A fierce enthusiast for architecture, Victor Hugo maintained a peculiar relationship with a monument that adorned the centre of the Place de la Bastille in Paris before it was replaced by the present July Column. An envelope which was found upon Hugo’s death in 1885 demonstrates his devotion to the construction. Overleaf, one can read that it used to hold a “piece of wood of the Elephant of the Bastille’s structure, demolished during the last days of July 1846. Collected by myself, yesterday, on the 27th of July 1846. Victor (Hugo).” The Elephant of the Bastille, a project for a monumental fountain issued by Napoleon I in 1810 but torn down in its provisional plaster outlook in 1846, did not leave Hugo’s imagination on. The author immortalized the building/monument in Les Misérables as a shelter for the Parisian gamin Gavroche.

The monument itself also did not go by unnoticed in the exploding printed press of nineteenth-century France for obvious reasons. Authors in newspapers have stressed the animal’s role in the constant political (re-)appropriation of the square where once stood the Bastille fortress. Others have discussed the bizarre and exotic construction as a memory of the Emperor and his vision of Paris’ urban planning, involved with both a functional lay-out of modern infrastructures and questions of a public monumentality. Hugo seems to have addressed similar architectural issues in the episodes of Les Misérables concerned.

This doctoral research circles around over the former monument known as the Elephant of the Bastille, its architectural qualities and public reactions, serving as an entry point to address further questions. Ultimately, the work intends to better understand Victor Hugo’s involvement with architecture beyond the gothic cathedral. The elephant’s themes listed below offer ample opportunity to do so and to situate Hugo’s opinions on architecture within his own context. Where did his opinions on the matter conflict with and deviate from the ones of contemporaries? And what does this teach us? In a broader scope, this research deals with discussions on the monument in nineteenth-century France.

As soon as our fathers had conquered the Bastille, they considered erecting a monument on the site of the former fortress. Other preoccupations soon after postponed this project until Napoleon picked up the thread.