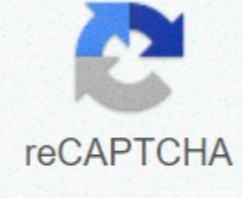




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From Laurence Porter's Introduction to Les Miserables The Great French NovelWhy do we still read Les Misérables? Not too many years ago, it was added to the required reading list for the agrégation in French literature, the competitive state examination that qualifies teachers at advanced levels. Its moral, social, and political messages remain pertinent to many of the situations we confront. But above all, Les Misérables is the unrecognized “Great French Novel,” analogous to Herman Melville’s Moby Dick, Alessandro Manzoni’s The Betrothed, Leo Tolstoy’s War and Peace, or Thomas Mann’s The Magic Mountain. I do not mean that it is necessarily the greatest French novel: one might prefer Proust’s À la recherche du temps perdu, just as in the literature of other languages, one might prefer Faulkner’s The Sound and the Fury, James Joyce’s Ulysses, Fyodor Dostoevsky’s The Brothers Karamazov, Kafka’s The Trial, or Gunther Grass’s The Tin Drum. The social, moral, and intellectual range of Hugo’s characters far exceeds what we find in all these other great authors, whose social density is nonetheless noteworthy. Beyond that impressive achievement, Les Misérables in many respects conforms to an ideal type, an influential theoretical entity whose traits are realized only in part by any concrete example. The Great National Novel is capacious: it covers substantial amounts of time and space. It contains many vivid characters belonging to varied social conditions: it is not intimist in its setting, not a drawing-room adventure limited to family, friends, and courtship. It tells its sprawling story in a traditional mode, dominated by the controlling perspective of an omniscient author who, despite flashbacks and digressions, generally proceeds steadily forward, following the protagonists as they age. It usually deploys la grande histoire (“big” history, revolutions and wars) in the background, although the main characters, affected as they are by political dramas, usually are not leading players in them. It implies some connection between individual and national destinies. By the time he wrote Les Misérables, Hugo had had more direct political experience at the highest levels of government than had many other writers of his time. Very often the Great National Novel suggests the looming presence of the supernatural, hidden but at times glimpsed behind the scenes, or during “second states” of consciousness such as dreams, drug experiences, visions, hallucinations, illness, passion, or prayer. Hugo began writing Les Misérables shortly after spending several years of evenings at mystical séances, and after elaborating the religious system, based on punitive and redemptive reincarnation, that he finally made explicit in his visionary poem La Fin de Satan. The Great National Novel usually relegates artistic self-consciousness to the background: it does not become a Künstlerroman—the portrait of the artist as a young man—nor does it foreground the cleverness of the writer’s craft by radical experiments in point of view, plot structure, stylistic innovations, or characterization. Instead, the Great National Novel quietly insinuates the mature author’s hard-won wisdom through a series of aphorisms, or pithy, penetrating generalizations about human nature. These maxims demonstrate the author’s ability to synthesize many experiences. The digressions are miniature essays on varied subjects—authors of the Great National Novel are born essayists and amateur philosophers—that aim to instruct the audience. In contrast to the Self-Conscious Novel (Cervantes, Sterne, Diderot), digressions do not serve to tease the expectant reader by delaying the forward progress of the story, but to establish the writer’s authority as a portraitist of a wide world by giving glimpses into his or her encyclopedic knowledge. The Influence of Les MisérablesIn the late nineteenth century, Les Misérables anticipated both the naturalistic movement and its opposite pole, the Catholic Renaissance. Whereas the realistic novel typically deals with the middle class, Naturalism deals with the working class and with the underworld. Repetitious, menial labor is difficult to dramatize in a novel; but Hugo devotes ample space to describing members of the working class at play (Fantine and her friends), and the criminal class at work or trying to escape from the police. In the Paris scenes, he depicts the grisettes (young proletarian women who wore gray smocks at their jobs, and who were stereotypically easy targets for seduction). Notably in the chapter “L’Année 1817,” he emphasizes the inequities of their sexual exploitation by middle-class men in a direct way that Zola, with his sexual insecurities, could not (compare Zola’s Nana, 1880, depicting female sexuality as a monstrous source of social corruption). Hugo has not yet received due credit for anticipating the naturalist movement in the chapters devoted to Fantine’s life both in Paris and in her hometown. The Catholic Renaissance, which deplored Hugo’s bombastic, prophetic rhetoric and his pretensions to revealing a new religion, also derived considerable indirect inspiration from Hugo. Like Claudel, who detested him and made a point of saying so, like Mauriac, or like Bernanos, from thirty to ninety years after him, Hugo in 1862 dramatizes his heroes’ relentless pursuit by conscience, meaning our instinctive awareness of God. Hugo’s appeal to posterity depends not only on the awe-inspiring range and depth of his masterpiece, Les Misérables, not only on his inspiring, idealistic visions of political and social progress, but also on the acute visual sense that put him well ahead of his time, but that can be captured and reinforced by modern media such as film and television. His extraordinary visual imagination is both impressionistic—sensitive to colors, including colored shadows, and to changes in light—and cinematic, aware of varying angles of vision and shifting vantage points. It involves an exceptional responsiveness to both light and motion. One can find striking proof of this in Hugo’s correspondence. He does not write interesting letters; he wrote letters while resting from his continuous periods of creative work on most days, on his feet in front of his writing stand from 5 a.m. to noon, with a cup of hot chocolate nearby. In letters, he cares more about making contact with others than about thinking of precisely what he has to say. But the one interesting letter in the first volume of his correspondence describes his first ride on a train, and his fascination with how the landscape blurs and flickers as he passes it at speeds far greater than he had ever experienced before. Compare the description of what Jean Valjean sees on his carriage ride to denounce himself at the court in Arras. Notre-Dame de Paris provides even better examples. Hugo anticipates Claude Monet’s famous series of paintings of the same subject when he evokes the changing light on the façade of the Cathedral of Notre Dame. Following this passage, he executes the verbal equivalent of a zoom-in shot to approach a balcony on which an engagement party has gathered. Earlier, the description circling Paris from the top of the cathedral towers (“A Bird’s-Eye View of Paris”) anticipates the cinematic technique of the traveling shot. At the beginning of the twentieth century, polls rated Hugo as the greatest nineteenth-century French poet, but his gifts as a storyteller in his plays and novels were fully acknowledged on an international scale only when Les Misérables was produced as the first full-length feature film in France in 1909; within a few years Albert Capellani of Pathé and André Antoine of Le Théâtre-Libre produced a noteworthy series of silent films of Hugo’s works: Les Misérables (1912), the play Marie Tudor (1912), and the novels Quatrevingt-treize (1914) and Les Travailleurs de la mer (1918). Lon Chaney’s celebrated performance as Quasimodo in W. Worsley’s film The Hunchback of Notre-Dame de Paris (1924) consolidated these triumphs. More recently, television versions of the plays Les Burgraves (1968) and Torquemada (1976) were triumphs. Today (November 2002), Alain Boublil and Claude-Michel Schoenberg’s stage version of Les Misérables (1980), inspired by the rock opera Jesus-Christ Superstar, is still running in New York and on tour in the United States. It eclipsed the record number of international productions of a musical, previously held by Cats (see Porter, Victor Hugo, pp. 152–156). “They fought hand to hand, foot to foot, with pistols, with sabers, with fists, from a distance, from up close, from above, below, everywhere at once, from the roofs of houses, from the windows of the tavern, from the basement windows of the cellars that some of them had slipped down into. It was one against sixty. The façade of Corinthé, half-demolished, was hideous to behold. The window, speckled with shot, had lost both glass and frame, and was just a shapeless hole, crazily stopped up with c “They fought hand to hand, foot to foot, with pistols, with sabers, with fists, from a distance, from up close, from above, below, everywhere at once, from the roofs of houses, from the windows of the tavern, from the basement windows of the cellars that some of them had slipped down into. It was one against sixty. The façade of Corinthé, half-demolished, was hideous to behold. The window, speckled with shot, had lost both glass and frame, and was just a shapeless hole, crazily stopped up with cobbles... [One man], run through with three thrusts of a bayonet to the chest just as he was lifting up to look up at the sky before he breathed his last...” - Victor Hugo, Les Misérables (translated by Julie Rose) I wanted a reading challenge. This was a reading challenge. At 1,376 pages, the Julie Rose-translated, unabridged version of Les Misérables is one of the longest single volumes I have ever read. More than sheer length, though, is that length’s composition. This is not an A-to-B type of story. This is A-to-Z, with stops along the way to ponderously scrutinize each and every other letter, describing its shape, its genealogy, and its place in the fabric of the universe. By the end, I was exhausted, hammered into submission by Victor Hugo’s unwillingness to use one word when an entire chapter will do. The conclusion, I recall, was absolutely beautiful, and yet, by the time I reached that endpoint, all my patience had long since disappeared (or perhaps it simply assumed a false identity and retreated to Montreuil-sur-Mer in northern France). Despite its prodigious size, summarizing Hugo’s famous novel is rather easy, given the fame of its derivative works. At the center of Les Misérables is Jean Valjean, imprisoned for nineteen years for stealing bread (and subsequently attempting to escape several times). Finally released, he soon realizes that society is not ready to accept him, despite paying for his crimes. He is hounded by the upright and sanctimonious bloodhound Inspector Javert. As he is chased, Jean Valjean comes into contact with Cosette, an orphan who he raises as his own. Eventually, Jean Valjean, Cosette, Inspector Javert, and a supporting cast of many dozens of others, find themselves on the cobbled streets of Paris during the June Rebellion of 1832. This story is told in inimitable fashion by an author of extraordinary talents. Say what you will about Hugo – and I shall – the man had unique abilities. First, he has an extraordinary way with characters. Most of the individuals in Les Misérables are a mile wide and an inch deep; that is, they tend to be either white-hats or black-hats (though in some cases, the black-hats undergo near-religious conversions). Nevertheless, he imbues even the most tangential characters with some memorable detail, with some humanizing aspect. One of my favorites was Monseigneur Bienvenu, the Bishop of Digne, a man who has only one small role to play in this tale, and yet is given a full-dress biography before disappearing offstage. Second, Hugo is a master of describing a particular place at a particular time. It is not long ago that the world held its breath, transfixed, as Notre-Dame de Paris threatened to crumble before our very eyes. That event sent people rushing to The Hunchback of Notre Dame, for the reason that Hugo’s rapt descriptions had helped save the cathedral in the first place. While Notre-Dame is only fleetingly referenced here, Hugo still delivers a lengthy love letter to Paris, solloquizing on the granular level, creating a written-word, street-by-street map. If you ever find yourself in a time machine heading to 1830s France, take this as a guide. Finally, Hugo knows how to create a set piece. Much of Les Misérables is given over to essays and exposition (Hugo will barely allow a character to take a step without delivering a history of the shoe). Sprinkled amidst these word-bogs, however, are some crackling scenes that Hugo carefully builds and skillfully executes. There is a sick chase, a fraught standoff, and a visceral street battle, all of which demonstrate why Les Misérables is so often adapted. Okay. So that was the good stuff. I wanted to get that out of the way so we could talk about the real issue. This book is too damn long. Les Misérables suffers from a near-fatal case of literary edema. It is swollen out of all proportion to its subject. I know what you’re going to say: “Abridgment. To which I reply: Gross. I don’t do abridgments. Abridging a book is like kissing an eager and willing cousin. It might be easy, but it ain’t right. When I read a novel, I want it to be on the original terms, as mediated by author and editor. As far as I know, this is the version that Hugo wanted; thus, this is the version on which I will judge him. (I cannot judge the translation, other than to say I liked it. There were a few clunky moments and some dialogue that seemed a bit anachronistic as it tried to convey a modern flavor. Overall, I often forgot this was a translation, which is a good thing). The style employed by Hugo is digressionary to the extreme. Remember when you were young, and it took your mom and dad forever to get to the point? Well, just thank your lucky stars that you weren’t raised by the French romantic poet, dramatist, and novelist Victor Hugo! Because I can guarantee that it would take him a week to explain why you shouldn’t be sneaking out of your room. The digressions in Les Misérables take many forms. Some are simply a function of overexplaining. For instance, as noted above, we did not need to know everything about the Bishop of Digne in order for him to perform his one crucial act. Similarly, the incidental meeting of two characters at the battle of Waterloo did not require an epic recapitulation of the famous clash. To the contrary, that intersection could have been effectuated in a sentence or – if we’re getting paid by the word – a paragraph. This overexplaining can be a bit taxing, but it is also ably handled and adds a sort of mythical overlay to the narrative. The other digressions, however, serve only to distract, to burden, to annoy. The essays are the worst. In contemporary times, perhaps, they might have served a purpose. Not any longer. There is, to take one example, a critique on monasticism. I will allow that when Hugo writes this, convents might have been a great danger to the world. Now, it fails to make the list of “One Trillion Things I’m Worried About.” At page 805, the reader is treated to Hugo going meta on us, as he delvers 20 pages about the use of slang in a novel. Again, this has no present-day relevance in a world in which realistic dialogue (utilizing slang, specific speech patterns, or terms of art) are the norm. Hugo’s digressions are inexcusably disruptive and antithetical to all notions of pacing and flow. He is like the speedbump on the Indy 500 track, the blind dogleg on the interstate. Every time Les Misérables gets some momentum going, Hugo yanks on the leash. It almost seems an intentional act, as though he is troubled by the thought of his novel being too entertaining. I can accept, as I noted above, the idea that an author might find it necessary to explain the history of a sewer system, before a character attempts to escape through it. What I cannot accept, though, is how this history is presaged by a disquisition on poop that manages to be simultaneously unneeded, gross, and a little racist. (Yes, there is really an essay on poop. (view spoiler)[I sh!t you not. (hide spoiler)]]) Classic novels tend to be challenging to read. It takes a certain amount of discipline and patience and maturity to appreciate them. There was a time, I will admit, that I opened certain books by the likes of Melville, Dickens, and Tolstoy, with a sneer already on my face, ready to puncture time-honored masterpieces with snark and sarcasm (though I stand by every unkind word I uttered about Moby Dick). I opened Les Misérables cognizant of its challenges, but truly (I believe) openminded as to its quality. It therefore came as a surprise when about halfway through (or a mere 688 pages), I started to dread this. It became my anti-white-whale, a thing that obsessed me but that I wanted to avoid. A good book can lift your spirits and brighten your day; a bad one does the opposite. Of course, I am old enough now to recognize the arrogance inherent in calling a timeless work like Les Misérables “bad.” (Though arrogance is something that Hugo had in spades. After all, he wrote an essay on poop water and convinced you it was genius). This recognition led to a bit of meditation, as I tried to separate what I liked from what I didn’t, what worked from what failed. I tried to divine an answer as to why this excessive and overlong monument to protracted verbosity has endured.Ultimately, I think it has to do with the fact that there is a lean, effective tale of bracing moral clarity within these pages. When we think of Les Misérables, even if we haven’t read it, we conjure images of broken systems, of justice that will break a man’s back, of city streets abounding with poor children; and we applaud the message of charity, kindness, and goodwill that Hugo preaches. Of course, when we think of Les Misérables, we also tend to forget that this simple and timeless message is nearly obscured by antimonarchical screeds and learned tracts on sewage.more