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Mario Vargas Llosa: The Temptation of the Impossible

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INTRODUCTION

Victor Hugo, the Ocean

The winter in the boarding school of the Leoncio Prado Military College in Lima that year, 1950, was damp and gray, the routine was numbingly boring, and my life was rather unhappy. The adventures of Jean Valjean, the bloodhound obstinacy of Javert, the warmth of Gavroche, and the heroism of Enjolras blotted out the hostility of the world, turning my depression into enthusiasm during those hours of reading stolen from classes and military training, and transporting me to a world blazing with extreme misfortune, love, courage, happiness, and vile deeds. Revolution, sanctity, sacrifice, prison, crime, men who were supermen, women who were virgins or whores, saintly or wicked, a whole cast of characters shaped by theatricality, euphony, and metaphor. It was a great place to take refuge; this splendid fictional life gave one strength to put up with real life. But the treasures of literature also made real reality seem more impoverished.

Who was Victor Hugo? Having spent the last two years totally immersed in his books and in his time, I now know that I will never know. Jean-Marc Hovasse, the most me-

ticulous of his biographers to date—his biography is, as yet, unfinished—has calculated that a passionate bibliographer of the romantic bard, reading fourteen hours a day, would take twenty years just to read all the books dedicated to the author of *Les Misérables* that can be found in the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris. Because, after Shakespeare, Victor Hugo has generated across five continents more literary studies, philological analyses, critical editions, biographies, translations, and adaptations of his work than any other Western author.

How long would it take the same titanic reader to read the complete works of Victor Hugo himself, including the still unedited thousands of letters, notes, papers, and drafts that can be found in public and private libraries and antiquarian collections across half the globe? No less than ten years, so long as this were his or her obsessive, full-time occupation in life. The prolific output of this poet and dramatist, the emblematic figure of French romanticism, has a dizzying effect on anyone attempting to peer into this bottomless universe. His precociousness was as remarkable as his capacity for work and the extraordinary facility with which rhymes, images, antitheses, brilliant phrases, and the most sonorous affectations flowed from his pen. Before he was fifteen, he had already written thousands of verses, a comic opera, the prose melodrama *Inez de Castro*, the draft of a five-act tragedy (in verse), *Athélie ou les Scandinaves*, the epic poem *Le Déluge*, and sketched hundreds of drawings. In a magazine that he edited as an adolescent with his brothers Abel and Eugène, which appeared for no more than a year and a half, he published 112 articles and 22 poems. He kept up that delirious pace throughout his long life—1802–1885—which encompassed almost the whole of the nineteenth century, and he left for posterity such a

mountain of work that, we can be sure, nobody has read or will ever read it from beginning to end.

One would expect that the life of someone who had generated so many tons of paper scrawled with ink would be that of a hardworking, sedentary monk, confined for all his days and years to his study, never lifting his head from the desk where his tireless hand wore out pens and emptied inkwells. But no, the extraordinary thing is that Victor Hugo did in his life almost as many things as his imagination and his words could conjure up, because he had one of the richest and most adventurous lives of his day. He always embraced everything fully and had an amazing knack of being at the center of important historical events, as a participant or as a privileged witness. His love life alone was so intense and varied that it gives cause for astonishment (and, of course, a certain envy). He was a twenty-year-old virgin when he married Adèle Foucher, but from the wedding night on, he began to make up for lost time. In the many years remaining to him, he performed innumerable amorous feats with democratic impartiality, for he went to bed with ladies from all echelons of society—from marquises to servant women, with a certain preference for the latter in his later years—and his biographers, those *voyeurs*, have discovered that a few weeks before he died, at eighty-three years old, he escaped from his house to make love to an old servant woman of his long-term lover, Juliette Drouet.

He did not just mix with all types of human beings, goaded on as always by a universal curiosity toward everything and everybody. Perhaps the afterlife, transcendence, God concerned him even more than the creatures of this world. We can say in all seriousness that this writer, who had his feet so firmly on the ground, saw himself increas-

ingly as not just a poet, dramatist, narrator, prophet, draftsman, and painter, but rather as a theologian, a seer, someone who revealed the mysteries of the afterlife, the most recondite designs of the Supreme Being, and that his magnum opus was not, for him, about the creation and redemption of man, but rather about forgiveness for Satan. He intended *Les Misérables* to be a religious tract, not an adventure novel.

His dealings with the afterlife went through a part-comic, part-horrific period that has yet to be adequately studied: for two and a half years he conducted séances in his house in Marine Terrace, Jersey, where he spent part of his nine years in exile. Apparently he was introduced to these practices by a Parisian medium, Delphine de Girardin, who spent a few days with the Hugo family in the Channel Islands. Madame Girardin bought a suitable table—round, with three legs—in St. Héliier, and the first session was held on 11 September 1853. After a three-quarters of an hour wait, Leopoldine, a daughter of Victor Hugo who had drowned, made contact. From that time on, until December 1854, innumerable séances took place in Marine Terrace—attended by the poet, his wife, Adèle, his children Charles and Adèle, friends, and neighbors—in which Victor Hugo had occasion to converse with Jesus Christ, Muhammad, Joshua, Luther, Shakespeare, Molière, Dante, Aristotle, Plato, Galileo, Louis XVI, Isaiah, Napoleon (the elder), and other celebrities. Also with mythical and biblical animals, like the Lion of Androcles, Balaam's Ass, and the Dove from Noah's Ark. And abstract beings like Criticism and the Idea. The latter turned out to be a vegetarian and showed a passion that would have delighted the fanatics of the Animal Defence League, to judge by certain remarks that it made to the spiritualists, through

the medium of the glass and the letters of the alphabet: “Greed is a crime. Liver pâté is a disgrace . . . the death of an animal is as inadmissible as the suicide of a man.”

The spirits manifested their presence by making the table legs jump and vibrate. Once the transcendent visitor had been identified, the dialogue began. The spirit replied with faint taps that corresponded to letters of the alphabet (the apparitions spoke only French). Victor Hugo spent hours and hours—sometimes entire nights—transcribing the dialogues. Although some anthologies of these “mediumistic documents” have appeared, there are still many hundreds of unpublished pages that should rightfully appear in the poet’s oeuvre, if only because all the spirits with whom he spoke agree completely with his political, religious, and literary convictions, and share his rhetorical self-assurance and stylistic quirks, as well as professing the necessary admiration for him that his egomania demanded.

It is difficult to imagine today the extraordinary popularity that Victor Hugo achieved in his day throughout the Western world and beyond. His precocious talent as a poet made him well known in literary and intellectual circles when he was still in his teens, and later his plays, in particular after the tumultuous opening night of *Hernani*, on 25 February 1830, which marked the symbolic birth of the romantic movement in France, turned the young dramatist into a celebrity, on a par with the fame enjoyed by certain singers and film stars today. His novels, primarily *Notre-Dame de Paris* and, later, *Les Misérables*, increased exponentially the number of his readers, not just in French, but in other languages, where soon Quasimodo or Jean Valjean became as famous as in France. Along with his literary fame, his active political life, as a member of the governing assemblies and as an orator, commentator, and polemicist

on issues of current affairs, consolidated his overall prestige, making him a kind of political and moral conscience of his society. In the just over nineteen years of his exile, this image of him as the great patriarch of letters, public morality, and civic life reached legendary proportions. His return to France, on 5 September 1870, with the establishment of the Republic, attracted unprecedented crowds, as thousands of Parisians, many of whom had not read a single line of his work, came to cheer him. This popularity would continue growing apace until the day of his death, when the whole of France, the whole of Europe, wept for him. Paris in almost its entirety turned out to follow his funeral cortège, in a demonstration of affection and solidarity that only very few state figures or political leaders have subsequently managed to enjoy. When he died, in 1883, Victor Hugo had become something more than a great writer: he had become a myth, the personification of the Republic, the symbol of his society and of his century.

Spain and things Spanish played a central role in the mythology of European romanticism, and in the work of Victor Hugo in particular. He learned Spanish when he was nine, before traveling to Spain, in 1811, with his mother and his two brothers, to meet up with his father, one of Joseph Bonaparte's most trusted generals. Three months before the trip, the child had his first classes in a language that he would later sprinkle into his poems and plays, and which appears in the strange ditty that the bohemian Tholomyès sings to his lover, Fantine: "Soy de Badajoz / Amor me llama / Toda mi alma / Es en mis ojos / Porque enseñas / A tus piernas [*sic*]." (I'm from Badajoz / Love calls me / All my soul / Is in my eyes / Because you show / Your legs.) In Madrid, he spent several months at a boarding school, the Colegio de los Nobles, on Hortenza

Street, which was run by nuns. Victor and Abel were exempted from going to Mass, confession, and communion because their mother, who was a follower of Voltaire, passed them off as Protestants. In that gloomy school, he would later remark, he was cold and hungry and had many fights with his schoolmates. But in those months, he learned things about Spain and the Spanish language that he would carry with him for the rest of his life and which proved very fertile in his imagination. When he returned to France in 1812, he saw a scaffold for the first time, and the image of a man who was about to be garroted, riding backward on a donkey, surrounded by priests and penitents, remained emblazoned on his memory. Shortly afterward, in Vitoria, he saw the crucified remains of a man who had been dismembered, which would cause him to speak with horror, many years later, about the ferocity of the reprisals taken by the French occupying forces against local resistance. It is quite possible that these childhood experiences were at the root of his rejection of the death penalty, which he fought against tirelessly, the only political conviction that he was absolutely faithful to throughout his life.

Spanish not only allowed him to soak up the legends, stories, and myths of a country where he thought he had found the paradise of passions, feelings, adventures, and wild excesses that his fevered imagination dreamed of. It also allowed him to hide from other people the brazen entries that he made in his secret notebooks, not out of exhibitionism, but because of his rather unhealthy obsession with keeping a minute account of all his expenditure. These detailed records now allow us to know, with a precision that is unimaginable in any other writer, how much Victor Hugo earned and spent throughout his life (he died a rich man).

In his very amusing book, *Hugo et la sexualité*, Professor Henri Guillemin has deciphered the secret notebooks that Victor Hugo kept in Jersey and Guernsey, in the years of his exile, a period that, for obvious reasons, some commentators have called “the servant years.” Despite having brought his wife, Adèle, and his lover Juliette with him to the Channel Islands and having sporadic intimate relations with local women or visitors, he maintained continued carnal commerce with the servant girls. It was commerce in all senses of the word, beginning with making payments. He paid for their services according to a strict tariff. If the girl only let him look at her breasts, she received a few centimes. If she completely undressed, but the poet could not touch her, that was fifty centimes. If he could caress her but go no further, it was one franc. When, by contrast, he achieved the ultimate, the payment could be one franc fifty or even, on the occasional lavish afternoon, two francs! Almost all these notes are written in Spanish to cover his tracks. Who would have thought that Spanish would become the language of transgression, forbidden pleasures, and sin for the great romantic. Some examples: “E.G. Esta mañana. Todo, todo.” “Mlle Rosier. Piernas.” “Marianne. La primera vez.” “Ferman Bay. Toda tomada. 1fr 25.” “Visto mucho. Cogido todo. Osculum.”¹ Et cetera.

Are biographers wrong to explore these sordid intimacies and take the Olympian god down from his pedestal? No, they are right to do so. Because all of this humanizes him, showing that the genius was also of the stuff of ordinary mortals. And Victor Hugo showed that he was a genius, not in all his works, but in some of them, like *Notre-Dame de Paris*, *Cromwell*, and, above all, *Les Misérables*, one of the most ambitious literary undertakings of the nine-

teenth century, that century of the great deicides, like Tolstoy, Dickens, Melville, and Balzac. But he was also vain and precious, and a great deal of the enormous amount that he wrote is today seen as lifeless, as minor literature. (André Breton praised him maliciously, stating that “[h]e was a surrealist when he wasn’t *con* [an idiot].”) But the nicest definition came from Jean Cocteau: “Victor Hugo was a madman who thought he was Victor Hugo.”

In the house on the Place des Vosges where he lived, there is a museum dedicated to his memory. In one of the glass display cases there is an envelope that bears the following address: “Mr. Victor Hugo. The Ocean.” And he was so famous that the letter reached him. The word “ocean” also suits him perfectly. For that is what he was: an immense sea, quiet at times and at other times whipped up by ferocious storms, an ocean inhabited by beautiful shoals of dolphins and by dull-colored crustaceans and electric eels, an infinite stretch of choppy waters where the best and the worst—the most beautiful and the ugliest—of human creations live together.

What we most admire in him is the extraordinary ambition of some of his literary works and his absolute conviction that the literature he wrote was not just a work of art, an artistic creation that would enrich his readers spiritually, bathing them in ineffable beauty. He also felt that when they read him, these readers would learn more about life and nature, and would improve both their civic conduct and their awareness of arcane infinity: the afterlife, the immortal soul, God. These ideas might now seem naive: how many readers still believe that literature can revolutionize existence, subvert society, and win us eternal life? But reading *Les Misérables*, becoming immersed in that dizzying

swirl that seems to contain the infinite extent and the microscopic detail of an entire world, we cannot but shiver at the intuition of the divine attribute, omniscience.

Are we better or worse for incorporating fiction into our lives, for trying to meld fiction with history? It is difficult to know whether the falsehoods that our imagination conjures up help us to live or contribute to our misfortune by revealing the insuperable gap between reality and dreams, whether they dull our resolve or encourage us to act. Some centuries ago, the novels to which a fifty-year-old man from La Mancha was addicted changed his perception of reality and launched him into the world—a world that he thought was the same as that described in fictions—in search of honor, glory, and adventure, with the outcome that we all know. However, the humiliations, mockery, and misfortunes that Alonso Quijano suffered because of novels have not turned him into a character to be pitied. Quite the reverse, for in his impossible attempt to live fiction, to shape reality in accordance with his fantasy, Cervantes's character is a paradigm of generosity and idealism. Without our going to the extremes of an Alonso Quijano, it is possible that novels can also make us feel dissatisfied with what exists, and give us an appetite for unreality that can influence our lives in many different ways and affect the wider world. If men and women have spent so many centuries writing and reading fiction, it must be for a reason. I know that in that winter of 1950, in my military uniform, shrouded by the drizzle and the fog on top of the cliff at La Perla, thanks to *Les Misérables*, life for me was very much less wretched.

Lima

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