

Conversations With Eternity: The Forgotten Masterpiece of Victor Hugo

John Chambers, Translator

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In exile on Jersey, with “Ocean,” sky, and sadness shaping the emotional environment, Victor Hugo took up the newly popular practice of spiritism (“table turning”). Between 1853 and 1855, he, his family and friends recorded conversations with over a hundred of the illustrious dead. Aeschylus, Plato, Christ, Mahomet, Dante, Machiavelli, Moliere, Shakespeare, Voltaire, Mozart, Andre Chenier, Byron, and Walter Scott spoke, as well as Balaam’s Ass, Death, Metempsychosis and Ocean.

Few People give credence to conversations with the dead, believing that most visionaries, mystics and eccentrics who report them are seeking support for personal agendas. In Hugo’s case, in a gross simplification, his agenda appears to be enhancing humankind’s spiritual resources through instructing the world in a gospel of redemption. Through sin we have blemished God’s creation, blighted our lives and become “imprisoned souls.” Through re-incarnations, we can finally ascend into “worlds of reward”—or will descend into “punitive worlds.”

The theme, however, is by no means so straightforward. An often skeptical Hugo questioned the immortals (or so they chose to speak) on an amazing range of other topics—some as specialized as the deficiencies of Racine’s classical plays. Challenging, memorable, poetic utterances abound. The reader’s journey is not easy, but much guidance is given. Martin Ebon (“dean of writers on the Paranormal”) provides a useful historical Introduction. John Chambers (the translator) does much to define operating conditions, explain process, and analyze themes and development in the conversations.

Nevertheless, problems abound. The hand-activated table gave one tap for “a” and 26 for “z.” Thus the time and effort required for “receiving” answers seems impossible. Did making fair copies of the en séance notes promote unlimited “automatic writing” in which Hugo’s untrammelled imagination took over? The poet-author of the brilliant *Hernani*, *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, *Napoleon the Small* and so much else certainly had a compulsion to write and teach.

Not the least interesting element of this strange but well-structured book is Chamber’s expansion and exploration of home-grown spiritism through skillful introduction of channeling, Gaia, quantum holography, the Great Chain of Being, James Merrill’s *The Changing Light at Sandover*, and Cao Dai (the contemporary Vietnamese “Third Alliance between God and Man” and repository of Hugolian religious thought). This is a book for the curious. If open-minded, they will forgive the misdating of Julius II, consult the book’s bibliography, and also read Graham Robb’s fine new biography of Hugo.

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