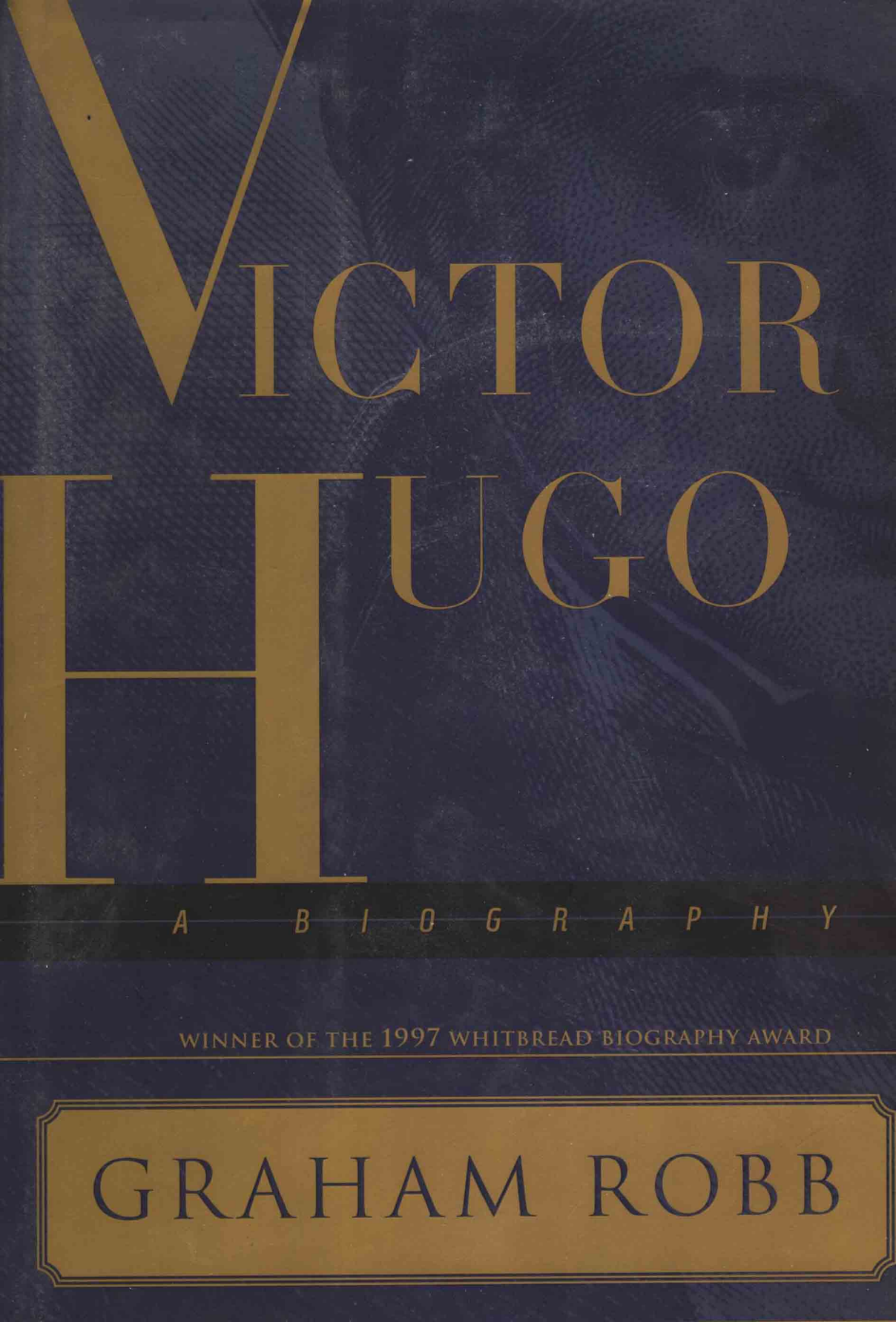
VICTOR HUGO
A BIOGRAPHY
WINNER OF THE 1997 WHITBREAD BIOGRAPHY AWARD
GRAHAM ROBB

Graham Robb

VICTOR HUGO

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List of Illustrations

Section One

1. General Léopold Hugo, with his brothers, Louis-Joseph and François-Juste (Francis) and VH's brother Abel. By Julie Duvidal de Montferrier. (*Bulloz; Maison de Victor Hugo*)
2. Sophie Hugo. Anonymous. (*Bulloz; Maison de Victor Hugo*)
3. Eugène Hugo. (*Bulloz; Maison de Victor Hugo*)
4. Marquesa de Montehermoso ('Pepita'), by Goya. (*Giraudon; private collection*)
5. Adèle Foucher. (*Bulloz; Maison de Victor Hugo*)
6. VH at the Coronation of Charles X. (*Bulloz; Maison de Victor Hugo*)
7. *Les Orientales* (1829), title page and frontispiece. (*Bulloz; Maison de Victor Hugo*)
8. First night of *Hernani* (1830), by Grandville. (*Bulloz; Maison de Victor Hugo*)
9. Sainte-Beuve, 1844. (*Roger-Viollet; Bibliothèque Universitaire de la Sorbonne*)
10. Juliette Drouet in 1832, by A. Léon-Noël. (*Bulloz; Musée Carnavalet*)
11. Léopoldine, daughter of VH, by Auguste de Châtillon. (*Bulloz; Maison de Victor Hugo*)
12. VH with his son François-Victor in 1836, by Auguste de Châtillon. (*Bulloz; Maison de Victor Hugo*)
13. VH in 1837, by Louis Boulanger. (*Bulloz; private collection*)

14. Adèle, wife of VH, in 1838, by Louis Boulanger. (*Bulloz; Maison de Victor Hugo*)
15. 6, Place Royale (Place des Vosges). (*Bulloz*)
16. VH in Benjamin Roubaud's 'Panthéon Charivarique' (1841). (*Bulloz; Maison de Victor Hugo*)
17. 'Barricades before the attack' Rue Saint-Maur, 25 June 1848. (*Collection Comte Geoffroy de Beauffort. Photo Gérard Leyris, Bibliothèque Historique de la Ville de Paris.*)
18. Marine Terrace (Jersey), by VH. (*Bulloz; Maison de Victor Hugo*)

Section Two

19. François-Victor, Adèle, Mme Hugo, Charles and VH, by A. Garnier. (*Bulloz; Maison de Victor Hugo*)
20. 'Victor Hugo listening to God', by his sons, 1856. (*Bulloz; Maison de Victor Hugo*)
21. Hauteville House. (*Bulloz; Maison de Victor Hugo*)
22. Hauteville House: the Oak Gallery. (*Roger-Viollet*)
23. Hauteville House: the 'look-out'. (*Bulloz; Maison de Victor Hugo*)
24. Adèle, daughter of VH. (*Bulloz; Maison de Victor Hugo*)
25. Frontispiece for *Les Travailleurs de la Mer*. (*Bulloz; Bibliothèque Nationale*)
26. Manuscript of *L'Homme Qui Rit*, fo285. (*Bibliothèque Nationale*)
27. 'The Imperial Eagle blasted by *Les Châtiments*', by H. Daumier. (*Bulloz; Maison de Victor Hugo*)
28. Funeral of Charles Hugo, Paris, 1871, by Daniel Vierge. (*Bulloz; Maison de Victor Hugo*)
29. Blanche Lanvin. Anonymous. (*Photothèque des Musées de la Ville de Paris; SPADEM*)
30. VH in 1879, by Léon Bonnat. (*Bulloz; Maison de Victor Hugo*)
31. VH and his grandchildren, Jeanne and Georges. (*Bulloz; Maison de Victor Hugo*)
32. Juliette Drouet in 1883, by Bastien-Lepage. (*Bulloz; Maison de Victor Hugo*)

33. VH with Paul Meurice and Auguste Vacquerie at Veules-les-Roses, c. 1883–4. (*Bulloz; Maison de Victor Hugo*)
34. VH on his deathbed, by Nadar. (*Phototbèque des Musées de la Ville de Paris; SPADEM*)
35. VH's funeral procession arrives at the Panthéon, by E. Lampué (*Bulloz; Maison de Victor Hugo*)

Introduction

WHEREVER ONE LOOKS in the nineteenth century, there is a Victor Hugo – each one accompanied by its contradiction: the angelic child prodigy of the early Romantics and the satanic 'Attila of the French language';[1] the militant monarchist and the revolutionary socialist; the symbol of a corrupt aristocracy and defender of the *misérables*; a represser of revolts and instigator of riots.

By the time he fled the country in 1851, Hugo was the most famous living writer in the world, the founder of two distinct phases of Romanticism. His influence on French literature was second only to that of the Bible. In the long night of exile, faced with a new audience – the ocean – he discovered a new set of identities: the visionary poet who invented a religion and received personal compliments on his work from Jesus Christ and Shakespeare; the hero of freedom-fighters from Serbia to South America.

Hugo returned to Paris at the end of the Empire in 1870 as a gigantic oxymoron who seemed single-handedly to represent the history of France since the Revolution. When he died in 1885, he was followed to his tomb by a crowd which outnumbered the usual population of Paris. The obituaries turned out to be premature: it emerged that only two-thirds of Hugo's work had been published in his lifetime. Seventeen years after his death, the corpus had swollen to include seven novels, eighteen volumes of poetry, twenty-one plays, a small museum of paintings and drawings, and approximately three million words of history, criticism, travel writing and philosophy. Now that the fragments of *Océan* and the coded diaries have been published, Hugo seems to have erred on the side of modesty when he

hoped that his complete works would form 'a multiple book that sums up a whole century'.[2]

Our own century has added several Hugos of its own: the prophet of Surrealism, two World Wars and the European Community; the principal saint of a Vietnamese religion; the General de Gaulle of French letters and hero of the French Left; the popular classic whose works have spawned adaptations often profoundly opposed to the spirit of the originals; the cross-party monarch of a French Republic which commemorated the centenary of his death in 1985 with a nationwide spate of exhibitions, postcards and videos.

This proliferation of Victor Hugos has had an unexpected consequence: each separate Hugo has fallen into a kind of obscurity or been tidied away under the heading of Cocteau's distracting paradox: 'Victor Hugo was a madman who thought he was Victor Hugo.'[3] The disputatious rabble of his writing was not invited to the celebration of its own revolution. Twelve years on, the epic edition of the *Correspondance Familiale* has been arrested at 1839 by the commercial *coup d'état* of a publisher. France now has several miles of Boulevards Victor Hugo and a small population of busts, bas-reliefs and statues, but there is still no complete, scholarly edition of his works and letters. It was in exile in the Channel Islands that Hugo plumbed his own depths and found his widest audience. Definitions of 'Hugoesque' in *The Oxford English Dictionary* unfortunately suggest a similar eclipse of the work by the image in Britain. In 1893, 'Hugoesque' was a synonym of Romantic–Medieval. By 1960, it had acquired a different connotation: 'Almost Hugoesque in his unflagging pursuit of maids'.[4]

THIS BIOGRAPHY had one of its origins in the bowels of the ferry that mysteriously stops its engines in mid-Channel and sits in total darkness for several hours before sailing for Guernsey with the first light of dawn. Trapped on the ocean, I began to read the novel which George Saintsbury called 'the maddest book in recognized literature':[5] *L'Homme Qui Rit*. It had been written a short distance across the water on the top floor of a house which might be called the maddest building in the history of domestic architecture: Hauteville House.

A few months later, I started work with a sense of righteous excitement that the magnificent delusions of works like *L'Homme Qui Rit* were still being locked away during official visits, and with a nagging sense of personal ignorance. Hugo always ended up occupying a large part of anything I wrote on the French nineteenth century. His name came up in conversations and tutorials on apparently unrelated subjects. Several of his poems had recorded themselves in memory to be declaimed in moments of guaranteed privacy. Hugo himself remained a mystery. I knew the Romantic boot that marched into the Comédie Française in 1830, the fist that 'confiscated' French verse for the best part of a century, the eye of conscience that stared at Napoleon III from the Channel Islands, and, inevitably, the token of another kind of virility that Hugo poetically called his 'lyre'; but I had never seen the giant as a whole.

This book is an attempt to explore Victor Hugo in his entirety by using the work on which he lavished the greatest amount of love and ingenuity: his life.

THE FIRST BIOGRAPHIES of Hugo were a small, inbred community spawned by two squabbling parents: the adulatory account of Hugo's life up to 1841 written by his wife and doctored by his disciples – possibly the most plagiarized book in French literature – and Edmond Biré's three vitriolic testaments to the disappointments of growing up (1883, 1891 and 1894). A devout Catholic and passionate admirer of Hugo in his youth, Biré followed the advice of his Bishop to treat *Les Misérables* as a thing of Satan and produced a relentlessly negative image of a self-inflated balloon who held the gaze of the myrmidons below for seventy years, showering them with lies and beautiful poems. For one side, Hugo was 'a hero of humanity'; for the other, a hypocrite and a traitor who cheated and scrimped his way to fame and fortune.

Each of these biographers wrote with only one eye open at a time, and while, from a scholarly point of view, one might prefer Biré's black eye-patch to the rose-tinted monocle of the Hugophiles, both sides laboured under self-imposed constraints which made it impossible for them to be honest. Hugo was so enmeshed in French cultural

institutions and their historical controversies that studies written by his compatriots were often more closely related to polemic than to literary criticism. Significantly, the fairest early biographies were Frank Marzials' *Life of Victor Hugo* (London, 1888) and J. Pringle Nichol's *Sketch of His Life and Work* (London and New York, 1893).

Even when scholarly habits began to prevail, Hugo's biographers were hampered by the self-defeating discretion of the forty-five-volume 'Imprimerie Nationale' edition (1904–52), flaunting its omissions on unnecessarily large and expensive pages. It ended with four volumes of carefully weeded correspondence, edited by a woman who was rumoured to be one of Hugo's unacknowledged daughters. It presented the image of a model father and husband, the tireless grandfather of French letters who suffered five generations of little poets to worship at his feet. Similarly asphyxiated by incense, Hugo's mistress of fifty years, Juliette Drouet, had her 20,000 love letters boiled down by Paul Souchon to 1001 monotonous examples of self-macerating devotion, offering the unnuanced image of a clinging psychopath – an 'act of piety' which was in reality a monument to the editor's unconscious misogyny and a serious distortion of a complex relationship.

A new age of Hugo biography began in 1954 with André Maurois's reputable *Olympio*, continued in its benign spirit by Alain Decaux's *Victor Hugo* (1984). Both lean heavily to the early years, before Hugo sailed for England. Hubert Juin's three-volume *Victor Hugo* (1980–86) is a narrative chronology which turns the Jean Massin 'Édition Chronologique' into continuous prose. All three decline to investigate the parts of Hugo's genius that appeared to take the form of deliberate deception. Biographers may still be prone to what Macaulay termed the 'disease of admiration'. Hugo's biographers have suffered more particularly from the disease of discretion. The best biographies of Hugo, in fact, are not biographies at all but editions and studies in which analysis or simple fidelity to the texts makes it possible to peel away the layers of legend to see whether anything is left in the middle: Jean Gaudon's *Le Temps de la Contemplation* (1969), Victor Brombert's *Victor Hugo and the Visionary Novel* (1984), and the editorial explorations of Pierre Albouy, Jean-Bertrand Barrère, Evelyn Blewer, Jean and Sheila Gaudon, Pierre Georgel, Henri Guillemin,

A. R. W. James, René Journet, Bernard Leuilliot, Jean Massin, Guy Robert and Jacques Seebacher.

The last life of Victor Hugo in English (1976) deserves a special place as an example of political propaganda surviving the regime that produced it: in this case, the Second Empire (1852–70). As Hugo wrote of a similar historical anomaly: 'This rejuvenation of a corpse is surprising.'[6] Nourished by lies long since disproved, it briefly describes a self-serving, ignorant megalomaniac inexplicably adored by the French as their greatest poet. It is in parts an unacknowledged paraphrase of other biographies. The plot summaries, also unattributed, are lifted, with minute changes, from the old *Oxford Companion to French Literature* (1959). Each borrowed passage is followed by a judgement from the biographer's own pen: 'cumbersome plot', 'the plot and characters ... do not bear analysis', 'has long since become unreadable', etc. Works – even major works – not described by the *Companion* are not mentioned in the biography.

Hugo's fond belief that misdeeds come with their own punishment does not in this case seem overly optimistic. It is fair to assume that the magpie biographer never had the pleasure of reading some of the most exciting works of Romantic literature. According to the introduction, 'The task of writing a life so full, so complex, so exhaustively documented, has clearly daunted many biographers. No English writer, until now, has attempted to write a critical biography'. This remark has remained true.

The present biography was intended primarily to provide its author with an excuse to spend four years reading the works of Victor Hugo. It contains new letters, verses, anecdotes, facts and sources. Some mysteries have been solved, others created. Unknown editions and publications have come to light. Information on 'the most obnoxious'[7] of French exiles as he appeared in the prying eyes of Scotland Yard and the Home Office is new. Many of the quotations from Hugo's works and letters have never before appeared out of French – not necessarily a sign of progress in Hugo's view: 'How does one recognize intelligence in a nation? By its ability to speak French.'[8]

Translations from the poems are unavoidably utilitarian and give about as much idea of the original as a written description would of a piece of music. Elucidations which concern the history of Hugo's

biographies rather than the story of his life or which open up divergent lines of enquiry have been removed to the archival attic, accessible by the hidden staircases marked with note numbers. The largest of these has been given a room to itself (Appendix III).

A handful of anachronistic allusions to computers and the like are intended to illuminate rather than trivialize, to suggest that Hugo's brain is not the exclusive property of the nineteenth century, and to serve as reminders that the past is not a theme park or a refuge from the present.

This is the first fully referenced biography of Hugo in any language. It is based on direct exposure to the works of a writer who was once described as 'an element of Nature'. I have accepted the umbrellas of other biographies only when they had some precise find to offer or when they exemplified a particular attitude. Since approximately 3000 words are published every day on Victor Hugo, it will be several lifetimes before I can claim to have read everything that has ever been written about him. The exhaustive, 'definitive' biography is in any case a myth: the only possible complete biography would be the life of a plant or a worm – unless, that is, one accepted Hugo's view that even stones have souls. The test of a biographer lies in the willingness to discard and select. I have tried to offer the reader a mine of information without including the slag heap.

Biographers of famous writers who believe in their own originality are of course happily deluded. It is usual to talk of one's 'debt' to editors and critics. In most cases, 'free gift' would be nearer the mark. The mainstays of this biography are the epic Jean Massin edition and the more recent *Oeuvres Complètes* in the 'Bouquins' series, which became more complete as it went along. Without the work of several generations of editors, it would be impossible to survive in the subterranean labyrinth of Hugo's works, to identify unknown objects and observe its processes before re-emerging in the expected place and in a more or less presentable condition.

For illumination, I am grateful to Jean-Paul Avice, Alain Brunet, Robert Ellwood, Jean and Sheila Gaudon, Charles Hambrick, Danielle Molinari, Geoffrey Neate, James Patty, Claude Pichois, Stephen Roberts and Adrian Tahourdin, and to the following institutions: Taylor Institution Library, Bodleian Library, Bibliothèque

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I am happy to say that every page of this biography owes an unreasonably large debt to Margaret.

GRAHAM ROBB

139 Hollow Way
Oxford OX4 2NE

Contents

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS ix

INTRODUCTION xiii

PART ONE

1. A Sabre in the Night (1802–1803)
3

2. Secrets (1804–1810)
17

3. The Disasters of War (1811–1815)
31

4. Metromania (1815–1818)
48

5. *Passion* (1818–1820)
68

6. The Demon Dwarf (1821–1824)
87

PART TWO

7. Traitors (1824–1827)
107

8. ■ (1828–1830)
131

9. What the Concierge Saw (1831–1833)
158

10. Olympio (1833–1839)
186

11. 'Dark Doors Stand Open in the Invisible' (1839–1843)
212

12. Criminal Conversation (1843–1848)
241

PART THREE

13. Mount Sinai and a Pile of Rubbish (1848–1851)
273

14. Poetic Injustice (1851–1852)
296

15. Strange Horizon (1852–1855)
316

16. '*Hu*! Go!' (1855–1861)
342

17. '*Merde*!' (1862)
376

18. Salvage (1863–1868)
395

19. Stations of the Cross (1868–1870)
421

PART FOUR

20. *L'Année Terrible* (1870–1871)
447

21. '*Because*' (1871–1873)
472

22. 'A Man Who Thinks of Something Else' (1874–1878)
491

23. 'To Love is to Act' (1878–1885)
507

24. God (1885)
525

EPILOGUE. Hugo After Hugo
533

APPENDICES

I. FAMILY TREES 545

II. PRINCIPAL PUBLISHED WORKS 550

III. 'GASTIBELZA, LE FOU DE TOLÈDE' 553

NOTES 555

SELECT BIBLIOGRAPHY 621

GENERAL INDEX 651

INDEX OF WORKS 677

INDEX OF CHARACTERS 681

Part One