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Adèle Hugo: A Bibliographical Note

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Where does Amelia Culpeper's memoir fit into what we already know about Adèle Hugo, the youngest of Victor and Adèle Hugo's four children? In his introduction to her *Journal*, Frances Vernor Guille provides an overview of Adèle's life¹ chronicling its major events from the time of her birth to young adulthood in Paris (1830-1851), the family's exile (1851-1870), her desperate flight to follow Albert Pinson that took her to Halifax, Nova Scotia (1863-1866),² and then to the island of Barbados (1866-1872), and finally her return to Paris at age 42, where she would spend the remainder of her life in a mental care facility (1872-1915). The documentation regarding Adèle's life can be divided into two categories: information obtained from European sources, and that originating from North America. From the European side, we have her *Journal*, the fourth volume of which was recently published (for the year 1855).³ There is also the correspondence of certain members of the Hugo family, especially that of her brother François-Victor.⁴ Finally, certain facts about her life can be gleaned from Victor Hugo's *Carnets*.⁵

When taking into consideration the documents originating from the other side of the Atlantic, it is interesting to note that it was not until the time of Victor Hugo's death in 1885 that articles about Adèle began to be published.⁶ Regarding her stay in Halifax, 15 articles appeared in various newspapers and reviews between 1885 up until as recently as 1964 (Guille 118). Contemporary reports, given by those who may have had some contact with Adèle or who knew her personally, came from her lawyers Mr. Motton and Mr. Lenoir,⁷ her neighbors, the local sheriff, and the owner of a bookstore from whom she purchased writing supplies (Guille 132). It is from the document provided by the families with whom Adèle lived, the Saunders and the Mottions, that we have the greatest detail concerning her life during this three-year period.⁸ Mrs. Saunders's faithful correspondence with François-Victor⁹ in particular, permitted the Hugo family to be kept abreast of Adèle's health, her activities, and her visitors.¹⁰ Their correspondence spans not only the time during which Adèle was a lodger in the

Saunders home, but also the time leading up to her departure from Halifax in December of 1866 when she resided with the Motton family two miles outside of town (Guille 100).

Adèle followed Pinson's regiment to the island of Barbados in the West Indies, where he was stationed from 1866 to 1869. It was not until February, 1872 that she found her way back to Paris accompanied by a black Trinidadian woman, Mme Céline Alvarez Baa.¹¹ There is precious little information available about the six years Adèle spent on Barbados. Her *Journal* from this period has yet to be published. Moreover, given what we know of her declining mental health, it is difficult to say whether her diary will provide a reliable account of events. During this period, correspondence between Adèle and the Hugo family was exceedingly sparse. Money was sent every trimester, instead of every month, as had been the case when she resided in Halifax (Guille 108). Correspondence may have been further interrupted by the death of Mme Hugo in 1868, followed by that of Adèle's elder brother Charles in 1871.

In 1885 several articles appeared about Adèle in American newspapers, one of which was a letter signed "P." that was printed in the *New York Tribune* (Guille 134).¹² In this letter, the author recounted certain childhood memories he had of Adèle in Barbados: her sad, disheveled appearance, her wardrobe ill-suited to the tropical climate, her habit of writing constantly, her practice of wandering the streets at all hours of the day where she became an object of ridicule and "servait de cible à maints quolibets d'enfants" (Guille 135, translation by Guille). Although no one knew her true identity, the author states that she came to be known as Mrs. Pinson in connection with a Captain Pinson stationed on the island (135).

During this same period, a Dominican missionary from Trinidad published another relevant detail. His second-hand account told part of Mme Baa's story: When Mme Baa left Paris in 1872 to return to Trinidad, Victor Hugo asked that she, upon one day hearing of his death, have three masses said for him. Therefore, in 1885, to keep her promise, Mme Baa went to a local priest, Père Marie-Joseph.¹³ Surprised to hear the name of the person for whom these masses were requested, the priest asked Baa to tell him how she came to know Victor Hugo. Baa explained how she had met Adèle in Barbados and had taken the unhappy woman into her care out of pity. When she eventually discovered that Adèle was Victor Hugo's daughter, she promptly wrote to her father¹⁴ and offered to accompany Adèle back to France. Hugo's swift response and advance of the money necessary for the voyage¹⁵ facilitated his daughter's return after an absence of nine years.¹⁶

Turning now to the Culpeper document, this eye-witness account dates from the same period as the other articles published about Adèle in North America

occasioned by Victor Hugo's death. Amelia Culpeper's dedication of her memoirs to her daughter Amy is dated May, 1887, and the account of Adèle is from June of the same year. Furthermore, at the beginning of her account, Culpeper cites an excerpt taken from *News of the World*, May 1, 1887, concerning Adèle's inheritance. In all likelihood, the article inspired her to commit her recollections to paper. It is not clear when Amelia Culpeper came to think of Mme Pinson as Adèle Hugo. She and her acquaintances seem to have had their suspicions,¹⁷ however, that Adèle Hugo was indeed the woman whom she had met in Barbados sometime "early in the [eighteen] seventies."

Amelia Culpeper's memoir is of interest on several counts. First, it corroborates the substance of the letter signed "P.," the only other eye-witness account of Adèle's stay on Barbados: her wild appearance, her compulsion to write voluminously,¹⁸ and her ridicule at the hands of the island children.¹⁹ There are new details in this memoir, however, that come through – the striking description of Adèle's physical appearance and of her living conditions that could only be characterized as the squalor brought on by a profoundly troubled personality: "the poor creature was not considered sane and, in addition, that her habits were so dirty, *no one* could take her as a lodger" (Hoad 4). Finally, although Culpeper does not mention Baa by name, Mme Pinson's watchful translator could only be she, as Patricia Hoad surmises. This brief though sympathetic portrait of a "fine-looking black woman, who spoke English well" is the only one we have of her, and adds a new dimension to the story surrounding Adèle Hugo's unhappy life.

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NOTES

1 The essential details about Adèle Hugo's life, including her correspondence, are presented in popular biographies such as Henri Guillemin's *L'Engloutie* and Leslie Smith Dow's *La Misérable*. François Truffaut's remarkable film, *Adèle H*, focuses on the American episode. All these works are based on Guille's authoritative introduction to Adèle's *Journal*.

2 Determined to marry her alleged lover and fiancé, one Albert Andrew Pinson of the English Army whom Adèle had met in Jersey in 1854 and with whom she had maintained correspondence, Hugo followed Pinson's regiment to Halifax, Nova Scotia where she arrived on August 4, 1863. The question of marriage before and after her departure for Halifax is an important one. First, the Hugo family was against

such a union. Adèle however employed any measure at her disposal to obtain not only the consent of her parents, but also the consent of Pinson (she even wrote to him saying she had borne his illegitimate child). Upon Adèle's departure for Halifax, the Hugo family assumed the marriage between Adèle and Pinson was an inevitability, therefore, in order to present things in a more positive light, M. and Mme Hugo sent their double consent to Pinson through ministerial channels. There was never any acknowledgement from Pinson or from Adèle as to the receipt of this consent. Upon returning from vacation in October of 1863, François-Victor received a letter from his sister informing him of her marriage to Pinson on September 17. The engagement was announced in the *Gazette de Guernesey* October 7, as well as in every London newspaper of the same date; it read that after the wedding, the couple would live in Canada. Ten days following, her marriage was announced in the same manner. It appears as though these measures were taken not only to protect Adèle's (and the family's) reputation, but also to put pressure on Pinson to marry Adèle should she not have told her family the truth. In November, François-Victor received a letter from Adèle where she confessed that the marriage had not taken place, but that she still held hopes of convincing Pinson to marry her (she thought of hiring a hypnotist for this purpose). In December of that same year, François received a letter from Pinson where he communicated his surprise at the false announcements of his marriage to Adèle as well as his having no intention of ever marrying her. François-Victor then tried to convince Adèle to return to Europe under the pretense that she and Pinson had divorced. As François-Victor stated in a letter to his brother Charles: "Le divorce en Amérique est chose aisée et fréquente. On se démarie presque à volonté" (Guille 73-83).

3 This appeared in 2002. According to the current editor of *Adèle's Journal*, M. Jean-Marc Hovasse, the publication schedule for future volumes remains uncertain.

4 Born in 1828, François-Victor was the closest to Adèle in age. He served as liaison between his sister and their parents from the time of her clandestine departure from Guernesey in 1863 until her return to France in 1872. Furthermore, because he was the only member of the family to possess a mastery of English, he was able to correspond with the Saunders family and receive regular reports about Adèle's life in Halifax. (François-Victor Hugo completed the first translation in French of Shakespeare's complete works [1859-66], edited by Guille and published by Nizet in 1950) (Guille 89, 110).

5 See Guille for a complete list of bibliographical information (139-40).

6 Guille states that people were shocked to learn that Adèle was still alive because no one had heard about her until the time of her father's death when she was named heiress to Hugo's impressive estate (114).

7 Among the people Adèle came into contact with in Halifax, her lawyers were the only ones to learn her true identity. At one point Adèle even offered her manuscripts to Mr.

Motton, (those which she carried with her at all times and called her autobiography), an offer he later regretted refusing, telling him to publish them one day and astonish the world (Guille 131). However, it was most likely because of the announcement of Pinson's engagement to the daughter of a local judge that Adèle first made her identity known. She fabricated a story in order to prevent this marriage. As she explained to her lawyers, she was Pinson's true wife: they had met in Jersey, maintained correspondence, become engaged, signed a marriage contract (of which no record exists), and were married in secret. She went on to state that Pinson had promised her a public ceremony in the Anglican Church. Therefore, determined to put the affair in order, she had come to Halifax with parental consent and sufficient monies. In response to her story, Motton wrote two letters, one to the judge and one to Pinson. The judge called off his daughter's engagement (Guille 129-31).

8 According to Mrs. Saunders, Adèle rarely left the house, nor did she receive any visitors aside from a few rare visits paid by Pinson (and after which Adèle was left without money). She spent her days writing. And rarely did she let anyone enter her ill-kept room. By Adèle's manners, clothing, and jewelry Mrs. Saunders guessed she was a woman of distinction (Guille 121).

9 It was Grace Saunders, an infant at the time of Adèle's 18-month stay in the Saunders home, who, in learning of their distinguished former lodger, found two letters addressed by François-Victor to her mother and had them published in *The Morning Herald*, in June 1885. Aside from Adèle's lawyers, the Saunders never knew her true identity; letters to Adèle were always addressed to Miss Lewly or to Mrs. Pinson. It was out of concern for Adèle's desolate state, that Mrs. Saunders noted the address on a letter destined to François-Victor and took it upon herself to write to him. (Guille 124-25).

10 Though Adèle kept mostly to her room, several articles from Halifax cite her outings on evenings when balls would take place in Belleville. She went there, either dressed in formal evening attire or as a gentleman, in order to see Pinson. Others note that, regardless of the weather, she never left the house without an umbrella, that she wore only black (Guille 127). All of these details contributed to the romanticizing of Adèle and to the creation of legends about her that circulated at the time of Victor Hugo's death.

11 Baa is also sometimes written as Bàà or Bà (Guille 111).

12 In the opening portion of the letter signed "P.," (May 28, 1885, reproduced in the *Halifax Morning Herald*, June 2, 1885) the author made reference to having read an article about Adèle, "la malheureuse fille de Victor Hugo" published in a Halifax bulletin in 1885. This article sparked the connection between Adèle and the "mysterious woman" remembered from long ago in Barbados (Guille 134).

13 It appears as though the missionary heard this account directly from the priest Père Marie-Joseph. This letter was published in 1885 and reproduced in the *Halifax*

Evening Mail, May 17, 1930.

14 “Wrote” or “had written”? Guille states that when she contacted Victor Hugo, “elle fit écrire une lettre”(136). According to Amelia Culpeper, Baa spoke both English and French, and was moreover well-spoken in English. While bilingualism does not preclude illiteracy in someone of Baa’s background, the quality of speech at least in her English may be a sign of some formal education. Truffaut followed Guille for much detail, and in his film shows Baa dictating her letter as if she were illiterate.

15 A M. Werder from Martinique advanced the money for the voyage (Guille 110).

16 A year after Adèle’s return, Hugo wrote again to Baa communicating Adèle’s desire for her return. Baa arrived in Paris accompanied by two Dominicans returning to Europe. It was upon her second departure for Trinidad that Hugo requested she say three masses at the time of his death (Guille 137). Hugo had taken more than a cursory interest in this woman, noting in his *Carnets* that she was “la primera negra de mi vida” (Guille 112).

17 It is interesting to note that although Adèle’s existence in Barbados was shrouded in mystery, Ruth Carrington, an acquaintance of Mrs. Culpeper, as well as Culpeper herself, were able to draw certain accurate conclusions about Adèle’s life: her alleged marriage to Captain Pinson, the strained relations between father and daughter, and the role François-Victor played in assuring his sister’s well-being through financial support (Hoad 5).

18 Some “reams of paper, scribbled all over” were left behind by Adèle upon her vacating the Culpeper’s Westbury Cottage (Hoad 4).

19 Culpeper’s own “saucy children” found Adèle’s filthy appearance to be strange (Hoad 4).

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