Origins of *Les Misérables*

"To understand Victor Hugo's life is to understand the nineteenth century."

— Richard Heath

On a snowy January day in 1841, Victor Hugo was walking down the rue Taitbout, waiting for a carriage, when he saw a prostitute standing out in the cold in a low-cut dress. As he watched, a wealthy, fashionably dressed young man picked up a handful of snow and threw it down the back of her dress.

The woman cried out in shock and began viciously beating the man until the police pulled her off of him. The man was left untouched.

> While the two sergeants forced her to walk, each holding her by the arm, she cried:
>
> "I didn't do anything wrong, I assure you, it was the monsieur who did it to me. I'm not guilty, I beg you, leave me alone. I didn't do anything wrong, surely!"
>
> The sergeant replied without listening:
>
> "Come on, walk, you'll have six months in prison."
>
> At these words: "You'll have six months," the poor girl recommenced her justifications and redoubled her pleas and prayers.
>
> The sergeants, little touched by her tears, dragged her to a post in the Rue Chauchat, behind the Opera.

Hugo followed the scene along with an interested crowd. After some internal debate, he decided to intervene on the woman's behalf. His testimony was, at first, snidely refused by the police commissioner until he introduced himself as Victor Hugo, after which they apologized profusely and agreed to include his testimony. He explained that he had seen the entire scene happen, that the woman was justified, and it was really the man who should be arrested. The police commissioner replied:

> "I believe everything you say, Monsieur, but the sergeants have testified, there is a report started. Your testimony will go into these minutes, you can be assured. But justice must have its course and I cannot set this girl free."
>
> "What! Monsieur, after what I just told you, which is the truth—truth that you cannot doubt, that you do not doubt—you're going to hold this girl? But this justice is a horrible injustice."
>
> "There is only one case, Monsieur, where I could put a stop to the matter, it would be the one where you would sign your statement—would you like to?"
>
> "If this woman's freedom depends on my signature, here it is." And V. H. signed it.
>
> The woman kept saying: "God! How good this gentleman is! My God, how good he is!"
>
> These unhappy women are not only astonished and grateful when we are compassionate towards them, they are no less so when we are just (Hugo, *Choses* 62).

Hugo was profoundly touched by this incident. Years later, this scene would be included as a pivotal moment in *Les Misérables*. Fantine, a poor young woman, is fired from her factory job when her illegitimate child is discovered by a meddler. She is gradually driven into deeper and deeper poverty as the cruel innkeepers who she left Cosette with as a toddler demand more and more money to keep Cosette every month. If she does not send money, they warn, Cosette will be thrown out into the street. Eventually, she is forced to resort to prostitution.

The scene above is reproduced almost exactly: Fantine is walking along a street corner being heckled by a wealthy young man who mocks her lack of hair and teeth (which she sold to

provide for Cosette) but she ignores him. Annoyed by her lack of response, he throws snow down her back. She throws herself upon him, attacking him, only to be pulled off by the merciless Inspector Javert:

> When Javert had finished, he signed the paper, folded it, and said to the sergeant of the guard, as he handed it to him, "Take three men and conduct this girl to jail."
>
> He then turned to Fantine. "You are to have six months."
>
> The unhappy woman shuddered. "Six months! Six months of prison! Six months in which to earn seven sous a day! But what will become of Cosette? My daughter! My daughter! But I still owe the Thénardiers over a hundred francs; do you know that, Monsieur Inspector?"
>
> She dragged herself across the damp floor, among the muddy boots of all those men, without rising, clasping her hands, and taking great strides on her knees.
>
> "Monsieur Javert," said she, "I beg your mercy. I assure you that I was not in the wrong. If you had seen the beginning, you would have seen. I swear to you by the good God that I was not to blame! That monsieur, the bourgeois, whom I do not know, put snow down my back. Does anyone have the right to put snow down our backs when we are walking along peaceably, not hurting anyone? It seized me. I am a little sick, you see! And then, he had been insulting me for a while: 'You are ugly! you have no teeth!' I know well that I no longer have those teeth. I did nothing; I said to myself, 'The gentleman is amusing himself.' I was fair with him; I did not speak to him. It was at that moment that he put the snow down my back. Monsieur Javert, good Monsieur Inspector! Isn't there someone here who saw it and can tell you that this is true?" (Hugo, *Misérables* 1: 467.)

Of course, it is Jean Valjean, not Hugo, who intervenes, but the effect is the same: Valjean (as Madeleine) uses his authority to have Fantine freed, and thus begins a series of events that opens a new chapter of his life.

Where did *Les Misérables* come from? It is certain that much of it was gleaned from instances such as this, from Hugo's own life. But it has too broad a scope to be mere autobiography. Les Mis encompasses the most minute details and the greatest philosophical questions of the period, wrapped up in a brief fifteen hundred or so pages. It is extraordinarily comprehensive. It takes readers from the inside of a dream to the fields of Waterloo to the depths of the sewers. It is written with the precision of a photographic memory—Hugo recalls the streets of the medieval Paris of his youth, the routes and buildings, even as they were torn down in the era of Hausmann renovations as the book was being written.

The scope and ambition of *Les Misérables* is, perhaps, testament also to the scope of Hugo's ego. It takes a certain kind of man to write the definitive novel of 19th century France. But this was no starving artist hunched over his writing in a hovel, doomed to be unappreciated throughout his lifetime, according to Graham Robb's acclaimed 1997 biography. A precocious literary genius, a fourteen-year-old Hugo wrote in his diary, "I want to be Chateaubriand (then the preeminent *homme de lettres* in France) or nothing (Robb 59)." At fifteen, he received an honorable mention for a poem in a competition run by the Académie Française. His monumental career began with a collection of royalist poetry published at age twenty that earned him a pension from Louis XVIII.

By the time he started writing *Les Misérables*, Hugo was already a literary and political superstar—in 1845, the year he began writing it, he also became a *pair de France*. His liberal inclinations made him popular amongst the people, and his bourgeois sensibilities made him popular amongst the elite. The popularity of an early novel, *Notre-Dame de Paris*, almost single-handedly saved Notre Dame cathedral from demolition and sparked interest in the preservation of Gothic architecture in France. He was on friendly terms with the king, Louis-Philippe, and was regularly invited to his soirees. In the Chambre, he gave resounding speeches on social issues and the abolition of the death penalty. His celebrity was unmatched.

Naturally, this Hugomania did not go uncriticized. Heine, a German contemporary, said that *Hugoiste* was the superlative form of *egoiste* (Robb 219). But Hugo himself did not take his celebrity lightly. In all his mediums he carried out what he believed was his duty: to align the human race with Progress. That is what makes certain passages of *Les Misérables* so fascinating—even at the height of pretension to the point of ridiculousness, they are written with complete sincerity. Hugo felt, rightly or wrongly, that his words carried the weight of nations.

From its inception, *Les Misérables* was intended to be an almost definitive examination of the social ills Hugo had observed throughout his life—crime driven by poverty, prostitution, the injustice of the law. The main character, convict-turned-saint Jean Valjean, remains one of the most famous literary characters of all time, as does his merciless pursuant, Inspector Javert. The plot thread of Javert pursuing Valjean is often considered to be the central narrative of the book, although this is not necessarily true. Javert is not particularly obsessed with catching Jean Valjean, or at least not more than he is obsessed with catching any criminal. But throughout the novel, a series of strange coincidences repeatedly draw them together like the thread of fate.

The two men represent wholly contradictory ideologies: Valjean exists outside of the law, and does good outside of the law; as mayor, he even breaks into people's homes in order to leave money for them. He is extraordinarily self-sacrificing, and routinely puts himself in danger in order to save other people.

He is also highly gifted in what was then the skill set of criminals: he scales a sheer wall with ease, disguises himself and lives under an alias, is an excellent marksman, and uses a hollowed-out coin with a small saw inside to escape a ransom situation, as prisoners were said to have used to help them escape. His extraordinary strength is what first draws suspicion to him from Javert, who remembers a prisoner with strength like that from his days as a guard in the bagne of Toulon.

Javert represents an extremely black-and-white worldview: to him, all figures of authority must be good, and all criminals must be bad.

> This man was composed of two very simple and two very good sentiments, comparatively; but he rendered them almost bad, by dint of exaggerating them,—respect for authority, hatred of rebellion; and in his eyes, murder, robbery, all crimes, are only forms of rebellion. He enveloped in a blind and profound faith everyone who had a function in the state, from the prime minister to the rural policeman. He covered with scorn, aversion, and disgust everyone who had once crossed the legal threshold of evil (Hugo, *Misérables* 1: 414.

Later in the book at the barricades, Javert is captured as a police spy, and set to be executed. Jean Valjean has saved the barricade by shooting down a mattress to nullify the cannon fire, and asks the leader, Enjolras if he may be the one to execute Javert.

Rather than take his revenge, Valjean frees Javert—even knowing Javert will return to arrest him. But this in itself is not what sends Javert over the edge. When Javert returns to arrest Valjean as he promised, Valjean requests two favors from him: that he may first return an injured Marius, who he has saved from the barricade, to his grandfather, and to return home to say goodbye to Cosette.

Against all his morals, Javert agrees.

When Valjean returns from saying his farewells to Cosette, Javert is no longer there. He is free.

Javert is broken. Not only has he been spared by a criminal, but he himself has granted favors to a criminal—and he finds he cannot bring himself to send his savior to prison. But his moral code is unable to accept this.

> His supreme anguish was the loss of certainty. He felt that he had been uprooted. The code was no longer anything more than a stump in his hand. [...] A whole new world was dawning on his soul: kindness accepted and repaid, devotion, mercy, indulgence, violences committed by pity on austerity, respect for people [...] (Hugo, *Misérables* 5: 366).

> He said to himself that it was true that there were exceptional cases, that authority might be put out of countenance, that the rule might be inadequate in the presence of a fact, that everything could not be framed within the text of the code, that the unforeseen compelled obedience, that the virtue of a convict might set a snare for the virtue of the functionary,

> that destiny did indulge in such ambushes, and he reflected with despair that he himself had not even been fortified against a surprise.
>
> He was forced to acknowledge that goodness did exist. This convict had been good. And he himself, unprecedented circumstance, had just been good also. So he was becoming depraved (Hugo, *Misérables* 5: 367).

Driven to despair, he throws himself into the Seine.

Since much of the plot is devoted to the conflict between these characters and their ideologies, it may surprise the reader to learn that both were inspired by one real-life man: Eugène-François Vidocq.

Vidocq was a criminal-turned-police who was well known in the 19th century for his outrageous life story. Vidocq went to prison for the first time when he was thirteen years old for stealing and selling his family's silver plates, as his father arranged the arrest to teach him a lesson. After years of being in and out of prison and escape attempts of varying success, he offered to work as an informant to the police, and spied on his fellow inmates in the prison. After he was released, he continued to act as a criminal while secretly providing information on the criminal underworld to the police. By 1812, he formally established the Sûreté, a civil police force, often hiring fellow ex-convicts and training them how to effectively disguise themselves and become spies. He also took on cases as a private investigator. Crime in Paris decreased significantly.

After resigning from the force, he set up a paper factory in the small town of Saint-Mandé and again employed mostly ex-convicts, both men and women. However, unlike Jean Valjean's black glass factory, this was not a successful endeavor, and he went bankrupt in 1831,

and returned to being chief of the Sûreté . His force was involved in the June Rebellion of 1832, fighting against the rioters.

Until the end of his life, he continued to take on private cases, and also to allegedly be involved in crime. He went to prison for the last time in 1849 but was released when the charges were dropped, and died in 1857.

Vidocq's memoirs were published in 1828, and his unusual life story inspired a number of literary characters, including Balzac's Vautrin (Reboussin 527) as well as Valjean and Javert. The similarities in his story to the stories of both characters are undeniable. Some might see that Vidocq's turning to the police force was him turning to "good" after having been on the side of "evil." But Hugo's interpretation has the criminal, Jean Valjean, being on the side of good, and the police inspector, Javert, as the vehicle for state-sanctioned evil. Could it be in part a criticism of Vidocq's (often questionably ethical) actions on the police force? Or a reminder that both impulses, of both characters, can exist in the human conscience? Javert is "Brutus in Vidocq", the honest but merciless incarnation of the law. Though Valjean is generous and selfless, he lives constantly through lies and subterfuge. Even the factory he opens produces faux jet, a bourgeois pretender. Throughout the novel he is known under many different aliases and has a penchant for disguise. When he is forced to reveal his past as a convict, it is tellingly in Arras: the place of Vidocq's birth.

Throughout his life, Victor Hugo assumed nearly every possible political position one could have in 19th century France. In his youth he was a Royalist due to the influence of his Royalist mother, even writing Royalist poetry. Later, he would become a Bonapartist, and in his

later years he would be known as a socialist republican, which he mirrors with the political journey of his self-insert character, Marius.

Even as he drafted what would become *Les Misérables*, his political views continued to evolve. The 1848 draft, *Les Misères*, is especially useful for tracking these changes. Possibly some of the most notable changes occur within the group of young revolutionaries Marius meets, Les Amis de l'ABC. Hugo did not approve of the June Rebellion in 1832 that he would later use as the setting for this drama; at the time, he was still a Bonapartist. "One day we shall have a republic," he wrote, "and when it comes of its own free will, it will be good. But let us not harvest in May the fruit which will not ripen until July (Robb 173)."

These young republican men as they appear in *Les Misérables* are: Enjolras, a "priest" of the Revolution; Combeferre, his more moderate right-hand man; Courfeyrac, Marius's best friend, Feuilly, a working man; Jean Prouvaire, a poet; Joly, a medical student; Bossuet, a poor law student; Bahorel, emphatically not a law student; and Grantaire, a drunk skeptic who believes in no ideals and no man but Enjolras.

Most of them also appear in *Les Misères*, with a few differences. Courfeyrac is the leader of the group and a Bonapartist, which is how he befriends Marius, and much of his introduction is later given to the other characters. Enjolras is "cold, fanatic and sad," Combeferre exists in name but his characterization would later become Jean Prouvaire's. A stark difference from the final version, in which not only is his characterization completely different, but he gets by far the longest introduction of any member of Les Amis de l'ABC, including Enjolras, the leader.

Out of the group, only Combeferre and Feuilly's introductions are completely absent in 1848—the two characters who, apart from Enjolras, have the best-defined political ideals of the group.

So what happened between 1848 and 1860?

The reason Hugo abandoned *Les Misères* in February of 1848 was due to a revolution—the first of that year, which would remove Louis-Philippe from the throne of France. The 1848 draft leaves Marius at the barricades in a rebellion intended to overthrow Louis-Philippe, just as Hugo left to deal with such a thing actually happening. Where 1832 failed, 1848 succeeded: Louis-Philippe would be the last king of France.

Hugo, as a *pair de France*, was highly involved in the proceedings. He found himself quickly, and hesitantly, a republican. Though he was for republicanism in theory, he said to his friend Lamartine (a poet and the new leader of the provisional government), he didn't know if the time had come for one yet in France.

As the upper Chambre de Pairs where Hugo resided was abolished with the monarchy, Hugo ran in the June elections and was elected as a representative of the people of Paris to the constituent assembly. But in just a few short weeks, chaos would break out again.

The June Days of 1848 were a working-class reaction to the relatively conservative and moderate provisional government of the Second Republic, and the decision to close the National Workshops. Barricades were built once again in the streets of Paris, and the National Guard clashed with the insurgents. Sixty representatives were sent out to "stop the spilling of blood," Hugo among them.

They did not succeed. The extent of Hugo's participation in the June Days of 1848 is somewhat unknown, as Hugo's own accounts of the events are rather questionable and contradictory. What *is* known is that he was on the side of the government, against the people, believing he was "saving the life of the human race". Some of his justifications for his actions can also be found in a short digression on 1848 in *Les Misérables*:

> The exasperations of this suffering and bleeding crowd, its violences contrary to all the principles of its life, its assaults on justice, are its popular *coups d'état* and should be repressed. The man of probity sacrifices himself, and out of his very love for this crowd, he combats it. But how excusable he feels it even while holding out against it! How he venerates it even while resisting it! This is one of those rare moments when, while doing that which it is one's duty to do, one feels something disconcerting, and which would dissuade us from proceeding further; we persist, it is necessary, but conscience, though satisfied, is sad, and the accomplishment of duty is complicated with a pain at the heart.
>
> June, 1848, let us hasten to say, was an exceptional fact, and almost impossible to classify in the philosophy of history. All the words which we have just uttered must be discarded, when it becomes a question of this extraordinary revolt, in which one feels the holy anxiety of labor claiming its rights. It was necessary to combat it, and this was a duty, for it attacked the Republic. But what was June 1848 essentially? A revolt of the people against itself (Hugo, *Misérables* 5: 15)

Attacking the people to save them from themselves, impeding progress in its name—a very Hugolian justification.

The revised characters of Enjolras and Combeferre may be seen as stemming from Hugo's reactions to both February 1848 and June 1848 and his complex feelings about revolution. Combeferre, in the final iteration of the book, is now placed beside Enjolras. While Enjolras "represented the logic of the Revolution, Combeferre represented its philosophy. Between the logic of the Revolution and its philosophy there exists this difference—that its logic may end in war, whereas its philosophy can end only in peace" (Hugo, *Misérables* 3: 182).

Combeferre is implicitly the most politically moderate of the group: Enjolras "attached himself to Robespierre" while Combeferre "confined himself to Condorcet", and "around the mountain (*montagne*) peak he opened the vast blue horizon" (182-183).

There are strong religious connotations to Enjolras and Combeferre's devotion to the cause. Enjolras, the "priest of the ideal," is particularly evocative of Christian imagery. He is celibate, like a priest, wholly devoting himself to the Republic. His name echoes the word for "angel", described as "angelically beautiful," whose speech has "the tremor of a hymn." The metaphor is explicit in warning potential love affairs "not to confound the gallant cherubino of Beaumarchais with the formidable cherub of Ezekiel" (180-182). —which testifies to his role as the avenging angel, the mighty servant of God, as does his speech after executing a murderer in the name of the Republic: "...in the future there will be neither darkness nor thunderbolts; neither ferocious ignorance nor bloody retaliation. As there will be no more Satan, there will be no more Michael" (Hugo, *Misérables* 4: 691)

There is Christlike imagery given to him as well in his martyr's death in an attempt to deliver the human race; when he himself is executed he remains upright against the wall, "as though the bullets had nailed him there" (Hugo, *Misérables* 5: 204)

In contrast, as Hugo neatly entwines their descriptions together, Combeferre "lived the life of all the world more than Enjolras." Although he is arguably more idealistic than Enjolras, emphasis is given to his humanity rather than divinity. Hugo calls them "*homo* and *vir*", the man-human and the man-warrior. "Revolution, but civilization," Combeferre says. His faith in the future is broader, envisioning scientific and societal progress for all of humanity, he "would have knelt and clasped his hands to implore the future to arrive in all its candor" (Hugo, *Misérables* 3: 183-186).

Combeferre perhaps represents Hugo's philosophical ideal: the beautiful, pure path of progress, unhurried and unsullied by violence, utopian socialism, the advancement of science for the good of the human race. His dreams—photography, telegraphs, railroads—had not yet come to fruition when his story is set, in 1828-1832, but they had been proven by the time Hugo published the book in 1862, as readers would doubtless be aware. Hugo subverts the dramatic irony inherent to the historical setting, giving Combeferre almost prophetic vision of the future while affirming the eventual truth of his convictions.

The two are inextricably linked from their first introduction in the narrative. Combeferre "completed and corrected Enjolras" (182) the gentle guiding light of civilization for Enjolras's revolutionary fervor, as Hugo writes, "Enjolras was the chief, Combeferre was the guide…" (192). This is fully followed through in Enjolras's triumphant final speech at the barricades and its introduction:

> Enjolras bore within him the plenitude of the revolution; yet he was incomplete, so far as the absolute can be; he had too much of Saint-Just about him and not enough of Anacharsis Cloots; however, his mind, in the society of the Friends of the A B C, had ended up undergoing a certain magnetization of Combeferre's ideas; for some time he had been emerging little by little from the narrow form of dogma and had surrendered to the broadening of progress, and he had come to accept, as a definitive and magnificent evolution, the transformation of the great French Republic into the immense human republic. As far as the immediate means were concerned, a violent situation being given, he wished to be violent; on that he never varied; and he remained of that epic and

> redoubtable school which is summed up in the words: "Ninety-three" (Hugo, *Misérables* 5: 55)

The speech itself is also notable for its similarities to the philosophical views Combeferre's introduction espouses: Enjolras's exclamation over the technological progress that has been achieved, his exhortation for "science made government," the necessity of free and compulsory education, and the union of Europe; he, too, has gained the prophetic vision of Combeferre's influence.

However, although he has adopted many of Combeferre's ideas, Enjolras remains unwilling to wait and pray for progress to come in its own time. Yet Combeferre himself does not condemn the violence of the barricades. Indeed, when Enjolras condemns himself after executing a murderer in the name of the Republic, it is Combeferre who speaks for the group: "'We will share your fate,' cried Combeferre" (Hugo, *Misérables* 4: 691)

While Enjolras's following speech is certainly an echo of Combeferre's insistence that "the good must be innocent", Combeferre's exclamation signifies both his endorsement and recognition of the necessity of his act. And later, after discussing Enjolras's "sad severity", tells a crowd of listeners:

> "Cæsar," said Combeferre, "fell justly. Cicero was severe towards Cæsar, and he was right. That severity is not diatribe. [...] Cicero is a judge in thought, just as Brutus is a judge by the sword. For my own part, I blame that last justice, the blade; but antiquity admitted it. Cæsar, the violator of the Rubicon, conferring, as though they came from him, the dignities which came from the people, not rising at the entrance of the senate, committed, as Eutrope said, the acts of a king and almost of a tyrant, *regia ac pene*

> *tyrannica*. He was a great man; so much the worse, or so much the better; the lesson is but more powerful. His twenty-three wounds touch me less than the spitting in the head of Jesus Christ. Cæsar is stabbed by senators; Christ is slapped by lackeys. In the greater outrage, we feel God" (Hugo, *Misérables* 5: 35)

Violence is sometimes a necessity, Combeferre concludes. The death of a tyrant is preferable to the death of a people.

The function of these two characters can be understood as a revolutionary dialectic; through their interplay the revolutionary question is heightened from mere politics. The barricade is elevated from a simple structure for street fighting to a symbol of faith in the human race, "a heap of ideas and a heap of woes…From the embrace of all desolations faith leaps forth" (62). Enjolras is no longer only a revolutionary but the "priest of the ideal," Combeferre the faithful believer in all dreams of progress, "even to chimeras".

Les Misérables is unquestionably a novel concerning Hugo's faith: "This book whose first character is the Infinite. Man is the second." This line occurs in "A Parenthesis," the book's central discussion of religion. Hugo, as is well known, was no lover of the Catholic Church or of organized religion in general. Yet he was deeply spiritual, and *Les Misérables* explores his philosophies in depth.

> Progress is the goal, the ideal is the type.
>
> What is this ideal? It is God.
>
> Ideal, absolute, perfection, infinity: identical words (Hugo, *Misérables* 2: 521).

Hugo's all-encompassing God, the Infinite, is, as Pierre Albouy writes, "the supreme character of the Hugolian mythology." This concept lies at the novel's center, making it not simply a commentary on social ills but one of Hugo's great philosophical accomplishments. To Hugo, God was "manifest in both the immense and the microscopic, in the beautiful and the ugly, in the gracious and the frightening […] antithetically both transcendent and imminent: simultaneously existing outside limitations of the material world and permanently pervading the universe" (Barnett 214). It is through this framework that *Les Misérables* works to explain the tumultuous 19th century as part of the natural evolution of humanity. Certainly the 19th century and its accompanying struggles, the number of regime changes and the enduring legacy of Napoleon and his defeat were variously interpreted by members of all philosophical factions and political parties. In *Les Misérables*, Hugo devotes a considerable amount of pages to an examination of Napoleon's final defeat at Waterloo. Rather than being due to French mistakes or English ability, he argues, the outcome of Waterloo was determined by things beyond any army's control; for example, rain during the night before the battle.

> A few drops of water, more or less, decided the downfall of Napoleon. For Waterloo to be the end of Austerlitz Providence needs only a little rain, and a cloud crossing the sky out of season sufficed to make a world crumble (Hugo, *Misérables* 2: 30).

Thus Waterloo was no French humiliation. Napoleon had not been defeated by the English, but by God. He had been "denounced in the Infinite" and therefore it was not possible he could have won. Napoleon's greatness "disturbed the balance" of the universe, it was

necessary for the balance to be restored. Hugo recontextualizes Waterloo and the 19th century as part of a greater narrative of the French nation and its inevitable march towards progress.
But what does progress mean in this framework? He warns the reader not to confuse progress for God, as Gerard de Nerval does. Within the encyclopedic pages of *Les Misérables*, the absence of one subject is so conspicuous as to be odd.

There is no French Revolution digression in *Les Misérables*. The subject is rarely discussed explicitly within those 1500 pages.

One aspect of reading the novel that tends to irritate lovers of the musical is that it actually begins with the story of Bishop Myriel, not Jean Valjean. M. Myriel, an unusually sympathetic clerical character from the anti-Church Hugo, is sympathetic precisely because of his ideological differences from the Catholic Church. He gives his generous income away to the poor, and turns the episcopal palace into a hospital. He speaks to the Provencal rural folk in their own language, visits prisoners on death row, and rides without fear into the bandit-stricken mountains. "As you can see," Hugo writes, "he had a strange way of judging things. I suspect he got it from the Gospel" (Hugo, *Misérables* 1: 40).

M. Myriel was based off of the real-life Bishop of Digne, Bienvenu de Miollis. Bienvenu de Miollis was known for his charitable and gentle nature like the fictional M. Myriel, and was by all accounts a highly respected bishop.

However, the de Miollis family was not pleased with the portrayal. His nephew, Francis de Miollis, wrote to a Legitimist newspaper to complain about the "defamatory" nature of the character. While the fictional Myriel had had a wild and worldly youth, de Miollis wrote that his uncle had lived his whole life piously and had never been married. Furthermore, he wrote, his uncle had never submitted to the Revolution, and was a lifelong defender of the Church and the

Papacy. Possibly the worst offense was “showing this worthy and holy bishop forcing religion to kneel before a free-thinker, and episcopal dignity before a Conventionist” (Bire 140).

In the town of Digne, there is one person who is a total outcast, only mentioned in the town “with a sort of horror,” who even the Bishop hesitates before meeting. That is, of course, the Conventionist, known only as G__.

G__ had not been forced into exile because he had not voted for the death of the king in the Convention, but the people of Digne regard him as a “quasi-regicide”, and an atheist besides.

One day, word gets around town that the old man is dying, and the Bishop finally decides to pay him a visit. When he meets him, however, he is not as charitable to this man as he feels towards all other men, and feels a sort of revulsion towards him. The Bishop speaks to him coldly, saying:

> “I congratulate you,” he said, in the tone of a reprimand. “You did not vote for the death of the king, after all.”
>
> The old member of the Convention did not appear to notice the bitter meaning in the words “after all.” He replied. The smile had disappeared from his face.
>
> “Do not congratulate me too much, sir. I did vote for the death of the tyrant.”
>
> It was austerity answering severity.
>
> “What do you mean?” resumed the Bishop.
>
> “I mean to say that man has a tyrant, ignorance. I voted for the death of that tyrant. That tyrant engendered royalty, which is authority falsely understood, while science is authority rightly understood. Man must be governed only by science.”
>
> “And conscience,” added the Bishop.

> "It is the same thing. Conscience is the quantity of innate science which we have within us" (Hugo, *Misérables* 1: 101).

The Bishop, we know, had lost his fortune to the Revolution before he joined the Church, and furthermore has little taste for the bloodshed that would come to define the Revolution.

He brings up '93 and the death of Louis XVII, to which the Conventionist replies:

> "Louis XVII! Let us see. For whom do you weep? Is it for the innocent child? Very well; in that case I weep with you. Is it for the royal child? I demand to reflect. [...] You have mentioned Louis XVII. to me. Let us come to an understanding. Shall we weep for all the innocent, all martyrs, all children, those below as well as those above? I agree to that. But in that case, as I have told you, we must go back further than '93, and our tears must begin before Louis XVII. I will weep with you for the children of kings, if you will weep with me over the children of the people."
>
> "I weep for all," said the Bishop.
>
> "Equally!" exclaimed conventionist G__; "and if the balance must tilt, let it be on the side of the people. They have suffered longer" (106).

This is perhaps the most definitive answer to the question of the French Revolution in *Les Misérables*, and it is often missed completely as it occurs so early in the book. It is the closest thing to a debate on the relative merits of the Revolution; the conclusion, which was so offensive to Francis de Miollis, is as follows:

> "Bishop," said he, with a slowness which probably arose more from his dignity of soul than from the failing of his strength, "I have passed my life in meditation, study, and contemplation. I was sixty years of age when my country called me and commanded me to concern myself with its affairs. I obeyed. Abuses existed, I combated them; tyrannies existed, I destroyed them;[...] I tore the cloth from the altar, it is true; but it was to bind up the wounds of my country. I have always upheld the march forward of the human race, forward towards the light, and I have sometimes resisted progress without pity. [...] For many years past, I with my white hair have been conscious that many people think they have the right to despise me; to the poor ignorant masses I present the visage of one damned. And I accept this isolation of hatred, without hating anyone myself. Now I am eighty-six years old; I am on the point of death. What is it that you have come to ask of me?"
>
> *"*Your blessing*,"* said the Bishop.
>
> And he knelt down.
>
> When the Bishop raised his head again, the face of the conventionist had become august. He had just expired (115).

It may be surprising to know that this scene, possibly one of the most central to understanding the overarching theme of *Les Misérables*, was not originally in the novel. This scene was added in 1860, after Hugo had abandoned the original draft in 1848.

Les Misérables is indeed a book about the French Revolution. The matter is at the very soul of it, in the question of social issues, of civil war, of God; in all the events and every

revolution that followed it. The subject need not be brought up because it permeates every aspect of the book from the Bishop and the Conventionist to the fall of the barricades. Each departure from the main plotline interrogates it and French culture in the wake of it. It asks the questions: What is God? What does it mean to be good? Where are we going? It is Hugo's most complete work of philosophy and social questions that tries to make sense of the turbulent century that resulted from the French Revolution—and he ultimately concludes that it was necessary.

> However that may be, even when fallen, above all when fallen, these men, who at every point of the universe, with their eyes fixed on France, are striving for the grand work with the inflexible logic of the ideal, are august; they give their life a free offering to progress; they accomplish the will of Providence; they perform a religious act. At the appointed hour, with as much disinterestedness as an actor who answers to his cue, in obedience to the divine stage-manager, they enter the tomb. And this hopeless combat, this stoical disappearance they accept in order to bring about the supreme and universal consequences, the magnificent and irresistibly human movement begun on the 14th of July, 1789; these soldiers are priests. The French revolution is an act of God.

The barricades, then, like Waterloo, like the French Revolution, are predestined in their defeat and necessity in bringing forth progress, progress being the means towards nearing the ideal. As Hugo writes in "A Parenthesis," "...we neither understand man as a point of departure nor progress as an end without these two forces which are their motors: faith and love." The combatants' quasi-religious faith in humanity's destiny evokes Hugo's declaration that

"Philosophy [...] should have for effort and effect to improve the condition of man. [...] Contemplation leads to action." Enjolras, as noted, becomes a martyr for his faith; Combeferre "raise[s] his eyes towards the heavens" before dying.

Only one member of the group does not share their faith: Grantaire, who takes care "not to believe in anything" (Hugo, *Misérables* 3: 199) yet venerates Enjolras for his belief, loving "to watch faith soar" in him. "No one loves the light like a blind man" Hugo writes of him, echoing his earlier statement that "There is, as we know, a philosophy which denies the infinite. There is also a philosophy, pathologically classified, which denies the sun; this philosophy is called blindness" (Hugo, *Misérables* 2: 517). Grantaire, Enjolras's foil, lacks the faith that defines Enjolras, loving what he does not possess. His character broadly represents what may be called atheism in the framework of *Les Misérables*; as Hugo writes, "A faith is a necessity to a man. Woe to him who believes in nothing" (524).

Grantaire does not fight on the barricades but sleeps in a drunken stupor in the attached building while the fighting occurs, only waking when Enjolras is cornered in the same room, about to be executed.

> "Long live the Republic! I'm one of them."
>
> Grantaire had risen. The immense gleam of the entire combat that he had missed, and in which he had no part, appeared in the brilliant glance of the transfigured drunken man (Hugo, *Misérables* 5: 204).

At the last moment he is executed besides Enjolras, imbued with belief for the first time; Hugo's faith triumphing over nihilism. Their deaths are undoubtedly triumphant as they die in

service to the human race, entering that tomb "all flooded with dawn." In Hugo's eyes, the march of progress continues, from the French Revolution to the 20th century and beyond.

As Hugo wrote in a letter in 1862:

> Any serious study of the infinite leads to progress. Observed perfection demonstrates perfectability. Hence the liberation of political and social laws, consequence of natural laws, no authority outside of the author, the divine excludes the royal. The republic follows from religion (Hugo, *Oeuvres* 311).

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