

REVIEW FROM

Dalhousie French Studies (no.86, Spring 2009), Reviews, p 161.

BY

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FOR:

**Chambers, John. *Victor Hugo's Conversations with the Spirit World. A Literary
Genius's Hidden Life. Rochester: Destiny Books, 2008. 372 p.***

It may be because our own time is so painfully lacking in true and undisputed literary geniuses that we tend to discount the possibility of them ever having existed, and rather consider them somewhat like mirages: magnificent and misleading images created by our own desires and imagination. Nowadays, it is certainly in that fashion that one may think of Victor Hugo, one of the most prolific and successful writers of the nineteenth century, novelist, poet, playwright, political activist and... prophet. Such personalities, and the works they produced, are often better taken in small doses. It is more or less manageable to talk of Hugo's novels, to discuss his plays, and even, although it represents a greater challenge, to delve in his poetic *opera omnia*. Hugo as a whole is quite a different matter, and some aspects of his work or of his life tend to go fairly unexamined. Some others, yet, are often discounted as being of minor importance: eccentric asides, quirky

peculiarities, somewhat ridiculous interests that can be forgiven on account of the vast and powerful works left by the author. John Chambers has devoted his book to just one such somewhat discreditable passion: Hugo's exploration of the spirit world.

It could be a surprise to some to learn that France, the land of rationality and *laïcité*, can also boast of a long tradition of occultist and mystical inquiry. From Mesmer and magnetism to the Decadents' passion for satanic imagery, a more or less uninterrupted line of thinkers and writers has delved into the relations between this world and other possible dimensions. In the second half of the nineteenth century, in particular, it did seem for a while that scientific thought and metaphysical investigation could find a common ground. Camille Flammarion elaborated on life on other planets and on the paths of wandering souls amongst the stars. Villiers de l'Isle-Adam likened the modern scientist to the magician of ancient tradition in his representation of Edison, the wizard of electricity. Before them, Hugo, in his exile on the Channel Islands during the dictatorship of Napoleon III, entertained long-running conversations with the likes of William Shakespeare, Molière, André Chénier, Giordano Bruno, Hannibal and Napoleon the first, not to mention Jesus Christ and various personifications and mythical creatures, such as Civilization, the Ocean, Tragedy, the Lion of Androcles, and The Lady in White. The transcripts of the séances to which the whole Hugo family participated together with various visitors, originally at the instigation of Delphine de Girardin, have never really been accepted in the Hugo canon. The French studies that have appeared on the subject have always tended to emphasize the influence of Charles Hugo, Victor's son, as the medium, and have more or less openly suggested that he controlled the spirits' messages, whether consciously or unconsciously. Chambers' work has the merit of making

available to an English-speaking audience, for the first time, some very evocative texts that deserve to be read, even only for their poetic value. It is also a highly readable account, well-organized and methodically presented, of an important period in the novelist's life, one that contributed greatly to the development of his legend. Chambers' writing is somewhat redolent of the style of some French popular biographers of the 1950s, such as André Maurois. This is not a criticism by any means. Quite the opposite, in fact: the novelistic way in which he presents a certain number of scenes – all conscientiously documented, one should add – makes for very pleasant reading and helps to better grasp the ambiance of the time. Readers who are not very familiar with Hugo or with French history will find this both useful and satisfying. Chambers manages to demonstrate quite convincingly that, far from being an unimportant pastime, the séances represented crucial moments in the construction of Hugo's vision of the universe and of his own role in History. He points out the important and significant similarities between the messages spelled out by the tapping table and the representations proposed in some of Hugo's most distinctive and important poems, in particular "Les contemplations". This is all truly most useful and well presented. Chambers, while himself a student of paranormal phenomena, refrains from imposing categorical conclusions as to the actual nature of the experiences he describes:

To what extent were the concepts and even the words of the Jersey Island spirits, when they echoed what Victor Hugo already knew about the *Zohar*, simply the poet's own thoughts, in some way telepathically conveyed through the tapping tables? To what extent were they an amalgam of Hugo's thoughts and those of, say, Pierre Leroux, or Charles Hugo, or Auguste Vacquerie, all of whom were

intelligent and learned and, if not already, then soon to be, authors of books themselves? To what extent were these concepts and words partially the thoughts of the séance attendees and partially the thoughts of something whose nature we do not understand? (133-4)

The answer is wisely left to the reader to arrive at, or at least to guess. Quite apart from any conclusion one may want to draw from the description of Hugo's experiences with the spirits, Chambers should be commended for a very honest and straight-forward piece of work: a well-researched and well-written book that is often more rewarding and thought-provoking than many supposedly more academic productions.

Wondering about the truth of the events he describes, the author proposes a reflection that warrants some consideration and that, in turn, we would like to offer as a losing statement to this review:

So what was Victor Hugo, then: ascended master or madman? If it's a sign of their ultimate sanity that visionaries faithfully, coherently, and effectively practice what they preach, without harming others, and indeed often helping others, then Victor Hugo was a sane man. (319)