
H-France Review Vol. 21 (March 2021), No. 33

Marva Barnett, *To Love Is to Act: Les Misérables and Victor Hugo's Vision for Leading Lives of Conscience*. Chicago: Swan Isle Press, 2020. 213 pages. \$30 U.S. (pb). Notes, appendices, and references. ISBN 9780997228762.

Review by Stéphanie Boulard, Georgia Institute of Technology.

As early as 1862, an American edition of Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables* was published and offered for sale in *The New York Times* as "the acknowledged literary event of the century--Large octavo, paper covers, price 50 cents, and on superior paper, elegant cloth binding, \$ 1." [1] Since that publication, the popular success of Victor Hugo's novel has never wavered. From film adaptations, musicals, theatrical plays and video games to manga, parodies, cartoons and comics, *Les Misérables* has inspired all genres and has been adapted in all countries, in all languages, most notably in the English-speaking world. The English version of the French musical, created in the London scene in 1985 with a libretto by Herbert Kretzmer, who died last year at the age of 95 [2] was inspired by the 1980 French production at the Palais des sports in Paris by Robert Hossein with music by Claude-Michel Schönberg and a libretto by Alain Boublil and Jean-Marc Natel. That version, revised several times and presented without interruption on the international scene, reached a record for number of performances for a musical theater adaptation. From the very beginning, the American public has been there. The 2012 epic musical film directed by Tom Hooper, starring Hugh Jackman, Russell Crowe, Anne Hathaway and Amanda Seyfried, rekindled American audiences' interest in the story of Jean Valjean, Cosette, Fantine and Javert.

Marva Barnett's book *To Love Is to Act: Les Misérables and Victor Hugo's Vision for Leading Lives of Conscience* is primarily aimed at this American audience. Rather than capture the power of the Hugolian references or conduct new in-depth analysis of the Hugo text, Barnett's goal is to contextualize the work both in terms of its characters, events and main themes as they correspond to Victor Hugo's own life, and in terms of a contemporary American perspective. This is the originality of her approach. *Les Misérables*, a French novel from the 19th century? Barnett demonstrates point by point how Victor Hugo's *oeuvre* is a universal novel of the twenty-first century, one that speaks to everyone, as it does to Americans today.

"To love is to act", Hugo's words three days before dying, center Barnett's explorations of freedom, democracy, justice, poverty--the moral principles that underlie the 2000 pages of Hugo's *Les Misérables*--and her reflection on the major themes of conscience and love. Rather than dwell on literary analysis unfamiliar to the American connoisseur of the musical, the book's short

chapters invite the reader to explore details of Hugo's masterpiece, the conditions of its creation, its references and its mysteries.

It should be noted that the majority of Americans who are passionate admirers of *Les Mis* the musical have not read Victor Hugo's novel. They are enthralled by the adaptation—its dialogue, its song lyrics recited by heart, its scenes and characters selected, transformed, enhanced, reinvented from the original to serve the needs of the production. Adaptations are choices made when the whole cannot be rendered in its complexity. Having taught my “Reading Les Miserables” seminar to my Georgia Tech students several times, I, like Marva Barnett, experienced the fascination that the story of *Les Miserables* incites in young American students who have seen either the film or stage adaptation. However, these same students, confronted with the original novel in French, discover something like another world as the richness and subtlety of Hugo's text is revealed to them. Characters flesh out their complexity while new images emerge to embed them in their historical, economic and social reality. For students such as these, or for any admirer of musical adaptations, Barnett's book offers an entry into this captivating experience.

From the first chapter, entitled “Seeing Others,” Barnett demonstrates how Hugo's novel makes the reader aware of the social cataclysm produced by misery as she evokes the famous scene of the poor wretch looking down at the beautiful bourgeois woman in an elegant carriage who is unaware of his presence: “once this man perceives that this woman exists, and the woman does not perceive that the man is there, catastrophe is inevitable” (Hugo cited p. 4). The French composer of *Les Misérables*, Claude-Michel Schönberg, and his collaborator, Alain Boublil, believed that it was this scene that triggered the writing of Hugo's novel. Barnett reminds the reader that this is not so.

Barnett identifies two determining factors as the start of Hugo's writing of *Les Miserables*: first the events that led to the death of Hugo's daughter, Léopoldine; second, the flagrant offense of adultery in which the police surprised the writer on July 5, 1845, with his mistress Léonie Biard. These events are, of course, also decisive in other ways, in that Hugo's subsequent personal suffering (Léopoldine) and public humiliation (Léonie) would nourish his novel from the inside.

However, Barnett could also have recalled that, before Hugo, through works of Sue and Balzac, misery had already become a target of literary representation and social observation thanks to major sociological surveys. Poetry and plays such as *Les Burgraves* (1843) were no longer sufficient for Hugo to fully study the social question and the people. When Hugo began his sixth novel, *Les Misères* (first title of the novel) on November 17, 1845, poverty and misery were social questions being observed rather than addressed. Moreover, Hugo's writing of the novel was interrupted in chapter IV, XV, 1, in February 1848, because of the debate on “the law of prisons” and the wave of revolution, as Hugo himself declared in 1851.[3]

As its title indicates, Barnett's second chapter “Why Forgive?” addresses forgiveness and compassion along with themes of cruelty and freedom that are at the heart of Hugo's novel. Freedom is, moreover, before equality and fraternity, the great principle of 1789, the first of the human rights that Hugo claimed, without waiting to rally to liberalism.

These themes are universal. They are also at the core of all film and theatrical adaptations, and Barnett gives voice to those who worked on these adaptations: to Claude-Michel Schönberg and

Alain Boublil, whom she invited to her class seminar on *Les Misérables* (one can only imagine the happiness of the students); or to the testimony of Hugh Jackman, whose Oscar-nominated portrayal of Jean Valjean in *Les Misérables* (2012) has the capacity, as Jackman says, to resonate and “to teach people some things” (p. 21). Barnett shows how these “things” to be addressed and learned are central in America: “How often do people released from American prisons have a fair chance of getting a job they’re qualified for? ... Will they have the right to vote? Having ‘paid for their crimes,’ aren’t they commonly still suspected when a new crime occurs? [...] How willingly would I—or you—hire someone who’s served his time?” (p. 20) These contemporary questions very much resonate within Hugo’s novel.

We can also add that, for Hugo, the ideal of fraternity, the principle of solidarity, of the self belonging to society on the one hand and to the cosmos on the other, is what fundamentally removes all solitude from man. What can be linked to this “humanity” (p. 35), which Barnett speaks of in relation to the characters, and which is one of Hugo’s central concerns, is the abolition of the death penalty. Barnett does not devote more than a line to Hugo’s plea against the execution of John Brown in the United States. Is it because she finds the episode already over-commented? That event nevertheless marked a major point in Hugo’s commitment against the death penalty, another common leitmotif of *Les Misérables*. There is not one chapter of *Les Misérables* that does not refer to the death penalty, the guillotine or the reign of Terror during the French Revolution. Hugo’s letter to the United States of America [4] thus would have had its place in the appendices of Barnett’s book as *To Love Is to Act* insightfully explores all possible connections between *Les Mis* and America.

Readers will appreciate Barnett’s recalling in her fourth chapter, “Seeking—and Finding—God,” Victor Hugo’s deeply anticlerical sentiment so evident in *Les Misérables*. Barnett quite rightly points out that the word “God” does not mean for Hugo a reference to Christianity (p. 76). On the contrary, it encompasses the notion of spirituality in its broad sense and distinct from established religion: “never finding a definitive answer, Hugo contends that God is ultimately unknowable” (p. 76). For Hugo it is indeed the infinite that is “God,” that is to say anything that escapes a strictly rational grasp and not an organized dogma or religion. In this sense, putting the scene of Bishop Bienvenu’s meeting with the former *Conventionnel* G in perspective is very enlightening. These pages of Barnett’s work shed light on the concise and enigmatic definition of God, the “I of the infinite” (“*moi de l’infini*”), which the conventional G. gives to a nodding Bishop Myriel (p. 26). It is in this sense problematic that the American director Tom Hooper altered Hugo’s concept of “God” into a singularly Christian one because Hugo’s language “felt wrong” to him (*sic*) (p. 26). It is important for any American reader to know that Hugo’s novel is fundamentally anticlerical. The central theme, however, is that of consciousness, which is the pivot of Hugo’s philosophy and the leitmotif of *Les Misérables*.

As Barnett points out very well in Chapter 3, “Love is Action,” the religion of the poet, if, however, he has one, is love, as Hugo’s daughter Adèle writes in her notes: “My father arrives finally at his own religion, which is summarized in this great word: *Love*” (p. 56). For Hugo, loving each other, promoting acts of compassion and the correctness of conscience, are not connected to the Christian sense of God. Love is, rather, an absolute to achieve, to create, to experience. In this sense, *Les Misérables*, a novel of love and compassion for the other, is the opposite of the individualistic society in which we live and which, Barnett observes, lives detached, centered on Instagram and social networks. This contrast is interesting because, paradoxically, the success of *Les Misérables* has not diminished through the years. One must

wonder, however, why Barnett neglected to discuss *Les Misérables's* chapter “Un Coeur sous un pierre,” and the central place of love within it, since love and the profound bonds that it forms between human beings are her topic.

Through the theme of stigma and redemption in Chapter 5, “Is Change Possible?,” Barnett seeks to demonstrate the seemingly unlikely similarities between Hugo’s Jean Valjean and Shaka Senghor, lecturer at MIT’s Media Lab, convicted murderer and author of *Writing my Wrongs*, published in March 2016. Later, in Chapter 6, “Listening to Our Best Selves,” Barnett draws connections to other contemporary figures, such as Mahatma Gandhi, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Nelson Mandela, Malala Yousafzai, to explore complex dilemmas: what does my conscience tell me in these situations? The ethical questions of the novel, *cas de conscience*, like the positions taken by its author, find their equivalents in our contemporary world. Perhaps few professors who have thought of teaching *Les Misérables* to young students in the United States have experienced moments of such intense discussions.

The greatness of the human spirit in the face of adversity, the choices we make, our relationships and family, our separations, exile and prison: *Les Misérables* shows that conscience is an internal law, an instinct that characterizes humanity much as we have been given freedom and responsibility. This is, in fact, the pure reason from which the categorical imperative derives. Barnett’s Chapter 7, “Either Valjean or Javert!” aptly poses the dilemma by referencing a scene from the musical in which the two characters, two incarnations of conscience and of humanity, must decide between “what’s legal and what’s right” (p. 122).

The eighth and final chapter, “Finding Strength to Carry On,” discusses the novel’s relationship to the notion of resilience. The English word *resilience* derives from the Latin *resilio*, literally “to jump back,” hence “to rebound, to resist” (to shock). It was from the observation of the survivors of the concentration camps that Boris Cyrulnik, at the end of the 90s, mediated in France the concept of resilience in psychoanalysis.[5] One might be surprised at the use of such a term belonging to the fields of psychology and neuroscience. However, Barnett’s argument is convincing if we, in fact, define resilience as a psychological phenomenon that consists of a traumatized individual taking note of the traumatic event in such a way as to curb unhappiness and rebuild self in a socially acceptable way. That is how Victor Hugo, like Victor Frankl, Sheryl Sandberg, Adam Grant, or even Malala Yousafzai as “resilient people” have overcome the trials of their lives (pp. 144-145). We see how Victor Hugo himself relied on the words, first of his “motto” *perseverando* (to persevere: continue to work, continue to hope), then of those engraved in his house in Guernsey: *Perge / Surge* (*Persist / Rise up*) and *Ad augusta per angusta* (“toward elevated goals via narrow paths”) and finally, through the characters of *Les Misérables* themselves who are not “archetypes”. For Barnett, the most “resilient” character in the work would be Gavroche, and to prove so, she points to all of his “resilience strategies” in the novel (pp. 147-149).

Scholars of Hugo’s work may learn nothing new in Barnett’s book, but they will find something precious: a reading of the work with a contemporary angle, a new look and perspective, something that is rare amidst the literature on an author so well studied. Readers who are only familiar with the Broadway show or the movie may be inclined to finally dive into the 2000 pages of *Les Misérables* to discover unsuspected treasures. It is, perhaps, for our students that this book could prove to be the most valuable because it simply and clearly sheds light on how a work can still have such an enormous impact in their world of Instagram, Netflix and Twitter.

We may indeed rightly ask why such a tragic story as *Les Misérables* still inspires so many. Between idealism and optimism, between conscience and love, Hugo believed in the capacity for progress—*progressus*—forward movement as much opposed to imaginary utopias as to harsh realities. For Hugo, the purpose of writing is not so much to represent progress as to effect it. If *Les Misérables* moves, mobilizes, sets in motion—it is because it is the movement itself, a *work in progress* beyond the death of its author, for a time still to come. For that very reason, Marva Barnett's book might mobilize new readers as well as scholars and specialists of Hugo's work, who will appreciate her thoughtful approach to reading *Les Misérables*.

NOTES

[1] Olin H. Moore, "Some Translations of *Les Misérables*," *Modern Language Notes* 74 (3) (1959): 240-246.

[2] <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/10/14/theater/herbert-kretzmer-dead.html> (last accessed March 5 2021).

[3] Victor Hugo, *Histoire, Œuvres complètes*, ed. Jacques Seebacher and Guy Rosa (Paris: Laffont, 2002), p. 665.

[4] https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Victor_Hugo%27s_letter_to_the_London_News_regarding_John_Brown (last accessed March 5 2021).

[5] Boris Cyrulnik, *The Whispering of Ghosts: Trauma and Resilience*, trans. Susan Fairfield (New York: Other Press, 2005).

Stéphanie Boulard
Georgia Institute of Technology
sboulard3@gatech.edu

Copyright © 2021 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for redistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of *H-France Review* nor republication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on *H-France Review* are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172