

# TRANSNATIONAL LITERATURE

## Helen Humphreys, *The Reinvention of Love* (Serpent's Tail, 2011)

The opening chapters of *The Reinvention of Love* are intoxicating. In this historical novel based on the lives of Victor and Adèle Hugo and set in Paris over the years of 1830s to the 1860s, Humphreys, an award-winning Canadian novelist and poet, explores the Hugos' relationship with Charles Sainte-Beuve, an aspiring literary man, seeking to emulate Victor's international literary successes and in love with his wife, Adèle. Humphreys acknowledges that the novel has drawn upon the historical biography of Charles Sainte-Beuve written by Harold Nicholson.

In her Author's note Humphreys claims that 'There is more "truth" in the book than fiction' (249), and that her interest was to explore the life of a man less famous but perhaps of more interest than Victor Hugo. Charles Sainte-Beuve recognised Victor's brilliance, wrote favourable reviews about his literary endeavours, befriended and sought to emulate him.

Set against the milieu of the literary accomplishments and jealousies of the time, *The Reinvention of Love* explores the themes of writing, the oppression of married women, unfulfilled love, subterfuge, longing and regret, gender identity, betrayal and what Humphreys portrays as the unabashed ambition and selfishness of Victor Hugo who Charles describes as 'a fire who uses all those around him as fuel for his work' (223).

The story-line of what is essentially a three-way relationship unfolds through the narratives of Charles and Adèle and towards the end of the novel the younger daughter of the Hugos, also named Adèle. As a child Adèle played at the feet of the lovers when they met secretly. We read about the perceptions of Charles and Adèle of the events in Victor's life and his attitudes throughout these narratives. He does not have an independent voice in the novel.

Humphreys has a wonderful flair for succinct and poignant writing of events and character depictions with beautiful turns of phrases. The novel opens with a brief duel scene involving the junior writer. At a newspaper, Charles, the central character of the novel, is challenged for his insolence in calling his senior editor, Pierre Dubois, a 'glorious inferior'. Charles, anticipating the pistol shot, reflects on his predicament: 'We are writers. We are meant to brandish pens, not pistols' (4). He fires the first unsuccessful shot and waits for Pierre to fire back thinking 'of Adèle, and how if I die, she will weep and despair and be impressed by my courage' (5). The outcome of the duel is not resolved and the reader is thrust immediately into the domestic scene involving Victor and Adèle and over six succinct pages Humphreys sets out the plot of the narrative. Children run through the house as their father, Victor, negotiates the staging of *Hernani*, a drama production, with two young men who hang on the glory of his genius (7). Charles, a family friend, observes the discussion sceptically for he doubts Victor's skills as a dramatist.

Adèle refrains from contributing to the discussion as Charles delights in their fleeting sensuous touches delicately depicted by Humphreys: 'Our heads are a whisper apart' (7). The lovers briefly embrace in the upstairs hallway until daughter Adèle 'calls out in her sleep and the balance shifts from me and back towards Adèle's family' (9). Returning downstairs Victor warmly hugs Charles expressing his

Book reviews: *The Reinvention of Love* by Helen Humphreys. Loula S. Rodopoulos.  
*Transnational Literature* Vol. 4 no. 1, November 2011.  
<http://fhrc.flinders.edu.au/transnational/home.html>

appreciation of their friendship. Victor says to Charles 'I don't know what I'd do without you' (10).

The only occasion that Charles and Adèle are seen publicly together is when they attend the opening of the performance of *Hernani* at Victor's request. Adèle reveals how she feels trapped in her marriage, for Victor's 'hands write the words that keep us alive. They are also the hands that wrote the play that is forcing us to move across the river' (63). This move is necessary because the play, *Hernani*, was controversial and the Hugo's landlord evicts them from their lodgings, conveniently located near to where Charles lived and the setting of their assignations, the accounts of which are full of surprises that I'll leave the reader to discover. At this point Charles reveals his affair with Adèle to Victor and in a brief meeting with her, he records their interchange:

'He insisted we would remain friends.'

'He calls you a twisty little cheat.' Replies Adèle.

I look down at little Adèle. She's playing in the dirt by our feet with a stick and a beetle (75).

Now no longer seeing Adèle, Charles writes love poetry, recognising that 'Our future is, unfortunately, beyond the control of my pen' (90). His literary fortunes improve and, notwithstanding Hugo's efforts to impede his aspirations, Charles becomes a member of the prestigious Academie Française and later takes a position as librarian at the Mazarine Library situated in the French Institute. These chapters explore the theme of the 'lesser' man in the literary circle and note that Adèle recognizes that 'Charles did not just want to please Victor, but rather he wanted to be Victor' (67).

The later chapters, set in Guernsey in the 1850s and Halifax, Canada in the 1860s, reflect on the later lives of the ageing threesome. Victor has a mistress but Adèle remains with him because of the children, recognising that her friendship with Charles 'keeps me alive. I fear myself without him' (59). She acknowledges that unlike other women it is not enough for her to care for her children, 'Why isn't it enough for me?' (64)

The drowning of her daughter, Léopoldine and her loved husband causes Adèle to once again question her bondage to Victor and her humiliation. A philanderer, travelling incognito abroad, Victor does not learn about his daughter's death until after the funeral and he writes to Adèle: '*My God what have I done to you?*' (139). Adèle briefly encounters Charles after Léopoldine's death. Charles says to her:

'It is as though we have died,' I say, unable to stop myself. Adèle smiles at my vehemence. 'We have, Charles,' she says. 'Don't you feel it? We have died and this is the afterlife.' (218)

As the novel reaches its close the reader is overloaded, in my view, with repetitious introspections of Charles and Adèle. An entire chapter is devoted to the letters of daughter Adèle. Daughter Adèle has run away to Halifax to pursue Albert whom she claims is in love with her. This is not the case but Humphreys portrays the comparison with her mother's loving relationship with Charles. Adèle, unlike her mother, dares to

pursue her unrequited passion with disastrous consequences.

Notwithstanding my reservations about the closing chapters, *The Reinvention of Love* offers a fascinating and stimulating read. For those unfamiliar with the lives of the Hugos, Humphreys presents a creative historical overview which may generate some interesting debates. Nevertheless the novel can simply be enjoyed as a very unusual and poignant love story.

**Loula S. Rodopoulos**