Journal of Moral Theology, Vol. 11, No. 1 (2022): 131–153

Revolution of Faith in *Les Misérables*: The Journey from Misery to Mercy in the Secular Age

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"La mort, c'est la même chose que la grâce."
-Victor Hugo

AS HIS EPIGRAPHIC REMARKS SHOW, WITH *Les Misérables* Victor Hugo intended to provide a remedy for human ignorance and misery.[1] Recasting the Christian way of life in terms of conscience, history, and progress, *Les Misérables* proposes a unique transposition of moral theology into the context of secular nineteenth century France. The Christian vision has yet to redefine European values and society for the better (1.5.11, 158). Hugo wishes to reform society, religion, and humanity to foster a communal harmony embracing diversity and transcending political, cultural, and religious conflicts.[2] Reflecting its exiled author's processing of the collapse of the second Republic, *Les Misérables* takes account of the serious obstacles to moral, spiritual, and social progress that are ignorance (lack of access to education), poverty (human induced economic and spiritual misery), and criminality (habitual evil). Hugo struggles to keep his vision of a democratic society alive. At stake is the possibility of social-political and moral-spiritual reform empowering the people to take charge of its destiny. Hugo comes to terms with the fact that revolutions do not effect lasting positive social change, rather the opposite.[3]

Of the main characters, only Mgr. Myriel and Jean Valjean succeed at completing the journey from vice to virtue. With the exception of Myriel's influence on Valjean, both however strikingly fail at altering

[1] "Death is the same (thing) as grace" (translation, mine). Victor Hugo, *Les Misérables*, tr. Julie Rose (New York: Modern Library, 2009), 1. Hereafter cited by part, book, chapter and page numbers between brackets.
[2] See Victor Hugo, *Correspondance II: Années 1849–1866*, Œuvres complètes, Vol. 42 (Paris: Albin Michel, 1950), 400.
[3] See Daniel Sipe, "'Les horizons du rêve': Hugo's Utopianism," in *Approaches to Teaching Hugo's* Les Misérables, ed. Michal P. Ginsburg and Bradley Stephens (New York: MLA, 2018), 128.

the character of individuals with whom they interact and the structures of communities to whom they belong in lasting fashion. Some characters are forced by poverty and social exclusion to engage in self-destructive behavior (Fantine). Some remain entrenched in evil or an abstract sense of duty and intentionally attempt to thwart Valjean's moral development (Thénardier, Javert). Others persevere in the good throughout but lose their lives in defense of a lost cause (Gavroche, Éponine, Enjolras, Mabeuf). As for Valjean himself, he undergoes complete transformation of character and way of life, facing a series of moral dilemmas and crises whose outcome deepen his option for the good. Valjean's life, however, ends in at least apparent failure, for he is never recognized as citizen and his self-giving way of life is not embraced by others, not even by his adoptive daughter and son-in-law who are set to enjoy a privileged (*Bourgeois*) existence deprived of any reference to the transcendent.[4] Like the story of the passion it emulates, the self-sacrificial quest and ministry of vicarious representation of Jean Valjean, the "proletarian Christ,"[5] seems to involve only his own definitive moral-spiritual transformation.

Acknowledging, alongside Samuel L. Goldberg, that "imaginative literature has traditionally been, and still is, a distinctive and irreplaceable form of moral thinking,"[6] in what follows, I theologize in the medium of literature by taking a systematic look at the life of Jean Valjean, the lead character of Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables*, on the path that led him from criminality to self-sacrifice. With Frédérique Leichter-Flack, I argue that in the wake of failed revolutions, Hugo moved the quest and task of human transformation from the social and political realms into the moral and spiritual. The existence of a single instance of authentic conversion of a hardened criminal translating into the lifelong practice of virtue confirms the potential of all human beings to experience redemption.[7] Hugo provides an exemplary life designed to help readers recognize this truth and submit themselves to transformative self-examination. Exploring the morally possible enables the determination of a given individual's personal vocation, which becomes a standard against which "the subject's fidelity to this unique destiny"[8] can be measured. Moral life can then be understood

[4] See Philippe Moisan, "*Les Misérables* and the Nineteenth-Century French Novel," in *Approaches to Teaching Hugo's* Les Misérables, 78.
[5] Pierre-Étienne Cudmore, "Jean Valjean et les avatars du poète éponyme," *French Review* 61, no. 2 (1987): 171.
[6] Samuel L. Goldberg, *Agents and Lives: Moral Thinking in Literature* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1993), 63.
[7] See Frédérique Leichter-Flack, "Encore un mal que le roman nous fait? Morale du dilemme, de Hugo à Dostoïevski," *Romantisme* 142, no. 4 (2008): 73 and 80.
[8] Jose Ortega y Gasset, "In Search of Goethe from Within," in *The Dehumanization of Art and Other Essays on Art, Culture, and Literature* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1969), 144.

as "a set of potentialities that thrust and grow themselves into being, that necessarily strive to actualize or realize themselves in time, and in the course of this perhaps become subject to consciousness and so to voluntary evaluation and deliberate choice."[9]

Engagement with the humanity of another, even that of a fictional other, nurtures renewed relationship with one's own humanity. God reveals Godself (as Christ) to humans by revealing humans to themselves and one another. In this context, Victor Hugo's depiction of Jean Valjean's story can be understood as the author's attempt to enjoin his readers to experience vicariously the "revolutionary grace"[10] effecting the complete inner transformation of the lead character of *Les Misérables*. Hence, following Lisa Gasbarrone, I consider Valjean's life story to be "an apprenticeship of the sacred"[11] involving the "exploration of the meaning and practice of faith."[12] Through his embodiment of holiness, Valjean shows how the Christian ideal can be assumed and made incarnate by the miserable. The transformation of the human condition from sin to virtue and grace is a long walk and work in the dark, a journey to and in faith, whose ultimate outcome is not achieved or experienced in the present life. Valjean's story gives narrative articulation to Hugo's hope for humanity, grounded in the faith that all human beings are called to be mediators of the transcendent. Partaking in Valjean's experience of inner reform induced and guided by Myriel's embodiment of gratuitous love, the readers of *Les Misérables* may be led to recognize the humanity of others and their own, and join the struggle for the formation of a free people.[13]

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[9] Goldberg, *Agents and Lives*, 73.

[10] André Brochu, *Hugo: amour, crime, révolution. Essai sur Les Misérables* (Montreal: Presses de l'Université de Montréal, 1974), 235.

[11] Lisa Gasbarrone, "Restoring the Sacred in *Les Misérables*," *Religion & Literature* 40, no. 2 (2008): 23.

[12] Gasbarrone, "Restoring the Sacred," 17.

[13] Surprisingly few studies consider the import and implications of Hugo's masterpiece for moral and spiritual theology. Jerry H. Gill discerns "patterns of grace" setting Valjean on a new life path and powerfully summoning him to remain true to the ideal and mission set and entrusted by Mgr. Myriel throughout his life. For Gill, Valjean embodies the transformative agency of "unconditioned goodwill" received and offered gratuitously, effecting positive change even in those who resist it, such as Javert ("Patterns of Grace in *Les Misérables*," *Encounters* 74, no. 1 [2013]: 29–40). In "Providence, Duty, Love: The Regeneration of Jean Valjean in Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables*" (*Heythrop Journal* 59 [2018]: 24–33), Gordon Leah similarly argues that Hugo upholds the existence and efficacy of divine providence, operating and speaking through the conscience of individuals transformed and commissioned by gratuitous forgiveness. Mgr. Myriel's compassion induced Valjean's regeneration, which itself led the latter to embrace a self-sacrificial way of existence. Mary Christian and Jean-François Chiron consider the economics of redemption; the gift of the silverware attests that the regeneration of the miserable requires not only moral or spiritual resources, but also material ones (in "Bought with Silver: Victor Hugo, George Bernard Shaw, and the Economics of Salvation," *Religion & Literature* 47, no. 2 [2015]: 1–22

SETTING THE STANDARD

The fact that the novel opens with an entire book dedicated to Mgr. Myriel, bishop of Digne, is not indifferent. Myriel embodies the religious ideal whose secular transposition the narrative operates in Jean Valjean, the lead character. Myriel teaches Jesus Christ using words and deeds that speak to everyone (1.1.4, 11–13). He never theorized but always spoke from the heart and through action (1.1.14, 48–49). To the salvation of others, he fully dedicated himself, never hesitating to put his life at risk to serve this purpose (1.1.7, 24). Myriel was materially poor but spiritually rich; with an economy of words and a multitude of deeds, he reaches out and brings God's merciful grace to those who, like him, are living in misery. His faith is rooted in the personal experience of God in the midst of destitution. Estranging himself from ecclesial politics, abstract teachings, and discriminatory practices, the bishop of Digne relates to the poor as one of them (1.1.11, 41).

In the same way that in his misery he encountered God and was saved, Myriel works at channeling grace to others. So claims the narrator of *Les Misérables*: "There are men who work hard, digging for gold; he worked hard, digging for pity. The misery of the world was his mine. Pain everywhere was an occasion for goodness always. *Love one another*: He declared this to be complete, desired nothing more; it was the sum total of his doctrine" (1.1.14, 49). Myriel's faith finds expression in absolute love, given especially to those who suffer and are lost. Henri Scepi notes that in *Les Misérables*, Myriel functions as the embodiment of Hugo's idea and ideal of charity; a life according to Christ, lived in simplicity and profusion of mercy.[14] Myriel indwells human misery as the moon inhabits the night. Through his words and

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and "Ce que des chandeliers peuvent exprimer. Symbole et rédemption dans *Les Misérables*," *Theophilyon* 24, no. 2 [2019]: 459–91). Fatma Dore's analysis of Valjean's self-denunciation to spare the innocent Champmathieu from a sure conviction through the lens of consequential utilitarian ethics concludes, against the narrative and Hugo, that Valjean should not have followed his conscience ("Jean Valjean's Dilemma and Utilitarian Ethics," *Folklor/Edebiyat* 90 [2017]: 147–61). Dore claims that the impact of this decision on the people of Montreuil-sur-mer and the surrounding region was such as to justify allowing Champmathieu to be condemned for a crime he did not commit. While these studies do contribute to laying foundations for a contemporary theological interpretation of *Les Misérables*—not the least by providing ample justification for avoiding any easy Christian eisegesis of the text—they also share a basic deficiency: they do not take sufficiently (if at all) into account the nature and effects of misery on the physical, psychological, moral, and spiritual development and identity of the (main) characters. The present article attempts to demonstrate that this omission makes all the difference, for misery operates in the novel as milieu and mediation for particular manifestations of divine grace and human transformation in (conformity to) Christ.

[14] See Henri Scepi, "*Les Misérables*, 'Un livre de charité'?" *Romantisme* 180, no. 2 (2018): 49.

deeds, this servant of God acts as an instrument for divine grace effecting the conversion of other persons. In him, the magnificence of divine grace resides and shows through:

> His whole face was luminous with a vague expression of contentment, hope, and bliss. It was more than a smile, almost a radiance.... A reflection of this heaven lay over the bishop. It was at the same time a luminous transparency, for this heaven was inside him. This heaven was the internal light of his conscience. (1.2.11, 86)

Hugo`s portrayal of holiness in the figure of Myriel is not unilaterally dithyrambic, for it also evokes darker shades and undertones. Myriel's charity does not alter unjust social structures; it limits itself to bringing solace to the latter's undeserving victims. Mary Christian aptly observes that "Hugo makes clear that the bishop, though eager to relieve individual suffering, has little or nothing to say about institutional injustices, being 'anything but a political animal.' … The bishop does not question the political status quo or suggest that it may play a role in causing the poverty he lightens."[15] While Myriel's charity is not explicitly intended to be the figment of a social revolution, it does embody alternative relational dynamics and way of life. Based on the life and deeds of a real bishop (Mgr. de Miollis), the figure of Myriel is but a rare instance of authentic Christian identity.[16]

If faith is to play a significant role in the transformation of French society, Christianity and the church have yet to bring this potential to fruition. Hugo gives voice to the need for profound transformation of religious institutions and practices. Scepi convincingly argues that Hugo transfers the notion and reality of charity from the realm of sacred doctrine and theology into that of secular practice and philosophy. In this latter realm, charity translates into the right to receive forgiveness and redemption (no one is excluded from experiencing and contributing actively to moral and social progress).[17] Acknowledging the church's failure to act as an agent of social reform, Myriel operates from the margins of the church, inaugurating the secularization of grace by triggering the inner transformation of the miserable, even former inmates.

The move of Christian life and values outside the Church will be brought to completion with Valjean's heartfelt belief, prayer, and discipleship exempt of participation in formal rituals.[18] Myriel (and later Valjean) embodies Hugo's attempt to redefine the Christian understanding and practice of charity in secular social and political terms.

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[15] Christian, "Bought with Silver," 8.
[16] See Christian, "Bought with Silver," 4.
[17] See Scepi, "*Les Misérables*," 50.
[18] See David Bellos, *The Novel of the Century: The Extraordinary Adventure of* Les Misérables (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2017), 162.

This reconceived concept of charity focuses on the inclusive and invincible love for humanity and the clear affirmation of moral perfectibility.[19] Charity supersedes law to administer a superior kind of justice, taking the form of infinite mercy. Henri Scepi astutely remarks that by promoting such a conception of charity, Hugo is led to rethink the nature and effects of sin and redemption. Hugo advocates for a "right to expiate" one's faults. God's infinite mercy never gives up on human beings, granting them ever-renewed opportunities to repent and experience conversion. Infinite mercy creates a possible future for fallen humanity, including the miserable.[20] Thus reconceived, charity becomes the cornerstone of Hugo's post-revolutionary social-political vision, for it enables and sustains authentic compassion for every human being, independently from their intrinsic qualities or external circumstances. Compassion entails the experience and manifestation of a shared humanity, itself the foundation of and condition for a democratic society.[21] Pity, not judgment, is the beginning and guiding principle of morality.[22]

After nineteen years in prison, Jean Valjean experiences both human and divine clemency in and through the person and actions of the Bishop of Digne. Rejected on account of his criminal record, he walks from one village to another unable to get food or find a place to stay. Noticing him lying on a bench, a lady urges him to knock at the bishop's door. In a scene whose Eucharistic overtones bring to mind the disciples on the road to Emmaus, Myriel welcomes Valjean, shares a meal with him and provides him with a room without asking anything from him, not even his name. This latter fact is most significant, for it bespeaks of the main challenge to which Valjean is confronted: (re)building his (moral and social) identity and reputation. As Pierre-Étienne Cudmore notes, "*Les Misérables* is, at a fundamental level, the story of a man who loses, recovers, redeems and, lastly, relinquishes his name."[23] During the night, Valjean's traumatized and hardened heart yields to the temptation of stealing the bishop's silverware and the ex-convict flees away. Arrested the next morning, he is confronted by the bishop. To his amazement, the bishop informs the officers that the silverware was a gift to which assorted chandeliers are to be added. As he is handing the latter over to Valjean, the bishop spells out the true meaning of his generous gesture:

> Don't forget, don't ever forget, that you promised me to use this silver to make an honest man of yourself.… Jean Valjean, my brother, you

[19] See Scepi, "*Les Misérables*," 55.
[20] See Scepi, "*Les Misérables*," 50.
[21] See Claude Millet, "'Commençons donc par l'immense pitié' (Victor Hugo)," *Romantisme* 142, no. 4 (2008): 14.
[22] See Millet, "Commençons donc par l'immense pitié," 10–11.
[23] Cudmore, "Jean Valjean et les avatars du poète éponyme," 171 (translation, mine).

> no longer belong to evil but to good. It is your soul that I am buying for you; I am taking it away from black thoughts and from the spirit of perdition, and I am giving it to God. (1.2.12, 90)

Myriel's charity is realistic, for the bishop saves Valjean with undeserved mercy *and* expensive silverware. Spiritual transformation supposes basic material needs are met. As Christian observes, "The bishop confers new spiritual value on the silver utensils even while reaffirming their function as an economic resource. It is the economic value of the silver, as well as the kindness with which it is given, that allows it to be the instrument for Jean Valjean's salvation."[24] Valjean is to be judged by his future actions and character, as well as the use he makes of the gifted silverware. This fact leads Christian to further claim that "the story of Jean Valjean, like that of Judas Iscariot, insists that how one gets or spends one's silver may have far-reaching consequences for one's soul."[25] This "spiritual economics," whereby individuals are led to display their moral quality in daily commerce, is challenged by the unfair administration of justice in society. Valjean is sent to jail for a loaf of bread he stole to feed starving nephews and nieces for whose needs his limited outcome does not enable him to provide. His sentence is lengthened on account of his repeated attempts to escape from jail. For these reasons, Jacques Dubois believes that Valjean's plight establishes *Les Misérables* as the "narrative of punishment without [proportionate] crime."[26] *Les Misérables* would thus be the story of the struggle of the undeservedly reprobate to find purpose and achieve moral-spiritual maturity in and through human misery. Many characters share in this plight; the names of Fantine, Cosette, Éponine, Gavroche and Mabeuf naturally come to mind. These characters are subjected to undeserved poverty and hardship and seek to remain faithful to themselves and to the good.

Only once Valjean has committed a further crime—the robbery of Petit-Gervais, a poor wandering orphan—does the demand placed on him by Myriel's figure and gesture come to bear weight. Valjean falls "in a trance, caught in a limbo between his past life of survival through theft and his present and future life as a reformed man under the influence of the previous night's experience."[27] He realizes what the bishop has done to him. The bishop of Digne's completely undeserved forgiveness is summoning him to undergo spiritual transformation. Myriel's mercy forces Valjean to revive and listen to his long buried

[24] Christian, "Bought with Silver," 5.
[25] Christian, "Bought with Silver," 20.
[26] Jacques Dubois, "Le crime de Valjean et le châtiment de Javert," in *Crime et châtiment dans le roman populaire de langue française du XIXe siècle*, ed. Ellen Constans and Jean-Claude Vareille (Limoges: Presses universitaires de Limoges, 2013), 325.
[27] Gordon Leah, "Providence, Duty, Love," 25.

conscience. He must now take a stand for or against undeserved goodness.

> He felt indistinctly that the old priest's forgiveness was the greatest assault and the most deadly attack he had ever been rocked by; that if he could resist such clemency his heart would be hardened once and for all; that if he gave in to it, he would have to give up the hate that the actions of other men had filled his heart with for so many years and which he relished; that this time, he had to conquer or be conquered and that the struggle, a colossal and decisive struggle, was now on between his own rottenness and the goodness of that man. (1.2.13, 94–95)

THE PANGS OF CONVERSION

Valjean then goes into terrible pain, for the pure love displayed by Myriel strikingly reveals his need for conversion. This new awareness results from his already begun inner transformation. Kathryn M. Grossman explains: "In divesting himself of his silver, Myriel invests in Valjean. All he demands of the recipient is that he prove worthy of the promise that he could not have made in his prison of sin, but that he will have made following his liberation."[28] It is by experiencing self-revealing transformative misery that human beings come to learn and responsibly assume the truth about their moral condition.

> One thing was certain,…he was no longer the same man, already everything about him had changed, and it was no longer in his power to act as though the bishop had not spoken to him, had not touched him to the quick.… The very moment he shouted "I am a miserable bastard!" he saw himself for what he was, and he was already so dissociated from himself that he felt he was now no more than a ghost. (1.2.13, 95–96)

Within Valjean's conscience, the bishop of Digne now shines brightly as *the* ethical and spiritual ideal to pursue. Valjean desires to dwell in divine mercy, nothing else. Directly gazing at the ideal of holiness, he then reinterprets his existence in its light and measures the depth of his sinfulness (1.2.13, 97).

Myriel's intervention opens a new future for Jean Valjean, a life dedicated to growing in virtue (2.4.3, 363). Valjean's road to holiness will lead him to mature appropriation of his sinful self. The misery he must endure will turn him into a prism diffusive of divine mercy. To become a virtuous citizen, Valjean chooses to hide his criminal past. The preservation of his reputation depends on the quality of his behavior and ability to conceal his status of ex-convict. The converted

[28] Kathryn M. Grossman, *Figuring Transcendence in* Les Misérables*: Hugo's Romantic Sublime* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1994), 128.

Valjean thus applies himself to fulfilling Myriel's demanding vision: truly to become a holy man (1.7.3, 185). Using his wits and the money obtained from the sale of the silverware,[29] Valjean—now going by the name of Madeleine—manages to establish himself as a successful entrepreneur whose visionary leadership and moral integrity sustain the prosperity of an entire region (1.5.2, 136–37). Moving the focus of his attention away from himself, Valjean dedicates his time and energy to creating conditions where others can prosper and flourish. The name Valjean chooses to go by—Madeleine—suggests significant connections. "Madeleine" is the French rendering of "Magdalene," the patronym of a biblical character. Mary Madgalene is a "fallen" woman in social disrepute thanks to actions and/or status unfairly attributed to her, to whom Jesus grants the ability to "redeem herself." Valjean is a new Magdalene insofar as he has been granted by Mgr. Myriel with the ability to become an honest man, and promised to complete the mission of a "fallen" woman (Fantine): be a parental figure to Cosette. As will become clear later, Valjean—again like Magdalene—is invited to stand and live at the foot of Jesus's cross partaking in a privileged way in his passion.

But holiness demands more than the successful dissimulation of one's troubled past under bounteous philanthropy. Madeleine's generosity shows limitations similar to Myriel's charity: the thriving economy of Montreuil-sur-mer does not prevent people like Fantine from falling into undeserved misery which in turn leads her to moral deprivation and an untimely death. Madeleine's "insisting and faultless"[30] presence and ministry nurture in the villagers moral and spiritual dependence upon his benevolence. Such "virtue" does not withstand the test of time. The virtue of the villagers reflects that of Valjean himself, who can only be generous under the cover of a false identity. Holiness entails complete spiritual translucence, that is, transparency to divine grace and mercy. Measured by the ideal set by Myriel, the demands of Valjean's conscience, therefore, cannot be satisfied with his self-dedication to others, if the latter is not grounded in the complete acceptance of all he is and has done. Valjean is summoned to find holiness in his own misery, to transform this misery into an abode for the transcendent.

A convicted and interned criminal, Valjean is aware that his existence in society is forfeit. Madeleine's remarkable success, affable personality, and reserve (with more than a touch of aloofness) set him apart. He is a benefactor who expresses a generosity no aristocrat

[29] Jean-François Chiron rightly observes that Valjean only sells the dinnerware, faithfully keeping the chandeliers to the end of his life. The chandeliers remind him—especially in times of moral crisis—of Mgr. Myriel's merciful gesture, offer, and symbol of salvation ("Ce que des chandeliers peuvent exprimer," 461).

[30] Dubois, "Le crime de Valjean," 321–22.

could display. His nobility exceeds nobility conferred by birth. His moral integrity is, however, tainted by his inability to acknowledge his origins, at once humble and unknown. Valjean's "virtue is not entirely pure.… His radical 'transfiguration' from sinner to saint, a conversion that he must renew daily, requires the continual stripping away of the subtle layers of hypocrisy and egotism that so often warp one's judgment."[31] Valjean's conversion is not instantaneous, but rather takes the form of a lifelong journey of transformation marked by evermore unsettling challenges. Isabel Roche explains: "Valjean's trajectory is built upon successive moments of crisis, increasingly internalized and self-imposed, and each capable of fully undoing his moral progress."[32] To change his bitter self-centered heart of stone into a loving other-oriented heart of flesh Valjean must die many deaths and come to life again under as many distinct identities. This transformative process will bring him to suffer his own humanity in a redeeming way. Estranged from God and outlawed by human society, the dislocated Valjean exists outside the human world.

Converted and blessed by God through the instrumental agency of Myriel, Valjean is summoned to follow the dictates of his conscience, the locus where God reveals and expresses Godself personally. Hugo finds in conscience a manifestation of the divine within the human.[33] The converted Valjean's mission is to enter human society and redeem himself by working at the salvation of others. He must live according to principles not of this world, and thereby condemn himself in the eyes of others and his own. When Champmathieu, a fellow ex-convict, is about to be condemned for his crimes, Valjean, in the person of Madeleine, the respected mayor of Montreuil-sur-mer, is led to denounce himself. Losing everything, he faces the prospect of a life in prison (1.7.3, 190).

Michael Hoffheimer rightly emphasizes the bearings of the Champmathieu affair on Valjean's life and social standing:

> The Champmathieu affair radically alters Jean Valjean's legal status. When he escapes for the second time, he does not just face the burden of prejudice visited on former convicts as he had at the outset. For the rest of the novel, as an escaped prisoner serving a life sentence, he

[31] Kathryn M. Grossman, "Hugo's Romantic Sublime: Beyond Chaos and Convention in *Les Misérables*," *Philological Quarterly* 60, no. 4 (1981): 474–75.
[32] Isabel K. Roche, "On (the Usefulness of Hunger and) Beauty," in *Les Misérables and Its Afterlives—Between Page, Stage, and Screen*, ed. Kathryn M. Grossman and Bradley Stephens (Farnham: Ashgate, 2015), 21.
[33] See Yves Gohin, "L'étrange existence de Jean Valjean," in *From Baudelaire to Lorca: Approaches to Literary Modernism*, ed. José Manuel Losada Goya and Alfredo Rodriguez Lopez-Vazquez (Kassel: Reichenberger, 1996), 90.

> faces the prospect of life imprisonment, possibly even death, if his identity is discovered.[34]

Valjean knows that in this process of self-humiliation, he is being led by a greater power.

> He turned away from all delusion, detached himself more and more from earthly things and sought consolation and strength elsewhere. He told himself he had to do his duty.… He told himself that it was essential, that this was his fate, that it was not for him to disturb the way things were arranged up above, that in any case he had to choose: either virtue without an abomination within or holiness within and disgrace on show without. (1.7.3, 192)

Mayor Madeleine dies for the prisoner Valjean to rise again. The conflict then raging in his heart attests of his enduring temptation to fall away from grace and virtue and his corollary need for further spiritual maturing. Valjean is by no means perfectly righteous; at least in three critical situations—during the Champmathieu affair, Marius's rescue, and the final surrender of Cosette—his moral integrity is on the brink of collapse and giving free rein to selfish possessive desires.

Before being led to prison, Madeleine-Valjean makes a promise to the dying Fantine: he will care for her orphaned daughter Cosette. He will nurture humanity in the person of Cosette, the suffering innocent (4.15.1, 948). For Cosette to become his adoptive daughter, though, Valjean must find a way to extricate himself from the hold of legal authorities. This, he accomplishes by disappearing into the sea while saving the life of a sailor. Valjean then releases Cosette from the custody of the Thénardiers, who grievously mistreated her, and takes her to Paris. Constable Javert, who suspects Valjean is still alive, finds and chases him in the streets of the city. Climbing a wall to save his and Cosette's life, Valjean finds himself in a convent of recluse nuns where he decides to stay for a time. To free himself from the relentless pursuit of blind human (in)justice embodied in Javert,[35] and to be able to fulfill his promise, Valjean can only live in a place which, while being located in the center of the city, is not strictly speaking part of it (2.8.1, 433–34). To live peacefully with Cosette in the cloister, he must leave its precincts without being discovered by both the nuns and the police and be admitted in "legitimate" manner. Valjean, as illegal intruder, must suffer death to rise again, this time as Ultime Fauche-

[34] Michael H. Hoffheimer, "Jean Valjean's Nightmare: Rehabilitation and Redemption in *Les Misérables*," *McGeorge Law Review* 43 (2012): 171.
[35] See Géraldine Crahay, "*Serenity*'s Operative and *Les Misérables*' Inspector Javert: The Masculinity of Scrupulous Civil Servants," *Slayage* 15, no. 1 (2017): 9.

levent, the brother of the cloister's gardener. Thus death and resurrection will involve, for Valjean, burial in a cemetery in place of a deceased nun and an interview with the prioress.

THE IDEAL AND THE TEST OF REALITY

These requirements met, a long period of formation begins for Valjean and Cosette. Converted by a bishop, Valjean continues his spiritual transformation in the cloister, taking care of the gardens and Cosette. In the cloister, Valjean practices gardening in external and internal gardens. Physical and spiritual gardening are interwoven: Valjean is both gardener and garden.[36] The orphaned daughter of a miserable woman, Cosette incarnates human innocence preserved in and despite undeserved suffering. Under the guidance of Valjean and the nuns, the sparkle of Cosette's childhood purity will grow into the radiance of adult virginity.[37] Hugo makes it clear that Cosette is not holy in or by herself, but rather is made holy through Valjean's (and the cloister nuns') agency (5.7.2, 1152).

André Brochu notes that *Les Misérables* contains no example of biological fathers expressing healthy love for and providing proper care to their daughters. Similarly, *Les Misérables* presents no instance of biological mothers showing healthy love to and taking good care of their sons. There are, however, instances of biological mothers showing effusive love and care for their daughters (e.g., Fantine toward Cosette).[38] Brochu further observes that the novel only allows for fatherly display of love toward a daughter when the latter is an adopted child. Valjean did not receive love from his parents, was forced to provide for his older sister's children and never had the opportunity to experience romantic love. Love starved, Valjean is a romantic wanderer who then promises to care for a child to whom he can relate as adoptive grandfather, father, mother and husband.[39] Overcoming the temptation to assume all these roles proves to be quite a challenge for Valjean, as the following parts of the narrative reveal.

Valjean's sufferings were not intended to end in the Petit-Picpus convent. For once he had successfully raised Cosette's untainted humanity to maturity, he felt compelled to introduce her to human society. The irony is that by taking Cosette out of the convent, Valjean curtails her freedom. In nineteenth-century France, as Bellos explains, convents are "'ideal communit[ies]' offering women an escape from

[36] See Mauri Cruz Previde, "A Vereda de João Traços de *Bildungsroman* em *Les Misérables* de Victor Hugo," *Lettres Françaises* 6 (2005): 96.
[37] See Isabel K. Roche, "Type Transformed: Character and Characterization in *Les Misérables*," in *Approaches to Teaching Hugo's* Les Misérables, 197.
[38] See Brochu, *Hugo: amour, crime, révolution*, 212.
[39] See Brochu, *Hugo: amour, crime, révolution*, 216.

the contradictions of civilian life" and this because they form "autonomous, self-governing communities of women."[40] When he brings Cosette into secular society, he at the same time ensures that she will not assert herself and will remain completely dependent on him, unless another man challenges his authority over her. Marius precisely levels such a challenge on the grounds of romantic love. Valjean must let go of his almost obsessive need for Cosette's presence. In the same way he preserved and nurtured her innocence and purity, he will save Marius from certain death at the hands of the French army (whose soldiers are busy quenching the civil uprising in which Marius is involved), by carrying him through the city's sewer system, bringing him back to his family and facilitating his union to Cosette. This journey into the entrails of the city will put him to the test and bring his extraordinary dedication, endurance, and humanity to the limit.

The journey into the sewer system is imbued with significant symbolism. The sewer forms the most elementary discriminatory system of the city; in it, the rejected meet and blend, standing equal in their marginalization and/or exclusion from society. This leveling down effect leads Maxwell to speak of the "ultimate democracy of the sewer."[41] More importantly, the sections of the narrative on the history of Paris' sewer system and Valjean's flight through it embody Hugo's critique of Parisian/French society's blindness to its own exclusionary practices. "The long sewer digression," argues Lewis, "can be read as a call for the reintegration of society's outcasts along with its waste water."[42] Justice is so administered that the rehabilitation of the socially excluded is not possible. In this context, the police becomes the instrument used by the city to monitor closely the boundary between society and its underworld and ensure that while reputed citizens enjoy status and privilege, disreputable individuals are never allowed to (re)gain any. Hugo wishes to change that. Valjean's story shows one can live in misery through no significant fault of one's own and grow out of it, into social-spiritual maturity. Out of the mud of the sewer (the contemporary analogue to the biblical dirt and dust) a renewed human condition may thus be forged. The elevation of the miserable is effected by means of free self-humiliation (kenosis).[43]

Carrying the grievously wounded Marius on his back, Valjean—risking his life—does not hesitate to enter fetid waters. When all hope is lost and he finds himself about to drown, his foot hits a stone on which he can stand and begin to make his way out (5.3.7, 1062). This

[40] Bellos, *The Novel of the Century*, 185.
[41] Richard Maxwell, "Mystery and Revelation in *Les Misérables*," *Romanic Review* 73, no. 3 (1982): 314.
[42] Briana Lewis, "The Sewer and the Prostitute in *Les Misérables*: From Regulation to Redemption," *Nineteenth-Century French Studies* 44, nos. 3–4 (2016): 274.
[43] See Maxime Goergen, "Fonctions de la lutte des classes dans *Les Misérables*," *Nineteenth-Century French Studies* 45, nos. 1–2 (2016–17): 44.

physical test prefigures and leads to a spiritual one. Reaching the outer limit of the sewer, Valjean walks into a locked gate. There he meets with Thénardier, a hardened criminal who wishes to profit from Valjean's need of a way out. Thénardier (alongside the other members of Patron-Minette) bears witness to Hugo's recognition that there is such a thing as irreformable persistence in evil. As Bellos observes, in *Les Misérables*, "the destructive potential of hate," taking "the form of resentment and greed," remains "an unsolved problem," for Thénardier is not moved by Valjean's example, abandons his wife and children, and ultimately sails to the Americas to own slaves.[44] Entering the sewer to flee from the police and assuming Valjean has killed the man he carries, Thénardier offers to open the gate in exchange for monetary compensation. Forced to accept the offer, Valjean exits the underground and re-enters human society only to fall into the hands of Javert. Offering no resistance to his arrest, Valjean begs Javert to allow him to leave the injured Marius with his grandfather.

Recognizing in Marius's savior his own, Javert faces his greatest moral challenge. Precisely when, mechanically applying the law, he is about to fulfill his duty and put this relapsing criminal behind bars, Javert's conscience compels him to set Valjean free.

> To owe your life to a malefactor, to accept his debt and pay it back, to be, in spite of yourself, on a par with a fugitive from justice and to pay him back for a good deed done by another good deed; to let him say to you, "Off you go" and to say to him in turn, "You're free," to sacrifice duty, that all-encompassing obligation, to personal motives, and to feel in those personal motives something that was also all-encompassing and, perhaps, superior; to betray society in order to remain true to your conscience—that all these absurd things should happen and should come and heap themselves upon him, absolutely floored him.... One thing had amazed him and that was that Jean Valjean had spared him; and one thing had petrified him, and that was that he, Javert, had spared Jean Valjean. (5.4.1, 1080)

To foresee the depth of Javert's internal conflict, one must consider how much Javert attempts to deny and transcend his own origins. The son of an inmate and a prostitute, Javert is a miserable and, in this regard, no different from Valjean. His status and role of police inspector scrupulously imposing the rule of law enable him to elevate himself over and beyond his own condition. Javert completely projects himself into a constructed identity and life based on the rigorous distinction between just and criminal. His status of judge standing at the frontier of civilized society and its unlawful fringes depends on his

[44] Bellos, *The Novel of the Century*, 206. See also Leichter-Flack, "Encore un mal que le roman nous fait?" 73.

ability to play his part rigorously (admitting no mistakes). As Fiona Cox spells out:

> In his despair at his exile from society Javert forges an identity of absolute integrity for himself which enters into direct conflict with the identity that is his birthright. He is an actor playing a part which he has scripted for himself.… It is only by turning himself into a caricature that Javert is able to bear the ordeal of existing.… To become an actor in one's life is symptomatic of the loss of the self, as it points to either a sense of emptiness, or the sense of being the wrong person born into the wrong background.[45]

The constructed character of Javert's identity as dutiful servant of the law is rendered all the more obvious by the fact that he persists in his role while and as he is forced to swear allegiance to diverse political systems and rulers. For, as Crahay explains, "The inspector lives in troubled times and has experienced many changes of regimes, including absolute as well as constitutional monarchies, a revolution, a republic, and an empire. In spite of all the historical, political, and social changes of his times, Javert remains true in serving law and order, regardless of their coming from an emperor, an absolute king, or a constitutional king."[46] None of these significant social and political upheavals and redefinitions lead Javert to question or alter his constructed identity and administration of justice.

When he decides to obey his conscience and let Valjean go, however, Javert completely redefines his moral identity, breaking "character," freeing himself from his self-made role and subjecting his ethics of duty to a higher principle allowing for evil to be turned into good and sinfulness to be morphed into sanctity. Javert recognizes the possibility and need for moral discernment; "He discovers with anxiety the constraint of thinking by himself."[47] Javert must reckon with the reality of moral and spiritual growth. Human justice must be subjected to divine mercy. During the civil uprising of 1832, Valjean had displayed gratuitous mercy by setting him free instead of rightfully taking his life. He thereby protected, reasserted, and fulfilled human law through the expression of charity. Javert perceives this supernatural truth and is summoned by his conscience to emulate Valjean's behavior.

> A whole order of unexpected acts surged up and subjugated him. A whole new world appeared to his soul: kindness accepted and re-

[45] Fiona Cox, "'The Dawn of a Hope so Horrible': Javert and the Absurd," in *Victor Hugo: Romancier de l'abîme*, ed. James A. Hiddleston (Oxford: Legenda, 2002), 81.
[46] Crahay, "*Serenity*'s Operative," 4–5.
[47] Crahay, "*Serenity*'s Operative," 7.

> turned, devotion, miséricorde, leniency, the havoc wreaked on austerity by pity, acceptance of other people, no more definitive condemnation, no more damnation, the possibility of a tear pearling in the eye of the law, some indefinable sense of justice according to God's rules that was the reverse of justice according to man. He saw in the darkness the terrifying sun of an unknown morality dawning. (5.4.1, 1082)

Javert finds himself in a situation analogous to that of Pontius Pilate having to decide the fate of Jesus.

> This man is forever a prisoner of the law; the law will do with him what it likes. What could be more just? Javert had told himself all that; he had tried to carry on regardless, to act, to apprehend the man, and, then as now, he had not been able to; and every time his hand had shot up convulsively toward Jean Valjean's collar, his hand had dropped again, as though under an enormous weight, and in the back of his mind, a voice, a strange voice, cried out to him: "Go on, then. Hand over your savior. Then have them bring you Pontius Pilate's washbasin and wash your claws." (5.4.1, 1082)

Javert foresees that Valjean's radical spiritual transformation and free self-sacrifice reveal God. While he manages to muster enough courage to release Valjean, he—and in him human law and justice—cannot accept to subject himself to the supernatural justice of God—the law of love—and commits suicide. The recognition of Valjean's humanity and his own shows to be too much for Javert to handle. The narrator explains that after his conversion, Valjean can no longer use violence against himself or others. The aggressive use of force implies the denial of the divine purpose and human dignity embodied in one's person and that of others. Suicide bears eternal consequences (5.3.11, 1073).

CONFESSING THE TRUTH

The narrator of *Les Misérables* claims that the purpose served by the novel resides in the provision of a figure that can lead humanity to take "a step from bad to good, from the unjust to the just, from the false to the true, from night to day, from appetite to awareness, from rottenness to life; from bestiality to duty, from hell to heaven, from nothingness to God" (5.1.20, 1018). The person and moral-spiritual journey of Jean Valjean embody this figure. Following his conscience led Valjean to allow his personal identity to be absorbed in God's, for "God is not only his guide, but is controlling his entire character."[48] Valjean's self-sacrifice for others turns him into "another Christ."[49]

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[48] Leah, "Providence, Duty, Love," 31.

[49] Jean Malavié, "Victor Hugo et la prière: sa présence dans *Les Misérables*," in ADIREL, *Travaux de littérature* (Paris: Klincksieck, 1993), 253.

On his deathbed, Valjean confesses the name of the one in whose footsteps he was summoned to follow: the crucified Christ (5.9.5, 1190-91). Converted by Myriel's clemency, Valjean was called to sacrifice and suffer everything to obey his conscience, serving God by demonstrating altruistic love. Throughout his life,

> He had been subjected to horrific trials and tribulations; not a single assault and battery of an ill-starred life had ever been spared him; the ferocity of fate, armed with every act of vengeance and every kind of social scorn, had taken him up and hounded him relentlessly. He had not backed down or flinched before any of it. He had accepted, when he had to, every violent blow; he had sacrificed his inviolability as a man redeemed, surrendered his freedom, risked his neck, lost everything, been to hell and back, and had remained disinterested and stoical, to the point where at times you might have thought him dissociated from himself in the manner of a martyr. (4.15.1, 947)

Valjean dedicates everything he is and does to the salvation of others (Cosette and Marius, especially). His vocation is one of perpetual devotion (5.6.4, 1134). Humanity now stands under divine judgment. Hugo has the narrator unambiguously assert: "The earth is not unlike a jail. Who knows if man is not an ex-convict of divine justice? Look closely at life. It is so made that you can sense punishment everywhere" (4.7.1, 810). Humanity's primary access to truth resides in suffering, for "whoever does not weep, does not see" (5.1.16, 1001). Misery is therefore the crucible into which the moral identity of each person is forged for good or ill. Confronting those subjected to it with absolute humiliation, misery excludes neutrality and half-measures. The miserable wholly commit themselves to God (Valjean) or reject him completely (Thénardier) (3.5.1, 560). Removing that which, in the human soul, is materially superfluous, misery fosters spiritual contemplation (3.5.3, 565–66).

Not all experiences of suffering and misery, however, induce spiritual growth. As Porter notes, for Hugo "suffering is a necessary but insufficient precondition for spiritual progress. It must be understood and transformed through a connection to God—through conscience (God's voice speaking to humans) and prayer (humans speaking to God)."[50] Valjean's ethical-spiritual dilemmas and struggles deepen and intensify as he grows in faith and holiness. In Mary O'Neil's apt words, "Jean Valjean's transformation from a brutish criminal without a moral conscience into an honest father and citizen requires vigilance and commitment.... Hugo insists upon the anguish suffered by his protagonist, who most often contemplates alternatives alone in a darkness

[50] Laurence M. Porter, "The Grotesque and Beyond in *Les Misérables*: Material Privation and Spiritual Transfiguration," in *Les Misérables and its Afterlives*, 50.

that suggests his doubts. Choice becomes more difficult rather than easier."[51]

Misfortune can thus lead to an encounter with God, when God wishes to disclose Godself and pour out grace into miserable humanity. "The pupil dilates in the night and ends up finding a kind of daylight there, just as the soul dilates in misery and ends up finding God" (5.3.1, 1047). Judged and condemned by human justice and society, God invites Valjean, through the mediation of Myriel, Fantine, and Cosette, to suffer the punishment unjustly imposed upon him. After having over-expiated his own crimes in prison, Valjean enters the Petit-Picpus convent to learn how to take upon himself human sinfulness on behalf of others. Valjean comes to understand that

> The most divine form of human generosity [is] atonement for others.... the sublime summit of self-abnegation, the highest peak of virtue possible—that innocence that forgives men for their sins and atones in their stead; servitude endured, torture accepted, torment sought out by souls who have not sinned in order to exempt from such torment souls that have faltered; the love of humanity losing itself in the love of God, yet remaining there, distinct and imploring; gentle weak creatures taking on the misery of those who are punished. (2.8.9, 472)

Like the cloistered nuns, Valjean lives by faith, identifying with "those humble and august souls who dare to live on the very brink of mystery...aspiring to the void and the unknown, their eye fixed on the unmoving darkness, on their knees, overcome, stunned, shivering, half lifted up at certain moments by the deep breaths of eternity" (2.7.8, 432). Out of his entire person a living and open prayer is made.[52] Valjean's humanity becomes a privileged locus for the manifestation of the divine in this world. In Valjean's suffering, endured out of love, humanity is perfected and meets with God, for "to put the infinite below in touch with the infinite above, in thought—this is what we call prayer" (2.7.5, 428).

FOR A TRULY EMPOWERING RELIGIOSITY

While the previous considerations demonstrate that the author of *Les Misérables* upholds modern society's need for the Christian faith, in this work Victor Hugo also expresses views highly critical of the way of life adopted by a majority of Christians in his day. The problem is that, in most cases, intense religious devotion leads to disengagement from real life and world, leaving the faithful unaffected by historical events and changes. Truly devout Christians do not take enough

[51] Mary A. O'Neil, "Pascalian Reflections in *Les Misérables*," *Philological Quarterly* 78, no. 3 (1999): 343–44.

[52] For a detailed treatment of Hugo's relationship to and practice of prayer, see Malavié, "Victor Hugo et la prière," 225–61.

of an active part in the transformation of society. Their asceticism leaves them trapped in an emotional and moral standstill. See, for instance, how Hugo's narrator characterizes the spiritual life of Marius's aunt, as she reacts to the many changes affecting her existence:

> Aunt Gillenormand studied all this with her unflappable placidity. She had had a certain dose of emotion in the space of five or six months.... Then she reverted to her usual indifference, the lack of interest of a first communicant. She regularly went to church services, said her rosary, read her prayer book, which she called a *Euchologion*, whispered *Aves* in one corner of the house while they were whispering *I love you*s in the other, looked on Marius and Cosette as two shadows. She was the shadow. There is a certain state of inert asceticism in which the soul, neutralized by torpor, foreign to what might be called the business of living, does not pick up any human impressions, whether pleasant or painful—with the exception of earthquakes and other disasters. (5.5.6, 1108)

Hugo wants nothing to do with a religious practice which "cannot smell anything of life"; he is looking for a religiosity that permeates the whole person, empowering her to engage history in a transformative way. God reveals and accomplishes his will in history. Those who do not interpret and engage history have no access to the supernatural aspect of human existence (4.1.4, 688). God is the goal of history, the aim and purpose of human action, life, and society. Progress is the means and way that leads from the current human predicament—that is, misery—to the ideal that is God (5.1.20, 1013). God is not an abstract truth, but a practical absolute, an ideal that leads to and empowers for righteous action. Hugo's God speaks to human beings from within their hearts, as the binding voice of conscience.[53] For Hugo, the true power of Christianity resides in its ability to enter and indwell misery, to effect the conversion of the human soul by sharing in the condition of the destitute and to bring authentic consolation by humbly embodying the divine in the midst of poverty. To this mission, Mgr. Myriel and Jean Valjean after him devote their whole persons and lives (2.7.6, 430). Valjean experienced the resuscitation of his conscience by Mgr. Myriel. As Bellos notes, "possession, emulation, duty, conscience and the divine are all wrapped up"[54] to form a cohesive process of moral (trans)formation. The encounter with Mgr. Myriel and the undeserved expression of mercy received make such an impression on Valjean that they lastingly take hold of him and become a standard he feels summoned to imitate.

From then on, Valjean recognizes the sacredness of human existence and refuses to commit any act denying the dignity or preventing

[53] See Bellos, *The Novel of the Century*, 258.
[54] Bellos, *The Novel of the Century*, 258.

the moral-spiritual progress and flourishing of any human person. Valjean finds in his conscience a transcendent norm for action. In the fateful encounter between Myriel and Valjean, Victor Hugo is offering no less than "a reversal of Mephistopheles's pact with Dr. Faust" which has "Myriel purchase the ex-prisoner's soul with an unsolicited and almost inconceivable gift."[55] Divine mercy, expressed through the mediation of a righteous person, and not knowledge or power, redeems humankind. Valjean takes this process one step further by including his own life in the gift. He repeatedly puts his life on the line to protect the lives of those he loves. He ultimately overcomes his own selfish desires and chooses to give his life to expiate for others. He learned this from the Petit-Picpus recluse nuns. Having lost his biological family through crime, Valjean binds himself to all human beings in mercy. Altruistic love and service demand the surrender of self to receive others.[56] Valjean is not only officiating as priest, but also as offering presented to God. The Eucharistic and Christlike overtones of the final scenes of the narrative cannot be missed or denied.

Hugo's *Les Misérables* serves an overarching purpose: affirm "the possibility of transformation and transcendence, on economic, social, moral and spiritual planes."[57] To achieve this goal, the narrative demonstrates that education and language can be "a vector of human diversity and of the human potential for change."[58] Progress occurs through the expression of an excess of trust and love going far beyond the legitimate demands of human justice. Myriel and Valjean believe and love humanity in an unfathomable way. They believe and love humanity to the point of giving their life to redeem it. Faith and love move history forward by empowering people to embody the transcendent ideal in unprecedented ways. As Laurence Porter remarks, Victor Hugo invokes the Christian concept of the communion of saints, which he sets as both the means and goal of social activism and transformation: "A person who has benefitted from a generous act by another is inspired to 'pay it forward' by selflessly helping someone else."[59] Under the sure guidance of divine providence, history will ultimately bring about the emergence and "consecration of a classless, egalitarian, democratic republic."[60] As Mgr. Myriel's encounter with the former revolutionary illustrates—by having the bishop recognize that though their respective ways of enacting it differ significantly, they do share a common vision of truth—Hugo's premise and conclusion is, as Julia Viglione argues, that "redemption must extend to all

[55] Bellos, *The Novel of the Century*, 254.
[56] See Kathryn M. Grossman, "Homelessness, Wastelands, and Barricades: Transforming Dystopian Spaces in *Les Misérables*," *Utopian Studies* 4 (1991): 32.
[57] David Bellos, "Sounding Out *Les Misérables*," *Dix-Neuf* 20, nos. 3–4 (2016): 249.
[58] Bellos, "Sounding Out *Les Misérables*," 249.
[59] Porter, "Teaching Social Class," 63.
[60] Porter, "Teaching Social Class," 63.

humanity, not just the exceptional Christian."[61] Hugo uses Christian values (charity, mercy, altruistic service, and sacrifice) to assess the shortcomings of and respond to the challenges confronting society in his time. Hugo invokes these values to critique both secular society and the Church (institutional religion) and proposes to fulfill the first and complete the mission of the second by realizing the democratic ideal.[62] Hugo advocates for a new Church in the world, as transformed world. Hugo's secular ecclesiology does not envision a world Church, but rather a church World.

In the end *Les Misérables* certainly does not offer easy recipes for quick and comprehensive social transformation, for as André Brochu observes, "The only successful revolution in the book is Valjean's, thanks to which Cosette and Marius will be able to live their love in full."[63] Valjean's moral, social, and spiritual revolution is personal, that is, fully accomplished only in his own person and this at the cost of great sacrifices. The completion of Valjean's salvation occurs in and through death, which means he could not definitively overcome the conflict between sinner and saint raging in his heart in this life. Final resolution and true holiness are granted only after and beyond the current existence. Luther's *simul justus et peccator* finds emphatic reaffirmation in Hugo's famous narrative. Valjean never becomes a respectable citizen; he can only provide for Cosette who will become one through marital alliance. "Valjean's true identity," argues Isabel Roche, "is and remains undesirable throughout. It is, in fact, his decision to reveal his true name, first to Javert and then to Marius, that brings about Valjean's subsequent and ultimate dispossession of self."[64] The prevailing capitalist social order is not affected by Valjean's personal transformation and salvation, which only results in the emergence of new Bourgeois consumers.[65] The decline of the prosperity of Montreuil-sur-mer after the demise of Mr. Madeleine only confirms such an assessment. Motivated in part by romantic grief (over the supposed move of Cosette to England), Marius's involvement in revolutionary activism dies with his marriage. Cosette does not promise to become more than a submissive housewife.[66] The deaths of other inherently "good" or "just" characters such as Fantine,

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[61] Julia Douthwaite Viglione, "*Les Misérables* and the French Revolution: How to Keep That 'Unfamiliar Light' Aflame," in *Approaches to Teaching Hugo's* Les Misérables, 132.
[62] See José Rafael Arce Gamboa, "La justicia y la misericordia en *Los Miserables*," *Revista de Lenguas Modernas* 19 (2013): 718.
[63] Brochu, *Hugo: amour, crime, révolution*, 242 (translation mine).
[64] See Roche, "Type Transformed," 195.
[65] See Viglione, "*Les Misérables* and the French Revolution," 135.
[66] See Laurence M. Porter, "Teaching Social Class and the Dynamics of History in Hugo's *Les Misérables*," in *Approaches to Teaching Hugo's* Les Misérables, 58.

Éponine, Gavroche, Enjolras, and Mabeuf further demonstrate that personal redemption does not coincide with social transformation.[67]

With the main narrative not altering prevailing social conditions and structures, with so many character arcs reaching an inconclusive ending, readers feel entitled to enquire as to what Hugo wished to accomplish with *Les Misérables*. By disrupting the natural flow of the narrative, the author forces readers to take critical distance from their interpretive expectations.[68] Self-questioning precisely is that with which Hugo himself was confronted in the wake of the failed revolution of 1851, as he spent more than a decade in exile and revised the manuscript that would be released in 1862 as *Les Misérables*. Hugo then still believes in the ideal and motto set forth by the French revolution—Liberty, Equality, Fraternity—but he holds these values higher than national identity and pride. To him, these values are universal and respond to global ills—ignorance, poverty, and criminality (resulting from destitution and despair).[69]

The failure of revolution does not lead Hugo the social reformer to give up on his faith in the possibility of creating a "classless, egalitarian, democratic republic."[70] To sustain this belief, he retrieves from the Christian tradition the theological virtue of charity, which he understands as the principle and expression of infinite compassion providing healing, purpose, and a future to those in need, especially the miserable (guilty and innocent). Hugo foresees and professes that successful revolutions involve conversion, that is, complete inner transformation. Valjean's story is at once the proposal and enactment of a "programme of social action."[71] The accomplishment of this revolutionary programme is made possible by the free decision of individuals who, listening to their conscience, take a leap of faith and express gratuitous mercy, even and as no objective external confirmation or inner consolation ensue. Mgr. Myriel and Jean Valjean teach us to acknowledge and transform our condition of miserable by receiving and offering in our own turn the gratuitous mercy giving life and hope. Despite and against all odds, shattered dreams, and unfulfilled expectations, these characters are empowered to reinvent themselves to give form to a different way of being human. Through them, Hugo invites his readers to elect the way of boundless love, the way of God, the way to God, the true human way. M

[67] See Roche, "Type Transformed," 198.
[68] See Timothy Raser, "No Expectations: An Aspect of Misery in *Les Misérables*," in *Approaches to Teaching Hugo's* Les Misérables, 186.
[69] See Victor Hugo, *Letter of 18 October 1862 to Gino Daëlli*, cited in Bellos, *The Novel of the Century*, 237.
[70] Porter, "Teaching Social Class," 63.
[71] See Bellos, *The Novel of the Century*, 202–03.

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