

SUZANNE NASH

Les Contemplations of Victor Hugo

An Allegory of the Creative Process



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LES CONTEMPLATIONS OF
VICTOR HUGO

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An Allegory of
the Creative Process

BY SUZANNE NASH

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To
my parents

PREFACE

ALTHOUGH Victor Hugo was recognized early in his own lifetime as one of the great literary geniuses of the nineteenth century and has continued to live in the popular imagination as France's poet laureate, he has not always fared well at the hands of the critics. Before Hugo was even dead, Edmond Biré, in his four-volume biography, began deflating the legend Hugo had so artfully created for himself. Almost immediately after his death there set in, both in France and abroad, a reaction against the "hugolatrie" that had reigned for over fifty years and had turned Hugo's funeral into a gaudy national holiday.

For the first fifty years of this century Hugo scholarship in France centered mainly on his social, religious, and political ideology, very little attention being paid to his work as a formal achievement. In English-speaking countries, even to this day, Hugo is primarily known as a novelist, probably because the difficulties of translating his poetry are almost insurmountable. Swinburne, George Saintsbury, and Tennyson were among the rare nineteenth-century critics who appreciated his genius for language, and when French poetic theory began to interest the English poets at the beginning of this century, critics turned resolutely to the symbolists for inspiration, stressing the mediocrity of Hugo's thought and the bombastic nature of his rhetoric. Most importantly, perhaps, Hugo's formal innovations, crucial to the development of French poetic diction, did not affect English poetry because many of them were relevant only to French problems of versification. This book is an effort to fill the gap in English criticism by clarifying Hugo's contribution to the development of modernist poetics through a detailed study of one of his best-known mature works.

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Since the 1950's there has been a vital resurgence of Hugo studies in France, and in the last decade particular interest has been paid the later, visionary works which characterize the sixth book of the *Contemplations*. I have found Michael Riffaterre's short studies of Hugo's visionary style especially stimulating and suggestive. Although there is no full-length study of *Les Contemplations* as a unified whole, I am indebted to many great Hugo scholars who have written about this work. René Journet and Guy Robert have produced an updated examination of the manuscript based on Joseph Vianey's critical edition of 1922 and have collated all the materials from the Hugo dossier related to the composition of the collection. Their three books, *Autour des 'Contemplations,' Le Manuscrit des 'Contemplations,'* and *Notes sur 'Les Contemplations,'* have been indispensable tools in the writing of this study. In their introductions to various recent editions of *Les Contemplations*, Pierre Albouy (Pléiade, 1964), Jacques Seebacher (Cluny, 1964), Léon Cellier (Garnier, 1970) have all emphasized the importance of the larger narrative and of Léopoldine as a key figure in its unfolding. One of the most provocative studies of Hugo's poetic creation during the period surrounding the composition of *Les Contemplations* (1830-1860) is Jean Gaudon's monumental *Le Temps de la contemplation* (Flammarion, 1969). His book has served as a demanding and inspiring interlocutor, forcing me to question my own apprehension of Hugo's work with greater rigor. Finally, the new *Club français du livre* edition of Hugo's complete works, published under the direction of Jean Massin, has been a mine of information for every aspect of Hugo scholarship. I will refer the reader to Jean Gaudon's fine edition of *Les Contemplations* in Vol. ix of Massin throughout this work.

The inspiration for this study, which was in its original form my doctoral dissertation, belongs, in the first place, to the teaching of Paul de Man, whose lectures on Romantic and

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symbolist poetry I attended while a graduate student at Cornell University. I am grateful to him for reading my manuscript in an earlier form and for making suggestions which I have only imperfectly been able to fulfill.

I wish to thank my dissertation advisor at Princeton University, Léon-François Hoffmann, for his clear-minded counsel and for allowing me the freedom to pursue my own course. Special thanks go to Karl D. Uitti and Eloise Goreau for their painstaking readings of early drafts, and their consistently perceptive critical advice.

It is due in large part to the interest and encouragement of my colleague, Alban Forcione, that I decided to revise and enlarge my original study to its present form. His willingness to listen, and his tactful and discriminating observations provided a vital dialogue throughout the writing of this book. I am further indebted to the many other friends and colleagues who were kind enough to read portions of the manuscript at various stages and offer valuable suggestions—notably, Sylvia Molloy, Albert Sonnenfeld, John Logan, Laura Curtis, Stanley Corngold, and Barbara Guetti. My thanks go as well to Jerry Sherwood and Joanna Hitchcock of Princeton University Press for their patience and expert advice. Finally, my greatest debt is to my husband and children for their loving support and most especially for being my link to the creature world.

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LES CONTEMPLATIONS OF
VICTOR HUGO

INTRODUCTION

WHEN Victor Hugo died in 1885, "France unburdened itself of a man, a literary movement, and a century." Thus, in terms implying an almost visceral relief, Roger Shattuck describes the beginning of a new era of conscious modernism in French poetry.¹ Cynical admiration often characterizes the tone modernists adopt when referring to this poet who was for them too prolific, too popular, too much the official poet of the Republic. They cannot reconcile the dazzling originality of Hugo's art and the adulation he always enjoyed from the crowd and officialdom alike. Critics have consistently struggled to split Hugo in two, to separate man from poet and message from expression, in their evaluations of him. Baudelaire liked to see Hugo's immense popularity as a sign of dangerous simple-mindedness. Thus, in *L'Art romantique*, he began his essay on Hugo with typically ambivalent condescension:

Je me souviens d'un temps où sa figure était une des plus rencontrées parmi la foule; et bien des fois je me suis demandé, en le voyant si souvent apparaître dans la turbulence des fêtes ou dans le silence des lieux solitaires, comment il pouvait concilier les nécessités de son travail assidu avec ce goût sublime, mais dangereux, des promenades et des rêveries? Cette apparente contradiction est évidemment le résultat d'une existence bien réglée et d'une forte constitution spirituelle qui lui permet de travailler en marchant, ou plutôt de ne pouvoir marcher qu'en travaillant.²

When asked who was the greatest French poet who ever lived,

¹ *The Banquet Years* (New York, 1955), p. 5.

² *Oeuvres complètes*, ed. Le Dantec (Paris: Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1956), p. 1082.

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André Gide replied for all modern French writers when he answered: "Victor Hugo, hélas!"

Nevertheless, despite their disdain for Hugo as a social reformer and religious philosopher, precursors or practitioners of modernism have all been aware of Hugo's profound contribution to the resources of French poetic diction. Baudelaire, Rimbaud, Valéry, Breton, Aragon—each an exemplar of some form of *profound literary change*—have all cited Hugo as the writer whose experimentation with language, quite simply, made their work possible. More acutely than Hugo's indiscriminating popular audience, they recognized that from the very beginning of his career, Hugo had struggled to liberate poetic language from the ossified restrictions of a worn-out neoclassical aesthetic which had held France in its grip longer than any other European country.

An assessment of Hugo as a genuinely original poet did not come easily to his literary heirs, virtually all of whom felt driven to distinguish between the generative influence of his art and the stultifying effects of his philosophical pretensions and public reputation. Force-fed on Hugo, Rimbaud is a good example of the rebellious schoolboy who, when he wished to ridicule his austere religious mother, called her "La Bouche d'ombre," but who also wrote to Paul Demeny: "Hugo, *trop cabochard*, a bien *vu* dans les derniers volumes."

Recognition of Hugo's genius was perhaps most painful for his younger contemporary, Baudelaire, who felt overshadowed throughout his lifetime by the kind of popular acclaim which the constant and prodigious flow of Hugo's writing seemed to produce and who sought, almost pathetically, until he died, to win the master's recognition and approval for his own neurotically restricted work. The public's relatively easy acceptance of Hugo's artistic innovations seemed to preclude any critical awareness of the value of these experiments and hence of the experiments in which Baudelaire was at that time engaged.

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Baudelaire's understandable resentment caused him repeatedly to question, indeed to attack Hugo's critical intelligence, all the while acknowledging and even extolling his creative genius. Even though Baudelaire complained about the virtual dictatorship that Hugo had exercised over literary activity in France in the 1830's, he insisted that Hugo alone was responsible for the revitalization of poetry which had been dead or dying in France for over 100 years:

Quand on se figure ce qu'était la poésie française avant qu'il apparût, et quel rajeunissement elle a subi depuis qu'il est venu; quand on imagine ce peu qu'elle eût été s'il n'était pas venu; combien de sentiments mystérieux et profonds, qui ont été exprimés, seraient restés muets; combien d'intelligences il a accouchées, combien d'hommes qui ont rayonné par lui seraient restés obscurs, il est impossible de ne pas le considérer comme un de ces esprits rares et providentiels qui opèrent, dans l'ordre littéraire, le salut de tous, comme d'autres dans l'ordre moral et d'autres dans l'ordre politique. (*L'Art romantique*, p. 1084)

Baudelaire's ironic use of Hugo's own religious vocabulary reflects the ambivalent attitude he has adopted throughout his essay in *L'Art romantique*, where he insidiously underscores the seemingly miraculous nature of Hugo's inventions:

Je vois dans la Bible un prophète à qui Dieu ordonne de manger un livre. J'ignore dans quel monde Victor Hugo a mangé préalablement le dictionnaire de la langue qu'il était appelé à parler; mais je vois que le lexique français, en sortant de sa bouche, est devenu un monde, un univers coloré, mélodieux et mouvant. Par suite de quelles circonstances historiques, fatalités philosophiques, conjonctions sidérales, cet homme est-il né parmi nous, je n'en sais rien. . . . (p. 1086)

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Baudelaire thus makes the mistake of distinguishing spontaneous creation from reflective consciousness by suggesting that Hugo *unwittingly* touched upon all the resources of French poetic diction, leaving his heirs the task of rationalizing his achievement.³

It was Paul Valéry, one of the most cerebral and technically meticulous of all modern French poets, who was to place Baudelaire's jaundiced assessment of Hugo into question. "Hugo, comme tout véritable poète, est un critique de premier ordre," he says in a lecture significantly entitled, "Victor Hugo, créateur par la forme."⁴ Valéry distinguishes Hugo from the other Romantic poets (Lamartine, Vigny, Musset), who, he felt, sought above all to give vent to their emotions, and thus to overcome the formal restrictions which poetic language necessarily imposes upon spontaneous feeling. Hugo, Valéry claims, did just the opposite: form, not feeling, was the source of his inspiration:

Ce qu'on nomme la Pensée devient en lui . . . le moyen et non la fin de l'expression. Souvent le développement d'un poème est visiblement chez lui la déduction d'un merveilleux accident de langage qui a surgi dans son esprit.
(p. 589)

³ Baudelaire's biased distinction became a cliché of Hugo criticism and has only recently been challenged. René Wellek, for example, begins his discussion of Hugo in *A History of Modern Criticism*, Vol. II, "The Romantic Age" (New Haven, 1955), p. 252: "It has been the fashion to dismiss Hugo as an intellect and as a critic, but this understandable reaction against the excesses of his rhetoric has surely gone too far, as has the wholesale dismissal of his poetry. Both need rectification. Much has been done for the reinstatement of his last 'apocalyptic' poems; something can be done for his criticism, which among much verbiage, contains profound insights and brilliant formulas for age-old problems."

⁴ *Oeuvres*, ed. Jean Hytier, Vol. I (Paris: Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1962), p. 587.

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For Valéry, Hugo is the father of modern French poetry because he was the first to grasp the crucial truth that form is meaning. Hugo sought to resolve all of his problems, artistic and philosophical, through the artifice of rhetoric. Contrary to Shattuck, Valéry insists that Hugo did not die in 1885 and that France will never be free of his meteoric presence as long as his work continues to excite impassioned debate amongst poets. The extent of his genius, Valéry says, can be measured by the innovations his work has required of his successors:

Pour le *mesurer*, il suffit de rechercher ce que les poètes qui sont nés autour de lui, ont été *obligés* d'inventer pour exister auprès de lui. Le problème capital de la littérature, depuis 1840 jusqu'en 1890, n'est-il pas: Comment faire autre chose que Hugo? Comment être visible malgré Hugo? Comment se percher sur les cimes de Hugo? On l'a cherché du côté de la perfection technique, du côté de la bizarrerie des sujets, du côté des sentiments, du côté des dimensions du poème, etc., etc.⁵

Hugo's critical awareness of the difficulties of translating perception into language is clear from the very beginning of his career and is, I believe, responsible for the increasingly complex structure of his linguistic universe in the very works Baudelaire most admired. I have chosen to analyze one of those later works, *Les Contemplations*, because it dramatizes the relationship between spontaneity and reflectiveness in an especially crucial and highly self-conscious manner. Hugo wrote most of the poems in the collection during the traumatic early years of his exile (1851-1856), at a time when he began to look back upon his life and perceive in it the outlines of a larger, metaphysical pattern. For Hugo, as for Coleridge, revelation

⁵ Letter from Valéry to Paul Souday, *Oeuvres*, Vol. 1, p. 1715.

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is rooted in self-consciousness.⁶ The book is organized in such a way as to reflect simultaneously the evolution of his personal, historical existence and that of his poetical and religious consciousness. *Les Contemplations* successfully realizes the blurring of distinctions between genres that Hugo laid down in his preface to *Cromwell* in 1827 as the revolutionary aim of great Romantic art. It is a collection of separate lyric poems that, if taken together, act out the drama of their own creation. Understanding the complex superstructure within which each poem occupies a place is a necessary task for any serious exegete of this work.

An examination of the thematic and structural patterns in *Les Contemplations* should help to resolve a paradox central to all Hugo's later, visionary works. At the same time that he was developing an increasingly schematized account of the cosmogony and man's place within it, his own creations appear—but only appear—to become more unstructured and digressive—even monstrous in their proportions. This apparent contradiction between message and form became obvious for the first time with the publication of *Les Contemplations*. The sheer weight and variety of the collection would seem to defy any attempt to establish a clear-cut order; yet Hugo says in his preface that the reader will find mirrored in his book, not only Hugo's own life, but the story of human destiny as well. He seems to be saying that to read this work is to read all his works; to understand his achievement is to understand the Divine Logos itself. His organization of the collection into six parts, each one with a chapter heading referring to some stage

⁶ “. . . the act of self-consciousness is for *us* the source and principle of all *our* possible knowledge. . . . We begin with the *I know myself*, in order to end with the absolute *I am*. We proceed from the self, in order to lose and find all self in God.” *Biographia Literaria*, ed. J. Shawcross, Vol. 1 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1907), p. 186.

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in his life, reinforces the messianic tone of the preface and sets the stage for a narrative and, in my view, an essentially allegorical experience.

Hugo announces at the outset that *Les Contemplations* is arcane and initiatory. A careful reading of the work reveals that its formal irregularity is consciously designed to obscure a unity that Hugo wishes his reader to perceive *in a particular way*. During his years of exile he became increasingly convinced that he had been chosen to lead mankind toward reform by effecting its spiritual conversion. Thus, as the architect of his imaginary universe, he felt justified in imposing upon the reader a sequence of steps by which he must ascend to the cosmic height necessary for a panoramic view of the total vision. Hugo wanted the task of the decipherer of that fundamental unity to be a difficult one, but there can be no doubt that the reader has failed to enter Hugo's world on his terms if he does not seek to discern a providential order behind the apparent chaos.

Hugo's use of allegory as late as 1856, one year before the publication of *Les Fleurs du mal*, is particularly significant in view of the controversy over the relative value of symbol and allegory that had been the subject of debate in Germany and England since the turn of the century. Goethe was the first to redefine the terms, giving preference to the symbol, which permits one to grasp the ineffable immediately, through a particular form, whereas allegory, he said, never moves beyond the level of rational analysis. Like Goethe, Coleridge believed that symbolic language could reveal Divinity directly:

Now an allegory is but a translation of abstract notions into a picture language, which is itself nothing but an abstraction from objects of the senses; the principle being more worthless even than its phantom proxy. . . . On the

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other hand, a symbol . . . is characterized above all by the translucence of the eternal through and in the temporal. . . .⁷

Hugo too believed in the power of symbolic language to reveal Divine Presence, but not before a prolonged initiation that requires the active participation of the reader in the creation of that language. Allegory was the trope most suited to Hugo's utopian purpose. Because allegory both constitutes and contains a prolonged, narrative experience, it involves the historical consciousness of the reader, who is forced to move sequentially through the text and to become involved in a dialectical relationship with the writer, who himself is figural. Hugo's belief in poetry—a belief that must be understood in its total context—implies a concomitant belief in progress and man's ability to alter the course of human history. He was bent upon breathing new life into a rhetorical form which could articulate that belief.

Hugo's purpose seems to have been apparent to Baudelaire, for in 1861 he dedicated to Victor Hugo "Le Cygne," a poem which implicitly redefines allegory as the rhetorical statement of man's hopeless imprisonment within the flux of time and thus poetically suggests the naiveté of Hugo's idealism. "Paris change! mais rien dans ma mélancolie / N'a bougé . . . / . . . tout pour moi devient allégorie." Baudelaire's response to Hugo's work reflects an awareness of the philosophical implications of the use of such rhetorical devices that would later become the very subject of Mallarmé's po-

⁷ *The Statesman's Manual*, ed. W.G.T. Shedd (New York, 1875), pp. 437-38, quoted in Angus Fletcher's *Allegory: The Theory of a Symbolic Mode* (Ithaca, 1964), p. 16. For a brilliant discussion of the function of these tropes for certain Romantic poets see Paul de Man's "The Rhetoric of Temporality," in *Interpretation, Theory and Practice*, ed. Charles S. Singleton (Baltimore, 1969).

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etry. Thus an appreciation of Hugo's use of allegory in *Les Contemplations* should help to establish his position within the debate regarding figurative language that began toward the end of the eighteenth century and has yet to be resolved.

Current, post-structuralist critics, for example, tend to view all literary discourse as an endless deferment of sense, a deferment that they in turn equate with a loss of plenitude traditionally associated with natural man; and they see the use of such rhetorical figures as allegory or metonymy as signs of the poet's awareness of the failure of language to move beyond its own hollow constructs. Hugo certainly understood poetic language and the natural experience that inspired its creation to be radically cut off from one another ("*Autrefois, Aujourd'hui. Un abîme les sépare, le tombeau,*" preface to *Les Contemplations*), yet he repeatedly affirmed that this language constitutes a new, supernatural Presence in its own right, one to be experienced empirically by the reader. Although there are moments throughout Hugo's work when we sense his awareness of the problematical basis of his faith in the mediating power of language, they do not undercut the rationalized intentions that forcefully determine the architecture of his world. Indeed, the skepticism that appears to subvert his messianic pretensions is, as we shall see, an essential part of a larger, redemptive pattern. Such moments of ironic deconstruction serve, then, entirely different functions in the works of Hugo and Baudelaire.

This study will propose a new reading of *Les Contemplations* as a unified, allegorical whole; only in this way, I am convinced, is it possible to demonstrate properly the relationship between Hugo's thought and the complex structure of his linguistic universe. Because he organized his book so as to reflect his own development as a poet, the work constitutes a key document for understanding Hugo's perception of the

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poetic process and hence of his other works as well. By remaining within the boundaries of this single work, I hope to define the cosmic scope of Hugo's visionary consciousness; by examining the monstrous complexity of its formal structure, to discover the fundamental simplicity of his belief: "La création est un palimpseste à travers lequel on déchiffre Dieu."