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An Interview

Walter T. Secor

Completing the diaries of Adele Hugo

Mrs. Frances Guille-Secor, a professor at Wooster College, Wooster, Ohio, spent twenty years transcribing, translating, decoding, dating and annotating the journals of Adele Hugo. The first two volumes of her definitive study were published in France by Minard, in 1968 and 1971. Francois Truffaut's movie, *The Story of Adele H.* is based on the biographical section of this work, contained in volume one.

Mrs. Guille-Secor attended the premiere of the film at the 1975 New York Film Festival. One week after returning from the festival, she was taken ill while teaching. She died two days later of a heart attack.

The two volumes of the journal already published are recognized as being so significant that no scholarly examination of Hugo can be complete without some reference to this work. The enormous scholarly task of completing the fifth and final volume, left unfinished at her death, is now being conducted by her husband, Walter T. Secor, with the help of her research assistant, Carol McDaid.

An Interview with Walter T. Secor
By Luciana Bohne and Chris Dubbs

- FC. . Perhaps the first question should be, when did Adele begin her journal?**
S In March 1852 in Paris. Adele was 22.
- FC. . What were the circumstances of the Hugo family at this time?**
S Victor Hugo was in exile in Brussels since 1851. Adele's brothers Charles and Francois-Victor were in prison. Adele and her mother were alone in Paris.
- FC. . What about her sister, Leopoldine?**
S Leopoldine drowned in 1843 while on her honeymoon, right out on the Seine before the family property. Incidentally, Hugo wrote a very famous poem called "Villequier" in which he accuses God, almost blasphemously—you have to remember that he thought he and God were pretty much the same. He accused God of having taken away this earthly representation of great beauty who he was using to explain childhood to humanity.



Mrs. Frances Guille-Secor with Francois Truffaut at the 1975 New York Film Festival.

FC Didn't her husband, Charles Vacquerie, drown with her when he realized she was lost?

S Yes, it was a great tragedy for the family. It's important to remember that Adele loved her sister, they all just worshipped her, but Adele's became a kind of love-hate thing because Leopoldine's memory seemed to get in the way of her relationship with her family, and with all of them because they were always thinking of Leopoldine. Then when they started with the tables (beginning in 1853 the Hugo family took spiritualism very seriously and made repeated attempts to contact the dead Leopoldine). It was with Leopoldine they were constantly talking. Right now, I'm working on material in which Adele talks to Leopoldine every night on her own. Her aberration is showing up a little bit. She is constantly saying, "Oh, Leopoldine, what shall I do about this or about that? Tell me what to do." She is constantly repeating herself, too, which might show it is a

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FC.. What was life like for Adele in Jersey?

S Picture her now, taken from the Paris scene, a beautiful young girl who should have been going to balls, put on this rocky island! In her journal she talks about the effect of exile on the men, but I am always thinking, poor Adele, out on this rock, where there was not much to do, and she's watched over constantly. Constantly. Restricted in every sense of the word.

FC.. Then it was a life of isolation?

S Let's say there weren't many outlets for her emotional depth. The only other woman in the household was her mother. She was surrounded by her brothers and her father's exiled friends. Her brothers enjoyed great freedom as did her father. Adele, however, was always chaperoned by her mother.

FC.. What were Adele's interests?

S In Guernsey, people called, she played the piano for them, they didn't have to ask her twice. Her father would say, she has a beautiful voice, too, then she would sing. In some of the things I'm working on now, she mentions "P" in background. That's Pinson. In the diary it's just P and she mentions, 'Did you feel the emotion with which I was singing?' The other man in her life, Auguste (Vacquerie), was there and there was the rivalry. Truffaut has eliminated him because that would have brought another man into the picture. What he has done here is to concentrate on her obsession with Pinson.

FC.. So, there was another man in Adele's life?

S Yes, Auguste Vacquerie. Her family, especially her mother, was constantly pushing her to marry him. They considered them engaged. Adele was fond of him, even in love with him at the beginning, but refused to marry him after meeting Pinson.

FC.. How did she first meet Pinson?

S We don't know exactly, but he came to Jersey with his garrison in 1854. He was a climber and was impressed with the family when he first came over.

FC.. In the film, Adele reminds Pinson of having sought her out.

S He was on the make for her, and perhaps she was easy pickings. She did fall in love with him and in her words, gave herself to him and felt that she was his wife, but he was a collector of women and soon turned away from her.

FC.. But she still pursued him?

S It is as if she's punishing herself over this fellow who doesn't even merit it. He has women and is a gambler. She is complex; I think you see that all along the way, but I think it's a normal complexity. There's a lady in Paris who has just written to me and wants to do a pathological study of Adele, and I just don't think it's that strong. It's normal given the contingencies of her experience. Especially in the material I'm looking at now, there is a lot of contradiction. She is constantly saying to herself, 'Do I really want to follow this man (Pinson). Shouldn't I really launch out and become this great woman? That's the feminist part of her.' 'And, do I really want to marry? Because she says marriage is a humiliating thing for a woman, when the whole family is pushing her to marry Auguste.'

FC.. And yet she's willing to marry Pinson?

S It is complex. You keep wondering why doesn't she just wipe this man out of her life. I get the feeling she prides herself that she caught up in this, committed to this passion. She does say that somehow in her mind she realizes the weakness in Albert but that through her power of love she might be able to regenerate him. That's all in the material I'm working on now. I think she felt that after giving herself to him, that he needed her, that she could perhaps save him by the power of her love. By the time she gets to Halifax, though, he's become a perfect cad.

FC.. Let's talk more about the journal. In addition to her music, she loved to write. Truffaut portrays her as writing constantly in Halifax.

S That's all lost, everything after 1856 is lost. My wife believed there was a third portion of her diary which remains to be discovered.

FC.. But this is crucial. The film doesn't start until 1863. Where does Truffaut's material for the film come from?

S The film is based on the biographical material in volume one. All of the psychological and philosophical material does come from the diary, but the facts about her going to Nova Scotia and Barbados, that is in the letters of Francois-Victor, my wife's doctoral dissertation published in 1950.

FC.. Would you clarify for us exactly what material was used for the film?

S Primarily Truffaut used the biography from volume one. He first read a review of that volume in "Le Monde," then eventually contacted my wife about making a movie from it. The biography is an accumulation of material about Adele's life that was taken from the letters of Francois-Victor, a book by my wife, published in 1950. When my wife began editing the journals, she included the biography in the first volume.

FC.. What is the story of the Francois-Victor letters?

S Francois-Victor corresponded with Adele in Halifax and Barbados. He, in turn, would relate the contents of her letters to the rest of the family. Adele's letters from this period have not survived, but we do have Francois-Victor's writing to his mother. The family tried to keep track of her. We know for instance, Francois-Victor was in contact with Mrs. Saunders, the landlady, to learn what Adele was doing.

FC.. Then the material from the journals was not actually used in the film?

S Some of it was. Actually, the journal is more concerned with Hugo himself. My wife acted as a consultant for the film. She and Truffaut were in constant correspondence and he consulted her on changes in the scenario. When she would come across something in her research, some new fact about Adele, she would send it to him. Some of these things were finally incorporated into the film. One of the best examples is the tables, the speaking to the spirits. Fran thought it was so much a part of the journal, she wrote to him saying she thought it should be included. Isabelle Adjani was consulted and she thought it should be included. But, when it was put in, it's only a very short scene.

FC.. Do you think that theme should have been stressed more?

S Personally, I would have liked to see it developed more, but it might have become unbelievable. There were a lot of themes, it's a question of balance.

FC.. Her relationship with her father is another important theme. At one point she says, "I am born of an unknown father."

S She would have liked to imagine herself as a child of an unknown father so that she could be accepted for her own authenticity. She feels she hasn't had a chance because of his fame, a chance for full expression. At times, she has an over-balanced appraisal of her own talent.

FC.. Yet at another point, she says, "But then if my father were unknown, I wouldn't know my father." She's really caught in this paradox.

S That's one of the contradictions she has. It's a very important theme that Truffaut comes back to more than any other except the obsession with love. You must realize that she felt she was in the presence of this greatness, which was her father, and also her brothers. There's some competition there, too. Charles was very far to the left. Hugo was in the center politically, a liberal. Charles was constantly debating with his father on every subject under the sun. The father tried to temper his radicalism. And Francois-Victor, who really had inherited his father's talent, translated all of Shakespeare into French. Adele was more or less a secretary, recording this in her journal.

FC. . So that was the function of her journal?

S Yes, her father encouraged her to record what was going on at Hauteville-House on Guernsey, and told her it would be her creation.

FC. . The writing on these pages seems very garbled, undated, written in vertical lines over horizontal lines, etc.

S Lots of times she'd be in a hurry because of the hurried discussions that were downstairs. She's writing with these men talking, and some of them would get into heated discussions or they are gambling or playing a Lotto game and she doesn't get time to get everything in. She writes in between the lines sometimes, too.

FC. . Does the condition of the pages in any way reflect her emotional state when she wrote them?

S No. Most of it is due to haste. But we do get into a problem when she records her own thoughts which are often in code.

FC. . Was this code hard to break?

S Not really, it was fairly simple. In most of the words it was just a reversal of



syllables. Albert, for instance, would be written Bertal. The shorter words such as "but" would have their spelling reversed; instead of "mais," it would be "siam."

FC. . Why doesn't Truffaut develop any of the psychological factors that might have contributed to her madness?

S Because they aren't there. He shows every factor we know that could have entered into it. I think he arrives at a believability of an impossible situation.

FC. . Is Adele's love the impossible situation?

S Yes, but it's also a self-realization. This is something she can attach herself to in revolt against her father. Because he's the one who's turned her down in the question of the marriage of Pinson.

FC. . In the film, she reminds Pinson of his proposal of marriage. Was there ever a proposal?

S There was a time when he was interested, but the Hugo family wouldn't hear of it.

FC. . We know that Hugo almost went insane when Leopoldine died. How did he react when Adele left?

S He didn't write for a long time, it was a kind of family disgrace. He wanted her to come back, but she revolted against his wish.

FC. . Truffaut draws a parallel between Leopoldine and Adele through a recurrent nightmare in which Adele is drowning. Another recurrent nightmare is cut from the final scenario. It showed Adele in a room with a dark-clad woman who played eerie music on the piano.

S That was her aunt, Martine.

FC. . In the original scenario, Adele mentions to the landlady that she adored her aunt, but that aunt used to tell her frightening stories and that ever since she's easily frightened. This comes from Mrs. Secor's biography, but Truffaut chooses not to use it. Did he give any explanation?

S No, no explanation. There are many letters in which Madame Hugo is trying to market Adele's music in Paris. At least friends of Victor Hugo said it was good, but it was never sold. Later, when Adele was in Halifax, her brother wrote saying they would not try to sell her music because it would attract attention to her absence.

FC. . It comes down to Truffaut's choice of themes.

S Everything is there. My wife and I loved the movie. It's authentic and all, but he could have developed some of the themes more, but if he developed one he might have had to develop others.

FC. . Is there any counterpart in literature to Adele's extreme obsession?

S Knowing French literature in the romantic period, I'd say the classic example is Chateaubriand's Rene. He didn't go mad but he was on the verge of madness.

FC. . And Werther, in German literature.

S Oh, yes.

FC. . Truffaut, in his Antoine Doinel films, deals with the theme of the unloved child. Is *The Story of Adele H.* a variation on the same theme?

S I'm most familiar with that through Hugo's poetry. In that he conveys that he felt Leopoldine had inherited his talent. He always spoke about her as extremely sensitive. And Leopoldine being older was naturally in the foreground. When he wrote poems about the children, Leopoldine always received full billing. She was always number one. But in the letters he treats them with equal affection.

FC. . What was Adele's relationship with her mother?

S I can't remember any specific conflicts with her mother except that she was always chaperoning her and that she wanted Adele to marry Vacquerie. There were rumors that Adele was a love child of Sainte-Beuve.

FC. . She was his godchild.

S Yes.

FC. . Did Adele know of the rumors?

S There is a very ambiguous poem written by Sainte-Beuve in 1832, when Adele was two years old, in which there is a vague implication of paternity. The question has been debated ever since. We don't know if Adele knew of the rumors.

FC. . Truffaut has said, "I cannot make films against, I can only make films for." What is Adele H. in favor of? What does it plead for?

S It pleads for an understanding of Adele. It is in favor of the rehabilitation of Adele and her emotional gifts, and her emotional depths and the dimensions of her love. Leopoldine was a flower that had a beautiful bloom and disappeared. She didn't have to face up to the human condition. But here was Adele who suffered, ignored for her sister, ignored for her father. One French friend wrote to me about my wife's work, "Wasn't it wonderful she heard Adele's plaintive cry and gave it life?" Perhaps, Truffaut wouldn't have paid attention to her if she wasn't Victor Hugo's daughter, but all the same, he wanted to treat an aspect of love he hadn't treated before—unrequited love treated in the extreme. That's why he wanted to take it out of its historical setting to see if it is possible structurally to have this kind of love which tries to find fulfillment against all odds. This quest is in part madness. Romanticism is a kind of madness anyway. He's for understanding that.

FC. . Truffaut places Adele in a world potentially full of love, even in Halifax, but it doesn't seem to be the kind of love she's looking for.

S Yes, there's the beginning of affection in every case, with the bookseller, with Mrs. Saunders and with the coachman, O'Brien. She doesn't recognize the tenderness of the bookseller when he gives her *Les Misérables*. She revolts because it exposes her identity. She has gone under the name of Miss Lull, up until then. But her rejection of the gift also indicates a lack of equilibrium at that point.

FC. . So, Truffaut has her reject ordinary affection in favor of an unattainable ideal?

S She has her father's pride. Imagine her on Guernsey, on that rock, saying, "This incredible thing, that a young woman walks on the sea, passes from the old world to the new to join her lover. This I will do." She sees her quest as an impossible task, but is determined to do it.

FC. . It was very unusual for a woman of that century to show such independence and determination.

S Well, she considered herself a woman of the 19th century speaking to the 20th century. As she put it, she was writing a book that would not be laughed at in a hundred years. I just came across a statement of hers last week that is very modern, almost existential, in which she says, "We are just happy enough to tolerate the weight of the world."

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