

Barnett, Marva A. To Love Is to Act. Les Misérables and Victor Hugo's Vision for Leading Lives of Conscience

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À la valeur indiscutable de l'édition critique de Rosemary A. Peters-Hill, il faut ajouter la qualité des notes de la traductrice, qui accompagnent la première version anglaise de la *Reconnaissance* au Maroc. En plus d'éclairer des concepts, personnages, mots étrangers et endroits mentionnés par Foucauld, les notes de Rosemary A. Peters-Hill s'attachent à expliquer l'histoire des lieux, tout en y ajoutant des renseignements sur leur situation à présent. Souvent, les notes en bas de page sont de vraies intrusions de commentateur, des digressions critiques ou plutôt des capsules d'analyses littéraires et même des études de génétique textuelle (335) qui profiteraient mieux d'une publication à part sous la forme d'articles qui permettent à l'auteure de justifier plus largement son opinion.

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Barnett, Marva A. *To Love Is to Act. Les Misérables and Victor Hugo's Vision for Leading Lives of Conscience*. Chicago: Swan Isle Press, 2020. 213 p.

What is literature good for? That is a question that is being asked rather often in university boardrooms nowadays. Most of the time, the answer leads to cutbacks in humanities programs, in the name of efficiency and focusing on what "society" (also known as "the market") is presumed to really need. This book goes against the grain of received administrative wisdom and provides an answer to that vexing question, at least as far as Victor Hugo and his masterpiece *Les Misérables* are concerned. On the strength of four decades of teaching experience and a deep familiarity with the author's life and works, Marva Barnett has penned with this volume a true love letter to Hugo and a paean to his best-known novel. But not just to the novel: the stage adaptation, the world-famous *Les Mis*, often takes pride of place in this analysis, through interviews the author has conducted with Tom Hooper, the musical's director, Alain Boubil, the author of the libretto, Claude-Michel Schönberg, the composer of the music, and Hugh Jackman, who played the key role of Jean Valjean in the movie. This multiplicity of voices – a form of metacriticism, where various interpretations intersect with and complete each other – comes together seamlessly in the basic idea that undergirds Barnett's book and its author's "journey to better grasp the impact of [Hugo's] epic around the world" (79-80): what can a reader get out of the novel or the spectator of its adaptation, that will help them live a better and happier life?

The journey starts with a conclusion. Contrary to what common wisdom says about literature – that its value lies in it asking the right questions and not in providing answers – Hugo, says Barnett, "doesn't just leave us with questions" (xxiii). Through the story of his characters he teaches many practical lessons drawn from his own life experiences, that his readers will be able to adopt and adapt to their own circumstances. The enduring popularity of his heroes, eternal human archetypes recognizable worldwide, independently of one's culture, is explained by the fact that they find themselves confronted by situations that all humans will experience in some form, and manage somehow to overcome these difficulties and become better persons. Thus the book, in the author's own words, aims to "explore how crucial events in Hugo's life related to his universal *Les Misérables* themes, beginning with his life-changing experiences just before he started his novel, and then [turns] to how his life and ideas can inspire us today" (xxv). Indeed, the "Inspirational power" (xxv) of *Les Misérables* is the guiding thread running through the volume. The question is "[w]hy does such a tragic story as *Les Misérables* uplift and inspire so many who read it or see the musical?" (156); both novel and show are equally "uplifting and inspiring" (108); the creators of the show share

“[w]hat [they] find very inspiring about the story” (88), and generally, that is the fact that “Hugo’s inspirational [...] characters show what it takes to carry on” (141).

Barnett positions herself explicitly against “contemporary disillusionment and cynicism” (56). She “applaud[s] [Hugo’s] optimism and belief in human potential” (39) and focuses relentlessly on what good can be extracted from his novel, while interspersing her commentary with numerous modern comparisons (Hugo as the Mandela of his time) and asides, drawn from her lengthy teaching career. Her approach to the novel echoes in a significant way the conception of literature espoused by Sainte-Beuve, the well-known critic (and rival of Hugo in matters of the heart), by concentrating solely on the autobiographical. Thanks to her encyclopedic knowledge of Hugo’s life, Barnett explains the work through the author’s experiences, stressing his resilience in the face of overwhelming odds and personal tragedy, his sense of morality, his notion of social justice and what he did to advance the causes he believed in.

The intended public for this book appears to be American, certainly young, and most likely not very informed about life in France in the times of Hugo. In other words, the typical second-year student who is taking an introductory French literature course. The American perspective comes across most strongly from the frequent comparisons between Jean Valjean’s experiences with the law and similar cases of justice denied in U.S. prisons, and from the fact the author feels the need to excuse Hugo for his socialism (a “provocative idea for some today” [157]), and even to specify, after quoting an author, “It doesn’t bother me that Frankl, like Hugo, wrote at a time when writers used the term man/men to refer to either men or people of whatever gender”(143). But more than anything else, it comes across from the extreme importance given in the analysis to religion and spirituality, considered to be the source of morality. Barnett is clearly writing for a very conservative audience, who believes in “our God-given sense of morality” (121), when she specifies that “Victor and Léonie” (his mistress) were “[v]ery much in love” and therefore “did not consider their affair sordid” (13). And she is also writing for a very religious audience when she states: “Watching what’s going on in our country, I see that I’m not the only one with questions about spirituality” (61) and notes that “for some of us, traditional boundaries between religions more and more blur, in a way that illuminates the connections between religious and spiritual beliefs” (62). Hugo, with his extremely vague deistic approach, unconnected to any one particular Church, appears to be the perfect vehicle to discuss ethical choices – the difference between right and wrong, self-interest and altruism – or “[t]he eternal struggle between what’s moral and what’s legal” (30).

Indeed, Hugo is forever using “the traditional term God” (78) to designate a form of private, personal spirituality, which could create much confusion for a naive reader. Barnett notes quite rightly the paradox that *Les Misérables*, “especially as seen through the [...] musical – looks to many people like a completely Christian story” (66), while the novel was harshly criticized and condemned by the Church at the time of its publication. Supposedly “eternal” values are not judged or perceived the same way in different countries at different times, even when they are allegedly inspired by the same faith. Much of the discussion around the character of Jean Valjean centres on the role of Bishop Myriel in transforming the former convict into a new man. And that is where the meaning of religion according to the author becomes apparent: “In forgiving Valjean, Bishop Myriel encourages this hate-filled man to move his life toward God. And since the bishop focuses more on love and goodness than on religious dogma, his counsel makes sense not only to the religiously faithful but also to people who, like me, consider decency to be simply part of our humanity” (26). In that, she echoes “Hugo’s sense that love and God are identical” (39) and can therefore continue debating at length crucial issues with

universal appeal like the power of absolution, redemption, and the numerous ways in which we can “pick ourselves back up” (142) the way Hugo did so many times.

As it must by now be obvious, this is not the book you should read if you are interested in strictly literary considerations. Much could be said, for example, of Hugo’s reasons for writing *Les Misérables* besides personal experiences and anecdotes, such as his desire to replicate the success of Eugène Sue’s *Les Mystères de Paris*, the novel from which he borrows the character of Tortillard, who will become Gavroche – one of those Barnett comments upon the most. But literary considerations are not the reason why this book was written. Its goal is to highlight the fact “*Les Misérables* shows us” (116) “we can change for the better” (96).

To Love Is to Act is in itself an act of love, an enthusiastic exploration of an author’s existence as seen through what is probably his most significant and certainly his most successful work. It should be read and enjoyed on its own terms.

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Girard, André. *Dictionnaire de l'anarchie*. Réuni et présenté par François Gaudin et Françoise Guerard. Paris : Honoré Champion, 2021. 378 p.

Un inédit d'André Girard est un événement qui mérite d'être noté. François Gaudin et Françoise Guerard ont réuni dans ce volume une série de trente-neuf articles parus dans le *Dictionnaire-journal* de Maurice Lachâtre à partir de la fin des années 1880, qui constituent un tout idéal qui n'a cependant jamais paru en tant que tel auparavant. La chose ne pourrait étonner : Girard est un excellent exemple de ces intellectuels essentiellement autodidactes, animés d'une curiosité formidable et d'un appétit insatiable pour tout ce qui est science, philosophie, sociologie et littérature, qui ont dispersé leurs écrits dans les journaux anarchistes de l'entre-deux-siècles et n'ont par conséquent guère laissé de trace bien profonde dans l'histoire culturelle de leur époque. Ce manque de reconnaissance, dicté bien davantage par des motifs politiques que par une quelconque absence d'intérêt de leurs écrits, commence à être corrigé par des travaux tel celui-ci. Et il faut bien dire qu'une redécouverte de la pensée de Girard, une des colonnes portantes des *Temps Nouveaux*, journal essentiel dans le panorama du développement de l'anarchisme français, représente une nouvelle particulièrement bienvenue.

Le *Dictionnaire-journal* de Lachâtre est conçu comme « une actualisation régulière de son *Nouveau Dictionnaire universel*, qui avait fini de paraître en 1870 » (9). Girard, mis en contact avec Lachâtre par Jean Grave, le propagandiste anarchiste le plus connu de l'époque, devient secrétaire de rédaction du *Dictionnaire-journal*, se retrouvant au sein d'une équipe qui comprend plusieurs noms significatifs de la gauche révolutionnaire, plus ou moins anarchisante, de l'époque, dont notamment Hector France. L'apport de Girard au projet, toujours important, devient crucial après la disparition de Lachâtre. Dans le groupe qui s'occupe de terminer son *Dictionnaire* au tout début du nouveau siècle figurent, à côté de Girard, des noms importants de la mouvance anarchiste, tels Henry Fabre, Victor Méric ou Miguel Almereyda. Les directeurs de ce volume ont vu juste en estimant que « André Girard a rédigé au fil de la plume un traité de la pensée anarchiste fin de siècle. Éparpillé sous de nombreuses entrées, l'ensemble de ces contributions forme un tout cohérent dont nous avons pensé qu'il méritait une publication autonome » (11).

L'introduction reconstruit le parcours de Girard, employé tout d'abord, ironiquement, à la préfecture de police, d'où il est renvoyé une fois ses sympathies libertaires découvertes, et qui gagnera sa vie principalement comme correcteur d'imprimerie – métier fort répandu chez les anarchistes. Écrivain infatigable, il publie