

REPRESENTATIONS OF INVISIBILITY IN VICTOR HUGO'S *L'HOMME QUI RIT*

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It has been argued that Hugo's modernity lies in his fascination with mirror effects, dissolving processes, and traces. This fascination is generally studied in terms of literary motifs or themes: the grotesque, the tower of Babel, and exile to name a few. I would like to bypass motifs and thematic concerns to discuss the essential quality of Hugo's aforementioned fascination, which is another fascination, a fascination with invisibility. In the literary text, this fascination channels itself in textual moments where things, happenings or occurrences, which have solid form or are considered visible entities on the level of mimesis, are later, through a semiotic process of textual transformation, recognized to be entirely invisible. Invisible here signifies an invisibility proper to the Hugolian corpus and will be defined negatively through periphrasis.

Before passing to the text, I will present *mimesis*, *representation* and *semiosis* using definitions provided by Michael Riffaterre.¹ Mimesis is the literary representation of reality and as such establishes a verisimilitude level which becomes the norm for a given text and by opposition to which we can perceive departures. The most general definition of representation has it that representation 1) presupposes the existence of its object outside of the text and preexistent to it, and 2) the reader's response to mimesis or the literary representation of reality consists in a rationalization tending to verify and complete the mimesis and to expand on it in sensory terms. Both of these processes assume that referentiality is the

basic semantic mechanism of literary mimesis. This will not be our vantage point. We will conform to the argument that Hugolian writing issues from the verbal, his images are not based in the referentiality of language, but on sign systems that are already textualized. Words don't signify in terms of their usage, but rather in terms of other texts, the text and the intertext being variants of the same structures. Semiosis occurs upon the integration of an ungrammaticality—a deviant lexicon or grammar—recognized at the mimetic level into another system, a system that is grammatical. A sign then is transferred from one level of discourse to another level, from the level of meaning to the level of significance.

Turning to *L'Homme qui rit*, I would first like to contextualize the passage we will consider. Gwynplaine is a young boy who has been both disfigured and abandoned barefoot in a glacial winter storm on the rocky shore of southern England by a group of gypsies. He is abandoned in the evening time and at the time of our passage, which is three o'clock in the morning, he has finally found civilization after having crossed vast expanses of perilous terrain, scaled a vertical ice-covered cliff, encountered the horrific decomposing corpse of a hanged criminal, and rescued an infant from the arms of its frozen dead mother. He passes from the sparsely populated market town, Weymouth, where he knocks in vain on the doors of the rare houses he encounters, to the mazelike streets and alleyways of the city of Malcomb-Regis. The city's inhabitants are obviously asleep and have taken all necessary precautions so as not to be awakened. As in Weymouth, his knocking at the doors of Malcomb-Regis goes unheeded.

The action of our passage takes place in the city and is a description in which the characters of dreams are not internal phantasms. Instead, they are a crowd of sleepwalkers² that spill out of the minds they occupy, and actually populate the city. The ever-expanding crowd is packed so tightly against Gwynplaine that it imposes itself in his field of vision, blocking his view. Our hero is thus forced to physically push his way through its members, phantoms of sleep that are simultaneously living and dead. In the anthropological code established by the lexeme

‘crowd,’ these sleeping living-dead are variants in the paradigm of the zombie or the soulless corpse.

One of the principal attributes of the crowd is equality, that is to say that a head is a head and an arm is an arm—differences between individual bodies are irrelevant and go unnoticed.³ Thus, the members of the crowd may as well be indistinguishable copies or replicas of each other, an actuality which reinforces the zombie imagery. Gwynplaine, fortunately, is not part of the crowd:

L’homme éveillé qui chemine à travers les fantômes du sommeil des autres refoule confusément des formes passantes, a, ou croit avoir, la vague horreur des contacts hostiles de l’invisible et sent à chaque instant la poussée obscure d’une rencontre inexprimable qui s’évanouit. Il y a des effets de forêts dans cette marche au milieu de la diffusion nocturne des songes. (220)

On the level of mimesis, the image is one of a stranger (“l’homme éveillé”) in a strange land pushing his way through a crowd of zombie-like beings. He is experiencing, or believes to be experiencing horror. The element of doubt (namely, “[Il] a, *ou croit avoir...*”) combined with the adjective “vague” indicates that he is experiencing a low degree of horror, like the simple horror or shock a person feels when they are slighted unexpectedly or when they receive a less than hospitable reception in a place where they had hoped for, and perhaps expected, a warm welcome. This low-grade horror, the text tells us, is being experienced because of hostile contacts from the invisible—past, present and future. As was mentioned in the contextualization of the passage, Gwynplaine has been unsuccessfully knocking on doors since his arrival in the market town, continues to do so upon his arrival in the city and will continue to do so until someone eventually opens their door. The unseen inhabitants behind locked door and bolted window take no notice of his rapping. This hostility is reflected and concretized in the streets in the inevitable barrage of shoves one endures in the city’s dense crowd; that is to say, the shove that originates in an undistinguished human body and disappears into

the anonymity of the mass when one turns to try to catch a glimpse of the perpetrator (“à chaque instant la poussée obscure d’une rencontre inexprimable qui s’évanouit”).

Semiotic transformation begins with the ungrammaticality “des effets de forêts” in the sentence “Il y a des effets de forêts dans cette marche au milieu de la diffusion nocturne des songes.” As there are sound effects and light effects in theatrical spectacles, here we are offered ‘forests effects.’ This aberrant feature inscribed in an albeit bizarre cityscape causes the reader to make connections with other texts where this anomaly is grammatical. In “Des églises gothiques,” Chateaubriand calls forests Divinity’s first temples and says that it was forests which were the inspiration for architecture and, more specifically, for the gothic cathedral. Branches, tree trunks, darkness, secret passages and the labyrinthine structure and vaults of forests are replicated in the gothic cathedral:

Ces voûtes ciselées en feuillages, ces jambages, qui appuient les murs et finissent brusquement comme des troncs brisés, la fraîcheur des voûtes, les ténèbres du sanctuaire, les ailes obscures, les passages secrets, les portes abaissées, tout retrace les labyrinthes des bois dans l’église gothique. (25)

Forests, via architecture, pass into the inside of gothic cathedrals and simultaneously into the city center. Forests, then, are urbanized and serve both as the floor plan and as the stimulus for the decor of the interior of the cathedral. The effects of forests—that is to say their labyrinthine structure, darkness, vaults, etc.—are henceforth contained within the walls of a sacred space. Through a semiotic transferal, Gwynplaine is relocated to the inside of a sacred space.

The forest-inspired architectural effects of the cathedral have the visceral effect of “la religieuse horreur, les mystères et la divinité” (Chateaubriand 25). This visceral effect is best depicted in a scene from *Les Misérables* which is both analogous to our passage and follows the structural invariant established in fables and legends since before the Brothers Grimm of a scared little child walking alone in the deep, dark forest at night. The scene is

that of a terrified Cosette fetching water for the Thénardier and describes her hallucinations of dissolving profiles and unknown beings in the lugubrious setting of frightening tree trunks, mysterious leaning branches and an immense sepulchral silence, all the markings of the inside of a gothic cathedral. The passage appropriately closes in religious code with "leur voûte monstrueuse," referring to the forests', and culminates in the striking metaphor "les forêts sont des apocalypses" (469).

'Apocalypse' generates two derivatives which are not entirely distinct one from the other; hence, the appropriate plural form 'apocalypses.' The first derivative accepts apocalypse figuratively as the end of the world. Architecturally, as a symbol of the Gothic conquest of Rome in 410, the end of the world is the gothic cathedral. As can be recognized in the cathedralization of forests, religion at the time of Gothic reign was not the provision of moral guidance or spiritual insight, but the propitiation of the unseen. And making amends with the unseen is exactly what the Goths do once in power.

The Gothic peoples were part of an East Germanic group that spread from the Rhine to, appropriately enough, the Black Sea. In Hugo's prose travel journal, *Le Rhin. Lettres à un ami*, he writes that the barbarian invasion and the death of Rome⁴ allowed for the territorial expansion not only of the barbarians, but of their metonymic clan which was repressed under Roman rule. This metonymic clan is an entire population of imaginary beings: "toute une population d'êtres imaginaires...se répandit dans le Rhingau" (116). Although spread throughout the Rhingau, these illusory beings are concentrated in one of the region's more enchanting locations, the *locus amœnus* of the imagination or the Black Forest—the place where historical certitude ends and the sacred world of fables, supernatural figures, phantoms and dreams begins.

Here, the first derivative starts to bleed into the second, which understands apocalypse literally as a revelation, the hypogram of which is Saint John's revelations recorded in the Bible. In *Le Promontoire du songe (Promontorium somnii)*, Hugo invents a bestiary of awe-inspiring imaginary creatures similar to that of Saint John. These creatures, along with those of

Saint John, have *their locus amœnus* in the realm of the dream's edge, the "rêve éveillé" or the "songe debout:" "*Promontorium somnii*. Songes debout. Car, insistons-y, dormir n'est pas une formalité nécessaire... [L]'homme... voit [les bestions] volontiers hors du sommeil" (78-79). The end of the world is the beginning of another and, in the Hugolian *imaginaire*, the decisive end of the world is the end of alert consciousness and the beginning of the world of revelation, of pleasurable daydreams (indicated by the positive lexeme "volontiers") or, what we could call, 'mind effects.'

In the context of the ending / beginning paradigm that 'apocalypse' establishes, there is the explicit crossing of a frontier or border. "Dans cette marche" (from our original sentence), in this paradigm, signifies 'the step,' the step from one reality—an ending reality—into another one—the beginning reality or, as the case is, the reality that has already begun. This is the *modus operandi* of the apocalypse and it is nowhere better made into a maxim (or maximized) than in the novel of the gothic cathedral, *Notre-Dame de Paris*. The prophetic maxim drops from the lips of the infamous dark priest, Claude Frollo: "Ceci tuera cela" (235). This will kill that; the step, whether it is inadvertent or intentional, is apocalyptic, without a period for transition, and is the marker of an ending.

The apocalypse is syntactically appropriated. Gwyplaine's step, the text tells us, lacks a transitional period and lands him directly in the middle of a new reality: "dans cette marche *au milieu de* [and the new reality is...] la diffusion nocturne des songes." Signifying both invasion or raid and expansion or enlargement, "la diffusion" is a dual sign. Paradoxically, the lexeme offers the beginnings of a solution to the problem it poses by rejuvenating the indirect war code of "Des églises gothiques" inscribed in the 'goth' of the gothic cathedral. Fully reactivated in the metonymy of Frollo, the gothic cathedral-residing priest whose purpose in life is to wage war on goodness, which is to say on everyone and everything outside himself, the war code surprisingly provides the key to Hugolian invisibility.

Modified by "nocturne," semes of which are darkness and evil, "la diffusion" not only occurs at night, but is charged with

the quality of being the enemy or the foreign element. "La diffusion" generates two textual derivations. The second of these diffusions is a conversion of the first. The first derivation is intratextually determined, accepts diffusion as an expansion or enlargement and is actualized in the chapter of *Notre-Dame de Paris* called "Fièvre." In this chapter, the sun sets and Frollo, haunted by his evil thoughts and deeds, becomes feverishly mad and sees the Strasbourg bell tower as immense, enormous and gigantic. Right before his eyes it becomes a colossal obelisk, the bell tower of hell from which emanates voices, shouts and moans of death. He turns his back on the familiar cum foreign tower and hurries away from it, but can't escape because "la vision était en lui" (457). With visions of death and chaos surrounding him, specifically and analogously in the form of ghosts in the city streets, he flees towards what one would assume to be his refuge, the gothic cathedral or Notre-Dame. The interior of the cathedral, however, has also assumed larger than life proportions and Frollo's madness peaks in a 'visible apocalypse:' "[L]e monde extérieur n'était plus pour l'infortuné qu'une sorte d'apocalypse visible, palpable, effrayant" (461). The external world, which is actually the interior of the church, is transformed into a negative variant of the apocalypse hypogram. In a basic psychoanalytic turn, Claude's eyes betray him, serving as projection lenses projecting onto the external world his internal vision, namely his fear of eternal damnation for his corrupt, ungodly acts. Frollo's apocalyptic vision does not end in the triumph of good over evil as it does in the hypogram, but rather in the persecution of the body by the mind. Frollo's eyes transform the interior of the cathedral into a terrific place of anxiety while his mind transforms his body into the same. The first derivation, then, doubly negativizes what it allegorizes, namely the biblical allusion *the body is a temple* and, at the same time, actualizes a negative valorization of the given *the prison of the mind*, transforming the mind into a claustrophobic and inescapable room.

The second derivation accepts "la diffusion" as an invasion or raid and, as a conversion of the first derivation, is its positive valorization. In the Middle Ages the cathedral provided asylum

or a place of peace and refuge for the criminal, significantly a seme of the sememe vagabond or wanderer, who was considered sacred once inside. Asylum, however, usually meant a vaulted cell located in the church attic and, as such, "l'asile était une prison comme une autre" (464). If in the model *the body is a temple* we replace *body* with the variable x , *is* with an equal sign, and *temple* with the variable y , then $x = y$ and $y = x$; the temple is a body. Through a process of semantic algebra, the temple becomes a body: the temple is the body proper topped with an attic or a head, inside of which is the cell, the place of asylum, or the mind. *The prison of the mind* then has a positive valorization as a place of asylum and becomes doubly positive once we bring it into the grammar of forests. In the grammar of forests, the body's central structure is the vault of the ribcage, which harbors all vital organs, like the vault of the cathedral, which harbors its vital community. The smaller vault or the cell undergoes a final intratextual transformation and becomes the living imagination or the lush asylum of the dreamer: "dans l'obscurité [du] cerveau végète la profonde forêt qu'on ne voit point ailleurs" (*Les Rayons et les Ombres* 1074).

As has already been demonstrated, through a semiotic transferal Gwynplaine has been relocated into a sacred space. In the grammar of *forests* and *songes debout*, this space is unmistakably the mind. Delightful daydreams are the apocalyptic intruders of our hero's mind. What is mimetically portrayed as a zombie invasion of the labyrinthine streets is semiotically a reverse invasion, an inward invasion into the labyrinth of the mind. The exhausted and discouraged Gwynplaine, although seemingly numb at three in the morning in the dead of winter after having performed an array of superhuman feats, is inwardly awakened by happy daydreams of people able to sleep and walk at the same time. This is the image of what he most desires, namely to be able to fall asleep while still ushering to safety the infant he is carrying. The text serves the role of confessor unveiling and revealing this hidden desire.

Through a series of textual transformations catalyzed by an ungrammaticality on the level of mimesis, the contours of invisibility, which are reactivated throughout the novel, are

brought to light. The representation of **in**visibility, then, is the representation of what is only perceived internally in the sacred space or the asylum of the dreamer's mind.



Notes

¹ See *Semiotics of Poetry*.

² "[C]es sommeils sont une foule." In the context of a crowd, *sommeil* in the plural, preceded by an indefinite adjective and lacking a succeeding adjectival qualifier (like, for example, *ces sommeils profonds*) is a poeticization of "ces somnambules."

³ Canetti 29.

⁴ Hugo, *Le Rhin* 115.

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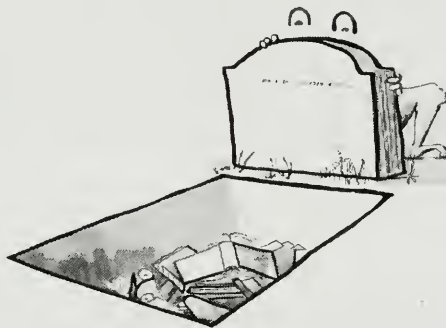
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*Ce serait le moment de philosopher et de
rechercher si, par hasard, se trouvait ici
l'endroit où de telles paroles dégèlent.*

Rabelais,
Le Quart Livre

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