

Paul de Saint-Victor says: "The flag of liberty in art was first planted by 'Hernani' on the breach of an assaulted citadel. What the 'Cid' was for the ancient stage, such was 'Hernani' for the new, at once a revolution and a renaissance. The mission of 'Hernani', in 1830, was to overturn the false classic tragedy that Corneille had reared in marble, and Campestron had imitated in plaster. 'Hernani' sounded his horn as Joshua blew his trumpet, and the three unities tottered to their fall. A long array of living personages, genuine flesh and blood, natural, with human passions, fanciful and lyrical, strange it might be, and picturesque in their attire, came trooping in from every epoch of history, to take the places where hitherto abstract kings had been accustomed to recount their abstract dreams. . . . The main design of this literary revolution was to annihilate the trashy repetitions of the old drama, and to stamp out commonplace conventionalities of comedy, where true eloquence was only aided by laborious rhetoric. The 'romantics' have been likened to barbarians; and they may do worse than accept the comparison. Wherever the horse of Attila set his hoof the grass would grow no more; so where Victor Hugo's drama has made good its footing, the miserable thistles and artificial flowers of the false classic style have never again been seen. The renaissance was magnificent, and requickered every form of language and thought."

Following Hernani at various times, he has produced *Ruy Blas*, *Marie Tudor*, *Le roi s'amuse* (known to English people under its adaptation, "The Fool's Revenge"), *Lucrèce Borgia*, *Angelo*, and others.

In 1831, at a time when he was endeavoring to regenerate the stage by renovating the style of the drama, he brought out "*Notre Dame de Paris*," a prose work which of it itself would suffice to immortalize its author's name.

I cannot here give an elaborate analysis of its plot. Suffice it to say: "As an archaeologist he has revived for us the monuments of ancient Paris; has ransacked the annals of the cathedral," of which the story bears the name, and has exhaustively treated the development and decay of architecture.

"To artistic enthusiasm he has joined the erudition of the historian and has brought to light the superstitions of the Parisians of the middle-ages, and has thrown life into the physiognomies of scholars, vagrants, alchemists, poets, merchants, magistrates, kings and bandits." Alfred de Musset acknowledged the work to be so colossal that he was unable to take in its scope. Sainte-Beuve, one of the most trenchant of critics, has for it nothing but the most pronounced praise; and Jules Janin delivers the most enthusiastic encomium upon it.

From a review, then, of the literary movements of the time, and with some knowledge of his sturdy, unyielding integrity, his impatience of pretense and his impulsive, sympathetic nature, one can readily understand that there must of necessity be found in his writings grave defects, for the plummet must, when released from the hand on one

side, swing to the opposite pole and continue to vibrate some time before attaining its equipoise, and in their enthusiasm for charge the romanticists would perforce be driven to extremes, which time alone would tame and modify into just proportions.

Before passing to his great merits, I will point out what seem clearly to be defects:—

1. Strange conceits and audacious figures.
2. Startling innovations and puzzling paradoxes.
3. Excessive invective and galling epithets.
4. Frequent obscurities.
5. Revelling in the terrible, the ludicrous, the voluptuous, the horrific.

6. Exaggeration of a single trait of character and making it a type.

7. Whimsical, fantastic and sarcastic humor.

"Napoléon le Petit" illustrates in its extreme form one of the defects of Hugo's style, viz., hyperbole. He there revels in exaggeration, piling Pelion upon Ossa; heaping up ridicule, sarcasm, invective, and almost destroying the effect by making it ridiculous with his Billingsgate turgidity. The style is unique, Hugoesque. To this charge Swinburne, however, protests by saying that such a man witnessing such events could not do otherwise, and that the ardor of one roused to just indignation is more trustworthy than scientific or æsthetic serenity.

The egotism of Hugo has been the subject of many an epigram, as for instance: "France is the centre of the world; Paris the centre of France, and Hugo the centre of Paris." Deficiency in the sense of humorous contrast and in perception of proportion has also been ascribed to his style.

But when all this has been said, there remains a sum total of literary excellencies, which suffices to place him on a level with the greatest in literature:

1. His richness of diction, his unique power over the French language and his endless fertility of rhetoric; so rich, varied and profuse is it, that it easily becomes extravagant—even his objectionable metaphors and other figures of speech are the result of his lavish outpouring of vocabulary, tropical in its luxuriance.

2. His invention of brief, comprehensive phrases, which linger in the mind like an exquisite verbal photograph.

3. His mastery of scenic effects and his generalship of character and incident.

4. His power to project himself into a given situation and, describing it, make it *live*.

5. His intense realism (not the vulgar, disgusting *naturalism* of such writers as Bayle, Zola, Cherbuliez and others, which is no part of the romantic school, but only "the scum on the surface of the stream").

6. Particularly in "*Notre Dame de Paris*," his Grecian perfection of structure, combined with his Gothic intensity of pathos.

7. His majestic symbolism.

8. His manly, lofty optimism.