

VICTOR HUGO
SELECTED POEMS

*Translated and with an Introduction
by Brooks Haxton*



PENGUIN BOOKS

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SELECTED POEMS

Victor Hugo (1802-1885) was the most forceful, prolific, and versatile of French nineteenth-century writers. He wrote Romantic costume dramas, many volumes of lyrical and satirical verse, political and other journalism, criticism, and several novels, the best known of which are *Les Misérables* (1862) and the youthful *Notre Dame de Paris* (1831). A royalist and conservative as a young man, Hugo later became a committed social democrat and during the Second Empire of Napoleon III was exiled from France, living in the Channel Islands. He returned to Paris in 1870 and remained a great public figure until his death: his body lay in state under the Arc de Triomphe before being buried in the Panthéon.

Brooks Haxton is the author of five selections of poetry. Among his translations are *Dances for Flute and Thunder: Poems from the Ancient Greek*, which was nominated for the PEN translation award, and *Fragments: The Collected Wisdom of Heraclitus*. He lives in Syracuse, New York.

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Ceci est le sac du semeur.

Prenez et jetez au vent.

This is the grainsack.

Take and scatter on the wind.

INTRODUCTION

EXACTLY TWO HUNDRED YEARS AGO, while Napoleon flourished at the first height of his dictatorial power, Victor-Marie Hugo was born with weak limbs and a large head. His mother had little interest in her three boys, least of all in him, whose sickliness she found repugnant. Bored with her husband, a carpenter's son risen through the ranks of the Republican army, she abandoned her family and went to live in Paris with her husband's superior officer. Later, she came back and left again, came back, and left, finally, with the children.

The baby, which one doctor said would need a miracle to survive, died eighty-three years later, a old man well known for his stamina and for the vigor of his mind and body. For most of his life he was the most famous writer in the world. His legacy includes the century's most celebrated works of drama, fiction, memoir, criticism, and poetry. Because his novels *Les Misérables* and *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* have now entered their third century of continuous success, we may forget that Hugo was a poet first. His poems have been judged by many great writers among the finest in French, though for several generations they have been neglected in France and virtually unknown to readers in English.

Of course, no serious reader would consider such a lapse at all reliable as a measure of the poems themselves. The best of Shakespeare's sonnets, for example, seem to us among the finest poems ever written, but we know that almost no one for two hundred years appreciated them. Even a poet as keen on sonnets as William Wordsworth wrote that the twenty-eight poems at the end of Shakespeare's sequence are "worthless" because of their "sameness, tediousness, quaintness, and obscurity." This supposedly worthless group includes many masterpieces. Wordsworth's inability to read those poems resembles our own recent obliviousness to the poetry of Hugo.

Hugo himself, as one of the most influential critics of Shakespeare, argued that shifts in the history of tastes and styles accounted for audiences' difficulty with *Lear*. The play in its original form has been restored to the stage in Hugo's lifetime after a two-hundred-year hiatus. We no longer need the world's most famous writer to lead us past our prejudices into an awareness of Shakespeare's greatest writing. But we may need a critic of Hugo's stature to help us see Hugo. The passionate vision in the poems themselves will take us past a superficial sense of datedness, but only if we feel the great receptivity and practice the sharper attention that good writing celebrates.

During his exile on Guernsey, as a leader in the opposition to Napoleon III, Hugo often wrote a hundred lines of poetry per day. From the cot in his study, which was a solarium overlooking the sea, Hugo rose every day before dawn, drank cold coffee from the night before, and stood at his table writing until noon. After a five-course lunch, with several fine wines from his private cellar, he spent two hours hiking, in sunshine or full gale, and swimming in the sea. In the afternoon he returned to work long into the evening. Then, late at night, he ate an even larger meal with his mistress, for whom he had bought the neighboring house, and went to sleep.

Œuvres Poétiques Complètes, without the plays in verse or the far vaster prose, is half again the length of the complete Shakespeare, enough to fill ten volumes as thick as *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson*. At Guernsey alone, Hugo wrote twice as many lines as Whitman wrote in his whole life. Meanwhile, he also wrote the vast *Les Misérables* and thousands more pages of prose.

Though much of Hugo is overwritten, the best of it still represents in French "a kind of superhuman power," in the words of Jean Paul Sartre, who judges Hugo as a poet "unquestionably the sovereign of

the whole century.” Hugo’s loosening of the strictures of French poetry is distinct even to a foreign ear. ~~He used common words, without the so-called nobility of poets before him. He broke new ground~~ in his direct engagement with personal experience; for example, in the straightforwardness of the exposition in the opening of this poem about the massacre of 1851:

The boy had taken two shots in the head . . .
Speechless, his gray lips fell open. Death
had drowned out in his eye the last wild look.
His arms hung limp, as if they needed to be held.
He had in his pocket a boxwood top and string.
My forefinger would have fit in either wound.
Have you seen blackberries bleed? His skull
had been punched through easily as punkwood.

By the time he wrote this poem in his forties, Hugo was the most famous writer in France, the host of the most renowned salon, a personal friend of the former king, a member of the Academy, and a peer. Still, he considered himself a poet of the people. Six months before the coup of 1851, he denounced his former friend, Louis Bonaparte, as an enemy of freedom. On December 3, at the beginning of the violence in which more than four hundred men, women, and children were shot dead by Bonaparte’s soldiers, the famous poet climbed the steps of the Bastille and made a passionate plea to the army to join the people in their resistance to tyranny. His mistress begged him to come down before he was shot, and he shouted back, “I am willing to die for the cause of freedom.”

The self-glorification in this moment of bona fide heroism is distinct. Hugo’s eagerness to celebrate his own accomplishments and virtues is legendary. He declared repeatedly in old age that his poem would live as long as the French language itself, a claim some may find the more distasteful because it is true.

His work expanded in all directions the range of subject matters and tones admitted into French poetry. He wrote with passion about history, erotic experience, familial love, philosophy, nature, social justice, art, and mysticism. This range of interests, his enormous vocabulary, and his singular skill in various styles make him the most protean of all French poets.

Without having read the celebrations of childhood in the poems of Blake and Wordsworth, Hugo discovered children as a subject for poetry in France. Some of his best poems were written in memory of his daughter Leopoldine, who, six months after she was married at the age of nineteen, drowned with her husband in a boating accident, believed by some to be a suicide:

Consider how, in doubt, my Lord, in suffering,
with eyes too full of tears, gone blind, plunged
into the blackest depth of grief, in sight of nothing,
wracked, a mind might lose its blessedness . . .

My God, I understand it, that the man is mad
who dares object.
I quit accusing you. I quit the cursing.

Please, though, let me cry!

At least let tears still blur my sight,
since you designed the flesh for this!
Just let me lean against this stone and ask
my child if she can feel that I am here.

These translations mean, above all, to communicate intensity of feeling. French poetry after Villon and Ronsard turned from dramatic energy toward wit and ideal beauty, with rigorous attention to sound, diction, and lucidity of style. Hugo was master of these strict conventions, winning a prize from the French Academy at the age of fifteen. Even so, intense dramatic energy characterized his poems almost from the start, as André Gide has written about the second book, *Les Orientales*, published when the poet was twenty-seven: “Everything is there—strength, grace, a smile, and the most moving sobs . . . What a poetic earthquake!”

Hugo’s sensory and dramatic acuity take his poems beyond traditional beauty into a sublime inclusiveness and energy still thrilling to the modern reader. This later poem, for example, dwells on the erotic charge in the biblical story of Ruth’s visit to Boaz sleeping:

Ruth was dreaming. Boaz slept. The grass looked black. And little bells of sheep were trembling on the verge of silence. Goodness came down clear as starlight into the great calm where the lions go to drink.

All slept, all, from Ur to Bethlehem.
The stars enameled the deep black of the sky.
A narrow crescent in the low dark
of the West shone, while Ruth wondered,

lying still now, eyes half opened,
under the twinging of their lids, what god
of the eternal summer passing dropped
his golden scythe there in that field of stars.

Hugo’s friend Sainte-Beuve, a minor poet and one of the century’s most powerful literary critics, was an early champion of Hugo’s work. But when Sainte-Beuve and Madame Hugo entered into a longtime sexual liaison in September 1831, the critic began to cast aspersions on Hugo’s writings and character.

Until this betrayal, Hugo seems to have been monogamous. His first mistress, the actress Juliette Drouet, remained his companion for fifty years until she died in his arms. While maintaining his arrangements with his wife and mistress, he also had many hundreds of brief sexual encounters. One young woman whom he saw for several months was Sarah Bernhardt, shortly thereafter to become the

world's most celebrated actress. She was twenty-six and he, in his seventies, was maintaining a simultaneous affair with the beautiful, already married daughter of his old friend, the poet Théophile Gautier. Judith Gautier was later an inspiration to Wagner and a prominent woman of letters in her own right. Hugo speaks in the following sonnet to Judith Gautier and publishes the poem as a direct challenge to conventional assumptions:

Death and Beauty, being deep, the both of them,
both jeweled with obsidian and azure, I would say
the two were sisters, fierce and rich
with the same promise, and enigma. Women,
shine to me!—voices, glances, black hair,
blond—for I am dying! I, who see your brilliance,
like the sheen of pearls that tumble in the breakers,
or like birds that flash far off in a dark woods.

Judith, our two fates have brought us closer
than we seem, to see your face and mine;
in your eyes a divine abyss appears, and I feel

in my soul a gulf plunged through with stars;
both of us belong to that same sky,
since you are beautiful and I am old.

When Hugo died, he lay in state under the Arc de Triomphe, the whole of which was draped for the occasion in black velvet. He was mourned by millions, a crowd larger, it was said, than the entire population of Paris. Then attacks on his work and on his character became more and more common, first in France and later in other countries. After his death, Hugo, already a controversial figure, was much more widely attacked and much more seldom defended.

But however real the weaknesses in Hugo's character, including his obvious self-indulgence and vanity, and however stirring his heroism at the ramparts in 1851 and again after his return to Paris during the troubles of 1871, finally, we judge him as a writer by the work. His poetry, to many of the best writers in France, appears unsurpassed. As for its moral character, his writing did as much as anyone's to expose the horrors of capital punishment, poverty, and social injustice.

For the past century, Hugo as a poet has been absent from the minds of American readers. These translations are an effort to bring speakers of English closer to an amazing poet and human presence. Without his groundbreaking genius, others like Baudelaire, Rimbaud, and those who followed in France and elsewhere could not have written as they did. Much of what seems best in twentieth-century American poetry would have been inconceivable, and the world of imagination would have been less rich and free.

As Baudelaire wrote in 1861, even before the publication of much of Hugo's most exploratory late work:

When you think of what French poetry was before he appeared and what a rejuvenation it has undergone since his arrival, when you imagine how insignificant it would have been if he had not appeared, how many deep and mysterious feelings which have been put into words would have remained unexpressed, how many intelligent minds he has brought into being . . . it is impossible not to consider him as one of those rare and providential minds who in the domain of literature bring about the salvation of us all. . . .

A NOTE ON THE TRANSLATION

I HAVE BEGUN by trying to find in English the most effective literal rendition of the French. Most of my versions stay close to the phrasing of the originals.

The main difference between Hugo's verse and my versions may be my enjambment of lines that Hugo stopped with terminal punctuation. Because the end-stopped line has not been required in English as strictly as in French, to observe French practice of another era ignores the disposition of the ear for poetry in English. What my overflowing line has lost in fidelity to outward form it gains by its fidelity to the suppleness and muscularity of Hugo's style.

Similarly, for American readers more accustomed to free verse, strict meter and rhyme may misrepresent the tone of a writer whose fluency loosened the alexandrine. Free verse, on the other hand, misses the tenor of Hugo's formal mastery. My rule of thumb has been to write iambically with no equivalent measure. In place of rhyme, deliberate assonance and consonance sustain the verbal music.

Since the dramatic vitality of verbal music is almost never reproduced in paraphrase, I have paraphrased down especially where the effectiveness of a lofty tone depends on Hugo's genius for French verse. Often my omissions involve rhetorical figures that feel strained in literal English. Notes say where these changes have been most conspicuous.

While avoiding quaintness, I have tried to find in English the flavor of Hugo's French. Where liberties serve my version of the poem, I have altered and substituted freely. I have also omitted words or phrases, in some cases sentences at a stretch, that in English fail to suggest the intensity of the original poem.

The greatest possible success for my versions, at their strictest and their freest, is to suggest the power of Hugo's imagination and, I hope, to send my readers back to him in his own language.

Le toit s'égayé et rit. André Chénier.

Lorsque l'enfant paraît, le cercle de famille
Applaudit à grands cris. Son doux regard qui brille
Fait briller tous les yeux,
Et les plu tristes fronts, les plus souillés peut-être,
Se dérident soudain à voir l'enfant paraître,
Innocent et joyeux.

Soit que juin ait verdi mon seuil, ou que novembre
Fasse autour d'un grand feu vacillant dans la chambre
Les chaises se toucher,
Quand l'enfant vient, la joie arrive et nous éclaire.
On rit, on se récrie, on l'appelle, et sa mère
Tremble à le voir marcher.

Quelquefois nous parlons, en remuant la flamme,
De patrie et de Dieu, des poètes, de l'âme
Qui s'élève en priant;
L'enfant paraît, adieu le ciel et la patrie
Et les poètes saints! la grave causerie
S'arrête en souriant.

La nuit, quand l'homme dort, quand l'esprit rêve, à l'heure
Où l'on entend gémir, comme une voix qui pleure,
L'onde entre les roseaux,
Si l'aube tout à coup là-bas luit comme un phare,
Sa clarté dans les champs éveille une fanfare
De cloches et d'oiseaux.

Enfant, vous êtes l'aube et mon âme est la plaine
Qui des plus douces fleurs embaume son haleine
Quand vous la respirez;

One-Year-Old

When he arrived, the family clapped their hands
and called to him. His sweet look
made our looks more tender.
Even the saddest, the most haggard
face would smile to see him
innocent and happy.

With June green at the threshold, or November
splashing firelight on the hearth, chairs
drawn close by evening,
when he came, his joy contained us in its clarity:
we laughed, we called to him, his mother caught
her breath to see him walk.

Sometimes, stirring up the fire, we spoke
about great causes: justice, truth, and art,
souls stirred by passion;
but, when he arrived, our high talk stopped—
God, Art, and the Republic—all
suspended in a smile.

As if, at night, when every mind must sleep,
in dreams where waves among the reeds make
low sobs like a woman's voice,
as if dawn swept up like a beacon
over the wide fields, rousing into fanfare
all the great bells and the songbirds—

child! you are that dawn to me, and in my soul
wildflowers steeped in sunlight breathe their balm
when your breath brushes mine.
Mon âme est la forêt dont les sombres ramures
S'emplissent pour vous seul de suaves murmures
Et de rayons dorés!

Car vos beaux yeux sont pleins de douceurs infinies,
Car vos petites mains, joyeuses et bénies,

N'ont point mal fait encor;
Jamais vos jeunes pas n'ont touché notre fange,
Tête sacrée! enfant aux cheveux blonds! bel ange
A l'auréole d'or!

Vous êtes parmi nous la colombe de l'arche.
Vos pieds tendres et purs n'ont point l'âge où l'on marche,
Vos ailes sont d'azur.
Sans le comprendre encor vous regardez le monde.
Double virginité! corps où rien n'est immonde,
Ame où rien n'est impur!

Il est si beau, l'enfant, avec son doux sourire,
Sa douce bonne foi, sa voix qui veut tout dire,
Ses pleurs vite apaisés,
Laisant errer sa vue étonnée et ravie,
Offrant de toutes parts sa jeune âme à la vie
Et sa bouche aux baisers!

Seigneur! préservez-moi, préservez ceux que j'aime,
Frères, parents, amis, et mes ennemis même
Dans le mal triomphants,
De jamais voir, Seigneur! l'été sans fleurs vermeilles,
La cage sans oiseaux, la ruche sans abeilles,
La maison sans enfants!

18 mai 1830.

In these dark woods in me black branches
burgeon for you only, and turn gold at sunrise,
filling with sweet murmurs.

Because your eyes are infinitely tender,
because your small hands, joyful, wholly blessed,
have wronged no one ever,
your steps never touch our filth, your head
is sacred, your blond hair makes visible
the aura of angelic thought.

You see a world beyond mere understanding.
In your body nothing is unclean, nothing
in your soul impure!

Your gaze, astonished, ravished, wanders—
everywhere you offer up your soul to life
and your mouth to kisses!

Lord, keep me, and keep the ones I love,
my brothers, kinsmen, friends—worst enemies:
preserve us from the hell
of summer unsurprised by flowers, from the bare cage
without songbirds, from the hive the bees deserted,
and the house unvisited by children.

Puisque j'ai mis ma lèvre à ta coupe encor pleine,
Puisque j'ai dans tes mains posé mon front pâli,
Puisque j'ai respiré parfois la douce haleine
De ton âme, parfum dans l'ombre enseveli,

Puisqu'il me fut donné de t'entendre me dire
Les mots où se répand le cœur mystérieux,
Puisque j'ai vu pleurer, puisque j'ai vu sourire
Ta bouche sur ma bouche et tes yeux sur mes yeux;

Puisque j'ai vu briller sur ma tête ravie
Un rayon de ton astre, hélas! voilé toujours,
Puisque j'ai vu tomber dans l'onde de ma vie
Une feuille de rose arrachée à tes jours,

Je puis maintenant dire aux rapides années:
—Passez! passez toujours! je n'ai plus à vieillir!
Allez-vous-en avec vos fleurs toutes fanées;
J'ai dans l'âme une fleur que nul ne peut cueillir!

Votre aile en le heurtant ne fera rien répandre
Du vase où je m'abreuve et que j'ai bien rempli.
Mon âme a plus de feu que vous n'avez de cendre!
Mon cœur a plus d'amour que vous n'avez d'oubli!

1^{er} janvier 1835. Minuit et demi.

As I Have Set My Lip

As I have set my lip to your still brimming cup,
as I have laid my forehead in your hands,
as I have drawn the warm breath
of your soul, wrapped in its redolence,

as I have heard you speak to me the words
the heart pours forth to show its mystery,
as I have seen, though weeping, yet seen smile,
your mouth on my mouth, your eye into mine,

as I have felt on my astonished head
the lightbeam of your star, still veiled,
while into the waters of my life one rose leaf
dropped out of the flurry of your days,

now I can say to the harrier of the years:
Go! I have nothing left to age! I'm done
with you and all your withered flowers.
I have here the flower none can cut!

Your wingstroke cannot shake from this cup
one drop of what fills it to the brim.
My soul has more fire than you have ashes!
My heart has more love than you have dark!

Oceano nox

Oh! combien de marins, combien de capitaines
Qui sont partis joyeux pour des courses lointaines,
Dans ce morne horizon se sont évanouis!
Combien ont disparu, dure et triste fortune!
Dans une mer sans fond, par une nuit sans lune,
Sous l'aveugle océan à jamais enfouis!

Combien de patrons morts avec leurs équipages!
L'ouragan de leur vie a pris toutes les pages
Et d'un souffle il a tout dispersé sur les flots!
Nul ne saura leur fin dans l'abîme plongée.
Chaque vague en passant d'un butin s'est chargée;
L'une a saisi l'esquif, l'autre les matelots!

Nul ne sait votre sort, pauvres têtes perdues!
Vous roulez à travers les sombres étendues,
Heurtant de vos fronts morts des écueils inconnus.
Oh! que de vieux parents, qui n'avaient plus qu'un rêve,
Sont morts en attendant tous les jours sur la grève
Ceux qui ne sont pas revenus!

On s'entretient de vous parfois dans les veillées.
Maint joyeux cercle, assis sur des ancrs rouillées,
Mêle encor quelque temps vos noms d'ombre couverts
Aux rires, aux refrains, aux récits d'aventures,
Aux baisers qu'on dérobe à vos belles futures,
Tandis que vous dormez dans les goémons verts!

On demande:—Où sont-ils? sont-ils rois dans quelque île?
Nous ont-ils délaissés pour un bord plus fertile?—
Puis votre souvenir même est enseveli.
Le corps se perd dans l'eau, le nom dans la mémoire.

Oceano Nox

How many captains, how many sailors,
glad to set off toward some distant port,
have vanished forever under this dark horizon!
How many went down with their luck
into the sea, under a night sky with no moon,
under a black wave, never to touch the earth again!

How many coxswains with their gear
have hurricanes thrown into the waves—like pages
torn from books unread!—the ends of them
secret in the abyss, breakers stealing away
downwind, each with its keepsakes, one
with the skiff, one with a dead man and an oar.

Nobody knows your fate, poor boys!—
who tumble under that dark expanse,
dead foreheads bumping into the hidden reefs.
Your families age with nothing to take your place
but thoughts. They die still looking out
from shore for sons who never come!

We talk about you still, some nights,
a few of us, hunkering by the rusted anchor.
Your names console us after dark. We laugh,
we envy you your adventures, we remember
the kisses we stole from the girls who wanted you back,
while you slept under burgeoning rafts of kelp.

Somebody asks: Where are they? Are they kings
of islands somewhere? Have they left us
for a paradise on earth? Then, your names fade.
Bodies sink in the water, names in the mind.
Le temps, qui sur toute ombre en verse une plus noire,
Sur le sombre océan jette le sombre oubli.

Bientôt des yeux de tous votre ombre est disparue.
L'un n'a-t-il pas sa barque et l'autre sa charrue?

Seules, durant ces nuits où l'orage est vainqueur,
Vos veuves aux fronts blancs, lasses de vous attendre,
Parlent encor de vous en remuant la cendre
De leur foyer et de leur cœur!

Et quand la tombe enfin a fermé leur paupière,
Rien ne sait plus vos noms, pas même une humble pierre
Dans l'étroit cimetière où l'écho nous répond,
Pas même un saule vert qui s'effeuille à l'automne,
Pas même la chanson naïve et monotone
Que chante un mendiant à l'angle d'un vieux pont!

Où sont-ils, les marins sombrés dans les nuits noires?
O flots, que vous savez de lugubres histoires!
Flots profonds redoutés des mères à genoux!
Vous vous les racontez en montant les marées,
Et c'est ce qui vous fait ces voix désespérées
Que vous avez le soir quand vous venez vers nous!
Time, dimming even the darkness, pours
oblivion into the nethermost gulf.

Soon from every eye your shadow fades.
One friend has a boat to keep, another a plow.
Alone, when the storms come after dark, your widows
pale from years of worry, now no longer fret
to speak of you, stirring the embers on the grate,
their memories like ash!

And after the coffins over their eyelids shut, no one
is left to say your name, not even a small stone
in the churchyard where the echoes visit,
not even a willow yellowing in the fall,
not even a simple, tuneless ballad
a beggar sings at the corner beside the bridge!

Where did they go, the sailors quenched in the dark?
Waves! what terrible stories you could tell
to the disbelieving mothers on their knees!
You keep repeating the details to yourself.
This is what makes the disconsolate voices

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