

Introduction

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On 22 November 1835 Juliette Drouet, aged twenty-nine, wrote to Victor Hugo, renowned poet, novelist, and dramatist, and her lover of two years: “It’s my love that will make me immortal. When I am dead, I will love you still. My body and my life will be used up before one single particle of my love disappears” (*MUL*, 77).¹ By 1833 when Drouet died at seventy-seven after a lifetime of passionate love for Hugo, it had long been clear that this early description of the intensity and durability of her love was no exaggeration. Just as she had predicted, it would be this love, expressed in some twenty thousand love letters written over a period of fifty years, that would make her and her relationship with Hugo “immortal.”

Juliette Drouet was born Julienne Gauvain on 10 April 1806 in Fougères, Brittany.² Her parents, Marie and Julien Gauvain, were artisans of peasant stock who made a humble living in the town’s weaving industry. They died in 1806 and 1807 respectively, both at the age of about thirty, leaving behind four orphaned children: three girls, Renée (born 1800), Thérèse (born 1801), and Juliette (or Julienne as she was christened), and one boy, Armand (born 1803). Renée, aged six when her parents died, was sent to a local hospice run by a religious order, while her younger siblings were farmed out to foster mothers. Thérèse would also end up in the hospice and die there in 1813 at the age of eleven. Armand became completely separated from his two surviving sisters and grew up apart from them.³ It is unclear what happened to baby Juliette immediately after she left the wet nurse who looked after her following her parents’ death. In the long term, however, she seems to have had a slightly luckier fate than her two sisters in that she was taken into the care of her mother’s sister, her Aunt Françoise, and her Uncle René-Henry Drouet.

René-Henry was in the Army, but also worked for part of his married life as a printer. Drouet always remembered him with affection as “uncle by name, but father in heart,” and she adopted his surname (*MUL*, 617). For her aunt, however, she never had much good to say. The couple probably first sent her to a local convent in Brittany and then took her with them when they moved to Paris in 1815. In Paris, René-Henry (now retired from the Army on a very small pension) hoped, perhaps, for help from his brother, who had been living there for some time. Juliette was placed, once again, in a convent, and her aunt and uncle separated. Her aunt, who appears to have gained some kind of marginal footing in Parisian artistic circles after her separation, gave birth to an illegitimate daughter, Eugénie, in 1816.⁴ To judge by subsequent events, Juliette emerged from the convent with considerably more education and polish than had been afforded to her elder sister. After leaving the hospice in 1812 at the age of twelve, Renée remained in Brittany and was probably sent into service by her Aunt Françoise. She ended up with a level of education considerably inferior to Drouet’s, and her letters written as an adult are semi-illiterate.⁵

The story is that Drouet was allowed to leave the Parisian convent in 1821 on the eve of taking orders, having discovered that she had no vocation for the nunhood.⁶ Virtually nothing is known about Drouet’s life in the next five years, but it must have been, as Gaudon puts it, a life that “bordered on prostitution” (*LJD*, 11). Later in a letter to Hugo, Drouet would thank him for having saved her from “poverty and prostitution,”⁷ and as Drouet herself would admit, before she met Hugo she had been “a woman whom necessity can throw into the arms of the first rich man that wants to buy her” (*MUL*, 40). Some idea of the joys and of the much more obvious sorrows of living such a life are given by Hugo’s description in his novel *Les Misérables* of the four *grisettes*, Dahlia, Zéphine, Favourite, and Fantine, as well as of Eponine and Azelma. Perhaps the sympathy with which Hugo portrays them owes something to what he knew of Drouet’s past life.

In 1826 at the age of twenty Drouet gave birth to an illegitimate child, Claire, the daughter of Jean-Jacques Pradier, a sculptor who called himself James and was sixteen years older than Drouet. This was doubtless not Drouet’s first liaison before she met Hugo, and there would be others after it, but it was the most important of the several relationships she had before she met Hugo because of the lasting consequences it would have on her life.

Born in 1790 in Geneva to French Huguenot parents, Pradier came to Paris around 1808 to join his brother, Charles-Simon, who had, like himself, been trained as an engraver.⁸ He became a student at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts where he studied sculpture. He won the prestigious Prix de Rome in 1813, spent some years in Italy as a consequence (1814–1818), and subsequently kept a studio in Paris. He had soon acquired all the symbols of success within the establishment—exhibiting annually at the Salon, becoming a member of the Académie des Beaux-Arts (1827), professor at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts (1827), chevalier de la Légion d’honneur (1828), officier de la Légion d’honneur (1834), and obtaining numerous important commissions from the State for public build-

ings and monuments.⁹ While now an unknown name, Pradier considered himself, and was considered by others, to be among the foremost sculptors of his time.¹⁰ He specialized in erotic female nudes in marble, which he turned out in mythological guises in the hundreds. In the opinion of some, Drouet may have modeled for one of these, the *Satyre et Bacchante*,¹¹ a sculpture that many contemporary critics found indecent.

The reminiscences of his acquaintances allude to Pradier's flamboyant sartorial style and taste for frequent and extravagant entertainment.¹² A self-portrait¹³ shows Pradier every inch the poseur, self-consciously enveloped in his trademark cape,¹⁴ accompanied by a large greyhound. Since he assiduously tended his social and political connections, Pradier frequently threw parties, on which he spent exorbitant sums of money. One of his guests was Gustave Flaubert, who became acquainted through Pradier with the poetess Louise Colet, who was to become his mistress and "Muse."¹⁵ Furthermore, Pradier's eventual wife, the reckless Louise d'Arcet, would provide the model for Emma in Flaubert's novel *Madame Bovary*.¹⁶ Pradier had musical aspirations as well as artistic ones, dabbling on the piano, guitar, organ, and harp, and composing ballads, and was friends with a number of prominent composers of the time.¹⁷ The cover of the score of one of his ballads, entitled *Le Chagrin de l'absence*, features a prominent dedication to Drouet "by her very humble servant" and a Pradier drawing of a romantically-cloaked man looking for all the world just like the self-portrait described above.¹⁸

Pouchain (*JDD*, 35) speculates that there are two possible ways in which Drouet could have been introduced to Pradier: either during the course of her artistic studies with Pierre-Joseph Redouté, a teacher of drawing, who must have known Pradier and may possibly have introduced her as a potential model, or, alternatively, through Drouet's friendship with Laure Krafft, a musician, who may have taken her to one of Pradier's musical soirées.¹⁹ Another possibility is that, like her cousin, Eugénie, Drouet was first introduced into the artistic world—if only for the exploitation of her beauty as a model—by her manipulative aunt-cum-stepmother.²⁰ Like Drouet, Eugénie ended up with an illegitimate child fathered by an artist, Jules Ziegler. In any event, however Drouet may have met Pradier, she eventually became his model and therefore, as so often with Pradier, also his mistress.²¹ Indeed, the narrow dividing line between sex and art in Pradier's studio is underlined by Arsène Houssaye, friend of Victor Hugo and onetime director of the Comédie-Française. In his memoirs he describes meeting in 1832 (almost at exactly our period) two *grisettes* who had been modeling, "naturally as goddesses or demigoddesses on Olympus," in Pradier's studio, and who were "not ashamed to undress before a bunch of prying men who wouldn't pretend to be artists except for the nude models."²² Drouet claimed to have been the model for the city of Strasbourg, one of the two statues that Pradier executed for the place de la Concorde in Paris representing France's important cities.²³ She doubtlessly modeled for other well-known Pradier sculptures too.

Within Pradier's flamboyant and boastful bohemian facade there lurked a circumspect, bourgeois soul. Pradier had no intention of marrying Drouet, albeit the mother of his daughter. Any marriage he might make would be calculated to support his lavish lifestyle and social status. His marriage in 1833 to the wealthy nineteen-year-old, Louise d'Arcet (although it proved to be a grave mistake that Pradier would greatly regret, especially financially),²⁴ must have been based on just such a calculation. A marriage with Drouet could only be a marriage of love, although if Drouet ever felt any love for him it was probably quickly extinguished. Pradier's letters to her convey a picture of a man who was vain, self-centered, and self-righteous. Drouet would later feel nothing but contempt for him, describing him in one letter to Hugo as "a miserable imbecile, a stupid rogue, the vilest and most foolish of men."²⁵ In any case, the arrival of the baby Claire must have introduced a note of harsh reality into the relationship that brought it to an end. The most Pradier was willing to do was to put in a word for her later with contacts that might help launch Drouet's theatrical career²⁶ and to provide grudging and sporadic support for his daughter. This very rich man could never find the ready cash to pay for her upkeep on time, yet, as Houssaye tells us, he could spend ten thousand francs on one party.²⁷ Pradier's response to Drouet's cries for help was only to prevaricate concerning the money and to send pompous letters filled with gratuitous advice: "Come, come, now, courage and mint pastilles!"²⁸

Before Drouet's theatrical career was to begin, however, Claire would be boarded out with a wet nurse (*JDD*, 41), and by 1827 Drouet was involved in a liaison with a married man with consequences far more important than the affair itself. This man was Scipion Pinel, a wealthy doctor in his early thirties with a specialization in psychiatric disorders and an interest in the arts.²⁹ Pinel presented Drouet with jewelry and Indian cashmere amounting to the value of twenty thousand francs, an enormous sum of money that was too much even for the affluent Pinel to afford: to finance the purchase of the gifts he borrowed money from a dealer in cashmere (*JDD*, 148) called Mme Ribot or Ribou. Subsequently Pinel found himself unable to repay the money as contracted, and by the beginning of the following year newspapers carried accounts of the legal case brought against Pinel by Ribot. The next months were spent by the two lovers in Frankfurt-am-Main in Germany, perhaps to avoid the possibility of further legal action. While they were there, Pradier wrote Drouet letters of paternalistic advice.³⁰ By October 1828, however, Drouet's affair with Pinel had finished. She was now on her own financially and physically and must take drastic measures to earn enough money to live and make at least some gestures toward paying off her large debts. She went to Brussels where she initiated, without any dramatic training whatsoever, a career in the theater. Why Brussels? It was a cosmopolitan cultural center with many links to Paris. Drouet may also have been helped to break into theatrical circles there by Simone Luigi Peruzzi, the ambassador for Tuscany in Brussels and Paris, with whom she had a liaison, which was in full swing by January 1829 (*JDD*, 83). The debt

to Mme Ribot, which Drouet had honorably assumed after the end of her relationship with Pinel, and the debts to her many other creditors, would continue to haunt her, however, for many years to come.³¹

Drouet's theatrical debut—under the stage name “Mlle Juliette”—occurred on December 6 1828, in a play by Scribe and Courcy called *Simple Histoire* at the Théâtre du Parc in Brussels.³² It was a theater that specialized in vaudeville—short, comic, lighthearted plays, often with some topical relevance and interspersed with songs. Drouet played the role of Miss Milner in this vacuous story of the love affair between Lord Frédéric, “so well-known for his duels and gallant adventures,” and his seventeen-year-old pupil. This play, like nearly all the plays in which Drouet would hold a role of any importance, was of second-rate literary merit by now forgotten dramatists.³³ The reviews in the press of her first ever appearance on stage, however, were encouraging and all of them remarked on her beauty.

Without a doubt, Juliette Drouet was a beautiful woman. In a description that originally appeared in *Les Belles Femmes de Paris (The Beautiful Women of Paris)*, Théophile Gautier, friend of Victor Hugo, Parnassian poet, novelist, and journalist, said of her:

Mlle Juliette's face is beautiful in a regular and delicate way . . . Her nose is purely cut and finely chiseled. Her eyes are sparkling and limpid . . . Her mouth, which is of a dewy rose and lively in expression, is always small, even in bursts of the greatest gaiety. All these features, which are so charming in themselves, are contained within an oval face of the smoothest and most harmonious outline. A smooth and serene forehead like the white marble pediment of a Greek temple luminously crowns this delightful face. Abundant black hair with a wonderful shine sets off marvelously, by contrast, its diaphanous glow.

Mlle Juliette's neck, shoulders, and arms are of quite classical perfection. She could be a worthy inspiration to sculptors and compete with the beauty of the young Athenian women who cast off their veils before Praxiteles as he contemplated his Venus.³⁴

Drouet's stay in Brussels turned out to be a short one. By April 1829 she was back in Paris and, possibly with the help of Pradier, managed to secure a role at the Théâtre du Vaudeville which, true to its name, specialized in staging vaudevilles. Her debut on the Parisian stage on 29 July 1829 was in *Kettly ou le retour en Suisse* by Duvert and Paulin. In this play Drouet played the part of Kettly, the young, female love interest and a role in which she was required to sing some duets. Her connection with this theater, too, did not last long. The Théâtre du Vaudeville was in financial difficulty, and Juliette Drouet left it after just a few months to make her debut on 27 February 1830 at another Parisian theater, the Théâtre de la Porte-Saint-Martin.

Like the Théâtre du Vaudeville this theater catered to popular (although more middle-class) audiences, with a specialty in melodrama: sensational plays with some incidental music and often a strong moral component.³⁵ Drouet began in the box office success *L'Homme du monde* by Ancelot and Saintine and then appeared, beginning in April, in *Shylock* by Dulac and Alboise. This sensational melodrama was described by one drama critic as “horror from beginning to end. Not a smile, but constantly cries of rage, vengeance, cruelty, despair, tears, sighs, pain, misery. First of all tempests, shipwrecks, abductions, then a deathbed, a funeral procession, secret meetings in underground caverns, a trial, finally the frightful triumph of hatred and vengeance in the heart of the Jew.”³⁶ Drouet played the part of Jessica, the young daughter of Shylock, who falls in love with a young gentile Venetian, Lorenzo. The couple attempts to elope by sea, but a storm wrecks their ship. The play ends climactically with Jessica’s confession to her father of her love for Lorenzo and her conversion to Christianity. Shylock is about to run her through with his sword when she is saved, fainting, by Lorenzo and Bassiano. The spirit of Shakespeare was a long way from this melodrama, but the public loved it.

Drouet stayed just over a year at the Porte-Saint-Martin and, excluding one benefit performance, played seven different roles in as many different plays. The last new role that she took was the young love interest, Clémence, in *Napoléon ou Schönbrunn et Sainte-Hélène* by Dupeuty, Régnier, and Detourbey—one of the several dramatizations of the life of Napoleon popular in theaters at this time. She would perform the part of Clémence more than a hundred times.

In April 1831 Drouet left the Porte-Saint-Martin for the Odéon, a first-class, state-subsidized theater. Pouchain speculates (*JDD*, 75) that one reason Drouet moved there may have been the prospect of being able to play the female lead alongside Frédéric Lemaître, one of the most celebrated actors of the time, and of putting a distance between herself and Marie Dorval. Dorval was the principal actress at the Porte-Saint-Martin and one of the leading actresses of her day. Drouet would show some jealousy of her seductiveness and powers as an actress in her letters to Victor Hugo (L. 17). Drouet imitated Dorval’s acting style in her role as Antonia in the melodrama in which she appeared at the Odéon on 28 May 1831. This was *Le Moine* by Louis-Marie Fontan, one of several stage versions of the sensational 1796 Gothic novel *The Monk* by the English novelist Matthew Gregory Lewis (1775–1818).³⁷ The plot of *Le Moine* has some similarities to the story of Hugo’s perverted archdeacon, Claude Frollo, and his love for Esmeralda in his novel *Notre-Dame de Paris*, which appeared this same year, 1831. In *Le Moine* a Franciscan monk, Ambrosio, has been tricked by the Devil and made to fall in love with Antonia. Seeking to possess her, Ambrosio creeps in on Antonia while she is sleeping (as does Claude Frollo on Esmeralda). Antonia is defended by her brother, whom Ambrosio kills before abducting her. The play concludes with a duel between Ambrosio and the Devil, which the Devil wins. Drouet would receive good

reviews for her performance of this part and she would play it again when she returned to the Porte-Saint-Martin the following year, performing the role all in all some fifty times.

Drouet's time at the Odéon turned out to be even shorter than her previous stint at the Porte-Saint-Martin. In October of 1831 the newspapers reported that she had decided to break with this theater. She left it perhaps for the Florentine palazzo of Simone Peruzzi, the above-mentioned ambassador for Tuscany, whose unedited diaries reveal a whirl of daily cultural and social activity, including ambassadorial parties that he attended in the company of Juliette Drouet. There appears to be no evidence, however, for the tenacious story that while in Florence Drouet belonged to the theatrical company of a Russian prince, Demidoff. The story—which has been repeated by most of Drouet's biographers since Paul Chenay, the son-in-law of Victor Hugo, alleged that Drouet was protected by “a fabulously rich Russian prince, owner of mines in Siberia”³⁸—seems to date back to a gossipy article about Drouet that appeared in 1832 in the theatrical magazine *La Rampe et les coulisses*. In this article it was claimed that “authors, directors, stockbrokers, Russian aristocrats, and even a certain *Préfet de police* were hot on her heels” (*JDD*, 86). In any case, Drouet returned to Paris in January 1832 after a three-month stay in Florence, and Peruzzi would return three months later.

On her return Drouet signed up not with the Odéon, the theater she had left for Italy, but once again with the Porte-Saint-Martin. She began with a part in the sensational melodrama *Shylock*, a part she had played more than forty times in her previous stint at this theater. Drouet's next role at the Porte-Saint-Martin was in a production by Scribe and Terrier called *Dix ans de la vie d'une femme*. The play began in March 1832 with Mme Zélie-Paul playing the part of Sophie Marini. Drouet at this point had no part in the play—luckily for her, as the audience judged the play with its female “nudity” too indecent, and the actresses, including Marie Dorval, were booed off the stage. Responding to the criticism, the dramatists made some changes to the play that must have satisfied the public, as more than fifty performances followed with Drouet now playing Sophie Marini. However, an epidemic of cholera struck Paris at this time and severely diminished the size of audiences, while a more personal form of misfortune struck Drouet in particular. The enormous debt to Mme Ribot, incurred by her former lover Pinel, but assumed by Drouet in 1830, now caught up with her. Ribot sued Drouet for failing to make payments on the eight thousand francs for which she had taken responsibility, and which represented almost three years' salary (*VS*, 4:48). Drouet lost the case and was ordered to repay the debt with interest.

Drouet had no means to repay the money except by incurring further debt since she was already living beyond her means and was already in debt to many other people, including the furniture dealer,³⁹ the jeweler, the glover, the dressmaker, the cosmetician, the laundress, and two other dealers in cashmere besides Ribot (*VS*, 4:49). Actresses were required to furnish their own lavish

costumes, which were extremely costly. Furthermore, Drouet had an expensive apartment and a social life to maintain where she had to keep up appearances. So it is not surprising to find at this time signs of stress in reviews that allude to slipshod, lackluster performances in which she did not know her words and read them from the back of a fan or written on letters used as props! Moreover, just at a time when she most needed the money, Drouet began to find that she could not keep up with the grueling schedule of performances night after night. The stress was beginning to tell mentally and physically, and reviewers were not kind. Yet the test was just beginning. As she was in financially desperate straits, Drouet needed to perform as much as possible. Accordingly Drouet engaged upon what Pouchain calls “a stupefying theatrical marathon” (*JPD*, 100), acting between August 1832 and the end of 1833 in a dozen or so different plays and in nearly five hundred performances. On more than a hundred occasions she performed in two or even three plays on a single night.

However, by the end of 1832 Drouet was beginning to get a taste of what her career might have become if she had not met Victor Hugo. In November she appeared in the part of Marie in the drama *Perrinet Leclerc* by Lockroy and Anicet Bourgeois, which, catering to the taste for historical drama with lavish costumes and staging that Hugo would exploit so well, was set in fifteenth-century France in the context of the feud between the Armagnacs and the Burgundians. The play was a tremendous success, and the theater was full to overflowing night after night. Even though Drouet did not have the leading part, even though she had received some negative reviews for her lack of theatrical technique, and even though her fatigue, in the eyes of some, had begun to take a toll on her acting and her looks, she had achieved star status. She was a celebrity whose doings were the fodder of gossip columns in newspapers and magazines and the subject of satirical plays and novels. Like the image of a modern pop or screen idol, Drouet’s portrait (a lithograph in these predaguerreotype days) appeared that autumn in the magazine *L’Artiste*, accompanied by a lengthy eulogy.

Separated by a few pages in the same magazine there appeared a lithograph by the same artist, Léon Noël, of another celebrity, the thirty-year-old Victor Hugo. Drouet and Hugo were not yet acquainted with one another, but they would be very soon! In the meantime, however, Drouet had become involved in a new liaison, this time with Alphonse Karr, drama critic for *Le Figaro*, who had been following her career with interest for some time. In his reviews Karr had highly praised not only Drouet’s beauty but also her acting. It was Karr who had written the article that accompanied the portrait of Drouet in *L’Artiste* in which he says, in part:

Some of our actresses may perhaps compete with Mlle Juliette for the prize for beauty; but not one has this purity, this youthfulness, these artless contours which recall Greek sculpture, and, at the same time, this poetic and expressive face that brings to mind

Shakespearean heroines. Thus M. Léon Noël, whose talent the readers of *L'Artiste* have already come to appreciate, must regret the impossibility of capturing on stone this face that is in turns passionate and deadly, witty and biting. There are limits to art and the finest heads of Van Dyck do not speak to us. Only Lawrence could have rendered these features, pure and smooth. (*JPD*, 105)

Unsurprisingly, Alphonse Karr was another disappointment. While alluring Drouet with promises of marriage, he demanded from her—as she staggered under her own burden of debt—loans of money that he would never pay back. The relationship was very short-lived. By the beginning of the next year, 1833, Drouet was ready for an affair that would last for the rest of her life.

Drouet and Victor Hugo met on 2 January 1833 at the Théâtre de la Porte-Saint-Martin. Hugo was there to read to the actors his sensational and bloodcurdling prose drama *Lucrece Borgia*, in preparation for their performance of it. Twenty-two years later in a New Year's letter dated 31 December 1854, he reminisced to Drouet: "The day after tomorrow, 2 January, it will be twenty-two years since I saw you for the first time. Do you remember? Since that moment it has been 2 January (and not the first) that has started the year, or rather life itself, for me" (*LJD*, 212).

Notwithstanding the importance in retrospect of this initial meeting, or of the fact that this was Drouet's first part in a play that could lay claim to literary merit, Drouet resigned from the theater. The papers said that she found her role as the Princesse Negroni insultingly small.⁴⁰ Then, perhaps because the director, Harel, called her bluff by accepting her resignation, Drouet quickly returned and accepted the role, declaring, so the legend has it, that "there is no small role in a play by Victor Hugo."⁴¹ Before the play even opened, however, Drouet found herself summoned to court on 23 January to answer charges brought by Mme Ribot who, hearing the press reports of Drouet's imminent appearance in this play with its eminent author and celebrated actors, Frédéric Lemaître and Mlle George, had decided that the time was opportune to make another attempt to recoup the money Drouet owed her. The case was referred to another court before which she would be called to appear on 8 February. The press was titillated by the spectacle of the young star in trouble with the law, and Hugo, along with the rest of the world, could not have failed to be aware of the situation. If her outstanding beauty had not already brought her to his attention during rehearsals, then surely "the prestige of this great misfortune" must have. As Drouet would remark ruefully in years to come, Hugo, who had already written a play about a redeemed courtesan, *Marion de Lorme*, never could resist the sight of a young woman in trouble, or as Drouet later acidly put it, "a tart in a bind" (L. 175).⁴²

The play had its premiere on 2 February 1833 and was a tremendous success with the theater packed to capacity. Several eulogistic accounts of Drouet's performance appeared in the papers, but the most evocative account of Drouet's presence in the play is that of Théophile Gautier:

It was in the small role of the Princesse Negroni in *Lucrece Borgia* that Mlle Juliette cast the most dazzling light. She had only a couple of words to say and really only crossed the stage: but with such little time and with so few words she found a way to create a ravishing figure, a real Italian princess with a gracious and deadly smile, her eyes full of treacherous inebriation . . .

Her costume was ravishing in its character and taste: a dress of pink damask with a silver floral pattern, feathers and pearls in her hair; all that in a capricious and Romanesque style like a drawing by Tempeste or della Bella. She was like a snake standing upright on its tail, so undulating, supple, and serpentine were her movements. Through all her grace how well she conveyed something venomous! With what disturbing and mocking agility did she slip away from the prostrate adoration of the handsome Venetian noblemen!⁴³

In her appearance in court on 8 February Drouet had been ordered, once again, to pay the eight thousand francs with interest for which she had assumed responsibility three years previously. Her situation was such that she had already had to sell and pawn her belongings. Prison was a possibility if she did not come up with the money. So as the eighty performances of *Lucrece Borgia* got underway, Drouet maintained a punishing schedule, appearing also on other nights in other plays that were already running at the Porte-Saint-Martin: *Le Moine*, *L'Homme au masque de fer*, *Jeanne Vaubernier*, *Térésa*, and *Perrinet Leclerc*. She appeared, as Pouchain calculates, in more than one hundred performances in three months⁴⁴ and, from 1 May 1833 onward, acted in two plays every night. After her evening performance at the Porte-Saint-Martin she would rush to the Théâtre Molière and perform late at night in *Le Fils de Zambular*. It is no surprise to find her letters from this time referring to a breakdown in her health, and in the context of such overwhelming stress the theory (*JDD*, 115–7) that Drouet audaciously appealed to Hugo for help is not at all difficult to believe.

In any case, the sophisticated boldness of one of Drouet's earliest letters to him, possibly dated 16 February 1833, and miraculously preserved, bears the legend out (L. 1):

Come for me this evening at Mme K's.

I will love you until then just to stay patient. See you this evening!
Oh, this evening will be everything!

I will give myself to you completely.

It was the night of 16–17 February 1833 (or so they always said) that

Drouet and Hugo first slept together, and it was also Mardi Gras. They would memorialize this night for the rest of their fifty years together (L. 80, 135, 142). Drouet kept under her pillow a red book they called the *Livre de l'anniversaire*, in which, beginning in 1835 and ending in 1882, the year before she died, Hugo wrote a few lines each year to commemorate the moment.⁴⁵ Hugo evocatively described their first night together in his entry in the *Livre de l'anniversaire* for 1841:

Our first night was a carnival night, the night of Mardi Gras 1833. They were giving in some theater or other some ball to which we were both supposed to go, and which we both missed . . . Your little bedroom was full of an adorable silence. Outside we could hear Paris laughing and singing and the masqueraders passing by with loud shouts. In the midst of the general festivities we secluded and concealed in the shadows our own sweet festival. (*LJD*, 336–7).

When he came to write his monumental novel *Les Misérables*, which was published in 1862, Hugo made Mardi Gras, 16 February 1833, the day on which the young hero and heroine, Marius and Cosette, were married and consummated their love. The carriages taking the wedding party to church thread their way through Parisian streets thronged with masqueraders celebrating Mardi Gras. Like Marius and Cosette, it seems, Drouet and Hugo sensed on that first fateful night the presence of “the forms of the night, the unknown winged ones, the blue passersby of the invisible, bending in a crowd of somber heads around the luminous dwelling—satisfied, offering benediction.”⁴⁶ Similarly, in a letter written sixteen years after their first night (20 February 1849, *LJD*, 181), Hugo poetically evokes the morning after:

I'll never forget that morning as I left your place, my heart bedazzled. The day was just beginning, it was pouring rain, the masqueraders, in tatters and covered with mud, were yelling as they came down from La Courtille and flooded into the Boulevard du Temple. They were drunk, and I was too—they with wine, I with love. Through their shrieks I heard a song that I had in my heart. I didn't see all these specters around me, specters of a joy that had died away, ghosts of an orgy that was over—I saw you—you, sweet shadow shining in the darkness, your eyes, your forehead, your beauty, and your smile as inebriating as your kisses. O morning, icy and rainy in the sky, radiant and ardent in my soul! Memory!

Aside from Drouet, could any reader of *Les Misérables* on its publication in 1862 have recognized the symbolism of the hero and heroine's marriage date? Undoubtedly Mme Hugo will have done so, for as she will have remembered, her marriage of eleven years' standing was in serious trouble by

this point. By February 1833, Adèle Hugo and her husband's best friend, Charles-Augustin Sainte-Beuve—poet, literary critic, and admirer of Hugo's work—had been carrying on an affair for at least the previous two years, which would continue until 1836.⁴⁷ Mme Hugo had terminated sexual relations with Hugo after the birth of their last child, Adèle.⁴⁸ There would be gossip later that Sainte-Beuve was not only this girl's godfather, but her biological father too.⁴⁹ In any case, Hugo's marriage had deteriorated since 1822 when he had married Adèle Foucher, a childhood sweetheart, and by 1833 it seemed to be maintained only for the sake of appearances. Yet it was a complex relationship. Hugo's letters to her, written touring France or farther afield with Drouet, while admittedly rather like travelogues, are wonderful examples of his skills as poet, novelist, and artist. Their correspondence, while difficult to analyze completely, seems to give evidence of mutual affection. Hugo assures Adèle in 1835 while on vacation with Drouet: "I still love you more than anything in the world, you can believe me. You are my life itself" (*CF*, 2:235).⁵⁰ Adèle, simultaneously away from home to attend a wedding in the company of Sainte-Beuve, goes out of her way to assure Hugo that she is sharing a bedroom with her daughter, not Sainte-Beuve (*CF*, 2:223, 229). Both spouses emphasize how much they miss each other. But Adèle's tone with Hugo is often self-righteous and sometimes accusatory.⁵¹ The prosaic banality of her letters makes one feel that, in contrast to Drouet, she must have poorly appreciated his artistic genius. In any case, a childhood torn between two warring parents, each with an extramarital relationship, combined with his present marital situation, had made Hugo insecure. He needed a solid relationship with a motherly woman to reaffirm his self-esteem. Concomitantly, Drouet needed a father figure to protect her in her current financial crisis and to provide her in general with the parenting that, as an orphan, she had never received. Drouet and Hugo would, in a sense, give each other exactly what each needed. No doubt that is why the relationship would last a whole lifetime.

What Hugo needed, in fact, was that Drouet should need him entirely. He therefore wanted her to give up her theatrical career. While she may, in the short term, have been glad to be released from the exhausting grind of too many performances, Drouet would eventually bitterly regret her break with the theater. She continued to perform at the Porte-Saint-Martin for about a year after meeting Hugo until the end of her contract, which occurred on 30 March 1834. She could hardly have suspected it at the time—after all she had a new contract starting 1 April with the prestigious Comédie-Française—but she would never again appear onstage after her last performance that night as (once again) Antonia in *Le Moine*. She had appeared during her six-year theatrical career in at least thirty-four different roles and had performed onstage more than a thousand times.

In some respects, however, the end of Drouet's dramatic career had already occurred on 7 November 1833. On this date Drouet appeared at the Porte-Saint-Martin in the premiere of Hugo's play *Marie Tudor*. It was an experience so excruciatingly embarrassing that the memory of it would last a lifetime.

On the night of the performance the audience arrived in the mood for a fight—perhaps with latent hostility toward Hugo and sensing another “Battle of *Hernani*.”⁵² The atmosphere had been primed by the knowledge that the playwright had given the young female lead, Jane, to his mistress, Mlle Juliette, piquing the jealousy of fellow actresses Mlle George and Mlle Ida. There had also been disagreements between Hugo and the theater director, Harel. The audience tangled with police outside the theater and, once inside it, behaved like animals. A journalist’s account describes “shrieks, barking.” He continues: “There was a gentleman in the second tier who could take off a dog to perfection and who gave us the proof of his talent for mimicry five or six times. We were also subjected to the *Marseillaise* sung out of tune by two hundred rather discordant voices . . . Added to this prologue there was a little entertainment, a shower of pieces of paper, inoffensive enough, but not so were the crusts of bread, apples, hats, and other projectiles thrown at the women.”⁵³

Any actor would have been disconcerted by such a brouhaha taking place during his or her performance. Drouet was already nervous after the weeks of backbiting and hostility to which she had been subjected during rehearsals. She was also acutely desirous of doing justice to her lover’s faith in her acting. She lost her nerve. Almost all the newspaper reviews of the performance the next day lambasted her performance and commented on the way she had acted with her head lowered throughout the entire play. She looked, when her back was to the audience, as though she had been decapitated, one reviewer wrote scathingly!⁵⁴ Hugo must have been similarly dismayed by her performance, for the very next day Drouet found herself out of the play and replaced by Mlle Ida. She would continue to perform until the end of her contract in the other plays in her repertoire at the theater, but her confidence was broken, as she herself said (*MUL*, 45). Hugo was anxious for her to abandon her career and willing to provide for her. The Comédie-Française, which seems to have engaged her only under pressure from Hugo, never offered her any roles (L. 20). The combination of these factors sufficed to prevent her from returning to the stage ever again.

For some years after her last appearance, however, Drouet would continue to hope for a comeback. There would be one brief moment of ecstasy in 1838 when Hugo promised Drouet the role of the Queen of Spain, Doña Maria de Neubourg, in his play *Ruy Blas* (L. 31), but it was quickly scotched by Mme Hugo. Unbeknownst to Hugo and Drouet, she wrote to the director of the Théâtre de la Renaissance to suggest that Mlle Juliette might compromise the success of the play. The role went instead, with no protest from Hugo, to Mlle Beaudoïn, the mistress of the male lead, Frédéric Lemaître.⁵⁵ After this final blow Drouet felt that her morale had been destroyed forever—“I’m demoralized to the point that I wouldn’t dare to perform, no matter what the role or whose play it was,” she said (L. 34). With the years she would gradually come to accept her retirement from the theater. For someone who had made her name in parts contingent on youth and beauty the passage of time made it inevitable.

Once Drouet had retired from the theater, the contrast between her previous life as an actress and her life as Hugo's mistress became stark. Whereas she had previously led a busy independent life in the center of Paris's social maelstrom, glamorous and desired both onstage and off, and had lived in a relatively luxurious apartment on the rue de l'Echiquier, Drouet gained in return for being Hugo's lover a parsimonious and solitary existence that she would describe at times as the life of "a squirrel in a cage."⁵⁶ Her social circle was reduced to one. Hugo, who was intensely jealous and possessive, would not allow her to leave her apartment without him or open her own letters, even from her daughter.⁵⁷ Despite Hugo's famed dictum, "Oh! n'insultez jamais une femme qui tombe!" ("Oh, never insult a woman who falls!" *Les Chants du crépuscule*, XIV), and despite the sympathy he would show later in *Les Misérables* for the plight of the young unmarried mother, Fantine, at his worst moments he also raked up Drouet's "sinful" past and demanded that she atone for it. (L. 4). Throughout the letters that Drouet wrote to Hugo over fifty years, she often compared him to God (L. 32, 49, 55, 97, 99, 105, 115, 118, 122, 133, 144, 145, 152)⁵⁸ or to Jesus Christ (L. 145, 164, 177).⁵⁹ She, on the other hand, was cast in the role of Mary Magdalene (L. 105), as Hugo began to congratulate her on her moral "ascension" (*LJD*, 109) and on her "devotion, resignation, and virtue."⁶⁰ Accepting the role of redeemed harlot, Drouet writes in a letter dated 2 May 1837:

I am in ecstasy as I contemplate the thought of you and your adored image. I see what you are, that is to say, God-made-Man, to redeem me and save me from this infamous life to which I was enslaved for so long. What Jesus Christ did for the world as a whole, you have done for me alone. Like Him you have redeemed my soul at the expense of your repose and your life. (*VHJD*, 2:335)

In Hugo's view, Drouet's past sin had taken two forms, sexual and financial. In fact he saw these as being two sides of the same coin.⁶¹ She would be redeemed in his eyes by practicing total monogamy and stringent economy. When Hugo met Drouet she was not only being sued for debts she was unable to meet, but she had no financial records of her own affairs, no record of what she had paid for purchases, no clear idea of whom she owed what. This was a situation that shocked the bourgeois in Hugo. All his life he wrote down every day every penny he spent (including on prostitutes) and was always very frugal, even after he had become an extremely wealthy man. Complete financial dependence on Hugo required that his money be accounted for, as Drouet complained, down to the last carrot in her stewpot.⁶² From now on, instead of being surrounded by luxurious furnishings in a luxurious apartment, wearing the finest clothes and jewelry, she would have to make do with bare necessities in much more humble quarters. Indeed, some of her letters show her referring to economizing on firewood (L. 20) and owning only the dress she has on her back

(L. 42, 47, 73). In order to set off on trips with Hugo she has to borrow a hat, shawl, even a corset, from a friend (L. 30, 42).⁶³

The first couple of years of the relationship were stormy with constant rows, often arising from Hugo's unfounded suspicions of Drouet's infidelity. Matters reached a head with Drouet's flight to Brittany with her daughter, Claire, in August 1834 (L. 11), where she stayed with her sister Renée and her brother-in-law, Louis Koch. Hugo followed her. There was a passionate reconciliation and a meandering return—which became the prototype for a tradition of annual pleasure trips—and then an idyllic interlude in the forested countryside outside Paris in a village called Les Metz (L. 14). Drouet lived in a little cottage Hugo had rented for her, and he stayed with his family not far away at the country home of the cultured family of François Bertin, editor of *Le Journal des débats*. The two lovers met each day in the woods and left notes for each other in the hollow trunk of a chestnut tree. The idyll would be repeated in the autumn of 1835.

During this second idyllic interlude Hugo writes on 25 September 1835, after a meeting in the forest the day before:

Let us never forget this terrible storm of 24 September 1835 that was so full of divine things for us. The rain fell in torrents, the leaves of the tree served only to bring it down more cold upon our heads, the sky was full of thunder, you were naked in my arms—your beautiful face hidden in my lap turning only to smile at me—and your wet blouse clung to your shoulders.

This was a love with a vision of itself, and a strikingly modern—in fact, Romantic—one at that. Indeed, what else from the leader of the French Romantic movement? Clearly, in order to properly romanticize itself such a love needed the written word and a lover who could respond in kind.⁶⁴ Hugo agreed with Drouet: “You're right. We must love each other, and then we must tell ourselves we love each other, and then we must write it to each other” (*LJD*, 32). Drouet was the perfect correspondent. As Hugo was writing his description of their lovemaking in the rain, Drouet had also committed hers to paper:

My dear beloved, my Victor, I would not give this day and especially the moment when I trembled with cold upon your lap for the finest and most radiant of summer days. It seems to me that we were reborn in this baptism, showered on us by Heaven and presided over by Love.” (*MUL*, 86)

Drouet felt from the very beginning a need to write down her feelings about Hugo and observations that she would have made to him in person, had he been there. She wrote her first letter of this kind the morning of 17 February 1833 after their first night together, and such letters served, she said, as “a kind

of electric wire by which my soul felt connected with your soul when you were far from me” (*MUL*, 606). But writing letters was not only a substitute for being together. It was also a necessary adjunct to it. The “epistolary prodigality” (*VHJD*, 2:261) for which Drouet was already apologizing in 1833 would continue and grow, with Hugo’s encouragement, for the next half century.

If we are to judge by Drouet’s letters and the course of events, for Hugo—who could find sexual appeal only in very young women—the relationship appears to have lost its sexual excitement, although certainly not its poetic and moral interest, quite soon. Many of Drouet’s letters in the first two decades of their relationship, perhaps, indeed, the majority, complain about how very little time Hugo spends with her. The state of incarceration imposed on her by Hugo now becomes unbearable as Hugo’s visits become shorter and shorter (and often occur in the middle of the night—L. 44, 47). She finds herself going days, even weeks or months, without setting foot outdoors. She must wait for Hugo to find time to take her out, whether for a walk or for essential business, such as visiting her daughter in the pension or making purchases (*VS*, 1:69–72). She lives all year waiting for their annual trip and the chance to be with Hugo for a few days at a time. Despite Hugo’s obvious sexual appetite for other women and numerous letters in which Drouet openly describes her sexual desire, many of Drouet’s letters from early on testify to little sexual contact in the relationship, or what she calls “the scandal of two lovers living in a state of atrocious chastity” (25 November 1834 [*VS*, 1:20]).⁶⁵ In one letter she asks, “When are you going to come and sleep with me?” (7 March 1837 [*MUL*, 115]) or, “When is the orgy? When . . . ??????”⁶⁶ In another letter (19 December 1848 [*LVH*, 122]) she complains about the fact that Hugo has refused to have sex with her. In other letters she promises sexual delights if only Hugo will take advantage of them.⁶⁷ “I have a burning heart and lips on fire,” she writes on 30 May 1842, “why do you condemn me the whole year through to the punishment of Tantalus?” (*VS*, 1:53). In a letter dated 11 March 1852 (L. 100), she comments ironically vis-à-vis an ailment of Hugo’s, “It appears you must double your chastity, which won’t be difficult as far as I’m concerned, for you only have to continue the continence you have observed with me so scrupulously for what will soon be two months, although I could even say for what will soon be *eight years*.” With hindsight, and the decipherment and publication of Hugo’s encrypted notations on his sex life, we know that Hugo’s prodigious sexual appetite was finding other means to express itself. Drouet’s had to remain unsatisfied.⁶⁸

On 17 November 1839 when the relationship was six years old, Hugo promised Drouet, in return for her promising to abandon all intentions of returning to the stage, that he would never leave her and that he would support her and her daughter, Claire, for the rest of their lives (L. 37, 38). This was a promise that Hugo kept, and both saw it as a kind of marriage between them. But perhaps it also extinguished the last vestiges of the sexual interest of the relationship for Hugo: Drouet was now fully and safely his in every sense of the word and the excitement of the chase was truly gone.

Many of the letters Drouet wrote in the 1840s reflect her unhappiness with the situation. At the beginning of the decade she writes on 20 July 1841, “This year is one of the saddest, coldest, and most denuded of any kind of happiness that has ever weighed on my life.”⁶⁹ On 16 February 1843, the anniversary of their first night of love, which was usually for her an occasion for rejoicing, she writes:

Always to be sacrificed to everything: to business, to pleasure, to family affections—this is not living. May God forgive me what I’m going to say if it’s blasphemy, but if I had known ten years ago what I know today, I would have rather killed myself than have accepted my life as it is now.

I’m all ready in fact to renounce this life. The most miserable condition is preferable to the life that I lead. I’m like a poor starving person condemned to live in the midst of painted game, pâté, and fruit, and whatever the merit of the painting might be, it’s difficult to restrict oneself to food for the eyes alone. I have only painted happiness and cardboard pleasures. (*MUL*, 252)

In this letter Drouet dates the beginning of her insufferable existence to three years previously and remarks, “It’s very clear that you no longer have any love for me.” Notwithstanding the fact that Drouet made observations of this kind many times, especially during the 1840s, and whatever the exact chronology of Hugo’s feelings for her may have been, it does seem that a turning point was reached in the years 1843–1844 that would permanently change the nature of their relationship. It was heart wrenching for Hugo when his treasured nineteen-year-old daughter, Léopoldine, got married (L. 50). A few months later, she drowned with her husband, Charles Vacquerie, in a boating accident. Hugo learned of the accident by chance as he read a newspaper at an inn, while away on a trip with Drouet (L. 53, 54).

This event may have been partly the catalyst, if not the motivation or the justification, for his first serious affair since he had met Drouet eleven years previously. The affair began probably in 1844 with a woman named Léonie Biard (née d’Aunet)⁷⁰ who was married to an academic and fashionable painter of about the same age as Hugo. She had moved into the luxurious residence of the wealthy society painter when she was between sixteen and seventeen years old (1837–1838) and had already acquired some celebrity by accompanying him on a voyage to Spitsbergen in the Arctic. Léonie d’Aunet was pregnant by François Biard when she married him in 1840. At twenty-four years old she was fourteen years younger than Drouet and eighteen years younger than Hugo. Ironically, Hugo probably met her through Pradier, whose house and studio he often visited as a friend and as an advocate of Drouet, mother of Pradier’s daughter.⁷¹

To Léonie Biard Hugo wrote passionate love letters as spontaneous as those Drouet wrote to him, and strangely reminiscent of them. Just as Drouet declares in her letters her unbearable longing for Hugo's presence, which sanctifies as religious relics even the traces of disorder left in the room behind him, so Hugo repeats the same sentiment to Biard;⁷² just as Drouet compares Hugo to God and declares her willingness to die for him, so Hugo repeats the same sentiment to Biard.⁷³ Yet in 1847 at the height of his affair with Biard, and unknown to both her and Drouet, Hugo attempted to initiate an affair with the actress Alice Ozy, who was at the time mistress of his son Charles.⁷⁴ As Arsène Houssaye acutely commented with reference to Hugo, "There are some men whom it is impossible to contain within the laws of family and society, because they comprise several men."⁷⁵

The Hugo-Biard relationship would continue for seven years and Drouet would not know about it, even though in 1845 Hugo and Biard would be caught together in flagrante delicto and arrested after Biard's husband had hired a private detective (L. 57). The incident was reported in the newspapers, and yet Drouet—who did not read them, or perhaps read only what Hugo allowed her to read—had no inkling of the event that reached even the ears of her sister and brother-in-law in Brittany. When that brother-in-law, Louis Koch, brought the news to her attention, albeit in a very oblique kind of way, she chose to dismiss it (L. 58). Perhaps it was imperative to believe that Hugo could not be unfaithful to her, since as she frequently said, infidelity on his part would have killed her (L. 58). "I know you are incapable of lying to me, because *I* always tell *you* the truth," she wrote (L. 59). Unfortunately, Drouet's confidence in Hugo in this respect was grossly misplaced. And yet maybe, at a subconscious level, Drouet did suspect the truth. Certainly she refers to the possibility of infidelity on Hugo's part many times, especially in the 1840s. For example, in a letter dated 20 September 1845, some two months after Hugo's arrest in flagrante delicto, Drouet writes:

I had a bad night, complicated . . . by frightful dreams. I woke up several times sobbing. Every time I dream of you, which I do almost every night, I have terrible dreams . . .

I hope that these hideous dreams are the opposite of reality, for if they aren't, I would be in despair and would kill you without pity.

It's true that all these horrible dreams are lies, isn't it? It's true that you love me and are very faithful to me, isn't it?" (VS, 3.32)⁷⁶

On 28 June 1851, Drouet wrote two witty letters (L. 81, 82) to Hugo about a dish of strawberries that she had sent to his house by her servant, Suzanne, for him and his family to enjoy, concluding with the line: "As long as you are completely faithful to me and love me, I permit you everything." Sometime

shortly afterward that day she received in the mail a package of love letters written by Hugo to Léonie Biard over the course of the preceding seven years. Biard had sent them to her with a note saying that the relationship was still flourishing. Drouet's feelings as she opened the package and read the letters can only be imagined. But she did not die. From then on more than ever, it was Drouet's conviction and pride that her love for Hugo was a greater love than any other.⁷⁷ While she may not have been able to compete in life with the beauty of women years younger, in death the beauty of her loving soul would outshine all others (L. 83). Nevertheless, as she wrote on 28 December 1851, she felt that there was "something dead in the depths of [her] soul" that would never revive.

Why did Drouet tolerate Hugo's treatment of her? A pragmatic answer is that Drouet was entirely financially dependent on Hugo and had no hope of earning any income as an actress by this point in her life. Moreover, Hugo's dual standards were merely the norm, as the literature of the period abundantly testifies. Indeed, reading accounts of extramarital relationships of the time, such as Arsène Houssaye's self-glorifying and callous description of his treatment of Marie Garcia,⁷⁸ one is tempted to conclude that Hugo's behavior was actually rather more decent than the contemporary norm. But aside from practical considerations and social mores, Drouet had made loving Hugo her life's work. "I live to love you and I love you to live," she wrote on 4 September 1853 (*LVH*, 190) or, on 1 January 1868: "My virtue is to love you. My body, my blood, my heart, my life, my soul are employed in loving you. Beyond my love, I am nothing, I understand nothing, I want nothing. Loving you, loving you, loving you, that is my one and only perfection" (L. 141). Finally, she needed Hugo to provide her with the psychological security that her orphaned childhood had not given her. This need was to become even stronger after 1846 with the death of her daughter, Claire, from tuberculosis (L. 62, 63, 64, 65).

The story of Claire Pradier's life makes for painful reading. She spent her whole short life farmed out to strangers, incarcerated in pensions, or boarding schools, first as a pupil and then, ultimately, as a student teacher—sad, lonely, waiting for opportunities to see her mother and father, both of whose approbation she desperately desired. Indeed, it seems that it was partly shame at having failed her parents by failing her teacher's examinations for a second time that caused Claire to fall seriously ill in March 1846.⁷⁹ She died three months later. It was clear too that although she already had a tubercular infection, Claire's illness was exacerbated by "sorrow," and after her death Drouet admitted that Claire must have had a desire to die.⁸⁰

Boarding at a pension outside Paris at Saint-Mandé, she saw her mother every two weeks, if Drouet was not away on a trip with Hugo, and she would hope—often without result—to see her father also. When her mother left on a trip of several weeks, Claire was left behind. She longed for an affectionate relationship with her father, James Pradier. While he did do some charming sketches of her,⁸¹ he was inadequate and irresponsible in his relations with her, often refusing her mother's request for money to pay the school fees, rebuffing

all Claire's attempts at affection, and even eventually forbidding her to use his surname.⁸² Although Claire was deeply hurt by this, her instinct throughout her life was to adore him.⁸³ In tragic letters (*MUL*, 325, 326) Drouet describes how brief visits by Pradier to Claire's deathbed were the only thing that could arouse her from her apathy, bringing a glow of joy to her face. Even after Claire's death, Pradier failed her. Having promised that he would design a monument to mark her grave, he never did so.⁸⁴ He even took his time paying her doctor.⁸⁵ Shortly after her death in June 1846 it was discovered that Claire had written her will the previous November, surely an unusual act for a twenty-year-old.⁸⁶ In it she bequeathed some mementoes from her small possessions to her two half sisters, Charlotte and Thérèse Pradier, but strangely enough made no mention of her father.

Claire was fond of Hugo, calling him "Monsieur Toto," and it is to Hugo's credit that he was affectionate toward Claire. For the rest of her life Drouet would commemorate the anniversary of Claire's death, and it was a convention between her and Hugo to invoke at solemn moments in their letters the spirits of their two dead daughters, Léopoldine and Claire, the two "angels" (L. 123, 135, 141). Around Claire's memory Drouet erected a monument to virginity, which contrasts strangely with the sensuality and enjoyment of sexuality that is both implicit and explicit in her letters to Hugo.⁸⁷ The contradiction only underlines the inherent paradoxes in the nineteenth-century role of women, which Hugo would do as much as anyone to perpetuate. While his diaries reveal relations throughout his life with an astonishing number of prostitutes and various other women, he also cultivated the concept of the virgin—worshiped by him in his own daughter Léopoldine—but also memorably enshrined in *Les Misérables* in the figure of Cosette.

The year 1851 was a turning point in France and for Drouet and Hugo in their lives and relationship, a year that Hugo would describe as "a year of pain, a year of struggle, a year of trial" (*LJD*, 197). It was the year of the coup d'état that brought Napoleon III to power, and it was the year in which Drouet and Hugo went into exile. It was also quite possibly this event that saved their relationship. Who knows whether Hugo would have chosen Drouet over Biard, if it had not been for the coup d'état, which made Hugo's swift departure from France, leaving Biard behind, a necessity? Hugo's politics had made him anathema to the regime that came to power, and it was only because of Drouet, as he believed, that he was not deported or killed.⁸⁸ Hugo left on 12 December under an assumed name and with a false passport. Drouet joined him on 14 December, carrying a trunk containing Hugo's manuscripts (L. 97). They would not return for nineteen years. They went first to Brussels, and when they were no longer welcome there, they went to Jersey in the British Channel Islands. From there too they were obliged to leave in 1855, and they spent the remaining fifteen years in Jersey's neighboring island, Guernsey. It was in Guernsey that Hugo would write some of his greatest works. Drouet had Hugo to herself without serious threat from competing relationships, and during the extended absences of Adèle Hugo, almost became his surrogate wife, or what she called