

VICTOR HUGO'S ROMANTIC THEATER:

REVOLUTION OR EVOLUTION

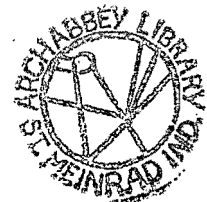
AS STUDIED IN LA PRÉFACE DE

GROMWELL AND HERNANI

A Thesis

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Dedicated to

Sister Mary Alice Lawhead, O.S.B.

In Appreciation For All Her Assistance And Guidance

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Introduction:

Literary historians use the term "Romantic Revolution" in speaking of Victor Hugo and his theater. His two most noted plays, Hernani (1830) and Ruy Blas (1838) are judged to be his two masterpieces in the movement of this "revolution" in French theater. Prior to these two plays, Hugo wrote a play called Cromwell, that never reached the stage and is only remembered now because of the preface that he added later. In this preface he set forth his theories about how to rejuvenate a dull and boring theater. The question in this thesis is to examine what influence this preface as well as his first dramatic masterpiece, Hernani, had in this "Romantic Revolution", in the first half of the nineteenth century. Was this a trend in an already developing revolution or rather, was it a step forward in an already advanced evolutionary process? If these were real changes in theater and drama, of what did they consist and what role did Victor Hugo play in the development of this theater? These are the crucial questions that underlie this thesis.

Our purpose here is, then, first to look briefly at the development of theater from the French 17th century Classical theater up to the so-called "Romantic Revolution" of the 1830's. Secondly, we will undertake a brief analysis of the proposals contained in Hugo's Préface de Cromwell to examine his theories about theater and their role in this movement.

Finally, by studying the manner in which Hugo did or did not incorporate these proposals in his play, Hernani, we will try to discover whether Hugo really accomplished a revolution in theater or whether these were inevitable changes evolving from a general literary climate. If the latter is true, we then ask ourselves why 1830 is considered a "turning point" in French theater?

The method proposed to examine these questions is to devote a chapter to each of the above areas. Chapter One will deal with the development of theater, Chapter Two will analyze the proposals in La Préface de Cromwell and Chapter Three will briefly study the manner in which Hugo incorporates these theories and ideals into his play Hernani.

We thus hope to show in this thesis, why Hugo was considered "le chef d'école" of the Romantic movement in France and what his contributions were to the development of French theater.

CHAPTER I

Simplicity, restraint and proportion best describe the classical theater of the Greek and Roman days. A strict discipline was followed by all writers of theatrical productions for the Classical theater. Following the style and rules set up by their Ancient Greek and Roman predecessors, a clear-cut, and orderly format was followed by French 17th century dramatists. In France, the so-called Classical Age was at its apex from 1661 to 1685, and during this time, the search for the "perfect" theater, "l'honnête homme" and a refinement of "le goût" of the people, seemed to prevail. Racine once stated that "La principale règle est de plaire et de toucher"¹, to please the people, and this was certainly the goal of every writer. But, in following this rule, many writers did not dare shake the foundations or introduce any shocking situations on stage, for fear of disturbing the peoples' sensibilities. So rules of theater were drawn up merely to keep everything orderly, simple, and not too intellectually demanding. Through unity of time, place and action, the playwrights hoped to give strict continuity to each play.²

Let us take a brief look at the underlying theories that evolved and were developed not only by the critics, principally Boileau in his "Art Poétique", but by the two most prominent playwrights, Corneille and Racine, who dominated the 17th century French theater. The following pages will focus on a

concept of theater that, for all practical purposes, dominated and controlled French playwrights for approximately two hundred years.

A definition of classical tragedy might help to clarify what was expected of plays. First of all, there must be a serious and complete sequence of actions. Secondly, this sequence of events should be based on history or legend. Thirdly, the action must take place between main characters, featured throughout the play. Finally, terror and pity must be evoked in the hearts and minds of the spectators over the struggles of human passions, conflicting between each other or against destiny.³ The French "tragédie classique" of the 17th century differed from that of the previous century, in that it began to illuminate the lyrical elements and placed emphasis on the dramatic action. Simple action, progression according to the passions without outside interference and the omitting of the pathetic, all three of these themes dominated this century's dramas.⁴

In addition to the three unities of time, place and action, a tenet of classical tragedy called "la bienséance" forbade the acting out of any violent scenes on stage. The two other elements which Classical theater joined to "la bienséance", were "le nécessaire" defined as "ce qui doit arriver suivant les lois naturelles", and "le vraisemblance" defined as "ce qui doit arriver suivant les circonstances."⁵ Last of all, human nature stems from reason, and they believe that art reproduces this nature just as it is, thus thinking

that art reproduces this nature just as it is, thus thinking that all art represents things truthfully if only it stays faithful to the original model.⁶

From 1636, the date of Le Cid, it was Pierre Corneille, whose genius dominated the literature of the first half of the 17th century. He followed many of the rules of the classical theater, while introducing new aspects and themes to the stage. Corneille continued to emphasize heroes in his plays, but they began to take on certain attributes unknown to those heroes of Ancient Greek and Roman plays. The Corneillian hero is the artist or designer of his destiny, unlike Greek heroes who fell destined to their fate.⁷ His actors became men who did their own thinking and judging; it was they themselves that made the choices between certain key decisions. A sort of free-will was granted to the characters, making the plays more realistic and acceptable to the audience. Fate no longer played the major role; the hero did. Corneille's heroes became so much in control of themselves that they could even renounce love at their own choosing.

Themes of "la raison", "la gloire", "la volonté", "le patriotisme" and "la loyauté", permeated his plays. He used primarily the history of Rome and of Spain as his sources. Le Cid, based on the history of Spain and one man's exploits, is probably his best known play. First presented in 1636, the center of complexity lies in the struggle between honor and passion. This play was a "tragi-comédie", the first in

which these two themes were juxtaposed and mingled.

Corneille made admiration a motivating force in his plays, playing side by side with terror and pity, and, with the exception of Le Cid, giving only a secondary role to love and passion. Jean Racine, on the other hand, the greatest creator of tragedy in the second half of the 17th century, brought passionate love to its "apogée" as the motive in his tragedies, giving it the power to provoke the most tragic occurrences. Although Corneille followed the basic format of classical rules in his theater, as mentioned before, he was not rigid in following them all. He tried to enlarge the unity of action to that of unity of peril, the first step away from the tight reigns of the three unities.⁸

Corneille believed that drama consisted of portraits of men's actions, and that the subject matter was founded on Greek and Latin origins, to prove the reality "des faits".⁹ Racine's work plunged into the depths of the human heart and could be characterized by this one quote, "Le jour n'est pas plus pur que le fond de mon coeur", (Phèdre, v.1112). In Corneille it is the free-will of men that prevails, the pure strength of choice; but for Racine it is usually passion that imposes its will on the mind and power of choice. Yet, for both of them, it is "la connaissance du coeur humain" that makes their works so inspiring.¹⁰

As the 18th century developed, an evolution was taking place in peoples' tastes and ideas. Tastes changed in keeping with sociological, historical and theological concepts.

The role of the common man was vastly increased. The old order, "L'Ancien Régime", was tottering, the weakness of which led eventually to its overthrow in 1789 by the French revolution. With the overthrow of the monarchy, the Church lost its prominent role in the lives of French intellectuals and Deism became the fashionable theology. The people and critics were looking for something other than the strict forms of the Classical movement in their drama. Larger crowds of people started to attend the theater, demanding a more entertaining form of relaxation. Enough of all the rules and regulations in the theater that made everything so dry and lifeless! A hunger for exciting action and a thirst for a more vivid depiction of the passions of life, these characterized the 18th century man. The playwrights initiated an attack against the unities, saying that these destroyed the reality of everyday life, and presented fictitious solutions to human problems. Classical theater had come to bore the average man. As the theater became more accessible to the masses, society demanded more action from the playwrights.¹¹

Leaving aside the very important dramatic genre created by Marivaux in the 18th century and the trenchant political satire of Beaumarchais, both of whom contributed little to development of melodrama and "le théâtre larmoyant", before examining the immediate predecessors of the 19th century Romantics, it is important to investigate the contributions made by Voltaire to the evolution away from Classical theater.

Because he introduced the first real aspects of romantic

drama, Voltaire must be judged one of the most important French dramatists of the 18th century. This new form of theater offered a larger range of subjects from which to choose, dealing not only with things in one particular country, but including international affairs. There was a strong emphasis on exactness of costumes and of stage props, in order to depict more really and believably the particular era being represented on stage. Comedy was transformed to encompass a larger spectrum. Voltaire accomplished this through something he called "un genre mixte", a forerunner hinting of the "mélange de genres". Moreover, the French theater found itself opening up to other influences from foreign countries such as England, with its Shakespeare.¹²

The literature of the 18th century was what we would call a literature "engagée". Many different writers and composer were bombarding the literary scene with their works and new ideas, so it was a time of trial and error. It was particularly demanded of the playwrights that they present a more realistic representation of life. The audience wanted to become more involved in the play, it needed to relate to the actors and this was impossible in the intellectual climate of the classical theater. Characters had to be so convincing in their roles, that the people could actually feel the emotions and vigour of the play through them. A thirst for total realism was coming from the audience, for a little more "authenticity" in the play. This illusion of reality could only be achieved if the setting was authentic and actually depicted

the life and scene of the times. This is why realism in the costumes and the scenes was so important and why much time was spent on detailed sets. Equally important were the actions and gestures of the actors. Language had to be authentic and related to both the times and the cultural level of the characters; it could not be the stylized formulae of the Greek heroes and gods. All this was the beginning of the bourgeoisie theater, the entertainment for the upper class.¹³ Although Voltaire along with Diderot did much to introduce the theories behind romantic theater, neither was completely successful in bringing it about.

Toward the end of the 18th century and the beginning of the 19th, the melodrama started to come before the footlights. It is in the works of such men as Guilbert de Pixérécourt, that we acknowledge the first successful glimpses of this new era. Philippe Van Tieghem summarizes this development that took place in French theater between the decline of the Classical taste and the advent of the Romantic theater:

En cent ans la tragédie classique s'était usée: comment la renouveler? Certains étrangers pouvaient nous montrer la voie. Voltaire avait découvert Shakespeare: Ducis l'imite avec prudence et même timidité de 1769 à la Révolution. Diderot, Sedaine et Mercier tentent une tragédie bourgeoise plus proche des réalités moyennes de la vie, et Benjamin Constant, en 1809, recommande et propose une tragédie plus vivante, animée par la réalité historique, à l'imitation de Schiller. Le mélodrame libéré des règles, s'adapte à un public nouveau, qui ignore la tradition, et l'intéresse par les détours d'une intrigue passionnante et les événements nombreux qu'elle entasse et qu'elle place directement sous les yeux.¹⁴

It was a few years later in 1823, in his important work, Racine and Shakespeare, that Stendhal made one of the first noteworthy attempts in the battle for the Romantic theater.

Stendhal stated:

Le romantisme est l'art de présenter aux peuples les oeuvres littéraires qui, dans l'état actuel de leurs habitudes et de leurs croyances, sont susceptibles de leur donner le plus de plaisir possible. Le classicisme, au contraire, leur présente la littérature qui donnait le plus grand plaisir possible à leurs arrière-grands-pères.¹⁵

In 1824, through the efforts of the Globe, a further move was made to acquaint French authors with Shakespeare.

It became apparent that romantic drama could get nowhere without first combatting the old rules of the theater, starting ^{with} these three unities, it was contended, one goes completely against all laws for expressing oneself artistically. How can one create something realistic and in an artful manner if he has to conform to so many restrictions? It was in this same light that these critics condemned the alexandrine verse form. The problem is that they had a classical education and yet their instincts were those of romanticists.

This is the literary climate of the period designated by literary historians as "Préromantisme", a period of transition, in which, again to quote Philippe Van Tieghem:

...se forme peu à peu, dans le goût et les tendances morales et sentimentales du public, un idéal nouveau que quelques écrivains essaient de rendre dans leurs oeuvres en se dégageant peu à peu de la tradition antérieure, mais sans avoir l'audace ni, en général, le talent suffisants pour adapter l'art au renouvellement de l'âme.¹⁶

Thus the stage was set awaiting a literary giant who possessed the daring, enthusiasm, and genius to respond to these needs. Such a giant entered the scene in the early nineteenth century. His name was Victor Hugo.

Footnotes:

1. Denise-P. et Pierre Cogny, ed. "Racine, L'Homme", citing Racine in Racine. Andromaque, p.15.
2. Pierre-Georges Castex, Paul Surer, Manuel des Études Littéraires Françaises. Vols. 1-3, Chapter 7, Boileau, p.209.
3. Henri Bénac, Vocabulaire de la Dissertation, pp.167-168.
4. Bénac, pp.167-168.
5. Bénac, p.110.
6. Bénac, p.110.
7. Bénac, p.111.
8. Bénac, p.168.
9. Pierre Bornecque, La France et sa Littérature, p.501.
10. Richard Switzer, et al. Pensée et Littérature Française; Anthologie, p.85.
11. Philippe Van Tieghem, Le Romantisme Français, pp.56-60.
12. André Lagarde, Laurent Michard, XVIII^e Siècle, Les Grands Auteurs Français du Programme, p.185.
13. Van Tieghem, pp.56-60.
14. Van Tieghem, p.13.
15. André Lagarde, Laurent Michard, XIX Siècle, Les Grands Auteurs Français du Programme, p.327.
16. Van Tieghem, p.14.

CHAPTER II

Historians of French literature are generally in agreement in seeing the year 1827 as the crucial year in the history of French Romantic theater.¹ Though most writers refer to these particular episodes and events as the "Romantic Revolution", from our vantage point, it seems rather to be an extremely important "turning point" and an "evolution" rather than a "revolution". An "evolution", since its roots have been developing for at least a hundred years. Maurice Descotes in his section on "Le Théâtre Romantique" in the second volume of the Larousse series, Littérature Française, capsulizes the background of this so-called "revolution" in French theater. He explains it in this way:

On date de 1827 (Préface de Cromwell) et de 1830 (Hernani) la brutale irruption du théâtre romantique dans l'histoire de notre dramaturgie. Mais, comme toutes les révolutions, celle-ci avait été préparée par de longs cheminements: apparemment soudaine, elle était le fruit de la crise depuis longtemps ouverte sur la scène française. Car, dès le XVIII^e siècle, et malgré les efforts de renouvellement de Voltaire, la tragédie ne jouissait plus que d'un prestige académique: genre officiel, révérend comme une noble institution à laquelle devait obligatoirement sacrifier l'auteur dramatique qui souhaitait se pousser dans la bonne société et obtenir sa consécration. Mais genre qui ennuyait, que les esprits libres (Diderot, Beaumarchais, Sébastien Mercier) renvoyaient au magasin des vieux accessoires. Pour le grand public, assister à une représentation tragique n'était qu'une manière, entre bien d'autres, de satisfaire au code de la vie mondaine.²

Cromwell, (1827), Hugo's play, written in five acts and completely incapable of being performed on the stage, was written to illustrate his "revolutionary" theories of drama. The play itself would hardly be remembered, had he not later added the famous "Préface" in which he expounded these theories. It was because of this "Préface", enthusiastically acclaimed, especially by the young writers, that Victor Hugo was hailed as the leader of this "Romantic Revolution", and became "le chef d'école".

Elle, (Cromwell), fut écrite après le drame et accueillie, surtout par la jeunesse, avec un enthousiasme inouï. Pour Hugo, elle constituait enfin un choix et un engagement. Harcelé par des classiques hargneux et sots, il prenait la tête des révoltés.³

At this period, numerous manifestos, treaties, and prefaces cautiously suggested the changes on which Hugo was insisting. Prior to Hugo, many of these ideas had been the concern of such influential writers as Mme de Stael, the Italian, Manzoni, and Stendhal with his two famous publications of Racine et Shakespeare, (1823-1825). It was in these two publications of Stendhal's that there appears the first real elaboration of the theory of modern theater. Maurice Descotes explains this way:

Sans doute, les deux Racine et Shakespeare (1823-1825) n'eurent-ils pas le retentissement qu'on imagine aujourd'hui. Stendhal n'avait aucune des qualités qui consacrent le chef d'école; il n'en reste pas moins qu'il est le premier à avoir, en France, élaboré la théorie du drame moderne: le "romanticisme" étant l'art de "présenter aux peuples les oeuvres littéraires qui, dans l'état actuel de leurs habitudes et de leurs croyances, sont susceptibles de leur donner le plus de plaisir

possible", il convenait de se détourner d'un classicisme adapté aux goûts des "arrière-grands-pères"; de renoncer à la contrainte des unités, des bien-séances, de l'alexandrin "cache-sottises"; d'aller aux sujets nationaux ornements d'un recours hardi aux ressources de la couleur locale.⁴

Nevertheless, according to Philippe Van Tieghem, what set Hugo's Préface apart from these other documents was: "... l'audace tranchante d'un esprit jeune et ardent, qui ne craint pas d'affirmer, de décider, et d'aller jusqu'au bout de ses idées,"⁵ all this, coupled with Hugo's powerful vision. He begins his Préface with his own unique synthesis of history and proceeds from that viewpoint to enlarge upon his theories. Van Tieghem again succinctly summarizes the varied aspects of this controversial document:

...il ne s'agit plus seulement de cette société nouvelle issue de la Révolution; Hugo voit plus loin et domine les siècles du regard; l'âge moderne commence au christianisme; c'est le Christ qui nous a appris à considérer notre dualité: l'âme et le corps, le ciel et la terre, le sublime et le grotesque. Ce dialogue éternel entre les deux parties de nous-mêmes, qui est l'essentiel de la vie morale de l'homme moderne, est en même temps l'essence du théâtre et, dans le théâtre, du drame, qui fait place au bas ou au familier à côté du sublime, seul représenté dans la tragédie. Hugo, par là, fait accomplir un pas énorme à l'évolution du théâtre; avant lui, on admettait tout au plus que le drame pût se développer parallèlement à la tragédie, parfaite en son genre; mais voilà que la tragédie, passe au rang de drame imparfait; philosophiquement, historiquement, c'est le drame qui a raison, qui est seul capable de traduire l'âme moderne totale. On voit le changement de perspective! D'autre part, le drame est le genre complet: il contient le lyrisme et l'épopée, tandis que la tragédie est un genre étrié d'où sont bannies toutes les sources vives de la poésie. Le drame, enfin, est un genre libre, où le génie peut se

déployer sans contrainte, et interpréter la nature dans toute sa variété. Mais, si proche de la nature que soit le drame, c'est cependant avant tout une oeuvre d'art, une oeuvre soumise à des contraintes artificielles, dont la principale est le vers. Hugo repousse le drame en prose et maintient l'alexandrin, libéré et assoupli.⁶

Let us examine in some detail Hugo's vision of theater as presented in La Préface de Cromwell. It was his intention first to give the history of poetry as it was handed down through the ages which he divided into, "les temps primitifs, les temps antiques et les temps modernes".⁷ In "les temps primitifs", Hugo sees man as being close to God, continually marvelling at all his beauty and forever singing praise to Him. All the poetry was in lyrical form and it varied in beauty by the genius of each author.⁸

Sa lyre n'a que trois cordes, Dieu, l'âme, la création: mais ce triple mystère enveloppe tout, mais cette triple idée comprend tout.⁹

Man relied on the basic foundations of his being as the source and support of all his creations. These three themes of God, soul, and creation (nature), were his sole sources from which to form beautiful poems of life and love.

"Les temps antiques" revolved around war time epics and the enlargement of everyday life. Greek theater developed out of this epic stance.

Avec les nations apparaissent les guerres et les grands mouvements de peuples. La poésie témoigne de cette évolution: 'Elle devient épiques, elle enfante Homère.'. Toute la littérature antique, en effet, relève de l'Illiade et de l'Odyssée, qu'elle ne fait que reproduire sous des formes variées (histoire, tragédie).¹⁰

In drama, everything seemed to be out of proportion: the stage, the actors, the costumes, the masks and certainly the tragic plots. The actors would have to portray themselves as giants in order to play the giant roles they enacted. According to Hugo, in the time of ancient Greece and Rome the drama had a "choeur" that portrayed by word of mouth any events that either could not be "executed" on stage or action that would break unity on the stage in terms of time and place. Critics, however, take exception to Hugo's simplistic definition of "le choeur", noting that the role of the "choeur" is closely linked to the action and intermingled lyrically with it.

Toute cette conception du choeur est fausse. Le choeur antique n'a pas un rôle de complément ou de soutien, il n'est pas un personnage surajouté. A l'origine le choeur est lié étroitement à l'action tragique; le chant se mêle au dialogue. C'est d'ailleurs du lyrisme choral que naît la tragédie.¹¹

Just as the authors during "les temps primitifs" wrote of things that surrounded them, the poets and playwrights of "les temps antiques" portrayed the lifestyle and epic heroes that surrounded them. Certain so-called Classical rules and guidelines evolved at this time were strictly followed, thus tragic scenes could be foreseen and heroic endings were always expected. This, the era of the great Greek tragedies of Aescylus, Sophocles, and Euripides, produced plays, epic in subject, lyrical in form.

Paganism was confronted by Christianity at the beginning

of what Hugo sees as the final period, "les temps modernes". It seems that the pagan worship of the Greek gods and epic heroes was losing credence and was coming to an end. Modern man sensed more of a unity in the world which could only be brought about by one all-powerful God.

Une religion spiritualiste, supplantant le paganisme matériel et extérieur, se glisse au coeur de la société antique, la tue, et dans ce cadavre d'une civilisation décrépite dépose le germe de la civilisation moderne.¹²

It was this religious spirit that brought reality into poetry and drama. Man was portrayed as himself, average height and features, and the stage became a mirror of "real life". As we know, truth can often be more shocking than fiction and when it is presented on stage, it can be revolting to the audience. This dramatic poetry mingled dissimilar and opposing events, just as nature does, in order more accurately to portray reality. There were contrasts of shadows and light, body and soul, stupidity and real genius; just as contrasts and opposites constitute nature, so drama was to bring all this to the stage during "les temps modernes".¹³

Hence, Hugo drew up a new theory for the grotesque in drama.

Ainsi naît un principe nouveau, pierre angulaire de la poésie de la 'troisième civilisation': le grotesque. Plus varié que le beau, ce type, qui représente la 'bête humaine' en face du sublime de l'âme épurée par la morale chrétienne', est, en effet, comme moyen de contraste [...] la plus riche source que la nature puisse ouvrir à l'art.¹⁴

The contrasting effects found in nature prepared the way for the grotesque on the stage. This "grotesque" art form that is brought out by the third civilization, "les temps modernes", is nothing more than the actual depiction of the way man and nature interact by opposites and contrasts. However, to the theater audience of the late 18th and early 19th century, this portrayal of human life with all its impurities and faults, was considered grotesque and to be rejected. Nevertheless, in defending the role of the grotesque, Hugo recalls that as early as the 16th century in England, this total depiction of life was first introduced to the stage by a man named Shakespeare.¹⁵ He was the first playwright to bring confusion, murder, slang, tragedy and comedy to the stage, all in one play. To the modern writer, the grotesque was to play an important role. On the one hand, in the same scene, it would depict the horrible and the distorted; on the other hand, it would evoke laughter and comedy, confronting the audience with both extremes at opposite ends of the stage.¹⁶

Hugo reminds us that it was Dant  who explained the necessity of the grotesque in drama when he said:

Il semble, au contraire, que le grotesque sort un temps d'arr t, un terme de comparaison, un point de d part d'o  l'on s' l ve vers le beau avec une perception plus fra che et plus excit e.¹⁷

There is always a storm before a rainbow, and we must endure one in order to enjoy and appreciate the next. We can only understand the beauty of life if we know about the ugly, the

grotesque, the mistakes and the failures.

Hugo ends the first section on the historic periods by a summary. Primitive poetry was lyrical, ancient poetry produced epics, but if modern poetry was to become drama, life in its fullest had to be painted with all its shadows and brilliant colours. The first poetry was based on naiveness, the second on simplicity and today's dramatic poetry is centered on truth.¹⁸ Poets first wrote what they dreamed, then they recounted what they did and finally they began to draw out what they thought. It is because of this that drama is able to combine several elements and present both philosophical and picturesque scenes.¹⁹

Hugo goes on to develop his theory of drama. He states that drama seeks to restore reality and to make people realize the harmony in opposites.²⁰ Hugo designates the depiction of the "mélange des genres", as man and his soul combined with all the grotesque and the sublime elements essential to interpret life as it really is.²¹ Life is a mixture, a "mélange" of many diversified things and it is up to the poet or dramatist to gather them all together and portray them in a unified fashion. Creativity is an important factor but true success in accomplishing this task comes with the individual "génie". While combining the contrasting views and chaotic aspects of life, turning over in their heads the pros and cons of life and society in which they live, these playwrights who once made us laugh and dream, are suddenly becom-

ing melancholic. When one has to philosophize and meditate on his existence in the world, life can suddenly take on a whole new light.²² These men were no longer spotlighting certain good and bad times of life and dealing with them from a distance. Life in all of its' splendour and gloominess was being viewed at one time, on the stage. Hugo and Shakespeare were turning on the house lights in the theater and telling the audience to look around at themselves, and see what the stage was merely reflecting. Grotesque, sublime, funny, melancholic and mysterious, all of us are walking examples of the world we live in and when we are confronted with it, what do we do? At first we may laugh and say it is only a play but then again, who would we be fooling? In his Préface, Hugo depicts three leading writers, "Beaumarchais était morose Molière était sombre, Shakespeare mélancolique!"²³

Drama designated as "romantic", which Hugo brought to the stage in the early 19th century, is in direct contrast to the rules and regulations set up in the 17th century by the French Classical writers. The melodramas of the late 18th and early 19th centuries provided a bridge from the strict Classical theater to the more free flowing Romantic drama of the 19th century. Among all the rules that the Classical writers followed, that of the three unities best captures the spirit of the times. Hugo discusses at length the unities of place, time and action. These rules controlled the stage to such a point, Hugo insists, that it was impossible to "create"

or represent any artistic piece of work. Hugo draws a graphic parallel here with painting; if a painter were given three shades of grey and told to paint a spectacular sunset, he could only laugh! A sunset is made up of many contrasting and opposing colours, blended and strewn together only to dazzle the human eye in awe and ecstasy. So is life with all its appurtenances. To portray it in such restrictive ways is not creative; it is stiffling.

Au lieu de scènes, nous avons des récits; au lieu de tableaux, des descriptions. De graves personnages placés, comme le chœur antique, entre le drame et nous, viennent nous raconter ce qui se fait dans le temple, dans le palais, dans la place publique, de façon que souventes fois nous sommes tentés de leur crier: 'Vraiment! Mais conduisez-nous donc là-bas! On s'y doit bien amuser, cela doit être beau à voir!'.²⁴

It seems apparent that the playwrights were actually deciding for the audience what they should see and what they should be protected from seeing.

"L'unité de lieu" is the first unity which Hugo attacks. It called for everything in the play to take place in one setting. The play had to be centered, for instance, around the dining room or one particular setting, and whatever went on outside of that one setting was recounted to the audience either by the actors or a "chœur". Since no bloodshed or violent scenes could take place on the stage, a messenger would have to relay the news to the actors on stage and the audience. As Shakespeare before him, Hugo began to realize that in order fully to portray reality in the plays, the

exact setting and location of an event had to be shown or depicted.²⁵ Not only was it too restrictive to one's creativity to produce a play whose action took place in one room, it was totally unrealistic, falsifying life.

"L'unité de temps", the second unity, called for the play to take place within a twenty-four hour period. The ancients believed it would be too complicated and drawn out to have a play cover more than a day, so they limited it to one "revolution of the sun". As we all know, it is just as illogical to produce a play that covers the life of a person and present it as if it happened within a day, as it is to make it all happen in the corridor of a home somewhere. Hugo states that, "Toute action a sa durée propre comme son lieu particulier"²⁶, emphasizing the aspect of reality. One cannot allot the same amount of time to all events in life and portray them properly. To most, it destroys their continuity and true development. Few things of importance start and finish in the same day. We would laugh if a doctor prescribed the same medicine for every patient, and so it is with "l'unité de temps".

Croiser l'unité de temps à l'unité de lieu comme les barreaux d'une cage, et y faire pédantesquement entrer, de par Aristote, tous ces faits, tous ces peuples, toutes ces figures que la providence déroule à si grandes masses dans la réalité! C'est mutiler hommes et choses, c'est faire grimacer l'histoire... Voilà pourquoi, bien souvent, la cage des unités ne renferme qu'un squelette.²⁷

"L'unité d'action" is the third and final unity discus-

sed by Hugo. According to Hugo, the result of rigidly observing this unity was that each play must be presented in fragments, bits and pieces at a time. Dramatists presented scenes expecting the audience to use only its eye to interpret the action. Fitting into the realm of unity of time and place, Hugo argues the unity of action produced non-progressive action; the entire play or presentation could be caught up in one scene. There was to be no "mélange" of themes or events, everything had to follow an order so as, supposedly, to give the play continuity. None of the action could overlap into another part of the play. When a particular situation was brought up, it was acted on then and there in the very same scene, it could not be drawn out through the play. There could be no underlying themes or actions throughout the play. Frustration could be the only just word for an author who had to comply with these rules unless he was not dealing with reality or life. According to Hugo, the classical writers could write plays observing these "unities" since they dealt with fiction and unreal themes. For an author to create an artistic and colourful play, he must not be bound by rules that constrict his genius. For the 17th century eye and mind, a strict classical play might answer all their expectations but for an intelligent, educated 19th century audience, it would be boring and insulting. However, through an acquaintance with some of the truly great plays of Corneille and Racine, it is obvious that Hugo's description of what the

classical theater meant by "unité d'action" is a gross distortion.

In reviewing the theater and drama, Hugo saw another question that puzzled the artist, "le problème de l'imitation".

On répète néanmoins, et quelque temps encore sans doute on ira répétant: suivez les règles! Imitiez les modèles! Ce sont les règles qui ont formé les modèles! Un moment! Il y a en ce cas deux espèces de modèles, ceux qui se sont faits d'après les règles, et, avant eux, ceux d'après lesquels on a fait les règles.²⁹

Which model, if any, should the modern writer choose for a pattern? Is drama merely an imitation of what the world is like or is it an artist's view of how the world should be? One must not imitate anything, he must rely on his own knowledge and experience of society and life, and draw upon that for his work. Life can be painted in as many ways as there are men to do so and colours to fill the canvas. The challenge given to the modern playwrights is to understand how to blend the past examples and mistakes of earlier artists and add to them his creative genius in order to present to the audience an authentic and believable view of life as it is at the present time.

"Le principe de la liberté dans l'art" had to be examined if drama was to achieve its full potential. Hugo knew the time had come, the stage seemed to be in an evolutionary age so why had the light of liberty not shown onto the minds of men of the theater as it had in society in general?³⁰ So far as the audience was concerned, the classical was becoming

boring and the melodramas were a welcome relief, but it was this liberty that had to permeate the souls and thoughts of the leading writers. They were relying too much on their memories instead of being daring and engaging their imaginations.³¹ Hugo stressed that there has to be a "rapports entre l'art et la nature", before any creative work can be done. It is necessary to realize that the two are different categories and at times in conflict, yet they join together so as to create the world in which we live. Nature and art are two things that cannot exist without each other. Art portrays the ideal things in life, and nature is like the sounding board, the solid base that exists, the earth.³² Drama is a "miroir de concentration", says Hugo, and it must reflect life to its fullest. Unlike a simple mirror that reflects only an image, Hugo called for a concentrated study of life with all its good and evil, and insists that the portrayal stand out as a three dimensional image on stage. It is not sufficient merely to reflect life, the mirror has to accept and assimilate the image, picking and choosing the best way to present it to the audience.³³

One of Hugo's most interesting contributions to Romantic theater was his concept of the necessity of "couleur locale".

Le drame doit être radicalement imprégné de cette couleur des temps; elle doit en quelque sorte y être dans l'air, de façon qu'on ne s'aperçoive qu'en y entrant et qu'en en sortant qu'on a changé de siècle et d'atmosphère.³⁴

Keeping in mind that the play must be a representation of

nature and life, it is very important to present it in the "couleur des temps", the proper setting, the exact location and atmosphere of the particular scene and play. As the quote states, the audience must have the feeling that it is actually in the area of the play and in the same time period, not necessarily choosing the most beautiful aspects but often times the things that are central to the depiction.³⁵ This "couleur locale" must be an integral part of the play, not just a superficial decoration.³⁶

Yet, all of these aspects are not his primary concerns. Since Hugo is first and foremost the poet par excellence, he has a deep concern for poetic form. He lays down stipulations about the suppleness of the line and tells how to stimulate the mind with poetic imagery. He emphasizes the need to use the very accoutrements of poetry such as, paraphrases and metaphors, to present one's views. Hugo stresses the fact that in drama, the poetry must be picturesque; "... l'autre poésie était descriptive, celle-ci serait pittoresque."³⁷

This insistence on the evolution of poetic form is perhaps his greatest contribution to 19th century drama.

Une langue ne se fixe pas. L'esprit humain est toujours en marche, ou, si l'on veut, en mouvement, et les langues avec lui. Les choses sont ainsi. Quand le corps change, comment l'habit ne changerait-il pas? Le français du dix-neuvième siècle ne peut pas plus être le français du dix-huitième, que celui-ci n'est le français du dix-septième, que le français du dix-septième n'est celui du seizième. La langue de Montaigne n'est plus celle de Rabelais, la langue

de Pascal n'est plus celle de Montaigne, la langue de Montesquieu n'est plus celle de Pascal.³⁸

Just as people live and change, so does the language. One form of poetry describes perfectly a certain era, one group of persons, and a definite society, whereas a few years later both may have changed so much that a new style has to be created to portray them correctly. Hugo was calling for a change that was long overdue, poetic expression indeed but clothed in a new form with newly applied guidelines and more freedom of expression.

In the Préface de Cromwell, Hugo evaluated and adjusted many of the rules of drama and poetry so as to create theater and an expression of thought that would coincide with the evolution that was taking place in society. He called for the introduction of the sublime and grotesque in the theater, the "mélange de genres", disregard of the unities of time and place, and a broadening of the concept of unity of action, as well as "l'imitation de la nature", "la liberté dans l'art" and many other steps that would lead to the true depiction of life and nature. Maurice Descotes sums up Hugo's real contributions to the development of the 19th century French theater in his Préface de Cromwell, by stating:

En un certain sens, la célèbre Préface de Cromwell est moins audacieuse, puisque, tout en souhaitant que le vers, au théâtre, dépouille 'tout amour-propre, toute exigence, toute coquetterie', Hugo n'en conserve pas moins l'alexandrin. Elle est loin, d'autre part, d'être, par son contenu, pleinement originale: la critique des unités, de la distinction des genres, la répudiation des

règles viennent de Manzoni et de Mme de Staël. Ce qui fait l'incomparable prix de la Préface, c'est d'abord l'effort fourni pour rattacher les réformes réclamées à un système d'ensemble, si contestable soit-il: aux temps primitifs, dont l'expression était naturellement lyrique, aux temps antiques, dont la civilisation se reflète dans l'épopée, ont succédé les temps modernes et, par le mélange du grotesque et du sublime, c'est l'âme de cette ère nouvelle que le drame doit exprimer, puisque le christianisme a appris à l'homme que sa nature était double, 'l'une de la terre, l'autre du ciel'. 'Tout ce qui est dans la nature est dans l'art.' Mais ce qui, dans la Préface, est inimitable, c'est l'élan qui soulève le texte, le mouvement et l'enthousiasme.³⁹

In the following chapter, we will examine his play

Hernani and see whether or not Hugo incorporated any of these changes in his own theater, and if so, to what degree he succeeded.

Footnotes:

1. Philippe, Van Tieghem, Le Romantisme Français, "Cette année 1827 est une année capitale dans l'histoire du théâtre romantique.", p.61.
2. Maurice Descotes, "Le Théâtre Romantique", in Adam Antoine et al, ed. Littérature Française, II, p.53.
3. André Maurois, Victor Hugo, p.34.
4. Descotes, p.54.
5. Van Tieghem, p.62.
6. Van Tieghem, pp.62-63.
7. Victor Hugo, La Préface de Cromwell (1971), p.19.
8. Hugo, p.19.
9. Hugo, p.31.
10. Hugo, p.19.
11. Victor Hugo, La Préface de Cromwell (1949), p.23.
12. Hugo, (1971), p.36.
13. Hugo, p.41.
14. Hugo, p.20.
15. Hugo, p.20.
16. Hugo, p.45.
17. Hugo, p.48.
18. Hugo, p.54.
19. Hugo, p.55.
20. Hugo, p.20.
21. Hugo, p.20.
22. Hugo, p.64.

23. Hugo, p.64.
24. Hugo, p.67.
25. Hugo, p.68.
26. Hugo, pp.68-69.
27. Hugo, p.69.
28. Hugo, p.70.
29. Hugo, p.75.
30. Hugo, p.77.
31. Hugo, p.79.
32. Hugo, p.82.
33. Hugo, p.82.
34. Hugo, p.84.
35. Victor Hugo, Hernani, p.36.
36. Hugo, La Préface de Cromwell (1971), p.84.
37. Hugo, p.92.
38. Hugo, p.94.
39. Descotes, p.54.

CHAPTER III

On the twenty-fifth of February, 1830, at the end of the famous forty-five day "bataille d'Hernani", waged between the die-hard Classicists of the old guard and the young artists and writers led by Théophile Gautier in his colorful pink waistcoat, who formed the "Claque" at the Comédie Française during the attempts to present Hernani, the curtain rang down on what was finally judged a successful play, and the first real masterpiece of the Romantic theater was born.¹

V.L. Saulnier in his book, La Littérature Française du Siècle Romantique, acclaims Hugo as "chef d'école" of the Romantic movement in the three great genres:

Hugo chef d'école (1827-32). Chef d'école, Hugo s'affirme dans les trois grands genres, en établissant par là-même des formules stables, par trois oeuvres: un drame, Hernani (1830), un roman, Notre-Dame de Paris et un recueil lyrique, les Feuilles d'automne (1831).²

Saulnier's overview of Hugo's two masterpieces of Romantic theater, distinguishes those elements which characterize the genre.

Le drame: une action pathétique, développée avec une certaine liberté dans le temps et l'espace et dans le mélange des genres, mais sans égarement (l'action dure quelques mois ou années; un décor pour chaque acte, sans plus); empruntant à l'histoire un cadre anecdotique pittoresque (les grands d'Espagne se couvrent devant le roi; ils sont seuls tutoyés par lui) en même temps qu'une toile de fond grandiose, par l'évocation, en tableau à la fresque, d'une grande époque révolue (l'aurore de Charles Quint dans Hernani, la décadence de l'Espagne dans Ruy Blas); exprimée dans un style et

une versification affranchis des vaines contraintes, et surtout prétexte à morceaux de bravoure d'une beauté sonore: c'est de la prestidigitation théâtrale, dit L. Jouvet.³

It is the goal of this final chapter to examine Hugo's play Hernani, to see to what extent he incorporated the theories he has devised and set forth in his Préface de Cromwell. First of all, what does Hugo declare about the classical dictum, obliging the playwrights to be limited by the three unities of time, place and action? It becomes evident that Hugo's renewal of drama has mainly to do with form; a direct attack, among other areas, on what he considers to be the restricting effect of these three unities. First let us examine his views on the unities of time and place:

Ce qu'il y a d'étrange, c'est que les routiniers prétendent appuyer leur règle des deux unités sur la vraisemblance, tandis que c'est précisément le réel qui la tue. Quoi de plus invraisemblable et de plus absurde, en effet, que ce vestibule, ce péristyle, cette antichambre, lieu banal où nos tragédies ont la complaisance de venir se dérouler, où arrivent, on ne sait comment, les conspirateurs pour déclamer contre le tyran, le tyran pour déclamer contre les conspirateurs, chacun à son tour...⁴

How can the action be restricted to the same room, the same setting and the short time span of twenty-four hours at the most, be it murder, parties or love affairs? Drama was to portray reality and truth, instead it was presented in unreal settings and places inappropriate for certain actions. "Toute action a sa durée propre comme son lieu particulier,"⁵ holds Hugo; each action has its proper setting and time period in which it should occur. Just as he objects to unity of "lieu"

Hugo finds unity of "temps" to be totally unrealistic.

Let us look at how Hugo disregards the unity of place throughout his play, Hernani. Act One takes place in the castle of Doña Sol, in Saragossa. Act Two takes place at Saragossa but this time it is outside the castle doors. Hernani, the bandit, had arranged a secret meeting with Doña Sol the night before in her bedroom but Don Carlos overheard the plan and so he comes back to the castle this same night. Act three takes us to the Chateau de Silva, home of Ruy Gomez, where his marriage to Doña Sol is to take place. The fourth act brings us to Aix-la-Chapelle, where the emperor, Don Carlos, renounces his own right to fall in love with Doña Sol, Hernani's beloved. Finally, act five takes place back at Saragossa, in the palace of Hernani, where fate finally reigns. Through this examination of the play's settings, we can substantiate the fact that Hugo upheld his theory against unity of place.

Since Hugo denied the unity of time in the Préface de Cromwell, let us look at how he did this in Hernani. The entire play takes place over a four day period. Act one takes place at night in Doña Sol's bedroom. Act two takes us to the following night when Hernani and Doña Sol are to have their "secret" rendez-vous. The third act takes place during the third day at the castle of Silva with Don Ruy Gomez. Act four is set during the night of the third day, with Don Carlos renouncing Hernani, the famous bandit. The

final act, act five takes place on the fourth day in the castle of Hernani. This clearly shows us how Hugo practiced his theory against unity of time, since the entire play lasted four days, not just one twenty-four hour period.

Hugo admits that unity of action is a necessity, stating in the Préface de Cromwell that the unity of action is essential to proper production of dramatic presentations.

Il suffirait enfin, pour démontrer l'absurdité de la règle des deux unités, d'une dernière raison, prise dans les entrailles de l'art. C'est l'existence de la troisième unité, l'unité d'action la seule admise de tous parce qu'elle résulte d'un fait: l'oeil ni l'esprit humain ne sauraient saisir plus d'un ensemble à la fois. Celle-là est aussi nécessaire que les deux autres sont inutiles. C'est elle qui marque le point de vue du drame; or, par cela même, elle exclut les deux autres. Il ne peut pas plus y avoir trois unités dans le drame que trois horizons dans un tableau. Du reste, gardons-nous de confondre l'unité avec la simplicité d'action. L'unité d'ensemble ne répudie en aucune façon les actions secondaires sur lesquelles doit s'appuyer l'action principale. Il faut seulement que ces parties, savamment subordonnées au tout, gravitent sans cesse vers l'action centrale et se groupent autour d'elle aux différents étages ou plutôt sur les divers plans du drame. L'unité d'ensemble est la loi de perspective du théâtre.⁶

Hugo's conception of unity of action is broader than the idea of "unité d'action" held by the 17th century French playwright. In view of Hugo's statements in the Préface de Cromwell about the necessity of unity of action, we will now examine Hernani in order to discover whether the love that exists between Doña Sol and Hernani is sufficiently powerful to maintain this unity throughout the play. The first act sets

the scene introducing the characters and the plot. It is here that we are shown the reality of the love between Hernani and Doña Sol. The "noeud" of the play, in other words, the unifying element, is the mutual love between Hernani and Doña Sol. Two other lovers, Ruy Gomez and Don Carlos provide the rivalry that constitutes the plot and causes the conflict which involves love, hatred, murder and revenge. Act Two introduces the haughty rivalry of Don Carlos; Act Three, the jealousy and vindictive claim of the doddering old man, "le vieillard Ruy Gomez". Act Four develops Don Carlos renunciation of Doña Sol's hand because of the higher political claims made on him as Charles V, and act Five brings the final resolution of the love story and the plot through the famous scene with Ruy Gomez, claiming his revenge after the wedding of Hernani and Doña Sol. The play closes with final scenes reminiscent of Romeo and Juliet, and which contain some of the most lyrical poetry of the play. It seems evident that the unifying action upon which Hugo insisted is clearly demonstrated in Hernani by the love theme between Doña Sol and Hernani, which is the unifying thread running throughout the entire play.

In the Préface de Cromwell, Hugo vowed obedience to the rule of "mélange de genres" in order to give a play character and variety. He often parallels the grotesque with the comical, adding the sublime in the same breath and act. Hugo insists that this brings a tone of reality to the play instead

of sticking to a strictly tragic or comical form. A prime example of a grotesque character is Ruy Gomez, in Hernani, who plays the role of a selfish old man who lusts for pleasure. Yet at the same time, Hugo adds a light tone of comedy to a scene of almost sure violence. Act One, scene one, combines the tragic with the comical when Don Carlos goes to visit Doña Sol in her bed chambers and is forced to hide inside a locker while his rival, Hernani, appears unexpectedly. Not being able to withstand his "imprisonment", Don Carlos jumps out of the locker and challenges Hernani for the right to Doña Sol.

DON CARLOS, ouvrant avec fracas la porte de l'armoire.

— Quand aurez-vous fini de conter votre histoire?

Croyez-vous donc qu'on soit à l'aise en cette armoire?

(Hernani recule, étonné. Doña Sol pousse un cri et se réfugie dans ses bras, en fixant sur don Carlos des yeux effarés.)

HERNANI, la main sur la garde de son épée.

— Quel est cet homme?

When the audience has settled down from this disruption, a third character, Ruy Gomez appears in Doña Sol's bed chambers.

(Ils croisent leurs épées. Doña Sol tombe tremblante sur un fauteuil. On entend des coups à la porte.)

DOÑA JOSEFA, a doña Sol.

...
Madame! un coup inattendu!

C'est le duc qui revient!

...
(Les deux combattants [Hernani and Don Carlos] remettent leurs épées dans le

fourreau. Don Carlos s'enveloppe dans son manteau et rabat son chapeau sur ses yeux. On frappe.)⁸

The following scene, scene three, identifies the third rival.

DON RUY GOMEZ.

— Des hommes chez ma nièce à cette heure de nuit!
Venez tous! Cela vaut la lumière et le bruit.

. . .

Non. C'est bien. Poursuivez. Ai-je autre chose encore?

(Il arrache son collier.)

Tenez, foulez aux pieds, foulez ma toison d'or!

(Il jette son chapeau.)

Arracher mes cheveux, faites-en chose vile!
Et vous pourrez demain vous vanter par la ville

Que jamais débauchés, dans leurs jeux insolents,

N'ont sur plus noble front souillé cheveux plus blancs!

DOÑA SOL.— Monseigneur...

DON RUY GOMEZ, à ses valets.

— Écuyers! écuyers! à mon aide!

Ma hache, mon poignard, ma dague de Tolède!

(Aux deux jeunes gens.)

Et suivez-moi tous deux!⁹

Finally, scene three reveals the identity of Don Carlos, the third principal in the threefold rivalry.

DON CARLOS, faisant un pas.

— Duc, ce n'est pas d'abord

De cela qu'il s'agit. Il s'agit de la mort

De Maximilien, empereur d'Allemagne.

(Il jette son manteau, et découvre son visage caché par son chapeau.)

DON RUY GOMEZ.

— Raillez-vous?... Dieu! le roi!

DOÑA SOL.—

Le roi!

HERNANI, dont les yeux s'allument.

Le roi
d'Espagne!

DON CARLOS, gravement.

— Oui, Carlos. — Seigneur duc, es-tu donc insensé?

Mon aïeul l'empereur est mort...¹⁰

Thus in this first act, Hugo leads the audience into the principal plot, the rivalry for the hand of Doña Sol that exists among the three disparate characters, the old grandee, Don Ruy Gomez; the future emperor, Don Carlos; and the bandit, Hernani. Here, the audience sees a classic example of what Hugo means by "mélange de genres", the mingling of the sublime and the grotesque.

"La couleur locale" must play an integral part in the creation of a play according to Hugo, lest the play become dull with the same settings, costumes and scenery. Hugo strove for perfection of "la couleur locale". Costumes, scenery, props and lighting became as integral to the production of a play as the characters themselves. If his theory concerning the portrayal of reality was to be accomplished, Hugo had to emphasize the need for detailed costumes and authentic furnishings, props that truly resembled the time period and decor in which the play was to be set. "La couleur locale" was of extreme importance according to Hugo's theories. The dramatist must set the scene, time, place and action, with the furnishings on stage and the costumes worn by the actors.

Ce n'est point à la surface du drame que doit être la 'couleur locale', mais au fond, dans le coeur même de l'oeuvre, d'où elle se répand au dehors d'elle-même, naturellement, également, et, pour

ainsi parler, dans tous les coins du drame, comme la sève qui monte de la racine à la dernière feuille de l'arbre. Le drame doit être radicalement imprégné de cette couleur des temps; elle doit, en quelque sorte, y être dans l'air, de façon qu'on ne s'aperçoive qu'en y entrant et qu'en en sortant qu'on a changé de siècle et d'atmosphère.¹¹

Hugo goes to great lengths in Hernani to give authenticity to "la couleur locale". He puts detailed instructions in the margins of his writings, giving descriptions of costumes, reactions, movement of characters and props. Two excellent examples of this technique appear in Act Two, scene one and Act Two, scene two. For instance in Act Two, scene one, the stage direction reads:

(Ils arrivent tous quatre, don Carlos en tête, chapeaux rabattus, enveloppés de longs manteaux dont leurs épées soulèvent le bord inférieur.)¹²

In Act Two, scene two, another example of Hugo's directions:

(Le roi se retourne, et voit Hernani immobile derrière lui, dans l'ombre, les bras croisés sous le long manteau qui l'enveloppe, et le large bord de son chapeau relevé. Doña Sol pousse un cri, court à Hernani et l'entoure de ses bras.)¹³

In addition to Hugo's theories on the unities, the "mélange de genre", and "la couleur locale", in the Préface de Cromwell, he also spoke of the "vraisemblance des personnages". Our question is: does he adequately illustrate his point in Hernani? His villains, Ruy Gomez and Don Carlos, though not exaggerated characters, seem to be more stereotypes than individuals. Ruy Gomez is a typical old man that

seeks love in a young woman. Don Carlos is a classic example of a corrupt ruler who takes what he wants and who uses others. Hernani is called a bandit because he lives in the mountains and associates with outcasts of society; later we discover his aristocratic lineage. As the play develops, the most individualistic of the three men proves to be Hernani. He is the most loyal, sincere and true to Doña Sol his loved one. Doña Sol's role is typical of a beautiful maiden, but one might have liked to see her stand stronger in her conviction to love Hernani. In Hernani, Hugo has succeeded in portraying a typical romantic scene, where more than one man seeks the love of a beautiful woman. Throughout the play, the characters never show themselves to be strong individuals but rather appear molded on the accepted models of heroes, villains and innocent heroines.

In none of the four categories discussed here do we find much that was not considered previously by former playwrights, especially as we noted in Chapter I, by Voltaire and Diderot. Hugo's true innovation in Romantic theater is revealed in the suppleness and imagery of his poetry. What sets Hugo apart as France's greatest lyric poet becomes evident in the poetry of Hernani. If no other factor of his plays seems ingenious and new, his poetic style is indeed an innovation. Hugo clearly states his position in regard to poetic form in the theater, in this quote from La Préface de Cromwell;

Que si nous avions le droit de dire quel pourrait être, à notre gré, le style du drame, nous voudrions un vers libre, franc, loyal, osant tout dire sans prudence, tout exprimer sans recherche; passant d'une naturelle allure de la comédie à la tragédie, du sublime au grotesque; tour à tour positif et poétique, tout ensemble artiste et inspiré, profond et soudain, large et vrai; sachant briser à propos et déplacer la césure pour déguiser sa monotonie d'alexandrin; plus ami de l'enjambement qui l'allonge que de l'inversion qui l'embrouille; fidèle à la rime, cette esclave reine, cette suprême grâce de notre poésie, ce générateur de notre mètre; inépuisable dans la variété de ses tours, insaisissable dans les secrets d'élégance et de facture;... tel que le ferait l'homme qu'une fée aurait doué de l'âme de Corneille et de la tête de Molière.¹⁴

For Hugo, in drama, poetry combined in a lyrical form, the grotesque and the sublime in order to make the play more realistic and to keep it flowing smoothly. Commenting on the two most important aspects of Hugo's poetry, "le lyrisme et l'élément épique", Lagarde et Michard point out how these portray his genius. Of "lyrisme" they say, "les héros chantent leur enthousiasme, leurs rêves, leur mélancholie, leur amour avec un lyrisme qui compense par son pouvoir de suggestion les imperfections de l'analyse".

One of the most poignant illustrations of Hugo's lyrical drama is Doña Sol's outburst in Act Five, scene six:

DOÑA SOL, se jetant sur lui.

Ciel! des douleurs
étranges!

Ah! jette loin de toi ce philtre!...
Ma raison
S'égare. Arrête! Hélas! mon don Juan,
ce poison
Est vivant! ce poison dans le coeur
fait éclore
Une hydre à mille dents qui ronge et
qui dévore!

Oh! je ne savais pas qu'on souffrit
 a ce point!
 Qu'est-ce donc que cela? c'est du
 feu! ne bois point!
 Oh! tu souffrirais trop!¹⁵

There are many examples in Hernani of Hugo's poetical genius. Another striking example appears in Act Three, scene four where we find Hernani and Doña Sol together in the shadows of Ruy Gomez's castle. Doña Sol threatens to kill herself in lieu of being unfaithful to Hernani. Thus Hernani, with a "lyrisme sombre", pleads with her to understand his unstable and dangerous life style.

HERNANI. —

Où vais-je? je ne sais. Mais je me
 sens poussé
 D'un souffle impétueux, d'un destin
 insensé.
 Je descends, je descends, et jamais
 ne m'arrête.

Tout se brise, tout meurt. Malheur à
 qui me touche!
 Oh! fuis! détourne-toi de mon chemin
 fatal,
 Hélas! sans le vouloir, je te ferais
 du mal!¹⁶

Again, in Act Five, scene three, Hernani proclaims his love for Doña Sol:

HERNANI. —

Ah! qui n'oublierait tout à cette voix
 céleste?
 Ta parole est un chant où rien d'hu-
 main ne reste.
 Et, comme un voyageur, sur un fleuve
 emporté,
 Qui glisse sur les eaux par un beau
 soir d'été,
 Et voit fuir sous ses yeux mille plaines
 fleuries,
 Ma pensée entraînée erre en tes rêve-
 ries!¹⁷

The epic element is also basic in most of Hugo's works.

He says his plays are:

...de l'histoire écoutée aux portes de la légende. Il brosse de vastes fresques, très colorées, évoquant autour de l'action centrale toute une époque, tout un pays; la révolution d'Angleterre (Cromwell), ...l'Espagne de Charles Quint (Hernani) puis une Espagne au bord de la décadence (Ruy Blas).¹⁸

Act Four, scene four, is an excellent example of the fusion of epic drama with lyrical expression. The scene commences with Don Carlos's stirring speech:

DON CARLOS. — Messieurs, allez plus loin! l'empereur vous entend.
 (tous les flambeaux s'éteignent à la fois.—Profond silence.—
 Il fait un pas dans les ténèbres, si épaisses qu'on y distingue à peine les conjurés muets et immobiles.)
 Silence et nuit! l'essaim en sort et s'y replonge.
 Croyez-vous que ceci va passer comme un songe,
 Et que je vous prendrai, n'ayant plus vos flambeaux,
 Pour des hommes de pierre assis sur leurs tombeaux?
 Vous parliez tout à l'heure assez haut, mes statues!
 Allons! relevez donc vos têtes abattues,
 Car voici Charles-Quint! Frappez, faites un pas!
 Voyons, osez-vous? — Non, vous n'oserez pas.
 Vos torches flamboyaient sanglantes sous ces voûtes.
 Mon souffle a donc suffi pour les éteindre toutes!
 Mais voyez, et tournez vos yeux irrésolus,
 Si j'en éteins beaucoup, j'en allume encor plus.

(Il frappe de la clef de fer sur la porte de bronze du tombeau. A ce bruit, toutes les profondeurs du souterrain se remplissent de soldats portant des torches et des pertuisanes. A leur tête, le duc d'Alcala, le marquis d'Almuñan.)

Accourez, mes faucons! j'ai le nid, j'ai la proie!

(Aux conjurés.)

J'illumine à mon tour. Le sépulcre flamboie, Regardez!

(Aux soldats)

Venez tous, car le crime est flagrant. 19

The principal innovation that Hugo effected in poetic form took place in his transformation of the Classical alexandrine, the accepted verse form for drama. He made the line more supple, often disregarded the mid-line caesura, and used devices rigidly forbidden by the theorists of dramatic poetry. For instance, the Parisian literary world was rocked by the now famous "enjambement" that greeted the audience as the curtain rises on Act One, scene one of Hernani, as Josefa inquires:

DOÑA JOSEFA, seule.

— Serait-ce déjà lui?

(Un nouveau coup.)

Dérobé. 20 C'est bien à l'escalier

In La Préface de Cromwell, Hugo emphasized five areas in which drastic changes seemed essential if theater was to be revived. These areas are: "les unités", "le mélange des genres", "la couleur locale", "la vraisemblance des personnages" et "la poésie". The fundamental question we have

sought to explore in this study is: "What is the historical value of Hugo's theories? What did he really contribute to the development of theater in France during the Romantic Movement? Did he bring about a real revolution in theater? The critic, Philippe Van Tieghem has asked these same questions and his response seems just:

Quelle est la valeur historique et littéraire de cette date de février 1830? Elle parut beaucoup moins grande alors qu'elle ne sembla l'être à Hugo lui-même, lorsqu'il écrivit la Réponse à un acte d'accusation, qui devait paraître dans Les Contemplations; une victoire, oui; une révolution? non. 21

Footnotes:

1. Pierre Bornecque, La France et sa Littérature, p.503.

2. V. L. Saulnier, La Littérature Française du Siècle Romantique, p.43.

3. Saulnier, p.43.

4. Victor Hugo, La Préface de Cromwell (1949), p.36.

5. Hugo, p.38.

6. Hugo, p.39.

7. Victor Hugo, Hernani, p.61.

8. Hugo, p.62.

9. Hugo, pp.64-66.

10. Hugo, p.66.

11. Hugo, La Préface de Cromwell (1949), p.46.

12. Hugo, Hernani, p.73.

13. Hugo, p.81.

14. Hugo, La Préface de Cromwell, pp.48-49.

15. Hugo, Hernani, p.179.

16. Hugo, p.104.

17. Hugo, p.166.

18. André Lagarde, Laurent Michard, XIX^e Siècle, Les Grands Auteurs Français au Programme, p.236.

19. Hugo, Hernani, p.145.

20. Hugo, p.51.

21. Philippe Van Tieghem, Le Romantisme Français, pp.66-67.

Conclusion:

The problem in this thesis was to try to discover whether Victor Hugo effected a real revolution in French theater around 1830, or whether his dramatic theories and his own plays were only an important turning point in its evolution. In studying his Préface de Cromwell we became acquainted with the proposals that Hugo suggested would revolutionize theater. We then examined his drama, Hernani, in order to see to what extent he had incorporated these proposed changes, and to judge whether he had created a new and radical form of theater. In preparation for this study, we had briefly examined the French theater through the eighteenth century, only to discover that most of Hugo's so-called revolutionary techniques had already been proposed by such dramatists as Voltaire and Diderot.

Nevertheless, there remained the historical fact of the celebrated "battle of Hernani." In trying to discover what this battle was all about, it became apparent that the play was not allowed to proceed, not because the unities were ignored, nor because of an unaccustomed "mélange de genres", nor because of an attack on any of the other consecrated elements associated with form in the Classical theater. What really shocked and excited the critics was Hugo's new and supple verse form, his "subversion" of the sacred Classical alexandrine. In the very first scene of the very first act,

the sensitive ears of the critics were assaulted by that famous "enjambement".

Therefore, in agreement both with the critics contemporary with Hugo and with those who for over a hundred years have been concerned to discover the true nature of Hugo's contribution to French theater, we seem justified in concluding that this drama did really mark a turning point and an evolution in the French theater, but not for the precise reasons that Hugo had anticipated. This evolution stemmed not so much from his repudiation of Classical dramatic form as from his new and refreshing poetry. Hugo's conviction that it is by form and not by subject that art is renewed, is expressed in Hernani by a true renewal of dramatic poetic form, characterized by fresh and lyrical imagery and a vigorous transformation of the Classical alexandrine. It seems apparent that it is in this area that we discover Hugo's true contribution to French Romantic theater. What raises Hernani above the level of the melodramas that immediately preceded it and has guaranteed the fact that it is still in the repertoire of the Comédie Française is its innovative poetry and inimitable imagery.

The knowledgeable critic, Philippe Van Tieghem summarizes this conclusion by saying:

Hernani est simplement la victoire remportée par un style neuf sur un style vieilli; le style en est la pierre d'achoppement; c'est sur le style qu'ont buté les classiques; c'est lui qu'ils se sont refusés à admettre; c'est lui que les jeunes hugolâtres ont applaudi avec sincérité. Sans

doute la critique, étudiant à loisir le texte, a-t-elle mis en lumière dans ce drame des défauts et des qualités qui portent sur d'autres points: intrigue, couleur locale, caractères, situations; mais tant pour les spectateurs de la représentation que pour l'historien qui juge avec cent ans de recul, l'impression de nouveauté que donne Hernani vient surtout de la langue et du style... Qu'avait-il manqué à toutes ces préfaces, théories et systèmes pour la construction d'un théâtre neuf? Cette idée que c'est par la forme et non par le sujet que l'art se renouvelle; le sujet ne doit être renouvelé que dans la mesure où un contenu nouveau permettra une expression nouvelle. Hernani est une des nombreuses preuves de cette idée capitale de l'histoire de l'art. Ainsi, un style poétique nouveau avait pu se faire admettre au théâtre. Style nouveau en quoi? Rupture de l'alexandrin en tronçons de longueurs variables, et effets d'opposition produits par l'alternance, elle-même irrégulière, de l'alexandrin classique régulier et du vers coupé; images plus nombreuses, plus audacieuses, plus colorées; langue plus concrète et beaucoup plus riche, qui admet les termes les plus prosaïques et les mêle aux plus nobles; tournures familières, copiées sur celles de la prose la plus courante; ton plus varié: tantôt vif, primesautier, nerveux, tantôt méditatif et rêveur, tantôt éloquent et majestueux.

Footnote:

1. Philippe Van Tieghem, Le Romantisme Français, pp.67-68.

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