

Translating Labyrinths: Victor Hugo and Octave Mirbeau

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When I was asked to translate two Victor Hugo plays for Methuen, the editor Claude Schumacher said that he wanted something between the *literal* and the *performable*. This is one reason why the resulting translation of Hugo's *Ruy Blas* (1838) is in prose and not in the rhyming Alexandrine couplets of the original. Retaining Hugo's compelling and strict rhyming pattern in translation would have maintained, as it were, the *rhythm and pulse* of the original but not the closeness of semantic *meaning* or the *myth* of the text. "Myth" is used here in the sense of an underlying core of meaning – or what a Russian Formalist such as Boris Tomashevsky would define as "story" (as opposed to "plot") – the essence which persists and survives through any variation, adaptation or translation. Of course, maybe such a concept is a fallacy: a myth in the sense of its more popular usage – pure fantasy. But as a translator of plays that you hope will not only be read but put on the stage you have to believe in something and metempsychosis is as good an ethos as any.

When translating plays I find I need to put the works into context, so a great deal of the groundwork is reading around the authors in cultural, historical and – perhaps most problematically – biographical context. Victor Hugo (1802-85) and Octave Mirbeau (1848-1917) are writers of different generations and yet they crossover and share parallels. Hugo and Mirbeau remain powerful voices of provocation and criticism; both are now neglected playwrights despite enjoying huge success in their own times; yet in terms of generic translation Hugo's novels *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* and *Les Misérables* remain favourites of adaptation and Mirbeau's novel *Diary of a Chambermaid* has the privilege of being adapted to the screen by both Jean Renoir and Luis Buñuel. Central to both writers' careers as playwrights is Paris. The French capital was the focus of their theatrical activities and success. And this city helped to translate these complex playwrights; to negotiate contexts; to locate themes.

All cities have a nexus of death, locations which signify the mortality of its urbanites: for London it is Highgate Cemetery and the patches of grass that were medieval plague pits; for New York City it is Ground Zero. For Paris it is the Cemeteries and the Catacombs. The linking of *l'amour* and *la mort* in French has become a cliché, but in Parisian culture there is a constant

interplay and exchange between the erotic and death: these are themes of profound significance in the drama of Hugo and Mirbeau. In the monumental *Paris Arcades Project*, Walter Benjamin unearths the labyrinths of Parisian culture whether it is by following the journey of the *flâneur* into the “dark” labyrinths that wormhole beneath the City of Light; or among the prostitutes who plied their trade in cemeteries and created a sexual argot of funereal terminologies.

Hugo and Mirbeau are Thesean guides to these unsettling labyrinths. Hugo’s *Lucretia Borgia* (1833) can still be arresting with its themes of incest and perverse irony: resolutely showing us the face of Thanatos when we are expecting Eros; refusing redemption and opting for annihilation. Similarly, Isidore Lechat in Mirbeau’s satire *Business is Business* (1903) is one of the most diabolical characters in French drama: a tragic Faust in love with money, power and desire itself but hopelessly lost in a godless and anarchistic universe.

Translation can never be in isolation but builds on and emerges from contexts, histories and other parallel or contrary narratives. The special feature of translating drama is that one creates works that continue to be ceaselessly adapted, reworked and reopened for realisation on the stage.

Richard J. Hand is Professor of Theatre and Media Drama at the University of Glamorgan, Wales. In the area of French theatre, his translations include *Lucretia Borgia* and *Ruy Blas* in *Victor Hugo: Plays* (Methuen, 2004); ten plays in *Grand-Guignol: the French Theatre of Horror* (co-written with Michael Wilson), “Studies in Performance” Series, University of Exeter Press (2002); and a forthcoming volume *Octave Mirbeau: Selected Plays*. He is currently directing a production of *Lucretia Borgia* which will open at the Gatehouse Theatre in London as part of the 2007 International Victor Hugo Festival.