

## Laberge on Hugo (2014)

Hugo, Victor. *God and the End of Satan / Dieu and La Fin de Satan*. Trans. and ed. R. G. Skinner. Chicago: Swan Isle Press, 2014. Pp. 475. ISBN: 978-0-98332204-7

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This monumental, bilingual edition reconfirms Victor Hugo's status as one of the greatest poets in history. Nonetheless he left *God* (1–159) and *The End of Satan* (161–425), two separate, epic poems, unfinished, even though they are hundreds of pages long. In fact, most readers will not notice these posthumous works are incomplete as such, because they are eminently dense, consistent, and rigorous. Even the beautiful fragments reproduced in the supplements (138–59 and 416–25) do not seem like works in progress. The mature Victor Hugo wrote both works during his years in exile on the British Channel Islands; they are stylistically reminiscent of other masterworks such as *Les Contemplations* and *Les Châtiments*.

Not to be confused with Christian prayers or pious texts, these epic poems inspired mainly from the *Old Testament* are truly mystical writings by a visionary author who considered himself a doubtful believer without any specific religion or belief. If we consider as exceptions the excerpts published in previous collections, most of these splendid verses were unavailable in English; even in French, they remain hard-to-find. In this first edition accessible for English-speaking readers, one can read, side by side, thousands of magnificent lines of Victor Hugo's mystical poetry, with the French version appearing on the left and the English translation on the right side.

This bilingual edition allows the Anglophone reader fluent in both French and English to observe at a glance the stylistic operations and the nuanced transpositions made by the translator. Two examples will follow. In the first poem, titled *God*, some indirect passages are inverted and reorganized in the translation, perhaps to allow more fluidity, for example in these three verses: "Rappelant au Seigneur ce que l'homme lui doit, / Prêt à maudire, il met sur cette bouche un doigt. / Ce doigt mystérieux et doux, c'est la clémence" (100). In the English version, these verses are reformulated as such: "Ready to condemn to eternal punishment, reminding the / Lord that Man is indebted to him, God puts a finger to his lips; / And this mysterious and gentle finger is called Mercy" (101).

Other passages from the same poem titled *God* are inverted to adopt a more straightforward style, for example in these two verses: "Clémence, c'est le fond de Dieu. Dieu boit le fiel. / Dieu ne venge pas Dieu devant l'azur du ciel" (100). Translated into English, some repetitions (and alliterations) of the word "Dieu," appearing previously in each of these verses, are now avoided; the four occurrences of the word "Dieu" are reduced to only one: "The substance of God is Mercy. He drinks the gall, / And does not avenge Himself before the Azure of the sky" (101).

Apart from the genuine pleasure of reading the outstanding verses, this edition will be of interest to students in literature, translation, linguistics, religious studies, and scholars working on symbolism and mysticism. A very useful glossary explains the names, characters, places, and mythological terms included (427–53). The endnotes (about one hundred) are detailed and instructive, mostly referring to Victor Hugo's correspondence and monographs (455–70). Some rare photographs and a few sketches by Victor Hugo are included as well (see xxxvi, 33, 83, 160, 221, 307, and 391).

Stylistically unsurpassed, always deploying a rich vocabulary to question infinity and eternity, Victor Hugo is perhaps the only poet who could reach perfection so easily and so constantly, as proven in these poignant pages. This edition of Victor Hugo's *God and The End of Satan / Dieu et La Fin de Satan* from the Swan Isle Press should be part of all academic and public libraries.

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