

Fernando Pessoa

## **Victor Hugo — The difficulty however becomes sensibly greater when we pass...**

Victor Hugo

The difficulty however becomes sensibly greater when we pass from the mere attempt to classify Victor Hugo as a poet to trying to understand him as a mind. He is a philosophical poet — thus much is clear from the choice he makes of his themes, from the poems he rises most in, from the whole habits and trend of his mind, which habitually treats philosophically the simplest themes. He meets a beggar and the beggar becomes the beggar for him: he generalises him, distinctly a philosopher's act. He takes the smallest, most everyday objects for his theme and draws from them conclusions widely transcending their apparent scope — and this is philosophical work. But his mind is the reverse of philosophic. He thinks in images not in ideas — that is the first obstacle; and all philosophical thought, properly so called, is — it is hardly necessary to say so — the contrary of that. Every small thought is for him an image; every great thought a vision. He is perpetually at Patmos, too perpetually, if perpetuity admit the saying this. — But he is not only a visioner, he is, besides, confused in his thought, in his vision-thought. He merges accessory images into larger ones, confuses the vision itself by partial metaphors, which rise on the swell of line by line composition.

But this is not all. He is, if not evidently, at least overapparently insincere in his philosophical theories: “Ce que dit la bouche d'ombre” overwhelms, but does not leave an impression of having been thought through feeling, of having pervaded *qua* theory the whole being of the poet. It gives us an impression analogous to that of Pope's philosophy in the “Essay on Man”: that of having been poetically conceived, not spiritually felt.

To refer to opposites, the contrary impression is given by Wordsworth in the great “Ode” or in the “Tintern Abbey” lines: here it seems that a sincere faith does make itself visible in poetry. It was on an intuition of this that Renan called Victor Hugo cymbale. This, however, is the product of the non-subjective character of his poetry. It seems to issue from outside the soul, somewhere from

the circumference of the mind. What Lowell said of Poe can be applied to Victor Hugo, though in another sense: in Victor Hugo indeed the heart seems to be crushed out by the mind; not, however, as in Poe, by the evident prevalence of the intellect (...), but by some approximate and distant psychic fact — the almost-evident crushing out by the theme of the conviction of the theme.

In Victor Hugo the intellect is not great. But his sensibility is not great, either. The perusal of his poetry leaves in us the impression of a powerful and unfeeling mind. There is something exterior, gestural, in all he writes; the bitter rest hatred seems calculated as his intensest philosophy seems circum-thought rather than thought. His private life helps in this: no act of his stamps him as possessed of anything resembling sensitiveness. On the contrary, his fundamental coarseness (...) pierces through every cover he or others ever tried to put upon him. Goethe wrote lyrical poems with greater show of feeling than Hugo [...] This is of course dramatic power, in part. He may not feel really the state of mind he describes, but he ever thinks himself with feeling it).

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