

Alexander on Philippot (2017)

Philippot, Didier. *Victor Hugo et la vaste ouverture du possible: essai sur l'ontologie romantique*. Classiques Garnier, 2017, pp. ix+ 254, ISBN:978-2-406-06385-8

Abigail Ray Alexander, University of Southern Indiana

In *Victor Hugo et la vaste ouverture du possible*, Didier Philippot explores the exceptional ontological weight Hugo granted to the possible, the imaginary, the invisible, dreams, visions, simulacra, and chimeras. He analyses the vast array of manifestations of the possible in Hugo's prose and elucidates their ramifications for other domains of thought. Philippot argues that Hugo's notion of the possible occupies the space between the real and the non-real. Indeed, as the author shows, Hugolian characters and scenes often inhabit and occasionally even epitomize the kind of interstitial spaces that exist between the known and the unknown, waking and sleeping, life and death, and more: "Dans le siècle littéraire des foules, Hugo a inventé la foule des songes" (103). Recognizing this propensity allows Philippot to trace the contours of what he calls Hugo's "ontologie graduée ou graduelle, qui bat en brèche tous les dualismes (sujet/objet, réel/imaginaire) de la pensée par antinomies" (12).

A central question of this study concerns the ontological status of ephemeral, ethereal, and oneiric phenomena, the kind that seem to exist without *really* existing. Conversely, the work is also invested in things that emanate an air of unreality despite their obvious existence. The manifestation of such contradictory elements in Hugo's writing constitutes the primary subject of this study. Philippot stresses that Hugolian paradoxes are fundamentally rooted in a series of natural and divine analogues particularly useful for the Hugolian understanding of the connection between dreaming and creation: "Parce que Dieu exagère en tout, la vérité n'est autre que le possible, c'est-à-dire le paradoxe, l'incroyable mais vrai" (51). Philippot's examination of these analogues leads to a series of revelations that are as overwhelming as they are sublime. He finds that, in Hugo, Nature can dream. Since we are part of Nature, Nature can dream through us. It is Nature's dream that creates the possible and dreams it in us. Upon receiving this oneiric vision of the possible, we can then generate non-real chimeras. Nevertheless, from this perspective, God alone can finally vivify the non-real dreams of Nature and make what was previously merely possible into a reality. To illustrate these last two steps, Philippot summons the image of the *pieuvre*: "Les hommes n'ont pu faire que la Chimère; Dieu a fait la pieuvre" (111). Viewed from this angle, the notion that what is impossible for humanity is possible for God lays bare the paradoxical foundations underlying the very definition of the possible.

Philippot's work is divided into five chapters that examine the relationship between the possible and the following primary concepts: the conceivable (followed by an in-depth case study of Gilliat's "aquarium de la nuit"), being, non-being, and fiction. Unpacking Hugo's ontology of the possible throughout this work allows Philippot to present Hugolian rejoinders to a series of important debates from the history of philosophy. Hugo's thinking is put into conversation with Leibniz's possible worlds, Descartes's cogito, and Lucretius's simulacra, just to name a few. Philippot also offers a highly engaging meditation on the distinction between the Hugolian possible and Aristotle's notion of *vraisemblance* that lends further nuance to our understanding of paradoxes: "Ne l'intéresse [Hugo], en effet, que ce qui échappe à la régularité logique de l'enchaînement causal (le nécessaire) et que ce qui déborde l'attente de la *doxa* (le vraisemblable classique), que ce qui est, profondément, *paradoxal*" (51). In presenting these philosophical interactions, Philippot also strengthens our grasp of Hugo's own ardent resistance to a myriad of different "manifestations du nihilisme moderne" (123) including positivism, Cartesianism, and atheism. Careful analyses of Hugo's philosophical works (i.e. *William Shakespeare*, *La Mer et le Vent*, *Océan*, and *Philosophie*) lend support to Philippot's arguments; moreover, he also draws on Hugo's fiction, including a rarely-cited passage on nihilism from *Les Misérables*: "La négation de l'infini mène droit au nihilisme. [...] Il n'y a pas de néant. Zéro n'existe pas. Tout est quelque chose. Rien n'est rien" (125).

Les Misérables, *L'Homme qui rit*, and *Les Travailleurs de la mer* serve as the dominant sources for Philippot's exploration of Hugo's novels. His study of these works of fiction emphasizes how excess—"la principale qualité du réel" (51)—gives rise to both *le monstre* and *le prodige*. The omission of *Notre-Dame de Paris* from this study is somewhat surprising, particularly because the monstrous and miraculous inhabitants of that novel coincide with Philippot's concerns here. Nevertheless, Philippot's reading of selections from Hugo's fiction is at once delicate and thorough. The work is skillfully balanced by incorporating a selection of both well-known passages and others deserving of more scholarly attention. Philippot's interpretation of one oft-studied passage, the "aquarium de la nuit" portion from *Les Travailleurs de la mer*, is a particularly fascinating exploration of the philosophical context and consequences of some of Hugo's most striking lines.

In *Victor Hugo et la vaste ouverture du possible*, Philippot foregrounds the oneiric character of Hugo's works while also

illuminating the powerful, albeit often dormant, philosophical potential of his thinking. The critic's careful consideration of the possible in Hugo's works furnishes readers with a deeper understanding of how we think possibility and the possible. And yet, glimpsing these possibilities also prompts the appearance of the ultimate impossibility of fixing the possible within defined bounds. As Philippot reminds us at his work's conclusion, that is the final paradox inherent to thinking the possible: "Nulle ontologie possible du possible sans attention à ce qui, dans la notion, comme dans la réalité qu'elle recouvre, échappe à tout figement" (232).

Volume: 47.3–4

Year:

- 2019