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“I Should Like to Say a Word or Two About Your Empire”¹:

Victor Hugo le Grand, Napoléon III le Petit, and the Historiographical Battlefield of the French
Second Empire

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PSU Honors History of Modern Europe, Block 2

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¹ Said by Victor Hugo at the National Assembly in 1851. Quoted in D’Ambès, Baron, *Intimate Memoirs of Napoleon III: Personal Reminiscences of the Man and the Emperor*, ed. and trans. A. R. Allinson (London: Stanley Paul & Co., 1912), 259.

The lapping of waves, the soft calls of seabirds, and the cool breeze buffeting patches of wildflowers are sounds typically uncommon to the battlefield. Yet it was indeed a vicious war Victor Hugo waged from his home on Guernsey Island. Although he fought with a pen rather than a sword, and although he attacked while thousands of miles away from his opponent, the acclaimed author managed to mount a mighty assault on the man he believed to be the antithesis of liberty, equality, and justice: Napoléon III. This lesser-known nephew of the infamous Napoléon I, initially known as Louis-Napoléon, had made himself emperor, established the French Second Empire, and exiled his political opponents just four years before in 1851. In those four years, Hugo moved his family three times (from Paris to Brussels, from Brussels to the island of Jersey, and from Jersey to Guernsey), fleeing Napoléon's overseas reach, but he also managed to publish the first of several written attacks on the Second Empire: the nonfiction pamphlet *Napoléon le Petit* and its verse equivalent, *Les Châtiments*.² In these works, along with his later works *Les Misérables* and *Histoire d'un Crime*, Hugo spun a narrative of betrayal, injustice, and righteous fury about the new Emperor, as well as a vision of an ideal future republic.³ What would be Napoléon III's counterattack? Despite making concentrated efforts to censor Hugo's work and prevent it from reaching his country, and despite using propaganda to improve his image with the working class, the Emperor never offered a specific response to Hugo's claims. Unfortunately for him, propaganda and censorship were subjects ripe for critique by Hugo and the movement of republican opposition, made up of historians such as Eugène Ténot and Pierre de La Gorce, that would later be responsible for recording his legacy. Hugo succeeded in putting forth his narrative of opposition and ensuring it would become a definitive

² "Napoleon the Little," "The Punishments."

³ "The Misérables," "History of a Crime."

historical portrait of the Emperor and his Empire; Napoléon's efforts to repress Hugo's narrative only provided the popular and talented storyteller with more evidence to support his tales, and the emperor's attempts to influence his image with the public did not influence his depiction in historical memory.

The decades leading up to the Second Empire, beginning with the French Revolution and the subsequent Reign of Terror, saw numerous political upheavals centered on the struggle to find a working system of government. The French Revolution began in 1789, led by the radical Maximilien Robespierre; in 1792, it overthrew and beheaded Louis XVI, a member of the House of Bourbon which had ruled France since 1598. Following this Reign of Terror, Napoléon Bonaparte took control of the country through a coup d'état in 1799 after gaining influence in the government of the Directory from 1785 to 1789.⁴ Napoléon achieved a great number of military victories and greatly expanded the country during his reign. He also cultivated his public image through propaganda, contributing to the creation of the Napoleonic legend; writers such as Emmanuel de Las Cases nourished this legend by painting the ruler as a heroic martyr in their work, and this portrayal of the emperor would endure until the Second Empire and beyond.⁵ He abdicated at the end of his Campaign of France upon the insistence of his European allies during the war, returned for his "One Hundred Days" as ruler for a second time, then abdicated again in 1815 and left for his exile on the island of St. Helena. At that point, the Bourbon monarchy was restored, and Louis XVIII returned to power. The throne passed to his younger brother Charles X when he died in 1824. In 1830, after Charles X instituted increasingly repressive measures including censoring the press and reducing the electorate, the people united in "Three Glorious

⁴ *Historical Dictionary of Napoleonic France, 1799-1815*, eds. Owen Connelly, Janice Seaman Berbin, Harold T. Parker, and Peter W. Becker (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1985), 471.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 298.

Days” of revolution against him, but before a new Republic could be established, Louis-Philippe d’Orléans (a member of a “cadet branch” of the Bourbon dynasty) was asked to become a constitutional monarch.⁶ Thus began the July Monarchy, which lasted for eighteen years, as well as the growing conflict between Legitimists (supporters of the old monarchy), Orléanists (supporters of the new ruler), Bonapartists (supporters of Napoléon I), and republicans (supporters of a republican form of government run by an elected leader rather than a monarch). The people overthrew Louis-Philippe in the February Revolution of 1848 after he too imposed censorship and repressed political opponents, instituting the Second Republic.⁷ For the first time, the people had the opportunity to elect a new ruler. However, in order to exercise their new power, they had to answer important questions about what they wanted from their government: did they believe another potential Napoléon Bonaparte, the presidential candidate Louis-Napoléon, would lead their country to prosperity and security, and did they trust him to lead as president of a republic rather than emperor of a dictatorship?

Although not old enough to experience the French Revolution for himself, Victor Hugo was an “intellectually precocious thirteen-year-old” when the First Empire fell and the Bourbon monarchy was restored.⁸ Born in 1802, he rose to fame as a young literary prodigy, winning prizes and royal patronage for his poetry, and became a leading member of the group of artists and writers who dubbed themselves the Romantics.⁹ By 1848, he had become a major player in the world of Parisian theater, published the wildly successful *Notre Dame de Paris*, been elected to the Académie française, and been appointed to the Upper Chamber of French Parliament,

⁶ David Bellos, *The Novel of the Century: The Extraordinary Adventure of Les Misérables* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2017), 38-39.

⁷ Bellos, 42.

⁸ Bellos, 3.

⁹ Bellos, 4.

making him both an “immortal” and a “lord of the realm.”¹⁰ Once the Upper Chamber was abolished by the provisional government following the February Revolution of 1848, he was elected as representative to the new National Assembly as a moderate republican.^{11,12} However, despite believing in principles such as abolition of the death penalty and universal male suffrage, republican ideals he believed would help the common people, as well as expressing horror at the National Guard for murdering prostitutes on the barricades in June 1848, Hugo did not fight for these ideals or the common people during the chaos of June 1848.¹³ Rather, he fought on the barricades against the revolting workers for three days straight as an impromptu military commander. Biographer Graham Robb paints his subsequent embrace of the political left as him “spott[ing] the solution to his moral discomfort” at his actions during the rebellion.¹⁴ From then on, Hugo “rematerialized on the other side of the barricades,” attacking those who would “insult civilization by defending it with barbaric means” and increasingly intertwining himself with socialism.¹⁵ Yet there was one significant exception to this trend -- his support for Louis-Napoléon's presidential campaign. Napoléon's beliefs as expressed through his earlier writings did tend toward socialism, but he also appealed to his uncle's image of a strong and benevolent leader, especially in *Des Idées Napoléoniennes*.¹⁶ Hugo “allowed himself to share these false hopes” of order and security for his country, and endorsed the candidate through his family newspaper *L'Événement* after the future president thanked him in person for his role in

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Graham Robb, *Victor Hugo* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1998), 267.

¹² *Historical Dictionary of the French Second Empire, 1852-1870*, ed. William E. Echard (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1985), 293.

¹³ Bellos, 46-47.

¹⁴ Robb, 284.

¹⁵ Robb, 285, 288.

¹⁶ Stuart L. Campbell, *The Second Empire Revisited: A Study in French Historiography* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1978), 3.

ending the Bonaparte's exile.¹⁷ Just as he concealed his role in the events of June 1848, so did he conceal his role in the presidential campaign of the man who would later become his greatest enemy.

According to his nemesis, Louis-Napoléon Bonaparte was “a man of middle height, cold, pale, slow in his movements, having the air of a person not quite awake.”¹⁸ Although intended critically, this description rang true with those of people close to the Emperor, who agreed that his appearance was average and his thoughts nearly impossible to ascertain.¹⁹ As a member of the Bonaparte family, he grew up in exile in southern Germany and Switzerland starting in 1815.²⁰ By the time he returned to France to run for President in 1848, he already had two failed coups d'état under his belt -- one in Strasbourg, the other in Boulogne, both against Louis-Philippe, and both ending in exile or imprisonment.²¹ He had also published three pamphlets -- *Réveries Politiques* (1832), *Des Idées Napoléoniennes* (1839), and *L'Extinction du Paupérisme* (1844) -- detailing his criticism of oligarchic Orléanist as well as his liberal Bonapartist beliefs.²² In all three, he espouses democracy and the inevitability of progress; in the latter, he hones in on French economic inequality, proposes state intervention as the solution to working-class unemployment, and aligns these beliefs and solutions with the political philosophy of Bonapartism.^{23,24} According to historian Stuart L. Campbell, every major project of the

¹⁷ Hugo believed that allowing the Bonaparte family to return from exile would prevent them from becoming martyrs. Robb acknowledges doubts that this meeting took place, as it is recounted only in Hugo's *Histoire d'un Crime*, where Napoléon speaks “pure Hugonic.” Robb, 282.

¹⁸ Victor Hugo, *Napoléon le Petit*, trans. George Burnham Ives (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1909).

¹⁹ Fenton S. Bresler, *Napoleon III: A Life* (New York: Carroll & Graf, 1999), xvii-xviii.

²⁰ Born in 1808, he was seven years old when his exile started. *Ibid.*

²¹ Robb, 281.

²² “Political Reflections,” “Napoleonic Ideas,” “The Extinction of Poverty.” Campbell, 2.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ David I. Kulstein, *Napoleon III and the Working Class: a Study of Government Propaganda under the Second Empire* (Sacramento: California State Colleges, 1969), 28.

Emperor during his reign had its ideological origins in those pamphlets. So did his speeches to the National Assembly before and during his bid for presidency: in one, he stated, “It is to the Republic that I give this pledge of my gratitude and devotion . . . I shall do all I can to justify [my fellow countrymen’s] confidence by working with you for the preservation of tranquility, for that is the primary need of the country -- and for the development of those democratic institutions which the people rightly demands.”²⁵ The future Emperor made good on his written promises by framing his goals for the country -- “the preservation of tranquility” -- through the lens of protecting the democratic system and honoring the power of the people. Napoléon ended up winning the election against General Cavaignac (who had led the Second Republic since taking down the June Rebellion) in a landslide, garnering 74% of the vote.²⁶ The people of France had put another Napoléon into power.

They soon found that this Napoléon was quick to follow in his uncle’s footsteps. Over his four years as President, Louis-Napoléon’s rule became increasingly imperial: he began portraying himself as a spokesman of God, demanded increasingly large amounts of money from the Assembly, dismissed his Prime Minister Odilon Barrot so he could rule directly, censored the press with the aim of reducing the number of democratic-socialist newspapers, and gave his government the right to ban “dangerous” meetings.^{27,28,29} In opposition, the National Assembly that had changed the Constitution to limit the President to one four-year term in 1848 changed it again in 1850 to remove the poorest voters from the electorate, excluding many of his supporters

²⁵ Louis-Napoléon Bonaparte, “Oath as Deputy to National Assembly in 1848,” quoted in Bresler, 220. My title.

²⁶ Roger Price, *The French Second Empire: an Anatomy of Political Power* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 18.

²⁷ Bresler, 230.

²⁸ Price, 22.

²⁹ Robb, 289.

from future elections.^{30,31} However, the power that Napoléon had taken already was not enough -- he wanted to rule beyond his term limit.

After meeting with his advisors, he decided to ask the Assembly for a constitutional amendment allowing him to extend his term, resolving to perform another coup d'état with the support of the military if it was rejected.³² Sure enough, the Assembly voted to reject his proposal after a heated debate dominated by Victor Hugo.³³ Napoléon and his advisors thus began planning the takeover, setting the date for the second of December -- the anniversary of Napoléon I's coronation and his victory at Austerlitz.³⁴ When the day of the coup arrived, Napoléon distributed three proclamations to the people of Paris in the early morning.³⁵ He began the first one with a condemnation of the National Assembly: "Instead of making laws in the general interest, it is forging arms for civil war; it threatens the power I hold directly from the people; it encourages every evil passion; it compromises the security of France: I have dissolved it and call on the people to judge between it and myself."³⁶ Later in the appeal, he outlines a proposed constitution based on that of the First Empire under Napoléon I, stating that it "provided France with security and prosperity," and ends the proclamation with a mandate: "Ensure that France and Europe will be preserved from anarchy."³⁷ He thereby informed the public of the plebiscite that would be taking place to determine his validity as ruler while simultaneously appealing to the sense of order the people associated with his uncle, a move that

³⁰ Bresler, 220.

³¹ Price, 20.

³² Bresler, 232.

³³ Bresler, 234.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Bresler, 239-240.

³⁶ Louis-Napoléon Bonaparte, "Presidential appeal to the people, 2 December 1851," in *Documents on the Second French Empire, 1852-1870*, ed. Roger Price (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 8.

³⁷ Bonaparte, 9.

would be later reflected in his decision to take his uncle's name when he became emperor. There was almost no resistance to the coup on the first day, and the working class did not respond when Hugo and other members of the former Assembly tried to incite rebellion on December 3rd.³⁸ As Napoléon biographer Fenton Bresler put it, “Why should they be so opposed to a President, one of whose first actions had been to arrest and throw into prison the hated General Cavaignac who had slaughtered, imprisoned and sent into exile so many thousands of their comrades in the ‘Red Days of June’ only three years before?”³⁹ Indeed, support from the working class would constitute most of Napoléon's electoral strength in the years to come.⁴⁰ Only on December 4th did Napoléon resort to military action. Thirty thousand troops crushed all remaining opposition in six hours, and in the following days, Napoléon allowed his ministers of interior and war to arrest twenty-seven thousand potential supporters of insurrections in the country districts on suspicion alone.⁴¹ On December 31st, 1851, the people of France voted to allow their President to stay in power; on January 24th, 1852, Louis-Napoléon declared a new Constitution that gave him the sole power to declare war and initiate laws.⁴² The Second Empire had begun.

Opposition to it, however, had begun some time before with the imperialization of Napoléon’s presidency, coming to a climax in the 1851 National Assembly meeting where he made his request for a constitutional amendment. A one hour speech by Victor Hugo was stretched into four hours by interruptions and heated debate, and culminated in a statement that would constitute the first blow of an epic war of words between him and the Emperor: “Just

³⁸ Price, 28.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Price, 18. This assertion will be expanded upon later in the paper.

⁴¹ Bresler, 243-244.

⁴² Bresler, 246-247.

because we had Napoléon le Grand, do we have to have Napoléon le Petit?"⁴³ By basing his critique on the very associations with Napoléon's uncle that Napoléon had used to appeal to the people, Hugo turned Napoléon's primary rhetorical strategy against him. During the coup, Hugo responded to Napoléon's decrees with one of his own, entitled "Au Peuple" and proclaiming "Louis-Napoléon is a traitor! He has violated the Constitution! ... The republican representatives will lead [the people]. To arms! *Vive la République!*"⁴⁴ These opposing decrees, one an appeal to order printed by official governmental presses for workers all over the city to see on bill-posters, the other a call to arms printed by secret presses and immediately torn down by soldiers, capture the essence of the literary battle between these two men: both appealed to the people of France from their ideological standpoint, but only one mentioned the other by name.^{45,46} By now, Napoléon had dissolved the Assembly and begun arresting its members.⁴⁷ Starting on the 5th of December, members of the former Assembly began to leave in disguise; Hugo departed for Brussels on the 10th of December.^{48,49} A few days later the Emperor declared him and other republicans *proscrits*, to be banished from France until he allowed them back.⁵⁰

The military conflict had ended, but the literary one had just begun. Victor Hugo's first task from his exile in Brussels was to transform his stinging verbal blow at the Assembly into a full-scale attack. This came in the form of *Napoléon le Petit*, a scathing political polemic full of bitter rhetoric detailing the Emperor's betrayal of his country from the perspective of Hugo as an

⁴³ Victor Hugo, "Speech to National Assembly, 1851," quoted in Robb, 290. My title.

⁴⁴ "To the People." "Long live the Republic." Victor Hugo, "Au Peuple," quoted in Robb, 298.

⁴⁵ Bresler, 238.

⁴⁶ Robb, 298.

⁴⁷ Robb, 300.

⁴⁸ Robb, 303.

⁴⁹ Bellos, 53.

⁵⁰ "Exiles." Bellos, 53.

historical witness. Its first section, entitled “December 20, 1848,” begins with a description of Napoléon taking the oath of office after his presidential election, followed by an illustration of the myriad ways in which he broke it on the 2nd of December in 1851.⁵¹ Hugo follows this with a “Biography” of the Emperor, and in the rest of the book, puts forth descriptions of the election and the coup d’état, supporting his accounts with the information he gathered from almost two hundred eyewitness accounts of the coup.⁵² However, Victor Hugo does not stop at “the physical side of the question,” as the “moral side” is “the true side, the important side of this question of the 2nd of December.” In fact, in his description of the book about the 2nd of December he plans to publish later (*Histoire d'un Crime*, which he published in 1877), Hugo recognizes “the exalted responsibility of the historian” and equates his moral accusations with his historical accounts: “Woe to him who should remain impartial in face of the bleeding wounds of liberty! ... The indignant man does not lie.” Hugo thus proclaims not only that *his* indignation is factual, but that *anyone* who opposes the Emperor on moral grounds is completely credible (especially if they are accused of being partial), thereby lending the strength of his beliefs, his rhetoric, and his self-established credibility as an historian to the entire movement of republican opposition.

Now came the time for Napoléon to make his first counterattack. In December 1851 and February 1852, he issued decrees requiring newspapers to obtain official approval before being established, changing ownership, or publishing an issue, ensuring that the government could control all information distributed to the people through the press.⁵³ Napoléon also created a climate of political repression by doubling down on theater censorship, including banning

⁵¹ Hugo, *Napoléon le Petit*.

⁵² William VanderWolk, *Victor Hugo in Exile: From Historical Representations to Utopian Vistas* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2006), 71.

⁵³ Price, 171.

Hugo's plays.⁵⁴ He then turned his efforts to silencing Hugo directly, pressuring the Belgian government to pass a law punishing "whoever is guilty of any offense toward foreign sovereign monarchs or anyone attacking their authority" -- in other words, a law preventing them from harboring political exiles.⁵⁵ One year from his coup d'état, the law passed, and Hugo was forced to leave Brussels for a new place of exile on Jersey Island. Napoléon's government also sought to prevent copies of *Napoléon le Petit* and other "subversive" literature from entering the country by seizing copies from people and putting their names onto a list of individuals suspected to have ties to French exiles.⁵⁶ No official propaganda or decrees were issued in specific response to *Napoléon le Petit* or the other smuggled literature; Napoléon relied on suppression alone to silence Hugo's message.

Yet a significant number of people still read *Napoléon le Petit*. Napoléon's efforts at repression did not stop copies of the book from entering the country in sardine tins, hay bales, shoes with false bottoms, balloons, and even plaster busts of Napoléon himself.⁵⁷ By 1852, there were 38,500 copies in France.⁵⁸ Despite their illegality, secret republican societies continued to meet in social gathering spaces such as cafés, where they often discussed and distributed Hugo's work.^{59,60} Napoléon's censorship of *Napoléon le Petit* had failed in "the physical sense," but it had also failed in the moral -- from now on, Hugo attacked the moral implications of such political repression in all his works pertaining to the Empire.

⁵⁴ Robert Justin Goldstein, "Fighting French Censorship, 1815-1881." *The French Review* 71, no. 5 (1998): 787-788.

⁵⁵ Gabrielle Chamarat, Preface to *Les Châtiments* (Paris: Pocket, 1998), 6-7, quoted in VanderWolk, 221.

⁵⁶ Price, 327.

⁵⁷ Robb, 321-322.

⁵⁸ Also in circulation were translations in German, Italian, and Spanish. The book (and Hugo) were widely popular in London, making appearances on sandwich boards and railway carriages. Robb, 320-321.

⁵⁹ Price, 330.

⁶⁰ Robb, 320.

Hugo's next attack was *Les Châtiments*, a collection of ninety-seven poems published secretly in Brussels in 1853 then republished in France in 1870.⁶¹ It is a deeper exploration of the implications of Napoléon's actions, combining lyric poetry with satirical headings mocking the Second Empire's rhetoric (such as "Society has been Saved" and "Stability is Assured").^{62,63} However, unlike its predecessor, it encourages the people of France to look forward toward a better future, led by "virtue," "courage," and "faith."⁶⁴ The first poem is entitled "Nox" and condemns the Emperor for his corruption and evilness, contrasting him with the ideals of progress and glory symbolized by the French Revolution and Napoléon I; the last is entitled "Lux" and presents a "radiant future" where "progress ... makes happiness out of our pain."⁶⁵ Hugo thus set Napoléon III against the positive ideals of republicanism and progress in a literary fashion. He could not have done so in such an effective manner without providing his own account of the historical facts that signified those ideals in *Napoléon le Petit*, which lent historical credibility to his literary accusation.

Hugo continued the work of equating the facts of history with his interpretation of it throughout and after the Second Empire, revealing another major limitation of Napoléon's primary tactic of censorship and repression: it could not prevent Hugo from republishing *Les Châtiments* in 1870 after the Second Empire had fallen, reaffirming his claim that the Second Empire was morally corrupt, or from publishing *Histoire d'un Crime* for the first time in 1877 with the byline "The Testimony of an Eyewitness," which provided a detailed and "factual"

⁶¹ Robb, 326.

⁶² VanderWolk, 118.

⁶³ Robb, 320.

⁶⁴ Victor Hugo, *Les Châtiments*, trans. William VanderWolk, (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2006), quoted in VanderWolk, 142.

⁶⁵ Hugo, *Les Châtiments*, quoted in VanderWolk, 124, 148.

account of the coup d'état reaffirming many of the same claims to Hugo's historical authority and Napoléon's corruption that Hugo had made in *Napoléon le Petit*.⁶⁶ Hugo actually went beyond restating his previous claims in *Histoire d'un Crime* to apply them to new events, proclaiming that Napoléon's defeat by the Prussian army in 1870 was a result of his ineptitude as a leader.⁶⁷ Hugo's argument now encompassed not only the assertion that Napoléon's coup proved that he was corrupt but that the depravity exemplified by this one action could be extended to his every action as a leader, setting the stage for later republican writers to use a wide range of Napoléon's actions to affirm their claims.

Censorship also failed to stop Hugo from continuing the process of equating history with his beliefs through his novel *Les Misérables* (published in 1865) -- the novel was a work of fiction, whose events took place during the 1810s through the 1830s rather than the time when it was written. This allowed Hugo to disguise his criticism of Napoléon as commentary on past historical events, allowing it to seem like a universally inherent fact that could be seen throughout all of French history. One example of such commentary is when Hugo discusses Louis-Philippe's ascension to the throne. Hugo stresses that Louis-Philippe "had not given himself this command [of the country]; he had not taken it; it had been offered to him and he had accepted it, convinced -- wrongly in our opinion, but convinced -- that the offer was consistent with right and that the acceptance was consistent with duty. Hence a possession in good faith."⁶⁸ The circumstances of Napoléon III's rise to power were still recent and present in the minds of Hugo's audience (the people of France), making obvious the disparity between Louis-Philippe's

⁶⁶ Hugo, *Histoire d'un Crime*.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Victor Hugo, *Les Misérables*, trans. Lee Fahnestock and Norman MacAfee (New York: New American Library, 1987), 837.

“possession in good faith” and Napoléon’s forceful coup d’état.⁶⁹ Hugo also imbued the novel with his own ideas about revolution and progress, from describing how Bishop Myriel’s encounter with a former member of the French Revolution showed him the positive aspects of social change to stating his personal beliefs outright (“Progress is the goal, the ideal is the model. What is the ideal? It is God”), just as Hugo did in *Les Châtiments*.⁷⁰ The novel was successful in its time and to this day. In his book *The Novel of the Century: The Extraordinary Adventure of Les Misérables*, a story of the book’s creation and a discussion of its enduring influence as one of the most adapted books of all time, scholar David Bellos asserts that although *Les Misérables* was not well received by critics during its time, it was almost immediately beloved by the common people -- the first two volumes (“Fantine”) sold out completely in their international release (the first truly international release ever, complete with the first ever billboard ad campaign created by Hugo’s wife Adele) in two days, before the rest of the book was even copy edited.⁷¹ Although the first stage adaptation of the novel (by Hugo’s son Charles) was not successful, other stage adaptations appeared across the world within weeks of the book’s release, and *Les Misérables* has since become one of the most frequently adapted novels of all time. This far-reaching success, both in its time and to this day, disseminated Hugo’s implicit criticism all throughout the world -- all without a direct response from the person it most harmed.

However, despite Napoléon’s failure to counter Hugo’s narrative with one of his own, he was not inept at the task of shaping public opinion -- he merely directed his efforts more toward

⁶⁹ Angelo Metzidakis, “On Rereading French History in Hugo's *Les Misérables*.” *The French Review* 67, no. 2 (1993): 189.

⁷⁰ Bishop Myriel is the kindly bishop who first shows mercy to Jean Valjean, the main character of *Les Misérables*. He is generally portrayed as more liberal than his peers, but like most of the other characters, reviled anyone associated with the French Revolution before this encounter. Hugo, *Les Misérables*, 520.

⁷¹ Bellos, 224-225, 228, 230, 248.

the working class than toward his exiled opponent. Throughout his reign, his government utilized such tools as newspapers, pamphlets, speeches, posters, and songs to affirm his dedication to the republic, his goodwill toward the people, and to attain electoral victories for his party.⁷² He repressed opposition newspapers by creating a system of “warnings” to encourage self censorship, but he also actively used newspapers to advance his ideas -- for example, he repurposed a newspaper called *Le Moniteur Universel* to spread news favorable to the government, populating its staff with great writers and printing news unavailable to other papers.⁷³ Aside from cultivating newspapers, Napoléon hired talented writers such as Amédée de Césna and Granier de Cassagnac to craft well-worded and compelling pamphlets.⁷⁴ Napoléon had actually been working to improve his image with the working class since 1844 with his pamphlet *L'Extinction du Paupérisme*; he had made efforts to distribute it to prominent individuals in working class neighborhoods soon after its publication, and he distributed it further during his presidential campaign.⁷⁵ Throughout his reign, Napoléon continued to direct much of his propaganda toward the working class through newspapers such as *Le Moniteur*, placards with quotations from his three pre-regime pamphlets, other pamphlets detailing his plans to help the working class, and by visiting different parts of France to create the appearance of learning more about workers’ issues (through descriptions of his visits in newspapers) and win their loyalty (by giving them gifts upon leaving).⁷⁶ However, his propaganda was not only abundant but savvy. In the 1860s, election results and official reports made it clear that the

⁷² Natalie Isser, *The Second Empire and the Press: A Study of Government-Inspired Brochures on French Foreign Policy in Their Propaganda Milieu* (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1974), 10-12.

⁷³ “Universal Monitor.” Isser, 19.

⁷⁴ Isser, 25.

⁷⁵ Kulstein, 29, 30, 35.

⁷⁶ Kulstein, 67, 70-71, 75, 78, 84.

working class still believed in the idea of a republic; in response, Napoléon's government made its propaganda message more sophisticated, enacting such measures as creating newspapers and a series of pamphlets that promised reforms for the workers while praising the Empire, endorsing propaganda messages by a prominent journalist named Armand Lévy that encouraged workers to ally with the Empire, and organizing a Bonapartist workers' movement called the Palais Royal group.⁷⁷ Most importantly, Napoléon did not mindlessly suppress all opposition -- rather, he strove to create the impression of a politically diverse press by cultivating the existence of moderate opposition newspapers.⁷⁸ *Le Siècle*, a moderate republican paper run by Joseph Havin with the greatest circulation of any political newspaper at the time, was the most prominent of these papers.⁷⁹ Although some officials expressed worry that it had a negative influence on workers, Napoléon's government allowed it to continue running -- it did not directly attack the Empire, and its occasional praise for Napoléon's actions (such as his policy on Italy) appeared more meaningful and impactful than praise from known pro-government papers.⁸⁰ Napoléon may have let Hugo's depiction of him go mostly unchallenged, but he was extremely conscious of his image in the eyes of his citizens and active in shaping it to his advantage.

Unfortunately for Napoléon, it was not the working class of France but republican opposition authors who wrote the initial histories of the Empire that would define his depiction in historical memory. Along with a wave of liberal reforms in the 1860s, which Napoléon enacted in the hopes that conservative-leaning liberals and increasingly educated workers would rally behind a more liberal Empire, came a press law in 1868 that relaxed many of the previous

⁷⁷ Kulstein, 122, 131, 137, 154, 126.

⁷⁸ Isser, 27.

⁷⁹ Isser, 26.

⁸⁰ Kulstein, 58-59.

repression republican opposition writers had suffered from.^{81,82} This allowed for an upsurge in republican journals and allowed writers to attack the Empire more directly.⁸³ In 1868, Eugène Ténot, a moderate republican and an editor of *Le Siècle*, published a book called *Paris en décembre*, where he echoed Hugo's claims that Napoléon's rise to power and his repressive measures were unjust and unforgivable.⁸⁴ The book became extremely popular, going through six editions, and inspired the construction of a statue in memory of a republican deputy slaughtered on the barricade during the coup d'état.⁸⁵ Eugène Spuller, a more extreme republican, wrote the next account of the Second Empire, *Un Petit Histoire du Second Empire*, where he too emulated Hugo's tone and argument that the Empire "suffocate[d] liberty while appearing to serve it" and that it was "bastard and corrupt."⁸⁶ These works did not affect the results of the 1870 plebiscite to accept or reject the reforms of the Liberal Empire, which came out in favor of Napoléon, but they nevertheless contributed to a legacy of critical accounts of Napoléon's Empire.⁸⁷

Napoléon's reputation took far greater hits after the siege of Paris and its fall to the Prussians in 1870. Critical pamphlets attributed Napoléon's defeat to his moral failings, and Napoléon was further criticized by the historical accounts of Taxile Delord, a prominent republican journalist and editor of *Le Siècle*, and Pierre de La Gorce, an Orléanist and a more established historian.⁸⁸ Both were named *Histoire du Second Empire*, and both continued the traditional republican arguments against the Emperor. Delord attacked Napoléon's repressive

⁸¹ Price, 318, 396.

⁸² Campbell, 43.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ "Paris in December." Campbell, 44.

⁸⁵ His name was Baudin; his death had mostly been forgotten until its dramatization in the book. Campbell, 44-45.

⁸⁶ "A Small History of the Second Empire." Eugène Spuller, *Un Petit Histoire du second Empire*, quoted in Campbell, 47.

⁸⁷ Price, 397.

⁸⁸ Campbell, 50, 52, 58.

measures and invalidated his popular support with an argument against Bonapartism, although the power of his account suffered from absolute antagonism of the Empire; de La Gorce took a more nuanced approach in describing Napoléon's regime, coining the idea of "a tragedy of good intentions," but ultimately concluded it was despotic and failed in many of its goals.⁸⁹ De La Gorce's account won the Académie française's highest award, establishing it as a lauded intellectual work.⁹⁰ During his era of historical writing, political beliefs and the writing of history were indistinguishable -- it was not until the establishment of the Third Republic that history became a profession that required credentials and a semblance of objectivity.⁹¹ However, even empirical historians who attempted to follow the scientific method and separate history from literature, such as Charles Seignobos, often wrote through a critical, republican lens already employed by previous authors such as de La Gorce and Hugo; Seignobos repeated many of Hugo's arguments, emphasizing the injustice of the coup d'état and deemphasizing the Empire's liberalization.^{92,93} Only after World War I, when major world events such as the War and the economic depression challenged notions about the legitimacy of the traditional political system and shifted national focus toward economics and other previously deemphasized issues, did prominent historians seem to break free of Hugo's interpretational template.⁹⁴ For example, rather than focusing on Bonapartist politics (an issue very important to Hugo and other republican writers), post-WWI historians tended to focus more on how the Second Empire paved

⁸⁹ Campbell, 54, 55, 56, 63, 71.

⁹⁰ Campbell, 60.

⁹¹ Hugo embodied this earlier view of history; it is reflected in one of his proclamations in *Napoléon le Petit*: "Woe to him who should remain impartial in face of the bleeding wounds of liberty!" Campbell, xii, 91.

⁹² Campbell, 101.

⁹³ Campbell, 101, 106.

⁹⁴ Campbell, 149, 152.

the way for the current industrial society.⁹⁵ The fact that Hugo's historical interpretation went mostly unchallenged by major historians until a major world war and societal upheaval is a testament to his pervasive influence on the people of his time.

Yet Hugo was not solely responsible for this trend. He did not single-handedly write every historical account of the Second Empire, nor was he the single influence on those early republican historians. He certainly was not the "one man opposition and conscience of the nation" that his superego envisioned himself to be.⁹⁶ Neither was Napoléon the only person who made decisions about how his government would be run; he had a host of advisers and ministers who influenced and made governmental decisions, not to mention countless other individuals over the course of his life who influenced the worldview that would inform his actions. To reduce the historiography of the Second Empire to a battle between two men is to disregard the complexity that makes it so compelling -- this "war of words" is not over, nor will it ever be. It has many players, and many secrets yet untold. To have a "battle" at all, the two men could not recognize their commonalities, such as their experience of exile or their belief in progress and popular sovereignty. The attacks that constituted it necessitated absolute misunderstanding of the other side: to sustain his moral judgment, Hugo could not know that Napoléon expressed guilt about his coup d'état for the rest of his life, and to maintain his policies of repression, Napoléon could not realize that the novel he was planning to write about his own empire might have served his image better than censorship.^{97,98} The relative "loss" by one side cannot be entirely attributed to personal failing: Napoléon might have risked losing the popular support that sustained his

⁹⁵ Campbell, 152.

⁹⁶ Robb, 286.

⁹⁷ Bresler, 245.

⁹⁸ Kulstein, 93.

empire had he shifted his focus away from current perceptions of him and toward historical ones. It has not been comprehensively defined: sources on the Second Empire are many, while sources on the historiography surrounding it are few. Each new addition explores one part of it, such as its literary nature, and neglects another part, such as its unique expression in its original language of French. All of these complexities only serve to illustrate the core of this topic: the enduring and endlessly complex power of the written narrative.

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