

## The Poor Man As Saint: A Trilogy of Poems

The name of Marceline Desbordes-Valmore is perhaps remembered for one of her poems that is found in anthologies, namely "La couronne effeuillée." In her poetic endeavors, the poetess is influenced to some extent by the style and the imagery of Victor Hugo. In her collection of poems of 1833, Les Pleurs, she demonstrates that she wishes to accomplish what Hugo has done in his Feuilles d'automne (1831), and it is evident that "sous l'influence de Victor Hugo, sa phrase est devenue ample et sonore."<sup>1</sup> In turn, it is also true that Hugo is impressed, if not by Desbordes-Valmore's more sober and unpretentious style, at least by certain examples of her imagery. Sainte-Beuve quotes Hugo as saying of her that "vous êtes un talent charmant, le talent de femme le plus pénétrant que je connaisse."<sup>2</sup>

Eliane Jasenas reveals two examples of probable influence of Mme Desbordes-Valmore's poetry upon that of Hugo. "A Villequier" bears some resemblance to her early poem, "Aux Enfants qui ne sont plus"; Hugo's pity for women throughout the Chants du Crépuscule (1835), moreover, compares favorably with that manner of pity found in Les Pleurs.<sup>3</sup> A third probable affinity exists between Hugo and the poetess, namely the similarity between Hugo's "Le Mendiant" (Les Contemplations) and Mme Desbordes-Valmore's "Un Pauvre" (Bouquets et Prières).

Despite the date of publication of Les Contemplations (1856), "Le Mendiant" precedes the appearance of the collection by a number of years, and is even placed as early as 1843.<sup>4</sup> Bouquets et Prières also dates from 1843. Hence, the

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proximity of the dates of the poems, that of the composition of the former and that of the publication of the latter, is not without its importance.

In "Un Pauvre," Mme Desbordes-Valmore merely indicates that her poor man passes long nights "sous un peu de paille."<sup>5</sup> In "Le Mendiant," however, Hugo contrasts the beggar's existence with that of the peasants who, although not wealthy, possess their animals and are able to buy or trade in the market place. Furthermore, Hugo says of the beggar: "C'était le vieux qui vit dans une niche au bas/ De la montée," which implies that the man has only a hole in the wall for a domicile.<sup>6</sup> The word "niche" also suggests the place in a church for a statue of a saint; hence, "ce pauvre est un chien et un saint." Both poor men, then, live in abject poverty, but Hugo's description of the man is richer in symbolic detail.

The one consolation of these two poor men, in any case, is at night, at a time when they are able to dream, and thereby escape the misery of everyday life. The poetess presents a rather fanciful dream on the part of her poor man, a dream wherein an angel would wash his feet and generally console him. This angel entreats him and counsels him in the following words: "Ayez foi dans la mort: cette cueilleuse d'âmes/ Ne les moissonne pas pour en tuer les flammes,/ Mais pour délivrer de leur lourd vêtement, / Comme on ôte le sable où dort le diamant" (p. 85). This process of the shuffling off of the sand from the diamond as an analogy of the final separation of the soul from the body at the moment of death is a

metaphor worthy of Hugo. As for Hugo's beggar, the dream might consist only of possessing "un rayon du ciel triste, un liard de la terre" (p. 691). In both instances, this dream sequence is infinitely preferable to their miserable daily existence.

In both poems, moreover, the poor man is described as a solitary person; society has little or nothing to do with these misfits. The life of the poor man of the poetess is a continual "épreuve solitaire" (p. 85), and Hugo's beggar, even in his dreams, is "solitaire" (p. 691). This sentiment of solitude morale vis-à-vis society intensifies the sympathy already generated for the poor man in both cases.

At the end of each poem, in true Romantic fashion, both poets emotionally enter their respective poems. "Un Pauvre" terminates with the following eight verses:

Ce pauvre est plus qu'un  
 pauvre! une telle indigence,  
 Puisque Dieu la permet, ouvre  
 l'intelligence:  
 Dieu voilé parle en lui.  
 Souvent ses vieux lambeaux,  
 M'ont paru lumineux, comme si  
 de flambeaux,  
 Comme si des rayons d'une  
 auréole sainte,  
 Sa tête blanchissante et  
 paisible était ceinte.  
 Ce pauvre est plus qu'un  
 pauvre! Enfant, sois doux

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pour lui,  
Comme tu fus hier, s'il revient  
aujourd'hui. (pp. 85-86)

The last nine verses of "Le Mendiant" are as follows:

Son manteau, tout mangé des  
vers, et jadis bleu,  
étalé largement sur la chaude  
fournaise,  
Piqué de mille trous par la  
lueur de braise,  
Couvrait l'âtre, et semblait  
un ciel noir étoilé.  
Et, pendant qu'il séchait ce  
haillon désolé,  
D'où ruisselaient la pluie et  
l'eau des fondrières,  
Je songeais que cet homme était  
plein de prières,  
Et je regardais, sourd à ce  
que nous disions,  
Sa bure où je voyais des  
constellations. (p. 692)

Mme Desbordes-Valmore's evocation of the poor man's clothing is summarized in the rather curt reference to "ses vieux lambeaux." Hugo, on the other hand, refers at first to the worm-eaten cloak; secondly, the poet dramatizes its appearance ("ce haillon désolé"); finally, he calls it a "bure," which denotes something more specifically saintly ("le mot ajoute au caractère religieux du pauvre").<sup>8</sup> Once again, Hugo

manifests his richness of detail, as he has the beggar's clothes coincide with his saintliness.

In both works, a luminosity emanates from the tattered clothes of the poor man. In "Un Pauvre," the clothes appear simply as "lumineux," without any elaboration; in "Le Mendiant," the illumination is exalted to the point of cosmic (Hugolesque) grandeur. The combination of light from the hearth shining through the holes in the garment, plus the outstretched cloak itself, renders the effect of many constellations of stars on a dark night for the poet, as he becomes lost in contemplation of the scene in front of him. From the basic luminosity common to both poets, therefore, Hugo weaves a magical sidereal image, while Mme Desbordes-Valmore remains more terre-à-terre. Up to this point in the two poems, then, Hugo's imagery is undoubtedly superior to the more simple descriptive passages of Desbordes-Valmore.

Both poets reflect upon the spiritual effect of the poor man upon others. For the poetess, "une telle indigence ... ouvre l'intelligence," that is to say, it should inculcate in her son (for whom the poem is dedicated) an awareness of the misery and the degradation of poverty. Her son should also realize that, concerning the poor man, "Dieu voilé parle en lui." For Hugo, on the other hand, the spiritual effect is in the determination of the role of the beggar in general in society, since for him this particular poor man assumes the role of all poor men ("Je me nomme/ Le pauvre," states the poor man in the early part of the poem.

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At the end of the poem, the imagery of the poetess is definitely more physical, climaxed by the transformation (a veritable cinema technique) of the poor man into a saint with brilliant raiment and a shining halo ("Comme si des rayons d'une auréole sainte,/ Sa tête blanchissante, et paisible était ceinte"). Hugo is here more succinct: the descriptive passages preceding the end are so colorful and majestic that the unembellished statement of the saintliness of the beggar ("plein de prières") is quite effective in its utter simplicity. Here at the end, then, it is Desbordes-Valmore who displays more imagery than Hugo; but, as we have indicated, Hugo already has disposed the reader for the effect.

In both "Le Mendiant" and "Un Pauvre," therefore, the poor man is considered with respect as the symbol of the saint; this symbol has become the leitmotif of the poems. The vocabulary and the basic imagery correspond to some extent in the two poems. Hugo, however, embroiders the simple pattern that he might well have borrowed from Mme Desbordes-Valmore into a detailed panorama of stars and constellations; instead of a homily, moreover, "Le Mendiant" becomes an example of the more encompassing romantisme social, which for Hugo will culminate in his great novel, Les Misérables (1862).

These two aspects of the poor man as a saint by Mme Desbordes-Valmore and by Victor Hugo are essentially synthesized by Charles Baudelaire in his poem, "La Mort des Pauvres" of 1852. Instead of proposing a homily (à la Desbordes-Valmore) or instead of injecting romantisme social (à la Hugo) into the poem, however, Baudelaire's originality

lies precisely in his extraction of the inherent spirituality latent in the two earlier poems. "La Mort des Pauvres" is, then, the spiritual quintessence of "Un Pauvre" and of "Le Mendiant" ("car j'ai de chaque chose extrait la quintessence"). Baudelaire's sonnet crystallizes this spirituality endemic in the death of the poor man in general:

C'est la Mort qui console,  
           hélas! et qui fait vivre;  
 C'est le but de la vie, et  
           c'est le seul espoir  
 Qui, comme un élixir, nous  
           monte et nous enivre,  
 Et nous donne le coeur de  
           marcher jusqu'au soir;

A travers la tempête, et la  
           neige, et le givre,  
 C'est la clarté vibrante à  
           notre horizon noir;  
 C'est l'auberge fameuse  
           inscrite sur le livre,  
 Où l'on pourra manger, et  
           dormir, et s'asseoir.

C'est un Ange qui tient dans  
           ses doigts magnétiques  
 Le sommeil et le don des rêves  
           extatiques,  
 Et qui refait le lit des gens  
           pauvres et nus;  
 C'est la gloire des Dieux,  
           c'est le grenier mystique,  
 C'est la bourse du pauvre et sa  
           patrie antique,  
 C'est le portique ouvert sur

les Cieux inconnus!<sup>10</sup>

Baudelaire's concern is not for any amelioration of the poor man here and now, in this life; his entire attention is directed to the death ("le but de la vie") and the afterlife of his subject. Whereas, moreover, both Desbordes-Valmore and Hugo grant some solace to their outcast by means of his nocturnal dreams, which accord him some consolation for his daily misery, Baudelaire places this alleviation only in death ("C'est un Ange qui tient dans ses mains magnétiques/ Le sommeil et le don des rêves extatiques"). There is, then, a definite change of perspective, all the more so since, as Judd D. Hubert indicates, Baudelaire is not merely considering those in dire physical poverty, but also the poor in spirit.<sup>11</sup> For all of these poor, death is the only goal, the only respite.

The afterlife of the poor is, however, envisioned by Baudelaire in terms of physical comfort, in contrast to their present physical suffering ("à travers la tempête, et la neige, et le givre") in all its vicissitudes. For these poor, death is the "auberge fameuse ... où l'on pourra manger, et dormir, et s'asseoir." Not only will they be able to eat and sleep, but also they are assured that they will also have the right to sit down, these poor who have had the obligation of humbly standing and administering to the rich during their lives.

Death, then, is the only consolation and the only inspiration for the poor to continue living. For them, this future event will be the great hour



of deliverance from misery, as well as being the moment of entry into a new and different life ("C'est le portique ouvert sur les Cieux inconnus!").

The trilogy of poems reviewed, "Un Pauvre," "Le Mendiant" and "La Mort des Pauvres" reveal the individual traits of both style and imagery of the three poets involved. Mme Desbordes-Valmore draws from her work an object lesson in charity for her son; Victor Hugo, renowned for his rich and colorful imagery, betrays that talent in his poem, as well as manifesting his espousal of le romantisme social; finally, Baudelaire's poem, by contrast with the other two, is almost Biblical in his spiritual adaptation of the basic theme of the poor man.

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#### Notes

<sup>1</sup>Eliane Jasenas, Marceline Desbordes-Valmore devant la critique (Geneva: Droz, 1962), p. 148.

<sup>2</sup>Sainte-Beuve, "Mme Desbordes-Valmore: Sa vie et sa correspondance," in Nouveaux lundis (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, n.d.), XII, 253.

<sup>3</sup>Jasenas, pp. 28 and 39.

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<sup>4</sup>See René Journet and Guy Robert, Notes sur Les Contemplations (Paris: Les Belles Lettes, 1958), p. 145.

<sup>5</sup>Marceline Debordes-Valmore, OEuvres poétiques, vol. 3 (1886; rpt Geneva: Slatkine, 1972), p. 84. Subsequent references will be in the text.

<sup>6</sup>Victor Hugo, Les Contemplations, in OEuvres poétiques, vol. 2 (Paris: Gallimard, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1967), p. 691. Subsequent references will be in the text.

<sup>7</sup>Léon Cellier, ed., Les Contemplations (Paris: Garnier, 1969), p. 663.

<sup>8</sup>Philippe Van Tieghem, ed., Les Contemplations (Paris: Hachette, 1950), n. 1, p. 100.

<sup>9</sup>Charles Baudelaire, "Projet d'épilogue pour la seconde édition des Fleurs du mal, in OEuvres complètes (Paris: Gallimard, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1961), p. 180.

<sup>10</sup>Baudelaire, "La Mort des Pauvres," in OEuvres complètes, pp. 119-20.

<sup>11</sup>Judd D. Hubert, L'Esthétique des "Fleurs du mal; Essai sur l'ambiguïté poétique (Geneva: Pierre Cailler, 1953), p. 254.