SGI PRESIDENT IKEDA'S ESSAY SERIES
A RECORD OF MY LIFE
THE OPENING OF THE VICTOR HUGO HOUSE OF LITERATURE
BY SGI PRESIDENT DAISAKU IKEDA

The surrounding woods were a deep, dense green. A gentle breeze sifted through the trees. Little birds sang, bathed in sunlight. The quiet pond was a respite for those who lingered by its banks, and stepping stones leading to the small floating island in its center stirring the imagination.

Gently enveloped in the wonderful scenery of June, the Victor Hugo House of Literature was a castle shining with the light of humanity. The beautiful house, the pond, the road, the lawn and flowers, all situated on the edge of the woods in Bièvres on the southern outskirts of Paris, were loved by that literary giant — Victor Hugo (1802–85).

As a young man struggling against injustice, this preeminent French writer of the nineteenth century often stayed here at the Château des Roches. On those occasions, he would contemplate life, exercise his poetic imagination, engage in literary discourse with the other guests, and take up his pen and inscribe his very life. He once extolled the beautiful area of Bièvres in a poem [which is inscribed on the monument in the garden of the House], writing: "Its tranquil, inexhaustible, deep beauty makes the souls of those on earth oblivious of, and rise above, all evil."

In Hugo there is poetry. There is boundless love and compassion for the oppressed. There is a spirit vaster than the ocean, broader than the sky. And his anger toward falsehood and injustice, as well as his thirst for truth and justice, rage fierce like a blustery storm.

Hugo is a comrade in spirit of my youth — no, of my entire life.

Opening Day

The Victor Hugo House of Literature opened on June 21, 1991. It has on public display a collection of 1,900 items that embody the spirit of this great writer, including handwritten manuscripts, personal effects and various documents.

The opening itself was attended by many distinguished intellectuals who love and admire Hugo, and who sympathize with his eventful and turbulent life. A congratulatory message was sent to the gathering from then French President François Mitterrand (1916–96), whom I had met two years prior. Among the guests were a number of representatives from the French art and academic worlds, as well as diplomatic representatives from twelve embassies.

Honorary membership to the commemorative hall's oversight committee was bestowed upon eight prominent individuals that day: Jack Lang, French Minister of Culture and Communications; Alain Decaux, member of the Institut de France; Hervé Bazin, president of the Goncourt Academy; Marcel Landowski, permanent secretary of the Académie des Beaux-Arts and chancellor of the Institut de France; René Huyghe, aesthetician and member of the Institut de France; Georges Poisson, the French general inspector of museums; Gonzague Saint Bris, author; and Jean Gaudon, professor of the University of Paris XII and international authority on Hugo.

Mr. Landowski, who had invited me to speak at the Institut de France [in 1989] and had received me warmly there, delivered an eloquent speech at the opening. Expressing his delight at the establishment of a "house that will bring Hugo back to life," he discussed a number of specific qualities that characterize Hugo's lifetime writings and activities, all of which are still fresh in my mind. These included the courage to speak out against authority and open the eyes of the public while at the same time staying in touch with the global trends of literature, culture

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and society; the will to protect those who were suffering; the aspiration to lead a spiritual life; and a belief in peace.

Hugo's Great-Great-Grandson

Also present at the opening were Madam René Cassin, the wife of René Cassin, who drafted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and is a recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize, and Françoise des Varennes, president of the French Association of Poets, both with whom I exchanged greetings. Pierre Hugo, a fifth-generation descendant of the author, was there as well. His smile bore a close resemblance to that of a young Victor Hugo. I will never forget his remark as he presented me with a photographic portrait of his great-great-grandfather that had been handed down as a family heirloom: "Now the Hugo of the Hugo family and the Hugo of Japan have met."

Dr. Serge Tolstoy, grandson of Leo Tolstoy, was also among the guests. A physician, Dr. Tolstoy serves as vice chair of the Tolstoy Foundation and as president of the Friends of Tolstoy Society. He presented me with a certificate of honorary membership to the Society, an honor that has been extended to only two others, including former French President Giscard d'Estaing. I was deeply grateful for his generous encouragement. He said that my efforts to unite people all over the world and bring human beings closer to nature were in complete agreement with the philosophy and ideals of his grandfather. He also lauded the fact that the collected articles in the Victor Hugo House of Literature were being displayed in France, Hugo's homeland, where they could be put to practical use.

Along with the certificate, I also received from Dr. Tolstoy a commemorative medal which is engraved on one side with an image of the train station at Astapovo (now Tolstoy Station) where the preeminent writer passed away. The time on the clock in the image reads 6:05, the moment when Tolstoy is believed to have breathed his last [on the morning of November 7, 1910].

Both Hugo and Tolstoy had a profound influence on the formation of my character. As I spoke with their direct descendants, my thoughts turned to the awesome struggles of these two men of letters. Placing their bond with the people above all else, each waged a dauntless struggle against authority using the power of the pen. Transcending all barriers of time, place and language, their spirits continue to shine with the ever-increasing light of great humanity.

Greeting Friends From Afar

My dear friend the author Chingiz T. Aitmatov drove to Bièvres from Luxembourg, where he was serving as ambassador of the Soviet Union, to attend the opening. Mr. Aitmatov also delivered a congratulatory speech, in which he said: "Asia and Europe — East and West — are constantly searching for ways to engage in active exchange and to find a common ground." He hailed the contributions of the SGI as offering a fine example in this regard through its creative endeavors and concrete initiatives.

President Ricardo Diez-Hochleitner of the Club of Rome traveled from Spain to take part in the event. We had a lively conversation which began with him saying: "I have inherited the profound feelings of friendship the late founder and former Club of Rome president Aurelio Peccei had for you." Director Fabio Magalhães of the Museum of Art in São Paulo (MASP) came all the way from Brazil.

As founder of the facility, I also addressed the gathering, saying: "The immense spiritual light that the nineteenth-century author Victor Hugo shone over this great nation of France continues to emit a brilliance to the world that transcends time and place.

"It is my wish that displaying the dazzling depth of Hugo's writings in this house, the

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Château des Roches, which Hugo loved so deeply during his lifetime, will serve as a rainbow of hope for the new century....

"I am overjoyed that this castle of literature has been given a new lease on life in this way, wrapped in the warm embrace of the hearts of Hugo lovers from around the world."

The Age Seeks the Flame of Humanism

I was compelled to mention the impact Hugo's masterpiece *Les Misérables* had on me when I first read it as a young man. Each page had taken me far into the realm of the human heart, deeply and broadly turning my young spirit around and around.

I also talked about my mentor Josei Toda, who loved Hugo's writings, and I introduced the unforgettable memory of learning from Mr. Toda the shining ideals of humanism, human rights and education through Hugo's revolutionary novel *Quatrevingt-treize* (Ninety-Three)."1

I said that Hugo's life of action, which demonstrated the victory of humanism through the author's ability to triumph over the storms of criticism and misunderstanding that raged about him, was tremendous encouragement for our [the SGI's] popular movement — a movement aimed at creating a new culture for human happiness. And, remarking that the flame of Hugo's humanism was needed then more than ever, I expressed my profound wish that the Victor Hugo House of Literature would become a spiritual beacon sending the lofty spirit of France — of liberty, equality and fraternity — out into the world and well into the future.

The Power of Literature to Bring People Together

I went on to talk about how, when Paris celebrated the tercentennial of the birth of British playwright William Shakespeare in 1864, Hugo sent a message conveying his joy from his place of exile on the island of Guernsey. In it, he stated that the French people's celebration of Shakespeare, an Englishman, was the same as praising the Earth itself, or praising the lofty spiritual law that pervades the entire universe. The sharing of literature among the peoples of the world, he said, heralded the dawn of the harmonious fusion of humankind. I agree completely.

I concluded my speech with my determination that the year 2002, the 200th anniversary of Hugo's birth, would see the start of a resplendent century of the people that is characterized by humanism — something for which Hugo so fervently yearned. A number of the guests voiced their sympathy with my remarks.

The year 2002 is just around the corner. And, just as Hugo envisioned, the process of unifying of Europe is well underway.

A Person Who Doesn't Fear Death Doesn't Fear Anything

The House has five exhibition rooms: three on the first floor and two on the second. Thanks to the dedicated efforts of Philippe Moine, the facility's first director, and others who spent two years preparing for its opening, a collection of valuable items was carefully classified, organized and arranged in a beautiful display.

One of the exhibition rooms, the Blue Room, which is decorated in light blue, focuses on the period of Hugo's youth. Among the works on display in this room are a book containing the poem which won Hugo, who was seventeen at the time, first prize in a writing competition; a lithographic portrait of the writer exhibiting the passion and sensitivity of an eighteen-year-old; as well as handwritten manuscripts and first-edition books. All convey the youthful energy of Hugo as he spread his wings and took flight into the vast azure skies of poetry and playwriting.

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The Multi-Purpose Room is organized around the theme of Hugo's time in exile. It houses precious articles that tell the story of the author's invincible life and his creative and impassioned struggles against tyranny. Viewing the memos in which Hugo set down his ideas for *Les Misérables* and *Quatrevingt-treize*, along with his handwritten corrections and the copies of these works, enables one to trace the steps of the writer's thought process that led to the birth of many great works of literature.

The handwritten manuscript of *Quatrevingt-treize*, in which Hugo poignantly stresses the "justice of humanity" over the "justice of revolution," moved me deeply.

When I was twenty-three, I made the following entry in my diary (on January 13, 1951): "Victor Hugo, great master of literature. Finished reading his great work of revolutionary poetry, *Quatrevingt-treize*. Many thoughts and feelings. Earnestly hope that many great literary figures of his caliber will appear in our country as well. Ah, when will we see the emergence of great literary masters who base themselves on this great philosophy, thought and religion? Ah, great authors who burn with passion, revolution and profound ideals! Your appearance could not come a day too soon!"2

That was a time of tremendous hardship and struggle. I was single-handedly supporting President Toda, whose business was in dire straits. Never compromising my ideals, I gave all I had without retreating a single step. *Quatrevingt-treize*, a novel about the French Revolution, affected me that much more because of what I was going through.

Using Hugo's writings as his base, President Toda freely and dynamically elucidated the currents at work in society and the lives of people involved in and affected by revolution. "Revolution means death," Mr. Toda declared. A person who does not fear death does not fear anything. A person who fears nothing will not be daunted by the basest of schemes or even physical attack. A genuine youth lives resolutely, burning with ideals. A life of spirit and resolve will strike back with twice the force of any obstacle or attack; it will rise above any onslaught of persecution or jealousy.

Hugo was driven into exile [in 1851], where he stayed for nineteen years, to avoid arrest for leading the struggle against the authoritarian Napoleon III.3

Courageously assisted by Juliette Drouet,4 an actress who had appeared in one of his plays, Hugo fled France carrying a false passport and disguised in the hat and dark overcoat of a laborer. Starting in Brussels, Belgium, he was forced to move next to the British island of Jersey, and then to the island of Guernsey. Yet he never desisted in his fight for freedom. On the contrary, his war of words only intensified. He continued to mercilessly bombard the powerful with scathing words of condemnation.

At Jersey, he composed a collection of poetry, the famous *Les Châtiments* (The Punishments),5 of which the final poem, "Ultima Verba" ("Last Words"), expressed his dauntless determination:

I accept the harsh exile, which has neither end nor term;
Without seeking to know and without considering
Whether someone has crumpled who had been thought more firm,
And whether many have fled who ought to stand fast.
If there are no more than a thousand, well, I am among them!
If even there are no more than a hundred, I brave Scylla [Napoleon III] still;
If ten remain, I shall be the tenth;
And if there remains only one, I shall be he!

Jersey, December 2, 1852

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Driven from Jersey, Hugo moved to Guernsey, where he faced extreme hardship. It was on this island, situated in the English Channel to the northwest of France, that the poet of the people spent the majority of his lonely exile, from age fifty-three to sixty-eight. Still, he could not be silenced. Though the attacks on him grew fiercer, he did not relent; rather, he became more resolved to fight back, his will to engage in the struggle and write growing ever stronger. Such was his unyielding spirit and his passion for challenge.

The Château des Roches and the Young Hugo

Another of the exhibition rooms, the Bertin Literary Salon, introduces the members of the Bertin family — the owners of the house when Hugo frequented it — as well as Hugo's exchanges with other friends who stayed there, and the works that he produced there.

The Château des Roches was originally built in the verdant town of Bièvres by the Sun King Louis XIV (1638–1715). In the nineteenth century, it was bought by Louis-François Bertin, a well-known patron of the literary arts, and became known as a renowned intellectual salon. Writers and artists came together to share their ideas at the salon of Bertin, who had also started the famous newspaper of the day *Journal des Débats*.6

In his greetings at the opening of the House, Director Moine touched on this history, remarking: "From 1815 until 1841, the salon continued to be patronized by highly prominent figures of the political and artistic worlds. These included the novelist and politician François-René de Chateaubriand, the composers Hector Berlioz and Franz Liszt, and the painter Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres. The most eminent of all of Bertin's guests, however, was Victor Hugo."

The young Hugo was extremely fond of the Château des Roches. Staying there provided him the opportunity to refresh his spirit and think about the future. Surrounded by rich nature, he met with intelligent and creative minds, and cultivated his own poetic genius. The Hugos and Bertins continued to enjoy close familial ties. This is also conveyed in the articles on display in the room.

Upstairs, one finds the warmly decorated Red Room, which covers the period from Hugo's triumphant return from exile until the day his noble life of vicissitude came to an end. Hugo at last returned to Paris in September 1870, three days after Napoleon III was defeated by the Prussian army and taken prisoner. He was sixty-eight.

"The Spiritual Eye Will Remain Open"

Throngs of people shouting "Long live Victor Hugo!" welcomed him when his train arrived in Paris. They cheered eagerly for this victorious champion of the spirit who had stood up to tyranny and oppressive rule on their behalf.

Hugo — who lived, sang, called out and fought with all his might — was a staunch ally of justice and the people. When he died at age eighty-three, the people once again turned out in great numbers to bid him a last farewell. Hugo's remains were carried in a "pauper's hearse" — an old car which he had commissioned for that purpose — from the Arc de Triomphe to the Panthéon. The procession was completely swallowed up in the more than 2 million onlookers. A photo of this solemn scene on display in the Red Room is an expression of the author's eternal victory.

Regarding death, Hugo once said: "I shall close my terrestrial eye, but the spiritual eye will remain open, wider than ever."7

His immense life comes to shine ever-brighter with each passing century.

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Criticism and Slander Are Proof of Greatness

It goes without saying that Hugo was the target of much criticism and slander — the decorations of all great historical figures. Commenting on the fact that even fifty years after his death, Hugo continued to be vilified, the French poet Paul Valéry (1871–1945) said: "He [Hugo] was attacked again yesterday as though he were one of the living. They tried to stifle the root of his spirit. This is the mark of true greatness."8 But Hugo remained undaunted by the stream of curses and base sneers of those who merely stood on the sidelines. To the end, he waged an eternal battle for the sake of the people, his eyes fixed on the future.

A Treasure Trove of Books

The library on the second floor of the House of Literature contains Hugo's complete works, along with translations of them in various languages. For a lover of Hugo, the room is a veritable treasure trove of books.

The memorial hall was opened with the hope of contributing to the revival of the cultural heritage of the city of Bièvres and the surrounding area, and promoting the development and advancement of literature. Plans to create it were officially announced two years before the opening, but I had actually been dreaming about it for some time.

My Meeting With Alain Poher

Ten years prior to the House's opening, in June 1981, I met Alain Poher, then president of the French Senate, for the first time. On that occasion he graciously gave me a tour of the Senate chamber, where I saw the seat that Hugo had occupied when he served as a member of the Senate. A commemorative plaque attached to the seat praises Hugo's immortal achievements. As I sat down in the chair, I recalled the life of this great man who kindled an impassioned war of words. The Luxembourg Palace (which houses the French Senate) contains many magnificent rooms, one of the most splendid of which is the Hugo Room. A wonderful relief of the author adorns one wall.

When I met with Mr. Poher again the day before the opening, I said to him: "The idea of establishing such a commemorative hall occurred to me ten years ago at the time of our first meeting. It was then that I made up my mind to do what I could to preserve the history of Hugo's literary achievements and his heroic lifetime struggles for the sake of future generations. That was the first step toward the establishment of this House of Literature. And that beginning was possible thanks to you."

He seemed delighted as he listened to me talk about the events leading up to the realization of the commemorative hall and, smiling brightly, said that he thought it beautifully represented the spirit of Hugo. Mr. Poher, a dignified statesman who had fought against the Nazi occupiers as a member of the Resistance during the Second World War, sent a kind message to the opening:

> Victor Hugo is the French author who is most famous and most widely read in other countries. Hence it should come as no surprise to us when foreigners dedicate an exhibition or a commemorative hall to this great lyric poet in their countries. However, it is something very rare and moving for a foreign friend to show the desire to honor the glory of Hugo here in our own country.

Since its opening, the facility has shown a number of exhibitions in addition to its permanent exhibits. These include "Hugo and Photography," "*Quatrevingt-treize*," "Hugo and

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Human Rights," "Hugo and the 21st Century" and "Hugo and Shakespeare," and all have been well received by the community.

The House of Literature is also carrying out joint research with a Hugo research group made up of university specialists. Its collection of more than 4,700 items comprises a number of priceless articles that are considered national treasures. I am also delighted to learn that residents of Bièvres and its neighborhood have taken a strong personal pride and interest in the facility, visiting it several times a year with friends and family. In addition, the facility welcomes a steady stream of visitors from throughout France, as well as from abroad.

Television stations, newspapers and magazines have lauded the facility as one of the "must-see" cultural attractions in the area, and as "an extremely worthy project, both educationally and culturally." It is also visited regularly by groups of young people, which seems highly appropriate given Hugo's immense love for youth. One member of a group of high school students who visited from another town wrote in the guest registry: "The words of Hugo on display here will become our rules for combating violence within our school. That's because they make us think and they teach us."

The Eternal Struggle Between Light and Darkness

Hugo, the great poet of spiritual liberation that came from France's womb, opened the eyes of the world to liberty and justice. His tumultuous life was a grand drama, a work of art. He was a fighter who demonstrated to the world the power of words. He was a champion who forged himself through each ordeal. He was a free person who called for spiritual liberty and independence. He was a strong-minded humanist who was bitterly indignant toward injustice. He was a person who lived his life to the full, perceiving the reality of life and death with keen sensitivity while battling the hostile circumstances that bore down on him like crashing waves.

"This is the struggle between day and night"9— these were among his last words.

The struggle of light and darkness — this is a struggle that continues eternally. But light will always succeed in defeating darkness. This was Hugo's conviction, and his life.

The Victor Hugo House of Literature in Bièvres is a palace of the victory of the spirit. It is a "house of the light of justice" that vanquishes evil and banishes misery.

1. *Quatrevingt-treize*: Set in France in 1793, in this work Hugo portrays the lives of people living amid the tumultuous aftermath of the French Revolution of 1789. Published in 1874.
2. Daisaku Ikeda, *A Youthful Diary: One Man's Journey from the Beginning of Faith to Worldwide Leadership for Peace* (Santa Monica, CA: World Tribune Press, 2000), p. 76.
3. Napoleon III (1808–73): Nephew of Napoleon I. Led a coup d'etat in 1851 that resulted in the establishment of the Second Empire.
4. Juliette Drouet (1805–83): A long-time companion of Victor Hugo who was the inspiration for several volumes of poetry published by the author in the 1830s.
5. *Les Châtiments*: First published in Brussels in 1853, the original comprising ninety-seven poems all attacking Napoleon III.
6. *Journal des Débats*: Founded in 1789, the year of the French Revolution, the paper supported liberalist views. In 1875, however, with the establishment of the constitution under the Third Republic, it adopted a conservative stance. The paper ceased publication in 1944.
7. Graham Robb, *Victor Hugo* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1997), p. 524.
8. Translated from Japanese, *Paul Valéry, Bareri Zenshu* (Collected Writings of Paul Valéry) (Tokyo: Chikuma Shobo, 1973), vol. 8, p. 295.
9. Graham Robb, *Victor Hugo*, p. 522.

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