

*Victor Hugo on Things that Matter: A Reader*. Edited by Marva A. Barnett. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009. xxvi + 492 pp., ill. Pb £30.00; \$50.00.

Marva Barnett opens this bountiful volume of Hugo's writings with his declaration from *L'Homme qui rit* that 'il n'y a de lecteur que le lecteur pensif. C'est à lui que je dédie mes oeuvres' (p. xv). Not only is this a pertinent reminder of Hugo's will to engage his reader, but it also sets the tone for Barnett's approach to the vast corpus of writing that is at our disposal today. Barnett reveals herself to be exactly the kind of reader that Hugo wanted to attract to his works. The result is both meticulously organized and compellingly informative, arranging extracts from well over thirty of Hugo's writings (as well as samples of his graphic work) according to key aspects of the poet's private and public life. Such ordering should not, however, be mistaken for rigidity or fullness. In keeping with Hugo's own worldview on the infinite nature of human experience and natural creation, Barnett is careful to stress the character of her portrait as representative rather than exhaustive. In turn, this volume stands as both a helpful composite of Hugo's oeuvre and an exciting introduction to what remains one of the modern age's most extensive bodies of literature. Indeed, Barnett structures the coherence that should appeal to aficionados and newcomers alike. Following a lucid biographical and cultural overview of the literary titan himself, Barnett offers thumbnail sketches of the works she draws upon, from the well-known sweep of *Les Misérables* to the less recognizable intimacy of *Choses vues*, as well as concise introductions to each extract as it appears. What becomes strikingly apparent across these pages is the timelessness of a poetic mind that was so attuned to its own age. Be it the privacy of a grief-stricken heart or the bombast of a political conscience, Hugo is revealed as remaining in dialogue with a century some two hundred years removed from his own. Inevitably with a reader of this kind, the selection of texts included here betrays its somewhat arbitrary evolution: obvious contenders for inclusion, such as 'Les Mages' in a section on the role of the poet, or the *Préface de Cromwell* in a section on the grotesque, are notably absent. However, Barnett closes her collection with a list of precisely those works that unmistakably relate to her thematic headings but do not appear. From there, a sound bibliography and even a list of websites to consult rounds off the kind of invitation for readers to go further that Hugo would have appreciated. Notwithstanding these welcome achievements, Barnett's objective to 'help twenty-first-century Anglophone readers to appreciate Hugo's talent' (p. xvi) is perhaps thwarted in the end. In the absence of English translations of the extracts on display, Hugo's oeuvre surely remains the dominion of the francophone reader. Consequently, not only does this volume remind us of a literary powerhouse, but it also surreptitiously reaffirms the need for sustained projects of translation in the future.

BRADLEY STEPHENS

UNIVERSITY OF BRISTOL

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