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Mario Vargas Llosa, *The Temptation of the Impossible: Victor Hugo and Les Misérables*. Trans. John King. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007. 196 pp. Notes, index. \$24.95 (cl). ISBN 13 9780691131115

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As is often the case when one well-known writer takes on another, Mario Vargas Llosa's study of Hugo's *Les Misérables* generated a fair amount of attention upon its publication in Spain in 2004, as well as upon the recent publication of John King's English-language translation. Rightly so, this attention has been uniformly positive, as Llosa's reading provides us with a richly nuanced understanding of the novel and its stakes.

While neither the first writer nor the first French writer to capture Llosa's attention (earlier studies of Gabriel García Márquez and Gustave Flaubert both met with acclaim), Victor Hugo, as the personal introduction lets us know, is an author for whom Llosa has had a particular affinity since reading and finding solace in *Les Misérables* during a bleak period in his youth as a student in a military boarding school (pp. 1-10). The study, based on a series of lectures delivered while a visiting professor at Oxford University in April in May of 2004 is unencumbered by an explicit theoretical approach and makes only light reference to the (abundant, indeed overwhelming) scholarly work that has been done on the novel. Although Llosa demonstrates a firm grasp of nineteenth-century French literature, history, and politics and makes smart use of contemporary reactions to the novel, this is Llosa on Hugo. Such directness, for those accustomed to the larger scholarly dialogues that almost always swirl around studies of great works requires some recalibration, and those for whom *Les Misérables* is an object of critical or scholarly interest will quickly come to the realization that, most of the time, Llosa is not saying anything new. Rather, what is showcased here is the art and the enduring interest of methodical, careful reading and reflection and the dynamism it engenders. Nothing is lost on Llosa and what is most remarkable here is perhaps the resulting immediacy of his analysis.

Organized around Llosa's understanding and questioning of the novel as form, this study is as interested in prodding how Hugo constructed this fictional world and reality as by what it contains. The first several chapters focus in this way on elements of narration, plot, and character. The first chapter, "The Divine Stenographer," treats the Hugolian narrator, advancing at its opening that "The main character in *Les Misérables* is not Monseigneur Bienvenu or Jean Valjean, or Fantine, or Gavroche, or Marius, or Cosette, but the person that invents them and tells their story, this insolent narrator who is constantly cropping up between his creation and the reader" (p. 11). Llosa links the germination and spurt-like growth of the novel to almost 2000 pages over a nearly twenty-year period (1845 to 1862) to Hugo's aesthetic aspiration to totality. To his mind, the narrator serves necessarily as its principal support, with a presence and knowledge "as excessive as the story itself" (p. 13). Accordingly, the narrator of *Les Misérables* unapologetically manifests his presence (be it through explanations, attitudes and behaviors, digressions, or even rants) and even his absences (in moments of purposefully restricted omniscience) are acutely felt. Llosa's conclusion, all while built around one of the most basic tenets of narrative theory—that one must never confuse the narrator of a novel with its author—compellingly situates the larger-than-life quality of this narrator in the evolution of the novel from classic to modern.

The second and third chapters (“The Dark Vein of Destiny” and “Touchy Monsters”, respectively) turn our attention to aspects of plot and character. Identifying what he calls an “order of coincidence” (p. 40) in the novel, Llosa traces the way in which the fictional mechanism of chance unifies the unwieldy plot of *Les Misérables*, focusing his attention on three key episodes. These significant moments (or “volcanic craters” (p. 41) in his words)—the ambush in the Gorbeau tenement, the barricade at La Chanvrerie, and the Paris sewers—generate an energy that reverberates throughout the entire novel and reveal both the providential and the dark workings of fate. Yet as Llosa also observes, this grip is both tempered and complicated by concrete suggestions of the possibility of freedom and free will, leaving us to wonder how events and lives really unfold—“in a programmed way, dictated by the workings of fate, or through the achievements and failures of sovereign human beings?” (p. 53). His exploration of the novel’s characters, and his grouping them according to their polarized defining qualities of good and evil (or “luminous” and “shadowy,” (p. 57) provides solid readings of Monseigneur Bienvenu, Jean Valjean, Javert, and Gavroche among others.

Beginning with the fourth chapter, “The Great Theater of the World,” Llosa’s analysis becomes more distinctive, above all for its organization. While critics have long-noted the blurring of genre in Hugo’s work and the poetic and theatrical qualities of his fiction, Llosa draws here on theater and performance—both concretely and as a metaphor—as a way of connecting and understanding aspects of *Les Misérables* most often examined through a narratological lense. In this way, for example, attention to onomastics (the names that characters are assigned) results not in a thematic discussion of identity but as one of the purposes of shifting roles and theatrical conventions. Similarly, setting is evoked not as much for its symbolic value as for the value of its contrivance, as the artifice of the novel’s strangest locations—the Elephant at the Bastille, the Gorbeau tenement—paradoxically makes the novel more believable. Through the strength of its performance, Llosa concludes, this novel and great novels in general succeed in offering “another life, endowed with its own attributes, that is created to discredit real life. They hold up a mirror that seems to reflect real life but in fact deforms real life, adds fresh touches, reshapes it” (pp. 103-4).

The fifth and sixth chapters (“Rich, Poor, Leisured, Idle, and Marginal” and “Civilized Barbarians,” respectively) delve into the philosophical and ideological underpinnings of *Les Misérables*, and take care to contextualize them within Hugo’s own complex political evolution. Llosa underscores in the first of these chapters the fact that the liberal utopianism Hugo advanced, while a rather benign stance to twenty-first century readers, was viewed as a real threat to the world that received it and had no way of knowing what was coming next. The novel also offers a “disproportionate reorganization” (p. 130) of social problems, with the ills issued of an imperfect judicial and penal system the pivot around which everything turns. Llosa responds vigorously to many of Hugo’s contemporary critics, who bemoaned the danger of such a slant, as a way of asserting the liberty, the very fictionality that fiction must be granted. If Hugo’s dissatisfaction with the way human justice is conceived and executed is clear, his stance on history and particularly on the insurrection of 1832 is less so, and the second of these two chapters is not afraid to make the very basic observation that we, the readers of *Les Misérables*, are really never told what is at stake in the revolt. Llosa convincingly argues that readers and critics, quick to supplement the fiction with the historical fact that surrounds it, miss Hugo’s intent by attributing information to it that is not there. Hugo does not tell us much because “in the fictional reality, these problems belong not to the historical domain, but to the domain of fate or divine predetermination. Men are agents through whom the unfathomable hand of God maps the course of history, which, as the narrator emphatically declares, is a steady march toward improvements in society and justice” (p. 133). In this way, the novel makes use of history above all to shape a reality of Hugo’s own design, one in which, as Llosa concludes, “the mysterious hand of God” (p. 145) is the unifying force.

The seventh chapter, “From Heaven Above”, develops this thread, first in drawing proof from the little-read “preface philosophique” drafted for the novel in 1860 but abandoned, and then in revisiting Hugo’s

ambition to totality from personal and esthetic perspectives as a way of both affirming Hugo's belief in a larger divine force and apprehending its imprint upon the novel. The concluding chapter, "The Temptation of the Impossible," thoroughly dissects Alfred de Lamartine's harsh critical study of *Les Misérables*. Highlighting the irony in Lamartine's assessment--that concern that the truths of the fiction were powerful enough to be taken for real proved in fact the power of the fiction--permits Llosa to arrive neatly at the conclusion, or the truism, that the entire study prepares: that the enduring power of fiction is its ability to give form, make meaning, out of all that spins and churns around us, precisely in transporting us outside of ourselves, in letting us live "the impossible" (p. 173).

King's translation, although very readable, either contains or maintains a few odd errors of fact: "nine years in exile" (p. 4) instead of nineteen; Hugo's date of death given as "1883" (p. 6) instead of 1885; the "street uprising of 1932" (p. 54) instead of 1832.

One has the sense from the beginning to end of *The Temptation of the Impossible* that similarly sweeping political trajectories additionally feed and shape Llosa's fascination and dialogue with Hugo, but these are not mentioned. Be this purposeful or a curious omission, the study, all on its own, is a testament to the value of solid, carefully constructed criticism, criticism which is additionally bolstered by Llosa's intuitive understanding of the equally important mysteries and mechanics of great fiction.

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