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## Thunderstruck

Tim Parks

*The Novel of the Century: The Extraordinary Adventure of 'Les Misérables'* by David Bellos

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Particular, 307 pp, £20.00, January, ISBN 978 1 84614 470 7

**Tim Parks** teaches at IULM University in Milan. His most recent books are the novel *In Extremis*, and the critical work *The Novel: A Survival Skill*.

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13 DECEMBER 2001

Any reflection on Victor Hugo risks degenerating into a procession of superlatives. Poet, dramatist, novelist, romantic, reactionary, revolutionary, mystic, miser and indefatigable philanderer: without him French literature, French politics of the 19th century are unimaginable. The scope of his ambition, the range of his genius, the vastness of his output, the extent of his appetite, the audacity of his opportunism and the oceanic immensity of his self-regard prompt awe – as well as sentences like these, cumulative and insistent, as his own so often were. The title of David Bellos's book on *Les Misérables* – *The Novel of the Century* – immediately tells us we're in the territory; Hugo is greater than his rivals; Bellos has fallen under the spell. 'I was entranced,' he tells us at once of his first reading of the 1500-page novel, and goes on:

Nineteenth-century France ... was uncommonly generous to the rest of the world ... But among all the gifts France has given to Hollywood, Broadway and the common reader wherever she may be, *Les Misérables* stands out as the greatest by far. This reconstruction of how this extraordinary novel arose, how it was published, what it means and what it has become is my way of saying thank you to France.

Never abandoning this celebratory tone, *The Novel of the Century* makes a number of large claims with gusto. The first is that despite being composed over 16 years, from 1845 to 1861, the novel was all intended to be exactly as it is. 'Everything in a work of art is an act of the will,' Bellos quotes Hugo. And so 'every detail and every dimension' of this 500,000-word novel 'was designed, calculated and decided by the author'. And calculated to be successful: 'The unique adventure of *Les Misérables* as a global cultural resource did not come about by chance ... Hugo always intended his great work to speak far beyond the borders of France, and beyond the pages of a book. Most plans to conquer the whole world with a story go awry. *Les Misérables* is a wonderful exception.'

Occasionally the claims become embarrassing. Hugo's visit to Bicêtre prison, just south of Paris, in 1828 – he was 26 at the time – doubtless provided him with the knowledge of the way an iron collar is riveted around a convict's neck (the fate of *Les Misérables*'s hero, Jean Valjean), and more immediately inspired his campaign against the death penalty as well as his novel *The Last Day of a Condemned Man* (1829). But Bellos isn't satisfied. The death penalty was abolished in France, he observes, 'in 1981, after a century and a half of campaigning that had its source in the visit made by Victor Hugo to the prison of Bicêtre'. No mention is made of Cesare Beccaria's study *On Crimes and Punishments*, published in France in 1765 to great acclaim. Beccaria attacked both torture and the death penalty as inhumane and counterproductive.

Imprecisions leap to the eye. Dickens is said to have 'spent his teenage years putting shoeblack into pots'. In fact the 12-year-old Dickens worked in a relative's factory for about a year before resuming his middle-class education. In excited response to Hugo's use of *merde* in the Waterloo episode of *Les Misérables*, Bellos insists that not only is the forbidden word 'a nutshell expression of the linguistic, historical and human message' of the novel but that it had 'never been seen in print in a literary work before'. Search Rabelais's *Gargantua et Pantagruel* (1542) and you will find *merde* occurring 15 times.

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Such errors make one a little wary of the other material on offer, and this is a shame because much of the context Bellos provides, on the meaning of the colours red, blue and white in early 19th-century France, on the bead factory Valjean sets up as he passes with miraculous rapidity from destitution to wealth, on the different coins the characters of *Les Misérables* use and the various means of transport they adopt, is useful for getting a fuller sense of what is going on in the book. Bellos never fails to complete these comments with a reminder of Hugo's reforming zeal. 'The fact that it went without saying that rich and poor used different words for money is both sign and substance of the social injustices that *Les Misérables* sought to dramatise and to protest.'

To a large degree, then, it appears that *Les Misérables* is a good novel because its purpose is good. This is seen, Bellos explains, in the ingenious title. Originally *Les Misères* – 'the miseries' or 'woes' – the novel became *Les Misérables*, a word that can switch its 'value from positive to negative without notice'. Bellos compares it with 'wretched': 'a wretched person is worthy of pity but may just as well be beneath contempt.' In the way it draws attention to a failure to discriminate, the word *misérables* actually pushes the reader towards an act of discrimination: are the poor, the destitute and the outcast morally at fault, or victims of bad luck and social injustice? All this seems obvious enough. But having established the near equivalence of 'the wretched' and 'les misérables', Bellos then tells us that there is 'no way of reinventing' the 'inclusiveness' of Hugo's title 'in any other tongue. That's why *Les Misérables* remains *Les Misérables*' in English editions.

This is not the case. Translated as *Die Elenden* in German, *Sefiller* in Turkish, *Отверженные* in Russian, *Jadnici* in Croatian (and so on), *Les Misérables* keeps its French title in English because the word has an attractive, exotic ring to the English ear. It is a question of marketing. *Les Misérables* sounds more romantic than *The Wretched*, a title that was initially placed alongside it in explanation. If anything, the use of the French title obscures the moral discrimination Hugo is asking us to make, since for the English the ideas of misery and miserable are to the fore, not the accusation: *Misérable!* 'Scum!' It also suggests that what we're talking about is largely a French affair, a series of predicaments that don't concern British society; in that sense the foreign word is reassuring.

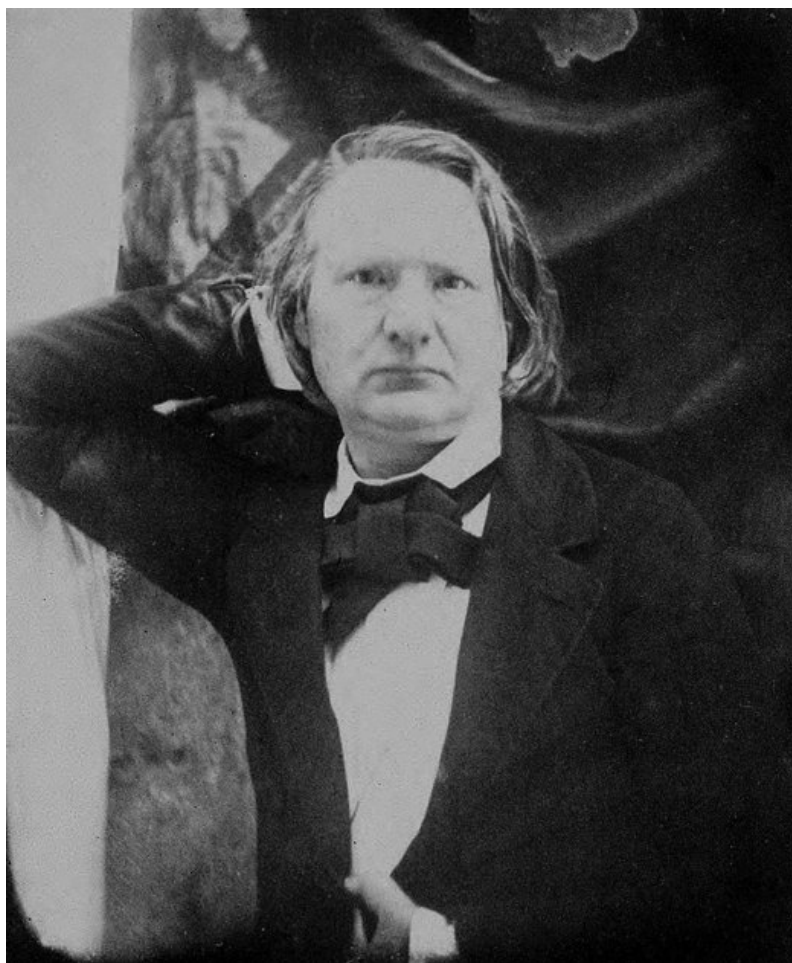
The character names are also, we are reminded, brilliantly invented. Bellos ponders the origins of Fantine, the name of the single mother who falls into prostitution: 'The first syllable is a contraction of *enfant*, "child", so the name itself suggests a meaning close to that of "kid girl".' Fantine, Bellos points out, had 'no parents to name her and no formal identity at all'. The name is part of her status as a *misérable*. Cosette, Fantine's illegitimate child and later Valjean's adopted daughter, might be confused with *chosette*, a 'small thing', or nothing in particular. Again it is a sign she is one of the dispossessed. Bellos doesn't remark on the irony that these names, while elaborately suggesting a blurred identity at the semantic level, are in fact highly idiosyncratic and wonderfully memorable. It's in this sense that they are so clever. There are any number of Emmas, only one Fantine. The name is for ever associated with Hugo's novel. Conversely, Jean Valjean, Bellos explains, couples France's most common Christian name with a surname that amounts to a contraction of 'Voilà Jean!', suggesting 'somebody or other, anybody, a nobody'. 'It's as heart-rending,' he tells us, 'as a slumdog answering to the name of "Heyou".' Some readers may struggle to feel this.

Hugo began the novel in his early forties in Paris, where he was already a prominent and highly controversial public figure; after some three years he broke off writing during the turmoil of the 1848 revolution and resumed in December 1860, nine years into his long exile, which at this point had taken him to the island of Guernsey. Moving back and forth both in history and inside the novel itself, Bellos sketches in the key events in Hugo's tumultuous life and the novel's possible relation to them. In 1845 Hugo, who had always sought favours from whatever monarch was on the throne, was made a member of the Chamber of Peers, something that would enable him – though not his married lover Léonie Biard – to avoid jail, when caught in flagrante in an act of adultery a few months later. As a young man, he had been romantically conservative and insanely jealous, to the point of insisting that his teenage beloved, Adèle, keep every inch of her ankles properly covered. But after his early marriage to Adèle, in 1822, at the age of 20, five children in rapid

succession and the realisation that his wife had had an affair with his friend, the critic Sainte-Beuve, Hugo, in 1833, secured himself a lifelong mistress and worshipper in the actress Juliette Drouet, then in 1844 began his passionate seven-year affair with Biard.

The discovery of his adultery exposed Hugo to ridicule around the time he began *Les Misérables*, a book that opens, we remember, with a long account of a man who having 'given the best years of his life ... to worldly pursuits and love affairs' becomes a priest, a prelate and ultimately a kind of saint. 'People joked,' Bellos remarks, 'that [Hugo] must be doing penance for his unsaintly behaviour,' but declares himself sceptical of this 'moralising approach' or of any idea that a troubled Hugo might have looked for 'refuge in an uplifting tale'. Rather, 'the main impact of the Biard affair' was to convince Hugo to 'write about everything *except that*'. The novel 'is unusual ... for not talking at any point about adultery or even sex'.

This is almost true. Fantine enjoys a brief affair with a privileged young man who disappears leaving her pregnant, disgraced and indigent, problems she seeks to solve first with factory work, then with prostitution. So there are references to sex in the book, but it is always disreputable, destructive sex. This is one of the things that must put a question mark over the novel's achievement: a narrative claiming to offer 'the social and historical drama of the 19th century', should surely have something to say about the impulse that was absolutely central not only to its author's life, but to life in general. Despite passing from poverty and vulnerability to wealth and power, Valjean not only remains celibate, but appears to have no problem doing so. Sex never so much as occurs to him, or indeed to those who adore him – this while Valjean's creator was enjoying the charms of every chambermaid he could lay his hands on and recording his encounters with compulsive delight in a coded diary. *Les Misérables* is built on a gesture of simplification, even denial.



Hugo in 1853

And on another, of reversal. Elected to the National Assembly after the collapse of the monarchy in 1848, Hugo found himself at the centre of things when Parisian workers rebelled against the new government's decision to introduce conscription for the unemployed and threw up barricades across the city in

response. Though at this point he was claiming that the future lay with the people, Hugo first agreed to visit the barricades and demand they be dismantled, then, when the rebels wouldn't obey, exceeded his brief by ordering the National Guard to open fire. For three tumultuous days and at great personal risk, Hugo, unmasked, led government attacks on the barricades. 'He was a dutiful man,' Bellos remarks. Hugo's biographer Graham Robb puts it more brutally. 'This means that [Hugo] was directly responsible for the deaths of untold numbers of workers.' \*

*Les Misérables* also offers a barricade melodrama, though set in the minor and earlier uprising of 1832. Here the book's narrator appears to be entirely on the rebels' side, though their enterprise is presented as doomed and perhaps futile. In the fictional version, one of the main threats to the barricade is the manically dutiful, law-obsessed psychopath Javert, the policeman who makes Valjean's life impossible, while Valjean himself rescues his daughter's beloved from the jaws of death as the rebels are overwhelmed. The scene is such a complete inversion of Hugo's own experience that the notion the author might be seeking redemption, or cleansing his conscience, by rerunning events in this way hardly seems far-fetched.

Turning to the novel itself, aside from the immediate pleasure of its steady forward movement, lively metaphors and acute observations, what strikes the reader is Hugo's determined schematism. Everything is understood as either good or evil, renunciation or indulgence, generosity or small-mindedness. The casual playboy Monsieur Myriel becomes the bishop of Digne, renouncing earthly pleasures to serve the poor and write a book on the idea of duty. Released from the galleys where he has served 19 years for stealing a loaf of bread, Valjean is first treated abominably by a society that sees him as irredeemable, then with sublime generosity by the bishop. The only complication in this essentially Manichaean vision is that petty crimes of the sort carried out by Valjean and others, while evil in themselves, are actually products of a greater evil – poverty – that society, while believing itself good, continues to perpetrate. The supposed moral superiority that the haves enjoy at the expense of the have-nots is the cause of infinite suffering. Hugo does everything possible to expose this state of affairs and to validate the consequent reflection that one need only eliminate poverty and crime will be largely eradicated. Everything is pushed to extremes, the dice heavily loaded, the reader determinedly manipulated. Valjean is polite and inoffensive as he seeks shelter at the beginning of the book, magnifying the unpleasantness of the innkeepers and bourgeois householders who reject him, then ferociously aggressive towards the bishop, pointing up the saintly man's extraordinary charity.

The pattern is sustained throughout the book. Once 'converted' and transformed into a wealthy industrialist and mayor of Montreuil-sur-Mer, Valjean is unbelievably thoughtful and philanthropic, sneaking into the houses of the poor to leave gold coins on their kitchen tables. Crime within his jurisdiction is drastically diminished. Meanwhile, Fantine is treated with scandalous cruelty, first by her boyfriend, then by her fellow factory workers. Placing Cosette in the care of others, she inevitably chooses the most exploitative family imaginable, arguably the only family portrayed in the book. Evil in themselves, not as a result of their poverty, the Thénardiens actually take advantage of the socialist theory that poverty causes crime to excuse their own behaviour. Supreme manifestation of insane inflexibility, the policeman Javert goes to incredible lengths to uphold the view that anyone who has committed even the smallest crime is incorrigibly evil and should be punished for all eternity. In doing so he engages in a struggle not so much with Valjean as with Hugo himself and his progressive ideas. And the reader, who is on Hugo's side.

\*

Beyond the obviousness, or we might say clarity, of the enterprise (is it really a positive thing for a work of art to be entirely calculated by its creator?), what impresses and endears the book to the reader, almost despite himself, is Hugo's evident and immense pleasure in dramatising the extremes of this mental scheme. He loves rubbing in the world's cruelty: Fantine sells her beautiful hair and teeth, then descends into prostitution where, alas, none of her clients resembles that charming womaniser Victor Hugo; they are all universally, splendidly, brutal. He revels in Javert's dastardly ubiquity and

triumphant self-righteousness. He adores the Thénardiens and their fantastic determination to wring every last sou out of a girl who has nothing. Equally – one pleasure feeds the other – he is thrilled when the bishop or Valjean does something so self-sacrificing, so unutterably altruistic, as to leave normal folk quite speechless. Valjean's eyes 'nearly popped out of his head' when the bishop not only forgives the ex-convict for walking off with his silverware, but tells the police he gave it to the man to help him rebuild his life. Javert is 'thunderstruck' when Valjean, now mayor, intervenes on Fantine's behalf after she's accused of offending a gentleman: 'thought and speech both failed him.' In one of the novel's strongest scenes, Valjean interrupts a trial to confess his identity and save a man about to be condemned to the galleys in his place; the court is seized by a 'kind of religious terror' on witnessing this 'simple and magnificent story'. 'The peculiarity of sublime spectacles,' Hugo enthuses, 'is to seize all souls and make all witnesses spectators ... no doubt none of them told himself he was seeing a great light shining there in all its splendour; but all felt inwardly dazzled.'

Hugo loves imagining this and knowing that he is the creator of this sublimity. The reader feels it, shares his pleasure and duly signs up to be dazzled. For all Bellos's insistence that Hugo did careful research and has his facts right, we are very far from realism. To turn to *Madame Bovary*, published six years before Hugo's novel and equally interested in the hypocrisies of the middle classes, is to find oneself in a world of social and psychological subtlety that simply isn't there in *Les Misérables*, isn't attempted. Essentially, Hugo has split society into innocent and loveable victims (viewed in great detail), callously complacent middle classes (who remain, for all their proper Christian and surnames, an anonymous chorus) and magnificent (Hugo-like), strangely powerful saints. While Valjean oscillates from victim to saint, one or two anomalous figures – Javert, the Thénardiens – are given the task of rendering the saintliness of the saints ever more visible. Coincidences abound. Hugo isn't embarrassed by them; they allow for endless turns of plot with just a few central characters who never stop meeting, harming and helping one another. This is why *Les Misérables* is so successful not just as a film, but as a musical, in a way that *Anna Karenina*, *Middlemarch* and the many other fine novels of the time never could be. It is a story of extravagant gesture and irrepressible underlying optimism. Hugo believes in progress. Despite its title, the novel is never a downer.

Occasionally, a digression will remind us of the more bizarre aspects of the author's thinking:

It is our conviction that if souls were visible to the naked eye, we would clearly see the strange phenomenon whereby every individual member of the human race corresponds to one of the species of the animal kingdom ... Animals are nothing more than the forms our virtues and our vices take, trotting around before our very eyes, the visible phantoms of our souls. God reveals them to us to give us pause for thought. Only, since animals are mere shadows, God has not made them educable in the complete sense of the word. What would be the point? On the contrary, our souls being what is real and having a purpose unique to themselves, God has endowed them with intelligence, that is, the possibility of being educated. Public education, when it is good, can always bring out the latent usefulness of a soul, no matter what it is like to start with.

Exiled in the Channel Islands, Hugo had excogitated a new religion. Between transforming his homes into gothic castles; keeping wife, mistress and casual sexual partners apart; spending hours staring at the sea; recording household expenditures to the last sou; showering naked on the terrace in full view of the locals; and writing volume after volume of poetry that is far more exciting than his prose, Hugo found time for spiritualism and séances. Just as a daughter wrote down everything the great man said over meals, so a son kept the minutes for the dead. Dante, it seems, congratulated Victor on his poetry. Jesus Christ conceded that the French genius's new religion would replace his own. Juliette Drouet, arguably Hugo's first disciple, addressed her unfaithful lover in daily letters as 'my Christ'.

Bellos offers some of these details, but his account is sketchy and their connection with *Les Misérables* so intriguing one turns to a full-length biography – I chose Robb's excellent *Victor Hugo* – to get a deeper sense of what Hugo is up to. Like Bellos, Robb has allowed his writing to be infected by Hugo's, but in an altogether different way. Where Bellos's rhetoric is a hollow echo of Hugo's more sonorous and accomplished self-importance, Robb seems

to have borrowed the poet's facility for metaphor. He uses it not to inflate Hugo, but to show he has his measure and isn't going to be overwhelmed: 'By now,' he tells us, 'Hugo was not just a real person with several masks, but a limited liability company of egos.' Where Bellos is a fan, Robb is admiring and aghast. 'His campaign against the death penalty was also a cloak of respectability which allowed him to feast his eyes on punishment and cruelty, and to imagine his own execution.' Where Bellos appropriates the labours of others for Hugo, Robb wryly observes how Hugo himself had perfected the 'post facto appropriation of every significant change in French poetry and theatre since the 1820s'.

It is not so much that a different Hugo emerges, more that one is made aware of the many possible responses (between total submission and violent resistance) when confronted with a phenomenon as daunting, seductive and coercive as Hugo. On the question of religion, while Bellos remains vague and preacherly (Hugo's 'natural religion' encourages reconciliation and the 'movement from conflict to harmony' which is the 'purpose' of *Les Misérables*), Robb provides the details: 'The central pillar of [Hugo's] system is the belief that the entire universe is sentient ... anything possessing weight and substance is the product of original sin ... The worst evil inhabits stones ... Man is an intermediate, crepuscular creature, suspended between the light of heaven and the murk of the bottomless sewer ... "Good deeds are the invisible hinges of heaven's door." 'It is impossible not to notice,' Robb concludes, 'that this is a supremely convenient religion for a poet. It turns the universe into an infinite library of living symbols marshalled by a cataloguing system which is all the easier to use for being based on subjective impressions.'

On one question, however, Robb and Bellos speak with the same voice. Neither will hear a word against Hugo's strategy for publishing *Les Misérables*; this involved dumping his regular publisher, Pierre-Jules Hetzel, insisting on an enormous 300,000 francs for an eight-year licence (around £3 million today, Bellos calculates), then orchestrating a huge book launch with more or less simultaneous publication in various countries, an equally huge publicity campaign (the novel's content was kept a secret until the last moment) with queues at the bookshops and so on. And the man who borrowed heavily to effect this huge leap forward in book promotion, Albert Lacroix, had not even read the novel when he signed the deal, since he was in Brussels and the manuscript in Guernsey. Such was Hugo's celebrity, literary and political, that Lacroix was convinced he could make the novel a must-read work across Europe before anyone even knew what was in it. And he was right.

For Bellos this feat, the complex logistics of copying, proofreading, printing, translating and distributing such a huge text over a short period of time, is part of the reason the book is 'the novel of the century'. '*Les Misérables*,' he tells us, 'stands at the vanguard of the democratisation of literature and of the use of venture capital to fund the arts.' Robb quotes the Goncourt brothers observing wryly that Hugo had got all that money 'for taking pity on the suffering masses' and complains that this set 'a trend of innuendo which has dogged *Les Misérables* to this day'. In fact, Robb claims, Hugo was doing other writers a favour by establishing 'the idea that serious writing could be a respectable, money-making profession'. Earlier he noted that Hugo secretly persuaded a publisher to delay a friend's collection of essays so they would not draw attention away from a publication of his own.

Whatever Hugo's motives, it remains a fact that the huge payment for *Les Misérables* reinforced the already rapidly consolidating connection between liberal posture and financial success in the arts. Of course if, as Bellos believes, works like *Les Misérables* genuinely lead to social reform, one could hardly complain. Others might argue – Leopardi put forward the view in his *Zibaldone* years before *Les Misérables* was written – that compassion in literature simply allows the reader to congratulate himself on his humanity without producing any change in behaviour. It encourages people to believe, Muriel Spark commented more recently, 'that their moral responsibilities are sufficiently fulfilled by the emotions they have been induced to feel'. In short, it is a substitute for charity.

Of the two positions, optimistic and pessimistic, I suspect both have an element of truth, but I fear the pessimists have the larger part. Hugo's great book sold millions of copies, but did not radically alter social conditions in

France, or halt Napoleon III's drift towards despotism, or stop the thousands of executions after the collapse of the Commune in 1871. Audiences leave West End performances of *Les Misérables* and walk past the beggars on the pavements much as they always have. Back in Guernsey, though, in the 1860s, Hugo set a charming new trend in philanthropy by inviting the poor children of the island to regular garden parties. He loved children and wrote wonderful poems about his grandchildren, though he did not generally keep track of his illegitimate offspring. At death he left less than one per cent of his considerable fortune to charity. Miserable.

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