

Hugo, Hélas! The Poetics of Excess, Umberto Eco

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DISCUSSIONS ABOUT Victor Hugo usually start with a comment by Gide who, when asked who was the greatest French poet, replied, "Hugo, hélas!" ("Hugo, alas!").¹ Anyone wanting to hit harder might go on to quote Cocteau: "Victor Hugo was a madman who believed he was Victor Hugo."²

Gide's lament meant many things, but now tends to be read as meaning that Hugo (and perhaps, in particular, Hugo the narrator) is a great writer despite his innumerable defects, his bombast, his sometimes insufferable rhetoric. Cocteau's quip, however, is not quite correct: Victor Hugo was not a madman who believed he was Victor Hugo—Victor Hugo simply believed he was God, or at least his official interpreter.

In Hugo there is always an excess in the description of earthly events, and an indomitable desire to see them always from God's point of view. The taste for excess leads him to descriptions that become interminable lists, to the creation of characters whose psychological workings are always regarded as unsustainable, rough-hewn, but whose passions are taken to such levels of paroxysm as to become memorable, a sign of the forces that move history. His desire to be God enables him to see the great forces that move human history, above and beyond the events in which his heroes are involved, and if it is not God then it is Fate, a Destiny that is sometimes presented as providence and sometimes as an almost Hegelian plan that dominates and directs the desires of individuals.

The taste for excess explains why one could mistake Hugo for the Almighty, a personality who, by definition, is larger than life, who convulses the abyss to create heaven and earth, unleashes universal floods, plunges sinners into the fiery bowels of Gehenna, and so forth (a little moderation, please!), and also justifies the plaintive lament from Gide, who evidently identified art with Apollonian poise and not with Dionysian frenzy.

I am perfectly aware of my passion for Hugo. Elsewhere I have praised his sublime excess: and excess can turn even bad writing and banality into a Wagnerian tempest. To explain the fascination of a film like *Casablanca*, I have noted³ that while a single cliché is kitsch, shamelessly letting fly a hundred clichés makes an epic; and I have noted how the Count of Monte Cristo might be badly written (unlike other novels by Dumas, such as *The Three Musketeers*) and may be rambling and verbose, but it is precisely because of these defects, taken beyond reasonable limits, that it reaches that Kantian vision of the sublime, and justifies the hold it has had, and still has, on millions of readers.⁴

But returning to Hugo, let us look at an area typical of Romantic excess, the representation of ugliness and evil.

From the time of Achilles to the dawn of Romanticism, the hero was always handsome, while from Thersites up until more or less the same period, the villain was always ugly, hideous, grotesque, or absurd. And when a hero is made from a villain, he becomes handsome, as with Milton's Satan.

But by the time we reach the gothic novel, the picture is reversed: not only does the hero appear unsettling and fearsome, but the antihero also, in his darkness, becomes if not appealing at least interesting.

Byron says of his Giaour that the glare beneath his dusky cowl was "dark and unearthly," and his eye and his bitter smile aroused fear and guilt. And Ann Radcliffe, describing another dark spirit in *The Italian*; or, *The Confessional of the Black Penitents*, tells us that his appearance was striking, his limbs large and uncouth, and as he stalked away, wrapped in the black habit of his order, his features expressed something terrible and almost superhuman, while his cowl, casting a shadow over the livid paleness of his face, gave a sense of horror to his large melancholy eyes . . .

The figure of William Beckford's Vathek was pleasing and majestic, but when angry, one of his eyes became so terrible that no person could bear to behold it, and the wretch upon whom it was fixed fell instantly backward and sometimes died. For Stevenson, Hyde was pale and dwarfish, he gave an impression of deformity without any nameable malformation, he had a displeasing smile, behaved himself with a disturbing mixture of timidity and boldness, and spoke with a husky, whispering, and somewhat broken voice, which inspired disgust, loathing, and fear.

Of Heathcliff, Emily Brontë writes that his forehead was shaded with a heavy cloud, his eyes were basilisks, and his lips seemed sealed in an expression of unspeakable sadness. And here is how Eugène Sue describes the Schoolmaster in *Les mystères de Paris*: his face scored in all directions with deep, livid scars; his lips swollen by the corrosive action of vitriol; the cartilage of his nose cut; his nostrils replaced by two shapeless holes; his head was disproportionately large; he had long arms and short, stubby hands, with hairy fingers, and bow legs and restless, mobile eyes, flashing like those of a wild beast.

But Hugo too is excessive in his descriptions of ugliness, for reasons set out in his famous preface to *Cromwell*, where he theorizes comprehensively on the revolution of beauty, which, in the Romantic period, is transformed into its opposite—into ugliness and deformity, or at least into the grotesque.

Modern ingenuity—he says—transforms giants into dwarfs; from Cyclopes gnomes are made. Contact with deformity has given modern sublimity something greater, more sublime than ancient beauty.

The grotesque is the other face of the sublime, as shadow is to light. Grotesqueness is the richest resource nature can offer art. The universal beauty that antiquity solemnly gave to everything was not without its monotony, and this impression can produce tedium through repetition. Beauty is only of one kind; there are a thousand kinds of ugliness. It is difficult to compare one sublime with another, and we need to take a rest from everything, even from beauty. The salamander makes the Ondine more attractive; the gnome makes Sisyphus more handsome.

But Hugo is more radical when he is creating than when he is theorizing. Deformity is not only a form of evil that contrasts with beauty and goodness; it is, in itself, an atrocious and unsought modesty, as if God had wanted to conceal from others, under the guise of external ugliness, an inner beauty that is destined nonetheless to be lost. Hugo softens the irredeemable ugliness of the spider and the nettle ("I love the spider and the nettle / because they hate us. / O passer-by, forgive / that obscure plant, / that poor animal, / for their ugliness and their sting. / Have pity on evil!").

Quasimodo, the hunchback of Notre-Dame, has a tetrahedral nose and a horseshoe mouth; his left eye is obstructed by a red, bushy brow, while his right disappears under an enormous wart; his straggling teeth are broken here and there like the battlements of a fortress; a tooth protrudes from his callused lip like the tusk of an elephant . . . He has a huge head, bristling with red hair; between his shoulders an enormous hump; large feet, monstrous hands, legs so strangely aligned that they could touch each other only at the knees and, viewed from the front, resembled the crescents of two scythes joined by the handles . . .

To contrast this repellent aspect, Hugo gives Quasimodo a sensitive soul and a great capacity to love. But he reaches the highest point with the figure of Gwynplaine, the Man Who Laughs.

Gwynplaine is not only the ugliest of all and, due to his ugliness, the unhappiest; he is also the most pure-spirited of all, capable of infinite love. And—paradox of Romantic ugliness—monstrous as he is, and precisely because he is monstrous, he stirs the desires of the most beautiful woman in London.

For those who have forgotten the story, let us summarize it. The scion of a noble family, kidnapped as a child in a political feud, Gwynplaine is transformed by comprachicos into a grotesque mask, his features surgically disfigured, and he is condemned to an eternal smile.

Nature had been prodigal of her kindness to Gwynplaine. She had bestowed on him a mouth opening to his ears, ears folding over to his eyes, a shapeless nose to support the spectacles of the grimace maker, and a face that no one could look upon without laughing . . .

But was it nature? Had she not been assisted? Two slits for eyes, a hiatus for a mouth, a snub protuberance with two holes for nostrils, a flattened face, all having for the result an appearance of laughter; it is certain that nature never produces such perfection single-handed . . .

Such a face could never have been created by chance; it must have resulted from intention . . . Had Gwynplaine when a child been so worthy of attention that his face had been subjected to transmutation? Why not? Needed there a greater motive than the speculation of his future exhibition? According to all appearance, industrious manipulators of children had worked upon his face. It seemed evident that a mysterious and probably occult science, which was to surgery what alchemy was to chemistry, had chiseled his flesh, evidently at a very tender age, and manufactured his countenance with premeditation. That science, clever with the knife, skilled in obtusions and ligatures, had enlarged the mouth, cut away the lips, laid bare the gums, distended the ears, cut the cartilages, displaced the eyelids and the cheeks, enlarged the zygomatic muscle, pressed the scars and cicatrices to a level, turned back the skin over the lesions whilst the face was thus stretched, from all which resulted that powerful and profound piece of sculpture, the mask, Gwynplaine. (part 2, book 2, chapter 1)

With this mask, Gwynplaine becomes an acrobat, highly popular with audiences. Since childhood he has been in love with Dea, a blind girl who performs with him. Gwynplaine had eyes for only one woman in the whole world—that blind creature. Dea idolized Gwynplaine. She would touch him and say, "How beautiful you are."

Until two things happen. Lady Josiane, the queen's sister, adored by all the gentlemen of the court for her beauty, sees Gwynplaine at the theater, sends him a letter: "You are hideous, I am beautiful. You are a player; I am a duchess. I am the highest, you are the lowest. I desire you! I love you! Come!"

Gwynplaine grapples between his feelings of excitement and desire, and his love for Dea. Then something happens. He thinks he has been arrested. He is questioned, and brought face to face with a bandit who is dying; in short, all of a sudden he has been recognized as Lord Fermain Clancharlie, baron of Clancharlie and Hunkerville, marquis of Corleone in Sicily, and an English peer, who had been kidnapped and disfigured at a tender age in a family feud.

We move onward by leaps and bounds, as Gwynplaine suddenly finds himself propelled from the gutter to the stars, hardly realizing what is going on, except that at a certain point he finds himself, extravagantly dressed, in the room of a palace that, he is told, is his.

It seems to him like an enchanted palace, and already the series of marvels he discovers there (alone in the resplendent desert), the succession of halls and chambers, is bewildering not only to him but to the reader. It is no coincidence that the title of the chapter is "The Resemblance of a Palace to a Wood," and the description of what seems like the Louvre or the Hermitage takes up five or six pages (depending on the edition). Gwynplaine wanders, dazed, from room to room until he reaches an alcove where, on the bed, beside a tub of water made ready for a virginal bath, he sees a naked woman.

Not literally naked, Hugo tells us. She is clothed. But the description of this clothed woman, especially if we see her through the eyes of Gwynplaine, who has

never seen a naked woman, certainly represents one of the heights of erotic literature.

At the center of this web, where one might expect a spider, Gwynplaine saw a formidable object—a woman naked.

Not literally naked. She was dressed. And dressed from head to foot. The dress was a long chemise, so long that it floated over her feet, like the dresses of angels in holy pictures, but so fine that it seemed liquid. From here, the appearance of female nudity, more treacherous and dangerous than real nudity . . . The silver tissue, transparent as glass, was a curtain. It was fastened only at the ceiling, could be lifted aside . . . On that bed, which was silver like the bath and the canopy, lay the woman. She was asleep . . .

Between her nudity and his gaze there were two obstacles, her chemise and the silver veil, two transparencies. The room, more an alcove than a room, was lit with a sort of discretion from the light reflected from the bathroom. The woman may have had no modesty, but the lighting did. The bed had neither columns nor canopy, so that the woman, when she opened her eyes, could see herself a thousand times naked in the mirrors above her. Gwynplaine saw only the woman. He recognized her. She was the duchess. Again he saw her, and saw her terrible.

A woman naked is a woman armed . . . That immodesty was merged in splendor. That creature lay naked with the same calm of one with the divine right of cynicism. She had the security of an Olympian who knew that she was daughter of the depths, and might say to the ocean, "Father!" And she exposed herself, unattainable and proud, to everything that should pass—to looks, to desires, to ravings, to dreams; as proud in her languor, on her boudoir couch, as Venus in the immensity of foam. (part 2, book 7, chapter 3)

And so Josiane awakens, recognizes Gwynplaine, and begins a furious seduction, which the poor man can no longer resist, except that she brings him to the peak of desire but does not yield. She erupts into a series of fantasies, more stimulating than her own nudity, in which she reveals herself as a virgin (as she still is) and a prostitute, anxious to enjoy not only the pleasures of the teratology that Gwynplaine promises her, but also the thrill of defying the world and the court, a prospect that intoxicates her. She is a Venus awaiting the double orgasm of private possession and public exhibition of her Vulcan:

"I feel degraded in your presence, and oh, what happiness that is! How insipid it is to be a grandee! I am noble; what can be more tiresome? Disgrace is a comfort. I am so satiated with respect that I long for contempt.

"I love you, not only because you are deformed, but because you are low. I love monsters, and I love mountebanks. A lover despised, mocked, grotesque, hideous, exposed to laughter on that pillory called a theater, has for me an extraordinary attraction. It is tasting the fruit of hell. An infamous lover, how exquisite! To taste the apple, not of Paradise, but of hell—such is my temptation. It is for that I hunger and thirst. I am that Eve, the Eve of the depths. Probably you are, unknown to yourself, a devil. I am in love with a nightmare. You are a moving puppet, of which the strings are pulled by a specter. You are the incarnation of infernal mirth . . . Gwynplaine, I am the throne; you are the footstool. Let us join on the same level. Oh, how happy I am in my fall! I wish all the world could know how abject I am become. It would bow down all the lower. The more man abhors, the more does he cringe. It is human nature. Hostile, but reptile; dragon, but worm. Oh, I am as depraved as are the gods! . . . Now, you are not ugly; you are deformed. Ugliness is mean, deformity is grand. Ugliness is the devil's grin behind beauty; deformity is the reverse of sublimity.

"I love you!" she cried. And she bit him with a kiss. (part 2, book 7, chapter 4)

Just as Gwynplaine is about to yield, a message arrives from the queen, telling her sister that the Man Who Laughs has been recognized as the rightful Lord Clancharlie and that he is to be her husband. Josiane comments, "Be it so." She

gets up, gives him her hand (moving from familiar to formal address), saying "Get out" to the man she had so wildly sought to seduce, and adds: "Since you are my husband, get out . . . You have no right to be here; this place is for my lover."

Gwynplaine is excessive in his disfigurement; Josiane is excessive in her initial sadomasochism, excessive in her reaction. There is another reversal in the situation, which has already been reversed through a normal recognition device (you are not an acrobat but a lord) and added to by a double change of fortune (you were a wretch, now you are not only a lord but desired by the most beautiful woman in the realm, whom you too now desire with all your confused and disturbed soul)—and this would be enough as comedy, if not as tragedy. The reversal, however, is not into tragedy (at least not for the moment: Gwynplaine will kill himself only at the end), but into a grotesque farce. The reader is exhausted and, all of a sudden, understands the threads of Destiny as well as the weave of gallant society of that century. Hugo has no shame: compared to him, Josiane is as prim as a saint.

And now we come to the other reversal of fortune. Gwynplaine—who, after the episode with Josiane, had already begun to understand the laws and powers and customs that she represents—enters the House of Lords and is greeted with suspicion and curiosity. He does nothing to make himself accepted; indeed, at the first vote he stands up and makes a passionate appeal in support of the people, and against the aristocracy who are exploiting them. It is a passage worthy of Marx's *Das Kapital*, but when spoken with a face that laughs even when it is expressing scorn, passion, pain, and love for the truth, it stirs not scorn but hilarity.

The sitting ends in fun and laughter, Gwynplaine understands that this cannot be his world, and after a desperate search, returns to Dea. She, alas, suffering more from the loss of her lover than from the illness that has afflicted her for some time, dies happily in his arms. Gwynplaine does not hold back. Divided between two worlds—one that disowns him and the other that has gone—he kills himself. Thus, in Gwynplaine, the quintessential Romantic hero, we find a synthesis of all the elements of the Romantic novel: purest passion, the temptation and fascination of sin, the rapid reversals of fortune with his passage from the depths of poverty to the magnificence of the court, his titanic rebellion against the world of injustice, his heroic testimony to truth, even at the cost of losing everything, the death of his lover from consumption, a destiny crowned by his own suicide. But everything highly exaggerated.

The Hunchback of Notre-Dame, though an early work, shows all the signs of a poetics of excess. In the opening chapters, to create the idea of public celebration and the participation of the aristocracy as well as members of the bourgeoisie and the populace, to create the impression of grouillement (to use Hugo's word), of a teeming mass, the reader has to digest a vast series of names of characters who may be historical but are completely unfamiliar and therefore meaningless. Heaven help anyone who tries to identify them, or to find out anything about them.

It is like watching a procession—perhaps a July 14 parade in Paris or Trooping the Colour in London—where we cannot identify the various regiments from their uniforms and know nothing about their history, but are struck by the immensity of the parade, and woe betide us if we see only half of it, since we will lose the charm and majesty of the event. Hugo never says to us, "There was a crowd." He puts us right there in the middle of it, as if he is presenting each of its members to us one by one. We can shake a few hands, pretend to recognize someone we ought to know, and then return home with the feeling of experiencing its immensity.

The same can be said about Gringoire's Dantesque visit to the Court of Miracles, among villains, vagrants, beggars, defrocked priests, young delinquents, whores, gypsies, narquois, coquillarts, hubins, sabouilleux, false cripples, cutpurses, scoundrels, and so on. We don't need to recognize them all: it is the

descriptions of them that create the effect; we have to feel the place teeming with criminals and wretches to understand this turbulent festering swamp population who, many chapters later, will attack the cathedral like an immense colony of termites, sewer rats, cockroaches, locusts—the protagonist is not one person but the mass. In short, we have to learn to read through the inventories, lists, catalogs like a flow of music. And then we become absorbed into the book.

And we arrive at the point where the poetics of excess is apparent through the technique of the catalog and the list. Hugo uses this technique on countless occasions but perhaps it is used most continuously, most completely and convincingly in *Ninety-three*.

Though we might be able to spot and list many shortcomings in this book—above all, the rhetorical incontinence—as we thrust the knife deeper in the wound, they begin to appear splendid to us. It would be like a devotee of Bach and his disembodied, almost cerebral compositions, saying that Beethoven creates more noise in comparison with those fine pieces for the well-tempered clavier: but to what purpose? Can we resist the power of the Fifth or the Ninth?

We can avoid indulging in a Pantagruelian feast, but once we have accepted the rules of the game, there is no point remembering the dietitian's advice or longing for the delicate sensations of nouvelle cuisine. If we have the stomach to join the orgy, it will be an unforgettable experience. Otherwise it is better to leave straightaway and lull ourselves to sleep reading a few aphorisms by an eighteenth-century gentleman. Hugo is not for the faint-hearted. Yet while the battle of *Hernani* is later than *Sturm und Drang*, the shadow of that storm and that assault still illuminates the last Romantic in 1874, the date of the novel's publication (though not of its gestation).

To understand just how *Ninety-three* is fueled by excess, let us look at the story, which, all in all, is very simple, though heavily melodramatic, and in the hands of an Italian opera librettist could have produced the equivalent, perhaps, of *Tosca* or *Il trovatore* (by which I mean their plots, without the music that allows us to take the verses more seriously).

It is the *annus horribilis* of the Revolution. The Vendée is in revolt. An old aristocrat with a glorious military past, the marquis de Lantenac comes ashore to take command of the peasant masses, who emerge like devils from mysterious forests and shoot while they recite the rosary. The Revolution, in the form of the Convention, has set its men against him.

First there is Gauvain (Lantenac's nephew), a young aristocrat turned republican, a man of feminine beauty fired with warlike fervor, but an angelic utopian who still hopes that the conflict can be settled in a spirit of compassion and respect for the enemy. Then we meet Cimourdain, a man we'd call a political adviser today. He is a former priest, as ruthless as Lantenac, who is convinced that social and political regeneration will happen only through a bloodbath, and that every hero pardoned today will become the enemy who will kill us tomorrow. Cimourdain, moreover—melodrama does have its demands—was Gauvain's tutor when he was a child and loves him like a son. Hugo never allows us to think of a passion different from that of a man (first celibate through faith and later through revolutionary vocation) who is consecrated to spiritual fatherhood—but who knows? Cimourdain's passion is ferocious, complete, and carnally mystical.

In this struggle between Revolution and Reaction, Lantenac and Gauvain try to kill each other, attacking and retreating in a whirl of endless massacres. Yet this story of multiple horrors opens when a hungry widow and her three children are discovered by the men of a republican battalion, who decide to adopt the children one radiant day in May when "les oiseaux gazouillaient au-dessus des baïonnettes." The children will later be captured by Lantenac, who shoots the mother and takes the little ones (now republican mascots) as hostages. The mother survives the execution and wanders about, desperately looking for them, while the republicans fight to free the three innocent captives, who are held prisoner in the dark medieval tower where Lantenac is then besieged by Gauvain.

After fierce resistance, Lantenac manages to escape from the siege along a secret passage, but his followers have set fire to the tower and the children are about to perish. The desperate mother reappears, and Lantenac (who undergoes a sort of transfiguration and is transformed from Satan into a salvific Lucifer) reenters the tower and allows himself to be captured by his enemies in order to rescue the children and bring them to safety.

While waiting for the trial that Cimourdain has organized on the spot, arranging for the guillotine to be brought there, Gauvain asks himself whether a man who has redeemed his errors through an act of generosity has to be sent to death. He enters the prisoner's cell where, in a long monologue, Lantenac reaffirms the rights of the throne and the altar. In the end Gauvain lets Lantenac escape, and waits in the cell in his place. When Cimourdain discovers what he has done, he has no choice but to put Gauvain on trial and, with his casting vote, to decide his death—the death of the only person he has ever loved.

The recurring theme of the three children to some extent accompanies the troubled story of Gauvain, who, through his kindness and compassion, will face the punishment that awaits him, and both of the themes cast a ray of hope on that future that can only be brought about through human sacrifice. It is to no avail that the whole army shouts out for their commander to be reprieved. Cimourdain knows the suffering of deepest love but has dedicated his life to duty, to the law, and he is guardian of that revolutionary purity that is identified with terror—or rather, with the Terror. Yet at the moment Gauvain's head rolls into the basket, Cimourdain fires his pistol into his own heart, "and those two souls, tragic sisters, took flight together, the shadow of the one blending with the light of the other."

Is that it? Did Hugo simply want to reduce us to tears? Of course not, and the first observation has to be made in narrative rather than political terms. It is now part of the *koinè*, the common language of every scholar of narrative structures (and I will avoid making learned reference to secondary theoretical notions), that in a story the actors of course take part in the action, but the actors are the embodiment of the actants, which might be described as the narrative roles through which the actors can pass, perhaps changing their function in the plot structure. For instance, in a novel like *I promessi sposi* (*The Betrothed*), the forces of evil or human weakness can act against the forces of a providence that controls everyone's destinies, and one and the same actor, such as *L'Innominato*, can suddenly change from the role of Opponent to that of Auxiliary. And—compared to actors chained to an unchangeable actant role, such as Don Rodrigo on the one hand and Fra Cristoforo on the other—this explains the ambiguity of Don Abbondio, "a vessel of fragile earthenware, obliged to journey in company with many vessels of iron," who constantly moves from one role to another, and this is why we feel, in the end, that his bewilderment is forgivable.

When Hugo, in his old age, wrote this novel, which he had been pondering for some time (he had mentioned it in the preface to *The Man Who Laughs*, several years earlier), the political and ideological position of his youth had drastically changed. Although as a young man he had expressed legitimist ideas and had supported the Vendée, he later regarded 1793 as a cloud in the blue sky of 1789 and moved toward liberal, then socialist principles and then, after Louis Napoleon's coup d'état, toward socialist, democratic, and republican principles. In his 1841 admission speech to the Académie française, he paid tribute to the Convention, which "smashed the throne and saved the country, . . . which committed acts and outrages that we might detest and condemn, but which we must admire." Though he did not understand the Paris Commune, after the Restoration he fought for an amnesty for the communards. In short, the gestation and publication of *Ninety-three* coincide with the completion of his movement toward an increasingly radical position. To understand the Commune, Hugo must justify even the Terror. He had fought for a long time against the death penalty but—mindful of the great reactionary lesson of an author he knew well, Joseph de Maistre—he knew that redemption and purification also occur through the horrors of human sacrifice.

His reference to de Maistre appears in book 1, chapter 4, of *Les misérables*, in that scene where Monsignor Myriel contemplates the guillotine:

He who sees it shivers with the most mysterious of shivers . . . The scaffold is a vision . . . It seems as though it were a being, possessed of I know not what sombre initiative; one would say that this piece of carpenter's work saw, that this machine heard, that this mechanism understood, that this wood, this iron, and these cords were possessed of will . . . The scaffold is the accomplice of the executioner; it devours, it eats flesh, it drinks blood . . . a spectre which seems to live with a horrible vitality composed of all the death which it has inflicted. (translated by Isabel F. Hapgood)

But in Ninety-three the guillotine, even though it will kill the Revolution's purest hero, passes from the side of death to that of life and, in any event, stands as a symbol for the future against the darkest symbols of the past. It is now erected in front of La Tourgue, the stronghold where Lantenac is besieged. Fifteen hundred years of feudal sin are condensed in it—a hard knot to untie. The guillotine stands before it with the purity of a blade that will slice through that knot—it was not created out of nothing, it has been drenched by the blood spilled over fifteen centuries on that same land, and it rises up from the ground, an unknown vindicator, and says to the tower, "I am thy daughter." And the tower realizes that its end is near. This exchange is not new for Hugo: it is reminiscent of Frollo in *The Hunchback of Notre-Dame*, when he compares the printed book to the towers and gargoyles of the cathedral: "Ceci tuera cela." Though the guillotine is still a monster, in Ninety-three it takes the side of the future.

What is a ferocious, death-giving monster that promises a better life? An oxymoron. Victor Brombert has observed how many oxymorons populate this novel: rapacious angel, intimate discord, colossal sweetness, odiously obliging and terrible serenity, venerable innocents, frightening wretches, hell in the midst of dawn, and Lantenac himself, who at one point shifts from being an infernal Satan to a celestial Lucifer.⁵ The oxymoron is "a rhetorical microcosm that affirms the substantially antithetical nature of the world," though Brombert emphasizes that the antitheses are ultimately resolved into a higher order. Ninety-three tells the story of a virtuous crime, a healing act of violence whose deep purposes must be understood for its events to be justified. Ninety-three is not the story of what a few men did, but the story of what history forced those men to do, irrespective of their wishes, often undermined by contradictions. And the idea of a purpose to the story justifies even that force—the Vendée—which ostensibly seeks to move against it.

This takes us back to defining the relationship between the novel's minor actors and the actants. Each individual and each object, from Marat to the guillotine, represent not themselves but the great forces that are the actual protagonists of the novel. Hugo presents himself here as the authorized interpreter of divine will, and seeks to justify each story he tells from the point of view of God.

Whatever Hugo's God might be, he is always present in his narrative to explain the bloody enigmas of history. Perhaps Hugo would never have written that everything real is rational, but he would have agreed that everything ideal is rational. In any event, there is always a Hegelian tone in acknowledging that history marches toward its own ends, over the heads of the actors condemned to embody its purposes. Just think of the Beethovenian description of the Battle of Waterloo in *Les misérables*. Unlike Stendhal, who describes the battle through the eyes of Fabrizio, who is in the midst of it and doesn't understand what is going on, Hugo describes the battle through the eyes of God—he watches it from above.

He knows that if Napoleon had known there was a cliff beyond the crest of the Mont-Saint-Jean plateau (but his guide had failed to tell him about it), Milhaud's cuirassiers would not have been destroyed by the English army; that if the shepherd boy who was Bülow's guide had suggested a different route, the

Prussian army would not have arrived in time to decide the fate of the battle. But what does it matter, and what is the importance of the miscalculations of Napoleon (actor), the folly of Grouchy (actor)—who could have returned but didn't—or the ruses, if such they were, of the actor Wellington, seeing that Hugo describes Waterloo as a first-rate victory by a second-rate leader?

This vertigo, this terror, this downfall into ruin of the loftiest bravery which ever astounded history,—is that causeless? No. The shadow of an enormous right hand is projected athwart Waterloo . . . The disappearance of the great man was necessary to the advent of the great century. Someone, a person to whom one replies not, took the responsibility on himself. The panic of heroes can be explained. In the battle of Waterloo there is something more than a cloud, there is something of the meteor. God has passed by. (volume 2, book 1, chapter 13)

And God also passes through the Vendée and the Convention, gradually putting on the actorial guise of wild, ferocious peasants, of aristocrats converted to égalité, of heroes gloomy and nocturnal like Cimourdain, or radiant like Gauvain. Hugo sees the Vendée rationally, as a mistake. But since this mistake was deliberate and kept under control by a providential (or fatal) plan, he is fascinated by the Vendée, and turns it into an epic. He is skeptical, sarcastic, petty in describing the men who populate the Convention, but he sees them as giants, or rather, he gives us a gigantic picture of the Convention.

This is why he isn't worried that his actors are psychologically rigid and bound up in their destiny. He isn't worried that the cold frenzies of Lantenac, the harshness of Cimourdain, or the hot passionate sweetness of his Homeric Gauvain (Achilles? Hector?) are improbable. Hugo wants us to feel through them the Great Forces at play.

He wants to tell us a story about excess, and about excess that is so inexplicable that it can only be described through oxymorons. What style do you use to talk about one excess, about many excesses? An excessive style. That is exactly the style that Hugo adopts.

We have seen in *The Man Who Laughs* that one of the manifestations of excess is the vertiginous reversal in events and points of view. It is difficult to explain this technique, of which Hugo is the master. He knows that the rules of tragedy require what the French call a coup de théâtre. In classical tragedy, one is generally more than enough: Oedipus discovers he has killed his father and slept with his mother—what more do you want? End of the tragic action, and catharsis—if you're able to swallow it.

But for Hugo this is not enough (doesn't he believe he is Victor Hugo, after all?). Let us see what happens in *Ninety-three*. The corvette *Claymore* is trying to break through the republican naval blockade along the Brittany coast to bring ashore Lantenac, the future head of the Vendée revolt. It looks like a freighter from the outside but is armed with thirty guns. And the drama begins—Hugo, lest we fail to realize its magnitude, announces that “nothing more terrible could have happened.” A twenty-four-pounder cannon breaks loose. In a ship that plunges and pitches at the mercy of a rough sea, a cannon rolling from port to starboard is worse than enemy fire.

It hurtles about, like one of its cannonballs, crashing into the walls, opening up leaks. No one can stop it. And the ship is destined to sink. It is a supernatural beast, Hugo warns us, fearing that we haven't yet understood, and to avoid any misunderstanding, he describes the catastrophic event for five pages. Until one brave gunner, playing with the iron beast like a matador with a bull, takes up the challenge, throws himself before it, risking his life, dodges it, provokes it, attacks it once again, and is about to be crushed by it when Lantenac throws a bale of counterfeit banknotes between its wheels, stopping it for a moment, allowing the sailor to plunge an iron bar between the spokes of its hind wheels, to lift up the monster, turn it over, and restore it to its mineral immobility. The crew rejoices. The sailor thanks Lantenac for having saved his life. Shortly afterward, before the whole crew, Lantenac commends him

for his courage and, taking a cross of Saint-Louis from an officer, pins it on his chest.

Then he orders him to be shot.

He has been brave, but he was also the gunner in charge of that cannon, and he should have prevented it from breaking loose. The man, with the medal on his chest, offers himself up to the firing squad.

Is this reversal enough? No. With the ship now damaged, Lantenac will reach the coast in a small boat rowed by a sailor. Halfway there, the sailor reveals he is the brother of the executed man and declares he will kill Lantenac, who then stands up before this avenger and makes a speech that carries on for five pages. He explains what duty means, reminds him that their duty is to save France, to save God; he convinces him that he, Lantenac, has acted in accordance with justice, while if the sailor yields to the desire for revenge, he will be committing the greatest injustice ("You take my life from the King, and you give your eternity to the devil!"). The sailor, overcome, asks him for forgiveness. Lantenac grants it, and from that moment, Halmalo, the failed avenger, will become the servant of his brother's executioner, in the name of the Vendée.

Enough of this excessive series of reversals. Let us turn to the other, and principal, force for excess, the Endless List. Having described the leader, he has to give an idea of the army that awaits him. Hugo wants to build up a picture, village by village, castle by castle, region by region, of every aspect of the uprising in support of the monarchy. He could, rather flatly, have reproduced a map of those towns, marking out the main centers of revolt. But he would have ended up reducing to a regional dimension an event he wanted to portray as cosmic. Instead, with remarkable narrative inventiveness, he devises a messenger reminiscent of a Pico della Mirandola. Halmalo cannot read, which suits Lantenac very well—a man who reads is a hindrance. It is enough that he has a good memory. And he gives him his instructions, which I will set out only in part, because this time the list covers eight pages.

"Good. Listen, Halmalo. You must go to the right and I to the left. I shall go in the direction of Fougères, and you must go towards Bazouges. Keep your bag, which gives you the appearance of a peasant. Conceal your weapons. Cut a stick for yourself in the hedges. Creep through the rye, which is high . . . Keep a distance from those you meet. Avoid the roads and the bridges. Do not enter Pontorson . . . You know the woods?"

"Everywhere."

"All over the country?"

"From Noirmoutiers to Laval."

"You know their names too?"

"I know the woods, I know their names, I know all of them."

"You will not forget anything?"

"Nothing."

"Good. Now, pay attention. How many leagues can you walk a day?"

"Ten, fifteen, eighteen, twenty, if necessary."

"It will be necessary. Don't lose a word of what I am going to tell you. You must go to the woods of Saint-Aubin."

"Near Lamballe?"

"Yes. On the edge of the ravine between Saint-Rieul and Plédéliac there is a great chestnut-tree. You must stop there. You will see nobody . . . You must make a call. Do you know how to make this call?" . . .

He handed the green silk bow to Halmalo.

"Here is my badge of command. Take it. It is important that nobody should know my name at present. But this bow will be enough. The fleur-de-lis was embroidered by Madame Royal, in the Temple prison . . . Listen carefully to this. This is the order: 'Rise in revolt. No quarter.' Then on the edge of the

woods of Saint-Aubin give the call. You must give it three times. The third time you will see a man come out of the ground . . . This man is Planchenault, also called Coeur-de-Roi. Show him this knot. He will understand. Then go, whatever way you can, to the woods of Astillé; you will find there a knock-kneed man surnamed Mousqueton, and who shows pity to nobody. You will tell him that I love him and that he is to stir up his parishes.

You will then go to the woods of Couesbon, which is one league from Ploërmel. Make the call of the owl; a man will come, out of a hole; it will be M. Thuault, seneschal of Ploërmel, who has belonged to what is called the Constitution Assembly, but on the good side. Tell him to arm the castle of Couesbon, belonging to the marquis de Guer, a refugee . . . Then go to Saint-Guen-les-Toits, and speak to Jean Chouan, who is, in my eyes, the real chief. Then go to the woods of Ville-Anglose, where you will see Gutter, called Saint-Martin. Tell him to have an eye for a certain Courmesnil, son-in-law of old Goupil de Préfelin, and who leads the Jacobins of Argentan. Remember all this well. I write nothing because nothing must be written . . . Then go to the woods of Rougefeu, where Miélette is, who leaps ravines, balancing himself on a long pole."

I jump ahead three whole pages:

"Go to Saint-M'Hervé. There you will see Gaulier, called Grand-Pierre. Go to the district of Parné, where the men blacken their faces . . . Go to the camp of La Vache Noire, which is on a height, in the midst of the wood of La Charnie, then to the camp of L'Avoine, then to Champ Vert, then to Champ des Fourmis. Go to the Grand-Bordage, also called the Haut-du-Pré, which is inhabited by a widow whose daughter is married to Treton, called the Englishman. The Grand-Bordage is in the parish of Queslaines. You must go to Épineux-le-Chevreuil, Sillé-le-Guillaume, Parannes, and all the men in every wood . . ."

And so on to the final exchange:

"Forget nothing."

"Have no fear."

"Start now. God be with you. Go."

"I will do all you have told me. I will go. I will speak the word. I will obey. I will command." (book 3, chapter 2)

It is, of course, impossible for Halmalo to remember everything, and the reader is fully aware of it—one line later, we have already forgotten the names on the previous line. The list is tedious, but it has to be read, and reread. It is like music. Pure sound, it could be an index of names at the back of an atlas, but this frenzy of cataloging makes the Vendée into an infinity.

The technique of the list is an ancient one. The catalog becomes useful when something has to appear so immense and confused that a definition or description would be insufficient to show its complexity, especially to give the feeling of a space and all it contains. The list or catalog does not fill up a space (which in itself would be neutral) with significant phenomena, associations, facts, details that catch the eye. It brings together objects or people, or places. It is a hypotyposis, which creates a description through an excess of flatus vocis, as if the ear had given the eye part of the impossible task of memorizing everything it hears, or as if the imagination was striving to construct a place in which to put all the things named. The list is a Braille hypotyposis.

Nothing is inessential in the list that Halmalo is pretending (I hope) to remember: altogether it represents the very enormosity of the counterrevolution, its extension throughout the land, into the hedgerows, villages, woods, and parishes. Hugo knows every ploy, as well as being aware (as perhaps Homer also was) that readers would never read the whole list (or that those listening to the ancient bard would have listened in the same way that

people listen to the recital of the rosary, yielding to its pure captivating incantation). Hugo, I am sure, knew that his reader would have skipped these pages, as Manzoni did when, contrary to every rule of narrative, he leaves us in suspense with Don Abbondio faced by two villains, and then gives us four pages about local laws and edicts (four in the 1840 edition, but almost six in the 1827 edition). The reader skips over these pages (or might perhaps look at them on a second or third reading), but we cannot ignore the fact that the list is there before our eyes, forcing us to jump ahead as the suspense is unbearable—it is its unbearableness that amplifies its power. Returning to Hugo, the insurrection is so enormous that we, while reading it, cannot remember all the main characters, or even just their leaders. It is the compunction of this prolonged reading that makes us feel the sublimity of the Vendée.

The Royalist revolt is sublime, as must be the picture of the Convention, the very essence of the Revolution. We reach the third book, titled "The Convention." The first three chapters describe the hall, and already in these first seven pages the abundance of description leaves the reader dazed and deprived of all feeling of space. But it then continues—for another fifteen pages—with the list of the members of the Convention, more or less as follows:

On the right, the Gironde, a legion of thinkers; on the left the Mountain, a group of athletes. On one side, Buissot, who received the keys of the Bastille; Barbaroux, whom the Marseilles troops obeyed; Kervélegan, who had the battalion of Brest garrisoned in the Faubourg Saint-Marceau, under his hand; Gersonné, who established the supremacy of representatives over generals . . . Sillery, the humpback of the Right, as Couthon was the cripple of the Left. Lause-Duperret, who when called a "rascal" by a journalist, invited him to dine with him, saying: "I know that rascal means simply a man who does not think as we do"; Rabaut-Saint-Étienne, who commenced his Almanac of 1790 with these words: "The revolution is ended" . . .

Vigée, who had the title of grenadier in the second battalion of Mayenne-et-Loire, who, when threatened by the public tribunes, cried out: "I ask that at the first murmur of the public tribunes, we withdraw and march to Versailles, sword in hand!"; Buzot, destined to die of hunger; Valazé, victim of his own dagger; Condorcet, who was to die at Bourg-la-Reine, changed to Bourg-Égalité, denounced by the Horace he carried in his pocket; Pétion, whose fate was to be worshiped by the multitude in 1792, and devoured by the wolves in 1793; twenty others beside, Pontécoulant, Marboz, Lidon, Saint-Martin, Dussaulx, the translator of Juvenal, who took part in the campaign of Hanover; Boilleau, Bertrand, Lesterp-Beauvais, Lesage, Gomaire, Gardien, Mainvielle, Duplantier, Lacaze, Antiboul, and at their head a Barnave called Vergniaud . . .

And so on, for fifteen pages, like the litany of a black mass, Antonie-Louis-Léon Florelle de Saint-Just, Merlin de Thionville, Merkin de Douai, Billaud-Varenne, Fabre d'Églantine, Fréron-Thersite, Osselin, Garan-Coulon, Javogues, Camboulas, Collot, d'Herbois, Goupilleau, Laurent Lecointre, Léonard Bourdoïn, Bourbotte, Levasseur de la Sarthe, Reverchon, Bernard de Saintres, Charles Richard, Châteauneuf-Randon, Lavicomterie, Le Peletier de Saint-Fargeau, almost as if Hugo realized that anyone reading this mad catalog would have lost the identity of the actors in order to become aware of the titanic dimensions of the only actant he was interested in—the Revolution itself, with its glories and its miseries.

Yet it seems that Hugo (was it due to weakness, shyness, excessive excess?) is worried that the reader (even though he presumably skips ahead) will not fully grasp the dimensions of the monster he wishes to portray and so—using an entirely new technique in the history of the list, and in any case different from the description of the Vendée—the author's moralizing voice continually intervenes at the beginning, at the end, in the list itself:

Here is the Convention.
The attention must be fixed on this summit.

Never did anything higher appear on man's horizon.
There is Mt. Himalaya, and there is the Convention . . .
The Convention is the first avatar of the people . . .
The effect of all this was intense, savage, regular. Savage correctness; this is
a suggestion of the whole Revolution . . .
Nothing was more deformed, nor more sublime. A pile of heroes, a herd of
cowards. Wild beasts on a mountain, reptiles in a marsh . . . A gathering of
Titans . . .
Tragedies knotted by giants and untied by dwarfs . . .
Minds, a prey to the wind. But this wind a miraculous wind . . .

Such was this boundless Convention; an entrenched camp of the human race
attacked by all the powers of darkness at once, the night fires of a besieged
army of ideas, the immense bivouac of minds on the edge of a precipice. Nothing
in history can be compared to this gathering, both senate and populace, conclave
and street crossing, areopagus and public square, tribunal and the accused.

The Convention always yielded to the wind; but the wind came from the mouth of
the people and was the breath of God . . .
It is impossible not to give attention to this great procession of shades.
(section 2, book 3, chapter 1)

Unbearable? Unbearable. Bombastic? Much worse. Sublime? Sublime. See how I am
being swept away by my author and have even begun to speak like him: but when
bombast bursts its banks, breaks down the wall of the sound of excessive excess,
a hint of poetry begins to form. Hélas.

Authors (unless they are writing with no interest in money and no hope of
immortality, for a readership of seamstresses, traveling salesmen, or lovers of
pornography whose tastes at that specific time and in one given country are
well-known) never write for their own specific kind of reader but try to
construct a Model Reader—in other words, the kind of reader who, having accepted
from the beginning the rules of the textual game on offer, will become the ideal
reader of that book, even a thousand years later. What kind of Model Reader is
Hugo thinking of? I think he had two kinds in mind. The first was someone
reading in 1874, eighty years after the fateful year of 1793—someone who still
knew many of the names of the Convention.

It would be like someone in Italy today reading a book about the 1920s, who
would not be taken completely by surprise at the sight of names like Mussolini,
D'Annunzio, Marinetti, Facta, Corridoni, Matteotti, Papini, Boccioni, Carrà,
Italo Balbo, or Turati. The second kind is the future reader (or perhaps even
the foreign reader of Hugo's time), who—with the exception of a few names like
Robespierre, Danton, and Marat—would have been bewildered in the face of so many
unfamiliar names; but at the same time, he would have the impression of
listening to endless tittle-tattle about the village he is visiting for the
first time and where he gradually learns to separate himself from the crowd of
contradictory figures, to sniff the atmosphere, to become accustomed little by
little to moving about in that crowded arena where he imagines that each unknown
face is a mask hiding a story of bloodshed and is, ultimately, one of the many
masks of history.

As I have said, Hugo is not interested in the psychology of his wooden or
marmoreal characters. He is interested in the antonomasia to which they relate
or, if you like, their symbolic value. The same applies for things: for the
forests of the Vendée, or for La Tourgue, the immense Tour Gauvain in which
Lantenac is besieged by Gauvain, both men attached to the ancestral fortress
that both will try to destroy, one laying siege from outside and the other
besieged within, each threatening a final holocaust. Much has been written about
the symbolic value of this tower, not least because another innocent symbolic
gesture takes place in it—the destruction of a book by the three children.

The children are hostages of Lantenac, who threatens to blow them up if the

republicans try to set them free. They are locked in the library of the besieged tower and have nothing better to do than destroy, transforming a magnificent book about Saint Bartholomew into a pile of paper fragments—and there are those who see in their gesture the reenactment, in reverse, of the night of Saint Bartholomew, carried out to the shame of the monarchy of the time, and therefore perhaps a revenge of history, a childish antistrophe of that work of annihilating the past that is being carried out elsewhere by the guillotine. What is more, the title of the chapter that narrates this story is “The Massacre of Saint Bartholomew”—Hugo was always worried his readers weren’t quaking quite enough.

But this gesture, due to its excess, can also be seen as symbolic. The children’s games are described in every detail for fifteen pages, and it is thanks to this excess that Hugo warns us that we are not dealing even here with an individual story but with the tragedy of an actant—Innocence—which is at least benevolent if not redemptive. He could obviously have resolved everything in a sudden epiphany. That he was capable of doing so can be seen in the last lines of book 3, chapter 6—little Georgette picks up handfuls of the book assigned to that sacred sparagmos, throws them from the window, sees them being scattered in the breeze, and says, “Papillons”—and the ingenuous massacre ends with these butterflies disappearing into thin air.

But Hugo could not weave this very brief epiphany into the plot of so many other excesses at the risk of it going unnoticed. If excess is to exist, even the most dazzling numinous apparitions (contrary to every mystical tradition) have to last for a very long time. In Ninety-three, even charm must appear murky, like a froth of white-hot lava, waters spilling forth, inundations of affections and of effects. It is pointless asking Wagner to reduce his entire Ring to the size of a Chopin scherzo.

So as not to allow our author to take over, let us move on finally to the end. After a truly epic battle (what a great screenwriter Hugo would have made!), Gauvain finally captures Lantenac. The duel is over. Cimourdain has no hesitation and—even before the trial—gives orders for the guillotine to be set up. Killing Lantenac would mean killing the Vendée, and killing the Vendée would mean saving France.

But Lantenac, as I revealed at the beginning, has voluntarily given himself up to save the three children who were in danger of being burned to death in the library to which he alone had the key. In the face of this gesture of generosity, Gauvain does not have the heart to send the man to his death, and saves him. Hugo uses other rhetorical devices to compare two worlds, first in the dialogue between Lantenac and Gauvain, and then in the dialogue between Cimourdain and Gauvain, who at that point awaits his death. In Lantenac’s first invective against Gauvain (before realizing he was going to save him), he expresses all the arrogance of the *ci-devant* before the representative of those who have guillotined the king. In the confrontation between Cimourdain and Gauvain a deep gulf appears between the high priest of vengeance and the apostle of hope.

I would like man to be made according to Euclid, says Cimourdain, and Gauvain replies that he would like man to be made according to Homer. The whole novel suggests to us (in stylistic terms) that Hugo would have taken Homer’s part, which is why he fails to make us loathe his Homeric Vendée, but in ideological terms this Homer has tried to tell us that to build the future it is necessary to follow the straight line of the guillotine.

This is the story told in the novel, the story of Hugo’s stylistic choices, the story of one interpretation (my own—and others are possible). What can we say? That historians have identified many anachronisms and unacceptable liberties in this book? Does that matter? Hugo wasn’t interested in writing history; he wanted us to feel the panting breath, the often fetid roar of history. Did he want to deceive us, like Marx, who claimed that Hugo was more interested in the moral conflicts of individual people than in understanding the class struggle?6

If anything, it was the opposite, and he said so.

Hugo carves his psychological portraits with a hatchet to make us feel the forces in conflict—and if it wasn't class conflict that he was thinking about, it was certainly (as Lukács recognized) the ideals of a "revolutionary democracy that point the way ahead"—though Lukács then tempered his judgment with the stern warning that "the real human and historical conflicts of the aristocrat and the priest who sided with the Revolution become, for each of them, artificial conflicts of duty in the context of this abstract humanism."⁷ Heavens above, it has even been suggested that Hugo was not interested in class but in the People and in God. It was typical of Lukács's mental rigidity that he failed to understand that Hugo could not be Lenin (if anything, Lenin was a Cimourdain who doesn't kill himself) and that indeed the tragic and Romantic magic of *Ninety-three* lies in the interplay between the reasons of history and those of various moral individuals, measuring the constant divide between politics and utopia.

But I believe there is no better book for understanding the underlying motives of the Revolution and of its enemy, the Vendée, which is an ideological force even today for so many nostalgics of *la France profonde*. To tell the story of two excesses, Hugo (faithful to his poetics) could choose only the technique of excess, taken from excess. Only by accepting this convention is it possible to understand the Convention, becoming the Model Reader that Hugo had hoped to reach—made not with flimsy cardboard cutouts but with an opus incertum of rough-hewn boulders. If we enter into the spirit that animates this novel, we may come out dry-eyed but with our minds in tumult. Hélas!

[Previously unpublished in this form, this essay summarizes various articles and lectures.]

The end