

A Study of Victor Hugo



A review from *The Dial*, Vol. 6, 1886: Mr. Swinburne's critical method is so unlike the one most in vogue that it cannot be appreciated without a sort of mental readjustment on the part of most readers. The critical brotherhood at large finds its account so entirely in the searching out and triumphant parading of flaws in the work of an artist—the greater the artist the more minute the search and the louder the shout of triumph—that it is hardly apt to deal gently with a critic who, like Mr. Swinburne, believes that the noble pleasure of praising is the chief function of criticism, and invariably acts upon this belief. Mr. Swinburne's new volume is a study of Victor Hugo, which serves as an acceptable companion-piece to his *Study of Shakespeare*. It consists of his *Fortnightly Review* and *Nineteenth Century* articles, republished with some additions, these being mainly in the direction of quoted passages from the work of Hugo. Thus put together and suitably illustrated, the articles form a sort of running commentary upon the entire succession of Victor Hugo's works. As a handbook for those who may desire to acquaint themselves with the great poet of the century, it will be found especially valuable. No other English writer speaks of Victor Hugo with the authority of Mr. Swinburne, and the fervor of his praise does not prevent him from being acutely and subtly discriminative. The one who thus takes up the work of a great and voluminous writer, and tells where its chief beauties are to be sought for, performs a task of much service to many readers. Mr. Swinburne has faithfully fulfilled his apostolic function in this as in many other ways, and it is largely owing to his efforts in and out of season that English people are coming to see, what the rest of the world has seen and admitted for years, that the central figure of the age now drawing to its close is that of the great Frenchman whose death a year ago made

the earth seem somehow less fair than it had been. Against the final record of this judgment many will doubtless still protest; those critics who cannot scan a line of French verse will be especially vehement, and those others who assert that poetry of the highest order cannot be written in the French language; but the entry will none the less be made, just as similar entries have been made concerning Goethe and Shakespeare and Dante. Mr. Swinburnes style is not at its best in this study. It is more than usually involved and obscure, although still a marvellous word-fabric which would defy all attempts at imitation. The number of misprints in the American edition of the work (published by Worthington Co.) is quite inexcusable. N.B.: The volume for sale here is from the original Chatto & Windus publication, not Worthington Co. edition.

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