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Bradley Stephens, *Victor Hugo*. Critical Lives. London: Reaktion Books, 2019. 224 pp. Illustrations, references, notes, and bibliography. £11.99 U.K. (pb). ISBN 978-1789140842.

Review by Timothy Raser, University of Georgia.

To write a writer's biography entails compression and abbreviation, to say nothing of truncation of his or her life's work. In Victor Hugo's case this project becomes even more difficult, given the length of his life, the number of years during which he published significant works, the volume of works published, and the domains—literary and other—that he occupied. The overwhelming aspect of Hugo's importance has given rise to witticisms whose formal brevity contrasts with his gigantic reputation: "Victor Hugo, hélas!" ("Victor Hugo, alas!"), Gide is supposed to have said in answer to the question: "Who is France's greatest poet?" "Mais, il faut comprendre, c'était Victor Hugo!" ("You've got to understand: it was Victor Hugo!"), responded the Besançon doctor when his wife complained that he had spent the entire night delivering a woman of her baby. More to the point, however, is Cocteau's barb: "Victor Hugo était un fou qui se croyait Victor Hugo," ("Victor Hugo was a madman who thought he was Victor Hugo"), where the man is compared to the legend and is found lacking, a lack that is labelled "folly."

Such sallies come to mind whenever a "life" of Victor Hugo appears, and especially Bradley Stephens's contribution to the Reaktion Books "Critical Lives" series, which "present[s] the work of leading cultural figures of the modern period. Each book explores the life of the artist...in question and relates it to their major works" (p. 2), and does so in two hundred pages or so of text, punctuated with a few dozen illustrations and followed by ten pages of references and a five-page bibliography. This series is intended for an English audience, one familiar with Hugo but not necessarily at ease reading French. Stephens thus puts all citations in English translation, and where published ones exist, uses those. Page references are to the Robert Laffont edition of Hugo's works from the eighties, and references to translations tend to push the reader to twenty-first-century editions. With these restrictions the question arises: how is one to perform the compression, abbreviation, and amputations required by the series, and what can be lopped off without being missed? An apposite question, but one especially germane to a volume on Hugo, who dated his coming of age as a writer to his declaration of opposition to the guillotine.[1]

To be clear: Stephens has not left a vital member behind, nor has he given undue weight to one achievement over another. His account of Hugo's major writings is scrupulously fair, giving measured accounts of his poems, his plays, his novels, his travel writings, and his speeches. More importantly, he refuses to allow one facet of Hugo's personality to eclipse others, acknowledging and even celebrating the about-faces and contradictions of his life, without seeking to explain

them as corollaries of larger principles: “a man of contrasts... a life and mind driven by conviction but vulnerable to collapse, whose appetite for grandeur and gratification was matched by his aching sense of disenchantment and limitation” (p. 19). This strategy is in sharp contrast to that used by Graham Robb, whose brilliant 1998 biography of Hugo was the most recent English-language one until Stephens, and whose dominant concern was to reveal hidden aspects of the writer.[2]

Stephens’s indication of “contrasts” is striking, for antithesis is the figure that one circles helplessly about when reading Hugo, like a black hole whose field of gravity one cannot escape. Antithesis serves also to describe the reversals and contradictions of Hugo’s itinerary, as well as his desire to encompass all. A young Baudelaire complained that in Hugo’s works one always glimpsed “un système d’alignement et de contrastes uniformes” (“a system of uniform alignment and contrasts”).[3] When the angel said, “I am the alpha and the omega,” s/he used the antithesis that labels beginning and end, but also includes everything that comes between, from beta to psi. Hugo’s own version of these contrasts is a series of personae representing his different fields of activity: Olympio (poetry), Herman (love), Maglia (laughter), Hierro (combat).[4] André Maurois, whose study of Hugo dates from 1954, selects the first of these personae as title of his biography.[5] More generally, can one get away from the neat polarities that antitheses exemplify and that so effectively pigeonhole reader and writer alike?

An event that he placed at his life’s center, and that occurred midway between his own birth and death, was the drowning of his daughter Léopoldine in a boating accident shortly after her marriage to Charles Vacquerie while Victor was unavailable on vacation in Spain with his mistress, Juliette Drouet. Hugo placed the drowning’s date at the middle of his great collection *Les Contemplations*, and in its preface claimed that a “tomb” lies at heart of these “memoirs of a soul” (Stephens, p. 118). He referred to the date in many places with different figures: the asyndeton that destroys the syntax of the collection, the reversal that turns desire into mourning, the antithesis that turns a thing into its opposite. Léopoldine’s death, especially in its extraordinary, melodramatic circumstances (her father’s favorite child, just married, newly pregnant, with her husband; her father away on a trip with his mistress; that father learning of the death far away, after the fact, after the burial, through a newspaper article) lends itself to unpacking in a multitude of ways, ranging from the-inconsolable-father-mourns-the-death-of-his-cherished-child to the-guilty-husband-is-punished-for-his-infidelity-through-the-death-of-his-child. Stephens chooses sagely to keep to the facts of the case and paraphrases Juliette’s account, found in her diary: “Dumbstruck, he pointed to his copy of *Le Siècle*. It had been announced that on 4 September Léopoldine, her husband, his uncle, and a young cousin had all drowned in a yachting accident not far from Villequier on the way back to Le Havre” (p. 89).

The problem is perhaps insoluble: how can one account for an author’s life when that author claims that that life is entirely inner, when it is not the dates or the facts that count, but the intentions, emotions, and reactions? This is not just the case for the author of *Les Contemplations*. Jean Valjean’s grave with its miserable poem scratched on the stone slab betrays the same predicament: a five-volume life reduced to four lines. Here, Stephens offers an interesting, even an engaging answer. Instead of trying to pronounce the last word on Hugo, the figure that would account for the man or his works, or both, he suggests adding another chapter to the story. He asks how “Marius and Cosette—the newly-wed inheritors of Valjean’s fortune and benevolence—would have acted in 1851, given the popular support for Napoleon III” (p. 144)? Stephens’s coda

to *Les Misérables* leaves us with a question, but that is perhaps better than any answer, for it reflects Hugo's doubts regarding human weaknesses.

Stephens uses another figure dear to Hugo here: apposition, which places one term adjacent to another, suggesting contrast, resemblance, or transformation.[6] When repeated many times, the figure becomes accumulation, perhaps the trope most familiar, albeit unrecognized, to Hugo's readers.[7] Certainly, Hugo's fascination with things piled one on another or one beside each other (as in his celebration of Paris barricades) owes much to this figure. But while accumulation might be a tool to employ in a multivolume account of the writer's life, that option is not available to Stephens, for here economies of length imply economies of language, and accumulation must be reduced to its kernel: apposition.

At critical moments Stephens juxtaposes works from Hugo's canon beside actions from his life, offering minimal explanation. One example occurs at the end of the 1850s, when Hugo, having published *Les Contemplations*, pursued several new paths. In Graham Robb's telling, Hugo's sexual relations with maids and prostitutes on Guernesey constituted the mind-cleaning that facilitated the writing of *La Légende des siècles*,[8] the first in the service of libidinal drives balanced by the latter in service of death. For Stephens, several activities have the same weight: the decoration of his new home, Hauteville House; the watercolor *cartes de visite* (works in their own right) he composed, often deforming the letters of his name; his relations with maids and prostitutes; the composition of *La Légende des siècles*; Hugo's refusal of the amnesty offered by Napoleon III to exiles; his efforts on behalf of John Brown to prevent the raider's execution. Robb's presentation offers us a man to recognize behind the legend, and achieves this result by making "Victor Hugo" (and here I would, if printing technology afforded that possibility, write the name out in those monumental, crumbling characters Hugo used for his *cartes de visite*) all too human. And to his credit, he employs the figure for which Hugo is known. Stephens offers us deeds—private and public, trivial and significant—whose syntax we must provide.

It is understandable that in a shorter work the reader should be asked to contribute more. In the case of Hugo, that effort is great not simply because Hugo was great, but also because over the course of his lifetime, he put forward so many different personae that one always has the impression that a familiar one is at hand, ready to incorporate and totalize the facts at hand. But even when such personae are there for the taking, they must be handled with care: each one is partial, and shows a single, antithetical Hugo. That Bradley Stephens places so many actions, events, and works in proximity within the confines of the collection is quite remarkable; and even if we must supply the relations that bring them together, that effort brings us to a deeper understanding of a very complicated man.

NOTES

[1] *Le Dernier Jour d'un condamné*, a first-person account of a man's last day before passing under the guillotine, is the first novel Hugo wrote to have been signed by him on publication.

[2] Graham Robb, *Victor Hugo* (London: Picador, 1997). Robb makes frequent reference to Hugo's personal notebooks, where he kept coded records of dalliances. He also attempts to determine just what Hugo's role was during the repression of the workers' insurrection in June 1848. This effort to pierce the veil of Hugo's legend is more suited to a six-hundred-page biography than a volume of the Critical Lives series. It should be pointed out that personification

is one of Robb's principal tools, one that makes his works such a pleasure to read, for he endows the multifaced being that Hugo was with a familiar face—the faun, the satyr—that renders his contradictions far easier to understand.

[3] Charles Baudelaire, *Œuvres complètes*, ed. Claude Pichois, 2 vols. (Paris: Gallimard, 1975-76), 2:431.

[4] Victor Hugo, *Œuvres poétiques I*, ed. Pierre Albouy (Paris: Gallimard, 1964), pp. 1522-1525.

[5] Andre Maurois, *Olympio, ou, la vie de Victor Hugo*, (Paris : Hachette, 1954).

[6] The consecrated example from Hugo's work is "pâtre promontoire" ("pastor-promontory") from "Pasteurs et troupeaux," in *Les Contemplations*, ed. Pierre Albouy (Paris: Gallimard, 1954), p. 282.

[7] The "grotesque," a codeword used to characterize Hugo's aesthetics, has as much to do with apposition as with antithesis, e.g., the slogan attributed to him by his contemporaries, "Le laid c'est le beau" ("The ugly is the beautiful"), the juxtaposition of items taken from different registers, as in the case of ornamental figures adorning illuminated manuscripts.

[8] Robb: "These women...were being asked to extend their spring-cleaning to their master's brain, to serve as reminders of the physical world" (p. 364).

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