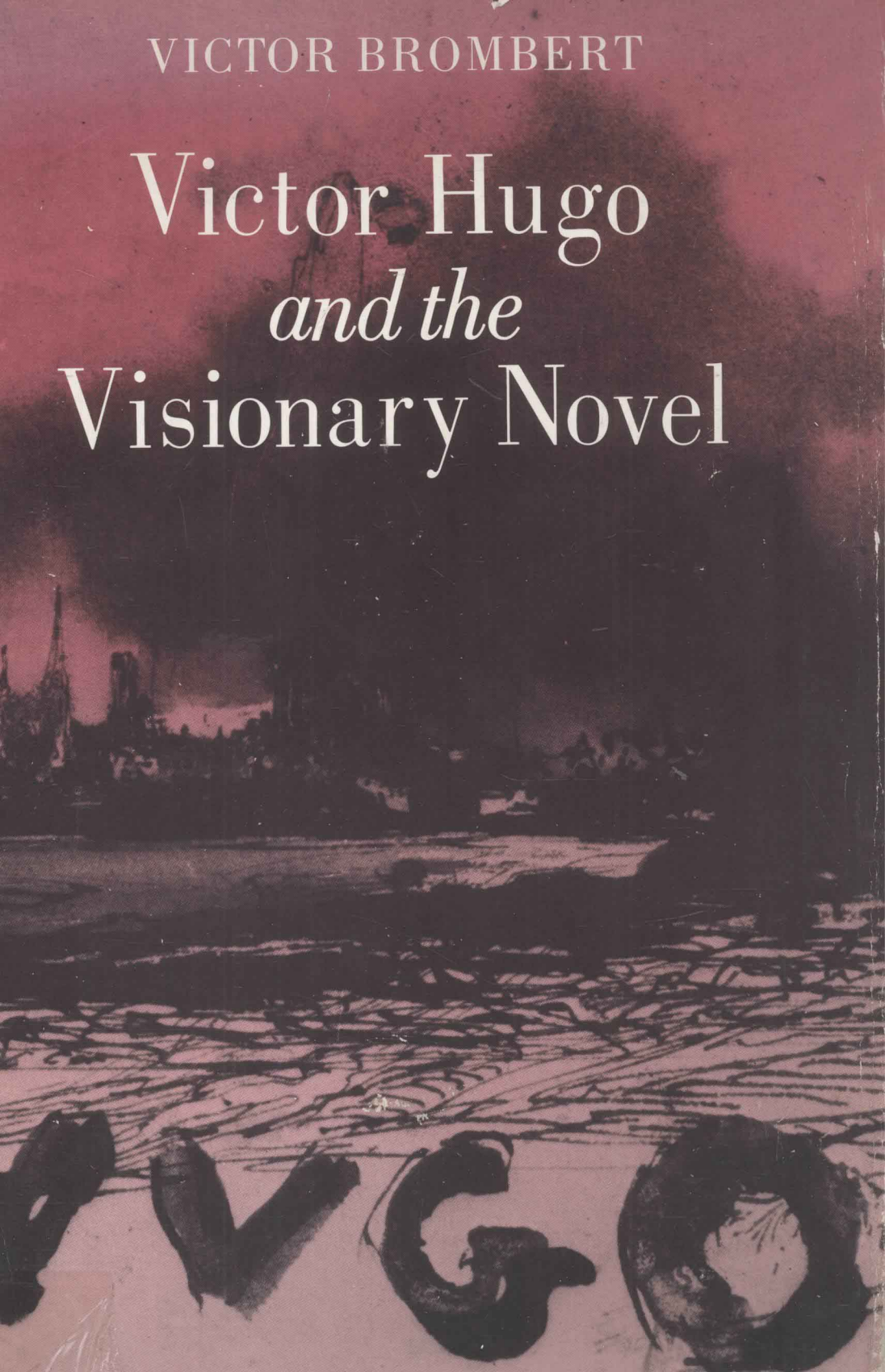
VICTOR BROMBERT

Victor Hugo *and the* Visionary Novel



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Harvard University Press
Cambridge, Massachusetts
and London, England
1984

Printed in the United States of America
10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

This book is printed on acid-free paper, and its binding materials have been chosen for strength and durability.

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Brombert, Victor H.
Victor Hugo and the visionary novel.
Bibliography: p.
Includes index.
1. Hugo, Victor, 1802–1885—Fictional works.
2. Myth in literature. I. Title.
PQ2304.M88B76 1984 843'.7 83-26584
ISBN 0-674-93550-0

To Beth

To Sheila and Jean Gaudon

Acknowledgments

I owe a special debt to a number of Hugo scholars: Pierre Albouy, Jean-Bertrand Barrère, André Brochu, Jean Gaudon, Claude Gély, Richard B. Grant, Guy Rosa, Jacques Seebacher, Anne Ubersfeld. Many of them contributed to Jean Massin's splendid chronological edition, which has become an indispensable working tool.

Conversations over the years with the late Pierre Albouy, and with my friends Sheila and Jean Gaudon, have been very enriching.

I also wish to express my gratitude to all those who have read Hugo with me at Princeton, as well as in seminars I offered at the Johns Hopkins University and the University of California at Berkeley.

Special thanks are due to Joseph Frank, whose friendship, intellectual presence, and penetrating comments on several of the chapters have been particularly inspiring.

A Senior Fellowship of the National Endowment for the Humanities enabled me to begin work on this book. Repeated assistance from the Princeton University Committee on Research in the Humanities and Social Sciences contributed to its completion.

Some sections of this book appeared in an earlier and quite different form in *Nineteenth-Century French Studies* 5 (Fall–Winter 1976–77); *New Literary History* 9 (Spring 1978); *The Romanic Review* 70 (March 1979); and *Stanford French Review* 3 (Fall 1979). For permission to reprint in a revised form I wish to thank the respective editors.

I am especially grateful to Maria Ascher, who has given the manuscript expert care; it is difficult to imagine a more highly qualified and attentive editor.

I am also indebted to Simone Balayé, Roger Pierrot, and Charles A. Porter for generously helping me obtain reproductions of Hugo's drawings, and to Ewa Lewis, Suzanne Sinton, and Carol Szymanski, who in various ways have provided much-valued assistance.

Finally, my loving thanks go to B.A.B., who may not suspect how much I owe her, but who knows, better than anyone else, why I had to write this book.

V.B.

Illustrations

The quality and variety of the more than two thousand drawings by Victor Hugo which are reproduced and catalogued in volumes 17 and 18 of Jean Massin's edition of the complete works (and it is far from a complete listing) would suffice to establish Hugo's reputation as a visionary artist. Many of these drawings can be seen at the Maison Victor Hugo, on the Place des Vosges in Paris. Others illustrate manuscripts held by the Bibliothèque Nationale. Still others are dispersed in various collections. Hugo's graphic work was for him an important form of self-expression. It often parallels his written work, at times precedes and inspires it. It often displays an obsession with his own name or initials. Hugo was in the habit of offering drawings to friends and family members. But he also liked to surround himself with his own favorite drawings.

The graphic works that illustrate this book have been selected because of their thematic relevance to the different chapters, as well as to the visionary nature of Hugo's imagination.

Titles in quotation marks are Hugo's own.

Following page 48:

1. Octopus. *Pieuvre*.
2. Conscience in front of an evil deed.
   "La conscience devant une mauvaise action."
3. The judge. *"Judex."*
4. The executioner. *"Le bourreau."*
5. The Vianden ruin seen through a spider web.
   La ruine de Vianden à travers une toile d'araignée.

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Contents

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Approaches

Le roman c'est le drame hors cadre.

The novels of Victor Hugo are as much of an anomaly as the legend of the man. To judge *Les Travailleurs de la mer* or *Les Misérables* by the standards of the French realist novel from Balzac to Zola is to miss the surprisingly modern nature of his fiction making, which undermines and decenters the subject, using character and plot to achieve the effects of visionary prose narrative. Hugo is as far removed from Stendhal's self-conscious and ironic lyricism as he is from Flaubert's obsessive concern for tight constructions and technical mastery. The dramatic and psychological power of Hugo's novels depends in large part on the creation of archetypal figures. Their poetic and thematic unity derives from his ability to conceive the linguistic analogue for larger forces at work. The sweep of his texts and the moving, even haunting visions they project are a function of the widest range of rhetorical virtuosity.

Hugo was perfectly aware of the magnitude of his undertaking. At the age of twenty-one, reviewing a novel by Walter Scott, he called for a new type of fiction that would give epic scope to the moral and social consciousness of his period. Years later, as he

approached the writing of *Les Misérables*, he wanted more than ever to achieve a fusion of epic and dramatic elements. Such a fusion, he felt, was the proper business of the novel—that new and unique literary phenomenon ("merveilleuse nouveauté littéraire") which also was a powerful social force. At the end of his career, surveying his own works, he was more than ever convinced that the novel—his kind of novel—was a drama too big to be performed on any stage. By his own definition, every one of his novels was a "drame hors des proportions ordinaires"—a drama of more than ordinary dimensions.[1]

During his lifetime, Hugo's reputation as poet and novelist was almost as enormous as his ambition. Though he had detractors, unrestrained praise from the most diverse quarters generally greeted his productions. When *Notre-Dame de Paris* appeared in 1831, Lamartine did not hesitate to refer to its author as the Shakespeare of the novel. Nor was the praise, echoing throughout the nineteenth century, limited to France. Swinburne, who felt that Hugo was one of the greatest elegiac and lyric poets, stood in awe of the sustained power and "terrible beauty" of his novels, hailing him as the greatest prose writer of his generation—in fact, "the greatest writer whom the world has seen since Shakespeare." Walter Pater, a somewhat more sober admirer, considered the energy, the "strangeness," the grim humor, and the compassion of Hugo's work characteristic expressions of the very best in Romanticism. Dostoevsky, who early in life had compared Hugo to Homer, not only insisted that *Les Misérables* was superior to *Crime and Punishment*, but continued to revere Hugo as a prophetic voice, as a modern spokesman for the idea of spiritual regeneration. In a similar vein, Tolstoy saw Hugo—especially Hugo the novelist—towering over his century as a model of the highest type of artistic and moral consciousness.[2]

Even masters of irony ceased being ironic when writing about him. Flaubert proclaimed that Hugo, more than anyone, had made his heart throb, that he simply adored the "immense vieux"—the grand old man. Compared to him, Flaubert felt, all other contemporary writers, himself included, looked pale: "Hugo . . . enfoncera

tout le monde." He admired the "power" and the "genius" of *Notre-Dame de Paris* and was dazzled by the "colossal" poetry of *La Légende des siècles*—"lines such as have never before been written." Likewise, Baudelaire asserted in a dithyrambic essay that modern French poetry would be poor indeed had this rare and providential poet not appeared. Baudelaire extolled Hugo's extraordinary verbal resources, his ability to decipher the great dictionary of nature, to dig into the inexhaustible treasure of the "universal analogy." And it is worth recalling that Rimbaud, who read Hugo's fiction the way one reads and relishes poetry ("*Les Misérables* sont un vrai poème") granted him privileged status in his celebrated literary credo known as "La Lettre du voyant."[3]

Does Hugo still speak to us? Or must his fame be attributed to a romantic taste for grandiose visions and myth making? The complex reactions of a figure such as Jean-Paul Sartre cast light on our own ambivalences. Sartre was unavoidably suspicious of Hugo's idealistic humanism. Having set out to denounce all literary *cléricatures*, as well as the implicit ideal of a communion in the absolute of art, Sartre could hardly be expected to endorse the vatic poet entranced by his self-appointed role as the spokesman for transcendence. (Sartre refers ironically to Hugo as the "favorite interviewer of God.") Yet Sartre recognized, with admiration and envy, that Hugo was the only French writer who had been able to reach the masses and who was still read by the working classes. It is only half ironically that, in *L'Idiot de la famille*, he speaks of Hugo as the supreme lord of his epoch, the "incontestable souverain du siècle." Sartre's own language grows surprisingly hyperbolic when he speaks of Hugo. He is not merely impressed by Hugo's prodigious vitality, by his sense of his own life as a project and destiny, and by his prestige in political exile, but refers to him as "cet homme étonnant"—a man endowed with almost superhuman power: "il possède je ne sais quelle puissance surhumaine."[4]

If Sartre consistently treats Hugo as exceptional in every sense of the word, despite Hugo's self-glorification as high priest of Literature and Word incarnate, it is doubtless because he rec-

ognized in him the supreme nineteenth-century exemplar of the committed, *engagé* writer. Sartre's views on the writer's function and responsibilities are explicitly set forth in *Qu'est-ce que la littérature?* and in the short manifesto introducing the first issue of *Les Temps Modernes*: the writer must not miss out on his time; he must espouse his period; he must avoid indifference and understand that silence can be shameful. More fundamentally, the writer must give society an uneasy conscience (*conscience malheureuse*) and will thereby necessarily clash with all conservative forces. Ultimately, the notion of *engagement* is philosophical: the acute awareness that evil is not simply a product or by-product; that it cannot be conveniently denied, reduced, or assimilated by the rhetoric of idealistic humanism; that it remains a hard reality and that literature has therefore an obligation to deal with "extreme situations." By Hugo's own definition there can be no innocent bystander, either in daily life or in the face of history. "Qui assiste au crime assiste le crime"—any bystander is necessarily an accomplice. Hugo's aphorism has, by anticipation, a Sartrian ring.[5]

To say, as did André Gide, that Hugo is the most powerful assembler of images and master of syntax in the French tradition is true enough, but is almost as wide of the mark as Gide's much-quoted "Victor Hugo, hélas!" Jean Cocteau's famous quip comes closer to the truth: "Victor Hugo was a madman who thought he was Victor Hugo."[6] For Hugo's supreme talent was essentially of a mythopoetic nature. He was able to convert personal experiences into a destiny, and then relate this destiny to the disturbing configurations of contemporary history. Facts and phantasms of a family drama (hostility between father and mother, rivalry between brother and brother) overlap and blend from the outset with the drama of external events (the Napoleonic adventure, Waterloo, the Restoration), thus creating a powerful bond among private obsessions, political evolution, and a strikingly personal reading of history. Hugo's literary consciousness, early in life, becomes the stage for a historical psychodrama whose symbolic actors are the Father, Napoleon, the King, and the guillotine. The true monsters, however, are within. It is by drawing them out into the open that

Hugo constructs himself; the man becomes a text. Hence the importance of literary documents such as *Promontorium somnii* and *William Shakespeare* which deal with the vertiginous poetry of dreams and the abyss of genius.

Perspectives change. Hugo no longer appears as the prodigious pyrotechnist posing as God's special interlocutor. The past two decades have brought into sharper focus—largely because of contemporary concerns—the relationship between poetic vision and ideology, as well as Hugo's love-hate relationship with history. Recurrent images in his work—the statue, the Tower of Babel, the spider, the human monster, the sea changes, the grimacing buffoon—can all be traced to a fundamental design. The well-known antitheses and oxymorons, the seditious tropes, far from proposing irreconcilable opposites, function as harmonizing elements. The prophetic voice can be related to Hugo's graphic art and to a morally inspired hallucination that makes him a brother to Goya. Yet the visionary thrust of his work is always controlled by a will to lucidity, by a longing for order. *Chaos vaincu*, the title of the allegorical play in the novel *L'Homme qui rit*, points to Hugo's need to overcome his own inner anarchy, as well as to the political tensions of the public figure trying to reconcile commitment to progress with allegiance to the past.

There is no denying that Hugo's name and vast body of writing fell into disfavor during the first half of the twentieth century. The reasons for this are complex. There was the obvious reaction against his glorification—indeed apotheosis—culminating in the magnificent funeral of a national hero. Yet despite the idolatry, or *hugolâtrie*, which extended beyond his death in 1885, Hugo remained misunderstood. He was emasculated by the pieties of the Third Republic, which fixed him in the statuesque pose of *père bénisseur* of democratic virtues; repressed by new generations of writers, who were uncomfortably aware of his crushing superiority; and betrayed by anthologies, which consistently included only his flashier or more sentimental pieces. Yet no writer's work is less suited to being immobilized in the display case of an anthology. Hugo set his sights not on the poem but on poetry, not on the novel but on

fiction making, not on the well-wrought artifact (though he is a splendid craftsman and lord of language) but on poetic process and becoming.

There has been, in recent years, a growing pattern of critical reassessment that has nothing to do with hagiography. Earlier work by J.-B. Barrère and Pierre Albouy set the tone and the high standards. In the 1960s the chronological edition of Hugo's complete works, under the editorship of Jean Massin, became the rallying point for a distinguished group of young scholars of unusual critical sensitivity—among them Jean Gaudon, Jacques Seebacher, Guy Rosa, Claude Gély, Henri Meschonnic, and Anne Ubersfeld, whose study of Hugo's theater (*Le Roi et le Bouffon*, 1974) has far-reaching implications. But whereas the poetry and the theater acquired a renewed luster in this modern perspective, the novels, in part because of their size and complexity, continued to pose a serious challenge to Hugo critics.

Yet modern theoretical concern with narrative and metaphor, ideology and tropes, myth and historiography—not to mention thematic and deconstructive readings that tend to question the centrality of the subject and the authority of the auctorial voice—should have been sufficient reason to explore the unusually fertile terrain of Hugo's prose fiction. It is, for instance, hard to imagine a fictional world that more strikingly anticipates Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of the novel as a problematic genre which, through parodic subversion of the canonic genres, not only undermines the hieratic world of the epic but defies all the hierarchies of established tradition, thus participating in a dynamic and essentially revolutionary process of renewal and becoming. According to Bakhtin, this transformational and future-oriented potential of the novel—by definition a noncanonical genre-in-the-making—finds its source in the tradition of Menippean satire, and its vivifying inspiration in the liberating forces of popular laughter.[7]

Nothing illustrates the dynamic tensions in Hugo's work better than the dialectics of laughter, which he repeatedly endows with revolutionary significance. Hugo in fact defines *revolution* as the hour of laughter; hence the importance of the king's buffoon: the

threatening grimace of the oppressed challenges the cruel laughter of the oppressor. The misshapen faun who faces the laughing gods on Olympus in Hugo's poem "Le Satyre," and who finally overpowers them with his cosmic song, is the mythical embodiment of a victory from below, of which there are many variations in his novels. But laughter is also the prerogative of the oneiric artist. In *Promontorium somnii* he refers to the hilarity of dreams; in the poem "Les Mages" he sees the creative genius as the high priest of laughter. The poet-novelist's visionary and political themes thus merge.

Hugo's prose narratives obviously cannot be approached as conventional novels. Paradoxically, this writer who aimed at, and succeeded in, reaching the largest possible public also made new and difficult demands on the reader. Closer to romance and myth than to the realist tradition, projecting linguistic and metaphoric structures that achieve what has been called the *roman poème*, the novels of Hugo, always steeped in a sociohistorical context, tend toward the elaboration of a new epic which no longer sings the heroic exploit but the moral adventure of man. Hugo converts politics into myth, much as he translates private obsessions into collective symbols. This transformational thrust is made possible by an exceptional stylistic and formal range. On the occasion of Balzac's funeral, Hugo let it be understood that for him the novel was a protean genre that takes on "all forms and all styles."[8]

The insistence on a multiplicity of tones and structural centers may indeed cast light on the originality of Hugo's fiction, for his novels tend to be centrifugal. As Jean Gaudon shrewdly observed in discussing the aesthetics of digression, Hugo deliberately undermines the monocentric conception of the novel, as part of a larger attempt to break with "pseudo-Aristotelian concepts."[9] Viewed in this perspective, Hugo appears at the origin of the modern "polycentric" novel—as the creator of a liberating but always problematic countercode.

Further complicating the problematic nature of Hugo's novels