

The Impact of Victor Hugo's Writings from Exile upon the French Second Empire

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Abstract

When Louis-Napoleon staged a coup d'état and overthrew the French Second Republic in 1851, renowned French author and republican politician Victor Hugo escaped into exile on the British isle of Guernsey. He remained in exile until the republic was reestablished in 1870. This thesis examines the works he published during the period, including the political pamphlet *Napoléon le Petit*, two poetry collections—*Les Châtiments* and *Les Contemplations*—and his magnum opus novel *Les Misérables*. Victor Hugo used these writings to remain politically active, even while in exile, by consistently promoting the cause of republicanism in France. His politically charged writings helped shape the course of French politics in the 1860s, ultimately contributing to the fall of the French Second Empire and the restoration of the Republic.

The Impact of Victor Hugo's Writings from Exile upon the French Second Empire

Victor Hugo (1802-1885) is revered as one of the foremost poets in French history. French cities are littered with tributes to him in the form of statues and street names. Despite his august legacy, spanning multiple decades of prodigious literary production, as a poet in his home country, in America he is known almost exclusively as a novelist. An enormously popular musical and its motion picture adaptation, starring Hugh Jackman and Anne Hathaway, have introduced many Americans to Hugo's most famous work: *Les Misérables* (1862). Unbeknownst to many, however, *Les Misérables* was produced alongside other works with a consciously political purpose for a specific time-period of French history. While in exile because of his opposition to Napoleon III's Second Empire, Victor Hugo wrote pamphlets, poetry collections, and novels with the overt or underlying purpose of inspiring opposition to the Empire, and the reestablishment of the French republic. Far from being the ineffectual ramblings of a disgruntled expatriate, these writings had a significant effect on French politics and helped hasten the downfall of the Second Empire.

Recent research on Napoleon III's regime is almost non-existent. The decades following World War II saw an increase in Second Empire scholarship as historians began to depict Napoleon III as the first modern dictator who set the precedent for Mussolini and Hitler.¹ More recent works have been written on Napoleon III himself, but

¹ The following works encompass much of the body of post-World War II research on the Second Empire: Roger L. Williams, *The World of Napoleon III: 1851-1870*. (New York: The Free Press, 1957); *Napoleon III: Man or Destiny, Enlightened Statesman, or Proto-Fascist?* Ed. Brison Gooch, (Austin: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1963); *Napoleon III and the Second Empire*, Ed. Samuel M. Osgood, (Lexington: Heath & Co, 1973). The two most notable works from more recent years are: Alain Plessis, *The Rise and Fall of the Second Empire 1852-1871*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989) and Roger Price, *The French Second Empire: An Anatomy of Political Power*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

these are primarily biographic, not analytic, in nature.² Many biographies have been written on Victor Hugo, of both popular and scholarly variety. Even the most scholarly, however, have a tendency to take Victor Hugo's political impact for granted.³ Consequently, little in-depth research has been conducted on Hugo's politically charged writings and their impact upon Second Empire France.

From his birth onward, politics shaped Hugo's life and career. Born to a Bonapartist father, and a royalist mother, Hugo characterized himself as a microcosm of France. While his mother was probably not the ardent Catholic royalist that Hugo portrayed her as, and his father was more of a loyal soldier than a true Bonapartist ideologue, the image of their supposedly conflicting allegiances literally wedded together carried metaphorical resonance for the writer throughout his career.⁴ According to this self-mythologizing version of events, as France struggled in the early nineteenth century to reconcile centuries of monarchic tradition with the changes brought about by the French Revolution and the First Empire, the Hugo family gave birth to Victor, the personified synthesis of France's political heritage.

As Hugo established himself as a prominent, romantic poet in the 1820s, he identified himself as a royalist. While this political allegiance appears to have been sincere, it was also advantageous to his career; France during the Restoration Monarchy supported the arts and artists, as long as they in turn supported the Restoration. As

² Two of the more recent biographies of Napoleon III are: John Bierman, *Napoleon III and his Carnival Empire*, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1988) and Fenton. Bresler, *Napoleon III: A Life*, (New York: Carroll & Graff, 1999).

³ One of the earliest scholarly biographies of Victor Hugo was: Andre Maurois, *Olympio: The Life of Victor Hugo*, trans. Gerard Hopkins, (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1956). One of the most recent scholarly biographies is: Graham Robb, *Victor Hugo: A Biography*, (New York: Norton, 1999).

⁴ *Ibid.*, 7.

Hugo's royalism gradually took on a more liberal republican slant, the July Revolution replaced the conservative Charles X with a more liberal monarch: Louis-Philippe. After witnessing the July Monarchy's brutal crackdown of the 1832 republican insurrection in Paris, Hugo became disillusioned with Louis Philippe and suspicious of the pseudo-republicanism he claimed to espouse.⁵ The July Monarchy's failure to live up to its liberal promises caused Hugo to break his royalist ties, and identify himself as a liberal republican, the political affiliation he maintained until his death.

After his conversion to republicanism, Hugo's writing became increasingly political. He also grew in fame as one of France's most prominent poets. Biographer Graham Robb credits Hugo's success to, "The realization that instead of using literature to fight political battles, literature itself could be politicized."⁶ Hugo's popularity and political activism meant that when the republican revolution of 1848 overthrew the July Monarchy, Hugo easily won election to the newly created parliament of the Second Republic. Hugo's writing career, however, did not effectively prepare him for political office. His time in parliament convinced him that he was not a particularly good politician.⁷ Perhaps his skills as a statesman would have improved with time, but the French Second Republic did not last long enough for Hugo to find out.

On December 2nd, 1851, President Louis-Napoleon Bonaparte, the nephew of the Emperor Napoleon I, staged a coup-d'état. Parisians woke to find troops had mobilized to prevent resistance around the city and to arrest members of the former government. Hugo

⁵ Ibid., 173.

⁶ Ibid., 111.

⁷ Maurois, 299.

evaded capture and met secretly other former members of Parliament. Hugo declared the coup a “crime” and resistance to it “justice.”⁸ He implored the people of Paris to take up arms against the usurper, but his pleas fell upon deaf ears. The Second Republic had lost the support of the people. When Louis-Napoleon called a nationwide plebiscite just eighteen days later to support or condemn his coup, 7.5 million Frenchmen voted to support their new leader and his actions; only 64 thousand voted to condemn them.⁹ Defeated, Hugo and his family escaped France and went into exile. They arrived first in Brussels, Belgium, but after less than a year, sensing their welcome was wearing thin, they relocated to the British isle of Jersey. After three years in Jersey, they moved one final time to Guernsey, a British island less than thirty miles from the coast of France, where Hugo would spend the remainder of his exile.

Louis-Napoleon's triumph, and Hugo's retreat into exile, established a bitter rivalry between the two men. On the first anniversary of his coup-d'état, and not coincidentally, the forty-eighth anniversary of Napoleon's coronation, Louis-Napoleon revived the Empire and declared himself Emperor Napoleon III. On the same day, the new emperor offered amnesty to all exiles who would swear, “To do nothing against those whom the country has elected.”¹⁰ Hugo refused the offer. In 1859 the Empire even went so far as to offer blanket amnesty to all political exiles. Hugo responded by vowing not to return to France until the republic was restored.¹¹ While Hugo remained firmly opposed to the Emperor, Napoleon III's actions should not be mistaken as conciliatory

⁸ Robb, 300.

⁹ Mike Rapport, *1848: Year of Revolution*, (New York: Basic Books, 2008), 398.

¹⁰ Maurois, 316.

¹¹ Robb, 373.

gestures, or indicative of a one-sided rivalry. Historian Roger Williams writes, “Though a charitable man and given to amnesties, Napoleon III was as unforgiving of Hugo as Hugo was of Napoleon III.”¹²

Undergirding their rivalry was the profound egotism of both men. Early Second Empire propaganda, “presented the Emperor as the man of Providence who, just like his uncle, had saved France from anarchy.”¹³ Nor was this position simply empty rhetoric designed to win the loyalty of the masses. Historian Alain Plessis argues that Napoleon III truly, “considered himself to be the providential man whose destiny it was to govern France.”¹⁴ Possessed of this heavenly mandate, Napoleon III did his best to ignore Hugo, and thus give the impression that the exiled author and his words were of no importance.

Hugo's own ego, however, would not allow him to be content with being ignored. Throughout his career he had, according to Graham Robb, “tended to see the nation as an audience composed of loyal fans and a handful of hecklers.”¹⁵ While egotistical, this view was not wholly inaccurate. He was perhaps the most well-known living writer in the world when he went into exile.¹⁶ Thus convinced of his own popularity and importance, Hugo did not believe that he was being condemned to obscurity. Instead, he became convinced that he was filling the vacant position of exiled martyr for the cause of republicanism.¹⁷ Hugo displayed this belief with his characteristic egotistical hyperbole

¹² Williams, 128.

¹³ Price, 117.

¹⁴ Plessis, 7.

¹⁵ Robb, 277.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, xiii.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 191.

when he wrote to a correspondent, "It is not I, sir, who have been outlawed, but liberty. It is not I who have been banished, but France."¹⁸ Hugo's genuine belief that he represented the synthesis of French national identity gave him the conviction he needed to continue to oppose Napoleon III.

Hugo settled quite naturally into his self-appointed role as the exiled martyr representing all of France. Though he lived on British soil for nineteen years, he refused to assimilate into the local culture, most notably by his refusal to learn English. With all the gravity of the personification of France that he styled himself to be, he declared, "When England wishes to converse with me, it will learn to speak French."¹⁹ He took great pains to make the public display of poverty befitting a dispossessed exile, though privately he still received regular sums in royalties from his earlier literary endeavors.²⁰ He made frequent, and dramatic reference to his exile in his writings, including several references as the narrator in *Les Misérables*.²¹ In his poetry collection *Les Châtiments* he self-aggrandized that even if he alone remained in opposition to the Second Empire he would continue to resist.²²

Hugo's writings during the period cannot be characterized as the self-obsessed ramblings of a delusional political dissident. Each stands alone on its own literary merit. Literary critic Mario Vargas Llosa asserts, "Instead of depressing him and causing his

¹⁸ Maurois, 306.

¹⁹ Robb, 324.

²⁰ Maurois, 299-300.

²¹ Victor Hugo, *Les Misérables*, Trans. Lee Fahnestock and Norman MacAfee. (New York: New American Library, 1987), 116, 447.

²² Victor Hugo, "After the Coup D'état," in *Les Chatiments*, 1853. Project Gutenberg. last updated May 5, 2013.

demise, [Hugo's] long exile in Belgium, Jersey and Guernsey enabled him to write his most ambitious books and increased his prestige in society to mythological proportions."²³ Though already firmly established as a poet of repute, Hugo expanded his literary output while in exile to include not only poetry, but also political pamphlets, and historical novels. Hugo, who considered the purpose of his writing to be the advancement of his political cause, infused his liberal republican ideology into each genre he wrote in.²⁴ He wrote with the conscious intent to undermine the support of Second Empire and hasten the return of the Republic.

Hugo's first work written and published while in exile was the political pamphlet *Napoléon le Petit*.²⁵ Hugo first coined the title term in during a parliamentary speech before the fall of the Republic to refer derogatorily to Louis-Napoleon in comparison to his uncle Napoleon Bonaparte.²⁶ Once he arrived in Brussels, Hugo immediately set about working on the pamphlet, in which he castigated Napoleon III as a laughable imitation of his uncle. The pamphlet set the tone for biographers of Napoleon III to depict him as a humorously inept man, until the late 1970s.²⁷ This interpretation of the work, however, inaccurately summarizes Hugo's argument. He wrote in *Napoléon le Petit*, "Louis Bonaparte is a man of one fixed idea, but a fixed idea is not idiocy. He knows what he wants and marches to his aim. Over justice, over law, over reason, honour, and

²³ Mario Vargas Llosa, *The Temptation of the Impossible*, trans. John King. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 51.

²⁴ Robb, 178-179.

²⁵ Translated as "Napoleon the Little."

²⁶ Robb, 290.

²⁷ Bresler, xix.

humanity, if you will, he still marches to his aim.”²⁸ Hugo’s depiction of Napoleon III can most accurately be described as the subtle mastermind of a limited vision. This depiction cannot be dismissed as egotistical paranoia on Hugo’s part. Historian Fenton Bresler’s research indicates that all of Louis-Napoleon’s political maneuvers during the Second Republic were calculated stepping stones toward creating the Second Empire.²⁹

Napoléon le Petit was a resounding success. By taking on, “The semblance of a personal duel,” it provided, “a brilliant, precise description of a modern police state.”³⁰ Over a million copies were printed officially—the number of bootlegged editions is difficult to estimate—and spread around the world in English and Spanish translations.³¹ The work was banned in France and had to be smuggled in. Using various ingenious methods, including one edition the size of a pack of playing cards, traders distributed copies throughout France in what Graham Robb describes as, “Smuggling’s hour until the French resistance ninety years later.”³² The pamphlet created such a stir that Hugo’s continued residence in Belgium became an inconvenience to the Belgian King Leopold I, who sought to maintain peaceable relations with France and Napoleon III.³³ Fearing political repercussions, Hugo left Brussels and sailed for Jersey August, 1852.³⁴

²⁸ Victor Hugo, “Napoleon the Little.” In *Napoleon III: Buffoon, Modern Dictator, or Sphinx?* ed. Samuel M. Osgood. (Lexington: Heath & Co, 1963), 3.

²⁹ Bresler, 213-227.

³⁰ Matthew Josephson, *Victor Hugo: A Realistic Biography of the Great Romantic*, (New York: Doubleday & Co., 1946), 361; Robb, 309.

³¹ Maurois, 313.

³² Robb, 313, 321.

³³ *Ibid.*, 309.

³⁴ Maurois, 312.

Having thus tried his hand at pamphleteering, Hugo returned to poetry, his most popular genre, for his next work, *Les Châtiments*.³⁵ The work was overtly political in tone, but also represented a step forward in Hugo's poetic style, allowing it to stand on its merit both as a work of political activism, and a work of literature.³⁶ Biographers of Hugo have declared it to be, "the verse equivalent of *Napoléon le Petit*," and "a dream of vengeance."³⁷ In the tradition of epic poetry stretching from Homer to Milton, Hugo began the work by invoking a muse. Rather than one of the classical muses, however, Hugo created his own muse: Indignation.³⁸ From this irregular invocation the work launched into verse after verse declaiming Napoleon III. The language was purposefully, "savage," and "violent," in attempt to rouse the passions of the French people, as well as to demonstrate that Napoleon III's fall was inevitable and justice would be done.³⁹ Even Hugo's publisher, Hetzel, thought *Les Châtiments* was too violent, but, at Hugo's urging, agreed to publish the work in 1853.⁴⁰

Like *Napoléon le Petit*, *Les Châtiments* was banned in France and had to be smuggled in. While the smuggled editions circulated well, they did not provide royalties for the author. Hugo's diminishing income necessitated that he write a commercially successful work. For this effort, he turned to *Les Contemplations*, the unpublished, half-finished collection of poetry that he had begun almost twenty years earlier. Exile afforded

³⁵ Translated as "The Chastisements."

³⁶ Robb, 328.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 325; Maurois, 314.

³⁸ Victor Hugo, "Indignation!" in *Les Chatiments*, (1853) Prelude. Project Gutenberg. last updated May 5, 2013.

³⁹ Robb, 325.

⁴⁰ Maurois, 314.

Hugo the free time to edit the first volume and write the second volume of *Les Contemplations*.⁴¹ His publisher lobbied the Directeur de la Surete Generale to allow *Les Contemplations* to be published in France. He gave permission on the condition that the work contain only, "Pure poetry," devoid of political content.⁴² Hugo published the work in 1856, and it immediately became an enormous commercial success in France. While not political in its content, *Les Contemplations* significantly promoted Hugo's political goals while exile in two ways: first, it reestablished his popularity, proving that the public had not turned their backs on Hugo; second, it provided much needed income and established the precedent that the exiled Hugo's works could be published in France so long as they did not directly speak out against the Second Empire.⁴³

Following the success of *Les Contemplations*, Hugo set about editing, rewriting, and expanding another unfinished work that would become the most important work of his exile and his career. When Hugo went into exile he took the near completed manuscript of *Les Misères* with him.⁴⁴ He set it aside for a time while he wrote *Napoléon le Petit*, *Les Châtiments*, and *Les Contemplations*. When he at last returned to the work following the publication of *Les Contemplations* in 1856, his vision for it had expanded. He spent the next six years remolding it into his magnum opus: *Les Misérables*. For a novel meant for mass consumption it was astoundingly lengthy: 3,510 pages in its original printing.⁴⁵ The length can be explained in part by Hugo's health. He became

⁴¹ Ibid., 322.

⁴² Robb, 354.

⁴³ Maurois, 326-328.

⁴⁴ Josephson, 400.

⁴⁵ Robb, 380.

seriously ill while writing *Les Misérables*, causing him to feel that this might be his last opportunity to share his thoughts with his audience through his writing.⁴⁶

Consequently, Hugo's greatest work seems, at times, to be almost more social commentary than novel. He predicted that audiences would begin to read *Les Misérables* for the characters, and keep reading for the larger social message.⁴⁷ Within the novel he editorialized his intent for the work by writing, "Let us study things that are no more. It is necessary to understand them, if only to avoid them."⁴⁸ His use of the word "us" in this mission statement holds a double meaning. Hugo used the French plural that forms the "royal we" as the narrator throughout the text to establish himself, in Mario Vargas Llosa's view, as the "absolute monarch of knowledge."⁴⁹ The use of "us" in the sentence also gives a glimpse into Hugo's conception of his audience. Hugo saw himself as writing, not for a popular audience, but for an implied audience that he conceived of as "the enlightened masses."⁵⁰

With this idealized audience in mind, Hugo penned one of the most grandiose, yet intricate stories ever undertaken. While the book could technically be summarized as a Romantic novel on the life of the fictional escaped convict Jean Valjean, the scope of the work far exceeds this explanation. For significant portions of the book Jean Valjean does not appear at all, and the reader is instead introduced to the kindly Bishop Myriel, the

⁴⁶ Ibid., 374.

⁴⁷ Lee Fahnestock, "Introduction," in Victor Hugo, *Les Misérables*, trans. by Lee Fahnestock and Norman MacAfee. (New York: New American Library, 1987), v.

⁴⁸ Victor Hugo, *Les Misérables*, trans. by Lee Fahnestock and Norman MacAfee. (New York: New American Library, 1987), 508.

⁴⁹ Llosa, 14-15.

⁵⁰ Isabel Roche, *Character and Meaning in the Novels of Victor Hugo*, (West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, 2007), 44.

single-mother-turned-prostitute Fantine, her daughter Cosette, the deceitful innkeeper Thenadier and his wife, their children Eponine and Gavroche, the dispossessed but idealistic Marius, his revolutionary associates, their inspired leader Enjolras, and finally the dogged police inspector Javert. Literary critic Isabel Roche argues, "Hugo repeatedly uses character and the quest motif not, as in the Romance genre, to affirm ethical truths and reinforce social norms, but rather to complicate and challenge them."⁵¹ The stories of these ancillary characters fit together like pieces of jigsaw puzzle to form the larger plot of the novel. Within this myriad of subplots, Hugo subverted the norms of the Romance genre to communicate his arguments to his readers.

In order to avoid censorship, *Les Misérables* conformed to the precedent established by *Les Contemplations* and did not openly criticize Napoleon III or the Second Empire. Instead, Hugo adopted a subtler tactic. While the novel spans the time period from the First Empire to July Monarchy, almost one fifth of the novel takes place on June 5th and 6th, 1832, the dates of a failed republican insurrection in Paris against Louis-Philippe.⁵² This focus was not accidental. Many of Napoleon III's ministers had previously served as bureaucrats for Louis-Philippe.⁵³ In light of the Second Empire's strong connections to the July Monarchy, Hugo's supposedly historical work takes on a different tone. In depicting an incident of valiant, though ultimately unsuccessful, republican resistance against Louis-Philippe, Hugo made a veiled, but recognizable call for resistance against Napoleon III by using a narrative style that encouraged readers to

⁵¹ Ibid., 22.

⁵² Robb, 384.

⁵³ Plessis, 33.

try to decode the underlying meaning.⁵⁴ Determined to disseminate his message as effectively, and profitably, as possible, Hugo turned the multi-part release of *Les Misérables* into a major literary event.⁵⁵ His grandest work completed, Hugo's beliefs, opinions, and political positions were now available for public consumption, if the people of France cared to read them.

In order to gauge the impact of Hugo's writings on the French Second Empire, an in-depth examination of his arguments themselves is warranted. Given the changing character of Hugo's literary production throughout his career, his writings while in exile, spanning, from *Napoléon le Petit* to *Les Misérables*, eleven years of his life, are remarkably philosophically consistent. While *Napoléon le Petit* and *Les Châtiments* overtly condemned the Second Empire, *Les Misérables* used digressions from the plot as a platform to make ideological points that that would then interweave with narrative in ways that encouraged the reader to connect them to Napoleon III and his regime.⁵⁶

The key to understanding Hugo's arguments lies in his view of history. In keeping with enlightenment theories, Hugo saw history as the inevitable upward march of human progress: "He who despairs is wrong. Progress infallibly wakes up."⁵⁷ By Hugo's own admission within the work, *Les Misérables* is a microcosm of progress.⁵⁸ This is depicted in political terms as the perpetual and daily march from tyranny to liberty: "If you wish to understand what revolution is, call it progress; if you wish to know what progress is, call

⁵⁴ Roche, 46.

⁵⁵ Robb, 377.

⁵⁶ Roche, 48.

⁵⁷ Hugo, *Les Misérables*, 1236.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 1242.

it tomorrow. Tomorrow performs its work irresistibly, and it does it from today.”⁵⁹ By depicting revolution as the agent of progress, Hugo provided justification for armed resistance to tyranny, and justified the French Revolution in one broad stroke.⁶⁰ For Hugo, however, revolutions were not the result of impersonal events, but the culmination of ideas. Thus he saw himself, as a disseminator of ideas through writing, as an agent of progress: “There is no backward flow of ideas any more than of rivers. But those who do not want the future should think it over. In saying no to progress, it is not the future that they condemn but themselves.”⁶¹ By depicting himself as progress’s standard bearer, Hugo’s disdainful reference to, “those who do not want the future,” could easily be decoded by his readers to mean Napoleon III and his supporters.

Hugo’s conception of progress, however, was not a materialistic yardstick of human activity, but rather the result of divinely ordained fate. Of Napoleon Bonaparte, he wrote, “[Progress] adapts to its divine work the man who strode over the Alps.”⁶² For Hugo, mankind’s inevitable progress was the result of God’s sovereign hand. In an over fifty page digression from the plot of *Les Misérables*, Hugo summarized the battle of Waterloo, not coincidentally the downfall of Napoleon III’s uncle, to demonstrate that God inevitably brings down tyrants in His time.⁶³ In *Les Châtiments* Hugo even referred

⁵⁹ Ibid., 349.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 1126.

⁶¹ Ibid., 1000.

⁶² Ibid., 349.

⁶³ Ibid., 329.

to “the Future” as “God’s Justicar,” declaring that Napoleon III would face judgment for his crimes through the working of God’s sovereign and just hand through history.⁶⁴

Hugo’s conception of God’s sovereignty over history, however, did not preclude the existence of free will. Though God may direct the flow of human history, human action impacted the timing of the march of progress. He cautioned, “A people cannot be surprised into more rapid progress than it wants. Woe to him who attempts to force its hand.”⁶⁵ All people are not equally influential over the timing of progress, however.

Hugo believed that the bourgeoisie held the most sway over the future of France. He wrote in *Les Misérables*:

Who stops revolutions halfway? The Bourgeoisie. Why? Because the Bourgeoisie is the self-interest that has attained satisfaction. ... There has been an erroneous attempt to make a special class of the Bourgeoisie. The Bourgeoisie is simply the contented portion of the people. The bourgeois is the man who now has time to sit down. A chair is not a caste. But by wishing to sit down too soon, we may stop the progress of even the human race. That has often been the fault of the bourgeois.⁶⁶

By using the word “we” in the passage, the narrator self-identifies himself for his readers as a member of the Bourgeoisie. This narrator is not Hugo, Mario Vargas Llosa argues, but rather a fictionalized construct of an idealized Hugo.⁶⁷ Graham Robb gives a more complete picture by writing that the narrator of *Les Misérables*, “Can best be described as God masquerading as a law-abiding bourgeois.”⁶⁸ Hugo envisioned his idealized audience for *Les Misérables* as members of the bourgeoisie, and wrote accordingly.

⁶⁴ Hugo, “The Dispatch of Doom” in *Les Chatiments*, Bk. IV. xiii.

⁶⁵ Hugo, *Les Misérables*, 1235.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 829.

⁶⁷ Llosa, 11-12.

⁶⁸ Robb, 379.

Hugo's conception of the role of the bourgeoisie in history must be viewed in its proper historical context. The modern conception of the bourgeoisie stems from the Marxist theory of class conflict. Karl Marx co-wrote *The Communist Manifesto* with Friedrich Engels in 1848, and Hugo was certainly aware of its existence, but his conception of the bourgeoisie stemmed from an early philosophical school. Roger Williams argues that, in keeping with the precepts of Romanticism, Hugo, "understood Bourgeois to mean a spirit—an attitude—rather than a class."⁶⁹ Hugo's reference in the above passage to, "an erroneous attempt to make a special class of the Bourgeoisie," summarized his rejection of Marxist conceptions of class divisions. To Hugo, education marked the only realistic class distinction: "The true division of humanity is this: the luminous and the dark. To diminish the number of the dark, to increase the number of the luminous there is the aim. That is why we cry: education, knowledge!"⁷⁰ Hugo also differed philosophically with Marxists on other issues. Whereas communist parties across Europe sought the abolition of private property, Hugo advocated the democratization of property.⁷¹ He also argued in *Les Misérables* that communism was not a workable solution to alleviate social suffering because its method of distribution destroyed production.⁷² To interpret Hugo's use of "bourgeoisie" through a Marxist lens is to fundamentally misunderstand his argument.

By invoking the bourgeois spirit Hugo sought to create, "conscious opposition" to

⁶⁹ Williams, *The World of Napoleon III*, 116.

⁷⁰ Hugo, *Les Misérables*, 985.

⁷¹ Robb, 267.

⁷² Hugo, *Les Misérables*, 841.

the Second Empire among the bourgeoisie.⁷³ His efforts were certainly a gamble. Graham Robb writes that Hugo took on the mantle of, “defending bourgeois ideology when it had become unacceptable to the bourgeoisie itself.”⁷⁴ Hugo astutely concluded that the bourgeoisie needed to be galvanized against the Second Empire. From Napoleon III’s perspective, the Second Republic had demonstrated that the bourgeoisie lacked the strength and resolve needed to govern France.⁷⁵ When he staged his coup d’état, the bourgeoisie did not cohesively oppose or support him.⁷⁶ This lack of unity continued throughout most of Napoleon III’s reign.⁷⁷

The bourgeoisie’s passivity was not without its logic, however. The Second Empire was economically beneficial for them, and Napoleon III drew many of his ministers, prefects, and deputies from among their ranks.⁷⁸ To Hugo, the bourgeois’ acceptance of economic security and political advancement under the Second Empire constituted a betrayal of the principles of the French Revolution that they had long stood for. In a letter discussing his bombastic tone in *Les Châtiments*, Hugo vented his frustration: “Niggling strokes have no effect upon the masses. I may, perhaps, terrify the bourgeois, but what do I care so long as I can rouse the people.”⁷⁹ Despite his

⁷³ Angelo Metzidakis, “On Rereading French History in Hugo’s *Les Misérables*.” *The French Review* 67, no. 2 (December 1993): 187, Jstor.

⁷⁴ Robb, 513.

⁷⁵ Bresler, 218.

⁷⁶ Bierman, 93.

⁷⁷ Plessis, 125.

⁷⁸ Roger Williams, “Louis Napoleon: A Tragedy of Good Intentions,” in *Napoleon III: Man or Destiny, Enlightened Statesman, or Proto-Fascist?* Edited by Brison Gooch. Austin: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1963, 110; Plessis, 25-57.

⁷⁹ Maurois, 314.

indignation, however, Hugo knew that in order to rouse the people he needed to first rouse the bourgeoisie.⁸⁰ They were the key to achieving the divinely ordained progress that Hugo firmly believed would sweep away the Second Empire.

With his belief in progress undergirding his arguments, Hugo turned his pen toward proving the illegitimacy of the Second Empire, thereby explaining why “God’s Justicar” must soon sweep it away. Unimpressed by the constitutional nature of the Empire, Hugo wrote in *Napoléon le Petit* that Napoleon III had, “decreed despotism in fifty-eight articles under the title of a constitution.”⁸¹ Hugo continued to articulate this view in *Les Châtiments* by referring to Napoleon III as the, “sham-crowned head.”⁸² Though the Second Empire liberalized throughout its reign, Hugo remained unconvinced of its sincere dedication to liberty. He implored French workers in one poem in *Les Châtiments* not to be duped by, “Tinselled crime, and spy no wolf beneath the fleece.”⁸³ Though ostensibly referring to the Restoration Monarchy, Hugo warned his readers to be wary of monarchists espousing liberal ideas when convenient, calling such figures, “Serpents changing their skins.”⁸⁴ The implication was clear; Napoleon III and the Second Empire could not be trusted to safeguard the liberty of the people.

Many of Hugo’s arguments on the illegitimacy of Napoleon III’s rule rest upon a comparison to the Emperor’s uncle, Napoleon Bonaparte. He saw Napoleon III’s political

⁸⁰ Hugo’s distinction between the “bourgeois” and “the people” is not a classist distinction, but rather a distinction between those who have attained a sense of satisfaction with the political system—the bourgeois—and those who have not.

⁸¹ Hugo, *Napoleon Le Petit*, 2.

⁸² Hugo, *Les Chatiments*, Bk. I. x.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, Bk. I. x.

⁸⁴ Hugo, *Les Misérables*, 351.

career as a continuation of, and resting on, the nostalgic memory of Napoleon Bonaparte.⁸⁵ He did not, however, view the two as equals. He described the disparity between the two rulers as the difference “Between conquering the Empire and filching it.”⁸⁶ This comparison, however, was not to suggest that Hugo revered Napoleon Bonaparte. In *Les Misérables*, he compared the first Emperor to Julius Caesar, who also rose to power under a republic and then established an empire. He let his audience infer that Caesar’s downfall was just.⁸⁷ In another reference to Caesar later in the novel, he admonished his readers, “Certainly, despotism is always despotism, even under a despot of genius.”⁸⁸ In Hugo’s view, even Napoleon Bonaparte’s august stature did not lend him legitimacy as a ruler, but Napoleon III lacked even the grandeur expected of a despot. He argued in *Napoléon le Petit*, the pamphlet whose very title derided the Emperor as pale imitation of his Uncle, that history would remember Napoleon III not as a great tyrant, both despised and respected, but as a laughable imitation of such figures.⁸⁹

Hugo’s condemnation of the Second Empire sought to prove not only its illegitimacy, but also the inevitability of its demise. He made veiled references to the Second Empire in *Les Misérables* as the “revivification of a corpse” and warned his readers, “the counterfeits of the past take assumed names, and are fond of calling themselves the future.”⁹⁰ While empires have existed over thousands of years of human

⁸⁵ Bresler, 220.

⁸⁶ Hugo, *Napoleon Le Petit*, 3.

⁸⁷ Hugo, *Les Misérables*, 312.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 1053.

⁸⁹ Hugo, *Napoleon Le Petit*, 5.

⁹⁰ Hugo, *Les Misérables*, 999, 508.

history, Hugo believed that an empire could not long endure in the modern era. This was particularly true in France, according to Hugo, because the nation was characterized by “Three centuries of learning and enlightenment and by the French Revolution.”⁹¹

Under such circumstances, Napoleon III's position was untenable. Hugo wryly observed, “Louis Bonaparte thinks he is ascending a throne; he does not perceive that he is climbing a gibbet.”⁹² Napoleon III depended upon the complacency of the people in order to maintain power. Hugo drew the analogy to the Restoration Monarchy in *Les Misérables* where he quoted an 1817 police report to the king, though it is unclear if this report is one of the historical or fictional elements of his novel. The report assured the king that the people were now, “lazy as cats,” that revolutionary zeal had left the people, and they could now be considered, “dependable riff raff.” In a call to action, Hugo refuted the report with the assertion that, “a cat may change into a lion.”⁹³ In Hugo's view of history, “Revolutions spring, not from an accident, but from necessity.”⁹⁴ The Second Empire's demise was inevitable; progress demanded it. The only questions were when it would fall, and what would replace it.

Hugo sought to direct French opinion to the conclusion that a republic ought to replace the Second Empire. Historian Angelo Metzidakis writes, “In *Les Misérables*, Hugo presents a very selective reading of nineteenth-century French history in order to convince the bourgeoisie of the Second Empire of the Second Empire of the virtues of

⁹¹ Hugo, *Napoleon Le Petit*, 3.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 2.

⁹³ Hugo, *Les Misérables*, 131.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 838.

Republicanism.”⁹⁵ Arguing that true revolutions must advance progress, Hugo defended the French Revolution as, “The ideal armed with the sword...it created man a second time, in giving him a second soul, his rights.”⁹⁶ While Hugo viewed the Reign of Terror as regrettable, he nonetheless saw the French Revolution as progress because it inculcated the people with a strong conception of their rights.

The French Revolution espoused the three-fold rights of the people as liberty, equality and fraternity. Hugo defended each of these rights in turn in *Les Misérables* through the character Enjolras, the republican revolutionary. He defined liberty as, “The sovereignty of man over himself.”⁹⁷ He argued this sovereignty formed the backbone of a republican society. When defending equality he explained that it did not mean all citizens must be, “on one level,” but that it meant, “equal opportunity,” and “equal rights.”⁹⁸ Fraternity, he saw as the destination of humanity’s progress: “In the future no man will slay his fellow, the earth will be radiant, the human race will love.”⁹⁹ In one conciliatory passage in *Les Misérables* Hugo made it clear to his readers that he did not blame those who opposed a republic out of ignorance, but he maintained that only republics upheld these fundamental rights.¹⁰⁰

Having established the French Revolution’s role in establishing humanity’s rights, and the nature of those rights, Hugo passed judgment on France’s governments

⁹⁵ Metzidakis, 187.

⁹⁶ Hugo, *Les Misérables*, 1051, 997.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 1190.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 1116.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 837.

throughout the nineteenth century. In *Les Misérables* he argued that the Restoration Monarchy “fell justly,” because it denied the people’s rights.¹⁰¹ He spent an entire chapter praising King Louis-Philippe as an able leader of the July monarchy, but still advocated a republic, implying that republics are preferable to monarchy even in its best form. It was not a coincidence that he chose to heroically portray the republican insurrection against Louis-Philippe, a monarch he described as being, “As gentle as Louis IX, and as good as Henry IV.”¹⁰² He evaluated the Second Republic by implication when he described democratic states as “the only governments founded on justice.”¹⁰³ In Hugo’s view, republicanism’s virtues were too numerous to deny.

In light of the virtues of republicanism, and the illegitimacy of the Second Empire, Hugo believed that his readers would be persuaded to join his cause. Partly because of this belief, and partly because of his belief in the inevitability of progress, Hugo presented republicanism’s return to France as inevitable. He began the last main section of *Les Châtiments* with a poem predicting the inevitable rise of the title entity, “The Universal Republic.”¹⁰⁴ Hugo believed that events are caused by ideas, and therefore credited the ideas of the French Revolution with fundamentally altering the nature of French culture.¹⁰⁵ While he preferred a calm, collected transition to a republic over the savagery of a revolution, he nonetheless believed that a revolution in the name or

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 824.

¹⁰² Ibid., 830-836.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 1050.

¹⁰⁴ Hugo, *Les Chatiments*, Lux.

¹⁰⁵ Hugo, *Les Misérables*, 984, 154.

republicanism would be justified.¹⁰⁶ He explained, “There comes an hour when protest no longer suffices; after philosophy there must be action.”¹⁰⁷ Perceptive readers could easily discern Hugo’s barely veiled blessing of resistance to the Second Empire.

The 1850s were a dark time for Republicans. Under these circumstances, Hugo’s choice to set the main action of *Les Misérables* during the July Monarchy provided a particularly apt analogy. Under the July Monarchy, only 0.5 percent of the population of France was eligible to vote.¹⁰⁸ The republican insurrection of June 5th and 6th, 1832, that Hugo depicted in *Les Misérables*, was brutally repressed and ended in utter failure. In context of the later successful republican revolution of 1848, Hugo’s message was clear: even though the cause may seem hopeless at present, republicanism would eventually triumph again. Those who died in the process, like the republican student revolutionaries immortalized in his novel, would become martyrs of a cause that would inevitably succeed.¹⁰⁹

Hugo’s political topics in his writings while in exile extended beyond advocating a return to a republic and included his positions on a myriad of social issues. In lieu of a dedication for *Les Misérables* Hugo wrote, “So long as ignorance and misery remain on the earth, there should be a need for books such as this.”¹¹⁰ The most frequently referenced political or social issue throughout the novel was poverty and how to address it. He lamented that, “social suffering can begin at any age,” and argued that crime was

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 854.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 1127.

¹⁰⁸ Rapport, 3.

¹⁰⁹ Hugo, *Les Misérables*, 1237.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., i.

the result of systemic poverty, a controversial position in the 1860s.¹¹¹ Unlike socialist literature of the time, however, Hugo did not indict the rich as the cause of social misery. Instead he called upon the wealthy to act compassionately on behalf of the poor out of conscience, not government mandate.¹¹²

Hugo's writings on poverty were both timely and strategic for his overarching case for republicanism. Roger Williams argues Napoleon III sought to avoid further revolutions by "satisfying the legitimate needs of the people," and to that end prioritized economic growth to keep the masses satisfied.¹¹³ In order to encourage economic growth he kept direct taxes low, and raised revenue through indirect consumption taxes, which disproportionately affected the poor.¹¹⁴ Poverty in France became so extensive that one 1862 estimate claimed that 70 percent of the Parisian population were on the verge of requiring government assistance to feed themselves if food prices rose at all.¹¹⁵ Class distinctions had also become more rigid during the Second Empire, causing the bourgeoisie to feel less kinship with the working class.¹¹⁶ By targeting *Les Misérables* toward the bourgeois, and impressing upon them the need for compassion for the poor, Hugo sought to curtail class conflict in France, and thus avert a communist revolution that would be inimical to establishing a republic.

¹¹¹ Ibid., 157, 87.

¹¹² Llosa, 115.

¹¹³ Plessis, 9, 62.

¹¹⁴ Price, *The French Second Empire*, 213.

¹¹⁵ Plessis, 102.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 117-118.

Hugo's solution to poverty was simple: education.¹¹⁷ He stressed the importance of education in *Les Misérables* by listing wet nurses and school teachers, the two professions most directly involved in educating the youth of France, as, "The two highest functionaries of the state."¹¹⁸ Education not only alleviated poverty, but in Hugo's estimation, eradicated crime: "Destroy the cave ignorance, and you destroy the mole crime."¹¹⁹ Once again, Hugo's calls for education were timely. In 1851 only 51 percent of children in France between five and fourteen attended school. By 1866 that number had increased to 68 percent, but still fell far short of Hugo's standards. He predicted that the need for "universal education" would soon be considered an "absolute truth."¹²⁰ An educated public was a prerequisite for the republican society Hugo sought to create.

Hugo also wrote passionately on the treatment of women. He wrote in *Les Misérables*, "They say slavery has disappeared from European civilization. That is incorrect. It still exists, but now it weighs only on women, and it is called prostitution."¹²¹ Through the character Fantine he introduced his bourgeois readers to the harsh realities of life for poor women in nineteenth century France. After being fired from her job when the foreman discovered that she was unwed but had a child, Fantine turned to prostitution out of desperation to provide for her daughter. Her tragic story challenged Hugo's readers' preconceived notions of prostitution. Fantine did not voluntarily engage in a life of sin because of moral degeneracy, but rather out of desperate, but pure, maternal

¹¹⁷ Hugo, *Les Misérables*, 587.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 161.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 720.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, 588.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 187.

instincts she debased herself because existing social mores gave her no alternative. Rather than experiencing moral outrage at the prostitute herself, Hugo meant for his readers to feel morally outraged at a system that would force a woman into such extreme measures.

Hugo continued to challenge societal norms with his discussion of crime and punishment. Conventional wisdom at the time dictated that poverty did not cause crime; criminals committed crimes because they were evil.¹²² Hugo, however, ascribed to a much more Rousseauian view of human nature. Man was born good but was corrupted by society. He wrote in *Les Misérables* of the protagonist, “Jean Valjean was not, we have seen, born evil. He was still good when he arrived in prison.”¹²³ Valjean’s crime, stealing a loaf of bread, did not stem from a depraved nature, but from his extreme poverty and his attempts to feed his sister’s children. Prison hardened him, however. Hugo wrote that the French penal system, “wrecks a man,” and caused, “the irreparable loss of a sentient being.”¹²⁴ Reforming criminals, Hugo argued, must begin with reforming the penal system itself.

Nowhere was Hugo’s call for penal system reform more clear and concrete than his opposition to the death penalty. His commitment to this issue stretched back at least to 1829, and was, according to Mario Vargas Llosa, “the only political conviction that [Hugo] was absolutely faithful to throughout his life.”¹²⁵ He opposed the death penalty so vehemently that according to one, possibly apocryphal, story, he wasted valuable time

¹²² Robb, 380.

¹²³ Hugo, *Les Misérables*, 89.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, 84.

¹²⁵ Robb, 137; Llosa, 7.

during secret meetings of representatives during the coup d'état arguing that the central committee must not condemn Louis-Napoleon to death when and if he was captured.¹²⁶ Lending legitimacy to the veracity of this tale is Hugo's poem "No Assassination" in *Les Châtiments* where he urged his readers not to assassinate Napoleon III, but assured them that the Emperor would face divine justice for his crimes.¹²⁷ Bishop Myriel, the righteous man in *Les Misérables* who reformed Jean Valjean through kindness where punishment had failed, made the pronouncement, "Death belongs to God alone," after witnessing a man convicted of murder being guillotined.¹²⁸ Hugo's opposition to the death penalty stemmed from his belief that humanity had immortal souls and that God would reward the good and punish the wicked.¹²⁹

From his view of history to his opposition to the death penalty, Hugo's religious beliefs infused his writings while in exile. While he identified as Christian, his beliefs differed greatly from devout Catholicism. Biographer Andre Maurois summarized Hugo's religious beliefs best: "The essential characteristic of Hugo's religion is a piece of cosmic theatricality. Suddenly what is damned attains to salvation; what previously was humiliated is exalted.... That was the source of his optimism. He knew the usurper would be conquered, that good would triumph, that God would be the victor."¹³⁰ Religious themes pervaded *Les Misérables* to the extent that Hugo himself wrote, "This book is a

¹²⁶ Josephson, 341.

¹²⁷ Hugo, *Les Chatiments*, Bk. III. xvi.

¹²⁸ Hugo, *Les Misérables*, 16.

¹²⁹ Maurois, 322-323.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*

drama whose first character is the infinite. Man is the second.”¹³¹ Hugo's faith set him, and the republicanism he advocated, apart from the Jacobin republicanism of the late eighteenth century. Whereas the revolutionaries that overthrew Louis XVI sought to abolish the religious order of the day, Hugo sought to reform it.¹³² To this end, Mario Vargas Llosa argues, Hugo, “Intended *Les Misérables* to be a religious tract, not an adventure novel.”¹³³ Hugo sought to impress upon his readers the need for a firm religious foundation to his ideal republic.

While Hugo's religious convictions informed his opposition to the Second Empire, his belief in French exceptionalism was just as foundational. He believed that France set the example for the rest of the world because the love of liberty was central to French national identity.¹³⁴ By depriving France of liberty, the Second Empire was, in Hugo's view, like a monastery: possessing equality and fraternity, but the people are trapped.¹³⁵ In *Napoléon le Petit* he derogatively referred to Napoleon III as, “The pygmy tyrant of a great people.”¹³⁶ Of this “great people” Hugo gave the citizens of Paris primacy. He wrote in *Les Misérables*, “The Parisian is to the Frenchmen what the Athenian was to the Greeks.” The Greeks may have set the example of civilization for the world, but the Athenians set the example for the Greeks. Hugo extorted his Parisian readers, and by extension the rest of France, and through them the world that, “The

¹³¹ Hugo, *Les Misérables*, 509.

¹³² *Ibid.*, 508.

¹³³ Llosa, 4.

¹³⁴ Hugo, *Les Misérables*, 1128, 368.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, 516.

¹³⁶ Hugo, *Napoleon Le Petit*, 4.

onward march of the human race requires that the heights around constantly blaze with noble lessons of courage.”¹³⁷ In Hugo's view, he had set a courageous example for the French in his opposition to Napoleon III, and had articulated in his writings his strongest arguments to convince the people of France to do the same. He had done all he could. Only time would now reveal if his arguments would take hold in France and lead to the reestablishment of the republic.

The impact of Hugo's writings upon France while he was in exile can be difficult to ascertain, particularly for *Napoléon le Petit* and *Les Châtiments*, which had to be smuggled in. historian John Bierman claims that, “The very shrillness of [Hugo's] tirades against Napoleon [III] blunted their impact,” and historian Fenton Bresler argues that because *Napoleon Le Petit* was banned in France that few Frenchmen read it, and it had little impact.¹³⁸ Both of these arguments, however, are inaccurate. The Second Empire took Hugo's writings much more seriously than these historians. His popularity and influence made the Second Empire anxious.¹³⁹ During the early years of the empire the republican opposition was divided against itself, scattered, and subject to open repression by the regime. Hugo's writings worked as a unifying influence for republicans during this time. *Les Châtiments* was distributed by republicans secretly throughout France, and helped spread republican ideals, even during a time of comparatively little active opposition to the Empire in the early 1850s that historian Alain Plessis refers to as the, “Silent years.”¹⁴⁰

¹³⁷ Hugo, *Les Misérables*, 592.

¹³⁸ Bierman, 96; Bresler, 247-248.

¹³⁹ Robb, 402.

¹⁴⁰ Plessis, 137-139.

In *Napoléon le Petit* and *Les Châtiments* Hugo found an effective platform to remain relevant in his opposition to the Second Empire. The ridicule he levelled at Napoleon III in both these works was far more damaging to the Emperor than Hugo's opposition during the coup d'état.¹⁴¹ The titles of the sections of *Les Châtiments* were mockeries of official Second Empire propaganda.¹⁴² Over 38,500 copies of *Napoléon le Petit* were printed in 1852, and demand was so great that hand written copies were made at covert gatherings all over France.¹⁴³ According to Hugo biographer Andre Maurois, the content and distribution of *Napoléon le Petit* was, "arousing great enthusiasm," in France.¹⁴⁴ Hugo was acutely aware of the success of his writings. In a letter to Colonel Charras in Brussels he wrote, "I am told my little book [*Napoléon le Petit*] is infiltrating France, where it is falling drop by drop upon the Bonaparte. It may end by making a hole in him."¹⁴⁵ *Napoléon le Petit* and *Les Châtiments* kept republican sentiment alive in France during the 1850s, and set the ideological stage for his masterwork: *Les Misérables*.

Hugo knew that *Les Misérables* would cause controversy; indeed, he welcomed it. *Les Misérables* translator Lee Fahnestock writes, "Hugo clearly took it as a compliment that his liberal views had enraged the reactionary, the conservative catholic, and the Bonapartist journals."¹⁴⁶ Amidst all of the outraged reactions his book sold rapidly.

¹⁴¹ Williams, *The World of Napoleon III*, 128.

¹⁴² Robb, 326.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, 320.

¹⁴⁴ Maurois, 313.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 312-313.

¹⁴⁶ Fahnestock, *Introduction*.

Demand was so great that within three months of its publication twenty-one illegal editions of *Les Misérables* were printed.¹⁴⁷ The novel's influence quickly began to be felt. Hugo's work caused a shift in popular dialogue. According to historian Matthew Josephson, following the publishing of *Les Misérables*, "It became fashionable to make fun of the Empire."¹⁴⁸ This would be only the first of many effects of the novel.

Perhaps the most surprising effect of *Les Misérables* was its popularity among the French working class. During the 1850's and 1860's France's workers, particularly in the countryside, began to read more popular novels, which caused them to turn their attention to the city, and by extension, the nation at large.¹⁴⁹ Even though Hugo intended the novel for bourgeois audiences, the novel became enormously popular among the working class. Workers would often pool funds together, or pay several weeks' wages in installments to obtain a copy of *Les Misérables*.¹⁵⁰

By helping to propagate republican ideals among the working class, *Les Misérables* played a critical role in expanding the base of opposition to the Second Empire. To its detriment, the Second Republic did not focus on winning the political support of the rural workers it had recently enfranchised until it was too late and Louis Napoleon was already in power.¹⁵¹ Learning from their mistake, Napoleon III sought to win the support of the working class by satisfying their demands, and by doing so, keep

¹⁴⁷ Robb, 378.

¹⁴⁸ Josephson, 447.

¹⁴⁹ Plessis, 112.

¹⁵⁰ Robb, 378.

¹⁵¹ Rapport, 384, 386.

them politically uninvolved.¹⁵² While they were politically motivated, Napoleon III's policies were legitimately aimed at improving the lot of French workers. In spite of these sincere attempts, however, he was not able to win the long term support of the working class.¹⁵³ Historian David Kulstein estimates that the Second Empire enjoyed the most support from the working class between 1858 and 1863.¹⁵⁴ It is not a coincidence that *Les Misérables* (1862) was published the year before the end of this period of popularity. The novel cannot be given sole credit for this shift in support, but the evidence suggests that it was a significant factor.

The effects of *Les Misérables* were soon felt within the government. One literary critic, Alphonse de Lamartine, attacked the novel on the grounds that it might upset the existing social order.¹⁵⁵ Within a year, Lamartine's prediction began to come true. The new awareness of the social issues depicted within *Les Misérables* caused the 1862 session of parliament to place prison reform, orphan care, education, and care for exploited women on the agenda.¹⁵⁶ While it was not the violent upset that Lamartine feared, it did represent a shift in France's social and political order.

That shift became more pronounced in the following year during France's parliamentary elections. The Second Empire, which took overt authoritarian actions only in times of great need, had retained the universal manhood suffrage first established by

¹⁵² Hendrik Nicolaas Boon, "The Social and Economic Policies of Napoleon III.," In *Napoleon III and the Second Empire*, 2nd. Ed. ed. Samuel M. Osgood, (Lexington: Heath & Co, 1973), 69.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*, 76.

¹⁵⁴ David I. Kulstein, "The French Workers and the Second Empire," In *Napoleon III and the Second Empire*, 2nd. Ed. edited by Samuel M. Osgood, (Lexington: Heath & Co, 1973), 78.

¹⁵⁵ Llosa, 165-167.

¹⁵⁶ Robb, 381.

the Second Republic, but had reorganized the electoral system, voting procedures, and the candidate selection process to favor government backed candidates.¹⁵⁷ Through the effective use of this system, government backed candidates had garnered ninety percent of the vote in the 1857 election.¹⁵⁸ The results of the 1863 election, held just one year after the publication of *Les Misérables*, were much different. Due in large part to the impact of the novel, opposition candidates made significant gains in a parliamentary election for the first time since the founding of the Second Empire.¹⁵⁹ Historian John Bierman argues that the 1863 election marked a turning point in the Second Empire. For the first time since the coup, Parliament, “Was no longer the meek servant of the regime.”¹⁶⁰ Government candidates still won an overall majority, but opposition parties carried all the major population centers, including Paris, where republican candidates carried sixty-three percent of the vote.¹⁶¹ The government had expected the opposition to make gains in the cities, but they were taken aback by the significant gains made by opposition parties in smaller towns.¹⁶² The influence of *Les Misérables* upon the rural working class no doubt played a role in this.

Due to the influence of his writings while in exile, Victor Hugo became the symbolic leader of French republicanism. Mario Vargas Llosa describes Hugo's role as, “The personification of the Republic, the symbol of his society and of his century.”¹⁶³ He

¹⁵⁷ Bierman, 99; Price, *The French Second Empire*, 95.

¹⁵⁸ Plessis, 144.

¹⁵⁹ Metzidakis, 191.

¹⁶⁰ Bierman, 312.

¹⁶¹ Plessis, 158.

¹⁶² Kulstein, 81.

¹⁶³ Llosa, 6.

consciously took on this role from the very beginning of his exile. While in Belgium, Hugo and his lodgings quickly became a “center of activity” for exiled Frenchmen.¹⁶⁴ When he moved to Guernsey the man who already saw himself as a microcosm of France, began to depict himself as the ideal French republican. He modeled the social responsibility he espoused by holding weekly dinners for poor children and donating large sums of money, despite his self-imposed façade of poverty, to charity each year.¹⁶⁵ His poetry collection *Les Contemplations* even depicts his life as an example of what life should be.¹⁶⁶ While his actions were certainly posturing, Hugo sincerely believed that he could further the cause of French republicanism by becoming the living embodiment of it.

An entire generation of idealistic Frenchmen became enraptured by Hugo's carefully crafted image. According to one account, “Young poets used to pray: ‘Our Father, which art in Guernsey!’”¹⁶⁷ Through surviving correspondence, we can be certain that Hugo was aware of this deifying adoration. Jules Janin wrote to Hugo, “You are our leader and our God. You have been for us the resurrection and the life. It needed only that you should know misfortune, that you should be removed from us, for you to be seen in all your greatness.”¹⁶⁸ For a man already possessed of an enormous ego, letters such as this must have spurred him on to new heights of egotism. Hugo put his ego to good use through his writings, aiding the cause of republicanism in France as much through his

¹⁶⁴ Josephson, 351.

¹⁶⁵ Robb, 407-408.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 357.

¹⁶⁷ William F. Giese, *Victor Hugo, the Man & the Poet*, (New York: Dial Press, 1926), 14.

¹⁶⁸ Maurois, 305-306.

arguments as through his cult of personality. By the last days of the Second Empire, Hugo's name had become synonymous with the republican cause. In one instance, Police dispersed a May, 1869 meeting of the Association Philotechnique because the crowd, riled up by republican activist Desire Bancel, began shouting, "Vive Hugo! Vive la Liberté!"¹⁶⁹ Hugo, and the republican ideals he symbolized, had taken root within the French national psyche and the Second Empire was powerless to stop it.

While certainly not the only cause, Hugo's writings helped bring about the fall of the French Second Empire and the reestablishment of the Republic. Historian Alain Plessis classifies the years between 1852 and 1861 as "the good years" for the second Empire.¹⁷⁰ These years came to an end, however, with a series of foreign policy blunders. In 1859, after forging a secret alliance with Count Cavour of Piedmont, Napoleon III marched into Italy with the intention of forcing the Austrians out. When the Prussians threatened to mobilize, however, the Emperor quickly backed out of Italy in what many Frenchmen considered to be an embarrassing show of weakness.¹⁷¹ Napoleon III's botched attempt to install Maximilian I as Emperor of Mexico beginning in 1861 also raised the ire of many in France. According to historian Octave Aubry, "Even had [Napoleon III's plans for Mexico] proved successful it could have ended in no real or considerable profit to France."¹⁷² Hugo's 1862 release of *Les Misérables* added domestic

¹⁶⁹ Translated as, "Long Live Hugo! Long Live Liberty.;" Philip Nord, *The Republican Moment: Struggles for Democracy in Nineteenth Century France*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 194.

¹⁷⁰ Plessis, 132.

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 147.

¹⁷² Octave Aubry, "The Second Empire," in *Napoleon III: Man or Destiny, Enlightened Statesman, or Proto-Fascist?* Ed. Brison Gooch. (Austin: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1963), 29.

policy concerns to the momentum of the French opposition that already resented the Emperor's foreign policy.

The ideals that Hugo argued for so passionately in *Les Misérables* continued to shape French politics long after the 1863 parliamentary election. In an effort to win back support, Napoleon III continued to embrace more liberal policies and positions throughout the 1860s. Despite his liberalization, the opposition toward him continued to grow stronger during the period.¹⁷³ According to historian John Bierman, in the 1869 election, "The pro-government vote fell by almost 1 million compared with the 1863 results, while the total vote for opposition candidates rose by 1.3 million."¹⁷⁴ Not only did the opposition manage to sway voters away from the government, but it also successfully convinced more people to vote than in previous elections. Much of this surge in opposition came from the working class which had become so enamored with *Les Misérables*. Historian David Kulstein writes, "In March 1870 [only five months before the collapse of the Second Empire] a *Commissaire Special* at Lyons reported that the idea had taken root among workers that their economic conditions would be ameliorated only with the end of the Empire."¹⁷⁵ Napoleon III's base of support was dissolving away around him.

The disastrous Franco-Prussian War in 1870 struck the final blow to the French Second Empire, but its foundations were already crumbling. A plebiscite held in May, 1870 confirmed Napoleon III's leadership, but the large opposition vote worried the

¹⁷³ Gordon Wright, "The Imperial Experiment," in *Napoleon III: Man or Destiny, Enlightened Statesman, or Proto-Fascist?* Ed. Brison Gooch. (Austin: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1963), 36.

¹⁷⁴ Bierman, 315.

¹⁷⁵ Kulstein, 81.

Emperor. In an effort to save face in wake of the Prussian Chancellor Otto von Bismarck's Ems Dispatch, a carefully crafted telegram designed to insult France, Napoleon III declared war on Prussia. When the foolhardy venture was cut short by Napoleon III's capture at the battle of Sedan in September, an emergency Republican Cabinet took charge in Paris. A testament to Hugo's influence and prestige, almost every member of the cabinet had close connections to the writer.¹⁷⁶ Napoleon III wisely chose to abdicate, but this was little more than a formality. The Third Republic had already been established.

This new Republic was quintessentially a reflection of Hugo's ideology. Hugo accurately predicted that the bourgeoisie were the key to France's political future. Philip Nord writes, *The Third Republic*, "Understood itself as the special handiwork of a new middle class of businessmen and professionals."¹⁷⁷ Hugo's passionate pleas for bourgeois compassion on social issues had also taken root among this "new middle class." Historian Katherine Auspitz argues that the republicans who founded the Third Republic believed that the regime would only be successful if, "peasants, workers, and women, as well as bourgeois men believed themselves to be heirs of 1789."¹⁷⁸ With the founding of the new republic, Hugo's renown as a symbol of republicanism climbed to new heights in France. His poetic indictment of Napoleon III, *Les Châtiments*, had been published elsewhere in 1853, but was not published in France until 1870. Amidst the real life fall of the Second Empire, Hugo's words, penned seventeen years earlier, took on an almost prophetic air as

¹⁷⁶ Robb, 444.

¹⁷⁷ Nord, 246.

¹⁷⁸ Auspitz, Katherine. *The Radical Bourgeoisie: The Ligue l'Eseignement and the origins of the Third Republic 1866-1885*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002.

mass French audiences read the work, and its predictions of Napoleon III's inevitable downfall, for the first time.¹⁷⁹

His vow—not to return until the Republic was restored—fulfilled, Hugo watched as the Franco-Prussian War worsened, and he began to plan the most effective way to return to France.¹⁸⁰ On September 5th, 1870, Hugo triumphantly returned to Paris. His carriage ride through the city quickly took on the appearance of a parade as mass crowds gathered to cheer on their hero. According to reports, people shouted quotation from *Les Châtiments* as he passed by.¹⁸¹ Within five months of his return he was elected to the National assembly, though he stepped down shortly thereafter due to health issues.¹⁸² His exile now at an end, the living symbol of French Republicanism, Victor Hugo resided in his beloved France for fifteen more years until his death in 1885. More people attended his funeral than the typical population of Paris at the time.¹⁸³

Hugo's self-image as the embodiment of French Republicanism was perhaps narcissistic, but nonetheless accurate and earned. From the time of his exile in 1851 to his return in 1870 he tirelessly championed the cause of republicanism in his writings. From his incendiary pamphlet *Napoléon le Petit*, to his caustic poetry collection *Les Châtiments*, to his leviathan of a novel *Les Misérables* Hugo worked to stir up his fellow Frenchman to resistance against the Second Empire and support of republicanism. His writings spread rapidly throughout France, fanning the flames of republican sentiment

¹⁷⁹ Josephson, 466.

¹⁸⁰ Robb, 442.

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 448.

¹⁸² *Ibid.*, 458.

¹⁸³ *Ibid.*, xiii.

and influencing political agendas and elections. While the influence of his work was not the sole cause for the dissolution of the French Second Empire, it played a significant role that has remained mostly unexplored from a research perspective. The definitive work on Victor Hugo's political impact has yet to be written. Without Hugo's staunch opposition, Napoleon III would have faced little continued resistance to his regime. Even had he still lost the Franco-Prussian war, it would not have been guaranteed that the government that followed the Second Empire would have been a republic. Victor Hugo rekindled the dormant embers of French Republicanism with a new cry for *liberté, égalité, fraternité*.

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