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**The premiere of Victor Hugo's *Les Burgraves* (7<sup>th</sup> of March 1843)**

**and the narrative construction of its reception**

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On the 7<sup>th</sup> of March, 1843 Victor Hugo's *Les Burgraves* was performed at the Comédie-Française. Very quickly, a theatrical myth was born that lasted for nearly a century and a half: that of the fall of *Les Burgraves*, and with it, of Romantic drama as a whole. According to Camille Latreille's 1899 dissertation, the last drama of Hugo constituted the "Waterloo of Romanticism". Many were willing to trumpet the failure of the play in order to balk Hugo and Romantic drama, both of which were too much out of line for the French stage and the political, moral and social issues that were then at stake in France. Although Romanticism no longer seemed as subversive as in the 1830s, in school textbooks of the Third Republic as well as for numerous critics, the Romanticists were often described as subject to the influence of foreign literature and declared anti-patriotic. They were thus perceived as a significant threat to the dramatic system, of which it was expected that it both reflect and preserve the social order. Romantic heroes, it was thought, were literally invading the reputedly classical stage of the Comédie-Française with their daggers, their poisons, and other melodramatic devices<sup>1</sup>. To crown it all, Hugo does not save his plays' characters by providential ends and his theatre thus does not restore the social order. Consequently, such a drama was accused of making the social bond more precarious instead of fortifying it. Against this background, to say that Romantic drama ended in 1843 amounts to giving it the shortest possible period of existence - from 1830, with *Hernani*, to 1843, with *Les Burgraves* - and to minimizing its cultural interest and impact.<sup>2</sup>

At the end of the 20th century, however, based on the archives of the original production of the play, theatre historians came to question the date of 1843 which had been defined as a landmark by literature history. In 1995, Patrick Berthier showed that the play did not fail: it was performed thirty-three times and the revenue was quite satisfactory.<sup>3</sup> In 2008, Olivier Bara studied Ponsard's play *Lucrèce*, which was considered for a century and a half as the return of classical aesthetics on the French stage because of its success in April 1843 at the Odéon theatre, one month after the premiere of *Les Burgraves*.<sup>4</sup> This success was often contrasted with Hugo's failure and thought to prove that the last hour of Romanticism had come. However, Olivier Bara showed that *Lucrèce*'s success was in fact circumstantial and based on a significant media coverage orchestrated by Hugo's enemies siding with Neo-classicism. The alleged failure of *Les Burgraves* was orchestrated by a cabal set up against the play, but also and above all against Romantic drama and Hugo himself.

These works thus show, on the one hand, that the 7<sup>th</sup> of March, 1843 only constituted an event in literary and theatre history in so far as such an event was in fact the retrospective product of narratives reconstructing the reception of *Les Burgraves* and serving ideological, political and aesthetic ends. This narrative was constituted in two stages: first, as early as 1843, by the speeches of journalists and critics opposed to Hugo, by whom the reception was covered and who built such a narrative in order to trumpet the play's failure; then, in the following decades, by the story told in school textbooks. On the other hand, the narrative that was built about the event of 1843 has conditioned and determined the entire subsequent reception of Hugo's *Burgraves*: the myth of the play's failure has constituted for nearly a century and a half the main angle for approaching the work, as if it were only to be read on the basis of its original reception, regardless of the factitious character of the latter.

In the following, I would like to show how the memory of the event of the 7<sup>th</sup> of March, 1843, was elaborated, and then to examine how this memory determined the reception

of *Les Burgraves* when the play was staged in the 20<sup>th</sup> century (first, in 1902 at the Comédie-Française for the centenary of the author's birth and, second, in Antoine Vitez's 1977 production).

### ***The contemporary reconstitution of the event***

First of all, the process which turned the 7<sup>th</sup> of March, 1843 into a memorable event actually began as early as 1842 – that is to say before the premiere of the play – when opponents of Hugo and of Romantic drama took advantage of a legal case between Hugo and M<sup>lle</sup> Maxime, the actress who was supposed to play the role of the old witch Guanhumara. Following her removal from the cast after nearly thirty rehearsals, M<sup>lle</sup> Maxime had decided to sue the playwright as well as the Comédie-Française. Notwithstanding the court's ruling in favour of Hugo, who was at that time commonly seen as the leader of Romanticism, she called on her friends in the press as well as in the literary milieu in order to hatch a cabal and bring Hugo into disfavour. The ensuing journalistic campaign against the play paved the way for its reception before it was first performed: anti-Hugolian and anti-Romantic newspapers such as *Le Constitutionnel*, *Le Coureur des Spectacles* or *Le Journal des débats* gave accounts of the legal case which stigmatized the new work. Their method consisted for example in leaking verses from the play (a strategy quite common in 19th century theatre feuds) or in defending M<sup>lle</sup> Maxime by showing that her failing to play Guanhumara stemmed from Hugo's lack of talent as a dramatic author. The action of Hugo's play, to sum up these criticisms, would be exceedingly implausible and would contain too many melodramatic elements.

These attacks did not cease after the premiere, and although Hugo was able to find a number of allies among his friends, such as Théophile Gautier or Granier de Cassagnac, his

critics in the press remained active, concerning themselves with exposing the scandalous character of the play in the name of Neo-classical aesthetics. Beyond the implausibility and the melodramatic influence of his theatre, Hugo was thus criticized for the length of his monologues, the unpronounceable names he uses – belying a suspicious and unpatriotic fascination for Germany –, the epic style and the staggering cost of the play, making it unsuitable for the theatre if not impossible to produce on stage altogether.

The critics targeted the form of Hugo's drama but also its themes, and claimed that the play was scandalous, that is to say dangerous and morally reprehensible. As Clothilde Thouret and François Lecercle have shown, such accusations often sought to disqualify the work in question. Judging Hugo's play to be scandalous allowed its detractors to discredit it while at the same time establishing themselves as those who "know the rules and norms",<sup>5</sup> be they aesthetic, moral, political or social. In the case of *Les Burgraves*, the journalists started from aesthetic problems and concluded their arguments with moral considerations, thus moving from the evaluative to the axiological register by claiming that the aesthetics of *Les Burgraves* would produce neither the beautiful, nor the good, nor the true, and that it would constitute a moral danger in this sense. For example, Hugo's play is assimilated to melodrama and thus belittled since this genre is mainly considered by critics as a sub-genre suited for the crowd only.<sup>6</sup>

In truth, the criticisms levelled at *Les Burgraves* were based on a whole range of criticism that had been used since the early 1830s. This was not the only scandal of Hugo's career, nor of the Romantic school but merely one more scandal they precipitated.<sup>7</sup> In *Le Roi et le bouffon*, Anne Ubersfeld dedicated a significant development to the analysis of the press kit associated with *Marie Tudor*, since, she argued, this was the moment when the positions on Hugo's theatre became clearer and more salient.<sup>8</sup> From then on, the criticisms against Hugo's drama would always be more or less the same: Hugo does not know how to

write theatre, it is claimed : his aesthetic would fall short of decency; it would show no respect for history, for plausibility nor for propriety. Hugo's theatre would be too close to melodrama and Hugo himself could be regarded as a materialist poet at best. These recurrent criticisms regularly sought to turn Hugo's plays into an aesthetic scandal, and contributed to the myth according to which the Romanticists, with Hugo as their leader, would be the terrorists of literature: thirsty revolutionaries desecrating the French language and the French theatrical and literary system as a whole.<sup>9</sup>

Hugo's alleged failure in *Les Burgraves* was systematically contrasted with Ponsard's *Lucrèce*, which was acclaimed as the proof that the time had come for Hugo to exit the stage and leave it in the hands of younger writers, both talented and more respectful of the traditions of the French theatre. Out of the young Ponsard, the supporters of the Classical school – journalists, authors, playwrights, politicians – were eager to make a competitor matching the Romanticists and Hugo especially, whose last drama was considered a monstrous outrage. Literature history has subsequently built its understanding of 1843 on the basis of the couple of *Les Burgraves* and *Lucrèce*, to show how the success of the second, assimilated to a classical tragedy by its supporters, would deal the *coup de grâce* to Romantic drama, and would be the unmistakable proof of its failure. In the eyes of some Neo-classical critics, Ponsard's *école du bon sens* – which was also represented, among others, by Émile Augier – thus came to be seen as a lifesaver for the French stage<sup>10</sup>.

The cabal thus served a twofold purpose: to scare the public away by claiming that the play is bad and, through this, to bring down Romantic drama itself. The traditional understanding of the 7<sup>th</sup> of March, 1843, thus, should not be taken at face value, and one must investigate secondary sources such as correspondence and diaries in order to examine whether the received story is the only one available, and whether others confirm, invalidate or qualify it. For example, the letters of Juliette Drouet indisputably show that the play did not fall<sup>11</sup>.

Such letters function at the same time as a diary, and Juliette Drouet highlights *Les Burgraves*'s successful evenings as much as their more difficult days. This alternation of good and bad performances indicates that the play in fact resisted the fierce cabal it was facing. Thus, Juliette Drouet's diary from 1843 confirms the annotation to the Comédie-Française's register: "disputed success".<sup>12</sup> Another direct witness allows us to approach what really took place on the 7<sup>th</sup> of March, 1843: the actress M<sup>lle</sup> Mars. In her diary, on the date of the premiere, she writes that "the play was a success"<sup>13</sup> : just as the diary of the actor Joanny allows us to reconstruct the performances of *Hernani* on a day to day basis,<sup>14</sup> this testimony is essential in deciding whether the performances were a success or a failure. This comment is in line with the letters of Juliette Drouet and with the theatre's register, thus invalidating the discourse of journalists opposed to the play.

My purpose here is not to counter the views of Hugo's critics nor to vindicate the play's importance, and to claim that the play was entirely successful. Rather, based on a historical approach, my aim is to gather as many facts as possible from reliable and objective sources. In March 1843, the production of *Les Burgraves* was an undeniable success: the significant audience the play had received led the Comédie-Française to consider producing it again in the following years, before 1902, when the play was eventually produced again for the centenary of Hugo's birth. Had its first production been an utter failure, the theatre would never have revived the play.

### ***The narrative construction of the 7<sup>th</sup> of March, 1843 as an event in textbooks***

The cabal did not prevent the audience from attending the 1843 performances, but it had tangible effects nonetheless, as the account of the play's premiere and the arguments put forward in the cabal against Hugo were taken up by school textbook authors in the following decades and throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The cabal of 1843 thus had a delayed effect: if the

reception of 1843 was in fact not as bad as often claimed, subsequent accounts led posterity to believe that it was so. The reception fabricated by the press campaign became Romanticism's black legend, advertising the myth of Hugo's theatrical failure.

It can be shown that the legend contrived in 1843 was often uncritically handed down by school textbooks. In fact, these textbooks often took up the very words used by the newspapers I mentioned. In nearly three out of four textbooks, among those I examined,<sup>15</sup> the 7<sup>th</sup> of March, 1843 is depicted as a remarkable event. This event is itself frequently designated as that of a "failure" (*échec, insuccès*), a "fall" (*chute*) or a "disaster" (*désastre, carrière lamentable*). Now, the word *chute* is actually a technical term for the deprogramming of a play after its premiere: thus, one can say that *Le Roi s'amuse* has fallen, for example. Since the original production of the play was performed more than thirty times, however, this cannot be said of *Les Burgraves* strictly speaking. Yet, textbook authors pay little attention to this technicality. In 1916, in a chapter dedicated to Hugo, Aubry, Audic and Crouzet mention the "fall" of *Les Burgraves* and go on to speak of a "failure".<sup>16</sup> Other authors tend to give a dramatic account of the alleged fall by their use of adjectives which make their interpretation of the 7<sup>th</sup> of March, 1843 all the more subjective: Julleville writes that the "failure was complete" (*l'insuccès fut complet*),<sup>17</sup> Mabileau speaks of a "resounding fall" (*chute retentissante*),<sup>18</sup> Strowski of an "irremediable fall" (*chute irrémédiable*)<sup>19</sup> and Rincé, Horville and Pagès of a "brutal failure" (*échec brutal*).<sup>20</sup> These textbooks belong to diverse historical periods, and yet they all repeat the same idea: the more recent textbooks manifestly followed what the previous ones had expounded, without questioning it or trying to prove it.

Yet the authors of textbooks did not content themselves with painting a grim picture of March 1843: they also interpreted the alleged downfall of the play as the failure of Romanticism as a whole, so that their reviews of *Les Burgraves* served at the same time as arguments aimed at demonstrating the necessity for Romantic drama to end. The date of 1843



thus came to be perceived as a watershed in literature history and to be used as a milestone in the periodization of the Romantic literary movement, as evidenced by Brunetière's statement in 1898: "the resounding fall (*la chute retentissante*) of *Les Burgraves* in 1843 (...) dealt Romantic drama a blow from which it has not recovered".<sup>21</sup>

Florence Naugrette has shown how the understanding of Romantic drama, according to such a short periodization (beginning in 1830 with the battle of *Hernani* and ending with the so-called fall of *Les Burgraves* in 1843), served the ideology of the French Third Republic, which looked unfavourably on Romantic aesthetics. The Romanticists were contrasted with Classical literature, which supposedly represented and embodied the French spirit.<sup>22</sup> The periodization of Romantic drama arguably answered a need for delivering the story of the quarrel between the Classicists and the Romanticists and to exhibit the triumph of the former over the latter.<sup>23</sup> The political significance of this opposition between the Classicists and the Romanticists is all the more important since, as Stéphane Zékian showed in *L'Invention des classiques*,<sup>24</sup> the 19th century was a crucial phase in the shaping of France as a nation, a process which involved the institution of a national heritage in which Classicism was dominant: taken as the model of the French genius, it was understood to reflect the triumph of the greatness of France. In this sense, classical works, which held the first place in the French literary canon of the 19th century,<sup>25</sup> were read not only as literary masterpieces, but also as ethical and political examples of virtue.

The 20<sup>th</sup> century did not question the myth of 1843, and thus continued to pass it down to generations of young pupils and students who read *Les Burgraves* with anti-Romantic prejudices directly inherited from the narrative set up in 1843.

### *The myth's consequences*

It was therefore difficult for 20<sup>th</sup> century productions or revivals of *Les Burgraves* to claim to offer a new reception of the play: the legacy of 1843 was heavy with the weight of a mortifying past. The audience of the 1902 and 1927 productions at the Comédie-Française, but also that of Antoine Vitez in 1977, was conditioned by the legend upheld by literature history. I shall now turn to this question.

### *The 1902 production at the Comédie-Française*

Between 1843 and 1902, the myth of the fall of *Les Burgraves* was constructed and strengthened: the stories told by journalists in 1843 were taken up in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century both by school textbook authors and by academics such as Camille Latreille in his 1899 dissertation, which validated and perpetuated the myth.<sup>26</sup> At the time of the revival of the play in 1902 at the Comédie-Française for the centenary of Hugo's birth, the legend of *Les Burgraves* was thus an integral part of the cultural discourse emanating from the school, the university and the theatrical world. The revival of the play by the official institution of the Comédie-Française did not reduce the scope of the myth, on the contrary: the journalists of 1902 constantly recalled the anecdotes of the rehearsals and performances of 1843, which, even if they were not confirmed by any source, constituted a discursive reality in which the readership and the audience believed. The myth was revived by these accounts of 1902, and although a few articles denounced the cabal and exhibited the lack of objectivity in these stories, they were very quickly forgotten. For instance, in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Jules Clarétie, Adolphe Aderer and Félix Duquesnel attempted to unravel how the play had been targeted by a political cabal in 1843<sup>27</sup>; but subsequent critics and textbook authors seem to have ignored their studies and never refer to them.

The revival on the occasion of the centenary was almost unanimously seen as a success by the press; however, it did not vindicate the play itself which, in the following decades, continued to be perceived as Hugo's theatrical failure. Three factors can account for such a contradiction: first, the myth was so deeply rooted that it survived the single event of Hugo's centenary; second, prejudices against Hugo's theatre and against Romantic drama conditioned the way the play was read and performed in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, so that it was impossible for it to find a new audience; lastly, the centenary was first and foremost an opportunity to celebrate Hugo himself, not *Les Burgraves*. This accounts for the paradoxical magnitude of the media coverage associated with the revival of 1902: the reason why the press talked about it as a major event had more to do with the author than with the play itself: the latter was used in order to glorify and sanctify the former. Between 1843 and 1902, Hugo himself had become a myth for the French nation: his social stance, his relentless struggle against the Second Empire, his exile, his triumphant return to France and his *panthéonisation* had made him one of the great men of the Republic. Although he was still a divisive figure in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, surrounded with as much controversy as with admiration, he was generally seen as an honourable figure and as a symbol of the nation. The national consensus about Hugo distinguishes the performances of 1843 from those of 1902: in the 1840s, Hugo was beginning his political career and public opinion about him was divided; in 1902, the revival of *Les Burgraves* was part of a number of official ceremonies, and became a great patriotic celebration in honour of the national poet. The 1902 performances at the Comédie-Française were thus an event that critics remembered throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century as constituting a key moment in the process leading to the patrimonialisation of Hugo in France. Among the few occasions on which the play or the staging were mentioned for themselves, it was less to vindicate Hugo's work than to celebrate the splendour of the performances, which constituted one of the greatest theatrical festivals of the Comédie-Française.

The revival was also an important date in the reception of *Les Burgraves*, since the play had not been performed for nearly sixty years, precisely because of the myth of its downfall. Curiosity was therefore paramount in 1902: made famous by its alleged failure, the play attracted audiences and critics alike.

However, many press articles from 1902 begin their account by bringing to mind the performances of 1843, sometimes without mentioning the staging of 1902, as is for instance the case of an article published in *La Fronde* on the 15<sup>th</sup> of February, 1902. Further, their obsession with 1843 led some newspapers to transcribe accounts of what had happened then without questioning the source of such testimonies: on the 26<sup>th</sup> of February, 1902, for example, *Le Figaro* devoted an article to the play based on an excerpt from Philoxène Boyer's *Études politiques et littéraires sur Le Rhin et Les Burgraves*, whose author speaks of the premiere of 1843 as if he had personally attended it. In truth, Mr. Boyer, born in 1829, was 13 years old at the time of the premiere, which certainly casts doubt on the accuracy of his testimony.

By repeating the same unverified anecdotes and stressing time and again the significance of the events of 1843, these press articles provided Hugo's critics with a new audience sixty years after their first attack and thus helped to reinforce the myth of the fall of *Les Burgraves*, as the accounts given in the newspapers followed and resembled one another, and referred to the same anecdotes as those told in 1843.<sup>28</sup>

#### *Vitez's staging in 1977*

The same stories were told in 1977, when Antoine Vitez produced the first staging of *Les Burgraves* since the revival of the play at the Comédie-Française in 1902. The 1843 reception of the play, in 1977, was still understood as it was in 1902: many journalists begin their articles by recounting the legend of the play "whose reputation is known".<sup>29</sup> As in the

press reviews of 1902, and as it had been the case in school textbooks for a century and a half, the same anecdotes were repeated again and again, but none of these authors tried to investigate the source of the stories they told. The programme published by the Maison de la Culture d'Amiens during the tour, for example, repeated word for word the story usually told by literature history: in 1843, " la pièce est représentée à un public qui commence à délaisser le drame romantique pour se rallier au drame bourgeois, et c'est un échec. Victor Hugo en souffre et abandonne le théâtre (...)." <sup>30</sup> This assessment dates back to 1843 and corresponds the myth of an irrevocable failure: the words "failure" (*échec*, *four*) or "fall" were found in most reviews of 1977. <sup>31</sup> Thus, *Les Burgraves* was never received in an unprejudiced way: "the title alone is often known to the general public", <sup>32</sup> but not for the same reasons as are those of *Le Misanthrope*, *Phèdre* or *Le Cid*. These three plays belong to the school and literary canon; on the contrary, *Les Burgraves* seems to have been doomed from the start never to become part of it. Some journalists even admitted that the play was known to them only as one example among "la cohorte de souvenirs scolaires " <sup>33</sup>: the story of *Les Burgraves* represents " le typique exemple de cette petite histoire littéraire dont nos professeurs étaient friands, jadis ", <sup>34</sup> says Matthieu Galey, in reference to the way literature was taught before Structuralism, at a time, that is, when material peripheral to the work would sometimes take precedence over the text. This mixed assessment of academic discourse shows that a slight shift had already taken place, in 1977, in the way the myth of the fall of *Les Burgraves* was received: in contrast to the beginning of the century, many were aware that this was a story told by the institution, whose grounds were not perfectly certain. Nevertheless, the consequences of this legend still endured, in particular in the idea that Hugo's plays were unfit for the theatre.

In the way the play was received in 1977, therefore, appraisals stemming from the cabal of 1843 still persisted, and these in turn conditioned the reception of Vitez's own staging. Beyond the consequences it had on the definition and on the periodization of

Romanticism, the myth of the fall of *Les Burgraves* led to the belief that Hugo's theatre and a great part of the Romantic theatre would be "impossible"<sup>35</sup> or "unplayable".<sup>36</sup> Another play of Hugo's, of course, was held to be still less "playable": *Cromwell*. But contrary to *Les Burgraves*, when he was writing *Cromwell*, Hugo was well aware that he would not be able to stage it. Furthermore, if it is true that school textbooks very often refer to this play as a cornerstone of Romantic aesthetics, the play itself is not as highly regarded as its preface. Such a prejudice is based on a number of clichés about Romantic drama: the length and slowness of its plot, the large number of its characters, its immorality, its implausibility, and the undramatic nature of its action. These preconceived notions led teachers and directors alike to neglect Hugolian and Romantic theatre for much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and *Les Burgraves* suffered from a reputation that was for a time even worse than that of *Ruy Blas* and *Lucrece Borgia*. One element which contributed to make *Les Burgraves* unplayable to the eyes of many was its peculiar epic style. Although this specificity of *Les Burgraves* cannot be denied, it was often caricatured by the critical discourse. The term *epic* used in this context refers both to a genre (the epic) and to a register (or tonality). These two meanings overlap and sometimes merge. According to Judith Wulf, "comme le tragique, le comique ou encore le dramatique, l'épique tire de son statut de registre la propriété de bénéficiaire des ressources du genre auquel il est attaché tout en échappant, du moins en partie, à ses contraintes"<sup>37</sup> : this makes it difficult to define precisely what 19<sup>th</sup> century critics meant by this word. According to Aristotle, the epic is distinguished from tragedy by the narrative that it sets up and by the greater freedom it shows in the use of temporality<sup>38</sup> : by definition, the epic genre would thus be opposed to, since less regulated and codified than the dramatic genre. This lack of respect for generic boundaries is largely what Hugo was reproached for by critics: Hugo casts his play in an epic mould and accumulates the narrative passages, they argue, thereby neglecting the action and the dramatic interest. The epic also relies on the use of the irrational and of the

marvellous, both of which are found in the "dispositif légendaire"<sup>39</sup> which earned *Les Burgraves* its reputation of being unplayable. Hugo's use of the legendary, his critics argue, would have unsuitable aesthetic consequences; in particular, it would prevent any plausibility in terms of time, space, characters and situations. On the one hand, it is argued that such a procedure leads Hugo to play with the limits of the dramatic genre and turns the drama into the epic; on the other hand, the legend is said to entail a writing process belonging to what can be identified as the epic *register* (distortion, accumulation, amplification thanks to hyperboles, poetic plurals and superlatives). Many critics therefore claimed that the 1843 drama was unplayable precisely because of its epic vein, which they considered inexplicable or which they could not imagine on the stage. They thus used the word "epic" in order to question the play itself: to say that the play is epic means to deny it any dramatic value, and this apparently neutral generic characterization thus contains an implicitly axiological judgment. Critics thus had trouble coming to terms with the epic dimension at play in *Les Burgraves*, and such a difficulty was not solved until the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when the revival of Hugolian studies made significant breakthrough into the understanding of Hugo's conception of drama.<sup>40</sup>

In 1977, the play was very often described in this way by journalists and *Les Burgraves* continued to be perceived as a dramatic aberration. For instance, Vitez's choice to stage this play raised many questions in the press and the word "unplayable" is one of the most frequently used adjectives in the 1977-1978 reviews.<sup>41</sup> Interestingly, however, it was employed just as much by the detractors of Vitez, Hugo and *Les Burgraves* as by their defenders. As we will see, all begin their reviews with the idea that the play is unplayable, but while the former conclude that Vitez's staging only confirms the verdict of literature history, the latter show that Vitez successfully frees Hugo's play from its bad reputation. For the former, the play is essentially unplayable and Vitez's willingness to stage it is indefensible;

for the latter, on the contrary, it would finally pass the test and Vitez's daring undertaking is in fact successful.

These reviews thus tend to present Vitez's staging as a test that Hugo and his play would have to take. If both the audience and the critics seemed to take an interest in this production, it was perhaps less because of Hugo's play than because of Vitez's reputation, for whom some journalists had high hopes. Many spectators were nonetheless disappointed by this revival, which could have vindicated the play thanks to its director's public stature. In the very first lines of his article in *Le Figaro* (11/24/1977), Pierre Marcabru claims that the play has failed: " Bon ! C'est entendu. *Les Burgraves* sont injouables."<sup>42</sup> Such bad appraisals are aimed at Hugo but also at Vitez, since the producer does not seem capable of saving *Les Burgraves*: Dominique Jamet thus asks " Est-il décidément possible de réhabiliter *Les Burgraves* ?" and concludes: "Nous le saurons une autre fois" (*Le Journal du Dimanche*, 11/27/1977). For this critic, Hugo's text is "sombre et tarabiscoté", "énorme, titanesque, abracadabrant". Only a director as talented as Vitez could take on such a play, but he only succeeds in "ridiculer [*sic*] une pièce injouable".<sup>43</sup> Both the playwright and the producer thus end up wearing the dunce's cap: they are described as black sheep of French literature and theatre, good for little more than the amusement of their detractors. This judgment passed on *Les Burgraves* is sometimes extended to Hugo's theatre as a whole. On the one hand, these remarks prove that contempt for Hugo's theatre was still widespread in 1977; on the other hand, they created a wider audience for the academic discourse that had been conveying this prejudice for nearly a century and a half. The material on which Hugo's detractors had been basing their attacks ever since the 1840s thus reappeared in the press reviews of 1977: the play would be a mere melodrama or at best an epic poem, not a dramatic work worthy of the name; it would consist exclusively in exaggerated, disproportionate and implausible elements; finally, its verses, though they are judged sublime, are said to be excessively pompous



nonetheless.<sup>44</sup> In a word, the reception of 1977 bears the mark of the original event of 1843 and Vitez's staging was judged according to the way *Les Burgraves* was presented by literature history.

This is precisely what prompted Vitez's interest in the play. His decision to stage a play that had been considered for nearly a century and a half as the perfect example of an anti-theatrical form, was deliberately unsettling, and he was explicitly interested in unplayable, "énorme" works or plays that seemed "hors de la norme"<sup>45</sup>. Interrupted during an interview on France Culture by Michel Bydlowski, who was reasserting the traditional anti-Hugolian prejudice - "oui mais on dit que Hugo est injouable" - Vitez replied, with provocation: "c'est justement cela qui m'intéresse. Ce qu'il y a de meilleur chez Victor Hugo, c'est ce qu'il y a de plus mauvais."<sup>46</sup> He explains this paradox by proposing a hierarchy of Hugo's works that entirely contradicts that given by literature history: *Ruy Blas* is often considered one of Hugo's best plays - and Vitez claims that this is what most journalists often tell him - but, for the director, it would "merely" be a well-constructed and well-executed work. On the contrary, the most interesting plays are for him those in which the playwright gave free rein to his fantasies: in *Les Burgraves*, for instance, Hugo made room for excess, for the extraordinary, for the implausible and for the dream of extreme old age. Vitez thus did not seek to vindicate the work by ignoring the alleged flaws it had been criticized for: on the contrary, he made them the primary interest of the play.

The idea that *Les Burgraves* is unplayable was reinforced by the extremely daring, disconcerting and iconoclastic nature of Vitez's work, which broke with previous stagings and which many critics did not understand or support. Vitez approached the epic character of the play by calling upon many dramatic devices in order to reveal Hugo's "onirism". With *Les Burgraves*, everything becomes possible: a young actor can represent a ninety-years-old woman, five actors play twenty-seven characters, Guanhumara the witch is interpreted by a

man (Pierre Vial), a giant hand comes out of the ground, the verse is dislocated, the lines are shared between all the actors, the language is jostled and the audience is unsettled.

In spite of the innovative character of this staging, which was acclaimed by some (especially Hugo specialists<sup>47</sup>), the critiques it received remained the same as in 1843 and 1902: *Les Burgraves* should be left outside the theatrical and literary world. The perception of the play was therefore still strongly influenced by the history and legend of its reception in 1843.

### ***Conclusion***

The myth of the fall of *Les Burgraves*, whose reception was constructed and narrated by the detractors of Hugo and of Romantic drama, as well as its consequences on the subsequent reception of the play, allows us to reflect on the notion of event and, more specifically, on the notion of theatrical event: what defines an event? How does it come to be memorable or remembered? Through what channels is the memory of the event of a reception in theatre constructed? The theatrical performance is an ephemeral event, and, as Vitez explains, "on n'en garde au mieux que des traces, des photos, des bandes magnétiques, des récits, et les témoignages du temps dans les journaux; l'œuvre elle-même s'efface. [...] Ce qui reste, c'est la mémoire de l'événement."<sup>48</sup> For almost a century and a half, all that remained of *Les Burgraves* was the memory of its fall. But today, the archives have shown how wrong this memory was: financial registers, testimonies long forgotten by literature history and now unearthed (such as the letters of Juliette Drouet or the diary of the actress M<sup>lle</sup> Mars), as well as the prompter's manuscript – all show that the play did not fall and that the memory of the event must be reconsidered.

Yet, however successful they may have been in fact, the first performances of *Les Burgraves* also met with reproof benefiting from a remarkably strong media campaign,

which resulted in the subsequent myth of the play's downfall. Such a myth was then perpetuated and bolstered by posterity on the unilateral basis of the detractors' account. In this process, sources of the contrary opinion were either silenced or forgotten. This example shows that literary events sometimes happen retrospectively: they are constructed by the discourse that is held on them. At first largely fantasised or mainly discursive, they acquire an existence through the very real consequences of such discourses, which thereby provide themselves with the means of their own confirmation. In this respect, one can indeed speak of a failure of *Les Burgraves* and speak of the cabal of 1843 as a "self-fulfilling prophecy"<sup>49</sup>: before, during and after its first performances, the play was clouded by such a mist of disapproving rumours that it was later doomed to oblivion or to a very bad reputation in literature history at least. It thus never could enter the canon studied at school or produced on the stage. What matters, then, is not so much whether or not *Les Burgraves* fell on the 7<sup>th</sup> of March, 1843, but why and how literature history has constructed and retained the event of their fall. It is necessary to dismantle and to deconstruct the narrative of this event in order to try to free its future perception from the prejudices conveyed until now by literature history.

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  8. Ubersfeld Anne. [1974] 2001. *Le Roi et le bouffon*. Paris, Corti. 263.
  9. This was in fact the figure Hugo pretended to endorse in his "Réponse à un acte d'accusation", "Suite" and "Quelques mots à un autre". *Les Contemplations (Œuvres complètes : Poésie II)*. 1985. Paris, Robert Laffont, 263-268-290).
  10. See Christophe Bertiau. "Racine contre Shakespeare : François Ponsard et le tropisme "moderne" de l'histoire littéraire". *CONTEXTES*, 27/2020.



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11. See, for instance, Paploray Olivia. *Des Burgraves à la mort de Léopoldine : le public et l'intime. Lettres du 1<sup>er</sup> janvier 1843 au 10 juillet 1843*. Defended in 2009. Masters thesis presented, Université de Rouen. See also 2019. "La saison des *Burgraves* (1843)". *Juliette Drouet épistolière*, proceedings of the symposium in Paris 16-17 octobre 2017, Florence Naugrette and Françoise Simonet-Tenant (ed.). Paris, Eurédit. 89-100. The other letters of Juliette Drouet are currently being digitalized under the supervision of Florence Naugrette. See [juliettedrouet.org](http://juliettedrouet.org) (visited 06/26/2021).

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these works are of equal importance in the history of pedagogy": when going through the textbooks, one must keep in mind that those of Lagarde and Michard, for example, as well as the *Textes français* by Chevaillier and Audiat, have been more widely read than the literary histories by Fortunat Strowski and have been used by teachers for many decades. The publication of textbooks does not necessarily mean that they were immediately used in the classroom: this may explain why the myth of the fall of *Les Burgraves* persisted for so long in school discourse, even after it was no longer mentioned by academic research, on which textbooks are mostly based.

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28. See, for instance, the following issues : *Le Journal*, 02/05/1902 ; *L'Express* (Mulhouse), 02/25/1902 ; *Le Gaulois*, 02/26/1902 ; *Le Journal des débats*, 02/28/1902
29. *Art Press*, January 1978.
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31. See, for instance, Jamet Dominique. "Hue-go, Vite-aise". *L'Aurore*, 11/24/1977 : « le four mémorable des *Burgraves* en 1843 – incontestablement le bide du siècle » ; J. Poulet, « V. Hugo, bravo ! », *Découvrir*, 12/19/1977 : « l'échec le plus retentissant de Victor Hugo » ; C. Desbois, *Courrier de l'Ouest*, 03/11/1978 : « épopée hugolienne, qui acheva la carrière dramatique du père Victor. Sur un échec. ».
32. *Progrès de Lyon*, 02/01/1978.
33. "*Les Burgraves* : une révolution colossale de la mise en scène". *Le Dauphiné libéré*, 02/09/1978.
34. Galey Matthieu. *Le Quotidien de Paris*. 11/24/1977.

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35. We borrow this phrase from the study by Dost Bernadette, Louette Jean-François, Vibert Bertrand. 2005. *Impossibles théâtres XIX<sup>e</sup>-XX<sup>e</sup> siècles*. Paris, Éditions Comp-Act.
36. About this term, see the special issue Alice Folco and Séverine Ruset. 2015. "L'injouable au théâtre", *Revue d'histoire du théâtre*, 2015-III, n°267.
37. Wulf Judith, entry « Épique », *Dictionnaire Victor Hugo*, available on [http://victoradudemanager.ouvaton.org/DVH\\_Textes\\_def/Epique\\_Wulf\\_def.htm](http://victoradudemanager.ouvaton.org/DVH_Textes_def/Epique_Wulf_def.htm) (visited 06/10/2021).
38. See Aristote, *Poetics*, 1449b. For a theoretical and critical overview of literary genre, see Stalloni Yves. 1997. *Les Genres littéraires*. Paris, Armand Colin. 59-64.
- 39 Millet Claude. 1997. *Le Légendaire au XIXe siècle : poésie, mythe et vérité*, Presses Universitaires de France. 5.
40. Among others, see Ubersfeld Anne. [1974] 2001. *Le Roi et le Bouffon : essai sur le théâtre de Hugo*. Paris, José Corti.
- 41 .See, for instance, " « Les forçats du théâtre », à propos des *Burgraves* de Victor Hugo", article quoted above ; "Quand Vitez rêve des *Burgraves*", *Le Figaro*, 03/17/1978 ; "Un cauchemar sur la vieillesse", *Le Matin de Paris*, 11/22/1977 ; *Art Press*, January 1978. The word "impossible" is also used by critics to refer to Hugo's play : see, for instance, "Le jeu avec l'impossible", *Ouest-France*, 02/23/1978.
42. The title of Marcabru's review already indicates the meaning of this appraisal : "Antoine Vitez ou le terrorisme du n'importe quoi !", *Le Figaro*, 11/24/1977.
43. Jamet Dominique. *Le Journal du dimanche*, 11/27/1977.
44. See, for instance, *Études*, March 1978 : "mélodrame conventionnel" ; *Le Quotidien de Paris*, 11/24/1977 : "un mélodrame démultiplié", "l'extravagance du cataclysme ou de la parodie" ; "Un pied de nez à Hugo", *L'Informé*, 11/24/1977 ; "Et dans le décor. Pourquoi d'un drame-corrída de Hugo faire une charlotade et se croire obligé de « compléter » Labiche ?",

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*Le Nouvel observateur*, 12/05/1977 : "drame grandiloquent, absurde" ; *La Nouvelle république du Centre-Ouest*, 03/08/1978 : " mélodrame extravagant" ; *Courrier de l'Ouest*, 03/11/1978 : "cocktail indigeste", "la pièce – mais en est-ce vraiment une – est écrite en vers avec une langue superbe [...]."

45. Antoine Vitez, interviewed for Alain Leblanc in *Le Quotidien de Paris*, 11/17/1977.

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