



VICTOR HUGO

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VICTOR MARIE HUGO, a great French poet, dramatist, novelist, man of letters, and senator, was born at Besançon, France, Feb. 26, 1802, and died at Paris, May 22, 1885. His father, a royalist general and adherent of Napoleon, lived to see his son attain fame, though he died in the service of Louis XVIII in the year 1828. Young Hugo had meanwhile published his "Odes et Ballades" and "Les Orientales," and was about to bring out "Hernani," the drama that launched on his country the fierce contest between the Classicists and Romanticists, to the latter of whom Hugo and his friends joyously belonged. The literary revolution which "Hernani" brought about was speedily followed by the political one, in 1830, in which Hugo was weaned from his adherence to Bourbonism, and identified himself with the popular cause. Though Louis Philippe had in 1845 made him a Peer of France, he continued loyal to republicanism, so much so, indeed, as to suffer banishment under "Napoleon le Petit" in 1852. But literature remained to the last his lodestar, and through all the political storm and stress of the time he plied his pen unintermittently and added to his triumphs such fictional masterpieces as "Notre Dame de Paris," "Les Misérables," "Les Travailleurs de la Mer," "L'Homme qui rit," and "Quatre-vingt-treize," besides much magnificent verse, and some speeches and orations of a high order, such as the two here reproduced.

ON THE CENTENNIAL OF VOLTAIRE'S DEATH

DELIVERED AT PARIS, MAY 30, 1878

ONE hundred years ago to-day a man died! He died immortal, laden with years, with labors, and with the most illustrious and formidable of responsibilities—the responsibility of the human conscience informed and corrected. He departed amid the curses of the past and the blessings of the future—and these are the two superb forms of glory!—dying amid the acclamations of his contemporaries and of posterity, on the one hand, and on the other with the hootings and hatreds bestowed by the implacable past on those who combat it. He was more than a man—he was an epoch! He had done his work; he had fulfilled the mission evidently chosen for him by the Supreme Will, which manifests itself as visibly in the laws

of destiny as in the laws of nature. The eighty-four years he had lived bridge over the interval between the apogee of the Monarchy and the dawn of the Revolution. At his birth, Louis XIV. still reigned; at his death Louis XVI. had already mounted the throne. So that his cradle saw the last rays of the great throne and his coffin the first gleams from the great abyss. . . .

The court was full of festivities; Versailles was radiant; Paris was ignorant; and meanwhile, through religious ferocity, judges killed an old man on the wheel and tore out a child's tongue for a song. Confronted by this frivolous and dismal society, Voltaire alone, sensible of all the forces marshalled against him—court, nobility, finance; that unconscious power, the blind multitude; that terrible magistracy, so oppressive for the subject, so docile for the master, crushing and flattering, kneeling on the people before the king; that clergy, a sinister medley of hypocrisy and fanaticism—Voltaire alone declared war against this coalition of all social iniquities—against that great and formidable world. He accepted battle with it. What was his weapon? That which has the lightness of the wind and the force of a thunderbolt—a pen. With that weapon Voltaire fought, and with that he conquered! Let us salute that memory! He conquered! He waged a splendid warfare—the war of one alone against all—the grand war of mind against matter, of reason against prejudice; a war for the just against the unjust, for the oppressed against the oppressor, the war of goodness, the war of kindness! He had the tenderness of a woman and the anger of a hero. His was a great mind and an immense heart. He conquered the old code, the ancient dogma! He conquered the feudal lord, the Gothic judge, the Roman priest! He bestowed

on the populace the dignity of the people! He taught, pacified, civilized. He fought for Sirven and Montbailly as for Calas and Labarre. Regardless of menaces, insults, persecutions, calumny, exile, he was indefatigable and immovable. He overcame violence by a smile, despotism by sarcasm, infallibility by irony, obstinacy by perseverance, ignorance by truth! I have just uttered the word "smile," and I pause at it! "To smile!" That is Voltaire. Let us repeat it—pacification is the better part of philosophy. In Voltaire the equilibrium was speedily restored. Whatever his just anger, it passed off. The angry Voltaire always gives place to the Voltaire of calmness; and then in that profound eye appears his smile. That smile is wisdom—that smile, I repeat, is Voltaire. It sometimes goes as far as a laugh, but philosophic sadness tempers it. It mocks the strong, it caresses the weak. Disquieting the oppressor, it reassures the oppressed. It becomes raillery against the great; pity for the little! Ah! let that smile sway us, for it had in it the rays of the dawn. It was an illumination for truth, for justice, for goodness, for the worthiness of the useful. It illuminated the inner stronghold of superstition. The hideous things it is salutary to see, he showed. It was a smile, fruitful as well as luminous! The new society, the desire for equality and concession; that beginning of fraternity called tolerance, mutual good will, the just accord of men and right, the recognition of reason as the supreme law, the effacing of prejudices, serenity of soul, the spirit of indulgence and pardon, harmony and peace—behold what has resulted from that grand smile! On the day—undoubtedly close at hand—when the identity of wisdom and clemency will be recognized, when the amnesty is proclaimed, I say it!—yonder in the stars Voltaire will smile.

Between two servants of humanity who appeared at one thousand eight hundred years' interval, there is a mysterious relation. To combat Pharisaism, unmask imposture, overturn tyrannies, usurpations, prejudices, falsehoods, superstitions—to demolish the temple in order to rebuild it—that is to say, to substitute the true for the false, attack the fierce magistracy, the sanguinary priesthood; to scourge the money changers from the sanctuary; to reclaim the heritage of the disinherited; to protect the weak, poor, suffering and crushed; to combat for the persecuted and oppressed—such was the war of Jesus Christ! And what man carried on that war? It was Voltaire! The evangelical work had for its complement the philosophic work; the spirit of mercy commenced, the spirit of tolerance continued, let us say it with a sentiment of profound respect: Jesus wept—Voltaire smiled. From that divine tear and that human smile sprang the mildness of existing civilization.

Alas! the present moment, worthy as it is of admiration and respect, has still its dark side. There are still clouds on the horizon; the tragedy of the peoples is not played out; war still raises its head over this august festival of peace. Princes for two years have persisted in a fatal misunderstanding; their discord is an obstacle to our concord, and they are ill-inspired in condemning us to witness the contrast. This contrast brings us back to Voltaire. Amid these threatening events let us be more peaceful than ever. Let us bow before this great death, this great life, this great living spirit. Let us bend before this venerated sepulchre! Let us ask counsel of him whose life, useful to men, expired a hundred years ago, but whose work is immortal. Let us ask counsel of other mighty thinkers, auxiliaries of this

glorious Voltaire—of Jean Jacques, Diderot, Montesquieu! Let us stop the shedding of human blood. Enough, despots! Barbarism still exists. Let philosophy protest. Let the eighteenth century succor the nineteenth. The philosophers, our predecessors, are the apostles of truth. Let us invoke these illustrious phantoms that, face to face with monarchies thinking of war, they may proclaim the right of man to life, the right of conscience to liberty, the sovereignty of reason, the sacredness of labor, the blessedness of peace! And since night issues from thrones, let light emanate from the tombs.

ON HONORE DE BALZAC

THE man who now goes down into this tomb is one of those to whom public grief pays homage.

In our day all fictions have vanished. The eye is fixed not only on the heads that reign, but on heads that think, and the whole country is moved when one of those heads disappears. To-day we have a people in black because of the death of the man of talent: a nation in mourning for a man of genius.

Gentleman, the name of Balzac will be mingled in the luminous trace our epoch will leave across the future.

Balzac was one of that powerful generation of writers of the nineteenth century who came after Napoleon, as the illustrious Pleiad of the seventeenth century came after Richelieu—as if in the development of civilization there were a law which gives conquerors by the intellect as successors to conquerors by the sword.

Balzac was one of the first among the greatest, one of

the highest among the best. This is not the place to tell all that constituted this splendid and sovereign intelligence. All his books form but one book—a book living, luminous, profound, where one sees coming and going and marching and moving, with I know not what of the formidable and terrible, mixed with the real, all our contemporary civilization—a marvellous book which the poet entitled “a comedy” and which he could have called history; which takes all forms and styles, which surpasses Tacitus and Suetonius; which traverses Beaumarchais and reaches Rabelais—a book which realizes observation and imagination, which lavishes the true, the esoteric, the commonplace, the trivial, the material, and which at times through all realities, swiftly and grandly rent away, allows us all at once a glimpse of a most sombre and tragic ideal. Unknown to himself whether he wished it or not, whether he consented or not, the author of this immense and strange work is one of the strong race of revolutionist writers. Balzac goes straight to the goal. Body to body he seizes modern society; from all he wrests something, from these an illusion, from those a hope; from one a catchword, from another a mask. He ransacked vice, he dissected passion. He searched out and sounded man, soul, heart, entrails, brain—the abyss that each one has within himself. And by grace of his free and vigorous nature; by a privilege of the intellect of our time, which, having seen revolutions face to face, can see more clearly the destiny of humanity and comprehend Providence better—Balzac redeemed himself smiling and severe from those formidable studies which produced melancholy in Moliere and misanthropy in Rousseau.

This is what he has accomplished among us, this is the work which he has left us—a work lofty and solid—a monu-

ment robustly piled in layers of granite, from the height of which hereafter his renown shall shine in splendor. Great men make their own pedestal, the future will be answerable for the statue.

His death stupefied Paris! Only a few months ago he had come back to France. Feeling that he was dying, he wished to see his country again, as one who would embrace his mother on the eve of a distant voyage. His life was short, but full, more filled with deeds than days.

Alas! this powerful worker, never fatigued, this philosopher, this thinker, this poet, this genius, has lived among us that life of storm, of strife, of quarrels and combats, common in all times to all great men. To-day he is at peace. He escapes contention and hatred. On the same day he enters into glory and the tomb. Hereafter beyond the clouds, which are above our heads, he will shine among the stars of his country. All you who are here, are you not tempted to envy him?

Whatever may be our grief in presence of such a loss, let us accept these catastrophes with resignation! Let us accept in it whatever is distressing and severe; it is good perhaps, it is necessary perhaps, in an epoch like ours, that from time to time the great dead shall communicate to spirits, devoured with scepticism and doubt, a religious fervor. Providence knows what it does when it puts the people face to face with the supreme mystery and when it gives them death to reflect on—death which is supreme equality, as it is also supreme liberty. Providence knows what it does, since it is the greatest of all instructors.

There can be but austere and serious thoughts in all hearts when a sublime spirit makes its majestic entrance into another life, when one of those beings who have long

soared above the crowd on the visible wings of genius, spreading all at once other wings which we did not see, plunges swiftly into the unknown.

No, it is not the unknown; no, I have said it on another sad occasion and I shall repeat it to-day; no, it is not night, it is light. It is not the end, it is the beginning! It is not extinction, it is eternity! Is it not true, my hearers, such tombs as this demonstrate immortality? In presence of the illustrious dead, we feel more distinctly the divine destiny of that intelligence which traverses the earth to suffer and to purify itself—which we call man.

ON CAPITAL PUNISHMENT

IN DEFENCE OF CHARLES HUGO, JUNE 11, 1851¹

GENTLEMEN OF THE JURY,—At the first words spoken by the attorney-general I believed for a moment that he intended to abandon the prosecution, but this illusion was of short duration. After having tried in vain to circumscribe and curtail the argument, the counsel for the prosecution has been drawn by the nature of the subject into disclosures which have opened afresh the question in all its phases, and in spite of him it appears again in all its magnitude.

I do not complain. I proceed immediately to the indict-

¹A poacher of Nièvre, Montcharmant, condemned to death, was carried for execution to the little village where the crime had been committed. The culprit was endowed with great physical strength; the executioner and his assistants were not able to drag him from the fatal cart; the execution was suspended until the arrival of reinforcements. When the minions of the law of blood were in sufficient numbers the prisoner was brought before the horrible machine, lifted from the tumbrel, carried upon the unsteady platform, and pushed under the knife. The "Événement" depicted in vivid colors this horrible scene. Its editor, Mr. Charles Hugo, was indicted before the court of assizes under the charge of having failed in respect due the law. The young editor was defended by his father.

ment; but first let us begin by a mutual understanding of a word. Good definitions make good discussions.

This phrase, "respect due to the law," which serves as the basis of the accusation, what is its import? What does it signify? What is its real meaning? Evidently—and the prosecution appeared to me not to be strenuous in maintaining the contrary—it cannot mean to suppress criticism of the laws under pretence of respect due to them.

This phrase signifies simply respect for the execution of the law; nothing else. It permits criticism, likewise censure, even severe censure. We see examples every day, even with regard to the constitution, which is superior to the law. This phrase permits the invocation of legislative power for the abolishment of a dangerous law; it permits, in short, the opposition of a moral impediment, but it does not permit the opposition of a material obstacle. Let a law be executed though evil, though unjust, though barbarous; denounce it to the judgment, denounce it to the legislator, but let it be executed; say that it is evil, say that it is unjust, say that it is barbarous, but let it be executed. Criticism, yes,—revolt, no. Behold the true sense, the only sense of the phrase, "respect for the laws."

Otherwise, gentlemen, consider this! In this grave work, the elaboration of the laws; work which embraces two functions—the function of the press which criticises, which counsels, which instructs, and the function of the legislator who decides; in this serious work I say the first function, that of criticism, would be paralyzed, and as a result the second also. The laws would never be criticised and consequently there would be no reason for either their amelioration or reformation. The national legislative assembly would be utterly useless; there would be nothing left save to dissolve