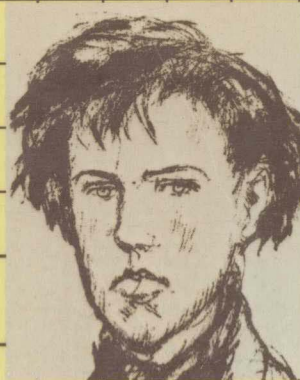
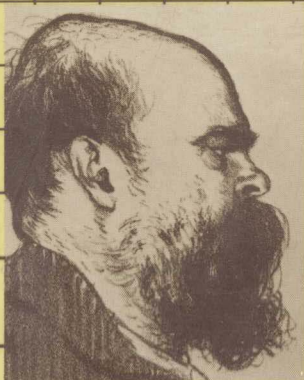
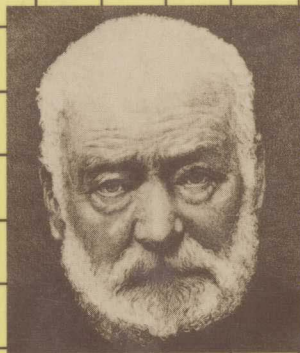
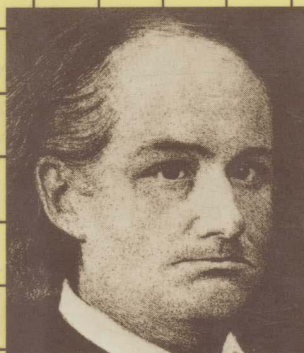


The Critical Cosmos Series

Edited and with an Introduction by HAROLD BLOOM

French Poetry: The Renaissance through 1915



THE CRITICAL COSMOS SERIES

*French Poetry: The Renaissance
through 1915*

Edited and with an introduction
by *HAROLD BLOOM*
Sterling Professor of the Humanities
Yale University



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Editor's Note

This volume brings together the best critical essays available in English upon French poetry (except for drama) from its true beginnings with Villon and Marguerite de Navarre through Apollinaire, who died fighting for France in World War I. I am grateful to Karin Cope and Chantal McCoy for their erudition and judgment in helping me to edit this volume.

My introduction studies the sequence of Hugo, Baudelaire, Mallarmé, and Rimbaud, emphasizing the role of Hugo as the inevitable point of departure for all who came after him.

The historic sequence begins with Jefferson Humphries' Gnostic interpretation of François Villon, emphasizing the psychic and sexual anarchy in Villon's violent vision. Robert D. Cottrell follows with his reading of Marguerite de Navarre's poetry, centering upon her rhetoric of tears, the falling cadence of her grief.

A very different rhetorical world opens in Maurice Scève's *Délie*, studied here by Elisabeth Guild, who deconstructs the sequence into "frames," with all their signs of fragmentation, plurality, and mobility. Ann Rosalind Jones sets forth the differences in the relation to male poetic tradition of the Renaissance women poets Louise Labé and Pernette du Guillet, who attempt to change the rules of the game of poetic influence.

Joachim Du Bellay's *Antiquités de Rome* is seen by Daniel Russell as a reconstruction of the cultural continuity of Rome by means of emblematic images. Ronsard's sonnets are analyzed by Terence C. Cave in terms of the poet's intelligent awareness of the incompatibility of poetry and experience. La Fontaine is celebrated in Ross Chambers's exposition on the delicious fable "Les Femmes et le secret."

We move to the Romantics with a meditation upon the consciousness of Lamartine by Georges Poulet, who finds in this poet without external forms an achieved impotence (as it were) not wholly unlike the celebrated

"sterility" of Mallarmé. Alfred de Vigny is viewed by Martha Noel Evans as a dismantler of the mirror of life and so as akin to Poulet's Lamartine, each blanched by the "purity" of his poetic language.

The titanic Victor Hugo, strongest poet of his nation's tradition, is first introduced by Joan C. Kessler, who centers upon his problematic image of the Tower of Babel. Margery Sabin traces the difference between Hugo's assertions of the poet's spiritual power, and the more ambitious visions of the English High Romantic poets.

The *Gaspard de la nuit* of Aloysius Bertrand is analyzed by Richard Sieburth as a sequence of paratexts. Gérard de Nerval, purest of visionary poets, is first seen by Shoshana Felman as a transformer of hallucination into the narrative of *Aurélia*, and then is deconstructed in his *Sylvie* by Rodolphe Gasché.

Georges Poulet returns in a mapping of Musset's consciousness of the immortal moment of love. High priest of art for art's sake, Gautier is analyzed in his fantastic writings by Albert B. Smith, who finds in them the quest for an ideal beauty.

Baudelaire receives two sharply distinct homages, the first from the late Paul de Man, most distinguished of deconstructors, the second from the Marxist Fredric Jameson. De Man shows the negating effects of figurative language in Baudelaire, while Jameson sees the poet as a post-modernist of a transfigured Sublime that affirms what crushes the self.

Barbara Johnson reflects upon Mallarmé's intertextual struggles with his prime precursor, Baudelaire, while James Lawler explicates Mallarmé's "Toast funèbre." Verlaine's poetic diction is examined by Carol de Dobay Rifelj, who finds in his use of slang and familiar language a more innovative poet than the lover of Rimbaud generally is taken to be.

Corbière's parodistic relation to the great Hugo is studied by Robert L. Mitchell, after which the reader's share in Lautréamont's *Maldoror* is set forth by Robin Lydenberg. Three of Rimbaud's verse poems are read by Marshall Lindsay as instances of the poetics of the seer of *Une Saison en enfer* and the *Illuminations*. Karin J. Dillman follows with an analysis of Rimbaud's profound questioning of the subject, his dark insight that the I is always an other.

Jules Laforgue's ironic balance is praised by Warren Ramsey. In this book's final essay, Dennis G. Sullivan reads Apollinaire's poetry as an intuition that denies the efficacy of all ontological claims.

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Introduction

I

In his *William Shakespeare* (1864), Hugo attempted to proclaim his own radical originality, as the prophet of French Romanticism:

The Nineteenth century springs only from itself; it does not receive an impulse from any ancestor; it is the child of an idea . . . but the Nineteenth century has an august mother, the French Revolution.

Even as Shakespeare had no poetic father (though one might argue for Chaucer, noting the link between the Wife of Bath and Falstaff), so Hugo, the nineteenth century incarnate, denied any precursor except the Revolution. It is true that the Bible and Shakespeare counted for more in Hugo's poetry than any French forerunners, at least once the early effect of Chateaubriand rapidly wore away. Blake, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Shelley, and Keats, turning themselves away from Pope, had the native tradition of Spenser, Shakespeare, and Milton to sustain them, but Hugo and his contemporaries could not see themselves similarly as a renaissance of the Renaissance. Boileau could be defied by Keats, charmingly and convincingly, but French literary culture can no more eliminate the influence of Boileau than French thought can cease to be Cartesian, despite the tyranny of German philosophy in France since the student upheavals of the later 1960s.

I myself always recall, with amiable zest, a train ride back from Princeton to Yale that I enjoyed a decade or so ago with the leading theoretician of Gallic deconstruction. We were recent friends, had encountered one another while lecturing separately at Princeton, and fell into cultural debate on the train. Deploing a belated French modernism that wholly absorbed

my friend, I urged the poetic strength of Victor Hugo as against that of the more fashionable Mallarmé. In honest amazement, my philosophic companion burst forth: "But, Harold, in France Victor Hugo is a poet read only by schoolchildren!"

It seems safe enough to prophesy that Hugo, like Shelley, always will bury his undertakers. He goes into English about as well as Shelley goes into French, so that there are no adequate translations of Hugo's poetry and there are not likely to be any. Yet curiously enough, Hugo is a poet who in some ways fits better into Anglo-American than into French literary tradition. He is, at his strongest, a mythopoeic or visionary poet akin to Blake and Shelley, as Swinburne first saw. Unfortunately, Hugo has nothing like Blake's conceptual powers and also he does not approximate the subtle, skeptical intellect of Shelley. Since he also lacked epic precursors in his own language, Hugo had the advantage neither of Blake's and Shelley's gifts, nor of their agonistic relationship to that mortal god, John Milton. Hugo had to become his own Milton, with rather mixed results, one must sadly admit, thinking of *La Fin de Satan* and *Dieu*. Astonishing as those curious epics are, they lack the authority of Hugo at his strongest, in "A Albert Dürer" and "Tristesse d'Olympio," "Sonnez, sonnez toujours" and "Booz endormi," "A Théophile Gautier" and "Orphée," and so many others. This is the authority of a Sublime directness: "Qu'il m'exauce. Je suis l'âme humaine chantant,/Et j'aime."

Whether or not table-rappings with assorted spooks sometimes helped to sabotage Hugo's eloquent directness, after 1853, is not clear to me. Seances seem to have been more benign for W. B. Yeats and James Merrill than they were for the already dangerously theomorphic Hugo. The spirits were tricky with Yeats, and are sometimes wicked with the urbane and kindly Merrill, but they seem to have been so thoroughly cowed by the overbearing Hugo as nearly everyone else was. Apocalyptic poetry is a dangerous genre, particularly if attempted at some length. Yeats shrewdly developed the dialectics of his eschatology in the two versions (1925, 1937) of his prose tract, *A Vision*, and then based apocalyptic lyrics like "The Second Coming" and "Leda and the Swan" upon the more sequestered exegetical work. Merrill, with insouciant audacity, follows Dante and Blake by incorporating his doctrinal speculations directly into *The Changing Light at Sandover*. Hugo is more puzzling, in that he never worked his preternatural revelations into a system, whether in prose or verse. Instead, he wrote titanic, fragmentary poems, that both expound and refuse to expound his cosmological imaginings. *La Fin de Satan*, *Dieu*, and much of *La Légende des siècles* form together the closest French equivalent to that great mode of English poetry of which *Paradise Lost* is the masterpiece, and Blake's *The Four Zoas*, Milton, and *Jerusalem*, Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound*, and Keats's two *Hyperion* fragments are the grand second wave.

La Fin de Satan began under the title of *Satan pardonné*, which is an oxymoron, since a pardoned Satan hardly could be Satan. But there is much

that is oxymoronic in the design and the rhetoric of Hugo's epic fragments. This is accompanied by a consistent parataxis, doubtless biblical in its stylistic origins, but beautifully subversive in Hugo's later rhetoric, since his syntax thus refuses traditional distinctions between higher and lower orders, up and down, heaven and the abyss. Here is Satan in the night, limning his best night-piece in *La Fin de Satan*:

Jadis, ce jour levant, cette lueur candide,
C'était moi.—Moi!—J'étais l'archange au front splendide,
La prunelle de feu de l'azur rayonnant.
Durant le ciel, la vie et l'homme; maintenant
Je suis l'astre hideux qui blanchit l'ossuaire.
Je portais le flambeau, je traîne le suaire;
J'arrive avec la nuit dans ma main; et partout
Où je vais, surgissant derrière moi, debout,
L'hydre immense de l'ombre ouvre ses ailes noires.

The cunning power of this is that Hugo's Satan, unlike Milton's, is no different in value before and after his fall. The syntax and the tropological pattern combine to make equal the rising light with its white glow and the supposedly hideous star that casts a white glow upon the boneyard. Satan as torchbearer or Lucifer is one with Satan trailing the winding sheet and arriving with night in his hand. An archangel making all things golden is neither better nor worse than the being behind whom the great hydra of darkness opens its black wings. This Satan hardly requires pardon. It is as though, for the later Hugo, there are no opposites, provided that the Sublime be intense enough.

Texture rather than architectonics is the strength of the later Hugo in verse. The lack of an epic precursor in French, or at least one that he could recognize, cost him a great deal. I remember his apocalyptic poems as individual passages or moments, not as fully achieved designs. If he was not Blake or Shelley or Keats, he remains their peer in great, isolated fragments, visions of an abyss that he had found for himself. He wrote his own elegy partly in his lament for Gautier, where he hymns the departure (though in 1872) of his own century, the Romantic nineteenth:

Passons; car c'est la loi; nul ne peut s'y soustraire;
Tout penche; et ce grand siècle avec tous ses rayons
Entre en cette ombre immense où pâles nous fuyons.
Oh! quel farouche bruit font dans le crépuscule
Les chênes qu'on abat pour le bûcher d'Hercule!
Les chevaux de la mort se mettent à hennir,
Et sont joyeux, car l'âge éclatant va finir;
Ce siècle altier qui sut dompter le vent contraire,
Expire . . . —Ô Gautier! toi, leur égal et leur frère,
Tu pars après Dumas, Lamartine et Musset.

L'onde antique est tarie où l'on rajeunissait;
 Comme il n'est plus de Styx il n'est plus de Jouvence.
 Le dur faucheur avec sa large lame avance
 Pensif et pas à pas vers le reste du blé;
 C'est mon tour; et la nuit emplit mon œil troublé
 Qui, devinant, hélas, l'avenir des colombes,
 Pleure sur des berceaux et sourit à des tombes.

The Hercules for whose pyre the great oaks are being filled so noisily is hardly Gautier, but is rather Booz (Boaz), whose eyes held light and grandeur, and who turned to God as naturally as he turned to himself, because the timelessness was already his own:

Le vieillard, qui revient vers la source première,
 Entre aux jours éternels et sort des jours changeants;
 Et l'on voit de la flamme aux yeux des jeunes gens,
 Mais dans l'oeil du vieillard on voit de la lumière.

II

Sartre ended his book on Baudelaire by insisting that this poet, like Emerson's ideal being, made his own circumstances:

But we should look in vain for a single circumstance for which he was not fully and consciously responsible. Every event was a reflection of that indecomposable totality which he was from the first to the last day of his life. He refused experience. Nothing came from outside to change him and he learned nothing.

Could there have been such a person? Can any poet refuse the experience of reading his precursors? Was Victor Hugo a circumstance for which Baudelaire was fully and consciously responsible? Valéry, who was (unlike Sartre) a theorist of poetic influence, thought otherwise:

Thus Baudelaire regarded Victor Hugo, and it is not impossible to conjecture what he thought of him. Hugo reigned; he had acquired over Lamartine the advantage of infinitely more powerful and more precise *working materials*. The vast range of his diction, the diversity of his rhythms, the superabundance of his images, crushed all rival poetry. But his work sometimes made concessions to the vulgar, lost itself in prophetic eloquence and infinite apostrophes. He flirted with the crowd, he indulged in dialogues with God. The simplicity of his philosophy, the disproportion and incoherence of the developments, the frequent contrasts between the marvels of detail and the fragility of the subject, the inconsistency of the whole—everything, in a word, which could shock and thus instruct and orientate a pitiless young observer toward

his future personal art—all these things Baudelaire was to note in himself and separate from the admiration forced upon him by the magic gifts of Hugo, the impurities, the imprudences, the vulnerable points in his work—that is to say, the possibilities of life and the opportunities for fame which so great an artist left to be gleaned.

With some malice and a little more ingenuity than is called for, it would be only too tempting to compare Victor Hugo's poetry with Baudelaire's, with the object of showing how exactly *complementary* the latter is to the former. I shall say no more. It is evident that Baudelaire sought to do what Victor Hugo had not done; that he refrained from all the effects in which Victor Hugo was invincible; that he returned to a prosody less free and scrupulously removed from prose; that he pursued and almost always captured the production of *unbroken charm*, the inappreciable and quasi-transcendent quality of certain poems—but a quality seldom encountered, and rarely in its pure state, in the immense work of Victor Hugo. . . .

Hugo never ceased to learn by practice; Baudelaire, the span of whose life scarcely exceeded the *half* of Hugo's, developed in quite another manner. One would say he had to compensate for the probable brevity and foreshadowed insufficiency of the short space of time he had to live, by the employment of that critical intelligence of which I spoke above. A score of years were vouchsafed him to attain the peak of his own perfection, to discover his personal field and to define a specific form and attitude which would carry and preserve his name. Time was lacking to realize his literary ambitions by numerous experiments and an extensive output of works. He had to choose the shortest road, to limit himself in his gropings, to be sparing of repetitions and divergences. He had therefore to seek by means of analysis what he was, what he could do, and what he wished to do; and to unite, in himself, with the spontaneous virtues of a poet, the sagacity, the skepticism, the attention and reasoning faculty of a critic.

One can transpose this simply enough into very nearly any of the major instances of poetic influence in English. Attempt Wallace Stevens, a true peer of Valéry, but with a more repressed or disguised relation to Whitman than Baudelaire manifested towards Hugo:

It is evident that Wallace Stevens sought to do what Walt Whitman had not done; that he refrained from all the effects in which Walt Whitman was invincible; that he returned to a prosody less free and scrupulously removed from prose; that he pursued and almost always captured the production of *unbroken charm*, the inappreciable and quasi-transcendent quality of certain poems—but a qual-

ity seldom encountered, and rarely in its pure state, in the immense work of Walt Whitman.

Valéry, unlike both Formalist and Post-Structuralist critics, understood that Hugo was to French poetry what Whitman was to American poetry and Wordsworth was to all British poetry after him: the inescapable precursor. Baudelaire's Hugo problem was enhanced because the already legendary poetic father was scarcely twenty years older than the gatherer of *Les Fleurs de mal*. All French literary movements are curiously belated in relation to Anglo-American literature. Current French sensibility of the school of Derrida is merely a revival of the Anglo-American literary Modernism of which Hugh Kenner remains the antiquarian celebrant. "Post-Structuralist Joyce" is simply Joyce as we read and discussed him when I was a graduate student, thirty-five years ago. In the same manner, the French Romanticism of Hugo in 1830 repeated (somewhat unknowingly) the movement of British sensibility that produced Wordsworth and Coleridge, Byron and Shelley and Keats, of whom the first two were poetically dead, and the younger three long deceased, well before Hugo made his revolution.

Baudelaire started with the declaration that the Romanticism of 1830 could not be the Romanticism (or anything else) of 1845. T. S. Eliot, as was inevitable, cleansed Baudelaire of Romanticism, baptized the poet an Original Sinner and a Neo-Classicist, and even went so far as to declare the bard of Lesbos a second Goethe. A rugged and powerful literary thinker, Baudelaire doubtless would have accepted these amiable distortions as compliments, but they do not help much in reading him now.

His attitude towards Hugo, always tinged with ambivalence, became at times savage, but a student of poetic influence learns to regard such a pattern as one of the major modes of misprision, of that strong misreading of strong poets that permits other strong poets to be born. *The Salon of 1845* blames the painter Boulanger on poor Hugo:

Here we have the last ruins of the old romanticism—this is what it means to come at a time when it is the accepted belief that inspiration is enough and takes the place of everything else; this is the abyss to which the unbridled course of Mazeppa has led. It is M. Victor Hugo that has destroyed M. Boulanger—after having destroyed so many others; it is the poet that has tumbled the painter into the ditch. And yet M. Boulanger can paint decently enough—look at his portraits. But where on earth did he win his diploma as history-painter and inspired artist? Can it have been in the prefaces and odes of his illustrious friend?

That Baudelaire was determined not to be destroyed by Hugo was clear enough, a determination confirmed by the rather invidious comparison of Delacroix to Hugo in *The Salon of 1846*:

Up to the present, Eugène Delacroix has met with injustice. Criticism, for him, has been bitter and ignorant; with one or two noble exceptions, even the praises of his admirers must often have seemed offensive to him. Generally speaking, and for most people, to mention Eugène Delacroix is to throw into their minds goodness knows what vague ideas of ill-directed fire, of turbulence, of hazardous inspiration, of confusion, even; and for those gentlemen who form the majority of the public, pure chance, that loyal and obliging servant of genius, plays an important part in his happiest compositions. In that unhappy period of revolution of which I was speaking a moment ago and whose numerous errors I have recorded, people used often to compare Eugène Delacroix to Victor Hugo. They had their romantic poet; they needed their painter. This necessity of going to any length to find counterparts and analogues in the different arts often results in strange blunders; and this one proves once again how little people knew what they were about. Without any doubt the comparison must have seemed a painful one to Eugène Delacroix, if not to both of them; for if my definition of romanticism (intimacy, spirituality and the rest) places Delacroix at its head, it naturally excludes M. Victor Hugo. The parallel has endured in the banal realm of accepted ideas, and these two preconceptions still encumber many feeble brains. Let us be done with these rhetorical ineptitudes once and for all. I beg all those who have felt the need to create some kind of aesthetic for their own use and to deduce causes from their results, to make a careful comparison between the productions of these two artists.

M. Victor Hugo, whose nobility and majesty I certainly have no wish to belittle, is a workman far more adroit than inventive, a labourer much more correct than *creative*. Delacroix is sometimes clumsy, but he is essentially creative. In all his pictures, both lyric and dramatic, M. Victor Hugo lets one see a system of uniform alignment and contrasts. With him even eccentricity takes symmetrical forms. He is in complete possession of, and coldly employs, all the modulations of rhyme, all the resources of antithesis and all the tricks of apposition. He is a composer of the decadence or transition, who handles his tools with a truly admirable and curious dexterity. M. Hugo was by nature an academician even before he was born, and if we were still living in the time of fabulous marvels, I would be prepared to believe that often, as he passed before their wrathful sanctuary, the green lions of the Institut would murmur to him in prophetic tones, "Thou shalt enter these portals."

For Delacroix justice is more sluggish. His works, on the contrary, are poems—and great poems, *naïvely* conceived and executed with the usual insolence of genius. In the works of the former

there is nothing left to guess at, for he takes so much pleasure in exhibiting his skill that he omits not one blade of grass nor even the reflection of a street-lamp. The latter in his works throws open immense vistas to the most adventurous imaginations. The first enjoys a certain calmness, let us rather say a certain detached egoism, which causes an unusual coldness and moderation to hover above his poetry—qualities which the dogged and melancholy passion of the second, at grips with the obstinacies of his craft, does not always permit him to retain. One starts with detail, the other with an intimate understanding of his subject; from which it follows that one only captures the skin, while the other tears out the entrails. Too earthbound, too attentive to the superficialities of nature, M. Victor Hugo has become a painter in poetry; Delacroix, always respectful of his ideal, is often, without knowing it, a poet in painting.

This is grand polemical criticism, deliciously unfair to the greatest French poet ever. Hugo is now adroit, but not inventive; a correct laborer, but not creative. Few critical remarks are as effectively destructive as "with him even eccentricity takes symmetrical forms." Hugo is somehow a mere, earthbound painter of nature and an academic impostor doomed from birth to be an institutional pillar. Baudelaire's stance towards Hugo over the next decade became yet more negative, so that it is at first something of a surprise to read his letters to the exiled Hugo in 1859. Yet the complex rhetoric of the letters is again wholly human, all-too-human, in the agon of poetic influence:

So now I owe you some explanations. I know your works by heart and your prefaces show me that I've overstepped the theory you generally put forward on the alliance of morality and poetry. But at a time when society turns away from art with such disgust, when men allow themselves to be debased by purely utilitarian concerns, I think there's no great harm in exaggerating a little in the other direction. It's possible that I've protested too much. But that was in order to obtain what was needed. Finally, even if there were a little Asiatic fatalism mixed up in my reflections I think that would be pardonable. The terrible world in which we live gives one a taste for isolation and fatality.

What I wanted to do above all was to bring the reader's thoughts back to that wonderful little age whose true king you were, and which lives on in my mind like a delicious memory of childhood. . . .

The lines I enclose with this letter have been knocking around in my brain for a long time. The second piece was written with the *aim of imitating you* (laugh at my absurdity, it makes me laugh myself) after I'd reread some poems in your collections, in which

such magnificent charity blends with such touching familiarity. In art galleries I've sometimes seen wretched art students copying the works of the masters. Well done or botched, these imitations sometimes contained, unbeknownst to the students, something of their own character, be it great or common. Perhaps (perhaps!) that will excuse my boldness. When *The Flowers of Evil* reappears, swollen with three times as much material as the Court suppressed, I'll have the pleasure of inscribing at the head of these poems the name of the poet whose works have taught me so much and brought such pleasure to my youth.

"That wonderful little age" doubtless referred to the Romanticism of the Revolution of 1830, that enchanted moment when Victor Hugo was king. But the true reference is to the nine-year-old Baudelaire, who found in his precursor "a delicious memory of childhood," and no mere likeness. When Baudelaire goes on to speak of imitation he cannot forbear the qualification "something of their own character, great or common." A few months later, sending his poem "The Swan" to Hugo, he asked that the poem be judged "with your paternal eyes." But, a year later, Baudelaire again condemned Hugo for "his concern with contemporary events . . . the belief in progress, the salvation of mankind by the use of balloons, etc."

The whip of ambivalence lashed back and forth in Baudelaire. Though a believer in salvation through balloons, the bardic Hugo was also, in his bad son's estimate, a force of nature: "No other artist is so universal in scope, more adept at coming into contact with the forces of the universe, more disposed to immerse himself in nature." That might seem definitive, but later Baudelaire allowed himself this diatribe, which hardly dents the divine precursor:

Hugo thinks a great deal about Prometheus. He has placed an imaginary vulture on a breast that is never lacerated by anything more than the flea-bites of his own vanity. . . .

Hugo-the-Almighty always has his head bowed in thought; no wonder he never sees anything except his own navel.

It is painful to read this; more painful still to read the references to Hugo in Baudelaire's letters of 1865-66. One moment, in its flash of a healthier humor, renders a grand, partly involuntary tribute to the normative visionary who both inspired and distressed Baudelaire:

It appears that he and the Ocean have quarreled! Either he has not the strength to bear the Ocean longer, or the Ocean has grown weary of his presence.

To confront, thus again, the rock-like ego of that force of nature, your poetic father, is to admit implicitly that he returns in his own colors, and not in your own.