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VICTOR HUGO's CROMWELL

René Coulet du Gard

When on December 5, 1827 Cromwell was published by Ambroise Dupont, Victor Hugo knew that the play would encounter hostility and surprise among the "Classics." Victor Hugo had prepared a brilliant Preface, which represents the manifesto of the romantic theater.

Why is this Preface, which is part of all programs in the French lycées, colleges and universities so important? Already Chateaubriand and Stendhal had expressed some concern about the aging of the French literature, they wanted some new forms, the right and the desire to express historic realities, and to see in history the tool of literary renovation. In his Preface Hugo introduced the germ of the romantic revolution; the abolition of rigid rules of unity of time and place, respecting only the unity of action. Reality was to be the key of romantic theater, and the "mélange des genres" would give a feeling of truth.

Between 1825-1826 one sees signs of the fragility of the monarchic system of the Restoration. The confrontation of the people and the kings is imminent, and the political preoccupations invade every mind. The theme of Cromwell floats in the air: it offers the contemporary the possibility to think about the present history through a past event, which, renewing at the same time the memory of the French Revolution and the death of Louis XVI, Napoleon and the revolutionary succession and the Restoration, allows the writer to play on three levels at the same time. Many writers have written a Cromwell, and the character of this theme is to set on stage the confrontation, the tragic opposition of the king and of the regicide of Charles the First and of Cromwell.

But for Victor Hugo, his task is different: he chooses to set in full light the moment where Cromwell is forced, after the death of the king and the monarchy, to restore a new legitimacy. Thus the problem is not about the regicide and the revolution, but the one of the power which can succeed to a revolution. Then the question asked to Cromwell is not "Must I kill a king?" but "Will I be king, I, the regicide?" and then the natural unfolding of this question: "What form of sovereignty can I found?" Hugo sets himself in the historico-political paradox: "Here starts one of the most

significant portraits of the Protector's life, the one perhaps, which shows accurately the resources of his genius... one can imagine Cromwell destructor of the throne, succeeding in the reconciliation of the minds with the idea of the restoration of the monarchy with Cromwell as a King."

More than a new political option, what Hugo's Cromwell describes is a tragic situation. Thus Hugo's endeavour in the renovation of the drama is a total representation of the society; the task of the playwright is not only the scrupulous painting of the historical moment, but the study of the structures of the different human groups and of their conflicts.

Cromwell is for Victor Hugo an historical transposition.

Cromwell is at the same time the Lord Protector of England, and the Napoleon whose myth comes through Hugo's poetry. Naturally Cromwell represents altogether the Revolution, Napoleon and the wished man of genius that the Restoration never had. But above all, Cromwell ressembles Napoleon: like the latter he has both military and political talent; like him he humiliates the kings; like him he governs with infinite detail, witnessed by his mysterious star. He bears his crime like Napoleon's murder of the Duc d'Enghien, which on the Royalist's eyes is a major crime; like him he confiscates to his own profit a victorious revolution to establish a

legitimate dynasty of whom he would be the founder and the source...like him he knows how to keep the contact with the people and to perceive in the minimal reactions the evolution of temper of the people or of a class.

And so, in front of the historical emptiness of his contemporaries in front of these insecure quarelling pygmies, Hugo sets in front of them the stature of the giant, of the man of talent equal to the grandeur of his century.

If the drama is a "mirror of concentration" as Hugo says in his Preface, this concentration spins around the hero, who is the center of the play. If the events are true historically, everything is brought back toward Cromwell, to his action, to his talent. The play tends to a show of heroism of the main character; all the transcendental qualities are shown the public: his military victories, his diplomatic successes, his political triumph, the debasement of the Parliament, the crushing of the two conspiracies. His grandeur as well as his efficacy are the main themes of the play, and they are measured not only by his contempt against kings or bourgeois, nobles or members of Parliament, but to the epic magnification that Hugo gives to his character, thus: the seer, Manassé ben Israel discovers in the sky Cromwell's star, and when he encounters in the middle of the night the Lord Protector of England

disguised as a soldier, he falls on his knees recognizing the terrible hand, instrument of destiny, and he cries out: "Ah! this is the hand, big enough to carry the world."

However, if Hugo sets up a Cromwell larger than nature, it is not only for the good and success, but also in evil. As Napoleon's crime darkens his popularity, Cromwell's grandeur has its crime for ransom, which apparents him to Cain. For Hugo, Cain's crime is inextinguishable; the regicide, traditionally assimilated to parricide is in the play compared to the family murder. Lady Francis, favorite daughter of Cromwell curses at the regicides:

"Bannished be, all of them who resemble Cain." (III,v)
In front of him his alive conscience stands ignoring his crime: Francis, his daughter. Separated from her by his crime and his silence, he is by the same token separated from her eternally. This crime brings him remorse, but no regrets. "I had to strike a king." He has wielded "the axe of a people." He says conscience and acceptance of evil make of him another man: he is the one, great among all, who has voluntarily lost his first whiteness to be great by evil; he is the mortal archangel (thus Milton calls him) as well as Lucifer, Satan (other names which will be directed at him). Invectives and jokes bring constantly in the language, the comparison of Cromwell

to Satan. Elespuru, the jester, joins in his song (III,1)
Old Nick (the devil) and Old Noll (Olivier Cromwell):

Say,-who is devilisher,
Old Nick or Old Noll?
One knows who Satan prefers
Of the Snakes of which he is the father?

In Cromwell as well as in Napoleon, evil and greatness, one being the necessary counterpart of the other, coincide, and this assimilation of Cromwell or Napoleon to the angel of evil is not a romantic style effect: he is the destructor, the one who has thrown away the ancient world and the old system of values, the one who has carried fire and steel in the reassuring structure of the monarchy of divine right: the scaffold of Charles the First has not only taken a king's head, it has uncrowned monarchy of its sacred halo.

Destructive work, with a touch of satanism, be it, but necessary, of which Cromwell alone carries the criminal weight, but that never, in the play Hugo accepts to condemn.

Making a hero of Cromwell is correlative of the derision which sets inside of the personage. The grotesque uncrowns the great man, whose jesters define in such manner: "We are his jesters, but he is our fool." He fears his wife, as much as the needles of irony (he would forgive rather a plot against himself than a sarcasm); he is greedy and miserly, and shows

no scruples joining cynism to superstition, with a certain dose of hypocrisy.

But if individual weakness is an entire part of the character, if the grotesque integrates to the sublime, into Cromwell, it is hard to see in the only limitations of his nature the reason of his failure: these limitations are bound to those found in his action. Cromwell's superstition is the image of the resistance of the world against the creative action of genius; it is the acknowledgement by the hero of non-controlled forces, to which he has to submit himself; by its superstition the victorious hero bows his head in front of fatality, and the scene where Cromwell questions Manasse the astrologer is the center of the play (III, Ivii):

"If you want to be king, my son, your death is sure."
If failure is written in the plays plot and in the heart of the heroic character, it is because the world offers Cromwell a rebellious matter: to him, failure is the "others."

Weakness of men stops his action:

"Le présent lui tue l'avenir." Present kills the future, says Hugo, thus indicating the reasons of his fundamental failure.

The will of the genius is not enough to triumph of men.

Is there a mean of salvation for Cromwell?

"King stricken by fatality, revolted against the People and God, he can only succeed through reconciliation with the people and God, and become what is historically forbidden to him by history - at the same time: well-liked by the people and divine.

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