THE POET AND THE PRESIDENT

VICTOR HUGO IN THE POETS' REPUBLIC

October 22nd 2018 to February 24th 2019

Maison Vacquerie
Musée Victor Hugo
Rives-en-Seine (Villequier)

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A TURBULENT AGE

Among the French, the word ‘revolution’ is commonly associated with the year 1789, and the year 1789 with the storming of the Bastille on July 14th.

Yet this event, although of great symbolic value, marked only the beginning of a period of political upheaval and instability which would rock France until 1879 and the proclamation of the Third Republic.

The French Directory, the Directoire, a government established soon after the Revolution, was overthrown in 1799, and France entered a period governed by the Consulate. This arbitrary totalitarian government was set up under the illusory authority of three consuls, yet in reality the power was held by only one, Napoléon Bonaparte. He would go on to proclaim himself Emperor of the French on May 18th 1804. Napoléon I was also an ambitious soldier and he set out to conquer Europe.

However, his conquests and conflicts were expensive and his defeats grew increasingly numerous and disastrous. On April 6th 1814, Napoléon I abdicated and was sent into exile.

His reign was followed by the restoration of the Bourbons. During this period, the government which would prove more unpopular than the last. This would finally lead to the fervent return of liberal ideas and the rejection of a monarchy seen as despotic and reactionary. During its final years, the French economy faltered and harvests were poor. The price of bread continued to rise, while poverty and crime wreaked havoc across the land.

A revolutionary movement known as Les Journées de Juillet (1830) – literally, the days of July – finally put an end to the reign of Charles X. The Orléans family assumed power and Louis-Philippe I became not the king of France but King of the French, a title which aimed to express his willingness to turn France into a parliamentary monarchy. It was under the reign of Louis-Philippe, with whom he was quite intimate, that Victor Hugo became a Peer of France. The July Monarchy held power until 1848.

The JULY MONARCHY

Louis-Philippe I of Orléans was proclaimed King of the French on August 9th 1830. Supported by the wealthy bourgeoisie, he attracted opposition from ultra-royalists, moderate royalists, and republicans.

This period marked the end of the divine right of kings and would also be the last ruling monarchy in France. This was the golden age of the bourgeoisie and the bankers, embodied by the rallying cry of “enrichissez-vous!” (enrich yourselves) voiced by the head of the government, François Guizot. The state apparatus was in the hands of the financiers, the public was gagged, its anger violently suppressed.

Hugo himself, after having profited from the largesse of Charles X, did not hesitate to profit from this new king. He composed odes in homage to the new regime and Louis-Philippe I became not the king of France but King of the French, a title which aimed to express his willingness to turn France into a parliamentary monarchy. It was under the reign of Louis-Philippe, with whom he was quite intimate, that Victor Hugo became a Peer of France. The July Monarchy held power until 1848.

FALL OF THE JULY MONARCHY

Victor Hugo’s social affairs often took him to Les TUILERIES where he mingled with the king and the court. There was undoubtedly some interest on both sides. The poet was on the literary ascent; he became a member of the Académie Française in 1841 (after four failed attempts, but before he reached the age of 40), and was then subsequently named a peer of France by Louis-Philippe in 1845.

However, he was not completely blinded by the advantages he gained from Louis-Philippe. He continued to express his disagreement with the government’s positions in the Chamber of Peers.

This was followed by a series of speeches on the denunciation of poverty and the promotion of education, marking the start of Victor Hugo’s entry into politics, while pointing to his future shift to the left of the political spectrum.

In contrast to this rhetoric, Louis-Philippe’s government, which claimed to avoid excess, was increasingly weakened by a proliferation of scandals linked to the corruption of ministers and of those close to the king.

In the preface to Voix Intérieures (Inner Voices) (1837), Hugo explains, hopes, and reinforces his idea of the role of the poet in society:

“(…) the poet has a serious role, (...) a civilising influence (...), it is up to him to elevate political events to the dignity of historic events when they so deserve. He must know how to remain above the unrelenting turmoil, austere and benevolent; (...) he has in his heart this sympathetic understanding of revolutions which implies disdain of disorder, this grave respect for the people combined with contempt of the mob.”

His conclusion:

Revolution: yes.
Disorder and anarchy: no.

ROMANTICISM IN POLITICS

At the beginning of the 1830s, Victor Hugo spoke out for the motherland, for freedom, and for the people, and hoped, for lack of a better option, that Louis-Philippe’s political project would achieve this ideal. He wrote in Choses Vues (Things Seen) after July 1830: “We need the thing ‘republic’ and the word ‘monarchy’.”

He meditated on the role of the poet in revolutions, in the fight for freedom. Putting his thoughts into action, he composed and staged 8 plays in 8 years. They all addressed the clash of opposites, redemption through love, and culminated in a tragic and unjust death. This final injustice was intended to outrage the audience, to make them feel a great need for change, to mend the injustice.

During this period, theater acted as a platform for Victor Hugo. His monologues were invective, songs of anger, and acts of accusation calling for disrespect, for citizens to revolt against oppression.

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As the years passed, the people lost confidence in the “Citizen King”, seeing the government and its decisions move increasingly towards conservatism and monarchism, yet Louis-Philippe did not take full measure of the situation.

On February 25th 1848, in the face of the extent of the revolutionary movement, Louis-Philippe abdicated in favour of his grandson. But it was too late to save the monarchy. Lamartine proclaimed the republic at the Hôtel de Ville in Paris.

Victor Hugo understood the situation and ceased his support for the monarchy in France.
THE ANGER OF THE PEOPLE

Although Louis-Philippe had not been aware of the storm brewing, this change had been looming for almost ten years. During the July Monarchy, France, although still very rural, was also in the midst of an industrial revolution. Working conditions for the new class which arose from this economic upheaval were difficult: a worker carried out 15 hours of labour per day, in exchange for pay which was only just enough for survival. These men inevitably listened to socialist theories, but had no opportunity to express themselves or to defend their interests.

The phenomenon of pauperisation was further accelerated by the economic crisis which hit France between 1846 and 1848; harvests were poor and the price of bread rose ominously. Many businesses failed, the number of unemployed grew. Strikes ended in hunger riots which were violently suppressed.

The proclamation of the republic marked the start of an extremely unstable period, during which the principal political movements would clash in their attempts either to impose a new regime or to re-establish the old.

The provisional government established on February 24th 1848, headed by Lamartine, was composed of men from different backgrounds, whose hopes and dreams were difficult to reconcile. They agreed on only one matter: the necessary end of the monarchy and the proclamation of the republic. They also shared the same desire for fraternity. The provisional government rapidly took some significant measures:
- Affirmation of the right to work
- Universal male suffrage
- Abolition of slavery in the colonies
- Abolition of the death penalty for political offences
- Re-establishment of freedom of the press and the right of assembly, association, etc.

The right to work, the major preoccupation for the working population in Paris, led to the foundation of the National Workshops. These were intended to avert unemployment through the implementation of road and railway construction works, etc. Unfortunately, it was impossible to initiate such major projects in only a few days and a workforce converged on Paris from all of France. By the end of April, more than 100,000 people were registered, but many remained without work.

The effect on opinion was disastrous. Hugo was opposed to this system: he wrote in Choses Vues: “Men in overalls are playing cards under the arcades of Place Royale, which is now called Place des Vosges. Playing cards is one of the projects of the National Workshops. Another man, also in overalls, is lying stretched out beside a wall. One of the players comes up to him, nudges him with his foot, and says: ‘What are you doing?’ The sleeper wakes up, rubs his eyes, lifts his head, and answers: ‘Well, I’m earning my 20 sous!’ And he lies back down on the pavement. This is what the National Workshops look like.”

The candidates who stood at the first election after the sanction of universal male suffrage were General Cavaignac and Lamartine, both moderate republicans, Ledru-Rollin, leader of the social democrats, Raspail, in the name of the socialists, Changarnier, representing the monarchists, and Louis-Napoléon Bonaparte, at the head of his own party, the Bonapartists. The electoral campaign was largely carried out in the press. The re-establishment of freedom of the press had led to a proliferation of newspapers and each championed one candidate. Hugo was no exception; he founded a newspaper called L’Événement. However, as he was himself a member of parliament and did not wish to give the impression that he was throwing his own hat into the ring, he entrusted the running and editing of the newspaper to some of the more loyal members of the Hugo clan, his two sons Charles and François-Victor, as well as Auguste Vacquerie and Paul Meurice. L’Événement supported the Bonaparte candidate.

THE PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION

For many, Louis-Napoléon Bonaparte was both the epitome of certain values and traditions and the possible founder of a new society, a progressive conservative.

In fact, L. N. Bonaparte had published several essays, including L’Extinction du Paupérisme (The Extinction of Pauperism) (1844), which, associated with a prestigious name, incited Hugo to rally behind his cause. Bonaparte presented a project in which romantic ideals rubbed shoulders with utopia-tinged socialist principles. He also claimed that political rigour was essential for maintaining order. It was therefore no real surprise that he was elected president on December 10th 1848 with more than 75% of the vote.

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FROM FEBRUARY TO JUNE 1848

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The satisfaction of having been elected rapidly diminished in the face of the political reality. The president soon discovered the difficulty of governing without support and without real knowledge of the world of French politics. The republicans distrusted him and refused to join his government. Against his will, he was forced to form a government dominated by the monarchists. After the elections of May 1849, the French Assembly reverted to a conservative majority. Bonaparte never seemed to have the support of his government and the Assembly, regardless of the ministers in attendance or propositions put forward.

Hugo was quickly disabused of his hopes of becoming a minister. Yet he still hoped that the president would realise that he was wrong to make a pact with a minister. Yet he still hoped that the president would tell L’Évènement: “All our freedoms snared and garrotted one after the other; universal suffrage betrayed, abandoned, mutilated; socialist programmes ending in Jesuit politics; for government, a huge intrigue (Movement), history will perhaps speak of a conspiracy (Lively Commotion) […] which has turned five thousand officials into a sort of Bonapartist Freemasonry in the heart of the nation! All reforms deferred or overridden, disproportionate burdensome taxes on the people retained or re-established, a state of siege in five départements, Paris and Lyon placed under surveillance, amnesty refused, transportation intensified, deportation backed, groans in the kasbah of Bône [now Annaba], tortures at Belle-Ile, casemates where you would not leave mattresses to rot, but where men are being left to rot (Commotion)! The press tracked, the jury culled, not enough justice, and far too many police.”

It was during this speech that he rechristened the president “Napoléon le Petit”, or Napoleon the Little.

In this uncompromising harangue, he makes a sad assessment of the first three years of the presidency:

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On November 26th 1849, one of the writers commented in L’Événement:

“(…) Time passes. The anniversary of 10 December is fast approaching. In one year, the person elected by six million votes, bearer of the greatest name in modern times, the chief magistrate of France, has not been able to give France one single idea, nor a peaceful conquest! […]”

This was only the beginning of an increasing number of attacks and harsh criticisms in the newspapers. Fearing the impact of these condemnations on public opinion, the government decided to curb the freedom of the press, and, consequently, freedom of thought and freedom of expression. The right to assembly was also restricted and tightly controlled, as fear of the influence of secret societies was real.

Freedom of the press was an issue with which Hugo had always sympathised and which he had defended since his youth. He had never opposed publication of a caricature or scathing portrait, even though press illustrators were not always kind to him.

On September 15th 1851, after having published various articles attacking the executive power, as well as extracts from declarations by the president stating his respect for and loyalty to the constitution, L’Événement was suspended for one month. François-Victor Hugo and Paul Meurice were sentenced to several months in prison. To avoid suspending publication, the newspaper was rechristened L’Événement du Peuple.

Opponents of the looming coup d’état were too divided to be seen as credible in the eyes of the people. The field was therefore left open for the president and his partisans. From then on, the days of the Second Republic were numbered.