“A Few Pages of History”: Les Misérables in the Nineteenth-Century French Imagination

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Introduction

“Etait-ce bien une histoire véritable ou un simple roman, sorti tout entier de l’imagination de Victor Hugo, ou un plaidoyer contre le mal social de la misère? C’était tout cela à la fois.”
— Gustave Simon, 1909

Few would dispute Les Misérables’ iconic status as a story that has transcended boundaries of language, nation, and culture. It had always been conceived as a work of world literature by its author, Victor Hugo, who once wrote in a letter to his Italian publisher, “You are right, sir, when you tell me that Les Misérables is written for all nations.” Over 150 years have elapsed since the novel’s publication in 1862, but the passage of time does not seem to have diminished its relevance and popularity across the globe, especially here in the United States, where it has become deeply entrenched in our current cultural consciousness. Les Misérables has been name-dropped in countless television shows like The Simpsons and Seinfeld, earned a parody on Saturday Night Live, and provided the musical background to several high-profile American political campaigns. Around the world, there have been dozens of film adaptations (including ones produced in India, Brazil, Russia, Sri Lanka, Egypt, and Mexico), a radio play by Orson Welles, a Japanese fighting game called “ArmJoe,” a fifty-two-episode anime, mangas, comic books, straight plays, and, of course, the runaway hit musical. In short, Les Misérables may rightly be called one of the most famous stories of all

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time, yet its two most popular incarnations, the novel and the musical, have never enjoyed
critical acclaim despite their international success, and furthermore have tended to prompt
extreme partisan responses. The novel was released in 1862 to reviews that largely dismissed
it as the last gasp of the dying Romantic tradition, the vaguely mystical diatribe of a man who
had lived in exile for the past ten years. Though it was hailed as Hugo’s magnum opus within
Hugophile circles, *Les Misérables* was received by the majority of the press as a valiant
attempt that nevertheless failed to be “great art.”

Launched by editors Albert Lacroix and Hippolyte Verboeckhoven from Brussels, the
novel was initially published in five volumes that appeared sequentially in France on April 3,
May 15, and June 30, and simultaneously in Belgium, Portugal, Italy, England, Germany,
Spain, and Russia. The novel’s target audience was not merely France, but the world, just as
Hugo envisaged, and its immediate international publication ensured its status as a piece of
world literature with an immense audience. *Les Misérables* was especially a smash hit in
France, where 5,000 copies had been already sold in advance by April. It was compared
immediately to Balzac’s epic *La Comédie humaine*, which chronicled French society
throughout the Restoration and July Monarchy, and Eugène Sue’s *Les Mystères de Paris*. This
intertextual approach would continue to pervade critical reception of *Les Misérables* well into
the early twentieth century, and instead of diminishing the novel’s reception, only served to
anticipate its place in the canon of great works of the French nineteenth century.

Magnifying the novel’s release, too, was the extensive press campaign—described by
contemporaries as unprecedented—undertaken by a group of Hugophile writers and
journalists in the months preceding publication that heralded *Les Misérables* as the
masterpiece of the century. All maneuvers were carefully orchestrated, down to the timing of
delivery and the selection of papers to which the novel would be first sent; and the exaggerated praise with which Hugo supporters described the novel galvanized similarly melodramatic critical reception—hence such panegyrics as liberal republican journalist Auguste Neffitzer’s in *Le Temps* the day before the first volume went on sale, in which he noted that *Les Misérables* contained “les magnificences de *Notre-Dame de Paris* unies à l’analyse du *Dernier Jour d’un Condamné*, les misères de notre état social mises à nu avec franchise mais expliquées avec équité, le cœur humain sondé, les abîmes de la conscience éclairés.”

By the time all five volumes had been published by June 1862, almost a hundred reviews had appeared in journals across the nation, which together constituted a single larger discourse whose volume and intensity was rarely equaled in the history of French literature. In a letter to journalist Auguste Vacquerie from May 1862, Hugo lamented the reaction in the press to his work: “Les journaux soutenant le vieux monde disent: c'est hideux, infâme, odieux, exécrable, abominable, grotesque, repoussant, difforme, monstrueux, épouvantable, etc. Les journaux démocrates et amis répondent: Mais non ce n’est pas si mal.” Despite Hugo’s penchant for the melodramatic, he was accurate in assessing the magnitude of the frenzy in the press surrounding *Les Misérables*, for despite the tremendous variance in initial opinion, the reviews all shared a certain vehemence: critics who liked the novel effusively praised it as a masterpiece, while those who did not tore it to pieces. It went without saying, however, that critics were entitled to fashion their opinions of the novel around their regard

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3 “…the splendors of *Notre-Dame de Paris* joined with the scrutiny of *The Last Days of a Condemned Man*, the miseries of our social state laid bare with frankness but explained with fairness, the human heart probed, the abysses of the conscience illuminated.” Auguste Neffitzer, *Le Temps*. April 2, 1862.
4 “The journalists of the old world say: it is hideous, infamous, odious, execrable, abominable, grotesque, repulsive, deformed, monstrous, horrifying, etc. The democratic journalists and their friends respond: but it is not so bad.” Cited in Pierre Malandain, “La Réception des Misérables.” *Revue d'histoire littéraire de la France* 86, no. 6 (1986).
for Hugo himself. Thus many of the most rapturous reviews came from journalists who had worked and developed personal relationships with Hugo, and conversely many of the most hostile were written by those whose political philosophies diverged sharply. But although the novel’s reception in the press was multifarious, it was not an augury of any new development in literary criticism; rather the underlying tensions and contradictions within the genres of literature and history allowed *Les Misérables* to be received as something other—something greater than—a mere work of literature.

Still, given the novel’s status as an enduring cultural referent, it has received comparably scant recognition in academia. Dozens of studies by men of letters were published around 1900—many of which figure into the data used for this paper—but the mid- and late twentieth century saw a noticeable absence of critical studies on the novel. While Hugo’s popularity among the masses remained undiminished even after his death, his critical reputation was not so secure. He was often derided during his lifetime as an overblown romantic, and by the advent of communism in the 1920s, had become too much of an established figure to be seen as anything other than conservative, provoking several decades’ worth of *Hugophobie*. After World War II, when the academy had begun to develop the lexicon and modes of literary criticism that would now constitute an acceptable critical study to modern scholars, *Les Misérables* only made a reappearance—albeit a prodigious one at that—with its centennial celebration in 1962, which prompted droves of articles, conferences, colloquia and reflections in France. Over the next thirty years, however, critical attention waned again, leaving only a handful of scholars in France publishing on *Les Misérables*, and it took the centennial of his death in 1985 to revitalize Hugo studies once again.
Today, Hugo is far from absent in university French departments in the U.S., but does not receive comparable attention to such nineteenth-century novelist peers as Balzac, Flaubert, or Zola. His works have been studied in a remarkable number of fields—genre studies, poetics, feminist criticism, Marxist criticism, Kantian studies, psychoanalytic theory, post-colonialism, and semiotics among them—yet his novels remain curiously ignored. Instead, he is studied most often a poet and dramatist, and a focus on Les Misérables has only just begun to resurface in the Anglophone world thanks to scholars like Kathryn Grossman and Bradley Stephens, who currently study its countless adaptations. Like the reception of the novel itself, academic studies of Les Misérables have always been products of their time, currently reflecting trends in academia like the study of interpretive communities and transformative works. Still, the majority of academic work done on Les Misérables has been literary, seeking to locate certain overarching themes or narratives within the novel, rather than historical. Studies on the influence the novel has had on French culture, and the diverse ways in which it has been read, in the 150 years since its publication have only scarcely been attempted.

This thesis intends to trace the history of the reception of Les Misérables in the press from its publication in 1862 to the beginning of World War II in 1914, spanning the Second Empire, the Paris Commune, the Third Republic, and Belle Époque era. Given the large volume of references to the novel in newspapers, periodicals, and reviews in the latter half of the nineteenth century, it must have occupied some larger space in the French consciousness than would otherwise befit a novel, even one by Victor Hugo, and thus several key questions

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6 Two French historians, Max Bach and Pierre Malandain, have separately published studies on initial reception to Les Misérables in 1862, and Despina Provata has written an article that touches on the reception of the novel in Greece in the nineteenth century.
arose as data continued to accumulate. Were there particular moments in that period when people turned to the novel, and why? Had the sanguinary skirmishes of the Paris Commune in 1871 invoked the barricade upon which Enjolras and his fictional band of student revolutionaries spilled their blood in 1832? Had the miscarriage of justice in the Dreyfus affair recalled the egregiously harsh sentence handed out to Jean Valjean a century earlier? Had the legal establishment of state secularism in France in 1905 brought to mind Hugo’s own hatred of the Catholic Church that pervaded Les Misérables? And, most importantly, as a story of the nineteenth century that fused fiction and reality, how did the novel affect perceptions of the boundaries between history and literature?

In discussing film adaptations of Les Misérables and The Count of Monte Cristo, theorist André Bazin wrote in 1967, “[The characters] have become part of a mythology existing outside of the novels. They enjoy in some measure an autonomous existence of which the original works are no longer anything more than an accidental and almost superfluous manifestation.” While this notion is perhaps more pertinent in the realm of adaptation theory, public perception of Les Misérables in the late nineteenth century as interpreted through the lens of press coverage confirms the legendary status to which it had risen by the late 1960s. The characters and their trials transcended the narrow confines of the novel and acquired a mythic quality that allowed them to permeate the French consciousness and exist, in that discursive ether, as extensions of the ineffable génie of Victor Hugo. But despite the tremendous popular success enjoyed by Les Misérables over the past 150 years, critical acclaim has always eluded it, which prompts the question: how did such a monumental disparity between the novel’s popularity and its dearth of critical success come about? Only in

tracking the history of the reception of *Les Misérables*, which illustrates the unique way in which it was read as a work that transcended both genre and discipline, does an answer emerge.

Yet any study performed on a thematic and temporal scale this broad is bound to have certain lacunae. While the richness of available sources in this case is undeniable, presenting a reasonably comprehensive overview of late-nineteenth-century sociopolitical discourse in the press, the voice of the male bourgeois nevertheless tends to predominate. Though women and the working class were active readers and publishers at the time, which meant they would certainly be aware of the historical resonance of *Les Misérables*, what press they did produce were overwhelmingly eclipsed by the sheer volume of newspapers and journals owned and written by class-privileged Parisian men. The critics featured in this paper are certainly not meant to encompass the totality of French society, but rather function as a reflection of circulating dominant discourses of the era that had in turn been created by dominant historical frames of reference—therefore an examination of those critics’ responses to *Les Misérables* is really an examination of how and where the novel fit into contemporary dominant discourse.

Allowing the critics’ words to take center stage in this analysis is crucial, too, for it yields an understanding of the novel that serves a different purpose than simply a close reading of the text. Several studies on *Les Misérables* have been published that sufficiently elucidate its historical underpinnings, of course, but invariably any literary interpretation of a text suffers from a certain cultural and historical specificity that binds it to the very moment in which it is conceived by the writer. Eschewing a deliberate exegesis of Hugo’s text in this paper, then, steers the focus back towards a nineteenth-century understanding of the novel, in which the critical response it generated functions as a historical artifact of sorts, and away
from a twenty-first-century one. Rather than viewing literature as a reflection or manifestation of historical developments, this analysis rather seeks to investigate the dialogic relationship between those developments and contemporaneous cultural forms.

The first chapter of this paper examines how the novel came to be coopted for political purposes. Besides provoking a mixed reaction among socialists, it cropped up again and again in debates about legal reform and criminality, and also came to be used as a persuasive tool in the conflict between institutionalized religion (predominantly Catholicism and Protestantism) and non-denominational spirituality near the end of the nineteenth century. As a patently spiritual work that preached the power of redemption through faith, *Les Misérables* was easily appropriated by proponents of organized religion despite Hugo’s professed hostility towards the Catholic Church, and as an immensely popular work that clearly resonated with the masses, utilizing it in such a way could confer considerable authority on the journalist writing about the issue.

The second chapter addresses where the novel was located in the space between history and literature. To many critics, *Les Misérables* seemed to resemble a real story that could be critiqued on the basis of truthfulness, as if Hugo had written a factual exposé and it was their duty to verify his conclusions. The mania for authentication that ensued shaped not only the political and religious debates for which the novel was coopted, but also the debates within the literary world that pitted Romanticism against Realism, the two preeminent genres of the mid-nineteenth century. In investigating the opposing forces that arose through these debates—art and utility, history and literature, reality and fiction, and so on—the liminal position occupied by *Les Misérables* becomes clear. Not only did the novel lie somewhere in
between the margins of those forces, it also disrupted them, creating new ways of thinking about the themes in *Les Misérables* that intensified engagement between the reader and text.

Finally, the third chapter explores the third player in that relationship: Victor Hugo himself. Acknowledged by his peers as the greatest writer of the nineteenth century, Hugo’s reputation was, to say the least, intrusive where his texts were concerned even though he personally believed they belonged to the public alone after publication. Determining the extent to which readers identified Hugo with his work, in particular *Les Misérables*, helps shed light on how, exactly, they engaged with the novel. As we will see, it was both the extraordinarily diverse reception of *Les Misérables* and the august reputation of its creator that ultimately ensured it would be immortalized for centuries to come.
Chapter I

Despite the deluge of criticism, both in 1862 and in the decades that followed, over Hugo’s stylistic choices in *Les Misérables*, it soon became clear that the novel functioned most conspicuously as a referent for contemporary social and political phenomena in France. And because *Les Misérables* managed to cover nearly every topical issue in nineteenth-century French society, rendering it a highly universal and palatable text to the masses, critics with a vested interest in the politics behind the novel used its widespread appeal to their advantage by coopting it. The claims that *Les Misérables* was a piece of secret Catholic propaganda, for example, were legion, as were the connections made between the novel and various sociopolitical happenings in the late nineteenth century. Although any work of fiction may resonate outside of its fictional context, Hugo’s novel seemed to be more than simply an affecting tale; many journalists treated it like a real story that lay at the center of pressing contemporary issues such as socialist ideology, criminality, and secularization. This confusion over the novel’s genre—was it fiction or history or, perhaps, both?—ultimately enabled and generated the proliferation of appropriation for political purposes by various journalists in the late nineteenth century.

In 1862, the dominant current within the republican movement was liberalism, rather than the socialist trend that had predominated fifteen years earlier among leftists and would eventually do so again by the end of the century.\(^8\) The relative absence of socialism in mainstream politics upon the initial publication of *Les Misérables* is evident in both the novel itself and reception to it. While Hugo often toed the line of socialism and had, in fact,

identified as a socialist near the end of his life, *Les Misérables* was a work much more rooted in democratic liberal republicanism. This fact was apparent to most reviewers. To many radical leftists, *Les Misérables* pandered to the interests of the bourgeoisie, who could only envision progress through legal reform and the dismantling of the class system. The marriage of romantic heroes Marius and Cosette and their subsequent assimilation into bourgeois society at the hands of Marius’ ultraconservative royalist grandfather, for example, is written by Hugo as the apotheosis of a life-affirming, redemptive love rather than the betrayal of revolutionary ideals. Furthermore, the political program of student revolutionaries les Amis de l’ABC is based on popular liberal objectives of the time that would come to fruition in France in the next few decades: the abolition of the monarchy; free compulsory public education; universal employment and male suffrage; freedom of speech, press, assembly, and religion; the adoption of science and technology as a mechanism for human progress; and an equitable, meritocratic economic system, rather than a radical redistribution of wealth. Even the novel’s irresolute acceptance of revolutionary violence as a means to justify the end only applies to revolutions that propose liberal political aims, for in Hugo’s mind, revolutions that destabilize the class system itself would only exacerbate miserable conditions. Thus *Les Misérables* is a “socialist” work insofar as it draws attention to social problems like poverty and prostitution and seeks to ameliorate condition of man in the social sphere.⁹

Yet at the same time there are hints of an anti-capitalist orientation in the novel that perhaps make its politics slightly closer to true socialism than many critics might have imagined. Hugo condemns the commodification of female bodies through prostitution in tracking Fantine’s descent and reveals the fragile, ephemeral nature of a seemingly productive

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relationship between capitalist and worker. Although Valjean brings booming prosperity to Montreuil-sur-Mer with his glasswork factory, as soon as he leaves to turn himself in the town immediately reverts back to its former state of ruin and indigence. Hugo is quick to remind his readers, too, that Valjean never finds peace or happiness in the fortune he earns through his capitalist endeavors, or in marrying and producing the perfect capitalist social unit, but rather through love and faith. So while Hugo’s ideas about class struggle and revolution were at odds with radical socialist thought, his diagnosis of social ills, such as they were, appealed to more moderate socialists who valued social change through popular action.¹⁰

As the nineteenth century drew to an end, socialism in France continued to gain greater traction within mainstream politics, even as it fragmented in the midst of debates between working-class and so-called “intellectual” socialists. Anti-clerical republican socialist André-Ferdinand Hérold, who belonged to the latter faction, published his assessment of Hugo in *Le Mouvement socialiste* in 1902 (the same year the French Socialist Party was founded), and in *Les Misérables* he identified a significant socialist undercurrent. The novel demonstrates that “l’organisation du monde est mauvaise,” he claimed, that “la société n’obéit pas à de bonnes règles.”¹¹ *Les Misérables* is not so much about structural change and the abolition of the class system as it is about legal reforms, in essence pursuing a liberal agenda rather than a purely socialist one, but for some moderate socialists like Hérold, Hugo’s vision in the novel was sufficiently radical.

Other socialists, too, found threads of radical politics in *Les Misérables* that intertwined with their own. The poet, novelist, biographer, and critic Camille Mauclair

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¹¹ “… the organization of the world is bad… society does not obey good rules.” André-Ferdinand Hérold, “Victor Hugo poète.” *Le Mouvement socialiste*. March 1, 1902.
published a piece called “De la tour d’ivoire à la barricade” in the March 1902 edition of La Nouvelle revue. Mauclair’s politics had shifted from anarchism to a more hazy position by the end of the century; disillusioned by the bourgeois environment and quixotic romantic fantasies in anarchist circles, he eventually became a dyed-in-the-wool socialist (though at first he objected to its utilitarianism) and then a Vichy collaborator during World War II. In his article, Mauclair discussed the genesis of novelist Paul Adam’s new work, La Ruse, which interpolates the student revolutionaries of Les Misérables into Adam’s own fictional narrative tracing the revolutionary fervor of 1827-28 in Paris. That les Amis de l’ABC, Hugo’s fictional revolutionaries, drew their ideological breath from the French Revolution was evident to Mauclair, and it was their “haine de la bourgeoisie et l’amour de la liberté” that coalesced with the legacy of the Revolution to produce a political initiative.

Mauclair explicitly identified les Amis de l’ABC’s “jacobinisme,” as well as their secret hope that “quelque chose arrive.” Not coincidentally, this utopian rhetoric was echoed by nineteenth-century anarchists such as Louise Michel (famous for signing herself “Enjolras” in both personal correspondence and published work), who once said, “When the Revolution comes, you and I and all humanity will be transformed.” In that respect, Mauclair wrote, the students in Les Misérables closely resembled contemporary youth who rallied behind Boulangisme or anarchism, equally awaiting the dawn of some inevitable utopia, as well as the young dandies in the fin-de-siècle decadent movement, which shared significant ideological ground with Mauclair’s own symbolist circle. Finally, Mauclair inscribed the

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13 “hatred of the bourgeoisie and love of liberty”
14 “something is coming”
fictional students’ revolt in *Les Misérables* into a cyclical grand narrative of revolution spanning the entire nineteenth century: “Au début, insurgés romantiques détestant les tyrans; au milieu, insurgés logiciens entreprenant par la plume et le verbe la destruction du tyran capital… à la fin, insurgés repris de la folie du sang et du lyrisme, attaquant la foule inerte qui ne comprend pas le bien qu’on lui veut.”16 As the next chapter will illustrate, the identification of certain episodes and themes in Hugo’s novel with real historical phenomena was a persistent preoccupation for many critics. In Camille Mauclair’s case, the relation les Amis de l’ABC appeared to bear to late nineteenth-century radical movements (both on the left and the right) not only indicated that the novel remained a compelling referent for contemporary politics, but also that it was potentially ripe for appropriation by leftists.

More hardline radicals found little in common with *Les Misérables*, however. The Marxist writer and activist Paul Lafargue had once accused Hugo of disguising the “ideas and sentiments supplied to him by the bourgeois” in a “grandiloquent verbiage,”17 and one month after Hugo’s death, he published an article called “La légende de Victor Hugo,” which claimed to “mettre en lumière le véritable caractère de Victor Hugo, si étrangement méconnu”—in other words, illuminate the Hugo who had pandered to bourgeois interests, amassed his own personal fortune, and betrayed the workers. For Lafargue, *Les Misérables* was not the socialist bible it purported to be, but rather limited itself to a single socialist aim: the abolition of the death penalty. Where Hugo revealed his loyalties in the novel, he contended, was in his personification of two institutions of bourgeois society, capitalist exploitation and the police, in two “types ridicules”: Jean Valjean, who built his fortune on

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16 “At the beginning, romantic insurgents detest the tyrants; in the middle, insurgent logicians undertake the destruction of the tyrant of capital through the pen and the spoken word; at the end, insurgents, again taking up the folly of blood and lyricism, attack the listless crowd that knows not what is best for it.”

the backs of his workers; and Javert, “la vertu faite mouchard.”\(^{18}\) Firmly entrenched in high society and enjoying the exorbitant advance he received from the publication of *Les Misérables*, Hugo could not imagine the existence of a society “sans police et sans exploitation ouvrière,” and for Lafargue therein lay his great deficiency.\(^{19}\)

Yet Hugo’s condemnation of the French legal system in *Les Misérables* seemed to resonate quite acutely with others. In 1904, a man tried for petty theft in Paris attempted to plead his case using a psychological defense: kleptomania. In the court transcript published in the *Revue des grand procès contemporains*, his attorney, Jacques Bonzon, argued, “Certes je ne prétendrai point que la misère seule amène le crime, que Jean Valjean vole seulement parce qu’il a faim, comme ne se prostitue Fantine que pour nourrir son enfant.”\(^{20}\) To make his client’s case, Bonzon annexed the characters of *Les Misérables*, whose criminal offenses are portrayed as the products of an oppressive society, and situated them in a psychological framework in which the crime was compelled not only by desperation, but also by an innate inclination towards theft. It was mental illness, then, that primarily bred poverty and crime rather than the material reality of those affected by it. Shifting the focus away from Hugo’s depiction of that oppressive material reality and towards a pathologization of the poor—and using two characters enshrined in the French collective memory to do so—implied an interest in perpetuating the very sociopolitical systems and practices decried in *Les Misérables*.

In the years after the novel’s publication, the character of Valjean was used not only to highlight extenuating circumstances, but also to provoke empathy among the jury. In 1902, an article appeared in *La Presse* called “Un nouveau Jean Valjean,” which detailed the

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\(^{18}\) “virtue made snitch”  
\(^{19}\) Paul Lafargue, “La légende de Victor Hugo.” June 23, 1885. From Marxists Internet Archive.  
\(^{20}\) “Certainly I do not pretend that poverty alone induces crime, that Jean Valjean steals only because he is hungry, just as Fantine only sells herself to feed her child.” Jacques Bonzon, *Revue des grands procès contemporains*. 1905.
circumstances of a man named Laurent Vincent, who had been sentenced in 1894 to twenty years of hard labor for theft and resisting arrest. Flouting his conviction, however, he became employed at a photographer’s studio, married, and had a child, and several years later in 1902 went back to court to stand trial for his crimes. In Vincent’s defense, his lawyer spoke of Jean Valjean, whose story bore a striking similarity, and requested a lenient verdict. Ultimately, the jury pronounced the acquittal of this “moderne Jean Valjean qui, très ému, remercie la cour et messieurs les jurés de leur bonté.” For those who felt sympathy towards Hugo’s characters, the invocation of their plight and redemption could be incredibly effective, especially after the Pierre Maurin account (to be discussed in the following chapter), which indicated a new interest in the historicity of Les Misérables. By acquitting a “modern Jean Valjean,” whose crime a century ago would have warranted five years of hard labor, the French legal system could prove that it, too, was making headway on the path of progress that would one day culminate in the utopia Hugo proposed.

Citing Les Misérables as a paragon of facile politics became fairly common for the right wing around the turn of the century. Writer Maurice Barrès, whose attempt to galvanize ethnic nationalism in France eventually led him into proto-fascist territory by World War I, used the novel to support an editorial he wrote in 1908 endorsing capital punishment. The reforms that may seem generous or democratic only served to put the little people at risk, he argued, and all notions of some misguided affection for criminals must be put aside in the interest of society. While his opponent Jean Jaurès, one of the leading socialist politicians in France, subscribed to the thesis laid out by Victor Hugo that blamed society for Valjean’s petty theft, Barrès retorted sardonically that all problems would be solved if only society had

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21 “this modern Jean Valjean, who, very moved, thanks the court and ladies and gentlemen of the jury for their kindness.” “Un Nouveau Jean Valjean,” La Presse. February 26, 1902.
the right to take precautions against crime by punishing those it had corrupted.22 (Incidentally, the opposing “contre la peine de mort” column published adjacent to Barrès’ was written by Paul Adam, a novelist whose own works heavily featured as characters the student revolutionaries from Les Misérables.) Hugo’s novel continued to crop up in this fashion as a sounding board of left-wing propaganda against which conservatives could substantiate their own political aims in support of preexisting social structures.

Religious journalists were equally active in coopting Les Misérables for their own ends, typically by conservative Catholics who found Hugo’s pinpointing of the Church as a propagator of social evils rather misguided. Whether they found fault in Hugo’s diagnosis of those evils or in his solution to them (or both), they were quick to remind readers that the Church, as well as the Catholic faith, had been instrumental in combatting poverty and offering aid to those in need for centuries. On the other end of the spectrum, journalists who celebrated the powerful spiritual underpinnings of Les Misérables were sometimes liable to appropriate the novel, too, in their case as a bastion of anticlericalism that renounced organized religion while finding salvation in a depoliticized spirituality. Regardless of denomination, however, invoking Les Misérables in an age where the debate over secularization was on the verge of exploding could be very effective indeed.

Devout conservatives had been scandalized by Les Misérables and its subversive content since its publication in 1862. Edmond Biré, a Hugophobe writer and critic who published extensive critiques of Hugo that bordered on outright opprobrium, had been instructed by his bishop to treat the novel as a work of Satan.23 One of his many retrospectives on Hugo’s oeuvre was published in the liberal Catholic Le Correspondant during the 1902

centennial, aiming to displace the writer’s exalted status. Like his right-wing Catholic peers
who reviewed *Les Misérables* in 1862, Biré pinpointed the Catholic notion of rehabilitation
through repentance as the idea dominating the entire first part of *Les Misérables*. Although the
Christian spirit did not permeate the rest of the novel to nearly the same degree, Biré chalked
this discrepancy up to Hugo’s own vacillating convictions. As the beginning of *Les
Misérables* was written before 1848, when Hugo had been less hostile to organized religion,
its narrative and thematic framework naturally reflected a more tolerant view of the
institutions and teachings of Catholicism; not wanting to discard an entire volume of his
work, Hugo simply retouched a few sections here and there to make them more congruent
with the following ones. These later opinions that constitute the rest of the novel, developed
during Hugo’s exile at Guernesey, were distasteful to Biré. Hugo “insulte la société et…
divinise la Révolution et ses hommes, depuis Danton jusqu’à Marat,” he complained. “Il
déverse l’outrage… contre les princes qui ont protégé sa jeunesse, contre ce gouvernement de
la Restauration auquel il avait consacré ses premières chants!”

To a devout Royalist like Biré, the pervasive spirit of 1793 in *Les Misérables* was objectionable. An excerpt from his
*Victor Hugo avant 1830* that had appeared twenty years earlier in *Le Correspondant*
confirmed that Biré’s political and literary inclinations had not budged a single inch between
1882 and 1902. *Les Misérables* was “une œuvre mauvaise au point de vue social” that
insulted religion, glorified revolution, and agitated the “social question” without proposing
any kind of resolution; not only was it “inutile,” it was also “dangereux au fond.”

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24 “Hugo maligns society and deifies the Revolution and its men, from Danton to Marat. He lets the insults
flow… against the princes who protected his youth, against the Restoration government to which he had
dedicated his first songs!”
25 “A bad work from the social point of view… useless… fundamentally dangerous.” Edmond Biré, *Le
Correspondant*. 1882.
The perception of *Les Misérables* as a legitimate threat to the status quo was a common one among conservative journalists. *Le Constitutionnel*, founded during the Hundred Days by Joseph Fouché, ran for two decades as a mouthpiece for liberals, Bonapartists, and critics of the Restoration, although by the 1860s it had become a major government newspaper of the Second Empire. Antoine Grenier, its longtime editor, published his review of *Les Misérables* in May 1862. He found the character of Bishop Myriel implausible, for a bishop should be “le dépositaire du dogme, le gardien de la morale et de la discipline,” rather than simply a “mère qui n’a besoin que d’amour pour remplir sa mission.” In recasting the Bishop in an institutional light, representing dogma and discipline, Grenier effectively repudiated the entire novel’s moral thesis; if the Bishop's love that derives its redemptive power from an authority higher and more obscure than the institutions governing society is merely a misrepresentation of the clergyman's duties, then the notion of love as a political force in *Les Misérables* holds no weight whatsoever. In fact, Grenier continued, if the Catholic Church were to be replaced by some vague law of universal love, then “la religion s’en irait en idées confuses, en visions romanesques et en fadeurs béates.” In short, the doctrine Hugo laid out in his work presented a wholly distorted and contemptuous picture of the France’s religious institutions, posing a legitimate threat to the fabric of society. As a government paper, the duty of *Le Constitutionnel* was to peddle the party line, which in 1862 demanded full support of the Church as part of an entente between Bonapartism and

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27 “the custodian of dogma, the guardian of moral and discipline, rather than simply a mother who fulfills her mission solely through love.”

28 “religion would fade away in muddled ideas, in fanciful visions, and in blissful vapidity.”
Catholicism predicated on shared principles of social conservatism. Thus Grenier’s condemnation of Hugo’s amorphous spirituality that rejected the Church’s stringent teachings was more than a question of religious preferences, but rather an attempt to classify the novel as having the potential—however slight—to disrupt the stability currently being upheld by the alliance between church and state.

Numerous critics who reviewed the novel upon its release in 1862 saw therein a mission of Catholic proselytization. While the influence of Catholicism had begun to dwindle in France by 1862—spurred by legislation like the 1850 Falloux Law, which made it nearly impossible for the Church to open its own secondary schools—the bourgeoisie still remained loyal to the clergy during the Second Empire as a means of thwarting social unrest. The Abbé Ulysse Maynard, writing in the Bibliographie Catholique, Revue Critique, was convinced that Hugo’s depiction of Catholic institutions in Les Misérables illustrated their curative powers. “Multipliez les couvents, et vous diminuerez d’autant l’ombre des Valjean, des Fantine et des Cosette.” he wrote. “D’où date la réhabilitation des Valjean, sinon de la croix du bon larron? Qui a affranchi la femme et l’enfant, sinon le christianisme, et cela principalement par ses institutions monastiques?” In attributing the novel’s themes of redemption and grace to the convents and the Gospel—two cornerstones of Catholicism—rather than to love and human connection, as Hugo so emphatically proposes, Maynard displaced the political program of Les Misérables from its position of anti-institutional sentiment and reinscribed it in the French Catholic tradition. The solution to society’s ills was

31 “Multiply convents, and you will diminish especially the shadows of the Valjeans, the Fantines, and the Cosettes. Whence comes the rehabilitation of the Valjeans, if not from the thief on the cross? Who freed woman and child, if not Christianity, and that principally through its monastic institutions?” Ulysse Maynard, Bibliographie Catholique, Revue Critique. 1862.
not the dismantling of oppressive institutions, education reform, or universal suffrage, as Maynard believed Hugo proposed, but rather an unwavering belief in the Catholic Church.

Nowhere was this sentiment expressed more virulently than in Louis Veuillot’s review. His paper *L’Univers*, which wielded considerable influence over French clergymen and royalists, was a reactionary ultramontane organ deemed intellectually disreputable by bourgeois republicans, rendered even more unpopular by its loyalty to Rome rather than France.³² Veuillot himself “thundered against all aspects of modern society,” from industry and science to intellectualism, liberalism, and the bourgeois spirit.³³ His review, printed in the *Revue du Monde Catholique*, came to similar conclusions as the Abbé Maynard’s. “Il me semble que l’histoire même de Valjean et de Fantine réfute les propositions radicales de la préface,” he wrote, “et montrent que ni le mal n’est si grand qu’il le dit, ni le remède si difficile à trouver et si impraticable qu’il le croit. Ce remède est dans la société même, et il a un nom fort connu: c’est la religion catholique.”³⁴ Indeed, “le christianisme travaillait à résoudre ce problème longtemps avant que M. Hugo ne songeât à écrire son livre.” He also condemned excess in the novel, not only in the characters themselves but also in their plight, which he deemed highly exaggerated in severity, for “…ni Valjean ni Fantine ne sont si rejetés, si destitués d’appui, si fatalement condamnés et perdues que M. Hugo le prétend.”³⁵

To Veuillot, Valjean and Fantine were too intelligent, too courageous, too noble to represent the ordinary miscreants who actually filled the bagnes and brothels; instead, the

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³³ Plessis, 139.
³⁴ “It seems to me that even the story of Valjean and Fantine refutes the radical propositions of the preface, and shows that neither the evil is so great as Hugo says, nor the remedy so hard to find and so impracticable as he believes. Christianity had been working to resolve this problem long before M. Hugo ever thought to write his book.”
³⁵ “…neither Valjean nor Fantine are so rejected, so bereft of support, so hopelessly condemned and lost as M. Hugo pretends.” Louis Veuillot, *Revue du Monde Catholique*. April 1862.
“true” criminal must be an easily identifiable type: stupid, slow, selfish, cowardly. This reading of Hugo’s novel, which only attempts verisimilitude insofar as it critiques certain real phenomena, as a factual work that had to be either verified or discredited was not limited to the Catholic right, as the next chapter demonstrates, although to many of them it presented an urgent problem. The resolution to that problem was, of course, to insist that *Les Misérables* had gotten it all wrong, that Hugo had erroneously pointed to the Church as a malignant force when, in fact, the Church was the answer to human suffering on earth.

Other times, however, the right did not use *Les Misérables* as an antithesis to its policies, but rather as an exemplar. Jean Lerolle, a right-wing Catholic politician who had at one time presided over the Catholic Association for French Youth, wrote a piece for the *Echo du patronage Notre-Dame de Lourdes* in 1903 titled “Les Moines!” that petitioned readers on behalf of those who practiced religious asceticism. The legacy of Victor Hugo—whose own *Les Misérables*, Lerolle boasted, contained the phrase “Le monastère est le produit de la formule: égalité, fraternité!”—had been appropriated by his followers, who strove to proscribe religious orders even as they jubilantly carried his body to the Panthéon. Yet if any one of them had bothered to mediate on his chapter on convents in *Les Misérables*, according to Lerolle, they would grasp that Hugo was in fact “un clérical.” Ironically, this very article that condemned the posthumous appropriation of Hugo’s beliefs was itself an enormous distortion of his intentions in *Les Misérables*, where he explains his opinions on monasteries in the middle of an extraordinarily lengthy digression on convents. “Monasteries, when they abound in a nation,” he says, “are clogs in its circulation, cumbrous establishments, centers of idleness where centers of labor should exist”; moreover, monasteries were only

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37 “The monastery is the product of the formula: fraternity, equality.”
products of equality and fraternity insofar as they were voluntary associations that stripped each member of any individual characteristics.\textsuperscript{38} Lerolle’s claim \textit{Les Misérables} had been coopted by anticlericals was misleading, then, for Hugo was at the forefront of the movement and considered religious institutions a hindrance to progress, but it undoubtedly served a political purpose.

Appropriation of the novel was not limited to Catholics, either. Edmond de Pressensé, a prominent Protestant figure and leader of the Free Evangelical Church who had opposed Louis-Napoleon’s regime,\textsuperscript{39} proposed in the \textit{Revue chrétienne} that \textit{Les Misérables} “belonged” to Christians by virtue of its compassion for the suffering and demonstration of the dialectics of Christian morality, dramatized mostly potently in the chapter in which Valjean agonizes over the decision to turn himself in to save a man falsely accused. Where others had tried to ascribe “le Dieu adoré par Victor Hugo” to the Gnostic tradition (which, according to Pressensé, was merely a divinity with neither heart nor morality) or organized religion, which Hugo deplored, in fact \textit{Les Misérables} exhibited a simpler, more amorphous religiosity with which the liberal \textit{Revue chrétienne} could evidently identify. And although Hugo had been led astray in his early years by distorted impressions of religion, these were simply “petites erreurs” made during the “entraînement de son cœur généreux.”\textsuperscript{40} Hugo was more Christian than the hypocrites of the Catholic press, Pressensé claimed, who sought to sully his reputation because he did not obey the doctrines of their church.\textsuperscript{41}

Around the turn of the century, the clash between socialists, republicans, and the clergy—already exploded by the Dreyfus Affair several years earlier, which solidified the

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\textsuperscript{38} Victor Hugo, \textit{Les Misérables}, Vol. II, Book VII, Ch. II \\
\textsuperscript{39} Robert Gildea, \textit{The Past in French History}. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1994, 257. \\
\textsuperscript{40} “little errors made during the training of his generous heart.” \\
\textsuperscript{41} Edmond de Pressensé, \textit{Revue chrétienne}. 1885.
\end{flushleft}
bifurcation of the socialist movement into two distinct wings—monopolized French political 
expression. While a dialogue could be opened between Catholics and Marxists, the latter of 
whom believed that anticlericalism ought to be subordinate to the dismantling of the 
bourgeoisie, republicans and the religious right were embroiled in conflict. Thus it was in the 
best interest of a conservative Catholic politician in 1903 to attempt to forge an alliance 
between the two factions by hijacking the legacy of France’s greatest republican icon, Victor 
Hugo. Furthermore, in co-opting the novel as a propaganda instrument for institutionalized 
religion—either Catholic or Protestant—which it most surely was not, all matters of literary 
interpretation aside, these critics sought to steer it away from any subversive implications and 
back towards the dominant discourse; proving that *Les Misérables* took its powerful moral 
impetus from organized religion meant that it was a work thoroughly entrenched in the 
tradition, stability, and orthodoxy of the French church. As mediators between text and 
consumer, critics could shape the narrative of the novel’s reception, hence its location within 
the crosshairs of literary and political debates. Despite an ending that sees its romantic heroes 
happily assimilated into the bourgeoisie, *Les Misérables* is recognized today as a patently 
anti-institutional work, yet was not characterized as such in many reviews upon its publication 
in 1862.

Still, some critics recognized the spiritual—not Christian in the institutional sense—
thrust of the novel. The Ligue de l’enseignement, a confederation of associations dedicated to 
secular education, was founded in 1866 by Jean Macé, a pedagogue and journalist exiled to 
Alsace after Louis-Napoleon’s coup in 1851. Picking up where the Guizot Laws of 1833 left 
off, the Ligue sought a universal, compulsory, free, and secular school system backed by

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Protestant funds. It also established libraries and reading groups throughout France and had the support of leading Republican politicians by 1870. The literature disseminated by the Ligue was “useful”—in other words, material that could be internalized and put to some practical purpose in technical or civic realms. According to historian Patrick Harrigan, Macé left “no doubt that it was universal suffrage that convinced him of the need for wider education,” two of the most important reforms promoted by Hugo in Les Misérables. In his review of the novel for the Revue d’Alsace in 1862, Macé remarked that it was, first and foremost, “profondément chrétien… une éloquente protestation de l’esprit évangélique, qui est l’âme des sociétés modernes, contre les révoltes du corps social dans lequel l’âme chrétienne est enfermée.” Distinguishing between the Christian spirit and the fabric of society was in the interest of Macé, a member of the radical bourgeoisie committed to republicanism and anticlericalism, for it vindicated his position: if spirituality could exist separately from society, then the two had no business uniting under the guise of organized religion. In this way Les Misérables could function as an anticlerical tool for Macé just as it had been a bastion of Catholicism for conservative devotees.

Yet not every commentary on the religiosity of Les Misérables in the early twentieth century promoted such politically-charged readings of the text. Le Penseur featured an article in 1908 by its founder and editor, Emile Blémont, on the philosophy of Les Misérables, which

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48 “profoundely Christian… an eloquent avowal of the evangelical spirit, which is the soul of modern society, against the revolt of the social body in which the Christian soul is confined.”
he called “l’œuvre si puissante et si généreuse qu’on a pu appeler « l’Evangile du peuple ».”

As a poet and dramaturge whose papers had been organs for the Parnassian poets, Blémont was undoubtedly an acquaintance of Hugo, whose influence likely varnished the hagiographical tone of Blémont’s piece, but calling *Les Misérables* the “Gospel of the people” meant it still bore significant weight in pre-war French society. “Nous avons si longuement parlé de la préface qu’il nous reste à peine la place de parler du livre,” he went on. “Mais est-il besoin de répéter ce qui a été dit tant de fois, ce que tout le monde sait parfaitement?” Was, indeed, “everyone” familiar with *Les Misérables*, or was Blémont merely referring to his own circle of educated bourgeois men? In fact, a study done by Anne-Marie Thiesse shows that a large number of working-class readers born in the early twentieth century counted *Les Misérables* among their formative reading material.

What Hugo had achieved in 1862 by writing a novel deeply sympathetic to the common man, therefore demonstrating solidarity, helped to sustain his image during the last decades of the nineteenth century. Yet that image was liable to be appropriated for various political purposes; *Les Misérables* was meaningful enough to the public that an argument citing it, speciously or otherwise, could have considerable clout.

Establishing how and for what purposes the press wielded *Les Misérables* as a political tool is not enough. In order to understand why the novel was such a compelling referent in the last decades of the nineteenth century, it is necessary to deconstruct how, exactly, these journalists understood *Les Misérables* as a story that was not only a reflection

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49 “the work so powerful and so generous that one might call it ‘the Gospel of the people.’”


51 “We have spoken at such length of the preface that we have hardly any room to speak of the book. But must we repeat what has been said so many times, what everyone knows perfectly?” Blémont, Emile, *Le Penseur*. December 1908.

of history, but in fact a historical document of sorts in itself. Alluding to the novel in arguments against secularization, for example, was so effective because it was not perceived as pure fiction: rather, it was so close to reality that, as the next chapter will demonstrate, establishing the story’s authenticity eventually acquired the utmost importance.
Chapter II

History and literature, Victor Brombert suggests, are both conceived by the cumulative experiences of a cultural past. Conflating these two disciplines, a sort of generic hybridization, allows the communication of historical ideas through fiction, which Georg Lukács calls a “sense of human connection,” as well as the acknowledgment of historical influence on the contemporary. The past can be seen as reflecting the present, and the present reflecting the past, generating a circular view of history as constantly in flux, and thus the historical novel fundamentally challenges subjectivities in creating diverse identities and historical narratives. According to theorist Jerome de Groot, the historical novel has “queried, interrogated, and complicated fixed ideas of selfhood, historical progression, and objectivity” ever since it emerged as a distinct form after the publication of Walter Scott’s Waverley in 1814. Hugo’s conceptualization of history in Les Misérables, which tries to locate and understand historical machinery, certainly substantiates that claim, but it is the reception of the novel that fully illuminates the extent to which it spawned a multiplicity of readings that sought to reconcile the contradiction between subjectivity and objectivity, between fiction and reality.

55 Ibid, 25.
56 Ibid, 29.
In *Les Misérables*, history is malleable: real historical events mingle with fictional ones to disrupt the topos of the genre.\textsuperscript{58} 1789, 1793, 1815, 1830, 1848, 1851: these dates, forever engraved in the collective French memory, serve as the subtextual underpinnings of *Les Misérables*, yet its narrator hardly refers to them at all; even the fictitious events of the novel are not situated within the broader context of a significant date in French history. Rather than underlining those dates, Hugo peers into the interstices of history and brings into relief there what was long forgotten—but what was nevertheless ultimately the motor of events both great and obscure. The introductory chapter for student revolutionaries les Amis de l’ABC is entitled “A Group Which Nearly Became Historic,” suggesting a group which could have achieved historical prominence in the alternate history of *Les Misérables* but did not by some chance stroke of fate. In illuminating the vicissitudes of the past century, where the outcome of a momentous battle could be determined by the most infinitesimal gesture, Hugo established his own conceptualization of history that would allow him to make sense of the historical contradictions that still plagued France. As Hugo said in correspondence to his editor Albert Lacroix in March 1862, “ce livre, c’est l’histoire mêlée au drame, c’est le siècle.”\textsuperscript{59} But despite Hugo’s persistent historical theorizing in the text, what made *Les Misérables* so powerful as a work of pseudo-history was not its author’s agency, but rather how it functioned as a blank slate upon which readers could project their own understanding of various historical problems.

The awareness of history, engendered largely by the French Revolution and ensuing Napoleonic Wars, as a mass experience—an uninterrupted process of changes that had a


direct effect on the life of every individual—was a necessary precondition for the historical novel as a form.\textsuperscript{60} Thus, given this new conception of history, the Romantic historical novel of the early- and mid-nineteenth century attempted to transport readers back in time in materializing a realistic vision of the past. Novels steeped in the Realist tradition, however, which gradually attained popularity as the century progressed, rejected the obsession with history and instead focused on contemporary events.\textsuperscript{61} As we will see, these two discordant modes of representation would come to shape critical reception of \textit{Les Misérables}, in particular where its verisimilitude was concerned. At stake in these debates was more than mere literary interpretation, for what critics were truly grappling with was a confusion between the categories of history and literature, which were never fixed in the first place but perhaps appeared to be to nineteenth-century readers, that had significant implications for how they conceptualized the divide between the real and the imaginary.

The way critics associated \textit{Les Misérables} with real events sometimes highlighted the mythic qualities those events came to possess in the French consciousness, and how they fit into overarching narratives about culture, space, and representation. The Paris Commune, arguably the most momentous event in France in the last half of the nineteenth century, was one such event. It was not as though the Commune became somehow fictitious in the minds of critics, of course, but the ways in which it was perceived as belonging to a revolutionary tradition—a lineage quite clearly also shared by Hugo’s novel—reminded newspaper readers that it was more than simply a tumultuous event: it had a greater significance that allowed it to seep into all recesses of the French consciousness, from the obvious upheaval in social and


political life to literature. Here, literature had the power to shape the legacy of sociopolitical phenomena. The idea of a “long” French Revolution, or a constant process of recovery and reinvention that dominated nineteenth-century politics, was crucial in both the narrative of *Les Misérables* itself as well as the ways in which critics located the novel within that revolutionary metanarrative. The Revolution was not “over” even after the actual events of 1789-99 occurred, and the understanding of revolution that arose in the coming century was imbued with an iterative quality by which all revolutions in France were simply recapitulations of earlier ones.

The Paris Commune was the final episode in the nation’s struggle with the legacy of the French Revolution over the course of the nineteenth century. It invoked that legacy in extremely deliberate ways: newspapers named after the popular press of the Revolution, the implementation of a Committee of Public Safety, the women’s march on the government at Versailles that recalled the October Days of 1789, and a call to republican fraternalism that acknowledged “nos pères” of ’89 and ’93. Hugo’s student revolutionaries who fight on the barricades during the very real June Rebellion in 1832 act out a similar revolutionary passion play, a term coined by historian Richard Cobb to describe a rubric of actions, words, and symbols through which revolutionary events were understood as such. These students are not meant to represent an accurate retelling of the events of 1832, but rather a conflation of the urban revolutionary tradition in France that had peaked around the middle of the century, stringing together a myriad of individual uprisings in 1830, 1831, 1832, 1834, 1848, and 1851. As historian Mark Traugott indicates, the word “barricade” had become all but

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synonymous with the concept of revolution in France by the second half of the nineteenth century.\textsuperscript{63}

The Commune’s brutal repression in 1871, however, suggested that urban insurrection was no longer viable in Western Europe,\textsuperscript{64} and this traditional mode of revolution was subsequently replaced in the 1890s by the anarchist vision of “le grand soir,” in which bourgeois society would be annihilated by a single great revolutionary strike.\textsuperscript{65} As symbolist poet and anarchist Adolphe Retté declared in 1899: “Soon perhaps darkness lit by the flickering flames of the Great Evening will cover the earth. Then will come the dawn of joy and fraternity.”\textsuperscript{66} This apocalyptic rhetoric is anticipated almost verbatim in revolutionary chief Enjolras’ sermon atop the barricade in \textit{Les Misérables}, delivered on the eve of the final battle, in which he urges the combatants to take comfort in knowing their deaths will inspire others in the future. “From the embrace of all desolations faith leaps forth. Sufferings bring hither their agony and ideas their immortality. This agony and this immortality are about to join and constitute our death. Brothers, he who dies here dies in the radiance of the future, and we are entering a tomb all flooded with the dawn.”\textsuperscript{67} The teleological utopian vision embodied in Enjolras established a revolutionary narrative bridging the Parisian street riots of the 1830s, Hugo’s perception of the French political climate of the 1850s and 1860s, and radical fin-de-siècle politics. Given the shared political heritage between the events \textit{Les Misérables} and the Commune, critics writing in the 1870s were quick to observe a connection between the two.

One of these was a piece by legitimist critic Armand de Pontmartin published on July 10, 1871, in \textit{Le Correspondant}, a monthly periodical popular with liberal Catholics and

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{63} Mark Traugott, \textit{The Insurgent Barricade}. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2010. 9.
\item \textsuperscript{64} Magraw, 108.
\item \textsuperscript{66} Adolphe Retté, “Vers la revolution,” \textit{Le Libertaire}. July 1899.
\item \textsuperscript{67} \textit{Les Misérables}, Volume V, Book I, Chapter V
\end{itemize}
moderate royalists. The publication, run by Pontmartin himself, featured the writings of a liberal Catholic coterie that included Félix Dupanloup, Henri-Dominique Lacordaire, and the Count de Montalembert. Only a few weeks after the uprising had been quashed, Pontmartin wrote that *Les Misérables* ought to be subtitled “le prologue de la Commune,” for it contained “pas un chapitre qui ne soit une préface d’insurrection, pas une page qui ne puisse tapisser une barricade, pas une personnage sur lequel n’auraient pu se mouler les orateurs, les chefs et les exécuteurs communistes.” A piece published in the December 1871 issue of the conservative *Le Figaro* also saw a similar connection between Hugo’s work and the Commune, maintaining that “il ne faut pas oublier que *Les Misérables* peuvent être considérés comme la ritournelle de la Commune.” Furthermore, Pontmartin continued, “il nous montrait le séraphique Enjolras et ses compagnons agissant exactement comme auraient agi à leur place [the infamous Communards] Assi, Mégy, Flourens, Grousset et Billioray.” In linking Enjolras and his fellow insurrectionists, who are deliberately written to evoke the *grands hommes* of the French Revolution such as Robespierre, Saint Just, and Condor cet, to the Communards, Pontmartin drew on the century-old legacy of the Revolution that continued to beleaguer France, a thread that was inextricably entwined with both the revolt of 1832 and the Paris Commune of 1871, thereby conferring on *Les Misérables* an explicitly political potentiality.

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69 Plessis, 136.
70 “not one chapter that is not the preface to an insurrection, not one page that could not paper a barricade, not one character that had not been modeled on communist orators, leaders, and enforcers.”
71 *Le Figaro*. December 26, 1871.
72 “he showed us the seraphic Enjolras and his companions acting exactly as Assi, Mégy, Flourens, Grousset, and Billioray would have in their place.”
Moreover, according to Pontmartin, “le roman des Misérables sera pour la Commune ce que l’Histoire des Girondins a été pour la Révolution de février [in 1848].”³⁷³ Published in 1847, Lamartine’s Histoire des Girondins was not particularly successful as a work of history, but its pronounced ideological bias, coupled with an extensive promotional campaign during its release, galvanized pro-revolutionary sentiment and elevated Lamartine’s political cachet after the revolution. Pontmartin’s review, published only two months after la Semaine sanglante, saw Les Misérables as an inspirational work that ultimately did nothing to actually precipitate political victory, and perhaps also failed on a more symbolic level: just as the Histoire des Girondins failed to make sense of the past, so too did Les Misérables represent Hugo’s futile attempts to resolve his own political convictions and envisioned path to utopia with the legacy of the Revolution.⁷⁴ As the final chapter will illustrate, the reputation of the author bore significant weight in these matters. Because the veracity of the Histoire des Girondins was questioned, Lamartine was perceived as having violated the contract whereby a historian must respect historical facts, and therefore his book ceased to have any authority or significance as history.⁷⁵ Such was also the case for Victor Hugo with Les Misérables even though his work was clearly conceived as fiction despite its strong ties to historical phenomena.

And, crucially, Pontmartin’s comparison of Les Misérables, a novel, to the Histoire des Girondins, a history, confirms the extent to which Les Misérables was perceived as a work rooted in objective historical truth that served as a key referent in the nineteenth-century grand narrative of revolution. Neither the content nor the form of the two works are similar:

³⁷³ “Les Misérables will be for the Commune what the History of the Girondins was for the February Revolution.”
³⁷⁵ Ibid, 23.
Les Misérables relates a fictional narrative fabricated by the author, while the Histoire des Girondins supplies an ostensibly objective account of the history of the Girondist faction during the French Revolution. There was no mistaking Hugo’s work for a historical textbook like the ones penned by Lamartine or Jules Michelet, of course, but his fictional narrative appeared to occupy the same discursive space as an “objective” historical one. How was this possible? As Hayden White suggests, a nineteenth-century view of narrative in historical discourse stipulated that historical events manifest themselves in reality as elements and aspects of stories. In other words, for nineteenth-century readers the boundary between subjective fiction and objective history was a porous one—thus a novel like Les Misérables could be perceived as a precursor to the Commune just as Lamartine’s work was for the 1848 revolution.

The identification of Hugo’s novel with the Commune was not only limited to matters of intangible discourse, however. An anti-Communard polemic in Le Petit Journal from May 1871 lamented the destruction of Parisian monuments (“chaque jour on découvre de nouveaux désastres”), especially the post adjacent to the July Column in the place de la Bastille, the former location of the plaster elephant famously described by Hugo in Les Misérables. The July Column, built between 1835 and 1840 in commemoration of the Trois Glorieuses of 1830, was the second post-revolutionary monument erected in the space of the place de la Bastille; the first, as this journalist noted, was the elephant commissioned by Napoleon to celebrate his Egyptian campaign that stood from 1814 to 1846, undergoing total dilapidation as it became forgotten by city planners. These two monuments, whose commemorative referents were both firmly situated in the nineteenth-century narrative of the legacy of the

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French Revolution, were attempts to remember collectively by means of the sacralization of triumphs and heroes through the manipulation of public space. Despite the existing parallel and competing collective memories elaborated by communities that were still grappling with the legacy of the Revolution, these monuments—authorized first by Napoleon and then by Louis-Philippe—sought to eradicate that multiplicity by implementing, in its place, a dominant ideology figured by their engagement with public space. In *Les Misérables*, Hugo describes the elephant as “unclean, despised, repulsive, and superb, ugly in the eyes of the bourgeois, melancholy in the eyes of the thinker.” The political intimations of the July Column and former site of the Elephant of the Bastille, coupled with the *Petit Journal* journalist’s association of the two with Hugo’s equally political novel, together constituted a larger discourse that strove—as so many others did in the nineteenth century—to resolve the legacy of the Revolution. Although the Elephant was not a particular popular subject in contemporary writing and likely would no longer be remembered today if not for *Les Misérables*, the connection made between the site of the monuments and the novel was key in drawing on a shared political heritage that traced back to 1789. Through its spectacular fictionalization of reality that continually blurred generic boundaries, *Les Misérables* could become a part of that heritage even as a work of fiction.

More than three decades later, at least one journalist still identified a connection between Hugo’s novel and the Commune. A piece in *Le Mois littéraire et pittoresque* from 1906 on the Parisian sewer system linked its immortalization in *Les Misérables* to wartime fears: “En 1870, Paris assiégée, affolé, se souvint du roman des *Misérables*. Pas un amateur

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78 Gildea, 10.
79 *Les Misérables*, Vol. IV, Book VI, Ch. II
The writer described *Les Misérables*, moreover, as “une fiction Romanesque qui faillit passer à l’histoire,” bringing into relief the distinction between fiction and history. What did it mean for *Les Misérables* to “almost pass for history”? As Hayden White suggests, what distinguishes historical from fictional is chiefly the content; where real events constitute historical stories, imaginary ones constitute fiction. Yet historical novels can muddy that distinction by integrating the two, producing a story whose veracity may be disputed as if the author had intended it to be completely truthful in the first place. As *Les Misérables* continued to swell in popularity and establish itself in the French cultural consciousness in the later years of the nineteenth century, this mania for authenticity only intensified.

In August 1879, the *Gazette de France* published a story by Armand de Pontmartin that appeared to dispel established notions about the verisimilitude of *Les Misérables*. Pontmartin, a legitimist journalist with strong ties to the Catholic world, claimed to have made the acquaintance of the canon Angelin, a former secretary of Mgr Miollis, who had recounted to him the story of the “true Jean Valjean,” Pierre Maurin. According to the narrative relayed to Pontmartin, Maurin had been sentenced to five years’ imprisonment in 1801 for stealing a loaf of bread to feed his sister’s seven starving children. After serving out his sentence, he was released in 1806 and eventually entered the town of Digne, where he happened to knock on Mgr Miollis’ door in search of sustenance and shelter. Maurin received dinner and a bed that night, and the next morning a letter of recommendation from Mgr Miollis to his brother, one of Napoleon’s generals fighting in Italy. He departed Digne

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81 “In 1870, Paris besieged, distraught, remembered the novel *Les Misérables*. There was not one lover of serials who did not dream of the Prussians entering through that subterranean route.” *Le Mois littéraire et pittoresque*, 1906
82 White, 21
83 Reprinted in *Le Figaro*, May 9, 1880.
straightaway and went to enlist, where he became renowned as a soldier of prodigious bravery and honor. Some discrepancies existed between Maurin and Valjean—Maurin was from Forcalquier in the south, Valjean from Faverolles in the north; Maurin never stole the Bishop’s silver; Maurin went on to become a soldier and Valjean a manufacturer—but the salient elements of their stories were strikingly similar.

In 1909, Gustave Simon’s article in the *Revue de Paris*, “Les Origines des *Misérables*,” presented Pontmartin’s reportage as largely incontrovertible fact, and supplemented it with notes Hugo had apparently made on the French penal code. Discovered among Hugo’s papers was a document from February 1823 entitled “le Code pénal des chiourmes.” The penalties enumerated therein included three years for an escape attempt from the bagne, which appears to corroborate the twelve years for four attempts added to Valjean’s sentence in *Les Misérables*.84 An article by Jean Frollo that appeared in *Le Petit Parisien* (which attracted largely middle-class readers through its serialized novels and financial news85) in 1909, shortly after the publication of Simon’s “Les Origines des Misérables,” took great stock in Pontmartin’s story. “Nous sommes certains aujourd’hui que ce forçat a existé,” Frollo wrote, transporting Valjean from the fictional universe of *Les Misérables* to an authentic sociopolitical context in French history.86 While the characters and events of *Les Misérables* often inhabit a liminal space in between real and fictional—its unreliable narrator says of Bishop Myriel: “We do not claim that the portrait herewith presented is probable; we confine ourselves to stating that it resembles the original”87—the

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86 “Today, we are certain that this convict existed.”
Maurin revelation demonstrated a vested interest in the historicity of *Les Misérables* among its readers.

Although the story of Pierre Maurin was apocryphal—no hard evidence had ever been presented in its defense—it was reprinted in numerous newspapers, anthologies, reviews, and prefaces of *Les Misérables*, and almost a century after Pontmartin’s initial purported discovery had elapsed before anyone attempted to debunk it. Literary historian Jean Pommier’s article “Sur *Les Misérables*,” written in 1962 in response to research conducted for the Hugo centenary at a colloquium in Strasbourg, found no traces of Pontmartin’s source and Mgr Miollis’ secretary, the canon Angelin, in any biography of Miollis. In “Qui était Jean Valjean,” published in *Cahiers de l’Alpe* the same year, Emile Escallier further discredited the Maurin myth; he found that the archives of the Cour de Justice criminelle des Basses-Alpes contained no record of Maurin’s purported sentencing at Forcalquier, and the name Pierre Maurin did not appear once on the registers of the Toulon prison.

Between the novel’s publication in 1862 and Pontmartin’s account in 1879, as well as Simon’s investigation of the novel’s origins thirty years thereafter, a discursive shift had clearly occurred. While initial reviews of *Les Misérables* lambasted its perceived excess and complete renunciation of realism, echoing a changing literary culture, many critics who returned to the novel in subsequent years in fact sought to establish its verisimilitude. The most logical reasoning behind Pontmartin’s fabrication of the story is a desire to sell copies, but how had the cultural climate changed from 1862 to 1879 insofar as he believed—correctly—the story might resonate? For one thing, public perception of Hugo had certainly changed during those seventeen years. Where before he had been a prophet, political polemicist, and exalted poet in exile, his return to France from exile in 1870 saw him fully
reintegrated into French public life, even winning a seat in the National Assembly in February 1871. The mysticism that pervaded perception of Hugo in 1862 gave way to greater consideration for his political doctrine as he resumed a vigorous career in politics, allowing readers to view *Les Misérables* more as a serious historical work and less as a romantic spectacle of melodrama.

Under the auspices of Hugo’s *génie* and the reforms of the Third Republic, the question of verisimilitude in *Les Misérables* had evolved to the point where recognizing its historical roots made it all the more powerful. Hugo’s ability to preemptively plan a work he would begin writing twenty years later by conducting extensive research in the 1820s confirmed his unparalleled genius, and evidence that Maurin could have really been sentenced to five years for petty theft and gone on to become an honorable citizen (which had been lambasted by initial reviewers as completely unrealistic in Valjean’s case) fortified the novel’s moral thesis. As journalist Emile Blémont wrote in remarking on the purported historicity of Jean Valjean: “La vérité est infiniment plus féconde et plus merveilleuse que la fable.” But besides Hugo’s reputation, as well as the repudiation of Romantic excess that had been in vogue for the past few decades, why was it so important to France to establish the truthfulness of Hugo’s novel?

When *Les Misérables* was published in 1862, its truthfulness or lack thereof was similarly crucial in readings of the text—but only insofar as it was deemed just about as far from the truth as possible by the majority of critics. Alfred-Auguste Cuvillier-Fleury, former secretary to the son of Louis-Philippe and future member of the Académie française, was the

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editor of the Orléanist *Journal des débats* in 1862.\(^9\) His review of *Les Misérables* addressed its apparent lack of verisimilitude, in particular the second sentencing of Jean Valjean after his tenure as the mayor of a prosperous town: “Il n’y a pas un tribunal français qui eut condamné comme récidiviste aux travaux forcés à perpétuité, peut-être à la mort, comme le croit M. Victor Hugo.”\(^9\) It was widely proposed by readers and critics alike that Valjean’s original sentence of five years for petty theft was implausible as well. “La prison, le bagne, l’échafaud lui-même,” he continued, “sont moins horribles dans la réalité que dans ses récits,” and ultimately, the characters were “des arguments pour une thèse brillante” rather than “ressorts pour un drame vigoureusement conçu.”\(^9\) Hugo never attempted to pass *Les Misérables* off as a factual exposé, so why did critics respond to the novel as if it were? Valjean’s experiences could not simply be exaggerated for the sake of narrative or stylistic conventions—they had to be unequivocally in accordance with contemporary perceptions about criminality and the French legal system.

Cuvilier-Fleury was far from the only critic who declared the purported inauthenticity of Hugo’s depiction of the legal system and various circumstances of suffering. This trend was symptomatic of a larger desire to undermine his “thèse brillante” and reassure the public—who was likely to read at least one of these reviews as they were disseminated in these hugely popular dailies—that the miseries of Valjean, Fantine, and their compatriots were merely the ingredients of a Romantic fantasy rather than a dramatization of reality. Thus in questioning the veracity of circumstances about which these journalists had relatively little

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\(^9\) “There is not one French tribunal that would have condemned him as a recidivist to the galleys, perhaps to death, as M. Hugo believes.”

\(^9\) “Prison, the galleys, even the scaffold itself are less horrible in reality than in his tale.” Alfred-Auguste Cuvilier-Fleury, *Journal des débats*. May 6, 1862.
first-hand knowledge, they effectively steered the discourse out of the hands of the subject and the target of *Les Misérables*—the underclass and the mass public, respectively—and into those of the bourgeois and aristocratic men of letters.

The critique of *Les Misérables* as “excessive” doubtless mirrored a larger cultural trend of moving away from grandiose Romanticism and towards a more refined realism and naturalism in literature, but also reflected reviewers’ status as predominantly bourgeois and aristocratic men whose political inclinations rarely strayed far from the center. They were outsiders reviewing a novel about the underclass. Poverty was visible to them as soon as they left their homes—although the gentrification brought about by Haussmannization made it easier for the bourgeoisie to turn a blind eye by pushing the poor from the center of Paris out towards the suburbs—yet they had never experienced it first-hand or, in most cases, even devoted time to its study or proliferation. Then why profess authority on the boundaries of a “realistic” situation for people living in poverty in their reviews? Not only did these critics’ class privilege confer on them a false sense of authority, but their attempt to mitigate society’s ills by claiming that Hugo’s plots and characters lacked verisimilitude served a greater political purpose. By convincing newspaper consumers—the aggregate of which represented almost the entire population of Paris—that things were not so bad as they seemed, that Hugo was merely fabricating distorted circumstances of misery, critics could successfully uphold a primary underpinning of the Second Empire: social stability.

Even critics who were personal friends of Hugo (which meant they would never utter a bad word against him in public) seemed to be caught up in the mania for authenticity surrounding *Les Misérables* even as they bestowed on it the most fulsome of praise. While they did not attempt to discredit the novel on any objective basis, they did tend to view it as a
spectacular expression of the intersection of history and modernity that was firmly rooted in reality. Because a refutation of the novel’s “facts” simultaneously entailed the discrediting of the author himself as an irresponsible “historian,” disciples of Hugo painted *Les Misérables* as a completely authentic illustration of contemporary society. One of these was Adolphe Gaïffe, a Protestant journalist who launched *La Revue de Paris* in 1851 and became an editor at the then-liberal *La Presse* by the 1860s.\(^\text{93}\) He had worked closely with Victor Hugo on the paper *L’Événement* to combat slavery and the death penalty, and later became heavily involved in republican activity after its termination in 1868.\(^\text{94}\) His rhapsodic review of *Les Misérables* appeared in *La Presse* in April 1862, in which he recognized its ability to encompass the entirety of society: “*Les Misérables, c’est la vie du dix-neuvième siècle,*” and to the beauty of style and invention that had made Hugo’s 1830 *Notre Dame de Paris* such a tremendous success, “*Les Misérables ajoutent un intérêt : l’actualité.*” Gaïffe’s understanding of Hugo’s novel as an expression of *actualité* (current affairs or news) speaks to the potency of the historical novel as a mode of reading in which history and modernity are intertwined and the present is inescapably rooted in the events of the past. If the historical novel captures history in its state of constant flux, then the extent to which critics perceived *Les Misérables* as capturing the totality of the nineteenth century indicates the genre’s capacity to conceptualize all life as steeped in the process of history.\(^\text{95}\) Furthermore, reading *Les Misérables* as a guide to *actualité*—as a factual exposé rather than fiction—implicitly validated the novel as an effective social polemic, which stood in opposition to the outcry of the novel’s detractors, who sought to punish Hugo for writing a social polemic by drawing attention to its lack of realism. Ultimately, the mania for evaluating the novel as pseudo-social science perversely

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\(^{93}\) Alain Becker, “Adolphe Gaïffe: Une Vie ardente.” Chateau d’Oron.


\(^{95}\) de Groot, 25.
and paradoxically destabilized the boundary between history and fiction—already muddled by the existence of the historical novel genre—to further deepen confusion between the two.

Debates over the authenticity of Les Misérables also brought to the fore the conflict between Romanticism and Realism, two movements that had been in fierce competition since the beginning of the century. Writers and poets from these schools did not only differ in their stylistic approaches, but also in their conceptualization of history and politics. Where Romantics valued social institutions only insofar as they were manifestations of arcane natural forces or expressions of individual human will, and believed social forces could only impact the individual negatively, Realists accepted a “realistic” multiplicity of social forces that would have varying effects in different times and places. And while the two movements were not necessarily always diametrically opposed to each other, their respective views on the nature of social processes set them apart where Les Misérables was concerned. Realist writers tended to be more conservative as individuals and ascribe psychological deficiencies to the conflicts they portrayed, which alienated them from Romantics like Hugo who strove to point the finger at society in their romans à thes.

Given the largely incompatible nature of Romanticism and Realism, both in terms of the two movements’ differing philosophies and how they were perceived by the literati of France, many critics set Les Misérables in direct opposition to Realist works that also attempted to address social issues. La Jeune Champagne, a monthly printed in Reims, devoted an article in 1904 to the development of the nineteenth-century novel, in particular observing an interplay between art, literature, and history in the works of Victor Hugo. Les Misérables was a clear successor to Notre-Dame de Paris in its acceptance of the supreme power of fate,

the author wrote, and therefore stood in opposition to works by Realist novelists like Balzac and Stendhal.\footnote{La Jeune Champagne, January 1904.} Where Realists sought to identify the multiple competing forces that affected the psychology of their characters, which in turn constituted the drama of the novel, the author maintained, Hugo’s conflation of fantasy (through characters like Valjean) and reality (through characters like Javert and Gavroche) allowed art and history to mingle freely in his works. Just as it had in matters of politics and religion, the opposition between the real and the imaginary dominated this sort of criticism by journalists around the turn of the century that saw Romanticism and Realism as fundamentally incompatible.

Even in comparing Hugo’s novel to those of his peers in the Romantic movement, critics often used verisimilitude as a distinguishing criterion. Some drew a parallel between Jean Valjean and Edmond Dantès, the hero of Dumas père’s Romantic The Count of Monte Cristo who suffers a similar fate—two characters both birthed by the Romantic movement. According to an article published in March 1894 in La Nouvelle Revue, Valjean was a far cry from a realistic or satisfying creation next to Dantès. His superhuman goodness and charity was not even believable within the realm of Hugo’s extraordinary universe, as some critics had conceded, but rather an indicator of someone completely outside the bounds of society. While Valjean—Tolstoian before his time, the author suggested—was completely out of touch with normal human passions and, in fact, suggested an acceptance of iniquity and slavery, Dumas’ Edmond Dantès was a far more masterful creation that relied on realistic characteristics to produce a sympathetic and easily identifiable character.\footnote{“Drame et comédie,” La Nouvelle Revue, May 1894.} Even disregarding the political background and ramifications of each work, stylistically it seemed that what made them either Romantic or Realist was their depiction of reality.
Still, the issue was not always black and white, and for some critics, the lines between the two genres could be blurred even while their stylistic differences were readily apparent. Where the journalist from La Nouvelle revue had designated Jean Valjean “Tolstoïan avant la lettre,” so too did literary critic André le Breton identify a connection between the works of Hugo and master Realist Tolstoy. In a 1902 article for the Revue des deux mondes titled “La Pitié sociale dans le roman,” he compared Les Misérables with Tolstoy’s newest release, Résurrection, a controversial work that sought to expose the tyranny of organized religion and the legal system. Both novels were infused with a democratic and egalitarian spirit, but where Hugo’s characters were the personification of an abstract idea, Tolstoy’s were complex, protean creatures whose individuality always prevailed; Valjean’s redemption at the hands of Bishop Myriel, for example, is quick and irreversible, while Katucha’s journey of regeneration is painful and protracted. The hero of Les Misérables is not really Valjean, but rather France herself throughout the omnipresent nineteenth-century march towards liberty, and the Valjean’s adventures are really a drama of “la vie nationale.” In short, le Bréton concluded, Hugo “nous élevait au-dessus du réel; Tolstoï nous y ramène.”99 For some critics, then, Romantic spectacle and Realist authenticity could coexist peacefully, serving two disparate purposes, even though the opposition between the real and the imaginary was still crucial in distinguishing them.

The genesis of Hugo’s novel also raised questions of reality vs. fiction. In 1911, critic René Dumesnil came out with an article for the illustrious arts review Mercure de France that investigated the origins of two volumes of Les Misérables. Along with Louis Blanc’s Histoire de dix ans, Le cloître Saint-Méry, an 1832 historical novel by Rey Dusseuil set during the

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99 “Hugo elevates us above the real; Tolstoy brings us back there.”
June Rebellion of the same year, is recognized today as having served as Hugo’s primary inspiration for the revolutionary activity dramatized in *Les Misérables*, and to Dumesnil this fact was indisputable. Hugo modeled nearly all the salient features of his two middle volumes on Dusseueil’s work: the geographic location of the barricades, their structure, the phases of combat, the route of General Lamarque’s funeral procession, the account of public discontent in Paris. While the discovery that Hugo had drawn inspiration from another work for his own was irrefutable, it by no means cheapened *Les Misérables*, Dumesnil maintained; in fact, the act of repetition in literature being unavoidable, the author should strive to express something more skillfully than those who had done so before him. Thus, he concluded, the true mark of genius comes not from originality, but from creating art with an indelibility of style.\(^\text{100}\) The inauthenticity of *Les Misérables* was permissible in this case because it concerned matters of fiction, not reality. So while disputes over the accuracy of Hugo’s portrayal of the Catholic Church had serious ramifications for the ways in which people understood novels that were rooted in both history and social justice, revealing that Hugo had parroted his sources only indicated that artists sometimes copy each other.

If Hugo was going to write a trenchant social polemic, then it would be treated as such, and by condemning *Les Misérables* as a bad work of history, critics confused what it really was: a novel that would ordinarily be judged on the merits of its artistic caliber alone. To many critics, the dialectic between art and utility in French literature was irresolvable, and a novel could be either great or practical: there was no middle ground. Charles Baudelaire’s assessment of *Les Misérables* embodied this mentality. A review he wrote for the April 1862 issue of *Le Boulevard* was, on first glance, mildly favorable; where other critics saw excess

\(^{100}\) René Dumesnil, “L’Origine de deux livres des Misérables.” *Mercure de France*. May 1, 1911.
and clumsy hyperbole, he saw the necessary ingredients of an epic: “Il est bien évident que
l’auteur a voulu… créer des abstractions vivantes, des figures idéales dont chacune,
représentant un des types principaux nécessaires du développement de sa thèse, fut élevée
jusqu’à une hauteur épique.” Baudelaire also noted the power of the text to provoke the
reader, to create a relationship between the two that transcended simple consumption,
conceding that Les Misérables was “un livre interrogeant, posant des cas de complexité
sociale, d’une nature terrible et navrante, disant à la conscience du lecteur : « Eh bien? Qu’en
pensez-vous? Que concluez-vous? »” He largely avoided critiquing the novel’s political
program, however, and only reserved praise for Hugo’s skill as a propagandist to divert public
attention to the social evils of the day. Nowhere in the review was Les Misérables
acknowledged as great—or even good—art.

In Baudelaire’s case, it was not even that art and utility were equally valuable despite
their incompatibility, but rather that utility in literature was foolish and misguided. Hugo’s
optimistic views on progress in Les Misérables were especially facile to Baudelaire, who was
privately quite conservative. Indeed, in quoting the novel’s preface (“tant qu’il y aura sur la
terre ignorance et misère…”) he replied sarcastically: “Tant que! Hélas! Autant dire
toujours!” A letter from Baudelaire to his mother, Madame Aupick, written four months
later, revealed his apparent distaste for the novel, calling it “immonde et inepte.” He also
admitted to having willfully written a review that obscured his true opinion: “J’ai montré, à ce

101 “It is evident that the author wanted to create living abstractions, idealized figures, each of which,
representing one of the principal archetypes necessary to the development of his thesis, were elevated to an epic
height.”
102 “an interrogative novel, posing complex social scenarios of a terrible and distressing nature, asking the
conscience of the reader: ‘Well? What do you think? What do you conclude?’”
104 Charles Baudelaire, Le Boulevard. April 1862.
sujet, que je possédais l’art de mentir.”

Why publish a seemingly favorable review in *Le Boulevard*, then, a paper strongly predisposed towards Hugo? The answer is prosaic: in dire physical and financial straits, Baudelaire probably elected to review *Les Misérables* in order to be guaranteed remuneration for the article’s publication, the exigencies of *Le Boulevard*’s allegiance dictating the tone of his review. But rooted therein, nevertheless, were his own aesthetic ideas, which found utility incompatible with and subordinate to great art.

Even if they did not state so outright, this was a mentality adopted by the majority of critics in assessing *Les Misérables*. A “useful” novel, or one that was written expressly as a social polemic, was one that naturally invited criticism on the basis of authenticity, as if the author had somehow renounced the right to his fictional work and was henceforth obliged to defend it as a factual report. Paradoxically, the mania for authenticity that pervaded reception of *Les Misérables* in the decades after its publication became a simultaneously authorizing and discrediting gesture. By treating the novel as an objective work of history, it implicitly recognized the history therein as at least somewhat accurate—otherwise, the rush to discredit that history would be meaningless. Although *Les Misérables* was recognized as belonging to the historical novel genre, the space it occupied in between history and literature was ambiguous to many critics, which only served to further muddle the two disciplines and ultimately agitate unresolved historical tensions. Yet amidst these debates over history, literature, reality, and fiction that raged over the last few decades of the nineteenth century, there was one constant: Hugo himself.

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105 “I showed, on this subject, that I possessed the art of lying.” Ibid, “Lettre à Madame Aupick.” August 10, 1962.
Chapter III

Despite the putative stability provided by a regime with as much longevity as the Third Republic, fin-de-siècle France was in the volatile process of discarding the cultural foundations of the nineteenth century and adopting ones that were more fit for modernity and the onset of a new millennia. To this end, the sacrosanct reputation of the nineteenth century’s greatest writer, Victor Hugo, was in serious jeopardy. Born in 1802, Hugo had lived through virtually every political regime and upheaval of the century before he died in 1885. He revised his own image as the years passed—from wunderkind of the Romantics in the 1830s, to mystical prophet during his exile in the 1850s and 60s, to hallowed superstar of the Third Republic—as well as his politics, which gradually shifted from monarchist in his youth to socialist republican in his old age. In short, Hugo was perceived as encompassing the French nineteenth century as a totalizing figure whose life and work transcended the confines of mere personhood. After his death, however, without the corporeal presence of Hugo himself—always so integral to the legendary prestige he enjoyed during his lifetime—would Hugomania persist?

Between 1885 and 1902, Hugo’s reputation remained wholly intact. The intense reactions he had always aroused in people, disciples and detractors alike, were invigorated by his posthumous sacralization as the last grand homme of the nineteenth century. Just as fin-de-siècle France fractured along Dreyfusard and anti-Dreyfusards lines, so too did people divide among Hugophiles and Hugophobes. In fact, as Graham Robb proposes, the Hugo obsession was so great that the two camps might instead be merged into a single Hugofolie, or a “collective neurosis” whose only salient feature was the idea that Hugo mattered
inordinately in some shape or form.\textsuperscript{106} Yet, as we see in the early years of the twentieth century, Hugofolie was not as interminable as it had perhaps once appeared. His works still remained enshrined in the inviolable canon of nineteenth-century literature, but the reputation of the man himself had waned; no longer would the formerly omnipresent shadow of Victor Hugo seep into his texts and color their readings. Given the oscillation in Hugomania over the last half of the century that strongly influenced perception of \textit{Les Misérables}, then, this chapter seeks to appraise the extent to which Hugo destabilized the ordinarily dyadic relationship between reader and text through his overbearing reputation. Why was Hugo as an individual indivisible to the text? Was he an anomaly in that respect, or did practices of reading in nineteenth-century France require the reader to engage with author and text in equal measure?

Because nearly all men of letters in nineteenth-century Paris were personally acquainted with Victor Hugo in one way or another, critics in particular tended to assess \textit{Les Misérables} on the basis of their relationship with him. The Goncourt brothers, widely considered the authority on literary criticism in the mid-nineteenth century (and for whom the Prix Goncourt is named), initially heralded the novel’s publication in a letter to Gustave Flaubert in December 1861: “According to the latest rumors, \textit{Les Misérables} will certainly be published next February.” They also advised him to delay the release of his own novel \textit{Salammbô}, for “Hugo has so great a hold on the critics and the public” that it would be imprudent to compete with \textit{Les Misérables} by publishing them concurrently; if he could wait until November, when “the excitement will have calmed down,” surely he would have more

\textsuperscript{106} Robb, 198.
success.

Several months later, after *Les Misérables* had been published, a scathing critique of the novel appeared in the Goncourt brothers’ own Journal. “Une grande déception pour nous, *Les Misérables* d’Hugo,” they wrote. “J’écarte la morale du livre: il n’y a point de morale en art; le point de vue humanitaire de l’œuvre m’est absolument égal. D’ailleurs, à y bien réfléchir, je trouve assez amusant de gagner deux cent mille francs,—qui est le vrai chiffre de vente—à s’apitoyer sur les misères du peuple!” (Despite the Goncourts’ disdain for *Les Misérables*, it ultimately proved an inspiration for them: in October 1862, after visiting a women’s prison in Clermont, they began writing a novel about a working-class prostitute, seeking to present “real prostitutes and criminals instead of puppets,” that was published in 1877 as *La Fille Elisa*.)

Hugo was actually paid 300,000 francs (equal to about two million dollars today), not 200,000, after convincing his publishers to grant him the largest advance payment in the history of French literature, which—as he wrote to Lacroix—sufficiently restored his finances. Accusing Hugo of hypocrisy by acquiring an exorbitant sum for a work about the underclass was a popular strategy in initial criticism of *Les Misérables*, one that also coalesced the reputation of the author and the text itself, as if Hugo’s actions were inseparable from his novel and had the power to cheapen it. For critics like the Goncourts, then, their reading of *Les Misérables* was situated at a particular point in time rather than an understanding of the text as a document that could be reinterpreted and reproduced in

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108 “I dismiss the moral of the book: there is no moral in art; the humanitarian perspective of the work is absolutely the same to me. Besides, reflecting on it, I find rather amusing the profit of one hundred thousand francs—which is the true selling price—to feel sorry for the miseries of the people!”


perpetuity; whatever they drew from the novel was irretreievably tied to their perception of its 
author as he existed in 1862.

Conversely, the author in question could also influence readings of his works 
extratextually. Though Hugo had long fought for copyright laws during his career—he was a 
founding member of the Association littéraire et artistique internationale in 1878, which 
culminated in the creation of an international agreement governing copyright in 1886—he 
relinquished the rights to his entire oeuvre in 1870. Addressing the same association he had 
helped to establish several years later, he said, “Before the publication, the author has an 
undeniable and unlimited right. […] But as soon as the work is published, the author is not 
any more the master. It is then that other persons seize it: call them what you will: human 
spirit, public domain, society.”111 His will bequeathed all his manuscripts, published and 
unfinished, to the Bibliothèque nationale de Paris, which he insisted would one day be called 
the “Bibliothèque des Etats-Unis d’Europe,”112 making him the first major French writer to do 
so.113 “Mes œuvres, c’est mon âme,” he wrote in the posthumously-published Choses Vues, 
“et mon âme appartient à mon pays.”114 But while Hugo had willingly removed himself from 
the relationship between text and reader in entrusting his works to the public, they were not 
quite ready to do the same. Thus his persona as author and celebrity remained a crucial 
influence in the readings of his works throughout the end of the nineteenth century and into 
the early twentieth, especially during those particular moments in time when the man himself 
incited spectacle.

113 Garval, 197. 
114 “My works are my soul, and my soul belongs to my country.” Victor Hugo, Choses Vues, Vol. II. 1900. 409.
Hugo’s death on May 22, 1885, triggered an exceptionally intense state of mourning in France. His funeral procession in Paris a week later attracted over two million followers, and the concurrent expression of grief across the city—predominantly through activities featuring alcohol and sex—was fittingly profligate. His subsequent interment in the Panthéon, which also housed the bodies of Voltaire and Rousseau, signaled the final sacralization of Victor Hugo as a national hero to whom the nation owed a great debt. Numerous retrospectives on Hugo’s oeuvre suddenly sprung up in the press in the weeks after his death, the majority of them reverent towards the recently deceased “Master.” Writing in Georges Clemenceau’s radical republican organ *La Justice* in June 1885, Sutter Laumann noted the transformation that had occurred in “l’âme du poète” between *Notre-Dame de Paris* and *Les Misérables*. Where his earlier works had been suffused with pity for “tout ce qui souffre et pleure,” *Les Misérables* was both a call to arms, demonstrating the need for a resolution to the “social question” (a buzzword on the agenda of every contemporary politician), as well as Hugo’s most popular work that could be found in every library across the nation. While Baudelaire had maintained in 1862 that great art was incompatible with utility, Hugophiles readily saw the two as congruent insofar as the writer’s oeuvre improved in conjunction with the advancement of his thinking. Here, Hugo the artist was linked inextricably with Hugo the politician—as one developed, so did the other. His work’s merits transcended style alone, instead drawing their power from the accomplishments of their creator.

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115 Robb, 528.
116 Sutter Laumann, *La Justice*. June 1, 1885.
Figure 1.1 — “Comme Jean Valjean aidait Cosette, Victor Hugo a aidé la jeune Marianne”
Adolphe Willette’s drawing (fig 1.1) for the menu of a banquet held in June 1893 to celebrate the posthumous publication of *Toute la Lyre*, a collection of Hugo’s poems, likewise indicated the fusion of popular perception of *Les Misérables* and its author. Captioned “Comme Jean Valjean aidait Cosette, Victor Hugo a aidé la jeune Marianne,” the piece was a visual codifier of Hugo’s immense and indespensible position in the Third Republic. He had already established his solidarity with the people of France by writing *Les Misérables*, in effect a paen to the lower classes, but upon returning from exile in 1870 he strove to sculpt an image of himself as an exemplary republican to buttress a shaky republic, as well as a transcendent cultural figure around whom the citizenry could rally. As such, he could also confer a legitimacy that was sorely lacking on the tenuous regime of the Third Republic, which was suffering from a “malaise over its solidity and future was deeply rooted in larger questions of French identity and, particularly, of how to justify France's claims to greatness in the world.”

Thus to equate Valjean carrying Cosette’s heavy bucket and ultimately becoming her father-cum-savior with Hugo helping along the fledging republic was to present a two-pronged idea: first, the elevation of Hugo to superhuman Romantic heights through an endeavor as heroic and selfless as Valjean’s; and second, the conflation of a text and its creator. Hugo’s presence become so vast that he no longer existed on a purely physical plane in the imagination of the French, but instead seemed to inhabit a liminal space between the real and the fictional in merging with his own creations.

1902, the centenary of Hugo’s birth, occasioned nearly innumerable reflections on the man and his oeuvre. A speech given by ardent Robespierrist Hippolyte Buffenoir at a conference in Nantes in honor of the event noted Hugo’s immortal legacy and identification

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118 Garval, 193.
with his creations. On *Les Misérables*, Buffenoir said, “Il y a là des souvenirs évoqués, des détails du passé qui vont à l’âme du lecteur, et qui se gravent pour toujours dans sa mémoire.” Just as critics in 1862 remarked upon the novel’s instant popularity, how the scenes and characters had permeated the hearts and minds of the French people within days of its publication, so too did Buffenoir—a testament to its longevity in the national consciousness and ability to resonate just as deeply forty years later. Yet the shadow of Hugo the genius still predominated, and indeed Buffenoir read Valjean’s final monologue on his deathbed through the lens of Hugo’s own life: “c’est en réalité Victor Hugo lui-même [qui parle], songeant à sa propre destinée, renvoyant sa jeunesse lointaine, et entrant dans cette belle vieillesse qui se prolongea longtemps et que nos contemporains ont connue.”

Valjean’s death was not only the liberation of a repentant sinner from his mortal coil, but also Hugo’s visionary contemplations on his own mortality, and thus Hugo remained a character of sorts in his own novel. However, as historian Michael Garval points out, 1902 was the watershed where Hugo’s intrusion into his texts was concerned. Celebrations for the centenary were organized mostly by scholarly associations for erudite audiences rather than the general public, and subsequently Hugo was perceived less and less as a cultural icon and more as simply a major writer of the nineteenth century.

As the twentieth century progressed and Hugo became increasingly associated with the establishment, and therefore unpopular, reflections on his person and oeuvre no longer possessed the hyperbolic tenor they once did. Historian Maurice Souriau’s “Les Idées morales

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119 “Therein are memories evoked, details of the past that pierce the soul of the reader, and that engrave themselves for eternity in her memory.”
120 “it is in reality Victor Hugo himself who speaks, dreaming of his own destiny, returning to his distant youth, and entering into this fine old age that we know well.” Hippolyte Buffenoir, *Annales de la Société royale académique de Nantes et du département de la Loire-Inférieure*. February 26, 1902.
121 Garval, 224
de Victor Hugo” in 1908 examined the initial barrage of criticism tearing into *Les Misérables* in 1862. While the critics had been fair in some ways, he said, they failed to anticipate the novel’s tremendous influence in later years; they did not explain how *Les Misérables* could have served as a model for Dostoevsky and Tolstoy, or how Hugo’s moral thesis slowly began to infiltrate the legal system in France. These feats could not simply be chalked up to a triumph of literary style, but rather a fundamental Christian influence whose tales of redemption illuminated the virtue of man guided by God. Those who initially recognized the perfusion of Christianity in the novel came at the issue from widely differing sides, Souriau continued, so while the ultramontane zealot Louis Veuillot perhaps sought to claim the genius of Victor Hugo for his own faction in discerning its “témoignage de l’âme naturellement chrétienne,” conversely George Sand called *Les Misérables* “trop chrétienne” and dismissed the entire first volume.  

In general, to use literary scholar David Charles’ phrase, criticism of *Les Misérables* eventually became criticism of criticism itself.

Thus, the more time passed, the more the formerly overbearing influence of Hugo seemed to dwindle in influencing readings of his works, and the more removed from the text critics became. By the outbreak of World War I, the extreme partisan reactions that characterized the vast majority of opinions on the novel in the nineteenth century had largely disappeared, instead giving way to a more detached tone that dovetailed with the rise of “objective” criticism in the academy. In short, Hugo was most certainly divisible from his works where before he had been arguably indivisible from them. Although Jean-Paul Sartre would assume the mantle of the century’s greatest writer, just as Hugo had before him in the preceding century, the acute identification of Hugo with his texts, particularly *Les Misérables*,

seems to be a distinctly nineteenth-century phenomenon. If the author is a construction of a given discursive regime that varies according to historical periods and their normative discourses, then Hugo must have been historically and culturally bound to the era he inhabited, and indeed the practices of reading and engagement with literature in nineteenth-century France enabled the level of celebrity that allowed Hugo to dominate readings of his works. The reception of *Les Misérables* was shaped by Hugo, too, such that critics responded not only to the text of the novel, but also to the extratextual actions of his author. And, most importantly, amidst confusion over genre and discipline that obfuscated the boundaries between fiction and reality, the abiding presence of Hugo provided relative stability: whether Hugophile or Hugophobe, critics reviewing *Les Misérables* were sure of at least that much.

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Conclusion

Now, enough time has elapsed that Hugo has returned to fashion in France and prevails as a perennial cultural icon, although “Les Mis” has certainly eclipsed the name “Victor Hugo” here in the United States, where in the past decade Les Misérables has become perhaps one of the most well-known stories in pop culture. If there is one thing we may learn from the vicissitudes of the popularity of Hugo and his works, it is that Les Misérables has inexplicably continued to resonate with readers in the 150 years since its publication. Synopses on Amazon.com for various editions and translations of the novel all seem to describe Les Misérables in the most superlative language possible: “ranks among the greatest novels of all time,” “widely considered one of the greatest novels of the nineteenth century,” “Victor Hugo’s greatest achievement,” “wildly popular since its first publication in 1862,” “one of the most important novels ever written.” The novel’s eternal popularity is usually attributed to textual elements: timeless archetypes, thrilling chase sequences, rousing episodes of resistance and revolution—even Hugo’s call to readers to develop their critical consciousness stems from a certain historical and cultural specificity within the text. In seeking to move beyond these clear-cut rationales, in attempting to discover how and why Les Misérables affected readers in the first fifty years after its publication, the answer no longer lies within the text. Only in looking outside of the novel itself can we fully understand why it attained such instant and long-lasting popularity, and why its publication was met with such extreme partisan responses.

Published at the tail end of a boom in industrialization in France, when the emergence of a truly “modern” period yielded new developments in the conceptualization of history and
literature, *Les Misérables* was, quite simply, the right novel at the right time. It was guaranteed at least a certain number of copies sold thanks to the monumental fame of its author and the following he attracted, of course, but nevertheless it proved to embody precisely the right contradictions plaguing French society such that the reaction to its release was vociferous. While critics who judged *Les Misérables* a manifestation of the entire century were perhaps somewhat exaggerated in their praise, the sentiment was genuine: the novel did, in fact, express all the tensions generated by the seemingly indefatigable specter of the French Revolution and the evolution of a modern understanding of history, both of which were a source of considerable anxiety for people involved with art and politics in the mid-nineteenth century in France.

Thus, perceived as having the capacity to express so many facets of their own lives, critics turned to *Les Misérables* as a referent for the pressing political and religious issues du jour—the rampant appropriation of the novel is evidence of enough of that. What allowed it to be such an effective tool for those purposes in the first place, however, is far more interesting. As we have seen, the fact that *Les Misérables* was a roman à thèse, in essence a social polemic designed to inspire change in policy, produced so much confusion over which genres and disciplines it ought to belong that its status as a work of fiction was implicitly disputed. The ensuing mania for authentication, which challenged the supposed veracity of Hugo’s depiction of French society, soon became so widespread that one journalist even turned to fabricating a story about the “true Jean Valjean” that would permanently establish the novel as construed from historical actuality. Critics had a vested interest in validating or disputing its authenticity, that much is clear, but either way the existence of such a mania points to the struggle of nineteenth-century France to reconcile fiction and reality. Today, *Les Misérables*
is sometimes described as “real” insofar as parallels can be drawn between its characters or themes and contemporary movements for social justice like the Arab Spring or the Tiananmen Square protests. While the specific ways in which we view the story as “real” today and critics of the nineteenth century viewed it as an objective expression of reality certainly differ, that a similar phenomenon continues to exist after 150 years is sufficient testament to the enduring resonance of Victor Hugo’s *Les Misérables*. 
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