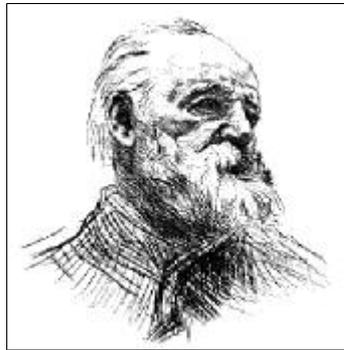


HUGO, RAND, AND THE PURPOSE OF ART

Peter Saint-André



Victor Hugo
(1802-1885)

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Thinker vs. Artist

In her introduction to Victor Hugo's novel *Ninety-Three*, Ayn Rand writes as follows about the author:

His attitude toward the intellect was highly ambiguous. It is as if Hugo the artist has overwhelmed Hugo the thinker... Toward the close of *Ninety-Three*, Hugo the artist sets up two superlatively dramatic opportunities for his characters to express their ideas, to declare the intellectual grounds of their stand... Hugo the thinker was unable to do it: the characters' speeches are not expressions of ideas, but only rhetoric, metaphors and generalities. His fire, his eloquence, his emotional power seemed to desert him when he had to deal with theoretical subjects.



Ayn Rand (1905-1982)

It is fascinating that Rand should have accepted an opposition between the thinker and the artist, for the ages-old conflict between art and philosophy (going back at least as far as Plato) is

merely one form of the very mind-body dichotomy she both decried in Western philosophy and claimed to have overcome in her own system of Objectivism. Yet given her philosophical outlook and her own aesthetic practice, it comes as no surprise that she considered Hugo to be less than complete as a novelist. Let us explore the matter to see where the truth lies.

Novelistic Imperialism

The first clue that Rand's estimation of Hugo may be misguided is that she proclaims him to be "the greatest novelist in world literature". Since I hold Hugo's novels in high esteem, I would not necessarily disagree with the sentiment that they are some of the finest ever written. However, it is anachronistic, not to mention false to Hugo's own self-definition, to call him a novelist; for, despite the fact that he wrote seven novels (two of which are commonly thought of as classics), Hugo's main literary activity was the writing of verse, and he considered himself first and foremost not a novelist but a poet.

The distinction is not unimportant, especially when one considers that Rand admitted she was "not an admirer of poetry" (quoted in Torres and Kamhi, *What Art Is*, 354) and when one realizes that out of an entire volume devoted to "a philosophy of literature" (*The Ro-*

mantic Manifesto), Rand wrote only twenty-one words about poetry.

Ayn Rand was a novelist, so naturally enough she argued that “a novel is *the* major literary form” (*The Romantic Manifesto*, 81). Homer, Dante, and Shakespeare would be surprised to hear it (though she defines a novel as “a long, fictional story about human beings and the events in their lives” (*The Romantic Manifesto*, 80), which could fit epic poems as well as novels). Indeed her argument could make sense only in quite recent times, since it was only around 1900 that the novel supplanted the poem as the leading form of literature (a development which followed on the demise, round about 1800, of narrative and dramatic poetry in favor of the prose novel). Rand’s argument is revealing (*The Romantic Manifesto*, 81):

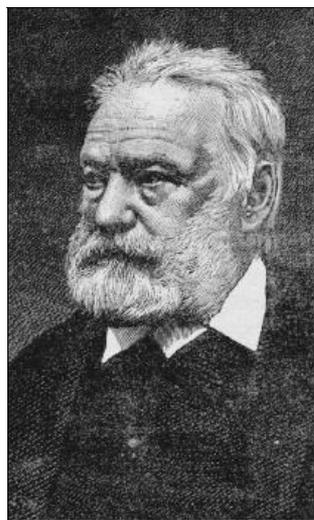
A novel is *the* major literary form -- in respect to its scope, its inexhaustible potentiality, its almost unlimited freedom (including the freedom from physical limitations of the kind that restrict a stage play) and, most importantly, in respect to the fact that a novel is a purely *literary* form of art which does not require the intermediary of the performing



arts to achieve its ultimate effect.

The most important factor in Rand’s judgment that the novel is the major literary form is that it is purely literary, presumably in contradistinction to the play. Yet both short stories and poems are likewise purely literary; for despite the fact that a poem can be read aloud (as for that matter a short story or even a novel can), it does not depend on being read aloud to “achieve its ultimate effect”. Rand here falls victim to some of the same definitional errors she decries in her *Introduction to Objectivist Epistemology*, specifically definition by non-essentials.

The truth is that Rand thinks the novel is the major literary form because “art is the indispensable medium for the communication of a moral ideal”, which communication is effected by “projecting an actual human figure -- an integration that illuminates a [moral] theory and makes it intelligible” (*The Romantic Manifesto*, 21). And according to Rand it is the novel -- with its capacity for portraying multiple characters and a large number of their thoughts and actions -- that can best serve the purpose of projecting



life “as it might be and ought to be” (*The Romantic Manifesto*, 168). Plainly put, for Rand the best art

“present[s] a certain moral-philosophical position” (*The Romantic Manifesto*, 81) and the novel has the greatest potential to be such philosophical art.

The Independence of Art

Thus the importance for Rand of integration between “the artist” and “the thinker”, and her disdain for Hugo’s relative lack of a moral-philosophical position in his novels (at least in comparison to Rand herself). Yet the critical wedge Rand uses here lacks force in speaking about any art other than plotted fiction. Would it make sense to talk of “Bach the artist” vs. “Bach the thinker” or “Michelangelo the artist” vs. “Michelangelo the thinker”? Decidedly not. The reason is not that art is opposed to thought, but that art is thought. The artist is a thinker who does his thinking in the form of art (i. e., by creating a concrete art-work in a particular art-form such as music, sculpture, or dance). Art cannot be reduced to philosophy, for it is an independent intellectual and creative realm.

Hugo, in his own poetic way, recognizes this fact. In his book *William Shakespeare*, which contains his most sustained reflections on the nature of art and especially literature, Hugo argues that “the poet is necessarily at once poet, historian, and philosopher” (II.1.i). And in the *Post-Script to My Life*, he observes:

It is needful that there be in

the poet a philosopher, yet also something more. He who is lacking in this celestial quality, the dream, is a philosopher only. (§2)

What is this “something more”? It is “the secretion of the ideal” (*William Shakespeare*, II.5.ii), the celestial quality of the dream -- and “man is virtually made up of dreams” (*Love in Prison*, §5). Yet although “the human mind has a greater need of the ideal even than of the real” (*William Shakespeare*, II.5.ii), the true challenge of art is to “generate the real in the ideal” (*William Shakespeare*, I.2.ii, §1). So in art there is no opposition between the real and the ideal, between the thought and the dream. For “the ideal is nothing but the culmination of logic” (*Les Misérables*, V.1.xx) and thus “poetry contains philosophy as the soul contains reason” (*Post-Script to My Life*, §12).



Hugo pays homage to philosophy and reason, but he knows there is more to life than reason: there is passion, there is wisdom, there is friendship, there is love. According to Hugo, these are the spark and the fire of life, and it is the sacred purpose of poetry to capture that fire, concentrate it to a white heat, and shower an exhalation of light upon the human soul.