

UNDER SENTENCE OF DEATH

Victor Hugo

A Novel
Set in Contemporary Iran

Edited and reset by
Jeff Hood

V. 9

THE ABOLITION CLASSICS
The texts that built the case against the death penalty

Complicit Press

UNDER SENTENCE OF DEATH
A Novel Set in Contemporary Iran

This edition © 2026 Complicit Press

Editorial matter and contemporary setting © 2026 Jeff Hood

Victor Hugo's *Le Dernier Jour d'un condamné* was first published in Paris by Charles Gosselin in February 1829 and is in the public domain. This volume is not a translation of that text. It is an original composition by the editor that resets Hugo's novel in a contemporary context, preserving its structure, premises and argument.

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form without written permission from the publisher, except by a reviewer quoting brief passages.

Published by Complicit Press

THE ABOLITION CLASSICS
The texts that built the case against the death penalty

CONTENTS

FRONT MATTER

Foreword

Editor's Note

UNDER SENTENCE OF DEATH

- I. Sentenced
- II. The Trial
- III. Evin
- IV. The Walls
- V. The Execution Yard
- VI. Transfer
- VII. Morning
- VIII. The Mullah
- IX. Maryam
- X. The Square

EDITORIAL APPARATUS

Definitions and Terms

Further Reading

FOREWORD

I have sat in the chair where someone will sit tomorrow and wait to die. Not the condemned person's chair — their cell, their waiting room, whatever space the state has designated as the last stop before the machinery of execution takes over. I know the quality of that particular silence. I know how time moves in those rooms — not slowly, as you might expect, but in fragments, lurching and stuttering, an hour gone before you noticed it passing, then thirty seconds that refuse to end. I know what it costs a person to maintain their dignity in a room like that, knowing what is coming, knowing that nothing they do or say or pray will change the arithmetic of the calendar.

Victor Hugo knew that room too. He had been inside French prisons. He had watched men condemned to the guillotine. He had seen the crowd gather in the Place de Grève. When he wrote this novel in 1829 — quickly, in something close to one continuous burst, at the age of twenty-seven — he wrote from something more than imagination. He wrote from witness.

The novel is a diary. No name is given for the narrator. No crime is specified. This is deliberate. Hugo understood that naming the crime would allow the reader to exclude themselves — to say, I would not have done that, therefore this does not concern me. By leaving the crime unnamed, he forces the question: not whether this particular man deserves to die, but whether any person's death can be managed, bureaucratized, scheduled, and carried out by the state without an act of profound moral violence being done — not only to the condemned, but to everyone who participates, everyone who watches, everyone who consents.

The argument is the same in Tehran in 2026 as it was in Paris in 1829. The mechanism is different — hanging rather than the guillotine, a mobile crane rather than a wooden scaffold, a mullah

rather than a priest, the Supreme Leader rather than the king who will not act — but the essential situation is identical. A human being has been processed by a legal system, sentenced to death, and is now sitting in a cell counting the remaining hours of his life. The state has decided that this death will serve a purpose. Hugo spent his entire life arguing that it would not.

Iran executes more people than any country on earth except China. In 2025 the documented total passed sixteen hundred, the highest annual figure recorded there since 1989. The charges are frequently elastic to the point of meaninglessness — *moharebeh*, enmity against God; *efsad-e fel-arz*, spreading corruption on earth — categories capacious enough to include political dissidents, religious minorities, people who posted something online during a protest, people whose confessions were extracted under duress in Ward 209 of Evin Prison. Since the uprising that began at the end of December 2025, and the killings that followed it in January, the Revolutionary Courts have been running a conveyor. Most of the hangings are carried out inside prison walls at dawn and announced afterward, if they are announced at all. Some are carried out in public squares, the body left suspended for hours as a message to the living. The Islamic Republic frames all of them as divinely sanctioned — as acts of justice endorsed by God and required by the Quran. This is the additional cruelty of the Iranian context that Hugo did not face: not only does the state kill you, but it kills you in God's name, and the mullah who comes to your cell in the final hours tells you to make your peace with the God whose law demands your death.

I want to say something about the daughter. Hugo's narrator has a three-year-old daughter named Marie. In the penultimate scene, she comes to the prison — brought there by her grandmother, who does not know who has asked to see her. The child does not recognize her father. He has been so changed by the months in prison, so hollowed out, that his own daughter looks at him and sees a stranger. He does not identify himself. He holds her briefly, weeps into her hair, and lets her be taken away. It is the most devastating scene in the novel because it shows what the death penalty actually

costs — not the moment of death, which is brief, but the long destruction of the person before that moment arrives.

The daughter in this edition is named Maryam. She is three years old. She has her father's eyes and her mother's stubborn mouth. She does not recognize him either. He lets her go. That scene is the same in every language.

I have been in the rooms where men wait to die. I have held their hands. I have said whatever words seemed most honest and most kind, knowing they were not enough. I have walked out of those buildings into the living world and felt the dissonance of being a person who goes home afterward. Hugo's novel is about that dissonance — about the obscenity of the fact that while one man sits counting hours, the rest of the city is going about its business, drinking tea, watching television, arguing about politics, putting children to bed. The state has arranged a death. The city does not stop. The state calls this justice.

It is not justice. It is killing. The method, the justification, the jurisdiction — these are details. The killing is the constant.

Rev. Dr. Jeff Hood

North Little Rock, Arkansas

2026

EDITOR'S NOTE

The Author

Victor Hugo (1802–1885) is one of the great figures of French literature — the author of *Les Misérables*, *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, and an enormous body of poetry, drama, and political writing. He was also a lifelong opponent of capital punishment who used every form available to him — fiction, polemic, public address, personal intervention — to argue for its abolition. He appealed personally to authorities in France, Belgium, and the United States on behalf of individual condemned prisoners. Writing from exile on Guernsey, he sent an open letter in defense of John Brown on 2 December 1859, not knowing it was the day Brown would hang. He appealed again in 1867 on behalf of Maximilian of Mexico. The campaign he joined as a young man was still unfinished when he died; France did not abolish the guillotine until 1981.

Under Sentence of Death (in French: *Le Dernier Jour d'un condamné*) was written in 1829, when Hugo was twenty-seven years old. He began it, by his own account, the day after passing a public square where an executioner was greasing the guillotine in preparation for a scheduled killing, and he finished it very quickly. Charles Gosselin published it in Paris in February 1829 without the author's name. Reviewers initially debated whether it was fiction or an actual document — a genuine prisoner's diary — a confusion Hugo later treated as evidence that the book had achieved what he intended. On 15 March 1832 he added a long preface and his signature to the second edition, and there he was explicit about his purpose. The book, he wrote, was a plea for the abolition of the death penalty: not the defense of any particular criminal, but *the general and permanent plea for all the accused, present and to come*.

The Novel

The novel takes the form of a diary kept by a condemned man from the day of his sentencing to the final moments before his execution. No name is given. No crime is specified. The anonymity is the point: Hugo refuses to give the reader a way to distinguish himself from the narrator, refuses to allow the comfortable moral distance of “I would not have done that.” The narrator is simply a human being who has been sentenced to die, who loves his daughter, who has memories and fears and a body that will cease to function on a specific date already written in a ledger somewhere.

Hugo structures the diary around the psychological reality of waiting — the way the knowledge of a fixed execution date colonizes every thought, corrupts every pleasure, makes time itself a kind of torture. The novel moves from the Bicêtre prison to the Conciergerie to the final journey through the streets to the Place de Grève. In the penultimate scene the narrator’s three-year-old daughter is brought to see him; she does not recognize him.

The Contemporary Setting

This edition moves the story to Tehran in 2026 and sets the execution by public hanging rather than guillotine.

Iran executes more people annually than any country except China. Iran Human Rights and ECPM documented at least 1,639 executions there in 2025, a sixty-eight percent increase over the previous year and the highest recorded figure since 1989. Roughly half were for drug offenses. The charges most commonly brought against political prisoners are *moharebeh* — enmity against God, or waging war against God — and *efsad-e fel-arz*, spreading corruption on earth. Both are hadd offenses. Both are broad enough to encompass virtually any form of political opposition, and both routinely produce death sentences, though neither carries a mandatory one: under Articles 282 and 286 of the Islamic Penal Code the court chooses among several prescribed punishments, of which execution is one.

The setting is specific to this moment. Nationwide protests erupted at the end of December 2025. Security forces answered them with lethal force on a mass scale on 8 and 9 January 2026 and arrested tens of thousands. In the months since, the Revolutionary Courts have issued and carried out death sentences against people detained in those protests at a pace without recent precedent — some for alleged violence, some for transporting the wounded, some on charges that were never made public because the hearings are closed and the judgments are not published. Amnesty International documented dozens of such executions in the first half of 2026 alone, following what it described as torture-tainted and grossly unfair trials. The narrator of this edition is a man swept up in the long tail of that crackdown.

He is held in Ward 209 of Evin Prison, the wing controlled by the Intelligence Organization of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and used primarily for political prisoners and those charged with offenses against the state. His crime, like the original's, is not specified. His daughter is named Maryam. The mullah who comes to attend him in his final hours holds the same role as Hugo's priest.

The novel's argument requires no translation. The Islamic Republic's claim that its executions are divinely sanctioned is the same claim that every state apparatus of execution has made in every era — that God, or nature, or justice, or necessity demands this particular death. Hugo's answer to that claim in 1829 is the same answer this edition makes in 2026: no authority — divine, legal, or political — can transform the killing of a human being into an act of justice. It remains killing. And the person dying in the last cell at the end of the corridor feels every second of it.

A Note on the Form and on Three Choices

Hugo's original is divided into short chapters, most of them only a page or two, each a dated or timed entry in the narrator's diary. This edition condenses them into ten, each covering the same essential ground. The narrator's voice — educated, lyrical, increasingly

desperate, capable of terrible clarity and moments of almost unbearable tenderness — is preserved throughout.

Three choices in this adaptation are deliberate and worth naming.

The first is the public execution. The overwhelming majority of executions in Iran are carried out inside prisons at dawn. Public hangings are a small fraction of the total, and public hangings of political prisoners are rarer still. But they are not hypothetical: three protesters were hanged publicly in Qom in March 2026, and two more were publicly executed that July. When the state chooses to kill someone where people can watch, that choice is itself an argument, and the narrator recognizes it as one.

The second is the hour. Hugo's condemned man goes to the Place de Grève in the late afternoon, and this edition keeps his clock. An Iranian execution would ordinarily come at dawn. The final day is compressed here as Hugo compressed it, because the shape of that day — the warden's visit, the cleric, the child, the transport — is the architecture of the book.

The third is that the narrator has read Hugo. He recalls the novel from university and quotes it once. This is not an accident of the reset. He is a literate man detained on political charges in a country where such men are routinely detained, and the tradition he is dying inside of is one he can name. Hugo wrote a plea for all the accused, present and to come. The narrator of this edition is one of the ones to come.

I. SENTENCED

Sentenced to death.

For five weeks I have lived with this single thought — always alone with it, always frozen by its presence, always crushed beneath its weight.

Before, I was a man like other men. Each day had its own texture, its own particular quality of morning light through the apartment window, its own arguments and small pleasures. I had a wife, a daughter, a career I had managed with some care, opinions about things that seemed important. The future was a space I occupied with reasonable confidence, a country in which I had citizenship.

Now that country has been revoked.

Now I have one thought only, and it is this: that I have been sentenced to death. It is not a thought that one can place beside other thoughts and compare. It is not a thought at all, in the ordinary sense — it is a condition, a weather, a gravity that acts on every other thing. When the guard brings my food I see it on his face — the slight shift in how he holds himself before a man who will not be alive in three weeks. When I read (they have given me books, a small mercy I did not expect) I find after a paragraph that I have not read but rather stared, that the words have passed through my eyes without registering, because the sentence was there again, between me and the page.

Sentenced to death.

I say it to myself sometimes, deliberately, as an experiment. I try to make it mean what it says. I cannot. The mind refuses. There is something in the structure of human consciousness — some deep assumption of continuation — that the sentence cannot penetrate. And yet it is true. A judge in a robe read it from a paper, in a room full of people, and everyone wrote it down, and now it is in a ledger

somewhere, and in less than three weeks they will come and carry it out.

I write this from my cell in Evin Prison, Ward 209. The ward is controlled by the Intelligence Organization of the Revolutionary Guards. The ceiling is low. The walls are white. There is a drain in the floor and a camera in the corner and a slot in the door through which a tray appears three times a day. I am not permitted to know what time it is. I am not permitted natural light. I have been here two and a half months, and the sentence was read to me on the forty-third day.

My crime is written in the papers. I will not write it here. It does not matter, in the end, what the papers say. What matters is that a court has decided the state requires my death, and that the state has found language in scripture to say so. God's law is clear, the judge told me. Your life is forfeit. God's mercy is not yours to claim.

II. THE TRIAL

The trial lasted three days. I call it a trial in the way one uses words conventionally, to indicate that a proceeding took place in a room with a judge and a defendant and an outcome. Whether it was a trial in any sense that the word is supposed to carry — a genuine inquiry into truth, a genuine weighing of evidence — this I do not know. I was present for most of it, and I cannot tell you.

On the first morning they brought me in handcuffs and sat me in a chair behind a metal rail. The room was small, with painted walls and fluorescent lights and portraits of the Supreme Leader and the founder of the Republic on the wall behind the bench. The judge was a cleric in a black turban. He had a neat beard and reading glasses and the manner of a man who has done this many times before and finds it neither pleasant nor unpleasant — simply the work in front of him. The hearing was closed. No one was there for me.

The prosecution was presented by a man who spoke quickly and with apparent certainty. He had documents and testimony and a video that had been played on state television, in which I appeared to confess to what I was accused of. I will not say the confession was false. I will say that it was obtained after fourteen days in which I did not sleep for more than two hours at a time, and that certain things that look like choices, when a person is that tired, are not choices in any meaningful sense.

My lawyer — a young man assigned to me by the court — had been given my file the morning of the trial. He asked for a postponement. The judge denied it. He asked several questions in cross-examination that seemed to confuse the prosecution's witnesses. The judge struck most of his questions from the record as irrelevant or as contrary to the dignity of the court. He was, I think, genuinely trying to help me. I did not blame him for what happened.

He was doing what he could in the time available, and the outcome was never in question.

On the third day the judge read the verdict. Guilty of *moharebeh* — enmity against God. Guilty of *efsad-e fel-arz* — spreading corruption on earth. For each of these the court may choose among several punishments, and the court chose death. He delivered the sentence in a voice that I noticed, with the strange detachment of shock, was entirely ordinary — the voice one uses to give directions, or to describe the weather. He may have said something about God's mercy. I believe he did. The words reached me and passed through without leaving any mark.

I looked at the portrait of the Supreme Leader on the wall as the guard came to take me back to my cell. I thought: there is a man who could stop this. He is alive in this city at this moment, perhaps twenty kilometers from where I am sitting. He could make a call. Nothing would happen to him if he made the call — the opposite. He would be praised for his mercy, his wisdom, his Islamic compassion. He will not make the call. I know this without needing to be told.

III. EVIN

Evin Prison sits at the northern edge of Tehran, against the foothills of the Alborz Mountains. From the main road it looks unremarkable — concrete walls, surveillance cameras, an entry gate with guards. The Alborz rises green and white behind it. On clear days you can see the snow on the peaks. I know this because a guard described it to me once, in an unguarded moment of something that might have been pity. I have not seen the mountains. I have not seen natural light since the day they brought me here. The window in my cell is painted over.

The cell is four paces wide and six paces long. I have measured this many times. A sleeping mat on the floor, a thin blanket, a small squat toilet and a tap that produces water that is sometimes warm. The camera in the corner has a red light that stays on. I have learned not to look at it, the way one learns not to look at a wound. A slot in the door. Fluorescent light twenty-four hours a day. The light never changes; there is no way to tell day from night except by the regularity of the meal trays.

In the first weeks after sentencing they gave me paper and a pen, which I believe they have since come to regret. I began to write, not because I thought it would do any good, but because the alternative was to sit on the mat and think, and thinking had become a form of torture too refined to endure indefinitely.

I have written about my daughter. I have written about my wife. I have written about the morning the guards came to our apartment, the particular way the light was coming through the kitchen window when the knock came, which I remember precisely and which I know I will be thinking about when they come for me on the last morning. I have written about my parents, who are old, and who have been told nothing — I have been told nothing about whether they have been told anything. I have written, in the night watches

when the corridor outside goes quiet, about the nature of death, which I cannot comprehend no matter how deliberately I approach it, as a mathematician approaches a problem — systematically, from all angles, with patience — and which refuses to yield any meaning at all.

I write now because not writing is worse.

IV. THE WALLS

I was taken once, briefly, to a larger cell while mine was searched. In that cell the walls were covered with writing — names, dates, fragments of prayer, lines of poetry I recognized and some I did not, numbers that might have been dates or sentences or ages. Many generations of condemned men had left their marks in the plaster, and subsequent coats of paint had not entirely covered the deeper cuts. I pressed my fingers into the grooves of the letters and thought about the hands that had made them.

One inscription was a name and a date from 2009 — the year of the Green Movement, when hundreds of protesters were arrested after the disputed election. One was a line of verse in a careful hand, something about waiting for morning, with no poet's name beneath it and no name of its own. I did not recognize it. It may have been the man's own. He had begun to scratch it out again and then stopped partway, as though he had thought better of hope and then thought better of that.

One was a number — 22 — which might have been an age, the age at which its author was executed. If it was an age then he was twelve years younger than I am. My daughter will one day be older than he ever became.

I found, in the lower corner behind the toilet, a small drawing of a bird in flight. It had been made with great care — you could see from the fineness of the line that it had taken time, that whoever made it had worked on it over many sessions, returning to add detail, refine the wing angle, add a suggestion of wind in the feathers. The bird was rising. It was not a symbol I could interpret with confidence. It was simply a bird, drawn by a man in a cell who wanted to make something beautiful before he died.

I did not add my name to the walls. I thought about it. But I did not want to leave only a name. A name without context is nothing —

just proof of presence, a mark an animal might make on a tree. If anything remains of me, I want it to be something that explains, that gives weight to the name. I want Maryam, when she is old enough, to know who I was — not just that I existed, but what it felt like to exist, inside this particular body, during these particular weeks, in this particular cell at the end of the corridor in Evin Prison.

This is what it feels like. It feels like being alive while knowing, with increasing certainty, that the aliveness will be terminated on a specific date by a specific mechanism. The specific mechanism is hanging. I have tried not to think about the specific mechanism. I have not succeeded.

V. THE EXECUTION YARD

One week ago I was permitted into the courtyard for exercise — forty minutes, the first time I had been outside the cell since the sentencing. The courtyard was a concrete rectangle with high walls and a narrow rectangle of sky above. Three other men were there, each with his own guard, none of us permitted to speak to the others.

I knew, looking at them, that they were also under sentence. There is something in the posture of a man waiting to be executed that distinguishes him from a man serving a term, even a long one. A term has an end that the man will reach. These men moved with the particular economy of people who had stopped planning for a future.

One was young — perhaps twenty-five. He had dark circles under his eyes and a recent bruise on his jaw, yellowing. He walked in careful circles near the wall on the far side of the courtyard. At one point he stopped and pressed his forehead against the concrete of the wall and stayed that way for perhaps thirty seconds. No one interfered. The guard looked at the sky.

I wanted to speak to him. I wanted to say — I don't know what I wanted to say. That I see you. That whatever brought you here, I do not think it makes your life worth less than mine. That the young man you were before all this is still the person I see in this courtyard, not the charge in the court document. But I was not permitted to speak, and perhaps even permitted I would have found no words adequate to what I wanted to say.

Through a door in the far wall I heard, once, a sound I recognized and then immediately tried to un-recognize. A voice beginning something — a prayer, I think — and then cut short. Then silence. Then ordinary prison sounds again, as if nothing had occurred.

UNDER SENTENCE OF DEATH

I went back to my cell and I wrote nothing for two days.

VI. TRANSFER

This morning, without warning, they moved me.

The guard came at what I estimated to be five in the morning and said: gather your things. I had very little — the paper I had been writing on, a Quran they had provided, a photograph of Maryam that my wife sent and that was somehow permitted. I held the photograph for a moment before putting it in my pocket. She is three years old in the photograph. She is sitting on the floor with her legs out in front of her and she is laughing at something off to the right of the frame. Her hair is dark and curly and her eyes are my eyes and she is the most beautiful person I have ever seen.

They put me in a van with blacked-out windows. I could not tell the route we took. After perhaps thirty minutes, a door opened, and I was brought into a building that I did not recognize. They put me in a room that was larger than my cell at Evin — a table, a chair, a bed with an actual mattress, a window with bars that looked into a concrete airshaft rather than the painted-over glass I had been living with. I could not see the sky, but I could tell from the quality of the light reflected in the airshaft that it was daylight outside.

A guard told me the date. I had lost count and did not know if he was telling the truth, but I believed him because there was no evident reason to lie. The date he gave me means that I have been in detention for ninety-three days total, and that the execution is now four days away.

Four days. I said it to myself several times. I tried to make it feel like something. It felt like nothing. The mind refuses, as I have written before. The mind takes the number and turns it over and cannot find purchase on it.

I asked the guard for more paper. He said he would see. I asked if I could receive a visitor — my wife, my mother, anyone. He said he would pass on the request. He did not say it in the way of a man who

intends to pass on anything. He said it in the way of a man concluding a conversation.

VII. MORNING

It is morning. I know this because the light has changed in the airshaft — it has shifted from the gray of early dawn to something fuller, with actual color, a pale orange that touches the upper edge of the concrete wall. I have been awake since the middle of the night. There is no clock in this room. I know only that the call to prayer reached me at some point in the dark, from a loudspeaker somewhere beyond the walls, and that I was already lying there awake when it came.

The guard who brought my morning tray said nothing unusual. He set the tray on the table and left. But when he came for the tray an hour later, the warden came with him — a man in a dark suit who had been to my cell once before, shortly after my arrival, to ask if I had complaints. He asked again whether I had complaints. He asked how I had slept. He called me *Agha* — Sir. He left.

This is the ceremony of the final day. I know it because I have read Hugo's novel, years ago, in university — the governor who visits on the morning of the execution, the suddenly ceremonious courtesy, the implicit apology that is not quite an apology. When Hugo's condemned man receives that visit, he writes: *It is for today*. That entry is two lines long, and the two lines contain everything.

It is for today. I write this at mid-morning, I believe. The tray with breakfast has been taken. The warden has made his visit. The mullah who has come to my cell twice in the last four days has not yet arrived, but I expect him. Somewhere in this building there are preparations being made — not the scaffold-building that Hugo describes, the carpenters working in the night — but their modern equivalent. Administrative preparations. Paperwork. The coordination of officials and vehicles and the particular machinery

that will be used to end my life. All of this is happening now, in other rooms, while I sit here and write.

I asked the guard, when he came for the tray: has anything come from the Supreme Leader's office? He did not answer. He looked at a point slightly to the left of my face and waited for me to say something else. When I said nothing more, he left.

Nothing will come from the Supreme Leader's office. I knew this before I asked. The asking was not hope; it was ritual, the last motion of a form that had become meaningless.

VIII. THE MULLAH

He came at midday. An older man, with a white beard and the slow, deliberate movements of someone who has made peace with most things — the kind of person who in another context you might find reassuring. He sat across from me at the table and placed his hands on the surface between us. He asked if I had made my peace with God.

I told him I had been trying to pray and that the words would not come in the right order. He said that was common, and that God understood the disorder of the condemned heart. He recited some Quran — a passage from Al-Baqarah, about God being with the patient. He spoke about the mercy of martyrdom, about how the moment of death is also the moment of release, about how the brief passage of dying opens into an eternity that our finite minds cannot conceive.

I listened. I have not been violent or uncooperative with anyone in this building. I have no interest in making their work harder than it is; they are doing what the state has assigned them, just as the state assigned me this cell and this date.

But I found, listening to him, that what I could not accept was not the dying, precisely — it was the framing. The Islamic Republic had charged me with enmity against God. The Revolutionary Court had convicted me of spreading corruption on earth. The mullah was now telling me to make peace with God. All of this assumed that God was on their side — that the state and its courts and its execution chamber were instruments of divine will, and that I was the party who had been distant from God, and that death would bring me back to him.

I said to the mullah: do you believe this execution is what God wants?

He looked at me for a moment. He said: the law is the law.

I said: I know the law. I am asking about God.

He said: they are the same.

I did not argue further. He stayed another half hour, praying and reciting, and I sat with him and let him do his work, because it seemed to give him comfort, and comfort is not a thing I am in a position to deny anyone today.

After he left I remained at the table for a long time. The light in the airshaft had moved to the right, which meant it was afternoon. I thought about God. I have believed in God, in the approximate and unexamined way of people who grew up in religious households and absorbed belief along with everything else. I did not stop believing when I was arrested. I did not stop believing when I was sentenced. I have been trying to find, in whatever remains of my faith, something that resembles peace, and what I have found instead is a question that will not resolve: if God is merciful, why has God made me capable of counting the hours until I am killed, and why has God given me a three-year-old daughter who will grow up without knowing me?

I have not answered this question. I have run out of time to answer it.

IX. MARYAM

They told me at two in the afternoon that I would have a visitor. I was not told who. I assumed my wife; I hoped for my mother. When the door opened and the guard brought in a woman I did not immediately recognize — my wife's mother, older and thinner than the last time I had seen her — and then a small child holding the woman's hand, I understood what was happening before I had time to prepare for it.

My wife was not with them. I did not ask why. There are a hundred reasons in this country why a woman married to a condemned man might not be permitted through a door, and I did not want to spend the minutes I had on any of them.

Maryam is three years old. She was wearing a red coat that I did not recognize — it must be new since the last time I saw her, which was the morning of the arrest, three months ago. She had my eyes. She had her mother's particular expression of cautious assessment when faced with something unfamiliar. She looked at me with exactly that expression.

She did not know me.

I understood this in the first two seconds. The three-year-old mind holds what it sees daily and lets the rest dissolve. I had been gone three months, which at her age is long enough for a face to go. And the man in front of her was thin and pale, with a beard he had not worn before, in a room that smelled of disinfectant and fear. She looked at me and then looked up at her grandmother.

I said her name. She looked back at me. Something moved across her face — not recognition exactly, but a willingness to consider. She was trying to locate me in her memory, and finding something approximate there, something that resembled what I had been, close enough to make her tilt her head.

I could not say: I am your father. I could not do that to her — bring her all the way to recognition and then take myself away from her in the same day. What would it cost her, to know her father's face clearly and then lose it?

I held out my hand. She came to me, one step, then two, and I took her up in my arms and she let me hold her. She smelled of the outdoors, of cold air and something sweet, and she weighed almost nothing, and I pressed my face into her hair and I shook, and she put her small hand on my cheek with an expression of solemn concern, as children do when they encounter adult distress they cannot explain.

I held her for what I was allowed — four minutes, perhaps five. Then the guard said it was time. I put her down and straightened her red coat and said: goodbye, little one. She said: bye. She turned and took her grandmother's hand. At the door she looked back at me once, with an expression that I cannot describe and that I will carry with me to the end.

My mother-in-law looked at me for a moment, and in her face I saw: she knows. She knows what today is. She brought the child today because it was the last day. She nodded at me, very slightly. I nodded back. The door closed.

I sat on the floor and did not move for a long time. There is nothing left to write. All the pages I have filled mean nothing beside the weight of that child in my arms and the coolness of her hand on my cheek. She touched me as if I were real. As if I were still here. And I was, for those minutes. I was absolutely and entirely here.

X. THE SQUARE

From the van. They are taking me across the city.

I can see Tehran through the tinted window. It is late afternoon — the light is low and golden, the specific light of Iranian autumn that I have loved my whole life without knowing I was capable of loving it so much, the light that turns the mountains behind the city purple and makes the traffic seem beautiful from a distance.

The streets are full. People walking, driving, buying fruit from a cart, talking on their phones, doing all the ordinary things of a Wednesday afternoon. A man in a suit argues with a taxi driver at an intersection. Two women laugh at something between them. A child is asleep in the back seat of a car beside us, cheek pressed against the window. None of them know what is in this van. The van does not announce itself. The state does not advertise; it simply arrives.

I try to look at everything. I have been trying, since I understood that this was the last time, to look at everything — really look, as if I could keep it by looking. The mountains. The sky. The light on the buildings. The faces of people living their lives at four o'clock on a Wednesday who will not remember today as anything particular, because for them it was not particular. For them it was a Wednesday.

They tell me the execution will be public. A mobile crane in a square. I have seen photographs of this — the condemned man on a truck or a platform, the rope, the crane that lifts rather than drops, the death that comes slowly.

Almost everyone who dies in this country dies inside a wall at dawn, and the family is informed afterward, if they are informed. A public execution is a decision. Someone above the warden, someone above the judge, decided that my death should be watched. That is not a sentence. That is a message, and I am the paper it is written on.

I am trying not to think about the method. I am thinking about Maryam's hand on my cheek. I am thinking about the bird drawn on the wall of the cell. I am thinking about the twenty-five-year-old man in the courtyard pressing his forehead against the concrete.

I want to say something about the state that is doing this. Not in anger — I am past anger, or anger is beside the point now. I want to say: the Islamic Republic has told its people, and tells itself, that these executions are divine justice. That God requires them. That the deaths it carries out in public squares, on cranes, in front of crowds who are sometimes compelled to attend, are acts of piety. I want to say to anyone who will read this: ask the question Hugo asked nearly two hundred years ago. Ask it seriously. Ask it without the answer already prepared.

What purpose does this serve?

Not the stated purpose — not the deterrence that statistics have consistently failed to demonstrate, not the closure that never quite arrives for the victims' families who are also watching a human being die in a square. The real purpose. Why does the state need this? What does the state require that can only be obtained through killing?

I believe the answer is what it has always been: not justice but power. The demonstration of the willingness to kill is itself the point. The crane in the square says: we can do this. We have the authority and the apparatus and the will. We can make a person disappear — first into a cell, then into a verdict, then into a rope — and the world will continue around the gap.

They are slowing down. I can hear the crowd before I can see it.

I am thirty-four years old. I have a wife I love and a daughter who touched my cheek this afternoon. I have done things I regret and things I am proud of, in the same proportions as most people. I was a man like any other man. What is about to happen to me will be called justice.

It is not justice. It is killing. And I am asking anyone who reads this — now or in fifty years, in Iran or anywhere — to keep asking the question. To refuse the state's answer. To stand in the square and refuse to call it justice.

UNDER SENTENCE OF DEATH

My name is—

[The diary ends here.]

DEFINITIONS AND TERMS

Victor Hugo (1802–1885): The author of this work — French poet, novelist, playwright, and political activist, widely regarded as the greatest French-language writer of the nineteenth century. His opposition to capital punishment was lifelong and sustained: he wrote *Under Sentence of Death* at twenty-seven, intervened personally on behalf of condemned prisoners across his career, and continued to press the case for abolition through his years in the French Senate. He did not live to see the guillotine abolished in France; abolition came in 1981, nearly a century after his death.

Evin Prison: The principal political detention facility in Tehran, operated in part by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps. Ward 209, where the narrator is held, is controlled specifically by the Intelligence Organization of the IRGC and is used for prisoners charged with national security offenses, political crimes, and crimes against the state. Evin has held journalists, lawyers, human rights activists, dual nationals, and political dissidents. Conditions in Ward 209 include extended solitary confinement, sleep deprivation, and forced confessions.

***Moharebeh*:** An Arabic term, used in Iranian law, meaning enmity against God or waging war against God. It is one of the charges most commonly brought against political prisoners in Iran. Under Article 282 of the Islamic Penal Code the court may impose one of several punishments on a person convicted of moharebeh, of which execution is one; in political cases execution is the usual outcome. The charge has been applied to members of political opposition groups, armed insurgents, protesters, and individuals whose connection to any organized resistance is tenuous or nonexistent.

***Efsad-e fel-arz*:** An Arabic term meaning spreading corruption on earth, and the other charge routinely producing

death sentences in Iranian political cases. Article 286 defines it expansively — offenses against persons, property, or internal or external security, committed on a large scale, or acts causing public anxiety or disorder — and prescribes execution as one of the available hadd penalties. Like moharebeh, it is applied broadly: to drug traffickers, to people convicted of repeated moral offenses, and to political opponents of the government. The breadth of the definition gives courts wide latitude.

The Revolutionary Court: The judicial body in Iran that handles cases involving national security, political crimes, and crimes said to be against God. Its judges are appointed by the Head of the Judiciary; some are clerics and some are not. Trials are frequently conducted without adequate access to defense counsel, without meaningful discovery of evidence, and with confessions obtained under duress given significant evidentiary weight. The branches handling political cases sit in closed session, and their judgments are not published — a practice UN human rights experts have criticized directly, noting that in some 2026 cases the precise charges against the condemned were never made public.

The Supreme Leader: The head of state of the Islamic Republic of Iran, holding authority over all branches of government including the judiciary, the military, and the security services. Clemency in capital cases involving offenses against the state passes through the Head of the Judiciary, who is appointed by the Supreme Leader, and ultimately rests with the Supreme Leader himself. In the novel, the narrator's awareness that one man could stop the execution and will not is the Iranian equivalent of Hugo's condemned man contemplating the king who will not intervene.

Public hanging by crane: A method used in Iran's public executions. A mobile crane is positioned in a public square or street; the condemned person is placed in a noose attached to the crane's arm and lifted, dying by slow strangulation rather than the rapid cervical dislocation of a measured drop. Bodies are sometimes left suspended for hours. Public executions are a small fraction of Iran's total — roughly a dozen a year against well over a thousand carried out inside prisons — which is precisely what makes them

significant. The state uses them to deter and to display, and attendance has at times included children.

The mullah: In this adaptation, the clerical official who comes to the narrator's cell in his final hours, the equivalent of Hugo's prison chaplain. The Iranian context adds a layer unavailable to Hugo: the mullah represents a state that has fused religious and political authority, and he comes to tell the condemned man to make peace with a God whose law the state claims to be enforcing. The narrator's question — *do you believe this execution is what God wants?* — and the mullah's answer — *they are the same* — is the novel's clearest statement of what is wrong with theocratic capital punishment.

Maryam: The narrator's three-year-old daughter, named for the Quranic figure of Mary, mother of Jesus, a figure of profound reverence in Islam. Her name carries the weight of all the Islamic Republic's claims to piety and mercy against the reality of a child who will grow up without her father. In Hugo's original she is named Marie; the adaptation preserves both the name's religious resonance and the scene in which she fails to recognize her father and he does not identify himself to her.

Hugo's preface of 1832: Hugo added a long preface, and his name, to the second edition on 15 March 1832. He was explicit there that the book was not a defense of any particular criminal but a plea on behalf of every accused person, present and to come, and that its object was the abolition of the death penalty in any form and in any society. The plea is the same in every edition — Paris, 1829; Tehran, 2026.

The diary's last entry: The narrator begins to write his name and stops. The sentence is unfinished. In Hugo's original, the diary ends as the narrator is taken to the scaffold. The incompleteness is not a literary device — it is the argument. The life was cut short. The sentence was not finished. There was more to say.

FURTHER READING

Hugo's Own Work

Hugo, Victor. *The Last Day of a Condemned Man and Other Prison Writings*. Translated and edited by Geoff Woollen. Oxford: Oxford University Press, World's Classics, 1992. The standard English scholarly edition of the novel, printed with the 1832 preface, *Claude Gueux*, and Hugo's own diary entries from his visits to La Roquette and the Conciergerie. The best single volume for readers who want Hugo's prison writing gathered in one place.

Hugo, Victor. *Claude Gueux*. 1834. A short work of documentary fiction published five years after *Under Sentence of Death*, following the case of a French prisoner driven to kill and then executed for it. Hugo regarded it as the companion piece to this novel; it is included in the Woollen edition above.

Hugo, Victor. *Les Misérables*. 1862. The great novel that grew, in part, from Hugo's sustained meditation on crime, punishment, and the question of what society owes the people it has failed. Jean Valjean is the extended version of the condemned man in this diary — a person processed by a penal system and stripped of his humanity by that processing.

On Iran's Death Penalty

Iran Human Rights and ECPM. *Annual Report on the Death Penalty in Iran*. Published jointly each year; the eighteenth edition, covering 2025, appeared in 2026. The most rigorous available count of executions in Iran, broken down by charge, province, and demographic, with methodology stated. The figure of at least 1,639 executions in 2025 comes from this report.

Amnesty International. *Iran: Death Penalty and Executions*. Ongoing reporting at [amnesty.org](https://www.amnesty.org). Amnesty's 2026 coverage documents the wave of death sentences and executions arising from the January 2026 protests, including the use of national security charges, closed Revolutionary Court hearings, and torture-tainted confessions.

Center for Human Rights in Iran. Ongoing reporting at iranhumanrights.org. Case-level documentation of political prosecutions, named defendants, named judges, and named courts — the granular record behind the aggregate numbers.

Abrahamian, Ervand. *Tortured Confessions: Prisons and Public Recantations in Modern Iran*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999. The standard scholarly account of the Islamic Republic's use of detention, forced confession, and public recantation — the system within which the narrator's confession in Chapter II would have been obtained.

Memarian, Omid, ed. *Sketches of Iran: A Glimpse from the Front Lines of Human Rights*. International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran, 2013. Forty commentaries paired with drawings by Iranian artists, on imprisonment, forced confession, and the silencing of writers and lawyers. Memarian was himself detained in 2004 and forced to confess on state television.

The Broader Tradition

Darrow, Clarence. *An Eye for an Eye*. Edited and reset by Jeff Hood. Complicit Press, 2026. The companion fiction volume in this series — Darrow's 1905 novel, reset in St. Louis in 2026. Where Hugo's condemned man is educated and lyrical, Darrow's is working-class and plain-spoken. Together they make the same argument.

Spear, Charles. *Essays on the Punishment of Death*. Edited and modernized by Jeff Hood. Complicit Press. The 1844 American abolitionist argument that anticipates many of Hugo's themes.

Bovee, Marvin H. *Christ and the Gallows; or, Reasons for the Abolition of Capital Punishment*. New York: Masonic Publishing

Company, 1869. The nineteenth-century American work that addresses most directly the claim that capital punishment is divinely sanctioned — the same claim the Islamic Republic makes in the narrator's Revolutionary Court.

Fiction and Testimony

Nemat, Marina. *Prisoner of Tehran: A Memoir*. New York: Free Press, 2007. An account of detention in Evin Prison in the 1980s — the institution in which this novel is set — and one of the most detailed descriptions of that place available in English.

Satrapi, Marjane. *Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood*. New York: Pantheon Books, 2003. A graphic memoir of growing up in Iran during and after the Revolution, providing essential context for the Islamic Republic's relationship to execution, repression, and the lives of ordinary Iranians.

Kafka, Franz. *The Trial*. 1925. The greatest fictional treatment of the person processed to death by an opaque and unaccountable legal system. Hugo and Kafka are the poles of the genre: one lyrical and romantic, one bureaucratic and uncanny. Between them they have described every courtroom in which the outcome was never in question.