

H-France Review Vol. 7 (November 2007), No. 137

William VanderWolk, *Victor Hugo in Exile: From Historical Representations to Utopian Vistas*. Lewisburg, Penn.: Bucknell University Press, 2006. 235 pp. Notes, select bibliography, and index. \$49.50 U.S. (cl). ISBN 0-8387-5628.

Review by Isabel K. Roche, Bennington College.

At the end of 1851, Louis-Napoléon Bonaparte, the president of France's Second Republic and the nephew of Napoléon I, seized power through a violent *coup d'état*. Declaring himself emperor (Napoléon III), he established an anti-parliamentary constitution and ruled until defeated by the Prussians in 1870. Victor Hugo, a strong supporter of the Republic and a deputy in the National Assembly, fled France in protest and remained in exile, first in Brussels, then on the Channel Islands of Jersey and Guernsey, throughout the Second Empire.

Hugo's exile writings have long been mined by literary scholars interested in bringing into sharper focus the significance of elements in individual texts colored by his anger at the events of this period as well as the thematic and ideological concerns of Hugo's larger body of work. In this study, VanderWolk proposes a different way of understanding three key texts from this period (*Napoléon le petit* [1852], *Les Châtiments* [1853], and *Les Misérables* [1862]): what they reveal to us about Hugo as a historian. Indeed, as VanderWolk observes in the introduction, "no comprehensive study of Hugo as a historian has yet been written" (p. 9). VanderWolk seeks to fill this gap by arguing for the potential of literature to act as a historical text. His resulting analysis, which claims that Hugo influenced the way in which Louis-Napoléon Bonaparte and the Second Empire were remembered by future generations, is both original and thought-provoking.

The book's first two chapters ("Memory as Historiographical Process" and "Memory as Narrative") lay the theoretical foundation on which VanderWolk's argument rests. In the first chapter, he focuses on the role of memory in the historiographical process. Distinguishing between the creation of individual and collective memory (and drawing most strongly on the work of Paul Ricoeur and Maurice Halbwachs [1]), VanderWolk stresses the importance of collective memory as a form "of the dominant discourse" (p. 23) into which individual memories are added but not simply stockpiled. In establishing the Second Empire, Louis-Napoléon took advantage of the collective memory of his uncle in order to control the masses and convince them that he was rightfully seizing power. Hugo's challenge, as VanderWolk presents it, was to dissuade the people of Louis-Napoléon's legitimacy, to combat the repression of his regime (which exerted control on all aspects of daily life and notably on the press), and to shift memory through a polemical counter-discourse designed to change the way events were being remembered or reshaped by the emperor.

The second chapter further develops the link between memory and history. Building primarily on Ricoeur's distinction between representation (history) and self-representation (memory) [2] and Michel Foucault's notion of "problematization" [3], VanderWolk specifies that his interest is how "history is represented and the role that memory plays in that representation" (p. 44). Hugo serves as an interesting but complex case study for such an exploration since, as a writer and "amateur" historian, he projected the realities of his own present on a not-so-distant (and thus non-objectified) past.

In the third chapter, "*Napoléon le petit*: Hugo as Archivist," VanderWolk turns his attention to the first of

the three exile texts that form his corpus here: *Napoléon le petit*, a non-fictional account of Louis-Napoléon's rise to power and subsequent abuse of it through his non-constitutional *coup d'état*. Written and published in Belgium in the first year of Hugo's exile and then smuggled into France in small quantities, *Napoléon le petit* suffered from its lack of widespread circulation and from the strong censorship that prevented its discussion in the press. Yet while the text did not provoke the kind of concrete reaction to the new regime that Hugo had anticipated, it nonetheless, as VanderWolk argues, managed to strike a chord in France and ultimately found its true value to be a future one: its ability to reshape collective memory. Through detailed and convincing analysis of each section of the work, VanderWolk explores how Hugo uses his privileged position of "eyewitness" to document the events that had unfolded in order both to underscore the mediocrity and opportunism of Louis-Napoléon and to promote a moral understanding of national consciousness. Even if many, according to VanderWolk, were unable to get past the venomous nature of Hugo's attack (and *Napoléon le petit* remains among Hugo's least read and studied works), Hugo nonetheless set the stage with it for the revised understanding of the Second Empire that is still widely accepted today.

The fourth chapter, "*Les Châtiments*: Poetry as Historical Metaphor," discusses how the documentary impulse witnessed in *Napoléon le petit* is replaced in this collection of poems by an explanation of the events of 1851-52 and how they fit into the larger unfolding of history. As VanderWolk notes, although the majority of the poems of *Les Châtiments* were written in the earliest part of Hugo's exile—between late 1851 and 1853—and first published in Brussels in 1853, the work did not reach a large public until its reissue in 1870. This delay was propitious for Hugo in that much of what he predicted had been realized as "seventeen years after the fact, the *coup d'état* no longer looked like the beginning of a glorious new era" (p. 110). The choice of a poetic form liberated Hugo from the constraints of believability inherent to historical narrative and allowed him to draw on poetic techniques that strengthened the force of his reflection on the past and hopes for the future. Furthermore, in casting himself in the role of poet-prophet, Hugo charged himself with the role of seeing "his readers through the darkness and into the light" (p. 143). In this way, the future—a time when the ideals that Hugo privileges here are to be realized—is glorified through a sustained discourse on the nature of progress that calls not for Louis-Napoléon's bloody defeat but an orderly return to the republican model of government. VanderWolk's argument is interwoven throughout the chapter with the close analysis of passages of poems so as to "discover the flavor of Hugo's passion for progress through remembering" (p. 119).

In his final chapter, "*Les Misérables*: The Novel as Historical Allegory," VanderWolk tackles Hugo's longest and best-known work, looking at how this novel, completed in the middle of Hugo's exile period, through its use of allegory, suggestion, and metaphor, goes even farther than *Napoléon le petit* and *Les Châtiments* in its criticism of Louis-Napoléon. Indeed, as VanderWolk contends, situating the novel's events between 1815 and 1830 allows Hugo to appeal "to the reader's remembrance of Napoléon I and then of the freedoms won in the ensuing years to fashion his call for a return to a republican form of government" (p. 151). Specifying that his aim in the chapter is "to look at ways in which Hugo manipulates the collective memory of his readers in order to gain their support" (p. 152), VanderWolk focuses the bulk of his attention on the effects of distance and memory and on the many digressions that punctuate the novel. His claim, that *Les Misérables* represents the third stage of Ricoeur's concept of "historical knowledge" as Hugo moves from documentation and explanation to overt argumentation, is reinforced by careful analysis of Hugo's representation of past (the 1789 Revolution and the First Empire) and present (the Restoration) history in the novel that was itself designed to influence collective memory. Calling *Les Misérables* Hugo's most successful effort at persuasion, VanderWolk underscores the power of fiction to do what historiography could not: reach the masses and allow the reader to share his vision of a republican future.

VanderWolk's conclusion further elucidates Hugo's position as a historian and looks both at how Hugo continues to shape our view of the Second Empire and at his vision of the future, of a world in which "the ideal will transcend the historical, in which we can find again our humanity. This vision, while

rooted in history, seeks to eliminate history as a determining factor in our behavior” (p. 215).

This study is richly detailed, well argued, and well written and will appeal to historians and literary scholars alike. It convincingly sets forth and interweaves its theoretical perspective and explicates the link between three texts that are markedly different in many ways. A question that arose—and remains—for this reviewer is how VanderWolk understands the relationship between literary genres and the historical function he ascribes them. He discusses how poetry (through his analysis of *Les Châtiments*) and the novel (through his analysis of *Les Misérables*) lend themselves as forms in distinct ways to historical remembering, but he doesn’t let us know whether he thinks one has more potential to act as a historical text than the other. Nor does he make mention of Hugo’s other important exile writings, such as *Les Contemplations* (1856) or *La Légende des siècles* (of which the first series was published in 1859), either to account for the turning away from the historical in favor of elegiac and metaphysical musings in the first or the enlargement of the historical scale in the second. Addressing either or both of these questions would have strengthened VanderWolk’s argument. This said, he nonetheless succeeds in his objectives and argues persuasively not only that Hugo be recognized as a historian but for Hugo’s ability to be many things at one time.

NOTES

[1] Paul Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, trans. Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004); Maurice Halbwachs, *Les Cadres sociaux de la mémoire* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1994).

[2] Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, trans. Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984).

[3] VanderWolk cites Foucault’s definition of problematization as “the totality of discursive and non-discursive practices that bring something into the play of truth and falsehood and set it up as an object for the mind” (p. 55).

Isabel K. Roche Bennington College iroche@bennington.edu

Copyright © 2007 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and its location on the H-France website. No republication or distribution by print media will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France.

H-France Review Vol. 7 (November 2007), No. 137

ISSN 1553-9172