

“When Freedom Returns . . .”: Exile for Victor Hugo and Other Engagé Writers

Departments of French; Spanish, Italian & Portuguese; History;
Middle Eastern & South Asian Languages & Cultures

Intellectual focus of the initiative:

Page-Barbour Funds make possible remarkable, multifaceted, interdisciplinary explorations into the contemporary question of what exile means for writers and cultures. We are looking broadly at exile by expanding the French Department’s Müller Colloquium on Victor Hugo and connecting it with the Colloquium on Exile organized by the Spanish and History Departments in collaboration with the Colegio de México. We enhance our exchanges with a performance of Alain Lecompte’s one-man show *Hugo Live*, recounting Hugo’s life through his poetry set to music.

One of the most renowned nineteenth-century exiled writers, Hugo became an exemplar of the exiled author *and* a citizen of the world by tenaciously supporting the French Republic in the face of Emperor Napoleon III. Exile for reasons of politics and censorship was common in the nineteenth century; and still today many writers are forced into exile – or choose exile – because of their ideas. What does the exile phenomenon tell us about authors’ roles? What can students learn about the value of community engagement by considering how following their conscience leads some writers to leave their homeland? What do writers lose and gain by going into exile? French culture, literature, and history has profound and long-standing connections with both Latin American and Middle Eastern culture; in addition, Hugo’s ideas have had enormous impact in Latin America and Spain. Planning these activities collaboratively among our departments connects otherwise isolated events and enhances their import for all.

Four departments (French; Spanish, Italian and Portuguese [SIP]; History; and Middle Eastern and South Asian Languages and Cultures [MESALC]) are co-sponsoring this novel opportunity to work collectively. Through the Colloquia, outside scholars, U.Va. faculty, and students – and also high-school teachers and members of the general public – examine the impact on writers of exile for reasons of political oppression, social injustice, or artistic freedom. Colloquia participants explore connections between writers and society, between the past and the present, and ultimately between literature and life. Those who attend the free *Hugo Live* concert will be musically moved by Hugo’s perseverance. Inspired by the timelessness of Hugo’s arguments for democratic ideals in the face of a tyrannical government and by our connection with the Colegio de México, we are excited about the provocative discussions that will result from our coming together over this universal topic. The Colloquium title comes from Hugo’s famous words “When freedom returns, I will return,” his rejection of Napoleon III’s amnesty for French exiles during the Second Empire.

Organizational format, dates, and venue:

In March, the Colloquium on Exile both focuses on the Spanish exiles who came to the United States and Latin America after the Spanish Civil War (1936–1939) and also includes presentations about exiles from Latin America itself. Planned in collaboration with the Colegio de México (COLMEX) – founded by Spanish exiles and widely regarded as the most distinguished research institution of Latin America – the Colloquium on Exile includes as speakers exiled authors and scholars of exile.

On April 16-17, the Müller Colloquium explores the theme of exile for Victor Hugo and other important writers by connecting French and American Hugo scholars with UVA

specialists on exiled authors from other cultures. Some students who have taken FREN 3655: Victor Hugo have competed to present their research, as well. Conversation begins with scholarly presentations about exiled writers and expands to consider not only the role of the writer in society but also the individual's responsibility in the face of censorship or tyranny. We thus aim to inspire students to consider how their ideas might improve the world, as we promote interdisciplinary scholarly engagement and inquiry.

With *Hugo Live*, Québécois composer, pianist, and singer Alain Lecompte tells the story of Victor Hugo's life, including the sadness of his nineteen-year-long exile, in twenty-eight original songs written around Hugo's poetry. Müller Colloquium speakers include these, among others:

1. Keynoter: Jean-Marc Hovasse, Centre National de Recherche Scientifique in Paris, editor of two key Hugo exile works (*Les Châtiments* and *Napoléon le Petit*) and author of the magisterial biography *Victor Hugo*. Volume 1 was awarded the CNRS Bronze Medal in 2002; editors of *Le Point* chose Volume 2 as one of twenty best books of 2008.
2. American Hugo scholars who have accepted invitations to present papers:
 - Kathryn M. Grossman (Penn State)
 - Laurence M. Porter (Michigan State)
 - Isabel Roche (Bennington)
 - William VanderWolk (Bowdoin)Marva Barnett (U.Va.), whose *Victor Hugo on Things That Matter* has recently appeared with Yale University Press, will also participate.
3. U.Va. faculty: Hanadi al-Samman (MESALC); Mehr Farooqi (MESALC); María-Inés Lagos (SIP).

Professors responsible for organization of the two Colloquia: Marva Barnett (French), Hanadi al-Samman (Middle Eastern and South Asian Languages and Cultures), María-Inés Lagos (SIP), Daniel Lefkowitz (MESALC), and Brian Owensby and Tico Braun (History).