to elope by sea, but a storm wrecks their ship. The play ends climactically with Jessica's confession to her father of her love for Lorenzo and her conversion to Christianity. Shylock is about to run her through with his sword when she is saved, fainting, by Lorenzo and Bassiano. The spirit of Shakespeare was a long way from this melodrama, but the public loved it.

Drouet stayed just over a year at the Porte-Saint-Martin and, excluding one benefit performance, played seven different roles in as many different plays. The last new role that she took was the young love interest, Clémence, in *Napoléon ou Schönbrunn et Sainte-Hélène* by Dupeuty, Régnier, and Detourbey—one of the several dramatizations of the life of Napoleon popular in theaters at this time. She would perform the part of Clémence more than a hundred times.

In April 1831 Drouet left the Porte-Saint-Martin for the Odéon, a first-class, state-subsidized theater. Pouchain speculates (*JDD,* 75) that one reason Drovet moved there may have been the prospect of being able to play the female lead alongside Frédérick Lemaître, one of the most celebrated actors of the time, and of putting a distance between herself and Marie Dorval. Dorval was the principal actress at the Porte-Saint-Martin and one of the leading actresses of her day. Drouet would show some jealousy of her seductiveness and powers as an actress in her letters to Victor Hugo (L. 17). Drouet imitated Dorval's acting style in her role as Antonia in the melodrama in which she appeared at the Odéon on 28 May 1831. This was *Le Moine* by Louis-Marie Fontan, one of several stage versions of the sensational 1796 Gothic novel *The Monk* by the English novelist Matthew Gregory Lewis (1775–1818).[37] The plot of *Le Moine* has some similarities to the story of Hugo's perverted archdeacon, Claude Frollo, and his love for Esmeralda in his novel *Notre-Dame de Paris,* which appeared this same year, 1831. In *Le Moine* a Franciscan monk, Ambrosio, has been tricked by the Devil and made to fall in love with Antonia. Seeking to possess her, Ambrosio creeps in on Antonia while she is sleeping (as does Claude Frollo on Esmeralda). Antonia is defended by her brother, whom Ambrosio kills before abducting her. The play concludes with a duel between Ambrosio and the Devil, which the Devil wins. Drouet would receive good

reviews for her performance of this part and she would play it again when she returned to the Porte-Saint-Martin the following year, performing the role all in all some fifty times.

Drouet's time at the Odéon turned out to be even shorter than her previous stint at the Porte-Saint-Martin. In October of 1831 the newspapers reported that she had decided to break with this theater. She left it perhaps for the Florentine palazzo of Simone Peruzzi, the above-mentioned ambassador for Tuscany, whose unedited diaries reveal a whirl of daily cultural and social activity, including ambassadorial parties that he attended in the company of Juliette Drouet. There appears to be no evidence, however, for the tenacious story that while in Florence Drouet belonged to the theatrical company of a Russian prince, Demidoff. The story—which has been repeated by most of Drouet's biographers since Paul Chenay, the son-in-law of Victor Hugo, alleged that Drouet was protected by "a fabulously rich Russian prince, owner of mines in Siberia"[38]—seems to date back to a gossipy article about Drouet that appeared in 1832 in the theatrical magazine *La Rampe et les coulisses*. In this article it was claimed that "authors, directors, stockbrokers, Russian aristocrats, and even a certain *Préfet de police* were hot on her heels" (*JDD*, 86). In any case, Drouet returned to Paris in January 1832 after a three-month stay in Florence, and Peruzzi would return three months later.

On her return Drouet signed up not with the Odéon, the theater she had left for Italy, but once again with the Porte-Saint-Martin. She began with a part in the sensational melodrama *Shylock,* a part she had played more than forty times in her previous stint at this theater. Drouet's next role at the Porte-Saint-Martin was in a production by Scribe and Terrier called *Dix ans de la vie d'une femme*. The play began in March 1832 with Mme Zélie-Paul playing the part of Sophie Marini. Drouet at this point had no part in the play—luckily for her, as the audience judged the play with its female "nudity" too indecent, and the actresses, including Marie Dorval, were booed off the stage. Responding to the criticism, the dramatists made some changes to the play that must have satisfied the public, as more than fifty performances followed with Drouet now playing Sophie Marini. However, an epidemic of cholera struck Paris at this time and severely diminished the size of audiences, while a more personal form of misfortune struck Drouet in particular. The enormous debt to Mme Ribot, incurred by her former lover Pinel, but assumed by Drouet in 1830, now caught up with her. Ribot sued Drouet for failing to make payments on the eight thousand francs for which she had taken responsibility, and which represented almost three years' salary (*VS,* 4:48). Drouet lost the case and was ordered to repay the debt with interest.

Drouet had no means to repay the money except by incurring further debt since she was already living beyond her means and was already in debt to many other people, including the furniture dealer,[39] the jeweler, the glover, the dressmaker, the cosmetician, the laundress, and two other dealers in cashmere besides Ribot (*VS,* 4:49). Actresses were required to furnish their own lavish

costumes, which were extremely costly. Furthermore, Drouet had an expensive apartment and a social life to maintain where she had to keep up appearances. So it is not surprising to find at this time signs of stress in reviews that allude to slipshod, lackluster performances in which she did not know her words and read them from the back of a fan or written on letters used as props! Moreover, just at a time when she most needed the money, Drouet began to find that she could not keep up with the grueling schedule of performances night after night. The stress was beginning to tell mentally and physically, and reviewers were not kind. Yet the test was just beginning. As she was in financially desperate straits, Drouet needed to perform as much as possible. Accordingly Drouet engaged upon what Pouchain calls "a stupefying theatrical marathon" (*JPD,* 100), acting between August 1832 and the end of 1833 in a dozen or so different plays and in nearly five hundred performances. On more than a hundred occasions she performed in two or even three plays on a single night.

However, by the end of 1832 Drouet was beginning to get a taste of what her career might have become if she had not met Victor Hugo. In November she appeared in the part of Marie in the drama *Perrinet Leclerc* by Lockroy and Anicet Bourgeois, which, catering to the taste for historical drama with lavish costumes and staging that Hugo would exploit so well, was set in fifteenth-century France in the context of the feud between the Armagnacs and the Burgundians. The play was a tremendous success, and the theater was full to overflowing night after night. Even though Drouet did not have the leading part, even though she had received some negative reviews for her lack of theatrical technique, and even though her fatigue, in the eyes of some, had begun to take a toll on her acting and her looks, she had achieved star status. She was a celebrity whose doings were the fodder of gossip columns in newspapers and magazines and the subject of satirical plays and novels. Like the image of a modern pop or screen idol, Drouet's portrait (a lithograph in these predaguerreotype days) appeared that autumn in the magazine *L'Artiste,* accompanied by a lengthy eulogy.

Separated by a few pages in the same magazine there appeared a lithograph by the same artist, Léon Noël, of another celebrity, the thirty-year-old Victor Hugo. Drouet and Hugo were not yet acquainted with one another, but they would be very soon! In the meantime, however, Drouet had become involved in a new liaison, this time with Alphonse Karr, drama critic for *Le Figaro,* who had been following her career with interest for some time. In his reviews Karr had highly praised not only Drouet's beauty but also her acting. It was Karr who had written the article that accompanied the portrait of Drouet in *L'Artiste* in which he says, in part:

> Some of our actresses may perhaps compete with Mlle Juliette for the prize for beauty; but not one has this purity, this youthfulness, these artless contours which recall Greek sculpture, and, at the same time, this poetic and expressive face that brings to mind

> Shakespearean heroines. Thus M. Léon Noël, whose talent the readers of *L'Artiste* have already come to appreciate, must regret the impossibility of capturing on stone this face that is in turns passionate and deadly, witty and biting. There are limits to art and the finest heads of Van Dyck do not speak to us. Only Lawrence could have rendered these features, pure and smooth. (*JPD,* 105)

Unsurprisingly, Alphonse Karr was another disappointment. While alluring Drouet with promises of marriage, he demanded from her—as she staggered under her own burden of debt—loans of money that he would never pay back. The relationship was very short-lived. By the beginning of the next year, 1833, Drouet was ready for an affair that would last for the rest of her life.

Drouet and Victor Hugo met on 2 January 1833 at the Théâtre de la Porte-Saint-Martin. Hugo was there to read to the actors his sensational and bloodcurdling prose drama *Lucrèce Borgia,* in preparation for their performance of it. Twenty-two years later in a New Year's letter dated 31 December 1854, he reminisced to Drouet: "The day after tomorrow, 2 January, it will be twenty-two years since I saw you for the first time. Do you remember? Since that moment it has been 2 January (and not the first) that has started the year, or rather life itself, for me" (*LJD*, 212).

Notwithstanding the importance in retrospect of this initial meeting, or of the fact that this was Drouet's first part in a play that could lay claim to literary merit, Drouet resigned from the theater. The papers said that she found her role as the Princesse Negroni insultingly small.[40] Then, perhaps because the director, Harel, called her bluff by accepting her resignation, Drouet quickly returned and accepted the role, declaring, so the legend has it, that "there is no small role in a play by Victor Hugo."[41] Before the play even opened, however, Drouet found herself summoned to court on 23 January to answer charges brought by Mme Ribot who, hearing the press reports of Drouet's imminent appearance in this play with its eminent author and celebrated actors, Frédérick Lemaître and Mlle George, had decided that the time was opportune to make another attempt to recoup the money Drouet owed her. The case was referred to another court before which she would be called to appear on 8 February. The press was titillated by the spectacle of the young star in trouble with the law, and Hugo, along with the rest of the world, could not have failed to be aware of the situation. If her outstanding beauty had not already brought her to his attention during rehearsals, then surely "the prestige of this great misfortune" must have. As Drouet would remark ruefully in years to come, Hugo, who had already written a play about a redeemed courtesan, *Marion de Lorme,* never could resist the sight of a young woman in trouble, or as Drouet later acidly put it, "a tart in a bind" (L. 175).[42]

The play had its premiere on 2 February 1833 and was a tremendous success with the theater packed to capacity. Several eulogistic accounts of Drouet's performance appeared in the papers, but the most evocative account of Drouet's presence in the play is that of Théophile Gautier:

> It was in the small role of the Princesse Negroni in *Lucrèce Borgia* that Mlle Juliette cast the most dazzling light. She had only a couple of words to say and really only crossed the stage: but with such little time and with so few words she found a way to create a ravishing figure, a real Italian princess with a gracious and deadly smile, her eyes full of treacherous inebriation . . .
>
> Her costume was ravishing in its character and taste: a dress of pink damask with a silver floral pattern, feathers and pearls in her hair; all that in a capricious and Romanesque style like a drawing by Tempeste or della Bella. She was like a snake standing upright on its tail, so undulating, supple, and serpentine were her movements. Through all her grace how well she conveyed something venomous! With what disturbing and mocking agility did she slip away from the prostrate adoration of the handsome Venetian noblemen![43]

In her appearance in court on 8 February Drouet had been ordered, once again, to pay the eight thousand francs with interest for which she had assumed responsibility three years previously. Her situation was such that she had already had to sell and pawn her belongings. Prison was a possibility if she did not come up with the money. So as the eighty performances of *Lucrèce Borgia* got underway, Drouet maintained a punishing schedule, appearing also on other nights in other plays that were already running at the Porte-Saint-Martin: *Le Moine*, *L'Homme au masque de fer, Jeanne Vaubernier, Térésa,* and *Perrinet Leclerc*. She appeared, as Pouchain calculates, in more than one hundred performances in three months[44] and, from 1 May 1833 onward, acted in two plays every night. After her evening performance at the Porte-Saint-Martin she would rush to the Théâtre Molière and perform late at night in *Le Fils de Zambular.* It is no surprise to find her letters from this time referring to a breakdown in her health, and in the context of such overwhelming stress the theory (*JDD,* 115–7) that Drouet audaciously appealed to Hugo for help is not at all difficult to believe.

In any case, the sophisticated boldness of one of Drouet's earliest letters to him, possibly dated 16 February 1833, and miraculously preserved, bears the legend out (L. 1):

> Come for me this evening at Mme K's.
>
> I will love you until then just to stay patient. See you this evening!
> Oh, this evening will be everything!
>
> I will give myself to you completely.

It was the night of 16–17 February 1833 (or so they always said) that