

Victor Hugo as a Reader of the *Edda* : "*Han d'Islande*"

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1. On the 12th March 1823 Charles Nodier on a review of the anonymous novel *Han d'Islande*, published a few weeks beforehand, for the Parisina paper *La Quotidienne*, presented the author as a sure rival to Ch.R.Maturin and claimed that he had effected «une bonne lecture de l'*Edda* et de l'histoire» (quoted in *Victor Hugo raconté* II p. 220). The novel was then re-published in July of the same year with a preface by the author himself. The critical edition published by B.Levilliot in 1981 is based on this second edition.

The most important among the various subjects Hugo dealt with in this novel is undoubtedly the strange story of Han d'Islande himself. According to Hugo's account, Han was a semi-human monster coming from Iceland and living in the Norwegian mountains in the late 17th century. Han used to drink in his father's skull the blood of men he killed during his raids against the Danish King's soldiers in order to avenge his son's death.

The evidence that Nodier gives of Hugo's having read the *Edda* before writing the novel is of primary importance as it comes from a person who was close to Hugo; the epigraph to chapter 44 in the 1st edition (from Kotzebue) was in fact later substituted by Hugo by a saying of Nodier's «c'était le malheur qui les rendait égaux». On the other hand some of the chapters in Hugo's novel have epigraphic quotes from *Edda*, which should be proof enough that Hugo read it. Notwithstanding this the critics do not seem to have ever closely examined in what ways *Han d'I.* may have been influenced by the *Edda*.

In reality *Han d'Islande* did not encounter great favour on the critic's part although it was quickly and greatly appreciated by the reading public. It is a work which belongs to the author's youth when Hugo was influenced by the gothic novels of Sir Walter Scott, above all, (whom Hugo discusses in *La Muse française* in the same year) and Maturin, the author of *Melmoth the Wanderer* (1820), whom Nodier mentioned. There are no doubts about the influence of this genre, which was so fashionable at the time, on Hugo's work. It is also significant that he revisited some of the ideas taken up in his

brother Abel's novel *Bardon le Roux* (1821). These aspects have been treated by BROMBERT, BARRERE, MESCHONNIC and others (on the success of this genre see also HARTLAND). Critics have also examined the most typical of Hugo's traits in *Han d'I.* - which pre-announce his greater works: see FRIEDEMANN; SIMAIKA; IMPERT; ALBOUY (see also the dissertations by O'CONNOR and INAGAKI 1981, and INAGAKI 1984). Much less attention has been dedicated to the historical and Northern mythological sources by which Hugo must certainly have been inspired.

In the context of the novel's narrative several ancient sources are mentioned : "Thormodus Thorfoeus" (chapters 6 and 46); "le professeur Schoenning" (chapters 1 and 22); "Saemond-Sigfusson" (chapter 8); "l'évêque Arngrim" (chapter 46); "l'évêque Isleif" (chapters 1, 22 and 46), and also "Snorro Sturleson" (chapter 6) and "Saxon le grammairien" (chapter 46). These are obviously not direct sources as they are almost all rather heavy-going treatises, some of which are in Danish. Hugo took almost all these names from the first volume of MALLET's *Histoire de Dannemark, the Introduction à l'histoire de Dannemark où l'on traite de la religion, des lois, des mœurs et des usages des ancien Danois*, published in 1755 in Copenhagen and re-published (together with the other volumes) in Paris and Geneva (the work was translated in English in 1770). This was the main source used by Hugo regarding the ancient historical background to *Han d'I.*, as clearly demonstrated by PEES by a sequence of accurate items. Another source that Hugo definitely used for its geographical information was the French translation of FABRICIUS. Both of these sources had been indicated, before PEES, by ETIENNE (1923) - as he himself points out in a note published in the very same journal publishing PEES' article, see ETIENNE 1929. He also mentions the 1788 Paris edition by MALLET, which Hugo used.

Mallet is the «point de départ obligé, là encore, de la diffusion de toutes choses scandinaves en France» (see BOYER 1972 p. 41; or in more detail BOYER 1965; see also CASTREN). The *Edda* also owes much of its fortune in France to Mallet. The second volume of his *Histoire* (1756) consists, in fact, of a translation of the *Edda*, entitled *Monuments de la mythologie et de la poésie des Celtes et particulièrement des anciens Scandinaves* (the idea that the Scandinavians were Celts was, however, quite common at that time). This volume was later published with the title *Edda ou monuments de la mythologie et de la poésie des anciens peuples du Nord* (the third part of the *Histoire*, in 3 volumes, is actually a history of Denmark). This is the version of the *Edda*, that Hugo read and, as is to be expected, he took account of his reading it when composing *Han*

d'l. This is what we shall be attempting to demonstrate in what follows.

2. Victor Hugo showed great interest and curiosity in the Scandinavian languages and the Old-Norse mythology and antiquities. It is more than probable that the Scandinavian languages (so different in phonetics and vocabulary from French) seemed to him a picturesque background for his novel. In the preface to the first edition in January 1823 he writes that the author «se bornera seulement à faire remarquer que la partie pittoresque de son roman a été l'objet d'un soin particulier; qu'on y rencontre fréquemment des K, des Y, des H et des W, quoqu'il n'ait jamais employés ces caractères romantiques qu'avec une extrême sobriété, témoin le nom historique de *Guldenlew*, que plusieurs chroniqueurs écrivent *Guldenloëwe*, ce qu'il n'a pas osé se permettre; qu'on y trouve également de nombreuses diphtongues variées avec beaucoup de goût ed d'élégance».

As far as the name of Han is concerned, it is possible that Hugo took the name of the character from two Old-Norse words: 'hann' is the masculine personal pronoun, like 'he', which might be an evocative name for the Devil as a mysterious and indescribable entity, of which one must speak only indirectly and allusively. Han would besides allude to a 'cock' ('hani' in Icelandic), see CLEASBY s.vv. *Hann* and *Hani*. The cock received great importance in Germanic mythology, as we may assume from many items of the *Edda* with their several mythical names. In fact in the Old-Norse mythical world, alongside several roosters of shining golden feathering in the heavens and in the superior world, there is also a smutty red cock which crows in the underworld of the dead (in Hel), see *Völuspá* 43.

There are also some other fictional names, the origin of which could be derived from the Old-Norse mythology and antiquities. We quote here only that of Turiaf Musdæmon, the diabolic servant of the Chancellor count Ahlefeld. It is clear that *dæmon* is the correspondent of the Danish *dæmon*, Swedish and Norwegian *demon*, i.e. 'the demon'; 'mus' could refer to the Icelandic *mús*, i. e. 'a mouse', but also to the first part of *Múspell*, the 'abode of fire', which is quoted in the *Völuspá*. The false name of *Haket*, that Musdæmon assumed in order to organize the rising of the miners, is a name that speaks for itself, as it means 'a hook' and indicates the sly and treacherous behaviour of the man, see Icelandic 'haki', which is also a mythical proper name, Danish 'hage' and Swedish 'hake'.

In short, we think that a closer and wider inquiry into the proper names of the novel would cast some light on Hugo's linguistic and cultural background.

3. *Han d'I.*, ch. 6 : «Et moi, je n'aurai pas en mourant la consolation de penser qu'un héritier de l'âme d'Ingolphe boira dans mon crâne le sang des hommes et l'eau des mers».

The name Ingolf also derived from Hugo's readings of Iceland's ancient history, as in the Book of the Settlement (*Landnámabók*) we find none other than Ingólfr, who is said to be the best known of all the settlers, as he was the first man to arrive in Iceland, when the country was uninhabited. All the other settlers followed his example. There is, however, no proof of Hugo having read this ancient text - more probably he deduced the name from some historical treatises because it was symbolic of a genealogical aristocracy.

Among the classical sources Herodotus witnessed the ancestral custom of the North-Eastern peoples of keeping the skulls of the dead and transforming them into a worshipped object. When the skull belonged to the father or nearest of kin to one of Issedones, it was turned into a sacred relic (*ἄγαλμα*), see bk. 4, ch. 26 «as for his head, they strip it bare and cleanse and gild it, and keep it for a sacred relic, whereto they offer yearly solemn sacrifice»; differently to the Issedones, the Scythians transformed the skulls of their foes into cups, following in the proceeding an established hierarchy, see bk. 4, ch. 65 : «The heads themselves, not of all but of their bitterest foes, they treat in this wise. Each saws off all the part beneath the eyebrows, and cleanses the rest. If he be a poor man, then he does but cover the outside with a piece of raw hide, and so makes use of it; but if he be rich, he covers the head with the raw hide, and gilds the inside of it and so uses it for a drinking-cup. Such cups a man makes also of the head of his own kinsman with whom he has been at feud, and whom he has vanquished in single combat before the king; and if guests whom he honours visit him he will serve them with these heads, and show how the dead were his kinsfolk who made war upon him and were worsted by him; this they call manly valour» (transl. A.D.Godley). We find the same account in the *Chorographia* of Mela, see 2,1,9, *capita ubi fabre expolivere* [scil. *Essedones*] *auro vincta pro poculis gerunt tredecim pocula ut Essedones parentium ita inimicissimorum capitibus expoliunt*.

Concerning the Germanic sources of the rite of the skull (see BOBERG C13: "the offended skull"), we quote Paulus Diaconus' *Historia Langobardorum*, see 1,27, *in eo proelio Alboin Cunimundum occidit, caputque illius sublatum, ad bibendum ex eo poculo fecit*.

Quod genus poculi apud eos 'scala' dicitur, lingua vero Latina patera vocitatur, and some references from the *Edda*, as the *Völundarkvidha* 24, «he [*scil.* Völund, the blacksmith] cut the heads off those young boys / and threw their feet into the furnace. / But their skulls, which were beneath their hair / he mounted in silver and gave them to Nidhudh», and again 35, «their skulls, which were beneath their hair / I mounted in silver and sent to Nidhudh», and the *Atlamál in Groenlenzku* 82, : «You lost your sons as you would never have supposed / you see their skulls turned into cups / I prepared the drink thus; I mixed in their blood». Nodier's hypothesis that Hugo gathered the pattern from his Old-Norse readings, and especially from the *Edda*, would be confirmed by these references.

4. A character such as Han, to whom Hugo has given depth as a romantic rebel with a wild melancholic nature cannot die by the hand of the executioner, as sentenced by the court, the fate that awaited the despicable Musdæmon. Hugo therefore planned an extraordinary death for him. When Han is in the jail waiting to die , he asks for straw and fire, with which he says, he wants to warm himself at night, but which will be used in order to set the barracks of the whole garrison of Munckhom's harquebusiers in Drontheim on fire, crowning his desire for revenge and at the same time providing a tragic ending to a novel based on the theme of rebellion.

Thus we read in Hugo's text: «Un immense incendie, accru per la violence du vent d'est, dévorait la prison militaire et la caserne des arquebusiers. La flamme, poussée en tourbillons, rampait autour des murs de pierre, couronnait les toits ardents, sortait comme d'une bouche des fenêtres dévorées; et les noirs tours de Munckholm tantôt se rougissaient d'une clarté sinistre, tantôt disparaissaient dans d'épais nuages de fumée [...] La flamme victorieuse embrassait tout l'édifice [...] toute la charpente embrasée du toit de la caserne s'écrouta avec un long fracas sur les infortunés soldats, entraînant dans sa chute les combles et les étages incendiés. L'édifice entier disparut alors dans un tourbillon de poussière enflammée et de fumée ardente».

Now, if one accepts that Hugo read the translation of the *Edda*, a comparison may then be made with the final scene of the *Twilight of the Gods (ragnarök)*, which ends with a great fire, the land sinking into the sea and the stars falling from the sky when the giant of fire, Surtr, the Black, comes for this final burning which will destroy the world, see *Völuspá* 52, «Surtr comes from the South with the fire [...] boulders fall [...] the men leave for Hel and the sky is split in two», and 57, «the smoke and fire rage together / the tall

flames mock the very sky»; Surtr is probably to be identified in other Norse texts with *Brandingi*, as 'he who sets fire'. The fact that Surtr is a mythological figure known only in Iceland (the *Surtshellir* cave) and most probably a personification of the Island's underground volcanic activity suggests that the juxtaposition of demon and nature, revealed in both the volcanic features of the territory and in Han's very character, make up another side to the plot in Hugo's novel, alongside the love story of Ordener and Ethel in the context of a historical novel based on the vicissitudes of Schuhmacker (see BOBERG K812: "Victim burned in his own house"; K950: "Various kinds of treacherous murder"; K955: "Murder by burning").

5. The character of Han, as described by Hugo, is clearly the last literary product of the demonization of Iceland. This pattern first started up in a national modern literature in the 13th century with the "Feats of the Danish people" (*Gesta Danorum*) by Saxo Grammaticus and fully established itself in the 16th century through the Nordic encyclopaedia, the *Historia de gentibus Septentrionalibus*, first issued in Rome in 1555 by the archbishop of Upsala, the great Swedish writer Olaus Magnus (Olaf Månsson). However, some patterns of demonization of the Iceland had been already in progress since ancient Greek times, when people believed (see Claudianus *In Rufinum* bk. 3 ll. 123-128; Procopius *De bello Gothico* bk. 4 par. 48 foll.) the land of the hereafter was placed in this island on the border of the world. This fact was certainly known, at least by hearsay, through the explorers' accounts, because of its distance from human society, exceptional darkness of the sky (see Plinius *Naturalis historia* bk.2 par.186) and active vulcanism of the earth.

Everybody knows that it was at the end of the 4th century B.C. that the great Greek navigator Pitheas first hinted at an island lying on the farthest North of England that he named Thule (i.e. probably 'the *Fjorde* '). But it was only in the middle Ages that the present Iceland was definitely identified with Thule, first A.D 825, by the Irish monk Dicuil in his "Book on the Measurement of the World" (*Liber de mensura orbis terrae*).

Anyhow, throughout the ancient world nobody knew anything else about Iceland except that it was the land that lay at the farthest North-West of the world, where volcanos were glowing, the sun set and where darkness came from: and - as would have it the popular misconception - the gates of Hell opened on darkness and fire, as wrote Olaus Magnus: «The island is famous because of many

strange miracles. There is there a rocky promontory (as quoted above) that like Aetna is belching out an eternal fire, and people say it is here that the damned souls are punished» (*Historia de gentibus Septentrionalibus* bk.2 ch.3; from Olaus Magnus D.Blefken, *De Islandia, sive Populorum et Mirabilium quae in ea insula reperiuntur accuratior descriptio*, Lugduni Bat. 1607, p. 42: «damnatorum animas sic torqueri vulgus credit»).

However even before Olaus Magnus the Hecla volcano had been identified as home to the souls of the damned (*carcer sordidarum animarum*) in the *Cosmographia universalis* of Sebastian Münster (Basileae 1554), see also the offended critic of Arngrímur Jónsson, *Brevis commentarius de Islandia*, ed. J.Benediktsson, Hafniae 1950, pp. 23-27. We can also detect variations on the theme in the *Gesta Hammaburgensis ecclesiae pontificum* by Adam from Bremen, later divulged by Albert Kranz (see BENEDIKTSSON, pp. 34-35).

6. Hugo's Han is a real Devil coming from that Icelandic Hell. He surely belongs to the fantasies of the Edda Saga or other Icelandic myths, as Charles Nodier supposed, but also to the literary tradition recorded by Olaus Magnus and, yet more, to the personal and cultural recollections of Hugo himself. It is important to remember that when Hugo was creating his *Han* he had also committed himself to translate the episode of the Cyclops from the 3rd book of Virgil's *Aeneis* (see O'CONNOR p. 111). It was in this episode that a giant, the Cyclops Polyphemus, was described by Virgil as eating human bodies. The point is that Hugo described in the same way Han's slave Friend - that was a white giant bear with a gigantic appetite - as eating the body of the chancellor's son (see BOBERG B430, "Helpful with beasts", and B510, "Healing by animals"). Compare Hugo's translation of the Polyphemus' episode by Virgil (see Victor Hugo. *Achéménide*, in *Victor Hugo raconté*, I p. 239): «J'ai vu leurs corps brisés sur un roc tressaillir, / Leurs crânes sur le seuil en mille éclats jaillir, / Et sa faim, saisissant leurs entrailles mourantes, / Faire crier leurs os sous ses dents dévorantes», with the episode of the bear Friend feeding a human body in *Han d'I.*, ch. 25: «l'ours, ennuyé sans doute de son inaction, s'était approché comme furtivement de l'autre object couché dans l'ombre, et bientôt il s'éleva de cette partie ténébreuse de la salle un bruit de dents mêlé de soupirs d'agonie faibles et douloureux [...] J'entends, dit celui-ci [*i.e.* Han], cela est déjà trop mort pour toi, tandis que l'autre palpite encore. Tu es raffiné dans tes voluptés, Friend, autant qu'un homme; tu veux que ta nourriture vive encore au moments où tu la déchires; tu aimes à sentir la chaire mourir sous ta dent; tu ne jouis que de ce qui

souffre». The semantics of the words Hugo used is the same and the imagery of the whole matter comes from the same river that is the Polyphemus' scene by Virgil.

In another way, among Hugo's personal recollections it is possible to place the psychophysical portrait of Han that Hugo drew in *Han d'I.*, ch. 6: «Les traits du petit homme, que la lumière faisait vivement ressortir, avaient quelque chose d'extraordinairement sauvage. Sa barbe était rousse et touffue, et son front, caché sous un bonnet de peau d'élan, paraissait hérossé de cheveux de même couleur; sa bouche était large, ses lèvres épaisses, ses dents blanches, aiguës et séparées; son nez, recourbé comme le bec de l'aigle; et son oeil gris bleu, extrêmement mobile, lançait sur Spiagudry un regard oblique, où la férocité du tigre n'était tempérée que par la malice du singe». Irene O'Connor properly remarked (p. 109) that this odd portrait of Han - short as he is represented, and savage as a Norwegian 'troll' - precisely looks like the other one, that is a real portrait, of the famous Italian brigand Fra Diavolo, described by Hugo himself who had heard from his father, the general Hugo, the story of the brigand's capture in Naples (see *Victor Hugo raconté* I, p. 45): «Fra Diavolo était petit; ce qu'il avait de plus remarquable, c'étaient ses yeux, vifs et pénétrants».

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