

BARNETT, MARVA A. *Victor Hugo on Things That Matter*. New Haven, CT: Yale UP, 2010. ISBN 978-0-300-12245-9. Pp. xv + 491. \$50.00.

Marva Barnett pulls off a neat trick: in grouping Hugo's writing across genres by themes with universal resonance and timeless appeal, it proves that what ought to matter to the modern reader is Victor Hugo. While many scholarly books on Hugo underscore his enduring appeal and the modernity of his thinking, this book, unencumbered by the weight of interpretation and geared toward a more general audience with a reading knowledge of French, succeeds strikingly in showing how and why Hugo still speaks to us today. And this without oversimplifying or ignoring the contradictions inherent in his work; on the contrary, Barnett's meticulously researched and carefully organized reader provides a nuanced picture of Hugo's life and body of work, and the philosophical and ideological concerns that render it rich and still captivating in the twenty-first century.

With a general introduction that also serves as a "how-to guide," the anthology invites its readers to enter into Hugo's *œuvre* both chronologically and thematically, separating on a structural level topics of import to Hugo into those related to private life and those related to public life. Introductions to each main part set up the thematic groupings that follow, while acknowledging the overlap between the two. Indeed, Barnett does not have to work hard to show that everything in Hugo's body of work is related. The strength here is how she artfully presents from the themes selected for each main section Hugo's multilayered and multi-genre engagement with life's biggest questions. "Private life" takes on, among other essential subjects, love and passion (chapter 1), death, grief, and tragedy (chapter 3), and God and religion (chapter 6); "Public life" contends with liberty and democracy (chapter 9), social justice (chapter 11), and humanity, progress, and peace (chapter 13), to name but half of its chapters.

The texts chosen for each chapter include excerpts from Hugo's novels, plays, and correspondence; poems, offered mainly in their entirety; selections from his travel logs and travel writing; speeches that Hugo drafted and delivered; general musings noted in his personal diaries; and—particularly effective here—reproductions from Hugo's graphic *œuvre*. There is a mix of well-known and lesser-known texts and ample biographical and literary contextualization. Footnotes give readers a clear path to follow if interested in pursuing the context or individual topics further, and the entire volume is bolstered by supplements designed to enhance the reader's experience in different ways depending on his or her interests: a historical timeline, suggestions for further reading in Hugo on the same topics, a critical bibliography.

The Victor Hugo who jumps off the pages here impresses us not just with his foresight—he did, after all, predict the formation of the European Union and plead for an end to the death penalty—but with his lucid understanding of what was and what remains at stake in the private and public spheres, thus closing gaps of time and space. *Victor Hugo on Things That Matter* should be, accordingly, recommended to all those interested in "things that matter": presumably (or optimistically), then, to everyone. This leads one to regret, at certain instances in perusing the volume, that the texts and quotations are not accompanied by translations so as to reach an even larger audience. That said, this type of project is refreshingly alive, and Barnett's fluid prose and clear passion for this undertaking additionally demonstrate the pleasure that can be derived for scholars from engaging with a public other than themselves.

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