



# The Later Novels of Victor Hugo: Variations on the Politics and Poetics of Transcendence

*Kathryn M. Grossman*

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This study places the last three novels of Victor Hugo's maturity - *Les Travailleurs de la mer* (1866), *L'Homme qui rit* (1869), and *Quatrevingt-Treize* (1874) - within the context of his artistic development after the success of *Les Misérables* (1862). By situating these historical narratives in relation to each other, to all of Hugo's previous fiction, and to a number of poetic and critical works published in exile and in the initial years of the Third Republic, it illuminates the final structural and thematic shifts from a poetics of harmony to one of transcendence. As in *Les Misérables*, the disharmony associated with social tumult, apocalyptic vision, and oxymoronic tensions provides an essential component of the later Hugo's Romantic sublime. Instead of merely capitalizing on the runaway success of *Les Misérables* by recycling its prominent features, however, each novel makes an original contribution to the political and aesthetic trajectory inscribed by the entire *oeuvre*. Each testifies as well to the wizardry of Hugo's own 'special effects' that contribute to his story-telling genius. Such effects, especially the dizzying spatial optics and manipulation of temporal dimensions, function not as mere playful gimmicks or novelistic flourishes but as strategies for figuring and communicating the ideal, both political and artistic. The unique interplay of poetic and historical discourse in each text reconfigures our disordered experience of the world into something far more coherent a construction of meaning that strives to change perceptions and to promote social action.

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